February 19th 2024: I've decided not to include the Reader's Corner. They're annoying and I don't feel like editing them en masse.

To do:

1. put illustrations in the right spots, describe all

2. update the authors list for allllllllllllllllllll of them

Month = Header 1

Title = Header 2

Chapters = header 3

Astounding Stories Of Super-Science

Contributing Authors, in order of appearance:

Victor Rousseau Emanuel

Sterner St. Paul Meek

Ray Cummings

M. L. Staley

Charles Victor Tench

Murray Leinster

Anthony Pelcher

Harold Vincent Schoepflin

Charles Willard Diffin

Hugh Barnett Cave

Sophie Wenzel Ellis

Will Smith

R. J. Robbins

Sewell Peaslee Wright

A. T. Locke

Thomas Holt Knight

Arthur Josephus Burks

Tom Curry

Lilith Lorraine

James P. Olsen

Roman Frederick Starzl

Edmond Hamilton

Harold Thompson Rich

Miles John Breuer, M.D.

Paul Ernst

Robert Henry Leitfred

Jackson Gee

William Merriam Rouse

Lloyd Arthur Eshbach

David R. Sparks

Hal K. Wells

Note from the editor of this master file:

This compilation was started on July 2nd, 2023, by Tinyel. Which is pronounced exactly the way it looks: tin-yell. Two syllables. I am nonbinary, and my pronouns are it/its/itself.

This means that rather than saying “He combined Astounding Stories of Super-Science into one master book”, or “She edited the formatting from the original magazine's set up”, or “They removed all the randomly inserted advertisements and put them in the back of the book”, you say: “It wanted to make life easier for future readers of Astounding Stories of Super-Science, so it created this compilation so you don't have to. That was very nice of it.”

Originally published from January 1930 to January 1931, the following short stories were spaced out across thirteen issues of Astounding Stories of Super-Science.

They are now (and have been for a while) public domain, meaning they belong to everyone and no one, and are available to download from Gutenberg.org, archive.org, and many other places, for free, endlessly.

To make things more convenient for future readers, I have compiled all the short stories into a single file, with the formatting fixed from the original magazine layout, the illustrations put in the proper places, trigger warnings added before each story, and the stories that had been originally broken up into multiple parts now combined into a whole. Stories that had sequels will now have the sequel immediately following the first story.

This version of the master file will include all stories as they were originally published. A second version will be hand-picked of my favorite of these stories, with are also the ones with the least amount of bigotry.

Each story will have specific warnings and ratings in front for your convenience, but as a general warning, many of the authors showcased here were cis straight white privileged men, and they hated women, they hated Black and brown people, they hated fat people, they hated disabled people, they hated foreigners...the list goes on.

Some of these stories are more bigoted than others, and some are so bigoted I had to stop and resit the urge to throw my phone across the room. Some of them are also just not very well written.

I hope you enjoy reading at least some of these stories.

Astounding Stories of Super-Science

January 1930

#01 The Beetle Horde, By Victor Rousseau Emanuel:

Only two young explorers stand in the way of the mad Bram's horrible revenge—the releasing of his trillions of man-sized beetles upon an utterly defenseless world.

Aproximate word count: 24,000
Bigotry: Racism, ableism,
Warnings:

- - -

Chapter 1: Dodd's Discovery

Out of the south the biplane came winging back toward the camp, a black speck against the dazzling white of the vast ice-fields that extended unbroken to the horizon on every side.

It came out of the south, and yet, a hundred miles further back along the course on which it flew, it could not have proceeded in any direction except northward. For a hundred miles south lay the south pole, the goal toward which the Travers Expeditions had been pressing for the better part of that year.

Not that they could not have reached it sooner. As a matter of fact,

the pole had been crossed and re-crossed, according to the estimate of Tommy Travers, aviator, and nephew of the old millionaire who stood fairy uncle to the expedition. But one of the things that was being sought was the exact site of the pole. Not within a couple of miles or so, but within the fraction of an inch.

It had something to do with Einstein, and something to do with terrestrial magnetism, and the variations of the south magnetic pole, and the reason therefore, and something to do with parallaxes and the precession of the equinoxes and other things, this search for the pole's exact location. But all that was principally the affair of the astronomer of the party. Tommy Travers, who was now evidently on his way back, didn't give a whoop for Einstein, or any of the rest of the stuff. He had been enjoying himself after his fashion during a year of frostbites and hard rations, and he was beginning to anticipate the delights of the return to Broadway.

Captain Storm, in charge of the expedition, together with the five others of the advance camp, watched the plane maneuver up to the tents. She came down neatly on the smooth snow, skidded on her runners like an expert skater, and came to a stop almost immediately in front of the marquee.

Tommy Travers leaped out of the enclosed cockpit, which, shut off

by glass from the cabin, was something like the front seat of a limousine.

"Well, Captain, we followed that break for a hundred miles, and there's no ground cleft, as you expected," he said. "But Jim Dodd and I picked up something, and Jim seems to have gone crazy."

Through the windows of the cabin, Jim Dodd, the young archaeologist of the party, could be seen apparently wrestling with something that looked like a suit of armor. By the time Captain Storm, Jimmy, and the other members of the party had reached the cabin door, Dodd had got it open and flung himself out backward, still hugging what he had found, and maneuvering so that he managed to fall on his back and sustain its weight.

"Say, what the—what—what's that?" gasped Storm.

Even the least scientific minded of the party gasped in amazement at what Dodd had. It resembled nothing so much as an enormous beetle. As a matter of fact, it was an insect, for it had the three sections that characterize this class, but it was merely the shell of one. Between four and five feet in height, when Dodd stood it on end, it could now be seen to consist of the hard exterior substance of some huge, unknown coleopter.

This substance, which was fully three inches thick over the thorax, looked as hard as plate armor.

"What is it?" gasped Storm again.

Tommy Travers made answer, for James Dodd was evidently

incapable of speech, more from emotion than from the force with which he had landed backward in the snow.

"We found it at the pole, Captain," he said. "At least, pretty near where the pole ought to be. We ran into a current of warm air or something. The snow had melted in places, and there were patches of bare rock. This thing was lying in a hollow among them."

"If I didn't see it before my eyes, I'd think you crazy, Tommy," said Storm with some asperity. "What is it, a crab?"

"Crab be damned!" shouted Jim Dodd, suddenly recovering his faculties. "My God, Captain Storm, don't you know the difference between an insect and a crustacean? This is a fossil beetle. Don't you see the distinguishing mark of the coleoptera, those two elytra, or wing-covers, which meet in the median dorsal line? A beetle, but with the shell of a crustacean instead of mere chitin. That's what led you astray, I expect. God, what a tale we'll have to tell when we get back to New York! We'll drop everything else, and spend years, if need be, looking for other specimens."

"Like fun you will!" shouted Higby, the astronomer of the party. "Lemme tell you right here, Dodd, nobody outside the Museum of Natural History is going to care a damn about your old fossils. What

we're going to do is to march straight to the true pole, and spend a year taking observations and parallaxes. If Einstein's brochure, in which he links up gravitation with magnetism, is correct—"

"Fossil beetles!" Jim Dodd burst out, ignoring the astronomer. "That means that in the Tertiary Era, probably, there existed forms of life in the antarctic continent that have never been found elsewhere. Imagine a world in which the insect reached a size proportionate to the great saurians, Captain Storm! I'll wager poor Bram discovered this. That's why he stayed behind when the Greystoke Expedition came within a hundred miles of the pole. I'll wager he's left a cairn somewhere with full details inside it. We've got to find it. We—"

But Jim Dodd, suddenly realizing that the rest of the party could hardly be said to share his enthusiasm in any marked degree, broke off and looked sulky.

"You say you found this thing pretty nearly upon the site of the true pole?" Captain Storm asked Tommy.

"Within five miles, I'd say, Captain. The fog was so bad that we couldn't get our directions very well."

"Well, then, there's going to be no difficulty," answered Storm. "If

this fair weather lasts, we'll be at the pole in another week, and we'll start making our permanent camp. Plenty of opportunity for all you gentlemen. As for me, I'm merely a sailor, and I'm trying to be impartial.

"And please remember, gentlemen, that we're well into March now, and likely to have the first storms of autumn on us any day. So let's drop the argument and remember that we've got to pull together!"

Tommy Travers was the only skilled aviator of the expedition, which had brought two planes with it. It was a queer friendship that had sprung up between him and Jim Dodd. Tommy, the blasé ex-Harvard man, who was known along Broadway, and had never been able to settle down, seemed as different as possible from the spectacled, scholarly Dodd, ten years his senior, red-haired, irascible, and living, as Tommy put it, in the Age of Old Red Sandstone, instead of in the year 1930 A. D.

It was generally known—though the story had been officially denied—that there had been trouble in the Greystoke Expedition of three years before. Captain Greystoke had taken the brilliant, erratic Bram, of the Carnegie Archaeological Institute, with him, and Bram's history was a long record of trouble.

It was Bram who had exploded the faked neolithic finds at Mannheim, thereby earning the undying enmity of certain European savants, but brilliantly demolishing them when he smashed the so-called Mannheim stone pitcher (valued at a hundred thousand dollars) with a pocket-axe, and caustically inquired whether neolithic man used babbit metal rivets to fasten on his jug handles.

Bram's brilliant work in the investigation of the origin of the negrito Asiatic races had been awarded one of the Nobel prizes, and Bram

had declined it in an insulting letter because he disapproved of the year's prize award for literature.

He had been a storm center for years, embittered by long opposition, when he joined the Greystoke Expedition for the purpose of investigating the marine fauna of the antarctic continent.

And it was known that his presence had nearly brought the Greystoke Expedition to the point of civil war. Rumor said he had been deliberately abandoned. His enemies hoped he had. The facts seemed to be, however, that in an outburst of temper he had walked out of camp in a furious snowstorm and perished. For days his body had been sought in vain.

Jimmy Dodd had run foul of Bram some years before, when Bram had published a criticism of one of Dodd's addresses dealing with fossil monotremes, or egg-laying mammals. In his inimitable way, Bram had suggested that the problem which came first, the egg or the chicken, was now seen to be linked up with the Darwinian theory, and solved in the person of Dodd.

Nevertheless, Jimmy Dodd entertained a devoted admiration for the memory of the dead scientist. He believed that Bram must have left records of inestimable importance in a cairn before he died. He

wanted to find that cairn.

And he knew, what a number of Bram's enemies knew, that the dead scientist had been a morphine addict. He believed that he had wandered out into the snow under the influence of the drug.

Dodd, who shared a tent with Tommy, had raved the greater part of the night about the find.

"Well, but see here, Jimmy, suppose these beetles did inhabit the antarctic continent a few million years ago, why get excited?" Tommy had asked.

"Excited?" bellowed Dodd. "It opens one of the biggest problems that science has to face. Why haven't they survived into historic times? Why didn't they cross into Australia, like the opossum, by the land bridge then existent between that continent and South America? Beetles five feet in length, and practically invulnerable! What killed them off? Why didn't they win the supremacy over man?"

Jimmy Dodd had muttered till he went to sleep, and he had muttered worse in his dreams. Tommy was glad that Captain Storm had given them permission to return to the same spot next morning and look for further fossils, though his own interest in them was of the

slightest.

The dogs were being harnessed next morning when the two men hopped into the plane. The thermometer was unusually high for the season, for in the south polar regions the short summer is usually at an end by March. Tommy was sweating in his furs in a temperature well above the freezing point. The snow was crusted hard, the sky overcast with clouds, and a wind was blowing hard out of the south, and increasing in velocity hourly.

"A bad day for starting," said Captain Storm. "Looks like one of the autumn storms was blowing up. If I were you, I'd watch the weather, Tommy."

Tommy glanced at Dodd, who was huddled in the rear cockpit, fuming at the delay, and grinned whimsically. "I guess I can handle her, Captain," he answered. "It's only an hour's flight to where he found that fossil."

"Just as you please," said Storm curtly. He knew that Tommy's judgment as a pilot could always be relied upon. "You'll find us here when you return," he added. "I've counter-manded the order to march. I don't like the look of the weather at all."

Tommy grinned again and pressed the starter. The engine caught and warmed up. One of the men kicked away the blocks of ice that had been placed under the skids to serve as chocks. The plane taxied over the crusted snow, and took off into the south.

The camp was situated in a hollow among the ice-mountains that rose to a height of two or three thousand feet all around. Tommy had not dreamed how strongly the gale was blowing until he was over the top of them. Then he realized that he was facing a tougher proposition than he had calculated on. The storm struck the biplane with full force.

A snowstorm was driving up rapidly, blackening the sky. The sun, which only appeared for a brief interval every day, was practically touching the horizon as it rose to make its minute arc in the sky. A star was visible through a rift in the clouds overhead, and the pale daylight in which they had started had already become twilight.

Tommy was tempted to turn back, but it was only a hundred miles, and Jimmy Dodd would give him no peace if he did so. So he put the plane's nose resolutely into the wind, watching his speed indicator drop from a hundred miles per hour to eighty, sixty, forty—less.

The storm was beating up furiously. Of a sudden the clouds broke into a deluge of whirling snow.

In a moment the windshield was a frozen, opaque mass. Tommy opened it, and peered out into the biting air. He could see nothing.... The plane, caught in the fearful cross-currents that swirl about the

southern roof of the world, was fluttering like a leaf in the wind. The altimeter was dropping dangerously.

Tommy opened the throttle to the limit, zooming, and, like a spurred horse, the biplane shot forward and upward. She touched five thousand, six, seven—and that, for her, was ceiling under those conditions, for a sudden tremendous shock of wind, coming in a fierce cross-current, swung her round, tossed her to and fro in the enveloping white cloud. And Tommy knew that he had the fight of his life upon his hands.

The compasses, which required considerable daily adjusting to be of use so near to the pole, had now gone out of use altogether. The air speed indicator had apparently gone west, for it was oscillating between zero and twenty. The turn and bank indicator was performing a kind of tango round the dial. Even the eight-day clock had ceased to function, but that might have been due to the fact that Tommy had neglected to wind it. And the oil pressure gauge presented a still more startling sight, for a glance showed that either there was a leak or else the oil had frozen.

Tommy looked around at Dodd and pointed downward. Dodd responded with a vicious forward wave of his hand.

Tommy shook his head, and Dodd started forward along the cabin, apparently with the intention of committing assault and battery upon him. Instead, the archaeologist collapsed upon the floor as the plane spun completely around under the impact of a blast that was like a giant's slap.

The plane was no longer controllable. True, she responded in some sort to the controls, but all Tommy was able to do was to keep her from going into a crazy sideslip or nose dive as he fought with the elements. And those elements were like a devil unchained. One moment he was dropping like a plummet, the next he was shooting up like a rocket as a vertical blast of air caught the plane and tossed her like a cork into the invisible heavens. Then she was revolving, as if in a maelstrom, and by degrees this rotary movement began to predominate.

Round and round went the plane, in circles that gradually narrowed, and it was all Tommy could do to swing the stick so as to keep her from skidding or sideslipping. And as he worked desperately at his task Tommy began to realize something that made him wonder if he was not dreaming.

The snow was no longer snow, but rain—mist, rather, warm mist that had already cleared the windshield and covered it with tiny drops.

And that white, opaque world into which he was looking was no longer snow but fog—the densest fog that Tommy had ever encountered.

Fog like white wool, drifting past him in fleecy flakes that looked as if they had solid substance. Warm fog that was like balm upon his frozen skin, but of a warmth that was impossible within a few miles of the frozen pole.

Then there came a momentary break in it, and Tommy looked down and uttered a cry of fear. Fear, because he knew that he must be dreaming.

Not more than a thousand feet beneath him he saw patches of snow, and patches of—green grass, the brightest and most verdant green that he had ever seen in his life.

He turned round at a touch on his shoulder. Dodd was leaning over him, one hand pointing menacingly upward and onward.

"You fool," Tommy bellowed in his ear, "d'you think the south pole lies over there? It's here! Yeah, don't you get it, Jimmy? Look down! This valley—God, Jimmy, the south pole's a hole in the ground!"

And as he spoke he remembered vaguely some crank who had once insisted that the two poles were hollow because—what was the fellow's reasoning? Tommy could not remember it.

But there was no longer any doubt but that they were dropping into a hole. Not more than a mile around, which explained why neither Scott nor Amundsen had found it when they approximated to the site of the pole. A hole—a warm hole, up which a current of warm air was rushing, forming the white mist that now gradually thinned as the plane descended. The plateau with its covering of eternal snows loomed in a white circle high overhead. Underneath was green grass now—grass and trees!

The fog was nearly gone. The plane responded to the controls again. Tommy pushed the stick forward and came round in a tighter circle.

And then something happened that he had not in the least expected. One moment he seemed to be traveling in a complete calm, a sort of clear funnel with a ring of swirling fog outside it—the next he was dropping into a void!

There was no air resistance—there seemed hardly any air, for he felt a choking in his throat, and a tearing at his lungs as he strove to breathe. He heard a strangled cry from Dodd, and saw that he was

clutching with both hands at his throat, and his face was turning purple.

The controls went limp in Tommy's hands. The plane, gyrating more slowly, suddenly nosed down, hung for a moment in that void, and then plunged toward the green earth, two hundred feet below, with appalling swiftness.

Tommy realized that a crash was inevitable. He threw his goggles up over his forehead, turned and waved to Dodd in ironic farewell. He saw the earth rush up at him—then came the shattering crash, and then oblivion!

Chapter 2: Beetles and Humans

How long he had remained unconscious, Tommy had no means of determining. Of a sudden he found himself lying on the ground beside the shattered plane, with his eyes wide open.

He stared at it, and stared about him, without understanding where he was, or what had happened to him. His first idea was that he had crashed on the golf links near Mitchell Field, Long Island, for all about him were stretches of verdant grass and small shrubby plants. Then, when he remembered the expedition, he was convinced that he

had been dreaming.

What brought him to a saner view was the discovery that he was enveloped in furs which were insufferably hot. He half raised himself and succeeded in unfastening his fur coat, and thus discovered that apparently none of his bones was broken.

But the plane must have fallen from a considerable height to have been smashed so badly. Then Tommy discovered that he was lying upon an extensive mound of sand, thrown up as by some gigantic mole, for burrow tracks ran through it in every direction. It was this that had saved his life.

Something was moving at his side. It was half-submerged in the sand-pile, and it was moving parallel to him with great rapidity.

A grayish body, half-covered with grains of sand emerged, waving two enormously long tentacles. It was a shrimp, but fully three feet in length, and Tommy had never before had any idea what an unpleasant object a shrimp is.

Tommy staggered to his feet and dropped nearer the plane, eyeing the shrimp with horror. But he was soon relieved as he discovered that it was apparently harmless. It slithered away and once more

buried itself in the pile of sand.

Now Tommy was beginning to remember. He looked into the wreckage of the plane. Jim Dodd was not there. He called his name repeatedly, and there was no response, except a dull echo from the ice-mountains behind the veil of fog.

He went to the other side of the plane, he scanned the ground all about him. Jimmy had disappeared. It was evident that he was nowhere near, for Tommy could see the whole of the lower scope of the bowl on every side of him. He had walked away—or he had been carried away! Tommy thought of the shrimp, and shuddered. What other fearsome monsters might inhabit that extraordinary valley?

He sat down, leaning against the wreck of the fuselage, and tried to adjust his mind, tried to keep himself from going mad. He knew now that the flight had been no dream, that he was a member of his uncle's expedition, that he had flown with Jim toward the pole, had crashed in a vacuum. But where was Jim? And how were they going to get out of the damn place?

Something like a heap of stones not far away attracted Tommy's attention. Perhaps Jim Dodd was lying behind that. Once more Tommy got upon his feet and began walking toward it. On the way,

he stumbled against the sharp edge of something that protruded from the ground.

It cut his leg sharply, and, with a curse, he began rubbing his shin and looking at the thing. Then he saw that it was another of the fossil shells, half-buried in the marshy ooze on which he was treading. The ground in this lower part of the valley was a swamp, on account of the very fine mist falling from the fog clouds that surrounded it impenetrably on every side.

Then Tommy came upon another shell, and then another. And now he saw that there were piles of what he had taken to be rock everywhere, and that this was not rock but great heaps of the shells, all equally intact.

Hundreds of thousands of the prehistoric beetles must have died in that valley, perhaps overcome by some cataclysm.

Tommy examined the heap near which he stood; he yelled Dodd's name, but again no answer came.

Instead, something began to stir among the heaps of shells. For a moment Tommy hoped against hope that it was Dodd, but it wasn't Dodd.

It was a living beetle!

A beetle fully five feet high as it stood erect, a pair of enormous wings outspread. And the head, which was larger than a man's, was the most frightful object Tommy had ever seen.

Jim Dodd would have said at once that this was one of the Curculionidae, or snout beetles, for a prolongation of the head between the eyes formed a sort of beak a foot in length. The mouth, which opened downward, was armed with terrific mandibles, while the huge, compound eyes looked like enormous crystals of cut glass. Immediately in front of the eyes were two mandibles as long as a man's arms, with feathery processes at the ends. In addition to these there were three pairs of legs, the front pair as long as a man's, the hind pair almost as long as a horse's.

Paralyzed with horror, Tommy watched the monster, which had apparently been disturbed by the vibrations of his voice, extract itself from among the shells. Then, with a bound that covered fifteen feet, it had lessened the distance between them by half.

And then a still more amazing thing happened. For of a sudden the hard shell slipped from the thorax, the wing-cases dropped off, the whole of the bony parts slipped to the ground with a clang, and a

soft, defenseless thing went slithering away among the rocks.

The beetle had moulted!

Tommy dropped to the ground in the throes of violent nausea.

Then, looking up again, he saw the girl!

She was about a hundred yards away from him, very close to the fallen plane, and she must have emerged from a large hole in the ground which Tommy could now see under a ledge of overhanging rock.

She seemed to be dressed in a single garment which fell to her knees, and appeared to fit tightly about her body, but as she came nearer, Tommy, watching her, petrified by this latest apparition, discovered that it was woven of her own hair, which must have been of immense length, for it fell naturally to her shoulders, and thence was woven into this close-fitting material, a fringe an inch or two in length extending beneath the selvage.

She was about six feet tall, and apparently made after the normal human pattern. She moved with a slow, majestic swing, and if ever any female had seemed to Tommy to have the appearance of an

angel, this unknown woman did.

She was so fair, in that flossy, flaxen covering, she moved with such easy grace, that Tommy, gaping, gradually crept nearer to her. She did not seem to see him. She was stooping over the very sand heap into which he had fallen. Suddenly, with lightning-like rapidity, her arms shot out, her hands began tunneling in the sand. With a cry of triumph she pulled out the shrimp Tommy had seen, or another like it, and, stripping it off the shell, began devouring it with evident relish.

In the midst of her meal the girl raised her head and looked at Tommy. He saw that her eyes were filmed, vacant, dead. Then of a sudden a third membrane was drawn back across the pupils, and she saw him.

She let the shrimp drop to the ground, uttered a cry, and moved toward him with a tottering gait. She groped toward him with outstretched arms. And then she was blind again, for the membrane once more covered her pupils. It was as if her eyes were unable to endure even the dim light of the valley, through whose surrounding mists the low sun, setting just above the horizon, was unable to diffuse itself save as a brightening of the fog curtain.

Tommy stepped toward the girl. His outstretched hand touched hers. It was unquestionably a woman's hand he held, delicately warm, with exquisitely moulded fingers, in whose touch there seemed to be, for the girl, some tactile impression of him.

Again that membrane was drawn back from the girl's pupils for a fleeting flash. Tommy saw two eyes of intense black, their color contrasting curiously with the flaxen color of her hair and her white skin, almost the tint of an albino's. Those eyes had surveyed him, and appeared satisfied that he was one of her kind. She could not have seen very much in that almost instantaneous flash of vision. Queer, that membrane—as if she had been used to living in the dark, as if the full light of the day was unbearable!

She drew her hand away. Soft vocals came from her lips. Suddenly she turned swiftly. She could not have seen, but before Tommy had seen, she had sensed the presence of the old man who was creeping out of the hole in the mountainside.

He moved forward craftily, and then pounced upon the sand pile, and in a moment had pulled out another of the big shrimps, which he proceeded to devour with greedy relish. The girl, leaving Tommy's side, joined him in that unpleasant feast.

And in the midst of it a flood came pouring from the hole—a flood of living beetles, covering the ground in fifteen-foot leaps as they dashed at the two.

To his horror, Tommy saw Jimmy Dodd among them, wrapped in his fur coat like a mummy, and being pushed and rolled forward like a football.

For a moment Tommy hesitated, torn between his solicitude for Jim Dodd and that for the girl. Then, as the foremost of the monsters bounded to her side, he ran between them. The vicious jaws snapped within six inches of Tommy's face, with a force that would have carried away an ear, or shredded the cheek, if they had met.

Tommy struck out with all his might, and his fist clanged on the resounding shell so that the blood spurted from his bruised knuckles. He had struck the monster squarely upon the thorax, and he had not discommoded it in the least. It turned on him, its glassy, many-faceted eyes glaring with a cold, infernal light. Tommy struck out again with his left hand, this time upon the pulpy flesh of the downward-opening mouth.

An inch higher, and he would have impaled his hand upon the beak, with a point like a needle, and evidently used for purposes of attack,

since it was not connected with the mandibles. The blow appeared to fall in the only vulnerable place. The monster dropped upon its back and lay there, unable to reverse itself, its antenna and forelegs waving in the air, and the rear legs rasping together in a shrill, strident shriek.

Instantly, as Tommy darted out of the way, the swarm fell upon the helpless monster and began devouring it, tearing strips of flesh from the lower shell, which in the space of a half-minute was reduced simply to bone. The most horrible feature of this act of cannibalism was the complete silence with which it was performed, except for the rasping of the dying monster's legs. It was evident that the huge beetles had no vocal apparatus.

For the moment left unguarded, Jim Dodd flung down the collar of his fur coat, stared about him, and recognized Tommy.

"My God, it's you!" he yelled. "Well, can you—?"

He had no time to finish his sentence. A pair of antenna went round his neck from behind. At the same instant Tommy, the old man, and the girl were gripped by the monsters, which, forming a solid phalanx about them, began hustling them in the direction of the hole. Resistance was utterly impossible. Tommy felt as if he was being

pushed along by a moving wall of stone.

Inside the opening it was completely dark. Tommy shouted to Dodd, but the strident sounds of the moving legs drowned his cries. He was being pushed forward into the unknown.

Suddenly the ground seemed to fall away beneath his feet. He struggled, cried out, and felt himself descending through the air.

For a full half-minute he went downward at a speed that constricted his throat so that he could hardly draw breath. Then, just as he had nerved himself for the imminent crash, the speed of his descent was checked. In another moment he found that he was slowing to a standstill in mid-air.

He was beginning to float backward—upward. But the wall of moving shells, pushing against him, forced him on, downward, and yet apparently against the force of gravitation.

Then of a sudden Tommy was aware of a dim light all about him. His feet touched earth and grass as softly as a thistledown alighting.

He found himself seated in the same dim light upon red grass, and staring into Jimmy's face.

Chapter 3: Ten Miles Underground

"What I was going to say when we were interrupted, was, 'Can you beat it?'" Jimmy Dodd observed, with admirable sang-froid.

They were still seated on the red grass, gazing about them at what looked like an illimitable plain, and upward into depths of darkness. It was warm, and the light, furnished by what appeared to be luminous vegetation, was about that of twilight.

On every side were clumps of trees and shrubs, which formed centers of phosphorescent illumination, but for the most part the land was open, and here and there human figures appeared, moving with head down and arms hanging earthward.

"No, I'm damned if I can," said Tommy. "What happened to you after we crashed?"

"Why, first thing I knew, I found myself riding on the back of a fossil beetle, apparently one of the *curculionidae*," said Dodd.

"Never, mind being so precise, Jimmy. Let's call it a beetle. Go on."

"They set me down inside the hole and seemed to be investigating me, the whole swarm of them. Of course, I thought I was dead, and

come to my just reward, especially when I saw those beaks. Then one of them began tickling my face with its antenna, and I drew up my fur collar. They didn't seem to like the feel of the fur, and after a while the whole gang started hustling me back again, like a nest of ants carrying something they don't want outside their hill. And then you bobbed up."

"Well, my opinion is you saved your life by pulling up your collar," said Tommy. "Looks to me as if it's a case of the survival of the fittest, said fittest being the insect, and the human race taking second place. You know what the humans here live on, don't you?"

"No, what?"

"Shrimps as big as poodles. If you'd seen that girl and the old man getting outside them, you'd realize that there seems to be a food shortage in this part of the world. Say, where in thunder are we, Jimmy?"

"Haven't you guessed yet, Travers?" asked Dodd, a spice of malice in his voice.

"I suppose this is some sort of big hole on the site of the south pole, with warm vapors coming up. Maybe a great fissure in the earth, or

something."

Jimmy Dodd's grin, seen in the half-light, was rather disconcerting. "How far do you think we dropped just now?" Dodd asked.

"Why, I'd say several hundred yards," replied Tommy. "What's your estimate?"

"Just about ten miles," answered Dodd.

"What? You're still crazy! Why, we slowed up!"

"Yeah," grinned Dodd, "we slowed up. We're inside the crust of the world. That's the long and short of it. The earth we've known is just a shell over our heads."

"Yeah? Walking head downward, are we? Then why don't we drop to the center of the earth, you damn fool?"

"Because, my dear fellow, you can swing a pailful of water round your head without spilling any of it. In other words, our old friend, centrifugal force. The speed with which the earth is rotating, keeps us on our feet, head downward. To be precise, the center of the earth's gravity lies in the middle of the hollow sphere, of course, but the counteraction of centrifugal force throws it outward to the

middle of the ten-mile crust. That's why we slowed down after we were half-way through. We were moving against gravity."

"And what's up there, or down there, or whatever you call it?" asked Tommy, pointing to what ought to have been the sky.

"Nothing. It's the center of the tennis ball, though I imagine it's pretty near a vacuum when you get up a mile or so, owing to the speed of the earth's rotation, which forces the heat into the shell."

"You mean to say you actually believe that stuff you've been handing me?" asked Tommy, after a pause. "Then how did human beings get here, and those damn beetles? And why's the grass red?"

"The grass is red because there's no sunlight to produce chlorophyll. The inhabitants of the deep sea are red or black, almost invariably. In the case of the humans, they've become bleached. My belief is that that man and woman we saw, and those"—he pointed to the vague forms of human beings, who moved across the grass, gathering something—"are survivors of the primitive race that still exists as the Australians. Undoubtedly one of the branches of the human stock originated in antarctica at a time when it enjoyed a tropical temperature, and was the land bridge between Australia and South America."

"And the—beetles?" asked Tommy.

"Ah, they go back to the days when nature was in a more grandiose mood!" replied the archaeologist enthusiastically. "That's the most wonderful discovery of the ages. The world will go crazy over them when we bring back the first living specimens to the zoological parks of the great cities.

"But," Dodd went on, speaking with still more enthusiasm, "of course, this is only the beginning, Tommy. There are ten million species of insects, according to Riley, and it is inevitable that there must be hundreds of thousands of other survivals from the age of the great saurians, perhaps even some of the saurians themselves. Who knows but that we may discover the ancestor of the extinct monotremes, the rhynchocephalia, the pterodactyls, hatch a brood of aepyornis eggs—"

"And," said Tommy tartly, "how are we going to get them back, apart from the little problem of getting out of here ourselves?"

"Don't let's worry about that now," answered Dodd. "It will take ten years of the hardest kind of labor even to begin a classification of the inhabitants of this inner world. I could sit down for ever, and—"

But Jimmy Dodd rose to his feet as a pair of antenna whipped round his neck and jerked him bodily upward.

One of the monster beetles was standing upright behind them, and by its gestures it evidently meant that Dodd and Tommy were to join the crowd of humans in the offing. As Dodd turned upon it with an indignant show of fists, one of the antennae whipped off his fur coat and stung him painfully with the bristle-like attachment at the end.

It was a painful moment when Dodd and Tommy realized that they were powerless against the monstrous beetles.

Tommy tried the uppercut with which he had knocked out the deceased monster, but the quick jerks of the present beetle's head were infinitely faster than the movements of his fists, while the antenna had a whiplike quality about them that speedily convinced him that discretion was the card to play.

Under the threat of the curling antenna, Tommy and Dodd moved in the direction of the slowly circulating humans. Numerous tiny rodents, which evidently kept the red grass short, scampered away under their feet. The beetles made no further effort to force them on, but now they could see that a number of the monsters were stationed at intervals around a wide circle, keeping the humans in a single

body.

"Good Lord!" ejaculated Tommy, stopping. "See what they're doing, Dodd? They're herding us, like cowboys herd steers. Look at that!"

One of the herd, a male with a long beard, suddenly broke from the herd, bawling, and flung himself upon a beetle guard. The antenna shot forth, coiled around his neck, and hurled him a dozen feet to the ground, where he lay stunned for a moment before arising and rejoining his companions.

"But what are they looking for?" demanded Dodd.

Tommy had not heard him. He had stopped in front of one of the luminous trees and was plucking a fruit from it.

"Jimmy, ever see an apple before?" he asked. "If this isn't an apple, I'll eat my head."

It certainly was an apple, and one of the largest and juiciest that Tommy had ever tasted. It was the reddest apple he had ever seen, and would have won the first prize at any agricultural fair.

"And look at this!" shouted Tommy, plucking an enormous luminous peach from another tree.

They began munching slowly, then, seeing one of the beetle guards approaching them, they moved into the midst of the crowd.

"Did you notice anything strange about those fruit trees?" inquired Dodd, as he munched. "I'll swear they were monocotyledonous, which, after all, is what one would expect. Still, to think that the monocotyledons evolved the familiar drupes, or stone fruits, on a parallel line to the dicotyledons is—amazing!"

A box on the ear like the kick of a mule's hoof jerked the last word from his lips as he went sprawling. He got up, to see the girl standing before him, intense disgust and anger on her face.

She snatched the fruits from the hands of the two Americans and hurled them away. It was evident from her manner that she considered such diet in the highest degree unclean and disgusting; also that she considered herself charged with the duty of superintending Tommy's and Dodd's education, but especially Dodd's.

Taking him by the arm, she propelled him into the midst of the groping humans. She released him, stooped, and suddenly stood up, a shrimp about eighteen inches long in her hand.

Towering over Dodd by six inches, she took his face in her hands and began caressing him; then, seizing his jaws in her strong fingers, she pried them apart, and popped the tail end of the shrimp into his mouth.

Dodd let out a yelp, and spat out the love-gift, to be rewarded with another box on the ear by the young Amazon, while Tommy stood by, convulsed with laughter, and yet in considerable trepidation, for fear of being forced to share Dodd's fate.

For the girl was again holding out the tail end of the crustacean, and Jim Dodd's jaws were slowly and reluctantly approaching it.

But suddenly there came an intervention as the strident rasping of beetle legs was heard in the distance. Panic seized the human herd, grovelling for shrimps in the sandy soil with its tufts of red grasses. Milling in an uneasy mob, they cowered under the lashes of the antenna of the beetle guards, which sacrificed their backs through their hair garments whenever any of them tried to bolt.

Nearer and nearer came the beetles, louder and more penetrating the shriek of their rasping legs. Now the swarm came into sight, rank after rank of the shell-clad monsters, leaping fifteen feet at a bound with perfect precision, until they had formed a solid phalanx all

around the humans.

Tommy heard sighs of despair, he heard muttering, and then he realized, with deep thankfulness, that these human beings, degraded though they were, had a speech of their own.

In the middle of the front line appeared a beetle a foot taller than the rest. That it was either a king or queen was evident from the respect paid it by the rest of the swarm. At its every movement a bodyguard of beetles moved in unison, forming themselves in a group before it and on either side.

There would have been something ludicrous about these movements, but for the impression of horror that the swarm made upon Tommy and Jim Dodd. Hitherto both had supposed that the hideous insects acted by blind instinct, but now there could no longer be any doubt that they were possessed of an organized intelligence.

The strident sounds grew louder. Already Tommy was beginning to discover certain variations in them. It was dawning upon him that they formed a language—and a perfectly intelligible one. For, as the note changed about a half-semitone, two of the monsters left the side of their ruler and reached the two men with three successive leaps.

Their movements left no doubt in either Tommy's or Dodd's mind what was required. The two strode hastily toward the assemblage, and stopped as the antenna of their guards came down in menacing fashion.

It was light enough for Tommy to see the face of the ruler of the hellish swarm. And it required all his powers of will to keep from collapsing from sheer horror at what he saw.

For, despite the close-fitting shell, the face of the beetle king was the face of a man—a white man!

Jim Dodd's shriek rang out above the shrilling of the beetle-legs, "Bram! It's you, it's you! My God, it's you, Bram!"

Chapter 4: Bram's Story

A sneering chuckle broke from Bram's lips. "Yes, it's me, James Dodd," he answered. "I'm a little surprised to see you here, Dodd, but I'm mighty glad. Still insane upon the subject of fossil monotremes, I suppose?"

The words came haltingly from Bram's lips, as from those of a man who had lost the habit of easy speech. And Tommy, looking on, and trying to keep in possession of his faculties, had already come to the

conclusion that the sounds were inaudible to the beetles. Probably their hearing apparatus was not attuned to such slow vibrations of the human voice.

Also he had discovered that Bram was wearing the discarded shell of one of the monsters: he had not grown the shell himself. It was fastened about his body by a band of the hair-cloth, fastened to the two protuberances of the elytra, or wing-cases, on either side of the dorsal surface.

The discovery at least robbed the situation of one aspect of terror. Bram, however he had obtained control of the swarm, was still only a man.

"Yes, still insane," answered Dodd bitterly. "Insane enough to go on believing that the polyprotodontia and the dasyuridae, which includes the peramelidae, or bandicoots, and the banded ant-eaters, or myrmecobidae, are not to be found in fossil form, for the excellent reason that they were not represented before the Upper Cretaceous period."

"You lie! You lie!" screamed Bram. "I have shown to all the world that phascalotherium, amphitherium, amblotherium, spalacotherium, and many other orders are to be found in the Upper Jurassic rocks of

England, Wyoming, and other places. You—you are the man who denied the existence of the nototherium, of the marsupial lion, in pleistocene deposits! You denied that the dasyuridae can be traced back beyond the pleistocene. And you stand there and lie to me, when you are at my mercy!"

"For God's sake don't aggravate him," whispered Tommy to Dodd. "Don't you see that he's insane? Humor him, or we'll be dead men. Think what the world will lose, if you are never able to go back with your specimens," he added craftily.

But Dodd, whose eyes were glaring, said a sublime thing: "I have given my life to science, and I will never deny my master!"

With a screech, which, however, was evidently inaudible to the beetles, Bram leaped at Dodd and seized him by the throat. The two men fell to the ground, the ponderous beetle-shell completely covering them. Underneath it they could be seen to be struggling desperately. All the while the beetle horde remained perfectly motionless. Tommy thought afterward that in this fact lay their brightest chances of escape, if Bram's immediate vengeance did not fall on them.

Either because Bram was not himself a beetle, or because in some

other way the swarm instinct was not stirred, the monsters watched the struggle with complete indifference.

At the moment, however, Tommy was only concerned with saving Dodd from the madman. He got his foot beneath the shell, then inserted his leg; using his whole body as a lever, he succeeded in turning Bram over on his back.

Then, and only then, the swarm rushed in upon them. Then Tommy realized that he had touched one of the triggers that regulated the beetle's automatism. In another instant Bram would have been torn to pieces. The needle-beaks were darting through the air, the hideous jaws were snapping. Bram's yells rang through the cavern.

Dodging beneath the avalanche of the monsters, Tommy got Bram upon his feet again. The beetles stopped, every movement arrested. Bram's hand went to the pocket of his tattered coat, there came a snap, a flash. Bram had ignited an automatic cigarette-lighter!

Instantly the monsters went scurrying away into the distance. And Tommy had another clue. The beetles, living in the dimness of the underworld, could not stand light or fire!

He ran to where Jimmy was lying, face upward, on the ground. His

face was badly scarred by Bram's nails, and the blood was spurting from a long gash in his throat, made by the sharp flint that was lying beside him.

He had some time before discarded his fur coat. Now he pulled off his coat, and, tearing off the tail of his shirt, he made a pad and a bandage, with which he attempted to staunch the blood and bind the wound. It must have taken ten minutes before the failing heart force enabled him to get the bleeding under control. Dodd had nearly bled to death, his face was drawn and waxen, but, because the pulsation was so feeble, the artery had ceased to spurt.

Then only did Tommy take notice of Bram. He had been squatting near, and Tommy realized that he had unconsciously observed Bram put some sort of pellets into his mouth. Now he realized that Bram was a drug fiend. That was what had made him walk out of the Greystoke camp in the storm.

Bram got up and came toward them. "Is he dead?" he whispered hoarsely. "I—I lost my temper. You two—I don't intend to kill you. There—there's room for the three of us. I've got—plans of the utmost importance to humanity."

"I don't think much of the way you've started to carry them out,"

answered Tommy bitterly. "No, he's not dead yet, but I wouldn't give much for his chances, even in the best hospital. The best thing you can do now is to go to hell, and take your beetles with you," he added.

Bram, without replying, raised his head and emitted from his throat the shrillest whistle that Tommy had ever heard. The response was amazing.

Rasping out of the darkness came eight beetles in pairs. Instead of leaping from an upright position, they trotted in the manner of horses, on all fours, their shells, which touched at the edges, forming a solid surface, gently rounded in the center so that a man's body could lie there and fit snugly into the groove.

"Help me get him up," said Bram. "Trust me! I'll do my best for him. If we leave him here they may kill and eat him. I can't trust all those beetle guards."

Tommy hesitated a moment, then decided to follow Bram's suggestion. Together they raised the unconscious man to the beetle-shell couch. Bram seated himself upon the boss of one of the beetle-shells in front, and Tommy jumped up behind.

Next moment, to his amazement, the trained steeds were flying smoothly through the air, at a rate that could not have been less than seventy-five to eighty miles an hour.

Tommy's shell seat was not a bed of roses, but he hardly noticed that. He was thinking that if Dodd lived they should be able to turn the tables.

For, unknown to Bram, he was in possession of the cigarette-lighter which he had picked up, and which Bram, in his agitation, had forgotten. It was full of petrol, or some other fluid of a similar nature, which Bram must have obtained from some natural source within the earth. And, in an emergency, Tommy knew that he had the means of keeping the beetles at bay.

They had traveled for perhaps an hour when a faint light began to glow in the distance. It grew brighter, and a roaring sound became audible. A turn of the track that they were traversing, and the light became a glare. A terrific sight met Tommy's eyes.

Out of the bowels of the earth—actually out of the crust beneath their feet—there shot a pillar of roaring flame, of intense white color, and radiating a heat that was perceptible even at a distance of several hundred yards. The beetle steeds dropped gently to the ground; they

halted. Bram got down, grinning.

"Nicely trained horses, what?" he asked. "By the way, you have the advantage of me in names. Who and what are you?"

Tommy told him.

"Well, Travers, it looks as if we're going to be companions for some time to come, and I quite admit you saved my life back there. So we don't want to start with secrets. This is a natural petrol spring, which has probably been burning undiminished for ages. My trained beetles are blind—you didn't happen to notice I'd cut off their antenna? But the rest of the swarm daren't come near it. So that makes me their master.

"Pretty trick, what, Travers? I'm the Lord of the Flame down here, and I'm using my advantage. But don't get the idea of supplanting me. There are lots of other tricks you don't know anything about, and I'll have to trust you better before—"

He broke off and slipped another pellet into his mouth.

"Help me get Dodd down, if this is our destination," answered Tommy.

They lifted Dodd to the ground. He was conscious now, and moaning for water. The two men carried him into a sort of large cavern, at the farther end of which the fire was roaring. Bram went to a spring that trickled down one side, filled something that looked like a petrified lily calyx, and brought it to Dodd, who drained it.

Tommy looked about him. He was astonished to see that the place was, in a way, furnished. Bram had carved out a very creditable couch, and several low chairs, evidently with a stone ax, for by the light of the fire, which cast a fair illumination even at that distance, Tommy could see the marks of the implement, rough and irregular, in the wood.

On the ground were thick rugs, woven of hair, and two or three more rugs of the same material lay on the couch. It was evident that the human herd was expected to furnish textile materials as well as meat.

"Sit down, and make yourself comfortable," said Bram, when they had raised Dodd to the couch. "We'll have dinner, and then we'll talk. I can give you a fine vegetarian meal. Those dirty shrimp-eating savages look on me as a cannibal because I eat the fruits of the trees." He grinned. "There's a bad shortage of food in Submundia, as I've named this part of the world," he went on, "for until I came the

beetles simply devoured the humans wholesale, instead of breeding them, like I taught them. And there's another of the hundred-and-fifty year swarms due to hatch out soon. However, we'll talk about that later. And all those fine fruits going to waste! Excuse me, Travers."

He disappeared, and returned in a minute or two with a small table, piled high with luscious fruits unknown to Tommy, though among them were some that looked like loaves of natural bread.

Tommy, whose appetite never failed him even in the worst circumstances, fell to with a will. He was enjoying his meal when he happened to look up, and saw that the penumbra at the edge of the lighted zone was dense with beetles.

Thousands—perhaps millions, for they stretched away as far as the eye could see, were packed together, their antenna waving in unison, their heads, beneath the shells, directed toward the fire.

Bram saw Tommy's look of disgust, and laughed. "The fire seems to intoxicate them, Travers," he said. "They always throng the entrance when I'm here. It's as far as they dare go. They're quite blind in the least light. Care to smoke? I've learned the art of making some quite decent cigars." He produced a handful. "Oh, by the way, you didn't

see my lighter anywhere, did you?" he went on, with a pretense of carelessness.

"No," lied Tommy. "I was surprised you—"

"Oh, there's a supply of petrol in the rocks. No matter," answered Bram carelessly. "Your friend looks bad," he added, glancing at Dodd, who had fallen asleep. "Travers, I'm sorry I lost my temper. The—the shock of meeting men from the upper world, you know."

Dodd opened his eyes and tried to whisper. Tommy bent over him and listened.

"He wants to know whether he can have that girl to take care of him," he said.

"What, the one I saw you with? Why, she's a cull, Travers."

"What d'you mean?" asked Tommy.

"Why—useless, you know. There's several of them running loose, and waiting to be rounded up. We raise two breeds, one for replenishing the stock, and one for meat. She's just a cull, a reversion, no use for either purpose. I'll have her brought by all means. I—I like Dodd. I want to get him to like me," Bram went on,

with a sort of penitence that had a pathetic touch. "Our little differences—quite absurd, and I can prove he's wrong in his ideas.

"Make yourself comfortable as long as you're here, Travers, and don't mind me. Only, don't try to escape. The beetles will get you if you do, and there's no way out of here—none that you'll find. And don't try to follow me. But you're a sensible man, and we'll all get along famously, I'm sure, as soon as Dodd recovers."

Chapter 5: Doomed!

There were no means known to Tommy of reckoning time in that strange place of twilight. His watch had been broken in the airplane fall; and Dodd never remembered to wind his, but they estimated that about two weeks had passed, judging from the number of times they had slept and eaten.

In those two weeks they had gradually begun to grow accustomed to their surroundings. Haidia, the girl, had arrived on beetle-back within an hour after Bram's departure, apparently into a cleft of the rocks—how he had communicated his order to the beetle steeds Tommy had no idea. And under the girl's ministrations Dodd was making good progress toward recovery.

That Haidia was in love with Dodd in quite a human way was evident. To please the girl, both Dodd and Tommy had learned to eat the raw shrimps, which, being bloodless, were really no worse than oysters, and had a flavor half-way between shrimp and crawfish. To please the men, Haidia tried not to shudder when she saw them devouring the breadfruit and nectarines of which Bram always had a plentiful supply. Bram was solicitous in his inquiries for Dodd's health.

"Jim, I've been thinking about our chances of getting away," said Tommy one morning. "It's evident Bram's only waiting for your recovery to put some proposition up to us. Suppose you were to feign paralysis."

"How d'you mean? What for?" demanded Dodd.

"If he thinks you're helpless, he'll be less on his guard. You haven't walked about in his presence." That was true, for the activities of the two had been nocturnal, when Bram had vanished. "Let him think a nerve's been severed in your neck, or something of the sort. If it doesn't work, you can always get better."

Dodd's realistic portrayal of a man with a partly paralyzed right side brought cries of horror from Bram next morning. Solicitously he

helped Dodd back to the couch. Bram, when not under the influence of his drug, had moments of human feeling.

"Can't you move that arm and leg at all, Dodd?" he asked. "No feeling in them?"

"There's plenty of feeling," growled Dodd, "but they don't seem to work, that's all."

"You'll get better," said Bram eagerly. "You must get better. I need you, Dodd, in spite of our differences. There's work for all of us, wonderful work. A new humanity, waiting to be born, Dodd, not of the miserable ape race, but of—of—"

He checked himself, and a cunning look came over his face. He turned away abruptly.

At the end of two weeks or so, an amazing thing happened. One day Haidia, with a look of triumph in her eyes, addressed Dodd with a few English words!

Her brain, which had probably developed certain faculties in different proportions from those of the upper human race, had registered every word that either of the two men had ever spoken,

and remembered it. As soon as Dodd ascertained this, he began to instruct her, and, with her abnormal faculties of memory, it was not long before she could talk quite intelligently. The obstacle that had stood between them was swept away. She became one of themselves.

In the days that followed the girl told them brokenly something of the history of her race, of the legend of the universal flood that had driven them down into the bowels of the earth, of the centuries-long struggle with the beetles, and of the insects' gradual conquest of humanity, and the final reduction of the human race to a miserable, helpless remnant.

Everywhere, Haidia told them, were beetle swarms, everywhere humanity had been reduced to a few handfuls. Bram, by breeding mankind from prolific strains, and using the new-born progeny for food, had temporarily averted universal starvation. But a new swarm of beetles was due to hatch out shortly, and then—

The girl, with a shudder, put her hand to her bosom, and brought out a little bright-eyed lizard.

"The old man you saw with me, who is one of our wise elders, has told our people that these things feed upon the beetle larvae," she

said. "We are putting them secretly into the nests. But what can a few lizards do against millions." She looked up. "In the earth above us, the beetle larvae extend for miles, in a solid mass," she said. "When they come out as beetles, it will be the end of all of us."

Bram had grown less suspicious as the time passed. His sudden visits to the cavern had ceased. Dodd and Tommy knew that he spent the nights—if they could be termed nights—lying in a drugged slumber somewhere among the rocks. They had asked Haidia whether there was any way of escape into the upper world.

"There are two ways from here," answered the girl. "One is the way you came, but it is impossible to pass the beetle guards without being torn to pieces. The other—"

She shuddered, and for an instant drew back the film from across her pupils, then uttered a little cry of pain at the light, dim though it was.

"There is a bridge across that terrible monster that devours all it touches," she said, shuddering, meaning the fire.

Suddenly Dodd had an inspiration. He still had the fur coat that he had worn, and, reaching into a pocket he drew out a pair of snow goggles, which he adjusted over Haidia's nose.

"Now look!" he said.

Haidia looked, blinked and, with an effort kept her eyes open. She gazed at Dodd in amazement. Dodd laughed, and pulled her toward him. He kissed her, and Haidia's eyes closed.

"What is this?" she murmured. "First you give me medicine that opens my eyes, and then you give me medicine that closes them."

"That's nothing," grinned Dodd. "Wait till you understand me better."

Bram's eyes were preternaturally bright. It was evident that he had been increasing his dose of late, and that he was fully under the influence of it now.

"Well, gentlemen, the time has come for us to be frank with one another," he said, as the three were gathered about the little table, while Haidia crouched in a far corner of the cave. "I want you to work for me in my plans for the regeneration of humanity. The time for which I have long labored is almost at hand. Any day now the new swarm of beetles may emerge from the pupal stage. But before I speak further, come and see them, gentlemen!"

He rose, and Dodd and Tommy rose too, Tommy supporting Dodd,

who let his arm and leg trail awkwardly as he moved.

Bram led the way into the cleft among the rocks into which he had been in the habit of passing. Beyond this opening the two men saw another smaller cavern, with a beetle guard standing on either side, antenna waving.

Bram shrilled a sound, and the antenna dropped. The three passed through. Tommy saw a hair-cloth pallet set against the rocks, a table, and a chair. Beyond was a sloping ramp of earth. Overhead was a rock ceiling.

Bram led the way up the ramp, and the three stepped through a gap in the rocks and found themselves on an extensive prairie. But in place of the red grass there was a vast sea of mud.

By the light cast by the petrol fire, which roared up in the distance, a veritable fiery fountain, the two Americans could see that the mud was filled with huge encysted forms, grubs three or four feet long, motionless in the soil.

Bram scooped up one of them and tossed it into the air. It thudded to their feet and remained motionless.

"As far as you can see, and for miles beyond, these pupae of the beetles lie buried in the decaying vegetation in which the eggs were hatched," said Bram. "Every century and a half, so far as I have been able to judge from comparative anatomy, a fresh swarm emerges. See!"

He pointed to the pupa he had unearthed, which, as if stirred into activity by his handling, was now beginning to move. Or, rather, something was moving inside the cocoon.

The shell broke, and the hideous head and folded antenna of a beetle appeared. With a convulsive writhing, the monster threw off the covering and stepped out. It extended its wings, glistening, with moisture, from the still soft and pliant carapace, or shell, and suddenly zoomed off into the distance.

Tommy shuddered as the boom of its flight grew softer and subsided.

"Any day now the entire swarm will emerge," cried Bram. "How many moultings they undergo before they undergo the finished state, I do not know, but already, as you see, they are prepared for the battle of life. They emerge ravenous. That beetle will fall upon the man-herds and devour a full grown man, unless the guards destroy

it."

He raised his arms with the gesture of an ancient prophet. "Woe to the human race," he cried, "the wretched ape spawn that has cast out its teachers and persecuted those who sought to raise it to higher things!"

Tommy knew that Bram was referring to himself. Bram turned fiercely upon Dodd.

"When I joined the Greystoke expedition," he cried, "it was with the express intention of refuting your miserable theories as to the fossil monotremes. I could not sleep or eat, so deeply was I affronted by them. For, if they were true, the dasyuridae are an innovation in the great scheme of nature, and man, instead of being a mere afterthought, a jest of the Creative Force, came to earth with a purpose.

"That I deny," he yelled. "Man is a joke. Nature made him when she was tired, as the architect of a cathedral fashions a gargoyle in a sportive moment. It is the insect, not man, who is the predestined lord of the ages!"

And for once in his life, perhaps because at this point Tommy dug

him violently in the ribs, Dodd had the sense to remain silent. Bram led the way swiftly back into the larger cave.

"When this swarm hatches out," he said, "I calculate that there will be a trillion beetles seeking food. There is no food for a tithe of them here underneath the earth. What then? Do you realize their stupendous power, their invincibility?

"No, you don't realize it, because your minds, through long habit, are only attuned to think in terms of man. All man's long history of slaughter of the so-called lower creatures obsesses you, blinds your understanding. A beetle? Something to be trodden underfoot, crushed in sport! But I tell you, gentlemen, that nature—God, if you will—has designed to supplant the man-ape by the beetle.

"He has resolved to throw down the wretched so-called intelligence of your kind and mine, and supplant it by the divine instinct of the beetle, an instinct that is infinitely superior, because it arrives at results instantaneously. It knows where man infers. Attuned closely to nature, it alone is able to fulfil the divine plan of Creation."

Bram was certainly under the influence of his drug; nevertheless, so violent were his gestures, so inspired was his utterance, that Tommy and Dodd listened almost in awe.

"They are invincible," Bram went on. "Their fecundity is such that when the new swarm is hatched out their numbers alone will make them irresistible. They do not know fear. They shrink from nothing. And they will follow me, their leader—I, who know the means of controlling them. How, then, can puny man hope to stand against them?

"Join me, gentlemen," Bram went on. "And beware how you decide rashly. For this is the supreme moment, not only of your own lives, but for all humanity and beetledom. Upon your decision hangs the future of the world.

"For, irresistible as the beetles are, there is one thing they lack. That is the sense of historic continuity. If they destroy man, they will know nothing of man's achievements, poor though these are. My own work on the fossil monotremes—"

"Which is a tissue of inaccuracies and half-baked deductions!" shouted Dodd.

Bram started as if a whip had lashed him. "Liar!" he bawled. "Do you think that I, who left the Greystoke expedition in a howling blizzard because I knew that here, in the inner earth, I could refute your miserable impostures—do you think that I am in the mood to

listen to your wretched farrago of impossibilities?"

"Listen to me," bawled Dodd, advancing with waving arms. "Once and for all, let me tell you that your deductions are all based upon fallacious premises. No, I will not shut up, Tom Travers! You want me to aid your damned beetles in the destruction of humanity! I tell you that your phascalotherium, amphitherium, and all the rest of them, including the marsupial lion, are degenerate developments of the age following the pleistocene. I say the whole insect world was made to fertilize the plant world, so that it should bear fruit for human food. Man is the summit of the scale of evolution, and I will never join in any infamous scheme for his destruction."

Bram glared at Dodd like a madman. Three times he opened his mouth to speak, but only inarticulate sounds came from his throat. And when at last he did speak, he said something that neither Dodd nor Tommy had anticipated.

"It looks as if you're not so paralysed as you made out," he sneered. "You'll change your mind within what used to be called a day, Dodd. You'll crawl to my feet and beg for pardon. And you'll recant your lying theories about the fossil monotremes, or you die—the pair of you—you die!"

Chapter 6: Escape!

"I heard what he said. You shall not die. We shall go away to your place, where there are no beetles to eat us, even if"—Haidia shuddered—"even if we have to cross the bridge of fire, beyond which, they tell me, lies freedom."

High over and a little to one side of the petrol flame Dodd and Tommy had seen the slender arch of rock leading into another cleft in the rocks. They had investigated it several times, but always the fierce heat had driven them back.

Both Dodd and Tommy had noticed, however, that at times the fire seemed to shrink in volume and intensity. Observation had shown them that these times were periodical, recurring about every twelve hours.

"I think I've got the clue, Tommy," said Dodd, as the three watched the fiery fountain and speculated on the possibility of escape. "That flow of petrol is controlled, like the tides on earth, by the pull of the moon. Just now it is at its height. I've noticed that it loses pretty nearly half its volume at its alternating phase. If I'm right, we'll make the attempt in about twelve hours."

"Bram's given us twenty-four," said Tommy. "But how about getting Haidia across?"

"I go where you go," said Haidia, sidling up to Dodd and looking down upon him lovingly. "I do not afraid of the fire. If it burn me up, I go to the good place."

"Where's that, Haidia?" asked Dodd.

"When we die, we go to a place where it is always dark and there are no beetles, and the ground is full of shrimps. We leave our bodies behind, like the beetles, and fly about happy for ever."

"Not a bad sort of place," said Dodd, squeezing Haidia's arm. "If you think you're ready to try to cross the bridge, we'll start as soon as the fire gets lower."

"I'll be on the job," answered Haidia, unconsciously reproducing a phrase of Tommy's.

The girl glided away, and disappeared through the thick of the beetle crowd clustered about the entrance to the cavern. Tommy and Dodd had already discovered that it was through her ability to reproduce a certain beetle sound meaning "not good to eat" that the girl could

come and go. They had once tried it on their own account, and had narrowly escaped the lashing tentacles.

After that there was nothing to do but wait. Three or four hours must have passed when Bram returned from his inner cave.

"Well, Dodd, have you experienced a change of heart?" he sneered. "If you knew what's in store for you, maybe you'd come to the conclusion that you've been too cocksure about the monotremes. We're slaughtering in the morning."

"That so?" asked Dodd.

"That's so," shouted Bram. "The beetles are beginning to emerge from the pupae, and they'll need food if they're to be kept quiet. We're rounding up about threescore of the culls—your friend Haidia will be among them. We've got some caged ichneumon flies, pretty little things only a foot long, which will sting them in certain nerve centers, rendering them powerless to move. Then we shall bury them, standing up, in the vegetable mould, for the beetles to devour alive, as soon as they come out of the shells. You'll feel pretty, Dodd, standing there unable to move, with the new born beetles biting chunks out of you."

Tommy shuddered, despite his hopes of their escaping. Bram, for a scientist, had a grim and picturesque imagination.

"Dodd, there is no personal quarrel between us," Bram went on. Again that note of pathetic pleading came into his voice. "Give up your mad ideas. Admit that the banded ant-eater, at least, existed before the pleistocene epoch, and everything can be settled. When you see what my beetles are going to do to humanity, you'll be proud to join us. Only make a beginning. You remember the point I made in my paper, about spalacotherium in the Upper Jurassic rocks. It would convince anybody but a hardened fanatic."

"I read your paper, and I saw your so-called spalacotherium, reconstructed from what you called a jaw-bone," shouted Dodd. "That so-called jaw-bone was a lump of chalk, made porous by water, and the rest was in your imagination. Do your worst, Bram, I'll never crucify truth to save my life. And I'll laugh at your spalacotherium when your beetles are eating me."

Bram yelled and shrieked, he stamped up and down the cavern, shaking his fists at Dodd. At last, with a final torrent of objurgation, he disappeared.

"A pleasant customer," said Tommy. "We'll have to make that bridge,

Jim, no question about it, even if it means death in the petrol fire."

"Fire's dying down fast," answered Dodd. "Haidia ought to be here soon."

"If Bram hasn't got her."

"Bram got—that girl? If Bram harms a hair of her head I'll kill him with worse tortures than he's ever dreamed of," answered Dodd, leaping up, white with rage.

"You mean you—?" Tommy began.

"Love her? Yes, I love her," shouted Dodd. "She's a girl in a million. Just the sort of helpmate I need to assist me in my work when we get back. I tell you, Tommy, I didn't know what love meant before I saw Haidia. I laughed at it as a romantic notion. 'Oh lyric love, half angel and half bird!'" he quoted, beginning to stride up and down the cavern, while Tommy watched him in amazement.

And at this moment a complete beetle entered the cave. Complete, because it had a plastron, or breast-shell, as well as a back-shell, or carapace.

A double breast-shell! A new species of beetle? An executioner

beetle, sent by Bram to summon them to the torture? Tommy shuddered, but Dodd, lost in his love ecstasy, was ignorant of the creature's advent.

"'Oh lyric love—'" he shouted again, as he twirled on his heel, to run smack into the monster. The crack of Dodd's head against the beetle-shell re-echoed through the cave.

The double plastron dropped, the carapace fell down: Haidia stood revealed. The lovers, folded in each other's arms, passed momentarily into a trance.

It was Tommy who separated them. "We'll have to make a move," he said. "I think the fire's as low as it ever gets. Why did you bring the shells, Haidia?"

"To save us all from the beetles," answered the girl. "When they see us in the shells, they will not know we are human. That is what makes it so hard to have to be eaten by those beetles, when they are such dumb-bells," she added, reproducing another of Tommy's words.

"Come," she continued bravely, "let us see if we can pass the fire."

The roaring fountain made the air a veritable inferno. Overhead the rocks were red-hot. A cascade of sparks tumbled in a fiery shower from the rock roof. Dodd, holding Haidia in his arms, to protect her, staggered ahead, with Tommy in the rear. Only the beetle-shells, which acted as non-conductors of the heat, made that fiery passage possible.

There was one moment when it seemed to Tommy as if he must let go, and drop into that raging furnace underneath. He heard Dodd bawling hoarsely in front of him, he nerved himself to a last effort, beating fiercely at his blazing hair—and then the heat was past, and he had dropped unconscious upon a bed of cool earth beside a rushing river.

He was vaguely aware of being carried in Dodd's arms, but a long time seemed to have passed before he grew conscious again. He opened his eyes in utter darkness. Dodd was whispering in his ear.

"Tommy, old man, how are you feeling now?" Dodd asked.

"All—right," Tommy muttered. "How's Haidia?"

"Still unconscious, poor girl. We've got to get out of here. I heard Bram yelling in the distance. He's discovered our flight. There may

be another way out of the cave, and, if so, he'll stop at nothing to get us. See if you can stand, but keep your head low. There's a low roof of rock above us."

"There's water," said Tommy, listening to the roar of a torrent that seemed to be rushing past them.

"It's a stream, and I believe these shells will float and bear our weight. We've got to try. We've got to put everything to the touch now, Tommy. I'm going to lay Haidia on one of the shells, poor girl, and start her off. Then I'll follow, and you can bring up the rear."

"I'm with you," said Tommy, getting upon his feet, and uttering an exclamation of pain as, forgetful of Dodd's injunction, he let his head strike the rock roof overhead.

In the darkness he felt the outlines of his beetle-shell lying beside the torrent. He could hear Dodd in front of him, grunting as he raised Haidia's unconscious form in his arms and deposited her in her shell. Tommy got his own shell into the stream, and held it there as the waters swirled around it.

"Ready?" he heard Dodd call.

Before he could answer, there sounded from not far away, yet strangely muffled by the rocks, Bram's bellow of fury. Bram was evidently fully drugged and beside himself. Inarticulate threats came floating through the rocky chamber.

"Bram seems to have lost his head temporarily," called Dodd, laughing. "A madman, Tommy. He insists that the marsupial lion—"

"Yes, I heard you telling him about it," answered Tommy. "You handed it to him straight. However, more about the marsupial lion later. I'm ready."

"Then let 'er go," called Dodd, and his words were swallowed up by the sound of the hollow shell striking against the rocky bank as he launched his strange craft into the water.

Tommy set one foot into the hollow of his shell, and let himself go.

Instantly the shell shot forward with fearful velocity. It was all Tommy could do to balance himself, for it seemed more unstable than a canoe. Once or twice he thought he heard Dodd shouting ahead of him, but his cries were drowned in the rush of the torrent.

Suddenly a light appeared in the distance. Tommy thought it was

another of the petroleum fountains, and his heart seemed to stand still. But then he gave a gasp of relief. It was a cluster of luminous fungi, ten or twelve feet tall, emitting a glow equal to that of a dozen 40-watt electric bulbs.

By that infernal light Tommy could see that the stream curved sharply. It was about fifty feet in width, and the low rock roof had receded to some fifteen feet overhead. Instead of a tunnel, there was nothing on either side of them but a vast tract of marshy ground thinly coated with the red grass.

As Tommy looked, he saw the shell that carried the unconscious body of Haidia strike the bank beside the phosphorescent growth. He could see the girl lying in the hollow of the shell, as pale as death, her eyes closed. Dodd was close behind. As the swirl of the current caught his shell, he turned to shout a warning to Tommy.

And Tommy noticed a singular thing, of which his sense of balance had already warned him, though he had hardly given conscious thought to the matter. *The river was running up-hill!*

Of course it was, since the center of gravity was in the shell of the earth, and not in the center!

But, again, the shell of the earth was under their feet!

Then Tommy hit on the solution to the problem. If the river was running up-hill, that meant that they must be near the exterior of the earth. In other words, they had passed the center of gravity: they must be within a mile or so of the exit from Submundia!

Tommy was about to shout his discovery to Dodd when his shell grounded beside the two others, at the base of the clump of fungi.

Huge, straight, hollow stems they were, with mushroom caps, and, like all fungi, fly-blown, for Tommy could see worms nearly a foot in length crawling in and out of the porous stalks. The stench from the growth was nauseating and overpowering, utterly sickening.

"Push off and let's get out of here!" Tommy called to Dodd, who was balancing his shell against the bank, and trying to peer into Haidia's face.

At that moment he caught sight of something that made his blood turn cold!

It was an insect fully fifteen feet in height, three times that of a beetle, lurking among the fungi. He saw a hugely elongated neck, a

three-cornered head with a pair of tentacles, and two pairs of legs as long as a giraffe's. But what gave the added touch of horror was that the monster, balancing itself on its hind legs, had its forelegs extended in the attitude of one holding a prayer-book!

That attitude of devotion was so terrible that Tommy uttered a wild cry of terror. At the same time another cry broke from Dodd's lips.

"God, a praying mantis!" he shouted, struggling madly to push off his shell and Haidia's.

The next moment, as if shot from a catapult, the hideous monster launched itself into the air straight toward them.

Chapter 7: Through the Inferno

Fortunately, the monster miscalculated its leap. The huge legs, whirling through the air, came within a few inches of Tommy's head, but passed over him, and the mantis plunged into the stream. Instantly the water was alive with leaping things with faces of such grotesque horror that Tommy sat paralyzed in his rocking shell, unable to avert his eyes.

Things no more than a foot or two in length, to judge from the slender, eel-like bodies that leaped into the air, but things with catfish heads and tentacles, and eyes waving on stalks; things with clawlike appendages to their ventral fins, and mouths that widened to fearful size, so that the whole head seemed to disappear above them, disclosing fangs like wolves'. Instantly the water was churned into phosphorescent fire as they precipitated themselves upon the struggling mantis, whose enormous form, extending halfway from shore to shore, was covered with the river monsters, gnawing, rending, tearing.

Luckily the struggles of the dying monster carried it downstream instead of up. In a few moments the immediate danger was past. And suddenly Haidia awoke, sat up.

"Where are we?" she cried. "Oh, I can see! I can see! Something has burned away from my eyes! I know this place. A wise man of my people once came here, and returned to tell of it. We must go on. Soon we shall be safe on the wide river. But there is another way that leads to here. We must go on! We must go on!"

Even as she spoke they heard the distant rasping of the beetle-legs. And before the shells were well in mid-current they saw the beetle horde coming round the bend; in the front of them Bram, reclining on his shell couch, and drawn by the eight trained beetles.

Bram saw the fugitives, and a roar of ironic mirth broke from his lips, resounding high above the strident rasping of the beetle-legs, and roaring over the marshes.

"I've got you, Dodd and Travers," he bellowed, as the trained beetles hovered above the shell canoes. "You thought you were clever, but you're at my mercy. Now's your last chance, Dodd. I'll save you still if you'll submit to me, if you'll admit that there were fossil monotremes before the pleistocene epoch. Come, it's so simple! Say it after me: 'The marsupial lion—'"

"You go to hell!" yelled Dodd, nearly upsetting his shell as he shook his fist at his enemy.

High above the rasping sound came Bram's shrill whistle. Just audible to human ears, though probably sounding like the roar of thunder to those of the beetles, there was no need to wonder what it was.

It was the call to slaughter.

Like a black cloud the beetles shot forward. A serried phalanx covered the two men and the girl, hovering a few feet overhead, the long legs dangling to within arm's reach. And a terrible cry of fear broke from Haidia's lips.

Suddenly Tommy remembered Bram's cigarette-lighter. He pulled it from his pocket and ignited it.

Small as the flame was, it was actinically much more powerful than the brighter phosphorescence of the fungi behind them. The beetle-cloud overhead parted. The strident sound was broken into a confused buzzing as the terrified, blinded beetles plopped into the stream.

None of them, fortunately, fell into either of the three shells, but the mass of struggling monsters in the water was hardly less formidable to the safety of the occupants than that menacing cloud overhead.

"Get clear!" Tommy yelled to Dodd, trying to help the shell along with his hands.

He heard Bram's cry of baffled rage, and, looking backward, could not refrain from a laugh of triumph. Bram's trained steeds had taken fright and overset him. Bram had fallen into the red mud beside the stream, from which he was struggling up, plastered from head to feet, and shaking his fists and evidently cursing, though his words could not be heard.

"How about your marsupial lion now, Bram?" yelled Dodd. "No monotremes before the pleistocene! D'you get that? That's my slogan now and for ever more!"

Bram shrieked and raved, and seemed to be inciting the beetles to a renewed assault. The air was still thick with them, but Tommy was waving the cigarette-lighter in a flaming arc, which cleared the way for them.

Then suddenly came disaster. The flame went out! Tommy closed the lighter with a snap and opened it. In vain. In his excitement he must have spilled all the contents, for it would not catch.

Bram saw and yelled derision. The beetle-cloud was thickening.

Tommy, now abreast of his companions on the widening stream, saw the imminent end.

And then once more fate intervened. For, leaping through the air out of the places where they had lain concealed, six mantises launched themselves at their beetle prey.

Those awful bounds of the long-legged monsters, the scourges of the insect world, carried them clear from one bank to the other—fortunately for the occupants of the shells. In an instant the beetle-cloud dissolved. And it had all happened in a few seconds. Before Dodd or Tommy had quite taken in the situation, the mantises, each carrying a victim in its grooved legs, had vanished like the beetles. There was no sign of Bram. The three were alone upon the face of the stream, which went swirling upward into renewed darkness.

Tommy saw Dodd bend toward Haidia as she lay on her shell couch. He heard the sound of a noisy kiss. And he lay back in the hollow of his shell, with the feeling that nothing that could happen in the future could be worse than what they had passed through.

Days went by, days when the sense of dawning freedom filled their hearts with hope. Haidia told Dodd and Tommy that, according to the legends of her people, the river ran into the world from which

they had been driven by the floods, ages before.

There had been no further signs of Bram or the beetle horde, and Dodd and Tommy surmised that it had been disorganized by the attack of the mantises, and that Bram was engaged in regaining his control over it. But neither of them believed that the respite would be a long one, and for that reason they rested ashore only for the briefest intervals, just long enough to snatch a little sleep, and to eat some of the shrimps that Haidia was adept at finding—or to pull some juicy fruit surreptitiously from a tree.

Incidents there were, nevertheless, during those days. For hours their shells were followed by a school of the luminous river monsters, which, nevertheless, made no attempt to attack them. And once, hearing a cry from Haidia, as she was gathering shrimps, Dodd ran forward to see her battling furiously with a luminous scorpion, eight feet in length, that had sprung at her from its lurking place behind a pear shrub.

Dodd succeeded in stunning and dispatching the monster without suffering any injury from it, but the strain of the period was beginning to tell on all of them. Worst of all, they seemed to have left all the luminous vegetation behind them, and were entering a region of almost total darkness, in which Haidia had to be their eyes.

Something had happened to the girl's sight in the journey over the petrol spring. As a matter of fact, the third, or nictitating membrane, which the humans of Submundia possessed, in common with birds, had been burned away. Haidia could see as well as ever in the dark, but she could bear more light than formerly as well. Unobtrusively she assumed command of the party. She anticipated their wants, dug shrimps in the darkness, and fed Tommy and Dodd with her own hands.

"God, what a girl!" breathed Dodd to his friend. "I've always had the reputation of being a woman-hater, Tommy, but once I get that girl to civilization I'm going to take her to the nearest Little Church Around the Corner in record time."

"I wish you luck, old man, I'm sure," answered Tommy. Dodd's words did not seem strange to him. Civilization was growing very remote to him, and Broadway seemed like a memory of some previous incarnation.

The river was growing narrower again, and swifter, too. On the last day, or night, of their journey—though they did not know that it was to be their last—it swirled so fiercely that it threatened every moment to overset their beetle-shells. Suddenly Tommy began to feel giddy. He gripped the side of his shell with his hand.

"Tommy, we're going round!" shouted Dodd in front of him.

There was no longer any doubt of it. The shells were revolving in a vortex of rushing, foaming water.

"Haidia!" they shouted.

The girl's voice came back thickly across the roaring torrent. The circles grew smaller. Tommy knew that he was being sucked nearer and nearer to the edge of some terrific whirlpool in that inky blackness. Now he could no longer hear Dodd's shouts, and the shell was tipping so that he could feel the water rushing along the edge of it. But for the exercise of centrifugal force he would have been flung from his perilous seat, for he was leaning inward at an angle of forty-five degrees.

Then suddenly his progress was arrested. He felt the shell being drawn to the shore. He leaped out, and Haidia's strong hands dragged the shell out of the torrent, while Tommy sank down, gasping.

"What's the matter?" he heard Dodd demanding.

"There is no more river," said Haidia calmly. "It goes into a hole in

the ground. So much I have heard from the wise men of my people. They say that it is near such a place that they fled from the flood in years gone by."

"Then we're near safety," shouted Tommy. "That river must emerge as a stream somewhere in the upper world, Dodd. I wonder where the road lies."

"There is a road here," came Haidia's calm voice. "Let us put on our shells again, since who knows whether there may not be beetles here."

"Did you ever see such a girl as that?" demanded Dodd ecstatically. "First she saves our lives, and then she thinks of everything. Good lord, she'll remember my meals, and to wind my watch for me, and —and—"

But Haidia's voice, some distance ahead, interrupted Dodd's soliloquy, and, hoisting the beetle-shells upon their backs, they started along the rough trail that they could feel with their feet over the stony ground. It was still as dark as pitch, but soon they found themselves traveling up a sunken way that was evidently a dry watercourse. And now and again Haidia's reassuring voice would come from in front of them.

The road grew steeper. There could no longer be any doubt that they were ascending toward the surface of the earth. But even the weight of the beetle-shells and the steepness could not account for the feeling of intense weakness that took possession of them. Time and again they stopped, panting.

"We must be very near the surface, Dodd," said Tommy. "We've surely passed the center of gravity. That's what makes it so difficult."

"Come on," Haidia said in her quiet voice, stretching out her hand through the darkness. And for very shame they had to follow her.

On and on, hour after hour, up the steep ascent, resting only long enough to make them realize their utter fatigue. On because Haidia was leading them, and because in the belief that they were about to leave that awful land behind them their desires lent new strength to their limbs continuously.

Suddenly Haidia uttered a fearful cry. Her ears had caught what became apparent to Dodd and Jimmy several seconds later.

Far down in the hollow of the earth, increased by the echoes that came rumbling up, they heard the distant, strident rasp of the beetle swarm.

Then it was Dodd's turn to support Haidia and whisper consolation in her ears. No thought of resting now. If they were to be overwhelmed at last by the monsters, they meant to be overwhelmed in the upper air.

It was growing insufferably hot. Blasts of air, as if from a furnace, began to rush up and down past them. And the trail was growing steeper still, and slippery as glass.

"What is it, Jim?" Tommy panted, as Dodd, leaving Haidia for a moment, came back to him.

"I'd say lava," Dodd answered. "If only one could see something! I don't know how she finds her way. My impression is that we are coming out through the interior of an extinct volcano."

"But where are there volcanoes in the south polar regions?" inquired Tommy.

"There are Mount Erebus and Mount Terror, in South Victoria Land, active volcanoes discovered by Sir James Ross in 1841, and again by Borchgrevink, in 1899. If that's where we're coming out—well, Tommy, we're doomed, because it's the heart of the polar continent. We might as well turn back."

"But we won't turn back," said Tommy. "I'm damned if we do."

"We're damned if we don't," said Dodd.

"Come along please!" sang Haidia's voice high up the slope.

They struggled on. And now a faint luminosity was beginning to penetrate that infernal darkness. The rasping of the beetle-legs, too, was no longer audible. Perhaps they had thrown Bram off their track! Perhaps in the darkness he had not known which way they had gone after leaving the whirlpool!

That thought encouraged them to a last effort. They pushed their flagging limbs up, upward through an inferno of heated air. Suddenly Dodd uttered a yell and pointed upward.

"God!" ejaculated Tommy. Then he seized Dodd in his arms and nearly crushed him. For high above them, a pin-point in the black void, they saw—a star!

They were almost at the earth's surface!

One more effort, and suddenly the ground seemed to give beneath them. They breathed the outer air, and went sliding down a chute of sand, and stopped, half buried, at the bottom.

Chapter 8: Recaptured

"Where are we?" each demanded of the other, as they staggered out.

It was a moonless night, and the air was chill, but they were certainly nowhere near the polar regions, for there was no trace of snow to be seen anywhere. All about them was sand, with here and there a spiny shrub standing up stiff and erect and solitary.

When they had disengaged themselves from the clinging sand they could see that they were apparently in the hollow of a vast crater, that must have been half a mile in circumference. It was low and worn down to an elevation of not more than two or three hundred feet, and evidently the volcano that had thrown it up had been extinct for millennia.

"Water!" gasped Dodd.

They looked all about them. They could see no signs of a spring anywhere, and both were parched with thirst after their terrific climb.

"We must find water, Haidia," said Tommy. "Why, what's the matter?"

Haidia was pointing upward at the starry heaven, and shivering with fear. "Eyes!" she cried. "Big beetles waiting for us up there!"

"No, no, Haidia," Dodd explained. "Those are stars. They are worlds—places where people live."

"Will you take me up there?" asked Haidia.

"No, this is our world," said Dodd. "And by and by the sun will rise, that's a big ball of fire up there. He watches over the world and gives us light and warmth. Don't be afraid. I'll take care of you."

"Haidia is not afraid with Jimmydodd to take care of her," replied the girl with dignity. "Haidia smells water—over there." She pointed across one side of the crater.

"There we'd better hurry," said Tommy, "because I can't hold out much longer."

The three scrambled over the soft sand, which sucked in their feet to the ankle at every step. It was with the greatest difficulty that they succeeded in reaching the crater's summit, low though it was. Then Dodd uttered a cry, and pointed. In front of them extended a long pool of water, with a scrubby growth around the edges.

The ground was firmer here, and they hurried toward it. Tommy was the first to reach it. He lay down on his face and drank eagerly. He had taken in a quart before he discovered that the water was saline.

At the same time Dodd uttered an exclamation of disgust. Haidia, too, after sipping a little of the fluid, had stood up, chattering excitedly in her own language.

But she was not chattering about the water. She was pointing toward the scrub. "Men there!" she cried. "Men like you and Tommy, Jimmydodd."

Tommy and Dodd looked at each other, the water already forgotten in their excitement at Haidia's information, which neither of them doubted.

Brave as she was, the girl now hung back behind Dodd, letting the two men take precedence of her. The water, saline as it was, had partly quenched their thirst. They felt their strength reviving.

And it was growing light. In the east the sky was already flecked with yellow pink. They felt a thrill of intense excitement at the prospect of meeting others of their kind.

"Where do you think we are?" asked Tommy.

Dodd stopped to look at a shrub that was growing near the edge of the pool. "I don't think, I know, Tommy," he answered. "This is wattle."

"Yes?"

"We're somewhere in the interior regions of the Australian continent—and that's not going to help us much."

"Over there—over there," panted Haidia. "Hold me, Jimmydodd. I can't see. Ah, this terrible light!"

She screwed her eyelids tightly together to shut out the pale light of dawn. The men had already discovered that the third membrane had been burned away.

"We must get her out of here," whispered Dodd to Tommy. "Somewhere where it's dark, before the sun rises. Let's go back to the entrance of the crater."

But Haidia, her arm extended, persisted, "Over there! Over there!"

Suddenly a spear came whirling out of a growth of wattle beside the

pool. It whizzed past Tommy's face and dropped into the sand behind. Between the trunks of the wattles they could see the forms of a party of blackfellows, watching them intently.

Tommy held up his arms and moved forward with a show of confidence that he was far from feeling. After what he had escaped in the underworld he was in no mood to be massacred now.

But the blacks were evidently not hostile. It was probable that the spear had not been aimed to kill. At the sight of the two white men, and the white woman, they came forward doubtfully, then more fearlessly, shouting in their language. In another minute Tommy and Dodd were the center of a group of wondering savages.

Especially Haidia. Three or four gins, or black women, had crept out of the scrub, and were already examining her with guttural cries, and fingering the hair garment that she wore.

"Water!" said Tommy, pointing to his throat, and then to the pool, with a frown of disgust.

The blackfellows grinned, and led the three a short distance to a place where a large hollow had been scooped in the sandy floor of the desert. It was full of water, perfectly sweet to the taste. The three

drank gratefully.

Suddenly the edge of the sun appeared above the horizon, gilding the sand with gold. The sunlight fell upon the three, and Haidia uttered a terrible cry of distress. She dropped upon the sand, her hands pressed to her eyes convulsively. Tommy and Dodd dragged her into the thickest part of the scrub, where she lay moaning.

They contrived bandages from the remnants of their clothing, and these, damped with cold water, and bound over the girl's eyes, alleviated her suffering somewhat. Meanwhile the blackfellows had prepared a meal of roast opossum. After their long diet of shrimps, it tasted like ambrosia to the two men.

Much to their surprise, Haidia seemed to enjoy it too. The three squatted in the scrub among the friendly blacks, discussing their situation.

"These fellows will save us," said Dodd. "It may be that we're quite near the coast, but, any way, they'll stick to us, even if only out of curiosity. They'll take us somewhere. But as soon as we get Haidia to safety we'll have to go back along our trail. We mustn't lose our direction. Suppose I was laughed at when I get back, called a liar! I tell you, we've got to have something to show, to prove my

statements, before I can persuade anybody to fit out an expedition into Submundia. Even those three beetle-shells that we dropped in the crater won't be conclusive evidence for the type of mind that sits in the chairs of science to-day. And, speaking of that, we must get those blacks to carry those shells for us. I tell you, nobody will believe—"

"What's that?" cried Tommy sharply, as a rasping sound rose above the cries of the frightened blacks.

But there was no need to ask. Out of the crater two enormous beetles were winging their way toward them, two beetles larger than any that they had seen.

Fully seven feet in length, they were circling about each other, apparently engaged in a vicious battle.

The fearful beaks stabbed at the flesh beneath the shells, and they alternately stabbed and drew back, all the while approaching the party, which watched them, petrified with terror.

It was evident that the monsters had no conception of the presence of humans. Blinded by the sun, only one thing could have induced them to leave the dark depths of Submundia. That was the mating instinct.

The beetles were evidently rival leaders of some swarm, engaged in a duel to the death.

Round and round they went in a dizzy maze, stabbing and thrusting, jaws closing on flesh, until they dropped, close-locked in battle, not more than twenty feet from the little party of blacks and whites, both squirming in the agonies of death.

"I don't think that necessarily means that the swarm is on our trail," said Tommy, a little later, as the three stood beside the shells that they had discarded. "Those two were strays, lost from the swarm and maddened by the mating instinct. Still, it might be as well to wear these things for a while, in case they do follow us."

"You're right," answered Dodd, as he placed one of the shells around Haidia. "We've got to get this little lady to civilization, and we've got to protect our lives in order to give this great new knowledge to the world. If we are attacked, you must sacrifice your life for me, Tommy, so that I can carry back the news."

"Righto!" answered Tommy with alacrity. "You bet I will, Jim."

The glaring sun of mid-afternoon was shining down upon the desert, but Haidia was no longer in pain. It was evident that she was fast

becoming accustomed to the sunlight, though she still kept her eyes screwed up tightly, and had to be helped along by Dodd and Jimmy. In high good humor the three reached the encampment, to find that the blacks were feasting on the dead beetles, while the two eldest members of the party had proudly donned the shells.

It was near sunset before they finally started. Dodd and Tommy had managed to make it clear to them that they wished to reach civilization, but how near this was there was, of course, no means of determining. They noted, however, that the party started in a southerly direction.

"I should say," said Dodd, "that we are in South Australia, probably three or four hundred miles from the coast. We've got a long journey before us, but these blackfellows will know how to procure food for us."

They certainly knew how to get water, for, just as it began to grow dark, when the three were already tormented by thirst, they stopped at what seemed a mere hollow among the stones and boulders that strewed the face of the desert, and scooped away the sand, leaving a hole which quickly filled with clear, cold water of excellent taste.

After which they made signs that they were to camp there for the

night. The moon was riding high in the sky. As it grew dark, Haidia opened her eyes, saw the luminary, and uttered an exclamation, this time not of fear, but of wonder.

"Moon," said Dodd. "That's all right, girl. She watches over the night, as the sun does over the day."

"Haidia likes the moon better than the sun," said the girl wistfully. "But the moon not strong enough to keep away the beetles."

"If I was you, I'd forget about the beetles, Haidia," said Dodd. "They won't come out of that hole in the ground. You'll never see them again."

And, as he spoke, they heard a familiar rasping sound far in the distance.

"How the wind blows," said Tommy, desperately resolved not to believe his ears. "I think a storm's coming up."

But Haidia, with a scream of fear, was clinging to Dodd, and the blacks were on their feet, spears and boomerangs in their hands, looking northward.

Out of that north a little black cloud was gathering. A cloud that

spread gradually, as a thunder-cloud, until it covered a good part of the sky. And still more of the sky, and still more. All the while that faint, distant rasping was audible, but it did not increase in volume. It was as if the beetles had halted until the full number of the swarm had come up out of the crater.

Then the cloud, which by now covered half the sky, began to take geometric form. It grew square, the ragged edges seemed to trim themselves away, streaks of light shot through it at right angles, as if it was marshaling itself into companies.

The doomed men and the girl stood perfectly still, staring at that phenomenon. They knew that only a miracle could save them. They did not even speak, but Haidia clung more tightly to Dodd's arm.

Then suddenly the cloud spread upward and covered the face of the moon.

"Well, this is good-by, Tommy," said Dodd, gripping his friend's hand. "God, I wish I had a revolver, or a knife!" He looked at Haidia.

Suddenly the rasping became a whining shriek. A score of enormous beetles, the advance guards of the army, zoomed out of the darkness into a ray of straggling moonlight. Shrieking, the blacks, who had

watched the approaching swarm perfectly immobile, threw away the two shells and bolted.

"Good Lord," Dodd shouted, "did you see the color of their shells, Tommy?" Even in that moment the scientific observer came uppermost in him. "Those red edges? They must be young ones, Tommy. It's the new brood! No wonder Bram stayed behind! He was waiting for them to hatch! The new brood! We're doomed—doomed! All my work wasted!"

The blackfellows did not get very far. A hundred yards from the place where they started to run they dropped, their bodies hidden beneath the clustering monsters, their screams cut short as those frightful beaks sought their throats, and those jaws crunched through flesh and bone.

Circling around Dodd, Tommy, and Haidia, as if puzzled by their appearance, the beetles kept up a continuous, furious droning that sounded like the roar of Niagara mixed with the shrieking of a thousand sirens. The moon was completely hidden, and only a dim, nebulous light showed the repulsive monsters as they flew within a few feet of the heads of the fugitives. The stench was overpowering.

But suddenly a ray of white light shot through the darkness, and,

with a changed note, just perceptible to the ears of the two men, but doubtless of the greatest significance to the beetles, the swarm fled apart to right and left, leaving a clear lane, through which appeared —Bram, reclining on his shell-couch above his eight trained beetle steeds!

Hovering overhead, the eight huge monsters dropped lightly to the ground beside the three. Bram sat up, a vicious grin upon his twisted face. In his hand he held a large electric bulb, its sides sheathed in a roughly carved wooden frame; the wire was attached to a battery behind him.

"Well met, my friends!" he shouted exultantly. "I owe you more thanks than I can express for having so providentially left the electrical equipment of your plane undamaged after you crashed at the entrance to Submundia. I had a hunch about it—and the hunch worked!"

He grinned more malevolently as he looked from one man to the other.

"You've run your race," he said. "But I'm going to have a little fun with you before you die. I'm going to use you as an object lesson. You'll find it out in a little while."

"Go ahead, go ahead, Bram," Dodd grinned back at him. "Just a few million years ago, and you were a speck of protoplasm—in that pre-pleistocene age—swimming among the invertebrate crustaceans that characterized that epoch."

"Invertebrates and monotremes, Dodd," said Bram, almost wistfully. "The mammals were already existent on the earth, as you know—" Suddenly he broke off, as he realized that Dodd was spoofing him. A yell of execration broke from his lips. He uttered a high whistle, and instantly the whiplike lashes of a hundred beetles whizzed through the darkness and remained poised over Dodd's head.

"Not even the marsupial lion, Bram," grinned Dodd, undismayed. "Go ahead, go ahead, but I'll not die with a lie upon my lips!"

Chapter 9: The Trail of Death

"There's sure some sort of hoodoo on these Antarctic expeditions, Wilson," said the city editor of *The Daily Record* to the star rewrite man. He glanced through the hastily typed report that had come through on the wireless set erected on the thirty-sixth story of the Record Building. "Tommy Travers gone, eh? And James Dodd, too! There'll be woe and wailing along the Great White Way to-night when this news gets out. They say that half the chorus girls in town

considered themselves engaged to Tommy. Nice fellow, too! Always did like him!"

"Queer, that curtain of fog that seems to lie on the actual site of the south pole," he continued, glancing over the report again. "So Storm thinks that Tommy crashed in it, and that it's a million to one against their ever finding his remains. What's this about beetles? Shells of enormous prehistoric beetles found by Tommy and Dodd! That'll make good copy, Wilson. Let's play that up. Hand it to Jones, and tell him to scare up a catching headline or two."

He beckoned to the boy who was hurrying toward his desk, a flimsy in his hand, glanced through it, and tossed it toward Wilson.

"What do they think this is, April Fool's Day?" he asked. "I'm surprised that the International Press should fall for such stuff as that!"

"Why, to-morrow is the first of April!" exclaimed Wilson, tossing back the cable dispatch with a contemptuous laugh.

"Well, it won't do the I. P. much good to play those tricks on their subscribers," said the city editor testily. "I'm surprised, to say the least. I guess their Adelaide correspondent has gone off his head or

something. Using poor Travers's name, too! Of course that fellow didn't know he was dead, but still...."

That was how *The Daily Record* missed being the first to give out certain information that was to stagger the world. The dispatch, which had evidently outrun an earlier one, was as follows:

> ADELAIDE, South Australia, March 31.—Further telegraphic communications arriving almost continuously from Settler's Station, signed by Thomas Travers, member of Travers Antarctic Expedition, who claims to have penetrated earth's interior at south pole and to have come out near Victoria Desert. Travers states that swarm of prehistoric beetles, estimated at two trillion, and as large as men, with shells impenetrable by rifle bullets, now besieging Settler's Station, where he and Dodd and Haidia, woman of subterranean race whom they brought away, are shut up in telegraph office. Bram, former member of Greystoke Expedition, said to be in charge of swarm, with intention of obliterating human race. Every living thing at Settler's Station destroyed, and swarm moving south.

It was a small-town paper a hundred miles from New York that took a chance on publishing this report from the International Press, in

spite of frantic efforts on the parts of the head office to recall it after it had been transmitted. This paper published the account as an April Fool's Day joke, though later it took to itself the credit for having believed it. But by the time April Fool's Day dawned all the world knew that the account was, if anything, an under-estimate of the fearful things that were happening "down under."

It was known now that the swarm of monsters had originated in the Great Victoria Desert, one of the worst stretches of desolation in the world, situated in the south-east corner of Western Australia. Their numbers were incalculable. Wimbush, the aviator, who was attempting to cross the continent from east to west, reported afterward that he had flown for four days, skirting the edge of the swarm, and that the whole of that time they were moving in the same direction, a thick cloud that left a trail of dense darkness on earth beneath them, like the path of an eclipse. Wimbush escaped them only because he had a ceiling of twenty thousand feet, to which apparently the beetles could not soar.

And this swarm was only about one-fourth of the whole number of the monsters. This was the swarm that was moving westward, and subsequently totally destroyed all living things in Kalgoorlie, Coolgardie, Perth, and all the coastal cities of Western Australia.

Ships were found drifting in the Indian Ocean, totally destitute of crews and passengers; not even their skeletons were found, and it was estimated that the voracious monsters had carried them away bodily, devoured them in the air, and dropped the remains into the water.

All the world knows now how the sea elephant herd on Kerguelen Island was totally destroyed, and of the giant shells that were found lying everywhere on the deserted beaches, in positions that showed the monsters had in the end devoured one another.

Mauritius was the most westerly point reached by a fraction of the swarm. A little over twenty thousand of the beetles reached that lovely island, by count of the shells afterward, and all the world knows now of the desperate and successful fight that the inhabitants waged against them. Men and women, boys and girls, blacks and whites, finding that the devils were invulnerable against rifle fire, sallied forth boldly with knives and choppers, and laid down a life for a life.

On the second day after their appearance, the main swarm, a trillion and a half strong, reached the line of the transcontinental railway, and moved eastward into South Australia, traveling, it was estimated, at the rate of two hundred miles an hour. By the next

morning they were in Adelaide, a city of nearly a quarter of a million people. By nightfall every living thing in Adelaide and the suburbs had been eaten, except for a few who succeeded in hiding in walled-up cellars, or in the surrounding marshes.

That night the swarm was on the borders of New South Wales and Victoria, and moving in two divisions toward Melbourne and Sydney.

The northern half, it was quickly seen, was flying "wild," with no particular objective, moving in a solid cohort two hundred miles in length, and devouring game, stock, and humans indiscriminately. It was the southern division, numbering perhaps a trillion, that was under command of Bram, and aimed at destroying Melbourne as Adelaide had been destroyed.

Bram, with his eight beetle steeds, was by this time known and execrated throughout the world. He was pictured as Anti-Christ, and the fulfilment of the prophecies of the Rock of Revelations.

And all this while—or, rather, until the telegraph wires were cut—broken, it was discovered later, by perching beetles—Thomas Travers was sending out messages from his post at Settler's Station.

Soon it was known that prodigious creatures were following in the wake of the devastating horde. Mantises, fifteen feet in height, winged things like pterodactyls, longer than bombing airplanes, followed, preying on the stragglers. But the main bodies never halted, and the inroads that the destroyers made on their numbers were insignificant.

Before the swarm reached Adelaide the Commonwealth Government had taken action. Troops had been called out, and all the available airplanes in the country had been ordered to assemble at Broken Hill, New South Wales, a strategic point commanding the approaches to Sydney and Melbourne. Something like four hundred airplanes were assembled, with several batteries of anti-aircraft guns that had been used in the Great War. Every amateur aviator in Australia was on the spot, with machines ranging from tiny Moths to Handley-Pages—anything that could fly.

Nocturnal though the beetles had been, they no longer feared the light of the sun. In fact, it was ascertained later that they were blind. An opacity had formed over the crystalline lens of the eye. Blind, they were no less formidable than with their sight. They existed only to devour, and their numbers made them irresistible, no matter which way they turned.

As soon as the vanguard of the dark cloud was sighted from Broken Hill, the airplanes went aloft. Four hundred planes, each armed with machine guns, dashed into the serried hosts, drumming out volleys of lead. In a long line, extending nearly to the limits of the beetle formation, thus giving each aviator all the room he needed, the planes gave battle.

The first terror that fell upon the airmen was the discovery that, even at close range, the machine gun bullets failed to penetrate the shells. The force of the impact whirled the beetles around, drove them together in bunches, sent them groping with weaving tentacles through the air—but that was all. On the main body of the invaders no impression was made whatever.

The second terror was the realization that the swarm, driven down here and there from an altitude of several hundred feet, merely resumed their progress on the ground, in a succession of gigantic leaps. Within a few minutes, instead of presenting an inflexible barrier, the line of airplanes was badly broken, each plane surrounded by swarms of the monsters.

Then Bram was seen. And that was the third terror, the sight of the famous beetle steeds, four pairs abreast, with Bram reclining like a Roman emperor upon the surface of the shells. It is true, Bram had

no inclination to risk his own life in battle. At the first sight of the aviators he dodged into the thick of the swarm, where no bullet could reach him. Bram managed to transmit an order, and the beetles drew together.

Some thought afterward that it was by thought transference he effected this maneuver, for instantly the beetles, which had hitherto flown in loose order, became a solid wall, a thousand feet in height, closing in on the planes. The propellers struck them and snapped short, and as the planes went weaving down, the hideous monsters leaped into the cockpits and began their abominable meal.

Not a single plane came back. Planes and skeletons, and here and there a shell of a dead beetle, itself completely devoured, were all that was found afterward.

The gunners stayed at their posts till the last moment, firing round after round of shell and shrapnel, with insignificant results. Their skeletons were found not twenty paces from their guns—where the Gunners' Monument now stands.

Half an hour after the flight had first been sighted the news was being radioed to Sydney, Melbourne, and all other Australian cities, advising instant flight to sea as the only chance of safety. That radio

message was cut short—and men listened and shuddered. After that came the crowding aboard all craft in the harbors, the tragedies of the *Eustis*, the *All Australia*, the *Sepphoris*, sunk at their moorings. The innumerable sea tragedies. The horde of fugitives that landed in New Zealand. The reign of terror when the mob got out of hand, the burning of Melbourne, the sack of Sydney.

And south and eastward, like a resistless flood, the beetle swarm came pouring. Well had Bram boasted that he would make the earth a desert!

A hundred miles of poisoned carcasses of sheep, extended outside Sydney's suburbs, gave the first promise of success. Long mounds of beetle shells testified to the results; moreover, the beetles that fed on the carcasses of their fellows, were in turn poisoned and died. But this was only a drop in the bucket. What counted was that the swift advance was slowing down. As if exhausted by their efforts, or else satiated with food, the beetles were doing what the soldiers did.

They were digging in!

Twenty-four miles from Sydney, eighteen outside Melbourne, the advance was stayed.

Volunteers who went out from those cities reported that the beetles seemed to be resting in long trenches that they had excavated, so that only their shells appeared above ground. Trees were covered with clinging beetles, every wall, every house was invisible beneath the beetle armor.

Australia had a respite. Perhaps only for a night or day, but still time to draw breath, time to consider, time for the shiploads of fugitives to get farther from the continent that had become a shambles.

And then the cry went up, not only from Australia, but from all the world, "Get Travers!"

Chapter 10: At Bay

Bram put his fingers to his mouth and whistled, a shrill whistle, yet audible to Dodd, Tommy, and Haidia. Instantly three pairs of beetles appeared out of the throng. Their tentacles went out, and the two men and the girl found themselves hoisted separately upon the backs of the pairs. Next moment they were flying side by side, high in the air above the surrounding swarm.

They could see one another, but it was impossible for them to make their voices heard above the rasping of the beetles' legs. Hours went

by, while the moon crossed the sky and dipped toward the horizon. Tommy knew that the moon would set about the hour of dawn. And the stars were already beginning to pale when he saw a line of telegraph poles, then two lines of shining metals, then a small settlement of stone and brick houses.

Tommy was not familiar with the geography of Australia, but he knew this must be the transcontinental line.

Whirling onward, the cloud of beetles suddenly swooped downward. For a moment Tommy could see the frightened occupants of the settlement crowding into the single street, then he shuddered with sick horror as he saw them obliterated by the swarm.

There was no struggle, no attempt at flight or resistance. One moment those forty-odd men were there—the next minute they existed no longer. There was nothing but a swarm of beetles, walking about like men with shells upon their backs.

And now Tommy saw evidences of Bram's devilish control of the swarm. For out of the cloud dropped what seemed to be a phalanx of beetle guards, the military police of beetledom, and, lashing fiercely with their tentacles, they drove back all the swarm that sought to join their companions in their ghoulish feast. There was just so much

food and no more; the rest must seek theirs further.

But even beetles, it may be presumed, are not entirely under discipline at all times. The pair of beetles that bore Tommy, suddenly swooped apart, ten or a dozen feet from the ground, and dashed into the thick of the struggling, frenzied mass, flinging their rider to earth.

Tommy struck the soft sand, sat up, half dazed, saw his shell lying a few feet away from him, and retrieved it just as a couple of the monsters came swooping down at him.

He looked about him. Not far away stood Dodd and Haidia, with their shells on their backs. They recognized Tommy and ran toward him.

Not more than twenty yards away stood the railroad station, with several crates of goods on the platform. Next to it was a substantial house of stone, with the front door open.

Tommy pointed to it, and Dodd understood and shouted something that was lost in the furious buzz of the beetles' wings as they devoured their prey. The three raced for the entrance, gained it unmolested, and closed the door.

There was a key in the door, and it was light enough for them to see a chain, which Dodd pulled into position. There was only one story, and there were three rooms, apparently, with the kitchen. Tommy rushed to the kitchen door, locked it, too, and, with almost super-human efforts, dragged the large iron stove against it. He rushed to the window, but it was a mere loophole, not large enough to admit a child. Nevertheless, he stood the heavy table on end so that it covered it. Then he ran back.

Dodd had already barricaded the window of the larger room, which was a bed-sitting room, with a heavy wardrobe, and the wooden bedstead, jamming the two pieces sidewise against the wall, so that they could not be forced apart without being demolished. He was now busy in the smaller room, which seemed to be the station-master's office, dragging an iron safe across the floor. But the window was criss-crossed with iron bars, and it was evident that the safe, which was locked, contained at times considerable money, for the window could hardly have been forced save by a charge of nitro-glycerine or dynamite. However, it was against the door that Dodd placed the safe, and he stood back, panting.

"Good," said Haidia. "That will hold them."

The two men looked at her doubtfully. Did Haidia know what she

was talking about?

The sun had risen. A long shaft shot into the room. Outside the beetles were still buzzing as they turned over the vestiges of their prey. There were as yet no signs of attack. Suddenly Tommy grasped Dodd's arm.

"Look!" he shouted, pointing to a corner which had been in gloom a moment before.

There was a table there, and on it a telegraphic instrument. Telegraphy had been one of Tommy's hobbies in boyhood. In a moment he was busy at the table.

Dot-dash-dot-dash! Then suddenly outside a furious hum, and the impact of beetle bodies against the front door.

Tommy got up, grinning. That was the first, interrupted message from Tommy that was received.

Through the barred window the three could see the furious efforts of the beetles to force an entrance. But the very tensile strength of the beetle-shells, which rendered them impervious to bullets, required a laminate construction which rendered them powerless against brick

or stone.

Desperately the swarm dashed itself against the walls, until the ground outside was piled high with stunned beetles. Not the faintest impression was made on the defenses.

"Watch them, Jim," said Tom. "I'll go see if the rear's secure."

That thought of his seemed to have been anticipated by the beetles, for as Tommy reached the kitchen the swarm came dashing against door and window, always recoiling. Tommy came back, grinning all over his face.

"You were right, Haidia," he said. "We've held them all right, and the tables are turned on Bram. Also I got a message through, I think," he added to Dodd.

Dash—dot—dash—dot from the instrument. Tommy ran to the table again. Dash—dot went back. For five minutes Tommy labored, while the beetles hammered now on one door, now on another, now on the windows. Then Tommy got up.

"It was some station down the line," he said. "I've told them, and they're sending a man up here to replace the telegraphist, also a

couple of cops. They think I'm crazy. I told them again. That's the best I could do."

"Dodd! Travers! For the last time—let's talk!"

The cloud of beetles seemed to have thinned, for the sun was shining into the room. Bram's voice was perfectly audible, though he himself was invisible; probably he thought it likely that the defenders had obtained firearms.

"Nothing to say to you, Bram," called Dodd. "We've finished our discussion on the monotremes."

"I want you fellows to stand in with me," came Bram's plaintive tones. "It's so lonesome all by one's self, Dodd."

"Ah, you're beginning to find that out, are you?" Dodd could not resist answering. "You'll be lonelier yet before you're through."

"Dodd, I didn't bring that swarm up here. I swear it. I've been trying to control them from the beginning. I saw what was coming. I believe I can avert this horror, drive them into the sea or something like that. Don't make me desperate, Dodd.

"And listen, old man. About those monotremes—sensible men don't

quarrel over things like that. Why can't we agree to differ?"

"Ah, now you're talking, Bram," Dodd answered. "Only you're too late. After what's happened here to-day, we'll have no truck with you. That's final."

"Damn you," shrieked Bram. "I'll batter down this house. I'll—"

"You'll do nothing, Bram, because you can't," Dodd answered. "Travers has wired full information about your devil-horde, and likewise about you, and all Australia will be prepared to give you a warm reception when you arrive."

"I tell you I'm invincible," Bram screamed. "In three days Australia will be a ruin, a depopulated desert. In a week, all southern Asia, in three weeks Europe, in two months America."

"You've been taking too many of those pellets, Bram," Dodd answered. "Stand back now! Stand back, wherever you are, or I'll open the door and throw the slops over you."

Bram's screech rose high above the droning of the wings. In another moment the interior of the room had grown as black as night. The rattle of the beetle shells against the four walls of the house was like

the clattering of stage thunder.

All through the darkness Dodd could hear the unhurried clicking of the key.

At last the rattling ceased. The sun shone in again. The ground all around the house was packed with fallen beetles, six feet high, a writhing mass that creaked and clattered as it strove to disengage itself.

Bram's voice once more: "I'm leaving a guard, Dodd. They'll get you if you try to leave. But they won't eat you. I'm going to have you three sliced into little pieces, the Thousand Deaths of the Chinese. The beetles will eat the parts that are sliced away—and you'll live to watch them. I'll be back with a stick or two of dynamite to-morrow."

"Yeah, but listen, Bram," Dodd sang out. "Listen, you old marsupial tiger. When those pipe dreams clear away, I'm going to build a gallows of beetle-shells reaching to the moon, to hang you on!"

Bram's screech of madness died away. The strident rasping of the beetles' legs began again. For hours the three heard it; it was not until nightfall that it died away.

Bram had made good his threat, for all around the house, extending as far as they could see, was the host of beetle-guards. To venture out, even with their shells about them, was clearly a hazardous undertaking. There was neither food nor water in the place.

"We'll just have to hold out," said Dodd, breaking one of the long periods of silence.

Tommy did not answer; he did not hear him, for he was busy at the key. Suddenly he leaped to his feet.

"God, Jimmy," he cried, "that devil's making good his threat! The swarm's in South Australia, destroying every living thing, wiping out whole towns and villages! And they—they believe me now!"

He sank into a chair. For the first time the strain of the awful past seemed to grip him. Haidia came to his side.

"The beetles are finish," she said in her soft voice.

"How d'you know, Haidia?" demanded Dodd.

"The beetles are finish," Haidia repeated quietly, and that was all that Dodd could get out of her. But again the key began to click, and Tommy staggered to the table. Dot—dash—dash—dot. Presently he

looked up once more.

"The swarm's halfway to Adelaide," he said. "They want to know if I can help them. Help them!" He burst into hysterical laughter.

Toward evening he came back after an hour at the key. "Line must be broken," he said. "I'm getting nothing."

In the moonlight they could see the huge compound eyes of the beetle guards glittering like enormous diamonds outside. They had not been conscious of thirst during the day, but now, with the coming of the cool night their desire for water became paramount.

"Tommy, there must be water in the station," said Dodd. "I'm going to get a pitcher from the kitchen and risk it, Tommy. Take care of Haidia if—" he added.

But Haidia laid her hand upon his arm. "Do not go, Jimmydodd," she said. "We can be thirsty to-night, and to-morrow the beetles will be finish."

"How d'you know?" asked Dodd again. But now he realized that Haidia had never learned the significance of an interrogation. She only repeated her statement, and again the two men had to remain

content.

The long night passed. Outside the many facets of the beetle eyes. Inside the two men, desperate with anxiety, not for themselves, but for the fate of the world, snatching a few moments' sleep from time to time, then looking up to see those glaring eyes from the silent watchers.

Then dawn came stealing over the desert, and the two shook themselves free from sleep. And now the eyes were gone.

But there was immense activity among the beetles. They were scurrying to and fro, and, as they watched, Dodd and Tommy began to see some significance in their movements.

"Why, they're digging trenches!" Tommy shouted. "That's horrible, Jimmy! Are they intending to conduct sapping operations against us like engineers, or what?"

Dodd did not reply, and Tommy hardly expected any answer. As the two men, now joined by Haidia, watched, they saw that the beetles were actually digging themselves into the sand.

Within the space of an hour, by the time the first shafts of sunlight

began to stream into the room, there was to be seen only the massive, rounded shells of the monsters as they squatted in the sand.

"Now you may fetch water," said Haidia, smiling at her lover. "No, you do not need the shells," she added. "The beetles are finish. It is as the wise men of my people told me."

Wondering, hesitating, Tommy and Dodd unlocked the front door. They stood upon the threshold ready to bolt back again. But there was no stirring among the beetle hosts.

Growing bolder, they advanced a few steps; then, shamed by Haidia's courage, they followed her, still cautiously to the station.

Dodd shouted as he saw a water-tank, and a receptacle above it with a water-cock. They let Haidia drink, then followed suit, and for a few moments, as they appeased their thirst, the beetles were forgotten.

Then they turned back. There had been no movement in that line of shells that glinted in the morning sunlight.

"Come, I shall show you," said Haidia confidently, advancing toward the trench.

Dodd would have stopped her, but the girl moved forward quickly, eluded him with a graceful, mirthful gesture, and stooped down over the trench.

She rose up, raising in her arms an empty beetle-shell!

Dodd, who had reached the trench before Tommy, turned round and yelled to him excitedly. Tommy ran forward—and then he understood.

The shells were empty. The swarm, whose life cycle Bram had admitted he did not understand, had just moulted!

It had moulted because the bodies, gorged with food, had grown too large for the shells. In time, if left alone, the monsters would grow larger shells, become invincible again. But just now they were defenseless as new-born babes—and knew it.

Deep underneath the empty shells they had burrowed into the ground. Everywhere at the bottom of the deep trenches were the naked, bestial creatures, waving helpless tentacles and squirming over one another as they strove to find shelter and security.

A sudden madness came over Tommy and Dodd. "Dynamite—there

must be dynamite!" Dodd shouted, as he ran back to the station.

"Something better than dynamite," shouted Tommy, holding up one of a score of drums of petrol!

Chapter 11: The World Set Free

They waited two days at Settler's Station. To push along the line into the desert would have been useless, and both men were convinced that an airplane would arrive for them. But it was not until the second afternoon that the aviator arrived, half-dead with thirst and fatigue, and almost incoherent.

His was the last plane on the Australian continent. He brought the news of the destruction of Adelaide, and of the siege of Melbourne and Sydney, as he termed it. He told Dodd and Tommy that the two cities had been surrounded with trenches and barbed wire. Machine guns and artillery were bombarding the trenches in which the beetles had taken shelter.

"Has any one been out on reconnaissance?" asked Tommy.

Nobody had been permitted to pass through the barbed wire, though there had been volunteers. It meant certain death. But, unless the beetles were sapping deep in the ground, what their purpose was,

nobody knew.

Tommy and Dodd led him to the piles of smoking, stinking débris and told him.

That was where the aviator fainted from sheer relief.

"The Commonwealth wants you to take supreme command against the beetles," he told Tommy, when he had recovered. "I'm to bring you back. Not that they expect me back. But—God, what a piece of news! Forgive my swearing—I used to be a parson. Still am, for the matter of that."

"How are you going to bring us three back in your plane?" asked Tommy.

"I shall stay here with Jimmydodd," said Haidia suavely. "There is not the least danger any more. You must destroy the beetles before their shells have grown again, that's all."

"Used to be a parson, you say? Still are?" shouted Dodd excitedly. "Thank God! I mean, I'm glad to hear it. Come inside, and come quick. I want you too, Tommy!"

Then Tommy understood. And it seemed as if Haidia understood, by

some instinct that belongs exclusively to women, for her cheeks were flushed as she turned and smiled into Dodd's eyes.

Ten minutes later Tommy hopped into the biplane, leaving the happy married couple at Settler's Station. His eyes grew misty as the plane took the air, and he saw them waving to him from the ground. Dodd and Haidia and he had been through so many adventures, and had reached safety. He must not fail.

He did not fail. He found himself at Sydney in command of thirty thousand men, all enthusiastic for the fight for the human race, soldiers and volunteers ready to fight until they dropped. When the news of the situation was made public, an immense wave of hope ran through the world.

National differences were forgotten, color and creed and race grew more tolerant of one another. A new day had dawned—the day of humanity's true liberation.

Tommy's first act was to call out the fire companies and have the beetles' trenches saturated with petrol from the fire hoses. Then incendiary bullets, shot from guns from a safe distance, quickly converted them into blazing infernos.

But even so only a tithe of the beetle army had been destroyed. Two hundred planes had already been rushed from New Zealand, and their aviators went up and scoured the country far and wide. Everywhere they found trenches, and, where the soil was stony, millions of the beetles clustered helplessly beneath great mounds of discarded shells.

An army of black trackers had been brought in planes from all parts of the country, and they searched out the beetle masses everywhere along the course that the invaders had taken. Then incendiary bombs were dropped from above.

Day after day the beetle massacre went on. By the end of a week the survivors of the invasion began to take heart again. It was certain that the greater portion of the horde had been destroyed.

There was only one thing lacking. No trace of Bram had been seen since his appearance at the head of his beetle army in front of Broken Hill. And louder and more insistent grew the world clamor that he should be found, and put to death in some way more horrible than any yet devised.

The ingenuity of a million minds worked upon this problem. Newspapers all over the world offered prizes for the most suitable

form of death. Ingenious Oriental tortures were rediscovered.

The only thing lacking was Bram.

A spy craze ran through Australia. Five hundred Brams were found, and all of them were in imminent danger of death before they were able to prove an alias.

And, oddly enough, it was Tommy and Dodd who found Bram. For Dodd had been brought back east, together with his bride, and given an important command in the Army of Extermination.

Dodd had joined Tommy not far from Broken Hill, where a swarm of a hundred thousand beetles had been found in a little known valley. The monsters had begun to grow new shells, and the news had excited a fresh wave of apprehension. The airplanes had concentrated for an attack upon them, and Tommy and Dodd were riding together, Tommy at the controls, and Dodd observing.

Dodd called through the tube to Tommy, and indicated a mass that was moving through the scrub—some fifty thousand beetles, executing short hops and evidently regaining some vitality. Tommy nodded.

He signalled, and the fleet of planes circled around and began to drop their incendiary bombs. Within a few minutes the beetles were ringed with a wall of fire. Presently the whole terrain was a blazing furnace.

Hours later, when the fires had died away, Tommy and Dodd went down to look at the destruction that had been wrought. The scene was horrible. Great masses of charred flesh and shell were piled up everywhere.

"I guess that's been a pretty thorough job," said Tommy. "Let's get back, Jim."

"What's that?" cried Dodd, pointing. Then, "My God, Tommy, it's one of our men!"

It was a man, but it was not one of their men, that creeping, maimed, half-cinder and half-human thing that was trying to crawl into the hollow of a rock. It was Bram, and recognition was mutual.

Bram dropping, moaning; he was only the shell of a man, and it was incredible how he had managed to survive that ordeal of fire. The remainder of his life, which only his indomitable will had held in that shattered body, was evidently a matter of minutes, but he looked

up at Dodd and laughed.

"So—you're—here, damn you!" he snarled. "And—you think—you've won. I've—another card—another invasion of the world—beside which this is child's play. It's an invasion—"

Bram was going, but he pulled himself together with a supreme effort.

"Invasion by—new species of—monotremes," he croaked. "Deep down in—earth. Was saving to—prove you the liar you are. Monotremes—egg-laying platypus big as an elephant—existent long before pleistocene epoch—make you recant, you lying fool!"

Bram died, an outburst of bitter laughter on his lips. Dodd stood silent for a while; then reverently he removed his hat.

"He was a madman and a devil, but he had the potentialities of a god, Tommy," he said.

#02 The Cave Of Horror, by Sterner St. Paul Meek:

Screaming, the guardsman was jerked through the air. An unearthly screech rang through the cavern. The unseen horror of mammoth have had struck again!

Aproximate word count: 8,300

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Dr. Bird looked up impatiently as the door of his private laboratory in the Bureau of Standards swung open, but the frown on his face changed to a smile as he saw the form of Operative Carnes of the United States Secret Service framed in the doorway.

"Hello, Carnes," he called cheerfully. "Take a seat and make yourself at home for a few minutes. I'll be with you as soon as I finish getting this weight."

Carnes sat on the edge of a bench and watched with admiration the long nervous hands and the slim tapering fingers of the famous

scientist. Dr. Bird stood well over six feet and weighed two hundred and six pounds stripped: his massive shoulders and heavy shock of unruly black hair combined to give him the appearance of a prize-fighter—until one looked at his hands. Acid stains and scars could not hide the beauty of those mobile hands, the hands of an artist and a dreamer. An artist Dr. Bird was, albeit his artistry expressed itself in the most delicate and complicated experiments in the realms of pure and applied science that the world has ever seen, rather than in the commoner forms of art.

The doctor finished his task of weighing a porcelain crucible, set it carefully into a dessicator, and turned to his friend.

"What's on your mind, Carnes?" he asked. "You look worried. Is there another counterfeit on the market?"

The operative shook his head.

"Have you been reading those stories that the papers have been carrying about Mammoth Cave?" he asked.

Dr. Bird emitted a snort of disgust.

"I read the first one of them part way through on the strength of its

being an Associated Press dispatch," he replied, "but that was enough. It didn't exactly impress me with its veracity, and, from a viewpoint of literature, the thing was impossible. I have no time to pore over the lucubrations of an inspired press agent."

"So you dismissed them as mere press agent work?"

"Certainly. What else could they be? Things like that don't happen fortuitously just as the tourist season is about to open. I suppose that those yarns will bring flocks of the curious to Kentucky though: the public always responds well to sea serpent yarns."

"Mammoth Cave has been closed to visitors for the season," said Carnes quietly.

"What?" cried the doctor in surprise. "Was there really something to those wild yarns?"

"There was, and what is more to the point, there still is. At least there is enough to it that I am leaving for Kentucky this evening, and I came here for the express purpose of asking you whether you wanted to come along. Bolton suggested that I ask you: he said that the whole thing sounded to him like magic and that magic was more in your line than in ours. He made out a request for your services and I

have it in my pocket now. Are you interested?"

"How does the secret service cut in on it?" asked the doctor. "It seems to me that it is a state matter. Mammoth Cave isn't a National Park."

"Apparently you haven't followed the papers. It *was* a state matter until the Governor asked for federal troops. Whenever the regulars get into trouble, the federal government is rather apt to take a hand."

"I didn't know that regulars had been sent there. Tell me about the case."

"Will you come along?"

Dr. Bird shook his head slowly.

"I really don't see how I can spare the time, Carnes," he said. "I am in the midst of some work of the utmost importance and it hasn't reached the stage where I can turn it over to an assistant."

"Then I won't bother you with the details," replied Carnes as he rose.

"Sit down, confound you!" cried the doctor. "You know better than to try to pull that on me. Tell me your case, and then I'll tell you

whether I'll go or not. I can't spare the time, but, on the other hand, if it sounds interesting enough...."

Carnes laughed.

"All right, Doctor," he said, "I'll take enough time to tell you about it even if you can't go. Do you know anything about it?"

"No. I read the first story half way through and then stopped. Start at the beginning and tell me the whole thing."

"Have you ever been to Mammoth Cave?"

"No."

"It, or rather they, for while it is called Mammoth Cave it is really a series of caves, are located in Edmonson County in Central Kentucky, on a spur railroad from Glasgow Junction on the Louisville and Nashville Railroad. They are natural limestone caverns with the customary stalactite and stalagmite formation, but are unusually large and very beautiful. The caves are quite extensive and they are on different levels, so that a guide is necessary if one wants to enter them and be at all sure of finding the way out. Visitors are taken over a regular route and are seldom allowed to visit

portions of the cave off these routes. Large parts of the cave have never been thoroughly explored or mapped. So much for the scene.

"About a month ago a party from Philadelphia who were motoring through Kentucky, entered the cave with a regular guide. The party consisted of a man and his wife and their two children, a boy of fourteen and a girl of twelve. They went quite a distance back into the caves and then, as the mother was feeling tired, she and her husband sat down, intending to wait until the guide showed the children some sights which lay just ahead and then return to them. The guide and the children never returned."

"What happened?"

"No one knows. All that is known is the bare fact that they have not been seen since."

"A kidnapping case?"

"Apparently not, in the light of later happenings, although that was at first thought to be the explanation. The parents waited for some time. The mother says that she heard faint screams in the distance some ten minutes after the guide and the children left, but they were very far away and she isn't sure that she heard them at all. At any

rate, they didn't impress her at the time.

"When half an hour had passed they began to feel anxious, and the father took a torch and started out to hunt for them. The usual thing happened; he got lost. When *he* failed to return, the mother, now thoroughly alarmed, made her way, by some uncanny sense of direction, to the entrance and gave the alarm. In half an hour a dozen search parties were on their way into the cave. The father was soon located, not far from the beaten trail, but despite three days of constant search, the children were not located. The only trace of them that was found was a bracelet which the mother identified. It was found in the cavern some distance from the beaten path and was broken, as though by violence. There were no other signs of a struggle.

"When the bracelet was found, the kidnapping theory gained vogue, for John Harrel, the missing guide, knew the cave well and natives of the vicinity scouted the idea that he might be lost. Inspired by the large reward offered by the father, fresh parties began to explore the unknown portions of the cave. And then came the second tragedy. Two of the searchers failed to return. This time there seemed to be little doubt of violence, for screams and a pistol shot were faintly heard by other searchers, together with a peculiar 'screaming howl,' as it was described by those who heard it. A search was at once made

toward the spot where the bracelet had been picked up, and the gun of one of the missing men was found within fifty yards of the spot where the bracelet had been discovered. One cylinder of the revolver had been discharged."

"Were there any signs on the floor?"

"The searchers said that the floor appeared to be rather more moist and slimy than usual, but that was all. They also spoke of a very faint smell of musk, but this observation was not confirmed by others who arrived a few moments later."

"What happened next?"

"The Governor was appealed to and a company of the National Guard was sent from Louisville to Mammoth Cave. They took up camp at the mouth of the cave and prevented everyone from entering. Soldiers armed with service rifles penetrated the caverns, but found nothing. Visitors were excluded, and the guardsmen established regular patrols and sentry posts in the cave with the result that one night, when time came for a relief, the only trace that could be found of one of the guards was his rifle. It had not been fired. Double guards were then posted, and nothing happened for several days—and then another sentry disappeared. His companion

came rushing out of the cave screaming. When he recovered, he admitted that both he and the missing man had gone to sleep and that he awoke to find his comrade gone. He called, and he says that the answer he received was a peculiar whistling noise which raised all the hair on the back of his neck. He flashed his electric torch all around, but could see nothing. He swears, however, that he heard a slipping, sliding noise approaching him, and he felt that some one was looking at him. He stood it as long as he could and then threw down his rifle and ran for his life."

"Had he been drinking?"

"No. It wasn't delirium either, as was shown by the fact that a patrol found his gun where he had thrown it, but no trace of the other sentry. After this second experience, the guardsmen weren't very eager to enter the cave, and the Governor asked for regulars. A company of infantry was ordered down from Fort Thomas to relieve the guardsmen, but they fared worse than their predecessors. They lost two men the first night of their guard. The regulars weren't caught napping, for the main guard heard five shots fired. They rushed a patrol to the scene and found both of the rifles which had been fired, but the men were gone.

"The officer of the day made a thorough search of the vicinity and

found, some two hundred yards from the spot where the sentries had been posted, a crack in the wall through which the body of a man could be forced. This bodycrack had fresh blood on each side of it. Several of his men volunteered to enter the hole and search, but the lieutenant would not allow it. Instead, he armed himself with a couple of hand-grenades and an electric torch and entered himself. That was last Tuesday, and he has not returned."

"Was there any disturbance heard from the crack?

"None at all. A guard was posted with two machine-guns pointed at the crack in the wall, and a guard of eight men and a sergeant stationed there. Last night, about six o'clock, while the guard were sitting around their guns, a faint smell of musk became evident. No one paid a great deal of attention to it, but suddenly for no apparent reason at all one of the men on guard was jerked into the air feet upwards. He gave a scream of fear, and an unearthly screech answered him.

The guard, with the exception of one man, turned tail and ran. One man stuck by his gun and poured a stream of bullets into the crack. The retreating men could hear the rattle of the gun for a few moments and then there was a choking scream, followed by silence. When the officer of the day got back with a patrol, there was a heavy

smell of musk in the air, and a good deal of blood was splashed around. The machine-guns were both there, although one of them was twisted up until it looked like it had been through an explosion.

"The Officer commanding the company investigated the place, ordered all men out of the cave, and communicated with the War Department. The Secretary of War found it too tough a nut to crack and he asked for help, so Bolton is sending me down there. Do you think, in view of this yarn, that your experiments can wait?"

The creases on Dr. Bird's high forehead had grown deeper and deeper as Carnes had told his story, but now they suddenly disappeared, and he jumped to his feet with a boyish grin.

"How soon are we leaving?" he asked.

"In two hours, Doctor. A car is waiting for us downstairs and I have reservations booked for both of us on the Southern to-night. I knew that you were coming; in fact, the request for your services had been approved before I came here to see you."

Dr. Bird rapidly divested himself of his laboratory smock and took his coat and hat from a cupboard.

"I hope you realize, Carnsey, old dear," he said as he followed the operative out of the building, "that I have a real fondness for your worthless old carcass. I am leaving the results of two weeks of patient work alone and unattended in order to keep you out of trouble, and I know that it will be ruined when I get back. I wonder whether you are worth it?"

"Bosh!" retorted Carnes. "I'm mighty glad to have you along, but you needn't rub it in by pretending that it is affection for me that is dragging you reluctantly into this mess. With an adventure like this ahead of you, leg-irons and handcuffs wouldn't keep you away from Mammoth Cave, whether I was going or not."

It was late afternoon before Dr. Bird and Carnes dismounted from the special train which had carried them from Glasgow Junction to Mammoth Cave. They introduced themselves to the major commanding the guard battalion which had been ordered down to reinforce the single company which had borne the first brunt of the affair, and then interviewed the guards who had been routed by the unseen horror which was haunting the famous cave. Nothing was learned which differed in any great degree from the tale which Carnes had related to the doctor in Washington, except that the officer of the day who had investigated the last attack failed to entirely corroborate the smell of musk which had been reported by

the other observers.

"It might have been musk, but to me it smelled differently," he said. "Were you ever near a rattlesnake den in the west?"

Dr. Bird nodded.

"Then you know the peculiar reptilian odor which such a place gives off. Well, this smell was somewhat similar, although not the same by any manner of means. It was musky all right, but it was more snake than musk to me. I rather like musk, but this smell gave me the horrors."

"Did you hear any noises?"

"None at all. The men describe some rather peculiar noises and Sergeant Jervis is an old file and pretty apt to get things straight, but they may have been made by the men who were in trouble. I saw a man caught by a boa in South America once, and the noises he made might very well have been described in almost the same words as Jervis used."

"Thanks, Lieutenant," replied the Doctor. "I'll remember what you have told me. Now I think that we'll go into the cave."

"My orders are to allow no one to enter, Doctor."

"I beg your pardon. Carnes, where is that letter from the Secretary of War?"

Carnes produced the document. The lieutenant examined it and excused himself. He returned in a few moments with the commanding officer.

"In the face of that letter, Dr. Bird," said the major, "I have no alternative to allowing you to enter the cave, but I will warn you that it is at your own peril. I'll give you an escort, if you wish."

"If Lieutenant Pearce will come with me as a guide, that will be all that I need."

The lieutenant paled slightly, but threw back his shoulders.

"Do you wish to start at once, sir?" he asked.

"In a few moments. What is the floor of the cave like where we are going?"

"Quite wet and slimy, sir."

"Very slippery?"

"Yes, sir."

"In that case before we go in we want to put on baseball shoes with cleats on them, so that we can run if we have to. Can you get us anything like that?"

"In a few moments, sir."

"Good! As soon as we can get them we'll start. In the meantime, may I look at that gun that was found?"

The Browning machine-gun was laid before the doctor. He looked it over critically and sniffed delicately at it. He took from his pocket a phial of liquid, moistened a portion of the water-jacket of the weapon, and then rubbed the moistened part briskly with his hand. He sniffed again. He looked disappointed, and again examined the gun closely.

"Carnes," he said at length, "do you see anything on this gun that looks like tooth marks?"

"Nothing, Doctor."

"Neither do I. There are some marks here which might quite conceivably be finger-prints of a forty-foot giant, and those two parallel grooves look like the result of severe squeezing, but there are no tooth marks. Strange. There is no persistent odor on the gun, which is also strange. Well, there's no use in theorizing: we are confronted by a condition and not a theory, as someone once said. Let's put on those baseball shoes and see what we can find out."

Dr. Bird led the way into the cave, Carnes and the lieutenant following closely with electric torches. In each hand Dr. Bird carried a phosphorus hand-grenade. No other weapons were visible, although the doctor knew that Carnes carried a caliber .45 automatic pistol strapped under his left armpit. As they passed into the cave the lieutenant stepped forward to lead the way.

"I'm going first," said the doctor. "Follow me and indicate the turns by pressure on my shoulder. Don't speak after we have started, and be ready for instant flight. Let's go."

Forward into the interior of the cave they made their way. The iron cleats of the baseball shoes rang on the floor and the noise echoed back and forth between the walls, dying out in little eerie whispers of sound that made Carnes' hair rise. Ever forward they pressed, the lieutenant guiding the doctor by silent pressure on his shoulder and

Carnes following closely. For half a mile they went on until a restrainable pressure brought the doctor to a halt. The lieutenant pointed silently toward a crack in the wall before them. Carnes started forward to examine it, but a warning gesture from the doctor stopped him.

Slowly, an inch at a time, the doctor crept forward, hand-grenades in readiness. Presently he reached the crack and, shifting one of the grenades into his pocket, he drew forth an electric torch and sent a beam of light through the crack into the dark interior of the earth.

For a moment he stood thus, and then suddenly snapped off his torch and straightened up in an attitude of listening. The straining ears of Carnes and Lieutenant Pearce could hear a faint slithering noise coming toward them, not from the direction of the crack, but from the interior of the cave. Simultaneously a faint, musky, reptilian odor became apparent.

"Run!" shouted the doctor. "Run like hell! It's loose in the cave!"

The lieutenant turned and fled at top speed toward the distant entrance to the cave, Carnes at his heels. Dr. Bird paused for an instant, straining his ears, and then threw a grenade. A blinding flash came from the point where the missile struck and a white cloud rose

in the air. The doctor turned and fled after his companions. Not for nothing had Dr. Bird been an athlete of note in his college days. Despite the best efforts of his companions, who were literally running for their lives, he soon caught up with them. As he did so a weird, blood-curdling screech rose from the darkness behind them. Higher and higher in pitch the note rose until it ended suddenly in a gurgling grunt, as though the breath which uttered it had been suddenly cut off. The slithering, rustling noise became louder on their trail.

"Faster!" gasped the doctor, as he put his hand on Carnes' shoulder and pushed him forward.

The noise of pursuit gained slightly on them, and a sound as of intense breathing became audible. Dr. Bird paused and turned and faced the oncoming horror. His electric torch revealed nothing, but he listened for a moment, and then threw his second grenade. Keenly he watched its flight. It flew through the air for thirty yards and then struck an invisible obstruction and bounded toward the ground. Before it struck the downward motion ceased, and it rose in the air. As it rose it burst with a sharp report, and a wild scream of pain filled the cavern with a deafening roar. The doctor fled again after his companions.

By the time he overtook them the entrance of the cave loomed before them. With sobs of relief they burst out into the open. The guards sprang forward with raised rifles, but Dr. Bird waved them back.

"There's nothing after us, men," he panted. "We got chased a little way, but I tossed our pursuer a handful of phosphorus and it must have burned his fingers a little, judging from the racket he made. At any rate, it stopped the pursuit."

The major hurried up.

"Did you see it, Doctor?" he asked.

"No, I didn't. No one has ever seen it or anything like it. I heard it and, from its voice, I think it has a bad cold. At least, it sounded hoarse, so I gave it a little white phosphorus to make a poultice for its throat, but I didn't get a glimpse of it."

"For God's sake, Doctor, what is it?"

"I can't tell you yet, Major. So far I can tell, it is something new to science and I am not sure just what it looks like. However, I hope to be able to show it to you shortly. Is there a telegraph office here?"

"No, but we have a Signal Corps detachment with us, and they have a portable radio set which will put us in touch with the army net."

"Good! Can you place a tent at my disposal?"

"Certainly, Doctor."

"All right, I'll go there, and I would appreciate it if you would send the radio operator to me. I want to send a message to the Bureau of Standards to forward me some apparatus which I need."

"I'll attend to it, Doctor. Have you any special advice to give me about the guarding?"

"Yes. Have you, or can you get, any live stock?"

"Live stock?"

"Yes. Cattle preferred, although hogs or sheep will do at a pinch. Sheep will do quite well."

"I'll see what I can do, Doctor."

"Get them by all means, if it is possible to do so. Don't worry about paying for them: secret service funds are not subject to the same

audit that army funds get. If you can locate them, drive a couple of cattle or half a dozen sheep well into the cave and tether them there. If you don't get them, have your sentries posted well away from the cave mouth, and if any disturbance occurs during the night, tell them to break and run. I hope it won't come out, but I can't tell."

A herd of cattle was soon located and two of the beasts driven into the cave. Two hours later a series of horrible screams and bellowings were heard in the cave. Following their orders the sentries abandoned their posts and scattered, but the noise came no nearer the mouth, and in a few minutes silence again reigned.

"I hope that will be all that will be needed for a couple of days," said the doctor to the commanding officer, "but you had better have a couple more cattle driven in in the morning. We want to keep the brute well fed. Is there a tank stationed at Fort Thomas?"

"No, there isn't."

"Then radio Washington that I want the fastest three-man tank that the army has sent here at once. Don't bother with military channels, radio direct to the Adjutant General, quoting the Secretary of the Treasury as authority. Tell him that it's a rush matter, and sign the message 'Bird' if you are afraid of getting your tail twisted."

Twice more before the apparatus which the doctor had ordered from Washington arrived cattle were driven into the depths of the cave, and twice were the screams and bellowings from the cave repeated. Each time searching parties found the cattle gone in the morning. A week after the doctor's arrival, a special train came up, carrying four mechanics from the Bureau of Standards, together with a dozen huge packing cases. Under the direction of the doctor the cases were unpacked and the apparatus put together. Before the assembly had been completed the tank which had been requested arrived from Camp Meade, and the Bureau mechanics began to install some of the assembled units in it.

The first apparatus which was installed in the tank consisted of an electric generator of peculiar design which was geared to the tank motor. The electromotive force thus generated was led across a spark gap with points of a metallic substance. The light produced was concentrated by a series of parabolic reflectors, directed against a large quartz prism, and thence through a lens which was designed to throw a slightly divergent beam.

"This apparatus," Dr. Bird explained to the Signal Corps officer, who was an interested observer, "is one which was designed at the Bureau for the large scale production of ultra-violet light. There is nothing special about the generator except that it is highly efficient and gives

an almost constant electromotive force. The current thus produced is led across these points, which are composed of magnalloy, a development of the Bureau. We found on investigation that a spark gave out a light which was peculiarly rich in ultra-violet rays when it was passed between magnesium points. However, such points could not be used for the handling of a steady current because of lack of durability and ease of fusion, so a mixture of graphite, alundum and metallic magnesium was pressed together with a binder which will stand the heat. Thus we get the triple advantages of ultra-violet light production, durability, and high resistance.

"The system of reflectors catches all of the light thus produced except the relatively small portion which goes initially in the right direction, and directs it on this quartz prism where, due to the refractive powers of the prism, the light is broken up into its component parts. The infra-red rays and that portion of the spectrum which lies in the visible range, that is, from red to violet inclusive, are absorbed by a black body, leaving only the ultra-violet portion free to send a beam through this quartz lens."

"I thought that a lens would absorb ultra-violet light," objected the signal officer.

"A lens made of glass will, but this lens is made of rock crystal, which is readily permeable to ultra-violet. The net result of this apparatus is that we can direct before us as we move in the tank a beam of light which is composed solely of the ultra-violet portion of the spectrum."

"In other words, an invisible light?"

"Yes. That is, invisible to the human eye. The effect of this beam of ultra-violet light in the form of severe sunburn would be readily apparent if you exposed your skin to it for any length of time, and the effects on your eyesight of continued gazing would be apt to be disastrous. It would produce a severe opthalmia and temporary impairment of the vision, somewhat the same symptoms as are observed in snow blindness."

"I see. May I ask what is the object of the whole thing?"

"Surely. Before we can successfully combat this peculiar visitant from another world, it is necessary that we gain some idea of the size and appearance of it. Nothing of the sort has before made its appearance, so far as the annals of science go, and so I am forced to make some rather wild guesses at the nature of the animal. You are probably aware of the fact that the property of penetration possessed

by all waves is a function of their frequency, or, perhaps I should say, of their wave-length?"

"Certainly."

"The longer rays of visible light will not penetrate as deeply into a given substance as the shorter ultra-violet rays. This visitor is evidently from some unexplored and, indeed, unknown cavern in the depths of the earth where visible light has never penetrated. Apparently in this cavern the color of the inhabitants is ultra-violet, and hence invisible to us."

"You are beyond my depth, Doctor."

"Pardon me. You understand, of course, what color is? When sunlight, which is a mixture of all colors from infra-red to ultra-violet inclusive, falls on an object, certain rays are reflected and certain others are absorbed. If the red rays are reflected and all others absorbed, the object appears red to our eyes. If all the rays are reflected, the object appears white, and if all are absorbed, it appears black."

"I understand that."

"The human eye cannot detect ultra-violet. Suppose then, that we have an object, either animate or inanimate, the surface of which reflects only ultra-violet light, what will be the result? The object will be invisible."

"I should think it would be black if all the rays except the ultra-violet were absorbed."

"It would, but mark, I did not say the others were absorbed. Are you familiar with fluorescein?"

"No."

"I think you are. It is the dye used in making changeable silk. If we fill a glass container with a fluorescein solution and look at it by reflected light it appears green. If we look at it by transmitted light, that is, light which has traversed the solution, it appears red. In other words, this is a substance which reflects green light, allows a free passage to red light, and absorbs all other light. This creature we are after, if my theory is correct, is composed of a substance which allows free passage to all of the visible light rays and at the same time reflects ultra-violet light. Do I make this clear?"

"Perfectly."

"Very well, then. My apparatus will project forward a beam of ultra-violet light which will be in much greater concentration than exists in an incandescent electric light. It is my hope that this light will be reflected by the body of the creature to a sufficient to allow me to make a photograph of it."

"But won't your lens prevent the ultra-violet light from reaching your plate?"

"An ordinary lens made of optical glass would do so, but I have a camera here equipped with a rock crystal lens, which will allow ultra-violet light to pass through it practically unhindered, and with very slight distortion. When I add that I will have my camera charged with X-ray film, a film which is peculiarly sensitive to the shorter wave-lengths, you will see that I will have a fair chance of success."

"It sounds logical. Would you allow me to accompany you when you make your attempt?"

"I will be glad of your company, if you can drive a tank. I want to take Carnes with me, and the tank will only hold two besides the driver."

"I can drive a tractor."

"In that case you should master the tricks of tank driving in short order. Get familiar with it and we'll appoint you as driver. We'll be ready to go in to-night, but I am going to wait a day. Our friend was fed last night, and there is less chance he'll be about."

The early part of the next evening was marked by howls and screams coming from the mouth of the cave. As the night wore on the noises were quite evidently coming nearer and the sentries watched the cave mouth nervously, ready to bolt and scatter according to their orders at the first alarm. About two A. M. the doctor and Carnes climbed into the tank beside Lieutenant Leffingwell, and the machine moved slowly into the cave. A search-light on the front of the tank lighted the way for them and, attached to a frame which held it some distance ahead of them, was a luckless sheep.

"Keep your eye on the mutton, Carnes," cautioned the doctor. "As soon as anything happens to it, shut off the search-light and let me try to get a picture. As soon as I have made my exposures I'll tell you, and you can snap it on again. Lieutenant, when the picture is made, turn your tank and make for the entrance to the cave. If we are lucky, we'll get out."

Forward the tank crawled, the sheep bleating and trying to break loose from the bonds which held it. It was impossible to hear much over the roar of the motor, but presently Dr. Bird leaned forward, his eyes shining.

"I smell musk," he announced. "Get ready for action."

Even as he spoke the sheep was suddenly lifted into the air. It gave a final bleat of terror, and then its head was torn from its body.

"Quick, Carnes!" shouted the doctor.

The search-light went out, and Carnes and the lieutenant could hear the slide of the ultra-violet light which Dr. Bird was manipulating open. For two or three minutes the doctor worked with his apparatus.

"All right!" he cried suddenly. "Lights on and get out of here!"

Carnes snapped on the search-light and Lieutenant Leffingwell swung the tank around and headed for the cave mouth. For a few feet their progress was unhindered and then the tank ceased its forward motion, although the motor still roared and the track slid on the cave floor. Carnes watched with horror as one side of the tank bent slowly in toward him. There was a rending sound, and a portion

of the heavy steel fabric was torn away. Dr. Bird bent over something on the floor of the tank. Presently he straightened up and threw a small object into the darkness. There was a flash of light, and bits of flaming phosphorus flew in every direction. The anchor which held the tank was suddenly loosed and the machine crawled forward at full speed, while a roar as of escaping air mingled with a bellowing shriek burdened the smoke-laden air.

"Faster!" cried the doctor, as he threw another grenade.

Lieutenant Leffingwell got the last bit of speed possible out of the tank and they reached the cave mouth without further molestation.

"I had an idea that our friend wouldn't care to pass through a phosphorus screen," said Dr. Bird with a chuckle as he climbed out of the tank. "He must have been rather severely burned the other day, and once burned is usually twice shy. Where is Major Brown?"

The commanding officer stepped forward.

"Drive a couple of cattle into the cave, Major," directed Dr. Bird. "I want to fill that brute up and keep him quiet for a while. I'm going to develop my films."

Lieutenant Leffingwell and Carnes peered over the doctor's shoulders as he manipulated his films in a developing bath. Gradually vague lines and blotches made their appearance on one of the films, but the form was indistinct. Dr. Bird dropped the films in a fixing tank and straightened up.

"We have something, gentlemen," he announced, "but I can't tell yet how clear it is. It will take those films fifteen minutes to fix, and then we'll know."

In a quarter of an hour he lifted the first film from the tank and held it to the light. The film showed a blank. With an exclamation of disappointment he lifted a second and third film from the tank, with the same result He raised the fourth one.

"Good Lord!" gasped Carnes.

In the plate could be plainly seen the hind quarters of the sheep held in the grasp of such a monster as even the drug-laden brain of an opium smoker never pictured. Judging from the sheep, the monster stood about twenty feet tall, and its frame was surmounted by a head resembling an overgrown frog. Enormous jaws were opened to seize the sheep but, to the amazement of the three observers, the jaws were entirely toothless. Where teeth were to be expected, long

parallel ridges of what looked like bare bone, appeared, without even a rudimentary segregation into teeth. The body of the monster was long and snakelike, and was borne on long, heavy legs ending in feet with three long toes, armed with vicious claws. The crowning horror of the creature was its forelegs. There were of enormous length, thin and attenuated looking, and ended in huge misshapen hands, knobby and blotched, which grasped the sheep in the same manner as human hands. The eyes were as large as dinner plates, and they were glaring at the camera with an expression of fiendish malevolence which made Carnes shudder.

"How does that huge thing ever get through that crack we examined?" demanded the lieutenant.

Dr. Bird rubbed his head thoughtfully.

"It's not an amphibian," he muttered, "as is plainly shown by the shape of the limbs and the lack of a tail, and yet it appears to have scales of the true fish type. It corresponds to no recovered fossil, and I am inclined to believe it is unique. The nervous organisation must be very low, judging from the lack of forehead and the general conformation. It has enormous strength, and yet the arms look feeble."

"It can't get through that crack," insisted the lieutenant.

"Apparently not," replied the doctor. "Wait a moment, though. Look at this!"

He pointed to the great disproportion between the length and diameter of the forelegs, and then to the hind legs.

"Either this is grave distortion or there is something mighty queer about that conformation. No animal could be constructed like that."

He turned the film so that an oblique light fell on it. As he did so he gave a cry of astonishment.

"Look here!" he said sharply. "It does get through that crack! Look at those arms and hands! There is the answer. This creature is tall and broad, but from front to rear it can measure only a few inches. The same must be true of the froglike head. That animal has been developed to live and move in a low roofed cavern, and to pass through openings only a few inches wide. Its bulk is all in two dimensions!"

"I believe you're right," said Carnes as he studied the film.

"There is no doubt of it," answered the doctor. "Look at those paws, too, Carnes. That substance isn't bone, it's gum. The thing is so young and helpless that it hasn't cut its teeth yet. It must be a baby, and that is the reason why it made its way into the cave when no other of its kind ever has."

"How large are full grown ones if this is a baby?" asked the lieutenant.

"The Lord alone knows," replied Dr. Bird. "I hope that I never have to face one and find out. Well, now that we know what we are fighting, we ought to be able to settle its hash."

"High explosive?" suggested the lieutenant.

"I don't think so. With such a low nervous organization, we would have to tear it practically to pieces to kill it, and I am anxious to keep it from mutilation for scientific study. I have an idea, but I'll have to study a while before I am sure of the details. Send me the radio operator."

The next day the Bureau mechanics began to dismount the apparatus from the tank and to assemble another elaborate contrivance. Before they had made an end of the work additional equipment arrived from

Washington, which was incorporated in the new set-up. At length Dr. Bird pronounced himself ready for the attempt.

Under his direction, three cattle were driven into the cave and there tethered. They were there the next morning unharmed, but the second night the now familiar bellowing and howling came from the depths of the cave and in the morning two of the cattle were gone.

"That will keep him quiet for a day or two," said the doctor, "and now to work!"

The tank made its way into the cave, dragging after it two huge cables which led to an engine-driven generator outside the cave. These cables were attached to the terminals of a large motor which was set up in the cave near the place where the cattle were customarily tethered. This motor was the actuating force which turned two generators, one large and one small. The smaller one was mounted on a platform on wheels, which also contained the spark gaps, the reflectors and other apparatus which produced the beam of ultra-violet light which had been used to photograph the monster.

From the larger generator led two copper bars. One of these was connected to a huge copper plate which was laid flat on the floor of the cave. The other led to a platform which was erected on huge

porcelain insulators some fifteen feet above the floor. Huge condensers were set up on this platform, and Dr. Bird announced himself in readiness.

A steer was dragged into the cave and up a temporary runway which led to the platform containing the condensers, and there tied with the copper bus bar from the larger generator fastened to three flexible copper straps which led around the animal's body. When this had been completed, everyone except the doctor, Carnes, and Lieutenant Leffingwell left the cave. These three crouched behind the search-light which sent a mild beam of ultra-violet onto the platform where the steer was held. The engine outside the cave was started, and the three men waited with tense nerves.

For several hours nothing happened. The steer tried from time to time to move and, finding it impossible, set up plaintive bellows for liberty.

"I wish something would happen," muttered the lieutenant. "This is getting on my nerves.

"Something is about to happen," replied Dr. Bird grimly. "Listen to that steer."

The bellowing of the steer had suddenly increased in volume and, added to the note of discontent, was a note of fright which had previously been absent. Dr. Bird bent over his ultra-violet search-light and made some adjustments. He handed a helmetlike arrangement to each of his companions and slipped one on over his head.

"I can't see a thing, Doctor," said Carnes in a muffled voice.

"The objects at which you are looking absorb rather than reflect ultra-violet light," said the doctor. "This is a sort of a fluoroscope arrangement, and it isn't perfect at all. However, when the monster comes along, I am pretty sure that you will be able to see it. You may see a little more as your eyes get accustomed to it."

"I can see very dimly," announced the lieutenant in a moment.

Dimly the walls of the cave and the platform before them began to take vague shape. The three stared intently down the beam of ultra-violet light which the doctor directed down the passageway leading deeper into the cave.

"Good Lord!" ejaculated Carnes suddenly.

Slowly into the field of vision came the hideous figure they had seen on the film. As it moved forward a rustling, slithering sound could be heard, even over the bellowing of the steer and the hum of the apparatus. The odor of musk became evident.

Along the floor toward them the thing slid. Presently it reared up on its hind legs and its enormous bulk became evident. It turned somewhat sideways and the correctness of Dr. Bird's hypothesis as to its peculiar shape was proved. All of the bulk of the creature was in two dimensions. Forward it moved, and the horrible human hands stretched forward, while the mouth split in a wide, toothless grin. Nearer the doomed steer the creature approached, and then the reaching hands closed on the animal.

There was a blinding flash, and the monster was hurled backward as though struck by a thunderbolt, while a horrible smell of musk and burned flesh filled the air.

"After it! Quick!" cried the doctor as he sprang forward.

Before he could reach the prostrate creature it moved and then, slowly at first, but with rapidly gaining speed, it slithered over the floor in retreat. Dr. Bird's hand swung through an arc, and there was a deafening crash as a hand-grenade exploded on the back of the

fleeing monster.

An unearthly scream came from the creature, and its motion changed from a steady forward glide to a series of convulsive jerks. Leffingwell and Carnes threw grenades, but they went wide of their mark, and the monster began to again increase its speed. Another volley of grenades was thrown and one hit scored, which slowed the monster somewhat but did not arrest the steady forward movement.

"Any more bombs?" demanded the doctor.

"Damn!" he cried as he received negative answers. "The current wasn't strong enough. It's going to get away."

Carnes jerked his automatic from under his armpit and poured a stream of bullets into the fleeing monster. Slower and slower the motion of the creature became, and its movements again became jerky and convulsive.

"Keep it in sight!" cried the doctor. "We may get it yet!"

Cautiously the three men followed the retreating horror, Leffingwell pushing before him the platform holding the ultra-violet ray apparatus. The chase led them over familiar ground.

"There is the crack!" cried the lieutenant.

"Too late!" replied the doctor.

He rushed forward and seized the lower limb of the monster and tried with all his strength to arrest its flight, but despite all that he could do it slid sideways through the crack in the wall and disappeared. A final backward kick of its leg threw the doctor twenty feet against the far wall of the cave.

"Are you hurt, Doctor?" cried Carnes.

"No, I'm all right. Put on your masks and start the gas! Quick! That may stop it before it gets in far!"

The three adjusted gas masks and thrust the mouths of two gas cylinders which were on the light truck into the crack, and opened the valves. The hissing of the gas was accompanied by a thrashing, writhing sound from the bowels of the earth for a few minutes, but the sound retreated and finally died away into an utter silence.

"And that's that!" cried the doctor half an hour later as they took off their gas masks outside the cave. "It got away from us. Carnes, how soon can we get a train back to Washington?"

"What kind of a report are you going to make to the Bureau, Doctor?" asked Carnes as they sat in the smoker of a southern train, headed for the capital.

"I'm not going to put in any report, Carnes," replied the doctor. "I haven't got the creature or any part of it to show, and no one would believe me. I am going to maintain a discreet silence about the whole matter."

"But you have your photograph to show, Doctor, and you have my evidence and Lieutenant Leffingwell's."

"The photograph might have been faked and I might have doped both of you. In any case, your words are no better than mine. No, indeed, Carnes, when I failed to make the current strong enough to kill it outright I made the first of the moves which bind me to silence, although I thought that two hundred thousand volts would be enough.

"The second failure I made was when I missed him with my second grenade, although I doubt if all six would have stopped him. My third failure was when we failed to get a sufficient concentration of cyanide gas into that hole in a hurry. The thing is so badly crippled that it will die, but it may take hours, or even days, for it to do so. It

has already made its way so far into the earth that we couldn't reach it by blasting without danger of bringing the whole place down on our heads. Even if we could blast our way into the place it came from I wouldn't dare open a path which would allow Lord only knows what terrible monsters to invade the earth. When the soldiers have finished stopping that crack with ten feet of solid masonry, I think the barrier will hold, even against that critter's papa and mamma and all its relatives. Then Mammoth Cave will be safe for visitors again. That latter fact is the only report which I will make."

"It is a dandy story to go to waste," said Carnes soberly.

"Tell it then, if you wish, and get laughed at for your pains. No, Carnes, you must learn one thing. A man like Bolton, for instance, will implicitly believe that a four leaf clover in his watch-charm will bring him good luck, and that carrying a buckeye keeps rheumatism away from him; but tell him a bit of sober fact like this, attested by three reliable witnesses and a good photograph, and you'll just get laughed at for your pains. I'm going to keep my mouth shut."

"So be it, then!" replied Carnes with a sigh.

#03 Phantoms Of Reality, by Ray Cummings:

Red Sensua's knife came up dripping—and the two adventurers knew that chaos and bloody revolution had been unleashed in that shadowy kingdom of the fourth dimension.

Aproximate word count: 17,200

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Chapter 1: Wall Street—or the Open Road?

When I was some fifteen years old, I once made the remark, "Why, that's impossible."

The man to whom I spoke was a scientist. He replied gently, "My boy, when you are grown older and wiser you will realize that nothing is impossible."

Somehow, that statement stayed with me. In our swift-moving wonderful world I have seen it proven many times. They once

thought it impossible to tell what lay across the broad, unknown Atlantic Ocean. They thought the vault of the heavens revolved around the earth. It was impossible for it to do anything else, because they could see it revolve. It was impossible, too, for anything to be alive and yet be so small that one might not see it. But the microscope proved the contrary. Or again, to talk beyond the normal range of the human voice was impossible, until the telephone came to show how simply and easily it might be done.

I never forgot that physician's remark. And it was repeated to me some ten years later by my friend, Captain Derek Mason, on that memorable June night of 1929.

My name is Charles Wilson. I was twenty-five that June of 1929. Although I had lived all of my adult life in New York City, I had no relatives there and few friends.

I had known Captain Mason for several years. Like myself, he seemed one who walked alone in life. He was an English gentleman, perhaps thirty years old. He had been stationed in the Bermudas, I understood, though he seldom spoke of it.

I always felt that I had never seen so attractive a figure of a man as this Derek Mason. An English aristocrat, he was, straight and tall

and dark, and rather rakish, with a military swagger. He affected a small, black mustache. A handsome, debonair fellow, with an easy grace of manner: a modern d'Artagnan. In an earlier, less civilized age, he would have been expert with sword and stick, I could not doubt. A man who could capture the hearts of women with a look. He had always been to me a romantic figure, and a mystery that seemed to shroud him made him no less so.

A friendship had sprung up between Derek Mason and me, perhaps because we were such opposite types! I am an American, of medium height, and medium build. Ruddy, with sandy hair. Derek Mason was as meticulous of his clothes, his swagger uniforms, as the most perfect Beau Brummel. Not so myself. I am careless of dress and speech.

I had not seen Derek Mason for at least a month when, one June afternoon, a note came from him. I went to his apartment at eight o'clock the same evening. Even about his home there seemed a mystery. He lived alone with one man servant. He had taken quarters in a high-class bachelor apartment building near lower Fifth Avenue, at the edge of Greenwich Village.

All of which no doubt was rational enough, but in this building he had chosen the lower apartment at the ground-floor level. It adjoined

the cellar. It was built for the janitor, but Derek had taken it and fixed it up in luxurious fashion. Near it, in a corner of the cellar, he had boarded off a square space into a room. I understood vaguely that it was a chemical laboratory. He had never discussed it, nor had I ever been shown inside it. Unusual, mysterious enough, and that a captain of the British military should be an experimental scientist was even more unusual. Yet I had always believed that for a year or two Derek had been engaged in some sort of chemical or physical experiment. With all his military swagger he had the precise, careful mode of thought characteristic of the man of scientific mind.

I recall that when I got his note with its few sentences bidding me come to see him, I had a premonition that it marked the beginning of something strange. As though the portals of a mystery were opening to me!

Nothing is impossible! Nevertheless I record these events into which I was plunged that June evening with a very natural reluctance. I expect no credibility. If this were the year 2000, my narrative doubtless would be tame enough. Yet in 1929 it can only be called a fantasy. Let it go at that. The fantasy of to-day is the sober truth of to-morrow. And by the day after, it is a mere platitude. Our world moves swiftly.

Derek received me in his living-room. He admitted me himself. He told me that his man servant was out. It was a small room, with leather-covered easy chairs, rugs on its hardwood floor, and sober brown portieres at its door and windows. A brown parchment shade shrouded the electrolier on the table. It was the only light in the room. It cast its mellow sheen upon Derek's lean graceful figure as he flung himself down and produced cigarettes.

He said, "Charlie, I want a little talk with you. I've something to tell you—something to offer you."

He held his lighter out to me, with its tiny blue alcohol flame under my cigarette. And I saw that his hand was trembling.

"But I don't understand what you mean," I protested.

He retorted, "I'm suggesting that you might be tired of being a clerk in a brokerage office. Tired of this humdrum world that we call civilization. Tired of Wall Street."

"I am, Derek. Heavens, that's true enough."

His eyes held me. He was smiling half whimsically: his voice was only half serious. Yet I could see, in the smoldering depths of those

luminous dark eyes, a deadly seriousness that belied his smiling lips and his gay tone.

He interrupted me with, "And I offer you a chance for deeds of high adventuring. The romance of danger, of pitting your wits against villainy to make right triumph over wrong, and to win for yourself power and riches—and perhaps a fair lady...."

"Derek, you talk like a swashbuckler of the middle ages."

I thought he would grin, but he turned suddenly solemn.

"I'm offering to make you henchman to a king, Charlie."

"King of what? Where?"

He spread his lean brown hands with a gesture. He shrugged. "What matter? If you seek adventure, you can find it—somewhere. If you feel the lure of romance—it will come to you."

I said, "Henchman to a king?"

But still he would not smile. "Yes. If I were king. I'm serious. Absolutely. In all this world there is no one who cares a damn about me. Not in this world, but...."

He checked himself. He went on, "You are the same. You have no relatives?"

"No. None that ever think of me."

"Nor a sweetheart. Or have you?"

"No," I smiled. "Not yet. Maybe never."

"But you are too interested in Wall Street to leave it for the open road?" He was sarcastic now. "Or do you fear deeds of daring? Do you want to right a great wrong? Rescue an oppressed people, overturn the tyranny of an evil monarch, and put your friend and the girl he loves upon the throne? Or do you want to go down to work as usual in the subway to-morrow morning? Are you afraid that in this process of becoming henchman to a king you may perchance get killed?"

I matched his caustic tone. "Let's hear it, Derek."

Chapter 2: The Challenge of the Unknown

Incredible! Impossible! I did not say it, though my thoughts were written on my face, no doubt.

Derek said quietly, "Difficult to believe, Charlie? Yes! But it happens to be true. The girl I love is not of this world, but she lives nevertheless. I have seen her, talked with her. A slim little thing—beautiful...."

He sat staring. "This is nothing supernatural, Charlie. Only the ignorant savages of our past called the unknown—the unusual—supernatural. We know better now."

I said, "This girl—"

He gestured. "As I told you, I have for years been working on the theory that there is another world, existing here in this same space with us. The Fourth Dimension! Call it that it you like. I have found it, proved its existence! And this girl—her name is Hope—lives in it. Let me tell you about her and her people. Shall I?"

My heart was pounding so that it almost smothered me. "Yes, Derek."

"She lives here, in this Space we call New York City. She and her people use this same Space at the same time that we use it. A different world from ours, existing here now with us! Unseen by us. And we are unseen by them!

"A different form of matter, Charlie. As tangible to the people of the other realm as we are to our own world. Humans like ourselves."

He paused, but I could find no words to fill the gap. And presently he went on:

"Hope's world, co-existing here with us, is dependent upon us. They speak what we call English. They shadow us."

I murmured, "Phantoms of reality."

"Yes. A world very like ours. But primitive, where ours is civilized."

He paused again. His eyes were staring past me as though he could see through the walls of the cellar room into great reaches of the unknown. What a strange mixture was this Derek Mason! What a strange compound of the cold reality of the scientist and the fancy of the romantic dreamer! Yet I wonder if that is not what science is. There is no romantic lover gawping at the moon who could have more romance in his soul, or see in the moonlit eyes of his loved one more romance than the scientist finds in the wonders of his laboratory.

Derek went on slowly:

"A primitive world, primitive nation, primitive passions! As I see it now, Charlie—as I know it to be—it seems as though perhaps Hope's world is merely a replica of ours, stripped to the primitive. As though it might be the naked soul of our modern New York, ourselves as we really are, not as we pretend to be."

He roused himself from his reverie.

"Hope's nation is ruled by a king. An emperor, if you like. A monarch, beset with the evils of luxury and ease, and wine and women. He is surrounded by his nobles, the idle aristocracy, by virtue of their birth proclaiming themselves of too fine a clay to work. The crimson nobles, they are called. Because they affect crimson cloaks, and their beautiful women, voluptuous, sex-mad, are wont to bedeck themselves in veils and robes of crimson.

"And there are workers, toilers they call them. Oppressed, down-trodden toilers, with hate for the nobles and the king smoldering within them. In France there was such a condition, and the bloody revolution came of it. It exists here now. Hope was born in the ranks of these toilers, but has risen by her grace and beauty to a position in the court of this graceless monarch."

He leaped from his chair and began pacing the room. I sat silent,

staring at him. So strange a thing! Impossible? I could not say that. I could only say, incredible to me. And as I framed the thought I knew its incredibility was the very measure of my limited intelligence, my lack of knowledge. The vast unknown of nature, so vast that everything which was real to me, understandable to me, was a mere drop in the ocean of the existing unknown.

"Don't you understand me now?" Derek added vehemently. "I'm not talking fantasy. Cold reality! I've found a way to transport myself—and you—into this different state of matter, into this other world! I've already made a test. I went there and stayed just for a few moments, a night or so ago."

It made my heart leap wildly. He went on:—

"There is chaos there. Smoldering revolution which at any time—to-night perhaps—may burst into conflagration and destroy this wanton ruling class." He laughed harshly. "In Hope's world the workers are a primitive, ignorant people. Superstitious. Like the peons of Mexico, they're all primed and ready to shout for any leader who sets himself up. My chance—our chance—"

He suddenly stopped his pacing and stood before me. "Don't you feel the lure of it? The open road? 'The road is straight before me and the

Red Gods call for me!' I'm going, Charlie. Going to-night—and I want you to go with me! Will you?"

Would I go? The thing leaped like a menacing shadow risen solidly to confront me. Would I go?

Suddenly there was before me the face of a girl. White. Apprehensive. It seemed almost pleading. A face beautiful, with a mouth of parted red lips. A face framed in long, pale-golden hair with big staring blue eyes. Wistful eyes, wan with starlight—eyes that seemed to plead.

I thought, "Why, this is madness!" I was not seeing this face with my eyes. There was nothing, no one here in the room with me but Derek. I knew it. The shadows about us were empty. I was conjuring the face only from Derek's words, making real that which existed only in my imagination.

Yet I knew that in another realm, with my thoughts now bridging the gap, the girl was real. Would I go into the unknown?

The quest of the unknown. The gauntlet of the unknown flung down now before me, as it was flung down before the ancient explorers who picked up its challenge and mounted the swaying decks of their

little galleons and said, "We'll go and see what lies off there in the unknown."

That same lure was on me now. I heard my voice saying, "Why yes, I guess I'll go, Derek."

Chapter 3: Into the Unknown

We stood in the boarded room which was Derek's laboratory. Our preparations had been simple: Derek had made them all in advance. There was little left to do. The laboratory was a small room of board walls, board ceiling and floor. Windowless, with a single door opening into the cellar of the apartment house.

Derek had locked the door after us as we entered. He said, "I have sent my man servant away for a week. The people in the house here think I have gone away on a vacation. No one will miss us, Charlie —not for a time, anyway."

No one would miss me, save my employers, and to them I would no doubt be small loss.

We had put out the light in Derek's apartment and locked it carefully after us. This journey! I own that I was trembling, and frightened. Yet a strange eagerness was on me.

The cellar room was comfortably furnished. Rugs were on its floor. Whatever apparatus of a research laboratory had been here was removed now. But the evidence of it remained—Derek's long search for this secret which now he was about to use. A row of board shelves at one side of the room showed where bottles and chemical apparatus had stood. A box of electrical tools and odds and ends of wire still lay discarded in a corner of the room. There was a tank of running water, and gas connections, where no doubt bunsen burners had been.

Derek produced his apparatus. I sat on a small low couch against the wall and watched him as he stripped himself of his clothes. Around his waist he adjusted a wide, flat, wire-woven belt. A small box was fastened to it in the middle of the back—a wide, flat thing of metal, a quarter of an inch thick, and curved to fit his body. It was a storage battery of the vibratory current he was using. From the battery, tiny threads of wire ran up his back to a wire necklace flat against his throat. Other wires extended down his arms to the wrists. Still others down his legs to the ankles. A flat electrode was connected to the top of his head like a helmet. I was reminded as he stood there, of medical charts of the human body with the arterial system outlined. But when he dressed again and put on his jaunty captain's uniform, only the electrode clamped to his head and the thin wires dangling from it in the back were visible to disclose that there was anything

unusual about him.

He said smilingly, "Don't stare at me like that."

I took a grip on myself. This thing was frightening, now that I actually was embarked on it. Derek had explained to me briefly the workings of his apparatus. A vibratory electronic current, for which as yet he had no name, was stored in the small battery. He had said:

"There's nothing incomprehensible about this, Charlie. It's merely a changing of the vibration rate of the basic substance out of which our bodies are made. Vibration is the governing factor of all states of matter. In its essence what we call substance is wholly intangible. That is already proven. A vortex! A whirlpool of nothingness! It creates a pseudo-substance which is the only material in the universe. And from this, by vibration, is built the complicated structure of things as we see and feel them to be, all dependent upon vibration. Everything is altered, directly as the vibratory rate is changed. From the most tenuous gas, to fluids to solids—throughout all the different states of matter the only fundamental difference is the rate of vibration."

I understood the basic principle of this that he was explaining—that now when this electronic current which he had captured and

controlled was applied to our physical body, the vibration rate of every smallest and most minute particle of our physical being was altered. There is so little in the vast scale of natural phenomena of which our human senses are cognisant! Our eyes see the colors of the spectrum, from red to violet. But a vast invisible world of color lies below the red of the rainbow! Physicists call it the infra-red. And beyond the violet, another realm—the ultra-violet. With sound it is the same. Our audible range of sound is very small. There are sounds with too slow a vibratory rate for us to hear, and others too rapid. The differing vibratory rate from most tenuous gas to most substantial solid is all that we can perceive in this physical world of ours. Yet of the whole, it is so very little! This other realm to which we were now going lay in the higher, more rapid vibratory scale. To us, by comparison, a more tenuous world, a shadow realm.

I listened to Derek's words, but my mind was on the practicality of what lay ahead. An explorer, standing upon his ship, may watch his men bending the sails, raising the anchor, but his mind flings out to the journey's end....

We were soon ready. Derek wore his jaunty uniform, I wore my ordinary business suit. A magnetic field would be about us, so that in the transition anything in fairly close contact with our bodies was affected by the current.

Derek said, "I will go first, Charlie."

"But, Derek—" A fear, greater than the trembling I had felt before, leaped at me. Left here alone, with no one on whom to depend!

He spoke with careful casualness, but his eyes were burning me. "Just sit there, and watch. When I am gone, turn on the current as I showed you and come after me. I'll wait for you."

"Where?" I stammered.

He smiled faintly. "Here. Right here. I'm not going away! Not going to move. I'll be here on the couch waiting for you."

Terrifying words! He had lowered the couch, bending out its short legs until the frame of it rested on the board floor. He drew a chair up before it and seated me. He sat down on the couch.

He said, "Oh, one other thing. Just before you start, put out the light. We can't tell how long it will be before we return."

Terrifying words!

His right hand was on his left wrist where the tiny switch was placed. He smiled again. "Good luck to us, Charlie!"

Good luck to us! The open road, the unknown!

I sat there staring. He was partly in shadow. The room was very silent. Derek lay propped up on one elbow. His hand threw the tiny switch.

There was a breathless moment. Derek's face was set and white, but no whiter than my own, I was sure. His eyes were fixed on me. I saw him suddenly quiver and twitch a little.

I murmured, "Derek—"

At once he spoke, to reassure me. "I'm all right, Charlie. That was just the first feel of it."

There was a faint quivering throb in the room, like a tiny distant dynamo throbbing. The current was surging over Derek; his legs twitched.

A moment. The faint throbbing intensified. No louder, but rapid, infinitely more rapid. A tiny throb, an aerial whine, faint as the whirring wings of a humming bird. It went up the scale, ascending in pitch, until presently it was screaming with an aerial microscopic voice.

But there seemed no change in Derek. His uniform was glowing a trifle, that was all. His face was composed now; he smiled, but did not speak. His eyes roved away from me, as though now he were seeing things that I could not see.

Another moment. No change.

Why, what was this? I blinked, gasped. There was a change! My gaze was fastened upon Derek's white face. White? It was more than white now! A silver sheen seemed to be coming to his skin!

I think no more than a minute had passed. His face was glowing, shimmering. A transparent look was coming to it, a thinness, a sudden unsubstantiality! He dropped his elbow and lay on the couch, stretched at full length at my feet. His eyes were staring.

And suddenly I realized that the face that held those staring eyes was erased! A shimmering apparition of Derek was stretched here before me. I could see through it now! Beneath the shimmering, blurred outlines of his body I could see the solid folds of the couch cover. A ghost of Derek here. An apparition—fading—dissipating!

A gossamer outline of him, imponderable, intangible.

I leaped to my feet, staring down over him.

"Derek!"

The shape of him did not move. Every instant it was more vaporous, more unreal.

I thought, "He's gone!"

No! He was still there. A white mist of his form on the couch. Melting, dissipating in the light like a fog before sunshine. A wisp of it left, like a breath, and then there was nothing.

I sat on the couch. I had put out the light. Around me the room was black. My fingers found the small switch at my wrist. I pressed it across its tiny arc.

The first shock was slight, but infinitely strange. A shuddering, twitching sensation ran all over me. It made my head reel, swept a wave of nausea over me, a giddiness, a feeling that I was falling through darkness. I lay on the couch, bracing myself. The current was whining up its tiny scale. I could feel it now. A tiny throbbing, communicating itself to my physical being.

And then in a moment I realized that my body was throbbing. The

vibration of the current was communicating itself to the most minute cells of my body. An indescribable tiny quivering within me. Strange, frightening, sickening at first. But the sickness passed, and in a moment I found it almost pleasant.

I could see nothing. The room was wholly dark. I lay on my side on the couch, my eyes staring into the blackness around me. I could hear the humming of the current, and then it seemed to fade. Abruptly I felt a sense of lightness. My body, lying on the couch, pressed less heavily.

I gripped my arm. I was solid, substantial as before. I touched the couch. It was the couch which was changing, not I! The couch cover queerly seemed to melt under my hand!

The sense of my own lightness grew upon me. A lightness, a freedom, pressed me, as though chains and shackles which all my life had encompassed me were falling away. A wild, queer freedom.

I wondered where Derek was. Had I arrived in the other realm? Was he here? I had no idea how much time had passed: a minute or two, perhaps.

Or was I still in Derek's laboratory? The darkness was as solid,

impenetrable as ever. No, not quite dark! I saw something now. A glowing, misty outline around me. Then I saw that it was not the new, unknown realm, but still Derek's room. A shadowy, spectral room, and the light, which dimly illumined it, was from outside.

I lay puzzling, my own situation forgotten for the moment. The light came from overhead, in another room of the apartment house. I stared. Around me now was a dim vista of distance, and vague, blurred, misty outlines of the apartment building above me. The shadowy world I had left now lay bare. There was a moment when I thought I could see far away across a spectral city street. The shadows of the great city were around me. They glowed, and then were gone.

A hand gripped my arm in a solid grip. Derek's voice sounded.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes," I murmured. The couch had faded. I was conscious that I had floated or drifted down a few inches, to a new level. The level of the cellar floor beneath the couch. Cellar floor! It was not that now. Yet there was something solid here, a solid ground, and I was lying upon it, with Derek sitting beside me.

I murmured again, "Yes, I'm all right."

My groping hand felt the ground. It was soil, with a growth of vegetation like a grass sward on it. Were we outdoors? It suddenly seemed so. I could feel soft, warm air on my face and had a sense of open distance around me. A light was growing, a vague, diffused light, as though day were swiftly coming upon us.

I felt Derek fumbling at my wrist. "That's all, Charlie."

There was a slight shock. Derek was pulling me up beside him. I found myself on my feet, with light around me. I stood wavering, gripping Derek. It was as though I had closed my eyes, and now they were suddenly open. I was aware of daylight, color, and movement. A world of normality here, normal to me now because I was part of it. The realm of the unknown!

Chapter 4: *"Hope, I Came...."*

I think I was first conscious of a queer calmness which had settled upon me, as though now I had withdrawn contact with the turmoil of our world! Something was gone, and in its place came a calmness. But that was a mere transition. It had passed in a moment. I stood trembling with eagerness, as I know Derek was trembling.

A radiant effulgence of light was around us, clarifying, growing. There was ground beneath our feet, and sky overhead. A rational landscape, strangely familiar. A physical world like my own, but, it seemed, with a new glory upon it. Nature, calmly serene.

I had thought we were standing in daylight. I saw now it was bright starlight. An evening, such as the evening we had just left in our own world. The starlight showed everything clearly. I could see a fair distance.

We stood at the top of a slight rise. I saw gentle, slightly undulating country. A brook nearby wound through a grove of trees and lost itself. Suddenly, with a shock, I realized how familiar this was! We stood facing what in New York City we call West. The contour of this land was familiar enough for me to identify it. A mile or so ahead lay a river; it shimmered in its valley, with cliffs on its further side. Near at hand the open country was dotted with trees and checkered with round patches of cultivated fields. And there were occasional habitations, low, oval houses of green thatch.

The faint flush of a recent sunset lay upon the landscape, mingled with the starlight. A road—a white ribbon in the starlight—wound over the countryside toward the river. Animals, strange of aspect, were slowly dragging carts. There were distant figures working in

the fields.

A city lay ahead of us, set along this nearer bank of the river. A city! It seemed a primitive village. All was primitive, as though here might be some lost Indian tribe of our early ages. The people were picturesque, the field workers garbed in vivid colors. The flat little carts, slow moving, with broad-horned oxen.

This quiet village, drowsing beside the calm-flowing river, seemed all very normal. I could fancy that it was just after sundown of a quiet workday. There was a faint flush of pink upon everything: the glory of the sun just set. And as though to further my fancy, in the village by the river, like an angelus, a faint-toned bell was chiming.

We stood for a moment gazing silently. I felt wholly normal. A warm, pleasant wind fanned my hot face. The sense of lightness was gone. This was normality to me.

Derek murmured, "Hope was to meet me here."

And then we both saw her. She was coming toward us along the road. A slight, girlish figure, clothed in queerly vivid garments: a short jacket of blue cloth with wide-flowing sleeves, knee-length pantaloons of red, with tassels dangling from them, and a wide red

sash about her waist. Pale golden hair was piled in a coil upon her head....

She was coming toward us along the edge of the road, from the direction of the city. She was only a few hundred feet from us when we first saw her, coming swiftly, furtively it seemed. A low pike fence bordered the road. She seemed to be shielding herself in the shadows beside it.

We stood waiting in the starlight. The nearest figures in the field and on the road were too far away to notice us. The girl advanced. Her white arm went up in a gesture, and Derek answered. She left the road, crossing the field toward us. As she came closer, I saw how very beautiful she was. A girl of eighteen, perhaps, a fantastic little figure with her vivid garments. The starlight illumined her white face, anxious, apprehensive, but eager.

"Derek!"

He said, "Hope, I came...."

I stood silently watching. Derek's arms went out, and the girl, with a little cry, came running forward and threw herself into them.

Chapter 5: Intrigue

"Am I in time, Hope?"

"Yes, but the festival is to-night. In an hour or two now. Oh Derek, if the king holds this festival, the toilers will revolt. They won't stand it __"

"To-night! It mustn't be held to-night! It doesn't give me time, time to plan."

I stood listening to their vehement, half-whispered words. For a moment or two, absorbed, they ignored me.

"The king will make his choice to-night, Derek. He has announced it. Blanca or Sensua for his queen. And if he chooses the Crimson Sensua—" She stammered, then she went on:

"If he does—there will be bloodshed. The toilers are waiting, just to learn his choice."

Derek exclaimed, "But to-night is too soon! I've got to plan. Hope, where does Rohbar stand in this?"

Strange intrigue! I pieced it together now, from their words, and

from what presently they briefly told me. A festival was about to be held, an orgy of feasting and merrymaking, of music and dancing. And during it, this young King Leonto was to choose his queen. There were two possibilities. The Crimson Sensua, a profligate, debauched woman who, as queen, would further oppress the workers. And Blanca, a white beauty, risen from the toilers to be a favorite at the Court. Hope was her handmaiden.

If Blanca were chosen, the toilers would be appeased. She was one of them. She would lead this king from his profligate ways, would win from him justice for the workers.

But Derek and Hope both knew that the pure and gentle Blanca would never be the king's choice. And to-night the toilers would definitely know it, and the smoldering revolt would burst into flame.

And there was this Rohbar. Derek said, "He is the king's henchman, Charlie."

I stood here in the starlight, listening to them. This strange primitive realm. There were no modern weapons here. We had brought none. The current used in our transition would have exploded the cartridges of a revolver. I had a dirk which Hope now gave me, and that was all.

Primitive intrigue. I envisaged this chaotic nation, with its toilers ignorant as the oppressed Mexican peons at their worst. Striving to better themselves, yet, not knowing how. Ready to shout for any leader who might with vainglorious words set himself up as a patriot.

This Rohbar, perhaps, was planning to do just that.

And so was Derek! He said, "Hope, if you could persuade the king to postpone the festival—if Blanca would help persuade him—just until to-morrow night...."

"I can try, Derek. But the festival is planned for an hour or two from now."

"Where is the king?"

"In his palace, near the festival gardens."

She gestured to the south. My mind went back to New York City. This hillock, where we were standing in the starlight beside a tree, was in my world about Fifth Avenue and Sixteenth Street. The king's palace—the festival gardens—stood down at the Battery, where the rivers met in the broad water of the harbor.

Derek was saying, "We haven't much time: can you get us to the palace?"

"Yes. I have a cart down there on the road."

"And the cloaks for Charlie and me?"

"Yes."

"Good!" said Derek. "We'll go with you. It's a long chance; he probably won't postpone it. If he does not, we'll be among the audience. And when he chooses the Red Sensua—"

She shuddered, "Oh, Derek—" And I thought I heard her whisper, "Oh, Alexandre—" and I saw his finger go to his lips.

His arm went around her. She huddled, small as a child against his tall, muscular body.

He said gently, "Don't be afraid, little Hope."

His face was grim, his eyes were gleaming. I saw him suddenly as an instinctive military adventurer. An anachronism in our modern New York City. Born in a wrong age. But here in this primitive realm he was at home.

I plucked at him. "How can you—how can we dare plunge into this thing? Hidden with cloaks, yes. But you talk of leading these toilers."

He cast Hope away and confronted me. "I can do it! You'll see, Charlie." He was very strangely smiling. "You'll see. But I don't want to come into the open right away. Not to-night. But if we can only postpone this accursed festival."

We had been talking perhaps five minutes. We were ready now to start away. Derek said:

"Whatever comes, Charlie, I want you to take care of Hope. Guard her for me, will you?"

I said, "Yes, I will try to."

Hope smiled as she held out her hand to me. "I will not be afraid, with Derek's friend."

Her English was of different intonation from our own, but it was her native language, I could not doubt.

I took her cold, slightly trembling hand. "Thank you, Hope."

Her eyes were misty with starlight. Tender eyes, but the tenderness was not for me.

"Yes," I repeated. "You can depend upon me, Derek."

We left the hillock. A food-laden cart came along the road. The driver, a boy vivid in jacket and wide trousers of red and blue, bravely worn but tattered, ran alongside guiding the oxen. When they had passed we followed, and presently we came to the cloaks Hope had hidden. Derek and I donned them. They were long crimson cloaks with hoods.

Hope said, "Many are gathering for the festival shrouded like that. You will not be noticed now."

Further along the road we reached a little eminence. I saw the river ahead of us, and a river behind us. And a few miles to the south, an open spread of water where the rivers joined. Familiar contours! The Hudson River! The East River. And down at the end of the island, New York Harbor.

Hope gestured that way. "The king's palace is there."

We were soon passing occasional houses, primitive thatched

dwellings. I saw inside one. Workers were seated over their frugal evening meal. Always the same vivid garments, jaunty but tattered. We passed one old fellow in a field, working late in the starlight. A man bent with age, but still a tiller of the soil. Hope waved to him and he responded, but the look he gave us as we hurried by shrouded in our crimson cloaks was sullenly hostile.

We came to an open cart. It stood by the roadside. An ox with shaggy coat and spreading horns was fastened to the fence. It was a small cart with small rollers like wheels. Seats were in it and a vivid canopy over it. We climbed in and rumbled away.

And this starlit road in our own world was Broadway! We were presently passing close to the river's edge. This quiet, peaceful, starlit river! Why, in our world it was massed with docks! Great ocean liners, huge funneled, with storied decks lay here! Under this river, tunnels with endless passing vehicles! Tubes, with speeding trains crowded with people!

The reality here was so different! Behind us what seemed an upper city was strung along the river. Ahead of us also there were streets and houses, the city of the workers. A bell was tolling. Along all the roads now we could see the moving yellow spots of lights on the holiday carts headed for the festival. And there were spots of yellow

torchlight from boats on the river.

We soon were entering the city streets. Narrow dirt streets they were, with primitive shacks to the sides. Women came to the doorways to stare at our little cart rumbling hastily past. I was conscious of my crimson cloak, and conscious of the sullen glances of hate which were flung at it from every side, here in this squalid, forlorn section where the workers lived.

Along every street now the carts were passing, converging to the south. They were filled, most of them, with young men and girls, all in gaudy costumes. Some of them, like ourselves, were shrouded in crimson cloaks. The carts occasionally were piled with flowers. As one larger than us, and moving faster rumbled by, a girl in it stood up and pelted me with blossoms. She wore a crimson robe, but it had fallen from her shoulders. I caught a glimpse of her face, framed in flowing dark hair, and of eyes with laughter in them, mocking me, alluring.

We came at last to the end of the island. There seemed to be a thousand or more people arriving, or here already. The tip of the island had an esplanade with a broad canopy behind it. Burning torches of wood gave flames of yellow, red and blue fire. A throng of gay young people promenaded the walk, watching the arriving boats.

And here, behind the walk at the water's edge, was a garden of trees and lawn, shrubs and beds of tall vivid flowers. Nooks were here to shelter lovers, pools of water glinted red and green with the reflected torchlight. In one of the pools I saw a group of girls bathing, sportive as dolphins.

To one side at a little distance up the river, banked against the water, was a broad, low building: the palace of the king. About it were broad gardens, with shrubs and flowers. The whole was surrounded by a high metal fence, spiked on top.

The main gate was near at hand; we left our cart. Close to the gate was a guard standing alert, a jaunty fellow in leather pantaloons and leather jacket, with a spiked helmet, and in his hand a huge, sharp-pointed lance. The gardens of the palace, what we could see of them, seemed empty—none but the favored few might enter here. But as I climbed from the cart, I got the impression that just inside the fence a figure was lurking. It started away as we approached the gate. The guard had not seen it—the drab figure of a man in what seemed to be dripping garments, as though perhaps he had swum in from the water.

And Derek saw him. He muttered, "They are everywhere."

Hope led us to the gate. The guard recognized her. At her imperious gesture he stood aside. We passed within. I saw the palace now as a long winged structure of timber and stone, with a high tower at the end of one wing. The building fronted the river, but here on the garden side there was a broad doorway up an incline, twenty feet up and over a small bridge, spanning what seemed a dry moat. Beyond it, a small platform, then an oval archway, the main entrance to the building.

Derek and I, shrouded in our crimson cloaks with hoods covering us to the eyes, followed Hope into the palace.

Chapter 6: The King's Henchmen

The long room was bathed in colored lights. There was an ornate tiled floor. Barbaric draperies of heavy fabric shrouded the archways and windows. It was a totally barbaric apartment. It might have been the audience chamber of some fabled Eastern Prince of our early ages. Yet not quite that either. There was a primitive modernity here. I could not define it, could not tell why I felt this strangeness. Perhaps it was the aspect of the people. The room was crowded with men and gay laughing girls in fancy dress costumes. Half of them at least were shrouded in crimson cloaks, but most of the hoods were back. They moved about, laughing and talking, evidently waiting for

the time to come for them to go to the festival. We pushed our way through them.

Derek murmured, "Keep your hood up, Charlie."

A girl plucked at me. "Handsome man, let me see." She thrust her painted lips up to mine as though daring me to kiss them. Hope shoved her away. Her parted cloak showed her white, beautiful body with the dark tresses of her hair shrouding it. Exotically lovely she was, with primitive, unrestrained passions—typical of the land in which she lived.

"This way," whispered Hope. "Keep close together. Do not speak!"

We moved forward and stood quietly against the wall of the room, where great curtains hid us partly from view. Under a canopy, at a table on a raised platform near one end of the apartment, sat the youthful monarch. I saw him as a man of perhaps thirty. He was in holiday garb, robed in silken hose of red and white, a strangely fashioned doublet, and a close-fitting shirt. Bare-headed, with thick black hair, long to the base of his neck.

He sat at the table with a calm dignity. But he relaxed here in the presence of his favored courtiers. He was evidently in a high good

humor this night, giving directions for the staging of the spectacle, despatching messengers. I stood gazing at him. A very kingly fellow this. There was about him, that strange mingled look of barbarism and modernity.

Hope approached him and knelt. Derek and I could hear their voices, although the babble of the crowd went on.

"My little Hope, what is it? Stand up, child."

She said, "Your Highness, a message from Blanca."

He laughed. "Say no more! I know it already! She does not want this festival. The workers,"—what a world of sardonic contempt he put into that one word!—"the workers will be offended because we take pleasure to-night. Bah!" But he was still laughing. "Say no more, little Hope. Tell Blanca to dance and sing her best this night. I am making my choice. Did you know that?"

Hope was silent. He repeated, "Did you know that?"

"Yes, Your Highness," she murmured.

"I choose our queen to-night, child. Blanca or Sensua." He sighed. "Both are very beautiful. Do you know which one I am going to

choose?"

"No," she said.

"Nor do I, little Hope. Nor do I."

He dismissed her. "Go now. Don't bother me."

She parted her lips as though to make another protest, but his eyes suddenly flashed.

"I would not have you annoy me again. Do you understand?"

She turned away, back toward where Derek and I were lurking. The chattering crowd in the room had paid no attention to Hope, but before she could reach us a man detached himself from a nearby group and accosted her. A commanding figure, he was, I think, quite the largest man in the room. An inch or two taller than Derek, at the least. He wore his red cloak with the hood thrown back upon his wide heavy shoulders. A bullet-head with close-clipped black hair. A man of about the king's age, he had a face of heavy features, and flashing dark eyes. A scoundrel adventurer, this king's henchman.

Hope said, "What is it, Rohbar?"

"You will join our party, little Hope?" He laid a heavy hand on her white arm. His face was turned toward me. I could not miss the gleaming look in his eyes as he regarded her.

"No," she said.

It seemed that he twitched at her, but she broke away from him.

Anger crossed his face, but the desirous look in his eyes remained.

"You are very bold, Hope, to spurn me like this." He had lowered his voice as though fearful that the king might hear him.

"Let me alone!" she said.

She darted away from him, but before she joined us she stood waiting until he turned away.

"No use," Hope whispered. "There is nothing we can do here. You heard what the king said—and the festival is already begun."

Derek stood a moment, lost in thought. He was gazing across the room to where Rohbar was standing with a group of girls. He said at last:

"Come on, Charlie. We'll watch this festival. This damn fool king will choose the Red Sensua." He shrugged. "There will be chaos...."

We shoved our way from the room, went out of the main doorway and hurried through the gardens of the palace. The red-cloaked figures were leaving the building now for the festival grounds. We waited for a group of them to pass so that we might walk alone. As we neared the gate, passing through the shadows of high flowered shrubs, a vague feeling that we were being followed shot through me. In a moment there was so much to see that I forgot it, but I held my hand on my dirk and moved closer to Hope.

We reached the entrance to the canopy. A group of girls, red-cloaked, were just coming out. They rushed past us. They ran, discarding their cloaks. Their white bodies gleamed under the colored lights as they rushed to the pool and dove.

We were just in time. Hope whispered, "The king will be here any moment."

Beneath the canopy was a broad arena of seats. A platform, like a stage, was at one end. It was brilliantly illuminated with colored torches held aloft by girls in flowing robes, each standing like a statue with her light held high. The place was crowded. In the gloom

of the darkened auditorium we found seats off to one side, near the open edge of the canopy. We sat, with Hope between us.

Derek whispered, "Shakespeare might have staged a play in a fashion like this."

A primitive theatrical performance. There was no curtain for interlude between what might have been the acts of a vaudeville. The torch girls, like pages, ranged themselves in a line across the front of the stage. They were standing there as we took our seats. The vivid glare of their torches concealed the stage behind them.

There was a few moments wait, then, amid hushed silence, the king with his retinue came in. He sat in a canopied box off to one side. When he was seated, he raised his arm and the buzz of conversation in the audience began again.

Presently the page girls moved aside from the stage. The buzz of the audience was stilted. The performance, destined to end so soon in tragedy, now began.

Chapter 7: The Crimson Murderess

Hope murmured. "The three-part music comes first. There will first be the spiritual."

An orchestra was seated on the stage in a semi-circle. It was composed of men and women musicians, and there seemed to be over a hundred of them. They sat in three groups; the center group was about to play. In a solemn hush the leaderless choirs, with all its players garbed in white, began its first faint note. I craned to get a clear view of the stage. This white choir seemed almost all wood-wind. There were tiny pipes in little series such as Pan might have used. Flutes, and flageolets; and round-bellied little instruments of clay, like ocarinas. And pitch-pipes, long and slender as a marsh reed.

In a moment I was lost in the music. It began softly, with single muted notes from a single instrument, echoed by the others, running about the choir like a will-o'-the-wisp. It was faint, as though very far away, made more sweet by distance. And then it swelled, came nearer.

I had never heard such music as this. Primitive! It was not that. Nor barbaric! Nothing like the music of our ancient world. Nor was it what I might conceive to be the music of our future. A thing apart, unworldly, ethereal. It swept me, carried me off; it was an exaltation of the spirit lifting me. It was triumphant now. It surged, but there was in its rhythm, the beat of its every instrument, nothing but the soul of purity. And then it shimmered into distance again, faint and

exquisite music of a dream. Crooning, pleading, the speech of whispering angels.

It ceased. There was a storm of applause.

I breathed again. Why, this was what music might be in our world but was not. I thought of our blaring jazz.

Hope said, "Now they play the physical music. Then Sensua will dance with Blanca. We will see then which one the king chooses."

On the stage all the torches were extinguished save those which were red. The arena was darker than before. The stage was bathed with a deep crimson. Music of the physical senses! It was, indeed, no more like the other choir than is the body to the spirit.

There were stringed instruments playing now; deep-toned, singing zithers, and instruments of rounded, swelling bodies, like great viols with sensuous, throbbing voices. Music with a swift rhythm, marked by the thump of hollow gourds. It rose with its voluptuous swell into a paean of abandonment, and upon the tide of it, the crimson Sensua flung herself upon the stage. She stood motionless for a moment that all might regard her. The crimson torchlight bathed her, stained crimson the white flush of her limbs, her heavy shoulders, her full,

rounded throat.

A woman in her late twenties. Voluptuous of figure, with crimson veils half-hiding, half-revealing it. A face of coarse, sensuous beauty. A face wholly evil, and it seemed to me wholly debauched. Dark eyes with beaded lashes. Heavy lips painted scarlet. A pagan woman of the streets. One might have encountered such a woman swaggering in some ancient street of some ancient city, flaunting the finery given her by a rich and profligate eastern prince.

She stood a moment with smoldering, passion-filled eyes, gazing from beneath her lowered lids. Her glance went to the king's canopy, and flashed a look of confidence, of triumph. The king answered it with a smile. He leaned forward over his railing, watching her intently.

With the surge of the music she moved into her dance. Slowly she began, quite slowly. A posturing and swaying of hips like a nautch girl. She made the rounds of the musicians, leering at them. She stood in the whirl of the music, almost ignoring it, stood at the front of the stage with a gaze of slumberous, insolent passion flung at the king. A knife was in her hand now. She held it aloft. The red torchlight caught its naked blade. With shuddering fancy I seemed to see it dripping crimson. She frowned, and struck it at a phantom

lover. She backed away. She stooped and knelt. She knelt and seemed with her empty arms to be caressing a murdered lover's head. She kissed him, rained upon his dead lips her macabre kisses.

And then she was up on her bare feet, again circling the stage. Her anklets clanked as she moved with the tread of a tigress. The musicians shrank from her waving blade.

A girl in white veils was suddenly disclosed standing at the back of the stage.

Derek whispered, "Is that Blanca?"

"Yes," whispered Hope.

Blanca stood watching her rival. The crimson Sensua passed her, took her suddenly by the wrist, drew her forward. For an instant I thought it might have been rehearsed. I saw Blanca as a slim, gentle girl in white, with a white head-dress. A dancer who could symbolize purity, now in the grip of red passion.

An instant, and then horror struck us. And I could feel it surge over the audience. A gasp of horror. The frightened girl in white tried to escape. The musicians wavered and broke. I stared, stricken, with

freezing blood. Upon the stage the knife went swiftly up; it came down; then up again. The red Sensua stood gloating. The knife she waved aloft was truly dripping crimson now.

With a choked, gasping scream the white girl of the toilers crumpled and fell.... She lay motionless, at the feet of the crimson murderess.

Chapter 8: "Why, This Is Treason!"

There was a gasp. The audience sat frozen. On the stage, with no one lifting a hand to stop her, the crimson murderess made a leap and vanished. A moment, and then the spell broke. A girl in the audience screamed. Some one moved to stand up and overturned a seat with a crash.

The amphitheater under the canopy broke into a pandemonium. Screams and shouts, crashing of seats, screaming, frightened people struggling to get out of the darkness. The torches on the stage were dropped and extinguished. The darkness leaped upon us.

Derek and I were gripping Hope. We were struck by a bench flung backward from in front. People were rushing at us. We were swept along in the panic of the crowd.

I heard Derek shout, "We must keep together!"

We fought, but we were swept backward. We found ourselves outside the canopy. Torchlight was here. It glimmered on the pool of water. People were everywhere rushing past us, some one way, some another. Aimless, with the shock of terror upon them. Under the canopy they were still screaming.

I was momentarily separated from Derek and Hope. I very nearly stumbled into the pool. A girl was here, crouched on the stone bank. Her wet crimson veils clung to her white body. Her long, wet hair lay on her. I stumbled against her. She raised her face. Eyes, wide with terror. Mute, painted red lips....

I heard Derek calling again, "Charlie!" I shoved my way back to him. The crowd was thinning out around us. Girls were climbing from the pool, rushing off in terror, to mingle with the milling throng. Among the crowd now, down by the edge of the bay, I saw the sinister figures of men come running. The toilers, miraculously appearing everywhere! I saw, across the pool, a terrified girl crouching. A huge man in a black cloak came leaping. The colored lights in the trees glittered on his upraised knife blade as it descended. The girl fell with a shuddering scream. The murderer turned and whirled away into the crowd.

"Charlie!"

I was back with Derek and Hope. Hope stood trembling, with her hand pressed against her mouth. Derek gripped me.

"That cloak, get it off!" He ripped his crimson cloak from him and tossed it away. He jerked mine off. "Too dangerous! That's the crimson badge of death to-night."

We stood revealed in the clothes of our own world. My business suit, in which that day I had worked in Wall Street. Derek in his swagger uniform. He stood drawn to his full height, a powerful figure. The wires of our mechanism showed at his wrists. They dangled at the back of his neck, mounting to that strangely fashioned electrode clamped to his head. Strange, awe-inspiring figure of a man!

We were momentarily alone under the colored lights of the trees. Hope murmured, "But they will see us—see you...."

Derek's face was grim, but at her words he laughed harshly. "See us! What matter?" He swung on me. "It forces our hand; we've got to come out in the open now! This murder—this king! My God, what a fool to let himself get into such a condition as this! His people—this chaos—what a fool!"

He had drawn his dirk. I realized that I was holding mine. Near us

the body of a crimson noble was lying under a tree. A sword was there on the ground. Derek sprang for it, waved it aloft.

I think that no more than a minute or two had passed since the murder. Down by the water the boats were hastily loading and leaving the dock. One of them overturned. There were screams everywhere. Red forms lay inert upon the ground where they had been trampled, or stabbed. But the prowling figures of the toilers now seemed to have vanished.

Derek gestured. "Look at the palace! The garden!"

Beyond the canopy I could see the dim gardens surrounding the palace. I glimpsed the high fence, and the gateway in front. A mob of toilers was there. The guard at the gate had fled. The mob was surging through. Men and women in the vivid garments of the fields, armed with sticks and clubs and stones and the implements of agriculture. They milled at the gate; rushed through; scattered over the garden. Their shouts floated back to us in a blended murmur.

We were standing only a dozen feet from the edge of the pavilion. No one seemed yet to have noticed us. A few straggling lights had come on under the canopy. I could see the dead lying there in the wreckage of overturned seats.

Derek said, "We can't help it—it's done. Look at them! They're attacking the palace!"

This mob springing miraculously into existence! I realized that the toilers had planned that if Sensua were chosen they would attack the festival. The murder of Blanca had come as big a surprise to them as to us....

"Come on! Can you get into the palace, Hope? The king must have gotten back there. Get your wits, girl!" Derek stood gripping her, shaking her.

"Yea, there's an underground passage. He probably went that way."

From the palace gardens the shouts of the mob sounded louder now. And from within the building there was an alarm bell tumultuously clanging.

Hope gasped, "This way."

She led us back into the pavilion. We clambered over its broken seats, past its grewsome huddled figures. Some were still moving.... We went to a small door under the platform. A dim room was here, deserted now. Against the wall was a large wardrobe closet; stage

costumes were hanging in it. The closet was fully twenty feet deep. We pushed our way through the hanging garments. Hope fumbled at the blank board wall in the rear. Her groping fingers found a secret panel. A door swung aside and a rush of dank cool air came at us. The dark outlines of a tunnel stretched ahead.

"In, Charlie!"

I crouched and stepped through the door. Hope closed it behind us. The tunnel passage was black, but soon we began to see its vague outlines. Derek, sword in hand, led us. I clutched my dirk. We went perhaps five hundred feet. Down at first, then up again. I figured we were under the palace gardens now, as the tunnel was winding to the left. There were occasional small lights.

Derek whispered to Hope, "The toilers don't know of this?"

"No."

"Where does it bring us out?" I whispered.

"Into the lower floor of the castle. The king must have gone this way. There might be a guard, Derek. What will you do?"

He laughed. "I can handle this mob. Disperse it! You'll see! And

handle the king." He laughed again grimly. "There is no Blanca to choose now."

The tunnel went round a sharp angle and began steeply ascending. Derek stopped.

"How much further, Hope?"

"Not far," she whispered.

We crept forward. The tunnel was more like a small corridor now. Beyond Derek's crouching figure, in the dimness I could see a doorway. Derek turned and gestured to us to keep back. A palace guard was standing there. His pike went up.

"Who are you?"

"A friend."

But the man lunged with his pike. Derek leaped aside. His sword flashed; the flat of it struck the fellow in the face. Derek, with incredible swiftness, was upon him. They went down together and before the man could shout, Derek had struck him on the head with the sword hilt. The guard lay motionless. Derek climbed up as we ran forward to join him.

I noticed now, for the first time, that in his left hand Derek held a small metal cylinder. A weapon, strange to me, which he had brought with him. He had not mentioned it. He had produced it, when menaced by this guard. Then he evidently decided not to use it.

He shoved it back in his pocket. He whirled on us, panting. "Hurry! Close that door!"

We closed the door of the tunnel.

"Charlie, help me move him!"

We dragged the prostrate figure of the unconscious guard aside into a shadow of the wall. We were in a lower room of the palace. It seemed momentarily unoccupied. Overhead we could hear the footsteps of running people. A confusion in the palace, and outside in the garden the shouts of the menacing throng of toilers. And above it all, the wild clanging of the alarm bell from the palace tower.

Derek said swiftly, "Get us to the king!"

Hope led us through the castle corridors, and up a flight of steps to the main floor. The rooms here were thronged with terrified people —crimson nobles in their bedraggled finery of the festival. In all the

chaos no one seemed to notice us.

We mounted another staircase. We found a vacant room; through its windows we looked a moment, gazing into the garden. It was jammed with a menacing mob, which milled about, leaderless, waving crude weapons, shouting imprecations at the palace. At the foot of the main steps the throng stood packed, but none dared to mount. A group of the palace guards stood on the platform over the moat.

Derek turned away impatiently. "Let's get to the king."

We mounted to the upper story. The castle occupants stared at Derek and me as we passed them. A group of girls at the head of the staircase fled before us.

"The king," Derek demanded, "Which is his apartment? Hurry, Hope, we've no time now!"

We found the frightened king seated on a couch with his counsellors around him. It was a small room in this top story of the castle, with long windows to the floor. I saw that they gave onto a balcony which overlooked the gardens. There were perhaps twenty or thirty people huddled in the room. A confusion existed here as everywhere else—

no one knowing what to do in this crisis. And that cursed alarm bell wildly adding to the turmoil. We paused at the doorway.

"Now," whispered Derek. He drew himself to his full height. His eyes were flashing. It was a Derek I had not seen before; he wore an air of mastery. As though he, and not the frightened, trembling monarch on the couch, were master here. And as I stared at him that instant in this primitive chaotic environment, the power of him swept me. A conqueror. The strange electrode clamped to his head gave him an aspect miraculous, awe inspiring.

He strode forward across the apartment. The king was just giving some futile, vague command to be transmitted to his guards down below. A hush fell over the room at our appearance. The king half stood up, then sank back.

"Why—why—who—"

I saw Rohbar here. His long crimson cloak hung from his shoulders, with its hood thrown back. Beneath it, as it parted in front, his leather uniform was visible. A sword was strapped to his waist. He was striding back and forth with folded arms, frowning, but his gaze was very keen. Rohbar was not frightened. He seemed rather to be gauging the situation, pondering how he might turn it to his own

ends. He stopped short and swung about to face us. His jaw dropped with surprise, amazement, at our strangeness.

Derek confronted him. His bulk, and huge weight towered even over Derek. The king gasped and sat helplessly staring.

Rohbar spoke first. "Who are you?"

"This mob must be dispersed. Don't stand looking at me like that, man!"

Derek spoke in friendly fashion, but vehemently. "This is no time for explanations."

They were menacing each other. Rohbar's heavy hand fell to his sword, but Derek boldly pushed him away. He faced the king.

"Your Majesty...."

The king stared blankly at him. The title was no doubt strange to this realm, but no stranger than Derek's aspect.

"Your Majesty...."

But the noise from the garden, the confusion which now broke out in

the room, and that damnable clattering bell, drowned his words.

The king found his voice. "Be quiet, all of you!" He was on his feet. He demanded of Derek again, "Who are you?"

Derek said swiftly, "I'll show you. I can disperse this mob! Charlie, come."

It seemed as though the gaze of everyone in the room went to me. I drew myself up and flashed defiance back at them. And I followed Derek to one of the balcony windows. He went through it, with me after him. I stood at the threshold, watchful of the room behind us. Rohbar was standing aside, and I saw now the woman Sensua with him. They were whispering, staring at me and Derek.

I had been wondering why, when Sensua must have known that the king would choose her—why she had dared to murder her rival. I thought now—as I saw her with Rohbar—that I could guess the reason. She loved Rohbar, not the king. Rohbar was plotting to put himself on the throne, using Sensua as a lover to that end. He had doubtless persuaded her to this murder, knowing it would arouse the toilers, precipitate this chaos which was what he wanted. Scheming scoundrel! I could not forget the look of desire on his face as he had accosted Hope....

And now Derek appeared, to add an unknown element to Rohbar's plans. There was no way he could guess who or what we were. I saw that he was puzzled, was whispering to Sensua about us, doubtless wondering how to handle us.

I saw too, that there were half a dozen crimson cloaked men here who were not frightened. They had gathered in a group. They stood with hands upon their swords, eyeing me, and watching Rohbar—as though at a sign from him they would rush me.

On the balcony Derek stood with the light from the room upon him. The crowd saw him. The main gateway of the palace was just under his balcony. The crowd had now started up the steps to where the guards were standing at the top. At the sight of Derek the mob let out a roar, and those on the steps retreated down again.

Derek stood at the balcony rail, silent, with upraised arms, gazing down upon the menacing throng. There was a moment of startled silence as he appeared. Then the shout broke out louder than before. The crowd was milling and pushing, but still leaderless. An aimless activity. Someone threw a stone. It came hurtling up. It missed Derek and struck the castle wall, falling almost at my feet.

Derek did not move. He stood calmly gazing down; stood like an

orator waiting for the confusion to die before he would speak.

From the platform, just beneath Derek, the guards were staring wonderingly up, awed, startled. To the right a wing of the building turned an angle. The castle tower was there: it rose perhaps a hundred feet higher than our balcony. On the railed platform-balcony girding its top I saw the figures of other guards standing, gazing down at Derek. The clanging bell up there was suddenly stilled.

I became aware of the king close behind me. His voice rang out: "What are you doing? How dare you?"

Derek whirled, "You fool! To what a pass you have come! Your people in arms against you...."

His violent words brought the king's anger. "How dare you! This is treason!"

I stood alert, with my hand upon my dirk.

There would be conflict here, I felt that we could not hold it off more than a moment longer. My mind leaped to that metal cylinder Derek had concealed. A weapon? Then why did he not have it out now? His eyes were flashing. The aspect of power, of confidence, upon him

was unmistakable. It heartened me. I took a step toward him.

He smiled faintly. "Wait, Charlie."

The king gasped again. "How dare you? Why, this is treason! Rohbar, seize him!"

Hope was beside me, her eyes watching the room. Rohbar came striding forward. Derek rasped, "You perhaps have some sense! Lead His Majesty away. Take care of him until this is over."

They stood with crossing glances. And upon Rohbar's face a look, queerly sinister, had come. A smile, sardonic.

He said abruptly to the king, "I think we should let him have his way. What harm?"

He gestured and Sensua came forward. The crimson murderess! Her voluptuous figure was shrouded in a crimson cloak. Her heavy painted lips smiled at the King. Her rounded white arms went over his shoulders.

"Leonto, do as Rohbar says. Let this stranger try. It can do no harm."

The king yielded to her; I watched as she and Rohbar urged him

through an archway that gave into the adjoining apartment.

No wonder Rohbar was sardonically smiling! Derek had played into his hand. We did not know it then, but we were soon to find it out.

Chapter 9: "Alexandre—"

Derek turned back to the balcony. It had been a brief interlude. The mob in the garden, the soldiers at the top of the stairway, and the other guards high on the bridge of the tower were all standing gazing. Shouts again arose as Derek appeared. Again he raised his arms. This time his voice rang out.

"Silence all of you! I am a friend! Silence!"

At first they did not heed him; then someone shouted:

"Quiet! Listen to him! Let him talk!"

The crowd was bellowing, and then they ceased. The bell was still. In the hush came Derek's voice:

"I am a friend. I come from foreign lands, from distant lands of strange people and strange magic."

For answer the crowd shouted and milled in confusion. A stone came up and then another. Derek stood immovable, like a statue gazing down at them.

"I command you to disperse. You will not? Then look at me! Look at me, all of you. My will is law beyond this king—beyond these palace soldiers—beyond any power you have ever known."

Then I knew a part of Derek's purpose! He had pressed the mechanism at his wrist. He stood imperious with upraised arms. The garden was in a tumult, but in a moment it died. A wave of horror swept the crowd. A freezing, incredulous horror. They stood staring, incredulous, silent, swept with a widening wave of horror.

The figure of Derek on the balcony was fading, turning luminous. A wraith, a ghost of his menacing shape standing there. It faded until it was almost gone, and then, as he reversed the mechanism, it materialized again. A moment passed, then he stood again solid before them.

His voice rang out, "Will you obey me now? I am a friend of the toilers!"

They were prostrate before him. There is no fear more terrible than

the fear of the supernatural. In all of history there has been in our world no worship more abject than the worship and fear of a primitive people for its supernatural God. On the platform beneath the balcony, the palace soldiers stared up, horrified. Then they too were prostrate before Derek's threatening gestures and commanding voice.

I stood watching, listening. And suddenly, from the prostrate crowd, a man leaped up. In the silence his amazed voice carried over the garden.

"Alexandre! It is our Prince Alexandre! Our lost prince!"

He stood staring at Derek, his arms gesturing to his comrade around him. He shouted it again:

"Our rightful king, come back to us! Don't you recognize him? *I* saw him go! He went like that—fading into a ghost. Ten years ago, when Leonto killed his father and would have killed him had he not escaped!"

The crowd was standing up now. They recognized Derek! There was no doubt of it. The garden was ringing with the tumultuous shouts,

"Alexandre! Our lost prince has come back to us!"

My head was whirling with it. Derek, prince of this realm? I could see that it was true. Escaped from here as a young lad, when his throne was usurped. Returning now, a man, to claim his own.

And suddenly he turned and flashed me his smile.

The din from the garden drowned his words. The crowd was shouting: "Alexandre! Our lost prince!"

The king's guards on the lower platform stood sullen, confused. I heard footsteps behind me. I whirled around.

From the room, the group of Rohbar's crimson nobles were rushing toward me! Their swords were out. One of them shouted, "Kill them now! We must kill them and have done!"

There were five or six men in the group. They were no more than ten feet away from me. They came leaping.

I stood in the window opening, with only my dirk to oppose them. I shouted, "Derek! Derek!"

I think I took a step backward. I was out on the balcony. It flashed

over me—Derek and I were caught out here!

The first of the red cloaked figures came hurtling through the doorway. I leaped to avoid his sword. I saw the others crowding behind him.

Then I felt Derek shove me violently aside. I half fell, but recovered myself at the balcony rail. Five of the crimson nobles were on the balcony. Derek confronted them. His aspect made them pause. They stood, with outstretched swords. The garden was silent; the crowd stared up. And in the silence Derek roared,

"Get back! All of you, go back inside! Back, or I'll kill you!"

In Derek's right hand he held the cylinder outstretched, leveled at the menacing nobles.

"Back, I say!"

But instead they rushed him. There was a flash. From the cylinder it seemed that a ray spat out, a flash of silver light. It caught the three men who were in advance of the others. Their swords dropped with a clatter to the balcony floor. They stood, transfixed.

An instant. Derek's silver ray played upon them. Their red cloaks

were painted with its silver sheen.

They were shimmering! I gasped, staring. The other nobles, beyond the ray, had fallen back. And they too stood staring in horror.

Another instant The three figures wavered. I saw the face of one of them, with the shock of incredulous horror still upon it. A face turning luminous! A face, erased, with only the staring eyes to mark where it had been!

There was a moment when the three stricken men stood like shimmering ghosts, with Derek's deadly ray upon them. Then they were gone! It seemed, just as they vanished, that they were falling through the balcony floor....

Derek snapped off his ray. He rasped, "Back into that room, I tell you!"

The remaining nobles fled before him. He turned again to the balcony rail.

"My people—yes, I am Alexandre—I had not thought you would recognize me so soon. But you are right—the time has come for me to claim my inheritance. And I will rule you justly."

His cylinder was still in his hand; he swept a watchful glance behind him. I thought of Rohbar. He was in the next room, with the king. Had they seen this attack upon Derek? They must have heard the crowd shouting, "Alexandre!" It seemed strange they did not appear.

I recall now, as I look back to this moment on the balcony, that I suddenly thought of Hope. She had been beside me just before the nobles attacked. I did not see her now. I was startled, but thought of her was driven from my mind. From within the palace a scream sounded. A girl screaming.

But it was not Hope's voice. A girl, screaming, and then shouting:

"The king is dead!"

Derek came rushing at me. "Charlie, that—"

We heard it again. "The king is dead!"

We hurried into the adjoining room. There was no one to stop us—no one up here now who dared oppose Derek. The terrified nobles in the room fell cringing before him.

"Alexandre—spare us! We are loyal to you!"

He strode past them. In the adjacent apartment we found the king lying upon the floor. A wound in his throat welled crimson. He had evidently been lying here alone, and had just now been found by a girl who had entered. He was not quite dead. Derek bent over him. He opened his eyes.

He gasped faintly: "Rohbar—killed me. Rohbar and that—accursed crimson Sensua...."

His voice trailed away. The light went out of his staring eyes. Derek laid him gently back on the floor.

And as though already the news of his death had miraculously spread, the bell in the castle tower began tolling. Not clanging now. Tolling, with slow, solemn accent. The crowd evidently recognized it. We could hear the shouts: "Death! Death has come!"

Derek's eyes ware blazing as he stood up. "The end, Charlie! I would not have planned this, and yet...."

He did not finish. He whirled, rushed back to the other room and to the balcony. The scene was again in confusion the crowd milling, voices shouting:

"The king is dead!"

At the edge of the garden a woman's shrill, hysterical laughter rose over the din.

Derek called, "Yes, the king is dead!" He paused. Then he added, "If you want me—if I have your loyalty—I will claim my throne."

A tumult interrupted him. "Alexandre! King Alexandre!"

He spread his arms, but he could not silence them.

"The king is dead. Long live King Alexandre!"

A wave of it swept over the garden, engulfing the castle. At the main entrance Leonto's soldiers stood sullen, listening to it.

Derek stood triumphant. His hands were outstretched, palms down. But up on the circular bridge at the top of the tower there was a sudden commotion. The soldiers up there had vanished, moved back within the tower to make room for other figures. I stared amazed, transfixed. A huge man in leather garments was there, with a sword stuck in his wide belt. A man with a bullet head, a heavy face, gazing down....

Rohbar!

And held in front of him the slender figure of a girl. Hope! He clutched her, his thick arm encircling her breast. With sinking heart I realized what had happened. Hope had moved away from me. Every one in the room had been intent upon Derek. Rohbar had come quietly in, after murdering the king, had seized Hope, stifled her outcry, and had taken her up into the tower.

And I had promised Derek that I would shield this girl from harm! The horror of it—the self-condemnation of it—swept me, froze me to numbness. I could not think; I could only stand and stare. Rohbar held Hope like a shield before him. The low railing hardly reached her knees. A sheer drop to the garden beneath. He held her tightly, and in his free hand I saw his dirk come up menacingly against her white throat. His voice called:

"Silent, down there! Alexandre, you traitor! Silence!"

Derek stared up. The triumph faded from him. He stared, stricken. The crowd stared. The soldiers on the lower platform ceased their shouting and gazed up at these new actors, come so unexpectedly upon the stage. Again Rohbar called, to the guards this time:

"I represent your King Leonto. This Alexandre is a traitor to us all. And he cannot harm me! I defy him. Look at him! I defy him to use his evil weapon upon me!"

Derek was silent. A single adverse move and Rohbar's knife would stab into Hope's throat. Derek's ray was powerless. A flash from it would have killed Hope, not Rohbar.

The king's soldiers saw Derek's indecision. One of them shouted, "He cannot harm us! Look, he is frightened!"

The crowd recognized Hope. They began calling her name. And calling, "Master Rohbar, do not harm our Hope!"

"I will not harm her! Not if you do what I tell you! Leave the garden—go quietly! I will deal with this traitor!"

He added to the guards, "Go up and seize him! He cannot hurt you! Traitor! Seize him! If he does not yield—if any of this crowd attacks you—then I will kill Hope."

Derek stood clinging to the balcony rail. With Rohbar's watchful gaze upon him he did not dare turn or move. I was standing back from the balcony, behind Derek and partly in the room. No one

thought of me. No one from outside could see me. And I, who had played no part in this, save that one I had neglected, suddenly saw my role. My cue was sounding. My role to play, here upon this tumultuous stage.

I turned back into the dim room. A few frightened men and girls were here. They were all crowding forward, gazing through the windows at the scene outside. No one noticed me, but I saw, with sudden realization, my role to play.

I darted across the room, out into the dim, deserted corridor of the castle.

Chapter 10: My Role to Play

I slipped like a shadow through the almost empty corridors. Down on the lower floor I found that many of the soldiers were on the inside, standing about the corridors in groups, waiting for word from their comrades on the platform to indicate what action they should take. My time was short; I knew that within a few minutes they would be rushing up to overpower Derek.

I stood unseen against the wall near the main entrance. I could not get outside. There were too many soldiers there.

I tried to keep my sense of direction. The wing upon which the tower stood was about two hundred feet from me here. If I could not get outside I would have to try the inside, along this corridor. I prayed that I might not make an error. I tried to gauge exactly where the tower would be.

The hallway was almost dark and in this wing there chanced to be no one at the moment. I came to the angle and turned it to the left. I was unarmed save my dirk. I drew it. But I encountered no one. I passed the doors of many empty rooms. The windows were all barred on this lower floor. I could hear the shouts of the crowd outside.

I came at last to the end of the wing. A staircase here led upward. I guessed that I was directly under the tower now, and that this staircase undoubtedly led upward into it. I mounted a few steps to verify what I was sure would be the condition. It was as I thought. Rohbar had won over the soldiers who were here. He had sent them down from the tower bridge. They were guarding this staircase.

I crept up another few steps, very cautiously. I could hear their voices on the stairs. A light was up there. I could see the legs of some of them as they crowded the stairs. I softly retreated.

There was no way of getting up into the tower here. Alone and

armed only with my dirk, I could not mount these stairs and assail a dozen armed men standing above me; especially when, if I raised an alarm, Rohbar overhead might be startled into killing Hope.

I stood another moment, thinking, planning my actions. I was trembling. Everything depended upon me now. I must get up into the tower. And, above everything, haste was necessary.

I retreated back to the lower floor. I was still some twenty feet above the ground, I judged. That was too far. A dozen paces along the hall I saw a stairway leading downward into the ground level cellar of the castle. I marked in my mind exactly in which direction I turned, and how far. I went down the stairs.

There was an empty lower room. It was pitch black. I lay down on its earthen floor. Above me, a few paces off to one side I could visualize the tower. A hundred and fifty feet above me, at least, up to that bridge balcony, where Rohbar stood with Hope. I kept my mind on it and prayed that I might not be making an error, a miscalculation.

I prayed, too, that luck would be with me. A desperate chance, yet I thought I knew what was here, or about here, in New York City. I lay on my side, alone in the blackness, and pressed the switch at my

wrist....

The familiar sensation of the transition began. The darkness grew luminous. Around me shadows were taking form. My body was humming, thrilling with the vibrations within it. I could feel the ground under me seeming to melt. My head was reeling. Nausea swept me, but with it all I tried to keep my wits. I must watch this new Space into which I was going. Space? I prayed that here on this spot in New York City there would be empty space! If not, at the first warning, I was prepared to stop my mechanism.

The shadows grew around me. There was a moment or two when I felt as though I were floating. Weightless. The sense of my body hovering in a void, intangible, imponderable, with only my struggling mentality holding it together....

And then I felt myself materializing. Around me walls were taking form. I floated down a foot or two and came to rest upon a new floor. My hand brushed it. My physical senses were returning. I could feel a floor of concrete. A vague, shimmering light was near me. It seemed to outline the rectangle of a window. All around was darkness. Empty darkness. Soundless, with only the throbbing hum of the mechanism....

I was indoors, in a room. I felt suddenly almost normal, except for the whirring vibration. I flung the switch again. There was a shock. A whirling of my senses. Then I sat up; my head steadied. The nausea passed.

I was back in my own world, in New York City. This was night: I tried to calculate the time. Derek and I had departed about midnight. This would be, then some time before dawn. I was in a cellar room, lying on its cement floor. There was a window, with a faint light outside it. A window up near the ceiling. A straggling illumination showed me a bin, a few barrels, a door leading into another room which looked as though it might be a machine shop.

I sat up, calculating. I was a thousand feet perhaps from the Battery wall, two hundred feet from the Hudson River. This was an office building, and I was in one of its cellar rooms, at the ground level.

Near dawn? I tried to calculate what might be overhead. A deserted office building. Too early yet for the scrub-women. The elevator would not be running. I laughed to myself. Of what use to me an elevator, if it had been running? How could I, a midnight prowler, appear from the cellar of this building, and demand to be taken upstairs! There would be no elevator, but there would be watchmen. I would avoid them.

I found a door. My heart leaped with a sudden fear that it would be locked, but it was not. I went through it into a passage and found the staircase. I made two turns. I tried again to keep my mind on this Space here. I stood, carefully thinking. I had it clear. I had made no move without careful thought. The tower with Rohbar was still to my left, and about directly above me.

I went up the short stone staircase, opened another door carefully. I was in the dim lower hall of the office building. I found myself beside the deserted elevator shaft. A light was burning on the night attendant's table in an alcove, on the other side of the shaft. He sat there with his back to me. I closed the door soundlessly.

The stairway upward beside the elevator was here. I watched my chance. I darted around the angle and went up. I met no one. The concrete staircase had a light at each floor. Four floors up. No, not enough! I opened the fourth floor door. The marble hall of the office building was empty and silent. Rows of locked office doors with their gold-leaf names and numbers. A single dim light to illumine the silent emptiness....

I retreated into the staircase shaft and mounted higher. My dirk was in my hand. Charlie Wilson, the Wall Street brokerage clerk, prowling here! And upon what a strange adventure!

I came to what I thought was the proper floor. In the hall I selected a room. The door was securely locked. I had no way of breaking the lock, but the panel was of opaque glass. I would have to chance the noise. I rushed the length of the hall, to where a red fire-ax hung in a bracket. I came back with it. I smashed the glass panel of the door.

Would a watchman hear me? I did not wait to find out. With the ax I scraped away the splinters of glass. I climbed through the opening. My hand was cut, but I did not heed it.

I was in a dim, silent office, with rugs on the floor, desks standing about, filing cases, a water-cooler, and a safe in the corner. I rushed to one of the windows. It looked over Battery Park and the upper bay. The stars were shining, but to the east over Brooklyn I could see them paling with the coming dawn. I gazed down to try and calculate my height. Yes, this would be about right. And my position. I could see the outline of the shore, the trees of Battery Park, the busy harbor, even at this hour before dawn, thronged with the moving lights of its boats.

I saw all this with my eyes, but with my mind I saw the wrecked, deserted pavilion, and the gardens of Leonto's castle. The threatening mob would be below me. The palace entrance would be here to my left, down in the street where those taxis were parked. There was a

commotion down there by the office building entrance. I know now what caused it, but at the time I did not notice. The wing of the castle was under me. This would be the tower. Its upper room, or the balcony, just about where I was standing. I prayed that it might be so. I seemed with my mind to see it all.

I lay down on the floor by the window. Out in the office building hallway I heard heavy footsteps come running. One of the night watchmen had evidently heard the glass crashed.

I laughed. I pressed the switch at my wrist....

Chapter 11: The Fight on the Tower Balcony

The sensations swept me again. The room faded. Whether the watchmen came in to see a ghost of me lying there on the floor I did not know, nor did I care. I whirled into the shadows. And came in a moment out of the black silence. The office room was gone. I seemed to have fallen or floated down—how far I do not know. A triumph swept me. I was lying on another floor. I could see a doorway materializing. I was not upon the balcony as I had calculated, but within the tower room. New walls sprang around me.

[ID: A black and white illustration showing the protagonist starting to sit up from the floor, wearing a black business suit, looking ahead of him, with the background a combination of the castle tower, with the balcony visible through a doorway, and the office building, fading together, with a still partially transparent guard standing directly in front of the narrator, looking straight ahead, unable to see him yet. On the balcony, Rohbar stands, clutching Hope, a knife raised in threat. Image description end.]

I did not heed it, this time, the sensation, of the transition. I was too alert to what new situation might come upon me. The tower room. I could see it. I could see its oval windows close at hand. The doorway to its balcony. Sounds flooded me, mingled with the humming within me. Familiar sounds. The crowd shouting. And a single voice —the voice of Rohbar. Vague and blurred, but as I materialized it became clearer.

I was suddenly aware that there was a man beside me. One of the palace soldiers. He saw me materialize. He leaped backward in horror. I flung my switch. I was on my feet, swaying, and then I leaped upon him. My dirk plunged downward into his chest.

The thing made me shudder. I reeled with the sickness of it, but as he fell I clung to the dirk and ripped it out of him. It was dripping with his blood.

I stood trembling. The small tower room had no other occupants. I turned toward the door. I could see a patch of stars, paling with the coming dawn. I crouched in the small doorway which gave onto the balcony, staring, swiftly calculating. The scene had scarcely changed. But, some of the soldiers had left the entrance platform, gone, no doubt, into the castle on their way upstairs to seize Derek.

On this upper balcony, no more than ten feet before me, Rohbar still stood gripping Hope. She was in front of him. His back was to me. A sudden jump, and I could plunge my dagger into his back.

Rohbar was shouting, "King Leonto is dead. If you should want me to succeed him, I will take this girl Hope for my queen. You all love her...."

I was tense to spring. Then out in the balcony, to one side, I saw Sensua crouching. Her crimson robe fell away to bare her white limbs. Her hand fumbled in her robe. She had been Rohbar's dupe, and now she knew it. Her knife was in her hand. Frenzied with jealousy and rage she sprang upon Rohbar's back, trying to stab at Hope.

Perhaps he sensed her coming, heard her; or perhaps she was unskilful. Her knife only grazed Hope's shoulder. He released Hope. He roared. He turned and gripped his murderous assailant. A second or two while I stood watching. He caught Sensua's wrist, twisted the knife from it and plunged the knife into her breast. She sank with a scream at his feet, and as he straightened he saw me.

But I had leaped. I was upon him. His own knife had remained in Sensua's breast. As I raised mine in my leap, he caught at my wrist;

twisted it, but I flung the knife away before he could get it. The knife fell over the balcony rail. The weight of my hurtling body flung him backward, but the rail caught him. His arms went around me. Powerful arms, crushing me. I gripped at his throat.

There was an instant when I thought that we would both topple over the railing. I felt Hope beside us. I heard her scream. We did not go over the rail, for Rohbar lurched and flung us back. We dropped to the balcony floor, rolling, locked together. He was far stronger and heavier than I. He came uppermost. He lunged and broke my hold upon his throat, but I was agile: I squirmed from under him. I almost regained my feet. He got up on one knee. He was trying to draw his sword. Then again I bore into him, kicking and tearing. He roared like a bull. And ignoring my plucking fingers, my flailing fists, he lunged to his feet with me gripping again at his throat.

His huge height swung me off the ground. I was aware that he had drawn his sword, but I was too close for him to use it. He swayed drunkenly with my weight; he was confused. I felt the rail behind us. We lunged again into it. Again I heard Hope scream in terror, and saw her leap at us. Rohbar stooped, trying to clutch the low rail. His bending down brought my feet to the balcony floor. With a last despairing effort I shoved him backward. And as he toppled at the rail, I fought to break his hold upon me. I felt us going and then I felt

Hope reach me. Her arms flung about my waist. Her hold tore me loose. Rohbar's huge body fell away....

For an instant Rohbar seemed balanced upon the rail; then he went over. He gave a last long, agonized scream as he fell. I did not look down. I crouched by the rail. The crowd in the garden; Derek standing on the other balcony; the soldiers who now had appeared behind him—all were silent, and in the silence I heard the horrible thud of Rohbar's body as it struck....

I clung to Hope for an instant, and she shuddered against me. The scene broke again into chaos. I cast Hope away and leaped up. I stood at the balcony rail. My arms went up and gestured to Derek. Amazement was on his face, but he answered my gesture. Behind him the soldiers who had come to seize him were standing in a group, stricken at this new tragedy.

Derek swung on them. He was not powerless now! "Away with you!"

His cylinder menaced them, and they fell back in terror before him.

He darted past them and disappeared into the castle.

I felt Hope plucking at me. "I want to talk to the people."

She stood beside me, leaning over the rail. Gentle little figure. Familiar figure to them all. Their beloved Hope. Her voice rang out clearly through the hush.

"My people, we all want our beloved Alexandre—he has come back to us. He is our rightful king."

"King Alexandre! Long live King Alexandre!"

Derek in a moment appeared behind us. "My God, Charlie, I can't understand—"

I told him how I had done it. He gripped me. "I'll never be able to repay you for this!"

I pushed him forward and he joined Hope at the rail. Held her, and her arms went around his neck as she returned his kisses. The crowd gaped, then cheered.

I shouted, "Hope will be your queen—The reign of the crimson nobles is at an end!"

The wild cheering of the people, in which now the castle guards

were joining, surged up to mingle with my words.

Chapter 12: One Tumultuous Night

I come now with very little more to record.

I returned to my own world. And Derek stayed in his. Each to his own; one may rail at this allotted portion—but he does not lightly give it up.

The scientists who have examined the mechanism with which I returned very naturally are skeptical of me. Derek feared a further communication between his world, and mine. He smiled his quiet smile.

"Your modern world is very aggressive, Charlie. I would not want to chance having my mechanism duplicated—a conquering army coming in here."

And so he adjusted the apparatus to carry me back and then go dead. I have wires and electrodes to show in support of my narrative. But since they will not operate I cannot blame my hearers for smiling in derision.

Yet there is some contributing evidence. Derek Mason has vanished.

A watchman in an office building near Battery Park reports that at dawn of that June morning he heard splintering glass. He found the office door with its broken panel, and the ax lying on the hall floor. He even thinks he saw a ghost stretched out by the window. But he is laughed at for saying it.

And there is still another circumstance. If you will trouble to examine the newspaper files of that time, you will find an occurrence headed "Inexplicable Tragedy at Battery Park." You will read that near dawn that morning, the bodies of three men in crimson cloaks came hurtling down through the air and fell in the street near where several taxis were parked. Strange, unidentified men. Of extraordinary aspect. The flesh burned, perhaps. All three were dead; the bodies were mangled by falling some considerable height.

An inexplicable tragedy. Why should anyone believe that they were the three crimson nobles whom Derek attacked with his strange ray?

I am only Charles Wilson, clerk in a Wall Street brokerage office. If you met me, you would find me a very average, prosaic sort of fellow. You would never think that deeds of daring were in my line at all. Yet I have lived this one strange tumultuous night, and I shall always cherish the memory.

#04 The Stolen Mind, by M. L. Staley (full name unknown):

What would you do, if, like Quest, you were tricked, and your very mind and will stolen from your body?

Aproximate word count: 9,700

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

"What caused you to answer our advertisement?" Owen Quest felt the steel of the quick gray eyes that jabbed like gimlets across the office table.

"Why does any man apply for a job?" he bristled.

Keane Clason gave an impatient smile.

"Come!" he said. "I'm not trying to snare you. But there were unusual features to my ad, and they were put there to attract an unusual type of man. To judge your qualifications, I must know just why this proposition appeals to you."

"I can tell you that," nodded Quest, "but there's nothing unusual about it. In the first place, I knew that the Clason Research Corporation is the leading concern of its kind in the country. In the second place, this seemed to offer a way to obtain a substantial sum of money quickly."

"Good," said Clason. "And you feel that you have all the necessary qualifications?"

"Decidedly. I am 24 years old, athletic, and of an earnest and determined nature. Moreover, I have no family ties, and I'm willing to run any reasonable risk in order to improve the condition of my fellow men."

Clason smiled his approval.

"You say you need money. How much immediately?"

Quest was unprepared for the question.

"A thousand dollars," he ventured.

Without hesitation Clason counted out ten one-hundred-dollar notes from his wallet and laid them on the table.

"There's your advance fee. You're ready to go to work immediately, I hope?"

"Certainly," stammered Quest.

Stunned by the swiftness of the transaction, he sat staring at the money that lay untouched before him.

To accept it would be like signing an unread contract. But he had asked for it; to refuse it was impossible. Even to delay about picking it up might arouse Clason's suspicion. Already the latter had turned away and was opening the door of a steel cabinet. Quest had one second in which to reach a decision.... He crammed the currency into his pocket.

With delicate care Clason set two objects on the table. One looked to Quest like a miniature broadcasting tower or a mooring mast for lighter than air craft. The other was a circular vat of some black material, probably carbon. Within it a series of concentric tissues were suspended from metal rings, and in a trough outside ranged four stoppered flasks containing liquids of as many different colors.

"Look at these models carefully," said Clason. "They represent two of the most remarkable discoveries of all time. The one on your left

is the most *de*structive weapon known to man. The other I consider the most *con*structive discovery in the history of science. It may even lead to an understanding of the nature of life, and of the future of the spirit after death.

"Both of these were developed by my brother Philip and me together—but we have disagreed about the use to which they shall be put.

"Philip"—the inventor dropped his voice to a whisper—"wants to sell the secret of the Death Projector—the tower, there—as an instrument of war. If I should permit him to do that, it might lead to the destruction of whole nations!"

"How?" demanded Quest "I've heard of a device called the Death Ray. Is this it?"

"No, no," said Clason contemptuously. "Even in a perfected state the Ray would be a child's toy compared to the Projector. This is based on our discovery that invisible light rays of a certain wave-length, if highly concentrated, destroy life—and our additional discovery that if these are synchronized with short radio waves the effect is absolutely devastating.

"We obtain the desired concentration of invisible light by using a

tellurium current-filter under the influence of alternate flashes of red and blue light. The projector can literally blanket vast areas with death, up to a top range of at least five hundred miles.

"Just picture to yourself what this means! In a space of ten minutes two men can lay down a circle of destruction a thousand miles in diameter; or they can cut a swath five hundred miles long in any desired direction."

"Have you ever proved it?" demanded Quest skeptically.

"Yes, young man, we have," snapped Clason. "Right here in the laboratory—but on a minute scale, of course. However, there's no time to demonstrate now. The point is that my brother is determined to sell if he can obtain his price for the invention. He argues that instead of bringing disaster upon the world, this machine will forever discourage war by making it too terrible for any civilized nation to consider. In spite of my opposition he has opened negotiations with an ambitious Balkan power. He may actually close the sale at any moment!

"However," Clason drew a deep breath "you see this other device? Simple as it appears, it is the key to the whole situation. We can use it—you and I—to overcome Philip's will and prevent this

unthinkable transaction. The two of us can do it. Alone I would be virtually helpless."

"Why not have the Projector confiscated or destroyed by our own Government?" suggested Quest. "That seems to me the only safe and sure way out of the difficulty."

"You simply do not understand," frowned Clason impatiently. "Philip is selling the plans and descriptions of the machine, not the machine itself. Even if this model and the larger test machine that we have built were destroyed—even if I were willing to have Philip sent to Leavenworth for life—he could still sell the Projector.

"But this other invention, our Osmotic Liberator, makes it possible for me to gain control of Philip and actually *change his mind*, through the medium of an agent. I have hired you to act as my Agent, Quest, because I can see that you are a young man of unusual character and vitality. And by way of reward I can promise you both money and a brilliant future."

The inventor poised in a tense attitude on the edge of his chair as though his body were charged with electricity. His eyes seemed to dart out emanations that set Quest's blood to tingling. Then for a moment the latter lost consciousness of his physical self. It was as

though he had opened a door and found himself suddenly on the brink of a new and totally strange world. He dispelled this fancy by a quick effort of the will, for he knew that he had a delicate problem on his hands and that it must be solved within a very few minutes. However he proceeded, he must act without disloyalty to his Government, and at the same time without injustice to Keane Clason.

"Tell me," he said in a husky voice, "how do you intend to use me? I do not believe in Spiritualism. I would be a poor medium."

Clason gave a short laugh.

"You are not to be a medium in that sense at all. Spiritualism as practiced is just a blind sort of groping and hoping. Osmotic Liberation, on the other hand, is an exact and opposite physico-chemical science. Here—I will show you."

Into the outer cell of the Liberator he emptied the purple vial, and so on to the innermost, which he filled with a golden-green liquid like old Chartreuse.

"The separating membranes, you understand, are permeable by these complicated solutions. Each liquid has a different osmotic pressure

and therefore should, under normal conditions, interchange with the others through the membranes until all pressures are equalized. I prevent such interchange, however, by maintaining an anti-electrolysis which retards ionization and thus builds up what might be called osmotic potential.

"Now if an Agent—yourself for instance—submerges himself in the central cell, at the same time maintaining a physical contact with his Control at the surface of the liquid, and if then the osmotic potential is suddenly released by throwing the electrolytic switch, the host of ions thus turned loose in the outer compartments make one grand rush for the center solution, which contains the cathode.

"Under these conditions your body becomes a sort of sixth cell, and your skin another membrane in the series. Properly speaking, however, you are not a part of the electrolytic circuit but are merely present in the action. Your body acts as a catalyser, hastening the chemical action without itself being affected in any way. Physically you undergo no change whatever; but in some strange way which is, like life, beyond analysis, your mind flows out into the solution, while your unaltered body remains at the bottom of the tank in a state of suspended animation.

"If no Control is present, all that is needed to return your mind into

your body is a throw of the electrolytic switch back to negative, whereupon you emerge from the tank exactly as you entered it. But with your Control present and in contact with your submerged body, your mind, instead of remaining suspended in the solution, flows instantly into his body and resides there subject to his will.

"This can not be done, however, unless the wills of Control and Agent have first been brought into accord. To accomplish that, we clasp hands"—Quest grasped Clason's extended hand—"and look steadily into each other's eyes.

"Now, it is well known that the vibrations of an individual's will are as distinctive as the sworls of his finger-prints. What is not so well known is that the frequency of vibration in one person can be brought into accord with that in another.

"You consciously retract your will by concentrating your mind upon the thing which you know I wish to accomplish. Gradually while we continue in this position your vibrations speed up or slow down until they acquire exactly the same frequency as my own. We are then in accord, and when your mind is liberated in the tank it is in a state which admits absorption into my body. And it is subject to my will because you have purposely attuned it to my peculiar frequency. Immediately after the transfer there will be a brief conflict, due to

the instinctive desire of your will to obtain the ascendancy. But of course mine will gain the upper hand at once, since both wills will be in my frequency."

Quest felt, rather than saw, a wall of alarm closing in on him. He tried to avert his eyes, to withdraw his hand from Clason's grasp. With a nostalgic pang in the pit of his stomach he suddenly realized that he could not do so. He had gone too far—farther than any man in his position had a right to go. Having deliberately weakened his will, it seemed now to have deserted him entirely. A prickling sensation coursed up his spine, his extended arm went numb, his hand trembled violently.

"Splendid!" said Clason, suddenly releasing both eye and hand. "Just as I foresaw, you will be able to attune yourself to my vibration-frequency with hardly an effort. Now please remain seated; I'll be back in a moment."

For a second after the door closed, Quest remained slumped in his chair. Then he was on his feet, shaking himself like a wet dog to free himself from the spell under which he had fallen. Something about Clason attracted and at the same time repelled him, fraying his nerves like an irritant drug and confusing his mind at the moment when he needed the full alertness of every faculty.

Invisible light—disembodied minds—will vibrations! Nothing there to get hold of. Were these things real or imaginary? Was Keane Clason a great inventor, or a madman? Would Philip prove to be a real or an imaginary scoundrel? Should he summon help, or go on alone?

Professional pride said: wait, don't be an alarmist! With his knuckles Quest tapped the table, half expecting it to melt under his fingers. The feeling and sound of the contact gave him a peculiar start. On the farther end of the table stood a letter-box—an invitation. From his pocket Quest snatched a slip of paper, and wrote:

6 stroke 4—9:45A—Hired. If no report in 48 hours, clamp down hard.

To address a stamped envelope and slip it in with the outgoing mail was the work of seconds. But he was none too quick. He had just dropped back into a lounging attitude when the door burst open and Clason flew into the room?

"We must act instantly," hissed the inventor. "Philip plans to close the transaction within a day."

In spite of himself, Quest jumped upright in his chair. Clason tapped

him on the shoulder reassuringly.

"It's all right," he smiled, "I'm ready for him. We'll make our move this afternoon and beat him by eighteen hours.

"Let's see." He paused. "Oh! yes. I was about to explain to you that as soon as the will of the Agent enters the body of his Control, the latter can again transfer it into the body of still another person.

"Now you understand why I advertised for a man of exceptional character? As my Agent, I want you to enter the body of Philip, and your will must be strong enough to conquer his in the battle for mastery which will begin the instant you intrude into his body. You will still be under my control, but your will must be strong enough on its own merits to overcome his. I can direct you, but your strength must be your own. That's clear, isn't it?"

"I think so," said Quest slowly. "But what becomes of me after you have frustrated Philip's plot?"

"That's the easy part of the process," smiled Clason; "but naturally you feel some anxiety about it. I simply withdraw your will from Philip, return it to your own body, and pay you a reward of ten thousand dollars."

"You're sure you can?"

"Perfectly. I have merely to touch Philip's hand to recapture your will. Then I immerse myself in the tank with the switch at plus. The osmotic action will extract both wills momentarily from my body. But the presence of two bodies and two wills in the solution together forces a balance, and each will seeks out and enters its own body. Then you and I climb out of the tank exactly as we are this minute."

"If it weren't for my belief that anything is possible," Quest shook his head, "I'd say that your claims for this invention were ridiculous."

"And you couldn't be blamed," admitted Clason readily. "This toy of a model is hardly convincing. But come along with me and I'll show you how the Liberator looks in actual operation."

The office rug concealed a trap door which gave upon a spiral stair. Below, Clason unlocked another door and led the way through a narrow and tremendously long passage lighted at intervals by small electric bulbs. Presently another door yielded to the inventor's deft touch and closed behind them with a portentous chug. Here the darkness was so utter and intense that Quest imagined he could feel the weight of it on his shoulders. From the slope of the passageway

and the muffled beat of machinery that had come to his ears on the way along, he guessed that he was below ground in some chamber at the rear of the factory.

He gave a low exclamation as Clason switched on the toplight. No wonder the darkness had seemed of almost supernatural quality! Even the hard white glare of the daylight arc was grisly. Its rays rebounded from the liquids of the great circular tank in a blinding dazzle of color, while the dull black walls and ceiling were so perfectly absorptive that beyond arm's length they became to all effects invisible. Even the ledge on which he stood—the shoulder of the vat—gave Quest the feeling that to move would be to step off into a bottomless pit.

But Clason took his attention at once, pointing here and there in his quick, nervous way to indicate how faithfully the Liberator had been reproduced from the model. In all respects the arrangements were the same, with the addition that here a long plank like a spring-board extended out from a wall-mount as far as the central compartment of the tank, and that from its end a narrow ladder hung down to the surface of the Chartreuse liquid. A double-throw switch fixed to the wall above the base of the plank was evidently the source of electrolytic control.

"When you throw the switch to plus," said Clason, pointing to the chalk-marked sign above, "you produce the violent electrolytic action needed to bring about a liberation. All the rest of the time it should be closed at minus, in order to maintain the anti-action which I explained to you.

"Now let's rehearse, so that when the time for the real performance arrives we can be sure of running it off without a hitch."

"All right, sir," nodded Quest, so dazed by the glittering light that he was hardly conscious of what he said.

"First," said Clason, running lightly up the steps to the plank, "you walk out to the end, like this, and start down the ladder. Then you lower yourself into the tank. The liquid is at body temperature; it's neither strongly acid nor caustic; it will cause you no injury or discomfort whatever.

"Meanwhile I keep in contact with your hand until the instant that you become submerged. Now your mind is in me, see?—ready for transfer into Philip, where it will act as my Agent. That's how simple it is! Come on up and we'll go through the motions."

Quest experienced a shiver as he mounted the bridge. Annoyed with

himself, he shrugged the feeling off. There was no risk here. Moreover, it was a part of his daily work to take chances; he had done so a hundred times without hesitation. Now he moved all the more quickly, as if to belie the squeamishness that possessed him in spite of himself.

Swinging past Clason on the plank, he lowered himself without a pause to the bottom rung of the ladder, while the inventor, hanging head down, maintained contact with him.

"No need to stay here," he said in sudden irritation. "I understand perfectly what I am to do."

"I'm testing my own acrobatic ability," grunted Clason amiably. "Just a minute now."

He wriggled as if trying to adjust himself to a better balance, but in reality to mask the motion of his free hand with which he reached up and pressed a button in the side of the plank. Instantly the structure, pivoting downward on its wall-socket, plunged Quest to his waist in the osmotic solution.

"For God's sake get out of the way!" he shouted, trying to wrench his hand out of Clason's sinewy grip. "Let go, I tell you!"

But Clason clung like a leech, his teeth gritted under the strain. Again the plank lurched downward, and with a violent splash Quest vanished below the surface.

Quick as a cat, Clason scrambled up the ladder and back to the base of the plank, where he erased and interchanged the chalk-marked signs with which he had misled Quest. Then with a sinister twist of a smile he threw the switch to minus, and turned to watch as the plank slowly righted itself and the vacant ladder came clear of the liquid.

For some time he stood staring at the gleaming colored rings of his dissociation-vat like some witch over her cauldron, his lips working, his hands clasping and unclasping like the tentacles of some sub-sea monster. Then, as if the spell had suddenly broken, he turned on his heel and switched off the light. As he hastened down the passageway toward his office, the airlock sucked the door against its jamb with an ominous whistle.

In a twinkling, as Quest's shackled spirit writhed in its new housing, he knew that he was in bondage to a scoundrel. Formless and voiceless, he still fought madly for the freedom which the instinct of ten thousand generations made necessary to him.

At the same time he was furious at himself for having been tricked

like an innocent schoolboy. The plank socket, the button which had tripped the supporting spring, the fake rehearsal, the tuning of his will to that of Clason—step by step the whole cunning scheme unfolded itself to him now.

But what could be the purpose behind this villainy? Only one answer seemed possible. Keane must be the one bent on selling the Death Projector, Philip the one who wished to frustrate the fiendish transaction! And Quest of the Secret Service—he was to be the tool to force the sale.

With the soundless scream of rage Quest's will hurled itself against Keane's. The two met like infuriated bulls, and for an instant too brief to be pictured as a lapse of time they poised immovable. But two wills can not exist on equal terms in a single body, and in this case the vibration of both was that of Clason. Quest had challenged the Master Will. He could do no more. It hurled him back, crushed him like foam, compressed him to the proportions of an atom in the background of his consciousness. So brief and unequal was the conflict that in the next breath Clason had all but forgotten the presence of the stolen will within him. When he was ready to use his Agent, that would be time enough to summon him!

Despite this suppression, Quest began to see dimly through strange

eyes, and to hear vaguely with ears that were not his own. Feelers, tentacles, some intangible kind of conduits carried thought impulses to him from the Master Will. He received these impressions vividly, but those which he gave off in return were so weak, due to the subjection of his will, that Clason was entirely unconscious of any response. Quest was not enough of a scientist to be astonished at the ability of a disembodied mind to experience sense impressions in the body of another. He was only glad that the darkness and silence were growing less. Very, very slowly he was awakening to a new kind of consciousness—the consciousness of another person's Self. He hated and loathed that Self, yet it was better than the awful blankness that had gone before.

Suddenly, as light grew brighter and sound more clear and definite, a new element entered—the element of hope. At first it was feeble: its only suggestion was that sometime, somehow, he might escape this prison. But it was like water to a parched plant. It caused his will to expand, to extend its feelers, to press up a little more bravely against the crushing pile of the Master Will.

Now another surprise sprang upon him. He was moving! That is, Clason's body was moving in some kind of a conveyance, which was threading its way through crowded streets. Stores, buildings, buses, people—Quest remembered them all distantly as things he had

known thousands of years ago. The driver turned his head, and his profile seemed vaguely familiar.

Now a rush of foreign thoughts drowned out his own. They were a sort of overflow from the mind of Clason. They thronged along the conduits that bound the two wills together, but only Quest was conscious of the movement.

Keane's mind was on his brother Philip: that much was particularly clear. And there was something about a telephone call. Yes, Keane had telephoned to the police, disguising his voice, refusing to divulge his name. He had said that a man by the name of Philip Clason was in trouble and had told them where to find him. Then the police had telephoned the factory, and Keane had pretended astonishment and alarm at the news. That's why he was here now—he was on the way to confer with the police. And he was chuckling—chuckling because he had fooled Quest and the police, and because now the hundred million dollars was almost in his grasp.

Cutting in close, the car turned a corner and drew up before one of a row of loft buildings in a section of the city which Quest failed to recognize. As Clason stepped to the sidewalk, Quest was more painfully aware than ever of his powerlessness to influence by so much as the twitch of a muscle the behavior of this hostile body in

which he had permitted himself to be trapped. In his weakness he felt himself shrinking, contracting almost to nothingness under the careless pressure of the Master Will.

Clason glanced casually at his watch, and three men converged toward him from as many directions. There was nothing to distinguish them from anyone else in the street, but along the conduits it came to Quest that they were detectives and that they were there by appointment with Keane Clason.

"What floor?" asked the latter, with an excitement which Quest felt instantly was pure pretense. "Are you sure they haven't spirited him away?"

"Don't worry," replied the leader of the detectives. "The alley and roof are covered. We'll take care of the rest ourselves."

On tiptoe they climbed three long flights of stairs in the half-light. Clason held back as if in fear. He was a good actor, and Quest felt the shrinking and hesitation of his body as he crouched and slunk along in the wake of the detectives, pretending terror at what was about to happen, though he knew—and Quest knew he knew—that there would be no resistance up there—that Philip would be found alone exactly as he had been left by Keane's hired thugs.

On the top landing Burke, the leader, paused to count the doors from front to rear.

"This is it," he whispered to the bull-necked fellow just behind him.

The other nodded, and crouched back against the opposite wall while his companions placed themselves in position to cross-fire into the room the moment the door gave way.

Quest longed for the power to kick his hypocrite of a master as he still held back, cowering on the stairs, playing his fake to the limit. Then the door flew in with a splintering shriek under the charge of the human battering ram, and across it hurtled the other two detectives in a cloud of ancient dust.

"Here he is!" someone shouted.

"Phil! Phil!" Keane Clason's voice fairly quavered with sham emotion as he ran into the room and threw himself at a man tightly bound to an upholstered chair, which in turn was wedged in among other articles of stored furniture.

But Philip was too securely gagged to reply, and as Burke slashed the ropes from across his chest he dropped forward in a state of

collapse. Stretched on a couch, he soon gave signs of response as a brisk massage began to restore the circulation to his cramped limbs. Suddenly he sat up and thrust his rescuers aside.

"What time is it?" he demanded with an air of alarm.

"One o'clock," replied Keane before anyone else could answer, patting his brother affectionately on the shoulder while within him Quest writhed with indignation. "By Jove! Phil, it's wonderful that we got to you in time. Really, how—you're not injured?"

"No," grunted Philip, "just lamed up. I'll be as fit as ever by tomorrow."

"If you feel equal to it," suggested Burke, "I wish you'd tell me briefly how you arrived here. Do you know the motive behind this affair? Did you recognize any of the body-snatchers?"

Philip frowned and shook his head.

"Yesterday noon," he said slowly, "I took the eight-passenger Airline Express to Cleveland on business. There were three other passengers in the cabin—two men and a woman. Right away I got out a correspondence file and was running over some letters. The next

thing I knew I was approaching the ground in the strangest state of mind I ever experienced. My head was splitting, and everything looked unreal to me. Seemed as if I was coming down on some new planet."

"You mean the ship was gliding down to land?"

"No, no. I was dangling from a parachute.... By the way, where am I now?"

"In a Munson Avenue loft."

"In Chicago?"

Burke nodded.

"I guessed as much," frowned Philip. "You see, I came down in a field, and then before I could free myself from my trappings I was pounced on—trussed up and blindfolded—by a gang of men. I knew they had taken me a long distance by automobile, but I saw nothing more until they tore the blindfold from my eyes when they left me here."

"And they were all strangers to you?"

"Yes—those that I saw."

"Isn't this enough for just now, Burke?" interrupted Keane, and Quest received an impression of uneasiness that was not apparent in the inventor's tone. "After a good rest he's sure to recall things that escape him now."

"Just one minute," nodded the detective, turning back to Philip. "Can you think of no plausible reason for this attack? Is there no one who might possibly benefit by putting you temporarily out of the way?"

Philip gave a frightened start. Then he was on his feet, clutching at his brother's arm.

"Keane!" he pleaded, "Keane! What's happened? I know, I know! It's the Projector."

"Water!" roared Keane, and Quest felt the panic that coursed through him as he tried to drown out his brother. "Somebody bring water! He needs it!"

At the same time he snatched up Philip's hand in a grip of steel. Instantly the latter's wild eyes became calm, the flush passed from his relaxing face, and he slumped down weakly on the couch.

In that fleeting moment Quest surged into the body of Philip and confronted his will with a fierce and triumphant ardor. For now his will would have command of a body with which to fight his fiend of a Control.

With a sensation of contempt he met Philip's resistance and buffeted him ruthlessly backward, crushed down and compressed his feebly struggling will. And as Philip yielded, Quest felt his own will expanding to normal, taking possession of the borrowed body with hungry greed, and flashing from its faded eyes the spark of youth.

Burke stared in amazement at the kaleidoscopic rapidity of the changes in the rescued man's expression. Strange lights and shadows continued to flit across Philip's face as Quest's invasion of him proceeded, but with a diminishing frequency which soon assured Keane that his Agent was tightening his command.

The younger of Burke's aides stood fascinated, his mouth agape. The other spoke guardedly to his superior:

"Dope, eh!"

"Nah!" replied Burke, shrugging himself out of his trance. "Shock."

The actual duration of the conflict in Philip was something less than three seconds. It would have been more brief if Quest had exerted himself to the utmost. But his sensations as he first surged into this new habitat under Keane's propulsion were so weird and unearthly that for the moment he was lost in the wonder of the experience. For that short time, therefore, Philip was able to fight back against the onrush of the invading will.

In the next second Quest became conscious of the resistance. Urged on by his Control, he must push Philip back and quell him; but his sympathy for his opponent and his hatred of Keane roused him to sudden revolt. He wanted to disobey the Master Will, retreat, leave Philip in command of himself. But he could only go on, unwillingly thrusting back Philip's will despite the indescribable torment and confusion in his own. Then, with the feeling that he was ten times worse than the most inhuman ghoul, he took full possession of his borrowed body.

"I'll take him home now," said Keane composedly to Burke. "As you see, he needs a little extra sleep. Meanwhile, if you have any occasion to call me, I will be at the factory."

To the youthful mind of the Agent, used to the lightness of an athletic physique, the body in which it moved down the stairs to the

limousine seemed strangely heavy and awkward.

"I'm badly done up, Keane," he said with Philip's lips as the car got under way.

"Bah!" snorted Keane, "you've had a scare, that's all. Go to bed when you get home and sleep till nine this evening. At ten a man named Dr. Nukharin will call for you. He will drive you to a garage, leave the car, and transfer to another one a few blocks away.

"Out near Marbleton you will find an airplane staked in an open field. Nukharin is a capable pilot. He will fly back southeast along the lakeshore to the meeting place. You should arrive about twelve-thirty. The test is set for one o'clock."

Quest listened in a state of abject rage. Lacking the power to resist his Control, he could only boil away in Philip's body like a wild creature hemmed in by bars of steel.

"Bring with you," continued Keane venomously, "the set of papers that you took from the safe in my office. Hold the other set in readiness to deliver to Nukharin to-morrow, after he has studied the results of the test and has notified Paris to release a hundred million dollars in cash for delivery at your Loop office at 3 p. m."

The murderous greed of the man maddened Quest. He tried to revolt, his will squirming like a physical thing, threshing the ether like a wounded shark in the sea. For a moment he felt that he was about to burst the bonds that his demon of a Control had woven around him. So violently did he resist that the immured and sporelike will of Philip forged up fitfully out of the blackness and joined his in the hopeless struggle. But along the attenuated conduits that still chained Quest to the Master Will Keane caught the impulse of the mutiny, and his eyes darted flame as he countered with a will-shock that paralyzed his unruly Agent.

"Listen! you whimpering dog," he snarled. "Think as I tell you—and nothing more! You are going to apologize to Dr. Nukharin for your previous unwillingness to sell the Projector. You are going to tell him that I am at fault—that I held out—but that you found a way to force my compliance. You understand?"

Quest could find no words. With Philip's head he nodded meekly. Just then the car stopped and the chauffeur threw open the door.

Dr. Nukharin flew high despite the masses of cumulus cloud which frequently reduced visibility to zero. He had merely to follow the rim of the lake to his destination, and an occasional glimpse of the water was sufficient to hold him on his course.

In the back seat hunched Philip, his body crumbling under the weight of Quest's despair. For hours the latter had gone on vaguely, hoping somehow to thwart this horrible transaction that was rushing the world to its doom, thinking he might grow strong enough to wrench himself free and so liberate Philip from the dominance of his conscienceless brother. Even though such a move should leave his own will forever separate from his body, he was ready and anxious to make the sacrifice.

Suddenly the crash of the motor ceased and Nukharin banked the ship up in a spiral glide. Quest had never been in the air before, and the long whirl down into the darkness on this devil's errand was to him as eery as a ride to perdition in a white-hot projectile.

His mind seemed to trail out in a great nebular helix behind the descending ship. He felt that he had suddenly crossed some cosmic meridian into a new plane of existence, where he was changed to a gas, yet continued capable of thought. But even here his obsession remained the same. Keane Clason—trickster, traitor, arch-criminal—must be destroyed!

"I'll get him!" vowed Quest in words that were no less real for being soundless. "I'll trail him to the end of space and bring him to account!"

Then wheels touched earth and the cold, bare facts of his destiny rushed in on him with redoubled force. He felt the nearness of his Control seconds before he perceived him through the eyes of Philip. With a sensation like a stab he realized that now he must speak, play his part, be any bloodless hypocrite that Keane Clason chose to make him. The silent order surged down the conduits promptly enough; he responded as an automaton obeys the pressure of a button.

"Well, Doctor," chuckled Philip with a cunning leer, "here's the magic tower, just as I promised you. We'll run it up in a jiffy. This test is going to be so vivid and conclusive that not even a hard-headed skeptic like you can raise a question."

"You misunderstand me," returned Nukharin in an injured tone. "So far as I am concerned this procedure is only a formality, but it is none the less necessary. Suppose that I should spend a hundred million of my government's money and the purchase prove worthless? You may guess that my folly would cost me dear."

Keane Clason was waiting on the platform of a giant truck, the motor of which was idling. All the apparatus was in readiness except that the three demountable sections of the tower had yet to be run up into position.

"One of the beauties of the D. P.," said Philip gleefully to the Doctor, while Keane smiled slyly to himself, "is that this pint-size dynamo provides all the current needed for the test. We pick the power for our radio right out of the air by means of a wave trap and mensurator invented by this bright little brother of mine," and he clapped Keane patronizingly on the back.

"Yes, ah—Dr. Nukharin," ventured Keane timidly, and at that moment Quest experienced the raging red hatred that causes men to murder. "Philip has promised me that you will employ this device only as a threat to hold the ambitions of the larger powers in check."

"Of course, of course!" replied the Doctor heartily. "But now let's have the test. Even at night I'm not too fond of these open-air performances."

The height of the tower as they ran the upper sections into place was forty feet. When all connections had been inspected, first by Keane, then by Philip, the former led Nukharin aloft.

As the climax of his plot approached, Keane's excitement bordered on a cataleptic state, hints of which came confusedly through the conduits to Quest. With a peculiar satisfaction he felt that Keane was suffering. The inventor's jaws became rigid, as though his blood had

changed to liquid air and frozen him, and he had difficulty in controlling the movements of his arms.

Now he was afraid! Genuinely afraid, this time. Quest caught the impulse too clearly to doubt its meaning. This was no sham! Keane was doubting his own machine, fearing that in the crisis some element in the finely calculated mechanism might fail to operate, thus cheating him of the blood-money on which his heart was set. Then he was speaking, and even Nukharin noticed the tremor in his voice:

"These nine tubes, which look like a row of gun barrels, are molded from silicon paste. Each shoots a beam of invisible light and a radio dart of precisely the same wave length. The destructive effect depends chiefly upon this exactness of synchronization."

"A question occurs to me," said the Doctor: "will others be able to manipulate the machine as successfully as you can?"

"It's fool-proof," chattered Keane, almost losing control of his voice, "absolutely fool-proof. Surely you have scientists in your country who can follow written directions! Nothing more is necessary."

"Very well," shrugged Nukharin. "I only want to be sure that no

unforeseen difficulties may arise in an emergency."

"See this range-setter?" continued Keane. "The thread on the vertical shaft enables us not only to limit the range by angling the beams into the ground, but it can also be disengaged and the Projector revolved in a flat circle for maximum ranges."

"And is there no danger of the machine going wrong—of destroying itself and us?" suggested Nukharin.

"None whatever, Doctor. There is no explosive force and no great electrical voltage involved. As long as we stand back of the muzzles we have nothing to fear.

"Now look. I have set the micrometer at three hundred yards, which will just about cover the stretch between ourselves and the lake. I will cut a swath for you—and every bush, every blade of grass, every insect in this swath will be withered to ash in the twinkling of an eye. The destruction will be absolute."

"Please proceed," said Nukharin grimly.

Keane pulled a lever in its slot, then pressed it down into its lock as his projection battery swung lakeward at the desired angle. Then

with one hand poised on another lever, he pressed an electric button.

At the controls below, a bulb flashed on and off. The signal was superfluous, for already Quest had received his silent command from the Master Will. An icy dread fastened on him. He must obey the unspoken command; he had no will of his own with which to resist. The test would be a success; the Projector would be sold; the world would be turned into a shambles. And he, Owen Quest, would be the destroyer, the murderer, the weak fool who made this horror possible.

All this flashed through the Agent's mind in the fraction of a second that it took him to extend Philip's hand, close the switch of the dynamo, and snap on the alternating lights in the housing over the tellurium filter.

For an interminable five seconds he waited, in a ferment of revolt which the paralysis of his will made it impossible to put into action. Then again the command pulsed within him, the signal bulb flashed, and he reversed his motions of the moment before.

Cold sweat cascaded down Philip's face as Quest felt the ladder vibrating under descending feet. He longed for the power to hurl Keane Clason to the ground and turn the Projector upon him. But

with an awful irony the Master Will forced him to his feet, and to speak in a tone that withered the manhood within him.

"Come," said Philip in a triumphant tone to Nukharin, "and I will show you that Clason inventions perform as well as they sound."

Flashlight in hand, he started toward the lake with Nukharin and his brother close behind him. Twenty paces, and the long meadow grass suddenly vanished from beneath their feet.

"See that!" whispered Philip excitedly, waving the light from side to side to show the forty-foot swath that stretched away before them. "Not a trace of life left, not a blade of grass—nothing but dust!"

The only response was a gurgling sound that issued from Nukharin's throat.

"Look!" Quest formed the word with Philip's lips under the urge of the Master Will. "Here was a tall bush. What do you see now? Just a teaspoonful of ash. When you examine the remains by daylight, you will find that even the root has disintegrated to a depth of two feet."

"Enough of this," croaked Nukharin in horror. "The deal is closed."

His face was convulsed with fear. Without another word he whirled

about and fled toward his airplane. Philip gave a start as if to follow.

"Halt! you slob," growled Keane, whose composure had returned with the successful outcome of the test. "I have use for your company, even though you are as great a coward as our Slavic friend."

Coward! The epithet stung Quest like a flaming goad. One of the fine, intangible lines that bound him under the will of Keane Clason severed, and his own will exploded into action like a thunderbolt. With startling agility he whirled Philip about, the flashlight clubbed in his hand. But Keane was quicker still. A clip on the wrist sent the weapon flying. Then Philip reeled backward from a kick in the stomach, and his clutching hands beat the air as he sank unconscious in the dust.

With a violent tug, Quest lifted Philip's body to a sitting posture. The phone was ringing, and by the pull on the will-fibers he knew that Keane was at the other end of the wire. Philip's body was failing under the strain of the part it was forced to play, and the blow of the night before had further weakened it. Now he sat rocking his head painfully between his hands. But Quest lifted him to his feet by sheer will, and he staggered across the room.

"Hello!", he said in a hoarse voice.

"Get the hell out here to the factory!" rasped Keane, and the crash of the receiver emphasized the command.

It was one o'clock as Philip whirled his sedan into Olmstead Avenue. At three, reflected Quest as the car scorched over the pavements, he must be at the downtown office to deliver the papers and receive the money.

Then he was face to face with Keane, reeling dizzily at the hatred that blazed from the latter's accusing eyes.

"Double-crossed me, eh!" The voice was a low snarl, and as he spoke Keane thumped the extra outspread on his desk. "But you're not going to get away with it—neither of you!"

Dismay, hope, dread, wonder robbed Quest of the power to speak. But he whirled around behind the desk with such unexpected violence that Keane staggered back in alarm. Then he was devouring the screaming headlines of the newspaper. Three seconds, like a slow exposure, and every word of the Record's great scoop was etched upon his mind as if with caustic:

DOOM LAUNCH ADRIFT ON LAKE

Physician Baffled by Condition of Five Bodies Found in Craft

Blighted Area on Shore Said to Have Bearing on Tragedy

THAW HARBOR, IND., June 6.—Five Chicago sportsmen, most of them prominent in business and society, perished in the early hours this morning while returning in the launch of A. Gaston Andrews from a weekend camping party near Hook Spit on the Michigan shore.

The boat was towed into this port at daybreak by the Interlake Tug Mordecai after being found adrift less than a mile off shore. According to Captain Goff of the Mordecai the death craft carried no lights and he barely avoided running her down. The weather along the Indiana shore was perfect throughout the night and there is nothing to indicate that the launch was in trouble at any time. The bodies are unmarked, and this little community is agog with rumors ranging all the way from murder and suicide to the supernatural.

Dr. J. M. Addis of Thaw Harbor, the first physician to examine the bodies, says that they appear to have suffered some violent electro-chemical action the nature of which cannot be determined at the

moment. This statement is considered significant in view of the reported discovery ashore of a large blighted area almost directly opposite the point where the launch was found. Joseph Sleichert, a farmer who lives in that vicinity, reports that this patch of ground extending back from the lakeshore was completely stripped of vegetation overnight. He ascribes the damage to some unknown insect pest. Others say that the condition of the ground indicates that it has been burned at incinerator temperatures. Nothing is left of the soil but a blue powder.

Philip faced his brother with eyes that were dull with agony.

"You have made me a murderer!" Quest forced out the words in painful gasps.

But Keane snapped back at him like a rabid dog.

"You did it—you did it yourself! You tampered with the Projector. You tried to spoil the test. You changed the range. You tried to kill me, and instead you killed these others. And you're going to pay—both of you. You hear me?—you're going to pay!"

His voice mounted the scale to a scream. It was a wail of unreasoning terror, of the dread of exposure, of the fear that he

would fail to collect the fortune now so nearly in his grasp. The accident that had jarred his well-laid plans had unnerved him.

Frantically Quest strove to answer him, to explain his utter subjection, as Agent, to say that if he had possessed the will to oppose or trick him he would have turned him over to the police, or might even have killed him, at the very outset. But in his frenzy, Keane had so tightened his control that Quest was speechless. Now he tried to substitute gesture for words, but Philip was rooted to the spot like a statue; even his hands were immovable.

He might have remained in this state indefinitely had not Keane's fears withdrawn his mind from his immediate surroundings. Momentarily he forgot Quest, Philip—everything but himself and his predicament. And in the instant that his vigilance relaxed, Quest's enslaved will experienced a sudden lease of strength and hope. Independently of his Control, he found that he could move Philip's hand, could take a faltering step.

But now, what to do? How might he fan this feeble spark of volition to sufficient strength for decisive resistance? The idea came to him: if only he could place distance between himself and Keane, perhaps with one titanic effort he might launch himself against the Master Will, take him by surprise, crush him down, and reverse him to the

status of Agent instead of Control.

With infinite effort Quest forced Philip's body step by step across the room. He must reach that window, get a signal of distress to someone in the street.

But Keane began to sense a mutiny. He followed. He crossed the floor with slinking, tigerish steps and snaking body. His wet lips writhed back over his teeth, and his contorted features wove the leer of the abyss. Now as his Control drew physically near, Quest felt his mite of strength ebbing fast. Slowly Keane reached up with his clawed fingers and grasped his Agent by the arm.

"Remember!" he hissed, "if these deaths are traced to us, you break down—you confess—you take the blame—you paint me lily white—you describe the cowardly means by which you moulded me to your will—you plead only for a quick trial and the full penalty of the law. You understand?"

Quest made no reply, but he understood all too well the hideous intention of his betrayer. What a fool he had been to imagine that Keane Clason would ever restore him to his body! Philip to the chair, Quest a homeless spirit wandering in space, and for the body at the bottom of the tank, the brief regrets of the Department!

A sudden rushing sound filled the air with a sense of action and alarm.

Two—three—four speeding automobiles swung in recklessly to the curb and shrieked to a standstill under smoking brakes. Men leaped out and deployed on the run to surround the factory. Keane darted to the door and twisted the key.

"Come on!" he spat at Philip as he snatched back the rug and threw open the trap door.

The command galvanized Quest to action. In two bounds he had Philip on the stairs. A heavy impact rattled the office door just as he dropped the trap into place over his head. Then, infected with Keane's panic, he was running down the passageway like mad.

Inside the tank chamber the brilliantly colored rings of liquid flashed back the rays of the arclight. Half crazed with anxiety, Keane danced on the black ledge like a monkey on a griddle. His face was ashen, drool ran from his twisted mouth, his eyes were two black pools of terror.

Again Quest experienced the peculiar sensation which came with the slackening of control. New hope sprang up in his agonized being as

heavy blows boomed against the air-locked door. Great waves of fear poured along the conduits, betraying to the Agent the state of mind of his Control. Now what would Keane do? What could he do? Why, of all places, had he fled down into this blind burrow?

Thud, thud! Then came a series of sharp reports. Outside, they were trying to shoot away the deep-sunk disk hinges.

Still the door stood fast, but the fury of the assault on it whipped the faltering Keane to action. In a bound he was on the platform. With a lightning hand he threw the switch to plus, starting electrolytic action in the tank. Then he pressed a button concealed under the edge of the switch-mount and a panel slid silently aside in the wall, revealing a narrow outlet.

To Quest everything went a flaming red. He might have known that this fox would have something in reserve—a way of escape when danger threatened!

But his Control gave him no time for independent thought. He forced Quest to turn Philip's eyes up to his own. Without disconnecting that grip of his glittering eyes, Keane leaped back to the ledge. Quest felt the silent order:

"Get up on that plank! Dive into the tank! Get back into your own body, let Philip have his! Then come up—the two of you—and face the music. For I'll be gone, and your story will sound like the ravings of a maniac."

Quest took an obedient step toward the platform. But at the same instant a tremendous crash shivered the door. It seemed to unnerve Keane Clason. With a gasp he sank down upon the steps, his body doubled in pain, his hand clutching at his heart. Another crash followed, and he shuddered and cried out.

Instantly Quest felt an expansion of the will. Keane's sudden physical weakness had loosened his control. Philip's lips worked painfully as Quest forced him to pause, to disobey the command of the Master Will. In a spasm of will he fought to wrench himself free from the countless clinging tentacles of his Control. In great surges, Quest's reviving volition pounded against the walls of his borrowed body. Now he sought to force this sluggish body back to the wall, so that he might release the airlock and spring the door. But Philip seemed to ossify, every cord and muscle of his body frozen to stone by the conflict that raged within him.

Braced against the wall, Keane was rising slowly to his feet. His seizure was easing, and so he was able to exert a better pressure

upon his rebellious Agent.

"Come!" he gasped, realizing that he lacked the strength to escape alone and must therefore change his plan. "Lift me—quick! Carry me out! Slide the panel back into place. We will escape together!"

The spoken command turned the balance against Quest. His will yielded to the master. At the same instant Philip's body relaxed like an object relieved of a great excess of electrical potential. Suddenly strong and supple, he lifted the trembling Keane and tossed him across his shoulder.

For a moment there had been a lull in the assault on the door. Now the battering resumed with a fury that jarred the whole chamber and sent ripples dancing across the varicolored liquids in the osmotic tank.

"Quick!" gasped Keane. "Move! I say. Carry me out."

But he was in a fainting condition. Crash after crash rocked the chamber, and with every blow Quest's will felt a stimulation that enabled him to stand off the commands of his Control. Then a wave of nausea swept over him and left him reeling. It seemed that Philip's blood had turned to boiling oil. A dazzling mist swallowed him up,

and with a weird sense of inflation he felt full strength returning to his will.

A booming blow that bulged the door inward acted upon him like a stage player's cue. He leaped to the platform. The gurgling sound of remonstrance rattled from Keane's throat. But Quest paid no heed. Philip was walking the plank—away from the open panel—out over the tank.

Rapidly he dropped down the ladder to the bottom rung, snatched Keane's wrist in a gorillalike grip, and hurled him down into the vat.

Then Philip was clinging desperately to the ladder, his strength gone, his body shivering as if with ague.

"Go on up!" came a strange, impatient voice from below him. "For heaven's sake let me out of here!"

A downward glance, and with a shout of alarm Philip was scrambling up the ladder, for there was a head down there, and a pair of naked shoulders, and the face of a man he had never seen before. Hand over hand Quest followed. Philip had collapsed and lay prone on the plank. Quest lifted him to his feet and shook him anxiously.

"Philip!" he urged. "Philip! Can you walk?"

The tattoo on the battered door helped to revive the older man.

"Quick!" whispered Quest, kneading Philip's arms. "There's barely an hour left. Get to your office. Burn the papers. Refuse the money. Do you hear me?"

Philip nodded dazedly.

"Hurry!" puffed Quest, thrusting him through the opening that Keane had reserved for his own escape, and sliding the panel back into place.

Quest was himself now—young, strong, free. Instantly he threw the electrolytic switch to minus. For Keane had failed to emerge from the tank, and since he was submerged alone, he could not escape until electrolysis was halted.

Just as Quest leaped from the platform to release the airlock, the door burst in and three men with drawn guns rushed into the chamber.

The leader stopped with a startled oath and stood blinking his unbelieving eyes. Quest was poised like a statue, his naked body

gleaming an unearthly white against the lusterless black of the wall.

"Quest," came from the three in chorus. Then a rush of questions: "What's the matter? What's happened to you? Where are the Clasons?"

Quest turned toward the platform, expecting to see Keane.

"Something's wrong!" he shouted. "Quick! Somebody get Philip. He's gone to his Loop office. Keane Clason's at the bottom of this tank. I'm not sure how this thing works, but Philip can get him out! I'm sure of it!"

Despite the confident predictions of both Quest and Philip Clason, osmotic association failed to restore Keane to life, and at last the coroner ordered the removal of the body. The autopsy revealed heart disease as the cause of his death.

For reasons best understood at Washington, the cause of the five launch deaths was withheld from the public. Quest's punishment for his part in the crime consisted of a promotion and a warm personal letter from the President of the United States.

#05 Compensation, by Charles Victor Tench:

Professor Wroxton Had Disappeared—But in the Bottom of the Mysterious Crystal Cage Lay the Diamond from His Ring!

Aproximate word count: 4,500

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

"Why, John!" Involuntarily I halted at the entrance to my snug bachelor quarters as the flood of light my turning of the switch produced revealed a huddled figure slumped in an easy chair.

"Aye, sir, 'tis me." The man got to his feet, gnarled hands rubbing at his eyes. "An' 'tis all day that I've been waiting for you, sir. The caretaker said you'd be back soon so let me in. I must have fell asleep, an' no wonder, what with the strain an' no sleep or rest all last night."

"Strain? No rest?" I stared my bewilderment, trying at the same time to conceal the vague apprehensions occasioned by the fact that the

trusted servitor of my friend, Professor Wroxton, should wait all day for me.

Hastily shedding my outer things, I bade him again be seated, sat down facing him, and asked him to explain.

"'Tis the professor, sir." The old chap peered at me with anxious, wrinkled eyes. "'Tis common enough for him to send me here on messages, sir, but to-day I've come on my own, because, sir," answering the question in my eyes, "I haven't seen sight of him since last night."

"Why—" I began.

"That's just it, sir." John took the words out of my mouth. "For twenty years my wife an' me have looked after the professor at The Grange. In all that time he's never been away at night. Whenever he had to come to town he'd tell us. Most times I'd drive him myself in the old car. But that was very seldom, sir, for Professor Wroxton had few interests outside."

"But, John," I protested "is there no other reason for your agitation? He might have had an urgent call, or gone out for a walk or drive by himself."

"No, sir. If you'll pardon me, sir, you're wrong. The professor was fixed in his habits. He would not go away without tellin' me. Think back, sir, you know the professor as well as me. Better, because you are his friend and I am only a servant. Although, sir," this proudly, "he always treated me as a friend."

"Go on," I urged, seeing he was not finished.

"Well, sir, a few minutes back you asked me if there was no other reason for my being upset like. There is, sir. You know, sir, that for more'n twenty years the professor has led a retired sort of life; the life of a—a—"

"Recluse," I suggested.

"That's it, sir. He only left The Grange when he had to. He was all wrapped up in some weird-like thing he was inventing. In all those years, sir, you were the only visitor who ever went into his laboratory, or stayed at The Grange for a night or more. That is, sir, until three days ago."

"Go on," I again urged, some of his perturbation communicating itself to me.

"The Grange, sir, lying as it does, fifteen miles from town an' back in its own grounds away from the road, isn't noted by many. When strangers do get into the grounds I usually gets 'em out again in short order. Three days ago, sir, a stranger drove up to the door in a fine car. He told me he was wantin' to purchase a country home. I told him The Grange was not for sale an' turned 'im away. He was turning his car to leave when my master came out. To my surprise, sir, he invited the stranger in. An' I'm sure, sir, because he looked so taken aback like, that the stranger had never seen the professor before."

"And after that?" I asked, now feeling decidedly uneasy.

"The stranger, sir—a Mr. Lathom he called himself—stayed on. He was in the study with the master last night. This morning there was no trace of either of them."

"But—good God, John!" I jerked to my feet, a fresh dread clutching at my heart. "What are you trying to get at? The professor and Mr. Lathom might possibly have driven away somewhere last night."

"Both cars, sir," the servant answered, "are in the garage. I bolt all the doors in the house myself every night. They were still fastened this morning. My wife an' me searched the house from cellar to garret an' hunted all over the grounds. We couldn't find a trace of the

master or his guest."

"You mean to suggest then," I shot at him, "that two full grown men have completely vanished? It's absurd, John, absurd!"

I paced the floor thinking desperately for a few minutes, conscious of the ancient's anxious eyes. I half smiled. The thing was too ridiculous for anything. Old John had grown morbid from living away from the outer world. Also, I had to admit that the atmosphere of The Grange, impregnated as it was with the lethal scientific dabblings of my friend, was exactly suited to the conjuring up of unhealthy forebodings in uneducated minds. I'd drive out to the home of my friend at once. No doubt I'd find him fit and well. He had refused to install a phone, so drive it had to be.

"John." I stopped my pacing and patted him on the shoulder. "I'm coming out to The Grange at once." His face showed his thankfulness. "I am sure," I went on as I struggled into my coat, "that we shall find the professor and his guest awaiting us. Anyway, it's time you got back to your wife and had some food."

"I hope to Heaven, sir, that you're right." With that we left the building and entered my car.

Although I had tried to dispel my fears, although I had tried to banter John out of his dread, I drove that evening as I had never driven before or since. Barely fifteen minutes later I halted my roadster at the short flight of steps leading to the main door of The Grange. Even as we stepped from the machine the door flung open and an agitated woman hurried towards us. She was Mary, John's wife.

"Sir!" She gripped my arm and stared anxiously into my face. "'Tis glad I am that you've come. The Grange is a house of death."

In spite of myself a chill shook my whole body. Gently handing her to John, I strode up the steps.

At the open doorway I halted, the aged couple crowding on my heels, the woman still babbling about death. I couldn't blame her. All day she had been alone in that gloomy, rambling old building, wondering, no doubt, why John and I had not returned sooner.

And gloomy the house was. Always, even when staying there at the professor's request, I had found it to be somber and depressing, as if there lurked within its walls the shadowy wings of the years-old tragedy that had caused my friend to retire to such a God-forsaken place, and there become absorbed in his scientific experiments.

Even now, as I gazed into the dimly-lighted hallway, the air seemed charged with that same malignant something I cannot describe.

Pulling myself together I strode quickly along the corridor, and flung open the study door. The lights being full on, one glance sufficed to show me that my friend was not there. Swinging on my heel, the horror I saw in the eyes of the servants, honest, healthy folks not easily frightened, conveyed itself to me. Somehow, the sight of that room, lights on, chairs drawn up to the burnt-out fire, brought home to me the fact that something serious was amiss. I chided myself for thinking John had been unduly agitated.

For a moment I stood, trying to conceal the chill coursing through my veins, puzzling what to do next. I decided to search the house thoroughly. If I found no sign of the professor or his guest, I would call in the police.

Fearfully yet willingly the aged couple led me from room to room, from attic to basement, until but one place remained—the laboratory. I hesitated for several seconds at the closed door of my friend's workroom. Not that I had never entered the—to a layman's eyes—weirdly-appointed place. I had been in many times with the professor. But this time I dreaded what I might find.

Pulling myself together, I gently tried the door. To my horror it yielded to my touch. Alive, the professor always kept it locked. A new dread assailed me, as, flinging the door wide open, I blinked in the sudden glare of powerful globes. Someone had left the lights full on!

Horrified I stood and stared, knowing by their heavy breathing that the aged couple were also staring with fright-widened eyes. Afraid of what? I did not know. I only knew that the atmosphere had become even more sinister. I knew that something dreadful had taken place in that room.

Trembling with consternation I forced myself to take a few steps forward, then I again stared about me. At one end of the large room something shone brightly in the glow of the lights. Slowly I walked across to examine it: it appeared to be a glass case, almost like a show-case, about eight feet square and seven feet in height. With the mechanical actions of the mentally distraught I walked all around it. Not the slightest sign of an entrance could I see. The fact intrigued me. I tapped lightly on the highly polished surface with my fingers. It rang to my touch like cut glass.

Through the transparent surface I could see John and his wife. They were watching me furtively, wondering, no doubt, why I lingered. As

I looked at them John suddenly lumbered up to the case on the opposite side. Dropping to his knees, he stared. Turning an imploring gaze to me, he pointed. His lips moved soundlessly. I followed the pointing finger with my eyes; gasped at what I saw.

Near the center of the cage, on the floor constructed of the same crystalline substance, something glittered, its brilliance almost dazzling as the light rays struck it. My face pressed close to the cold outer surface of the structure, my shocked intelligence gradually realized what that small sparkling object was. It was a magnificent diamond—and the professor had always worn a diamond ring!

In a sudden frenzy of horror I pawed my way around the cage to where John still knelt. As I reached him he jerked his head in a numb way as he croaked, "It's a diamond, sir! The professor's!"

"But how?" I implored. "How can it be? There's no way into this thing. Perhaps he was working here, and the stone came loose from its setting. He couldn't have dropped it after the cage was completed."

"It's his diamond, sir," intoned the old man, dully. "I know it is."

Then a sudden unreasoning terror filled me. I shrank away from that

shining box. It seemed to be mocking me, gloatingly, malevolently.

"Quickly!" I threw at the aged couple. "Let us get out of here! Now! At once!" They needed no second urging. I knew that they felt as I felt: the laboratory was a sepulcher!

Five minutes later I was guiding my car over the narrow road to town. I did not pause until I drew up at police headquarters. I suppose my appearance was distraught, for I was ushered into the presence of the chief without delay. In a few moments I had poured out my story. He listened with a polite calmness I found almost maddening. Leaning back in his chair, he reviewed, audibly, the facts.

"Some twenty-odd years ago your friend, Professor Wroxton, married. He was so absorbed in the pursuit of some weird invention that he neglected his bride. She ran away with another man. This man deserted her, and disappeared. The professor found her many months later, in desperate health. Shortly afterwards she died. Your friend tried to trail the man, but failed. Shocked and saddened beyond measure, he retired to a place known as The Grange."

He suddenly straightened up in his seat, and pointed at me a thick forefinger.

"How long have you known Professor Wroxton?"

"About ten years," I answered.

"What was he trying to invent?"

"I don't know," I replied.

"And yet you had his confidence in other matters?"

"But what has all this to do with finding out what has become of my friend?" I blurted out. "Perhaps every moment counts."

"A lot." The chief eyed me in a way I did not like. "Solely because your friend has not been seen by his servants for nearly twenty-four hours, merely because you saw what you believe to be his diamond in some kind of a glass compartment in his laboratory, you come here as distraught as a man who has something terrible on his mind. Why?"

"I can't say." I shifted uneasily under that direct stare. "Somehow I *feel* that something dreadful has happened to my friend."

"We do not go by *feelings*." The chief got to his feet. "But you have told me enough to warrant action. I want you to guide me and a

couple of men to this house. Please wait here until I return." He left the room.

Sitting there awaiting his return, I tried to ponder the matter reasonably. After all, perhaps the chief was right. Merely because the professor had been absent for a few hours and I had seen what I thought to be his diamond in the laboratory, I had worked myself into a perfect fever of anxiety. I almost smiled to myself. In that businesslike office the whole affair did seem absurd. After all the professor did not have to answer to his servants for his actions.

Heavy footsteps, announcing the chief's return, caused me to rise to my feet. A few minutes later, in company with the three officers, I was driving again towards The Grange.

We made the return journey in almost complete silence. Occasionally the chief would shoot a question at me; but, the night air cooling my fevered brain, my replies were guarded. He realized that fact, for I felt his eyes upon me all the way. What was going on behind that broad forehead, I wondered.

Then we reached The Grange. As we mounted the steps, John, his wife herding behind him, flung wide the door. He answered the question in my eyes with a negative shake of his head, and the

words, "Nothing fresh, sir."

The chief eyed him keenly, then curtly bade him lead the way to the laboratory. John hung back, his face blanched. "I can't, sir," he faltered. The chief turned to me, and, although I wanted to follow John's example, although the atmosphere of the house had again filled me with an unshakable dread, I led the way, standing back at the door to allow the officers to enter first.

With calculating gaze the chief slowly took in every detail of the stone apartment. He turned to me.

"What is there here to be afraid of?" I pointed hesitatingly towards the crystalline cage. The chief and his men strode across to it.

"You don't know how to open this?" the chief shot at me after a brief examination.

"No," I replied. "It was not here on my last visit."

"When was that?"

"Some two or three months ago", I answered. "My work occasions much traveling on my part."

The chief and his men turned again to the cage, talking in undertones. He turned again to me.

"You notice that this thing is built in sections. One of them must be movable. Perhaps—" He paused as his eyes fell upon some wires and tubes that trailed across the floor from underneath the cage to a switchboard fastened to the wall.

"Perhaps," he repeated, "it is worked from that board." He crossed over, stared thoughtfully at the shining levers for some seconds, and moved one slightly. The result was astounding. All four of us stared with unbelieving eyes as slowly, without the faintest sound, a section of one wall slid inwards, as if guided by invisible tracks on floor and ceiling.

"Guess that's enough for now." With the words the chief backed away, almost timidly, I thought, from the switchboard, and walked to the cage. For a moment he hesitated, but he entered, and emerged with the sparkling object in his hand.

"It's the professor's," I choked, crowding close to him.

"How'd you know?" he shot back. "All unset stones look pretty much alike."

"I just know," was all I could falter.

[ID: A black and white illustration showing the narrator standing with one of the police in front of the crystal box as the narrator gestures towards it. Image description end.]

"You 'just know'." The chief sat down on a stool and regarded me searchingly. "Mr. Thornton, when I started out with you, I thought I was on a wild goose chase or the trail of a confession. You looked exactly like a man who had either committed a serious crime, or was getting over a bad drunk. I feel sure now"—he again regarded the diamond—"that your story was not the product of an alcohol-crazed brain. Come on!" He lurched to his feet, and grasped me by the shoulder. "Come through!"

Without answering, I wrenched myself free. Over my shoulder I saw one of the policemen at the door. In the hand of the other a revolver suddenly appeared. Good God! I glared in bewilderment from one to another. Was I going mad? Surely this was some awful nightmare! What had I said to make them suspect me of having committed a revolting crime?

"Sit down!" The command came from the chief. Mechanically I found a stool, and obeyed him. "Hold your stations, boys, and listen carefully," he ordered his men. Then he turned to me.

"Professor Wroxton was a wealthy man without kith or kin?"

"Yes."

"Do you know the nature of his will?"

"Yes." Chilled to the heart, I felt the circumstantial net tightening.

"What is its nature?"

"This house and an annuity to John and his wife," I explained. "The residue of his wealth to me."

"Humph!" The chief stared at me piercingly. "And how has business been with you lately?"

Damn the man! What right had he to put me through the third degree? I felt my state of dazed horror slowly giving way to anger. I glanced around. The pistol still menaced; the man at the door had not moved. It was useless to try and evade the questions.

"For the past year," I replied, "business has been very poor. In fact, the professor advanced me some money."

"Humph!" Again that irritating, non-committal grunt.

The chief turned in his seat and stared thoughtfully at the crystalline cage.

"And you don't know what the professor was trying to invent?"

"Only its nature," I began.

"Ah! That's better. Why didn't you tell me that before?" The chief leaned forward.

"Well," I explained, "the whole thing seems so absurd. When the professor told me how his married life had been broken up, he told me that at that time he reached the utmost depths of human suffering. Absolute zero, he called it."

"Ah!"

"The experiments he indulged in," I continued, trying to hide the shiver pimpling my flesh, "were to produce an actual state of absolute zero. It is years since he told me this. I had almost forgotten it."

"And exactly what is an absolute zero?" The chief's eyes never left mine.

"Well," I protested, "please understand that I also am a layman in these matters. According to my friend, an absolute zero has been the dream of scientists for ages. Once upon a time it was attained, but

the secret became lost."

"And exactly what is an absolute zero?"

Curse the man! I could have struck him down for the chilling level of his tone. I forced myself to go on, realizing that I was damning myself at every step.

"An absolute zero is a cold so intense it will destroy flesh, bone and tissue. Remove them," my voice rose in spite of myself, "leaving absolutely no trace."

No trace! Something attracted my eyes. The chief had opened his hand. The diamond there flashed and sparkled as if mocking me. I pulled myself together, and went on.

"It all comes back to me now. One day I came out here and found the professor terribly distraught. He told me that, with the aid of electric currents he had been able to invent the absolute zero, but he could not invent a *container*."

"Why?" Those eyes continued to bore into mine.

"Because—remember it is years since he told me this—there was difficulty in controlling the power. Besides destroying living things,

it would destroy bricks and mortar, stone and iron. Only one substance it could not wipe out—crystalline of diamond hardness.

"I know, now!" I jumped to my feet and grabbed the chief's arm. "I know now what he meant. Fool, fool! Why did I not think of it before? This—" I swung towards the cage—"is compensation." Almost panting in my eagerness I went on:

"My friend told me that the law of compensation would atone to him for the tragedy of his youth. Absolute zero in suffering would be atoned for by a real state of absolute zero. Chief!" I whirled on him. "Don't you understand? This is the perfected dream of my friend. It is the absolute zero."

"Humph! Plausible but not convincing." I slumped back at the officer's words. "That does not explain the professor's disappearance. Even if it did, what about Mr. Lathom? And don't forget this contrivance is worked from outside. We found the diamond inside. Of course, he might have placed it there himself to test the machine," he concluded.

"Of course, that's it," I commenced. But I regretted the words when I saw suspicion flicker again in the chief's eyes. Lamely I finished, "And he has probably rushed off, in an ecstasy of triumph, to

acquaint professional colleagues."

"Without unlocking any doors or taking a car, eh?

"Mr. Thornton." The chief stood up and regarded me sternly. "As a sensible man, don't you think yourself that your story is a bit thin? The professor has disappeared. Here is a strange-looking case which you say is an absolute zero container. Whether you know, or are just jumping at conclusions, remains to be proved. But even if it is, do you think that, after perfecting such a tremendous invention, the professor would commit suicide?"

"On the contrary," I gasped, "my friend was a man of gentle, kindly disposition, but strong purpose. I should think his first action on attaining his life's ambition would be to notify me, his closest friend."

"And he didn't." Every word condemned me, and roused me to retaliate.

"Chief, I know enough of the law to know that, before you can try a man for murder, you must prove that murder has been committed." I grinned savagely. "You must have the corpus delicti. Go ahead! Find my friend or his remains, or else withdraw your charges." I grinned

again, with shocked mirthlessness.

Then I buried my head in my hands. I had called in the police to help find the professor, and they had only blundered around and asked a lot of stupid questions. The chief had practically accused me of murder—something I knew he could not prove, yet feared he might. Because I had told the chief of the locked doors and unused cars, he had confined his investigations to the house itself.

He interrupted my thoughts.

"Mr. Thornton, I am going back to town. You will remain here with my men. I advise you to get some sleep, as I shall not be able to carry out certain investigations until the morning. One of my men will spend his time searching the house and patrolling the grounds, the other one will stay here with you."

He turned away, whispered some instructions to his men, and, followed by one of them, silently left the laboratory. I started to protest, tried to follow him; the man at the door stopped me. Silently, almost grimly, he indicated a narrow cot at one end of the room. For a moment I hesitated, feeling the man's eyes upon me.

Sleep on my dead—I felt sure he was dead—friend's cot! Sleep in

that fearful place! My whole being crawled with horror. I turned again to the man. His features were unyielding. Perhaps this was more third degree. Limp with weakness and weariness, I dragged my lagging feet towards the cot.

As long as I live I shall never forget my awakening. A uniformed figure, the chief, shaking me by the shoulder. Two other uniformed men silently watching. I sat up and gazed about me, dazedly. Bright sunlight streamed through the windows. A stray gleam struck the cage. I shrank back, trembling. And yet I had slept soundly.

"Mr. Thornton," the chief said, "I have serious news for you. I have positive proof your friend is dead."

"Dear God!" The exclamation was wrung from me as recollection returned with a rush. "Where? You can't have!"

"Here." He thrust a bundle of letters into my hands. "You acted so strangely last night you caused me to suspect you of a serious crime. Also, you overlooked several important points. You got back from a trip only last night."

Last night! Surely it was years.

"You had left instructions to have your mail forwarded," the level voice went on. "These letters were evidently one day behind you. I picked them up at your rooms this morning. I took the liberty of opening them. Read this one." He selected it.

With trembling fingers I extracted from the envelope a single written page. I recognized the handwriting as the professor's. I read with feverish intensity, each single word burning itself into my consciousness:

> Dear Thornton:
>
> I am writing this in anticipation. I will see that it is mailed when my plans are completed. Too late, dear friend, for you to attempt, with the best intentions in the world, to frustrate them.
>
> You will, perhaps, recall that many years ago, when I gave you my full confidence, I told you that I felt sure that the law of compensation would atone in some measure for my loss. Thornton, old friend, I believe that, in more ways than one, my hour has arrived. Two days ago I completed the absolute zero. But even better!

A man called here to-day. Although he did not recognize me, I saw through the veneer of added years with ease. Fate, call it what you will, my visitor is the man who wrecked my happiness.

Under pretext I shall detain him. I shall induce him to enter the crystalline cage. I have already arranged a dual control which the power will destroy when I apply it from *the inside of the cage*.

Please destroy the cage. It will have brought compensation to me before you read this.

Good-by, dear friend!

Wroxton.

"I apologize, Mr. Thornton." The chief offered a hand which I clutched in mingled sorrow and relief. The world had lost a genius. I had lost a dear friend. But he was right. It was compensation.

#06 Tanks, By Murray Leinster:

Two miles of American front had gone dead. And on two lone infantrymen, lost in the menace of the fog-gas and the tanks, depended the outcome of the war of 1932.

Aproximate word count: 9,600

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

The persistent, oily smell of fog-gas was everywhere, even in the little pill-box. Outside, all the world was blotted out by the thick gray mist that went rolling slowly across country with the breeze. The noises that came through it were curiously muted—fog-gas mutes all noises somewhat—but somewhere to the right artillery was pounding something with H E shell, and there were those little spitting under-current explosions that told of tanks in action. To the right there was a distant rolling of machine-gun fire. In between was an utter, solemn silence.

Sergeant Coffee, disreputable to look at and disrespectful of mien,

was sprawling over one of the gunners' seats and talking into a field telephone while mud dripped from him. Corporal Wallis, equally muddy and still more disreputable, was painstakingly manufacturing one complete cigarette from the pinched-out butts of four others. Both were rifle-infantry. Neither had any right or reason to be occupying a definitely machine-gun-section post. The fact that the machine-gun crew was all dead did not seem to make much difference to sector H.Q. at the other end of the telephone wire, judging from the questions that were being asked.

"I tell you," drawled Sergeant Coffee, "they're dead.... Yeah, all dead. Just as dead as when I told you the firs' time, maybe even deader.... Gas, o'course. I don't know what kind.... Yeh. They got their masks on."

He waited, looking speculatively at the cigarette Corporal Wallis had in manufacture. It began to look imposing. Corporal Wallis regarded it affectionately. Sergeant Coffee put his hand over the mouthpiece, and looked intently at his companion.

"Gimme a drag o' that, Pete," he suggested. "I'll slip y' some butts in a minute."

Corporal Wallis nodded, and proceeded to light the cigarette with

infinite artistry. He puffed delicately upon it, inhaled it with the care a man learns when he has just so much tobacco and never expects to get any more, and reluctantly handed it to Sergeant Coffee.

Sergeant Coffee emptied his lungs in a sigh of anticipation. He put the cigarette to his lips. It burned brightly as he drew upon it. Its tip became brighter and brighter until it was white-hot, and the paper crackled as the line of fire crept up the tube.

"Hey!" said Corporal Wallis in alarm.

Sergeant Coffee waved him aside, and his chest expanded to the fullest limit of his blouse. When his lungs could hold no more he ceased to draw, grandly returned about one-fourth of the cigarette to Corporal Wallis, and blew out a cloud of smoke in small driblets until he had to gasp for breath.

"When y' ain't got much time," said Sergeant Coffee amiably, "that's a quick smoke."

Corporal Wallis regarded the ruins of his cigarette with a woeful air.

"Hell!" said Corporal Wallis gloomily. But he smoked what was left.

"Yeah," said Sergeant Coffee suddenly, into the field telephone, "I'm

still here, an' they're still dead.... Listen, Mr. Officer, I got me a black eye an' numerous contusions. Also my gas-mask is busted. I called y'up to do y' a favor. I aim to head for distant parts.... Hell's bells! Ain't there anybody else in the army—" He stopped, and resentment died out in wide-eyed amazement. "Yeh.... Yeh.... Yeh.... I gotcha, Loot. A'right, I'll see what I c'n do. Yeh.... Wish y'd see my insurance gets paid. Yeh."

He hung up, gloomily, and turned to Corporal Wallis.

"We' got to be heroes," he announced bitterly. "Sit out here in th' stinkin' fog an' wait for a tank t' come along an' wipe us out. We' the only listenin' post in two miles of front. That new gas o' theirs wiped out all the rest without report."

He surveyed the crumpled figures, which had been the original occupants of the pill-box. They wore the same uniform as himself and when he took the gas-mask off of one of them the man's face was strangely peaceful.

"Hell of a war," said Sergeant Coffee bitterly. "Here our gang gets wiped out by a helicopter. I ain't seen sunlight in a week, an' I got just four butts left. Lucky I started savin' 'em." He rummaged shrewdly. "This guy's got half a sack o' makin's. Say, that was

Loot'n't Madison on the line, then. Transferred from our gang a coupla months back. They cut him in the line to listen in on me an' make sure I was who I said I was. He recognized my voice."

Corporal Wallis, after smoking to the last and ultimate puff, pinched out his cigarette and put the fragments of a butt back in his pocket.

"What we got to do?" he asked, watching as Sergeant Coffee divided the treasure-trove into two scrupulously exact portions.

"Nothin'," said Coffee bitterly, "except find out how this gang got wiped out, an' a few little things like that. Half th' front line is in th' air, the planes can't see anything, o'course, an' nobody dares cut th' fog-gas to look. He didn't say much, but he said for Gawd's sake find out somethin'."

Corporal Wallis gloated over one-fourth of a sack of tobacco and stowed it away.

"Th' infantry always gets th' dirty end of the stick," he said gloomily. "I'm goin' to roll me a whole one, pre-war, an' smoke it, presently."

"Hell yes," said Coffee. He examined his gas-mask from force of habit before stepping out into the fog once more, then

contemptuously threw it aside. "Gas-masks, hell! Ain't worth havin'. Come on."

Corporal Wallis followed as he emerged from the little round cone of the pill-box.

The gray mist that was fog-gas hung over everything. There was a definite breeze blowing, but the mist was so dense that it did not seem to move. It was far enough from the fog-flares for the last least trace of striation to have vanished. Fifteen miles to the north the fog-flares were placed, ranged by hundreds and by thousands, burning one after another as the fog service set them off, and sending out their incredible masses of thick gray vapor in long threads that spread out before the wind, coalesced, and made a smoke-screen to which the puny efforts of the last war—the war that was to make the world safe for democracy—were as nothing.

Here, fifteen miles down wind from the flares, it was possible to see clearly in a circle approximately five feet in diameter. At the edge of that circle outlines began to blur. At ten feet all shapes were the faintest of bulks, the dimmest of outlines. At fifteen feet all was invisible, hidden behind a screen of mist.

"Cast around," said Coffee gloomily. "Maybe we'll find a shell, or

tracks of a tank or somethin' that chucked the gas here."

It was rather ludicrous to go searching for anything in that mass of vapor. At three yards distance they could make each other out as dim outlines, no more. But it did not even occur to them to deplore the mist. The war which had already been christened, by the politicians at home, the last war, was always fought in a mist. Infantry could not stand against tanks, tanks could not live under aircraft-directed artillery fire—not when forty guns fired salvos for the aircraft to spot—and neither artillery nor aircraft could take any advantage of a victory which either, under special conditions, might win. The general staffs of both the United States and the prominent nation—let us say the Yellow Empire—at war with it had come to a single conclusion. Tanks or infantry were needed for the use of victories. Infantry could be destroyed by tanks. But tanks could be hidden from aerial spotters by smoke-screens.

The result was fog-gas, which was being used by both sides in the most modern fashion when, their own unit wiped out and themselves wandering aimlessly in the general direction of the American rear, Sergeant Coffee and Corporal Wallis stumbled upon an American pill-box with its small garrison lying dead. For forty miles in one direction and perhaps thirty in the other, the vapor lay upon the earth. It was being blown by the wind, of course, but it was

sufficiently heavier than air to cling to the ground level, and the industries of two nations were straining every nerve to supply the demands of their respective armies for its material.

The fog-bank was nowhere less than a hundred feet thick—a cloud of impalpable particles impenetrable to any eye or any camera, however shrewdly filtered. And under that mattress of pale opacity the tanks crawled heavily. They lurched and rumbled upon their deadly errands, uncouth and barbarous, listening for each other by a myriad of devices, locked in desperate, short-range conflict when they came upon each other, and emitting clouds of deadly vapor, against which gas-masks were no protection, when they came upon opposing infantry.

The infantrymen, though, were few. Their principal purpose was the reporting of the approach or passage of tanks, and trenches were of no service to them. They occupied unarmed little listening-posts with field telephones, small wireless or ground buzzer sets for reporting the enemy before he overwhelmed them. They held small pill-boxes, fitted with anti-tank guns which sometimes—if rarely—managed to get home a shell, aimed largely by sound, before the tank rolled over gun and gunners alike.

And now Sergeant Coffee and Corporal Wallis groped about in that

blinding mist. There had been two systems of listening-posts hidden in it, each of admittedly little fighting value, but each one deep and composed of an infinity of little pin-point posts where two or three men were stationed. The American posts, by their reports, had assured the command that all enemy tanks were on the other side of a certain definite line. Their own tanks, receiving recognition signals, passed and repassed among them, prowling in quest of invaders. The enemy tanks crawled upon the same grisly patrol on their own side.

But two miles of the American front had suddenly gone silent. A hundred telephones had ceased to make reports along the line nearest the enemy. As Coffee and Wallis stumbled about the little pill-box, looking for some inkling of the way in which the original occupants of the small strong-point had been wiped out, the second line of observation-posts began to go dead.

Now one, now another abruptly ceased to communicate. Half a dozen were in actual conversation with their sector headquarters, and broke off between words. The wires remained intact. But in fifteen nerve-racking minutes a second hundred posts ceased to make reports and ceased to answer the inquiry-signal. G.H.Q. was demanding explanations in crisp accents that told the matter was being taken very seriously indeed. And then, as the officer in

command of the second-line sector headquarters was explaining frenziedly that he was doing all any man could do, he stopped short between two words and thereafter he, also, ceased to communicate.

Front-line sector headquarters seemed inexplicably to have escaped whatever fate had overtaken all its posts, but it could only report that they had apparently gone out of existence without warning. American tanks, prowling in the area that had gone dead, announced that no enemy tanks had been seen. G-81, stumbling on a pill-box no more than ten minutes after it had gone silent, offered to investigate. A member of her crew, in a gas-mask, stepped out of the port doorway. Immediately thereafter G-81's wireless reports stopped coming in.

The situation was clearly shown in the huge tank that had been built to serve as G.H.Q. That tank was seventy feet long, and lay hidden in the mist with a brood of other, smaller tanks clustered near it, from each of which a cable ran to the telephones and instruments of the greater monster. Farther off in the fog, of course, were other tanks, hundreds of them, fighting machines all, silent and motionless now, but infinitely ready to protect the brain of the army.

The G.H.Q. maneuver-board showed the battle as no single observer could ever have seen it. A map lay spread out on a monster board,

under a pitiless white light. It was a map of the whole battlefield. Tiny sparks crawled here and there under the map, and there were hundreds of little pins with different-colored heads to mark the position of this thing and that. The crawling sparks were the reported positions of American tanks, made visible as positions of moving trains had been made visible for years on the electric charts of railroads in dispatcher's offices. Where the tiny bulbs glowed under the map, there a tank crawled under the fog. As the tank moved, the first bulb went out and another flashed into light.

The general watched broodingly as the crawling sparks moved from this place to that place, as varicolored lights flashed up and vanished, as a steady hand reached down to shift tiny pins and place new ones. The general moved rarely, and spoke hardly at all. His whole air was that of a man absorbed in a game of chess—a game on which the fate of a nation depended.

He was thus absorbed. The great board, illuminated from above by the glaring bulb, and speckled with little white sparks from below by the tiny bulbs beneath, showed the situation clearly at every instant. The crawling white sparks were his own tanks, each in its present position. Flashing blue sparks noted the last report of enemy tanks. Two staff officers stood behind the general, and each spoke from time to time into a strapped-on telephone transmitter. They were

giving routine orders, heading the nearest American patrol-tanks toward the location of the latest reported enemies.

The general reached out his hand suddenly and marked off an area with his fingers. They were long fingers, and slender ones: an artist's fingers.

"Our outposts are dead in this space," he observed meditatively. The use of the word "outposts" dated him many years back as a soldier, back to the old days of open warfare, which had only now come about again. "Penetration of two miles—"

"Tank, sir," said the man of the steady fingers, putting a black pin in position within that area, "let a man out in a gas-mask to examine a pill-box. The tank does not report or reply, sir."

"Gas," said the general, noting the spot. "Their new gas, of course. It must go through masks or sag-paste, or both."

He looked up to one of a row of officers seated opposite him, each man with headphones strapped to his ears and a transmitter before his lips, and each man with a map-pad on his knees, on which from time to time he made notations and shifted pins absorbedly.

"Captain Harvey," said the general, "you are sure that dead spot has not been bombarded with gas-shells?"

"Yes, General. There has been no artillery fire heavy enough to put more than a fraction of those posts out of action, and all that fire, sir, has been accounted for elsewhere."

The officer looked up, saw the general's eyes shift, and bent to his map again, on which he was marking areas from which spotting aircraft reported flashes as of heavy guns beneath the mist.

"Their aircraft have not been dropping bombs, positively?"

A second officer glanced up from his own map.

"Our planes cover all that space, sir, and have for some time."

"They either have a noiseless tank," observed the general meditatively, "or...."

The steady fingers placed a red pin at a certain spot.

"One observation-post, sir, has reopened communication. Two infantrymen, separated from their command, came upon it and found the machine-gun crew dead, with gas-masks adjusted. No tanks or

tracks. They are identified, sir, and are now looking for tank tracks or shells."

The general nodded emotionlessly.

"Let me know immediately."

He fell back to the ceaseless study of the board with its crawling sparks and sudden flashes of light. Over at the left, there were four white sparks crawling toward a spot where a blue flash had showed a little while since. A red light glowed suddenly where one of the white sparks crawled. One of the two officers behind the general spoke crisply. Instantly, it seemed, the other three white sparks changed their direction of movement. They swung toward the red flash—the point where a wireless from the tank represented by the first white flash had reported, contact with the enemy.

"Enemy tank destroyed here, sir," said the voice above the steady fingers.

"Wiped out three of our observation posts," murmured the general, "His side knows it. That's an opportunity. Have those posts reoccupied."

"Orders given, sir," said a staff officer from behind. "No reports as yet."

The general's eyes went back to the space two miles wide and two miles deep in which there was only a single observation-post functioning, and that in charge of two strayed infantrymen. The battle in the fog was in a formative stage, now, and the general himself had to watch the whole, because it was by small and trivial indications that the enemy's plans would be disclosed. The dead area was no triviality, however. Half a dozen tanks were crawling through it, reporting monotonously that no sign of the enemy could be found. One of the little sparks representing those tanks abruptly went out.

"Tank here, sir, no longer reports."

The general watched with lack-luster eyes, his mind withdrawn in thought.

"Send four helicopters," he said slowly, "to sweep that space. We'll see what the enemy does."

One of the seated officers opposite him spoke swiftly. Far away a roaring set up and was stilled. The helicopters were taking off.

They would rush across the blanket of fog, their vertical propellers sending blasts of air straight downward. For most of their sweep they would keep a good height, but above the questionable ground they would swoop down to barely above the fog-blanket. There their monstrous screws would blow holes in the fog until the ground below was visible. If any tanks crawled there, in the spaces the helicopters swept clear, they would be visible at once and would be shelled by batteries miles away, batteries invisible under the artificial cloud-bank.

No other noises came through the walls of the monster tank. There was a faint, monotonous murmur of the electric generator. There were the quiet, crisp orders of the officers behind the general, giving the routine commands that kept the fighting a stalemate.

The aircraft officer lifted his head, pressing his headphones tightly against his ears, as if to hear mores clearly.

"The enemy, sir, has sent sixty fighting machines to attack our helicopters. We sent forty single-seaters as escort."

"Let them fight enough," said the general absently, "to cause the enemy to think us desperate for information. Then draw them off."

There was silence again. The steady fingers put pins here and there. An enemy tank destroyed here. An American tank encountered an enemy and ceased to report further. The enemy sent four helicopters in a wide sweep behind the American lines, escorted by fifty fighting planes. They uncovered a squadron of four tanks, which scattered like insects disturbed by the overturning of a stone. Instantly after their disclosure a hundred and fifty guns, four miles away, were pouring shells about the place where they had been seen. Two of the tanks ceased to report.

The general's attention was called to a telephone instrument with its call-light glowing.

"Ah," said the general absently. "They want publicity matter."

The telephone was connected to the rear, and from there to the Capital. A much-worried cabinet waited for news, and arrangements were made and had been used, to broadcast suitably arranged reports from the front, the voice of the commander-in-chief in the field going to every workshop, every gathering-place, and even being bellowed by loud-speakers in the city streets.

The general took the phone. The President of the United States was at the other end of the wire, this time.

"General?"

"Still in a preliminary stage, sir," said the general, without haste. "The enemy is preparing a break-through effort, possibly aimed at our machine-shops and supplies. Of course, if he gets them we will have to retreat. An hour ago he paralyzed our radios, not being aware, I suppose, of our tuned earth-induction wireless sets. I daresay he is puzzled that our communications have not fallen to pieces."

"But what are our chances?" The voice of the President was steady, but it was strained.

"His tanks outnumber ours two to one, of course, sir," said the general calmly. "Unless we can divide his fleet and destroy a part of it, of course we will be crushed in a general combat. But we are naturally trying to make sure that any such action will take place within point-blank range of our artillery, which may help a little. We will cut the fog to secure that help, risking everything, if a general engagement occurs."

There was silence.

The President's voice, when it came, was more strained still.

"Will you speak to the public, General?"

"Three sentences. I have no time for more."

There were little clickings on the line, while the general's eyes returned to the board that was the battlefield in miniature. He indicated a spot with his finger.

"Concentrate our reserve-tanks here," he said meditatively. "Our fighting aircraft here. At once."

The two spots were at nearly opposite ends of the battle field. The chief of staff, checking the general's judgment with the alert suspicion that was the latest addition to his duties, protested sharply.

"But sir, our tanks will have no protection against helicopters!"

"I am quite aware of it," said the general mildly.

He turned to the transmitter. A thin voice had just announced at the other end of the wire, "The commander-in-chief of the army in the field will make a statement."

The general spoke unhurriedly.

"We are in contact with the enemy, have been for some hours. We have lost forty tanks and the enemy, we think, sixty or more. No general engagement has yet taken place, but we think decisive action on the enemy's part will be attempted within two hours. The tanks in the field need now, as always, ammunition, spare tanks, and the special supplies for modern warfare. In particular, we require ever-increasing quantities of fog-gas. I appeal to your patriotism for reinforcements of material and men."

He hung up the receiver and returned to his survey of the board.

"Those three listening-posts," he said abruptly, indicating a place near where an enemy tank had been destroyed. "Have they been reoccupied?"

"Yes, sir. Just reported. The tank they reported rolled over them, destroying the placement. They are digging in."

"Tell me," said the general, "when they cease to report again. They will."

He watched the board again and without lifting his eyes from it, spoke again.

"That listening-post in the dead sector, with the two strayed infantrymen in it. Was it reported?"

"Not yet, sir."

"Tell me immediately it does."

The general leaned back in his chair and deliberately relaxed. He lighted a cigar and puffed at it, his hands quite steady. Other officers, scenting the smoke, glanced up enviously. But the general was the only man who might smoke. The enemy's gases, like the American ones, could go through any gas-mask if in sufficient concentration. The tanks were sealed like so many submarines, and opened their interiors to the outer air only after that air had been thoroughly tested and proven safe. Only the general might use up more than a man's allowance for breathing.

The general gazed about him, letting his mind rest from its intense strain against the greater strain that would come on it in a few minutes. He looked at a tall blond man who was surveying the board intently, moving away, and returning again, his forehead creased in thought.

The general smiled quizzically. That man was the officer appointed

to I. I. duty—interpretative intelligence—chosen from a thousand officers because the most exhaustive psychological tests had proven that his brain worked as nearly as possible like that of the enemy commander. His task was to take the place of the enemy commander, to reconstruct from the enemy movements reported and the enemy movements known as nearly as possible the enemy plans.

"Well, Harlin," said the general, "Where will he strike?"

"He's tricky, sir," said Harlin. "That gap in our listening-posts looks, of course, like preparation for a massing of his tanks inside our lines. And it would be logical that he fought off our helicopters to keep them from discovering his tanks massing in that area."

The general nodded.

"Quite true," he admitted. "Quite true."

"But," said Harlin eagerly. "He'd know we could figure that out. And he may have wiped out listening posts to make us think he was planning just so. He may have fought off our helicopters, not to keep them from discovering his tanks in there, but to keep them from discovering that there were no tanks in there!"

"My own idea exactly," said the general meditatively. "But again, it looks so much like a feint that it may be a serious blow. I dare not risk assuming it to be a feint only."

He turned back to the board.

"Have those two strayed infantrymen reported yet?" he asked sharply.

"Not yet, sir."

The general drummed on the table. There were four red flashes glowing at different points of the board—four points where American tanks or groups of tanks were locked in conflict with the enemy. Somewhere off in the enveloping fog that made all the world a gray chaos, lumbering, crawling monsters rammed and battered at each other at infinitely short range. They fought blindly, their guns swinging menacingly and belching lurid flames into the semi-darkness, while from all about them dropped the liquids that meant death to any man who breathed their vapor. Those gases penetrated any gas-mask, and would even strike through the sag-pastes that had made the vesicatory gases of 1918 futile.

With tanks by thousands hidden in the fog, four small combats were

kept up, four only. Battles fought with tanks as the main arm are necessarily battles of movement, more nearly akin to cavalry battles than any other unless it be fleet actions. When the main bodies come into contact, the issue is decided quickly. There can be no long drawn-out stalemates such as infantry trenches produced in years past. The fighting that had taken place so far, both under the fog and aloft in the air, was outpost skirmishing only. When the main body of the enemy came into action it would be like a whirlwind, and the battle would be won or lost in a matter of minutes only.

The general paid no attention to those four conflicts, or their possible meaning.

"I want to hear from those two strayed infantrymen," he said quietly, "I must base my orders on what they report. The whole battle, I believe, hinges on what they have to say."

He fell silent, watching the board without the tense preoccupation he had shown before. He knew the moves he had to make in any of three eventualities. He watched the board to make sure he would not have to make those moves before he was ready. His whole air was that of waiting: the commander-in-chief of the army of the United States, waiting to hear what he would be told by two strayed infantrymen, lost in the fog that covered a battlefield.

The fog was neither more dense nor any lighter where Corporal Wallis paused to roll his pre-war cigarette. The tobacco came from the gassed machine-gunner in the pill-box a few yards off. Sergeant Coffee, three yards distant, was a blurred figure. Corporal Wallis put his cigarette into his mouth, struck his match, and puffed delicately.

"Ah!" said Corporal Wallis, and cheered considerably. He thought he saw Sergeant Coffee moving toward him and ungenerously hid his cigarette's glow.

Overhead, a machine-gun suddenly burst into a rattling roar, the sound sweeping above them with incredible speed. Another gun answered it. Abruptly, the whole sky above them was an inferno of such tearing noises and immediately after they began a multitudinous bellowing set up. Airplanes on patrol ordinarily kept their engines muffled, in hopes of locating a tank below them by its noise. But in actual fighting there was too much power to be gained by cutting out the muffler for any minor motive to take effect. A hundred aircraft above the heads of the two strayed infantrymen were fighting madly about five helicopters. Two hundred yards away, one fell to the earth with a crash, and immediately afterward there was a hollow boom. For an instant even the mist was tinged with yellow from the exploded gasoline tank. But the roaring above continued—not mounting, as in a battle between opposing patrols of

fighting planes, when each side finds height a decisive advantage, but keeping nearly to the same level, little above the bank of cloud.

Something came down, roaring, and struck the earth no more than fifty yards away. The impact was terrific, but after it there was dead silence while the thunder above kept on.

Sergeant Coffee came leaping to Corporal Wallis' side.

"Helicopters!" he barked. "Huntin' tanks an' pill-boxes! Lay down!"

He flung himself down to the earth.

Wind beat on them suddenly, then an outrageous blast of icy air from above. For an instant the sky lightened. They saw a hole in the mist, saw the little pill-box clearly, saw a huge framework of supporting screws sweeping swiftly overhead with figures in it watching the ground through wind-angle glasses, and machine-gunners firing madly at dancing things in the air. Then it was gone.

"One o' ours," shouted Coffee in Wallis' ear. "They' tryin' to find th' Yellows' tanks!"

The center of the roaring seemed to shift, perhaps to the north. Then a roaring drowned out all the other roarings. This one was lower

down and approaching in a rush. Something swooped from the south, a dark blotch in the lighter mist above. It was an airplane flying in the mist, a plane that had dived into the fog as into oblivion. It appeared, was gone—and there was a terrific crash. A shattering roar drowned out even the droning tumult of a hundred aircraft engines. A sheet of flame flashed up, and a thunderous detonation.

"Hit a tree," panted Coffee, scrambling to his feet again. "Suicide club, aimin' for our helicopter."

Corporal Wallis was pointing, his lips drawn back in a snarl.

"Shut up!" he whispered. "I saw a shadow against that flash! Yeller infantryman! Le's get 'im!"

"Y'crazy," said Sergeant Coffee, but he strained his eyes and more especially his ears.

It was Coffee who clutched Corporal Wallis' wrist and pointed. Wallis could see nothing, but he followed as Coffee moved silently through the gray mist. Presently he too, straining his eyes, saw an indistinct movement.

The roaring of motors died away suddenly. The fighting had stopped, a long way off, apparently because the helicopters had been withdrawn. Except for the booming of artillery a very long distance away, firing unseen at an unseen target, there was no noise at all.

"Aimin' for our pill-box," whispered Coffee.

They saw the dim shape, moving noiselessly, halt. The dim figure seemed to be casting about for something. It went down on hands and knees and crawled forward. The two infantrymen crept after it. It stopped, and turned around. The two dodged to one side in haste. The enemy infantryman crawled off in another direction, the two Americans following him as closely as they dared.

He halted once more, a dim and grotesque figure in the fog. They saw him fumbling in his belt. He threw something, suddenly. There was a little tap as of a fountain pen dropped upon concrete. Then a hissing sound. That was all, but the enemy infantryman waited, as if listening....

The two Americans fell upon him as one individual. They bore him to the earth and Coffee dragged at his gas-mask, good tactics in a battle where every man carries gas-grenades. He gasped and fought desperately, in a seeming frenzy of terror.

They squatted over him, finally, having taken away his automatics, and Coffee worked painstakingly to get off his gas-mask while Wallis went poking about in quest of tobacco.

"Dawggone!" said Coffee. "This mask is intricate."

"He ain't got any pockets," mourned Wallis.

Then they examined him more closely.

"It's a whole suit," explained Coffee. "H-m.... He don't have to bother with sag-paste. He's got him on a land diving-suit."

"S-s-say," gasped the prisoner, his language utterly colloquial in spite of the beady eyes and coarse black hair that marked him racially as of the enemy, "say, don't take off my mask! Don't take off my mask!"

"He talks an' everything," observed Coffee in mild amazement. He inspected the mask again and painstakingly smashed the goggles. "Now, big boy, you take your chance with th' rest of us. What' you doin' around here?"

The prisoner set his teeth, though deathly pale, and did not reply.

"H'm-m...." said Coffee meditatively. "Let's take him in the pill-box an' let Loot'n't Madison tell us what to do with him."

They picked him up.

"No! No! For Gawd's sake, no!" cried the prisoner shrilly. "I just gassed it!"

The two halted. Coffee scratched his nose.

"Reckon he's lyin', Pete?" he asked.

Corporal Wallis shrugged gloomily.

"He ain't got any tobacco," he said morosely. "Let's chuck him in first an' see."

The prisoner wriggled until Coffee put his own automatic in the small of his back.

"How long does that gas last?" he asked, frowning. "Loot'n't Madison wants us to report. There's some fellers in there, all gassed up, but we were in there a while back an' it didn't hurt us. How long does it last?"

"Fur-fifteen minutes, maybe twenty," chattered the prisoner. "Don't put me in there!"

Coffee scratched his nose again and looked at his wrist-watch.

"A'right," he conceded, "we give you twenty minutes. Then we chuck you down inside. That is, if you act real agreeable until then. Got anything to smoke?"

The prisoner agonizedly opened a zipper slip in his costume and brought out tobacco, even tailor-made cigarettes. Coffee pounced on them one second before Wallis. Then he divided them with absorbed and scrupulous fairness.

"Right," said Sergeant Coffee comfortably. He lighted up. "Say, you, if y' want to smoke, here's one o' your pills. Let's see the gas stuff. How' y' use it?"

Wallis had stripped off a heavy belt about the prisoner's waist and it was trailing over his arm. He inspected it now. There were twenty or thirty little sticks in it, each one barely larger than a lead pencil, of dirty gray color, and each one securely nested in a tube of flannel-lined papier-mache.

"These things?" asked Wallis contentedly. He was inhaling deeply with that luxurious enjoyment a tailor-made cigarette can give a man who had been remaking butts into smokes for days past.

"Don't touch 'em," warned the prisoner nervously. "You broke my goggles. You throw 'em, and they light and catch fire, and that scatters the gas."

Coffee touched the prisoner, indicating the ground, and sat down, comfortably smoking one of the prisoner's cigarettes. By his air, he began to approve of his captive.

"Say, you," he said curiously, "you talk English pretty good. How'd you learn it?"

"I was a waiter," the prisoner explained. "New York. Corner Forty-eighth and Sixth."

"My Gawd!" said Coffee. "Me, I used to be a movie operator along there. Forty-ninth. Projection room stuff, you know. Say, you know Heine's place?"

"Sure," said the prisoner. "I used to buy Scotch from that blond feller in the back room. With a benzine label for a prescription?"

Coffee lay back and slapped his knee.

"Ain't it a small world?" he demanded. "Pete, here, he ain't never been in any town bigger than Chicago. Ever in Chicago?"

"Hell," said Wallis, morose yet comfortable with a tailor-made cigarette. "If you guys want to start a extra war, go to knockin' Chicago. That's all."

Coffee looked at his wrist-watch again.

"Got ten minutes yet," he observed. "Say, you must know Pete Hanfry—"

"Sure I know him," said the enemy prisoner, scornfully. "I waited on him. One day, just before us reserves were called back home...."

In the monster tank that was headquarters the general tapped his fingers on his knees. The pale white light flickered a little as it shone on the board where the bright sparks crawled. White sparks were American tanks. Blue flashes were for enemy tanks sighted and reported, usually in the three-second interval between their identification and the annihilation of the observation-post that had reported them. Red glows showed encounters between American and

enemy tanks. There were a dozen red glows visible, with from one to a dozen white sparks hovering about them. It seemed as if the whole front line were about to burst into a glare of red, were about to become one long lane of conflicts in impenetrable obscurity, where metal monsters roared and rumbled and clanked one against the other, bellowing and belching flame and ramming each other savagely, while from them dripped the liquids that made their breath mean death. There were nightmarish conflicts in progress under the blanket of fog, unparalleled save perhaps in the undersea battles between submarines in the previous European war.

The chief of staff looked up; his face drawn.

"General," he said harshly, "it looks like a frontal attack all along our line."

The general's cigar had gone out. He was pale, but calm with an iron composure.

"Yes," he conceded. "But you forget that blank spot in our line. We do not know what is happening there."

"I am not forgetting it. But the enemy outnumbers us two to one—"

"I am waiting," said the general, "to hear from those two infantrymen who reported some time ago from a listen-post in the dead area."

The chief of staff pointed to the outline formed by the red glows where tanks were battling.

"Those fights are keeping up too long!" he said sharply. "General, don't you see, they're driving back our line, but they aren't driving it back as fast as if they were throwing their whole weight on it! If they were making a frontal attack there, they'd wipe out the tanks we have facing them; they'd roll right over them! That's a feint! They're concentrating in the dead space—"

"I am waiting," said the general softly, "to hear from those two infantrymen." He looked at the board again and said quietly, "Have the call-signal sent them. They may answer."

He struck a match to relight his dead cigar. His fingers barely quivered as they held the match. It might have been excitement—but it might have been foreboding, too.

"By the way," he said, holding the match clear, "have our machine-shops and supply-tanks ready to move. Every plane is, of course,

ready to take the air on signal. But get the aircraft ground personnel in their traveling tanks immediately."

Voices began to murmur orders as the general puffed. He watched the board steadily.

"Let me know if anything is heard from these infantrymen...."

There was a definite air of strain within the tank that was headquarters. It was a sort of tensity that seemed to emanate from the general himself.

Where Coffee and Wallis and the prisoner squatted on the ground, however, there was no sign of strain at all. There was a steady gabble of voices.

"What kinda rations they give you?" asked Coffee interestedly.

The enemy prisoner listed them, with profane side-comments.

"Hell," said Wallis gloomily. "Y'ought to see what we get! Las' week they fed us worse'n dogs. An' th' canteen stuff—"

"Your tank men, they get treated fancy?" asked the prisoner.

Coffee made a reply consisting almost exclusively of high powered expletives.

"—and the infantry gets it in the neck every time," he finished savagely. "We do the work—"

Guns began to boom, far away. Wallis cocked his ears.

"Tanks gettin' together," he judged, gloomily. "If they'd all blow each other to hell an' let us infantry fight this battle—"

"Damn the tanks!" said the enemy prisoner viciously. "Look here, you fellers. Look at me. They sent a battalion of us out, in two waves. We hike along by compass through the fog, supposed to be five paces apart. We come on a pill-box or listenin' post, we gas it an' go on. We try not to make a noise. We try not to get seen before we use our gas. We go on, deep in your lines as we can. We hear one of your tanks, we dodge it if we can, so we don't get seen at all. O'course we give it a dose of gas in passing, just in case. But we don't get any orders about how far to go or how to come back. We ask for recognition signals for our own tanks, an' they grin an' say we won't see none of our tanks till the battle's over. They say 'Re-form an' march back when the fog is out.' Ain't that pretty for you?"

"You second wave?" asked Coffee, with interest.

The prisoner nodded.

"Mopping up," he said bitterly, "what the first wave left. No fun in that! We go along gassin' dead men, an' all the time your tanks is ravin' around to find out what's happenin' to their listenin'-posts. They run into us—"

Coffee nodded sympathetically.

"The infantry always gets the dirty end of the stick," said Wallis morosely.

Somewhere, something blew up with a violent explosion. The noise of battle in the distance became heavier and heavier.

"Goin' it strong," said the prisoner, listening.

"Yeh," said Coffee. He looked at his wrist-watch. "Say, that twenty minutes is up. You go down in there first, big boy."

They stood beside the little pill-box. The prisoner's knees shook.

"Say, fellers," he said pleadingly, "they told us that stuff would

scatter in twenty minutes, but you busted my mask. Yours ain't any good against this gas. I'll have to go down in there if you fellers make me, but—"

Coffee lighted another of the prisoner's tailor-made cigarettes.

"Give you five minutes more," he said graciously. "I don't suppose it'll ruin the war."

They sat down relievedly again, while the fog-gas made all the earth invisible behind a pall of grayness, a grayness from which the noises of battle came.

In the tank that was headquarters, the air of strain was pronounced. The maneuver-board showed the situation as close to desperation, now. The reserve-tank positions had been switched on the board, dim orange glows, massed in curiously precise blocks. And little squares of green showed there that the supply and machine-shop tanks were massed. They were moving slowly across the maneuver-board. But the principal change lay in the front-line indications.

The red glows that showed where tank battles were in progress formed an irregularly curved line, now. There were twenty or more such isolated battles in progress, varying from single combats

between single tanks to greater conflicts where twenty to thirty tanks to a side were engaged. And the positions of those conflicts were changing constantly, and invariably the American tanks were being pushed back.

The two staff officers behind the general were nearly silent. There were few sparks crawling within the American lines now. Nearly every one had been diverted into the front-line battles. The two men watched the board with feverish intensity, watching the red glows moving back, and back....

The chief of staff was shaking like a leaf, watching the American line stretched, and stretched....

The general looked at him with a twisted smile.

"I know my opponent," he said suddenly. "I had lunch with him once in Vienna. We were attending a disarmament conference." He seemed to be amused at the ironic statement. "We talked war and battles, of course. And he showed me, drawing on the tablecloth, the tactical scheme that should have been used at Cambrai, back in 1917. It was a singularly perfect plan. It was a beautiful one."

"General," burst out one of the two staff officers behind him. "I need

twenty tanks from the reserves."

"Take them," said the general. He went on, addressing his chief of staff. "It was an utterly flawless plan. I talked to other men. We were all pretty busy estimating each other there, we soldiers. We discussed each other with some freedom, I may say. And I formed the opinion that the man who is in command of the enemy is an artist: a soldier with the spirit of an amateur. He's a very skilful fencer, by the way. Doesn't that suggest anything?"

The chief of staff had his eyes glued to the board.

"That is a feint, sir. A strong feint, yes, but he has his force concentrated in the dead area."

"You are not listening, sir," said the general, reprovingly. "I am saying that my opponent is an artist, an amateur, the sort of person who delights in the delicate work of fencing. I, sir, would thank God for the chance to defeat my enemy. He has twice my force, but he will not be content merely to defeat me. He will want to defeat me by a plan of consummate artistry, which will arouse admiration among soldiers for years to come."

"But General, every minute, every second—"

"We are losing men, of whom we have plenty, and tanks, of which we have not enough. True, very true," conceded the general. "But I am waiting to hear from two strayed infantrymen. When they report, I will speak to them myself."

"But, sir," cried the chief of staff, withheld only by the iron habit of discipline from violent action and the taking over of command himself, "they may be dead! You can't risk this battle waiting for them! You can't risk it, sir! You can't!"

"They are not dead," said the general coolly. "They cannot be dead. Sometimes, sir, we must obey the motto on our coins. Our country needs this battle to be won. We have got to win it, sir! And the only way to win it—"

The signal-light at his telephone glowed. The general snatched it up, his hands quivering. But his voice, was steady and deliberate as he spoke.

"Hello, Sergeant—Sergeant Coffee, is it?... Very well, Sergeant. Tell me what you've found out.... Your prisoner objects to his rations, eh? Very well, go on.... How did he gas our listening-posts?... He did, eh? He got turned around and you caught him wandering about?... Oh, he was second wave! They weren't taking any chances on any of

our listening-posts reporting their tanks, eh?... Say that again, Sergeant Coffee!" The general's tone had changed indescribably. "Your prisoner has no recognition signals for his own tanks? They told him he wouldn't see any of them until the battle was over?... Thank you, Sergeant. One of our tanks will stop for you. This is the commanding general speaking."

He rang off, his eyes blazing. Relaxation was gone. He was a dynamo, snapping orders.

"Supply tanks, machine-shop tanks, ground forces of the air service, concentrate here!" His finger rested on a spot in the middle of the dead area. "Reserve tanks take position behind them. Draw off every tank we've got—take 'em out of action!—and mass them in front, on a line with our former first line of outposts. Every airplane and helicopter take the air and engage in general combat with the enemy, wherever the enemy may be found and in whatever force. And our tanks move straight through here!"

Orders were snapping into telephone transmitters. The commands had been relayed before their import was fully realized. Then there was a gasp.

"General!" cried the chief of staff. "If the enemy is massed there,

he'll destroy our forces in detail as they take position!"

"He isn't massed there," said the general, his eyes blazing. "The infantrymen who were gassing our listening-posts were given no recognition signals for their tanks. Sergeant Coffee's prisoner has his gas-mask broken and is in deadly fear. The enemy commander is foolish in many ways, perhaps, but not foolish enough to break down morale by refusing recognition signals to his own men who will need them. And look at the beautiful plan he's got."

He sketched half a dozen lines with his fingers, moving them in lightning gestures as his orders took effect.

"His main force is here, behind those skirmishes that look like a feint. As fast as we reinforce our skirmishing-line, he reinforces his —just enough to drive our tanks back slowly. It looks like a strong feint, but it's a trap! This dead space is empty. He thinks we are concentrating to face it. When he is sure of it—his helicopters will sweep across any minute, now, to see—he'll throw his whole force on our front line. It'll crumple up. His whole fighting force will smash through to take us, facing the dead space, in the rear! With twice our numbers, he'll drive us before him."

"But general! You're ordering a concentration there! You're falling in

with his plans!"

The general laughed.

"I had lunch with the general in command over there, once upon a time. He is an artist. He won't be content with a defeat like that! He'll want to make his battle a masterpiece, a work of art! There's just one touch he can add. He has to have reserves to protect his supply-tanks and machine-shops. They're fixed. The ideal touch, the perfect tactical fillip, will be—Here! Look. He expects to smash in our rear, here. The heaviest blow will fall here. He will swing around our right wing, drive us out of the dead area into his own lines—and drive us on his reserves! Do you see it? He'll use every tank he's got in one beautiful final blow. We'll be outwitted, out-numbered, out-flanked and finally caught between his main body and his reserves and pounded to bits. It is a perfect, a masterly bit of work!"

He watched the board, hawklike.

"We'll concentrate, but our machine-shops and supplies will concentrate with us. Before he has time to take us in rear we'll drive ahead, in just the line he plans for us! We don't wait to be driven into his reserves. We roll into them and over them! We smash his supplies! We destroy his shops! And then we can advance along his

line of communication and destroy it, our own depots being blown up—give the orders when necessary—and leaving him stranded with motor-driven tanks, motorized artillery, and nothing to run his motors with! He'll be marooned beyond help in the middle of our country, and we will have him at our mercy when his tanks run out of fuel. As a matter of fact, I shall expect him to surrender in three days."

The little blocks of green and yellow that had showed the position of the reserve and supply-tanks, changed abruptly to white, and began to crawl across the maneuver-board. Other little white sparks turned about. Every white spark upon the maneuver-board suddenly took to itself a new direction.

"Disconnect cables," said the general, crisply. "We move with our tanks, in the lead!"

The monotonous humming of the electric generator was drowned out in a thunderous uproar that was muffled as an air-tight door was shut abruptly. Fifteen seconds later there was a violent lurch, and the colossal tank was on the move in the midst of a crawling, thundering horde of metal monsters whose lumbering progress shook the earth.

Sergeant Coffee, still blinking his amazement, absent-mindedly

lighted the last of his share of the cigarettes looted from the prisoner.

"The big guy himself!" he said, still stunned. "My Gawd! The big guy himself!"

A distant thunder began, a deep-toned rumbling that seemed to come from the rear. It came nearer and grew louder. A peculiar quivering seemed to set up in the earth. The noise was tanks moving through the fog, not one tank or two tanks, or twenty tanks, but all the tanks in creation rumbling and lurching at their topmost speed in serried array.

Corporal Wallis heard, and turned pale. The prisoner heard, and his knees caved in.

"Hell," said Corporal Wallis dispairingly. "They can't see us, an' they couldn't dodge us if they did!"

The prisoner wailed, and slumped to the floor.

Coffee picked him up by the collar and jerked him out of the pill-box.

"C'mon Pete," he ordered briefly. "They ain't givin' us a infantryman's chance, but maybe we can do some dodgin'!"

Then the roar of engines, of metal treads crushing upon earth and clinking upon their joints, drowned out all possible other sounds. Before the three men beside the pill-box could have moved a muscle, monster shapes loomed up, rushing, rolling, lurching, squeaking. They thundered past, and the hot fumes of their exhausts enveloped the trio.

Coffee growled and put himself in a position of defiance, his feet braced against the concrete of the pill-box dome. His expression was snarling and angry but, surreptitiously, he crossed himself. He heard the fellows of the two tanks that had roared by him, thundering along in alignment to right and left. A twenty-yard space, and a second row of the monsters came hurtling on, gun muzzles gaping, gas-tubes elevated, spitting smoke from their exhausts that was even thicker than the fog. A third row, a fourth, a fifth....

The universe was a monster uproar. One could not think in this volume of sound. It seemed that there was fighting overhead. Crackling noises came feebly through the reverberating uproar that was the army of the United States in full charge. Something came whirling down through the overhanging mist and exploded in a lurid flare that for a second or two cast the grotesque shadows of a row of tanks clearly before the trio of shaken infantrymen.

Still the tanks came on and roared past. Twenty tanks, twenty-one ... twenty-two.... Coffee lost count, dazed and almost stunned by the sheer noise. It rose from the earth and seemed to be echoed back from the topmost limit of the skies. It was a colossal din, an incredible uproar, a sustained thunder that beat at the eardrums like the reiterated concussions of a thousand guns that fired without ceasing. There was no intermission, no cessation of the tumult. Row after row after row of the monsters roared by, beaked and armed, going greedily with hungry guns into battle.

And then, for a space of seconds, no tanks passed. Through the pandemonium of their going, however, the sound of firing somehow seemed to creep. It was gunfire of incredible intensity, and it came from the direction in which the front-rank tanks were heading.

"Forty-eight, forty-nine, forty-ten, forty-'leven," muttered Coffee dazedly, his senses beaten down almost to unconsciousness by the ordeal of sound. "Gawd! The whole army went by!"

The roaring of the fighting-tanks was less, but it was still a monstrous din. Through it, however, came now a series of concussions that were so close together that they were inseparable, and so violent that they were like slaps upon the chest.

Then came other noises, louder only because nearer. These were different noises, too, from those the fighting-tanks had made. Lighter noises. The curious, misshapen service tanks began to rush by, of all sizes and all shapes. Fuel-carrier tanks. Machine-shop tanks, huge ones, these. Commissary tanks....

Something enormous and glistening stopped short. A door opened. A voice roared an order. The three men, beaten and whipped by noise, stared dumbly.

"Sergeant Coffee!" roared the voice. "Bring your men! Quick!"

Coffee dragged himself back to a semblance of life. Corporal Wallis moved forward, sagging. The two of them loaded their prisoner into the door and tumbled in. They were instantly sent into a heap as the tank took up its progress again with a sudden sharp leap.

"Good man," grinned a sooty-faced officer, clinging to a handhold. "The general sent special orders you were to be picked up. Said you'd won the battle. It isn't finished yet, but when the general says that—"

"Battle?" said Coffee dully. "This ain't my battle. It's a parade of a lot of damn tanks!"

There was a howl of joy from somewhere above. Discipline in the machine-shop tanks was strict enough, but vastly different in kind from the formality of the fighting-machines.

"Contact!" roared the voice again. "General wireless is going again! Our fellows have rolled over their reserves and are smashing their machine-shops and supplies!"

Yells reverberated deafeningly inside the steel walls, already filled with tumult from the running motors and rumbling treads.

"Smashed 'em up!" shrieked the voice above, insane with joy. "Smashed 'em! Smashed 'em! Smashed 'em! We've wiped out their whole reserve and—" A series of detonations came through even the steel shell of the lurching tank. Detonations so violent, so monstrous, that even through the springs and treads of the tank the earth-concussion could be felt. "There goes their ammunition! We set off all their dumps!"

There was sheer pandemonium inside the service-tank, speeding behind the fighting force with only a thin skin of reserve-tanks between it and a panic-stricken, mechanically pursuing enemy.

"Yell, you birds!" screamed the voice. "The general says we've won

the battle! Thanks to the fighting force! We're to go on and wipe out the enemy line of communications, letting him chase us till his gas gives out! Then we come back and pound him to bits! Our tanks have wiped him out!"

Coffee managed to find something to hold on to. He struggled to his feet. Corporal Wallis, recovering from the certainty of death and the torture of sound, was being very sea-sick from the tank's motion. The prisoner moved away from him on the steel floor. He looked gloomily up at Coffee.

"Listen to 'em," said Coffee bitterly. "Tanks! Tanks! Tanks! Hell! If they'd given us infantry a chance—"

"You said it," said the prisoner savagely. "This is a hell of a way to fight a war."

Corporal Wallis turned a greenish face to them.

"The infantry always gets the dirty end of the stick," he gasped. "Now they—now they' makin' infantry ride in tanks! Hell!"

#07 Invisible Death by Anthony Pelcher:

On Lees' quick and clever action depended the life of "Old Perk" Ferguson, the millionaire manufacturer threatened by the uncanny, invisible killer.

Aproximate word count: 8,700
Bigotry:
Warnings:

- - -

The inquest into the mysterious death of Darius Darrow, savant, inventor, recluse and eccentric, resembled a scientific convention. Men and women of high scientific attainment, and, in some instances, world fame, attended to hear first hand the strange, uncanny, unbelievable circumstances as hinted by the newspapers.

Mrs. Susan Darrow, the widow, was the paramount witness. She appeared a quaint figure as she took the stand. Tearful, yet alert, this little woman betrayed the intelligence that had made her one of the world's foremost chemists. She gave her age as fifty-eight, but if it had not been for her snowy hair she would have looked much younger. She was small but not frail, and had expressive blue eyes.

She had a firm little nose and chin, and was garbed in black silk garments of a fashion evidently dating back a decade.

Although not modern in dress, her answers to questions regarding scientific and business affairs involved in the mysterious case, proved she was thoroughly abreast of the times in all other particulars.

"You believe your husband was murdered?" bluntly asked the examiner at one stage.

"That is my opinion," she said, then added: "It might have been some scientific accident, the nature of which I cannot fathom. We were confidential in all matters except my husband's work. He reserved the right to be secretive about the scientific problems on which he was working."

"Can you throw any light on a motive for such a crime?"

"The motive seems self-evident. He was working on an invention that he said would do away with war and would make the owner of the device a practical world dictator, should he choose to exercise such power. The device was completed. The murderer killed him to secure his device. That all seems plain enough."

"Was anything else of value taken?"

"We had nothing else of value about the place. I was never given to jewelry. The furnishings and equipment were undisturbed. It is quite evident, I think, that the thief was no ordinary petty burglar."

The attorney interposed: "I believe we had better let Mrs. Darrow tell this story from the beginning in her own way. There are only two really important witnesses. Whatever she can remember to recite might be of value to the authorities. Now, Mrs. Darrow, how long had you lived at Brooknook? Begin there and just let your story unfold. Try to control your nerves and emotions."

"I am not emotional. I am not nervous," said the quaint little woman, bravely. "My heart hurts, that is all.

"The place was named by my father. We inherited it at his death, thirty years ago, and moved in. My two children were born and died there. At first we kept the servants and maintained all of the thirty-two rooms. But after the children were gone, we both gave ourselves over to study and we began to close one room after another, releasing the servants one by one."

"How many rooms do you occupy now?"

"We lived in three, a living-room, kitchen and bedroom. The two big parlors were turned into a laboratory. We both worked there. It was there my husband met his death at his work. Sometimes we worked together, sometimes independently. I did all my own housework, except the laundry, which I sent out. We had no visitors. We lived for each other and our work."

"Tell us about the rooms that were not occupied."

"We left them just as they always had been. I have not been in any of these rooms for twenty years. Once I looked into the little girl's room —my daughter's room. It was dusty and cobwebby, but undisturbed by human hand. My husband peered in over my shoulder. I closed the door. We turned away in each other's arms."

Here the little old woman fell to weeping softly into her lace handkerchief. Minutes lapsed as the court waited, respecting her grief.

"Were these rooms locked?" asked the attorney finally.

"No," said the widow, recovering, as she dabbed at her eyes. "We feared no one. All the rooms were closed, but not locked. The outside doors were seldom locked. We lived in our own world. For

appearance sake we kept up the grounds. Peck, the gardener, kept the grounds, as you know. He called in outside help when necessary. This was his affair. We never bothered him. He lived probably a half mile up the road. The first of each month he would come for his pay. He was practically our only visitor.

"When it was necessary to see our attorney or other connections, Peck would drive us. At first he used to drive our horses. Ten years ago we pastured the horses for life and bought the small car. We seldom went out. We have no close friends and no relatives nearer than the Pacific coast. They are distant cousins. You see, we were rather alone in the world since the children went away—we never spoke of them as being dead."

Again the court was hushed. The coroner and the attorney took occasion to blow their noses rather violently.

"On May 27th, the day your husband died, what happened, as you re-remember it?" asked the attorney.

"We arose and had breakfast as usual. I was puttering about the rooms. My husband kissed me and started for the laboratory. I was in the kitchen. It was about ten o'clock when I finished in the kitchen and went into the living room which adjoins the laboratory. I had

been rather fretted, something unusual for me. It seemed I dimly sensed the presence of someone near me, someone I did not know, an outsider. I thought it was foolish of me and buckled up.

"But when I went into the living room, it seemed as if some invisible presence were following me. I could hear the low hum of my husband's device. The door of the laboratory was open. He called to me and said:

"'Sue dear, it seems strange, but I made two models of this set and now I can find only one. You could not have misplaced the other by any chance, could you?'

"I assured him I knew nothing of it and he said, 'Hum-m, that's funny.' Then he went back into the library and closed the door. The humming continued. I was more annoyed than ever, but I did not want to bother my husband. Then a queer thing happened. I saw the door of the laboratory open and close, but I did not see anyone. The next instant, I heard my husband's outcry. It was more a groan than a scream.

"I rushed into the laboratory. My husband was lying by his slate-topped table. The device, I noticed, was gone. It was no bigger than a coffee-mill, I thought, as I bent over my husband. Strange how

such a thought could have crowded in at such a time.

"My husband's head was bleeding. It was cut, a long gash over the ear, just below the bald spot. It must have been a frightful blow. I looked in his eyes. My nurse's and pharmaceutical course gave me knowledge which sent a chill to my heart. He was dead. I must have fainted.

"When I recovered I ran for Peck. I found him near the house, coming my way and holding his right eye.

"'Something struck me,' he said. Then, seeing me so pale, he said, 'My God! Mrs. Darrow, what has happened?'

"'Run for the doctor,' I said. When the doctor came he called the police and coroner. They told me not to disturb the body. Later they took it away, and the gardener told me—"

"Never mind what Peck told you," interrupted the attorney. "We will let him tell it. Is that all you can tell us about the death itself?"

But the widow was weeping now, so violently that the court ordered her excused.

The gardener was called and took the stand displaying a big, black

eye, which offered comedy relief to a pathetic situation.

"On the main road to the east," he began after preliminary questioning, "was a small car which had been parked there all morning. I noticed it because it had no license plates. It was visible from the inside of the grounds, but was hidden from the road by a hedge. It made me wonder because it was just inside our grounds.

"I had some very special red flags which I planted as a border back of pink geraniums. They were doing fine. I got them from the Fabrish seed house. There are no plants like Fabrish's—I wouldn't give a snap of my finger for all the other—"

"Just a minute," interrupted the attorney. He told the gardener to never mind the geraniums and flags, but to tell just what happened.

"Well, I was bending over the border bed when I heard sounds like someone running along the gravel path towards me. I heard a humming like a bumble bee and I jumped to my feet. Just then something hit me in the eye and knocked me down. Yes sir, knocked me plumb down, and—"

"Then what happened? Never mind the asides, the extras—tell us just the simple facts," instructed the attorney.

"Well, you won't believe it, but I heard the footsteps leave the road. The geraniums were badly trampled. I looked at the parked automobile and could hear the hum coming from there.

"The machine started and turned into the road—"

"Did you notice anyone at the wheel?"

"That's what you're not going to believe. There wasn't anybody in that auto at all. I didn't see anyone at any time. The auto started itself, and what is more, that auto only went about a hundred yards when it disappeared altogether—like that—like a flash."

"Did it turn off the road?"

"I didn't turn anywhere. It was in the middle of the road. It just disappeared right in the middle of the road. It started without a driver, it turned north without a driver, and went on by itself for about a hundred yards. Then it vanished in the middle of the road. Just dropped out of sight."

The court-room was hushed. The audience and court attaches were awe stricken and looked their incredulity.

"Do you mean to tell us that auto drove itself?" asked the court

sternly.

The witness was completely confused. The attorney came to his rescue, looked at the court, and said:

"He has told that same story a hundred times, and he will stick to it. It seems impossible, but has not Mrs. Darrow told us she heard this humming and saw nothing? With the purely perfunctory recitals of the doctor and the constabulary this court and the jury have heard all there is to hear. We have no more witnesses. That is all there is.

"The jury will have to decide from the evidence whether this case is accident or murder. The doctor and two experts have reported that the wound appeared to have been made by some blunt instrument, swung powerfully. The skull under the wound and back of the ear was simply crushed. Death was instantaneous. It all happened in broad daylight."

After an hour's deliberation the jury decided the savant came to his death in his laboratory from a blow on the skull received in some manner unknown.

The crowd filed out, spiritedly discussing the unusual crime. In the crowd was Perkins Ferguson, known as "Old Perk," head of the

Schefert Engineering Corporation, who paid royalty on some of the Darrow patents. With him was Damon Farnsworth, his first vice-president.

"Well, what do you think of it?" asked Farnsworth, biting into a black cigar.

"Damned weird, isn't it?" replied "Old Perk." "I have my own theory, however," he added, "but I am going to know a whole lot more about this case before I venture it." The pair climbed into Ferguson's car discussing the Darrow death case with furrowed brows.

What might be termed an extraordinary meeting of the directors of the Schefert Engineering Corporation, was held a few days later in a big building in the financial district.

The rich furnishings of the directors' room indicated, better than Bradstreet's, the great wealth of the corporation. Uniformed pages stood at attention at each end of the long, mahogany table at which were seated the fourteen directors of the company. All were men of wealth, standing and engineering knowledge. The departed Darrow often had been summoned to such meetings, and at this one there was a hush because of his recent demise.

After a batch of preliminary business had been transacted, Ferguson arose and cleared his throat. The directors leaned forward in their chairs expectantly. The page boys lost their mechanical attitude for the instant and fairly craned their necks around the bulks of the forms in front of them.

"The Darrow case has taken a sudden and sinister turn," said the president. "I have a letter. I will read it:

> "Old Perk: Get wise to yourself. We are in a position to destroy you and all the pot-bellies in the Wall Street crowd. If you want to die of old age, remember what happened to Darrow and begin declaring us in on Wall Street dividends. If you do not you will follow Darrow in the same way.
>
> "Our first demand is for $100,000. Leave this amount in hundreds and fifties in the rubbish can at the corner of 50th Street and Broadway at 10 A. M. next Thursday. If you fail we will break your damned neck. Bring the police with you if you like.
>
> Invisible Death.

Ferguson passed the letter around for inspection. It was

painstakingly printed, evidently from the type in a rubber stamp set such as is sold in toy stores.

"I have decided," said Perkins at length, "to give this case to Walter Lees. He has never failed us in mechanical, chemical, or any form of scientific problem. I hope he will not fail in this. He will work independently of the police, who have requested that we keep the appointment at 50th Street and Broadway at the hour named. We will deposit a roll of newspapers, around which has been wrapped a fifty dollar bill and then we will stand by while the awaiting detectives do their duty."

"You do not think anyone is going to call for any supposed package of money at one of the most congested corners in the world in broad daylight?" asked a director at the end of the table.

"Why not?" asked Ferguson. "A seedy individual could pick a package from a rubbish bin at that corner without attracting the least attention."

"I guess you're right," agreed the doubting one.

"I know I'm right," said the president. And he usually was.

"I have already arranged to have Lees instructed in his work," Ferguson volunteered as a pause came in the buzz of conversation about the table. "Lees is young, but he is capable." There was general discussion of the strange case of Darius Darrow; the room filled with the blue haze of many cigars.

Suddenly a low, humming sound was heard in the room.

Papers on the directors' table were bunched as if by unseen hands, and thrown to the ceiling, from which they descended like flakes of snow and scattered about the room.

A book of minutes was torn from the hands of a secretary. It was raised and brought down on vice-president Farnsworth's head. A chair was pulled out from under another director and he was deposited in an undignified heap on the floor.

Another director acted as though he had been tripped, and he fell on top of Farnsworth. Two big vases crashed to the floor in bits. Other decorative objects were scattered about.

The directors who had been hurtled to the floor stood up with expressions of comical surprise on their features. Their chairs catapulted into a far corner of the room, one after the other.

Startled expressions resounded from the group.

A small bookcase fell on its front with a crash of glass. Ferguson's cane jumped in the air and crashed a window pane.

The humming ceased suddenly.

The room was a wreck. The assembled men stood aghast. They were simply nonplussed. Finally they phoned for the police.

After hearing the strange recital from so many highly reputable witnesses, a detective sergeant, who had responded to the call with others, reported to headquarters.

A uniformed police guard was sent to the place with instructions to remain on duty until relieved.

Ferguson sent for Walter Lees, the young engineer of whom he had spoken to the directorate. Assigned to the task of unraveling the Darrow death mystery, Lees ran true to form by getting busy at once. This was at midnight of the day of the surprising directors' meeting. Lees owned a big car; he piled into it and started for the scene of the crime.

Daybreak found him examining every inch of the road around the

Darrow estate. Then he searched the hedge along the east road, where the phantom auto had disappeared after the crime. The brush along the opposite side of the thoroughfare was also gone over.

Passing autos had stopped to ask the meaning of his flashlight. Lees explained he had lost a pocketbook. It was as good an excuse as any and served to keep him from drawing a crowd. He found nothing to reward his long and painstaking efforts.

At seven A. M. he decided to interview the Darrow widow, and found her already up and about her kitchen, weeping softly as she worked.

She bade him be seated in the living room.

"No, I am not afraid to stay here alone," she said in reply to Lees' first question. "Whoever killed my husband did so to get possession of his second model. They had already stolen the first. I have thought since that they were afraid that the finding of the second model after his death would aid in their detection. For some reason they had to have both models."

She agreed to tell all she knew of the case. Lees listened to the long recital as already recorded at the coroner's inquest. By adroit

questioning Lees gained just one new fact. Mrs. Darrow remembered that she had called her husband, just before he retired to his laboratory, to fix a towel hanger in the kitchen. "He found the pivot needed oiling," explained the widow. "That was all. He oiled it and went into the laboratory."

The idea of one of the world's greatest mechanical engineers stopping his work to oil a towel hanger caused Lees to smile, but Mrs. Darrow did not smile.

"My husband was a genius at repairing about the house," she said, in all seriousness.

"I can imagine so," agreed Lees.

The conversation ceased. Lees sat for a few minutes with his head in his hands, thinking deeply. Finally he said:

"I am convinced that someone who was well aware of your husband's habits committed this crime. Do you believe, positively, that the gardener is above suspicion?"

"Oh, it couldn't have been Peck," insisted Mrs. Darrow. "I had seen him down near the gate from the window. He was too far from the

house, and besides, he was devoted to us both."

"Then it was somebody from the neighborhood," said Lees.

"Maybe so," replied Mrs. Darrow, noncommittally.

"Who lives in the next house south?"

"That is towards the city," mused the widow. "There are no houses south on either side of the road for a little further than a mile, when you reach the town limits of Farsdale. The town line is about half-way between, and marks the southern end of this estate."

"Who lives in the first house to the north?"

"That is the cottage of Peck, the gardener."

"How near is the next house?"

"That was the parcel my father sold. It is about three acres, and in the center, or about the center, is the house built by Adolph Jouret, who bought the land. He lives there with his daughter. They built a magnificent place. The brook that traverses our grounds rises at a spring back of his house. Save for two West Indian servants, they are alone. The servants live in Farsdale and motor back and forth."

"What do you know of this—what's his name?" queried Lees, who had assumed the role of examiner.

"Jouret? Very little. He is some sort of a circus man or showman, or was before he retired. He once had wealth, but my husband, some weeks ago, said that because of ill-advised investments he was not so well rated as formerly. I had the feeling that he might be forced to give up the place. I just felt that. I never heard it. I am so sorry because of the daughter. She is a beautiful girl, and seemed kindly, the one time I saw her. She was about twelve then. I do not like to say it, but she seemed a little dazed or slow witted, but really beautiful." Mrs. Darrow fell to smoothing out the folds in her house apron as Lees asked:

"When was the only time you saw her?"

"Ten years ago, about. Just after my father's death. They called on us. We did not care to continue the friendship, as Jouret seemed a little flamboyant—his circus nature, I suppose. Anyway, we were quiet folks, and there was no need of close association with neighbors.

"I remember," continued the widow, after a pause, "that Jouret, when he heard my husband was a scientist, simulated an interest in

science. He did have a smattering knowledge of science, but he was plainly affected, so we decided to just let him drop. No ill-feeling. We just—well, we were not interested."

"You do not approve of circus people?"

"It is not that. Any honest work is honorable. It seems commendable to furnish amusement for the public. I know little about people of his profession but I am sure they are perfectly all right. It was Jouret, personally. He seemed noisy and insincere. The girl was nice. I loved her."

"That is all you know of the Jourets?"

"That is all."

"Mrs. Darrow, I wish to go through this house from attic to basement. Have you any objections?"

"None whatever. Make yourself free, but do not attach any significance to what appears to be a secret passageway and cave. My father was a biological chemist. He used to experiment much with small animals. He had a cave where he stored chemicals, and I believe you will find old chemicals stored down there now. I

disturbed nothing."

The widow forced a smile to her lips. "Will you excuse me?" she concluded. "I am trying to carry on."

Lees, carrying a flashlight, began a systematic search of the premises. He made his way up a winding staircase, through dust and cobwebs to the attic. He found the top story filled with trunks and bits of furniture of a previous generation. All was in order, but dust-covered and cobwebby.

"Someone has been here before me," he said to himself, brushing a mist of cobwebs from his coat sleeves. "There is a path brushed through the spiderwebs." Turning his flashlight on the floor, he exclaimed:

"And here are footprints in the dust. Well I'll be—!"

Then, after some study, he mused:

"Of course there has been someone here. The killer of Darrow probably has been here to see what he could see. It was no great task. The doors were never locked. The footprints are of no value except to give me the size of his shoes."

He measured the footprints carefully. Then he went downstairs and phoned the measurements to a local shoe dealer, asking him to give him the trade size of shoes which would make such prints.

"They are number nines," decided the shoe dealer.

Lees then returned to resume his search in the rooms and corridors.

"Wonder if Jouret wears nines," he questioned himself. "But what if he does? I couldn't convict him on that score. However, it might help."

Then he fell to searching through the old trunks. He found old photographs, articles of apparel, knicknacks—grandmother's and grandfather's belongings all of them, and some children's clothes of the days when little boys wore ruffles about their necks and little girls' pantalettes reached to their ankles.

Carefully each article was replaced. He made his way down to the third and then the second floor. Through cobwebby corridors and bedchambers he searched, but found nothing further to aid his case.

In the unused rooms on the first floor he found an old spinning-wheel, candle moulds and utensils used in cooking in the days when

housewives cooked over an open fire.

He did not find the "secret" passageway until Mrs. Darrow came to his aid. Leading from the basement was a coal chute. This shoot was formed in a triangle with the point under a trap. It was man-high at the cellar opening and its floor was a slide for fuel. It had been in use, evidently, quite recently.

At the cellar wall of this chute, Mrs. Darrow pressed what appeared to be a knot in the old timber and pushed open a door.

A dank odor issued forth as the door was opened. Lees entered the passage and Mrs. Darrow returned upstairs.

Following the underground passageway, Lees came onto a cave about 14 by 14 feet in size with a ceiling and walls of arched brick. It had evidently been built before the days of cement construction.

A long bench and shelves with carboys and jars of chemicals were the only furnishings. Lees sounded all the walls, but found nothing further to interest him.

Lees returned to town at the urgent call of "Old Perk," who had arranged with great care to keep the appointment at 50th street and

Broadway, where the decoy package was to be left. He had snipers in nearby windows. He had detectives, dressed in the gay garb of the habitues of the neighborhood, patrolling the corner, and he and his own guard parked an automobile, against all traffic rule, at the curb near the rubbish can.

An office boy sauntered up to the rubbish can, threw in the decoy package, and sauntered away.

A second later there was a low humming sound. The decoy package fairly jumped out of the rubbish can and disappeared in thin air.

The humming sound seemed to round the corner into 50th Street. Detectives followed on the jump. The humming approached an auto at the curb and the auto's self starter began to function. As the police stood near by, enough to have jumped into the auto, the whole machine, a big touring car, actually disappeared before their eyes.

Consternation is a mild word when used to describe the result.

All forces set to trap the extortionists gathered in a group, and in their surprise and disappointment began discussing the queer case in loud tones. A crowd was gathering which was blocking traffic.

"Old Perk" was the first to recover from his surprise.

"Get the hell out of this neighborhood," he yelled to his working forces. "All of you get down to my office!"

The working force dissolved and "Old Perk" drove away.

At "Old Perk's" office shortly afterward a conference of the defeated forces of the law and of science was held.

"Old Perk" stormed and raged and the detective captain in charge fumed and fussed, but nothing came of it all. One was as powerless as another. Finally the conference adjourned.

The next morning in the mail, Perkins Ferguson, president of Schefert Engineering Corporation, received a letter carefully printed in rubber type. It read:

> Thanks for the $50 bill. You cheated us by $99,950. This will never do. Don't be like that. You poor fools, you make us increase our demand. We double it. Leave $200,000 for us on your desk and leave the desk unlocked. We will get it. Every time you ignore one of our demands, one of your number will die. Better take this matter seriously. Last

warning.

Invisible Death.

"Not another dime will they get out of me," mused Ferguson.

He started opening the rest of his mail.

A clerk entered and handed him a telegram. It read:

"Damon Farnsworth struck down at breakfast table. Family heard humming sound as he fell from his chair. Removed to Medical Center. Skull reported fractured. May die.

"William Devins, Chief of Police, Larchmont."

Ferguson wildly seized the telephone. "Get me Farnsworth's house at Larchmont!" he shouted to his operator.

The phone was answered by Jones, the butler.

"This is Ferguson."

An agitated voice replied:

"'Ow sir, yes sir. It's true, sir. 'E was bleeding at the 'ead, sir. Something 'it 'im."

"Let me talk to Mrs. Farnsworth."

"They are at the 'ospital, sir."

"One of the boys."

"Both are at the 'ospital, sir."

"Do you think he will live?"

"An' 'ow could I say, sir?"

Ferguson called the Medical Center. They permitted him to talk to a doctor and a nurse. The nurse referred him to the doctor, who said:

"He is unconscious. There is a wicked fracture at the base of the brain. He was struck from the back—a club, I believe. He may die without regaining consciousness. I am hoping he will rally and that he will be all right."

Ferguson ordered his car and, with Lees at his heels, jumped in the tonneau. He heard a humming sound back of him. He looked back

and saw nothing. Both he and Lees were too impressed for words.

"Step on it," Ferguson ordered the chauffeur. "Drive us to the Medical Center."

At the world's largest group of hospitals, Ferguson's worst fears were confirmed. The patient was reported sinking.

Ferguson, giant of Wall Street, was a low spirited man as he drove back down town to his office. With Lees he passed through the outer offices, buzzing with business and the click of typewriters. Not a head was raised from a desk or machine. It was a well-drilled force.

Into his private sanctum he walked or rather dragged himself, and wearily he sat down. He pushed a pile of papers from him and ran his hand over his hot brow.

Blood pounded at his temples.

For the first time in his life he faced a situation which was too deep for his understanding.

Over and over again he reviewed the uncanny events as Lees sat awaiting orders.

"I cannot have them killing off my friends like that," he mused finally.

He called a clerk.

"Go to the bank and get $200,000 in fifties and one hundreds," he commanded.

When the clerk returned with the money he laid the package on his desk and left the desk open. "This might appear cowardly, but it will give us time," he said. Lees did not offer an opinion.

Ferguson drew a personal note for $200,000 and sent it to the Schefert Corporation's attorneys. This amount represented a large part of Ferguson's personal assets, not involved with any company with which he was connected. He told Lees to go about his further investigations. Then he left the office and started for his home. "I'll bank my life Lees will have those crooks lined up within a week," he assured himself as he lolled in his auto, bound homeward. But his voice sounded hollow, and the blood still pounded at his temples.

Reaching home, he found a call from the western plant, at Chicago. He phoned the superintendent with a foreboding that all was not well.

"This you, Perk?" sounded the voice on the wire.

"Yes, what's up?"

"I had not intended bothering you with this, but in the light of all that has happened I guess you had better know that one of our engineers went stark mad out here about three weeks ago. He was a very brainy man but his reason snapped. He first appeared queer when he began talking of anarchy and cursing capitalists. Then one afternoon he struck a shop foreman down with a heavy wrench and rushed out of the plant. We have not seen him since. The police have been looking for him, but he is still at large."

"That explains a lot of things," said "Old Perk." "Tell the police to keep after him. We'll look for him here. File me a complete detailed report of the incident by telegraph," he instructed. Then he asked:

"How is the foreman? Badly hurt?"

"He dodged; it was a glancing blow. The foreman was back to work in a week. But he is nervous and has armed himself. We have put on extra guards."

"Good," commended Ferguson. "Don't hesitate to spend tolls to keep

me advised of any developments."

An hour and a half later, Ferguson phoned the chief clerk in his offices:

"Go into my private office," he ordered, "and see if there is a package on my desk. It is a bank package."

The clerk returned in a few moments.

"There is no package on your desk, Mr. Ferguson."

"That is all I wanted to know," said Ferguson, and hung up the receiver.

Then Ferguson called up the Darrow home and tried to get in touch with Lees, but was unable to do so, as Mrs. Darrow said she had not seen him since he had been called back to the office.

The reason Ferguson could not reach Lees was because Lees had decided to learn once and for all if Jouret wore number nine shoes. He had started for Jouret's in his own car. It was a beautiful country he was traversing, but he had no time to note that the tree branches almost met over his head and that his way was bordered with a profusion of wild flowers, displaying a rainbow of colors.

The house of Jouret, the retired circus performer, sat back far from the road, against the side of a beautiful hill, and was surrounded by poplars. The landscape was wilder and more natural than that of the Darrow place adjoining.

The door was opened by a Porto Rican boy. Lees lost no time. He said bluntly:

"Tell your master that a gentleman is here to see him on very particular business."

Jouret, himself, came back with the boy.

"What is it?" he asked, smiling a welcome.

"I am working on the case of the death of Mr. Darrow, your neighbor. I believed you might have seen something. I thought you might aid me."

Jouret betrayed no surprise.

"Come in," he said. He led the way to a large reception room and asked his visitor to be seated. He was the soul of affability. Short, husky and florid. His eyes large, black and staring. His hair black, quite long and curling upward at the ears. He was dressed in black,

and he had the appearance of a big, fat crow.

"I am glad you came," he greeted his guest, "for I have far too few callers." He switched on a big electric bunch-light in the center of the room, for it was dusk.

"We have been told that you are a retired circus man," said Lees, in his usual frank manner.

"Not exactly," said Jouret. "I traveled on the continent, finally journeying to Australia and then to the States. I crossed the country from San Francisco and settled down here. I was known as 'Elias, the Great.' I had my own company and property. It was a magic show. It was not a circus, although we did carry two elephants, three camels, some ponies, snakes, and birds and smaller animals. That's where the circus report came from.

"When I retired I sold my stock to a circus. The newspapers regarded it as funny, and one of them printed a half page story with pictures about the public sale. It was very much exaggerated. They mentioned giraffes, hyenas, and a lot of other animals I never possessed. Odd, wasn't it, getting so much publicity after I was through needing it? However I never, in those days, dodged the limelight." Jouret ended his speech with a loud and hearty guffaw.

"I will call my daughter," Jouret appended. "She will be glad to meet you." He left the room.

Lees had taken occasion to note the size of Jouret's feet. They were small, almost effeminate. More likely fives or sixes than nines.

Soon Jouret returned with a girl in her early twenties. She was blond and radiantly beautiful.

Doris Jouret bowed and smiled in a perfectly friendly manner. Lees noted that there was something about her eyes that made her appear dazed.

Jouret monopolized the conversation, giving no one a chance to edge in a word.

"This gentleman desires information in connection with the death of our neighbor Mr., or is it Dr., Darrow? I want you to assure him, as I will, that we have seen or noted nothing that could possibly throw light on the strange case."

The girl nodded, it seemed a little wearily, and Jouret was off on another conversational flight:

"I too am a man of scientific attainments," he chattered. "I am a

biologist, toxicologist, doctor of medicine, a geologist, metalurgist, mineralogist, and somewhat of a mechanic and electrician. I have given long hours to the study of strange sciences in meta-physics, to which you men give too little attention. There are sciences which transcend any of this sphere. There is a higher astronomy. I neglected to say that I am an astronomer."

"Yes?" drawled Lees.

"Yes!" said Jouret emphatically.

The girl had adopted rather a theatrical pose, which disclosed considerable of her nether charms, and said nothing at all.

"When you find your man," volunteered Jouret, "you will find a madman." He said this ponderously and with a gesture meant evidently to be impressive.

"You believe a madman did it?" asked Lees, as Jouret paused, expecting a question.

"Undoubtedly. It was a paranoic with delusions of money, grandeur and a strongly developed homicidal mania. To me, that is the only sensible solution. I am quite sure that I am correct."

Lees arose to go and Jouret did not urge him to stay. He bowed Lees out and Doris bowed with him.

"She is a beautiful girl," mused Lees once he was outside.

Lees ran over in his mind the circumstances of his visit to Jouret. There was no doubt in his mind that Jouret's shoes were too small to be number nines, and he reasoned that that fact might tend to eliminate Jouret. But he was not satisfied.

"I am going to get some gas," he told himself, "and then I am going to get two private detectives to assist me, for I'm going right back there. For the first time in my life I am going to be a Peeping Tom.

"There is no moon. The poplars will give us a view of all three floors of that house, if they leave their blinds up enough, and three of us can watch all three floors at once."

He phoned Ferguson that he might be busy for days, joined his pair of operatives from the detective agency and for some time the three operated on a well conceived plan.

It was probably a week later that Lees rendered a report to Perkins Ferguson, which for a time proved one of the strangest documents in

the weird case. It read:

"You will probably think I am crazy, and for this reason I am having this report subscribed and sworn to, jointly and severally. With my two detectives I have seen Miss Jouret, the girl I told you about over the phone, in three places at one and the same time. Not once but twice this has happened.

"Looking through the windows of the Jouret place at night, we saw the girl on the first, second and third floor of the house. We believed this due to a clever arrangement of mirrors. But figure this out:

"The next day she drove a car to town. We followed. She got out at one theater and entered. She did not come back, that we could see, but the car drove off. There was no chauffeur, and we thought we had discovered the driverless auto, until we looked and saw Miss Jouret still at the wheel.

"She got out and entered another theater. She did not come back, but the car drove off with her still at the wheel. She entered a third theater after parking the car and this time the driver's seat and the tonneau was empty.

"Reverse the reel and you will see her coming out of three theaters

and driving home. That is what happened. There must be three of her, all identical, but only one shows at a time. If it's some of Jouret's far-famed magic, I'll say he's some conjurer. The explanation is not yet forthcoming. We want to shadow Jouret, but he never goes anywhere. The girl has only been out the one time when she attended three matinees as described. Believe it or not.

"The next night we each—the two detectives and I—tried to steal a march on one another and called her up and asked her to go out. To our individual surprise, she agreed in each case. To our collective surprise, she kept all three dates on the same night. She walked through the trees in this vicinity with me. She also drove down the road in the auto with one of my detectives, and she went dancing with the other. She was in three places miles apart at one and the same time.

"We each brought her home within a half hour of the other and we are swearing to that. Either we are all hypnotized or else there are three identical Misses Jouret.

"Jouret himself treats us all wonderfully, gives us the run of the house, and tries to talk us to death."

The strange document was subscribed by Lees and the two

detectives and was held by Ferguson pending developments.

The next report from Lees read:

"I had a chance to prowl around the Jouret house a little while waiting for Miss Jouret to dress. I met her twice in my ramblings and a few minutes later she met me again, this time in a different costume.

"I got a chance to search the woods back of Jouret's house in the evening. I found a spot where the earth had been disturbed, and dug up a pair of shoes. They were number nines."

A fourth report from him read:

"We found the body of the crazed engineer. He had drowned himself in a lake. This eliminates him as a murder suspect."

Two weeks passed with no new developments in the "Invisible Death" case except for the arrival of a letter demanding $1,000,000 and threatening the life of Perkins Ferguson if the demand was ignored. It was ignored, and only served to spur Lees and his detectives on to decisive action.

They decided to rush the Jouret house and kidnap Jouret with the

idea of holding him until he agreed to explain the presence of the number nine shoes buried back of his house.

A low moon hung over the poplars when Lees rang the Jouret front door bell. One detective was guarding a side door and the other a back door.

Suddenly Jouret was seen to jump from a second-story window. As he did, a car driven by one of his Porto Ricans came along the drive and he leaped into it. Lees, first to see Jouret, called his detectives. They came running. Their car was waiting in the road.

The Porto Rican was seen to jump from the Jouret car just as it started south towards New York.

Lees took up the race. Both cars had plenty of power, but the Jouret car suddenly disappeared as a low humming noise began to break the stillness of the night.

One of the detectives was at the wheel. Lees, as usual, was giving orders:

"Keep close to that hum. Never mind that you cannot *see* the car. It is there all right. If you can gain on it enough, drive right into it."

"Righto!" shouted the detective. "We're wise to him now."

The humming noise was taking on speed with every second. So was Lees' car. Soon Lees' car was making sixty miles an hour with the hum just ahead and barely audible.

Past traffic lights, over bridges and grade crossings the mad chase of the phantom continued.

Wildly racing through the night, missing other cars by a breath, the big, visible auto continued its pursuit of—what?

Careening, Lees' car rounded a curve, and, above the hum just ahead, they heard the shouted curses of their quarry. But he could not be seen. Lees could only see the road marked by his lights.

Mile after mile the wild, uncanny chase of the phantom continued.

Soon the lights of New York could be seen in the distance. The cars were forced to slow down somewhat. Suddenly there was a thundering crash ahead. A car was twisted in a mass of tangled wreckage.

Feminine and masculine shrieks blended as Lees' car piled up on the wrecked heap. A third car, becoming suddenly visible, rolled over

and brought up at the edge of the road. From this car emerged the limping, cursing form of Jouret.

From the wreckage three painfully injured young men dragged and tore themselves. Then they leaped—ignoring their hurts—at the limping figure.

The fight was on. Jouret was heavy and powerful and proved an obstinate fighter, for he knew he was fighting for his life. He bit and clawed. He kicked with one uninjured leg and butted with his massive head.

Lees and his detectives were fighting with no respect for the rules. Lees managed to get his two hands on the bull-neck of Jouret just as one detective connected a duet of blows to the man's wind.

Lees' hands closed in a steely grip, and soon Jouret was limp and helpless.

They held him there. An ambulance arrived. A few minutes later a police auto with reserves came on the scene. The police shackled Jouret.

The car that had been hit by the phantom was a light sedan. It was

occupied by two women. Their bodies were drawn from the wreckage. Both were dead—innocents sacrificed to the blood madness of a maniac.

Jouret was right about himself. He was a paranoic with a strongly developed homicidal mania.

In the wreckage was found a package containing $200,000 and also two twisted and broken mechanisms. One of these was about the size of an ordinary kitchen coffee-mill, and the other slightly larger.

Regarding these machines, Lees wrote in a report:

"While making a fourth search of Darrow's laboratory, I found the equations, specifications and what I believe to be the full plans for the last invention of the ingenious Darius Darrow.

"Many of the most astounding inventions and discoveries have resulted from theories which were laughed to scorn at the time they were advanced. Roebling's plans for the Brooklyn Bridge resulted in a meeting of the foremost engineers of the day. All agreed that the plans were built on a false premise. They argued that the bridge would fall of its own weight. Then they all had a good laugh. The bridge still stands.

"Watching smoke float over a hill from army camp fires caused an early French scientist to dream of filling a bag full of smoke and riding with it over the hill. The first balloon was the answer to this dream.

"James Watt is said to have gotten his idea for a steam engine from watching a lid on a tea-kettle dance under steam pressure.

"When Langley was flying his man-carrying kites the Wright brothers dreamed of hitching an engine and a propeller to a giant kite. The airplane was the result of these experiments.

"Darrow got his idea from watching a rapidly revolving wheel. He noticed that the spokes and rim blended into a blurred disc when a certain speed was reached. The entire wheel was practically invisible, under certain lighting conditions, when a higher speed was attained.

"Darrow went further and reached the conclusion that there was a rate of vibration that would produce invisibility. This was accepted in practically all engineering research plants, long before it was perfected by Darrow.

"The facts are that any rapidly vibrating object becomes more and

more difficult to outline as its rate of vibration increases. All that was left for Darrow was to arrive at the exact mathematical time, tone, or rate of vibration producing invisibility and to construct a vibrator tuned to produce this condition.

"His first machine produced the vibrations of invisibility in a field with a three-foot radius in all directions. That is, it caused every solid object, within this atmospheric field, to vibrate at the rate, tone, or speed of invisibility. This machine was in no sense rotary. It departed from the original example of a revolving wheel and entered instead into general vibration in a given or measured field.

"The pulsations or vibrations of an ordinary automobile engine will cause every ounce of metal, or solid, in the automobile—including the driver—to vibrate at the same rate or momentum. This is a known fact, and it provided the basis for Darrow's experiments.

"Darrow built two machines. The first had a field with a radius of three feet on all sides. This was used by the killer in his murders. Jouret stole this machine first, thus paving his way for the second robbery.

"With the first machine in his possession, Jouret was able to commit the Darrow murder without being seen. He had to have the second

and larger machine, however, to make his auto disappear. He stole the larger machine at the time of the Darrow murder, and with it he had his auto vanish, as the gardener testified.

"Both machines were hopelessly smashed in the wreck, but with Darrow's documents at hand, we might be able to construct another and a larger model. A machine built on the proper scale will make a plane or a battleship invisible and should, as Darrow said, make war against this country impossible.

"Digging into Jouret's history we found that the 'Misses Jouret' were one-cell triplets. Their mother, Mrs. Doris Nettleton, an English woman, was a member of Jouret's troupe, as was the father.

"The mother died at the birth of the triplets. The father died a few years later. The company was touring Australia at the time. Jouret and the father had the birth of only one baby recorded. She was named Doris, after the mother. The other girls also used this one name. They now have only one name among them until the court gives them individual names.

"Jouret never let but one girl be seen at a time. The reason was that he and the father had planned to use the girls, when grown, to create a surprising stage illusion. In this illusion, one girl was to act as the

earthly body and the other girls as the astral bodies of the same purported individual.

"The father died, and Jouret retired before he ever got around to staging the illusion. Jouret continued the deception, however, because it appealed to his showman's nature.

"The girls, at all times, were under the hypnotic control of Jouret, and, of course, knew nothing of his crazed intellect or crimes. Upon his arrest Jouret released the girls from the spell of years.

"The Misses Nettleton say that Jouret was always kind to them and was an ethical showman until his mind gave way.

"I told the triplets that I might find them employment with our concern, but they prefer to follow in the footsteps of their mother and father, and return to the stage."

Ferguson, quite his normal self once more, since Farnsworth was recovering slowly, twitted Lees about being in love with one of the triplets. Lees admitted they were most gorgeous blondes, but insisted he preferred one brunette.

"Then another thing," added Lees. "Any man who falls in love with

one of the Nettleton triplets will never be sure just which one he fell in love with."

February 1930

#08 Old Crompton's Secret, by Harold Vincent Schoepflin:

Tom's extraordinary machine glowed—and the years were banished from old crompton's body. But there still remained, deep-seated in his century-old mind, the memory of his crime.

Aproximate word count: 7,800

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Two miles west of the village of Laketon there lived an aged recluse who was known only as Old Crompton. As far back as the villagers could remember he had visited the town regularly twice a month, each time tottering his lonely way homeward with a load of provisions. He appeared to be well supplied with funds, but purchased sparingly as became a miserly hermit. And so vicious was his tongue that few cared to converse with him, even the young hoodlums of the town hesitating to harass him with the banter

usually accorded the other bizarre characters of the streets.

The oldest inhabitants knew nothing of his past history, and they had long since lost their curiosity in the matter. He was a fixture, as was the old town hall with its surrounding park. His lonely cabin was shunned by all who chanced to pass along the old dirt road that led through the woods to nowhere and was rarely used.

His only extravagance was in the matter of books, and the village book store profited considerably by his purchases. But, at the instigation of Cass Harmon, the bookseller, it was whispered about that Old Crompton was a believer in the black art—that he had made a pact with the devil himself and was leagued with him and his imps. For the books he bought were strange ones; ancient volumes that Cass must needs order from New York or Chicago and that cost as much as ten and even fifteen dollars a copy; translations of the writings of the alchemists and astrologers and philosophers of the dark ages.

It was no wonder Old Crompton was looked at askance by the simple-living and deeply religious natives of the small Pennsylvania town.

But there came a day when the hermit was to have a neighbor, and

the town buzzed with excited speculation as to what would happen.

he property across the road from Old Crompton's hut belonged to Alton Forsythe, Laketon's wealthiest resident—hundreds of acres of scrubby woodland that he considered well nigh worthless. But Tom Forsythe, the only son, had returned from college and his ambitions were of a nature strange to his townspeople and utterly incomprehensible to his father. Something vague about biology and chemical experiments and the like is what he spoke of, and, when his parents objected on the grounds of possible explosions and other weird accidents, he prevailed upon his father to have a secluded laboratory built for him in the woods.

When the workmen started the small frame structure not a quarter of a mile from his own hut, Old Crompton was furious. He raged and stormed, but to no avail. Tom Forsythe had his heart set on the project and he was somewhat of a successful debater himself. The fire that flashed from his cold gray eyes matched that from the pale blue ones of the elderly anchorite. And the law was on his side.

So the building was completed and Tom Forsythe moved in, bag and baggage.

For more than a year the hermit studiously avoided his neighbor,

though, truth to tell, this required very little effort. For Tom Forsythe became almost as much of a recluse as his predecessor, remaining indoors for days at a time and visiting the home of his people scarcely oftener than Old Crompton visited the village. He too became the target of village gossip and his name was ere long linked with that of the old man in similar animadversion. But he cared naught for the opinions of his townspeople nor for the dark looks of suspicion that greeted him on his rare appearances in the public places. His chosen work engrossed him so deeply that all else counted for nothing. His parents remonstrated with him in vain. Tom laughed away their recriminations and fears, continuing with his labors more strenuously than ever. He never troubled his mind over the nearness of Old Crompton's hut, the existence of which he hardly noticed or considered.

It so happened one day that the old man's curiosity got the better of him and Tom caught him prowling about on his property, peering wonderingly at the many rabbit hutches, chicken coops, dove cotes and the like which cluttered the space to the rear of the laboratory.

Seeing that he was discovered, the old man wrinkled his face into a toothless grin of conciliation.

"Just looking over your place, Forsythe," he said. "Sorry about the

fuss I made when you built the house. But I'm an old man, you know, and changes are unwelcome. Now I have forgotten my objections and would like to be friends. Can we?"

Tom peered searchingly into the flinty eyes that were set so deeply in the wrinkled, leathery countenance. He suspected an ulterior motive, but could not find it within him to turn the old fellow down.

"Why—I guess so, Crompton," he hesitated: "I have nothing against you, but I came here for seclusion and I'll not have anyone bothering me in my work."

"I'll not bother you, young man. But I'm fond of pets and I see you have many of them here; guinea pigs, chickens, pigeons, and rabbits. Would you mind if I make friends with some of them?"

"They're not pets," answered Tom dryly, "they are material for use in my experiments. But you may amuse yourself with them if you wish."

"You mean that you cut them up—kill them, perhaps?"

"Not that. But I sometimes change them in physical form, sometimes cause them to become of huge size, sometimes produce pigmy

offspring of normal animals."

"Don't they suffer?"

"Very seldom, though occasionally a subject dies. But the benefit that will accrue to mankind is well worth the slight inconvenience to the dumb creatures and the infrequent loss of their lives."

Old Crompton regarded him dubiously. "You are trying to find?" he interrogated.

"The secret of life!" Tom Forsythe's eyes took on the stare of fanaticism. "Before I have finished I shall know the nature of the vital force—how to produce it. I shall prolong human life indefinitely; create artificial life. And the solution is more closely approached with each passing day."

The hermit blinked in pretended mystification. But he understood perfectly, and he bitterly envied the younger man's knowledge and ability that enabled him to delve into the mysteries of nature which had always been so attractive to his own mind. And somehow, he acquired a sudden deep hatred of the coolly confident young man who spoke so positively of accomplishing the impossible.

During the winter months that followed, the strange acquaintance progressed but little. Tom did not invite his neighbor to visit him, nor did Old Crompton go out of his way to impose his presence on the younger man, though each spoke pleasantly enough to the other on the few occasions when they happened to meet.

With the coming of spring they encountered one another more frequently, and Tom found considerable of interest in the quaint, borrowed philosophy of the gloomy old man. Old Crompton, of course, was desperately interested in the things that were hidden in Tom's laboratory, but he never requested permission to see them. He hid his real feelings extremely well and was apparently content to spend as much time as possible with the feathered and furred subjects for experiment, being very careful not to incur Tom's displeasure by displaying too great interest in the laboratory itself.

Then there came a day in early summer when an accident served to draw the two men closer together, and Old Crompton's long-sought opportunity followed.

He was starting for the village when, from down the road, there came a series of tremendous squawkings, then a bellow of dismay in the voice of his young neighbor. He turned quickly and was astonished at the sight of a monstrous rooster which had escaped and

was headed straight for him with head down and wings fluttering wildly. Tom followed close behind, but was unable to catch the darting monster. And monster it was, for this rooster stood no less than three feet in height and appeared more ferocious than a large turkey. Old Crompton had his shopping bag, a large one of burlap which he always carried to town, and he summoned enough courage to throw it over the head of the screeching, over-sized fowl. So tangled did the panic-stricken bird become that it was a comparatively simple matter to effect his capture, and the old man rose to his feet triumphant with the bag securely closed over the struggling captive.

"Thanks," panted Tom, when he drew alongside. "I should never have caught him, and his appearance at large might have caused me a great deal of trouble—now of all times."

"It's all right, Forsythe," smirked the old man. "Glad I was able to do it."

Secretly he gloated, for he knew this occurrence would be an open sesame to that laboratory of Tom's. And it proved to be just that.

A few nights later he was awakened by a vigorous thumping at his door, something that had never before occurred during his nearly

sixty years occupancy of the tumbledown hut. The moon was high and he cautiously peeped from the window and saw that his late visitor was none other than young Forsythe.

"With you in a minute!" he shouted, hastily thrusting his rheumatic old limbs into his shabby trousers. "Now to see the inside of that laboratory," he chuckled to himself.

It required but a moment to attire himself in the scanty raiment he wore during the warm months, but he could hear Tom muttering and impatiently pacing the flagstones before his door.

"What is it?" he asked, as he drew the bolt and emerged into the brilliant light of the moon.

"Success!" breathed Tom excitedly. "I have produced growing, living matter synthetically. More than this, I have learned the secret of the vital force—the spark of life. Immortality is within easy reach. Come and see for yourself."

They quickly traversed the short distance to the two-story building which comprised Tom's workshop and living quarters. The entire ground floor was taken up by the laboratory, and Old Crompton stared aghast at the wealth of equipment it contained. Furnaces there

were, and retorts that reminded him of those pictured in the wood cuts in some of his musty books. Then there were complicated machines with many levers and dials mounted on their faces, and with huge glass bulbs of peculiar shape with coils of wire connecting to knoblike protuberances of their transparent walls. In the exact center of the great single room there was what appeared to be a dissecting table, with a brilliant light overhead and with two of the odd glass bulbs at either end. It was to this table that Tom led the excited old man.

"This is my perfected apparatus," said Tom proudly, "and by its use I intend to create a new race of supermen, men and women who will always retain the vigor and strength of their youth and who can not die excepting by actual destruction of their bodies. Under the influence of the rays all bodily ailments vanish as if by magic, and organic defects are quickly corrected. Watch this now."

He stepped to one of the many cages at the side of the room and returned with a wriggling cottontail in his hands. Old Compton watched anxiously as he picked a nickeled instrument from a tray of surgical appliances and requested his visitor to hold the protesting animal while he covered its head with a handkerchief.

"Ethyl chloride," explained Tom, noting with amusement the look of

distaste on the old man's face. "We'll just put him to sleep for a minute while I amputate a leg."

The struggles of the rabbit quickly ceased when the spray soaked the handkerchief and the anaesthetic took effect. With a shining scalpel and a surgical saw, Tom speedily removed one of the forelegs of the animal and then he placed the limp body in the center of the table, removing the handkerchief from its head as he did so. At the end of the table there was a panel with its glittering array of switches and electrical instruments, and Old Crompton observed very closely the manipulations of the controls as Tom started the mechanism. With the ensuing hum of a motor-generator from a corner of the room, the four bulbs adjacent to the table sprang into life, each glowing with a different color and each emitting a different vibratory note as it responded to the energy within.

"Keep an eye on Mr. Rabbit now," admonished Tom.

From the body of the small animal there emanated an intangible though hazily visible aura as the combined effects of the rays grew in intensity. Old Crompton bent over the table and peered amazedly at the stump of the foreleg, from which blood no longer dripped. The stump was healing over! Yes—it seemed to elongate as one watched. A new limb was growing on to replace the old! Then the animal

struggled once more, this time to regain consciousness. In a moment it was fully awake and, with a frightened hop, was off the table and hobbling about in search of a hiding place.

Tom Forsythe laughed. "Never knew what happened," he exulted, "and excepting for the temporary limp is not inconvenienced at all. Even that will be gone in a couple of hours, for the new limb will be completely grown by that time."

"But—but, Tom," stammered the old man, "this is wonderful. How do you accomplish it?"

"Ha! Don't think I'll reveal my secret. But this much I will tell you: the life force generated by my apparatus stimulates a certain gland that's normally inactive in warm blooded animals. This gland, when active, possesses the function of growing new members to the body to replace lost ones in much the same manner as this is done in case of the lobster and certain other crustaceans. Of course, the process is extremely rapid when the gland is stimulated by the vital rays from my tubes. But this is only one of the many wonders of the process. Here is something far more remarkable."

He took from a large glass jar the body of a guinea pig, a body that was rigid in death.

"This guinea pig," he explained, "was suffocated twenty-four hours ago and is stone dead."

"Suffocated?"

"Yes. But quite painlessly, I assure you. I merely removed the air from the jar with a vacuum pump and the little creature passed out of the picture very quickly. Now we'll revive it."

Old Crompton stretched forth a skinny hand to touch the dead animal, but withdrew it hastily when he felt the clammy rigidity of the body. There was no doubt as to the lifelessness of this specimen.

Tom placed the dead guinea pig on the spot where the rabbit had been subjected to the action of the rays. Again his visitor watched carefully as he manipulated the controls of the apparatus.

With the glow of the tubes and the ensuing haze of eery light that surrounded the little body, a marked change was apparent. The inanimate form relaxed suddenly and it seemed that the muscles pulsated with an accession of energy. Then one leg was stretched forth spasmodically. There was a convulsive heave as the lungs drew in a first long breath, and, with that, an astonished and very much alive rodent scrambled to its feet, blinking wondering eyes in the

dazzling light.

"See? See?" shouted Tom, grasping Old Crompton by the arm in a viselike grip. "It is the secret of life and death! Aristocrats, plutocrats and beggars will beat a path to my door. But, never fear, I shall choose my subjects well. The name of Thomas Forsythe will yet be emblazoned in the Hall of Fame. I shall be master of the world!"

Old Crompton began to fear the glitter in the eyes of the gaunt young man who seemed suddenly to have become demented. And his envy and hatred of his talented host blazed anew as Forsythe gloried in the success of his efforts. Then he was struck with an idea and he affected his most ingratiating manner.

"It is a marvelous thing, Tom," he said, "and is entirely beyond my poor comprehension. But I can see that it is all you say and more. Tell me—can you restore the youth of an aged person by these means?"

"Positively!" Tom did not catch the eager note in the old man's voice. Rather he took the question as an inquiry into the further marvels of his process. "Here," he continued, enthusiastically, "I'll prove that to you also. My dog Spot is around the place somewhere. And he is a decrepit old hound, blind, lame and toothless. You've

probably seen him with me."

He rushed to the stairs and whistled. There was an answering yelp from above and the pad of uncertain paws on the bare wooden steps. A dejected old beagle blundered into the room, dragging a crippled hind leg as he fawned upon his master, who stretched forth a hand to pat the unsteady head.

"Guess Spot is old enough for the test," laughed Tom, "and I have been meaning to restore him to his youthful vigor, anyway. No time like the present."

He led his trembling pet to the table of the remarkable tubes and lifted him to its surface. The poor old beast lay trustingly where he was placed, quiet, save for his husky asthmatic breathing.

"Hold him, Crompton," directed Tom as he pulled the starting lever of his apparatus.

And Old Crompton watched in fascinated anticipation as the ethereal luminosity bathed the dog's body in response to the action of the four rays. Somewhat vaguely it came to him that the baggy flesh of his own wrinkled hands took on a new firmness and color where they reposed on the animal's back. Young Forsythe grinned triumphantly

as Spot's breathing became more regular and the rasp gradually left it. Then the dog whined in pleasure and wagged his tail with increasing vigor. Suddenly he raised his head, perked his ears in astonishment and looked his master straight in the face with eyes that saw once more. The low throat cry rose to a full and joyous bark. He sprang to his feet from under the restraining hands and jumped to the floor in a lithe-muscled leap that carried him half way across the room. He capered about with the abandon of a puppy, making extremely active use of four sound limbs.

"Why—why, Forsythe," stammered the hermit, "it's absolutely incredible. Tell me—tell me—what is this remarkable force?"

His host laughed gleefully. "You probably wouldn't understand it anyway, but I'll tell you. It is as simple as the nose on your face. The spark of life, the vital force, is merely an extremely complicated electrical manifestation which I have been able to duplicate artificially. This spark or force is all that distinguishes living from inanimate matter, and in living beings the force gradually decreases in power as the years pass, causing loss of health and strength. The chemical composition of bones and tissue alters, joints become stiff, muscles atrophied, and bones brittle. By recharging, as it were, with the vital force, the gland action is intensified, youth and strength is renewed. By repeating the process every ten or fifteen years the

same degree of vigor can be maintained indefinitely. Mankind will become immortal. That is why I say I am to be master of the world."

For the moment Old Crompton forgot his jealous hatred in the enthusiasm with which he was imbued. "Tom—Tom," he pleaded in his excitement, "use me as a subject. Renew my youth. My life has been a sad one and a lonely one, but I would that I might live it over. I should make of it a far different one—something worth while. See, I am ready."

He sat on the edge of the gleaming table and made as if to lie down on its gleaming surface. But his young host only stared at him in open amusement.

"What? You?" he sneered, unfeelingly. "Why, you old fossil! I told you I would choose my subjects carefully. They are to be people of standing and wealth, who can contribute to the fame and fortune of one Thomas Forsythe."

"But Tom, I have money," Old Crompton begged. But when he saw the hard mirth in the younger man's eyes, his old animosity flamed anew and he sprang from his position and shook a skinny forefinger in Tom's face.

"Don't do that to me, you old fool!" shouted Tom, "and get out of here. Think I'd waste current on an old cadger like you? I guess not! Now get out. Get out, I say!"

Then the old anchorite saw red. Something seemed to snap in his soured old brain. He found himself kicking and biting and punching at his host, who backed away from the furious onslaught in surprise. Then Tom tripped over a wire and fell to the floor with a force that rattled the windows, his ferocious little adversary on top. The younger man lay still where he had fallen, a trickle of blood showing at his temple.

"My God! I've killed him!" gasped the old man.

With trembling fingers he opened Tom's shirt and listened for his heartbeats. Panic-stricken, he rubbed the young man's wrists, slapped his cheeks, and ran for water to dash in his face. But all efforts to revive him proved futile, and then, in awful fear, Old Crompton dashed into the night, the dog Spot snapping at his heels as he ran.

Hours later the stooped figure of a shabby old man might have been seen stealthily re-entering the lonely workshop where the lights still burned brightly. Tom Forsythe lay rigid in the position in which Old

Crompton had left him, and the dog growled menacingly.

Averting his gaze and circling wide of the body, Old Crompton made for the table of the marvelous rays. In minute detail he recalled every move made by Tom in starting and adjusting the apparatus to produce the incredible results he had witnessed. Not a moment was to be wasted now. Already he had hesitated too long, for soon would come the dawn and possible discovery of his crime. But the invention of his victim would save him from the long arm of the law, for, with youth restored, Old Crompton would cease to exist and a new life would open its doors to the starved soul of the hermit. Hermit, indeed! He would begin life anew, an active man with youthful vigor and ambition. Under an assumed name he would travel abroad, would enjoy life, and would later become a successful man of affairs. He had enough money, he told himself. And the police would never find Old Crompton, the murderer of Tom Forsythe! He deposited his small traveling bag on the floor and fingered the controls of Tom's apparatus.

He threw the starting switch confidently and grinned in satisfaction as the answering whine of the motor-generator came to his ears. One by one he carefully made the adjustments in exactly the manner followed by the now silenced discoverer of the process. Everything operated precisely as it had during the preceding experiments. Odd

that he should have anticipated some such necessity! But something had told him to observe Tom's movements carefully, and now he rejoiced in the fact that his intuition had led him aright. Painfully he climbed to the table top and stretched his aching body in the warm light of the four huge tubes. His exertions during the struggle with Tom were beginning to tell on him. But the soreness and stiffness of feeble muscles and stubborn joints would soon be but a memory. His pulses quickened at the thought and he breathed deep in a sudden feeling of unaccustomed well-being.

The dog growled continuously from his position at the head of his master, but did not move to interfere with the intruder. And Old Crompton, in the excitement of the momentous experience, paid him not the slightest attention.

His body tingled from head to foot with a not unpleasant sensation that conveyed the assurance of radical changes taking place under the influence of the vital rays. The tingling sensation increased in intensity until it seemed that every corpuscle in his veins danced to the tune of the vibration from those glowing tubes that bathed him in an ever-spreading radiance. Aches and pains vanished from his body, but he soon experienced a sharp stab of new pain in his lower jaw. With an experimental forefinger he rubbed the gum. He laughed aloud as the realization came to him that in those gums where there

had been no teeth for more than twenty years there was now growing a complete new set. And the rapidity of the process amazed him beyond measure. The aching area spread quickly and was becoming really uncomfortable. But then—and he consoled himself with the thought—nothing is brought into being without a certain amount of pain. Besides, he was confident that his discomfort would soon be over.

He examined his hand, and found that the joints of two fingers long crippled with rheumatism now moved freely and painlessly. The misty brilliance surrounding his body was paling and he saw that the flesh was taking on a faint green fluorescence instead. The rays had completed their work and soon the transformation would be fully effected. He turned on his side and slipped to the floor with the agility of a youngster. The dog snarled anew, but kept steadfastly to his position.

There was a small mirror over the wash stand at the far end of the room and Old Crompton made haste to obtain the first view of his reflected image. His step was firm and springy, his bearing confident, and he found that his long-stooped shoulders straightened naturally and easily. He felt that he had taken on at least two inches in stature, which was indeed the case. When he reached the mirror he peered anxiously into its dingy surface and what he saw there so

startled him that he stepped backward in amazement. This was not Larry Crompton, but an entirely new man. The straggly white hair had given way to soft, healthy waves of chestnut hue. Gone were the seams from the leathery countenance and the eyes looked out clearly and steadily from under brows as thick and dark as they had been in his youth. The reflected features were those of an entire stranger. They were not even reminiscent of the Larry Crompton of fifty years ago, but were the features of a far more vigorous and prepossessing individual than he had ever seemed, even in the best years of his life. The jaw was firm, the once sunken cheeks so well filled out that his high cheek bones were no longer in evidence. It was the face of a man of not more than thirty-eight years of age, reflecting exceptional intelligence and strength of character.

"What a disguise!" he exclaimed in delight. And his voice, echoing in the stillness that followed the switching off of the apparatus, was deep-throated and mellow—the voice of a new man.

Now, serenely confident that discovery was impossible, he picked up his small but heavy bag and started for the door. Dawn was breaking and he wished to put as many miles between himself and Tom's laboratory as could be covered in the next few hours. But at the door he hesitated. Then, despite the furious yapping of Spot, he returned to the table of the rays and, with deliberate thoroughness smashed

the costly tubes which had brought about his rehabilitation. With a pinch bar from a nearby tool rack, he wrecked the controls and generating mechanisms beyond recognition. Now he was absolutely secure! No meddling experts could possibly discover the secret of Tom's invention. All evidence would show that the young experimenter had met his death at the hands of Old Crompton, the despised hermit of West Laketon. But none would dream that the handsome man of means who was henceforth to be known as George Voight was that same despised hermit.

He recovered his satchel and left the scene. With long, rapid strides he proceeded down the old dirt road toward the main highway where, instead of turning east into the village, he would turn west and walk to Kernsburg, the neighboring town. There, in not more than two hours time, his new life would really begin!

Had you, a visitor, departed from Laketon when Old Crompton did and returned twelve years later, you would have noticed very little difference in the appearance of the village. The old town hall and the little park were the same, the dingy brick building among the trees being just a little dingier and its wooden steps more worn and sagged. The main street showed evidence of recent repaving, and, in consequence of the resulting increase in through automobile traffic; there were two new gasoline filling stations in the heart of the town.

Down the road about a half mile there was a new building, which, upon inquiring from one of the natives, would be proudly designated as the new high school building. Otherwise there were no changes to be observed.

In his dilapidated chair in the untidy office he had occupied for nearly thirty years, sat Asa Culkin, popularly known as "Judge" Culkin. Justice of the peace, sheriff, attorney-at-law, and three times Mayor of Laketon, he was still a controlling factor in local politics and government. And many a knotty legal problem was settled in that gloomy little office. Many a dispute in the town council was dependent for arbitration upon the keen mind and understanding wit of the old judge.

The four o'clock train had just puffed its labored way from the station when a stranger entered his office, a stranger of uncommonly prosperous air. The keen blue eyes of the old attorney appraised him instantly and classified him as a successful man of business, not yet forty years of age, and with a weighty problem on his mind.

"What can I do for you, sir?" he asked, removing his feet from the battered desk top.

"You may be able to help me a great deal, Judge," was the

unexpected reply. "I came to Laketon to give myself up."

"Give yourself up?" Culkin rose to his feet in surprise and unconsciously straightened his shoulders in the effort to seem less dwarfed before the tall stranger. "Why, what do you mean?" he inquired.

"I wish to give myself up for murder," answered the amazing visitor, slowly and with decision, "for a murder committed twelve years ago. I should like you to listen to my story first, though. It has been kept too long."

"But I still do not understand." There was puzzlement in the honest old face of the attorney. He shook his gray locks in uncertainty. "Why should you come here? Why come to me? What possible interest can I have in the matter?"

"Just this, Judge. You do not recognize me now, and you will probably consider my story incredible when you hear it. But, when I have given you all the evidence, you will know who I am and will be compelled to believe. The murder was committed in Laketon. That is why I came to you."

"A murder in Laketon? Twelve years ago?" Again the aged attorney

shook his head. "But—proceed."

"Yes. I killed Thomas Forsythe."

The stranger looked for an expression of horror in the features of his listener, but there was none. Instead the benign countenance took on a look of deepening amazement, but the smile wrinkles had somehow vanished and the old face was grave in its surprised interest.

"You seem astonished," continued the stranger. "Undoubtedly you were convinced that the murderer was Larry Crompton—Old Crompton, the hermit. He disappeared the night of the crime and has never been heard from since. Am I correct?"

"Yes. He disappeared all right. But continue."

Not by a lift of his eyebrow did Culkin betray his disbelief, but the stranger sensed that his story was somehow not as startling as it should have been.

"You will think me crazy, I presume. But I am Old Crompton. It was my hand that felled the unfortunate young man in his laboratory out there in West Laketon twelve years ago to-night. It was his

marvelous invention that transformed the old hermit into the apparently young man you see before you. But I swear that I am none other than Larry Crompton and that I killed young Forsythe. I am ready to pay the penalty. I can bear the flagellation of my own conscience no longer."

The visitor's voice had risen to the point of hysteria. But his listener remained calm and unmoved.

"Now just let me get this straight," he said quietly. "Do I understand that you claim to be Old Crompton, rejuvenated in some mysterious manner, and that you killed Tom Forsythe on that night twelve years ago? Do I understand that you wish now to go to trial for that crime and to pay the penalty?"

"Yes! Yes! And the sooner the better. I can stand it no longer. I am the most miserable man in the world!"

"Hm-m—hm-m," muttered the judge, "this is strange." He spoke soothingly to his visitor. "Do not upset yourself, I beg of you. I will take care of this thing for you, never fear. Just take a seat, Mister—er __"

"You may call me Voight for the present," said the stranger, in a

more composed tone of voice, "George Voight. That is the name I have been using since the mur—since that fatal night."

"Very well, Mr. Voight," replied the counsellor with an air of the greatest solicitude, "please have a seat now, while I make a telephone call."

And George Voight slipped into a stiff-backed chair with a sigh of relief. For he knew the judge from the old days and he was now certain that his case would be disposed of very quickly.

With the telephone receiver pressed to his ear, Culkin repeated a number. The stranger listened intently during the ensuing silence. Then there came a muffled "hello" sounding in impatient response to the call.

"Hello, Alton," spoke the attorney, "this is Asa speaking. A stranger has just stepped into my office and he claims to be Old Crompton. Remember the hermit across the road from your son's old laboratory? Well, this man, who bears no resemblance whatever to the old man he claims to be and who seems to be less than half the age of Tom's old neighbor, says that he killed Tom on that night we remember so well."

There were some surprised remarks from the other end of the wire, but Voight was unable to catch them. He was in a cold perspiration at the thought of meeting his victim's father.

"Why, yes, Alton," continued Culkin, "I think there is something in this story, although I cannot believe it all. But I wish you would accompany us and visit the laboratory. Will you?"

"Lord, man, not that!" interrupted the judge's visitor. "I can hardly bear to visit the scene of my crime—and in the company of Alton Forsythe. Please, not that!"

"Now you just let me take care of this, young man," replied the judge, testily. Then, once more speaking into the mouthpiece of the telephone, "All right, Alton. We'll pick you up at your office in five minutes."

He replaced the receiver on its hook and turned again to his visitor. "Please be so kind as to do exactly as I request," he said. "I want to help you, but there is more to this thing than you know and I want you to follow unquestioningly where I lead and ask no questions at all for the present. Things may turn out differently than you expect."

"All right, Judge." The visitor resigned himself to whatever might

transpire under the guidance of the man he had called upon to turn him over to the officers of the law.

Seated in the judge's ancient motor car, they stopped at the office of Alton Forsythe a few minutes later and were joined by that red-faced and pompous old man. Few words were spoken during the short run to the well-remembered location of Tom's laboratory, and the man who was known as George Voight caught at his own throat with nervous fingers when they passed the tumbledown remains of the hut in which Old Crompton had spent so many years. With a screeching of well-worn brakes the car stopped before the laboratory, which was now almost hidden behind a mass of shrubs and flowers.

"Easy now, young man," cautioned the judge, noting the look of fear which had clouded his new client's features. The three men advanced to the door through which Old Crompton had fled on that night of horror, twelve years before. The elder Forsythe spoke not a word as he turned the knob and stepped within. Voight shrank from entering, but soon mastered his feelings and followed the other two. The sight that met his eyes caused him to cry aloud in awe.

At the dissecting table, which seemed to be exactly as he had seen it last but with replicas of the tubes he had destroyed once more in

place, stood Tom Forsythe! Considerably older and with hair prematurely gray, he was still the young man Old Crompton thought he had killed. Tom Forsythe was not dead after all! And all of his years of misery had gone for nothing. He advanced slowly to the side of the wondering young man, Alton Forsythe and Asa Culkin watching silently from just inside the door.

"Tom—Tom," spoke the stranger, "you are alive? You were not dead when I left you on that terrible night when I smashed your precious tubes? Oh—it is too good to be true! I can scarcely believe my eyes!"

He stretched forth trembling fingers to touch the body of the young man to assure himself that it was not all a dream.

"Why," said Tom Forsythe, in astonishment. "I do not know you, sir. Never saw you in my life. What do you mean by your talk of smashing my tubes, of leaving me for dead?"

"Mean?" The stranger's voice rose now; he was growing excited. "Why, Tom, I am Old Crompton. Remember the struggle, here in this very room? You refused to rejuvenate an unhappy old man with your marvelous apparatus, a temporarily insane old man—Crompton. I was that old man and I fought with you. You fell,

striking your head. There was blood. You were unconscious. Yes, for many hours I was sure you were dead and that I had murdered you. But I had watched your manipulations of the apparatus and I subjected myself to the action of the rays. My youth was miraculously restored. I became as you see me now. Detection was impossible, for I looked no more like Old Crompton than you do. I smashed your machinery to avoid suspicion. Then I escaped. And, for twelve years, I have thought myself a murderer. I have suffered the tortures of the damned!"

Tom Forsythe advanced on this remarkable visitor with clenched fists. Staring him in the eyes with cold appraisal, his wrath was all too apparent. The dog Spot, young as ever, entered the room and, upon observing the stranger, set up an ominous growling and snarling. At least the dog recognized him!

"What are you trying to do, catechise me? Are you another of these alienists my father has been bringing around?" The young inventor was furious. "If you are," he continued, "you can get out of here—now! I'll have no more of this meddling with my affairs. I'm as sane as any of you and I refuse to submit to this continual persecution."

The elder Forsythe grunted, and Culkin laid a restraining hand on his arm. "Just a minute now, Tom," he said soothingly. "This stranger is

no alienist. He has a story to tell. Please permit him to finish."

Somewhat mollified, Tom Forsythe shrugged his assent.

"Tom," continued the stranger, more calmly now, "what I have said is the truth. I shall prove it to you. I'll tell you things no mortals on earth could know but we two. Remember the day I captured the big rooster for you—the monster you had created? Remember the night you awakened me and brought me here in the moonlight? Remember the rabbit whose leg you amputated and re-grew? The poor guinea pig you had suffocated and whose life you restored? Spot here? Don't you remember rejuvenating him? I was here. And you refused to use your process on me, old man that I was. Then is when I went mad and attacked you. Do you believe me, Tom?"

Then a strange thing happened. While Tom Forsythe gazed in growing belief, the stranger's shoulders sagged and he trembled as with the ague. The two older men who had kept in the background gasped their astonishment as his hair faded to a sickly gray, then became as white as the driven snow. Old Crompton was reverting to his previous state! Within five minutes, instead of the handsome young stranger, there stood before them a bent, withered old man—Old Crompton beyond a doubt. The effects of Tom's process were spent.

"Well I'm damned!" ejaculated Alton Forsythe. "You have been right all along, Asa. And I am mighty glad I did not commit Tom as I intended. He has told us the truth all these years and we were not wise enough to see it."

"We!" exclaimed the judge. "You, Alton Forsythe! I have always upheld him. You have done your son a grave injustice and you owe him your apologies if ever a father owed his son anything."

"You are right, Asa." And, his aristocratic pride forgotten, Alton Forsythe rushed to the side of his son and embraced him.

The judge turned to Old Crompton pityingly. "Rather a bad ending for you, Crompton," he said. "Still, it is better by far than being branded as a murderer."

"Better? Better?" croaked Old Crompton. "It is wonderful, Judge. I have never been so happy in my life!"

The face of the old man beamed, though scalding tears coursed down the withered and seamed cheeks. The two Forsythes looked up from their demonstrations of peacemaking to listen to the amazing words of the old hermit.

"Yes, happy for the first time in my life," he continued. "I am one hundred years of age, gentlemen, and I now look it and feel it. That is as it should be. And my experience has taught me a final lasting lesson. None of you know it, but, when I was but a very young man I was bitterly disappointed in love. Ha! ha! Never think it to look at me now, would you? But I was, and it ruined my entire life. I had a little money—inherited—and I traveled about in the world for a few years, then settled in that old hut across the road where I buried myself for sixty years, becoming crabbed and sour and despicable. Young Tom here was the first bright spot and, though I admired him, I hated him for his opportunities, hated him for that which he had that I had not. With the promise of his invention I thought I saw happiness, a new life for myself. I got what I wanted, though not in the way I had expected. And I want to tell you gentlemen that there is nothing in it. With developments of modern science you may be able to restore a man's youthful vigor of body, but you can't cure his mind with electricity. Though I had a youthful body, my brain was the brain of an old man—memories were there which could not be suppressed. Even had I not had the fancied death of young Tom on my conscience I should still have been miserable. I worked. God, how I worked—to forget! But I could not forget. I was successful in business and made a lot of money. I am more independent—probably wealthier than you, Alton Forsythe, but that did not bring happiness. I longed to be myself once more, to have the aches and

pains which had been taken from me. It is natural to age and to die. Immortality would make of us a people of restless misery. We would quarrel and bicker and long for death, which would not come to relieve us. Now it is over for me and I am glad—glad—glad!"

He paused for breath, looking beseechingly at Tom Forsythe. "Tom," he said, "I suppose you have nothing for me in your heart but hatred. And I don't blame you. But I wish—I wish you would try and forgive me. Can you?"

The years had brought increased understanding and tolerance to young Tom. He stared at Old Crompton and the long-nursed anger over the destruction of his equipment melted into a strange mixture of pity and admiration for the courageous old fellow.

"Why, I guess I can, Crompton," he replied. "There was many a day when I struggled hopelessly to reconstruct my apparatus, cursing you with every bit of energy in my make-up. I could cheerfully have throttled you, had you been within reach. For twelve years I have labored incessantly to reproduce the results we obtained on the night of which you speak. People called me insane—even my father wished to have me committed to an asylum. And, until now, I have been unsuccessful. Only to-day has it seemed for the first time that the experiments will again succeed. But my ideas have changed with

regard to the uses of the process. I was a cocksure young pup in the old days, with foolish dreams of fame and influence. But I have seen the error of my ways. Your experience, too, convinces me that immortality may not be as desirable as I thought. But there are great possibilities in the way of relieving the sufferings of mankind and in making this a better world in which to live. With your advice and help I believe I can do great things. I now forgive you freely and I ask you to remain here with me to assist in the work that is to come. What do you say to the idea?"

At the reverent thankfulness in the pale eyes of the broken old man who had so recently been a perfect specimen of vigorous youth, Alton Forsythe blew his nose noisily. The little judge smiled benevolently and shook his head as if to say, "I told you so." Tom and Old Crompton gripped hands—mightily.

#09 Spawn of the Stars, by Charles Willard Diffin:

The earth lay powerless beneath those loathsome, yellowish monsters that, sheathed in cometlike globes, sprang from the skies to annihilate man and reduce his cities to ashes.

Aproximate word count: 11,800

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

When Cyrus R. Thurston bought himself a single-motored Stoughton job he was looking for new thrills. Flying around the east coast had lost its zest: he wanted to join that jaunty group who spoke so easily of hopping off for Los Angeles.

And what Cyrus Thurston wanted he usually obtained. But if that young millionaire-sportsman had been told that on his first flight this blocky, bulletlike ship was to pitch him headlong into the exact center of the wildest, strangest war this earth had ever seen—well, it is still probable that the Stoughton company would not have lost the sale.

They were roaring through the starlit, calm night, three thousand feet above a sage sprinkled desert, when the trip ended. Slim Riley had the stick when the first blast of hot oil ripped slashingly across the pilot's window. "There goes your old trip!" he yelled. "Why don't they try putting engines in these ships?"

He jammed over the throttle and, with motor idling, swept down toward the endless miles of moonlit waste. Wind? They had been boring into it. Through the opened window he spotted a likely stretch of ground. Setting down the ship on a nice piece of Arizona desert was a mere detail for Slim.

"Let off a flare," he ordered, "when I give the word."

The white glare of it faded the stars as he sideslipped, then straightened out on his hand-picked field. The plane rolled down a clear space and stopped. The bright glare persisted while he stared curiously from the quiet cabin. Cutting the motor he opened both windows, then grabbed Thurston by the shoulder.

"'Tis a curious thing, that," he said unsteadily. His hand pointed straight ahead. The flare died, but the bright stars of the desert country still shone on a glistening, shining bulb.

It was some two hundred feet away. The lower part was lost in shadow, but its upper surfaces shone rounded and silvery like a giant bubble. It towered in the air, scores of feet above the chaparral beside it. There was a round spot of black on its side, which looked absurdly like a door....

"I saw something moving," said Thurston slowly. "On the ground I saw.... Oh, good Lord, Slim, it isn't real!"

Slim Riley made no reply. His eyes were riveted to an undulating, ghastly something that oozed and crawled in the pale light not far from the bulb. His hand was reaching, reaching.... It found what he sought; he leaned toward the window. In his hand was the Very pistol for discharging the flares. He aimed forward and up.

The second flare hung close before it settled on the sandy floor. Its blinding whiteness made the more loathsome the sickening yellow of the flabby flowing thing that writhed frantically in the glare. It was formless, shapeless, a heaving mound of nauseous matter. Yet even in its agonized writhing distortions they sensed the beating pulsations that marked it a living thing.

There were unending ripplings crossing and recrossing through the convolutions. To Thurston there was suddenly a sickening likeness:

the thing was a brain from a gigantic skull—it was naked—was suffering....

The thing poured itself across the sand. Before the staring gaze of the speechless men an excrescence appeared—a thick bulb on the mass—that protruded itself into a tentacle. At the end there grew instantly a hooked hand. It reached for the black opening in the great shell, found it, and the whole loathsome shapelessness poured itself up and through the hole.

Only at the last was it still. In the dark opening the last slippery mass held quiet for endless seconds. It formed, as they watched, to a head—frightful—menacing. Eyes appeared in the head; eyes flat and round and black save for a cross slit in each; eyes that stared horribly and unchangingly into theirs. Below them a gaping mouth opened and closed.... The head melted—was gone....

And with its going came a rushing roar of sound.

From under the metallic mass shrieked a vaporous cloud. It drove at them, a swirling blast of snow and sand. Some buried memory of gas attacks woke Riley from his stupor. He slammed shut the windows an instant before the cloud struck, but not before they had seen, in the moonlight, a gleaming, gigantic, elongated bulb rise swiftly—

screamingly—into the upper air.

The blast tore at their plane. And the cold in their tight compartment was like the cold of outer space. The men stared, speechless, panting. Their breath froze in that frigid room into steam clouds.

"It—it...." Thurston gasped—and slumped helpless upon the floor.

It was an hour before they dared open the door of their cabin. An hour of biting, numbing cold. Zero—on a warm summer night on the desert! Snow in the hurricane that had struck them!

"'Twas the blast from the thing," guessed the pilot; "though never did I see an engine with an exhaust like that." He was pounding himself with his arms to force up the chilled circulation.

"But the beast—the—the *thing*!" exclaimed Thurston. "It's monstrous; indecent! It thought—no question of that—but no body! Horrible! Just a raw, naked, thinking protoplasm!"

It was here that he flung open the door. They sniffed cautiously of the air. It was warm again—clean—save for a hint of some nauseous odor. They walked forward; Riley carried a flash.

The odor grew to a stench as they came where the great mass had

lain. On the ground was a fleshy mound. There were bones showing, and horns on a skull. Riley held the light close to show the body of a steer. A body of raw bleeding meat. Half of it had been absorbed....

"The damned thing," said Riley, and paused vainly for adequate words. "The damned thing was eating.... Like a jelly-fish, it was!"

"Exactly," Thurston agreed. He pointed about. There were other heaps scattered among the low sage.

"Smothered," guessed Thurston, "with that frozen exhaust. Then the filthy thing landed and came out to eat."

"Hold the light for me," the pilot commanded. "I'm goin' to fix that busted oil line. And I'm goin' to do it right now. Maybe the creature's still hungry."

They sat in their room. About them was the luxury of a modern hotel. Cyrus Thurston stared vacantly at the breakfast he was forgetting to eat. He wiped his hands mechanically on a snowy napkin. He looked from the window. There were palm trees in the park, and autos in a ceaseless stream. And people! Sane, sober people, living in a sane world. Newsboys were shouting; the life of the city was flowing.

"Riley!" Thurston turned to the man across the table. His voice was curiously toneless, and his face haggard. "Riley, I haven't slept for three nights. Neither have you. We've got to get this thing straight. We didn't both become absolute maniacs at the same instant, but—it was *not* there, it was *never* there—not *that*...." He was lost in unpleasant recollections. "There are other records of hallucinations."

"Hallucinations—hell!" said Slim Riley. He was looking at a Los Angeles newspaper. He passed one hand wearily across his eyes, but his face was happier than it had been in days.

"We didn't imagine it, we aren't crazy—it's real! Would you read that now!" He passed the paper across to Thurston. The headlines were startling.

"Pilot Killed by Mysterious Airship. Silvery Bubble Hangs Over New York. Downs Army Plane in Burst of Flame. Vanishes at Terrific Speed."

"It's our little friend," said Thurston. And on his face, too, the lines were vanishing; to find this horror a reality was positive relief. "Here's the same cloud of vapor—drifted slowly across the city, the accounts says, blowing this stuff like steam from underneath. Airplanes investigated—an army plane drove into the vapor—terrific

explosion—plane down in flames—others wrecked. The machine ascended with meteor speed, trailing blue flame. Come on, boy, where's that old bus? Thought I never wanted to fly a plane again. Now I don't want to do anything but."

"Where to?" Slim inquired.

"Headquarters," Thurston told him. "Washington—let's go!"

From Los Angeles to Washington is not far, as the plane flies. There was a stop or two for gasoline, but it was only a day later that they were seated in the War Office. Thurston's card had gained immediate admittance. "Got the low-down," he had written on the back of his card, "on the mystery airship."

"What you have told me is incredible," the Secretary was saying, "or would be if General Lozier here had not reported personally on the occurrence at New York. But the monster, the thing you have described.... Cy, if I didn't know you as I do I would have you locked up."

"It's true," said Thurston, simply. "It's damnable, but it's true. Now what does it mean?"

"Heaven knows," was the response. "That's where it came from—out of the heavens."

"Not what we saw," Slim Riley broke in. "That thing came straight out of Hell." And in his voice was no suggestion of levity.

"You left Los Angeles early yesterday; have you seen the papers?"

Thurston shook his head.

"They are back," said the Secretary. "Reported over London—Paris—the West Coast. Even China has seen them. Shanghai cabled an hour ago."

"Them? How many are there?"

"Nobody knows. There were five seen at one time. There are more—unless the same ones go around the world in a matter of minutes."

Thurston remembered that whirlwind of vapor and a vanishing speck in the Arizona sky. "They could," he asserted. "They're faster than anything on earth. Though what drives them ... that gas—steam—whatever it is...."

"Hydrogen," stated General Lozier. "I saw the New York show when

poor Davis got his. He flew into the exhaust; it went off like a million bombs. Characteristic hydrogen flame trailed the damn thing up out of sight—a tail of blue fire."

"And cold," stated Thurston.

"Hot as a Bunsen burner," the General contradicted. "Davis' plane almost melted."

"Before it ignited," said the other. He told of the cold in their plane.

"Ha!" The General spoke explosively. "That's expansion. That's a tip on their motive power. Expansion of gas. That accounts for the cold and the vapor. Suddenly expanded it would be intensely cold. The moisture of the air would condense, freeze. But how could they carry it? Or"—he frowned for a moment, brows drawn over deep-set gray eyes—"or generate it? But that's crazy—that's impossible!"

"So is the whole matter," the Secretary reminded him. "With the information Mr. Thurston and Mr. Riley have given us, the whole affair is beyond any gage our past experience might supply. We start from the impossible, and we go—where? What is to be done?"

"With your permission, sir, a number of things shall be done. It

would be interesting to see what a squadron of planes might accomplish, diving on them from above. Or anti-aircraft fire."

"No," said the Secretary of War, "not yet. They have looked us over, but they have not attacked. For the present we do not know what they are. All of us have our suspicions—thoughts of interplanetary travel—thoughts too wild for serious utterance—but we know nothing.

"Say nothing to the papers of what you have told me," he directed Thurston. "Lord knows their surmises are wild enough now. And for you, General, in the event of any hostile move, you will resist."

"Your order was anticipated, sir." The General permitted himself a slight smile. "The air force is ready."

"Of course," the Secretary of War nodded. "Meet me here to-night—nine o'clock." He included Thurston and Riley in the command. "We need to think ... to think ... and perhaps their mission is friendly."

"Friendly!" The two flyers exchanged glances as they went to the door. And each knew what the other was seeing—a viscous ocherous mass that formed into a head where eyes devilish in their hate stared coldly into theirs....

"Think, we need to think," repeated Thurston later. "A creature that is just one big hideous brain, that can think an arm into existence—think a head where it wishes! What does a thing like that think of? What beastly thoughts could that—that *thing* conceive?"

"If I got the sights of a Lewis gun on it," said Riley vindictively, "I'd make it think."

"And my guess is that is all you would accomplish," Thurston told him. "I am forming a few theories about our visitors. One is that it would be quite impossible to find a vital spot in that big homogeneous mass."

The pilot dispensed with theories: his was a more literal mind. "Where on earth did they come from, do you suppose, Mr. Thurston?"

They were walking to their hotel. Thurston raised his eyes to the summer heavens. Faint stars were beginning to twinkle; there was one that glowed steadily.

"Nowhere on earth," Thurston stated softly, "nowhere on earth."

"Maybe so," said the pilot, "maybe so. We've thought about it and

talked about it ... and they've gone ahead and done it." He called to a newsboy; they took the latest editions to their room.

The papers were ablaze with speculation. There were dispatches from all corners of the earth, interviews with scientists and near scientists. The machines were a Soviet invention—they were beyond anything human—they were harmless—they would wipe out civilization—poison gas—blasts of fire like that which had enveloped the army flyer....

And through it all Thurston read an ill-concealed fear, a reflection of panic that was gripping the nation—the whole world. These great machines were sinister. Wherever they appeared came the sense of being watched, of a menace being calmly withheld. And at thought of the obscene monsters inside those spheres, Thurston's lips were compressed and his eyes hardened. He threw the papers aside.

"They are here," he said, "and that's all that we know. I hope the Secretary of War gets some good men together. And I hope someone is inspired with an answer."

"An answer is it?" said Riley. "I'm thinkin' that the answer will come, but not from these swivel-chair fighters. 'Tis the boys in the cockpits with one hand on the stick and one on the guns that will

have the answer."

But Thurston shook his head. "Their speed," he said, "and the gas! Remember that cold. How much of it can they lay over a city?"

The question was unanswered, unless the quick ringing of the phone was a reply.

"War Department," said a voice. "Hold the wire." The voice of the Secretary of War came on immediately.

"Thurston?" he asked. "Come over at once on the jump, old man. Hell's popping."

The windows of the War Department Building were all alight as they approached. Cars were coming and going; men in uniform, as the Secretary had said, "on the jump." Soldiers with bayonets stopped them, then passed Thurston and his companion on. Bells were ringing from all sides. But in the Secretary's office was perfect quiet.

General Lozier was there, Thurston saw, and an imposing array of gold-braided men with a sprinkling of those in civilian clothes. One he recognized: MacGregor from the Bureau of Standards. The Secretary handed Thurston some papers.

"Radio," he explained. "They are over the Pacific coast. Hit near Vancouver; Associated Press says city destroyed. They are working down the coast. Same story—blast of hydrogen from their funnel shaped base. Colder than Greenland below them; snow fell in Seattle. No real attack since Vancouver and little damage done—" A message was laid before him.

"Portland," he said. "Five mystery ships over city. Dart repeatedly toward earth, deliver blast of gas and then retreat. Doing no damage. Apparently inviting attack. All commercial planes ordered grounded. Awaiting instructions.

"Gentlemen," said the Secretary, "I believe I speak for all present when I say that, in the absence of first hand information, we are utterly unable to arrive at any definite conclusion or make a definite plan. There is a menace in this, undeniably. Mr. Thurston and Mr. Riley have been good enough to report to me. They have seen one machine at close range. It was occupied by a monster so incredible that the report would receive no attention from me did I not know Mr. Thurston personally.

"Where have they come from? What does it mean—what is their mission? Only God knows.

"Gentlemen, I feel that I must see them. I want General Lozier to accompany me, also Doctor MacGregor, to advise me from the scientific angle. I am going to the Pacific Coast. They may not wait —that is true—but they appear to be going slowly south. I will leave to-night for San Diego. I hope to intercept them. We have strong air-forces there; the Navy Department is cooperating."

He waited for no comment. "General," he ordered, "will you kindly arrange for a plane? Take an escort or not as you think best.

"Mr. Thurston and Mr. Riley will also accompany us. We want all the authoritative data we can get. This on my return will be placed before you, gentlemen, for your consideration." He rose from his chair. "I hope they wait for us," he said.

Time was when a commander called loudly for a horse, but in this day a Secretary of War is not kept waiting for transportation. Sirening motorcycles preceded them from the city. Within an hour, motors roaring wide open, propellers ripping into the summer night, lights slipping eastward three thousand feet below, the Secretary of War for the United States was on his way. And on either side from their plane stretched the arms of a V. Like a flight of gigantic wild geese, fast fighting planes of the Army air service bored steadily into the night, guarantors of safe convoy.

"The Air Service is ready," General Lozier had said. And Thurston and his pilot knew that from East coast to West, swift scout planes, whose idling engines could roar into action at a moment's notice, stood waiting; battle planes hidden in hangars would roll forth at the word—the Navy was cooperating—and at San Diego there were strong naval units, Army units, and Marine Corps.

"They don't know what we can do, what we have up our sleeve: they are feeling us out," said the Secretary. They had stopped more than once for gas and for wireless reports. He held a sheaf of typewritten briefs.

"Going slowly south. They have taken their time. Hours over San Francisco and the bay district. Repeating same tactics; fall with terrific speed to cushion against their blast of gas. Trying to draw us out, provoke an attack, make us show our strength. Well, we shall beat them to San Diego at this rate. We'll be there in a few hours."

The afternoon sun was dropping ahead of them when they sighted the water. "Eckener Pass," the pilot told them, "where the Graf Zeppelin came through. Wonder what these birds would think of a Zepp!

"There's the ocean," he added after a time. San Diego glistened

against the bare hills. "There's North Island—the Army field." He stared intently ahead, then shouted: "And there they are! Look there!"

Over the city a cluster of meteors was falling. Dark underneath, their tops shone like pure silver in the sun's slanting glare. They fell toward the city, then buried themselves in a dense cloud of steam, rebounding at once to the upper air, vapor trailing behind them.

The cloud billowed slowly. It struck the hills of the city, then lifted and vanished.

"Land at once," requested the Secretary. A flash of silver countermanded the order.

It hung there before them, a great gleaming globe, keeping always its distance ahead. It was elongated at the base, Thurston observed. From that base shot the familiar blast that turned steamy a hundred feet below as it chilled the warm air. There were round orifices, like ports, ranged around the top, where an occasional jet of vapor showed this to be a method of control. Other spots shone dark and glassy. Were they windows? He hardly realized their peril, so interested was he in the strange machine ahead.

Then: "Dodge that vapor," ordered General Lozier. The plane wavered in signal to the others and swung sharply to the left. Each man knew the flaming death that was theirs if the fire of their exhaust touched that explosive mixture of hydrogen and air. The great bubble turned with them and paralleled their course.

"He's watching us," said Riley, "giving us the once over, the slimy devil. Ain't there a gun on this ship?"

The General addressed his superior. Even above the roar of the motors his voice seemed quiet, assured. "We must not land now," he said. "We can't land at North Island. It would focus their attention upon our defenses. That thing—whatever it is—is looking for a vulnerable spot. We must.... Hold on—there he goes!"

The big bulb shot upward. It slanted above them, and hovered there.

"I think he is about to attack," said the General quietly. And, to the commander of their squadron: "It's in your hands now, Captain. It's your fight."

The Captain nodded and squinted above. "He's got to throw heavier stuff than that," he remarked. A small object was falling from the cloud. It passed close to their ship.

"Half-pint size," said Cyrus Thurston, and laughed in derision. There was something ludicrous in the futility of the attack. He stuck his head from a window into the gale they created. He sheltered his eyes to try to follow the missile in its fall.

They were over the city. The criss-cross of streets made a grill-work of lines; tall buildings were dwarfed from this three thousand foot altitude. The sun slanted across a projecting promontory to make golden ripples on a blue sea and the city sparkled back in the clear air. Tiny white faces were massed in the streets, huddled in clusters where the futile black missile had vanished.

And then—then the city was gone....

A white cloud-bank billowed and mushroomed. Slowly, it seemed to the watcher—so slowly.

It was done in the fraction of a second. Yet in that brief time his eyes registered the chaotic sweep in advance of the cloud. There came a crashing of buildings in some monster whirlwind, a white cloud engulfing it all.... It was rising—was on them.

"God," thought Thurston, "why can't I move!" The plane lifted and lurched. A thunder of sound crashed against them, an intolerable

force. They were crushed to the floor as the plane was hurled over and upward.

Out of the mad whirling tangle of flying bodies, Thurston glimpsed one clear picture. The face of the pilot hung battered and blood-covered before him, and over the limp body the hand of Slim Riley clutched at the switch.

"Bully boy," he said dazedly, "he's cutting the motors...." The thought ended in blackness.

There was no sound of engines or beating propellers when he came to his senses. Something lay heavy upon him. He pushed it to one side. It was the body of General Lozier.

He drew himself to his knees to look slowly about, rubbed stupidly at his eyes to quiet the whirl, then stared at the blood on his hand. It was so quiet—the motors—what was it that happened? Slim had reached for the switch....

The whirling subsided. Before him he saw Slim Riley at the controls. He got to his feet and went unsteadily forward. It was a battered face that was lifted to his.

"She was spinning," the puffed lips were muttering slowly. "I brought her out ... there's the field...." His voice was thick; he formed the words slowly, painfully. "Got to land ... can you take it? I'm—I'm—" He slumped limply in his seat.

Thurston's arms were uninjured. He dragged the pilot to the floor and got back of the wheel. The field was below them. There were planes taxiing out; he heard the roar of their motors. He tried the controls. The plane answered stiffly, but he managed to level off as the brown field approached.

Thurston never remembered that landing. He was trying to drag Riley from the battered plane when the first man got to him.

"Secretary of War?" he gasped. "In there.... Take Riley; I can walk."

"We'll get them," an officer assured him. "Knew you were coming. They sure gave you hell! But look at the city!"

Arms carried him stumbling from the field. Above the low hangars he saw smoke clouds over the bay. These and red rolling flames marked what had been an American city. Far in the heavens moved five glinting specks.

His head reeled with the thunder of engines. There were planes standing in lines and more erupting from hangars, where khaki-clad men, faces tense under leather helmets, rushed swiftly about.

"General Lozier is dead," said a voice. Thurston turned to the man. They were bringing the others. "The rest are smashed up some," the officer told him, "but I think they'll pull through."

The Secretary of War for the United States lay beside him. Men with red on their sleeves were slitting his coat. Through one good eye he squinted at Thurston. He even managed a smile.

"Well, I wanted to see them up close," he said. "They say you saved us, old man."

Thurston waved that aside. "Thank Riley—" he began, but the words ended in the roar of an exhaust. A plane darted swiftly away to shoot vertically a hundred feet in the air. Another followed and another. In a cloud of brown dust they streamed endlessly out, zooming up like angry hornets, eager to get into the fight.

"Fast little devils!" the ambulance man observed. "Here come the big boys."

A leviathan went deafeningly past. And again others came on in quick succession. Farther up the field, silvery gray planes with rudders flaunting their red, white and blue rose circling to the heights.

"That's the Navy," was the explanation. The surgeon straightened the Secretary's arm. "See them come off the big airplane carriers!"

If his remarks were part of his professional training in removing a patient's thoughts from his pain, they were effective. The Secretary stared out to sea, where two great flat-decked craft were shooting planes with the regularity of a rapid fire gun. They stood out sharply against a bank of gray fog. Cyrus Thurston forgot his bruised body, forgot his own peril—even the inferno that raged back across the bay: he was lost in the sheer thrill of the spectacle.

Above them the sky was alive with winged shapes.

IMAGEDESCRIPTION

And from all the disorder there was order appearing. Squadron after squadron swept to battle formation. Like flights of wild ducks the

true sharp-pointed Vs soared off into the sky. Far above and beyond, rows of dots marked the race of swift scouts for the upper levels. And high in the clear air shone the glittering menace trailing their five plumes of gas.

A deeper detonation was merging into the uproar. It came from the ships, Thurston knew, where anti-aircraft guns poured a rain of shells into the sky. About the invaders they bloomed into clusters of smoke balls. The globes shot a thousand feet into the air. Again the shells found them, and again they retreated.

"Look!" said Thurston. "They got one!"

He groaned as a long curving arc of speed showed that the big bulb was under control. Over the ships it paused, to balance and swing, then shot to the zenith as one of the great boats exploded in a cloud of vapor.

The following blast swept the airdrome. Planes yet on the ground went like dry autumn leaves. The hangars were flattened.

Thurston cowered in awe. They were sheltered, he saw, by a slope of the ground. No ridicule now for the bombs!

A second blast marked when the gas-cloud ignited. The billowing flames were blue. They writhed in tortured convulsions through the air. Endless explosions merged into one rumbling roar.

MacGregor had roused from his stupor; he raised to a sitting position.

"Hydrogen," he stated positively, and pointed where great volumes of flame were sent whirling aloft. "It burns as it mixes with air." The scientist was studying intently the mammoth reaction. "But the volume," he marveled, "the volume! From that small container! Impossible!"

"Impossible," the Secretary agreed, "but...." He pointed with his one good arm toward the Pacific. Two great ships of steel, blackened and battered in that fiery breath, tossed helplessly upon the pitching, heaving sea. They furnished to the scientist's exclamation the only adequate reply.

Each man stared aghast into the pallid faces of his companions. "I think we have underestimated the opposition," said the Secretary of War quietly. "Look—the fog is coming in, but it's too late to save them."

The big ships were vanishing in the oncoming fog. Whirls of vapor were eddying toward them in the flame-blaster air. Above them the watchers saw dimly the five gleaming bulbs. There were airplanes attacking: the tapping of machine-gun fire came to them faintly.

Fast planes circled and swooped toward the enemy. An armada of big planes drove in from beyond. Formations were blocking space above.... Every branch of the service was there, Thurston exulted, the army, Marine Corps, the Navy. He gripped hard at the dry ground in a paralysis of taut nerves. The battle was on, and in the balance hung the fate of the world.

The fog drove in fast. Through straining eyes he tried in vain to glimpse the drama spread above. The world grew dark and gray. He buried his face in his hands.

And again came the thunder. The men on the ground forced their gaze to the clouds, though they knew some fresh horror awaited.

The fog-clouds reflected the blue terror above. They were riven and torn. And through them black objects were falling. Some blazed as they fell. They slipped into unthought maneuvers—they darted to earth trailing yellow and black of gasoline fires. The air was filled with the dread rain of death that was spewed from the gray clouds.

Gone was the roaring of motors. The air-force of the San Diego area swept in silence to the earth, whose impact alone could give kindly concealment to their flame-stricken burden.

Thurston's last control snapped. He flung himself flat to bury his face in the sheltering earth.

Only the driving necessity of work to be done saved the sanity of the survivors. The commercial broadcasting stations were demolished, a part of the fuel for the terrible furnace across the bay. But the Naval radio station was beyond on an outlying hill. The Secretary of War was in charge. An hour's work and this was again in commission to flash to the world the story of disaster. It told the world also of what lay ahead. The writing was plain. No prophet was needed to forecast the doom and destruction that awaited the earth.

Civilization was helpless. What of armies and cannon, of navies, of aircraft, when from some unreachable height these monsters within their bulbous machines could drop coldly—methodically—their diminutive bombs. And when each bomb meant shattering destruction; each explosion blasting all within a radius of miles; each followed by the blue blast of fire that melted the twisted framework of buildings and powdered the stones to make of a proud city a desolation of wreckage, black and silent beneath the cold stars.

There was no crumb of comfort for the world in the terror the radio told.

Slim Riley was lying on an improvised cot when Thurston and the representative of the Bureau of Standards joined him. Four walls of a room still gave shelter in a half-wrecked building. There were candles burning: the dark was unbearable.

"Sit down," said MacGregor quietly; "we must think...."

"Think!" Thurston's voice had an hysterical note. "I can't think! I mustn't think! I'll go raving crazy...."

"Yes, think," said the scientist. "Had it occurred to you that that is our only weapon left?

"We must think, we must analyze. Have these devils a vulnerable spot? Is there any known means of attack? We do not know. We must learn. Here in this room we have all the direct information the world possesses of this menace. I have seen their machines in operation. You have seen more—you have looked at the monsters themselves. At one of them, anyway."

The man's voice was quiet, methodical. Mr. MacGregor was

attacking a problem. Problems called for concentration; not hysterics. He could have poured the contents from a beaker without spilling a drop. His poise was needed: they were soon to make a laboratory experiment.

The door burst open to admit a wild-eyed figure that snatched up their candles and dashed them to the floor.

"Lights out!" he screamed at them. "There's one of 'em coming back." He was gone from the room.

The men sprang for the door, then turned to where Riley was clumsily crawling from his couch. An arm under each of his, and the three men stumbled from the room.

They looked about them in the night. The fog-banks were high, drifting in from the ocean. Beneath them the air was clear; from somewhere above a hidden moon forced a pale light through the clouds. And over the ocean, close to the water, drifted a familiar shape. Familiar in its huge sleek roundness, in its funnel-shaped base where a soft roar made vaporous clouds upon the water. Familiar, too, in the wild dread it inspired.

The watchers were spellbound. To Thurston there came a fury of

impotent frenzy. It was so near! His hands trembled to tear at that door, to rip at that foul mass he knew was within.... The great bulb drifted past. It was nearing the shore. But its action! Its motion!

Gone was the swift certainty of control. The thing settled and sank, to rise weakly with a fresh blast of gas from its exhaust. It settled again, and passed waveringly on in the night.

Thurston was throbbingly alive with hope that was certainty. "It's been hit," he exulted; "it's been hit. Quick! After it, follow it!" He dashed for a car. There were some that had been salvaged from the less ruined buildings. He swung it quickly around where the others were waiting.

"Get a gun," he commanded. "Hey, you,"—to an officer who appeared—"your pistol, man, quick! We're going after it!" He caught the tossed gun and hurried the others into the car.

"Wait," MacGregor commanded. "Would you hunt elephants with a pop-gun? Or these things?"

"Yes," the other told him, "or my bare hands! Are you coming, or aren't you?"

The physicist was unmoved. "The creature you saw—you said that it writhed in a bright light—you said it seemed almost in agony. There's an idea there! Yes, I'm going with you, but keep your shirt on, and think."

He turned again to the officer. "We need lights," he explained, "bright lights. What is there? Magnesium? Lights of any kind?"

"Wait." The man rushed off into the dark.

He was back in a moment to thrust a pistol into the car. "Flares," he explained. "Here's a flashlight, if you need it." The car tore at the ground as Thurston opened it wide. He drove recklessly toward the highway that followed the shore.

The high fog had thinned to a mist. A full moon was breaking through to touch with silver the white breakers hissing on the sand. It spread its full glory on dunes and sea: one more of the countless soft nights where peace and calm beauty told of an ageless existence that made naught of the red havoc of men or of monsters. It shone on the ceaseless surf that had beaten these shores before there were men, that would thunder there still when men were no more. But to the tense crouching men in the car it shone only ahead on a distant, glittering speck. A wavering reflection marked the uncertain flight of

the stricken enemy.

Thurston drove like a maniac; the road carried them straight toward their quarry. What could he do when he overtook it? He neither knew nor cared. There was only the blind fury forcing him on within reach of the thing. He cursed as the lights of the car showed a bend in the road. It was leaving the shore.

He slackened their speed to drive cautiously into the sand. It dragged at the car, but he fought through to the beach, where he hoped for firm footing. The tide was out. They tore madly along the smooth sand, breakers clutching at the flying wheels.

The strange aircraft was nearer; it was plainly over the shore, they saw. Thurston groaned as it shot high in the air in an effort to clear the cliffs ahead. But the heights were no longer a refuge. Again it settled. It struck on the cliff to rebound in a last futile leap. The great pear shape tilted, then shot end over end to crash hard on the firm sand. The lights of the car struck the wreck, and they saw the shell roll over once. A ragged break was opening—the spherical top fell slowly to one side. It was still rocking as they brought the car to a stop. Filling the lower shell, they saw dimly, was a mucouslike mass that seethed and struggled in the brilliance of their lights.

MacGregor was persisting in his theory. "Keep the lights on it!" he shouted. "It can't stand the light."

While they watched, the hideous, bubbling beast oozed over the side of the broken shell to shelter itself in the shadow beneath. And again Thurston sensed the pulse and throb of life in the monstrous mass.

He saw again in his rage the streaming rain of black airplanes; saw, too, the bodies, blackened and charred as they saw them when first they tried rescue from the crashed ships; the smoke clouds and flames from the blasted city, where people—his people, men and women and little children—had met terrible death. He sprang from the car. Yet he faltered with a revulsion that was almost a nausea. His gun was gripped in his hand as he ran toward the monster.

"Come back!" shouted MacGregor. "Come back! Have you gone mad?" He was jerking at the door of the car.

Beyond the white funnel of their lights a yellow thing was moving. It twisted and flowed with incredible speed a hundred feet back to the base of the cliff. It drew itself together in a quivering heap.

An out-thrusting rock threw a sheltering shadow; the moon was low in the west. In the blackness a phosphorescence was apparent. It

rippled and rose in the dark with the pulsing beat of the jellylike mass. And through it were showing two discs. Gray at first, they formed to black, staring eyes.

Thurston had followed. His gun was raised as he neared it. Then out of the mass shot a serpentine arm. It whipped about him, soft, sticky, viscid—utterly loathsome. He screamed once when it clung to his face, then tore savagely and in silence at the encircling folds.

The gun! He ripped a blinding mass from his face and emptied the automatic in a stream of shots straight toward the eyes. And he knew as he fired that the effort was useless; to have shot at the milky surf would have been as vain.

The thing was pulling him irresistibly; he sank to his knees; it dragged him over the sand. He clutched at a rock. A vision was before him: the carcass of a steer, half absorbed and still bleeding on the sand of an Arizona desert....

To be drawn to the smothering embrace of that glutinous mass ... for that monstrous appetite.... He tore afresh at the unyielding folds, then knew MacGregor was beside him.

In the man's hand was a flashlight. The scientist risked his life on a

guess. He thrust the powerful light into the clinging serpent. It was like the touch of hot iron to human flesh. The arm struggled and flailed in a paroxysm of pain.

Thurston was free. He lay gasping on the sand. But MacGregor!... He looked up to see him vanish in the clinging ooze. Another thick tentacle had been projected from the main mass to sweep like a whip about the man. It hissed as it whirled about him in the still air.

The flashlight was gone; Thurston's hand touched it in the sand. He sprang to his feet and pressed the switch. No light responded; the flashlight was out—broken.

A thick arm slashed and wrapped about him.... It beat him to the ground. The sand was moving beneath him; he was being dragged swiftly, helplessly, toward what waited in the shadow. He was smothering.... A blinding glare filled his eyes....

The flares were still burning when he dared look about. MacGregor was pulling frantically at his arm. "Quick—quick!" he was shouting. Thurston scrambled to his feet.

One glimpse he caught of a heaving yellow mass in the white light; it twisted in horrible convulsions. They ran stumblingly—drunkenly

—toward the car.

Riley was half out of the machine. He had tried to drag himself to their assistance. "I couldn't make it," he said: "then I thought of the flares."

"Thank Heaven," said MacGregor with emphasis, "it was your legs that were paralyzed, Riley, not your brain."

Thurston found his voice. "Let me have that Very pistol. If light hurts that damn thing, I am going to put a blaze of magnesium into the middle of it if I die for it."

"They're all gone," said Riley.

"Then let's get out of here. I've had enough. We can come back later on."

He got back of the wheel and slammed the door of the sedan. The moonlight was gone. The darkness was velvet just tinged with the gray that precedes the dawn. Back in the deeper blackness at the cliff-base a phosphorescent something wavered and glowed. The light rippled and flowed in all directions over the mass. Thurston felt, vaguely, its mystery—the bulk was a vast, naked brain; its

quiverings were like visible thought waves....

The phosphorescence grew brighter. The thing was approaching. Thurston let in his clutch, but the scientist checked him.

"Wait," he implored, "wait! I wouldn't miss this for the world." He waved toward the east, where far distant ranges were etched in palest rose.

"We know less than nothing of these creatures, in what part of the universe they are spawned, how they live, where they live—Saturn! —Mars!—the Moon! But—we shall soon know how one dies!"

The thing was coming from the cliff. In the dim grayness it seemed less yellow, less fluid. A membrane enclosed it. It was close to the car. Was it hunger that drove it, or cold rage for these puny opponents? The hollow eyes were glaring; a thick arm formed quickly to dart out toward the car. A cloud, high above, caught the color of approaching day....

Before their eyes the vile mass pulsed visibly; it quivered and beat. Then, sensing its danger, it darted like some headless serpent for its machine.

It massed itself about the shattered top to heave convulsively. The top was lifted, carried toward the rest of the great metal egg. The sun's first rays made golden arrows through the distant peaks.

The struggling mass released its burden to stretch its vile length toward the dark caves under the cliffs. The last sheltering fog-veil parted. The thing was halfway to the high bank when the first bright shaft of direct sunlight shot through.

Incredible in the concealment of night, the vast protoplasmic pod was doubly so in the glare of day. But it was there before them, not a hundred feet distant. And it boiled in vast tortured convulsions. The clean sunshine struck it, and the mass heaved itself into the air in a nauseous eruption, then fell limply to the earth.

The yellow membrane turned paler. Once more the staring black eyes formed to turn hopelessly toward the sheltering globe. Then the bulk flattened out on the sand. It was a jellylike mound, through which trembled endless quivering palpitations.

The sun struck hot, and before the eyes of the watching, speechless men was a sickening, horrible sight—a festering mass of corruption.

The sickening yellow was liquid. It seethed and bubbled with

liberated gases; it decomposed to purplish fluid streams. A breath of wind blew in their direction. The stench from the hideous pool was overpowering, unbearable. Their heads swam in the evil breath.... Thurston ripped the gears into reverse, nor stopped until they were far away on the clean sand.

The tide was coming in when they returned. Gone was the vile putrescence. The waves were lapping at the base of the gleaming machine.

"We'll have to work fast," said MacGregor. "I must know, I must learn." He drew himself up and into the shattered shell.

It was of metal, some forty feet across, its framework a maze of latticed struts. The central part was clear. Here in a wide, shallow pan the monster had rested. Below this was tubing, intricate coils, massive, heavy and strong. MacGregor lowered himself upon it, Thurston was beside him. They went down into the dim bowels of the deadly instrument.

"Hydrogen," the physicist was stating. "Hydrogen—there's our starting point. A generator, obviously, forming the gas—from what? They couldn't compress it! They couldn't carry it or make it, not the volume that they evolved. But they did it, they did it!"

Close to the coils a dim light was glowing. It was a pin-point of radiance in the half-darkness about them. The two men bent closer.

"See," directed MacGregor, "it strikes on this mirror—bright metal and parabolic. It disperses the light, doesn't concentrate it! Ah! Here is another, and another. This one is bent—broken. They are adjustable. Hm! Micrometer accuracy for reducing the light. The last one could reflect through this slot. It's light that does it, Thurston, it's light that does it!"

"Does what?" Thurston had followed the other's analysis of the diffusion process. "The light that would finally reach that slot would be hardly perceptible."

"It's the agent," said MacGregor, "the activator—the catalyst! What does it strike upon? I must know—I must!"

The waves were splashing outside the shell. Thurston turned in a feverish search of the unexplored depths. There was a surprising simplicity, an absence of complicated mechanism. The generator, with its tremendous braces to carry its thrust to the framework itself, filled most of the space. Some of the ribs were thicker, he noticed. Solid metal, as if they might carry great weights. Resting upon them were ranged numbers of objects. They were like eggs, slender, and

inches in length. On some were propellers. They worked through the shells on long slender rods. Each was threaded finely—an adjustable arm engaged the thread. Thurston called excitedly to the other.

"Here they are," he said. "Look! Here are the shells. Here's what blew us up!"

He pointed to the slim shafts with their little propellerlike fans. "Adjustable, see? Unwind in their fall ... set 'em for any length of travel ... fires the charge in the air. That's how they wiped out our air fleet."

There were others without the propellers; they had fins to hold them nose downward. On each nose was a small rounded cap.

"Detonators of some sort," said MacGregor. "We've got to have one. We must get it out quick; the tide's coming in." He laid his hands upon one of the slim, egg-shaped things. He lifted, then strained mightily. But the object did not rise; it only rolled sluggishly.

The scientist stared at it amazed. "Specific gravity," he exclaimed, "beyond anything known! There's nothing on earth ... there is no such substance ... no form of matter...." His eyes were incredulous.

"Lots to learn," Thurston answered grimly. "We've yet to learn how to fight off the other four."

The other nodded. "Here's the secret," he said. "These shells liberate the same gas that drives the machine. Solve one and we solve both—then we learn how to combat it. But how to remove it—that is the problem. You and I can never lift this out of here."

His glance darted about. There was a small door in the metal beam. The groove in which the shells were placed led to it; it was a port for launching the projectiles. He moved it, opened it. A dash of spray struck him in the face. He glanced inquiringly at his companion.

"Dare we do it?" he asked. "Slide one of them out?"

Each man looked long into the eyes of the other. Was this, then, the end of their terrible night? One shell to be dropped—then a bursting volcano to blast them to eternity....

"The boys in the planes risked it," said Thurston quietly. "They got theirs." He stopped for a broken fragment of steel. "Try one with a fan on; it hasn't a detonator."

The men pried at the slim thing. It slid slowly toward the open port.

One heave and it balanced on the edge, then vanished abruptly. The spray was cold on their faces. They breathed heavily with the realization that they still lived.

There were days of horror that followed, horror tempered by a numbing paralysis of all emotions. There were bodies by thousands to be heaped in the pit where San Diego had stood, to be buried beneath countless tons of debris and dirt. Trains brought an army of helpers; airplanes came with doctors and nurses and the beginning of a mountain of supplies. The need was there; it must be met. Yet the whole world was waiting while it helped, waiting for the next blow to fall.

Telegraph service was improvised, and radio receivers rushed in. The news of the world was theirs once more. And it told of a terrified, waiting world. There would be no temporizing now on the part of the invaders. They had seen the airplanes swarming from the ground—they would know an airdrome next time from the air. Thurston had noted the windows in the great shell, windows of dull-colored glass which would protect the darkness of the interior, essential to life for the horrible occupant, but through which it could see. It could watch all directions at once.

The great shell had vanished from the shore. Pounding waves and

the shifting sands of high tide had obliterated all trace. More than once had Thurston uttered devout thanks for the chance shell from an anti-aircraft gun that had entered the funnel beneath the machine, had bent and twisted the arrangement of mirrors that he and MacGregor had seen, and, exploding, had cracked and broken the domed roof of the bulb. They had learned little, but MacGregor was up north within reach of Los Angeles laboratories. And he had with him the slim cylinder of death. He was studying, thinking.

Telephone service had been established for official business. The whole nation-wide system, for that matter, was under military control. The Secretary of War had flown back to Washington. The whole world was on a war basis. War! And none knew where they should defend themselves, nor how.

An orderly rushed Thurston to the telephone. "You are wanted at once; Los Angeles calling."

The voice of MacGregor was cool and unhurried as Thurston listened. "Grab a plane, old man," he was saying, "and come up here on the jump."

The phrase brought a grim smile to Thurston's tired lips. "Hell's popping!" the Secretary of War had added on that evening those long

ages before. Did MacGregor have something? Was a different kind of hell preparing to pop? The thoughts flashed through the listener's mind.

"I need a good deputy," MacGregor said. "You may be the whole works—may have to carry on—but I'll tell you it all later. Meet me at the Biltmore."

"In less than two hours," Thurston assured him.

A plane was at his disposal. Riley's legs were functioning again, after a fashion. They kept the appointment with minutes to spare.

"Come on," said MacGregor, "I'll talk to you in the car." The automobile whirled them out of the city to race off upon a winding highway that climbed into far hills. There was twenty miles of this; MacGregor had time for his talk.

"They've struck," he told the two men. "They were over Germany yesterday. The news was kept quiet: I got the last report a half-hour ago. They pretty well wiped out Berlin. No air-force there. France and England sent a swarm of planes, from the reports. Poor devils! No need to tell you what they got. We've seen it first hand. They headed west over the Atlantic, the four machines. Gave England a

burst or two from high up, paused over New York, then went on. But they're here somewhere, we think. Now listen:

"How long was it from the time when you saw the first monster until we heard from them again?"

Thurston forced his mind back to those days that seemed so far in the past. He tried to remember.

"Four days," broke in Riley. "It was the fourth day after we found the devil feeding."

"Feeding!" interrupted the scientist. "That's the point I am making. Four days. Remember that!

"And we knew they were down in the Argentine five days ago—that's another item kept from an hysterical public. They slaughtered some thousands of cattle; there were scores of them found where the devils—I'll borrow Riley's word—where the devils had fed. Nothing left but hide and bones.

"And—mark this—that was four days before they appeared over Berlin.

"Why? Don't ask me. Do they have to lie quiet for that period miles

up there in space? God knows. Perhaps! These things seem outside the knowledge of a deity. But enough of that! Remember: four days! Let us assume that there is this four days waiting period. It will help us to time them. I'll come back to that later.

"Here is what I have been doing. We know that light is a means of attack. I believe that the detonators we saw on those bombs merely opened a seal in the shell and forced in a flash of some sort. I believe that radiant energy is what fires the blast.

"What is it that explodes? Nobody knows. We have opened the shell, working in the absolute blackness of a room a hundred feet underground. We found in it a powder—two powders, to be exact.

"They are mixed. One is finely divided, the other rather granular. Their specific gravity is enormous, beyond anything known to physical science unless it would be the hypothetical neutron masses we think are in certain stars. But this is not matter as we know matter; it is something new.

"Our theory is this: the hydrogen atom has been split, resolved into components, not of electrons and the proton centers, but held at some halfway point of decomposition. Matter composed only of neutrons would be heavy beyond belief. This fits the theory in that

respect. But the point is this: When these solids are formed—they are dense—they represent in a cubic centimeter possibly a cubic mile of hydrogen gas under normal pressure. That's a guess, but it will give you the idea.

"Not compressed, you understand, but all the elements present in other than elemental form for the reconstruction of the atom ... for a million billions of atoms.

"Then the light strikes it. These dense solids become instantly a gas—miles of it held in that small space.

"There you have it: the gas, the explosion, the entire absence of heat—which is to say, its terrific cold—when it expands."

Slim Riley was looking bewildered but game. "Sure, I saw it snow," he affirmed, "so I guess the rest must be O.K. But what are we going to do about it? You say light kills 'em, and fires their bombs. But how can we let light into those big steel shells, or the little ones either?"

"Not through those thick walls," said MacGregor. "Not light. One of our anti-aircraft shells made a direct hit. That might not happen again in a million shots. But there are other forms of radiant energy

that do penetrate steel...."

The car had stopped beside a grove of eucalyptus. A barren, sun-baked hillside stretched beyond. MacGregor motioned them to alight.

Riley was afire with optimism. "And do you believe it?" he asked eagerly. "Do you believe that we've got 'em licked?"

Thurston, too, looked into MacGregor's face: Riley was not the only one who needed encouragement. But the gray eyes were suddenly tired and hopeless.

"You ask what I believe," said the scientist slowly. "I believe we are witnessing the end of the world, our world of humans, their struggles, their grave hopes and happiness and aspirations...."

He was not looking at them. His gaze was far off in space.

"Men will struggle and fight with their puny weapons, but these monsters will win, and they will have their way with us. Then more of them will come. The world, I believe, is doomed...."

He straightened his shoulders. "But we can die fighting," he added, and pointed over the hill.

"Over there," he said, "in the valley beyond, is a charge of their explosive and a little apparatus of mine. I intend to fire the charge from a distance of three hundred yards. I expect to be safe, perfectly safe. But accidents happen.

"In Washington a plane is being prepared. I have given instructions through hours of phoning. They are working night and day. It will contain a huge generator for producing my ray. Nothing new! Just the product of our knowledge of radiant energy up to date. But the man who flies that plane will die—horribly. No time to experiment with protection. The rays will destroy him, though he may live a month.

"I am asking you," he told Cyrus Thurston, "to handle that plane. You may be of service to the world—you may find you are utterly powerless. You surely will die. But you know the machines and the monsters; your knowledge may be of value in an attack." He waited. The silence lasted for only a moment.

"Why, sure," said Cyrus Thurston.

He looked at the eucalyptus grove with earnest appraisal. The sun made lovely shadows among their stripped trunks: the world was a beautiful place. A lingering death, MacGregor had intimated—and

horrible.... "Why, sure," he repeated steadily.

Slim Riley shoved him firmly aside to stand facing MacGregor.

"Sure, hell!" he said. "I'm your man, Mr. MacGregor.

"What do you know about flying?" he asked Cyrus Thurston. "You're good—for a beginner. But men like you two have got brains, and I'm thinkin' the world will be needin' them. Now me, all I'm good for is holdin' a shtick"—his brogue had returned to his speech, and was evidence of his earnestness.

"And, besides"—the smile faded from his lips, and his voice was suddenly soft—"them boys we saw take their last flip was just pilots to you, just a bunch of good fighters. Well, they're buddies of mine. I fought beside some of them in France.... I belong!"

He grinned happily at Thurston. "Besides," he said, "what do you know about dog-fights?"

MacGregor gripped him by the hand. "You win," he said. "Report to Washington. The Secretary of War has all the dope."

He turned to Thurston. "Now for you! Get this! The enemy machines almost attacked New York. One of them came low, then went back,

and the four flashed out of sight toward the west. It is my belief that New York is next, but the devils are hungry. The beast that attacked us was ravenous, remember. They need food and lots of it. You will hear of their feeding, and you can count on four days. Keep Riley informed—that's your job.

"Now I'm going over the hill. If this experiment works, there's a chance we can repeat it on a larger scale. No certainty, but a chance! I'll be back. Full instructions at the hotel in case...." He vanished into the scrub growth.

"Not exactly encouraging," Thurston pondered, "but he's a good man, Mac, a good egg! Not as big a brain as the one we saw, but perhaps it's a better one—cleaner—and it's working!"

They were sheltered under the brow of the hill, but the blast from the valley beyond rocked them like an earthquake. They rushed to the top of the knoll. MacGregor was standing in the valley; he waved them a greeting and shouted something unintelligible.

The gas had mushroomed into a cloud of steamy vapor. From above came snowflakes to whirl in the churning mass, then fall to the ground. A wind came howling about them to beat upon the cloud. It swirled slowly back and down the valley. The figure of MacGregor

vanished in its smothering embrace.

"Exit, MacGregor!" said Cyrus Thurston softly. He held tight to the struggling figure of Slim Riley.

"He couldn't live a minute in that atmosphere of hydrogen," he explained. "They can—the devils!—but not a good egg like Mac. It's our job now—yours and mine."

Slowly the gas retreated, lifted to permit their passage down the slope.

MacGregor was a good prophet. Thurston admitted that when, four days later, he stood on the roof of the Equitable Building in lower New York.

The monsters had fed as predicted. Out in Wyoming a desolate area marked the place of their meal, where a great herd of cattle lay smothered and frozen. There were ranch houses, too, in the circle of destruction, their occupants frozen stiff as the carcasses that dotted the plains. The country had stood tense for the following blow. Only Thurston had lived in certainty of a few days reprieve. And now had come the fourth day.

In Washington was Riley. Thurston had been in touch with him frequently.

"Sure, it's a crazy machine," the pilot had told him, "and 'tis not much I think of it at all. Neither bullets nor guns, just this big glass contraption and speed. She's fast, man, she's fast ... but it's little hope I have." And Thurston, remembering the scientist's words, was heartless and sick with dreadful certainty.

There were aircraft ready near New York; it was generally felt that here was the next objective. The enemy had looked it over carefully. And Washington, too, was guarded. The nation's capital must receive what little help the aircraft could afford.

There were other cities waiting for destruction. If not this time—later! The horror hung over them all.

The fourth day! And Thurston was suddenly certain of the fate of New York. He hurried to a telephone. Of the Secretary of War he implored assistance.

"Send your planes," he begged. "Here's where we will get it next. Send Riley. Let's make a last stand—win or lose."

"I'll give you a squadron," was the concession. "What difference whether they die there or here...?" The voice was that of a weary man, weary and sleepless and hopeless.

"Good-by Cy, old man!" The click of the receiver sounded in Thurston's ear. He returned to the roof for his vigil.

To wait, to stride nervously back and forth in impotent expectancy. He could leave, go out into open country, but what were a few days or months—or a year—with this horror upon them? It was the end. MacGregor was right. "Good old Mac!"

There were airplanes roaring overhead. It meant.... Thurston abruptly was cold; a chill gripped at his heart.

The paroxysm passed. He was doubled with laughter—or was it he who was laughing? He was suddenly buoyantly carefree. Who was he that it mattered? Cyrus Thurston—an ant! And their ant-hill was about to be snuffed out....

He walked over to a waiting group and clapped one man on the shoulder. "Well, how does it feel to be an ant?" he inquired and laughed loudly at the jest. "You and your millions of dollars, your acres of factories, your steamships, railroads!"

The man looked at him strangely and edged cautiously away. His eyes, like those of the others, had a dazed, stricken look. A woman was sobbing softly as she clung to her husband. From the streets far below came a quavering shrillness of sound.

The planes gathered in climbing circles. Far on the horizon were four tiny glinting specks....

Thurston stared until his eyes were stinging. He was walking in a waking sleep as he made his way to the stone coping beyond which was the street far below. He was dead—dead!—right this minute. What were a few minutes more or less? He could climb over the coping; none of the huddled, fear-gripped group would stop him. He could step out into space and fool them, the devils. They could never kill him....

What was it MacGregor had said? Good egg, MacGregor! "But we can die fighting...." Yes, that was it—die fighting. But he couldn't fight; he could only wait. Well, what were the others doing, down there in the streets—in their homes? He could wait with them, die with them....

He straightened slowly and drew one long breath. He looked steadily and unafraid at the advancing specks. They were larger now. He

could see their round forms. The planes were less noisy: they were far up in the heights—climbing—climbing.

The bulbs came slantingly down. They were separating. Thurston wondered vaguely.

What had they done in Berlin? Yes, he remembered. Placed themselves at the four corners of a great square and wiped out the whole city in one explosion. Four bombs dropped at the same instant while they shot up to safety in the thin air. How did they communicate? Thought transference, most likely. Telepathy between those great brains, one to another. A plane was falling. It curved and swooped in a trail of flame, then fell straight toward the earth. They were fighting....

Thurston stared above. There were clusters of planes diving down from on high. Machine-guns stuttered faintly. "Machine-guns—toys! Brave, that was it! 'We can die fighting.'" His thoughts were far off; it was like listening to another's mind.

The air was filled with swelling clouds. He saw them before the blast struck where he stood. The great building shuddered at the impact. There were things falling from the clouds, wrecks of planes, blazing and shattered. Still came others; he saw them faintly through the

clouds. They came in from the West; they had gone far to gain altitude. They drove down from the heights—the enemy had drifted—they were over the bay.

More clouds, and another blast thundering at the city. There were specks, Thurston saw, falling into the water.

Again the invaders came down from the heights where they had escaped their own shattering attack. There was the faint roar of motors behind, from the south. The squadron from Washington passed overhead.

They surely had seen the fate that awaited. And they drove on to the attack, to strike at an enemy that shot instantly into the sky leaving crashing destruction about the torn dead.

"Now!" said Cyrus Thurston aloud.

The big bulbs were back. They floated easily in the air, a plume of vapor billowing beneath. They were ranging to the four corners of a great square.

One plane only was left, coming in from the south, a lone straggler, late for the fray. One plane! Thurston's shoulders sagged heavily. All

they had left! It went swiftly overhead.... It was fast—fast. Thurston suddenly knew. It was Riley in that plane.

"Go back, you fool!"—he was screaming at the top of his voice —"Back—back—you poor, damned, decent Irishman!"

Tears were streaming down his face. "His buddies," Riley had said. And this was Riley, driving swiftly in, alone, to avenge them....

He saw dimly as the swift plane sped over the first bulb, on and over the second. The soft roar of gas from the machines drowned the sound of his engine. The plane passed them in silence to bank sharply toward the third corner of the forming square.

He was looking them over, Thurston thought. And the damn beasts disregarded so contemptible an opponent. He could still leave. "For God's sake, Riley, beat it—escape!"

Thurston's mind was solely on the fate of the lone voyager—until the impossible was borne in upon him.

The square was disrupted. Three great bulbs were now drifting. The wind was carrying them out toward the bay. They were coming down in a long, smooth descent. The plane shot like a winged rocket

at the fourth great, shining ball. To the watcher, aghast with sudden hope, it seemed barely to crawl.

"The ray! The ray...." Thurston saw as if straining eyes had pierced through the distance to see the invisible. He saw from below the swift plane, the streaming, intangible ray. That was why Riley had flown closely past and above them—the ray poured from below. His throat was choking him, strangling....

The last enemy took alarm. Had it seen the slow sinking of its companions, failed to hear them in reply to his mental call? The shining pear shape shot violently upward; the attacking plane rolled to a vertical bank as it missed the threatening clouds of exhaust. "What do you know about dog-fights?" And Riley had grinned ... Riley belonged!

The bulb swelled before Thurston's eyes in its swift descent. It canted to one side to head off the struggling plane that could never escape, did not try to escape. The steady wings held true upon their straight course. From above came the silver meteor; it seemed striking at the very plane itself. It was almost upon it before it belched forth the cushioning blast of gas.

Through the forming clouds a plane bored in swiftly. It rolled slowly,

was flying upside down. It was under the enemy! Its ray.... Thurston was thrown a score of feet away to crash helpless into the stone coping by the thunderous crash of the explosion.

There were fragments falling from a dense cloud—fragments of curved and silvery metal ... the wing of a plane danced and fluttered in the air....

"He fired its bombs," whispered Thurston in a shaking voice. "He killed the other devils where they lay—he destroyed this with its own explosive. He flew upside down to shoot up with the ray, to set off its shells...."

His mind was fumbling with the miracle of it. "Clever pilot, Riley, in a dog-fight...." And then he realized.

Cyrus Thurston, millionaire sportsman, sank slowly, numbly to the roof of the Equitable Building that still stood. And New York was still there ... and the whole world....

He sobbed weakly, brokenly. Through his dazed brain flashed a sudden, mind-saving thought. He laughed foolishly through his sobs.

"And you said he'd die horribly, Mac, a horrible death." His head

dropped upon his arms, unconscious—and safe—with the rest of humanity.

#10 The Corpse on the Grating, by Hugh Barnett Cave:

In the gloomy depths of the old warehouse dale saw a thing that drew a scream of horror to his dry lips. It was a corpse—the mold of decay on its long-dead features—and yet it was alive!

Aproximate word count: 5,400

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

It was ten o'clock on the morning of December 5 when M. S. and I left the study of Professor Daimler. You are perhaps acquainted with M. S. His name appears constantly in the pages of the Illustrated News, in conjunction with some very technical article on psycho-analysis or with some extensive study of the human brain and its functions. He is a psycho-fanatic, more or less, and has spent an entire lifetime of some seventy-odd years in pulling apart human skulls for the purpose of investigation. Lovely pursuit!

For some twenty years I have mocked him, in a friendly, half-hearted fashion. I am a medical man, and my own profession is one that does

not sympathize with radicals.

As for Professor Daimler, the third member of our triangle—perhaps, if I take a moment to outline the events of that evening, the Professor's part in what follows will be less obscure. We had called on him, M. S. and I, at his urgent request. His rooms were in a narrow, unlighted street just off the square, and Daimler himself opened the door to us. A tall, loosely built chap he was, standing in the doorway like a motionless ape, arms half extended.

"I've summoned you, gentlemen," he said quietly, "because you two, of all London, are the only persons who know the nature of my recent experiments. I should like to acquaint you with the results!"

He led the way to his study, then kicked the door shut with his foot, seizing my arm as he did so. Quietly he dragged me to the table that stood against the farther wall. In the same even, unemotional tone of a man completely sure of himself, he commanded me to inspect it.

For a moment, in the semi-gloom of the room, I saw nothing. At length, however, the contents of the table revealed themselves, and I distinguished a motley collection of test tubes, each filled with some fluid. The tubes were attached to each other by some ingenious arrangement of thistles, and at the end of the table, where a chance

blow could not brush it aside, lay a tiny phial of the resulting serum. From the appearance of the table, Daimler had evidently drawn a certain amount of gas from each of the smaller tubes, distilling them through acid into the minute phial at the end. Yet even now, as I stared down at the fantastic paraphernalia before me, I could sense no conclusive reason for its existence.

I turned to the Professor with a quiet stare of bewilderment. He smiled.

"The experiment is over," he said. "As to its conclusion, you, Dale, as a medical man, will be sceptical. And you"—turning to M. S. —"as a scientist you will be amazed. I, being neither physician nor scientist, am merely filled with wonder!"

He stepped to a long, square table-like structure in the center of the room. Standing over it, he glanced quizzically at M. S., then at me.

"For a period of two weeks," he went on, "I have kept, on the table here, the body of a man who has been dead more than a month. I have tried, gentlemen, with acid combinations of my own origination, to bring that body back to life. And ... I have—failed!

"But," he added quickly, noting the smile that crept across my face,

"that failure was in itself worth more than the average scientist's greatest achievement! You know, Dale, that heat, if a man is not truly dead, will sometimes resurrect him. In a case of epilepsy, for instance, victims have been pronounced dead only to return to life—sometimes in the grave.

"I say 'if a man be not truly dead.' But what if that man *is* truly dead? Does the cure alter itself in any manner? The motor of your car dies—do you bury it? You do not; you locate the faulty part, correct it, and infuse new life. And so, gentlemen, after remedying the ruptured heart of this dead man, by operation, I proceeded to bring him back to life.

"I used heat. Terrific heat will sometimes originate a spark of new life in something long dead. Gentlemen, on the fourth day of my tests, following a continued application of electric and acid heat, the patient—"

Daimler leaned over the table and took up a cigarette. Lighting it, he dropped the match and resumed his monologue.

"The patient turned suddenly over and drew his arm weakly across his eyes. I rushed to his side. When I reached him, the body was once again stiff and lifeless. And—it has remained so."

The Professor stared at us quietly, waiting for comment. I answered him, as carelessly as I could, with a shrug of my shoulders.

"Professor, have you ever played with the dead body of a frog?" I said softly.

He shook his head silently.

"You would find it interesting sport," I told him. "Take a common dry cell battery with enough voltage to render a sharp shock. Then apply your wires to various parts of the frog's anatomy. If you are lucky, and strike the right set of muscles, you will have the pleasure of seeing a dead frog leap suddenly forward. Understand, he will not regain life. You have merely released his dead muscles by shock, and sent him bolting."

The Professor did not reply. I could feel his eyes on me, and had I turned, I should probably had found M. S. glaring at me in honest hate. These men were students of mesmerism, of spiritualism, and my commonplace contradiction was not over welcome.

"You are cynical, Dale," said M. S. coldly, "because you do not understand!"

"Understand? I am a doctor—not a ghost!"

But M. S. had turned eagerly to the Professor.

"Where is this body—this experiment?" he demanded.

Daimler shook his head. Evidently he had acknowledged failure and did not intend to drag his dead man before our eyes, unless he could bring that man forth alive, upright, and ready to join our conversation!

"I've put it away," he said distantly. "There is nothing more to be done, now that our reverend doctor has insisted in making a matter of fact thing out of our experiment. You understand, I had not intended to go in for wholesale resurrection, even if I had met with success. It was my belief that a dead body, like a dead piece of mechanism, can be brought to life again, provided we are intelligent enough to discover the secret. And by God, it is *still* my belief!"

That was the situation, then, when M. S. and I paced slowly back along the narrow street that contained the Professor's dwelling-place. My companion was strangely silent. More than once I felt his eyes upon me in an uncomfortable stare, yet he said nothing. Nothing, that is, until I had opened the conversation with some casual remark

about the lunacy of the man we had just left.

"You are wrong in mocking him, Dale," M. S. replied bitterly. "Daimler is a man of science. He is no child, experimenting with a toy; he is a grown man who has the courage to believe in his powers. One of these days...."

He had intended to say that some day I should respect the Professor's efforts. One of these days! The interval of time was far shorter than anything so indefinite. The first event, with its succeeding series of horrors, came within the next three minutes.

We had reached a more deserted section of the square, a black, uninhabited street extending like a shadowed band of darkness between gaunt, high walls. I had noticed for some time that the stone structure beside us seemed to be unbroken by door or window—that it appeared to be a single gigantic building, black and forbidding. I mentioned the fact to M. S.

"The warehouse," he said simply. "A lonely, God-forsaken place. We shall probably see the flicker of the watchman's light in one of the upper chinks."

At his words, I glanced up. True enough, the higher part of the grim

structure was punctured by narrow, barred openings. Safety vaults, probably. But the light, unless its tiny gleam was somewhere in the inner recesses of the warehouse, was dead. The great building was like an immense burial vault, a tomb—silent and lifeless.

We had reached the most forbidding section of the narrow street, where a single arch-lamp overhead cast a halo of ghastly yellow light over the pavement. At the very rim of the circle of illumination, where the shadows were deeper and more silent, I could make out the black mouldings of a heavy iron grating. The bars of metal were designed, I believe, to seal the side entrance of the great warehouse from night marauders. It was bolted in place and secured with a set of immense chains, immovable.

This much I saw as my intent gaze swept the wall before me. This huge tomb of silence held for me a peculiar fascination, and as I paced along beside my gloomy companion, I stared directly ahead of me into the darkness of the street. I wish to God my eyes had been closed or blinded!

He was hanging on the grating. Hanging there, with white, twisted hands clutching the rigid bars of iron, straining to force them apart. His whole distorted body was forced against the barrier, like the form of a madman struggling to escape from his cage. His face—the

image of it still haunts me whenever I see iron bars in the darkness of a passage—was the face of a man who has died from utter, stark horror. It was frozen in a silent shriek of agony, staring out at me with fiendish maliciousness. Lips twisted apart. White teeth gleaming in the light. Bloody eyes, with a horrible glare of colorless pigment. And—*dead*.

I believe M. S. saw him at the very instant I recoiled. I felt a sudden grip on my arm; and then, as an exclamation came harshly from my companion's lips, I was pulled forward roughly. I found myself staring straight into the dead eyes of that fearful thing before me, found myself standing rigid, motionless, before the corpse that hung within reach of my arm.

And then, through that overwhelming sense of the horrible, came the quiet voice of my comrade—the voice of a man who looks upon death as nothing more than an opportunity for research.

"The fellow has been frightened to death, Dale. Frightened most horribly. Note the expression of his mouth, the evident struggle to force these bars apart and escape. Something has driven fear to his soul, killed him."

I remember the words vaguely. When M. S. had finished speaking, I

did not reply. Not until he had stepped forward and bent over the distorted face of the thing before me, did I attempt to speak. When I did, my thoughts were a jargon.

"What, in God's name," I cried, "could have brought such horror to a strong man? What—"

"Loneliness, perhaps," suggested M. S. with a smile. "The fellow is evidently the watchman. He is alone, in a huge, deserted pit of darkness, for hours at a time. His light is merely a ghostly ray of illumination, hardly enough to do more than increase the darkness. I have heard of such cases before."

He shrugged his shoulders. Even as he spoke, I sensed the evasion in his words. When I replied, he hardly heard my answer, for he had suddenly stepped forward, where he could look directly into those fear twisted eyes.

"Dale," he said at length, turning slowly to face me, "you ask for an explanation of this horror? There *is* an explanation. It is written with an almost fearful clearness on this fellow's mind. Yet if I tell you, you will return to your old skepticism—your damnable habit of disbelief!"

I looked at him quietly. I had heard M. S. claim, at other times, that he could read the thoughts of a dead man by the mental image that lay on that man's brain. I had laughed at him. Evidently, in the present moment, he recalled those laughs. Nevertheless, he faced me seriously.

"I can see two things, Dale," he said deliberately. "One of them is a dark, narrow room—a room piled with indistinct boxes and crates, and with an open door bearing the black number 4167. And in that open doorway, coming forward with slow steps—alive, with arms extended and a frightful face of passion—is a decayed human form. A corpse, Dale. A man who has been dead for many days, and is now —*alive*!"

M. S. turned slowly and pointed with upraised hand to the corpse on the grating.

"That is why," he said simply, "this fellow died from horror."

His words died into emptiness. For a moment I stared at him. Then, in spite of our surroundings, in spite of the late hour, the loneliness of the street, the awful thing beside us, I laughed.

He turned upon me with a snarl. For the first time in my life I saw

M. S. convulsed with rage. His old, lined face had suddenly become savage with intensity.

"You laugh at me, Dale," he thundered. "By God, you make a mockery out of a science that I have spent more than my life in studying! You call yourself a medical man—and you are not fit to carry the name! I will wager you, man, that your laughter is not backed by courage!"

I fell away from him. Had I stood within reach, I am sure he would have struck me. Struck me! And I have been nearer to M. S. for the past ten years than any man in London. And as I retreated from his temper, he reached forward to seize my arm. I could not help but feel impressed at his grim intentness.

"Look here, Dale," he said bitterly, "I will wager you a hundred pounds that you will not spend the remainder of this night in the warehouse above you! I will wager a hundred pounds against your own courage that you will not back your laughter by going through what this fellow has gone through. That you will not prowl through the corridors of this great structure until you have found room 4167 —*and remain in that room until dawn*!"

There was no choice. I glanced at the dead man, at the face of fear

and the clutching, twisted hands, and a cold dread filled me. But to refuse my friend's wager would have been to brand myself an empty coward. I had mocked him. Now, whatever the cost, I must stand ready to pay for that mockery.

"Room 4167?" I replied quietly, in a voice which I made every effort to control, lest he should discover the tremor in it. "Very well, I will do it!"

It was nearly midnight when I found myself alone, climbing a musty, winding ramp between the first and second floors of the deserted building. Not a sound, except the sharp intake of my breath and the dismal creak of the wooden stairs, echoed through that tomb of death. There was no light, not even the usual dim glow that is left to illuminate an unused corridor. Moreover, I had brought no means of light with me—nothing but a half empty box of safety matches which, by some unholy premonition, I had forced myself to save for some future moment. The stairs were black and difficult, and I mounted them slowly, groping with both hands along the rough wall.

I had left M. S. some few moments before. In his usual decisive manner he had helped me to climb the iron grating and lower myself to the sealed alley-way on the farther side. Then, leaving him without a word, for I was bitter against the triumphant tone of his

parting words, I proceeded into the darkness, fumbling forward until I had discovered the open door in the lower part of the warehouse.

And then the ramp, winding crazily upward—upward—upward, seemingly without end. I was seeking blindly for that particular room which was to be my destination. Room 4167, with its high number, could hardly be on the lower floors, and so I had stumbled upward....

It was at the entrance of the second floor corridor that I struck the first of my desultory supply of matches, and by its light discovered a placard nailed to the wall. The thing was yellow with age and hardly legible. In the drab light of the match I had difficulty in reading it—but, as far as I can remember, the notice went something like this:

WAREHOUSE RULES

1. No light shall be permitted in any room or corridor, as a prevention against fire.

2. No person shall be admitted to rooms or corridors unless accompanied by an employee.

3. A watchman shall be on the premises from 7 P.M. until

6 A.M. He shall make the round of the corridors every hour during that interval, at a quarter past the hour.

4. Rooms are located by their numbers: the first figure in the room number indicating its floor location.

I could read no further. The match in my fingers burned to a black thread and dropped. Then, with the burnt stump still in my hand, I groped through the darkness to the bottom of the second ramp.

Room 4167, then, was on the fourth floor—the topmost floor of the structure. I must confess that the knowledge did not bring any renewed burst of courage! The top floor! Three black stair-pits would lie between me and the safety of escape. There would be no escape! No human being in the throes of fear could hope to discover that tortured outlet, could hope to grope his way through Stygian gloom down a triple ramp of black stairs. And even though he succeeded in reaching the lower corridors, there was still a blind alley-way, sealed at the outer end by a high grating of iron bars....

Escape! The mockery of it caused me to stop suddenly in my ascent and stand rigid, my whole body trembling violently.

But outside, in the gloom of the street, M. S. was waiting, waiting

with that fiendish glare of triumph that would brand me a man without courage. I could not return to face him, not though all the horrors of hell inhabited this gruesome place of mystery. And horrors must surely inhabit it, else how could one account for that fearful thing on the grating below? But I had been through horror before. I had seen a man, supposedly dead on the operating table, jerk suddenly to his feet and scream. I had seen a young girl, not long before, awake in the midst of an operation, with the knife already in her frail body. Surely, after those definite horrors, no *unknown* danger would send me cringing back to the man who was waiting so bitterly for me to return.

Those were the thoughts pregnant in my mind as I groped slowly, cautiously along the corridor of the upper floor, searching each closed door for the indistinct number 4167. The place was like the center of a huge labyrinth, a spider-web of black, repelling passages, leading into some central chamber of utter silence and blackness. I went forward with dragging steps, fighting back the dread that gripped me as I went farther and farther from the outlet of escape. And then, after losing myself completely in the gloom, I threw aside all thoughts of return and pushed on with a careless, surface bravado, and laughed aloud.

So, at length, I reached that room of horror, secreted high in the

deeper recesses of the deserted warehouse. The number—God grant I never see it again!—was scrawled in black chalk on the door—4167. I pushed the half-open barrier wide, and entered.

It was a small room, even as M. S. had forewarned me—or as the dead mind of that thing on the grate had forewarned M. S. The glow of my out-thrust match revealed a great stack of dusty boxes and crates, piled against the farther wall. Revealed, too, the black corridor beyond the entrance, and a small, upright table before me.

It was the table, and the stool beside it, that drew my attention and brought a muffled exclamation from my lips. The thing had been thrust out of its usual place, pushed aside as if some frenzied shape had lunged against it. I could make out its former position by the marks on the dusty floor at my feet. Now it was nearer to the center of the room, and had been wrenched sidewise from its holdings. A shudder took hold of me as I looked at it. A living person, sitting on the stool before me, staring at the door, would have wrenched the table in just this manner in his frenzy to escape from the room!

The light of the match died, plunging me into a pit of gloom. I struck another and stepped closer to the table. And there, on the floor, I found two more things that brought fear to my soul. One of them was a heavy flash-lamp—a watchman's lamp—where it had

evidently been dropped. Been dropped in flight! But what awful terror must have gripped the fellow to make him forsake his only means of escape through those black passages? And the second thing —a worn copy of a leather-bound book, flung open on the boards below the stool!

The flash-lamp, thank God! had not been shattered. I switched it on, directing its white circle of light over the room. This time, in the vivid glare, the room became even more unreal. Black walls, clumsy, distorted shadows on the wall, thrown by those huge piles of wooden boxes. Shadows that were like crouching men, groping toward me. And beyond, where the single door opened into a passage of Stygian darkness, that yawning entrance was thrown into hideous detail. Had any upright figure been standing there, the light would have made an unholy phosphorescent specter out of it.

I summoned enough courage to cross the room and pull the door shut. There was no way of locking it. Had I been able to fasten it, I should surely have done so; but the room was evidently an unused chamber, filled with empty refuse. This was the reason, probably, why the watchman had made use of it as a retreat during the intervals between his rounds.

But I had no desire to ponder over the sordidness of my

surroundings. I returned to my stool in silence, and stooping, picked up the fallen book from the floor. Carefully I placed the lamp on the table, where its light would shine on the open page. Then, turning the cover, I began to glance through the thing which the man before me had evidently been studying.

And before I had read two lines, the explanation of the whole horrible thing struck me. I stared dumbly down at the little book and laughed. Laughed harshly, so that the sound of my mad cackle echoed in a thousand ghastly reverberations through the dead corridors of the building.

It was a book of horror, of fantasy. A collection of weird, terrifying, supernatural tales with grotesque illustrations in funereal black and white. And the very line I had turned to, the line which had probably struck terror to that unlucky devil's soul, explained M. S.'s "decayed human form, standing in the doorway with arms extended and a frightful face of passion!" The description—the same description—lay before me, almost in my friend's words. Little wonder that the fellow on the grating below, after reading this orgy of horror, had suddenly gone mad with fright. Little wonder that the picture engraved on his dead mind was a picture of a corpse standing in the doorway of room 4167!

I glanced at that doorway and laughed. No doubt of it, it was that awful description in M. S.'s untempered language that had made me dread my surroundings, not the loneliness and silence of the corridors about me. Now, as I stared at the room, the closed door, the shadows on the wall, I could not repress a grin.

But the grin was not long in duration. A six-hour siege awaited me before I could hear the sound of human voice again—six hours of silence and gloom. I did not relish it. Thank God the fellow before me had had foresight enough to leave his book of fantasy for my amusement!

I turned to the beginning of the story. A lovely beginning it was, outlining in some detail how a certain Jack Fulton, English adventurer, had suddenly found himself imprisoned (by a mysterious black gang of monks, or something of the sort) in a forgotten cell at the monastery of El Toro. The cell, according to the pages before me, was located in the "empty, haunted pits below the stone floors of the structure...." Lovely setting! And the brave Fulton had been secured firmly to a huge metal ring set in the farther wall, opposite the entrance.

I read the description twice. At the end of it I could not help but lift my head to stare at my own surroundings. Except for the location of

the cell, I might have been in they same setting. The same darkness, same silence, same loneliness. Peculiar similarity!

And then: "Fulton lay quietly, without attempt to struggle. In the dark, the stillness of the vaults became unbearable, terrifying. Not a suggestion of sound, except the scraping of unseen rats—"

I dropped the book with a start. From the opposite end of the room in which I sat came a half inaudible scuffling noise—the sound of hidden rodents scrambling through the great pile of boxes. Imagination? I am not sure. At the moment, I would have sworn that the sound was a definite one, that I had heard it distinctly. Now, as I recount this tale of horror, I am not sure.

But I am sure of this: There was no smile on my lips as I picked up the book again with trembling fingers and continued.

"The sound died into silence. For an eternity, the prisoner lay rigid, staring at the open door of his cell. The opening was black, deserted, like the mouth of a deep tunnel, leading to hell. And then, suddenly, from the gloom beyond that opening, came an almost noiseless, padded footfall!"

This time there was no doubt of it. The book fell from my fingers,

dropped to the floor with a clatter. Yet even through the sound of its falling, I heard that fearful sound—the shuffle of a living foot! I sat motionless, staring with bloodless face at the door of room 4167. And as I stared, the sound came again, and again—*the slow tread of dragging footsteps, approaching along the black corridor without*!

I got to my feet like an automaton, swaying heavily. Every drop of courage ebbed from my soul as I stood there, one hand clutching the table, waiting....

And then, with an effort, I moved forward. My hand was outstretched to grasp the wooden handle of the door. And—I did not have the courage. Like a cowed beast I crept back to my place and slumped down on the stool, my eyes still transfixed in a mute stare of terror.

I waited. For more than half an hour I waited, motionless. Not a sound stirred in the passage beyond that closed barrier. Not a suggestion of any living presence came to me. Then, leaning back against the wall with a harsh laugh, I wiped away the cold moisture that had trickled over my forehead into my eyes.

It was another five minutes before I picked up the book again. You call me a fool for continuing it? A fool? I tell you, even a story of

horror is more comfort than a room of grotesque shadows and silence. Even a printed page is better than grim reality!

And so I read on. The story was one of suspense, madness. For the next two pages I read a cunning description of the prisoner's mental reaction. Strangely enough, it conformed precisely with my own.

"Fulton's head had fallen to his chest," the script read. "For an endless while he did not stir, did not dare to lift his eyes. And then, after more than an hour of silent agony and suspense, the boy's head came up mechanically. Came up—and suddenly jerked rigid. A horrible scream burst from his dry lips as he stared—stared like a dead man—at the black entrance to his cell. There, standing without motion in the opening, stood a shrouded figure of death. Empty eyes, glaring with awful hate, bored into his own. Great arms, bony and rotten, extended toward him. Decayed flesh—"

I read no more. Even as I lunged to my feet, with that mad book still gripped in my hand, I heard the door of my room grind open. I screamed, screamed in utter horror at the thing I saw there. Dead? Good God, I do not know. It was a corpse, a dead human body, standing before me like some propped-up thing from the grave. A face half eaten away, terrible in its leering grin. Twisted mouth, with only a suggestion of lips, curled back over broken teeth. Hair—

writhing, distorted—like a mass of moving, bloody coils. And its arms, ghastly white, bloodless, were extended toward me, with open, clutching hands.

It was alive! Alive! Even while I stood there, crouching against the wall, it stepped forward toward me. I saw a heavy shudder pass over it, and the sound of its scraping feet burned its way into my soul. And then, with its second step, the fearful thing stumbled to its knees. The white, gleaming arms, thrown into streaks of living fire by the light of my lamp, flung violently upwards, twisting toward the ceiling. I saw the grin change to an expression of agony, of torment. And then the thing crashed upon me—dead.

With a great cry of fear I stumbled to the door. I groped out of that room of horror, stumbled along the corridor. No light. I left it behind, on the table, to throw a circle of white glare over the decayed, living-dead intruder who had driven me mad.

My return down those winding ramps to the lower floor was a nightmare of fear. I remember that I stumbled, that I plunged through the darkness like a man gone mad. I had no thought of caution, no thought of anything except escape.

And then the lower door, and the alley of gloom. I reached the

grating, flung myself upon it and pressed my face against the bars in a futile effort to escape. The same—as the fear-tortured man—who had—come before—me.

I felt strong hands lifting me up. A dash of cool air, and then the refreshing patter of falling rain.

It was the afternoon of the following day, December 6, when M. S. sat across the table from me in my own study. I had made a rather hesitant attempt to tell him, without dramatics and without dwelling on my own lack of courage, of the events of the previous night.

"You deserved it, Dale," he said quietly. "You are a medical man, nothing more, and yet you mock the beliefs of a scientist as great as Daimler. I wonder—do you still mock the Professor's beliefs?"

"That he can bring a dead man to life?" I smiled, a bit doubtfully.

"I will tell you something, Dale," said M. S. deliberately. He was leaning across the table, staring at me. "The Professor made only one mistake in his great experiment. He did not wait long enough for the effect of his strange acids to work. He acknowledged failure too soon, and got rid of the body." He paused.

"When the Professor stored his patient away, Dale," he said quietly, "he stored it in room 4170, at the great warehouse. If you are acquainted with the place, you will know that room 4170 is directly across the corridor from 4167."

#11 Creatures of the Light, by Sophie Wenzel Ellis:

He had striven to perfect the faultless man of the future, and had succeeded—too well. For in the pitilessly cold eyes of Adam, his super-human creation, Dr. Mundson saw only contempt—and annihilation—for the human race.

Aproximate word count: 14,100

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

In a night club of many lights and much high-pitched laughter, where he had come for an hour of forgetfulness and an execrable dinner, John Northwood was suddenly conscious that Fate had begun shuffling the cards of his destiny for a dramatic game.

First, he was aware that the singularly ugly and deformed man at the next table was gazing at him with an intense, almost excited scrutiny. But, more disturbing than this, was the scowl of hate on the face of another man, as handsome as this other was hideous, who sat in a far corner hidden behind a broad column, with rude elbows on the table,

gawking first at Northwood and then at the deformed, almost hideous man.

Northwood's blood chilled over the expression on the handsome, fair-haired stranger's perfectly carved face. If a figure in marble could display a fierce, unnatural passion, it would seem no more eldritch than the hate in the icy blue eyes.

It was not a new experience for Northwood to be stared at: he was not merely a good-looking young fellow of twenty-five, he was scenery, magnificent and compelling. Furthermore, he had been in the public eye for years, first as a precocious child and, later, as a brilliant young scientist. Yet, for all his experience with hero worshippers to put an adamantine crust on his sensibilities, he grew warm-eared under the gaze of these two strangers—this hunchback with a face like a grotesque mask in a Greek play, this other who, even handsomer than himself, chilled the blood queerly with the cold perfection of his godlike masculine beauty.

Northwood sensed something familiar about the hunchback. Somewhere he had seen that huge, round, intelligent face splattered with startling features. The very breadth of the man's massive brow was not altogether unknown to him, nor could Northwood look into the mournful, near-sighted black eyes without trying to recall when

and where he had last seen them.

But this other of the marble-perfect nose and jaw, the blond, thick-waved hair, was totally a stranger, whom Northwood fervently hoped he would never know too well.

Trying to analyze the queer repugnance that he felt for this handsome, boldly staring fellow, Northwood decided: "He's like a newly-made wax figure endowed with life."

Shivering over his own fantastic thought, he again glanced swiftly at the hunchback, who he noticed was playing with his coffee, evidently to prolong the meal.

One year of calm-headed scientific teaching in a famous old eastern university had not made him callous to mysteries. Thus, with a feeling of high adventure, he finished his supper and prepared to go. From the corner of his eye, he saw the hunchback leave his seat, while the handsome man behind the column rose furtively, as though he, too, intended to follow.

Northwood was out in the dusky street about thirty seconds, when the hunchback came from the foyer. Without apparently noticing Northwood, he hailed a taxi. For a moment, he stood still, waiting

for the taxi to pull up at the curb. Standing thus, with the street light limning every unnatural angle of his twisted body and every queer abnormality of his huge features, he looked almost repulsive.

On his way to the taxi, his thick shoulder jostled the younger man. Northwood felt something strike his foot, and, stooping in the crowded street, picked up a black leather wallet.

"Wait!" he shouted as the hunchback stepped into the waiting taxi.

But the man did not falter. In a moment, Northwood lost sight of him as the taxi moved away.

He debated with himself whether or not he should attempt to follow. And while he stood thus in indecision, the handsome stranger approached him.

"Good evening to you," he said curtly. His rich, musical voice, for all its deepness, held a faint hint of the tremulous, birdlike notes heard in the voice of a young child who has not used his vocal chords long enough for them to have lost their exquisite newness.

"Good evening," echoed Northwood, somewhat uncertainly. A sudden aura of repulsion swept coldly over him. Seen close, with the

brilliant light of the street directly on his too perfect face, the man was more sinister than in the café. Yet Northwood, struggling desperately for a reason to explain his violent dislike, could not discover why he shrank from this splendid creature, whose eyes and flesh had a new, fresh appearance rarely seen except in very young boys.

"I want what you picked up," went on the stranger.

"It isn't yours!" Northwood flashed back. Ah! that effluvium of hatred which seemed to weave a tangible net around him!

"Nor is it yours. Give it to me!"

"You're insolent, aren't you?"

"If you don't give it to me, you will be sorry." The man did not raise his voice in anger, yet the words whipped Northwood with almost physical violence. "If he knew that I saw everything that happened in there—that I am talking to you at this moment—he would tremble with fear."

"But you can't intimidate me."

"No?" For a long moment, the cold blue eyes held his

contemptuously. "No? I can't frighten you—you worm of the Black Age?"

Before Northwood's horrified sight, he vanished; vanished as though he had turned suddenly to air and floated away.

The street was not crowded at that time, and there was no pressing group of bodies to hide the splendid creature. Northwood gawked stupidly, mouth half open, eyes searching wildly everywhere. The man was gone. He had simply disappeared, in this sane, electric-lighted street.

Suddenly, close to Northwood's ear, grated a derisive laugh. "I can't frighten you?" From nowhere came that singularly young-old voice.

As Northwood jerked his head around to meet blank space, a blow struck the corner of his mouth. He felt the warm blood run over his chin.

"I could take that wallet from you, worm, but you may keep it, and see me later. But remember this—the thing inside never will be yours."

The words fell from empty air.

For several minutes, Northwood waited at the spot, expecting another demonstration of the abnormal, but nothing else occurred. At last, trembling violently, he wiped the thick moisture from his forehead and dabbed at the blood which he still felt on his chin.

But when he looked at his handkerchief, he muttered:

"Well, I'll be jiggered!"

The handkerchief bore not the slightest trace of blood.

Under the light in his bedroom, Northwood examined the wallet. It was made of alligator skin, clasped with a gold signet that bore the initial M. The first pocket was empty; the second yielded an object that sent a warm flush to his face.

It was the photograph of a gloriously beautiful girl, so seductively lovely that the picture seemed almost to be alive. The short, curved upper lip, the full, delicately voluptuous lower, parted slightly in a smile that seemed to linger in every exquisite line of her face. She looked as though she had just spoken passionately, and the spirit of her words had inspired her sweet flesh and eyes.

Northwood turned his head abruptly and groaned, "Good Heavens!"

He had no right to palpitate over the picture of an unknown beauty. Only a month ago, he had become engaged to a young woman whose mind was as brilliant as her face was plain. Always he had vowed that he would never marry a pretty girl, for he detested his own masculine beauty sincerely.

He tried to grasp a mental picture of Mary Burns, who had never stirred in him the emotion that this smiling picture invoked. But, gazing at the picture, he could not remember how his fiancée looked.

Suddenly the picture fell from his fingers and dropped to the floor on its face, revealing an inscription on the back. In a bold, masculine hand, he read: "Your future wife."

"Some lucky fellow is headed for a life of bliss," was his jealous thought.

He frowned at the beautiful face. What was this girl to that hideous hunchback? Why did the handsome stranger warn him, "*The thing inside never will be yours*?"

Again he turned eagerly to the wallet.

In the last flap he found something that gave him another surprise: a

plain white card on which a name and address were written by the same hand that had penned the inscription on the picture.

Emil Mundson, Ph. D.,
44-1/2 Indian Court

Emil Mundson, the electrical wizard and distinguished scientific writer, friend of the professor of science at the university where Northwood was an assistant professor; Emil Mundson, whom, a week ago, Northwood had yearned mightily to meet.

Now Northwood knew why the hunchback's intelligent, ugly face was familiar to him. He had seen it pictured as often as enterprising news photographers could steal a likeness from the over-sensitive scientist, who would never sit for a formal portrait.

Even before Northwood had graduated from the university where he now taught, he had been avidly interested in Emil Mundson's fantastic articles in scientific journals. Only a week ago, Professor Michael had come to him with the current issue of New Science, shouting excitedly:

"Did you read this, John, this article by Emil Mundson?" His shaking, gnarled old fingers tapped the open magazine.

Northwood seized the magazine and looked avidly at the title of the article, "Creatures of the Light."

"No, I haven't read it," he admitted. "My magazine hasn't come yet."

"Run through it now briefly, will you? And note with especial care the passages I have marked. In fact, you needn't bother with anything else just now. Read this—and this—and this." He pointed out penciled paragraphs.

Northwood read:

> Man always has been, always will be a creature of the light. He is forever reaching for some future point of perfected evolution which, even when his most remote ancestor was a fish creature composed of a few cells, was the guiding power that brought him up from the first stinking sea and caused him to create gods in his own image.
>
> It is this yearning for perfection which sets man apart from all other life, which made him *man* even in the rudimentary stages of his development. He was man when he wallowed in the slime of the new world and yearned for the air above. He will still be man when he has evolved into that glorious

> creature of the future whose body is deathless and whose mind rules the universe.

Professor Michael, looking over Northwood's shoulder, interrupted the reading:

"*Man always has been man*," he droned emphatically. "That's not original with friend Mundson, of course; yet it is a theory that has not received sufficient investigation." He indicated another marked paragraph. "Read this thoughtfully, John. It's the crux of Mundson's thought."

Northwood continued:

> Since the human body is chemical and electrical, increased knowledge of its powers and limitations will enable us to work with Nature in her sublime but infinitely slow processes of human evolution. We need not wait another fifty thousand years to be godlike creatures. Perhaps even now we may be standing at the beginning of the splendid bridge that will take us to that state of perfected evolution when we shall be Creatures who have reached the Light.

Northwood looked questioningly at the professor. "Queer, fantastic

thing, isn't it?"

Professor Michael smoothed his thin, gray hair with his dried-out hand. "Fantastic?" His intellectual eyes behind the thick glasses sought the ceiling. "Who can say? Haven't you ever wondered why all parents expect their children to be nearer perfection than themselves, and why is it a natural impulse for them to be willing to sacrifice themselves to better their offspring?" He paused and moistened his pale, wrinkled lips. "Instinct, Northwood. We Creatures of the Light know that our race shall reach that point in evolution when, as perfect creatures, we shall rule all matter and live forever." He punctuated the last words with blows on the table.

Northwood laughed dryly. "How many thousands of years are you looking forward, Professor?"

The professor made an obscure noise that sounded like a smothered sniff. "You and I shall never agree on the point that mental advancement may wipe out physical limitations in the human race, perhaps in a few hundred years. It seems as though your profound admiration for Dr. Mundson would win you over to this pet theory."

"But what sane man can believe that even perfectly developed beings, through mental control, could overcome Nature's fixed

laws?"

"We don't know! We don't know!" The professor slapped the magazine with an emphatic hand. "Emil Mundson hasn't written this article for nothing. He's paving the way for some announcement that will startle the scientific world. I know him. In the same manner he gave out veiled hints of his various brilliant discoveries and inventions long before he offered them to the world."

"But Dr. Mundson is an electrical wizard. He would not be delving seriously into the mysteries of evolution, would he?"

"Why not?" The professor's wizened face screwed up wisely. "A year ago, when he was back from one of those mysterious long excursions he takes in that weirdly different aircraft of his, about which he is so secretive, he told me that he was conducting experiments to prove his belief that the human brain generates electric current, and that the electrical impulses in the brain set up radioactive waves that some day, among other miracles, will make thought communication possible. Perfect man, he says, will perform mental feats which will give him complete mental domination over the physical."

Northwood finished reading and turned thoughtfully to the window.

His profile in repose had the straight-nosed, full-lipped perfection of a Greek coin. Old, wizened Professor Michael, gazing at him covertly, smothered a sigh.

"I wish you knew Dr. Mundson," he said. "He, the ugliest man in the world, delights in physical perfection. He would revel in your splendid body and brilliant mind."

Northwood blushed hotly. "You'll have to arrange a meeting between us."

"I have." The professor's thin, dry lips pursed comically. "He'll drop in to see you within a few days."

And now John Northwood sat holding Dr. Mundson's card and the wallet which the scientist had so mysteriously dropped at his feet.

Here was high adventure, perhaps, for which he had been singled out by the famous electrical wizard. While excitement mounted in his blood, Northwood again examined the photograph. The girl's strange eyes, odd in expression rather than in size or shape, seemed to hold him. The young man's breath came quicker.

"It's a challenge," he said softly. "It won't hurt to see what it's all

about."

His watch showed eleven o'clock. He would return the wallet that night. Into his coat pocket he slipped a revolver. One sometimes needed weapons in Indian Court.

He took a taxi, which soon turned from the well-lighted streets into a section where squalid houses crowded against each other, and dirty children swarmed in the streets in their last games of the day.

Indian Court was little more than an alley, dark and evil smelling.

The chauffeur stopped at the entrance and said:

"If I drive in, I'll have to back out, sir. Number forty-four and a half is the end house, facing the entrance."

"You've been here before?" asked Northwood.

"Last week I drove the queerest bird here—a fellow as good-looking as you, who had me follow the taxi occupied by a hunchback with a face like Old Nick." The man hesitated and went on haltingly: "It might sound goofy, mister, but there was something funny about my fare. He jumped out, asked me the charge, and, in the moment I glanced at my taxi-meter, he disappeared. Yes, sir. Vanished, owing

me four dollars, six bits. It was almost ghostlike, mister."

Northwood laughed nervously and dismissed him. He found his number and knocked at the dilapidated door. He heard a sudden movement in the lighted room beyond, and the door opened quickly.

Dr. Mundson faced him.

"I knew you'd come!" he said with a slight Teutonic accent. "Often I'm not wrong in sizing up my man. Come in."

Northwood cleared his throat awkwardly. "You dropped your wallet at my feet, Dr. Mundson. I tried to stop you before you got away, but I guess you did not hear me."

He offered the wallet, but the hunchback waved it aside.

"A ruse, of course," he confessed. "It just was my way of testing what your Professor Michael told about you—that you are extraordinarily intelligent, virile, and imaginative. Had you sent the wallet to me, I should have sought elsewhere for my man. Come in."

Northwood followed him into a living room evidently recently furnished in a somewhat hurried manner. The furniture, although rich, was not placed to best advantage. The new rug was a trifle

crooked on the floor, and the lamp shades clashed in color with the other furnishings.

Dr. Mundson's intense eyes swept over Northwood's tall, slim body.

"Ah, you're a man!" he said softly. "You are what all men would be if we followed Nature's plan that only the fit shall survive. But modern science is permitting the unfit to live and to mix their defective beings with the developing race!" His huge fist gesticulated madly. "Fools! Fools! They need me and perfect men like you."

"Why?"

"Because you can help me in my plan to populate the earth with a new race of godlike people. But don't question me too closely now. Even if I should explain, you would call me insane. But watch; gradually I shall unfold the mystery before you, so that you will believe."

He reached for the wallet that Northwood still held, opened it with a monstrous hand, and reached for the photograph. "She shall bring you love. She's more beautiful than a poet's dream."

A warm flush crept over the young man's face.

"I can easily understand," he said, "how a man could love her, but for me she comes too late."

"Pooh! Fiddlesticks!" The scientist snapped his fingers. "This girl was created for you. That other—you will forget her the moment you set eyes on the sweet flesh of this Athalia. She is an houri from Paradise—a maiden of musk and incense." He held the girl's photograph toward the young man. "Keep it. She is yours, if you are strong enough to hold her."

Northwood opened his card case and placed the picture inside, facing Mary's photograph. Again the warning words of the mysterious stranger rang in his memory: "*The thing inside never will be yours.*"

"Where to," he said eagerly; "and when do we start?"

"To the new Garden of Eden," said the scientist, with such a beatific smile that his face was less hideous. "We start immediately. I have arranged with Professor Michael for you to go."

Northwood followed Dr. Mundson to the street and walked with him

a few blocks to a garage where the scientist's motor car waited.

"The apartment in Indian Court is just a little eccentricity of mine," explained Dr. Mundson. "I need people in my work, people whom I must select through swift, sure tests. The apartment comes in handy, as to-night."

Northwood scarcely noted where they were going, or how long they had been on the way. He was vaguely aware that they had left the city behind, and were now passing through farms bathed in moonlight.

At last they entered a path that led through a bit of woodland. For half a mile the path continued, and then ended at a small, enclosed field. In the middle of this rested a queer aircraft. Northwood knew it was a flying machine only by the propellers mounted on the top of the huge ball-shaped body. There were no wings, no birdlike hull, no tail.

"It looks almost like a little world ready to fly off into space," he commented.

"It is just about that." The scientist's squat, bunched-out body, settled squarely on long, thin, straddled legs, looked gnomelike in the

moonlight. "One cannot copy flesh with steel and wood, but one can make metal perform magic of which flesh is not capable. My sun-ship is not a mechanical reproduction of a bird. It is—but, climb in, young friend."

Northwood followed Dr. Mundson into the aircraft. The moment the scientist closed the metal door behind them, Northwood was instantly aware of some concealed horror that vibrated through his nerves. For one dreadful moment, he expected some terrific agent of the shadows that escaped the electric lights to leap upon him. And this was odd, for nothing could be saner than the globular interior of the aircraft, divided into four wedge-shaped apartments.

Dr. Mundson also paused at the door, puzzled, hesitant.

"Someone has been here!" he exclaimed. "Look, Northwood! The bunk has been occupied—the one in this cabin I had set aside for you."

He pointed to the disarranged bunk, where the impression of a head could still be seen on a pillow.

"A tramp, perhaps."

"No! The door was locked, and, as you saw, the fence around this field was protected with barbed wire. There's something wrong. I felt it on my trip here all the way, like someone watching me in the dark. And don't laugh! I have stopped laughing at all things that seem unnatural. You don't know what is natural."

Northwood shivered. "Maybe someone is concealed about the ship."

"Impossible. Me, I thought so, too. But I looked and looked, and there was nothing."

All evening Northwood had burned to tell the scientist about the handsome stranger in the Mad Hatter Club. But even now he shrank from saying that a man had vanished before his eyes.

Dr. Mundson was working with a succession of buttons and levers. There was a slight jerk, and then the strange craft shot up, straight as a bullet from a gun, with scarcely a sound other than a continuous whistle.

"The vertical rising aircraft perfected," explained Dr. Mundson. "But what would you think if I told you that there is not an ounce of gasoline in my heavier-than-air craft?"

"I shouldn't be surprised. An electrical genius would seek for a less obsolete source of power."

In the bright flare of the electric lights, the scientist's ugly face flushed. "The man who harnesses the sun rules the world. He can make the desert places bloom, the frozen poles balmy and verdant. You, John Northwood, are one of the very few to fly in a machine operated solely by electrical energy from the sun's rays."

"Are you telling me that this airship is operated with power from the sun?"

"Yes. And I cannot take the credit for its invention." He sighed. "The dream was mine, but a greater brain developed it—a brain that may be greater than I suspect." His face grew suddenly graver.

A little later Northwood said: "It seems that we must be making fabulous speed."

"Perhaps!" Dr. Mundson worked with the controls. "Here, I've cut her down to the average speed of the ordinary airplane. Now you can see a bit of the night scenery."

Northwood peeped out the thick glass porthole. Far below, he saw

two tiny streaks of light, one smooth and stationery, the other wavering as though it were a reflection in water.

"That can't be a lighthouse!" he cried.

The scientist glanced out. "It is. We're approaching the Florida Keys."

"Impossible! We've been traveling less than an hour."

"But, my young friend, do you realize that my sun-ship has a speed of over one thousand miles an hour, how much over I dare not tell you?"

Throughout the night, Northwood sat beside Dr. Mundson, watching his deft fingers control the simple-looking buttons and levers. So fast was their flight now that, through the portholes, sky and earth looked the same: dark gray films of emptiness. The continuous weird whistle from the hidden mechanism of the sun-ship was like the drone of a monster insect, monotonous and soporific during the long intervals when the scientist was too busy with his controls to engage in conversation.

For some reason that he could not explain, Northwood had an

aversion to going into the sleeping apartment behind the control room. Then, towards morning, when the suddenly falling temperature struck a biting chill throughout the sun-ship, Northwood, going into the cabin for fur coats, discovered why his mind and body shrank in horror from the cabin.

After he had procured the fur coats from a closet, he paused a moment, in the privacy of the cabin, to look at Athalia's picture. Every nerve in his body leaped to meet the magnetism of her beautiful eyes. Never had Mary Burns stirred emotion like this in him. He hung over Mary's picture, wistfully, hoping almost prayerfully that he could react to her as he did to Athalia; but her pale, over-intellectual face left him cold.

"Cad!" he ground out between his teeth. "Forgetting her so soon!"

The two pictures were lying side by side on a little table. Suddenly an obscure noise in the room caught his attention. It was more vibration than noise, for small sounds could scarcely be heard above the whistle of the sun-ship. A slight compression of the air against his neck gave him the eery feeling that someone was standing close behind him. He wheeled and looked over his shoulder. Half ashamed of his startled gesture, he again turned to his pictures. Then a sharp cry broke from him.

Athalia's picture was gone.

He searched for it everywhere in the room, in his own pockets, under the furniture. It was nowhere to be found.

In sudden, overpowering horror, he seized the fur coats and returned to the control room.

Dr. Mundson was changing the speed.

"Look out the window!" he called to Northwood.

The young man looked and started violently. Day had come, and now that the sun-ship was flying at a moderate speed, the ocean beneath was plainly visible; and its entire surface was covered with broken floes of ice and small, ragged icebergs. He seized a telescope and focused it below. A typical polar scene met his eyes: penguins strutted about on cakes of ice, a whale blowing in the icy water.

"A part of the Antarctic that has never been explored," said Dr. Mundson; "and there, just showing on the horizon, is the Great Ice Barrier." His characteristic smile lighted the morose black eyes. "I am enough of the dramatist to wish you to be impressed with what I shall show you within less than an hour. Accordingly, I shall make a

landing and let you feel polar ice under your feet."

After less than a minute's search, Dr. Mundson found a suitable place on the ice for a landing, and, with a few deft manipulations of the controls, brought the sun-ship swooping down like an eagle on its prey.

For a long moment after the scientist had stepped out on the ice, Northwood paused at the door. His feet were chained by a strange reluctance to enter this white, dead wilderness of ice. But Dr. Mundson's impatient, "Ready?" drew from him one last glance at the cozy interior of the sun-ship before he, too, went out into the frozen stillness.

They left the sun-ship resting on the ice like a fallen silver moon, while they wandered to the edge of the Barrier and looked at the gray, narrow stretch of sea between the ice pack and the high cliffs of the Barrier. The sun of the commencing six-months' Antarctic day was a low, cold ball whose slanted rays struck the ice with blinding whiteness. There were constant falls of ice from the Barrier, which thundered into the ocean amid great clouds of ice smoke that lingered like wraiths around the edge. It was a scene of loneliness and waiting death.

"What's that?" exclaimed the scientist suddenly.

Out of the white silence shrilled a low whistle, a familiar whistle. Both men wheeled toward the sun-ship.

Before their horrified eyes, the great sphere jerked and glided up, and swerved into the heavens.

Up it soared; then, gaining speed, it swung into the blue distance until, in a moment, it was a tiny star that flickered out even as they watched.

Both men screamed and cursed and flung up their arms despairingly. A penguin, attracted by their cries, waddled solemnly over to them and regarded them with manlike curiosity.

"Stranded in the coldest spot on earth!" groaned the scientist.

"Why did it start itself, Dr. Mundson!" Northwood narrowed his eyes as he spoke.

"It didn't!" The scientist's huge face, red from cold, quivered with helpless rage. "Human hands started it."

"What! Whose hands?"

"*Ach!* Do I know?" His Teutonic accent grew more pronounced, as it always did when he was under emotional stress. "Somebody whose brain is better than mine. Somebody who found a way to hide away from our eyes. *Ach, Gott!* Don't let me think!"

His great head sank between his shoulders, giving him, in his fur suit, the grotesque appearance of a friendly brown bear.

"Doctor Mundson," said Northwood suddenly, "did you have an enemy, a man with the face and body of a pagan god—a great, blond creature with eyes as cold and cruel as the ice under our feet?"

"Wait!" The huge round head jerked up. "How do you know about Adam? You have not seen him, won't see him until we arrive at our destination."

"But I have seen him. He was sitting not thirty feet from you in the Mad Hatter's Club last night. Didn't you know? He followed me to the street, spoke to me, and then—" Northwood stopped. How could he let the insane words pass his lips?

"Then, what? Speak up!"

Northwood laughed nervously. "It sounds foolish, but I saw him

vanish like that." He snapped his fingers.

"*Ach, Gott!*" All the ruddy color drained from the scientist's face. As though talking to himself, he continued:

"Then it is true, as he said. He has crossed the bridge. He has reached the Light. And now he comes to see the world he will conquer—came unseen when I refused my permission."

He was silent for a long time, pondering. Then he turned passionately to Northwood.

"John Northwood, kill me! I have brought a new horror into the world. From the unborn future, I have snatched a creature who has reached the Light too soon. Kill me!" He bowed his great, shaggy head.

"What do you mean, Dr. Mundson: that this Adam has arrived at a point in evolution beyond this age?"

"Yes. Think of it! I visioned godlike creatures with the souls of gods. But, Heaven help us, man always will be man: always will lust for conquest. You and I, Northwood, and all others are barbarians to Adam. He and his kind will do what men always do to barbarians—

conquer and kill."

"Are there more like him?" Northwood struggled with a smile of unbelief.

"I don't know. I did not know that Adam had reached a point so near the ultimate. But you have seen. Already he is able to set aside what we call natural laws."

Northwood looked at the scientist closely. The man was surely mad —mad in this desert of white death.

"Come!" he said cheerfully. "Let's build an Eskimo snow house. We can live on penguins for days. And who knows what may rescue us?"

For three hours the two worked at cutting ice blocks. With snow for mortar, they built a crude shelter which enabled them to rest out of the cold breath of the spiral polar winds that blew from the south.

Dr. Mundson was sitting at the door of their hut, moodily pulling at his strong, black pipe. As though a fit had seized him, he leaped up and let his pipe fall to the ice.

"Look!" he shouted. "The sun-ship!"

It seemed but a moment before the tiny speck on the horizon had swept overhead, a silver comet on the grayish-blue polar sky. In another moment it had swooped down, eaglewise, scarcely fifty feet from the ice hut.

Dr. Mundson and Northwood ran forward. From the metal sphere stepped the stranger of the Mad Hatter Club. His tall, straight form, erect and slim, swung toward them over the ice.

"Adam!" shouted Dr. Mundson. "What does this mean? How dare you!"

Adam's laugh was like the happy demonstration of a boy. "So? You think you still are master? You think I returned because I reverenced you yet?" Hate shot viciously through the freezing blue eyes. "You worm of the Black Age!"

Northwood shuddered. He had heard those strange words addressed to himself scarcely more than twelve hours ago.

Adam was still speaking: "With a thought I could annihilate you where you are standing. But I have use for you. Get in." He swept his hand to the sun-ship.

Both men hesitated. Then Northwood strode forward until he was within three feet of Adam. They stood thus, eyeing each other, two splendid beings, one blond as a Viking, the other dark and vital.

"Just what is your game?" demanded Northwood.

The icy eyes shot forth a gleam like lightning. "I needn't tell you, of course, but I may as well let you suffer over the knowledge." He curled his lips with superb scorn. "I have one human weakness. I want Athalia." The icy eyes warmed for a fleeting second. "She is anticipating her meeting with you—bah! The taste of these women of the Black Age! I could kill you, of course; but that would only inflame her. And so I take you to her, thrust you down her throat. When she sees you, she will fly to me." He spread his magnificent chest.

"Adam!" Dr. Mundson's face was dark with anger. "What of Eve?"

"Who are you to question my actions? What a fool you were to let me, whom you forced into life thousands of years too soon, grow more powerful than you! Before I am through with all of you petty creatures of the Black Age, you will call me more terrible than your Jehovah! For see what you have called forth from unborn time."

He vanished.

Before the startled men could recover from the shock of it, the vibrant, too-new voice went on:

"I am sorry for you, Mundson, because, like you, I need specimens for my experiments. What a splendid specimen you will be!" His laugh was ugly with significance. "Get in, worms!"

Unseen hands cuffed and pushed them into the sun-ship.

Inside, Dr. Mundson stumbled to the control room, white and drawn of face, his great brain seemingly paralyzed by the catastrophe.

"You needn't attempt tricks," went on the voice. "I am watching you both. You cannot even hide your thoughts from me."

And thus began the strange continuation of the journey. Not once, in that wild half-hour's rush over the polar ice clouds, did they see Adam. They saw and heard only the weird signs of his presence: a puffing cigar hanging in midair, a glass of water swinging to unseen lips, a ghostly voice hurling threats and insults at them.

Once the scientist whispered: "Don't cross him; it is useless. John Northwood, you'll have to fight a demigod for your woman!"

Because of the terrific speed of the sun-ship, Northwood could distinguish nothing of the topographical details below. At the end of half-an-hour, the scientist slowed enough to point out a tall range of snow-covered mountains, over which hovered a play of colored lights like the *aurora australis*.

"Behind those mountains," he said, "is our destination."

Almost in a moment, the sun-ship had soared over the peaks. Dr. Mundson kept the speed low enough for Northwood to see the splendid view below.

In the giant cup formed by the encircling mountain range was a green valley of tropical luxuriance. Stretches of dense forest swept half up the mountains and filled the valley cup with tangled verdure. In the center, surrounded by a broad field and a narrow ring of woods, towered a group of buildings. From the largest, which was circular, came the auroralike radiance that formed an umbrella of light over the entire valley.

"Do I guess right," said Northwood, "that the light is responsible for this oasis in the ice?"

"Yes," said Dr. Mundson. "In your American slang, it is canned

sunshine containing an overabundance of certain rays, especially the Life Ray, which I have isolated." He smiled proudly. "You needn't look startled, my friend. Some of the most common things store sunlight. On very dark nights, if you have sharp eyes, you can see the radiance given off by certain flowers, which many naturalists say is trapped sunshine. The familiar nasturtium and the marigold opened for me the way to hold sunshine against the long polar night, for they taught me how to apply the Einstein theory of bent light. Stated simply, during the polar night, when the sun is hidden over the rim of the world, we steal some of his rays; during the polar day we concentrate the light."

"But could stored sunshine alone give enough warmth for the luxuriant growth of those jungles?"

"An overabundance of the Life Ray is responsible for the miraculous growth of all life in New Eden. The Life Ray is Nature's most powerful force. Yet Nature is often niggardly and paradoxical in her use of her powers. In New Eden, we have forced the powers of creation to take ascendency over the powers of destruction."

At Northwood's sudden start, the scientist laughed and continued: "Is it not a pity that Nature, left alone, requires twenty years to make a man who begins to die in another ten years? Such waste is not

tolerated in New Eden, where supermen are younger than babes and __"

"Come, worms; let's land."

It was Adam's voice. Suddenly he materialized, a blond god, whose eyes and flesh were too new.

They were in a world of golden skylight, warmth and tropical vegetation. The field on which they had landed was covered with a velvety green growth of very soft, fine-bladed grass, sprinkled with tiny, star-shaped blue flowers. A balmy, sweet-scented wind, downy as the breeze of a dream, blew gently along the grass and tingled against Northwood's skin refreshingly. Almost instantly he had the sensation of perfect well being, and this feeling of physical perfection was part of the ecstasy that seemed to pervade the entire valley. Grass and breeze and golden skylight were saturated with a strange ether of joyousness.

At one end of the field was a dense jungle, cut through by a road that led to the towering building from which, while above in the sun-ship, they had seen the golden light issue.

From the jungle road came a man and a woman, large, handsome

people, whose flesh and eyes had the sinister newness of Adam's. Even before they came close enough to speak, Northwood was aware that while they seemed of Adam's breed, they were yet unlike him. The difference was psychical rather than physical; they lacked the aura of hate and horror that surrounded Adam. The woman drew Adam's head down and kissed him affectionately on both cheeks.

Adam, from his towering height, patted her shoulder impatiently and said: "Run on back to the laboratory, grandmother. We're following soon. You have some new human embryos, I believe you told me this morning."

"Four fine specimens, two of them being your sister's twins."

"Splendid! I was sure that creation had stopped with my generation. I must see them." He turned to the scientist and Northwood. "You needn't try to leave this spot. Of course I shall know instantly and deal with you in my own way. Wait here."

He strode over the emerald grass on the heels of the woman.

Northwood asked: "Why does he call that girl grandmother?"

"Because she is his ancestress." He stirred uneasily. "She is of the

first generation brought forth in the laboratory, and is no different from you or I, except that, at the age of five years, she is the ancestress of twenty generations."

"My God!" muttered Northwood.

"Don't start being horrified, my friend. Forget about so-called natural laws while you are in New Eden. Remember, here we have isolated the Life Ray. But look! Here comes your Athalia!"

Northwood gazed covertly at the beautiful girl approaching them with a rarely graceful walk. She was tall, slender, round-bosomed, narrow-hipped, and she held her lovely body in the erect poise of splendid health. Northwood had a confused realization of uncovered bronzy hair, drawn to the back of a white neck in a bunch of short curls; of immense soft black eyes; lips the color of blood, and delicate, plump flesh on which the golden skylight lingered graciously. He was instantly glad to see that while she possessed the freshness of young girlhood, her skin and eyes did not have the horrible newness of Adam's.

When she was still twenty feet distant, Northwood met her eyes and she smiled shyly. The rich, red blood ran through her face; and he, too, flushed.

She went to Dr. Mundson and, placing her hands on his thick shoulders, kissed him affectionately.

"I've been worried about you, Daddy Mundson." Her rich contralto voice matched her exotic beauty. "Since you and Adam had that quarrel the day you left, I did not see him until this morning, when he landed the sun-ship alone."

"And you pleaded with him to return for us?"

"Yes." Her eyes drooped and a hot flush swept over her face.

Dr. Mundson smiled. "But I'm back now, Athalia, and I've brought some one whom I hope you will be glad to know."

Reaching for her hand, he placed it simply in Northwood's.

"This is John, Athalia. Isn't he handsomer than the pictures of him which I televisioned to you? God bless both of you."

He walked ahead and turned his back.

A magical half hour followed for Northwood and Athalia. The girl told him of her past life, how Dr. Mundson had discovered her one year ago working in a New York sweat shop, half dead from

consumption. Without friends, she was eager to follow the scientist to New Eden, where he promised she would recover her health immediately.

"And he was right, John," she said shyly. "The Life Ray, that marvelous energy ray which penetrates to the utmost depths of earth and ocean, giving to the cells of all living bodies the power to grow and remain animate, has been concentrated by Dr. Mundson in his stored sunshine. The Life Ray healed me almost immediately."

Northwood looked down at the glorious girl beside him, whose eyes already fluttered away from his like shy black butterflies. Suddenly he squeezed the soft hand in his and said passionately:

"Athalia! Because Adam wants you and will get you if he can, let us set aside all the artificialities of civilization. I have loved you madly ever since I saw your picture. If you can say the same to me, it will give me courage to face what I know lies before me."

Athalia, her face suddenly tender, came closer to him.

"John Northwood, I love you."

Her red lips came temptingly close; but before he could touch them,

Adam suddenly pushed his body between him and Athalia. Adam was pale, and all the iciness was gone from his blue eyes, which were deep and dark and very human. He looked down at Athalia, and she looked up at him, two handsome specimens of perfect manhood and womanhood.

"Fast work, Athalia!" The new vibrant voice was strained. "I was hoping you would be disappointed in him, especially after having been wooed by me this morning. I could take you if I wished, of course; but I prefer to win you in the ancient manner. Dismiss him!" He jerked his thumb over his shoulder in Northwood's direction.

Athalia flushed vividly and looked at him almost compassionately. "I am not great enough for you, Adam. I dare not love you."

Adam laughed, and still oblivious of Northwood and Dr. Mundson, folded his arms over his breast. With the golden skylight on his burnished hair, he was a valiant, magnificent spectacle.

"Since the beginning of time, gods and archangels have looked upon the daughters of men and found them fair. Mate with me, Athalia, and I, fifty thousand years beyond the creature Mundson has selected for you, will make you as I am, the deathless overlord of life and all nature."

He drew her hand to his bosom.

For one dark moment, Northwood felt himself seared by jealousy, for, through the plump, sweet flesh of Athalia's face, he saw the red blood leap again. How could she withhold herself from this splendid superman?

But her answer, given with faltering voice, was the old, simple one: "I have promised him, Adam. I love him." Tears trembled on her thick lashes.

"So! I cannot get you in the ancient manner. Now I'll use my own."

He seized her in his arms crushed her against him, and, laughing over her head at Northwood, bent his glistening head and kissed her on the mouth.

There was a blinding flash of blue electric sparks—and nothing else. Both Adam and Athalia had vanished.

Adam's voice came in a last mocking challenge: "I shall be what no other gods before me have been—a good sport. I'll leave you both to your own devices, until I want you again."

White-lipped and trembling, Northwood groaned: "What has he

done now?"

Dr. Mundson's great head drooped. "I don't know. Our bodies are electric and chemical machines; and a super intelligence has discovered new laws of which you and I are ignorant."

"But Athalia...."

"She is safe; he loves her."

"Loves her!" Northwood shivered. "I cannot believe that those freezing eyes could ever look with love on a woman."

"Adam is a man. At heart he is as human as the first man-creature that wallowed in the new earth's slime." His voice dropped as though he were musing aloud. "It might be well to let him have Athalia. She will help to keep vigor in the new race, which would stop reproducing in another few generations without the injection of Black Age blood."

"Do you want to bring more creatures like Adam into the world?" Northwood flung at him. "You have tampered with life enough, Dr. Mundson. But, although Adam has my sympathy, I'm not willing to turn Athalia over to him."

"Well said! Now come to the laboratory for chemical nourishment and rest under the Life Ray."

They went to the great circular building from whose highest tower issued the golden radiance that shamed the light of the sun, hanging low in the northeast.

"John Northwood," said Dr. Mundson, "with that laboratory, which is the center of all life in New Eden, we'll have to whip Adam. He gave us what he called a 'sporting chance' because he knew that he is able to send us and all mankind to a doom more terrible than hell. Even now we might be entering some hideous trap that he has set for us."

They entered by a side entrance and went immediately to what Dr. Mundson called the Rest Ward. Here, in a large room, were ranged rows of cots, on many of which lay men basking in the deep orange flood of light which poured from individual lamps set above each cot.

"It is the Life Ray!" said Dr. Mundson reverently. "The source of all growth and restoration in Nature. It is the power that bursts open the seed and brings forth the shoot, that increases the shoot into a giant tree. It is the same power that enables the fertilized ovum to develop

into an animal. It creates and recreates cells almost instantly; accordingly, it is the perfect substitute for sleep. Stretch out, enjoy its power; and while you rest, eat these nourishing tablets."

Northwood lay on a cot, and Dr. Mundson turned the Life Ray on him. For a few minutes a delicious drowsiness fell upon him, producing a spell of perfect peace which the cells of his being seemed to drink in. For another delirious, fleeting space, every inch of him vibrated with a thrilling sensation of freshness. He took a deep, ecstatic breath and opened his eyes.

"Enough," said Dr. Mundson, switching off the Ray. "After three minutes of rejuvenation, you are commencing again with perfect cells. All ravages from disease and wear have been corrected."

Northwood leaped up joyously. His handsome eyes sparkled, his skin glowed. "I feel great! Never felt so good since I was a kid."

A pleased grin spread over the scientist's homely face. "See what my discovery will mean to the world! In the future we shall all go to the laboratory for recuperation and nourishment. We'll have almost twenty-four hours a day for work and play."

He stretched out on the bed contentedly. "Some day, when my work

is nearly done, I shall permit the Life Ray to cure my hump."

"Why not now?"

Dr. Mundson sighed. "If I were perfect, I should cease to be so overwhelmingly conscious of the importance of perfection." He settled back to enjoyment of the Life Ray.

A few minutes later, he jumped up, alert as a boy. "*Ach!* That's fine. Now I'll show you how the Life Ray speeds up development and produces four generations of humans a year."

With restored energy, Northwood began thinking of Athalia. As he followed Dr. Mundson down a long corridor, he yearned to see her again, to be certain that she was safe. Once he imagined he felt a gentle, soft-fleshed touch against his hand, and was disappointed not to see her walking by his side. Was she with him, unseen? The thought was sweet.

Before Dr. Mundson opened the massive bronze door at the end of the corridor, he said:

"Don't be surprised or shocked over anything you see here, John Northwood. This is the Baby Laboratory."

They entered a room which seemed no different from a hospital ward. On little white beds lay naked children of various sizes, perfect, solemn-eyed youngsters and older children as beautiful as animated statues. Above each bed was a small Life Ray projector. A white-capped nurse went from bed to bed.

"They are recuperating from the daily educational period," said the scientist. "After a few minutes of this they will go into the growing room, which I shall have to show you through a window. Should you and I enter, we might be changed in a most extraordinary manner." He laughed mischievously. "But, look, Northwood!"

He slid back a panel in the wall, and Northwood peered in through a thick pane of clear glass. The room was really an immense outdoor arena, its only carpet the fine-bladed grass, its roof the blue sky cut in the middle by an enormous disc from which shot the aurora of trapped sunshine which made a golden umbrella over the valley. Through openings in the bottom of the disc poured a fine rain of rays which fell constantly upon groups of children, youths and young girls, all clad in the merest scraps of clothing. Some were dancing, others were playing games, but all seemed as supremely happy as the birds and butterflies which fluttered about the shrubs and flowers edging the arena.

"I don't expect you to believe," said Dr. Mundson, "that the oldest young man in there is three months old. You cannot see visible changes in a body which grows as slowly as the human being, whose normal period of development is twenty years or more. But I can give you visible proof of how fast growth takes place under the full power of the Life Ray. Plant life, which, even when left to nature, often develops from seed to flower within a few weeks or months, can be seen making its miraculous changes under the Life Ray. Watch those gorgeous purple flowers over which the butterflies are hovering."

Northwood followed his pointing finger. Near the glass window through which they looked grew an enormous bank of resplendent violet colored flowers, which literally enshrouded the entire bush with their royal glory. At first glance it seemed as though a violent wind were snatching at flower and bush, but closer inspection proved that the agitation was part of the plant itself. And then he saw that the movements were the result of perpetual composition and growth.

He fastened his eyes on one huge bud. He saw it swell, burst, spread out its passionate purple velvet, lift the broad flower face to the light for a joyous minute. A few seconds later a butterfly lighted airily to sample its nectar and to brush the pollen from its yellow dusted

wings. Scarcely had the winged visitor flown away than the purple petals began to wither and fall away, leaving the seed pod on the stem. The visible change went on in this seed pod. It turned rapidly brown, dried out, and then sent the released seeds in a shower to the rich black earth below. Scarcely had the seeds touched the ground than they sent up tiny green shoots that grew larger each moment. Within ten minutes there was a new plant a foot high. Within half an hour, the plant budded, blossomed, and cast forth its own seed.

"You understand?" asked the scientist. "Development is going on as rapidly among the children. Before the first year has passed, the youngest baby will have grandchildren; that is, if the baby tests out fit to pass its seed down to the new generation. I know it sounds absurd. Yet you saw the plant."

"But Doctor," Northwood rubbed his jaw thoughtfully, "Nature's forces of destruction, of tearing down, are as powerful as her creative powers. You have discovered the ultimate in creation and upbuilding. But perhaps—oh, Lord, it is too awful to think!"

"Speak, Northwood!" The scientist's voice was impatient.

"It is nothing!" The pale young man attempted a smile. "I was only imagining some of the horror that could be thrust on the world if a

supermind like Adam's should discover Nature's secret of death and destruction and speed it up as you have sped the life force."

"*Ach Gott!*" Dr. Mundson's face was white. "He has his own laboratory, where he works every day. Don't talk so loud. He might be listening. And I believe he can do anything he sets out to accomplish."

Close to Northwood's ear fell a faint, triumphant whisper: "Yes, he can do anything. How did you guess, worm?"

It was Adam's voice.

"Now come and see the Leyden jar mothers," said Dr. Mundson. "We do not wait for the child to be born to start our work."

He took Northwood to a laboratory crowded with strange apparatus, where young men and women worked. Northwood knew instantly that these people, although unusually handsome and strong, were not of Adam's generation. None of them had the look of newness which marked those who had grown up under the Life Ray.

"They are the perfect couples whom I combed the world to find," said the scientist. "From their eugenic marriages sprang the first

children that passed through the laboratory. I had hoped," he hesitated and looked sideways at Northwood, "I had dreamed of having the children of you and Athalia to help strengthen the New Race."

A wave of sudden disgust passed over Northwood.

"Thanks," he said tartly. "When I marry Athalia, I intend to have an old-fashioned home and a Black Age family. I don't relish having my children turned into—experiments."

"But wait until you see all the wonders of the laboratory! That is why I am showing you all this."

Northwood drew his handkerchief and mopped his brow. "It sickens me, Doctor! The more I see, the more pity I have for Adam—and the less I blame him for his rebellion and his desire to kill and to rule. Heavens! What a terrible thing you have done, experimenting with human life."

"Nonsense! Can you say that all life—all matter—is not the result of scientific experiment? Can you?" His black gaze made Northwood uncomfortable. "Buck up, young friend, for now I am going to show you a marvelous improvement on Nature's bungling ways—the

Leyden jar mother." He raised his voice and called, "Lilith!"

The woman whom they had met on the field came forward.

"May we take a peep at Lona's twins?" asked the scientist. "They are about ready to go to the growing dome, are they not?"

"In five more minutes," said the woman. "Come see."

She lifted one of the black velvet curtains that lined an entire side of the laboratory and thereby disclosed a globular jar of glass and metal, connected by wires to a dynamo. Above the jar was a Life Ray projector. Lilith slid aside a metal portion of the jar, disclosing through the glass underneath the squirming, kicking body of a baby, resting on a bed of soft, spongy substance, to which it was connected by the navel cord.

"The Leyden jar mother," said Dr. Mundson. "It is the dream of us scientists realized. The human mother's body does nothing but nourish and protect her unborn child, a job which science can do better. And so, in New Eden, we take the young embryo and place it in the Leyden jar mother, where the Life Ray, electricity, and chemical food shortens the period of gestation to a few days."

At that moment a bell under the Leyden jar began to ring. Dr. Mundson uncovered the jar and lifted out the child, a beautiful, perfectly formed boy, who began to cry lustily.

"Here is one baby who'll never be kissed," he said. "He'll be nourished chemically, and, at the end of the week, will no longer be a baby. If you are patient, you can actually see the processes of development taking place under the Life Ray, for babies develop very fast."

Northwood buried his face in his hands. "Lord! This is awful. No childhood; no mother to mould his mind! No parents to watch over him, to give him their tender care!"

"Awful, fiddlesticks! Come see how children get their education, how they learn to use their hands and feet so they need not pass through the awkwardness of childhood."

He led Northwood to a magnificent building whose façade of white marble was as simply beautiful as a Greek temple. The side walls, built almost entirely of glass, permitted the synthetic sunshine to sweep from end to end. They first entered a library, where youths and young girls poured over books of all kinds. Their manner of reading mystified Northwood. With a single sweep of the eye, they

seemed to devour a page, and then turned to the next. He stepped closer to peer over the shoulder of a beautiful girl. She was reading "Euclid's Elements of Geometry," in Latin, and she turned the pages as swiftly as the other girl occupying her table, who was devouring "Paradise Lost."

Dr. Mundson whispered to him: "If you do not believe that Ruth here is getting her Euclid, which she probably never saw before to-day, examine her from the book; that is, if you are a good enough Latin scholar."

Ruth stopped her reading to talk to him, and, in a few minutes, had completely dumbfounded him with her pedantic replies, which fell from lips as luscious and unformed as an infant's.

"Now," said Dr. Mundson, "test Rachael on her Milton. As far as she has read, she should not misquote a line, and her comments will probably prove her scholarly appreciation of Milton."

Word for word, Rachael was able to give him "Paradise Lost" from memory, except the last four pages, which she had not read. Then, taking the book from him, she swept her eyes over these pages, returned the book to him, and quoted copiously and correctly.

Dr. Mundson gloated triumphantly over his astonishment. "There, my friend. Could you now be satisfied with old-fashioned children who spend long, expensive years in getting an education? Of course, your children will not have the perfect brains of these, yet, developed under the Life Ray, they should have splendid mentality.

"These children, through selective breeding, have brains that make everlasting records instantly. A page in a book, once seen, is indelibly retained by them, and understood. The same is true of a lecture, of an explanation given by a teacher, of even idle conversation. Any man or woman in this room should be able to repeat the most trivial conversation days old."

"But what of the arts, Dr. Mundson? Surely even your supermen and women cannot instantly learn to paint a masterpiece or to guide their fingers and their brains through the intricacies of a difficult musical composition."

"No?" His dark eyes glowed. "Come see!"

Before they entered another wing of the building, they heard a violin being played masterfully.

Dr. Mundson paused at the door.

"So that you may understand what you shall see, let me remind you that the nerve impulses and the coordinating means in the human body are purely electrical. The world has not yet accepted my theory, but it will. Under superman's system of education, the instantaneous records made on the brain give immediate skill to the acting parts of the body. Accordingly, musicians are made over night."

He threw open the door. Under a Life Ray projector, a beautiful, Juno-esque woman was playing a violin. Facing her, and with eyes fastened to hers, stood a young man, whose arms and slender fingers mimicked every motion she made. Presently she stopped playing and handed the violin to him. In her own masterly manner, he repeated the score she had played.

"That is Eve," whispered Dr. Mundson. "I had selected her as Adam's wife. But he does not want her, the most brilliant woman of the New Race."

Northwood gave the woman an appraising look. "Who wants a perfect woman? I don't blame Adam for preferring Athalia. But how is she teaching her pupil?"

"Through thought vibration, which these perfect people have developed until they can record permanently the radioactive waves

of the brains of others."

Eve turned, caught Northwood's eyes in her magnetic blue gaze, and smiled as only a goddess can smile upon a mortal she has marked as her own. She came toward him with outflung hands.

"So you have come!" Her vibrant contralto voice, like Adam's, held the birdlike, broken tremulo of a young child's. "I have been waiting for you, John Northwood."

Her eyes, as blue and icy as Adam's, lingered long on him, until he flinched from their steely magnetism. She slipped her arm through his and drew him gently but firmly from the room, while Dr. Mundson stood gaping after them.

They were on a flagged terrace arched with roses of gigantic size, which sent forth billows of sensuous fragrance. Eve led him to a white marble seat piled with silk cushions, on which she reclined her superb body, while she regarded him from narrowed lids.

"I saw your picture that he televisioned to Athalia," she said. "What a botch Dr. Mundson has made of his mating." Her laugh rippled like falling water. "I want you, John Northwood!"

Northwood started and blushed furiously. Smile dimples broke around her red, humid lips.

"Ah, you're old-fashioned!"

Her large, beautiful hand, fleshed more tenderly than any woman's hand he had ever seen, went out to him appealingly. "I can bring you amorous delight that your Athalia never could offer in her few years of youth. And I'll never grow old, John Northwood."

She came closer until he could feel the fragrant warmth of her tawny, ribbon bound hair pulse against his face. In sudden panic he drew back.

"But I am pledged to Athalia!" tumbled from him. "It is all a dreadful mistake, Eve. You and Adam were created for each other."

"Hush!" The lightning that flashed from her blue eyes changed her from seductress to angry goddess. "Created for each other! Who wants a made-to-measure lover?"

The luscious lips trembled slightly, and into the vivid eyes crept a suspicion of moisture. Eternal Eve's weapons! Northwood's handsome face relaxed with pity.

"I want you, John Northwood," she continued shamelessly. "Our love will be sublime." She leaned heavily against him, and her lips were like a blood red flower pressed against white satin. "Come, beloved, kiss me!"

Northwood gasped and turned his head. "Don't, Eve!"

"But a kiss from me will set you apart from all your generation, John Northwood, and you shall understand what no man of the Black Age could possibly fathom."

Her hair had partly fallen from its ribbon bandage and poured its fragrant gold against his shoulder.

"For God's sake, don't tempt me!" he groaned. "What do you mean?"

"That mental and physical and spiritual contact with me will temporarily give you, a three-dimension creature, the power of the new sense, which your race will not have for fifty thousand years."

White-lipped and trembling, he demanded: "Explain!"

Eve smiled. "Have you not guessed that Adam has developed an additional sense? You've seen him vanish. He and I have the sixth sense of Time Perception—the new sense which enables us to

penetrate what you of the Black Age call the Fourth Dimension. Even you whose mentalities are framed by three dimensions have this sixth sense instinct. Your very religion is based on it, for you believe that in another life you shall step into Time, or, as you call it, eternity." She leaned closer so that her hair brushed his cheek. "What is eternity, John Northwood? Is it not keeping forever ahead of the Destroyer? The future is eternal, for it is never reached. Adam and I, through our new sense which comprehends Time and Space, can vanish by stepping a few seconds into the future, the Fourth Dimension of Space. Death can never reach us, not even accidental death, unless that which causes death could also slip into the future, which is not yet possible."

"But if the Fourth Dimension is future Time, why can one in the third dimension feel the touch of an unseen presence in the Fourth Dimension—hear his voice, even?"

"Thought vibration. The touch is not really felt nor the voice heard: they are only imagined. The radioactive waves of the brain of even you Black Age people are swift enough to bridge Space and Time. And it is the mind that carries us beyond the third dimension."

Her red mouth reached closer to him, her blue eyes touched hidden forces that slept in remote cells of his being. "You are going into

Eternal Time, John Northwood, Eternity without beginning or end. You understand? You feel it? Comprehend it? Now for the contact—kiss me!"

Northwood had seen Athalia vanish under Adam's kiss. Suddenly, in one mad burst of understanding, he leaned over to his magnificent temptress.

For a split second he felt the sweet pressure of baby-soft lips, and then the atoms of his body seemed to fly asunder. Black chaos held him for a frightful moment before he felt sanity return.

He was back on the terrace again, with Eve by his side. They were standing now. The world about him looked the same, yet there was a subtle change in everything.

Eve laughed softly. "It is puzzling, isn't it? You're seeing everything as in a mirror. What was left before is now right. Only you and I are real. All else is but a vision, a dream. For now you and I are existing one minute in future time, or, more simply, we are in the Fourth Dimension. To everything in the third dimension, we are invisible. Let me show you that Dr. Mundson cannot see you."

They went back to the room beyond the terrace. Dr. Mundson was

not present.

"There he goes down the jungle path," said Eve, looking out a window. She laughed. "Poor old fellow. The children of his genius are worrying him."

They were standing in the recess formed by a bay window. Eve picked up his hand and laid it against her face, giving him the full, blasting glory of her smiling blue eyes.

Northwood, looking away miserably, uttered a low cry. Coming over the field beyond were Adam and Athalia. By the trimming on the blue dress she wore, he could see that she was still in the Fourth Dimension, for he did not see her as a mirror image.

A look of fear leaped to Eve's face. She clutched Northwood's arm, trembling.

"I don't want Adam to see that I have passed you beyond," she gasped. "We are existing but one minute in the future. Always Adam and I have feared to pass too far beyond the sweetness of reality. But now, so that Adam may not see us, we shall step five minutes into what-is-yet-to-be. And even he, with all his power, cannot see into a future that is more distant than that in which he exists."

She raised her humid lips to his. "Come, beloved."

Northwood kissed her. Again came the moment of confusion, of the awful vacancy that was like death, and then he found himself and Eve in the laboratory, following Adam and Athalia down a long corridor. Athalia was crying and pleading frantically with Adam. Once she stopped and threw herself at his feet in a gesture of dramatic supplication, arms outflung, streaming eyes wide open with fear.

Adam stooped and lifted her gently and continued on his way, supporting her against his side.

Eve dug her fingers into Northwood's arm. Horror contorted her face, horror mixed with rage.

"My mind hears what he is saying, understands the vile plan he has made, John Northwood. He is on his way to his laboratory to destroy not only you and most of these in New Eden, but me as well. He wants only Athalia."

Striding forward like an avenging goddess, she pulled Northwood after her.

"Hurry!" she whispered. "Remember, you and I are five minutes in the future, and Adam is only one. We are witnessing what will occur four minutes from now. We yet have time to reach the laboratory before him and be ready for him when he enters. And because he will have to go back to Present Time to do his work of destruction, I will be able to destroy him. Ah!"

Fierce joy burned in her flashing blue eyes, and her slender nostrils quivered delicately. Northwood, peeping at her in horror, knew that no mercy could be expected of her. And when she stopped at a certain door and inserted a key, he remembered Athalia. What if she should enter with Adam in Present Time?

They were inside Adam's laboratory, a huge apartment filled with queer apparatus and cages of live animals. The room was a strange paradox. Part of the equipment, the walls, and the floor was glistening with newness, and part was moulding with extreme age. The powers of disintegration that haunt a tropical forest seemed to be devouring certain spots of the room. Here, in the midst of bright marble, was a section of wall that seemed as old as the pyramids. The surface of the stone had an appalling mouldiness, as though it had been lifted from an ancient graveyard where it had lain in the festering ground for unwholesome centuries.

Between cracks in this stained and decayed section of stone grew fetid moss that quivered with the microscopic organisms that infest age-rotten places. Sections of the flooring and woodwork also reeked with mustiness. In one dark, webby corner of the room lay a pile of bleached bones, still tinted with the ghastly grays and pinks of putrefaction. Northwood, overwhelmingly nauseated, withdrew his eyes from the bones, only to see, in another corner, a pile of worm-eaten clothing that lay on the floor in the outline of a man.

Faint with the reek of ancient mustiness, Northwood retreated to the door, dizzy and staggering.

"It sickens you," said Eve, "and it sickens me also, for death and decay are not pleasant. Yet Nature, left to herself, reduces all to this. Every grave that has yawned to receive its prey hides corruption no less shocking. Nature's forces of creation and destruction forever work in partnership. Never satisfied with her composition, she destroys and starts again, building, building towards the ultimate of perfection. Thus, it is natural that if Dr. Mundson isolated the Life Ray, Nature's supreme force of compensation, isolation of the Death Ray should closely follow. Adam, thirsting for power, has succeeded. A few sweeps of his unholy ray of decomposition will undo all Dr. Mundson's work in this valley and reduce it to a stinking holocaust of destruction. And the time for his striking has come!"

She seized his face and drew it toward her. "Quick!" she said. "We'll have to go back to the third dimension. I could leave you safe in the fourth, but if anything should happen to me, you would be stranded forever in future time."

She kissed his lips. In a moment, he was back in the old familiar world, where right is right and left is left. Again the subtle change wrought by Eve's magic lips had taken place.

Eve went to a machine standing in a corner of the room.

"Come here and get behind me, John Northwood. I want to test it before he enters."

Northwood stood behind her shoulder.

"Now watch!" she ordered. "I shall turn it on one of those cages of guinea pigs over there."

She swung the projector around, pointed it at the cage of small, squealing animals, and threw a lever. Instantly a cone of black mephitis shot forth, a loathsome, bituminous stream of putrefaction that reeked of the grave and the cesspool, of the utmost reaches of decay before the dust accepts the disintegrated atoms. The first touch

of seething, pitchy destruction brought screams of sudden agony from the guinea pigs, but the screams were cut short as the little animals fell in shocking, instant decay. The very cage which imprisoned them shriveled and retreated from the hellish, devouring breath that struck its noisome rot into the heart of the wood and the metal, reducing both to revolting ruin.

Eve cut off the frightful power, and the black cone disappeared, leaving the room putrid with its defilement.

"And Adam would do that to the world," she said, her blue eyes like electric-shot icicles. "He would do it to you, John Northwood—and to me!" Her full bosom strained under the passion beneath.

"Listen!" She raised her hand warningly. "He comes! The destroyer comes!"

A hand was at the door. Eve reached for the lever, and, the same moment, Northwood leaned over her imploringly.

"If Athalia is with him!" he gasped. "You will not harm her?"

A wild shriek at the door, a slight scuffle, and then the doorknob was wrenched as though two were fighting over it.

"For God's sake, Eve!" implored Northwood. "Wait! Wait!"

"No! She shall die, too. You love her!"

Icy, cruel eyes cut into him, and a new-fleshed hand tried to push him aside. The door was straining open. A beloved voice shrieked. "John!"

Eve and Northwood both leaped for the lever. Under her tender white flesh she was as strong as a man. In the midst of the struggle, her red, humid lips approached his—closer. Closer. Their merest pressure would thrust him into Future Time, where the laboratory and all it contained would be but a shadow, and where he would be helpless to interfere with her terrible will.

He saw the door open and Adam stride into the room. Behind him, lying prone in the hall where she had probably fainted, was Athalia.

IMAGEDESCRIPTION

In a mad burst of strength he touched the lever together with Eve.

The projector, belching forth its stinking breath of corruption swung

in a mad arc over the ceiling, over the walls—and then straight at Adam.

IMAGEDESCRIPTION

Then, quicker than thought, came the accident. Eve, attempting to throw Northwood off, tripped, fell half over the machine, and, with a short scream of despair, dropped into the black path of destruction.

Northwood paused, horrified. The Death Ray was pointed at an inner wall of the room, which, even as he looked, crumbled and disappeared, bringing down upon him dust more foul than any obscenity the bowels of the earth might yield. In an instant the black cone ate through the outer parts of the building, where crashing stone and screams that were more horrible because of their shortness followed the ruin that swept far into the fair reaches of the valley.

The paralyzing odor of decay took his breath, numbed his muscles, until, of all that huge building, the wall behind him and one small section of the room by the doorway alone remained whole. He was trying to nerve himself to reach for the lever close to that quiet formless thing still partly draped over the machine, when a faint sound in the door electrified him. At first, he dared not look, but his own name, spoken almost in a gasp, gave him courage.

Athalia lay on the floor, apparently untouched.

He jerked the lever violently before running to her, exultant with the knowledge that his own efforts to keep the ray from the door had saved her.

"And you're not hurt!" He gathered her close.

"John! I saw it get Adam." She pointed to a new mound of mouldy clothes on the floor. "Oh, it is hideous for me to be so glad, but he was going to destroy everything and everyone except me. He made the ray projector for that one purpose."

Northwood looked over the pile of putrid ruins which a few minutes ago had been a building. There was not a wall left intact.

"His intention is accomplished, Athalia," he said sadly. "Let's get out before more stones fall."

In a moment they were in the open. An ominous stillness seemed to grip the very air—the awful silence of the polar wastes which lay not far beyond the mountains.

"How dark it is, John!" cried Athalia. "Dark and cold!"

"The sunshine projector!" gasped Northwood. "It must have been destroyed. Look, dearest! The golden light has disappeared."

"And the warm air of the valley will lift immediately. That means a polar blizzard." She shuddered and clung closer to him. "I've seen Antarctic storms, John. They're death."

Northwood avoided her eyes. "There's the sun-ship. We'll give the ruins the once over in case there are any survivors; then we'll save ourselves."

Even a cursory examination of the mouldy piles of stone and dust convinced them that there could be no survivors. The ruins looked as though they had lain in those crumbling piles for centuries. Northwood, smothering his repugnance, stepped among them—among the green, slimy stones and the unspeakable revolting débris, staggering back and faint and shocked when he came upon dust that was once human.

"God!" he groaned, hands over eyes. "We're alone, Athalia! Alone in a charnal house. The laboratory housed the entire population, didn't it?"

"Yes. Needing no sleep nor food, we did not need houses. We all

worked here, under Dr. Mundson's generalship, and, lately under Adam's, like a little band of soldiers fighting for a great cause."

"Let's go to the sun-ship, dearest."

"But Daddy Mundson was in the library," sobbed Athalia. "Let's look for him a little longer."

Sudden remembrance came to Northwood. "No, Athalia! He left the library. I saw him go down the jungle path several minutes before I and Eve went to Adam's laboratory."

"Then he might be safe!" Her eyes danced. "He might have gone to the sun-ship."

Shivering, she slumped against him. "Oh, John! I'm cold."

Her face was blue. Northwood jerked off his coat and wrapped it around her, taking the intense cold against his unprotected shoulders. The low, gray sky was rapidly darkening, and the feeble light of the sun could scarcely pierce the clouds. It was disturbing to know that even the summer temperature in the Antarctic was far below zero.

"Come, girl," said Northwood gravely. "Hurry! It's snowing."

They started to run down the road through the narrow strip of jungle. The Death Ray had cut huge swathes in the tangle of trees and vines, and now areas of heaped débris, livid with the colors of recent decay, exhaled a mephitic humidity altogether alien to the snow that fell in soft, slow flakes. Each hesitated to voice the new fear: had the sun-ship been destroyed?

By the time they reached the open field, the snow stung their flesh like sharp needles, but it was not yet thick enough to hide from them a hideous fact.

The sun-ship was gone.

It might have occupied one of several black, foul areas on the green grass, where the searching Death Ray had made the very soil putrefy, and the rocks crumble into shocking dust.

Northwood snatched Athalia to him, too full of despair to speak. A sudden terrific flurry of snow whirled around them, and they were almost blown from their feet by the icy wind that tore over the unprotected field.

"It won't be long," said Athalia faintly. "Freezing doesn't hurt, John, dear."

"It isn't fair, Athalia! There never would have been such a marriage as ours. Dr. Mundson searched the world to bring us together."

"For scientific experiment!" she sobbed. "I'd rather die, John. I want an old-fashioned home, a Black Age family. I want to grow old with you and leave the earth to my children. Or else I want to die here now under the kind, white blanket the snow is already spreading over us." She drooped in his arms.

Clinging together, they stood in the howling wind, looking at each other hungrily, as though they would snatch from death this one last picture of the other.

Northwood's freezing lips translated some of the futile words that crowded against them. "I love you because you are not perfect. I hate perfection!"

"Yes. Perfection is the only hopeless state, John. That is why Adam wanted to destroy, so that he might build again."

They were sitting in the snow now, for they were very tired. The storm began whistling louder, as though it were only a few feet above their heads.

"That sounds almost like the sun-ship," said Athalia drowsily.

"It's only the wind. Hold your face down so it won't strike your flesh so cruelly."

"I'm not suffering. I'm getting warm again." She smiled at him sleepily.

Little icicles began to form on their clothing, and the powdery snow frosted their uncovered hair.

Suddenly came a familiar voice: "*Ach Gott!*"

Dr. Mundson stood before them, covered with snow until he looked like a polar bear.

"Get up!" he shouted. "Quick! To the sun-ship!"

He seized Athalia and jerked her to her feet. She looked at him sleepily for a moment, and then threw herself at him and hugged him frantically.

"You're not dead?"

Taking each by the arm, he half dragged them to the sun-ship, which

had landed only a few feet away. In a few minutes he had hot brandy for them.

While they sipped greedily, he talked, between working the sun-ship's controls.

"No, I wouldn't say it was a lucky moment that drew me to the sun-ship. When I saw Eve trying to charm John, I had what you American slangists call a hunch, which sent me to the sun-ship to get it off the ground so that Adam couldn't commandeer it. And what is a hunch but a mental penetration into the Fourth Dimension?" For a long moment, he brooded, absent-minded. "I was in the air when the black ray, which I suppose is Adam's deviltry, began to destroy everything it touched. From a safe elevation I saw it wreck all my work." A sudden spasm crossed his face. "I've flown over the entire valley. We're the only survivors—thank God!"

"And so at last you confess that it is not well to tamper with human life?" Northwood, warmed with hot brandy, was his old self again.

"Oh, I have not altogether wasted my efforts. I went to elaborate pains to bring together a perfect man and a perfect woman of what Adam called our Black Age." He smiled at them whimsically.

"And who can say to what extent you have thus furthered natural evolution?" Northwood slipped his arm around Athalia. "Our children might be more than geniuses, Doctor!"

Dr. Mundson nodded his huge, shaggy head gravely.

"The true instinct of a Creature of the Light," he declared.

#12 Into Space, by Sterner St. Paul Meek:

What was the extraordinary connection between Dr. Livermore's sudden disappearance and the coming of a new satellite to the Earth?

Aproximate word count: 4,600

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Many of my readers will remember the mysterious radio messages which were heard by both amateur and professional short wave operators during the nights of the twenty-third and twenty-fourth of last September, and even more will remember the astounding discovery made by Professor Montescue of the Lick Observatory on the night of September twenty-fifth. At the time, some inspired writers tried to connect the two events, maintaining that the discovery of the fact that the earth had a new satellite coincident with the receipt of the mysterious messages was evidence that the new planetoid was inhabited and that the messages were attempts on the part of the inhabitants to communicate with us.

The fact that the messages were on a lower wave length than any receiver then in existence could receive with any degree of clarity, and the additional fact that they appeared to come from an immense distance lent a certain air of plausibility to these ebullitions in the Sunday magazine sections. For some weeks the feature writers harped on the subject, but the hurried construction of new receivers which would work on a lower wave length yielded no results, and the solemn pronouncements of astronomers to the effect that the new celestial body could by no possibility have an atmosphere on account of its small size finally put an end to the talk. So the matter lapsed into oblivion.

While quite a few people will remember the two events I have noted, I doubt whether there are five hundred people alive who will remember anything at all about the disappearance of Dr. Livermore of the University of Calvada on September twenty-third. He was a man of some local prominence, but he had no more than a local fame, and few papers outside of California even noted the event in their columns. I do not think that anyone ever tried to connect up his disappearance with the radio messages or the discovery of the new earthly satellite; yet the three events were closely bound up together, and but for the Doctor's disappearance, the other two would never have happened.

Dr. Livermore taught physics at Calvada, or at least he taught the subject when he remembered that he had a class and felt like teaching. His students never knew whether he would appear at class or not; but he always passed everyone who took his courses and so, of course, they were always crowded. The University authorities used to remonstrate with him, but his ability as a research worker was so well known and recognized that he was allowed to go about as he pleased. He was a bachelor who lived alone and who had no interests in life, so far as anyone knew, other than his work.

I first made contact with him when I was a freshman at Calvada, and for some unknown reason he took a liking to me. My father had insisted that I follow in his footsteps as an electrical engineer; as he was paying my bills, I had to make a show at studying engineering while I clandestinely pursued my hobby, literature. Dr. Livermore's courses were the easiest in the school and they counted as science, so I regularly registered for them, cut them, and attended a class in literature as an auditor. The Doctor used to meet me on the campus and laughingly scold me for my absence, but he was really in sympathy with my ambition and he regularly gave me a passing mark and my units of credit without regard to my attendance, or, rather, lack of it.

When I graduated from Calvada I was theoretically an electrical

engineer. Practically I had a pretty good knowledge of contemporary literature and knew almost nothing about my so-called profession. I stalled around Dad's office for a few months until I landed a job as a cub reporter on the San Francisco *Graphic* and then I quit him cold. When the storm blew over, Dad admitted that you couldn't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear and agreed with a grunt to my new line of work. He said that I would probably be a better reporter than an engineer because I couldn't by any possibility be a worse one, and let it go at that. However, all this has nothing to do with the story. It just explains how I came to be acquainted with Dr. Livermore, in the first place, and why he sent for me on September twenty-second, in the second place.

The morning of the twenty-second the City Editor called me in and asked me if I knew "Old Liverpills."

"He says that he has a good story ready to break but he won't talk to anyone but you," went on Barnes. "I offered to send out a good man, for when Old Liverpills starts a story it ought to be good, but all I got was a high powered bawling out. He said that he would talk to you or no one and would just as soon talk to no one as to me any longer. Then he hung up. You'd better take a run out to Calvada and see what he has to say. I can have a good man rewrite your drivel when you get back."

I was more or less used to that sort of talk from Barnes so I paid no attention to it. I drove my flivver down to Calvada and asked for the Doctor.

"Dr. Livermore?" said the bursar. "Why, he hasn't been around here for the last ten months. This is his sabbatical year and he is spending it on a ranch he owns up at Hat Creek, near Mount Lassen. You'll have to go there if you want to see him."

I knew better than to report back to Barnes without the story, so there was nothing to it but to drive up to Hat Creek, and a long, hard drive it was. I made Redding late that night; the next day I drove on to Burney and asked for directions to the Doctor's ranch.

"So you're going up to Doc Livermore's, are you?" asked the Postmaster, my informant. "Have you got an invitation?"

I assured him that I had.

"It's a good thing," he replied, "because he don't allow anyone on his place without one. I'd like to go up there myself and see what's going on, but I don't want to get shot at like old Pete Johnson did when he tried to drop in on the Doc and pay him a little call. There's something mighty funny going on up there."

Naturally I tried to find out what was going on but evidently the Postmaster, who was also the express agent, didn't know. All he could tell me was that a "lot of junk" had come for the Doctor by express and that a lot more had been hauled in by truck from Redding.

"What kind of junk?" I asked him.

"Almost everything, Bub: sheet steel, machinery, batteries, cases of glass, and Lord knows what all. It's been going on ever since he landed there. He has a bunch of Indians working for him and he don't let a white man on the place."

Forced to be satisfied with this meager information, I started old Lizzie and lit out for the ranch. After I had turned off the main trail I met no one until the ranch house was in sight. As I rounded a bend in the road which brought me in sight of the building, I was forced to put on my brakes at top speed to avoid running into a chain which was stretched across the road. An Indian armed with a Winchester rifle stood behind it, and when I stopped he came up and asked my business.

"My business is with Dr. Livermore," I said tartly.

"You got letter?" he inquired.

"No," I answered.

"No ketchum letter, no ketchum Doctor," he replied, and walked stolidly back to his post.

"This is absurd," I shouted, and drove Lizzie up to the chain. I saw that it was merely hooked to a ring at the end, and I climbed out and started to take it down. A thirty-thirty bullet embedded itself in the post an inch or two from my head, and I changed my mind about taking down that chain.

"No ketchum letter, no ketchum Doctor," said the Indian laconically as he pumped another shell into his gun.

I was balked, until I noticed a pair of telephone wires running from the house to the tree to which one end of the chain was fastened.

"Is that a telephone to the house?" I demanded.

The Indian grunted an assent.

"Dr. Livermore telephoned me to come and see him," I said. "Can't I call him up and see if he still wants to see me?"

The Indian debated the question with himself for a minute and then nodded a doubtful assent. I cranked the old coffee mill type of telephone which I found, and presently heard the voice of Dr. Livermore.

"This is Tom Faber, Doctor," I said. "The *Graphic* sent me up to get a story from you, but there's an Indian here who started to murder me when I tried to get past your barricade."

"Good for him," chuckled the Doctor. "I heard the shot, but didn't know that he was shooting at you. Tell him to talk to me."

The Indian took the telephone at my bidding and listened for a minute.

"You go in," he agreed when he hung up the receiver.

He took down the chain and I drove on up to the house, to find the Doctor waiting for me on the veranda.

"Hello, Tom," he greeted me heartily. "So you had trouble with my guard, did you?"

"I nearly got murdered," I said ruefully.

"I expect that Joe would have drilled you if you had tried to force your way in," he remarked cheerfully. "I forgot to tell him that you were coming to-day. I told him you would be here yesterday, but yesterday isn't to-day to that Indian. I wasn't sure you would get here at all, in point of fact, for I didn't know whether that old fool I talked to in your office would send you or some one else. If anyone else had been sent, he would have never got by Joe, I can tell you. Come in. Where's your bag?"

"I haven't one," I replied. "I went to Calvada yesterday to see you, and didn't know until I got there that you were up here."

The Doctor chuckled.

"I guess I forgot to tell where I was," he said. "That man I talked to got me so mad that I hung up on him before I told him. It doesn't matter, though. I can dig you up a new toothbrush, and I guess you can make out with that. Come in."

I followed him into the house, and he showed me a room fitted with a crude bunk, a washstand, a bowl and a pitcher.

"You won't have many luxuries here, Tom," he said, "but you won't need to stay here for more than a few days. My work is done: I am

ready to start. In fact, I would have started yesterday instead of to-day, had you arrived. Now don't ask any questions; it's nearly lunch time."

"What's the story, Doctor?" I asked after lunch as I puffed one of his excellent cigars. "And why did you pick me to tell it to?"

"For several reasons," he replied, ignoring my first question. "In the first place, I like you and I think that you can keep your mouth shut until you are told to open it. In the second place, I have always found that you had the gift of vision or imagination and have the ability to believe. In the third place, you are the only man I know who had the literary ability to write up a good story and at the same time has the scientific background to grasp what it is all about. Understand that unless I have your promise not to write this story until I tell you that you can, not a word will I tell you."

I reflected for a moment. The *Graphic* would expect the story when I got back, but on the other hand I knew that unless I gave the desired promise, the Doctor wouldn't talk.

"All right," I assented, "I'll promise."

"Good!" he replied. "In that case, I'll tell you all about it. No doubt

you, like the rest of the world, think that I'm crazy?"

"Why, not at all," I stammered. In point of fact, I had often harbored such a suspicion.

"Oh, that's all right," he went on cheerfully. "I *am* crazy, crazy as a loon, which, by the way, is a highly sensible bird with a well balanced mentality. There is no doubt that I am crazy, but my craziness is not of the usual type. Mine is the insanity of genius."

He looked at me sharply as he spoke, but long sessions at poker in the San Francisco Press Club had taught me how to control my facial muscles, and I never batted an eye. He seemed satisfied, and went on.

"From your college work you are familiar with the laws of magnetism," he said. "Perhaps, considering just what your college career really was, I might better say that you are supposed to be familiar with them."

I joined with him in his laughter.

"It won't require a very deep knowledge to follow the thread of my argument," he went on. "You know, of course, that the force of

magnetic attraction is inversely proportional to the square of the distances separating the magnet and the attracted particles, and also that each magnetized particle had two poles, a positive and a negative pole, or a north pole and a south pole, as they are usually called?"

I nodded.

"Consider for a moment that the laws of magnetism, insofar as concerns the relation between distance and power of attraction, are exactly matched by the laws of gravitation."

"But there the similarity between the two forces ends," I interrupted.

"But there the similarity does *not* end," he said sharply. "That is the crux of the discovery which I have made: that magnetism and gravity are one and the same, or, rather, that the two are separate, but similar manifestations of one force. The parallel between the two grows closer with each succeeding experiment. You know, for example, that each magnetized particle has two poles. Similarly each gravitized particle, to coin a new word, had two poles, one positive and one negative. Every particle on the earth is so oriented that the negative poles point toward the positive center of the earth. This is what causes the commonly known phenomena of gravity or weight."

"I can prove the fallacy of that in a moment," I retorted.

"There are none so blind as those who will not see," he quoted with an icy smile. "I can probably predict your puerile argument, but go ahead and present it."

"If two magnets are placed so that the north pole of one is in juxtaposition to the south pole of the other, they attract one another," I said. "If the position of the magnets be reversed so that the two similar poles are opposite, they will repel. If your theory were correct, a man standing on his head would fall off the earth."

"Exactly what I expected," he replied. "Now let me ask you a question. Have you ever seen a small bar magnet placed within the field of attraction of a large electromagnet? Of course you have, and you have noticed that, when the north pole of the bar magnet was pointed toward the electromagnet, the bar was attracted. However, when the bar was reversed and the south pole pointed toward the electromagnet, the bar was still attracted. You doubtless remember that experiment."

"But in that case the magnetism of the electromagnet was so large that the polarity of the small magnet was reversed!" I cried.

"Exactly, and the field of gravity of the earth is so great compared to the gravity of a man that when he stands on his head, his polarity is instantly reversed."

I nodded. His explanation was too logical for me to pick a flaw in it.

"If that same bar magnet were held in the field of the electromagnet with its north pole pointed toward the magnet and then, by the action of some outside force of sufficient power, its polarity were reversed, the bar would be repelled. If the magnetism were neutralized and held exactly neutral, it would be neither repelled nor attracted, but would act only as the force of gravity impelled it. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly," I assented.

"That, then, paves the way for what I have to tell you. I have developed an electrical method of neutralizing the gravity of a body while it is within the field of the earth, and also, by a slight extension, a method of entirely reversing its polarity."

I nodded calmly.

"Do you realize what this means?" he cried.

"No," I replied, puzzled by his great excitement.

"Man alive," he cried, "it means that the problem of aerial flight is entirely revolutionized, and that the era of interplanetary travel is at hand! Suppose that I construct an airship and then render it neutral to gravity. It would weigh nothing, *absolutely nothing*! The tiniest propeller would drive it at almost incalculable speed with a minimum consumption of power, for the only resistance to its motion would be the resistance of the air. If I were to reverse the polarity, it would be repelled from the earth with the same force with which it is now attracted, and it would rise with the same acceleration as a body falls toward the earth. It would travel to the moon in two hours and forty minutes."

"Air resistance would—"

"There is no air a few miles from the earth. Of course, I do not mean that such a craft would take off from the earth and land on the moon three hours later. There are two things which would interfere with that. One is the fact that the propelling force, the gravity of the earth, would diminish as the square of the distance from the center of the earth, and the other is that when the band of neutral attraction, or rather repulsion, between the earth and the moon had been reached, it would be necessary to decelerate so as to avoid a smash on landing. I have been over the whole thing and I find that it would take twenty-nine hours and fifty-two minutes to make the whole trip.

The entire thing is perfectly possible. In fact, I have asked you here to witness and report the first interplanetary trip to be made."

"Have you constructed such a device?" I cried.

"My space ship is finished and ready for your inspection," he replied. "If you will come with me, I will show it to you."

Hardly knowing what to believe, I followed him from the house and to a huge barnlike structure, over a hundred feet high, which stood nearby. He opened the door and switched on a light, and there before me stood what looked at first glance to be a huge artillery shell, but of a size larger than any ever made. It was constructed of sheet steel, and while the lower part was solid, the upper sections had huge glass windows set in them. On the point was a mushroom shaped protuberance. It measured perhaps fifty feet in diameter and was one hundred and forty feet high, the Doctor informed me. A ladder led from the floor to a door about fifty feet from the ground.

I followed the Doctor up the ladder and into the space flier. The door led us into a comfortable living room through a double door arrangement.

"The whole hull beneath us," explained the Doctor, "is filled with

batteries and machinery except for a space in the center, where a shaft leads to a glass window in the bottom so that I can see behind me, so to speak. The space above is filled with storerooms and the air purifying apparatus. On this level is my bedroom, kitchen, and other living rooms, together with a laboratory and an observatory. There is a central control room located on an upper level, but it need seldom be entered, for the craft can be controlled by a system of relays from this room or from any other room in the ship. I suppose that you are more or less familiar with imaginative stories of interplanetary travel?"

I nodded an assent.

"In that case there is no use in going over the details of the air purifying and such matters," he said. "The story writers have worked out all that sort of thing in great detail, and there is nothing novel in my arrangements. I carry food and water for six months and air enough for two months by constant renovating. Have you any question you wish to ask?"

"One objection I have seen frequently raised to the idea of interplanetary travel is that the human body could not stand the rapid acceleration which would be necessary to attain speed enough to ever get anywhere. How do you overcome this?"

"My dear boy, who knows what the human body can stand? When the locomotive was first invented learned scientists predicted that the limit of speed was thirty miles an hour, as the human body could not stand a higher speed. To-day the human body stands a speed of three hundred and sixty miles an hour without ill effects. At any rate, on my first trip I intend to take no chances. We know that the body can stand an acceleration of thirty-two feet per second without trouble. That is the rate of acceleration due to gravity and is the rate at which a body increases speed when it falls. This is the acceleration which I will use.

"Remember that the space traveled by a falling body in a vacuum is equal to one half the acceleration multiplied by the square of the elapsed time. The moon, to which I intend to make my first trip, is only 280,000 miles, or 1,478,400,000 feet, from us. With an acceleration of thirty-two feet per second, I would pass the moon two hours and forty minutes after leaving the earth. If I later take another trip, say to Mars, I will have to find a means of increasing my acceleration, possibly by the use of the rocket principle. Then will be time enough to worry about what my body will stand."

A short calculation verified the figures the Doctor had given me, and I stood convinced.

"Are you really going?" I asked.

"Most decidedly. To repeat, I would have started yesterday, had you arrived. As it is, I am ready to start at once. We will go back to the house for a few minutes while I show you the location of an excellent telescope through which you may watch my progress, and instruct you in the use of an ultra-short-wave receiver which I am confident will pierce the Heaviside layer. With this I will keep in communication with you, although I have made no arrangements for you to send messages to me on this trip. I intend to go to the moon and land. I will take atmosphere samples through an air port and, if there is an atmosphere which will support life, I will step out on the surface. If there is not, I will return to the earth."

A few minutes was enough for me to grasp the simple manipulations which I would have to perform, and I followed him again to the space flier.

"How are you going to get it out?" I asked.

"Watch," he said.

He worked some levers and the roof of the barn folded back, leaving the way clear for the departure of the huge projectile. I followed him

inside and he climbed the ladder.

"When I shut the door, go back to the house and test the radio," he directed.

The door clanged shut and I hastened into the house. His voice came plainly enough. I went back to the flier and waved him a final farewell, which he acknowledged through a window; then I returned to the receiver. A loud hum filled the air, and suddenly the projectile rose and flew out through the open roof, gaining speed rapidly until it was a mere speck in the sky.

IMAGEDESCRIPTION

It vanished. I had no trouble in picking him up with the telescope. In fact, I could see the Doctor through one of the windows.

"I have passed beyond the range of the atmosphere, Tom," came his voice over the receiver, "and I find that everything is going exactly as it should. I feel no discomfort, and my only regret is that I did not install a transmitter in the house so that you could talk to me; but there is no real necessity for it. I am going to make some

observations now, but I will call you again with a report of progress in half-an-hour."

For the rest of the afternoon and all of that night I received his messages regularly, but with the coming of daylight they began to fade. By nine o'clock I could get only a word here and there. By noon I could hear nothing. I went to sleep hoping that the night would bring better reception, nor was I disappointed. About eight o'clock I received a message, rather faintly, but none the less distinctly.

"I regret more than ever that I did not install a transmitter so that I could learn from you whether you are receiving my messages," his voice said faintly. "I have no idea of whether you can hear me or not, but I will keep on repeating this message every hour while my battery holds out. It is now thirty hours since I left the earth and I should be on the moon, according to my calculations. But I am not, and never will be. I am caught at the neutral point where the gravity of the earth and the moon are exactly equal.

"I had relied on my momentum to carry me over this point. Once over it, I expected to reverse my polarity and fall on the moon. My momentum did not do so. If I keep my polarity as it was when left the earth, both the earth and the moon repel me. If I reverse it, they

both attract me, and again I cannot move. If I had equipped my space flier with a rocket so that I could move a few miles, or even a few feet, from the dead line, I could proceed, but I did not do so, and I cannot move forward or back. Apparently I am doomed to stay here until my air gives out. Then my body, entombed in my space ship, will endlessly circle the earth as a satellite until the end of time. There is no hope for me, for long before a duplicate of my device equipped with rockets could be constructed and come to my rescue, my air would be exhausted. Good-by, Tom. You may write your story as soon as you wish. I will repeat my message in one hour. Good-by!"

At nine and at ten o'clock the message was repeated. At eleven it started again but after a few sentences the sound suddenly ceased and the receiver went dead. I thought that the fault was with the receiver and I toiled feverishly the rest of the night, but without result. I learned later that the messages heard all over the world ceased at the same hour.

The next morning Professor Montescue announced his discovery of the world's new satellite.

#13 Mad Music, by Anthony Pelcher:

The sixty stories of the perfectly constructed colossus building had mysteriously crashed! What was the connection between this catastrophe and the weird strains of the mad musician's violin?

Aproximate word count: 6,100

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

To the accompaniment of a crashing roar, not unlike rumbling thunder, the proud Colossus Building, which a few minutes before had reared its sixty stories of artistic architecture towards the blue dome of the sky, crashed in a rugged, dusty heap of stone, brick, cement and mortar. The steel framework, like the skeleton of some prehistoric monster, still reared to dizzy heights but in a bent and twisted shape of grotesque outline.

The sixty stories of the perfectly constructed Colossus building had mysteriously crashed! What was the connection between this catastrophe and the weird strains of the Mad Musician's violin?

No one knew how many lives were snuffed out in the avalanche.

As the collapse occurred in the early dawn it was not believed the death list would be large. It was admitted, however, that autos, cabs and surface cars may have been caught under the falling rock. One train was known to have been wrecked in the subway due to a cave-in from the surface under the ragged mountain of debris.

The litter fairly filled a part of Times Square, the most congested cross-roads on God's footstool. Straggling brick and rock had rolled across the street to the west and had crashed into windows and doors of innocent small tradesmen's shops.

A few minutes after the crash a mad crowd of people had piled from subway exits as far away as Penn Station and Columbus Circle and from cross streets. These milled about, gesticulating and shouting hysterically. All neighboring police stations were hard put to handle the growing mob.

Hundreds of dead and maimed were being carried to the surface from the wrecked train in the subway. Trucks and cabs joined the ambulance crews in the work of transporting these to morgues and hospitals. As the morning grew older and the news of the disaster spread, more milling thousands tried to crowd into the square. Many

were craning necks hopelessly on the outskirts of the throng, blocks away, trying vainly to get a view of what lay beyond.

The fire department and finally several companies of militia joined the police in handling the crowd. Newsies, never asleep, yowled their "Wuxtras" and made much small money.

The newspapers devoted solid pages in attempting to describe what had happened. Nervously, efficient reporters had written and written, using all their best adjectives and inventing new ones in attempts to picture the crash and the hysterics which followed.

When the excitement was at its height a middle-aged man, bleeding at the head, clothes torn and dusty, staggered into the West 47th street police station. He found a lone sergeant at the desk.

The police sergeant jumped to his feet as the bedraggled man entered and stumbled to a bench.

"I'm Pat Brennan, street floor watchman of the Colossus," he said. "I ran for it. I got caught in the edge of the wreck and a brick clipped me. I musta been out for some time. When I came around I looked back just once at the wreck and then I beat it over here. Phone my boss."

"I'll let you phone your boss," said the sergeant, "but first tell me just what happened."

"Earthquake, I guess. I saw the floor heaving in waves. Glass was crashing and falling into the street. All windows in the arcade buckled, either in or out. I ran into the street and looked up. God, what a sight! The building from sidewalk to towers was rocking and waving and twisting and buckling and I saw it was bound to crumple, so I lit out and ran. I heard a roar like all Hell broke loose and then something nicked me and my light went out."

"How many got caught in the building?"

"Nobody got out but me, I guess. There weren't many tenants. The building is all rented, but not everybody had moved in yet and those as had didn't spend their nights there. There was a watchman for every five stories. An engineer and his crew. Three elevator operators had come in. There was no names of tenants in or out on my book after 4 A.M. The crash musta come about 6. That's all."

Throughout the country the news of the crash was received with great interest and wonderment, but in one small circle it caused absolute consternation. That was in the offices of the Muller Construction Company, the builders of the Colossus. Jason V.

Linane, chief engineer of the company, was in conference with its president, James J. Muller.

Muller sat with his head in his hands, and his face wore an expression of a man in absolute anguish. Linane was pacing the floor, a wild expression in his eyes, and at times he muttered and mumbled under his breath.

In the other offices the entire force from manager to office boys was hushed and awed, for they had seen the expressions on the faces of the heads of the concern when they stalked into the inner office that morning.

Muller finally looked up, rather hopelessly, at Linane.

"Unless we can prove that the crash was due to some circumstance over which we had no control, we are ruined," he said, and there actually were tears in his eyes.

"No doubt about that," agreed Linane, "but I can swear that the Colossus went up according to specifications and that every ounce and splinter of material was of the best. The workmanship was faultless. We have built scores of the biggest blocks in the world and of them all this Colossus was the most perfect. I had prided myself

on it. Muller, it was perfection. I simply cannot account for it. I cannot. It should have stood up for thousands of years. The foundation was solid rock. It positively was not an earthquake. No other building in the section was even jarred. No other earthquake was ever localized to one half block of the earth's crust, and we can positively eliminate an earthquake or an explosion as the possible cause. I am sure we are not to blame, but we will have to find the exact cause."

"If there was some flaw?" questioned Muller, although he knew the answer.

"If there was some flaw, then we're sunk. The newspapers are already clamoring for probes, of us, of the building, of the owners and everybody and everything. We have got to have something damned plausible when we go to bat on this proposition or every dollar we have in the world will have to be paid out."

"That is not all," said Muller: "not only will we be penniless, but we may have to go to jail and we will never be able to show our faces in reputable business circles again. Who was the last to go over that building?"

"I sent Teddy Jenks. He is a cub and is swell headed and too big for

his pants, but I would bank my life on his judgment. He has the judgment of a much older man and I would also bank my life and reputation on his engineering skill and knowledge. He pronounced the building positively O.K.—100 per cent."

"Where is Jenks?"

"He will be here as soon as his car can drive down from Tarrytown. He should be here now."

As they talked Jenks, the youngest member of the engineering force, entered. He entered like a whirlwind. He threw his hat on the floor and drew out a drawer of a cabinet. He pulled out the plans for the Colossus, big blue prints, some of them yards in extent, and threw them on the floor. Then he dropped to his knees and began poring over them.

"This is a hell of a time for you to begin getting around," exploded Muller. "What were you doing, cabareting all night?"

"It sure is terrible—awful," said Jenks, half to himself.

"Answer me," thundered Muller.

"Oh yes," said Jenks, looking up. He saw the look of anguish on his

boss's face and forgot his own excitement in sympathy. He jumped to his feet, placed his arm about the shoulders of the older man and led him to a chair. Linane only scowled at the young man.

"I was delayed because I stopped by to see the wreck. My God, Mr. Muller, it is awful." Jenks drew his hand across his eye as if to erase the scene of the wrecked building. Then patting the older man affectionately on the back he said:

"Buck up. I'm on the job, as usual. I'll find out about it. It could not have been our fault. Why man, that building was as strong as Gibraltar itself!"

"You were the last to inspect it," accused Muller, with a break in his voice.

"Nobody knows that better than I, and I can swear by all that's square and honest that it was no fault of the material or the construction. It must have been—"

"Must have been what?"

"I'll be damned if I know."

"That's like him," said Linane, who, while really kindly intentioned,

had always rather enjoyed prodding the young engineer.

"Like me, like the devil," shouted Jenks, glaring at Linane. "I suppose you know all about it, you're so blamed wise."

"No, I don't know," admitted Linane. "But I do know that you don't like me to tell you anything. Nevertheless, I am going to tell you that you had better get busy and find out what caused it, or—"

"That's just what I'm doing," said Jenks, and he dived for his plans on the floor.

Newspaper reporters, many of them, were fighting outside to get in. Muller looked at Linane when a stenographer had announced the reporters for the tenth time.

"We had better let them in," he said, "it looks bad to crawl for cover."

"What are you going to tell them?" asked Linane.

"God only knows," said Muller.

"Let me handle them," said Jenks, looking up confidently.

The newspapermen had rushed the office. They came in like a wild wave. Questions flew like feathers at a cock-fight.

Muller held up his hand and there was something in his grief-stricken eyes that held the gentlemen of the press in silence. They had time to look around. They saw the handsome, dark-haired, brown-eyed Jenks poring over the plans. Dust from the carpet smudged his knees, and he had rubbed some of it over a sweating forehead, but he still looked the picture of self-confident efficiency.

"Gentlemen," said Muller slowly, "I can answer all your questions at once. Our firm is one of the oldest and staunchest in the trade. Our buildings stand as monuments to our integrity—"

"All but one," said a young Irishman.

"You are right. All but one," confessed Muller. "But that one, believe me, has been visited by an act of God. Some form of earthquake or some unlooked for, uncontrolled, almost unbelievable catastrophe has happened. The Muller company stands back of its work to its last dollar. Gentlemen, you know as much as we do. Mr. Jenks there, whose reputation as an engineer is quite sturdy, I assure you, was the last to inspect the building. He passed upon it when it was finished. He is at your service."

Jenks arose, brushed some dust from his knees.

"You look like you'd been praying," bandied the Irishman.

"Maybe I have. Now let me talk. Don't broadside me with questions. I know what you want to know. Let me talk."

The newspapermen were silent.

"There has been talk of probing this disaster, naturally," began Jenks. "You all know, gentlemen, that we will aid any inquiry to our utmost. You want to know what we have to say about it—who is responsible. In a reasonable time I will have a statement to make that will be startling in the extreme. I am not sure of my ground now."

"How about the ground under the Colossus?" said the Irishman.

"Don't let's kid each other," pleaded Jenks. "Look at Mr. Muller: it is as if he had lost his whole family. We are good people. I am doing all I can. Mr. Linane, who had charge of the construction, is doing all he can. We believe we are blameless. If it is proven otherwise we will acknowledge our fault, assume financial responsibility, and take our medicine. Believe me, that building was perfection plus, like all our buildings. That covers the entire situation."

Hundreds of questions were parried and answered by the three engineers, and the reporters left convinced that if the Muller Construction Company was responsible, it was not through any fault of its own.

The fact that Jenks and Linane were not strong for each other, except to recognize each other's ability as engineers, was due to an incident of the past. This incident had caused a ripple of mirth in engineering circles when it happened, and the laugh was on the older man, Linane.

It was when radio was new. Linane, a structural engineer, had paid little attention to radio. Jenks was the kind of an engineer who dabbled in all sciences. He knew his radio.

When Jenks first came to work with a technical sheepskin and a few tons of brass, Linane accorded him only passing notice. Jenks craved the plaudits of the older man and his palship. Linane treated him as a son, but did not warm to his social advances.

"I'm as good an engineer as he is," mused Jenks, "and if he is going to high-hat me, I'll just put a swift one over on him and compel his notice."

The next day Jenks approached Linane in conference and said:

"I've got a curious bet on, Mr. Linane. I am betting sound can travel a mile quicker than it travels a quarter of a mile."

"What?" said Linane.

"I'm betting fifty that sound can travel a mile quicker than it can travel a quarter of a mile."

"Oh no—it can't," insisted Linane.

"Oh yes—it can!" decided Jenks.

"I'll take some of that fool money myself," said Linane.

"How much?" asked Jenks.

"As much as you want."

"All right—five hundred dollars."

"How you going to prove your contention?"

"By stop watches, and your men can hold the watches. We'll bet that

a pistol shot can be heard two miles away quicker than it can be heard a quarter of a mile away."

"Sound travels about a fifth of a mile a second. The rate varies slightly according to temperature," explained Linane. "At the freezing point the rate is 1,090 feet per second and increases a little over one foot for every degree Fahrenheit."

"Hot or cold," breezed Jenks, "I am betting you five hundred dollars that sound can travel two miles quicker than a quarter-mile."

"You're on, you damned idiot!" shouted the completely exasperated Linane.

Jenks let Linane's friends hold the watches and his friend held the money. Jenks was to fire the shot.

Jenks fired the shot in front of a microphone on a football field. One of Linane's friends picked the sound up instantaneously on a three-tube radio set two miles away. The other watch holder was standing in the open a quarter of a mile away and his watch showed a second and a fraction.

All hands agreed that Jenks had won the bet fairly. Linane never

exactly liked Jenks after that.

Then Jenks rather aggravated matters by a habit. Whenever Linane would make a very positive statement Jenks would look owl-eyed and say: "Mr. Linane, I'll have to sound you out about that." The heavy accent on the word "sound" nettled Linane somewhat.

Linane never completely forgave Jenks for putting over this "fast one." Socially they were always more or less at loggerheads, but neither let this feeling interfere with their work. They worked together faithfully enough and each recognized the ability of the other.

And so it was that Linane and Jenks, their heads together, worked all night in an attempt to find some cause that would tie responsibility for the disaster on mother nature.

They failed to find it and, sleepy-eyed, they were forced to admit failure, so far.

The newspapers, to whom Muller had said that he would not shirk any responsibility, began a hue and cry for the arrest of all parties in any way concerned with the direction of the building of the Colossus.

When the death list from the crash and subway wreck reached 97, the press waxed nasty and demanded the arrest of Muller, Linane and Jenks in no uncertain tones.

Half dead from lack of sleep, the three men were taken by the police to the district attorney's offices and, after a strenuous grilling, were formally placed under arrest on charges of criminal negligence. They put up a $50,000 bond in each case and were permitted to go and seek further to find the cause of what the newspapers now began calling the "Colossal Failure."

Several days were spent by Linane and Jenks in examining the wreckage which was being removed from Times Square, truckload after truckload, to a point outside the city. Here it was again sorted and examined and piled for future disposal.

So far as could be found every brick, stone and ounce of material used in the building was perfect. Attorneys, however, assured Linane, Jenks and Muller that they would have to find the real cause of the disaster if they were to escape possible long prison sentences.

Night after night Jenks courted sleep, but it would not come. He began to grow wan and haggard.

Jenks took to walking the streets at night, mile after mile, thinking, always thinking, and searching his mind for a solution of the mystery.

It was evening. He had walked past the scene of the Colossus crash several times. He found himself on a side street. He looked up and saw in electric lights:

TOWN HALL

Munsterbergen, the Mad Musician
Concert Here To-night.

He took five dollars from his pocket and bought a ticket. He entered with the crowd and was ushered to a seat. He looked neither to the right or left. His eyes were sunken, his face lined with worry.

Something within Jenks caused him to turn slightly. He was curiously aware of a beautiful girl who sat beside him. She had a mass of golden hair which seemed to defy control. It was wild, positively tempestuous. Her eyes were deep blue and her skin as white as fleecy clouds in spring. He was dimly conscious that those glorious eyes were troubled.

She glanced at him. She was aware that he was suffering. A great surge of sympathy welled in her heart. She could not explain the feeling.

A great red plush curtain parted in the center and drew in graceful folds to the edges of the proscenium. A small stage was revealed.

A tousle-headed man with glaring, beady black eyes, dressed in black evening clothes stepped forward and bowed. Under his arm was a violin. He brought the violin forward. His nose, like the beak of some great bird, bobbed up and down in acknowledgment of the plaudits which greeted him. His long nervous fingers began to caress the instrument and his lips began to move.

Jenks was aware that he was saying something, but was not at all interested. What he said was this:

"Maybe, yes, I couldn't talk so good English, but you could understood it, yes? Und now I tell you dot I never play the compositions of any man. I axtemporize exgloosively. I chust blay und blay, und maybe you should listen, yes? If I bleeze you I am chust happy."

Jenks' attention was drawn to him. He noted his wild appearance.

"He sure looks mad enough," mused Jenks.

The violinist flipped the fiddle up under his chin. He drew the bow over the strings and began a gentle melody that reminded one of rain drops falling on calm waters.

Jenks forgot his troubles. He forgot everything. He slumped in his seat and his eyes closed. The rain continued falling from the strings of the violin.

Suddenly the melody changed to a glad little lilting measure, as sweet as love itself. The sun was coming out again and the birds began to sing. There was the trill of a canary with the sun on its cage. There was the song of the thrush, the mocking-bird and the meadow lark. These blended finally into a melodious burst of chirping melody which seemed a chorus of the wild birds of the forest and glen. Then the lilting love measure again. It tore at the heart strings, and brought tears to one's eyes.

Unconsciously the girl next to Jenks leaned towards him. Involuntarily he leaned to meet her. Their shoulders touched. The cloud of her golden hair came to rest against his dark locks. Their hands found each other with gentle pressure. Both were lost to the world.

Abruptly the music changed. There was a succession of broken treble notes that sounded like the crackling of flames. Moans deep and melancholy followed. These grew more strident and prolonged, giving place to abject howls, suggesting the lamentations of the damned.

The hands of the boy and girl gripped tensely. They could not help shuddering.

The violin began to produce notes of a leering, jeering character, growing more horrible with each measure until they burst in a loud guffaw of maniacal laughter.

The whole performance was as if someone had taken a heaven and plunged it into a hell.

The musician bowed jerkily, and was gone.

There was no applause, only wild exclamations. Half the house was on its feet. The other half sat as if glued to chairs.

The boy and the girl were standing, their hands still gripping tensely.

"Come, let's get out of here," said Jenks. The girl took her wrap and Jenks helped her into it. Hand in hand they fled the place.

In the lobby their eyes met, and for the first time they realized they were strangers. Yet deep in their hearts was a feeling that their fates had been sealed.

"My goodness!" burst from the girl.

"It can't be helped now," said Jenks decisively.

"What can't be helped?" asked the girl, although she knew in her heart.

"Nothing can be helped," said Jenks. Then he added: "We should know each other by this time. We have been holding hands for an hour."

The girl's eyes flared. "You have no right to presume on that situation," she said.

Jenks could have kicked himself. "Forgive me," he said. "It was only that I just wanted so to know you. Won't you let me see you home?"

"You may," said the girl simply, and she led the way to her own car.

They drove north.

Their bodies seemed like magnets. They were again shoulder to shoulder, holding hands.

"Will you tell me your name?" pleaded Jenks.

"Surely," replied the girl. "I am Elaine Linane."

"What?" exploded Jenks. "Why, I work with a Linane, an engineer with the Muller Construction Company."

"He is my father," she said.

"Why, we are great friends," said the boy. "I am Jenks, his assistant —at least we work together."

"Yes, I have heard of you," said the girl. "It is strange, the way we met. My father admires your work, but I am afraid you are not great friends." The girl had forgotten her troubles. She chuckled. She had heard the way Jenks had "sounded" her father out.

Jenks was speechless. The girl continued:

"I don't know whether to like you or to hate you. My father is an old dear. You were cruel to him."

Jenks was abject. "I did not mean to be," he said. "He rather belittled me without realizing it. I had to make my stand. The difference in our years made him take me rather too lightly. I had to compel his notice, if I was to advance."

"Oh!" said the girl.

"I am sorry—so sorry."

"You might not have been altogether at fault," said the girl. "Father forgets at times that I have grown up. I resent being treated like a child, but he is the soul of goodness and fatherly care."

"I know that," said Jenks.

Every engineer knows his mathematics. It was this fact, coupled with what the world calls a "lucky break," that solved the Colossus mystery. Nobody can get around the fact that two and two make four.

Jenks had happened on accomplishment to advance in the engineering profession, and it was well for him that he had reached a crisis. He had never believed in luck or in hunches, so it was good for him to be brought face to face with the fact that sometimes the

footsteps of man are guided. It made him begin to look into the engineering of the universe, to think more deeply, and to acknowledge a Higher Power.

With Linane he had butted into a stone wall. They were coming to know what real trouble meant. The fact that they were innocent did not make the steel bars of a cage any more attractive. Their troubles began to wrap about them with the clammy intimacy of a shroud. Then came the lucky break.

Next to his troubles, Jenks' favorite topic was the Mad Musician. He tried to learn all he could about this uncanny character at whose concert he had met the girl of his life. He learned two facts that made him perk up and think.

One was that the Mad Musician had had offices and a studio in the Colossus and was one of the first to move in. The other was that the Mad Musician took great delight in shattering glassware with notes of or vibrations from a violin. Nearly everyone knows that a glass tumbler can be shattered by the proper note sounded on a violin. The Mad Musician took delight in this trick. Jenks courted his acquaintance, and saw him shatter a row of glasses of different sizes by sounding different notes on his fiddle. The glasses crashed one after another like gelatine balls hit by the bullets of an expert

rifleman.

Then Jenks, the engineer who knew his mathematics, put two and two together. It made four, of course.

"Listen, Linane," he said to his co-worker: "this fiddler is crazier than a flock of cuckoos. If he can crack crockery with violin sound vibrations, is it not possible, by carrying the vibrations to a much higher power, that he could crack a pile of stone, steel, brick and cement, like the Colossus?"

"Possible, but hardly probable. Still," Linane mused, "when you think about it, and put two and two together.... Let's go after him and see what he is doing now."

Both jumped for their coats and hats. As they fared forth, Jenks cinched his argument:

"If a madman takes delight in breaking glassware with a vibratory wave or vibration, how much more of a thrill would he get by crashing a mountain?"

"Wild, but unanswerable," said Linane.

Jenks had been calling on the Mad Musician at his country place.

"He had a studio in the Colossus," he reminded Linane. "He must have re-opened somewhere else in town. I wonder where."

"Musicians are great union men," said Linane. "Phone the union."

Teddy Jenks did, but the union gave the last known town address as the Colossus.

"He would remain in the same district around Times Square," reasoned Jenks. "Let's page out the big buildings and see if he is not preparing to crash another one."

"Fair enough," said Linane, who was too busy with the problem at hand to choose his words.

Together the engineers started a canvass of the big buildings in the theatrical district. After four or five had been searched without result they entered the 30-story Acme Theater building.

Here they learned that the Mad Musician had leased a four-room suite just a few days before. This suite was on the fifteenth floor, just half way up in the big structure.

They went to the manager of the building and frankly stated their suspicions. "We want to enter that suite when the tenant is not there,"

they explained, "and we want him forestalled from entering while we are examining the premises."

"Hadn't we better notify the police?" asked the building manager, who had broken out in a sweat when he heard the dire disaster which might be in store for the stately Acme building.

"Not yet," said Linane. "You see, we are not sure: we have just been putting two and two together."

"We'll get the building detective, anyway," insisted the manager.

"Let him come along, but do not let him know until we are sure. If we are right we will find a most unusual infernal machine," said Linane.

The three men entered the suite with a pass-key. The detective was left outside in the hall to halt anyone who might disturb the searchers. It was as Jenks had thought. In an inner room they found a diabolical machine—a single string stretched across two bridges, one of brass and one of wood. A big horsehair bow attached to a shaft operated by a motor was automatically sawing across the string.

IMAGEDESCRIPTION

The note resulting was evidently higher than the range of the human ear, because no audible sound resulted. It was later estimated that the destructive note was several octaves higher than the highest note on a piano.

The entire machine was enclosed in a heavy wire-net cage, securely bolted to the floor. Neither the string or bow could be reached. It was evidently the Mad Musician's idea that the devilish contrivance should not be reached by hands other than his own.

How long the infernal machine had been operating no one knew, but the visitors were startled when the building suddenly began to sway perceptibly. Jenks jumped forward to stop the machine but could not find a switch.

"See if the machine plugs in anywhere in a wall socket!" he shouted to Linane, who promptly began examining the walls. Jenks shouted to the building manager to phone the police to clear the streets around the big building.

"Tell the police that the Acme Theater building may crash at any moment," he instructed.

The engineers were perfectly cool in face of the great peril, but the building manager lost his head completely and began to run around in circles muttering: "Oh, my God, save me!" and other words of supplication that blended into an incoherent babel.

Jenks rushed to the man, trying to still his wild hysteria.

The building continued to sway dangerously.

Jenks looked from a window. An enormous crowd was collecting, watching the big building swinging a foot out of plumb like a giant pendulum. The crowd was growing. Should the building fall the loss of life would be appalling. It was mid-morning. The interior of the building teemed with thousands of workers, for all floors above the third were offices.

Teddy Jenks turned suddenly. He heard the watchman in the hall scream in terror. Then he heard a body fall. He rushed to the door to see the Mad Musician standing over the prostrate form of the detective, a devilish grin on his distorted countenance.

The madman turned, saw Jenks, and started to run. Jenks took after him. Up the staircase the madman rushed toward the roof. Teddy followed him two floors and then rushed out to take the elevators.

The building in its mad swaying had made it impossible for the lifts to be operated. Teddy realized this with a distraught gulp in his throat. He returned to the stairway and took up the pursuit of the madman.

The corridors were beginning to fill with screaming men and wailing girls. It was a sight never to be forgotten.

Laboriously Jenks climbed story after story without getting sight of the madman. Finally he reached the roof. It was waving like swells on a lake before a breeze. He caught sight of the Mad Musician standing on the street wall, thirty stories from the street, a leer on his devilish visage. He jumped for him.

The madman grasped him and lifted him up to the top of the wall as a cat might have lifted a mouse. Both men were breathing heavily as a result of their 15-story climb.

The madman tried to throw Teddy Jenks to the street below. Teddy clung to him. The two battled desperately as the building swayed.

The dense crowd in the street had caught sight of the two men fighting on the narrow coping, and the shout which rent the air reached the ears of Jenks.

The mind of the engineer was still working clearly, but a wild fear gripped his heart. His strength seemed to be leaving him. The madman pushed him back, bending his spine with brute strength. Teddy was forced to the narrow ledge that had given the two men footing. The fingers of the madman gripped his throat.

He was dimly conscious that the swaying of the building was slowing down. His reason told him that Linane had found the wall socket and had stopped the sawing of the devil's bow on the engine of hell.

He saw the madman draw a big knife. With his last remaining strength he reached out and grasped the wrist above the hand which held the weapon. In spite of all he could do he saw the madman inching the knife nearer and nearer his throat.

Grim death was peering into the bulging eyes of Teddy Jenks, when his engineering knowledge came to his rescue. He remembered the top stories of the Acme building were constructed with a step of ten feet in from the street line, for every story of construction above the 24th floor.

"If we fall," he reasoned, "we can only fall one story." Then he deliberately rolled his own body and the weight of the madman, who

held him, over the edge of the coping. At the same time he twisted the madman's wrist so the point of the knife pointed to the madman's body.

There was a dim consciousness of a painful impact. Teddy had fallen underneath, but the force of the two bodies coming together had thrust the knife deep into the entrails of the Mad Musician.

Clouds which had been collecting in the sky began a splattering downpour. The storm grew in fury and lightning tore the heavens, while thunder boomed and crackled. The rain began falling in sheets.

This served to revive the unconscious Teddy. He painfully withdrew his body from under that of the madman. The falling rain, stained with the blood of the Mad Musician, trickled over the edge of the building.

Teddy dragged himself through a window and passed his hand over his forehead, which was aching miserably. He tried to get to his feet and fell back, only to try again. Several times he tried and then, his strength returning, he was able to walk.

He made his way to the studio where he had left Linane and found him there surrounded by police, reporters and others. The infernal

machine had been rendered harmless, but was kept intact as evidence.

Catching sight of Teddy, Linane shouted with joy. "I stopped the damned thing," he chuckled, like a pleased schoolboy. Then, observing Teddy's exhausted condition he added:

"Why, you look like you have been to a funeral!"

"I have," said Teddy. "You'll find that crazy fiddler dead on the twenty-ninth story. Look out the window of the thirtieth story," he instructed the police, who had started to recover the body. "He stabbed himself. He is either dead or dying."

It proved that he was dead.

No engineering firm is responsible for the actions of a madman. So the Muller Construction Company was given a clean bill of health.

Jenks and Elaine Linane were with the girl's father in his study. They were asking for the paternal blessing.

Linane was pretending to be hard to convince.

"Now, my daughter," he said, "this young man takes $500 of my

good money by sounding me out, as he calls it. Then he comes along and tries to take my daughter away from me. It is positively high-handed. It dates back to the football game—"

"Daddy, dear, don't be like that!" said Elaine, who was on the arm of his chair with her own arms around him.

"I tell you, Elaine, this dates back to the fall of 1927."

"It dates back to the fall of Eve," said Elaine. "When a girl finds her man, no power can keep him from her. If you won't give me to Teddy Jenks, I'll elope with him."

"Well, all right then. Kiss me," said Linane as he turned towards his radio set.

"One and one makes one," said Teddy Jenks.

Every engineer knows his mathematics.

#14 The Thief of Time, by Sterner St. Paul Meek:

The teller turned to the stacked pile of bills. They were gone! And no one had been near!

Aproximate word count: 8,100

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Harvey Winston, paying teller of the First National Bank of Chicago, stripped the band from a bundle of twenty dollar bills, counted out seventeen of them and added them to the pile on the counter before him.

The teller turned to the stacked pile of bills. They were gone! And no one had been near!

"Twelve hundred and thirty-one tens," he read from the payroll change slip before him. The paymaster of the Cramer Packing Company nodded an assent and Winston turned to the stacked bills in his rear currency rack. He picked up a handful of bundles and

turned back to the grill. His gaze swept the counter where, a moment before, he had stacked the twenties, and his jaw dropped.

"You got those twenties, Mr. Trier?" he asked.

"Got them? Of course not, how could I?" replied the paymaster. "There they are...."

His voice trailed off into nothingness as he looked at the empty counter.

"I must have dropped them," said Winston as he turned. He glanced back at the rear rack where his main stock of currency was piled. He stood paralyzed for a moment and then reached under the counter and pushed a button.

The bank resounded instantly to the clangor of gongs and huge steel grills shot into place with a clang, sealing all doors and preventing anyone from entering or leaving the bank. The guards sprang to their stations with drawn weapons and from the inner offices the bank officials came swarming out. The cashier, followed by two men, hurried to the paying teller's cage.

"What is it, Mr. Winston?" he cried.

"I've been robbed!" gasped the teller.

"Who by? How?" demanded the cashier.

"I—I don't know, sir," stammered the teller. "I was counting out Mr. Trier's payroll, and after I had stacked the twenties I turned to get the tens. When I turned back the twenties were gone."

"Where had they gone?" asked the cashier.

"I don't know, sir. Mr. Trier was as surprised as I was, and then I turned back, thinking that I had knocked them off the counter, and I saw at a glance that there was a big hole in my back racks. You can see yourself, sir."

The cashier turned to the paymaster.

"Is this a practical joke, Mr. Trier?" he demanded sharply.

"Of course not," replied the paymaster. "Winston's grill was closed. It still is. Granted that I might have reached the twenties he had piled up, how could I have gone through a grill and taken the rest of the missing money without his seeing me? The money disappeared almost instantly. It was there a moment before, for I noticed when Winston took the twenties from his rack that it was full."

"But someone must have taken it," said the bewildered cashier. "Money doesn't walk off of its own accord or vanish into thin air—"

A bell interrupted his speech.

"There are the police," he said with an air of relief. "I'll let them in."

The smaller of the two men who had followed the cashier from his office when the alarm had sounded stepped forward and spoke quietly. His voice was low and well pitched yet it carried a note of authority and power that held his auditors' attention while he spoke. The voice harmonized with the man. The most noticeable point about him was the inconspicuousness of his voice and manner, yet there was a glint of steel in his gray eyes that told of enormous force in him.

"I don't believe that I would let them in for a few moments, Mr. Rogers," he said. "I think that we are up against something a little different from the usual bank robbery."

"But, Mr. Carnes," protested the cashier, "we must call in the police in a case like this, and the sooner they take charge the better chance there will be of apprehending the thief."

"Suit yourself," replied the little man with a shrug of his shoulders. "I merely offered my advice."

"Will you take charge, Mr. Carnes?" asked the cashier.

"I can't supersede the local authorities in a case like this," replied Carnes. "The secret service is primarily interested in the suppression of counterfeiting and the enforcement of certain federal statutes, but I will be glad to assist the local authorities to the best of my ability, provided they desire my help. My advice to you would be to keep out the patrolmen who are demanding admittance and get in touch with the chief of police. I would ask that his best detective together with an expert finger-print photographer be sent here before anyone else is admitted. If the patrolmen are allowed to wipe their hands over Mr. Winston's counter they may destroy valuable evidence."

"You are right, Mr. Carnes," exclaimed the cashier. "Mr. Jervis, will you tell the police that there is no violence threatening and ask them to wait for a few minutes? I'll telephone the chief of police at once."

As the cashier hurried away to his telephone Carnes turned to his companion who had stood an interested, although silent spectator of the scene. His companion was a marked contrast to the secret service operator. He stood well over six feet in height, and his protruding

jaw and shock of unruly black hair combined with his massive shoulders and chest to give him the appearance of a man who labored with his hands—until one looked at them. His hands were in strange contrast to the rest of him. Long, slim, mobile hands they were, with tapering nervous fingers—the hands of a thinker or of a musician. Telltale splotches of acid told of hours spent in a laboratory, a tale that was confirmed by the almost imperceptible stoop of his shoulders.

"Do you agree with my advice, Dr. Bird?" asked Carnes deferentially.

The noted scientist, who from his laboratory in the Bureau of Standards had sent forth many new things in the realms of chemistry and physics, and who, incidentally, had been instrumental in solving some of the most baffling mysteries which the secret service had been called upon to face, grunted.

"It didn't do any harm," he said, "but it is rather a waste of time. The thief wore gloves."

"How in thunder do you know that?" demanded Carnes.

"It's merely common sense. A man who can do what he did had at

least some rudiments of intelligence, and even the feeblest-minded crooks know enough to wear gloves nowadays."

Carnes stepped a little closer to the doctor.

"Another reason why I didn't want patrolmen tramping around," he said in an undertone, "is this. If Winston gave the alarm quickly enough, the thief is probably still in the building."

"He's a good many miles away by now," replied Dr. Bird with a shrug of his shoulders.

Carnes' eyes opened widely. "Why?—how?—who?" he stammered. "Have you any idea of who did it, or how it was done?"

"Possibly I have an idea," replied Dr. Bird with a cryptic smile. "My advice to you, Carnes, is to keep away from the local authorities as much as possible. I want to be present when Winston and Trier are questioned and I may possibly wish to ask a few questions myself. Use your authority that far, but no farther. Don't volunteer any information and especially don't let my name get out. We'll drop the counterfeiting case we were summoned here on for the present and look into this a little on our own hook. I will want your aid, so don't get tied up with the police."

"At that, we don't want the police crossing our trail at every turn," protested Carnes.

"They won't," promised the doctor. "They will never get any evidence on this case, if I am right, and neither will we—for the present. Our stunt is to lie low and wait for the next attempt of this nature and thus accumulate some evidence and some idea of where to look."

"Will there be another attempt?" asked Carnes.

"Surely. You don't expect a man who got away with a crime like this to quit operations just because a few flatfeet run around and make a hullabaloo about it, do you? I may be wrong in my assumption, but if I am right, the most important thing is to keep all reference to my name or position out of the press reports."

The cashier hastened up to them.

"Detective-Captain Sturtevant will be here in a few minutes with a photographer and some other men," he said. "Is there anything that we can do in the meantime, Mr. Carnes?"

"I would suggest that Mr. Trier and his guard and Mr. Winston go

into your office," replied Carnes. "My assistant and I would like to be present during the questioning, if there are no objections."

"I didn't know that you had an assistant with you," answered the cashier.

Carnes indicated Dr. Bird.

"This gentleman is Mr. Berger, my assistant," he said. "Do you understand?"

"Certainly. I am sure there will be no objection to your presence, Mr. Carnes," replied the cashier as he led the way to his office.

A few minutes later Detective-Captain Sturtevant of the Chicago police was announced. He acknowledged the introductions gruffly and got down to business at once.

"What were the circumstances of the robbery?" he asked.

Winston told his story, Trier and the guard confirming it.

"Pretty thin!" snorted the detective when they had finished. He whirled suddenly on Winston.

"Where did you hide the loot?" he thundered.

"Why—uh—er—what do you mean?" gulped the teller.

"Just what I said," replied the detective. "Where did you hide the loot?"

"I didn't hide it anywhere," said the teller. "It was stolen."

"You had better think up a better one," sneered Sturtevant. "If you think that you can make me believe that that money was stolen from you in broad daylight with two men in plain sight of you who didn't see it, you might just as well get over it. I know that you have some hiding place where you have slipped the stuff and the quicker you come clean and spill it, the better it will be for you. Where did you hide it?"

"I didn't hide it!" cried the teller, his voice trembling. "Mr. Trier can tell you that I didn't touch it from the time I laid it down until I turned back."

"That's right," replied the paymaster. "He turned his back on me for a moment, and when he turned back, it was gone."

"So you're in on it too, are you?" said Sturtevant.

"What do you mean?" demanded the paymaster hotly.

"Oh nothing, nothing at all," replied the detective. "Of course Winston didn't touch it and it disappeared and you never saw it go, although you were within three feet of it all the time. Did *you* see anything?" he demanded of the guard.

"Nothing that I am sure of," answered the guard. "I thought that a shadow passed in front of me for an instant, but when I looked again, it was gone."

Dr. Bird sat forward suddenly. "What did this shadow look like?" he asked.

"It wasn't exactly a shadow," said the guard. "It was as if a person had passed suddenly before me so quickly that I couldn't see him. I seemed to feel that there was someone there, but I didn't rightly *see* anything."

"Did you notice anything of the sort?" demanded the doctor of Trier.

"I don't know," replied Trier thoughtfully. "Now that Williams has mentioned it, I did seem to feel a breath of air or a motion as though something had passed in front of me. I didn't think of it at the time."

"Was this shadow opaque enough to even momentarily obscure your vision?" went on the doctor.

"Not that I am conscious of. It was just a breath of air such as a person might cause by passing very rapidly."

"What made you ask Trier if he had the money when you turned around?" asked the doctor of Winston.

"Say-y-y," broke in the detective. "Who the devil are you, and what do you mean by breaking into my examination and stopping it?"

Carnes tossed a leather wallet on the table.

"There are my credentials," he said in his quiet voice. "I am chief of one section of the United States Secret Service as you will see, and this is Mr. Berger, my assistant. We were in the bank, engaged on a counterfeiting case, when the robbery took place. We have had a good deal of experience along these lines and we are merely anxious to aid you."

Sturtevant examined Carnes' credentials carefully and returned them.

"This is a Chicago robbery," he said, "and we have had a little experience in robberies and in apprehending robbers ourselves. I

think that we can get along without your help."

"You have had more experience with robberies than with apprehending robbers if the papers tell the truth," said Dr. Bird with a chuckle.

The detective's face flushed.

"That will be enough from you, Mr. Sherlock Holmes," he said. "If you open your mouth again, I'll arrest you as a material witness and as a possible accomplice."

"That sounds like Chicago methods," said Carnes quietly. "Now listen to me, Captain. My assistant and I are merely trying to assist you in this case. If you don't desire our assistance we'll proceed along our own lines without interfering, but in the meantime remember that this is a National Bank, and that our questions will be answered. The United States is higher than even the Chicago police force, and I am here under orders to investigate a counterfeiting case. If I desire, I can seal the doors of this bank and allow no one in or out until I have the evidence I desire. Do you understand?"

Sturtevant sprang to his feet with an oath, but the sight of the gold badge which Carnes displayed stopped him.

"Oh well," he said ungraciously. "I suppose that no harm will come of letting Winston answer your fool questions, but I'll warn you that I'll report to Washington that you are interfering with the course of justice and using your authority to aid the getaway of a criminal."

"That is your privilege," replied Carnes quietly. "Mr. Winston, will you answer Mr. Berger's question?"

"Why, I asked him because he was right close to the money and I thought that he might have reached through the wicket and picked it up. Then, too—"

He hesitated for a moment and Dr. Bird smiled encouragingly.

"What else?" he asked.

"Why, I can't exactly tell. It just seemed to me that I had heard the rustle that bills make when they are pulled across a counter. When I saw them gone, I thought that he might have taken them. Then when I turned toward him, I seemed to hear the rustle of bills behind me, although I knew that I was alone in the cage. When I looked back the money was gone."

"Did you see or hear anything like a shadow or a person moving?"

"No—yes—I don't know. Just as I turned around it seemed to me that the rear door to my cage had moved and there may have been a shadow for an instant. I don't know. I hadn't thought of it before."

"How long after that did you ring the alarm gongs?"

"Not over a second or two."

"That's all," said Dr. Bird.

"If your high and mightiness has no further questions to ask, perhaps you will let me ask a few," said Sturtevant.

"Go ahead, ask all you wish," replied Dr. Bird with a laugh. "I have all the information I desire here for the present. I may want to ask other questions later, but just now I think we'll be going."

"If you find any strange finger-prints on Winston's counter, I'll be glad to have them compared with our files," said Carnes.

"I am not bothering with finger-prints," snorted the detective. "This is an open and shut case. There would be lots of Winston's finger-prints there and no others. There isn't the slightest doubt that this is an inside case and I have the men I want right here. Mr. Rogers, your bank is closed for to-day. Everyone in it will be searched and then

all those not needed to close up will be sent away. I will get a squad of men here to go over your building and locate the hiding place. Your money is still on the premises unless these men slipped it to a confederate who got out before the alarm was given. I'll question the guards about that. If that happened, a little sweating will get it out of them."

"Are you going to arrest me?" demanded Trier in surprise.

"Yes, dearie," answered the detective. "I am going to arrest you and your two little playmates if these Washington experts will allow me to. You will save a lot of time and quite a few painful experiences if you will come clean now instead of later."

"I demand to see my lawyer and to communicate with my firm," said the paymaster.

"Time enough for that when I am through with you," replied the detective.

He turned to Carnes.

"Have I your gracious permission to arrest these three criminals?" he asked.

"Yes indeed, Captain," replied Carnes sweetly. "You have my gracious permission to make just as big an ass of yourself as you wish. We're going now."

"By the way, Captain," said Dr. Bird as he followed Carnes out. "When you get through playing with your prisoners and start to look for the thief, here is a tip. Look for a left-handed man who has a thorough knowledge of chemistry and especially toxicology."

"It's easy enough to see that he was left-handed if he pulled that money out through the grill from the positions occupied by Trier and his guard, but what the dickens led you to suspect that he is a chemist and a toxicologist?" asked Carnes as he and the doctor left the bank.

"Merely a shrewd guess, my dear Watson," replied the doctor with a chuckle. "I am likely to be wrong, but there is a good chance that I am right. I am judging solely from the method used."

"Have you solved the method?" demanded Carnes in amazement. "What on earth was it? The more I have thought about it, the more inclined I am to believe that Sturtevant is right and that it is an inside job. It seems to me impossible that a man could have entered in broad daylight and lifted that money in front of three men and within

sight of a hundred more without some one getting a glimpse of him. He must have taken the money out in a grip or a sack or something like that, yet the bank record shows that no one but Trier entered with a grip and no one left with a package for ten minutes before Trier entered."

"There may be something in what you say, Carnes, but I am inclined to have a different idea. I don't think it is the usual run of bank robbery, and I would rather not hazard a guess just now. I am going back to Washington to-night. Before I go any further into the matter, I need some rather specialized knowledge that I don't possess and I want to consult with Dr. Knolles. I'll be back in a week or so and then we can look into that counterfeiting case after we get this disposed of."

"What am I to do?" asked Carnes.

"Sit around the lobby of your hotel, eat three meals a day, and read the papers. If you get bored, I would recommend that you pay a visit to the Art Institute and admire the graceful lions which adorn the steps. Artistic contemplations may well improve your culture."

"All right," replied Carnes. "I'll assume a pensive air and moon at the lions, but I might do better if you told me what I was looking for."

"You are looking for knowledge, my dear Carnes," said the doctor with a laugh. "Remember the saying of the sages: To the wise man, no knowledge is useless."

A huge Martin bomber roared down to a landing at the Maywood airdrome, and a burly figure descended from the rear cockpit and waved his hand jovially to the waiting Carnes. The secret service man hastened over to greet his colleague.

"Have you got that truck I wired you to have ready?" demanded the doctor.

"Waiting at the entrance; but say, I've got some news for you."

"It can wait. Get a detail of men and help us to unload this ship. Some of the cases are pretty heavy."

Carnes hurried off and returned with a gang of laborers, who took from the bomber a dozen heavy packing cases of various sizes, several of them labelled either "Fragile" or "Inflammable" in large type.

"Where do they go, Doctor?" he asked when the last of them had been loaded onto the waiting truck.

"To the First National Bank," replied Dr. Bird, "and Casey here goes with them. You know Casey, don't you, Carnes? He is the best photographer in the Bureau."

"Shall I go along too?" asked Carnes as he acknowledged the introduction.

"No need for it. I wired Rogers and he knows the stuff is coming and what to do with it. Unpack as soon as you get there, Casey, and start setting up as soon as the bank closes."

"All right, Doctor," replied Casey as he mounted the truck beside the driver.

"Where do we go, Doctor?" asked Carnes as the truck rolled off.

"To the Blackstone Hotel for a bath and some clean clothes," replied the doctor. "And now, what is the news you have for me?"

"The news is this, Doctor. I carried out your instructions diligently and, during the daylight hours, the lions have not moved."

Dr. Bird looked contrite.

"I beg your pardon, Carnes," he said. "I really didn't think when I left

you so mystified how you must have felt. Believe me, I had my own reasons, excellent ones, for secrecy."

"I have usually been able to maintain silence when asked to," replied Carnes stiffly.

"My dear fellow, I didn't mean to question your discretion. I know that whatever I tell you is safe, but there are angles to this affair that are so weird and improbable that I don't dare to trust my own conclusions, let alone share them. I'll tell you all about it soon. Did you get those tickets I wired for?"

"Of course I got them, but what have two tickets to the A. A. U. track meet this afternoon got to do with a bank robbery?"

"One trouble with you, Carnes," replied the doctor with a judicial air, "is that you have no idea of the importance of proper relaxation. Is it possible that you have no desire to see Ladd, this new marvel who is smashing records right and left, run? He performs for the Illinois Athletic Club this afternoon, and it would not surprise me to see him lower the world's record again. He has already lowered the record for the hundred yard dash from nine and three-fifths to eight and four-fifths. There is no telling what he will do."

"Are we going to waste the whole afternoon just to watch a man run?" demanded Carnes in disgust.

"We will see many men run, my dear fellow, but there is only one in whom I have a deep abiding interest, and that is Mr. Ladd. Have you your binoculars with you?"

"No."

"Then by all means beg, borrow or steal two pairs before this afternoon. We might easily miss half the fun without them. Are our seats near the starting line for the sprints?"

"Yes. The big demand was for seats near the finish line."

"The start will be much more interesting, Carnes. I was somewhat of a minor star in track myself in my college days and it will be of the greatest interest to me to observe the starting form of this new speed artist. Now Carnes, don't ask any more questions. I may be barking up the wrong tree and I don't want to give you a chance to laugh at me. I'll tell you what to watch for at the track."

The sprinters lined up on the hundred yard mark and Dr. Bird and Carnes sat with their glasses glued to their eyes watching the slim

figure in the colors of the Illinois Athletic Club, whose large "62" on his back identified him as the new star.

"On your mark!" cried the starter. "Get set!"

"Ah!" cried Dr. Bird. "Did you see that Carnes?"

The starting gun cracked and the runners were off on their short grind. Ladd leaped into the lead and rapidly distanced the field, his legs twinkling under him almost faster than the eye could follow. He was fully twenty yards in the lead when his speed suddenly lessened and the balance of the runners closed up the gap he had opened. His lead was too great for them, and he was still a good ten yards in the lead when he crossed the tape. The official time was posted as eight and nine-tenths seconds.

"Another thirty yards and he would have been beaten," said Carnes as he lowered his glasses.

"That is the way he has won all of his races," replied the doctor. "He piles up a huge lead at first and then loses a good deal at the finish. His speed doesn't hold up. Never mind that, though, it is only an additional point in my favor. Did you notice his jaws just before the gun went?"

"They seemed to clench and then he swallowed, but most of them did some thing like that."

"Watch him carefully for the next heat and see if he puts anything into his mouth. That is the important thing."

Dr. Bird sank into a brown study and paid no attention to the next few events, but he came to attention promptly when the final heat of the hundred yard dash was called. With his glasses he watched Ladd closely as the runner trotted up to the starting line.

"There, Carnes!" he cried suddenly. "Did you see?"

"I saw him wipe his mouth," said Carnes doubtfully.

"All right, now watch his jaws just before the gun goes."

The final heat was a duplicate of the first preliminary. Ladd took an early lead which he held for three-fourths of the distance to the tape, then his pace slackened and he finished only a bare ten yards ahead of the next runner. The time tied his previous world's record of eight and four-fifths seconds.

"He crunched and swallowed all right, Doctor," said Carnes.

"That is all I wanted to be sure of. Now Carnes, here is something for you to do. Get hold of the United States Commissioner and get a John Doe warrant and go back to the hotel with it and wait for me. I may phone you at any minute and I may not. If I don't, wait in your room until you hear from me. Don't leave it for a minute."

"Where are you going, Doctor?"

"I'm going down and congratulate Mr. Ladd. An old track man like me can't let such an opportunity pass."

"I don't know what this is all about, Doctor," replied Carnes, "but I know you well enough to obey orders and to keep my mouth shut until it is my turn to speak."

Few men could resist Dr. Bird when he set out to make a favorable impression, and even a world's champion is apt to be flattered by the attention of one of the greatest scientists of his day, especially when that scientist has made an enviable reputation as an athlete in his college days and can talk the jargon of the champion's particular sport. Henry Ladd promptly capitulated to the charm of the doctor and allowed himself to be led away to supper at Bird's club. The supper passed off pleasantly, and when the doctor requested an interview with the young athlete in a private room, he gladly

consented. They entered the room together, remained for an hour and a half, and then came out. The smile had left Ladd's face and he appeared nervous and distracted. The doctor talked cheerfully with him but kept a firm grip on his arm as they descended the stairs together. They entered a telephone booth where the doctor made several calls, and then descended to the street, where they entered a taxi.

"Maywood airdrome," the doctor told the driver.

Two hours later the big Martin bomber which had carried the doctor to Chicago roared away into the night, and Bird turned back, reentered the taxi, and headed for the city alone.

When Carnes received the telephone call, which was one of those the doctor made from the booth in his club, he hurried over to the First National Bank. His badge secured him an entrance and he found Casey busily engaged in rigging up an elaborate piece of apparatus on one of the balconies where guards were normally stationed during banking hours.

"Dr. Bird said to tell you to keep on the job all night if necessary," he told Casey. "He thinks he will need your machine to-morrow."

"I'll have it ready to turn on the power at four A.M.," replied Casey.

Carnes watched him curiously for a while as he soldered together the electrical connections and assembled an apparatus which looked like a motion picture projector.

"What are you setting up?" he asked at length.

"It is a high speed motion picture camera," replied Casey, "with a telescopic lens. It is a piece of apparatus which Dr. Bird designed while he was in Washington last week and which I made from his sketches, using some apparatus we had on hand. It's a dandy, all right."

"What is special about it?"

"The speed. You know how fast an ordinary movie is taken, don't you? No? Well, it's sixteen exposures per second. The slow pictures are taken sometimes at a hundred and twenty-eight or two hundred and fifty-six exposures per second, and then shown at sixteen. This affair will take half a million pictures per second."

"I didn't know that a film would register with that short an exposure."

"That's slow," replied Casey with a laugh. "It all depends on the light. The best flash-light powder gives a flash about one ten-thousandth of a second in duration, but that is by no means the speed limit of the film. The only trouble is enough light and sufficient shutter speed. Pictures have been taken by means of spark photography with an exposure of less than one three-millionth of a second. The whole secret of this machine lies in the shutter. This big disc with the slots in the edge is set up before the lens and run at such a speed that half a million slots per second pass before the lens. The film, which is sixteen millimeter X-ray film, travels behind the lens at a speed of nearly five miles per second. It has to be gradually worked up to this speed, and after the whole thing is set up, it takes it nearly four hours to get to full speed."

"At that speed, it must take a million miles of film before you get up steam."

"It would, if the film were being exposed. There is only about a hundred yards of film all told, which will run over these huge drums in an endless belt. There is a regular camera shutter working on an electric principle which remains closed. When the switch is tripped, the shutter opens in about two thirty-thousandths of a second, stays open just one one-hundredth of a second, and then closes. This time is enough to expose nearly all of our film. When we have our

picture, I shut the current down, start applying a magnetic brake, and let it slow down. It takes over an hour to stop it without breaking the film. It sounds complicated, but it works all right."

"Where is your switch?"

"That is the trick part of it. It is a remote control affair. The shutter opens and starts the machine taking pictures when the back door of the paying teller's cage is opened half an inch. There is also a hand switch in the line that can be opened so that you can open the door without setting off the camera, if you wish. When the hand switch is closed and the door opened, this is what happens. The shutter on the camera opens, the machine takes five thousand pictures during the next hundredth of a second, and then the shutter closes. Those five thousand exposures will take about five minutes to show at the usual rate of sixteen per second."

"You said that you had to get plenty of light. How are you managing that?"

"The camera is equipped with a special lens ground out of rock crystal. This lens lets in ultra-violet light which the ordinary lens shuts out, and X-ray film is especially sensitive to ultra-violet light. In order to be sure that we get enough illumination, I will set up

these two ultra-violet floodlights to illumine the cage. The teller will have to wear glasses to protect his eyes and he'll get well sunburned, but something has to be sacrificed to science, as Dr. Bird is always telling me."

"It's too deep for me," said Carnes with a sigh. "Can I do anything to help? The doctor told me to stand by and do anything I could."

"I might be able to use you a little if you can use tools," said Casey with a grin. "You can start bolting together that light proof shield if you want to."

"Well, Carnes, did you have an instructive night?" asked Dr. Bird cheerfully as he entered the First National Bank at eight-thirty the next morning.

"I don't see that I did much good, Doctor. Casey would have had the machine ready on time anyway, and I'm no machinist."

"Well, frankly, Carnes, I didn't expect you to be of much help to him, but I did want you to see what Casey was doing, and a little of it was pretty heavy for him to handle alone. I suppose that everything is ready?"

"The motor reached full speed about fifteen minutes ago and Casey went out to get a cup of coffee. Would you mind telling me the object of the whole thing?"

"Not at all. I plan to make a permanent record of the work of the most ingenious bank robber in the world. I hope he keeps his word."

"What do you mean?"

"Three days ago when Sturtevant sweated a 'confession' out of poor Winston, the bank got a message that the robbery would be repeated this morning and dared them to prevent it. Rogers thought it was a hoax, but he telephoned me and I worked the Bureau men night and day to get my camera ready in time for him. I am afraid that I can't do much to prevent the robbery, but I may be able to take a picture of it and thus prevent other cases of a like nature."

"Was the warning written?"

"No. It was telephoned from a pay station in the loop district, and by the time it was traced and men got there, the telephoner was probably a mile away. He said that he would rob the same cage in the same manner as he did before."

"Aren't you taking any special precautions?"

"Oh, yes, the bank is putting on extra guards and making a lot of fuss of that sort, probably to the great amusement of the robber."

"Why not close the cage for the day?"

"Then he would rob a different one and we would have no way of photographing his actions. To be sure, we will put dummy money there, bundles with bills on the outside and paper on the inside, so if I don't get a picture of him, he won't get much. Every bill in the cage will be marked as well."

"Did he say at what time he would operate?"

"No, he didn't, so we'll have to stand by all day. Oh, hello, Casey, is everything all right?"

"As sweet as chocolate candy, Doctor. I have tested it out thoroughly, and unless we have to run it so long that the film wears out and breaks, we are sitting pretty. If we don't get the pictures you are looking for, I'm a dodo, and I haven't been called that yet."

"Good work, Casey. Keep the bearings oiled and pray that the film doesn't break."

The bank had been opened only ten minutes when the clangor of gongs announced a robbery. It was practically a duplicate of the first. The paying teller had turned from his window to take some bills from his rack and had found several dozens of bundles missing. As the gongs sounded, Dr. Bird and Casey leaped to the camera.

"She snapped, Doctor!" cried Casey as he threw two switches. "It'll take an hour to stop and half a day to develop the film, but I ought to be able to show you what we got by to-night."

"Good enough!" cried Dr. Bird. "Go ahead while I try to calm down the bank officials. Will you have everything ready by eight o'clock?"

"Easy, Doctor," replied Casey as he turned to the magnetic brake.

By eight o'clock quite a crowd had assembled in a private room at the Blackstone Hotel. Besides Dr. Bird and Carnes, Rogers and several other officials of the First National Bank were present, together with Detective-Captain Sturtevant and a group of the most prominent scientists and physicians gathered from the schools of the city.

"Gentlemen," said Dr. Bird when all had taken seats facing a miniature moving picture screen on one wall, "to-night I expect to

show you some pictures which will, I am sure, astonish you. It marks the advent of a new departure in transcendental medicine. I will be glad to answer any questions you may wish to ask and to explain the pictures after they are shown, but before we start a discussion, I will ask that you examine what I have to show you. Lights out, please!"

He stepped to the rear of the room as the lights went out. As his eyes grew used to the dimness of the room he moved forward and took a vacant seat. His hand fumbled in his pocket for a second.

"Now!" he cried suddenly.

In the momentary silence which followed his cry, two dull metallic clicks could be heard, and a quick cry that was suddenly strangled as Dr. Bird clamped his hand over the mouth of the man who sat between him and Carnes.

"All right, Casey," called the doctor.

The whir of a projection machine could be heard and on the screen before them leaped a picture of the paying teller's cage of the First National Bank. Winston's successor was standing motionless at the wicket, his lips parted in a smile, but the attention of all was riveted on a figure who moved at the back of the cage. As the picture

started, the figure was bent over an opened suitcase, stuffing into it bundles of bills. He straightened up and reached to the rack for more bills, and as he did so he faced the camera full for a moment. He picked up other bundles of bills, filled the suitcase, fastened it in a leisurely manner, opened the rear door of the cage and walked out.

"Again, please!" called Dr. Bird. "And stop when he faces us full."

The picture was repeated and stopped at the point indicated.

"Lights, please!" cried the doctor.

The lights flashed on and Dr. Bird rose to his feet, pulling up after him the wilted figure of a middle-aged man.

"Gentlemen," said the doctor in ringing tones, "allow me to present to you Professor James Kirkwood of the faculty of the Richton University, formerly known as James Collier of the Bureau of Standards, and robber of the First National Bank."

Detective-Captain Sturtevant jumped to his feet and cast a searching glance at the captive.

"He's the man all right," he cried. "Hang on to him until I get a wagon here!"

"Oh, shut up!" said Carnes. "He's under federal arrest just now, charged with the possession of narcotics. When we are through with him, you can have him if you want him."

"How did you get that picture, Doctor?" cried the cashier. "I watched that cage every minute during the morning and I'll swear that man never entered and stole that money as the picture shows, unless he managed to make himself invisible."

IMAGE DESCRIPTION

"You're closer to the truth than you suspect, Mr. Rogers," said Dr. Bird. "It is not quite a matter of invisibility, but something pretty close to it. It is a matter of catalysts."

"What kind of cats?" asked the cashier.

"Not cats, Mr. Rogers, catalysts. Catalysts is the name of a chemical reaction consisting essentially of a decomposition and a new combination effected by means of a catalyst which acts on the compound bodies in question, but which goes through the reaction itself unchanged. There are a great many of them which are used in

the arts and in manufacturing, and while their action is not always clearly understood, the results are well known and can be banked on.

"One of the commonest instances of the use of a catalyst is the use of sponge platinum in the manufacture of sulphuric acid. I will not burden you with the details of the 'contact' process, as it is known, but the combination is effected by means of finely divided platinum which is neither changed, consumed or wasted during the process. While there are a number of other catalysts known, for instance iron in reactions in which metallic magnesium is concerned, the commonest are the metals of the platinum group.

"Less is known of the action of catalysts in the organic reactions, but it has been the subject of intensive study by Dr. Knolles of the Bureau of Standards for several years. His studies of the effects of different colored lights, that is, rays of different wave-lengths, on the reactions which constitute growth in plants have had a great effect on hothouse forcing of plants and promise to revolutionize the truck gardening industry. He has speeded up the rate of growth to as high as ten times the normal rate in some cases.

"A few years ago, he and his assistant, James Collier, turned their attention toward discovering a catalyst which would do for the metabolic reactions in animal life what his light rays did for plants.

What his method was, I will not disclose for obvious reasons, but suffice it to say that he met with great success. He took a puppy and by treating it with his catalytic drugs, made it grow to maturity, pass through its entire normal life span, and die of old age in six months."

"That is very interesting, Doctor, but I fail to see what bearing it has on the robbery."

"Mr. Rogers, how, on a dark day and in the absence of a timepiece, would you judge the passage of time?"

"Why, by my stomach, I guess."

"Exactly. By your metabolic rate. You eat a meal, it digests, you expend the energy which you have taken into your system, your stomach becomes empty and your system demands more energy. You are hungry and you judge that some five or six hours must have passed since you last ate. Do you follow?"

"Certainly."

"Let us suppose that by means of some tonic, some catalytic drug, your rate of metabolism and also your rate of expenditure of energy has been increased six fold. You would eat a meal and in one hour

you would be hungry again. Having no timepiece, and assuming that you were in a light-proof room, you would judge that some five hours had passed, would you not?"

"I expect so."

"Very well. Now suppose that this accelerated rate of digestion and expenditure of energy continued. You would be sleepy in perhaps three hours, would sleep about an hour and a quarter, and would then wake, ready for your breakfast. In other words, you would have lived through a day in four hours."

"What advantage would there be in that?"

"None, from your standpoint. It would, however, increase the rate of reproduction of cattle greatly and might be a great boom to agriculture, but we will not discuss this phase now. Suppose it were possible to increase your rate of metabolism and expenditure of energy, in other words, your rate of living, not six times, but thirty thousand times. In such a case you would live five minutes in one one-hundredth of a second."

"Naturally, and you would live a year in about seventeen and one-half minutes, and a normal lifespan of seventy years in about twenty

hours. You would be as badly off as any common may-fly."

"Agreed, but suppose that you could so regulate the dose of your catalyst that its effect would last for only one one-hundredth of a second. During that short period of time, you would be able to do the work that would ordinarily take you five minutes. In other words, you could enter a bank, pack a satchel with currency and walk out. You would be working in a leisurely manner, yet your actions would have been so quick that no human eye could have detected them. This is my theory of what actually took place. For verification, I will turn to Dr. Kirkwood, as he prefers to be known now."

"I don't know how you got that picture, but what you have said is about right," replied the prisoner.

"I got that picture by using a speed of thirty thousand times the normal sixteen exposures per second," replied Dr. Bird. "That figure I got from Dr. Knolles, the man who perfected the secret you stole when you left the Bureau three years ago. You secured only part of it and I suppose it took all your time since to perfect and complete it. You gave yourself away when you experimented on young Ladd. I was a track man myself in my college days and when I saw an account of his running, I smelt a rat, so I came back and watched him. As soon as I saw him crush and swallow a capsule just as the

gun was fired, I was sure, and got hold of him. He was pretty stubborn, but he finally told me what name you were running under now, and the rest was easy. I would have got you in time anyway, but your bravado in telling us when you would next operate gave me the idea of letting you do it and photographing you at work. That is all I have to say. Captain Sturtevant, you can take your prisoner whenever you want him."

"I reckoned without you, Dr. Bird, but the end hasn't come yet. You may send me up for a few years, but you'll never find that money. I'm sure of that."

"Tut, tut, Professor," laughed Carnes. "Your safety deposit box in the Commercial National is already sealed until a court orders it opened. The bills you took this morning were all marked, so that is merely additional proof, if we needed it. You surely didn't think that such a transparent device as changing your name from 'James Collier' to 'John Collyer' and signing with your left hand instead of your right would fool the secret service, did you? Remember, your old Bureau records showed you to be ambidextrous."

"What about Winston's confession?" asked Rogers suddenly.

"Detective-Captain Sturtevant can explain that to a court when Mr.

Winston brings suit against him for false arrest and brutal treatment," replied Carnes.

"A very interesting case, Carnes," remarked the doctor a few hours later. "It was an enjoyable interlude in the routine of most of the cases on which you consult me, but our play time is over. We'll have to get after that counterfeiting case to-morrow."

March 1930

#15 Cold Light, by Sterner St. Paul Meek:

How could a human body be found actually splintered—broken into sharp fragments like a shattered glass! Once again Dr. Bird probes deep into an amazing mystery.

Aproximate word count: 7,000

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

“Confound it, Carnes, I am on my vacation!”

“I know it, Doctor, and I hate to disturb you, but I felt that I simply had to. I have one of the weirdest cases on my hands that I have ever been mixed up in and I think that you’ll forgive me for calling you when I tell you about it.”

How could a human body be found actually splintered—broken into sharp fragments like a shattered glass! Once again Dr. Bird probes deep into an amazing mystery.

Dr. Bird groaned into the telephone transmitter.

“I took a vacation last summer, or tried to, and you hauled me away from the best fishing I have found in years to help you on a case. This year I traveled all the way from Washington to San Francisco to get away from you and the very day that I get here you are after me. I won’t have anything to do with it. Where are you, anyway?”

“I am at Fallon, Nevada, Doctor. I’m sorry that you won’t help me out because the case promises to be unusually interesting. Let me at least tell you about it.”

Dr. Bird groaned louder than ever into the telephone transmitter.

“All right, go ahead and tell me about it if it will relieve your mind, but I have given you my final answer. I am not a bit interested in it.”

“That is quite all right, Doctor, I 296 don’t expect you to touch it. I hope, however, that you will be able to give me an idea of where to start. Did you ever see a man’s body broken in pieces?”

“Do you mean badly smashed up?”

“No indeed, I mean just what I said, broken in pieces. Legs snapped off as though the entire flesh had become brittle.”

“No, I didn’t, and neither did anyone else.”

“I have seen it, Doctor.”

“Hooey! What had you been drinking?”

Operative Carnes of the United States Secret Service chuckled softly to himself. The voice of the famous scientist of the Bureau of Standards plainly showed an interest which was quite at variance with his words.

“I was quite sober, Doctor, and so was Hughes, and we both saw it.”

“Who is Hughes?”

“He is an air mail pilot, one of the crack fliers of the Transcontinental Airmail Corporation. Let me tell you the whole thing in order.”

“All right. I have a few minutes to spare, but I’ll warn you again that I don’t intend to touch the case.”

“Suit yourself, Doctor. I have no authority to requisition your services. As you know, the T.A.C. has been handling a great deal of the transcontinental air mail with a pretty clean record on accidents.

The day before yesterday, a special plane left Washington to carry two packages from there to San Francisco. One of them was a shipment of jewels valued at a quarter of a million, consigned to a San Francisco firm and the other was a sealed packet from the War Department. No one was supposed to know the contents of that packet except the Chief of Staff who delivered it to the plane personally, but rumors got out, as usual, and it was popularly supposed to contain certain essential features of the Army's war plans. This much is certain: The plane carried not only the regular T.A.C. pilot and courier, but also an army courier, and it was guarded during the trip by an army plane armed with small bombs and a machine-gun. I rode in it. My orders were simply to guard the ship until it landed at Mills Field and then to guard the courier from there to the Presidio of San Francisco until his packet was delivered personally into the hands of the Commanding General of the Ninth Corps Area.

"The trip was quiet and monotonous until after we left Salt Lake City at dawn this morning. Nothing happened until we were about a hundred miles east of Reno. We had taken elevation to cross the Stillwater Mountains and were skimming low over them, my plane trailing the T.A.C. plane by about half a mile. I was not paying any particular attention to the other ship when I suddenly felt our plane leap ahead. It was a fast Douglas and the pilot gave it the gun and

made it move, I can tell you. I yelled into the speaking tube and asked what was the reason. My pilot yelled back that the plane ahead was in trouble.

“As soon as it was called to my attention I could see myself that it wasn’t acting normally. It was losing elevation and was pursuing a very erratic course. Before we could reach it it lost flying speed and fell into a spinning nose dive and headed for the ground. I watched, expecting every minute to see the crew make parachute jumps, but they didn’t and the plane hit the ground with a terrific crash.”

“It caught fire, of course?”

“No, Doctor, that is one of the funny things about the accident. It didn’t. It hit the ground in an open place free from brush and literally burst into pieces, but it didn’t flame up. We headed directly for the scene of the crash and we encountered another funny thing. We almost froze to death.”

“What do you mean?”

“Exactly what I say. Of course, it’s 297 pretty cold at that altitude all the time, but this cold was like nothing I had ever encountered. It seemed to freeze the blood in our veins and it congealed frost on the

windshields and made the motor miss for a moment. It was only momentary and it only existed directly over the wrecked plane. We went past it and swung around in a circle and came back over the wreck, but we didn't feel the cold again.

"The next thing we tried to do was to find a landing place. That country is pretty rugged and rough and there wasn't a flat place for miles that was large enough to land a ship on. Hughes and I talked it over and there didn't seem to be much of anything that we could do except to go on until we found a landing place. I had had no experience in parachute jumping and I couldn't pilot the plane if Hughes jumped. We swooped down over the wreck as close as we dared and that was when we saw the condition of the bodies. The whole plane was cracked up pretty badly, but the weird part of it was the fact that the bodies of the crew had broken into pieces, as though they had been made of glass.

IMAGEDESCRIPTION

Arms and legs were detached from the torsos and lying at a distance. There was no sign of blood on the ground. We saw all this with our naked eyes from close at hand and verified it by observations through binoculars from a greater height.

“When we had made our observations and marked the location of the wreck as closely as we could, we headed east until we found a landing place near Fallon. Hughes dropped me here and went on to Reno, or to San Francisco if necessary, to report the accident and get more planes to aid in the search. I was wholly at sea, but it seemed to be in your line and as I knew that you were at the St. Francis, I called you up.”

“What are your plans?”

“I made none until I talked with you. The country where the wreck occurred is unbelievably wild and we can’t get near it with any transportation other than burros. The only thing that I can see to do is to gather together what transportation I can and head for the wreck on foot to rescue the packets and to bring out the bodies. Can you suggest anything better?”

“When do you expect to start?”

“As soon as I can get my pack train together. Possibly in three or four hours.”

“Carnes, are you sure that those bodies were broken into bits? An arm or a leg might easily be torn off in a complete crash.”

“They were smashed into bits as nearly as I could tell, Doctor. Hughes is an old flier and he has seen plenty of crashes but he never saw anything like this. It beats anything that I ever saw.”

“If your observations were accurate, there could be only one cause and that one is a patent impossibility. I haven’t a bit of equipment here, but I expect that I can get most of the stuff I want from the University of California across the bay at Berkeley. I can get a plane at Crissy Field. I’ll tell you what to do, Carnes. Get your burro train together and start as soon as you can, but leave me half a dozen burros and a guide at Fallon. I’ll get up there as soon as I can and I’ll try to overtake you before you get to the wreck. If I don’t, don’t disturb anything any more than you can help until my arrival. Do you understand?”

“I thought that you were on your vacation, Doctor.”

“Oh shut up! Like most of my vacations, this one will have to be postponed. I’ll move as swiftly as I can and I ought to be at Fallon to-night if I’m lucky and don’t run into any obstacles. Burros are fairly slow, but I’ll make the best time possible.”

“I rather expected you would, Doctor. I can’t get my pack train together until evening, so I’ll wait for you right here. I’m mighty

glad that you are going to get in on it.”

298

Silently Carnes and Dr. Bird surveyed the wreck of the T.A.C. plane. The observations of the secret service operative had been correct. The bodies of the unfortunate crew had been broken into fragments. Their limbs had not been twisted off as a freak of the fall but had been cleanly broken off, as though the bodies had suddenly become brittle and had shattered on their impact with the ground. Not only the bodies, but the ship itself had been broken up. Even the clothing of the men was in pieces or had long splits in the fabric whose edges were as clean as though they had been cut with a knife.

Dr. Bird picked up an arm which had belonged to the pilot and examined it. The brittleness, if it had ever existed, was gone and the arm was limp.

“No *rigor mortis*,” commented the Doctor. “How long ago was the wreck?”

“About seventy-two hours ago.”

“Hm-m! What about those packets that were on the plane?”

Carnes stepped forward and gingerly inspected first the body of the army courier and then that of the courier of the T.A.C.

“Both gone, Doctor,” he reported, straightening up.

Dr. Bird’s face fell into grim lines.

“There is more to this case than appears on the surface, Carnes,” he said. “This was no ordinary wreck. Bring up that third burro; I want to examine these fragments a little. Bill,” he went on to one of the two guides who had accompanied them from Fallon, “you and Walter scout around the ground and see what you can find out. I especially wish to know whether anyone has visited the scene of the wreck.”

The guides consulted a moment and started out. Carnes drove up the burro the Doctor had indicated and Dr. Bird unpacked it. He opened a mahogony case and took from it a high powered microscope. Setting the instrument up on a convenient rock, he subjected portions of the wreck, including several fragments of flesh, to a careful scrutiny. When he had completed his observations he fell into a brown study, from which he was aroused by Carnes.

“What did you find out about the cause of the wreck, Doctor?”

“I don’t know what to think. The immediate cause was that everything was frozen. The plane ran into a belt of cold which froze up the motor and which probably killed the crew instantly. It was undoubtedly the aftermath of that cold which you felt when you swooped down over the wreck.”

“It seems impossible that it could have suddenly got cold enough to freeze everything up like that.”

“It does, and yet I am confident that that is what happened. It was no ordinary cold, Carnes; it was cold of the type that infests interstellar space; cold beyond any conception you have of cold, cold near the range of the absolute zero of temperature, nearly four hundred and fifty degrees below zero on the Fahrenheit scale. At such temperatures, things which are ordinarily quite flexible and elastic, such as rubber, or flesh, become as brittle as glass and would break in the manner which these bodies have broken. An examination of the tissues of the flesh shows that it has been submitted to some temperature that is very low in the scale, probably below that of liquid air. Such a temperature would produce instant death and the other phenomena which we can observe.”

“What could cause such a low temperature, Doctor?”

“I don’t know yet, although I hope to find out before we are finished. Cold is a funny thing, Carnes. Ordinarily it is considered as simply the absence of heat; and yet I have always held it to be a definite negative quantity. All through nature we observe that every force has its opposite or negative force to oppose it. We have positive and negative electrical charges, positive and negative, or north and south, magnetic poles. We have gravity and its 299 opposite apergy, and I believe cold is really negative heat.”

“I never heard of anything like that, Doctor. I always thought that things were cold because heat was taken from them—not because cold was added. It sounds preposterous.”

“Such is the common idea, and yet I cannot accept it, for it does not explain all the recorded phenomena. You are familiar with a searchlight, are you not?”

“In a general way, yes.”

“A searchlight is merely a source of light, and of course, of heat, which is placed at the focus of a parabolic reflector so that all of the rays emanating from the source travel in parallel lines. A searchlight, of course, gives off heat. If we place a lens of the same size as the searchlight aperture in the path of the beam and concentrate all the

light, and heat, at one spot, the focal point of the lens, the temperature at that point is the same as the temperature of the source of the light, less what has been lost by radiation. You understand that, do you not?"

"Certainly."

"Suppose that we place at the center of the aperture of the searchlight a small opaque disc which is permeable neither to heat nor light, in such a manner as to interrupt the central portion of the beam. As a result, the beam will go out in the form of a hollow rod, or pipe, of heat and light with a dark, cold core. This core will have the temperature of the surrounding air plus the small amount which has radiated into it from the surrounding pipe. If we now pass this beam of light through a lens in order to concentrate the beam, both the pipe of heat and the cold core will focus. If we place a temperature measuring device near the focus of the dark core, we will find that the temperature is lower than the surrounding air. This means that we have focused or concentrated cold."

"That sounds impossible. But I can offer no other criticism."

"Nevertheless, it is experimentally true. It is one of the facts which lead me to consider cold as negative heat. However, this is true of

cold, as it is of the other negative forces; they exist and manifest themselves only in the presence of the positive forces. No one has yet concentrated cold except in the presence of heat, as I have outlined. How this cold belt which the T.A.C. plane encountered came to be there is another question. The thing which we have to determine is whether it was caused by natural or artificial forces."

"Both of the packets which the plane carried are gone, Doctor," observed Carnes.

"Yes, and that seems to add weight to the possibility that the cause was artificial, but it is far from conclusive. The packets might not have been on the men when the plane fell, or someone may have passed later and taken them for safekeeping."

The doctor's remarks were interrupted by the guides.

"Someone has been here since the wreck, Doctor," said Bill. "Walter and I found tracks where two men came up here and prowled around for some time and then left by the way they came. They went off toward the northwest, and we followed their trail for about forty rods and then lost it. We weren't able to pick it up again."

"Thanks, Bill," replied the doctor. "Well, Carnes, that seems to add

more weight to the theory that the spot of cold was made and didn't just happen. If a prospecting party had just happened along they would either have left the wreck alone or would have made some attempt to inter the bodies. That cold belt must have been produced artificially by men who planned to rob this plane after bringing it down and who were near at hand to get their plunder. Is there any chance of following that trail?"

"I doubt it, Doc. Walter and I scouted around quite a little, but we couldn't pick it up again."

300

"Is there any power line passing within twenty miles of here?"

"None that Walter and I know of, Doc."

"Funny! Such a device as must have been used would need power and lots of it for operation. Well, I'll try my luck. Carnes, help me unpack and set up the rest of my apparatus."

With the aid of the operative, Dr. Bird unpacked two of the burros and extracted from cases where they were carefully packed and padded some elaborate electrical and optical apparatus. The first was

a short telescope of large diameter which he mounted on a base in such a manner that it could be elevated or depressed and rotated in any direction. At the focal point of the telescope was fastened a small knot of wire from which one lead ran to the main piece of apparatus, which he sat on a flat rock. The other lead from the wire knot ran into a sealed container surrounded by a water bath under which a spirit lamp burned. From the container another lead led to the main apparatus. This main piece consisted of a series of wire coils mounted on a frame and attached to the two leads. The doctor took from a padded case a tiny magnet suspended on a piece of wire of exceedingly small diameter which he fastened in place inside the coils. Cemented to the magnet was a tiny mirror.

“What is that apparatus?” asked Carnes as the doctor finished his set-up and surveyed it with satisfaction.

“Merely a thermocouple attached to a D’Arsonval galvanometer,” replied the doctor. “This large, squat telescope catches and concentrates on the thermocouple and the galvanometer registers the temperature.”

“You’re out of my depth. What is a thermocouple?”

“A juncture of two wires made of dissimilar metals, in this case of

platinum and of platinum-iridium alloy. There is another similar junction in this case, which is kept at a constant temperature by the water bath. When the temperatures of the two junctions are the same, the system is in equilibrium. When they are at different temperatures, an electrical potential is set up, which causes a current to flow from one to the other through the galvanometer. The galvanometer consists of a magnet set up inside coils through which the current I spoke of flows. This current causes the magnet to rotate and by watching the mirror, the rotation can be detected and measured.

“This device is one of the most sensitive ever made, and is used to measure the radiation from distant stars. Currents as small as .00000000000000000000000001 ampere have been detected and measured. This particular instrument is not that sensitive to begin with, and has its sensitivity further reduced by having a high resistance in one of the leads.”

“What are you going to use it for?”

“I am going to try to locate somewhere in these hills a patch of local cold. It may not work, but I have hopes. If you will manipulate the telescope so as to search the hills around here, I will watch the galvanometer.”

For several minutes Carnes swung the telescope around. Twice Dr. Bird stopped him and decreased the sensitiveness of his instrument by introducing more resistance in the lines in order to keep the magnet from twisting clear around, due to the fluctuations in the heats received on account of the varying conditions of reflection. As Carnes swung the telescope again the magnet swung around sharply, nearly to a right angle to its former position.

“Stop!” cried the doctor. “Read your azimuth.”

Carnes read the compass bearing on the protractor attached to the frame which supported the telescope. Dr. Bird took a pair of binoculars and looked long and earnestly in the indicated direction. With a sigh he laid down the glasses.

“I can’t see a thing, Carnesy,” he said. “We’ll have to move over to the next crest and make a new set-up. Plant a rod on the hill so that we can get an azimuth bearing and get the airline distance with a range finder.”

On the hilltop which Dr. Bird had pointed out the apparatus was again set up. For several minutes Carnes swept the hills before an

exclamation from the doctor told him to pause. He read the new azimuth, and the doctor laid off the two readings on a sheet of paper with a protractor and made a few calculations.

“I don’t know,” he said reflectively when he had finished his computations. “This darned instrument is still so sensitive that you may have merely focused on a deep shadow or a cold spring or something of that sort, but the magnet kicked clear around and it may mean that we have located what we are looking for. It should be about two miles away and almost due west of here.”

“There is no spring that I know of, Doc, and I think I know of every water hole in this country,” remarked Bill.

“There could hardly be a spring at this elevation, anyway,” replied the doctor. “Maybe it is what we are seeking. We’ll start out in that direction, anyway. Bill, you had better take the lead, for you know the country. Spread out a little so that we won’t be too bunched if anything happens.”

For three-quarters of an hour the little group of men made their way through the wilderness in the direction indicated by the doctor. Presently Bill, who was in the lead, held up his hand with a warning gesture. The other three closed up as rapidly as cautious progress

would allow.

“What is it, Bill?” asked the doctor in an undertone.

“Slip up ahead and look over that crest.”

The doctor obeyed instructions. As he glanced over he gave vent to a low whistle of surprise and motioned for Carnes to join him. The operative crawled up and glanced over the crest. In a hollow before them was a crude one-storied house, and erected on an open space before it was a massive piece of apparatus. It consisted of a number of huge metallic cylinders, from which lines ran to a silvery concave mirror mounted on an elaborate frame which would allow it to be rotated so as to point in any direction.

“What is it?” whispered Carnes.

“Some kind of a projector,” muttered the doctor. “I never saw one quite like it, but it is meant to project something. I can’t make out the curve of that mirror. It isn’t a parabola and it isn’t an ellipse. It must be a high degree subcatenary or else built on a transcendental function.”

He raised himself to get a clearer view, and as he did so a puff of

smoke came from the house, to be followed in a moment by a sharp crack as a bullet flattened itself a few inches from his head. The doctor tumbled back over the crest out of sight of the house. Bill and Walter hurried forward, their rifles held ready for action.

“Get out on the flanks, men,” directed the doctor. “The man we want is in a house in that hollow. He’s armed, and he means business.”

Bill and Walter crawled under the shelter of the rocks to a short distance away and then, rifles ready, advanced to the attack. A report came from the hollow and a bullet whined over Bill’s head. Almost instantly a crack came from Walter’s rifle and splinters flew from the building in the hollow a few inches from a loophole, through which projected the barrel of a rifle.

The rifle barrel swung rapidly in a circle and barked in Walter’s direction; but as it did so, Bill’s gun spoke and again splinters flew from the building.

“Good work!” ejaculated Dr. Bird as he watched the slow advance of the two guides. “If we just had rifles we could 302 join in the party, but it’s a little far for effective pistol work. Let’s go ahead, and we may get close enough to do a little shooting.”

Pistols in hand, Carnes and the doctor crawled over the crest and joined the advance. Again and again the rifle spoke from the hollow and was answered by the vicious barks of the rifles in the hands of the guides, Carnes and the doctor resting their pistols on rocks and sending an occasional bullet toward the loophole. The conditions of light and the moving target were not conducive to good marksmanship on the part of the besieged man, and none of the attackers were hit. Presently Walter succeeded in sending a bullet through the loophole. The rifle barrel suddenly disappeared. With a shout the four men rose from their cover and advanced toward the building at a run.

As they did so an ominous whirring sound came from the apparatus in front of the house and a sudden chill filled the air.

“Back!” shouted Dr. Bird. “Back below the hill if you value your lives!”

He turned and raced at full speed toward the sheltering crest of the hill, the others following him closely. The whirring sound continued, and the concave reflector turned with a grating sound on its gears. As the path of its rays struck the ground the rocks became white with frost and one rock split with a sharp report, one fragment rolling down the slope, carrying others in its trail.

With panic-stricken faces the four men raced toward the sheltering crest, but remorselessly the reflector swung around in their direction. The intense cold numbed the racing men, cutting off their breath and impeding their efforts for speed.

“Stop!” cried the doctor suddenly. “Fire at that reflector! It’s our only chance!”

He set the example by turning and emptying his pistol futilely at the turning mirror. Bill, Walter and Carnes followed his example. Nearer and nearer to them came the deadly ray. Bill was the nearest to its path, and he suddenly stiffened and fell forward, his useless gun still grasped in his hands. As his body struck the ground it rolled down hill for a few feet, the deadly ray following it. His head struck a rock, and Carnes gave a cry of horror as it broke into fragments.

Walter threw his rifle to his shoulder and fired again and again at the rotating disc. The cold had became intense and he could not control the actions of his muscles and his rifle wavered about. He threw himself flat on the ground, and, with an almost superhuman effort, steadied himself for a moment and fired. His aim was true, and with a terrific crash the reflector split into a thousand fragments. Dr. Bird staggered to his feet.

“It’s out of order for a moment!” he cried. “To the house while we can!”

As swiftly as his numbed feet would allow him, he stumbled toward the house. The muzzle of the rifle again projected from the loophole and with its crack the doctor staggered for a moment and then fell. Walter’s rifle spoke again and the rifle disappeared through the loophole with a spasmodic jerk. Carnes stumbled over the doctor.

“Are you hit badly?” he gasped through chattering teeth.

“I’m not hit at all,” muttered the doctor. “I stumbled and fell just as he fired. Look out! He’s going to shoot again!”

The rifle barrel came slowly into view through the loophole. Walter fired, but his bullet went wild. Carnes threw himself behind a rock for protection.

The rifle swung in Walter’s direction and paused. As it did so, from the house came a strangled cry and a sound as of a blow. The rifle barrel disappeared, and the sounds of a struggle came from the building.

“Come on!” cried Carnes as he rose to his feet, and made his

stumbling way 303 forward, the others following at the best speed which their numbed limbs would allow.

As they reached the door they were aware of a struggle which was going on inside. With an oath the doctor threw his massive frame against the door. It creaked, but the solid oak of which it was composed was proof against the attack, and he drew back for another onslaught. From the house came a pistol shot, followed by a despairing cry and a guttural shout. Reinforced by Carnes, the doctor threw his weight against the door again. With a rending crash it gave, and they fell sprawling into the cabin. The doctor was the first one on his feet.

“Who are you?” asked a voice from one corner. The doctor whirled like a flash and covered the speaker with his pistol.

“Put them up!” he said tersely.

“I am unarmed,” the voice replied. “Who are you?”

“We’re from the United States Secret Service,” replied Carnes who had gained his feet. “The game is up for you, and you’d better realize it.”

“Secret Service! Thank God!” cried the voice. “Get Koskoff—he has the plans. He has gone out through the tunnel!”

“Where is it?” demanded Carnes.

“The entrance is that iron plate on the floor.”

Carnes and the doctor jumped at the plate and tried to lift it, without result. There was no handle or projection on which they could take hold.

“Not that way,” cried the voice. “That cover is fastened on the inside. Go outside the building; he’ll come out about two hundred yards north. Shoot him as he appears or he’ll get away.”

The three men nearly tumbled over each other to get through the doorway into the bitter cold outside. As they emerged from the cabin the gaze of the guide swept the surrounding hills.

“There he goes!” he cried.

“Get him!” said Carnes sharply.

Walter ran forward a few feet and dropped prone on the ground, cuddling the stock of his rifle to his cheek. Two hundred yards ahead

a figure was scurrying over the rocks away from the cabin. Walter drew in his breath and his hand suddenly grew steady as his keen gray eyes peered through the sights. Carnes and the doctor held their breath in sympathy.

Suddenly the rifle spoke, and the fleeing man threw up his arms and fell forward on his face.

“Got him,” said Walter laconically.

“Go bring the body in, Carnes,” exclaimed the doctor. “I’ll take care of the chap inside.”

“Did you get him?” asked the voice eagerly, as the doctor stepped inside.

“He’s dead all right,” replied the doctor grimly. “Who the devil are you, and what are you doing here?”

“There is a light switch on the left of the door as you come in,” was the reply.

Dr. Bird found the switch and snapped on a light. He turned toward the corner from whence the voice had come and recoiled in horror. Propped in the corner was the body of a middle-aged man, daubed

and splashed with blood which ran from a wound in the side of his head.

“Good Lord!” he ejaculated. “Let me help you.”

“There’s not much use,” replied the man rather faintly. “I am about done in. This face wound doesn’t amount to much, but I am shot through the body and am bleeding internally. If you try to move me, it may easily kill me. Leave me alone until your partners come.”

The doctor drew a flask of brandy from his pocket and advanced toward the corner.

“Take a few drops of this,” he advised.

With an effort the man lifted the flask to his lips and gulped down a little of the fiery spirit. A sound of tramping feet came from the outside and then a thud as though a body had 304 been dropped. Carnes and Walter entered the cabin.

“He’s dead as a mackerel,” said Carnes in answer to the doctor’s look. “Walter got him through the neck and broke his spinal cord. He never knew what hit him.”

“The plans?” came in a gasping voice from the man in the corner.

“We got them, too,” replied Carnes. “He had both packets inside his coat. They have been opened, but I guess they are all here. Who the devil are you?”

“Since Koskoff is dead, and I am dying, there is no reason why I shouldn’t tell you,” was the answer. “Leave that brandy handy to keep up my strength. I have only a short time and I can’t repeat.

“As to who I am or what I was, it doesn’t really matter. Koskoff knew me as John Smith, and it will pass as well as any other name. Let my past stay buried. I am, or was, a scientist of some ability; but fortune frowned on me, and I was driven out of the world. Money would rehabilitate me—money will do anything nowadays—so I set out to get it. In the course of my experimental work, I had discovered that cold was negative heat and reacted to the laws which governed heat.”

“I knew that,” cried Dr. Bird; “but I never could prove it.”

“Who are you?” demanded John Smith.

“Dr. Bird, of the Bureau of Standards.”

“Oh, Bird. I’ve heard of you. You can understand me when I say that

as heat, positive heat is a concomitant of ordinary light. I have found that cold, negative heat, is a concomitant of cold light. Is my apparatus in good shape outside?”

“The reflector is smashed.”

“I’m sorry. You would have enjoyed studying it. I presume that you saw that it was a catenary curve?”

“I rather thought so.”

“It was, and it was also adjustable. I could vary the focal point from a few feet to several miles. With that apparatus I could throw a beam of negative heat with a focal point which I could adjust at will. Close to the apparatus, I could obtain a temperature almost down to absolute zero, but at the longer ranges it wasn’t so cold, due to leakage into the atmosphere. Even at two miles I could produce a local temperature of three hundred degrees below zero.”

“What was the source of your cold?”

“Liquid helium. Those cylinders contain, or rather did contain, for I expect that Koskoff has emptied them, helium in a liquid state.”

“Where is your compressor?”

“I didn’t have to use one. I developed a cold light under whose rays helium would liquefy and remain in a state of equilibrium until exposed to light rays. Those cylinders had merely enough pressure to force the liquid out to where the sun could hit it, and then it turned to a gas, dropping the temperature at the first focal point of the reflector to absolute zero. When I had this much done, Koskoff and I packed the whole apparatus here and were ready for work.

“We were on the path of the transcontinental air mail, and I bided my time until an especially valuable shipment was to be made. My plans, which worked perfectly, were to freeze the plane in midair and then rob the wreck. I heard of the jewel shipment the T.A.C. was to carry and I planned to get it. When the plane came over, Koskoff and I brought it down. The unsuspected presence of another plane upset us a little, and I started to bring it down. But we had been all over this country and knew there was no place that a plane could land. I let it go on in safety.”

“Thank you,” replied Carnes with a grimace.

“We robbed the wreck and we found two packets, one the jewels I was after, 305 and the other a sealed packet, which proved to contain certain War Department plans. That was when I learned who Koskoff was. I had hired him in San Francisco as a good mechanic

who had no principles. He was to get one-fourth of the loot. When we found these plans, he told me who he was. He was really a Russian secret agent and he wanted to deliver the plans to Russia. I may be a thief and a murderer, but I am not yet ready to betray my country, and I told him so. He offered me almost any price for the plans; but I wouldn't listen. We had a serious quarrel, and he overpowered me and bound me.

"We had a radio set here and he called San Francisco and sent some code message. I think he was waiting here for someone to come. Had we followed our original plans, we would have been miles from here before you arrived.

"He had me bound and helpless, as he thought, but I worked my bonds a little loose. I didn't let him know it, for I knew that the plane I had let get away would guide a party here and I thought I might be able to help out. When you came and attacked the house, I worked at my bonds until they were loose enough to throw off. I saw Koskoff start my cold apparatus to working and then he quit, because he ran out of helium. When he started shooting again, I worked out of my bonds and tackled him.

"He was a better man than I gave him credit for, or else he suspected me, for about the time I grabbed him he whirled and struck me over

the head with his gun barrel and tore my face open. The blow stunned me, and when I came to, I was thrown into this corner. I meant to have another try at it, but I guess you rushed him too fast. He turned and ran for the tunnel, but as he did so, he shot me through the body. I guess I didn't look dead enough to suit him. You gentlemen broke open the door and came in. That's all."

"Not by a long shot, it isn't," exclaimed Dr. Bird. "Where is that cold light apparatus of yours?"

"In the tunnel."

"How do you get into it?"

"If you will open that cupboard on the wall, you'll find an open knife switch on the wall. Close it."

Dr. Bird found the switch and closed it. As he did so the cabin rocked on its foundations and both Carnes and Walter were thrown to the ground. The thud of a detonation deep in the earth came to their ears.

"What was that?" cried the doctor.

"That," replied Smith with a wan smile, "was the detonation of two

hundred pounds of T.N.T. When you dig down into the underground cave where we used the cold light apparatus, you will find it in fragments. It was my only child, and I'll take it with me."

As he finished his head slumped forward on his chest. With an exclamation of dismay Dr. Bird sprang forward and tried to lift the prostrate form.

In an agony of desire the Doctor tightened his grip on the dying man's shoulder. But Smith collapsed into a heap. Dr. Bird bent forward and tore open his shirt and listened at his chest. Presently he straightened up.

"He is gone," he said sadly, "and I guess the results of his genius have died with him. He doesn't strike me as a man who left overmuch to chance. Carnes, is your case completed?"

"Very satisfactorily, Doctor. I have both of the lost packets."

"All right, then, come back to the wreck and help me pack my burros. I can make my way back to Fallon without a guide."

"Where are you going, Doctor?"

"That, Carnes, old dear, is none of your blankety blanked business.

Permit me to remind you that I am on my vacation. I haven’t decided yet just where I am going, but I can tell you one thing. It’s going to be some place where you can’t call me on the telephone.”

#16 Brigands of the Moon, by Ray Cummings:

Black mutiny and brigandage stalk the space-ship Planetara as she speeds to the moon to pick up a fabulously rich cache of radium-ore.

Aproximate word count: 77,300

Bigotry:

Warnings:

Foreword by Ray Cummings:

I have been thinking that if, during one of those long winter evenings at Valley Forge, someone had placed in George Washington's hands one of our present day best sellers, the illustrious Father of our Country would have read it with considerable emotion. I do not mean what we call a story of science, or fantasy—just a novel of action, adventure and romance. The sort of thing you and I like to read, but do not find amazing in any way at all.

Black mutiny and brigandage stalk the Space-ship Planetara as she speeds to the Moon to pick up a fabulously rich cache of radium-ore.

But I fancy that George Washington would have found it amazing. Don't you? It might picture, for instance, a factory girl at a sewing machine. George Washington would be amazed at a sewing machine. And the girl, journeying in the subway to and from her work! Stealing an opportunity to telephone her lover at the noon hour; going to the movies in the evening, or listening to a radio. And there might be a climax, perhaps, with the girl and the villain in a transcontinental railway Pullman, and the hero sending frantic telegrams, or telephoning the train, and then chasing it in his airplane.

George Washington would have found it amazing!

And I am wondering how you and I would feel if someone were to give us now a book of ordinary adventure of the sort which will be published a hundred and fifty years hence. I have been trying to imagine such a book and the nature of its contents.

IMAGEDESCRIPTION

Let us imagine it together. Suppose we walk down Fifth Avenue, a pleasant spring morning of May, 2080. Fifth Avenue, no doubt, will be there. I don't know whether the New York Public Library will be there or not. We'll assume that it is, and that it has some sort of books, printed, or in whatever fashion you care to imagine.

The young man library attendant is surprised at our curiously antiquated aspect. We look as though we were dressed for some historical costume ball. We talk old-fashioned English, like actors in an historical play of the 1930 period.

But we get the book. The attendant assures us it is a good average story of action and adventure. Nothing remarkable, but he read it himself, and found it interesting.

We thank him and take the book. But we find that the language in which it is written is too strange for comfortable reading. And it names so many extraordinary things so casually! As though we knew all about them, which we certainly do not!

So we take it to the kind-hearted librarian in the language division. He modifies it to old-fashioned English of 1930, and he puts occasional footnotes to help explain some of the things we might not understand. Why he should bother to do this for us I don't know; but let us assume that he does.

And now we take the book home—in the pneumatic tube, or aerial moving sidewalk, or airship, or whatever it is we take to get home.

And now that we are home, let's read the book. It ought to be interesting.

Chapter 1 Tells of the Grantline Moon Expedition and of the Mysterious Martian Who Followed Us in the City Corridor

One may write about oneself and still not be an egoist. Or so, at least, they tell me. My narrative went broadcast with a fair success. It was pantomimed and the public flashed me a reasonable approval. And so my disc publishers have suggested that I record it in more permanent form.

I introduce myself, begging grace that I intrude upon your busy minutes, with my only excuse that perhaps I may amuse you. For what the commercial sellers of my pictured version were pleased to blare as my handsome face, I ask your indulgence. My feminine audience of the pantomimes was undoubtedly graciously pleased at my personality and physical aspect. That I am “tall as a Viking of old”—and “handsome as a young Norse God”—is very pretty talk in the selling of my product. But I deplore its intrusion into the personality of this, my recorded narrative. And so now, for preface, to all my audience I do give earnest assurance that Gregg Haljan is no conceited zebra, handsomely striped by nature, and proud of it. Not so. I am, I do beg you to believe, a very humble fellow, striving for your approval, hoping only to entertain you.

My introduction: My name, Gregg Haljan. My age, twenty-five

years. I was, at the time my narrative begins, Third Officer on the Space-Ship Planetara. Our line was newly established; in 2070, to be exact, following the modern improvements of the Martel Magnetic Levitation. (As early as 1910 it was discovered that an object magnetized under certain conditions was subject to a loss of weight, its gravity partially nullified. The Martel discovery undoubtedly followed that method.)

Our ship, whose home port was Great-New York, carried mail and passenger traffic to and from both Venus and Mars. Of astronomical necessity, our flights were irregular. This spring, with the two other planets both close to the earth, we were making two complete round trips. We had just arrived in Great-New York, this May evening, from Grebhar, Venus Free State. With only five hours in port here, we were departing the same night at the zero hour for Ferrok-Shahn, capital of the Martian Union.

We were no sooner at the landing stage than I found a code-flash summoning Dan Dean and me to Divisional Detective Headquarters. Dan "Snap" Dean was one of my closest friends. He was radio-helio operator of the Planetara. A small, wiry, red-headed chap, with a quick, ready laugh and a wit that made everyone like him.

The summons to Detective-Colonel Halsey's office surprised us.

Snap eyed me.

“You haven’t been opening any treasury vaults, have you, Gregg?”

“He wants you, also,” I retorted.

He laughed. “Well, he can roar at me like a traffic switchman and my private life will remain my own.”

We could not think why we should be wanted. It was the darkness of mid-evening when we left the Planetara for Halsey’s office. It was not a long trip. We went direct in the upper monorail, descending into the subterranean city at Park-Circle 30.

We had never been to Halsey’s office before. We found it to be a gloomy, vaultlike place in one of the deepest corridors. The door lifted.

“Gregg Haljan and Daniel Dean.”

The guard stood aside. “Come in.”

I own that my heart was unduly thumping as we entered. The door dropped behind us. It was a small blue-lit apartment—a steel-lined room like a vault.

Colonel Halsey sat at his desk. And the big, heavy-set, florid Captain Carter—our commander of the Planetara—was here. That surprised us: we had not seen him leave the ship.

Halsey smiled at us gravely. Captain Carter said, “Sit down, lads.”

We took the seats. There was an alarming solemnity about this. If I had been guilty of anything that I could think of, it would have been frightening. But Halsey’s first words reassured me.

“It’s about the Grantline Moon Expedition. In spite of our secrecy, the news has gotten out. We want to know how. Can you tell us?”

Captain Carter’s huge bulk—he was about as tall as I am—towered over us as we sat before Halsey’s desk. “If you lads have told anyone—said anything—let slip the slightest hint about it—”

Snap smiled with relief; but he turned solemn at once. “I haven’t. Not a word!”

“Nor have I,” I declared.

The Grantline Moon Expedition! We had not thought of that as a reason for this summons. Johnny Grantline was a close friend to us both. He had organized an exploring expedition to the Moon.

Uninhabited, with its bleak, forbidding, airless, waterless surface, the Moon—even though so close to the Earth—was seldom visited. No regular ship ever stopped there. A few exploring parties of recent years had come to grief.

But there was a persistent rumor that upon the Moon, mineral riches of fabulous wealth were awaiting discovery. The thing had already caused some interplanetary complications. The aggressive Martians would be only too glad to explore the Moon. But the U.S.W. ("United States of the World," which came into being in 2057 upon the centenary of the Yellow War.) definitely warned them away. The Moon was World Territory, we announced, and we would protect it as such.

The threatened conflict between the Earth and Mars had come to nothing. There was, this year of 2079, a thorough amity between all three of the inhabited planets. It still holds, and I pray that it may always hold.

There was, nevertheless, a realization by our government, that whatever riches might be upon the Moon should be seized at once and held by some reputable Earth Company. And when Johnny Grantline applied, with his father's wealth and his own scientific record of attainment, the government was only too glad to grant him

its writ.

The Grantline Expedition had started six months ago. The Martian government had acquiesced in our ultimatum, yet brigands have been known to be financed under cover of a governmental disavowal. And so the expedition was kept secret.

My words need give no offense to any Martian who comes upon them. I refer to the history of our earth only. The Grantline Expedition was on the Moon now. No word had come from it. One could not flash helios even in code without letting all the universe know that explorers were on the Moon. And why they were there, anyone could easily guess.

And now Colonel Halsey was telling us that the news was abroad! Captain Carter eyed us closely; his flashing eyes under the white bushy brows would pry a secret from anyone.

“You’re sure? A girl of Venus, perhaps, with her cursed, seductive lure! A chance word, with you lads befuddled by alcolite?”

We assured him we had been careful. By the heavens, I know that I had been. Not a whisper, even to Snap, of the name Grantline in six months or more.

Captain Carter added abruptly, “We’re insulated here, Halsey?”

“Yes, talk as freely as you like. An eavesdropping ray will never get into these walls.”

They questioned us. They were satisfied at last that, though the secret had escaped, we had not done it. Hearing it discussed, it occurred to me to wonder why Carter was concerned. I was not aware that he knew of Grantline’s venture. I learned now the reason why the Planetara, upon each of her voyages, had managed to pass fairly close to the Moon. It had been arranged with Grantline that if he wanted help or had any important message, he was to flash it locally to our passing ship. And this Snap knew, and had never mentioned it, even to me.

Halsey was saying, “Well, we can’t blame you, but the secret is out.”

Snap and I regarded each other. What could anyone do? What would anyone dare do?

Captain Carter said abruptly, “Look here, lads, this is my chance now to talk plainly to you. Outside, anywhere outside these walls, an eavesdropping ray may be upon us. You know that? One may never even dare whisper since that accursed ray was developed.”

Snap opened his mouth to speak but decided against it. My heart was pounding.

Captain Carter went on, “I know I can trust you two more than anyone else under me on the Planetara—”

“What do you mean by that?” I demanded. “What—”

He interrupted me. “Nothing at all but what I say.”

Halsey smiled grimly. “What he means, Haljan, is that things are not always what they seem these days. One cannot always tell a friend from an enemy. The Planetara is a public vessel. You have—how many is it, Carter?—thirty or forty passengers this trip to-night?”

“Thirty-eight,” said Carter.

“There are thirty-eight people listed for the flight to Ferrok-Shahn to-night,” Halsey said slowly. “And some may not be what they seem.” He raised his thin dark hand. “We have information—” He paused. “I confess, we know almost nothing—hardly more than enough to alarm us.”

Captain Carter interjected, “I want you and Dean to be on your guard. Once on the Planetara it is difficult for us to talk openly, but

be watchful. I will arrange for us to be doubly armed."

Vague, perturbing words! Halsey said, "They tell me George Prince is listed for the voyage. I am suggesting, Haljan, that you keep your eye especially upon him. Your duties on the Planetara leave you comparatively free, don't they?"

"Yes," I agreed. With the first and second officers on duty, and the captain aboard, my routine was more or less that of an understudy.

I said, "George Prince! Who is he?"

"A mechanical engineer," said Halsey. "An under-official of the Earth Federated Radium Corporation. But he associates with bad companions—particularly Martians."

I had never heard of this George Prince, though I was familiar with the Federated Radium Corporation, of course. A semi-government trust, which controlled virtually the entire Earth supply of radium.

"He was in the Automotive Department," Carter put in. "You've heard of the Federated Radium Motor?"

We had, of course. A recent Earth invention which promised to revolutionize the automotive industry. An engine of a new type,

using radium as its fuel.

Snap demanded, “What in the stars has this got to do with Johnny Grantline?”

“Much,” said Halsey quietly, “or perhaps nothing. But George Prince some years ago mixed in rather unethical transactions. We had him in custody once. He is known now as unusually friendly with several Martians in New York of bad reputation.”

“Well—” began Snap.

“What you don’t know,” Halsey went on quietly, “is that Grantline expects to find radium on the Moon.”

We gasped.

“Exactly,” said Halsey. “The ill-fated Ballon Expedition thought they had found it on the Moon some years ago. A new type of ore, as rich in radium as our gold-bearing sands are rich in gold. Ballon’s first samples gave uranium atoms with a fair representation of ionium and thorium. A richly radio-active ore. A lode of the pure radium is there somewhere, without doubt.”

He added vehemently, “Do you understand now why we should be

suspicious of this George Prince? He has a criminal record. He has a thorough technical knowledge of radium ores. He associates with Martians of bad reputation. A large Martian Company has recently developed a radium engine to compete with our Earth motor. You know that? You know that there is very little radium available on Mars, and our government will not allow our own radium supply to be exported. That Martian Company needs radium. It will do anything to get radium. What do you suppose it would pay for a few tons of really rich radio-active ore—such as Grantline may have found on the Moon?"

"But," I objected, "that is a reputable Martian company. It's backed by the government of the Martian Union. The government of Mars would not dare—"

"Of course not!" Captain Carter exclaimed sardonically. "Not openly! But if Martian brigands had a supply of radium—I don't imagine where it came from would make much difference. That Martian Company would buy it."

Halsey added, "And George Prince, my agents inform me, seems to know that Grantline is on the Moon. Put it all together, lads. Little sparks show the hidden current.

“More than that: George Prince knows that we have arranged to have the Planetara stop at the Moon and bring back Grantline’s radium-ore. This is your last voyage this year. You’ll hear from Grantline this time, we’re convinced. He’ll probably give you the signal as you pass the Moon on your way out. Coming back, you’ll stop at the Moon and transport whatever radium-ore Grantline has ready. The Grantline Flyer is too small for ore transportation.”

Halsey’s voice turned grimly sarcastic. “Doesn’t it seem queer that George Prince and a few of his Martian friends happen to be listed as passengers for this voyage?”

In the silence that followed, Snap and I regarded each other. Halsey added abruptly,

“We had George Prince typed that time we arrested him four years ago. I’ll show him to you.”

He snapped open an alcove, and said to his waiting attendant, “Get me the type of George Prince.”

The disc in a moment came through the pneumatic. Halsey, smiling wryly, adjusted it.

“A nice looking fellow. Nicely spoken. Though at the time we made this he was somewhat annoyed, naturally. He is older now. Twenty-nine, to be exact. Here he is.”

The image glowed on the grids before us. His name, George Prince, in letters illumined upon his forehead, showed for a moment and then faded. He stood smiling sourly before us as he repeated the official formula:

“My name is George Prince. I was born in Great-New York City twenty-five years ago.”

I gazed at this life-size, moving image of George Prince. He stood somber in the black detention uniform. A dark, almost a girlishly handsome fellow, well below medium height—the rod beside him showed five feet four inches. Slim and slight. Long, wavy black hair, falling about his ears. A pale, clean-cut, really handsome face, almost beardless. I regarded it closely. A face that would have been femininely beautiful without its masculine touch of heavy black brows and firmly set jaw. His voice as he spoke was low and soft; but at the end, with the concluding words, “I am innocent!” it flashed into strong masculinity. His eyes, shaded with long, girlish black lashes, by chance met mine. “I am innocent.” His curving sensuous lips drew down into a grim sneer....

The type faded at its end. Halsey replaced the disc in its box and waved the attendant away. “Thank you.”

He turned back to Snap and me. “Well, there he is. We have nothing tangible against him now. But I’ll say this: he’s a clever fellow, one to be afraid of. I would not blare it from the newscasters’ microphone, but if he is hatching any plot, he has been too clever for my agents.”

We talked for another half-hour, and then Captain Carter dismissed us. We left Halsey’s office with Carter’s final words ringing in our ears. “Whatever comes, lads, remember I trust you....”

Snap and I decided to walk a portion of the way back to the ship. It was barely more than a mile through this subterranean corridor to where we could get the vertical lift direct to the landing stage.

We started off on the lower level. Once outside the insulation of Halsey’s office we did not dare talk of this thing. Not only electrical ears, but every possible eavesdropping device might be upon us. The corridor was two hundred feet or more below the ground level. At this hour of the night this business section was comparatively deserted. The through tube sounded over our heads with the passing of its occasional trains. The ventilators buzzed and whirred. At the

cross intersections, the traffic directors dozed at their posts. It was hot and sticky down here, and gloomy with the daylight globes extinguished, and only the night lights to give a dim illumination. The stores and office arcades were all closed and deserted; only an occasional night-light burning behind their windows.

Our footfalls echoed on the metal grids as we hurried along.

“Nice evening,” said Snap awkwardly.

“Yes,” I said, “isn’t it?”

I felt oppressed. As though prying eyes and ears were here. We walked for a time in silence, each of us busy with memory of what had transpired in Halsey’s office.

Suddenly Snap gripped me. “What’s that?”

“Where?” I whispered.

We stopped at a corner. An entryway was here. Snap pulled me into it. I could feel him quivering with excitement.

“What is it?” I demanded in a whisper.

“We’re being followed. Did you hear anything?”

“No!” Yet I thought now I could hear something. Vague footfalls. A rustling. And a microscopic electrical whine, as though some device were near us.

Snap was fumbling in his pocket. “Wait, I’ve got a pair of low-scale phones.”

He put the little grids against his ears. I could hear the sharp intake of his breath. Then he seized me, pulled me down to the metal floor of the entryway.

“Back, Gregg! Get back!” I could barely hear his whisper. We crouched as far back into the doorway as we could get. I was armed. My official permit for the carrying of the pencil heat-ray allowed me to have it always with me. I drew it now. But there was nothing to shoot at. I felt Snap clamping the grids on my ears. And now I heard something! An intensification of the vague footsteps I had thought I heard before.

There was something following us! Something out in the corridor there now! A street light was nearby. The corridor was dim, but plainly visible; and to my sight it was empty. But there was

something there. Something invisible! I could hear it moving. Creeping towards us. I pulled the grids off my ears.

Snap murmured, “You’ve got a local phone.”

“Yes! I’ll get them to give us the street glare!”

I pressed the danger signal, giving our location to the nearest operator. In a second or two we got the light. The street in all this neighborhood burst into a brilliant actinic glare. The thing menacing us was revealed! A figure in a black cloak, crouching thirty feet away across the corridor.

Snap was on his feet. His voice rang shrilly, “There it is! Give it a shot, Gregg!”

Snap was unarmed, but he flung his hands out menacingly. The figure, which may perhaps not have been aware of our city safeguard, was taken wholly by surprise. A human figure. Seven feet tall, at the least, and therefore, I judged, doubtless a Martian man. The black cloak covered his head. He took a step toward us, hesitated, and then turned in confusion.

Snap’s shrill voice was bringing help. The whine of a street guard’s

alarm whistle nearby sounded. The figure was making off! My pencil-ray was in my hand and I pressed its switch. The tiny heat-ray stabbed through the glare, but I missed. The figure stumbled, but did not fall. I saw a bare gray arm come from the cloak, flung up to maintain its balance. Or perhaps my pencil-ray of heat had seared the arm. The gray-skinned arm of a Martian.

Snap was shouting, “Give him another!” But the figure passed beyond the actinic glare and vanished.

We were detained in the turmoil of the corridor for ten minutes or more with official explanations. Then a message from Halsey released us. The Martian who had been following us in his invisible cloak was never caught.

We escaped from the crowd at last and made our way back to the Planetara, where the passengers were already assembling for the outward Martian voyage.

Chapter 2 “A Fleeting Glance—”

I stood on the turret-balcony of the Planetara with Captain Carter and Dr. Frank, the ship surgeon, watching the arriving passengers. It was close to the zero hour: the level of the stage was a turmoil of confusion. The escalators, with the last of the freight aboard, were folded back. But the stage was jammed with the incoming passenger baggage: the interplanetary customs and tax officials with their X-ray and Zed-ray paraphernalia and the passengers themselves, lined up for the export inspection.

At this height, the city lights lay spread in a glare of blue and yellow beneath us. The individual local planes came dropping like birds to our stage. Thirty-eight passengers for this flight to Mars, but that accursed desire of every friend and relative to speed the departing voyager brought a hundred or more extra people to crowd our girders and bring added difficulty to everybody.

Carter was too absorbed in his duties to stay with us long. But here in the turret Dr. Frank and I found ourselves at the moment with nothing much to do but watch.

“Think we’ll get away on time, Gregg?”

“No,” I said. “And this of all voyages—”

I checked myself, with thumping heart. My thoughts were so full of what Halsey and Carter had told us that it was difficult to rein my tongue. Yet here in the turret, unguarded by insulation, I could say nothing. Nor would I have dared mention the Grantline Moon Expedition to Dr. Frank. I wondered what he knew of this affair. Perhaps as much as I—perhaps nothing.

He was a thin, dark, rather smallish man of fifty, this ship’s surgeon, trim in his blue and white uniform. I knew him well: we had made several flights together. An American—I fancy of Jewish ancestry. A likable man, and a skillful doctor and surgeon. He and I had always been good friends.

“Crowded,” he said. “Johnson says thirty-eight. I hope they’re experienced travelers. This pressure sickness is a rotten nuisance—keeps me dashing around all night assuring frightened women they’re not going to die. Last voyage, coming out of the Venus atmosphere—”

He plunged into a lugubrious account of his troubles with space-sick voyagers. But I was in no mood to listen. My gaze was down on the spider incline, up which, over the bend of the ship’s sleek, silvery

body, the passengers and their friends were coming in little groups. The upper deck was already jammed with them.

The Planetara, as flyers go, was not a large vessel. Cylindrical of body, forty feet maximum beam, and two hundred and seventy-five feet in overall length. The passenger superstructure—no more than a hundred feet long—was set amidships. A narrow deck, metallic-enclosed, and with large bulls-eye windows, encircled the superstructure. Some of the cabins opened directly onto the deck. Others had doors to the interior corridors. There were half a dozen small but luxurious public rooms.

The rest of the vessel was given to freight storage and the mechanism and control compartments. Forward of the passenger structure the deck level continued under the cylindrical dome-roof to the bow. The forward watch-tower observatory was here; officers' cabins; Captain Carter's navigating rooms and Dr. Frank's office. Similarly, under the stern-dome, was the stern watch-tower and a series of power compartments.

Above the superstructure a confusion of spider bridges, ladders and balconies were laced like a metal network. The turret in which Dr. Frank and I now stood was perched here. Fifty feet away, like a bird's nest, Snap's instrument room stood clinging to the metal

bridge. The dome-roof, with the glassite windows rolled back now, rose in a mound-peak to cover this highest middle portion of the vessel.

Below, in the main hull, blue-lit metal corridors ran the entire length of the ship. Freight storage compartments; gravity control rooms; the air renewal systems; heater and ventilators and pressure mechanisms—all were located there. And the kitchens, stewards' compartments, and the living quarters of the crew. We carried a crew of sixteen, this voyage, exclusive of the navigating officers, and the purser, Snap Dean, and Dr. Frank.

The passengers coming aboard seemed a fair representation of what we usually had for the outward voyage to Ferrok-Shahn. Most were Earth people—and returning Martians. Dr. Frank pointed out one. A huge Martian in a gray cloak. A seven-foot fellow.

"His name is Set Miko," Dr. Frank remarked. "Ever heard of him?"

"No," I said. "Should I?"

"Well—" The doctor suddenly checked himself, as though he were sorry he had spoken.

“I never heard of him,” I repeated slowly.

An awkward silence fell suddenly between us.

There were a few Venus passengers. I saw one of them presently coming up the incline, and recognized her. A girl traveling alone. We had brought her from Grebhar, last voyage but one. I remembered her. An alluring sort of girl, as most of them are. Her name was Venza. She spoke English well. A singer and dancer who had been imported to Great-New York to fill some theatrical engagement. She’d made quite a hit on the Great White Way.

She came up the incline, with the carrier ahead of her. Gazing up, she saw Dr. Frank and me at the turret window and waved her white arm in greeting. And flashed us a smile.

Dr. Frank laughed. “By the gods of the airways, there’s Alta Venza! You saw that look, Gregg? That was for me, not you.”

“Reasonable enough,” I retorted. “But I doubt it—the Venza was nothing if not impartial.”

I wondered what could be taking Venza now to Mars. I was glad to see her. She was diverting. Educated. Well-traveled. Spoke English

with a colloquial, theatrical manner more characteristic of Great-New York than of Venus. And for all her light banter, I would rather put my trust in her than any Venus girl I had ever met.

The hum of the departing siren was sounding. Friends and relatives of the passengers were crowding the exit incline. The deck was clearing. I had not seen George Prince come aboard. And then I thought I saw him down on the landing stage, just arrived from a private tube-car. A small, slight figure. The customs men were around him: I could only see his head and shoulders. Pale, girlishly handsome face; long, black hair to the base of his neck. He was bareheaded, with the hood of his traveling-cloak pushed back.

I stared, and I saw that Dr. Frank was also gazing down. But neither of us spoke.

Then I said upon impulse, “Suppose we go down to the deck, Doctor?”

He acquiesced. We descended to the lower room of the turret and clambered down the spider ladder to the upper deck-level. The head of the arriving incline was near us. Preceded by two carriers who were littered with hand-baggage, George Prince was coming up the incline. He was closer now. I recognized him from the type we had

seen in Halsey's office.

And then, with a shock, I saw it was not so. This was a girl coming aboard. An arch-light over the incline showed her clearly when she was half way up. A girl with her hood pushed back; her face framed in thick black hair. I saw now it was not a man's cut of hair; but long braids coiled up under the dangling hood.

Dr. Frank must have remarked my amazed expression.

"Little beauty, isn't she?"

"Who is she?"

We were standing back against the wall of the superstructure. A passenger was near us—the Martian whom Dr. Frank had called Miko. He was loitering here, quite evidently watching this girl come aboard. But as I glanced at him he looked away and casually sauntered off.

The girl came up and reached the deck. "I am in A22," she told the carrier. "My brother came aboard two hours ago."

Dr. Frank answered my whisper. "That's Anita Prince."

She was passing quite close to us on the deck, following the carrier, when she stumbled and very nearly fell. I was nearest to her. I leaped forward and caught her as she went down.

“Oh!” she cried.

With my arm about her, I raised her up and set her upon her feet again. She had twisted her ankle. She balanced herself upon it. The pain of it eased up in a moment.

“I’m—all right—thank you!”

In the dimness of the blue-lit deck, I met her eyes. I was holding her with my encircling arm. She was small and soft against me. Her face, framed in the thick, black hair, smiled up at me. Small, oval face—beautiful—yet firm of chin, and stamped with the mark of its own individuality. No empty-headed beauty, this.

“I’m all right, thank you very much—”

I became conscious that I had not released her. I felt her hands pushing at me. And then it seemed that for an instant she yielded and was clinging. And I met her startled, upflung gaze. Eyes like a purple night with the sheen of misty starlight in them.

I heard myself murmuring, “I beg your pardon. Yes, of course!” I released her.

She thanked me again and followed the carrier along the deck. She was limping slightly from the twisted ankle.

An instant, while she had clung to me—and I had held her. A brief flash of something, from her eyes to mine—from mine back to hers. The poets write that love can be born of such a glance. The first meeting, across all the barriers of which love springs unsought, unbidden—defiant, sometimes. And the troubadours of old would sing: “A fleeting glance; a touch; two wildly beating hearts—and love was born.”

I think, with Anita and me, it must have been like that....

I stood gazing after her, unconscious of Dr. Frank, who was watching me with his humorous smile. And presently, no more than a quarter beyond the zero hour, the Planetara got away. With the dome-windows battened tightly, we lifted from the landing stage and soared over the glowing city. The phosphorescence of the electronic tubes was like a comet’s tail behind us as we slid upward.

At the trinight hour the heat of our atmospheric passage was over.

The passengers had all retired. The ship was quiet, with empty decks and dim, silent corridors. Vibrationless, with the electronic engines cut off and only the hum of the Martel magnetizers to break the unnatural stillness. We were well beyond the earth's atmosphere, heading out in the cone-path of the earth's shadow, in the direction of the moon.

Chapter 3 In the Helio-room

At six A.M., earth Eastern time, which we were still carrying, Snap Dean and I were alone in his instrument room, perched in the network over the Planetara's deck. The bulge of the dome enclosed us; it rounded like a great observatory window some twenty feet above the ceiling of this little metal cubby-hole.

The Planetara was still in the earth's shadow. The firmament—black interstellar space with its blazing white, red and yellow stars—lay spread around us. The moon, with nearly all its disc illumined, hung, a great silver ball, over our bow quarter. Behind it, to one side, Mars floated like the red tip of a smoldering cigarillo in the blackness. The earth, behind our stern, was dimly, redly visible—a giant sphere, etched with the configurations of its oceans and continents. Upon one limb a touch of the sunlight hung on the mountain-tops with a crescent red-yellow sheen.

And then we plunged from the cone-shadow. The sun, with the leaping Corona, burst through the blackness behind us. The earth lighted into a huge, thin crescent with hooked cusps.

To Snap and me, the glories of the heavens were too familiar to be remarked. And upon this voyage particularly we were in no mood to consider them. I had been in the helio-room several hours. When the Planetara started, and my few routine duties were over, I could think of nothing save Halsey's and Carter's admonition: "Be on your guard. And particularly—watch George Prince."

I had not seen George Prince. But I had seen his sister, whom Carter and Halsey had not bothered to mention. My heart was still pounding with the memory....

When the passengers had retired and the ship quieted, I prowled through the passenger corridors. This was about the trinight hour. (Trinight Hour, i.e., 3 A. M.) Hot as the corridors of hell, with our hull and the glassite dome seething with the friction of our atmospheric flight. But the refrigerators mitigated that; the ventilators blasted cold air from the renewers into every corner of the vessel. Within an hour or two, with the cold of space striking us, it was hot air that was needed.

Dr. Frank evidently was having little trouble with pressure-sick passengers (Pressure sickness. Caused by the difficulty of maintaining a constantly normal air pressure within the vessel owing to the sudden, extreme changes from heat to cold.)—the Planetara's equalizers were fairly efficient. I did not encounter Dr. Frank. I prowled through the silent metal lounges and passages. I went to the door of A22. It was on the deck-level, in a tiny transverse passage just off the main lounging room. Its name-grid glowed with the letters: "*Anita Prince.*" I stood in my short white trousers and white silk shirt, like a cabin steward gawping. Anita Prince! I had never heard the name until this night. But there was magic music in it now, as I murmured it to myself. Anita Prince....

She was here, doubtless asleep, behind this small metal door. It seemed as though that little oval grid were the gateway to a fairyland of my dreams.

I turned away. And thought of the Grantline Moon Expedition stabbed at me. George Prince—Anita's brother—he whom I had been told to watch. This renegade—associate of dubious Martians, plotting God knows what.

I saw, upon the adjoining door, "A20, *George Prince*." I listened. In the humming stillness of the ship's interior there was no sound from

these cabins. A20 was without windows, I knew. But Anita's room had a window and a door which gave upon the deck. I went through the lounge, out its arch, and walked the deck length. The deck door and window of A22 were closed and dark.

The ten-foot-wide deck was dim with white starlight from the side ports. Chairs were here, but they were all empty. From the bow windows of the arching dome a flood of moonlight threw long, slanting shadows down the deck. At the corner where the superstructure ended, I thought I saw a figure lurking as though watching me. I went that way, but it vanished.

I turned the corner, went the width of the ship to the other side. There was no one in sight save the observer on his spider bridge, high in the bow network, and the second officer, on duty on the turret balcony almost directly over me.

As I stood and listened, I suddenly heard footsteps. From the direction of the bow a figure came. Purser Johnson.

He greeted me. "Cooling off, Gregg?"

"Yes," I said.

He went past me and turned into the smoking room door nearby.

I stood a moment at one of the deck windows, gazing at the stars; and for no reason at all I realized I was tense. Johnson was a great one for his regular sleep—it was wholly unlike him to be roaming about the ship at such an hour. Had he been watching me? I told myself it was nonsense. I was suspicious of everyone, everything, this voyage.

I heard another step. Captain Carter appeared from his chart-room which stood in the center of the narrowing open deck space near the bow. I joined him at once.

“Who was that?” he half-whispered.

“Johnson.”

“Oh, yes.” He fumbled in his uniform; his gaze swept the moonlit deck. “Gregg—take this.” He handed me a small metal box. I stuffed it at once into my shirt.

“An insulator,” he added, swiftly. “Snap is in his office. Take it to him, Gregg. Stay with him—you’ll have a measure of security—and you can help him to make the photographs.” He was barely

whispering. “I won’t be with you—no use making it look as though we were doing anything unusual. If your graphs show anything—or if Snap picks up any message—bring it to me.” He added aloud, “Well, it will be cool enough presently, Gregg.”

He sauntered away toward his chart-room.

“By heavens, what a relief!” Snap murmured as the current went on. We had wired his cubby with the insulator; within its barrage we could at last talk with a degree of freedom.

“You’ve seen George Prince, Gregg?”

“No. He’s assigned A20. But I saw his sister. Snap, no one ever mentioned—”

Snap had heard of her, but he hadn’t known that she was listed for this voyage. “A real beauty, so I’ve heard. Accursed shame for a decent girl to have a brother like that.”

I could agree with him there, but I made no comment.

It was now 6 A.M. Snap had been busy all night with routine cosmo-radios from the earth, following our departure. He had a pile of them beside him. Many were for the passengers; but anything that savored

of a code was barred.

“Nothing queer looking?” I suggested.

“No. Not a thing.”

We were at this time no more than some sixty-five thousand miles from the moon’s surface. The Planetara presently would swing upon her direct course for Mars. There was nothing which could cause passenger comment in this close passing of the moon; normally we used the satellite’s attraction to give us additional starting speed.

It was now or never that a message would come from Grantline. He was supposed to be upon this earthward side of the moon. While Snap had rushed through with his routine, I had searched the moon surface with our glass, as I knew Carter was searching it—and also the observer in his tower, very possibly.

But there was nothing. Copernicus and Kepler lay in full sunlight. The heights of the lunar mountains, the depths of the barren, empty seas were etched black and white, clear and clean. Grim, forbidding desolation, this unchanging moon! In romance, moonlight may shimmer and sparkle to light a lover’s smile; but the reality of the moon is cold and bleak. There was nothing to show my prying eyes

where the intrepid Grantline might be.

“Nothing at all, Snap.”

And Snap’s helio mirrors, attuned for an hour now to pick up the faintest signal, were motionless.

“If he has concentrated any appreciable amount of radio-active ore,” said Snap, “we should get an impulse from its Gamma rays.”

But our receiving shield was dark, untouched. We tried taking hydrogen photographic impressions of the visible moon surface. A sequence of them, with stereoscopic lenses, forty-eight to the second. Our mirror-grid gave the magnified images; the spectro-heliograph, with its wave-length selection, pictured the mountain-levels, and slowly descended into the deepest seas.

There was nothing.

Yet in those moon caverns—a million million recesses amid the crags of that tumbled, barren surface—the pin-point of movement which might have been Grantline’s expedition could so easily be hiding! Could he have the ore insulated, fearing its Gamma rays would betray its presence to hostile watchers?

Or might disaster have come to him? Or he might not be upon this hemisphere of the moon at all....

My imagination, sharpened by fancy of a lurking menace which seemed everywhere about the Planetara this voyage, ran rife with fears for Johnny Grantline. He had promised to communicate this voyage. It was now, or perhaps never.

Six-thirty came and passed. We were well beyond the earth's shadow now. The firmament blazed with its vivid glories; the sun behind us was a ball of yellow-red leaping flames. The earth hung, opened to a huge, dull-red half-sphere.

We were within some forty thousand miles of the moon. Giant white ball—all of its disc visible to the naked eye. It poised over the bow, and presently, as the Planetara swung upon her course for Mars, it shifted sidewise. The light of it glared white and dazzling in our tiny side windows.

Snap, with his habitual red celluloid eyeshade shoved high on his forehead, worked over our instruments.

"Gregg!"

The receiving shield was glowing a trifle! Gamma rays were bombarding it! It glowed, gleamed phosphorescent, and the audible recorder began sounding its tiny tinkling murmurs.

Gamma rays! Snap sprang to the dials. The direction and strength were soon obvious. A richly radio-active ore body, of considerable size, was concentrated upon this hemisphere of the moon! It was unmistakable.

“He’s got it, Gregg! He’s—”

The tiny helio mirrors began quivering. Snap exclaimed triumphantly, “Here he comes! By God, the message at last! Bar off that light!”

I flung on the absorbers. The moonlight bathing the little room went into them and darkness sprang around us. Snap fumbled at his instrument board. Actinic light showed dimly in the quivering, thumbnail mirrors. Two of them. They hung poised on their cobweb wires, infinitely sensitive to the infra-red light-rays Grantline was sending from the moon. The mirrors in a moment began swinging. On the scale across the room the actinic beams from them were magnified into sweeps of light.

The message!

Snap spelled it out, decoded it.

"*Success! Stop for ore on your return voyage. Will give you our location later. Success beyond wildest hopes*—"

The mirrors hung motionless. The shield, where the Gamma rays were bombarding, went suddenly dark.

Snap murmured, "That's all. He's got the ore! 'Success beyond wildest hopes.' That must mean an enormous quantity of it available!"

We were sitting in darkness, and abruptly I became aware that across our open window, where the insulation barrage was flung, the air was faintly hissing. An interference there! I saw a tiny swirl of purple sparks. Someone—some hostile ray from the deck beneath us, or from the spider bridge that led to our little room—someone out there trying to pry in!

Snap impulsively reached for the absorbers to let in the outside light—it was all darkness to us outside. But I checked him.

"Wait!" I cut off our barrage, opened our door and stepped to the

narrow metal bridge.

“Wait, Snap! You stay there.” I added aloud, “Well, Snap, I’m going to bed. Glad you’ve cleaned up that batch of work.”

I banged the door upon him. The lacework of metal bridges and ladders seemed empty. I gazed up to the dome, and forward and aft. Twenty feet beneath me was the metal roof of the cabin superstructure. Below it, both sides of the deck showed. All patched with moonlight.

No one visible down there. I descended a ladder. The deck was empty. But in the silence something was moving! Footsteps moving away from me down the deck! I followed; and suddenly I was running. Chasing something I could hear, but could not see. It turned into the smoking room.

I burst in. And a real sound smothered the phantom. Johnson the purser was sitting here alone in the dimness. He was smoking. I noticed that his cigar held a long, frail ash. It could not have been him I was chasing. He was sitting there quite calmly. A thick-necked, heavy fellow, easily out of breath. But he was breathing calmly now.

He sat up with amazement at my wild-eyed appearance, and the ash

jarred from his cigar.

“Gregg! What in the devil—”

I tried to grin. “I’m on my way to bed—worked all night helping Snap with those damn Earth messages.”

I went past him, out the door into the main interior corridor. It was the only way the invisible prowler could have gone. But I was too late now—I could hear nothing. I dashed forward into the main lounge. It was empty, dim and silent, a silence broken presently by a faint click—a stateroom door hastily closing. I swung and found myself in a tiny transverse passage. The twin doors of A22 and A20 were before me.

The invisible eavesdropper had gone into one of these rooms! I listened at each of the panels, but there was only silence within.

The interior of the ship was suddenly singing with the steward’s siren—the call to awaken the passengers. It startled me. I moved swiftly away. But as the siren shut off, in the silence I heard a soft, musical voice:

“Wake up, Anita—I think that’s the breakfast call.”

And her answer: “All right, George. I hear it.”

Chapter 4 A Burn on a Martian Arm

I did not appear at that morning meal. I was exhausted and drugged with lack of sleep. I had a moment with Snap, to tell him what had occurred. Then I sought out Carter. He had his little chart-room insulated. And we were cautious. I told him what Snap and I had learned: the Gamma rays from the moon, proving that Grantline had concentrated a considerable ore-body. I also told him the message from Grantline.

“We’ll stop on the way back, as he directs, Gregg.” He bent closer to me. “At Ferrok-Shahn I’m going to bring back a cordon of Interplanetary Police. The secret will be out, of course, when once we stop at the moon. We have no right, even now, to be flying this vessel as unguarded as it is.”

He was very solemn. And he was grim when I told him of the invisible eavesdropper.

“You think he overheard Grantline’s message?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Who was it? You seem to feel it was George Prince?”

“Yes.”

I was convinced that the prowler had gone into A20. When I mentioned the purser, who seemed to have been watching me earlier in the night, and again was sitting in the smoking room when the eavesdropper fled past, Carter looked startled.

“Johnson is all right, Gregg.”

“Is he? Does he know anything about this Grantline affair?”

“No—no,” said the captain hastily. “You haven’t mentioned it, have you?”

“Of course I haven’t. I’ve been wondering why Johnson didn’t hear that eavesdropper. I could hear him when I was chasing him. But Johnson sat perfectly unmoved and let him go by. What was he sitting there for, anyway, at that hour of the morning?”

“You’re too suspicious, Gregg. Overwrought. But you’re right—we can’t be too careful. I’m going to have that Prince suite searched when I catch it unoccupied. Passengers don’t ordinarily travel with invisible cloaks. Go to bed, Gregg—you need a rest.”

I went to my cabin. It was located aft, on the stern deck-space, near the stern watch-tower. A small metal room, with a desk, a chair and bunk. I made sure no one was in it. I sealed the lattice grill and the door, set the alarm trigger against any opening of them, and went to bed.

The siren for the mid-day meal awakened me. I had slept heavily. I felt refreshed. And hungry.

I found the passengers already assembled at my table when I arrived in the dining salon. It was a low-vaulted metal room of blue and yellow tube-lights. At the sides its oval windows showed the deck, with its ports of the dome-side, through which a vista of the starry firmament was visible. We were well on our course to Mars. The moon had dwindled to a pin-point of light beside the crescent earth. And behind them our sun blazed, visually the largest orb in the heavens. It was some sixty-eight million miles from the earth to Mars, this voyage. A flight, under ordinary circumstances, of some ten days.

There were five tables in the dining salon, each with eight seats. Snap and I had one of the tables. We sat at the ends, with three passengers on each of the sides.

Snap was in his seat when I arrived. He eyed me down the length of the table.

“Good morning, Gregg. We missed you at breakfast. Not pressure-sick, I hope?”

There were three passengers already seated at our table—all men. Snap, in a gay mood, introduced me.

“This is our third officer, Gregg Haljan. Big, handsome fellow, isn’t he? And as pleasant as he is good-looking. Gregg, this is Sero Ob Hahn.”

I met the keen, dark-eyed somber gaze of a Venus man of middle age. A small, slim, graceful man, with sleek black hair. His pointed face, accentuated by the pointed beard, was pallid. He wore a white and purple robe; upon his breast was a huge platinum ornament, a device like a star and cross entwined.

“I am happy to meet you, sir.” His voice was soft and sleek.

“Ob Hahn,” I repeated. “I should have heard of you, no doubt. But—”

A smile plucked at his thin, gray lips. “That is the error of mine, not

yours. My mission is that all the universe shall hear of me.”

“He’s preaching the religion of the Venus Mystics,” Snap explained.

“And this enlightened gentleman,” said Ob Hahn ironically, “has just termed it fetishism. The ignorance—”

“Oh, I say!” protested the man at Ob Hahn’s side. “I mean, you seem to think I intended something opprobrious. As a matter of fact—”

“We’ve an argument, Gregg,” laughed Snap. “This is Sir Arthur Coniston, an English gentleman, lecturer and sky-trotter—that is, he will be a sky-trotter; he tells us he plans a number of voyages.”

The tall Englishman in his white linen suit bowed acknowledgment. “My compliments, Mr. Haljan. I hope you have no strong religious convictions, else we will make your table here very miserable!”

The third passenger had evidently kept out of the argument. Snap introduced him as Rance Rankin. An American—a quiet, blond fellow of thirty-five or forty.

I ordered my breakfast and let the argument go on.

“Won’t make me miserable,” said Snap. “I love an argument. You

said, Sir Arthur?...

“I mean to say, I think I said too much. Mr. Rankin, you are more diplomatic.”

Rankin laughed. “I am a magician,” he said to me. “A theatrical entertainer. I deal in tricks—how to fool an audience—” His keen, amused gaze was on Ob Hahn. “This gentleman from Venus and I have too much in common to argue.”

“A nasty one!” the Englishman exclaimed. “By Jove! Really, Mr. Rankin, you’re a bit too cruel!”

I could see we were doomed to have turbulent meals this voyage. I like to eat in quiet; arguing passengers always annoy me. There were still three seats vacant at our table; I wondered who would occupy them. I soon learned the answer—for one seat at least. Rankin said calmly:

“Where is the little Venus girl this meal?” His glance went to the empty seat at my right hand. “The Venza—wasn’t that her name? She and I are destined for the same theater in Ferrok-Shahn.”

So Venza was to sit beside me. It was good news. Ten days of a

religious argument three times a day would be intolerable. But the cheerful Venza would help.

“She never eats the mid-day meal,” said Snap. “She’s on the deck, having orange juice. I guess it’s the old gag about diet, eh?”

My attention wandered about the salon. Most of the seats were occupied. At the captain’s table I saw the objects of my search. George Prince and his sister sat one on each side of the captain. I saw George Prince in the life now as a man who looked hardly twenty-five. He was at this moment evidently in a gay mood. His clean-cut, handsome profile, with its poetic dark curls, was turned toward me. There seemed little of the villain about him.

And I saw Anita Prince now as a dark-haired, black eyed little beauty, in feature resembling her brother very strongly. She presently finished her meal. She rose, with him after her. She was dressed in Earth fashion—white blouse and dark jacket, wide, knee-length trousers of gray, with a red sash her only touch of color. She went past me, flashed me her smile and nod.

My heart was pounding. I answered her greeting, and met George Prince’s casual gaze. He, too, smiled, as though to signify that his sister had told him of the service I had done her. Or was his smile an

ironical memory of how he had eluded me this morning when I chased him?

I gazed after his small, white-suited figure as he followed Anita from the salon. And thinking of her, I prayed that Carter and Halsey might be wrong. Whatever plotting against the Grantline Expedition might be going on, I hoped that George Prince was innocent of it. Yet I knew in my heart it was a futile hope. Prince had been that eavesdropper outside the helio-room. I could not really doubt it. But that his sister must be ignorant of what he was doing, I was sure.

My attention was brought suddenly back to the reality of our table. I heard Ob Hahn's silky voice:

"We passed quite close to the moon last night, Mr. Dean."

"Yes," said Snap. "We did, didn't we? Always do—it's a technical problem of the exigencies of interstellar navigation. Explain it to them, Gregg—you're an expert."

I waved it away with a laugh. There was a brief silence. I could not help noticing Sir Arthur Coniston's queer look, and I think I have never seen so keen a glance as Rance Rankin shot at me. Were all these people aware of Grantline's treasure on the moon? It suddenly

seemed so. I wished fervently at that instant that the ten days of this voyage were over and we were safely at Ferrok-Shahn. Captain Carter was absolutely right. Coming back we would have a cordon of interplanetary police aboard.

Sir Arthur broke the awkward silence. “Magnificent sight, the moon, from so close a viewpoint—though I was too much afraid of pressure-sickness to be up to see it.”

I had nearly finished my hasty meal when another incident shocked me. The two other passengers at our table came in and took their seats. A Martian girl and man. The girl had the seat at my left, with the man beside her. All Martians are tall. This girl was about my own height—that is, six feet, two inches. The man was seven feet or more. Both wore the Martian outer robe. The girl flung hers back. Her limbs were encased in pseudo-mail. She looked, as all Martians like to look, a very warlike Amazon. But she was a pretty girl. She smiled at me with a keen-eyed, direct gaze.

“Mr. Dean said at breakfast that you were big and handsome. You are.”

They were brother and sister, these Martians. Snap introduced them as Set Miko and Setta Moa. (“Set and Setta,” the Martian equivalent

of Mr. and Miss.)

This Miko was, from our Earth standards, a tremendous, brawny giant. Not spindly, like most Martians, this fellow, for all his seven feet of height, was almost heavy-set. He wore a plaited leather jerkin beneath his robe, and knee pants of leather out of which his lower legs showed as gray, hairy pillars of strength. He had come into the salon with a swagger, his sword-ornament clanking.

“A pleasant voyage so far,” he said to me as he started his meal. His voice had the heavy, throaty rasp characteristic of the Martian. He spoke perfect English—both Martians and Venus people are by heritage extraordinary linguists. Miko and his sister Moa had a touch of Martian accent, worn almost away by living for some years in Great-New York.

The shock to me came within a few minutes. Miko, absorbed in attacking his meal, inadvertently pushed back his robe to bare his forearm. An instant only, then it dropped again to his wrist. But in that instant I had seen, upon the gray flesh, a thin sear turned red. A very recent burn—as though a pencil-ray of heat had caught his arm.

My mind flung back. Only last night in the City Corridor, Snap and I had been followed by a Martian. I had shot at him with the heat-ray;

I thought I had hit him on the arm. Was this the mysterious Martian who had followed us from Halsey's office?

Chapter 5 Venza the Venus Girl

It was shortly after that mid-day meal when I encountered Venza sitting on the starlit deck. I had been in the bow observatory; taken my routine castings of our position and worked them out. I was, I think, of the Planetara's officers the most expert handler of the mathematical mechanical calculators. The locating of our position and charting the trajectory of our course was, under ordinary circumstances, about all I had to do. And it took only a few minutes each twelve hours.

I had a moment with Carter in the isolation of his chart-room.

"This voyage! Gregg, I'm getting like you—too fanciful. We've a normal group of passengers, apparently; but I don't like the look of any of them. That Ob Hahn, at your table—"

"Snaky-looking fellow," I commented. "He and the Englishman are great on arguments. Did you have Prince's cabin searched?"

My breath hung on his answer.

“Yes. Nothing unusual among his things. We searched both his room and his sister’s.”

I did not follow that up. Instead I told him about the burn on Miko’s thick gray arm.

He stared. “I wish to the Almighty we were at Ferrok-Shahn. Gregg, to-night when the passengers are asleep, come here to me. Snap will be here, and Dr. Frank. We can trust him.”

“He knows about—about the Grantline treasure?”

“Yes. And so do Balch and Blackstone.”

Balch and Blackstone were our first and second officers.

“We’ll all meet here, Gregg—say about the zero hour. We must take some precautions.”

He suddenly felt he should say no more now. He dismissed me.

I found Venza seated alone in a secluded corner of the starlit deck. A porthole, with the black heavens and the blazing stars, was before her. There was an empty seat nearby.

“Hola-lo, (A Venus form of jocular, intimate greeting.] Gregg! Sit here with me. I have been wondering when you would come after me.”

I sat down beside her. “What are you doing—going to Mars, Venza? I’m glad to see you.”

“Many thanks. But I am glad to see you, Gregg. So handsome a man.... Do you know, from Venus to the earth and I have no doubt on all of Mars, no man will please me more.”

“Glib tongue,” I laughed. “Born to flatter the male—every girl of your world.” And I added seriously, “You don’t answer my question? What takes you to Mars?”

“Contract. By the stars, what else? Of course, a chance to make a voyage with you—”

“Don’t be silly, Venza.”

I enjoyed her. I gazed at her small, slim figure gracefully reclining in the deck chair. Her long, gray robe parted—by design, I have no doubt—to display her shapely, satin-sheathed legs. Her black hair was coiled in a heavy knot at the back of her neck; her carmined lips

were parted with a mocking, alluring smile. The exotic perfume of her enveloped me.

She glanced at me sidewise from beneath her sweeping black lashes.

“Be serious,” I added.

“I am serious. Sober. Intoxicated by you, but sober.”

I said, “What sort of a contract?”

“A theater in Ferrok-Shahn. Good money, Gregg. I’m to be there a year.” She sat up to face me. “There’s a fellow here on the Planetara, Rance Rankin, he calls himself. At our table—a big, good-looking blond American. He says he is a magician. Ever hear of him?”

“That’s what he told me. No, I never heard of him.”

“Nor did I. And I thought I had heard of everyone of any importance. He is listed for the same theater where I’m going. Nice sort of fellow.” She paused, and added suddenly, “If he’s a professional entertainer, I’m a motor-oiler.”

It startled me. “Why do you say that?”

Instinctively my gaze swept the deck. An Earth woman and child and a small Venus man were in sight, but not within earshot.

“Why do you look so furtive?” she retorted. “Gregg, there’s something strange about this voyage. I’m no fool, nor you, and you know it as well as I do.”

“Rance Rankin—” I prompted.

She leaned closer toward me. “He could fool you. But not me—I’ve known too many real magicians.” She grinned. “I challenged him to trick me. You should have seen him trying to evade!”

“Do you know Ob Hahn?” I interrupted.

She shook her head. “Never heard of him. But he told me plenty at breakfast. By Satan, what a flow of words that devil-driver can muster! He and the Englishman don’t mesh very well, do they?”

She stared at me. I had not answered her grin; my mind was too busy with queer fancies. Halsey’s words: “Things are not always what they seem—” Were these passengers masqueraders? Put here by George Prince? And then I thought of Miko the Martian, and the burn upon his arm.

“Come back, Gregg! Don’t go wandering off like that!” She dropped her voice to a whisper. “I’ll be serious. I want to know what in the hell is going on aboard this ship. I’m a woman, and I’m curious. You tell me.”

“What do you mean?” I parried.

“I mean a lot of things. What we’ve just been talking about. And what was the excitement you were in just before breakfast this morning?”

“Excitement?”

“Gregg, you may trust me.” For the first time she was wholly serious. Her gaze made sure no one was within hearing. She put her hand on my arm. I could barely hear her whisper: “I know they might have a ray upon us—I’ll be careful.”

“They?”

“Anyone. Something’s going on. You know it—you are in it. I saw you this morning, Gregg. Wild-eyed, chasing a phantom—”

“You?”

“And I heard the phantom! A man’s footsteps. A magnetic reflecting invisible cloak. You couldn’t fool an audience with that—it’s too commonplace. If Rance Rankin tried—”

I gripped her. “Don’t ramble, Venza! You saw me?”

“Yes. My stateroom door was open. I was sitting with a cigarillo. I saw the purser in the smoking room. He was visible from—”

“Wait! Venza, that prowler went through the smoking room!”

“I know he did. I could hear him.”

“Did the purser hear him?”

“Of course. The purser looked up, followed the sound with his gaze. I thought that was queer. He never made a move. And then you came along and he acted innocent. Why? What’s going on, that’s what I want to know!”

I held my breath. “Venza, where did the prowler run to? Can you—”

She whispered calmly, “Into A20. I saw the door open and close—I even think I could see the blurred outline of him. Those magnetic cloaks!” She added, “Why should George Prince be sneaking around

with you after him? And the purser acting innocent? And who is this George Prince, anyway?”

The huge Martian, Miko, with his sister Moa came strolling along the deck. They nodded as they passed us.

I whispered, “I can’t explain anything now. But you’re right, Venza: there is something going on. Listen! Whatever you learn—anything you encounter which looks unusual—will you tell me? I—well, I do trust you—really I do!—but the thing isn’t mine to tell.”

The somber pools of her eyes were shining. “You are very lovable, Gregg. I won’t question you.” She was trembling with excitement. “Whatever it is, I want to be in it. Here’s something I can tell you now. We’ve two high-class gold-leaf gamblers aboard. Did you know that?”

“No. Who are—”

“Shac and Dud Ardley. Let me state every detective in Great-New York knows them. They had a wonderful game with that Englishman, Sir Arthur Coniston, this morning. Stripped him of half a pound of eight-inch leaves—a neat little stack. A crooked game, of course. Those fellows are more nimble-fingered than Rance Rankin

ever dared to be!”

I sat staring at her. She was a mine of information, this girl.

“And Gregg, I tried my charms on Shac and Dud. Nice men, but dumb. Whatever’s going on, they’re not in it. They wanted to know what kind of a ship this was. Why? Because Shac has a cute little eavesdropping microphone of his own. He had it working in the night last night. He overheard George Prince and that big giant Miko arguing about the moon!”

I gasped. “Venza, softer!”

Against all propriety of this public deck she pretended to drape herself upon me. Her hair smothered my face as her lips almost touched my ear.

“Something about treasure on the moon—Shac couldn’t understand what. And they mentioned you. He didn’t hear what they said because the purser joined them.” Her whispered words tumbled over one another. “A hundred pounds of gold leaf—that’s the purser’s price. He’s with them, whatever it is. He promised to do something for them.”

She stopped. “Well?” I prompted.

“That’s all. Shac’s current was interrupted.”

“Tell him to try it again, Venza! I’ll talk with him. No! I’d better let him alone. Can you get him to keep his mouth shut?”

“I think he might do anything I told him. He’s a man.”

“Find out what you can.”

She sat away from me suddenly. “There’s Anita and George Prince.”

They came to the corner of the deck, but turned back. Venza caught my look. And understood it.

“So you love Anita Prince so much as that, Gregg?” Venza was smiling. “I wish you—I wish some man handsome as you would gaze after me like that.”

She turned solemn. “You may be interested to know that she loves you. I could see it. I knew it when I mentioned you to her this morning.”

“Me? Why, we’ve hardly spoken!”

“Is it necessary? I never heard that it was.”

I could not see Venza’s face; she stood up suddenly. And when I rose beside her, she whispered,

“We should not be seen talking so long. I’ll find out what I can.”

I stared after her slight robed figure as she turned into the lounge archway and vanished.

Chapter 7 A Traitor, and a Passing Asteroid

Captain Carter was grim. “So they’ve bought him off, have they? Go bring him in here, Gregg. We’ll have it out with him now.”

Snap, Dr. Frank, Balch, our first officer, and I were in the captain’s chart-room. It was 4 P.M.—our Earth starting time. We were sixteen hours upon our voyage.

I found Johnson in his office in the lounge. “Captain wants to see you. Close up.”

He closed his window upon an American woman passenger who was demanding details of Martian currency, and followed me forward. “What is it, Gregg?”

“I don’t know.”

Captain Carter banged the slide upon us. The chart-room was insulated. The hum of the current was obvious. Johnson noticed it. He started at the hostile faces of the surgeon and Balch. And he tried to bluster.

“What is this? Something wrong?”

Carter wasted no words. “We have information, Johnson—there’s some under cover plot here aboard. I want to know what it is. Suppose you tell us frankly.”

The purser looked blank. “What do you mean? We’ve gamblers aboard, if that’s—”

“To hell with that,” growled Balch. “You had a secret interview with that Martian, Set Miko, and with George Prince!”

Johnson scowled from under his heavy brows, and then raised them in surprise.

“Did I? You mean changing their money? I don’t like your tone, Balch. I’m not your under-officer!”

“But you’re under me,” roared the captain. “By God, I’m master here!”

“Well, I’m not disputing that,” said the purser mildly. “This fellow Balch—”

“We’re in no mood for argument,” Dr. Frank cut in. “Clouding the issue.”

“I won’t let it be clouded,” the captain exclaimed. I had never seen Carter so choleric. He was evidently under a tremendous strain. He added,

“Johnson, you’ve been acting suspiciously. I don’t give a damn whether I’ve proof of it or not—I say it. Did you, or did you not meet George Prince and that Martian last night?”

“No, I did not. And I don’t mind telling you, Captain Carter, that your tone also is offensive!”

“Is it?” Carter suddenly seized him. They were both big men. Johnson’s heavy face went purplish red.

“Take your hands!—” They were struggling. Carter’s hands were fumbling at the purser’s pockets. I leaped, flung an arm around

Johnson's neck, pinning him.

"Easy there! We've got you, Johnson!"

Snap tried to help me. "Go on, bang him on the head, Gregg. Now's your chance!"

We searched him. A heat-ray cylinder—that was legitimate. But we found a small battery and eavesdropping microphone similar to the one Venza had mentioned that Shac the gambler was carrying.

"What are you doing with that?" the captain demanded.

"None of your business! Is it criminal? Carter, I'll have the Line officials dismiss you for this! Take your hands off me, all of you!"

"Look at this!" exclaimed Dr. Frank.

From Johnson's breast pocket the surgeon drew a folded document. It was the scale drawing of the Planetara's interior corridors, the lower control rooms and mechanisms. It was always kept in Johnson's safe. And with it, another document: the ship's clearance papers—the secret code pass-words for this voyage, to be used if we should be challenged by any interplanetary police ship.

Snap gasped. “My God, that was in my helio-room strong box! I’m the only one on this vessel except the captain who’s entitled to know those pass-words!”

Out of the silence, Balch demanded, “Well, what about it, Johnson?”

The purser was still defiant. “I won’t answer your questions, Balch. At the proper time, I’ll explain—Gregg Haljan, you’re choking me!”

I eased up. But I shook him. “You’d better talk.”

He was exasperatingly silent.

“Enough!” exploded Carter. “He can explain when we get to port. Meanwhile I’ll put him where he’ll do no more damage. Gregg, lock him in the cage.”

We ignored his violent protestations. The cage—in the old days of sea-vessels on Earth, they called it the brig—was the ship’s jail. A steel-lined, windowless room located under the deck in the peak of the bow. I dragged the struggling Johnson there, with the amazed watcher looking down from the observatory window at our lunging, starlit forms.

“Shut up, Johnson! If you know what’s good for you—”

He was making a fearful commotion. Behind us, where the deck narrowed at the superstructure, half a dozen passengers were gazing in surprise.

“I’ll have you thrown out of the Service, Gregg Haljan!”

I shut him up finally. And flung him down the ladder into the cage and sealed the deck trap-door upon him. I was headed back for the chart-room when from the observatory came the lookout’s voice.

“An asteroid, Haljan! Officer Blackstone wants you.”

I hurried to the turret bridge. An asteroid was in sight. We had attained nearly our maximum speed now. An asteroid was approaching, so dangerously close that our trajectory would have to be altered. I heard Blackstone’s signals ringing in the control rooms; and met Carter as he ran to the bridge with me.

“That scoundrel! We’ll get more out of him, Gregg. By God, I’ll put the chemicals on him—torture him, illegal or not!”

We had no time for further discussion. The asteroid was rapidly approaching. Already, under the glass, it was a magnificent sight. I had never seen this tiny world before—asteroids are not numerous

between the Earth and Mars, or in toward Venus. I never expected to see this one again. How little of the future can we humans fathom, for all our science! If I could only have looked into the future, even for a few short hours! How different then would have been the outcome of this tragic voyage!

The asteroid came rushing at us. Its orbital velocity, I later computed, was some twenty-two miles a second. Our own, at the present maximum, was a fraction over seventy-seven. The asteroid had for some time been under observation by the lookout. He gave his warning only when it seemed that our trajectory should be altered to avoid a dangerously close passing.

At the combined speeds of nearly a hundred miles a second the asteroid swept into view. With the naked eye, at first it was a tiny speck of star-dust, unnoticed in the gem-strewn black velvet of Space. A speck. Then a gleaming dot, silver white, with the light of our Sun upon it.

Five minutes. The dot grew to a disc. Expanding. A full moon, silver-white. Brightest world in the firmament—the light from it bathed the Planetara, illumined the deck, painting everything with silver.

I stood with Carter and Blackstone on the turret bridge. It was obvious that unless we altered our course, the asteroid would pass too close for safety. Already we were feeling its attraction; from the control rooms came the report that our trajectory was disturbed by this new mass so near.

“Better make your calculations now, Gregg,” Blackstone suggested.

I cast up the rough elements from the observational instruments in the turret. It took me some ten or fifteen minutes. When I had us upon our new course, with the attractive and repulsive plates in the Planetara’s hull set in their altered combinations, I went out to the bridge again.

The asteroid hung over our bow quarter. No more than twenty or thirty thousand miles away. A giant ball now, filling all that quadrant of the heavens. The configurations of its mountains—its land and water areas—were plainly visible. Its axial rotation was apparent.

“Perfectly habitable,” Blackstone said. “But I’ve searched all over this hemisphere with the glass. No sign of human life—certainly nothing civilized—nothing in the fashion of cities.”

A fair little world, by the look of it. A tiny globe: Blackstone had

figured it at some eight hundred miles in diameter. There seemed a normal atmosphere. We could see areas where the surface was obscured by clouds. And oceans, and land masses. Polar icecaps. Lush vegetation at its equator.

Blackstone had roughly cast its orbital elements. A narrow ellipse. No wonder we had never encountered this fair little world before. It had come from the outer region beyond Neptune. At perihelion it would reach inside Mercury, round the Sun, and head outward again.

We swept past the asteroid at a distance of some six thousand miles. Close enough, in very truth—a minute of flight at our combined speeds totaling a hundred miles a second. I had descended to the passenger deck, where I stood alone at a window, gazing.

The passengers were all gathered to view the passing little world. I saw, not far from me, Anita, standing with her brother; and the giant figure of Miko with them.

Half an hour since, first with the naked eye, this wandering little world had shown itself; it swam slowly past, began to dwindle behind us. A huge half moon. A thinner, smaller quadrant. A tiny crescent, like a silver bar-pin to adorn some lady's breast. And then it was a dot, a point of light indistinguishable among the myriad others

hovering in this great black void.

The incident of the passing of the asteroid was over. I turned from the deck window. My heart leaped. The moment for which all day I had been subconsciously longing was at hand. Anita was sitting in a deck chair, momentarily alone. Her gaze was on me as I looked her way, and she smiled an invitation for me to join her.

Chapter 8 Unspoken Love

Unspoken love! I think if I had yielded to the impulse of my heart, I would have poured out all those protestations of a lover's ecstasy, incongruous here upon this starlit public deck, to a girl I hardly knew. I think, too, she might have received them with a tender acquiescence. The starlight was mirrored in her dark eyes. Misty eyes, with great reaches of unfathomable space in their depths. Yet I felt their tenderness.

Unfathomable strangeness of love! Who am I to write of it, with all the poets of all the ages striving to express the unexpressible? A bond, strangely fashioned by nature, between me and this little dark-haired Earth beauty. As though marked by the stars we were destined to be lovers....

Thus ran the romance of my unspoken thoughts. But I was sitting quietly in the deck chair, striving to regard her gentle beauty impersonally. And saying:

"But Miss Prince, why are you and your brother going to Ferrok-Shahn? His business—"

Even as I voiced it, I hated myself for such a question. So nimble is

the human mind that mingled with my rhapsodies of love was my need for information of George Prince....

“Oh,” she said, “this is pleasure, not business, for George.” It seemed to me that a shadow crossed her expressive face. But it was gone in an instant, and she smiled. “We have always wanted to travel. We are alone in the world, you know—our parents died when we were children.”

I filled in her pause. “You will like Mars—so many interesting things to see.”

She nodded. “Yes, I understand so. Our Earth is so much the same all over, cast all in one mould.”

“But a hundred or two hundred years ago it was not, Miss Prince. I have read how the picturesque Orient, differing from—well, Great-New York, or London, for instance—”

“Transportation did that,” she interrupted eagerly. “Made everything the same—the people all look alike—dress alike.”

We discussed it. She had an alert, eager mind, childlike with its curiosity, yet strangely matured. And her manner was naïvely

earnest. Yet this was no clinging vine, this little Anita Prince. There was a firmness, a hint of masculine strength in her chin, and in her manner.

“If I were a man, what wonders I could achieve in this marvelous age!” Her sense of humor made her laugh at herself. “Easy for a girl to say that,” she added.

“You have greater wonders to achieve, Miss Prince,” I said impulsively.

“Yes? What are they?” She had a very frank and level gaze, devoid of coquetry.

My heart was pounding. “The wonders of the next generation. A little son, cast in your own gentle image—”

What madness, this clumsy brash talk! I choked it off.

But she took no offense. The dark rose-petals of her cheeks were mantled deeper red, but she laughed.

“That is true.” She turned abruptly serious. “I should not laugh. The wonders of the next generation—conquering humans marching on....” Her voice trailed away. My hand went to her arm. Strange

tingling something which poets call love! It burned and surged from my trembling fingers into the flesh of her forearm.

The starlight glowed in her eyes. She seemed to be gazing, not at the silver-lit deck, but away into distant reaches of the future. And she murmured:

“A little son, cast in my own gentle image. But with the strength of his father....”

Our moment. Just a breathless moment given us as we sat there with my hand burning her arm, as though we both might be seeing ourselves joined in a new individual—a little son, cast in his mother’s gentle image and with the strength of his father. Our moment, and then it was over. A step sounded. I sat back. The giant gray figure of Miko came past, his great cloak swaying, with his clanking sword-ornament beneath it. His bullet head, with its close-clipped hair, was hatless. He gazed at us, swaggered past, and turned the deck corner.

Our moment was gone. Anita said conventionally, “It has been pleasant to talk with you, Mr. Haljan.”

“But we’ll have many more,” I said. “Ten days—”

“You think we’ll reach Ferrok-Shahn on schedule?”

“Yes. I think so.... As I was saying, Miss Prince, you’ll enjoy Mars. A strange, aggressively forward-looking people.”

An oppression seemed on her. She stirred in her chair.

“Yes, they are,” she said vaguely. “My brother and I know many Martians in Great-New York.” She checked herself abruptly. Was she sorry she had said that? It seemed so.

Miko was coming back. He stopped this time before us.

“Your brother would see you, Anita. He sent me to bring you to his room.”

The glance he shot me had a touch of insolence. I stood up, and he towered a head over me.

Anita said, “Oh yes. I’ll come.”

I bowed. “I will see you again, Miss Prince. I thank you for a pleasant half-hour.”

The Martian led her away. Her little figure was like a child with a

giant. It seemed, as they passed the length of the deck with me staring after them, that he took her arm roughly. And that she shrank from him in fear.

And they did not go inside. As though to show me that he had merely taken her from me, he stopped at a distant deck window and stood talking to her. Once he picked her up as one would pick up a child to show it some distant object through the window.

“A little son with the strength of his father....” Her words echoed in my mind. Was Anita afraid of this Martian’s wooing? Yet held to him by some power he might have over her brother? The vagrant thought struck me.

Was it that?

Chapter 8 A Scream in the Night

We kept, on the Planetara, always the time and routine of our port of departure. The rest of that afternoon and evening were a blank of confusion to me. Anita’s words; the touch of my hand upon her arm; that vast realm of what might be for us, like a glimpse of a magic land of happiness which I had seen in her eyes, and perhaps she had seen in mine—all this surged within me.

I wandered about the vessel. I was not hungry. I did not go to the dining salon for dinner. I carried Johnson food and water to his cage; and sat, with my heat-cylinder upon him, listening to his threats of what would happen when he could complain to the Line's higher officials.

But what was Johnson doing carrying a plan of the ship's control rooms in his pockets? And worse: How had he dared open Snap's box in the helio-room and abstract the code pass-words for this voyage? Without them we would be an outlawed vessel, subject to arrest if any patrol hailed us. Had Johnson been planning to sell those pass-words to Miko? I thought so. I tried to get the confession out of him, but could not.

I had a brief consultation with Captain Carter. He was genuinely apprehensive now. The Planetara carried no long-range guns, and very few side-arms. A half-dozen of the heat-ray hand projectors; a few old-fashioned weapons of explosion-rifles and automatic revolvers. And hand projectors with the new Benson curve-light. We had models of this for curved vision, so that one might see around a corner, so to speak. And with them, we could project the heat-ray in a curve as well.

The weapons were all in Carter's chart-room, save the few we

officers always carried. Carter was apprehensive, but of what he could not say. He had not thought that our plan to stop at the Moon for treasure could affect this outward voyage. Any danger would be upon the way back, when the Planetara would be adequately guarded with long-range electronic guns, and manned with police-soldiers.

But now we were practically defenseless....

I had a moment with Venza, but she had nothing new to communicate to me.

And for half an hour I chatted with George Prince. He seemed a gay, pleasant young man. I could almost have fancied I liked him. Or was it because he was Anita's brother? He told me how he looked forward to traveling with her on Mars. No, he had never been there before, he said.

He had a measure of Anita's earnest naïve personality. Or was he a very clever scoundrel, with irony lurking in his soft voice, and a chuckle that he could so befool me?

"We'll talk again, Haljan. You interest me—I've enjoyed it."

He sauntered away from me, joining the saturnine Ob Hahn, with

whom presently I heard him discussing religion.

The arrest of Johnson had caused considerable comment among the passengers. A few had seen me drag him forward to the cage. The incident had been the subject of passenger discussion all afternoon. Captain Carter had posted a notice to the effect that Johnson's accounts had been found in serious error, and that Dr. Frank for this voyage would act in his stead.

It was near midnight when Snap and I closed and sealed the helio-room and started for the chart-room, where we were to meet with Captain Carter and the other officers. The passengers had nearly all retired. A game was in progress in the smoking room, but the deck was almost deserted.

Snap and I were passing along one of the interior corridors. The stateroom doors, with the illumined names of the passengers, were all closed. The metal grid of the floor echoed our footsteps. Snap was in advance of me. His body suddenly rose in the air. He went like a balloon to the ceiling, struck it gently, and all in a heap came floating down and landed on the floor!

"What in the infernal!—"

He was laughing as he picked himself up. But it was a brief laugh. We knew what had happened: the artificial gravity-controls in the base of the ship, which by magnetic force gave us normality aboard, were being tampered with! For just this instant, this particular small section of this corridor had been cut off. The slight bulk of the Planetara, floating in space, had no appreciable gravity pull on Snap's body, and the impulse of his step as he came to the unmagnetized area of the corridor had thrown him to the ceiling. The area was normal now. Snap and I tested it gingerly.

He gripped me. "That never went wrong by accident, Gregg! Someone down there—"

We rushed to the nearest descending ladder. In the deserted lower room the bank of dials stood neglected. A score of dials and switches were here, governing the magnetism of different areas of the ship. There should have been a night operator, but he was gone.

Then we saw him lying nearby, sprawled face down on the floor! In the silence and dim lurid glow of the fluorescent tubes, we stood holding our breaths, peering and listening. No one here.

The guard was not dead. He lay unconscious from a blow on the head. A brawny fellow. We had him revived in a few moments. A

broadcast flash of the call-buzz brought Dr. Frank in haste from the chart-room.

“What’s the matter?”

We pointed at the unconscious man. “Someone was here,” I said hastily. “Experimenting with the magnetic switches. Evidently unfamiliar with them—pulling one or another to test their workings and so see the reactions on the dials.”

We told him what had happened to Snap in the upper corridor.

Dr. Frank revived the guard in a moment. He was no worse off for the episode, save a lump on his head, and a nasty headache.

But he had little to tell us. He had heard a step. Saw nothing—and then had been struck on the head, by some invisible assailant.

We left him nursing his head, sitting belligerent at his post. Armed now with my heat-ray cylinder which I loaned him.

“Strange doings this voyage,” he told us. “All the crew knows it—all been talkin’ about it. I stick it out now, but when we get back home I’m done with this star travelin’. I belong on the sea anyway. A good old freighter is all right for me.”

We hurried back to the upper level. We would indeed have to plan something at this chart-room conference. This was the first tangible attack our adversaries had made.

We were on the passenger deck headed for the chart-room when all three of us stopped short, frozen with horror. Through the silent passenger quarters a scream rang out! A girl's shuddering, gasping scream. Terror in it. Horror. Or a scream of agony. In the silence of the dully vibrating ship it was utterly horrible. It lasted an instant—a single long scream; then was abruptly stilled.

And with blood pounding my temples and rushing like ice through my veins, I recognized it.

Anita!

Chapter 9 The Murder in A 22

"Good God, what was that?" Dr. Frank's face had gone white in the starlight. Snap stood like a statue of horror.

The deck here was patched as always, silver radiance from the deck ports. The empty deck chairs stood about. The scream was stilled, but now we heard a commotion inside—the rasp of opening cabin

doors; questions from frightened passengers; the scurry of feet.

I found my voice. “Anita! Anita Prince!”

“Come on!” shouted Snap. “Was it the Prince girl? I thought so too! In her stateroom, A22!” He was dashing for the lounge archway.

Dr. Frank and I followed. I realized that we passed the deck door and window of A22. But they were dark, and evidently sealed on the inside. The dim lounge was in a turmoil; passengers standing at their cabin doors. I heard Sir Arthur Coniston:

“I say, what was that?”

“Over there,” said another man. “Come back inside, Martha.” He shoved his wife back. “Mr. Haljan!” He plucked at me as I went past.

I shouted, “Go back to your rooms! We want order here—keep back!”

We came to the twin doors of A22 and A20. Both were closed. Dr. Frank was in advance of Snap and me. He paused at the sound of Captain Carter’s voice behind us.

“Was it from in there? Wait a moment!”

Carter dashed up; he had a large heat-ray projector in his hand. He shoved us aside. “Let me in first. Is the door sealed? Gregg, keep those passengers back!”

The door was not sealed. Carter burst into the room. I heard him gasp, “Good God!”

Snap and I shoved back three or four crowding passengers, and in that instant Dr. Frank had been in the room and out again.

“There’s been an accident! Get back, Gregg! Snap, help him keep the crowd away.” He shoved me forcibly.

From within, Carter was shouting, “Keep them out! Where are you, Frank? Come back here! Send a flash for Balch—I want Balch!”

Dr. Frank went back into the room and banged the cabin door upon Snap and me. I was unarmed—I had loaned my cylinder to the guard in the lower corridor. Weapon in hand, Snap forced the panic-stricken passengers back to their rooms.

“It’s all right! An accident! Miss Prince is hurt.”

Snap reassured them glibly; but he knew no more about it than I. Moa, with a night-robe drawn tight around her thin, tall figure, edged up to me.

“What has happened, Set Haljan?”

I gazed around for her brother Miko, but did not see him.

“An accident,” I said shortly. “Go back to your room. Captain’s orders.”

She eyed me and then retreated. Snap was threatening everybody with his cylinder. Balch dashed up. “What in the hell? Where’s Carter?”

“In there.” I pounded on A22. It opened cautiously. I could see only Carter, but I heard the murmuring voice of Dr. Frank through the interior connecting door to A20.

The captain rasped, “Get out, Haljan! Oh, is that you, Balch? Come in.” He admitted the older officer and slammed the door again upon me. And immediately reopened it.

“Gregg, keep the passengers quiet. Tell them everything’s all right. Miss Prince got frightened, that’s all. Then go up to the turret. Tell

Blackstone what's happened."

"But I don't know what's happened," I protested miserably.

Carter was grim and white. He whispered, "I think it may turn out to be murder, Gregg! No, not dead yet—Dr. Frank is trying—Don't stand there like an ass, man! Get to the turret! Verify our trajectory—no—wait—"

The captain was almost incoherent. "Wait a minute, I don't mean that! Tell Snap to watch his helio-room. Gregg, you and Blackstone stay in the chart-room. Arm yourselves and guard our weapons. By God, this murderer, whoever he is—"

I stammered, "If—if she dies—will you flash us word?"

He stared at me strangely. "I'll be there presently, Gregg."

He slammed the door upon me.

I followed his orders, but it was like a dream of horror. The turmoil of the ship gradually quieted. Snap went to the helio-room; Blackstone and I sat in the tiny steel chart-room. How much time passed, I do not know. I was confused. Anita hurt! She might die.... Murdered.... But why? By whom? Had George Prince been in his

own room when the attack came? I thought now I recalled hearing the low murmur of his voice in there with Dr. Frank and Carter.

Where was Miko? It stabbed at me. I had not seen him among the passengers in the lounge.

Carter came into the chart-room. “Gregg, you get to bed—you look like a ghost!”

“But—”

“She’s not dead—she may live. Dr. Frank and her brother are with her. They’re doing all they can.” He told us what had happened. Anita and George Prince had both been asleep, each in their respective rooms. Someone unknown had opened Anita’s corridor door.

“Wasn’t it sealed?” I demanded.

“Yes. But the intruder opened it.”

“Burst it? I didn’t think it was broken.”

“It wasn’t broken. The assailant opened it somehow, and assaulted Miss Prince—shot her in the chest with a heat-ray. Her left lung.”

“She is conscious?” Balch demanded.

“Yes. But she did not see who did it. Nor did Prince. Her scream awakened him, but the intruder evidently fled out the corridor door of A22, the way he entered.”

I stood weak and shaken at the chart-room entrance. “A little son, cast in the gentle image of his mother. But with the strength of his father....” But Anita—dying, perhaps; and all my dreams were fading into a memory of what might have been.

“You go to bed, Gregg—we don’t need you.”

I was glad enough to get away. I would lie down for an hour, and then go to Anita’s stateroom. I’d demand that Dr. Frank let me see her, if only for a moment.

I went to the stern deck-space where my cubby was located. My mind was confused, but some instinct within me made me verify the seals of my door and window. They were intact. I entered cautiously, switched on the dimmer of the tube-lights, and searched the room. It had only a bunk, my tiny desk, a chair and clothes robe.

There was no evidence of any intruder here. I set my door and

window alarm. Then I audiphoned to the helio-room.

“Snap?”

“Yes.”

I told him about Anita. Carter cut in on us from the chart-room. “Stop that, you fools!”

We cut off. Fully dressed, I flung myself on my bed. Anita might die....

I must have fallen into a tortured sleep. I was awakened by the sound of my alarm buzzer. Someone was tampering with my door! Then the buzzer ceased; the marauder outside must have found a way of silencing it. But it had done its work—awakened me.

I had switched off the light; my cubby was Stygian dark. A heat-cylinder was in the bunk-bracket over my head; I searched for it, pried it loose softly.

I was fully awake. Alert. I could hear a faint sizzling—someone outside trying to unseal the door. In the darkness, cylinder in hand, I crept from the bunk. Crouched at the door. This time I would capture or kill this night prowler.

The sizzling was faintly audible. My door-seal was breaking. Upon impulse I reached for the door, jerked it open.

No one there! The starlit segment of deck was empty. But I had leaped, and I struck a solid body, crouching in the doorway. A giant man. Miko!

His electronized metallic robe burned my hands. I lunged against him—I was almost as surprised as he. I shot, but the stab of heat evidently missed him.

The shock of my encounter close-circuited his robe; he materialized in the starlight. A brief, savage encounter. He struck the weapon from my hand. He had dropped his hydrogen torch, and tried to grip me. But I twisted away from his hold.

“So it’s you!”

“Be quiet, Gregg Haljan! I only want to talk.”

Without warning, a stab of radiance shot from a weapon in his hand. It caught me. Ran like ice through my veins. Seized and numbed my limbs.

I fell helpless to the deck. Nerves and muscles paralyzed. My tongue

was thick and inert. I could not speak, nor move. But I could see Miko bending over me. And hear him:

“I don’t want to kill you, Haljan. We need you.”

He gathered me up like a bundle in his huge arms; carried me swiftly across the deserted deck.

Snap’s helio-room in the network under the dome was diagonally overhead. A white actinic light shot from it—caught us, bathed us. Snap had been awake; had heard the slight commotion of our encounter.

His voice rang shrilly: “Stop! I’ll shoot!” His warning siren rang out to arouse the ship. His spotlight clung to us.

Miko ran with me a few steps. Then he cursed and dropped me, fled away. I fell like a sack of carbide to the deck. My senses faded into blackness....

“He’s all right now.”

I was in the chart-room, with Captain Carter, Snap and Dr. Frank bending over me. The surgeon said,

“Can you speak now, Gregg?”

I tried it. My tongue was thick, but it would move. “Yes.”

I was soon revived. I sat up, with Dr. Frank vigorously rubbing me.

“I’m all right.” I told them what had happened.

Captain Carter said abruptly, “Yes, we know that. And it was Miko also who killed Anita Prince. She told us before she died.”

“Died!...” I leaped to my feet. “She ... died....”

“Yes, Gregg. An hour ago, Miko got into her stateroom and tried to force his love on her. She repulsed him—he killed her.”

It struck me blank. And then with a rush came the thought, “He says Miko killed her....”

I heard myself stammering, “Why—why we must get him!” I gathered my wits; a surge of hate swept me; a wild desire for vengeance.

“Why, by God, where is he? Why don’t you go get him? I’ll get him—I’ll kill him, I tell you!”

“Easy, Gregg!” Dr. Frank gripped me.

The captain said gently, “We know how you feel, Gregg. She told us before she died.”

“I’ll bring him in here to you! But I’ll kill him, I tell you!”

“No you won’t, lad. You’re hysterical now. We don’t want him killed, not attacked even. Not yet. We’ll explain later.”

They sat me down, calming me.

Anita dead. The door of the shining garden was closed. A brief glimpse, given to me and to her of what might have been. And now she was dead....

Chapter 10 A Speck of Human Earth-dust, Falling Free....

I had not been able at first to understand why Captain Carter wanted Miko left at liberty. Within me there was that cry of vengeance, as though to strike Miko down would somehow lessen my own grief at Anita’s loss. Whatever Carter’s purpose, Snap had not known it. But Balch and Dr. Frank were in the captain’s confidence—all three of them working on some plan of action. Snap and I argued it, and thought we could fathom it; and in spite of my desire to kill Miko,

the thing looked reasonable.

It was obvious that at least two of our passengers were plotting with Miko and George Prince; trying during this voyage to learn what they could about Grantline's activities on the Moon; scheming doubtless to seize the treasure when the Planetara stopped at the Moon on the return voyage. I thought I could name those masquerading passengers. Ob Hahn, supposedly a Venus Mystic. And Rance Rankin, who called himself an American magician. Those two, Snap and I agreed, seemed most suspicious. And there was the purser.

With my hysteria still on me, I sat for a time on the deck outside the chart-room with Snap. Then Carter summoned us back, and we sat listening while he, Balch and Dr. Frank went on with their conference. Listening to them I could not but agree that our best plan was to secure evidence which would incriminate all who were concerned in the plot. Miko, we were convinced, had been the Martian who followed Snap and me from Halsey's office in Great-New York. George Prince had doubtless been the invisible eavesdropper outside the helio-room. He knew, and had told the others, that Grantline had found radium-ore on the Moon—that the Planetara would stop there on the way home.

But we could not incarcerate George Prince for being an eavesdropper. Nor had we the faintest tangible evidence against Ob Hahn or Rance Rankin. And even the purser would probably be released by the Interplanetary Court of Ferrok-Shahn when it heard our evidence.

There was only Miko. We could arrest him for the murder of Anita. But the others would be put on their guard. It was Carter's idea to let Miko remain at liberty for a time and see if we could not identify and incriminate his fellows. The murder of Anita obviously had nothing to do with any plot against the Grantline Moon treasure.

"Why," exclaimed Balch, "there might be—probably are—huge Martian interests concerned in this thing. These men here aboard are only emissaries, making this voyage to learn what they can. When they get to Ferrok-Shahn they'll make their report, and then we'll have a real danger on our hands. Why, an outlaw ship could be launched from Ferrok-Shahn that would beat us back to the Moon—and Grantline is entirely without warning of any danger!"

It seemed obvious. Unscrupulous, moneyed criminals in Ferrok-Shahn would be dangerous indeed, once these details of Grantline were given them. And so now it was decided that in the remaining nine days of our outward voyage, we would attempt to secure

enough evidence to arrest all these plotters.

“I’ll have them all in the cage when we land,” Carter declared grimly. “They’ll make no report to their principals. The thing will end, be stamped out!”

Ah, the futile plans of men!

Yet we thought it practical. We were all doubly armed now. Explosive bullet-projectors and the heat-ray cylinders. And we had several eavesdropping microphones which we planned to use whenever occasion offered.

It was now, Earth Eastern Time, A.M. Twenty-eight hours only of this eventful voyage were passed. The Planetara was some six million miles from the Earth; it blazed behind us, a tremendous giant.

The body of Anita was being made ready for burial. George Prince was still in his stateroom. Glutz, effeminate little hairdresser, who waxed rich acting as beauty doctor for the women passengers, and who in his youth had been an undertaker, had gone with Dr. Frank to prepare the body.

Gruesome details. I tried not to think of them. I sat, numbed, in the chart-room.

An astronomical burial—there was little precedent for it. I dragged myself to the stern deck-space where, at five A.M., the ceremony took place. Most of the passengers were asleep, unaware of all this—which was why Carter hastened it.

We were a solemn little group, gathered there in the checkered starlight with the great vault of the heavens around us. A dismantled electronic projector—necessary when a long-range gun was mounted—had been rigged up in one of the deck ports.

They brought out the body. I stood apart, gazing reluctantly at the small bundle, wrapped like a mummy in a dark metallic screen-cloth. A patch of black silk rested over her face.

Four cabin stewards carried her. And beside her walked George Prince. A long black robe covered him, but his head was bare. And suddenly he reminded me of the ancient play-character of Hamlet. His black, wavy hair; his finely chiseled, pallid face, set now in a stern, patrician cast. And staring, I realized that however much of a villain this man not yet thirty might be, at this instant, walking beside the body of his dead sister, he was stricken with grief. He

loved that sister with whom he had lived since childhood; and to see him now, with his set white face, no one could doubt it.

The little procession stopped in a patch of starlight by the port. They rested the body on a bank of chairs. The black-robed Chaplain, roused from his bed and still trembling from excitement of this sudden, inexplicable death on board, said a brief, solemn little prayer. An appeal: That the Almighty Ruler of all these blazing worlds might guard the soul of this gentle girl whose mortal remains were now to be returned to Him.

Ah, if ever God seemed hovering close, it was now at this instant, on this starlit deck floating in the black void of space.

Then Carter for just a moment removed the black shroud from her face. I saw her brother gaze silently; saw him stoop and implant a kiss—and turn away. I did not want to look, but I found myself moving slowly forward.

She lay, so beautiful. Her face, white and calm and peaceful in death. My sight blurred. Words seemed to echo: “A little son, cast in the gentle image of his mother....”

“Easy, Gregg!” Snap was whispering to me. He had his arm around

me. “Come on away!”

They tied the shroud over her face. I did not see them as they put her body in the tube, sent it through the exhaust-chamber, and dropped it.

But a moment later I saw it—a small black oblong bundle—hovering beside us. It was perhaps a hundred feet away, circling us. Held by the Planetara’s bulk, it had momentarily become our satellite. It swung around us like a moon. Gruesome satellite, by nature’s laws forever to follow us.

Then from another tube at the bow, Blackstone operated a small Zed-co-ray projector. Its dull light caught the floating bundle, neutralizing its metallic wrappings.

It swung off at a tangent. Speeding. Falling free in the dome of the heavens. A rotating black oblong. But in a moment distance dwindled it to a speck. A dull silver dot with the sunlight on it. A speck of human Earth-dust, falling free....

It vanished. Anita—gone. In my heart was an echo of the prayer that the Almighty might watch over her and guard her always....

Chapter 11 The Electrical Eavesdropper

I turned from the deck. Miko was near me! So he had dared to show himself here among us! But I realized that he could not be aware we knew he was the murderer. George Prince had been asleep, had not seen Miko with Anita. Miko, with impulsive rage, had shot the girl and escaped. No doubt now he was cursing himself for having done it. And he could very well assume that Anita had died without regaining consciousness to tell who had killed her.

He gazed at me now, here on the deck. I thought for an instant he was coming over to talk to me. Though he probably considered he was not suspected of the murder of Anita, he realized, of course, that his attack on me was known; he must have wondered what action Captain Carter would take.

But he did not approach me; he moved away, and went inside. Moa had been near him; and as though by pre-arrangement with him she now accosted me.

“I want to speak to you, Set Haljan.”

“Go ahead.”

I felt an instinctive aversion for this Martian girl. Yet she was not unattractive. Over six feet tall, straight and slim. Sleek blond hair. Rather a handsome face. Not gray, like the burly Miko, but pink and white. Stern-lipped, yet feminine, too. She was smiling gravely now. Her blue eyes regarded me keenly. She said gently:

“A sad occurrence, Gregg Haljan. And mysterious. I would not question you—”

“Is that all you have to say?” I demanded, when she paused.

“No. You are a handsome man, Gregg—attractive to women—to any Martian woman.”

She said it impulsively. Admiration for me was on her face, in her eyes—a man cannot miss it.

“Thank you.”

“I mean, I would be your friend. My brother Miko is so sorry about what happened between you and him this morning. He only wanted to talk to you, and he came to your cubby door—”

“With a torch to break its seal,” I interjected.

She waved that away. “He was afraid you would not admit him. He told you he would not hurt you.”

“And so he struck me with one of your cursed Martian paralyzing rays!”

“He is sorry....”

She seemed gauging me, trying, no doubt, to find out what reprisal would be taken against her brother. I felt sure that Moa was as active as a man in any plan that was under way to capture the Grantline treasure. Miko, with his ungovernable temper, was doing things that put their plans in jeopardy.

I demanded abruptly, “What did your brother want to talk to me about?”

“Me,” she said surprisingly. “I sent him. A Martian girl goes after what she wants. Did you know that?”

She swung on her heel and left me. I puzzled over it. Was that why Miko had struck me down, and was carrying me off? Was my accursed masculine beauty so attractive to this Martian girl? I did not think so. I could not believe that all these incidents were so unrelated

to what I knew was the main undercurrent. They wanted me, had tried to capture me. For something else than because Moa liked my looks....

Dr. Frank found me mooning alone.

“Go to bed, Gregg! You look awful.”

“I don’t want to go to bed.”

“Where’s Snap?”

“I don’t know. He was here a while ago.” I had not seen him since the burial of Anita.

“The captain wants him.” The surgeon left me.

Within an hour the morning siren would arouse the passengers. I was seated in a secluded corner of the deck, when George Prince came along. He went past me, a slight, somber, dark-robed figure. He had on high, thick boots. A hood was over his head, but as he saw me he pushed it back and dropped down beside me.

But for a moment he did not speak. His face showed pallid in the pallid star-gleams.

“She said you loved her.” His soft voice was throaty with emotion.

“Yes.” I said it almost against my will. There seemed a bond springing between this bereaved brother and me. He added, so softly I could barely hear him, “That makes you, I think, almost my friend. And you thought you were my enemy.”

I held my answer. An incautious tongue running under emotion is a dangerous thing. And I was sure of nothing.

He went on, “Almost my friend. Because—we both loved her, and she loved us both.” He was hardly more than whispering. “And there is aboard—one whom we both hate.”

“Miko!” It burst from me.

“Yes. But do not say it.”

Another silence fell between us. He brushed back the black curls from his forehead. And his dark eyes searched mine.

“Have you an eavesdropping microphone, Haljan?”

I hesitated. “Yes.”

“I was thinking....” He leaned closer toward me. “If, in half an hour, you could use it upon Miko’s cabin—I would rather tell you than the captain or anyone else. The cabin will be insulated, but I shall find a way of cutting off that insulation so that you may hear.”

So George Prince had turned with us! The shock of his sister’s death—himself allied to her murderer!—had been too much for him. He was with us!

Yet his help must be given secretly. Miko would kill him in an instant if it became known.

He had been watchful of the deck. He stood up now.

“I think that is all.”

As he turned away, I murmured, “But I do thank you....”

The name Set Miko glowed upon the small metal door. It was in a transverse corridor similar to A22. The corridor was forward of the lounge: it opened off the small circular library.

The library was unoccupied and unlighted, dim with only the reflected lights from the nearby passages. I crouched behind a cylinder-case. The door of Miko’s room was in sight, being some

thirty feet away from me.

I waited perhaps five minutes. No one entered. Then I realized that doubtless the conspirators were already there. I set my tiny eavesdropper on the library floor beside me; connected its little battery; focused its projector. Was Miko's room insulated? I could not tell. There was a small ventilating grid above the door. Across its opening, if the room were insulated, a blue sheen of radiance would be showing. And there would be a faint hum. But from this distance I could not see or hear such details, and I was afraid to approach closer. Once in the transverse corridor, I would have no place to hide, no way of escape; if anyone approached Miko's door, I would be discovered.

I threw the current into my little apparatus. I prayed, if it met interference, that the slight sound would pass unnoticed. George Prince had said he would make opportunity to disconnect the room's insulation. He had evidently done so. I picked up the interior sounds at once; my headphone vibrated with them. And with trembling fingers on the little dial between my knees as I crouched in the darkness behind the cylinder-case, I synchronized.

"Johnson is a fool." It was Miko's voice. "We must have the pass-words."

“He got them from the helio-room.” A man’s voice; I puzzled over it at first, then recognized it. Rance Rankin.

Miko said, “He is a fool. Walking around this ship as though with letters blazoned on his forehead—‘Watch me—I need watching—’ Hah! No wonder they apprehended him!”

Was George Prince in there? Rankin’s voice said: “He would have turned the papers over to us. I would not blame him too much. What harm—”

“Oh, I’ll release him,” Miko declared. “What harm? That braying ass did us plenty of harm. He has lost the pass-words. Better he had left them in the helio-room.”

Moa was in the room. Her voice said: “We’ve got to have them. The Planetara, upon such an important voyage as this, may be watched. How do we know—”

“It is, no doubt,” Rankin said quietly. “We ought to have the pass-words. When we are in control of this ship....”

It sent a shiver through me. Were they planning to try and seize the Planetara? Now? It seemed so.

“Johnson undoubtedly memorized them,” Moa was saying. “When we get him out—”

“Hahn is to do that, at the signal.” Miko added, “George could do it better, perhaps.”

And then I heard George Prince for the first time. He murmured, “I will try.”

“No need,” said Miko. “I praise where praise is deserved. And I have little praise for you now, George!”

I could not see what happened. A look, perhaps, which Prince could not avoid giving this man he had come to hate. Miko doubtless saw it, and the Martian’s hot anger leaped.

Rankin said hurriedly, “Stop that!”

And Moa: “Let him alone! Sit down, you fool!”

I could hear the sound of a scuffle. A blow—a cry, half suppressed, from George Prince.

Then Miko: “I will not hurt him. Craven coward! Look at him! Hating me—frightened!”

I could fancy George Prince sitting there with murder in his heart, and Miko taunting him:

“Hates me now, because I shot his sister!”

Moa: “Hush!”

“I will not! Why should I not say it? I will tell you something else, George Prince. It was not Anita I shot at, but you! I meant nothing for her, but love. If you had not interfered—”

This was different from what we had figured. George Prince had come in from his own room, had tried to rescue his sister, and in the scuffle, Anita had taken the shot intended for George.

“I did not even know I had hit her,” Miko was saying. “Not until I heard she was dead.” He added sardonically, “I hoped it was you I had hit, George. And I will tell you this: You hate me no more than I hate you. If it were not for your knowledge of radium ores—”

“Is this to be a personal wrangle?” Rankin interrupted. “I thought we were here to plan—”

“It is planned,” Miko said shortly. “I give orders, I do not plan. I am waiting now for the moment—”

He checked himself. Moa said, “Does Rankin understand that no harm is to come to Gregg Haljan?”

“Yes,” said Rankin. “And Dean. We need them, of course. But you cannot make Dean send messages if he refuses, nor make Haljan navigate.”

“I know enough to check on them,” Miko said grimly. “They will not fool me. And they will obey me, have no fear. A little touch of sulphuric—” His laugh was gruesome. “It makes the most stubborn very willing.”

“I wish,” said Moa, “we had Haljan safely hidden. If he is hurt—killed—”

So that was why Miko had tried to capture me? To keep me safe so that I might navigate the ship.

It occurred to me that I should get Carter at once. A plot to seize the Planetara? But when?

I froze with startled horror.

The diaphragms at my ears rang with Miko’s words: “I have set the time for now! In two minutes—”

It seemed to startle both Rankin and George Prince almost as much as I. Both exclaimed:

“No!”

“No? Why not? Everyone is at his post!”

Prince repeated: “No!”

And Rankin: “But can we trust them? The stewards—the crew?”

“Eight of them are our own men! You didn’t know that, Rankin? They’ve been aboard the Planetara for several voyages. Oh, this is no quickly-planned affair, even though we let you in on it so recently. You and Johnson. By God!”

I crouched tense. There was a commotion in the stateroom. Miko had discovered that his insulation was cut off! He had evidently leaped to his feet; I heard a chair overturn. And the Martian’s roar: “It’s off! Did you do that, Prince? By God, if I thought—”

My apparatus went suddenly dead as Miko flung on his insulation. I lost my wits in the confusion; I should have instantly taken off my vibrations. There was interference; it showed in the dark space of the ventilator grid over Miko’s doorway; a snapping in the air there, a

swirl of sparks.

I heard with my unaided ears Miko's roar over his insulation: "By God, they're listening!"

The scream of a hand-siren sounded from his stateroom. It rang over the ship. His signal! I heard it answered from some distant point. And then a shot; a commotion in the lower corridors....

The attack upon the Planetara had started!

I was on my feet. The shouts of startled passengers sounded, a turmoil beginning everywhere.

I stood momentarily transfixed. The door of Miko's stateroom burst open. He stood there, with Moa, Rankin and George Prince crowding behind him.

He saw me. "You, Gregg Haljan!"

He came leaping at me.

Chapter 12 The Weightless Combat

I was taken wholly by surprise. There was an instant when I stood

numbed, fumbling for a weapon at my belt, undecided whether to run or stand my ground. Miko was no more than twenty feet from me. He checked his forward rush. The light from an overhead tube was on him; I saw in his hand the cylinder projector of his paralyzing ray.

I plucked my heat-cylinder from my belt, and fired without taking aim. My tiny heat-beam flashed. I must have grazed Miko's hand. His roar of anger and pain rang out over the turmoil. He dropped his weapon; then stooped to pick it up. But Moa forestalled him. She leaped and seized it.

"Careful! Fool—you promised not to hurt him!"

A confusion of swift action. Rankin had turned and darted away. I saw George Prince stumbling half in front of the struggling Miko and Moa. And I heard footsteps beside me; a hand gripped me, jerked at me.

Over the turmoil Prince's voice sounded: "Gregg—Haljan!"

I recall I had the impression that Prince was frightened; he had half fallen in front of Miko. And there was Miko's voice:

“Let go of me!”

And Moa: “Come!”

It was Balch gripping me. “Gregg! This way—run! Get out of here! He’ll kill you with that ray—”

Miko’s ray flashed, but George Prince had knocked at his arm. I did not dare fire again. Prince was in the way. Balch, who was unarmed, shoved me violently back.

“Gregg—the chart-room!”

I turned and ran, with Balch after me. Prince had fallen, or been felled by Miko. A flash followed me. Miko’s weapon, but again it missed. He did not pursue me; he ran the other way, through the port-side door of the library.

Balch and I found ourselves in the lounge. Shouting, frightened passengers were everywhere. The place was in wild confusion, the whole ship ringing now with shouts.

“To the chart-room, Gregg!”

I called to the passengers: “Get back to your rooms!”

I followed Balch. We ran through the archway to the deck. In the starlight I saw figures scurrying aft, but none were near us. The deck forward was dim with heavy shadows. The oval window and door of the chart-room were blue-yellow from the tube-lights inside. No one seemed on the deck there; and then, as we approached, I saw, further forward in the bow, the trap-door to the cage standing open. Johnson had been released.

From one of the chart-room windows a heat-ray sizzled. It barely missed us. Balch shouted, “Carter—don’t!”

The captain called, “Oh—you, Balch—and Haljan—”

He came out on the deck as we rushed up. His left arm was dangling limp.

“God—this—” He got no further. From the turret overhead a tiny search-beam came down and disclosed us. Blackstone was supposed to be on duty up there, with a course-master at the controls. But, glancing up, I saw, illumined by the turret lights, the figures of Ob Hahn in his purple-white robe, and Johnson the purser. And on the turret balcony, two fallen men—Blackstone and the course-master.

Johnson was training the spotlight on us. And Hahn fired a Martian

ray. It struck Balch beside me. He dropped.

Carter was shouting, “Inside! Gregg, get inside!”

I stopped to raise up Balch. Another beam came down. A heat-ray this time. It caught the fallen Balch full in the chest, piercing him through. The smell of his burning flesh rose to sicken me. He was dead. I dropped his body. Carter shoved me into the chart-room.

In the small, steel-lined room, Carter and I slid the door closed. We were alone here. The thing had come so quickly it had taken Captain Carter, like us all, wholly unawares. We had anticipated spying eavesdroppers, but not this open brigandage. No more than a minute or two had passed since Miko’s siren in his stateroom had given the signal for the attack. Carter had been in the chart-room. Blackstone was in the turret. At the outbreak of confusion, Carter dashed out to see Hahn releasing Johnson from the cage. From the forward chart-room window now I could see where Hahn with a torch had broken the cage-seal. The torch lay on the deck. There had been an exchange of shots; Carter’s arm was paralyzed; Johnson and Hahn had escaped.

Carter was as confused as I. There had simultaneously been an encounter up in the turret. Blackstone and the course-master were

killed. The lookout had been shot from his post in the forward observatory. His body dangled now, twisted half in and half out of his window.

We could see several of Miko's men—erstwhile members of our crew and steward-corps—scurrying from the turret along the upper bridges toward the dark and silent helio-room. Snap was up there. But was he? The helio-room glowed suddenly with dim light, but there was no evidence of a fight there. The fighting seemed mostly below the deck, down in the hull-corridors. A blended horror of sounds came up to us. Screams, shouts, and the hissing and snapping of ray weapons. Our crew—such of them as were loyal—were making a stand down below. But it was brief. Within a minute it died away. The passengers, amidships in the superstructure, were still shouting. Then above them Miko's roar sounded.

"Be quiet! Go in your rooms—you will not be harmed."

The brigands in these few minutes were in control of the ship. All but this little chart-room, where, with most of the ship's weapons, Carter and I were intrenched.

"God, Gregg, that this should come upon us!"

Carter was fumbling with the chart-room weapons. “Here, Gregg, help me. What have you got? Heat-ray? That’s all I had ready.”

It struck me then as I helped him make the connections that Carter in this crisis was at best an inefficient commander. His red face had gone splotchy purple; his hands were trembling. Skilled as captain of a peaceful liner, he was at a loss now. Nor could I blame him. It is easy to say we might have taken warning, done this or that, and come triumphant through this attack. But only the fool looks backward and says, “I would have done better.”

I tried to summon my wits. The ship was lost to us, unless Carter and I could do something. Our futile weapons! They were all here—four or five heat-ray hand projectors that could send a pencil-ray a hundred feet or so. I shot one diagonally up at the turret where Johnson was leering down at our rear window, but he saw my gesture and dropped back out of sight. The heat-beam flashed harmlessly up and struck the turret roof. Then across the turret window came a sheen of radiance—an electro-barrage. And behind it, Hahn’s suave, evil face appeared. He shouted down:

“We have orders to spare you, Gregg Haljan—or you would have been killed long ago!”

My answering shot hit his barrage with a shower of sparks, behind which he stood unmoved.

Carter handed me another weapon. “Gregg, try this.”

I levelled the old explosive bullet projector; Carter crouched beside me. But before I could press the trigger, from somewhere down the starlit deck an electro-beam hit me. The little rifle exploded, burst its breech. I sank back to the floor, tingling from the shock of the hostile current. My hands were blackened from the exploding powder.

Carter seized me. “No use! Hurt?”

“No.”

The stars through the dome-windows were swinging. A long swing—the shadows and starlit patches on the deck were all shifting. The Planetara was turning. The heavens revolved in a great round sweep of movement, then settled as we took our new course. Hahn at the turret controls had swung us. The earth and the sun showed over our bow quarter. The sunlight mingled red-yellow with the brilliant starlight. Hahn’s signals were sounding; I heard them answered from the mechanism rooms down below. Brigands there—in full control.

The gravity plates were being set to the new positions; we were on our new course. Headed a point or two off the Earth-line. Not headed for the moon? I wondered.

Carter and I were planning nothing. What was there to plan? We were under observation. A Martian paralyzing ray—or electronic beam, far more deadly than our own puny police weapons—would have struck us the instant we tried to leave the chart-room.

My swift-running thoughts were interrupted by a shout from down the deck. At a corner of the cabin superstructure some fifty feet from our windows the figure of Miko appeared. A barrage-radiance hung around him like a shimmering mantle. His voice sounded:

“Gregg Haljan, do you yield?”

Carter leaped up from where he and I were crouching. Against all reason of safety he leaned from the low window, waving his hamlike fist.

“Yield? No! I am in command here, you pirate! Brigand—murderer!”

I pushed him back. “Careful!”

He was spluttering, and over it Miko's sardonic laugh sounded. "Very well—but you will talk? Shall we argue about it?"

I stood up. "What do you want to say, Miko?"

Behind him the tall, thin figure of his sister showed. She was plucking at him. He turned violently.

"I won't hurt him! Gregg Haljan—is this a truce? You will not shoot?" He was shielding Moa.

"No," I called. "For a moment, no. A truce. What is it you want to say?"

I could hear the babble of passengers who were herded in the cabin with brigands guarding them. George Prince, bareheaded, but shrouded in his cloak, showed in a patch of light behind Moa. He looked my way and then retreated into the lounge archway.

Miko called, "You must yield. We want you, Haljan."

"No doubt," I jeered.

"Alive. It is easy to kill you."

I could not doubt that. Carter and I were little more than rats in a trap, here in the chart-room. But Miko wanted to take me alive: that was not so simple. He added persuasively:

“We want you to help us navigate. Will you?”

“No.”

“Will you help us, Captain Carter? Tell your cub, this Haljan, to yield. You are fools. We understand that Haljan has been handling the ship’s mathematics. Him we need most.”

Carter roared: “Get back from there! This is no truce!”

I shoved aside his levelled bullet-projector. “Wait a minute!” I called to Miko. “Navigate—where?”

“Oh,” he retorted, “that is our business, not yours. When you lay down your weapons and come out of there, I will give you the course.”

“Back to the earth?” I suggested.

I could fancy him grinning behind the sheen of his barrage at my question.

“The earth? Yes—shall we go there? Give me your orders, Gregg Haljan. Of course I will obey them.”

His sardonic words were interrupted. And I realized that all this parley was a ruse of Miko’s to take me alive. He had made a gesture. Hahn, watching from the turret window, doubtless flashed a signal down to the hull-corridors. The magnetizer control under the chart-room was altered, our artificial gravity cut off. I felt the sudden lightness; I gripped the window casement and clung. Carter was startled into incautious movement. It flung him out into the center of the chart-room, his arms and legs grotesquely flailing.

And across the chart-room, in the opposite window, I felt rather than saw the shape of something. A figure—almost invisible, but not quite—was trying to climb in! I flung the empty rifle I was holding. It hit something solid in the window; in a flare of sparks a black-hooded figure materialized. A man climbing in! His weapon spat. There was a tiny electronic flash, deadly silent. The intruder had shot at Carter; struck him. Carter gave one queer scream. He had floated to the floor; his convulsive movement when he was hit hurled him to the ceiling. His body struck, twitched; bounced back and sank inert on the floor-grid almost at my feet.

I clung to the casement. Across the space of the weightless room the

hooded intruder was also clinging. His hood fell back. It was Johnson. He leered at me.

“Killed him, the bully! Well, he deserved it. Now for you, Mr. Third Officer Haljan!”

But he did not dare fire at me—Miko had forbidden it. I saw him reach under his robe, doubtless for a low-powered paralyzing ray such as Miko already had used on me. But he never got it out. I had no weapon within reach. I leaned into the room, still holding the casement, and doubled my legs under me. I kicked out from the window.

The force catapulted me across the space of the room like a volplane. I struck the purser. We gripped. Our locked, struggling bodies bounced out into the room. We struck the floor, surged up like balloons to the ceiling, struck it with a flailing arm or a leg and floated back.

Grotesque, abnormal combat! Like fighting in weightless water. Johnson clutched his weapon, but I twisted his wrist, held his arm outstretched so that he could not aim it. I was aware of Miko’s voice shouting on the deck outside.

Johnson's left hand was gouging at my face, his fingers plucking at my eyes. We lunged down to the floor, then up again, close to the ceiling.

I twisted his wrists. He dropped the weapon and it sank away. I tried to reach it, but could not. Then I had him by the throat. I was stronger than he, and more agile. I tried choking him, his thick bull-neck within my fingers. He kicked, scrambled, tore and gouged at me. Tried to shout, but it ended in a gurgle. And then, as he felt his breath stopped, his hands came up in an effort to tear mine loose.

We sank again to the floor. We were momentarily upright. I felt my feet touch. I bent my knees. We sank further.

And then I kicked violently upward. Our locked bodies shot to the ceiling. Johnson's head was above me. It struck the steel roof of the chart-room. A violent blow. I felt him go suddenly limp. I cast him off, and, doubling my body, I kicked at the ceiling. It sent me diagonally downward to the window, where I clung and regained stability.

And I saw Miko standing on the deck with a weapon levelled at me!

Chapter 13 The Torture

“Haljan! Yield or I’ll fire! Moa, give me the smaller one. This cursed—”

He had in his hand too large a projector. Its ray would kill me. If he wanted to take me alive, he would not fire. I chanced it.

“No!”

I tried to draw myself beneath the window. An automatic bullet projector was on the floor where Carter had dropped it. I pulled myself down. Miko did not fire. I reached the revolver. The dead bodies of the captain and purser had drifted together on the floor in the center of the room.

I hitched myself back to the window. With upraised weapon I gazed cautiously out. Miko had disappeared. The deck within my line of vision was empty.

But was it? Something told me to beware. I clung to the casement, ready upon the instant to shove myself down. There was a movement in a shadow along the deck. Then a figure rose up.

“Don’t fire, Haljan!”

The sharp command, half appeal, stopped the pressure of my finger on the trigger of the automatic. It was the tall lanky Englishman, Sir Arthur Coniston, as he called himself. So he too was one of Miko's band! The light through a dome-window fell full on him.

"If you fire, Haljan, and kill me—Miko will kill you then, surely."

From where he had been crouching he could not command my window. But now, upon the heels of his placating words, he abruptly shot. The low-powered ray, had it struck, would have felled me without killing. But it went over my head as I dropped. Its aura made my senses reel.

Coniston shouted, "Haljan!"

I did not answer. I wondered if he would dare approach to see if I had been hit. A minute passed. Then another. I thought I heard Miko's voice on the deck outside. But it was an aerial, microscopic whisper close beside me.

"We see you, Haljan! You must yield!"

Their eavesdropping vibrations, with audible projection, were upon me. I retorted aloud.

“Come and get me! You cannot take me alive.”

I do protest if this action of mine in the chart-room may seem bravado. I had no wish to die. There was within me a very healthy desire for life. But I felt, by holding out, that some chance might come wherewith I might turn events against these brigands. Yet reason told me it was hopeless. Our loyal members of the crew were killed, no doubt. Captain Carter and Balch were killed. The lookouts and Course-masters also. And Blackstone.

There remained only Dr. Frank and Snap. Their fate I did not yet know. And there was George Prince. He, perhaps, would help me if he could. But, at best, he was a dubious ally.

“You are very foolish, Haljan,” murmured the projection of Miko’s voice. And then I heard Coniston:

“See here, why would not a hundred pounds of gold-leaf tempt you? The code-words which were taken from Johnson—I mean to say, why not tell us where they are?”

So that was one of the brigands new difficulties! Snap had taken the code-word sheet, that time we sealed the purser in the cage.

I said, “You’ll never find them. And when a police ship sights us, what will you do then?”

The chances of a police ship were slim indeed, but the brigands evidently did not know that. I wondered again what had become of Snap. Was he captured—or still holding them off?

I was watching my windows; for at any moment, under cover of this talk, I might be assailed.

Gravity came suddenly to the room. Miko’s voice said. “We mean well by you, Haljan. There is your normality. Join us. We need you to chart our course.”

“And a hundred pounds of gold-leaf,” urged Coniston. “Or more. Why, this treasure—”

I could hear an oath from Miko. And then his ironic voice: “We will not bother you, Haljan. There is no hurry. You will be hungry in good time. And sleepy. Then we will come and get you. And a little acid will make you think differently about helping us....”

His vibrations died away. The pull of gravity in the room was normal. I was alone in the dim silence, with the bodies of Carter and

Johnson lying huddled on the grid. I bent to examine them. Both were dead.

My isolation was no ruse this time. The outlaws made no further attack. Half an hour passed. The deck outside, what I could see of it, was vacant. Balch lay dead close outside the chart-room door. The bodies of Blackstone and the Course-master had been removed from the turret window. A forward lookout—one of Miko's men—was on duty in the nearby tower. Hahn was at the turret controls. The ship was under orderly handling, heading back upon a new course. For the Earth? Or the Moon? It did not seem so.

I found, in the chart-room, a Benson curve-light projector which poor Captain Carter had very nearly assembled. I worked on it, trained it through my rear window, along the empty deck; bent it into the lounge archway. Upon my grid the image of the lounge interior presently focused. The passengers in the lounge were huddled in a group. Disheveled, frightened, with Moa standing watching them. Stewards were serving them with a meal.

Upon a bench, bodies were lying. Some were dead. I saw Rance Rankin. Others were evidently only injured. Dr. Frank was moving among them, attending them. Venza was there, unharmed. And I saw the gamblers, Shac and Dud, sitting white-faced, whispering

together. And Glutz's little be-ribboned, be-curled figure on a stool.

George Prince was there, standing against the walls shrouded in his mourning cloak, watching the scene with alert, roving eyes. And by the opposite doorway, the huge towering figure of Miko stood on guard. But Snap was missing.

A brief glimpse. Miko saw my Benson-light. I could have equipped a heat-ray, and fired along the curved Benson-light into that lounge. But Miko gave me no time.

He slid the lounge door closed, and Moa leaped to close the one on my side. My light was cut off; my grid showed only the blank deck and door.

Another interval. I had made plans. Futile plans! I could get into the turret perhaps, and kill Hahn. I had the invisible cloak which Johnson was wearing. I took it from his body. Its mechanism could be repaired. Why, with it I could creep about the ship, kill these brigands one by one perhaps. George Prince would be with me. The brigands who had been posing as the stewards and crew-members were unable to navigate; they would obey my orders. There were only Miko, Coniston and Hahn to kill.

Futile plans! From my window I could gaze up to the helio-room. And now abruptly I heard Snap's voice:

"No! I tell you—no!"

And Miko: "Very well. We will try this."

So Snap was captured, but not killed. Relief swept me. He was in the helio-room, and Miko was with him. But my relief was short-lived.

After a brief interval there came a moan from Snap. It floated down from the silence overhead. It made me shudder.

My Benson-beam shot into the helio window. It showed me Snap lying there on the floor. He was bound with wire. His torso had been stripped. His livid face was ghastly plain in my light.

Miko was bending over him. Miko with a heat-cylinder no longer than a finger. Its needle-beam played upon Snap's naked chest. I could see the gruesome little trail of smoke rising; and as Snap twisted and jerked, there on his flesh was the red and blistered trail of the violet-hot ray.

"Now will you tell?"

“No!”

Miko laughed. “No? Then I shall write my name a little deeper....”

A black scar now—a trail etched in the quivering flesh.

“Oh!—” Snap’s face went white as chalk as he pressed his lips together.

“Or a little acid? This fire-writing does not really hurt? Tell me what you did with those code-words!”

“No!”

In his absorption Miko did not notice my light. Nor did I have the wit to try and fire along it. I was trembling. Snap under torture!

As the beam went deeper, Snap suddenly screamed. But he ended, “No! I will send—no message for you—”

It had been only a moment. In the chart-room window beside me again a figure appeared! No image. A solid, living person, undisguised by any cloak of invisibility. George Prince had chanced my fire and had crept up upon me.

“Haljan! Don’t attack me.”

I dropped my light connections. As impulsively I stood up, I saw through the window the figure of Coniston on the deck watching the result of Prince’s venture.

“Haljan—yield.”

Prince no more than whispered it. He stood outside on the deck; the low window casement touched his waist. He leaned over it.

“He’s torturing Snap! Call out that you will yield.”

The thought had already been in my mind. Another scream from Snap chilled me with horror. I shouted,

“Miko! Stop!”

I rushed to the window and Prince gripped me.

“Louder!”

I called louder. “*Miko!* Stop!” My upflung voice mingled with Snap’s agony of protest. Then Miko heard me. His head and shoulders showed up there at the helio-room oval.

“You, Haljan?”

Prince shouted, “I have made him yield. He will obey you if you stop that torture.”

I think that poor Snap must have fainted. He was silent. I called, “Stop! I will do what you command.”

Miko jeered, “That is good. A bargain, if you and Dean obey me. Disarm him, Prince, and bring him out.”

Miko moved back into the helio-room. On the deck Coniston was advancing, but cautiously, mistrustful of me.

“Gregg.”

George Prince flung a leg over the casement and leaped lightly into the dim chart-room. His small slender figure stood beside me, clung to me.

“Gregg.”

A moment, while we stood there together. No ray was upon us. Coniston could not see us, nor could he hear our whispers.

“Gregg.”

A different voice; its throaty, husky quality gone. A soft pleading. “Gregg—

“Gregg, don’t you know me? Gregg, dear....”

Why, what was this? Not George Prince? A masquerader, yet so like George Prince.

“Gregg, don’t you know me?”

Clinging to me. A soft touch upon my arm. Fingers, clinging. A surge of warm, tingling current was flowing between us.

My sweep of instant thoughts. A speck of human Earth-dust, falling free. That was George Prince, who had been killed. George Prince’s body, disguised by the scheming Carter and Dr. Frank, buried in the guise of his sister. And this black-robed figure who was trying to help us—

“Anita! Dear God! Anita, darling! Anita!”

“Gregg, dear one!”

“Anita! Dear God!”

My arms went around her, my lips pressed hers, and felt her tremulous, eager answer.

“Gregg, dear.”

“Anita, you!”

The form of Coniston showed at our window. She cast me off. She said, with her throaty swagger of assumed masculinity:

“I have him, Sir Arthur. He will obey us.”

I sensed her warning glance. She shoved me toward the window. She said ironically, “Have no fear, Haljan. You will not be tortured, you and Dean, if you obey our commands.”

Coniston gripped me. “You fool! You caused us a lot of trouble, didn’t you? Move along there!”

He jerked me roughly through the window. Marched me the length of the deck. Out to the stern-space; opened the door of my cubby; flung me in and sealed the door upon me.

“Miko will come presently.”

I stood in the darkness of my tiny room, listening to his retreating footsteps. But my mind was not on him....

All the Universe in that instant had changed for me. Anita was alive!

Part 2

My name, Gregg Haljan. My age, twenty-five years. My occupation, at the time my narrative begins, in 2075, was third officer of the Interplanetary Space-ship *Planetara*.

Thus I introduce myself to you. For this is a continuation of the book of Gregg Haljan, and of necessity I am the chief actor therein. I shall recapitulate very briefly what has happened so far:

Unscrupulous Martian brigands were scheming for Johnny Grantline's secret radium-ore treasure, dug out of the Moon and waiting there to be picked up by the *Planetara* on her return trip from Mars.

The *Planetara* left, bound for Mars, some ten days away. Suspicious interplanetary passengers were aboard: Miko and Moa, a brother and a sister of Mars; Sir Arthur Coniston, a mysterious Englishman; Ob

Hahn, a Venus mystic. And small, effeminate George Prince and his sister, Anita. Love, I think, was born instantly between Anita and me. I found all too soon that Miko, the sinister giant from Mars, also desired her.

As we neared the Moon we received Grantline's secret message: "Stop for ore on your return voyage. Success beyond wildest hopes!" But I soon discovered that an eavesdropper in an invisible cloak had overheard it!

Soon afterwards Miko accidentally murdered a person identified as Anita Prince.

Then, in the confusion that resulted, Miko struck his great blow. The crew of the *Planetara*, secretly in his pay, rose up and killed the captain and all the officers but Snap Dean, the radio-helio operator, and myself.

I was besieged in the chart-room. George Prince leaped in upon me

—and put his arms around me. I looked at him closer—only to discover it was Anita, disguised as her brother! It was her brother, George, who had been killed! George had been in the brigands' confidence—thus Anita was able to spy for us.

Quickly we plotted. I would surrender to her, Anita Prince, whom the brigands thought was George Prince. Together we might possibly be able, with Snap's help, to turn the tide, and reclaim the *Planetara*.

I was taken to my stateroom and locked there until Miko the brigand leader should come to dispose of me. But I cared not what had happened—Anita was alive!

Chapter 14 The Brigand Leader

The giant Miko stood confronting me. He slid my cubby door closed behind him. He stood with his head towering close against my ceiling. His cloak was discarded. In his leather clothes, and with his clanking sword-ornament, his aspect carried the swagger of a brigand of old. He was bareheaded; the light from one of my tubes fell upon his grinning, leering gray face.

"So, Gregg Haljan? You have come to your senses at last. You do not wish me to write my name upon your chest? I would not have done that to Dean; he forced me. Sit back."

I had been on my bunk. I sank back at the gesture of his huge hairy arm. His forearm was bare now; the sear of a burn on it was plain to be seen. He remarked my gaze.

"True. You did that, Haljan, in Great-New York. But I bear you no malice. I want to talk to you now."

He cast about for a seat, and took the little stool which stood by my desk. His hand held a small cylinder of the Martian paralyzing ray; he rested it beside him on the desk.

"Now we can talk."

I remained silent. Alert. Yet my thoughts were whirling. Anita was alive. Masquerading now as her brother. And, with the joy of it, came a shudder. Above everything, Miko must not know.

"A great adventure we are upon, Haljan."

My thoughts came back. Miko was talking with an assumption of friendly comradeship. "All is well—and we need you, as I have said before. I am no fool. I have been aware of everything that went on aboard this ship. You, of all the officers, are most clever at the routine mathematics. Is that so?"

"Perhaps," I said.

"You are modest." He fumbled at a pocket of his jacket, produced a scroll-sheaf. I recognized it: Blackstone's figures; the calculation Blackstone roughly made of the elements of the asteroid we had passed.

"I am interested in these," Miko went on. "I want you to verify them. And this." He held up another scroll. "This is the calculation of our present position. And our course. Hahn claims he is a navigator. We

have set the ship's gravity plates—see, like this—"

He handed me the scrolls; he watched me keenly as I glanced over them.

"Well?" I said.

"You are sparing of words, Haljan. By the devils of the airways, I could make you talk! But I want to be friendly."

I handed him back the scrolls. I stood up; I was almost within reach of his weapon, but with a sweep of his great arm he abruptly knocked me back to my bunk.

"You dare?" Then he smiled. "Let us not come to blows!"

"No," I said. I returned his smile. In truth, physical violence could get me nothing in dealing with this fellow. I would have to try guile. And I saw now that his face was flushed and his eyes unnaturally bright. He had been drinking alcolite; not enough to befuddle him—but enough to make him triumphantly talkative.

"Hahn may not be much of a mathematician," I suggested. "But there is your Sir Arthur Coniston." I managed a sarcastic grin. "Is that his name?"

"Almost. Haljan, will you verify these figures?"

"Yes. But why? Where are we going?"

He laughed. "You are afraid I will not tell you! Why should I not? This great adventure of mine is progressing perfectly. A tremendous stake, Haljan. A hundred millions of dollars in gold-leaf; there will be fabulous riches for us all, when that radium ore is sold for a hundred million in gold-leaf."

"But where are we going?"

"To that asteroid," he said abruptly. "I must get rid of these passengers. I am no murderer."

With half a dozen killings in the recent fight this was hardly convincing. But he was obviously wholly serious. He seemed to read my thoughts.

"I kill only when necessary. We will land upon the asteroid. A perfect place to maroon the passengers. Is it not so? I will give them the necessities of life. They will be able to signal. And in a month or so, when we are safely finished with our adventure, a police ship no doubt will rescue them."

"And then, from the asteroid," I suggested, "we are going—"

"To the Moon, Haljan. What a clever guesser you are! Coniston and Hahn are calculating our course. But I have no great confidence in them. And so I want you."

"You have me."

"Yes. I have you. I would have killed you long ago—I am an impulsive fellow—but my sister restrained me."

He gazed at me slyly. "Moa seems strangely to like you, Haljan."

"Thanks," I said. "I'm flattered."

"She still hopes I may really win you to join us," he went on. "Gold-leaf is a wonderful thing; there would be plenty for you in this affair. And to be rich, and have the love of a woman like Moa...."

He paused. I was trying cautiously to gauge him, to get from him all the information I could. I said, with another smile, "That is premature, to talk of Moa. I will help you chart your course. But this venture, as you call it, is dangerous. A police-ship—"

"There are not many," he declared. "The chances of us encountering

one is very slim." He grinned at me. "You know that as well as I do. And we now have those code pass-words—I forced Dean to tell me where he had hidden them. If we should be challenged, our pass-word answer will relieve suspicion."

"The *Planetara*," I objected, "being overdue at Ferrok-Shahn, will cause alarm. You'll have a covey of patrol-ships after you."

"That will be two weeks from now," he smiled. "I have a ship of my own in Ferrok-Shahn. It lies there waiting now, manned and armed. I am hoping that, with Dean's help, we may be able to flash it a signal. It will join us on the Moon. Fear not for the danger, Haljan. I have great interests allied with me in this thing. Plenty of money. We have planned carefully."

He was idly fingering his cylinder; his gaze roved me as I sat docile on my bunk. "Did you think George Prince was a leader of this? A mere boy. I engaged him a year ago—his knowledge of ores is valuable."

My heart was pounding, but I strove not to show it. He went on calmly.

"I told you I am impulsive. Half a dozen times I have nearly killed

George Prince, and he knows it." He frowned. "I wish I had killed him, instead of his sister. That was an error."

There was a note of real concern in his voice. Did he love Anita Prince? It seemed so.

He added, "That is done—nothing can change it. George Prince is helpful to me. Your friend Dean is another. I had trouble with him, but he is docile now."

I said abruptly, "I don't know whether your promise means anything or not, Miko. But George Prince said you would use no more torture."

"I won't. Not if you and Dean obey me."

"You tell Dean I have agreed to that. You say he gave you the code-words we took from Johnson?"

"Yes. There was a fool! That Johnson! You blame me, Haljan, for the killing of Captain Carter? You need not. Johnson offered to try and capture you. Take you alive. He killed Carter because he was angry at him. A stupid, vengeful fool! He is dead, and I am glad of it."

My mind was on Miko's plans. I ventured. "This treasure on the

Moon—did you say it was on the Moon?"

"Don't be an idiot," he retorted. "I know as much about Grantline as you do."

"That's very little."

"Perhaps."

"Perhaps you know more, Miko. The Moon is a big place. Where, for instance, is Grantline located?"

I held my breath. Would he tell me that? A score of questions—vague plans—were in my mind. How skilled at mathematics were these brigands? Miko, Hahn, Coniston—could I fool them? If I could learn Grantline's location on the Moon, and keep the *Planetara* away from it. A pretended error of charting. Time lost—and perhaps Snap could find an opportunity to signal Earth, get help.

Miko answered my question as bluntly as I asked it. "I don't know where Grantline is located. But we will find out. He will not suspect the *Planetara*. When we get close to the Moon, we will signal and ask him. We can trick him into telling us. You think I do not know what is on your mind, Haljan? There is a secret code of signals

arranged between Dean and Grantline. I have forced Dean to confess it. Without torture! Prince helped me in that. He persuaded Dean not to defy me. A very persuasive fellow, George Prince. More diplomatic than I am, I give him credit."

I strove to hold my voice calm. "If I should join you, Miko—my word, if I ever gave it, you would find dependable—I would say George Prince is very valuable to us. You should rein your temper. He is half your size—you might some time, without intention do him injury."

He laughed. "Moa says so. But have no fear—"

"I was thinking," I persisted, "I'd like to have a talk with George Prince."

Ah, my pounding, tumultuous heart! But I was smiling calmly. And I tried to put into my voice a shrewd note of cupidity. "I really know very little about this treasure, Miko. If there were a million or two of gold-leaf in it for me—"

"Perhaps there would be."

"I was thinking. Suppose you let me have a talk with Prince? I have

some knowledge of radium ores. His skill and mine—a calculation of what Grantline's treasure may really be. You don't know; you are only assuming."

I paused. Whatever may have been in Miko's mind I cannot say. But abruptly he stood up. I had left my bunk, but he waved me back.

"Sit down. I am not like Moa. I would not trust you just because you protested you would be loyal." He picked up his cylinder. "We will talk again." He gestured to the scrolls he had left upon my desk. "Work on those. I will judge you by the results."

He was no fool, this brigand leader.

"Yes," I agreed. "You want a true course now to the asteroid?"

"Yes. I will get rid of these passengers. Then we will plan further. Do your best, Haljan—no error! By the Gods, I warn you I can check up on you!"

I said meekly, "Very well. But you ask Prince if he wants my calculations of Grantline's ore-body."

I shot Miko a foxy look as he stood by my door. I added, "You think you are clever. There is plenty you don't know. Our first night out

from the Earth—Grantline's signals—didn't it ever occur to you that I might have some figures on his treasure?"

It startled him. "Where are they?"

I tapped my forehead. "You don't suppose I was foolish enough to record them. You ask Prince if he wants to talk to me. A high thorium content in ore—you ask Prince. A hundred millions, or two hundred. It would make a big difference, Miko."

"I will think about it." He backed out and sealed the door upon me once again.

But Anita did not come. I verified Hahn's figures, which were very nearly correct. I charted a course for the asteroid; it was almost the one which had been set.

Coniston came for my results. "I say, we are not so bad as navigators, are we? I think we're jolly good, considering our inexperience. Not bad at all, eh?"

"No."

I did not think it wise to ask him about Prince.

"Are you hungry, Haljan?" he demanded.

"Yes."

A steward came with a meal. The saturnine Hahn stood at my door with a weapon upon me while I ate. They were taking no chances—and they were wise not to.

The day passed. Day and night, all the same of aspect here in the starry vault of Space. But with the ship's routine it was day.

And then another time of sleep. I slept, fitfully, worrying, trying to plan. Within a few hours we would be nearing the asteroid.

The time of sleep was nearly passed. My chronometer marked five A. M. of our original Earth starting time. The seal of my cubby door hissed. The door slowly, opened.

Anita!

She stood there with her cloak around her. A distance away on the shadowed deck-space Coniston was loitering.

"Anita!" I whispered it.

"Gregg, dear!"

She turned and gestured to the watching brigand. "I will not be long, Coniston."

She came in and half closed the door upon us, leaving it open enough so that we could make sure that Coniston did not advance.

I stepped back where he could not see us.

"Anita!"

She flung herself into my opened arms.

Chapter 15 The Masquerader

A moment when beyond all thought of the nearby brigand—or the possibility of an eavesdropping ray trained now upon my little cubby—a moment while Anita and I held each other; and whispered those things which could mean nothing to the world, but which were all the world to us.

Then it was she whose wits brought us back from the shining fairyland of our love, into the sinister reality of the *Planetara*.

"Gregg, if they are listening—"

I pushed her away. This brave little masquerader! Not for my life, or for all the lives on the ship, would I consciously have endangered her.

"But the ore," I said aloud. "There was, in Grantline's message—See here, Prince."

Coniston was too far away on the deck to hear us. Anita went to my door again and waved at him reassuringly. I put my ear to the door opening, and listened at the space across the grid of the ventilator over my bunk. The hum of a vibration would have been audible at those two points. But there was nothing.

"It's all right," I whispered. "Anita—not you who was killed! I can hardly realize it now. Not you whom they buried yesterday morning."

We stood and whispered, and she clung to me—so small beside me. With the black robe thrown aside, it seemed that I could not miss the curves of her woman's figure. A dangerous game she was playing. Her hair had been cut short to the base of her neck, in the fashion of her dead brother. Her eyelashes had been clipped; the line of her

brows altered. And now, in the light of my ray tube as it shone upon her earnest face, I could remark other changes. Glutz, the little beauty specialist, was in this secret. With plastic skill he had altered the set of her jaw with his wax—put masculinity there.

She was whispering: "It was—was poor George whom Miko shot."

I had now the true version of what had occurred. Miko had been forcing his wooing upon Anita. George Prince was a weakling whose only good quality was a love for his sister. Some years ago he had fallen into evil ways. Been arrested, and then discharged from his position with the Federated Radium Corporation. He had taken up with evil companions in Great-New York. Mostly Martians. And Miko had met him. His technical knowledge, his training with the Federated Corporation, made him valuable to Miko's enterprise. And so Prince had joined the brigands.

Of all this, Anita had been unaware. She had never liked Miko. Feared him. And it seemed that the Martian had some hold upon her brother, which puzzled and frightened Anita.

Then Miko had fallen in love with her. George had not liked it. And that night on the *Planetara*, Miko had come and knocked upon Anita's door. Incautiously she opened it; he forced himself in. And

when she repulsed him, struggled with him, George had been awakened.

She was whispering to me now. "My room was dark. We were all three struggling. George was holding me—the shot came—and I screamed."

And Miko had fled, not knowing whom his shot had hit in the darkness.

"And when George died, Captain Carter wanted me to impersonate him. We planned it with Dr. Frank, to try and learn what Miko and the others were doing. Because I never knew that poor George had fallen into such evil things."

I could only hold her thankfully in my arms. The lost what-might-have-been seemed coming back to us.

"And they cut my hair, Gregg, and Glutz altered my face a little, and I did my best. But there was no time—it came upon us so quickly."

And she whispered, "But I love you, Gregg. I want to be the first to say it: I love you—I love you."

But we had the sanity to try and plan.

"Anita, when you go back, tell Miko we discussed radium ores. You'll have to be careful, clever. Don't say too much. Tell him we estimate the treasure at a hundred and thirty millions."

I told her what Miko had vouchsafed me of his plans. She knew all that. And Snap knew it. She had had a few moments alone with Snap. Gave me now a message from him:

"We'll pull out of this, Gregg."

With Snap she had worked out a plan. There were Snap and I; and Shac and Dud Ardley, upon whom we could doubtless depend. And Dr. Frank. Against us were Miko and his sister; and Coniston and Hahn. Of course there were the members of the crew. But we were numerically the stronger when it came to true leadership. Unarmed and guarded now. But if we could break loose—recapture the ship....

I sat listening to Anita's eager whispers. It seemed feasible. Miko did not altogether trust George Prince; Anita was now unarmed.

"But I can make opportunity! I can get one of their ray cylinders, and an invisible cloak equipment."

That cloak—it had been hidden in Miko's room when Carter

searched for it in A20—was now in the chart-room by Johnson's body. It had been repaired now; Anita thought she could get possession of it.

We worked out the details of the plan. Anita would arm herself, and come and release me. Together, with a paralyzing ray, we could creep aboard the ship, overcome these brigands one by one. There were so few of the leaders. With them felled, and with us in control of the turret and the helio-room we could force the crew to stay at their posts. There were, Anita said, no navigators among Miko's crew. They would not dare oppose us.

"But it should be done at once, Anita. In a few hours we will be at the asteroid."

"Yes. I will go now—try and get the weapons."

"Where is Snap?"

"Still in the helio-room. One of the crew guards him."

Coniston was roaming the ship; he was still loitering on the deck, watching our door. Hahn was in the turret. The morning watch of the crew were at their posts in the hull-corridors; the stewards were

preparing a morning meal. There were nine members of subordinates altogether, Anita had calculated. Six of them were in Miko's pay; the other three—our own men who had not been killed in the fighting—had joined the brigands.

"And Dr. Frank, Anita?"

He was in the lounge. All the passengers were herded there, with Miko and Moa alternating on guard.

"I will arrange it with Venza," Anita whispered swiftly. "She will tell the others. Dr. Frank knows about it now. He thinks it can be done."

The possibility of it swept me anew. The brigands were of necessity scattered singly about the ship. One by one, creeping under cover of an invisible cloak, I could fell them, and replace them without alarming the others. My thoughts leaped to it. We would strike down the guard in the helio-room. Release Snap. At the turret we could assail Hahn, and replace him with Snap.

Coniston's voice outside broke in upon us. "Prince."

He was coming forward. Anita stood in the doorway. "I have the figures, Coniston. By God, this Haljan is with us! And clever! We

think it will total a hundred and thirty millions. What a stake!"

She whispered, "Gregg, dear—I'll be back soon. We can do it—be ready."

"Anita—be careful of yourself! If they should suspect you...."

"I'll be careful. In an hour, Gregg, or less, I'll come back. All right, Coniston. Where is Miko? I want to see him. Stay where you are, Haljan! All in good time Miko will trust you with your liberty. You'll be rich like us all, never fear."

She swaggered out upon the deck, waved at the brigand, and banged my cubby door in my face.

I sat upon my bunk. Waiting. Would she come back? Would she be successful?

Chapter 16 In the Blue-lit Corridor

She came. I suppose it was no more than an hour: it seemed an eternity of apprehension. There was the slight hissing of the seal of my door. The panel slid. I had leaped from my bunk where in the darkness I was lying tense.

"Prince?" I did not dare say, "Anita."

"Gregg."

Her voice. My gaze swept the deck as the panel opened. Neither Coniston nor anyone else was in sight, save Anita's dark-robed figure which came into my room.

"You got it?" I asked her in a low whisper.

I held her for an instant, kissed her. But she pushed me away with quick hands.

"Gregg, dear—"

She was breathless. My kisses, and the tenseness of what lay before us were to blame.

"Gregg, see, I have it. Give us a little light—we must hurry!"

In the blue dimness I saw that she was holding one of the Martian cylinders. The smallest size; it would paralyze, but not kill.

"Only one, Anita?"

"Yes. I had it before, but Miko took it from me. It was in his room. And this—"

The invisible cloak. We laid it on my grid, and I adjusted its mechanism. A cloak of the reflecting-absorbing variety.*

*(The principle of this invisible cloak involves the use of an electronized fabric. All color is absorbed. The light rays reflected to the eye of the observer thus show an image of empty blackness. There is also created about the cloak a magnetic field which by natural laws bends the rays of light from objects behind it. This principle of the natural bending of light when passing through a magnetic field was first recognized by Albert Einstein, a scientist of the Twentieth century. In the case of this invisible cloak, the bending light rays, by making visible what was behind the cloak's blackness, thus destroyed its solid black outline and gave a pseudo-invisibility which was fairly effective under favorable conditions.)

I donned it, and drew its hood, and threw on its current.

"All right, Anita?"

"Yes."

"Can you see me?"

"No." She stepped back a foot or two further. "Not from here. But you must let no one approach too close."

Then she came forward, put out her hand, fumbled until she found me.

It was our plan to have me follow her out. Anyone observing us would see only the robed figure of the supposed George Prince, and I would escape notice.

The situation about the ship was almost unchanged. Anita had secured the weapon and the cloak and slipped away to my cubby without being observed.

"You're sure of that?"

"I think so, Gregg. I was careful."

Moa was now in the lounge, guarding the passengers. Hahn was asleep in the chart-room; Coniston was in the turret. Coniston would be off duty presently, Anita said, with Hahn taking his place. There were look-outs in the forward and stern watch-towers, and a guard upon Snap in the helio-room.

"Is he inside the room, Anita?"

"Snap? Yes."

"No—the guard."

"No. He was sitting upon the spider bridge at the door."

This was unfortunate. That guard could see all the deck clearly. He might be suspicious of George Prince wandering around; it would be difficult to get near enough to assail him. This cylinder, I knew, had an effective range of only some twenty feet.

Anita and I were swiftly whispering. It was necessary now to decide exactly what we were to do; once under observation outside, there must be no hesitation, no fumbling.

"Coniston is sharpest, Gregg. He will be the hardest to get near."

The languid-spoken Englishman was the one Anita most feared. His alert eyes seemed to miss nothing. Perhaps he was suspicious of this George Prince—Anita thought so.

"But where is Miko?" I whispered.

The brigand leader had gone below a few moments ago, down into the hull-corridor. Anita had seized the opportunity to come to me.

"We can attack Hahn in the chart-room first," I suggested. "And get the other weapons. Are they still there?"

"Yes. But Gregg, the forward deck is very bright."

We were approaching the asteroid. Already its light like a brilliant moon was brightening the forward deck-space. It made me realize how much haste was necessary.

We decided to go down into the hull-corridors. Locate Miko. Fell him, and hide him. His non-appearance back on deck would very soon throw the others into confusion, especially now with our impending landing upon the asteroid. And under cover of this confusion we would try and release Snap.

We had been arguing no more than a minute or two. We were ready. Anita slid my door wide. She stepped through, with me soundlessly scurrying after her. The empty, silent deck was alternately dark with shadow-patches and bright with blobs of starlight. A sheen of the Sun's corona was mingled with it; and from forward came the radiance of the asteroid's mellow silver glow.

Anita turned to seal my door; within my faintly humming cloak I stood beside her. Was I invisible in this light? Almost directly over us, close under the dome, the look-out sat in his little tower. He gazed down at Anita.

Amidships, high over the cabin superstructure, the helio-room hung dark and silent. The guard on its bridge was visible. He, too, looked down.

A tense instant. Then I breathed again. There was no alarm. The two guards answered Anita's gesture.

Anita said aloud into my empty cubby: "Miko will come for you presently, Haljan. He told me to tell you that he wants you at the turret controls to land us on the asteroid."

She finished sealing my door and turned away; started forward along the deck. I followed. My steps were soundless in my elastic-bottomed shoes. Anita swaggered with a noisy tread. Near the door of the smoking room a small incline passage led downward. We went into it.

The passage was dimly blue-lit. We descended its length, came to the main corridor, which ran the length of the hull. A vaulted metal

passage, with doors to the control rooms opening from it. Dim lights showed at intervals.

The humming of the ship was more apparent here. It drowned the slight humming of my cloak. I crept after Anita; my hand under the cloak clutched the ray weapon.

A steward passed us. I shrank aside to avoid him.

Anita spoke to him. "Where is Miko, Ellis?"

"In the ventilator-room, Mr. Prince. There was difficulty with the air renewal."

Anita nodded, and moved on. I could have felled that steward as he passed me. Oh, if I only had, how different things might have been!

But it seemed needless. I let him go, and he turned into a nearby door which led to the galley.

Anita moved forward. If we could come upon Miko alone. Abruptly she turned, and whispered, "Gregg, if other men are with him, I'll draw him away. You watch your chance."

What little things may overthrow one's careful plans! Anita had not

realized how close to her I was following. And her turning so unexpectedly caused me to collide with her sharply.

"Oh!" She exclaimed it involuntarily. Her outflung hand had unwittingly gripped my wrist, caught the electrode there. The touch burned her, and close-circuited my robe. There was a hiss. My current burned out the tiny fuses.

My invisibility was gone! I stood, a tall black-hooded figure, revealed to the gaze of anyone who might be near!

The futile plans of humans! We had planned so carefully! Our calculations, our hopes of what we could do, came clattering now in a sudden wreckage around us.

"Anita, run!"

If I were seen with her, then her own disguise would probably be discovered. That above everything would be disaster!

"Anita, get away from me! I must try it alone!"

I could hide somewhere, repair the cloak perhaps. Or, since now I was armed, why could I not boldly start an assault?

"Gregg, we must get you back to your cubby!" She was clinging to me in a panic.

"No! You run! Get away from me! Don't you understand? George Prince has no business here with me! They'd kill you!"

Or worse—- Miko would discover it was Anita, not George Prince.

"Gregg, let's get back to the deck."

I pushed at her. Both of us in sudden confusion.

From behind me there came a shout. That accursed steward! He had returned, to investigate perhaps what George Prince was doing in this corridor. He heard our voices; his shout in the silence of the ship sounded horribly loud. The white-clothed shape of him was in the nearby doorway. He stood stricken in surprise at seeing me. And then turned to run.

I fired my paralyzing cylinder through my cloak. Got him! He fell. I shoved Anita violently.

"Run! Tell Miko to come—tell him you heard a shout! He won't suspect you!"

"But Gregg—"

"You mustn't be found out! You're our only hope, Anita! I'll hide, fix the cloak, or get back to my cubby. We'll try it again."

It decided her. She scurried down the corridor. I whirled the other way. The steward's shout might not have been heard.

Then realization flashed to me. That steward would be revived. He was one of Miko's men: for two voyages he had been a spy upon the *Planetara*. He would be revived and tell what he had seen and heard. Anita's disguise would be revealed.

A cold-blooded killing I do protest went against me. But it was necessary. I flung myself upon him. I beat his skull with the metal of my cylinder.

I stood up. My hood had fallen back from my head. I wiped my bloody hands on my useless cloak. I had smashed the cylinder.

"Haljan!"

Anita's voice! A sharp note of horror and warning. I became aware that in the corridor, forty feet down its dim length, Miko had appeared, with Anita behind him. His rifle-bullet-projector was

leveled. It spat at me. But Anita had pulled at his arm.

The explosive report was sharply deafening in the confined space of the corridor. With a spurt of flame the leaden pellet struck over my head against the vaulted ceiling.

Miko was struggling with Anita. "Prince, you idiot!"

"Miko, don't! It's Haljan! Don't kill him—"

The turmoil brought members of the crew. From the shadowed oval near me they came running. I flung the useless cylinder at them. But I was trapped in the narrow passage.

I might have fought my way out. Or Miko might have shot me. But there was the danger that, in her horror, Anita would betray herself.

I backed against the wall. "Don't kill me! See, I will not fight!"

I flung up my arms. And the crew, emboldened, and courageous under Miko's gaze, leaped on me and bore me down.

The futile plans of humans! Anita and I had planned so carefully, and in a few brief minutes of action it had come only to this!

Chapter 17 A Woman of Mars

"So, Gregg Haljan, you are not as loyal as you pretend!"

Miko was livid with suppressed anger. They had stripped the cloak from me, and flung me back in my cubby. Miko was now confronting me; at the door Moa stood watching. And Anita was behind her. I sat outwardly defiant and sullen on my bunk. But I was alert and tense, fearful still of what Anita's emotion might betray her into doing.

"Not so loyal," Miko repeated. "And a fool! Do you think I am such a child you can escape me!"

He swung around. "How did he get out of here? Prince, you came in here!"

My heart was wildly thumping. But Anita retorted with a touch of spirit:

"I came to tell him what you commanded. To check Hahn's latest figures—and to be ready to take the controls when we go into the asteroid's atmosphere."

"Well, how did he get out?"

"How should I know?" she parried. Little actress! Her spirit helped to allay my fear. She held her cloak close around her in the fashion they had come to expect from the George Prince who had just buried his sister. "How should I know, Miko? I sealed his door."

"But did you?"

"Of course he did," Moa put in.

"Ask your look-outs," said Anita. "They saw me—I waved to them just as I sealed the door."

I ventured, "I have been taught to open doors." I managed a sly, lugubrious smile. "I shall not try it again, Miko."

Nothing had been said about my killing of the steward. I thanked my constellations now that he was dead. "I shall not try it again," I repeated.

A glance passed between Miko and his sister. Miko said abruptly, "You seem to realize that it is not my purpose to kill you. And you presume upon it."

"I shall not again." I eyed Moa. She was gazing at me steadily. She said, "Leave me with him, Miko...." She smiled. "Gregg Haljan, we

are no more than twenty thousand miles from the asteroid now. The calculations for retarding are now in operation."

It was what had taken Miko below, that and trouble with the ventilating system, which was soon rectified. But the retarding of the ship's velocity when nearing a destination required accurate manipulation. These brigands were fearful of their own skill. That was obvious. It gave me confidence. I was really needed. They would not harm me. Except for Miko's impulsive temper, I was in no danger from them—not now, certainly.

Moa was saying, "I think I may make you understand, Gregg. We have tremendous riches within our grasp."

"I know it," I added with sudden thought. "But there are many with whom to divide this treasure...."

Miko caught my intended implication. "By the infernal, this fellow may have felt he could seize the treasure for himself! Because he is a navigator!"

Moa said vehemently, "Do not be an idiot, Gregg! You could not do it! There will be fighting with Grantline."

My purpose was accomplished. They seemed to see me a willing outlaw like themselves. As though it were a bond between us. And they could win me.

"Leave me with him," said Moa.

Miko acquiesced. "For a few minutes only." He proffered a heat-ray cylinder, but she refused it.

"I am not afraid of him."

Miko swung on me. "Within an hour we will be nearing the atmosphere. Will you take the controls?"

"Yes."

He set his heavy jaw. His eyes bored into me. "You're a strange fellow, Haljan. I can't make you out. I am not angry now. Do you think, when I am deadly serious, that I mean what I say?"

His calm words set a sudden shiver over me. I checked my smile.

"Yes," I said.

"Well then, I will tell you this: not for all of Prince's well-meaning

interference, or Moa's liking for you, or my own need of your skill, will I tolerate more trouble from you. The next time—I will kill you. Do you believe me?"

"Yes."

"That is all I want to say. You kill my men, and my sister says I must not hurt you. I am not a child to be ruled by a woman!"

He held his huge fist before my face. "With these fingers I will twist your neck! Do you believe it?"

"Yes." I did indeed.

He swung on his heel. "If Moa wants to try and put sense into your head—I hope she does. Bring him to the lounge when you are finished, Moa. Come, Prince—Hahn will need us." He chuckled grimly. "Hahn seems to fear we will plunge into this asteroid like a wild comet gone suddenly tangent!"

Anita moved aside to let him through the door. I caught a glimpse of her set white face as she followed him down the deck.

Then Moa's bulk blocked the doorway. She faced me.

"Sit where you are, Gregg." She turned and closed the door upon us. "I am not afraid of you. Should I be?"

"No," I said.

She came and sat down beside me. "If you should attempt to leave this room, the stern look-out has orders to bore you through."

"I have no intention of leaving the room," I retorted. "I do not want to commit suicide."

"I thought you did. You seem minded in such a fashion. Gregg, why are you so foolish?"

I remained silent.

"Why?" she demanded.

I said carefully, "This treasure—you are many who will divide it. You have all these men on the *Planetara*. And in Ferrok-Shahn, others, no doubt."

I paused. Would she tell me? Could I make her talk of that other brigand ship which Miko had said was waiting on Mars? I wondered if he had been able to signal it. The distance from here to Mars was

great; yet upon other voyages Snap's signals had gotten through. My heart sank at the thought. Our situation here was desperate enough. The passengers soon would be cast upon the asteroid: there would be left only Snap, Anita and myself. We might recapture the ship, but I doubted it now. My thoughts were turning to our arrival upon the Moon. We three might, perhaps, be able to thwart the attack upon Grantline, hold the brigands off until help from the Earth might come.

But with another brigand ship, fully manned and armed, coming from Mars, the condition would be immeasurably worse. Grantline had some twenty men, and his camp, I knew, would be reasonably fortified. I knew, too, that Johnny Grantline would fight to his last man.

Moa was saying, "I would like to tell you our plans, Gregg."

Her gaze was on my face. Keen eyes, but they were luminous now—an emotion in them sweeping her. But outwardly she was calm, stern-lipped.

"Well, why don't you tell me?" I said. "If I am to help you...."

"Gregg, I want you with us. Don't you understand? We are not many.

My brother and I are guiding this affair. With your help, I would feel differently."

"The ship at Ferrok-Shahn—"

My fears were realized. She said, "I think our signals reached it. Dean tried, and Coniston was checking him."

"You think the ship is coming?"

"Yes."

"Where will it join us?"

"At the Moon. We will be there in thirty hours. Your figures gave that, did they not, Gregg?"

"Yes. And the other ship—how fast is it?"

"Quite fast. In eight days—or nine, perhaps—it will reach the Moon."

She seemed willing enough to talk. There was indeed, no particular reason for reticence; I could not, she naturally felt, turn the knowledge to account.

"Manned—" I prompted.

"About forty men."

"And armed? Long range projectors?"

"You ask very avid questions, Gregg!"

"Why should I not? Don't you suppose I'm interested?" I touched her. "Moa, did it ever occur to you, if once you and Miko trusted me—which you don't—I might show more interest in joining you?"

The look on her face emboldened me. "Did you ever think of that, Moa? And some arrangement for my share of this treasure? I am not like Johnson, to be hired for a hundred pounds of gold-leaf."

"Gregg, I will see that you get your share. Riches, for you—and me."

"I was thinking, Moa, when we land at the Moon to-morrow—where is our equipment?"

The Moon, with its lack of atmosphere, needed special equipment. I had never heard Carter mention what apparatus the *Planetara* was carrying.

Moa laughed. "We have located air-suits and helmets—a variety of suitable apparatus, Gregg. But we were not foolish enough to leave Great-New York on this voyage without our own arrangements. My brother, and Coniston and Prince—all of us shipped crates of freight consigned to Ferrok-Shahn—and Rankin had special baggage marked 'theatrical apparatus.'"

I understood it now. These brigands had boarded the *Planetara* with their own Moon equipment, disguised as freight and personal baggage. Shipped in bond, to be inspected by the tax officials of Mars.

"It is on board now. We will open it when we leave the asteroid, Gregg. We are well equipped."

She bent toward me. And suddenly her long lean fingers were gripping my shoulders.

"Gregg, look at me!"

I gazed into her eyes. There was passion there; and her voice was suddenly intense.

"Gregg, I told you once a Martian girl goes after what she wants. It

is you I want—"

Not for me to play like a cad upon a woman's emotions! "Moa, you flatter me."

"I love you." She held me off, gazing at me. "Gregg—"

I must have smiled. And abruptly she released me.

"So you think it amusing?"

"No. But on Earth—"

"We are not on the Earth. Nor am I of the Earth!" She was gauging me keenly. No note of pleading was in her voice; a stern authority; and the passion was swinging to anger.

"I am like my brother: I do not understand you, Gregg Haljan. Perhaps you think you are clever? It seems stupidity, the fatuousness of man!"

"Perhaps," I said.

There was a moment of silence. "Gregg, I said I loved you. Have you no answer?"

"No." In truth, I did not know what sort of answer it would be best to make. Whatever she must have read in my eyes, it stirred her to fury. Her fingers with the strength of a man in them, dug into my shoulders. Her gaze searched me.

"You think you love someone else? Is that it?"

That was horribly startling; but she did not mean it just that way. She amended with caustic venom: "That little Anita Prince! You thought you loved her! Was that it?"

"No!"

But I hardly deceived her. "Sacred to her memory! Her ratlike little face—soft voice like a purring, sniveling cat! Is that what you're remembering, Gregg Haljan?" she sneered.

I tried to laugh. "What nonsense!"

"Is it? Then why are you cold under my touch? Am I—a girl descended from the Martian flame-workers—impotent now to awaken a man?"

A woman scorned! In all the Universe there could be no more dangerous an enemy. An incredible venom shot from her eyes.

"That miserable mouselike creature! Well for her that my brother killed her."

It struck me cold. If Anita was unmasked, beyond all the menace of Miko's wooing, I knew that the venom of Moa's jealousy was a greater danger.

I said sharply, "Don't be simple, Moa!" I shook off her grip. "You imagine too much. You forget that I am a man of the Earth and you a girl of Mars."

"Is that reason why we should not love?"

"No. But our instincts are different. Men of the Earth are born to the chase."

I was smiling. With thought of Anita's danger I could find it readily in my heart to dupe this Amazon.

"Give me time, Moa. You attract me."

"You lie!"

"Do you think so?" I gripped her arm with all the power of my fingers. It must have hurt her, but she gave no sign; her gaze clung to

me steadily.

"I don't know what to think, Gregg Haljan...."

I held my grip. "Think what you like. Men of Earth have been known to kill the thing they love."

"You want me to fear you?"

"Perhaps."

She smiled scornfully. "That is absurd."

I released her. I said earnestly, "I want you to realize that if you treat me fairly, I can be of great advantage to this venture. There will be fighting—I am fearless."

Her venomous expression was softening. "I think that is true, Gregg."

"And you need my navigating skill. Even now I should be in the turret."

I stood up. I half expected she would stop me, but she did not. I added, "Shall we go?"

She stood beside me. Her height brought her face level with mine.

"I think you will cause no more trouble, Gregg?"

"Of course not. I am not wholly witless."

"You have been."

"Well, that is over." I hesitated. Then I added, "A man of Earth does not yield to love when there is work to do. This treasure—"

I think that of everything I said, this last most convinced her.

She interrupted, "That I understand." Her eyes were smoldering. "When it is over—when we are rich—then I will claim you, Gregg."

She turned from me. "Are you ready?"

"Yes. No! I must get that sheet of Hahn's last figures."

"Are they checked?"

"Yes." I picked the sheet up from my desk. "Hahn is fairly accurate, Moa."

"A fool nevertheless. An apprehensive fool."

A comradeship seemed coming between us. It was my purpose to establish it.

"Are we going to maroon Dr. Frank with the passengers?" I asked.

"Yes."

"But he may be of use to us." I wanted Dr. Frank kept aboard. I still felt that there was a chance for us to recapture the ship.

But Moa shook her head decisively. "My brother has decided not. We will be well rid of Dr. Frank. Are you ready, Gregg?"

"Yes."

She opened the door. Her gesture reassured the look-out, who was alertly watching the stern watch-tower.

"Come, Gregg."

I stepped out, and followed her forward along the deck, which now was bright with the radiance of the nearby asteroid.

Chapter 18 Marooned on an Asteroid

A fair little world. I had thought so before; and I thought so now as I gazed at the asteroid hanging so close before our bow. A huge, thin crescent, with the Sun off to one side behind it. A silver crescent, tinged with red. From this near viewpoint, all of the little globe's disc was visible. The shadowed portion lay dimly red, mysteriously; the sunlit crescent—widening visibly is we approached—was gleaming silver. Inky moonlike shadows in the hollows, brilliant light upon the mountain heights. The seas lay in gray patches. The convexity of the disc was sharply defined. So small a world! Fair and beautiful, shrouded with clouded areas.

"Where is Miko?"

"In the lounge, Gregg."

"Can we stop there?"

Moa turned into the lounge archway. Strange, tense scene. I saw Anita at once. Her robed figure lurked in an inconspicuous corner; her eyes were upon me as Moa and I entered, but she did not move. The thirty-odd passengers were huddled in a group. Solemn, white-faced men, frightened women. Some of them were sobbing. One

Earth-woman—a young widow—sat holding her little girl, and wailing with uncontrolled hysteria. The child knew me. As I appeared now, with my gold-laced white coat over my shoulders, the little child seemed to see in my uniform a mark of authority. She left her mother and ran to me.

"You, please—you will help us? My moms is crying."

I sent her gently back. But there came upon me then a compassion for these innocent passengers, fated to have embarked upon this ill-starred voyage. Herded here in this cabin, with brigands like pirates of old guarding them. Waiting now to be marooned on an uninhabited asteroid roaming in space. A sense of responsibility swept me. I swung upon Miko. He stood with a nonchalant grace, lounging against the wall with a cylinder dangling in his hand. He anticipated me.

"So, Haljan—she put some sense into your head? No more trouble? Then get into the turret. Moa, stay there with him. Send Hahn here. Where is that ass Coniston? We will be in the atmosphere shortly."

I said, "No more trouble from me, Miko. But these passengers—what preparation are you making for them on the asteroid?"

He stared in surprise. Then he laughed. "I am no murderer. The crew is preparing food, all we can spare. And tools. They can build themselves shelter—they will be picked up in a few weeks."

Dr. Frank was here. I caught his gaze, but he did not speak. On the lounge couches there still lay the quarter-score bodies. Rankin, who had been killed by Blackstone in the fight; a man passenger killed; a woman and a man wounded.

Miko added, "Dr. Frank will take his medical supplies—he will care for the wounded. There are other bodies among the crew." His gesture was deprecating. "I have not buried them. We will put them ashore; easier that way."

The passengers were all eyeing me. I said:

"You have nothing to fear. I will guarantee you the best equipment we can spare. You will give them apparatus with which to signal?" I demanded of Miko.

"Yes. Get to the turret."

I turned away, with Moa after me. Again the little girl ran forward.

"Come—speak to my moms! She is crying."

It was across the cabin from Miko. Coniston had appeared from the deck; it created a slight diversion. He joined Miko.

"Wait," I said to Moa. "She is afraid of you. This is humanity."

I pushed Moa back. I followed the child. I had seen that Venza was sitting with the child's weeping mother. This was a ruse to get word with me.

I stood before the terrified woman while the little girl clung to my legs.

I said gently, "Don't be so frightened. Dr. Frank will take care of you. There is no danger—you will be safer on the asteroid than here on the ship."

I leaned down and touched her shoulder. "There is no danger."

I was between Venza and the open cabin. Venza whispered swiftly, "When we are landing, Gregg, I want you to make a commotion—anything—just as the women passengers go ashore."

"Why? No, of course you will have food, Mrs. Francis."

"Never mind! An instant. Just confusion. Go, Gregg—don't speak

now!"

I raised the child. "You take care of mother." I kissed her.

From across the cabin Miko's sardonic voice made me turn. "Touching sentimentality, Haljan! Get to your post in the turret!"

His rasping note of annoyance brooked no delay. I set the child down. I said, "I will land us in an hour. Depend on it."

Hahn was at the controls when Moa and I reached the turret.

"You will land us safely, Haljan?" he demanded anxiously.

I pushed him away. "Miko wants you in the lounge."

"You take command here?"

"Of course, Hahn. I am no more anxious for a crash than you."

He sighed with relief. "That is true. I am no expert at atmospheric entry, Haljan—nor Coniston, nor Miko."

"Have no fear. Sit down, Moa."

I waved to the look-out in the forward watch-tower, and got his routine gesture. I rang the corridor bells, and the normal signals came promptly back.

"It's correct, Hahn. Get away with you." I called after him. "Tell Miko that things are all right here."

Hahn's small dark figure, lithe as a leopard in his tight fitting trousers and jacket with his robe now discarded, went swiftly down the spider incline and across the deck.

"Moa, where is Snap? By the infernal, if he has been injured!—"

Up on the helio-room bridge the brigand guard still sat. Then I saw that Snap was out there sitting with him. I waved from the turret window, and Snap's cheery gesture answered me. His voice carried down through the silver moonlight: "Land us safely, Gregg. These weird amateur navigators!"

Within the hour I had us dropping into the asteroid's atmosphere. The ship heated steadily. The pressure went up. It kept me busy with the instruments and the calculations. But my signals were always promptly answered from below. The brigand crew did its part efficiently.

At a hundred and fifty thousand feet I shifted the gravity plates to the landing combinations, and started the electronic engines.

"All safe, Gregg?" Moa sat at my elbow; her eyes, with what seemed a glow of admiration in them, followed my busy routine activities.

"Yes. The crew works well."

The electronic streams flowed out like a rocket tail behind us. The *Planetara* caught their impetus. In the rarified air, our bow lifted slightly, like a ship riding a gentle ground swell. At a hundred thousand feet we sailed gently forward, hull down to the asteroid's surface, cruising to seek a landing space.

A little sea was now beneath us. A shadowed sea, deep purple in the night down there. Occasional green-verdured islands showed, with the lines of white surf marking them. Beyond the sea, a curving coastline was visible. Rocky headlines, behind which mountain foothills rose in serrated, verdured ranks. The sunlight edged the distant mountains; and presently this rapidly turning little world brought the sunlight forward.

It was day beneath us. We slid gently downward. Thirty thousand feet now, above a sparkling blue ocean. The coastline was just

ahead: green with a lush, tropical vegetation. Giant trees, huge-leaved. Long dangling vines; air plants, with giant pods and vivid orchidlike blossoms.

I sat at the turret window, staring through my glasses. A fair little world, yet obviously uninhabited. I could fancy that all this was newly-sprung vegetation. This asteroid had whirled in from the cold of the interplanetary space far outside our Solar System. A few years ago—as time might be measured astronomically, it was no more than yesterday—this fair landscape was congealed white and bleak, with a sweep of glacial ice. But the seeds of life miraculously were here. The miracle of life! Under the warming, germinating sunlight, the verdure sprung.

"Can you find landing space, Gregg?"

Moa's question brought back my wandering fancies. I saw an upland glade, a level spread of ferns with the forest banked around it. A cliff-height nearby, frowning down at the sea.

"Yes. I can land us there." I showed her through the glasses. I rang the sirens, and we spiraled, descending further. The mountain tops were now close beneath us. Clouds were overhead, white masses with blue sky behind them. A day of brilliant sunlight. But soon,

with our forward cruising, it was night. The sunlight dropped beneath the sharply convex horizon; the sea and the land went purple.

A night of brilliant stars; the Earth was a blazing blue-red point of light. The heavens visibly were revolving; in an hour or so it would be daylight again.

On the forward deck now Coniston had appeared, commanding half a dozen of the crew. They were carrying up caskets of food and the equipment which was to be given the marooned passengers. And making ready the disembarking incline, loosening the seals of the side-dome windows.

Sternward on the deck, by the lounge oval, I could see Miko standing. And occasionally the roar of his voice at the passengers sounded.

My vagrant thought flung back into Earth's history. Like this, ancient travelers of the surface of the sea were herded by pirates to walk the plank, or put ashore, marooned upon some fair desert island of the tropic Spanish main.

Hahn came mounting our turret incline. "All is well, Gregg Haljan?"

"Get to your work," Moa told him sharply. "We land in an hour-quadrant."

He retreated, joining the bustle and confusion which now was beginning on the deck. It struck me—could I turn that confusion to account? Would it be possible, now at the last moment, to attack these brigands? Snap still sat outside the helio-room doorway. But his guard was alert, with upraised projector. And that guard, I saw, in his position high amidships, commanded all the deck.

And I saw too, as the passengers now were herded in a line from the lounge oval, that Miko had roped and bound all of the men. And a clanking chain connected them. They came like a line of convicts, marching forward, and stopped on the open deck-space near the base of the turret. Dr. Frank's grim face gazed up at me.

Miko ordered the women and children in a group beside the chained men. His words to them reached me: "You are in no danger. When we land, be careful. You will find gravity very different—this is a very small world."

I flung on the landing lights; the deck glowed with the blue radiance; the search-beams shot down beside our hull. We hung now a thousand feet above the forest glade. I cut off the electronic streams.

We poised, with the gravity-plates set at normal, and only a gentle night-breeze to give us a slight side drift. This I could control with the lateral propeller rudders.

For all my busy landing routine, my mind was on other things. Venza's swift words back there in the lounge. I was to create a commotion while the passengers were landing. Why? Had she and Dr. Frank, perhaps, some last minute desperate purposes?

I determined I would do what she said. Shout, or mis-order the lights. That would be easy. But to what advantage?

I was glad it was night—I had, indeed, calculated our descent so that the landing would be in darkness. But to what purpose? These brigands were very alert. There was nothing I could think of to do which would avail us anything more than a possible swift death under Miko's anger.

"Well done, Gregg!" said Moa.

I cut off the last of the propellers. With scarcely a perceptible jar, the *Planetara* grounded, rose like a feather and settled to rest in the glade. The deep purple night with stars overhead was around us. I hissed out our interior air through the dome and hull-ports, and

admitted the night-air of the asteroid. My calculations—of necessity mere mathematical approximations—proved fairly accurate. In temperature and pressure there was no radical change as the dome-windows slid back.

We had landed. Whatever Venza's purpose, her moment was at hand. I was tense. But I was aware also, that beside me Moa was very alert. I had thought her unarmed. She was not. She sat back from me; in her hand was a small thin knife-blade.

She murmured tensely, "You have done your part, Gregg. Well and skillfully done. Now we will sit here quietly and watch them land."

Snap's guard was standing, keenly watching. The look-outs in the forward and stern towers were also armed; I could see them both gazing keenly down at the confusion of the blue-lit deck.

The incline went over the hull-side and touched the ground.

"Enough!" Miko roared. "The men first. Hahn, move the women back! Coniston, pile those caskets to the side. Get out of the way, Prince."

Anita was down there. I saw her at the edge of the group of women.

Venza was near her.

Miko shoved her. "Get out of the way, Prince. You can help Coniston. Have the things ready to throw off."

Five of the steward-crew were at the head of the incline. Miko shouted up at me:

"Haljan, hold our shipboard gravity normal."

"Yes," I responded.

I had done so. Our magnitizers had been adjusted to the shifting calculations of our landing. They were holding now at intensities, so that upon the *Planetara* no change from fairly normal Earth-gravity was apparent. I rang a tentative inquiry signal; the operator in the hull-magnetizer control answered that he was at his post.

The line of men were first to descend. Dr. Frank led them. He flashed a look of farewell up at me and Snap as he went down the incline with the chained men passengers after him.

Motley procession! Twenty odd, dishevelled, half-clothed men of three worlds. The changing, lightening gravity on the incline caught them. Dr. Frank bounded up to the rail under the impetus of his step:

caught and held himself, drew himself back. The line swayed. In the dim, blue-lit glare it seemed unreal, crazy. A grotesque dream of men descending a plank.

They reached the forest glade. Stood swaying, afraid at first to move. The purple night crowded them; they stood gazing at this strange world, their new prison.

"Now the women."

Miko was shoving the women to the head of the incline. I could feel Moa's steady gaze upon me. Her knife-blade gleamed in the turret light.

She murmured again, "In a few minutes you can ring us away, Gregg."

I felt like an actor awaiting his cue in the wings of some turgid drama the plot of which he did not know. Venza was near the head of the incline. Some of the women and children were on it. A woman screamed. Her child had slipped from her hand, bounded up over the rail, and fallen. Hardly fallen—floated down to the ground, with flailing arms and legs, landing in the dark ferns, unharmed. Its terrified wail came up.

There was a confusion on the incline. Venza, still on the deck, seemed to send a look of appeal to the turret. My cue?

I slid my hand to the light switchboard. It was near my knees. I pulled a switch. The blue-lit deck beneath the turret went dark.

I recall an instant of horrible, tense silence, and in the gloom beside me I was aware of Moa moving. I felt a thrill of instinctive fear—would she plunge that knife into me?

The silence of the darkened deck was broken with a confusion of sounds. A babble of voices; a woman passenger's scream; shuffling of feet; and above it all, Miko's roar:

"Stand quiet! Everyone! No movement!"

On the descending incline there was chaos. The disembarking women were clinging to the gang-rail; some of them had evidently surged over it and fallen. Down on the ground in the purple-shadowed starlight I could vaguely see the chained line of men. They too were in confusion, trying to shove themselves toward the fallen women.

Miko roared:

"Light those tubes! Gregg Haljan! By the Almighty, Moa, are you up there? What is wrong? The light-tubes—"

Dark drama of unknown plot! I wonder if I should try and leave the turret. Where was Anita? She had been down there on the deck when I flung out the lights.

I think twenty seconds would have covered it all. I had not moved. I thought, "Is Snap concerned with this?"

Moa's knife could have stabbed me. I felt her lunge against me; and suddenly I was gripping her, twisting her wrist. But she flung the knife away. Her strength was almost the equal of my own. Her hand went for my throat, and with the other hand she was fumbling.

The deck abruptly sprang into light again. Moa had found the switch and threw it back.

"Gregg!"

She fought me as I tried to reach the switch. I saw down on the deck Miko gazing up at us. Moa panted, "Gregg—stop! If he—sees you doing this, he'll kill you—"

The scene down there was almost unchanged. I had answered my

cue. To what purpose? I saw Anita near Miko. The last of the women were on the plank.

I had stopped struggling with Moa. She sat back, panting; and then she called: "Sorry, Miko. It will not happen again."

Miko was in a towering rage. But he was too busy to bother with me; his anger swung on those nearest him. He shoved the last of the women violently at the incline. She bounded over. Her body, with the gravity-pull of only a few Earth-pounds, sailed in an arc and dropped to the sward near the swaying line of men.

Miko swung back. "Get out of my way!" A sweep of his huge arm knocked Anita sidewise. "Prince, damn you, help me with those boxes!"

The frightened stewards were lifting the boxes, square metal storage-chests each as long as a man, packed with food, tools, and equipment.

"Here, get out of my way, all of you!"

My breath came again; Anita nimbly retreated before Miko's angry rush. He dashed at the stewards. Three of them held a box. He took it

from them; raised it at the top of the incline. Poised it over his head an instant, with his massive arms like gray pillars beneath it. And flung it. The box catapulted, dropped; and then, passing the Planetara's gravity area, it sailed in a long flat arc over the forest glade and crashed into the purple underbrush.

"Give me another!"

The stewards pushed another at him. Like an angry Titan, he flung it. And another. One by one the chests sailed out and crashed.

"There is your food—go pick it up! Haljan, make ready to ring us away!"

On the deck lay the dead body of Rance Rankin, which the stewards had carried out. Miko seized it, flung it.

"There! Go to your last resting place!"

And the other bodies. Balch Blackstone, Captain Carter, Johnson—Miko flung them. And the course masters and those of our crew who had been killed; the stewards appeared with them; Miko unceremoniously cast them off.

The passengers were all on the ground now. It was dim down there. I

tried to distinguish Venza, but could not. I could see Dr. Frank's figure at the end of the chained line of men. The passengers were gazing in horror at the bodies hurtling over them.

"Ready, Haljan?"

Moa prompted me. "Tell him yes!"

I called, "Yes!" Had Venza failed in her unknown purpose? It seemed so. On the helio-room bridge Snap and his guard stood like silent statues in the blue-lit gloom.

The disembarkation was over.

"Close the ports," Miko commanded.

The incline came folding up with a clatter. The port and dome-windows slid closed. Moa hissed against my ear:

"If you want life, Gregg Haljan, you will start your duties!"

Venza had failed. Whatever it was, it had come to nothing. Down in the purple forest, disconnected now from the ship, the last of our friends stood marooned. I could distinguish them through the blur of the closed dome—only a swaying, huddled group was visible. But

my fancy pictured this last sight of them—Dr. Frank, Venza, Shac and Dud Ardley.

They were gone. There were left only Snap, Anita, and myself.

I was mechanically ringing us away. I heard my sirens sounding down below, with the answering clangs here in the turret. The *Planetara's* respiratory controls started; the pressure equalizers began operating, and the gravity plates shifted into lifting combinations.

The ship was hissing and quivering with it, combined with the grating of the last of the dome ports. And Miko's command:

"Lift, Haljan."

Hahn had been mingled with the confusion of the deck, though I had hardly noticed him; Coniston had remained below, with the crew answering my signals. Hahn stood now with Miko, gazing down through a deck window. Anita was alone at another.

"Lift, Haljan."

I lifted us gently, bow first, with a repulsion of the bow plates. And started the central electronic engine. Its thrust from our stern moved

us diagonally over the purple forest trees.

The glade slid downward and away. I caught a last vague glimpse of the huddled group of marooned passengers, staring up at us. Left to their fate, alone on this deserted little world.

With the three engines going we slid smoothly upward. The forest dropped, a purple spread of tree-tops, edged with starlight and Earth-light. The sharply curving horizon seemed following us up. I swung on all the power. We mounted at a forty degree angle, slowly circling, with a bank of clouds over us to the side and the shining little sea beneath.

"Very good, Gregg." In the turret light Moa's eyes blazed at me. "I do not know what you meant by darkening the deck-lights." Her fingers dug at my shoulders. "I will tell my brother it was an error."

I said, "An error—yes."

"An error? I don't know what it was. But you have me to deal with now. You understand? I will tell my brother so. You said, 'On Earth a man may kill the thing he loves.' A woman of Mars may do that! Beware of me, Gregg Haljan."

Her passion-filled eyes bored into me. Love? Hate? The venom of a woman scorned—a mingling of turgid emotions....

I twisted away from her grip and ignored her; she sat back, silently watching my busy activities; the calculations of the shifting conditions of gravity, pressures, temperatures; a checking of the score or more of instruments on the board before me.

Mechanical routine. My mind went to Venza, back there on the asteroid. The wandering little world was already shrinking to a convex surface beneath us. Venza, with her last unknown play, gone to failure. Had I failed my cue? Whatever my part, it seemed now that I must have horribly mis-acted it.

The crescent Earth was presently swinging over our bow. We rocketed out of the asteroid's shadow. The glowing, flaming Sun appeared, making a crescent of the Earth. With the glass I could see our tiny Moon, visually seeming to hug the limb of its parent Earth.

We were away upon our course for the Moon. My mind flung ahead. Grantline with his treasure, unsuspecting this brigand ship. And suddenly, beyond all thought of Grantline and his treasure, there came to me a fear for Anita. In God's truth I had been, so far, a very stumbling inept champion—doomed to failure with everything I

tried. It swept me, so that I cursed my own incapacity. Why had I not contrived to have Anita desert at the asteroid? Would it not have been far better for her there? Taking her chance for rescue with Dr. Frank, Venza and the others?

But no! I had, like an inept fool, never thought of that! Had left her here on board at the mercy of these outlaws.

And I swore now that, beyond everything, I would protect her.

Futile oath! If I could have seen ahead a few hours! But I sensed the catastrophe. There was a shudder within me as I sat in that turret, docilely guiding us out through the asteroid's atmosphere, heading us upon our course for the Moon.

Chapter 19 In the Zed-light Glow

"Try again. By the infernal, Snap Dean, if you do anything to balk us!"

Miko scanned the apparatus with keen eyes. How much technical knowledge of signaling instruments did this brigand leader have? I was tense and cold with apprehension as I sat in a corner of the helio-room, watching Snap. Could Miko be fooled? Snap, I knew,

was trying to fool him.

The Moon spread close beneath us. My log-chart, computed up to thirty minutes past, showed us barely some thirty thousand miles over the Moon's surface. The globe lay in quadrature beneath our bow quarter—a huge quadrant spreading across the black starry vault of the lower heavens. A silver quadrant. The sunset caught the Lunar mountains, flung slanting shadows over the empty Lunar plains. All the disc was plainly visible. The mellow Earth-light glowed serene and pale to illumine the Lunar night.

The *Planetara* was bathed in silver. A brilliant silver glare swept the forward deck, clean white and splashed with black shadows. We had partly circled the Moon, so as now to approach it from the Earthward side. I had worked with extreme concentration through the last few hours, plotting the trajectory of our curving sweep, setting the gravity plates with constantly shifting combinations. And with it a necessity for the steady retarding of our velocity.

Miko for a time was at my elbow in the turret. I had not seen Coniston and Hahn of recent hours. I had slept, awakened refreshed, and had a meal. Coniston and Hahn remained below, one or the other of them always with the crew to execute my sirened orders. Then Coniston came to take my place in the turret, and I went with Miko

to the helio-room.

"You are skilful, Haljan." A measure of grim approval was in Miko's voice. "You evidently have no wish to try and fool me in this navigation."

I had not, indeed. It is delicate work at best, coping with the intricacies of celestial mechanics upon a semicircular trajectory with retarding velocity, and with a make-shift crew we could easily have come upon real difficulty.

We hung at last, hull-down, facing the Earthward hemisphere of the Lunar disc. The giant ball of the Earth lay behind and above us—the Sun over our stern quarter. With forward velocity almost checked, we poised, and Snap began his signals to the unsuspecting Grantline.

My work momentarily was over. I sat watching the helio-room. Moa was here, close beside me; I felt always her watchful gaze, so that even the play of my expression needed reining.

Miko worked with Snap. Anita too was here. To Miko and Moa it was the somber, taciturn George Prince, shrouded always in his black mourning cloak, disinclined to talk; sitting alone, brooding and cowardly sullen.

Miko repeated, "By the infernal, if you try to fool me, Snap Dean!"

The small metal room, with its grid floor and low-arched ceiling, glared with moonlight through its windows. The moving figures of Snap and Miko were aped by the grotesque, misshapen shadows of them on the walls. Miko gigantic—a great, menacing ogre. Snap small and alert—a trim, pale figure in his tight-fitting white trousers, broad-flowing belt, and white shirt open at the throat. His face was pale and drawn from lack of sleep and the torture to which Miko had subjected him. But he grinned at the brigand's words, and pushed his straggling hair closer under the red eyeshade.

"I'm doing my best, Miko—you can believe it."

The room over long periods was deadly silent, with Miko and Snap bending watchfully at the crowded banks of instruments. A silence in which my own pounding heart seemed to echo. I did not dare look at Anita, nor she at me. Snap was trying to signal Earth, not the Moon! His main helios were set in the reverse. The infra-red waves, flung from the bow window, were of a frequency which Snap and I believed that Grantline could not pick up. And over against the wall, close beside me and seemingly ignored by Snap, there was a tiny ultra-violet sender. Its faint hum and the quivering of its mirrors had so far passed unnoticed.

Would some Earth-station pick it up? I prayed so. There was a thumb nail mirror here which could bring an answer. I prayed that it might swing.

Would some Earth telescope be able to see us? I doubted it. The pinpoint of the *Planetara's* infinitesimal bulk would be beyond them.

Long silences, broken only by the faint hiss and murmur of Snap's instruments.

"Shall I try the 'graphs, Miko?"

"Yes."

I helped him with the spectroheliograph. At every level the plates showed us nothing save the scarred and pitted Moon-surface. We worked for an hour. There was nothing. Bleak cold night on the Moon here beneath us. A touch of fading sunlight upon the Apennines. Up near the South Pole, Tycho with its radiating open rills stood like a grim dark maw.

Miko bent over a plate. "Something here? Is there?"

An abnormality upon the frowning ragged cliffs of Tycho? We

thought so. But then it seemed not.

Another hour. No signal came from Earth. If Snap's calls were getting through we had no evidence of it. Abruptly Miko strode at me from across the room. I went cold and tense; Moa shifted, alert to my every movement. But Miko was not interested in me. A sweep of his clenched fist knocked the ultra-violet sender and its coils and mirrors in a tinkling crash to the grid at my feet.

"We don't need that, whatever it is!"

He rubbed his knuckles where the violet waves had tinged them, and turned grimly back to Snap.

"Where are your Gamma ray mirrors? If the treasure is exposed—"

This Martian's knowledge was far greater than we believed. He grinned sardonically at Anita. "If our treasure is on this hemisphere, Prince, we should pick up Gamma rays? Don't you think so? Or is Grantline so cautious it will all be protected?"

Anita spoke in a careful, throaty drawl. "The Gamma rays came plain enough when we passed here on the way out."

"You should know," grinned Miko. "An expert eavesdropper, Prince

—I will say that for you. Come Dean, try something else. By God, if Grantline does not signal us, I will be likely to blame you—my patience is shortening. Shall we go closer, Haljan?"

"I don't think it would help," I said.

He nodded. "Perhaps not. Are we checked?"

"Yes." We were poised, very nearly motionless. "If you wish an advance, I can ring it. But we need a surface destination now."

"True, Haljan." He stood thinking. "Would a zed-ray penetrate those crater-cliffs? Tycho, for instance, at this angle?"*

*(An allusion to the use of the zed-ray light for making spectro-photographs of what might be behind obscuring rock masses, similar to the old-style X-ray.)

"It might," Snap agreed. "You think he may be on the Northern inner side of Tycho?"

"He may be anywhere," said Miko shortly.

"If you think that," Snap persisted, "suppose we swing the *Planetara* over the South Pole. Tycho, viewed from there—"

"And take another quarter-day of time?" Miko sneered. "Flash on your zed-ray; help him hook it up, Haljan."

I moved to the lens-box of the spectroheliograph. It seemed that Snap was very strangely reluctant: Was it because he knew that the Grantline camp lay concealed on the north inner wall of Tycho's giant ring? I thought so. But Snap flashed a queer look at Anita. She did not see it, but I did. And I could not understand it.

My accursed, witless incapacity! If only I had taken warning!

"Here," commanded Miko. "A score of 'graphs with the zed-ray. I tell you I will comb this surface if we have to stay here until our ship comes from Ferrok-Shahn to join us!"

The Martian brigands were coming. Miko's signals had been answered. In ten days the other brigand ship, adequately manned and armed, would be here.

Snap helped me connect the zed-ray. He did not dare even to whisper to me, with Moa hovering always so close. And for all Miko's sardonic smiling, we knew that he would tolerate nothing from us now. He was fully armed, and so was Moa.

I recall that Snap several times tried to touch me significantly. Oh, if only I had taken warning!

We finished our connecting. The dull gray point of zed-ray gleamed through the prisms, to mingle with the moonlight entering the main lens. I stood with the shutter trip.

"The same interval, Snap?"

"Yes."

Beside me, I was aware of a faint reflection of the zed-light—a gray Cathedral shaft crossing the helio-room and falling upon the opposite wall. An unreality there, as the zed-light faintly strove to penetrate the metal room-side.

I said, "Shall I make the exposure?"

Snap nodded. But that 'graph was never made. An exclamation from Moa made us all turn. The Gamma mirrors were quivering! Grantline had picked our signals! With what undoubtedly was an intensified receiving equipment which Snap had not thought Grantline able to use, he had caught our faint zed-rays, which Snap was sending only to deceive Miko. And Grantline had recognized the

Planetara, and had released his occulting screens surrounding the radium ore. The Gamma rays were here, unmistakable!

And upon their heels came Grantline's message. Not in the secret system he had arranged with Snap, but unsuspectingly in open code. I could read the swinging mirror, and so could Miko.

And Miko decoded it triumphantly aloud:

"Surprised but pleased your return. Approach Mid-Northern hemisphere, region of Archimedes, forty thousand toises* off nearest Apennine range."

*(About fifty miles.)

The message broke off. But even its importance was overshadowed. Miko stood in the center of the helio-room, triumphantly reading the light-indicator. Its beam swung on the scale, which chanced to be almost directly over Anita's head. I saw Miko's expression change. A look of surprise, amazement came to him.

"Why—"

He gasped. He stood staring. Almost stupidly staring for an instant. And as I regarded him with fascinated horror, there came upon his

heavy gray face a look of dawning comprehension. And I heard Snap's startled intake of breath. He moved to the spectroheliograph, where the zed-ray connections were still humming.

But with a leap Miko flung him away. "Off with you! Moa, watch him! Haljan, don't move!"

Again Miko stood staring. Oh dear God, I saw now that he was staring at Anita!

"Why George Prince! How strange you look!"

Anita did not move. She was stricken with horror: she shrank back against the wall, huddled in her cloak. Miko's sardonic voice came again:

"How strange you look. Prince!" He took a step forward. He was grim and calm. Horribly calm. Deliberate. Gloating—like a great gray monster in human form toying with a fascinated, imprisoned bird.

"Move just a little Prince. Let the zed-ray light fall more fully."

Anita's head was bare. That pale, Hamletlike face. Dear God, the zed-light reflection lay gray and penetrating upon it!

Miko took another step. Peering. Grinning. "How amazing, George Prince! Why, I can hardly believe it!"

Moa was armed with an electronic cylinder. For all her amazement —what turgid emotions sweeping her I can only guess—she never took her eyes from Snap and me.

"Back! Don't move, either of you!" She hissed it at us.

Then Miko leaped at Anita like giant gray leopard pouncing.

"Away with that cloak, Prince!"

I stood cold and numbed. And realization came at last. The faint zed-light glow had fallen by chance upon Anita's face. Penetrated the flesh; exposed, faintly glowing, the bone-line of her jaw. Unmasked the waxen art of Glutz.

And Miko had seen it.

"Why George, how surprising! Away with that cloak!"

He seized her wrist, drew her forward, beyond the shaft of zed-light, into the brilliant light of the Moon. And ripped her cloak from her. The gentle curves of her woman's figure were so unmistakable!

And as Miko gazed at them, all his calm triumph swept away.

"Why, Anita!"

I heard Moa mutter: "So that is it?" A venomous flashing look—a shaft from me to Anita and back again. "So that is it?"

"Why, *Anita*!"

Miko's great arms gathered her up as though she were a child. "So I have you back; from the dead delivered back to me!"

"Gregg!" Snap's warning, and his grip over my shoulders brought me a measure of sanity. I had tensed to spring. I stood quivering, and Moa thrust her weapon against my face. The helio mirrors were swaying again with another message from Grantline. But it came ignored by us all.

In the glare of moonlight by the forward window, Miko held Anita, his great hands pawing her with triumphant possessive caresses.

"So, little Anita, you are given back to me."

Against her futile struggles he held her.

Dear God, if only I had had the wit to have prevented this!

Chapter 20 The Grantline Camp

In the mid-northern hemisphere upon the Earthward side of the Moon, the giant crater of Archimedes stood brooding in silent majesty. Grim, lofty walls, broken, pitted and scarred, rising precipitous to the upper circular rim. Night had just fallen. The sunlight clung to the crater-heights; it tinged with flame the jagged peaks of the Apennine Mountains which rose in tiers at the horizon; and it flung great inky shadows over the intervening lowlands.

Northward, the Mare Imbrium stretched mysterious and purple, its million rills and ridges and crater holes flattened by distance and the gathering darkness into a seeming level surface. The night slowly deepened. The dead-black vault of the sky blazed with its brilliant starry gems. The gibbous Earth hung high above the horizon, motionless, save for the invisible pendulum sway over the tiny arc, of its libration: widening to quadrature, casting upon the bleak naked Lunar landscape its mellow Earth-glow.

Slow, measured process, this coming of the Lunar night! For an Earth-day the sunset slowly faded on the Apennines; the poised Earth widened a little further—an Earth-day of time, with the Earth-

disc visibly rotating, the faint tracery of its oceans and continents passing in slow, majestic review.

Another Earth-day interval. Then another. And another. Full night now enveloped Archimedes. Splotches of Earth-light and starlight sheen slowly shifted as the night advanced.

Between the great crater and the nearby mountains, the broken, pseudo-level lowlands lay wan in the Earth-light. A few hundred miles, as distance would be measured upon Earth. A million million rills were here. Valleys and ridges, ravines, sharp-walled canyons, cliffs and crags—tiny craters like pock-marks.

Naked, gray porous rock everywhere. This denuded landscape! Cracked and scarred and tumbled, as though some inexorable Titan torch had seared and crumbled and broken it, left it now congealed like a wind-lashed sea abruptly frozen into immobility.

Moonlight upon Earth so gently shines to make romantic a lover's smile! But the reality of the Lunar night is cold beyond human rationality. Cold and darkly silent. Grim desolation. Awesome. Majestic. A frowning majesty that even to the most intrepid human beholder is inconceivably forbidding.

And there were humans here now. On this tumbled plain, between Archimedes and the mountains, one small crater amid the million of its fellows was distinguished this night by the presence of humans. The Grantline camp! It huddled in the deepest purple shadows on the side of a bowl-like pit, a crudely circular orifice with a scant two miles across its rippling rim. There was faint light here to mark the presence of the living intruders. The blue-glow radiance of Morrell tube-lights under a spread of glassite.

The Grantline camp stood mid-way up one of the inner cliff-walls of the little crater. The broken, rock-strewn floor, two miles wide, lay five hundred feet below the camp. Behind it, the jagged precipitous cliff rose another five hundred to the heights of the upper rim. A broad level shelf hung midway up the cliff, and upon it Grantline had built his little group of glassite dome shelters. Viewed from above there was the darkly purple crater floor, the upflung circular rim where the Earth-light tinged the spires and crags with yellow sheen; and on the shelf, like a huddled group of birds nests, Grantline's domes clung and gazed down upon the inner valley.

Intricate task, the building of these glassite shelters! There were three. The main one stood close at the brink of the ledge. A quadrangle of glassite walls, a hundred feet in length by half as wide, and a scant ten feet high to its flat-arched dome roof. Built for

this purpose in Great-New York, Grantline had brought his aluminite girders and braces and the glassite panels in sections.

The air here on the Moon surface was negligible—a scant one five-thousandth of the atmospheric pressure at the sea-level on Earth. But within the glassite shelter, a normal Earth-pressure must be maintained. Rigidly braced double walls to withstand the explosive tendency, with no external pressure to counteract it. A tremendous necessity for mechanical equipment had burdened Grantline's small ship to its capacity. The chemistry of manufactured air, the pressure equalizers, renewers, respirators, the lighting and temperature-maintenance systems—all the mechanics of a space-flyer were here.

And within the glassite double walls, there was necessity for a constant circulation of the Erentz temperature insulating system.*

*(An intricate system of insulation against extremes of temperature, developed by the Erentz Kinetic Energy Corporation in the twenty-first century. Within the hollow double shell of a shelter-wall, or an explorer's helmet-suit, or a space-flyer's hull, an oscillating semi-vacuum current was maintained--an extremely rarified air, magnetically charged, and maintained in rapid oscillating motion.)

Across this field the outer cold, or heat, as the case might be, could

penetrate only with slow radiation. This Erentz system gave the most perfect temperature insulation known in its day. Without it, interplanetary flight would have been impossible.

And it served a double purpose. Developed at first for temperature insulation only, the Erentz system surprisingly brought to light one of the most important discoveries made in the realm of physics of the century. It was found that any flashing, oscillating current, whether electronic, or the semi-vacuum of rarified air--or even a thin sheet of whirling fluid--gave also a pressure-insulation. The kinetic energy of the rapid movement was found to absorb within itself the latent energy of the unequal pressure.

(The intricate postulates and mathematical formulae necessary to demonstrate the operation of the physical laws involved would be out of place here.)

The *Planetara* was so equipped, against the explosive tendency of its inner air-pressures when flying in the near-vacuum of space. In the case of Grantline's glassite shelters, the latent energy of his room interior air pressure went largely into a kinetic energy which in practical effect resulted only in the slight acceleration of the vacuum current, and thus never reached the outer wall. The Erentz engineers claimed for their system a pressure absorption of 97.4%, leaving, in

Grantline's case, only 2.6% of room pressure to be held by the building's aluminite bracers.

It may be interesting to note in this connection that without the Erentz system as a basis, the great sub-sea developments on Earth and Mars of the twenty-first century would also have been impossible. Equipped with a fluid circulation device of the Erentz principle within its double hull, the first submarine was able to penetrate the great ocean deeps, withstanding the tremendous ocean pressures at depths of four thousand fathoms.]

There was this main Grantline building, stretching low and rectangular along the front edge of the ledge. Within it were living rooms, messroom and kitchen. Fifty feet behind it, connected by a narrow passage of glassite, was a similar, though smaller structure. The mechanical control rooms, with their humming, vibrating mechanisms were here. And an instrument room with signaling apparatus, senders, receivers, mirror-grids and audiphones of several varieties; and an electro-telescope, small but modern, with dome overhead like a little Earth observatory.

From this instrument building, beside the connecting pedestrian passage, wire cables for light, and air-tubes and strings and bundles of instrument wires ran to the main structure—gray snakes upon the

porous, gray Lunar rock.

The third building seemed a lean-to banked against the cliff-wall, a slanting shed-wall of glassite fifty feet high and two hundred in length. Under it, for months Grantline's borers had dug into the cliff. Braced tunnels were here, penetrating back and downward into this vein of radio-active rock.

The work was over now. The borers had been dismantled and packed away. At one end of the cliff the mining equipment lay piled in a litter. There was a heap of discarded ore where Grantline had carted and dumped it after his first crude refining process had yielded it as waste. The ore-slag lay like gray powder-flakes strewn down the cliff. Tracks and ore-carts along the ledge stood discarded, mute evidence of the weeks and months of work these helmeted miners had undergone, struggling upon this airless, frowning world.

But now all that was finished. The radio-active ore was sufficiently concentrated. It lay—this treasure—in a seventy-foot pile behind the glassite lean-to, with a cage of wires over it and an insulation barrage guarding its Gamma rays from escaping to mark its presence.

The ore-shelter was dark; the other two buildings were lighted. And

there were small lights mounted at intervals about the camp and along the edge of the ledge. A spider ladder, with tiny platforms some twenty feet one above the other, hung precariously to the cliff-face. It descended the five hundred feet to the crater floor; and, behind the camp, it mounted the jagged cliff-face to the upper rim-height, where a small observatory platform was placed.

Such was the outer aspect of the Grantline Treasure Camp near the beginning of this Lunar night, when, unbeknown to Grantline and his score of men, the *Planetara* with its brigands was approaching. The night was perhaps a sixth advanced. Full night. No breath of cloud to mar the brilliant starry heavens. The quadrant Earth hung poised like a giant mellow moon over Grantline's crater. A bright Earth, yet no air was here on this Lunar surface to spread its light. Only a glow, mingling with the spots of blue tube-light on the poles along the cliff, and the radiance from the lighted buildings.

The crater floor was dimly purple. Beyond the opposite upper rim, from the camp-height, the towering top of distant Archimedes was visible.

No evidence of movement showed about the silent camp. Then a pressure door in an end of the main building opened its tiny series of locks. A bent figure came out. The lock closed. The figure

straightened and gazed about the camp. Grotesque, bloated semblance of a man! Helmeted, with rounded dome-hood suggestion of an ancient sea diver, yet goggled and trunked like a gas-masked fighter of the twentieth century war.

He stooped presently and disconnected metal weights which were upon his shoes.*

*(Within the Grantline buildings it was found more convenient to use a gravity normal to Earth. This was maintained by the wearing of metal-weighted shoes and metal-loaded belt. The Moon-gravity is normally approximately one-sixth the gravity of Earth.)

Then he stood erect again, and with giant strides bounded along the cliff. Fantastic figure in the blue-lit gloom! A child's dream of crags and rocks and strange lights with a single monstrous figure in seven-league boots.

He went the length of the ledge with his twenty-foot strides, inspected the lights, and made adjustments. Came back, and climbed with agile, bounding leaps up the spider ladder to the dome on the crater top. A light flashed on up there. Then it was extinguished.

The goggled, bloated figure came leaping down after a moment.

Grantline's exterior watchman making his rounds. He came back to the main building. Fastened the weights on his shoes. Signaled within.

The lock opened. The figure went inside.

It was early evening, after the dinner hour and before the time of sleep, according to the camp routine Grantline was maintaining. Nine P. M. of Earth Eastern-American time, recorded now upon his Earth chronometer. In the living room of the main building Johnny Grantline sat with a dozen of his men dispersed about the room, whiling away as best they could the lonesome hours.

"All as usual. This cursed Moon! When I get home—if ever I do get home—"

"Say your say, Wilks. But you'll spend your share of the gold-leaf and thank your constellations that you had your chance!"

"Let him alone! Come on, Wilks, take a hand here. This game is no good with three."

The man who had been outside flung his hissing helmet recklessly to the floor and unsealed his suit. "Here, get me out of this. No, I won't

play. I can't play your cursed game with nothing at stake!"

"Commissioner's orders."

A laugh went up at the sharp look Johnny Grantline flung from where he sat reading in a corner of the room.

"Commander's orders. No gambling gold-leafers tolerated here."

"Play the game, Wilks." Grantline said quietly. "We all know it's infernal doing nothing."

"He's been struck by Earth-light," another man laughed. "Commander, I told you not to let that guy Wilks out at night."

A rough but good-natured lot of men. Jolly and raucous by nature in their leisure hours. But there was too much leisure here now. Their mirth had a hollow sound. In older times, explorers of the frozen polar zones had to cope with inactivity, loneliness and despair. But at least they were on their native world. The grimness of the Moon was eating into the courage of Grantline's men. An unreality here. A weirdness. These fantastic crags. The deadly silence. The nights, almost two weeks of Earth-time in length, congealed by the deadly frigidity of Space. The days of black sky, blaring stars and flaming

Sun, with no atmosphere to diffuse the daylight. Days of weird blending sheen of illumination with most of the Sun's heat radiating so swiftly from the naked Lunar surface that the outer temperature still was cold. And day and night, always the familiar beloved Earth-disc hanging poised up near the zenith. From thinnest crescent to full Earth, and then steadily back again to crescent.

All so abnormal, irrational, disturbing to human senses. With the mining work over, an irritability grew upon Grantline's men. And perhaps since the human mind is so wonderful, elusive a thing, there lay upon these men an indefinable sense of impending disaster. Johnny Grantline felt it. He thought about it now as he sat in the room corner watching Wilks being forced into the plaget-game, and he found it strong within him. Unreasonable, ominous depression! Barring the accident which had disabled his little space-ship when they reached this small crater hole, his expedition had gone well. His instruments, and the information he had from the former explorers, had picked up the ore-vein with a scant month of search.

The vein had now been exhausted; but the treasure was here. Nothing was left but to wait for the *Planetara*. The men were talking of that now.

"She ought to be well mid-way from here to Ferrok-Shahn by now.

When do you figure she'll be back here, and signal us?"

"Twenty days. Give her another five now to Mars, and five in port. That's ten. We'll pick her signals in three weeks, mark me."

"Three weeks! Just give me three weeks of reasonable sunrise and sunset! This cursed Moon! You mean, Williams, next daylight."

"Hah! He's inventing a Lunar language. You'll be a Moon-man yet, if you live here long enough."

Olaf Swenson, the big blond fellow from the Scandia fiords, came and flung himself down by Grantline.

"Ay tank they bane without not enough to do, Commander. If the ore yust would not give out—"

"Three weeks—it isn't very long, Ollie."

"No. Maybe not."

From across the room somebody was saying, "If the *Comet* hadn't smashed on us, damn me but I'd ask the Commander to let some of us take her back. The discarded equipment could go."

"Shut up, Billy. She is smashed."

The little *Comet*, cruising in search of the ore, had come to grief just as the ore was found. It lay now on the crater floor with its nose bashed into an upflung spire of rock. Wrecked beyond repair. Save for the pre-arrangement with the *Planetara*, the Grantline party would have been helpless here on the Moon. Knowledge of that—although no one ever suspected but that the *Planetara* would come safely—served to add to the men's depression. They were cut off, virtually helpless on a strange world. Their signalling devices were inadequate even to reach Earth. Grantline's power batteries were running low.* He could not attempt wide-flung signals without jeopardizing the power necessary for the routine of his camp in the event of the *Planetara* being delayed. Nor was his electro-telescope adequate to pick small objects at any great distance.**

*(The Gravely storage tanks—the power used by the Grantline expedition—were heavy and bulky affairs. Economy of space on the Comet allowed but few of them.)

**(Electro-telescopes of most modern use and power were too large and used too much power to be available to Grantline.)

All of Grantline's effort, in truth, had gone into equipment for the

finding and gathering of the treasure. The safety of the expedition had to that extent been neglected.

Swenson was mentioning that now.

"You all agreed to it," Johnny said shortly. "Every man here voted that, above everything, what we wanted was to get the radium."

A dynamic little fellow, this Johnny Grantline. Short of temper sometimes, but always just, and a perfect leader of men. In stature he was almost as small as Snap. But he was thick-set, with a smooth shaven, keen-eyed, square-jawed face, and a shock of brown tousled hair. A man of thirty-five, though the decision of his manner, the quiet dominance of his voice, mode him seem older. He stood up now, surveying the blue-lit glassite room with its low ceiling close overhead. He was bowlegged; in movement he seemed to roll with a stiff-legged gait like some sea captain of former days on the deck of his swaying ship. Queer-looking figure! Heavy flannel shirt and trousers, boots heavily weighted, and bulky metal-loaded belt strapped about his waist.

He grinned at Swenson. "When we divide this treasure, everyone will be happy, Ollie."

The treasure was estimated by Grantline to be the equivalent of ninety millions in gold-leaf. A hundred and ten millions in the gross as it now stood, with twenty millions to be deducted by the Federated Refiners for reducing it to the standard purity of commercial radium. Ninety millions, with only a million and a half to come off for expedition expenses, and the *Planetara* Company's share another million. A nice little stake.

Grantline strode across the room with his rolling gait.

"Cheer up, boys. Who's winning there? I say, you fellows—"

An audiphone buzzer interrupted him, a call from the duty man in the instrument room of the nearby building.

Grantline clicked the receiver. The room fell into silence. Any call was unusual—nothing ever happened here in the camp.

The duty man's voice sounded over the room.

"Signals coming! Not clear. Will you come over, Commander?"

Signals!

It was never Grantline's way to enforce needless discipline. He

offered no objection when every man in the camp rushed through the connecting passages. They crowded the instrument room where the tense duty man sat bending over his helio receivers. The mirrors were swaying.

The duty man looked up and met Grantline's gaze.

"I ran it up to the highest intensity. Commander. We ought to get it—not let it pass."

"Low scale, Peter?"

"Yes. Weakest infra-red. I'm bringing it up, even though it uses too much of our power." The duty man was apologetic.

"Get it," said Grantline shortly.

"I had a swing a minute ago. I think it's the *Planetara*."

"*Planetara!*" The crowding group of men chorused it. How could it be the *Planetara*?

But it was. The call presently came in clear. Unmistakably the *Planetara*, turned back now from her course to Ferrok-Shahn.

"How far away, Peter?"

The duty man consulted the needles of his dial scale. "Close! Very weak infra-red. But close. Around thirty thousand miles, maybe. It's Snap Dean calling."

The *Planetara* here within thirty thousand miles! Excitement and pleasure swept the room. The *Planetara's* coming had for so long been awaited so eagerly!

The excitement communicated to Grantline. It was unlike him to be incautious; yet now with no thought save that some unforeseen and pleasing circumstance had brought the *Planetara* ahead of time; incautious Grantline certainly was.

"Raise the ore-barrage."

"I'll go! My suit is here."

A willing volunteer rushed out to the ore-shed. The Gamma rays, which in the helio-room of the *Planetara* came so unwelcome to Snap and me, were loosed.

"Can you send, Peter?" Grantline demanded.

"Yes, with more power."

"Use it."

Johnny dictated the message of his location which we received. In his incautious excitement he ignored the secret code.

An interval passed. The ore was occulted again. No message had come from us—just Snap's routine signal in the weak infra-red, which we hoped Grantline would not get.

The men crowding Grantline's instrument room waited in tense silence. Then Grantline tried the telescope. Its current weakened the lights with the drain upon the distributors, and cooled the room with a sudden deadly chill as the Erentz insulating system slowed down.

The duty man looked suddenly frightened. "You'll bulge out our walls, Commander. The internal pressure—"

"We'll chance it."

They picked up the image of the *Planetara*! It came from the telescope and shone clear on the grid—the segment of star-field with a tiny, cigar-shaped blob. Clear enough to be unmistakable. The *Planetara*! Here now over the Moon, almost directly overhead,

poised at what the altimeter scale showed to be a fraction under thirty thousand miles.

The men gazed in awed silence. The *Planetara* coming....

But the altimeter needle was motionless. The *Planetara* was hanging poised.

A sudden gasp went about the room. The men stood with whitening faces, gazing at the *Planetara's* image. And at the altimeter needle. It was moving. The *Planetara* was descending. But not with an orderly swoop.

The image showed the ship clearly. The bow tilted up, then dipped down. But then in a moment it swung up again. The ship turned partly over. Righted itself. Then swayed again, drunkenly.

The watching men were stricken into horrified silence. The *Planetara's* image momentarily, horribly, grew larger. Swaying. Then turning completely over, rotating slowly end over end.

The *Planetara*, out of control, was falling!

Chapter 21 The Wreck of the Planetara

On the *Planetara*, in the helio-room, Snap and I stood with Moa's weapon upon us. Miko held Anita. Triumphant. Possessive. Then as she struggled, a gentleness came to this strange Martian giant. Perhaps he really loved her. Looking back on it, I sometimes think so.

"Anita, do not fear me." He held her away from him. "I would not harm you. I want your love." Irony came to him. "And I thought I had killed you! But it was only your brother."

He partly turned. I was aware of how alert was his attention. He grinned. "Hold them, Moa—don't let them do anything foolish. So, Anita, you were masquerading to spy upon me? That was wrong of you." He was again ironic.

Anita had not spoken. She held herself tensely away from Miko; she had flashed me a look—just one. What horrible mischance to have brought this catastrophe!

The completion of Grantline's message had come unnoticed by us all.

"Look! Grantline again!" Snap said abruptly.

But the mirrors were steadying. We had no recording-tape apparatus; the rest of the message was lost. The mirrors pulsed and then steadied.

No further message came. There was an interval while Miko waited. He held Anita in the hollow of his great arm.

"Quiet, little bird. Do not fear me. I have work to do, Anita—this is our great adventure. We will be rich, you and I. All the luxuries three worlds can offer, all for us when this is over. Careful, Moa! This Haljan has no wit."

Well could he say it! I, who had been so witless to let this come upon us! Moa's weapon prodded me. Her voice hissed at me with all the venom of a reptile enraged. "So that was your game, Gregg Haljan! And I was so graceless to admit love for you!"

Snap murmured in my ear, "Don't move, Gregg! She's reckless."

She heard it. She whirled on him. "We have lost George Prince, it seems. Well, we will survive without his ore knowledge. And you, Dean—and this Haljan—mark me, I will kill you both if you cause

trouble!"

Miko was gloating. "Don't kill them yet, Moa. What was it Grantline said? Near the crater of Archimedes? Ring us down, Haljan! We'll land."

He signaled the turret. Gave Coniston the Grantline message, and audiphoned it below to Hahn. The news spread about the ship. The bandits were jubilant.

"We'll land now, Haljan. Ring us down. Come, Anita and I will go with you to the turret."

I found my voice. "To what destination?"

"Near Archimedes. The Apennine side. Keep well away from the Grantline camp. We will probably sight it as we descend."

There was no trajectory needed. We were almost over Archimedes now. I could drop us with a visible, instrumental course. My mind was whirling with a confusion of thoughts. What could we do? What could we dare attempt to do? I met Snap's gaze.

"Ring us down, Gregg," he said quietly.

I nodded. I pushed Moa's weapon away. "You don't need that. I obey orders."

We went to the turret. Moa watched me and Snap, a grim, cold Amazon. She avoided looking at Anita, whom Miko helped down the ladders with a strange mixture of courtierlike grace and amused irony. Coniston gazed at Anita with falling jaw.

"I say! Not George Prince? The girl—"

"No time for argument now," Miko commanded. "It's the girl, masquerading as her brother. Get below, Coniston. Haljan takes us down."

The astounded Englishman continued gazing at Anita. "I mean to say, where to on the Moon? Not to encounter Grantline at once, Miko? Our equipment is not ready."

"Of course not. We will land well away. He won't be suspicious—we can signal him again after we land. We will have time to plan, to assemble the equipment. Get below, I told you."

The reluctant Coniston left us. I took the controls. Miko, still holding Anita as though she were a child, sat beside me. "We will watch him,

little Anita. A skilled fellow at this sort of work."

I rang my signals for the shifting of the gravity plates. The answer should have come from below within a second or two. But it did not. Miko regarded me with his great bushy eyebrows upraised.

"Ring again, Haljan."

I duplicated. No answer. The silence was frightening. Ominous.

Miko muttered, "That accursed Hahn. Ring again!"

I sent the imperative emergency demand.

No answer. A second or two. Then all of us in the turret were startled. Transfixed. From below came a sudden hiss. It sounded in the turret: it came from shifting-room call-grid. The hissing of the pneumatic valves of the plate-shifters in the lower control room. The valves were opening; the plates automatically shifting into neutral, and disconnecting!

An instant of startled silence. Miko may have realized the significance of what had happened. Certainly Snap and I did. The hissing ceased. I gripped the emergency plate-shifter switch which hung over my head. Its disc was dead! The plates were dead in

neutral. In the positions they were only placed while in port! And their shifting mechanisms were imperative!

I was on my feet. "Snap! Good God, we're in neutral!"

Miko, if he had not realized it before, was aware if it now. The Moon-disc moved visibly as the *Planetara* lurched. The vault of the heavens was slowly swinging.

Miko ripped out a heavy oath. "Haljan! What is this?"

He stood up, still holding Anita. But there was nothing that he could do in this emergency. "Haljan—what—"

The heavens turned with a giant swoop. The Moon was over us. It swung in dizzying arc. Overhead, then back past our stern; under us, then appearing over our bow.

The *Planetara* had turned over. Upending. Rotating, end over end.

For a moment or two I think all of us in that turret stood and clung. The Moon-disc, the Earth, Sun and all the stars were swinging past our windows. So horribly dizzying. The *Planetara* seemed lurching and tumbling. But it was an optical effect only. I stared with grim determination at my feet. The turret seemed to steady.

Then I looked again. That horrible swoop of all the heavens! And the Moon, as it went past, seemed expanded. We were falling! Out of control, with the Moon-gravity pulling us inexorably down!

"That accursed Hahn—" Miko, stricken with his lack of knowledge of these controls, was wholly confused.

A moment only had passed. My fancy that the Moon-disc was enlarged was merely the horror of my imagination. We had not fallen far enough yet for that.

But we were falling. Unless I could do something, we would crash upon the Lunar surface.

Anita, killed in this *Planetara* turret. The end of everything for us.

Action came to me. I gasped, "Miko, you stay here! The controls are dead! You stay here—hold Anita."

I ignored Moa's weapon which she was still clutching mechanically. Snap thrust her away.

"Sit back! Let us alone! We're falling! Don't you understand?"

This deadly danger, to level us all! No longer were we captors and

captured. Not brigands for this moment. No thought of Grantline's treasure! Trapped humans only! Leveled by the common, instinct of self-preservation. Trapped here together, fighting for our lives.

Miko gasped. "Can you—check us? What happened?"

"I don't know. I'll try."

I stood clinging. This dizzying whirl! From the audiphone grid Coniston's voice sounded.

"I say, Haljan, something's wrong! Hahn doesn't signal."

The look-out in the forward tower was clinging to his window. On the deck below our turret a member of the crew appeared, stood lurching for a moment, then shouted, and turned and ran, swaying, aimless. From the lower hull-corridors our grids sounded with the tramping of running steps. Panic among the crew was spreading over the ship. A chaos below decks.

I pulled at the emergency switch again. Dead....

But down below there was the manual controls.

"Snap, we must get down. The signals."

"Yes."

Coniston's voice came like a scream from the grid. "Hahn is dead—the controls are broken! Hahn is dead!"

We barely heard him. I shouted, "Miko—hold Anita! Come on, Snap!"

We clung to the ladders. Snap was behind me. "Careful, Gregg! Good God!"

This dizzying whirl. I tried not to look. The deck under me was now a blurred kaleidoscope of swinging patches of moonlight and shadow.

We reached the deck. Ran, swaying, lurching.

It seemed that from the turret Anita's voice followed us. "Be careful!"

Within the ship our senses steadied. With the rotating, reeling, heavens shut out, there were only the shouts and tramping steps of the panic-stricken crew to mark that anything was amiss. That, and a pseudo-sensation of lurching caused by the pulsing of gravity—a pull when the Moon was beneath our hull to combine its force with

our magnetizers; a lightening when it was overhead. A throbbing, pendulum lurch—that was all.

We ran down to the corridor incline. A white-faced member of the crew, came running up.

"What's happened? Haljan, what's happened?"

"We're falling!" I gripped him. "Get below. Come on with us!"

But he jerked away from me. "Falling?"

A steward came running. "Falling? My God!"

Snap swung at them. "Get ahead of us! The manual controls—our only chance—we need all you men at the compressor pumps!"

But it was an instinct to try and get on deck, as though here below we were rats caught in a trap. The men tore away from me and ran. Their shouts of panic resounded through the dim, blue-lit corridors.

Coniston came lurching from the control room. "I say—falling! Haljan, my God, look at him!"

Hahn was sprawled at the gravity-plate switchboard. Sprawled,

head-down. Dead. Killed by something? Or a suicide?

I bent over him. His hands gripped the main switch. He had ripped it loose. And his left hand had reached and broken the fragile line of tubes that intensified the current of the pneumatic plate-shifters. A suicide? With his last frenzy determined to kill us all?

Then I saw that Hahn had been killed! Not a suicide! In his hand he gripped a small segment of black fabric, a piece torn from an invisible cloak? Was it?

The questions were swept away by the necessity for action. Snap was rigging the hand-compressors. If he could get the pressure back in the tanks....

I swung on Coniston. "You armed?"

"Yes." He was white-faced and confused, but not in a panic. He showed me his heat-ray cylinder. "What do you want me to do?"

"Round up the crew. Get all you can. Bring them here to man these pumps."

He dashed away. Snap shouted after him. "Kill them down if they argue!"

Miko's voice sounded from the turret call grid: "Falling! Haljan, you can see it now! Check us!"

I did not answer that. I pumped with Snap.

Desperate moments. Or was it an hour? Coniston brought the men. He stood over them with menacing weapon.

We had all the pumps going. The pressure rose a little in the tanks. Enough to shift a bow-plate. I tried it. The plate slowly clicked into a new combination. A gravity repulsion just in the bow-tip.

I signaled Miko. "Have we stopped swinging?"

"No. But slower."

I could feel it, that lurch of the gravity. But not steady now. A limp. The tendency of our bow was to stay up.

"More pressure, Snap."

"Yes."

One of the crew rebelled, tried to bolt from the room. "God, we'll crash, caught in here!"

Coniston shot him down.

I shifted another bow-plate. Then two in the stern. The stern-plates seemed to move more readily than the others.

"Run all the stern-plates," Snap advised.

I tried it. The lurching stopped. Miko called. "We're bow down. Falling!"

But not falling free. The Moon-gravity pull upon us was more than half neutralized.

"I'll go up, Snap, and try the engines. You don't mind staying down? Executing my signals?"

"You idiot!" He gripped my shoulders. His eyes were gleaming, his face haggard, but his pale lips twitched with a smile.

"Maybe it's good-by, Gregg. We'll fall—fighting."

"Yes. Fighting. Coniston, you keep the pressure up."

With the broken set-tubes it took nearly all the pressure to maintain the few plates I had shifted. One slipped back to neutral. Then the

pumps gained on it, and it shifted again.

I dashed up to the deck. Ah, the Moon was so close now! So horribly close! The deck shadows were still. Through the forward bow windows the Moon surface glared up at us.

I reached the turret. The *Planetara* was steady. Pitched bow-down, half falling, half sliding like a rocket downward. The scarred surface of the Moon spread wide under us.

These last horrible minutes were a blur. And there was always Anita's face. She left Miko. Faced with death, he sat clinging. Ignoring her, Moa, too, sat apart. Staring—

And Anita crept to me. "Gregg, dear one. The end...."

I tried the electronic engines from the stern, setting them in the reverse. The streams of their light glowed from the stern, forward along our hull, and flared down from our bow toward the Lunar surface. But no atmosphere was here to give resistance. Perhaps the electronic streams checked our fall a little. The pumps gave us pressure, just in the last minutes, to slide a few of the hull-plates. But our bow stayed down. We slid, like a spent rocket falling.

I recall the horror of that expanding Lunar surface. The maw of Archimedes yawning. A blob. Widening to a great pit. Then I saw it was to one side. Rushing upward.

A phantasmagoria of uprushing crags. Black and gray. Spires tinged with Earth-light.

"Gregg, dear one—good-by."

Her gentle arms around me. The end of everything for us. I recall murmuring, "Not falling free, Anita. Some hull-plates are set."

My dials showed another plate shifting, checking us a little further. Good old Snap.

I calculated the next best plate to shift. I tried it. Slid it over. Good old Snap....

Then everything faded but the feeling of Anita's arms around me.

"Gregg, dear one—"

The end of everything for us....

There was an up-rush of gray-black rock.

An impact....

Chapter 22 The Hiss of Death

I opened my eyes to a dark blur of confusion. My shoulder hurt—a pain shooting through it. Something lay like a weight on me. I could not seem to move my left arm. Very queer! Then I moved it, and it hurt. I was lying twisted: I sat up. And with a rush, memory came. The crash was over. I am not dead. Anita—

She was lying beside me. There was a little light here in this silent blur—a soft, mellow Earth-light filtering in the window. The weight on me was Anita. She lay sprawled, her head and shoulders half way across my lap.

Not dead! Thank God, not dead! She moved. Her arms went around me, and I lifted her. The Earth-light glowed on her pale face; but her eyes opened and she faintly smiled.

"It's past, Anita! We've struck, and we're still alive."

I held her as though all life's turgid danger were powerless to touch us.

But in the silence my floating senses were brought back to reality by

a faint sound forcing itself upon me. A little hiss. The faintest murmuring breath like a hiss. Escaping air!

I cast off her clinging arms. "Anita, this is madness!"

For minutes we must have been lying there in the heaven of our embrace. But air was escaping! The *Planetara's* dome was broken—or cracked—and our precious air was hissing out.

Full reality came to me at last. I was not seriously injured. I found that I could move freely. I could stand. A twisted shoulder, a limp left arm, but they were better in a moment.

And Anita did not seem to be hurt. Blood was upon her. But not her blood.

Beside Anita, stretched face down on the turret grid, was the giant figure of Miko. The blood lay in a small pool against his face. A widening pool.

Moa was here. I thought her body twitched; then was still. This soundless wreckage! In the dim glow of the wrecked turret with its two motionless, broken human figures, it seemed as though Anita and I were ghouls prowling. I saw that the turret had fallen over to

the *Planetara's* deck. It lay dashed against the dome-side.

The deck was aslant. A litter of wreckage. A broken human figure showed—one of the crew, who at the last must have come running up. The forward observation tower was down on the chart-room roof: in its metal tangle I thought I could see the legs of the tower look-out.

So this was the end of the brigands' adventure! The *Planetara's* last voyage! How small and futile are human struggles! Miko's daring enterprise—so villainous, inhuman—brought all in a few moments to this silent tragedy. The *Planetara* had fallen thirty thousand miles. But why? What had happened to Hahn? And where was Coniston, down in this broken hull?

And Snap. I thought suddenly of Snap.

I clutched at my wandering wits. This inactivity was death. The escaping air hissed in my ears. Our precious air, escaping away into the vacant desolation of the Lunar emptiness. Through one of the twisted, slanting dome-windows a rocky spire was visible. The *Planetara* lay bow-down, wedged in a jagged cradle of Lunar rock. A miracle that the hull and dome had held together.

"Anita, we must get out of here!"

I thought I was fully alert now. I recalled that the brigands had spoken of having partly assembled their Moon equipment. If only we could find suits and helmets!

"We must get out," I repeated. "Get to Grantline's camp."

"Their helmets are in the forward storage room, Gregg. I saw them there."

She was staring at the fallen Miko and Moa. She shuddered and turned away and gripped me. "In the forward storage room, by the port of the emergency lock-exit."

If only the exit locks would operate! We must get out of here, but find Snap first. Good old Snap! Would we find him lying dead?

We climbed from the slanting, fallen turret, over the wreckage of the littered deck. It was not difficult, a lightness was upon us. The *Planetara's* gravity-magnetizers were dead: this was only the light Moon-gravity pulling us.

"Careful, Anita. Don't jump too freely."

We leaped along the deck. The hiss of the escaping pressure was like a clanging gong of warning to tell us to hurry. The hiss of death so close!

"Snap—" I murmured.

"Oh, Gregg. I pray we may find him alive—!"

"And get out. We've got to rush it. Get out and find the Grantline camp."

But how far? Which way? I must remember to take food and water. If the helmets were equipped with admission ports. If we could find Snap. If the exit locks would work to let us out.

With a fifteen foot leap we cleared a pile of broken deck chairs. A man lay groaning near them. I went back with a rush. Not Snap! A steward. He had been a brigand, but he was a steward to me now.

"Get up! This is Haljan. Hurry, we must get out of here. The air is escaping!"

But he sank back and lay still. No time to find if I could help him: there were Anita and Snap to save.

We found a broken entrance to one of the descending passages. I flung the debris aside and cleared it. Like a giant of strength with only this Moon-gravity holding me, I raised a broken segment of the superstructure and heaved it back.

Anita and I dropped ourselves down the sloping passage. The interior of the wrecked ship was silent and dim. An occasional passage light was still burning. The passage and all the rooms lay askew. Wreckage everywhere: but the double-dome and hull-shell had withstood the shock. Then I realized that the Erentz system was slowing down. Our heat, like our air, was escaping, radiating away, a deadly chill settling upon everything. And our walls were bulging. The silence and the deadly chill of death would soon be here in these wrecked corridors. The end of the *Planetara*. I wondered vaguely if the walls would explode.

We prowled like ghouls. We did not see Coniston. Snap had been by the shifter-pumps. We found him in the oval doorway. He lay sprawled. Dead? No, he moved. He sat up before we could get to him. He seemed confused, but his senses clarified with the movement of our figures over him.

"Gregg! Why, Anita!"

"Snap! You're all right? We struck—the air is escaping."

He pushed me away. He tried to stand. "I'm all right. I was up a minute ago. Gregg, it's getting cold. Where is she? I had her here—she wasn't killed. I spoke to her."

Irrational!

"Snap!" I held him, shook him. "Snap, old fellow!"

He said, normally. "Easy, Gregg. I'm all right now."

Anita gripped him. "Who, Snap?"

"She! There she is."

Another figure was here! On the grid-floor by the door oval. A figure partly shrouded in a broken invisible cloak and hood. An invisible cloak! I saw a white face with opened eyes regarding me. The face of a girl.

Venza!

I bent down. "You!"

Anita cried, "Venza!"

Venza here? Why—how—my thoughts swept away. Venza here, dying? Her eyes closed. But she murmured to Anita. "Where is he? I want him."

Dying? I murmured impulsively, "Here I am, Venza dear." Gently, as one would speak with gentle sympathy to humor the dying. "Here I am, Venza."

But it was only the confusion of the shock upon her. And it was upon us all. She pushed at Anita. "I want him." She saw me. This whimsical Venus girl! Even here as we gathered, all of us blurred by the shock, confused in the dim, wrecked ship with the chill of death coming—even here she could make a jest. Her pale lips smiled.

"You, Gregg. I'm not hurt—I don't think I'm hurt." She managed to get herself up on one elbow. "Did you think I wanted you with my dying breath? Why, what conceit! Not you, Handsome Haljan! I was calling Snap."

He was down to her. "We're all right, Venza. It's over. We must get out of the ship—the air is escaping."

We gathered in the oval doorway. We fought the confusion of panic.

"The exit port is this way."

Or was it? I answered Snap, "Yes, I think so."

The ship suddenly seemed a stranger to me. So cold. So vibrationless. Broken lights. These slanting, wrecked corridors. With the ventilating fans stilled, the air was turning fetid. Chilling. And thinning, with escaping pressure, rarifying so that I could feel the grasp of it in my lungs and the pin-pricks of my burning cheeks.

We started off. Four of us, still alive in this silent ship of death. My blurred thoughts tried to cope with it all. Venza here. I recalled how she had bade me create a diversion when the women passengers were landing on the asteroid. She had carried out her purpose! In the confusion she had not gone ashore. A stowaway here. She had secured the cloak. Prowling, to try and help us, she had come upon Hahn. Had seized his ray-cylinder and struck him down, and been herself knocked unconscious by his dying lunge, which also had broken the tubes and wrecked the *Planetara*. And Venza, unconscious, had been lying here with the mechanism of her cloak still operating, so that we did not see her when we came and found why Hahn did not answer my signals.

"It's here, Gregg."

Snap and I lifted the pile of Moon equipment. We located four suits and helmets and the mechanisms to operate them.

"More are in the chart-room," Anita said.

But we needed no others. I robed Anita, and showed her the mechanisms.

"Yes. I understand."

Snap was helping Venza. We were all stiff from the cold; but within the suits and their pulsing currents, the blessed warmth came again.

The helmets had admission ports through which food and drink could be taken. I stood with my helmet ready. Anita, Venza and Snap were bloated and grotesque beside me. We had found food and water here, assembled in portable cases which the brigands had prepared. Snap lifted them, and signed to me he was ready.

My helmet shut out all sounds save my own breathing, my pounding heart, and the murmur of the mechanism. The blessed warmth and pure air were good.

We reached the hull port-locks. They operated! We went through in the light of the head-lamps over our foreheads.

I closed the locks after us. An instinct to keep the air in the ship for the other trapped humans lying there.

We slid down the sloping side of the *Planetara*. We were unweighted, irrationally agile with the slight gravity. I fell a dozen feet and landed with barely a jar.

We were out on the Lunar surface. A great sloping ramp of crags stretched down before us. Gray-black rock tinged with Earth-light. The Earth hung amid the stars in the blackness overhead like a huge section of glowing yellow ball.

This grim, desolate, silent landscape! Beyond the ramp, fifty feet below us, a tumbled naked plain stretched away into blurred distance. But I could see mountains off there. Behind us the towering, frowning rampart-wall of Archimedes loomed against the sky.

I had turned to look back at the *Planetara*. She lay broken, wedged between spires of upstanding rock. A few of her lights still gleamed. The end of the *Planetara*!

IMAGEDESCRIPTION

The three grotesque figures of Anita, Venza and Snap had started off. Hunchback figures with the tanks mounted on their shoulders. I bounded and caught them. I touched Snap. We made audiphone contact.

"Which way do you think?" I demanded.

"I think this way, down the ramp. Away from Archimedes, toward the mountains. It shouldn't be too far."

"You run with Venza. I'll hold Anita."

He nodded. "But we must keep together, Gregg."

We could soon run freely. Down the ramp, out over the tumbled plain. Bounding, grotesque leaping strides. The girls were more agile, more skilful. They were soon leading us. The Earth-shadows of their figures leaped beside them. The *Planetara* faded into the distance behind us. Archimedes stood back there. Ahead, the mountains came closer.

An hour perhaps. I lost count of time. Occasionally we stopped to rest. Were we going toward the Grantline camp? Would they see our

tiny waving headlights?

Another interval. Then far ahead of us on the ragged plain, lights showed! Moving tiny spots of light! Headlights on helmeted figures!

We ran, monstrously leaping. A group of figures were off there. Grantline's party? Snap gripped me.

"Grantline! We're safe, Gregg! Safe!"

He took his bulb-light from his helmet: we stood in a group while he waved it. A semaphore signal.

"*Grantline?*"

And the answer came. "*Yes. You, Dean?*"

Their personal code. No doubt of this—it was Grantline, who had seen the *Planetara* fall and had come to help us.

I stood then with my hand holding Anita. And I whispered, "It's Grantline! We're safe, Anita, my darling!"

Death had been so close! Those horrible last minutes on the *Planetara* had shocked us, marked us.

We stood trembling. And Grantline and his men came bounding up.

A helmeted figure touched me. I saw through the helmet-pane the visage of a stern-faced, square-jawed, youngish man.

"Grantline? Johnny Grantline?"

"Yes," said his voice at my ear-grid. "I'm Grantline. You're Haljan? Gregg Haljan?"

They crowded around us. Gripped us to hear our explanations.

Brigands! It was amazing to Johnny Grantline. But the menace was over now, over as soon as Grantline had realized its existence. As though the wreck of the *Planetara* were foreordained by an all-wise Providence, the brigands' adventure had come to tragedy.

We stood for a time discussing it. Then I drew apart, leaving Snap with Grantline. And Anita joined me. I held her arm so that we had audiphone contact.

"Anita, mine."

"Gregg, dear one."

Murmured nothings which mean so much to lovers!

As we stood in the fantastic gloom of the Lunar desolation, with the blessed Earth-light on us, I sent up a prayer of thankfulness. Not that a hundred millions of treasure were saved. Not that the attack upon Grantline had been averted. But only that Anita was given back to me. In moments of greatest emotion the human mind individualizes. To me, there was only Anita.

Life is very strange! The gate to the shining garden of our love seemed swinging wide to let us in. Yet I recall that a vague fear still lay on me. A premonition?

I felt a touch on my arm. A bloated helmet visor was thrust near my own. I saw Snap's face peering at me.

"Grantline thinks we should return to the *Planetara*. Might find some of them alive."

Grantline touched me. "It's only humanity."

"Yes," I said.

We went back. Some ten of us—a line of grotesque figures bounding with slow, easy strides over the jagged, rock-strewn plain. Our lights

danced before us.

The *Planetara* came at last into view. My ship. Again that pang swept me as I saw her. This, her last resting place. She lay here in her open tomb, shattered, broken, unbreathing. The lights on her were extinguished. The Erentz system had ceased to pulse—the heart of the dying ship, for a while beating faintly, but now at rest.

We left the two girls with some of Grantline's men at the admission port. Snap, Grantline and I, with three others, went inside. There still seemed to be air, but not enough so that we dared remove our helmets.

It was dark inside the wrecked ship. The corridors were black; the hull control-rooms were dimly illumined with Earth-light straggling through the windows.

This littered tomb! Already cold and silent with death. We stumbled over a fallen figure. A member of the crew.

Grantline straightened from examining him.

"Dead."

Earth-light fell on the horrible face. Puffed flesh, bloated red from

the blood which had oozed from its pores in the thinning air. I looked away.

We prowled further. Hahn lay dead in the pump-room.

The body of Coniston should have been near here. We did not see it.

We climbed up to the slanting littered deck. The dome had not exploded, but the air up here had almost all hissed away.

Again Grantline touched me. "That the turret?"

"Yes."

No wonder he asked! The wreckage was all so formless.

We climbed after Snap into the broken turret room. We passed the body of that steward who just at the end had appealed to me and I had left dying. The legs of the forward look-out still poked grotesquely up from the wreckage of the observatory tower where it lay smashed down against the roof of the chart-room.

We shoved ourselves into the turret. What was this? No bodies here! The giant Miko was gone! The pool of his blood lay congealed into a frozen dark splotch on the metal grid.

And Moa was gone! They had not been dead. Had dragged themselves out of here, fighting desperately for life. We would find them somewhere around here.

But we did not. Nor Coniston. I recalled what Anita had said: other suits and helmets had been here in the nearby chart-room. The brigands had taken them, and food and water doubtless, and escaped from the ship, following us through the lower admission ports only a few minutes after we had gone out.

We made careful search of the entire ship. Eight of the bodies which should have been here were missing: Miko, Moa, Coniston, and five of the steward-crew.

We did not find them outside. They were hiding near here, no doubt, more willing to take their chances than to yield now to us. But how, in all this Lunar desolation, could we hope to locate them?

"No use," said Grantline. "Let them go. If they want death—well, they deserve it."

But we were saved. Then, as I stood there, realization leaped at me. Saved? Were we not indeed fatuous fools?

In all these emotion-swept moments since we had encountered Grantline, memory of that brigand ship coming from Mars had never once occurred to Snap or me!

I told Grantline now. His eyes through the visor stared at me blankly.

"What!"

I told him again. It would be here in eight days. Fully manned and armed.

"But Haljan, we have almost no weapons! All my *Comet's* space was taken with mining equipment and the mechanisms for my camp. I can't signal Earth! I was depending on the *Planetara*!"

It surged upon us. The brigand menace past? We were blindly congratulating ourselves on our safety! But it would be eight days or more before in distant Ferrok-Shahn the non-arrival of the *Planetara* would cause any real comment. No one was searching for us—no one was worried over us.

No wonder the crafty Miko was willing to take his chances out here in the Lunar wilds! His ship, his reinforcements, his weapons were coming rapidly!

And we were helpless. Almost unarmed. Marooned here on the Moon with our treasure!

Chapter 23 The Prowling Watchman

Try it again," Snap urged. "Good God, Johnny, we've got to raise some Earth station! Chance it! Use your power—run it up to the full. Chance it!"

We were gathered in Grantline's instrument room. The duty-man, with blanched grim face, sat at his senders. The Grantline crew shoved close around us, tense and silent.

Above everything we must make some Earth station aware of our plight. Conditions were against us. There were very few observers, in the high-powered Earth stations who knew that an exploring party was on the Moon. Perhaps none of them. The Government officials who had sanctioned the expedition—and Halsey and his confrères in the Detective Bureau—were not anticipating trouble now. The *Planetara* was supposed to be well on her course to Ferrok-Shahn. It was when she was due to return that Halsey would be alert.

And it seemed, too, that nature was against us. The bulging half-Earth* hung poised near the zenith over our little crater. Its rotation through the hours was clearly visible. We timed our signals when the western hemisphere was facing us. But nature was against us. No clouds, no faintest hint of mist could fog the airless Lunar surface.

*(Between the half and the full illumined disc, the complete Earth now was some ten days old.)

But there were continuous clouds over the Americas.

"Try it again," Snap urged.

These bulging walls! Grantline used his power far beyond the limits of safety. He cut down his lights; the telescope intensifiers were permanently disconnected; the ventilators were momentarily stilled, so that the air here in the little room crowded with men rapidly grew fetid. All to save power pressure, that the vital Erentz system might survive.

Even so it was strained to the danger point. The walls seemed to bulge outward with the pressure of the room, the aluminite braces straining and creaking. And our heat was radiating away; the deadly chill of space crept in.

"Again!" ordered Grantline.

The duty-man flung on the power in rhythmic pulses. In the silence the tubes hissed. The light sprang through the banks of rotating prisms, intensified up the scale until, with a vague, almost invisible

beam, it left the last swaying mirror and leaped through our overhead dome into space.

"Commander!" The duty-man's voice carried an appeal. These bulging walls! If they cracked, or even sprung a serious leak, the camp would be uninhabitable....

"Enough," said Grantline. "Switch it off. We'll let it go at that for now."

It seemed that every man in the room had been holding his breath in the darkness. The lights came on again: the Erentz motors accelerated to normal. The strain on the walls eased up, and the room began warming.

Had the Earth caught our signal? We did not want to waste the power to find out. Our receivers were disconnected. If an answering signal came, we could not know it. One of the men said:

"Let's assume they saw us." He laughed, but it was a high-pitched, tense laugh. "We don't dare even use the telescope. Our rescue ship will be right overhead, visible to the naked eye before we see it. Three days more—that's what I'll give it."

But the three days passed, and no rescue ship came. The Earth was almost at the full. We tried signaling again. Perhaps it got through—we did not know. But our power was weaker now. The wall of one of the rooms sprang a leak, and the men were hours repairing it. I did not say so, but never once did I feel that our signals were seen on Earth. Those cursed clouds! The Earth almost everywhere seemed to have poor visibility.

Four of our eight days of grace were all too soon passed. The brigand ship must be half-way here by now.

They were busy days for us. If we could have captured Miko and his band, our danger would have been less imminent. With the treasure insulated so that its Gamma rays could not betray us, and our camp in darkness, the arriving brigand ship might never find us. But Miko knew our location: he would signal his oncoming ship when it was close and lead it to us.

Three times during those days—and the days which followed them—Grantline sent out searching parties. But it was unavailing. Miko, Moa and Coniston, with their five underlings, could not be found. We searched all the territory from the camp to the *Planetara*, and off to the foot-crags of Archimedes, and a score of miles into the flatness of the Mare Imbrium. There was no sign of the brigands. Yet

we knew they could be near here—it was so easy to hide amid the tumbled crags, the ravines, the gullies, the numberless craters and pit-holes: or underground in the vast honeycombed subterranean recesses.

We had at first hoped that the brigands might have perished. But that was soon dispelled! I went—about the third day—with the party that was sent to the *Planetara*. We wanted to salvage such of its equipment, its unbroken power units, as might be available. And Snap and I had worked out an idea which we thought might be of service. We needed some of the *Planetara's* smaller gravity-plate sections. Those in Grantline's wrecked little *Comet* had stood so long that their radiations had gone dead. But the *Planetara's* were still efficacious.

We secured the fragments of Newtonia.* But our hope that Miko might have perished was dashed. He too had returned to the *Planetara*! The evidence was clear before us. The vessel was stripped of all its power units save those which were dead and useless. The last of the food and water stores was taken. The weapons in the chart-room—the Benson curve-lights, bullet projectors, and heat-rays—had vanished.

*(An allusion to the element Newtonia, named in memory of the

great founder of celestial mechanics, Sir Isaac Newton. Artificially electronized, this metal element may be charged either positively or negatively, thus to attract or repell other masses of matter. The gravity plates of all space-ships were built of it.)

Other days passed. The Earth reached the full, and began waning. The twenty-eight day Lunar night was in its last half. No rescue ship came from Earth. We had ceased our efforts to signal, for we needed all our power to maintain ourselves. The camp would be in a state of siege. That was the best we could hope for. We had a few short-range weapons, such as Bensons, heat-rays and rifles. A few hundred feet of effective range was the most any of them could obtain. The heat-rays—in giant form one of the most deadly weapons on Earth—were only slowly efficacious on the airless Moon. Striking an intensely cold surface, their warming radiations, without atmosphere to aid them, were slow to act. Even in a blasting heat-beam a man in his Erentz helmet-suit could withstand the ray for several minutes.

We were, however, well equipped with explosives. Grantline had brought a large supply for his mining operations, and much of it was still unused. We had, also, an ample stock of oxygen fuses, and a variety of oxygen light flares in small fragile glass-globes.

It was to use these explosives against the brigands that Snap and I

were working out our scheme with the gravity-plates. The brigand ship would come with giant projectors and with some thirty men. If we could hold out against them for a time, the fact that the *Planetara* was missing would bring us help from Earth.

"A month," said Grantline. "A month at the most. If we can hold them off that long—even in a week or two help may come."

Another day. A tenseness fell on us all, despite the absorption of our feverish activities. To conserve the power, the camp was almost dark, we lived in dim, chill rooms, with just a few weak spots of light outside to mark the watchmen on their rounds. We did not use the telescope,* but there was scarcely an hour when one or the other of the men was not sitting on a cross-piece up in the dome of the little instrument room, casting tense searching gaze into the black, starry firmament. A ship might appear at any time now—a rescue ship from Earth, or the brigands from Mars.

*(An old-fashioned telescope, of limited field and needing no electronic power, would have been immensely serviceable to Grantline, but his was of the more modern type.)

Anita and Venza during these days could aid us very little save by their cheering words. They moved about the rooms, trying to inspire

us; so that all the men, when they might have been humanly sullen and cursing their fate, were turned to grim activity, or grim laughter, making a joke of this coming siege. The morale of the camp now was perfect. An improvement indeed over the inactivity of the former peaceful weeks!

Grantline mentioned it to me. "We'll put up a good fight, Haljan. These fellows from Mars will know they've had a task before they ever sail off with this treasure."

I had many moments alone with Anita. I need not mention them. It seemed that our love was crossed by the stars, with an adverse fate dooming it. And Snap and Venza must have felt the same. Among the men we were always quietly, grimly active. But alone.... I came upon Snap once with his arms around the little Venus girl. I heard him say:

"Accursed luck! That you and I should find each other too late, Venza. We could have a mighty lot of fun in Great-New York together."

"Snap, we will!"

As I turned away, I murmured: "And, pray God, so will Anita and I."

The girls slept together in a small room of the main building. Often during the time of sleep, when the camp was stilled except for the night watch, Snap and I would sit in the corridor near the girls' door-grid, talking of that time when we would all be back on our blessed Earth.

Our eight days of grace were passed. The brigand ship was due—now, to-morrow, or the next day.

I recall, that night, my sleep was fitfully uneasy. Snap and I had a cubby together. We talked, and made futile plans. I went to sleep, but awakened after a few hours. Impending disaster lay heavily on me. But there was nothing abnormal nor unusual in that!

Snap was asleep. I was restless, but I did not have the heart to awaken him. He needed what little repose he could get. I dressed, left our cubby and wandered out into the corridor of the main building.

It was cold in the corridor, and gloomy with the weak blue light. An interior watchman passed me.

"All as usual, Haljan."

"Nothing in sight?"

"No. They're looking."

I went through the connecting corridor to the adjacent building. In the instrument-room several of the men were gathered, scanning the vault overhead.

"Nothing, Haljan."

I stayed with them awhile, then wandered away. The outside man met me near the admission lock-chambers of the main building. The duty-man here sat at his controls, raising the air-pressure in the locks through which the outside watchman was coming. The relief sat here in his bloated suit, with his helmet on his knees. It was Wilks.

"Nothing yet, Haljan. I'm going up to the peak of the crater to see if anything is in sight. I wish that damnable brigand ship would come and get it over with."

Instinctively we all spoke in half whispers, the tenseness bearing in on us.

The outside man came out of his helmet. He was white and grim, but he grinned at Wilks.

"All is usual." He tried the familiar jest at Wilks, but his voice was flat: "Don't let the Earthlight get you!"

Wilks went out through the portes—a process of no more than a minute. I wandered away again through the corridors.

I suppose it was half an hour later that I chanced to be gazing through a corridor window. The lights along the rocky cliff-edge were tiny blue spots. The head of the stairway leading down to the abyss of the crater floor was visible. The bloated figure of Wilks was just coming up. I watched him for a moment making his rounds. He did not stop to inspect the lights. That was routine; I thought it queer that he passed them.

Another minute passed. The figure of Wilks went with slow bounds over toward the back of the ledge where the glassite shelter housed the treasure. It was all dark off there. Wilks went into the gloom, but before I lost sight of him he came back. As though he had changed his mind he headed for the foot of the staircase which led up the cliff-face to where, at the peak of the little crater, five hundred feet above us, the narrow observatory platform was perched. He climbed with easy bounds, the light on his helmet bobbing in the gloom.

I stood watching. I could not tell why there seemed to be something

queer about Wilks' actions. But I was struck with it, nevertheless. I watched him disappear over the peak of the summit.

Another minute went by. Wilks did not reappear. I thought I could make out his light on the platform up there. Then abruptly a tiny white beam was waving from the observatory platform! It flashed once or twice, then was extinguished. And now I saw Wilks plainly, standing in the Earthlight, gazing down.

Queer actions! Had the Earthlight touched him? Or was that a local signal-call which he had sent out? Why should Wilks be signalling? What was he doing with a hand-helio? Our watchmen, I knew, had no reason to carry one.

And to whom could Wilks be signalling across this Lunar desolation? The answer stabbed at me: to Miko's band!

I waited another moment. No further light. Wilks was still up there!

I went back to the lock entrance. Spare suits and helmets were here beside the keeper. He gazed at me inquiringly.

"I'm going out, Franck, just for a minute." It struck me that perhaps I was a meddlesome fool. Wilks, of all Grantline's men, was, I knew,

most in his commander's trust. The signal could have been some part of this night's ordinary routine, for all I knew.

I was hastily donning an Erentz suit. I added, "Let me out. I just got the idea Wilks is acting queerly." I laughed. "Maybe the Earthlight has touched him."

With my helmet on I went through the locks. Once outside, with the outer panel closed behind me, I dropped the weights from my belt and shoes and extinguished my helmet-light.

Wilks was still up there. Apparently he had not moved. I bounded off across the ledge to the foot of the ascending stairs. Did Wilks see me coming? I could not tell. As I approached the stairs the platform was cut off from my line of vision.

I mounted with bounding leaps. In my flexible gloved hand I carried my only weapon, a small bullet projector with oxygen firing caps for use in this outside near-vacuum. The leaden bullet with its slight mass would nevertheless pierce a man at the distance of twenty feet.

I held the weapon behind me. I would talk to Wilks first.

I went slowly up the last hundred feet. Was Wilks still up there? The

summit was bathed in Earthlight. The little metal observatory platform came into view above my head.

Wilks was not there. Then I saw him standing on the rocks nearby, motionless. But in a moment he saw me coming.

I waved my left arm with a gesture of greeting. It seemed to me that he started, made as though to leap away, then changed his mind and waited for me.

I sailed from the head of the staircase with a twenty-foot leap and landed lightly beside him. I gripped his arm for audiphone contact.

"Wilks!"

Through the visors his face was visible. I saw him, and he saw me. And I heard his voice.

"You, Haljan! How nice!"

It was not Wilks, but the brigand Coniston!

Chapter 24 Imprisoned!

The duty-man at the exit locks of the main building stood at his

window and watched me curiously. He saw me go up the spider-stairs. He could see the figure he thought was Wilks, standing at the top. He saw me join Wilks, saw us locked together in combat.

For an instant the duty-man stood amazed. There were two fantastic, misshapen figures swaying in the Earthlight five hundred feet above the camp, fighting desperately at the very brink. They were small, dwarfed by distance, alternately dim and bright as they swayed in and out of the shadows. Soon the duty-man could not tell one from the other. Haljan and Wilks—fighting to the death!

The duty-man recovered himself and sprang into action. An interior siren-call was on the instrument panel near him. He rang it, alarming the camp.

The men came rushing to him, Grantline among them.

"What's this? Good God, Franck!"

They saw the silent, deadly combat up there on the cliff. The two figures had fallen together from the observatory platform, dropped twenty feet to a lower landing on the stairs. They lay as though stunned for a moment, then fought on.

Grantline stood stricken with amazement. "That's Wilks!"

"And Haljan," the duty-man gasped. "Went out—something wrong with Wilks—acting strangely—"

The interior of the camp was in a turmoil. The men awakened from sleep, ran out into the corridors, shouted questions.

"An attack?"

"Is it an attack?"

"The brigands?"

But it was Wilks and Haljan in a fight out there on the cliff. The men crowded at the bulls'-eye windows.

And over all the confusion the alarm siren, with no one thinking to shut it off, was screaming with its electrical voice.

Grantline, stricken for that moment of inactivity, stood gazing. One of the figures broke away from the other, bounded up to the summit from the stair-platform to which they had fallen. The other followed. They locked together, swaying at the brink. For an instant it seemed to Grantline that they would go over; then they surged back,

momentarily out of sight.

Grantline found his wits. "Stop them! I'll go out to stop them! What fools!"

He was hastily donning one of the Erentz suits which stood at the lock entrance. "Shut off that siren, Franck!"

Within a minute Grantline was ready. The duty-man called from the window:

"Still at it! By the infernal, such fools! They'll kill themselves!"

The figures had swayed back into view, then out of sight again.

"Franck, let me out."

Grantline was ready. He stood, helmet in hand.

"I'll go with you, Commander."

But the volunteer was not equipped. Grantline would not wait.

"I'm going at once. Hurry, Franck."

The duty-man turned to his panel. The volunteer shoved a weapon at Grantline. "Here, take this."

Grantline jammed on his helmet.

He moved the few steps into the small air-chamber which was the first of the three pressure locks. Its interior door-panel swung open for him. But the door did not close after him!

Cursing the duty-man's slowness, he waited a few seconds. Then he turned to the corridor. The duty-man came running.

Grantline took off his helmet. "What in hell—"

"Broken! Dead!"

"What!"

"Smashed from outside," gasped the duty-man. "Look there—my tubes—"

The control-tubes of the portes had flashed into a close-circuit and burned out. The admission portes would not open!

"And the pressure controls smashed! Broken from outside—!"

There was no way now of getting out through these pressure-locks. The doors, the entire pressure-lock system, was dead. Had it been tampered with from outside?

As though to answer Grantline's amazed question there came a chorus of shouts from the men at the corridor windows.

"Commander! By God—look!"

A figure was outside, close to the building! Clothed in suit and helmet, it stood, bloated and gigantic. It had evidently been lurking at the porte-entrance, had ripped out the wires there.

It moved past the windows, saw the staring faces of the men, and made off with giant bounds. Grantline reached the window in time to see it vanish around the building corner.

It was a giant figure, larger than a normal Earthman. A Martian?

Up on the summit of the crater the two small figures were still fighting. All this turmoil had taken no more than a minute or two.

A lurking Martian outside? The brigand, Miko? More than ever, Grantline was determined to get out. He shouted to his men to don some of the other suits, and called for some of the hand bullet

projectors.

But he could not get out through these main admission portes. He could have forced the panels open perhaps; but with the pressure-changing mechanisms broken, it would merely let the air out of the corridor. A rush of air, probably uncontrollable. How serious the damage was no one could tell as yet. It would perhaps take hours to repair it.

Grantline was shouting. "Get those weapons! That's a Martian outside! The brigand leader, probably! Get into your suits, anyone who wants to go with me! We'll go by the manual emergency exit!"

But the prowling Martian had found it! Within a minute Grantline was there. It was a smaller, two-lock gateway of manual control, so that the person going out could operate it himself. It was in a corridor at the other end of the main building. But Grantline was too late! The lever would not open the panels!

Had someone gone out this way and broken the mechanisms after him? A traitor in the camp? Or had someone come in from outside? Or had the skulking Martian outside broken this lock as he had broken the other?

The questions surged on Grantline. His men crowded around him. The news spread. The camp was a prison. No one could get out.

And outside, the skulking Martian had disappeared. But Wilks and Haljan were still fighting. Grantline could see the two figures up on the observatory platform. They bounded apart, then together again. Crazily swaying—bouncing—striking the rail.

They went together in a great leap off the platform onto the rocks, and rolled in a bright patch of Earthlight. First one on top, then the other, they rolled, unheeding, to the brink. Here, beyond the midway ledge which held the camp, it was a sheer drop of a thousand feet, on down to the crater-floor.

The figures were rolling: then one shook himself loose, rose up, seized the other and, with a desperate lunge, shoved him—

The victorious figure drew back to safety. The other fell, hurtling down into the shadows past the camp-level—down out of sight in the darkness of the crater-floor.

Snap, who was in the group near Grantline at the windows, gasped.

"God! Was that Gregg Haljan who fell?"

No one could say. No one answered. Outside, on the camp-ledge, another helmeted figure now became visible. It was not far from the main building when Grantline first noticed it. It was running fast, bounding toward the spider-staircase. It began mounting.

And now still another figure became visible—the giant Martian again. He appeared from around the corner of the main Grantline building. He evidently saw the winner of the combat on the cliff, who now was standing in the Earthlight, gazing down. And he saw, too, no doubt, the second figure mounting the stairs. He stood quite near the window through which Grantline and his men were gazing, with his back to the building, looking up to the summit. Then he ran with tremendous leaps toward the ascending staircase.

Was it Haljan standing up there on the summit? Who was it climbing the staircase? And was the third figure Miko?

Grantline's mind framed the questions. But his attention was torn from them, and torn even from the swift silent drama outside. The corridor was ringing with shouts.

"We're imprisoned! Can't get out! Was Haljan killed? The brigands are outside!"

And then an interior audiphone blared a call for Grantline. Someone in the instrument room of the adjoining building was talking:

"Commander, I tried the telescope to see who got killed—"

But he did not say who got killed, for he had greater news.

"Commander! The brigand ship!"

Miko's reinforcements from Mars had come.

Chapter 25 The Combat on the Crater-top

Not Wilks, but Coniston! His drawling, British voice:

"You, Gregg Haljan! How nice!"

His voice broke off as he jerked his arm from me. My hand with the bullet-protector came up, but with a sweeping blow he struck my wrist. The weapon dropped to the rocks.

I fought instinctively, those first moments; my mind was whirling with the shock of surprise. This was not Wilks, but the brigand Coniston.

His blow wrenched him around. Awkward, fighting in the air-puffed suits, with only a body-weight of some thirty pounds! Coniston stumbled over the rocks. I had still scarce recovered my wits, but I avoided his outflung arms, and, stooping, tried to recover my revolver. It lay nearby. But Coniston followed my scrambling steps and fell upon me. My foot struck the weapon; it slid away and fell down a crag into a six-foot pit.

We locked together, and when I rose erect he had me around the middle. His voice jangled with broken syllables in my receiver.

"Do for you now, Haljan—"

It was an eery combat. We swayed, shoving, kicking, wrestling. His hold around my middle shut off the Erentz circulation; the warning buzz rang in my ears to mingle with the rasp of his curses. I flung him off, and my tiny Erentz motors recovered. He staggered away, but in a great leap came at me again.

I was taller, heavier and far stronger than Coniston. But I found him crafty, and where I was awkward in handling my lightness, he seemed more skilfully agile.

I became aware that we were on the twenty-foot square grid of the observatory platform. It had a low metal railing. We surged against it. I caught a dizzying glimpse of the abyss. Then it receded as we bounced the other way. And then we fell to the grid. His helmet bashed against mine, striking as though butting with the side of his head to puncture my visor-panel. His gloved fingers were trying to rip at the fabric around my throat.

As we regained our feet, I flung him off, and bounded, like a diver, head-first into him. He went backward, but skilfully kept his feet, gripped me again and shoved me.

I was tottering at the head of the staircase—falling. But I clutched at him.

We fell some twenty or thirty feet to the next lower spider landing. The impact must have dazed us both. I recall my vague idea that we had fallen down the cliff—my Erentz motors smashed—my air shut off. Then the air came again. The roaring in my ears was stilled; my head cleared, and I found that we were on the landing—fighting.

He presently broke away from me, bounded to the summit, with me after him. In the close confines of the suit I was bathed in sweat, and gasping. I had had no thought to increase the oxygen content of my air. But I sorely needed more oxygen for my laboring, pounding heart and my panting breath. I fumbled for the oxygen control-lever. I could not find it; or it would not operate.

I realized I was fighting sluggishly, almost aimlessly. But so was Coniston!

It seemed dreamlike. A phantasmagoria of blows and staggering steps. A nightmare with only the horrible vision of this goggled helmet always before my eyes.

It seemed that we were rolling on the ground, back on the summit.

The unshadowed Earthlight was clear and bright. The abyss was beside me. Coniston, rolling, was now on top, now under me, trying to shove me over the brink. It was all like a dream—as though I were asleep, dreaming that I did not have enough air.

I strove to keep my senses. He was struggling to roll me over the brink. Ah, that would not do! But I was so tired. One cannot fight without oxygen!

I suddenly knew that I had shaken him off and gained my feet. He rose up, swaying. He was as tired, confused, half-asphyxiated as I.

The brink of the abyss was behind us. I lunged, desperately shoving, avoiding his clutch.

He went over, and fell soundlessly, his body whirling end over end down into the shadows, far down.

I drew back. My senses faded as I sank panting to the rocks. But with inactivity, my thumping heart quieted. My respirations slowed. The Erentz circulation gained on my poisoned air. It purified.

That blessed oxygen! My head cleared again. Strength came to me. I felt better.

Coniston had fallen to his death. I was victor. I went to the brink, cautiously, for I was still dizzy. I could see, far down there on the crater-floor, a little patch of Earthlight in which a mashed human figure was lying.

I staggered back again. A moment or two must have passed while I stood there on the summit, with my senses clearing and my strength renewed as the blood-stream cleared in my veins.

I was victor. Coniston was dead. I saw now, down on the lower staircase below the camp-ledge, another goggled figure lying huddled. That was Wilks, no doubt. Coniston had doubtless caught him there, surprised him, killed him.

My attention, as I stood gazing, went down to the camp-buildings. Another figure was outside! It bounded along the ledge, reached the foot of the ascending staircase at the top of which I was standing. With agile leaps, it came mounting at me!

Another brigand! Miko? No, it was not large enough to be Miko, not nearly large enough. I was still confused. I thought of Hahn. But that was absurd. Hahn was in the wreck of the *Planetara*. One of the stewards then....

The figure came up the staircase recklessly, to assail me. I took a step backward, bracing myself to receive this new antagonist.

And then I saw Miko! Unquestionably he: for there was no mistaking his giant figure. He was down on the camp-ledge, running toward the foot of the staircase, coming up to help this other man in advance of him.

I thought of my revolver. I turned to try and find it. I was aware that the first of my assailants was at the stairhead. I could not locate at once where the revolver had fallen. I would be caught, leaped upon from behind. Should I run?

I swung back to see what the oncoming brigand was doing. He had reached the summit. His arms went up, legs bent under him. With a sailing leap he launched for me. I could have bounded way, but with a last look to locate the revolver, I braced myself for the shock.

The figure hit me. It was small and light in my clutching arms. I recall I saw that Miko was half-way up the staircase. I gripped my assailant. The audiphone contact brought a voice.

"Gregg! Is it you?"

It was Anita clutching at me!

Chapter 26 At Bay

“Gregg, you're safe!"

She had heard the camp corridors resounding with the shouts that Wilks and Haljan were fighting. She had come upon a suit and helmet by the manual emergency lock, had run out through the lock, confused, with her only idea to stop Wilks and me from fighting. Then she had seen one of us killed. Impulsive, barely knowing what she was doing, she mounted the stairs, frantic to find if I were alive.

"Anita!"

Miko was coming! She had not seen him: for she had no thought of brigands—only the belief that either Wilks or I had been killed.

But now, as for an instant we stood together on the rocks near the observation platform, I could see the towering figure of Miko nearing the top of the stairs.

"Anita, that's Miko! We must run."

Then I saw my bullet projector. It lay in a bowl-like depression quite

near us. I jumped for it. And as I tore loose from Anita, she leaped down after me. It was a broken bowl in the rocks, some six feet deep. It was open on the side facing the staircase—a narrow, ravinelike gully, full of gray, broken, tumbled rock-masses. The little gully was littered with crags and boulders. But I could see out through it.

Miko had come to the head of the staircase. He stopped there, his great figure etched sharply by the Earthlight. I think he must have known that Coniston was the one who had fallen over the cliff, as my helmet and Coniston's were different enough for him to recognize which was which. He did not know who I was, but he did know me for an enemy.

He stood now at the summit, peering to see where we had gone. He was no more than fifty feet from us.

"Anita, lie down."

I pulled her down on the rocks. I took aim with the bullet projector. But I had forgotten our helmet-lights. Miko must have seen them just as I pulled the trigger. The flying bullet missed him as he jumped sidewise. He dropped, but I could see him moving in the shadows to where a jutting rock gave him shelter. I fired again.

"Gregg."

I had stood up to take aim. I saw the bullet chip a bit of rock. Anita pulled me sharply down beside her.

"Gregg, he's armed!"

It was his turn to fire. It came—the familiar vague flash of the paralyzing ray. It spat its tint of color on the rocks near us, but could not reach us.

Miko rose a moment later and bounded to another rock. I scrambled up, and shot at him, but missed. Then he crouched and returned my fire from his new angle; but Anita and I had shifted.

Time passed—only a few moments. I could not see Miko momentarily. Perhaps he was crouching; perhaps he had moved away again. He was, or had been, on slightly higher ground than the bottom of our bowl. It was dim down here where we were lying, but I feared that every moment Miko might appear and strike at us. His ray at any short range would penetrate our visor-panes, even though our suits might temporarily resist it.

"Anita—it's too dangerous here."

Had I been alone, I might perhaps have leaped up to lure Miko. But with Anita I did not dare chance it.

"We've got to get back to the camp," I told her. The audiphone brought her comment:

"Perhaps he has gone."

But he had not. We saw him again, out in a distant patch of Earthlight. He was further from us than before, but on still higher ground. We had extinguished our small helmet-lights. But he knew we were here, and possibly he could see us. His projector flashed again. But we had again shifted, and were untouched. He was a hundred feet or more away now. His weapon was of longer range than mine. I did not answer his fire, for I could not hope to hit him at such a distance, and the flash of my weapon would help him with his aim.

I murmured to Anita, "We must get out of here."

Yet how did I dare take Anita from these concealing shadows? Miko could reach us so easily as we bounded away, in plain view in the Earthlight of the open summit! We were caught, at bay in this little bowl.

The camp from here was not visible. But out through the broken gully, beyond the staircase top, a white beam of light suddenly came up from below.

"*Haljan.*"

It spelled the signal.

"*Haljan.*"

It was coming from the Grantline instrument room, I knew.

I could answer it with my helmet-light, but I did not dare. I hesitated.

"Try it," urged Anita.

We crouched where we thought we might be safe from Miko's fire. My little light-beam shot up from the bowl. It was undoubtedly visible to the camp.

"*Yes? I am Haljan.*"

And I added:

"*Help! Send us help.*"

I did not mention Anita. Miko could doubtless read these signals. And in the camp they must have missed Anita by now. They answered:

"*Cannot—*"

I lost the rest of it. There came a flash from Miko's weapon. But it gave us confidence. He could not reach us at the moment.

The Grantline beam repeated:

"*Cannot come out. Portes broken. You cannot get in. Stay where you are—an hour or two. We may be able to repair portes.*"

The portes were broken! Stay here an hour or two! But I could not hold this position against Miko that long! Sooner or later he would find a place from where he could sweep this bowl beyond possibility of our hiding. I saw him running now, well beyond my range, to ferret out another point of vantage.

I extinguished my light. What use was it to tell Grantline anything further? Besides, my light was dangerous.

But the Grantline beam spelled another message:

"*The brigand ship is coming! It will be here before we can get out to you! No lights! We will try and hide our location.*"

And the signal-beam brought a last appeal to me:

"*Miko and his men will divulge where we are. Unless you can stop them—*"

The beam vanished. The lights of the Grantline camp made a faint glow that showed above the crater-edge. The glow died, as the camp now was plunged into darkness.

Chapter 27 Anita's Plan

We crouched in the shadows, the Earthlight filtering down to us. The skulking figure of Miko had vanished; but he was out there somewhere on the crags I was sure, lurking, maneuvering to where he could strike us with his ray. Anita's metal-gloved hand was on my arm; in my ear diaphragm her voice sounded eager and unmistakable:

"What was the signal, Gregg?"

She could not read the semaphore lights. I told her.

"Oh Gregg, the Martian ship coming!"

Her mind clung to that as the most important thing. But not so myself. To me there was only the realization that Anita was caught out here, almost at the mercy of Miko's ray. Grantline's men could not get out to help us, nor could I get Anita into the camp.

She added, "Where do you suppose the ship is? In telescopic view?"

"Yes—twenty or thirty thousand miles up, probably."

The stars and the Earth were visible over us. Somewhere up there disclosed by Grantline's instrument but not yet discernible to the naked eye, Miko's reinforcements were hovering.

I stood up cautiously to try and locate Miko. Immediately I saw him. He jumped as though fearing my coming bullet, and I dropped back, barely avoiding his flash, which swept across the top of our bowl.

"Gregg—Gregg, don't take such a chance!"

We lay for a moment in silence. It was horribly nerve-straining. Miko could be creeping up on us. Would he dare chance my sudden fire? Creeping—or would he make a swift, unexpected rush?

The feeling that he was upon us abruptly swept me. I jumped to my feet, against Anita's effort to hold me. But again Miko had vanished. Where was he now?

Isank back. "That ship will be here in a few hours."

I told her what Grantline's signal had suggested: the ship was hovering overhead. It must be fairly close; for Grantline's telescope had revealed its identity as a bandit flyer, unmarked by any of the standard code-identification lights. It was doubtless too far away as yet to have located the whereabouts of Grantline's camp. The Martian brigands knew that we were in the vicinity of Archimedes, but no more than that. Searching this glowing Moon surface, our little lights, the tiny local semaphore beams we had momentarily been using, could easily pass unnoticed.

But as the brigand ship approached now—dropping close to Archimedes as it probably would—our danger was that Miko and his men would then signal it, join it, and reveal the camp's location, and the brigand attack would be upon us.

I told this now to Anita. "The signal said, '*Unless you can stop them*.'"

It was an appeal to me. But how could I respond to it? What could I do, alone out here with Anita, to cope with this enemy?

Anita made no comment.

I added, "That ship will land near Archimedes I imagine, within an hour or two! If Grantline can repair his portes, and I can get you inside—"

Again she made no comment. Then suddenly she gripped me. "Gregg, look there!"

Out through the gully break in our bowl the figure of Miko showed! He was running. But not at us. Circling the summit, leaping to keep himself behind the upstanding crags. He passed the head of the staircase; he did not descend it, but headed off along the summit of the curving crater-rim.

I stood up to watch him. He was making off. Abandoning us!

"He's going!"

I let her stand up beside me; cautiously, at first, for it occurred to me that this might be a ruse to cover some other of Miko's men who might be lurking up here.

But the summit seemed clear. The figure of Miko was a thousand feet away now. We could see the tiny blob of it bobbing over the rocks. Then it plunged down—not into the crater-valley, but out toward the open Moon surface.

Miko had abandoned his attack on us. The reason seemed plain. He had come here from his encampment with Coniston, had sent Coniston ahead to lure and kill Wilks. When this was done, Coniston had flashed his brief signal to Miko, who was hiding nearby.

It was not like the brigand leader to remain in the background. Miko was no coward. But Coniston could impersonate Wilks, whereas Miko's giant stature at once would reveal his identity. Miko had been engaged in smashing the portes. He had looked up and seen me kill Coniston. He had come up to assail me. And then he had read Grantline's signal to me. It was his first knowledge that his ship was at hand. With the camp exits inoperative, Grantline and his men were imprisoned. Miko made an effort to kill me. He did not know my companion was Anita. The effort was taking too long: with the Grantline camp imprisoned and his ship at hand, it was Miko's best move to return to his own camp, rejoin his men, and await their opportunity to signal the ship.

At least, so I reasoned it. Anita and I stood alone. What could we do?

We went to the brink of the cliff. The unlighted Grantline buildings showed vaguely in the Earthlight.

I said, "We'll go down, I'll leave you there. You can wait at the porte. They'll repair it soon, perhaps, and let you in."

"And what will you do?" she demanded.

I was hurrying her down the stairs. But suddenly she stopped. "What are you going to do, Gregg?"

I had not intended to tell her. "Hurry, Anita!"

"Why?" She stood stock still. Through the visors I could see her white face gazing at me rebelliously.

"Why should I hurry, Gregg?"

"Because I want to leave you at the porte. I'm going after Miko—try and locate where he and his men are camping."

I had indeed no specific plan as yet. But it seemed useless for me to sit at the porte waiting to be let in.

"But he's gone, Gregg."

She was right on that. Miko was already a mile or more away, down on the outer surface, making off. He would soon be out of sight. It would be impossible to follow him.

"Gregg, let me go with you."

She jerked away from me and bounded back up the staircase. I caught her on the summit.

"Anita!"

"I'm going with you."

"You're going to stay here."

"I'm not!"

This exasperating controversy! And time was so precious!

"Anita, please."

"I'll be safer with you than waiting here, Gregg."

It almost decided me. Perhaps she would. It was only my intention to follow Miko at a distance. And with much more of this delay here,

he would be lost to me.

And she added, "Besides, I won't stay, and you can't make me."

We ran along the crater-top. At its distant edge the lower plain spread before us. Far down, and far away on the distant broken surface, the leaping figure of Miko showed.

We plunged down the broken outer slope, reached the level. Soon, as we ran, the little Grantline crater faded behind us.

Anita ran more skillfully than I. Ten minutes or so passed. We had seen Miko, and the direction he was taking, but down here on the plain we could no longer see him. It struck me that this was purposeless—and dangerous. Suppose Miko were to see us following? Suppose he stopped and lay in ambush to fire at us as we came leaping heedlessly by?

"Anita, wait," I said, checking her.

I drew her down amid a group of tumbled boulders. And then abruptly she clung to me.

"Gregg, I know what we can do! Gregg, don't tell me you won't let me try it!"

I listened to her plan. Incredible! Incredibly dangerous! Yet, as I pondered it, the very daring of the thing seemed the measure of its possible success. The brigands would never imagine we could be so rash!

"But Anita—"

"Gregg, you're stupid!" It was her turn to be exasperated. In truth, I was indeed in no mood for daring, for my mind was obsessed with Anita's safety. I had been planning that we might see the glow of Miko's encampment, and then return to Grantline and hope that he would have the portes repaired.

"But Gregg—the safety of the treasure—of all the Grantline men...."

"To the infernal with that! It's you—your safety."

"My safety, then! If you put me in the camp and the brigands attack it and I am killed—what then? But this plan of mine, if we can do it, Gregg ... safety, in the end, for all of us."

And it seemed possible. We crouched, discussing it. So daring a thing!

The brigand ship would come down near Archimedes. That was fifty

miles from Grantline. The brigands from Mars would not have seen the dark Grantline buildings hidden in the little crater-pit. They would wait for Miko and his men to make their whereabouts known.

Miko's encampment was ahead of us now, undoubtedly. We had been following him toward the Mare Imbrium; we were at its borders now. Archimedes from here was also about fifty miles.

And Anita proposed that we go to Archimedes, climb in slope and await the coming of the brigand ship. Miko would be off in the Mare Imbrium. Or at least, we hoped so. He would signal his ship. But Anita and I, closer to it, would also signal it—and, posing as brigands, could join it!

"Remember, Gregg, I am Anita Prince, George's sister." Her voice trembled as, she mentioned her dead brother. "They know that George was in Miko's pay, and I am his sister.... It will help convince them."

This daring scheme! If we could join the ship, we might be able to persuade its leader that Miko's distant signals were merely a ruse of Grantline to lure the brigands in that direction. A long-range projector from the ship would kill Miko and his men as they came forward to join it! And then we could falsely direct the brigands, lead

them away from Grantline and the treasure.

"Gregg, we must try it."

Heaven help me, I yielded to her persuasion!

We turned at right angles and ran toward where the distant frowning walls of Archimedes loomed against the starlit sky.

Chapter 28 The Ascent of Archimedes

The broken shaggy ramparts of the giant crater rose above us. We toiled upward, out of the foothills, clinging now to the crags and pitted terraces of the main ascent. An hour had passed since we turned from the borders of the Mare Imbrium. Or was it two hours? I could not tell. I only know that we ran with desperate frantic haste.

Anita would not admit that she was tired. She was more skilful than I in this leaping over the broken rock masses. Yet I felt that her slight strength must give out. It seemed miles up the undulating slopes of the foothills with the black and white ramparts of the massive crater close before us.

And then the main ascent. There were places where, like smooth black frozen ice, the walls rose sheer. We avoided them, toiling aside, plunging into gullies, crossing pits where sometimes we perforce went downwards, and then up again; or sometimes we stood, hot and breathless, upon ledges, recovering our strength, selecting the best route upward.

This tumbled mass of rock! Honeycombed everywhere with caves and passages leading into darkness impenetrable. There were pits into which we might so easily have fallen; ravines to span,

sometimes with a leap, sometimes by a long and arduous detour.

Endless climb! We came to a ledge, with the plains of the Mare Imbrium stretching out beneath us. We might have been upon this main ascent for an hour; the plains were far down, the broken surface down there smoothed now by the perspective of our height. And yet still above us the brooding circular wall went up into the sky. Ten thousand feet still above us—I think it was at least that, or more.

"You're tired, Anita. We'd better stay here."

"No! If we could only get to the top—the ship may land on the other side—they would see us if we were at the top."

There was as yet no sign of the brigand ship. With every stop for rest we searched the starry vault. The Earth hung over us, flattened beyond the full. The stars blazed to mingle with the Earthlight and illumine these massive crags of the Archimedes walls. But no speck appeared to tell us that the ship was up there.

We were on the curving side of the Archimedes wall which fronted the Mare Imbrium to the North. The plains lay like a great frozen sea, congealed ripples shining in the light of the Earth, with dark

patches to mark the hollows. Somewhere down there—six or eight thousand feet below us now, or even more than that, for all I could tell—Miko's encampment lay concealed. We searched for lights of it, but could see none.

Or had Miko rejoined his party, left his camp and come here like ourselves to climb Archimedes? Or was our assumption wholly wrong—perhaps the brigand ship would not land near here at all?

Sweeping around from the Mare Imbrium, the plains were less smooth—the shattered, crag-littered, crater-scarred region beyond which the distant Apennines raised their terraced walls. The little crater which concealed the Grantline camp was off that way. There was nothing to mark it from here.

"Gregg, do you see anything up there? There seems to be a blur."

Her sight, sharper than mine, had picked it out. The descending brigand ship! A faintest tiny blur against the stars, a few of them occulted as though strangely an invisible shadow were upon them. A growing shadow, materializing into a blur—a blob, a shape faintly defined. Then sharper until we were sure of what we saw. It was the brigand ship. It came dropping slowly, silently down.

We crouched on the little ledge. A cave-mouth was behind us. A gully was beside us, a break in the ledge; and at our feet the wall dropped sheer.

We had extinguished our little lights. We crouched, silently gazing up into the stars.

The ship, when first we distinguished it was central over Archimedes. We thought for a while that it might descend into the crater. But it did not; it came sailing forward.

I whispered into the audiphone—whispering by instinct, as though out here in all this airless desolation someone might overhear us!

"It's coming over the crater."

Her hand pressed my arm in answer.

I recalled that when, from the *Planetara*, Miko had forced Snap to signal this brigand band on Mars, Miko's only information as to the whereabouts of the Grantline camp was that it lay between Archimedes and the Apennines. That was Grantline's first message to us, and Miko had relayed it to his men. The brigands from Mars now were following that information.

A tense interval passed. We could see the ship plainly above us now, a gray-black shape among the stars up beyond the shaggy, towering crater-rim. The vessel came upon a level keel, hull-down, slowly circling, looking for Miko's signal, no doubt, or for possible lights of Grantline. They were also picking a landing place.

We saw it soon as a cylindrical, cigarlike shape, rather smaller than the *Planetara*, but similar of design. It bore lights now. The ports of its hull were tiny rows of illumination, and the glow of light under its rounding upper dome was faintly visible.

A bandit ship, no doubt of that. Its identification keel-plate was empty of official pass-code lights. These brigands had not attempted to secure official sailing lights when leaving Ferrok-Shahn. It was an outlawed ship, unmistakably. And here upon the deserted Moon there was no need for secrecy. Its lights were openly displayed, that Miko might see it and join it.

It went slowly past us, only a few thousand feet higher than our level. We could see the whole outline of its pointed cylinder-hull, with the rounded dome on top. And under the dome was its open deck-space, with a little cabin superstructure in the center.

I thought for a moment that by some fortunate chance it might land

quite near us. There was a wide ledge a quarter of a mile away.

"Anita, look."

But it went past. And then I saw that it was heading for a level, plateau-like surface a few miles further on. It dropped, cautiously floating down.

There was still no sign of Miko. But I realized that haste was necessary. We must be the first to join the brigand ship.

I lifted Anita to her feet. "I don't think we should signal from here."

"No. Miko might see it."

We could not tell where he was. Down on the plains, perhaps? Or up here, somewhere in these miles of towering rocks?

"Are you ready, Anita?"

"Yes, Gregg."

I stared through the visors at her white, solemn face.

"Yes, I'm ready," she repeated.

Her hand-pressure seemed to me suddenly like a farewell. Were we plunging rashly into what was destined to mean our death? Was this a farewell?

An instinct swept me not to do this thing. Why, in an hour or two I could have Anita back to the comparative safety of the Grantline buildings. The exit portes would doubtless be repaired by now. I could get her inside.

She had bounded away from me, leaped down some thirty feet into the broken gully, to cross it and then up on the other side. I stood for an instant watching her fantastic shape, with the great rounded, goggled, trunked helmet and the lump on her shoulders which held the little Erentz motors. Then I made after her.

It did not take us long—two or three miles of circling along the giant wall. The ship lay only a few hundred feet above our level.

We stood at last on a buttelike pinnacle. The hull-porte lights of the ship were close over us. And there were moving lights up there, tiny moving spots on the adjacent rocks. The brigands had come out, prowling around to investigate their location.

No signal yet from Miko. But it might come at any moment.

"I'll flash now," I whispered.

"Yes."

The brigands had probably not yet seen us. I took the lamp from my helmet. My hand was trembling. Suppose my signal were answered by a shot? A flash from some giant projector mounted on the ship?

Anita crouched behind a rock, as she had promised. I stood with my torch, and flung its switch.

My puny light-beam shot up. I waved it, touched the ship with its faint glowing circle of illumination.

They saw me. There was a sudden movement among the lights up there.

I semaphored:

"*I am from Miko. Do not fire.*"

I used the open Universal Code. In Martian first, and then in English.

There was no answer, but no attack. I tried again.

"*This is Haljan, once of the* Planetara. *George Prince's sister is with me. There has been disaster to Miko.*"

A small light-beam came down from the brink of the overhead cliff beside the ship.

"*We read you.*"

I went steadily on: "*Disaster—the* Planetara *is wrecked. All killed but me and George Prince's sister. We want to join you.*"

I flashed off my light. The answer came: "*Where is the Grantline camp?*"

"*Near here. The Mare Imbrium.*"

As though to answer my lie, from down on the Earthlit plains, ten miles or so from the crater-base, a tiny signal-light shot up. Anita saw it and gripped me.

"There is Miko's light!"

It spelled in Martian, "*Come down. Land Mare Imbrium.*"

Miko had seen the signalling up here and was joining it! He

repeated, "*Land Mare Imbrium.*"

I flashed a protest up to the ship: "*Beware! That is Grantline! Trickery!*"

From the ship the summons came: "*Come up.*"

We had won this first encounter! Miko must have realized his disadvantage. His distant light went out.

"Come, Anita."

There was no retreat now. But again I seemed to feel in the pressure of her hand that vague farewell.

Her voice whispered, "We must do our best, act our best to be convincing."

In the white glow of a search-beam we climbed the crags, reached the broad upper ledge. Helmeted figures rushed at us, searched us for weapons, seized our helmet lights. The evil face of a giant Martian peered at me through the visors. Two other monstrous, towering figures seized Anita.

We were shoved toward the port-locks at the base of the ship's hull.

Above the hull bulge I could see the grids of projectors mounted in the dome-side, and the figures of men standing on the deck, peering down at us.

We went through the admission locks into a hull corridor, up an incline passage, and reached the lighted deck. Our helmets were taken off. The Martian brigands crowded around us.

Chapter 29 On the Brigand Ship

Anita's words echoed in my memory: "We must act our best to be convincing." It was not her ability that I doubted as much as my own. She had played the part of George Prince cleverly, unmasked only by an evil chance.

I steeled myself to face the searching glances of the brigands as they shoved around us. This was a desperate game into which we had plunged! For all our acting, how easy it would be for some small chance thing abruptly to undo us! I realized it, and now, as I gazed into the peering faces of these men from Mars, I cursed my witless rashness which had brought Anita into this!

The brigands—some ten or fifteen of them here on the deck—stood in a ring around us. They were all big men, nearly of a seven-foot

average, dressed in leather jerkins and short leather breeches, with bare knees and flaring leatherboots. Piratical swaggering fellows, knife-blades mingled with small hand-projectors fastened to their belts. Gray, heavy faces, some with scraggling, unshaved beard. They plucked at us, jabbering in Martian.

One of them seemed the leader. I said sharply, "Are you the commander here? I speak not Ilton* well. You speak the Earth English?"

*(Ilton, the ruling race and official language of the Martian Union.)

"Yes," he said readily, "I am Commander here." He spoke English with the same freedom and accent of Miko. "Is this George Prince's sister?"

"Yes. Her name is Anita Prince. Tell your men to take their hands off her."

He waved his men away. They all seemed more interested in Anita than in me. He added:

"I am Set Potan." He addressed Anita. "George Prince's sister? You are called Anita? I have heard of you. I knew your brother—indeed,

you look very much like him."

He swept his plumed hat to the grid with a swaggering gesture of homage. A courtierlike fellow this, debonair as a Venus cavalier!

He accepted us. I realized that Anita's presence was immensely valuable in making us convincing. Yet there was about this Potan—as with Miko—a disturbing suggestion of irony. I could not make him out. I decided that we had fooled him. Then I remarked the steely glitter of his eyes as he turned to me.

"You were an officer of the *Planetara*?"

The insignia of my rank was visible on my white jacket-collar which showed beneath the Erentz suit, now that my helmet was off.

"Yes, I was supposed to be. But a year ago I embarked upon this adventure with Miko."

He was leading us to his cabin. "The *Planetara* wrecked? Miko dead?"

"And Hahn and Coniston. George Prince, too—we are the only survivors."

While we divested ourselves of our Erentz suits at his command, I told him briefly of the *Planetara's* fall. All had been killed on board save Anita and me. We had escaped, awaited his coming. The treasure was here; we had located the Grantline camp, and were ready to lead him to it.

Did he believe me? He listened quietly. He seemed not shocked at the death of his comrades. Nor yet pleased: merely imperturbable.

I added with a sly, sidelong glance, "There were too many of us on the *Planetara*. The purser had joined us, and many of the crew. And there was Miko's sister, the Setta Moa—too many. The treasure divides better among less."

An amused smile played on his thin gray lips. But he nodded. The fear which had leaped in me was allayed by his next words.

"True enough, Haljan. He was a domineering fellow, Miko. A third of it all was for him alone. But now...."

The third would go to this sub-leader, Potan! The implication was obvious.

I said, "Before we go any further—I can trust you for my share?"

"Of course."

I figured that my very boldness in bargaining so prematurely would convince him. I insisted, "And Miss Prince? She will have her brother's share?"

Clever Anita! She put in swiftly, "I give no information until you promise! We know the location of the Grantline camp, its weapons, its defense, the amount and location of the ore. I warn you, if you do not play us fair...."

He laughed heartily. He seemed to like us. He spread his huge legs as he lounged in his settle, and drank of the bowl which one of his men set before him.

"Little tigress! Fear me not—I play fair!" He pushed two of the bowls across the table. "Drink, Haljan. All is well with us, and I am glad to hear it. Miss Prince, drink my health as your leader."

I waved it away from Anita. "We need all our wits; your strong Martian drinks are dangerous. Look here, I'll tell you just how the situation stands—"

I plunged into a glib account of our supposed wanderings to find the

Grantline camp; its location off in the Mare Imbrium—hidden in a cavern there. Potan, with the drink, and under the gaze of Anita's eyes, was in a high good humor. He laughed when I told him that we had dared to invade the Grantline camp, had smashed its exit portes, had even gotten up to have a look at where the ore was piled.

"Well done, Haljan! You're a fellow to my liking!" But his gaze was on Anita. "You dress like a man, or a charming boy."

She still wore the dark clothes of her brother. She said, "I am used to action—man's garb pleases me. You shall treat me like a man, give me my share of the gold-leaf."

He had already demanded of us the meaning of that signal from the Mare Imbrium. Miko's signal! It had not come again, though any moment I feared it. I told him that Grantline had doubtless repaired his damaged portes and sallied out to assail me in reprisal. And seeing the brigand ship landing on Archimedes, had tried to lure it.

I wondered if my explanation were very convincing. It did not sound so. But he was flushed now with the drink. And Anita added:

"Grantline knows the territory near his camp very well. He is equipped only for short-range fighting."

I took it up. "It's like this, Potan: if he could get you to land unsuspectingly near the mouth of his cavern...."

I pictured how Grantline might have figured on a sudden surprise attack upon the ship. It was his only chance to catch it unprepared.

We were all three in friendly, intimate mood now. Potan said, "We'll land down there right enough! But I need a few hours for my assembling."

"He will not dare advance," I said. "For one thing, he can't leave the treasure."

"He knows we have unmasked his lure," Anita put in smilingly. "Haljan and I joining you—that silenced him. His light went out very promptly, didn't it?"

She flashed me a side-gaze. Were we acting convincingly? But if Miko started up his signals again, they might so quickly betray us! Anita's thoughts were upon that, for she added:

"Grantline will not dare show his light! If he does, Set Potan, we can blast him with a ray from here! Can't we?"

"Yes," Potan agreed. "If he comes within ten miles, I have one

powerful enough. We are assembling it now."

"And we have thirty men?" Anita persisted. "When we sail down to attack him it should not be very difficult to kill all the Grantline party. Thirty of us—that's enough to share in this treasure. I'm glad Miko is dead."

"By Heaven, Haljan, this girl of yours is small, but very blood-thirsty!"

"That accursed Miko murdered her brother," I explained.

Acting! And never once did we dare relax! If only Miko's signals would hold off and give us time!

We may have talked for half an hour. We were in a small, steel-lined cubby, located in the forward deck-space of the ship. The dome was over it. I could see from where I sat at the table that there was a forward observatory tower under the dome quite near here. The ship was laid out in rather similar fashion to the *Planetara*, though considerably smaller.

Potan had dismissed his men from his cubby so as to be alone with us. Out on the deck I could see them dragging apparatus about—

bringing the mechanisms of giant projectors up from below, beginning to assemble them. Occasionally some of the men would come to our cubby windows to peer in at us curiously.

My mind was roaming as I talked. For all my manner of casualness, I knew that haste was necessary. Whatever Anita and I were to do must be quickly done. But to win this fellow's utter confidence first was necessary, so that we might have the freedom of the ship, might move about unnoticed, unwatched.

I was horribly tense inside. Through the dome windows across the deck from the cubby the rocks of the Lunar landscape were visible. I could see the brink of this ledge upon which the ship lay, the descending crags down the precipitous wall of Archimedes to the Earthlit plains far below. Miko, Moa, and a few of the *Planetara's* crew were down there somewhere.

Anita and I had a fairly definite plan. We were now in Potan's confidence. With this interview at an end, I felt that our status among the brigands would be established. We would be free to move about the ship, join in its activities. It ought to be possible to locate the signal-room, get friendly with the operator there.

Perhaps we would find a secret opportunity to flash a signal to Earth.

This ship, I was confident, would have the power for a long-range signal, if not of too sustained a length. It was a desperate thing to attempt but our whole procedure was desperate! And I felt—if Anita perhaps could cajole the guard or the duty-man from the signal-room—I might send a single flash or two that would reach the Earth. Just a distress call, signed "Grantline." If I could do that and not get caught.

Anita was engaging Potan in talking of his plans. The brigand leader was boasting of his well-equipped ship, the daring of his men, and questioning her about the size of the treasure. My thoughts were free to roam.

A signal to Earth. And while we were making friends with these brigands, the longest range electronic projector was being assembled. Miko then could flash his signal and be damned to him! I would be on the deck with that projector. Its operator, and I would turn it upon Miko—one flash of it and he and his little band would be wiped out.

But there was our escape to be thought of. We could not remain very long with these brigands. We could tell them that the Grantline camp was on the Mare Imbrium. It would delay them for a time, but our lie would soon be discovered. We must escape from them, get away and

back to Grantline. With Miko dead—a distress signal to Earth—and Potan in ignorance of Grantline's location, the treasure would be safe until help arrived from Earth.

It all fitted together so nicely! It seemed possible of success.

Our futile plans! Star-crossed always, doomed, fated always to be upset by such unforeseen evil chances!

"By the infernal, little Anita, you look like a dove, but you're a tigress! A comrade after my own heart—blood-thirsty as a fire-worshipper!"

Her laugh rang out to mingle with his. "Oh no, Set Potan! I am treasure-thirsty."

"We'll get the treasure, never fear, little Anita."

"With you to lead us, Potan, I'm sure we will."

A man entered the cubby. Potan looked frowningly around. "What is it, Argle?"

The fellow answered in Martian, leered at Anita and withdrew.

Potan stood up. I noticed that he was unsteady with the drink.

"They want me with the work at the projectors."

"Go ahead," I said.

He nodded. We were comrades now.

"Amuse yourself, Haljan. Or come out on deck if you wish. I will tell my men you are one of us."

"And tell them to keep their hands off Miss Prince."

He stared at me. "I had not thought of that—a woman among so many men."

His own gaze at Anita was as leeringly offensive as any of his men could have given. He said, "Have no fear, little tigress."

Anita laughed. "I am afraid of nothing."

But when he had lurched from the cabin she touched me. Smiled with her mannish swagger, for fear we were still observed, and murmured:

"Oh, Gregg, I am afraid!"

We stayed in the cubby a few moments, whispering—trying to plan.

"You think the signal room is in the tower, Gregg? This tower outside our window here?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Shall we go out and see?"

"Yes. Keep near me always."

"Oh, Gregg. I will!"

We deposited our Erentz suits carefully in a corner of the cubby. We might need them so suddenly! Then we swaggered out to join the brigands working on the deck.

Chapter 30 Desperate Plans

The deck glowed lurid in the queer blue-greenish glare of Martian electro-fuse lights. It was in a bustle of ordered activity. Some twenty of the crew were scattered about, working in little groups. Apparatus was being brought up from below to be assembled. There

was a pile of Erentz suits and helmets, of Martian pattern, but still very similar to those with which Grantline's expedition was equipped. There were giant projectors of several kinds, some familiar to me, others of a fashion I had never seen before. It seemed there were six or eight of them, still dismantled, with a litter of their attendant batteries and coils and tube-amplifiers. They were to be mounted here on the deck, I surmised; I saw in the dome-side one or two of them already rolled into position at the necessary pressure portes.

Anita and I stood outside Potan's cubby, gazing around us curiously. The men looked at us, but none of them spoke.

"Let's watch from here a moment," I whispered. She nodded, standing with her hand on my arm. I felt that we were very small, here in the midst of these seven-foot Martian men. I was all in white, the costume used in the warm interior of the Grantline camp. Bareheaded, white silk *Planetara* uniform jacket, broad belt and tight-laced trousers. Anita was a slim black figure beside me, somber as Hamlet, with her pale boyish face and wavy black hair.

The gravity being maintained here on the ship we had found to be stronger than that of the Moon—rather more like Mars.

"There are the heat-rays, Gregg."

A pile of them was visible down the deck-length. And I saw caskets of fragile glass globes, bombs of different styles; hand-projectors of the paralyzing ray; search-beams of several varieties; the Benson curve-light, and a few side-arms of ancient Earth-design—swords and dirks, and small bullet projectors.

There seemed to be some mining equipment also. Far along the deck, beyond the central cabin in the open space of the stern, steel rails were stacked; half a dozen small-wheeled ore-carts; a tiny motor engine for hauling them—and what looked as though it might be the dismembered sections of an ore-shute.

The whole deck was presently strewn with this mass of equipment.

Potan moved about, directing the different groups of workers. The news had spread that we knew the location of the treasure. The brigands were jubilant. In a few hours the ship's armament would be ready, and it would advance to attack Grantline.

I saw many glances being cast out the dome side-windows toward the distant, far-down plains of the Mare Imbrium. The brigands believed that the Grantline camp lay in that direction.

Anita whispered, "Which is their giant electronic projector, Gregg?"

I could see it amidships of the deck. It was already in place. Potan was there now, superintending the men who were connecting it. The most powerful weapon on the ship, it had, Potan said, an effective range of some ten miles. I wondered what it would do to a Grantline building! The Erentz double walls would withstand it for a time, I was sure. But it would blast an Erentz fabric-suit, no doubt of that. Like a lightning bolt, it would kill—its flashing free-stream of electrons shocking the heart, bringing instant death.

I whispered, "We must smash that before we leave! But first turn it on Miko, if he signals now."

I was tensely watchful for that signal. The electronic projector obviously was not yet ready. But when it was connected, I must be near it, to persuade its duty-man to fire it on Miko. With this done we would have more time to plan our other tasks. I did not think Potan would be ready for his attack before another time of sleep here in the ship's routine. Things would be quieter then—I would watch my chance to send a signal to Earth, and then we would escape.

With my thoughts roving, we had been standing quietly at the cubby door-oval for perhaps fifteen minutes. My hand in my side pouch

clutched the little bullet projector. The brigands had taken it from me and given it to Potan. He had placed it on the settle with my Erentz suit; and when we gained his confidence he had forgotten it and left it there. I had it now, and the feel of its cool sleek handle gave me a measure of comfort. Things could go wrong so easily—but if they did, I was determined to sell my life as dearly as possible. And a vague thought was in my mind: I must not use the last bullet. That would be for Anita.

I shook myself free from such sinister fancy.

"That electronic projector is remote-controlled. Look, Anita—that's the signal room over us. The giant projector will be aimed and fired from up there."

It seemed so. A thirty-foot skeleton tower stood on the deck near us, with a spiral ladder leading up to a small square steel cubby at the top. Through the cubby window-ovals I could see instrument panels. A single Martian was up there; he had called down to Potan concerning the electronic projector.

The roof of this little tower room was close under the dome—a space of no more than four feet. A pressure lock-exit in the dome was up there, with a few steps leading up to it from the roof of the

tower signal-room. We could escape that way, perhaps. In the event of dire necessity it might be possible. But only as a desperate resort, for it would put us on the top of the glassite dome, with a sheer hundred feet or more down its sleek bulging exterior side, and down the outside bulge of the ship's hull, to the rocks below. There might be a spider ladder outside leading downward, but I saw no evidence of it. If Anita and I were forced to escape that way, I wondered how we could manage a hundred foot jump to the rocks and land safely. Even with the slight gravity of the Moon it would be a dangerous fall.

"You are Gregg Haljan?"

I started as one of the brigands, coming up behind us, addressed me.

"Yes."

"Commander Potan tells me you were chief navigator of the *Planetara*?"

"Yes."

"You shall pilot us when we advance upon the Grantline camp. I am control-commander here—Brotow, my name."

He smiled. A giant fellow, but spindly. He spoke good English. He seemed anxious to be friendly.

"We are glad to have you and George Prince's sister with us." He shot Anita an admiring glance. "I will show you our controls, Haljan."

"All right," I said. "Whatever I can do to help...."

"But not now. It will be some hours before we are ready."

I nodded, and he wandered away. Anita whispered:

"Did he mean that signal room up here in the tower? Oh, Gregg, maybe it's only the ship's control room!"

"I don't know. But the projector range-finders are up there, and I think it's the signal room."

"Suppose we go up and see? Gregg, Miko's signals might start any minute."

And the electronic projector now seemed about ready. It was time for me to act. But a reluctant instinct was upon me. Our Erentz suits were here close behind us in Potan's cubby. I hated to leave them: if

anything happened and we had to make a sudden dash, there would be no time to garb ourselves in the suits. To adjust the helmets was bad enough.

I whispered swiftly, "We must get into our suits—find some pretext." I drew her back through the cubby doorway where we would be more secluded.

"Anita, listen: I've been a fool not to plan our escape more carefully! We're in too great a danger here."

It seemed to me suddenly that we were in desperate plight. Was it premonition?

"Anita, listen: if anything happens and we have to make a dash—"

"Up through that dome-lock, Gregg? It's a manual control; you can see the levers."

"Yes. It's a manual. But up there—how would we get down?"

She was far calmer than I. "There may be an outside ladder, Gregg."

"I don't think so. I haven't seen it."

"Then we can get out the way they brought us in. The hull-porte—it's a manual, too."

"Yes, I think I can find our way down through the hull corridors. I mean, for a quick run. If we have to run, you stay close behind me. I've this bullet projector, and evidently there aren't many men in the lower corridors."

"There are guards outside on the rocks."

We had seen them through the dome windows. But there were not many—only two or three. A surprise rush at them would turn the trick.

We donned our Erentz suits.

"What will we do with the helmets?" Anita demanded. "Leave them here?"

"No—take them with us. I'm not going to get separated from them; it's too dangerous."

"We'll look strange going up to that signal room equipped like this," she commented.

"I can't help it. We'll figure out something to explain it."

She stood before me, a queer-looking little figure in the now deflated, bagging suit with her slim neck and head protruding above the metal circle of its collar.

"Carry your helmet, Anita. I'll take mine."

We could adjust the helmets and start the Erentz motors all within a few seconds.

"I'm ready, Gregg."

"Come on, then. Let me go first."

I had the bullet projector in an outer pouch of the suit where I could instantly reach it. This was more rational: we had a fighting chance now. The fear which had swept me so suddenly began to recede. I was calm.

"We'll climb the tower to the signal room," I whispered. "Do it boldly."

We stepped from the cubby. Potan was not in sight; he was on the further deck beyond the central cabin structure perhaps, or had gone

below.

On the deck, we were immediately accosted. This was different—our appearance in the Erentz suits!

"Where are you going?"

This fellow spoke in Martian. I answered in English.

"Up there."

He stood before us, towering over me. I saw a group of nearby workers stop to regard us. In a moment we would be causing a commotion, and it was the last thing I desired.

I said in Martian, "Commander Potan told me, what I wish I can do. From the dome we look around—see where is the Grantline camp—I am pilot of this ship to go there."

The man who had called himself Brotow passed near us. I appealed to him.

"We put on our suits. I thought we might go up on the dome for a minute and look around. If I'm to pilot the ship...."

He hesitated, his glance sweeping the deck as though to ask Potan. Someone said in Martian:

"The commander is down in the stern storeroom."

It decided Brotow. He waved away the Martian who had stopped me.

"Let them alone."

Anita and I gave him our most friendly smiles.

"Thanks."

He bowed to Anita with a sweeping gesture. "I will show you over the control room presently."

His gaze went to the peak of the bow. The little hooded cubby there was the control room. Satisfaction swept me. Then this, above us in the tower, must surely be the signal room. Would Brotow follow us up? I hoped not. I wanted to be alone with the duty-man up there, giving me a chance to get at the projector controls if Miko's signal should come.

I drew Anita past Brotow, who had stood aside. "Thanks," I repeated. "We won't be long."

We mounted the little ladder.

Chapter 31 In the Tower Cubby

Hurry, Anita!"

I feared that Potan might come up from the hull at any moment and stop us. The duty-man over us gazed down, his huge head and shoulders blocking the small signal room window. Brotow called up in Martian, telling him to let us come. He scowled, but when we reached the trap in the room floor-grid, we found him standing aside to admit us.

I flung a swift glance around. It was a metallic cubby, not much over fifteen feet square, with an eight-foot arched ceiling. There were instrument panels. The range-finder for the giant projector was here; its little telescope with the trajectory apparatus and the firing switch were unmistakable. And the signalling apparatus was here! Not a Martian set, but a fully powerful Botz ultra-violet helio sender with its attendant receiving mirrors. The *Planetara* had used the Botz system, so I was thoroughly familiar with it. I saw, too, what seemed to be weapons: a row of small fragile glass globes, hanging on clips along the wall—bombs, each the size of a man's fist. And a broad belt with bombs in its padded compartments.

My heart was pounding as my first quick glance took in these details. I saw also that the room had four small oval window openings. They were breast-high above the floor; from the deck below I knew that the angle of vision was such that the men down there could not see into this room except to glimpse its upper portion near the ceiling. And the helio set was banked on a low table near the floor.

In a corner of the room a small ladder led through a ceiling trap to the cubby roof. This upper trap was open. Four feet above the room-roof was the arch of the dome, with the entrance to the upper exit-lock directly above us. The weapons and the belt of bombs were near this ascending ladder, evidently placed here as equipment for use from the top of the dome.

I turned to the solitary duty-man. I must gain his confidence at once. Anita had laid her helmet aside. She spoke first.

"We were with Set Miko," she said smilingly, "in the wreck of the *Planetara*. You heard of it? We know where the treasure is."

This duty-man was a full seven feet tall, and the most heavy-set Martian I had ever seen. A tremendous, beetling-browed, scowling fellow. He stood with hands on his hips, his leather-garbed legs

spread wide; and as I fronted him I felt like a child. He was silent, glaring down at me as I drew his attention from Anita.

"You speak English? We are not skilled with Martian."

I wondered if at the next time of sleep this fellow would be on duty here. I hoped not; it would not be easy to trick him and find an opportunity to flash a signal. But that task was some hours away as yet; I would worry about it when the time came. Just now I was concerned with Miko and his little band, who at any moment might arrive in sight. If we could persuade this scowling duty-man to turn the projector on them....

He answered me in ready English:

"You are the man Gregg Haljan? And this is the sister of George Prince—what do you want up here?"

"I am a navigator. Brotow wants me to pilot the ship when we advance to attack Grantline."

"This is not the control room."

"No, I know it isn't."

I put my helmet carefully on the floor-grid beside Anita's. I straightened to find the brigand gazing at her. He did not speak; he was still scowling. But in the dim blue glow of the cubby I caught the look in his eyes.

I said hastily, "Grantline knows your ship has landed here on Archimedes. His camp is off there on the Mare Imbrium. He sent up a signal—you saw it, didn't you?—just before Miss Prince and I came aboard. He was trying to pretend that he was your Earth-party, Miko and Coniston."

"Why?"

The fellow turned his scowl on me, but Anita brought his gaze back to her. She put in quickly:

"Grantline, as Brother always said, has no great cunning. I believe he's planning now to creep up on us, catch us unaware by pretending that he is Miko."

"If he does that," I said, "we will turn this electronic projector on him and annihilate him. You have its firing mechanism here."

"Who told you so?" he shot at me.

I gestured. "I see it here. It's obvious. I'm skilled at trajectory-firing. If Grantline appears down there now, I'll help you—"

"Is it connected?" Anita demanded boldly.

"Yes," he said. "You have on your Erentz suits: are you going to the dome-roof? Then go."

But that was what we did not want to do. Anita's glance seemed to tell me to let her handle this. I turned toward one of the cubby windows; she said sweetly:

"Are you in charge of this room? Show me how that projector is operated; it will be invincible against the Grantline camp."

"Yes."

I had my back to them for a moment. Through the breast-high oval I could see down across the deck-space and out through the side dome windows. And my heart suddenly leaped into my throat. It seemed that down there in the Earthlit shadows, where the spreading base of the giant crater joined the plains, a light was bobbing. I gazed, stricken. Miko's lights? Was he advancing, preparing to signal? I tried to gauge the distance; it was not over two miles from here.

Or was it not a light at all? With the naked eye, I could not be sure. Perhaps there was a telescopic finder here in the cubby....

I was subconsciously aware of the voices of Anita and the duty-man behind me. Then abruptly I heard Anita's low cry. I whirled around.

The giant Martian had gathered her into his huge arms, his heavy-jowled gray face with a leering grin close to hers!

He saw me coming. He held her with one arm: his other flung at me, caught me, knocked me backward. He rasped:

"Get out of here! Go up to the dome, leave us."

Anita was silently struggling with her little hands at his thick throat. His blow flung me against a settle. But I held my feet. I was partly behind him. I leaped again, and as he tried to disengage himself from Anita to front me, her clutching fingers impeded him.

My bullet projector was in my hand. But in that second as I leaped, I had the sense to realize I should not fire it and with its noise alarm the ship. I grasped its barrel, reached upward and struck with its heavy metal butt. The blow caught the Martian on the skull, and simultaneously my body struck him.

We went down together, falling partly upon Anita. But the giant had not cried out, and as I gripped him now, I felt his body limp. I lay panting. Anita squirmed silently from under us. Blood from the giant's head was welling out, hot and sticky against my face as I lay sprawled on him.

I cast him off. He was dead, his fragile Martian skull split open by my blow.

There had been no alarm. The slight noise we made had not been heard down on the busy deck. Anita and I crouched by the floor. From the deck all this part of the room could not be seen.

"Dead!"

"Oh, Gregg—"

It forced our hand. I could not wait now for Miko to come. But I could flash the Earth signal now, and then we would have to make our run to escape.

Abruptly I remembered that light down at the crater-base! I kept Anita out of sight on the floor and went cautiously to a window. The deck was in turmoil with brigands moving about excitedly. Not

because of what had happened in our tower signal room; they were unaware of that.

Miko's signals were showing! I could see them now plainly, down at the crater-base. A group of hand-lights and a small waving helio-beam.

And they were being answered from the ship! Potan was on the deck —a babble of voices, above which his rose with roars of command. At one of the dome windows a brigand with a hand search-beam was sending its answering light. And I saw that Potan was working over a deck telescope-finder.

It had all come so suddenly that I was stunned. But I did not wait to read the signals. I swung back at Anita.

"It's Miko! And they are answering him! Get your helmet; I'll try firing the projector."

Or would I instead try to send a brief flash-signal to Earth? There would be no time to do both: we must escape out of here. The route up through the dome was the only feasible one now.

This range mechanism of the projector was reasonably familiar, and

I felt that I could operate it. The range-finder and switch were on a ledge at one of the windows. I rushed to it. As I swung the little telescope, training it down on Miko's lights, I could see the huge projector on the deck swinging similarly. Its movement surprised the men who were attending it. One of them called up to me, but I ignored him.

Then Potan looked up and saw me. He shouted in Martian at the duty-man, whom he doubtless thought was behind me: "Be ready! We may fire on them, whoever they are. I'll give you the word."

The signals were proceeding. It had only been a moment. I caught something like, "*Haljan is impostor.*"

I was aiming the projector. I was aware of Anita at my elbow. I pushed her back.

"Put on your helmet!"

I had the range. I flung the firing switch.

At the deck window the giant projector spat its deadly electronic stream. The men down there leaped away from it with surprise. I heard Potan's voice, his shout of protest and anger.

But down in the Earthglow at the crater-base, Miko's lights had not vanished! I had missed! An error in the range? Abruptly I knew it was not that. Miko's lights were still there. His signals still coming. And I remarked now a faint distortion about them, the glow of his little group of hand-lights faintly distorted and vaguely shot with a greenish cast. Benson curve-lights! I realized it.

My thoughts whirled in the few seconds while I stood there at the tower window. Miko had feared he might summarily be fired upon. He had gone back to his camp, equipped all his lights with the Benson curve. He was somewhere at the crater-base now. But not where I thought I saw him! The Benson curve-light changed the path of the light-rays traveling from him to me—I could not even approximate his true position!

Anita was plucking at me. "Gregg, come."

"I can't hit him!" I gasped.

Should I try the flash-signal to Earth? Did we dare linger here? I stood another few seconds fascinated at the window. I saw Potan down in the confusion of the deck, training a telescope. He had shouted up violently at his duty-man here not to fire again.

And now he suddenly let out a roar. "I can see them! It's Miko! By the Almighty—his giant stature—Brotow, look! That's not an Earthman!"

He flung aside his little telescope finder. "Disconnect that projector! It's Miko down there! This Haljan is a trickster! Where is he? Braile—Braile, you accursed fool! Are Haljan and the girl up there with you?"

But the duty-man lay weltering in his blood at our feet.

I had dropped back from the window. Anita and I crouched for an instant in confusion, fumbling with our helmets.

The ship rang with the alarm. And amid the turmoil we could hear the shouts of the infuriated brigands swarming up the tower ladder after us!

Chapter 32 A Speck Amid the Stars

I was only inactive a moment. I had thought Anita would have on her helmet. But she was reluctant, or confused.

"Gregg."

"We've got to get out of here! Up through the overhead locks to the dome."

"Yes—" She fumbled with the helmet. Under the floor-grid the climbing men on the ladder were audible. They were already nearing the top. The trap door was closed: Anita and I were crouching on it. There was a thick metal bar set in a depressed groove of the grid. I slid it in place—it would seal the trap for a time, at any rate.

A degree of confidence came to me. We had a few moments before there could be any hand-to-hand conflict. That giant electronic projector would eventually be used against Grantline: it was the brigands' most powerful weapon. Its controls were here—by Heaven, I would smash them! That at least I could do!

I jumped for the window. Miko's signals had stopped, but I caught a glimpse of his distant moving curve-lights.

A flash came up at me, as in the window I became visible to the brigands on the ship's deck. It was a small hand-projector, hastily fired, for it went wide of the window. It was followed by a rain of small beams, but I was warned and I dropped my head beneath the high sill. The rays flashed diagonally upward through the oval opening, hissed against our vaulted roof. The air snapped and tingled

with a shower of blue-red sparks, and the acrid odor of the released gases settled down upon me.

The trajectory controls of the projector were beside me. I seized them, ripped and tore at them. There was a roar down on the deck. The projector had exploded. A man's agonized scream split the confusion of sounds.

It silenced the brigands on the deck. Under our floor-grid those on the ladder had been pounding at the trap-door. They stopped, evidently to see what had happened. The bombardment of our windows ceased momentarily.

I cautiously peered out the window again. In the wreck of the projector three men were lying. One of them was screaming horribly. The dome-side was damaged. Potan and other men were frantically investigating to see if the ship's air were hissing out.

A triumph swept me. They had not found me so meek and inoffensive as they might have thought!

Anita clutched at me. She still had not donned her helmet.

"Put it on!"

"But Gregg—"

"Put it on!"

"I—I don't want to put it on until you put yours on."

"I've smashed the projector! We've stopped them coming up for a while."

But they were still on the ladder under our floor. They heard our voices; they began thumping again. Then pounding. They seemed now to have some heavy implement. They rammed with it against the trap.

But the floor seemed holding. The square of metal grid trembled, yielded a little. But it was good for a few minutes longer.

I called down, "The first one who comes through will be shot." My words mingled with their oaths. There was a moment's pause, then the ramming went on. The dying man on the deck was still screaming.

I whispered, "I'll try an Earth-signal."

She nodded. Pale, tense, but calm. "Yes, Gregg. And I was thinking

—"

"It won't take a minute. Have your helmet ready."

"I was thinking—"

She hurried across the room. I swung on the Botz signaling apparatus. It was connected. Within a moment I had it humming. The fluorescent tubes lighted with their lurid glare; they painted purple the body of the giant duty-man who lay sprawled at my feet. I drew on all the ship's power. The tube-lights in the room quivered and went dim.

I would have to hurry. Potan could shut this off from the main hull control room. I could see, through the room's upper trap, the primary sending mirror mounted in the peak of the dome. It was quivering, radiant with its light-energy. I sent the flash.

The flattened, past-full Earth was up there. I knew that the western hemisphere faced the Moon at this hour. I flashed in English, with the open Universal Earth-code:

"*Help! Grantline.*"

And again: "*Send help! Archimedes region near Apennines. Attacked*

by brigands. Send help at once! Grantline!"

If only it would be received! I flung off the current. Anita stood watching me intently. "Gregg, look!"

She had taken some of the glass globe-bombs which lay by the foot of the ascending ladder. She held some of them now.

"Gregg. I threw some."

At the window we gazed down. The globes she flung had shattered on the deck. They were occulting darkness bombs.*

*(Filled with an odorless, harmless gas, these bombs were used in warfare, taking the place of the old-fashioned smoke screens. The diffusing gas was of such a nature that, when released, it absorbed within itself all the color inherent to the light-rays striking it, thus creating a temporary darkness.)

Through the blackness of the deck, the shouts of the brigands came up. They were stumbling about. But the ramming of our trap went on, and I saw that it was beginning to yield. One corner of it was bent up.

"We've got to go, Anita!"

"Yes."

From out of the darkness which hung like a shroud over the deck an occasional flash came up, unaimed—wide of our windows. But the darkness was dissipating. I could see now the dim glow of the deck lights, blurred as through a heavy fog.

I dropped another of the bombs.

"Put on your helmet."

"Yes—yes, I will. You put on yours."

We had them adjusted in a moment. Our Erentz motors were pumping.

I gripped her. "Put out your helmet-light."

She extinguished it. I handed her my bullet projector.

"Hold it a moment. I'm going to take that belt of bombs."

The trap-door was all but broken under the ramming blows of the men on the ladder. I leaped over the body of the duty-man, seized the belt of bombs and strapped it about my waist.

Anita stood with me.

"Give me the projector."

She handed it to me. The trap-door burst upward! A man's head and shoulders appeared. I fired a bullet into him—the little leaden pellet singing down through the yellow powder-flash that spat from the projector's muzzle.

The brigand screamed, and dropped back out of sight. There was confusion at the ladder-top. I flung a bomb at the broken trap. A tiny heat-ray came wavering up through the opening, but went wide of us.

The instrument room was in darkness. I clung to Anita.

"Hold on to me! You go first—here is the ladder."

We found it in the blackness, mounted it and went through the cubby's roof-trap.

I took a hasty look and dropped another bomb beside us. The four-foot space up here between the cubby roof and the overhead dome went black. We were momentarily concealed.

Anita located the manual levers of the lock-entrance.

"Here, Gregg."

I shoved at them. Fear leaped in me that they would not operate. But they swung. The tiny porte opened wide to receive us. We clambered into the small air-chamber; the door slid closed, just as a flash from below struck at it. The brigands had seen our little cloud of darkness and were firing up through it.

We were through the locks in a moment, out on the open dome-top. A sleek, rounded spread of glassite, with broad aluminite girders. There were cross-ribs which gave us footing, and occasional projections—streamline fin-tips, the casings of the upper rudder shafts, and the upstanding stubby funnels into which the helicopters were folded.

We moved along the central footpath and crouched by a six-foot casing. The stars and the glowing Earth were over us. The curving dome-top—a hundred feet or so in length, and bulging thirty feet wide beneath us—glistened in the Earthlight. It was a sheer drop down these curving sides past the ship's hull, a hundred feet to the rocks on which the vessel rested. The towering wall of Archimedes was beside us; and beyond the brink of the ledge the thousands of

feet down to the plains.

I saw the lights of Miko's band down there. He had stopped signaling. His little lights were spread out, bobbing as he and his men advanced up the crater's foothills, coming to join their ship.

I had an instant's glimpse. Anita and I could not stay here. The brigands would follow us up in a moment. I saw no exterior ladder. We would have to take our chances and jump.

There were brigands down there on the rocks. I saw three or four skulking helmeted figures, and they saw us! A bullet whizzed by us, and then came the flash of a hand-ray.

I touched Anita. "Can you make the leap? Anita, dear...."

Again it seemed that this must be farewell.

"Gregg, dear one—oh, we've got to do it!"

Those waiting figures would pounce on us.

"Anita, lie here a moment."

I jumped up and ran twenty feet toward the bow; then back, toward

the stern, flinging down the last of my bombs. The darkness was like a cloud down there, enveloping the outer brigands. But up here we were above it, etched by the starlight and Earthglow.

I came back to Anita.

"We'll have to chance it now."

"Gregg...."

"Good-by, dear. I'll jump first, down this side—you follow."

To leap into that black patch, with the rocks under it....

"Gregg—"

She was trying to tell me to look overhead. She gestured. "Gregg, see!"

I saw it out over the plains—a little speck amid the stars. A moving speck, coming toward us!

"Gregg, what is it?"

I gazed, held my breath. A moving speck out there. A blob now.

And then I realized that it was not a large object, far away, but small, and already very close—only a few hundred feet off, dropping toward the top of our dome. A narrow, flat, ten-foot object, like a wingless volplane. There were no lights on it, but in the Earthlight I could see two crouching, helmeted figures riding it.

"Anita! Don't you remember!"

I was swept with dawning comprehension. Back in the Grantline camp Snap and I had discussed how to use the *Planetara's* gravity plates. We had gone to the wreck and secured them, had rigged this little volplane flyer....

The brigands on the rocks saw it now. A flash went up at it. One of the figures crouching on it opened a flexible fabric like a wing over its side. I saw another flash from below, harmlessly striking the insulated shield.

I gasped to Anita, "Light your helmet! It's from Grantline! Let them see us!"

I stood erect. The little flying platform went over us, fifty feet up, circling, dropping to the dome-top.

I waved my helmet-light. The exit-lock from below—up which we had come—was near us. The advancing brigands were already in it! I had forgotten to demolish the manuals. And I saw that the darkness down on the rocks was almost gone now, dissipating in the airless night. The brigands down there began firing up at us.

It was a confusion of flashing lights. I clutched at Anita.

"Come this way—run!"

The platform barely missed our heads. It sailed lengthwise of the dome-top, and crashed silently on the central runway near the stern-tip. Anita and I ran to it.

The two helmeted figures seized us, shoved us prone on the metal platform. It was barely four feet wide: a low railing, handles with which to cling, and a tiny hooded cubby in front, with banks of controls.

"Gregg!"

"Snap!"

It was Snap and Venza. She seized Anita, held her crouching in place. Snap flung himself face down at the controls.

The brigands in the lock were out on the dome now. I took a last shot as we lifted. My bullet punctured one of them; he fell, slid scrambling off the rounded dome and dropped out of sight.

Light-rays and silent flashes seemed to envelop us. Venza held the side-shields higher.

IMAGEDESCRIPTION

We tilted, swayed crazily, and then steadied.

The ship's dome dropped away beneath us. The rocks of the open ledge were under us. Then the abyss, with the moving climbing specks of Miko's lights far down.

I saw, over the side-shield, the already distant brigand ship resting on the ledge with the massive Archimedes' wall behind it. A confusion back there of futile flashing rays.

It all faded into a remote glow as we sailed smoothly up into the starlight and away, heading for the Grantline camp.

Chapter 33 Besieged!

“Wake up, Gregg! They're coming!"

I forced myself to consciousness. "Coming—"

"Yes. Wake up!"

I leaped from my bunk, followed Snap with a rush into the corridor. We had returned safely to the Grantline Camp. Anita and I found ourselves exhausted from lack of sleep, our arduous climb of Archimedes and that tense time on the brigand ship. On the flight back Snap had explained how the landing of the ship on Archimedes was observed through the Grantline telescope, using but little of its power for this local range. They had read with amazement my signals to the brigands. Snap had rushed to completion the first of our contemplated flying platforms. Then he had seen Miko's signals from the crater-base, seen the lights of the fight to capture Anita and me in the cubby, and had come to rescue us.

Back at the camp we were given food, and Grantline forced me to try and sleep.

"They'll be on us in a few hours, Gregg. Miko will have joined them by now. He'll lead them to us. You must rest, for we need everyone at his best."

And surprisingly, in the midst of the camp's turmoil of last minute

activities, I slept soundly, until Snap called me that the ship was coming.

The corridor echoed with the tramp of Grantline's busy crew. But there was no confusion now; a grim calmness had settled upon everyone.

Anita and Venza rushed up to join us. "It's in sight!"

There was no need of going to the instrument room. From the windows fronting the brink of the cliff the brigand ship was plainly visible. It came sailing from Archimedes, a dark shape blurring the stars. All its lights were extinguished save a single white search-beam in the bow-peak, slanting diagonally down.

The beam presently caught our little group of buildings; its glare shone in the windows as it clung for a moment. I could envisage the triumphant curiosity, of Potan and his fellows up there, gazing along the beam.

Then it swung away. The ship was at an altitude of no more than three thousand feet when I first saw it, coming upon a level keel. Would it circle over us, firing at us? Or sail past, after inspecting us? Or land, perhaps, boldly crowded upon our little ledge?

We were ready—as ready as we could be with our meager equipment. The camp was in a state of siege. The cliff-lights were extinguished: the interior lights were dim, save in the workshops of the main building, where the final assembling of Snap's other flying platforms and their insulated protective shields was still in progress.

We had dimmed the lights to conserve our power, and to enable the Erentz motors to run at full capacity. Our buildings would have to withstand the brigand rays which soon would be upon us.

Outside on our dim, Earthlit cliff, the tiny lights showed where our few guards were lurking. As I stood at the window watching the oncoming ship, Grantline's voice sounded:

"Call in those men! Ring the call-lights, Franck!"

The siren buzzed over the camp's interior; the warning call-lights on the roof brought in the outer guards. They came running to the admission portes, which had been repaired after Miko disabled them.

The guards came in. We dimmed our lights further. The treasure sheds were black against the cliff behind us. No need for guards there—the bulk of the ore was such that we reasoned the brigands would not attempt to move it until our buildings were captured. But,

if they should try it, we were prepared to sally out with our hand-weapons and defend it.

In the dim lights we crouched. A silence was upon us, save for the clanging in the workshop down the corridor. Most of us wore our Erentz suits, with helmets ready, though I am sure there was not a man of us but who prayed he might not have to go out. At many of the windows—our weakest points to withstand the rays—insulated fabric shields were hung like curtains.

The brigand ship slowly advanced. It was soon over the opposite rim of our little crater. Its search-beam swung about the rim and down into the valley.

My thoughts ran like a turgid stream as I stood tensely watching.

Four hours ago I had sent that flash-signal to Earth. If it were received, a patrol-ship could come to our rescue and arrive here in another eight hours—or perhaps even less.

Ah, that "if!" *If* the signal were received! *If* the patrol-ship were immediately available! *If* it started at once....

Eight hours at the very least. I tried to assure myself that we could

hold out that long....

The brigand ship crossed the opposite crater-rim. It dropped lower. It seemed poised over the crater-valley, almost at our own level and less than two miles from us. Its search-beam vanished. For a moment it hung, a sleek, cylindrical silver shape, gleaming in the Earthlight.

Snap looked at me and murmured, "It's descending."

It slowly settled, cautiously picked its landing-place amid the crags and pits of the tumbled scarred valley floor. It came to rest, a vague silver menacing shape lurking in the lower shadows, close at the foot of the inner opposite crater-wall.

A few moments of tense waiting passed. Soon tiny lights were moving down there, some out on the rocks near the ship, others up under its deck-dome.

A stab of searchlight shot across the valley, swung along our ledge and clung with its glaring ten-foot circle to the front of our main building. Then a ray flashed.

The assault had begun!

Chapter 34 The First Encounters

The besieged Earth-men wage grim, ultra-scientific war with Martian bandits in a last great struggle for their radium-ore—and their lives.

It seemed, with that first shot from the enemy, that a great relief came to me—an apprehension fallen away. We had anticipated this moment for so long, dreaded it. I think all our men felt it. A shout went up:

"Harmless!"

It was not that. But our building withstood it better than I had feared. It was a flash from a large electronic projector mounted on the deck of the brigand ship. It stabbed up from the shadows across the valley at the foot of the opposite crater-wall, a beam of vaguely fluorescent light. Simultaneously the search-light vanished.

The stream of electrons caught the front face of our main building in a six-foot circle. It held a few seconds, vanished; then stabbed again, and still again. Three bolts. A total, I suppose, of nine or ten seconds.

I was standing with Grantline at a front window. We had rigged an

oblong of insulated fabric like a curtain: we stood peering, holding the curtain cautiously aside. The ray struck some twenty feet away from us.

"Harmless!"

The men in the room shouted it with derision. But Grantline swung on them.

"Don't think that!"

An interior signal-panel was beside Grantline. He called the duty-men in the instrument room.

"It's over. What are your readings?"

The bombarding electrons had passed through the outer shell of the building's double-wall, and been absorbed in the rarefied, magnetized air-current of the Erentz circulation. Like poison in a man's veins, reaching his heart, the free alien electrons had disturbed the motors. They accelerated, then retarded. Pulsed unevenly, and drew added power from the reserve tanks. But they had normalized at once when the shot was past. The duty-man's voice sounded from the grid in answer to Grantline's question:

"Five degrees colder in your building. Can't you feel it?"

The disturbed, weakened Erentz circulation had allowed the outer cold to radiate through a trifle. The walls had had a trifle extra explosive pressure from the room-air. A strain—but that was all.

"It's probably their most powerful single weapon, Gregg." Grantline said.

I nodded. "Yes. I think so."

I had smashed the real giant, with its ten-mile range. The ship was only two miles from us, but it seemed as though this projector were exerted to its distance limit. I had noticed on the deck only one of this type. The others, paralyzing-rays and heat rays, were less deadly.

Grantline commented: "We can withstand a lot of that bombardment. If we stay inside—"

That ray, striking a man outside, would penetrate his Erentz suit within a few seconds, we could not doubt. We had, however, no intention of going out unless for dire necessity.

"Even so," said Grantline. "A hand-shield would hold it off for a certain length of time."

We had an opportunity a moment later to test our insulated shields. The bolt came again. It darted along the front face of the building, caught our window and clung. The double window-shells were our weakest points. The sheet of flashing Erentz current was transparent: we could see through it as though it were glass. It moved faster, but was thinner at the windows than in the walls. We feared the bombarding electrons might cross it, penetrate the inner shell and, like a lightning bolt, enter the room.

We dropped the curtain corner. The radiance of the bolt was dimly visible. A few seconds, then it vanished again, and behind the shield we had not felt a tingle.

"Harmless!"

But our power had been drained nearly an aeron, to neutralize the shock to the Erentz current. Grantline said:

"If they kept that up, it would be a question of whose power supply would last longest. And it would not be ours.... You saw our lights fade down while the bolt was striking?"

But the brigands did not know we were short of power. And to fire the projector with a continuous bolt would, in thirty minutes,

perhaps, have exhausted their own power-reserve.

This strange warfare! It was new to all of us, for there had been no wars on any of the three inhabited worlds for many years. Silent, electronic conflict! Not a question of men in battle. A man at a switch on the brigand ship was the sole actor so far in this assault. And the results were visible only in the movement of the needle-dials on our instrument panels. A struggle, so far, not of man's bravery, or skill, or strategy, but merely of electronic power supply.

Yet warfare, however modern, can never transcend the human element. Before this insult was ended I was to have many demonstrations of that!

"I won't answer them," Grantline declared. "Our game is to sit defensive. Conserve everything. Let them make the leading moves."

We waited half an hour, but no other shot came. The valley floor was patched with Earthlight and shadow. We could see the vague outline of the brigand ship backed up at the foot of the opposite crater-wall. The form of its dome over the illumined deck was visible, and the line of its tiny hull ovals.

On the rocks near the ship, helmet-lights of prowling brigands

occasionally showed.

Whatever activity was going on down there we could not see with the naked eye. Grantline did not use our telescope at first. To connect it, even for local range, drew on our precious ammunition of power. Some of the men urged that we search the sky with the telescope. Was our rescue ship from Earth coming? But Grantline refused. We were in no trouble yet. And every delay was to our advantage.

"Commander, where shall I put these helmets?"

A man came wheeling a pile of helmets on a little truck.

"At the manual porte—other building."

Our weapons and outside equipment were massed at the main exit-locks of the large building. But we might want to sally out through the smaller locks also. Grantline sent helmets there; suits were not needed, as most of us were garbed in them now, but without the helmets.

Snap was still in the workshop. I went there during this first half-hour of the attack. Ten of our men were busy there with the little flying platforms and the fabric shields.

"How is it, Snap?"

"Almost all ready."

He had six of the platforms, including the one we had already used, and more than a dozen hand-shields. At a squeeze, all of us could ride on these six little vehicles. We might have to ride them! We planned that, in the event of disaster to the buildings, we could at least escape in this fashion. Food supplies and water were now being placed at the portes.

Depressing preparations! Our buildings uninhabitable, a rush out and away, abandoning the treasure.... Grantline had never mentioned such a contingency, but I noticed, nevertheless, that preparations were being made.

"Only that one shot, Gregg?"

Snap's voice was raised over the clang of the workmen bolting the little gravity-plates of the last platform.

"Four blasts. But just the one projector. Their strongest."

He grinned. He wore no Erentz suit as yet. He stood in torn grimy work-trousers and a bedraggled shirt, with the inevitable red

eyeshade holding back his unruly hair. Around his waist was the weighted belt and there were weights on his shoes for gravity stability.

"Didn't hurt us much."

"No."

"When I get the tube-panels in this thing I'll be finished. It'll take another half-hour. I'll join you. Where are you stationed?"

I shrugged. "I was at a front window with Johnny. Nothing to do as yet."

Snap went back to his work. "Well, the longer they delay, the better for us. If only your signal got through, Gregg! We'll have a rescue ship here in a few hours more."

Ah, that "if!"

I turned away. "Can't help you, Snap?"

"No. Take those shields," he added to one of the men.

"Take them where?"

"To Grantline. The front admission porte, or the back. He'll tell you which."

The shields were wheeled away on a little cart. I followed it. Grantline sent it to the back exit.

"No other move from them yet, Johnny?"

"No. All quiet."

"Snap's almost finished."

The brigands presently made another play. A giant heat-ray beam came across the valley. It clung to our front wall for nearly a minute.

Grantline got the reports from the instrument room. He laughed.

"That helped rather than hurt us. Heated the outer wall. Frank took advantage of it and eased up the motors."

We wondered if Miko knew that. Doubtless he did, for another interval passed and the heat-ray was not used again.

Then came a zed-ray. I stood at the window, watching it, faint sheen of beam in the dimness. It crept with sinister deliberation along our

front building-wall, clung momentarily to our shielded windows and pried with its revealing glow into Snap's workshop.

"Looking us over," Grantline commented. "I hope they like what they see."

I knew he did not feel the bravado that was in his tone. We had nothing but small hand weapons: heat-rays, electronic projectors, and bullet projectors. All for very short-range fighting. If Miko had not known that before, he could at least make a good guess at it after the careful zed-ray inspection. With his ship down there two miles away, we were powerless to reach him.

It seemed that Miko was now testing the use of all his mechanisms. A light-flare went up from the dome-peak of the ship. It rose in a slow arc over the valley, and burst. For a few seconds the two-mile circle of crags was brilliantly illumined. I stared, but I had to shield my eyes against the dazzling actinic glare, and I could see nothing. Was Miko making a zed-ray photograph of our interiors? We had no way of knowing.

He was testing his short-range projectors now. With my eyes again accustomed to the normal Earthlight in the valley, I could see the stabs of little electronic beams, the Martian paralyzing-rays and

heat-beams. They darted out like flashing swords from the rocks near the ship.

Then the whole ship and the crater-wall behind it seemed to shift sidewise as a Benson curve-light spread its glow about the ship, with a projector curve-beam coming up and touching the window through which I was peering.

"Haljan, come look at these damn girls! Commander—shall I stop them? They'll kill themselves, or kill us—or smash something!"

We followed the man into the building's broad central corridor. Anita and Venza were riding a midget flying platform! Anita, in her boyish black garb; Venza with a flowing white Venus-robe. They lay on the tiny, six-foot oblong of metal, one manipulating its side shields, the other at the controls. As we arrived, the platform came sliding down the narrow confines of the corridor, lurching, barely missing a door-grid projection. Up to skim the low vaulted ceiling, then down to the floor.

It sailed past our heads, rising over us as we ducked. Anita waved her hand.

Grantline gasped, "By the infernal!"

I shouted, "Anita, stop!"

But they only waved at us, skimming down the length of the corridor, seeming to avoid a smash a dozen times by the smallest margin of chance, stopping miraculously at the further end, hanging poised in mid-air, wheeling, coming back, undulating up and down.

Grantline clung to me. "By the gods of the airways!"

In spite of my astonished horror I could not but share Grantline's obvious admiration. Three of four other men were watching. The girls were amazingly skillful, no doubt of that. There was not a man among us who could have handled that gravity-platform indoors, not one who would have had the brash temerity to try it.

The platform landed with the grace of a humming bird at our feet, the girls dexterously balancing so that it came to rest swiftly, without the least bump.

I confronted them. "Anita, what are you doing?"

She stood up, flushed and smiling.

"Practising."

Imperturbable girls! The product of their age. Oblivious to the brigand attack, they were in here practising!

"What for?" I demanded.

Venza's roguish eyes twinkled at me. Her hands went to her slim hips with a gesture of defiance.

She asked, "Are you speaking for yourself or the commander?"

I ignored her. "What for?" I reiterated.

"Because we're good at it," Anita retorted. "Better than any of you men. If you should need us...."

"We don't. We won't." I said shortly.

"But if you should...."

Venza put in, "If Snap and I hadn't come for you, you wouldn't be here, Gregg Haljan. I didn't notice you were so horrified to see me holding that shield up over you!"

It silenced me.

She added, "Commander, let us alone. We won't smash anything."

Grantline laughed, "I hope you won't!"

A warning call took us back to the front window. The brigand's search-beam was again being used. It swept slowly along the length of the cliff. Its circle went down the cliff steps to the valley floor, and came sweeping up again. Then it went up to the observatory platform at the summit above us, then back and crept over to the ore-sheds.

We had no men outside, if that was what the brigand wanted to determine. The search-beam presently vanished. It was replaced immediately by a zed-ray, which darted at once to our treasure sheds and clung.

That stung Grantline into his first action. We flung our own zed-ray down across the valley. It reached the brigand ship; this zed-ray and a search-light were our only two projectors of long range.

The brigand ray vanished when ours flashed on. I was with Grantline at an image grid in the instrument room. We saw the deck of the brigand ship and the blurred interior of the cabins.

"Try the search-beam, Franck. We don't need the other."

The zed-ray went off. We gazed down our search-light which clung to the dome of the distant enemy vessel. We could see movement there.

"The telescope," Grantline ordered.

The little dynamos hummed. The telescope-finder glowed and clarified. On the deck of the ship we saw the brigands working with the assembling of ore-carts. A deck landing-porte was open. The ore-carts were being carried out through a porte-lock and down a landing incline. And on the rocks outside, we saw several of the carts—and rail-sections and the sections of an ore-shute.

Miko was unloading his mining apparatus! He was making ready to come up for the treasure!

The discovery, startling as it was, nevertheless was far overshadowed by an imperative danger alarm from our main building. Brigands were outside on our ledge! Miko's search-beam, sweeping the ledge a moment before, had carefully avoided revealing them. It had been done just for that purpose, no doubt—making us sure that the ledge was unoccupied and thus to guard

against our own light making a search.

But there was a brigand group here close outside our walls! By the merest chance the radiating glow from our search-ray had shown the helmeted figures scurrying for shelter.

Grantline leaped to his feet.

We rushed for the rear exit-porte which was nearest us. The giant bloated figures had been seen running along the outside of the connecting corridor, in this direction. But before we ever got there, a new alarm came. A brigand was crouching at a front corner of the main building! His hydrogen heat-torch had already opened a rift in the wall!

Chapter 35 Desperate Offensive

“In with you!" ordered Grantline. "Get your helmets on! How many? Six? Enough—get back there, Williams—you were last. The lock won't hold any more."

I was one of the six who jammed into the manual exit lock. We went through it: in a moment we were outside. It was less than three minutes since the prowling brigands had been seen.

Grantline touched me just as we emerged. "Don't wait for orders! Get them!"

"That fellow with the torch, the most dangerous—"

"Yes! I'm with you."

We went out with a rush. We had already discarded our shoe and belt weights. I leaped, regardless of my companions.

The scurrying Martians had disappeared. Through my visor bull's-eye I could see only the Earthlit rocky surface of the ledge. Beside me stretched the dark wall of our building.

I bounded toward the front. The brigand with the torch had been at this front corner. I could not see him from here: he had been crouching just around the angle.

I had a tiny bullet projector, the best weapon for short range outdoors. I was aware of Grantline close behind me.

It took only a few of my giant leaps. I landed at the corner, recovered my balance, and whirled around to the front.

The Martian was here, a giant misshapen lump as he crouched. His

torch was a little stab of blue in the deep shadow enveloping him. Intent upon his work, he did not see me. Perhaps he thought his fellows had broken our exits by now.

I landed like a leopard upon his back and fired, my weapon muzzle ramming him. His torch fell hissing with a silent rain of blue fire upon the rocks.

As my grip upon him made audiphone contact, his agonized scream rattled the diaphragms of my ear-grids with horrible, deafening intensity.

He lay writhing under me, then was still. His scream choked into silence. His suit deflated within my encircling grip. He was dead; my leaden, steel-tipped pellet had punctured the double surface of his Erentz-fabric, penetrated his chest.

Grantline's following leap landed him over me.

"Dead?"

"Yes."

I climbed from the inert body. The torch had hissed itself out. Grantline swung on our building corner, and I leaned down with him

to examine it. The torch had fused and scarred the surface of the wall, burned almost through. A pressure-rift had opened. We could see it, a curving gash in the metal wall-plate like a crack in a glass window-pane.

I went cold. This was serious damage! The rarefied Erentz-air would seep out. It was leaking now: we could see the magnetic radiance of it all up the length of the ten-foot crack. The leak would change the pressure of the Erentz system, constantly lower it, demanding steady renewal. The Erentz motors would overheat; some might go bad from the strain.

Grantline stood gripping me.

"Damn bad!"

"Yes. Can't we repair it, Johnny?"

"No. Have to take that whole plate-section out, shut off the Erentz plant and exhaust the interior air of all this bulkhead of the building. Day's job—maybe more."

And the crack would get worse, I knew. It would gradually spread and widen. The Erentz circulation would fail. All our power would

be drained struggling to maintain it. This brigand who had unwittingly committed suicide by his daring act had accomplished more than he perhaps had realized. I could envisage our weapons, useless from lack of power. The air in our buildings turning fetid and frigid: ourselves forced to the helmets. A rush out to abandon the camp and escape. The buildings exploding—scattering into a litter on the ledge like a child's broken toy. The treasure abandoned, with the brigands coming up and loading it on their ship.

Our defeat. In a few hours now—or minutes. This crack could slowly widen, or it could break suddenly at any time. Disaster, come now so abruptly upon us at the very start of the brigand attack....

Grantline's voice in my audiphone broke my despairing rush of thoughts. "Bad. Come on, Gregg; nothing to do here."

We were aware that our other four men had run along the building's other side. They emerged now—with the running brigands in front of them, rushing out toward the staircase on the ledge. Three giant Martian figures in flight, with our four men chasing.

A bullet projector spat, with its queer stab of exploding powder fed by the burning oxygen fumes of its artificial air-chamber—one of our men firing. A brigand fell to the rocks by the brink of the ledge.

The others reached the descending staircase, tumbled down it with reckless leaps.

Our men turned back. Before we could join them, the enemy ship down in the valley sent up a cautious search-beam which located its returning men. Then the beam swung up to the ledge, landed upon us.

We stood confused, blinded by the brilliant glare. Grantline stumbled against me.

"Run, Gregg! They'll be firing at us."

We dashed away. Our companions joined us, rushing back for the porte. I saw it open, reinforcements coming out to help us—half a dozen figures carrying a ten-foot insulated shield. They could barely get it out through the porte.

The Martian search-ray abruptly vanished. Then almost instantly the electronic ray came with its deadly stab. Missed us at first, as we ran for the shield. It vanished, and stabbed again. It caught us, but now we were behind the shield, carrying it back to the porte, hiding behind it.

The ray stabbed once or twice more.

Whether Miko's instruments showed him how serious that damage was to our front wall, we never knew. But I think that he realized. His search-beam clung to it, and his zed-ray pried into our interiors.

The brigand ship was active now. We were desperate: we used our telescope freely for observation. And used our zed-ray and search-light. Miko's ore-carts and mining apparatus were unloaded on the rocks. The rail-sections were being carried a mile out, nearly to the center of the valley. A subsidiary camp was being established there, only a mile from the base of our cliff, but still far beyond reach of our weapons. We could see the brigand lights down there.

Then the ore-shute sections were brought over. We could see Miko's men carrying some of the giant projectors, mounting them in the new position. Power tanks and cables. Light-flare catapults—little mechanical cannons for throwing the bombs.

The enemy search-light constantly raked our vicinity. Occasionally the giant electronic projector flung up its bolt as though warning us not to dare leave our buildings.

Half an hour went by. Our situation was even worse than Miko could

know. The Erentz motors were running hot—our power draining, the crack widening. When it would break we could not tell; but the danger was like a sword over us.

An anxious thirty minutes for us, this second interlude. Grantline called a meeting of all our little force, with every man having his say. Inactivity was no longer a feasible policy. We recklessly used our power to search the sky. Our rescue ship might be up there; but we could not see it with our disabled instruments. No signals came. We could not—or, at least, did not—receive them.

"They wouldn't signal," Grantline protested. "They'd know the Martians would be more likely to get the signal than us. Of what use to warn Miko?"

But he did not dare wait for a rescue ship that might or might not be coming! Miko was playing the waiting game now—making ready for a quick loading of the ore when we were forced to abandon our buildings.

The brigand ship suddenly moved its position! It rose up in a low flat arc, came forward and settled in the center of the valley where the carts and rail-sections were piled, and the outside projectors newly mounted on the rocks. But the projectors only shot at us

occasionally.

The brigands now began laying the rails from the ship toward the base of our cliff. The chute would bring the ore down from the ledge, and the carts would take it to the ship.

The laying of the rails was done under cover of occasional stabs from the electronic projector.

And then we discovered that Miko had made still another move. The brigand rays, fired from the depths of the valley, could strike our front building, but could not reach all our ledge. And from the ship's new and nearer position this disadvantage was intensified. Then abruptly we realized that under cover of darkness-bombs an electronic projector and search-ray had been carried to the top of the crater-rim, diagonally across and only half a mile from us. Their beams shot down, raking all our vicinity from this new angle.

I was on the little flying platform which sallied out as a test to attack these isolated projectors. Snap and I and one other volunteer went. He and I held the shield; Snap handled the controls.

Our exit-porte was on the lee side of the building from the hostile search-beam. We got out unobserved and sailed upward; but soon a

light from the ship caught us. And the projector bolts came up....

Our sortie only lasted a few minutes. To me, it was a confusion of crossing beams, with the stars overhead, the swaying little platform under me, and the shield tingling in my hands when the blasts struck us. Moments of blurred terror....

The voice of the man beside me sounded in my ears: "Now, Haljan, give them one!"

We were up over the peak of the rim with the hostile projectors under us. I gauged our movement, and dropped an explosive powder bomb.

It missed. It flared with a puff on the rocks, twenty feet from where the two projectors were mounted. I saw that two helmeted figures were down there. They tried to swing their grids upward, but could not get them vertical to reach us. The ship was firing at us, but it was far away. And Grantline's search-beam was going full-power, clinging to the ship to dazzle them.

Snap circled us. As we came back I dropped another bomb. Its silent puff seemed littered with flying fragments of the two projectors and the bodies of the men.

We flew swiftly back and got in.

It decided Grantline. For an hour past Snap and I had been urging our plan to use the gravity platforms. To remain inactive was sure defeat now. Even if our buildings did not explode—if we thought to huddle in them, helmeted in the failing air—then Miko could readily ignore us and proceed with his loading of the treasure under our helpless gaze. He could do that now with safety—if we refused to sally out—for we could not fire our weapons through our windows.*

*(To fire a projector through the walls or windows would at once wreck the protective Erentz system. The enemy ship has pressure portes, constructed for the emission of the weapon-rays. Grantline's only weapons thus mounted were his search-beam and zed-ray.)

To remain defensive would end inevitably in our defeat. We all knew it now; it was obvious. The waiting game was Miko's—not ours! And he was playing it.

The success of our attack upon the distant isolated projectors heartened us. Yet it was a desperate offensive indeed upon which we now decided!

We prepared our little expedition at the larger of the exit portes.

Miko's zed-ray was watching all our interior movements. We made a brave show of activity in our workshop with abandoned ore-carts which were stored there. We got them out, started to recondition them.

It seemed to fool Miko. His zed-ray clung to the workshop, watching us. And at the distant porte we gathered the little platforms, the shields, helmets, bombs, and a few hand-projectors.

There were six platforms—three of us upon each. It left four people to remain indoors.

I need not describe the emotion with which Snap and I listened to Venza and Anita pleading to be allowed to accompany us. They urged it upon Grantline, and we took no part. It was too important a decision. The treasure—the life or death of all these men—hung now upon the fate of our venture. Snap and I could not intrude our personal feelings.

And the girls won. Both were undeniably more skilful at handling the midget platforms than any of us men. Two of the six platforms could be guided by them. That was a third of our little force! And of what use to go out and be defeated, leaving the girls here to meet death almost immediately afterward?

We gathered at the porte. A last minute change made Grantline order six of his men to remain guarding the buildings. The instruments—the Erentz system—all the appliances had to be attended.

It left four platforms, each with three men, with Grantline at the controls of one of them. And upon the other two of the six Venza rode with Snap, and I with Anita.

We crouched in the shadows outside the porte. So small an army, sallying out to bomb this enemy vessel or be killed in the attempt! Only sixteen of us. And thirty or so brigands.

I envisaged then this tiny Moon-crater, the scene of this battle we were waging. Struggling humans, desperately trying to kill. Alone here on this globe. Around us, the wide reaches of Lunar desolation. In all this world, every human being was gathered here, struggling to kill!

Anita drew me down to the platform. "Ready, Gregg."

The others were rising. We lifted, moved slowly out and away from the protective shadows of the building.

In a tiny queue the six little platforms sailed out over the valley

toward the brigand ship.

Chapter 36 The Battle in the Crater

Grantline led us. We held about level. Five hundred feet beneath us the brigand ship lay, cradled on the rocks. When it was still a mile away from us I could see all its outline fairly clearly in the dimness. Its tiny hull-windows were now dark; but the blurred shape of the hull was visible and above it the rounded cap of dome, with a dim radiance beneath it.

We followed Grantline's platform. It was rising, drawing the others after it like a tail. I touched Anita where she lay beside me with her head half in the small hooded control-bank.

"Going too high."

She nodded, but followed the line nevertheless. It was Grantline's command.

I lay crouched, holding the inner tips of the flexible side-shields. The bottom of the platform was covered with the insulated fabric. There were two side-shields. They extended upward some two feet, flexible so that I could hold them out to see over them, or draw them up and in to cover us.

They afforded a measure of protection against the hostile rays, though just how much we were not sure. With the platform level, a bolt from beneath could not harm us unless it continued for a considerable time. But the platform, except upon direct flight, was seldom level, for it was a frail, unstable little vehicle! To handle it was more than a question of the controls. We balanced, and helped to guide it, with the movement of our bodies—shifting our weight sidewise, or back, or forward to make it dip as the controls altered the gravity-pull in its tiny plate-sections.

Like a bird, wheeling, soaring, swooping. To me, it was a precarious business.

But now we were in straight flight diagonally upward. The outline of the brigand ship came under us. I crouched tense, breathless; every moment it seemed that the brigands must discover us and loose their bolts.

They may have seen us for some moments before they fired. I peered over the side-shield down at our mark, then up ahead to get Grantline's firing signal. It seemed long delayed. We were almost over the ship. An added glow down there must have warned Grantline that a shot was coming. The tiny red light flared bright on his platform.

I hissed on our Benson curve-light radiance. We had been dark, but a soft glow now enveloped us. Its sheen went down to the ship to reveal us. But its curving path showed us falsely placed. I saw the little line of platforms ahead of us seem to move suddenly sidewise.

It was everyone for himself now; none of us could tell where the other platforms actually were placed or headed. Anita swooped us sharply down to avoid a possible collision.

"Gregg—?"

"Yes. I'm aiming."

I was making ready to drop the little explosive globe-bomb. Our search-light ray at the camp, answering Grantline's signal, shot down and bathed the ship in a white glare, revealing it for our aim. Simultaneously the brigand bolts came up at us.

I held my bomb out over the shield, calculating the angle to throw it down. The brigand rays flashed around me. They were horribly close; Miko had understood our sudden visible shift and aimed, not where we appeared to be, but where we had been a moment before.

I dropped my bomb hastily at the glowing white ship. The touch of a

hostile ray would have exploded it in my hand. I could see its blue-sizzling fuse as it fell. I saw the others also dropping from our nearby platforms. The explosions from them merged in a confusion of the white glare—and a cloud of black light-mist as the brigands out on the rocks used their occulting darkness bombs.

We swept past in a blur of leaping hostile beams. Silent battle of lights! Darkness bombs down at the ship struggling to bar our camp search-ray. The Benson radiance-rays from our passing platforms curving down to mingle with the confusion. The electronic rays sending up their bolts....

Our platforms dropped some ten dynamitrine bombs in that first passage over the ship. As we sped by, I dimmed the Benson's radiance. I peered. We had not hit the ship. Or if we had, the damage was inconclusive. But on the rocks I could see a pile of ore-carts scattered—broken wreckage, in which the litter of two or three projectors seemed strewn. And the gruesome deflated forms of several helmeted figures. Others seemed, to be running, scattering—hiding in the rocks and pit-holes. Twenty brigands at least were outside the ship. Some were running over toward the base of our camp-ledge. The darkness bombs were spreading like a curtain over the valley floor; but it seemed that some of the figures were dragging their projectors away.

We sailed off toward the opposite crater-rim. I remember passing over the broken wreckage of Grantline's little space-ship, the *Comet*. Miko's bolts momentarily had vanished. We had hit some of his outside projectors; the others were abandoned, or being dragged to safer positions.

After a mile we wheeled and went back. I suddenly realized that only four platforms were in the re-formed line ahead of us. One was missing! I saw it now, wavering down, close over the ship. A bolt leaped up diagonally from a distant angle on the rocks and caught the disabled platform. It fell, whirling, glowing red—disappeared into the blur of darkness like a bit of heated metal plunged into water.

One out of six of our platforms already lost! Three men of our little force gone!

But Grantline led us desperately back. Anita caught his signal to break our line. The five platforms scattered, dipping and wheeling like frightened birds—blurring shapes, shifting unnaturally in flight as the Benson curve-angles were altered.

Anita now took our platform in a long swoop downward. Her tense, murmured voice sounded in my ears:

"Hold off: I'll take us low."

A melee. Passing platform shapes. The darting bolts, crossing like ancient rapiers. Falling blue points of fuse-lights as we threw our bombs.

Down in a swoop. Then rising. Away, and then back. This silent warfare of lights! It seemed that around me must be bursting a pandemonium of sound. Yet I heard nothing. Silent, blurred melee, infinitely frightening. A bolt struck us, clung for an instant; but we weathered it. The light was blinding. Through my gloves I could feel the tingle of the over-charged shield as it caught and absorbed the hostile bombardment. Under me the platform seemed heated. My little Erentz motors ran with ragged pulse. I got too much oxygen; my head roared with it. Spots danced before my closed eyes. Then not enough oxygen. I was dully smothering....

Then the bolt was gone. I found us soaring upward, horribly tilted. I shifted over.

"Anita! Anita, dear!"

"Yes. Gregg. All right."

The melee went on. The brigand ship and all its vicinity was enveloped in darkness-mist now—a turgid sable curtain, made more dense by the dissipating heavy fumes of our exploding bombs which settled low over the ship and the rocks nearby. The search-light from our camp strove futilely to penetrate the cloud.

Our platforms were separated. One went by high over us; I saw another dart close beneath my shield.

"God, Anita!"

"Too close! I did not mean that—I didn't see it."

Almost a collision.

"Oh, Gregg, haven't we broken the ship's dome yet?"

It seemed not. I had dropped nearly all my bombs. This could not go on much longer. Had it been only five minutes? Only that? Reason told me so, yet it seemed an eternity of horror.

Another swoop. My last bomb. Anita had brought us into position to fling it. But I could not. A bolt stabbed up from the gloom and caught us. We huddled, pulling the shields up and over us.

Blurred darkness again. Too much to the side now. I had to wait while Anita swung us back. Then we seemed too high.

We swooped. But not too low! Down in the darkness-mist we would immediately have lost direction, and crashed.

I waited with my last bomb. The other platforms were occasionally dropping them: I had been too hasty, too prodigal.

Had we broken the ship's dome with a direct hit? It seemed not.

The brigands were occasionally sending up catapulted light-flares. They came from positions on the rocks outside the ship. They mounted in lazy curves and burst over us. The concealing darkness, broken only by the flares of our explosions, enveloped the enemy. Our camp search-light was still struggling with it. But overhead, where the few little platforms were circling and swooping, the flares gave an almost continuous glare. It was dazzling, blinding. Even through the smoked pane which I adjusted to my visor I could not stand it.

But there were thoughts of comparative dimness. In a patch where the Earthlight struck through the darkness of the rocks, I saw another of our fallen platforms! Snap and Venza! Dear God....

It was not they, but three figures of our men. One was dead. Two had survived the fall. They stood up, staggering. And in that instant, before the turgid black curtain closed over them, I saw two brigands come rushing. Their hand projectors stabbed at close range. Our men crumpled and fell.

And now I saw why probably we had never yet hit the ship.

Its outline was revealed. "Now, Gregg—can you fling it from here?"

We were in position again. I flung my last missile, watched its light as it dropped. On the dome-roof two of Miko's men were crouching. My bomb was truly aimed—perhaps one of the few in all our bombardment which would have landed directly on the dome-roof. But the waiting marksmen fired at it with short-range heat projectors and exploded it harmlessly while it was still above them.

We swung up and away. I saw, high above us, Grantline's platform, recognizing its red signal light. There seemed a lull. The enemy fire had died down to only a very occasional bolt. In the confusion of my whirling impressions I wondered if Miko were in distress? Not that! We had not hit his ship; perhaps we had done little damage indeed! It was we who were in distress. Two of our platforms had fallen—two out of six. Or more, of which I did not know.

I saw one rising off to the side of us. Grantline was over us. Well, we were at least three. And then I saw the fourth.

"Grantline is calling us up, Gregg."

"Yes."

Grantline's signal-light was summoning us from the attack. He was a thousand or two thousand feet above.

I was suddenly shocked with horror. The search-ray from our camp abruptly vanished! Anita wheeled us to face the distant ledge. The camp-lights showed, and over one of the buildings was a distress light!

Had the crack in our front wall broken, threatening explosion of all the buildings? The wild thoughts swept me. But it was not that. I could see light-stabs from the cliff outside the main building. Miko had dared to send some of his men to attack our almost abandoned camp!

Grantline realized it. His red helmet-light semaphored the command to follow him. His platform soared away, heading for the camp, with the other two behind him.

Anita lifted us to follow. But I checked her.

"No! Off to the right, across the valley."

"But Gregg!"

"Do as I say, Anita."

She swung us diagonally away from both the camp and the brigand ship. I prayed that we might not be noticed by the brigands.

"Anita, listen: I've an idea!"

The attack on the brigand ship was over. It lay enveloped in the darkness of the powder-gas cloud and its own darkness bombs. But it was uninjured.

Miko had answered us with our own tactics. He had practically unmanned the ship, no doubt, and had sent his men to our buildings. The fight had shifted. But I was now without ammunition, save for two or three small bullet projectors.

Of what use for our platform to rush back? Miko expected that. His attack on the camp was undoubtedly made just for that purpose.

"Anita, if we can get down on the rocks somewhere near the ship, and creep up on it unobserved in that blackness...."

I might be able to open its manual hull-lock, rip it open and let the air out. If I could get into its pressure chamber and unseal the inner slide....

"It would wreck the ship, Anita, exhaust all its air. Shall we try it?"

"Whatever you say, Gregg."

We seemed to be unobserved. We skimmed close to the valley floor, a mile from the ship. We headed slowly toward it, sailing low over the rocks.

Then we landed, left the platform.

"Let me go first, Anita."

I held a bullet projector. With slow, cautious leaps, we advanced. Anita was behind me. I had wanted to leave her with the platform, but she would not stay. And to be with me seemed at least equally safe.

The rocks were deserted. I thought there was very little chance that

any of the enemy would lurk here. We clambered over the pitted, scarred surface. The higher crags, etched with Earthlight, stood like sentinels in the gloom.

The brigand ship with its surrounding darkness was not far from us. Then we entered the cloud.

No one was out here. We passed the wreckage of broken projectors, and gruesome, shattered human forms.

We prowled closer. The hull of the ship loomed ahead of us. All dark.

We came at last close against the sleek metal hull-side, slid along it toward where I was sure the manual-porte was located.

Abruptly I realized that Anita was not behind me! Then I saw her at a little distance, struggling in the grip of a giant helmeted figure! The brigand lifted her—turned, and, carrying her, ran the other way!

I did not dare fire. I bounded after them along the hull-side, around under the curve of the pointed bow, down along the other side.

I had mistaken the hull-porte location. It was here. The running, bounding figure reached it, slid the panel. I was only fifty feet away

—not much more than a single leap. I saw Anita being shoved into the pressure lock. The Martian flung himself after her.

I fired at him, but missed. I came with a rush. And as I reached the porte it slid closed in my face, barring me!

Chapter 37 In the Pressure Lock.

With puny fists I pounded the panel. A small pane in it was transparent. Within the lock I could see the blurred figures of Anita and her captor—and, it seemed, another figure. The lock was some ten feet square, with a low ceiling. It glowed with a dim tube-light.

I pounded, thumped with futile, silent blows. The mechanism was here to open this manual; but it was now clasped from within and would not operate.

A few seconds only, while I stood there in a panic of confusion, raging to get in. This disaster had come so suddenly! I did not plan; I had no thought save to batter my way in and rescue Anita. I recall that I beat on the glassite pane with my bullet projector until the weapon was bent and useless; and I flung it with a wild, despairing rage at my feet.

They were letting the ship's air-pressure into this lock. Soon they

would open the inner panel, step into the secondary chamber—and in a moment more would be within the ship's hull corridor. Anita, lost to me!

The outer panel suddenly opened! I had lunged against it with my shoulder; the giant figure inside slid it. I was taken by surprise! I half-fell inward.

Huge arms went around me. The goggled face of the helmet peered into mine.

"So it is you, Haljan! I thought I recognized that little device over your helmet-bracket. And there is my little Anita, come back to me again!"

Miko!

This was he. His great bloated arms encircling me, bending me backward, holding me almost helpless. I saw over his shoulder that Anita was clutched in the grip of another helmeted figure. No giant, but tall for an Earthman—almost as tall as myself. Then the tube-light in the room illumined the visor. I saw the face, recognized it. Moa!

I gasped, "So—I've—got you, Miko—"

"Got me! You're a fool to the last, Gregg Haljan! A fool to the last! But you were always a fool."

I could scarcely move in his grip. My arms were pinned. As he slowly bent me backward, I wound my legs around one of his; it was as unyielding as a steel pillar. He had closed the outer panel; the air-pressure in the lock was rising. I could feel it against my suit.

My helmeted head was being forced backward; Miko's left arm held me. In his gloved right hand as it came slowly up over my throat I saw a knife-blade, its naked, sharpened metal glistening blue-white in the light from overhead.

I seized his wrist. But my puny strength could not hold him. The knife, against all my efforts, came slowly down.

A moment of this slow deadly combat—the end of everything for me.

I was aware of the helmeted figure of Moa casting off Anita—and then the two girls leaping together upon Miko. It threw him off his balance, and my hanging weight made him topple forward. He took

a step to recover himself; his hand with the knife was flung up with an instinctive, involuntary balancing gesture. And as it came swiftly down again, I forced the knife-blade to graze his throat. Its point caught in the fabric of his suit.

His startled oath jangled in my ears. The girls were clawing at him; we were all four scrambling, swaying. With despairing strength I twisted at his waist. The knife went into his throat. I plunged it deeper.

His suit went flabby. He crumpled over me and fell, knocking me to the floor. His voice, with the horrible gurgling rasp of death in it, rattled my ear-grids.

"Not such a fool—are you, Haljan—"

Moa's helmeted head was close over us. I saw that she had seized the knife, jerked it from her brother's throat. She leaped backward, waving it.

I twisted from under Miko's inert, lifeless body. As I got to my feet, Anita flung herself to shield me. Moa was across the lock, backed up against its wall. The knife in her hand went up. She stood for the briefest instant regarding Anita and me holding each other. I thought

that she was about to leap upon us; but before I could move, the knife came down and plunged into her breast. She fell forward, her grotesque helmet striking the floor-grid almost at my feet.

"Gregg!"

"She's dead."

"No! She moved! Get her helmet off! There's enough air here."

My helmet pressure-indicator was faintly buzzing to show that a safe pressure was in the room. I shut off Moa's Erentz motors, unfastened her helmet, raised it off. We gently turned her body. She lay with closed eyes, her pallid face blue-cast from the light in the lock.

With our own helmets off, we knelt over her.

"Oh. Gregg, is she dead?"

"No. Not quite—but dying."

"Oh Gregg, I don't want her to die! She was trying to help you there at the last."

She opened her eyes; the film of death was glazing them. But she

saw me, recognized me.

"Gregg—"

"Yes, Moa, I'm here."

Her livid lips were faintly drawn in a smile. "I'm—so glad—you took the helmets off, Gregg. I'm—going—you know."

"No!"

"Going—back to Mars—to rest with the fire-makers—where I came from. I was thinking—maybe you would kiss me, Gregg—?"

Anita gently pushed me down. I pressed the white, faintly smiling lips with mine. She sighed, and it ended with a rattle in her throat.

"Thank you—Gregg—closer—I can't talk so loudly—"

One of her gloved hands struggled to touch me, but she had no strength and it fell back. Her words were the faintest of whispers:

"There was no use living—without your love. But I want you to see—now—that a Martian girl can—die with a smile—"

Her eyelids fluttered down: it seemed that she sighed and then was not breathing. But on her livid face the faint smile still lingered to show me how a Martian girl could die.

We had forgotten for the moment where we were. As I glanced up I saw that through the inner panel, past the secondary lock, the ship's hull-corridor was visible, and along its length a group of Martians were advancing! They saw us, and came running.

"Anita! Look! We've got to get out of here!"

The secondary lock was open to the corridor. We jammed on our helmets. The unhelmeted brigands by then were fumbling at the inner panel. I pulled at the lever of the outer panel. The brigands were hurrying, thinking they could be in time to stop me. One of the more cautious fumbled with a helmet.

"Anita, run! Try and keep your feet."

I slid the outer panel and pushed at Anita. Simultaneously the brigands opened the inner porte.

The air came with a tempestuous rush. A blast through the inner porte—through the little pressure-lock—a wild rush out to the airless

Moon. All the air in the ship madly rushing to escape....

Like feathers we were blown with it. I recall an impression of the hurtling brigand figures and swift-flying rocks under me. A silent crash as I struck.

IMAGEDESCRIPTION

Then soundless, empty blackness.

Chapter 38 Triumph!

“Is he conscious? We'd better take him back, get his helmet off."

"It's over. We can get back now. Venza, dear, we've won—it's over."

"He hears us!"

"Gregg!"

"He hears us—he's all right!"

I opened my eyes. I lay on the rocks. Over my helmet other helmets were peering, and faint, familiar voices mingled with the roaring in my ears.

"—back to the camp and get his helmet off."

"Are his motors smooth? Keep them right, Snap—he must have good air."

I seemed unhurt. But Anita....

She was here. "Gregg, dear one!"

Anita safe! All four of us here on the Earthlit rocks, close outside the brigand ship.

"Anita!"

She held me, lifted me. I was uninjured. I could stand; I staggered up and stood swaying. The brigand ship, a hundred feet away, loomed dark and silent, a lifeless bulk, already empty of air, drained in that mad blast outward. Like the wreck of the *Planetara*—a dead, pulseless hulk already.

We four stood together, triumphant. The battle was over. The brigands were worsted, almost the last man of them dead or dying. No more than ten or fifteen had been available for that final assault upon the camp buildings. Miko's last strategy. I think perhaps he had intended, with his few remaining men, to take the ship and make away, deserting his fellows.

All on the ship, caught unhelmeted by the explosion, were dead long since.

I stood listening to Snap's triumphant account. It had not been difficult for the flying platforms to hunt down the attacking brigands on the open rocks. We had only lost one more platform.

Human hearts beat sometimes with very selfish emotions. It was a triumphant ending for us, and we hardly gave a thought that half of Grantline's little group had perished.

We huddled on Snap's platform. It rose, lurching drunkenly, barely carrying us.

And as we headed for the Grantline buildings, where still the rift in the wall had not quite broken, there came the final triumph. Miko had been aware of it, and knew he had lost. Grantline's search-light leaped upward, swept the sky, caught its sought-for object—a huge silver cylinder, bathed brightly in the white search-beam glare.

The police-ship from Earth!

Chapter 39 My Exit

My narrative lies now in this permanently recorded form before you, and I prepare my exit bow with the humble hope that I may have given you pleasure. If so, I do beg you to tell me of it. There are some who already have flashed their approval of my discs; I thank them most earnestly and gratefully.

My errors of recording unquestionably are many; and for them I ask your indulgence. There have been, I can readily see, errors of

omission. I have not mentioned, for instance, the final rescue of the *Planetara's* marooned passengers on the asteroid. You will bear with me, since the disc-space has its technical limitations, that such omissions have been unavoidable.

Since the passage of the Earth-law by the Federated Board of Education, forcing narrative fiction to cling so closely to sworn facts of actual happening, I need offer no assurance of the truth of my narrative. My witnesses have filed their corroborating declarations. Indeed, the *Planetara's* wreck and the brigands' attack upon the Moon-treasure were given the widest news-casters' publicity, as you all know. Yet I, who was unwittingly involved in those stirring events, may have added a more personal note, making the scenes more vivid to your imagination. I have tried to do that. I do hope that in some measure you will think I have succeeded.

There are many foolish girls now who say that they would like to know Gregg Haljan. They doubtless would be very disappointed. I really crave no more publicity. And the girls of all the Universe have no charm for me. There is only one, for me—an Earth-girl.

I think that life has very beautifully endowed me with its blessings.

#17 The Soul Master, by Will Smith and R. J. Robbins:

Desperately O'Hara plunged into Prof. Kell's mysterious mansion. For his friend Skip was the victim of the eccentric scientist's deastralizing experiment, and faced a fate more hideous than death.

Aproximate word count: 15,600

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

The train was slowing down for Keegan. A whistle from the locomotive ahead had warned the two alert young men in the smoker to that effect, and they arose to leave the train. Both were neatly and quietly dressed. One carried a medium-sized camera with the necessary tripod and accessory satchel. The other carried no impediments of any sort. Both were smoking cigars, evidently not of expensive variety, judging by the unaromatic atmosphere thereabouts.

"Can't see what Bland shipped us up to this one-horse dump for," grumbled Skip Handlon, the one who carried the camera. He was the

slighter of the two and perhaps half a head shorter than the other. “Do you know anything about it?”

“Not much,” confessed the other as they alighted from the smoker. “All I can tell you is that Bland sent for me early this morning, told me to get a story out of this Professor Kell and to drag you along. After we get there you are to do as judgment dictates. But I remember that the Chief was specific as regards one thing. You are to get the proff’s mug. Don’t forget. The old fellow may growl and show fight, but it’s up to you to deliver the goods—or, in this case, get them. Don’t depend on me for help. I expect to have troubles of my own.” Thus gloomed Horace Perry, star reporter for the Journal.

“This Keegan place”—Handlon was using his eyes swiftly and comprehensively—“isn’t worth much. Can’t see how it manages to even rate a name. Some dump, all right!”

“You said a couple mouthfuls.”

“How’s the train service, if any?”

“Rotten. Two trains a day.” The other was anything but enthusiastic. “We’ve a nice long wait for the next one, you can bet. Now, just add to that a rough reception after we reach the old lion’s lair and you get

a nice idea of what Bland expects from his men."

Handlon made a wry face at this. "The bird who first applied the words 'Hard Boiled' to the Chief's monniker knew something."

"You don't know the half of it," retorted Perry encouragingly. "Just wait and see what a beaut of a fit he can throw for *your* benefit if you fail to do your stuff—and I don't mean maybe."

Old Man Bland owned the Journal, hired and fired his crew and did his own editing, with the help of as capable an office gang as could be gotten together. It is quite possible that "Hard Boiled" Bland demanded more from his men than any other editor ever has before or since. Nevertheless he got results, and none of his experienced underlings ever kicked, for the pay was right. If a hapless scribe had the temerity to enter the editorial sanctum with a negative report, the almost invariable reply had been a glare and a peremptory order, "Get the copy."

And get it they did. If a person refused an interview these clever fellows generally succeeded in getting their information from the next most reliable source, and it arrived in print just the same.

Of such a breed was Perry. Handlon, being a more recent acquisition

to the staff, was not yet especially aggressive in his work. On this account the former took keen zest in scaring him into displaying a bit more sand.

The train had disappeared around a bend and the two reporters felt themselves marooned. Keegan, without question, was a most forlorn looking spot. A dismal shanty, much the worse for weather, stood beside the track. In front, a few rotting planks proclaimed that once upon a time the place had boasted a real freight platform. Probably, back in some long-forgotten age, a station agent had also held forth in the rickety shanty. A sign hung on each end of the crumbling structure on which could still be deciphered the legend “KEEGAN.” On the opposite side of the track was an old, disused siding. The only other feature of interest thereabouts was a well traveled country road which crossed the tracks near the shanty, wound sinuously over a rock-strewn hill and became lost in the mazes of an upland forest.

There being no signboard of any kind to indicate their destination, the two, after a moment’s hesitation, started off briskly in a chance direction. The air was hot and sultry, and in the open spaces the sun beat down mercilessly upon the two hapless ones. As they proceeded into the depths of the forest they were shielded somewhat from the worst of the heat. Gradually upon their city-bred nostrils there stole the odor of conifers, accompanied by a myriad of other forest odors.

Both sniffed the air appreciatively.

“This is sure the life,” remarked Perry. “If I weren’t so darn thirsty now....” He became lost in mournful thought.

A considerable time passed. The newspaper men trudged wearily along until finally another bend brought them to the beginning of a steep descent. The forest had thinned out to nothing.

“Seems to me I smell smoke,” blurted out Handlon suddenly. “Must be that we are approaching the old party’s lair. Remember? Bland said that he—”

“Uh huh!” the other grunted, almost inaudibly. Now that they seemed to be arriving at their destination something had occurred to him. He had fished from his pocket a sheaf of clippings and was perusing them intently. “Bland said, ‘Get the copy’,” he muttered irrelevantly and half to himself.

The clippings all related directly to Professor Kell or to happenings local to Keegan. Some were of peculiar interest. The first one was headlined thus:

Mysterious Disappearance Of Robert Manion And Daughter

Still Unsolved

The piece contained a description of the missing man, a fairly prosperous banker who had been seen four days previously driving through Keegan in a small roadster, and one of the girl, who was in the car with him. It told that the banker and his daughter were last seen by a farmer named Willetts who lived in a shack on the East Keegan road, fleeing before a bad thunder storm. He believed the pair were trying to make the Kell mansion ahead of the rain. Nothing more of the Manions or their car had been seen, and their personal effects remained at their hotel in a nearby village unclaimed. The heavy rain had of course effectually obliterated all wheel tracks.

Another clipping was fairly lengthy, but Perry glanced only at the headlines:

"Kell Still Carrying On His Strange Experiments

Has Long Been Known to Have Fantastic Theories. Refuses to Divulge Exact Methods Employed, or Nature of Results"

Still another appeared to be an excerpt from an article in an agricultural paper. It read:

“A prize bull belonging to Alton Shepard, a Keegan cattle breeder, has created considerable sensation by running amuck in a most peculiar manner. While seemingly more intelligent than heretofore, it has developed characteristics known to be utterly alien to this type of animal.

Perhaps the most noteworthy feature of the case is the refusal of the animal to eat its accustomed food. Instead it now consumes enormous quantities of meat. The terrific bellow of the animal’s voice has also undergone a marked change, now resembling nothing earthly, although some have remarked that it could be likened to the bay of an enormous hound. Some of its later actions have seemingly added further canine attributes, which make the matter all the more mystifying. Veterinaries are asking why this animal should chase automobiles, and why it should carry bones in its mouth and try to bury them!”

The last one read in part:

“Professor Kell has been questioned by authorities at Keegan relative to the disappearance there last Tuesday of Robert Manion and his daughter. Kell seemed unable to furnish clues of any value, but officials are not entirely satisfied with the man’s attitude toward the questions.”

Somewhat bewildered by these apparently unrelated items, the reporter remained lost in thought for quite a space, the while he endeavored to map out his course of action when he should meet the redoubtable Professor. That many of the weird occurrences could be traced in some way to the latter's door had evidently occurred to Bland. Furthermore, the Old Man relied implicitly upon Perry to get results.

It must be said that for once the star reporter was not overly enthusiastic with the assignment. Certain rumors aside from the clippings in his hand had produced in his mind a feeling of uneasiness. So far as his personal preference was concerned he would have been well satisfied if some cub reporter had been given the job. Try as he would, however, he could offer no tangible reason for the sudden wariness.

He was aroused from his absorption by his companion.

"Thought I smelled smoke a while back, and I was right. That's the house up in the edge of the pines. Deep grounds in front and all gone to seed; fits the description exactly. Thank Heaven we struck off from the station in the right direction. This stroll has been long enough. Come out of it and let's get this job finished."

Suiting the action to the words Handlon started off at a brisk pace down the hill, followed at a more moderate rate by Perry. At length they came within full sight of the grounds. Extending for a considerable distance before them and enclosing a large tract of land now well covered with lush grass, was a formidable looking wall. In former days a glorious mantle of ivy had covered the rough stones; but now there was little left, and what there was looked pitifully decrepit. They continued their progress along this barrier, finally coming upon a huge iron gate now much the worse for rust. It stood wide open.

The road up to the house had long since become overgrown with rank grass and weeds. Faintly traceable through the mass of green could be seen a rough footpath which the two followed carefully. They met no one. As they approached the night of black pines the mass of the old mansion began to loom up before them, grim and forbidding.

Instinctively both shivered. The silence of the place was complete and of an uncannily tangible quality. Nervously they looked about them.

“How do you like it, Skip?” The words from Perry’s previously silent lips broke upon the stillness like a thunderclap. The other

started.

“I should hate to die in it,” Handlon answered solemnly. “I’ll bet the old joint is haunted. Nobody but a lunatic would ever live in it.”

“I get a good deal the same impression myself,” said Perry. “I don’t wonder that Bland sent two of us to cover the job.”

As he spoke he mounted a flight of steps to a tumbledown veranda. There was no sign of a door bell on the weather-beaten portal, but an ancient knocker of bronze hanging forlornly before him seemed to suggest a means of attracting attention. He raised it and rapped smartly.

No answer.

Possessing all the attributes of the conventional reporter and a few additional ones, Perry did not allow himself to become disheartened, but merely repeated his summons, this time with more vim.

“Well, Horace,” grinned Handlon, “it does look as if we were not so very welcome here. However, seems to me if you were to pick up that piece of dead limb and do some real knocking with it.... The dear Professor may be deaf, you know, or maybe he’s—”

“Skip, my boy, I don’t know as we ought to go in right now after all. Do you realize it will soon be dark?”

“To tell you the truth, Horace, I’m not stuck on this assignment either. And I feel that after dark I should like it even less, somehow. But, gee, the Old Man....”

“Oh, I’m not thinking of quitting on the job. We don’t do that on the Journal.” Perry smiled paternally at the photographer. Could it be he had purposely raised the other’s hopes in order to chaff him some more? “But I was thinking that it might be a good idea to look about the outbuildings a bit while we have a little daylight. Eh?”

Handlon looked disappointed, but nodded gamely. He delayed only long enough to deposit his camera and traps behind a grossly overgrown hydrangea by the steps, then, with a resigned air, declared himself ready to follow wherever the other might lead.

Perry elected to explore the barn first. This was a depressing old pile, unpainted in years, with what had once been stout doors now swinging and bumping in the light breeze. As the two men drew nearer, this breeze—which seemed to sigh through the place at will—brought foul odors that told them the place was at least not tenantless. In some trepidation they stepped inside and stood

blinking in the half darkness.

“Pretty Polly!”

“Good God! What was that?” Handlon whispered. He knew it was no parrot’s voice. This was a far deeper sound than that, a sound louder than anything a parrot’s throat could produce. It came from the direction of a ruinous stall over near a cobwebbed window. As Perry started fearfully toward this, there issued from it a curious scraping sound, followed by a fall that shook the floor, and a threshing as of hoofs. Now the great voice could be heard again, this time uttering what sounded strangely like oaths roared out in a foreign tongue. Yet when the newspaper men reached the stall they found it occupied only by a large mule.

The animal was lying on its side, its feet scraping feebly against the side of the stall. The heaving, foam-flecked body was a mass of hideous bruises, some of which were bleeding profusely. The creature seemed to be in the last stage of exhaustion, lying with lips drawn back and eyes closed. Beneath it and scattered all over the stall floor was a thick layer of some whitish seeds.

“That’s—why that’s sunflower seed, Horace!” Handlon almost whimpered. “And look! Look in that crib! It’s full of the same stuff!

Where's the hay, Horace? Does this thing—"

He was interrupted by a mighty movement of the beast—a threshing that nearly blinded the men in the cloud of bloodstained seeds it raised. With something between a curse and a sob, the mule lunged at its crib as if attempting to get bodily into it. But no: it was only trying to perch on its edge! Now it had succeeded. The ungainly beast hung there a second, two, three. From its uplifted throat issued that usually innocuous phrase, a phrase now a thing of delirious horror:

"Pretty Polly!"

With a crash the tortured creature fell to the floor, to lie there gasping and moaning.

Skip Handlon left that barn. Perry retained just enough wit to do what he should have done the instant he first saw the animal. He whipped out his automatic and fired one merciful shot. Then he too started for the outside. He arrived in the yard perhaps ten seconds behind Handlon.

"Good Heavens, Perry," gibbered Handlon. "I'm not going to stay around this place another minute. Just let me find where I left that

suffering camera, that's all I ask."

"Easy now." Perry laid a hand on his companion's shoulder. "I guess we're up against something pretty fierce here, but we're going to see it through, and you know it. So let's cut out the flight talk and go raise the Professor."

Handlon tried earnestly to don a look of determination. If Perry was set on staying here the least he could do was stay with him. However, could Perry have foreseen the events which were to entangle them, he probably would have led the race to the gate. As it was, he grasped a stick and marched bravely up toward the front door.

A sudden commotion behind him caused him to wheel sharply around. Simultaneously a yell burst from Handlon.

"Look out, Horace!"

What he saw almost froze the blood in his veins. From a tumbledown coach house had issued an enormous wolf-hound which was now almost upon then, eyes flaming, fangs gleaming horribly.

So unexpected was the attack that both men stood rooted in their

tracks. The next moment the charging brute was upon them, and had bowled Handlon off his equilibrium as if he were a child. The unfortunate photographer made a desperate attempt to prevent injury to his precious camera, which he had but a moment earlier succeeded in retrieving, and in doing so fell rather violently to the ground. Every moment he expected to feel the powerful jaws crunch his throat, and he made no effort to rise. For several seconds he remained thus, until he could endure the suspense no longer. He glanced around only to see Perry, staring open-mouthed at the animal which had so frightened them. Apparently it had forgotten the presence of the two men.

Handlon regained his feet rather awkwardly, the while keeping a watchful eye on the beast, of whose uncertain temper he was by now fully aware. In an undertone he addressed his companion.

“What do you make of it?” he wanted to know. “Did the critter bite you?”

“No. That’s the queer part of it. Neither did he bite you, if you were to think it over a minute. Just put his nose down and *rammed* you, head on.”

The photographer was flabbergasted. Involuntarily his gaze stole

again in the direction of the offending brute.

“What on earth—” he began. “Is he sharpening his teeth on a rock preparatory to another attack upon us? Or—What the deuce *is* he doing?”

“If you ask me,” came astonishingly from the watchful Perry, “he’s eating grass, which is my idea of something damn foolish for a perfectly normal hound, genus lupo, to be—Look out!”

The animal, as if suddenly remembering the presence of the men, suddenly charged at them again, head down, eyes blazing. As before, it made no effort to bite. Though both men were somewhat disconcerted by the great brute they held their ground, and when it presented the opportunity the older reporter planted a terrific kick to the flank which sent the animal whimpering back to its shed behind.

“Score one,” breathed Handlon. “If we—” At a sudden grating sound overhead, he stopped.

Both turned to face the threatening muzzle of an ancient blunderbuss. Behind it was an irate countenance, nearly covered by an unclipped beard of a dirty gray color. In the eyes now glaring at them malevolently through heavily concaved spectacles they read

hate unutterable. The barrel of the blunderbuss swung slightly as it covered alternately one and the other. Both sensed that the finger even now tightening on the trigger would not hesitate unduly. Being more or less hardened to rebuffs of all kinds in the pursuance of their calling, the reporters did not hesitate in stating their purpose.

“What?” yelled the old man. “You dare to invade my grounds and disturb me at my labors for such a reason? Reporters! My scientific research work is not for publicity, sirs; and futhermore I want it understood that I am not to be dragged from my laboratory again for the purpose of entertaining you or any others of your ilk. Get away!”

Without further ado the window was slammed down, a shutter closed on the inside, and once more the silence of the dead descended upon the spot. The two men grinned ruefully at each other, Handlon finally breaking the stillness.

“My idea of the world’s original one-sided conversation. We simply didn’t talk—and yet we’re supposed to be reporters. You’ve got to hand it to the Proff, Horace, for the beautiful rock-crusher he just handed us.”

“You didn’t think we had anything easy, did you?” said Perry irritably. “He’ll change his tune presently, when—”

Handlon's jaw dropped. "You don't mean you're going to take any more chances! Would you rouse him again after the way he treated us with that gun? Besides, the train...."

Perry bent a scathing glance at his companion. "What on earth has the train to do with our getting the Professor's confession of crime or whatever he has to offer? You evidently don't know Bland—much. I deduce that a lot of my sweetness has been wasted on the desert air. Once more, let me assure you that if you propose to go back without the Proff's mug on one of those plates you might as well mail your resignation from *here*. Get me?"

The other wilted.

"I wonder," Perry ruminated as he stared in the direction of the shed wherein the canine monstrosity had disappeared. "Do you suppose that you can get a snap of the old boy's mug if I can get him to the window again? If you can do that, just leave the rest to me. I've handled these crusty birds before. What say?"

"Go as far as you like." The photographer was once more grinning as he unslung his camera and carefully adjusted a plate in place. Everything at last to his satisfaction he gripped flash pan and bulb.

“I’m going to make some racket now,” announced Perry grimly. “If Kell shows up, work fast. He may shoot at you, but don’t get excited. It’s almost dark, so his aim *might* be poor.”

At this suggestion his companion showed signs of panic, but the other affected not to notice this. There came a deafening hullaballoo as Perry beat a terrific tattoo on the ancient door. Followed a deep silence, while Perry leaped back to stand in front of Skip and his camera. After perhaps a full minute’s wait he once more opened up his bombardment, to jump quickly back to the camera as before. This time he had better success. The window was again opened and the muzzle of the blunderbuss put in its appearance. Handlon stood close behind Perry as he silently swung the camera into a more favorable position for action. The face at the window was purple with wrath.

“You damned pests! Leave my grounds at once or I shall call my hound and set him upon you. And when—”

Crack! Flash! Click! Perry had made a sudden sidewise movement as Handlon went into action.

“Much obliged, Professor,” said Perry politely. “Your pose with that old cannon is going to be very effective from the front page. The

write-up will doubtless be interesting too. Probably the story won't be quite so accurate as it would be had you told it to us yourself; but we shall get as many of the details from the natives hereabouts as we can. Good-day to you, sir!"

Motioning to the other he turned on his heel and started down the driveway. It was an old trick, and for a long moment of suspense he almost feared that it would fail. Another moment—

"Wait!" The quavering voice of the irascible old villain had lost some of its malice. "Come back here a minute."

With simulated reluctance the two slowly retraced their steps. "Is there something else, sir?"

"Perhaps...." The old man hesitated, as if pondering upon his words. "Perhaps if you care to step in I can be of assistance to you after all. It occurs to me that possibly I have been too abrupt with you."

"I am very glad that you have decided to cooperate with us, Professor Kell," answered the reporter heartily, as they ascended the steps. The old man's head disappeared from the window and shortly the sound of footsteps inside told of his approach. Finally the oaken door swung open, and they were silently ushered into the musty

smelling hallway. Though outwardly accepting the Professor's suddenly pacific attitude, Perry made up his mind to be on his guard.

As they entered what had evidently been the parlor in bygone days, an oppressive, heavy odor smote their nostrils, telling of age-old carpets and of draperies allowed to decay unnoticed. On the walls hung several antique prints, a poorly executed crayon portrait of a person doubtless an ancestor of the present Kell, and one or two paintings done in oil, now badly cracked and stained. Everything gave the impression of an era long since departed, and the two men felt vaguely out of place. Their host led them to a pair of dilapidated chairs, which they accepted gratefully. The ride to Keegan after a hard day's work had not tended to improve their spirits.

"Now to business." Perry went straight to the point, desiring to get the interview over as soon as possible. "We have heard indirectly of various happenings in this vicinity which many think have some connection with your scientific experiments. Any statement you may care to make to us in regard to these happenings will be greatly appreciated by my paper. Inasmuch as what little has already been printed is probably of an erroneous nature, we believe it will be in your own best interest to give us as complete data as possible." Here he became slightly histrionic. "Of course we do not allow ourselves to take the stories told by the local inhabitants too literally, as such

persons are too liable to exaggerate, but we must assume that some of these stories have partial basis in fact. Any information relative to your scientific work, incidentally, will make good copy for us also."

Perry gazed steadily at the patriarch as he spoke. For a moment, a crafty expression passed over the old man's face, but as suddenly it disappeared. Evidently he had arrived at a decision.

"Come with me," he wheezed.

The two newspaper men exchanged swift glances, the same thought in the mind of each. Were they about to be led into a trap? If the old man's shady reputation was at all deserved they would do well to be wary. Perry thought swiftly of the clippings he had read and of what gossip he had heard, then glanced once more in the direction of Handlon. That worthy was smiling meaningly and had already arisen to follow the Professor. Reluctantly Perry got to his feet and the three proceeded to climb a rickety stairway to the third floor. The guide turned at the head of the stairs and entered a long dark corridor. Here the floor was covered with a thick carpet which, as they trod upon it, gave forth not the slightest sound.

The hall gave upon several rooms, all dark and gloomy and giving the same dismal impression of long disuse. How could the savant

endure such a depressing abode! The accumulation of dust and cobwebs in these long forgotten chambers, the general evidence of decay—all told of possible horrors ahead. They became wary.

But they were not wary enough!

The uncouth figure ahead of them had stopped and was fumbling with the lock of an ancient door. Instinctively Perry noted that it was of great thickness and of heavy oak. Now the Professor had it open and was motioning for them to enter. Handlon started forward eagerly, but hurriedly drew back as he felt the grip of the other reporter's hand on his arm.

"Get back, you fool!" The words were hissed into the ear of the incautious one. Then, to the Professor, Perry observed: "If you have no objection we would prefer that you precede us."

A look of insane fury leaped to the face of the old man, lingered but an instant and was gone. Though the expression was but momentary, both men had seen, and seeing had realized their danger.

They followed him into the chamber, which was soon illumined fitfully by a smoky kerosene lamp. Both took a rapid survey of the place. Conceivably it might have been the scene of scientific

experiments, but its aspect surely belied such a supposition. The average imagination would instantly pronounce it the abode of a maniac, or the lair of an alchemist. Again, that it might be the laboratory of an extremely slovenly veterinary was suggested by the several filthy cages to be seen resting against the wall. All of these were unoccupied except one in a dark corner, from which issued a sound of contented purring, evidently telling of some well-satisfied cat.

The air was close and foul, being heavy with the odor of musty, decaying drugs. In every possible niche and cranny the omnipresent dust had settled in a uniform sheen of gray which showed but few signs of recent disturbance.

“Here, gentlemen,” their host was saying, “is where I carry on my work. It is rather gloomy here after dark, but then I do not spend much time here during the night. I have decided to acquaint you with some of the details of one or two of my experiments. Doubtless you will find them interesting.”

While speaking he had, mechanically it seemed, reached for a glass humidor in which were perhaps a dozen cigars. Silently he selected one and extended the rest to the two visitors.

After all three had puffed for a moment at the weeds, the old man began to talk, rapidly it seemed to them. Perry from time to time took notes, as the old man proceeded, an expression of utter amazement gradually overspreading his face. Handlon pulled away contentedly at his cigar, and on his features there grew an almost ludicrous expression of well-being. Was the simple photographer so completely at ease that he had at length forsaken all thought of possible danger?

As Professor Kell talked on he seemed to warm to his subject. At the end of five minutes he began uncovering a peculiar apparatus which had rested beneath the massive old table before which they were sitting. The two men caught the flash of light on glass, and a jumble of coiled wires became visible.

Was the air in the laboratory getting unbearably close? Or was the queer leaden feeling that had taken possession of Perry's lungs but an indication of his overpowering weariness? He felt a steadily increasing irritation, as if for some strange reason he suddenly resented the words of their host, which seemed to be pouring out in an endless stream. The cigar had, paradoxically, an oddly soothing quality, and he puffed away in silence.

Why had the room suddenly taken on so hazy an aspect? Why did

Handlon grin in that idiotic manner? And the Professor ... he was getting farther and farther away ... that perfecto ... or was it an El Cabbajo? What was the old archfiend doing to him anyhow?... Why was he laughing and leering at them so horribly?... Confound it all ... that cigar ... where was it?... Just one more puff....

Blindly he groped for the missing weed, becoming aware of a cackle of amusement nearby. Professor Kell was standing near the spot where he had fallen and now began prodding him contemptuously with his toe.

“Fools!” he was saying. “You thought to interfere with my program. But you are in my power and you have no hope of escape. I am unexpectedly provided with more subjects for my experiments. You will....” His words became hazy and unintelligible, for the hapless reporter was drifting off into a numb oblivion. He had long since lost the power to move a muscle. Out of the corner of an eye, just before he lost consciousness altogether, he perceived Handlon lying upon the floor still puffing at the fateful drugged cigar.

Eons passed.

To the reporter came a vision of a throbbing, glaring inferno, wherein he was shaken and tossed by terrific forces. His very vital

essence seemed to respond to a mighty vibration. Now he was but a part of some terrific chaos. Dimly he became aware of another being with whom he must contend. Now he was in a death struggle, and to his horror he found himself being slowly but surely overpowered. A demoniac grin played upon the features of the other as he forced the reporter to his knees. It was Handlon.... Once more he was sinking into soft oblivion, the while a horrid miasma assailed his nostrils. He was nothing....

Slowly, and with infinite effort, Perry felt himself returning to consciousness, though he had no clear conception of his surroundings. His brain was as yet but a whirling vortex of confused sounds, colors and—yes, odors. A temporary rift came in the mental cloud which fettered his faculties, and things began to take definite shape. He became aware that he was lying upon his back at some elevation from the floor. Again the cloudy incubus closed in and he knew no more.

When he finally recovered the use of his faculties it was to discover himself the possessor of a violent headache. The pain came in such fearsome throbs that it was well nigh unendurable. The lamp still sputtered dimly where the professor had left it. At the moment it was on the point of going out altogether. The reporter noticed this, and over him stole a sense of panic. What if the light should fail

altogether, leaving him lying in the dark in this frightful place! Still dizzy and sick, he managed to rise upon his elbows enough to complete a survey of the room. He was still in the laboratory of Professor Kell, but that worthy had disappeared. Of Handlon there was no sign. The mysterious apparatus, of which he now had but a vague remembrance, also had vanished.

His thoughts became confused again, and wearily he passed a hand over his brow in the effort to collect all of his faculties. The lamp began to sputter, arousing him to action. Desperately he fought against the benumbing sensation that was even again stealing over him. Gradually he gained the ascendancy. He struggled dizzily to his feet and took a few tentative steps.

Where was Handlon? He decided his friend had probably recovered from the drug first and was gone, possibly to get a doctor for him, Perry. However, he must make some search to determine if Skip had really left the premises.

As he walked through the open door the lamp in his hand gave a last despairing flicker and went out. From there he was forced to grope his way down the dark hall to the stairs. Just how he reached the lower floor he was never able to remember, for as yet all the effect of the powerful drug had not worn off. He had a dim recollection of

being thankful to the ancestor of Kell who had provided such thick carpets in these halls. Thanks to them his footsteps had been noiseless, at any rate.

What was Kell's real object in giving them those drugged cigars? he wondered. How long had they been under the influence of the lethal stuff? Surely several hours. Upon glancing through a hall window he found that outside was the blackness of midnight.

Cautiously he explored the desolate chambers on the ground floor: the kitchen—where it could be plainly seen that cooking of a sort had been done—the barn, and woodshed. Not a living thing could he find, not even the huge wolf-hound which had attacked them in so strange a manner that afternoon.

By now he was quite frankly worried on Handlon's account. At that moment, could he have known the actual fate that had overtaken his companion, it is quite probable he would have gone mad. He stumbled back and into the dark front hall, shouting his friend's name. The response was a hollow echo, and once or twice he thought he heard the ghost of a mocking chuckle.

At length he gave up the search and started for the door, intent now only upon flight from the accursed place. He would report the whole

thing to the office and let Bland do what he pleased about it. Doubtless Handlon had already left. Then he stumbled over Handlon's camera. Evidently the Professor had neglected to take possession of it. That must be rescued, at all costs. He picked it up and felt the exposed plate still inside. He started again for the door.

What little light there was faded out and he felt stealing over him a horrid sensation of weakness. Again came a period of agony during which he felt the grip of unseen forces. Once more it seemed that he was engaged in mortal strife with Skip Handlon. Malevolently Handlon glared at him as he endeavored with all his strength to overcome Perry. This time, however, the latter seemed to have more strength and resisted the attack for what must have been hours. Finally the other drew away baffled.

At this the mental incubus surrounding Perry's faculties broke. Dimly he became aware of a grinding noise nearby and a constant lurching of his body. At length his vision cleared sufficiently to enable him to discover the cause of the peculiar sensations.

He was in a railroad coach!

He took a rapid glance around and noted a drummer sitting in the seat across the aisle, staring curiously at him. With an effort Perry

assumed an inscrutable expression and determined to stare the other out of countenance. Reluctantly the man glanced away, and after a moment, under Perry's stony gaze, he suddenly arose and chose a new seat in front of the car. Perry took to the solace of a cigarette and stared out at the flying telegraph poles. From time to time he noted familiar landmarks. The train had evidently left Keegan far behind and was already nearly into the home town.

For the balance of the ride the reporter experienced pure nightmare. The peculiar sensations of dizziness, accompanied by frightful periods of insensibility, kept recurring, now, however, not lasting more than ten or fifteen minutes at a time. At such times as he was conscious he found opportunity to wonder in an abstracted sort of way how he had ever managed to get on the train and pay his fare, which must have been a cash one, without arousing the conductor's suspicions. Discovery of a rebate in his pocket proved that he must have done so, however. The business of leaving the train and getting to the office has always been an unknown chapter in Perry's life.

He came out of one of his mental fogs to find himself seated in the private editorial sanctum of the Journal. Evidently he had just arrived. Bland, a thick-set man with the jaw of a bulldog, was eyeing him intently.

“Well! Any report to make?” The question was crisp.

The reporter passed a hand across his perspiring forehead. “Yes, I guess so. I—er—that is—you see—”

“Where’s Handlon? What happened to you? You act as if you were drunk.” Bland was not in an amiable mood.

“Search me,” Perry managed to respond. “If Skip isn’t here old man Kell must have done for him. I came back alone.”

“You wha-a-t?” the irate editor fairly roared, half rising from his chair. “Tell me exactly what happened and get ready to go back there on the next train. Or—no, on second thoughts you’d better go to bed. You look all used up. Handlon may be dead or dying at this minute. That Kell could do anything.” He pressed the button on his desk.

“Johnny,” he said to the office boy, “get O’Hara in here on the double quick and tell him to bring along his hat and coat.”

He turned again to Perry, who was gazing nervously at the door. “Now tell me everything that happened and make it fast,” he ordered.

The reporter complied, omitting nothing except the little matter of

his mental lapses at the house of Professor Kell and later on the train. The incident of the drugged cigars seemed to interest the Old Man hugely, and Perry did not forget to play up Handlon's exploits in getting the picture of the Professor. All through the recital he was in a sweat for fear that he might have a recurrence of one of his brain spells and that Bland would become cognizant of it. When would the Chief finish and let him escape from the office? Desperately he fought to prevent the numbing sensation from overcoming him. All that kept him from finally fleeing the place in panic was the entrance of Jimmie O'Hara.

Slight, wiry and efficient looking, this individual was a specimen of the perfect Journal reporter. This is saying a good deal, for the news crew and editorial force of the paper were a carefully selected body of men indeed. Bland never hired a man unless experience had endowed him with some unusual qualification. Most of them could write up a story with realistic exactitude, being able in most cases to supply details gleaned from actual experience in one walk of life or another.

Of this redoubtable crew probably the queerest was Jimmie O'Hara. Jimmie had just finished a sentence in the "pen" for safe-cracking at the time he landed the job with the Journal. Theoretically all men should have shunned him on account of his jailbird taint. Not so

Bland. The Chief was independent in his ideas on the eternal fitness of things and allowed none of the ordinary conventions of humanity to influence his decisions. So Jimmie became one of the staff and worked hard to justify Bland in hiring him. His former profession gave him valuable sidelights upon crime stories of all kinds, and he was almost invariably picked as the man to write these up for the columns.

"Jimmie," said the Chief, "we have need of an experienced strong-arm man and all around second story worker. You are the only man on the force who fills the bill for this job. Perry here has just returned from Keegan, where I sent him to interview Professor Kell. Skip Handlon went with him, but failed to return. We want to know what happened to Skip. That is your job. *Get Handlon!* If he is dead let me know by long distance phone and I'll have a couple of headquarters men down there in a hurry. Get a good fast car and don't waste any time. That's all."

O'Hara stopped long enough to get the location of Professor Kell's place fixed in his mind, then abruptly departed. Bland gazed after him musingly.

"The Professor will have some job to put anything over on that bird," he said grimly. "Personally, I'm sorry for the old soul."

After leaving the Journal office Jimmie proceeded directly to a certain stable where he kept his private car. It was a long, low speedster with a powerful engine, and capable of eating up distance. It was the work of a minute to touch the starter and back out of the yard.

For the next hour he held the wheel grimly while the car roared over the seventy-odd miles to Keegan. Would he be in time? At last a sign post told him that he was within five miles of the railroad crossing at Keegan. Now the headlights were picking out the black outlines of the freight shed, and the next moment he had swept over the tracks. The luminous dial on his wrist watch notified him that he had been on the road but little over an hour, but his spirits somehow refused to revive with the knowledge.

About a mile beyond the station he drove the car into a dark wood road and parked it, turning off all lights. The rest of the way to the Professor's mansion he did on foot. Rather than approach from the front of the grounds he nimbly climbed a stone wall and, crossing a field or two, entered the stretch of woods which extended just behind the mansion. His pocket flashlight here came into use, and once or twice he gave a reassuring pat to a rear pocket where bulged a heavy Colt automatic.

What was that? He had approached very close to the rear of the house now. No lights were visible as yet, but unless he was greatly mistaken he had heard a muffled scream. He stopped in his tracks and listened intently. Again it came, this time with a blood-curdling cadence ending in what he would have sworn was a choking sob.

The little job of getting the old-fashioned rear window open was a mere nothing to the experienced O'Hara, and in a moment he was inside the house. His feet struck soft carpet. Catlike, he stepped to one side in order to prevent any hidden eyes from perceiving his form silhouetted in the dim light of the open window. He dared not use his flashlight for fear that the circle of light would betray his position, thus making him an excellent target for possible bullets. Following the wall closely he managed to circle the room without mishap. His searching fingers finally came in contact with a door frame, and he breathed a sigh of relief. Here there was nothing to bar his progress except some moth-eaten portieres. These he brushed aside.

The room which he now entered was probably the same into which the Professor had ushered Handlon and Perry the day before. There being still no sign of life about, the reporter decided to throw caution to the winds. He brought his flash into play. Quickly casting the powerful beam around the chamber he examined the place with an

all-searching glance.

Nothing.

With a stifled oath he turned his attention to the other rooms in the immediate vicinity. The brilliant light revealed not the slightest trace of a person, living or dead. The sound must have come from the second story or from the cellar. He decided on the upper floor.

Feverish with impatience because of the valuable time he had already lost, he bounded up the heavily carpeted stairs two at a time. Now to his keen ears came certain faint sounds which told him that he was on the right track. Before him extended a long, dusty hall, terminating in a single heavy door. Several other doors opened at intervals along the corridor. One or two of these were open, and he threw the beam from his flash hastily into one after another of them. He saw only dusty and mildewed chamber furnishings of an ancient massive style.

Suddenly he pricked up his ears.

The door ahead of him was creaking slowly open. Instantly he extinguished his torch and leaped into the nearest room. Whoever was opening that end door was carrying a lamp. What if the

Professor had accomplices who might discover him and overpower him by force of numbers! O'Hara drew the automatic from his pocket, deriving a comforting assurance from the feel of the cold steel. Here was something no man could resist could he but get it into action. The light was now nearly abreast of his door, and for a sickening instant he thought the prowler was coming into the room. He held his breath. Now the lamp was at the open door, and now it was quickly withdrawn. After a breathless second he tip-toed forward and peered cautiously down the hallway.

About here it was that James O'Hara began to realize that this was going to be a horrible night indeed. He had wondered why the progress of the light had been so deathly slow. Now he knew why, by reason of what he saw—and what he saw made him feel rather sick. The man with the lantern was quite plainly Professor Kell, bent nearly double with the weight of a grotesquely big thing on his back, a thing that flung a dim, contorted shadow on the ceiling. And that thing was a dead man.

A corpse it was—the attitude proved that. With a numb relief O'Hara realized it was not the body of Skip Handlon. This had been a much larger man than Skip, and the clothing was different from anything Handlon had worn.

The light was now disappearing down the stairway. For a moment O'Hara felt undecided as to his next move. Should he follow Kell and his burden, or should he not take advantage of this fine opportunity to continue his search of the upper story? That scream still rang in his ears; there had been a very evident feminine quality in it, and the remembrance of that fact reproached him. Had he been guilty of mincing daintily about in this old house while a woman was being done to death under his nose, when a little bolder action on his part might have saved her?

Stepping once more into the hall he advanced to the door just closed behind the Professor and tried it, only to find it locked. Out of a pocket came several articles best known to the "profession"—a piece of stiff wire, a skeleton key and other paraphernalia calculated to reduce the obstinate mechanism to submission. For a minute, two, three, he worked at the ancient lock; then, without a creak, the door swung open. A touch of oil to the hinges had insured their silence. Jimmie O'Hara believed in being artistic in his work, especially when it came to fine points, and he was.

He found himself in the same room where the drugged cigars had been proved the undoing of Handlon and Perry. In order not to alarm the Professor unduly by chance noises and perhaps invite a surprise attack upon himself, O'Hara closed the laboratory door behind him

and let the lock spring again. Hastily he made search of the place. No trace of the missing reporter could he find, except two half-consumed cigars in a corner whence the Professor had impatiently kicked them.

On the big table in the center of the room, however, was an object which excited his interest. It was apparently nothing more or less than a giant Crookes tube, connected in some way with a complicated mechanism contained in a wooden cabinet under the table. Probably this apparatus was concerned in the Professor's weird experiments which had so aroused the countryside. He studied it curiously, his eyes for the moment closed in thought, until a slight sound somewhere near at hand caused him to open them wide. Was the Kell returning?

Quickly he extinguished the lamp and glided to a nearby door, thinking to secrete himself here, and take Kell by surprise. To his consternation the door swung inward at a touch. He prepared instinctively for battle against any foe who might present himself. For a moment he held himself taut; then, nothing of an alarming nature having happened, he drew a swift breath of relief and flashed on his light. He gave vent to a low exclamation. The swiftly darting shaft from the torch had revealed the figure of a girl, bound and gagged.

The girl lay trembling on a wretched bed in a corner of the dilapidated old chamber. O'Hara crossed the room and bent over her. Still wary of a trap he glanced back in the direction of the laboratory door: all safe there. Jimmie made haste to remove the cruel gag from her mouth.

"Courage," he whispered. "Half a minute and you will be free."

He produced a knife with a suspiciously long blade and cut her bonds. He then assisted her to her feet, where she reeled dizzily. Realizing the need for fast action he made her sit down while he massaged the bruised arms and ankles, which were badly swollen from the tight ropes. The girl had apparently been in the grip of such terrible fright that she had temporarily lost her power of speech. Mentally he chalked up another score against the Professor as the girl made several ineffectual attempts to speak.

"Easy, kid," Jimmie whispered. "Just sit tight, and when you feel able you can tell me all about it. I'm going to get him good for this, you can bank on that."

She thanked him with a faint smile, and of a sudden she found her voice.

“Who are you? Where is father? Oh, tell me, please! I am afraid that horrible man has murdered him. Are you a servant here? Oh, I don’t know whom to trust.”

“My name is Jimmie O’Hara,” replied the reporter briefly; “and I hope you won’t worry about me. I am gunning for the Proff myself. Tell me as quickly as you can what you know about him.” He still kept an eye on the door of the adjoining laboratory. Any moment he expected to hear the sound of the old man’s approach. The room would make an ideal place to ambush the maniac, he had swiftly decided.

“I am Norma Manion. Please don’t delay, but see if you can locate father.” The girl’s voice was agonized. “I heard him groan a half-hour ago, and a little later came a terrific crash. Oh, I’m afraid he’s dead!”

Reluctantly Jimmie gave up the idea of ambushing the Professor.

“Wait here,” he commanded curtly. “If you hear a shot join me as soon as you can. I want to take him alive if I can, but....” With this parting hint he disappeared through the door into the laboratory. Down the carpeted hall he crept to the stairway. Here he stopped and listened, but to his sensitive ears came no sound from below.

“Must have gone down the cellar with the body,” he muttered. “Here goes for a general exploration.”

With more boldness than the occasion perhaps really justified he descended the stairs and proceeded to examine the ground floor rooms minutely. The first was the room through which he had made entrance to the house. It proved to be but a storeroom containing nothing of interest, and he soon decided to waste no more time on it.

The adjoining chamber, however, yielded some surprising finds. He had pushed back a dusty portiere to find himself in what could be nothing less than the Professor’s sleeping chamber. At present the bed was unoccupied, though it showed signs of recent use. The electric torch played swiftly over every possible corner which could constitute a hiding place for an assassin, revealing nothing. Now the ever-searching ray fell upon an old-fashioned dresser, on which was piled a miscellaneous array of articles. Here were combs, brushes, a wig, a huge magnifying glass, and a gold watch. With a barely suppressed exclamation, Jimmie pounced upon the gold timepiece.

Handlon’s! So well did he know the particular design of his watch that he could have recognized it in the dark by sense of touch alone. So the old man was not averse to robbery among his other activities! The former two-story man thought fast. Handlon had probably been

done in, and the body had been disposed of in some weird manner. The only thing that remained to be done, since the unlucky photographer was evidently past human help, was to cut short the Professor's list of murders.

With the intention of missing no essential detail O'Hara swept the ray of the searchlight around the chamber once more, but discovered no more of importance. Deciding that the sleeping chamber could yield no further clue he shut off the tell-tale ray and stepped noiselessly back into the next room. Here he groped his way around until he encountered a door, which stood open. A moment's cautious exploration with an outstretched foot revealed the top step of a descending staircase. No faintest glimmer of light was visible, but muffled sounds proceeding from the depths told him that someone was below.

With infinite care, feeling his way gingerly over the rickety old steps and fearful that an unexpected creak from one of the ancient boards would at any moment prove his undoing, he commenced the descent. Once a board did groan softly, causing him to stop in his tracks and stand with bated breath. He listened for sign of a movement below, while his heart loudly told off a dozen strokes. Stealthily he continued his progress, until finally soft earth under his feet told him he had reached the cellar bottom.

Now his straining eyes perceived a tiny bit of light, and simultaneously he became conscious of a deathly stench. The damp earth padding his footsteps, he advanced swiftly toward the source of light, which now seemed to lie in stripes across his line of vision. He soon saw that the stairs gave upon a small boarded-off section of the cellar proper, and light was seeping between the boards. Ah, and here was a rickety door, fortuitously equipped with a large knot-hole. O'Hara applied an eye to this—and what he saw nearly ruined even his cast iron nerve.

The Professor was working beside a heavy wooden cask, from which issued the horrible stench. From time to time a sodden thud told that he was hacking something to pieces with an ax. Now and then he would strain mightily at a dark and bulky thing which lay on the floor, a thing that required considerable strength to lift. It seemed to be getting lighter after each spasm of frenzied chopping. For a second Kell's shadow wavered away from the thing, and the enervated newspaper man saw it plainly. His senses almost left him as he realized that he was witnessing the dismemberment of a human body.

As he hacked the fragments of tissue from the torso the fiend carefully deposited each in the huge cask. At such times a faint boiling sound was heard, and there arose an effluvium that bade fair

to overcome even the monster engaged in the foul work. At last the limbs and head had been entirely removed. The Professor evidently decided that the trunk should be left whole, and he put his entire strength into the job of getting it into the cask. It was almost more than he could negotiate, but finally a dull splash told that he had succeeded.

At this moment Jimmie O'Hara came out of his trance. The horrible proceeding had left him faint and shaken, and he wished heartily that he could leave the disgusting place as fast as his legs could carry him. But there was still work to be done and he resolved to get it over.

The lantern! First he must put that out of commission. The maniac would then be at his mercy. Slowly, steadily he stole through the doorway, his eyes glued to the Professor's back. Now he was within a yard of the lantern, and he drew back his foot for the kick.

Next moment Jimmie found himself gazing into the glaring eyes of his intended victim. Instinctively he struck out with the clubbed automatic, but the blow must have fallen short, or else the Professor had developed an uncanny agility. Now to his horror he saw the flashing blade of the bloodstained ax raised on high. He had no time to dodge the blow. He pressed the trigger of the Colt from the

position in which he held it.

The bullet grazed the upraised arm. The ax fell toward O'Hara from fingers lacking strength to retain it, and he grasped it by the handle in midair. The next moment the assassin collected his wits and sprang at him. Silently, the breath of both coming in gasps, the two men strove, each clawing desperately at the other's throat. The reporter fought with the knowledge that should he lose he would never again see the light of day, the other with the fear of the justice that would deal with him.

The maniac hugged his arms tightly about Jimmie, pinioning him so tightly that the reporter could not use his gun. At length their convulsive movements brought the men close to the lantern, and the next instant the cellar was plunged in darkness. A second later the Professor tripped over some hidden obstruction and fell, dragging his opponent with him to the earthen floor. To Jimmie's surprise there was no further movement from the body beneath him. Could the old villain be playing possum? He cautiously shifted his hold and grasped the hidden throat. He pressed the Professor's windpipe for a moment, but there was no answering struggle. Slowly the truth dawned upon him. The heavy fall to the floor had rendered the older man insensible.

He must work fast. Reaching into his pocket he brought out the ever handy electric torch and flashed it over the features of his prisoner. Kell was breathing heavily. With dexterous hands O'Hara swiftly went through the old man's pockets, removing all which might tend to make that worthy dangerous—an ugly looking pistol of large caliber, a blackjack similar to his own and a small bottle.

The latter item Jimmie examined curiously, finally uncorking it and inhaling the contents. He inhaled, not wisely but too well. The fumes from the vial were nigh overpowering, and he reeled back nauseated. The cork he hastily replaced. Just what the nature of the powerful stuff was he never attempted to discover. One acquaintance was enough.

He staggered to his feet and got the lantern lighted, then sat, gun in hand, waiting for his prisoner's return to his senses. This was becoming increasingly imminent, judging by certain changes in the Professor's respiration. Finally there came a series of shuddering movements as the man attempted to raise his battered body.

"Get up, you damned butcher," ordered Jimmie, "and march upstairs. And just remember that I've got you covered; don't make any false moves." He prodded the prostrate form of the by now glaring fiend before him. The stench of the place was nearly

overcoming him, and again he felt an overwhelming desire to dash madly from that den of evil, and once more breathe God's fresh air. Under the stimulus of several shoves the Professor finally won to his feet and stumbled up the stairs. Jimmie was taking no chances and kept the automatic sharply digging into the ribs of his prisoner. The fight, however, seemed temporarily to have been all taken out of the old man, and he made no resistance as the reporter drove him on up to the laboratory.

The room he found exactly as he left it. At a word from him Norma Manion came from her hiding place in the horrible room where she had been kept prisoner.

With an hysterical scream she fell limply to the floor. The sight of her father's murderer had proved too much for her. Forgetting his prisoner for the moment Jimmie sprang to the girl's side.

Kell chose this moment to make a dash for freedom. His footsteps, however, were not as noiseless as he had intended, and O'Hara whirled just in time to see his quarry about to throw open the hall door. Jimmie dove for his gun, only to encounter the Professor's mysterious vial, which, though forgotten, still lay in his pocket. With no time to think, he acted purely upon instinct. His arm drew back and the bottle flew straight for the Professor's head.

By a miracle the missile missed its mark. Came a shivering crash, as the bottle struck a stud in the massive door. Of a sudden recalling the terrific potency of the contents of that particular bottle, Jimmie gasped in dismay. Norma Manion's safety drove every other thought from his mind. At any cost he must remove her from the proximity of those lethal fumes.

Hastily and without a backward glance, he gathered the girl into his arms and dashed into the room where he had first found her. Ascertaining that she had but swooned he placed her gently on the bed. In some perplexity as to his next move he stared at the beautiful face now so wan and white. Queer that he hadn't noticed the fact before—she was beautiful. He even took a second look, then noting a continued absence of all sound from the laboratory decided to investigate.

Gingerly he pushed open the door, sniffing the air cautiously as he advanced. To his nostrils gradually came a slight scent, which though almost imperceptible made his senses reel. As he approached the hall door he found the atmosphere heavy with the soporific vapors from the broken vial, and he staggered drunkenly.

He gave a start of surprise. On the floor, lying in a grotesque huddle which suggested a most unpleasant possibility, was the inert body of

Professor Kell.

Jimmie bent over the body and put an experienced ear to the heart. Yes, there as a faint beat—very faint. Even as he listened he perceived a slight increase in the respiration. Now the breath began coming in great, choking gasps, only to die suddenly to next to nothing. At last with a rueful sigh Jimmie reached to his hip and produced the private O'Hara flagon. He stooped over the Professor's form once more and by dint of much prying at clenched jaws managed to force a sizeable charge of fiery liquid down the old man's throat. Jimmie had just begun to entertain a strong hope that this latter effort would bring the Professor to life, when his keen ear detected signs of a commotion below.

He sprang from his position over the slowly reviving Kell and leaped to a vantage point beside the door. A blackjack miraculously appeared from some hidden part of his anatomy and the ever-dependable Colt also became in evidence. Now came the banging of a door, muffled voices, a crash as of a chair overturned in the dark. Up rolled a horrible oath, and the same was rendered in a voice to Jimmie sweetly familiar. Came the sound of footsteps on the stairway and several persons coming along the hall.

"Where in hell is Jimmie?" roared a wicked voice. "If he's met with

any monkey business in this hell-hole I'll see that the damned place burns to the ground before I leave it!"

Delightedly Jimmie jerked open the door.

"Still alive, Chief," he chirped as the Old Man strode into the laboratory. Bland was followed by Perry, who seemed to be in a sort of daze. Bringing up the rear were a pair of plainclothesmen whom Jimmie knew very well—almost too well. One of these gentlemen bore a lantern which reminded Jimmie strongly of some he had seen that night guarding an open ditch in the public highway.

The Professor had fully regained consciousness and was struggling to his feet. As for Norma Manion, she had suddenly appeared, leaning weakly against the door casing, and was surveying the group in great alarm.

After being assured by O'Hara that they were her friends she smiled wanly. To Bland and the others she was, of course, an unexpected factor in the weird night's doings, and for several moments they regarded her curiously.

At length Jimmie, sensing the question in the Old Man's eyes, elected to offer a few words of explanation.

“Miss Manion has just been through a terrible experience,” he said. “She and her father have been for some time at the mercy of this monster”—indicating Kell—“and her nerves are completely shattered. We’d better get her out of this as quickly as we can.”

“Mike!” Hard Boiled Bland glared at one of the officers. “Don’t stand there with your teeth in your gums like that. Take this girl out to my car and let her lie down. She needs a stimulant, too. If you search my car and find any red liquor in the left back door pocket, I don’t know a thing about it. And stay with her so she won’t be afraid to go to sleep.”

She smiled in silent gratitude and allowed the plainclothesman to lead her away from that chamber of horror.

The reporter lost no time in telling Bland of his failure to find Skip Handlon. He went on to acquaint his Chief with the facts of all that had occured while he had been at the Professor’s house.

The fiery old fellow listened grimly. When Jimmie came to the story of the corpse and the cask the editor breathed one word, “Manion!”

Jimmie nodded sadly. All eyes turned to the dejected huddle on the floor that was Professor Kell. Finally Bland could wait no longer,

but fixed a terrible eye on the murderer and demanded harshly, “Where’s Handlon?”

Now the Professor burst into a fit of insane laughter, laughter that curdled the blood of the listeners.

“You ask me that! It’s almost too good. Hee-hee! You sent your two precious reporters out to my house to pry into my secrets, and thought to display my name all over your yellow sheet; but you forgot that you were dealing with Professor Anton Kell, didn’t you?” The last he fairly shrieked. “A lot of people have tried to intrude upon me before, but none ever escaped me!”

“We know that,” cut in Jimmie, for he was getting impatient and the old man’s boastings seemed out of place. “You are slated for the rope anyway, after what I discovered down cellar.” He jerked his eyes in the direction of the door significantly. “Now we propose to find Handlon, and the better it will be for you if you tell us what you have done with him. Otherwise....”

“You can go to hell!” screamed the maniac. “If you are so clever, find out for yourselves. He isn’t so far away that you couldn’t touch him by reaching out your hand. In fact, he’s been with you quite a while. Hee-hee-hee! Well, if you must know—there he is!” With an

insane chuckle he pointed at Horace Perry. And Perry did a strange thing.

“Yes, you fiend, here I am!” Whose voice was that? Was it Perry speaking, or was it Skip Handlon? Most assuredly Perry stood before them, but the voice, in a subtle manner, reminded the group strongly of poor old Skip.

As he spoke Perry had launched himself at the Professor’s throat and had to be restrained by the others. Savagely he fought them but slowly and surely they overcame his struggles and placed him, writhing, in a chair.

Of a sudden Bland leaned forward and scrutinized Perry’s face sharply. Had the reporter gone insane too? The pupils of the eyes had taken on a sort of queer contraction, a fixed quality that was almost ludicrous. He looked like a man under hypnosis. He had gone limp in their grasp, but now suddenly he stiffened. The eyes underwent another startling change, this time glowing undoubtedly with the look of reason. Bland was mystified and waited for Perry to explain his queer conduct. The latter seemed finally to come to. Simultaneously he realized that his peculiar lapse from consciousness had been observed by the others.

“Guess I may as well admit it,” he said with a wry smile. “Ever since I came back from my assignment with Kell I have had a hell of a time. Half the time I have been in a daze and have not had the least idea what I was doing. Funny part of it is that I have seemed to keep right on doing things even while I was out of my head.” He told briefly of the visions he had had in which he had seemed to contend with his brother reporter, the horrid sensations as he felt himself overcome, the black oblivion in which he then found himself, and the mysterious manner in which he had left Keegan on that ill-fated assignment.

“What have you done to Handlon?” Jimmie’s voice cut in. He was standing over the form of the maniac, rigid and menacing. “You have exactly two minutes to go.”

“Find out for yourself!” snarled the bruised and battered fiend.

“I will,” was the answer, and on the instant a horrible shriek rent the air. Jimmie had quickly grasped both of the Professor’s arms at the wrists and was slowly twisting them in a grip of iron. Kell’s face went white, the lips writhed back over toothless gums, the eyes closed in the supreme effort to withstand the excruciating pain. Then—

“Enough, enough!” he screamed.

O’Hara eased the pressure slightly but retained his hold upon the clawlike hands. “Talk fast,” he ordered.

The old man struggled futilely in the grasp of the powerful reporter, finally glancing in the direction of the others. Would they show signs of pity? Surely not Hard Boiled Bland. The Chief was watching the struggles of the victim through a cloud of tobacco smoke which he was slowly exhaling through his nose. The plainclothesman displayed no sign of interest at all. The game was up!

“Very well,” he said sullenly. “Handlon and Perry are both occupying the same body.”

“Wh-a-a-t?” roared Bland. “Jimmie, I guess you’ll have to put the screws to him some more. He’s trying to make fools of us at the last minute!”

“No, no!” screamed the Professor. “What I say is true. I have been working for years on my system of de-astralization. This last year I at length perfected my electric de-astralizer, which amplifies and exerts the fifth influence of de-cohesion.”

The whole party began to look uneasy and gazed apprehensively at the huge Crookes tube which still stood in its supporting frame on the table.

“I have been forced to experiment on animals for the most part,” the Professor continued. “I succeeded in de-astralizing a dog and a bull and caused them to exchange bodies. The bodies continued to function. I was enthusiastic. Other experiments took place of which I will not tell you. Finally I began to long for a human subject on which to try my fifth influence.”

“Just get down to cases, if you don’t mind, Kell.” The Chief wanted action. “Suppose you tell us just what you did to Handlon and where we can find him. I may as well mention that your life depends upon it. If we find that you have done for him, something worse than death may happen to you.” The tone was menacing. Although Handlon was a comparatively late acquisition to the old Chief’s staff, still he had been loyal to the paper.

“When your two damned reporters entered my driveway,” Kell resumed. “I saw them coming through a powerful glass which I always have on hand. I had no desire to see them, but they forced themselves upon me. At last I determined that they should furnish material for my experiments.

“If your men had looked into the grove behind the barn they would have found the automobile which furnished two more subjects I was keeping on hand in a room upstairs. Old Manion and his daughter gave me quite a bit of trouble, but I kept them drugged most of the time. He broke out of the room to-night though, and I had to kill him. It was self defense,” he added slyly.

“Anyway, I found it was possible to make two astrals exchange bodies. But I also wanted to see if it were possible to cause two astrals to occupy the same body at the same time, and if so what the result would be. I found out. It was rare sport to watch your star reporter leave my house. He was damned glad to leave, I believe....” Again came the insane cackle.

“Guess we have to believe him whether we want to or not.” The detective came to life. “How about making him release Handlon’s—what d’ye call it?—astral—from Perry’s body?”

“Just a moment.” The voice now was unmistakably Handlon’s, though it was issuing from the throat of Perry. “In the minute I have in consciousness let me suggest that before you do any more de-astralizing you *locate my body*. Until then, if I am released from this one I am a dead man.”

The words struck the group dumb. Where *was* Handlon's body? Could the Professor produce it?

That worthy looked rather haunted at that moment, and they began to see the fear of death coming upon him.

"Mercy, mercy!" he begged as the four men started to advance upon him. "As soon as I had de-astralized Handlon I destroyed his body in my pickling barrel down cellar. But there is another way...." He paused, uncertain as to how his next words would be received. "Go out and get the Manion girl. She can be de-astralized and friend Handlon can have her body."

At this suggestion, advanced so naïvely, the four men recoiled in horror. It was entirely too much even for Hard Boiled Bland, and he could hardly restrain himself from applying the editorial fist to the leering face before him. Undoubtedly Professor Kell was hopelessly insane, and for that reason he held himself in leash.

"Kell, you are slated to pull off one more stunt," Jimmie addressed the cringing heap. "You know what it is. Get busy. And just remember that I am standing over here"—he indicated a corner well separated from the rest—"with this cannon aimed in your direction. If things aren't just according to Hoyle, you get plugged. Get me?"

“What about it, men?” Bland spoke up. “Is it going to be treating Handlon right to de-astralize him now? It will be his last chance to have a body on this earth.”

“Unfortunately that body never belonged to Handlon,” said O’Hara. “Hence I fail to see why Perry should be discommoded for the balance of his life with a companion astral. Perry is clearly entitled to his own body, free and unhampered. Friend Skip is out of luck, unless—Well, I don’t mind telling you, Kell, that you just gave me an idea. Snap into it now!”

The Professor dragged himself to his feet and under the menace of the automatic fumbled under the table until he had located the intricate apparatus before mentioned.

“Now if Mr. Perry—or Handlon—will kindly recline at full length on this table,” he said with an obscene leer, “the experiment will begin.”

“Just remember, Kell, this is no experiment,” advised Bland, fixing the Professor with an ugly eye. “You do as you’re told.”

The other made no reply, but threw a hidden switch. Perry, lying flat on his back on the ancient table, suddenly found himself being

bathed by what seemed to be a ray of light, and yet was not a ray of light. What was it? It was surely not visible, yet it was tangible. A terrific force was emanating from that devilish globe above him, drawing him out of himself—or—no—was he expanding? Again his ears became filled with confused, horrible sounds, the outlines of the room faded from sight, he felt a strange sense of inflation ... of lightness.... Oblivion!

IMAGEDESCRIPTION

From where the others sat a gasp of wonder went up. At the first contact of the switch there had been a momentary flash of greenish light within the bulb, and then a swift transition to a beautiful orange. It had then faded altogether, leaving the glass apparently inert and inactive.

But it was not so! The form lying beneath the bulb was evidently being racked with untold tortures. The face became a thing of horror. Now it had twisted into a grotesque semblance of Handlon's—now it again resembled Perry's. The Professor quietly increased the pressure of the current. From the bulb emanated a steel gray exhalation of what must be termed light, and yet so real it was seemingly material. Assuredly it was not a ray of light as we understand light. It came in great beating throbs, in which the actual

vibrations were entirely visible. Under each impact the body of Perry seemed to change, slowly at first, then with increasing speed. The body was now swelled to enormous size. Bland reached forward to touch it.

“This de-cohering influence,” the Professor was murmuring, almost raptly, “causes the atoms that go to make a living body repel one another. When the body is sufficiently nebulized, the soul—Back! Back, you fool!” he suddenly shrieked, grasping Bland by the arm. “Do you want to kill him?”

Bland hurriedly retreated, convinced perforce that Kell’s alarm was genuine. The editorial fingers had penetrated the subject’s garments without resistance and sank into the body as easily as if it were so much soft soap!

The body continued to expand until at length even the hard-headed plainclothesman realized that it had been reduced to a mere vapor. Within this horrid vaporized body, which nearly filled the room and which had now lost all semblance to a man, could be discerned two faint shapes. Swiftly the Professor extinguished the lantern. The shapes, vague though they were, could be recognized as those of Horace Perry and Skip Handlon. And they were at strife!

All eyes were now focused on Professor Kell, who was evidently waiting for something to happen. The two apparitions within the body-cloud were at death grips. One had been overcome and was temporarily helpless. It was that of Handlon. And then again the astral of Perry forcibly ousted that of Handlon from the cloud-cyst. And at that instant Professor Kell shut off the influence-tube.

At once a terrific metamorphosis took place. There came a sharp sound almost like a clap of thunder, with the slight exception that this was occasioned by exactly the reverse effect. Instead of being an *ex*plosion it might more properly be termed an *in*plosion, for the mist-cloud suddenly vanished. The de-cohering influence having been removed, the cloud had condensed into the form of Perry. Apparently none the worse, he was even now beginning to recover consciousness. The astral of Handlon was no longer visible, though hovering in the vicinity.

Perry's body was again his own.

At this time Jimmie O'Hara elected to start something new by hitting the Professor a workmanlike blow on the back of the head with the butt of his automatic. The next thing Bland or anyone else present knew the unconscious body of the Professor was on the table and Jimmie was groping for the concealed switch. At length he found it,

and the green flash of light appeared in the bulb, followed by the brilliant orange manifestation.

“What in hell are you doing?” gasped Bland.

“De-astralizing the Professor,” replied O’Hara cheerfully. “Don’t you get the idea yet? Watch!”

Fascinated, the four men saw the terrific emanation take its baleful effect. As before, the body commenced to expand and gradually took on a misty outline. Larger and larger it grew, until finally it had become a vast cloud of intangible nothingness which filled the room like some evil nebula.

A cry of consternation from the detective aroused Jimmie. Skip Handlon’s astral had appeared within the field of the nebula to fight for possession. There ensued what was perhaps the weirdest encounter ever witnessed. Though he was in poor physical shape, the Professor seemed to have an extremely powerful astral; and for some time the spectators despaired of Handlon’s victory. Once the latter, evidently realizing that the powerful influence tube had rendered him visible, glanced sharply in Jimmie’s direction. O’Hara was considerably puzzled at this, but watched the progress of the struggle tensely. At length the moment seemed to arrive which the reporter’s

astral had been awaiting. It turned tail and fled away from the astral of the Professor, disappearing beyond the outer confines of the nebula.

Jimmie suddenly divined the other's purpose and dived for the hidden switch. As he had anticipated, Handlon had finally given up the attempt to overcome the astral of Kell by force and had made up his mind to accomplish his end by strategy. Almost on the instant that Jimmie's hand closed on the switch the reporter's astral again leaped into the field of the nebula. Fiercely it signalled to the former second story man to shut off the current, but the admonition was unnecessary, for Jimmie had already done so.

Swiftly the cloud-cyst faded. Even as the group caught a fleeting sight of Skip Handlon, the last that mortal eyes would ever see of him as he actually was, there came a violent disturbance at the edge of the shrinking nebula. Would the speed of condensation of the atoms which comprised the body of Professor Kell serve to shut out the pursuing astral of Kell?

Even Bland held his breath!

The cloud lost its luminous quality, the action of condensation increasing in speed. It was barely visible in the enshrouding gloom.

An astral had long since been enveloped within the rapidly accumulating substance. Came a sudden clap of sound as before, and the final act of resolution had been accomplished. Whether the Professor had succeeded in regaining a position within the cloud-cyst before the crucial second none could say.

Jimmie relighted the lantern. Apparently the effect of the love tap administered by his automatic was more or less of a lasting character, and the men were put to some ado to restore the body of Kell to consciousness. At length their efforts began to bear fruit, however, and it became expedient to remove the patient to the softer couch in the sitting room below. As they moved forward to lay hold of the limp body a figure appeared in the doorway to the hall. It was the plainclothesman, Riley.

“How about getting under way for town,” he wanted to know. “Is the old party croaked yet? Miss Manion has had a fierce time and says she won’t stay near this house another minute. I don’t like this place myself either. Do you know I just got kicked by a poll parrot? Let’s get away from here.”

“Hold on, Riley, what are you talking about?” growled Bland. “Kicked by a poll parrot! You’re—”

“That’s all right, Chief,” broke in the now thoroughly cheerful Perry. “That jackass I shot could probably have told us all about it. I positively know the beast could talk.”

“Humph!” snorted Bland, “Well, if a donkey can talk, and a bull can bite, and a hound can hook, why shouldn’t a parrot—Judas Priest, I’m getting as crazy as the rest of you! Hurry up and get Kell downstairs so we can see who he is. There I go again! Oh, go lie down, Riley.”

“But look, Bland, look!” Riley was pointing a demoralized finger at a cage in the corner. He tugged frantically at Bland’s coat sleeve. “See what’s in there, won’t you? I—well, I did find some liquor in your car, and Miss Manion made me take some. I—I didn’t know it would do this to me. Look in there; please, Mr. Bland!”

Bland gave Riley a dark look, but nevertheless he reached for O’Hara’s flashlight. In the cage two yellow eyes blinked sleepily out at him. Perry began to laugh.

“Why, there’s nothing in there but a cat. Skip and I heard it purring when we first came in here this afternoon. Guess Riley—”

“Great God, Jimmie, give me your gun!” Hard Boiled Bland for the

moment failed to merit his sobriquet. The torch in his hand threw a trembling beam full into the cage. “It’s a snake! And—there! It’s doing it again!”

A snake it was, indubitably, a huge black specimen with bright yellow stripes. Bland’s frenzied yell seemed not to have excited it at all, for now the sleek fellow had arched its body neatly and was calmly licking its sides with a long forked tongue. After a moment it halted the operation long enough to rub its jaw against a bar of its cage, and gave vent to a sociable mew!

Even this could not dash the spirits of Horace Perry. He laughed delightedly again as he laid Bland by the arm.

“That creature is perfectly harmless, Chief,” he told the editor. “Somewhere I suppose there’s a mighty dangerous kitty cat at large, but there’s no sense in taking it out on this poor reptile. Let’s live and let live.”

With a show of reluctance Bland returned Jimmie’s automatic, then strode over to where lay the form of Kell. Perry and O’Hara lingered by the cage long enough to arrange a plan to let the snake out doors as soon as opportunity offered, after which they joined their Chief. Riley went out to resume his vigil in Bland’s car, while his fellow

sleuth prepared to light the way downstairs. Under his guidance the sick man was carried below without mishap.

Downstairs the now conscious form of the venerable Professor was laid out on the ancient sofa until his senses could clear a bit. Presently the eyelids fluttered open and a feeble voice asked, "Where the deuce am I, and how did all you guys get here?"

A joyous gasp went up. That voice! Although uttered in somewhat the same vocal quality as Kell's the intonation and accents had strangely altered. O'Hara leaned eagerly over the figure on the couch. The question he asked was startling in its incongruity:

"How are you feeling, *Skip*!"

"Rotten," was the reply from the lips of Kell. "What hit me such a crack on the dome? I feel as if I had been dragged through a knot-hole. Lemme up."

"Stay still," commanded O'Hara, kindly but firmly. "You aren't fit to move yet. You are going on a long ride and will need your strength. Don't talk, either."

A half-hour later they left the house. In the front yard the editor

called a hasty conclave which included the entire party. Hard Boiled Bland has never been known to talk so much at a stretch, before or since.

“Before we start back,” he began, “we had better come to an understanding. In the first place—Skip, come over here a minute.”

Norma Manion uttered an involuntary cry of fear as the aged form of Kell passed by her. Skip’s instant response to his name had, of course, been perfectly natural to him. But it had an odd effect on the others.

“Miss Manion, and gentlemen,” Bland went on, with a bow of mock ceremony, “I want you to meet Mister—er, Mister—oh hell, call him Saunders. This is Mr. Kenneth Saunders, ladies and gentlemen. When he gets a shave and has his new face patched up I believe you will like his appearance much more than you do now.

“Seriously though, folks, I hope that with a little fixing up the gentleman will hardly resemble Professor Anton Kell. Kell is dead. Obviously, however, this gentleman can hardly continue his existence as Skip Handlon. Hence—well, hence Mr. Saunders. And don’t forget the name.

“Now another little matter. This house has proven a curse to humanity. What has transpired here need never be known. Would it not be the wiser to eliminate all traces of to-night’s happenings? There is a way.” He looked significantly at the others.

“You mean—” began Perry.

“That we destroy all traces of Professor Kell’s villainy. Although he is no more, still someone might notice that *his body actively remains*. And no one wants to do any explaining.”

“It’s the only way we can protect Handlon,” one of the sleuths ruminated, half to himself. “No judge would ever believe a word about this de-astralization business. The chances are we would all go to the booby hatch and Handlon would go to prison for Kell’s crimes.”

“There were four of us that witnessed the fact of the—the soul transfusion, though,” Perry objected. “Wouldn’t that be enough to clear Skip? Besides, wouldn’t it be possible for us to lead a jury out here and duplicate the experiment?”

“Too much undesirable publicity,” growled Bland, who for once in his life had found reason to keep something good out of the

headlines. “What do you say, people?”

“I move we move,” from the detective who had had the uncomfortable job of attending to Norma Manion.

“Gentleman, I believe we understand each other,” said Jimmie quietly. “Now I am going into the barn”—significantly—“to see if everything’s all right. While I am there something *might* happen. You understand?”

The others nodded silent assent.

In the snug seat of Jimmie’s speedster Norma Manion shivered as she followed the direction indicated by her companion’s finger. It was that darkest hour which comes just before the dawn.

To the westward could be perceived a dull, red glow, which, even as they watched with fascinated eyes, developed into an intense glare. Gradually the fading stars became eclipsed in the greater glory.

Three cars, motors throbbing as if eager to be gone, stood a space apart on the main road. The car behind O’Hara’s was the Manion machine, now occupied by Bland and Riley. The remaining one was a touring car and contained the balance of the party. Perry was at the

wheel, and beside him sat the Handlon-Kell-Saunders combination.

“Thus passes a den of horror,” whispered Jimmie to his companion.

“It is the funeral pyre of my father,” the girl answered simply. She had long since recovered from her initial outburst of grief at her loss, and now watched the progress of the conflagration dry-eyed. At length Jimmie slipped an arm protectingly about the trembling shoulders.

“You have seen enough,” he said. As the three cars raced from the scene of the holocaust, faint streamers in the east told of the rising orb of day.

“Good-by, Keegan, forever,” murmured Norma.

“Amen,” O’Hara devoutedly agreed.

#18 From the Ocean’s Depths, and the sequel, Into the Ocean's Depths, by Sewell Peaslee Wright:

Man came from the sea. Mercer, by his thought-telegraph, learns from the weirdly beautiful ocean-maiden of a branch that returned there.

From the Ocean’s Depths proximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

Into the Ocean's Depths, aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

From somewhere out on the black, heaving Atlantic, the rapid, muffled popping of a speed-boat’s exhaust drifted clearly through the night.

I dropped my book and stretched, leaning back more comfortably in my chair. There was real romance and adventure! Rum-runners, seeking out their hidden port with their cargo of contraband from Cuba. Heading fearlessly through the darkness, fighting the high seas, still running after the storm of a day or so before, daring a thousand dangers for the sake of the straw-packed bottles they carried. Sea-bronzed men, with hard, flat muscles and fearless eyes; ready guns slapping their thighs as they—

Absorbed in my mental picture of these modern free-booters, the sudden alarm of the telephone startled me like an unexpected shot fired beside my ear. Brushing the cigarette ashes from my smoking-jacket, I crossed the room and snatched up the receiver.

“Hello!” I snapped ungraciously into the mouthpiece. It was after eleven by the ship’s clock on the mantel, and if—

“Taylor?” The voice—Warren Mercer’s familiar voice—rattled on without waiting for a reply. “Get in your car and come down here as fast as possible. Come just as you are, and—”

“What’s the matter?” I managed to interrupt him. “Burglars?” I had never heard Mercer speak in that high-pitched, excited voice before; his usual speech was slow and thoughtful, almost didactic.

“Please, Taylor, don’t waste time questioning me. If it weren’t urgent, I wouldn’t be calling you, you know. Will you come?”

“You bet!” I said quickly, feeling rather a fool for ragging him when he was in such deadly earnest. “Have—”

The receiver snapped and crackled; Mercer had hung up the instant he had my assurance that I would come. Usually the very soul of courtesy and consideration, that act alone would have convinced me that there was an urgent need for my presence at The Monstrosity. That was Mercer’s own name for the impressive pile that was at once his residence and his laboratory.

I threw off the smoking-jacket and pulled on a woolen golfing sweater, for the wind was brisk and sharpish. In two minutes I was backing the car out of the garage; a moment later I was off the gravelled drive and tearing down the concrete with the accelerator all the way down, and the black wind shrieking around the windshield of my little roadster.

My own shack was out of the city limits—a little place I keep to live in when the urge to go fishing seizes me, which is generally about twice a year. Mercer picked the place up for me at a song.

The Monstrosity was some four miles further out from town, and off the highway perhaps a half-mile more.

I made the four miles in just a shade over that many minutes, and clamped on the brakes as I saw the entrance to the little drive that led toward the sea, and Mercer's estate.

With gravel rattling on my fenders, I turned off the concrete and swept between the two massive, stuccoed pillars that guarded the drive. Both of them bore corroded bronze plates, "The Billows," the name given The Monstrosity by the original owner, a newly-rich munitions manufacturer.

The structure itself loomed up before me in a few seconds, a rambling affair with square-shouldered balconies and a great deal of wrought-iron work, after the most flamboyant Spanish pattern. It was ablaze with light. Apparently every bulb in the place was burning.

Just a few yards beyond the surf boomed hollowly on the smooth, shady shore, littered now, I knew, by the pitiful spoils of the storm.

As I clamped on my brakes, a swift shadow passed two of the lower windows. Before I could leap from the car, the broad front door, with

its rounded top and circular, grilled window, was flung wide, and Mercer came running to meet me.

He was wearing a bathrobe, hastily flung on over a damp bathing suit, his bare legs terminating in a pair of disreputable slippers.

“Fine, Taylor!” he greeted me. “I suppose you’re wondering what it’s all about. I don’t blame you. But come in, come in! Just wait till you see her!”

“Her?” I asked, startled. “You’re not in love, by any chance, and bringing me down here like this merely to back up your own opinion of them eyes and them lips, Mercer?”

He laughed excitedly.

“You’ll see, you’ll see! No, I’m not in love. And I want you to help, and not admire. There are only Carson and myself here, you know, and the job’s too big for the two of us.” He hurried me across the broad concrete porch and into the house. “Throw the cap anywhere and come on!”

Too much amazed to comment further, I followed my friend. This was a Warren Mercer I did not know. Usually his clean-cut, olive-

tinted face was a polite mask that seldom showed even the slightest trace of emotion. His eyes, dark and large, smiled easily, and shone with interest, but his almost beautiful mouth, beneath the long slim mustache, always closely cropped, seldom smiled with his eyes.

But it was his present excited speech that amazed me most. Mercer, during all the years I had known him, had never been moved before to such tempestuous outbursts of enthusiasm. It was his habit to speak slowly and thoughtfully, in his low, musical voice; even in the midst of our hottest arguments, and we had had many of them, his voice had never lost its calm, unhurried gentleness.

To my surprise, instead of leading the way to the really comfortable, although rather gaudy living room, Mercer turned to the left, towards what had been the billiard room, and was now his laboratory.

The laboratory, brilliantly illuminated, was littered, as usual, with apparatus of every description. Along one wall were the retorts, scales, racks, hoods and elaborate set-ups, like the articulated glass and rubber bones of some weird prehistoric monster, that demonstrated Mercer's taste for this branch of science. On the other side of the room a corresponding workbench was littered with a tangle of coils, transformers, meters, tools and instruments, and at the end of the room, behind high black control panels, with gleaming

bus-bars and staring, gaping meters, a pair of generators hummed softly. The other end of the room was nearly all glass, and opened onto the patio and the swimming pool.

Mercer paused a moment, with his hand on the knob of the door, a strange light in his dark eyes.

“Now you’ll see why I called you here,” he said tensely. “You can judge for yourself whether the trip was worth while. Here she is!”

With a gesture he flung open the door, and I stared, following his glance, down at the great tiled swimming pool.

It is difficult for me to describe the scene. The patio was not large, but it was beautifully done. Flowers and shrubs, even a few small palms, grew in profusion in the enclosure, while above, through the movable glass roof—made in sections to disappear in fine weather—was the empty blackness of the sky.

None of the lights provided for the illumination of the covered patio was turned on, but all the windows surrounding the patio were aglow, and I could see the pool quite clearly.

The pool—and its occupant.

We were standing at one side of the pool, near the center. Directly opposite us, seated on the bottom of the pool, was a human figure, nude save for a great mass of tawny hair that fell about her like a silken mantle. The strangely graceful figure of a girl, one leg stretched out straight before her, the other drawn up and clasped by the interlocked fingers of her hands. Even in the soft light I could see her perfectly, through the clear water, her pale body outlined sharply against the jade green tiles.

I tore myself away from the staring, curious eyes of the figure.

“In God’s name, Mercer, what is it? Porcelain?” I asked hoarsely. The thing had an indescribably eery effect.

He laughed wildly.

“Porcelain? Watch ... *look*!”

My eyes followed his pointing finger. The figure was moving. Gracefully it arose to its full height. The great cloud of corn-colored hair floated down about it, falling below the knees. Slowly, with a grace of movement comparable only with the slow soaring of a gull, she came toward me, walking on the bottom of the pool through the clear water as though she floated in air.

Fascinated, I watched her. Her eyes, startlingly large and dark in the strangely white face, were fixed on mine. There was nothing sinister in the gaze, yet I felt my body shaking as though in the grip of a terrible fear. I tried to look away, and found myself unable to move. I felt Mercer's tense, sudden grip upon my arm, but I did not, could not, look at him.

"She—she's smiling!" I heard him exclaim. He laughed, an excited, high-pitched laugh that irritated me in some subtle way.

She was smiling, and looking up into my eyes. She was very close now, within a few feet of us. She came still closer, until she was at my very feet as I stood on the raised ledge that ran around the edge of the pool, her head thrown back, staring straight up at me through the water.

I could see her teeth, very white between her coral-pink lips, and her bosom rising and falling beneath the veil of pale gold hair. She was breathing *water*!

Mercer literally jerked me away from the edge of the pool.

"What do you think of her, Taylor?" he asked, his dark eyes dancing with excitement.

“Tell me about it,” I said, shaking my head dazedly. “She is not human?”

“I don’t know. I think so. As human as you or I. I’ll tell you all I know, and then you can judge for yourself. I think we’ll know in a few minutes, if my plans work out. But first slip on a bathing suit.”

I didn’t argue the matter. I let Mercer lead me away without a word. And while I was changing, he told me all he knew of the strange creature in the pool.

“Late this afternoon I decided to go for a little walk along the beach,” Mercer began. “I had been working like the devil since early in the morning, running some tests on what you call my thought-telegraph. I felt the need of some fresh sea air.

“I walked along briskly for perhaps five minutes, keeping just out of reach of the rollers and the spray. The shore was littered with all sorts of flotsam and jetsam washed up by the big storm, and I was just thinking that I would have to have a man with a truck come and clean up the shore in front of the place, when, in a little sandy pool, I saw—*her*.

“She was laying face down in the water, motionless, her head

towards the sea, one arm stretched out before her, and her long hair wrapped around her like a half-transparent cloak.

“I ran up and lifted her from the water. Her body was cold, and deathly white, although her lips were faintly pink, and her heart was beating, faintly but steadily.

“Like most people in an emergency. I forgot all I ever knew about first aid. All I could think of was to give her a drink, and of course I didn’t have a flask on my person. So I picked her up in my arms and brought her to the house as quickly as I could. She seemed to be reviving, for she was struggling and gasping when I got here with her.

“I placed her on the bed in the guest room and poured her a stiff drink of Scotch—half a tumblerful, I believe. Lifting up her head, I placed the glass to her lips. She looked up me, blinking, and took the liquor in a single draught. She did not seem to drink it, but sucked it out of the glass in a single amazing gulp—that’s the only word for it. The next instant she was off the bed, her face a perfect mask of hate and agony.

“She came at me, hands clutching and clawing, making odd murmuring or mewing sounds in her throat. It was then that I noticed

for the first time that her hands were webbed!”

“Webbed?” I asked, startled.

“Webbed,” nodded Mercer solemnly. “As are her feet. But listen, Taylor. I was amazed, and not a little rattled when she came for me. I ran through the French windows out into the patio. For a moment she ran after me, rather awkwardly and heavily, but swiftly, nevertheless. Then she saw the pool.

“Apparently forgetting that I existed, she leaped into the water, and as I approached a moment later I could see her breathing deeply and gratefully, a smile of relief upon her features, as she lay upon the bottom of the pool. Breathing, Taylor, on the bottom of the pool! Under eight feet of water!”

“And then what, Mercer?” I reminded him, as he paused, apparently lost in thought.

“I tried to find out more about her. I put on my bathing suit and dived into the pool. Well, she came at me like a shark, quick as a flash, her teeth showing, her hands tearing like claws through the water. I turned, but not quickly enough to entirely escape. See?” Mercer threw back the dressing robe, and I saw a ragged tear in his

bathing suit on his left side, near the waist. Through the rent three deep, jagged scratches were clearly visible.

“She managed to claw me, just once,” Mercer resumed, wrapping the robe about him again. “Then I got out and called on Carson for help. I put him into a bathing suit, and we both endeavored to corner her. Carson got two bad scratches, and one rather serious bite that I have bandaged. I have a number of lacerations, but I didn’t fare so badly as Carson because I am faster in the water than he is.

“The harder we tried, the more determined I became. She would sit there, calm and placid, until one of us entered the water. Then she became a veritable fury. It was maddening.

“At last I thought of you. I phoned, and here we are!”

“But, Mercer, it’s a nightmare!” I protested. We moved out of the room. “Nothing human can live under water and breathe water, as she does!”

Mercer paused a moment, staring at me oddly.

“The human race,” he said gravely, “came up out of sea. The human race as we know it. Some may have gone back.” He turned and

walked away again, and I hurried after him.

“What do you mean. Mercer? ‘Some may have gone back?’ I don’t get it.”

Mercer shook his head, but made no other reply until we stood again on the edge of the pool.

The girl was standing where we had left her, and as she looked up into my face, she smiled again, and made a quick gesture with one hand. It seemed to me that she invited me to join her.

“I believe she likes you, Taylor,” said Mercer thoughtfully. “You’re light, light skin, light hair. Carson and I are both very dark, almost swarthy. And in that white bathing suit—yes, I believe she’s taken a fancy to you!”

Mercer’s eyes were dancing.

“If she has,” he went on, “it’ll make our work very easy.”

“What work?” I asked suspiciously. Mercer, always an indefatigable experimenter, was never above using his friends in the benefit of science. And some of his experiments in the past had been rather trying, not to say exciting.

“I think I have what you call my thought-telegraph perfected, experimentally,” he explained rapidly. “I fell asleep working on it at three o’clock, or thereabouts, this morning, and some tests with Carson seem to indicate that it is a success. I should have called you to-morrow, for further test. Nearly five years of damned hard work to a successful conclusion, Taylor, and then this mermaid comes along and makes my experiment appear about as important as one of those breakers rolling in out there!”

“And what do you plan to do now?” I asked eagerly, glancing down at the beautiful pale face that glimmered up at me through the clear water of the pool.

“Why, try it on her!” exclaimed Mercer with mounting enthusiasm. “Don’t you see, Taylor? If it will work on her, and we can direct her thoughts, we can find out her history, the history of her people! We’ll add a page to scientific history—a whole big chapter!—that will make us famous. Man this is so big it’s swept me off my feet! Look!” And he held out a thin, aristocratic brown hand before my eyes, a hand that shook with nervous excitement.

“I don’t blame you,” I said quickly. “I’m no savant, and still I see what an amazing thing this is. Let’s get busy. What can I do?”

Mercer reached around the door into the laboratory and pressed a button.

“For Carson,” he explained. “We’ll need his help. In the meantime, we’ll look over the set-up. The apparatus is strewn all over the place.”

He had not exaggerated. The set-up consisted of a whole bank of tubes, each one in its own shielding copper box. On a much-drilled horizontal panel, propped up on insulators, were half a score of delicate meters of one kind and another, with thin black fingers that pulsed and trembled. Behind the panel was a tall cylinder wound with shining copper wire, and beside it another panel, upright, fairly bristling with knobs, contact points, potentiometers, rheostats and switches. On the end of the table nearest the door was still another panel, the smallest of the lot, bearing only a series of jacks along one side, and in the center a switch with four contact points. A heavy, snaky cable led from this panel to the maze of apparatus further on.

“This is the control panel,” explained Mercer. “The whole affair, you understand, is in laboratory form. Nothing assembled. Put the different antennae plug into these jacks. Like this.”

He picked up a weird, hastily built contrivance composed of two

semi-circular pieces of spring brass, crossed at right angles. On all four ends were bright silvery electrodes, three of them circular in shape, one of them elongated and slightly curved. With a quick, nervous gesture, Mercer fitted the thing to his head, so that the elongated electrode pressed against the back of his neck, extending a few inches down his spine. The other three circular electrodes rested on his forehead and either side of his head. From the center of the contrivance ran a heavy insulated cord, some ten feet in length, ending in a simple switchboard plug, which Mercer fitted into the uppermost of the three jacks.

"Now," he directed, "you put on this one"—he adjusted a second contrivance upon my head, smiling as I shrank from the contact of the cold metal on my skin—"and think!"

He moved the switch from the position marked "Off" to the second contact point, watching me intently, his dark eyes gleaming.

Carson entered, and Mercer gestured to him to wait. Very nice old chap, Carson, impressive even in his bathing suit. Mercer was mighty lucky to have a man like Carson....

Something seemed to tick suddenly, somewhere deep in my consciousness.

“Yes, that’s very true: Carson is a most decent sort of chap.” The words were not spoken. I did not *hear* them, I *knew* them. What—I glanced at Mercer, and he laughed aloud with pleasure and excitement.

“It worked!” he cried. “I received your thought regarding Carson, and then turned the switch so that you received my thought. And you did!”

Rather gingerly I removed the thing from my head and laid it on the table.

“It’s wizardry, Mercer! If it will work as well on *her*....”

“It will, I know it will!—if we can get her to wear one of these,” replied Mercer confidently. “I have only three of them; I had planned some three-cornered experiments with you, Carson, and myself. We’ll leave Carson out of to-night’s experiment, however, for we’ll need him to operate this switch. You see, as it is now wired only one person transmits thoughts at a time. The other two receive. When the switch is on the first contact, Number One sends, and Numbers Two and Three receive. When the switch is on Number Two, then he sends thoughts, and Numbers One and Three receive them. And so on. I’ll lengthen these leads so that we can run them out into the

pool, and then we'll be ready. Somehow we must induce her to wear one of these things, even if we have to use force. I'm sure the three of us can handle her."

"We should be able to," I smiled. She was such a slim, graceful, almost delicate little thing; the thought that three strong men might not be able to control her seemed almost amusing.

"You haven't seen her in action yet," said Mercer grimly, glancing up from his work of lengthening the cords that led from the antennae to the control panel. "And what's more, I hope you don't."

I watched him in silence as he spliced and securely taped the last connection.

"All set," he nodded. "Carson, will you operate the switch for us? I believe everything is functioning properly." He surveyed the panel of instruments hastily, assuring himself that every reading was correct. Then, with all three of the devices he called antennae in his hand, their leads plugged into the control panel, he led the way to the side of the pool.

The girl was strolling around the edge of the pool, feeling the smooth tile sides with her hands as we came into view, but as soon

as she saw us she shot through the water to where we were standing.

It was the first time I had seen her move in this fashion. She seemed to propel herself with a sudden mighty thrust of her feet against the bottom; she darted through the water with the speed of an arrow, yet stopped as gently as though she had merely floated there.

As she looked up, her eyes unmistakably sought mine, and her smile seemed warm and inviting. She made again that strange little gesture of invitation.

With an effort I glanced at Mercer. There was something devilishly fascinating about the girl's great, dark, searching eyes.

"I'm going in," I said hoarsely. "Hand me one of your head-set things when I reach for it." Before he could protest, I dived into the pool.

I headed directly towards the heavy bronze ladder that led to the bottom of the pool. I had two reasons in mind. I would need something to keep me under water, with my lungs full of air, and I could get out quickly if it were necessary. I had not forgotten the livid, jagged furrows in Mercer's side.

Quickly as I shot to the ladder she was there before me, a dim, wavering white shape, waiting.

I paused, holding to a rung of the ladder with one hand. She came closer, walking with the airy grace I had noted before, and my heart pounded against my ribs as she raised one long, slim arm towards me.

The hand dropped gently on my shoulder, pressed it as though in token of friendship. Perhaps, I thought quickly, this was, with her, a sign of greeting. I lifted my own arm and returned the salutation, if salutation it were, aware of a strange rising and falling sound, as of a distant humming, in my ears.

The sound ceased suddenly, on a rising note, as though of inquiry, and it dawned on me that I had heard the speech of this strange creature. Before I could think of a course of action, my aching lungs reminded me of the need of air, and I released my hold on the ladder and let my body rise to the surface.

As my head broke the water, a hand, cold and strong as steel, closed around my ankle. I looked down. The girl was watching me, and there was no smile on her face now.

“All right!” I shouted across the pool to Mercer, who was watching anxiously. Then, filling my lungs with air again, I pulled myself, by means of the ladder, to the bottom of the pool. The restraining hand was removed instantly.

The strange creature thrust her face close to mine as my feet touched bottom, and for the first time I saw her features distinctly.

She was beautiful, but in a weird, unearthly sort of way. As I had already noticed, her eyes were of unusual size, and I saw now that they were an intense shade of blue, with a pupil of extraordinary proportion. Her nose was well shaped, but the nostrils were slightly flattened, and the orifices were rather more elongated than I had ever seen before. The mouth was utterly fascinating, and her teeth, revealed by her engaging smile, were as perfect as it would be possible to imagine.

The great mane of hair which enveloped her was, as I have said, tawny in hue, and almost translucent, like the stems of some seaweeds I have seen. And as she raised one slim white hand to brush back some wisps that floated by her face, I saw distinctly the webs between her fingers. They were barely noticeable, for they were as transparent as the fins of a fish, but they were there, extending nearly to the last joint of each finger.

As her face came close to my own, I became aware of the humming, crooning sound I had heard before, louder this time. I could see, from the movement of her throat, that I had been correct in assuming that she was attempting to speak with me. I smiled back at her and shook my head. She seemed to understand, for the sound ceased, and she studied me with a little thoughtful frown, as though trying to figure out some other method of communication.

I pointed upward, for I was feeling the need for fresh air again, and slowly mounted the ladder. This time she did not grasp me, but watched me intently, as though understanding what I did, and the reasons for it.

“Bring one of your gadgets over here, Mercer,” I called across the pool. “I think I’m making progress.”

“Good boy!” he cried, and came running with two of the antennae, the long insulated cords trailing behind him. Through the water the girl watched him, evident dislike in her eyes. She glanced at me with sudden suspicion as Mercer handed me the two instruments, but made no hostile move.

“You won’t be able to stay in the water with her,” explained Mercer rapidly. “The salt water would short the antennae, you see. Try to get

her to wear one, and then you get your head out of water, and don yours. And remember, she won't be able to communicate with us by words—we'll have to get her to convey her thoughts by means of mental pictures. I'll try to impress that on her. Understand?"

I nodded, and picked up one of the instruments. "Fire when ready, Gridley," I commented, and sank again to the bottom of the pool.

I touched the girl's head with one finger, and then pointed to my own head, trying to convey to her that she could get her thoughts to me. Then I held up the antennae and placed it on my own head to show that it could not harm her.

My next move was to offer her the instrument, moving slowly, and smiling reassuringly—no mean feat under water.

She hesitated a moment, and then, her eyes fixed on mine, she slowly fixed the instrument over her own head as she had seen me adjust it upon my own.

I smiled and nodded, and pressed her shoulder in token of friendly greeting. Then, gesturing toward my own head again, and pointing upward. I climbed the ladder.

“All right, Mercer,” I shouted. “Start at once, before she grows restless!”

“I’ve already started!” he called back, and I hurriedly donned my own instrument.

Bearing in mind what Mercer had said, I descended the ladder but a few rungs, so that my head remained out of water, and smiled down at the girl, touching the instrument on my head, and then pointing to hers.

I could sense Mercer’s thoughts now. He was picturing himself walking long the shore, with the stormy ocean in the background. Ahead of him I saw the white body lying face downward in the pool. I saw him run up to the pool and lift the slim, pale figure in his arms.

Let me make it clear, at this point, that when I say that I saw these things, I mean only that mental images of them penetrated my consciousness. I visualized them just as I could close my eyes and visualize, for example, the fireplace in the living room of my own home.

I looked down at the girl. She was frowning, and her eyes were very wide. Her head was a little on one side, in the attitude of one who

listens intently.

Slowly and carefully Mercer thought out the whole story of his experiences with the girl until she had plunged into the pool. Then I saw again the beach, with the girl's figure in the pool. The picture grew hazy; I realized Mercer was trying to picture the bottom of the sea. Then he pictured again the girl lying in the pool, and once again the sea. I was aware of the soft little tick in the center of my brain that announced that the switch had been moved to another contact point.

I glanced down at her. She was staring up at me with her great, curious eyes, and I sensed, through the medium of the instrument I wore, that she was thinking of me. I saw my own features, idealized, glowing with a strange beauty that was certainly none of my own. I realized that I saw myself, in short, as she saw me. I smiled back at her, and shook my head.

A strange, dim whirl of pictures swept through my consciousness. I was on the bottom of the ocean. Shadowy shapes swept by silently, and from above, a dim bluish light filtered down on a scene such as mortal eyes have never seen.

All around were strange structures of jagged coral, roughly circular

as to base, and rounded on top, resembling very much the igloos of the Eskimos. The structures varied greatly in size, and seemed to be arranged in some sort of regular order, like houses along a narrow street. Around many of them grew clusters of strange and colorful seaweeds that waved their banners gently, as though some imperceptible current dallied with them in passing.

Here and there figures moved, slim white figures that strolled along the narrow street, or at times shot overhead like veritable torpedoes.

There were both men and women moving there. The men were broader of shoulder, and their hair, which they wore to their knees, was somewhat darker in color than that of the women. Both sexes were slim, and there was a remarkable uniformity of size and appearance.

None of the strange beings wore garments of any kind, nor were they necessary. The clinging tresses were cinctured at the waist with a sort of cord of twisted orange-colored material, and some of the younger women wore bands of the same material around their brows.

Nearest of all the figures was the girl who was visualizing all this for us. She was walking slowly away from the cluster of coral

structures. Once or twice she paused, and seemed to hold conversation with others of the strange people, but each time she moved on.

The coral structures grew smaller and poorer. Finally the girl trod alone on the floor of the ocean, between great growths of kelp and seaweeds, with dim, looming masses of faintly tinted coral everywhere. Once she passed close to a tilted, ragged hulk of some ancient vessel, its naked ribs packed with drifted sand.

Sauntering dreamily, she moved away from the ancient derelict. Suddenly a dim shadow swept across the sand at her feet, and she arrowed from the spot like a white, slim meteor. But behind her darted a black and swifter shadow—a shark!

Like a flash she turned and faced the monster. Something she had drawn from her girdle shone palely in her hand. It was a knife of whetted stone or bone.

Darting swiftly downward her feet spurned the yellow sand, and she shot at her enemy with amazing speed. The long blade swept in an arc, ripped the pale belly of the monster just as he turned to dart away.

A great cloud of blood dyed the water. The white figure of the girl shot onward through the scarlet flood.

Blinded, she did not see that the jutting ribs of the ancient ship were in her path. I seemed to see her crash, head on, into one of the massive timbers, and I cried out involuntarily, and glanced down at the girl in the water at my feet.

Her eyes were glowing. She knew that I had understood.

Hazily, then, I seemed to visualize her body floating limply in the water. It was all very vague and indistinct, and I understood that this was not what she had seen, but what she thought had happened. The impressions grew wilder, swirled, grew gray and indistinct. Then I had a view of Mercer's face, so terribly distorted it was barely recognizable. Then a kaleidoscopic maze of inchoate scenes, shot through with flashes of vivid, agonizing colors. The girl was thinking of her suffering, taken out of her native element. In trying to save her, Mercer had almost killed her. That, no doubt, was why she hated him.

My own face appeared next, almost godlike in its kindliness and its imagined beauty, and I noticed now that she was thinking of me with my yellow hair grown long, my nostrils elongated like her own—

adjusted to her own ideas of what a man should be.

I flung the instrument from my head and dropped to the bottom of the pool. I gripped both her shoulders, gently, to express my thanks and friendship.

My heart was pounding. There was a strange fascination about this girl from the depths of the sea, a subtle appeal that was answered from some deep subterranean cavern of my being. I forgot, for the moment, who and what I was. I remembered only that a note had been sounded that awoke an echo of a long-forgotten instinct.

I think I kissed her. I know her arms were about me, and that I pressed her close, so that our faces almost met. Her great, weirdly blue eyes seemed to bore into my brain. I could feel them throbbing there....

I forgot time and space. I saw only that pale, smiling face and those great dark eyes. Then, strangling, I tore myself from her embrace and shot to the surface.

Coughing, I cleared my lungs of the water I had inhaled. I was weak and shaking when I finished, but my head was clear. The grip of the strange fantasy that had gripped me was shaken off.

Mercer was bending over me; speaking softly.

“I was watching, old man,” he said gently. “I can imagine what happened. A momentary, psychic fusing of an ancient, long since broken link. You, together with all mankind, came up out of the sea. But there is no retracing the way.”

I nodded, my head bowed on my streaming chest.

“Sorry, Mercer,” I muttered. “Something got into me. Those big eyes of hers seemed to tug at threads of memory ... buried.... I can’t describe it....”

He slapped me on my naked shoulder, a blow that stung, as he had intended it to. It helped jerk me back to the normal.

“You’ve got your feet on the ground again, Taylor,” he commented soothingly. “I think there’s no danger of you losing your grip on terra firma again. Shall we carry on?”

“There’s more you’d like to learn? That you think she can give us?” I asked hesitantly.

“I believe,” replied Mercer, “that she can give us the history of her people, if we can only make her understand what we wish. God! If

we only could!" The name of the Deity was a prayer as Mercer uttered it.

"We can try, old-timer," I said, a bit shakenly.

Mercer hurried back to the other side of the pool, and I adjusted my head-set again, smiling down at the girl. If only Mercer could make her understand, and if only she knew what we wanted to learn!

I was conscious of the little click that told me the switch had been moved. Mercer was ready to get his message to her.

Fixing my eyes on the girl pleadingly, I settled myself by the edge of the pool to await the second and more momentous part of our experiment.

The vision was vague, for Mercer was picturing his thoughts with difficulty. But I seemed to see again the floor of the ocean, with the vague light filtering down from above, and soft, monstrous growths waving their branches lazily in the flood.

From the left came a band of men and women, looking around as though in search of some particular spot. They stopped, and one of the older men pointed, the others gathering around him as though in

council.

Then the band set to work. Coral growth were dragged to the spot. The foundation for one of the semi-circular houses was laid. The scene swirled and cleared again. The house was completed. Several other houses were in process of building.

Slowly and deliberately, the scene moved. The houses were left behind. Before my consciousness now was only a vague and shadowy expanse of ocean floor, and in the sand dim imprints that marked where the strange people had trod, the vague footprints disappearing in the gloom in the direction from which the little weary band had come. To me, at least, it was quite clear that Mercer was asking whence they came. Would it be as clear to the girl? The switch clicked, and for a moment I was sure Mercer had not been able to make his question clear to her.

The scene was the interior of one of the coral houses. There were persons there, seated on stone or coral chairs, padded with marine growths. One of the occupants of the room was a very old man; his face was wrinkled, and his hair was silvery. With him were a man and a woman, and a little girl. Somehow I seemed to recognize the child as the girl in the pool.

The three of them were watching the old man. While his lips did not move, I could see his throat muscles twitching as the girl's had done when she made the murmuring sound I had guessed was her form of speech.

The scene faded. For perhaps thirty seconds I was aware of nothing more than a dim gray mist that seemed to swirl in stately circles. Then, gradually, it cleared somewhat. I sensed the fact that what I saw now was what the old man was telling, and that the majestic, swirling mist was the turning back of time.

Here was no ocean bottom, but land, rich tropical jungle. Strange exotic trees and dense growths of rank undergrowth choked the earth. The trees were oddly like undersea growths, which puzzled me for an instant. Then I recalled that the girl could interpret the old man's words only in terms of that which she had seen and understood. This was the way she visualized the scene.

There was a gray haze of mist everywhere. The leaves were glistening with condensed moisture; swift drops fell incessantly to the soaking ground below.

Into the scene roamed a pitiful band of people. Men with massive frames, sunken in with starvation, women tottering with weakness.

The men carried great clubs, some tipped with rudely shaped stone heads, and both men and women clothed only in short kittles of skin.

They searched ceaselessly for something, and I guessed that something was food. Now and then one or the other of the little band tore up a root and bit at it, and those that did so soon doubled into a twitching knot of suffering and dropped behind.

At last they came to the edge of the sea. A few yards away the water was lost in the dense steaming miasma that hemmed them in on all sides. With glad expressions on their faces, the party ran down to the edge of the water and gathered up great masses of clams and crabs. At first they ate the food raw, tearing the flesh from the shells. Then they made what I understood was a fire, although the girl was able to visualize it only as a bright red spot that flickered.

The scene faded, and there was only the slowly swirling mist that I understood indicated the passing of centuries. Then the scene cleared again.

I saw that same shore line, but the people had vanished. There was only the thick, steamy mist, the tropic jungle crowding down to the shore, and the waves rolling in monotonously from the waste of gray ocean beyond the curtain of fog.

Suddenly, from out of the sea, appeared a series of human heads, and then a band of men and women that waded ashore and seated themselves upon the beach, gazing restlessly out across the sea.

This was not the same band I had seen at first. These were a slimmer race, and whereas the first band had been exceedingly swarthy, these were very fair.

They did not stay long on shore, for they were restless and ill at ease. It seemed to me they came there only from force of habit, as though they obeyed some inner urge they did not understand. In a few seconds they rose and ran into the water, plunged into it as though they welcomed its embrace, and disappeared. Then again the vision was swallowed up by the swirling mists of time.

When the scene cleared again, it showed the bottom of the sea. A group of perhaps a hundred pale creatures moved along the dim floor of the ocean. Ahead I could see the dim outlines of one of their strange cities. The band approached, seemed to talk with those there, and moved on.

I saw them capture and kill fish for food, saw them carve the thick, spongy hearts from certain giant growths and eat them. I saw a pair of killer sharks swoop down on the band, and the quick, deadly

accuracy with which both men and woman met the attack. One man, older than the rest, was injured before the sharks were vanquished, and when their efforts to staunch his wounds proved unavailing, they left him there and moved on. And as they left I saw a dim, crawling shape move closer, throw out a long, whiplike tentacle, and wrap the body in a hungry embrace.

They came to and passed other communities of beings like themselves, and a city of their own, in much the way that Mercer had visualized it.

Fading, the scene changed to the interior of the coral house again. The old man finished his story, and moved off into a cubicle in the rear of the place. Dimly, I could see there a low couch, piled high with soft marine growths. Then the scene shifted once more.

A man and a woman hurried up and down the narrow streets of the strange city the girl had pictured when she showed us how she had met with the shark, and struck her head, so that for a long period she lost consciousness and was washed ashore.

Others, after a time, joined them in their search, which spread out to the floor of the ocean, away from the dwellings. One party came to the gaunt skeleton of the ancient wreck, and found the scattered,

fresh-picked bones of the shark the girl had killed. The man and the woman came up, and I looked closely into their faces. The woman's features were torn with grief; the man's lips were set tight with suffering. Here, it was easy to guess, were the mother and the father of the girl.

A milling mass of white forms shot through the water in every direction, searching. It seemed that they were about to give up the search when suddenly, from out of the watery gloom, there shot a slim white figure—the girl!

Straight to the mother and father she came, gripping the shoulder of each with frantic joy. They returned the caress, the crowd gathered around them, listening to her story as they moved slowly, happily, towards the distant city.

Instead of a picture, I was conscious then of a sound, like a single pleading word repeated softly, as though someone said "Please! Please! Please!" over and over again. The sound was not at all like the English word. It was a soft, musical beat, like the distant stroke of a mellow gong, but it had all the pleading quality of the word it seemed to bring to mind.

I looked down into the pool. The girl had mounted the ladder until

her face was just below the surface of the water. Her eyes met mine and I knew that I had not misunderstood.

I threw off the instrument on my head, and dropped down beside her. With both hands I grasped her shoulders, and, smiling, I nodded my head vigorously.

She understood, I know she did. I read it in her face. When I climbed the ladder again, she looked after me, smiling confidently.

Although I had not spoken to her, she had read and accepted the promise.

Mercer stared at me silently, grimly, as I told him what I wished. Whatever eloquence I may have, I used on him, and I saw his cold, scientific mind waver before the warmth of my appeal.

“We have no right to keep her from her people,” I concluded. “You saw her mother and father, saw their suffering, and the joy her return would bring. You will, Mercer—you will return her to the sea?”

For a long time, Mercer did not reply. Then he lifted his dark eyes to mine, and smiled, rather wearily.

“It is the only thing we can do, Taylor,” he said quietly. “She is not a

scientific specimen; she is, in her way, as human as you or I. She would probably die, away from her own kind, living under conditions foreign to her. And you promised her, Taylor, whether you spoke your promise or not." His smile deepened a bit. "We cannot let her receive too bad an opinion of her cousins who live above the surface of the sea!"

And so, just as the dawn was breaking, we took her to the shore. I carried her, unresisting, trustful, in my arms, while Mercer bore a huge basin of water, in which her head was submerged, so that she might not suffer.

Still in our bathing suits we waded out into the ocean, until the waves splashed against our faces. Then I lowered her into the sea. Crouching there, so that the water was just above the tawny glory of her hair, she gazed up at us. Two slim white hands reached towards us, and with one accord, Mercer and I bent towards her. She gripped both our shoulders with a gentle pressure, smiling at us.

Then she did a strange thing. She pointed, under the water, out towards the depths and with a broad, sweeping motion of her arm, indicated the shore, as though to say that she intended to return. With a last swift, smiling glance up into my face, she turned. There was a flash of white through the water. She was gone....

Silently, through the silence and beauty of the dawn, we made our way back to the house.

As we passed through the laboratory, Mercer glanced out at the empty pool.

“Man came up from the sea,” he said slowly, “and some men went back to it. They were forced back to the teeming source from whence they came, for lack of food. You saw that, Taylor—saw her forebears become amphibians, like the now extinct Dipneusta and Ganoideii, or the still existing Neoceratodus, Polypterus and Amia. Then their lungs became, in effect, gills, and they lost their power of breathing atmospheric air, and could use only air dissolved in water.

“A whole people there beneath the waves that land-man never dreamed of—except, perhaps, the sailors of olden days, with their tales of mermaids, which we are accustomed to laugh at in our wisdom!”

“But why were no bodies ever washed ashore?” I asked. “I would think—”

“You saw why,” interrupted Mercer grimly. “The ocean teems with hungry life. Death is the signal for a feast. It was little more than a

miracle that her body came ashore, a miracle due perhaps to the storm which sent the hungry monsters to the greater depths. And even had a body come ashore it would have been buried as that of some unknown, unfortunate human. The differences between these people and ourselves would not be noticeable to a casual observer.

“No, Taylor, we have been party to what was close to a miracle. And we are the only witnesses to it, you and Carson and myself. And”—he sighed deeply—“it is over.”

I did not reply. I was thinking of the girl’s odd gesture, at parting, and I wondered if it were indeed a finished chapter.

Into the Ocean's Depths

I read the telegram for the second time. Then I folded it up, put it in my pocket, and pressed the little button on my desk. My mind was made up.

To save Imee's race of Men-Who-Returned-To-The-Sea, two Land-Men answer the challenge of the dreaded Rorn, corsairs of the under-seas.

"Miss Fentress, I'm leaving this afternoon on an extended trip. The Florida address will reach me after Thursday. Tell Wade and Bennett to carry on. I think you have everything in hand? Is everything clear to you?"

"Yes, Mr. Taylor." Miss Fentress was not in the least surprised. She was used to my sudden trips. The outfit got along perfectly without me; sometimes I think my frequent absences are good for the business. The boys work like the devil to make a fine showing while I'm away. And Miss Fentress is a perfect gem of a secretary. I had nothing to worry about there.

"Fine! Will you get my diggings on the phone?" I hurriedly put my few papers in place, and signed a couple of letters. Then Josef was

on the wire.

"Josef? Pack my bags right away, will you? For Florida. The usual things.... Yes, right away. I'll be leaving by noon.... Yes, driving through."

That was that. There were a few more letters to sign, a few hasty instructions to be given regarding one or two matters that were hanging fire. Then, on my way to my bachelor apartments, I read the telegram through again:

> Think it worth while if you feel adventurous and have nothing pressing to come to The Monstrosity. Make your will first. Shall look for you any day as I know you are always looking for excitement and never have anything important to do so don't bother to wire. Perhaps we shall see her again -Mercer.

I smiled at Mercer's frank opinion of my disposition and my importance to my business. But I frowned over the admonition to make my will, and the last telling statement in the wire: "Perhaps we shall see her again." I knew whom he meant by "her."

Josef had my bags waiting for me. A few hurried instructions, most of them shouted over my shoulder, and I was purring down the main

drag, my duffel in the rumble, and the roadster headed due south.

"Perhaps we shall see her again." Those words from the telegram kept coming before my eyes. Mercer knew what he was about, if he wanted my company, when he put that line in his wire.

I have already told the story of our first meeting with the strange being from the ocean's depths that, wounded and senseless, had been flung up on the beach near Warren Mercer's Florida estate. In all the history of civilization, no stranger bit of flotsam had ever been cast up by a storm.

Neither of us would ever forget that slim white creature, swathed in her veil of long, light golden hair, as she crouched on the bottom of Mercer's swimming pool, and pictured for us, by means of Mercer's thought-telegraph (my own name for the device; he has a long and scientific title for it with as many joints as a centipede), the story of her people.

They had lived in a country of steaming mist, when the world was very young. They had been forced into the sea to obtain food, and after many generations they had gone back to the sea as man once emerged from it. They had grown webs on their hands and feet, and they breathed oxygen dissolved in water, as fishes do, instead of

taking it from the atmosphere. And under the mighty Atlantic, somewhere, were their villages.

The girl had pictured all these things for us, and then—nearly a year ago, now—she had pleaded with us to let her return to her people. And so we had put her back into the sea, and she had bade us farewell. But just before she disappeared, she had done a strange thing.

She had pointed, under the water, out towards the depth, and then, with a broad, sweeping motion of her arm, she had indicated the shore, as though to promise, it seemed to me, that she intended to return.

And now, Mercer said, we might see her again! How? Mercer, conservative and scientific, was not the man to make rash promises. But how...?

The best way to solve the riddle was to reach Mercer, and I broke the speed laws of five states three days running.

I did not even stop at my own little shack. It was only four miles from there to the huge, rather neglected estate, built in boom times by some newly-rich promoter, and dubbed by Mercer "The

Monstrosity."

Hardly bothering to slow down, I turned off the concrete onto the long, weed-grown gravel drive, and shot between the two massive, stuccoed pillars that guarded the drive. Their corroded bronze plates, bearing the original title of the estate, "The Billows," were a promise that my long, hard drive was nearly at an end.

As soon as the huge, rambling structure was fairly in sight, I pressed the flat of my hand on the horn button. By the time I came to a locked-wheel halt, with the gravel rattling on my fenders, Mercer was there to greet me.

"It's ten o'clock," he grinned as he shook hands. "I'd set noon as the hour of your arrival. You certainly must have made time, Taylor!"

"I did!" I nodded rather grimly, recalling one or two narrow squeaks. "But who wouldn't, with a wire like this?" I produced the crumpled telegram rather dramatically. "You've got a lot to explain."

"I know it." Mercer was quite serious now. "Come on in and we'll mix highballs with the story."

Locked arm in arm, we entered the house together, and settled

ourselves in the huge living room.

Mercer, I could see at a glance, was thinner and browner than when we had parted, but otherwise, he was the same lithe, soft-mannered little scientist I had known for years; dark-eyed, with an almost beautiful mouth, outlined by a slim, closely cropped and very black moustache.

"Well, here's to our lady from the sea," proposed Mercer, when Carson, his man, had brought the drinks and departed. I nodded, and we both sipped our highballs.

"Briefly," said my friend, "this is the story. You and I know that somewhere beneath the Atlantic there are a people who went back to whence they came. We have seen one of those people. I propose that, since they cannot come to us, we go to them. I have made preparations to go to them, and I wanted you to have the opportunity of going with me, if you wish."

"But how, Mercer? And what—"

He interrupted with a quick, nervous gesture.

"I'll show you, presently. I believe it can be done. It will be a

dangerous adventure, though; I was not joking when I advised you to make your will. An uncertain venture, too. But, I believe, most wonderfully worth while." His eyes were shining now with all the enthusiasm of the scientist, the dreamer.

"It sounds mighty appealing," I said. "But how...."

"Finish your drink and I'll show you."

I downed what was left of my highball in two mighty gulps.

"Lead me to it, Mercer!"

He smiled his quiet smile and led the way to what had been the billiard room of "The Billows," but which was the laboratory of "The Monstrosity." The first thing my eyes fell upon were two gleaming metal objects suspended from chains let into the ceiling.

"Diving suits," explained Mercer. "Rather different from anything you've ever seen."

They were different. The body was a perfect globe, as was the head-piece. The legs were cylindrical, jointed at knee and thigh with huge discs. The feet were solid metal, curved rocker-like on the bottom, and at the ends of the arms were three hooked talons, the concave

sides of two talons facing the concave side of the third. The arms were hinged at the elbow just as the legs were hinged, but there was a huge ball-and-socket joint at the shoulder.

“But Mercer!" I protested. "No human being could even stand up with that weight of metal on and around him!"

"You're mistaken, Taylor," smiled Mercer. "That is not solid metal, you see. And it is an aluminum alloy that is not nearly as heavy as it looks. There are two walls, slightly over an inch apart, braced by innumerable trusses. The fabric is nearly as strong as that much solid metal, and infinitely lighter. They work all right, Taylor. I know, because I've tried them."

"And this hump on the back?" I asked, walking around the odd, dangling figures, hanging like bloated metal skeletons from their chains. I had thought the bodies were perfect globes; I could see now that at the rear there was a humplike excrescence across the shoulders.

"Air," explained Mercer. "There are two other tanks inside the globular body. That shape was adopted, by the way, because a globe can withstand more pressure than any other shape. And we may have to go where pressures are high."

"And so," I said, "we don these things and stroll out into the Atlantic looking for the girl and her friends?"

"Hardly. They're not quite the apparel for so long a stroll. You haven't seen all the marvels yet. Come along!"

He led the way through the patio, beside the pool in which our strange visitor from the depths had lived during her brief stay with us, and out into the open again. As we neared the sea, I became aware, for the first time, of a faint, muffled hammering sound, and I glanced at Mercer inquiringly.

"Just a second," he smiled. "Then—there she is, Taylor!"

I stood still and stared. In a little cove, cradled in a cunning, spidery structure of wood, a submarine rested upon the ways.

"Good Lord!" I exclaimed. "You're going into this right, Mercer!"

"Yes. Because I think it's immensely worth while. But come along and let me show you the *Santa Maria*—named after the flagship of Columbus' little fleet. Come on!"

Two men with army automatics strapped significantly to their belts nodded courteously as we came up. They were the only men in sight,

but from the hammering going on inside there must have been quite a sizeable crew busy in the interior. A couple of raw pine shacks, some little distance away, provided quarters for, I judged, twenty or thirty men.

"Had her shipped down in pieces," explained Mercer. "The boat that brought it lay to off shore and we lightered the parts ashore. A tremendous job. But she'll be ready for the water in a week; ten days at the latest."

"You're a wonder," I said, and I meant it.

Mercer patted the red-leaded side of the submarine affectionately. "Later," he said, "I'll take you inside, but they're busy as the devil in there, and the sound of the hammers fairly makes your head ring. You'll see it all later, anyway—if you feel you'd like to share the adventure with me?"

"Listen," I grinned as we turned back towards the house, "it'll take more than those two lads with the pop-guns to keep me out of the *Santa Maria* when she sails—or dives, or whatever it is she's supposed to do!"

Mercer laughed softly, and we walked the rest of the way in silence.

I imagine we were both pretty busy with our thoughts; I know that I was. And several times, as we walked along, I looked back over my shoulder towards the ungainly red monster straddling on her spindling wooden legs—and towards the smiling Atlantic, glistening serenely in the sun.

Mercer was so busy with a thousand and one details that I found myself very much in the way if I followed him around, so I decided to loaf.

For weeks after we had put our strange girl visitor back into the sea from whence Mercer had taken her, I had watched from a comfortable seat well above the high-water mark that commanded that section of shore. For I had felt sure by that last strange gesture of hers that she meant to return.

I located my old seat, and I found that it had been used a great deal since I had left it. There were whole winnows of cigarette butts, some of them quite fresh, all around. Mercer, cold-blooded scientist as he was, had hoped against hope that she would return too.

It was a very comfortable seat, in the shade of a little cluster of palms, and for the next several days I spent most of my time there, reading and smoking—and watching. No matter how interesting the

book, I found myself, every few seconds, lifting my eyes to search the beach and the sea.

I am not sure, but I think it was the eighth day after my arrival that I looked up and saw, for the first time, something besides the smiling beach and the ceaseless procession of incoming rollers. For an instant I doubted what I saw; then, with a cry that stuck in my throat, I dropped my book unheeded to the sand and raced towards the shore.

She was there! White and slim, her pale gold hair clinging to her body and gleaming like polished metal in the sun, she stood for a moment, while the spray frothed at her thighs. Behind her, crouching below the surface, I could distinguish two other forms. She had returned, and not alone!

One long, slim arm shot out toward me, held level with the shoulder: the well-remembered gesture of greeting. Then she too crouched below the surface that she might breathe.

As I ran out onto the wet sand, the waves splashing around my ankles all unheeded, she rose again, and now I could see her lovely smile, and her dark, glowing eyes. I was babbling—I do not know what. Before I could reach her, she smiled and sank again below the

surface.

I waded on out, laughing excitedly, and as I came close to her, she bobbed up again out of the spray, and we greeted each other in the manner of her people, hands outstretched, each gripping the shoulder of the other.

She made a quick motion then, with both hands, as though she placed a cap upon the shining glory of her head, and I understood in an instant what she wished: the antenna of Mercer's thought-telegraph, by the aid of which she had told us the story of herself and her people.

I nodded and smiled, and pointed to the spot where she stood, trying to show her by my expression that I understood, and by my gesture, that she was to wait here for me. She smiled and nodded in return, and crouched again below the surface of the heaving sea.

As I turned toward the beach, I caught a momentary glimpse of the two who had come with her. They were a man and a woman, watching me with wide, half-curious, half-frightened eyes. I recognized them instantly from the picture she had impressed upon my mind nearly a year ago. She had brought with her on her journey her mother and her father.

Stumbling, my legs shaking with excitement, I ran through the water. With my wet trousers flapping against my ankles, I sprinted towards the house.

I found Mercer in the laboratory. He looked up as I came rushing in, wet from the shoulders down, and I saw his eyes grow suddenly wide.

I opened my mouth to speak, but I was breathless. And Mercer took the words from my mouth before I could utter them.

"She's come back!" he cried. "She's come back! Taylor—she has?" He gripped me, his fingers like steel clamps, shaking me with his amazing strength.

"Yes." I found my breath and my voice at the same instant. "She's there, just where we put her into the sea, and there are two others with her—her mother and her father. Come on, Mercer, and bring your thought gadget!"

"I can't!" he groaned. "I've built an improvement on it into the diving armor, and a central instrument on the sub, but the old apparatus is strewn all over the table, here, just as it was when we used it the other time. We'll have to bring her here."

"Get a basin, then!" I said. "We'll carry her back to the pool just as we took her from it. Hurry!"

And we did just that. Mercer snatched up a huge glass basin used in his chemistry experiments, and we raced down to the shore. As well as we could we explained our wishes, and she smiled her quick smile of understanding. Crouching beneath the water, she turned to her companions, and I could see her throat move as she spoke to them. They seemed to protest, dubious and frightened, but in the end she seemed to reassure them, and we picked her up, swathed in her hair as in a silken gown, and carried her, her head immersed in the basin of water, that she might breathe in comfort, to the pool.

It all took but a few minutes, but it seemed hours. Mercer's hands were shaking as he handed me the antenna for the girl and another for myself, and his teeth were chattering as he spoke.

"Hurry, Taylor!" he said. "I've set the switch so that she can do the sending, while we receive. Quickly, man!"

I leaped into the pool and adjusted the antenna on her head, making sure that the four electrodes of the crossed curved members pressed against the front and back and both sides of her head. Then, hastily, I climbed out of the pool, seated myself on its edge, and put on my

own antenna.

Perhaps I should say at this time that Mercer's device for conveying thought could do no more than convey what was in the mind of the person sending. Mercer and I could convey actual words and sentences, because we understood each other's language, and by thinking in words, we conveyed our thoughts in words. One received the impression, almost, of having heard actual speech.

We could not communicate with the girl in this fashion, however, for we did not understand her speech. She had to convey her thoughts to us by means of mental pictures which told her story. And this is the story of her pictures unfolded.

First, in sketchy, half-formed pictures, I saw her return to the village, of her people; her welcome there, with curious crowds around her, questioning her. Their incredulous expressions as she told them of her experience were ludicrous. Her meeting with her father and mother brought a little catch to my throat, and I looked across the pool at Mercer. I knew that he, too, was glad that we bad put her back into the sea when she wished to go.

These pictures faded hastily, and for a moment there was only the circular swirling as of gray mist; that was the symbol she adopted to

denote the passing of time. Then, slowly, the picture cleared.

It was the same village I had seen before, with its ragged, warped, narrow streets, and its row of dome-shaped houses, for all the world like Eskimo igloos, but made of coral and various forms of vegetation. At the outskirts of the village I could see the gently moving, shadowy forms of weird submarine growths, and the quick darting shapes of innumerable fishes.

Some few people were moving along the streets, walking with oddly springy steps. Others, a larger number, darted here and there above the roofs, some hovering in the water as gulls hover in the air, lazily, but the majority apparently on business or work to be executed with dispatch.

Suddenly, into the midst of this peaceful scene, three figures came darting. They were not like the people of the village, for they were smaller, and instead of being gracefully slim they were short and powerful in build. They were not white like the people of the girl's village, but swarthy, and they were dressed in a sort of tight-fitting shirt of gleaming leather—shark-skin, I learned later. They carried, tucked through a sort of belt made of twisted vegetation, two long, slim knives of pointed stone or bone.

But it was not until they seemed to come close to me that I saw the great point of difference. Their faces were scarcely human. The nose had become rudimentary, leaving a large, blank expanse in the middle of their faces that gave them a peculiarly hideous expression. Their eyes were almost perfectly round, and very fierce, and their mouths huge and fishlike. Beneath their sharp, jutting jaws, between the angle of the jaws and a spot beneath the ears, were huge, longitudinal slits, that intermittently showed blood-red, like fresh gashes cut in the sides of their throats. I could see even the hard, bony cover that protected these slits, and I realized that these were gills! Here were representatives of a people that had gone back to the sea ages before the people of the girl's village.

Their coming caused a sort of panic in the village, and the three noseless creatures strode down the principal street grinning hugely, glancing from right to left, and showing their sharp pointed teeth. They looked more like sharks than like human beings.

A committee of five gray old men met the visitors, and conducted them into one of the larger houses. Insolently, the leader of the three shark-faced creatures made demands, and the scene changed swiftly to make clear the nature of those demands.

The village was to give a number of its finest young men and women

to the shark-faced people; about fifty of each sex, I gathered, to be servants, slaves, to the noseless ones.

The scene shifted quickly to the interior of the house. The old men were shaking their heads, protesting, explaining. There was fear on their faces, but there was determination, too.

One of the three envoys snarled and came closer to the five old men, lifting a knife threateningly. I thought for an instant that he was about to strike down one of the villagers; then the picture dissolved into another, and I saw that he was but threatening them with what he could cause to happen.

The fate of the village and the villagers, were the demands of the three refused, was a terrible one. Hordes of the noseless creatures came swarming. They tore the houses apart, and with their long, slim white weapons they killed the old men and women, and the children. The villagers fought desperately, but they were outnumbered. The shark-skin kirtles of the invaders turned their knives like armor, and the sea grew red with swirling blood that spread like scarlet smoke through the water. Then, this too faded, and I saw the old men cowering, pleading with the three terrible envoys.

The leader of the three shark-faced creatures spoke again. He would

give them time—a short revolving swirl of gray that indicated only a brief time, apparently—and return for an answer. Grinning evilly, the three turned away, left the dome-shaped house, and darted away over the roofs of the village into the dim darkness of the distant waters.

I saw the girl, then, talking to the elders. They smiled sadly, and shook their heads hopelessly. She argued with them earnestly, painting a picture for them: Mercer and myself, as she viewed us, tall and very strong and with great wisdom in our faces. We too walked along the streets of the village. The hordes of shark-faced ones came, like a swarm of monstrous sharks, and—the picture was very vague and nebulous, now—we put them to rout.

She wished us to help her, she had convinced the elders that we could. She, her mother and father, started out from the village. Three times they had fought with sharks, and each time they had killed them. They had found the shore, the very spot where we had put her back into the sea. Then there was a momentary flash of the picture she had called up, of Mercer and I putting the shark-faced hordes to rout, and then, startlingly, I was conscious of that high, pleading sound—the sound that I had heard once before, when she had begged us to return her to her people.

The sound that I knew was her word for "*Please!*"

There was a little click. Mercer had turned the switch. He would transmit now; she and I would listen.

In the center of the village—how vaguely and clumsily he pictured it!—rested the *Santa Maria*. From a trap in the bottom two bulging, gleaming figures emerged. Rushing up, a glimpse through the face-plates revealed Mercer and myself. The shark-faced hordes descended, and Mercer waved something, something like a huge bottle, towards them. None of the villagers were in sight.

The noseless ones swooped down on us fearlessly, knives drawn, pointed teeth revealed in fiendish grins. But they did not reach us. By dozens, by scores, they went limp and floated slowly to the floor of the ocean. Their bodies covered the streets, they sprawled across the roofs of the houses. And in a few seconds there was not one alive of all the hundreds who had come!

I looked down at the girl. She was smiling up at me through the clear water, and once again I felt the strange, strong tug at my heart-strings. Her great dark eyes glowed with a perfect confidence, a supreme faith.

We had made her a promise.

I wondered if it would be possible to keep it.

In the day following, the *Santa Maria* was launched. Two days later, trial trips and final adjustments completed, we submerged for the great adventure.

It sounds very simple when recorded thus in a few brief lines. It was not, however, such a simple matter. Those three days were full of hectic activity. Mercer and I did not sleep more than four hours any of those three nights.

We were too busy to talk. Mercer worked frantically in his laboratory, slaving feverishly beside the big hood. I overlooked the tests of the submarine and the loading of the necessary supplies.

The girl we had taken back to her parents, giving her to understand that she was to wait. They went away, but every few hours returned, as though to urge us to greater haste. And at last we were ready, and the girl and her two companions seated themselves on the tiny deck of the *Santa Maria*, just forward of the conning tower, holding themselves in place by the chains. We had already instructed the girl in her duties: we would move slowly, and she should guide us, by pointing either to the right or the left.

I will confess I gave a last long, lingering look at the shore before the hatch of the conning tower was clamped down. I was not exactly afraid, but I wondered if I would ever step foot on solid land again.

Standing in the conning tower beside Mercer, I watched the sea rise at an angle to meet us, and I dodged instinctively as the first green wave pelted against the thick porthole through which I was looking. An instant later the water closed over the top of the conning tower, and at a gentle angle we nosed towards the bottom of the sea.

An account of the trip itself, perhaps, does not belong in this record. It was not a pleasant adventure in itself, for the *Santa Maria*, like every undersea craft, I suppose, was close, smelly, and cramped. We proceeded very slowly, for only by so doing could our guide keep her bearings, and how she found the way was a mystery to all of us. We could see but very little, despite the clearness of the water.

It was by no means a sight-seeing trip. For various reasons, Mercer had cut our crew to the minimum. We had two navigating officers, experienced submarine men both, and five sailors, also experienced in undersea work. With such a short crew, Mercer and I were both kept busy.

Bonnett, the captain, was a tall, dark chap, stooped from years in the

low, cramped quarters of submarines. Duke, our second-officer, was a youngster hardly out of his 'teens, and as clever as they come. And although both of them, and the crew as well, must have been agog with questions, neither by word nor look did they express their feelings. Mercer had paid for obedience without curiosity, and he got it.

We spent the first night on the bottom, for the simple reason that had we come to the surface, we might have come down into territory unfamiliar to our guide. As soon as the first faint light began to filter down, however, we proceeded, and Mercer and I crowded together into the conning tower.

"We're close," said Mercer. "See how excited they are, all three of them."

The three strange creatures were holding onto the chains and staring over the bulging side of the ship. Every few seconds the girl turned and looked back at us, smiling, her eyes shining with excitement. Suddenly she pointed straight down, and held out her arm in unmistakable gesture. We were to stop.

Mercer conveyed the order instantly to Bonnett at the controls, and all three of our guides dived gracefully off the ship and disappeared

into the depths below.

"Let her settle to the bottom, Bonnett," ordered Mercer. "Slowly ... slowly...."

Bonnett handled the ship neatly, keeping her nicely trimmed. We came to rest on the bottom in four or five seconds, and as Mercer and I stared out eagerly through the round glass ports of the conning tower, we could see, very dimly, a cluster of dark, rounded projections cropping out from the bed of the ocean. We were only a few yards from the edge of the girl's village.

The scene was exactly as we had pictured it, save that it was not nearly as clear and well lighted. I realized that our eyes were not accustomed to the gloom, as were those of the girl and her people, but I could distinguish the vague outlines of the houses, and the slowly swaying shapes of monstrous growths.

"Well, Taylor," said Mercer, his voice shaking with excitement, "here we are! And here"—peering out through the glass-covered port again—"are her people!"

The whole village was swarming around us. White bodies hovered around us as moths around a light. Faces pressed against the ports

and stared in at us with great, amazed eyes.

Then, suddenly the crowd of curious creatures parted, and the girl came darting up with the five ancients she had showed us before. They were evidently the council responsible for the government of the village, or something of the sort, for the other villagers bowed their heads respectfully as they passed.

The girl came close to the port through which I was looking, and gestured earnestly. Her face was tense and anxious, and from time to time she glanced over her shoulder, as though she feared the coming of an enemy.

"Our time's short, I take it, if we are to be of service," said Mercer. "Come on, Taylor; into the diving suits!"

I signaled the girl that we understood, and would hurry. Then I followed Mercer into our tiny stateroom.

"Remember what I've told you," he said, as we slipped into the heavy woolen undergarments we were to wear inside the suits. "You understand how to handle your air, I believe, and you'll have no difficulty getting around in the suit if you'll just remember to go slowly. Your job is to get the whole village to get away when the

enemy is sighted. Get them to come this way from the village, towards the ship, understand. The current comes from this direction; the way the vegetation bends shows that. And keep the girl's people away until I signal you to let them return. And remember to take your electric lantern. Don't burn it more than is necessary; the batteries are not large and the bulb draws a lot of current. Ready?"

I was, but I was shaking a little as the men helped me into the mighty armor that was to keep the pressure of several atmospheres from crushing my body. The helmet was the last piece to be donned; when it was screwed in place I stood there like a mummy, almost completely rigid.

Quickly we were put into the air lock, together with a large iron box containing a number of things Mercer needed. Darkness and water rushed in on us. The water closed over my head. I became aware of the soft, continuous popping sounds of the air-bubbles escaping from the relief valve of the head-piece.

For a moment I was dizzy and more than a little nauseated. I could feel the cold sweat pricking my forehead. Then there was a sudden glow of light from before me, and I started walking towards it. I found I could walk now; not easily, but, after I caught the trick of it, without much difficulty. I could move my arms, too, and the

interlocking hooks that served me for fingers. When my real fingers closed upon a little cross-bar at the end of the armored arms, and pulled the bars towards me, the steel claws outside came together, like a thumb and two fingers.

In a moment we stood upon the bottom of the ocean. I turned my head inside the helmet, and there, beside me, was the sleek, smooth side of the *Santa Maria*. On my other side was Mercer, a huge, dim figure in his diving armor. He made an awkward gesture towards his head, and I suddenly remembered something.

Before me, where I could operate it with a thrusting movement of my chin, was a toggle switch. I snapped it over, and heard Mercer's voice: "—n't forget everything I tell him."

"I know it," I said mentally to him. "I was rather rattled. O.K. now, however. Anything I can do?"

"Yes. Help me with this box, and then get the girl to put on the antenna you'll find there. Don't forget the knife and the light."

"Right!" I bent over the box with him, and we both came near falling. We opened the lid, however, and I hooked the knife and the light into their proper places outside my armor. Then, with the

antenna for the girl, so that we could establish connections with her, and through her, with the villagers, I moved off.

This antenna was entirely different from the one used in previous experiments. The four cross-members that clasped the head were finer, and at their junction was a flat black circular box, from which rose a black rod some six inches in height, and topped by a black sphere half the size of my fist.

These perfected thought-telegraphs (I shall continue to use my own designation for them, as clearer and more understandable than Mercer's) did not need connecting wires; they conveyed their impulses by Hertzian waves to a master receiver on the *Santa Maria*, which amplified them and re-broadcast them so that each of us could both send and receive at any time.

As I turned, I found the girl beside me, waiting anxiously. Behind her were the five ancients. I slipped the antenna over her head, and instantly she began telling me that danger was imminent.

To facilitate matters, I shall describe her messages as though she spoke; indeed, her pictures were as clear, almost, as speech in my native tongue. And at times she did use certain sound-words; it was in this way that I learned, by inference, that her name was *Imee*, that

her people were called *Teemorn* (this may have been the name of the community, or perhaps it was interchangeable—I am not sure) and that the shark-faced people were the *Rorn*.

"The Rorn come!" she said quickly. "Two days past, the three came again, and our old men refused to give up the slaves. Today they will return, these Rorn, and my people, the Teemorn will all be made dead!"

Then I told her what Mercer had said: that she and every one of her people must flee swiftly and hide, beyond the boat, a distance beyond the village. Mercer and I would wait here, and when the Rorn came, it was they who would be made dead, as we had promised. Although how, I admitted to myself, being careful to hide the thought that she might not sense it, I didn't know. We had been too busy since the girl's arrival to go into details.

She turned and spoke quickly to the old men. They looked at me doubtfully, and she urged them vehemently. They turned back towards the village, and in a moment the Teemorn were stalking by obediently, losing their slim white forms in the gloom behind the dim bulk of the *Santa Maria*, resting so quietly on the sand.

They were hardly out of sight when suddenly Mercer spoke through

the antenna fitted inside my helmet.

"They're coming!" he cried. "Look above and to your right! The Rorn, as Imee calls them, have arrived!"

I looked up and beheld a hundred—no, a thousand!—shadowy forms darting down on the village, upon us. They, too, were just as the girl had pictured them: short, swart beings with but the suggestion of a nose, and with pulsing gill-covers under the angles of their jaws. Each one gripped a long, slim white knife in either hand, and their tight-fitting shark-skin armor gleamed darkly as they swooped down upon us.

Eagerly I watched my friend. In the clasping talons of his left hand he held a long, slim flask that glinted even in that dim, confusing twilight. Two others, mates to the first, dangled at his waist. Lifting it high above his head, he swung his metal-clad right arm, and shattered the flask he held in his taloned left hand.

For an instant nothing happened, save that flittering bits of broken glass shimmered their way to the sand. Then the horde of noseless ones seemed to dissolve, as hundreds of limp and sprawling bodies sank to the sand. Perhaps a half of that great multitude seemed struck dead.

"Hydrocyanic acid, Taylor!" cried Mercer exultantly. "Even diluted by the sea water, it kills almost instantly. Go back and make sure that none of the girl's people come back before the current has washed this away, or they'll go in the same fashion. Warn her to keep them back!"

I hurried toward the *Santa Maria*, thinking urgent warnings for Imee's benefit. "Stay back! Stay back, Imee! The Rorn are falling to the sand, we have made many of them dead, but the danger for you and your people is still here. Stay back!"

"Truly, do the Rorn become dead? I would like to see that with my own eyes. Be careful that they do not make you dead also, and your friend, for they have large brains, these Rorn."

"Do not come to see with your own eyes, or you will be as the Rorn!" I hurried around the submarine, to keep her back by force, if that were necessary. "You must—"

"Help, Taylor!" cut in a voice—Mercer's. "These devils have got me!"

"Right with you!" I turned and hurried back as swiftly as I could, stumbling over the bodies of dead Rorn that had settled everywhere

on the clean yellow sand.

I found Mercer in the grip of six of the shark-faced creatures. They were trying desperately to stab him, but their knives bent and broke against the metal of his armor. So busy were they with him that they did not notice me coming up, but finding their weapons useless, they suddenly snatched him up, one at either arm and either leg, and two grasping him by the head-piece, and darted away with him, carrying his bulging metal body between them like a battering ram, while he kicked and struggled impotently.

"They are taking him to the Place of Darkness!" cried Imee suddenly, having read my impressions of the scene. "Oh, go quickly, quickly, toward the direction of your best hand—to your right! I shall follow!"

"No! No! Stay back!" I warned her frantically. All but these six Rorn had fallen victims of Mercer's hellish poison, and while they seemed to be suffering no ill effects, I thought it more than likely that some sly current might bring the deadly poison to the girl, did she come this way, and kill her as surely as it had killed these hundreds of Rorn.

To the right, she had said. Towards the Place of Darkness. I hurried

out of the village in the direction she indicated, towards the distant gleam of Mercer's armor, rapidly being lost in the gloom.

"I'm coming, Mercer!" I called to him. "Delay them as much as you can. You're going faster than I can."

"I can't help myself much," replied Mercer. "Doing what I can. Strong—they're devilish strong, Taylor. And, at close range, I can see you were right. They have true gill-covers; their noses are rudimentary and—"

"The devil take your scientific observations! Drag! Slow them down. I'm losing sight of you. For heaven's sake, drag!"

"I'm doing what I can. Damn you, if I could only get a hand free—" I realized that this last was directed at his captors, and plunged on.

Huge, monstrous growths swirled around me like living things. My feet crunched on shelled things, and sank into soft and slimy creeping things on the bottom. I cursed the water that held me back so gently yet so firmly; I cursed the armor that made it so hard for me to move my legs. But I kept on, and at last I began to gain on them; I could see them quite distinctly, bending over Mercer, working on him....

"Do your best, Taylor," urged Mercer desperately. "We're on the edge of a sort of cliff; a fault in the structure of the ocean bed. They're tying me with strong cords of leather. Tying a huge stone to my body. I think they—" I had a momentary flash of the scene as Mercer saw it at that instant: the horrid noseless face close to his, the swart bodies moving with amazing agility. And at his very feet, a yawning precipice, holding nothing but darkness, leading down and down into nothingness.

"Run quickly!" It was Imee. She, too, had seen what I had seen. "That is the Place of Darkness, where we take those whom the Five deem worthy of the Last Punishment. They will tie the stone to him, and bear him out above the Blackness, and then they will let him go! Quickly! Quickly!"

I was almost upon them now, and one of the six turned and saw me. Three of them darted towards me, while the others held Mercer flat upon the edge of the precipice. If they had only realized that by rolling his armored body a foot or two, he would sink ... without the stone.... But they did not. Their brains had little reasoning power, apparently. The attaching of a stone was necessary, in their experience; it was necessary now.

With my left hand I unhooked my light; I already gripped my knife

in my right hand. Swinging the light sharply against my leg, I struck the toggle-switch, and a beam of intense brilliancy shot through the gloom. It aided me, as I had thought it would; it blinded these large-eyed denizens of the deep.

Swiftly I struck out with the knife. It hacked harmlessly into the shark-skin garment of one of the men, and I stabbed out again. Two of the men leaped for my right arm, but the knife found, this time, the throat of the third. My beam of light showed palely red, for a moment, and the body of the Rorn toppled slowly to the bed of the ocean.

The two shark-faced creatures were hammering at me with their fists, dragging at my arms and legs, but I plunged on desperately towards Mercer. Myriads of fish, all shapes and colors and sizes, attracted by the light, swarmed around us.

"Good boy!" Mercer commended. "See if you can break this last flask of acid, here at my waist. See—"

With a last desperate plunge, fairly dragging the two Rorn who tugged at me, I fell forward. With the clenched steel talons of my right hand, I struck at the silvery flask I could see dangling from Mercer's waist. I hit it, but only a glancing blow; the flask did not

shatter.

"Again!" commanded Mercer. "It's heavy annealed glass—hydrocyanic acid—terrible stuff—even the fumes—"

I paid but slight heed. The two Rorn dragged me back, but I managed to crawl forward on my knees, and with all my strength, I struck at the flask again.

This time it shattered, and I lay where I fell, sobbing with weakness, looking out through the side window of my head-piece.

The five Rorn seemed to suddenly lose their strength. They struggled limply for a moment, and then floated down to the waiting sand beneath us.

"Finish," remarked Mercer coolly. "And just in time. Let's see if we can find our way back to the *Santa Maria*."

We were weary, and we plodded along slowly, twin trails of air-bubbles like plumes waving behind us, rushing upwards to the surface. I felt strangely alone at the moment, isolated, cut off from all mankind, on the bottom of the Atlantic.

"Coming to meet you, all of us," Imee signaled us. "Be careful where

you step, so that you do not walk in a circle and find again the Place of Darkness. It is very large."

"Probably some uncharted deep," threw in Mercer. "Only the larger ones have been located."

For my part, I was too weary to think. I just staggered on.

A crowd of slim, darting white shapes surrounded us. They swam before us, showing the way. The five patriarchs walked majestically before us; and between us, smiling at us through the thick lenses of our headpieces, walked Imee. Oh, it was a triumphal procession, and had I been less weary, I presume I would have felt quite the hero.

Imee pictured for us, as we went along, the happiness, the gratefulness of her people. Already, she informed us, great numbers of young men were clearing away the bodies of the dead Rorn. She was so happy she could hardly restrain herself.

A dim skeleton shape bulked up at my left. I turned to look at it, and Imee, watching me through the lights of my head-piece, nodded and smiled.

Yes, this was the very hulk by which she had been swimming when

the shark had attacked her, the shark which had been the cause of the accident. She darted on to show me the very rib upon which her head had struck, stunning her so that she had drifted, unconscious and storm-tossed, to the shore of Mercer's estate.

I studied the wreck. It was battered and tilted on its beam ends, but I could still make out the high poop that marked it as a very old ship.

"A Spanish galleon, Mercer," I conjectured.

"I believe so." And then, in pictured form, for Imee's benefit, "It has been here while much time passed?"

"Yes." Imee came darting back to us, smiling. "Since before the Teemorn, my people were here. A Rorn we made prisoner once told us his people discovered it first. They went into this strange skeleton, and inside were many blocks of very bright stone." She pictured quite clearly bars of dully-glinting bullion. Evidently the captive had told his story well.

“These stones, which were so bright, the Rorn took to their city, which is three swims distant." How far that might be, I could not even guess. A swim, it seemed, was the distance a Teemorn could travel before the need for rest became imperative. "There were many

Rorn, and they each took one stone. And of them, they made a house for their leader." The leader, as she pictured him, being the most hideous travesty of a thing in semi-human form that the mind could imagine: incredibly old and wrinkled and ugly and gray, his noseless face seamed with cunning, his eyes red rimmed and terrible, his teeth gleaming, white and sharp, like fangs.

"A whole house, except the roof," she went on. "It is there now, and it is gazed at with much admiration by all the Rorn. All this our prisoner told us before we took him, with a rock made fast to him, out over the Place of Darkness. He, too, was very proud of their leader's house."

"Treasure!" I commented to Mercer. "If we could find the city of the Rorn, we might make the trip pay for itself!"

I could sense his wave of amusement.

"I think," he replied, "I'd rather stand it myself. These Rorn don't appeal to me."

It was over half an hour before we were at last free of our diving suits.

The first thing Captain Bonnett said:

"We've got to get to the surface, and that quickly. Our air supply is running damnably low. By the time we blow out the tanks we'll be just about out. And foul air will keep us here until we rot. I'm sorry, sir, but that's the way matters stand."

Mercer, white-faced and ill, stared at him dazedly.

"Air?" he repeated groggily—I knew just how he felt—"We should have lots of air. The specifications—"

"But we're dealing with facts, not specifications, sir," said Captain Bonnett. "Another two hours here and we won't leave ever."

"Then it can't be helped, Captain," muttered Mercer. "We'll go up. And back. For more compressed air. We must remember to plot our course exactly. You kept the record on the way out as I instructed you?"

"Yes, sir," said Captain Bonnett.

"Just a minute, then," said Mercer.

Weakly he made his way forward to the little cubbyhole in which

was housed the central station of his thought-telegraph. I didn't even inspect the gleaming maze of apparatus. I merely watched him dully as he plugged in an antenna similar to the one we had left with Imee, and adjusted the things on his head.

His eyes brightened instantly. "She's still wearing her antenna," he said swiftly over his shoulder. "I'll tell her that something's happened; we must leave, but that we will return."

He sat there, frowning intently for a moment, and then dragged the antenna wearily from his head. He touched a switch somewhere, and several softly glowing bulbs turned slowly red and then dark.

"You and I," he groaned, "had better go to bed. We overdid it. She understands, I think. Terribly sorry, terribly disappointed. Some sort of celebration planned, I gather. Captain Bonnett!"

"Yes, sir?"

"You may proceed now as you think best," said Mercer. "We're retiring. Be sure and chart the course back, so we may locate this spot again."

"Yes, sir!" said Captain Bonnett.

When I awoke we were at anchor, our deck barely awash, before the deserted beach of Mercer's estate. Still feeling none too well, Mercer and I made our way to the narrow deck.

Captain Bonnett was waiting for us, spruce in his blue uniform, his shoulders bowed as always.

"Good morning, gentlemen," he offered, smiling crisply. "The open air seems good, doesn't it?"

It did. There was a fresh breeze blowing in from the Atlantic, and I filled my lungs gratefully. I had not realized until that instant just how foul the air below had been.

"Very fine, Captain," said Mercer, nodding. "You have signaled the men on shore to send out a boat to take us off?"

"Yes, sir; I believe they're launching her now."

"And the chart of our course—did the return trip check with the other?"

"Perfectly, sir." Captain Bonnett reached in an inner pocket of his double-breasted coat, extracted two folded pages, and extended them, with a little bow, to Mercer.

Just as Mercer's eager fingers touched the precious papers, however, the wind whisked them from Bonnett's grasp and whirled them into the water.

Bonnett gasped and gazed after them for a split second; then, barely pausing to tear off his coat, he plunged over the side.

He tried desperately, but before he could reach either one of the tossing white specks, they were washed beneath the surface and disappeared. Ten minutes later, his uniform bedraggled and shapeless, he pulled himself on deck.

"I'm sorry, sir," he gasped, out of breath. "Sorrier than I can say. I tried—"

Mercer, white-faced and struggling with his emotions, looked down and turned away.

"You don't remember the bearings, I suppose?" he ventured tonelessly.

"I'm sorry—no."

"Thank you, Captain, for trying so hard to recover the papers," said Mercer. "You'd better change at once; the wind is sharp."

The captain bowed and disappeared down the conning tower. Then Mercer turned to me, and a smile struggled for life.

"Well, Taylor, we helped her out, anyway," he said slowly. "I'm sorry that—that Imee will misunderstand when we don't come back."

"But, Mercer," I said swiftly, "perhaps we'll be able to find our way back to her. You thought before, you know, that—"

"But I can see now what an utterly wild-goose chase it would have been." Mercer shook his head slowly. "No, old friend, it would be impossible. And—Imee will not come again to guide us; she will think we have deserted her. And"—he smiled slowly up into my eyes—"perhaps it is as well. After all, the photographs and the data I wanted would do the world no practical good. We did Imee and her people a good turn; let's content ourselves with that. I, for one, am satisfied."

"And I, old timer," I said, placing my hand affectionately upon his shoulder. "Here's the boat. Shall we go ashore?"

We did go ashore, silently. And as we got out of the boat, and set foot again upon the sand, we both turned and looked out across the smiling Atlantic, dancing brightly in the sun.

The mighty, mysterious Atlantic—home of Imee and her people!

#19 Vandals of the Stars, by A. T. Locke:

A livid flame flares across space—and over Manhattan hovers Teuxical, vassal of Malfero, Lord of the Universe, who comes with ten thousand warriors to ravage and subjugate one more planet for his master.

Aproximate word count: 17,000

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Vandals of the Stars By A. T. Locke

It came suddenly, without warning, and it brought consternation to the people of the world.

A livid flame flares across Space—and over Manhattan hovers Teuxical, vassal of Malfero, Lord of the Universe, who comes with ten thousand warriors to ravage and subjugate one more planet for his master.

A filament of flame darted down the dark skies one moonless night and those who saw it believed, at first, that it was a meteor. Instead of streaking away into oblivion, however, it became larger and larger, until it seemed as though some vagrant, blazing star was about to plunge into the earth and annihilate the planet and every vestige of life upon it. But then it drew slowly to a stop high up in the atmosphere, where it remained motionless, glowing white and incandescent against the Stygian background of the overcast skies.

In shape it resembled a Zeppelin, but its dimensions very apparently exceeded by far those of any flying craft that ever had been fabricated by the hand of man.

As it hung poised high up in the air it gradually lost its dazzling glow and became scarlet instead of white. Then, as it continued to cool, the color swiftly drained from it and, in a few minutes, it shone only with the dull and ugly crimson of an expiring ember. In a half-hour after it first had appeared its effulgence had vanished completely and it was barely visible to the millions who were staring up toward it from the earth.

It seemed to be suspended directly above Manhattan, and the

inhabitants of New York were thrown into a feverish excitement by the strange and unprecedented phenomenon.

For it scarcely had come to a stop, and certainly it had not been poised aloft for more than a few minutes, when most of those who had not actually witnessed its sensational appearance were apprised of the inexplicable occurrence by the radiovision, which were scattered throughout the vast metropolis. In theaters and restaurants and other gathering places, as well as in millions of homes, a voice from the Worldwide Broadcasting Tower announced the weird visitant. And its image, as it glowed in the night, was everywhere transmitted to the public.

Only a short time after it first had been observed people were thronging roof-tops, terraces, and streets, and gazing with awe and wonder at the great luminous object that was floating high above them.

There were those who thought that the world was coming to an end, and they either were dumb with fright or strident with hysteria. People with more judgment, and a smattering of scientific knowledge, dismissed the thing as some harmless meteorological manifestation that, while interesting, was not necessarily dangerous. And there were many, inclined to incredulity and skepticism, who

believed that they were witnessing a hoax or an advertising scheme of some new sort.

But as the moments went by the world commenced to become stirred and alarmed by the reports which came over the radiovisors.

For powerful planes and metal-shelled Zeppelins had climbed swiftly aloft to investigate the incomprehensible Thing that was poised high above Manhattan, and almost unbelievable reports were being sent earthward.

Dirk Vanderpool had been sitting alone on the broad terrace of his apartment that occupied the upper stories of the great Gotham Gardens Building when he saw that streak of fire slip down against the darkness of the night.

For a moment he, too, had believed that he was watching a meteor, but, when he saw it come to a slow stop and hang stationary in the heavens, he rose to his feet with an exclamation of surprise.

For a while he gazed upward with an expression of astonishment on his face and then he turned as he heard someone walking softly in his direction. It was Barstowe, his valet, and the eyes of the man were alive with fear.

“What is that thing, Mr. Vanderpool?” he asked in a voice that trembled with alarm. Barstowe was a man of middle age, diminutive in size, and he had the appearance of being nearly petrified with terror. “They are saying over the televisor that—”

“What are they saying about it?” asked Dirk somewhat impatiently.

“That no one can explain what it is,” continued Barstowe. “It must be something terrible, Mr. Vanderpool.”

“Wheel out the luciscope,” ordered Dirk.

Barstowe disappeared into the apartment and returned with a cabinet that was mounted on small, rubber-tired wheels. The top of it was formed of a metallic frame in which a heavy, circular, concave glass was fitted. The frame was hinged in front so that it could be raised from the rear and adjusted to any angle necessary to catch the light rays from any distant object. Within the cabinet the rays passed through an electrical device that amplified them millions of times, thus giving a clear, telescopic vision of the object on which the luciscope was focused.

This instrument, years before, had supplanted entirely the old-fashioned telescopes which not only had been immense and

unwieldly but which also had a very limited range of vision.

Dirk adjusted the light-converger so that it caught the rays that were being emanated by the weird and shimmering mass that was suspended almost directly above the lofty terrace on which he was standing.

Then he switched on the current and glanced into the eye-piece of the apparatus. For several moments he remained silent, studying the image that was etched so vividly on the ground-glass within the luciscope.

“It is a queer thing, there is no doubt about that,” he confessed when finally he raised his head. “It resembles a gigantic Zeppelin in shape but it does not seem to have any undercarriage or, as far as I can see, any indication of propellers or portholes. I would say, though, Barstowe, that it might be a ship from some other planet if it wasn’t for the fact that it seems to be in an almost molten state.”

Dirk again looked into the luciscope and then he made a few adjustments with a thumb-screw that projected from the side of the apparatus.

“It is up about forty thousand feet,” he told Barstowe, “and it must

be more than a half-mile in length. Probably," he added, "it is a planetary fragment of some odd composition that is less responsive to gravitation than the materials with which we are familiar. You will find, Barstowe, that there is nothing about it that science will not be able to explain. That will be all now," he concluded.

Barstowe walked over the terrace and disappeared into the apartment. Dirk, left alone, wheeled the luciscope over by the chair in which he had been sitting and near which a radiovisor was standing.

He switched on the latter and listened to the low but very distinct voice of the news-dispatcher.

"—and planes and Zeppelins now are starting up to investigate the strange phenomenon—"

Again Dirk placed an eye to the lens of the luciscope and once more the Thing leaped into his vision. The powerful machine brought it so close to him that he could see the heat waves quiver up from it.

The light that it radiated illuminated the night for thousands of feet and Dirk could see, by means of that crimson glare, that many planes and Zeppelins were circling around the mysterious visitant. None of

them, however, approached the alien freak, the heat apparently being too intense to permit close inspection.

Dirk himself was tempted for a moment to jump into a plane and go up and take a look at the fiery mass.

But, after a moment's consideration, he decided, that it would be far more interesting and comfortable to remain right where he was and listen to the reports which were being sent down from above.

"—thus far there seems to be no cause for alarm, and people are advised to remain calm—careful observations of the luminous monster are being made and further reports concerning it will be broadcast—"

Dirk Vanderpool rose to his feet, walked to the coping of the terrace and peered into the magnascope that was set into the wall.

He saw that the street, far below him, was jammed with struggling people and the device through which he was looking brought their faces before him in strong relief. Dirk was deeply interested and, at the same time, gravely concerned as he studied the upturned countenances in the mob.

Fear, despair, reckless abandon, mirth, doubt, religious ecstasy and all the other nuances in the gamut of human emotions and passions were reflected in those distorted visages which were gazing skyward.

The silvery humming of a bell diverted his attention from the scene of congestion below him and, turning away, he walked across the terrace and into the great living room of his luxurious abode.

Stepping to the televisor, he turned a tiny switch, and the face of a girl appeared in the glass panel that was framed above the sound-box. He smiled as he lifted the receiver and placed it to his ear.

“What is the matter, Inga?” he asked. “You look as if you were expecting—well, almost anything disastrous.”

“Oh, Dirk, what is that thing?” the girl asked. “I really am frightened!”

He could see by the expression in her blue eyes that she, too, was becoming a victim of the hysteria that was taking possession of many people.

“I wouldn’t be alarmed, Inga,” he replied reassuringly. “I don’t know

what it is, and no one else seems to be able to explain it."

"But it is frightful and uncanny, Dirk," the girl insisted, "and I am sure that something terrible is going to happen. I wish," she pleaded, "that you would come over and stay with me for a little while. I am all alone and—"

"All right, Inga," he told her. "I will be with you in a few minutes."

He hung up the receiver of the televisor and clicked off the switch. The image of the golden-haired girl to whom he had been speaking slowly faded from the glass.

Attiring himself for a short sixty-mile hop down Long Island, Dirk passed out to the landing stage and, stepping into the cabin of his plane, he threw in the helicopter lever. The machine rose straight into the air for a couple of hundred feet and then Dirk headed it westward to where the nearest ascension beam sent its red light towering toward the stars. It marked a vertical air-lane that led upward to the horizontal lanes of flight.

Northbound ships flew between two and four thousand feet; southbound planes between five and seven thousand feet; those eastbound confined themselves to the level between nine and eleven

thousand feet, while the westbound flyers monopolized the air between twelve and fourteen thousand feet.

All planes flying parallel to the earth were careful to avoid those red beacons which marked ascension routes, and the shafts of green light down which descending planes dropped to the earth or into lower levels of travel.

When Dirk's altimeter indicated seventy-five hundred feet he turned the nose of his ship eastward and adjusted his rheostat until his motors, fed by wireless current, were revolving at top speed.

The great canyons of Manhattan, linked by arches and highways which joined and passed through various levels of the stupendous structures of steelite and quartzite, passed swiftly beneath him; and, after passing for a few minutes over the deserted surface of Long Island, he completed his sixty-mile flight and brought his ship to a rest on a landing stage that was far up on the side of a vast pile that rose up close to the shore of the Sound.

As soon as he stepped from the door of the cabin he was joined by a girl who, apparently, had been lingering there, awaiting his arrival.

She was perhaps twenty years old, and she had the golden hair, the

light complexion, and the blue eyes which still were characteristic of the women of northern Europe.

The slender lines of her exquisite figure and the supple grace which she displayed when she moved toward Dirk were evidence, however, of the Latin blood which was in her veins.

For Inga Fragoni, the daughter and heiress of Orlando Fragoni, seemed to be a culmination of all of the desirable qualities of the women of the south and those of the north.

The terrace on which Dirk had landed was illuminated by lights which simulated sunshine, and their soft bright glow revealed the violet hue of her eyes and the shimmering gloss of her silken hair. She wore a sleeveless, light blue tunic which was gathered around her waist with a bejeweled girdle.

On her tiny feet she wore sandals which were spun of webby filaments of gold and platinum.

“Dirk, I am so glad that you are here!” she exclaimed. “I felt so much alone when I called you up. Dad is locked in the observatory with Professor Nachbaren and three or four other men and the servants—well, they all are so terrified that it simply alarms me to

have them around.”

“But that is Stanton’s plane there, isn’t it?” asked Dirk, indicating a powerful looking machine that stood on the terrace.

“Yes, Dirk,” the girl replied. “He arrived here three or four minutes before you did. I thought, at first, that it was you coming. And Dirk,” she continued, with a note of excitement in her voice, “he flew up to look at that thing, and I know that he is as frightened about it as I am.”

Dirk grunted, but he gave no expression of the dislike and distrust that Stanton aroused in him. The latter, he knew, was very much inclined to look with favor on Inga, and his presumption annoyed Dirk because, while he and the girl had not declared their intention of living together, they were very much in love with each other.

“You will want to hear him tell about it, I know, Dirk,” the girl said. “I left Stanton up on the garden terrace when I saw you coming down. Come; we will go and join him.”

Dirk and Inga strolled slowly along paths which were lined with exotic shrubbery and plants. Here and there a fountain tossed its glittering spray high into the air while birds, invisible in the feathery

foliage, warbled and thrilled entrancingly. Soft music, transmitted from the auditoriums below, blended so harmoniously with the atmosphere of the terraces that it seemed to mingle with and be a part of the drifting, subtle scents of the abundant flowers which bloomed on every side.

For these upper terraces of Fragoni's palace were enclosed, during inclement weather, with great glass plates which, at the touch of a button, automatically appeared or disappeared.

Winding their way easily upward, Dirk and Inga came finally to a secluded terrace which overlooked the Sound. Here they saw Stanton, who was unaware of their approach, looking skyward at the dim and sinister shape which was outlined against the sky. Stanton's brow was contracted and his expression was filled with apprehension. He started suddenly when he became conscious of the presence of Dirk and the lovely daughter of Fragoni.

He rose to his feet, a short man in his forties, stocky in build and somewhat swarthy in complexion. He contrasted very unfavorably with Dirk, who was tall and well-built and who had abundant blond hair and steady steel-blue eyes.

"What do you make of that thing, Vanderpool?" he asked, almost

ignoring the presence of Inga.

“I don’t know enough about it yet to be able to express an opinion,” Dirk replied. “We will find out about it soon enough,” he added, “so why worry about it in the meantime?”

“It is well enough to affect such an attitude,” said Stanton, with a touch of sarcasm in his voice, “but let me tell you, Vanderpool, that there is good reason to worry about it.”

Dirk frowned at the statement as he saw a shadow pass over the fair face of Inga.

“That thing up there,” continued Stanton, with conviction in his voice, “is not a natural phenomenon. I flew fairly close to it in my plane and I know what I am speaking about. That thing is some sort of a monster, Vanderpool, that is made of metal or of some composition that is an unearthly equivalent of metal. It is a diabolical creation of some sort that has come from out of the fathomless depths of the universe.” He shuddered at the fantasy that his feverish imagination was creating. “It is metal, I tell you,” he continued, “but it is metal that is endowed with some sort of intelligence. I was up there,” he breathed swiftly, “and I saw it hanging there in the sky, quivering with heat and life.”

“You are nervous, Stanton,” said Vanderpool coolly. “Get a grip on yourself, man, and look at the thing reasonably. If that thing has intelligence,” he added, “we will find some way to slay it.”

“Slay it!” exclaimed Stanton. “How can you expect to slay a mad creation that can leap through space, from world to world, like a wasp goes darting from flower to flower? How can you kill a thing which not only defies absolute zero but also the immeasurable heat which its friction with the atmosphere generated when it plunged toward the earth? How can you kill a thing that seems to have brains and nerves and bones and flesh of some strange substance that is harder and tougher than any earthly compound we have discovered?”

He stopped speaking for a moment. They listened to the voice that was broadcasting from the Worldwide Tower.

“—our planes have approached to within a few thousand feet of it and are playing their searchlights over the surface of the leviathan. It is not a meteorite of any kind that scientists have heretofore examined—its surface is smooth and unpitted and shows no apparent effect of the tremendous heat to which it was subjected during its drop through the atmosphere. It seems to be immune to gravity—its weight must be tremendous, and it is fully three-quarters of a mile

long and between seven and eight hundred feet in diameter at its widest part, but it lies motionless—motionless—at about forty thousand feet.”

“It doesn’t appear now as if it would prove very dangerous,” remarked Dirk.

“—and people are warned again to maintain their composure and to go to their homes and remain there for their own protection and the protection of others. Riots and serious disturbances are reported from cities in all parts of the world—mobs are swarming the streets of Manhattan and the other boroughs of New York, and the police are finding it difficult to restrain the frenzied populations in other centers....”

There was a pause, then, of some moments, and then the voice of the broadcaster, vibrant with excitement, was heard again.

“—a plane has made a landing on the surface of the monstrosity, which, it seems, has not only lost its heat but is becoming decidedly cold—”

A servant appeared from among the shrubbery and paused before Dirk.

“There is a call for you, Mr. Vanderpool,” he said respectfully.

Dirk excused himself and, entering the sumptuous apartment that opened from the terrace, went to the televisor. He saw the face of Sears, the chief secretary of Fragoni, in the glass panel.

“There will be a meeting of the council at nine o’clock in the morning, Mr. Vanderpool,” came the voice over the wire.

“Thank you, Sears,” replied Dirk. “It happens that Stanton is here at the present time. Shall I notify him of the conclave?”

“If you will, please,” Sears responded. “By the way, Mr. Vanderpool, is there anything wrong at your apartment? I tried to call you there before I located you here and I failed to get any response.”

“I guess that all of my servants have run out from under cover because of their fear of that thing in the sky,” Dirk responded. “Do you know anything about it, Sears?” he asked.

“It will be discussed at the meeting to-morrow morning,” replied Sears shortly. “Good night, Mr. Vanderpool.”

Dirk, upon returning to the terrace, saw that both Stanton and Inga were silently and fearfully looking up into the night.

“A meeting of the council at nine o’clock in the morning, Stanton,” Dirk said abruptly. “I told Sears I would notify you.”

“I thought that we would be called together very soon,” said Stanton. “It’s concerning that damn thing up there.”

“Perhaps,” agreed Dirk carelessly. “Well,” he added, “I believe that I will hop home and get some sleep.”

“Sleep!” exclaimed Stanton. “Sleep? On a night like this?”

“Oh, Dirk,” pleaded Inga, “stay here with me, won’t you? I am not going to bed because I just know that I wouldn’t be able to close my eyes.”

“Let him go, Inga, if he wants to sleep,” urged Stanton. “I will stay here and keep watch with you.”

“—and if order is not restored in the streets of Manhattan within the course of a short time, the authorities will resort to morphite gas to quell the turbulence and rioting—”

“The streets must be frightfully congested,” said Inga. “It is the first occasion in a long time that the police have had to threaten the use of morphite.”

“—we do not want to alarm people unnecessarily but we have to report,” came the hurried voice of the broadcaster, “that the monstrous mass that has been hanging above the city just made a sudden drop of five thousand feet and again came to a stop. It is now a little more than six miles over Manhattan and—again it has dropped. This time it fell like a plummet for twelve thousand feet. It is now about twenty thousand feet, some four miles, above Manhattan and—”

A cry of alarm came from the lips of Inga as she gazed upward and saw that gigantic, ominous-appearing object loom dim and vast in the darkness above them.

She went to Dirk and threw her arms around him, as if she were clinging to him for protection.

“Don’t leave me, Dirk,” she whispered. “I can just feel that something terrible is going to happen, and I want you with me!”

“I’ll stay with you, of course,” whispered Dirk. Something of that feeling of dread and apprehension which so fully possessed his two companions entered into his mind. “Don’t tremble so, Inga,” he pleaded. “It is a strange thing, but we will know more about it in the morning. Be calm until then, my dear, if you can.”

He looked over the shoulder of the girl, whose face was buried against his breast, and he saw a hundred great red and green shafts of light shooting up into the air. Fleeting shadows seemed to pass swiftly up and down them, and he knew that thousands of planes were abroad, some of them seeking the heights and others dropping down.

The great towers of Long Island were all aglow, and it was apparent that few people were sleeping that night. The scarlet sky over Manhattan indicated that the center of the metropolis, too, was alive to the menace of the weird visitant that now was so plainly visible.

All night long they remained on the terrace. Dirk and Inga seated close together and Stanton, at a distance, brooding alone over the disaster which he felt was impending.

The illuminated dial of the great clock that was a part of the beacon-tower on the Metropole Landing Field told of the slow passing of the hours.

All night long they listened to the reports that came through the radiovisor and watched that immobile, threatening monster of metal.

But it remained static during the rest of the night. And, with the

coming of a gray and sunless dawn, it still hung there, motionless, silent and sinister.

The next morning the President of the United States of the World, from the capitol at The Hague, issued a proclamation of martial law, to become effective at once in all parts of the world.

The edict forbade people to leave their homes, and it was vigorously executed, wherever the police themselves were not in a state of demoralization.

At about the same time a special meeting of the Supreme Congress was called, the body to remain in session until some solution of the mystery had been arrived at.

At the same time that martial law was declared, however, and the special assemblage of lawmakers convened, a statement was issued in which an attempt was made to eliminate from the minds of the people the idea that the undefinable object above the metropolis was at all dangerous.

It was, indeed, suggested that it very probably was some sort of new device which had been constructed on the earth and which was being introduced to the people of the world in a somewhat sensational

manner by the person or persons who were responsible for it.

The fears of the populace were, to some extent, allayed by this means, and some degree of order restored.

At nine o'clock Dirk Vanderpool was shown into the council chamber in the palace of Orlando Fragoni, and he was closely followed by Stanton. Fragoni was already there, and he greeted the two men with a countenance that was serene but that, nevertheless, revealed indications of concern. He was a man past middle age, tall and strikingly handsome in appearance. His eyes were dark and penetrating and his forehead, high and wide, was crowned by an abundance of snow-white hair. His voice, while pleasing to the ear, was vibrant with life and energy, and he spoke with the incisive directness of one accustomed to command.

For Orlando Fragoni, as nearly as any one man might be, was the ruler of the world.

It was in the early part of the twentieth century that wealth had commenced to concentrate into a relatively few hands. This was followed by a period in which vast mergers and consolidations had been effected as a result of the financial power and genius for organization which a few men possessed. A confederation of the

countries of the world was brought about by industrial kings who had learned, in one devastating war, that militarism, while it might bring riches to a few, was, in the final analysis, destructive and wasteful.

Mankind the world over, relieved of the menace of war, made more progress in a decade than they had made in any previous century, but all the time the invisible concentration of power and money continued.

And, in 1975, the affairs of the world were controlled by five men, of whom Orlando Fragoni was the most powerful and most important.

His grandfather had been a small banker, and out of his obscure transactions the great House of Fragoni had arisen. The money power of the world was now controlled by Orlando Fragoni. Dirk Vanderpool, partly as a result of a vast inheritance and partly through his own ability and untiring industry, dominated the transportation facilities of the world. Planes and Zeppelins, railroad equipment and ships, were built in his plants and operated by the many organizations which he controlled.

Stanton had inherited the agricultural activities of the world and, in

addition to this, he was the sovereign of distribution. He owned immense acreages in all of the continents; he not only cultivated every known variety of produce, but also handled the sale of his products through his own great chains of stores. His father had been one of the great geniuses of the preceding generation, but Stanton, while inheriting the commercial empire which he had ruled, had not inherited much of the ability which had gone into the establishment of it.

There were two other members of that invisible council of Five, the very existence of which was not even suspected by the general populace of the world.

Sigmund Lazarre was the world's mightiest builder, and millions of great structures, which were built of material from his own mines, were under his control. It was Lazarre, too, who owned the theaters and other amusement centers in which millions upon millions of people sought relaxation every day. The creation and application of electrical power made up the domain of Wilhelm Steinholt, who also owned the factories that made the machinery of the world.

Absolute control of all of the necessities and luxuries of life, in fact, were in the hands of the five men, who used their vast power wisely and beneficently.

Ostensibly the peoples of the world ruled themselves by means of a democratic form of government.

In reality their lives were directed by a few men whose power and wealth were entirely unsuspected by any but those who were close to them.

The council room in which Fragoni had received Dirk and Stanton was lofty and sumptuously appointed.

The rugs which covered the floor were soft to the tread, and the walls and ceiling were adorned with a series of murals which represented the various heavenly constellations.

At the far end of the chamber there was a staircase, and Dirk was among those who knew that it led up to the great observatory in which Fragoni and certain of his scientific associates spent so much of their time at night.

For men had commenced to talk about the conquest of the stars, and it was generally believed that it would not be many years more before a way would be found to traverse the interplanetary spaces.

“We are rather fortunate, my friends,” Fragoni said to his two

associates, “to have been the witnesses of the event that transpired last night.”

“Fortunate!” exclaimed Stanton. “Then you know that the thing is harmless?”

A little smile lit the benign and scholarly countenance of Fragoni as he calmly regarded Stanton.

“We know very little about it,” he replied after a brief pause, “and, if our surmises are correct, it may be very far from harmless. It is intensely interesting, nevertheless,” he continued, “because that thing, as you term it, unquestionably is directed by intelligence. Without the slightest doubt the people of the earth are about to behold a form of life from some far-away planet. What that form will be,” he added, with an almost imperceptible shrug of his shoulders, “it is impossible to forecast.”

“But it was so hot,” commenced Stanton, “that—”

“True,” agreed Fragoni, “but it also is large and it may be that only the outer shell of it was affected by friction with the atmosphere that surrounds the earth. Nachbaren,” he continued, “is certain that there is intelligent life within it; and Nachbaren,” he added dryly, “is

usually right.”

While Fragoni had been speaking, two more men had quietly joined them.

“Good morning, Lazarre,” Fragoni said, addressing a short, swarthy man who, very apparently, was of Jewish extraction.

“Good morning,” the other replied in a soft and mellifluous voice. “It seems,” he continued, with a twinkle in his eyes, “as if some of my pretty buildings may be toppled over soon.”

“Maybe,” agreed Fragoni. “And maybe,” he added more seriously, “much more than your buildings will be toppled over, Lazarre.”

“That thing, then, is...?” questioned the heavy-set, slow-speaking, blue-eyed Teuton who had come into the room with Lazarre.

“We do not know, Steinholt,” admitted Fragoni, “but our knowledge undoubtedly will be increased considerably within the next few hours. And now,” he said, “we will consider the problem at hand.”

“—the object which has created such unrest is slowly rising. It is now some twenty-five thousand feet above Manhattan. It is—”

The voice from the radiovisor attracted the attention of the five men, and, with one accord, they rushed to the terrace and looked toward Manhattan. They saw the great leviathan high in the air for a moment, and then, suddenly, it seemed to vanish from sight.

“It’s gone!” exclaimed Stanton, with a sigh of relief. “It must have been some odd atmospheric freak, that’s all.”

They searched the skies through the luciscope that was on the terrace, but failed to detect any trace of the monster.

“That seems to simplify matters,” remarked Fragoni as they again walked back into the great conference room. But here, once more, they heard the voice from the Worldwide Tower.

“—we are advised by Chicago that the thing, dull-red with heat, is hovering only a couple of thousand feet over the city. Thousands in the streets are being killed by the heat it is radiating—panic reigns, despite a rigorous enforcement of martial law. The strange object just rose suddenly to a high altitude and disappeared—”

“It’s another one of those damned things,” asserted Stanton. “That couldn’t go a thousand miles a minute!”

“It can go faster than that, if I am not mistaken,” said Fragoni. And it presently appeared that he was right, for in a couple of minutes the radiovisor transmitted the news that it was over San Francisco, where it remained for only a few seconds. It was not more than a minute later that word came from Shanghai that it had passed slowly over that city. Then again it was poised high over Manhattan, crimson with heat.

“Is there any possible defense against it, Steinholt?” Fragoni asked. The Teuton shook his head with an air of finality.

“None,” he said, “as far as I can determine now. We can create and direct artificial lightning that would reduce this building to a mass of powdered stone and fused metal in a fraction of a second. But I am certain that it wouldn’t leave as much as a scratch on that monster up there. We might try the Z-Rays on it, but an intelligence that could devise such a craft would undoubtedly have the wisdom to protect it against such an elementary menace as rays. Even the mightiest explosives that we have wouldn’t send a tremor through that mighty mass.”

“Why not await developments?” asked Dirk. “We do not even know the nature of the thing we are trying to combat.”

“It’s solid metal,” insisted Stanton tenaciously. “It’s a metal body with a metal brain.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” said Steinholt. “It seems quite apparent that the craft has come from another planet, and, if I am not greatly mistaken, there are intelligent creatures inside it.”

“In any event,” said Dirk, “it seems impractical to make any plans until we know more about it. I suggest that we empower Fragoni to act for the rest of us in this matter.”

“That is very agreeable to me,” said Steinholt. “A crisis very possibly may arise in which the quick judgment of one man may be necessary to avert the danger that always is inherent in delay.”

“You hold my proxy,” Lazarre said to Fragoni, “and I assume that Stanton is agreeable to this procedure.”

“—the thing is moving very slowly eastward in the direction of Long Island Sound. It is, at the same time, losing altitude. Its movements are being carefully watched. As yet we see no cause for immediate alarm—people are advised to remain calm—”

“Yes, I am agreeable,” said Stanton nervously and hastily. “If there

are things in it with which we can compromise, I would suggest that we do not offend them."

"I am, then, empowered to act for all of you," said Fragoni, ignoring the suggestion of Stanton.

He rose from his chair and walked out on the terrace. The others followed after him.

Looking westward, they saw the mammoth craft descending slowly in their direction.

Its vast dimensions became more and more apparent as, spellbound, they watched it approach closer and closer to them.

The thing in the sky was now not more than three thousand feet above them and only a few miles to the westward.

The observers on the terrace regarded it for a moment in silence as it drifted forward and downward.

"It's colossal!" Steinholt then exclaimed, lost in scientific admiration of the mammoth craft. "Magnificent! Superb!"

"But it's coming right toward us!" cried Stanton.

“What makes it move, I wonder?” asked Dirk. “And how in the world is it controlled?”

“It surely is not of this world,” said Fragoni quietly. “That gigantic thing has come to us from somewhere out of the infinite and terrible depths of space.”

Another minute elapsed while they watched it, speechless with wonder.

“Do you know,” Lazarre then said calmly, “I believe that it is going to land in the waters of the Sound. It appears so to me, anyway.”

It was nearly opposite them by this time, and not more than a thousand feet above the water. A few planes which, very apparently, were being flown by intrepid and fearless flyers, were hovering close around it.

Then finally it came to rest, as Lazarre had predicted, in the water some two miles off shore, and it was obscured by a great cloud of vapor for several minutes.

“Steam,” asserted Steinholt. “That trip around the world, which it made in a few minutes, generated considerable frictional heat in the

shell.”

“Come,” said Fragoni, “we’ll fly out and look the thing over.”

Around the corner of the building, on the level of the terrace, there was a landing stage which was occupied by a number of planes of various sizes.

Dirk entered the door of a small twenty passenger speedster, and the others filed in after him.

“Ready?” he asked, after he had seated himself at the controls.

“Ready!” replied Fragoni.

The plane rose straight up into the air and then darted gracefully out over the Sound.

Dirk swooped straight down at the leviathan which lay so quietly on the surface of the Sound and then slowly circled around it. No sign of an aperture of any sort could be seen in the craft. Then he dropped the plane lightly on the water, close to the metallic monster, which towered fully four hundred feet above them, despite the fact that more than half of it was submerged.

“It must be hollow,” remarked Steinholt, “or it wouldn’t be so far out of the water. In fact, it most certainly would sink, if it was solid.”

At the touch of a lever which lay under one of Dirk’s hands the plane rose straight out of the water, and he maneuvered it directly over the top of the strange enigma. Then he touched a button and the pontoons were drawn up into the undercarriage of the craft.

“Shall I make a landing on it?” he asked, turning his head and addressing Fragoni.

The latter nodded his head, and Dirk dropped the ship gently onto the smooth surface of the monster, the pneumatic gearing completely absorbing the shock of the landing.

Dirk relinquished the controls and, opening the door of the cabin, he stepped out onto the rough and pitted substance of which the leviathan was compounded. He stood there while the others came out after him.

A large area on the top of the monster was perfectly flat and, within a very few moments, Dirk discovered that it was decidedly warm. He had brought the plane down close to the middle of the length of the strange craft in the belief that there, if anywhere, some indication

of an entrance might be found.

The voice of Steinholt, tense with suppressed excitement, appraised him that his surmise had been correct.

“There is a manhole of some sort,” the electrical wizard exclaimed. “And look, it is turning!”

They saw, not far ahead of them, a circular twelve-foot section of the deck slowly revolving, and, even as they watched, it commenced to rise slowly upward as the threads with which it was provided turned gradually around.

Almost involuntarily they retreated a few feet and stood there, spellbound, as they stared at the massive, revolving section of the deck.

It continued to turn until fully ten feet of the mobile cylinder had been exposed. Then the bottom of it appeared. Even then it continued to revolve and rise on a comparatively small shaft which supported it and, at the same time, thrust it upward. Dirk and his companions kept their eyes on the rim of the well which had been exposed, and awaited the appearance of something, they knew not what. When the top of the great cylinder was fully twelve feet above

the deck of the craft it slowly ceased to revolve.

Moment succeeded moment as the members of the little group rigidly and almost breathlessly awaited developments.

Then Dirk, with an impatient ejaculation, stepped forward toward the yawning hole and cautiously peered over the edge of it.

He stood there for a moment, as if transfixed, and then, with an exclamation of horror, retreated swiftly to where his friends were standing.

“What is it?” gasped Steinholt. “What did you see when—”

But the words died on his lips for, swarming swiftly over every side of the well, there poured an array of erect, piercing-eyed beings, who had all the characteristics of humans. They were clad in tight-fitting attire of thin and pliant metal which, with the exception of their faces, shielded them from head to foot. On their heads they wore close-fitting helmets, apparently equipped with visors which could be drawn down to cover their unprepossessing features.

Each one of them carried a tube which bore a striking resemblance to a portable electric flashlight.

Swiftly they advanced, in ranks of eight, toward Dirk and his companions who, gripped with amazement, held their positions.

The first line came to a halt not more than four feet from the little group on the deck. The other lines halted, too, and formed a great platoon. Then a shrill whistle sounded and the formation parted in the middle, leaving an open path that led backward to the entrance, to the well.

A moment later the watchers saw the regal figure of a man emerge from the orifice and, after a moment's pause, advance slowly in their direction with a stately stride.

He was tall and muscular and blond and his attire, golden in texture, glittered with sparkling gems.

As he approached them he raised his right hand and, inasmuch as his countenance was calm and benign, his gesture appeared to be one of peace and good-will.

Following close behind him there was a younger man who, very apparently, was of the same lineage. His expression, however, was petulant and haughty and it contained more than a suggestion of rapacity and evil.

Behind him there were others of the same fair type, all of them sumptuously and ornately attired.

Fragoni stepped forward, himself a dignified and striking figure, as the leader of the strange adventurers came forth from the lane that had been formed by his immobile guard of warriors.

The two men confronted each other, one whose power and wealth gave him a dominate position on earth, and the other a personage from some domain that was remote in the abyss of space.

Fragoni bowed and spoke a few friendly words of welcome and the stranger, to the utter amazement of the banker and his associates, responded in an English that was rather peculiar in accent but that they could understand without any difficulty.

“From what part of the world do you come,” asked the astounded Fragoni, “that you speak our language?”

“We come from no part of this world,” replied the stranger. “The empire of my ruler is infinitely far away. But language, my friend, is not a thing of accident. Life grows out of the substance of the universe and language comes out of life. The speech of mankind, in your state of development, varies but little throughout all space and I

have heard your English, as you call it, spoken among those who dwell in many, many worlds."

"And your world?" asked Steinholt with avid curiosity. "Tell us of the planet from which you come."

But Fragoni, smiling at the eagerness of Steinholt, interposed with a kindly but arresting gesture.

"My name is Fragoni," he said to the stranger, "and I would have you partake, of my hospitality and refresh yourself after your long journey. These," he added, "are my friends, Steinholt, Vanderpool and Lazarre."

"I am Teuxical, vassal of his Supreme Highness, Malfero of Lodore," the other replied. "This is my son, Zitlan," he continued, indicating the young man behind him, "and the others are my high captains, Anteucan, Orzitza and Huazibar. More of my officers are below together with ten thousand armed and armored men such as you see before you."

If the last part of the statement was intended as a threat or a warning, the expression on Fragoni's face gave no indication that he was aware of it.

“You carry a large crew, sir,” Fragoni replied, “but we gladly will make provisions for all of your men. As for yourself, your son, and your captains, if you will come with me....”

He nodded in the direction of the plane which rested on the great interplanetary vessel and started to walk slowly in the direction of it. The leader of the skymen walked by his side and the other men from Lodore followed close after them.

Dirk, Steinholt and Lazarre brought up the rear, while the soldiers remained motionless in their serried array.

Innumerable planes were circling overhead and hundreds of them had landed on the water in the vicinity. Dirk saw that the wanderers from the stars regarded them curiously as if they never before had seen aircraft of that particular type.

When the cabin door of the plane was thrown open, Teuxical turned to one of his captains.

“Remain here, Anteucan, with the soldiers,” he commanded, “and await our return.”

Teuxical then entered the plane with his men and Fragoni, Steinholt

and Lazarre followed after them. Then Dirk took his seat at the controls.

“These are strange craft you use,” he heard Teuxical say. “I have seen them in only one of the multitude of other worlds on which I have set my feet, worlds which all pay tribute to Malfero of Lodore. It is safer and swifter to ride the magnetic currents than it is to ride the unstable currents of the air.”

Dirk caught the significance of the reference to tribute and he admired the clever diplomacy of Teuxical while, at the same time, he wondered if the earth and all of those who dwelt upon it were doomed to fall under the sway of some remote and unseen despot.

He also realized that the Lodorians had, in some way, devised a craft that rode the great magnetic streams which flowed through the universe in much the same way that men, in ships, navigated the streams of the earth.

He threw on the helicopter switch and the plane rose swiftly into the air, the myriad other flying craft which were circling nearby keeping at a safe distance from it.

“Land on the grand terrace,” Fragoni directed. The flight was short

and rapid and it was only a matter of seconds before Dirk brought the plane down on the landing stage which they had left only a scant half-hour before.

He opened the cabin door and stepped out of the plane and the others filed out after him.

Fragoni led the way along the stage, walking and chatting with Teuxical, and Dirk, following after the others, was the last to turn a corner that brought him a sweeping view of the magnificent terrace that fronted the private apartments of the banker and his daughter.

And, when he did, he saw that Inga was standing there, superbly beautiful, with Stanton a few paces behind her.

Her lovely eyes were alive with awe and wonder and her slender white hands were crossed over her heart.

And Dirk saw, too, that Zitlan, son of Teuxical, had paused and was standing quite still, with his unwavering and insolent eyes fixed on the girl. Resentment, and a touch of apprehension, agitated Dirk when he saw the expression on the face of the young Lodorian.

There was admiration in that disagreeable countenance, but it was

blended with arrogance, haughtiness and ill-concealed desire.

Dirk went quickly to Inga, standing between the girl and the one from Lodore who was staring at her so brazenly.

“What does it all mean, Dirk?” she asked in a low voice. “Those strange people, where are they from?”

Stanton had come quickly forward and had joined Inga and Dirk.

“They are from some far-off world, Inga,” he explained, “that we know nothing about as yet.”

“But what do they want?” she persisted. “What do they intend to do? I saw those horrible creatures through the magnascope when they came swarming out of the inside of that thing on the water and I thought, at first, that they were going to kill you all.”

“No, they seem to come in peace,” Dirk replied. “Teuxical, their leader, seems to be gracious and kindly.”

“We are all doomed,” asserted Stanton, “unless something happens. They can crumble our cities with heat and bury us under the ruins of

them.”

“Keep your silence!” breathed Dirk, quietly but tensely. “We will find a way to destroy those creatures if it becomes necessary.”

“That man who keeps staring at me, who is he?” asked Inga in a voice that betrayed her nervousness.

Dirk turned and saw that Zitlan was still standing where he had paused and that he still was looking with searching eyes in the direction of the girl.

He returned the insolent gaze of the young Lodorian with an impatient and threatening stare and the countenance of Zitlan at once became stern and menacing. He came striding in the direction of Inga, Dirk and Stanton and paused within a few feet of them, his rapacious eyes still fixed on the girl.

“My lady,” he said, “your beauty pleases me. I have walked on many worlds but never before have I seen one as lovely as yourself. Of the spoils of this world, all that I crave possession of is you. When we return to Lodore,” he added with an air of finality, “I will take you with me and place you with my other women in the Seraglio of the Stars.”

Dirk swiftly stepped close to Zitlan and the latter quickly clasped a tube that hung at his side, a tube of the sort that the soldiers had carried.

“Your words and your manner are insolent,” asserted Dirk angrily, “and I warn you now to cease making yourself offensive.”

“Dog!” exclaimed Zitlan fiercely, leveling the metal tube, “I’ll—”

But the left fist of Dirk cut short his threat as it made a sudden impact with his chin, and the Lodorian went crashing backward into some exotic shrubbery with a look of surprise on his countenance.

Then Dirk heard an odd hissing and crackling sound, and he felt himself becoming dizzy and weak.

Darkness seemed to sweep in upon him; he felt that he was dropping swiftly through space, and then he lost consciousness.

A vague and shadowy figure was standing close by his side and peering down into his face. After a while he realized that it was Steinholt.

“Steinholt!” he gasped. “Why—why am I here—in Fragoni’s? I must have had a dream—and yet....”

He furrowed his brow in thought and, gradually, he commenced to remember what had happened.

“It was no dream,” said the scientist softly. “Do you remember the trouble that you had with Zitlan?”

“Yes,” replied Dirk. “I remember that he was insolent to Inga and that I lost my temper and struck him. But what happened to me? I don’t recall that anybody hit me. I did hear sort of a peculiar sound just before I started to pass out, but—”

“Teuxical took a shot at you,” said Steinholt, “and you have been unconscious for over thirty-six hours.”

“Took a shot at me!” exclaimed Dirk. “What did he shoot me with?”

“That is what we all would like to know,” said Steinholt. “He leveled one of those damn tubes at you and pressed a button on it. There was a hissing sound, a flash of light, and you got groggy, and went out. He potted Zitlan, too,” continued Steinholt, “and he apologized for the trouble that his son was responsible for. Do you know,” he added, “I sort of like the old man.”

Lazarre, with a sympathetic smile on his face, entered the room at

that moment and overheard the conversation.

“Old man is right,” he remarked, with a little note of awe in his voice. “Teuxical admits that he is three thousand years old and that he has at least two thousand more ahead of him. That Lodore must be a queer world,” he commented, shaking his grizzly head.

“It is not so queer when you take everything into consideration,” said Steinholt. “It seems quite natural when Teuxical explains it. Lodore it seems, is something like a hundred thousand times as big as this miniature world we live on. It took Lodore infinitely longer to solidify from a gaseous state than it took this world, and its entire evolution has been relatively slower than ours. Therefore, according to Teuxical, the people up there live longer and, incidentally, know infinitely more than we do.”

“What time is it now?” asked Dirk, after a moment of thought.

“It is just about twelve o’clock at night,” Steinholt informed him.

“Have these Lodorians made any demands yet?” Dirk asked. “Does anybody know what they are going to do or what they want?”

“They are liable to do almost anything,” said Lazarre, “and it looks

as though they will be able to get anything that they want. Teuxical, as I understand it, just gave you a slight shock with his death-ray device. If he had pulled the trigger all the way you would have become just a little pile of dust that the first breeze would have blown away."

"Our own death-rays are somewhat similar," said Steinholt, "but they are not a hundredth as powerful. And they won't work on the Lodorians, either," he added, "because those metal sheaths that they wear make them immune to all kinds of destructive rays."

"It appears," remarked Lazarre morosely, "as if this little world of ours is going to be taken for a ride. And it's too bad, considering that it's the only world we've got. There has been no formal presentation of demands yet, but it seems to be sort of understood that the earth is going to become a tributary of Lodore. It is a good thing," he added, "that Teuxical, and not Zitlan, is the boss of that outfit. I don't like the looks of that young fellow. He's only twelve hundred years old and he is sort of hot-blooded, I guess."

"I was talking with Anteucan," said Steinholt, "and he told me that the Lodorians usually make heavy levies on worlds which they discover and dominate. As soon as Teuxical returns to Lodore and announces a new discovery a fleet of those damned monsters is sent

out to mop up the new planet. That Malfero, who is the emperor of Lodore, is considerable of a monarch, and it seems that he has a passion for piling up wealth. Gold and platinum are as precious on Lodore as they are here and he also likes pretty stones."

"And what is worse," added Steinholt, "is his practice of enslaving entire populations and making toilers or warriors out of them. Those soldiers on the ship are not Lodorians. Millions of them were seized on some planet and converted into troops. It was a strange conversion, too," said Steinholt with a shudder. "Their brains were operated on and most of their faculties removed. They have no sense of fear, no consciences, no power of reasoning. They respond only to certain signals on a whistle and their only definite and active impulse is that of murder and destruction."

"There is nothing to do," said Dirk positively, "but to kill all of these interlopers, if we hope to save our world from being desolated."

The three men looked at each other in silence for a moment and then Dirk, somewhat weakly, rose into a sitting position in the bed which he had been occupying.

"But how," asked Steinholt, "can we kill them? We might, of course, get rid of a few of them, but that simply would lead to our

destruction by those who were left."

"There must be some way," asserted Dirk, "and it is up to us to think of it without delay. If we let those Lodorians get a foothold on the world all will be lost."

"The old man seems to be reasonable enough," said Lazarre. "He doesn't seem inclined to be destructive."

"We must not trust him or any of the others," said Dirk imperatively. "We must rid the earth of every one of them. And the sooner we strike the better!"

"It had best be soon if it is to be at all," said Steinholt. "Fragoni has arranged to have Teuxical appear before the Congress, and the meeting has been called for to-night when, I imagine, certain specific demands will be made upon us. We all will go to The Hague together on the ship of the Lodorians."

"And we leave?" questioned Dirk.

"The meeting is set for ten P. M., New York time," said Lazarre. "We will start east at about four o'clock in the morning, I guess, because it will only take a minute or so to arrive at our destination."

“Is Fragoni going?” asked Dirk.

“Naturally,” replied Lazarre.

“And Inga?”

“I believe so,” Lazarre told him. “Fragoni was both afraid to take her and to leave her behind, but finally he decided that he wanted her with him in case of trouble.”

“And are they—the Lodorians—still here?” queried Dirk.

“Yes,” responded Lazarre. “Teuxical returned to his ship last night with Zitlan and his other followers, but they came back late this afternoon, and they are still here. Zitlan seemed to be all right this afternoon, too. They must have used some means of bringing him out of the daze that he was in. We did everything we could to revive you, but none of our measures were effective.”

“I’m all right now,” asserted Dirk, as he finished attiring himself. “I want to see Fragoni at once.”

“We’ll go out on the terrace then,” said Steinholt. “They are all out there.”

Dirk, with his two companions, strolled out through the maze of rooms and corridors that led to the garden which hung so high above the city and the Sound below it.

The first thing that Dirk saw, when he passed out onto the terrace, was the white tunic of Inga, who was leaning against a coping and talking with Zitlan.

The latter was pointing skyward and, very apparently, he was telling her of worlds which circled high among the stars.

As if she were suddenly aware of his presence, Inga turned and saw Dirk and he realized, by the expression on her face, that she was distraught and nervous. She came toward him quickly, after a few words to Zitlan, and the face of the latter darkened. There was hatred in his expression as he stared malevolently at Dirk.

Steinholt and Lazarre passed along and joined Fragoni and Teuxical, who were the center of a group that had formed in another part of the terrace.

“Oh, Dirk,” said Inga, “I am so afraid of that frightful Zitlan. He has been telling me again that he is going to take me back to his own world with him and it makes me shudder to think of it. He is so

strange and queer and his eyes are so terrible. He can't be as young as he looks, because he speaks of years like we speak of minutes. I will die if I ever find myself in that monster's power! He has been telling me of all the creatures he has slain on the worlds on which he has landed, and I tell you, Dirk, that he is cruel and ruthless and horrible."

"He will never have you!" swore Dirk. "And if I hear of any more of his insolence, I will throw him headlong from this terrace."

"Please, Dirk," she begged, "don't do anything—not yet. He is utterly unscrupulous, Dirk. He told me that, even now, he is plotting against some Malfero who rules Lodore like a god, and that he is planning to seize the throne of the planet. He wants to make me the queen of that fearful world when he becomes king. He boasted that, if I were on the throne, millions of people from other worlds would be sacrificed in my honor in the temples of Lodore." Her voice trembled and her eyes were terror-stricken as she continued. "They tear out the hearts of living victims," she whispered, "and burn them on their high and mammoth pyramids."

Rage took possession of Dirk and, casting a glance at Zitlan, he saw that the Lodorian was smiling insolently at him.

“I’ll kill that beast, if it’s the last thing that I do!” he exclaimed to Inga.

“Dirk, Dirk,” she implored, “don’t even look at him. He is proud and impetuous, and he will kill you in defiance of his own father.”

“We will find some way to rid the world of the scourge that has descended upon it,” asserted Dirk confidently, “and he will die with the rest of that monstrous crew.”

“I am going in, Dirk,” Inga said. “Please,” she begged, “don’t do anything rash. If—something—should happen to you, I would lose all the hope that I have and I would, I think, kill myself.”

“Don’t lose hope, my dear,” said Dirk reassuringly. “I believe that I know of a way to destroy the plague that menaces us.”

He pressed her hand and, after she left him, he walked over and joined the other men on the terrace. Zitlan, coming from the terrace wall, stretched out in a chair not far from Dirk.

Teuxical regarded the latter with a countenance that was calm and amicable. “I am sorry, my young friend,” he apologized, “that I had to intervene between you and my son.” He paused a moment and sat

in silence, a thoughtful expression on his face. “Ah,” he then said, “what disasters have arisen out of the desire of men for women. In my wanderings over the starlit worlds, I have seen....” He ceased speaking, brooded for a moment, and then shook his head slowly. “But you cannot say that I was not just,” he continued, addressing Dirk. “I punished Zitlan for his presumption. Fragoni tells me that the woman has pledged herself to you. Let her pledge be kept!” he exclaimed sternly, looking straight at Zitlan.

“We are the conquerors,” asserted the latter boldly, “and to us should belong the spoils of our daring!”

“Silence!” thundered Teuxical. “My own son, above all others, shall be obedient to my commands! Or, like others have done, he shall die because of insubordination!”

Zitlan, a defiant expression on his face, ceased to speak, but Dirk could see that he was livid with suppressed rage.

“As I was saying,” Teuxical remarked, turning to Fragoni, “I am getting old and long have I been weary of conquest. I have seen your world and it pleases me. It is a tiny and peaceful place, far removed from the strife and turbulence of the restless centers of the universe. So it is my will to leave you unscathed and return to Lodore for a

brief time to ask of the mighty Malfero the grant of this little provincial land. And then, with his permission, I will return here and rule it with wisdom and benevolence.

“I will bring to you much knowledge, and peace will be to the people of this earth and peace will be to me.”

“It is well,” replied Fragoni. “No world, I am certain, could hope for a wiser and more just ruler than yourself, and our Congress surely will receive you with acclaim.”

Teuxical bowed in recognition of the compliment, and his countenance indicated that he was gratified.

“We will go, now, back to our vessel,” he said, addressing the other Lodorians. “We will return for you at the appointed hour and conduct you to our ship,” he added, speaking to Fragoni.

“We will be ready,” Fragoni replied.

Zitlan had arisen with the rest of them and Dirk, with a look of contempt and amusement in his eyes, regarded him casually.

“May I have the honor of conducting our guests back to their ship in a plane?” Stanton requested of Fragoni.

The latter nodded and Stanton walked across the terrace in the direction of the landing stage.

Zitlan, as he followed after the others, passed close to Dirk and, pausing for a moment, fixed his hateful eyes on him.

“You dog,” he whispered malignantly, “remember what I tell you! The time will come when I will cast you to the carnaphlocti in the dark and icy caverns of sunless Tiganda. You will die,” he swore, “the death of a million agonies!”

For a moment Dirk felt an almost irresistible impulse to hurl himself on the Lodorian and slay him.

He managed to maintain his control, however, and only regarded Zitlan with disdain as the latter turned and went on his way.

In another moment the plane, containing Stanton and the Lodorians, was high up in the darkness.

Dirk glanced at the great clock that gleamed atop of the beacon-tower on the Metropole Landing Field.

The hour was close to twelve-thirty A. M.

A moment of silence on the terrace followed the departure of the plane that bore the Lodorians back to their craft.

For an hour the clouds had been gathering in the sky and now a fine, cold rain commenced to fall.

A peal of thunder echoed above them after a sharp flash of lightning had streaked across the black night above them.

A servant appeared from the entrance to the apartment and pressed a button close to the door.

Protective plates of glass noiselessly enveloped the terrace, sheltering those upon it from the inclement weather.

“It is well,” remarked Fragoni, breaking the silence, “that we were found by a leader like Teuxical. Our tribute will not be unbearable, and he will bestow many benefits upon us.”

“But surely,” protested Dirk, “you do not intend to surrender without a struggle! Nothing but disaster,” he asserted earnestly, “will come upon the earth if you do. Teuxical may be honest and just but, after all, he neither is immortal nor all-powerful, and something may happen to him at any moment. And there are those like Zitlan who

would turn the world over to ravage and rape, and then convert it into a blazing pyre, if they had their way. These vandals," he insisted, "must be slain one and all, or, mark my words, our world will be laid waste."

Dirk spoke with such a sense of conviction that his words held his listeners spellbound.

"Who is Teuxical," he asked, "but the vassal of a monarch whose corsairs, very apparently, are carrying on a war of conquest in the universe? It will be disastrous, I say, to place any dependence in the good will of this one Lodorian. If he, or any of his men, return to that far-off planet where they dwell word will be carried there of the existence of our world. But who can say that Teuxical ever will return here again? It may be the whim of his ruler to refuse his request, or any one of a thousand other events might arise to thwart his desire to live among us. No," concluded Dirk passionately, "it never will do to let that great engine of destruction rise into the skies again!"

"He is right!" asserted Steinholt positively. "It will be far better to annihilate these raiders, if such a thing can be accomplished!"

Lazarre was rather inclined to take sides with Fragoni.

“But how,” he demanded, “can such destruction be brought about? We know nothing of the capabilities of that monster that is lying down there in the Sound. It is undoubtedly equipped with the deadliest of devices and they all will be turned upon us if we fail in an effort to destroy the thing and those who have come from space upon it. If there was a way to smite them suddenly, to bring death to the Lodorians and to those swarming, mindless, murderous minions who act in obedience to them, I would favor doing it.

“But, as it is,” he concluded, “it seems like inviting disaster even to think of such an attempt, much less to try it.”

“It can be done, though,” asserted Dirk, “or there is at least a fighting chance of accomplishing it. The electrosceotan—” He paused, and looked questioningly at Steinholt. “The top of that monster is open and....”

The Teuton furrowed his brow and considered the proposition for a moment.

“Yes,” he said, nodding his head, “it might be done.” Again he silently gave the subject his thought. “It is well worth trying,” he asserted with an air of decision. “But we will have to make haste,” he warned, “if the thing is to be done before the flight to The

Hague."

"So be it," said Fragoni. "We will apply ourselves to the task at hand. I, too," he confessed, "had rather see these vandals destroyed like so much vermin rather than have them carry the news of the existence of this earth back into those strange worlds in the depth of space. I will only regret the passing of Teuxical, who could have taught us much wisdom. And now," he continued briskly, "I will place myself under your orders, Dirk. You are the one who suggested this plan and upon you will fall the responsibility of executing it. And, if it succeeds," he added, "the glory will be yours."

"I care little for the glory," replied Dirk, "but I gladly accept the duties and the responsibilities. These," he said to Fragoni, "are my instructions to you. Inasmuch as Teuxical and his captains will return here at about four o'clock in the morning to convey us back to their craft, it will be necessary to have this building emptied of its inhabitants by that time. Let all of those who dwell here depart from it, a few at a time, so as not to excite suspicion. Inga, above all others, must leave and retreat to a place of safety. Then, as the hour approaches for the arrival of the Lodorians, we will escape by plane from one of the rear terraces. They will land in search of us and—well, then they will feel the force of our power."

“I will follow your orders explicitly,” promised Fragoni. “I wonder,” he added, “where Stanton is? He should be advised of what we are going to attempt.”

“He will return in due time,” replied Dirk. “And, if not, it will be the worse for him. Lazarre will remain here with you,” he then told Fragoni, “and Steinholt and I will now go about our part of the task at hand.”

Dirk, followed by Steinholt, hurried across the terrace and, leaving the shelter of its quartzite plates, sought the landing stage.

The rain still was falling and the heavens were congested with dark and heavy clouds.

Dirk, selecting one of the smaller planes, entered the cabin and Steinholt, following after him, closed the door and threw on the lights.

Swiftly they shot straight up into the air, Dirk ignoring all of the rules of flight in his haste to be under way. Once in the westbound lane, he headed his plane toward Manhattan and threw his rheostat wide open. In a few minutes they were skimming over the great city and past the three-thousand-foot steel tower of the Worldwide

Broadcasting Station.

For fifteen minutes more he kept the plane on a straight course and then, bringing it to a quick stop, he let it drop like a plummet toward the earth.

It landed, among many other planes, on the transparent, quartzite roof of a vast building and, looking down into the interior, they could see several rows of great dynamos. Some of them were turning, and the humming that they made could be heard plainly.

Dirk and Steinholt ran rapidly across the roof until they came to a superstructure, which they entered. There was a shaft inside. Dirk pressed a button, and an elevator shot up and stopped at the door, which automatically flashed open.

He closed it after he and his companion had entered the cage and, dropping rapidly downward, they came to a stop in a lighted chamber that was far below the surface of the ground.

A stoop-shouldered old man greeted them, an expression of surprise on his face.

“Gentlemen!” he exclaimed. “What is—”

“Power, Gaeble!” commanded Steinholt tensely. “Power! Let every dynamo run its swiftest. To-night we have to use for the electrosceotan!”

“But I thought it was peace that those from the stars desired,” said the old electrician. “Through my radiovisor I heard—”

“That was sent out,” explained Steinholt, “to relieve the fears of the people and to keep them in order.”

Swiftly the distorted figure of the old man sped to a great switchboard, where he pressed button after button.

The very ground commenced to vibrate around them and the massive structure seemed to be alive with straining power.

Then Steinholt, going to a corner of the intricate board, adjusted a few levers, while his gnomelike companion watched him carefully.

“And now, Gaeble,” the scientist said impressively, “these are your orders. At precisely the hour of four o’clock in the morning make one connection with this switch.”

He indicated, with a stubby finger, the lever to be operated.

“Keep the circuit closed for just four seconds,” he added slowly, “and then break it. Do you understand, Gaeble?” he demanded.

“I do,” replied the old man.

“Then,” continued Steinholt, “after you break that connection you quickly will close this next circuit. Keep it closed for four seconds and then, after opening it for one second, close it again for four seconds. Repeat the procedure twice more, Gaeble, after that, and then await my further instructions. Is everything clear?” he asked.

“It is, sir,” the old man replied. “I will follow your orders implicitly.”

“There is one thing more,” Steinholt said. “Get the Worldwide Tower on the televisor and warn them of what is to happen.”

“I will do that immediately,” Gaeble replied.

Dirk and Steinholt shot up to the roof again and the building over which they walked seemed to be quivering with life.

They could see that all of the mammoth dynamos beneath them were revolving and the humming which they had heard before had changed into an ugly, vibrant roar.

Again they took flight and, reaching Manhattan, they continued north and east to the shore of Long Island Sound.

Long before the old East River had been filled in and the space which it had occupied reclaimed for building purposes. All indications of its former bed had been obliterated by mammoth terraced structures.

When they reached their destination on the shore of the Sound a small submarine, which Dirk had ordered by radio, was awaiting them.

“Submerge and proceed up the Sound,” Dirk ordered the officer, “and take us directly under the craft of the Lodorians.”

In a few minutes they were skimming over the surface of the water and, when a sufficient depth had been gained, the tiny boat disappeared beneath the rain-rippled sea.

Dirk sat at a port and watched the aquatic life as it was illuminated by the powerful aquamarine searchlights.

Progress under the water was comparatively slow, as mankind had made but little progress in underwater navigation. Air liners long

before had almost superseded travel by land and sea and the abolition of warfare had swept all of the old navies from the ocean.

It was more than an hour before the officer in charge of the boat announced that the mammoth hull of the monster that was lying on the Sound was visible directly above them.

Both Dirk and Steinholt donned diving apparatus, and the former carefully adjusted the mechanism that was contained in a metallic box about two feet square.

Then they stepped up into a chamber in the conning tower of the boat and, after a door slipped shut beneath them, water slowly commenced to pour into the compartment.

When it was full a sliding door that was in front of them slowly opened and they passed out onto the deck of the underwater craft.

Steinholt had been provided with some welding apparatus and, in a few minutes, the box which Dirk had carried was attached securely to the bottom of the craft of the Lodorians.

They then reentered the submarine by reversing the process which had attended their exit. Very soon they were in the cabin of the boat

again.

“If everything goes well,” said Dirk, “those damned Lodorians will never know what struck them.”

“I only hope,” said Steinholt, “that we don’t destroy that leviathan altogether. We might solve the secret of it and then we, too, could ride out into the heart of the universe.”

“It is impossible to imagine what will happen,” Dirk replied, “until after we launch our attack.”

Both of the men were silent during the return trip of the small undersea craft, which emerged at its dock a little before three-thirty in the morning.

“We’ll have to hurry,” urged Dirk nervously, “because we will need a little time to make preparations after we get back to Fragoni’s.”

They entered their plane and Dirk shot it swiftly up into the night, following the red shaft of light that rose almost directly from the point at which they had made their landing.

Then, having reached the eastbound level, he headed straight in the direction of the palace of Fragoni.

Dirk cast a glance at the great city that lay far beneath him. High up into the heavens it tossed the fulgurant fires that betokened its wealth and power. And, down among those myriad lights, millions and millions of people were restless under the danger that menaced them. It was only a matter of moments now before their fate, and the fate of their great metropolis, would be decided. By dawn they would be free forever from the threat of subjugation and slavery or else they, and all that they had toiled and striven for, would be the veriest dust of dying embers.

And whatever befell them likewise would befall the rest of the world and every living thing that moved upon it.

Dirk was high above Fragoni's when he stopped the forward flight of the plane and, dropping it rapidly through the misty night, brought up easily on the landing stage. The other planes which had been there when he and Steinholt had taken their departure were gone and Dirk felt a sense of relief when he observed this. Inga, then, must have departed with the other occupants of the colossal structure. Things were going according to the plan that he had conceived. He stepped out of the cabin, followed by Steinholt, and proceeded hastily along the terrace and turned the corner into the garden.

Then he came to an abrupt halt because there, before him, was

Zitlan, with one of the deadly ray-tubes of the Lodorians in his hand.

Dirk knew immediately that something unexpected had happened and that he was in the power of one who not only hated him but who had an unholy desire for Inga.

He realized, too, that any show of resistance would be nothing short of suicide, for he was well aware of the deadliness of the strange weapon with which he and Steinholt were being menaced by the gloating Lodorian.

“One false move and you die!” warned Zitlan. “Come forward, now, and join those two others over whom Anteucan and Huazibar are watching.”

Dirk and Steinholt promptly obeyed the command of Zitlan and walked over to where Fragoni and Lazarre were being guarded by two of the conquerors.

The rain had ceased to fall, but the skies were dark and overcast with heavy clouds. There was an occasional flash of lightning, and thunder rolled and echoed through the night.

The terrace, however, was brightly illuminated and every detail of

the scene around him was visible to Dirk.

He saw Stanton, on another part of the terrace, standing among some Lodorians he had not seen before. Stanton, apparently, was not being treated as a prisoner and Dirk wondered, rather vaguely, why this was.

“What happened?” Dirk asked Fragoni quietly.

“According to what I have heard,” the latter replied, “Zitlan murdered his father in a fit of rage, and has taken over the command of the ship. Many of the Lodorians are his adherents and even those who do not favor him are so terrified that they will be obedient to his wishes.”

“And Inga?” questioned Dirk.

“She is inside the apartment,” said Fragoni, a note of desperation in his voice. “Zitlan surprised us completely and he and his men had us covered before we realized that Teuxical was not among them.”

Zitlan, in the meantime, had entered the suite of Fragoni and he now came out, Inga walking before him.

She was silent and proudly erect but there was a pallor in her face

that indicated her realization of the danger that she was threatened with.

When Dirk saw her she gave him a brave smile, which he answered with a glance of reassurance.

He could see the great clock in the Metropole Tower, and he noticed, with a feeling of grave apprehension, that it was twenty minutes to four o'clock.

There were only a few minutes more in which to make a desperate and apparently a hopeless effort to save Inga, his friends and himself from a catastrophe which he had been instrumental in contriving.

Then Zitlan stood before him, haughty and arrogant, his lowering countenance ugly with hatred.

"So, dog," he said, "you who dared to defy Zitlan now stand before him a captive!"

Neither Dirk nor any one of the three others who were guarded with him replied to the utterance.

"You and that woman of yours," continued the Lodorian insolently, "both are my prisoners to do with as I please. Your fate," he

continued, “I already have planned for you and I assure you that it will not be as pleasurable as the one to which she is destined. You will find that Tigana, on which you and those with you will be cast, is a world of terror such as you never could dream of. Even the monsters which crawl through the deliriums of the mind are not as horrible as those which infest the mad and haunted world of which I speak.”

He paused a moment, a cruel smile on his face, as if he wished the full import of his words to sear themselves into the minds of the doomed men.

“But the woman,” he added, “will return to Lodore with me and be the queen of all women. And soon,” he said savagely, “she may be queen of all Lodore, of the worlds which pay tribute to Lodore, and of other worlds which I will conquer and ravage. My father stood in my way and he died at my own hands. So will others perish who thwart my ambition, and I will become supreme in the universe!”

A feeling of reckless fury possessed Dirk as he listened to the words of Zitlan and he felt an almost irresistible desire to drive a fist square between the mad, glittering eyes of the Lodorian.

He glanced at the great clock, however, and he saw that the time to

act had not yet come. At the last moment he would make one desperate attempt to frustrate the evil designs of Zitlan. If it failed—well, all would be lost. But it was a far better thing to die resisting the despicable Zitlan and his minions than it would be to live and to know that, without a struggle, he had abandoned to degradation the girl he loved.

“This world of yours will be my world,” he heard Zitlan boast, “and the spoils from it will add to my riches. This one here,” he continued, indicating Stanton, “has offered to show me where all of the treasures of the earth may be found. And, as a reward, he will return to Lodore with me and there be elevated to a high position.”

That, then, was why Stanton was not under guard like the rest of them.

“Our good friend, Stanton,” said Lazarre, “seems to have become something of a Judas.”

“And let his name be forever cursed, like the name of Judas,” said Dirk.

“Silence!” thundered the Lodorian. “I, Zitlan, am speaking.” He paused a moment. “When I garner up the treasures of this world in

the way of precious stones and metals I also shall gather more priceless loot in the way of women. And then, having taken all that I desire, I will lay waste to this earth so that those who survive will fear the name of Zitlan and will grovel before him like a god when once again he appears to them."

While Zitlan had been speaking, Dirk had been studying the opponents with whom he soon had to clash.

The two Lodorians who were standing guard over himself and his companions were close to his left side. Zitlan was directly in front of him, and there were seven of his minions clustered behind him.

Again Dirk glanced at the great dial of the clock, and he saw that it was seven minutes of four.

The moment had come to act if action was to prove of any avail.

"I will—"

But the words of Zitlan were interrupted by Dirk, who suddenly made a mighty sweep with his left arm and knocked the deadly tubes from the hands of Anteucan and Huazibar. Startled by the assault, they went reeling backward. At almost the same instant Dirk leaped

forward and, seizing Zitlan, hurled him among those Lodorians who had been massed behind him. Then he threw himself violently into the tangled mass, his fists driving in and out with deadly strength!

Out of the corner of one eye he saw Inga pass the melee and dart swiftly to the corner of the terrace. Instead of passing around to the landing stage, however, she lingered there and watched the combat.

Dirk, as he fought, became conscious that Steinholt and Fragoni were at his side, battling with him against his enemies. He saw, too, that Stanton had retired to the far end of the terrace and that he was watching the struggle with frightened eyes.

“We must reach the plane and get away,” gasped Dirk. “In another three minutes—”

He felled a Lodorian who, having lost his tube, was about to grapple with him. He saw Steinholt send another one of their opponents reeling backward.

“Fragoni!” he exclaimed. “The plane! Get in with Inga! We will come!”

Even as he spoke his fists were flailing back and forth between each

one of his staccato commands.

He saw beneath him a hand reaching toward a tube, and he kicked the instrument of death. It hurtled over in the direction of Stanton and landed close to his feet. Stanton might have picked it up and been in possession of the means of aiding his old friends or his new allies. But he shrunk away, panic-stricken, from the thing that lay so close to his reach.

A Lodorian leaped upon Dirk's back in an effort to bring him to the ground, but he stooped swiftly forward and his assailant was catapulted over his head into those who were in front of him.

He caught a flash of the contorted face of Zitlan flying through the air, and saw him land with a crash on the terrace, and lie there writhing in pain.

"Steinholt, Lazarre!" he said convulsively. "We've got to strike once more! And then—run!"

He plunged into their enemies with every bit of energy that he had left, and saw two of them toppling down. Then, like a flash, he turned to Lazarre, who was trying to fight off three of the Lodorians. Seizing one of them by the waist, Dirk hurled him backward and he

disposed of another one in the same manner. His sheer desperation seemed to have given him unbounded strength and power.

Lazarre sent his third opponent down with a blow under the chin and then, with Dirk at his side, they turned to the assistance of Steinholt.

With one mad rush they crashed into a group of Lodorians and sent them reeling away like so many nine-pins.

“Now! To the plane!” exclaimed Dirk, taking to his heels across the terrace. Steinholt and Lazarre followed after him and, turning the corner, they saw that the ship was in place and that Fragoni was anxiously waiting by the door of the cabin. Inga, Dirk knew, already was inside and safe. He stood aside while Steinholt and Lazarre leaped in. During the momentary wait he caught a glimpse of the great clock. It was one minute to four. Dirk jumping into the plane and switched on the helicopter without even waiting to close the cabin door.

The ship shot skyward like a rocket. When it reached an altitude of thirty-five hundred feet, he turned it north and raced at top speed in that direction.

It was miles away from the palace of Fragoni in less than thirty

seconds. Dirk then stopped the plane and held it poised in the air with the helicopter.

The skies were turgid and black and the massed clouds, reflecting the lights of the great city below them, were permeated with an ugly, feverish, red glow.

From where they were hanging in midair, the occupants of the plane could plainly see the sparkling palace of Fragoni towering high up into the darkness of the night.

The lights of the magnificent mansion were reflected far out into the Sound where, looming in the golden ripples, lay the sinister monster from the terrible depths of unfathomable space.

Dirk took a watch from his pocket and, after glancing at it, he hastily replaced it.

“Two seconds more,” he said, “and—”

A sharp and dazzling bolt of greenish fire came hurling suddenly out of the west and, with a thunderous concussion, seemed to fasten itself on the crest of Fragoni’s palace.

It trembled and quivered, as if endowed with some uncanny life and

power, as it remained there against the darkness, throwing a weird, green tinge over the water and up into the skies.

Blue waves of light could be seen pulsing and racing along the terrible beam and there, where it had fastened itself, they seemed to disappear in the vast and crumbling structure.

For four seconds that destructive treak of light, one end of which was lost back in the mists that concealed Manhattan, tore at the proud pile.

And, as the stone crumbled and the steelite fused under the mighty assault, an ominous roar swept through the night. The air was so violently agitated that the plane, miles away, tossed up and down like a tiny boat on a stormy sea.

Then suddenly the bolt was gone, but its livid image still burned in the eyes of those who had been watching it.

Once more, it came hurling out of the west and, like the fang of some great and deadly serpent, darted into the monster that lay in the waters of the Sound.

Dirk and his companions could see plainly, by the light of the bolt

itself, that it had crashed into the well from which the Lodorians first had appeared, and that it was beating and hammering its way into the very vitals of the craft.

Dazzling, blinding fire seemed to pour from the aperture through which the bolt had passed. The clamor that arose was deafening.

Then again the streak of fires was withdrawn, leaving the night intensely black until, in a moment more, it came thundering out of the west again and, with an impact that made the land and the sea and the very heavens tremble, hurled its way into the depths of the doomed leviathan.

Twice again it fell, a fiery scimitar out of the darkness, and twice again it careened at the vitals of the stricken monster.

Then, after the assault was over, the ship still floated on the surface of the Sound and its shell, as far as Dirk and the others could judge, still was unscathed.

“We will soon know our fate,” remarked Steinholt calmly. “If that didn’t kill those beasts we might as well give up our ghosts.”

“I’ll drop the plane a little lower and a little nearer to the ship,” said

Dirk. “I don’t believe that any life is surviving in that thing.”

“My beautiful palace is nothing but dust,” sighed Fragoni, mournfully. “And all my beautiful treasures, too.”

“And that beautiful Zitlan,” Lazarre reminded him, “and his beautiful boy friends, they are all dust too, thank God!”

“It was a queer fate that Stanton met,” suggested Dirk. “He thought that he would save his life by going over to our enemies, and, instead of that, he lost it.”

“Poor Stanton,” said Steinholt. “He was born that way, I suppose, and I, for one, am ready to forgive and forget him. And now,” continued the Teuton, “I hope that we didn’t do too much damage to that little boat of the Lodorians. If we could get just a little peep at the inside of it we might learn the secret of its contrivance. And then, my friends, we could do a little journeying ourselves.”

“Have you any theory regarding it?” asked Fragoni.

“Teuxical intimated that it rode the magnetic currents which, of course, flow through all the suns and planets in the universe,” replied Steinholt. “We have been working along that line ourselves, of

course, and it probably won't be very long anyway before we have the solution of interplanetary travel."

"Those Lodorians would have solved it for us if it hadn't been for that artificial lightning," said Lazarre. "That's powerful stuff, Steinholt."

"Yes, with that three-thousand-foot Worldwide Tower to hurl it from," agreed Steinholt, "we can get fair range with it. If the Lodorians hadn't left the well of their ship open, though, the lightning wouldn't have done us much good. I was afraid, too, for a time, that we might have trouble in welding that automatic wireless circuit box to the bottom of the ship."

Dirk, in the meantime, had brought the plane down to within a half-mile of the leviathan, and he was holding it poised there.

"It seems to me," he said, after scrutinizing the monster for a couple of minutes, "that it is moving in the water. It is!" he exclaimed. "Steinholt! Look!"

Only a comparatively short time had elapsed since the last bolt of lightning had vanished back into the darkness.

“It is still rocking with the force of the shock that we gave it,” asserted Steinholt. “You would be rocking, too, if you had been tickled by a bolt like that one.”

“It is rising, I tell you!” said Dirk. “The front end of it is slowly getting higher in the water!”

“You’re right, Dirk,” said Fragoni, excitement straining his voice. “Look! It just dropped back into the water!”

Then, as they watched, the movements of the leviathan became more and more agitated, until it was churning up the waves around it like a wounded and agonized monster of the sea.

Suddenly the front end tilted upward and the monster rose clear of the water. It shot straight up into the air at a speed so terrific that they could scarcely follow it.

“It’s gone!” gasped Fragoni. “Those brainless, mindless automatons must have survived!”

“No,” remarked Steinholt thoughtfully. “I don’t believe that there is any life left on that thing. No one had closed the well when it rose, and it would mean death to go out into space with the ship in that

condition.”

“Then what made it go up?” demanded Lazarre. “Can the damn thing run itself, Steinholt?”

“I imagine,” recalled the Teuton, “that our bolts killed every living thing that was on the craft but that, at the same time, they set the mechanism of the monster into action. Ah,” he moaned, “but that is too bad. We could have learned much by an examination of the interior of that liner of the air.”

A cry from Inga startled them and they saw that she was looking skyward, with terror in her eyes.

They followed her gaze and there, streaking through the black clouds, they saw a long trail of white fire.

“It’s that thing!” exclaimed Fragoni. “I tell you that those upon it still live and that they are about to wreak vengeance upon us.”

“No,” said Steinholt positively. “You are wrong, Fragoni. What is happening may be almost as disastrous, though,” he admitted. “That leviathan is in its death agonies; it is a metal monster gone mad, and none can say what will happen before it expires.”

“The place for us,” asserted Dirk hurriedly, “is in the Worldwide Tower. here we can keep track of what is transpiring and try to decide what to do.”

The others agreed with him and, seeking the westward level of flight, he sped the plane in the direction of the mammoth pyramid from which the news of the world was broadcast.

They reached the vast structure in a few minutes, and, after dropping the plane on a landing stage, they went into the operating room.

Here they learned quickly that the craft of the Lodorians was doing incalculable damage, and that it was throwing the population of the world into an unprecedented panic.

It was, apparently, following an erratic, uncertain orbit that took it far out into space and then back quite close to the surface of the earth again.

It had passed through the very heart of Chicago within a few yards of the ground, and it had cut and burned a swath more than a mile wide through the buildings of that metropolis.

Other cities in America had felt the devastating effects of its

irresistible and molten heat and, within a short time, thousands of people had been slain by it.

Time and again, from the terrace of the great tower, Dirk and his companions saw the skies above them light up as that terrible, blazing, projectile which, uncontrolled, went hurtling on its way through the night.

For three hours it careened on its mad course and hysteria reigned throughout the cities of the whole civilized world.

But then a report came from a rocket-liner that had left Berlin en route for San Francisco.

“Either a great meteor or that leviathan of the Lodorians just swept down past us in mid-Atlantic and plunged into the sea. Apparently it has exploded, for it has thrown a great column of water for miles up into the air. We are stopping and standing by, although the heat is intense and clouds of steam are rising from the sea.”

As the minutes passed by after the report from the rocket-ship had been received, the disappearance from the sky of the flaming craft from space seemed to confirm the belief that it had been swallowed by the ocean. This was accepted as a certainty by eight o’clock in the

morning.

“Ah,” sighed Steinholt, “if only it had crashed on land somewhere. If there only was enough of it left for us to—”

“Enough of any damn contraption of that kind,” swore Lazarre fervently, “is altogether too much. I hope, for one, that its fragments are scattered so far that we never can put them together again.”

Dirk and Inga leaned against one of the parapets that evening on a gardened terrace of his own great mansion in Manhattan.

Their little party had gone there after leaving the Worldwide Tower in the morning.

After resting during the day, Lazarre and Fragoni were somewhere together, discussing the plans for a new palace to take the place of the one that was destroyed so that Zitlan and his minions might die in its ruins.

Steinholt, elsewhere, was delving into oceanography and submarine engineering, in an attempt to learn whether or not it would be feasible to fish for the remains of the lost ship of Lodore.

“It seems like a dream, doesn’t it, Dirk?” the girl remarked. “It is

difficult to believe that we actually have seen and talked with people from some far-away world."

Together they looked up into the crystalline skies, where mazes of shining stars gave testimony to the countless worlds which were wheeling around them.

"And just to think, Dirk," Inga continued proudly, "that it was you who saved this world and all of its people from that horrible Zitlan and his horde."

"I saved you," he told her gravely and tenderly, "and that somehow means more to me than saving all of this world and all of the other worlds which are rolling through the uncharted ways of time and space."

April 1930

#20 The Man Who Was Dead, By Thomas Holt Knight:

As Jerry's eyes fell on the creature's head, he shuddered—for the face was nothing but bone, with dull-brown skin stretched taut over it. A skeleton that was alive!

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

It was a wicked night, the night I met the man who had died. A bitter, heart-numbing night of weird, shrieking wind and flying snow. A few black hours I will never forget.

"Well, Jerry, lad!" my mother said to me as I pushed back from the table and started for my sheepskin coat and the lantern in the corner of the room. "Surely you're not going out a night like this? Goodness gracious, Jerry, it's not fit!"

"Can't help it, Mother," I replied. "Got to go. You've never seen me miss a Saturday night yet, have you now?"

"No. But then I've never seen a night like this for years either. Jerry, I'm really afraid. You may freeze before you even get as far as—"

"Ah, come now, Mother," I argued. "They'd guy me to death if I didn't sit in with the gang to-night. They'd chaff me because it was too cold for me to get out. But I'm no pampered sissy, you know, and I want to see—"

"Yes," she retorted bitingly, "I know. You want to go and bask in that elegant company. Our stove's just as good as the one down at that dirty old store," continued my persistent and anxious parent, "and it's certainly not very flattering to think that you leave us on a night like this to—Who'll be there, anyway?"

"Oh, the usual five or six I suppose," I answered as I adjusted the wick of my lantern, hearing as I did the snarl and cut of the wind through the evergreens in the yard.

"That black-whiskered sphinx, Hammersly, will he be there?"

"Yes, he'll be there, I'm pretty sure."

"Hm-m!" she exclaimed, her expression now carrying all the contempt for my judgment and taste she intended it should. "Button your coat up good around your neck, then, if you must go to see your precious Hammersly and the rest of them. Have you ever heard that man say anything yet? Does he speak at all, Jerry?" Then her gentle mind, not at all accustomed to hard thoughts or contemptuous remarks, quickly changed. "Funny thing about that fellow," she mused. "He's got something on his mind. Don't you think so, Jerry?"

"Y-es, yes I do. And I've often wondered what it could be. He certainly's a queer stick. Got to admit that. Always brooding. Good fellow all right, and, for a 'sphinx' as you call him, likable. But I wonder what is eating him?"

"What do you suppose it could be, Jerry boy?" questioned Mother following me to the door, the woman of her now completely forgetting her recent criticisms and, perhaps, the rough night her son was about to step into. "Do you suppose the poor chap has a—a—broken heart, or something like that? A girl somewhere who jilted him? Or maybe he loves someone he has no right to!" she finished excitedly, the plates in her hand rattling.

"Maybe it's worse than that," I ventured. "P'r'aps—I've no right to say it—but p'r'aps, and I've often thought it, there's a killing he wants

to forget, and can't!"

I heard my mother's sharp little "Oh!" as I shut the door behind me and the warmth and comfort of the room away. Outside it was worse than the whistle of the wind through the trees had led me to expect. Black as pitch it was, and as cold as blazes. For the first moment or two, though, I liked the feel of the challenge of the night and the racing elements, was even a little glad I had added to the dare of the blackness the thought of Hammersly and his "killing." But I had not gone far before I was wishing I did not have to save my face by putting in an appearance at the store that night.

Every Saturday night, with the cows comfortable in their warm barn, and my own supper over, I was in the habit of taking my place on the keg or box behind the red-hot stove in Pruett's store. To-night all the snow was being hurled clear of the fields to block the roads full between the old, zigzag fences. The wind met me in great pushing gusts, and while it flung itself at me I would hang against it, snow to my knees, until the blow had gone along, when I could plunge forward again. I was glad when I saw the lights of the store, glad when I was inside.

They met me with mock applause for my pluck in facing the night, but for all their sham flattery I was pleased I had come, proud, I

must admit, that I had been able to plough my heavy way through the drifts to reach them. I saw at a glance that my friends were all there, and I saw too that there was a strange man present.

A very tall man he was, gaunt and awkward as he leaned into the angle of the two counters, his back to a dusty show-case. He attracted my attention at once. Not merely because he appeared so long and pointed and skinny, but because, of all ridiculous things in that frozen country, he wore a hard derby hat! If he had not been such a queer character it would have been laughable, but as it was it was—creepy. For the man beneath that hard hat was about as queer a looking character as I have ever seen. I supposed he was a visitor at the store, or a friend of one of my friends, and that in a little while I would be introduced. But I was not.

I took my place in behind the stove, feeling at once, though I am far from being unsociable usually, that the man was an intruder and would spoil the evening. But despite his cold, dampening presence we were soon at it, hammer and tongs, discussing the things that are discussed behind hospitable stoves in country stores on bad nights. But I could never lose sight of the fact that the stranger standing there, silent as the grave, was, to say the least, a queer one. Before long I was sure he was no friend or guest of anyone there, and that he not only cast a pall over me but over all of us. I did not like it, nor

did I like him. Perhaps it would have been just as well after all, I thought, had I heeded my mother and stayed home.

Jed Counsell was the one who, innocently enough, started the thing that changed the evening, that had begun so badly, into a nightmare.

"Jerry," he said, leaning across to me, "thinkin' of you s'afternoon. Readin' an article about reincarnation. Remember we were arguin' it last week? Well, this guy, whoever he was I've forgot, believes in it. Says it's so. That people *do* come back." With this opening shot Jed sat back to await my answer. I liked these arguments and I liked to bear my share in them, but now, instead of immediately answering the challenge, I looked around to see if any other of our circle were going to answer Jed. Then, deciding it was up to me, I shrugged off the strange feeling the man in the corner had cast over me, and prepared to view my opinions.

"That's just that fellow's belief, Jed," I said. "And just as he's got his so have I mine. And on this subject at least I claim my opinion is as good as anybody's." I was just getting nicely started, and a little forgetting my distaste for the man in the corner, when the fellow himself interrupted. He left his leaning place, and came creaking across the floor to our circle around the store. I say he came "creaking" for as he came he did creak. "Shoes," I naturally, almost

unconsciously decided, though the crazy notion was in my mind that the cracking I heard did sound like bones and joints and sinews badly in need of oil. The stranger sat his groaning self down among us, on a board lying across a nail keg and an old chair. Only from the corner of my eye did I see his movement, being friendly enough, despite my dislike, not to allow too marked notice of his attempt to be sociable seem inhospitable on my part. I was about to start again with my argument when Seth Spears, sitting closest to the newcomer, deliberately got up from the bench and went to the counter, telling Pruett as he went that he had to have some sugar. It was all a farce, a pretext, I knew. I've known Seth for years and had never known him before to take upon himself the buying for his wife's kitchen. Seth simply would not sit beside the man.

At that I could keep my eyes from the stranger no longer, and the next moment I felt my heart turn over within me, then lie still. I have seen "walking skeletons" in circuses, but never such a man as the one who was then sitting at my right hand. Those side-show men were just lean in comparison to the fellow who had invaded our Saturday night club. His thighs and his legs and his knees, sticking sharply into his trousers, looked like pieces of inch board. His shoulders and his chest seemed as flat and as sharp as his legs. The sight of the man shocked me. I sprang to my feet thoroughly frightened. I could not see much of his face, sitting there in the dark

as he was with his back to the yellow light, but I could make out enough of it to know that it was in keeping with the rest of him.

In a moment or two, realizing my childishness, I had fought down my fear and, pretending that a scorching of my leg had caused my hurried movement, I sat down again. None of the others said a word, each waiting for me to continue and to break the embarrassing silence. Hammersly, black-whiskered, the "sphinx" as my mother had called him, watched me closely. Hating myself not a little bit for actually being the sissy I had boasted I was not, I spoke hurriedly, loudly, to cover my confusion.

"No sir, Jed!" I said, taking up my argument. "When a man's dead, he's dead! There's no bringing him back like that highbrow claimed. The old heart may be only hitting about once in every hundred times, and if they catch it right at the last stroke they may bring it back then, but once she's stopped, Jed, she's stopped for good. Once the pulse has gone, and life has flickered out, it's out. And it doesn't come back in any form at all, not in this world!"

I was glad when I had said it, thereby asserting myself and downing my foolish fear of the man whose eyes I felt burning into me. I did not turn to look at him but all the while I felt his gimlety eyes digging into my brain.

Then he spoke. And though he sat right next to me his voice sounded like a moan from afar off. It was the first time we had heard this thing that once may have been a voice and that now sounded like a groan from a closely nailed coffin. He reached a hand toward my knee to enforce his words, but I jerked away.

"So you don't believe a man can come back from the grave, eh?" he grated. "Believe that once a man's heart is stilled it's stopped for good, eh? Well, you're all wrong, sonny. All wrong! You believe these things. I *know* them!"

His interference, his condescension, his whole hatefulness angered me. I could now no longer control my feeling. "Oh! You *know*, do you?" I sneered. "On such a subject as this you're entitled to *know*, are you? Don't make me laugh!" I finished insultingly. I was aroused. And I'm a big fellow, with no reason to fear ordinary men.

"Yes, I know!" came back his echoing, scratching voice.

"How do you know? Maybe you've been—?"

"Yes, I have!" he answered, his voice breaking to a squeak. "Take a good look at me, gentlemen. A good look." He knew now that he held the center of the stage, that the moment was his. Slowly he

raised an arm to remove that ridiculous hat. Again I jumped to my feet. For as his coat sleeve slipped down his forearm I saw nothing but bone supporting his hand. And the hand that then bared his head was a skeleton hand! Slowly the hat was lifted, but as quickly as light six able-bodied men were on their feet and half way to the door before we realized the cowardliness of it. We forced ourselves back inside the store very slowly, all of us rather ashamed of our ridiculous and childlike fear.

But it was all enough to make the blood curdle, with that live, dead thing sitting there by our fire. His face and skull were nothing but bone, the eyes deeply sunk into their sockets, the dull-brown skin like parchment in its tautness, drawn and shriveled down onto the nose and jaw. There were no cheeks. Just hollows. The mouth was a sharp slit beneath the flat nose. He was hideous.

"Come back and I'll tell you my yarn," he mocked, the slit that was his mouth opening a little to show us the empty, blackened gums. "I've been dead once," he went on, getting a lot of satisfaction from the weirdness of the lie and from our fear, "and *I* came back. Come and sit down and I'll explain why I'm this living skeleton."

We came back slowly, and as I did I slipped my hand into my outside pocket where I had a revolver. I put my finger in on the

trigger and got ready to use the vicious little thing. I was on edge and torn to pieces completely by the sight of the man, and I doubt not that had he made a move towards me my frayed nerves would have plugged him full of lead. I eyed my friends. They were in no better way than was I. Fright and horror stood on each face. Hammersly was worst. His hands were twitching, his eyes were like bright glass, his face bleached and drawn.

"I've quite a yarn to tell," went on the skeleton in his awful voice. "I've had quite a life. A full life. I've taken my fun and my pleasure wherever I could. Maybe you'll call me selfish and greedy, but I always used to believe that a man only passed this way once. Just like you believe," he nodded to me, his neck muscles and jaws creaking. "Six years ago I came up into this country and got a job on a farm," he went on, settling into his story. "Just an ordinary job. But I liked it because the farmer had a pretty little daughter of about sixteen or seventeen and as easy as could be. You may not believe it, but you can still find dames green enough to fall for the right story.

"This one did. I told her I was only out there for a time for my health. That I was rich back in the city, with a fine home and everything. She believed me. Little fool!" He chuckled as he said it, and my anger, mounting with his every devilish word, made the finger on the trigger in my pocket take a tighter crook to itself. "I

asked her to skip with me," the droning went on, "made her a lot of great promises, and she fell for it." His dry jaw bones clanked and chattered as if he enjoyed the beastly recital of his achievement, while we sat gaping at him, believing either that the man must be mad, or that we were the mad ones, or dreaming.

"We slipped away one night," continued the beast. "Went to the city. To a punk hotel. For three weeks we stayed there. Then one morning I told her I was going out for a shave. I was. I got the shave. But I hadn't thought it worth while to tell her I wouldn't be back. Well, she got back to the farm some way, though I don't know—"

"What!" I shouted, springing before him. "What! You mean you left her there! After you'd taken her, you left her! And here you sit crowing over it! Gloating! Boasting! Why you—!" I lived in a rough country. Associated with rough men, heard their vicious language, but seldom used a strong word myself. But as I stood over that monster, utterly hating the beastly thing, all the vile oaths and prickly language of the countryside, no doubt buried in some unused cell in my brain, spilled from my tongue upon him. When I had lashed him as fiercely as I was able I cried: "Why don't you come at me? Didn't you hear what I called you? You beast! I'd like to riddle you!" I shouted, drawing my gun.

"Aw, sit down!" he jeered, waving his rattling hand at me. "You ain't heard a thing yet. Let me finish. Well, she got back to the farm some way or another, and something over a year later I wandered into this country again too. I never could explain just why I came back. It was not altogether to see the girl. Her father was a little bit of a man and I began to remember what a meek and weak sheep he was. I got it into my head that it'd be fun to go back to his farm and rub it in. So I came.

"Her father was trying out a new corn planter right at the back door when I rounded the house and walked towards him. Then I saw, at once, that I had made a mistake. When he put his eyes on me his face went white and hard. He came down from the seat of that machine like a flash, and took hurried steps in the direction of a doublebarrelled gun leaning against the woodshed. They always were troubled with hawks and kept a gun handy. But there was an ax nearer to me than the gun was to him. I had to work fast but I made it all right. I grabbed that ax, jumped at him as he reached for the gun, and swung—once. His wife, and the girl too, saw it. Then I turned and ran."

The gaunt brute before us slowly crossed one groaning knee above the other. We were all sitting again now. The perspiration rolled down my face. I held my gun trained upon him, and, though I now

believed he was totally mad, because of a certain ring of truth in that empty voice, I sat fascinated. I looked at Seth. His jaw was hanging loose, his eyes bulging. Hammersly's mouth was set in a tight clenched line, his eyes like fire in his blue, drawn face. I could not see the others.

"The telephone caught me," continued our ghastly story-teller, "and in no time at all I was convicted and the date set for the hanging. When my time was pretty close a doctor or scientist fellow came to see me who said, 'Blaggett, you're slated to die. How much will you sell me your body for?' If he didn't say it that way he meant just that. And I said, 'Nothing. I've no one to leave money to. What do you want with my body?' And he told me, 'I believe I can bring you back to life and health, provided they don't snap your neck when they drop you.' 'Oh, you're one of *those* guys, are you?' I said then. 'All right, hop to it. If you can do it I'll be much obliged. Then I can go back on that farm and do a little more ax swinging!'" Again came his horrible chuckle, again I mopped my brow.

"So we made our plans," he went on, pleased with our discomfiture and our despising of him. "Next day some chap came to see me, pretending he was my brother. And I carried out my part of it by cursing him at first and then begging him to give me decent burial. So he went away, and, I suppose, received permission to get me right

after I was cut down.

"There was a fence built around the scaffold they had ready for me and the party I was about to fling, and they had some militia there, too. The crowd seemed quiet enough till they led me out. Then their buzzing sounded like a hive of bees getting all stirred up. Then a few loud voices, then shouts. Some rocks came flying at me after that, and it looked to me as though the hanging would not be so gentle a party after all. I tell you I was afraid. I wished it was over.

"The mob pushed against the fence and flattened it out, coming over it like waves over a beach. The soldiers fired into the air, but still they came, and I, I ran—up, onto the scaffold. It was safer!" As he said this he chuckled loudly. "I'll bet," he laughed, "that's the first time a guy ever ran into the noose for the safety of it! The mob came only to the foot of the scaffold though, from where they seemed satisfied to see the law take its course. The sheriff was nervous. So cut up that he only made a fling at tying my ankles, just dropped a rope around my wrists. He was like me, he wanted to get it over, and the crowd on its way. Then he put the rope around my neck, stepped back and shot the trap. Zamm! No time for a prayer—or for me to laugh at the offer!—or a last word or anything.

"I felt the floor give, felt myself shoot through. Smack! My weight

on the end of the rope hit me behind the ears like a mallet. Everything went black. Of course it would have been just my luck to get a broken neck out of it and give the scientist no chance to revive me. But after a second or two, or a minute, or it could have been an hour, the blackness went away enough to allow me to know I was hanging on the end of the rope, kicking, fighting, choking to death. My tongue swelled, my face and head and heart and body seemed ready to burst. Slowly I went into a deep mist that I knew then was *the* mist, then—then—I was off floating in the air over the heads of the crowd, watching my own hanging!

"I saw them give that slowly swinging carcass on the end of its rope time enough to thoroughly die, then, from my aerial, unseen watching place, I saw them cut it—me—down. They tried the pulse of the body that had been mine, they examined my staring eyes. Then I heard them pronounce me dead. The fools! I had known I was dead for a minute or two by that time, else how could my spirit have been gone from the shell and be out floating around over their heads?"

He paused here as he asked his question, his head turning on its dry and creaking neck to include us all in his query. But none of us spoke. We were dreaming it all, of course, or were mad, we thought.

"In just a short while," went on the skeleton, "my 'brother' came driving slowly in for my body. With no special hurry he loaded me onto his little truck and drove easily away. But once clear of the crowd he pushed his foot down on the gas and in five more minutes —with me hovering all the while alongside of him, mind you— floating along as though I had been a bird all my life—we turned into the driveway of a summer home. The scientific guy met him. They carried me into the house, into a fine-fitted laboratory. My dead body was placed on a table, a huge knife ripped my clothes from me.

"Quickly the loads from ten or a dozen hypodermic syringes were shot into different parts of my naked body. Then it was carried across the room to what looked like a large glass bottle, or vase, with an opening in the top. Through this door I was lowered, my body being held upright by straps in there for that purpose. The door to the opening was then placed in position, and by means of an acetylene torch and some easily melting glass, the door was sealed tight.

"So there stood my poor old body. Ready for the experiment to bring it back to life. And as my new self floated around above the scientist and his helper I smiled to myself, for I was sure the experiment would prove a failure, even though I now knew that the sheriff's haste had kept him from placing the rope right at my throat and had

saved me a broken neck. I was dead. All that was left of me now was my spirit, or soul. And that was swimming and floating about above their heads with not an inclination in the world to have a thing to do with the husk of the man I could clearly see through the glass of the bell.

"They turned on a huge battery of ultra-violet rays then," continued the hollow droning of the man who had been hanged, "which, as the scientist had explained to me while in prison, acting upon the contents of the syringes, by that time scattered through my whole body, was to renew the spark of life within the dead thing hanging there. Through a tube, and by means of a valve entering the glass vase in the top, the scientist then admitted a dense white gas. So thick was it that in a moment or two my body's transparent coffin appeared to be full of a liquid as white as milk. Electricity then revolved my cage around so that my body was insured a complete and even exposure to the rays of the green and violet lamps. And while all this silly stuff was going on, around and around the laboratory I floated, confident of the complete failure of the whole thing, yet determined to see it through if for no other reason than to see the discomfiture and disappointment that this mere man was bound to experience. You see, I was already looking back upon earthly mortals as being inferior, and now as I waited for this proof I was all the while fighting off a new urge to be going elsewhere.

Something was calling me, beckoning me to be coming into the full spirit world. But I wanted to see this wise earth guy fail.

"For a little while conditions stayed the same within that glass. So thick was the liquid gas in there at first that I could see nothing. Then it began to clear, and I saw to my surprise that the milky gas was disappearing because it was being forced in by the rays from the lights in through the pores into the body itself. As though my form was sucking it in like a sponge. The scientist and his helper were tense and taut with excitement. And suddenly my comfortable feeling left me. Until then it had seemed so smooth and velvety and peaceful drifting around over their heads, as though lying on a soft, fleecy cloud. But now I felt a sudden squeezing of my spirit body. Then I was in an agony. Before I knew what I was doing my spirit was clinging to the outside of that twisting glass bell, clawing to get into the body that was coming back to life! The glass now was perfectly clear of the gas, though as yet there was no sign of life in the body inside to hint to the scientist that he was to be successful. But I knew it. For I fought desperately to break in through the glass to get back into my discarded shell of a body again, knowing I must get in or die a worse death than I had before.

"Then my sharper eyes noted a slight shiver passing over the white thing before me, and the scientist must have seen it in the next

second, for he sprang forward with a choking cry of delight. Then the lolling head inside lifted a bit. I—still desperately clinging with my spirit hands to the outside, and all the time growing weaker and weaker—I saw the breast of my body rise and fall. The assistant picked up a heavy steel hammer and stood ready to crash open the glass at the right moment. Then my once dead eyes opened in there to look around, while I, clinging and gasping outside, just as I had on the scaffold, went into a deeper, darker blackness than ever. Just before my spirit life died utterly I saw the eyes of my body realize completely what was going on, then—from the inside now—I saw the scientist give the signal that caused the assistant to crash away the glass shell with one blow of his hammer.

"They reached in for me then, and I fainted. When I came back to consciousness I was being carefully, slowly revived, and nursed back to life by oxygen and a pulmotor."

The terrible creature telling us this tale paused again to look around. My knees were weak, my clothes wet with sweat.

"Is that all?" I asked in a piping, strange voice, half sarcastic, half unbelieving, and wholly spellbound.

"Just about," he answered. "But what do you expect? I left my friend

the scientist at once, even though he did hate to see me go. It had been all right while he was so keen on the experiment himself and while he only half believed his ability to bring me back. But now that he'd done it, it kinda worried him to think what sort of a man he was turning loose of the world again. I could see how he was figuring, and because I had no idea of letting him try another experiment on me, p'r'aps of putting me away again, I beat it in a hurry.

"That was five years ago. For five years I've lived with only just part of me here. Whatever it was trying to get back into that glass just before my body came to life—my spirit, I've been calling it—I've been without. It never did get back. You see, the scientist brought me back inside a shell that kept my spirit out. That's why I'm the skeleton you see I am. Something vital is missing."

He stood up cracking and creaking before us, buttoning his loose coat about his angular body. "Well, boys," he asked lightly, "what do you think of that?"

"I think you're a liar! A damn liar!" I cried. "And now, if you don't want me to fill you full of lead, get out of here and get out now! If I have to do it to you, there's no scientist this time to bring you back. When you go out you'll stay out!"

"Don't worry," he grimaced back to me, waving a mass of bones that should have been a hand contemptuously at me, "I'm going. I'm headed for Shelton." He stalked the length of the floor and shut the door behind him. The beast had gone.

"The dirty liar!" I cried. "I wish—yes—I wish I had an excuse to kill him. Just think of that being loose, will you? A brute who would think up such a yarn! Of course it's all absurd. All crazy. All a lie."

"No. It's not a lie."

I turned to see who had spoken. Hammersly's voice was so unfamiliar and now so torn in addition that I could not have thought he had spoken, had he not been looking right at me, his glittering eyes challenging my assertion. Would wonders never cease? I asked myself. First this outrageous yarn, now Hammersly, the "sphinx," expressing an opinion, looking for an argument! Of course it must be that his susceptible and brooding brain had been turned a bit by the evening we had just experienced.

"Why Hammersly! You don't believe it?" I asked.

"I not only believe it, Jerry, but now it's my turn to say, as he did, I *know* it! Jerry, old friend," he went on, "that devil told the truth. He

was hanged. He was brought back to life; and Jerry—I was that scientist!"

Whew! I fell back to a box again. My knees seemed to forsake me. Then I heard Hammersly talking to himself.

"Five years it's been," he muttered. "Five years since I turned him loose again. Five years of agony for me, wondering what new devilish crimes he was perpetrating, wondering when he would return to that little farm to swing his ax again. Five years—five years."

He came over to me, and without a word of explanation or to ask my permission he reached his hand into my pocket and drew out my revolver, and I did not protest.

"He said he was headed for Shelton," went on Hammersly's spoken thoughts. "If I slip across the ice I can intercept him at Black's woods." Buttoning his coat closely, he followed the stranger out into the night.

I was glad the moon had come up for my walk home, glad too when I had the door locked and propped with a chair behind me. I undressed in the dark, not wanting any grisly, sunken-eyed monster

to be looking in through the window at me. For maybe, so I thought, maybe he was after all not headed for Shelton, but perhaps planning on another of his ghastly tricks.

But in the morning we knew he had been going toward Shelton. Scientists, doctors, and learned men of all descriptions came out to our village to see the thing the papers said Si Waters had stumbled upon when on his way to the creamery that next morning.

It was a skeleton, they said, only that it had a dry skin all over it. A mummy. Could not have been considered capable of containing life only that the snow around it was lightly blotched with a pale smear that proved to be blood, that had oozed out from the six bullet holes in the horrid chest. They never did solve it.

There were five of us in the store that night. Five of us who know. Hammersly did what we all wanted to do. Of course his name is not really Hammersly, but it has done here as well as another. He is black-whiskered though, and he is still very much of a sphinx, but he'll never have to answer for having killed the man he once brought back to life. Hammersly's secret will go into five other graves besides his own.

#21 Monsters Of Moyen, By Arthur Josephus Burks:

"The western world shall be next!" was the dread ultimatum of the half-monster, half-god Moyen.

Aproximate word count: 17,000

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Forward:

In 1935 the mighty genius of Moyen gripped the Eastern world like a hand of steel. In a matter of months he had welded the Orient into an unbeatable war-machine. He had, through the sheer magnetism of a strange personality, carried the Eastern world with him on his march to conquest of the earth, and men followed him with blind faith as men in the past have followed the banners of the Thaumaturgists.

A strange name, to the sound of which none could assign nationality. Some said his father was a Russian refugee, his mother a Mongol

woman. Some said he was the son of a Caucasian woman lost in the Gobi and rescued by a mad lama of Tibet, who became father of Moyen. Some said that his mother was a goddess, his father a fiend out of hell.

But this all men knew about him: that he combined within himself the courage of a Hannibal, the military genius of a Napoleon, the ideals of a Sun Yat Sen; and that he had sworn to himself he would never rest until the earth was peopled by a single nation, with Moyen himself in the seat of the mighty ruler.

Madagascar was the seat of his government, from which he looked across into United Africa, the first to join his confederacy. The Orient was a dependency, even to that forbidden land of the Goloks, where outlanders sometimes went, but whence they never returned—and to the wild Goloks he was a god whose will was absolute, to render obedience to whom was a privilege accorded only to the Chosen.

In a short year his confederacy had brought under his might the millions of Asia, which he had welded into a mighty machine for further conquest.

And because the Americas saw the handwriting on the wall, they

sent out to see the man Moyen, with orders to penetrate to his very side, as a spy, their most trusted Secret Agent—Prester Kleig.

Only the ignorant believed that Moyen was mad. The military and diplomatic geniuses of the world recognized his genius, and resented it.

But Prester Kleig, of the Secret Service of the Americas, one of the *few* men whose headquarters were in the Secret Room in Washington, had reached Moyen.

Now he was coming home.

He came home to tell his people what Moyen was planning, and to admit that his investigations had been hampered at every turn by the uncanny genius of Moyen. Military plans had been guarded with unbelievable secrecy. War machines he knew to exist, yet had seen only those common to all the armies of the world.

And now, twenty-four hours out of New York City, aboard the *S. S. Stellar*, Prester Kleig was literally willing the steamer to greater speed—and in far Madagascar the strange man called Moyen had given the ultimatum:

"The Western World shall be next!"

Chapter 1: The Hand of Moyen.

"Who is that man?" asked a young lady passenger of the steward, with the imperious inflection which tells of riches able to force obedience from menials who labor for hire.

She pointed a bejeweled finger at the slender, soldierly figure which stood in the prow of the liner, like a figurehead, peering into the storm under the vessel's forefoot.

"That gentleman, milady?" repeated the steward obsequiously. "That is Prester Kleig, head of the Secret Agents, Master of the Secret Room, just now returning from Madagascar, via Europe, after a visit to the realm of Moyen."

A gasp of terror burst from the lips of the woman. Her cheeks blanched.

"Moyen!" She almost whispered it. "Moyen! The half-god of Asia, whom men call mad!"

"Not mad, milady. No, Moyen is not mad, save with a lust for power. He is the conqueror of the ages, already ruling more of the earth's

population than any man has ever done before him—even Alexander!"

But the young lady was not listening to stewards. Wealthy young ladies did not, save when asked questions dealing with personal service to themselves. Her eyes devoured the slender man who stood in the prow of the *Stellar*, while her lips shaped, over and over again, the dread name which was on the lips of the people of the world:

"Moyen! Moyen!"

Up in the prow, if Prester Kleig, who carried a dread secret in his breast, knew of the young lady's regard, he gave no sign. There were touches of gray at his temples, though he was still under forty. He had seen more of life, knew more of its terrors, than most men twice his age—because he had lived harshly in service to his country.

He was thinking of Moyen, the genius of the misshapen body, the pale eyes which reflected the fires of a Satanic soul, set deeply in the midst of the face of an angel; and wondering if he would be able to arrive in time, sorry that he had not returned home by airplane.

He had taken the *Stellar* only because the peacefulness of ocean liner travel would aid his thoughts, and he required time to marshal them.

Liner travel was now a luxury, as all save the immensely wealthy traveled by plane across the oceans. Now Prester Kleig was sorry, for any moment, he felt, Moyen might strike.

He turned and looked back along the deck of the *Stellar*. His eyes played over the trimly gowned figure of the woman who questioned the steward, but did not really see her. And then....

"Great God!" The words were a prayer, and they burst from the lips of Prester Kleig like an explosion. Passengers appeared from the lee of lifeboats. Officers on the bridge whirled to look at the man who shouted. Seamen paused in their labors to stare. Aloft in the crow's-nest the lookout lowered his eyes from scouring the horizon to stare at Prester Kleig—who was pointing.

All eyes turned in the direction indicated.

Climbing into the sky, a mile off the starboard beam, was an airplane with a bulbous body and queerly slanted wings. It had neither wheels nor pontoons, and it traveled with unbelievable speed. It came on bullet-fast, headed directly for the side of the *Stellar*.

"Lower the boats!" yelled Kleig. "Lower the boats! For God's sake lower the boats!"

For Prester Kleig, in that casual turning, had seen what none aboard the *Stellar*, even the lookout above, had seen. The airplane, which had neither wheels nor pontoons, had risen, as Aphrodite is said to have risen, out of the waves! He had seen the wings come out of the bulbous body, snap backward into place, and the plane was in full flight the instant it appeared.

Prester Kleig had no hope that his warning would be in time, but he would always feel better for having given it. As the captain debated with himself as to whether this lunatic should be confined as dangerous, the strange airplane nosed over and dived down to the sea, a hundred yards from the side of the *Stellar*. Just before it struck the water, its wings snapped forward and became part of the bulbous body of the thing, the whole of which shot like a bullet into the sea.

Prester Kleig stood at the rail, peering out at the spot where the plane had plunged in with scarcely a splash, and his right hand was raised as though he gave a final, despairing signal.

Of all aboard the *Stellar*, he only saw that black streak which, ten feet under water, raced like a bolt of lightning from the nose of the submerged but visible plane, straight as a die for the side of the *Stellar*. Just a black streak, no bigger than a small man's arm, from the nose of the plane to the side of the *Stellar*.

From the crow's-nest came the startled, terrific voice of the lookout, in the beginning of a cry that must remain forever inarticulate.

The world, in that blinding moment, seemed to rock on its foundations; to shatter itself to bits in a chaotic jumble of sound and of movement, shot through and through with lurid flames. Kleig felt himself hurled upward and outward, turned over and over endlessly....

He felt the storm-tossed waters close over him, and knew he had struck. In the moment he knew—oblivion, deep, ebon and impenetrable, blotted out knowledge.

Chapter 2: The Half-Dream

A roaring, rushing river of chaotic sound, first. Jumbled sound to which Prester Kleig could give no adequate name. But as he tried to analyze its meanings, he was able to differentiate between sounds, and to discover the identity of some.

The river of sound he decided to be the sound of a vibrational explosion of some sort—vibrational because it had that quivery quality which causes a feeling of uneasiness and fret, that feeling which makes one turn and look around to find the eyes boring into one's back—yet multiplied in its intensity an uncounted number of times.

Other sounds which came through the chaotic river of sound were the terrified screaming of the men and women who were doomed. Lifeboats were never lowered, for the reason that with the disintegration of the *Stellar*, everything inanimate aboard her likewise disintegrated, dropping men and women, crew and passengers, into the freezing waters of the Atlantic.

Prester Kleig dropped with them, only partially unconscious after the first icy plunge. He knew when he floated on the surface, for he felt himself lifted and hurled by the waves. In his half-dream he saw men

and women being carried away into wave-shrouded darkness, clawing wildly at nothingness for support, clawing at one another, locking arms, and going down together.

The *Stellar*, in the merest matter of seconds, had become spoil of the sea, and her crew and passengers had vanished forever from the sight of men. Yet Prester Kleig lived on, knew that he lived on, and that there was an element, too strong to be disbelieved, of reality in his dream.

There was a vibratory sense, too, as of the near activity of a noiseless motor. Noiseless motor! Where had he last thought of those two words? With what recent catastrophe were they associated? No, he could not recall, though he knew he should be able to do so.

Then the sense of motion to the front was apparent—an unnumbered sense, rather than concrete feeling. Motion to front, influenced by the rising and falling motion of mountainous waves.

So suddenly as to be a distinct shock, the wave motion ceased, though the forward motion—and *upward!*—not only continued but increased.

That airplane of the bulbous body, the queerly slanted wings....

But the glimmering of realization vanished as a sickishly sweet odor assailed his nostrils and sent its swift-moving tentacles upward to wrap themself soothingly about his brain. But the sense of flight, unbelievably swift, was present and recognizable, though all else eluded him. He had the impression, however, that it was intended that all save the most vagrant, most widely differentiated, impressions elude him—that he should acquire only half pictures, which would therefore be all the more terrible in retrospect.

The only impressions which were real were those of motion to the front, and upward, and the sense of noiseless machinery, vibrating the whole, nearby.

Then a distinct realization of the cessation of the sense of flying, and a return, though in lesser degree, of the rising and falling of waves. This latter sensation became less and less, though the feeling of traveling downward continued. Prester Kleig knew that he was going down into the sea again, down into it deeply.... Then that odor once more, and the elusive memory.

Forward motion at last, in the depths, swift, forward motion, though Prester Kleig could not even guess at the direction. Just swift motion, and the mutter of voices, the giving of orders....

Prester Kleig regained consciousness fully on the sands of the shore. He sat up stiffly, staring out to sea. A storm was raging, and the sea was an angry waste. No ship showed on the waters; the mad, tumbled sky above it was either empty of planes or they had climbed to invisibility above the clouds that raced and churned with the storm.

Out of the storm, almost at Prester Kleig's feet, dropped a small airplane. Through the window a familiar face peered at Kleig. A helmeted, begoggled figure opened the door and stepped out.

"Kleig, old man," said the flyer, "you gave me the right dope all right, but I'll swear there isn't a wireless tower within a hundred miles of this place! How did you manage it?"

"Kane, you're crazy, or I am, or...." But Prester Kleig could not go on with the thought which had rushed through his brain with the numbing impact of a blow. He grasped the hand of Carlos Kane, of the Domestic Service, and the yellow flimsy Kane held out to him. It read simply:

"Shipwrecked. Am ashore at—" There followed grid coordinate map readings. "Come at once, prepared to fly me to Washington." It was signed "Kleig."

"Kane," said Kleig, "I did not send this message!"

What more was there to be said? Horror looked out of the eyes of Prester Kleig, and was reflected in those of Carlos Kane. Both men turned, peering out across the tumbled welter of waters.

Somewhere out there, tight-locked in the gloomy archives of the Atlantic, was the secret of the message which had brought Carlos Kane to Prester Kleig—and the agency which had sent it.

Chapter 3: Wings of To-morrow

As Prester Kleig climbed into the enclosed passenger pit of the monoplane—a Mayther—his ears seemed literally to be ringing with the drumming, mighty voice of Moyen. But now that voice, instead of merely speaking, rang with sardonic laughter. He had never heard the laughter of Moyen, but he could guess how it would sound.

That airplane of the slanted wings, the bulbous, almost bulletlike fuselage, what of it? It was simple, as Kleig looked back at his memoried glimpse of it. The submarine was a metal fish made with human hands; the airplane aped the birds. The strange ship which had caused the destruction of the *Stellar*, was a combination fish and bird—which merely aped nature a bit further, as anyone who had ever traversed tropical waters would have instantly recognized.

But what did it portend? What ghastly terrors of Moyen roamed the deeps of the Atlantic, of the Pacific, the oceans of the world? How close were some of these to the United States?

The pale eyes of Moyen, he was sure, were already turned toward the West.

Prester Kleig sighed as he seated himself beside Carlos Kane. Then

Kane pressed one of the myriad of buttons on the dash, and Kleig lifted his eyes to peer through the skylight, to where that single press of a button had set in motion the intricate machinery of the helicopter.

A four-bladed fan lifted on a slender pedestal, sufficiently high above the surface of the wing for the vanes to be free of the central propeller. Then, automatically, the vanes became invisible, and the Mayther lifted from the sandy beach as lightly, and far more straightly, than any bird.

As the ship climbed away for the skies, and through the transparent floor the beach and the Atlantic fell away below the ship, a sigh of relief escaped Kleig. This was living! Up here one was free, if only for a moment, and the swift wind of flight brushed all cobwebs from the tired human brain. He watched the slender needle of the altimeter, as it moved around the face of the dial as steadily as the hands of a clock, around to thirty thousand, thirty-five, forty.

Then Carlos Kane, every movement as effortless as the flight of the silvery winged Mayther, thrust forth his hand to the dash again, pressed another button. Instantly the propellers vanished into a blur as the vanes of the helicopter dropped down the slender staff and the vanes themselves fitted snugly into their appointed notches atop the

wing.

For a second Carlos Kane glanced at the tiny map to the right of the dash, and set his course. It was a matter of moments only, but while Kane worked, Prester Kleig studied the instruments on the dash, for it had been months since he had flown, save for his recent half-dreamlike experience. There was a button which released the mechanism of the deadly guns, fired by compressed air, all operated from the noiseless motor, whose muzzles exactly cleared the tips of Mayther's wings, two guns to each wing, one on the entering edge, one on the trailing edge, fitted snugly into the adamant rigging.

Four guns which could fire to right or left, twin streams of lead, the number of rounds governed only by the carrying power of the Mayther. Prester Kleig knew them all: the guns in the wings, the guns which fired through the three propellers, and the guns set two and two in the fuselage, to right and left of the pits, which could be fixed either up or down—all by the mere pressing of buttons. It was marvelous, miraculous, yet even as Kleig told himself that this was so, he felt, deep in the heart of him, that Moyen knew all about ships like these, and regarded them as the toys of children.

Kane touched Kleig on the shoulder, signaling, indicating that the atmosphere in the pits had been regulated to their new height, and

that they could remove their helmets and oxygen tanks without danger.

With a sigh Prester Kleig sat back, and the two friends turned to face each other.

"You certainly look done in, Kleig," said Kane sympathetically. "You must have been through hell, and then some. Tell me about this Moyen; that is, if you think you care to talk about him."

"Talk about him!" repeated Kleig. "Talk about him? It will be a relief! There has been nothing, and nobody, on my mind save Moyen for weary months on end. If I don't talk to someone about him, I'll go mad, if I'm not mad already. Moyen? A monster with the face of an angel! What else can one say about him? A devil and a saint, a brute whose followers would go with him into hell's fire, and sing him hosannas as they were consumed in agony! The greatest mob psychologist the world has ever seen. He's a genius, Kane, and unless something is done, the Western world, all the world, is doomed to sit at the feet, listen to the commands, of Moyen!

"He isn't an Oriental; he isn't a European; he isn't negroid or Indian; but there is something about him that makes one thing of all of these, singly and collectively. His body is twisted and grotesque, and when

one looks at his face, one feels a desire to touch him, to swear eternal fealty to him—until one looks into his pale eyes, eyes almost milky in their paleness—and gets the merest hint of the thoughts which actuate him. If he has a failing I did not find it. He does not drink, gamble...."

"And women?" queried Kane, softly.

Kleig was madly in love with the sister of Kane, Charmion, and this thing touched him nearest the heart, because Charmion was one of her country's most famous beauties, about whom Moyen must already have heard.

"Women?" repeated Kleig musingly, his black eyes troubled, haunted. "I scarcely know. He has no love for women, only because he has no capacity for any love save self-love. But when I think of him in this connection I seem to see Moyen, grown to monster proportions, sitting on a mighty throne, with nude women groveling at his feet, bathed in tears, their long hair in mantles of sorrow, hiding their shamed faces! That sounds wild, doesn't it? But it's the picture I get of Moyen when I think of Moyen and of women. Many women will love him, and have, perhaps. But while he has taken many, though I am only guessing here, he has given *himself* to none. Another thing: His followers—well, he sets no limits to the lusts of

his men, requiring only that every soldier be fit for duty, with a body strong for hardship. You understand?"

Kane understood; and his face was very pale.

"Yes," he said, his voice almost a whisper, "I understand, and as you speak of this man I seem to see a city in ruins, and hordes of men marching, bloodstained men entering houses ... from which, immediately afterward, come the screams of women ... terror-stricken women...."

He shuddered and could not go on for the very horror of the vision that had come to him.

But Kleig stared at him as though he saw a ghost.

"Great God, Carl!" he gasped. "The same identical picture has been in my mind, not once but a thousand times! I wonder...."

Was it an omen of the future for the West?

Deep in his soul Prester Kleig fancied he could hear the sardonic laughter of the half-god, Moyen.

A tiny bell rang inside the dash, behind the instruments. Kane had

set direction finders, had pressed the button which signaled the Washington-control Station of the National Radio, thus automatically indicating the exact spot above land, by grid-coordinates, where the Mayther should start down for the landing.

An hour later they landed on the flat roof of the new Capitol Building, sinking lightly to rest as a feather, nursed to a gentle landing by the whirring vanes of the helicopter.

Prester Kleig, surrounded by uniformed guards who tried to shield him from the gaze of news-gatherers crowded there on the roof-top, hurried him to the stairway leading into the executive chambers, and through these to the Secret Chamber which only a few men knew, and into which not even Carlos Kane could follow Prester Kleig—yet.

But one man, one news-gatherer, had caught a glimpse of the face of Kleig, and already he raced for the radio tower of his organization, to blazon to the Western world the fact that Kleig had come back.

Chapter 4: A Nation Waits in Dread

As Prester Kleig, looking twice his forty years because of fatigue, and almost nameless terrors through which he had passed, went to his rendezvous, the news-gatherer, who shall here remain nameless, raced for the Broadcasting Tower.

As Prester Kleig entered the Secret Room and at a signal all the many doors behind him, along that interminable stairway, swung shut and were tightly locked, the news-gatherer raced for the microphone and gave the "priority" signal to the operator. Millions of people would not only hear the words of the news-gatherer, but would see him, note the expressions which chased one another across his face. For television was long since an accomplished, everyday fact.

"Prester Kleig, of this government's Secret Service, has just returned to the United Americas! Your informer has just seen him step from the monoplane of Carlos Kane, atop the Capitol Building, and repair at once to the Secret Room, closely guarded. But I saw his face, and though he is under forty, he seems twice that. And you know now what this country has only guessed at before—that he has seen Moyen. Moyen the half-man, half-god, the enigma of the ages. What does Prester Kleig think of this man? He doesn't say, for he dares not

speak, yet. But your informer saw his face, and it is old and twisted with terror! And—"

That ended the discourse of the news-gatherer, and it was many hours before the public really understood. For, with a new sentence but half completed, the picture of the news-gatherer faded blackly off the screens in a million homes, and his voice was blotted out by a humming that mounted to a terrific appalling shriek! Some terrible agency, about which people who knew their radio could only guess, had drowned out the words of the news-gatherer, leaving the public stunned and bewildered, almost groping before a feeling of terror which was all the more unbearable because none could give it a name.

And the public had heard but a fraction of the truth—merely that Kleig had come back. It had been the intention of the government to deny the public even this knowledge, and it had; but knowledge of the denial itself was public property, which filled the hearts of men and women all through the Western Hemisphere with nameless dread. And over all this abode of countless millions hovered the shadow of Moyen.

The government tried to correct the impression which the news-gatherer had given out.

"Prester Kleig is back," said the radio, while the government speaker tried, for the benefit of those who could see him, to smile reassuringly. "But there is nothing to cause anyone the slightest concern. He has seen Moyen, yes, and has heard him speak, but still there is nothing to distress anyone, and the whole story will be given to you as soon as possible. Kleig has gone into the Secret Room, yes, but every operative of the government, when discussing business connected with diplomatic relations with foreign powers, is received in the Secret Room. No cause for worry!"

It was so easy to say that, and the speaker realized it, which was why he could but with difficulty make his smile seem reassuring.

"Tell us the truth, and tell us quickly," might have been the voiceless cries of those who listened and saw the face and fidgeting form of the speaker. But the words were not spoken, because the people sensed a hovering horror, a dread catastrophe beyond the power of words to express—and so looked at one another in silence, their eyes wide with dread, their hearts throbbing to suffocation with nameless foreboding.

So eyes were horror-haunted, and men walked, flew, and rode in fear and trembling—while, down in the Secret Room, Prester Kleig and a dozen old men, men wise in the ways of science and invention, wise

in the ways of men and of beasts, of Nature and the Infinite Outside, decided the fate of the Nation.

That Secret Room was closed to every one. Not even the news-gatherers could reach it; not even the all-seeing eye of the telephotograph emblazoned to the world its secrets.

But *was* it secret?

Perhaps Moyen, the master mobster, smiled when he heard men say so, men who knew in their hearts that Moyen regarded other earthlings as earthlings regard children and their toys. Did the eyes of Moyen gaze even into the depths of the Secret Room, hundreds of feet below even the documentary-treasure vaults of the Capitol?

No one knew the answer to the question, but the radio, reporting the return of Kleig, had given the public a distorted vision of an embodied fear, and in its heart the public answered "Yes!" And what had drowned out the voice of the radio-reporter?

No wonder that, for many hours, a nation waited in fear and trembling, eyes filled with dread that was nameless and absolute, for word from the Secret Room. Fear mounted and mounted as the hours passed and no word came.

In that room Prester Kleig and the twelve old men, one of whom was the country's President, held counsel with the man who had come back. But before the spoken counsel had been held, awesome and awe-inspiring pictures had flashed across the screen, invented by a third of the old men, from which the world held no secrets, even the secrets of Moyen.

With this mechanism, guarded at forfeit of the lives of a score of men, the men of the Secret Room could peer into even the most secret places of the world. The old men had peered, and had seen things which had blanched their pale cheeks anew. And when they had finished, and the terrible pictures had faded out, a voice had spoken suddenly, like an explosion, in the Secret Room.

"Well, gentlemen, are you satisfied that resistance is futile?"

Just the voice; but to one man in the Secret Room, and to the others when his numbing lips spoke the name, it was far more than enough. For not even the wisest of the great men could explain how, as they knew, having just seen him there, a man could be in Madagascar while his voice spoke aloud in the Secret Room, where even radio was barred!

The name on the lips of Prester Kleig!

"Moyen! Moyen!"

Chapter 5: *Monsters of the Deep*

"Gentlemen," said Prester Kleig as he entered the Secret Room, where sat the scientists and inventive geniuses of the Americas, "we haven't much time, and I shall waste but little of it. Moyen is ready to strike, if he hasn't already done so, as I believe. We will see in a matter of seconds. Professor Maniel, we shall need, first of all, your apparatus for returning the vibratory images of events which have transpired within the last thirty-six hours.

"I wish to show those of you who failed to see it the sinking of the *Stellar*, on which I was a passenger and, I believe, the only survivor."

Professor Maniel strangely mouse-like save for the ponderous dome of his forehead, stepped away from the circular table without a word. He had invented the machine in question, and he was inordinately proud of it. Through its use he could pick up the sounds, and the pictures, of events which had transpired down the past centuries, from the tinkling of the cymbals of Miriam to all the horror of the conflict men had called the Great War, simply by drawing back from the ether, as the sounds fled outward through space, those sounds

and vibrations which he needed.

His science was an exact one, more carefully exact even than the measurement of the speed of light, taking into consideration the dispersion of sound and movement, and the element of time.

The interior of the Secret Room became dark as Maniel labored with his minute machinery. Only behind the screen on the wall in rear of the table was there light.

The voice of Maniel began to drone as he thought aloud.

"There is a matter of but a few minutes difference in time between Washington and the last recorded location of the *Stellar*. The sinking occurred at ten-thirty last evening you say, Kleig? Ah, yes, I have it! Watch carefully, gentlemen!"

So silent were the Secret Agents one could not even have heard the breathing of one of them, for on the screen, misty at first, but becoming moment by moment bolder of outline, was the face of a storm-tossed sea. The liner was slower in forming, and was slightly out of focus for a second or two.

"Ah," said Professor Maniel. "There it is!"

Through the sound apparatus came the roaring and moaning of a storm at sea. On the screen the *Stellar* rose high on the waves, dropped into the trough, while spumes of black smoke spread rearward on the waters from her spouting funnels. Figures were visible on her decks, figures which seemed carved in bronze.

In the prow, every expression on his face plainly visible, stood Prester Kleig himself, and as his picture appeared he was in the act of turning.

"Now," said Kleig himself, there in the Secret Room, "look off to the left, gentlemen, a mile from the *Stellar*!"

A rustling sound as the scientists shifted in their places.

They all saw it, and a gasp burst from their lips as though at a signal. For, as the *Stellar* seemed about to plunge off the shadowed screen into the Secret Room, a flying thing had risen out of the sea—an airplane with a bulbous body and queerly slanting wings.

At the same time, out of the mouth of the pictured figure of Prester Kleig, clear and agonized as the tones of a bell struck in frenzy, the words:

"Great God! Lower the boats! Lower the boats! For God's sake lower the boats!"

In the Secret Room the real Prester Kleig spoke again.

"When the black streak leaves the nose of the plane, after it has submerged, Professor Maniel," said Kleig softly, "slow your mechanism so that we can see the whole thing in detail."

There came a grunted affirmative from Professor Maniel.

The nose of the pictured plane tilted over, diving down for the surface of the sea.

"Now!" snapped Kleig. "Don't wait!"

Instantly the moving pictures on the screen reduced their speed, and the plane appeared to stop its sudden seaward plunge and to drop down as lightly as a feather. The wings of the thing moved forward slowly, folding into the body of the dropping plane.

"They fold forward," said Kleig quietly, "so that the speed of the plane in the take-off will snap them *backward* into position for flying!"

No one spoke, because the explanation was so obvious.

Slowly the airplane went down to the surface of the sea, with scarcely a plume of spindrift leaping back after she had struck. She dropped to ten feet below the surface of the water, a hundred yards off the starboard beam of the *Stellar*, her blunt nose pointing squarely at the side of the doomed liner.

"Now," said Kleig hoarsely, "watch closely, for God's sake!"

The liner rose and fell slowly. Out of the nose of the plane, which had now become a tiny submarine, started a narrow tube of black, oddly like the sepia of a giant squid. Straight toward the side of the liner it went. Above the rail the Secret Agents could see the pictured form of Prester Kleig, hand upraised. The black streak reached the side of the *Stellar*.

It touched the metal plates, spreading upon impact, growing, enlarging, to right and left, upward and downward, and where it touched the *Stellar* the black of it seemed to erase that portion of the ship. In the slow motion every detail was apparent. At regular speed the blotting out of the *Stellar* would have been instantaneous.

Kleig saw himself rise slowly from the vanished rail, turning over

and over, going down to the sea. He almost closed his eyes, bit his lips to keep back the cries of terror when he saw the others aboard the liner rise, turn over and over, and fly in all directions like jackstraws in a high wind.

The ship was erased from beneath passengers and crew, and passengers and crew fell into the sea. Out of the depths, from all directions, came the starving denizens of the sea—starving because liners now were so few.

"That's enough of that, Professor," snapped Kleig. "Now jump ahead approximately eight hours, and see if you can pick up that aero-sub after it dropped me on the Jersey Coast."

The picture faded out quickly, the screaming of doomed human beings, already hours dead, called back to apparent living by the genius of Maniel died away, and for a space the screen was blank.

Then, the sea again, storm-tossed as before, shifting here and there as Maniel sought in the immensity of sea and sky for the thing he desired.

"Two hundred miles south by east of New York City," he droned. "There it is, gentlemen!"

They all saw it then, in full flight, eight thousand feet above the surface of the Atlantic, traveling south by east at a dizzy rate of speed.

"Note," said Kleig, "that it keeps safely to the low altitudes, in order to escape the notice of regular air traffic."

No one answered.

The eyes of the Secret Agents were on that flashing, bulbous-bodied plane of the strange wings. It appeared to be heading directly for some objective which must be reached at top speed.

For fifteen minutes the flight continued. Then the plane tilted over and dived, and at an altitude still of three thousand feet, the wings slashed forward, clicking into their notches in the sides of the bulbous body, with a sound like the ratchets on subway turnstiles, and, holding their breath, the Secret Agents watched it plummet down to the sea. It was traveling with terrific speed when it struck, yet it entered the water with scarcely a splash.

Then, for the first time, an audible gasp, as that of one person, came from the lips of the Secret Agents. For now they could see the objective of the aero-sub. A monster shadow in the water, at a depth

of five hundred feet. A shadow which, as Maniel manipulated his instruments, became a floating underwater fortress, ten times the size of any submarine known to the Americas.

Sporting like porpoises about this held-in-suspension fortress were myriads of other aero-subs, maneuvering by squadrons and flights, weaving in and out like schools of fish. The plane which had bourne Prester Kleig churned in between two of the formations, and vanished into the side of the motionless monster of the deep.

The striking of a deep sea bell, muted by tons and tons of water, sounded in the Secret Room.

"Don't turn it off, Maniel," said Kleig. "There's more yet!"

And there was, for the sound of the bell was a signal. The aero-subs, darting outward from the side of the floating fortress like fish darting out of seaweed, were plunging up toward the surface of the Atlantic. Breathlessly the Secret Agents watched them.

They broke water like flying fish, and their wings shot backward from their notches in the myriad bulbous bodies to click into place in flying position as the scores of aero-subs took the air above the invisible hiding places of the mother submarine.

At eight thousand feet the aero-subs swung into battle formation and, as though controlled by word of command, they maneuvered there like one vast machine of a central control—beautiful as the flight of swallows, deadly as anything that flew.

The Secret Agents swept the cold sweat from their brows, and sighs of terror escaped them all.

At that moment came the voice, loud in the Secret Room, which Kleig at least immediately recognized:

"Well, gentlemen, are you satisfied that resistance is futile?"

And Kleig whispered the name, over and over again.

"Moyen! Moyen!"

It was Prester Kleig, Master of the Secret Room, who was the first to regain control after the nerve-numbing question which, asked in far Madagascar, was heard by the Agents in the Secret Room.

"No!" he shouted. "No! No! Moyen, in the end we will beat you!"

Only silence answered, but deep in the heart of Prester Kleig sounded a burst of sardonic laughter—the laughter of Moyen, half-

god of Asia. Then the voice again:

"The attack is beginning, gentlemen! Within an hour you will have further evidence of the might of Moyen!"

Chapter 6: ***Vanishing Ships***

Prester Kleig, ordered to Madagascar from the Secret Room, had been merely an operative, honored above others in that he had been one of the few, at that time, ever to visit the Secret Room. Now, however, because he had walked closer to Moyen than anyone else, he assumed leadership almost by natural right, and the men who had once deferred to him took orders from him.

"Gentlemen," he snapped, while the last words of Moyen still hung in the air of the Secret Room, "we must fight Moyen from here. The best brains in the United Americas are gathered here, and if Moyen can be beaten—*if* he can be beaten—he will be beaten from the Secret Room!"

A sigh from the lips of Professor Maniel. The President of the United Americas nodded his head, as though he too mutely gave authority into the hands of Prester Kleig. The other Secret Agents shifted slightly, but said nothing.

"I have been away a year," said Kleig, "as you know, and many things have come into regular use since I left. Professor Maniel's machine for example, upon which he was working when I departed under orders. There will be further use for it in our struggle with

Moyen. Professor, will you kindly range the ocean, beginning at once, and see how many of these monsters of Moyen we have to contend with?"

Professor Maniel turned back to his instruments, which he fondled with gentle, loving hands.

"We have nothing with which to combat the attacking forces of Moyen," went on Kleig, "save antiquated airplanes, and such obsolete warships as are available. These will be mere fodder for the guns, or rays, or whatever it is that Moyen uses in his aero-subs. Thousands, perhaps millions, of human lives will be lost; but better this than that Moyen rule the West! Better this than that our women be given into the hands of this mob as spoils of war!"

From the Secret Agents a murmur of assent.

And then, that voice again, startling, clear, with the slightest suggestion of some Oriental accent, in the Secret Room.

"Do not depend too much, gentlemen," it said, "upon your antiquated warships! See, I am merciful, in that I do not allow you to send them against me loaded with men to be slaughtered or drowned! Professor Maniel, I would ask you to turn that plaything of yours and gaze

upon the fleet of obsolete ships anchored in Hampton Roads! In passing, Professor, I venture to guess that the secret of how I am able to talk with you gentlemen, here in your Secret Room, is no secret at all to you. Now look!"

The Secret Agents gasped again, in consternation.

From the white lips of mouselike Maniel came mumbled words, even as his hands worked with lightning speed.

"His machine is simply a variation of my own. And, gentlemen, compatriots, with it he could as easily project himself, bodily, here into the room with us!"

Something like a suppressed scream from one of the men present. A cold hand of ice about the heart of Prester Kleig. But the words of Professor Maniel were limned on the retina of his brain in letters of fire. Suppose Moyen *were* to project himself into the Secret Room....

But he would not. He was no fool, and even these Secret Agents, most of whom were old and no longer strong, would have torn him limb from limb. But those words of Maniel set whirling once more, and in a new direction, the thoughts of Prester Kleig.

"Mr. President, gentlemen...." It was the voice of Professor Maniel.

All eyes turned again to the screen upon which the professor worked his miracles, which today were commonplaces, which yesterday had been undreamed of. Every Secret Agent recognized the outlines of Hampton Roads, with Norfolk and its towering buildings in the background, and the obsolete warships riding silently at anchor in the roadstead.

For three years they had been there, while a procrastinating Cabinet, Congress and Senate had debated their permanent disposal. They represented millions of dollars in money, and were utterly worthless. Prester Kleig, looking at them now, could see them putting out to sea, loaded with brave-visaged men, volunteering to go to sure destruction to feed the rapacity of Moyen's hordes. Men going out to sea in tubs, singing....

But these ships were silent. No plumes of smoke from their funnels. Like floating mausoleums, filled with dead hopes, shells of past and departed glories.

The beating of waves against their sides could plainly be heard. The anchor chains squeaked rustily in the hawse-holes. Wind sighed through regal, towering superstructures, and no man walked the

decks of any one of them.

With bated breath the Secret Agents watched.

Why had Moyen bidden them turn their attention to these shells of erstwhile naval grandeur?

This time no gasps broke from the lips of the Secret Agents. Not even the sound of breathing could be heard. Just the sighing of wind through the superstructures of a hundred ships, the whispering of waves against rusted bulkheads.

Almost imperceptibly at first the towering dreadnought in the foreground began to move! Slowly, the water swirling about her, she backed away from her anchor, tightening the curve of the anchor chain! Water quivered about the point of the chain's contact with the waves!

Quickly the eyes of the Secret Agents swept along the street of ships. The same backward motion, of dragging against their anchor chains, was visible at the bow of each warship!

With not a soul aboard them, the ships were waking into strange and awesome life, dragging at their anchors, like hounds pulling at

leashes to be free and away!

"How are they doing it?" It was almost a whisper from the President.

"Some electro-magnetic force, sir!" stated Prester Kleig. "Professor Blaine, that is your province! Please note what is happening, and advise us at once if you see how they are doing it!"

A grunt of affirmation from surly, obese Professor Blaine.

All eyes turned back again to the miracle of the moving ships. One by one, with crashes which echoed and re-echoed through the Secret Room, the anchor chains of the dreadnoughts parted. The ends of them swung from the prows of the warships, while the severed portions splashed into the Roads, and the waters hid them from view.

The great dreadnought in the foreground swung slowly about until her prow was pointed in the direction of the open sea, and though no sea was running, no smoke rose from her funnels, she got slowly, ponderously under way, and started out the Roads. Behind her, in formation, the other ships swung into line.

In a matter of seconds, faster than any of these vessels had ever traveled before, they were racing in column for the open Atlantic.

And from the sound apparatus came wails and shrieks of terror, the lamentations of men and women frightened as they had never been frightened before.

The shores behind the moving column of ships was moment by moment growing blacker with people—a black sea of people, whose faces were white as chalk with terror.

But on, out to sea, moved the column of brave ships.

A new note entered into the picture, as from all sides airplanes of many makes swooped in, and swept back and forth over the moving ships, while hooded heads looked out of pits, and faces of pilots were aghast at what they saw.

A ghost column of ships, moving out to sea, speed increasing moment by moment unbelievably. Even now, five minutes after the first dreadnought had started seaward, the wake of each ship spread away on either hand in the two sides of a watery triangle whose walls were a dozen feet high—racing for the shores with all the sullen majesty of tidal waves.

The crowds gave back, and their screams rose into the air in a frightened roar of appalling sound.

Even now, so rapidly did the warships travel, many of the planes could throttle down, so that they flew directly above the heaving decks of the runaway warships.

"Get word to them!" cried Prester Kleig suddenly. "Get word to them that if they follow the ships out to sea not a pilot will escape alive!"

One of the Secret Agents rose and hurried from the Secret Room, traveling at top speed for the first of the many doors enroute to the broadcasting tower from which all the planes could be reached at once. Prester Kleig turned back to the magic screen of Maniel.

The warships, water thrown aside by the lifting thrust of their forefeet in mountains that raced landward with ever-increasing fury, were clearing the Roads and swinging south by east, heading into the wastes of the Atlantic. As they cleared the land, and open water for unnumbered miles lay ahead, the speed of the mighty ships increased to a point where they rode as high on the water as racing launches, and the creaking and groaning of their rusty bolts and spars were a continual paean of protest in the sound apparatus accompanying the showing of the miracle on the screen.

"They're heading straight for the spot where that super-submarine lies!" said the President, and no one answered him.

Prester Kleig, watching, was racing over in his mind what he could recall of his country's armament. Warships were useless, as was being proved here before his eyes. But there still remained airplanes, in countless numbers, which could be diverted from ocean travel and from routine business, to battle this menace of Moyen.

But....

He shuddered as he pictured in his mind's eye the meeting of his country's flower of flying manhood with the monsters of Moyen.

His eyes, as he thought, were watching the racing of those ocean greyhounds, out to sea. They were now out of sight of land, and still some of the planes followed them.

A half hour passed, and then....

The American pilots, in obedience to the radio signals, turning back from this strange phenomenon of the ghost column of capital ships.

Simultaneously, out of the sky dead ahead, dropped the first flight of Moyen's aero-subs.

At the same moment the mysterious power which had dragged the ships to sea was withdrawn, and the warships, with no hands to

guide them, swung whither they willed, and floated in as many directions as there were ships, under their forward momentum. There were a score of collisions, and some of the ships were in sinking condition even before the aero-subs began their labors.

The remaining ships floated high out of the water, because they carried no ballast, and from all sides the aero-subs of Moyen settled to the task of destruction—destruction which was simply a warning of what was to come: Moyen's manner of proving to the Americas the fact that he was all-powerful.

"God, what fools!" cried Prester Kleig.

The rearmost of the American aviators had looked back, had seen the first of the aero-subs drop down among the doomed ships. Instantly he turned out to sea again, signalling as he did so to the nearest other planes. And in spite of the radio warning a hundred planes answered that signal and swept back to investigate this new mystery.

"They're going to death!" groaned the President.

"Yes," said Kleig, softly, "but it saves us ordering others to death. Perhaps we may learn something of value as we watch them die!"

Chapter 7:*Golden Oblivion*

"This," said Prester Kleig, as coldly precise as a judge pronouncing sentence of death, "will precipitate the major engagement with Moyen's forces. The fools, to rush in like this, when they have been warned! But even so, they are magnificent!"

The pilots of the aero-subs must instantly have noticed the return of the American pilots, for some of the aero-subs which had dropped to the ocean's surface rose again almost instantly, and swept into battle formation above the drifting hulks of the warships.

The Americans were wary. They drew together like frightened chickens when a hawk hovers above them, and watched the activities of the aero-subs, every move of each one being at the same time visible and audible to the Secret Agents in the Capitol's Secret Room.

The aero-subs which had submerged singled out their particular prey among the floating ships, and the Secret Agents, trying to see how each separate act of destruction was accomplished, watched the aero-sub in the foreground, which happened to be concentrating on the dreadnought which had led the ghost-march of the warships out to sea.

The aero-sub circled the swaying dreadnought as a shark circles a wreck, and through the walls of the aero-sub the watchers in the Secret Room could see the four-man crew of the thing. Grim faced men, men of the Orient they plainly were, coldly concentrating on the work in hand. Their faces were those of men who are merciless, even brutal, with neither heart nor compassion of any kind for weaker ones. One man maneuvered the aero-sub, while the other three concentrated on the apparatus in the nose of the hybrid vessel.

"See," spoke Prester Kleig again, "if you can tell what manner of ray they use, and how it is projected. That's your province, General Munson!"

From the particular Secret Agent named, who was expert for war in the membership of the Secret Room, came a short grunt of affirmation. A few murmured words.

"I'll be able to tell more about it when I see how they operate when they are flying. That black streak under water ... well, I must see it out of the water, and then...."

But here General Munson ended, for the aero-sub which they were especially watching had got into action against the dreadnought.

The aero-sub was motionless and submerged just off the port bow of the dreadnought. The three men inside the aero-sub were working swiftly and efficiently with the complicated but minute machinery in the nose of their transport.

"It can be controlled, then, this ray," said Munson, interrupting himself. "Watch!"

From the nose of the aero-sub leaped, like a streak of black lightning, that ebon agency of death. It struck the prow of the battleship—and the prow, as far aft as the well-deck, simply vanished from sight, disintegrated! It was as though it had never been, and for a second, so swiftly had it happened, the water of the ocean held the impression that portion of the warship had made—as an explosive leaves a crater in the soil of earth!

Then a drumming roar as the sea rushed in to claim its own. The roaring, as of a Niagara, as the waters claimed the ship, rushing down passageways into the hold, possessing the warship with all the invincible, speedy might of the sea.

Mingled with this roaring was the shivering, vibratory sound which Prester Kleig had experienced in his half-dream. The sound was so intense that it fairly rocked the Secret Room to its furthermost

cranny.

For a second the dreadnought, wounded to death, seemed to shudder, to hesitate, then to move backward as though wincing from her death blow. It was the pound of the inrushing waters which did it. Then up came the stern of the mighty ship, as she started her last long plunge into the depths.

But attention had swung to another warship, on the starboard beam of which another aero-sub had taken up position. Again the ebon streak of death from her blunt nose, smashing in and through the warship, directly amidships, cutting her in twain as though the black streak had been a pair of shears, the warship a strip of tissue paper.

Up went the prow and the stern of this one, and together, the water separating the two parts as it rushed into the gap, the broken warship went down to its final resting place.

Abruptly Professor Maniel swung back to the American planes which had come back to investigate the activities of the aero-subs, and on the screen, in the midst of the battle formation into which the pilots had swept to hurriedly, the Secret Agents could see the faces of those pilots....

White as chalk with fear, mouths open in gasping unbelief. One man, a pale-faced youth, was the first to recover. He stared around at his compatriots, and plainly through the sound apparatus in the Secret Room came his swift radio signals.

"Attack! Who will follow me against these people?"

His signals were very plain. So, too, were the answers of the other pilots, and the heart of Prester Kleig swelled with pride as he listened to the answering signals—and counted them, discovered that every last pilot there present elected to stay with this youngster, to avenge their country for this contemptuous insult which had been put upon her by the rape of Hampton Roads.

Into swift formation they swept, and with these planes—all planes in use were required by franchise of operating companies to be equipped for the emergencies of war—swung into an echelon formation, the youthful pilot leading by mutual consent.

They swept at full speed toward the warships, four of which had by this time been sent to destruction—one of which had appeared to vanish utterly in the space of a single heartbeat, so quickly that for a second or two the shape of its bilge, the bulge of its keel, was visible in the face of the deep—and openly challenged the aero-subs.

Muzzles of compressed air guns projected from the wing-tips of the planes. Buttons were pressed which elevated the muzzles of guns arranged to fire upward from either side the fighting pits, twin guns that were fired downward from the same central magazine—the only guns in use in the Americas which fired in opposite directions at the same time.

But for a few moments the aero-subs refused combat. Their speed was terrific, dazzling. They eluded the thrusts, the dives and plunges of the American ships as easily as a swallow eludes the dive of a buzzard.

It came to Prester Kleig, however, that the aero-subs were merely playing with the Americans; that when they elected to move, the planes would be blasted from the sky as easily as the warships were being erased from the surface of the Atlantic.

One by one, as methodically as machines, the aero-sub pilots blasted the warships into nothingness. They had their orders, and they went about their performance with a rigidity of discipline which astounded the Secret Agents. They had been ordered to destroy the warships, and they were doing that first—would go on to completion of this task, no matter how many American planes buzzed about their ears.

But one by one as the warships sank, the aero-subs which had either sunk or erased them made the surface and leaped into space with a snapping back of wings that was horribly businesslike as to sound, and climbed up to take part in the fight against the American planes, which must inevitably come.

The last warship, cut squarely in two from stem to stern along her center, as though split thus by a bolt of lightning, fell apart like pieces of cake, and splashed down, sinking away while the spume of her disintegration rolled back from her fallen sides in white-crested waves.

"It exemplifies the policies of Moyen," said Prester Kleig, "for his conquest of the world is a conquest of destruction."

The last aero-sub took to the sky, and the Americans rushed into battle with fine disregard for what they knew must be certain death. They were not fools, exactly, and they had seen, but not understood, the manner in which those gallant old hounds of the sea had been erased from existence.

But in they went, plunging squarely into the heart of the aero-subs' leading formation, which formation consisted of three aero-subs, flying a wing and wing formation.

The young American signaled with upraised hand, and the American pilots made their first move. Every plane started rolling, at dazzling speed, on the axis of its fuselage, while bullets spewed from the guns that fired through the propellers.

Bullets smashed into the leading aero-subs, with no apparent effect, though for a second it seemed that the central aero-sub of the leading formation hesitated for a moment in flight.

Then, swift as had that black streak flashed from the nose of aero-subs submerged, a streak darted from the nose of the central aero-sub, and glistened in the sun like molten gold!

It touched the youngster who had called for volunteers for his attack against this strange enemy. It touched his plane—and the plane vanished instantly, while for a fraction of a second the pilot was visible in his place, in the posture of sitting, hand on a row of buttons which did not exist, head forward slightly as he aimed guns that had vanished.

Then the pilot, still living, apparently unhurt, plunged down eight thousand feet to the sea. The water geysered up as he struck, then closed over the spot, and the gallant American youngster had become the first victim in battle of the monsters of Moyen.

Victim of a slender lancet of what seemed to be golden lightning.

"He could have killed the pilot aloft there," came quietly from Munson, "but he chose to pull his plane away from around him! Their control of the ray is miraculous!"

As though to confirm the statement of Munson, the leading aero-sub struck again, a second plane. The plane vanished, but from the spot where it had flown, not even a bit of metal or of man sufficiently large to be seen by the delicate recording instruments of Maniel dropped out of the sky.

The ray of gold was a ray of oblivion if the minions of Moyen willed.

Chapter 8: *Charmion*

"Prester Kleig," came suddenly into the Secret Room the voice of far distant Moyen, "you will at once make a change in your rules regarding the admission of other than Secret Agents to the Secret Room. You will at once see that Charmion Kane, sister of your friend, is allowed to enter!"

"God Almighty!" A cry of agony from the lips of Prester Kleig. He had not forgotten Charmion, but simply had had to move so swiftly that he had put her out of his mind. For a year he had not seen her, and an hour or two more could not matter greatly.

"And her brother Carlos," went on the voice, "see that he, too, is admitted. I wish, for certain reasons, that Charmion come unharmed through the direct attack I am about to make against your country. I confess that, save for this ability to speak to you, I am unable to work any damage to the Secret Room, which is therefore the safest place for Charmion Kane! Carlos Kane is being spared because he is her brother!"

There was no mistaking the import of this sinister command from Moyen. He had singled out Charmion, the best beloved of Prester Kleig, for his attentions, and that he was sure of the success of his

attack against the United Americas was proved by the calm assurance of his voice, and the fact that, concentrating on the attack as he must be, he still found time for a thought of Charmion Kane.

The hand of ice which had seldom been absent from the heart of Kleig since he had first seen and heard the voice of Moyen gripped him anew. Blood pounded maddeningly in his temples. Cold sweat bathed his body.

But the rest of the Secret Agents, save to freeze into immobility when the hated voice spoke, gave no sign. They had worries of their own, for no instructions had been given that they bring their own loved ones into the sanctuary of the Secret Room.

As though answering the thoughts of the others, the hated voice spoke again.

"I regret that I cannot arrange for sanctuary for the loved ones of all of you, for you are gallant antagonists; why save the few, when the many must perish? For I know you will not surrender, however much I have proved to you that I am invincible. But Charmion Kane must be saved."

"God!" whispered Kleig. "God!"

Then spoke General Munson.

"I think this ray which the Moyenites use is a variation of the principle used in the intricate machinery of Professor Maniel, though how they render it visible I do not know. But it doesn't matter, and may be only a blind! You'll note that when the black streak, or the golden ray, strikes anything that thing instantly disintegrates. A certain pitch of resonance will break a pane of glass. It's a matter of vibration, solely, wherein the molecules composing any object animate or inanimate, are hurled in all directions instantaneously.

"Professor Maniel's apparatus, the Vibration-Retarder, is able to recapture the vibrations, speeding outward endlessly through space, and to reconstruct, and *draw back* to visibility the objects destroyed by this visible vibratory ray, whatever it is. This problem, then, falls into the province of Professor Maniel!"

Through the heart and soul of Prester Kleig there suddenly flowed a great surge of hope.

"General Munson, if you will operate the machinery of the Vibration-Retarder, I wish to talk with Professor Maniel!"

Instantly, efficiently, without a word in reply to the eager command

of Prester Kleig, General Munson relieved Professor Maniel at the apparatus which Maniel called the Vibration-Retarder, his invention which he had combined with audible teleview to complete this visual miracle of the Secret Room. Professor Maniel stepped to where Prester Kleig was sitting.

Prester Kleig put fingers to his lips for silence, and an expression of surprise crossed the wrinkled dead-white face of the Professor.

Before Kleig could speak, however, there came a signal from somewhere outside the Secret Room, a signal which said that the doors were being opened and that a personage was coming. The Secret Agents looked at one another in surprise, for every man who had a right to be inside the Secret Room was already present.

"I know," said Kleig, his face a mask of terror. "It is Charmion and Carlos Kane! Moyen, the devil, has managed to make sure of obedience to his orders!"

The Secret Agents turned back to the screen, upon which the view of the first aerial brush of the American flyers with the minions of Moyen, in their aero-subs, was drawing to a terrible close.

For, as the aero-sub commanders had played with the warships,

which had no human beings aboard them, so now did they play with the planes of the Americas.

One American flyer, startled into a frenzy by the fate of his fellows, put his helicopter into action, and leaped madly out of the midst of the battle. Instantly an aero-sub zoomed, skyward after him. Again that golden streak of light from the nose of an aero-sub, and the helicopter vanes and the slender staff upon whose tip they whirled vanished, shorn short off above the vane-grooves in the top of the wing!

The plane dropped away, fluttering like a falling leaf for a moment, before the aviator started his three propellers again.

A cheer broke from the lips of Prester Kleig as he watched. The commander of that particular aero-sub, apparently contemptuous of this flyer who had tried to cut out of the fight, allowed him to fall away unmolested—and the American, driven berserk by the casual, contemptuous treatment accorded him by this strange enemy, zoomed the second his propellers whirred into top-speed action, and raced up the sky toward the belly of the aero-sub.

"If only the aero-sub has a blind spot!" cried Prester Kleig.

In that instant a roaring crash sounded in the Secret Room as the American plane, going full speed, crashed, propellers foremost, into the belly of the aero-sub.

And the aero-sub, whose brothers had seemed until this moment invincible, did not escape the wrath of the American—though the American went into oblivion with it!

For, welded together, American plane and aero-sub started the eight thousand feet plunge downward to the sea!

"Watch!" shrieked Munson. "Watch!"

As the aero-sub and the plane plunged down through the formation of fighters, the aero-sub pilots saw it, and they fled in wild dismay and at top speed from their falling compatriot. Why? For a moment it was not apparent. And then it was.

For out of the body of the doomed aero-subs came sheets of golden flame! Not the flames of fire, but the golden sheen of that streak which the aero-subs had used against the American planes already out of the fight! The American flyer had crashed into the container, whatever it was, that harnessed the agency through which the minions of Moyen had destroyed the *Stellar*, and the battleships

raped from Hampton Roads!

"It is liquid, then!" shrieked Munson.

And it seemed to be. For a second the golden mantle, strange, awe-inspiring, bathed and rendered invisible the aero-sub and the plane which had slain her. Then the golden flame vanished utterly, instantly—and in the air where it had been there was nothing! The aero-sub was gone, and the plane whose mad charge had erased her.

"Her own death dealing agency destroyed her!" shrieked Munson. "And the other aero-subs cut away from the fight to save themselves, because they too carry death and destruction within them!"

Then the inner door of the Secret Room opened and two people entered. One of them, a dazzling beauty with glorious black hair and the tread of a princess, a picture of perfection from jeweled sandals to coiffured hair, was Charmion Kane. Behind her came her brother, whose face was chalky white. But Charmion, as she crossed to Kleig and kissed him, while her eyes were luminous with love, held her head proudly high, imperious.

"I know," she said softly to Kleig, "and I am not afraid! I know you will prevent it!"

Kleig waved the two to chairs and turned again to Professor Maniel.

On a piece of paper he wrote swiftly, using a mode of shorthand known only to the Secret Agents.

"Professor," he wrote feverishly, "can you reverse the process used in your Vibration-Retarder? Tell me with your eyes, for Moyen may even know this writing, and I am sure he hears what we say here, may even be able to see us?"

Professor Maniel started and stared deeply into the eyes of Prester Kleig. His face grew thoughtful. He brushed his slender hand over the massive dome of his brow. Hope burned high in the heart of Prester Kleig.

Then, despite Kleig's instructions to answer merely by the expression in his eyes, Professor Maniel leaned forward and wrote quickly on the piece of paper Kleig had used.

"Two hours!"

Nothing else, no explanations; but Prester Kleig knew. Maniel believed he could do it, but he needed two hours in which to perfect his theory and make it workable. Kleig knew that had he been able

to do it in two years, or two decades, it still would have been in the nature of a miracle.

But two hours....

And Moyen had said that he was preparing to attack at once.

In two hours Moyen, unless the Americas fought against him with every resource at their command, could depopulate half the Western World. Kleig looked back to the screen.

There was not a single American plane in the sky above the graveyard of those vanished warships. And the aero-subs, swift flying as the wind, were racing back to the mother ship, scores of miles away.

Munson worked with the Vibration-Retarder, the Sound-and-Vision devices, ranging the sea off the coast to either side of that huge, suspended fortress which was the mother submarine of the aero-subs.

Gasps of terror, though the sight was not unexpected, broke from the lips of every person in the Secret Room.

For super-monsters of Moyen were moving to the attack.

Chapter 9: Flowers of Martyrdom

For a minute the Secret Agents were appalled by the air of might of the deep-sea monsters of Moyen, brought bodily, almost into the Secret Room by the activities of General Munson at the Sound-and-Vision apparatus.

Off the coast, miles away, yet looming moment by moment larger, indicating the deceptively swift speed of the monsters, were scores of the great under-water fortresses, traveling toward the coast of the United Americas in a far-flung formation, each submarine separated from its neighbor to right and left by something like a hundred miles, easy cruising radius for the little aero-subs carried inside the monsters.

That each submarine did carry such spawn of Satan was plainly seen, for as the great submarines moved landward, scores of aero-subs sported gleefully about the mother ships. There was no counting the number of them.

Two hours Maniel needed for his labors, which meant that for two hours the flower of the country's manhood must try to hold in check the mighty hordes of Moyen.

"Somewhere there," stated Prester Kleig, "in one or the other of those monsters, is Moyen himself. I know that since he wished Charmion saved for his attentions! Do your work with your apparatus, Munson, while I go out to the radio tower to broadcast an appeal for volunteers. Charmion—Carlos...."

But Prester Kleig found that he could not continue. Not that it was necessary, for Charmion and Carlos knew what was in his mind. Charmion was a lady of vast intelligence, from whom life's little ironies had not been hidden—and Kane and Kleig had already discussed the activities of Moyen where women were concerned.

Prester Kleig hurried to the Central Radio Tower, and as he passed through each of the many doors leading out to the roof of the new Capitol Building the guards at the doors left to form a guard for him, at this moment the most precious man in the country, because he knew best the terrible trials which faced her.

The country was in turmoil. It seemed almost impossible that a whole day had passed since Prester Kleig had returned and entered the Secret Room. In the meantime a fleet of battleships had been drawn by some mysterious agency out to sea from Hampton Roads, and a fleet of fighting planes which had followed the ghost column outward had not returned.

News-gatherers had spread the stories, distorted and garbled, across the western continents, and throughout the western confederacy men, women and children lived in the throes of the greatest fear that had ever gripped them. Fear held them most because they could not give the cause of their fear a name—save one....

Moyen.... And the name was on the lips of everyone, and frenzied woman stilled their squalling babes with its mention.

No word yet from the Secret Room, but Prester Kleig had scarcely appeared from it than someone started the radio signal which informed the frenzied, waiting world of the west that information, exact if startling, would now be forthcoming.

In millions of homes, in thousands of high-flying planes, listeners tuned in at the clear-all hum.

Prester Kleig wasted no time in preliminaries.

"Prester Kleig speaking. We are threatened by Moyen, with scores of monster submarines, each a mother ship for scores of aero-subs, combinations of airplanes and miniature submarines. They are moving up on our eastern coast, from some secret base which we have not yet located. They are equipped with death dealing

instruments of which we have but the most fragmentary knowledge, and for two hours I must call upon all flyers to combat the menace; until the Secret Agents, especially Professor Maniel, have had opportunity to counteract the minions of Moyen.

"Flyers of the United Americas! In the name of our country I ask that volunteers gather on the eastern coast, each flyer proceeding at once to the nearest coast-landing, after dropping all passengers. Your commanders have already been named by your various organizations, as required by franchise, and orders for the movement of the entire winged armada will come from this station. However, the orders will simply be this: Hold Moyen's forces at bay for a period of two hours! And know that many of you go to certain death, and make your own decisions as to whether you shall volunteer!"

This ended, Prester Kleig, excitement mounting high, hurried back to the Secret Room.

Now the public knew, and as the American public is given to doing, it steadied down when it knew the worst. Fear of the unknown had changed the public into a myriad-souled beast gone berserk. Now that knowledge was exact men grew calm of face, determined, and women assumed the supporting role which down the ages has been that of brave women, mothers of men.

A period of silence for a time after Prester Kleig's pronouncement.

As he entered the first door leading into the Secret Room, Carlos Kane met and passed him with a smile.

"You called for winged volunteers, did you not, Kleig?" he asked quietly.

Kleig nodded. "You are going?" he said.

"Yes. It is my duty."

No other words were necessary, as the men shook hands. Prester Kleig going on to the Secret Room, Carlos Kane going out to join the mighty armada which must fight against the minions of Moyen.

The words of Prester Kleig were heard by the pilots of the sky-lanes. The passenger pits, equipped with self-opening parachutes which dropped jumpers in series of long falls in order to acquire swift but accurate and safe landing—they opened at intervals in long falls of two thousand feet, stayed the fall, then closed again, so that drops were almost continuous until the last four hundred feet—and pilots, swiftly making up their minds, dropped their passengers, banked their planes, and raced into the east.

All over the Americas pilots dropped their passengers and their loads if their franchises called for the carrying of freight, and banked about to take part in the first skirmish with the Moyenites.

Dropping figures almost darkened the sky as passengers plunged downward after the startling signal from Washington. Flowers, which were the umbrellas of chutes, opened and closed like breathing winged orchids, letting their burdens safely to earth.

And clouds and fleets of airplanes came in from all directions to land, in rows and rows which were endless, wing and wing, along the eastern coast.

Prester Kleig had scarcely entered the Secret Room than the hated voice of Moyen again broke upon the ears of the machinelike Secret Agents.

"This is madness, gentlemen! My people will annihilate yours!"

But, since time for speech had passed, not one of the Secret Agents made answer or paid the slightest heed to the warning, though deep in the heart of each and every one was the belief that Moyen spoke no more than the truth.

Too, there was a growing respect for the half-god of Asia, in that he was good enough to warn them of the holocaust which faced their country.

By hundreds and thousands, wing and wing, airplanes dropped to the Atlantic coast at the closest point of contact, when the signal reached them. At high altitudes, planes crossing the Atlantic turned back and returned at top speed, dropping their passengers as soon as over land. That Moyen made no move to prevent the return of flyers out over the ocean, and now coming back, was an ominous circumstance.

It seemed to show that he held the American flyers, all of them, in utter contempt.

Prester Kleig regarded the time. It had been half an hour since Moyen had spoken of attack, half an hour since the monsters of the deep had started the inexorable move toward land. On the screen the submarines were bulking larger and larger as the moments fled, until it seemed to the Secret Agents that the great composite shadow of them already was sweeping inland from the coast.

As the coast came close ahead of the monster subs the little aero-subs, to the surprise of the Secret Agents, all vanished into their respective mother ships.

"But they have to use them," groaned Munson. "For their submarines are useless in frontal attack against our shores!"

"I am not so sure of that," said Prester Kleig. "For I have a suspicion that those submarines have tractors under their keels, and that they can come out on land! If this is so the monsters can, guarded by armour-plate, penetrate to the very heart of our most populated areas before their aero-subs are released."

None of the Secret Agents as yet had stopped to ponder how the monsters had reached their positions, and why Moyen was attacking from the east, when the Pacific side of the continents would have appeared to be the obvious point of attack, and would have obviated the necessity of long, secret under-sea journeys wherein discovery prematurely must have been one of the many worries of the submarine commanders.

The mere fact of the presence of the monsters was enough. What had preceded their presence was unimportant, save that their presence, and their near approach to the shore undetected, further proved the executive and planning genius of Moyen.

Two miles, on an average, off the eastern coast the submarines laid their eggs—the aero-subs, which darted from the sides of the mother

ships in flights and squadrons, made the surface, and leaped into the sky.

Five minutes later and the signal went forth to the phalanx of the volunteers.

"Take off! Fly east and engage the enemy, and hold him in check, and the God of our fathers go with you!"

One hour had passed since Moyen's ultimatum when the first vanguard of the American flyers, obeying the peremptory signal, took the air and darted eastward to meet the winged death-harbingers of Moyen.

Chapter 10: "They Shall Not Pass!"

Prester Kleig's heartfelt desire, as the American flyers closed with the first of the aero-subs, was to go out with them and aid them in the attack against the Moyenites. But he knew, and it was a tacit thing, that he best served his country from the safe haven of the Secret Room.

As he watched the scenes unfold on the screen of Maniel's genius, with occasional glances at the somewhat mysterious but profound and concentrated labors of Maniel, Charmion Kane rose from her place and came to his side.

Wide-eyed as she watched the joining of battle, she stood there, her tiny hand encased in the tense one of Prester Kleig.

"You would like to be out there," she murmured. "I know it! But your country needs you here—and I have already given Carlos!"

Prester Kleig tightened his grip on her hand.

There was deep, silent understanding between these two, and Prester Kleig, in fighting against the Moyenites, realized, even above his realization that his labors were primarily for the benefit of his

country, that he really matched wits with Moyen for the sake of Charmion. Had anyone asked him whether he would have sacrificed her for the benefit of his country, it would have been a difficult question to answer.

He was glad that the question was never asked.

"Yes, beloved," he whispered, "I would like to be out there, but the greatest need for me is here."

But even so he felt as though he was betraying those intrepid flyers he was sending to sure death. Yet they had volunteered, and it was the only way.

Maniel, a gnomelike little man with a Titan's brain, labored with his calculations, made swiftly concrete his theories, while at the Sound-and-Vision apparatus excitable General Munson ranged the aerial battlefield to see how the tide of battle ebbed and flowed.

That neither side would either ask or give quarter was instantly apparent, for they rushed head-on to meet each other, those vast opposing winged armadas, at top speed, and not a single individual swerved from his course, though at least the Americans knew that death rode the skyways ahead.

Then....

The battle was joined. Moyen's forces were superior in armament. Their sky-steeds were faster, more readily maneuverable, though the flying forces of the Americas in the last five years had made vast strides in aviation. But what the Americans lacked in power they made up for in fearless courage.

The plan of battle seemed automatically to work itself out.

The first vanguard of American planes came into contact with the forces of Moyen, and from the noses of countless aero-subs spurted that golden streak which the Secret Agents knew and dreaded.

The first flight of planes, stretching from horizon to horizon, vanished from the sky with that dreadful surety which had marked the passing of the *Stellar*, and such of those warships as had felt the full force of the visible ray.

From General Munson rose a groan of anguish. These convertible fighting planes had been the pride of the heart of the old warrior. To do him credit, however, it was the wanton, so terribly inevitable destruction of the flyers themselves which affected him. It was so final, so absolute—and so utterly impossible to combat.

"Wait!" snapped Prester Kleig.

For the intrepid flyers behind that vanguard which had vanished had witnessed the wholesale disintegration of the leading element of the vast armada, and the pilots realized on the instant that no headlong rush into the very noses of the aero-subs would avail anything.

The vast American formation broke into a mad maelstrom of whirling, darting, diving planes. Every third plane plummeted downward, every second one climbed, and the remaining ships, even in the face of what had happened to the vanished first flight, held steadily to the front.

In this mad, seemingly meaningless formation, they closed on the aero-subs. Without having seen the fight, the Americans were aping the action of that one nameless flyer who had charged the aero-sub that had been destroyed.

Kleig remembered. A score of ships had been destroyed utterly above the graveyard of dreadnoughts, yet only one aero-sub, and that quite by chance, had been marked off in the casualty column.

Death rode the heavens as the American flyers went into action. For head-on fights, flyers went in at top speed, their planes whirling on

the axes of fuselages, all guns going. Planes were armored against their own bullets, and they were not under the necessity of watching to see that they did not slay their own friends.

Even so, bullets were rather ineffective against the aero-subs, whose apparently flimsy, almost transparent outer covering diverted the bullets with amazing ease.

A whirling maelstrom of ships. The monsters of Moyen had drawn first blood, if the expression may be used in an action where no blood at all was drawn, but machines and men simply erased from existence.

Hundreds of planes already gone when the second flight of ships closed with the aero-subs. Yellow streaks of death flashed from aero-sub nostrils, but even as aero-sub operators set their rays into motion the American flyers in head-on charge rolled, dived or zoomed, and kept their guns going.

High above the first flight of aero-subs, behind which another flight was winging swiftly into action, American flyers tilted the noses of their planes over and dived under full power—to sure death by suicide, though none knew it there at the moment.

These aero-subs could not be driven from the sky by usual means, and could destroy American ships even before those planes could come to handgrips; but they, the flyers plainly believed, could be crashed out of the sky and so, never guessing what besides death in resulting crashes they faced, the flyers above the aero-subs, even as aero-subs in rear flashed in to prevent, dived down straight at the backs of the aero-subs.

In a hundred places the dives of the Americans worked successfully, and American planes crashed full and true, full power on, into the backs of the "flying fish." In some aero-subs the container of the Moyen-dealing agency apparently remained untouched, and airplanes and aero-subs, welded together, plunged down the invisible skylanes into the sea.

Under water, some of the aero-subs were seen to keep in motion, limping toward the nearest mother submarines.

"I hope," said Prester Kleig, "the American flyers in such cases are already dead, for Moyen will be a maniac in his tortures. Munson, do you hurriedly examine the mother-subs and see if you can locate Moyen."

However, only a scattered aero-sub here and there went down

without the strange substance of the yellow ray being released. In most cases, upon the contact of plane with aero-sub, the aero-subs and planes were instantly blotted from view by the yellow, golden flames from the heart of the winged harbingers of Moyen.

Golden flames, blinding in their brightness, dropping down, mere shapeless blotches, then fading out to nothingness in a matter of seconds—with aero-sub and airplane totally erased from action and from existence.

The American flyers saw and knew now the manner of death they faced. Yet all along the battle front not an American tried to evade the issue and draw out of the fight. A sublime, inspiring exhibition of mass courage which had not been witnessed down the years since that general engagement which men of the time had called the Great War.

Prester Kleig turned to look at Maniel. Drops of perspiration bathed the cheeks of the master scientist, but his eyes were glowing like coals of fire. His face was set in a white mask of concentration, and Prester Kleig knew that Maniel would find the answer to the thing he sought if such answer could be found.

Would the American flyers be able to hold off the minions of Moyen

until Maniel was ready? The fight out there above the waters was a terrible thing, and the Americans fought and died like men inspired, yet inexorably the winged armada of Moyen, preceded by those licking golden tongues, was moving landward.

"Great God!" cried Munson. "Look!"

There was really no need for the order, for every Secret Agent saw as soon as did Munson. Under the sea, just off the coast, the mother-subs had touched their blunt nose against the upward shelving of the sea bottom—had touched bottom, and were slowly but surely following the underwater curve of the land, up toward the surface, like unbelievable antediluvian monsters out of some nightmare.

"Yes," said Kleig quietly, "those monsters of Moyen can move on land, and the aero-subs can operate from them as easily on land as under water."

Kleig regarded the time, whirled to look at Professor Maniel.

One hour and forty minutes had passed since Maniel had begged for two hours in which to prepare some mode of effectively combatting the might of Moyen. Twenty minutes to go; yet the mother-subs would be ashore, dragging their sweating, monstrous sides out of the

deep, within ten minutes!

Ten minutes ashore and there was no guessing the havoc they could cause to the United Americas!

"Hurry, Maniel! Hurry! Hurry!" said Prester Kleig.

But he spoke the words to himself, though even had he spoken them aloud Maniel would not have heard. For Maniel, for two hours, had closed his mind to everything that transpired outside his own thoughts, devoted to foiling the power of Moyen.

"I've found him!" snapped Munson.

He pointed with a shaking forefinger to one of the mother-subs crawling up the slant of the ocean bed, twisted one of the little nubs of the Sound-and-Vision apparatus, and the angelic face and Satanic eyes, the twisted body, of Moyen came into view.

The face was calm with dreadful purpose, and Moyen stood in the heart of one of his monsters, his eyes turned toward the land. With a gasp of terror, dreadfully afraid for the first time, Prester Kleig turned and looked into the eyes of Charmion....

"No," she said. "It will never happen. I have faith in you!"

There were still ten minutes of the two hours left when the mother-subs broke water and started crawling inland, swiftly, surely, without faltering in the slightest as they changed their element from water to land.

As though their appearance had been the signal, the aero-subs in action against the first line of American planes broke out of the one-sided fight and dived for their mother ships, while a mere handful of the American planes started back for home to prepare anew to continue the struggle.

Prester Kleig gave the signal to the second monster armada which had remained in reserve.

"Do everything in your power to halt the march of Moyen's amphibians!"

Ten minutes to go, and Professor Maniel still labored like a Titan.

Chapter 11: Caucasia Falls Silent

As the scores of amphibian monsters came lumbering forth upon dry land it became instantly apparent why the aero-subs had returned to the mother ships. For a few moments, out of the water, the amphibians were almost helpless, with practically no way of attack

or defense—as helpless as huge turtles turned legs up.

But as each aero-sub entered its proper slot in the side of the mother amphibian, it was turned about and the nose thrust back into the opening, which closed down to fit tightly about the nose of the aero-sub, so that those flame-breathing monsters protruded from the sides of the amphibians in many places—transforming the amphibians into monsters with hundreds of golden, licking tongues!

As, with each and every aero-sub in place, the amphibians started moving inland, Professor Maniel made his first move. With the tiny apparatus upon which he had been working, he stepped to the table before the Sound-and-Vision apparatus and spoke softly to his compatriots.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I have finished, and it will work effectively!"

Though Maniel spoke softly, it was plain to be seen that he was proud of his accomplishment, which remained only to be attached to start performance.

A matter of seconds....

Yet during those seconds was the real might, the real power for utter

devastation, of Moyen fully exposed!

The amphibians got under way as the airplanes of the Americas swept into the fight.

From the sides of the monsters licked out those golden tongues of flame—and from the front.

Half a dozen amphibians slipped into New York from the harbor side and started into the heart of the city. And between the time when Maniel had said he was ready and the moment when he made his first active move against Moyen, a half-dozen skyscrapers vanished into nothingness, the spots where they had stood swept as clear of debris as though the land had never been reclaimed from Nature!

None was ever destined to know how many lives were lost in that first attack of the monsters of the golden, myriad tongues; but the monsters struck in the midst of a working day when the skyscrapers were filled with office workers.

And resolve struck deep into the hearts of the Secret Agents: if Moyen were turned back, he must be made to pay for the slaughter.

A matter of seconds....

Then a moment of deathly silence as Munson gave way at the screen for the gnomelike little Professor Maniel.

"Now, gentlemen!" snapped Maniel. "If my theory is correct," manipulating instruments with lightning speed as he talked, "the reversion of the principle of my Vibration-Retarder—which captures vibrations speeding outward from the earth and transforms them once again into sound and pictures audible and visible to the human ear—this apparatus will disintegrate the monsters as our boats and planes were disintegrated!

"In this I have even been compelled to manipulate in the matter of time! I must not only defeat and annihilate the minions of Moyen, but must work from a mathematical absurdity, so that at the moment of impact that moment itself must become part of the past, sufficiently remote to remove the monsters at such distance from the earth that not even the mighty genius of Moyen can return them!"

The whirring, gentle as the whirring of doves' wings. In the center of the picture on the screen were those half-dozen amphibians laying waste Manhattan. Maniel set his intricate, delicate machinery into motion.

Instantly the amphibians there seemed to become misty, shadowy,

and to lift out of Manhattan up above the roof-tops of skyscrapers still remaining, nebulous and wraithlike as ghost-shrouds—yet swinging outward from the earth with speed almost too swift for the eye to detect.

But where the amphibians had rested there stood, reclined—in all sorts of postures, surprising and even a bit ridiculous—the men of Moyen who had operated the monsters of Moyen!

From the Central Radio tower went forth a mighty voice of command to the planes which had been engaging the aero-subs off the coast.

"Slay! Slay!"

Down flashed the planes of the Americas, and their guns were blazing, inaudibly, but none the less deadly of aim and of purpose, straight into the midst of the men of Moyen who had thus been left marooned and almost helpless with the vanishing of their amphibians.

And, noting how they fell in strangled, huddled heaps before the vengeful fire of the American planes, the Secret Agents sighed, and Maniel, his face alight with the pride of accomplishment, switched

to another point along the coast.

And as a new group of the monsters of Moyen came into view, and Maniel bent to his labors afresh, the hated voice of the master mobster broke once more in the Secret Room.

"Enough, Kleig! Enough! We will surrender to save lives! I stipulate only that my own life be spared!"

To which Prester Kleig made instant reply.

"Did you offer us choice of surrender? Did you spare the lives of our people which, with your control of your golden rays, you could easily have done? No! Nor will we spare lives, least of all the life of Moyen!"

The whirring again, as of the whirring of doves' wings. More metal monsters, even as golden tongues spewed forth from their many sides, vanished from view, leaping skyward, while the operators of them were left to the mercies of the remaining airmen of the Americans.

Voicelessly the word went forth:

"Slay! Slay!"

It was Charmion who begged for mercy for the vanquished as, one by one, as surely as fate, the monsters with their contained aero-subs were blotted out, leaving pilots and operators behind them. Down upon these dropped the airmen of the West, slaying without mercy....

"Please, lover!" Charmion whispered. "Spare them!"

"Even...?" he began, thinking of Moyen, who would have taken Charmion. He felt her shudder as she read his mind, understood what he would have asked.

"There he is!" came softly from Munson.

An amphibian had just been disintegrated, had just climbed mistily, swiftly, into invisibility in the skies. And there in the midst of the conquerors left behind, his angel's face set in a moody mask, his pale eyes awful with fear, his misshapen body sagging, terrible in its realization of failure, was Moyen!

Even as Kleig prepared to give the mercy signal, a plane dived down on the group about Moyen, and the Secret Agents could see the hand of the pilot, lifted high, as though he signaled.

The plane was a Mayther! The pilot was Carlos Kane!

Just as Kane went into action, and the noiseless bullets from his ship crashed into that twisted body, causing it to jump and twitch with the might of them, Prester Kleig gave the signal.

Even as the figure of Moyen crashed to the soil and the man's soul quitted its mortal casement, Kleig commanded:

"Spare all who surrender! Make them prisoners, to be used to repair the damage they have done to our country! Guards will be instantly placed over the amphibians and the aero-subs—for the day may come when we shall need to know their secrets!"

And, as men, hands lifted high in token of surrender, quitted the now motionless amphibians, and flyers dropped down to make them prisoners, Maniel sighed, pressed various buttons on his apparatus, and the mad scene of carnage they had witnessed for hours faded slowly out, and darkness and silence filled the Secret Room.

But darkness is the joy of lovers, and in the midst of silence that was almost appalling by contrast, Kleig and Charmion were received into each other's arms.

#22 Vampires Of Venus, By Anthony Pelcher:

Leslie Larner, an Entomologist borrowed from the earth, pits himself against the night-flying vampires that are ravaging the inhabitants of Venus.

Aproximate word count: 7,000

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

It was as if someone had thrown a bomb into a Quaker meeting, when adventure suddenly began to crowd itself into the life of the studious and methodical Leslie Larner, professor of entomology.

Fame had been his since early manhood, when he began to distinguish himself in several sciences, but the adventure and thrills he had longed for had always fallen to the lot of others.

His father, a college professor, had left him a good working brain and nothing else. Later his mother died and he was left with no relatives in the world, so far as he knew. So he gave his life over to

study and hard work.

Still youthful at twenty-five, he was hoping that fate would "give him a break." It did.

He was in charge of a Government department having to do with Oriental beetles, Hessian flies, boll weevils and such, and it seemed his life had been just one bug after another. He took creeping, crawling things seriously and believed that, unless curbed, insects would some day crowd man off the earth. He sounded an alarm, but humanity was not disturbed. So Leslie Larner fell back on his microscope and concerned himself with saving cotton, wheat and other crops. His only diversion was fishing for the elusive rainbow trout.

He managed to spend a month each year in the Colorado Rockies angling for speckled beauties.

Larner was anything but a clock-watcher, but on a certain bright day in June he was seated in his laboratory doing just that.

"Just five minutes to go," he mused.

It was just 4:25 P. M. He had finished his work, put his affairs in

order, and in five minutes would be free to leave on a much needed and well earned vacation. His bags were packed and at the station. His fishing tackle, the pride of his young life, was neatly rolled in oiled silk and stood near at hand.

"I'll just fill my calabash, take one more quiet smoke, and then for the mountains and freedom," he told himself. He settled back with his feet on his desk. He half closed his eyes in solid comfort. Then the bomb fell and exploded.

B-r-r-r-r!

The buzzer on his desk buzzed and his feet came off the desk and hit the floor with a thud. His eyes popped open and the calabash was immediately laid aside.

That buzzer usually meant business, and it would be his usual luck to have trouble crash in on him just as he was on the edge of a rainbow trout paradise.

A messenger was ushered into the room by an assistant. The boy handed him an envelope, said, "No answer," and departed.

Larner tore open the envelope lazily. He read and then re-read its

contents, while a look of puzzled surprise disturbed his usually placid countenance. He spread the sheet of paper out on his desk, and for the tenth time he read:

Confidential.

Memorize this address and destroy this paper:

Tula Bela, 1726 88th Street, West, City of Hesper, Republic of Pana, Planet Venus.

Will meet you in the Frying Pan.

That was all. It was enough. Larner lost his temper. He crumpled the paper and tossed it in the waste basket. He was not given to profanity, but he could say "Judas Priest" in a way that sizzled.

"Judas Priest!" he spluttered. "Anyone who would send a man a crazy bunch of nonsense like that, at a time like this, ought to be snuffed out like a beetle!

"'Meet you in the Frying Pan,'" he quoted. Then he happened to recall something. "By golly, there is a fishing district in Colorado known as the Frying Pan. That's not so crazy, but the planet Venus part surely is cuckoo."

He fished the paper out of the waste basket, found the envelope, placed the strange message within and put it in his inside coat pocket. Then he seized his suitcase and fishing tackle, and, rushing out, hailed a taxi. Not long after he was on his way west by plane.

As the country unrolled under him he retrieved the strange note from his pocket. He read it again and again. Then he examined the envelope. It was an ordinary one of good quality, designed for business rather than social usage. The note paper appeared quite different. It was unruled, pure white, and of a texture which might be described as pebbly. It was strongly made, and of a nature unlike any paper Larner had ever seen before. It appeared to have been made from a fiber rather than a pulp.

"Wonder who wrote it?" Larner asked himself. "It is beautiful handwriting, masculine yet artistic. Wonder where he got the Frying Pan idea? At any rate, I'm not going to the Frying Pan this year—I'm camping on Tennessee Creek, in Lake County, Colorado. The country there is more beautiful and restful.

"But this street address on the planet Venus. Seems to me I read somewhere that Marconi had received mysterious signals that he believed came from the planet Venus. Hesper, Hesper ... it sounds familiar, somehow. Wonder if there could be anything to it?"

Something impelled him to follow out the instructions in the note. He spent the next few hours repeating the address over and over again. When he was satisfied that he had memorized it thoroughly, he tore the strange paper into bits and sent it fluttering earthward like a tiny snowstorm.

Larner was not a gullible individual, but neither was he unimaginative. He was scientist enough to know that "the impossibilities of to-day are the accomplishments of to-morrow." So while not convinced that the note was a serious communication, still his mind was open.

The weird address insisted on creeping into his mind and driving out other thoughts, even those of his speckled playfellows, the rainbow trout.

"I've a notion to change my plans and go from Denver to the Frying Pan," he cogitated. Then he thought, "No, I won't take it that seriously."

Anyone who knows the Colorado Rockies knows paradise. There is no more beautiful country on the globe. Lake County, where Larner had chosen his fishing grounds, has as its seat the old mining camp of Leadville. It has been visited and settled more for its gold mines

than the golden glow of its sunsets above the clouds, but the gold of the sunsets is eternal, while the gold of the mines is fading quickly away.

Leadville, with its 5,000 inhabitants, nestles above the clouds, at an altitude of more than 10,000 feet. Mount Massive with its three peaks lies back of the town in panorama and rises to a height of some 14,400 feet. In the rugged mountains thereabouts are hundreds of lakes fed by wild streams and bubbling crystal springs. All these lakes are above the clouds.

Winter sees the whole picture decorated with bizarre snowdrifts from twenty to forty feet deep, but spring comes early. The beautiful columbines and crocuses bloom before the snow is all off the ground in the valleys. The lands up to 12,000 feet altitude are carpeted with a light green grass and moss. Giant pines and dainty aspens, with their silvery bark and pinkish leaves blossom forth and whisper, while the eternal snows still linger in the higher rocky cliffs and peaks above.

Indian-paint blooms its blood red in contrast to the milder colorings. Blackbirds and bluebirds chatter and chipmunks chirp. The gold so hard to find in the mines glares from the skies. The hills cuddle in banks of snowy clouds, and above all a pure clear blue sky sweeps.

The lakes and streams abound with rainbow trout, the gamest of any fresh water fish. It is indeed a paradise for either poet or sportsman.

In any direction near to Leadville a man can find Heaven and recreation and rest.

Finding himself on Harrison Avenue, the main street of the county seat, Larner, after renewing some old acquaintanceships, started west in a flivver for Tennessee Creek. The flivver is a modern adjustment. Until a few years ago the only means of traversing these same hills was by patient, sure-footed donkeys, which carried the pack while the wayfarer walked along beside.

The first day's fishing was good. Trout seemed to greet him cheerily and sprang eagerly to the fray. They bit at any sort of silken fly he cast.

The site chosen by Larner for his camp was in a mossy clearing separated from the stream by a fringe of willows along the creek. Then came a border of aspens backed by a forest of silver-tipped firs.

It was ideal and his eyes swept the scene with satisfaction. Then he began whittling bacon to grease his pan for frying trout over the

open fire.

Suddenly he heard a rustle in the aspens, and, looking up, beheld a picture which made his eyes bulge. A man and a woman, garbed seemingly in the costumes of another world, walked toward him. Neither were more than five feet tall but were physically perfect, and marvelously pleasing to the eye. There was little difference in their dress.

Both wore helmets studded with what Larner believed to be sapphires. He learned later they were diamonds. Their clothing consisted of tight trouserlike garments surmounted by tunics of some white pelt resembling chamois save for color. A belt studded with precious stones encircled their waists. Artistic laced sandals graced their small firm feet.

Their skin was a pinkish white. Their every feature was perfection plus, and their bodies curved just enough wherever a curve should be. The woman was daintier and more fully developed, and her features were even more finely chiseled than the man. Otherwise it would have been difficult to distinguish their sex.

Larner took in these details subconsciously, for he was awed beyond expression. All he could do was to stand seemingly frozen, half bent

over the campfire with his frying pan in his hand.

The man spoke.

"I hope we did not startle you," he said. "I thought my note would partly prepare you for this meeting. We expected to find you in the Frying Pan district. When you did not appear there we tuned our radio locator to your heart beats and in that way located you here. It was hardly a second's space-flying time from where we were."

Larner said nothing. He could only stand and gape.

"I do not wonder that you are surprised," said the strange little man. "I will explain that I am Nern Bela, of the City of Hesper, on the planet Venus. This is my sister Tula. We greet you in the interest of the Republic of Pana, which embraces all of the planet you know as Venus."

When Larner recovered his breath, he lost his temper.

"I don't know what circus you escaped from, but I crave solitude and I have no time to be bothered with fairy tales," he said with brutal bruskness.

Expressions of hurt surprise swept the countenances of his visitors.

The man spoke again:

"We are just what we assert we are, and our finding you was made necessary by a condition which grieves the souls of all the 900,000,000 inhabitants of Venus. We have come to plead with you to come with us and use your scientific knowledge to thwart a scourge which threatens the lives of millions of people."

There was a quiet dignity about the man and an air of pride about the woman which made Larner stop and think, or try to. He rubbed his hand over his brow and looked questioningly at the pair.

"If you are what you say you are, how did you get here?" he asked.

"We came in a targo, a space-flying ship, capable of doing 426,000 miles an hour. This is just 1200 times as fast as 355 miles an hour, the highest speed known on earth. Come with us and we will show you our ship." They looked at him appealingly, and both smiled a smile of wistful friendliness.

Larner, without a word, threw down his frying pan and followed them through the aspens. The brother and sister walking ahead of him gave his eyes a treat. He surveyed the perfect form of the girl. Her perfection was beyond his ken.

"They certainly are not of this world," he mused.

A few hundred yards farther on there was a beach of pebbles, where the stream had changed its course. On this plot sat a gigantic spherical machine of a glasslike material. It was about 300 feet in diameter and it was tapered on two sides into tees which Larner rightly took to be lights.

"This is a targo, our type of space-flyer," said Nern Bela. "It is capable of making two trips a year between Venus and the earth. We have visited this planet often, always landing in some mountain or jungle fastness as heretofore we did not desire earth-dwellers to know of our presence."

"Why not?" asked Larner, his mouth agape and his eyes protruding. His mind was so full of questions that he fairly blurted his first one.

"Because," said Bela, slowly and frankly, "because our race knows no sickness and we feared contagion, as your race has not yet learned to control its being."

"Oh," said Lamer thoughtfully. He realized that humans of the earth, whom he had always regarded as God's most perfect beings, were not so perfect after all.

"How do you people control your being, as you express it?" he asked.

"It is simple," was the reply. "For ninety centuries we have ceased to breed imperfection, crime and disease. We deprived no one of the pleasures of life, but only the most perfect mental and physical specimens of our people cared to have children. In other words, while we make no claim to controlling our sex habits, we do control results."

"Oh," said Larner again.

Nern Bela led the way to a door which opened into the side of the space-flyer near its base. "We have a crew of four men and four women," he said. "They handle the entire ship, with my sister and I in command, making six souls aboard in all."

"Why men and women?" thought Larner.

As if in answer to his thought Bela said:

"On the earth the two sexes have struggled for sex supremacy. This has thrown your civilization out of balance. On Venus we have struggled for sex equality and have accomplished it. This is a perfect

balance. Man and women engage in all endeavor and share all favors and rewards alike."

"In war, too?" asked Larner.

"There has not been war on Venus for 600,000 years," said Bela. "There is only the one nation, and the people all live in perfect accord. Our only trouble in centuries is a dire peril which now threatens our people, and it is of this that I wish to talk to you more at length."

They were standing close to the targo. Larner was struck by the peculiar material of which it was constructed. There was a question in his eyes, and Nern Bela answered it:

"The metal is duranium; it is metalized quartz. It is frictionless, conducts no current or ray except repulsion and attraction ray NTR69X6 by which it is propelled. It is practically transparent, lighter than air and harder than a diamond. It is cast in moulds after being melted or, rather, fused.

"We use cold light which we produce by forcing oxygen through air tubes into a vat filled with the fat of a deep sea fish resembling your whale. You are aware, of course, that that is exactly how cold light is

produced by the firefly, except for the fact that the firefly uses his own fat."

Larner was positively fascinated. He smoothed the metal of the targo in appreciation of its marvelous construction, but he longed most to see the curious light giving mechanism, for this was closer to his own line of entomology. He had always believed that the light giving organs of fireflys and deep-sea fishes could be reproduced mechanically.

The interior of the ship resembled in a vague way that of an ocean liner. It was controlled by an instrument board at which a man and a girl sat. They did not raise their heads as the three people entered.

When called by Bela and his sister, who seemed to give commands in unison, the crew assembled and were presented to the visitor.

"Earth-dwellers are not the curiosity to us that we seem to be to you," said Tula Bela, speaking for the first time and smiling sweetly.

Larner was too engrossed to note the remark further than to nod his head. He was lost in contemplation of these strange people, all garbed exactly alike and all surpassingly lovely to look upon.

An odor of food wafted from the galley, and Larner remembered he was hungry, with the hunger of health. He had swung his basket of fish over his shoulder when he left his campfire, and Tula took it from him.

"Would you like to have our chef prepare them for you?" she said, as she caught his hungry glance at his day's catch. This time Larner answered her.

"If you will pardon me," he said awkwardly. "Really I am famished."

"You will not miss your fish dinner," said the girl.

"I believe there is enough for all of us," said Larner. "I caught twenty beauties. I never knew fish to bite like that. Why, they—" and he was off on a voluminous discourse on a favorite subject.

Those assembled listened sympathetically. Then Tula took the fish, and soon the aroma of broiling trout mingled with the other entrancing galley odors.

After a dinner at which some weird yet satisfying viands were served and much unusual conversation indulged in, Nern Bela led the way to what appeared to be the captain's quarters. The crew and their

visitor sat down to discuss a subject which proved to be of such a terrifying nature as to scar human souls.

"People on Venus," said Nern, as his eyes took on a worried expression, "are unable to leave their homes after nightfall due to some strange nocturnal beast which attacks them and vampirishly drains all blood from their veins, leaving the dead bodies limp and empty."

"What? How?" questioned Larner leaning far forward over the conference table.

The others nodded their heads, and in the eyes of the women there was terror. Larner could not but believe this.

"The beasts, or should I say insects, are as large as your horses and they fly, actually fly, by night, striking down humans, domestic animals and all creatures of warm blood. How many there are we have no means of knowing, and we cannot find their hiding and breeding places. They are not native to our planet, and where they come from we cannot imagine. They are actually monstrous flys, or bugs, or some form of insects."

Larner was overcome by incredulity and showed it. "Insects as big as

horses?" he questioned and he could hardly suppress a smile.

"Believe us, in the name of the God of us all," insisted Nern. "They have a mouth which consists of a large suction disk, in the center of which is a lancelike tongue. The lance is forced into the body at any convenient point, and the suction disk drains out the blood. If we only knew their source! They attack young children and the aged, up to five hundred years, alike."

"What! Five hundred years?" exploded Larner again.

"I should have explained," said Nern, simply, "that Venus dwellers, due to our advanced knowledge of sanitation and health conversation, live about 800 years and then die invariably of old age. The only unnatural cause of death encountered is this giant insect. Accidents do occur, but they are rare. There are no deliberate killings on Venus."

Larner did not answer. He only pondered. The more he ran over the strange happenings of the last week in his mind the more he believed he was dreaming. His thoughts took a strange turn: "Why do these vain people go around dressed in jeweled ornaments?"

Nern again anticipated a question. "Diamonds, gold and many of

what you call precious stones are common on Venus," he volunteered. "Talc and many other things are more valuable."

"Talc?"

"Yes, we use an immense quantity of it. We have a wood that is harder than your steel. We build machinery with it. We cannot use oil to lubricate these wooden shafts and bearings as it softens the wood, so all parts exposed to friction are sprayed constantly by a gust of talc from a blower.

"You use talc mostly for toilet purposes. We use it for various purposes. There is little left on Venus, and it is more valuable to us than either gold or diamonds. We draw on your planet now for talc. You dump immense quantities. We just shipped one hundred 1,000-ton globes of it from the Cripple Creek district, and the district never missed it. We drew most of it from your mine dumps."

Nern tried not to look bored as he explained more in detail: "We brought 100 hollow spheres constructed of duranium. We suspended these over the Cripple Creek district at an altitude of 10,000 feet above the earth's surface. Because of the crystal glint of duranium they were invisible to earth dwellers at that height. Then we used a suction draft at night, drawing the talc from the earth, filling one

drum after another. This is done by tuning in a certain selective attraction that attracts only talc. It draws it right out of your ground in tiny particles and assembles it in the transportation drums as pure talc. On the earth, if noticed at all, it would have been called a dust storm.

"The drums, when loaded with talc, are set to attract the proper planetary force and they go speeding toward Venus at the rate of 426,000 miles an hour. They are prevented from colliding with meteors by an automatic magnetic device. This is controlled by magnetic force alone, and when the targo gets too close to a meteor it changes its course instantly. The passenger targo we ride in acts similarly. And now may I return to the subject of the vampires of Venus?"

"Pardon my ignorance," said Larner, and for the first time in his life he felt very ignorant indeed.

"I know little more than I have told you," said Nern, rather hopelessly. "Our knowledge of your world, your people and your language comes from our listening in on you and observing you without being observed or heard. This might seem like taking an advantage of you, were it not for the fact that we respect confidences, and subjugate all else to science. We have helped you at

times, by telepathically suggesting ideas to your thinkers.

"We would have given you all our inventions in this way, gladly, but in many instances we were unable to find minds attuned to accept such advanced ideas. We have had the advantage of you because our planet is so many millions of years older than your own." There was a plaintive note in Nern's voice as he talked.

"But now we are on our knees to you, so to speak. We do not know everything and, desperately, we need the aid of a man of your caliber. In behalf of the distraught people of Venus, I am asking you bluntly to make a great sacrifice. Will you face the dangers of a trip to Venus and use your knowledge to aid us in exterminating these creatures of hell?" There was positive pleading in his voice, and in the eyes of his beautiful sister there were tears.

"But what would my superiors in the Government Bureau think?" feebly protested Larner, "I could not explain...."

"You have no superiors in your line. Our Government needs you at this time more than any earthly government. Your place here is a fixture. You can always return to it, should you live. We are asking you to face a horrible death with us. You can name your own compensation, but I know you are not interested so much in reward.

"Now, honestly, my good professor, there is no advantage to be gained by explanation. Just disappear. In the name of God and in the interests of science and the salvation of a people who are at your mercy, just drop out of sight. Drop out of life on this planet. Come with us. The cause is worthy of the man I believe you to be."

"I will go," said Larner, and his hosts waited for no more. An instant later the targo shot out into interstellar space.

"How do you know what course to follow?" asked Larner after a reasonable time, when he had recovered from his surprise at the sudden take-off.

"We do not need to know. Our machine is tuned to be attracted by the planetary force of Venus alone. We could not go elsewhere. A repulsion ray finds us as we near Venus and protects us against too violent a landing. We will land on Venus like a feather about three months from to-night."

The time of the journey through outer space was of little moment save for one incident. Larner and the other travelers were suddenly and rather rudely jostled about the rapidly flying craft.

Larner lost his breath but not his speech. "What happened?" he

inquired.

"We just automatically dodged a meteor," explained Nern.

Most of the time of the trip was spent by Larner in listening to explanations of customs and traditions of the people of the brightest planet in the universe.

There was a question Larner had desired to ask Nern Bela, yet he hesitated to do so. Finally one evening during the journey to Venus, when the travelers had been occupying themselves in a scientific discussion of comparative evolution on the two planets, Larner saw his opportunity.

"Why," he asked rather hesitatingly, "did the people of Venus always remain so small? Why did you not strive more for height? The Japanese, who are the shortest in stature of earth people, always wanted to be tall."

"Without meaning any offense," replied Nern, "I must say that it is characteristic of earth dwellers to want something without knowing any good reason why they want it. It is perfectly all right for you people to be tall, but for us it is not so fitting. You see, Venus is smaller than the earth. Size is comparative. You think we are not tall

because you are used to taller people. Comparatively we are tall enough. In proportion to the size of our planet we are exactly the right size. We keep our population at 900,000,000, and that is the perfectly exact number of people who can live comfortably on our planet."

Arriving on Venus, Larner was assigned a laboratory and office in one of the Government buildings. It was a world seemingly made of glass. Quartz, of rose, white and crystal coloring, Larner found, was the commonest country rock of the planet. In many cases it was shot full of splinters of gold which the natives had not taken the trouble to recover. This quartz was of a terrific hardness and was used in building, paving, and public works generally. The effect was bewildering. It was a world of shimmering crystal.

The atmosphere of Venus had long puzzled Larner. While not an astronomer in the largest sense of the word, yet he had a keen interest in the heavens as a giant puzzle picture, and he had given some spare time to the study.

He knew that from all indications Venus had a most unusual atmosphere. He had read that the atmosphere was considerably denser than that of the earth, and that its presence made observation difficult. The actual surface of the planet he knew could hardly be

seen due, either to this atmosphere, or seemingly perpetual cloud banks.

He had read that the presence of atmosphere surrounding Venus is indicated to earthly astronomers, during the planet's transit, by rings of light due to the reflection and scattering of collected sunlight by its atmosphere.

Astronomers on earth, he knew, had long been satisfied of the presence of great cloud banks, as rocks and soils could not have such high reflecting power. He knew that like the moon, Venus, when viewed from the earth, presents different phases from the crescent to the full or total stage.

Looking up at the sky from the quartz streets of Venus, Larner beheld, in sweeping grandeur, massed cloud banks, many of them apparently rain clouds.

Nern noted his skyward gaze, and said:

"We have accomplished meteorological control. Those clouds were brought under control when we conquered interplanetary force, and what you call gravity. We form them and move them at will. They are our rain factory. We make rain when and where we will. This

insures our crops and makes for health and contentment.

"The air, you will note, is about the same or a little more moist than the earth air at sea level. This is due to the planet's position nearer the sun.

"We have been striving for centuries to make the air a little drier and more rare, but we have not succeeded yet. The heavy content of disintegrated quartz in our soil makes moisture very necessary for our crops, so our moist atmosphere is evidently a provision of providence. We are used to breathing this moist air, and when I first visited the earth I was made uncomfortable by your rarified atmosphere. Now I can adjust myself to breathing the air of either planet. However, I find myself drinking a great deal more water on earth than on Venus."

In this fairyland which had enjoyed centuries of peace, health and accord, stark terror now reigned. In some instances the finely-bred, marvellously intelligent people were in a mental condition bordering on madness.

This was especially true in the farming districts, where whole herds of lats had been wiped out. Lats, Larner gleaned, were a common

farm animal similar to the bovine species on earth, only more wooly. On these creatures the Venus dwellers depended for their milk and dairy supplies, and for their warmer clothing, which was made from the skin. The hair was used for brushes, in the building trades, and a thousand ways in manufacturing.

Besides the domestic animals hundreds of people continued to meet death, and only a few of the flying vampires had been hunted down. The giant insects were believed to breed slowly as compared to earth insects, their females producing not more than ten eggs, by estimate, after which death overtook the adult. In spite of this they were reported to be increasing.

In the Government building Larner was placed in touch with all the Government scientists of Venus. His nearest collaborator was one Zorn Zada, most profound scientist of the planet. The two men, with a score of assistants, worked elbow to elbow on the most gigantic scientific mystery in the history of two planets.

A specimen of the dread invader was mounted and studied by the scientists, who were so engrossed in their work that they hardly took time to eat. As for sleep, there was little of it. Days were spent in research and nights in hunting the monsters. This hunting was done by newly recruited soldiers and scientists. The weapons used were a

short ray-gun of high destructive power which disintegrated the bodies of the enemies by atomic energy blasts. The quarry was wary, however, and struck at isolated individuals rather than massed fighting lines.

Seated at his work-bench Larner asked Zorn Zada what had become of Nern Bela. In his heart he had a horrible lurking fear that the beautiful Tula Bela might fall before a swarm of the strange vampires, but he did not voice this anxiety.

"Nern and his sister are explorers and navigators," was the reply. "They have been assigned to carry you anywhere on this or any other planet where your work may engage you. They await your orders. They are too valuable as space-navigators to be placed in harm's way."

Breathing a sigh of relief, Larner bent to his labors.

"What other wild animals or harmful insects have you on this planet?" he asked Zorn.

"I get your thought," replied the first scientist of Venus. "You are seeking a natural enemy to this deadly flying menace, are you not?"

"Yes," admitted Larner.

"All insects left on Venus with this one exception are beneficial," said Zorn. "There are no wild animals, and no harmful insects. All animals, insects and birds have been domesticated and are fed by their keepers. We get fabrics from forms of what you call spiders and other web-builders and cocoon spinners. All forms of birds, beasts and crawling and flying things have been brought under the dominion of man. We will have to seek another way out than by finding an enemy parasite."

"Where do you think these insect invaders came from?" asked Larner.

"You have noticed they are unlike anything you have on earth in anatomical construction," said the savant. "They partake of the general features of Coleoptera (beetles), in that they wear a sheath of armor, yet their mouth parts are more on the order of the Diptera (flys). I regard them more as a fly than a beetle, because most Coleoptera are helpful to humanity while practically all, if not all, Diptera are malignant.

"As to their original habitat, I believe they migrated here from some other planet."

"They could not fly through space," said Larner.

"No, that is the mystery of it," agreed Zorn. "How they got here and where they breed are the questions that we have to answer."

Long days passed on Venus. Long days and sleepless nights. The big insects were hunted nightly by men armed with ray-guns, and nightly the blood-sucking monsters took their toll of humanity and animals.

Finally Larner and Zorn determined to capture one of the insects alive, muzzle its lance and suction pad, and give it sufficient freedom to find its way back to its hiding place. By following the shackled monster the scientists hoped to find the breeding grounds.

All the provinces of the planet joined in the drive. Men turned out in automatic vehicles, propelled by energy gathered from the atmosphere. They came on foot and in aircraft. Mobilization was at given points and, leading the van, were Zorn and Larner and their confreres in the targo of Nern and Tula Bela. The great army of Venus carried giant searchlights and was armed with deadly ray-guns.

Headquarters of the vast Army of Offense was in the targo of the Belas. Larner was in supreme command. Just before the big army set out to scour the planet to seek the breeding place of the monsters Larner issued a bulletin that set all Venus by the ears.

Addressed to President Vole Vesta of the Republic of Pana and the good people of Venus, it read:

As is generally known, it has been the habit of the nation's space-flying merchantmen to visit the sunlit side of the planet Mercury to obtain certain rare woods and other materials not found on this planet.

One side of Mercury, as is known, is always turned from the sun and is in a condition of perpetual night. In this perpetual darkness and dampness, where many rivers flow into warm black swamps, the vampires have bred for centuries. Conditions were ideal for their growth, and so through the ages they evolved into the monsters we have encountered lately on Venus.

During some comparatively recent visit to Mercury the grubs of these insects have found their way abroad a vegetation-laden targo left standing near the edge of the black swamps of Mercury. These grubs were thus transported to Venus and underwent their natural

metamorphosis here. Reaching adult stage, they have found some place to hide and breed, and thus is explained the origin of the vampires of Venus.

This was widely read and discussed and was finally accepted as the means of the invasion of peaceful, beautiful Venus by a horror that might well have originated in hell.

However, this did not reveal the breeding grounds, or remove the nation-wide scourge of the horrible winged vampires, so the mobilization of all the forces of the planet continued.

As day followed day the hordes of fighting Venus dwellers grew in the concentration camps. In the targo of the Belas, Larner, brain-weary and body-racked as he was with overwork, found a grain of happiness in being in the presence of Nern and his beautiful, petite sister.

With Zorn, Larner was supervising the construction of a big net of strongly woven wire mesh, in which it was hoped to catch one of the vampires. It was decided to bait the trap with a fat female lat.

Zorn, Larner and the Belas fared forth from the concentration camp

followed by a company of soldiers carrying the big net. Tula with her own hand led the fat lat heifer. His eyes were filled with commiseration for the poor animal.

Thousands of soldiers and citizenry, in fighting array, watched the departure of the little group.

In a glade the trap was set and the net arranged to fall over the monster once it attacked the calf. From a thicket, in utter darkness, Zorn and Larner and the two Belas waited for the possible catch. The whole nation stood awaiting the order to advance.

On the fourth night the vigil was rewarded in a manner frightful to relate.

A clumsy flutter of giant wings broke the stillness.

The four waiting forms in the thicket rejoiced, believing the fat lat was about to be attacked.

Onward came the approaching horror. The measured flap, flap of its armored wings drawing nearer and nearer. Then, horror—horrors!

A feminine scream rent the air. Cries loud and shrill arose above a hysterical feminine cry for help.

The monster had chosen Tula Bela for its prey!

Zorn exploded an alarm bomb. A compressed air siren brought the army forward on the run. Giant floodlights began to light up the scene. The blood of Larner and Nern froze.

The monster had borne the girl to the ground. Its frightful lance and cupper was upraised to strike. Larner was the nearest and the quickest to act. He grabbed for his ray-gun, swung at his belt. It was gone! In horror he remembered he had left it at the base. He seized a short knife and threw himself forward, rolling his body between that of the girl and the descending lance and cupper.

As the lance pierced his shoulder Larner, in one wild gesture of frenzy, drove his knife through the soft, yielding flesh of the vampire's organ of suction.

Protected by no bony structure the snout of the monster was amputated.

The terrible creature had been disarmed of his most formidable weapon, but he continued to fight. Larner felt the spikes on the monster's legs tear at his flesh.

"Don't kill the thing," he shouted. "Bring on the net. For the love of God bring on the net!" Then he lost consciousness.

It was daylight when Larner, somewhat weakened from loss of blood, regained consciousness.

The beautiful Tula Bela was leaning over him.

She whispered comforting words to him in a language he did not fully understand. She whispered happy exclamations in words he did not know the meaning of, but the tone was unmistakably those of a sweetheart towards her lover.

Finally, in answer to a true scientist's question in his eyes, she said in English:

"They caught the thing alive. They await your order to advance."

"Let us be on our way," said Larner, and he started to arise.

"You are hardly strong enough," said Tula.

"Believe me, I am all right," insisted Larner, and after several trials he got to his feet. His constitution was naturally strong and his will was stronger, so he fought back all feelings of weakness and soon

announced himself ready to go ahead with the project at hand. For speed was all important, and the young professor found himself unable to remain inactive.

He rejoiced when Zorn told him that the big insect that had attacked Tula Bela had been captured alive and had been kept well nourished by lat's blood injected into its stomach.

With Zorn Larner went to inspect the hideous monstrosity and found it in leash and straining. It was ready to be used to lead the way back to its breeding place.

Its wings shackled, the lumbering insect floundered on its way straight north. Ponderously and half blindly it crawled as the searchlights' glare was kept far enough in advance to keep from blinding the monster.

True to instinct it finally brought up at early dawn under a high cliff of smoky quartz. Here, in the great crevices, the drove of diabolical vampires were hiding.

As the light struck their dens, they attempted clumsily to take wing, but a interlacing network of devastating disintegrating rays from the

ray-guns shattered their bodies to dust, which was borne away by the wind.

The next few months were spent in combing the quartz crags of Venus for similar infested areas, but only the one breeding nest was found. The scourge had been conquered in its first and only stronghold.

So ended the greatest reign of terror in the history of Venus.

Leslie Larner was given a vote of thanks, and riches were showered upon him by the good people of the sky's brightest star.

His modesty was characteristic, and he insisted that his part in saving humanity on the planet had been small.

Passage back to earth was offered him, but Nern and Tula Bela urged him to say and live his life on Venus. This he finally agreed to do.

"If I returned," he said, "I would always be tempted to tell my experiences while away, and there is not a jury in the world which would account me sane after I had once spoken."

That the story of Larner's adventure reached earth dwellers at all is due to the fact that Nern Bela on a subsequent visit to the earth

narrated it to a Colorado quartz miner. This miner, a bronzed and bearded prospector for gold, stumbled on the targo in a mountain fastness, and there was nought to do but make him welcome and pledge him to secrecy.

The miner surveyed the crystal targo in rapt wonderment and said: "And to think I am the only earth man who ever viewed such a craft!"

"No," answered Nern Bela, "there is one other." And then the stirring story of Leslie Larner's life on Venus was told.

#23 The Soul Snatcher, By Tom Curry:

From twenty miles away stabbed the "Atom-filtering" rays to Allen Baker in his cell in the death house.

Aproximate word count: 6,000

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

The shrill voice of a woman stabbed the steady hum of the many machines in the great, semi-darkened laboratory. It was the onslaught of weak femininity against the ebony shadow of Jared, the silent negro servant of Professor Ramsey Burr. Not many people were able to get to the famous man against his wishes; Jared obeyed orders implicitly and was generally an efficient barrier.

"I will see him, I will," screamed the middle-aged woman. "I'm Mrs. Mary Baker, and he—he—it's his fault my son is going to die. His fault. *Professor! Professor Burr!*"

Jared was unable to keep her quiet.

Coming in from the sunlight, her eyes were not yet accustomed to the strange, subdued haze of the laboratory, an immense chamber crammed full of equipment, the vista of which seemed like an apartment in hell. Bizarre shapes stood out from the mass of impedimenta, great stills which rose full two stories in height, dynamos, immense tubes of colored liquids, a hundred puzzles to the inexpert eye.

The small, plump figure of Mrs. Baker was very out of place in this setting. Her voice was poignant, reedy. A look at her made it evident that she was a conventional, good woman. She had soft, cloudy golden eyes and a pathetic mouth, and she seemed on the point of tears.

"Madam, madam, de doctor is busy," whispered Jared, endeavoring to shoo her out of the laboratory with his polite hands. He was respectful, but firm.

She refused to obey. She stopped when she was within a few feet of the activity in the laboratory, and stared with fear and horror at the center of the room, and at its occupant, Professor Burr, whom she had addressed during her flurried entrance.

The professor's face, as he peered at her, seemed like a disembodied

stare, for she could see only eyes behind a mask of lavender gray glass eyeholes, with its flapping ends of dirty, gray-white cloth.

She drew in a deep breath—and gasped, for the pungent fumes, acrid and penetrating, of sulphuric and nitric acids, stabbed her lungs. It was like the breath of hell, to fit the simile, and aptly Professor Burr seemed the devil himself, manipulating the infernal machines.

Acting swiftly, the tall figure stepped over and threw two switches in a single, sweeping movement. The vermillion light which had lived in a long row of tubes on a nearby bench abruptly ceased to writhe like so many tongues of flame, and the embers of hell died out.

Then the professor flooded the room in harsh gray-green light, and stopped the high-pitched, humming whine of his dynamos. A shadow picture writhing on the wall, projected from a lead-glass barrel, disappeared suddenly, the great color filters and other machines lost their semblance of horrible life, and a regretful sigh seemed to come from the metal creatures as they gave up the ghost.

To the woman, it had been entering the abode of fear. She could not restrain her shudders. But she bravely confronted the tall figure of Professor Burr, as he came forth to greet her.

He was extremely tall and attenuated, with a red, bony mask of a face pointed at the chin by a sharp little goatee. Feathery blond hair, silvered and awry, covered his great head.

"Madam," said Burr in a gentle, disarmingly quiet voice, "your manner of entrance might have cost you your life. Luckily I was able to deflect the rays from your person, else you might not now be able to voice your complaint—for such seems to be your purpose in coming here." He turned to Jared, who was standing close by. "Very well, Jared. You may go. After this, it will be as well to throw the bolts, though in this case I am quite willing to see the visitor."

Jared slid away, leaving the plump little woman to confront the famous scientist.

For a moment, Mrs. Baker stared into the pale gray eyes, the pupils of which seemed black as coal by contrast. Some, his bitter enemies, claimed that Professor Ramsey Burr looked cold and bleak as an iceberg, others that he had a baleful glare. His mouth was grim and determined.

Yet, with her woman's eyes, Mrs. Baker, looking at the professor's bony mask of a face, with the high-bridged, intrepid nose, the passionless gray eyes, thought that Ramsey Burr would be

handsome, if a little less cadaverous and more human.

"The experiment which you ruined by your untimely entrance," continued the professor, "was not a safe one."

His long white hand waved toward the bunched apparatus, but to her to the room seemed all glittering metal coils of snakelike wire, ruddy copper, dull lead, and tubes of all shapes. Hell cauldrons of unknown chemicals seethed and slowly bubbled, beetle-black bakelite fixtures reflected the hideous light.

"Oh," she cried, clasping her hands as though she addressed him in prayer, "forget your science, Professor Burr, and be a man. Help me. Three days from now my boy, my son, whom I love above all the world, is to die."

"Three days is a long time," said Professor Burr calmly. "Do not lose hope: I have no intention of allowing your son, Allen Baker, to pay the price for a deed of mine. I freely confess it was I who was responsible for the death of—what was the person's name?—Smith, I believe."

"It was you who made Allen get poor Mr. Smith to agree to the experiments which killed him, and which the world blamed on my

son," she said. "They called it the deed of a scientific fiend, Professor Burr, and perhaps they are right. But Allen is innocent."

"Be quiet," ordered Burr, raising his hand. "Remember, madam, your son Allen is only a commonplace medical man, and while I taught him a little from my vast store of knowledge, he was ignorant and of much less value to science and humanity than myself. Do you not understand, can you not comprehend, also, that the man Smith was a martyr to science? He was no loss to mankind, and only sentimentalists could have blamed anyone for his death. I should have succeeded in the interchange of atoms which we were working on, and Smith would at this moment be hailed as the first man to travel through space in invisible form, projected on radio waves, had it not been for the fact that the alloy which conducts the three types of sinusoidal failed me and burned out. Yes, it was an error in calculation, and Smith would now be called the Lindbergh of the Atom but for that. Yet Smith has not died in vain, for I have finally corrected this error—science is but trial and correction of error—and all will be well."

"But Allen—Allen must not die at all!" she cried. "For weeks he has been in the death house: it is killing me. The Governor refuses him a pardon, nor will he commute my son's sentence. In three days he is to die in the electric chair, for a crime which you admit you alone are

responsible for. Yet you remain in your laboratory, immersed in your experiments, and do nothing, nothing!"

The tears came now, and she sobbed hysterically. It seemed that she was making an appeal to someone in whom she had only a forlorn hope.

"Nothing?" repeated Burr, pursing his thin lips. "Nothing? Madam, I have done everything. I have, as I have told you, perfected the experiment. It is successful. Your son has not suffered in vain, and Smith's name will go down with the rest of science's martyrs as one who died for the sake of humanity. But if you wish to save your son, you must be calm. You must listen to what I have to say, and you must not fail to carry out my instructions to the letter. I am ready now."

Light, the light of hope, sprang in the mother's eyes. She grasped his arm and stared at him with shining face, through tear-dipped eyelashes.

"Do—do you mean it? Can you save him? After the Governor has refused me? What can you do? No influence will snatch Allen from the jaws of the law: the public is greatly excited and very hostile toward him."

A quiet smile played at the corners of Burr's thin lips.

"Come," he said. "Place this cloak about you. Allen wore it when he assisted me."

The professor replaced his own mask and conducted the woman into the interior of the laboratory.

"I will show you," said Professor Burr.

She saw before her now, on long metal shelves which appeared to be delicately poised on fine scales whose balance was registered by hair-line indicators, two small metal cages.

Professor Burr stepped over to a row of common cages set along the wall. There was a small menagerie there, guinea pigs—the martyrs of the animal kingdom—rabbits, monkeys, and some cats.

The man of science reached in and dragged out a mewing cat, placing it in the right-hand cage on the strange table. He then obtained a small monkey and put this animal in the left-hand cage, beside the cat. The cat, on the right, squatted on its haunches, mewing in pique and looking up at its tormentor. The monkey, after a quick look around, began to investigate the upper reaches of its

new cage.

Over each of the animals was suspended a fine, curious metallic armament. For several minutes, while the woman, puzzled at how this demonstration was to affect the rescue of her condemned son, waited impatiently, the professor deftly worked at the apparatus, connecting wires here and there.

"I am ready now," said Burr. "Watch the two animals carefully."

"Yes, yes," she replied, faintly, for she was half afraid.

The great scientist was stooping over, looking at the balances of the indicators through microscopes.

She saw him reach for his switches, and then a brusk order caused her to turn her eyes back to the animals, the cat in the right-hand cage, the monkey at the left.

Both animals screamed in fear, and a sympathetic chorus sounded from the menagerie, as a long purple spark danced from one gray metal pole to the other, over the cages on the table.

At first, Mrs. Baker noticed no change. The spark had died, the professor's voice, unhurried, grave, broke the silence.

"The first part of the experiment is over," he said. "The ego—"

"Oh, heavens!" cried the woman. "You've driven the poor creatures mad!"

She indicated the cat. That animal was clawing at the top bars of its cage, uttering a bizarre, chattering sound, somewhat like a monkey. The cat hung from the bars, swinging itself back and forth as on a trapeze, then reached up and hung by its hind claws.

As for the monkey, it was squatting on the floor of its cage, and it made a strange sound in its throat, almost a mew, and it hissed several times at the professor.

"They are not mad," said Burr. "As I was explaining to you, I have finished the first portion of the experiment. The ego, or personality of one animal has been taken out and put into the other."

She was unable to speak. He had mentioned madness: was he, Professor Ramsey Burr, crazy? It was likely enough. Yet—yet the whole thing, in these surroundings, seemed plausible. As she hesitated about speaking, watching with fascinated eyes the out-of-character behavior of the two beasts, Burr went on.

"The second part follows at once. Now that the two egos have interchanged, I will shift the bodies. When it is completed, the monkey will have taken the place of the cat, and vice versa. Watch."

He was busy for some time with his levers, and the smell of ozone reached Mrs. Baker's nostrils as she stared with horrified eyes at the animals.

She blinked. The sparks crackled madly, the monkey mewed, the cat chattered.

Were her eyes going back on her? She could see neither animal distinctly: they seemed to be shaking in some cosmic disturbance, and were but blurs. This illusion—for to her, it seemed it must be optical—persisted, grew worse, until the quaking forms of the two unfortunate creatures were like so much ectoplasm in swift motion, ghosts whirling about in a dark room.

Yet she could see the cages quite distinctly, and the table and even the indicators of the scales. She closed her eyes for a moment. The acrid odors penetrated to her lungs, and she coughed, opening her eyes.

Now she could see clearly again. Yes, she could see a monkey, and it

was climbing, quite naturally about its cage; it was excited, but a monkey. And the cat, while protesting mightily, acted like a cat.

Then she gasped. Had her mind, in the excitement, betrayed her? She looked at Professor Burr. On his lean face there was a smile of triumph, and he seemed to be awaiting her applause.

She looked again at the two cages. Surely, at first the cat had been in the right-hand cage, and the monkey in the left! And now, the monkey was in the place where the cat had been and the cat had been shifted to the left-hand cage.

"So it was with Smith, when the alloys burned out," said Burr. "It is impossible to extract the ego or dissolve the atoms and translate them into radio waves unless there is a connection with some other ego and body, for in such a case the translated soul and body would have no place to go. Luckily, for you, madam, it was the man Smith who was killed when the alloys failed me. It might have been Allen, for he was the second pole of the connection."

"But," she began faintly, "how can this mad experiment have anything to do with saving my boy?"

He waved impatiently at her evident denseness. "Do you not

understand? It is so I will save Allen, your son. I shall first switch our egos, or souls, as you say. Then switch the bodies. It must always take this sequence; why, I have not ascertained. But it always works thus."

Mrs. Baker was terrified. What she had just seen, smacked of the blackest magic—yet a woman in her position must grasp at straws. The world blamed her son for the murder of Smith, a man Professor Burr had made use of as he might a guinea pig, and Allen must be snatched from the death house.

"Do—do you mean you can bring Allen from the prison here—just by throwing those switches?" she asked.

"That is it. But there is more to it than that, for it is not magic, madam; it is science, you understand, and there must be some physical connection. But with your help, that can easily be made."

Professor Ramsey Burr, she knew, was the greatest electrical engineer the world had ever known. And he stood high as a physicist. Nothing hindered him in the pursuit of knowledge, they said. He knew no fear, and he lived on an intellectual promontory. He was so great that he almost lost sight of himself. To such a man, nothing was impossible. Hope, wild hope, sprang in Mary Baker's

heart, and she grasped the bony hand of the professor and kissed it.

"Oh, I believe, I believe," she cried. "You can do it. You can save Allen. I will do anything, anything you tell me to."

"Very well. You visit your son daily at the death house, do you not?"

She nodded; a shiver of remembrance of that dread spot passed through her.

"Then you will tell him the plan and let him agree to see me the night preceding the electrocution. I will give him final instructions as to the exchange of bodies. When my life spirit, or ego, is confined in your son's body in the death house, Allen will be able to perform the feat of changing the bodies, and your son's flesh will join his soul, which will have been temporarily inhabiting my own shell. Do you see? When they find me in the cell where they suppose your son to be, they will be unable to explain the phenomenon; they can do nothing but release me. Your son will go here, and can be whisked away to a safe place of concealment."

"Yes, yes. What am I to do besides this?"

Professor Burr pulled out a drawer near at hand, and from it

extracted a folded garment of thin, shiny material.

"This is metal cloth coated with the new alloy," he said, in a matter of fact tone. He rummaged further, saying as he did so, "I expected you would be here to see me, and I have been getting ready for your visit. All is prepared, save a few odds and ends which I can easily clean up in the next two days. Here are four cups which Allen must place under each leg of his bed, and this delicate little director coil you must take especial pains with. It is to be slipped under your son's tongue at the time appointed."

She was staring at him still, half in fear, half in wonder, yet she could not feel any doubt of the man's miraculous powers. Somehow, while he talked to her and rested those cold eyes upon her, she was under the spell of the great scientist. Her son, before the trouble into which he had been dragged by the professor, had often hinted at the abilities of Ramsey Burr, given her the idea that his employer was practically a necromancer, yet a magician whose advanced scientific knowledge was correct and explainable in the light of reason.

Yes, Allen had talked to her often when he was at home, resting from his labors with Professor Burr. He had spoken of the new electricity discovered by the famous man, and also told his mother that Burr had found a method of separating atoms and then transforming them

into a form of radio-electricity so that they could be sent in radio waves, to designated points. And she now remembered—the swift trial and conviction of Allen on the charge of murder had occupied her so deeply that she had forgotten all else for the time being—that her son had informed her quite seriously that Professor Ramsey Burr would soon be able to transport human beings by radio.

"Neither of us will be injured in any way by the change," said Burr calmly. "It is possible for me now to break up human flesh, send the atoms by radio-electricity, and reassemble them in their proper form by these special transformers and atom filters."

Mrs. Baker took all the apparatus presented her by the professor. She ventured the thought that it might be better to perform the experiment at once, instead of waiting until the last minute, but this Professor Burr waved aside as impossible. He needed the extra time, he said, and there was no hurry.

She glanced about the room, and her eye took in the giant switches of copper with their black handles; there were others of a gray-green metal she did not recognize. Many dials and meters, strange to her, confronted the little woman. These things, she felt with a rush of gratitude toward the inanimate objects, would help to save her son, so they interested her and she began to feel kindly toward the great

machines.

Would Professor Burr be able to save Allen as he claimed? Yes, she thought, he could. She would make Allen consent to the trial of it, even though her son had cursed the scientist and cried he would never speak to Ramsey Burr again.

She was escorted from the home of the professor by Jared, and going out into the bright, sunlit street, blinked as her eyes adjusted themselves to the daylight after the queer light of the laboratory. In a bundle she had a strange suit and the cups; her purse held the tiny coil, wrapped in cotton.

How could she get the authorities to consent to her son having the suit? The cups and the coil she might slip to him herself. She decided that a mother would be allowed to give her son new underwear. Yes, she would say it was that.

She started at once for the prison. Professor Burr's laboratory was but twenty miles from the cell where her son was incarcerated.

As she rode on the train, seeing people in everyday attire, commonplace occurrences going on about her, the spell of Professor Burr faded, and cold reason stared her in the face. Was it nonsense,

this idea of transporting bodies through the air, in invisible waves? Yet, she was old-fashioned; the age of miracles had not passed for her. Radio, in which pictures and voices could be sent on wireless waves, was unexplainable to her. Perhaps—

She sighed, and shook her head. It was hard to believe. It was also hard to believe that her son was in deadly peril, condemned to death as a "scientific fiend."

Here was her station. A taxi took her to the prison, and after a talk with the warden, finally she stood there, before the screen through which she could talk to Allen, her son.

"Mother!"

Her heart lifted, melted within her. It was always thus when he spoke. "Allen," she whispered softly.

They were allowed to talk undisturbed.

"Professor Burr wishes to help you," she said, in a low voice.

Her son, Allen Baker, M. D., turned eyes of misery upon her. His ruddy hair was awry. This young man was imaginative and could therefore suffer deeply. He had the gift of turning platitudes into

puzzles, and his hazel eyes were lit with an elfin quality, which, if possible, endeared him the more to his mother. All his life he had been the greatest thing in the world to this woman. To see him in such straits tore her very heart. When he had been a little boy, she had been able to make joy appear in those eyes by a word and a pat; now that he was a man, the matter was more difficult, but she had always done her best.

"I cannot allow Professor Burr to do anything for me," he said dully. "It is his fault that I am here."

"But Allen, you must listen, listen carefully. Professor Burr can save you. He says it was all a mistake, the alloy was wrong. He has not come forward before, because he knew he would be able to iron out the trouble if he had time, and thus snatch you from this terrible place."

She put as much confidence into her voice as she could. She must, to enhearten her son. Anything to replace that look of suffering with one of hope. She would believe, she did believe. The bars, the great masses of stone which enclosed her son would be as nothing. He would pass through them, unseen, unheard.

For a time, Allen spoke bitterly of Ramsey Burr, but his mother

pleaded with him, telling him it was his only chance, and that the deviltry Allen suspected was imaginary.

"He—he killed Smith in such an experiment," said Allen. "I took the blame, as you know, though I only followed his instructions. But you say he claims to have found the correct alloys?"

"Yes. And this suit, you must put it on. But Professor Burr himself will be here to see you day after to-morrow, the day preceding the—the—" She bit her lip, and got out the dreaded word, "the electrocution. But there won't be any electrocution, Allen; no, there cannot be. You will be safe, safe in my arms." She had to fight now to hold her belief in the miracle which Burr had promised. The solid steel and stone dismayed her brain.

The new alloy seemed to interest Allen Baker. His mother told him of the exchange of the monkey and the cat, and he nodded excitedly, growing more and more restive, and his eyes began to shine with hope and curiosity.

"I have told the warden about the suit, saying it was something I made for you myself," she said, in a low voice. "You must pretend the coil and the cups are things you desire for your own amusement. You know, they have allowed you a great deal of latitude, since you

are educated and need diversion."

"Yes, yes. There may be some difficulty, but I will overcome that. Tell Burr to come. I'll talk with him and he can instruct me in the final details. It is better than waiting here like a rat in a trap. I have been afraid of going mad, mother, but this buoys me up."

He smiled at her, and her heart sang in the joy of relief.

How did the intervening days pass? Mrs. Baker could not sleep, could scarcely eat, she could do nothing but wait, wait, wait. She watched the meeting of her son and Ramsey Burr, on the day preceding the date set for the execution.

"Well, Baker," said Burr nonchalantly, nodding to his former assistant. "How are you?"

"You see how I am," said Allen, coldly.

"Yes, yes. Well, listen to what I have to say and note it carefully. There must be no slip. You have the suit, the cups and the director coil? You must keep the suit on, the cups go under the legs of the cot you lie on. The director under your tongue."

The professor spoke further with Allen, instructing him in scientific

terms which the woman scarcely comprehended.

"To-night, then at eleven-thirty," said Burr, finally. "Be ready."

Allen nodded. Mrs. Baker accompanied Burr from the prison.

"You—you will let me be with you?" she begged.

"It is hardly necessary," said the professor.

"But I must. I must see Allen the moment he is free, to make sure he is all right. Then, I want to be able to take him away. I have a place in which we can hide, and as soon as he is rescued he must be taken out of sight."

"Very well," said Burr, shrugging. "It is immaterial to me, so long as you do not interfere with the course of the experiment. You must sit perfectly still, you must not speak until Allen stands before you and addresses you."

"Yes, I will obey you," she promised.

Mrs. Baker watched Professor Ramsey Burr eat his supper. Burr himself was not in the least perturbed; it was wonderful, she thought, that he could be so calm. To her, it was the great moment, the

moment when her son would be saved from the jaws of death.

Jared carried a comfortable chair into the laboratory and she sat in it, quiet as a mouse, in one corner of the room.

It was nine o'clock, and Professor Burr was busy with his preparations. She knew he had been working steadily for the past few days. She gripped the arms of her chair, and her heart burned within her.

The professor was making sure of his apparatus. He tested this bulb and that, and carefully inspected the curious oscillating platform, over which was suspended a thickly bunched group of gray-green wire, which was seemingly an antenna. The numerous indicators and implements seemed to be satisfactory, for at quarter after eleven Burr gave an exclamation of pleasure and nodded to himself.

Burr seemed to have forgotten the woman. He spoke aloud occasionally, but not to her, as he drew forth a suit made of the same metal cloth as Allen must have on at this moment.

The tension was terrific, terrific for the mother, who was awaiting the culmination of the experiment which would rescue her son from the electric chair—or would it fail? She shuddered. What if Burr

were mad?

But look at him, she was sure he was sane, as sane as she was.

"He will succeed," she murmured, digging her nails into the palms of her hands. "I *know* he will."

She pushed aside the picture of what would happen on the morrow, but a few hours distant, when Allen, her son, was due to be led to a legal death in the electric chair.

Professor Burr placed the shiny suit upon his lank form, and she saw him put a duplicate coil, the same sort of small machine which Allen possessed, under his tongue.

The Mephistophelian figure consulted a matter-of-fact watch; at that moment, Mrs. Baker heard, above the hum of the myriad machines in the laboratory, the slow chiming of a clock. It was the moment set for the deed.

Then, she feared the professor was insane, for he suddenly leaped to the high bench of the table on which stood one of the oscillating platforms.

Wires led out from this, and Burr sat gently upon it, a strange figure

in the subdued light.

Professor Burr, however, she soon saw, was not insane. No, this was part of it. He was reaching for switches near at hand, and bulbs began to glow with unpleasant light, needles on indicators swung madly, and at last, Professor Burr kicked over a giant switch, which seemed to be the final movement.

For several seconds the professor did not move. Then his body grew rigid, and he twisted a few times. His face, though not drawn in pain, yet twitched galvanically, as though actuated by slight jabs of electricity.

The many tubes fluoresced, flared up in pulsing waves of violet and pink: there were gray bars of invisibility or areas of air in which nothing visible showed. There came the faint, crackling hum of machinery rather like a swarm of wasps in anger. Blue and gray thread of fire spat across the antenna. The odor of ozone came to Mrs. Baker's nostrils, and the acid odors burned her lungs.

She was staring at him, staring at the professor's face. She half rose from her chair, and uttered a little cry.

The eyes had changed, no longer were they cold, impersonal, the

eyes of a man who prided himself on the fact that he kept his arteries soft and his heart hard; they were loving, soft eyes.

"Allen," she cried.

Yes, without doubt, the eyes of her son were looking at her out of the body of Professor Ramsey Burr.

"Mother," he said gently. "Don't be alarmed. It is successful. I am here, in Professor Burr's body."

"Yes," she cried, hysterically. It was too weird to believe. It seemed dim to her, unearthly.

"Are you all right, darling?" she asked timidly.

"Yes. I felt nothing beyond a momentary giddy spell, a bit of nausea and mental stiffness. It was strange, and I have a slight headache. However, all is well."

He grinned at her, laughed with the voice which was not his, yet which she recognized as directed by her son's spirit. The laugh was cracked and unlike Allen's whole-hearted mirth, yet she smiled in sympathy.

"Yes, the first part is a success," said the man. "Our egos have interchanged. Soon, our bodies will undergo the transformation, and then I must keep under cover. I dislike Burr—yet he is a great man. He has saved me. I suppose the slight headache which I feel is one bequeathed me by Burr. I hope he inherits my shivers and terrors and the neuralgia for the time being, so he will get some idea of what I have undergone."

He had got down from the oscillating platform, the spirit of her son in Ramsey's body.

"What—what are you doing now?" she asked.

"I must carry out the rest of it myself," he said. "Burr directed me when we talked yesterday. It is more difficult when one subject is out of the laboratory, and the tubes must be checked."

He went carefully about his work, and she saw him replacing four of the tubes with others, new ones, which were ready at hand. Though it was the body of Ramsey Burr, the movements were different from the slow, precise work of the professor, and more and more, she realized that her son inhabited the shell before her.

For a moment, the mother thought of attempting to dissuade her son

from making the final change; was it not better thus, than to chance the disintegration of the bodies? Suppose something went wrong, and the exchange did not take place, and her son, that is, his spirit, went back to the death house?

Midnight struck as he worked feverishly at the apparatus, the long face corrugated as he checked the dials and tubes. He worked swiftly, but evidently was following a procedure which he had committed to memory, for he was forced to pause often to make sure of himself.

"Everything is O. K.," said the strange voice at last. He consulted his watch. "Twelve-thirty," he said.

She bit her lip in terror, as he cried, "Now!" and sprang to the table to take his place on the metallic platform, which oscillated to and fro under his weight. The delicate grayish metal antenna, which, she knew, would form a glittering halo of blue and gray threads of fire, rested quiescent above his head.

"This is the last thing," he said calmly, as he reached for the big ebony handled switch. "I'll be myself in a few minutes, mother."

"Yes, son, yes."

The switch connected, and Allen Baker, in the form of Ramsey Burr, suddenly cried out in pain. His mother leaped up to run to his side, but he waved her away. She stood, wringing her hands, as he began to twist and turn, as though torn by some invisible force. Eery screams came from the throat of the man on the platform, and Mrs. Baker's cries of sympathy mingled with them.

The mighty motors hummed in a high-pitched, unnatural whine, and suddenly Mrs. Baker saw the tortured face before her grow dim. The countenance of the professor seemed to melt, and then there came a dull, muffled thud, a burst of white-blue flame, the odor of burning rubber and the tinkle of broken glass.

Back to the face came the clarity of outline, and still it was Professor Ramsey Burr's body she stared at.

Her son, in the professor's shape, climbed from the platform, and looked about him as though dazed. An acrid smoke filled the room, and burning insulation assailed the nostrils.

Desperately, without looking at her, his lips set in a determined line, the man went hurriedly over the apparatus again.

"Have I forgotten, did I do anything wrong?" she heard his

anguished cry.

Two tubes were burned out, and these he replaced as swiftly as possible. But he was forced to go all over the wiring, and cut out whatever had been short-circuited so that it could be hooked up anew with uninjured wire.

Before he was ready to resume his seat on the platform, after half an hour of feverish haste, a knock came on the door.

The person outside was imperative, and Mrs. Baker ran over and opened the portal. Jared, the whites of his eyes shining in the dim light, stood there. "De professah—tell him dat de wahden wishes to talk with him. It is very important, ma'am."

The body of Burr, inhabited by Allen's soul, pushed by her, and she followed falteringly, wringing her hands. She saw the tall figure snatch at the receiver and listen.

"Oh, God," he cried.

At last, he put the receiver back on the hook, automatically, and sank down in a chair, his face in his hands.

Mrs. Baker went to him quickly. "What is it, Allen?" she cried.

"Mother," he said hoarsely, "it was the warden of the prison. He told me that Allen Baker had gone temporarily insane, and claimed to be Professor Ramsey Burr in my body."

"But—but what is the matter?" she asked. "Cannot you finish the experiment, Allen? Can't you change the two bodies now?"

He shook his head. "Mother—they electrocuted Ramsey Burr in my body at twelve forty-five to-night!"

She screamed. She was faint, but she controlled herself with a great effort.

"But the electrocution was not to be until morning," she said.

Allen shook his head. "They are allowed a certain latitude, about twelve hours," he said. "Burr protested up to the last moment, and begged for time."

"Then—then they must have come for him and dragged him forth to die in the electric chair while you were attempting the second part of the change," she said.

"Yes. That was why it failed. That's why the tubes and wires burned out and why we couldn't exchange bodies. It began to succeed, then I

could feel something terrible had happened. It was impossible to complete the Beta circuit, which short-circuited. They took him from the cell, do you see, while I was starting the exchange of the atoms."

For a time, the mother and her boy sat staring at one another. She saw the tall, eccentric figure of Ramsey Burr before her, yet she saw also the soul of her son within that form. The eyes were Allen's, the voice was soft and loving, and his spirit was with her.

"Come, Allen, my son," she said softly.

"Burr paid the price," said Allen, shaking his head. "He became a martyr to science."

The world has wondered why Professor Ramsey Burr, so much in the headlines as a great scientist, suddenly gave up all his experiments and took up the practice of medicine.

Now that the public furor and indignation over the death of the man Smith has died down, sentimentalists believe that Ramsey Burr has reformed and changed his icy nature, for he manifests great affection and care for Mrs. Mary Baker, the mother of the electrocuted man who had been his assistant.

#24 The Ray Of Madness By Sterner St. Paul Meek:

Dr. Bird Uncovers a dastardly plot, amazing in its mechanical ingenuity, behind the apparently trivial eye trouble of the president.

Aproximate word count: 8,000

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

A knock sounded at the door of Dr. Bird's private laboratory in the Bureau of Standards. The famous scientist paid no attention to the interruption but bent his head lower over the spectroscope with which he was working. The knock was repeated with a quality of quiet insistence upon recognition. The Doctor smothered an exclamation of impatience and strode over to the door and threw it open to the knocker.

"Oh, hello, Carnes," he exclaimed as he recognized his visitor. "Come in and sit down and keep your mouth shut for a few minutes. I am busy just now but I'll be at liberty in a little while."

"There's no hurry, Doctor," replied Operative Carnes of the United States Secret Service as he entered the room and sat on the edge of the Doctor's desk. "I haven't got a case up my sleeve this time; I just came in for a little chat."

"All right, glad to see you. Read that latest volume of the *Zeitschrift* for a while. That article of Von Beyer's has got me guessing, all right."

Carnes picked up the indicated volume and settled himself to read. The Doctor bent over his apparatus. Time and again he made minute adjustments and gave vent to muttered exclamations of annoyance at the results he obtained. Half an hour later he rose from his chair with a sigh and turned to his visitor.

"What do you think of Von Beyer's alleged discovery?" he asked the operative.

"It's too deep for me, Doctor," replied the operative. "All that I can make out of it is that he claims to have discovered a new element named 'lunium,' but hasn't been able to isolate it yet. Is there anything remarkable about that? It seems to me that I have read of other new elements being discovered from time to time."

"There is nothing remarkable about the discovery of a new element by the spectroscopic method," replied Dr. Bird. "We know from Mendeleff's table that there are a number of elements which we have not discovered as yet, and several of the ones we know were first detected by the spectroscope. The thing which puzzles me is that so brilliant a man as Von Beyer claims to have discovered it in the spectra of the moon. His name, lunium, is taken from Luna, the moon."

"Why not the moon? Haven't several elements been first discovered in the spectra of stars?"

"Certainly. The classic example is Lockyer's discovery of an orange line in the spectra of the sun in 1868. No known terrestrial element gave such a line and he named the new element which he deduced helium, from Helos, the sun. The element helium was first isolated by Ramsey some twenty-seven years later. Other elements have been found in the spectra of stars, but the point I am making is that the sun and the stars are incandescent bodies and could be logically expected to show the characteristic lines of their constituent elements in their spectra. But the moon is a cold body without an atmosphere and is visible only by reflected light. The element, lunium, may exist in the moon, but the manifestations which Von Beyer has observed must be, not from the moon, but from the source

of the reflected light which he spectro-analyzed."

"You are over my depth, Doctor."

"I'm over my own. I have tried to follow Von Beyer's reasoning and I have tried to check his findings. Twice this evening I thought that I caught a momentary glimpse on the screen of my fluoroscope of the ultra-violet line which he reports as characteristic of lunium, but I am not certain. I haven't been able to photograph it yet. He notes in his article that the line seems to be quite impermanent and fades so rapidly that an accurate measurement of its wave-length is almost impossible. However, let's drop the subject. How do you like your new assignment?"

"Oh, it's all right. I would rather be back on my old work."

"I haven't seen you since you were assigned to the Presidential detail. I suppose that you fellows are pretty busy getting ready for Premier McDougal's visit?"

"I doubt if he will come," replied Carnes soberly. "Things are not exactly propitious for a visit of that sort just now."

Dr. Bird sat back in his chair in surprise.

"I thought that the whole thing is arranged. The press seems to think so, at any rate."

"Everything is arranged, but arrangements may be cancelled. I wouldn't be surprised to hear that they were."

"Carnes," replied Dr. Bird gravely, "you have either said too much or too little. There is something more to this than appears on the surface. If it is none of my business, don't hesitate to tell me so and I'll forget what you have said, but if I can help you any, speak up."

Carnes puffed meditatively at his pipe for a few minutes before replying.

"It's really none of your business. Doctor," he said at length, "and yet I know that a corpse is a chatterbox compared to you when you are told anything in confidence, and I really need to unload my mind. It has been kept from the press so far; but I don't know how long it can be kept muzzled. In strict confidence, the President of the United State acts as though he were crazy."

"Quite a section of the press has claimed that for a long time," replied Dr. Bird, with a twinkle in his eye.

"I don't mean crazy in that way, Doctor, I mean *really* crazy. Bugs! Nuts! Bats in his belfry!"

Dr. Bird whistled softly.

"Are you sure, Carnes?" he asked.

"As sure as may be. Both of his physicians think so. They were non-committal for a while, especially as the first attack waned and he seemed to recover, but when his second attack came on more violently than the first and the President began to act queerly, they had to take the Presidential detail into their confidence. He has been quietly examined by some of the greatest psychiatrists in the country, but none of them have ventured on a positive verdict as to the nature of the malady. They admit, of course, that it exists, but they won't classify it. The fact that it is intermittent seems to have them stopped. He was bad a month ago but he recovered and became, to all appearances, normal for a time. About a week ago he began to show queer symptoms again and now he is getting worse daily. If he goes on getting worse for another week, it will have to be announced so that the Vice-President can take over the duties of the head of the government."

"What are the symptoms?"

"The first we noticed was a failing of his memory. Coupled with this was a restlessness and a habit of nocturnal prowling. He tosses continually on his bed and mutters and at times leaps up and rages back and forth in his bedchamber, howling and raging. Then he will calm down and compose himself and go to sleep, only to wake in half an hour and go through the same performance. It is pretty ghastly for the men on night guard."

"How does he act in the daytime?"

"Heavy and lethargic. His memory becomes a complete blank at times and he talks wildly. Those are the times we must guard against."

"Overwork?" queried the Doctor.

"Not according to his physicians. His physical health is splendid and his appetite unusually keen. He takes his exercise regularly and suffers no ill health except for a little eye trouble."

Dr. Bird leaped to his feet.

"Tell me more about this eye trouble, Carnes," he demanded.

"Why, I don't know much about it, Doctor. Admiral Clay told me

that it was nothing but a mild opthalmia which should yield readily to treatment. That was when he told me to see that the shades of the President's study were partially drawn to keep the direct sunlight out."

"Opthalmia be sugared! What do his eyes look like?"

"They are rather red and swollen and a little bloodshot. He has a tendency to shut them while he is talking and he avoids light as much as possible. I hadn't noticed anything peculiar about it."

"Carnes, did you ever see a case of snow blindness?"

The operative looked up in surprise.

"Yes, I have. I had it myself once in Maine. Now that you mention it, his case does look like snow blindness, but such a thing is absurd in Washington in August."

Dr. Bird rummaged in his desk and drew out a book, which he consulted for a moment.

"Now, Carnes," he said, "I want some dates from you and I want them accurately. Don't guess, for a great deal may depend on the accuracy of your answers. When was this mental disability on the

part of the President first noticed?"

Carnes drew a pocket diary from his coat and consulted it.

"The seventeenth of July," he replied. "That is, we are sure, in view of later developments, that that was the date it first came on. We didn't realize that anything was wrong until the twentieth. On the night of the nineteenth the President slept very poorly, getting up and creating a disturbance twice, and on the twentieth he acted so queerly that it was necessary to cancel three conferences."

Dr. Bird checked off the dates on the book before him and nodded.

"Go on," he said, "and describe the progress of the malady by days."

"It got progressively worse until the night of the twenty-third. The twenty-fourth he was no worse, and on the twenty-fifth a slight improvement was noticed. He got steadily better until, by the third or fourth of August, he was apparently normal. About the twelfth he began to show signs of restlessness which have increased daily during the past week. Last night, the nineteenth, he slept only a few minutes and Brady, who was on guard, says that his howls were terrible. His memory has been almost a total blank today and all of his appointments were cancelled, ostensibly because of his eye

trouble. If he gets any worse, it probably will be necessary to inform the country as to his true condition."

When Carnes had finished, Dr. Bird sat for a time in concentrated thought.

"You did exactly right in coming to me, Carnes," he said presently. "I don't think that this is a job for a doctor at all—I believe that it needs a physicist and a chemist and possibly a detective to cure him. We'll get busy."

"What do you mean, Doctor?" demanded Carnes. "Do you think that some exterior force is causing the President's disability?"

"I think nothing, Carnes," replied the Doctor grimly, "but I intend to know something before I am through. Don't ask for explanations: this is not the time for talk, it is the time for action. Can you get me into the White House to-night?"

"I doubt it, Doctor, but I'll try. What excuse shall I give? I am not supposed to have told you anything about the President's illness."

"Get Bolton, your chief, on the phone and tell him that you have talked to me when you shouldn't have. He'll blow up, but after he is

through exploding, tell him that I smell a rat and that I want him down here at once with *carte blanche* authority to do as I see fit in the White House. If he makes any fuss about it, remind him of the fact that he has considered me crazy several times in the past when events showed that I was right. If he won't play after that, let me talk to him."

"All right, Doctor," replied Carnes as he picked up the scientist's telephone and gave the number of the home of the Chief of the Secret Service. "I'll try to bully him out of it. He has a good deal of confidence in your ability."

Half an hour later the door of Dr. Bird's laboratory opened suddenly to admit Bolton.

"Hello, Doctor," exclaimed the Chief, "what the dickens have you got on your mind now? I ought to skin Carnes alive for talking out of turn, but if you really have an idea, I'll forgive him. What do you suspect?"

"I suspect several things, Bolton, but I haven't time to tell you what they are. I want to get quietly into the White House as promptly as possible."

"That's easy," replied Bolton, "but first I want to know what the object of the visit is."

"The object is to see what I can find out. My ideas are entirely too nebulous to attempt to lay them out before you just now. You've never worked directly with me on a case before, but Carnes can tell you that I have my own methods of working and that I won't spill my ideas until I have something more definite to go on than I have at present."

"The Doctor is right, Chief," said Carnes. "He has an idea all right, but wild horses won't drag it out of him until he's ready to talk. You'll have to take him on faith, as I always do."

Bolton hesitated a moment and then shrugged his shoulders.

"Have it your own way, Doctor," he said. "Your reputation, both as a scientist and as an unraveller of tangled skeins, is too good for me to boggle about your methods. Tell me what you want and I'll try to get it."

"I want to get into the White House without undue prominence being given to my movements, and listen outside the President's door for a short time. Later I will want to examine his sleeping quarters

carefully and to make a few tests. I may be entirely wrong in my assumptions, but I believe that there is something there that requires my attention."

"Come along," said Bolton. "I'll get you in and let you listen, but the rest we'll have to trust to luck on. You may have to wait until morning."

"We'll cross that bridge when we get to it," replied the Doctor. "I'll get a little stuff together that we may need."

In a few moments he had packed some apparatus in a bag and, taking up it and an instrument case, he followed Bolton and Carnes down the stairs and out onto the grounds of the Bureau of Standards.

"It's a beautiful moon, isn't it?" he observed.

Carnes assented absently to the Doctor's remark, but Bolton paid no attention to the luminous disc overhead, which was flooding the landscape with its mellow light.

"My car is waiting," he announced.

"All right, old man, but stop for a moment and admire this moon," protested the Doctor. "Have you ever seen a finer one?"

"Come on and let the moon alone," snorted Bolton.

"My dear man, I absolutely refuse to move a step until you pause in your headlong devotion to duty and pay the homage due to Lady Luna. Don't you realize, you benighted Christian, that you are gazing upon what has been held to be a deity, or at least the visible manifestation of deity, for ages immemorial? Haven't you ever had time to study the history of the moon-worshipping cults? They are as old as mankind, you know. The worship of Isis was really only an exalted type of moon worship. The crescent moon, you may remember, was one of her most sacred emblems."

Bolton paused and looked at the Doctor suspiciously.

"What are you doing—pulling my leg?" he demanded.

"Not at all, my dear fellow. Carnes, doesn't the sight of the glowing orb of night influence you to pious meditation upon the frailty of human life and the insignificance of human ambition?"

"Not to any very great degree," replied Carnes dryly.

"Carnesy, old dear, I fear that you are a crass materialist. I am beginning to despair of ever inculcating in you any respect for the

finer and subtler things of life. I must try Bolton. Bolton, have you ever seen a finer moon? Remember that I won't move a step until you have carefully considered the matter and fully answered my question."

Bolton looked first at the Doctor, then at Carnes, and finally he looked reluctantly at the moon.

"It's a fine one," he admitted, "but all full moons look large on clear nights at this time of the year."

"Then you *have* studied the moon?" cried Dr. Bird with delight. "I was sure—"

He broke off his speech suddenly and listened. From a distance came the mournful howl of a dog. It was answered in a moment by another howl from a different direction. Dog after dog took up the chorus until the air was filled with the melancholy wailing of the animals.

"See, Bolton," remarked the Doctor, "even the dogs feel the chastening influence of the Lady of Night and repent of the sins of their youth and the follies of their manhood, or should one say doghood? Come along. I feel that the call of duty must tear us away from the contemplation of the beauties of nature."

He led the way to Bolton's car and got in without further words. A half-hour later, Bolton led the way into the White House. A word to the secret service operative on guard at the door admitted him and his party, and he led the way to the newly constructed solarium where the President slept. An operative stood outside the door.

"What word, Brady?" asked Bolton in a whisper.

"He seems worse, sir. I doubt if he has slept at all. Admiral Clay has been in several times, but he didn't do much good. There, listen! The President is getting up again."

From behind the closed door which confronted them came sounds of a person rising from a bed and pacing the floor, slowly at first, and then more and more rapidly, until it was almost a run. A series of groans came to the watchers and then a long drawn out howl. Bolton shuddered.

"Poor devil!" he muttered.

Dr. Bird shot a quick glance around.

"Where is Admiral Clay?" he asked.

"He is sleeping upstairs. Shall I call him?"

"No. Take me to his room."

The President's naval physician opened the door in response to Bolton's knock.

"Is he worse?" he demanded anxiously.

"I don't think so, Admiral," replied Bolton. "I want to introduce you to Dr. Bird of the Bureau of Standards. He wants to talk with you about the case."

"I am honored, Doctor," said the physician as he grasped the scientist's outstretched hand. "Come in. Pardon my appearance, but I was startled out of a doze when you knocked. Have a chair and tell me how I can serve you."

Dr. Bird drew a notebook from his pocket.

"I have received certain dates in connection with the President's malady from Operative Carnes," he said, "and I wish you to verify them."

"Pardon me a moment, Doctor," interrupted the Admiral, "but may I ask what is your connection with the matter? I was not aware that you were a physician or surgeon."

"Dr. Bird is here by the authority of the secret service," replied Bolton. "He has no connection with the medical treatment of the President, but permit me to remind you that the secret service is responsible for the safety of the President and so have a right to demand such details about him as are necessary for his proper protection."

"I have no intention in obstructing you in the proper performance of your duties, Mr. Bolton," began the Admiral stiffly.

"Pardon me, Admiral," broke in Dr. Bird, "it seems to me that we are getting started wrong. I suspect that certain exterior forces are more or less concerned in this case and I have communicated my suspicions to Mr. Bolton. He in turn brought me here in order to request from you your cooperation in the matter. We have no idea of demanding anything and are really seeking help which we believe that you can give us."

"Pardon me, Admiral," said Bolton. "I had no intention of angering you."

"I am at your service, gentlemen," replied Admiral Clay. "What information did you wish, Doctor?"

"At first merely a verification of the history of the case as I have it."

Dr. Bird read the notes he had taken down from Carnes and the Admiral nodded agreement.

"Those dates are correct," he said.

"Now, Admiral, there are two further points on which I wish enlightenment. The first is the opthalmia which is troubling the patient."

"It is nothing to be alarmed about as far as symptoms go, Doctor," replied the Admiral. "It is a rather mild case of irritation, somewhat analogous to granuloma, but rather stubborn. He had an attack several weeks ago and while it did not yield to treatment as readily as I could have wished, it did clear up nicely in a couple of weeks and I was quite surprised at this recurrent attack. His sight is in no danger."

"Have you tried to connect this opthalmia with his mental aberrations?"

"Why no, Doctor, there is no connection."

"Are you sure?"

"I am certain. The slight pain which his eyes give him could never have such an effect upon the mind of so able and energetic a man as he is."

"Well, we'll let that pass for the moment. The other question is this: has he any form of skin trouble?"

The Admiral looked up in surprise.

"Yes, he has," he admitted. "I had mentioned it to no one, for it really amounts to nothing, but he has a slight attack of some obscure form of dermatitis which I am treating. It is affecting only his face and hands."

"Please describe it."

"It has taken the form of a brown pigmentation on the hands. On the face it causes a slight itching and subsequent peeling of the affected areas."

"In other words, it is acting like sunburn?"

"Why, yes, somewhat. It is not that, however, for he has been exposed to the sun very little lately, on account of his eyes."

"I notice that he is sleeping in the new solarium which was added last winter to the executive mansion. Can you tell me with what type of glass it is equipped?"

"Yes. It is not equipped with glass at all, but with fused quartz."

"When did he start to sleep there?"

"As soon as it was completed."

"And all the time the windows have been of fused quartz?"

"No. They were glazed at first, but the glass was removed and the fused quartz substituted at my suggestion about two months ago, just before this trouble started."

"Thank you, Admiral. You have given me several things to think about. My ideas are a little too nebulous to share as yet but I think that I can give you one piece of very sound advice. The President is spending a very restless night. If you would remove him from the solarium and get him to lie down in a room which is glazed with ordinary glass, and pull down the shades so that he will be in the dark, I think that he will pass a better night."

Admiral Clay looked keenly into the piercing black eyes of the

Doctor.

"I know something of you by reputation, Bird," he said slowly, "and I will follow your advice. Will you tell me why you make this particular suggestion?"

"So that I can work in that solarium to-night without interruption," replied Dr. Bird. "I have some tests which I wish to carry out while it is still dark. If my results are negative, forget what I have told you. If they yield any information, I will be glad to share it with you at the proper time. Now get the President out of that solarium and tell me when the coast is clear."

The Admiral donned a dressing gown and stepped out of the room. He returned in fifteen minutes.

"The solarium is at your disposal, Doctor," he announced. "Shall I accompany you?"

"If you wish," assented Dr. Bird as he picked up his apparatus and strode out of the room.

In the solarium he glanced quickly around, noting the position of each of the articles of furniture.

"I presume that the President always sleeps with his head in this direction?" he remarked, pointing to the pillow on the disturbed bed.

The Admiral nodded assent. Dr. Bird opened the bag which he had packed in his laboratory, took out a sheet of cardboard covered with a metallic looking substance, and placed it on the pillow. He stepped back and donned a pair of smoked glasses, watching it intently. Without a word he took off the glasses and handed them to the Admiral. The Admiral donned them and looked at the pillow. As he did so an exclamation broke from his lips.

"That plate seems to glow," he said in an astonished voice.

Dr. Bird stepped forward and laid his hand on the pillow. He was wearing a wrist watch with a radiolite dial. The substance suddenly increased its luminescence and began to glow fiercely, long luminous streamers seeming to come from the dial. The Doctor took away his hand and substituted a bottle of liquid for the plate on the pillow. Immediately the bottle began to glow with a phosphorescent light.

"What on earth is it?" gasped Carnes.

"Excitation of a radioactive fluid," replied the Doctor. "The question

is, what is exciting it. Somebody get a stepladder."

While Bolton was gone after the ladder, the Doctor took from his bag what looked like an ordinary pane of glass.

"Take this, Carnes," he directed, "and start holding it over each of those panes of quartz which you can reach. Stop when I tell you to."

The operative held the glass over each of the panes in succession, but the Doctor, who kept his eyes covered with the smoked glasses and fastened on the plate which he had replaced on the pillow, said nothing. When Bolton arrived with the ladder, the process went on. One end and most of the front of the solarium had been covered before an exclamation from the Doctor halted the work.

"That's the one," he exclaimed. "Hold the glass there for a moment."

Hurriedly he removed the plate from the pillow and replaced the phial of liquid. There was only a very feeble glow.

"Good enough," he cried. "Take away the glass, but mark that pane, and be ready to replace it when I give the word."

From the instrument case he had brought he took out a spectroscope. He turned back the mattress and mounted it on the bedstead.

"Cover that pane," he directed.

Carnes did so, and the Doctor swung the receiving tube of the instrument until it pointed at the covered pane. He glanced into the eyepiece, and then held a tiny flashlight for an instant opposite the third tube.

"Uncover that pane," he said.

Carnes took down the glass plate and the Doctor gazed into the instrument. He made some adjustments.

"Are you familiar with spectroscopy, Admiral?" he asked.

"Somewhat."

"Take a squint in here and tell me what you see."

The Admiral applied his eye to the instrument and looked long and earnestly.

"There are some lines there, Doctor," he said, "but your instrument is badly out of adjustment. They are in what should be the ultra-violet sector, according to your scale."

"I forgot to tell you that this is a fluoroscopic spectroscope designed for the detection of ultra-violet lines," replied Dr. Bird. "Those lines you see are ultra-violet, made visible to the eye by activation of a radioactive compound whose rays in turn impinge on a zinc blende sheet. Do you recognize the lines?"

"No, I don't."

"Small wonder; I doubt whether there are a dozen people who would. I have never seen them before, although I recognize them from descriptions I have read. Bolton, come here. Sight along this instrument and through that plate of glass which Carnes is holding and tell me what office that window belongs to."

Bolton sighted as directed up at the side of the State, War and Navy Building.

"I can't tell exactly at this time of night, Doctor," he said, "but I'll go into the building and find out."

"Do so. Have you a flashlight?"

"Yes."

"Flash it momentarily out of each of the suspected windows in turn

until you get an answering flash from here. When you do, flash it out of each pane of glass in the window until you get another flash from here. Then come back and tell me what office it is. Mark the pane so that we can locate it again in the morning."

"It is the office of the Assistant to the Adjutant General of the Army," reported Bolton ten minutes later.

"What is there in the room?"

"Nothing but the usual desks and chairs."

"I suspected as much. The window is merely a reflector. That is all that we can do for to-night, gentlemen. Admiral, keep your patient quiet and in a room with *glass* windows, preferably with the shades drawn, until further notice. Bolton, meet me here with Carnes at sunrise. Have a picked detail of ten men standing by where we can get hold of them in a hurry. In the mean time, get the Chief of Air Service out of bed and have him order a plane at Langley Field to be ready to take off at 6 A. M. He is not to take off, however, until I give him orders to do so. Do you understand?"

"Everything will be ready for you, Doctor, but I confess that I don't know what it is all about."

"It's the biggest case you ever tackled, old man, and I hope that we can pull it off successfully. I'd like to go over it with you now, but I'll be busy at the Bureau for the rest of the night. Drop me off there, will you?"

At sunrise the next morning, Bolton met Dr. Bird at the entrance to the White House grounds.

"Where is your detail?" he asked.

"In the State, War and Navy Building."

"Good. I want to go to the solarium, put a light on the place where the President's pillow was last night, and mark that pane of quartz we were looking through. Then we'll join the detail."

Dr. Bird placed the light and walked with Carnes across the White House grounds. Bolton's badge secured admission to the State, War and Navy Building for the party and they made their way to the office of the Assistant to the Adjutant General.

"Did you mark the pane of glass through which you flashed your light last night, Bolton?" asked the Doctor.

The detective touched one of the panes.

"Good," exclaimed the Doctor. "I notice that this window has hooks for a window washer's belt. Get a life belt, will you?"

When the belt was brought, the Doctor turned to Carnes.

"Carnes," he said, "hook on this life saver and climb out on the window ledge. Take this piece of apparatus with you."

He handed Carnes a piece of apparatus which looked like two telescopes fastened to a base, with a screw adjustment for altering the angles of the barrels.

Carnes took it and looked at it inquiringly.

"That is what I was making at the Bureau last night," explained Dr. Bird. "It is a device which will enable me to locate the source of the beam which was reflected from this pane of glass onto the President's pillow. I'll show you how to work it. You know that when light is reflected the angle of reflection always equals the angle of incidence? Well, you place these three feet against the pane of glass, thus putting the base of the instrument in a plane parallel to the pane of glass. By turning these two knobs, one of which gives lateral and the other vertical adjustment, you will manipulate the instrument until the first telescope is pointing directly toward the President's

pillow. Now notice that the two telescope barrels are fastened together and are connected to the knobs, so that when the knobs are turned, the scopes are turned in equal and opposite amounts. When one is turned from its present position five degrees to the west, the other automatically turns five degrees to the east. When one is elevated, the other is correspondingly depressed. Thus, when the first tube points toward the pillow, the other will point toward the source of the reflected beam."

"Clever!" ejaculated Bolton.

"It is rather crude and may not be accurate enough to locate the source exactly, but at least it will give us a pretty good idea of where to look. Given time, a much more accurate instrument could have been made, but two telescopic rifle sights and a theodolite base were all the materials I could find to work with. Climb out, Carnesy, and do your stuff."

Carnes climbed out on the window and fastened the hooks of the life saver to the rings set in the window casings. He sat the base of the instrument against the pane of glass and manipulated the telescope knobs as Dr. Bird signalled from the inside. The scientist was hard to please with the adjustment, but at last the cross hairs of the first telescope were centered on the light in the solarium. He changed his

position and stared through the second tube.

"The angle is too acute and the distance too great for accuracy," he said with an air of disappointment. "The beam comes from the roof of a house down along Pennsylvania Avenue, but I can't tell from here which one it is. Take a look, Bolton."

The Chief of the Secret Service stared through the telescope.

"I couldn't be sure, Doctor," he replied. "I can see something on the roof of one of the houses, but I can't tell what it is and I couldn't tell the house when I got in front of it."

"It won't do to make a false move," said the Doctor. "Did you arrange for that plane?"

"It is waiting your orders at the field, Doctor."

"Good. I'll go up to the office of the Chief of Air Service and get in touch with the pilot over the Chief's private line. There are some orders that I wish to give him and some signals to be arranged."

Dr. Bird returned in a few minutes.

"The plane is taking off now and will be over the city soon," he

announced. "We'll take a stroll down the Avenue until we are in the vicinity of the house, and then wait for the plane. Carnes will take five of your men and go down behind the house and the rest of us will go in front. Which building do you think it is, Bolton?"

"About the fourth from the corner."

"All right, the men going down the back will take station behind the house next to the corner and the rest of us will get in front of the same building. When the plane comes over, watch it. If you receive no signal, go to the next house and wait for him to make a loop and come over you again. Continue this until the pilot throws a white parachute over. That is the signal that we are covering the right house. When you get that signal, Carnes, leave two men outside and break in with the other three. Get that apparatus on the roof and the men who are operating it. Bolton and I will attack the front door at the same time. Does everybody understand?"

Murmurs of assent came from the detail.

"All right, let's go. Carnes, lead out with your men and go half a block ahead so that the two parties will arrive in position at about the same time."

Carnes left the building with five of the operatives. Dr. Bird and Bolton waited for a few minutes and then started down Pennsylvania Avenue, the five men of their squad following at intervals. For three-quarters of a mile they sauntered down the street.

"This should be it, Doctor," said Bolton.

"I think so, and here comes our plane."

They watched the swift scout plane from Langley Field swing down low over the house and then swoop up into the sky again without making a signal. The party walked down the street one house and paused. Again the plane swept over them without sign. As they stopped in front of the next house a white parachute flew from the cockpit of the plane and the aircraft, its mission accomplished, veered off to the south toward its hangar.

"This is the place," cried Bolton. "Haggerty and Johnson, you two cover the street. Bemis, take the lower door. The rest come with me."

Followed closely by Dr. Bird and two operatives, Bolton sprinted across the street and up the steps leading to the main entrance of the house. The door was barred, and he hurled his weight against it without result.

"One side, Bolton," snapped Dr. Bird.

The diminutive Chief drew aside and Dr. Bird's two hundred pounds of bone and muscle crashed against the door. The lock gave and the Doctor barely saved himself from sprawling headlong on the hall floor. A woman's scream rang out, and the Doctor swore under his breath.

"Upstairs! To the roof!" he cried.

Followed by the rest of the party, he sprinted up the stairway which opened before him. Just as he reached the top his way was barred by an Amazonian figure in a green bathrobe.

"Who th' divil arre yer?" demanded an outraged voice.

"Police," snapped Bolton. "One side!"

"Wan side, is it?" demanded the fiery haired Amazon. "The divil a stip ye go until ye till me ye'er bizness. Phwat th' divil arre yer doin' in th' house uv a rayspictable female at this hour uv th' marnin'?"

"One side, I tell you!" cried Bolton as he strove to push past the figure that barred the way.

"Oh, ye wud, wud yer, little mann?" demanded the Irishwoman as she grasped Bolton by the collar and shook him as a terrier does a rat. Dr. Bird stifled his laughter with difficulty and seized her by the arm. With a heave on Bolton's collar she raised him from the ground and swung him against the Doctor, knocking him off his feet.

"Hilp! P'lice! Murther!" she screamed at the top of her voice.

"Damn it, woman, we're on—"

Dr. Bird's voice was cut short by the sound of a pistol shot from the roof, followed by two others. The Irishwoman dropped Bolton and slumped into a sitting position and screamed lustily. Bolton and Dr. Bird, with the two operatives at their heels, raced for the roof. Before they reached it another volley of shots rang out, these sounding from the rear of the building. They made their way to the upper floor and found a ladder running to a skylight in the roof. At the foot of the ladder stood one of Carnes' party.

"What is it, Williams?" demanded Bolton.

"I don't know, Chief. Carnes and the other two went up there, and then I heard shooting. My orders were to let no one come down the ladder."

As he spoke, Carnes' head appeared at the skylight.

"It's the right place, all right, Doctor," he called. "Come on up, the shooting is all over."

Dr. Bird mounted the ladder and stepped out on the roof. Set on one edge was a large piece of apparatus, toward which the scientist eagerly hastened. He bent over it for a few moments and then straightened up.

"Where is the operator?" he asked.

Carnes silently led the way to the edge of the roof and pointed down. Dr. Bird leaned over. At the foot of the fire escape he saw a crumpled dark heap, with a secret service operative bending over it.

"Is he dead, Olmstead?" called Carnes.

"Dead as a mackerel," came the reply. "Richards got him through the head on his first shot."

"Good business," said Dr. Bird. "We probably could never have secured a conviction and the matter is best hushed up anyway. Bolton, have two of your men help me get this apparatus up to the Bureau. I want to examine it a little. Have the body taken to the

morgue and shut up the press. Find out which room the chap occupied and search it, and bring all his papers to me. From a criminal standpoint, this case is settled, but I want to look into the scientific end of it a little more."

"I'd like to know what it was all about, Doctor," protested Bolton. "I have followed your lead blindly, and now I have a housebreaking without search-warrant and a killing to explain, and still I am about as much in the dark as I was at the beginning."

"Excuse me, Bolton," said Dr. Bird contritely; "I didn't mean to slight you. Admiral Clay wants to know about it and so does Carnes, although he knows me too well to say so. As soon as I have digested the case I'll let you know and I'll go over the whole thing with you."

A week later Dr. Bird sat in conference with the President in the executive office of the White House. Beside him sat Admiral Clay, Carnes and Bolton.

"I have told the President as much as I know, Doctor," said the Admiral, "and he would like to hear the details from your lips. He has fully recovered from his malady and there is no danger of exciting him."

"I cannot read Russian," said Dr. Bird slowly, "and so was forced to depend on one of my assistants to translate the papers which Mr. Bolton found in Stokowsky's room. There is nothing in them to definitely connect him with the Russian Union of Soviet Republics, but there is little doubt in my mind that he was a Red agent and that Russia supplied the money which he spent. It would be disastrous to Russia's plans to have too close an accord between this country and the British Empire, and I have no doubt that the coming visit of Premier McDougal was the underlying cause of the attempt. So much for the reason.

"As to how I came to suspect what was happening, the explanation is very simple. When Carnes first told me of your malady, Mr. President, I happened to be checking Von Beyer's results in the alleged discovery of a new element, lunium. In the article describing his experiments, Von Beyer mentions that when he tried to observe the spectra, he encountered a mild form of opthalmia which was quite stubborn to treatment. He also mentions a peculiar mental unbalance and intense exhilaration which the rays seemed to cause both in himself and in his assistants. The analogy between his observations and your case struck me at once.

"For ages the moon has been an object of worship by various religious sects, and some of the most obscene orgies of which we

have record occurred in the moonlight. The full moon seems to affect dogs to a state of partial hypnosis with consequent howling and evident pain in the eyes. Certain feeble minded persons have been known to be adversely affected by moonlight as well as some cases of complete mental aberration. In other words, while moonlight has no practical effect on the normal human in its usual concentration, it does have an adverse effect on certain types of mentality and, despite the laughter of medical science, there seems to be something in the theory of 'moon madness.' This effect Von Beyer attributed to the emanations of lunium, which element he detected in the spectra of the moon, in the form of a wide band in the ultra-violet region.

"I obtained from Carnes a history of your case, and when I found that your attacks grew violent with the full moon and subsided with the new moon, I was sure that I was on the right track, although I had at that time no way of knowing whether it was from natural or artificial causes that the effect was being produced. I interviewed Admiral Clay and found that you were suffering from a form of dermititis resembling sunburn, and that convinced me that an attack was being made on your sanity, for an excess of ultra-violet light will always tend to produce sunburn. I inquired about the windows of your solarium, for ultra-violet light will not pass through a lead glass. When the Admiral told me that the glass had been replaced

with fused quartz, which is quite permeable to ultra-violet and that the change had been almost coincident with the start of your malady, I asked him to get you out of the solarium and let me examine it.

"By means of certain fluorescent substances which I used, I found that your pillow was being bathed in a flood of ultra-violet light, and the fluoro-spectroscope soon told me that lunium emanations were present in large quantities. These rays were not coming to you directly from their source, but one of the windows of the State, War and Navy Building was being used as a reflector. I located the approximate source of the ray by means of an improvised apparatus, and we surrounded the place. Stokowsky was killed while attempting to escape. I guess that is about all there is to it."

"Thank you, Doctor," said the President. "I would be interested in a description of the apparatus which he used to produce this effect."

"The apparatus was quite simple, Sir. It was merely a large collector of moonlight, which was thrown after collection onto a lunium plate. The resultant emanations were turned into a parallel beam by a parabolic reflector and focused, through a rock crystal lens with an extremely long focal length, onto your pillow."

"Then Stokowsky had isolated Von Beyer's new element?" asked the

President.

"I am still in doubt whether it is a new element or merely an allotropic modification of the common element, cadmium. The plate which he used has a very peculiar property. When moonlight, or any other reflected light of the same composition falls on it, it acts on the ray much as the button of a Roentgen tube acts on a cathode ray. As the cathode ray is absorbed and an entirely new ray, the X-ray, is given off by the button, just so is the reflected moonlight absorbed and a new ray of ultra-violet given off. This is the ray which Von Beyer detected. I thought that I could catch traces of Von Beyer's lines in my spectroscope, and I think now that it is due to a trace of lunium in the cadmium plating of the barrels. Von Beyer could have easily made the same mistake. Von Beyer's work, together with Stokowsky's opens up an entirely new field of spectroscopic research. I would give a good deal to go over to Baden and go into the matter with Von Beyer and make some plans for the exploitation of the new field, but I'm afraid that my pocketbook wouldn't stand the trip."

"I think that the United States owes you that trip, Dr. Bird," said the Chief Executive with a smile. "Make your plans to go as soon as you get your data together. I think that the Treasury will be able to take care of the expense without raising the income tax next year."

May 1930

#25 Murder Madness, By Murray Leinster:

Murder madness! Seven secret service men had completely disappeared. Another had been found a screaming, homicidal maniac, whose fingers writhed like snakes. So Bell, of the secret "Trade," plunges into South America after the master—the mighty, unknown octopus of power whose diabolical poison threatens a continent!

Aproximate word count: 63,200

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Chapter 1

The engines of the *Almirante Gomez* were going dead slow. Away up beside her monster funnels her siren blew dismally, *Whoo-oo-oo-oo!* and was silent for the regulation period, and blew desolately again into the clinging gray mist that ringed her all about.

Her decks were wet and glistening. Droplets of water stood upon the

deck-stanchions, and dripped from the outer edge of the roof above the promenade deck. A thin, swirling fog lay soggily upon the water and the big steamer went dead slow upon her course, sending dismal and depressing blasts from her horn from time to time. It was barely possible to see from one side of the ship to the other. It was surely impossible to see the bow from a point half astern.

Charley Bell went forward along the promenade deck. He passed Senor Ortiz, ex-Minister of the Interior of the Argentine Republic. Ortiz bowed to him punctiliously, but Bell had a sudden impression that the Argentine's face was gray and ghastly. He checked himself and looked back. The little man was climbing the companion-ladder toward the wireless room.

Bell slipped on toward the bow. He did not want to give an impression of furtiveness, but the *Almirante Gomez* was twelve days out of New York and Bell was still entirely ignorant of why he was on board. He had been called into the office of his chief in the State Department and told curtly that his request for leave of absence had been granted. And Bell had not asked for a leave of absence. But at just that moment he saw a rubber band on the desk of his immediate superior, a fairly thick rubber band which had been tied into a certain intricate knot. And Bell had kept quiet. He went to his apartment, found his bags packed and tickets to Rio via the *Almirante Gomez* in

an envelope on his dressing-table, and went out and caught a train to the ship.

And that was all he knew. The siren up above blared dolefully into the fog. It was damp, and soggy, and depressing. The other passengers were under cover, and the decks seemed to be deserted. From the saloon came the sound of music. Bell pulled the collar of his light topcoat about his throat and strolled on toward the bow.

He faced a row of steamer chairs. There was a figure curled up in one of them. Paula Canalejas, muffled up against the dampness and staring somberly out into the mist. Bell had met her in Washington and liked her a great deal, but he swore softly at sight of her in his way.

The afternoon before, he had seen a stoker on the *Almirante Gomez* pick up a bit of rope and absently tie knots in it while he exchanged Rabelasian humor with his fellows. He had not looked at Bell at all, but the knots he tied were the same that Bell had last seen tied in a rubber band on a desk in the State Department in Washington. And Bell knew a recognition signal when he saw one. The stoker would be off watch, just now, and by all the rules of reason he ought to be out there on the forecastle, waiting for Bell to turn up and receive instructions.

But Bell paused, lit a cigarette carefully, and strolled forward.

"Mr. Bell."

He stopped and beamed fatuously at her. It would have been logical for him to fall in love with her, and it is always desirable to seem logical. He had striven painstakingly to give the impression that he had fallen in love with her—and then had striven even more painstakingly to keep from doing it.

"Hullo," he said in bland surprise. "What are you doing out on deck?"

Brown eyes regarded him speculatively.

"Thinking," she said succinctly. "About you, Mr. Bell."

Bell beamed.

"Thinking," he confided, "is usually a bad habit, especially in a girl. But if you must think, I approve of your choice of subjects. What were you thinking about me?"

The brown eyes regarded him still more speculatively.

"I was wondering—" said Paula, glancing to either side, "I was wondering if you happen to be—er—a member of the United States Secret Service."

Bell laughed with entire naturalness.

"Good Lord, no!" he said amusedly. "I have a desk in the State Department building, and I read consular reports all day long and write letters bedeviling the consuls for not including unavailable statistics in their communications. That's my work. I'm on leave now."

She looked skeptical and, it may be, disappointed.

"You look as if you didn't believe me," said Bell, smiling. "I give you my word of honor I'm not a member of the United States Secret Service. Will that do to relieve your suspicions?"

"I believe you," she said slowly, "but it does not relieve my mind. I shall think about other people. I have something important to tell a member of the United States Secret Service."

Bell shrugged.

"I'm sorry," he said amiably, "that I can't oblige you by tipping one

of them off. That's what you wanted me to do, isn't it?"

She nodded, and the gesture was very much like a dismissal. Bell frowned, hesitated, and went on. He was anxious to meet the stoker, but this....

The siren droned dismally over his head. Fog lay deep about the ship. The washing of the waves and dripping of water on the decks was depressing. It seemed to be getting thicker. Four stanchions ahead, the mist was noticeable. He found that he could count five, six, seven.... The eighth was indefinite. But a bar materialized in the fog before him, and the grayness drew away before him and closed in behind. When he was at the forward end of the promenade, looking down upon the forecastle deck, he was isolated. He heard footsteps some distance overhead. The watch officer up on the bridge. Bell glanced up and saw him as an indistinct figure. He waited until the officer paced over to the opposite side of the bridge. The air throbbed and shook with the roaring of the siren.

Bell slipped over the edge of the rail and swung swiftly down the little ladder of iron bars set into the ship's structure. In seconds he had landed, and was down upon that terra incognita of all passengers, the deck reserved for the use of the crew.

A mast loomed overhead, with its heavy, clumsy derrick-booms. A winch was by his side. Oddments of deck machinery, inexplicable to a landsman, formed themselves vaguely in the mist. The fog was thicker, naturally, since the deck was closer to the water's edge.

"Hey!" growled a voice close beside him. "Passengers ain't allowed down here."

An unshaven, soot-smeared figure loomed up. Bell could not see the man save as a blur in the mist, but he said cheerfully:

"I know it, but I wanted to look. Seafaring's a trade I'd like to know something about."

The figure grunted. Bell had just given his word of honor that he wasn't a member of the Secret Service. He wasn't. But he was in the Trade—which has no official existence anywhere. And the use of the word in his first remark was a recognition signal.

"What is your trade, anyways?" growled the figure skeptically.

"I sharpen serpents' teeth from time to time," offered Bell amiably. He recognized the man, suddenly. "Hullo, Jamison, you look like the devil."

Jamison drew nearer. He grunted softly.

"I know it. Listen closely, Bell. Your job is getting some information from Canalejas, Minister of War in Rio. He sent word up to Washington that he'd something important to say. It isn't treachery to Brazil, because he's a decent man. Seven Secret Service men have disappeared in South America within three months. They've found the eighth, and he's crazy. Something has driven him mad, and they say it's a devilish poison. He's a homicidal maniac, returning to the United States in a straight-jacket. Canalejas knows what's happened to the Service men. He said so, and he's going to tell us. His daughter brought the news to Washington, and then instead of going on to Europe as she was supposed to do, she started back to Rio. You're to get this formation and pass it on to me, then try to keep your skin whole and act innocent. You were picked out because, as a State Department man, hell could be raised if you vanished. Understand?"

Bell nodded.

"Something horrible is going on. Secret Service can't do anything. The man in Asunción isn't dead—he's been seen—but he's cut loose. And Service men don't often do that. He don't report. That means the Service code may have been turned over, and hell to pay generally.

It's up to the Trade."

"I've got it," said Bell. "Here are two items for you. Miss Canalejas just said she suspected I was Secret Service. I convinced her I wasn't. She says she has important information for a Service man."

The brawny figure of the stoker growled.

"Damn women! She was told somebody'd be sent to see her father. She was shown a recognition-knot with the outsider's variation. Given one, for father. That'll identify you to him. But she shouldn't have talked. Now, be careful. As nearly as we know, that chap in the straight-jacket was given some poison that drove him insane. There are hellish drugs down there. Maybe the same thing happened to others. Look out for yourself, and give me the information Canalejas gives you as quickly as God will let you. If anything happens to you, we want the stuff to get back. Understand?"

"Of course," said Bell. He carefully did not shiver as he realized what Jamison meant by anything happening to him. "The other item is that Ortiz, ex-Minister of the Interior of the Argentine, is scared to death about something. Sending radios right and left."

"Umph," growled Jamison. "One of our men vanished in Buenos

Aires. Watch him. You're friendly?"

"Yes."

"Get friendlier. See what he's got. Now shoo."

Bell swung up the ladder again. Mist opened before him and closed again behind. He climbed over the rail to the promenade deck, and felt a little flare of irritation. There was a figure watching him.

He slipped to the deck and grinned sheepishly at Paula Canalejas. She stood with her hands in the pockets of her little sport coat, regarding him very gravely.

“I suppose," said Charley Bell sheepishly, "that I look like a fool. But I've always wanted to climb up and down that ladder. I suppose it's a survival from the age of childhood. At the age of seven I longed to be a fireman."

"I wonder," said Paula quietly. "Mr. Bell"—she stepped close to him —"I am taking a desperate chance. For the sake of my father, I wish certain things known. I think that you are an honorable man, and I think that you lied to me just now. Go and see Senor Ortiz. Your government will want to know what happens to him. Go and see him

quickly."

Bell felt the same flare of irritation as before. Women do not follow rules. They will not follow rules. They depend upon intuition, which is sometimes right, but sometimes leads to ungodly errors. Paula was right this time, but she could have been wholly and hopelessly wrong. If she had talked to anyone else....

"My child," said Bell paternally—he was at least two years older than Paula—"you should be careful. I did not lie to you just now. I am not Secret Service. But I happen to know that you have a tiny piece of string to give your father, and I beg of you not to show that to anyone else. And—well—you are probably watched. You must not talk seriously to me!"

He lifted his hat and started astern. He was more than merely irritated. He was almost frightened. Because the Trade, officially, does not exist at all, and everybody in the Trade is working entirely on his own; and because those people who suspect that there is a Trade and dislike it are not on their own, but have plenty of resources behind them. And yet it is requisite that the Trade shall succeed in its various missions. Always.

The Government of the United States, you understand, will admit

that it has a Secret Service, which it strives to identify solely with the pursuit of counterfeiters, postal thieves, and violators of the prohibition laws. Strongly pressed, it will admit that some members of the Secret Service work abroad, the official explanation being that they work abroad to forestall smugglers. And at a pinch, and in confidence, it may concede the existence of diplomatic secret agents. But there is no such thing as the Trade. Not at all. The funds which members of the Trade expend are derived by very devious bookkeeping from the appropriations allotted to an otherwise honestly conducted Department of the United States Government.

Therefore the Trade does not really exist. You might say that there is a sort of conspiracy among certain people to do certain things. Some of them are government officials, major and minor. Some of them are private citizens, reputable and otherwise. One or two of them are in jail, both here and abroad. But as far as the Government of the United States is concerned, certain fortunate coincidences that happen now and then are purely coincidences. And the Trade, which arranges for them, does not exist. But it has a good many enemies.

The fog-horn howled dismally overhead. Mist swirled past the ship, and an oily swell surged vaguely overside and disappeared into a gray oblivion half a ship's length away. Bell moved on toward the stern. It was his intention to go into the smoking-room and idle

ostentatiously. Perhaps he would enter into another argument with that Brazilian air pilot who had so much confidence in Handley-Page wing-slots. Bell had, in Washington, a small private plane that, he explained, had been given him by a wealthy aunt, who hoped he would break his neck in it. He considered that wing-slots interfered with stunting.

He had picked out the door with his eye when he espied a small figure standing by the rail. It was Ortiz, the Argentine ex-Cabinet Minister, staring off into the grayness, and seeming to listen with all his ears.

Bell slowed up. The little stout man turned and nodded to him, and then put out his hand.

"Senor Bell," he said quietly, "tell me. Do you hear airplane motors?"

Bell listened. The drip-drip-drip of condensed mist. The shuddering of the ship with her motors going dead slow. The tinkling, muted notes of the piano inside the saloon. The washing and hissing of the waves overside. That was all.

"Why, no," said Bell. "I don't. Sound travels freakishly in fog,

though. One might be quite close and we couldn't hear it. But we're a hundred and fifty miles off the Venezuelan coast, aren't we?"

Ortiz turned and faced him. Bell was shocked at the expression on the small man's face. It was drained of all blood, and its look was ghastly. But the rather fine dark eyes were steady.

"We are," agreed Ortiz, very steadily indeed, "but I—I have received a radiogram that some airplane should fly near this ship, and it would amuse me to hear it."

Bell frowned at the fog.

"I've done a good bit of flying," he observed, "and if I were flying out at sea right now, I'd dodge this fog bank. It would be practically suicide to try to alight in a mist like this."

Ortiz regarded him carefully. It seemed to Bell that sweat was coming out upon the other man's forehead.

"You mean," he said quietly, "that an airplane could not land?"

"It might try," said Bell with a shrug. "But you couldn't judge your height above the water. You might crash right into it and dive under. Matter of fact, you probably would."

Ortiz's nostrils quivered a little.

"I told them," he said steadily, "I told them it was not wise to risk...."

He stopped. He looked suddenly at his hands, clenched upon the rail. A depth of pallor even greater than his previous terrible paleness seemed to leave even his lips without blood. He wavered on his feet, as if he were staggering.

"You're sick!" said Bell sharply. Instinctively he moved forward.

The fine dark eyes regarded him oddly. And Ortiz suddenly took his hands from the railing of the promenade deck. He looked at his fingers detachedly. And Bell could see them writhing, opening and closing in a horribly sensate fashion, as if they were possessed of devils and altogether beyond the control of their owner. And he suddenly realized that the steady, grim regard with which Ortiz looked at his hands was exactly like the look he had seen upon a man's face once, when that man saw a venomous snake crawling toward him and had absolutely no weapon.

Ortiz was looking at his fingers as a man might look at cobras at the ends of his wrists. Very calmly, but with a still, stunned horror.

He lifted his eyes to Bell.

"I have no control over them," he said quietly. "My hands are useless to me, Senor Bell. I wonder if you will be good enough to assist me to my cabin."

Again that deadly pallor flashed across his face. Bell caught at his arm.

"What is the matter?" he demanded anxiously. "Of course I'll help you."

Ortiz smiled very faintly.

"If any airplane arrives in time," he said steadily, "something may be done. But you have rid me of even that hope. I have been poisoned, Senor Bell."

"But the ship's doctor...."

Ortiz, walking rather stiffly beside Bell, shrugged.

"He can do nothing. Will you be good enough to open this door for me? And"—his voice was hoarse for an instant—"assist me to put my hands in my pockets. I cannot. But I would not like them to be

seen."

Bill took hold of the writhing fingers. He saw sweat standing out upon Ortiz's forehead. And the fingers closed savagely upon Bell's hands, tearing at them. Ortiz looked at him with a ghastly supplication.

"Now," he said with difficulty, "if you will open the door, Senor Bell...."

Bell slid the door aside. They went in together. People were making the best of boresome weather within, frankly yawning, most of them. But the card-room would be full, and the smoking-room steward would be busy.

"My cabin is upon the next deck below," said Ortiz through stiff lips. "We—we will descend the stairs."

Bell went with him, his face expressionless.

"My cabin should be unlocked," said Ortiz.

It was. Ortiz entered, and, with his hands still in his pockets, indicated a steamer-trunk.

"Please open that." He licked his lips. "I—I had thought I would have warning enough. It has not been so severe before. Right at the top...."

Bell flung the top back. A pair of bright and shiny handcuffs lay on top of a dress shirt.

"Yes," said Ortiz steadily. "Put them upon my wrists, please. The poison that has been given to me is—peculiar. I believe that one of your compatriots has experienced its effects."

Bell started slightly. Ortiz eyed him steadily.

"Precisely." Ortiz, with his face a gray mask of horror, spoke with a steadiness Bell could never have accomplished. "A poison, Senor Bell, which has made a member of the Secret Service of the United States a homicidal maniac. It has been given to me. I have been hoping for its antidote, but—Quick! Senor Bell! Quick! The handcuffs!"

Chapter 2

The throbbing of the engines went on at an unvarying tempo. There was the slight, almost infinitesimal tremor of their vibration. The electric light in the cabin wavered rhythmically with its dynamo.

From the open porthole came the sound of washing water. Now and then a disconnected sound of laughter or of speech came down from the main saloon.

Ortiz lay upon the bed, exhausted.

"It is perhaps humorous, Senor Bell," he said presently, in the same steady voice he had used upon the deck. "It is undoubtedly humorous that I should call upon you. I believe that you are allied with the Secret Service of your government."

Bell started to shake his head, but was still. He said nothing.

"I am poisoned," said Ortiz. He tried to smile, but it was ghastly. "It is a poison which makes a man mad in a very horrible fashion. If I could use my hands—and could trust them—I would undoubtedly shoot myself. It would be entirely preferable. Instead, I hope—"

He broke off short and listened intently. His forehead beaded.

"Is that an airplane motor?"

Bell went to the port and listened. The washing of waves. The throbbing of the ship's engines. The dismal, long-drawn-out moaning of the fog-horn. Nothing else.... Yes! A dim and distant muttering. It

drew nearer and died away again.

"That is a plane," said Bell. "Yes, It's out of hearing now."

Ortiz clamped his jaws together.

"I was about to speak," he said steadily, "to tell you—many things. Which your government should know. Instead, I ask you to go to the wireless room and have the wireless operator try to get in touch with that plane. It is a two-motored seaplane and it has a wireless outfit. It will answer the call M.S.T.R. Ask him to use his directional wireless and try to guide it to the ship. It brings the antidote to the poison which affects me."

Bell made for the door. Ortiz raised his head with a ghastly smile.

"Close the door tightly," he said quietly. "I—I feel as if I shall be unpleasant."

Closing the door behind him, Bell felt rather like a man in a nightmare. He made for the stairway, bolted for the deck, and fairly darted up the ladder to the wireless room.

"Ortiz sent me," he said to the operator. "You heard that plane just now. See if you can get it."

The operator looked up at him beneath a green eyeshade and grinned crookedly.

"Talking to 'em now," he said.

The key flicked up and down, and a tiny dancing spark leaped into being and vanished beneath its contact-point. The wireless room was dark save for the bright, shaded light above the sending table. A file of sent messages by an elbow. A pad for messages received was by a hand. Stray wreaths of tobacco smoke floated about the room, leaping into view as they drifted beneath the lamp.

"Is he bad?" asked the operator fascinatedly, his eyes fixed on his key.

Bell felt his eyelids flicker.

"Very bad," he said shortly.

"They tell me," said the operator and shuddered, "your hands get working and you can't stop 'em.... I'm playing, I am! I'm playing The Master's game!"

The key stopped. He listened.

"They're going to try to swoop over the ship and drop it," he said a moment later. "I don't think they can. But tell Ortiz they're going to try."

Bell's eyes were narrow. It is not customary for a radio operator on a passenger ship to speak of an ex-Cabinet Minister of the Argentine Republic by his surname only. It bespeaks either impertinence or a certain very peculiar association. Bell frowned imperceptibly for an instant, thinking.

"You've—had it?" he asked sharply.

"God, no! I never took the chance! I saw the red spots once, and I went to Rib—Say! You got a password?"

He was staring up at Bell. Bell shrugged.

"I'm trying to help Senor Ortiz now."

The operator continued to stare, his eyes full of suspicion. Then he grimaced.

"All right. Go tell him they're going to drop it."

Bell went out. Gray fog, and washing seas, and the big ship

ploughing steadily on toward the south.... The horn blared, startlingly loud and unspeakably doleful. Bell listened for other sounds. There were none.

Down the steep ladder to the promenade deck. Paula Canalejas nodded to him.

"I saw you speak to Senor Ortiz," she said quietly. "You see?"

Bell was beginning to have a peculiar, horrible suspicion. It was incredible, but it was inevitable.

"I think I see," he said harshly. "But I don't dare believe it. Keep quiet and don't speak to me unless I give you some sign it's safe! It's —hellish!"

He went inside and swiftly down the stairs. He found a steward hesitating outside the door of Ortiz's cabin. He touched Bell's arm anxiously as he was about to go in.

"Beg pardon, sir," he said, and stammered. "I—I heard Mr. Ortiz making some—very strange noises, sir. I—I thought he was sick...."

"He is," said Bell grimly. "He told me he does not want a doctor, though. I'm looking after him."

He closed the door behind him, and Ortiz grinned at him. It was a horrible, a terrible grin, and Ortiz fought it from his face with a terrific effort of will. There was foam about his lips.

“Dios! It was—it was devilish!" he gasped. "Senor Bell, *amigo mio*, for the love of the good God get my revolver from my trunk. Give it to me...."

Bell said shortly: "The airplane just radioed that it's going to try to swoop overhead and drop a package on board the steamer. It doesn't dare alight in this fog."

"I think," gasped Ortiz, "I think it would be well to tie my feet. Tie them fast! If—if the package comes, if I—if I am unpleasant, knock me unconscious and pour it into my mouth. I fear it is too late now. But try it...."

Through the port came the muttering of a seaplane's engines. The noise died away. Almost instantly the siren boomed hoarsely.

"Ah, *Dios!*" said Ortiz unsteadily. "There it is! Senor Bell, I think it is too late. Would you—would you assist me to go out on deck, where I might fling myself overboard? I—think I can control my legs so long."

"Steady!" said Bell, wrenched by the sight of the man before him fighting against unnameable horror. "Tell me—"

"It is poison," said Ortiz, his features fixed in a terrible effort of will. "A ghastly, a horrible poison of the *Indios* of Matto Grosso, in Brazil. It drives a man mad, murder mad. It is as if he were possessed by a devil. His hands first refuse to obey him. His feet next. And then his body. It is as if a devil had seized hold of his body and carried it about doing murder with it. A part of the brain is driven insane, and a man goes about shrieking with the horror of what crimes his body commits until the poison reaches that portion of his brain as well. Then he is mad forever. That is what I face, *amigo mio*. That is why I beg you, I implore you, to kill me or assist me to the side of the ship so that I may fling myself overboard! The Master had it administered to me secretly, and demanded treason as the price of the antidote. He deman—"

Steady and strong, rising from a muttering to a steady roar, the sound of airplane motors came through the port. Bell started up.

"Hold fast," he snapped savagely. "I'll go get that package when it lands. Hold fast, I tell you! Fight it!"

He flung out of the cabin and raced up the stairs. The door to the

deck was open. He crowded through a group of passengers who had discounted the dampness for the sake of a novelty—an airplane far out at sea—and raced up to the upper deck. The roaring noise was receding. The siren roared hoarsely. Then the noise came back.

For minutes, then, the ship seemed to play hide-and-seek with the invisible fliers. The roaring noise overhead circled about, now near, now seeming very far away. And the siren sent its dismal blasts out into the grayness all about. Then, for an instant, a swiftly scudding shadow was visible overhead. It banked steeply and vanished, and seemed to have turned and come lower when it reappeared a moment later. It was not distinct, at first. It was merely a silhouette of darker gray against the all-enveloping mist. But its edges sharpened and became clear. One could make out struts, an aileron's trailing edge.

"Got nerve, anyhow," said Bell grimly.

It swept across the ship and disappeared, but the noise of its engines did not dwindle more than a little. The blast of the siren seemed to summon it back again. Once more it came in sight, and this time it dived steeply, flashed across the forecastle deck amid a hideous uproar, desperately, horribly close to the dangling derrick-cables, and was gone.

Bell had seen it more clearly than anyone else on the ship, perhaps. He saw a man in the pilot's cockpit between wings and tail reach high and fling something downward, something with a long streamer attached to it. Bell had an instant's glimpse of the goggled face. Then he was darting forward, watching the thing that fell.

It took only a second. Two at most. But the thing seemed to fall with infinite deliberation, the streamer shivering out behind it. It fell at a steep slant, the forward momentum of the plane's speed added to its own drop. It swooped down, slanting toward the rail....

Bell groaned. It struck the rail itself, and bounced. A sailor flung himself toward it. The streamer slipped from his fingers and slithered over the side.

Bell was at the railing just in time to see it drop into the water. He opened his mouth to shout, and saw it sink. The last of the streamer followed the dropped object down into the green water when it was directly below him.

His hands clenched. Bell stared sickly at the spot where it had vanished. An instant later he had whirled and was thrusting wide the wireless room door. The operator was returning to his key, grinning crookedly. He looked up sidewise.

"Tell them it went overside," snapped Bell. "Tell them to try it again. Ortiz is in hell! To try again! He's dying!"

The operator looked up fascinatedly, his fingers working his key.

"Is he—bad?" he asked with a shuddering interest.

"He's dying!" snarled Bell, in a rage because of his helplessness. He had forgotten everything but the fact that a man below decks was facing the most horrible fate that can overtake a man, and facing it with a steadfast gameness that made Bell's heart go out to him.

"They don't die," said the operator. He shuddered. "They don't die of it."

His key stopped. He listened. His key clicked again.

"They only had two packages," he said a moment later. "They don't dare risk the other one. They say the fog ends twenty miles farther on. They're going to land up there and taxi back on the surface of the water. It shouldn't be more than half an hour."

He pushed himself back from the table with an air of finality.

"That's all. They've signed off."

Bell felt rage sweeping over him. The operator grinned crookedly.

"Better go down and tie him up," he said, and licked his lips with the fascinated air of one thinking of a known and terrifying thing. "Better tie him up tight. It'll be half an hour more."

Bell went down the companion-ladder. The promenade was crowded with passengers now, asking questions of each other. Some, frowning portentously, thought the plane an unscheduled ocean flier who had lost his way in the fog.

Paula Canalejas was close to Bell as he shouldered his way through the crowd.

"That was for him?" she asked, without moving her lips.

Bell nodded.

"Tell him," she said quietly, "I—pray for him."

Bell nodded abruptly and went into the saloon. It was nearly empty. He wiped the sweat off his face. It was horrible to have to go down to Ortiz and tell him that at best it would be half an hour more....

Then there was a sudden scream below him, and then a shot. Bell

jumped for the stairs, his heart in his throat, and saw Ortiz coming out of his stateroom door. His eyes were wide and agonized. His body....

Even in the incredibly short time before he reached the bottom of the steps, Bell had time to receive the ghastly impression that Ortiz was sane, but that his body had gone mad. Ortiz's face was white and horrified. His hands and arms were writhing savagely, working at the handcuffs on his wrists. His legs were carrying him at a curious, padding trot down the hallway. One of the hands held a glittering revolver. A steward was crouched behind a couch, his face white and filled with stark terror. And Ortiz held his head back, as if struggling to hold back and control his body, which was under the control of a malignant demon.

"Out of the way!" cried Ortiz in a voice of terrible despair. "Get someone to shoot me! Kill me! I cannot—ah, *Dios!*"

The hands leveled the revolver in spite of him, while he flung his head from side to side in a frantic attempt to disturb their aim.

"Close your eyes!" panted Bell, and hurled himself upon—whom? It was not Ortiz. It was Ortiz's body, gone mad and raging. The manacled arms flailed about frenziedly. The gun went off. Again.

Again....

Bell struck. He knocked the Thing that possessed Ortiz's body off its feet. The hands groped for him. They clubbed at him with the revolver. The feet kicked....

"Keep your eyes closed," gasped Bell, struggling to get the gun away from those horrible hands. "It—it can't see when you keep your eyes closed!"

Fighting insanely as the Thing was fighting, he could not identify it with Ortiz himself. One of the hands unclosed from about the revolver and clawed at his throat. It seemed to abandon that effort and attacked Ortiz's face in a frenzy of rage, struggling to claw his eyes open. The other held the weapon fast with maniacal strength.

At the horror of feeling one of his own manacled hands attacking his face savagely as if it were itself a sensate thing, Ortiz opened his eyes. They were wide with despair.

The hand with the revolver made a sudden movement, and Bell flung his weight upon it as the clutching hand pulled the trigger. There was a deafening report....

The body seemed to weaken suddenly in Bell's grip. It fought less and less terribly, though with no lessening of its savagery. He managed to get the revolver away from the hands that shook with unspeakable rage. He flung it away and stood panting.

There was a crowd of people suddenly all about the place. Staring, stunned, incredulous people who regarded Bell with a dawning, damning suspicion.

Ortiz spoke suddenly. His voice was weak, but it was steady, and it was full of a desperate relief.

"I wish to make a statement," he said sharply. "I—I wished to commit suicide for personal reasons. Senor Bell tried to dissuade me. The handcuffs upon my wrists were placed there with my consent. Senor Bell is my friend and has done me no wrong. I shot myself, with intention."

Bell beckoned to the ship's doctor.

"Get him bandaged up," he ordered harshly. "There's no need for him to die."

The body was writhing only feebly, now. Ortiz looked up at him, and

managed a smile. Again there was that incredible impression of the body not belonging to Ortiz, or Ortiz as a sane and whole and honorable, admirable man, and the feebly writhing body with its clutching hands as some evil thing that had properly been defeated and killed.

The doctor bent down. It was useless, of course. He made futile movements.

"I wish to speak to my friend, Senor Bell," said Ortiz weakly. "I—I have not long."

Bell knelt beside him.

"The Master's—deputy in Rio," panted Ortiz weakly, almost in a whisper, "is—is Ribiera. In Buenos Aires I—I do not know. There was a man—the one who poisoned me—but I killed him. Secretly. I do not think—the Master knows. I pray that—"

He stopped. He could not speak again. But he smiled, and a few seconds later Bell clenched his hands. Ortiz was gone.

Someone touched his arm. Paula Canalejas. He stared down at her and managed to smile. It was not a very successful smile. He drew a

deep breath.

"I would like," said Bell wryly, "to think that, when I die, I will die as well as this man did. But I'm afraid I shan't."

But Paula said:

"The airplane can be heard outside. It seems to be moving on the surface."

And ten minutes later the plane loomed up out of the mist, queerly ungainly on the surface of the water. Its motors roared impatiently as if held in leash. It swung clumsily about, heading off out of sight in the fog to turn. It came back, sliding along the top of the water with its wing-tip floats leaving alternate streaks of white foam behind them. A man stood up in its after cockpit.

Bell crowded to the rail. The man—goggled and masked—held up a package as if to fling it on board. Bell watched grimly. But he saw that the pilot checked himself and looked up at the upper deck. Bell craned his neck. The wireless operator was waving wildly to the seaplane. He writhed his hands, and held his hand to his head is if blowing out his brains, and waved the plane away, frantically.

The pilot of the plane sat down. A moment later its motors roared more thunderously. It is not safe to alight on either land or water when fog hangs low, but there is little danger in taking off.

The seaplane shot away into the mist, its motors bellowing. The sound of its going changed subtly. It seemed to rise, and grow more distant.... It died away.

Bell halted at the top of the companion-ladder and saw the wireless operator, with a crooked, nervous grin upon his face.

Chapter 3

Bell saw what he was looking for, out in the throng of traffic that filled the Avenida do Acre, in Rio. He'd seen it over the heads of the crowd, which was undersized, as most Brazilian crowds are, and he managed to get through the perpetual jam on the mosaic sidewalk and reach the curb.

He stood there and regarded the vehicles filling the broad avenue, wearing exactly the indifferent, half-amused air of a tourist with no place in particular to go and a great deal of time in which to go there. Taxis chuffed past, disputing right of way with private cars which were engaged in more disputes with other cars, all in the rather

extraordinary bad temper and contentiousness which comes to the Latin-American when he takes the wheel of an automobile.

As if coming to an unimportant decision, Bell raised his hand to an approaching cab. It had two men on the chauffeur's seat. Of course. All taxis in Rio carry two men in front. One drives, and the other lights his cigarettes, makes witty comments upon passing ladies, and helps in collecting the fares from recalcitrant passengers. The extra man is called the "secretary," and he assists materially in giving an impression of haughty pride.

The taxi ground to the curb. The secretary reached behind him indifferently and opened the door. Bell did not glance at him. He stepped inside and settled down languidly.

"The Beira Mar," he said listlessly.

The taxi started off with a jolt. It is the invariable custom in Rio de Janeiro. And besides, it reminds the passenger that he is merely a customer, admitted to the cab on suffrance, and that he must be suitably meek to those who will presently blandly ignore the amount registered by the meter and demand a fare of from eight to twenty-seven times the indicated amount.

The cab went shooting down the Avenida do Acre toward the harbor. The Avenida do Acre is officially the Avenida Rio Blanco, and it should be called by that name, only people forget. The Beira Mar, however, is named with entire propriety. It is actually the edge of the sea, and it is probably one of the two or three most beautiful driveways in the world.

The cab whirled past the crowded sidewalks. Incredible numbers of people, with an incredible variation in the shades of their complexions, moved to and from with the peculiar aimlessness of a Brazilian crowd. A stout and pompous negro politician from Bahia, wearing an orchid in his button-hole, rubbed elbows with a striking blonde lady of the sidewalks on his left, and forced a wizened little silk-hatted *parda*—approximately an octoroon—to dodge about him in order to progress. A young and languid person, his clothes the very last expiring gasp of fashion, fingered his stick patiently. He wore the painstakingly cultivated expression of bored disillusionment your young Brazilian dandy considers aristocratic. It was very probable that he shared a particularly undesirable bedroom with four or five other young men in order to purchase such clothing, but then, *farenda fita*—making a picture—is the national Brazilian sport.

Bell lighted a cigarette. It was not wise to regard the secretary of this

particular taxi too closely, but if his face had been thickly smeared with coal dust, and if he had had a two weeks' beard, and if he had been seen on the forecastle of the *Almirante Gomez*, one would have deduced him to be a stoker who had not used the name of Jamison.

The cab reached the Beira Mar, and turned to take the long route about the bay. It is one of the most beautiful views to be found anywhere, and tall apartment houses have been built along its whole length to capitalize the scenery. True, the more brightly-colored ladies of the capital have established themselves in vast numbers among these apartment houses, but in their languid promenades they add—let us say—the beauties of art to those of nature.

A voice spoke from the chauffeur's seat.

"Bell."

"Right," said Bell without moving. His eyes flickered, however, and he found the device Jamison had inserted. A speaking-tube of sorts. Not especially efficient, but inconspicuous enough. He stirred listlessly and got his lips near it.

"All right to talk?" he asked briefly.

"Shoot," said Jamison from the secretary's seat beside the chauffeur. "This man doesn't understand English, and he thinks I'm in a smuggling gang. He expects to make some money out of me eventually."

Bell spoke curtly, while the taxi rolled past the Morro da Gloria with its quaint old church and went along the winding, really marvelous driveway past many beaches, with the incredibly blue water beyond.

"Canalejas is out of town," he said. "It isn't known when he'll be back. I met his daughter at a dance at our Embassy here, and she told me. We didn't dare to talk much, but she's frightened. Especially after what happened to Ortiz. And I've met Ribiera, whom Ortiz named."

"I've been looking him up," growled Jamison through the speaking-tube.

Bell flicked the ash from his cigarette out the door, and went on quietly.

"He's trying to get friendly with me. I've promised to call at his house and have him take me out to the flying field. He has two planes, he tells me, a big amphibian and a two-seater. Uses them for

commuting between Rio and his place back inland. He went out of his way to cultivate me. I think he suspects I'm trying to find out something."

"Which you are," said Jamison dryly. "You've found out that Ortiz was right at least about—"

Bell nodded, and frowned at himself for having nodded. He spoke into the mouthpiece by his head with an expressionless face.

"He's practically fawned upon by a bunch of important officials and several high ranking army officers. Suspecting what I do, I think he's got hold of a devil of a lot of power."

Jamison scowled in a lordly fashion upon a mere pedestrian who threatened to impede the movement of the taxicab by making it run over him.

“Ortiz," said Bell quietly, "told me he'd been poisoned, and treason asked as the price of the antidote. I've heard that the Brazilian Minister for Foreign Affairs went insane six months ago. I heard, also, that it was homicidal mania—murder madness. And I'm wondering if these people who fawn upon Ribiera aren't paying a price for—well—antidotes, or their equivalent. The Minister for

Foreign Affairs may have refused."

"You're improving," said Jamison dryly. The taxi rounded a curve and a vista of sea and sand and royal palms spread out before it. "Yes, you're improving. But Ortiz spoke of Ribiera only as a deputy of The Master. Who is The Master?"

"God knows," said Bell. He stared languidly out of the window, for all the world to see. A tourist, regarding the boasted beauties of the Biera Mar.

"A deputy," said Jamison without emotion, "of some unknown person called The Master poisoned Ortiz in Buenos Aires. And Ortiz was an important man in the Argentine. Ribiera is merely the deputy of that same unknown Master in Rio, and he has generals and state presidents and the big politicians paying court to him. If deputies in two countries that we know of have so much power, how much power has The Master?"

Silence. The taxi chugged steadily past unnoticed beauties and colorings. Rio is really one of the most beautiful cities in the world.

"It's like this," said Jamison jerkily. "Seven Service men vanish and one goes mad. You get two tips that the fate of Ortiz is the fate of the

seven men—eight, in fact. We find that two men dispense a certain ghastly poison in two certain cities, at the orders of a man they call The Master. We find that those two men wield an astounding lot of power, and we know they're only deputies, only subordinates of the Master. We know, also, that the Service men vanished all over the whole continent, not in just those two cities. How many deputies has The Master? What's it all about? He wanted treason of Ortiz, we know. What does he want of the other men his deputies have enslaved? Why did he poison the Service men? And why—especially why—do two honorable men, officials of two important nations, want to tip off the United States Government about the ghastly business? What's it got to do with our nation?"

Bell flung away his cigarette.

"That last question has occurred to me too," he observed, and carefully repressed a slight shiver. "I have made a guess, which is probably insane. I'm going to see Ribiera this afternoon."

"He already suspects you know too much," said Jamison without expression.

"I am"—Bell managed the ghost of a mirthless smile—"I am uncomfortably aware of it. And I may need an antidote as badly as

Ortiz. If I do, and can't help myself, I'll depend on you."

Jamison growled.

"I simply mean," said Bell very quietly, "that I'd really rather not be —er—left alive if I'm mad. That's all. But Ortiz knew what was the matter with him before he got bad off. I know it's a risk. I'm goose-flesh all over. But somebody's got to take the risk. The guess I've made may be insane, but if it's right one or two lives will be cheap enough as a price for the information. Suppose you chaps turn around and take me to Ribiera's house?"

There was a long pause. Then Jamison spoke in Portuguese to his companion. The taxi checked, swerved, and began to retrace its route.

"You're a junior in the Trade," said Jamison painstakingly. "I can't order you to do it."

Bell fumbled with his cigarette case.

"The Trade doesn't exist, Jamison," he said dryly. "And besides, nobody gives orders in The Trade. There are only suggestions. Now shut up a while. I want to try to remember some consular reports I

read once, from the consul at Puerto Pachecho."

"What?"

"The consul there," said Bell, smiling faintly, "was an amateur botanist. He filled up his consular reports with accounts of native Indian medicinal plants and drugs, with copious notes and clinical observations. I had to reprove him severely for taking up space with such matters and not going fully into the exact number of hides, wet and dry, that passed through the markets in his district. His information will be entirely useless in this present emergency, but I'm going to try to remember as much of it as I can. Now shut up."

When the taxi swung off the Biera Mar to thread its way through many tree-lined streets—it is a misdemeanor, punishable by fine, to cut down a tree in Rio de Janeiro—it carried a young American with the air of an accomplished idler, who has been mildly bored by the incomparable view from the waterside boulevard. When it stopped at the foot of one of the slum covered *morros* that dot all Rio, and a liveried doorman came out of a splendid residence to ask the visitor his name, the taxi discharged a young American who seemed to feel the heat, in spite of the swift motion of the cab. He wiped off his forehead with his handkerchief as he was assured that the Senhor Ribiera had given orders he was to be admitted, night or day. When

the taxi drove off, it carried two men on the chauffeur's seat, of whom one had lost, temporarily, the manner of haughty insolence which is normally inseparable from the secretary of a taxicab chauffeur.

But though he wiped his forehead with his handkerchief, Bell actually felt rather cold when he followed his guide through ornately furnished rooms, which seemed innumerable, and was at last left to wait in an especially luxurious salon.

There was a pause. A rather long wait. A distinctly long wait. Bell lighted a cigarette and seemed to become mildly bored. He regarded a voluptuous small statuette with every appearance of pleased interest. A subtly decadent painting seemed to amuse him considerably. He did not seem to notice that no windows at all were visible, and that shaded lamps lit this room, even in broad daylight.

Two servants came in, a footman in livery and the major-domo. Your average *Carioca* servant is either fawning or covertly insolent. These two were obsequious. The footman carried a tray with a bottle, glass, ice, and siphon.

"The Senhor Ribiera," announced the major-domo obsequiously, "begs that the Senhor Bell will oblige him by waiting for the shortest

of moments until the Senhor Ribiera can relieve himself of a business matter. It will be but the shortest of moments."

Bell felt a little instinctive chill at sight of the bottle and glasses.

"Oh, very well," he said idly. "You may put the tray there."

The footman lifted the siphon expectantly. Bell regarded it indifferently. The wait before the arrival of this drink had been longer than would be required merely for the announcing of a caller and the tending of a tray, especially if such a tray were a custom of the place. And the sending of a single bottle only, without inquiry into his preferences....

"No soda," said Bell. He poured out a drink into the tinier glass. He lifted it toward his lips, hesitated vaguely, and drew out his handkerchief again.

He sneezed explosively, and the drink spilled. He swore irritably, put down the glass, and plied his handkerchief vigorously. A moment later he was standing up and pouring the drink out afresh, from the bottle in one hand to the glass in the other. He up-tilted the glass.

"Get rid of this for me," he said annoyedly of the handkerchief.

He saw a nearly imperceptible glance pass between the footman and the major-domo. They retired, and Bell moved about the room exactly like a young man who has been discomfited by the necessity of sneezing before servants. Anywhere else in the world, of course, such a pose would not have been convincing. But your Brazilian not only adopts *fazenda fita* as his own avocation, but also suspects it to be everybody else's too. And a young Brazilian of the leisure class would be horribly annoyed at being forced to so plebeian an exhibition in public.

He moved restlessly about the room, staring at the picture. Presently he blinked uncertainly and gazed about less definitely. He went rather uncertainly to the chair he had first occupied and sat down. He poured—or seemed to pour—another drink. Again he sneered, and looked mortified. He put down the glass with an air of finality. But he looked puzzledly about him. Then he sank back in his chair and gradually seemed to sink into a sort of apathetic indifference.

He looked, then, like a very bored young man on the verge of dozing off. But actually he was very much alert indeed. He had the feeling of eyes upon him for a while. Then that sensation ceased and he settled himself to wait. And meantime he felt a particular, peculiar gratitude to the late American consul at Puerto Pachecho for his interest in medicinal plants.

That gentleman had gone into the subject with the passionate enthusiasm of the amateur. He had described *icus*, *uirari* and *timbo*. He had particularized upon *makaka-nimbi* and *hervamoura*. And he had gone into a wealth of detail concerning *yagué*, on account of its probable value if used in criminology. As consul at Puerto Pachecho he was not altogether a success in some ways, but he had invented an entirely original method of experimentation upon those drugs and poisons which did not require to be introduced into the blood-stream. His method was simplicity itself. An alcoholic solution "carried" a minute quantity of the drug in its vapor, just as an alcoholic solution carries a minute quantity of perfuming essential oil. He inhaled the odor of the alcoholic solution. The effect was immediately, strictly temporary, and not dangerous. He was enabled to describe the odors, in some cases the tastes, and in a few instances the effects of the substances he listed, from personal experience.

And Bell had used his method as an unpromising but possible test for a drug in the drink that had been brought him. He inhaled the strangling odor of the spilled liquor on his handkerchief. And there was a drug involved. For an instant he was dizzy, and for an instant he saw the room through a vivid blue haze. And something clicked in his brain and said "It's *yagué*." And the relief of dealing with something which he knew—if only at second-hand—was so enormous that he felt almost weak.

Yagué, you see, is an extract from the leaves of a plant which is not yet included in materia medica. It has nearly the effect of scopolamine—once famous in connection with twilight sleep—and produces a daze of blue light, an intolerable sleepiness, and practically all the effects of hypnotism. A person under *yagué*, as under scopolamine or hypnosis, will seem to slumber and yet will obey any order, by whomever given. He will answer any question without reserve or any concealment. And on awakening he will remember nothing done under the influence of the potion. The effects are not particularly harmful.

Bell then, sat in an apparent half-daze, half-slumber, in the salon in which he waited for Ribiera to appear. He knew exactly what he was expected to do. Ribiera wanted to find out what he knew or suspected about Ortiz's death. Ribiera wanted to know many things, and he would believe what Bell told him because he thought Bell had taken enough *yagué* to be practically an hypnotic subject. Let Ribiera believe what he was told!

When he came into the room, bland and smiling, Bell did not stir. He was literally crawling, inside, with an unspeakable repulsion to the man and the things for which he stood. But he seemed dazed and dull, and when Ribiera began to ask questions he babbled his answers in a toneless, flat voice. He babbled very satisfactorily, in

Ribiera's view.

When Ribiera shook him roughly by the shoulder he started, and let his eyes clear. Ribiera was laughing heartily.

"Senhor! Senhor!" said Ribiera jovially. "My hospitality is at fault! You come to be my guest and I allow you to be so bored that you drop off to sleep! I was detained for five minutes and came in to find you slumbering!"

Bell stared ruefully about him and rubbed his eyes.

"I did, for a fact," he admitted apologetically. "I'm sorry. Up late last night, and I was tired. I dropped in to see those planes you suggested I'd be interested in. But I daresay it's late, now."

Ribiera chuckled again. He was in his late and corpulent forties and was something of a dandy. If one were captious, one might object to the thickness of his lips. They suggested sensuality. And there was a shade—a bare shade—more of pigment in his skin than the American passes altogether unquestioned. And his hair was wavy.... But he could be a charming host.

"We'll have a drink," he said bluntly, "while the car's coming around

to the door, and then go out to the flying field."

"No drink," said Bell, lifting his hand. "I feel squeamish now. I say! Haven't you changed the lamps, or something? Everything looks blue...."

That was a lie. Things looked entirely normal to Bell. But he looked about him as if vaguely puzzled. If he had drunk the liquor Ribiera had sent him, things would have had a bluish tinge for some time after. But as it was....

Ribiera chaffed him jovially on the way to the flying field. And introducing him to fliers and officials of the field, he told with gusto of Bell's falling asleep while waiting for him. A very jolly companion, Ribiera.

But Bell saw two or three men looking at him very queerly. Almost sympathetically. And he noticed, a little later, that a surprising number of fliers and officials of the airport seemed to be concealing an abject terror of Ribiera. One or two of them seemed to hate him as well.

Chapter 4

Bell stepped out of a tall French window to a terrace, and from the

terrace to the ground. There was a dull muttering in the sky to the east, and a speck appeared, drew nearer swiftly, grew larger, and became a small army biplane. It descended steeply to earth behind a tall planting of trees. Bell lighted a cigarette and moved purposelessly down an elaborately formalized garden.

"More victims," he observed grimly to himself, of the plane.

Ribiera lifted a pigmented hand to wave languidly from a shaded chair. There were women about him, three of them, and it sickened Bell to see the frightened assiduity with which they flattered him. Bell had met them, of course. Madame the wife of the State President of Bahia—in the United States of Brazil the states have presidents instead of governors—preferred the title of "Madame" because it was more foreign and consequently more aristocratic than Senhora. And Madame the wife of the General—

"Senhor," called Ribiera blandly, "I have news for you."

Bell turned and went toward him with an air of pleased expectancy. He noticed for the first time the third of the women. Young, in the first flush of youthful maturity, but with an expression of stark terror lingering behind a palpably assumed animation.

"An acquaintance of yours, Senhor," said Ribiera, "is to be my guests."

Bell steeled himself.

"The Senhor Canalejas," said Ribiera, beaming, "and his daughter."

Bell seemed to frown, and then seemed to remember.

"Oh, yes," he said carelessly, "I met her in Washington. She was on the *Almirante Gomez*, coming down."

The next instant he saw Ribiera's expression, and cursed himself for a fool. Ribiera's eyes had narrowed sharply. Then they half-closed, and he smiled.

"She is charming," said Ribiera in drowsy contentment, "and I had thought you would be glad to improve her acquaintance. Especially since, as my friend, you may congratulate me. A contract of marriage is under discussion."

Bell felt every muscle grow taut. The fat, pigmented man before him....

"Indeed," said Bell politely, "I do congratulate you."

Ribiera looked at him with an expression in which a sardonic admiration mingled with something else less pleasant.

"You are clever, Senhor Bell," he said heavily, seeming to sink more deeply into his chair. "Very clever." He shifted his eyes to the women who stood about him. "You may go," he said indifferently. His tone was exactly that of a despot dismissing his slaves. Two of them colored with instinctive resentment. His eyes lingered an instant on the third. Her face had showed only a passionate relief. "You, Senhora," he said heavily, "may wait nearby."

The terror returned to her features, but she moved submissively to a spot a little out of earshot. Bell found his jaws clenched. There is a certain racial taint widespread in Brazil which leads to an intolerable arrogance when there is the slightest opportunity for its exercise. Ribiera had the taint, and Bell felt a sickening wrath at the terrified submission of the women.

"*Si*," said Ribiera, suddenly adverting to insolence. "You are clever, Senhor Bell. Where did you learn of *yagué*?"

Bell inhaled leisurely. His muscles were tense, but he gave no outward sign. Instead, he sat down comfortably upon the arm of a chair facing Ribiera's. The only way to meet insolence is with equal

insolence and a greater calm.

"Ah!" said Bell pleasantly. "So you found out it didn't work, after all!"

Ribiera's eyes contracted. He became suddenly enraged.

"You are trifling with me," he said furiously. "Do you know the penalty for that?"

"Why, yes," said Bell, and smiled amiably. "A dose of—er—poison of The Master's private brand."

It was a guess, but based on a good deal of evidence. Ribiera turned crimson, then pale.

"What do you know?" he demanded in a deadly quietness. "You cannot leave this place. You are aware of that. The people here—guests and servants—are my slaves, the slaves of The Master. You cannot leave this place except also as my slave. I will have you bound and given *yagué* so that you cannot fail to tell me anything that I wish to know. I will have you tortured so that you will gladly say anything that I wish, in return for death. I will—"

"You will," said Bell dryly, "drop dead with seven bullets in your

body if you give a signal for anyone to attack me."

Ribiera stared at him as his hand rested negligently in his coat pocket. And then, quite suddenly Ribiera began to chuckle. His rage vanished. He laughed, a monstrous, gross, cackling laughter.

"You have been my guest for two days," he gasped, slapping his fat knees, "and you have not noticed that your pistol his been tampered with! Senhor Bell! Senhor Bell! My uncle will be disappointed in you!"

It seemed to impress him as a victory that Bell had been depending upon an utterly futile threat for safety. It restored his good humor marvelously.

"It does not matter," he said jovially. "Presently you will tell me all that I wish to know. More, perhaps. My uncle is pleased with you. You recall your little talk with the wireless operator on the *Almirante Gomez*? You tried to learn things from him, Senhor. He reported it. Of course. All our slaves report. He sent his report to my uncle, The Master, and I did not have it until to-day. I will admit that you deceived me. I knew you had talked with Ortiz, who was a fool. I thought that in his despair he might have spoken. I gave you *yagué*, as I thought, and informed my uncle that you knew nothing. And he

is very much pleased with you. It was clever to deceive me about the *yagué*. My uncle has high praise for you. He has told me that he desires your services."

Bell inhaled again. There was no question but that Ribiera was totally unafraid of the threat he had made. His gun must have been tampered with, the firing-pin filed off perhaps. So Bell said placidly:

"Well? He desires my services?"

Ribiera chuckled, in his gross and horrible good humor.

"He will have them. Senhor. He will have them. When you observe your hands writhing at the ends of your wrists, you will enter his service, through me. Of course. And he will reward you richly. Money, much money, such as I have. And slaves—such as I have. The Senhora...."

Ribiera looked at the terrified girl standing thirty or forty feet away. He chuckled again.

"My uncle desires that you should be induced to enter his service of your own will. So, Senhor, you shall see first what my uncle's service offers. And later, when you know what pleasures you may

some day possess as my uncle's deputy in your own nation, why, then the fact that your hands are writhing at the ends of your wrists will be merely an added inducement to come to me. And I bear you no ill will for deceiving me. You may go."

Bell rose.

"And still," he said dryly, "I suspect that you are deceived. But now you deceive yourself."

He heard Ribiera chuckling as he walked away. He heard him call, amusedly, "Senhora." He heard the little gasp of terror with which the girl obeyed. He passed her, stumbling toward the gross fat man with the light brown skin and curly hair. Her eyes were literally pools of anguish.

Bell threw away his cigarette and began to fumble for another. He was beginning to feel the first twinges of panic, and fought them down. Ribiera had not lied. Bell had been at this *fazenda* of his—which was almost a miniature Versailles three hundred miles from Rio—for two days. In all that time he had not seen one person besides himself who did not display the most abject terror of Ribiera. Ribiera had made no idle boast when he said that everyone about, guests and servants, were slaves. They were. Slaves of a terror vastly

greater than mere fear of death. It—

"Senhor!... *Oh, Dios!*" It was the girl's voice, in despair.

Ribiera laughed. Bell felt a red mist come before his eyes.

He deliberately steadied his hands and lighted his cigarette. He heard stumbling footsteps coming behind him. A hand touched his arm. He turned to see the girl Ribiera had pointed out, her cheeks utterly, chalky white, trying desperately to smile.

"Senhor!" she gasped. "Smile at me! For the love of God, smile at me!"

In the fraction of a second, Bell was mad with rage. He understood, and he hated Ribiera with a corrosive hatred past conception. And then he was deathly calm, and wholly detached, and he smiled widely, and turned and looked at Ribiera, and Ribiera's whole gross bulk quivered as he chuckled. Bell took the girl's arm with an excessive politeness and managed—he never afterward understood how he managed it—to grin at Ribiera.

"Senhora," he said in a low tone, "I think I understand. Stop being afraid. We can fool him. Come and walk with me and talk. The idea

is that he must think you are trying to fascinate me, is it not?"

She spoke through stiffened lips.

"Ah, that I could die!"

Bell had a horrible part to play while he walked the length of the formal garden with her, and found a pathway leading out of it, and led her out of sight. He stopped.

"Now," he said sharply, "tell me. I am not yet his slave. He has ordered you...."

She was staring before her with wide eyes that saw only despair.

"I—I am to persuade you to be my lover," she said dully, "or I shall know the full wrath of The Master...."

Bell asked questions, crisply, but as gently as he could.

"We are his slaves," she told him apathetically. "I and *mi Arturo*—my husband. Both of us...." She roused herself little under Bell's insistent questioning. "We were guests at his house at dinner. Our friends, people high in society and in the Republic, were all about us. We suspected nothing. We had heard nothing. But two weeks later

Arturo became irritable. He said that he saw red spots before his eyes. I also. Then Arturo's hands writhed at the ends of his wrists. He could not control them. His nerves were horrible. And mine. And we—we have a tiny baby.... And Senhor Ribiera called upon my husband. He was charming. He observed my husband's hands. He had a remedy, he said. He gave it to my husband. He became normal again. And then—my hands writhed. Senhor Ribiera told my husband that if he would bring me to him.... And I was relieved. We were grateful. We accepted the invitation of the Senhor Ribiera to this place. And he showed us a man, in chains. He—he went mad before our eyes. He was a member of the United States Secret Service.... And then the Senhor Ribiera told us that we faced the same fate if we did not serve him...."

Bell had thrust aside rage as useless, now. He was deliberately cold.

"And so?"

"It is a poison," she said unsteadily. "A deadly, a horrible poison which drives men murder mad in two weeks from the time of its administration. The Senhor Ribiera has an antidote for it. But mixed with the antidote, which acts at once, is more of the horrible poison, which will act in two weeks more. So that we are entrapped. If we disobey him...."

Bell began to smile slowly, and not at all mirthfully.

"I think," he said softly, "that I shall gain a great deal of pleasure from killing the Senhor Ribiera."

"*Dios*—" She strangled upon the word. "Do you not see, Senhor, that if he dies we—we—" She stopped and choked. "We—have a tiny baby, Senhor. We—we would...."

Again sick rage surged up in Bell. To kill Ribiera meant to drive his slaves mad, and mad in the most horrible fashion that can be imagined. To kill Ribiera meant to have these people duplicate the death of Ortiz, as their greatest hope, or to fill madhouses with snarling animals lusting to kill....

"It is—it is not only I, Senhor," said the girl before him. She was utterly listless, and in the agony of despair. "It is Arturo, also. The Senhor Ribiera has said that if I do not persuade you, that both Arturo and I.... And our little baby, Senhor!... Our families also will be entrapped some day. He has said so.... He will give that poison to our baby.... And it will grow up either his slave, or—"

Her eyes were pools of panic.

"Oh, God!" said Bell very quietly. "And he's offering me this power! He's trying to persuade me to become like him. He's offering me pleasures!"

He laughed unpleasantly. And then he went sick with helplessness. He could kill Ribiera, perhaps, and let only God know how many people go mad. Perhaps. Or perhaps Ribiera would merely be supplanted by another man. Ortiz had said that he killed The Master's deputy in Buenos Aires, but that another man had taken his place. And the thing went on. And The Master desired a deputy in the United States....

"Somehow," said Bell very softly, "this has got to be stopped. Somehow. Right away. That devilish stuff! Can you get hold of a bit of the antidote?" he asked abruptly. "The merest drop of it?"

She shook her head.

"No, Senhor. It is given in food, in wine. One never knows that one has had it. It is tasteless, and we have only Senhor Ribiera's word that it has been given."

Bell's hands clenched.

"So devilish clever.... What are we going to do?"

The girl stuffed the corner of her handkerchief into her mouth.

"I am thinking of my little baby," she said, choking. "I must persuade you, Senhor. I—I have been tearful. I—I am not attractive. I will try. If I am not attractive to you...."

Bell cursed, deeply and savagely. It seemed to be the only possible thing to do. And then he spoke coldly.

"Listen to me, Senhora. Ribiera talked frankly to me just now. He knows that so far I am not subdued. If I escape he cannot blame you. He cannot! And I am going to attempt it. If you will follow me...."

"There is no escape for me," she said dully, "and if he thinks that I knew of your escape and did not tell him...."

"Follow me," said Bell, smiling queerly. "I shall take care that he does not suspect it."

He gazed about for an instant, orienting himself. The plane that had just landed—the last of a dozen or more that had arrived in the past two days—had dipped down on the private landing field to the north.

There was a beautifully kept way running from the landing field to the house, and he went on through the thick shrubbery amid a labyrinth of paths, choosing the turnings most likely to lead him to it.

He came out upon it suddenly, and faced toward the field. There were two men coming toward the house, on foot. One was a flying pilot, still in his flying clothes. The other was a tall man, for a Brazilian, with the lucent clarity of complexion that bespeaks uncontaminated white descent. He was white-haired, and his face was queerly tired, as if he were exhausted.

Bell looked sharply. He seemed to see a resemblance to someone he knew in the tall man. He spoke quickly to the girl beside him.

"Who is the man to the left?"

"Senhor Canalejas," said the girl drearily. "He is the Minister of War. I suppose he, too...."

Bell drew a deep breath. He walked on, confidently. As the two others drew near he said apologetically:

"Senhores."

They halted with the instinctive, at least surface, courtesy of the Brazilian. And Bell was fumbling with his handkerchief, rather nervously tying a knot in it. He held it out to Canalejas.

"Observe."

It was, of course, a recognition-knot such as may be given to an outsider by one in the Trade. The tall man's face changed. And Bell swung swiftly and suddenly and very accurately to the point of the other man's jaw.

He collapsed.

“Senhor Canalejas," said Bell politely, "I am about to go and steal an airplane to take what I have learned to my companion for transmission. If you wish to go with me...."

Canalejas stared for the fraction of a second. Then he said quietly:

"But of course."

He turned to retrace his steps. Bell turned to the girl.

"If you are wise," he said gently, "you will go and give the alarm. If you are kind, you will delay it as much as you dare."

She regarded him in agonized doubt for a moment, and nodded. She fled.

"Now," said Bell casually, "I think we had better hasten. And I hope, Senhor Canalejas, that you have a revolver. We will need one. Mine has been ruined."

Without a word, the white-haired man drew out a weapon and offered it to him.

"I had intended," he said very calmly, "to kill the Senhor Ribiera. His last demand is for my daughter."

They went swiftly. The plane Bell had seen alight some fifteen or twenty minutes before was just being approached by languid mechanics. It was, of course, still warm. Canalejas shouted and waved his arm imperiously. It is probable that he gave the impression of a man returning for some forgotten thing, left in the cockpit of the plane.

What happened then, happened quickly. A few crisp words in a low tone. A minor hubbub began suddenly back at the house. Canalejas climbed into the passenger's seat as if looking for something. And Bell presented his now useless automatic pleasantly at the head of

the nearest staring mechanic, and while he froze in horror, scrambled up into the pilot's cockpit.

"Contact!" he snapped, and turned on the switch. The mechanic remained frozen with fear. "Damnation!" said Bell savagely. "I don't know the Portuguese for 'Turn her over'!"

He fumbled desperately about in the cockpit. Something whirred. The propeller went over.... Canalejas shot with painstaking accuracy, twice. The motor caught with a spluttering roar.

As a horde of running figures, servants and guests, running with the same desperation, came plunging out on the flying field from the shrubbery. Bell gave the motor the gun. The fast little plane's tail came up off the ground as she darted forward. Faster and faster, with many bumpings. The bumpings ceased. She was clear.

And Bell zoomed suddenly to lift her over the racing, fear-ridden creatures who clutched desperately at the wheels, and then the little ship shot ahead, barely cleared the trees to the east of the field, and began to roar at her topmost speed toward Rio.

Chapter 5

The Trade—which does not exist—has its obligations and its code,

but also it has its redeeming features. When a man has finished his job, he has finished it. And as far as the Trade was concerned, Bell had but little more to do. But after that—and his eyes burned smokily in their depths—there was much that he intended to do. He sat in one of the *bondes* of the Botanical Garden half of the street railway system of Rio, and absent mindedly regarded the scenery. This particular *bonde* was headed out toward the Lagoa Rodrigo de Freitas, by which salty mass of water Bell would meet Paula Canalejas. He would receive a package from her, which he would deliver to Jamison. And then he would be free, and it was his private intention to engage in an enterprise which was very probably a form of suicide. But there are some things one cannot dismiss with a sage reflection that they are not one's business. This matter of Ribiera was definitely one of them.

The escape from Ribiera's *fazenda* had been relatively easy, because so thoroughly unexpected. The little plane had climbed to five thousand feet and found a stratum of cloud that stretched for very many miles. Bell had emerged from it only twice in the first hour of flight, and the second time the sky was clear all about him. That he was pursued, he had no doubt. That Ribiera had wireless communications with Rio, he knew. And he knew that instant, and imperative orders would have gone out for his capture.

Rio would not be a healthy place for him. If Ribiera had power over high government officials, he had surely indirect power over the police, and a search for Bell would be in order at once. Yet Canalejas assuredly expected to return to Rio.

A shouted question with the motor cut out, and a nodded answer. Bell headed for Petropolis, which is Rio's only real summer resort and is high in the hills and only an hour and a half from it by train. It was surprisingly satisfactory to be handling a swift plane again, and Bell allowed himself what he knew was about the only pleasure he was likely to have for some time to come.

Something of his hatred of Ribiera, however, came back as he prepared to land. He managed to crack the plane up very neatly, so that it would be of no use to Ribiera any more. And at the same time, of course, the cracking-up provided an excellent excuse for Canalejas to continue on by train.

They talked very briefly by the puffing engine.

"It is best," said Canalejas, "for you, Senhor, to remain here overnight. I believe Senhor Ribiera has given orders for us both to be looked for, yet as a Cabinet Minister I am still immune from arrest by the ordinary police. If I reach my home I shall be able to do all

that is necessary."

"And you will prepare a message for me to carry," said Bell.

"It is ready," said Canalejas. He smiled faintly. "No, Senhor. I have instructions to give my daughter. She will deliver the information to you to-morrow. Let me see. At the edge of the Lagao Rodrigo de Feitas, at nine o'clock. She is the only messenger I can trust. I think that is all."

Bell hesitated uncomfortably.

"But you, sir," he said awkwardly. "You have been poisoned, as Senor Ortiz was."

"But certainly," said Canalejas. His smile was ironic as before. "But, unlike Senor Ortiz, I have no hope. I have arranged for my daughter to conceal herself and escape from Brazil. I have prepared for everything, Senhor. As you know, I had intended to kill Senhor Ribiera. In returning with you I have merely delayed my own death by a few hours."

Still smiling, and with the air of one entering a train for the most casual of journeys, Canalejas entered the coach.

And Bell, sitting in the *bonde* next morning, saw with an uncanny clarity the one weak point in Ribiera's hold upon his subjects. When they had courage to fear nothing more than death, they could defy him. And not many could attain to that courage. But a few....

"I'll have some help, anyway," muttered Bell savagely to himself.

It is a long ride to the Botanical Gardens, from which one half the surface lines of Rio take their name. On the way out to the Lagao Rodrigo de Feitas, which, is close by the Garden itself, Bell had time to work over for the thousandth time the information he possessed, and realize its uselessness. Two things, only, might be of service. One was that Ribiera was the nephew of the person referred to as The Master, and yet was evidently as much subjected to him as his own victims to himself. The other was that the ultimate end of all the ghastly scheme was in some fashion political. If wealth alone had been Ribiera's aim, the gathering of his slaves would have had a different aspect. The majority of them would have been rich men, men of business, men who could pay out hundreds of thousands a month in the desperate hope of being permitted to remain sane. There would not have been politicians and officials and officers of the army.

"The key men of the country," growled Bell inaudibly, "enslaved to

Ribiera. They give him the power he's after more than cash. And it's those key men who have more to lose than money. There's such a thing as honor...."

Three times the conductor stopped beside him and suggestively rattled the coins in his box. Three times Bell absent mindedly paid the fare for the zone. But the ride is a long one, and he had had time to realize the hopelessness of any single-handed attack upon the thing he faced long before the end.

Then he absently moved through the amazing collection of tropic and near tropic growths that is the Botanical Garden until he came at once to Paula and the Lagoa Rodrico de Freitas.

It was alive with birds, and they hopped and pecked and squabbled without acrimony within feet of her seated figure. Bell knew that she had been waiting for a long time. He looked quickly at her face. It was quite pale, but entirely tearless.

"Here is the message, Senhor Bell," she said quietly, "but I think I have been followed."

Bell growled in his throat.

"I did not discover it until I reached this spot," she said evenly. "And I did not know what to do. If I left, I would be seized and the message taken—and I think that someone would have waited here for you. So, in part to gain time, and in part because I hoped you might have some resource, I remained."

"How many of them?" asked Bell shortly.

"Two," she said quietly. She looked at him, her large eyes entirely calm and grave.

"Give me the package," said Bell briefly. "They'll be more anxious to get it back than to bother you. And I'll either knock them cold or hold them in a scrap until you get away."

She reached in her pocket and handed him a small thick envelope. He stuffed it in the side pocket of his coat.

"I will walk away," he observed, "and they'll follow me. Can you arrange to give me some sign that you're safe?"

"By the gateway," she told him. "My handkerchief. I shall start as soon as you have vanished. If I am followed, I will drop this handkerchief, as it is. If I am not followed, I will tie a knot. But what

can you do?"

"I'll do something," said Bell coldly. "Something!"

She smiled, with the same odd bitterness her father had shown.

"My father—shot himself," she said briefly. "I have no particular hope of doing better. But I shall not be Ribiera's slave."

She remained quite still. Bell moved away. He hurried. There was thick jungle ahead, a section of the Gardens that is painstakingly preserved untouched and undisturbed, that visitors to the capital of Brazil may observe a typical sample of the virgin interior. He dived into that jungle as if in flight.

And very shortly after, two men dived in after him. They hesitated, these men, because your policeman of Rio does not like to injure his uniform, and there are many thorns in jungle growths. But they entered it, having first drawn small glittering weapons. And then from the jungle came silence.

It seemed to be silence. But there may have been some small unusual noises. It would not be easy to tell if they were unusual or not, because there are peculiar flashes of charm in certain Brazilian

institutions. The preservation of the spot of jungle itself is one. Another is the fact that in the Gardens all manner of wild things live at large and provide unexpected and delightful surprises to the usually foreign visitors.

So there were noises, after a bit. Such noises as some grunting wild thing might have made, perhaps. But they might also have been the gasping of a man as breath was choked out of him.... And there was a cracking sound a little later, which might—of course—have been any one of any number of accidental and perfectly natural causes. And it might have been a man upon whom another man had hurled himself, when the second man landed on his jaw. And thrashing noises a little later might have been anything.

But after what seemed a long time, Bell emerged. Alone. He was breathing quickly, and there were scratches on his face and hands which—well, which might have been made by thorns. He went swiftly back toward the spot where Paula had waited. He looked cautiously. She was gone.

And then Bell went leisurely, in the studious fashion of a person going through the Botanical Gardens because it was the thing to do, toward the gateway and the surface cars. As he neared the gate his eyes roved with apparent casualness all about. He saw a tiny speck

of white on the edge of the roadway. It looked as if it had been flung from a car. Bell picked it up. It was Paula's handkerchief, and there was no knot whatever in it. In fact, its lacy edge was torn.

"They've got her," said Bell, apparently unmoved.

He waited for a car. A bulky figure wearing thick spectacles came placidly from the Gardens. It waited, also, for the car. The car arrived, in its two sections of first and second class; the first reserved for *cavalhieros*, which is to say persons wearing coat, shirt, collar, necktie, hat, shoes and socks, and carrying no parcel larger than a brief case. Lesser folk who lacked any of the sartorial requirements for admission to the first class section, or wore *tomancos* instead of shoes, heaped themselves into the second section and paid one-third of the fare in the first.

Bell took his seat in the first section. It was comfortably filled. The bulky person with the thick spectacles wedged himself carefully into the space beside Bell. He unfolded a copy of the *Jornal do Commercio* and began to regard the advertisements. Presently he found what he was looking for. "*O Bicho*," said medium-sized type. Beside it was a picture of a kangaroo. The gentleman with the thick spectacles resignedly fished into his pockets and found a lottery ticket. He tore it into scraps and threw them away. Then he began to

gaze disinterestedly at the scenery and the other passengers in the car.

Bell drummed on his knee. With one's forefinger representing a dot, and one's second finger serving as a dash, it is surprising how naturally and absentmindedly one may convey a perfectly intelligible message to a man sitting within a reasonable distance. When the man is alongside, the matter is absurdly simple.

Presently the man with the thick lenses got out his paper again, as if bored by vistas such as no other city in the world can offer. His paper was in the pocket which pressed against Bell. If in getting out his newspaper he also abstracted a thick fat envelope from Bell's pocket and placed it in his own, and if all this took place under a sign—even in the section reserved for *cavalhieros* of approved raiment—solemnly warning passengers against "*batadores de carteiras*," or pickpockets—well, it was an ironical coincidence whose humor Bell did not see.

He was busily tapping out on his knee the briefest possible account of what he had learned at Ribiera's *fazenda* up country.

"*One chance for me*," he tapped off at the end. "*If I can kidnap Ribiera I can make him talk. Somehow. He has big amphibian plane*

kept fueled and ready for long trip. I think he is back in Rio to direct hunt for me. Paula kidnapped. My job finished. On my own now."

The man with thick spectacles did not nod. He seemed to be looking idly at his paper, but it was folded at an article very discreetly phrased, beneath a photograph of Senhor Teixeira Canalejas, Minister of War, who had very unfortunately been found dead that morning. He had been depressed, of late, but there were certain circumstances which made it as yet impossible to determine whether he had killed himself or was the victim of an assassin.

"*Getting set for me*," tapped Bell grimly on his knee. "*Ribiera told me too much.*"

The man with thick spectacles yawned and turned the paper over. Under a smaller headline—which would only find a place on a Brazilian sheet—"A Regrettable Incident"—an item of more direct importance was printed. It told of an unnamed Senhor from the United States of the North America, who as the guest of a widely known Brazilian gentleman had behaved most boorishly, had stolen an airplane from his host and broken it to bits on landing unskilfully, and had vanished with priceless heirlooms belonging to his host. It read, virtuously:

No names are mentioned because the American Senhor has been widely introduced in Rio society as a person with an official status in Washington. It is understood that an inquiry is to be made of the Ambassador as to the status of the young man, before any action is taken by the police. It is to be expected, however, that he will at least be requested to leave the country.

Bell managed the barest flicker of a smile. Arrest, of course. Detention, most courteously arranged, while the Ambassador was communicated with. And Ribiera.

"*Give me dismiss*," he tapped on his knee.

The gentleman in the thick spectacles ran his finger thoughtfully about the edge of his collar. In the Trade that is a signal of many varied meanings. A hand across the throat in any fashion means, "Clear out, your job is finished," "Save your skin as best you can," and "Get away without trying to help me," according to circumstances. In this case it relieved Bell of all future responsibility.

He yawned, tapping his lips with the back of his hand, signaled for a stop of the car, and got out. Five minutes later he had signaled a taxicab and given Ribiera's address. In six minutes he was being

whirled toward the one house in all Rio de Janeiro from which his chance of a safe departure was slightest. In little more than half an hour he had dismissed the cab and was gazing placidly into the startled eyes of the doorman. The doorman, like all of Rio where Ribiera was known and feared, knew that Bell was being hunted.

Bell handed over his card with an inscrutable air.

"The Senhor Ribiera," he said drily, "returned to the city last night. Present my card and say that I would like to speak to him."

The doorman ushered him inside and summoned the major-domo, still blinking his amazement. And the major-domo blinked again. But Bell followed with the air of an habitué, as he was again ushered into the luxurious salon in which he had once been offered a drugged drink.

Again he sank down in a softly padded chair and surveyed the pictures and the minor objects of decadent art about him. Again he lighted a cigarette with every appearance of ease, and again had the impression of eyes upon him. The major-domo appeared, somewhat agitated.

"The Senhor Ribiera," he said harshly, "will see you only if you are

not armed. He requires your word of honor."

Bell smiled lazily.

"I'll do better than that," he said languidly. "I haven't had time to buy a revolver. But the automatic he had put out of commission is in my pocket. Present it to him with my compliments."

He handed over the weapon, butt first. The major-domo blinked, and took it. Bell sat down and smiled widely. He had been expected to be uproarious, to attempt to force the major-domo to lead him to Ribiera. And, of course, he would have been led past a perfectly planned ambush for his capture—but he might have killed the major-domo. Which would not disturb Ribiera, but had disturbed the servant.

Bell smoked comfortably. And suddenly hangings parted, and Ribiera came into the room. He smiled nervously, and then, as Bell blew a puff of smoke at him and nodded casually, he scowled.

"I came," said Bell deliberately, "to make a bargain. Frankly, I do not like to break my word. I was under obligations to deliver a package from Senhor Canalejas to a certain messenger who will take it to my government. I have done it. But I am not, Senhor Ribiera, a member

of the Secret Service. I am entirely a free agent now, and I am prepared to consider your proposals, which I could not in honor do before."

He smiled pleasantly. Effrontery, properly managed, is one of the most valuable of all qualities. Especially in dealing with people who themselves are arrogant when they dare.

Ribiera purpled with rage, and then controlled it.

"Ah!" he rumbled. "You are prepared to consider my proposals. There are no proposals. The Master may be amused at your cleverness in escaping. I do not know. I do know that I am ordered to make you my slave and send you to The Master. That, I shall do."

"Perhaps," said Bell blandly: "but I can go without food and drink for several days, which will delay the process. And while I cannot honorably tell you how to stop the man bearing Senhor Canalejas' package to my government, still ... If I willingly accepted a dose of *yagué* in token of my loyalty to The Master...."

Ribiera's good humor returned. He chuckled.

"You actually mean," he said jovially, "that you think you were given

some of The Master's little compound, and that you wish to make terms before your hands begin to writhe at the ends of your wrists. Is not that your reason?"

Bell's eyes flickered. He had been horribly afraid of just that. But Ribiera's amusement was reassuring.

"Perhaps," said Bell. "Perhaps I am."

Ribiera sat down and stretched his fat legs in front of him. He surveyed Bell with an obscene, horrible amusement.

"Ah, Senhor," he chuckled, "some day we will laugh together over this! You yet hope, and do not yet know how much better it will be for you if you cease to hope, and cultivate desires! The Master is pleased with you. You have just those qualities he knows are necessary in dealing with your nation. He is not angry with you. It is his intention to use you to extend his—ah—influence among the officials of your nation. You know, of course, that in but a little more time I will hold all Brazil—as I now hold this city—in the hollow of my hand. Four of the republics of this continent are already completely under the control of The Master's deputies, and of the rest, Brazil is not the most nearly subdued. A year or two, and The Master will become Emperor, and his deputies viceroys. And it is his

whim to give you the opportunity of becoming the first deputy and the first viceroy of North America. And you come to me and offer—you, Senhor!—to make terms! I believe even The Master will laugh when he hears of it."

"But," said Bell practically, "do you accept my terms?"

Ribiera chuckled again.

"What are they, Senhor?"

"That you release the daughter of the Senhor Canalejas and pledge your word of honor that she will not be enslaved."

Ribiera's word of honor, of course, would be worth rather less than the breath that was used to give it. But his reception of the proposal would be informative.

He chuckled again.

"No, Senhor. I do not accept. But I will promise you as a favor, because my uncle The Master admires you, that within a few weeks you shall enjoy her charms. I do not," he added with amused candor, "find that any one woman diverts me for a very long time."

"Oh," said Bell, very quietly.

He sat still for an instant, and then shrugged, and looked about as if for an ash tray in which to knock the ashes from his cigarette. He stood up, carrying the tube of tobacco gingerly, and moved toward one by Ribiera's elbow. He knocked off the ash, and crushed out the tiny coal. He fumbled in his pockets.

The next instant Ribiera choked with terror.

"Let me explain," said Bell softly. "I did not give your major-domo my word that I was unarmed. I merely gave him a weapon. I got these from two policemen who tried to arrest me an hour or so ago. And I also remind you, Senhor, that if the armed men you have posted to prevent my escape try to shoot me, that the inevitable contraction of my muscles will send two bullets into your heart—even if I am dead. I am a dead man, Senhor, if you give the word, but so are you if you give it."

Ribiera gasped. His eyes rolled in his head.

"Send for her," said Bell very gently. "Send for her, Senhor. I estimate that she has been in this house for less than half an hour. Have her brought here at once, and if she has been harmed the three

of us will perish very promptly, and half of Rio will go mad after our death."

And the muzzles of two revolvers bored into the fat flesh of Ribiera's body, and a gasp that was almost a wail of terror came from the watchers—armed watchers—who dared not kill the man they had been posted to guard Ribiera against.

Ribiera lifted his hand and croaked an order.

n this room the electric lights were necessary at all times. And it occurred to Bell irrelevantly that perhaps there were no windows because there might be sometimes rather noisy scenes within these walls. And windows will convey the sound of screaming to the outside air, while solid walls will not.

He stood alert and grim, with his revolvers pressing into Ribiera's flabby flesh. His fingers were tensed upon the triggers. If he killed Ribiera, he would be killed. Of course. And men and women he had known and liked might be doomed to the most horrible of fates by Ribiera's death. Yet even the death or madness of many men was preferable to the success of the conspiracy in which Ribiera seemed to figure largely.

Ribiera looked up at him with the eyes of a terrified snake. There was a little stirring at the door.

"Your friends," said Bell softly, "had better not come close."

Ribiera gasped an order. The stirrings stopped. Paula came slowly into the room quite alone. She smiled queerly at Bell.

"I believed that you would come," she said quietly. "And yet I do not know that we can escape."

"We're going to try," said Bell grimly. To Ribiera he added curtly, "You'd better order the path cleared to the door, and have one of your cars brought around."

Ribiera croaked a repetition of the command.

"Now stand up—slowly," said Bell evenly. "Very slowly. I don't want to die, Ribiera, so I don't want to kill you. But I haven't much hope of escape, so I shan't hesitate very long about doing it. And I've got these guns' hammers trembling at full cock. If I get a bullet through my head, they'll go off just the same and kill you."

Ribiera got up. Slowly. His face was a pasty gray.

"Your major-domo," Bell told him matter-of-factly, "will go before us and open every door on both sides of the way to the street. Paula"—he used her given name without thought, or without realizing it—"Paula will go and look into each door. If she as much as looks frightened, I fire, and try to fight the rest of the way clear. Understand? I'm going to get down to a boat I have ready in the harbor if I have to kill you and every living soul in the house!"

There was no boat in the harbor, naturally. But the major-domo moved hesitantly across the room, looking at his master for orders. For Ribiera to die meant death or madness to his slaves. The major-domo's face was ghastly with fear. He moved onward, and Bell heard the sound of doors being thrust wide. Once he gave a command in the staccato fashion of a terrified man. Bell nodded grimly.

"Now we'll move. Slowly, Ribiera! Always slowly.... Ah! That's better! Paula, you go on before and look into each room. I shall be sorry if any of your servants follow after you, Ribiera.... Through the doorway. Yes! All clear, Paula? I'm balancing the hammers very carefully, Ribiera. Very delicate work. It is fortunate for you that my nerves are rather steady. But really, I don't much care.... Still all clear before us, Paula? With the servants nerve-racked as they are, I believe we'll make it through, even if I do kill Ribiera. There'll be no

particular point in killing us then. It won't help them. Don't stumble, please, Ribiera.... Go carefully, and very slowly...."

Ribiera's face was a gray mask of terror when they reached the door. A long, low car with two men on the chauffeur's seat was waiting.

"Only one man up front, Ribiera," said Bell dryly. "No ostentation, please. Now, I hope your servants haven't summoned the police, because they might want to stop me from marching you out there with a gun in the small of your back. And that would be deplorable, Ribiera. Quite deplorable."

With a glance, he ordered Paula into the tonneau. He followed her, driving Ribiera before him. There seemed to be none about but the stricken, terrified servant who had opened the door for their exit.

"My friend," Bell told the major-domo grimly, "I'll give you a bit of comfort. I'm not going to try to take the Senhor Ribiera away with me. Once I'm on board the yacht that waits for me, I'll release him so he can keep you poor devils sane until my Government has found a way to beat this devilish poison of his. Then I'll come back and kill him. Now you can tell the chauffeur to drive us to the Biera Mar."

He settled back in his seat. There were beads of perspiration on his

forehead, but he could not wipe them off. He held the two revolvers against Ribiera's flabby body.

The car turned the corner, and he added dryly:

"Your servants, Ribiera, will warn your more prominent slaves of my intention of going on board a yacht. Preparations will be made to stop every pleasure boat and search it for me. So ... tell your chauffeur to swing about and make for the flying field. And tell him to drive carefully, by the way. I've still got these guns on a very fine adjustment of the trigger-pressure."

Ribiera croaked the order. Bell was exactly savage enough to kill him if he did not escape.

For twenty minutes the car sped through the residential districts of Rio. The sun was high in the air, but clouds were banking up above the Pao d'Assucar—the Sugarloaf—and it looked as if there might be one of the sudden summer thunderstorms that sometimes sweep Rio.

Then the clear road to the flying field. Rio has the largest metropolitan district in the world, but a great deal of it is piled on end, and Rio itself built on most of the rest. The flying field is necessarily some miles from even the residential districts, for the

sake of a level plain of sufficient area.

The car shot ahead through practically untouched jungle, interspersed with tiny clearings in which were patchwork houses that might have been a thousand miles in the interior instead of so near the center of all civilization in Brazil. Up smooth gradients. Around beautifully engineered curves.

Bell put aside one revolver long enough to search Ribiera carefully. He found a pearl-handled automatic, and handed it to Paula.

"Worth having," he said cheerfully. "I wonder if you'd mind searching the chauffeur: with that gun at his head I think he'd be peaceful. You needn't have him stop."

Paula stood up, smiling a little.

"I did not think I lacked courage, Senhor," she observed, "but you have taught me more."

"*Nil desperandum*," said Bell lightly. He relaxed deliberately. Matters would be tense at the flying field, and he would need to be wholly calm. There was little danger of an attempt at rescue here, and the necessity of being ready to shoot Ribiera at any instant was

no longer a matter of split seconds.

He watched, while, bent over the back of the front seat, she extracted two squat weapons from the chauffeur's pockets.

"Quite an arsenal," said Bell as he pocketed them. He turned pleasantly to Ribiera. "Now, Ribiera, you understand just what I want. That big amphibian plane of yours is fairly fast, and once when I was merely your guest you assured me that it was always kept fueled and even provisioned for a long flight. When we reach the flying field I want it rolled out and warmed up, over at the other end of the field from the flying line. We'll go over to it in the car.

"And I've thought of something. It worried me, before, because sometimes if a man's shot he merely relaxes all over. So while we're at the flying field I'm going to be holding back the triggers of these guns with my thumbs. I don't have to pull the trigger at all—just let go and they'll go off. It isn't so fine an adjustment as I had just now, but it's safer for you as long as you behave. And you might urge your chauffeur to be cautious. I do hope, Ribiera, that you won't look as if you were frightened. If there's any hitch, and delay for letting some fuel out of the tanks or messing up the motors, I'll be very sorry for you."

The car swooped out into bright sunshine. The flying field lay below, already in the shadow of the banking clouds above. Hangars lay stretched out across the level space.

Through the gates. Ribiera licked his lips. Bell jammed the revolver muzzles closer against his sides. The chauffeur halted the car. Paula spoke softly to him. He stiffened. Bell found it possible to smile faintly.

Ribiera gave orders. There was a moment's pause—the revolver muzzles went deeper into his side—and he snarled a repetition. The official cringed and moved swiftly.

"You have chosen your slaves well, Ribiera," said Bell coolly. "They seem to occupy all strategic positions. We'll ride across."

The gears clashed. The car swerved forward and went deliberately across the wide clear space that was the flying field. It halted near the farther side. In minutes the door of a hangar swung wide. There was the sputtering of a not-yet-warmed-up motor. The big plane came slowly out, its motors coughing now and then. It swung clumsily across the field, turned in a wide circle, and stopped some forty or fifty feet from the car.

"Send the mechanic back, on foot," said Bell softly.

Again Ribiera found it expedient to snarl. And Bell added, gently, while the throttled-down motors of the big amphibian boomed on:

"Now get out of the car."

Tiny figures began to gaze curiously at them from the row of hangars. The mechanic, starting back on foot, the four people getting out of the car, the big plane waiting....

With his revolver ready and aimed at Ribiera's bulk, Bell reached in the front of the car and turned off the switch. The motor died abruptly. He put the key in his pocket.

"Just to get a minute or two extra start," he said dryly. "Climb up in the plane, Paula."

She obeyed, and turned at the top.

"I will cover them until you are up," she said quietly.

Bell laughed, now. A genuine laugh, for the first time in many days.

"We do work together!" he said cheerfully.

But he backed up the ladder. There was a stirring over by the hangars. The mechanic who had taxied the plane to this spot was a dwindling speck, no more than a third of the way across the field. But even from the distant hangars it could be seen that something was wrong.

"Close the door, Paula," said Bell. He had seated himself at the controls, and scanned the instruments closely.

This machine was heavy and large and massive. The boat-body between the retractable wheels added weight to the structure, and when Bell gave it the gun it seemed to pick up speed with an irritating slowness, and to roll and lurch very heavily when it did begin to approach flying speed. The run was long before the tail came up. It was longer before the joltings lessened and the plane began to rise slowly, with the solid steadiness that only a large and heavily loaded plane can compass.

Up, and up.... Bell was three hundred feet high when he crossed the hangars and saw tiny faces staring up at him. Some of the small figures were pointing across the field. The big plane circled widely, gaining altitude, and Bell gazed down. Ribiera was gesticulating wildly, pointing upward to the soaring thing, shaking his fist at it, and making imperious, frantic motions of command.

Bell took one quick glance all about the horizon. Toward the sea the sun shone down brilliantly upon the city. Inland a broad white wall of advancing rain moved toward the coastline. And Bell smiled frostily, and flung the big ship into a dive and swooped down upon Ribiera as a hawk might swoop at a chicken.

Ribiera saw the monster thing bearing down savagely, its motors bellowing, its nose pointed directly at him. And there is absolutely nothing more terrifying upon the earth than to see a plane diving upon you with deadly intent. A panic that throws back to non-human ancestors seizes upon a man. He feels the paralysis of those ancient anthropoids who were preyed upon by dying races of winged monsters in the past. That racial, atavistic terror seizes upon him.

Bell laughed, though it sounded more like a bark, as Ribiera flung himself to the ground and screamed hoarsely when the plane seemed about to pounce upon him. The shrill timbre of the shriek cut through the roaring of the motors, even through the thick padding of the big plane's cabin walls that reduced that roaring to a not intolerable growl.

But the plane passed ten feet or more above his head. It rose, and climbed steeply, and passed again above the now buzzing, agitated hangars, and climbed above the hills behind the flying field as some

men went running and others moved by swifter means toward the shaken, nerve-racked Ribiera, on whose lips were flecks of foam.

Bell looked far below and far behind him. The incredible greenness of tropic verdure, of the jungle which rings Rio all about. The many glitterings of sunlight upon glass, and upon the polished domes of sundry public buildings, and the multitudinous shimmerings of the tropic sun upon the bay. The deep dark shadow of the banking clouds drew a sharp line across the earth, and deep in that shadow lay the flying field, growing small and distant as the plane flew on. But specks raced across the wide expanse. In a peculiar, irrational fashion those specks darted toward a nearly invisible speck, and encountered other specks darting away from that nearly invisible speck, and gradually all the specks were turned about and racing for the angular, toy-block squares which were the hangars of the aeroplanes of the city of Rio de Janeiro.

Little white things appeared from those hangars—planes being thrust out into the open air while motes of men raced agitatedly about them. One of them was suddenly in motion. It moved slowly and clumsily across the ground, and then abruptly moved more swiftly. It seemed to float upward and to swing about in mid-air. It came floating toward the amphibian, though apparently nearly stationary against the sky. Another moved jerkily, and another....

Just before the big plane dived into the wide white wall of falling water, the air behind it seemed to swarm with aircraft.

In the cabin of the amphibian, of course, the bellowing of the motors outside was muffled to a certain degree. Paula clung to the seats and moved awkwardly up to the place beside Bell. She had just managed to seat herself when the falling sheet of water obliterated all the world.

"Strap yourself in your seat," he said in her ear above the persistent tumult without. "Then you might adjust my safety-belt. Well be flying blind in this rain. I hope the propellers hold."

She fumbled, first at the belt beside his upholstered chair, and only afterward adjusted her own. He sent a quick glance at her.

"Shouldn't have done that," he said quietly. "I can manage somehow."

The plane lurched and tumbled wildly. He kicked rudder and jerked on the stick, watching the instrument board closely. In moments the wild gyrations ceased.

"The beginning of this," he said evenly, "is going to be hectic.

There'll be lightning soon."

Almost on his words the gray mist out the cabin windows seemed to flame. There was thunder even above the motors. But the faint, perceptible trembling of the whole plane under the impulse of its engines kept on. Bell kept his eyes on the bank and turn indicator, glancing now and then at the altimeter.

"We've got to climb," he said shortly, "up where the lightning is, too. We want to pass the Serra da Carioca with room to spare, or we'll crash on it."

There was no noticeable change in the progress of the plane, of course. Rain was dashing against the windows of the cabin with an incredible velocity. Rain at a hundred miles an hour acts more like hail than water, anyhow, and Bell was trusting grimly to the hope that the propellers were of steel, which will withstand even hail, and a hope that the blast through the engine cowlings would keep the wiring free of water-made short circuits.

But the air was bad beyond belief. At times the plane spun like thistledown in a vast and venomous flood that crashed into the windows with a vicious rattling. Lightning began and grew fiercer. It seemed at times as if the plane were whirling crazily in sheer

incandescent flame. The swift air-currents at the beginning of a tropic thunderstorm were here multiplied in trickiness and velocity by the hills of the Serra da Carioca, and Bell was flying blind as well. The safety-belts were needed fifty times within twenty minutes, as the big ship was flung about by fierce blasts that sometimes blew even the rain upward for a time. And over all, as the amphibian spun madly, and toppled crazily and fought for height, there was the terrific, incessant crashing of thunder which was horribly close, and the crackling flares of lightning all about.

"I'm going to take a chance," said Bell curtly above the uproar, with the windows seeming to look out upon the fires of hell. "I think we're high enough. The compass has gone crazy, but I'm going to risk it."

Again there was no perceptible alteration in the motion of the ship, but he fought it steadily toward the west. And it seemed that he actually was passing beyond the first fierce fringe of the storm, because the lightning became—well, not less frequent, but less continuous.

And suddenly, in a blinding flare of light that made every separate raindrop look like a speck of molten metal, he saw another airplane. It was close. Breath-takingly close. It came diving down out of

nowhere and passed less than twenty yards before the nose of the amphibian. It glistened with wet, and glittered unbearably in the incredible brightness of the lightning. Every spot and speck and detail showed with an almost ghastly distinctness. But it dived on past, its pilot rigid and tense and unseeing, plunging like a meteor straight downward. The golden, iridescent mist of rain closed over its body. And it was gone.

Ten minutes later Bell was driving onward through a gray obscurity, which now was no more than tinted pink by receding lightning-flashes. The air was still uneven and treacherous. The big plane hurtled downward hundreds of feet in wild descending gusts among the hills, and was then flung upward on invisible billows of air for other hundreds of feet. But it was less uncontrollable. There were periods of minutes when the safety-belts did not come into use.

And later still, half an hour perhaps, the steadiness of the air gave assurance that the plane was past the range of the Serra da Carioca and was headed inland. He drove on, watching his instruments and flying blind, but with a gathering confidence in an ultimate escape from the swarm of aircraft Ribiera had sent aloft in the teeth of the storm to hunt for him. The motors hummed outside the padded cabin. The girl beside him was very quiet and very still and very pale.

"We want to get out of this before long," he said in her ear, "and then we can find out where we are, and especially begin to make some plans for ourselves."

Her eyes turned to him. There was a curious stiffness in her manner. It might have seemed reserve, but Bell recognized the symptoms of a woman whose self-control is hanging by a thread. He smiled.

"Hold on a while yet," he said gently. "I know you want to cry. But please hold on a while yet. When we reach friends...."

Her hands went to her throat, and he could feel the effort of will that kept her voice steady.

"Friends? We have no friends." She managed a smile. "The Senhor Ribiera explained to me when I arrived at his house how it was that no questions would be asked about my disappearance. My father is dead. The newspapers this morning said that it was not known whether he killed himself or was assassinated. The Senhor Ribiera has given orders to his slaves. The newspapers of this afternoon will inform a horrified world that you and I, together, murdered my father that we might flee together with such of his riches as he had actually gathered together for me to take away. We are murderers, my friend. Cables and telegraph wires are reporting the news. The daughter of

the Minister of War of the Republic of Brazil was assisted by her lover to murder her father. She has fled with him. Now—where are we still to find friends?"

Bell stared, for the fraction of an instant. One thought came to him, and was checked. The Trade does not exist, anywhere. The Trade would not help. And murderers are always duly handed over when the Government of the United States is requested politely to do so by another nation. Always. And so far as the whole civilized world was concerned they were murderers. Even the employees of the flying field who were not subject to The Master would swear to the strictly accurate story of their escape together.

"It is just scandalous enough and horrible enough," said Bell quietly, "to be reprinted everywhere as news. You're right. We haven't any friends. We're up against it. And so I think we'll have to hunt down and kill The Master. Then we'll be believed. And there are just two of us, with what weapons we have in our pockets, to attack. How many thousands of slaves do you suppose The Master has by now?"

And, quite suddenly, he laughed.

Chapter 7

The sun was sinking slowly when the plane appeared above the valley. There was only jungle below. Jungle, and the languid river which now flowed sluggishly into a wide and shallow pool in which drowned trees formed a mass of substance neither land nor marsh nor river. The river now contracted to a narrow space and showed signs of haste, and even foaming water, and then again flowed placidly onward, sometimes even a hundred yards in breadth. Shadows of the mountains to the west were creeping toward the opposite hill-flanks, darkening the thick foliage and sending flocks of flying things home to their chosen roosts.

The sound of the plane was a buzzing noise, which grew louder to a sharp drone as it seemed to increase in size, and became a dull monotonous roar as it dipped toward the waters of the stream. It floated downward, very gently, and circled as if regarding a certain spot critically, and resumed its onward flight. Again it circled, anxiously, now, as if the time for alighting were short.

It seemed to hesitate in mid-air, and dived, and circled up-stream and came down the valley again. It sank, and sank, lower and lower, until the white of its upper wings was hidden by the tall trees on either side.

A *jabiru* stork saw it from downstream, solemnly squatting on four eggs which eventually would perpetuate the race. The *jabiru* was about forty feet above the water and had a clear view of the stream. The stork squatted meditatively, with its long, naked neck projecting above the edge of its nest.

The plane dipped ever lower, its reflection vivid and complete upon the waveless stream below it. Ten feet above the water. Five—and swift ripples from the rush of air disturbed the unbroken reflections behind. It was almost a silhouette against the mirrored appearance of the sunset sky. And then a clumsy-seeming boat body touched water with a vast hissing sound, and settled more and more heavily, while the speed of the plane checked markedly and its motors roared on senselessly.

Then, abruptly, the plane checked and partly swung around. The *jabiru* half-rose from its eggs. The motors were bellowing wildly again. As if tearing itself free, the plane sheered off from some invisible obstacle, one of its wing tip floats splashed water wildly, and, with the motors thundering at their fullest speed, it went toward the shore with a dragging wing, like some wounded bird.

It beached, and the *jabiru* heard a sudden dense silence fall. A man climbed out of the boatlike body. He walked to the bow and dropped

to the shore. He peered under the upward slanting nose of the boat-thing. The *jabiru*, listening intently, heard words.

Then, quite suddenly and quite abruptly, and generally with the unostentatious efficiency with which Nature manages such things in the tropics, night fell. It was dark within minutes.

The noise of Bell's scrambling back onto the deck of the amphibian's hull could be heard inside the cabin. He opened the door and slipped down inside.

"There ought to be some lights," he said curtly. "Ribiera did himself rather well, as a rule."

He struck a match. Paula's eyes shone in the match-flame, fixed upon his face. He looked about, frowning. He found a switch and pressed it, and a dome-light came into being. The cabin of the plane, from a place of darkness comparable to that of the jungle all about, became suddenly a cosy and comfortable place.

"Well?" said Paula quietly.

Bell hesitated, and took a deep breath.

"We're stuck," he said wryly. "We must have struck a snag or

perhaps a rock, just under water. Half the bottom of the hull's torn out. There's no hope of repair. If I hadn't given her the gun and beached her, we'd have sunk in mid-stream."

Paula said nothing.

"Things are piling on us," said Bell grimly. "In the morning I'll try to make a raft. We can't stay here indefinitely. I'll hunt for maps and we'll try to plan something out. But I'll admit that this business worries me—the plane being smashed."

He passed his hand harassedly over his forehead. To have escaped from Rio was something, but since Paula had told him Ribiera's plans, it was clearly but the most temporary of successes. Cabinet ministers are not so commonplace but that the scandalous and horrifying crime that was imputed to Bell and Paula would be printed in every foreign country. Newspapers in Tokio would include the supposed murder in their foreign news, and in Bucharest and even Constantinople it would merit a paragraph or two. Assuredly every South American country would discuss the matter editorially, even where The Master's deputies did not order it published far and wide. There would be pictures of Bell and of Paula, labeled with an infamy. In every town of all Brazil their faces would be known, and those who were The Master's slaves would hunt them desperately,

and all honorable men would seek them for a crime. Even in America there would be no safety for them. The Trade does not exist, officially, and a member of the Trade must get out of trouble as he can. As an accused murderer, Bell would be arrested anywhere. As worse than a mere murderess, Paula....

She was watching his face.

"This morning," she said queerly, "you—you quoted '*Nil desperandum*.'"

Bell ground his teeth, and then managed to smile.

"If I looked like I needed you say that," he said coolly, "I deserve to be kicked. Let's look for something to eat, and count up our resources. The thing to do is, when you fall down—bounce!"

He managed a nearly genuine grin, then, and to his intense amazement, she sobbed suddenly and bent her head down and began to weep. He stared at her in stupefaction for an instant, then swore at himself for a fool. Her father....

Half an hour later he roused her as gently as he could. It was helplessness, as much as anything else, that had made him leave her

alone; but a woman needs to weep now and then. And Paula assuredly had excuse.

"Here's a cup of coffee," he said practically, "which you must drink. You can't have had anything to eat all day. Have you?"

That question had haunted him too. She had been a prisoner in Ribiera's house for half an hour, possibly more. And Ribiera had in his possession, and used, a deadly, devilish poison from some unknown noxious plant. Its victim took the poison unknowingly, in a morsel of food or a glass of water or of wine. And for two weeks there was no sign of evil. And then the poison drove its victim swiftly mad—unless the antidote was obtained from Ribiera. And Ribiera administered the antidote with a further dose of poison.

If Paula had eaten one scrap of food or drunk one drop of water while Ribiera's captive....

She understood. She looked up suddenly, and read the awful anxiety in his eyes.

"No. Nothing." She caught her breath and steadied herself with an effort of the will. "I understand. You tried not to let me fear. But I ate nothing, touched nothing. I have not that to fear, at least."

"Drink this coffee," said Bell, smiling. "Ribiera was a luxurious devil. There's canned stuff and so on in a locker. He was prepared for a forced landing anywhere. Flares and rockets will do us no good, but there are a pair of machetes and a sporting rifle with shells. We don't need to die for a bit, anyhow."

Paula obediently took the coffee. He watched her anxiously as she drank.

"Now some soup," he urged, "and the rest of this condensed stuff. And I've found some maps and there's a radio receiving outfit if—"

Paula managed to smile.

"You want to know," she said, "if I can endure listening to it. Yes. I —I should not have given way just now. But I can endure anything."

Bell still hesitated, regarding her soberly.

"I've heard," he said awkwardly, "that in Brazil the conventions...."

She waited, looking at him with her large eyes.

"I hoped," said Bell, still more unhappily, "to find this place Moradores, where you said you had some relatives. I hoped to find it

before dark. But before I landed I knew I'd missed it and couldn't hope to locate it to-night. I thought—"

"You thought," said Paula, smiling suddenly, "that my reputation would be jeopardized. And you were about to offer—"

Bell winced.

"Of course I don't mean to act like an ass," he said apologetically, "but some people...."

"You forget," said Paula, with the same faint smile, "what the newspapers will say of us, Senhor. You forget what news of us the cables have carried about the world. I think that we had better forget about the conventions. As the daughter of a Brazilian, that remark is heresy. But did you know that my mother came from Maryland?"

"Thank God!" said Bell relievedly. "Then you can believe that I'm not thinking exclusively of you, and maybe we'll get somewhere."

Paula put out her hand. He grasped it firmly.

"Right!" he said, more cheerfully than ever before. "Now we'll turn on the radio and see what news we get."

Into the deep dark jungle night, then, a strange incongruity was thrust. Tall trees loomed up toward the stars. A nameless little stream flowed placidly through the night and, beached where impenetrable undergrowth crowded to the water's edge, a big amphibian plane lay slightly askew, while a light glowed brightly in its cabin. More, from that cabin there presently emerged the incredible sound of music, played in Rio for *os gentes* of the distinctly upper strata of society by a bored but beautifully trained orchestra.

The *jabiru* stork heard it, and craned its featherless neck to stare downward through beady eyes. But it was not frightened. Presently, instead of music, there was a man's voice booming in the disconnected sounds of human speech. And still the *jabiru* was unalarmed. Like most of the birds whose necks are bald, the *jabiru* is a useful scavenger, and so is tolerated in the haunts of men. And if man's gratitude is not enough for safety, the *jabiru* smells very, very badly, and no man hunts his tribe.

Bell had been listening impatiently, when a sudden whining, whistling noise broke into the program of very elevated music, played utterly without rest. The sound came from the speaker, of course.

He frowned thoughtfully. The whistling changed in timbre and

became flutelike, then changed again, nearly to its original pitch and tone.

Paula was not listening. Her mind seemed very far away, and on subjects the reverse of pleasurable.

"Listen!" said Bell suddenly. "You hear that whistle? It came on all at once!"

Paula waited. The whistling noise went on. It was vaguely discordant, and it was monotonous, and it was more than a little irritating. Again it changed timbre, going up to the shrillest of squealings, and back nearly to its original sound an instant later.

Bell began to paw over maps. The plane had been intended for flight over the vast distances of Brazil, and there was a small supply of condensed food and a sporting rifle and shells included in its equipment. Emergency landing fields are not exactly common in the back country of South America.

"Here," said Bell sharply. "Here is where we are. It must be where we are! No towns of any size nearby. No railroad. No boat route. Nothing! Nothing but jungle shown here!"

He frowned absorbedly over the problem.

"What is it?" asked Paula.

"Someone near," said Bell briefly. "That's another radio receiver, an old fashioned regenerative set, sensitive enough and reliable enough, but a nuisance to everyone but its owner—except when it's a godsend, as it is to us."

The music ended, and a voice announced in laboriously classic Portuguese, with only a trace of the guttural tonation of the *carioca*, that the most important news items of the day would be given.

Paula paled a little, but listened without stirring. The voice read—the rustling of sheets of paper was abnormally loud—a bit of foreign news, and a bit of local news, and then....

She was deathly pale when the announcement of her father's death was finished, and she had heard the official view of the police reported—exactly what Ribiera had told her it would be. When the voice added that a friend of the late Minister of War, the Senhor Ribiera, had offered twenty contos for the capture of the fugitive pair, who had escaped in an airplane stolen from him, she bit her lip until it almost bled.

“I know," he said abstractedly. "It's as you said. But listen to that whistle."

The news announcement ceased. Music began again. The whistling abruptly died away.

"I just found some coils," said Bell feverishly, "that plug in to take the place of the longer-wave ones. I'm going to try them. It's a hunch, and it's crazy, but...."

There were sharp clickings. The radio receiver was one of those extraordinarily light and portable ones that are made for aircraft. In seconds it was transformed into a short-wave receiver. Bell began to manipulate the dials feverishly. Two minutes. Three. Four.

The speaker suddenly began to whine softly and monotonously.

"Regeneration," said Bell feverishly, "on a carrier-wave. It can't be far off, that receiving set."

Suddenly a voice spoke. It was blurred and guttural. Infinitely delicate adjustments cleared it up. And then....

Bell listened eagerly, at first in triumph, then in amazement, and at last in a grim satisfaction. Reports from Rio on a short-wave band of

radio frequencies were passing from Ribiera to some other place apparently inland. It was Ribiera's own voice, which quivered with rage as he reported Bell's escape.

"*I do not think*," he snapped in Portuguese, "*that full details should be spoken even on beam wireless. I shall come to the* fazenda *to-morrow and communicate with The Master direct. In the meantime I have warned all sub-deputies in Brazil. I urge that all deputies be informed and instructed as The Master may direct.*"

Another voice replied that The Master would be informed. In the meantime the deputy for Brazil was notified.

This list of bits of information chilled Bell's blood. This man, of Venezuela, had been denied the grace of The Master by the deputy in Caracas. He would probably use the passwords and demand the grace of The Master of sub-deputies in the State of Pará. To be seized and Caracas informed. The deputy in Colombia desired that the son of Colonel García—upon a hunting-party with friends in the Amazon basin—should be attached to the service of The Master. His father had been so attached, and it was believed had smuggled a letter into the foreign mail warning his son. If possible, that letter should be intercepted. And from Paraguay the deputy requested that the family of Senor Gomez, visiting relatives in Rio, should be

induced to regard the service of The Master as desirable....

The orders ceased abruptly. Ribiera acknowledged them. The whining whistle cut off. And Bell turned to Paula very grimly indeed.

"Pretty, isn't it?" he asked in a vast calmness. "Apparently every nation on the continent has some devil like Ribiera in charge of the administration of this fiendish poison. Every republic has some fiend at work in it. And they're organized. My God! They're organized! The Master seems to supply them with the mixture of poison and its antidote, and they report to him...."

Paula nodded.

"That was what my father had written down for you," she said quietly. "Any man who can be lured to eat or drink anything these men have prepared is lost. He gains no pleasure, as a drug might give. He is entrapped into a lifetime of awful fear, knowing that a moment's disobedience, a moment's reluctance to obey whatever command they give, will cause his madness."

"I'm trying to think what we can work out of this," said Bell shortly. "Some things are clear. There's a radio receiving set nearby, which

listened to those short-wave reports. Within five or six miles, at most. We're going to find that to-morrow. And there's a central point, a *fazenda*, where one may talk direct with The Master, whoever and wherever he may be. And—judging by Ribiera—my guess is that The Master has the same hold upon them that they have on their underlings. Ribiera is too arrogant a scoundrel to make obsequious reports if he were not afraid to omit them." He was silent for a moment, thinking. Then he said abruptly, "Try to get some sleep, if you can. That pistol of Ribiera's—you have it handy? Keep it where you can reach it in the dark. I'm going to watch, though."

Paula settled herself comfortably, and looked queerly across the dimly lit little cabin at him.

"My friend," she said with the faintest of quavering smiles, "Please do not reassure me. I have the courage of endurance, at least. And—I do not fear you."

It seemed to Bell, listening in the darkness that fell when he turned off the switch, that she stayed awake for a long time. But when she did sleep, she slept heavily.

Bell had a raft of canes afloat beside the amphibian when she waked. He was sweat-streaked and bitten by many insects. He was tired, and

his clothes were rags. But the raft was nearly twenty feet long, it would easily float two persons and what small supplies the plane carried, and it could be handled by a long pole.

"Hullo," he said cheerfully when she climbed on top of the waterlogged hull of the plane. "We're nearly ready to start off. I'm sorry I can't advise you to try to refresh yourself in the river. There are some fish in it that are fiends. One of them took a slice out of the side of my hand."

"*Piranhas!*" she exclaimed, and was pale. "You should have known!"

Piranhas are small fresh-water fish of the Brazilian rivers, never more than a foot and a half long, which prove the existence of a devil. Where they swarm in schools they will tear every morsel of flesh from a swimmer's body as he struggles to reach shore, and leave a clean-stripped skeleton of a mule or horse if an animal should essay to swim a stream.

"I'll ask, next time," said Bell ruefully. "I'd planned a swim. But if you'll fix some coffee while I finish up this raft, we'll get going. I don't think we're far from some place or other. I heard what sounded suspiciously like a motor boat, about dawn."

She looked at him anxiously.

"Of course," said Bell, smiling, "if the boat belonged to whoever listened in on the Rio broadcast *and* the short-wave news, he won't be especially friendly, though he should be glad to see us. But I've been studying the map, and I have a rather hopeful idea. Let's have coffee."

He grinned as long as she was in sight, and when he went into the cabin of the plane he seemed more cheerful still. But the idea of floating down this nameless little jungle stream upon a raft of canes was not one that he would have chosen. It was forced upon him. To travel through the jungle itself was next to impossible with a girl, especially as they were dressed for city streets and not at all for battling with dense and thorn-studded undergrowth. And to stay with the plane was obviously absurd. Sooner or later they had to abandon it, though the moment they did desert it they would be encountering not only the impersonal menace of the jungle, but the actual enmity of all the human race. The raft was the only possibility.

It floated smoothly enough when they started off, with Bell working inexpertly with his long pole to keep it in mid-stream. He was, of course, acutely apprehensive. In country like this a rapid could be expected anywhere. The jungle life loomed high above their heads

on either side, and the life of the jungle went on undisturbed by their passage. Monkeys gaped at them and exchanged undoubtedly witty comments upon their appearance. Birds flew overhead with raucous and unpleasant cries. Toucans, in particular, made a most discordant din. Once they disturbed a tiny herd of peccaries, drinking, which regarded them pugnaciously and trotted sturdily out of sight as they came abreast.

But for one mile, for two, the stream flowed smoothly. A third.... And Paula pointed ahead in silence. A dug-out projected partly from the shoreline. Bell wielded his long pole cautiously now, and drew closer and ever closer to the stream bank. Paula pointed again. There was even a small dock—luxury unthinkable in these wilds.

The raft touched bottom. And suddenly from somewhere out of sight there came a horrible and a bestial sound. It was a scream of blood-lust, of madness, of overpowering and unspeakable rage. Following it came cackling laughter.

Paula went white.

"The *fazenda*," said Bell softly, "of the sub-deputy who was listening in on Ribiera last night. And it sounds as if someone were very much amused. Some poor devil...."

Paula shuddered.

"I'm going ashore," said Bell, smiling frostily. "There's nothing else to do."

Chapter 8

Crouched at the edge of the jungle, where the clearing began, Paula heard four shots. Two in quick succession, and a wait of minutes. Then a third, and another long wait, and then the last. Then silence. Paula began to shiver. Bell had helped her ashore from the raft and insisted on her waiting at the edge of the jungle.

"Not that you'll be any safer," he had told her grimly, "but that I may be. One person can move more quickly than two. And if I'm chased I'll plunge for the place you're hidden, and you can open fire. Then the two of us might hold them off."

"Why?" Paula said slowly.

And Bell caught at her wrist.

"Don't let me hear you talk like that!" he said sharply. "We're going to beat this thing! We've got to! And being desperate helps, but being in despair doesn't help a bit. Buck up!"

He frowned at her until she smiled.

"I will not despair again without your permission," she told him. "Really. I will not."

He found her a hiding-place and went cautiously out into the clearing, still frowning.

He had been gone five minutes before the first shot sounded, and quite ten before the last rang out dully, and was echoed and re-echoed hollowly by the jungle trees. And Paula lay waiting by the edge of the clearing, Ribiera's pearl-handled automatic in her hand—Bell had carried the rifle from the plane. Small insects moved all about her, and she heard soft rustlings as the life of the jungle went on over her head and under her feet, and terror welled up in her throat.

She was trembling almost uncontrollably when Bell came back. He walked openly toward her hiding-place.

"Paula."

She came out, trying to steady her quivering lips.

"We're all right," said Bell grimly. "This is the *fazenda* of a sub-

deputy. I suspect, also, it's an emergency landing field for Ribiera on the way to that place he talked to last night. There's a two-place plane here with both wheels and floats, in a filthy little shed. It seems to be all right. We're going to take off in it and try to make Moradores, where your people are. What's the matter?"

Her face was deathly pale.

"I thought," she said with some difficulty, "when I heard the shots—I thought you were killed."

Bell shook his head.

"I wasn't," he said grimly. "It was four other men who were killed."

He led her carefully past the house. It was a fairly typical *fazenda* dwelling, if more substantial than most. It was wholly unpretentious, with whitewashed walls, and the effect of grandeur it would give to natives of this region would come solely from the number of buildings. There were half a dozen or more.

"I killed four men," repeated Bell coldly. "And I'm damned glad of it. That scream we heard.... I know pretty well what happened here last night. Remember, Ribiera spoke of using a beam-wireless to

make his report. He must have had a short-wave beam set somewhere on the outskirts of Rio, aimed at whatever headquarters he reports to. He's going up to that headquarters some time to-day, by plane, of course. He needed emergency landing fields along the route, and here he picked out a native and made him a sub-deputy. Charming...."

Moving past the buildings, Paula caught sight of massive wooden bars set in the side of a building. Something crumpled up and limp lay before them.

"Don't look over there," said Bell harshly. "There was a woman in this house and she told me what happened, though I'd guessed it before. The sub-deputy was here last night with a party of friends. Newly enslaved, some of them. He entertained them.... Up at Ribiera's place a girl told me she and her husband had been shown a Secret Service man. He went mad before their eyes. It was an object-lesson for them, a clear illustration of what would happen to them if they ever disobeyed. I imagine that something of the sort is used by all The Master's deputies to convince their slaves of the fate that awaits them for disobedience. The local man had brought a party up to watch two men go mad. After that sight they'll be obedient."

He reached a shed, huge, but in disrepair. Monster doors were ajar.

Bell heaved at them and swung them wide. A small, trim, two-seated plane showed in the shadowy interior.

"This is for emergency use," said Bell grimly, "and we face an emergency. I'll get it out and load it up. There's a dump of gas and so on here. You might look around outside the door, in case the one man who got away can find someone to help stop me."

He set to work checking on fuel and oil. He loaded extra gas in the front cockpit, a huge tin of it. Another would crowd him badly in the pilot's cockpit in the rear, but he stowed it as carefully as he could.

"The local sub-deputy," he added evenly, "has added to the thrill by having the two men put in one cage. He let his guests observe the progress of the madness the damned poison produces. And presently, as the madness grew, the two men fought. They were murder mad.

“The local sub-deputy gave his guests the thrill of watching maniacs battling to the death. He left early this morning with his party, and I imagine that everyone was suitably submissive to his demands for the future. There were four men and a woman left as caretakers here. I found the four men before the cage, baiting the poor devil who'd killed the other last night. That's why we heard the scream. When I came up with my rifle they stared at me, and ran.

“I got one then, and as a matter of mercy I put a bullet through the man who'd gone murder mad. The"—Bell sounded as if he were acutely nauseated—"the man he'd killed was still in the cage. My God!... Then I went looking for the other three men. Wasting time, no doubt, but I found them. I was angry. I got one, and the others ran away again. A little later the third man jumped me with a knife. He slit my sleeve. I killed him. Didn't find the fourth man." Bell moved to the front of the plane. "I'll see if she catches."

He swung on the stick. It went over stiffly. Again, and again. With a bellow, the motor caught. Bell shouted in Paula's ear.

"We'll get in. Use the warming-up period to taxi out. We want to get away as soon as we can."

He helped her up into the seat, then remembered. He rummaged about and flung a tumbled flying suit up in the cockpit with her.

"If you get a chance, put it on!" he shouted. He stepped into a similar outfit, reached up and throttled down the motor, and kicked away the blocks under the wheels. He vaulted up into place. And slowly and clumsily the trim little ship came lurching and rolling out of the shed.

The landing field was not large, but Bell took the plane to its edge. He faced it about, and bent below the cockpit combing to avoid the slip stream and look at his maps again, brought from the big amphibian. Something caught his eye. Another radio receiving set.

"Amphibian planes," he muttered, "for landing on earth or water. And radios. I wonder if he has directional for a guide? It would seem sensible, and if a plane went down the rest of them would know about where to look."

Paula reached about and touched his shoulder. She pointed. There was a movement at the edge of the jungle and a puff of smoke. A bullet went through the fusilage of the plane, inches behind Bell. He frowned, grasped the stick, and gave the motor the gun.

It lifted heavily, like all amphibians, but it soared over the group of buildings some twenty or thirty feet above the top of the wireless mast and went on, rising steadily, to clear even the topmost trees on the farther side of the stream by a hundred feet or more.

It went on and on, roaring upward, and the jungle receded ever farther below it. The horizon drew back and back. At two thousand feet the earth began to have the appearance of a shallow platter. At three thousand it was a steep sided bowl, and Bell could look down

and trace the meandering of the stream on which he had landed the night before. Not too far downstream—some fifteen miles, perhaps—were the squalid, toy sized structures of a town of the far interior of Brazil. He never learned its name, but even in his preoccupation with the management of the plane and a search for landmarks, he wondered very grimly indeed what would be the state of things in that town. If in Rio, where civilization held sway, Ribiera exercised such despotic though secret power, in a squalid and forgotten little village like this the rule of a sub-deputy of The Master could be bestial and horrible beyond belief.

Eastward. Bell had overshot the mark the night before. Before he had located himself he was quite fifty miles beyond the spot Paula had suggested as a hiding place. Now he retraced his way. A peak jutting up from far beyond the horizon was a guiding mark. He set the plane's nose for it, and relaxed.

The motor thundered on valorously. Far below was a vast expanse of thick jungle, intercepted but nowhere broken by occasional small streams and now and then the tiny, angular things which might be houses. But houses were very infrequent. In the first ten miles—with a view of twenty miles in every direction—Bell picked out no more than four small groups of buildings which might be the unspeakably isolated *fazendas* of the folk of this region.

"Ribiera was coming this way," he muttered.

He fumbled the headphone of the radio set into place. The set seemed to be already arbitrarily tuned. He turned it on. There was a monotonous series of flashes, with the singing note of a buzzer in them. A radio direction signal.

"Ribiera's on the way."

Bell stared far ahead, without reason. And it seemed to him that just then, against that far distant guiding peak, he saw a black speck floating in mid-air.

He pulled back the joy stick. Detached, feathery clouds spread across the sky, and he was climbing for them. Paula looked behind at him, and he pointed. He saw her seem to stiffen upon sight of the other aircraft.

In minutes Bell's plane was tearing madly through sunlit fleecy monsters which looked soft and warm and alluring, and were cold and damp and blinding in their depths. Bell kept on his course. The two planes were approaching each other at a rate of nearly two hundred miles an hour.

And then, while the harsh, discordant notes of the radio signal sounded monotonously in his ears, Bell stared down and, through a rift between two clouds, saw the other plane for an instant, a thousand feet below.

The sun shone upon it fiercely. Its propeller was a shimmering, cobwebby disk before it. It seemed to hang motionless—so short was Bell's view of it—between earth and sky: a fat glistening body as of a monstrous insect. Bell could even see figures in its cockpits.

Then it was gone, but Bell felt a curious hatred of the thing. Ribiera was almost certainly in it, headed for the place to which he had spoken the night before. And Bell was no longer able to think of Ribiera with any calmness. He felt a personal, gusty hatred for the man and all he stood for.

His face was grim and savage as his own plane sped through the clouds. But just as the two aircraft had approached each other with the combined speed of both, so they separated. It seemed only a moment later that Bell dipped down below the clouds and the other plane was visible only as a swiftly receding mote in the sunlight.

"I wonder," said Bell coldly to himself, with the thunder of the motor coming through the singing of the air route signal, "I wonder if he'll

see the ship I cracked up last night?"

Paula was pointing. The shoulder of a hill upthrust beneath the jungle. The tall trees were cleared away at its crest. Small, whitewashed buildings appeared below.

"Good landing field," said Bell, his eyes narrowing suddenly. "On the direct route. Fifty miles back there's another landing field. I wonder...."

He was already suspicious before he flattened out above the house, while dogs fled madly. He noticed, too, that horses in a corral near the buildings showed no signs of fright. And horses are always afraid of landing aircraft, unless they have had much opportunity to grow accustomed to them.

The little plane rolled and bumped, and gradually came to a stop. Bell inconspicuously shifted a revolver to the outer pocket of his flying suit. Figures came toward them, with a certain hesitating reluctance that changed Bell's suspicions even while it confirmed them.

“Paula," he said grimly, "this is another landing field for Ribiera's emergency use. It sticks out all over the place. Relatives or no

relatives, you want to make sure of them. You understand?"

Her eyes widened in a sudden startled fear. She caught her breath sharply. Then she said quietly, though her voice trembled:

"I understand. Of course."

She slipped out of the plane and advanced to meet the approaching figures. There were surprised, astounded exclamations: A bearded man embraced her and shouted. Women appeared and, after staring, embraced. Paula turned to wave her hand reassuringly to Bell, and vanished inside the house.

Bell looked over his instruments, examined the gas in the tank, and began to work over his maps in the blaring sunlight. He cut out the switch and the motor stopped with minor hissings of compression. The maps held his attention, though he listened keenly as he worked for any signs of trouble that Paula might encounter.

He was beginning to have a definite idea in his mind. Ribiera had talked to a headquarters somewhere, by beam radio from Rio. Beam wireless, of course, is nothing more or less than a concentration of a radio signal in a nearly straight line, instead of allowing it to spread about equally on all sides of the transmitting station. It makes both

for secrecy and economy, since nearly all the power used at the sending apparatus is confined to an arc of about three degrees of a circle. Directed to a given receiving station, receiving outfits to one side or the other of that path are unable to listen in, and the signal is markedly stronger in the chosen path. Exactly the same process, of course, is used for radio directional signals, one of which still buzzed monotonously in Bell's ears until he impatiently turned it off. A plane in the path hears the signal. If it does not hear the signal, it is demonstrably off the straight route.

Bell, then, was in a direct line from Rio to the source of a radio direction signal. Fifty miles back, where the big amphibian had crashed, he was in the same air line. To extend that line on into the interior would give the destination of Ribiera, and the location of the headquarters where direct communication with The Master was maintained.

He worked busily. His maps were in separate sheets, and it took time to check the line from Rio. When he had finished, he computed grimly.

"At a hundred miles in hour...." He was figuring the maximum distance which could plausibly be accepted as a day's journeying by air. He surveyed the maps again. "The plateau of Cuyaba, at a guess.

Hm.... Fleets of aircraft could practise there and never be seen. An army could be maneuvered without being reported. Certainly the headquarters for the whole continent could be there. Striking distance of Rio, Montevideo, Buenos Aires, La Paz, and Asunción. Five republics."

Certainly, from his figures, it seemed plausible that somewhere up on the Plateau of Cuyaba—where no rails run, no boats ply, and no telegraph line penetrates; which juts out ultimately into that unknown region where the Rio Zingu and the Tapajoz have their origins—certainly it seemed plausible that there must lie the headquarters of the whole ghastly conspiracy. There, it might be, the deadly plants from which The Master's poison was brewed were grown. There the deadly stuff was measured out and mixed with its temporary antidote....

Paula came back, a young man with her. Her eyes were wide and staring, as if she had looked upon something vastly worse than death.

"He—Ribiera," she gasped. "My uncle, he owned this place. They—have him here—alive—and mad! And all the rest...."

Bell fumbled in the pocket of his flying suit. The young man with

Paula was looking carefully at the plane. And there was a revolver in a holster at his side. An air of grim and desperate doggedness was upon him.

"This is—my cousin," gasped Paula. "He—and his wife—and—and __"

The young man took out his weapon. He fired. There was a clanging of metal, the screech of tortured steel. Bell's own revolver went off the fraction of a second too late.

"You may kill me, Senhor," said the young man through stiff lips. His revolver had dropped from limp fingers. He pressed the fingers of his left hand upon the place where blood welled out, just above his right elbow. "You may kill me. But if you and my cousin Paula escaped.... I have a wife, Senhor, and my mother, and my children. Kill me if you please. It is your right. But I have seen my father go mad." Sweat, the sweat of agony and of shame, came out upon his face. "I fought him, Senhor, to save the lives of all the rest. And I have spoiled your engine, and I have already sent word that you and Paula are here. Not for my own life, but...."

He waited, haggard and ashamed and desperate and hopeless. But Bell was staring at the motor of the airplane.

"Crankcase punctured," he said dully. "Aluminum. The bullet went right through. We can't fly five miles. And Ribiera knows we're here—or will."

Chapter 9

There was the sound of weeping in the house, the gusty and hopeless weeping of women. Bell had been walking around and around the plane, staring at it with his hands clenched. Paula watched him.

"I am thinking," she said in an attempt at courage, "that you said I must not despair without your permission. But—"

"Hush!" said Bell impatiently. He stared at the engine. "I'd give a lot for a car. Bolts.... How many hours have we?"

"Four," said Paula drearily. "Perhaps five. You have smashed the radio in the house?"

Bell nodded impatiently. He had smashed the radio, a marvelously compact and foolproof outfit, arbitrarily tuned to a fixed short wave-length. It was almost as simple to operate as a telephone. There had been no opposition to the destruction. Paula's cousin had disabled their plane and reported their presence. He was inside the house now, sick with shame—and yet he would do the same again. In one of the

rooms of the house, behind strong bars, a man was kept who had been an object-lesson....

"Is there any machinery?" asked Bell desperately. "Any at all about the place?"

Paula shook her head.

"It may be that there is a pump."

Bell went off savagely, hunting it. He came back and dived into the cockpit of the plane. He came out with a wrench, and his jaws set grimly. He worked desperately at the pump. He came back with two short, thick bolts.

He crawled into the plane again, tearing out the fire wall impatiently, getting up under the motor.

"We have one chance in five thousand," he said grimly from there, "of getting away from here to crash in the jungle. Personally, I prefer that to falling into Ribiera's hands. If your cousin or anybody else comes near us, out here, call me, and I'll be much obliged."

There was the sound of scraping, patient, desperate, wholly unpromising scraping. It seemed to go on for hours.

"The wrench, please, Paula."

She passed it to him. The bullet had entered the aluminum crankcase of the motor and pierced it through. By special providence it had not struck the crankshaft, and had partly penetrated the crankcase on the other side. Bell had cut it out, first of all. He had two holes in the crankcase, then, through which the cylinder oil had drained away. And of all pieces of machinery upon earth, an aircraft motor requires oil.

Bell's scraping had been to change the punctured holes of the bullet into cone shaped bores. The aluminum alloy was harder than pure aluminum, of course, but he had managed it with a knife. Now he fitted the short bolts in the bores, forced the threads on them to cut their own grooves, and by main strength screwed them in to a fit. He tightened them.

He came out with his eyes glowing oddly.

"The vibration will work them loose, sooner or later," he observed grimly, "and they may not be oil tight. Also, the crankshaft may clear them, and it may not. If we go up in the ship in this state we may get five miles away, or five hundred. At any minute it may fail us, and sooner or later it will fail us. Are you game to go up, Paula?"

She smiled at him.

"With you, of course."

He began to brush off his hands.

"There ought to be oil and gas here," he said briefly. "Another thing, there'll probably be some metal chips in the crankcase, which may stop an oil line at any minute. It's a form of committing suicide, I imagine."

He went off, hunting savagely for the supplies of fuel and lubricant which would be stored at any emergency field. He found them. He was pouring gasoline into the tanks before what he was doing was noticed. Then there was stunned amazement in the house. When he had the crankcase full of oil the young man came out. Bell tapped his revolver suggestively.

"With no man about this house," he said grimly, "Ribiera will put in one of his own choice. And you have a wife and children and they'll be at that man's mercy. Don't make me kill you. Ribiera may not blame you for my escape if you tell him everything—and you're hurt, anyway. Either we get away, and you do that, or you're killed and we get away anyhow."

He toppled two last five gallon tins of gasoline into the cockpits—crowding them abominably—and swung on the prop. The engine caught. Bell throttled it down, kicked away the stones with which he had blocked its wheels, and climbed up into the pilot's cockpit. With his revolver ready in his lap he taxied slowly over to a favorable starting point.

The ship rose slowly, and headed west again. At three thousand feet he cut out the motor to shout to Paula.

"One place is as good as another to us, now. The whole continent is closed to us by now. I'm going to try to find that headquarters and do some damage. Afterwards, we'll see."

He cut in the motor again and flew steadily westward. He rose gradually to four thousand feet, to five.... He watched his instruments grimly, the motor temperature especially. There were flakes of metal in the oil lines. Twice he saw the motor temperature rise to a point that brought the sweat out on his face. And twice he saw it drop again. Bits of shattered metal were in the oiling system, and they had partly blocked the stream of lubricant until the engine heated badly. And each time the vibration had shifted them, or loosened them....

They had left the big amphibian no earlier than nine o'clock. It was noon when they took off for the *fazenda* of Paula's kin. But it was five o'clock and after when they rose from there with an engine which might run indefinitely and might stop at any second.

Bell did not really expect it to run for a long time. He had worked as much to cheat Ribiera of the satisfaction of a victory as in hopes of a real escape. But an hour, and the motor still ran. It was consistently hotter than an aero engine should run. Twice it had gone up to a dangerous temperature. One other time it had gone up for a minute or more as if the oiling system had failed altogether. But it still ran, and the sun was sinking toward the horizon and shadows were lengthening, and Bell began to look almost hopefully for a clearing in which to land before the dark hours came.

Then it was that he saw the planes that had been sent for him and for Paula.

There were three of them, fast two-seaters very much like the one he drove. They were droning eastward, with all cockpits filled, from that enigmatic point in the west. And Bell had descended to investigate a barely possible stream when they saw him.

The leader banked steeply and climbed upward toward him. The

others gazed, swung sharply, and came after him, spreading out as they came. And Bell, after one instant's grim debate, went into a maple leaf dive for the jungle below him. The others dived madly in his wake. He heard a sharp, tearing rattle. A machine-gun. He saw the streaks of tracers going very wide. Gunfire in the air is far from accurate. A machine-gun burst from a hundred yards, when the gun has to be aimed by turning the whole madly vibrating ship, is less accurate than a rifle at six hundred, or even eight. Most aircraft duels are settled at distances of less than a hundred yards.

It was that fact that Bell counted on. With a motor that might go dead at any instant and a load of passengers and gas at least equaling that of any of the other ships, mere flight promised little. The other ships, too, were armed, at any rate the leader was, and Bell had only small arms at his disposal. But a plane pilot, stunting madly to dodge tracer bullets, has little time to spare for revolver work.

Bell had but one advantage. He expected to be killed. He looked upon both Paula and himself as very probably dead already. And he infinitely preferred the clean death of a crash to either the life or death that Ribiera would offer them. He flattened out barely twenty yards above the waving branches that are the roof of the jungle. He went scudding over the tree tops, rising where the jungle rose, dipping where it dropped, and behind him the foliage waved wildly

as if in a cyclone.

The other planes dared not follow. To dive upon him meant too much chance of a dash into the entrapping branches. One plane, indeed, did try it, and Bell scudded lower and lower until the wheels of the small plane were spinning from occasional, breath taking contacts with the feathery topmost branches of jungle giants. That other plane flattened out not less than a hundred feet farther up and three hundred yards behind. To fire on him with a fixed gun meant a dive to bring the gun muzzle down. And a dive meant a crash.

A stream flashed past below. There was the glitter of water, reflecting the graying sky. A downward current here dragged at the wings of the plane. Bell jerked at the stick and her nose came up. There was a clashing, despite her climbing angle, of branches upon the running gear, but she broke through and shot upward, trying to stall. Bell flung her down again into his mad careering.

It was not exactly safe, of course. It was practically a form of suicide. But Bell had not death, but life to fear. He could afford to be far more reckless than any man who desired to live. The plane went scuttling madly across the jungle tops, now rising to skim the top of a monster *ceiba*, now dipping deliberately.

The three pursuing planes hung on above him helplessly while the short, short twilight of the tropics fell, and Bell went racing across the jungle, never twenty feet above the tree top and with the boughs behind him showing all the agitation of a miniature hurricane. As darkness deepened, the race became more suicidal still, and there were no lighted fields nearby to mark a landing place. But as darkness grew more intense, Bell could dare to rise to fifty, then a hundred feet above the tops, and the dangers of diving to his level remained undiminished. And then it was dark.

Bell climbed to two hundred feet. To two hundred and fifty. With more freedom, now, he could take one hand from the controls. He could feel the menace of the tumultuously roaring motors in his wake, but he was smiling very strangely in the blackness. He reached inside his flying suit and tore away the front of his shirt. He reached down and battered in the top of one of the five gallon gasoline tins in the cockpit with the barrel of his revolver. He stuffed the scrap of cloth into the rent. It was wetted instantly by the splashing. Another savage blow, unheard in the thunder of the motor. In the peculiarly calm air of the cockpit the reek of gasoline was strong, but cleared away. And Bell, with the frosty grim smile of a man who gambles with his life, struck a light. The cloth flared wildly, and he reached his hands into the flame and heaved the tin of fuel overside.

The cloth was burning fiercely, and spilled gasoline caught in mid-air. A fierce and savage flame dropped earthward. Spark on the cloth, and the cloud of inflammable vapor that formed where the leaking tin fell plummetlike, carried the flame down when the wind of its fall would have blown it out.

The following planes saw a flash of light. They saw a swiftly descending conflagration tracing a steep arch toward the tree tops. They saw that flaming vanish among the trees. And then they saw a vast upflaring of fire below. Flames licked upward almost to the tree tops....

Bell looked back from two thousand feet. Wing-tip lights were on, below, and disks of illumination played upon the roof of the jungle above the fire. The three planes were hovering over the spot. But a thick dense column of smoke was rising, now. Green things shriveling in the heat, and dried and rotted underbrush. Altogether, the volume of smoke and flame was very convincing evidence that an airplane had burst into flame in mid-air and crashed through the jungle top to burn to ashes beneath.

But Bell climbed steadily to five thousand feet. He cut out the motor, there, and in the shrieking and whistling of wind as the plane went into a shallow glide, he spoke sharply.

"Paula?"

"I am all right," she assured him unsteadily. "What now?"

"There's a seat pack under you," said Bell. "It's a parachute. You'd better put it on. God only knows where we'll land, but if the motor stops we'll jump together. And I think we'll have to jump before dawn. This plane won't fly indefinitely. There's just one chance in a million that I know of. There'll be a moon before long. When it comes up, look for the glitter of moonlight on water. With the wing-tip lights we may—we may—manage to get down. But I doubt it."

He moved his hand to cut in the motor again. She stopped him.

"If we head south," she said unsteadily, "we may reach the Paraguay. It is perhaps two hundred miles, but it is broad. We should see it. Perhaps even the stars...."

"Good work!" said Bell approvingly. "*Nils desperandum!* That's our motto, Paula."

He swung off his course and headed south. He was flying high, now, and an illogical and incomprehensible hope came to him. There was no hope, of course. He had had, more than once, a despairing

conviction that the utmost result of all his efforts would be but the delaying of their final enslavement to The Master, whose apparent impersonality made him the more terrible as he remained mysterious. So far they seemed like struggling flies in some colossal web, freeing themselves from one snaring spot to blunder helplessly into another.

But the moon came up presently, rounded and nearly full. The sky took on a new radiance, and the jungle below them was made darker and more horrible by the contrast.

And when there were broad stretches of moonlit foliage visible on the rising slopes beneath, Bell felt the engine faltering. He switched on the instrument board light. One glance, and he was cold all over. The motor was hot. Hotter than it had ever been. The oil lines, perhaps the pump itself....

Paula's hand reached back into the glow of the instrument board. He leaned over and saw her pointing. Moonlight on rolling water, far below. He dived for it, steeply. The wing-lights went on. Faint disks of light appeared far below, sweeping to and fro with the swaying of the plane, bobbing back and forth.

It seemed to Bell that there had been nothing quite as horrible as the

next minute or two. He felt the over-heated, maltreated motor laboring. It was being ruined, of course—and a ruined motor meant that they were marooned in the jungle. But if it kept going only until they landed. And if it did not....

White water showed below in the disks of the landing lights' glow. It tumbled down a swift and deadly *raudal*—a rapid. And then—black, deep water, moving swiftly between tall cliffs of trees.

Bell risked everything to bank about and land toward the white water. The little plane seemed to be sinking into a canyon as the trees rose overhead on either side. But the moonlit rapid gave him his height, approximately, and the lights helped more than a little.

He landed with a terrific crash. The plane teetered on the very verge of a dive beneath the surface. Bell jerked back the stick and killed the engine, and it settled back.

A vast, a colossal silence succeeded the deafening noise of twelve cylinders exploding continuously. There were little hissing sounds as the motor cooled. There was the smell of burnt oil.

"All right, Paula?" asked Bell quietly.

"I—I'm all right."

The plane was drifting backward, now. It spun around in a stately fashion, its tail caught in underbrush, and it swung back. It drifted past cliffs of darkness for a long time, and grounded, presently, with a surprising gentleness.

"Do you know," said Bell dryly, "this sort of thing is getting monotonous. I think our motor's ruined. I never knew before that misfortunes could grow literally tedious. I've been expecting to be killed any minute since we started off, but the idea of being stuck in the jungle with a perfectly good plane and a bad motor...."

He fished inside his flying suit and extracted a cigarette. Then he lit it.

"Let's see.... We haven't a thing to eat, have we?"

There was a little slapping noise. Bell became suddenly aware of a horde of insects swarming around him. Smoke served partially to drive them off.

"Look here," he said suddenly, "we could unfold a parachute and cover the cockpits for some protection against these infernal things

that are biting me."

"We may need the parachute," said Paula unsteadily. "Does—does that smoke of yours drive them away?"

"A little." Bell hesitated. "I say, it would be crowded, but if I came up there, or you here...."

"I—I'll come back there," she said queerly. "The extra cans of gasoline here...."

She slipped over the partition, in the odd flying suit which looks so much more odd when a girl wears it. She settled down beside him, and he tried painstakingly to envelope her in a cloud of tobacco smoke. The plague of insects lessened.

There was nothing to do but wait for dawn. She was very quiet, but as the moon rose higher he saw that her eyes were open. The night noises of the jungle all about them came to their ears. Furtive little slitherings, and the sound of things drinking greedily at the water's edge, and once or twice peculiar little despairing small animal cries off in the darkness.

The jungle was dark and sinister, and all the more so when the moon

rose high and lightened its face and left them looking into weird, abysmal blackness between moonlit branches. Bell thought busily, trying not to become too conscious of the small warm body beside him.

He moved, suddenly, and found her fingers closed tightly on the sleeve of his flying suit.

"Frightened, Paula?" he asked quietly. "Don't be. We'll make out."

She shook her head and looked up at him, drawing away as if to scan his face more closely.

"I am thinking," she said almost harshly, "of biology. I wonder—"

Bell waited. He felt an intolerable strain in her tensed figure. He put his hand comfortingly over hers. And, astoundingly, he found it trembling.

"Are all women fools?" she demanded in a desperate cynicism. "Are we all imbeciles? Are—"

Bell's pulse pounded suddenly. He smiled.

"Not unless men are imbeciles too," he said dryly. "We've been

through a lot in the past two days. It's natural that we should like each other. We've worked together rather well. I—well"—his smile was distinctly a wry and uncomfortable one—"I've been the more anxious to get to some civilized place where The Master hasn't a deputy because—well—it wouldn't be fair to talk about loving you while—" he shrugged, and said curtly, "while you had no choice but to listen."

She stared at him, there in the moonlight with the jungle moving about its business of life and death about them. And very, very slowly the tenseness left her figure. And very, very slowly she smiled.

"Perhaps," she said quietly, "you are lying to me, Charles. Perhaps. But it is a very honorable thing for you to say. I am not ashamed, now, of feeling that I wish to be always near you."

"Hush!" said Bell. He put his arm about her shoulder and drew her closer to him. He tilted her face upward. It was oval and quite irresistibly pretty. "I love you," said Bell steadily. "I've been fighting it since God knows when, and I'm going to keep on fighting it—and it's no use. I'm going to keep on loving you until I die."

Her fingers closed tightly upon his. Bell kissed her.

"Now," he said gruffly, "go to sleep."

He pressed her head upon his shoulder and kept it there. After a long time she slept. He stirred, much later, and she opened her eyes again.

"What is it?"

"Damn these mosquitos," growled Bell. "I can't keep them off your face!"

Chapter 10

For four hours after sunrise Bell worked desperately. With the few and inadequate tools in the plane he took apart the oiling system of the motor. It was in duplicate, of course, like all modern air engines, and there were three magnetos, and double spark plugs. Bell drained the crankcase beneath a sun that grew more and more hot and blistering, catching the oil in a gasoline can that he was able to empty into the main tanks. He washed out innumerable small oil pipes with gasoline, and flushed out the crankcase itself, and had at the end of his working as many small scraps of metal as would half fill a thimble. He showed then to Paula.

"And the stars in their courses fought against Sisera," he quoted dryly. "Any one of these, caught in just the right place, would have

let us down into the jungle last night."

She smiled up at him.

"But they didn't."

"No.... God loves the Irish," said Bell. "What's that thing?"

Paula was fishing, sitting on a fallen tree in the cloud of smoke from a smudge fire Bell had built for her. She was wearing the oily flying suit he had found in the shed with the plane, and had torn strips from her discarded dress to make a fishing line. The hook was made out of the stiff wire handle of one of the extra gasoline tins. "Hook and leader in one," Bell had observed when he made it.

He was pointing to a flat bodied fish with incredible jaws that lay on the grass, emitting strange sounds even in the air. It flapped about madly. Its jaws closed upon a stick nearly half an inch thick, and cut it through.

"It is a *piranha*," said Paula. "The same fish that bit your hand. It can bite through a copper wire fastened to a hook, but this hook is so long...."

"Pleasant," said Bell. Something large and red passed before his

eyes. He struck at it instinctively.

"Don't!" said Paula sharply.

"Why?"

"It's a *maribundi* wasp," she told him "And its sting.... Children have died of it. A strong man will be ill for days from one single sting."

"Still more pleasant," said Bell. "The jungle is a charming place, isn't it?" He wiped the sweat off his face. "Any more little pets about?"

She looked about seriously.

"There." She pointed to a sapling not far distant. "The *palo santo* yonder has a hollow trunk, and in it there are usually ants, which are called fire-ants. They bite horribly. It feels like a drop of molten metal on your flesh. And it festers afterwards. And there is a fly, the *berni* fly, which lays its eggs in living flesh. The maggot eats its way within. I do not know much about the jungle, but my father has—had a *fazenda* in Matto Grosso and I was there as a child. The *camaradas* told me much about the jungle, then."

Bell winced, and sat down beside her. She had Ribiera's pearl handled automatic within easy reach. She saw him looking at it.

"I do not think there is any danger," she said with a not very convincing smile, "but there are *cururus*—water snakes. They grow very large."

"And I asked you to fish!" said Bell. "Stop it!"

She hauled the line ashore, with a flapping thing on the end of it. Bell took the fish off and regarded her catch moodily.

"I'd been thinking," he said moodily, "that Ribiera suspects we're dead. I'd been envisioning ourselves as marooned, yes, but relatively safe as long as we were thought to be dead. And I'd thought that if we lived a sort of castaway existence for a few weeks we'd be forgotten, and would have a faint chance of getting out to civilization without being noticed. But this...."

"I will stay," she said steadily. "I will stay anywhere or go anywhere, with you."

Bell's hand closed on her shoulder.

"I believe it," he said heavily. "And—if you noticed—I had been thinking of letting down the Trade. I'd been thinking of not trying to fight The Master any longer, but only of getting you to safety. In a

sense, I was thinking of treason to my job and my government. I suspect"—he smiled rather queerly—"I suspect we love each other rather much, Paula. I'd never have dreamed for anyone else. Go over to the plane and don't fish any more. I'll rustle the food for both of us."

She stood up obediently, smiling at him.

"But kill that *piranha* before you try to handle it," she advised seriously.

Bell battered the savage thing until it ceased to move. He picked it up, then, and sniffed the air. Paula had been in a cloud of acrid smoke. She could not have detected the taint in the air he discovered. He went curiously, saw a broken branch overhead, and then saw something on the ground.

He came back to the plane presently, looking rather sick.

"Give me one of the machetes, Paula," he said quietly. "We brought them, I think."

"What is the matter?"

He took the wide-bladed woods knife.

"A man," he said, nauseated. "He either fell or was thrown from somewhere high above. From a plane. He was United States Secret Service. There's a badge in his clothes. Don't come."

He went heavily over to the spot beyond the smudge fire. He worked there for half an hour. When he came back there were earth stains on his hands and clothing, and he carried a very small brown package in his hand.

"He had a report ready to send off," said Bell grimly. "I read it. It's in code, of course, but in the Trade...."

He set to work savagely on the engine, reassembling it. As he worked, he talked in savage, jerky sentences.

"The Service man at Asunción. One of the seven who vanished. He'd learned more than we have. He was caught—poisoned, of course—and pretended to surrender. Told a great deal that he shouldn't, in order to convince The Master's deputy. The key men in nearly every republic in South America are in The Master's power. Paraguay belongs to him, body and soul. Bolivia is absolutely his. Every man of the official class from the President down knows that he has two weeks or less of sanity if The Master's deputy shuts down on him—and he knows that at the crook of the deputy's finger he'll be

assassinated before then. If they run away, they go murder mad. If they stay, they have to obey him. It's hellish!"

He stopped talking to make a fine adjustment. He went on, somberly.

"Chile's not so bad off, but the deputy has slaves nearly everywhere. Ecuador—well, the President and half of Congress have been poisoned. The man I found was trying to get a sample of the poison for analysis. He'd learned it was unstable. Wouldn't keep. The Master has to send fresh supplies constantly all over the continent. That accounts for the deputies remaining loyal. If The Master had reason to suspect them, he had only to stop their supply.... They couldn't stock up on the deadly stuff for their own use. So they're as abjectly subject to The Master as their slaves are to them. No new slaves are to be made in Paraguay or Bolivia, except when necessary. It's believed that in six months the other republics will have every influential man subjected. Every army officer, every judge, every politician, every outstanding rich man.... And then, overnight, South America will become an empire, with that devil of a Master as its overlord."

He lifted one of the oil pumps in place and painstakingly tightened the bolts that held it.

"Picture it," he said grimly. "Beasts as viceroys, already taking their pleasure. Caligulas, Neros, on viceregal thrones all over the continent.... And every man who shows promise, or shows signs of honor or courage or decency, either killed or sent mad or...."

Paula was watching his face closely.

"I think," she said soberly, "that there is something worse."

Bell was silent for an instant.

"For me," he said bitterly, "it is. Before The Master dares to make his coup public, he must be sure that there will be no foreign interference. So, he must establish a deputy in Washington. A relatively few chosen men, completely enslaved, could hold back our Government from any action. Leaders in Congress, and members of the Cabinet, working, in defense of The Master because his defeat would mean their madness.... He would demand no treason of them at first. He would require simply that he should not be interfered with. But his plans include the appointment of deputies in the United States later on. I don't think he can subdue America. I don't think so. But he could—and I think he would—send whole cities mad. And if you think of that...."

He was silent, working. A long, long time later he swung on the propeller. The motor caught. He throttled it down and watched it grimly. The motor warmed up to normal, and stayed there.

"It will run," he said coldly. "Those two plugs in the crankcase may come out at any time. I've tightened them a little. They'd worked loose from the vibration. But—well.... That Service man was heading for Asunción. He'd been found out. They probably shot him down in mid-air after he'd gotten away. His plane may be crashed anywhere in the jungle within a mile or so. And I've two bearings on the *fazenda* where Ribiera went, now. One from Asunción through here and one from Rio. I want to go back there to-night and dump burning gasoline on the buildings, to do enough damage to disorganize things a little. Then I'm going to try to make it to a seaport. We can stow away, perhaps."

He shut off the motor.

"We'll start at dusk. There'll be lights there. This report says it's nearly a city—of slaves. We want the darkness for our getaway."

Paula looked at the sky.

"We have three hours," she said quietly. "Let us cook and eat. You

must keep up your strength, Charles."

She said it in all seriousness, with the air of one who has entire confidence and is merely solicitous. And Bell, who knew of at least three excellent reasons why neither of them should survive until dawn—Bell looked at her queerly, and then grinned, and then took her in his arms and kissed her. She seemed to like it.

And they lunched quite happily on *piranha* and *pacu*—which is smaller—and drank water, and for dessert had more *piranha*.

The long afternoon wore away slowly. It was hot, and grew blistering. Insects came in swarms and tormented them until Bell built a second and larger smudge fire. But they fastened upon his flesh when he went out of its smoke for more wood.

They talked, as well as they could for smoke, and looked at each other as well as they could for smarting eyes. It was not at all the conventional idea of romantic conversation, but it was probably a good deal more honest than most, because they both knew quite well that their chance of life was small. A plane whose motor was precariously patched, flying over a jungle without hope of a safe landing if that patched-up motor died, was bad enough. But with the three nearest nations subservient to The Master, whose deputy

Ribiera was, and all those nations hunting them as soon as they were known to be yet alive....

"Would it not be wise, Charles," asked Paula wistfully, "just for us to try to escape, ourselves, and not try—"

"Wise, perhaps," admitted Bell, "but I've got to strike a blow while I can." He was staring somberly at the little plane, fast upon a mud bank, with the tall green jungle all about. "The deputies and all their slaves have their lives hanging by a thread—the thread of a constant supply of the antidote to the poison that's administered with the antidote. The deputies—Ribiera, for instance—don't realize that. Else they wouldn't dare do the things they do. But let them realize that the thread can be broken, and what their slaves would do to them before they all went mad.... You see? Let them learn that a blow has been struck at the center of all the ghastly thing, and they'll be frightened. They'll be close to mutiny through sheer panic. And there may be slip-ups."

It was vague, perhaps, but it was true. The subjection of the poisoned men and women was due not only to terror of what would happen if they disobeyed the deputies, but to a belief that that thing would not happen if they did obey. If Bell could do enough damage to the *fazenda* of The Master to shake the second belief, he would have

shaken the whole conspiracy. And a conspiracy that is not a complete success is an utter failure.

It was close to sunset when they heard a droning noise in the distance. Bell went swiftly to the cockpit of the plane and searched the sky.

"Don't see it," he said grimly, "and it probably doesn't see us. We're all right, I suppose."

But he was uneasy. The droning noise grew to a maximum and slowly died away again. It diminished to a distant muttering.

"What say," said Bell suddenly, "we get aloft now? We'll follow that damned thing home. It's going from Asunción to that place we want to find. This is on that route. Whoever's in it won't be looking behind, and it's close to darkness."

Paula stood up.

"I am ready, Charles."

Bell swung out on the floats and tugged at the prop. The motor caught and roared steadily. While it was warming up, he stripped off the rest of his shirt and tore it into wide strips, and tied the rags in

the handles of the gasoline tins in the two cockpits.

"For our bombs," he explained, smiling faintly. "You'll want to wear your chute pack, Paula. You know how to work it? And we'll divide the guns and what shells we have, and stick them in the flying suit pockets."

He made her show him a dozen times that she knew how to pull out the ring that would cause the parachute to open. She climbed into the front cockpit and smiled down at him. He throttled down the motor to its lowest speed and shoved off from the mud bank. Clambering up, while the plane moved slowly over the water under the gentle pull of the slow-moving propeller, he bent over and kissed her.

"For luck," he said in her ear.

The next instant he settled down at the controls, glanced a last time at the instruments, and gave the motor the gun.

The plane lifted soggily but steadily and swept up-stream toward the rolling water of the *raudal*, which tumbled furiously about an obstacle half of stones and shallows, and half of caught and rotting tree trunks. It rose steadily until the trees dropped away on either side and the jungle spread out on every hand. It rose to a thousand

feet and went roaring through the air to northward, while Bell strained his eyes for the plane on ahead.

It was ten minutes or more before he sighted it, winging its way steadily into the misty distance above the jungle. Bell settled down to follow. The engine roared valorously. For half an hour Bell watched it anxiously, but it remained cool and had always ample power. Paula's head showed above the cockpit combing. Mostly she looked confidently ahead, but once or twice she turned about to smile at him.

The sun seemed high when they rose from the water, but as it neared the horizon its rate of descent seemed to increase. They had been in the air for no more than three-quarters of an hour when it was twice its own disk above the far distant hills. Almost immediately, it seemed, it had halved that distance. And then the lower limb of the blaring circle was sharply cut off by the hill crests and the sun sank wearily to rest behind the edge of the world.

It seemed as if a swift chill breeze blew over the jungle, in warning of the night. The trees became dark. A shadowy dusk filled the air even up to where the plane flew thunderously on. And then, quite abruptly, stars were shining and it was night.

Bell remembered, suddenly, and switched on the radio as an experiment. The harsh, discordant dashes sounded in his ears through the roaring of the motor. A beam of short waves was being sent out from his destination. While he was on the direct path the monotonous signals could be heard. When they weakened or died he would have left the way.

But they continued, discordant and harsh and monotonous, while the last faint trace of the afterglow died away and night was complete, and a roof of many stars glittered overhead, and the jungle lay dark and deadly below him.

For nearly half an hour more he kept on. Twice he switched on the instrument board light to glance at the motor temperature. The first time it appeared a little high. The second time it was normal again. But there was little use in watching instruments. If the motor failed there was no landing field to make for.

A sudden faint glow sprang into being, many miles ahead. The pinkish glare of many, many lights turned on suddenly. As the plane thundered on the glow grew brighter. An illuminated field, for the convenience of messengers who carried the poison for The Master to all the nations which were to be subjected.

The glow went out as Bell was just able to distinguish long rows of twinkling bulbs, and he saw the harsher, fiercer glow of floodlights. He reached forward and touched Paula's shoulder. Conversation was impossible over the motor's roar. Her hand reached up and pressed his.

Then he saw other lights. Bright lights, as from houses. Arc lights as from storage warehouses, or something of the sort. A long, long row of lighted windows, which might be dormitories or perhaps sheds in which The Master's enslaved secretaries kept the record of his victims.

The earth flung back the roaring of the little plane's motor. Bell had but little time to act before other planes would dart upward to seek him out. He dived, and the wing tip landing lights went on, sending fierce glares downward. Twin disks of light appeared upon the earth. Sheds, houses, a long row of shacks as if for laborers. A drying field, on which were spread out plants with their leaves turning brown. A wall about it....

"The damned stuff," said Bell grimly.

He swept on. Jungle, only jungle. He banked steeply as lights flicked on and off below and as—once—the wing tip lights showed men

running frantically two hundred feet below.

Then a stream of fire shot earthward, and Bell held up his hand and arm into the blast of the slip stream. It blew out the blaze that had licked at his flesh. He stared down. The gas can had left a trailing stream of fluid behind it as it went spinning down to earth. All that stream of inflammable stuff was aflame. The can itself struck earth and seemed to explode, and the trailing mass of fire was borne onward by the wind and lay across a row of thatch-roofed buildings. An incredible sheet of fire spread out. The stuff in the drying yard was burning.

Bell laughed shortly, and flung over another of his flaming bombs, and another, and the fourth....

He climbed for the skies, then, as rectangles of light showed below and planes were thrust out of their lighted hangars. Four huge conflagrations were begun. One was close by a monster rounded tank, and Bell watched with glistening eyes as it crept closer. Suddenly—it seemed suddenly, but it must have been minutes later—flame rushed up the sides of that tank, there was a sudden hollow booming, and fire was flung broadcast in a blazing, pouring flood.

"Their fuel tank!" said Bell, his eyes gleaming in the ruddy light

from below. He shut off his landing lights and went upward, steeply. "I've played hell with them now!"

A thousand feet up. Two thousand. Two thousand five hundred.... And suddenly Bell felt cold all over. The instrument board! The motor was hot. Hot! Burning!

He shut it off before it could burst into flames, but he heard the squealing of tortured, unlubricated metal grinding to a stop. He leveled out. It was strangely, terribly silent in the high darkness, despite the roaring of wind about the gliding plane. The absence of the motor roar was the thing that made it horrible.

"Paula," said Bell harshly, "one of those plugs came out, I guess. The motor's ruined. Dead. The ship's going to crash. Ready with your parachute?"

It was dark, up there, save for the glare of fires upon the under surface of the wings. But he saw her hand, encarmined by that glare, upon the combing of the cockpit. A moment later her face. She turned, light-dazzled, to smile back at him.

"All right, Charles." Her voice quavered a little, but it was very brave. "I'm ready. You're coming, too?"

"I'm coming," said Bell grimly. Below them was the city of The Master, set blazing by their doing. If their chutes were seen descending.... And if they were not.... "Count ten," said Bell hoarsely, "and pull out the ring. I'll be right after you."

He saw the slim little black-clad figure drop, plummetlike, and prayed in an agony of fear. Then a sudden blooming thing hid it from sight. Thick clouds of smoke lay over the lights and fires below.

Bell stepped over the side and went hurtling down toward the earth in his turn.

Bell was falling head-first when the 'chute opened, and the jerk was terrific, the more so as he had counted not the customary ten, but fifteen before pulling out the ring. But very suddenly he seemed to be floating down with an amazing gentleness, with the ruddy blossom of a parachute swaying against a background of lustrous stars very far indeed over his head. Below him were masses of smoke and at least one huge dancing mass of flame, where the storage tank for airplane gas had exploded. It was unlikely in the extreme, he saw now, that anyone under that canopy of smoke could look up to see plane or parachute against the sky.

Clumsily enough, dangling as he was, Bell twisted about to look for

Paula. Sheer panic came to him before he saw her a little above him but a long distance off. She looked horribly alone with the glare of the fires upon her parachute, and smoke that trailed away into darkness below her. She was farther from the flames than Bell, too. The light upon her was dimmer. And Bell cursed that he had stayed in the plane to make sure it would dive clear of her before he stepped off himself.

The glow on the blossom of silk above her faded out. The sky still glared behind, but a thick and acrid fog enveloped Bell as he descended. Still straining his eyes hopelessly, he crossed his feet and waited.

Branches reached up and lashed at him. Vines scraped against his sides. He was hurled against a tree trunk with stunning force, and rebounded, and swung clear, and then dangled halfway between earth and the jungle roof. It was minutes before his head cleared, and then he felt at once despairing and a fool. Dangling in his parachute harness when Paula needed him.

The light in the sky behind him penetrated even the jungle growth as a faint luminosity. Presently he writhed to a position in which he could strike a match. A thick, matted mass of climbing vines swung from the upper branches not a yard from his fingertips. Bell cursed

again, frantically, and clutched at it wildly. Presently his absurd kickings set him to swaying. He redoubled his efforts and increased the arc in which he swung. But it was a long time before his fingers closed upon leaves which came away in his grasp, and longer still before he caught hold of a wrist-thick liana which oozed sticky sap upon his hands.

But he clung desperately, and presently got his whole weight on it. He unsnapped the parachute and partly let himself down, partly slid, and partly tumbled to the solid earth below.

He had barely reached it when, muffled and many times reechoed among the tree trunks, he heard two shots. He cursed, and sprang toward the sound, plunging headlong into underbrush that strove to tear the flesh from his bones. He fought madly, savagely, fiercely.

He heard two more shots. He fought the jungle in the darkness like a madman, ploughing insanely through masses of creepers that should have been parted by a machete, and which would have been much more easily slipped through by separating them, but which he strove to penetrate by sheer strength.

And then he heard two shots again.

Bell stopped short and swore disgustedly.

"What a fool I am!" he growled. "She's telling me where she is, and I __"

He drew one of the weapons that seemed to bulge in every pocket of his flying suit and fired two shots in the air in reply. A single one answered him.

From that time Bell moved more sanely. The jungle is not designed, apparently, for men to travel in. It is assuredly not intended for them to travel in by night, and especially it is not planned, by whoever planned it, for a man to penetrate without either machete or lights.

As nearly as he could estimate it afterward, it took Bell over an hour to cover one mile in the blackness under the jungle roof. Once he blundered into fire-ants. They were somnolent in the darkness, but one hand stung as if in white-hot metal as he went on. And thorns tore at him. The heavy flying suit protected him somewhat, but after the first hundred yards he blundered on almost blindly, with his arms across his face, stopping now and then to try to orient himself. Three times he fired in the air, and three times an answering shot came instantly, to guide him.

And then a voice called in the blackness, and he ploughed toward it, and it called again, and again, and at last he struck a match with trembling fingers and saw her, dangling as he had dangled, some fifteen feet from the ground. She smiled waveringly, with a little gasp of relief, and he heard something go slithering away, very furtively.

She clung to him desperately when he had gotten her down to solid earth. But he was savage.

"Those shots—though I'm glad you fired them—may have been a tip-off to the town. We've got to keep moving, Paula."

Her breath was coming quickly.

"They could trail us, Charles. By daylight we might not leave signs, but forcing our way through the night...."

"Right, as usual," admitted Bell. "How about shells? Did you use all you had?"

"Nearly. But I was afraid, Charles."

Bell felt in his pockets. Half a box. Perhaps twenty-five shells. With the town nearby and almost certainly having heard their signals to

each other. Black rage invaded Bell. They would be hunted for, of course. Dogs, perhaps, would trail them. And the thing would end when they were at bay, ringed about by The Master's slaves, with twenty-five shells only to expend.

The dim little glow in the sky between the jungle leaves kept up. It was bright, and slowly growing brighter. There was a sudden flickering and even the jungle grew light for an instant. A few seconds later there was a heavy concussion.

"Something else went up then," growled Bell. "It's some satisfaction, anyway, to know I did a lot of damage."

And then, quite abruptly, there was an obscure murmuring sound. It grew stronger, and stronger still. If Bell had been aloft, he would have seen the planes from The Master's hangars being rushed out of their shelters. One of the long row of buildings had caught. And the plateau of Cuyaba is very, very far from civilization. Tools, and even dynamos and engines, could be brought toilsomely to it, but the task would be terrific. Buildings would be made from materials on the spot, even the shelters for the planes. It would be much more practical to carry the parts for a saw mill and saw out the lumber on the spot than to attempt to freight roofing materials and the like to Cuyaba. So that the structures Bell had seen in the wing lights' glow

were of wood, and inflammable. The powerhouse that lighted the landing field was already ablaze. The smaller shacks of the laborers perhaps would not be burnt down, but the elaborate depot for communication by plane and wireless was rapidly being destroyed. The reserve of gasoline had gone up in smoke almost at the beginning, and in spreading out had extended the disaster to nearly all the compact nerve-center of the whole conspiracy.

Presently the droning noise was tumultuous. Every plane in a condition to fly was out on the landing field, now brightly lighted by the burning buildings all about. There was frantic, hectic activity everywhere. The secretaries of The Master were rescuing what records they could, and growing cold with terror. In the confusion of spreading flames and the noise of roaring conflagrations the stopping of the motor up aloft had passed unnoticed. In the headquarters of The Master there was panic. An attack had been made upon The Master. A person who could not be one of his slaves had found his stronghold and attacked it terribly. And if one man knew that location and dared attack it, then....

The hold of The Master upon all his slaves was based on one fact and its corollary. The fact was, that those who had been given his poison would go murder mad without its antidote. The corollary was that those who obeyed him would be given that antidote and be safe.

True, the antidote was but a temporary one, and mixed with it for administration was a further dosage of the poison itself. But the whole power of The Master was based on his slaves' belief that as long as they obeyed him abjectly there would be no failure of the antidote's supply. And Bell had given that belief a sudden and horrible shock.

Orders came from one frightened man, who cursed much more from terror than from rage. Ribiera had advised him. To do him justice, Ribiera felt less fear than most. Nephew to The Master, and destined successor to The Master's power, Ribiera dared not revolt, but at least he had little fear of punishment for incompetence. It was his advice that set the many aircraft motors warming up. It was his direction that assorted out the brainwork staff. And Ribiera himself curtly took control, indifferently abandoned the enslaved workers to the madness that would come upon them, and took wing in the last of a stream of roaring things that swept upward above the smoke and flame and vanished in the sky.

Bell and Paula were huddled in between the buttress roots of a jungle giant, protected on three sides by the monster uprearings of solid wood, and Bell was absorbedly feeding a tiny smudge fire. The smoke was thick and choking, but it did keep off the plague of insects which make jungle travel much less than the romantic

adventure it is pictured. Bell heard the heavy, thunderous buzzing from the town change timbre suddenly. A single note of it grew loud and soared overhead.

He stared up instinctively, but saw nothing but leaves and branches and many climbing things above him, dimly lighted by the smoky little blaze. The roaring overhead went on, and dimmed. A second roaring came from the town and rose to a monstrous growling and diminished. A third did likewise, and a fourth.

At stated, even intervals the planes at headquarters of The Master took off from the landing field, ringed about with blazing buildings, and plunged through the darkness in a straight line. The steadier droning from the town grew lighter as the jungles echoed for many miles with the sounds of aircraft motors overhead.

At last a single plane rose upward and thundered over the jungle roof. It went away, and away.... The town was silent, then, and only a faint and dwindling murmur came from the line of aircraft headed south.

"They've deserted the town, by God!" said Bell, his eyes gleaming. "Scared off!"

"And—and we—" said Paula, gazing at him.

"You can bet that every man who could crowd into a plane did so," said Bell grimly. "Those that couldn't, if they have any brains, will be trying to make it some other way to where they can subject themselves to one of The Master's deputies and have a little longer time of sanity. The poor devils that are left—well—they'll be *camaradas*, *peons*, laborers, without the intelligence to know what they can do. They'll wait patiently for their masters to come back. And presently their hands will writhe.... And the town will be a hell."

"Then they won't be looking for us?"

Bell considered. And suddenly he laughed.

"If the fire has burned out before dawn," he said coldly, "I'll go looking for them. It's going to be cold-blooded, and it's going to be rather pitiful, I think, but there's nothing else to do. You try to get some rest. You'll need it."

And for all the rest of the dark hours he crouched in the little angle formed by the roots of the forest giant, and kept a thickly smoking little fire going, and listened to the noises of the jungle all about him.

It was more than a mile back to the town. It was nearer two. But it was vastly less difficult to force a way through the thick growths by daylight, even though then it was not easy. With machetes, of course, Bell and Paula would have had no trouble, but theirs had been left in the plane. Bell made a huge club and battered openings by sheer strength where it was necessary. Sweat streamed down his face before he had covered five hundred yards, but then something occurred to him and he went more easily. If there were any of the intelligent class of The Master's subjects left in the little settlement, he wanted to allow time enough for them to start their flight. He wanted to find the place empty of all but laborers, who would be accustomed to obey any man who spoke arrogantly and in the manner of a deputy of The Master. Yet he did not want to wait too long. Panic spreads among the *camarada* class as swiftly as among more intelligent folk, and it is even more blind and hysterical.

It was nearly eleven o'clock before they emerged upon a cleared field where brightly blooming plants grew hugely. Bell regarded these grimly.

"These," he observed, "will be The Master's stock."

Paula touched his arm.

"I have heard," she said, and shuddered, "that the men who gather the plants that go to make the poisons of the *Indios* do not—do not dare to sleep near the fresh-picked plants. They say that the odor is dangerous, even the perfume of the blossoms."

"Very probably," said Bell. "I wish I could destroy the damned things. But since we can't, why, we'll go around the edge of the field."

He went upwind, skirting the edge of the planted things. A path showed, winding over half-heartedly cleared ground. He followed it, with Paula close behind him. Smoke still curled heavily upward from the heaps of ashes which he reached first of all. He looked upon them with an unpleasant satisfaction. He had to pick his way between still smoking heaps of embers to reach the huts about which laborers stood listlessly, not working because not ordered to work, not yet frightened because not yet realizing fully the catastrophe that had come upon them.

He was moving toward them, deliberately adopting an air of suppressed rage, when a voice called whiningly.

"Senhor! Senhor!" And then pleadingly, in Portuguese, "I have news for The Master! I have news for The Master!"

Bell jerked his head about. Bars of thick wood, cemented into heavy timbers at top and bottom. A building that was solid wall on three sides, and the fourth was bars. A white man in it, unshaven, haggard, ragged, filthy. And on the floor of the cage....

There had been another such cage on a *fazenda* back toward Rio. Bell had looked into it, and had shot the gibbering Thing that had been its occupant, as an act of pure mercy. But this man had been through horrors and yet was sane.

"Don't look," said Bell sharply to Paula. He went close.

The figure pressed against the bars, whining. And suddenly it stopped its fawning.

"The devil!" said the white man in the cage. "What in hell are you doing here, Bell? Has that fiend caught you too?"

"Oh, my God!" gasped Bell. He went white with a cold rage. He'd known this man before. A Secret Service man—one of the seven who had vanished. "How's this place opened? I'll let you out."

"It may be dangerous," said the white man with a ghastly grin. "I'm one of The Master's little victims. I've been trying to work a little

game in hopes of getting within arm's reach of him. How'd you get here? Has he got you too?"

"I burned the damned town last night," snarled Bell, "and crashed up after it. Where's that door?"

He found it, a solid mass of planks with a log bar fitted in such a way that it could not possibly be opened from within. He dragged it wide. The white man came out, holding to his self-control with an obvious effort.

"I want to dance and sing because I'm out of there," he told Bell queerly, "but I know you've done me no good. I've been fed The Master's little medicine. I've been in that cage for weeks."

Bell, quivering with rage, handed him a revolver.

"I'm going to get some supplies and stuff and try to make it to civilization," he said shortly. "If you want to help...."

"Hell, yes," said the white man drearily. "I might as well. Number One-Fourteen was here.... He's The Master's little pet, now. Turned traitor. Report it, if you ever get out."

"No," said Bell briefly. "He didn't turn." He told in a very few words

of the finding of the body of a man who had fallen or been thrown from a plane into the jungle.

They were moving toward the rows of still standing shacks, then, and faces were beginning to turn toward them, and there was a little stir of apathetic puzzlement at sight of the white man who had been set free.

That white man looked suddenly at Paula, and then at Bell.

"I've been turned into a beast," he said wryly. "Look here, Bell. There were as many as ten and fifteen of us in that cage at one time—men the deputies sent up for the purpose. We were allowed to go mad, one and two at a time, for the edification of the populace, to keep the *camaradas* scared. And those of us who weren't going mad just then used to have to band together and kill them. That cage has been the most awful hell on earth that any devil ever contrived. They put three women in there once, with their hands already writhing.... Ugh!..."

Bell's face was cold and hard is if carved from marble.

"I haven't lived through it," said the white man harshly, "by being soft. And I've got less than no time to live—sane, anyhow. I was

thinking of shooting you in the back, because the young lady—"

He laughed as Bell's revolver muzzle stirred.

"I'm telling you," said the white man in ghastly merriment, "because I thought—I thought One-Fourteen had set me the example of ditching the Service for his own life. But now it's different."

He pointed.

"There's a launch in that house, with one of these outboard motors. It was used to keep up communication with the boat gangs that sweat the heavy supplies up the river. It'll float in three inches of water, and you can pole it where the water's too shallow to let the propeller turn. This rabble will mob you if you try to take it, because it'll have taken them just about this long to realize that they're deserted. They'll think you are a deputy, at least, to have dared release me. I'm going to convince them of it, and use this gun to give you a start. I give you two hours. It ought to be enough. And then...."

Bell nodded.

"I'm not Service," he said curtly, "but I'll see it's known."

The white man laughed again.

"'Some sigh for the glories of this world, and some for a prophet's paradise to come,'" he quoted derisively. "I thought I was hard, Bell, but I find I prefer to have my record clean in the Service—where nobody will ever see it—than to take what pleasure I might snatch before I die. Queer, isn't it? Old Omar was wrong. Now watch me bluff, flinging away the cash for credit of doubtful value, and all for the rumble of a distant drum—which will be muted!"

They were surrounded by swarming, fawning, frightened *camaradas* who implored the Senhor to tell them if he were a deputy of The Master, and if he were here to make sure nothing evil befell them. They worked for The Master, and they desired nothing save to labor all their lives for The Master, only—only—The Master would allow no evil to befall them?

The white man waved his arms grandiloquently.

"The Senhor you behold," he proclaimed in the barbarous Portugese of the hinterland of Brazil, "has released me from the cage in which you saw me. He is the deputy of The Master himself, and is enraged because the landing lights on the field were not burning, so that his airplane fell down into the jungle. He bears news of great value from me to The Master, which will make me finally a sub-deputy of The Master. And I have a revolver, as you see, with which I could kill

him, but he dares not permit me to die, since I have given him news for The Master. I shall wait here and he will go and send back an airplane with the grace of The Master for me and for all of you."

Bell snarled an assent, in the arrogant fashion of the deputies of The Master. He waited furiously while the Service man argued eloquently and fluently. He fingered his revolver suggestively when a wave of panic swept over the swarming mob for no especial reason. And then he watched grimly while the light little metal-bottomed boat was carried to the water's edge and loaded with food, and fuel, and arms, and ammunition, and even mosquito bars.

The white man grinned queerly at Bell as he extended his hand in a last handshake.

"'I, who am about to die, salute you!'" he said mockingly. "Isn't this a hell of a world, Bell? I'm sure we could design a better one in some ways."

Bell felt a horrible, a ghastly shock. The hand that gripped his was writhing in his grasp.

"Quite so," said the white man. "It started about five minutes ago. In theory, I've about forty-eight hours. Actually, I don't dare wait that

long, if I'm to die like a white man. And a lingering vanity insists on that. I hope you get out, Bell.... And if you want to do me a favor,"—he grinned again, mirthlessly—"you might see that The Master and as many of his deputies as you can manage join me in hell at the earliest possible moment. I shan't mind so much if I can watch them."

He put his hands quickly in his pockets as the little outboard motor caught and the launch went on down-river. He did not even look after them. The last Bell saw of him he was swaggering back up the little hillside above the river edge, surrounded by scared inhabitants of the workmen's shacks, and scoffing in a superior fashion at their fears.

Chapter 12

It took Bell just eight days to reach the Paraguay, and those eight days were like an age-long nightmare of toil and discomfort and more than a little danger. The launch was headed downstream, of course, and with the current behind it, it made good time. But the distances of Brazil are infinite, and the jungles of Brazil are malevolent, and the route down the Rio Laurenço was designed by the architect of hell. *Raudales* lay in wait to destroy the little boat. Insects swarmed about to destroy its voyagers. And the jungle

loomed above them, passively malignant, and waited for them to die.

And as if physical sufferings were not enough, Bell saw Paula wilt and grow pale. All the way down the river they passed little clearings at nearly equal distances. And men came trembling out of the little houses upon those *fazendas* and fawned upon the Senhor who was in the launch that had come from up-river and so must be in the service of The Master himself. The clearings and the tiny houses had been placed upon the river for the service of the terribly laboring boat gangs who brought the heavier supplies up the river to The Master's central depot. Men at these clearings had been enslaved and ordered to remain at their posts, serving all those upon the business of The Master. They fawned abjectly upon Bell, because he was of *os gentes* and so presumably was empowered, as The Master had empowered his more intelligent subjects, to exact the most degraded of submission from all beneath him in the horrible conspiracy. Once, indeed, Bell was humbly implored by a panic stricken man to administer "the grace of The Master" to a moody and irritable child of twelve or so.

"She sees the red spots, Senhor. It is the first sign. And I have served The Master faithfully...."

And Bell could do nothing. He went on savagely. And once he

passed a gang of *camaradas* laboring to get heavily loaded dugouts up a fiendish *raudal*. They had ropes out and were hauling at them from the bank, while some of their number were breast-deep in the rushing water, pushing the dugouts against the stream.

"They're headed for the plantation," said Bell grimly, "and they'll need the grace of The Master by the time they get there. And it's abandoned. But if I tell them...."

Men with no hope at all are not to be trusted. Not when they are mixtures of three or more races—white and black and red—and steeped in ignorance and superstition and, moreover, long subject to such masters as these men had had. Bell had to think of Paula.

He could have landed and haughtily ordered them to float or even carry the light boat to the calmer waters below. They would have obeyed and cringed before him. But he shot the rapids from above, with the little motor roaring past rocks and walls of jungle beside the foaming water, at a speed that chilled his blood.

Paula said nothing. She was white and listless. Bell, himself, was being preyed upon by a bitter blend of horror and a deep-seated rage that consumed him like a fever. He had fever itself, of course. He was taking, and forcing Paula to take, five grains of quinine a day. It

had been included among his stores as a matter of course by those who had loaded his boat. And with the fever working in his brain he found himself holding long, imaginary conversations, in which one part of his brain reproached the other part for having destroyed the plantation of The Master. The laborers upon that plantation had been abandoned to the murder madness because of his deed. The caretakers of the tiny *fazenda* on the river bank were now ignored. Bell felt himself a murderer because he had caused The Master's deputies to cast them off in a callous indifference to their inevitable fate.

He suffered the tortures of the damned, and grew morose and bitter, and could only escape that self torture by coddling his hatred of Ribiera and The Master. He imagined torments to be inflicted upon them which would adequately repay them for their crimes, and racked his feverish brain for memories of the appalling atrocities which can be committed upon the human body without destroying its capacity to suffer.

It was not normal. It was not sane. But it filled Bell's mind and somehow kept him from suicide during the horrible passage of the river. He hardly dared speak to Paula. There was a time when he counted the days since he had been a guest at Ribiera's estate outside of Rio, and frenziedly persuaded himself that he saw red spots

before his eyes and soon would have the murder madness come upon him. And then he thought of the supplies in Ribiera's plane, in which they had escaped from Rio. They had eaten that food.

It was almost unconsciously, then, that he saw the narrow water on which the launch floated valiantly grow wider day by day. When at last it debouched suddenly into a vast stream whereon a clumsy steamer plied beneath a self made cloud of smoke, he stared dully at it for minutes before he realized.

"Paula," he said suddenly, and listened in amazement to his voice. It was hoarse and harsh and croaking. "Paula, we've made it. This must be the Paraguay."

She roused herself and looked about like a person waking from a lethargic sleep. And then her lips quivered, and she tried to speak and could not, and tears fell silently from her eyes, and all at once she was sobbing bitterly.

That sign of the terrific strain she had been under served more than anything else to jolt Bell out of his abnormal state of mind. He moved over to her and clumsily put his arm about her, and comforted her as best he could. And she sat sobbing with her head on his shoulder, gasping in a form of hysterical relief, until the

engine behind them sputtered, and coughed, and died.

When Bell looked, the last drop of gasoline was gone. But the motor had served its purpose. It had run manfully on an almost infinitesimal consumption of gasoline for eight days. It had not missed an explosion save when its wiring was wetted by spray. And now....

Bell hauled the engine inboard and got out the oars from under the seats. He got the little boat out to mid-stream, and they floated down until a village of squalid huts appeared on the eastern bank. He landed, there, and with much bargaining and a haughty demeanor disposed of the boat to the skipper of a *batelao* in exchange for passage down-river as far as Corumba. The rate was outrageously high. But he had little currency with him and dared go no farther on a vessel which carried a boat of The Master's ownership conspicuously towed behind.

At Corumba he purchased clothes less obviously of *os gentes*, both for himself and for Paula, and that same afternoon was able to arrange for their passage to Asunción as deck passengers on a river steamer going downstream.

It was as two peasants, then, that they rode in sweltering heat amid a

swarming and odorous mass of fellow humanity downstream. But it was a curious relief, in some ways. The people about them were gross and unwashed and stupid, but they were human. There was none of that diabolical feeling of terror all about. There were no strained, fear haunted faces upon the deck reserved for deck passengers and other cattle. The talk was ungrammatical and literal and of the earth. The women were stolid-faced and reserved. But when the long rows of hammocks were slung out in the open air, in the casual fashion of sleeping arrangements in the back-country of all South America, it was blessedly peaceful to realize that the folk who snored so lustily were merely human; human animals, it might be, with no thought above their *farinha* and *feijos* on the morrow, but human.

And the second day they passed the old fort at Coimbra, and went on. The passage into Paraguayan territory was signalized by an elaborate customs inspection, and three days later Asunción itself displayed its red-tiled roofs and adobe walls upon the shore.

Bell had felt some confidence in his ability to pass muster with his Spanish, though his Portuguese was limited, and it was a shock when the captain of the steamer summoned him to his cabin with a gesture, before the steamer docked. Bell left Paula among the other deck passengers and went with the peasant's air of suspicious humility

into the captain's quarters. But the captain's pose of grandeur vanished at once when the door closed.

"Señor," said the steamer captain humbly, "I have not spoken to you before. I knew you would not wish it. But tell me, senor! Have you any news of what The Master plans?"

Bell's eyes flickered, at the same time that a cold apprehension filled him.

"Why do you speak to me of The Master?" he demanded sharply.

The steamer captain stammered. The man was plainly frightened at Bell's tone. Bell relaxed, his flash of panic for Paula gone.

"I know," said the captain imploringly, "that the great *fazenda* has been deserted. On my last trip, down, senor, I brought many of the high deputies who had been there. They warned me not to speak, senor, but I saw that you were not what you seemed, and I thought you might be going about to see who obeyed The Master's orders...."

Bell nodded.

"That is my mission," he said curtly. "Do not speak of it further—not even to the deputy in Asunción."

The captain stammered again.

"But I must see the Señor Francia," he said humbly. "I report to him after every trip, and if he thought that I did not report all that I learn...."

"It is my order," snapped Bell angrily. "If he reproaches you, say that one who has orders from The Master himself gave them to you. And do not speak of the destruction of the *fazenda*. I am searching especially for the man who caused it. And—wait! I will take your name, and you shall give me—say—a thousand pesos. I had need of money to bribe a fool I could not waste time on, up-country. It will be returned to you."

And again the captain stammered, but Bell stared at him haughtily, and he knelt abjectly before the ship's safe.

Asunción, as everybody knows, is a city of sixty thousand people, and the capital of a republic which enjoyed the rule of a family of hereditary dictators for sixty years; which rule ended in a war wherein four-fifths of the population was wiped out. And since that beginning it has averaged eight revolutions to Mexico's three, has had the joy of knowing seven separate presidents in five years—none of them elected—and now boasts a population approximately

two-thirds illegitimate and full of pride in its intellectual and artistic tastes.

Bell and Paula made their way along the cobbled streets away from the river, surrounded by other similarly peasant-seeming folk. Bell told her curtly what had happened with the steamer captain.

"It's the devil," he said coldly, "because this whole republic is under The Master's thumb. Except among the peasants we can count on nearly everybody being on the lookout for us, if they so much as suspect we're alive. And they may because I burned their damned *fazenda*. So...."

Paula smiled at him, rather wanly.

"What are you going to do, Charles?"

"Get a boat," said Bell curtly. "One with three or four men, if I can. If I can buy it with the skipper's money, I will. But I can't take you to go bargaining. It would look suspicious."

They had reached the central plaza of the town. The market swarmed with brown skinned folk and seemed to overflow with fruits. A man was unconcernedly shoveling oranges out of a cart with a shovel, as

if they had been so much coal. A market woman as unconcernedly dropped some of the same golden fruit within a small pen where a piglet awaited a purchaser. To the left, there were rows of unshaded stalls where the infinitely delicate handmade Paraguayan lace was exposed for sale.

"I—think," said Paula, "I think I will go in the cathedral. I will be very devout, Charles, and you will find me there when you return. I will be safe there, certainly."

He walked with her across the crowded plaza. He should have known that your peasant does not stride with head up, but regarding the ground. That a man who works heavily droops his shoulders with weariness at the end of a day. And especially he should have realized that Paraguay is not, strictly speaking, a Latin-American nation. It is Latin-Indian, in which the population graduates very definitely from a sub-stratum of nearly or quite pure Indian race to an aristocracy of nearly or quite pure Spanish descent, and that the color of a man's skin fixes his place in society. Both Bell and Paula were too light of skin for the peasant's clothes they wore. They aroused curiosity at once. If it was not an active curiosity, it was nevertheless curiosity of a sort.

But Bell left her in the shadowy, cool interior of the cathedral which

seems so pitifully small to be the center of religion for a nation. He saw her move toward one of the little candle-lit niches in the wall and fall quite simply on her knees there.

And he moved off, to wander aimlessly down to the river shore and stare about and presently begin a desultory conversation with sleepy boatmen.

It was three hours and more before he returned to the Cathedral, and Paula was talking to someone. More, talking to a woman in the most discreet of mantilla'd church-going costumes. Paula saw him in the doorway, and uttered a little cry of relief. She came hurrying to him.

"Charles! I have found a friend! Isabella Ybarra. We were schoolmates in the United States and she has just come back from Paris! So you see, she cannot—"

"I see," said Bell very quietly.

Paula was speaking swiftly and very softly.

"We went to school together, Charles. I trust her. You must trust her also. There is no danger, this time. Isabella has never even heard of The Master. So you see...."

"I see that you need someone you can trust," said Bell grimly. "*I* found that the captain of the steamer had gone to The Master's deputy here. While I was talking to some boatmen a warning was given to look out for a man and woman, together, who may try to buy a boat. We're described, and only the fact that I was alone kept me from being suspected. Police, soldiers—everybody is looking out for us. Paraguay's under The Master's thumb more completely than any other nation on the continent."

The figure to which Paula had been talking was moving slowly toward them. A smiling, brown-eyed face twinkled at them.

"You must be Charles!" said a warm and cluckling voice. "Paula has raved, Señor. Now I am going to take her off in my carriage. She is my maid. And you will follow the carriage on foot and I will have the major-domo let you in the servants' entrance, and the three of us will conspire."

It was incongruous to hear the English of a girl's finishing school from the mantilla'd young woman who beamed mischievously at him. She had the delighted air of one aiding a romance. It was doubly incongruous because of the dark and shadowy Cathedral in which they were, and the raucous noises of the market in the plaza without. Bell had a sense of utter unreality as Isabella's good

humored voice went on:

"Do you remember, Paula, the time the French teacher caught us in the pantry? I shall feel just like that time."

"This is dangerous," said Bell, steadily, "and it is very serious indeed."

"Pooh!" said Isabella comfortably. "Paula, you didn't even know I was married! A whole year and a half! And he's a darling, really. I'm the Señora Isabella Ybarra de Zuloaga, if you please! Bow gracefully!" She chuckled. "Jaime came all the way to Rio to meet me last month. I'm wild about him, Paula.... But come on! Follow me humbly, like a nice little *mestizo* girl who wants to be my maid, and I'll let you ride with the *cochero* and Charles shall follow behind us."

She swept out of the Cathedral with the air of a grande dame suppressing a giggle, and Paula went humbly behind her.

And Bell trudged through the dust and the blistering sun while the highly polished carriage jolted over cobble stones and the youthful Señora Isabella Ybarra de Zuloaga beamed blissfully at the universe which did not realize that she was a conspirator, and Paula sat

modestly beside the brown skinned *cochero*.

It was not a long ride nor a long walk, though the sun was insufferable. The capital of Paraguay is not large. It is a sleepy, somnolent little town in which the most pretentious building was begun as the Presidential Palace and wound up as the home of a bank. But there are bullet marks on the façade of the *Museo Nacionál*, and there is still an empty pedestal here and there throughout the city where the heroes of last year's revolution, in bronze, have been pulled down and the heroes of this year's uprising of the people have not yet been set up. Red tiled roofs give the city color, and the varying shades of its populace give it variety, and the fact that below the whiter class of inhabitants *Guarani* is spoken instead of Spanish adds to the individuality of its effect.

But the house into which the carriage turned could have been built in Rio or Buenos Aires without comment on its architecture. It had the outer bleakness of most private homes of South America, but if it was huge and its windows were barred, the patio into which Bell was ushered by a bewildered and suspicious major-domo made up in color and in charm for all that the exterior lacked.

A fountain played amid flowers, and macaws and parrots and myriad other caged birds hung in their cages about the colonnade around the

court, and Bell found Paula being introduced to a pale young man in the stiff collar and unspeakably formal morning clothes of the South American who is of the upper class.

"Jaime," said Isabella, beaming. "And this is Charles, whom Paula is to marry! It is romantic! It is fascinating! And I depend on you to give him clothes so that all our servants won't stare goggle-eyed at him, and I am going to take Paula off at once and dress her! They are our guests! And, Jaime, you must threaten all the servants terribly so they will keep it very secret—that we have two such terrible people with us."

Paula smiled at Bell, and he saw that she felt utterly safe and wholly at peace. Something was hammering at Bell's brain, warning him, and he could not understand what it was. But he exchanged the decorous limp handshake which is conventional south of Panama, and followed his unsmiling host to rooms where a servant laid out a bewildering assortment of garments. They were all rather formal, the sort of clothing that is held to be fitting for a man of position where Spanish is the official if not the common tongue.

His host retired, without words, and Bell came out later to find him sipping moodily at a drink, waiting for him. He wiped his forehead.

"Be seated, Señor," he said heavily, "until the ladies join us."

He wiped his forehead again and watched somberly while Bell poured out a drink.

"Isabella...." He seemed to find it difficult to speak. "She has told me a little, but there has been no time for more than a little: I do not wish to have her tell me too much. She does not understand. She was educated in North America, where customs are different. She demands that I assist you and the senorita—it is the senorita?"

Bell stiffened. In all Spanish America the conventions are strict. For a man and woman to travel together, even perforce and for a short distance, automatically damns the woman.

"Go on," said Bell grimly.

His host was very pale indeed.

"She demands that I assist you and the senorita to escape the police and the government. Provided that you do not tell me who you are, I will attempt it. But—"

"I wonder," said Bell quietly, "if you have ever seen red spots dancing before your eyes."

His host went utterly livid.

Zuloaga looked down at his hands, as if expecting unguessable things of them. And then he shrugged, and said harshly:

"I have, Señor. So you see that Isabella, who does not know, is asking me to risk, not only my life, but her honor."

Bell said nothing for a moment. He was a little pale.

"And your honor?" he asked quietly.

The pallor on the face of the Señor Jaime Zuloaga was horrible. He tried to speak, and could not. He stood up, and managed to say:

"So much I will risk, because you have been my guest. Until to-morrow morning you are safe, unless the Señor Francia has his spies within my own house. I—I will attempt, even to procure a boat. But __"

Something made Bell turn. The major-domo was moving quickly out of sight. Like a flash Bell was upon him, and like a flash a knife came out.

Bell's host gasped. The fact that his servant had spied was more than

obvious, and he had spoke treason against The Master. He leaned against the table, sick and trembling and mumbling of despair, while there were crashes in the room into which Bell had plunged, while bodies thrashed about on the floor, and while stertorous breathing grew less, and stopped....

Bell came back, breathing hard. The front of his coat was slashed open.

"He's dead," he said harshly. "He'd have reported what you said, so I killed him.... And now we've got to do something with his body."

He helped in the horrible task, while his host grew more and more shaken. No other servants came near. And Bell could almost read the thoughts that went through Zuloaga's brain. One servant had spied, to report his treason. And that meant assassination for himself, as the least of punishments, and for his wife....

But there would be no punishment if he went first to the deputy and said that Bell had killed the major-domo.

Bell left the house before dusk, desperately determined to steal a craft of some sort, return for Paula, and get away from Asunción before dawn.

He returned after an hour. In the morning a man would be found bound and gagged, with five hundred pesos stuffed into his pockets. His boat would have vanished.

But there was a commotion before the house where Paula waited fearfully. A carriage stood there, with a company of mounted soldiers about it. Someone was being put into it. As Bell broke into a run toward the house the carriage started up and the soldiers trotted after it.

Paula was taken.

Chapter 13

That night Bell turned burglar. To attempt a rescue of Paula was simply out of the question. He was entirely aware that he would be expected to do just such a thing, and that it would be adequately guarded against. Therefore he prepared for a much more desperate enterprise by burglarizing a bookstore in the particularly neat method in which members of The Trade are instructed. The method was invented by a member of The Trade who was an ex-cabinet maker, and who perished disreputably. He killed a certain courier of a certain foreign government, thereby preventing a minor war and irritating two governments excessively, and was hanged.

The method, of course, is simplicity itself. One removes the small nails which hold the molding of a door panel in place. The molding comes out. So does the panel. One enters through the panel, commits one's burglary, and comes out, replacing the molding and the nails with reasonable care. Depending upon the care with which the replacing is done, the means of entrance is more or less undiscoverable. But it is usually used when it is not intended that the burglary ever be discussed.

Bell abstracted two books, wrapping paper and twine. He departed, using great care. He walked three miles out of town and to the banks of the Paraguay. There he carefully saturated the pages of both books in water, carefully keeping the bindings from being wetted. Then he tore one book to pieces, saving the leaves and inserting them between the leaves of the other book. Then, with a brazil nut candle for illumination, he began to write.

You see, when two thoroughly wetted pieces of paper are placed one above the other with a hard surface such as the cover of another book under them, you can write upon the top one with a stick. The writing will show dark against the gray of the saturated paper. You then remove the top sheet and end the writing reproduced on the bottom sheet. And then you can dry the second sheet and find the marking vanished—until it is wetted again. It is, in fact, a method of

water-marking paper. And it is the simplest of all methods of invisible writing.

Bell wrote grimly for hours. The book he had chosen was an old one, an ancient copy of one of Lope de Vega's plays, and the pages were wrinkled and yellow from age alone. When, by dawn, the last page was dried out, there was no sign that anything other than antiquity had affected the paper. And Bell wrapped it carefully, and addressed it to an elderly senora of literary tastes in San Juan, Porto Rico, and enclosed an affectionate letter to his very dear aunt, and signed it with an entirely improbable name.

It was mailed before sunrise, the necessary stamps having been filched from the burglarized bookstore and the price thereof being carefully inserted in the till. Bell had made a complete and painstaking report of every fact he had himself come upon in the matter of The Master and his slaves and appended to it a copy of the report of the dead Secret Service operative Number One-Fourteen. He destroyed that after copying it. And he concluded that since he had been given dismissal by Jamison in Rio, he considered himself at liberty to take whatever steps he saw fit. And since the Senhorina Paula Canalejas had been kidnapped by agents of The Master, he intended to take steps which might possibly bring about her safety, but would almost certainly cause his death.

The report should at least be of assistance if the Trade set to work to combat The Master. Bell had no information whatever about that still mysterious and still more horrible person himself. But what he knew about The Master's agents he sent to a lady in Porto Rico who has an astonishingly large number of far ranging nephews. And then Bell got himself adequately shaved, bought a hearty breakfast, and, after one or two heartening drinks, was driven grandly to the residence of the Señor Francia, deputy of The Master for the republic of Paraguay.

The servants who admitted him gazed blankly when he gave his name. A door was hastily closed behind him. He was ushered into an elaborate reception room and, after an agitated pause, no less than six separate frock-coated persons appeared and pointed large revolvers at him while a seventh searched him exhaustively. Bell submitted amusedly.

"And now," he said dryly, "I suppose the Señor Francia will receive me?"

There was more agitation. The six men remained; with their weapons pointed at him. The seventh departed, and Bell re-dressed himself in a leisurely fashion.

Ten minutes later a slender, dark skinned man with impeccably waxed moustaches entered, regarded Bell with an entirely impersonal interest, took one of the revolvers from one of the six frock-coated gentlemen, and seated himself comfortably. He waved his hand and they filed uneasily from the room. So far, not one word had been spoken.

Bell retrieved his cigarette case and lighted up with every appearance of ease.

"I have come," he said casually, "to request that I be sent to The Master. I believe that he is anxious to meet me."

The dark eyes scrutinized him coldly. Then Francia smiled.

"*Pero si*," he said negligently, "he is very anxious to see you. I suppose you know what fate awaits you?"

His smile was amiable and apparently quite friendly, but Bell shrugged.

"I suppose," he said dryly, "he wants to converse with me. I have been his most successful opponent to date, I think."

Francia smiled again. It was curious how his smile, which at first

seemed so genuine and so friendly, became unspeakably unpleasant on its repetition.

"Yes." Francia seemed to debate some matter of no great importance. "You have been very annoying, Señor Bell. The Senhor Ribiera asked that you be sent to him. It was his intention to execute you, privately. He described a rather amusing method to me. And I must confess that you have annoyed me, likewise. Since the Cuyaba plantation was destroyed my subjects have been much upset. They have been frightened, and even stubborn. Only last week"—he smiled pleasantly, and the effect was horrible—"only last week I desired the society of a lady who is my subject. And her husband considered that, since the *fazenda* was destroyed, The Master would be powerless to extend his grace before long, in any event. So he shot his wife and himself. It annoyed me enough to make me feel that it would be a pleasure to kill you."

He raised the revolver meditatively.

"Well?" said Bell coldly.

Francia lowered the weapon and laughed.

"Oh, I shall not do it. I think The Master would be displeased. You

seem to have the type of courage he most desires in his deputies. And it may yet be that I shall greet you as my fellow deputy or perhaps my fellow viceroy. So I shall send you to him. I would say that you have about an even chance of dying very unpleasantly or of being a deputy. Therefore I offer you such courtesies as I may."

Bell puffed a cloud of smoke toward the ceiling.

"I'm about out of cigarettes," he said mildly.

"They shall be supplied. And—er—if you would desire feminine society, I will have some of my pretty subjects...."

"No," said Bell bluntly. "I would like to speak to the Senhorina Canalejas, though."

Francia chuckled.

"She left for Buenos Aires last night. The Senhor Ribiera sent a most impatient message for her to be sent on at once. I regretted it, but he had The Master's authority. I thought her charming, myself."

The skin about Bell's knuckles was white. His hands had clenched savagely.

"In that event," he said coldly, "the only other courtesy I would ask is that of following her as soon as possible."

Francia rose languidly. The revolver dangled by his side, but his grip upon it was firm. He smiled at Bell with the same effect of a horrible, ghastly geniality.

"Within the hour, Señor," he said urbanely. "With the guard I shall place over you it is no harm, I am sure, to observe that The Master is at his retreat in Punta Arenas. You will go there to-morrow, as I go to-night."

He moved toward the door, and smiled again, and added pleasantly:

"The Senhorina was delivered to the Senhor Ribiera this morning."

Matters moved swiftly after that. A servant brought cigarettes and a tray of liquors—which Bell did not touch. There was the sound of movement, the scurrying, furtive haste which seems always to imply a desperate sort of fear. Bell waited in a terrible calmness, while rage hammered at his temples.

Then the clattering of horses' hoofs outside. A carriage was being brought. Soldiers came in and a man beckoned curtly. Bell stuffed

his pockets with smokes and followed languidly. He was realizing that there was little pretense of secrecy about the power of The Master's deputy here. Police and soldiers.... But Paraguay, of all the nations of the southern continent, has learned a certain calm realism about governmental matters.

The man who has power is obeyed. The man who has not power is not obeyed. Titles are of little importance, though it is the custom for the man with the actual power eventually to assume the official rank of authority. Since the President in Asunción was no more than a figurehead who called anxiously upon the Señor Francia every morning for instructions concerning the management of the nation, Francia indifferently ignored him whenever he chose and gave orders directly. There would be very little surprise and no disorder whatever when The Master proclaimed Paraguay a viceroyalty of his intended empire.

The carriage went smartly through the cobbled streets with a cavalry escort all about it. An officer sat opposite Bell with his hand on his revolver.

"I am receiving at least the honors of royalty," Bell commented coldly to him, in Spanish.

"Señor," said the officer harshly, "this is the state in which the deputies of The Master were escorted."

He watched Bell heavily, but with the desperate intentness of a man who knows no excuses will be received if his prisoner escapes.

Out of the town to a flying field, where a multi-engined plane was warming up. It was one of the ships that had been at The Master's *fazenda* of Cuyaba, one of the ships that had fled from the burning plantation. Bell was ushered into it with a ceremonious suspicion. Almost immediately he was handcuffed to his seat. Two men took their place behind him. The big ship rolled forward, lifted, steadied, and after a single circling set out to the southeast for Buenos Aires.

The whole performance had been run off with the smoothly oiled precision of an iron discipline exercised upon men in the grip of deadly fear.

"One man, at least," reflected Bell grimly, "has some qualities that fit him for his job."

And then, for hour after hour, the big ship went steadily southeast. It flew over Paraguayan territory for two hours, soaring high over the Lago Ypoa and on over the swampy country that extends to the

Argentine border. It ignored that border and all customs formalities. It went on, through long hours of flight, while mountains rose before it. It rose over those mountains and passed over the first railroad line —the first real sign of civilization since leaving Asunción—at Mercedes, and reached the Uruguay river where the Mirinjay joins it. It went roaring on down above the valley of the Rio Uruguay for long and tedious hours more. At about noon, lunch was produced. The two men who guarded Bell ate. Then, with drawn revolvers, they unlocked his handcuffs and offered him food.

He ate, of exactly those foods he had seen them eat. He submitted indifferently to the re-application of his fetters. He had reached a state which was curiously emotionless. If Paula had been turned over to Ribiera that morning, Paula was dead. And just as there is a state of grief which stuns the mind past the realization of its loss, so there is a condition of hatred which leads to an enormous calmness and an unnatural absence of any tremor. Bell had reached that state. The instinct of self-preservation had gone lax. Where a man normally thinks first, if unconsciously, of the protection of his body from injury or pain, Bell had come to think first, and with the same terrible clarity, of the accomplishment of revenge.

He would accept The Master's terms, if The Master offered them. He would become The Master's subject, accepting the poison of

madness without a qualm. He would act and speak and think as a subject of The Master, until his opportunity came. And then....

His absolute calmness would have deceived most men. It may have deceived his guards. Time passed. The Rio de la Plata spread out widely below the roaring multi-engined plane and the vast expanse of buildings which is Buenos Aires appeared far ahead in the gathering dusk. Little twinkling lights blinked into being upon the water and the earth far away. Then one of the two guards touched Bell on the shoulder.

"Señor," he said sharply above the motors' muffled roar, "we shall land. A car will draw up beside the plane. There will be no customs inspection. That has been arranged for. You can have no hope of escape. I ask you if you will go quietly into the car?"

"Why not?" asked Bell evenly. "I went to Señor Francia of my own accord."

The guard leaned back. The city of Buenos Aires spread out below them. The tumbled, congested old business quarter glittered in all its offices, and the broad Avenida de Mayo cut its way as a straight slash of glittering light through the section of the city to eastward. By contrast, from above, the far-flung suburbs seemed dark and

somber.

The big plane roared above the city, settling slowly; banked steeply and circled upon its farther side, and dipped down toward what seemed an absurdly small area, which sprang into a pinkish glow on their descent. That area spread out as the descent continued, though, and was a wide and level field when the ship flattened out and checked and lumbered to a stop.

A glistening black car came swiftly, humming into place alongside almost before the clumsy aircraft ceased to roll. Its door opened. Two men got out and waited. The hangars were quite two hundred yards away, and Bell saw the glitter of weapons held inconspicuously but quite ready.

He stepped out of the cabin of the plane with a revolver muzzle pressing into his spine. Other revolver muzzles pressed sharply into his sides as he reached earth.

Smiling faintly, he took four steps, clambered up into the glistening black car, and settled down comfortably into the seat. The two men who had waited by the car followed him. The door closed, and Bell was in a padded silence that was acutely uncomfortable for a moment. A dome light glowed brightly, however, and he lighted

nearly the last of the cigarettes from Asunción with every appearance of composure as the car started off with a lurch.

The windows were blank. Thick, upholstered padding covered the spaces where openings should have been, and there was only the muffled vibration of the motor and the occasional curiously distinct noise of a flexing spring.

"Just as a matter of curiosity," said Bell mildly, "what is the excuse given on the flying field for this performance? Or is the entire staff subject to The Master?"

Two revolvers were bearing steadily upon him and the two men watched him with the unwavering attention of men whose lives depend upon their vigilance.

"You, Señor," said one of them without expression or a smile, "are the corpse of a prominent politician who died yesterday at his country home."

And then for half an hour or more the car drove swiftly, and stopped, and drove swiftly forward again as if in traffic. Then there were many turns, and then a slow and cautious traverse of a relatively few feet. It stopped, and then the engine vibration ceased.

"I advise you, Señor," said the same man who had spoken before, and in the same emotionless voice, "not to have hope of escape in the moment of alighting. We are in an enclosed court and there are two gates locked behind us."

Bell shrugged as there was the clatter of a lock operating. The door swung wide.

He stepped down into a courtyard surrounded by nearly bare walls. It had once been the *patio* of a private home of some charm. Now, however, it was bleak and empty. A few discouraged flowers grew weedily in one corner. The glow of light in the sky overhead assured Bell that he was in the very heart of Buenos Aires, but only the most subdued of rumbles spoke of the activity and the traffic of the city going on without.

"This way," said the man with the expressionless voice.

The other man followed. The chauffeur of the car stood aside as if some formality required him neither to start the motor or return to his seat until Bell was clear of the courtyard.

Through a heavy timber door. Along a passageway with the odor of neglect. Up stairs which once had been impressive and ornamental.

Into a room without windows.

"You will have an interview with the Señorita Canalejas in five minutes," said the emotionless voice.

The door closed, while Bell found every separate muscle in his body draw taut. And while his brain at first was dazed with incredulous relief, then it went dark with a new and ghastly terror.

"They know *yagué*," he heard himself saying coldly, "which makes any person obey any command. They may know other and more hellish ones yet."

He fought for self control, which meant the ability to conceal absolutely any form of shock that might await him. That one was in store he was certain. He paced grimly the length of the room and back again....

Something on the carpet caught his eye. A bit of string. He stared at it incredulously. The end was tied into a curious and an individual knot, which looked like it might be the pastime of a sailor, and which looked like it ought to be fairly easy to tie. But it was one of those knots which wandering men sometimes tie absent mindedly in the presence of stirring events. It was the recognition-knot of the

Trade, one of those signs by which men may know each other in strange and peculiar situations. And there were many other knots tied along the trailing length of the string. It seemed as if some nervous and distraught prisoner in this room might have toyed abstractedly with a bit of cord.

Only, Bell drew it through his fingers. Double knot, single knot, double knot.... They spelled out letters in the entirely simple Morse code of the telegrapher, if one noticed.

"RBRA GN ON PLA HRE ST TGT J."

Your old-time telegrapher uses many abbreviations. Your short-wave fan uses more. Mostly they are made by a simple omission of vowels in normal English words. And when the recognition sign at the beginning was considered, the apparently cryptic letters leaped into meaning.

"RiBeRA GoNe ON PauLA HeRe SiT TiGhT Jamison."

When the door opened again and a terribly pale Paula was ushered in, Bell gave no sign of surprise. He simply took her in his arms and kissed her, holding her very, very close.

Chapter 14

Paula remained in the room with Bell for perhaps twenty minutes, and Bell had the feeling of eyes upon them and of ears listening to their every word. In their first embrace, in fact, he murmured a warning in her ear and she gasped a little whispered word of comprehension. But it was at least a relief to be sure that she was alive and yet unharmed. Francia had been in error when he told Bell of Paula's delivery to the Brazilian to be enslaved or killed as Ribiera found most amusing. Or perhaps, of course, Francia had merely wanted to cause Bell all possible discomfort.

It was clear, however, blessedly clear and evident, that Paula's pallor was due to nothing more than terror—a terror which was now redoubled because Bell was in The Master's toils with her. Forgetting his warning, she whispered to him desperately that he must try to escape, somehow, before The Master's poison was administered to him. Outside, he might do something to release her. Here, a prisoner, he was helpless.

Bell soothed her, not daring either to confess the plan he had formed of a feigned submission in order to wreak revenge, or to offer encouragement because of the message knotted in the piece of string by Jamison. And because of that caution she came to look at him

with a queer doubt, and presently with a terrible quiet grief.

"Charles—you—you have been poisoned like the rest?"

The feeling of watching eyes and listening ears was strong. Bell had a part to play, and the necessity for playing that part was the greater because now he was forced to hope. He hesitated, torn between the need to play his rôle for the invisible eavesdroppers and the desire to spare Paula.

Her hand closed convulsively upon his.

"V-very well, Charles," she said quietly, though her lips quivered. "If—if you are going to serve The Master, I—I will serve him too, if he will let me stay always near you. But if he—will not, then I can always—die...."

Bell groaned. And the door opened silently, and there were men standing without. An emotionless voice said:

"Señorita, the Señor Ortiz will interview the Señor Bell."

"I'm coming," said Paula quietly.

She went, walking steadily. Two men detached themselves from the

group about the door and followed her. The others waited for Bell. And Bell clenched his hands and squared his shoulders and marched grimly with them.

Again long passages, descending to what must have been a good deal below the surface of the earth. And then a massive door was opened, and light shone through, and Bell found himself standing on a rug of the thickest possible pile in a room of quite barbaric luxury, and facing a desk from which a young man was rising to greet him. This young man was no older than Bell himself, and he greeted Bell in a manner in which mockery was entirely absent, but in which defiance was peculiarly strong. A bulky, round shouldered figure wrote laboriously at a smaller desk to one side.

"Señor Bell," said the young man bitterly, "I do not ask you to shake hands with me. I am Julio Ortiz, the son of the man you befriended upon the steamer *Almirante Gomez*. I am also, by the command of The Master, your jailer. Will you be seated?"

Bell's eyes flickered. The older Ortiz had died by his own hand in the first stages of the murder madness The Master's poison produced. He had died gladly and, in Bell's view, very gallantly. And yet his son.... But of course The Master's deputies made a point of enslaving whole families when it was at all possible. It gave a stronger hold

upon each member.

"I beg of you," said young Ortiz bitterly, "to accept my invitation. I wish to offer you a much qualified friendship, which I expect you to refuse."

Bell sat down and crossed his knees. He lit a cigarette thoughtfully, thinking swiftly.

"I remember, and admired, your father," he said slowly. "I think that any man who died as bravely as he did is to be envied."

The younger Ortiz had reseated himself as Bell sat down, and now he fingered nervously, wretchedly, the objects on his desk. A penholder broke between his fingers and he flung it irritably into the wastebasket.

"You understand," he said harshly, "the obligations upon me. I am the subject of The Master. You will realize that if you desire to escape, I cannot permit it. But you did my father a very great kindness. Much of it I was able to discover from persons on the boat. More, from the wireless operator who is also the subject of The Master. You were not acting, Señor, as a secret service operative in your attempt to help my father. You bore yourself as a very

honorable gentleman. I wish to thank you."

"I imagine," said Bell dryly, "that anyone would have done what I did."

He seemed to be quite at ease, but he was very tense indeed. The bulky, round shouldered figure at the other desk was writing busily with a very scratchy pen. It was an abominable pen. Its sputtering was loud enough to be noticeable under any circumstances, but Bell was unusually alert, just now, and suddenly he added still more drily:

"Helping a man in trouble is quite natural. One always gets it back. It's a sort of dealing with the future in which there is a profit on every trade."

He put the slightest emphasis on the last word and waited, looking at young Ortiz, but listening with all his soul to the scratching of the pen. And that scratching sound ceased abruptly. The pen seemed to write smoothly all of an instant. Bell drew a deep breath of satisfaction. In the Trade, when in doubt, one should use the word "Trade" in one's first remark to the other man. Then the other man will ask your trade, and you reply impossibly. It is then up to the other man to speak frankly, first. But circumstances alter even recognition-signs.

Ortiz had not noticed any by-play, of course. It would have been rather extraordinary if he had. A pen that scratches so that the sound is Morse code for "Bell, play up. J." is just unlikely enough to avoid all notice.

Ortiz drummed upon the desk. "Now, Señor, what can I do that will serve you? I cannot release you. You know that. I am not the deputy here. There has been a set-back to The Master's plans and all the deputies are called to his retreat to receive instructions and to discuss. I have merely been ordered to carry out the deputy's routine labors until he returns. However, I will be obeyed in any matter. I can, and will, do anything that will make you more comfortable or will amuse you, from a change in your accommodations to providing you with companions. You observe," he added with exquisite bitterness, "that the limit of my capacity to prove my friendship is to offer my services as a pander."

Bell gazed at the tip of his cigarette, letting his eyes wander about the room for an instant, and permitting them to rest for the fraction of a second upon the round shouldered, writing form by the side wall.

"I am sufficiently amused," he said mildly. "I asked to be sent to The Master. He intends to make me an offer, I understand. Or he did. He

may have changed his mind. But I am curious. Your father told me a certain thing that seemed to indicate he did not enjoy the service of The Master. Your tone is quite loyal, but unhappy. Why do you serve him? Aside, of course, from the fact of having been poisoned by his deputy."

Internally, Bell was damning Jamison feverishly. If he was to play up to Ortiz, why didn't Jamison give him some sign of how he was to do it? Some tip....

"Herr Wiedkind," said Ortiz wearily, "perhaps you can explain."

The round shouldered figure swung about and bowed profoundly to Bell.

"Der Señor Ortiz," he said gutturally, and in a sepulchral profundity, "he does not understand himself. I haff nefer said it before. But he serfs Der Master because he despairs, andt he will cease to serf Der Master when he hopes. And I—I serf Der Master because I hope, andt I will cease to serf him when I despair."

Ortiz looked curiously and almost suspiciously at the Germanic figure which regarded him soberly through thick spectacles.

"It is not customary, Herr Wiedkind," he said slowly, "to speak of ceasing to serve The Master."

"Idt is not customary to speak of many necessary things," said the round shouldered figure dryly. "Of our religions, for example. Of der women we lofe. Of our gonsciences. Of various necessary biological functions. But in der presence of der young man who is der enemy of Der Master we can speak freely, you and I who serf him. We know that maybe der deputies serf because they enjoy it. But der subjects? Dey serf because dey fear. Andt fear is intolerable. A man who is afraid is in an unstable gondition. Sooner or later he is going to stop fearing because he gets used to it—when Der Master will haff no more hold on him—or else he is going to stop fearing because he will kill himself."

To an outsider the spectacle of the three men in their talk would have been very odd indeed. Two men who served The Master, and one who had been his only annoying opponent, talking of the service of The Master quite amicably and without marked disagreement.

Ortiz stirred and drummed nervously on the desk. The round shouldered figure put the tips of its fingers together.

"How did you know," demanded Ortiz suddenly, "that I serve

because I despair?"

Bell watched keenly. He began to see where the talk was trending, and waited alertly for the moment for him to speak. This was a battlefield, this too luxurious room in which young Ortiz seemed an alien. Rhetoric was the weapon which now would serve the best.

"Let us talk frankly," said the placid German voice. "You andt I, Señor Ortiz, haff worked together. You are not a defil like most of the deputies, and I do not regret hafing been sent here to help you. And I am not a scoundtrel like most of those who help the deputies, so you haff liked me a little. Let us talk frankly. I was trapped. I am a capable segretary. I speak seferal languages. I haff no particular ambitions or any loyalties. I am useful. So I was trapped. But you, Señor Ortiz, you are different."

Ortiz suddenly smiled bitterly.

"It is a saying in Brazil, if I recall the words, '*A cauda do demonio e de rendas*.' 'The devil's tail is made of lace.' That is the story."

Bell said quietly:

"No."

Ortiz stared at him. He was very pale. And suddenly he laughed without any amusement whatever.

"True," said Ortiz. He smiled in the same bitterness. "I had forgotten. I am a slave, and the Herr Wiedkind is a slave, and you, Señor Bell, are the enemy of our master. But I had forgotten that we are gentlemen. In the service of The Master one does forget that there are gentlemen."

He laughed again and lighted a cigarette with hands that shook a little.

"I loved a girl," he said in a cynical amusement. "It is peculiar that one should love any woman, *señores*—or do you, Señor Bell, find it natural? I loved this girl. It pleased my father. She was of a family fully equal to my own: their wealth, their position, their traditions were quite equal, and it was a most suitable match. Most remarkable of all, I loved her as one commonly loves only when no such considerations exist. It is amusing to me now, to think how deeply, and how truly, and how terribly I loved her...."

Young Ortiz's pallor deepened as he smiled at them. His eyes, so dark as to be almost black, looked at them from a smiling mask of whiteness.

"There was no flaw anywhere. A romance of the most romantic, my father very happy, her family most satisfied and pleased, and I—I walked upon air. And then my father suddenly departed for the United States, quite without warning. He left a memorandum for me, saying that it was a matter of government, a secret matter. He would explain upon his return. I did not worry. I haunted the house of my fiancée. The habits of her family are of the most liberal. I saw her daily, almost hourly, and my infatuation grew. And suddenly I grew irritable and saw red spots before my eyes....

"Her father took me to task about my nervousness. He led me kindly to a man of high position, who poured out for me a little potion.... And within an hour all my terrible unease had vanished. And then they told me of The Master, of the poison I had been given in the house of my fiancée herself. They informed me that if I served The Master I would be provided with the antidote which would keep me sane. I raged.... And then the father of my fiancée told me that he and all his family served The Master. That the girl I loved, herself, owed him allegiance. And while I would possibly have defied them and death itself, the thought of that girl not daring to wed me because of the poison in her veins.... I saw, then, that she was in terror. I imagined the two of us comforting each other beneath the shadow of the most horrible of fates...."

Ortiz was silent for what seemed to be a long time, smiling mirthlessly at nothing. When his lips parted, it was to laugh, a horribly discordant laughter.

"I agreed," he said in ghastly amusement. "For the sake of my loved one, I agreed to serve The Master that I might comfort her. And plans for our wedding, which had been often and inexplicably delayed, were set in train at once. And the deputy of The Master entertained me often. I plied him with drink, striving to learn all that I could, hoping against hope that there would be some way of befooling him and securing the antidote without the poison.... And at last, when very drunken, he laughed at me for my intention of marriage. He advised me tipsily to serve The Master zealously and receive promotion in his service. Then, he told me amusedly, I would not care for marriage. My fiancée would be at my disposal without such formalities. In fact—while I stood rigid with horror—he sent a command for her to attend him immediately. He commanded me to go to an apartment in his dwelling. And soon—within minutes, it seemed—the girl I loved came there to me...."

Bell did not move. This was no moment to interrupt. Ortiz's fixed and cynical smile wavered and vanished. His voice was harsh.

"She was at my disposal, as an act of drunken friendship by the

deputy of The Master. She confessed to me, weeping, that she had been at the disposal of the deputy himself. Of any other person he cared to divert or amuse.... Oh! *Dios!*"

Ortiz stopped short and said, in forced calmness:

"That also was the night that my father died."

Silence fell. Bell sat very still. The Teutonic figure spoke quietly after the clock had ticked for what seemed an interminable period.

"You didt know, then, that your father's death was arranged?"

Ortiz turned stiffly to look at him.

"Here," said the placid voice, quaintly sympathetic. "Look at these."

A hand extended a thick envelope. Ortiz took it, staring with wide, distended eyes. The round shouldered figure stood up and seemed to shake itself. The stoop of its shoulders straightened out. One of the seemingly pudgy hands reached up and removed the thick spectacles. A bushy gray eyebrow peeled off. A straggly beard was removed. The other eyebrow.... Jamison nodded briefly to Bell, and turned to watch Ortiz.

And Ortiz was reading the contents of the envelope. His hands began to shake violently. He rested them on the desk-top so that he could continue to read. When he looked up his eyes were flaming.

"The real Herr Wiedkind," said Jamison dryly, "came up from Punta Arenas with special instructions from The Master. You have talents, Señor Ortiz, which The Master wished to use. Also you have considerable wealth and the prestige of an honorable family. But you were afflicted with ideas of honor and decency, which are disadvantageous in deputies of The Master. The real Herr Wiedkind had remarkable gifts in eradicating those ideas."

Jamison sat down and crossed his knees carefully.

"I looked you up because I knew The Master had killed your father," he added mildly, "and I thought you'd either be hunting The Master or he'd be hunting you. My name's Jamison. I killed the real Wiedkind and took his identification papers. He was a singularly unpleasant beast. His idea of pleasure made him seem a fatherly sort of person, very much like my make-up. He was constantly petting children, and appeared very benign. I am very, very glad that I killed him."

Ortiz tore at his collar, suddenly. He seemed to be choking.

"This—this says.... It is The Master's handwriting! I know it! And it says—"

"It says," Jamison observed calmly, "that since your father killed the previous deputy in an attempt to save you from The Master's poison, that you are to be prepared for the work your father had been assigned. Herr Wiedkind is given special orders about your—ah—moral education. In passing, I might say that your father was sent to the United States because it was known he'd killed the previous deputy. He told Bell he'd done that killing. And he was allowed to grow horribly nervous on his return. He was permitted to see the red spots, because he was officially—even as far as you were concerned—to commit suicide.

"It was intended that his nervousness was to be noticed. And a plane tried to deliver a message to him. Your father thought the parcel contained the antidote to the poison that was driving him mad. Actually, it was very conventional prussic acid. Your father would have drunk it and dropped dead, a suicide, after a conspicuous period of nervousness and worry."

Bell felt his cigarette burning his fingers. He had sat rigid until the thing burned short. He crushed out the coal, looking at Ortiz.

And Ortiz seemed to gasp for breath. But with an almost superhuman effort he calmed himself outwardly.

"I—think," he said with some difficulty, "that I should thank you. I do. But I do not think that you told me all of this without some motive. I abandon the service of The Master. But what is it that you wish me to do? You know, of course, that I can order both of you killed...."

Bell put down the stub of his cigarette very carefully.

"The only thing you can do," he said quietly, "is to die."

"True," said Ortiz with a ghastly smile. "But I would like my death to perform some service. The Master has no enemies save you two, and those of us who die on becoming his enemies. I would like, in dying, to do him some harm."

"I will promise," said Jamison grimly, "to see that The Master dies himself if you will have Bell and myself put in a plane with fuel to Punta Arenas and a reasonable supply of weapons. I include the Señorita Canalejas as a matter of course."

Ortiz looked from one to the other. And suddenly he smiled once

more. It was queer, that smile. It was not quite mirthless.

"You were right, just now," he observed calmly, "when as the Herr Wiedkind you said that I would quit the service of The Master when I ceased to despair. I begin to have hopes. You two men have done the impossible. You have fought The Master, you have learned many of his secrets, and you have corrupted a man to treason when treason means suicide. Perhaps, Señores, you will continue to achieve the impossible, and assassinate The Master."

He stood up, and though deathly pale continued to smile.

"I suggest, Señor, that you resume your complexion. And you, Señor Bell, you will be returned to your confinement. I will make the necessarily elaborate arrangements for my death."

Bell rose. He liked this young man. He said quietly:

"You said just now you wouldn't ask me to shake hands. May I ask you?..." He added almost apologetically as Ortiz's fingers closed upon his: "You see, when your father died I thought that I would be very glad if I felt that I would die as well. But I think"—he smiled wryly—"I think I'll have two examples to think of when my time comes."

In the morning a bulky, round shouldered figure entered the room in which Bell was confined.

"You will follow me," said a harsh voice.

Bell shrugged. He was marched down long passageways and many steps. He came out into the courtyard, where the glistening black car with the blank windows waited. At an imperious gesture, he got in and sat down with every appearance of composure, as of a man resignedly submitting to force he cannot resist. The thick spectacles of the Herr Wiedkind regarded him with a gogglelike effect. There was a long pause. Then the sound of footsteps. Paula appeared, deathly pale. She was ushered into the vehicle—and only Bell's swift gesture of a finger to his lips checked her cry of relief.

Voices outside. The guttural Spanish of the Herr Wiedkind. Other, emotionless voices replying. The Herr Wiedkind climbed heavily into the car and sat down, producing a huge revolver which bore steadily upon Bell. The door closed, and he made a swift gesture of caution.

"Idt may be," said the Germanic voice harshly, "that you and the young ladty haff much to say to each other. But idt can wait. And I warn you, *mein Herr*, that at the first movement I shall fire."

Bell relaxed. There was the purring of the motor. The car moved off. Obviously there was some microphonic attachment inside the tonneau which carried every word within the locked vehicle to the ears of the two men upon the chauffeur's seat. An excellent idea for protection against treachery. Bell smiled, and moved so that his lips were a bare half-inch from Paula's ears.

"Try to weep, loudly," he said in the faintest of whispers. "This man is a friend."

But Paula could only stare at the bulky figure sitting opposite until he suddenly removed the spectacles, and smiled dryly, and then reached in his pockets and handed Bell two automatic pistols, and extended a tiny but very wicked weapon to Paula. He motioned to her to conceal it.

Jamison—moving to make the minimum of noise—handed Bell a sheet of stiff cardboard. It passed into Bell's fingers without a rustle. He showed it silently to Paula.

We were overheard last night by someone. We don't know who or how much he heard. Dictaphone in the room we talked in. Can't find out who it was or what action he's taken. We may be riding into a trap now. Ortiz has disappeared. He may be dead. We can only wait

and see.

The car was moving as if in city traffic, a swift dash forward and a sudden stop, and then another swift dash. But the walls within were padded so that no sound came from without save the faint vibration of the motor and now and then the distinct flexing of a spring. Then the car turned a corner. It went more rapidly. It turned another corner. And another....

In the light of the bright dome light, Bell saw beads of sweat coming out on Jamison's face. He did not dare to speak, but he formed words with his lips.

"He's turning wrong! This isn't the way to the field!"

Bell's jaws clenched. He took out his two automatics and looked at them carefully. And then, much too short a time from the departure for the flying field to have been reached, the car checked. It went over rough cobblestones, and Bell himself knew well that there had been no cobbled roadway between the flying field and his prison. And then the car went up a sort of ramp, a fairly steep incline which by the feel of the motor was taken in low, and on for a short distance more. Then the car stopped and the motor was cut off.

Keys rattled in the lock outside. The door opened. The blunt barrel of an automatic pistol peered in.

he door of the car swung wide, and Ortiz's pale grim face peered in behind the blue steel barrel of his automatic. He smiled queerly as Jamison, with a grunt of relief, tapped Bell's wrist in sign to put away his weapon.

Bell has fought through tremendous obstacles to find and kill The Master, whose diabolical poison makes murder-mad snakes of the hands; and, as he faces the monster at last—his own hands start to writhe!

"Ah, very well," said Ortiz, with the same queer smile upon his face. "One moment."

He disappeared. On the instant there was the thunderous crashing of a weapon. Bell started up, but Jamison thrust him back. Then Ortiz appeared again with smoke still trickling from the barrel of his pistol.

"I have just done something that I have long wished to do," he observed coolly. "I have killed the chauffeur and his companion. You may alight, now. I believe we will have half an hour or more. It will

do excellently."

He offered his hand to Paula as she stepped out. She seemed to shudder a little as she took it.

"I do not blame you for shuddering, Senorita," he said politely, "but men who are about to die may indulge in petty spites. And the chauffeur was a favorite with the deputy for whom I am substituting. Like all favorites of despots, he had power to abuse, and abused it. I could tell you tales, but refrain."

The car had come to a stop in what seemed to be a huge warehouse, and by the sound of water round about, it was either near or entirely built out over the harbor. A large section near the outer end was walled off. Boxes, bales, parcels and packages of every sort were heaped all about. Bell saw crated air engines lying in a row against one wall. There were a dozen or more of them. Machinery, huge cases of foodstuffs....

"The Buenos Aires depot," said Ortiz almost gaily. "This was the point of receipt for all the manufactured goods which went to the *fazenda* of Cuyaba, Senor Bell. Since you destroyed that place, it has not been so much used. However, it will serve excellently as a tomb. There are cases of hand grenades yonder. I advise you to carry a

certain number with you. The machine guns for the air-craft, with their ammunition, are here...."

He was hurrying them toward the great walled-off space as he talked, his automatic serving as a pointer when he indicated the various objects.

"Now, here," he added as he unlocked the door, "is your vessel. The Master bought only amphibian planes of late. Those for Cuyaba were assembled in this little dock and took off from the water. Your destruction up there, Senor Bell, left one quite complete but undelivered. I think another, crated, is still in the warehouse. I have been very busy, but if you can fuel and load it before we are attacked...."

They were in a roofed and walled but floorless shed, built into the warehouse itself. Water surged about below them, and on it floated a five passenger plane, fully assembled and apparently ready to fly, but brand new and so far unused.

“I'll look it over," said Bell, briefly. He swung down the catwalk painted on the wings. He began a swift and hasty survey. Soot on the exhaust stacks proved that the motors had been tried, at least. Everything seemed trim and new and glistening in the cabin. The

fuel tanks showed the barest trace of fuel. The oil tanks were full to their filling-plugs.

He swung back up.

"Taking a chance, of course," he said curtly. "If the motors were all right when they were tried, they probably are all right now. They may have been tuned up, and may not. I tried the controls, and they seem to work. For a new ship, of course, a man would like to go over it carefully, but if we've got to hurry...."

"I think," said Ortiz, and laughed, "that haste would be desirable. Herr Wiedkind—No! *Amigo mio*, it was that damned Antonio Calles who listened to us last night. I found pencil marks beside the listening instrument. He must have sat there and eavesdropped upon me many weary hours, and scribbled as men do to pass the time. He had a pretty taste in monograms.... I gave all the orders that were needful for you to take off from the flying field. I even went there myself and gave additional orders. And Calles was there. Also others of The Master's subjects. My treason would provoke a terrible revenge from The Master, so they thought to prove their loyalty by permitting me to disclose my plan and foil it at its beginning.

"I would have made the journey with you to The Master, but as a

prisoner with the tale of my treason written out. So I returned and changed the orders to the chauffeur, when all the Master's loyal subjects were waiting at the flying field. But soon it will occur to them what I have done. They will come here. Therefore, hasten!"

"We want food," said Bell evenly, "and arms, but mostly we want fuel. We'll get busy."

He shed his coat and picked up a hand-truck. He rammed it under a drum of gasoline and ran it to the walkway nearest to the floating plane. Coiled against the wall there was a long hose with a funnel at its upper end. In seconds he had the hose end in one of the wing fuel-tanks. In seconds more he had propped the funnel into place and was watching the gasoline gurgling down the hose.

"Paula," he said curtly, "watch this. When it's empty roll the drum away so I can put another in its place."

She moved quickly beside it, throwing him a little smile. She set absorbedly about her task.

Jamison arrived with another drum of gas before the first was emptied, and Bell was there with a third while the second still gurgled. They heaped the full drums in place, and Jamison suddenly

abandoned his truck to swear wrathfully and tear off his spectacles and fling them against the wall. The bushy eyebrows and beard peeled off. His coat went down. He began to rush loads of foodstuffs, arms, and other objects to a point from which they could be loaded on the plane. Ortiz pointed out the things he pantingly demanded.

In minutes, it seemed, he was demanding: "How much can we take? Any more than that?"

"No more," said Bell. "All the weight we can spare goes for fuel. See if you can find another hose and funnel and get to work on the other tank. I'm going to rustle oil."

He came staggering back with heavy drums of it. A thought struck him.

"How do we get out? What works the harbor door?"

Ortiz pointed, smiling.

"A button, Senor, and a motor does the rest." He looked at his watch. "I had better see if my fellow subjects have come."

He vanished, smiling his same queer smile. Bell worked frantically.

He saw Ortiz coming back, pausing to light a cigarette, and taking up a hatchet, with which he attacked a packing case.

"They are outside, Senor," he called. "They have found the signs of the car entering, and now are discussing."

He plucked something carefully from the packing box and went leisurely back toward the door. Bell began to load the food and stores into the cabin, with sweat streaming down his face.

There was the sound of a terrific explosion, and Bell jumped savagely to solid ground.

"Keep loading! I'll hold them back!" he snapped to Jamison.

But when he went pounding to the back of the warehouse he found Ortiz laughing.

"A hand grenade, Senor," he said in wholly unnatural levity. "Among the subjects of The Master. I believe that I am going mad, to take such pleasure in destruction. But since I am to die so shortly, why not go mad, if it gives me pleasure?"

He peered out a tiny hole and aimed his automatic carefully. It spurted out all the seven shots that were left.

"The man who poisoned me," he said pleasantly. "I think he is dead. Go back and make ready to leave, Senor Bell, because they will probably try to storm this place soon, and then the police will come, and then.... It is amusing that I am the one man to whom those enslaved among the city authorities would look for The Master's orders."

Bell stared out. He saw a small horde of people, frantically agitated, milling in the cramped and unattractive little street of Buenos Aires' waterfront. Sheer desperation seemed to impel them, desperation and a frantic fear. They surged forward—and Ortiz flung a hand grenade. Its explosion was terrific, but he had perhaps purposely flung it short. Bell suddenly saw police uniforms, fighting a way through to the front of the crowd and the source of all this disturbance.

"Go back," said Ortiz seriously. "I shall die, Senor Bell. There is nothing else for me to do. But I wish to die with Latin melodrama." He managed a smile. "I will give you ten minutes more. I can hold off the police themselves for so long. But you must hasten, because there are police launches."

He held out his hand. Bell took it.

"Good luck," said Ortiz.

"You can come—" began Bell, wrenched by the gaiety on Ortiz's face.

"Absurd," said Ortiz, smiling. "I should be murder mad within three days. This is a preferable death, I assure you. Ten minutes, no more!"

And Bell went racing back and found Jamison rolling away the last of the fuel drums and Paula looking anxiously for him.

"Tanks full," said Jamison curtly. "Everything set. What next?"

"Engines," said Bell.

He swung down and jerked a prop over. Again, and again.... The motor caught. He went plunging to the other. Minutes.... They caught. He throttled them down to the proper warming up roaring, while the air in the enclosed space grew foul.

Once more to the warehouse. Ortiz shouted and waved his hand. He was filling his pockets with hand grenades. Bell made a gesture of farewell and Ortiz seemed to smile as he went back to hold the entrance for a little longer.

"We're going," said Bell grimly. "Get your guns ready, Jamison, for when the door goes up."

He pressed on the button Ortiz had pointed out. There were more explosions and the rattle of firearms from the front of the warehouse. There was a sudden rumble of machinery and the blank front of the little covered dock rose suddenly. The sunlit waters of Buenos Aires harbor spread out before them. To Bell, who had not looked on sunlight that day, the effect was dazzling. He blinked, and then saw a fast little launch approaching. There were uniformed figures crowded about its bows.

"All set!" he snapped. "I'm going to give her the gun."

"Go to it," said Jamison. "We're—"

The motors bellowed and drowned out the rest. The plane shuddered and began to move. The sound of explosions from the back of the warehouse was loud and continuous, now. Out into the bright sunlight the plane moved, at first heavily, then swiftly....

Bell saw arms waving wildly in the launch with the uniformed men. Sunlight glittered suddenly on rifle barrels. Puffs of vapor shot out. Something spat through the wall beside Bell. But the roaring of the motors kept up, and the pounding of the waves against the curved bow of the boat-body grew more and more violent.... Sweat came out on Bell's face. The ship was not lifting....

But it did lift. Slowly, very slowly, carrying every pound with which it could have risen from the water. It swept past the police launch at ninety miles an hour, but no more than five feet above the waves. A big, clumsy tramp flying the Norwegian flag splashed up river with its propeller half out of water. Bell dared to rise a little so he could bank and dodge it. He could not rise above it.

He had one glimpse of blonde, astonished beards staring over the stern of the tramp as he swept by it, his wing tips level with its rail and barely twenty feet away. And then he went on and on, out to sea.

He began to spiral for height fully four miles offshore, and looked back at the sprawling city. Down by the waterfront a thick, curling mass of smoke was rising from one spot abutting on the water. It swayed aside and Bell saw the rectangular opening out of which the plane had come.

"Ortiz's in there," he said, sick at heart. "Dying as he planned."

But there was a sudden upheaval of timbers and roof. A colossal burst of smoke. A long time later the concussion of a vast explosion. There was nothing left where the warehouse had been.

Bell looked, and swore softly to himself, and felt a fresh surge of the

hatred he bore to The Master and all his works. And then filmy clouds loomed up but a little above the rising plane, and Bell shot into them and straightened out for the south.

For many long hours the plane floated on to southward, high above a gray ocean which seemed deceptively placid beneath a canopy of thin clouds. The motors roared steadily in the main, though once Bell instructed Jamison briefly in the maintenance of a proper course and height, and swung out into the terrific blast of air that swept past the wings. He clung to struts and handholds and made his way out on the catwalk to make some fine adjustment in one motor, with six thousand feet of empty space below the swaying wing.

"Carburetter wrong," he explained when he had closed the cabin window behind him again and the motors' roar was once more dulled. "It was likely to make a lot of carbon in the cylinders. O.K., now."

Paula's hand touched his shyly. He smiled abstractedly at her and went back to the controls.

And then the plane kept on steadily. Time and space have become purely relative in these days, in startling verification of Mr. Einstein, and the distance between Buenos Aires and Magellan Strait is great

or small, a perilous journey or a mere day's travel, according to the mind and the transportation facilities of the voyager. Before four o'clock in the afternoon the coast was low and sandy to the westward, and it continued sterile and bare for long hours while the plane hung high against the sky with a following wind driving it on vastly more swiftly than its own engines could have contrived.

It was little before sunset when the character of the shore changed yet again, and the sun was low behind a bank of angry clouds when the stubby forefinger of rock that Magellan optimistically named the Cape of the Eleven Thousand Virgins reached upward from the seemingly placid water. Bell swept lower, then, much lower, looking for a landing place. He found it eight or nine miles farther on, on a wide sandy beach some three miles from a lighthouse. The little plane splashed down into tumbling sea and, half supported by the waves and half by the lift remaining to its wings, ran for yards up upon the hard packed sand.

The landing had been made at late twilight, and Bell moved stiffly when he rose from the pilot's seat.

"I'm going over to that lighthouse," he said curtly. "There won't be enough men there to be dangerous and they probably haven't frequent communication with the town. I'll learn something, anyway.

You two stay with the plane."

Jamison lifted his eyebrows and was about to speak, but looked at Bell's expression and stopped. Leadership is everywhere a matter of emotion and brains together, and though Jamison had his share of brains, he had not Bell's corroding, withering passion of hatred against The Master and all who served him gladly. All the way down the coast Bell had been remembering things he had seen of The Master's doing. His power was solely that of fear, and the deputies of his selection had necessarily been men who would spread that terror with an unholy zest. The nature of his hold upon his subjects was such that no honorable man would ever serve him willingly, and for deputies he had need of men even of enthusiasm. His deputies, then, were men who found in the assigned authority of The Master full scope for the satisfaction of their own passions. And Bell had seen what those passions brought about, and there was a dull flame of hatred burning in his eyes that would never quite leave them until those men were powerless and The Master dead.

“You'll look after the ship and Paula," said Bell impatiently. "All right?"

Jamison nodded. Paula looked appealingly at Bell, but he had become a man with an obsession. Perhaps the death of Ortiz had

cemented it, but certainly he was unable to think of anything, now, but the necessity of smashing the ghastly hold of The Master upon all the folk he had entrapped. Subconsciously, perhaps, Bell saw in the triumph of The Master a blow to all civilization. Less vaguely, he foresaw an attempt at the extension of The Master's rule to his own nation. But when Bell thought of The Master, mainly he remembered certain disconnected incidents. The girl at Ribiera's luxurious *fazenda* outside of Rio, who had been ordered to persuade him to be her lover, on penalty of a horrible madness for her infant son if she failed. Of a pale and stricken *fazendiero* on the Rio Laurenço who thought him a deputy and humbly implored the grace of The Master for a moody twelve year old girl. Of a young man who kept his father, murder mad, in a barred room in his house and waited despairingly for that madness to be meted out upon himself and on his wife and children. Of a white man who had been kept in a cage in Cuyaba, with other men....

Bell trudged on through the deepening night with his soul a burning flame of hatred. He clambered amid boulders, guided by the tall lighthouse of Cape Possession with the little white dwelling he had seen at its base before nightfall. He fell, and rose, and forced his way on and upward, and at last was knocking heavily at a trim and neatly painted door.

He was so absorbed in his rage that his talk with the lighthouse keeper seemed vague in his memory, afterward. The keeper was a wizened little Welshman from the Chibut who spoke English with an extraordinary mixture of a Spanish intonation and a Cimbrian accent. Bell listened heavily and spoke more heavily still. At the end he went back to the plane with a spindle-shanked boy with a lantern accompanying him.

"All settled," he said grimly, when Jamison came out into the darkness with a ready revolver to investigate the approaching light. "We get a boat from the lighthouse keeper to go to Punta Arenas in. He's a devout member of some peculiar sect, and he's seen enough of the hell Punta Arenas amounts to, to believe what I told him of its cause. His wife will look after Paula, and this boy will hitch a team to the plane and haul it out of sight early in the morning. With the help of God, we'll kill Ribiera and The Master before sunset to-morrow."

Chapter 16

But they did not kill The Master before nightfall. It was not quite practicable. Bell and Jamison started out well before dawn with a favorable wind and tide, in the small launch the wizened Welshman placed at their disposal. His air was one of dour piety, but he

accepted Bell's offer of money with an obvious relief, and criticized his Paraguayan currency with an acid frankness until Jamison produced Argentine pesos sufficient to pay for the boat three times over.

"I think," said Jamison dryly, "that Pau—that Miss Canalejas is safe enough until we come back. The keeper is a godly man and knows we have money. She'll be in no danger, except of her soul. They may try to save that."

Bell did not answer. He could think of nothing but the mission he had set himself. He tinkered with the engine to make it speed up, and set the sails with infinite care to take every possible advantage of the stiff breeze that blew. During the day, those sails proved almost as much of a nuisance as a help. The fiendish, sullen williwaws that blow furiously and without warning about the Strait required watching, and more than once it was necessary to reef everything and depend on the motor alone.

Bell watched the horizon ahead with smouldering eyes. Jamison watched him almost worriedly.

"Look here, Bell," he said at last, "you'll get nowhere feeling like you do. I know you've done The Master more damage than I have,

but you'll just run your head into a trap unless you use your brains. For instance, you didn't ask about communications. There's a direct telegraph wire from Cape Virgins to Buenos Aires, and there's telephonic communication between the Cape and Punta Arenas. Do you imagine that the plane wasn't seen when it came in the Cape? And do you imagine The Master doesn't know we're here?"

Bell turned, then, and frowned blackly.

"I hadn't thought of it," he said grimly, "but I put some hand grenades in the locker, there."

"You damned fool!" said Jamison angrily. "Stop being bloodthirsty and use your head! You haven't even asked what I've done! I've done something, anyhow. That bundle I chucked in the bow has a couple of sheepmen's outfits in it. Lots of sheep raised around here. We'll put 'em on before we land. And like a good general, I arranged a method of retreat before we left B. A. There'll be a naval vessel here in two or three days. She's carrying a party of Government scientists. She'll anchor in Punta Arenas harbor and announce a case of some infectious disease on board. No shore leave, you see, and nobody from shore permitted on board her. And she has one or two damned good analytical chemists with a damned good laboratory on board her, too. It's a long gamble, but if we can get hold of some of The

Master's poison.... Do you see?"

"Yes," said Bell heavily. "I see. But you haven't been through what I've been through. What I've done, fighting that devil, has caused men to be deserted after being enslaved. There's one place, Cuyaba...."

His face twitched. That place was in his dreams, now. That place and others where human beings had watched their bodies go mad, and had been carried about screaming with horror at the crimes those bodies committed....

"I'm going to kill The Master," he rasped. "That's all."

He settled down to his grim watch for the city. All during the cloudy, overcast day he strained his eyes ahead. Jamison could make nothing of him. In the end he had to leave Bell to his moody waiting.

The morning passed, and midday, and a long afternoon. Three times Bell came restlessly back to the engine and tried to coax more speed out of it. But when darkness fell the town was still not in sight. They kept on, then, steering by the stars with the motor putt-putt-putting sturdily away in the stern. The water splashed and washed all about them. The little boat rose, and fell, and rose and fell again.

"That's the town," said Bell grimly.

It was eleven at night, or later. Lights began to appear, very far away, dancing miragelike on the edge of the water. They grew nearer with almost infinite slowness. Two wide bands of many lights, with a darker space in which a few much brighter lights showed clearly. Presently a single red light appeared, the Punta Arenas harbor light, twenty-five feet up on an iron pole. They passed it.

"Bell," said Jamison curtly, "it's time you showed some sense, now. We're going to find out some things before we get reckless. This town isn't a big one, but it always was a hell on earth. No extradition from here. It's full of wanted men. It's dying, now, from the old days when all ships passed the Straits before the Panama Canal opened up, but it ought to be still a hell on earth. And we're going to put on these sheepmen outfits, and put up at some low caste sailors' and sheepmen's hotel on shore, and find out what is what. In the morning, if you like—"

"In the morning," said Bell coldly, "I'm going to settle with The Master."

They found a small and filthy hotel, in a still filthier street where the houses were alternately black and silent and empty, and filled with

the squalid hilarity most seaport towns can somehow manage to support. The street lamps were white and cold. The dirt and squalor showed the more plainly by their light. There were sailors from the few ships in harbor, and women so haggard and bedraggled that shrill laughter and lavish endearments remained their only allure. And Bell and Jamison plodded to the reeking place in which a half-drunk sheepman pointed, and there Bell sat grimly in the vermin infested room while Jamison, swearing wryly, went out.

He came back later, much later. His breath was strong of bad whiskey and he looked like a man who feels that a bath would be very desirable. He looked like a man who feels unclean.

"Give me a cigarette," he said shortly. "I found out most of what we want to know."

Bell gave him a cigarette and waited.

"Good thing you stayed behind," said Jamison. "I want to vomit. Why people go in hell holes for fun.... But I was very drunk and very amorous. Picked up a woman and fed her liquor. Young, too. Damnation! She got crying drunk and told me everything she knew. I gave her money and left. Punta Arenas is The Master's, body and soul."

"One could have guessed it," said Bell grimly.

"Nothing like it is," said Jamison. "Every living creature, man, woman, and child, has been fed that devilish poison of his. The keepers of the dives go fawning to the local officials for the antidote. The *jefe politico* is driven in his carriage to be cured when red spots form before his eyes. The damned place is full of suicides, and women, and—oh, my God! It's horrible!"

A humming, buzzing noise set up off in the night somewhere. It kept up for a long time, throttled down. Suddenly it seemed to grow louder, changed in pitch, and dwindled as if into the far, far distance.

"That's one of The Master's planes now, no doubt," said Jamison savagely, "going off on some errand for him. He uses this place practically as an experiment station. The human beings here are his guinea pigs. The deputies get a standardized form of the stuff, but he's got it worked out in different doses so he can make a man go mad in hours, if he chooses, instead of after a delay. I don't know how. And The Master—"

He checked himself sharply. There were shuffling footsteps in the hall outside. A timid tap on the door. Jamison opened it, while Bell dropped one hand inconspicuously to a weapon inside his shapeless

clothing.

The toothless and filthy old man who kept the hotel beamed in at them.

"*Senores*," he cackled. "*Vdes son de Porvenir, no es verdad?*"

Jamison hiccoughed, as one who has been out and been drunken ought to do.

"*No, viejo*," he rumbled tipsily, "*somos de la estancia del Señor Rubio. Vaya.*"

The old man seemed to mourn that they did not come from the sheep ranches about Porvenir Bay. But he produced a bottle with a shaking hand, still beaming.

"*Tengo muchos amigos en Porvenir*," he chirped amiably. "*Y questa botella—*"

"*Démela*," rumbled Jamison. He reached out his hand.

"*No mas que poquito!*" said the old man, beaming but anxious as Jamison tilted it to his lips. "*Es visky de gentes....*"

He beamed upon Bell, and Bell swallowed a spoonful and seemed to swallow vastly more. He lay back lazily while Jamison in the part of a tipsy sheepherder bullied the old man amiably and eventually chased him out.

"You're amused?" asked Jamison sardonically, when there were no more sounds outside. "Because I said you didn't want to meet the young senorita who loved you when she saw you downstairs? Well, Bell, if you used your brain you didn't swallow any of that stuff."

Bell started up. Jamison caught him by the shoulder.

"I'm not sure," he said sharply. "Of course not. But it's damned funny for a Spanish hotel keeper to give something for nothing, even when he seemed just to want to gossip about his friends. Here. Drink this water. It looks vile enough to take the place of mustard...."

Next morning the hotel keeper beamed upon them both as they went out of the place. A slatternly, dark haired girl who leaned on his shoulder smiled invitingly at Bell. And Bell, in his character of a loutish sheepman from one of the ranches that dot the shores of the Strait, grinned awkwardly back. But he went on with Jamison.

"We separate," said Jamison under his breath. "We want to find

where The Master lives, mostly, and then we want to find the laboratory where his stuff is mixed. We don't want to do any killing until that's settled. After all, the Trade has something to say!"

Bell codded indifferently and began to wander idly about the streets, turning here and there as if moved by nothing more than the vaguest curiosity. But gradually he was working through the sections in which the larger buildings stood. Concrete structures, astonishingly modern, dotted the business section. But none of them had the air that would surround a place where a man with power of life or death would be. In a town the size of Punta Arenas there would be unmistakable evidences about The Master's residence, even if it were only that those who passed it did so hurriedly and with a twinge of fear.

There were prosperous men in plenty on the streets, mingled with deserting sailors, stockmen and farmers from the villages along the Strait, and even a few grimy men who looked like miners. But there is a lignite mine not far from the city, and a narrow gauge railroad running to it. Of the prosperous-seeming men, however, Bell picked out one here and there toward whom all passersby adopted a manner of cringing respect. Bell lounged against a pole and studied them thoughtfully. Men with an air of amused and careless scorn which only men with unlimited power may adopt. He saw one grossly fat

man with hard and cruel eyes. The uniformed policemen drove all traffic abjectly out of the way of his carriage, and stood with lifted hat until he had passed. The fat man gave no faintest sign of acknowledgment.

"I wonder," said Bell slowly, and very grimly, "if that's The Master?"

And then a passerby dodged quickly past his shoulder, brushing against him, and waited humbly in the street. Bell turned. A party of men were taking up nearly all the sidewalk. There were half a dozen of them in all. And nearly in the middle was the bulky, immaculate, pigmented Ribiera.

Bell stiffened. But to move, beyond clearing the way, would be to attract attention. He backed clumsily off the curbing as if making way....

And Ribiera looked at his face.

Bell's hand drifted near his hidden weapon. But Ribiera looked neither surprised nor alarmed. He halted and chuckled.

"Ah, the Senhor Bell!"

Bell said nothing, looking as stupid as possible, merely because

there was nothing else to do.

"Ah, do not deny my acquaintance!" said Ribiera. He laughed. "I advise you to go and look at the view, over the harbor. Good day, Senhor Bell."

Laughing, he went off along the street. And Bell felt a cold horror creeping over him as he realized what Ribiera might mean. Ribiera had entirely too much against him to greet him only, in a town where even the dogs dared not bark without The Master's express command. He had guards with him, men who would have shot Bell down at a nod from Ribiera.

Bell burst into a mad run for the waterfront. When the bay spread out before his eyes he saw what Ribiera meant, and something seemed to snap in his brain.

The plane in which he and Jamison and Paula had escaped in was floating out in the harbor. It was unmistakable. A larger, bulkier seaplane floated beside it. The buzzing in the air the night before.... The arrival of the plane had been telephoned from Cape Virgins. Through a glass, perhaps, even its alighting had been watched. And a big seaplane had gone out to bring it back. Footprints in the sand would lead toward the lighthouse. There would be plenty of men to

storm that, if necessary, to take the three fugitives. But they would have found only Paula. It was quite possible that the plane had only been sent for after Bell and Jamison had been seen to land in Punta Arenas. And Paula in The Master's hands would explain Ribiera's amusement perfectly.

Bell found Jamison looking unhurriedly for him. And Jamison glanced at his utterly white face and said softly:

"We want to get where we can't be seen, to talk. There's the devil to pay."

"No use hiding," said Bell. His lips seemed stiff. "Paula—"

"Hide anyway," snapped Jamison. He fairly thrust Bell into an alleyway between two houses and thrust two rounded objects beneath his loose fitting coat. "Two grenades. I have two more. The boat we came in is taken—"

"So is the plane," said Bell emotionlessly.

"And there is a sign, in English, posted where we tied it up. The sign says, '*The Senores Bell and Jamison may recover their boat on application to The Master, and may also receive news of a late*

traveling companion from him."

"We're known," Bell told him—and amazingly found it possible to smile faintly—"Ribiera met me on the street and spoke to me and laughed and went on."

Jamison stared. Bell's manner was almost entirely normal again. Then Jamison shrugged.

"The sense of what you're saying," he observed wryly, "is that we're licked. Let us, then, go to see The Master. I confess I feel some curiosity to know just what he's like."

Bell was smiling. Being in an entirely abnormal state, he had a curious certitude of the proper course to adopt. He went up to a policeman and said politely, in Spanish:

"I am desired to report to The Master, himself. Will you direct me?"

The policeman abased himself instantly and trotted with them as a guide. And Bell walked naturally, now, with his head up and his shoulders back, and smoked leisurely as he went, and the policeman's abasement became abject. All who walked with that air of amused superiority in Punta Arenas were high in the service of

The Master. Obviously, the two men in these dejected clothes must also be high in the service of The Master, and had adopted their disguise for purposes into which a mere policeman and a slave of The Master should not dare enquire.

Jamison was rather grim and still. Jamison thought he was walking to his death. But Bell smiled peculiarly and talked almost gaily and —as Jamison thought—almost irrationally.

They came to a house set in a fairly spacious lawn behind a rather high wall. There were greenhouses behind it, and there were flowers growing as well as any flowers can be expected to grow in such high altitudes. It was an extraordinarily cheerful dwelling to be found in Punta Arenas, but the shuddering fear with which the little policeman removed his hat as he entered the gateway was instructive.

They were confronted by four other policemen, on guard inside the gate.

"*Estos Señores*—" began the abject one.

"Take us to The Master," commanded Bell in a species of amused and superior scorn.

"It is required, Senor," said the leader of the four on guard, very respectfully, "it is required that none enter without being searched for weapons."

Bell laughed.

"Does The Master manage things so?" he asked scornfully. "Now, where I am deputy no man would dare to think of a weapon to be used against me! If it is The Master's rule, though...."

The policeman cringed. Bell scornfully thrust an automatic out.

"Take it," he snapped. "And go and tell The Master that the Senores Bell and Jamison await his pleasure, and that they have given up their weapons."

The policeman scuttled toward the house. Bell smiled at his cigarette.

"Do you know, Bell," said Jamison dryly, in English, "I'd hate to play poker with you."

"I'm not bluffing," said Bell. "Not altogether. I've a four card flush, with the draw to come."

Almost instantly the policeman returned, more abject still. He had stammered out Bell's message, just as it was given him. And the slaves of The Master did not usually disobey orders, especially orders designed to prevent any danger of a doomed man or woman trying to assassinate The Master before madness was complete. Bell and Jamison were received by liveried servants in utter silence and conducted through a long passageway, too long to have been contained entirely in the house as seen from the front. Indeed, they came out into a great open greenhouse, in which the smell of flowers was heavy. There were flowers everywhere, and a benign, small old man with a snowy beard and hair, sat at a desk as if chatting of amiable trivialities with the frock-coated men who stood about him. The white haired old man lifted a blossom delicately to his nostrils and inhaled its perfume with a sensitive delight. He looked up and smiled benignly upon the two.

It was then that Jamison got a shock surpassing all the rest. Bell's hands were writhing at the ends of his wrists, writhing as if they were utterly beyond his control and as if they were longing to rend and tear....

And Bell suddenly looked down at them, and his expression was that of a man who sees cobras at the ends of his arms.

Chapter 17

There was a long pause. Bell was very calm. He seemed to tear his eyes from the writhing hands that were peculiarly sensate, as if under the control of in intelligence alien to his own.

"I believe," said Bell steadily, "that The Master wishes to speak to me."

With an apparent tremendous effort of will, he thrust his hands into his pockets. Jamison cursed softly. Bell had taken the direction of things entirely out of his hands. It only remained to play up.

"To be sure," said a mild, benevolent voice. The man with the snowy beard regarded Bell exactly in the fashion of an elderly philanthropist. "I am The Master, Senor Bell. You have interested me greatly. I have grown to have a great admiration for you. Will you be seated? Your companion also pleases me. I would like"—and the mild brown eyes beamed at him—"I would like to have your friendship, Senor Bell."

"Pull out a chair for me, Jamison," said Bell in a strained voice. "And—I'd like to have a cigarette."

Jamison, cursing under his breath, put a chair behind Bell and stuck

a cigarette between his lips. He held a match, though his hands shook.

"You might sit down, too," said Bell steadily. "From the manner of The Master, I imagine that the conversation will take some time."

He inhaled deeply of his cigarette, and faced the little man again. And The Master looked so benevolent that he seemed absolutely cherubic, and there was absolutely no sign of anything but the utmost saintliness about him. His eyes were clear and mild. His complexion was fresh and translucent. The wrinkles that showed upon his face were those of an amiable and a serene soul filled with benevolence and charity. He looked like one of those irritatingly optimistic old gentlemen who habitually carry small coins and stray bits of candy in their pockets for such small children as they may converse with under the smiling eyes of nurses.

"Ah, Senor Bell," he said gently. "You do cause me to admire you. May I see your hands again?"

Bell held them out. He seemed to have conquered their writhing to some extent. But he could not hold them quite still. Sweat stood out on his forehead. He thrust them abruptly out of sight again.

"Sad," said The Master gently. "Very sad." He sighed faintly and laid down the rose he had been toying with. His fingers caressed the soft petals delicately. "Fortunately," he said benevolently, "it is not yet too late for me to relieve the strain under which you labor, Senor. May I send for a certain medicine which will dispose of those symptoms in a very short time?"

"We'll talk first," said Bell harshly. "I want to hear what you have to say."

The Master nodded, his fingers touching the rose petals as if in a sensitive pleasure in their texture.

"Always courageous," he said benignly. "I admire it while I combat it. But the Senor Jamison...."

Jamison had been looking fascinatedly at his own hands, opening and closing the fingers with a savage abruptness. They obeyed him, though they trembled.

"I didn't drink the damned stuff that hotel keeper brought us last night," he growled. "Bell did. And I—"

"Wait a minute, Jamison," said Bell evenly. "Let's talk to The Master

for a while. I swore, sir," he said grimly, "that I'd kill you. I've seen what your devilish poison does, in the hands of the men you've chosen to distribute it. I've seen"—he swallowed and said harshly—"I've seen enough to make me desire nothing so much as to see you roast in hell! But you wanted to talk to me. Go ahead!"

The Master beamed at him, and then glanced about at the frock-coated men who had been attending him. Bell glanced at them. Ribiera was there, chuckling.

"I told you, *tio mio*," he said familiarly, "that he would not be polite. You can do nothing with him. Better have him shot."

Francia, of Paraguay, nodded amusedly to Bell as their eyes met. But The Master shook his really rather beautiful head. An old man can be good to look at, and with a saintly aureole of snow-white hair and the patriarchal white beard, The Master was the picture of benign and beautiful old age.

"Ah, you do not understand," he protested mildly. "The more the Senor Bell shows his courage, *hijo mio*, the more we must persuade him." He turned to Bell. "I realise," he said gently, "that there are hardships connected with the administration of my power, Senor. It is inevitable. But the Latin races of the continent which is now

nearly mine require strong handling. They require a strong man to lead them. They are comfortable only under despotism. The task I have chosen for you is different, entirely. *Los Americanos del Norte* will not respond to the treatment which is necessary for those *del Sud*. Their governments, their traditions, are entirely unlike. If you become my deputy and viceroy for all your nation, you shall rule as you will. A benevolent, yet strong, rule is needed for your people. It may even be—I will permit it—that the democratic institutions of your nation may continue if you so desire. I am offering you, Senor, the position of the absolute ruler of your nation. You may interfere with the present government not at all, if you choose, provided only that my own commands are obeyed when relayed through you. I choose you because you have courage, and resource, and because you have the *Yanqui* cleverness which will understand your nation and cope with it."

Bell inhaled deeply.

"In other words," he said bitterly, "you're saying indirectly that you offer me a chance to be the sort of ruler Americans will submit to without too much fuss, because you think one of Ribiera's stamp would drive them to rebellion."

The fine dark eyes twinkled.

"You have much virtue, Senor. My nephew—though he is to be my successor—has a weakness for a pretty face. Would you prefer that I give him the task of subduing your nation?"

"You might try it," said Bell. His eyes gleamed. "He'd be dead within a week."

The Master laughed softly.

"I like you, Senor. I do like you indeed. I have not been so defied since another *Americano del Norte* defied me in this same room. But he had not your resource. He had been enslaved with much less difficulty than yourself. I do not remember what happened to him...."

"He was taken, Master," said a fat man with hard eyes, obsequiously, "he was taken in Bolivia." It was the man whom Bell had seen earlier that morning in a carriage. "You gave him to me. He had insulted me when I ordered him sent to you. I had him killed, but he was very obstinate."

"Ah, yes," said The Master meditatively. "You told me the details." He seemed to recall small facts in benevolent retrospection. "But you, Senor Bell, I have need of you. In fact, I shall insist upon your friendship. And therefore—"

He beamed upon Bell.

"I give you back the Senorita Canalejas."

He shook his head reproachfully at the utterly grim look in Bell's eyes.

"I shall give you one single portion of the antidote to the medicine which makes your hands behave so badly. You may take it when you please. The Senor Jamison I shall keep and enslave. I do not think he will be as obstinate as you are, but he has excellent qualities. If you prove obdurate, I may yet persuade him to undertake certain tasks for me. But you and the Senorita Canalejas are free. Your boat has been reprovisioned and provided with fuel. You may go from here where you will."

Ribiera snarled.

"*Tio mio*," he protested angrily, "you promised me—"

"Your will in many things," said The Master gently, "but not in all. Remember that you have much to learn, *hijo mio*. I have taught you to prepare my little medicine, it is true. That is so you can take my place if age infirmity shall carry me away." The Master folded his

hands with an air of pious resignation. "But you must learn policy. The Senorita Canalejas belongs to the Senor Bell."

Jamison was staring, now, but Bell's eyes had narrowed to mere slits.

"You see," said The Master gently, to him, "I desire your friendship. You may go where you will. You may take the Senorita Canalejas with you. You will have enough of the antidote to my little medicine to keep you sane for perhaps a week. In one week you may go far, with her. You may do many things. But you cannot find a place of safety for her. I still have a little power, Senor. If you take her with you, your hands will writhe again. Your body will become uncontrollable. Your eyes, staring and horror-struck, will observe your own hands rending her. While your brain is yet sane you will see this body of yours which now desires her so ardently, tearing at and crushing that delicate figure, gouging out her eyes, battering her tender flesh, destroying her.... Have you ever seen what a man who has taken my little medicine does to a human being at his mercy?"

The figures about The Master were peculiarly tense. The fat man with the hard eyes laughed suddenly. It was a horrible laugh. Francia of Paraguay took out his handkerchief and delicately wiped his lips. He was smiling. Ribiera looked at Bell's face and chuckled. His whole gross figure shook with his amusement.

"And of course," said The Master benignly, "if you prefer to commit suicide, if you prefer to leave her here—well, my nephew knows little expedients to reduce her will to compliance. You recall *Yagué*, among others."

Bell's face was a white mask of horror and fury. He tried to speak, and failed. He raised his hand to his throat—and it tore at the flesh, insanely.

"Let—let me see her," croaked Bell, as if strangling.

Jamison stiffened. Bell seemed to be trying to get his hands into his pockets. They were apparently uncontrollable. He thrust them under his coat as there was a stirring at the door.

And Paula was brought in, as if she had been waiting. She was entirely colorless, but she smiled at Bell. She came quickly to his side.

"I heard," she said in a clear and even little voice. "We will go together, Charles. If there is a week in which we can be together, it will be so much of happiness. And when you are—The Master's victim, we will let the little boat sink, and sink with it. I do not wish to live without you, Charles, and you do not wish to live as his

slave."

Bell gave utterance to a sudden laugh that was like a bark. His hands came out from under his coat. Dangling from each one was a small, pear-shaped globule of metal. A staff projected upward from each one, and he held those staffs in his writhing hands. About each wrist was a tiny loop of cord that went down to a pin at the base of the staffs.

"Close to me, Paula," he said coldly. She clung to his arm. He moved forward, with half-a-dozen revolver muzzles pointed at his breast.

"If one of you damned fools fires," he said harshly, "I'll let go. When I let go—these are Mills grenades, and they go off in three seconds after they leave the hand. Stand still!"

There was a terrible, frozen silence. Then a movement from behind Bell. Jamison was rising with a grunt.

"Some day, Bell," he observed coolly, "I'll be on to all of your curves. This is the best one yet. But you're likely to let go at any second, aren't you?"

"Like hell!" raged Bell. "I drank some of your poison," he snarled at

The Master. "Yes! I was fool enough to do it! But I took what measures any man will take who finds he's swallowed poison. I got it out of my stomach at once. And if you or one of these deputies tries to move...."

Ribiera had blanched to a pasty gray. The Master was frozen. But Bell saw Ribiera's eyes move in swift calculation. There was a solid wall behind The Master. It seemed as if the greenhouse were a sort of passageway between two larger structures. And there was a door almost immediately behind Ribiera. Ribiera glanced right—left—

He flung himself through that door. He knew the secret of The Master's power. He was The Master's appointed successor. If The Master and all his deputies died, Ribiera....

But Bell snapped into action like a bent spring released. His arm shot forward. A grenade went hurtling through the door through which Ribiera had fled. There was an instantaneous, terrific explosion. The solid wall shook and shivered and, with a vast deliberation, collapsed. The greenhouse was full of crushed plaster dust. Panes of glass shivered....

But Bell was upon The Master. He had struck the little man down and stood over him, his remaining automatic replacing the grenade

he had thrown.

"Ribiera's dead," he snapped, "and if I'm shot The Master dies too and you all go mad! Stand back!"

The deputies stood frozen.

"I think," said Jamison composedly, "I take a hand now. I'll pick him up, Bell.... Right. I've got him. With a grenade hanging down his back. If he jerks away from me, or I from him, it will blow his spine to bits."

"Hold him so," said Bell coldly.

He went coolly to where he could look over the heap of the collapsed wall. He saw a bundle of torn clothing that had been a man. It was flung against a cracked and tottering chimney.

"Right," he said evenly. "Ribiera's dead, all right."

He turned to the deputies, whose revolvers were still in their hands.

"The Master's carriage, please," he said politely. "To the door. You may accompany us if you please, but in other carriages. I am working for the release of all the Master's slaves, and you among

them if you choose. But you can see very easily that there is no hope of the release of The Master without the meeting of my terms."

The Master spoke, softly and mildly and without fear.

"It is my order that the Senor Bell is to be obeyed. I shall return. You need have no fear of my death. My carriage."

A man went stiffly, half-paralyzed with terror, to where chattering scared servants were grouped in the awful fear that came upon the slaves of The Master at any threat to his rule.

But Bell and Paula and Jamison went slowly and cautiously—though they held the whip hand—to the entrance door of the house, and out to the entrance gate. A carriage was already before the door when they reached it, and others were drawing up in a line behind it.

"Get in," said Bell briefly. "Down to the waterfront."

He turned to the group of frock-coated, stricken men who had followed.

"Some of you men," he said coldly, "had better go on ahead and warn the police and the public generally about the certainty of The Master's death if any attempt is made to rescue him."

Francia, of Paraguay, summoned a swagger and raised his hand to the second carriage. It drew in to the curb.

"I will attend to it, Senor Bell," he said politely. "Ah, when I think that I once raised my revolver to shoot you and refrained!"

He drove off swiftly.

Bell's eyes were glowing. He got into the carriage, and such a procession drove through the streets of Punta Arenas as has rarely moved through the streets of any city in the world. The long line of carriages moved at a funereal pace amid a surging, terrified mob. The Master beamed placidly as he looked out over white, starkly agonized faces. Some of the people groaned audibly. A few cursed The Master in their despair. More cursed Bell, not daring to strike or fire on him. But he would have been torn to bits if he had stepped from the carriage for an instant.

"Bell," said Jamison dryly, "considering that I'm prepared to be blown apart on three seconds notice, it is peculiar that this mob frightens me."

The Master's eyes twinkled benignly. He seemed totally insensible to fear.

"You need not be afraid," he said gently. "They will not touch you unless I order them."

Jamison stared down at the little man whose collar he held firmly, with a Mills grenade dangling down at the base of his neck.

"I wouldn't order them to attack, if I were you," he said coldly. "I haven't Bell's brains, but I have just as much dislike for you as he has."

They came to the harbor. Bell spoke again.

"The carriage is to drive out to the end of one of the docks, and no one else is to go out on that dock."

The Master relayed the order in his mild voice, but as the coachman obeyed him he clucked his tongue commiseratingly.

"Senor Bell," he protested gently. "You do not expect to escape! Not after killing me! Why that is absurd!"

Bell said nothing. He alighted from the carriage, his face set grimly, and stared ashore at the long, long row of terrified faces staring out at him. The whole waterfront seemed to be lined with staring faces. Wails came from that mass of enslaved human beings.

"Hold him here, Jamison," he said drearily. "I'm going out to look at that big plane. There's a rowboat tied to the dock, here."

He swung down the side into the dock and rowed off into the harbor, while the horses attached to The Master's carriage pawed impatiently at the wooden flooring of the dock. Bell reached the two planes anchored on the still harbor water. The smaller one had brought them down from Buenos Aires. The larger one had gone after the beached amphibian and brought it and Paula on to the city. Bell, from the shore, was seen to be investigating the larger one. He came rowing back.

His head appeared above the dock edge.

"All right," he said tiredly. "The Master has a rule requiring all his ships ready for instant flight. Very useful. The big plane is fueled and full of oil. We'll go out to it and take off."

Jamison lifted The Master to his feet and with a surge of muscles swept him down to the flooring of the dock.

"Paula first," said Bell, "and then The Master, and then you, Jamison."

"One moment," said The Master reproachfully. "It would be cruel not to let me reassure my subjects. I will give an order."

Bell and Jamison listened suspiciously. But he spoke gently to the coachman.

"You will tell the deputies," said The Master in Spanish, "that a month's supply of medicine for all my subjects will be found in my laboratory. And you may tell them that I shall return before the end of that time."

The coachman's eyes filled with a passionate relief.

"Now," said The Master placidly, "I am ready for our little jaunt."

Paula descended the ladder and seated herself in the bow of the boat. Bell covered The Master grimly with his automatic as he descended, with surprising agility. Jamison came down last, and resumed his former grip on The Master's collar. Bell rowed out to the big plane.

Jamison kept close watch while Bell started the four huge motors and throttled them down to warming up speed, and while he hauled up the anchor with which the huge seaplane was anchored.

The dock was covered with a swarm of panic stricken folk.

Everywhere, all the inhabitants of the city who were slaves to The Master had come in awful terror to watch. And all the inhabitants of the city were slaves to The Master. Some of them fell to their knees and held out imploring arms to Bell, begging him for mercy and the return of The Master. Some cursed wildly.

But, with his jaws set grimly, Bell gave the motors the gun.

The big plane moved heavily, then more swiftly through the water. It lifted slowly, and rose, and rose, and dwindled to a speck high in the air.

And all through the streets and ways of Punta Arenas, fear stalked almost as a tangible thing. Panic hovered over the housetops, always ready to descend. Terror was in the air that every man breathed, and every human being looked at every other human being with staring, haunted eyes. Punta Arenas was waiting for its murder madness to begin.

Chapter 18

There were four motors to pull the big plane through the air, and their roaring was a vast thundering noise which the earth re-echoed. But inside the cabin that tumult was reduced to a not intolerable

humming sound.

"What'll I do with this devil, Bell?" asked Jamison. "Now that we're aloft, I confess this grenade makes me nervous. I'm holding it so tightly my fingers are getting cramped."

"Tie him up," said Bell, without looking. "He'll talk presently."

Movements. The plane flew on, swaying slightly in the way of big sea-planes everywhere. A williwaw began in the hills ahead and swept out and set the ship to reeling crazily in its erratic currents. The Strait vanished and there were tumbled hills below them. Minutes passed.

"Got him fixed up," said Jamison coolly, "I'll guarantee he won't break loose. Got any plans, Bell?"

"No time," said Bell. "I haven't had time to make any. The first thing is to get where his folk will never find us. Then we'll see what we can do with him."

Paula looked at the now bound figure of The Master. And the little old man beamed at her.

"He—he's smiling!" said Paula, in a voice that was full of a peculiar

horrified shock.

Bell shrugged. Punta Arenas was all of twenty-five miles behind, and the earth over which they flew began to take on the shape of an island. Water appeared beyond it, and innumerable small islands. Bell began to rack his brain for the infinitesimal scraps of knowledge he had about this section of the world. It was pitifully scanty. Punta Arenas was the southernmost point of the continental mass. All about it was an archipelago and a maze of waterways, thinly inhabited everywhere and largely without any inhabitants at all. The only solid ground between Cape Horn and the Antarctic ice pack was Diego Ramirez and the South Shetlands....

Nothing to go on. But any sufficiently isolated and desolate spot would do. Almost anywhere along the southern edge of the continental islands should serve.

The plane roared on monotonously, while Bell began to wrestle with another and more serious problem. In three days—two, now—an American naval vessel would turn up, with scientists and chemists on board. It was to be doubted whether anything like an overt act would be risked by that vessel. If all the governments of South America were under The Master's thumb, then cabled orders from his deputies would race three navies to the spot. And the government

of the United States does not like to start war, anywhere. Certainly it would not willingly enter into a conflict with the whole southern continent for the solution of a problem that so far affected that continent alone. The Master's kidnapping had solved nothing, so far.

Jamison tapped his shoulder.

"No pursuit, so far," he observed coolly. "I've looked." Bell nodded.

"They don't dare. Not yet, anyhow. They're depending on The Master. How is he?"

"Smiling peacefully to himself, damn him!" snarled Jamison. "Do you know what we're up against?"

"Ourselves," said Bell coldly. "But I'm nearly licked. He's got to talk!"

Jamison moved away again. The earth below looked as if it had been torn to shreds in some titanic convulsion of ages past. The sea was everywhere, and so was land! There were little threads of silver interlacing and crossing and wavering erratically in every conceivable direction. And there were specks of islands—rocks only yards in extent—and islands of every imaginable size and shape,

with their surfaces in every possible state of upheaval and distortion. A broader mass of land appeared ahead and to the left.

"Tierra del Fuego again," muttered Bell. "If we cross it...."

For fifteen minutes the plane thundered across desolate, rocky hills. Then the maze of islets again. Bell scanned them keenly, and saw a tiny steamer traveling smokily, for no conceivable reason, among the scattered bits of stone. The sea appeared, stretching out toward infinity.

Bell rose, to survey a wider space. He swung to the left, so that he was heading nearly southeast, and went on down toward that desolation of desolations, the stormy cape which faces the eternal ice of the antarctic. He was five thousand feet up, then, and scanning sea and earth and sky....

And suddenly he swung sharply to the right and headed out toward the open sea. He felt a small figure pressing against his shoulder. Presently fingers closed tightly upon his sleeve. He glanced down at Paula and managed to smile.

"There are some rocks out there," he told her quietly. "Islands, I think, and Diego Ramirez, at a guess."

They were specks, no more, but they were vastly more distinct from the plane than from Mount Beaufoy. That is on Henderson Island in New Year Sound, and its seventeen-hundred-foot peak was almost below Bell when he sighted the islands. But the islands have been seen full fifty miles from there.

It took the plane nearly forty minutes to cover the space, but long before that the islands had become distinct. Two tiny groups of scattered rocks, the whole group hardly five miles in length and by far the greater number no more than boulders surrounded by sheets of foam from breakers. Two of them merited the name of islands. The nearer was high and bare and precipitous. No trace of vegetation showed upon it. The farther was smaller, and at its northern corner a little cove showed, nearly land-locked.

Bell descended steeply. The big plane plunged wildly in the air eddies about the taller island at five hundred feet, but steadied and went winging on down lower, and lower.... The waves between the two islands were not high, but the seaplane alighted with a mighty, a tremendous splashing, and Bell navigated it grimly though clumsily into the mouth of the cove. There a small beach showed. He went very slowly toward it. Presently he swung abruptly about. A wing tip float grounded close to the shore.

The motors cut off and left a thunderous silence. Bell climbed atop the cabin and let go the anchor.

"We're here," he said shortly. "Bring The Master and we'll go ashore."

The catwalk painted on the lower wing guided them. Bell jumped to the rocks first, and stumbled, and then rose to lift Paula down and take The Master's small, frail body from Jamison's arms.

"You looked for a gun?" asked Bell

"He'd nothing to fight with," said Jamison heavily. He had been facing the same problem Bell had worked on desperately, and had found no answer. But he shuddered a little as he looked about the island.

There was nothing in sight but rock. No moss. No lichens. Not even stringy grass or the tufty scrub bushes that seemed able to grow anywhere.

Bell untied The Master, carefully but without solicitude. The little man sat up, and brushed himself off carefully, and arranged himself in a comfortable position.

"I am an old man," said The Master in mild reproach. "You might at least have given me a cushion to sit upon."

Bell sat down and lighted a cigarette with fingers that did not tremble in the least.

"Suppose," he said hardly, "you talk. First, of what your poison is made. Second, of what the antidote is made. Third, how we may be sure you tell the truth."

The Master looked at him with bright, shrewd, and apparently kindly old eyes.

"*Hijo mio*," he said mildly, "I am an old man. But I am obstinate. I will tell you nothing."

Bell's eyes glowed coldly.

"Does it occur to you," he asked grimly, "that it's too important a matter for us to have any scruples about? That we can—and will—make you talk?"

"You may kill me," said The Master benignly, "but that is all."

"And," said Bell, still more grimly, "we have only to get back in the

plane yonder, and go away...."

The Master beamed at him. Presently he began to laugh softly.

"*Hijo mio*," he said gently, "let us stop this little byplay. You will take me back in my airplane, and you will land me at Punta Arenas. And then you will fly away. I concede you freedom, but that is all. You cannot leave me here."

"Paula," said Bell coldly, "get in the plane again. Jamison—"

Paula rose doubtfully. Jamison stood up. The Master continued to chuckle amiably.

"You see," he said cherubically, "you happen to be a gentleman, Senor Bell. Every man has some weakness. That is yours. And you will not leave me here to die, because you have killed my nephew, who was the only other man who knew how to prepare my little medicine. And you know, Senor, that all my subjects will wish to die. Those who do, in fact," he added mildly, "will be fortunate. The effect of my little medicine does not make for happiness without its antidote."

Bell's hands clenched.

"You know," said The Master comfortably, "that there are many thousands of people whose hands will writhe, very soon. The city of Punta Arenas will be turned into a snarling place of maniacs within a very little while—if I do not return. Would you like, Senor, to think in after days of that pleasant city filled with men and women tearing each other like beasts? Of little children, even, crouching, and crushing and rending the tender flesh of other little children? Of lisping little ones gone—"

"Stop!" snarled Bell, in a frenzy. "Damn your soul! You're right! I can't! You win—so far!"

"Always," said The Master benevolently. "I win always. And you forget, Senor. You have seen the worst side of my rule. The revolutions, the rebellions that have made men free, were they pretty things to watch? Always, *amigo*, the worst comes. But when my rule is secure, then you shall see."

He waved a soft, beautifully formed hand. From every possible aspect the situation was a contradiction of all reason. The bare, black, salt encrusted rocks with no trace of vegetation showing. The gray water rumbling and surging among the uneven rocks at the base of the shore, while gulls screamed hoarsely overhead. The white haired little man with his benevolent face, smiling confidently at the

two grim men.

"The time will come," said The Master gently, and in the tone of utter confidence with which one states an inescapable fact, "the time will come when all the earth will know my rule. The taking of my little medicine will be as commonplace a thing as the smoking of tobacco, which I abhor, Senores. You are mistaken about there being an antidote and a poison. It is one medicine only. One little compound. A vegetable substance, Senor Bell, combined with a product of modern chemistry. It is a synthetic drug. Modern chemistry is a magnificent science, and my little medicine is its triumph. Even my deputies have not heard me speak so, Senores."

Bell snarled wordlessly, but if one had noticed his eyes they would have been seen to be curiously cool and alert and waiting. The Master leaned forward, and for once spoke seriously, almost reverently.

"There shall be a forward step, Senores, in the race of men. Do you know the difference between the brain of a man and that of an anthropoid ape? It consists only of a filmy layer of cortex, a film of gray nerve cells which the ape has not. And that little layer creates the difference between ape and man. And I have discovered more. My little medicine acts upon that film. Administered in the tiny

quantities I have given to my slaves, it has no perceptible effect. It is merely a compound of a vegetable substance and a synthetic organic base. It is not excreted from the body. Like lead, it remains always in solution in the blood. But in or out of the blood it changes, always, to the substance which causes murder madness. Fresh or changed, my little medicine acts upon the brain."

He smiled brightly upon them.

"But though in tiny quantities it has but little effect, in larger quantities—when fresh it makes the functioning of the gray cells of the human brain as far superior to the unmedicated gray cells, as those human gray cells are to the white cells of the ape! That is what I have to offer to the human race! Intelligence for every man, which shall be as the genius of the past!"

He laughed softly.

"Think, Senores! Compare the estate of men with the estate of apes! Compare the civilization which will arise upon the earth when men's brains are as far above their present level as the present level is above the anthropoid! The upward steps of the human race under my rule will parallel, will surpass the advance from the brutish caveman to intellectual genius. But I have seen, Senores, the one danger in my

offering."

There was silence. Jamison shook his head despairingly. The Master could not see him. He formed the word with his lips.

"Crazy!"

But Bell said coldly:

"Go on."

"I must rule," said The Master soberly. "It is essential. If my little secret were known, intelligences would be magnified, but under many flags and with many aims. Scientists, with genius beside which Newton's pales, would seek out deadly weapons for war. The world would destroy itself of its own genius. But under my rule—"

"Men go mad," said Bell coldly.

The Master smiled reproachfully.

"Ah, you are trying to make me angry, so that I will betray something! You are clever, Senor Bell. With my little medicine, in such quantities as I would administer it to you...."

"You describe it," said Bell harshly and dogmatically, "as a brain stimulant. But it drives men mad."

"To be sure," said The Master mildly. "It does. It is not excreted from the body save very, very slowly. But it changes in the blood stream. As—let us say—sugar changes into alcohol in digestion. The end-product of my little medicine is a poison which attacks the brain. But the slightest bit of unchanged medicine is an antidote. It is"—he smiled amiably—"it is as if sugar in the body changed to alcohol, and alcohol was a poison, but sugar—unchanged—was an antidote. That is it exactly. You see that I have taken my little medicine for years, and it has not harmed me."

"Which," said Bell—and somehow his manner made utter silence fall so that each word fell separately into a vast stillness—"which, thank God, is the one thing that wins finally, for me!"

He stood up and laughed. Quite a genuine laugh.

"Paula," he said comfortably, "get on the plane. In the cabin. Jamison and I are going to strip The Master."

Paula stared. The Master looked at him blankly. Jamison frowned bewilderedly, but stood up grimly to obey.

"But Senor," said The Master in gentle dignity, "merely to humiliate me—"

"Not for that," said Bell. He laughed again. "But all the time I've been hearing about the stuff, I've noticed that nobody thought of it as a drug. It was a poison. People were poisoned. They did not become addicts. But you—you are the only addict to your drug."

He turned to Jamison, his eyes gleaming.

"Jamison," he said softly, "did you ever know of a drug addict who could bear to think of ever being without a supply of his drug—*right on his person*?"

Jamison literally jumped.

"By God! No!"

The Master was quick. He was swarming up the plane-wing tip before Jamison reached him, and he kicked frenziedly when Jamison plucked him off. But then it was wholly, entirely, utterly horrible that the little white haired man, whose face and manner had seemed so cherubic and so bland, should shriek in so complete a blind panic as they forced his fingers open and took a fountain pen away from him.

"This is it," said Bell in a deep satisfaction. "This is his point of weakness."

The Master was ghastly to look at, now. Jamison held him gently enough, considering everything, but The Master looked at that fountain pen as one might look at Paradise.

"I—I swear," he gasped. "I—swear I will give you the formula!"

"You might lie," said Jamison grimly.

"I swear it!" panted The Master in agony. "It—If the formula is known it—can be duplicated! It—the excretion can be hastened! It can all be forced from the body! Simply! So simply! If only you know! I will tell you how it is done! The medicine is the cacodylate of—"

Bell was leaning forward, now, like a runner breasting the tape at the end of a long and exhausting race.

"I'll trade," he said softly. "Half the contents of the pen for the formula. The other half we'll need for analysis. Half the stuff in the pen for the formula for freeing your slaves!"

The Master sobbed.

"A—a pencil!" he gasped. "I swear—"

Jamison gave him a pencil and a notebook. He wrote, his hands shaking. Jamison read inscrutably.

"It doesn't mean anything to me," he said soberly, "but you can read it. It's legible."

Bell smiled faintly. With steady finger he took his own fountain pen from his pocket. He emptied it of ink, and put a scrupulous half of a milky liquid from The Master's pen into it. He passed it over.

"Your medicine," said Bell quietly, "may taste somewhat of ink, but it will not be poisonous. Now, what do we do with you? I give you your choice. If we take you with us, you will be held very secretly as a prisoner until the truth of the information you have given us can be proven. And if your slaves have all been freed, then I suppose you will be tried...."

The Master was drawn and haggard. He looked very, very old and beaten.

"I—I would prefer," he said dully, "that you did not tell where I am, and that you go away and leave me here. I—I may have some

subjects who will search for me, and—they may discover me here.... But I am beaten, Senor. You know that you have won."

Bell swung up on the wing of the plane. He explored about in the cabin. He came back.

"There are emergency supplies," he said coldly. "We will leave them with you, with such things as may be useful to allow you to hope as long as possible. I do not think you will ever be found here."

"I—prefer it, Senor," said The Master dully. "I—I will catch fish...."

Jamison helped put the packages ashore. The Master shivered. Bell stripped off his coat and put it on top of the heap of packages. The Master did not stir. Bell laid a revolver on top of his coat. He went out to the plane and started the motors. The Master watched apathetically as the big seaplane pulled clumsily out of the little cove. The rumble of the engines became a mighty roar. It started forward with a rush, skimmed the water for two hundred yards or so, and suddenly lifted clear to go floating away through the air toward the north.

Paula was the only one who looked back.

"He's crying," she said uncomfortably.

"It isn't fear," said Bell quietly. "It's grief at the loss of his ambition. It may not seem so to you two, but I believe he meant all that stuff he told me. He was probably really aiming, in his own way, for an improved world for men to live in."

The plane roared on. Presently Bell said shortly:

"That stuff he has won't last indefinitely. I'm glad I left him that revolver."

Jamison stirred suddenly. He dug down in his pocket and fished out a cigar.

"Since I feel that I may live long enough to finish smoking this," he observed dryly, "I think I'll light it. I haven't felt that I had twenty minutes of life ahead of me for a long time, now. A sense of economy made me smoke cigarettes. It wouldn't be so much waste if you left half a cigarette behind you when you were killed."

The tight little cabin began to reek of the tobacco. Paula pressed close to Bell.

"But—Charles," she asked hopefully, "is—is it really all right,

now?"

"I think so," said Bell, frowning. "Our job's over, anyhow. We go up the Chilean coast and find that navy boat. We turn our stuff over to them. They'll take over the task of seeing that every doctor, everywhere in South America, knows how to get The Master's poison out of the system of anybody who's affected. Some of them won't be reached, but most of them will. I looked at his formula. Standard drugs, all of them. There won't be any trouble getting the news spread. The Master's slaves will nearly go crazy with joy. And," he added grimly, "I'm going to see to it that the Rio police take back what they said about us. I think we'll have enough pull to demand that much!"

He was silent for a moment or so, thinking.

"I do think, Jamison," he said presently, "we did a pretty good job."

Jamison grunted.

"If—if it's really over," said Paula hopefully, "Charles—"

"What?"

"You—will be able to think about me sometimes," asked Paula

wistfully, "instead of about The Master always?"

Bell stared down at her.

"Good Lord!" he groaned. "I have been a brute, Paula! But I've been loving you—" He stopped, and then said with the elaborate politeness and something of the customary idiotic air of a man making such an announcement. "I say, Jamison, did you know Paula and I were to be married?"

Jamison snorted. Then he said placidly:

"No. Of course not. I never dreamed of such a thing. When did this remarkably original idea occur to you?"

He puffed a huge cloud of smoke from his cigar. It was an unusually vile cigar. Bell scowled at him helplessly for a moment and then said wrathfully:

"Oh, go to hell!"

And he bent over and kissed Paula.

#27 The Jovian Jest, By Lilith Lorraine:

There came to our pigmy planet a radiant wanderer with a message —and a jest—from the Vasty universe.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Consternation reigned in Elsnore village when the Nameless Thing was discovered in Farmer Burns' corn-patch. When the rumor began to gain credence that it was some sort of meteor from inter-stellar space, reporters, scientists and college professors flocked to the scene, desirous of prying off particles for analysis. But they soon discovered that the Thing was no ordinary meteor, for it glowed at night with a peculiar luminescence. They also observed that it was practically weightless, since it had embedded itself in the soft sand scarcely more than a few inches.

By the time the first group of newspapermen and scientists had reached the farm, another phenomenon was plainly observable. The

Thing was growing!

Farmer Burns, with an eye to profit, had already built a picket fence around his starry visitor and was charging admission. He also flatly refused to permit the chipping off of specimens or even the touching of the object. His attitude was severely criticized, but he stubbornly clung to the theory that possession is nine points in law.

It was Professor Ralston of Princewell who, on the third day after the fall of the meteor, remarked upon its growth. His colleagues crowded around him as he pointed out this peculiarity, and soon they discovered another factor—pulsation!

Larger than a small balloon, and gradually, almost imperceptibly expanding, with its viscid transparency shot through with opalescent lights, the Thing lay there in the deepening twilight and palpably shivered. As darkness descended, a sort of hellish radiance began to ooze from it. I say hellish, because there is no other word to describe that spectral, sulphurous emanation.

As the hangers-on around the pickets shudderingly shrank away from the weird light that was streaming out to them and tinting their faces with a ghastly, greenish pallor, Farmer Burns' small boy, moved by some imp of perversity, did a characteristically childish

thing. He picked up a good-sized stone and flung it straight at the nameless mass!

Instead of veering off and falling to the ground as from an impact with metal, the stone sank right through the surface of the Thing as into a pool of protoplastic slime. When it reached the central core of the object, a more abundant life suddenly leaped and pulsed from center to circumference. Visible waves of sentient color circled round the solid stone. Stabbing swords of light leaped forth from them, piercing the stone, crumbling it, absorbing it. When it was gone, only a red spot, like a bloodshot eye, throbbed eerily where it had been.

Before the now thoroughly mystified crowd had time to remark upon this inexplicable disintegration, a more horrible manifestation occurred. The Thing, as though thoroughly awakened and vitalized by its unusual fare, was putting forth a tentacle. Right from the top of the shivering globe it pushed, sluggishly weaving and prescient of doom. Wavering, it hung for a moment, turning, twisting, groping. Finally it shot straight outward swift as a rattler's strike!

Before the closely packed crowd could give room for escape, it had circled the neck of the nearest bystander, Bill Jones, a cattleman, and jerked him, writhing and screaming, into the reddish core. Stupefied

with soul-chilling terror, with their mass-consciousness practically annihilated before a deed with which their minds could make no association, the crowd could only gasp in sobbing unison and await the outcome.

The absorption of the stone had taught them what to expect, and for a moment it seemed that their worst anticipations were to be realised. The sluggish currents circled through the Thing, swirling the victim's body to the center. The giant tentacle drew back into the globe and became itself a current. The concentric circles merged—tightened—became one gleaming cord that encircled the helpless prey. From the inner circumference of this cord shot forth, not the swords of light that had powdered the stone to atoms, but myriads of radiant tentacles that gripped and cupped the body in a thousand places.

Suddenly the tentacles withdrew themselves, all save the ones that grasped the head. These seemed to tighten their pressure—to swell and pulse with a grayish substance that was flowing from the cups into the cord and from the cord into the body of the mass. Yes, it was a grayish something, a smokelike Essence that was being drawn from the cranial cavity. Bill Jones was no longer screaming and gibbering, but was stiff with the rigidity of stone. Notwithstanding, there was no visible mark upon his body; his flesh seemed

unharmed.

Swiftly came the awful climax. The waving tentacles withdrew themselves, the body of Bill Jones lost its rigidity, a heaving motion from the center of the Thing propelled its cargo to the surface—and Bill Jones stepped out!

Yes, he stepped out and stood for a moment staring straight ahead, staring at nothing, glassily. Every person in the shivering, paralysed group knew instinctively that something unthinkable had happened to him. Something had transpired, something hitherto possible only in the abysmal spaces of the Other Side of Things. Finally he turned and faced the nameless object, raising his arm stiffly, automatically, as in a military salute. Then he turned and walked jerkily, mindlessly, round and round the globe like a wooden soldier marching. Meanwhile the Thing lay quiescent—gorged!

Professor Ralston was the first to find his voice. In fact, Professor Ralston was always finding his voice in the most unexpected places. But this time it had caught a chill. It was trembling.

"Gentlemen," he began, looking down academically upon the motley crowd as though doubting the aptitude of his salutation. "Fellow-citizens," he corrected, "the phenomenon we have just witnessed is,

to the lay mind, inexplicable. To me—and to my honorable colleagues (added as an afterthought) it is quite clear. Quite clear, indeed. We have before us a specimen, a perfect specimen, I might say, of a—of a—"

He stammered in the presence of the unnamable. His hesitancy caused the rapt attention of the throng that was waiting breathlessly for an explanation, to flicker back to the inexplicable. In the fraction of a second that their gaze had been diverted from the Thing to the professor, the object had shot forth another tentacle, gripping him round the neck and choking off his sentence with a horrid rasp that sounded like a death rattle.

Needless to say, the revolting process that had turned Bill Jones from a human being into a mindless automaton was repeated with Professor Ralston. It happened as before, too rapidly for intervention, too suddenly for the minds of the onlookers to shake off the paralysis of an unprecedented nightmare. But when the victim was thrown to the surface, when he stepped out, drained of the grayish smokelike essence, a tentacle still gripped his neck and another rested directly on top of his head. This latter tentacle, instead of absorbing *from* him, visibly poured into him what resembled a threadlike stream of violet light.

Facing the cowering audience with eyes staring glassily, still in the grip of the unknowable, Professor Ralston did an unbelievable thing. He resumed his lecture at the exact point of interruption! But he spoke with the tonelessness of a machine, a machine that pulsed to the will of a dictator, inhuman and inexorable!

"What you see before you," the Voice continued—the Voice that no longer echoed the thoughts of the professor—"is what you would call an amoeba, a giant amoeba. It is I—this amoeba, who am addressing you—children of an alien universe. It is I, who through this captured instrument of expression, whose queer language you can understand, am explaining my presence on your planet. I pour my thoughts into this specialised brain-box which I have previously drained of its meager thought-content." (Here the "honorable colleagues" nudged each other gleefully.) "I have so drained it for the purpose of analysis and that the flow of my own ideas may pass from my mind to yours unimpeded by any distortion that might otherwise be caused by their conflict with the thoughts of this individual.

"First I absorbed the brain-content of this being whom you call Bill Jones, but I found his mental instrument unavailable. It was technically untrained in the use of your words that would best convey my meaning. He possesses more of what you would call

'innate intelligence,' but he has not perfected the mechanical brain through whose operation this innate intelligence can be transmitted to others and, applied for practical advantage.

“Now this creature that I am using is, as you might say, full of sound without meaning. His brain is a lumber-room in which he has hoarded a conglomeration of clever and appropriate word-forms with which to disguise the paucity of his ideas, with which to express nothing! Yet the very abundance of the material in his storeroom furnishes a discriminating mind with excellent tools for the transportation of its ideas into other minds.

"Know, then, that I am not here by accident. I am a Space Wanderer, an explorer from a super-universe whose evolution has proceeded without variation along the line of your amoeba. Your evolution, as I perceive from an analysis of the brain-content of your professor, *began* its unfoldment in somewhat the same manner as our own. But in your smaller system, less perfectly adjusted than our own to the cosmic mechanism, a series of cataclysms occurred. In fact, your planetary system was itself the result of a catastrophe, or of what might have been a catastrophe, had the two great suns collided whose near approach caused the wrenching off of your planets. From this colossal accident, rare, indeed, in the annals of the stars, an endless chain of accidents was born, a chain of which this specimen,

this professor, and the species that he represents, is one of the weakest links.

"Your infinite variety of species is directly due to the variety of adaptations necessitated by this train of accidents. In the super-universe from which I come, such derangements of the celestial machinery simply do not happen. For this reason, our evolution has unfolded harmoniously along one line of development, whereas yours has branched out into diversified and grotesque expressions of the Life-Principle. Your so-called highest manifestation of this principle, namely, your own species, is characterized by a great number of specialized organs. Through this very specialization of functions, however, you have forfeited your individual immortality, and it has come about that only your life-stream is immortal. The primal cell is inherently immortal, but death follows in the wake of specialization.

“We, the beings of this amoeba universe, are individually immortal. We have no highly specialized organs to break down under the stress of environment. When we want an organ, we create it. When it has served its purpose, we withdraw it into ourselves. We reach out our tentacles and draw to ourselves whatsoever we desire. Should a tentacle be destroyed, we can put forth another.

"Our universe is beautiful beyond the dreams of your most inspired poets. Whereas your landscapes, though lovely, are stationary, unchangeable except through herculean efforts, ours are Protean, eternally changing. With our own substance, we build our minarets of light, piercing the aura of infinity. At the bidding of our wills we create, preserve, destroy—only to build again more gloriously.

"We draw our sustenance from the primates, as do your plants, and we constantly replace the electronic base of these primates with our own emanations, in much the same manner as your nitrogenous plants revitalize your soil.

"While we create and withdraw organs at will, we have nothing to correspond to your five senses. We derive knowledge through one sense only, or, shall I say, a super-sense? We see and hear and touch and taste and smell and feel and know, not through any one organ, but through our whole structure. The homogeneous force of our omni-substance subjects the plural world to the processing of a powerful unity.

“We can dissolve our bodies at will, retaining only the permanent atom of our being, the seed of life dropped on the soil of our planet by Infinite Intelligence. We can propel this indestructible seed on light rays through the depths of space. We can visit the farthest

universe with the velocity of light, since light is our conveyance. In reaching your little world, I have consumed a million years, for my world is a million light-years distant: yet to my race a million years is as one of your days.

"On arrival at any given destination, we can build our bodies from the elements of the foreign planet. We attain our knowledge of conditions on any given planet by absorbing the thought-content of the brains of a few representative members of its dominant race. Every well-balanced mind contains the experience of the race, the essence of the wisdom that the race-soul has gained during its residence in matter. We make this knowledge a part of our own thought-content, and thus the Universe lies like an open book before us.

"At the end of a given experiment in thought absorption, we return the borrowed mind-stuff to the brain of its possessor. We reward our subject for his momentary discomfiture by pouring into his body our splendid vitality. This lengthens his life expectancy immeasurably, by literally burning from his system the germs of actual or incipient ills that contaminate the blood-stream.

“This, I believe, will conclude my explanation, an explanation to which you, as a race in whom intelligence is beginning to dawn, are

entitled. But you have a long road to travel yet. Your thought-channels are pitifully blocked and criss-crossed with nonsensical and inhibitory complexes that stand in the way of true progress. But you will work this out, for the Divine Spark that pulses through us of the Larger Universe, pulses also through you. That spark, once lighted, can never be extinguished, can never be swallowed up again in the primeval slime.

"There is nothing more that I can learn from you—nothing that I can teach you at this stage of your evolution. I have but one message to give you, one thought to leave with you—forge on! You are on the path, the stars are over you, their light is flashing into your souls the slogan of the Federated Suns beyond the frontiers of your little warring worlds. Forge on!"

The Voice died out like the chiming of a great bell receding into immeasurable distance. The supercilious tones of the professor had yielded to the sweetness and the light of the Greater Mind whose instrument he had momentarily become. It was charged at the last with a golden resonance that seemed to echo down vast spaceless corridors beyond the furthermost outposts of time.

As the Voice faded out into a sacramental silence, the strangely assorted throng, moved by a common impulse, lowered their heads

as though in prayer. The great globe pulsed and shimmered throughout its sentient depths like a sea of liquid jewels. Then the tentacle that grasped the professor drew him back toward the scintillating nucleus. Simultaneously another arm reached out and grasped Bill Jones, who, during the strange lecture, had ceased his wooden soldier marching and had stood stiffly at attention.

The bodies of both men within the nucleus were encircled once more by the single current. From it again put forth the tentacles, cupping their heads, but the smokelike essence flowed back to them this time, and with it flowed a tiny threadlike stream of violet light. Then came the heaving motion when the shimmering currents caught the two men and tossed them forth unharmed but visibly dowered with the radiance of more abundant life. Their faces were positively glowing and their eyes were illuminated by a light that was surely not of earth.

Then, before the very eyes of the marveling people, the great globe began to dwindle. The jeweled lights intensified, concentrated, merged, until at last remained only a single spot no larger than a pin-head, but whose radiance was, notwithstanding, searing, excruciating. Then the spot leaped up—up into the heavens, whirling, dipping and circling as in a gesture of farewell, and finally soaring into invisibility with the blinding speed of light.

The whole wildly improbable occurrence might have been dismissed as a queer case of mass delusion, for such cases are not unknown to history, had it not been followed by a convincing aftermath.

The culmination of a series of startling coincidences, both ridiculous and tragic, at last brought men face to face with an incontestable fact: namely, that Bill Jones had emerged from his fiery baptism endowed with the thought-expressing facilities of Professor Ralston, while the professor was forced to struggle along with the meager educational appliances of Bill Jones!

In this ironic manner the Space-Wanderer had left unquestionable proof of his visit by rendering a tribute to "innate intelligence" and playing a Jovian Jest upon an educated fool—a neat transposition.

A Columbus from a vaster, kindlier universe had paused for a moment to learn the story of our pigmy system. He had brought us a message from the outermost citadels of life and had flashed out again on his aeonic voyage from everlasting unto everlasting.

#28 The Atom-smasher, By Victor Rousseau Emanuel:

Four destinies rocket through the strange time-space of the fourth dimension in Tode's marvelous atom-smasher.

Aproximate word count: 26,100

Bigotry: Antiblack racism, misogyny

Warnings: Extreme antiblackness, specifically against Aboriginal Australians. Victor Emanuel really fucking hates Black people. It's disgusting.

- - -

Chapter 1: The "Vanishing Place"

*"L*ook at that plane! That fellow's crazy! Took off with the wind behind him! He'll nose dive before he clears the clubhouse! He'll crash into those trees along the edge of the golf course!"

The group on the field at Westbury, Long Island, held their breaths as they watched James Dent take off in the wildest, most erratic flight that they had ever seen. Under lowering storm clouds, with the wind roaring half a hurricane behind him, Dent spiraled upward as if

unconscious of the laws of Earthly gravity.

"I told you so! You ought to have stopped him, even if it is his private plane! A feller's got no business trying to break his neck! Look there! He's cleared those trees after all!"

James Dent had cleared them, and the clubhouse too, and was already disappearing across the Hempstead Plains, looking like a leaf whirling up in a winter storm. At a height of five hundred feet he sped eastward.

"Didn't tell you where he was going?"

"Nope, acted like a crazy man. Something on his mind sure. Wherever he's bound for, he'll never get there!"

ut James Dent was already out of sight, and the little group dispersed. And Dent, winging his way due east, over the oak barrens of central Long Island, was conscious neither of the storm that howled about him nor of the excitement that his rash take-off had occasioned.

The rain lashed him in the open cockpit, the ground fog swirled about him, and, though it was still afternoon, there brooded a somber

twilight over the wastes. But in his mind Dent was already anticipating his descent at the "Vanishing Place," as the natives called it near Peconic Bay.

The "Vanishing Place" was so called because of the terrible and inexplicable catastrophe that had occurred there five years previously. In the two-century-old farmhouse, Miles Parrish, the world's greatest authority on physical chemistry, had been conducting investigations into the structure of the atom.

James Dent and Lucius Tode had been associated with old Parrish in this work, which, carried to a successful issue, would revolutionize the social organization of the world. The energy locked up in the atom is so stupendous that, as Eddington indicated, a thimbleful of coal, disintegrated, would carry the *Mauretania* from England to America and back again. To unlock this energy would be to set man free from bondage, to restore the pristine leisure and happiness of Eden.

And because the three men were playing with deadly forces, of incalculable power, this deserted spot had been selected for the carrying on of the investigations. The old farmhouse had been converted into a laboratory. For days together the three had bent over their tubes and laboratory apparatus, hardly eating or sleeping. And

the day had come when success had seemed almost within their grasp.

Dent had received six months' leave of absence from his duties at Columbia University in order to prosecute the experiments. As the weeks went by, and the blind track that the three were following opened into a clear road, a sort of madness settled upon every one of them.

The Planck-Bohr quantum theory that the energy of a body cannot vary continuously, but only by a certain finite amount, or exact multiples of this amount, had been the key that unlocked the door. But always it had been Lucius Tode who led the way. Tode was a graduate of the University of Virginia, and accounted one of the most brilliant minds of his generation. At thirty, he stood head and shoulders above his contemporaries.

Dark, handsome, fearless, with a will power that nothing seemed able to subdue, he had taken the leadership away from old Miles Parrish, who eagerly and without thought of his own reputation followed in his assistant's footsteps.

There were the three men—and there was the girl, Lucille Parrish, the child of Miles's old age. Seventeen, when the catastrophe

occurred, she had come out to the deserted spot sometimes of a Sunday from her boarding school at Garden City.

And Tode had found time to make love to her when he rushed her back to her school in his high-powered foreign car!

Jim Dent had known nothing of that until after the catastrophe. Lucille had been afraid of him, afraid to open her mouth upon the subject even to her father. And she had been fascinated too, as a young girl may well be, when a fascinating man of thirty uses his arts to win her.

It was only by chance that Jim had failed to be involved in the hideous catastrophe that had stamped the old farmhouse with the name of "Vanishing Place" whenever the natives spoke of it.

"Two Killed in Laboratory Explosion!" was the heading in the next morning's paper which gave Jim his first intimation of the accident. He had been to Columbia overnight to look up a new publication that contained an article on the hydrogen spectrum.

It was only a long paragraph, and the names of Parrish and Tode meant nothing to the man who had written it. But Jim had taken train to Hempstead, taxied to the flying fields, and essayed his first plane

ride to Peconic Bay, in the charge of a pilot.

A group of natives, three newspaper men and a Suffolk County policeman were near the spot where the farmhouse had been—near the spot, not on it.

For where the farmhouse had been was a great pool of stagnant water, black as ink, covering an expanse of perhaps three-quarters of an acre.

"No, sir, there was no explosion," said the officer. "At least, none of these fellows heard anything. Just a—you tell the Professor, Mr. Lumm."

"It was about half-past eight last night, Mr. Dent," said Andrew Lumm, who kept the village store a mile away. "Ground seemed to rock. Earthquake, I says to myself, holdin' on to the door. But it wasn't no earthquake. Too gentle for that. Nothin' broke, not even a plate. Then I says to Mrs. Lumm, 'They're gone, poor fellers, and I allus knowed it would be that way. It's lucky young Mr. Dent went out last night on the 7.15.'

"We hurried here, but there wasn't no sign of the place, jest a hole on the ground with a sort of sticky mud in it. Water's been fillin' in since

then, but I guess it's reached its level now. They jest blowed themselves to bits, Mr. Dent."

"Tell him about the vi'let light, Andy," put in one of the bystanders.

"Yeah, like a pillar of vi'let fire that were, Mr. Dent. We seed it through the trees, but by the time we got here it was 'most gone. Gosh, that throwed a scare into some of us!"

"It was Mr. Tode's soul a-burnin'," squeaked Granpop Dawes. "I allus said that feller'd come to no good end."

The group shook their heads and remained silent. It was clear that, if they did not share Granpop Dawes's opinion, at least they considered it not without the bounds of plausibility. Lucius Tode had created a bad impression among the natives.

Jim Dent stooped and picked up something lying imbedded in the mud at the edge of the black pool, and slipped it into his pocket. He had been present at the inquest and had gone back to Columbia. That had been five years before.

Professor McDowd, the palaeontologist, had identified the object Jim had found as the milk molar of *merychippus insignis*, the

miocene representative of the modern horse. And that had made Jim Dent think furiously.

The catastrophe must have been a gigantic one to have flung up that fossil tooth from strata far beneath the level of the earth's surface. More, there were even traces of archaean deposits around the borders of the pool, whose depth, in the center, was ascertained to be 164 feet.

Black, silent, uninhabited, unstirred save by a passing breeze, the pool had remained those five years past. The spot was shunned as haunted or accursed by the superstitious country folks. Dense underbrush had grown up around it.

Periodically, Jim had gone out to visit it. That was how he had come to invest in a private plane. It was only an hour to the flying-fields, and less than an hour from there to Peconic Bay. What he expected to achieve he did not know. In the back of his mind was the belief that some day he would light upon some clue that would tell something of the unusual catastrophe.

And then that afternoon he had been shaken to the depths when a message came to him in Lucille's voice over the telephone:

"I've heard from dad!"

Winging his way eastward through the storm, Jim Dent was mentally reconstructing all that had led up to the present moment.

Lucille had finished her high school course and gone into business life. Jim had found a position for her as secretary to a small group of physicists, who were conducting private investigations, a position for which her training well fitted her. She had done well. He had kept in touch with her.

Six months before, their relations had altered. They had realized that they were in love with each other. In the months that followed they had discovered all sorts of things about each other that neither had suspected, which might be summed up by saying that they had become all in all to each other.

It was so amazing, this transformation of ordinary friendship into radiant love, that they were still bewildered over it. They were to be married at the end of the year.

It was then that Lucille had first told Jim about Lucius's wooing, and her fear of the man. Apart from that, both had refrained, by tacit agreement, from making reference to the past.

And then, that afternoon, there sounded Lucille's voice over the telephone, "I've heard from dad!"

"From—your father? You're mistaken, dear!"

"No, Jim, I'm not mistaken. He called me on the 'phone two hours ago. I couldn't mistake his voice, and, besides, he called me "Lucy," like he used to do. He told me to come at once to the Vanishing Place, but not to tell a soul unless I wished to do him a great evil. Then he rang off."

"Where are you now?" asked Jim.

"I'm 'phoning from Amityville. I took the train immediately, but I was so frightened, and—and at last I decide I must tell you. I didn't think dad would have minded my telling you. So I got out. There's another train in a few minutes, and I shall go on to Hampton Bays and walk the two miles to the Vanishing Place. I—I'll meet you there."

"Lucille, wait! Can't you meet me somewhere else, and we'll go on together. I'll get my plane and—"

"Oh, I just can't wait, Jim! I'm in such terror that I won't find dad

when I get there. And he told me to tell nobody. I—I'll meet you at the Vanishing Place, Jim."

And so great had been her agitation that with that arrangement Jim had had to rest content. He had taken a taxi out to the flying fields at once.

In half an hour he would know what had happened. And he was obsessed by the terror that he would not find Lucille or anything except the lonely pool.

That was why he opened the throttle and drove on wildly through the scurrying wraiths of mist, pierced by the tops of trees that at times rose dangerously near the spreading wings.

That gap in the trees was Lake Ronkokoma. Not far now! Jim would know soon. But as he flew, vague fears that had beset his mind since he had received Lucille's message began to crystallize into the single fear of Tode. If Parrish was really alive—why not Tode too?

Beneath the polish and the surface comradeship, Jim had always been conscious of some *diablerie* about the man, of some inner life of which he knew nothing. Something unscrupulous and relentless, something infinitely cruel—as when he had tested the Atom Smasher

on a stray cur that had run into the laboratory, not for experimentation, but in mere ruthless savagery, converting the living beast instantly into a shapeless mass of flesh and bone.

And Tode had known more about the Atom Smasher—as they affectionately called the mechanism for releasing atomic energy—than old Parrish and he together. Suppose Lucille's story were true! Suppose old Parrish were actually alive, suppose Tode were responsible for some designed scheme which would, in the end place Lucille in his power!

Wild thoughts and fears—but Jim would soon know. And with throttle stretched to the limit he went roaring over the scrub oak toward Peconic Bay.

It was beginning to grow dark, almost too dark for landing. But now Jim could feel the tang of the salt wind upon his face. He slowed down. The fog was as thick as ever, but the scrub oak had given place to more open country. In a minute or two he ought to sight some landmark. Yes, he had overshot his mark, for suddenly, through a gap in the mists, he saw the line of breakers forming a white ridge upon the sand.

A mile southward! Jim knew where he was now, for he knew every

curve of that shore. He banked and turned. And then he saw something that for an instant chilled his blood.

Not far away, and not far beneath him, a ghostly violet haze was spreading through the fog, and the fog itself was coiling back from it until it formed a dense white wall.

For a moment Jim's hand was paralysed upon the stick. The next, his decision was made. He closed his throttle and went down in a slow descent right toward the heart of that column of lavender smoke that seemed to be springing straight up out of the ground. "A pillar of violet fire!" It could not have been described better.

The plane dived through the dense wall of fog, which for a moment shut out the violet fire completely. Then Jim was through, and almost immediately beneath him lay the black and glassy surface of the pool. Out of the very heart of it rose the fire, burning like some infernal flame that consumed nothing, and between it and the fog was a space of almost translucent air, extending to the borders of the pool.

Jim began to circle the pool to find a landing-place. But as he looked down, the surface of the pool began to change its aspect.

In place of the unruffled calm, it began to work with some devil's yeast all around the central pillar of flame, until its depths seemed to be churned up in frothy masses and the movement extended almost to the circumference. Then the whole surface of the water began to tilt and sway with a slow, shimmering, undulatory movement, as if it was a giant roulette wheel in rotation.

And something was materializing out of the heart of the violet flame itself.

It was a face—a human face, with bestial features, distorted and enormously magnified through the substance in which it was. Such a face as might look back upon an observer out of one of those distorting mirrors at Coney Island, or some other place of popular amusement, but twisted and enlarged beyond conception, so that it covered half the area of a city block.

Curiously blurred, too, as if each atom of that face was in isolated motion on its own account. And beneath the face appeared the vague outlines of a hand, apparently manipulating some sort of infernal mechanism.

And that face, enlarged as it was out of all proportion, filled Jim's heart with greater horror than any face he had ever known.

For it was the visage of Lucius Tode, and on those huge and distorted features was something that looked like a diabolical smile.

Everything vanished. Jim was back in the surrounding wall of fog. Instinctively he banked again. He strove to drive the horror from his brain. He must circle, circle incessantly, in the hope of finding Lucille. She must have already arrived. But if she had not fallen into Tode's power, she would hear the roaring of the plane and manage to signal him.

He circled back into the clear space between the white and the violet, and now he saw that the effect upon the pool was still more pronounced. The waters were rising up in a rim all around, and yet not overflowing. They were standing up like a bowl of clay upon the potter's wheel, and down in the depths Jim could see the head and shoulders of Tode, much less magnified, more natural in appearance, and less blurred. And Tode was looking up at him and pointing that infernal mechanism at him—something that looked like the tube of a telescope.

Suddenly the plane shivered and stood still. The motor died abruptly. The stick went dead. And yet the plane did not fall. As if upheld by the same repulsive force that drove back the white fog, it simply hung suspended three hundred feet above the heart of the violet

flame.

Then—there was no longer any plane. The stick had melted in Jim's hand, the wings dissolved like wreaths of mist. The entire body had disintegrated into nothingness. Jim sat suspended in the void, and felt himself very slowly descending into the violet column.

Down into the vortex of that bubbling pool, which rimmed him on all sides ... down into the central aperture out of which emerged the leering face of Tode! And as he dropped Jim heard, thin, faint, and very far away, the despairing cry of Lucille....

Chapter 2: *Old Friends—and Foes*

Jim must have lapsed into unconsciousness, for when he opened his eyes there was a gap in his consciousness of the passage of time, though none in his memory. He opened his eyes, and instantly he remembered everything.

Only a brief interval could have elapsed, for it was not quite dark. The fog and the violet flame had cleared away. Overhead a few stars twinkled. Jim was lying on his side, half-buried in the black, slimy mud of the dried up pool.

There was nothing but the smooth, shelving mud basin, with the

scrub oak surrounding it. Tode and the machine had vanished.

Jim pulled himself with an effort out of the sucking mud, and, heavily clogged with it, began to make his way toward the margin.

Stumbling, struggling through the viscid ooze, he shouted Lucille's name despairingly. But no answer came, and his cries only made the utter silence all about him seem more fearsome.

Exhausted by his efforts, he gained the edge of the pool at last, and stopped, trying to orientate himself. As he did so, he saw a human face peering at him out of a clump of scrub oak.

It was the face of an aged man, with a long white beard and rags of clothes that were festooned about him. Jim took a step toward it, shouting a challenge. Next moment it had hurled itself out of its shelter toward him, and two skeletonlike arms were twined about his shoulders, while the fingers worked upward toward his throat.

The face was that of a madman, crazed by fear. And Jim recognized it. It was the face of Professor Parrish.

Parrish, the trim, immaculate, clean-shaven, urbane old man, whose lectures, imbued with wit and scholarship, had always been the

delight of his classes—Parrish reduced to this gibbering maniac! And yet Parrish himself, returned to the site of their experiments after five years!

So fierce was the old man's onset, so desperate his clutch, that for a half-minute or more Jim was reduced to fighting for his life. The clawing fingers, armed with long nails, furrowed Jim's throat, there was a terrific strength in the body, wasted though it was almost to a skeleton.

But it was only for a half-minute that old Parrish's endurance lasted. Suddenly the old man went limp and tottered forward, dropped upon the ground. Jim bent over him.

"Parrish, you know me! I'm Jim Dent!" he cried. "I came here to save you."

Parrish was muttering something. Jim caught the words "Tode," and "God help Lucille!"

"Parrish, I'm Jim Dent!" Jim cried again, and the old man, shuddering, opened his eyes and recognized him.

"Jim!" he muttered. "Jim Dent! Then where is she? I got away from

that devil, found farmhouse empty, got telephone book, found her and 'phoned her. Told her to come. Save—Lucille!"

He fell back, his eyes closed. Jim crouched over the unconscious old man. He was in a state of utter perplexity. He could not quite gather what Parrish had been trying to tell him, and it was with difficulty that he could focus his mind upon the situation, so great had been the shock of finding his former chief in that condition.

What had become of his plane, and where was Lucille? Jim was positive that he had heard her cry for help out of the vortex in the water.

But there was no water, only the circle of black mud extended in the starlight.

Again and again Jim shouted Lucille's name, and his cries went echoing away through the scrub without result.

Jim looked down at the unconscious old man beside him. He must get Parrish away, get him to Andy Lumm's. He bent over him again and raised him in his arms.

Suddenly he heard two familiar sounds behind him, two dull thumps

that sounded less like explosions than echoes, long drawn out, and receding into infinity. There was no other sound quite like them that he had ever heard.

They were the snap of the electrical discharge as the Atom Smasher began to operate, and why the snap had sounded like a heavy body falling a long distance away, was not known.

Tode had said one day, with what Jim had taken for sarcasm, that they represented the wave series of a single sound extended in time to make four-dimensional action, but Jim had never considered the explanation seriously.

That sound, bringing back all Jim's memories of their experiments, brought him to his feet sharply. He swung around. The surface of the pool was a bubbling, seething mass of mud and water. And over its surface that faint violet haze was beginning to spread.

In the center where the light was thickest, something like a gyroscope appeared to be revolving. Out of the gyroscope something was beginning to project—that infernal tube of Lucius Tode. And Jim knew that in the heart of the flame that enormous, distorted face of Lucius Tode would again be visible.

The human nervous system can only endure a certain amount of impact. The sight of that ghastly flame, already condensing into a violet pillar, was more than Jim could stand. He dragged old Parrish to his feet and started off with him into the thickest part of the undergrowth.

A fearful scream behind him stopped him at the very edge of the scrub. He looked back, still supporting the half-conscious old man in his arms. The violet flame was shooting up in a straight pillar, the whole central portion of the pool was dry, and the waters were heaped up all around it.

From the slightly elevated spot where Jim stood, he could see Tode holding Lucille in his arms in the very heart of the fire, which threw a pale, fluorescent light over their faces. Tode was wearing a spotted skin, like that of a leopard, and Lucille was in the blue frock that she had worn when Jim and she had dinner together two evenings before.

Jim dropped old Parrish, shouted in answer, and dashed back like a madman down the slope into the solid wall of water.

He fought his way desperately through that wall, which seemed of the consistency of soft rubber or treacle, as if some subtle change

had taken place in its molecular isomers. It adhered to him without wetting him, and he plunged through it, hearing Lucille cry out again, and yet again.

And now he was through, and once more struggling over the viscid surface of the pond. Behind him he heard old Parrish blundering, and screeching at the top of his voice, but he paid no attention to him.

He could see Lucille more clearly, and the large, hazy outlines of Tode's features were beginning to assume the proper proportions. There was a diabolical leer upon Tode's face, unchanged during the five years since Jim had seen him last, except that it had become more evil, more powerful. The enormous and distorted face that Jim had seen had been simply due to the presence of some refracting medium.

The pillar of violet light was thinning, spreading out over the pool, but Jim could now see the scene more clearly than before, even as he rushed onward.

The machine was inside what looked like a flat boat, but more circular than a boat, and apparently was made of some metal resembling aluminum. Either from the metal hull or from the mechanism inside it there was emitted a pungent odor resembling

chlorine.

The mechanism itself bore some resemblance to the old Atom Smasher of five years before, but it appeared to be immensely more complicated. Wheels of various sizes were set at every conceivable angle around the central tube, from which the violet light was emanating, and all were rotating and gyrating so fast that they looked like discs of light. The boat itself was trembling, and this movement appeared to be communicated to the boiling mud in the central part of the pool.

As Jim tried to leap down through the sucking mud to snatch Lucille from Tode, the latter stopped, straightened himself, and pointed a short tube at Jim's heart.

Jim felt as if an enormous, invisible force had struck him in the chest. It was apparently the same repulsive force that had driven back the waters. The shock was not a violent one. It did not throw him off his feet. It merely pushed him slowly and irresistibly backward.

And the whole picture was beginning to fade. Etched sharply in the violet light one moment, it now looked like a drawing that had been covered with tissue paper.

The outlines were dissolving into a haze—or, rather, each line seemed reproduced an infinite number of times, as the edge of a vibrating saw shows an infinitude of edges. The violet fire was becoming still more diffused. It hovered over the waters, a pale, flickering glow. And simultaneously the walls of water began to break and come surging forward.

Jim saw Lucille stretching out her arms toward him, and tried to struggle forward, but in vain. She cried out his name, and he put all his strength into that desperate futile struggle to reach her. But he was being borne backward by the invisible power in the tube. The rushing torrent was surging about his knees; grew waist deep: in another moment Jim was swimming for his life against the furious flood.

Suddenly, however, the tremendous pressure on his chest was relaxed. Tode had turned the tube away from him. He was leaning forward out of the boat and grasped old Parrish, who had been flung violently against it by the dissolving waters.

The same flood carried Jim to the boat's side. Here, however, the flood was only knee deep, owing to the repulsion still being exercised by the violet light, which was glimmering feebly. Jim found his feet and leaped into the craft. He grasped Lucille in his

arms.

He turned to confront Tode, who had just dragged old Parrish over the side. The three men confronted one another.

"Turn that tube on me, and I'll jump into your damn machinery and bust it!" Jim shouted.

An ironical expression came on Tode's face. It was clear that he still considered himself master of the situation. "At the immediate moment, Dent, the lives of all of us depend upon your keeping absolutely still," he answered. "Take my advice and sit down!"

Jim saw Lucille's face, ghastly in the faint violet light that played about it. The girl had fainted. She was lying unconscious, her feet against the circular metal plate that protected the machinery, her head upon the rail that ran around the boat's upper edge. Tode, without waiting for Jim's answer, stepped over the plate and took his seat at a sort of instrument board with control levers and thumb screws that apparently controlled the needles on four dials. He touched a button, and instantly the violet light disappeared.

With its vanishing, the waves came surging forward, and lapped violently against the hull, as if about to overwhelm the vessel,

which, however, seemed immovable. It simply rose higher in the water.

Jim understood the cause of this. Those gyroscopes would retain the hull in the same position against anything but a mechanical force strong enough to ruin it. He watched Tode as he sat at the instrument board, which was illuminated by two tiny lights of what looked like mercury-vapor. His face, handsome and cruel as ever, was tense as he manipulated the thumb screws. Beside him lay Parrish, faintly whimpering. The old man had evidently abandoned all hope of effecting his escape, or of rescuing his daughter.

It was unbearable to have to sit there, knowing that the three of them were absolutely at Tode's mercy, and yet there was nothing else to do.

Tode looked up with a saturnine smile. "It's a delicate operation to blur the present without shooting out a hundred years or so in time," he said, "but my micrometer's pretty accurate, Dent. Don't move, I caution you!" He smiled again. "Yes, Dent, time is something like the fourth dimension of space, as we believed in the old days, and I've proved it."

Jim saw Tode touch the screw that controlled the fourth dial, and

instantly it was borne in on him that each of the dials controlled one spatial dimension. This fourth, then, was the time dimension!

Could it be true that Tode had solved the practical problem of traveling in time, theoretically implied since the discoveries of Einstein?

He had known in the old days that the Atom Smasher might be adapted to this purpose, but neither Parrish nor he had dreamed of turning aside from their endeavor to utilize it for the purpose of releasing atomic energy.

Thump! Thump! The familiar old sound, rushing back into memory after all those years, the release of the electrical discharge, echoing through infinity! The scrub around the pool blurred and was gone. A vast gray panorama extended itself on either side of them.

They were travelling—in space—and time too. Jim no longer doubted. And, chilled with horror, he sat there, his arm about Lucille's unconscious form.

Chapter 3: ***Into the Infinite***

How long he sat there he did not know. Minutes or hours seemed all the same to him. Nothing but that gray monochrome, of neither light nor darkness, that endless panorama of miles and years, blended together into this chaos!

But suddenly there came a shout from Tode. The blur ceased, the lights flickered. Again there sounded the two thumps of the electrical discharge. The vibrating mechanism grew steady. Above them, out of the grayness, a moon disclosed itself, then the pin-points of stars. All about them was an immense, sandy waste.

"Know where we are, Dent?" came Tode's chuckle.

Jim was not sufficiently master of himself to attempt to answer.

"We are on what will be the Russian steppes some fifty thousand years ahead of us in time," grinned Tode. "This is an interlude between two ice ages. Observe how pleasantly warm the climate is, for Russia. Unfortunately the receding glaciers carried off the top-soil, which accounts for the barrenness of the district, but in another century this country will be overgrown with ferns, and inhabited by the mastodon and wild horse, and a few enterprising palaeolithic hunters, who will come in to track them down and destroy them with their stone axes."

“I think you're the same sort of damn liar you always were, Tode," answered Jim—but without conviction. There was something terrific about that desolation. Nothing within a thousand miles of Long Island corresponded to it.

"You'll be convinced pretty quickly, when you see my specimen," answered Tode. "I let him off here on the way to the pool. He's not exactly presentable, and when I got the idea of picking up Lucille and taking her back with me, I thought it best not to let her see him. He didn't want to be let off. Was afraid I wouldn't pick him up again, and I'll admit it was a matter of pretty careful reckoning. But this is the place, almost to the yard.

"Yes, I've done some close reckoning, Dent, but the cleverest part of the business was letting old Parrish think he'd got away from me. I knew he'd telephone Lucille. You know, I always had the brains of the outfit, Dent," he continued, with a smirk of self-satisfaction.

He looked out of the boat. "And here, if I'm not mistaken, comes my specimen," he added.

Something was running across the steppes toward them. It came nearer, took human form. It was human! A man—but such a man as Jim had never seen before outside the covers of a book. And he

recognised the race immediately.

It was a Neanderthal man, one of the race that co-existed with the highly developed Cro-Magnons some thirty thousand years ago. Man and not ape, though the face was bestial, and there were huge ridges above the eyebrows.

And if Jim had needed conviction, the sight of this gibbering creature, now climbing into the boat and fawning upon Tode, convinced him. For the Neanderthal man vanished from the scene long before the beginning of recorded history.

For a few moments a deathly faintness overcame him ... his eyes closed, he felt unconsciousness rushing in upon him like a black cloud.

"It's all right, Dent—don't look so scared!" came Tode's mocking voice.

Jim opened his eyes, shook off that cloud of darkness with an immense effort. The boat was throbbing violently as the wheels gyrated, the violet light had become a pillar as thick as a man, and shot straight up to a height of fifty feet, before it rolled away. Lucille was lying where she had been, her eyes still staring up unseeing at

the stars. Old Parrish was whining and whimpering as he crouched in his place.

And at Tode's feet crouched the Neanderthal man, repulsive, bestial, even though hardly formidable, and filling the last vacant spot inside the boat. He was gibbering and mouthing as he fawned upon Tode and pressed his hand to his hairy face. He continued to crouch and looked up at his master with doglike eyes.

Repulsive, and yet man, not ape. Distinctly human, perhaps a little lower than the Australian aborigine, the Neanderthal showed by his reverence that the human faculty of worship existed in him.

"Meet Cain, one of my Drilgoes," said Tode, with a grin. "A faithful servant. I left him here to wait for me on the return journey. Cain's just my pet name for him because he subsists on the fruits of the earth, don't you, Cain?"

The Drilgo grunted, and pressed Tode's hand to his repulsive lips, which were fringed with a reddish beard. Suddenly Tode began to laugh uproariously. "Feel anything wrong with your head, Dent?" he asked.

Dent put up his hand and pulled away a quantity of charred hair. His

forehead began to itch, and, rubbing his finger across it, he realized that his eyebrows were gone. Tode laughed still louder.

"You've kept your teeth by about two seconds' grace, Dent, but I shouldn't be surprised if you needed dental attention shortly," he said. "What a pity dentists won't be invented for another forty or fifty thousand years."

"You're a devil!" cried Jim.

"You see, the human body is very resistant to the Ray," Tode went on. "It almost seems as if there is an organizing principle within it. Even the animal tissues are resistant, though not to the same extent as the human ones. It takes about twenty seconds for the organized human form to be disintegrated. But hair and beaks and claws, being superficial matter, vanish almost as soon as the Ray is turned on them. Ten seconds more, and you'd have been obliterated, Dent, just as your plane was.

"Yes, rub your head. Your hair will probably grow again—if I decide to let you live. It rather depends upon what impression you make upon Lucille as a bald-headed hero. After all, I didn't invite you to accompany us. It's your own lookout."

Jim could find nothing to say to that. He was discovering more and more that they were all helpless in Tode's hands.

"Sit back!" snarled Tode suddenly. He gave the Drilgo a push that sent him sprawling into the bottom of the boat. "Dent, your life depends upon your absolute acquiescence to my proposals. I didn't like you particularly in the old days, any more than you liked me. I thought you were a fool. On the other hand, I've no active reason to hate you, at present. It may be that I can use you.

"Meanwhile we've got a longish journey before us, ten thousand years more, multiplied by the fourth power of two thousand miles. Seems simple? Well, I had to invent the mathematical process for it. Reckon in the gravitational attraction of the planets, and you'll begin to get an idea of the complexity of it. So, in vulgar parlance, we're not likely to arrive till morning."

He glanced at Lucille, who was still lying unconscious with Jim's arm about her. Then his eyes rose to meet Jim's, and a sneering smile played about his lips. That smile was the acknowledgment of their rivalry for the girl's affections. And it was more—it was a challenge.

Tode welcomed that rivalry because, Jim could see, he meant to keep him alive under conditions of servitude, to demonstrate to Lucille his

superiority.

Tode turned his thumbscrews, and the two thuds resounded. The violet column sank down, the boat vibrated, the level stretch of land became a blur again. The moon and stars vanished. Once more the four were off on that terrific journey.

At first they seemed to be traversing space that was shot through by alternate light and darkness, so that at times Jim could see the other occupants of the boat clearly, while at other times there was only Tode visible at the instrument board, with the dark outlines of the Drilgo, Cain, sprawled at his feet. But soon these streaks seemed to come closer and closer together, until the duration of each was only a fraction of a second. And closer, until light and darkness blended into a universal gray. These, Jim knew, were the alternations of night and day.

They were traveling—incredible as it was—in time as well as space, though whether backward or forward Jim could not know. From the presence of the Neanderthal man, however, Jim was convinced that Tode was taking them back more thousands of years, into the beginnings of humanity.

A fearful journey! A madder journey than Jim could have conceived

of, had he not been a participant in it. He was losing all sense of reality. He was hardly convinced that he would not awaken in New York, to discover that the whole episode had been a dream.

Was this Lucille, the girl he loved ... with whom he had dined in New York only a day or two before ... this unconscious form, stretched out on the deck of the weird ship that was rushing through eternity? Or, rather, it was they who were rushing through space and time upon a stationary ship! What was reality, and what was dream, then?

Tode called "Come over here, Dent! I want to talk to you!"

Jim picked his way over the metal floor of the round boat, came up to Tode, and sat down beside him above the sprawling form of the Drilgo, Cain.

"You were a fool to come here, Dent." Tode turned with a malicious smile from his seat at the instrument board. "You didn't have to come. I take it that you are in love with Lucille, you poor imbecile, and still cherish dreams of winning her. We'll take up that matter in due course.

"Do you think I've been idle during these five years of my exile? I've

been too busy even to come back for the woman I was in love with. And do you know what I've been doing during all this hellish period? Charting courses, Dent! Mapping out all the planetary movements back for uncounted ages—roughly, crudely, of course, but the best I was able to. These are difficult seas to navigate, though they may not seem so. You fool," he added savagely, "why didn't you come in with me in the old days? I told you that the Atom Smasher could be used to travel through time, and you mocked at me as a dreamer.

"I chose my hour. When everything was ready, I set forth on the most desperate journey ever attempted by man. Talk of Columbus!—he had nothing on me. I tell you, Dent, I've been back to the Archaean Age, back to the time when nothing but crawling worms moved on the face of the earth. And I've been forward to the time when an errant planet will disrupt the earth into a shower of lava—and I nearly wrecked the boat. Dent.

"I've won, Dent! I've won! I've solved the problem that gives man immortality! All the epochs that have existed since God first formed the world are mine to play with! I have seen myself as a puling infant, and as a greybeard. I have made myself immortal, because, with this machine, I can set back the clock of time. I have found a land where I am worshipped as a god."

Tode's eyes glittered with maniacal fires. He went on in a voice of indescribable triumph:

"I'm a god there, Dent. Do you want to know where that land is? It is Atlantis, sunk beneath the waves nine thousand years before recorded history opened. It is Atlantis, from which the Cro-Magnons fled in their ships, to land on the coasts of Spain and France, and become the ancestors of modern man.

"In old Atlantis, still not wholly submerged, I have made myself a god. I have mastered the savage Drilgoes whom the Atlanteans oppressed. All the spoils of their ruined cities are at my disposal. And I came back to get Lucille, whom I had never ceased to love. Together Lucille and I will rule like god and goddess.

"Join me, Dent. I'm a god in Atlantis—a god, I tell you. The lesser races fear me as a supernatural being. Only the city remains uncaptured, but it is mine whenever I choose to take it. A god—a god—a god!"

Jim saw now what he had not realized before, that Tode was insane. It would, indeed, have been a miracle if he had been able to retain his sanity under such circumstances as he had described. His voice rose into a wild scream. Yes, Tode was mad—just such a madman as

any of the old Roman emperors, drunk with power, each in his turn the sole ruler of the world.

"The Earth is mine!" Tode screamed. "Before the modern world was dreamed of, before the nations were created, Atlantis was the sole power that held dominion over the scattered tribes of mankind. And she is in my hand whenever I strike.

"Wealth incalculable, treasures such as man has never since seen, marvels of scientific discovery, flying machines that would make ours look foolish, paintings grander than have since been executed—all these things exist in the proud city that will shortly be at my command. And I have my Drilgoes, the inferior race, to serve me. They worship me because they know I am a god. Join me, Dent, and taste the joys of being one of the supreme rulers of the world."

In spite of his undoubted madness, there was such power in Tode's voice that Jim could not help believe what he had said.

"Well," snarled Tode. "You hesitate to give me your answer, Dent?"

"Lucille and I are engaged to be married," answered Jim, and the words were drawn from his lips almost against his will. "We love each other. I am not going to lie to you and then betray you, Tode."

The expression on Tode's face was demoniacal. He snatched up the deadly tube that contained the violet fire and turned it upon Jim. Again Jim felt that repulsive force pushing him back. He gasped for breath, and tensed his whole body in supreme resistance, while he tried to grapple with Tode in vain.

But suddenly Tode dropped the tube, and a roar of laughter broke from his lips.

"You fool!" he shouted. "I tell you I am a god, the one god, supreme above all. Do you think to match your puny will against my own? I tell you Lucille is mine. And for ever, Dent. Whenever we two have reached old age, all that will be necessary for us to do will be to turn this screw a hair's breadth back into the past, and we are both young again. By holding this vessel steady in four-dimensional space, I can achieve immortality."

"Yes, Tode," answered Jim, "but, you see, that's the one thing that you haven't been able to work out yet."

The words seemed to come automatically from Jim's lips. It was only after he had spoken them that he realized they were true. For a moment Tode glared at him; then suddenly, with a shriek of insane rage, he leaped from the instrument board and swung the ray tube

with all his might.

Jim felt the blow descend with stunning force upon his head. He reeled, flung out his arms, and toppled forward, unconscious....

Chapter 4: *Escape*

An intolerably bright light that seemed to sear his eyeballs was the first thing of which Jim was conscious. Then he became aware of his aching head, of a sense of utter lassitude, as if he had been bruised all over in some machine that had caught him up and held him in its grip for endless aeons.

At last, despite the pain in his eyes, he managed to get his eyelids open. He tried to struggle to his feet, only to discover that he was firmly bound with what appeared to be tough creepers, pliant as ropes.

After the lapse of a few minutes, during which he struggled with the receding waves of unconsciousness, he came to a realization of his surroundings. That light that had so distressed him—though the effects were now beginning to pass off—was a pillar of smoke and flame, shooting out of the crater of a volcano about a mile away, across a valley.

He was lying in the entrance to a cave, pegged out on his back, and bound by the tough creepers to the stakes driven into the ground. Up to the mouth of the cave grew huge tree-ferns, cattails, cycads, and such growths as existed in earlier ages in the warm, moist regions of the world.

Beneath the level of the cave a heavy white fog completely shrouded the valley, extending up to within a short distance of the volcano opposite. But on the upper slopes of the volcano the sunlight played, making its crater a sheen of glassy lava, intolerably bright.

Beyond the volcano Jim could see what looked like an expanse of ocean.

He groaned, and at the sound a creature came shambling forward, carrying what looked like a huge melon in either hand. Jim recognized the Drilgo, Cain.

Chattering and mumbling, Cain placed one of the fruits to Jim's mouth. It was a sort of bread-fruit, but he was too nauseated to eat, and rejected it with disgust. Cain offered him the second fruit.

It was a hollow gourd, the interior filled with a clear fluid. Jim drank greedily as the Drilgo put it to his lips. The contents were like water,

but slightly acid. Jim felt refreshed. He looked about him.

The Drilgo uttered a chattering call, and immediately a host of the savages swarmed into the cave. Men—undoubtedly men, in spite of the brow ridges and the receding foreheads, carrying long spears, consisting of chipped and pointed heads of stone, with holes bored in them, through which long bands of creepers passed, fastening them firmly to the shaft.

Chattering and gesticulating, the Drilgoes surrounded Jim as he lay helpless on the ground. Their savage faces, their rolling eyes, the threatening gestures that they made with their spears, convinced Jim that his end was a foregone conclusion.

But suddenly a distant rumbling sound was heard, increasing rapidly in volume. The floor of the cave vibrated; masses of rock dropped from the walls. The light of the volcano across the valley was suddenly obscured in an immense cloud of black smoke. The twilight within the cave was succeeded by almost impenetrable darkness.

Shrieking in terror, the Drilgoes bolted, while Jim lay straining at his ropes, expecting each moment to be crushed by the masses of rock that were falling all about him.

Suddenly a soft whisper came to Jim through the darkness: "Jim! Are you safe! Where are you? I can't see you! Speak to me!"

It was Lucille's voice, and Jim called back, husky and tremulous in the sheer joy that had succeeded his anticipation of instant death.

Then he felt the girl kneeling at his side, and heard her hacking at his bonds. A whole minute passed before the stone knife was able to sever the last of the stout withes, however.

Then Jim was swaying on his feet, and Lucille's arms were about him, and for a few moments their fears were forgotten in the renewal of their love.

"I heard what that devil said to you last night," the girl said. "He means to kill you with awful tortures. He is away now, on some task or other, but he'll be back at any moment. We must get away at once —we three. Dad's in another cave not far away, and his guards bolted after the earthquake."

The earth was still rumbling, and the cavern still vibrating, but it was clear that there was no time to lose. As soon as the quake subsided the Drilgoes would return. Guided by Lucille, Jim groped his way through the cavern. The girl called softly at intervals, and presently

Jim heard old Parrish's answering call. Then the old man's form appeared in silhouette against the dark.

"I've got Jim," Lucille whispered. "Are you ready, dad?"

"Yes, yes, I'm ready," chattered the old man. "Now's our chance. I know a place where we can hide in the thick forests, where the Ray of the Atlanteans cannot penetrate the mists. Let's go! Let's go!"

Gripping hands, the three started back toward the point where a faint patch of darkness showed out the entrance to the cavern. They were nearing it when another and more violent shock flung them upon their faces.

Huge masses of rock came hurtling down from the roof and sides of the cavern, and again the three seemed to escape by a miracle.

Suddenly a huge shaft of fire shot from the crater opposite, evolving into an inverted cone that made the whole land dazzlingly bright. It pierced the mists in the valley underneath, and by that light Jim could see a great wave of lava streaming down the mountain sides, like soup spilled out of a bowl.

A gush of black smoke followed, and the light went out.

"Now!" gasped Parrish, and, clinging to one another, the three darted out of the cavern's entrance. Another terrific shock sent them stumbling and reeling and sprawling down the side of the mountain. Jim heard old Parrish wailing, and, as the shock subsided, groped his way to his side.

"You hurt?" he shouted.

"Lucille, Lucille," moaned the old man. "She's dead! A big rock crushed her. I wish I was dead too."

Jim called Lucille's name frantically, and to his immense relief heard her crying faintly out of the darkness. He rushed to her side and held her in his arms.

"Where are you hit, darling?"

"I'm—all right," she panted. "I was stunned for a moment. I—can—go on now."

But she went limp in Jim's arms, and Jim picked her up and stood irresolute, until he heard Parrish shambling toward him over the heaving ground.

"She's not hurt, I think, only fainted," said Jim. "Which way,

Parrish? You lead us."

"Down the slope," panted Parrish. "We'll be in the ferns in a minute. We can hide there for a while, till she's able to walk. God help us all! And I was once Professor of Physical Chemistry at Columbia!"

The outcry might have seemed comical under other circumstances; as it was, Jim heartily re-echoed old Parrish's sentiments in his heart.

The last shock was subsiding in faint earth tremors. The two men plunged down into the heavy fog, which quickly covered them, Jim carrying Lucille in his arms. He felt the ferny undergrowth all about him, the thick boles of tree-ferns emerged out of the mist.

"We can stop here for a while," panted Parrish. "Crouch down! They'll never find us in this fog, and in a few minutes, when Lucille's better, we can go on."

You must tell me where we are and what our chances are," said Jim, after again ascertaining that Lucille was unharmed.

"I'll tell you, Dent, as quick as I can. It's the place where I've spent five years of hell as the slave of that devil, Tode. I never dreamed, when we were working on the old Atom Smasher, that he had

adapted it to travel in the fourth dimension. He's taken us back twelve thousand years or so to the island of Atlantis. History hasn't begun yet. Atlantis is the only civilization in the world. The rest are Drilgoes, Neanderthal men, wandering in the forests, and still in their stone age.

"It's true, Dent, what old Plato learned from the Egyptian priests. Atlantis has been slowly sinking for thousands of years, and all that's left now is the one great island that we're on. Nearly all the Atlanteans, the Cro-Magnon men, have perished, except for a few who have crossed in ships to the coasts of France and Spain. They'll be the founders of modern Europe—Basques and Iberians, and Bretons and Welshmen. Our ancestors! It makes my brain reel to think of it!"

"Go on! Go on!" said Jim.

"There's a great city on the island, known as Atlantis too. As big as London or New York. With flying-machines and temples and art galleries and big ships that they're building to carry them away when the next subsidence comes. They know they're doomed, for every few days there's an eruption now.

"Tode means to make himself master of Atlantis, and transport it into

another epoch by means of the Atom Smasher. But he's never managed to enter. He's made himself a god in the eyes of the Drilgoes, the savages who inhabit these forests. He's planning to lead them against the city, and he's got an army of thousands from all parts of the interior, who worship him as divine.

“The Atlanteans are unwarlike. They've forgotten how to fight in their thousands of years of peace. But they've got a Ray ten times as strong as Tode's, that brings instant death to everything it touches. It shrivels it up. It's a different principle. I don't understand it, but it's this Ray that keeps the Drilgoes from capturing the city.

"Tode's got a laboratory inside the cave, fitted up with apparatus that he brought from Chicago, the world capital of the year 3000 A. D., after disintegrating the atoms and recombining them. But he hasn't succeeded altogether. He hasn't learned everything. The future isn't quite clear, like the past. There's a dark cloud moves across the spectral lines and blurs them. I think it's the element of free will—or God!"

"I know," Jim answered. "He can't hold that boat steady in four-dimensional space, as he pretends he can. If he could, it would mean that man was wholly master of his destiny. He can't and he never will.

"There's an unknown quantity comes in, Parrish. It is God, and that's what's going to beat him in the end."

"I've not been as idle as Tode thinks," said Parrish, with a senile leer. "I know more about the Atom Smasher than he dreams of. He thinks me just an old fool, the remnants of whose brains are useful to him in his laboratory. That's why he's kept me alive so far. He'll find out his mistake," he chuckled. "I have something Tode doesn't dream of."

Suddenly Parrish's air of intense seriousness vanished. He chuckled and fumbled in his rags. Jim felt a small object like a lever pressed into his hand and then withdrawn.

"It's death, Dent," chuckled old Parrish. "The concentrated essence of the destructive principle. It's a lever I fitted into a concealed groove in the Atom Smasher unknown to Tode. This lever has a universal joint and connects with a hidden chamber, and when pulled will catapult the annihilated components of a small quantity of uranium in any direction we desire. The release of the slumbering energy of this uranium will produce an explosion of proportions beyond the wildest dreams of engineers—perhaps, one great enough to throw the Earth out of its orbit!"

"Uranium!... Breaking up its components!" gasped Jim. "You mean you can actually do that?"

"Yes!" chuckled Parrish. "I'm keeping it for the day when Tode becomes a god. When he's steadied the boat in time-space and halted the march of the past, and when he's got Lucille—then, Dent, I shall so pull the lever that it will release the energy straight at Tode—and destroy the Atom-Smasher, ourselves, and even, perhaps, the whole Earth!"

And he burst into a peal of such wild laughter that Jim realized the old man's wits were gone.

Was it true, that amazing story? It was difficult to know, and yet anything seemed possible in this amazing world into which Jim had suddenly been thrown.

The vast pall of smoke cast out by the volcano was beginning to subside. Slowly a spectral light began to filter through the valley. Through the fog Jim could see glimpses of the ferny undergrowth, the giant tree-ferns and cycads that towered aloft. It was like a picture of the earth when the mastodons, the grass-eaters and the meat-eaters disputed for its supremacy.

Jim bent over Lucille. He saw her stir, he heard her murmur his name. Suddenly she sat up, fixed her eyes on his, and shuddered.

"I'm all right, Jim. Let's go," she said. "I can walk now."

She staggered to her feet. Jim put out his hand to support her, but she shook her head. Jim touched old Parrish on the arm. He started and uttered a wild screech; then seemed to come to himself and rose.

But that screech of his was re-echoed from the mountainside above. Other voices took up the echoes. Lucille clutched at Jim in a frenzy of fear.

"The Drilgoes!" she whispered. "They're on our trail!"

Seizing old Parrish by the arm, Jim started to drag him into the recesses of the fern forest. Suddenly the bestial face of a Drilgo appeared.

A yell broke from the man's throat. The hairy arm shot back. Jim saw the stone tip of the long spear poised overhead. He leaped forward, delivering a blow in the man's midriff with all the strength of his right arm.

The Drilgo grunted and doubled forward, the spear falling from his

hand. The heavy head of stone embedded itself in the soft ground, so that the spear remained upright. As the man collapsed he yelled at the top of his voice.

"This way! This way!" gibbered old Parrish, suddenly alert.

But now the undergrowth all about them was alive with Drilgoes. The three dodged and doubled like hunted hares. High overhead something began to clack with a sound like that made by a woodpecker drilling a tree, but infinitely louder.

And out of the void above came Tode's voice, shouting commands to the Drilgoes in their own language.

Suddenly a column of fire shot up from the volcano, infusing the white mists with a reddish glare. Overhead the three could see Tode. He was flying with a pair of mechanical wings strapped to his shoulders, not more than two hundred feet above them. With a shout of triumph he swooped down. In his hand was a small cylinder, about the mouth of which a phosphorescent violet light was beginning to play.

"I've got you, Dent," he screamed in triumph, hovering above the three, while the wings drummed and vibrated till they seemed the

mere play of light and shadow about Tode's shoulders. "Halt, or I'll blast your body and soul to hell! Halt, or I'll kill *her*!"

The deadly tube was pointing steadily at Lucille's body as Tode hovered ten feet overhead, perfectly still save for the whirring wings. The three stopped dead, and Tode, with a shout of triumph, began calling the Drilgoes, who swarmed forward out of the undergrowth.

Huge brown bodies, nude save for their skins of jungle-cat or serpent, they emerged, quickly forming a ring about the three prisoners. Tode fluttered to the ground.

"Fools, did you think you could escape that way?" he asked. "As for you, Dent. I'm going to convince you of the reality of four-dimensional space as you would not be convinced in the old days. Do you know what I'm going to do with you? I'm going to strip the skin from you with the ray, and take you into the anatomical room at Columbia University and leave you there as an exhibit, Dent!"

Tode grinned like a madman. But Jim was looking past him, at something that had suddenly appeared upon the far horizon.

It was a round disc of bluish white, a disc like the moon, but slightly smaller, a disc that flickered as if it had an eyelid that was being

winked repeatedly. Simultaneously screams broke from the throats of all the Drilgoes. They stampeded.

Tode whirled about and saw. With a curse he leaped into the air and whirred away.

Out of that disc a slender, blue-white beam shot suddenly, driving a pathway through the fog, and disclosing the dark depths of the valley.

"The Eye! The Eye!" screeched Parrish. "Down on the ground! Down! Down!"

He dropped, and Jim caught Lucille and flung himself headlong with her. To and fro overhead, but only a few feet above them, moved the searchlight. Shrieks broke from the Drilgoes' throats as they scattered through the jungle.

Everywhere that ray moved, trees and undergrowth simply disappeared. A bunch of Drilgoes, caught by it, were obliterated in an instant. Great gaps were left through the undergrowth as the ray passed.

It faded as quickly as it had come, and instantly old Parrish was on

his feet, dragging at his daughter.

"Now! Now!" he babbled, heading along one of the burned tracks through the undergrowth.

Jim seized Lucille and the two raced in the wake of old Parrish. Behind them they could hear the Drilgoes shouting, but a dense, impenetrable darkness was already beginning to settle down over the valley. They lost the track and went crashing through the ferns, on and on until all was silence about them.

Suddenly Parrish went down like a log. He lay breathing heavily, completely exhausted. When Jim spoke to him a feeble muttering was the only answer. Jim and Lucille dropped to the ground exhausted beside him.

Chapter 5: *The Eye of Atlantis*

For perhaps half an hour the three lay there, hearing nothing. It seemed to be night, for the darkness was impenetrable, save for the lurid flashes of fire from the volcano. Parrish, who was slowly recovering his strength, was mumbling incessantly. It was with difficulty that Jim recalled him to a realization of his surroundings.

"Where is the city of Atlantis?" he asked him.

"Over there," mumbled Parrish. "Behind the volcano. Why do you ask me?"

"I'm thinking of going there."

"Eh? Going there? You're mad. The Eye will see you, the Eye that can see for a hundred miles. They'll turn the Ray on you. Nothing is too small for the Eye. And they watch night and day."

"The Eye is off now."

"It's never off. The Eye is dark. It grows white only when they are about to use the Ray. Perhaps the Eye is watching us now."

"Nevertheless," said Jim, "I think we would do well to try to enter the city. We can't live here in the jungle at the mercy of these Drilgoes."

"It is impossible to enter. All strangers are killed by the Atlanteans."

"Dad," interposed Lucille, "I think we'd better do what Jim suggests. One of us must decide."

"My idea is that you take us to some place where we can get a view of the city," said Jim. "Then we can make up our minds what to do.

We've got to get somewhere out of this jungle."

Parrish rose to his feet, mumbling. "If we go round the base of the volcano we can see Atlantis," he said. "It's always light there. In the daytime they drive away the fogs by some means they've got, and at night they have an artificial sun. But we'll be killed, we'll all be killed."

Mumbling and muttering, he began groping his way through the undergrowth in the direction of the volcano, whose flashes were again becoming more frequent, affording a means of directing their route. Obscure rumblings were again beginning to shake the earth. For an hour the three picked their way steadily upward through the ferns, until the ground became more open.

They were approaching the base of the volcano, whose side now towered above them, the upper part glassy with vitreous lava.

Suddenly Parrish, who was still leading, stopped and began to tremble with fear. Stepping to his side, Jim heard the low muttering of voices not far away.

Very cautiously he moved forward through the thin fern scrub, until the glow of burning embers caught his sight. He stopped, hearing the

voices more distinctly, and again moved forward.

Three Drilgoes, huge, bestial men, and evidently an outpost, were squatting around the ashes, devouring something with noisy gusto.

Softly as Jim had moved, their acute ears had caught the sound of his footsteps. They rose, still holding what they were eating in their hands, and, grasping their stone spears, moved in three separate ways toward the edge of the clearing.

The man nearest Jim uttered a guttural exclamation and, after sniffing a moment, began to lope in his direction. Suddenly he stopped short, petrified with astonishment and fear at the sight of a man who, instinct told him, was neither Atlantean nor of his own kind.

Jim leaped, tackling him about the knees, and brought him heavily to the ground. As the Drilgo fell, the spear clattered from his hand, but from his snakeskin girdle he pulled a long, curved knife of chipped obsidian, sharp as a razor.

Jim grasped the Drilgo's wrist, but in a moment he saw that he was no match for the creature in strength. He drew back his right arm and delivered a punch to the solar plexus with all his strength.

As the Drilgo's hand grew limp he snatched away the knife. There was no helping what he did for the two others were close upon him.

A thrust, a slashing blow, and the Drilgo was weltering in his life-blood. A backward leap, and Jim evaded the flung spear by a hair's breadth.

Knife in hand he leaped forward, and, dodging in beneath the long shaft of the weapon, got in a slash that almost cut the Drilgo's body in two.

The third Drilgo, seeing his two companions in their death-throes, flung away his spear and fled with loud howls into the jungle.

Jim stepped back. Lucille and her father were already almost at his heels. "It's all right," he called. "Come this way!" He led them through the ferny growth in such a manner that they should not see the two dead bodies. Nevertheless, he felt that Lucille knew.

"Let's see what they were cooking," he said.

But again he turned quickly. He could not know for sure what flesh that was, roasting and scorching on the embers, and he had no desire to know. It might have been monkey, but ... he turned away, and as

he did so, Parrish picked up several round objects that were lying a little distance away.

"These are good to eat," he said. "A sort of bread-fruit. I've lived on it for five years," he added with a sort of grotesque pathos.

They munched the fruit as they proceeded up the mountain, and found it satisfying. Parrish seemed more himself again, though he still muttered at intervals. Lucille clung closely to Jim as they proceeded.

They were treading on lava now, vitreous, and smooth as glass. It was impossible to proceed further in that direction. They turned their steps around the base in the direction of the sea.

After another hour, during which their way was lit by almost continuous lurid flashes from the crater, a patch of illumination, apparently out at sea, began to become visible. A half hour more, and they were rounding the volcano's base, and suddenly it burst upon them, a stupendous spectacle that drew an exclamation of amazement from Jim's lips.

That low, flat background was the sea, the sound of whose breakers was faintly audible. Between sea and land ran a narrow, slender

causeway, perhaps a mile in length. And beyond that, set on a small island, was the most splendid city that Jim could have imagined.

Like New York—very like New York, with its mighty towers, but more symmetrical, sloping upward from the sea toward a towering rampart at the heart of it, crowned with huge domes and minarets and serpentine ramps and mighty blocks of stone that must have sheltered as many occupants as New York's highest skyscrapers.

The whole was snow-white, and gleamed softly in an artificial light dispensed from an enormous artificial planet that seemed to hover above the ramparts.

"God!" whispered Jim in awe as he gazed at the great city.

"You cannot cross that causeway," whimpered old Parrish. "It's death to try. One sweep of the Ray will blot out every living thing."

"Hush! Listen!" came from Lucille's lips. "Something's moving down there!"

The distant murmur of voices, the indescribable "feel" of the proximity of other human beings told Jim that they were in imminent danger. He glanced about him. A little overhead was an outcrop of

enormous boulders, standing up like a little fortress above the smooth lava.

"Get behind there!" Jim whispered.

They turned and ran, slipping and stumbling up the smooth slope. Reaching the boulders, they ensconced themselves hastily behind them. Jim peered out through a crevice between two of the largest stones. The sound of moving things became more audible.

Then, as a flash of flame shot from the crater overhead, Jim saw a black human horde creeping like an array of ants around the base of the mountain not far beneath.

Just like an army of warrior ants it seemed to flow onward, in perfect order. And in the midst of it a faint violet light began to be visible.

Parrish seized Jim's arm, shaking with terror. "You know what that is, Dent?" he whimpered.

"It's Tode's Drilgoes, moving for a night attack upon Atlantis," answered Jim. "And that thing in the middle is the Atom Smasher."

It seemed hours before the last of the serried ranks of Drilgoes had passed. By the light of a lurid flash from the volcano Jim could see

the column winding toward the causeway. Then all was shrouded in impenetrable darkness, save for the snow-soft city upon the island.

"What are we going to do?" chattered old Parrish. "I wish I was back in Tode's cave. He gave me food and let me help with his work sometimes. I'll die here. We'll never get away. We'll never get anywhere."

"We're safer here than anywhere else," answered Jim. "We'll have to stay till morning, or—God, look at that!"

Out of the ramparts of the city the round, blue-white disc of the Eye had suddenly disclosed itself. And simultaneously a violet flare shot up above the moving hosts of the Drilgoes in the middle of the causeway.

Out of the center of the Eye that blinding searchlight streamed. And the pillar of violet fire rose up to counter it, clove it in two, as a man cuts off the tentacle of a cuttlefish, and left it groping helplessly above the heads of the Drilgoes.

To and fro wavered the blue-white beam, and like a protective wall the violet column spread and extended, till the air was interlaced with the play of the two colors. Streaks of white shot through streaks

of purple and black neutral clouds twirled, swirling in ghostlike forms. It was a scene inconceivably beautiful, and it was impossible to realize what must be happening out there.

Men must be dying, withering like stubble in the blue-white flames, whenever they caught them. And yet, under that play of colors, Jim could see the vast host crawling forward to the assault.

He held his breath. It was sublime and terrible, and on the result of that conflict depended—what? What difference, when all this was forgotten history, antedating the written records of the human race?

Then of a sudden the blue-white rays were seen to win. They were beating down the violet light. Like living fingers they pierced that protective wall, flinging it back, until only the tall central pillar remained. And then for the first time the sound of combat became audible.

A groan of despair, of defeat, of hopelessness. The black stream was recoiling, turning upon itself. In the vivid glare of the white light it could be seen dissolving, breaking into a thousand pieces, streaming back toward the land. And, as it broke, the blue-white light pursued, eating its way and blasting all it met. Atlantis had triumphed.

Another sound was audible. From the city it came, a whirring as of innumerable grasshoppers, increasing till it sounded once more like the tapping of innumerable woodpeckers. Suddenly the night broke into whirling balls of fire.

Lucille cried out. Jim leaped to his feet to see more clearly.

"It's men with wings," he cried. "Scores of them. They're hurling something at the Drilgoes!"

The clacking of the wing mechanism filled the air. Now the fugitives from the Drilgo host were streaming along the base of the mountain underneath, seeking the safety of the jungles, and over them, riding them, harrying them, flew the Atlantean birdmen, hurling their fiery balls. And where the balls fell, conflagrations of cold fire seemed to start and run like mercury, and shrivel up everything they touched.

But the birdmen were not without casualties of their own. Here and there one could be seen to drop, and then the massed Drilgoes would turn savagely upon him with their stone-pointed spears. The fight was coming very close now. The savage cries of the Drilgoes filled the night.

A ball of fire broke hardly fifty yards away from where the three

were crouching. A birdman fluttered down like a wounded hawk and lay a-sprawl just underneath the rampart of boulders. Jim surmounted them, ran down the slope of the mountainside, and bent over the dying man. He was hideously wounded by the thrust of a Drilgo spear—whether because the mechanism had failed, or because he had swooped too low, Jim could not determine. As Jim bent over him he looked up at him.

A youth in his teens, with the face and build of a Greek warrior, a worthy ancestor of European man. Jim looked at him and shuddered. "My grandfather four hundred generations removed," he thought.

Seeing that this was no Drilgo, with eyes widened by the anticipation of death, the Atlantean smiled, and died.

Jim detached the straps that held the wings to his shoulders and examined them. They were multi-hinged, built of innumerable layers of laminated wood, which seemed to have been subjected to some special treatment. In the base of each, just where it fitted to the curve of the shoulder-blade, a tiny light was burning.

Jim looped the straps about his arms and walked back to the rampart. Old Parrish saw him and screamed. Lucille cried out.

"I'm going to try to get the Atom Smasher," said Jim, pointing to the thin spire of violet flame that was still visible in the center of the causeway. "It's our only chance. You must stay here. If I live, I'll return. If I don't return—"

But he knew that he must return. Nothing could kill him, because Lucille would be waiting for him behind that rampart of stones upon the bare, vitreous mountainside.

"I'm going to get the Atom Smasher," Jim repeated. "In these wings I'll be taken for Atlantean. I'll—bring it back." He spoke with faltering conviction. And yet there was nothing else to do. Everything depended upon his being able to bring back the Atom Smasher and take Lucille and her father away.

"I think you're right, Jim," answered Lucille. "We'll—wait here till you—come—back."

Her voice died away in a sob. Jim bent and kissed her. Then he began examining the mechanism of the wings. It did not appear difficult. A leather strap fastened around the body. Through this strap ran cords operated by levers upon the breast, and there was a knob in a groove that looked as if it controlled the starting of the mechanism.

"I'll be back," said Jim.

And suddenly the Eye appeared again, and with it there sounded once more the whir of wings.

"Down!" shouted Jim.

He was too late. A score of birdmen shot out of the dark and hovered over them. Next moment they had descended to the ground. Lucille and Parrish were seized, and Jim, struggling furiously, quickly found himself equally helpless in their grasp.

The accents of the Atlanteans as they spoke to one another were soft and liquid, their faces were refined and gentle, but their strength was that of athletes. Jim saw Lucille and Parrish lifted into the air; next moment he himself was raised in the arms of one of the birdmen, who shot upward like an arrow and headed a course back toward the city, carrying Jim as if he had been as light as a child.

Chapter 6: *Human Sacrifice*

In a great open space, flanked by temples and colonnades, the flight had come to rest. There, under the soft artificial light that made the whole city as bright as day, Jim, Lucille, and her father were set down before a sort of rostrum, on which were gathered the

dignitaries of the city.

Jim's hopes were rising fast, for between the Atlanteans and the savage Drilgoes there was as much difference as between a modern American and a blackfellow from the Australian bush. These men were civilized to a degree that even modern America has not attained.

Nowhere was there a speck of dirt to be seen. Vehicles moved soundlessly along the wide streets on either side of this central meeting-place, and the whole city was roofed with glass, through which could be seen the brilliant moon and stars—invisible from the mist-filled valley without.

Soft garments of white wool clothed men and women alike, fashioned something like togas, but cut short at the knee, leaving the lower part of the leg bare and disclosing the sandaled feet. The hair was long and flowed about the shoulders. But what struck Jim most forcibly was the look of utter gentleness and benignity upon these faces.

"I guess we've fallen into pretty good hands after all," he whispered to Parrish.

But one of the dignitaries upon the platform, an elderly man with a face reminiscent of William Jennings Bryan in his inspired moments, was leaning forward out of his curved chair and addressing the old man, and, to Jim's astonishment, Parrish was answering.

But these were not the liquid accents of the Atlanteans. The words resembled the barking of a dog, and across Jim's brain there suddenly flashed the explanation. The dignitary was speaking in the tongue of the Drilgoes, which Parrish, of course, would have learned in his five years of captivity.

Suddenly Parrish turned to Jim. "He wants to know where we come from," he said. "I've told him from a far country. He thinks we're ambassadors from some of the parts of Europe that the Atlanteans who sailed away some years ago landed at. It's no use trying to explain—they don't seem to have succeeded in inventing an Atom Smasher for themselves."

Jim nodded, and the colloquy went on and on, while the Atlanteans listened with languid interest, their kind and smiling faces seeming to exude benignity. At length the session seemed to have ended.

Parrish wore a wide grin. "Everything's coming right, dear," he told Lucille. "The old chap says we are to be the guests of the city either

for a night or for a week. It's something to do with the moon, and there seems to be a full moon to-night. Some quaint superstition or other. And then I guess we'll have a chance to get away in the Atom Smasher. I've learned something of the mechanism, and it won't be hard to operate it. We've fallen into good hands."

A squad of four soldiers or policemen, with shorter robes and what looked like truncheons in their hands, made signs to the three to accompany them. Amid mutual bows, the city's guests filled into a small court-way, closed at the further end, on which a number of Atlanteans were standing.

While Jim was wondering what the next move was to be, to his astonishment the whole courtyard began to rise slowly up the walls of the tall buildings on either side.

"An elevator!" gasped Lucille. "Now I do feel that everything is coming out all right, Jim, dear."

Jim did not question the psychology of this. He pressed her hand tenderly. Already Tode and the past were becoming a bad dream.

"Did you say anything about the Atom Smasher, Parrish?" he asked.

"No, I thought it better not to," replied the old scientist. "You see, they know it only as a force that neutralizes the blue-white ray. Best not to let them know we're sailing for home in it."

"I think that was wise," answered Jim, and just then the rising court-way came to a stop level with the top story of the great building at one side.

Smiling courteously, the guards invited the three to precede them inside an enormous hall, supported on pillars of gleaming stone resembling alabaster. In the center was a small, low table, triangular in shape, with three of the low, curved chairs. The guards invited the three to be seated.

Almost immediately smiling servitors brought in fruits on platters of porcelain, dishes of cooked vegetables, somewhat like the modern ones, but seasoned and flavored with delicious herbs. The staple dish was something like an oval banana, but infinitely more succulent. The three fell to and made a hearty meal, which was washed down with fine wines.

"We've certainly fallen into good hands," said Jim. "All we've got to do is to lie low, and look pleasant, and it won't be long before we get an opportunity to get hold of the Atom Smasher."

The guards, seeing that they had finished their meal, smilingly invited them to accompany them through a huge bronze door at one end of the hall. It swung back, disclosing complete darkness.

Jim felt Lucille's hand upon his arm. The girl was hesitating, and for a moment Jim hesitated too, half afraid of a fall into emptiness. Then he heard the footsteps of the guards ahead, and went on.

It was eery, moving there with the sound of feet in front of them, and, apart from that, utter silence. Then Lucille uttered a little cry.

"Jim, do you feel something pushing you?" she asked.

"There is something—" Jim swung around, but some invisible force continued to propel him forward. He moved sidewise, and the force gently corrected him. The sound of footsteps had ceased.

"What is it, Jim?" cried the girl. "Help me! Something's got hold of me!"

Old Parrish was struggling close beside them. Jim panted as he wrestled with the force, but his efforts were absolutely futile. Slowly, as if slid on wires, he was propelled forward, until a cushion of air seemed to block his further progress.

Dark as it was, and silent, Jim had the consciousness of other human beings about him, of a vast, unseen multitude that was watching him.

Suddenly the droning of a chant began to fill the place, as if a priest were intoning hymns. As that chant rose and fell, voices all about took up the echoing refrain. Jim tried to reach Lucille, but he could move his arm only a few inches against that resilient force pressing in on all sides of him.

Then, in an instant, a blinding, stabbing light shot through his eyeballs. He heard Lucille scream, old Parrish yelp, and, with eyelids screwed tight against the intolerable glare, fought once more desperately and ineffectively to reach Lucille's side.

Slowly Jim managed to unscrew his eyes. He began to realize that he was standing in what appeared to be an enormous amphitheatre. But high up, upon a narrow tongue of flooring that ran like a bridge from one end to the other, with Lucille on his right and Parrish on his left. Nothing visible seemed to be restraining them, and yet they were as securely held as if fastened with tight chains.

Jim's brain reeled as he looked down. Imagine a bridge about half-way up an amphitheatre of a hundred stories, the ground beneath packed with human beings no larger than ants, the whole of the vast

interior lined with them, tier above tier, faces and forms increasing from pismire size below to the dimensions of the human form upon a level, and, again, fading almost to pin-points at the summit of the vast building, where the soft glow of the artificial light filtered through the glass of the roof.

He clutched at the air, felt the soft pressure of the force that was restraining him, looked at Lucille, and saw her half-unconscious with fear, leaning against it, leaning against that soft, resilient, cushionlike, invisible substance; looked at Parrish, whom the shock had thrown into a sort of semi-catalepsy—Parrish, mouthing and staring!

He looked forward to where the tongue of flooring ended. Here, upon a stage, flanked with huge carven figures, a group was gathered. At first he was unable to discern what was being enacted there, so brilliant was the light that glared overhead.

It was the Eye, a round disc perhaps ten feet in diameter, that all-seeing Eye of Atlantis that guarded the great city, but how it worked Jim was totally unable to discover. He saw, however, that it was blinking rapidly, the alternations being so swift that it was only just possible to be conscious of them. Perhaps the Eye was opening and closing ten times a second.

Jim strained his eyes to see what was taking place on the stage at the end of the tongue on which he stood. What was it? What were they doing there? And was that the captured Atom Smasher standing between what looked like grinning idols? A group of captured Drilgoes near it?

A shrill scream from Lucille echoed through the vast amphitheatre. Her eye had seen what Jim's had not yet seen—something that had shocked her into complete unconsciousness.

A marble figure, she stood leaning against the invisible force that kept her on her feet, and in those open, staring eyes was a look of ineffable horror.

Jim could see clearly now, for the light from the Eye was slowly diminishing in brilliancy, or else his own eyes were growing more accustomed to it. Those carven figures, forming a semi-circle upon the platform were figures of gods, squat, huge forms seeming to emerge out of the blocks of rock from which they had been fashioned.

Hideous, gruesome carvings they were, resembling some futuristic sculpture of to-day, for the artist who had fashioned them had given hardly more than a hint of the finished representation. It was rather

as if the masses of rock that had been transported there had become vitalized, foreshadowing the dim yet awful beings that were some day to emerge from them.

Only the arms were clearly sculptured, and each of the half-dozen figures squatting upon its haunches in that semi-circle had four of them. Arms that protruded so as to form an interlacing network, and the fingers were long claws fashioned of some metal. Over the arms the shapeless heads beat down with a leering look, and from each mouth protruded a curved tongue.

A masterpiece of horror, that group, like the great stone figures of the Aztecs, or some of the hideous Indian gods. Seen under the glare of the Eye, they formed a background of horrible omen. In a flash it dawned upon Jim that these hideous figures might be gods of bloody sacrifice.

"That's why these people seem so gentle," he heard himself saying. "It's the—the contrast."

He pulled himself together. Again he tried to move towards Lucille, and again that invisible force restrained him.

Yes, it was the captured Atom Smasher upon the platform, and those

forms grouped in front of the dignitaries were captured Drilgoes, a dozen or so of them. And the concealed priest was droning a chant again. Every other sound was hushed, but from each square foot of the great amphitheatre a pair of eyes was watching.

A myriad of eyes turned upon the platform! What was going to happen next?

Suddenly the priest's voice died away, and simultaneously the three dignitaries, who seemed to be officiating priests, from their solemn gestures, stepped backward, passing beneath the protruding arms of the idols. There sounded the deep whir of some mechanism somewhere, and the same invisible force that had Jim and his two companions in its control suddenly began to agitate the captive Drilgoes.

It was shuffling them! It was forcing them into line, pushing here and pulling there, in spite of the Drilgoes' terrified struggles. They writhed and twisted, groaning and clicking in abject terror as they wrestled with that unseen power, and all in vain. Slowly the foremost of the Drilgoes was propelled forward, inch by inch, until he stood immediately beneath the interlacing arms.

And what happened next filled Jim with sick horror and loathing.

For of a sudden the arms began to move, the iron claws cut through the air—a shriek of terror and anguish broke from the Drilgo's mouth ... and he was no longer a man, but a clawed and pulped mass of human flesh!

"Aiah! Aiah! Aiah!" broke from the throats of the assembled multitude.

The weaving arms had stopped. From behind them an attendant was gathering up what had been the Drilgo in a basket. Then the mechanism had begun again, and again that shrill cry of the spectators was ringing in Jim's ears.

Louder still rose the shriek of old Parrish as he understood. Jim put forth all his strength in a mad effort to break free. A child would have had more chance in the grip of a giant. And each time the arms of the gods revolved, the unseen force pushed Jim, Lucille, and Parrish nearer the platform.

Now Jim understood. This horrible sacrifice was a part of the religion of the Atlanteans, and he, Lucille, and Parrish, were being reserved for the final spectacle.

And at the sight of Lucille beside him, stonily unconscious, and yet

standing, and moving like a mechanical doll, in little forward jerks—at the sight of the girl, hardly six feet distant, and yet utterly beyond the touch of his finger-tips, Jim went mad. He would not shout; he closed his lips in pride of race, pride of that civilization that he had left twelve thousand years ahead of him. Not like the shrieking Drilgoes on the platform, howling as each of them in turn was forced into that maze of revolving knives. But he fought as a madman fights. He hammered at the resilient air, while the sweat ran down his face, he braced his feet upon the wooden tongue, and sought to stay his forward progress. And all the while that infernal force moved him steadily onward.

He was on the platform now. He was traveling the same route that the Drilgoes had taken. The unseen force was shuffling him, Lucille, and Parrish, pushing and pulling them. And, despite Jim's efforts, it was Lucille who was first of the three ... and Jim second ... and old Parrish third....

Jim heard Parrish's hoarse whisper behind him, "Death! Death! The uranium!" He was fumbling at his breast, but the significance of the words and gestures escaped him. He was staring ahead. Only three living Drilgoes of the whole number of prisoners remained alive, and suddenly it was borne in upon Jim that he knew the last of the three.

It was the Drilgo, Cain, who had been their companion in the Atom Smasher—there, not a dozen feet distant. Cain, his bestial face, with the ridged eyebrows and great jaws convulsed with terror and dripping sweat. Cain, immediately in front of Lucille.

"God, let her not wake! Let her never know!" Jim breathed. The agony would be but momentary. And there was nothing a man could not endure if he must. He could even endure to see Lucille become —what the Drilgoes had become. It would soon be over now.

The Eye was blinking overhead. The hideous stone faces of the Atlantean gods looked down in leering mockery. Another of the Drilgoes had gone the same route as the others. Cain was the second now, Lucille the third victim, and he, Jim, would be the fourth.

Gritting his teeth, Jim saw the next Drilgo propelled forward into the whirling knives. He saw the man fling up his arms, as if to shield his head—and then he was a man no longer, and the horrible knives revolved, and "Aiah! Aiah! Aiah!" cried the multitude.

Once more the mechanism whirred.... Once more the arms revolved. A howl of terror broke from Cain's lips as he was propelled onward....

Then suddenly the whirring stopped. The arms of the stone gods, with their hooked, razorlike claws, to which clung particles of flesh, were arrested in mid-air. Cain, unharmed, was leaning backward, his features set in a mask of awful fear.

Simultaneously Jim knew that the force which had held him in thrall was gone. He flung his arms out. He was free. He grasped Lucille, held her tightly against his breast, stood there drawing great, labored breaths, waiting—for what?

A film was creeping over his eyes, but he was aware that the Eye had suddenly gone out. And out of the dark the priest was chanting.

Then came a deep-drawn sigh from the spectators, followed by a ringing shout. In place of the Eye the full moon appeared, sailing overhead. And, holding off that deathly weakness, Jim understood. The sacrifice had ended; a new month had begun....

Chapter 7: ***Back to Long Island***

Jim, seated beside Lucille, was listening to Cain's gruntings and chucklings as he expounded the situation to old Parrish.

It was the day following the scene in the amphitheatre. The four had been escorted back along the tongue of flooring into a hall with

walls of fretted stone and sumptuous colorings. The floor was strewn with rich rugs woven of some vegetable fibre. There were divans and low chairs. At brief intervals, servitors, always smiling, passed carrying trays with wines and foods. And in the corridors were always glimpses of the guards.

"It was the rising of the full moon saved our lives, Dent," Parrish explained. "It appears they have this sacrifice at each of the moon's phases. The victims, captives or criminals, are eaten by the priests. We've got a week's respite, Dent, and then—God help us."

Jim's arm tightened about Lucille, but the girl turned and smiled into his face. There was no longer any fear there. And Jim swore to himself that he would yet find some way of outwitting their devilish captors.

"What the devil are we supposed to be, criminals or what?" he asked her father. "Why do they smile at us all the time in that confounded way?"

Parrish questioned the Drilgo, but apparently he was unable to explain himself to him. "Maybe they think it an honor for us, Dent," he answered, "or maybe it's their idea of etiquette. Anyway, we four are to head the list when the moon's at the three-quarters. God, if

only we could reach the Atom Smasher, I'm certain I could find out how it works!"

Jim had tried more than once to reach it. Through the colonnades at the end of the hall he could see the mechanism standing on the platform, always being inspected by half a dozen or so of the dignitaries of Atlantis. But all his attempts to cross that tongue of flooring had been vetoed by the guards.

They had presented their hands to him, palms outward, and on the palms were fine steel points, about two inches long, set into leather gauntlets. It had been impossible to try conclusions with them.

Two days went by. Once a group of dignitaries had entered the hall and, with smiles and profuse bows, inspected the prisoners. Then they had departed. And Jim had paced the floor, to and fro, thinking desperately.

There was no sort of weapon with which to hazard an attack. Jim knew that they were under the closest observation. He could only wait and hope. And if all else failed, he meant to hurl himself, with Lucille in his arms, off the tongue of floor into the depths below when their time came.

On the third morning, after a troubled sleep induced by very weariness, Jim was awakened by one of the guards, and started up to see one of the bowing dignitaries before him, and Parrish and Lucille sitting up among their rugs.

Bowing repeatedly, the smiling old man addressed some words to Jim, and then turned to Parrish.

"He says he wants you to show him the way the Atom Smasher works," said Parrish. "Now's our chance, Dent. He thinks it's simply an apparatus for neutralizing the blue-white ray. Don't let him guess __"

"I won't let him guess," Jim answered. "Tell him we'll go and show him—"

"I've told him, and he says only you are to go. He's suspicious. Say something quickly, Dent."

"Tell him," said Jim, "that I must have my two assistants and the lady. Tell him I may also need the help of some of his people. It requires many men to operate the machine."

Parrish translated, speaking in the Drilgo tongue, which was their

only means of communication. The Atlantean considered. Then he spoke again.

"He says that we three men may go, but Lucille must be left behind," groaned Parrish.

"The answer is no," said Jim.

The old dignitary, who seemed somewhat crestfallen, departed with an expressive gesture. Jim and Parrish looked at each other.

"That's our end," groaned Parrish.

"No, he'll bite," answered Jim, with the first grin that had appeared on his countenance since their arrival. "Let's make our plans quickly. We must contrive to get Lucille inside the machine, under the pretense of assisting with the mechanism. And Cain, of course," he added, glancing at the goggly-eyed Drilgo. "You do your best to locate the starting mechanism, Parrish, and signal me the moment you're ready. We'll both leap in, and the four of us will sail—God, I don't care where we sail to, so long as we get away from here! Into eternity, if need be. But I hope it's Long Island!"

Back came the dignitary with two of the guards. Smiling at Jim, he

indicated by signs that the three others might accompany him. The Atlanteans had bitten, as Jim had forecast.

The four proceeded along the hall and over the tongue of flooring. This time the force that had previously controlled their movements was not in action. At the farther end of the bridge they saw the group of dignitaries gathered about the Atom Smasher, examining it curiously. Over their heads the hooked arms of the hideous gods were raised. The Eye was darkened, as if with a curtain, and through the glass roof, high overhead, the sunlight streamed down upon the empty amphitheatre.

In spite of their smiles, the dignitaries of Atlantis were very much on the alert, as their tense attitudes denoted. Two more guards had appeared, and Jim saw that they were uncovering some apparatus at the base of the Eye. They were swinging a camera-like object toward him, its lens focused upon the Atom Smasher. It was not difficult to understand what was in the minds of the Atlanteans. The dignitaries were uneasy and mistrustful, and at the first suspicion of treachery they meant to loose the blue-white Ray contained in the apparatus, and blow the Atom Smasher and the group about it to destruction.

Jim intercepted a sign from Parrish, indicating that he was to make pretense of assisting him. He bent over the machine, Lucille beside

him. Parrish was busily examining the wheels and levers. He was adjusting the thumbscrews, moving the needles along the dials.

One of the Atlanteans spoke, and Cain translated into "Drilgo" for Parrish's benefit. Parrish answered. Then, without raising his head, the old man said quietly, "I've located the starting lever, Dent. You and Lucille get inside quickly and pretend you're doing something to the machinery."

They stepped over the bow of the boat and stood beside Parrish, who continued examining the wheels. "We mustn't forget Cain," whispered the girl to her father. "Oh, I hope he understands!"

But there was no direct evidence that Cain did understand, and Parrish dared not warn him in "Drilgo," for fear one of the Atlanteans might understand the language. Cain was standing close beside the boat. But he was not in the boat.

Again one of the Atlanteans shot a question at Parrish. Parrish beckoned to Cain, and awaited the translation. He answered.

Each moment was growing tenser. It was impossible that the Atlanteans could fail to understand what was being planned. The only saving chance was that they did not realize the possibilities of

escape that the vessel offered. A full minute went by.

Suddenly Parrish raised his head. "I've got it fixed, I think, Dent," he said. "I'm going to count. When I reach 'three,' seize Cain and pull him aboard."

Jim nodded. The uneasiness was increasing. The guards at the camera-like object were each holding some sort of mechanical accessory in their hands. It looked like a small sphere of glass, and it connected with the apparatus by means of a hollow tube of fibre. Jim guessed that in an instant the Ray could be made to dart out of the lens. It would be quick work—as nearly as possible instantaneous work.

"Ready, Dent?" asked Parrish in an even voice. In this crisis the old man had become astonishingly calm. He seemed the calmest of the lot. "One!"

Jim beckoned to Cain, who came toward him, his eyes goggling in inquiry.

"Two!"

Jim reached out and took Cain by the arm. There was a sharp

question from the Atlantean who had spoken before.

"Three!"

With all his force Jim yanked Cain over the edge of the boat. The Drilgo stumbled and fell headlong with a howl of terror. But headlong—inside.

What happened was practically instantaneous. A sudden whir of the mechanism, a violet glow from the funnel, the smell of chlorine—a flash of blinding blue-white light. The Atlantean guards had fired—a quarter-second too late!

The thump, thump of the electrical discharge died away. The four were in the boat, whirling away through space. Cain was rising to his knees, a woe-begone expression on his face. And there was a clean cut, with charred, black edges along one side of the boat, showing how near the Atlanteans had come to success.

The relief, after the hideous suspense of the past days, was almost too much for the three white people. "We're free, we're going back home!" cried Jim exultantly, as he caught Lucille in his arms. And she surrendered her lips to his, while the tears streamed down her checks. Old Parrish, at the instrument board, looked up, smiling and

chuckling. Even Cain, understanding that they were not to be hacked to bits with knives, gurgled and grinned all over his black face.

"How long will it take us to get back?" Jim asked Parrish after a while.

"I—I'm not quite sure, my boy," the old man replied. "You see—I haven't quite familiarized myself with the machine as yet."

"But we'll get back all right?" asked Jim.

"Well, we—we're headed in the right direction," answered Parrish. "You see, my boy, it's rather an intricate table of logarithmic calculations that that scoundrel has pasted on this board. The great danger appears to be that of coming within the orbit of the giant planet Jupiter. Of course, I'm trying to keep within the orbit of the Earth, but there is a danger of being deflected onto Pallas, Ceres, or one of the smaller asteroids, and finding ourselves upon a rock in space."

Jim and Lucille looked at Parrish in consternation. "But you don't have to leave the Earth, do you?" Jim asked.

"Unfortunately, it's pretty hard sticking to the Earth, my lad," said

Parrish. "You see, Earth has moved a good many million miles through space since the time of Atlantis."

But both Jim and Lucille noticed that Parrish was already speaking of Atlantis as if it was in the past. They drew a hopeful augury from that. And then there was nothing to do but resign themselves to that universal greyness—and to hope.

They noticed that Cain seemed to be watching Parrish's movements with unusual interest. The Neanderthal man seemed fascinated by the play of the dials, the whir of the wheels and gyroscopes.

"Are you setting a course, dad?" asked Lucille presently. "I mean, do you know just where we are?"

"To tell you the truth, my dear," answered her father, "I don't. I'm relying on some markings that Tode made on the chart—certain combinations of figures. God only knows where they'll take us to. But I'm hoping that by following them we shall find ourselves back on Long Island in the year 1930.

"No, that rascal could hardly have written down those figures to no purpose. They seem to me to comprise a course, both going and returning. But the calculations are very intricate, especially in the

time dimension. I've nearly reached the last row now. Then, we shall have arrived, or—we sha'n't."

Jim and Lucille sat down again. There was nothing that they could do. But somehow their hopes of reaching Long Island in the year of grace 1930 had grown exceedingly slim. Everything depended upon whether or not Tode had meant those figures to represent the course back to the starting point or not.

A desperate hope—that was all that remained to them. They watched Parrish as his eyes wandered along the rows of figures, while his fingers moved the micrometer screws. And then he looked up.

"We're reaching the end of our course," he said. "We're going to land somewhere. God knows where it will be. We must hope—that's all that's left us."

His hands dropped from the dials. He pressed a lever. The blur of nights and days began to slow. A column of vivid violet light shot from the funnel.

"Grip tight!" shouted Parrish.

Thump, thump! The Atom Smasher was vibrating violently. A jar

threw Jim against Lucille. It was coming to a standstill. Trees appeared. Jim uttered a shout. He stepped across to Parrish and wrung his hand. He put his arms about Lucille and kissed her.

They were back at the Vanishing Place, and all their sufferings seemed to be of the past....

Chapter 8: ***A Fruitless Journey***

“Why don't you stop the boat, Parrish?"

"I'm trying to, lad!"

The Atom Smasher was still vibrating, even more violently than before. A column of violet light was pouring from her funnel. The pool, the mud, the walls of heaped up water were discernible, but all quivering and reproduced, line after line, to infinity. It was like looking into the rear-view mirror of a car that is vibrating rapidly. It was like one of those Cubist paintings of a woman descending the stairs, where one had to puzzle out which is the woman and which is the stairs.

A dreadful thought shot through Jim's mind. He remembered what he had said to Tode: "You can't hold the boat still in four-dimensional space."

This was not quite the same. By stopping the infernal mechanism, one re-entered three-dimensional space, and landed. Certainly the Atom Smasher could land. They were not like the motorcyclist who got on a machine for the first time, and rode to the admiration of all who saw him, except that he couldn't find out how to stop.

Yet there was Parrish still fumbling with the controls, and the boat was still vibrating at a terrific rate of speed. It is impossible to dream of leaping out, for there was no solidity, no continuity in the scenery outside.

It was not like attempting to leap from a moving train, for instance. In that case one knows that there is solid earth beneath, however hard one lands. Here everything was distorted, a sort of mirror reflection. And Jim noticed a strange thing that had never occurred to him before. Everything was reversed, as in a mirror picture. That clump of trees, for instance, which should have been on the right, was on the left.

Parrish looked up. "There's some means of stopping her, of course," he said. "There must be a lever—but I don't know where to look for it in all this mess." He pointed to the revolving wheels. No, it might be a matter of days of experimenting in order to discover the elusive switch.

"It may be a combination of switches," said Parrish. "I don't know what we're going to do."

"Suppose I jumped and chanced it," Jim suggested.

Lucille caught his arm with a little cry. Parrish shook his head.

"That devil—Listen: there was a Drilgo he disliked. He threw him out of the boat just before she landed at the cave. Everything was in plain sight, plainer than things are here. But he was never seen again. For God's sake, lad, sit still. I'll try—"

Hours later Parrish was still trying. And gradually Jim and Lucille had ceased to hope.

Side by side they had sat, watching that glimmering scene about them. Sometimes everything receded into a blur, across which sunlight and shadow, and then moonlight raced, at others the surroundings were so clear that it almost seemed as if, by steadying the boat, they could leap ashore. And once there happened something that sent a thrill of cold fear through both of them.

For where the pool had been there appeared suddenly a hut—and Tode, standing in the doorway, looking about him, a malicious sneer

curving his lips.

Jim leaped to his feet, and old Parrish, who had seen Tode too, sprang up in wild excitement.

"Sit down, lad," he shouted. "It's nothing. I—I turned the micrometer screw a trifle hard. I got us back to five years ago, when we were living here with Tode. That's just a picture—out of the past, Jim!"

Jim understood, but he sank down again with cold sweat bathing his forehead. The terrific powers of the Atom Smasher were unveiling themselves more and more each moment. Jim felt Lucille's hand on his arm. He looked into her face.

"Jim, darling, what's going to happen to us if dad can't find how to work the machine?"

"I don't know, dear. I've thought that we might all jump out and chance it. If we held each other tight, we'd probably land in the same place—"

Old Parrish stood up. "I can't work it, Jim," he said. "Tode's got us beat. There's only one thing for us to do. You can guess what it is."

"I think I can," said Jim, glancing askance at Lucille. Yes, he knew,

but he lacked the heart to tell her. "If we were all to jump out, tied together—don't you think we might land—somewhere near where we want to land?" he asked.

"Jim, do you realize what each vibration of this boat means?" asked Parrish. "There's a table on the instrument-board. It's a wave length of four thousand miles in space and nineteen years in time."

"You mean we're moving to London or San Francisco and back—"

"Further than that, every infinite fraction of a second," answered Parrish. "No, Jim, we—we wouldn't land. So we must just go back to where we came from, and—"

He had been speaking in a low voice, calculated not to reach Lucille's ears. The girl had been leaning back, her eyes closed, as if half asleep. Now she rose and stepped up to her father and lover. "You can tell me the truth," she said. "I'm not afraid."

"We've got to go back, Lucille," answered her father. "It's our only chance. By following the course in reverse we can expect to make Atlantis again—"

"Back to that horrible place?"

"No, my dear. The chart will lead us, obviously, back to the cave where Tode has his headquarters. We must try to surprise him, and force him to bring us back to Long Island."

"And then?" asked Lucille.

Parrish shrugged his shoulders. "We'll face that problem when we come to it," he answered.

"But how do you expect to be able to land at the other end any more than this?" asked Jim. "Suppose the machine continues to vibrate instead of coming to a standstill?"

"I think," said Parrish, "that we'll be able to strike a bargain with Tode. Obviously he will be willing to bring the machine to a standstill in order to parley with us. We'll make terms—the best we can. After all, he can't afford to remain marooned on the isle of Atlantis without the Atom Smasher."

"I hate the idea of bargaining with that wretch," said Lucille.

"So do we all, dear," answered Jim. "But there's nothing else that we can do. It's just a matter of give and take. And I'd be glad to consent to any terms that would bring us three safe back to earth, with all this

business behind us."

"I'll start back, then," said Parrish, turning back to the instrument board.

And, to the familiar thump, thump of the electrical discharge, the Atom Smasher took up its backward journey once more.

A long time passed. With her head resting against Jim's breast, Lucille rested. Jim bent over her, trying to discover whether she was asleep or not. Her eyes were closed, her breathing so soft that she hardly seemed alive. An infinite pity for the girl filled Jim's heart, and, mingled with it, the intense determination to overcome the madman who had subjected her to these perils. He glanced across at Parrish, fingering his screws. Old Parrish looked up and nodded. There was a new determination in the old man's face that made him a different person from the crazed old man whom Jim had encountered at the Vanishing Place.

"We can beat him, Parrish!" Jim called, and Parrish looked back and nodded again. "We're nearly back to the top of the column," he answered.

Not long afterward Parrish looked up once more. "Stand by, Jim!" he

called. "And be ready. Tode will be aware of our approach by means of the sensitive instruments he keeps in his laboratory. But don't harm him. We want him aboard, and we want him badly. He won't be able to play any more tricks with us. I've learned too much about the Atom Smasher."

He pressed a lever, and the greyness dissolved into its component parts of light and darkness. A jar. Thump, thump! The violet light! Lucille looked up, raised herself, uttered a low cry and caught at Jim's arm, trembling.

They had run their course truly. The Atom Smasher was vibrating outside the entrance to Tode's cave. And that was Tode, standing there, watching them, that devilish grin of his accentuated to the utmost. A blurred figure that appeared and vanished, and a surrounding crowd of Drilgoes—how many it was impossible to guess, for they looked like a crowd of apes in motion.

Suddenly Tode disappeared, and a moment later Lucille uttered a terrified cry as his voice spoke in her ear:

"I thought you'd be back. I knew you'd got away from Atlantis when my recorder showed the waves of electrical energy proceeding from the city. You were clever, Dent, but you see, you had to come back to

me to get my help."

"Don't be afraid, dear," said Jim, trying to soothe the girl. "That's a wireless receiving apparatus." He pointed to a sort of cabinet enclosed among the rotating wheels, and then it was evident that Tode's voice was proceeding from it.

Tode's figure appeared again, dancing through a haze of lines and patches. He was holding something in his hand which Jim made out to be the mouthpiece of a microphone. The voice inside the Atom Smasher spoke again:

"Turn all the micrometer screws until the needles register zero, Parrish. Then turn Dial D to point 3, Dial C to 5, Dial B to 1, and Dial A to 2. I'll repeat.... Now press the starting lever, Parrish, and you'll find yourself on firm ground again."

A few moments later the Atom Smasher was pouring out an immense column of the violet light, and slowly the vibration ceased. The blurred forms of Tode, of the Drilgoes grew clear. They had arrived.

Tode stepped over the rail. "And now, my friends, we'll have a talk," he said.

"No tricks, Tode," Jim warned him, "You've probably got a number of deviltries up your sleeve—"

"One or two, Dent," grinned Tode.

"We're willing to negotiate."

"Of course you are. You see, I hold the trumps, Dent. Those dial deflections, which are inevitable in the construction of any piece of mechanism, are not the same for Earth in 1920. Don't think you can use the same figures to land with. You must remember that there has been a precession of the equinoxes since the time of Atlantis, with a consequent shift in the earth's axis. No, Dent, I've got you very much where I want you. But I'm willing to discuss terms with you. First of all, let's get rid of this useless cargo. I don't believe in overburdening a ship," he grinned.

He picked up Cain bodily and heaved the astonished Drilgo over the side before he knew what was happening to him. Cain picked himself up and rubbed his sides, whimpering mournfully. The Drilgoes crowded closer, their faces agape with astonishment. Tode spoke a command sharply, and they scattered.

“Before we come to terms, Dent, I'll give you a piece of news that

may interest you," said Tode. "Much has happened during the time you've been away. Ambassadors have been out to see me from Atlantis. With the aid of a Drilgo interpreter, they conveyed to me that they had been greatly impressed by the disappearance of the Atom Smasher. They have nothing like it, of course, and they think I'm a Number One magician.

"The upshot is, they want me to accept the supreme rule of the city, and use my arts to restore the lost territory that has sunk beneath the waves. They swore on an image of their god, Cruk, that they were sincere. I told them that I'd sent the Atom Smasher away on a journey, but that it would be back shortly, and that I'd then give them their answer.

"Now, Dent"—Tode's face took on that look of fanaticism that Jim had seen on it before—"I'm going to repeat the proposition I made to you before. Join me. I'll make you my chief subordinate, and I'll load you and Parrish down with honors. Everything that a human being can desire shall be yours. And in a year or two, when we're tired of being gods, we'll take the Atom Smasher back to Earth and destroy it, and with our wealth we'll become the supreme rulers of Earth too. I need you, Dent. You don't realize how lonely life can be when one is worshiped as a god. As for Lucille, there are a thousand maidens more beautiful than she is, in Atlantis. Come, Dent, your answer!

Your last chance, Dent! Don't throw it away!"

He read the answer before Jim could speak it. Jim saw Tode's face flicker, and hurled himself upon him. Lucille screamed. The two men wrestled together in the narrow confines of the circular boat. Jim struck Tode a blow that sent him reeling against the rail. Then he felt himself seized from behind. A giant Drilgo had him in his arms. He lifted him over the side and flung him to the earth. In an instant the chattering Drilgoes were crowding down upon him.

Struggling madly, Jim saw Tode fell old Parrish with a blow, push back Lucille as she sprang at him, and quickly press the starting lever. The column of violet fire faded, there came the whir of the mechanism—the Atom Smasher vanished....

Chapter 9: *The Blinded Eye*

Jim fought with all his strength; he managed to shake off his assailants and regain his feet. Then one of the Drilgoes poised his stone-tipped spear, ready to hurl it through his body.

But the spear never left the Drilgo's hand in Jim's direction. Like a great black ape, Cain leaped upon the fellow and bore him to the ground, his feet twined around his shoulders, his hands gripping his

throat. Not until the Drilgo had been reduced to a heaving, half-strangled hulk did Cain leave him.

Then Cain, bending until his stomach almost touched the ground, came worming toward Jim, making signs of obeisance.

What had happened that Jim had won the Drilgo's faith? Why did Cain now look upon him, apparently, as his master? It was impossible to gauge the processes of the black man's mind, and at the moment Jim was in no mood to wonder. The stunning disaster that had overtaken him monopolized his thoughts.

Lucille and Parrish were once more in Tode's power. That was the dominating fact. The only gleam of comfort in the situation was that Tode had given him the clue to his movements.

Beyond a doubt Tode had taken his captives into Atlantis with him. It was impossible to disbelieve Tode's statement that he had been offered the supreme power in the city. Tode's egotism would have compelled him to blurt out that fact. Besides, Tode had certainly not gone back to earth.

Jim must force his way into Atlantis. He would find and rescue the two prisoners or die there.

He turned away from the groveling Cain and the chattering Drilgoes, who, inspired by Cain's example, now seemed animated by the same instinct to obey him, and went into the cave. But at the entrance he turned for a moment and looked back.

It was night. The valley was swathed in mists, the volcano opposite was spouting a shaft of lurid fire. On the water was a path of moonlight, where the clouds had been dispersed by the Atlanteans. Jim took in the scene, he raised one arm and shook his fist. Then, without a word, he passed inside.

There was a soft light in the cave, streaming out from an inner chamber, access to which was through a narrow orifice in the rock. Jim passed through, and found himself in Tode's laboratory.

He was astonished at its completeness, still more so at the existence of numerous pieces of apparatus whose purpose it was difficult to understand. There was a radio transmitter and receiver, but improved out of all recognition from those in use in the prosaic year 1930. Three or four tiny dynamos, little more than toys in appearance, were generating as much voltage, from the indicators, as a modern power station. And overhead was a dial, with two series of figures in black and red, and two needles, both of which were swinging briskly, indicating that there was an intense electrical disturbance in

the vicinity.

The Atom Smasher! Jim took heart. Tode could not be far away! He looked about him, subconsciously trying to discover some implement that would prove of service to him, but there was nothing that he could see, not even one of the ray tubes. He looked about uneasily.

Then his eyes fell upon something so singularly out of place that it looked, for the moment, like some pre-historic weapon. It was the last thing Jim would have expected to find there—nothing more nor less than a sporting rifle!

Deer shooting had been one of Tode's pastimes in the old days, and more than one fat buck had been surreptitiously shot for the benefit of the larder at the Vanishing Place. There was something almost pathetic in the sight of that rifle and the fifty cartridges in their cardboard carton. Perhaps Tode had pictured himself shooting big game in Atlantis at some period or other. It was a human weakness that for an instant lessened Jim's hate and horror of the man. It brought him to a saner view of the situation. Jim had been on the point of losing his powers of reason. The sight of the rifle restored them.

He turned sharply as he heard a sound in the entrance. Cain was coming toward him, with many genuflexions, and much stomach wriggling. He stopped, straightened himself. There was a look of singular intelligence on the Drilgo's face.

He began chattering, pointing in the direction of Atlantis. Jim could make nothing of what he was trying to convey.

"Yes, they're there," he said bitterly, "but I don't see how that's going to help me."

"Oh my poor Lucille!" said Cain unexpectedly.

The words were like a parrot's speech, the intonation so remarkable a copy of old Parrish's that Jim was flabbergasted. Nevertheless it was evident that Cain knew he was referring to Lucille.

With a strange, slinking motion he crossed the laboratory and bent beneath a huge slab of stone, resting on two great hewn rocks. He emerged, holding in his arms two curious contrivances. He laid them at Jim's feet.

Jim stared at them, and suddenly understood what they were. They were two pairs of wings, of the kind the Atlanteans had used when

they made their aerial sortie against the Drilgoes.

Cain picked up one pair and began adjusting it about his body. He made fluttering movements with his arms.

"You mean that you've learned how to fly, you black imp of Satan?" shouted Jim.

And Cain, as if understanding, nodded and beamed all over his black face.

With that Jim's idea was born. If the Drilgoes would follow him, he would lead them against Atlantis. And, before the assault began, he would fly to the great Eye that guarded it, and blind it.

He thought afterward that it was like a supernatural revelation, this scheme, that leaped full-fledged into his brain. And Cain had developed extraordinary executive ability. Outside the cave, through rifts in the swirls of fog, Jim could see innumerable Drilgoes massing in the valley, as if they understood Jim's purpose. From Cain's gesticulations, and the number of times he rubbed his stomach, it was evident that he counted upon sacking Atlantis and was imagining innumerable meals of fat captives.

Each flash of lurid light from the volcano disclosed further masses of Drilgoes, armed with their stone spears, apparently assembling for the attack. Whether Tode had summoned them before the Atlanteans offered him the rulership of the city, or whether Jim's own plan had been communicated to them by some telepathic process, it was impossible to guess, but there was not the least doubt but that they were prepared to follow him.

Cain nudged Jim and began strapping the other pair of wings about his body. Jim saw that the energy was supplied by two tiny, lights burning in the base, cold fire, stored energy whose strength he did not guess. For, when Cain took him by the hand, and motioned to him to slide the knob in the groove, he was hurled skyward like a rocket.

There followed a delirious hour. Tossing and tumbling like a pigeon in a gale, Jim by degrees acquired mastery over the apparatus. At the end of the hour he could fly almost as well as Cain, who, like a black guardian angel kept beside him, reaching out a hand when he overbalanced, and pulling him out of aerial side-slips.

Suddenly Cain motioned toward the volcano, and started toward it in a rocketlike swoop. Jim understood. The Drilgoes were ready for the attack upon Atlantis.

Jim dropped to earth, ran back into the cave, and picked up the rifle and the carton of ammunition. He filled the magazine, and, with the rifle on his arm, rose into the air again. Cain was circling back, uttering weird cries of distress at finding his master absent.

"It's all right, Cain," said Jim. "I'm here."

Side by side they flew steadily toward the base of the great cone, which was pouring out a fan-shaped stream of fire. Rumblings shook the earth; it was evident that another upheaval was in course of preparation. The long column of the Drilgoes could be seen, extending around the flank of the mountain.

Then of a sudden the Eye opened. And across the causeway came the blue-white Ray, carrying death and destruction.

The Drilgoes, who had learned wisdom, remained concealed out of the Ray's path, and escaped, but a great dinosaur, fifty or sixty feet in length, startled by the light, came blundering out of the ferns, uttered a bellow, and melted into an amorphous mass. Birds dropped from their roosting places with a sound like that of falling hail. Black paths were cloven through the midst of the jungle.

Rifle in hand, Jim soared into the air, and shot forward, high above

the causeway toward the glowing Eye.

He had noticed that the blue-white ray appeared in cycles of about two minutes, and had made his plans accordingly. Two minutes in which to accomplish his task, or take the chance of a hideous death. Some thirty seconds carried him right into the glowing heart of the winking Eye: he hovered and raised his rifle.

Underneath him the breakers thundered: round the Eye a myriad sea-birds fluttered, dashing themselves against it, falling into the waves. Huge and high the great city towered into the skies, lit by its soft incandescence. Jim could see the throngs in the streets, the traffic. But what was happening in the other side of the Eye?

Suddenly he saw the moon in her third quarter sailing through the skies, and a hideous fear overcame him. Suppose Tode had met with treachery; suppose that this very night Lucille were doomed to be sacrificed to the terrible god Cruk!

Suppose that even at that moment her tender flesh were being sacrificed by the awful hooks!

He drew a bead upon the Eye and fired—and missed. The bullet went wide. But even if it struck, what guarantee had he that it would

shatter the glass, or whatever substance it was that covered the orb?

He lost position, and knew that the two-minute interval was drawing to a close. He soared and fired again. The Eye still glowed.

Then of a sudden a blinding ray shot forth from it, so dazzling that it seemed to sear Jim's eyeballs. The interval was ended.

It shot beneath him, but no more than a few feet, and turning his eyes shoreward, Jim saw it sweep along the causeway and tear a black path through the forest. Frantically he soared, and circled around the temple.

The ray went out. Two minutes more. And now the temporary panic had passed; Jim's nerves grew steady as a rock. He eased the controls and floated in toward the glowing orb. Sea-mews, screaming, dashed themselves against it and fell, wounded and broken, into the breaking seas below. They fluttered past Jim's face, one impacted against his chest with a thud that rocked him where he hovered.

But Jim knew that he could not fail. At a distance of fifty feet he drew a bead upon the centre of the Eye and pressed the trigger.

And instantly the light went out....

Chapter 10: ***The Fight in the Dark***

He dropped down softly to the causeway. Within the city he heard a sound such as he had never heard before, as if some ancient prophecy of doom had been fulfilled, a wailing "Aiah! Aiah! Aiah!" that was caught up from throat to throat and rose upon the wind in a clamor wild and mournful as that of the sea-birds around the broken Eye. It was the death-keening of proud Atlantis, Queen of the Atlantic for fifty thousand years. She was dying in darkness.

For, with the blinding of the Eye, all the soft lights within the city had gone out. Dense, utter, impenetrable darkness reigned, and even the gibbous moon, floating overhead, seemed to give no light.

Jim dropped to the causeway and began running in the direction of the city. But, feeling the drag of his wings, he unbuckled the strap and flung them away. He might need them, but his one thought was to get to Lucille, if she were still alive. And he felt that each moment lost might mean that he would be too late.

Through the blackness he raced forward, hearing that sobbing ululation within the walls. But behind him he heard another sound,

and shuddered at it, all his hopes suddenly reversed. For that sound was the shouting of the Drilgoes as they rushed forward to conquest. And now it seemed a monstrous thing that proud Atlantis should be at the mercy of these hordes. He had let loose destruction upon the world. But it was to save Lucille.

That was his consolation. Yet he hardly checked the racing thoughts within his mind even for a moment, to meditate on what he had done. Those thoughts were all of Lucille. He must get to her before the Drilgoes entered. And he ran faster, panting, gasping, till of a sudden the portals loomed before him, and he saw a crowd of frenzied Atlanteans struggling to pass through, and a file of soldiers struggling to keep them back.

He could distinguish nothing more than the confused struggle. He hurled himself into the midst of the crowd and swept it back. He was within the walls now, and struggling to pass through the mob of people that was swarming like homeless bees.

He fought them with flailing fists, he clove a pathway through them, until he found himself in a great shadowy space that he recognized as the central assembly of the city. More by instinct than design he hit upon the narrow court that was the elevator. But the court was filled with another mob of struggling people, and in the darkness

there was no possibility of discovering the secret of raising it.

He blundered about, raging, forcing a path now here, now there. He ran into blind alleys, into small threading streets about the court, which led him back into the central place of assembly. It was like a nightmare, that blind search under the pale three-quarter moon and the black, star-blotched sky.

Suddenly Jim found himself wedged by the pressure of the crowd into a sort of recess leading off the elevator court. So strong was the pressure here that he was unable to move an inch. Wedged bolt upright, he could only wait and let the frenzied mob stream past him. And louder above the sound of wailing came the roars of the Drilgoes swarming along the causeway.

Suddenly something gave behind him—a door, as it seemed, broken off its hinges by the mob pressure. Jim was hurled backward, and fell heavily down a flight of stone stairs, bringing up against a stone balustrade. He got up, unconscious of his bruises, ran to the top of the flight, and saw the dim square of palest twilight where the door had been.

But over him he could faintly see the stairs and the balustrade, winding away to what seemed immeasurable height. That stairway

must lead to the top of the building, and thence there should be some access to the amphitheatre. Jim turned toward it.

Suddenly a tremendous uproar filled the streets, yells, the clicking grunts of the Drilgoes, the screams of the panic-stricken populace. The invaders had arrived, and they were sweeping all before them. No chance of recognition in that darkness. Lucille! Shouting her name, Jim began to ascend the stairs in leaps of three at a time.

But long before he reached the top he was ascending one by one, with straining limbs and laboring breath. Red slaughter down below, a very inferno of sound; above, that shadowy stairway, still extending almost to the heavens. Step after step, flight beyond flight!

Jim's lungs were bursting, and his heart hammering as if it would break his chest. One flight more! One more! Another! Suddenly he realized that his task was ended. In place of the stairs stood a vast hall, and beyond that another hall, dim in the faint light that filtered through the glass above.

Jim thought he remembered where he was. Beyond that next hall there should be the tongue of flooring, crossing the amphitheatre and joining the platform of the idols. But he stopped suddenly as he emerged, not upon the tongue, but upon still another stairway.

He had gone astray, and out of his bursting lungs a cry of rage and despair went up. For a moment he stood still. What use to proceed further?

And then, amazingly, there came what might have been a sign from heaven. Down through a small, square opening overhead, no larger than a ventilator, it came ... a glimmer of violet flame!

And Jim hurled himself like a madman against the stairs, and surmounted them with two bounds. There were no more. Instead, Jim found himself looking down into the amphitheatre.

The thick walls had cut off all sound from his ears, save a confused murmur, but now a hideous uproar assailed them. The whole floor of the amphitheatre was a mass of moving shadows, of slayers and slain.

The Drilgoes had broken in and trapped the multitudes that had taken refuge there. Their fearful stone-tipped spears thrust in and out, to the accompaniment of their savage howls and the screams of the dying.

Never has such a shadow-play been seen, perhaps, as that below, where death stalked in dense darkness, and the slayer did not even

see his victim. Only the thrust of spears, the soft, yielding flesh that they encountered, the scream, the wrench of stone from tissue, and the blended howl of triumph and scream of despair.

Yet only for a moment did Jim turn his eyes upon that sight. For he knew where he was now. He had emerged upon the other side of the amphitheatre, upon the platform where he had seen the priests and dignitaries gathered when he was led forward to be sacrificed.

There, in the rear, were the hideous, shadowy gods, looming up out of the darkness, their outstretched arms interlaced. And there upon the platform was the Atom Smasher, a little thread of violet light seeping out of the central tube.

Beside it stood a group of figures, impossible to distinguish in the darkness, but of a sudden Lucille's scream rang out above the din below.

With three leaps Jim was at her side. He saw the girl, Tode, and Parrish, struggling in the grasp of a dozen priests. They were dragging them toward the idols, and Jim understood what that scene portended.

In despair at the irruption of the Drilgoes, the priests were seeking to

propitiate their gods by sacrificing the three strangers whom they held responsible for all their woes.

Jim caught Lucille in his arms, shouting her name. She knew him, turned toward him. Then one of the priests, armed with a great stone-headed club—for no metal is permitted within the precincts of the god Cruk—struck at him furiously.

Jim leaped aside, letting the club descend harmlessly upon the floor. He shot out his right with all his strength behind it, catching the priest upon the jaw, and the man crumpled.

Whirling the club around his head, he fought back the fanatics, all the while shouting to Tode to start the Atom Smasher. In such a moment he only remembered that Tode was a white man, and of his own generation.

He struck down three of the priests; then he was seized around the knees from behind, and fell heavily. The club was wrenched from his hand. In another moment Jim found himself helpless in the grasp of the Atlanteans.

As he stopped struggling for a moment, to gather his strength for a supreme effort, he heard a whir overhead, and saw the arms of the

stone gods begin their horrible revolution. The priests had started the machinery. And high above the din below rang out the wild chant of the high priest.

Jim saw him now, a figure poised upon a platform behind the arms, his own arms raised heavenward.

"Aiah! Aiah! Aiah!"

Jim was being dragged forward, with Lucille beside him, old Parrish following, still making a futile struggle for life, while pitiful screeches issued from his mouth.

Jim saw the revolving arms descend within a foot of his head. One more fight—one more, the last.

Suddenly, with loud yells, a band of Drilgoes leaped forward from the head of the stairs and rushed upon the struggling priests and victims. And, dark as it was, Jim recognized their leader—Cain.

And Cain knew Lucille. As the priests rallied for a desperate resistance, Cain hurled his great body through the air, landing squarely upon the shoulders of the priest nearest the revolving arms, and knocking him flat.

Then the arms caught priest and Drilgo, and the steel hooks dug deep into their flesh. A screech of terror, a howl that reverberated through the amphitheatre, and nothing remained of either but a heap of macerated flesh.

But in that instant Jim had fought free again. He caught Lucille and dragged her back toward the Atom Smasher.

Tode had already broken from his captors and was working at it frantically.

"Hold on!" screeched old Parrish. "Hold on!"

They had a moment's leeway. The Drilgoes had driven the priests back into the hooks. With awful shrieks the fanatics were yielding up their lives, in the place of their selected victims.

But more Drilgoes were pouring up the stairs. A moment's leeway, and no more, before the savage band would impale the four upon their stone-pointed spears. There was not the slightest chance that they would be able to make their identity known.

"For God's sake hurry!" Jim yelled in Tode's ear.

The wheels were revolving, a stream of violet light, leaping out of

the central tunnel, cast a lurid illumination upon the scene.

But it was too late. A score of Drilgoes, with leveled spears, were rushing on the four.

"Hold tight!" screeched Parrish. He thrust his arm into his breast, and pulled out a little lever. Jim recognized it and remembered. It was the instrument of universal death—the uranium release of untold forces of cataclysmic depredation.

"Take that!" screamed the old man, inserting the lever into the secret groove in the Atom Smasher and jerking it in the direction of the priests.

Chapter 11: *Tode's Last Gamble*

A roar that seemed to rend the heavens followed. Roar upon roar, as the infinite momentum of the disintegrating uranium struck obstacle after obstacle. The Drilgoes vanished, the amphitheatre melted away, walls and roof.... Overhead were the moon and stars.

And proud Atlantis was sinking into the depths of the sea.... Not as a ship sinks, but piecemeal, her walls and towers crumbling and toppling as a child's sand-castle crumbles under the attack of the lapping waves. Down they crashed, carrying their freight of black,

clinging, human ants, while from the sea's depths a wave, a mile high, rose and battered the fragments to destruction. From the crater of the volcano a huge wave of fire fanned forward, and where fire and water met a cloud of steam rose up.

A boiling chaos in which water and earth and fire were blended, spread over land and sea. And then suddenly it was ended. Where the last island of the Atlantean continent had been, only the ocean was to be seen, placid beneath the stars.

The Atom Smasher was vibrating at tremendous speed. Jim, with one arm round Lucille, faced Tode at the instrument board. Near by sat Parrish, watching him too.

"That took a whole year," said Tode. "That pretty little scene of destruction we've just witnessed. The good old Atom Smasher has been doing some lively stunts, or we'd have been engulfed too. We're not likely to see anything so pretty in history again, unless we go to watch the destruction of Herculaneum and Pompeii by lava from Vesuvius. But that would be quite tame in comparison with this."

Tode's jeering tone grated on Jim's ears immeasurably.

"I don't think any of us are craving any more experiments, Tode," he

said, trying to keep his voice steady. "Suppose you take us back to Peconic Bay. We'll dump the Atom Smasher into the pond, and try to forget that we've had anything except a bad nightmare."

"Don't trust him, Jim," whispered Lucille.

Tode heard. "Thank you," he answered, scowling. "But seriously, Dent, we can't go back with nothing to show for all our trouble. Those fools tried to betray me, and then the Eye went out. Perhaps I have you to thank for that performance? However, the sensible thing is to let bygones be bygones. But we must make a little excursion. How about picking up a little treasure from the hoards of Solomon or Genghis Khan? A few pounds of precious stones would make a world of difference in our social status when we reach Long Island."

Jim felt a cold fury permeating him. Tode saw his grim look and laughed malignantly.

"Well, Dent, I'm ready to be frank with you," he said. "The game's still in my hands. I want Lucille. I'm willing to take you and Parrish back, provided you agree she shall be mine. I'll have to trust you, but I shall have means of evening up if you play crooked."

"Why don't you ask my girl herself?" piped old Parrish.

"He needn't trouble. He knows the answer!" cried Lucille scornfully.

"There's your answer," said Jim. "Now, what's the alternative?"

"The alternative is, that I have already set the dial to eternity, Dent," grinned Tode. "Eternity in the fifth dimension. Didn't know I'd worked that out, did you? A pleasant little surprise. No, don't try to move. My hand is on the lever. I have only to press it, and we're there."

Jim stood stock still in horror. Tode's voice rang true. He believed Tode had the power he claimed.

"Yes, the fifth dimension, and eternity," said Tode, "where time and space reel into functionlessness. Don't ask me what it's like there. I've never been there. But my impression of it is that it's a fairly good representation of the place popularly known as hell.

"You fool, Dent," Tode's voice rang out with vicious, snarling emphasis, "I gave you your chance to come in with me. Together we'd have made ourselves masters of Atlantis and brought back her plunder to our Twentieth Century world. You refused because of a girl—a girl, Dent, who loved me long before you came upon the scene."

"That's a lie, Lucius," answered Lucille steadily. "And you can do your worst. There's one factor you haven't reckoned in your calculations, and that's called God."

"The dark blur on the spectral lines," old Parrish muttered.

Tode laughed uproariously. "Come, make your choice, Dent," he mocked. "It's merely to press this lever. You'll find yourself—well, we won't go into that. I don't know where you'll find yourself. You'll disappear. So shall I. But I'm desperate. I must have Lucille. Choose!" His voice rang out in maniac tones. "Choose, all of you!"

"Lucille has answered you," Jim retorted.

"And how about you, old man?" called Tode to Parrish.

Parrish leased forward, making a swift movement with his hand. "Go to your own hell, you dev—"

A blinding light, a frantic oscillation of the Atom Smasher, a sense of death, awful and indescribable—and stark unconsciousness rushed over Jim. His last thought was that Lucille's arms were about him, and that he was holding her. Nothing mattered, therefore, even though they two were plunged into that awful nothingness of the

fifth dimension, where neither space nor time recognizably exists. Love could exist there.

Chapter 12: *Solid Earth*

“He's coming around, Lucille. Thank God for it!"

Jim opened his eyes. For a few moments he looked about him without understanding. Then the outlines of a room etched themselves against the clouded background. And in the foreground Lucille's face. The girl was bending over Jim, one hand soothing his forehead.

"Where am I?" Jim muttered.

"Back on earth, Jim, the good old earth, never again to leave it," answered Lucille, with a catch in her voice. With an effort she composed herself. "You mustn't talk," she said.

"But what place is this?"

"It's Andy Lumm's house. Now rest, and I'll explain everything later."

But the first explanation came from Andy Lumm. "Well, Mr. Dent,

my wife and me sure were glad to be on the spot when you and Miss Parrish got bogged on the edge of the Black Pool," he said. "Mean, treacherous place it is. Thar was a cow got mired thar last month, up to her belly. If us hadn't found her, and dragged her out with ropes, she'd have gone clear under. Granpop Dawes says thar's underground springs around the edge, and that it runs straight down to hell, though that seems sorter far-fetched to me.

"Yessir, and if I hadn't heard WNYC giving Miss Parrish on the list of missing persons, and as having been seen near here, I reckon I'd never have found you. Made me and my wife uneasy, that did. 'Andy,' she says. 'I got an inkling you oughter go to the Vanishing Place and see if she ain't there.' And there I found you two, mired to the waist, and Mr. Parrish dancing around and fretting, and his clothes burned to cinders.

"It sure seems strange to me, to think Mr. Parrish got away safe after that explosion five years ago, and of his wandering around with loss of memory, till you found him, and brung him back here to restore it, but thar's strange things in the world—yes, sir, thar surely is!"

In the happiness of being back on Earth once more, Jim was content to let further explanations go. The return of Parrish had been duly chronicled in the newspapers, and had provoked a mild interest, but

fortunately the public mind was so occupied at the moment with the trial of a night club hostess that, after the first rush of newspaper men, the three were left alone.

Day after day, in the brilliant autumn weather, Jim and Lucille would roam the tinted woods, recharging themselves with the feel of Earth, until the memory of those dread experiences grew dim.

"Well, Jim, I reckon I'd better tell you and get it over," said old Parrish one morning—Parrish, quite his old, jaunty self again. "Tode had got the dials pointing to the fifth dimension—eternity, he called it, though actually I believe it's nothing more than annihilation, a grand smash. Well, he pressed that lever. But something had gone wrong.

"You remember how poor Cain seemed to take great interest in the Atom Smasher. There's no way of telling what had been going on in that brain of his, but it looks to me like he'd known that that lever meant death. It was sealed up in wax, and Tode had got it free on the way out of Atlantis.

"Well—this it what I made out from examining the thing afterward. Cain had been monkeying with the lever. He'd pried loose one of the wires that hooked to the transformer, and short-circuited it, not

knowing, of course, just what he was doing. The result was that when Tode pressed that lever, instead of blowing the whole contraption to pieces, he got a couple of billion volts of electricity through his body, combined with a larger amperage than has ever been imagined. It burned him to a few grease spots. He simply—vanished. You don't remember what you did at the moment, boy?"

"I don't seem to remember anything," said Jim.

"Well, your response was an automatic one. You jumped him. Luckily you were too late, for Tode vanished like that!" Old Parrish snapped his fingers. "But you must have got into the field of magnetic force—any way, you were almost electrocuted. Lucille and I thought you were dead for hours.

"We laid you down and set a course for home. I used those dial numberings Tode had given me. He'd said they wouldn't work, but he'd lied. They did work. They brought us back to the Vanishing Place.

"We carried you out, and then I saw your eyelid twitch. We worked over you with artificial respiration till it looked as if there was a chance for you. Then I shut off the power and let the waters rush in over the Atom Smasher, and swam ashore. And there it lies at the

bottom of the pool, and may it lie there till the Judgment Day."

“Tode was a genius," said Jim, "but he never understood that character counts for more than genius."

"Let's think no more about him," said Lucille. She had come up to them, and the two looked at each other and smiled. Love is self-centred; other things it forgets very quickly.

"To-morrow we go back to New York," said Jim. "You think you're able to face the world and take up life again?"

"I think so, Jim," said Lucille.

"You're not remembering him after all?"

"No, Jim. I was thinking of poor Cain. He died for me."

"But that was twelve thousand years ago, my dear, and to-day's to-day," said Jim. "And to-morrow a new life begins for you and me."

He drew her closer to him. No, he would never quite forget, but that was twelve thousand years ago ... and to-morrow was his wedding day.

The Readers' Corner, May 1930

June 1930

#29 Out Of The Dreadful Depths, By Charles Willard Diffin:

Robert Thorpe seeks out the nameless horror that is sucking all human life out of ships in the south pacific.

Aproximate word count: 10,400

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Robert Thorpe reached languidly for a cigarette and, with lazy fingers, extracted a lighter from his pocket.

"Be a sport," he repeated to the gray haired man across the table. "Be a sport, Admiral, and send me across on a destroyer. Never been on a destroyer except in port. It ... would be a new experience ... enjoy it a lot...."

In the palm-shaded veranda of this club-house in Manila, Admiral Struthers, U. S. N., regarded with undisguised disfavor the young

man in the wicker chair. He looked at the deep chest and the broad shoulders which even a loose white coat could not conceal, at the short, wavy brown hair and the slow, friendly smile on the face below.

A likable chap, this Thorpe, but lazy—just an idler—he had concluded. Been playing around Manila for the last two months—resting up, he had said. And from what? the Admiral had questioned disdainfully. Admiral Struthers did not like indolent young men, but it would have saved him money if he had really got an answer to his question and had learned just why and how Robert Thorpe had earned a vacation.

"You on a destroyer!" he said, and the lips beneath the close-cut gray mustache twisted into a smile. "That would be too rough an experience for you, I am afraid, Thorpe. Destroyers pitch about quite a bit, you know."

He included in his smile the destroyer captain and the young lady who completed their party. The young lady had a charming and saucy smile and knew it; she used it in reply to the Admiral's remark.

"I have asked Mr. Thorpe to go on the *Adelaide*," she said. "We shall be leaving in another month—but Robert tells me he has other

plans."

"Worse and worse," was the Admiral's comment. "Your father's yacht is not even as steady as a destroyer. Now I would suggest a nice comfortable liner...."

Robert Thorpe did not miss the official glances of amusement, but his calm complacence was unruffled. "No," he said, "I don't just fancy liners. Fact is, I have been thinking of sailing across to the States alone."

The Admiral's smile increased to a short laugh. "I would make a bet you wouldn't get fifty miles from Manila harbor."

The younger man crushed his cigarette slowly into the tray. "How much of a bet?" he asked. "What will you bet that I don't sail alone from here to—where are you stationed?—San Diego?—from here to San Diego?"

"Humph!" was the snorted reply. "I would bet a thousand dollars on that and take your money for Miss Allaire's pet charity."

"Now that's an idea," said Thorpe. He reached for a check book in his inner pocket and began to write.

"In case I lose," he explained, "I might be hard to find, so I will just ask Miss Allaire to hold this check for me. You can do the same." He handed the check to the girl.

"Winner gets his thousand back, Ruth; loser's money goes to any little orphans you happen to fancy."

"You're not serious," protested the Admiral.

"Sure! The bank will take that check seriously, I promise you. And I saw just the sloop I want for the trip ... had my eye on her for the past month."

"But, Robert," began Ruth Allaire, "you don't mean to risk your life on a foolish bet?"

Thorpe reached over to pat tenderly the hand that held his check. "I'm glad if you care," he said, and there was an undertone of seriousness beneath his raillery, "but save your sympathy for the Admiral. The U. S. Navy can't bluff me." He rose more briskly from his chair.

"Thorpe...." said Admiral Struthers. He was thinking deeply, trying to recollect. "Robert Thorpe.... I have a book by someone of that

name—travel and adventure and knocking about the world. Young man, are you *the* Robert Thorpe?"

"Why, yes, if you wish to put it that way," agreed the other. He waved lightly to the girl as he moved away.

"I must be running along," he said, "and get that boat. See you all in San Diego!"

* * *

he first rays of the sun touched with golden fingers the tops of the lazy swells of the Pacific. Here and there a wave broke to spray under the steady wind and became a shower of molten metal. And in the boat, whose sails caught now and then the touch of morning, Robert Thorpe stirred himself and rose sleepily to his feet.

Out of the snug cabin at this first hint of day, he looked first at the compass and checked his course, then made sure of the lashing about the helm. The steady trade-winds had borne him on through the night, and he nodded with satisfaction as he prepared to lower his lights. He was reaching for a line as the little craft hung for an instant on the top of a wave. And in that instant his eyes caught a marking of white on the dim waters ahead.

"Breakers!" he shouted aloud and leaped for the lashed wheel. He swung off to leeward and eased a bit on the main-sheet, then lashed the wheel again to hold on the new course.

Again from a wave-crest he stared from under a sheltering hand. The breakers were there—the smooth swells were foaming—breaking in mid-ocean where his chart, he knew, showed water a mile deep. Beyond the white line was a three-master, her sails shivering in the breeze.

The big sailing ship swung off on a new tack as he watched. Was she dodging those breakers? he wondered. Then he stared in amazement through the growing light at the unbroken swells where the white line had been.

He rubbed his sleepy eyes with a savage hand and stared again. There were no breakers—the sea was an even expanse of heaving water.

"I could swear I saw them!" he told himself, but forgot this perplexing occurrence in the still more perplexing maneuvers of the sailing ship.

This steady wind—for smooth handling—was all that such a craft

could ask, yet here was this old-timer of the sea with a full spread of canvas booming and cracking as the ship jibed. She rolled far over as he watched, recovered, and tore off on a long, sweeping circle.

The one man crew of the little sloop should have been preparing breakfast, as he had for many mornings past, but, instead he swung his little craft into the wind and watched for near an hour the erratic rushes and shivering haltings of the larger ship. But long before this time had passed Thorpe knew he was observing the aimless maneuvers of an unmanned vessel.

And he watched his chance for a closer inspection.

The three-master *Minnie R.*, from the dingy painting of the stern, hung quivering in the wind when he boarded her. There was a broken log-line that swept down from the stern, and he caught this and made his own boat fast. Then, watching his chance, he drew close and went overboard, the line in his hand.

"Like a blooming native after cocoanuts," he told himself as he went up the side. But he made it and pulled himself over the rail as the ship drew off on another tack.

Thorpe looked quickly about the deserted deck. "Ahoy, there!" he

shouted, but the straining of rope and spars was his only answer. Canvas was whipping to ribbons, sheets cracked their frayed ends like lashes as the booms swung wildly, but a few sails still held and caught the air.

He was on the after deck, and he leaped first for the wheel that was kicking and whirling with the swing of the rudder. A glance at the canvas that still drew, and he set her on a course with a few steadying pulls. There was rope lying about, and he lashed the wheel with a quick turn or two and watched the ship steady down to a smooth slicing of the waves from the west.

And only then did the man take time to quiet his panting breath and look about him in the unnatural quiet of this strangely deserted deck. He shouted again and walked to a companionway to repeat the hail. Only an echo, sounding hollowly from below, replied to break the vast silence.

It was puzzling—inconceivable. Thorpe looked about him to note the lifeboats snug and undisturbed in their places. No sign there of an abandonment of the boat, but abandoned she was, as the silence told only too plainly. And Thorpe, as he went below, had an uncanny feeling of the crew's presence—as if they had been there, walked where he walked, shouted and laughed a matter of a brief hour or

two before.

The door of the captain's cabin was burst in, hanging drunkenly from one hinge. The log-book was open; there were papers on a rude desk. The bunk was empty where the blankets had been thrown hurriedly aside. Thorpe could almost see the skipper of this mystery ship leaping frantically from his bed at some sudden call or commotion. A chair was smashed and broken, and the man who examined it curiously wiped from his hands a disgusting slime that was smeared stickily on the splintered fragments. There was a fetid stench within his nostrils, and he passed up further examination of this room.

Forward in the fo'c'sle he felt again irresistibly the recent presence of the crew. And again he found silence and emptiness and a disorder that told of a fear-stricken flight. The odor that sickened and nauseated the exploring man was everywhere. He was glad to gain the freedom of the wind-swept deck and rid his lungs of the vile breath within the vessel.

He stood silent and bewildered. There was not a living soul aboard the ship—no sign of life. He started suddenly. A moaning, whimpering cry came from forward on the deck!

Thorpe leaped across a disorder of tangled rope to race toward the

bow. He stopped short at sight of a battered cage. Again the moaning came to him—there was something that still lived on board the ill-fated ship.

He drew closer to see a great, huddled, furry mass that crouched and cowered in a corner of the cage. A huge ape, Thorpe concluded, and it moaned and whimpered absurdly like a human in abject fear.

Had this been the terror that drove the men into the sea? Had this ape escaped and menaced the officers and crew? Thorpe dismissed the thought he well knew was absurd. The stout wood bars of the cage were broken. It had been partially crushed, and the chain that held it to the deck was extended to its full length.

"Too much for me," the man said slowly, aloud; "entirely too much for me! But I can't sail this old hooker alone; I'll have to get out and let her drift."

He removed completely one of the splintered bars from the broken cage. "I've got to leave you, old fellow," he told the cowering animal, "but I'll give you the run of the ship."

He went below once more and came quickly back with the log-book and papers from the captain's room. He tied these in a tight wrapping

of oilcloth from the galley and hung them at his belt. He took the wheel again and brought the cumbersome craft slowly into the wind. The bare mast of his own sloop was bobbing alongside as he went down the line and swam over to her.

Fending off from the wallowing hulk, he cut the line, and his small craft slipped slowly astern as the big vessel fell off in the wind and drew lumberingly away on its unguided course.

She vanished into the clear-cut horizon before the watching man ceased his staring and pricked a point upon his chart that he estimated was his position.

And he watched vainly for some sign of life on the heaving waters as he set his sloop back on her easterly course.

* * *

It was a sun-tanned young man who walked with brisk strides into the office of Admiral Struthers. The gold-striped arm of the uniformed man was extended in quick greeting.

"Made it, did you?" he exclaimed. "Congratulations!"

"All O.K.," Thorpe agreed. "Ship and log are ready for your

verification."

"Talk sense," said the officer. "Have any trouble or excitement? Or perhaps you are more interested in collecting a certain bet than you are in discussing the trip."

"Damn the bet!" said the young man fervently. "And that's just what I am here for—to talk about the trip. There were some little incidents that may interest you."

He painted for the Admiral in brief, terse sentences the picture of that day break on the Pacific, the line of breakers, white in the vanishing night, the abandoned ship beyond, cracking her canvas to tatters in the freshening breeze. And he told of his boarding her and of what he had found.

"Where was this?" asked the officer, and Thorpe gave his position as he had checked it.

"I reported the derelict to a passing steamer that same day," he added, but the Admiral was calling for a chart. He spread it on the desk before him and placed the tip of a pencil in the center of an unbroken expanse.

"Breakers, you said?" he questioned. "Why, there are hundreds of fathoms here, Mr. Thorpe."

I know it," Thorpe agreed, "but I saw them—a stretch of white water for an eighth of a mile. I know it's impossible, but true. But forget that item for a time, Admiral. Look at this." He opened a brief case and took out a log-book and some other papers.

"The log of the *Minnie R.*," he explained briefly. "Nothing in it but routine entries up to that morning and then nothing at all."

"Abandoned," mused the Admiral, "and they did not take to the boats. There have been other instances—never explained."

"See if this helps any," suggested Thorpe and handed the other two sheets of paper. "They were in the captain's cabin," he added.

Admiral Struthers glanced at them, then settled back in his chair.

"Dated September fourth," he said. "That would have been the day previous to the time you found her." The writing was plain, in a careful, well-formed hand. He cleared his throat and read aloud:

"Written by Jeremiah Wilkens of Salem, Mass., master of the *Minnie R.*, bound from Shanghai to San Pedro. I have sailed the seas for

forty years, and for the first time I am afraid. I hope I may destroy this paper when the lights of San Pedro are safe in sight, but I am writing here what it would shame me to set down in the ship's log, though I know there are stranger happenings on the face of the waters than man has ever seen—or has lived to tell.

All this day I have been filled with fear. I have been watched—I have felt it as surely as if a devil out of hell stood beside me with his eyes fastened on mine. The men have felt it, too. They have been frightened at nothing and have tried to conceal it as I have done.—And the animals....

"A shark has followed us for days—it is gone to-day. The cats—we have three on board—have howled horribly and have hidden themselves in the cargo down below. The mate is bringing a big monkey to be sold in Los Angeles. An orang-outang, he calls it. It has been an ugly brute, shaking at the bars of its cage and showing its ugly teeth ever since we left port. But to-day it is crouched in a corner of its cage and will not stir even for food. The poor beast is in mortal terror.

"All this is more like the wandering talk of an old woman muttering in a corner by the fireside of witches and the like than it is like a truthful account set down by Jeremiah Wilkins. And now that I have

written it I see there is nothing to tell. Nothing but the shameful account of my fear of some horror beyond my knowing. And now that it is written I am tempted to destroy—No, I will wait—"

"And now what is this?" Admiral Struthers interrupted his reading to ask. He turned the paper to read a coarse, slanting scrawl at the bottom of the page.

"The eyes—the eyes—they are everywhere above us—God help—" The writing trailed off in a straggling line.

The lips beneath the trim gray mustache drew themselves into a hard line. It was a moment before Admiral Struthers raised his eyes to meet those of Robert Thorpe.

"You found this in the captain's cabin?" he asked.

"Yes."

"And the captain was—"

"Gone."

"Blood stains?"

"No, but the door had been burst off its hinges. There had been a struggle without a doubt."

The officer mused for a minute or two.

"Did they go aboard another vessel?" he pondered. "Abandon ship—open the sea-cocks—sink it for the insurance?" He was trying vainly to find some answer to the problem, some explanation that would not impose too great a strain upon his own reason.

"I have reported to the owners," said Thorpe. "The *Minnie R.* was not heavily insured."

The Admiral ruffled some papers on his desk to find a report.

"There has been another," he told Thorpe. "A tramp freighter is listed as missing. She was last reported due east of the position you give. She was coming this way—must have come through about the same water—" He caught himself up abruptly. Thorpe sensed that an Admiral of the Navy must not lend too credulous an ear to impossible stories.

"You've had an interesting experience, Mr. Thorpe," he said. "Most interesting. Probably a derelict is the answer, some hull just afloat.

We will send out a general warning."

He handed the loose papers and the log book to the younger man. "This stuff is rubbish," he stated with emphasis. "Captain Wilkins held his command a year or so too long."

"You will do nothing about it?" Thorpe asked in astonishment.

"I said I would warn all shipping; there is nothing more to be done."

"I think there is." Thorpe's gray eye were steady as he regarded the man at the desk. "I intend to run it down. There have been other such instances, as you said—never explained. I mean to find the answer."

Admiral Struthers smiled indulgently. "Always after excitement," he said. "You'll be writing another book, I expect. I shall look forward to reading it ... but just what are you going to do?"

"I am going to the Islands," said Thorpe quietly. "I am going to charter a small ship of some sort, and I am going out there and camp on that spot in the hope of seeing those eyes and what is behind them. I am leaving to-night."

Admiral Struthers leaned back to indulge in a hearty laugh. "I refused you a passage on a destroyer once," he said, "and it was an

expensive mistake. I don't make the same mistake twice. Now I am going to offer you a trip....

"The *Bennington* is leaving to-day on a cruise to Manila. I'll hold her an extra hour or two if you would like to go. She can drop you at Honolulu or wherever you say. Lieutenant Commander Brent is in command—you remember him in Manila, of course."

"Fine," Thorpe responded. "I'll be there."

"And," he added, as he took the Admiral's hand, "if I didn't object to betting on a sure thing I would make you a little proposition. I would bet any money that you would give your shirt to go along."

"I never bet, either," said Admiral Struthers, "on a sure loss. Now get out of here, you young trouble-shooter, and let the Navy get to work." His eyes were twinkling as he waved the young man out.

* * *

Thorpe found himself comfortably fixed on the *Bennington*. Brent, her commander, was a fine example of the aggressive young chaps that the destroyer fleet breeds. And he liked to play cribbage, Thorpe found. They were pegging away industriously the sixth night out

when the first S.O.S. reached them. A message was placed before the commander. He read it and tossed it to Thorpe as he rose from his chair.

"S.O.S.," said the radio sheet, "*Nagasaki Maru*, twenty-four thirty-five N., one five eight West. Struck something unknown. Down at the bow. May need help. Please stand by."

Captain Brent had left the room. A moment later, and the quiver and tremble of the *Bennington* told Thorpe they were running full speed for the position of the stricken ship.

But: "Twenty-four thirty-five North," he mused, "and less than two degrees west of where the poor old *Minnie R.* got hers. I wonder ... I wonder...."

"We will be there in four hours," said Captain Brent on his return. "Hope she lasts. But what have they struck out there? Derelict probably, though she should have had Admiral Struthers' warning."

Robert Thorpe made no reply other than: "Wait here a minute, Brent. I have something to show you."

He had not told the officer of his mission nor of his experience, but

he did so now. And he placed before him the wildly improbable statement of the late Captain Wilkins.

"Something is there," surmised Captain Brent, "just awash, probably—no superstructure visible. Your *Minnie R.* hit the same thing."

"Something is there," Thorpe agreed. "I wish I knew what."

"This stuff has got to you, has it?" asked Brent as he returned the papers of Captain Wilkins. He was quite evidently amused at the thought.

"You weren't on the ship," said Thorpe, simply. "There was nothing to see—nothing to tell. But I know...."

He followed Brent to the wireless room.

"Can you get the *Nagasaki*?" Brent asked.

"They know we are coming, sir," said the operator. "We seem to be the only one anywhere near."

He handed the captain another message. "Something odd about that," he said.

"*U. S. S. Bennington*," the captain read aloud. "We are still afloat. On even keel now, but low in water. No water coming in. Engines full speed ahead, but we make no headway. Apparently aground. *Nagasaki Maru.*"

"Why, that's impossible," Brent exclaimed impatiently. "What kind of foolishness—" He left the question uncompleted. The radio man was writing rapidly. Some message was coming at top speed. Both Brent and Thorpe leaned over the man's shoulder to read as he wrote.

"*Bennington* help," the pencil was writing, "sinking fast—decks almost awash—we are being—"

In breathless silence they watched the pencil, poised above the paper while the operator listened tensely to the silent night.

Again his ear received the wild jumble of dots and dashes sent by a frenzied hand in that far-off room. His pencil automatically set down the words. "Help—help—" it wrote before Thorpe's spellbound gaze, "the eyes—the eyes—it is attack—"

And again the black night held only the rush and roar of torn waters where the destroyer raced quivering through the darkness. The message, as the waiting men well knew, would never be completed.

"A derelict!" Robert Thorpe exclaimed with unconscious scorn. But Captain Brent was already at a communication tube.

"Chief? Captain Brent. Give her everything you've got. Drive the *Bennington* faster than she ever went before."

The slim ship was a quivering lance of steel that threw itself through foaming waters, that shot with an endless, roaring surge of speed toward that distant point in the heaving waste of the Pacific, and that seemed, to the two silent men on the bridge, to put the dragging miles behind them so slowly—so slowly.

"Let me see those papers," said Captain Brent, finally.

He read them in silence.

Then: "The eyes!" he said. "The eyes! That is what this other poor devil said. My God, Thorpe, what is it? What can it be? We're not all insane."

"I don't know what I expected to find," said Thorpe slowly. "I had thought of many things, each wilder than the next. This Captain Wilkins said the eyes were above him. I had visions of some sky monster ... I had even thought of some strange aircraft from out in

space, perhaps, with round lights like eyes. I have pictured impossibilities! But now—"

"Yes," the other questioned, "now?"

"There were tales in olden times of the Kraken," suggested Thorpe.

"The Kraken!" the captain scoffed. "A mythical monster of the sea. Why, that was just a fable."

"True," was the quiet reply, "that was just a fable. And one of the things I have learned is how frequently there is a basis of fact underlying a fable. And, for that matter, how can we know there is no such monster, some relic of a Mesozoic species supposed to be extinct?"

He stood motionless, staring far out ahead into the dark. And Brent, too, was silent. They seemed to try with unaided eyes to penetrate the dark miles ahead and see what their sane minds refused to accept.

* * *

It was still dark when the search-light's sweeping beam picked up the black hull and broad, red-striped funnels of the *Nagasaki Maru*.

She was riding high in the water, and her big bulk rolled and wallowed in the trough of the great swells.

The *Bennington* swept in a swift circle about the helpless hulk while the lights played incessantly upon her decks. And the watching eyes strained vainly for some signal to betoken life, for some sign that their mad race had not been quite vain. Her engines had been shut down; there was no steerage-way for the *Nagasaki Maru*, and, from all they could see, there were no human hands to drag at the levers of her waiting engines nor to twirl with sure touch the deserted helm. The *Nagasaki Maru* was abandoned.

The lights held steadily upon her as the *Bennington* came alongside and a boat was swung out smartly in its davits. But Thorpe knew he was not alone in his wild surmise as to the cause of the catastrophe.

"Throw your lights around the water occasionally," Brent ordered. "Let me know if you see anything."

"Yes sir," said the man at the search-light. "I will report if I spot any survivors or boats."

"Report anything you see," said Commander Brent curtly.

"You go aboard if you want to," he suggested to Thorpe. "I will stay here and be ready if you need help."

Thorpe nodded with approval as the small boat pulled away in the dark, for there was activity apparent on the destroyer not warranted by a mere rescue at sea. Gun-crews rushed to their stations; the tarpaulin covers were off of the guns, and their slender lengths gleamed where they covered the course of the boat.

"Brent is ready," Thorpe admitted, "for anything."

They found the iron ladder against the ship's side, and a sailor sprang for it and made his way aboard. Thorpe was not the last to set foot on deck, and he shuddered involuntarily at the eery silence he knew awaited them.

It was the *Minnie R.* over again, as he expected, but with a difference. The sailing vessel, before he boarded it, had been for some time exposed to the sun, while the *Nagasaki Maru* had not. And here there were slimy trails still wet on the decks.

He went first to the wireless room. He must know the final answer to that interrupted message, and he found it in emptiness. No radio man was waiting him there, nor even a body to show the loser of an

unequal battle. But there was blood on the door-jamb where a body —the man's body, Thorpe was sure—had been smashed against the wood. A wisp of black hair in the blood gave its mute evidence of the hopeless fight. And the slime, like the trails on the deck, smeared with odorous vileness the whole room.

Thorpe went again to the deck, and, as on the other ship, he breathed deeply to rid his lungs and nostrils of the abhorrent stench. The ensign in charge of the boarding party approached.

"What kind of a rotten mess is this?" he demanded. "The ship is filthy and not a soul on board. Not a man of them, officers or crew, and the boats are all here. It's absolutely amazing, isn't it?"

"No," Thorpe told him, "about what we expected. What do you make of this?" He touched with his foot a broad trail that shone wet in the *Bennington's* lights.

"The Lord knows," said the ensign in wonder. "It's all over and it smells like a rotten dead fish. Well, we will be going back, sir." He called to a petty officer to round up the men, and the boat was brought alongside.

Their return to the *Bennington* again through a pathway of light that

Thorpe knew was safe under the black muzzles of the destroyer's guns.

Or was it, he asked himself. Safe! Was anything safe from this devilish mystery that could pluck each cowering human from the lowest depths of this steel freighter, that could drag her down in the water till the radio man sent his cry: "We are sinking!..."

He told Brent quietly, after the ensign had reported, of the struggles in the wireless room and its few remaining traces. And he watched with the commander through the hour of darkness while the *Bennington* steamed in slow circles about the abandoned hulk, while her search-lights played endlessly over the empty waters and the men at the guns cast wondering glances at their skipper who ordered such strange procedure when no danger was there.

With daylight the scene lost its sense of mysterious threat, and Thorpe was eager to return to the abandoned ship.

"I might find something," he said, "some trace or indication of what we have to fight."

"I must leave," said Commander Brent. "Oh, I'm coming back, never fear," he added, at the look of dismay on Thorpe's face. The thought

of leaving this mystery unsolved was more than that young seeker after adventure could accept.

"I'm coming back," Brent repeated. "I've been in communication with the Admiral—Honolulu has relayed the messages through. All code, of course; we mustn't alarm the whole Pacific with our nightmares. The old man says to stick around and get the low-down on this damn thing."

"Then why leave?" objected Thorpe.

Because I am coming around to your way of thinking, Thorpe. Because I am as certain as can be that we have a monster of some sort to deal with ... and because I haven't any depth charges. I want to run up to the supply station at Honolulu and get a couple of ash-cans of TNT to lay on top of the brute if we sight him."

"Glory be!" said Thorpe fervently. "That sounds like business. Go and get your eggs and perhaps we can feed them to this devil—raw.... And I think I'll stay here, if you will be back by dark."

"Better not," the other objected; but Thorpe overruled him.

"This thing attacks in the dark," he said. "I will lay a little bet on

that. It left the orang-outang on the *Minnie R.*—quit at the first sign of daylight. I will be safe through the day, and besides, the beast has gutted this ship. It won't return, I imagine. And if I stay there for the day—live as they lived, the men who manned that ship—I may have some information that will be of help when you get back. But for Heaven's sake, Brent, don't stop to pick any flowers on the way."

"It's your funeral," said Brent not too cheerfully. "The old man said to give you every assistance, and perhaps that includes helping you commit suicide."

But Robert Thorpe only laughed as Commander Brent gave his orders for a small boat to be lowered. A ship's lantern and rockets for night signals were taken at the officer's orders. "We'll be back before dark," he said, "but take these as a precaution."

One favor Thorpe asked—that the ship's carpenter go over with him and help him to make a strong-barred retreat of the wireless cabin.

"And I'll talk to you occasionally," he told Brent. "I tried the key while I was aboard; the wireless is working on its batteries."

He waved a cheery good-by as the small boat pulled away. "And hurry back," he called. The destroyer commander nodded an

emphatic assent.

On board the *Nagasaki Maru*, Thorpe directed the carpenter and his helpers in the work he wanted done. The man seemed to know instinctively where to put his hands on needed supplies, and the result was a virtual cage of strong oak bars enclosing the wireless room, and braces of oak to bar the single door. Thorpe was not assuming any bravado in his feeling of safety, but he was doing what he had done in many other tight corners, and he prepared his defences in advance.

These included weapons of offense as well. As the boat with the destroyer's men pulled back to the *Bennington*, he placed in easy reach in a corner of the room a heavy calibered rifle he had taken from his belongings.

And, still, with all his feeling of security, there was a strange depression fell upon him when the *Bennington's* narrow hull was small upon the horizon, and then that, too, was gone and only the heaving swells and the wallowing hulk were his companions.

Only these? He shivered slightly as he thought of that unseen watcher with the devil-eyes whose presence Captain Wilkins had felt —and his men, and the poor terrified ape! He deliberately put from

his mind the thought of this; no use to start the day with morbid fears. He went below to examine the cabins. But he carried the heavy elephant gun with him wherever he went.

Below decks the signs of the marauder were everywhere, yet there was little to be learned. The slimy trails dried quickly and vanished, but not before Thorpe had traced them to the uttermost depths of the ship.

There was not a nook or corner that had gone unsearched in the horrible quest for human food. And one thing impressed itself forcibly upon the man's mind. He found a lantern, and he used it of necessity in his explorations, but this thing had gone through the dark and with unerring certainty had found its way to every victim.

"Can it see in the dark?" Thorpe questioned. "Or...." He visioned dimly some denizen of the vast depths, living beyond the limits of the sun's penetration, far in the abysmal darkness where its only light must be self-made. But his mind failed in the attempt to picture what manner of horror this thing might be.

Even in the hold its evil traces were found. There were tiers of metal drums that still shone wet in his lantern's light. Calcium carbide—for making acetylene, he supposed—marked "Made in U.S.A." The

Nagasaki must have been westward bound.

He went, after an hour or so, to the wireless room, and only when he relaxed in the safety of his improvised fortress did he realize how tense had been every nerve and muscle through his long search. He tried the wireless and got an instant response from the destroyer.

"Don't shoot it too fast," he spelled out slowly to the distant operator: "I am only a dub. Just wanted to say hello and report all O.K."

"Fine," was the steady, careful response. "We have had a little trouble with our condensers—" There was a short pause, then the message continued, this portion dictated by the commander. "Delay not important. We will be back as agreed. Have picked up *S. S. Adelaide* bound east in your latitude. Warned her to take northerly course account derelict. See you later. Signed, Brent, commanding *U. S. S. Bennington*."

The man in the barred room tapped off his acknowledgement and closed the key. He suddenly realized he had had no breakfast, and the hours had been slipping past. He took his gun again and went down to the galley to prepare some coffee. It was not the time or place for an enjoyable meal, but he would have relished it more had he not pictured the *Adelaide* and her lovely owner steaming across

these threatening seas.

He knew the captain of the *Adelaide*. "Obstinate pigheaded old Scotchman!" "Hope he takes Brent's advice. Of course Brent couldn't tell him the truth. We can't blat this wild yarn all over the air or the passenger lines would have our scalps. But I wish the *Adelaide* was safe in Manila."

His explorations in the afternoon were half-hearted and perfunctory. There was nothing more to be learned. But he had seen in his mind some vague outline of what they must meet. He saw a something, mammoth, huge, that could grasp and hold an ocean freighter—against whose great body he had seen the waves dash in a line of white spray. Yet a something that could force its way down narrow passages, could press with terrific strength on bolted doors and crush them inward, wrecked and splintered. Some serpentine thing that felt and saw its way and crawled so surely through the dark—found its prey—seized it—and carried off a man as easily as it might a mouse.

No octopus, no matter what proportions, filled the description. He gave up trying to see too clearly the awful thing. And he kept away from the ship's rail when once he had ventured near. For there had come to him a feeling of fear that had sent the waves of cold trickling and prickling up his spine. Was there something really

there?... A waiting lurking horror in the depths?

"The eyes," he thought, "the eyes!..." And he went more quickly than he knew to his barred retreat where again he might breathe quietly.

* * *

The position of the deserted ship was south of the regular steamer lanes on the TransPacific run. Only a trace of smoke on the northern horizon marked through the afternoon the passage of other craft. It was a long and lonely vigil for the waiting man. But the *Bennington* would return, and he listened in at intervals hoping to hear her friendly signal.

The batteries operating the *Nagasaki's* wireless were none too strong; Thorpe saved their strength, though he tried at times to raise the *Bennington* somewhere beyond his reach.

The sun was touching the horizon when he got his first response. "Keep up the old nerve," admonished the slow, careful sending of the *Bennington's* operator. "We have been delayed but we are on our way. Signed, Brent."

The man in the wireless room placed the oak bars across the door,

and tried to believe he was nonchalant and unafraid as he laid out extra clips of cartridges. But his eyes persisted in following the sinking sun, and he watched from within his cage the coming of the quick dark.

The protecting glare of day must be unbearable to this monster from the lightless depths, and daylight was vanishing. Thorpe's mind was searching for additional means of defense. He found it in the cargo he had seen. The drums of carbide! He could scatter it on the deck—it reacted with water, and those slimy arms, if they came and touched it, could find the contact hot. He took his lantern and went hastily below to stagger back with a drum upon his shoulder.

In the half-light that was left him he forced the cover and then rolled the drum about the swaying deck. The gray, earthly lumps of carbide formed erratic lines. Useless perhaps, he admitted, but the threatening dark forced the man to use every means at his command.

He was scattering the contents of a second drum when he stiffened abruptly to rigid attention.

The ship, thrown broadside to the wide-spaced swells, had rolled endlessly with a monotonous motion. But now the deck beneath him was steadying. It assumed an abnormal levelness. The boat rose and

fell with the waves, but it no longer rolled. There was something beneath holding, drawing on it.

Thorpe knew in that frozen second what it meant. The drum clattered to the rail as he dashed for his room. Gun in hand, he watched with staring eyes where the deserted deck showed dim and vague in the light of the stars and the bow of the ship was lost in the uncertain dark of night.

Wide-eyed he watched into the blackness, and he listened with desperate attention for some slightest sound beyond the splashing of waves and the creaking of spars.

Far in the west a light appeared, to glow and vanish and glow again in the tumbling waters. The *Bennington*! His heart leaped at the thought, then sank as he knew the destroyer's lights would not appear from that direction.

Through a slow hour that seemed an eternity the oncoming ship drew near, and he knew with a sudden, startling certainty that it was the *Adelaide*—and Ruth Allaire—coming on, through into the horror awaiting.

He leaned forward tensely as a sound reached his ears. A ghostly

echo of a sound, like the softest of smooth, slipping fabric upon hard steel. And as he listened, before his staring eyes, a something came between him and the lighted yacht.

It wavered and swung in the darkness. It was formless, uncertain of outline, and it swung in the night out beyond the ship's rail till it suddenly neared, waved high overhead, and the cold light of the stars shone in pale reflection from an enormous, staring eye.

It surmounted a serpentine form that took shape in the dim radiance without and came lower in undulating folds to crash heavily upon the deck.

Thorpe's hand was upon the wireless key. He had wanted to warn off the yacht, but not till the thud of the creature on the bare deck proved its reality could he force his cold fingers to press the key.

Then, fast as his inexperience allowed, he called frantically for the *Adelaide*. He spelled her name, over and over.... Would the sleepy operator never answer?

The *Bennington* broke in one. "Is that you, Thorpe? What is up?" they demanded.

But Thorpe kept up his slow spelling of the yacht's name. He must get a warning to them! Then he realized that the *Bennington* could do it better.

"*Bennington*," he called, "*Adelaide* approaching. I am attacked. Warn them off. Warn them—" His frantic, hissing dots and dashes died immediately. Beneath his feet the *Nagasaki Maru* was rolling again, swinging free to the lift and thrust of the swells beneath.

"Good God!" he shouted aloud in his lonely cabin. "It's gone for the yacht. *Adelaide*—turn north—full speed—" he clicked off on a slow, stuttering key. "Head north. You are being attacked!" He groaned again as he saw the *Adelaide's* shining ports swing away from the safety of the north; the ship broached broadside to the waves and came slowly to a stop.

"*Bennington*," he radioed. "Brent—it has got the *Adelaide*. Help—hurry! I am going over."

He tore wildly at the barred door, and he made a dash across the deck to slip sprawling in a heap against the rail where the slimy traces of the recent visitor stretched glistening on the deck.

How he lowered the boat Thorpe never knew. But he knew there was

one that the men from the *Bennington* had swung over the side, and tore madly at the tackle to let the boat crash miraculously upright into the sea. He slung the rifle about his neck with a rope end—there were cartridges in his pocket—and he went down the dangling lines and cast off in a frenzy of haste.

What could he do? He hardly dared form the question. Only this stood clear and unanswerable in his mind: The yacht was in the monster's grip, and Ruth Allaire was there on board. Ruth Allaire, so smiling, so friendly, so lovable! Food for that horror from the depths.... He rowed with super-human strength to drive the heavy boat across the wave-swept distance that separated them.

Between gasping breaths he turned at times to glance over his shoulder and correct his course. And now, as he drew near, he saw though indistinct the unmistakable, snakelike weaving of horrible tenuous fingers, rolling and groping about the yacht.

They were plain as he drew alongside. The trim ship rose and fell with the water, while over her side where Thorpe approached swung a long, white monstrous rope of flesh. It retreated like the lash of a whip, and the horrified watcher saw as it went the struggling figure of a man in the grasp of flabby lips. And above them a single eye glared wickedly.

Another vile, twisting arm rose from the afterdeck with a screaming figure in its grasp and vanished into the water beyond the yacht. There were others writhing about the decks. Thorpe saw them as he made his boat fast and clambered aboard.

A wave of reeking air enveloped him as he reached the deck; the nauseous stench from the monster's tentacles was horrible beyond endurance. He gagged and choked as the stifling breath entered his lungs.

A huge rope of slippery, throbbing flesh stretched its twisted length toward the stern. It contracted as he watched into bulging muscular rings and withdrew from the afterdeck. The deadly end of it stopped in mid-air not twenty feet from where he stood. The jawlike pincers on it held the limp form of an officer in its sucking grip, while above, in a protuberance like a gnarled horn, a great eye glared into Thorpe's with devilish hatred.

The beak opened sharply to drop its unconscious burden upon the deck, and the watching man, petrified with horror, saw within the gaping maw great sucking discs and beyond them a brilliant glow. The whole cavernous pit was aflame with phosphorescent light. Dimly he knew that this light explained the ability of the beastly arms to grope so surely in the dark.

The eye narrowed as the gaping, fleshy jaws distended, and Robert Thorpe, in a flash that galvanized him to action, was aware that his fight for life was on. He fired blindly from the hip, and the recoil of the heavy gun almost tore it from his hands. But he knew he had aimed true, and the toothless, seeking jaws whipped in agony back into the sea.

There were other arms whose eyes were searching the stern of the yacht. Thorpe plunged frenziedly down a companionway for the cabin he knew was Ruth Allaire's. Was he in time? Could he save her if he found her? His mind was in a turmoil of half-formed plans as he rushed madly down the corridor to find the body of the girl a limp huddle across the threshold of her cabin.

She was alive; he knew it as he swung her soft body across one shoulder and staggered with his burden up the stairs. If he could only breathe! His throat was tight and strangling with the reeking putrescence in the air. And before his eyes was a picture of the strong oak bars of his own retreat. Somehow, some way, he must get back to the abandoned ship.

An eye detected him as he came on deck, and he dropped the limp body of the girl at his feet as he swung his rifle toward the glowing light within the opening jaws. The sucking discs cupped and

wrinkled in dread readiness in the fleshy, toothless opening. He emptied the magazine into the head, though he knew this was only a feeler and a feeder for a still more horrible mouth in the monstrous body that rose and fell tremendously in the dark waters beyond. But it was typical of Robert Thorpe that even in the horror and frenzy of the moment he rammed another clip of cartridges into his rifle before he stooped to again raise the prostrate figure of Ruth Allaire.

The forward deck for the moment was clear; it rose high with the weight of the writhing, twisting arms that weighed down the stern of the yacht where the crew had taken refuge.

To think of helping them was worse than folly—he dismissed the thought as another great eye came over the rail. Once more he used the gun, then lowered the girl to the waiting boat, and cast off and rowed with the stealthiest of strokes into the dark.

Behind him were whipping points of light above the white brilliance of the yacht *Adelaide*. The boat was tossing in great waves that came from beyond, where a body, incredibly huge, was tearing the waters to foam. There were ghostly arms that shone in slimy wetness, that lashed searchingly in all directions, as the monster gave vent to its fury at Thorpe's attack. There were screaming human figures grasped in many of the jaws, and the man was glad with a great thankfulness

that the girl's stupor could save her from the frightful sight.

He dared to row now, and his breath was coming in great choking sobs of sheer exhaustion when at last he pulled the senseless form of Ruth Allaire to the deck of the *Nagasaki* and drew her within the frail shelter of the wireless room.

Stout had the oaken bars appeared, and safe his refuge in the barricaded room, but that was before he had seen in horrible reality the fearful fury of this monster from the deep. He placed the braces against the door and turned with hopeless haste to seize the wireless key.

"*Bennington*," he called, and the answer came strong and clear. "Where are you.... Help—" His fingers froze upon the key and the answering message in his ears was unheeded as he watched across the water the destruction of the yacht.

This craft that had dared to resist the onset of the brute, to fight against it, to wound it, was feeling the full fury of the monster's rage. The gleaming lights of the doomed ship were waving lines that swept to and fro in the grip of those monstrous arms. The boat beneath Thorpe's feet was tossing in the waves that told of the titanic struggle. He had meant to look south for some sign of the oncoming

destroyer, but in fearful fascination he stared spellbound where the masts of the trim yacht swept downward into the waves, where the green of her star-board lantern glowed faintly for an instant, then vanished, to leave only the darkness and the starlit sea.

Avoice aroused him from his stupefaction. "Where am I ... where am I?" Ruth Allaire was asking in a frightened whisper. "That terrible thing—" She shuddered violently as memory returned to show again the horror she had witnessed. "Where are we, Robert? And the *Adelaide*—where is it?"

Thorpe turned slowly. The insane turmoil of the past hour had numbed his brain, stunned him.

"The *Adelaide*—" he mumbled, and groped fumblingly for coherent thoughts. He stared at the girl. She was half-risen from the floor where he had laid her, and the sight of her quivering face brought reason again to his mind. He knelt tenderly beside her and raised her in his arms.

"Where is the yacht?" she repeated. "The *Adelaide*?"

"Gone," Thorpe told her. "Lost!" A thought struck him.

"Was your father on board, Ruth?"

Ruth was dazed.

"Lost," she repeated. "The *Adelaide*—lost!... No," she added in belated response to Thorpe's question. "Daddy was not there. But the men—Captain MacPherson ... that horrible monster...." She buried her face in her hands as she realized what Thorpe's silence meant.

He held the trembling figure close as the girl whispered: "Where are we, Robert? Are we safe?"

"We may win through yet," he told her through grim, set lips. He realized abruptly that he was seeing the face of Ruth Allaire in the light. He had left a lantern burning! He withdrew his arms from about her and sprang quickly to his feet to put out the tell-tale light. In darkness and quiet was their only safety. And he knew as he sprang that he had waited too long. A soft body crashed heavily on the deck outside.

The girl's voice was shrill with terror as she began a question. Thorpe's hand pressed upon her lips in the dark where he stood waiting—waiting.

A luminous something was glowing outside the cabin. It searched and prodded about the deserted deck to whip upward at the audible hiss of wet carbide. Another appeared; the rifle came slowly to the man's shoulder as a pair of jaws gaped glowingly beyond the windows and an eye stared unblinkingly from its hornlike sheath. It crashed madly against the walls of the wireless room to shatter the glass and make kindling of the woodwork of the sash. Thorpe fired once and again before the specter vanished, and he knew with sickening certainty that the wounds were only messages to some central brain that would send other ravening tentacles against them. But the oak bars had held.

He reached in the brief interval for the key, and he sent out one final call for help. He strained his ears against the head-set for some friendly human word of hope.

"—rocket," the wireless man was saying. "Fire rockets. We can't find —" A swift, writhing arm wrapped crushingly about the cabin as the message ceased.

Thorpe seized his rifle and fired into the gray mass that bulged with terrible muscular contractions through the window. He fired again to aim lengthways of the arm and inflict as damaging a wound as his weapon would permit.

The arm relaxed, but a score of others took up the attack. Again the sickening stench was about them as gaping jaws gleamed fiery beneath the hateful eyes and tore at the flimsy structure. Thorpe jammed more cartridges into the gun and fired again and again, then dropped the weapon to fumble for the rockets that Brent had given him.

He lighted one with trembling fingers; the first ball shot straight into a waiting mouth. Another ignited a searing flame of acetylene gas where a wet arm writhed in the hot carbide trail. The man leaned far out through the broken window.

No time to look around. He let the red flares stream upward high into the air, then dropped the rocket hissing on the deck to seize once more the rifle.

A mass of muscle crashed against the door; it went to splinters under the impact, and only the two oak bars remained to hold in check the horrible tentacles and the darting heads. One mouth closed to a pointed end that forced its way between the bars. The oak gave under the strain as Robert Thorpe pulled vainly at an empty gun. Beside him rose shrieks of terror as the monstrous thing came on, and Thorpe beat with frantic fury with his clubbed rifle at the fleshy snout.

He knew as he swung the weapon that the shrieks had ceased, then smiled grimly in the numbing horror as he realized that Ruth Allaire was beside him. A piece of oak was in her hands, and she was striking with desperate and silent fury at the slimy flesh.

It was the end, Thorpe knew, and suddenly he was glad. The nightmare was over, and the end was coming with this girl beside him. But Robert Thorpe was fighting on to the last, and he tried to make his blows reach outward to the hateful devilish eye.

He saw it plainly now, for the deck was a glare of white light. He saw the eye and the thick arm behind it and the score of others that made a heaving, knotted mass were brilliant and wetly shining. He could see now how best to strike, and he turned his gun to thrust with the barrel at the eye.

It withdrew before his stroke—the jaws slid backward to the deck. There were sounds that hammered at his ears. "The guns! The guns!" a girl was screaming. Across the deck, where a search-light played, huge arms were lashing backward toward the sea. The waves beyond had vanished where a monstrous body shone wetly black in a blinding glare.

And the man hung panting, helpless, on the one remaining bar across

the doorway to look where, beyond, her forward guns a spitting stream of staccato flashes, the *Bennington* tore the waves to high-thrown spray. Her four clean funnels swung far over as the slim ship, with her stabbing, crashing guns, swung in a sweeping circle to bear down upon the black bulk slowly sinking in the search-light's glare.

The vast body had vanished as the destroyer shot like one of her own projectiles over the spot where the beast had lain. And then, where she had passed, the sea arose in a heaving mound. The big ship beneath the watching man shuddered again as another depth charge grumbled its challenge to the master of the deeps.

The warship went careening on an arc to return and throw the full glare of her search-lights on the scene. They lighted a vast sea, strangely stilled. An oily smoothness leveled waves and ironed them out to show more clearly the convulsions of a torn mass that rose slowly into sight.

Thorpe in some way found himself outside the cabin. And he knew that the girl was again beside him as he stared and stared at what the waters held. A bloated serpent form beyond believing was struggling in the greasy swell. Its waving tentacles again were flung aloft in impotent fury, and, beneath them, where their thick ends jointed the body, a head with one horrible eye rose into the air. A thick-lipped

mouth gaped open, and the gleam of molars shone white in the blinding glare.

The twisting body shuddered throughout its vast bulk, and the waving arms and futile staring eyes dropped helpless into the splashing sea. Again the revolting head was raised as the destroyer sent a rain of shells into its fearful mass. Once more the oily seas were calm. They closed over the whirling vortex where a denizen of the lightless depths was returning to those distant, subterranean caverns—returning as food for what other voracious monsters might still exist.

The man's arm was about the figure of the girl, trembling anew in a fresh reaction from the horror they had escaped, when a small boat drew alongside.

"They're safe," a hoarse voice bellowed back to the destroyer, and a man came monkeywise up a rope where Thorpe had launched his boat.

And now, as one in a dream, Thorpe allowed the girl to be taken from him, to be lowered to the waiting boat. He clambered down himself and in silence was rowed across to the destroyer.

"Thank God!" said Brent, as he met them at the rail. "You're safe, old man ... and Miss Allaire ... both of you! You let off that rocket just in time; we couldn't pick you up with our light—

"And now," he added, "we're going back; back to San Diego. The Admiral wants a word of mouth report."

Thorpe stilled him with a heavy gesture. "Give Ruth an opiate," he said dully. "Let her forget ... forget!... Good God, can we ever forget —" He stumbled forward, heedless of Brent's arm across his shoulders as the surgeon took the girl in charge.

* * *

Admiral Struthers, U.S.N., leaned back from his desk and blew a cloud of smoke thoughtfully toward the ceiling. He looked silently from Thorpe to Commander Brent.

"If either one of you had come to me with such a report," he said finally, "I would have found it incredible; I would have thought you were entirely insane, or trying some wild hoax."

"I wish it were a damn lie," said Thorpe quietly. "I wish I didn't have to believe it." There were new lines about the young-old eyes, lines

that spoke what the lips would not confess of sleepless nights and the impress of a picture he could not erase.

"Well, we have kept it out of the papers," said the Admiral. "Said it was a derelict, and the wild messages floating about were from an inexperienced man, frightened and irresponsible. Bad advertising—very—for the passenger lines."

"Quite," Commander Brent agreed, "but of course Mr. Thorpe may want to use this in his next book of travel. He has earned the right without doubt."

"No," said Thorpe emphatically. "No! I told you, Brent, there was often a factual basis for fables—remember? Well, we have proved that. But sometimes it is best to leave the fables just fables. I think you will agree." A light step sounded in the corridor beyond. "Nothing of this to Miss Allaire," he said sharply.

The men rose as Ruth Allaire entered the room. "We were just speaking," said the Admiral with an engaging smile beneath his close-cut mustache, "of the matter of a bet. Mr. Thorpe has won handily, and he has taught me a lesson."

He took a check book from his desk. "What charity would you like

to name, Miss Allaire? That was left to you, you remember."

"Some seamen's home," said Ruth Allaire gravely. "You will know best, if you two are really serious about that silly bet."

"That bet, my dear," said Robert Thorpe with smiling eyes, "was very serious ... and it has had most serious consequences." He turned to the waiting men and extended a hand in farewell.

"We are going to Europe, Ruth and I," he told them. "Just rambling around a bit. Our honeymoon, you know. Look us up if you're cruising out that way."

#30 The Cavern World, By James P. Olsen:

A great oil field had gone dry—and Asher, trapped far under the Earth among the revolting petrolia, learns why.

Aproximate word count: 7,000

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

“Impossible! What sort of creatures would they be, that could live two miles beneath the surface of the earth? Surely, Asher, you are joking!"

R. Briggs Johns, mighty power back of Stan-America Oil Corporation, looked at Blaine Asher closely, expecting to see the chief geologist and scientist of the company laugh. But Blaine Asher did not laugh. Serious, his rather thin face grave as he leaned his tall, muscular body above a torsion machine he was adjusting, there was nothing to indicate he had the faintest idea of a joke.

"Why damn it, Asher!" Johns insisted wrathfully, "you don't really

mean that. And"—he took a nervous turn around the laboratory—"if such a wild thing were possible, what has that to do with our trouble? You haven't led me on to spend a million dollars drilling a thirty-six-inch hole, just so you could test a fantastic theory?"

"You know better than that." Asher wiped his hands and leaned against a table. Johns, looking into the cool gray eyes of the man before him, did know better. Blaine Asher was more than just a geologist or scientist. Well he might be termed a master geo-metallurgist. Johns nodded, wiping beads of perspiration from his brow.

"You say impossible—and want to know how those creatures cause this field, the largest oil field in the world, to start going bone dry over night. All right:

"Remember how you laughed when I told you that oil would some day be mined instead of pumped or flowed from the earth? You couldn't see how one central shaft could be sunk, then tunnels run back underneath the oil strata, tapping the sand from the bottom and letting the oil run down to be pumped out one shaft. Yet, that way, we would get *all* the oil, instead of the possible one-eighth of the total amount as we get by present methods.

"Now, you have seen that done. And you said that was impossible."

“Yes," Johns objected, "but those test wells we mined were only a few hundred feet deep. Wells in this field are eight thousand feet deep! Think of the heat, man! You can't do it. And as for people—"

"Your great field has suddenly gone dry, almost in a month's time," Asher stopped him. "What is happening here can happen elsewhere. Only, formations in this field are more suited to there being life—or something—below us. Stan-America is going broke. Many others have already gone broke. Still, that oil couldn't have gotten away.

"As for heat—yes, we know that oil is hot when it comes up from the oil sand at eight thousand feet, or from ordinary wells at three to six thousand feet. But"—Asher lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply—"gas coming out of the same well is *cold*! So cold it forms frost inches thick on pipes and tanks.

"Rock pressure—the pressure of the earth—forcing up the gas, causes that. Why couldn't that same pressure cool great caverns below the granite cap below the oil sands? It could. For that matter, I know that same pressure will generate useful power. I'll show you that in a minute."

"All right!" Johns chewed his cigar almost savagely. "Say, then, that you can work down there, nearly two miles underground; granted that we can tunnel from beneath the sands and pump more oil from one central shaft than we now do from fifty wells—what has that to do with this tosh about a race of people?"

"They are not people, perhaps." Asher grinned at the "there, I've stuck you!" look on Johns' face. "Let's say, rather, creatures. Have you ever met Lee Wong, the great Chinese scientist, or his Russian geological collaborator, Krenski? No?

“Well, I have. I met them in Paris in 1935—five years ago. They're brilliant men, and they've prepared some wonderful papers. Brilliant, I said: they are also dangerous. They claim, you know, that the fossils we now drill up come from a lost race—people who went *into* the earth while man, like us, was coming up onto the earth from the water. Some claim those fossils have been on the surface at one time, and were silted over. But eight thousand feet is a lot of silt, Johns: ever thought of that?"

"Good God!" Johns gasped hoarsely. "You almost make me believe you are right. But, supposing there is such a race of things—what will you do?"

"This." Asher drew back a curtain that was stretched across one end of the laboratory. "You know I was working on a cage in which to descend into that eight-thousand-foot well you've drilled—the well you're going to use to try and find why this field is suddenly gone dry. This it it."

Johns stared, shook his head wonderingly and stared again. Before him, ready to be transported to the well that was larger than any ever drilled before, stood what Blaine Asher called his Miner, for want of a better name.

A thick steel tube, it was. Twelve feet long and large enough around that a man might stand inside of it. The top was welded on in much the manner a top is welded on an ordinary hot-water heater, and had connections for hose in it. At the height of a man's eyes heavy windows were set in, and in one side was a door just large enough to admit a man's body. This door sealed tight the minute it closed.

"It looks like—like some sort of a deep sea diving outfit," Johns said as he walked around the braces that held the Miner upright. "But all those gadgets inside and on the bottom—?" He indicated the strange instruments that could be seen when the door was opened, and the queer glass tubes that projected from the very bottom.

“Pressure-power units—my own invention," Asher told him. "For ten years I've been working on this. I knew that some day I would want to explore the oil caverns beneath the earth, so I made ready.

"As I told you, rock pressure, or earth pressure, is a tremendous thing. It is power, so I figured how to use it. Under artificial pressure, I have tried out my Miner and its equipment.

"Those tubes sticking from the bottom contain something you are familiar with: non-burning and non-explosive helium gas. I have discovered a way, by their use, to create power that will melt away rock or iron—literally dissolve it into nothing! Not in an hour, or minutes. In seconds, Johns!

"The pressure of the earth acts as my generator. The pressure action on the filaments of platinum, and several compositions I have no time to explain now, causes heat. Call it friction of compressed air, if you wish. As neon gases carry an electric spark, so does this helium carry the power generated by earth pressure. The pressure below earth acts on the delicate coils and points of my generator. This bit of power is carried into the helium tubes, and by a system of vacuum power, is increased millions of times. Thus, the tiny spark of a cigar lighter would electrocute a hundred men!"

"I—you mean somewhat like a violet ray is increased in the lightning tubes?" Johns strove to grasp the foundation of the thing.

"Yes, the foundation of it all—with the earth's pressure the power motive," Asher nodded. "So, after my Miner is on the bottom of our well, I can burn—or dissolve—a room as large as this laboratory in a few minutes. The whole thing is no mystery after you learn it—not nearly so much as radium, or radio, was. Merely creating a spark of electricity and fanning it through a vacuum and a conductor of massed gases."

"But"—Johns had unconsciously dropped his voice to a whisper—"what of these strange creatures? How would you deal with them? Damn it, Asher, I think I'm beginning to believe this nutty idea of yours. Any man who can generate power with the pressure of air as it is packed by earth must know what he is talking about!"

"I have but one protection against anything down there that tries to harm me," Asher said simply. "That is this—see?"

What he held up looked like an old-fashioned six shooter. It was fitted with a platinum-sealed box in the place where a cylinder would have been. The barrel looked like some queer, blue glass.

"Do you see that test tube?" Asher pointed to a glass tube on a table a few feet away. "Now watch."

He pressed a tiny ratchet under his thumb. A snapping, buzzing noise filled the laboratory. Johns gave an exclamation of wonder and awe. Quickly, the test tube started to melt into a pool of molten glass. Asher increased the pressure of his ratchet trigger. The tube was knocked to the floor.

"Static electricity—always some form of electricity," said Asher grinning at the astonished oil baron. "Conductor coils here," he continued as he tapped the sealed cylinder, "are charged much as a flash-lamp battery. The charged conductors attract the static electricity of the air, and, in a manner similar to the action of the power generator, increase power. There is a slight difference: by turning quick power on my static gun, I can cause the charge to knock down and merely electrocute, as I knocked the half-melted tube from the table."

"I can understand that, a little," Johns sighed profoundly. "It's the same juice that causes a gasoline truck to catch fire if you don't have a ground chain on it somewhere. But, just the same, I claim it's remarkable."

"Not half as remarkable as what I expect to find two miles down when I descend to-morrow." Asher had a dreamy look in his eyes. "I wonder: new ways to get petroleum wealth ... a strange people...."

“Men,"—Asher, a tight-fitting asbestos composition suit covering him from foot to neck, spoke tersely—"when you get me on bottom, stop every bit of machinery, and don't dare pull up until I give the signal. If I'm down there the entire day, all right. But"—he smiled, trying to make light of the danger—"if I don't signal within thirty-six hours, pull up anyhow."

From the bull-wheels of the drilling rig Asher spooled out some of the air-hose cable through which air blown over ice would be pumped into the Miner; then when the long steel cylinder was over the hole and ready, he turned to the company officials and government scientists and engineers around him in the boarded-up derrick.

"Possibly I can get a survey in an hour. Perhaps I'll have to come back to the surface and make adjustments to my equipment. That remains to be seen.... Now, let's get low."

He adjusted a helmet over his head. It looked much like the helmet worn by a sea diver, except that it had no connecting hose for air.

The windows in the helmet, which contained pressure lights, worked on the same principle as the disintegrating rays of the Miner. When Asher turned the ratchet that set the little pressure machine into motion, a violet tinged green ray of great lighting power shot out and increased, by weight of air, or atmosphere beneath the earth, the power of one tiny spark a million times.

Without ceremony or farewell, Asher crawled inside his tube. The door was closed and he fastened it from inside. For a moment, wild panic assailed him. But he fought it off, becoming again less the feeling human and more the cold calculator of advanced science. The light from outside, coming in through the windows of the Miner, was shut off. The long steel cage clanked against the sides of the special casing in the well, and Blaine Asher was on his trip into a lower world never before visited by man.

That was what Asher believed. But, had he known what waited for him, two miles into the bowels of the earth....

At five hundred feet, the descent stopped, giving him time to adjust himself to the pressure change. The gas and oil had been eased out of the hole. That is, the casing had been run on through the producing strata, shutting it off. Asher signaled by buzzer, and a stream of the ice-washed air flowed down to him.

Three thousand feet! Six thousand feet! More than a mile down! Sweat poured from his body in streams, and the air coming into the Miner through the hose did not relieve him. It was hot—almost unbearably so. His ears were roaring. The dark of his tube was relieved as he turned on his pressure lamps. He adjusted the pressure discs over his ears by twisting a thumbscrew on his helmet, and the pounding of his ear-drums ceased.

Gasping, he watched the depth meter in front of him. It did not seem as if he was moving, but the indicator now showed more than seven thousand feet. It moved around slowly and more slowly; trembled at eight thousand—and stopped.

Like the snapping of a man's fingers, the temperature inside the Miner changed. Asher was now fifty feet below the bottom of the oil and gas sands, and if his theory about rock pressure worked.... It *was* working. Frost was forming on the inside of the Miner!

"I'm right—right—right!" Asher thought, elated, sending his buzzer signal up to those so far above. The icy air through his hose changed to air of normal temperature. He signaled for slack in the lowering cable, then prepared for the greatest test of all.

Cramped, with hardly room to move, he studied his gages. Helium

tubes at the proper pressure for compressing the tiny spark of the pressure generator, so it would flare a million times stronger under the action of the vacuum tubes: diamond and cut-glass tubes in the bottom of the Miner, thermoed with layers of quicksilver: everything cleared, everything ready.

His hand shaking, Asher pushed the tiny switch that brought his filament points trembling together under the atmospheric pressure so far underground. A tiny spark danced and throbbed through the tiny glass tube before him, beginning to buzz as it started the circuit of increasing coils, and soon humming and vibrating as the helium and vacuum tubes swelled it to full power. Spark after spark, increased almost beyond imagination, followed one after another. The Miner throbbed and shook.

White-faced, Asher touched the little lever that opened the blasting outlets in the bottom. Almost instantly the Miner dropped a full six inches—went on, down to a foot. Asher, pride of success choking him, pulled the lever hard over, which brought some of the tubes beneath him spreading out, to blast away the earth on each side of him.

He signaled for more and more slack as the depth indicator showed he had burned, or disintegrated, his way down to thirty feet beyond

the original bottom of the hole. He was below the bottom of the protecting wall of casing now—at the mercy of the pressure of two miles of earth.

Slowly, setting all his bottom tubes to cutting away on all sides of him, he started hollowing out enough room to step out into. His lights, when he looked through the windows, showed ghostly on earth ten feet on each side of him. Ten more minutes and he had created a room nearly twenty-five feet square—a man-made cave, two miles below the surface.

There was something akin to awe in the feelings of Asher when he opened the little door, crawled out and stood erect. The pressure lamps in his helmet lit up the room he had made. There were no sounds, just a vague, ringing silence.

Then so quickly that it robbed him of his senses, two things happened. A hundred yards away from the well in which he had descended, another well, drilled by another oil company, was shot. Three hundred quarts of nitro-glycerine were set off in the hole.

Asher screamed and clamped his ear discs down tight. It seemed the very gods of thunder were shrieking and raging in his head; every nerve and fiber in his body throbbed and tingled with the hellish

vibration.

On his knees, where the shock had thrown him, in darkness beyond description, Asher realized the lights from the Miner no longer shone out. Frantically, he adjusted the small lights in his helmet and got them to sending off their rays again. Then, an icy hand seemed to squeeze his heart, turning his blood to ice-water in his veins. He cursed himself for not foreseeing that some company might shoot a well close by, while he was underground.

He turned. The Miner was all right, but Blaine Asher was trapped! For the walls of the hole below the bottom of the casing had caved. Thirty feet of rock, sand and conglomerate matter were between him and the bottom of the pipe.

He was trapped—two miles below the earth. There was no hope of rescue, the hope that miners feel in deep shafts. There could be no rescue for Asher. No one could get to him. He cried out his horror, fighting to keep from swooning.

The helmet hampered him. He turned on a small pressure lamp attached to the belt at his waist, and chanced taking the helmet off. Dank and nauseous was the air that he breathed, since it no longer came through the filters in his helmet. But it was air that would

serve, nevertheless.

A crackling, rumbling sound caused him to turn quickly. Eyes wide, he stared at the long crack that was opening before him.

Asher was between two layers of granite—one layer under him, and another above him, just below the oil sands. Now, as the crack between these two layers widened, he could see it slope downward until it ended in a great cavern that stretched endlessly away beyond the beams of his light.

It wasn't this crack that caused Blaine Asher, an iron-hearted man of science, to choke and sag down to a sitting position, his knees refusing to support him. No—it was the terrible, Godless, unbelievable *Things* that scurried around in the smooth rock hall that stretched away into the cavern.

Frozen with soul-chilling fear, Asher stared with eyes that bulged. What were they? Spawned neither of God nor Satan—what could they be? Black-skinned—or was it skin?—like rubber, with round bodies, like black basket balls inflated to triple size; bodies that seemed to ripple, distort, swell and contract with life within life.

Short, foot-long stems that must have been legs, ending in round

balls that served as feet, no doubt. Tentacles, Asher would have called them, six feet in length, thick as mighty cables and dotted with suckers like the tentacles of an octopus. And heads—Asher gagged and vomited!

Not heads. Just masses of the black body substance as large as the two fists of a man. In each head was a crooked black gash for a mouth. There were no eyes that Asher could see. Yet, these Things seemed to see one another, and emitted strange, chill, squeaking sounds!

As Asher watched, the Things sensed his presence. A half hundred of them rose and started toward him. They did not walk, nor did they crawl. Undulating, contorting strangely, they came on with incredible speed, long tentacles waving before them; slithering on the rocky floor of the cavern; making those odd squeaking noises.

As they neared him, Asher sprang to his feet, backing up against the pile of cavings beside the Miner. A long tentacle whipped out and wrapped around his leg. A short, snout-tentacle quivered toward his face. There was strength beyond imagining in the grip on him.

With an almost animal snarl the man from the earth's surface moved to protect himself from these creatures, surely of the lowest living

order. He grabbed into the pocket of his loose asbestos composition suit, and his fingers closed comfortingly around the static gun.

He aimed it, and the Thing gripping him was hurled back upon the others.

Crackling, snapping viciously, the charges of electricity that were drawn from the very earth increased in the gun and spumed out like lightning bolts. The Things squeaked excitedly and surged forward. Asher's finger pulled the ratchet trigger full force, and like dew before a strong shaft of sunlight, the gruesome Things were knocked away.

Hating the sight, Asher changed the charge of his gun, cutting the size of the path the volts covered, thereby increasing the potency of the discharge. The piled bodies sizzled, and to Asher's nose came a sulphurous smell. Then, there was nothing at all....

Sick, he put the gun back into the deep pocket and leaned on the wall. He turned around again to the pile of cavings that barred his way from the surface, and dug like a madman with his bare hands. The Miner was weighed down, and he could not use it anyhow. The blasting tubes were on the bottom, and could not be shifted to the top.

Suddenly he stopped his crazed work, raised his head and listened. "My God!" he gasped hoarsely, "am I stark mad?" He thought he must be, for the voice of a human being came to his ears.

"You will be pleased, Blaine Asher, to turn around! And do not make any foolish moves, I warn you."

"Lee Wong! Krenski!" Asher turned, face to face with the super-scientists of whom he had spoken to R. Briggs Johns the day before. Asher shook his head. More of the terrible dream, this meeting two humans down in the earth's core.

“Most right, honorable Asher." Lee Wong bowed mockingly. He and Krenski were garbed in loose-fitting garments of much the same style as Asher. In their hands, they carried static guns. Not the small gun, such as Asher had concealed in his pocket. More like heavy air drills, they were.

Asher frowned at the lamps they carried. He knew by the dazzling action of the rays that they were pressure lamps. But they gave off much better light than those of his own invention. They had gone him one better there.

"Did—did you see them?" Asher gulped. "And how—how did you

get down here? Tell me!" He took a step toward Lee Wong, intending to lay his hand on the Chinaman, to make sure he was live flesh and blood, and not a figment of his disordered brain.

"Stand where you are!" Lee Wong snapped. He held the heavy static gun up and Asher felt a light charge tingle his body. "Those Things of which you speak—I assume you mean the Petrolia. Ah, yes, we see them. Every day, we see them. For us they work. They work, my dear Blaine Asher, tapping upward into the oil sands; sands that are burial places of countless millions of generations of Petrolia; of lost races that once ruled supreme over these underground worlds.

"How simple, to take the oil from below—the oil you want so much above. Someone must do the work. I and Krenski found the Petrolia ready and willing. Being creatures of feeling, with little sense, we were able to bend their dying wills to do our work. You see, we made them feel we would save them, a dying race, from extinction! They do our bidding."

Asher was bewildered by the enormity of the thing. "You mean these Things you have called Petrolia actually work for you? And that you saved them from becoming extinct?"

“Exactly," Lee Wong nodded, seeming to be enjoying himself. "Like

humans of the surface, Petrolia live on the dead. I mean, wherever we get our living food from the earth, we plant our dead back in that earth. Petrolia are spawned in beds of petroleum. Just as eels seek deep water to lay their eggs, so do Petrolia go to the oil strata to spawn future tribes.

"When we pump out the oil, they have no—shall we say "hatching?"—beds. But now, by tapping and bringing down the oil, we have assured them more spawning pits. They will increase, and we have made them sense it. For that matter, the very oil they breed in, gives them sustenance. That is why they are black fleshed and blooded, and have suckers instead of mouths, as a black man is black through ages beneath hot suns.

"It's easy for us, who are wiser than other men, to figure what oilfield might contain such people. We have a rapid elevator connecting us to the surface. And—"

"Then," Asher almost shouted, "I'm not trapped!"

"No?" Lee Wong wrinkled his forehead quizzically. "You should realize that we cannot allow you to go back to the surface—alive, or any other way. We intend to increase the Petrolia, spreading them to other underground, yet uninhabited worlds. You would spoil that.

"No, you will never return to the surface. They cannot haul your tube to the top, so they will think you perished in it. And"—Lee Wong shrugged—"it might have been better if you had, Mr.—"

"*I wouldn't!*" the yellow man snarled. He rolled the ratchet of his static gun and Asher was hurled to the floor by the heavy shock. Wisely, he stood up, keeping his hands well away from the pocket in which his own gun rested. He doubted whether his little static gun could compete with the guns of the others, but it was something. They had not thought to search him—perhaps they might not. It was his only hope.

Lee Wong bowed low again, motioning Asher to go ahead. "Now you shall see what we have done. We are proud, and we know you can appreciate our workings. You will be glad to learn why we do as we are doing; you will be intrigued as a fellow scientist. Then, so sad to say, you must perish for having gained that very knowledge."

Asher shrugged, and through half-closed lids he eyed Lee Wong and the rather small, slender Krenski, of the high brow and large head. Then he walked ahead of them. Head up, shoulders back, he walked carelessly down the wide hall—a hall that led into the main cavern of that underground empire.

It was large—fully a hundred feet in a rough square. Not fifteen feet from floor to ceiling at any point, it followed the course of the two layers of granite between which it was sandwiched. Other long halls, or crevices, ran in every direction out of this main cavern. In the walls, in niches and cracks, the superior pressure lamps had been placed, throwing a bright, eery light over it all.

Asher recoiled suddenly at the sight of hundreds of Petrolia that swarmed the hallways, and they seemed to sense another presence beside that of Lee Wong or Krenski. A choked, gurgling sound came from the Chinaman, and they disappeared down the halls, squeaking angrily as they went.

"Our control room," explained Lee Wong waving his hand about him. He pointed to a dozen twenty-four inch pipe-lines that ran along the low ceiling, coming from as many different halls into the room, but all going out the same large hall, larger than the rest. "There are the arteries of our system. There is the oil that is so—shall we say strangely?—missing in your wells." He smiled, a taunting, mocking light in his eyes.

"You well understand how we do it. Above us, just below the oil strata, is a steel, trough-shaped roof. The oil, tapped from below, drains into these, and then into these pipe-lines. If we were working

from above, now, we would run it to a central shaft, and pump it out. We do not want it on the surface, however."

“Then why in the name of hell do you want it?" Asher barked, a tense note of anger in his voice. "And what do you do with it?" These two were humans. At least, they were in man-form, if not in feeling. And the Petrolia could be handled. Asher was getting mad, and his fear ebbed.

"Come." Lee Wong led the way under the pipe-lines, down the large hall. Krenski, his heavy static gun ready, walked at Asher's back. They came out into another cavern that stretched beyond the powerful lights. The sound of their voices echoed like thunder of the drums of Thor, and Asher realized this cavern might stretch away in Stygian blackness for hundreds of miles.

Asher marveled, for the floor of this cavern dropped at least five feet below the level of the control room or incoming hallways, forming a natural reservoir. A reservoir for the big streams of oil that were pouring into it from the pipe-lines.

The rumble of the oil as it came in and splashed out in a never-ending stream, and the rumble of the oil streams above them as the precious fluid flowed down into the plated drain roof, sounded like

the tramp of the weary feet of the damned, as it echoed back and forth across the mighty cavern.

"Our storage." Lee Wong stood at the edge and explained. "Also, as you may see, a concentration incubator, or spawning bed and food storage for our Petrolia."

Blaine Asher looked again at the rippling oil at his feet. He choked brokenly and stepped back a pace. For the oil near the bank was alive! It rippled and splashed, teeming with life. By the strange alchemy of breeding in oil and living on oil as man lives on bread, that lake of oil was a mass of growing Petrolia. Millions—yes, countless billions—of them! Hideous, foul Things that would be turned loose with the rest in that nightmare world—that would be taken to other buried worlds to start new races.

“But why—why?" Asher almost screamed the words at Lee Wong.

"Petrolia will be our armies, protecting our underground wealth," Lee Wong answered him. "They will be our faithful workers, under no command but mine. For, even Krenski has not mastered the over-control it takes to handle them!

"Gradually, as happened to the field we are now under, all oil fields

will go dry. We will be getting the oil from below, and putting it in storage in mother earth. Think, Blaine Asher, what it will mean!" There was a fanatical light in Lee Wong's beady eyes.

"A world without petroleum is a world without power. No oil for fuel; no gasoline, lubricants or by-products of any sort. No airplanes could fly; tanks, tractors, oil-burning trains and ships; mechanical appliances—nothing could run. We now take the oil from America. Later, when our Petrolia have increased and we have devised means of moving them, we will go to all oil-producing countries.

"We will secrete the oil and paralyze the world. Now, in Russia and China and India, our societies are organizing and growing. They will handle the weakened, powerless nations, and I shall be ruler of the universe, surface and beneath, with Krenski to aid me, you see. It it wonderful, is it not? And, knowing what you do, having seen what you have, could you call it impossible?"

Blaine Asher groaned. It was not impossible, he knew. Unreal; monstrous—but never impossible. A region of hideous Petrolia; a world stripped of automotive and mechanical power, its fuel held in the hands of a few, far underground—it was terrible to think of.

And Asher the only one who knew. The only one who could avert

such a thing. The fate of an entire world was in his hands. And he would soon die.

Die? No! Blaine Asher swore silently to himself that no power in existence should keep him from destroying these two fiends. It had to be done!

He dared not fail.

“Wonderful, stupendous thing," he forced himself to smile. "I'd like to grasp the hand of the genius who devised and carried out such a wonderful thing."

He took a step toward Lee Wong, right hand extended, his left slipping toward the pocket where his own static gun rested.

Lee Wong extended his own right band. Something in the chill, flint look of Asher's eyes must have warned him. Even as Asher's fingers closed around his hand, he tried to jerk back.

"Destroy him!" he cried out to Krenski.

Asher dropped to one knee, letting his static gun remain in his pocket. His left hand closed around Lee Wong's wrist as the Oriental tried to pull away. Krenski was bringing the heavy, cylinderlike gun

up and aiming it at Asher.

Asher twisted on one knee, his teeth gritted, braced to receive the shock from the gun. He jerked Lee Wong's arm down, heaved and came to his feet. Crying out, arms and legs flailing, the Chinaman catapulted toward Krenski—and just at the instant Krenski fired!

The sickening smell of cindered flesh was in Asher's nostrils as he turned and ran back up the main hallway. He glanced back over his shoulder as he ran, and shuddered at the black mass lying at Krenski's feet. Lee Wong was no more. Wide-eyed, the Russian stared at the thing at his feet. Then, with a fiendish shriek, turned and brought the gun into line on the fleeing Asher.

A crackling charge of electricity singed the back of Asher's head as he dove head first around the corner of the hall into the control cavern. He reasoned that Krenski had sent a full charge after him, and hope kindled higher in his breast. For Asher believed his smaller static weapon was as strong as that of the other. At that, it would be a test, and Asher dared not take chances.

He crouched in the door of another hallway, waiting. Cursing, Krenski dashed into the control cavern. Asher brought his gun up and fired. But even as he pulled the trigger, a long tentacle reached

from the dark crevice behind him and jerked his arm. His charge snapped by the Russian, warning the other that Asher, too, was dealing with powerful electric rays that meant death should they touch.

Asher yielded to the tug of the slimy, sulphur-smelling tentacle, letting it pull him into the crevice, the charges of Krenski's weapon crackling by him, leaving his skin dry, and a powdery sensation in his mouth.

In the shelter of the crevice, Asher turned his gun upon the Petrolia that gripped him. The tentacles fell away, fading to nothingness before the charges that showed quivery blue in the dark. Like catacombs, one crevice opened into another. Asher darted into the next crevice and edged cautiously toward the control cavern.

The angry buzzing and snapping of Krenski's weapon caused him to duck instinctively, although no deadly charges came his way.

"Oh, God!" he heard the Russian's high-pitched voice, agonized, wailing, "they're coming in—they're coming in!"

A squeaking and slithering, now greater than ever, rose above all other sounds. And Asher realized what Krenski meant. Lee Wong

had said that only he could control the Petrolia. They were swarming into the control room now. That was what Krenski was shooting at.

The squeaking sounds came up the crevice in which Asher was and a cold, clammy sweat broke out all over him. He could blast a thousand of them into nothing. But by sheer force, more body than his light static gun could down, they would overwhelm him.

His mind raced swiftly. He remembered the location, out in the control room, of the cage elevator that ran to the surface. It had not been hurt by the glycerine blast that had trapped Asher. The elevator shaft from the control room was cased clear into the cavern floor, and the blast had not jarred this far.

He wheeled and sent another charge of static electricity into the crevice back of him, then lunged out into the control room. It would be his own weapon against Krenski's, and a chance to gain the bottom of the shaft.

Krenski—piled, charred heaps of the Petrolia around him, which had momentarily cleared the attack—was running across the control room. Like a seething wave, the foul Petrolia undulated from every crevice and hallway, coming in to fresh attack. The Russian, terror lending him speed, raced for the cage at the foot of the shaft that led

to the surface. At the same time Asher ran out.

Nearly a hundred feet apart, on opposite sides of the cavern, they stopped. Krenski turned his heavy weapon toward Asher at the same time Asher sent his own gun crackling and snapping out blue, fiery flame.

Side-stepping, now crouching, now dodging to this side and that, they fought their strange duel. Asher's right arm was burned, his hair singed from his head, and his body jarred again and again as Krenski touched him. Krenski, groaning through gritted teeth, suffered burns all over his chest and left leg.

As the Petrolia came on, and the lightning play of deadly electric charges continued, Asher made a discovery. He noticed that the rays, or charges, of the two guns, when they met in mid-air, caused blue flame, and that the charge went no farther.

It did it again. The two charges met, crackled to explosion in the air. Krenski, too, noticed it, and he also noticed that the Petrolia were almost upon them again. Coming on in a wave that could not be hurled back.

He looked at Asher, and met the dare in Asher's eyes. Straight at

each other, neither moving, they shot their static charges. Neither would move: it was a challenge from Asher that Krenski had to meet. One of them would have to die before the other would be able to gain the cage in the shaft. There could be no compromise, and only one man at a time could go surfaceward. If they continued to dodge and fight, the Petrolia would overwhelm them.

Power against power, they fought it out.

Asher's finger tightened on his trigger release until it seemed the skin would split; then he caused his hand to tremble just enough to make his electric charges cover the space in which Krenski's charges traveled. Hissing, spitting, flashing explosions, giving off sounds and light like big explosions of flash powder, the charges met.

Asher tingled from head to foot, and thrilled to the very marvel of the thing. Two deadly beams of electricity, holding each other off!

In one long, continuous flash, the contact point of the charges began to shift. Closer and closer, as the force of superior charges cleaved through the other, the contact points neared Krenski. He saw death upon him, for in another instant, Asher's charges would hurl his own bolts back upon him. The smaller weapon of Blaine Asher, attracting more static electric currents by reason of having a small attracting

battery inside, where the larger gun of the other depended upon magnets for attraction, was triumphing.

Krenski's mustache and light beard singed and curled. He cried out, stepped back, throwing up his arms as death flashed through his body.

His gun playing about him, Asher raced toward the big valves and gates that shut off the drain of the pipe-lines. Burning, reeking of sulphur and burned leather, the Petrolia vanished before him. But, as he turned, the drainage system that was robbing the field shut off. They had blocked his way again!

Too many to blast away altogether, they pressed in. Asher leaped forward, feet kicking, left fist smashing out, static gun crackling as if to tell him that nothing could stop them. Tentacles gripped at him, the foul, stinking smell gagged him. But the squeaks of the Petrolia maddened him.

"Squeak, damn you!" Asher shouted wildly, kicking, shooting and hitting, gaining toward the shaft. "Squeak—for all the damned Things that ever bred below the earth cannot stop one surface man!"

He burned and fought his way through and jumped into the cage as

his gun electrocuted two of the Petrolia that tried to weave in after him. As he slammed the door, Asher was conscious that something was happening. He hesitated, just long enough to see the cavern start buckling and caving. The pressure of the oil, now shut off, was filling back toward the surface, creating a mighty pressure downward. The surface wells would produce man's power-fuel once more.

Asher slammed the door, turned on the power, and the cage shot upward.

A half hour later, those waiting on the floor of the derrick above the hole in which Asher had gone down, started. Asher, burned, wounded, blood streaming from his battered body, staggered in and collapsed at their feet.

“I can't believe it! Insane! Impossible! Yet, every well in this field has started producing again! And when we went to that old, abandoned wildcat well, we found the shaft opening! I had it covered up, as you ordered."

R. Briggs Johns paced up and down the laboratory floor, talking to Asher, who had just arisen from his bed, two weeks after he had collapsed at their feet in the derrick. Still bandaged, he was a

different Blaine Asher. His face was lined, and the hair next to his scalp nearly snow white.

"I'll be able to do some walking around outside in a few days," Asher declared as he cleaned a test tube and placed it in a rack. "I can locate several wells over that underground storage cavern, and you can recover that oil. But you can't mine this field.

"Twenty years, perhaps, and you can. But it will take that long for those Petrolia to die out. We've got to get the oil out from below to a point where they can no longer spawn. We will apply mining in other fields—but not here!"

"Not here," Johns repeated, shuddering.

"It's up to you to see no one else tries it." Asher lit a cigarette and nodded at Johns. "Get control of the field—anything. Tell the oil men something. But don't tell then the truth. They wouldn't believe you. They would call you raving mad.

"The world does not know. It would not believe. Can we do other than remain silent?"

R. Briggs Johns, sick of thinking of the cavern world and horrible

things below them, knew they could not.

#31 Giants Of The Ray, By Tom Curry:

Madly the three raced for their lives up the shaft of the radium mine, for behind them poured a stream of hideous monsters—giants of the ray!

Aproximate word count: 9,100

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

“I tell you I'm not crazy," insisted the tall man. "Durkin, they got a big mine."

Bill Durkin laughed roughly, and sneered openly at his partner, Frank Maget. "G'wan, you're drunk."

"Well, I was last night," admitted Maget. "But I'd slept it off this morning. I was lying under that table in the Portuguee's, and when I opened my eyes, there were these three birds sitting near me. They hadn't spotted me. I heard 'em talking of wealth, how their mine was of unbelievable richness and greater than any other deposit in the

world. Well, that means something, don't it?"

"That's all right," said Durkin. "But whoever saw a cricket fifteen inches long?"

"Listen. There were three of these guys. One was a hell of a looking fellow: his face was piebald, with purple spots. His skin was bleached and withered, and one eye looked like a pearl collar button! They called him Professor, too, Professor Gurlone. Well, he takes out this damn cricket thing and it was sort of reddish purple but alive, and as long as your forearm. This professor guy says his son had taken an ordinary cricket and made it grow into the one he had. But the mine was what interested me. I kept my mouth shut and my ears open, and it's in the Matto Grosso. May be emeralds, diamonds, or gold. Boy, I'm heading for it, right now. The old guy's going back tomorrow, get me?"

"It's a lot of bunk," growled Durkin, who was stout and red of countenance.

"Yeh? Well, Otto Ulrich don't put fifty thousand into bunk."

Durkin whistled. "You mean the German loosened up that much?" he asked, and his eyes showed interest.

"Sure. He paid this Gurlone fifty thousand dollars—credit, of course."

"Well—maybe there's something in the mine story. But boy, you were drunk when you saw that cricket. No cricket ever grew that big. You always see things when you get too much rum in you."

"The hell you say," cried Maget. "I saw it, I tell you!"

Durkin feigned elaborate politeness. "Oh, all right, Frank. Have it your own way. You saw a cricket that big and this Gurlone feller took a couple of pink elephants out of his pocket to pay the check. Sure, I believe you."

But money never failed to attract the two tropical tramps. They were looking for trouble, not work, and the idea of a raid on a rich mine in the Matto Grosso was just what they would enjoy.

An hour later, they had cornered a small, inoffensive peon named Juan. Juan, Maget and Durkin had discovered, had come out of the wilderness with Professor Gurlone, the strange looking gentleman who spoke of a fabulously wealthy mine and commanded checks for fifty thousand dollars from a reputable banking firm. Such a man was worth watching.

The two rascals were expert at pumping the little half-breed. They knew peons, and the first thing that happened was that Durkin had slipped Juan several dollars and had pressed a large glass of whiskey on the little man.

The conversation was in broken English and Spanish.

"Quien sabe?"

Durkin and Maget had this phrase flung at them often during the course of the talk with Juan, and there were many elaborate shrugs.

There was a mine, way back in the Matto Grosso, said Juan. He thought it might contain silver: there had been the shaft of an old mine there. But now they were deep down in the ground, digging out reddish brown ore, and the cavern smoked and smelled so badly a man could work but an hour or two before being relieved. But the pay was very high. Also, Juan, in his rambling way, spoke of grotesque animals. What were these creatures like? asked Durkin. Then came a shrug, and Juan said they were like nothing else on earth.

Durkin discounted the part of the story having to do with the strange animals. He thought it was peon superstition. But now he was sure

there was a rich mine to be raided.

"It's a tough part of the Grosso," he said, turning to Maget.

"Sure. Hard to carry enough water and supplies to make it. Say, Juan, who was that big Portuguee with Professor Gurlone? He's blind, ain't he? His eyes were white as milk, and his face tanned black as river mud. Surely is a great big guy, and tough looking, too."

Durkin drummed on the table, considering the matter, while Juan spoke of the big Portuguese. The swarthy man with the colorless blind eyes was Espinosa, former owner of the mine. He had sold part of his claim to the Gurlones, but had remained with them as an assistant. Though blind, he knew the depths of the mine and could feel his way about, and direct the peons in their labors.

"I've got it," said Durkin, turning back to Juan and Maget. "Juan, it's up to you. You've got to blaze the trail so we can follow you in. And you can steal food and cache it for use on the way, see? We'll come along a day or so after the Gurlones."

It took some persuading to make Juan consent to their plot, but the peon yielded at last to money and the promise of part of the spoils.

"Maybe you can steal Gurlone's samples and they'll give us a line on what he's up to out there. Whether it's emeralds or diamonds or gold that they're taking out of the mine."

Juan was stupid and superstitious, like most of his fellows. He had obeyed orders, digging out the red ore, and that was all he knew. But prompted by the two tramps, he was ready for trouble, too.

Juan told them that Professor Gurlone carried a small lead case which he seemed to prize greatly.

"Get it, then," ordered Durkin.

The two tramps saw Gurlone's party start on the morrow. There were many cases of supplies loaded into launches, some marked Glass, Acids, and so on. Then there were boxes of food and various things needed in a jungle camp.

Juan, their tool, was working with the other peons, and at ten o'clock in the morning the launches set out, pushing into the current of the Madeira.

Old Gurlone, of the livid face, was in charge of one boat, and the gigantic Portuguese, with his colorless eyes and burned complexion,

sat beside him.

That night, the two tropical tramps stole a small boat with a one-cylinder motor, and started up the river.

It was a hard journey, but they were used to river and jungle work, and the object they had in view was enough to make them discount trouble. They speculated upon what manner of treasure it was they would find in the cavern of the Matto Grosso mine. It might be precious stones, it might be gold. Certainly it was something very valuable.

They carried little supplies, but they were heavily armed. For food, they might hunt and also depend on the caches left by their friend, Juan the peon.

Three hundred miles from Manaos, they came to the landing where old Gurlone had unloaded his boats. The two tramps drew their own craft up on shore a quarter of a mile away, keeping out of sight, and hid the boat in dense brush. Then they crept up the river bank, keeping out of sight of the boatmen, who were preparing for the return voyage, and cut into the jungle so as to strike the trail of the caravan ahead.

For several hours they followed the path easily. They found palm trees blazed with new marks, and these they were sure their friend Juan had left for them. But the trail was easy to keep without these. The supplies had been loaded on burros, which had been awaiting the boats.

That night, they camped beside a small stream. They were but twenty-four hours behind Professor Gurlone and his party, and the food Juan had cached for them was in good condition.

They were up at daybreak, and pressed on, armed to the teeth and ready for a fight.

"What's that?" said Durkin, stopping so suddenly that Maget ran into him.

They had been walking at a swift pace along the jungle path, the giant trees forming a canopy overhead. Monkeys screamed at them, birds flitted a hundred feet above them in the roof of the forest.

The sun beat on the jungle top, but few rays lightened the gloom beneath.

From up ahead sounded a frightful scream, followed by a long

drawn out wailing. Maget glanced at Durkin, and the latter shrugged, and pressed on. But he gripped his rifle tightly, for the cries were eery.

From time to time the two stopped to catch better the direction of the wails. At last, they located the spot where the injured person lay.

It was under a great bombax tree, and on the shaded ground writhed a man. The two stopped, horrified at the squirming figure. The man was tearing at his face with his nails, and his countenance was bloody with long scratches.

He cursed and moaned in Spanish, and Durkin, approaching closer, recognized Juan the peon.

"Hey, Juan, what the hell's the matter? A snake bite you?"

The bronzed face of the sturdy little peon writhed in agony. He screamed in answer, he could not talk coherently. He mumbled, he groaned, but they could not catch his words.

At his side lay a small lead container, and closer, as though he had dropped it after extracting it from its case, lay a tube some six inches in length. It was a queer tube, for it seemed to be filled with smoky,

pallid worms of light that writhed even as Juan writhed.

"What's the trouble?" asked Durkin gruffly, for he was alarmed at the behavior of the peon. It seemed to both tramps that the man must have gone mad.

They kept back from him, with ready guns. Juan shrieked, and it sounded as though he said he was burning up, in a great fire.

Suddenly the peon staggered to his feet; as he pushed himself up, his hands gripped the tube, and he clawed at his face.

Perplexity and horror were writ on the faces of the two tramps. Maget was struck with pity for the unfortunate peon, who seemed to be suffering the tortures of the damned. He was not a bad man, was Maget, but rather a weakling who had a run of bad luck and was under the thumb of Durkin, a really hard character. Durkin, while astounded at the actions of Juan, showed no pity.

Maget stepped forward, to try and comfort Juan; the peon struck out at him, and whirled around. But a few yards away was the bank of the stream, and Juan crashed into a black palm set with spines, caromed off it, and fell face downward into the water. The glass tube was smashed and the pieces fell into the stream.

"God, he must be blind," groaned Maget. "Poor guy, I've got to save him."

"The hell with him," growled Durkin. He grasped his partner's arm and stared curiously down at the dying peon.

"Let go, I'll pull him out," said Maget, trying to wrench away from Durkin.

"He's done for. Why worry about a peon?" said Durkin. "Look at those fish!"

The muddy waters of the stream had parted, and dead fish were rising about the body of Juan. But not about the dying man so much as close to the spot where the broken tube had fallen. White bellies up, the fish died as though by magic.

"Let's—let's get the hell back to Manoas, Bill," said Maget in a sickly voice. "This—this is too much for me."

A nameless fear, which had been with Maget ever since the beginning of the venture, was growing more insistent.

"What?" cried Durkin. "Turn back now? The hell you say! That damn peon got into a fight with somebody and maybe got bit by a

snake later. We'll go on and get that treasure."

"But—but what made those fish come up that way?" said Maget, his brows creased in perplexity.

Durkin shrugged. "What's the difference? We're O. K., ain't we?"

In spite of the stout man's bravado, it was evident that he, too, was disturbed at the strange happenings. He kept voicing aloud the question in his mind; what was in the queer tube?

But he forced Maget to go on. Without Juan, the peon, to leave them caches of food on the trail, they would have a difficult time getting provender, but both were trained jungle travelers and could find fruit and shoot enough game to keep them going.

Day after day they marched on, not far from the rear of the party before them. They took care to keep off Gurlone's heels, for they did not wish their presence to be discovered.

When they had been on the journey, which led them east, for four days, the two rascals came to a waterless plateau, which stretched before them in dry perspective. Before they came to the end of this, they knew what real thirst was, and their tongues were black in their

mouths before they caught the curling smoke of fires in the valley where they knew the mine must be.

"That's the mine," gasped Durkin, pointing to the smoke.

The sun was setting in golden splendor at their backs; they crept forward, using great boulders and piles of reddish earth, strange to them, for cover. Finally they reached the trail which led to the hills overlooking the valley, and a panorama spread before them which amazed them because of its elaborateness.

It seemed more like a stage scene than a wilderness picture. Straight ahead of them, as they lay flat on their stomachs and peered at the big camp, yawned the black mouth of a large cavern. This, they were sure, was the mine itself. Close by this mouth stood a stone hut. It was clear that this building had something to do with the ore, perhaps a refining plant, Durkin suggested.

There were long barracks for the peons, inside a barbed wire enclosure, and they could see the little men lounging now about campfires, where frying food was being prepared. Also, there was a long, low building with many windows in it, and houses for supplies and for the use of the owners of the camp.

"Looks like they were ready in case of a fight," said Durkin at last. "That fence around the peons looks like they might be havin' trouble."

"Some camp," breathed Maget.

"We got to find somethin' to drink," said Durkin. "Come on."

They worked their way about the rim of the valley, and in doing so caught glimpses of Professor Gurlone, the elderly man they had spotted in Manaos, and also saw the big Portuguese with his sightless eyes.

At the other side of the valley, they came on a spring which flowed to the east and disappeared under ground farther down.

"Funny water, ain't it?" said Durkin, lying down on his stomach to suck up the milky water.

But they were not in any mood to be particular about the fluids they drank. The long dry march across the arid lands separating the camp from the rest of the world had taken all moisture from their throats.

Maget, drinking beside his partner, saw that the water glinted and sparkled, though the sun was below the opposite rim of the valley. It

seemed that greenish, silvery specks danced in the milky fluid.

"Boy, that's good," Durkin finally found time to say, "I feel like I could fight a wildcat."

The water did, indeed, impart a feeling of exhilaration to the two tramps. They crept up close to the roof of the parallel shaft which they had seen from the other side of the valley, and looked down into the camp again.

Professor Gurlone of the livid face and Espinosa the blind Portuguese, were talking to a big man whose golden beard shone in the last rays of the sun.

"That's the old bird's son," said Durkin, "that Juan told us about. Young Gurlone."

A rumbling, pleasant laugh floated on the breeze, issuing from the big youth's throat. The wind was their way, now, and the valley breathed forth an unpleasant odor of chemicals and tainted meat.

"Funny place," said Maget. "Say, I got a hell of a headache, Bill."

"So've I," grunted Durkin. "Maybe that water ain't as good as it seemed at first."

They lay in a small hollow, watching the activity of the camp. The peons were in their pen, and it was evident that they were being watched by the owners of the camp.

As purple twilight fell across the strange land, the two tramps began to notice the dull sounds which came to their ears from time to time.

"That's funny thunder," said Maget nervously. "If I didn't know it was thunder, I'd swear some big frogs were around here."

"Oh, hell. Maybe it's an earthquake," said Durkin irritatedly. "For God's sake, quit your bellyachin'. You've done nothin' but whine ever since we left Juan."

"Well, who could blame me—" began Maget. He broke off suddenly, the pique in his voice turned to a quiver of fear, as he grasped Durkin's arm. "Oh, look," he gasped.

Durkin, seeing his partner's eyes staring at a point directly behind him, leaped up and scrambled away, thinking that a snake must be about to strike him.

He turned round when he felt he was far enough away, and saw that the ground was moving near the spot where he had been lying.

The earth was heaving, as though ploughed by a giant share; a blunt, purplish head, which seemed too fearful to be really alive, showed through the broken ground, and a worm began to draw its purple length from the depths. It was no snake, but a gigantic angleworm, and as it came forth, foot after foot, the two watched with glazed eyes.

Maget swallowed. "I've seen 'em two feet long," he said. "But never like that."

Durkin, however, when he realized that the loathsome creature could not see them and was creeping blindly towards them with its ugly, fat body creasing and elongating, picked up rocks and began to destroy the monstrous worm. He cursed as he worked.

Dull red blood spattered them, and a fetid odor from the gashes caused them to retch, but they finally cut the thing in two, and then they moved away from there.

The dull rumblings beneath them frightened Maget, and Durkin too, though the latter tried to brazen it out.

"Come on, it's gettin' dark. We can take a look in their mine now."

Maget, whimpering, followed. The booming sounds were increasing.

But Durkin slipped down the hillside, and Maget followed into the valley. They crept past the stone shack, which they noticed was padlocked heavily.

Durkin stopped suddenly, and cursed. "I've cut my foot," he said. "These damn shoes are gone, all right, from that march. But come on, never mind."

They crept to the mouth of the cavern and peered in. "Ugh," said Maget.

He drew back with a shudder. The floor of the mine was covered with a grey slush, in which were seething white masses of slugs weaving in the slime. A powerful, rotten odor breathed in their faces, as though they stood in the mouth of a great giant.

"Ah!" yelled Durkin, throwing his arms across his face.

The greenish, ghostly light which emanated from the slime was weaker than moonlight, just enough to see by; a vast shadow hovered above their heads, as though a gigantic bat flew there. The sweep and beat of great wings drove them back, and they fled in

terror from such awful corruption.

But the flying monster, with a wing spread of eight feet, dashed past them, and silhouetted against the rising moon like a goblin. Then came another, and finally a flock of the big birds.

Durkin and Maget ran away, passing the stone house which stood near the cavern's mouth. The booming sounds from the bowels of the earth filled their ears now, and it was not thunder; no, it issued from the depths of the mine.

"We—we got to get somethin' to eat," said Durkin, as they paused near one of the shacks, in which shone a light.

Sounds of voices came from the interior. They crept closer, and listened outside the window. Inside, they could see Espinosa, Gurlone senior, and the big youth with the golden beard, Gurlone junior.

"Yes, father," the young man was saying. "I believe we had better leave, at once. It's getting dangerous. I've reached the five million mark now, with the new process, and it is ready to work with or sell, just as we wish."

"Hear that?" whispered Durkin triumphantly. "Five million!"

"It's all ready, in the stone house," said young Gurlone.

"Why should we leave now?" said old Gurlone, his livid face working. "Now, when we are just at the point of success in our great experiments? So far, while we have struck many creatures of abnormal growth, still, we have overcome them."

"Well, father, there is something in the mine now which makes it too dangerous to work. That is, until they are put out of the way. You can hear them now."

The three inside the shack listened, and so did Durkin and Maget. The booming sounds swelled louder and the earth of the valley shook.

"I t'ink we better go," said Espinosa gruffly. "I agree with your son, Professor."

"No, no. We can conquer this, what ever it is."

"You see, father, while you were away, we broke through into a natural cavern, an underground river. It was then that the trouble started. You know the effect of the stuff on the insects and birds. It

enlarged a cricket one hundred times. You saw that yourself. Six of the peons have disappeared—they didn't run away, either. They went down the shaft and never came back."

"Oh, they probably fell into the water and drowned," said old Gurlone impatiently. "Even if they did not, we can kill anything with these large bore rifles."

"We'd better pull out and let it alone for a while," said young Gurlone gravely. "The peons have been trying to bolt for several days. They'd be gone now if I hadn't penned them in and electrified the fence."

Maget put his hand on his friend's shoulder. "I'm starving," he whispered.

Durkin nodded, and they turned away, toward what they had marked as a supply shack. They heard a low murmur from the peons' pen, as they began to break off the hasps of the lock which held the door of the storehouse.

They got inside with little trouble, and began to feel about in the dark for food. They located biscuits and canned goods which they split open, and these they wolfed hungrily, listening carefully for

sounds from outside.

"Here they come," said Maget, gripping Durkin's arm.

They looked out the window of the supply shack, and saw old Gurlone issue from the building outside which the two tramps had been listening. In one hand, the old Professor, brave as a lion, carried an old fashioned double-barreled elephant gun, and the rays from a powerful electric torch shone across the barrel.

At least, they thought the bizarre figure was old Gurlone, from the size. For the man was clad in a black, shiny suit, and over his head was a flapping hood of the same material in which were large eyeholes of green glass. Behind this strange form came a larger one, armed also with a big bore rifle and with another powerful flashlight.

The blind Portuguese was armed, too, but he was not clad in the black suit. He took his stand beside the mouth of the cavern, and waited while the two Gurlones entered the mine.

"My foot hurts," said Durkin suddenly, breaking the silence.

"I'm going out and see what happens," said Maget.

Durkin limped after Maget, who now took the lead. They crept close

as possible to the mine opening, and saw the big Portuguese standing there in silence, listening carefully. Any sounds the two might have made were drowned in the great bellowing from within the cavern.

These noises, so like the croak of bullfrogs but magnified a thousand times, were terrifying to the heart.

The sweep of wings sounded on the night air, and Espinosa drew back and squatted close to the ground, as immense green creatures, flying on dusty wings, issued from the mine.

"God, those are moths," breathed Maget.

Yes, unmistakably, they were moths, as large as condors. The green ones, but for their size, were lunar moths, familiar enough to the two tramps. More bats came, disturbed by the entrance of the two Gurlones.

Durkin broke, then. "I'm—I'm—I guess you're right, Maget," he whispered, in a terrified voice. "We should have never come. If my foot wasn't hurt, I'd start for the river now. Curse it, what a place!"

The booming, vast croaks filled the whole valley, reverberating through the hills. Wails sounded from the peon camp.

The big Portuguese was shouting to the Gurlones. "Come out, come out!"

Maget gripped his own rifle, and stood up, bravely. His fear, though it was great, seemed to have brought out the better side of the man, while Durkin, so brave at first, had cracked under the strain.

"Look out, they'll see you," whimpered Durkin.

Maget strode forward. A blast of fetid, stinking air struck his face, and he choked. The noises were now ear-splitting, but above the bellows came the sounds of the big rifles, the echoes booming through the recesses of the cavern.

Then the two Gurlones, running madly, burst from the mine entrance.

"Run," they screamed. "Run for your life, Espinosa!"

"I'll help you," cried Maget, and Durkin could detain him no longer.

The Gurlones hardly noticed the newcomer, as they ran madly towards the shelter of their houses. Espinosa joined them, going swiftly in spite of his blind eyes.

The croaking made Maget's brain scream with the immensity of the sound. Luminous, white disks, three feet in diameter, glared at him, and the creature, which progressed with jerky leaps toward him, almost filled the mouth of the mine.

It was hot in pursuit of the fleeing Gurlones. It squatted and then jumped, and presently it was out in the night air.

Its form was that of a gigantic frog, but it stood some twenty feet in height, and from its throat sounded the terrific bellowing which rivalled the thunder.

Maget bravely stepped forward, and began to fire into the huge, soft body. The great mouth opened, and as the dum-dum bullets tore gashes in the blackish green batrachian, the thunderous croaks took on a note of pain.

The odor of the creature was horrible. Maget could scarcely draw his breath as he fired the contents of the magazine into the big animal. Two more jumps brought the frog almost to Maget's feet, and the tropical tramp felt a whiskerlike tentacle touch his face, and bad smelling slime covered him.

The frog was blind, without doubt, from its underground life, but the

tentacles seemed to be the way it finally located its prey, for it turned on Maget and made a final snap at him. The great jaws closed like the flap of hell, and Maget leaped back with a cry of triumphant terror.

The bullets had finally stopped the big frog, but at its heels came a strange, jellylike creature, not quite as bulky as the frog, but pushing along on its legs and with a tail some eight feet thick and fifteen feet in length. This, too, evidently a polywog, was blind, with whitened discs for eyes, but it slid along at a rapid rate because of its size. Maget's gun was empty; he turned so flee, but the polywog stopped and sniffed at the thick blood of its fellow. Then, to Maget's relief, it began to hungrily devour its companion.

Utterly filthy, and ferocious, the polywog in silence snapped great chunks from the dead giant frog.

"Hello. Who are you?"

Maget turned, having forgotten the amenities of life in the excitement. Professor Gurlone and his son, still clad in their black suits, but with their helmets off, were standing beside him, clutching their guns and lights.

The big Portuguese, Espinosa, appeared, and Durkin was beside him.

"Why," said Maget, between gasps, "we just happened to be out exploring, and we saw your camp. We were on our way in when we heard the noises and came to investigate."

"I see," said old Gurlone. "What made you head in this direction, and where's your outfit?"

"Oh, we cached most of it back there," said Maget. "My partner's hurt his foot, so he can't walk well. Isn't that so, Durkin?"

"Yeh," growled Durkin. "I got a sore foot, all right."

Old Gurlone was suspicious of the vague story which Maget and Durkin concocted as the explanation of their presence in the valley. But evidently the Professor was too worried about the situation in which he and his friends were, to question the two tramps very closely. In fact, he seemed rather glad that he had two more pairs of hands to aid him and he thanked Maget for his bravery.

They dispatched the great polywog as it tore its parent to bits, and then the five men, the two Gurlones, Espinoza, Maget, and the limping, cursing Durkin, retired to one of the shacks.

The living quarters of the Gurlones was quite elaborate. There were many books on rough shelves, and there was a small bench filled with glass phials and chemicals, though the main laboratory was in one of the long buildings.

Professor Gurlone poured drinks for the five, and welcomed Durkin and Maget as allies.

"We'll need every man we can get, if we are to cope with these great creatures," said old Gurlone. "The peons are too frightened to be of use. Luckily, it was a frog we came upon on the banks of the subterranean river. There is no telling how many more creatures of the same or greater size may be down there. We will have to destroy them, every one."

Maget and Durkin shuddered. "Say," blurted Durkin, his face working nervously, "how the hell did that frog get so big? I thought I was seein' things, Professor."

"No, no," said Professor Gurlone. "You see, the ore in the mine contains radium, that is, salts of radium. It is a pitchblende deposit, and it happens to be so rich in radium content that throughout the ages it has affected all the life in the cavern. The arid land surrounding the ore—this has been, generally, one of the

characteristics of radium deposits—has kept most of the jungle creatures away, but underground beings such as reptiles, worms and frogs, have gradually become immune to the effects of the ore and have grown prodigiously and abnormally under the stimulation of the rays given off by the radium.

"Now, this is nothing strange in itself, but never before has such a rich deposit been discovered, so that the amounts of radium available have been too small to really check its effect on growth in animals. That is our chief scientific object in coming here: we realized, from Senor Espinosa's description of the played-out silver mine he had, and from his loss of sight, that he had stumbled upon a valuable deposit of radium. It usually occurs with silver, that is, the uranium mother ore does, through the disintegration of which radium is formed. The content of radium per ton in this ore proved unbelievably rich: we were delighted. I have always suspected that the animal cell might be stimulated into abnormal growth by exposure to radium salts, for such a thing already has been hinted at in the scientific world. Not till our chance came here, however, has enough radium been available for the experiments."

Maget and Durkin listened with open mouths. Radium meant but vague things to them. They had heard of radium paint which shone in the dark on the dials of watches and clothes, but of the properties

of the metal and its salts they were utterly ignorant.

"That radium stuff is what makes the funny light in that mine, then?" asked Maget.

"Exactly. The radio-activity of the elements in the ore give off the light. There are three rays, the alpha, beta and gamma, and—"

The professor forgot himself in a lecture on the properties of radium.

Durkin, breaking in, asked, slyly. "Is this radium worth as much as silver?"

Young Kenneth Gurlone laughed, and even old Professor Gurlone smiled. "Radium is worth more than gold or diamonds or platinum. Its value is fabulous. We have five million dollars worth already, in the form of the chloride."

"Whew," whistled Durkin.

He glanced sidewise at Maget.

"Yes," said Professor Gurlone, "five million dollars worth of it! Those great monsters who have been developed throughout the ages by the action of the radium rays on their bodies, causing them to

grow so prodigiously, are but incidents. We must destroy them, so that our work cannot be interfered with. We must use dynamite, blow them to bits. They are powerful enough to crush the stone bank by the mine mouth and ruin the labors of the past two years, gentlemen."

Armed, and once more fortified with whiskey, the five made their way outside. The moon was darkened by an immense shadow, as one of the giant bats winged its way over their heads. But there were no more monster frogs. The ugly, bulky shapes of the dead polywog and its parent lay before them.

"We are safe for the moment," said Professor Gurlone. "Go and quiet the peons, Espinosa: they will listen to you."

The peons still wailed in terror; the blind Espinosa slipped silently away.

"Come," said Professor Gurlone, to his son and to Maget and Durkin. "I will show you the laboratory, so that you can understand better the effects of radium on growth."

The professor led them to the long, low, many-windowed building nearby, and flooded it with light. It contained cage after cage in

which were monkeys, pumas, and various jungle folk. These creatures set up a chattering and howling at the light and intruders.

Maget glanced curiously about him. He saw shining vials and glassware of queer shapes on long black tables, and tubes of chemicals. There were immense screens of dull lead. "Those are for protection," said Professor Gurlone, "as are the lead-cloth suits we wear. Otherwise we would be burned by radium rays."

Maget looked about, to see if his partner was listening, but he had gone away.

However, Maget was intensely interested. He went from cage to cage as Professor Gurlone, rather in the manner of a man giving a lecture to students, pointed out animal after animal that had been treated by the radium.

"This," said the professor, "is a monkey which usually attains a height of two feet. You can see for yourself that it is now larger than a gorilla."

The horrible, malformed creature bared its teeth and shook its bars in rage, but it was weak, evidently, from the treatment accorded it. Its hair was burned off in spots, and its eyes were almost white.

There was a jaguar, and this beast seemed to have burst its skin in its effort to grow as large as three of its kind.

"You see, we have not so much time as nature," said Professor Gurlone. "These beasts cannot be enlarged too rapidly, or they would die. They must be protected from the direct rays of the radium, which is refined. In the ore, the action is more gradual and gentle, since it is less concentrated. But the metal itself would burn the vital organs out of these creatures, cause them to be struck blind, shrivel them up inside and kill them in a few minutes in the quantity we have. We expose them bit by bit, allowing more and more time as they begin to grow immune to the rays. Here, you see, are smaller creatures which have grown some eight or ten times beyond normal size."

All the animals seemed the worse for wear. Maget, his brain reeling, yet was beginning to grasp what radium did to one. It was not gold that you could pick up and carry away.

"If a man touched that radium," he asked, "what would happen to him?"

"Just what I said would happen to the animals if we did not give it to them gradually," said Gurlone, with a wave of his hand. "It would

kill him, strike him down as though by invisible poison gas. His heart and lungs would cease to function, pernicious anemia would set in, as the red corpuscles in his blood perished by millions. He would be struck blind, fall down and die in agony."

To Maget came the picture of the unfortunate Juan. As though answering his unasked question, Professor Gurlone went on. "We had a peon coming up with us," he said. "His name was Juan. He stole my sample-case, which contained an ounce of radium chloride, and ran off with it. If he opens it, it will kill him in just that way."

Maget shivered. "But—but didn't it hurt you to carry it?" he asked.

"No. For it was incased in a lead container some two inches in thickness, and the rays cannot penetrate such a depth of lead. They are trapped in the metal."

"Father, father, you're wasting time," broke in Kenneth Gurlone, shaking his yellow head. "We must act at once. The peons are almost mad with fear. Even Espinosa cannot quiet them. And every moment is precious, for the monsters may break forth."

But Maget was looking nervously about for Durkin. Where was he? Durkin had his mind on the treasure, and—

As they turned toward the door, the professor saying. "The rays from the ore, which is not so concentrated as the purified metal, do not kill —" Durkin suddenly appeared.

He carried his rifle at his hip, and he limped and cursed angrily. "Come across," shouted Durkin. "Give me the key to that stone house. Snap into it, and no argument."

"The key—to the stone bank?" repeated old Gurlone.

"Yes. I'll give you five counts to throw it over—then I'll shoot you and take it," snarled Durkin savagely. "I want that treasure, whatever it is, and I'll have it. One ... two ... three...." The tramp sent a shot over their heads as a warning.

"Hey, Bill, easy, easy," pleaded Maget. "That stuff is radium. It'll ruin you, boy!"

"Shut up, you yeller-bellied bum," snarled Durkin. "Four...."

A tinkle of metal came on the stone floor of the laboratory, as old Gurlone tossed his keys to Durkin.

"Don't go in that shack," cried young Gurlone. "It'll be your death, man—"

"Liars," yelled Durkin, and backed out the door.

"H'm," said old Gurlone, turning to Maget. "So you came to rob us, eh?"

But Maget thought of Juan, and then he knew he did not want Durkin, in spite of his failings, to perish so. He ran for the door, and across the clearing.

"Durkin—Bill—wait, it's Frank—"

Great bellowings sounded from the bowels of the earth, but Maget ignored these in his effort to save his partner. Durkin had the padlock off the stone shack, and pulled back the door.

As the door disclosed the interior, Maget could see that a greenish haze filled the entire building. Wan liquid light streamed forth like heavy fluid.

Bravely, to save his pal from death, Maget ran forward. But Durkin had entered the stone shack.

Maget went to the very door of the building. Durkin was inside, and Maget could see his partner's thick form as a black object in the strange, thick air.

An eery scream came suddenly from Durkin's lips; Maget wrung his hands and called for help.

"Come out, Bill, come out," he cried.

Durkin evidently tried to obey, for he turned toward the door. But his knees seemed to give way beneath him, he threw his arm across his eyes as he sank to the ground, crying in agony, incoherent sounds issuing from his lips.

Shriek after shriek the unfortunate man uttered. As Maget made a dash forward to take a chance with death and rescue his friend, Professor Gurlone and his son Kenneth ran up and threw a black cloak over the tramp.

The three entered the shack of death. Maget, not entirely covered, felt his heart give a terrific jump, and he gasped for breath. Durkin was quivering on the floor which was lined with lead.

Round vials stood about the room like a battery of search-lights, and from these emanated the deadly green haze.

But almost before Maget touched his pal, Durkin was dead. Curled up as though sewed together by heavy cords. Durkin lay in a ball, a

shaking mass of burned flesh.

The two Gurlones pushed out ahead of them, and raised their hands. They had on their black suits and their helmets.

"It is too late to do anything for him now," said Kenneth Gurlone sadly. "He was headstrong. You can see for yourself that the five million dollars takes care of itself. Certain death goes with it if you are unprotected. These lead-cloth suits will keep off the rays for a short time. We always wear them when we are working with the metal, even when we have a lead screen."

"Poor Bill," sobbed Maget. "It's terrible!"

Professor Gurlone shrugged. "It was his own fault. He was a thief and he would not let us stop him. I hope it's been a lesson to you, Maget."

"Yes, I want to help you," said Maget. "If you'll keep me with you, I'll work for you and be straight. Give me a chance."

"Good. Then shake hands on it," said Kenneth, and they clasped hands firmly.

Espinosa appeared from the darkness. "The peons are mad with

terror," he said morosely. "They cannot be held much longer. They will revolt."

"Well, we must kill the creatures in the cavern: that will quiet them more than anything else," said Professor Gurlone.

"Better close the stone shack," said Kenneth.

But as he spoke, a vast shape, another giant frog, appeared in the entrance of the shaft.

"Get some dynamite and fuses," ordered Professor Gurlone quietly. "Come on Kenneth, and you, Maget, if you care to risk your life. You need not do so unless you wish to."

Bravely, the older man led the way towards the croaking monster. The ground shook at its approach. It was heading for the bodies of the dead frog and polywog, bent on a search for food. Evidently these vast creatures were forced to prey upon one another for sustenance.

The rifles spoke, and Maget and the professor, in their black suits, protected by the lead-cloth and helmets from the rays, advanced. They poured bullet after bullet into the frog.

Kenneth came running to join them, and Espinosa stood by. Kenneth had dynamite bombs with fuses ready for lighting and throwing. He also brought more ammunition, and the three armed themselves to the teeth.

It was well after midnight when they started into the mine. They knew they must act quickly or retreat, for the bellowing sounded nearer and nearer the surface of the earth.

Each man carried big, powerful flashlights, and the three entered the mine shaft and walked across the seething slugs into the bowels of the earth.

"Stay close together," ordered old Gurlone.

The mine was easy to descend for the first hundred yards. It led in a gentle slope downward. The way, save for a few giant bats and moths, and the big maggots, was clear. The greenish haze, not so bright as that in the death shack, enveloped them, but they needed their flashes to see clearly.

"Slowly, take it easy," counseled old Gurlone.

The mine spread out now, and began a steeper descent. The air was

poor, and it was hard to breathe through the mask. Maget, his heart thumping mightily, listened to the roaring within the depths of the mine.

Now the ground seemed to drop away before them. Maget could hear the running of water, the underground river, and every now and then there came an immense splash, as if some great whale had thrown itself about in the water.

A terrifically loud hissing filled their ears, and suddenly, before them, showed an utterly white snake with a head as big as a barrel. Its white eyes glared sightlessly, but its tongue stuck forth for several feet.

Kenneth Gurlone coolly tossed a lighted bomb at the creature: the explosion shattered their ear-drums, but it also smashed the serpent.

The writhing, wriggling coils, bigger than the body of a horse, slashed about, dangerously near. They picked themselves up, and pushed on, keeping close to the right wall.

A great bat smashed against Maget, and knocked the light out of his hand, but the blow was a glancing one, and he was able to retrieve his light and hurry on.

They were far from the entrance now. The hole which had been broken through by the peons showed before them, and they could see milky water dashing over black rocks.

Pallid eyes looked at them, and they knew they gazed upon another of the giant frogs. They tossed a bomb at the creature, and blew a jagged hole in his back. No sooner had he begun to die than there came a sudden rush of other monsters and a feast began.

"Throw, all together," yelled Kenneth Gurlone.

Into the vast mass of creatures, who crowded one another in the river for their share of the spoils, they threw bomb after bomb. The dynamite deafened them, and acrid fumes choked them, but they fired their rifles at the prodigious animals and there, in the big river cavern, was a seething mass of horrible life, dying in agony.

The bellowings and hissings sounded louder, so loud that the earth shook as if actuated by a mighty earthquake.

Maget gripped Kenneth Gurlone's arm. "My bombs are gone," he shouted.

He had but a few rounds of ammunition left, and still more of the

giant reptiles appeared. A centipede with its creeping, horrible legs topped the mass of squirming matter; they could see the terrific sting of the creature, so deadly when but a fraction of an inch long, and which was now at least a foot, armed with poison.

There came the rush of more bats and moths, a rush that threw the three men off their feet.

"We must have opened the hole more with our bombs," shrieked old Gurlone. "The dead bodies attract the other creatures, more and more of them are coming. It is impossible; we cannot deal with them all."

The vast gobbling of the great animals in the river below them was so prodigious they could not grasp it. It seemed it must be optical illusion. In a few moments, the dead had been eaten, swallowed whole, and fights were progressing between the victors.

They tossed the rest of their bombs, fired the remaining ammunition, and as they prepared to retreat, several of the big creatures slopped over and started up the river bank into the mine shaft.

They ran for their lives, the three. Madly, with the earth shaking behind them as they were pursued by a hopping monster of a beetle with immense mandibles reaching out at them, they dashed for the

open air.

Giant moths and bats struck at them, and Maget fell down several times before he reached the outside, and he was bruised and out of breath.

"Come on, there are too many to fight," gasped old Gurlone, throwing off the lead suit.

But there was no need to talk. The creatures, disturbed by the bombs, had collected in one spot and, shown the way out by one of their number, were coming.

Espinosa, with Kenneth Gurlone holding his hand, ran swiftly for the hills surrounding the valley. Maget helped old Professor Gurlone, who was so out of breath that he could scarcely move.

The great beetle which had been pursuing them was the first to break forth into the valley. Turning back for a look over his shoulder, Maget saw the thing pause, but the cavern belched forth a vast array of monsters, the beasts roaring, hissing, bellowing, in an increasing mass of sound.

They swarmed over the ground, and giant bats and moths winged

their way about the heads of the monsters.

At the rim of the valley, the four men paused.

"God help the peons," said Kenneth Gurlone.

Now the horde of monsters swelled more and more; the bats and moths winged in mad frenzy about the open door of the radium shack. There were great beetles, centipedes, ants, crickets, hopping, crawling things, and grotesquely immense in size. Fights progressed here and there, but the majority of them were carried along in the sweep of the multitude.

"See, the radium kills those who get too close," said Professor Gurlone, in a hushed voice.

The giant moths and bats were unable to withstand the lure of the green light. They flew with mad beatings of wings straight for the open door of the death house, and many of the great creatures, attracted by the light and urged on by an unexplainable force which sent them to death like gnats and moths in a flame, crowded near to the death-dealing radium.

Not until the whole shack was covered with quivering forms of the

dead, did the other creatures veer off and with hops, creepings and myriad giant legs, begin to cover the whole valley.

The stone walls of the death shack had crumpled in with the weight; the other buildings, more lightly built, gave at once, with crackings and crashings.

The four men were powerless to assist the unfortunate peons, who were trapped in their barracks. The charged wires stopped many of the big beasts, but soon the electric light was short-circuited, and the valley, in the moonlight, was a seething mass of fighting, dying, feasting monsters.

Other sounds, besides those made by the big creatures, came to the ears of the stricken men on the hillside. The breaking of glass, the cries of the jungle animals trapped in their cages, the shrieks of dying peons who were eaten at a gulp by the big frogs or stung to death, impaled on the mandibles of some great stinging centipede.

In the spot where the radium death shack had been, was a pulpy mass of livid, smoky light.

Now the bowl of the valley was filled as by some vast jelly. The creatures were slopping over the walls, and battling together.

The shambles was not yet over, but the four could remain no longer. They made their way down the hillside and struck out across the arid lands.

Maget, the tramp, became the leader. He was a trained jungle man, and it was he who finally brought them safely to the Madeira.

He was their strong man, the one who found the trail and located roots and fruit for the party to subsist on. They nearly perished in the trip for lack of water, but again, Maget was able to supply them with roots which kept them from dying in agony.

They lay upon the river bank now, exhausted but alive. Maget had assisted old Gurlone, acted as his staff, half carried him the last miles of the trip.

Their clothes were almost gone, they were burned to crisps by the tropic sun. Flies and other insects had taken their toll. But Maget had brought them through.

The tall, thin fellow's hair had turned utterly white. But so had his soul.

"You're a good man, Maget," said Professor Gurlone. "You have

saved us, and you have been brave as a lion."

Maget shook his head. "Professor," he said. "I came into the jungle to rob you. Durkin and I bribed Juan to steal that radium, and I feel responsible for his death. We thought you had diamonds or gold in the Matto Grosso, and we were after it. That's why I am here."

"You have repaid your debt to us, more than fully," said Kenneth, holding out his hand.

"Yes," said Espinosa.

"Will you keep me with you, then?" asked Maget anxiously. "Are—will you go back there?"

Professor Gurlone stared at him, and then said, in a surprised tone, "Why, of course!"

"But the monsters?" asked Maget.

"Many of them will die in the outer air," said Gurlone. "The survivors of the battles will start eating the dead. They will finally clear away the debris of dead creatures about the radium shack. As each is exposed to the rays of the concentrated metal, it will die. The others will eat it, and be killed in turn. Thus, they will be destroyed.

If there are any survivors after this evident turn of events, then we will cope with them when we return, reinforced. Dynamite, enough of it, will finish them off. And, Maget, in your next pursuit after knowledge of strange things, you may get a few earthly riches. The radium is still there, and you will share in it."

"Thank you," said Maget humbly. "I'm with you to the end."

"You must keep quiet about this," cautioned Kenneth Gurlone. "We do not want the world to know too much of our vast store of radium. It would attract adventurers and we would be annoyed by ignorant men. But we're thankful you lay drunk in that saloon when my father spoke of the millions, Maget."

In Manzos, Maget found himself a changed man. To his surprise, in spite of his white hair, brought on by the horror of what he had seen, he found that he had gained two inches in height, and that he was larger of girth. This, Professor Gurlone told him, was the effect of the radium rays.

Never again did Maget lie drunk on the floor of a saloon. The events through which he had gone had seared the tramp's soul, and he kept close to his new master, Professor Gurlone.

#32 The Moon Master, By Charles Willard Diffin:

Through infinite deeps of space Jerry Foster hurtles to the moon—only to be trapped by a barbaric race and offered as a living sacrifice to Oong, their loathsome, hypnotic god.

Aproximate word count: 22,200

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

“Now that's a mighty queer noise." Jerry Foster told himself. He dropped the pack from his shoulders and leaned closer to the canyon rim.

Miles behind him was the last beaten trail: Jerry wanted peace and solitude and quiet. And now the quiet of the silent mountains was disturbed.

From far below came a steady, muffled roar. Faint it was, and distant, but peculiar in its unvarying, unceasing rush.

"Not water," Jerry concluded; "not enough down there. Sounds like —like a wind—like a wind that can't quit.

"Oh well—" He shrugged his shoulders and slipped into the straps of his pack. Then he went back again to the granite ledge. "I wonder if there's a way down," he said.

There was, but it took all of Jerry's strength to see him safely through. On a fan-shaped talus of spreading boulders he stopped. There was a limestone wall beyond. And at its base, from a crevice that was almost a cave, came a furious rush of air and steam.

It touched him lightly a hundred feet away, and he threw himself flat to escape the hot blast. Endlessly it came, with its soft, rushing roar, a ceaseless, scorching blast from the cold rocks.

"That's almighty funny," mused Foster, and sniffed the air. There was no odor.

"And is it hot!" he said. "Nothing like that in my geology book. And what is beyond? Looks like concrete work, as if someone had plastered up the cave." He picked his way quickly across the rock slope.

It was hard going. Below him the rocks and dirt went steep to the canyon floor. At its foot the blast swept diagonally over the slope. He must see what lay beyond....

"Curious," he thought; "curious if that is nature's work—and a lot more so if it isn't."

A rock rolled beneath his feet. Another! He scrambled and fought desperately for foothold in the slipping earth. Then, rolling and clawing, he rode helpless on the slide straight toward the mysterious blast. He felt it envelop him, hot and strangling. His lungs were dry and burning ... the blazing sun faded from the rocks ... the world was dark....

Darkness was still about him when he awoke. But it was cool; the air was sweet on his lips. And it was not entirely dark.

He turned his head. He was in a room. On a rough-hewn table a candle was burning. Its light cast flickering shadows on walls of stone. Rumbling in his ears was the sound of the blast that had overwhelmed him. It echoed, seemingly, from far back in the stone cliff.

Jerry made a move to sit up. He found that his hands and feet were

tied, his body bound to the rough board bed.

At the sound of his stirring, a figure came out from the farther shadow. It was that of a man. Jerry looked at him in silence. He was tall, his thin erectness making him seem abnormal in the low room. The lean face was unshaven, and from under a thatch of black hair a pair of deep-set eyes stared penetratingly at the figure on the rude bed.

"Well," asked Jerry, at length, "what's the big idea?"

There was no reply. Only the intent, staring eyes.

"You got me out of that man-trap of yours," Jerry continued. "You saved my life."

The tall man finally spoke. "Yes, I saved your life. You missed the hottest part of the exhaust. I pumped you full of oxygen."

"Then why tie me up like this?" Jerry Foster was frankly puzzled.

"You are lucky to be alive. Spies are not always allowed—" He interrupted himself abruptly. "You are a reporter," he stated.

"Wrong," said Jerry Foster.

"Who sent you?"

"Nobody sent me. I heard the noise of your infernal blast-furnace and came down to have a look."

"Who sent you?" repeated the man. "Goodwin? The Stillwater crowd? Who was it?"

"I don't know what you are talking about," protested Jerry. "I don't know who your Goodwin or Stillwater people are. I don't know who you are—I don't give a damn. Take these ropes off and cut out the melodrama. I'll go on my way, and I don't care if I never see you again."

"That's a lie." The tall figure leaned over to shake a bony fist. "You'd report to Goodwin. He stole my last invention. He'll not get this."

Jerry considered the wild figure carefully. "He's a nut," he thought. When he spoke, his voice was controlled.

"Now, see here," he said: "I don't know anything about this. I'm Jerry Foster, live in San Francisco—"

"So does Goodwin."

"Confound you and your Goodwin! So do a million other people live there! I'm getting away from there; I'm heading into the hills for a short vacation. All I want is to get away from the world. I'm looking for a little peace and quiet."

The thin man interrupted with a harsh laugh.

"Come here spying," he said, "and tell me you want to get away from the world." Again he laughed shrilly.

"And I am going to be your little fairy godmother. I wish you were Goodwin himself! I wish I had him here. But you'll get your wish—you'll get your wish. You'll leave the world, you shall, indeed."

He rocked back and forth with appreciation of his humor.

"Didn't know I was all ready to leave, did you? All packed and ready to go. Supplies all stowed away; enough energy stored to carry me millions of miles. Or maybe you did know—maybe there are others coming...." He hurried across the room to open a heavy door of split logs in the rock wall.

"I'll fool them all this time," he said; "and you'll never go back to tell them." The door closed behind him.

"Crazy as a bed-bug," Jerry told himself. He strained frantically at the ropes that bound him. "Looks bad for me: the old bird said I'd never go back. Well, what if I die now ... or six months from now? Though I know that doctor was wrong."

He tried to accept his fate philosophically, but the will to live was strong. And one of his wrists felt looser in its bonds.

Across the room his pack lay on the floor, and in it was a heavy forty-five. If he could get the pistol.... A knot pulled loose under his twisting fingers. One hand was free. He worked feverishly at the other wrist.

The ropes were suddenly loose. He pulled himself to his feet, took a moment to regain control of cramped muscles, then flung himself at the pack. When the heavy door opened he was behind it, his pistol in his hand.

There was no struggle: the lanky figure showed no maniacal fury. Instead, the man did a surprising thing. He sank weakly upon the rough bunk where Jerry had lain, his face buried in his thin hands.

"I should have let you die," he said slowly, hopelessly. "I should have let you die. But I couldn't do that.... And now you'll steal my

invention for Goodwin."

Jerry was as exasperated as he was amazed.

"I told you," he almost shouted. "I never knew anyone named Goodwin! I don't care a hoot about your invention. And as for letting me die—why didn't you? That's a puzzle: you were about to kill me, anyway."

"No," said the other patiently. "I wasn't going to kill you."

"You said I'd never go back."

"I was going to take you with me."

"Take me where?"

"To the moon," said the drooping figure.

Jerry Foster stared, open-mouthed. The pistol lagged in his limp hand. "To the moon!" he gasped.

Then: "See here," he said firmly. "I've got you where I want you."—he held the pistol steady—"and now I'm going to learn what's back of this. I think you are crazy, absolutely crazy. But, tell me, who are

you? What do you think you're doing? What was the meaning of that roaring blast?"

The man looked up. "You don't know?" he asked eagerly. "You really don't?"

"No," said Jerry; "but I'm going to find out."

"Yes," the other agreed. "Yes, you can, now that you've got the upper-hand. I guess I was half crazy when I thought I had been spied out. But I'll tell you."

He sat erect. "I am Thomas J. Winslow," he said, and made the statement as if it were an explanation in itself.

"Well," said Jerry, "that's no burst of illumination to my ignorance. Come again."

The man called Winslow was ready—anxious—to talk.

"I am an inventor. I have made millions of dollars"—Jerry looked at the disheveled apparel of the speaker and smiled—"for other people. The Stillwater syndicate stole my valveless motor. Then I developed my television set. Goodwin beat me out of that: he will have it on the market inside of a year. I swore they should never profit by this, my

greatest invention."

Jerry was impressed in spite of himself by the man's earnest simplicity.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I've broken the atom," said Winslow. "First tore the atoms of hydrogen and oxygen apart—dissociated them in the molecule of water—and have resolved them into their energy components. That's what you heard—the reaction. It it self-sustaining, exothermic. That hot blast carried off the heat of my retort."

Winslow rose from the bunk. Gone was his listless despondency.

"Put up that gun," he said: "you don't need it now. I think we understand each other better than we did." He crossed with quick strides to the door leading into the cliff.

"Come with me," he told Foster. "I am leaving to-day. You will not stop me. But before I go I will show you something no other man than myself has ever seen."

He led the way through the doorway. There was another room beyond, Jerry saw. It was a cave. Plainly Winslow had taken these

caves in the rocks and had made of them a laboratory.

A lantern gave scant illumination: Jerry made out a small electric generator, and that was all. He felt a keen disappointment. Somehow this thin-faced man had communicated to him something of his own belief, his own earnestness.

"What kind of a laboratory do you call this?" he demanded. But the other was busy.

In the wall an opening had been closed with a small iron door, with cement around it. Winslow opened it and reached through. He was evidently adjusting something.

The little dynamo began to hum. There was a crackling hiss from beyond the iron doorway. The opening was flooded with a clear blue light.

Then the roar began. It was tremendous, deafening, in the echoing cave.

"You may look now," said Winslow, and stood aside.

Jerry peered through. There was another cave beyond. In it was a small metal cylinder, a retort of some kind. The blue light came from

a crooked bulb beyond. The retort itself was white-hot, despite a stream of water flowing upon it. A cloud of steam drove continuously out and up through a crevice in the rocks.

The water flowed steadily from some subterranean stream in the limestone formation. It was diverted for its cooling purposes, but a portion also flowed continuously into the retort. Jerry's eyes found this, and he could see nothing else. For, before his eyes, the impossible was occurring.

The retort was small, a couple of feet in diameter. It had no discharge pipes, could hold but a few gallons. Yet into it, in a steady stream, flowed the icy water. Gallons, hundreds of gallons, flowing and flowing, endlessly, into a reservoir which could never hold it.

The inventor watched Foster with complacent satisfaction.

"Where does it go?" Jerry asked incredulously.

"Into nothingness," was the reply. "Or nearly that!"

"See?" He held up a flask of pale green liquid. "And this," he added, exhibiting another that was colorless.

"I have worked here for many months. I have converted thousands of

thousands of gallons of water. It has flowed into that retort, never to return. I have gathered this, the product, a few drops at a time.

"The protons and the electrons," he explained, "are re-formed. They are static now, unmoving. Call this what you will—energy or matter—they are one and the same."

"Still," said Jerry, gropingly, "what has all that to do with the moon? You said you were going there."

“Yes," agreed the inventor. I am going, and this is the driving force to carry me there. I pass a certain electric current through these two liquids. I carry the wires to two heavy electrodes. Between them resolution of matter occurs. The current carries these two components to again combine them and form what we call matter, the gases hydrogen and oxygen.

"Do I need to tell you of the constant, ceaseless and tremendous explosion that follows?

"But enough of this! You said I was crazy. I gave you a few bad hours. I have shown you this much as a measure of recompense. You have seen what no other man has ever seen. It is enough."

He motioned Foster through the door. The roaring ceased. The inventor returned shortly, the two flasks of liquid in his hands. He transferred both to two metal containers that were ready for the precious load. He carried them with the utmost care as he went out of doors.

Once he returned, and Jerry knew by the crashes from the inner room that the laboratory work was indeed done. There would be nothing left to tell the secret to whomever might come.

He followed Winslow outside, trailing him toward a wooded knoll. There was a clearing among the trees. And in it, hidden from all sides, his eyes found another curious sight.

On the ground rested a dirigible in miniature. Still, it was small, he reasoned, only by comparison with its monster prototype: actually it was a sizable cylinder of aluminum that shone brightly in the sun. It was bluntly rounded at the ends. There were heavy windows, open exhaust ports, a door in the side, pierced through thick walls. Winslow vanished within, while Jerry watched in pitying wonder.

Despite its size, it was a toy, an absurd and pitiful toy. Real genius and lunacy had many an over-lapping line, Jerry reflected as he approached to look inside. But he found Winslow in a room

surrounded by a network of curving, latticed struts. The machine was no makeshift of a demented builder: it was a beautiful bit of construction that Jerry Foster examined.

"How did you ever get it here?" he marveled. "What you had in the cave you could pack in, but this—all these parts—castings—cases of supplies—"

The inventor did not even turn. He was busy with some final adjustments.

"Flew it in," he said shortly. "Built it in an old shop I owned out near Oakland."

"And it flew?" Jerry was still incredulous.

"Certainly it flew! On a drop or less of the liquids you saw." He pointed to a heavy casting at the center of the machine. There were braces tying it strongly to the entire structure, braces designed to receive and transmit a tremendous thrust.

"This is the generator. Blast expelled through the big exhaust at the stern. These smaller exhausts go above and below—right and left at the bow. Perfect control!"

"And you flew it here!" Jerry was still trying to grasp that incontrovertible fact. "And you were going to take me to the moon, you said."

He looked above him where a pale, silvery segment showed dimly in the sky. "But why the moon?" he questioned. "Even granting that this will fly through space...."

"It will," the other interrupted. "I tried it. Went up to better than fifty miles."

Jerry Foster took a minute to grasp that statement, then continued: "Granting that, why go to the moon? There is nothing there, no air to speak of, no water! It's all known."

The inventor turned to face the younger man in the doorway.

"There is *nothing* known," he stated. "The modern telescopes reach out a million light years into space. But the one place they have never seen—can never see—is less than two hundred and fifty thousand miles away. The moon, as of course you know, always keeps the same side toward us. The other side of the moon has never been seen.

"Listen," he said, and his deep-set eyes were afire with an intense emotion. "The moon is no tiny satellite; it is a sister planet. It is whirled on the end of a rope (we call it gravitation), swung around and around the earth. How could there be water or anything fluid on this side? It is all thrown to the other side by the centrifugal force. Who knows what life is there? No one—no one! I am going to find out."

Jerry Foster was silent. He was thinking hard. He looked about him at the clean hills, the trees, the world he knew. And he was weighing the secure life he knew against a great adventure.

He took one long breath of the clear air as one who looks his last at a familiar scene. He exhaled slowly. But he stepped firmly into the machine.

"Winslow," he said, "have you any rope handy?"

The inventor was annoyed. "Why, yes, I guess so. Why? What do you want of it?"

"I want you to tie me up again," said Jerry Foster. "I want you to carry me off as you planned. I want to go with you."

The tall man stared at the quiet, determined face before him. Slowly his own strained features smoothed into kindly lines. He grasped tight at Jerry's hand.

"I was dreading that part of it," he confessed slowly: "going alone. It would have been lonely—out there...."

The shining cylinder of aluminum alloy was hurtling through space. No longer was it a ship of the air; it had thrown itself far beyond that thin gaseous envelope surrounding the earth; out into the black and empty depths that lay beyond. And in it were two men, each reacting in his own way to an adventure incredible. One was deep in the computation of astronomical data; the other athrill with a quivering, nerve-shaking joy that was almost breath-taking.

A metal grating that had formed the rear wall of their cabin was now the floor. Winslow had thrown the ship into a vertical climb that made of their machine a projectile shooting straight out from the earth. Gravitation held them now to the grating floor. And, stronger even than the earth-pull, was the constant acceleration of motion that made their weight doubled again and again.

The inventor moved ponderously, with leaden limbs, to take sights from the windows above, to consult his maps of the sky, check and

re-check his figures. But Jerry had eyes only for the earth they had left.

Flat on the grating he lay, his eyes over a thick glass in a proturbance of the shell that allowed him to stare and stare at what lay directly below. He watched the familiar things of earth vanish in fleecy clouds; through them there formed the great ball, where oceans and continents drew slowly into focus.

And now he was filled with a sense of great solitude. The world, in its old, familiar companionship, was gone—probably forever. The earth—*his* earth—*his* world—that place of vast distances on land and on sea, of lofty mountain ranges and heaving oceans, of cities, countries, continents—was become but a toy. A plaything from the nursery of some baby god, hanging so quiet in space he could almost reach and take it in his hands.

Beyond it the sun was blaring, a hard outlined disc in the black sky. Its rays made shining brilliance of a polar ice-cap.

Jerry Foster closed his eyes and drew back from the glass. Again he was aware of the generator, whose endless roar reverberated in their compartment. A smaller but similar apparatus was operating on one of the liquids from the inventor's laboratory to generate oxygen and

release it inside the room. An escape valve had been set to maintain one atmosphere of pressure about them. Water dripped from a condenser where both gases were formed to burn into water vapor and cool to liquid form.

One of the windows below admitted a shaft of direct sunlight; it illumined their room with a faint glow. It would never cease, Jerry knew. They were in a place of eternal sunshine, yet a realm of an endless night. Above him, as Jerry raised his head, the windows framed nothing but utter blackness, save where some brilliant point marked the presence of a star. He missed the soft diffusion of light that makes daylight on earth. Here was only the one straight beam that entered one window to make a circle of light on the opposite wall.

Jerry looked from a window of heavy glass at the side. This had been the bottom of their ship when they left. And he found in the heavens the object of their quest. Clear-cut and golden was half the circle; the rest glowed faintly in the airless void. He tried to realize the bewildering fact—the moon, this great globe that he saw, was rushing, as were they, to their trysting-place in space.

Jerry stared until his eyes were aching. His mind refused to take hold upon the truth he knew was true. He was suddenly tired, heavy with

weariness that was an aftermath of his emotional turmoil. He let his heavy body relax where some blankets had piled themselves upon the grated floor. The roar of the generator faded into far silence as he slipped into that strange spaceless realm that men call sleep.

The human mind is marvelous in its power of adjustment, its adaptability to the new and the strange. The unbelievable is so soon the commonplace. Jerry Foster was to sleep more than once in this tiny new world of Winslow's creating, this diminutive meteor, inside which they lived and moved and thought and talked. The fact of their new existence soon ceased as a topic of wonder.

They alternated in their rest. And they counted the passage of time by the hours their watches marked, then divided these hours into days out there where there were no days. Seven of them had passed when the hour came that Winslow chose for checking their speed.

They were driving directly toward the moon, which was assuming proportions like those of earth. The pilot admitted a portion of the blast to a bow port, and the globe ahead of them gradually swung off. The pilot was reversing their position in space to bring the powerful blast of their stern exhaust toward the moon, so as to resist somewhat its increasing pull.

Now their stern windows showed the approaching globe. It was slowly expanding. They were falling toward it. The inventor moved a rheostat, and from behind them the stern blast rose to a tremendous roar. The deceleration held them with unbearable weight to the rear of the cabin.

No thought now for the shining earth, yellow and brilliant in the velvet sky above. Jerry Foster watched through the slow hours as the globe beneath them enlarged and expanded in ever-increasing slowness. Slowly their falling motion slackened as they cushioned against the terrific thrust of the exhaust below.

The globe ceased to grow and held constant. Winslow cut the exhaust to a gentler blast. They were definitely within the moon's gravitational field; their last hold upon the earth was severed. The great globe was revolving beneath them.

"How about it?" Foster asked breathlessly. "It doesn't revolve like that—not the moon!"

"We have approached from the earth side," said the other, "but we have overshot it. Say that the moon is revolving, or say that we are swinging about it in an orbit of our own—it is all the same thing."

"And soon," he added slowly, "we shall see...." He faltered and his lips trembled and refused to frame the words of a dream that was coming true. "We shall see ... the lost side of the moon. What will it be ... what—will—it—be...?"

To Foster the whole experience had now the unreality of a dream. He could not bring himself into mental focus. His thoughts were blurred, his emotions dead.

They were approaching the moon, he told himself. It was the moon that was there below them, slowly enlarging now, as their own earth had hung below them, but dwindling, when they left.

"The moon!" he told himself over and over. "The moon—it is real!" But the numbness in his brain would not be shaken off.

His voice, when he spoke, was casual. He might have been speaking of any commonplace—a ball-game, or a good show.

"The sun is coming from my right," he said. "We are going around toward the dark side of the moon. Shall you land there?"

Winslow shook his head. "Wait," he said, "and watch."

Jerry returned to his circle of glass.

There was a shading of light on the surface below him. From the right the sun's brilliance threw black shadows and bright beams transversely over a wilderness of volcanic waste. And beyond, where the rays could not reach, was a greater desolation of darkness, its blackness relieved only by a dim light. He realized with a start of amazement that the dim light he saw was that of their own earth far above: it was lighting their approach to this sister orb.

Their side-motion was swift as they drew nearer. Another hour and more, and they were drawing toward an expanse of utter darkness. The earth-light was fading where they passed. They were approaching, in very fact, the other side of the moon.

What was below? What mysteries awaited them? He shivered, despite the warmth of the generator, cherry-red, that heated the snug cabin; shivered with unformed thoughts of unknown terrors. But he forced his voice to calm steadiness when he repeated his question to Winslow.

"Must we land there?" he asked. "In the dark?"

The inventor was piloting his ship with ceaseless concentration. Their falling speed was checked; they were close enough so that the whistling of air was heard merging with the thunder of their exhaust.

He moved the rheostat under his hand, and the thunder slackened.

"No," he said. "You are forgetting your astronomy. This 'other side' is subject to the same conditions as the near side. The sun shines on them alike, but alternately. We are rounding the limb away from the sun. We find, as you see, a darkness that is absolute except for the light of the stars. Here the earth never shines, and the sun only during the lunar day. But the sun is creeping down this other side. Their day, equal to fifteen of our days, is beginning. We shall come into the light again. I am checking our motion across the surface. We shall land, when it seems best, later on. There will be light."

The thin strong hands of the pilot played over the current and valve controls. Their ship slowly swung and dipped to a horizontal position. A blast from below held them off from the moon. A bow port was roaring as their speed slowly decreased.

Minutes merged endlessly into long hours as Jerry's eager eyes strained to detect some definite form on the surface beneath. Dimly a glow appeared far ahead; slowly the darkness faded. They were moving ahead, but their wild speed was checked. And slowly the new earth below took on outline and form as the sun's glow crept over it.

What would the light disclose? His mind held irrationally to thoughts his reason would have condemned. He found himself watching for people, for houses, lights gleaming from windows. This, in a region of cold that approached the absolute zero. The reality came as a shock.

The first rays that crept into vision were silvery fingers of light. They reflected up to the heights in glittering brilliance. They gathered and merged as the ship drove on toward the sunrise, and they showed to the watching eyes a wondrous, a marvelous world. A world that was snowbound, weighted and blanketed with a mantle of white.

To Jerry the truth came as a crushing, a horrible blow. He turned slowly to look at his companion; to look and be startled anew by the happiness depicted on the lean face.

"I knew it," the pilot was saying. "I always knew it. But now—now...." He was speechless with joy.

"It's terrible!" said Foster. He almost resented the other's elation. "It's a hell! Just a frozen hell of desolation."

"Man—man!" was the response, "can't you see? Look! The

whiteness we see is snow, a snow of carbon dioxide. The cold is beyond guessing. But the clear places—the vast fields—it's ice, man, it's ice!"

"Horrible!" Jerry shuddered.

"Beautiful," said the other. "Marvellous! Think, think what that means. It means water in the hot lunar day. It means vapor and clouds in the sky. It means that where that is there is air—life, perhaps. God alone knows all that it means. And we, too, shall know...."

The ship settled slowly to the surface of the new world. Black blobs of shadow become distinct craters; volcanoes rose slowly to meet them, to drift aside and rise above as they sank to the floor of a valley. They came to rest upon a rocky floor.

On all sides their windows showed a waste of torn and twisted rock. Volcanic mountains towered to the heights, their sides streaked with masses of lava, frozen to stillness these countless years from its molten state. The rising sun, its movement imperceptible, cast long slanting rays between the peaks. It lighted a ghostly world, white with thick hoar-frost of solid carbon dioxide. A silent world, locked in the stillness of cold near the absolute zero. Not a breath of air

stirred; no flurry of snow gave semblance of life to the scene. Their generator was stillen, and the silence, after the endless roaring of endless days, was overpowering.

But Winslow pointed exultantly from one window, where an icy expanse could be seen. "That will be water," he said; "water, when the sun has risen."

He turned on the generator for warmth. The cold was striking through the thick insulated walls. They sat silent, peering out upon that boundless desolation, upon a world's breathless nakedness, exposed for the first time in all eternity to human eyes.

Jerry's mind was searching for some means of expression, but the words would not come. There were neither words nor coherent thoughts to give vent to the emotions that surged within him.

Their watches showed the passage of nearly two earth days before they dared venture forth. They watched the white mantle of frost vanish into gas. From the darkness that they called "west," winds rushed shriekingly into the sunrise.

"Convection currents," Winslow explained; "off under the sun. In the direct rays the heat grows intense; the air rises. This is rushing in to

fill the void. It will serve our ends, too. It will churn the air into a mixture we can breathe, dispel the thick layer of CO_2 that must have formed close to the ground."

More hours, and the icy sheet was melting. A film of water rippled in the gusts of wind. Winslow opened the release valve that would permit the escape of air from their chamber, equalizing the pressures within and without. The air hissed through the valve, and he closed it so the escape was gradual.

"We must exercise," he told Jerry. "We will decompress slowly, like divers coming up from deep-sea work. But watch yourself," he warned. "Remember you are six times as strong as you were on the earth. Don't jump through the roof."

The valve had ceased to hiss when Winslow opened it wide. The air in their cabin was thin; their lungs labored heavily at first. Jerry felt as he had felt more than once at some great elevation on earth. But they lived, and they could breathe, and they were about to do what never man had done—to set foot on this place men called the unknown side of the moon.

Earth habits were strong: Jerry brought his pistol and a hunting knife out of his pack and hung them at his belt, as the inventor opened the

door and sniffed cautiously of the air.

Jerry Foster's blood was racing; the air was cold on his face as he rushed out. But it brought to his nostrils odors strange and yet strangely familiar. He was oddly light-headed, irresponsible as a child as he shouted and danced and threw himself high in the air, to laugh childishly at the pure pleasure of his light landing.

The sun made long shadows of two ludicrous figures that went leaping and racing across the rocks. Their strength was prodigious, and they were filled with an upwelling joy of living and the combined urge of an eternity of spring-times. The very air tingled with life; there was overpowering intoxication in this potent, exhilarating breath from a world new-born.

The ground that they crossed so recklessly was a vast honeycomb of caves. Between the rocks the soil was soft with the waters from melting ice, and the men laughed as they floundered at times in the oozing mud. Beyond was a lake, and it was blue with a depth of color that was almost black, a reflection of the deep, velvet blackness of the sky overhead. And beyond that was the sloping side of an extinct volcano.

"Up—up!" Jerry shouted. "From up there we will see the whole

world—the whole moon!" He laughed as he repeated the exultant phrase: "The moon—the whole moon!"

Despite their strength which carried them in wild bounds across impassable chasms, their laboring lungs checked them in the ascent. The joyous inebriation was wearing off. Winslow met his companion's eyes sheepishly as they stopped where a sheer cliff of basalt above caught and held the warmth of the sun's rays. Behind them it rose a straight hundred feet, and before stretched a vast panorama. The sun was mounting now in the sky. It brought into strong relief the welter of volcanic waste that extended in bold detail through the clear air far out to the horizon, where, misty and dim, the first vaporous clouds were forming from the steaming earth.

And as they watched, the depressing bareness and emptiness of that gray-black expanse was changing. Far to the east a pink flush was spreading on the hills. It wavered and flowed, and it changed, as they watched, to deep areas of orange and red. The delicate pink swept in waves over valleys and hills, a vast kaleidoscopic coloration that rioted over a strange world.

In silence it spilled into the valley below. The slope they had traversed was radiant with color.

At their feet the ground was in motion: it heaved and rolled in countless places. Rounded shapes in myriads were emerging. Plants—mushroom growths—poured up from the earth to drink in the sunshine of their brief summer. They burst the earth to show unfolding leaves or blunted, rounding heads, that grew before the men's incredulous eyes.

Winslow was the first to recover from the stupefying beauty of the spectacle.

"The machine!" he gasped. "Back to the ship! We'll be swamped, overwhelmed...." He rushed madly back down the slope.

Jerry was beside him, a revulsion of feeling driving him to frantic efforts. The piercing beauty that had enthralled him has become a thing of terror. The soft, pulpy, growing things that crushed beneath his feet were a menace in their lust for life.

They were a mile and more from the machine. Could they ever find it, Jerry wondered. The whole landscape was changed; bare rocks were half-hidden now under clinging, creeping vines. Only the sun remained as a guide. They must go toward the sun and a little north.

He followed Winslow, who was circling a huge area of weird

growths that already were waist high. They leaped across a gaping chasm and fought their way over a low hill, rank with vegetation, only to be confronted by a maze of great stalks—stalks that sprouted as they watched, dismayed, and threw out grotesque and awkward branches.

They made one futile effort to force their way, but the trunks, though pliant, were unyielding. To attempt to find their way through the labyrinth was folly.

"We've got to keep on trying," said Jerry Foster. "We've got to get back, or...."

Winslow, as the look in his eyes showed, needed no ending to that sentence. There was the summer of a lunar day ahead; the inventor did not need to be told of the scorching, broiling heat that would wither the land when the sun struck from straight overhead. And in their ship was food and water and a means of transport to the cooler heights above.

It was Jerry who took charge of the situation. Here was a prodigious laboratory in which Winslow's science was useless, but in fighting with nature—even nature in as weird and terrifying a mood as this—Jerry felt himself not entirely incompetent.

He looked about him. It had been but an hour since they watched the first onslaught of this life that engulfed them. And now they were cut off. Through an opening, where bare rocks made a rift in the vegetation, he saw again the high ground where they had stood. There was more rock there on the volcanic slope: the growing things were in clumps—islands, rather than continents of rank growth.

"We must go back," he told Winslow, "and climb while we can. Get to the high ground, take bearings on the place where we left the ship. We'll look over the ground and figure some way to get there."

Winslow nodded. He was plainly bewildered, lost in the new jungle. He followed Jerry, who bounded across a crevice in the earth. The ground was rotten with the honeycomb of caves and cracks.

Jerry forced his way through and over a rock heap, where the thick trunks of nightmare trees were spaced farther apart. There was an opening ahead; he started forward, then stopped abruptly and motioned the other to silence.

From beyond there came sounds. There was rending of soft, pliant tissue. The sound came through the thin air from a grove up ahead, where big plants were waving, though the wind had long since ceased. To their ears came a snoring, blubbering snuffle. A stone was

dislodged, to come bounding toward them from the hillside; the soft plants were flattened before it. The men cowered in the shelter of a giant fungus.

Beyond the rocks, above the mottled reds and yellows of the grotesque trees, a head appeared. It waved at the end of a long, leathery neck. All mouth, it seemed to the watchers, as they saw a pair of short forelegs pull the succulent tops of the giant growth into a capacious maw. Below, there was visible a part of a gigantic, grayish body. It was crashing down toward them, eating greedily as it came.

"Back," said Jerry softly. "Go back to that cave. We will hide there in some crack in the ground."

They picked their way noiselessly over the rocks. The cave they had crossed offered a refuge from the beast. It went slantingly down into the ground, a great tunnel, deep in the rock. They dropped into the opening and started forward, only to recoil at the fetid stench that assailed their nostrils.

"A bear pit," gasped Jerry. "Great Heavens! What a smell!"

They stopped, dismayed. Far below them in the bowels of some

subterranean passage was the crashing of loose stone; a scrambling and scratching of great claws came echoing to them. They leaped madly for the outer air.

"Over here," Jerry directed, and led the way, crouching, to the concealment of great stalks and vine-covered rocks. He pointed toward the open ground where they had been a few moments before. The tree-eater was out in full view. Its flabby, barrel-like body was squatted like that of some unearthly, giant toad, on massive hind legs. It sat erect, its forelegs hung in air, as a hoarse, snarling cry came from the cave. The great head, perched on the long leathery neck, waved from side to side.

The noise from the cave ceased. The rift in the earth was in plain sight from where they cowered, and the eyes of the men were upon it. One instant it was empty; the next, in uncanny silence, it was filled with huge hideousness—an enormous, crouching beast.

It was black, a dull leathery black. Its thick, hairless hide hung in creases and folds on a gaunt frame. Shorter than the tree-eater, it was still a thing of mammoth ugliness. Its hind legs were powerful and armed with claws that curved deep into the earth; its front legs displayed the same fearful weapons. A thick, heavy tail slashed forward and back over the ground. And from this to the grinning,

heavy-toothed jaws and beady eyes where the long neck ended in a warty head, it was an incarnation of pitiless ferocity.

Was the scent of the hidden, shuddering men in its red nostrils? It forgot them at the sight of the beast in the clearing. The snarling cry echoed hideously in the thin air as the frightful body came erect with neck extended, jaws open and dripping. It hurled itself through the air in one terrific leap.

Had there been any lingering hope in the minds of the men that they had no carnivores to deal with, the ensuing struggle ended it. The attacker tore great masses of living flesh from the struggling, screaming body. The first cumbersome brute was helpless before its destroyer.

Jerry was trembling and sick at the sight, but he grasped his companion's arm and drew him after as he slipped quietly away.

"To the high ground," he whispered. "It's our only hope. Perhaps we can fight them off there—find some steep rock we can climb." They worked their way desperately through the rubbery, obstructing growth.

At the foot of the hill there was better going; the bare rock gave

winding and twisting passage to the heights. They could have leaped over the stunted growths here, could have raced frantically for the high ground, but they dared not. To leap up into view of those fierce, searching eyes! It was unthinkable. They crouched low as they darted from their concealment to new shelter, and crawled behind rocks when open ground must be crossed.

They had dared regain hope when again the paralyzing scream ripped through the silence. It was answered by another and another from distant points. The valley of the caves was spewing out its loathsome dwellers from their winter's sleep.

The men raced openly now for the heights. As he leaped, Jerry turned to see over one shoulder a pursuer appear. It was one of the flesh-eaters, head to the ground on their trail. At sight of them its cry rang out again. It bounded forward in pursuit. And again there were answering screams from the jungle growth.

The men threw themselves frantically up the mountainside. Once Winslow landed in a sprawling heap and groaned as he drew himself to his feet. The beast was below them. Jerry seized a great boulder, whose earth-weight would have made it immovable. He raised it above his head and sent it crashing down the slope.

Another and another he threw. One struck the great beast in mid-air; it was pure luck that drove the stone crashing against the creature's head. It fell back with a blood-chilling snarl that was half shriek. Another monster appeared, to throw itself upon the first and tear at the crushed, waving head.

Jerry took his companion by the arm. His voice came strangled from his straining lungs. "Are you hurt?" he gasped. "Can you run?"

Winslow nodded breathlessly. Again they gathered themselves for their wild, leaping retreat toward the top. An uproar of furious fighting behind them marked where a score of the monsters had gathered for the feast.

Jerry watched vainly for some refuge, some pinnacle of rock or precipice they could climb, and from which they could beat down their attackers. There was nothing but the welter of volcanic waste: rock heaps and boulders and smooth streams of solid lava. Perhaps in the crater, he thought, over the ragged crest of the cone, might be some place of safety.

The pack was in full cry again as they climbed gaspingly to the top. Beyond lay the funnel-shaped crater. Its vast inner slopes were less steep than the hill they had climbed. They were covered with a

jungle, like those they had seen—a maze of red toadstools and distorted trees.

Jerry turned savagely to face the oncoming brutes. This, he knew, was the end. For this they had hurled themselves through space—to make a morning morsel for these incredible beasts.

About the men was a confusion of granite rocks, thrown from the crater to provide weapons, crude and futile, for two puny earth-dwellers. The men raised great rocks in the air and threw them with all their strength. Jerry struggled with a mammoth boulder,—Winslow leaping to his aid. They toppled it over to start an avalanche of devastation that swept into the oncoming monsters.

And again there was respite for their aching arms, while the hunger-crazed brutes tore at the bruised bodies of their fellows.

Jerry Foster looked longingly again toward the crater. Should they chance the shelter of the jungle growth? Hopeless, he knew when these monsters could crash their way through while the men were impeded at every step. The mottled, orange-green stalks, as he watched them, seemed to move. He dashed the sweat from his face—his hair hung matted on his forehead—and passed a grimy hand across his eyes. Plainly, one of those stalks crossed a rocky-floored

clearing.

Was he dreaming? Was this all a dream—a mad nightmare from which he could force himself to wake? Another moved. He saw definitely a mushroom growth pass swiftly to lose itself in a neighboring clump. Dreaming? No! The screams from behind him and Winslow's hoarse yell proved the stark reality of his surroundings.

The vile creatures were close: Jerry could see their fierce heads dripping with blood. He reached for his pistol, knew instantly it was useless against these mammoth brutes, and joined Winslow, who was straining desperately at another great rock. It toppled and fell. Jerry hurled himself at a heap of smaller boulders and sent them crashing as fast as he could seize them and throw.

One quick look behind him showed still the impossible vision he had seen. And now there were figures—a mob of them—figures that threw off their wrappings of vegetation as they ran, cast to the ground the toadstool disguises that they held. They were caricatures of men that were swarming up the hill....

He swung again in one last hopeless stand against the first horrible enemy. The two men poured a torrent of stones down the slope; they

were useless, except for their delaying the advance. The beasts leaped and dodged. They were close when the rock-rain increased to a deluge.

Jerry was fighting in a red haze through which he saw dimly. He was aware of the hailstorm of boulders that were thick in the air. He saw vaguely the white faces and copper-clad bodies of strange men leaping about him, and he heard the wild bedlam of their shrieks as they joined in the mad battle against the common enemy.

The beasts were swept off in a landslide of loose rock—all but one. Above them, on a high point of stone, it was crouching to spring. A wild human figure, its flesh white as chalk, leaped forward with a tangle of fibers. The tangle was thrown as the brute was in air. A net spread and wrapped around the monster. It fell, clawing and tearing, to roll helplessly down the slope.

The battle was won. Jerry swayed drunkenly on his feet. About him the mountains seemed whirling, where unreal figures of men with dead white skin and shining copper armor danced dizzily.

He met for an instant the look from Winslow's dazed eyes. Out of the past a picture flashed clearly: Winslow—this same Winslow—arguing that the moon might hold mysteries still. He laughed thickly.

"And I said it was all known," he muttered through slack lips. "Nothing on the moon that wasn't known...."

He was still laughing in a wild inebriation as a net settled close to entangle his swaying figure and bear him helpless to the ground. He saw Winslow similarly bound, saw him lifted to the shoulders of shouting, yelling men, whose stupid, pasty faces were wide-eyed with excitement.

He, too, was raised into the air.... They were being carried toward the crater's mouth....

A fight for life in thin air does not make for clear thinking. Jerry Foster knew only that a nightmare world was whirling about him; that beneath him powerful shoulders supported, while the one who carried him leaped at racing speed down the slope.

They went more slowly down pathways cleared through the rank vegetation. Soft, pulpy vines from the grotesque trees brushed his face. He tried vaguely to shield himself, but his hands were bound fast. He was helpless in the entangling folds of the net.

The touch of cold stone brought him to his senses. He was lying on smooth rock. They were in a clearing. He turned his head to find

Winslow, but could not find him.

Across the open ground were naked men, their bodies, like these others, dead white in the sun's glare. They were dragging giant stalks to earth by means of ropes. Trunks and branches, bright in their colors of yellow and orange and flaming red, were hacked to short lengths and piled on all sides. The workers, as Jerry watched, dropped their implements to race toward him. There was a press of flat, white faces above. His captors, in their copper armor, beat the newcomers back. The babel of chattering voices was deafening.

Again he was lifted into the air—plainly these were no weaklings he had to deal with—and again the warrior band surrounded him as the march was resumed. The milling, shrieking crowd of workers followed in an ear-splitting mob.

The forest ended, and the men went slowly now down smooth, rocky slopes to stop upon a wide, level expanse. Before he was placed on the ground Jerry had a glimpse of a funnel-shaped pit—the mouth of the extinct volcano. And toward it, bound and helpless, was being carried a struggling form which he thought he recognized.

"Winslow!" he shouted. But the bodies in their gleaming copper armor closed about him in a solid throng and cut off his view.

In the sky the sun had moved slowly upward since first they landed. It slanted brightly now into the eyes of the prostrate man and made a spectacle of his twisting contortions as he tried to get his hands on his knife in its sheath at his belt. This and his pistol were under his coat. But he could not reach them. He lay panting with his exertions.

One of the warriors seemed to have authority, for his arms alone of all the group were sheathed with copper circlets, and the others obeyed his orders. Jerry addressed himself to this one. He knew the words were unintelligible, but he pleaded desperately for a chance.

"Take this off," he said. "We are friendly—friends—friends!" He struggled to keep himself from shouting, to keep his voice under control. "The other man," he said, "bring him back." And again he repeated: "We are friends."

He scanned his captors' faces.

The pasty face above him was impassive; the eyes stared uncomprehendingly into his. Then the figure barked an order. One of the warriors swung Jerry lightly to his shoulder, and started toward the pit.

At its edge was a basket, a huge affair of knotted fiber ropes. Dimly,

Jerry saw other baskets standing about: they were filled with the fragments of fungus. Still bound, he was placed in the empty container. Hands grasped the meshes, and he was swung out over the edge. A rope was above him: he was lowered steadily into the dark shaft.

Jerry breathed a sigh of relief. This was not death—not yet. And Winslow? Safe, perhaps, for he had traveled this same road.

There was figures outlined above against the circle of light, figures that clambered like apes down swaying ropes. The light glinted and sparkled from their shining armor. His escort was still with him.

The circle of light changed to a glowing ring, where only the rim was lighted. Above was the deep black of the lunar sky. Then the circle faded to a mere point as he went down into the pit.

The rope basket came to rest upon a rock floor, and Jerry was lifted out. He saw plainly the figures about him, and he wondered vaguely at the light that came from the walls of the cavern. There were long lines of soft light, leading off into the dark, lines that marked plainly a labyrinth of passageways, leading in all directions.

Beyond a narrow entrance was one brighter than the rest, a broad

avenue that led downward still further into the depths. Here he was carried. He tried vainly to keep some mental map of their course. He would return some day—he *must* return—he and Winslow. They would escape.... But the passage turned and twisted; there were many branching corridors, each with its lines of light. Jerry gave up the attempt. It was a maze of serpentine streets beyond his power to remember and recall.

Before him the passage was still wider. It was opening into a great room.... Jerry found himself upon the floor. He strained cruelly at the cords about his head as he twisted and turned to get a view of his surroundings.

The room was a cave, its vast vaulted ceiling sprung high above a level floor, where the figures of men—odd, plaster-white figures like animated statues—were small in the distance. His eyes were drawn quickly to the brilliant glow of the farther wall. There was the bright black of basaltic formation, and in it—though he knew the impossibility—was shining the sun.

Jerry blinked his eyes to look again and again; the golden circle was dazzling. It was set at a point well above the smooth floor, and up to it there led a sloping pathway of gold. It was as if they had indeed captured their god, these worshipers of the sun, had captured and

held it for the adoration of the grovelling people.

Jerry saw them upon the floor. The copper of the armored men gleamed bright in the glow from beyond, as they abased themselves and crept slowly toward the light. At each side of the dazzling orb was a platform. There were figures upon it, seated figures, Jerry saw, even at a distance, that were robed in vestments of the sun. Their forms gleamed gold in the light.

The leader that Jerry had noted among his captors crept on in advance of his men. From among the bright figures on the platform above one rose to extend a glowing arm. He spoke, and the tones rolled majestically back from the high vault above. The crawling man below him stopped rigidly where he was. Another word from above, and he rose slowly to his feet. He stood full in the glow of the captive sun, to be outlined in black against the brilliance beyond.

Haltingly he spoke. Then, seeming to gain confidence, he launched into a torrent of words. He gestured and waved, and, to Foster, the sign language was plain. He saw reenacted the surprise of the warriors upon beholding these intruders; saw how they had spied out upon them, using trunks and branches of the fungus as a screen; saw in pantomime their own battle with the beasts, then the rush of the armed men to the rescue. Again the net was thrown, and the

gesturing figure turned to point dramatically where Jerry lay bound, then pounded his armored chest with unconcealed pride.

He ceased to speak, and there was utter silence in the room as the figure above crossed to stand before the golden sun. He too abased himself before the sign of their god, then rose, to stand motionless, listening....

For a breathless interval he waited before the oracle, then prostrated himself again and returned to his place.

He repeated, it seemed, a command, congratulation, to judge by the ecstasy of the figure below. The warrior turned once to throw himself before the image of the sun; he repeated this again and yet again before he crept back to his fellows. The group arose and rushed swiftly toward the bound man.

They brought him quickly into the presence. With scant ceremony Jerry was unrolled from the net; he lay free and gasping upon the floor. The men scurried like mad from out the pathway of light that shone down from the false sun. Jerry rose to his feet; the brilliance before him almost blinded, but he saw now whence it came.

There was a hollow in the wall, a great parabola, deep and wide, and

it was lined throughout with beaten gold. In a straight path the light was reflected from every point—every point but one for at the far end, where the curved sides joined, was a circle of darkness. It stared like an eye, evil, portentous. Jerry nerved himself for an ordeal, unknown but imminent. The black eye glared at him unwinkingly.

Before him was the pathway of light: it shone brilliantly down the sloping ramp where a floor of bright gold led up to the sun god itself.

The figure on the dais raised its hand. Jerry heard the words come from its lips and roll sonorously back from above. The figure waited for an answer.

Jerry's hands slipped beneath his coat to rest reassuringly upon his weapons. He withdrew his hands empty and raised one toward the figure above.

"I do not understand your words," he said. "Your language is strange. No doubt mine is as strange to you. I come as a visitor—I am friendly." He held out both his hands, palms upward.

"We have come, my friend and myself, on a friendly errand." He paused to look vainly about for Winslow. "And you have received us as if we were wild animals."

Jerry Foster, of San Francisco, U. S. A., was suddenly resentful of their treatment. His words were meaningless, but his tones were not. "You have tied us," he said, "bound us—dragged us before you. Is that the way you receive your guests from another world?"

The golden-clad figure stood in majestic silence while Jerry was speaking. It waited a moment after his outburst, then crossed again to bow low in the floodlight of gold. As before, it seemed listening to words from the black heart of the strange sun, words quite inaudible—soundless. He returned quickly and waved Jerry's attention to the place of light.

The sense of a presence there in the central blackness was strong upon the waiting man. In that other life that now seemed so remote—his life on earth—Jerry had once felt the threat of a concealed intruder in the dark. He recalled it vividly now. The sensation was the same.

But it was magnified. There was no denying the reality of a malign something at the heart of that golden glow. The black center of it vibrated with cold and venomous hate. It struck upon the waiting man like a physical force. His head was swimming, his thoughts refused to form. He was as if suspended in a great void, where all that was lay deep in the center of that radiant orb. And it drew him

irresistibly on.

Like a dazed bird, held and stricken in the hypnotic gaze of a snake, Jerry took one stiff, unconscious forward step. Another, and another. He strove dumbly, helplessly, for realization—there was nothing in the universe but the certain thing ahead.

His foot was upon the golden incline leading to his doom, when that buried something which marks a man—the spark of divinity which sets him apart as one alone—reasserted itself.

"I am," he heard his own voice shouting in strangled tones, "I am Jerry Foster! I am I ... I am myself!"

He awoke from his stupor with a shock that set every nerve-fiber quivering. For long minutes he stood silent. Then, realizing his victory and proving it to his own soul, he looked straight into the black center of the threatening sun god, and he laughed, loudly and contemptuously.

Then, turning, and with steady stride, he walked calmly from the light.

The great hall was silent with a silence that was breathless. Then

pandemonium broke lose. The priests and the god had been defied, and screaming and shouts rang throughout the vast chamber to re-echo batteringly from ceiling and walls. There was tumult and confusion where the populace thronged. Even the figures above on the dais were milling about in disorder; the rippling gold of their robes made a spectacle that forced Jerry's involuntary admiration.

Then one from among them sprang forward. His voice roared above the shattering din. The room was still. Another order, and the guard of armed fighting men formed in a circle about the defier of their god.

Jerry waited. Trouble was about due, he told himself. One hand was on his pistol, tense and ready. As the ranks stood silent and made no move to attack, Jerry Foster did a curious thing.

It was not done intentionally, but Jerry Foster had nerves, and they had been under a strain. His hand went unconsciously to his pocket and extracted a cigarette. There were matches there, too, and he struck one and lighted the white cylinder. The match made a tiny flame where he flipped it.

The whole room whispered and hissed with one loud gasp of amazement, but the moan that followed, that echoed and resounded

from the roof, was of nothing but horror. Even the warriors drew back in trembling dismay. And before them the stranger they had brought to the very portal of their sanctum of holies blew clouds of white smoke that eddied and whirled as they rose round his head.

The effect was not lost upon Jerry. And his mind was working. Was fire unknown to these strange beings? Here in the deep caverns, far from the surface, was fire a thing of terror to them? He looked back toward the wall.

"If they rush me," he thought, "there's a good place to be. That will feel mighty comfortable at my back."

He walked slowly, the smoke rising thick about his head. The copper-clad figures before him withdrew, the ranks parting to let him through. Unharmed he reached the safety of the wall. The enemy now formed a semi-circle before him.

The inertia of the stricken beings on the platform was broken by his move. Again their head priest gave an order; from another side a second detachment of armed men came on. They were carrying something. Jerry leaned forward in quivering preparedness as he saw, in the floodlight of radiance, the body of Winslow lying on the floor.

Was he injured? Dead? The devastating loneliness that swept him at the sight of the still body was unnerving. He breathed a long sigh of relief as the lanky figure rose slowly to its feet. Winslow was alive! They would show these beastly, unearthly humans something yet.

There was no preparation—no preliminaries. Whether Winslow could have reacted as Jerry had would never be known. He seemed stunned and helpless, and it was with no resisting hesitation that he began the climb to the unknown.

Jerry's crouching tenseness snapped. No thought of the gun as he sprang toward the enemy between him and his friend. "No, Winslow—no!" he shouted as he leaped at the figures in front of him.

Their strength had seemed startling to Jerry when they had carried him like a child. He had forgotten his lightness here on this unheavy world. And he had forgotten his own great strength.

No panting, exhausted, beaten fighter of beasts was this that hurled himself against the ranks before him. One coppery sword flashed upward above his head. Its bearer was seized in two hands that picked him bodily from the floor and crashed him, a living projectile, among the others. Jerry waited for no more. There was an opening ahead, and beyond was Winslow, walking stiffly, certainly,

up that damnable slope. He threw himself in giant leaps across the floor.

His companion was half-way up the glittering ramp when Jerry seized him. Holding him in his arms, he leaped outward, to land rolling on the floor. He was on his feet in an instant. He dragged Winslow to a standing posture.

"Wake up, man," he was shouting. "Winslow—wake up!"

The onrushing horde was upon them while the tall man was still brushing his hand over weary eyes, and Jerry, for the moment, had the fighting to himself.

No time for anything but parry and strike. He caught one white face on the jaw; the man went bodily through the air. Jerry landed again and again. His weapons were his fists, and they did fearful execution. And he knew, at length, that he was not alone.

The long arms of the inventor tore a sword from an upraised hand. Its owner was thrown, as Jerry had thrown one previously, to catapult among its fellows.

They were clear for an instant. "Back to the wall!" shouted Jerry. He

had time and room to reach for his pistol, and drew it quickly from its holster. They backed hastily to the protection of the stone wall. There were scores upon scores of copper-clad figures that followed them held out of reach. With a flashing of gold, the head priest himself sprang to urge on his men.

"Ready!" said Jerry. "I wish you had a gun! Here! Take this!" He handed his companion a long-bladed knife, then turned to aim his pistol with steady hand at the oncoming figure in golden robes.

The priest stopped for a brief scrutiny of this new menace, then screamed out an order and hurled himself into the sheltering press of men.

Jerry fired into the whirl of bodies. The roar of the forty-five tore like a battery of siege guns throughout the great room. But the creatures before them were fighting now in an insane frenzy. Their bodies pressed the two men to the wall. Jerry fired again, and the fall of a limp, gold-robed body gave him a thrill of delight.

The inventor was holding a white body as a shield, while he thrust past it incessantly with a red blade. There were huddled figures before them that lay quiet or crept painfully away. The body of the head priest was being carried off.

The dark mouth of a passage had impressed itself upon Jerry; he remembered it now. It offered a means of escape.

"Off to your right," he said. "Work off to your right. There's a hole in the wall—"

They fought off the struggling eruption of bodies that drove at them. Jerry was saving his ammunition, but once more he fired as a sword was falling over Winslow's head. He drove strongly with his left and beat at the white skulls with the butt of the gun gripped in his other hand.

The passage was suddenly behind them. One last stand against the screaming, frothing faces, and they backed, panting, into the sheltering dark. Jerry stopped and took Winslow by the arm.

"Are you hurt?" he demanded. The inventor was too breathless for reply.

"Nothing much," he panted, after a moment. "One got me along the cheek—you shot him just in time. How about you?"

"O.K.," was the assurance. "But, man, I've been hammered!"

"What a peach of a fight," he added. "But now what?"

Winslow laughed mirthlessly in the dark. "This looks like a one-way street," he said. "We can't go back.

"Say," he demanded, with sudden, dim recollection. "I remember something of a dream—a ghastly sort of thing. I was ... I was ... where was I when you collared me? Where was I headed?"

"For something too damnable for us to imagine," Jerry stated emphatically.

They were walking as rapidly as they dared through the dark passage. There were high-pitched voices from the rear. From somewhere ahead came the sound of running water.

"Too damnable to imagine!" he repeated. "But we'll hunt the vile thing out if we get a chance, and we'll slaughter—"

The words ended in a startled exclamation as the ground fell beneath their feet. They pitched headlong into nothingness—

There was water in Jerry's face as he fell. A torrent engulfed him as he struck into it, pouring in from a lower passageway to plunge straight down the shaft. The roaring crash of water tore madly at his body; his arm was shot through with stabbing pain as Winslow's

falling body was torn from his grasp.

He was conscious only of his bursting lungs when he came to the surface from the depths into which he plunged. With one arm he swam weakly, the other trailing at his side, while he gulped greedily at the air.

A voice came hoarsely from a distance. "Foster," it called. "Jerry—where are you, Jerry?"

Ah, the good air in his lungs—he could swim more strongly now. He managed to gasp an answer: "Here, Winslow, over here!" There was a splashing in response to his voice. He heard it over the noise of the waters he had been swept away from the cataract.

A hand was upon him in the dark. "Hurt?" asked the welcome voice. "Can you swim, Jerry?"

"A little. One arm's working."

The hands fumbled over him quickly, and his good arm was drawn over the other's back. "Hang on," Winslow told him. "I can swim. I'm half fish."

Jerry clung to the folds of the coat. He was light in the water, he felt

—riding high—and the man beside him was swimming with strong strokes. He released his hold on the other as he felt strength ebbing back into his body.

"I can paddle," he said: "but stick around. Where are we going?"

"In a circle, probably," was the reply, "though I'm trying to hold a straight course. How big is this lake, I wonder?"

They swam slowly, saving their strength, but it was a time that seemed like endless hours before the answer to Winslow's question was found. Jerry was fighting weakly, exhausted, and the hand supporting him was failing when they felt sharp rocks against their dragging feet. The hand that had held him still clung tightly to his shoulder as they struggled upward and fell together where great rocks gave safety in the darkness. In his arm the sharp pain had dwindled to numbness; Jerry Foster asked only for sleep.

There was light about him when he awoke. In his stupor he had found again the surroundings he knew so well—the clash and clatter of a distant city—the roaring traffic—signals, and glowing lights. He came slowly back to unwelcome reality. The light was there, but it shone in luminous lines along the wall to illumine the hateful familiarity of the honeycombed rock that composed the moon.

It showed, too, a familiar figure, breathing heavily where it lay on the far side of the small room. Winslow's face was pale in the dull light, and his eyes were closed. He was on a thick pallet of soft fibers and across his body a cloth was spread, shot through with gold in strange designs.

Jerry Foster threw aside a robe of the same material that covered him. He stifled an involuntary word as a twinge of pain shot through his arm, then crossed noiselessly to shake softly at the shoulder of the sleeping man. Winslow, too, came slowly from his sleep of complete exhaustion, but his eyes were clear when they opened.

"Where are—" he began a question, but Jerry's hand was pressed quickly against his lips.

They stared slowly about. The room that held them was in the natural rock, but whether hewn out by hands or a natural formation they could not tell. The rock was rotten with perforations, through which air flowed in a cool stream.

Jerry came softly to his feet to feel cautiously of the glowing, luminous mounds along the wall. They were spread upon a ledge. The light was cold to his touch, the material like fine soil in his hands.

"Fluorescent," whispered Winslow. "Calcium sulphide, possibly; I saw them spreading it above ground in the sun. It absorbs light and gives it off slowly." Jerry nodded; the source of the endless glowing lines had been puzzling to him.

Their whispers ceased at a sound beyond a doorway. In the opening a figure appeared, tall and erect, the figure of a girl. Her face was white like the others of these whose lives were lived below the surface, but there was a kindly softness in the eyes, a refinement and intelligence of no low order, that contrasted with the cold eyes of the warriors and the priests. Not beautiful, perhaps, by earth standards, yet it required no straining of chivalry on Jerry's part to find her human and lovely.

In silence the men stood staring. Then Foster, with unconscious gentleness, made a revealing gesture. This woman—this girl—had saved them. He knew it without words, and he was wordless to reply. He dropped swiftly to his knees and pressed a bit of the golden robe against his lips.

A flush of scarlet swept across the white face and receded. The hand dropped from its startled poise and rested, gently, questioningly, on the brown head bent before her.

She murmured unintelligible words in a guarded voice as Jerry arose. "Marahna," she said, and touched her breast lightly. "Marahna." Her head was erect, the whole attitude imperious, commanding. She questioned them with swift, liquid words. The men shook their heads in utter incomprehension.

Again she spoke, and again they shook their heads. Jerry felt foolish and dumb. He took his turn at questioning, and this time, with a trace of a smile, it was the girl's turn to shake her head. She had mastered one sign at least.

Pointing toward the great hall they knew was somewhere above, she reenacted the scene there; she evidently knew what had transpired. And now Jerry nodded in confirmation. That she approved of the part they had played was evident.

Now she questioned whence they had come. She pointed down, and her fluttering hands and graceful posture spoke eloquently. She showed them more than a trace of fear, too, as she marked them coming from the depths. Jerry shook his head in vehement denial.

He pointed above, spread his hands wide, tried as best he could to indicate vast distance beyond. She stared, wide-eyed, then in her turn knelt as if before a god.

"She thinks we have come down from the sun," Winslow surmised. "Well, let it go at that." But Jerry Foster was embarrassed in the strange role of a god; he raised the humbled, kneeling young woman to her feet.

He pointed to her gold-clad figure and repeated the name she had given. "Marahna," he said. "Marahna!" Then, placing his hand on his companion, he repeated: "Winslow—Winslow!" And, pointing to himself, he completed the introduction with: "Foster, Jerry—Jerry Foster!"

The pale lips formed themselves slowly to the strange and unaccustomed sounds.

"Cherrie," she repeated, and smiled in comprehension. "Cherrie."

This was the first of many lessons, and it was amazing to both men how rapidly they learned to get their thoughts across. In turn, they learned to read the messages that the slim hands and graceful, undulating body conveyed. Even words were linked one by one with their indicated objects and meanings.

One syllable the girl used only in a hushed and awe-stricken tone. It was "Oong" that she whispered, while her eyes filled with terror and

dread. And they knew this for the name of the horror that waited in the black center of that unholy place where the pathway of light ascended. It was later that they learned to read hatred as well as sheer terror in the emotions that the word *Oong* aroused.

The first lesson ended in a soft exclamation from the girl. She withdrew, to return in a moment with a beaker of hammered gold, filled with cold water. In her hands, too, were strange fruits and branches of fungus. She ate bits of them to show they were food. And Jerry, as he watched her, was aware that he was famished. But the two men ate sparingly at first of the strange food.

It was tasteless, they found, except for an elusive flavor, but the reception of the food in their gnawing stomachs was satisfactory. Their strength was returning, and with it came hope of release. The moon-people, evidently, were not altogether villainous.

"Thank you," said Jerry in a normal tone, "that was—" White fingers trembled against his lips to enforce silence.

The girl listened intently, then stole softly out into the corridor from which she had come. She motioned the men to follow, and pointed there in the dim light to a far room.

There were others, they saw; a group of young women lying at ease on their pallets, or moving slowly about. The need for quiet was apparent, more so when the figure of a man appeared as they watched. Quickly the girl, Marahna, stepped before them and motioned them back to their room.

She followed and glanced quickly about. In the farther wall was an opening, close to the floor, and low, but they managed to work their way through at her silent command. A passage, much like the others, lay beyond. It widened and grew higher, until they could stand erect. Back in the circle of light they saw, for a moment, the man, bowing low in respect before Marahna. He carried a basket of light that shone brightly in the room.

"Replenishing the supply of sulphide," whispered Winslow.

A current of air came cool and refreshing from a branching tunnel in the rock. There was no lack of ventilation, as they well knew, throughout all the tortuous passages, but this came with a scent of outdoors that set both men a-tingle with hope. Jerry forgot even the dull ache in his arm as he breathed deep of this messenger from the outside.

But exploration must wait. They needed to rest, to learn and to plan.

They returned when Marahna called softly from the room.

Time had lost all its meaning. They could only guess at the hours that had passed since the hour they left their ship, could only make unanswered surmises as to where was the sun or how much was left of the long lunar day. They must escape—they would escape—but their one stroke for freedom must not be made when darkness and paralyzing cold should force them back into the hands of the enemy tribes.

Marahna was with them much of the time, and always they struggled and strove with desperate concentration to grasp at the meanings of the thoughts she tried to convey. And they learned much.

Of the passage they believed they had found out to the surface, she knew little. But she showed them, with doubt in her face, that there was almost hopeless struggle along that path to the freedom above. Sadly she touched Jerry's injured arm, and she shook her head in dejection.

The arm had had a bad wrench, Jerry found. No fracture, but the muscles and ligaments had been painfully torn. But Jerry set his teeth firm at the thought of a possible escape.

Once, peering along the dark passage that led to the room where the others had been seen, the men noticed the deep bows that unfailingly marked the entrance of Marahna. They questioned her and learned that here was royalty among the people of the moon. This, as they considered the proud poise of her head and her whole attitude of unassuming superiority was not entirely surprising. But they marveled the more at the truth that she finally made plain to them.

Marahna, she told them, as plainly as if she were speaking in their own tongue, Marahna was chosen for death. And her white face was pitiful and her eyes full of horror as she enacted for them the slow march she must take up the long golden slope and into the horror that waited.

"A sacrifice to that god!" Jerry spoke with dismay. "No, no!" But the face of the Princess Marahna of the moon people was unutterably sad with unspoken thoughts as she touched her breast with one slender finger, then indicated the outer room and showed there were two there beside herself who were to go.

"Help us to get out," Jerry begged, and with fierce eagerness he showed them going through the passage to the outside. "We will come back, and we will find some way to end all this damnable thing."

She gave them to understand the time that was left. The sun, she showed, was long past the meridian and was on its return. The day was now reaching a close. And then, as the sun set, the great sacrifice would be made—had always been made—to insure the return of their god.

Their watches were useless, for the water had entered their cases. The two men waited what they judged was the length of a day, while Jerry tried to believe that his arm was improving. Then, putting a small supply of food in their pockets, they were ready for the attempt.

Jerry saw that his gun and knife were ready at his belt, and patted a pocket where his matches were safe in their watertight container. The prospect of escape almost unnerved him. To breathe the clear air; to stand in the radiant light of the sun—he could understand now how these people made a god of the sun. He turned to Marahna.

"Good-by," he said, "but not for long. We'll be back. And we'll save you, Marahna, we'll save you. Winslow will figure some way to do it.... We'll be back...."

The girl was silent. She touched Jerry's arm, and shook her head slowly, doubtfully.

He reached for the hand. It trembled, he felt, in his. The impulse to take the slim form within his arms, to hold her close, was strong upon him. Would he ever see her again ... would he?

"Won't you say good-by, Marahna?" he asked.

But she smiled, instead—a friendly smile, and encouraging. Then dropped in silence to her knees to press with both her trembling hands his hand upon her forehead. And, still in silence, she rose to vanish from the room.

The men entered the narrow opening to start forward into the dark. But Jerry Foster was puzzled, puzzled and more than a trifle hurt. Marahna could at least have said good-by. She knew the word, for he had taught it to her. And she had let him—them—go....

"Oh, well," he thought, "how can I know how a princess feels—a princess of the moon? And why should I care—why should she? But...." He refused to complete the thought. He hurried instead, as best he could, to follow Winslow, fumbling ahead of him in the dark.

Jerry had used plenty of muttered invective with the massage he had given his arm, but he cursed his handicap wholeheartedly at the end of some several hours.

They were standing, he and Winslow, in a dark tunnel. They had climbed and clawed their way through the absolute dark, over broken fragments, through narrow apertures, down and up, and up again through a tortuous, winding course. And now they had reached the end. They had found the source of the fresh air, had come within reaching distance, it seemed, of sunlight and all that their freedom might mean. And they had come, too, to a precipitous rock wall.

They stared long and hopelessly at the shaft that reached, vertical and sheer, high, high over their heads. And a curse like that of Tantalus was theirs. For, far at the top, slanting in through some off-shooting passage, there was sunlight. It was unmistakable in its clear glare, beautiful, glorious—and unattainable.

There were roughnesses in the wall, footholds, handholds here and there. "It might be ... it might be...." Jerry tried to believe, but the ache in his arm made the thought hopeless and incomplete. He turned to his companion.

"I believe you can do it," he said steadily.

Winslow's dark eyes were gleaming in the dimness that surrounded. "Possibly," he replied, and eyed the ascent with an appraising stare. "Even probably. But you know damn well, Foster, that I'm not going

to try."

"Don't be an ass." Jerry's tone was harsh, but the tall man must have known what emotions lay underneath.

"We'll play it out together," he said.

Jerry was silent as he reached in the darkness for Winslow's hand.

"Of course I knew you were that sort," he said. He waited a moment, then added: "But you're going, old man, you're going. Don't you see it's our only hope?"

Winslow shook his head emphatically. Jerry could see him in the dim reflection from that radiance above. "Nothing doing," the calm voice assured him. "Don't bother to think up more reasons why I should desert."

"Listen!" Jerry gripped roughly at the other's shoulder. "Listen to reason.

"If you go and I go back there, what will happen? With Marahna gone we are helpless, and we will be helpless to save her. The long night is ahead. How can we live? Where can we live? We will be wiped out as sure as we're alive this minute.

"If you go—and if you make it to the ship—there's a chance. Alone, I may manage to stick it out." He knew he was lying, knew that the other knew it too, but he went on determinedly. "You can wait for me up above. My arm will be well—" Winslow stopped him with a gesture.

"There's a chance," the older man was muttering, "there's a chance...." He swung quickly toward Foster, to grab hard at the good right hand.

"I'm going," he stated. "I'm on my way. I won't say good-by; what's the use—I'll be back soon!"

He released his hold on Jerry to leap high in the air for a ledge of projecting rock. He caught it and hung. His foot found a toehold and he drew himself up to where another rough outcrop gave grip for his hand.

Jerry Foster stood frozen to throbbing stillness. Words were strangling in his throat, an impulse, almost irresistible, to call. If there were only a rope....

He was still silent when the tiny figure of his companion and friend was lost in the heights, where it vanished into that tunnel from which

came the light. He turned blindly, to stumble back into the dark.

Marahna was waiting when he regained the safety of her room. "Safety!" The thought was bitter when linked with the certain fate that lay ahead.

Silently she stroked the bent head of the man who dropped dejectedly upon the hard stone floor. Her fingers were gentle, comforting, despite the utter hopelessness and discouragement that lay heavily upon him.

They sat thus, nor counted the flying minutes, while the fog of despair in the mind of the beaten man was clearing. He raised his head finally to meet the look in the dark eyes. And he managed a smile, as one can who has thought his way through to the bitter end and has faced it. He patted the hand that had stroked his bowed head.

"It's all right," he said gently. "What is to be, will be—and we can't change it. And it's all right somehow."

His sleeping, during their long stay, had been a cause for amusement to Marahna, whose habits were tuned to the long days and nights on the moon. And he was sleepy now, sleepy and tired. She spread the robe over him as he rested on the soft fiber bed.

He awoke from a deep sleep with a light heart. For Jerry Foster, as he faced his own certain death, had seen certain things. It was the end—that was one fact he couldn't evade. But he grinned cheerfully, all by himself in that strange cheerless room, as he thought of what else he had visioned.

"And it will be just one hell of a fight," he said softly aloud. "There will be some of those priests that will know they have been in a war."

He examined again the knife and the automatic, and counted the cartridges left in the magazine. There were more he had found in a pocket of his coat, enough to replace those he had fired. He slipped the pistol into its holster at the sound of soft footsteps approaching.

It was Marahna who entered, a strange and barbaric Marahna. She was clad in a garment of spun gold that enveloped her tall figure. It trailed in rippling beauty on the floor—draped in resplendence her slim body, to end in soft folds about a head-dress that left Jerry breathless.

Her face was entirely concealed. The gold helmet covered her head. It was tall, made entirely of hammered gold in which spirals of jewels reflected their colors of glittering light. She was quite

unrecognizable in the weird magnificence.

Only her voice identified the figure. She murmured chokingly some soft words, then raised her head with its barbaric helmet proudly high as she concluded. There were words become familiar now to Jerry. Together with the spectacle she presented, her meaning was more than plain.

"The time has come," she was telling him. "The sun ... the hour of sacrifice."

Jerry leaped to his feet. His plans for battle were being revised. An idea—a plan, half-formed—was beating in his brain.

A sound was beating upon him, too. There were drums that throbbed in steady unison, that echoed hollowly along resounding walls, that approached in loudly increasing cadence.

The plan was complete. "No!" said Jerry Foster, with a wild laugh. He reached to remove the golden helmet.

He placed it upon his own head, under the startled gaze of the wondering girl. He reached out for the robe.

"You shall not go," he told her. "I will go in your place. And when I

reach that room...." His eyes were savage behind the slits in the golden head-dress.

"No—no!" the girl protested. Her face showed plainly the complete hopelessness of what Jerry proposed. To pit himself against that antagonist—she knew how futile was the brave gesture.

Jerry was undaunted. "I've got to die anyway," he tried to explain, "and if I can get in one good crack at whatever is there—well, I may be of help."

His hand was taking off the cloak. Marahna's eyes were steady upon him. She ceased to resist. She whipped one of the covers from the couch about her and helped him with the golden robe.

The throbbing of drums was hammering at Jerry's temples. They were close at hand! Marahna, without a word, rushed frantically back toward the room where the others waited.

And again Jerry Foster felt that odd tightening of disappointment about his heart. But what was the difference, he told himself, in a hundred years—or a hundred minutes. He set his lips tight and walked slowly out and down the passage.

The room he entered was deathly quiet. There were figures standing about, figures robed in their gold-threaded drapes, that stared strangely, wonderingly, at him, and drew themselves into a huddled group against the wall. And two there were, who stood apart: the other victims—their sacrificial garments wrapped them round where they waited for the third who was to accompany them. Jerry joined them as a guard came in from the outer hall.

The drums were rolling softly in their rhythmic beat. The priests who entered showed annoyance at the delay; they gave a curt order, and motioned the three to follow.

Outside, the corridor was broad, and the double rows of lights on either side glowed brightly to illumine a pageant grotesque and terrible in its barbaric splendor. The drums throbbed louder. Jerry saw them in their fire of burnished metal, beaten by the bands of naked men. Beyond, a group of warriors waited. Stalwart and strongly muscled, they stood erect in copper armor beside a platform of metal bars, whose floor was of latticed gold. The victims were placed upon it to stand erect. Jerry balanced himself upon the golden floor as the warriors raised it slowly to their shoulders.

Priests, in robes of heavy golden rope, were ranged about; they formed a guard and escort ten deep about the living sacrifice. At that

the drums increased their volume, and to this was added a nerve-racking, discordant and rasping jangle, when sheets of copper, paper-thin, were struck with a heavy hand. The pulsing, throbbing pandemonium was terrific as the march began.

Slowly they made their way through a winding gallery. Slowly they came to where a portal, high-arched, gave entrance upon the great hall. Solemnly, proudly, the priests lead the way as they circled the vast room. Their wrappings of gold were a scintillant quiver of light; above each hard face a circle of gold—symbol of the sun—was borne imperiously high.

The priestly guard surrounded the platform where the three standing figures were huddled. And behind, and on either side, the men with the drums and the discordant, ringing sheets gave full force to their blows. The high vault above thundered and roared to the thunder and roar of the drums. And, high over all, a wailing began.

The thin shrillness beat with the tempo of the drums in a pitch that steadily descended. The glittering procession had come to rest at its appointed place in the pathway, of light as the wailing came down to a moan. "*Oong! Oong!*" the voices groaned, while the walls re-echoed the despairing tones. Only from the band of warriors did the ear of Jerry Foster detect anything but misery and despair. The

priests were silent, but the warriors, in their shining armor, stood erect and roared out the syllables in exultant joy.

The priests were now upon the dais—the rocky platform, divided by the great, glowing parabola of light. They stood erect as a new high priest, replacing the one Jerry had killed, crossed to bow and grovel in the radiance from their god.

The room was silent with the silence of a great tomb as the march of death began. Softly, from the silence, the drums resumed the merest whisper of their former thunderous booming. Beside him. Jerry heard the soft sobs of a girl. One of the figures swayed and threatened to fall as the platform was lowered to rest upon the floor. The other pressed close to support the drooping figure.

Now the entire directed ray of light from the round, glowing hole struck full upon them. It blinded and dazzled, yet, plain and distinct, Jerry saw at its heart the circle of blackness, the eye of the mysterious, hypnotic parabola—the entrance to what lay beyond.

The beat of the drums was hypnotic. As if in a trance he saw, at the side of the way they must go, the form of the head priest beckon them on. The two victims at his side took one step on the path to their death. And the same stiff rigidity held Jerry as he, too, moved

onward and up the golden ramp.

The drums were bearing them on. Louder they throbbed in a steady crescendo, to carry the three rigid figures a step at a time up the pathway of light.

The priest, Jerry felt more than saw, was beside them. Close ahead was the blackness that held the set stare of his eyes. One of the golden figures was before him. He saw the priest reach out to take the helmet from her head.

The movement aroused him from his numb horror. An impulse to escape surged through him; every nerve was tense and ready for a spring. He looked quickly about. The warriors were behind, the priests ready on their platform to direct them. And in the doorway, from where he first had seen this chamber, on the only way he knew that led to freedom, another figure, tall in its priestly robes, blocked the passage.

Hopeless, he knew. And then there swept through him a wave of hate. Gone was his horror, and gone the dull deadness of brain and body. There, facing him, was the mouth of the pit, where waited a something—horrible, rapacious—demanding the lives of these people ... of Marahna ... of others—more and yet more.

No thought now of life or escape. For the moment, Jerry Foster's whole being held nothing but hot hate, and the wish for revenge.

Before him the priest was stripping the robe from the girl at his feet. She stood like a statue, a carving of purest alabaster, slim and erect in her white, slender nakedness. And the face that he saw through incredulous eyes was that of Marahna.

Marahna! The realization and quick understanding held him spellbound. She had come, had taken the robes from another poor victim ... to be with him in this, the last hour....

Marahna—a princess among these strange folk—was giving her life when another could have been in her place. And she smiled tremulously, bravely, as her eyes locked with his, as, speechless and spellbound, he stared through the eyelets of gold.

The priest was reaching for his head-dress, Jerry tensed. The moment had come.

He was ready. As the weight left his shoulders, he dropped, with one swift movement, his golden disguise. The robe fell in folds at his feet. He stared in silence, through narrowing eyes, at the face of the head priest above him. Then, leaping straight up, he fastened one

hand, sinewy, sun-browned and strong, on the white neck below the white face. They crashed back, to land on the ramp and roll, struggling, toward the edge.

Jerry's hold never slackened. He felt his fingers sink deep in the flesh. He came to his knees, then up, to hold the writhing figure at arm's length. Then, heaving with all his strength, he whipped the man into the air, to drag him in one leaping bound for the sheltering darkness beyond.

A figure was entering with him—a slim, naked figure, with glowing and worshipping eyes.

Behind them the silence was shattered. Jerry saw, as he stepped from the light, the riot of figures that surged in hysterical frenzy through the great hall. The priests were leaping among them ... the tall priest who had guarded the door was fighting his way through the mob.

Jerry loosed his quivering hand from the throat it held. He cast the figure from him. And he blinked his eyes to make them serve him in the blackness all about.

Beside him, a form, invisible in the dark, was stroking at his face, and a voice was whispering tremulously: "Cherrie ... Cherrie!"

The tumult in the great hall reached them but faintly. Jerry Foster strove desperately to focus his eyes in that darkness of utter night. A dim glow from the portal crept softly in to bring faint illumination to the farther wall. Slowly his eyes found that which they feared yet sought.

Off in the dark, directly opposite the entrance, was a white and ghostly thing. Formless and vague, it wavered and blurred to his straining eyes. He fumbled clumsily for a match, one of his treasured store. He must see—he must know what was waiting—

The match flared to a point of brilliance in the murky gloom. It showed, on the floor where they stood, a litter of dried vegetation—food, doubtless placed there as an offering. It was dry now, and dusty, and through it there shone the bleak whiteness of bones. Beyond was the floor, and beyond that.... The whiteness that had been but a blur grew sharply distinct.

Jerry could not have told what he expected the light to disclose. Certainly it was not the heaping of coils, milk-white and ghastly, that took shape before his staring eyes. Above them a head hung in air. It was motionless—lifeless, almost—like the coiled body that held it. But the eyes, black and staring, in the bloated, bulging head, made its poised stillness the more deadly.

Even in the dark Jerry had sensed the hypnotic spell of unseen eyes. Visible, they held him in a rigid, unreasoning terror. Unreal, unthinkable, this serpentlike horror, tremendous and ghastly in its loathsome whiteness. A dweller in the dark, used by the priests as a symbol and a threat for the ignorant folk who trusted and believed them. And it held him, stilled and stricken, in its evil spell.

The flame was scorching Jerry's hand that nervelessly opened to release the match. The man was like a statue, frozen to mental deadness. About his feet a light was playing, unseen. A bit of the dry stuff sprang brightly to yellow flame. Neither seeing nor feeling, the figure of Jerry Foster stood, held in the deadly magic of the malignant eyes.

Dimly he sensed that the prostrate body on the floor was that of Marahna. Vaguely he knew when the form of the priest took a halting step forward. The fire his match had kindled was rising about his feet. The flames seared and stabbed with a pain that reached his dulled brain. Quivering and shaken, the body of Jerry Foster reacted again to a conscious thought. He leaped quickly as the deadly witchery left him, and he tore at the smoldering cloth about his legs.

And now he knew the thing before him for what it was. Shocking in its gigantic size, more so in the concentrated venom of its gaze, it

was the flabby, scaly and crusted whiteness of the thing that filled his being with a deadly nausea. He stared with a sickened fascination at the flabby, drooping pouches beside the mouth, the distorted, bulging head and the short legs, armed with long, curving talons—legs that sprang from out the neck to clutch and tear at what the jaws might hold.

Deadly and hateful—loathsome beyond all imagining—still Jerry Foster found it was something a man could meet. Its devilish power to paralyze and still the soul of him was gone.

He snatched quickly for the gun at his belt and knelt to aim—then checked his finger on the trigger. The figure of the priest had come between him and the monster.

The golden robe was dragging. It fell to the floor, to gleam dully in the flickering light of the fire. Against the heaping coils of white the priest was outlined, drawn, as Jerry sensed, against the protest of every fiber of his being. Yet, one stiff step at a time, he went faltering on. The hair above his white face was torn in disarray. And the face itself, so exultantly fierce in its hour of triumph, now a mask of quivering, hopeless terror.

The head of the monster came slowly to life. It raised and raised into

the air. The mouth gaped open with a hoarse, sucking sound, then struck, like a whip of light, at the doomed priest.

His screams, as the thing descended upon him, rang through the roar of the forty-five. Jerry fired again where the black eyes showed above the writhing body of their prey. The head jerked backward, to tower in the darkness overhead. The mouth disgorged its contents to the floor.

Only for a shuddering instant did the monster pause. Then it launched its great bulk in a counter-attack, while the automatic poured out the rest of its futile lead.

The gun was knocked from his grasp as the great head smashed past, swerved from its aim by the blinding bullets. Jerry knew only that his knife was in his hand as the great scabrous coils closed inevitably about him.

Vaguely he heard the shouting from behind as the writhing folds engulfed him. He stabbed blindly at the scaly mass; again and again his knife ripped slashingly at the abhorrence that drew him close. Then his arm, too, was caught in the crushing loathsome embrace....

He felt no pain—the pressure alone was insufferable. His head was

drawn back. Above him the horrible eyes glared into his—there was blood dripping from the jaws....

He saw it in the brilliance of a light that flashed in blue heat overhead. There came in his ears a vast roaring of sound, a great heat-blast that scorched and burned at his face. The crushing pressure was relaxed. He went reeling to the floor, as the great coils whirled high into the air.

He was stunned by the fall, his body inert and relaxed. But he knew through it all that from somewhere above there was shrieking of gas—blue, roaring fires—a flame that tore blastingly into a writhing contortion beyond.

The tall figure of a priest was bending over him, but it was the voice of Winslow that was in his ears—a blessed, human voice—when he awoke.

"Thank God, I made it," the voice was saying, over and over. "Thank God, I found the ship and got back here in time!"

There was light within the cavern. The burning fungus was extinguished by the smothering coils that had crashed upon it, but beyond was a waving plume of yellow where a blue flame shot

against a wall of rock.

And Jerry, through the stress and riot of emotion that overwhelmed him, laughed chokingly, wildly, at the words of his companion.

"It is sodium," Winslow was saying in explanation, as he saw Jerry's eyes resting on the light. "A hydrogen flame, but there's sodium in the rocks that turns the flame yellow. I rigged up a flame-thrower of hydrogen."

"You would," Jerry gasped through hysterical laughter. "You would do just that, and make your way back to this hell just to save me—you damn fool inventor!"

He clung to Winslow, who was raising him to his feet. Marahna was beside him, robed in the golden garment of the priest. She placed her hands beside his face to turn him toward the further wall. The light was fickle, but it showed him, as it rose and fell, the blackened, swollen body of the monster, still writhing in its death struggle. And beside it, blasted and charred, the head of the obscene sun god, severed by the cutting, obliterating blast, lay flabby and black in a silent heap.

"Rather effective," said Winslow complacently, "though I didn't have

much to work with. Two small vials of my liquid and a hand generator to furnish the current. A tubular strut from the frame of the ship made the blow-pipe."

"And these?" Jerry questioned, and pointed to the priest's vestments that Winslow still wore.

"Oh, it was all quiet up above," said the inventor, "and I came down the rope. But there was one of them waiting at the bottom. He didn't need these any more when I left, so I took them to help get about—"

He stopped, to cross quickly and pick up the flame-thrower as the flame died away. It roared as he worked at the mechanism, then dwindled again. Its light, for an instant, was reflected in a liquid on the floor.

"Broken!" said Winslow in an anguished voice. "The vials are gone —smashed! And I counted on this to hold off the mob, to get us safely out...."

He regarded the instrument with silent dismay. The blue flame, as he held it, flickered and died.

"Not so good!" said Jerry slowly. He stopped to retrieve the knife.

This, he reflected, was their sole weapon of defense. In the dim light his eyes met with Winslow's in mutual comprehension of their plight.

There were caverns beyond, dark and forbidding. Did they lead to the outer world? Or, instead, was it not probable that they went to some deep, subterranean dens, from which this monster had learned to come at the priests' summons? Jerry put from his mind all thought of escape in that direction.

"And Marahna, too," he told Winslow. "What will become of her?"

The girl got the essence of the question. Fumbling for phrases that they knew, she made them believe that she was safe. Her people, she told them, would protect her.

"Yes," Jerry agreed. "I guess that's right. She's a princess, you know," he reminded Winslow, "and the great mass of the people look up to her. Only the priests and warrior gangs will be opposed. But how can we get through them?"

The question was unanswered.

"We've got to knock them cold some way," said the inventor. "Got to

give them a fright that will last till they let us get through. Once at the big shaft where we came down, we can make our getaway. But how to do it...." His voice died away in dismal thought.

Jerry's eyes were casting about. The priest's robe? No, not good enough. It had brought Winslow through, but it couldn't take them back. Marahna? No help there: she had enough to do to protect herself from the fury of the priests.

His eyes rested again on the steaming, blackened mass that still showed the horrible features that had marked the head of the monster. The sun god! There was an idea there.

"Come!" he said to Winslow, and walked swiftly across to the severed head.

He had to steel his nerves before he could lay hands upon the vile thing. The paws were still attached behind the head. He took a grip on one and pulled. The great mass moved.

"I don't get the idea," said Winslow.

"Nor I," Jerry admitted, "but there's an idea here." His thoughts were racing in the moment's silence.

"I've got it," he shouted. "I've got it! If only I can make Marahna understand!" He led the girl nearer to the door, where his signs could be seen more plainly.

"You," he told her, "go out there." He pointed to the place where the priests had stood. "Tell your people"—he took the attitude of the orator declaiming to his audience—"we have come here from the sun." Again his signs were plain. Marahna nodded. This plainly was literal truth to her.

"Tell them," he continued earnestly, "we have saved them from this thing. Tell them it was no sun god, but a monster that the priests had kept. Monster!" he exclaimed, and pointed to the head and to the body that still writhed and jerked spasmodically. "No god—no!" And again the girl showed her understanding. Her eyes were glowing.

"Then," said Jerry, indicating Winslow and himself, "we will take the head that they have worshipped, and we'll drag it out and throw it to the priests." His gestures were graphic. The girl nodded her head in an ecstasy of comprehension.

"And then," Jerry added softly for Winslow's hearing, "we'll beat it. And, with luck, we'll make it safe."

"There's a chance," said Winslow softly, "there's a chance—and that's all we ask."

It's up to you, Marahna," Jerry told her. His words were meaningless, but the tone sufficed. She drew herself proudly erect, wrapped herself closely in the robe of braided gold, and stepped firmly and fearlessly through the portal and down toward the platform of the priests.

The two men watched from the shadows. Beyond the outline of the platform they saw the warrior clans, a phalanx of protecting bodies. And beyond, drawn back in huddled consternation, were masses of white-faced people—Marahna's people—who listened, now, in wondering silence to their princess.

Marahna made her way slowly to the platform's edge. Of all the countless ones to have gone that road, she was the first ever to return. She stood silent, while her eyes found their way scornfully over the enemy below. Then looking beyond them, she began to speak.

Her soft voice echoed liquidly throughout the room. She gestured, and Jerry knew that she was giving them the message.

From the priests there came once a hoarse, inarticulate growl of hate and unbelief. She silenced them with her hand. She pointed to the heavens, and she told them of the sun and of the two who were true children of the sun, who had come to save them from their false god.

Her voice rose as she told her people in impassioned tones that which she had seen. And she was shouting above the tumult of the priests and pointing directly at them as she made the roof echo with the message: "*Oong devah! Oong devah!*"

"The god is dead," translated Jerry. "*Devah* means death; she said that of herself before we left. Come on!" he shouted, and laid-hold of one great claw. "It's our turn now."

Winslow was tugging at the other foot. Between them they dragged into the light the obscene burden. Down the long ramp they took it and off upon the platform of the priests, where Marahna waited.

The priests, as Jerry's quick glance showed, were milling wildly about. It seemed that a charge was soon to follow, but the commotion ceased as the two men come upon the platform, hauling between them the great scorched head of "Oong." The vast hall was without movement or sound as they made their way out to the front. Jerry stood erect and faced the crowd.

He pointed, as had Marahna, toward the sun somewhere above those thick masses of rock; he traced it in its course across the sky; he pointed to Winslow and himself. And in loudest tones he roared throughout the room his message. "Oong," he shouted, "*Oong devah!*"

"I'll count three," he whispered in the utter silence. "Then let 'er go!"

Again he took a firm hold on the flabby paw.

"One," he whispered, and swung his body with the word. "Two ... and *three*!"

The men heaved mightily upon the gruesome horror. The head swung ghastly in scorched whiteness into the air. The dead jaws fell open as it crashed downward among the huddled, stricken priests.

"This way!" commanded Winslow. He had been carefully appraising the openings in the crowd. "And don't hurry! Remember, you're a god to them—or something a darn sight worse."

Heads proudly erect, the two strode firmly down the pathway of golden light. The room was silent as the few they met fell back in cringing fear. Slowly, interminably, the long triumphal march was

made across the rocky cavern of the moon.

Not till they reached the portal did the silence break. The shrieks of the priests and the clashing of copper were behind them, as they vanished with steady steps from out the room.

"Now run!" ordered Winslow. "Run as if the devils from hell were after you—and I think they are!" The two tore madly down the corridor whose double rows of brightness made possible their utmost speed.

There was the narrowing of the passage—Jerry remembered it—where they came out at the foot of the great shaft, the dead throat of the volcano. Behind them the shrieks and clamor echoed close. A rope was dangling from far up at the top.

Jerry leaped for it before he recalled the condition of his arm. In the excitement of the encounter he had forgotten that the arm was still in no shape for a long hand-over-hand climb.

"I can't make it," he said, and looked about quickly. There were baskets of fungus growth, already dried from the heat of the mid-day sun that had shone where it grew. He dragged one to the narrow part of the tunnel. Winslow tugged at another and threw it up as a

barricade. A chalk-white figure in copper sheathing was clambering upon it as he worked at another of the nets.

Jerry let go the fiber basket he was dragging and drew his knife as he sprang to meet the assault. A sharp cutting edge was unknown to these workers in copper. Jerry slipped under the raised bludgeoning copper weapon to plunge the knife into a white throat. Then, without a look at the body he helped Winslow, struggling with another load.

They completed the barricade. A heap of fungus made a raised place where Jerry leaped. Commanding the top of the pile that blocked the choked throat of the passage, he was ready for the next figure that leaped wildly up.

It would take them a while, Jerry saw, to learn of this scintillant death that struck at them from close quarters. His knife flashed again and again as he took the men one at a time and let their limp bodies roll back to the passage beyond.

The assault was checked when Jerry shouted to his companion. "Tie the rope around me," he ordered, "up under my arms ... then you go on up. When you get there pull up—and for the Lord's sake pull fast!"

"Go on," he shouted. "I can hold them for a while—" He turned swiftly to take a leaping body upon the red point of his knife.

He felt the rope about him as he fought, knew by its twitching when Winslow started the long climb, and prayed dumbly for strength to hold his weak fortress till the other could hoist himself up to the top.

He was fighting blindly as they came on in endless succession, the figures of frenzied priests leaping grotesquely beyond. Only the strategic position he had taken allowed him to turn the wild assault again and again. They could only reach him by ones and twos, but the end must come soon. There were priests tearing at the foot of the barricade.... The cold winds that came down from above revived him, but it helped the figures ripping at the fiber cords. The dry fungus fragments whirled gaily away and down the passage in the wind.

The wind! The draft was blowing from him, directly upon his attackers. Jerry struggled and clinched with another that bounded beside him, and knew as he fought that a weapon was at hand. His knife found the lower edge of copper, and the figure screamed as he rolled it down the slope. He slipped the knife into his left hand as he fumbled with his right.

His precious matches! He struck one on the rock; it broke in his trembling fingers. Another—there were so few left. He drew it with infinite care on the surface of rock. The figures below tore in frenzy at the weakening barricade, while yet others stood waiting at this sign of some new form of magic.

They shouted again, as they had when, those long days ago, he had lighted a cigarette before their horrified gaze. Jerry shielded the tiny blaze in his hand to bring it beneath a papery leaf beside him.

The flame flashed and dwindled. He dared not drop back to set fire to the base of the heap. But even in the exhaustion and strain of the moment Jerry Foster still knew the value of the showman's tricks in reaching the fears of these white-faced fighters.

With grandiloquent gesture he raised another of the tindery fragments and ignited it from the first. Another, and he had the beginning of a fire. He lit another piece, and, when he had it blazing, dropped it behind him and kept on with the show.

A large piece became a flaming torch, and he waved it before him and laughed to see the warriors cringe. A cloud of smoke was billowing about him—he leaped to safety through a rising wall of flame.

The rear slope of the barricade became a furnace; the wind behind him swept the smoke clouds down the passage. He heard, and sank back weakly on the ground as it came to him, the screaming riot where a mob of terrified warriors fought and struck to turn the horde that clamored behind them and pushed them on. The blast roared over the heaped fuel and poured downward from the crest. The noise of the retreat went silent in the distance.

Spent and exhausted, Jerry Foster lay panting upon the stone floor. The breath of cold and life came down the long shaft from the crater. Had Winslow gained the top? Was he equal to the climb? Jerry hardly felt the jerking of the rope about his shoulders, but he knew as, in frantic haste, it drew him scraping up the long side of the shaft.

The biting cold above revived him, and again a scene of desolation was spread before his eyes. Winslow fumbled with the knots and released him from the rope.

"Come on!" he shouted, and extended a helping hand as they leaped and raced across the rocky floor.

Jerry again was vividly, strongly alive as the cold winds swept him. He leaped hugely through the whirling wisps of dried out vegetation —the sun had stripped the surface of every living thing. Again the

rocky slopes rose naked in the rosy light of evening. The sun was hidden below a distant range of jagged hills. The long night was begun.

"You're going the wrong way," Jerry shouted. "We left it over there." He stopped to point where the sun had set. "See, that's where we fought the beasts—"

"Come on!" repeated Winslow. "Hurry! We mustn't lose out now. I flew the ship over this way while I was up here before."

A ridge of rock cut off the view where Winslow pointed. "Bully for you!" Jerry shouted and turned to follow. They stopped as the slope ahead, from its multitude of honeycomb caverns, erupted men.

The priests were ahead, and behind them swarmed their men. Vindictive and revengeful, the wily enemy was fighting to the end. The two stopped in consternation.

"What's the use!" demanded Jerry. His voice was tired, utterly hopeless. "And the ship's right over there...."

"A million miles away," said Winslow slowly, "as far as we're concerned." The army was sweeping down the long slope: they had

found their quarry. There were other figures, too, pouring from the throat of the volcano—white, naked figures that swarmed in growing numbers and rushed across upon them from the rear.

"Trapped," said Jerry Foster savagely, "and we almost made it." He rose wearily to his feet. "We'll take it standing."

The armored warriors were approaching; in leaping triumph they raced to be the first ones at the death. The shouts of the priests were ringing encouragement in their ears.

But the leaders from the rear were nearer. One deep breath Jerry drew as he turned to meet them. Then stared, astonished, as the figures swept past. They streamed by in confusion. They were armed with rocks, with clubs or copper metal—some even carried bars of gold above their heads. They came in a great swarm that swept past and beyond them. And they met, like an engulfing wave, the bounding figures of the men in copper. Smothered and lost were the warriors in the horde that poured increasingly on.

The wave, before Jerry's eyes, swept on over the crest, while he still stood in amazed unbelief at the battle that raged.

It was Marahna who brought understanding. He turned to see her

kneel in sobbing, thankful abasement at his feet.

Marahna! Her people! She had saved them! There was time needed for the full force of the truth to banish the hopeless despair from his heart. Then he stooped to raise the crouching figure with arms that were suddenly strong.

The pale rose light of the departed sun above shone softly within a rocky valley of the moon. It tipped the tall crags with lavender hues, and it touched with soft gleaming reflections a blunted cylinder of aluminum alloy.

The valley was silent, save for the hushed whispers of wondering thousands who peopled the enclosing hills, and the rushing roar from the cylinder itself where the inventor was testing his machine.

There were figures in priestly robes—scores of them—and they were surrounded by a white throng that, silent and watchful, held them captive.

Beyond, in the open, where bare rock made a black rolling floor, there were two who stood alone. The golden figure of a girl, and beside her, Jerry Foster, in wordless indecision.

Behind him was the ship. Its muffled thunder came softly to his unheeding ears. He looked at the girl steadily, thoughtfully.

Gone was all trace of her imperious dignity. The Princess Marahna was now all woman. And Jerry, looking into her dark eyes, read plainly the yearning and adoration in their depths. The Princess Marahna had forgotten her deference to the god in her love for the man. The tale was told in her flushed face, openly, unashamed.

And his gray eyes were thoughtful and tender as he gazed into hers. He was thinking, was Jerry Foster, of many things. And he was weighing them carefully. His hand clasped and unclasped at something safely hidden in his pocket. He had taken it from his pack; he had wanted something for Marahna, something she would treasure.

And now she was offering him herself. He could take her with him, take her to that far-off world that she never dreamed existed. He could show her the things of that world, its wonders and beauties. He could train her in its ways. He would watch over her, love her.... And she would be miserable and heartsick for the sight of this awful desolation. He knew it—he told himself it was the truth—and he hated himself for the telling.

The voice of Winslow aroused him. The inventor had come from his ship. "We had better be starting," he said.

The slim figure of the girl in her robe of pure gold trembled visibly. She knew, it was plain, the import of the words. She spoke rapidly, beseechingly, in her own tongue. The words were liquid music in the air. Then, realizing their impotence, she resorted to her poor vocabulary of their own strange sounds.

"No!" she said, and shook her head vehemently. "No—no!"

She motioned to wait, and she called loud and clear across the silence to her own people. There was a stir about the priests. One in the robes and head-dress of the high priest was brought forward, led by two others of her men. They stopped a few steps from her and bowed low.

Again she called, and the leaders among the vast throng came, too, and made their obeisance before her.

She turned then to Jerry. And now it was Marahna, Princess of the Moon, who stood quiet and poised before him. The light, he saw, made soft wavelets of radiance in her hair, and her eyes were still glowing and tender. She stepped forward toward the priest.

The helmet of the sun god was upon his head. It marked him, Jerry knew, as the master of their world. True, they had bowed in submission to that other master, whose vile head lay horrible and harmless on the floor of the great hall—they had believed in the commands the priests had pretended to receive from him—but this emblem on the helmet marked the leader of the race, the master of this world, for these simple folk.

Marahna reached her slim hands and lifted the thing of gold. She turned, and held it above the startled eyes of Jerry Foster, and she placed it upon his head with all the dignity that became a queen. A word from her, and the men before him dropped in humbleness to the ground. The Princess Marahna was among them in honoring salutation to their king.

Jerry was beyond speech. Not so Winslow. "It looks to me," he said dryly, "as if you were being offered the kingdom of the earth—I mean the moon. Think it over, Jerry—think it over."

And Jerry Foster thought it over, deeply and soberly. He could rule this people, he and Marahna, rule in peace and quiet and comfort. He could bring them knowledge and wisdom of infinite help; he could make their new civilization a measure of advancement for a whole race. He could teach them, train them, instruct them. And he and

Marahna—there would be children who would be princes born—could be happy—for a time. And then ... and then he would be old. Old and lonely for his kind, hungering and longing for his own people. As Marahna would be on earth, so would he be here....

His decision was formed. And with it he knew he must not hurt the heart of Marahna. She loved him, Jerry Foster, the man. He must leave her as Jerry Foster, the god, child of the sun. He stood suddenly to his full height, and who shall say that for a moment the man did not approach the stature of divinity—for he was wholly kind.

He placed a hand upon the head of the kneeling girl before him. He held her in her submissive pose, then, turning to the waiting men, he spoke in measured tones.

"I thank you," he said, and the words came from a full heart, "but my place is not here. I leave with you one more worthy."

Before their wondering gaze he removed the glowing circlet from his head; he leaned to place it on the head of Marahna, humbled before him. With strong hands he raised her to her feet. His look, so tender yet reserved, was full of meaning. She followed his every sign.

He waved once toward the sun, hidden behind the distant hills: he pointed again to Winslow and himself and to their shining ship: and again he marked the going of the sun. His meaning was plain—these children of the sun must return to their far-off home.

He turned now to Marahna. In his hand was the object he had taken from his pack. It was a treasured thing, this locket of platinum on its thin and lacy chain; it had been his mother's, and he thought of her now as he opened the clasp to show his own face framed within the oval. His mother—she had worn this. And she would have approved, he knew, of its disposal.

Gravely he faced Marahna. He showed her the picture within the case, then held it aloft where all might see. He closed it and taught her the pressure that released the spring. Then, with gentle dignity that made of the gesture a rite, he placed the chain about the neck of Princess Marahna—Queen, now, of the People of the Moon. And he knew that he gave into her keeping their only relic of a being from the sun. It marked her beyond all future question with a symbol of mastery. And it made of him a god.

And even a queen may not aspire to such an one.

It was well that Winslow's hand was there to guide him as he walked

with unseeing eyes toward the ship.

Time may lose at times all meaning and measure—moments become timeless. It seemed ages to Jerry Foster when Winslow spoke in casual tones. "I'm going straight up," he said, above the generator's roar. "Then we'll swing around above the other side. We'll follow the sun—make the full circle of the moon before we start."

But Jerry neither thought nor heard. His eyes were close to a window of thick glass. Below him was a shrinking, dwindling landscape, wind-swept and desolate.

There was a multitude of faces, turned worshipping toward the sky. On one, who stood apart in tiny loneliness, his vision centered. He watched and strained his aching eyes until the figure was no more. Only the pale rose of a dying sun, and a torn, volcanic waste that tugged strangely at his heart.

"Yes," he answered mechanically, "yes, we'll go round with the sun ... a couple of sun gods."

He laughed strangely as he regarded his companion.

If Winslow wondered at the weariness in the voice he made no sign.

He was busy with a rheostat that made thunderous roaring of the blast behind their ship: that swung them in a sweeping arc through velvet skies, away from the far side of the moon, to follow the path of the setting sun—homeward bound.

July 1930

#33 Beyond The Heaviside Layer, By Sterner St. Paul Meek:

For eighty vertical Miles Carpenter and Bond blasted their way—only to be trapped by the extraordinary monsters of the heaviside layer.

Aproximate word count: 8,200

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

McQuarrie, the City Editor, looked up as I entered his office.

"Bond," he asked, "do you know Jim Carpenter?"

"I know him slightly," I replied cautiously. "I have met him several times and I interviewed him some years ago when he improved the Hadley rocket motor. I can't claim a very extensive acquaintance with him."

"I thought you knew him well. It is a surprise to me to find that there is any prominent man who is not an especial friend of yours. At any

rate you know him as well as anyone of the staff, so I'll give you the assignment."

"What's he up to now?" I asked.

"He's going to try to punch a hole in the heaviside layer."

"But that's impossible," I cried. "How can anyone...."

My voice died away in silence. True enough, the idea of trying to make a permanent hole in a field of magnetic force was absurd, but even as I spoke I remembered that Jim Carpenter had never agreed to the opinion almost unanimously held by our scientists as to the true nature of the heaviside layer.

"It may be impossible," replied McQuarrie dryly, "but you are not hired by this paper as a scientific consultant. For some reason, God alone knows why, the owner thinks that you are a reporter. Get down there and try to prove he is right by digging up a few facts about Carpenter's attempt. Wire your stuff in and Peavey will write it up. On this one occasion, please try to conceal your erudition and send in your story in simple words of one syllable which uneducated men like Peavey and me can comprehend. That's all."

He turned again to his desk and I left the room. At one time I would have come from such an interview with my face burning, but McQuarrie's vitriol slid off me like water off a duck's back. He didn't really mean half of what he said, and he knew as well as I did that his crack about my holding my job with the Clarion as a matter of pull was grossly unjust. It is true that I knew Trimble, the owner of the Clarion, fairly well, but I got my job without any aid from him. McQuarrie himself hired me and I held my job because he hadn't fired me, despite the caustic remarks which he addressed to me. I had made the mistake when I first got on the paper of letting McQuarrie know that I was a graduate electrical engineer from Leland University, and he had held it against me from that day on. I don't know whether he really held it seriously against me or not, but what I have written above is a fair sample of his usual manner toward me.

In point of fact I had greatly minimized the extent of my acquaintance with Jim Carpenter. I had been in Leland at the same time that he was and had known him quite well. When I graduated, which was two years after he did, I worked for about a year in his laboratory, and my knowledge of the improvement which had made the Hadley rocket motor a practicability came from first hand knowledge and not from an interview. That was several years before but I knew that he never forgot an acquaintance, let alone a friend,

and while I had left him to take up other work our parting had been pleasant, and I looked forward with real pleasure to seeing him again.

Jim Carpenter, the stormy petrel of modern science! The eternal iconoclast: the perpetual opponent! He was probably as deeply versed in the theory of electricity and physical chemistry as any man alive, but it pleased him to pose as a "practical" man who knew next to nothing of theory and who despised the little he did know. His great delight was to experimentally smash the most beautifully constructed theories which were advanced and taught in the colleges and universities of the world, and when he couldn't smash them by experimental evidence, to attack them from the standpoint of philosophical reasoning and to twist around the data on which they were built and make it prove, or seem to prove, the exact opposite of what was generally accepted.

No one questioned his ability. When the ill-fated Hadley had first constructed the rocket motor which bears his name it was Jim Carpenter who made it practical. Hadley had tried to disintegrate lead in order to get his back thrust from the atomic energy which it contained and proved by apparently unimpeachable mathematics that lead was the only substance which could be used. Jim Carpenter had snorted through the pages of the electrical journals and had turned out a modification of Hadley's invention which disintegrated aluminum. The main difference in performance was that, while Hadley's original motor would not develop enough power to lift

itself from the ground, Carpenter's modification produced twenty times the horsepower per pound of weight of any previously known generator of power and changed the rocket ship from a wild dream to an everyday commonplace.

hen Hadley later constructed his space flyer and proposed to visit the moon, it was Jim Carpenter who ridiculed the idea of the attempt being successful. He proposed the novel and weird idea that the path to space was not open, but that the earth and the atmosphere were enclosed in a hollow sphere of impenetrable substance through which Hadley's space flyer could not pass. How accurate were his prognostications was soon known to everyone. Hadley built and equipped his flyer and started off on what he hoped would be an epoch making flight. It was one, but not in the way which he had hoped. His ship took off readily enough, being powered with four rocket motors working on Carpenter's principle, and rose to a height of about fifty miles, gaining velocity rapidly. At that point his velocity suddenly began to drop.

He was in constant radio communication with the earth and he reported his difficulty. Carpenter advised him to turn back while he could, but Hadley kept on. Slower and slower became his progress, and after he had penetrated ten miles into the substance which hindered him, his ship stuck fast. Instead of using his bow motors

and trying to back out, he had moved them to the rear, and with the combined force of his four motors he had penetrated for another two miles. There he insanely tried to force his motors to drive him on until his fuel was exhausted.

He had lived for over a year in his space flyer, but all of his efforts did not serve to materially change his position. He had tried, of course, to go out through his air locks and explore space, but his strength, even although aided by powerful levers, could not open the outer doors of the locks against the force which was holding them shut. Careful observations were continuously made of the position of his flyer and it was found that it was gradually returning toward the earth. Its motion was very slight, not enough to give any hope for the occupant. Starting from a motion so slow that it could hardly be detected, the velocity of return gradually accelerated; and three years after Hadley's death, the flyer was suddenly released from the force which held it, and it plunged to the earth, to be reduced by the force of its fall to a twisted, pitiful mass of unrecognizable junk.

The remains were examined, and the iron steel parts were found to be highly magnetized. This fact was seized upon by the scientists of the world and a theory was built up of a magnetic field of force surrounding the earth through which nothing of a magnetic nature could pass. This theory received almost universal acceptance, Jim

Carpenter alone of the more prominent men of learning refusing to admit the validity of it. He gravely stated it as his belief that no magnetic field existed, but that the heaviside layer was composed of some liquid of high viscosity whose density and consequent resistance to the passage of a body through it increased in the ratio of the square of the distance to which one penetrated into it.

There was a moment of stunned surprise when he announced his radical idea, and then a burst of Jovian laughter shook the scientific press. Carpenter was in his glory. For months he waged a bitter controversy in the scientific journals and when he failed to win converts by this method, he announced that he would prove it by blasting a way into space through the heaviside layer, a thing which would be patently impossible were it a field of force. He had lapsed into silence for two years and his curt note to the Associated Press to the effect that he was now ready to demonstrate his experiment was the first intimation the world had received of his progress.

I drew expense money from the cashier and boarded the Lark for Los Angeles. When I arrived I went to a hotel and at once called Carpenter on the telephone.

"Jim Carpenter speaking," came his voice presently.

"Good evening, Mr. Carpenter," I replied, "this is Bond of the San Francisco Clarion."

I would be ashamed to repeat the language which came over that telephone. I was informed that all reporters were pests and that I was a doubly obnoxious specimen and that were I within reach I would be promptly assaulted and that reporters would be received at nine the next morning and no earlier or later.

"Just a minute, Mr. Carpenter," I cried as he neared the end of his peroration and was, I fancied, about to slam up the receiver. "Don't you remember me? I was at Leland with you and used to work in your laboratory in the atomic disintegration section."

"What's your name?" he demanded.

"Bond, Mr. Carpenter."

"Oh, First Mortgage! Certainly I remember you. Mighty glad to hear your voice. How are you?"

"Fine, thank you, Mr. Carpenter. I would not have ventured to call you had I not known you. I didn't mean to impose and I'll be glad to see you in the morning at nine."

"Not by a long shot," he cried. "You'll come up right away. Where are you staying?"

"At the El Rey."

"Well, check out and come right up here. There's lots of room for you here at the plant and I'll be glad to have you. I want at least one intelligent report of this experiment and you should be able to write it. I'll look for you in an hour."

"I don't want to impose—" I began; but he interrupted.

"Nonsense, glad to have you. I needed someone like you badly and you have come just in the nick of time. I'll expect you in an hour."

he receiver clicked and I hastened to follow his instructions. A ringside seat was just what I was looking for. It took my taxi a little over an hour to get to the Carpenter laboratory and I chuckled when I thought of how McQuarrie's face would look when he saw my expense account. Presently we reached the edge of the grounds which surrounded the Carpenter laboratory and were stopped at the high gate I remembered so well.

"Are you sure you'll get in, buddy?" asked my driver.

"Certainly," I replied. "What made you ask?"

"I've brought three chaps out here to-day and none of them got in," he answered with a grin. "I'm glad you're so sure, but I'll just wait around until you are inside before I drive away."

I laughed and advanced to the gate. Tim, the old guard, was still there, and he remembered and welcomed me.

"Me ordhers wuz t' let yez roight in, sor," he said as he greeted me. "Jist lave ye'er bag here and Oi'll have ut sint roight up."

I dropped my bag and trudged up the well remembered path to the laboratory. It had been enlarged somewhat since I saw it last and, late though the hour was, there was a bustle in the air and I could see a number of men working in the building. From an area in the rear, which was lighted by huge flood lights, came the staccato tattoo of a riveter. I walked up to the front of the laboratory and entered. I knew the way to Carpenter's office and I went directly there and knocked.

"Hello, First Mortgage!" cried Jim Carpenter as I entered in response to his call. "I'm glad to see you. Excuse the bruskness of my first greeting to you over the telephone, but the press have been deviling me all day, every man jack of them trying to steal a march on the

rest. I am going to open the whole shebang at nine to-morrow and give them all an equal chance to look things over before I turn the current on at noon. As soon as we have a little chat, I'll show you over the works."

After half an hour's chat he rose. "Come along, First Mortgage," he said, "we'll go out and look the place over and I'll explain everything. If my ideas work out, you'll have no chance to go over it to-morrow, so I want you to see it now."

I had no chance to ask him what he meant by this remark, for he walked rapidly from the laboratory and I perforce followed him. He led the way to the patch of lighted ground behind the building where the riveting machine was still beating out its monotonous cacaphony and paused by the first of a series of huge reflectors, which were arranged in a circle.

"Here is the start of the thing," he said. "There are two hundred and fifty of these reflectors arranged in a circle four hundred yards in diameter. Each of them is an opened parabola of such spread that their beams will cover an area ten yards in diameter at fifty miles above the earth. If my calculations are correct they should penetrate through the layer at an average speed of fifteen miles per hour per unit, and by two o'clock to-morrow afternoon, the road to space

should be open."

"What is your power?" I asked.

"Nothing but a concentration of infra-red rays. The heaviside layer, as you doubtless know, is a liquid and, I think, an organic liquid. If I am right in that thought, the infra-red will cut through it like a knife through cheese."

"If it is a liquid, how will you prevent it from flowing back into the hole you have opened?" I asked.

"When the current is first turned on, each reflector will bear on the same point. Notice that they are moveable. They are arranged so that they move together. As soon as the first hole is bored through, they will move by clockwork, extending the opening until each points vertically upward and the hole is four hundred yards in diameter. I am positive that there will be no rapid flow even after the current is turned off, for I believe that the liquid is about as mobile as petroleum jelley. Should it close, however, it would take only a couple of hours to open it again to allow the space flyer to return."

"What space flyer?" I demanded quickly.

"The one we are going to be on, First Mortgage," he replied with a slight chuckle.

e?" I cried, aghast.

"Certainly. We. You and I. You didn't think I was going to send you alone, did you?"

"I didn't know that anyone was going."

"Of course. Someone has to go; otherwise, how could I prove my point? I might cut through a hundred holes and yet these stiff-necked old fossils, seeing nothing, would not believe. No, First Mortgage, when those arcs start working to-morrow, you and I will be in a Hadley space ship up at the bottom of the layer, and as soon as the road has been opened, two of the lamps will cut off to allow us through. Then the battery will hold the road open while we pass out into space and return."

"Suppose we meet with Hadley's fate?" I demanded.

"We won't. Even if I am wrong—which is very unlikely—we won't meet with any such fate. We have two stern motors and four bow motors. As soon as we meet with the slightest resistance to our

forward progress we will stop and have twice the power plus gravity to send us earthwards. There is no danger connected with the trip."

"All the same—" I began.

"All the same, you're going," he replied. "Man alive, think of the chance to make a world scoop for your paper! No other press man has the slightest inkling of my plan and even if they had, there isn't another space flyer in the world that I know of. If you don't want to go, I'll give some one else the chance, but I prefer you, for you know something of my work."

I thought rapidly for a moment. The chance was a unique one and one that half the press men in San Francisco would have given their shirts to get. I had had my doubts of the accuracy of Jim Carpenter's reasoning while I was away from him, but there was no resisting the dynamic personality of the man when in his presence.

"You win," I said with a laugh. "Your threat of offering some of my hated rivals a chance settled it."

"Good boy!" he exclaimed, pounding me on the back. "I knew you'd come. I had intended to take one of my assistants with me, but as soon as I knew you were here I decided that you were the man.

There really ought to be a press representative along. Come with me and I'll show you our flyer."

The flyer proved to be of the same general type as had been used by Hadley. It was equipped with six rocket motors, four discharging to the bow and two to the stern. Any one of them, Carpenter said, was ample for motive power. Equilibrium was maintained by means of a heavy gyroscope which would prevent any turning of the axis of its rotation. The entire flyer shell could be revolved about the axis so that oblique motion with our bow and stern motors was readily possible. Direct lateral movement was provided for by valves which would divert a portion of the discharge of either a bow or stern motor out through side vents in any direction. The motive power, of course, was furnished by the atomic disintegration of powdered aluminum. The whole interior, except for the portion of the walls, roof and floor, which was taken up by vitriolene windows, was heavily padded.

At nine the next morning the gates to the enclosure were thrown open and the representatives of the press admitted. Jim Carpenter mounted a platform and explained briefly what he proposed to do and then broke the crowd up into small groups and sent them over the works with guides. When all had been taken around they were reassembled and Carpenter announced to them his intention of going

up in a space flyer and prove, by going through the heaviside layer, that he had actually destroyed a portion of it. There was an immediate clamor of applications to go with him. He laughingly announced that one reporter was all that he could stand on the ship and that he was taking one of his former associates with him. I could tell by the envious looks with which I was favored that any popularity I had ever had among my associates was gone forever. There was little time to think of such things, however, for the hour for our departure was approaching, and the photographers were clamoring for pictures of us and the flyer.

We satisfied them at last, and I entered the flyer after Carpenter. We sealed the car up, started the air conditioner, and were ready for departure.

"Scared, Pete?" asked Carpenter, his hand on the starting lever.

I gulped a little as I looked at him. He was perfectly calm to a casual inspection, but I knew him well enough to interpret the small spots of red which appeared on his high cheekbones and the glitter in his eye. He may not have been as frightened as I was but he was laboring under an enormous nervous strain. The mere fact that he called me "Pete" instead of his usual "First Mortgage" showed that he was feeling pretty serious.

"Not exactly scared," I replied, "but rather uneasy, so to speak."

He laughed nervously.

"Cheer up, old man! If anything goes wrong, we won't know it. Sit down and get comfortable; this thing will start with a jerk."

He pulled the starting lever forward suddenly and I felt as though an intolerable weight were pressed against me, glueing me to my seat. The feeling lasted only for a moment, for he quickly eased up on the motor, and in a few moments I felt quite normal.

"How fast are we going?" I asked.

"Only two hundred miles an hour," he replied. "We will reach the layer in plenty of time at this rate and I don't want to jam into it. You can get up now."

I rose, moved over to the observation glass in the floor, and looked down. We were already five or ten miles above the earth and were ascending rapidly. I could still detect the great circle of reflectors with which our way was to be opened.

"How can you tell where these heat beams are when they are turned on?" I asked. "Infra-red rays are not visible, and we will soon be out

of sight of the reflectors."

"I forgot to mention that I am having a small portion of visible red rays mixed with the infra-red so that we can spot them. I have a radio telephone here, working on my private wavelength, so that I can direct operations from here as well as from the ground—in fact, better. If you're cold, turn on the heater."

The friction of the flyer against the air had so far made up for the decreasing temperature of the air surrounding us, but a glance at the outside thermometer warned me that his suggestion was a wise one. I turned a valve which diverted a small portion of our exhaust through a heating coil in the flyer. It was hard to realize that I was actually in a rocket space ship, the second one to be flown and that, with the exception of the ill-fated Hadley, farther from the earth than any man had been before. There was no sensation of movement in that hermetically sealed flyer, and, after the first few moments, the steady drone of the rocket motor failed to register on my senses. I was surprised to see that there was no trail of detritus behind us.

"You can see our trail at night," replied Carpenter when I asked him about it, "but in daylight, there is nothing to see. The slight luminosity of the gasses is hidden by the sun's rays. We may be able to see it when we get out in space beyond the layer, but I don't know.

We have arrived at the bottom of the layer now, I believe. At any rate, we are losing velocity."

I moved over to the instrument board and looked. Our speed had dropped to one hundred and ten miles an hour and was steadily falling off. Carpenter pulled the control lever and reduced our power. Gradually the flyer came to a stop and hung poised in space. He shut off the power an instant and at once our indicator showed that we were falling, although very slowly. He promptly reapplied the power, and by careful adjustment brought us again to a dead stop.

"Ready to go," he remarked looking at his watch, "and just on time, too. Take a glass and watch the ground. I am going to have the heat turned on."

I took the binoculars he indicated and turned them toward the ground while he gave a few crisp orders into his telephone. Presently from the ground beneath us burst out a circle of red dots from which long beams stabbed up into the heavens. The beams converged as they mounted until at a point slightly below us, and a half-mile away they became one solid beam of red. One peculiarity I noticed was that, while they were plainly visible near the ground, they faded out, and it was not until they were a few miles below us that they again became apparent. I followed their path upward into the heavens.

"Look here, Jim!" I cried as I did so. "Something's happening!"

He sprang to my side and glanced at the beam.

"Hurrah!" he shouted, pounding me on the back. "I was right! Look! And the fools called it a magnetic field!"

Upward the beam was boring its way, but it was almost concealed by a rain of fine particles of black which were falling around it.

"It's even more spectacular than I had hoped," he chortled. "I had expected to reduce the layer to such fluidity that we could penetrate it or even to vaporize it, but we are actually destroying it! That stuff is soot and is proof, if proof be needed, that the layer is an organic liquid."

He turned to his telephone and communicated the momentous news to the earth and then rejoined me at the window. For ten minutes we watched and a slight diminution of the black cloud became apparent.

"They're through the layer," exclaimed Carpenter. "Now watch, and you'll see something. I'm going to start spreading the beam."

He turned again to his telephone, and presently the beam began to widen and spread out. As it did so the dark cloud became more dense

than it had been before. The earth below us was hidden and we could see the red only as a dim murky glow through the falling soot. Carpenter inquired of the laboratory and found that we were completely invisible to the ground, half the heavens being hidden by the black pall. For an hour the beam worked its way toward us.

"The hole is about four hundred yards in diameter right now," said Carpenter as he turned from the telephone. "I have told them to stop the movement of the reflectors, and as soon as the air clears a little, we'll start through."

It took another hour for the soot to clear enough that we could plainly detect the ring of red light before us. Carpenter gave some orders to the ground, and a gap thirty yards wide opened in the wall before us. Toward this gap the flyer moved slowly under the side thrust of the diverted motor discharge. The temperature rose rapidly as we neared the wall of red light before us. Nearer we drew until the light was on both sides of us. Another few feet and the flyer shot forward with a jerk that threw me sprawling on the floor. Carpenter fell too, but he maintained his hold on the controls and tore at them desperately to check us.

I scrambled to my feet and watched. The red wall was alarmingly close. Nearer we drove and then came another jerk which threw me

sprawling again. The wall retreated. In another moment we were standing still, with the red all around us at a distance of about two hundred yards.

"We had a narrow escape from being cremated," said Carpenter with a shaky laugh. "I knew that our speed would increase as soon as we got clear of the layer but it caught me by surprise just the same. I had no idea how great the holding effect of the stuff was. Well, First Mortgage, the road to space is open for us. May I invite you to be my guest on a little week-end jaunt to the Moon?"

"No thanks, Jim," I said with a wry smile. "I think a little trip to the edge of the layer will quite satisfy me."

"Quitter," he laughed. "Well, say good-by to familiar things. Here we go!"

He turned to the controls of the flyer, and presently we were moving again, this time directly away from the earth. There was no jerk at starting this time, merely a feeling as though the floor were pressing against my feet, a great deal like the feeling a person gets when they rise rapidly in an express elevator. The indicator showed that we were traveling only sixty miles an hour. For half an hour we continued monotonously on our way with nothing to divert us.

Carpenter yawned.

"Now that it's all over, I feel let down and sleepy," he announced. "We are well beyond the point to which Hadley penetrated and so far we have met with no resistance. We are probably nearly at the outer edge of the layer. I think I'll shoot up a few miles more and then call it a day and go home. We are about eighty miles from the earth now."

I looked down, but could see nothing below us but the dense cloud of black soot resulting from the destruction of the heaviside layer. Like Carpenter, I felt sleepy, and I suppressed a yawn as I turned again to the window.

"Look here, Jim!" I cried suddenly. "What's that?"

He moved in a leisurely manner to my side and looked out. As he did so I felt his hand tighten on my shoulder with a desperate grip. Down the wall of red which surrounded us was coming an object of some kind. The thing was fully seventy-five yards long and half as wide at its main portion, while long irregular streams extended for a hundred yards on each side of it. There seemed to be dozens of them.

"What is it, Jim?" I asked in a voice which sounded high and

unnatural to me.

"I don't know," he muttered, half to me and half to himself. "Good Lord, there's another of them!"

He pointed. Not far from the first of the things came another, even larger than the first. They were moving sluggishly along the red light, seeming to flow rather than to crawl. I had a horrible feeling that they were alive and malignant.

Carpenter stepped back to the controls of the flyer and stopped our movement; we hung in space, watching them. The things were almost level with us, but their sluggish movement was downward toward the earth. In color, they were a brilliant crimson, deepening into purple near the center. Just as the first of them came opposite us it paused, and slowly a portion of the mass extended itself from the main bulk; and then, like doors opening, four huge eyes, each of them twenty feet in diameter, opened and stared at us.

"It's alive, Jim," I quavered. I hardly knew my own voice as I spoke.

Jim stepped back to the controls with a white face, and slowly we moved closer to the mass. As we approached I thought that I could detect a fleeting passage of expression in those huge eyes. Then they

disappeared and only a huge crimson and purple blob lay before us. Jim moved the controls again and the flyer came to a stop.

Two long streamers moved out from the mass. Suddenly there was a jerk to the ship which threw us both to the floor. It started upward at express train speed. Jim staggered to his feet, grasped the controls and started all four bow motors at full capacity, but even this enormous force had not the slightest effect in diminishing our speed.

"Well, the thing's got us, whatever it is," said Jim as he pulled his controls to neutral, shutting off all power. Now that the danger had assumed a tangible form, he appeared as cool and collected as ever, to my surprise, I found that I had recovered control of my muscle and of my voice. I became aware that the shoulder which Jim had gripped was aching badly, and I rubbed it absently.

"What is it, Jim?" I asked for the third time.

"I don't know," he replied. "It is some horrible inhabitant of space, something unknown to us on earth. From its appearance and actions, I think it must be a huge single-celled animal of the type of the earthly amoeba. If an amoeba is that large here, what must an elephant look like? However, I expect that we'll learn more about the matter later because it's taking us with it, wherever it's going."

uddenly the flyer became dark inside. I looked at the nearest window, but I could not even detect its outline. I reached for the light switch, but a sudden change in direction threw me against the wall. There was an instant of intense heat in the flyer.

"We have passed the heaviside layer," said Jim. "The brute has changed direction, and we felt that heat when he took us through the infra-red wall."

I reached again for the light switch, but before I could find it our motion ceased and an instant later the flyer was filled with glaring sunlight. We both turned to the window.

We lay on a glistening plain of bluish hue which stretched without a break as far as we could see. Not a thing broke the monotony of our vision. We turned to the opposite window. How can I describe the sight which met our horrified gaze? On the plain before us lay a huge purple monstrosity of gargantuan dimensions. The thing was a shapeless mass, only the four huge eyes standing out regarding us balefully. The mass was continually changing its outline and, as we watched, a long streamer extended itself from the body toward us. Over and around the flyer the feeler went, while green and red colors played over first one and then another of the huge eyes before us. The feeler wrapped itself around the flyer and we were lifted into the

air toward those horrible eyes. We had almost reached them when the thing dropped us. We fell to the plain with a crash. We staggered to our feet again and looked out. Our captor was battling for its life.

ts attacker was a smaller thing of a brilliant green hue, striped and mottled with blue and yellow. While our captor was almost formless, the newcomer had a very definite shape. It resembled a cross between a bird and a lizard, its shape resembling a bird, as did tiny rudimentary wings and a long beak, while the scaly covering and the fact that it had four legs instead of two bore out the idea that it might be a lizard. Its huge birdlike beak was armed with three rows of long sharp teeth with which it was tearing at our captor. The purple amoeba was holding its assailant with a dozen of its thrown out feelers which were wrapped about the body and legs of the green horror. The whole battle was conducted in absolute silence.

"Now's our chance, Jim!" I cried. "Get away from here while that dragon has the amoeba busy!"

He jumped to the control levers of the flyer and pulled the starting switch well forward. The shock of the sudden start hurled me to the floor, but from where I fell I was able to watch the battle on the plain below us. It raged with uninterrupted fury and I felt certain of our escape when, with a shock which hurled both Jim and me to the

ceiling, the flyer stopped. We fell back to the floor and I reflected that it was well for us that the interior of the flyer was so well padded. Had it not been, our bones would have been broken a dozen times by the shocks to which we had been subjected.

"What now?" I asked as I painfully struggled to my feet.

"Another of those purple amoebas," replied Jim from the vantage point of a window. "He's looking us over as if he were trying to decide whether we are edible or not."

joined him at the window. The thing which had us was a replica of the monster we had left below us engaged in battle with the green dragon which had attacked it. The same indefinite and ever changing outline was evident, as well as the four huge eyes. The thing regarded us for a moment and slowly moved us up against its bulk until we touched it. Deeper and deeper into the mass of the body we penetrated until we were in a deep cavern with the light coming to us only from the entrance. I watched the entrance and horror possessed my soul.

"The hole's closing. Jim!" I gasped. "The thing is swallowing us!"

"I expected that," he replied grimly. "The amoeba has no mouth, you

know. Nourishment is passed into the body through the skin, which closes behind it. We are a modern version of Jonah and the whale, First Mortgage."

"Well, Jonah got out," I ventured.

"We'll try to," he replied. "When that critter swallowed us, he got something that will prove pretty indigestible. Let's try to give him a stomach ache. I don't suppose that a machine-gun will affect him, but we'll try it."

"I didn't know that you had any guns on board."

"Oh yes, I've got two machine-guns. We'll turn one of them loose, but I don't expect much effect from it."

He moved over to one of the guns and threw off the cover which had hidden it from my gaze. He fed in a belt of ammunition and pulled his trigger. For half a minute he held it down, and two hundred and fifty caliber thirty bullets tore their way into space. There was no evidence of movement on the part of our host.

"Just as I thought," remarked Jim as he threw aside the empty belt and covered the gun again. "The thing has no nervous organization

to speak of and probably never felt that. We'll have to rig up a disintegrating ray for him."

"What?" I gasped.

"A disintegrating ray," he replied. "Oh yes, I know how to make the fabulous 'death ray' that you journalists are always raving about. I have never announced my discovery, for war is horrible enough without it, but I have generated it and used it in my work a number of times. Did it never occur to you that the rocket motor is built on a disintegrating ray principle?"

"Of course it is, Jim. I never thought of it in that light before, but it must be. How can you use it? The discharge from the motors is a harmless stream of energy particles."

"Instead of turning the ray into powdered aluminum and breaking it down, what is to prevent me from turning it against the body of our captor and blasting my way out?"

"I don't know."

"Well, nothing is. I'll have to modify one of the motors a little, but it's not a hard job. Get some wrenches from the tool box and we'll

start."

An hour of hard work enabled us to disconnect one of the reserve bow motors and, after the modifications Jim had mentioned, turn the ray out through the port through which the products of disintegration were meant to go. When we had bolted it in place with an improvised coupling, Jim opened the vitriolene screen which held in our air and turned to his control board.

"Here goes," he said.

He pulled the lever to full power and with a roar which almost deafened us in the small flyer, the ray leaped out to do its deadly work. I watched through a port beside the motor. There was a flash of intense light for an instant and then the motor died away in silence. A path to freedom lay open before us. Jim started one of the stern motors and slowly we forced our way through the hole torn in the living mass. When we were almost at the surface, he threw in full power and we shot free from the amoeba and into the open. Again we were stopped in midair and drawn back toward the huge bulk. The eyes looked at us and we were turned around. As the ray swung into a position to point directly toward one of the eyes, Jim pulled the controlling lever. With the flash of light which ensued, the eye and a portion of the surrounding tissue disappeared. The amoeba

writhed and changed shape rapidly, while flashes of brilliant crimson played over the remaining eyes. Again the ray was brought into play and another of the eyes disappeared. This was evidently enough for our captor, for it suddenly released us and instantly we started to fall. Jim caught the control levers and turned on our power in time to halt us only a few feet above the plain toward which we were falling. We were close to the point whence we had started up and we could see that the battle below us was still raging.

The green dragon was partially engulfed by the amoeba, but it still relentlessly tore off huge chunks and devoured them. The amoeba was greatly reduced in bulk but it still fought gamely. Even as we approached the dragon was evidently satiated, for it slowly withdrew from the purple bulk and back away. Long feelers shot out from the amoeba's bulk toward the dragon but they were bitten off before they could grasp their prey.

"Let's get away from here, Jim," I cried, but I spoke too late. Even as the words left my mouth the green dragon saw us and raised itself in the air, and with gaping jaws launched itself at us. It took Jim only a moment to shoot the flyer up into space, and the charge passed harmlessly beneath us. The dragon checked its headway and turned again toward us.

"Use the machine-gun, Pete!" cried Jim. "I've got to run the ship."

I threw the cover off the gun and fed in a fresh belt of ammunition. As the green monster dashed toward us I hastily aligned the gun and pulled the trigger. My aim was good and at least fifty of the bullets plowed through the approaching bulk before Jim dropped the ship and allowed it to pass above us. Again the dragon turned and charged, and again I met it with a hail of bullets. They had no apparent effect and Jim dropped the ship again and let the huge bulk shoot by above us. Twice more the dragon rushed but the last rush was less violent than had been the first three.

"The bullets are affecting him, Pete!" cried Jim as he shot the flyer upward. "Give him another dose!"

I hastily fed in another belt, but it was not needed. The dragon rushed the fifth time, but before it reached us its velocity fell off and it passed harmlessly below us and fell on a long curve to the plain below. It fell near the purple amoeba which it had battled and a long feeler shot out and grasped it. Straight into the purple mass it was drawn, and vanished into the huge bulk.

Jim started one of the stern motors. In a few seconds we were far from the scene.

"Have you any idea of which direction to go?" he asked. I shook my head.

"Have you a radio beacon?" I asked.

He withered me with a glance.

"We're beyond the heaviside layer," he reminded me.

For a moment I was stunned.

"We can't be very far from the hole," he said consolingly as he fumbled with the controls. "But before we try to find it, we had better disconnect one of the stern motors and rig it as a disintegrating ray so that we will have one bearing in each direction. We may meet more denizens of space who like our looks, and we haven't much ammunition left."

We landed on the plain and in an hour had a second disintegrating ray ready for action. Thus armed, we rose from the blue plain and started at random on our way. For ten minutes we went forward. Then Jim stopped the flyer and turned back. We had gone only a short distance when I called to him to stop.

"What is it?" he demanded as he brought the flyer to a standstill.

"There's another creature ahead of us," I replied. "A red one."

"Red?" he asked excitedly as he joined me. About a mile ahead of us a huge mass hung in the air. It resembled the amoeba which had attacked us, except that the newcomer was red. As we watched, it moved toward us. As it did so its color changed to purple.

"Hurrah!" cried Jim. "Don't you remember, Pete, that the one which captured us and took us out of the hole was red while in the hole and then turned purple? That thing just came out of the hole!"

"Then why can't we see the red beam?" I demanded.

"Because there's no air or anything to reflect it," he replied. "We can't see it until we are right in it."

I devoutly hoped that he was right as he headed the ship toward the waiting monster. As we approached the amoeba came rapidly to meet us and a long feeler shot out. As it did so there was a flash of intense light ahead of us as Jim turned loose the ray, and the feeler disappeared. Another and another met the same fate. Then Jim rotated the ship slightly and let out the full force of the ray toward the monster. A huge hole was torn in it, and as we approached with our ray blazing, the amoeba slowly retreated and our path was open

before us. Again there was an instant of intense heat as we passed through the red wall, and we were again in the hole which Jim's lamps had blasted through the layer. Below us still lay the fog which had obscured the earth when we had started on our upward trip.

Down toward the distant earth we dropped. We had gone about thirty miles before we saw on the side of the hole one of the huge amoeba which were so thick above.

"We might stop and pick that fellow off," said Jim, "but, on the whole, I think we'll experiment with him."

He drove the ship nearer and turned it on its axis, holding it in position by one of the auxiliary discharges. A flash came from our forward ray and a portion of the amoeba disappeared. A long arm moved out toward us, but it moved slowly and sluggishly instead of with the lightninglike swiftness which had characterized the movements of the others. Jimmy easily eluded it and dropped the ship a few yards. The creature pursued it, but it moved slowly. For a mile we kept our distance ahead of it, but we had to constantly decrease our speed to keep from leaving it behind. Soon we were almost at a standstill, and Jim reversed our direction and drew nearer. A feeler came slowly and feebly out a few feet toward us and then stopped. We dropped the ship a few feet but the amoeba did not

follow. Jim glanced at the altimeter.

"Just as I thought," he exclaimed. "We are about forty-five miles above the earth and already the air is so dense that the thing cannot move lower. They are fashioned for existence in the regions of space and in even the most rarified air they are helpless. There is no chance of one ever reaching the surface of the earth without years of gradual acclimation, and even if it did, it would be practically immobile. In a few years the layer will flow enough to plug the hole I have made, but even so, I'll build a couple of space flyers equipped with disintegrating rays as soon as we get down and station them alongside the hole to wipe out any of that space vermin which tries to come through. Let's go home. We've put in a good day's work."

Hundreds of the purple amoeba have been destroyed by the guarding ships during the past five years. The hole is filling in as Jim predicted, and in another ten years the earth will be as securely walled in as it ever was. But in the mean time, no one knows what unrevealed horrors space holds, and the world will never rest entirely easy until the slow process of time again heals the broken protective layer.

#34 The Attack From Space, By Sterner St. Paul Meek:

From a far world came monstrous invaders who were all the more terrifying because invisible.

Aproximate word count: 11,000

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

"No one knows what unrevealed horrors space holds and the world will never rest entirely easy until the slow process of time again heals the protective layer."—From "Beyond the Heaviside Layer."

Over a year has passed since I wrote those lines. When they were written the hole which Jim Carpenter had burned with his battery of infra-red lamps through the heaviside layer, that hollow sphere of invisible semi-plastic organic matter which encloses the world as a nutshell does a kernel, was gradually filling in as he had predicted it would: every one thought that in another ten years the world would be safely enclosed again in its protective layer as it had been since

the dawn of time. There were some adventurous spirits who deplored this fact, as it would effectually bar interplanetary travel, for Hadley had proved with his life that no space flyer could force its way through the fifty miles of almost solid material which barred the road to space, but they were in the minority. Most of humanity felt that it would rather be protected against the denizens of space than to have a road open for them to travel to the moon if they felt inclined.

From a far world came monstrous invaders who were all the more terrifying because invisible.

To be sure, during the five years that the hole had been open, nothing more dangerous to the peace and well-being of the world had appeared from space than a few hundreds of the purple amoeba which we had found so numerous on the outer side of the layer, when we had traveled in a Hadley space ship up through the hole into the outer realms of space, and one lone specimen of the green dragons which we had also encountered. The amoeba had been readily destroyed by the disintegrating rays of the guarding space-ships which were stationed inside the layer at the edge of the hole and the lone dragon had fallen a ready victim to the machine-gun bullets which had been poured into it. At first the press had damned Jim Carpenter for opening the road for these horrors, but once their harmlessness had been clearly established, the row had died down

and the appearance of an amoeba did not merit over a squib on the inside pages of the daily papers.

While the hole in the heaviside layer was no longer news for the daily press, a bitter controversy still waged in the scientific journals as to the reason why no observer on earth, even when using the most powerful telescopes, could see the amoeba before they entered the hole, and then only when their telescopes were set up directly under the hole. When a telescope of even small power was mounted in the grounds back of Carpenter's laboratory, the amoeba could be detected as soon as they entered the hole, or when they passed above it through space; but, aside from that point of vantage, they were entirely invisible.

Carpenter's theory of the absorptive powers of the material of which the heaviside layer was composed was laughed to scorn by most scientists, who pointed out the fact that the sun, moon and stars could be readily seen through it. Carpenter replied that the rays of colored or visible light could only pass through the layer when superimposed upon a carrier wave of ultra-violet or invisible light. He stated dogmatically that the amoeba and the other denizens of space absorbed all the ultra-violet light which fell on them and reflected only the visible rays which could not pass through the heaviside layer because of the lack of a synchronized carrier wave of

shorter wave-length.

Despetier replied at great length and showed by apparently unimpeachable mathematics that Carpenter was entirely wrong and that his statements showed an absolute lack of knowledge of the most elementary and fundamental laws of light transmission. Carpenter replied briefly that he could prove by mathematics that two was equal to one and he challenged Despetier or anyone else to satisfactorily explain the observed facts in any other way. While they vainly tried to do so, Carpenter lapsed into silence in his Los Angeles laboratory and delved ever deeper into the problems of science. Such was the situation when the attack came from space.

My first knowledge of the attack came when McQuarrie, the city editor of the San Francisco *Clarion*, sent for me. When I entered his office he tossed a Los Angeles dispatch on the desk before me and with a growl ordered me to read it. It told of the unexplained disappearance of an eleven year old boy the night before. It looked like a common kidnapping.

"Well?" I asked as I handed him back the dispatch.

With another growl he tossed down a second telegram. I read it with astonishment, for it told of a second disappearance which had

happened about an hour after the first. The similarity of the two cases was at once apparent.

"Coincidence or connection?" I asked as I returned it.

"Find out!" he replied. "If I knew which it was I wouldn't be wasting the paper's money by sending you to Los Angeles. I don't doubt that I am wasting it anyway, but as long as I am forced to keep you on as a reporter, I might as well try to make you earn the money the owner wastes on paying you a salary, even although I know it to be a hopeless task. Go on down there and see what you can find out, if anything."

I jotted down in my notebook the names and addresses of the missing children and turned to leave. A boy entered and handed McQuarrie a yellow slip. He glanced at it and called me back.

"Wait a minute, Bond," he said as he handed me the dispatch. "I doubt but you'd better fly down to Los Angeles. Another case has just been reported."

I hastily copied down the dispatch he handed me, which was almost a duplicate of the first two with the exception of the time and the name. Three unexplained disappearances in one day was enough to

warrant speed; I drew some expense money and was on my way south in a chartered plane within an hour.

On my arrival I went to the Associated Press office and found a message waiting for me, directing me to call McQuarrie on the telephone at once.

"Hello, Bond," came his voice over the wire, "have you just arrived? Well, forget all about that disappearance case. Prince is on his way to Los Angeles to cover it. You hadn't been gone an hour before a wire came in from Jim Carpenter. He says, 'Send Bond to me at once by fastest conveyance. Chance for a scoop on the biggest story of the century.' I don't know what it's about, but Jim Carpenter is always front page news. Get in touch with him at once and stay with him until you have the story. Don't risk trying to telegraph it when you get it—telephone. Get moving!"

I lost no time in getting Carpenter on the wire.

"Hello, First Mortgage," he greeted me. "You made good time getting down here. Where are you?"

"At the A. P. Office."

"Grab a taxi and come out to the laboratory. Bring your grip with you: you may have to stay over night."

"I'll be right out, Jim. What's the story?"

His voice suddenly grew grave.

"It's the biggest thing you ever handled," he replied. "The fate of the whole world may hang on it. I don't want to talk over the phone; come on out and I'll give you the whole thing."

An hour later I shook hands with Tim, the guard at the gate of the Carpenter laboratory, and passed through the grounds to enter Jim's private office. He greeted me warmly and for a few minutes we chatted of old times when I worked with him as an assistant in his atomic disintegration laboratory and of the stirring events we had passed through together when we had ventured outside the heaviside layer in his space ship.

"Those were stirring times," he said, "but I have an idea, First Mortgage, that they were merely a Sunday school picnic compared to what we are about to tackle."

"I guessed that you had something pretty big up your sleeve from

your message." I replied. "What's up now? Are we going to make a trip to the moon and interview the inhabitants?"

"We may interview them without going that far," he said. "Have you seen a morning paper?"

"No."

"Look at this."

He handed me a copy of the *Gazette*. Streamer headlines told of the three disappearances which I had come to Los Angeles to cover, but they had grown to five during the time I had been flying down. I looked at Jim in surprise.

"We got word of that in San Francisco," I told him, "and I came down here to cover the story. When I got here, McQuarrie telephoned me your message and told me to come and see you instead. Has your message anything to do with this?"

"It has everything to do with it, First Mortgage; in fact, it *is* it. Have you any preconceived ideas on the disappearance epidemic?"

"None at all."

"All the better—you'll be able to approach the matter with an unbiased viewpoint. Don't read that hooey put out by an inspired reporter who blames the laxness of the city government; I'll give you the facts without embellishment. Nothing beyond the bare fact of the disappearance is known about the first case. Robert Prosser, aged eleven, was sent to the grocery store by his mother about six-thirty last night and failed to return. That's all we know about it, except that it happened in Eagle Rock. The second case we have a little more data on. William Hill, aged twelve, was playing in Glendale last night with some companions. They were playing 'hide and go seek' and William hid. He could not be found by the boy who was searching and has not been found since. His companions became frightened and reported it about eight o'clock. They saw nothing, but mark this! Four of them agree that they heard a sound in the air *like a motor humming*."

"That proves nothing."

"Taken alone it does not, but in view of the third case, it is quite significant. The third case happened about nine-thirty last night. This time the victim was a girl, aged ten. She was returning home from a moving picture with some companions and she disappeared. This time the other children saw her go. They say she was suddenly taken straight up into the air and then disappeared from sight. They, also

claim to have heard a sound like a big electric fan in the air at the time, although they could see nothing."

"Had they heard the details of the second disappearance?"

"They had not. I can see what you are thinking; that they were unconsciously influenced by the account given of the other case."

"Consciously or unconsciously."

"I doubt it, for the fourth case was almost a duplicate of the third. The fourth and fifth cases happened this morning. In the fourth case the child, for it was a nine year old girl this time, was lifted into the air in broad daylight and disappeared. This disappearance was witnessed, not only by children, but also by two adults, and their testimony agrees completely with that of the children. The fifth case is similar to the first: a ten year old boy disappeared without trace. The whole city is in a reign of terror."

The telephone at Carpenter's elbow rang and he answered it. A short conversation took place and he turned to me with a grim face as he hung up the receiver.

"Another case has just been reported to police headquarters from

Beverly Hills," he said. "Again the child was seen to be lifted into the air by some invisible means and disappeared. The sound of a motor was plainly heard by five witnesses, who all agree that it was just, above their heads, but that nothing could be seen."

"Was it in broad daylight?"

"Less than an hour ago."

"But, Jim, that's impossible!"

"Why is it impossible?"

"It would imply the invisibility of a tangible substance; of a solid."

"What of it?"

"Why, there isn't any such substance. Nothing of the sort exists."

Carpenter pointed to one of the windows of his laboratory.

"Does that window frame contain glass or not?" he asked.

I strained my eyes. Certainly nothing was visible.

"Yes," I said at a venture.

He rose and thrust his hand through the space where the glass should have been.

"Has this frame glass in it?" he asked, pointing to another.

"No."

He struck the glass with his knuckle.

"I'll give up," I replied. "I am used to thinking of glass as being transparent but not invisible; yet I can see that under certain light conditions it may be invisible. Granted that such is the case, do you believe that living organisms can be invisible?"

"Under the right conditions, yes. Has any observer been able to see any of the purple amoeba which we know are so numerous on the outer side of the heaviside layer?"

"Not until they have entered the hole through the layer."

"And yet those amoeba are both solid and opaque, as you know. Why is it not possible that men, or intelligences of some sort, are in the air about us and yet are invisible to our eyes!"

"If they are, why haven't we received evidence of it years ago?"

"Because there has only been a hole through the heaviside layer for six years. Before that time they could not penetrate it any more than poor Hadley could with his space ship. They have not entered the hole earlier because it is a very small one, at present only some two hundred and fifty yards in diameter in a sphere of over eight thousand miles diameter. The invaders have just found the entrance."

"The invaders? Do you think that the world has been invaded?"

"I do. How else can you explain the very fact which you have just quoted, that no evidence of the presence on these invisible entities has previously been recorded?"

"Where did they come from?"

"They may have come from any where in the solar system, or even from outside it but I fancy, that they are from Mars or Venus."

"Why so?"

"Because they are the two planets nearest to the earth and are the ones where conditions are the most like they are on the earth. Venus, for example, has an atmosphere and a gravity about .83 of earthly

gravity, and life of a sort similar to that of the earth might well live there. Further, it seems more probable that the invaders have come from one of the nearby planets than from the realms of space beyond the solar system."

"What about the moon?"

"We can dismiss that because of the lack of an atmosphere."

"It sounds logical, Jim, but the idea of living organisms of sufficient size to lift a child into the air who are invisible seems a little absurd."

"I never said they were invisible. I don't think they are."

"But they must be, else why weren't they seen?"

"Use your head, First Mortgage. Those purple amoeba we encountered were quite visible to us, yet they are invisible to observers on the earth."

"Yes, but that is because the heaviside layer is between them and the earth. As soon as they come below it they can be seen."

"Exactly. Why is it not possible that the Venetians, or Martians, or

whoever our invaders are, have encased themselves and their space flyer in a layer of some substance similar to the heaviside layer, a substance which is permeable to light rays only when a large proportion of ultra-violet rays accompany the visible rays? If they did this and then constructed the walls of their ship of some substance which absorbed all the ultra-violet rays which fell on it; not only would the ship itself be invisible, but also everything contained in it—and yet they could see the outside world easily. That such *is* the case is proved by the disappearance of those children in mid-air. They were taken into a space ship behind an ultra-violet absorbing wall and so became invisible."

"If the walls absorbed all the ultra-violet and were impermeable to light without ultra-violet, the ship would appear as a black opaque substance and could be seen."

"That would be true except for one thing which you are forgetting. The heaviside layer, as I have repeatedly proved, is a splendid conductor of ultra-violet. The rays falling on it are probably bent along the line of the covering layer so that they open up and bend around the ship in the same manner as flowing water will open up and flow around a stone and then come together again. The light must flow around the solid ship and then join again in such a manner that the eye can detect no interruption."

"Jim, all that sounds reasonable, but have you any proof of it?"

"No, First Mortgage, I haven't—yet; but if the Lord is good to us we'll have definite proof this afternoon and be in a position to successfully combat this new menace to the world."

"Do you expect me to go on another one of your crack-brained expeditions into the unknown with you?"

"Certainly I do, but this time we won't go out of the known. I have our old space flyer which we took beyond the heaviside layer six years ago ready for action and we're going to look for the invaders this afternoon."

"How will we see them if they are invisible?"

"They are invisible to ordinary light but not to ultra-violet light. While most of the ultra-violet is deflected and flows around the ship or else is absorbed, I have an idea that, if we bathe it in a sufficient concentration of ultra-violet, some would be reflected. We are going to look for the reflected portion."

"Ultra-violet light is invisible."

"It is to the eye, but it can be detected. You know that radium is

activated and glows under ultra-violet?"

"Yes."

"Mounted on our flyer are six ultra-violet searchlights. By the side of each one is a wide angle telescopic concentrator which will focus any reflected ultra-violet onto a radium coated screen and thus make it visible to us. In effect the apparatus is a camera obscura with all lens made of rock crystal or fused quartz, both of which allow free passage to ultra-violet."

"What will we do if we find them?"

"Mounted beneath the telescope is a one-pounder gun with radite shells. If we locate them, we will use our best efforts to shoot them down."

"Suppose they are armed too?"

"In that case I hope that you shoot faster and straighter than they do. If you don't—well, old man, it'll just be too damned bad."

"I don't know that the *Clarion* hires me to go out and shoot at invisible invaders from another planet, but if I don't go with you, I expect you'd just about call up the *Echo* or the *Gazette* and ask them

for a gunner."

"Just about."

"In that case, I may as well be sacrificed as anyone else. When do we start?"

"You old faker!" cried Jim, pounding me on the back. "You wouldn't miss the trip for anything. If you're ready we'll start right now. Everything is ready."

"Including the sacrifice," I replied, rising. "All right, Jim, let's go and get it over with. If we live, I'll have to get back in time to telephone the story to McQuarrie for the first edition."

I followed Jim out of the laboratory and to a large open space behind the main building where the infra-red generators with which he had pierced the hole through the heaviside layer had been located. The reflectors were still in place, but the bank of generators had been removed. A gang of men were hard at work erecting a huge parabolic reflector in the center of the circle, about the periphery of which the infra-red reflectors were placed. In an open space near the center stood a Hadley space ship, toward which Jim led the way.

I wondered at the activity and meant to ask what it portended, but in the excitement of boarding the flyer forgot it. I followed Jim in; he closed the door and started the air conditioner.

"Here, First Mortgage," he said as he turned from the control board and faced me, "here are the fluoroscopic screens. They are arranged in a bank, so that you can keep an eye on all of them readily. Beneath each telescope is an automatic one-pounder gun with its mount geared to the telescope and the light, so that the gun bears continually on the point in space represented by the center of the fluoroscopic screen which belongs to that light. If we locate anything, turn your beam until the object is in the exact center of the screen where these two cross-hairs are. When you have it lined up, push this button and the gun will fire."

"What about reloading?"

"The guns are self-loading. Each one has twenty shells in its magazine and will fire one shot each time the button is pushed until it is empty. If you empty one magazine, I can turn the ship so that another gun will bear. This gives you a total of one hundred and twenty shots quickly available; there are sixty extra rounds, which we can break out and load into the magazines in a few seconds. Do you understand everything?"

"I guess so. Everything seems clear enough."

"All right; sit down and we'll start."

I took my seat, and Jim pulled the starting lever. I was glued to the seat and the heavy springs in the cushion were compressed almost to their limit by the sudden acceleration. As soon as we were well clear of the ground Jim reduced his power, and in a few moments we were floating motionless in the air, a thousand feet up. He left the control board and came to my side.

"Start your ultra lights," he said as he joined me. "We may be able to spot something from here."

I started the lights and we stared at the screens before us. Nothing appeared on any of them except the one pointing directly down, and only an image of the ground, appeared on it. Under Jim's tutelage I swung the beams in wide circles, covering the space around us, but nothing appeared.

"Those beams won't project over five miles in this atmosphere," he said, "and the ship we are looking for may be so small that we would have trouble locating it at any great distance. I am going to move over near the scene of the last disappearance. Keep your lights

swinging and sing out if you see anything on the screens."

I could feel the ship start to move slowly under the force of a side discharge from the rocket motor, and I swung the beams of the six lights around, trying to cover the entire area about us. Nothing appeared on the screens for an hour, and my head began to ache from the strain of unremitting close observation of the glowing screens. A buzz sounding over the hum of the rocket motor attracted my attention; Jim pulled his levers to neutral with the exception of the one which maintained our elevation and stepped to an instrument on the wall of the flyer.

"Hello," he called. "What? Where did it happen? All right, thanks, we'll move over that way at once."

He turned from the radio telephone and spoke.

"Another disappearance has just been reported," he said. "It happened on the outskirts of Pasadena. Keep your eyes open: I'm going to head in that direction."

A few minutes later we were floating over Pasadena. Jim stopped the flyer and joined me at the screens. We swung our beams in wide circles to cover the entire area around us, but no image on the

screens rewarded us.

"Doggone it, they must have left here in a hurry," grumbled Jim.

Even as he spoke the flyer gave a lurch which nearly threw me off my seat and which sent Jim sprawling on the floor. With a white face he leaped to the control board and pulled the lever controlling our one working stern motor to full power. For a moment the ship moved upward and then came to a dead stop, although the motor still roared at full speed.

"Can't you see anything, Pete?" cried Jim as he threw our second stern motor into gear.

Again the ship moved upward for a few feet and then stopped. I swung the searchlights frantically in all directions, but five of the screens remained blank and the sixth showed only the ground below us.

"Not a thing," I replied.

"Something ought to show," he muttered, and suddenly shut off both motors. The flyer gave a sickening lurch toward the ground, but we fell only a hundred yards before our motion stopped. We hung

suspended in the air with no motors working. Jim joined me at the screens and we swung the lights rapidly without success.

"Look, Pete!" Jim cried hoarsely.

My gaze followed his pointing finger and I saw the door of our flyer springing out as though some force from the outside were trying to wrench it open. The pull ceased for an instant, then came again; the sturdy latches burst and the door was torn from its hinges. Jim swung one of the searchlights until the beam was at right angles to the hull of the flyer and pressed the gun button. A crash filled the confined space of the flyer as a one-pounder radite shell tore out into space.

"They're there but still invisible," he exclaimed as he shifted the direction of the gun and fired again. "I am shooting by guess-work, but I might score a hit."

He changed the direction of the gun again, but before he could press the button he was lifted into the air and drawn rapidly toward the open door.

"Shoot, Pete!" he shouted. "Shoot and keep on shooting—it's your only chance!"

I turned to the knobs controlling the guns and lights, but, before I could make a move, something hard and cold grasped me about the middle and I was lifted into the air and drawn toward the open door after Jim. I tore at the thing holding me with my hands, but it was a smooth round thing like a two-inch thick wire, and I could get no grip on it to loosen it. Out through the door I went and was drawn through the air a few feet behind Jim. He moved ahead of me for fifteen or twenty feet and then vanished in mid-air. I dared not struggle in mid-air and I was drawn through a door into a large space flyer which became visible as I entered it. The flexible wire or rod which had held me uncoiled and I was free on the floor beside Jim Carpenter. This much was clear and understandable, but when I looked at the crew of that space ship, I was sure that I had lost my mind or was seeing visions. I had naturally expected men, or at least something in semi-human form, but instead of anything of the sort, before me stood a dozen gigantic beetles!

I rubbed my eyes and looked again. There was no mistaking the fact that we had been captured by a race of gigantic beetles flying an invisible space ship. When I had time later to examine them critically, I could see marked differences between our captors and the beetles we were accustomed to see on the earth besides the mere matter of size. To begin with, their bodies were relatively much smaller, the length of shell of the largest specimen not being over

four feet, while the head of the same insect, exclusive of the horns or pinchers, was a good eighteen inches in length. The pinchers, which by all beetle proportions should have been a couple of feet long at the least, did not extend over the head a distance greater than eight inches, although they were sturdy and powerful.

Instead of traveling with their shells horizontal as do earthly beetles, these insects stood erect on their two lower pairs of legs, which were of different lengths so that all four feet touched the ground when the shell was vertical. The two upper pairs of legs were used as arms, the topmost pair being quite short and splitting out at the end into four flexible claws about five inches long, which they used as fingers. These upper arms, which sprouted from a point near the top of the head, were peculiar in that they apparently had no joints like the other three pairs but were flexible like an elephant's trunk. The second pair of arms were armed with long, vicious-looking hooks. The backplates concealed only very rudimentary wings, not large enough to enable the insects to fly, although Jim told me later that they could fly on their own planet, where the lessened gravity made such extensive wing supports as would be needed on earth unnecessary.

The backplates were a brilliant green in color, with six-inch stripes of chrome yellow running lengthwise and crimson spots three inches

in diameter arranged in rows between the stripes. Their huge-faceted eyes sparkled like crystal when the light fell on them, and from time to time waves of various colors passed over them, evidently reflecting the insect's emotions. Although they gave the impression of great muscular power, their movements were slow and sluggish, and they seemed to have difficulty in getting around.

(Editor's note 1:

Mr. Bond has made a laughable error in his description. Like all of the coleoptera, the Mercurians were hexapoda (six legged). What Mr. Bond continually refers to in his narrative as "upper arms" were really the antenna of the insects which split at the end into four flexible appendages resembling fingers. His mistake is a natural one, for the Mercurians used their antenna as extra arms.—James S. Carpenter. End Editor's note.]

As my horrified gaze took in these monstrosities I turned with a shudder to Jim Carpenter.

"Am I crazy, Jim," I asked, "or do you see these things too?"

"I see them all right, Pete," he replied. "It isn't as surprising as it seems at first glance. You expected to find human beings; so did I, but what reason had we for doing so? It is highly improbable, when you come to consider the matter, that evolution should take the same course elsewhere as it did on earth. Why not beetles, or fish, or horned toads, for that matter?"

"No reason, I guess," I answered; "I just hadn't expected anything of the sort. What do you suppose they mean to do with us?"

"I haven't any idea, old man. We'll just have to wait and see. I'll try to talk to them, although I don't expect much luck at it."

He turned to the nearest beetle and slowly and clearly spoke a few words. The insect gave no signs of comprehension, although it watched the movement of Jim's lips carefully. It is my opinion, and Jim agrees with me, that the insects were both deaf and dumb, for during the entire time we were associated with them, we never heard them give forth a sound under any circumstances, nor saw them

react to any sound that we made. Either they had some telepathic means of communication or else they made and heard sounds beyond the range of the human ear, for it was evident from their actions that they frequently communicated with one another.

When Jim failed in his first attempt to communicate he looked around for another method. He noticed my notebook, which had fallen on the floor when I was set down; he picked it up and drew a pencil from his pocket. The insects watched his movements carefully, and when he had made a sketch in the book, the nearest one took it from him and examined it carefully and then passed it to another one, who also examined it. The sketch which Jim had drawn showed the outline of the Hadley space flyer from which he had been taken. When the beetles had examined the sketch, one of them stepped to an instrument board in the center of the ship and made an adjustment. Then he pointed with one of his lower arms.

We looked in the direction in which he pointed; to our astonishment, the walls of the flyer seemed to dissolve, or at least to become perfectly transparent. The floor of the space ship was composed of some silvery metal, and from it had risen walls of the same material, but now the effect was as though we were suspended in mid-air, with nothing either around us or under us. I gasped and grabbed at the instrument board for support. Then I felt foolish as I realized that

there was no change in the feel of the floor for all its transparency and that we were not falling.

A short distance away we could see our flyer suspended in the air, held up by two long flexible rods or wires similar to those which had lifted us from our ship into our prison. I saw a dozen more of these rods coiled up, hanging in the air, evidently, but really on the floor near the edge of the flyer, ready for use. Jim suddenly grasped me by the arm.

"Look behind you in a moment," he said, "but don't start!"

He took the notebook in his hand and started to draw a sketch. I looked behind as he had told me to. Hanging in the air in a position which told me that they must have been in a different compartment of the flyer, were five children. They were white as marble, and lay perfectly motionless.

"Are they dead, Jim?" I asked in a low voice without looking at him.

"I don't know," he replied, "but we'll find out a little later. I am relieved to find them here, and I doubt if they are harmed."

The sketch which he was making was one of the solar system, and,

when he had finished, he marked the earth with a cross and handed the notebook to one of the beetles. The insect took it and showed it to his companions; so far as I was able to judge expressions, they were amazed to find that we had knowledge of the heavenly bodies. The beetle took Jim's pencil in one of its hands and, after examining it carefully, made a cross on the circle which Jim had drawn to represent the planet Mercury.

"They come from Mercury," exclaimed Jim in surprise as he showed me the sketch. "That accounts for a good many things; why they are so lethargic, for one thing. Mercury is much smaller than the earth and the gravity is much less. According to Mercurian standards, they must weigh a ton each. It is quite a tribute to their muscular development that they can move and support their weight against our gravity. They can understand a drawing all right, so we have a means of communicating with them, although a pretty slow one and dependent entirely on my limited skill as a cartoonist. I wonder if we are free to move about?"

"The only way to find out is to try," I replied and stood erect. The beetles offered no objection and Jim stood up beside me. We walked, or rather edged, our way toward the side of the ship. The insects watched us when we started to move and then evidently decided that we were harmless. They turned from us to the working of the ship.

One of them manipulated some dials on the instrument board. One of the rods which held our flyer released its grip, came in toward the Mercurian ship and coiled itself up on the floor, or the place where the floor should have been. The insect touched another dial. Jim threw caution to the winds, raced across the floor and grasped the beetle by the arm.

The insect looked at him questioningly; Jim produced the notebook and drew a sketch representing our flyer falling. On the level be had used to represent the ground he made another sketch of it lying in ruins. The beetle nodded comprehendingly and turned to another dial; the ship sank slowly toward the ground.

We sank until we hung only a few feet from the ground when our flyer was gently lowered down. When it rested on the ground, the wire which had held it uncoiled, came aboard and coiled itself up beside the others. As the Mercurian ship rose I noticed idly that the door which had been torn from our ship and dropped lay within a few yards of the ship itself. The Mercurian ship rose to an elevation of a hundred feet, drifting gently over the city.

As we rose I determined to try the effect of my personality on the beetles. I approached the one who seemed to be the leader and, putting on the most woeful expression I could muster, I looked at the

floor. He did not understand me and I pretended that I was falling and grasped at him. This time he nodded and stepped to the instrument board. In a moment the floor became visible. I thanked him as best I could in pantomime and approached the walls. They were so transparent that I felt an involuntary shrinking as I approached them. I edged my way cautiously forward until my outstretched hand encountered a solid substance. I looked out.

At the slow speed we were traveling the drone of our motors was hardly audible to us, and I felt sure that it could not be heard on the ground. Once their curiosity was satisfied, our captors paid little or no attention to me and left me free to come and go as I wished. I made my way cautiously toward the children, but ran into a solid wall. Remembering Jim's words, I made my way back toward him without displaying any interest.

Jim could probably have wandered around as I did had he wished, but he chose to occupy his time differently. With his notebook and pencil he carried on an extensive conversation, if that term can be applied to a crudely executed set of drawings, with the leader of the beetles. I was not especially familiar with the methods of control of space ships and I could make nothing of the maze of dials and switches on the instrument board.

For half an hour we drifted slowly along. Presently one of the beetles approached, seized my arm and turned me about. With one of his arms he pointed ahead. A mile away I could see another space flyer similar to the one we were on.

"Here comes another one, Jim." I called.

"Yes, I saw it some time ago. I don't know where the third one is."

"Are there three of them?"

"Yes. Three of them came here yesterday and are exploring the country round about here. They are scouts sent out from the fleet of our brother planet to see if the road was clear and what the world was like. They spotted the hole through the layer with their telescope and sent their fleet out to pay us a visit. He tells me that the scouts have reported favorably and that the whole fleet, several thousand ships, as near as I can make out, are expected here this evening."

"Have you solved the secret of their invisibility?"

"Partly. It is as I expected. The walls of the ship are double, the inner one of metal and the outer one of vitrolene or some similar perfectly transparent substance. The space between the walls is filled with

some substance which will bend both visible and ultra-violet rays along a path around the ship and then lets them go in their original direction. The reason why we can see through the walls and see the protective coating of that ship coming is that they are generating some sort of a ray here which acts as a carrier for the visible light rays. I don't know what sort of a ray it is, but when I get a good look at their generators, I may be able to tell. Are you beginning to itch and burn?"

"Yes, I believe that I am, although I hadn't noticed it until you spoke."

"I have been noticing it for some time. From its effects on the skin, I am inclined to believe it to be a ray of very short wave-length, possibly something like our X-ray, or even shorter."

"Have you found out what they intend to do with us?"

"I don't think they have decided yet. Possibly they are going to take us up to the leader of their fleet and let him decide. The cuss that is in command of this ship seems surprised to death to find out that I can comprehend the principles of his ship. He seems to think that I am a sort of a rara avis, a freak of nature. He intimated that he would recommend that we be used for vivisection."

"Good Lord!"

"It's not much more worse than the fate they design for the rest of their captives, at that."

"What is that?"

"It's a long story that I'll have to tell you later. I want to watch this meeting."

The other ship had approached to within a few yards and floated stationary, while some sort of communication was exchanged between the two. I could not fathom the method used, but the commander of our craft clamped what looked like a pair of headphones against his body and plugged the end of a wire leading from them into his instrument board. From time to time various colored lights glowed on the board before him. After a time he uncoupled his device from the board, and one of the long rods shot out from our ship to the other. It returned in a moment clamped around the body of a young girl. As the came on board, she was lowered onto the deck beside the other children. Like them, she was stiff and motionless. I gave an exclamation and sprang forward.

"Pete!"

Jim's voice recalled me to myself, and I watched the child laid with the others with as disinterested an expression as I could muster. I had never made a mistake in following Jim Carpenter's lead and I knew that somewhere in his head a plan was maturing which might offer us some chance of escape.

Our ship moved ahead down a long slant, gradually dropping nearer to the ground. I watched the maneuver with interest while Jim, with his friend the beetle commander, went over the ship. The insect was evidently amused at Jim and was determined to find out the limits of his intelligence, for he pointed out various controls and motors of the ship and made elaborate sketches which Jim seemed to comprehend fairly well.

One of the beetles approached the control board and motioned me back. I stepped away from the board; evidently a port in the side of the vessel opened, for I felt a breath of air and could hear the hum of the city. I walked to the side and glanced down, and found that we were floating about twenty feet off the ground over a street on the edge of the city. On the street a short distance ahead of us two children, evidently returning from school, to judge by the books under their arms, were walking unsuspectingly along. A turn of the dial sped up our motors, and as the hum rang out in a louder key the children looked upward. Two of the long flexible wires shot out and

wrapped themselves about the children; screaming, they were lifted into the space flyer. The port through which they came in shut with a clang and the ship rose rapidly into the air. The children were released from the wires which coiled themselves up on deck and the beetle who had operated them stepped forward and grasped the nearer of the children, a boy of about eleven, by the arm. He raised the boy, who was paralyzed with terror, up toward his head and gazed steadily into his eyes. Slowly the boy ceased struggling and became white and rigid. The beetle laid him on the deck and turned to the girl. Involuntarily I gave a shout and sprang forward, but Jim grasped me by the arm.

"Keep quiet, you darned fool!" he cried. "We can do nothing now. Wait for a chance!"

"We can't stand here and see murder done!" I protested.

"It's not murder. Pete, those children aren't being hurt. They are being hypnotized so that they can be transported to Mercury."

"Why are they taking them to Mercury?" I demanded.

"As nearly as I can make out, there is a race of men up there who are subject to these beetles. This ship is radium propelled, and the men

and women are the slaves who work in the radium mines. Of course the workers soon become sexless, but others are kept for breeding purposes to keep the race alive. Through generations of in-breeding, the stock is about played out and are getting too weak to be of much value.

"The Mercurians have been studying the whole universe to find a race which will serve their purpose and they have chosen us to be the victims. When their fleet gets here, they plan to capture thousands of selected children and carry them to Mercury in order to infuse their blood into the decadent race of slaves they have. Those who are not suitable for breeding when they grow up will die as slaves in the radium mines."

“Horrible!" I gasped. "Why are they taking children, Jim? Wouldn't adults suit their purpose better?"

"They are afraid to take adults. On Mercury an earthman would have muscles of unheard of power and adults would constantly strive to rise against their masters. By getting children, they hope to raise them to know nothing else than a life of slavery and get the advantage of their strength without risk. It is a clever scheme."

"And are we to stand here and let them do it?"

"Not on your life, but we had better hold easy for a while. If I can get a few minutes more with that brute I'll know enough about running this ship that we can afford to do away with them. You have a pistol, haven't you?"

"No."

"The devil! I thought you had. I have an automatic, but it only carries eight shells. There are eleven of these insects and unless we can get the jump on them, they'll do us. I saw what looks like a knife lying near the instrument board; get over near it and get ready to grab it as soon as you hear my pistol. These things are deaf and if I work it right I may be able to do several of them in before they know what's happening. When you attack, don't try to ram them in the back; their backplates are an inch thick and will be proof against a knife thrust. Aim at their eyes; if you can blind them, they'll be helpless. Do you understand?"

"I'll do my best, Jim," I replied. "Since you have told me their plans I am itching to get at them."

I edged over toward the knife, but as I did so I saw a better weapon. On the floor lay a bar of silvery metal about thirty inches long and an inch in diameter. I picked it up and toyed with it idly, meanwhile

edging around to get behind the insect which I had marked for my first attentions. Jim was talking again by means of the notebook with his beetle friend. They walked around the ship, examining everything in it.

"Are you ready, Pete?" came Jim's voice at last.

"All set," I replied, getting a firmer grasp on my bar and edging toward one of the insects.

"Well, don't start until I fire. You notice the bug I am talking to? Don't kill him unless you have to. This ship is a little too complicated for me to fathom, so I want this fellow taken prisoner. We'll use him as our engineer when we take control."

"I understand."

"All right, get ready."

I kept my eye on Jim. He had drawn the beetle with whom he was talking to a position where they were behind the rest. Jim pointed at something behind the insect's back and the beetle turned. As it did so, Jim whipped out his pistol and, taking careful aim, fired at one of the insects.

As the sound of the shot rang out I raised my bar and leaped forward. I brought it down with crushing force on the head of the nearest beetle. My victim fell forward, and I heard Jim's pistol bark again; but I had no time to watch him. As the beetle I struck fell the others turned and I had two of them coming at me with outstretched arms, ready to grasp me. I swung my bar, and the arm of one of them fell limp; but the other seized me with both its hands, and I felt the cruel hooks of its lower arms against the small of my back.

One of my arms was still free; I swung my bar again, and it struck my captor on the back of the head. It was stunned by the blow and fell. I seized the knife from the floor, and threw myself down beside it and struck at its eyes, trying to roll it over so as to protect me from the other who was trying to grasp me.

I felt hands clutch me from behind; I was wrenched loose from the body of my victim and lifted into the air. I was turned about and stared hard into the implacable crystalline eyes of one of the insects. For a moment my senses reeled and then, without volition, I dropped my bar. I remembered the children and realized that I was being hypnotized. I fought against the feeling, but my senses reeled and I almost went limp, when the sound of a pistol shot, almost in my ear, roused me. The spell of the beetle was momentarily broken. I thrust the knife which I still grasped at the eyes before me. My blow went

home, but the insect raised me and bent me toward him until my head lay on top of his and the huge horns which adorned his head began to close. Another pistol shot sounded, and I was suddenly dropped.

I grasped my bar as I fell and leaped up. The flyer was a shambles. Dead insects lay on all sides while Jim, smoking pistol in hand, was staring as though fascinated into the eyes of one of the surviving beetles. I ran forward and brought my bar down on the insect's head, but as I did so I was grasped from behind.

"Jim, help!" I cried as I was swung into the air. The insect whirled me around and then threw me to the floor. I had an impression of falling; then everything dissolved in a flash of light. I was unconscious only for a moment, and I came to to find Jim Carpenter standing over me, menacing my assailant with his gun.

"Thanks, Jim," I said faintly.

"If you're conscious again, get up and get your bar," he replied. "My pistol is empty and I don't know how long I can run a bluff on this fellow."

I scrambled to my feet and grasped the bar. Jim stepped behind me

and reloaded his pistol.

"All right," he said when he had finished. "I'll take charge of this fellow. Go around and see if the rest are dead. If they aren't when you find them, see that they are when you leave them. We're taking no prisoners."

I went the rounds of the prostrate insects. None of them were beyond moving except two whose heads had been crushed by my bar, but I obeyed Jim's orders. When I rejoined him with my bloody bar, the only beetle left alive was the commander, whom Jim was covering with his pistol.

"Take the gun," he said when I reported my actions, "and give me the bar."

We exchanged weapons and Jim turned to the captive.

"Now, old fellow," he said grimly, "either you run this ship as I want you to, or you're a dead Indian. Savvy?"

He took his pencil and notebook from his pocket and drew a sketch of our Hadley space ship. On the other end of the sheet he drew a picture of the Mercurian ship, and then drew a line connecting the

two. The insect looked at the sketch but made no movement.

"All right, if that's the way you feel about it," said Jim. He raised the bar and brought it down with crushing force on one of the insect's lower arms. The arm fell as though paralyzed and a blue light played across the beetle's eyes. Jim extended the sketch again and raised the bar threateningly. The beetle moved over to the control board, Jim following closely, and set the ship in motion. Ten minutes later it rested on the ground beside the ship in which we had first taken the air.

Following Jim's pictured orders the beetle opened the door of the Mercurian ship and followed Jim into the Hadley. As we emerged from the Mercurian ship I looked back. It had vanished completely.

"The children, Jim!" I gasped.

"I haven't forgotten them," he replied, "but they are all right for the present. If we turned them loose now, we'd have ninety reporters around us in ten minutes. I want to get our generators modified first."

He pointed toward the spot where the Mercurian ship had stood and then toward our generators. The beetle hesitated, but Jim swung his

bar against the insect's side in a vicious blow. Again came the play of blue light over the eyes; the beetle bent over our generaters and set to work. Jim handed me the bar and bent over to help. They were both mechanics of a high order and they worked well together; in an hour the beetle started the generators and swung one of the searchlights toward his old ship. It leaped into view on the radium coated screen.

"Good business!" ejaculated Jim. "We'll repair this door; then we'll be ready to release the children and start out."

We followed the beetle into the Mercurian ship, which it seemed to be able to see. It opened a door leading into another compartment of the flyer, and before us lay the bodies of eight children. The beetle lifted the first one, a little girl, up until his many-faceted eyes looked full into the closed ones of the child. There was a flicker of an eyelash, a trace of returning color, and then a scream of terror from the child. The beetle set the girl down and Jim bent over her.

"It's all right now, little lady," he said, clumsily smoothing her hair.

"You're safe now. Run along to your mother. First Mortgage, take charge of her and take her outside. It isn't well for children to see these things."

The child clung to my hand: I led her out of the ship, which promptly vanished as we left it. One by one, seven other children joined us, the last one, a miss of not over eight, in Jim's arms. The beetle followed behind him.

"Do any of you know where you are?" asked Jim as he came out.

"I do, sir," said one of the boys. "I live close to here."

"All right, take these youngsters to your house and tell your mother to telephone their parents to come and get them. If anyone asks you what happened, tell them to see Jim Carpenter to-morrow. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"All right, run along then. Now, First Mortgage, let's go hunting."

We wired our captive up so securely that I felt that there was no possible chance of his escape; then, with Jim at the controls and me at the guns, we fared forth in search of the invaders. Back and forth over the city we flew without sighting another spaceship in the air. Jim gave an exclamation of impatience and swung on a wider circle, which took us out over the water. I kept the searchlights working.

Presently, far ahead over the water, a dark spot came into view. I called to Jim and we approached it at top speed.

"Don't shoot until we are within four hundred yards," cautioned Jim.

I held my fire until we were within the specified distance. The newcomer was another of the Mercurian space-ships; with a feeling of joy I swung my beam until the cross-hairs of the screen rested full on the invader.

"All ready!" I sung out.

"If you are ready, Gridley, you may fire!" replied Jim. I pressed the gun button. The crash of the gun was followed by another report from outside as the radite shell burst against the Mercurian flyer. The deadly explosive did its work, and the shattered remains of the wreck fell, to be engulfed in the sea below.

"That's one!" cried Jim. "I'm afraid we won't have time to hunt up the other right now. This bug told me that the other Mercurians are due here to-day, and I think we had better form ourselves into a reception committee and go up to the hole to meet them."

He sent the ship at high speed over the city until we hovered over the

laboratory. We stopped for a moment, and Jim stepped to the radio telephone.

"Hello, Williams," he said, "how are things going? That's fine. In an hour, you say? Well, speed it up as much as you can; we may call for it soon."

He turned both stern motors to full power, and we shot up like a rocket toward the hole in the protective layer through which the invaders had entered. In ten minutes we were at the altitude of the guard ships and Jim asked if anything had been seen. The report was negative; Jim left them below the layer and sent our flyer up through the hole into space. We reached the outer surface in another ten minutes and we were none too soon. Hardly had we debouched from the hole than ahead of us we saw another Mercurian flyer. It was a lone one, and Jim bent over the captive and held a hastily made sketch before him. The sketch showed three Mercurian flyers, one on the ground, one wrecked and the third one in the air. He touched the drawing of the one in the air and pointed toward our port hole and looked questioningly at the beetle. The insect inspected the flyer in space and nodded.

"Good!" cried Jim. "That's the third of the trio who came ahead as scouts. Get your gun ready, First Mortgage: we're going to pick him

off."

Our ship approached the doomed Mercurian. Again I waited until we were within four hundred yards; then I pressed the button which hurled it, a crumpled wreck, onto the outer surface of the heaviside layer.

"Two!" cried Jim as we backed away.

"Here come plenty more," I cried as I swung the searchlight. Jim left his controls, glanced at the screen and whistled softly. Dropping toward us from space were hundreds of the Mercurian ships.

"We got here just in time," he said. "Break out your extra ammunition while I take to the hole. We can't hope to do that bunch alone, so we'll fight a rearguard action."

Since our bow gun would be the only one in action, I hastily moved the spare boxes of ammunition nearer to it while Jim maneuvered the Hadley over the hole. As the Mercurian fleet came nearer he started a slow retreat toward the earth. The Mercurians overtook us rapidly; Jim locked his controls at slow speed down and hurried to the bow gun.

"Start shooting as soon as you can," he said. "I'll keep the magazine filled."

I swung the gun until the cross-hairs of the screen rested full on the leading ship and pressed the button. My aim was true, and the shattered fragments of the ship fell toward me. The balance of the fleet slowed down for an instant; I covered another one and pressed my button. The ship at which I had aimed was in motion and I missed it, but I had the satisfaction of seeing another one fall in fragments. Jim was loading the magazine as fast as I fired. I covered another ship and fired again. A third one of our enemies fell in ruins. The rest paused and drew off.

"They're retreating, Jim!" I cried.

"Cease firing until they come on again," he replied is he took the shells from the magazines of the other guns and piled them near the bow gun.

I held my fire for a few minutes. The Mercurians retreated a short distance and then came on again with a rush. Twenty times my gun went off as fast as I could align it and press the trigger, and eighteen of the enemy ships were in ruins. Again the Mercurians retreated. I held my fire. We were falling more rapidly now and far below we

could see the black spots which were the guard ships. I told Jim that they were in sight; he stepped to the radio telephone and ordered them to keep well away from the hole.

Again the Mercurian ships came on with a rush, this time with beams of orange light stabbing a way before them. When I told Jim of this he jumped to the controls and shot our ship down at breakneck speed.

"I don't know what sort of fighting apparatus they have, but I don't care to face it," he said to me. "Fire if they get close; but I hope to get out of the hole before they are in range."

Fast as we fell, the Mercurians were coming faster, and they were not over eight hundred yards from us when he reached the level of the guard ships. Jim checked our speed; I managed to pick off three more of the invaders before we moved away from the hole. Jim stopped the side motion and jumped to the radio telephone.

"Hello, Williams!" he shouted into the instrument. "Are you ready down there? Thank God! Full power at once, please!

"Watch what happens," he said to me, as he turned from the instrument.

Some fifty of the Mercurian flyers had reached our level and had started to move toward us before anything happened. Then from below came a beam of intolerable light. Upward it struck, and the Mercurian ships on which it impinged disappeared in a flash of light.

"A disintegrating ray," explained Jim. "I suspected that it might be needed and I started Williams to rigging it up early this morning. I hated to use it because it may easily undo the work that six years have done in healing the break in the layer, but it was necessary. That ends the invasion, except for those ten or twelve ships ahead of us. How is your marksmanship? Can you pick off ten in ten shots?"

"Watch me," I said grimly as the ship started to move.

Pride goeth ever before a fall: it took me sixteen shots to demolish the eleven ships which had escaped destruction from the ray. As the last one fell in ruins, Jim ordered the ray shut off. We fell toward the ground.

"What are we going to do with our prisoner?" I asked.

Jim looked at the beetle meditatively.

"He would make a fine museum piece if he were stuffed," he said,

"but on the whole, I think we'll let him go. He is an intelligent creature and will probably be happier on Mercury than anywhere else. What do you say that we put him on his ship and turn him loose?"

"To lead another invasion?" I asked.

"I think not. He has seen what has happened to this one and is more likely to warn them to keep away. In any event, if we equip the guard ships with a ray that will show the Mercurian ships up and keep the disintegrating ray ready for action, we needn't fear another invasion. Let's let him go."

"It suits me all right, Jim, but I hold out for one thing. I will never dare to face McQuarrie again if I fail to get a picture of him. I insist on taking his photograph before we turn him loose."

"All right, go ahead," laughed Jim. "He ought to be able to stand that, if you'll spare him an interview."

An hour later we watched the Mercurian flyer disappear into space.

"I hope I've seen the last of those bugs," I said as the flyer faded from view.

"I don't know," said Jim thoughtfully. "If I have interpreted correctly the drawings that creature made, there is a race of manlike bipeds on Mercury who are slaves to those beetles and who live and die in the horrible atmosphere of a radium mine. Some of these days I may lead an expedition to our sister planet and look into that matter."

#35 Earth, The Marauder, By Arthur Josephus Burks:

Out of her orbit sped the teeming Earth—a marauding planet bent on starry conquest.

Aproximate word count: 43,000

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

2023 Editor's note:

I have added different symbols to differentiate between the secret hand code, {in brackets}, and telepathic communication, in ::double colons::, to help show the differences between different communication types since it's important to the plot.

In some areas it's not clear whether the characters are speaking aloud, telepathically, or with the secret hand code, so any parts left unclear are left in normal "quotation marks". There may also be sections where it's obvious but I forgot to mark them.

Foreword

Despite the fact that for centuries the Secret of Life had been the possession of children of men, the Earth was dying. She was dying because the warmth of the sun was fading; because, with the obliteration of the oceans in order to find new land upon which men might live, her seasons had become stormy, unbearably cold and dreary: and the very fact of her knowledge of the Secret of Life, in which men numbered their ages by centuries instead of by years, was her undoing.

For when men did not die, they multiplied beyond all counting, beyond all possibility of securing permanent abiding places. One man, in the days when the earth was young, and man lived at best to the age of three score years and ten, could have, given time and opportunity, populated a nation. Now, when men lived for centuries, eternally youthful, their living descendants ran into incalculable numbers.

The earth—strange paradox—was dying because it had learned the Secret of Life. Twenty centuries before, the last war of aggression had been fought, in order that an over-populated nation might find room in which to live. Now all the earth was one nation, speaking one tongue—and there were no more lands to conquer.

Chapter 1: Sarka

In his laboratory atop the highest peak in the venerable Himalayas, lived Sarka, conceded by the world to be its greatest scientist, despite his youth. His grandfather, who had watched the passing of eighteen centuries, had discovered the Secret of Life and thoughtlessly, in the light of later developments, broadcast his discovery to the world. The genius of this man, who was also called Sarka, had been passed on to his son, Sarka the Second, and by him in even greater degree to Sarka the Third ... called merely Sarka for the purposes of this history.

Had Sarka lived in the days before the discovery of the Secret of Life, people of that day would have judged him a young man of twenty. His real age was four centuries.

Behind him as he sat moodily staring at the gigantic Revolving Beryl stood a woman of most striking appearance. Her name was Jaska, and according to ideas of the Days Before the Discovery, she seemed a trifle younger than Sarka. Her hand, unadorned by jewelry of any kind, rested on Sarka's shoulder as he studied the Revolving Beryl, while her eyes, whose lashes, matching her raven hair, were like the wings of tiny blackbirds, noted afresh the wonder of this man.

"What is to be done?" she asked him at last, and her voice was like music there in the room where science performed its miracles for Sarka.

Wearily Sarka turned to face her, and she was struck anew, as she had been down the years since she had known this man, every time their glances met, at the mighty curve of his brow, which rendered insignificant his mouth, his delicate nose of the twitching nostrils, the well-deep eyes of him.

"Something must be done," he said gloomily, "and that soon! For, unless the children of men are provided with some manner of territorial expansion, they will destroy one another, only the strongest will survive, and we shall return to the days when the waters covered the earth, and monstrous creatures bellowed from the primeval slime!"

"You are working on something?" she asked softly.

For a moment he did not answer. While she waited, Jaska peered into the depths of the Revolving Beryl, which represented the earth. It was fifty feet in diameter, and in its curved surface and entrancing depths was mirrored, in this latest development of teleview, all the earth and the doings of its people. But Jaska scarcely saw the

fleeting images, the men locked in conflict for the right to live, the screaming, terror-stricken women. This was now a century-old story, and the civilization of Earth had almost reached the breaking point.

No, she scarcely saw the things in the Beryl, for she had read the hint of a vast, awesome secret in the eyes of Sarka—and wondered if he dared even tell her.

"If the people knew," he whispered, "they would do one of two things! They would tear me limb from limb, and hurl the parts of me outward into space forever—or they would demand that I move before I am ready—and cause a catastrophe which could never be rectified; and this grand old Earth of ours would be dead, indeed!"

{And this secret of yours?} Jaska now spoke in the sign language which only these two knew, for there were billions of other Revolving Beryls in the world, and words could be heard by universal radio by any who cared to listen. And always, they knew, the legions of enemies of Sarka kept their ears open for words of Sarka which could be twisted around to his undoing.

{I should not tell even you,} he answered, his fingers working swiftly in their secret, silent language, which all the world could see, but which only these two understood. {For if my enemies knew that

you possessed the information, there is nothing they would stop at to make you tell.}

"But I would not tell, Sarka," she said softly. "You know that!"

He patted her hands, and the ghost of a smile touched his lips.

"No," he said, "you would not tell. Some day soon—and it must be soon if the children of men are not to destroy themselves, I will tell you! It is a secret that lies heavily on my heart. If I should make a mistake.... Chaos! Catastrophe! Eternal, perpetual dark, the children of men reduced to nothingness!"

A little gasp from Jaska, for it was plain that this thing Sarka hinted at was far and away beyond anything he had hitherto done—and Sarka had already performed miracles beyond any that had ever been done by his predecessors.

"When my grandfather," went on Sarka moodily, "perfected, in this self-same laboratory, the machinery by which the waters of the oceans could be disintegrated, our enemies called him mad, and fought their way up these mountain slopes to destroy him! With the pack at his doors, he did as he had told them he would do. Though they hurried swiftly into the great valleys to colonize them—where

oceans had been—they were like ravening beasts, and gave my grandfather no thanks. Our people have always fought against progress, have always been disparaging of its advocates! When the first Sarka discovered the Secret they would have destroyed him, though he made them immortal...."

"If only the Secret," interrupted Jaska, "could be returned to him who discovered it! That would solve our problem, for men then would die and be buried, leaving their places for others."

Again that weary smile on the face of Sarka.

"Take back the Secret which is known to-day to every son and daughter of woman? Impossible! More nearly impossible than the attainment of my most ambitious dream!"

{And that dream?} spoke Jaska with speeding fingers.

"I have wondered about you," said Sarka softly, while those eyes of his bored deeply into hers. "We have been the best of friends, the best of comrades; but there are times when it comes to me that I do not know you entirely! And I have many enemies!"

"You mean," gasped the woman, for the moment forgetting the secret

sign manual, "you think it possible that I—I—might be one of your enemies, in secret?"

"Jaska, I do not know; but in this matter in my mind I trust no one. I am afraid even that people will read my very thoughts, though I have learned to so concentrate upon them that not the slightest hint of them shall go forth telepathically to my enemies! I do not mind death for myself; but our people must be saved! It is hideous to think that we have been given the Secret of Life, only to perish in the end because of it! I am sorry, Jaska, but I can tell no one!"

But Jaska, one of the most beautiful and intelligent of Earth's beautiful and intelligent women, seemed not to be listening to Sarka at all, and when he had finished, she shrugged her shoulders slightly and prepared to leave.

He followed her to the nearest Exit Dome, built solidly into the side of his laboratory, and watched her as she slipped swiftly into the white, skin-tight clothing—marked on breast and back with the Red Lily of the House of Cleric. His eyes still were deeply moody.

He helped her don the gleaming metal helmet in whose skull-pan was set the Anti-Gravitational Ovoid—invented by Sarka the Second, used now of necessity by every human creature—and strode

with her to the Outer Exit, a door of ponderous metal sufficiently strong to prevent the inner warmth of the laboratory getting out, or the biting cold of the heights to enter, and studied her still as she buckled about her hips her own personal Sarka-Belt, which automatically encased her, through contact with her tight clothing, with the warmth and balanced pressure of the laboratory, which would remain constant as long as she wore it.

With a nod and a brief smile, she stepped to the metal door and vanished through it. Sarka turned gloomily back to his laboratory. Looking into the depths of the Revolving Beryl and adjusting the enlarging device which brought back, life size, the infinitesmal individuals mirrored in the Beryl, he watched her go—a trim white figure which flashed across the void, from mountain-top to her valley home, like a very white projectile from another world. Very white, and very precious, but....

When she was home, and had waved to him that she had arrived safely, he forgot her for a time, and allowed his eyes to study the inner workings of this vast, crowded world whose on-rushing fate was so filling his brain with doubt, with fear—and something of horror!

Chapter 2: The People of the Hives

Moodily Sarka stared into the depths of the Beryl, which represented the Earth, and in which he could see everything that earthlings did, after visually enlarging them, through use of a microscope that could be adjusted, with relation to the Beryl, to bring out in detail any section of the world he wished to study. His face was utterly sad. The people at last truly possessed the Earth—all of it that was, even with the aid of every miracle known to science, habitable.

The surface of the Earth was one vast building, like a hive, and to each human being was allotted by law a certain abiding place. But men no longer died, unless they desired to do so, and then only when the Spokesmen of the Gens saw fit to grant permission; and there soon would be no place for the newborn to live. Even now that point had practically been reached throughout the world, and in the greater portion it *had* been reached, and passed, and men knew that while men did not die, they could be killed!

The vast building, towering above what had once been the surface of the earth, to heights undreamed of before the discovery, was irregular on its top, to fit the contour of the earth, and its roof, constructed of materials raped from the earth's core, was so designed as to catch and concentrate the yearly more feeble rays of the sun, so

that its life-giving warmth might continue to be the boon of living people.

It had been found as Earth cooled that life was possible to a depth of eight miles below the one-time surface, so that the one huge building extended below the surface to this great depth, and was divided and re-divided to make homes for men, their wives, and their progeny. But even so, space was limited. Neighboring families outgrew their surroundings, overflowed into the habitations of their neighbors—and every family was at constant war against its neighbors.

Men did not die, but they could be slain, and there was scarcely a home, above or below, in all the vast building, which had not planned and executed murder, times and times—or which had not left its own blood in the dwelling places of neighbors.

No law could cope with this intolerable situation, for men, down the ages, had changed in their essential characteristics but little—and recognized one law only in their extremity, that of self-preservation.

So there was murder rampant, and mothers who wept for children, husbands, fathers or mothers, who would never return to their homes.

"My grandfather," whispered Sarka, his eyes peering deeply into a certain area beyond that assigned by law to the House of Cleric, where men of two neighboring families were locked in mortal, silent conflict, "should not have frustrated the mad scheme of Dalis! It was slaughter, wholesale and terrible, but it would have cleansed the souls of the survivors!"

Mentally Sarka was looking back now to that red day when Dalis, the closest scientific rival of Sarka the First, had come to Sarka the First with his proposal which at the time had seemed so hideous. Sarka remembered that interval in all its details, for he had heard it many times.

"Sarka," Dalis had said in his high-pitched voice, staring at Sarka the First out of red-rimmed, fiery eyes, "unless something is done the world will rush on to self-destruction! Men will slay one another! Fathers will kill their sons, and sons their fathers, if something is not done! For always there is marrying and giving in marriage, and each family is reaching out in all directions, seeking merely space in which to live. Formerly there were wars which automatically took thought of the overplus of men; but to-day the world is at peace, as men regard the term—and every man's hand is against his neighbor! There will be no more wars, when there should be! There is but one alternative!"

"And that?" Sarka the First had queried suspiciously.

"The segregation of the fittest! The destruction, swiftly, painlessly, of all the others! And when the survivors have again re-populated the earth to overflowing—a repetition of the same corrective! Men will die, yes, by millions; but those who are left will be a stronger, sturdier race, and by this process of elimination, century by century, men will evolve and become super-men!"

"And this plan of yours?"

For a moment Dalis had paused, breathing heavily, as though almost afraid to continue. Then, while Sarka the First had listened in frozen terror, Dalis had explained his ghastly scheme.

"If it were not for the mountains and the valleys," said Dalis, "and the world were perfectly round and smooth of surface, that surface would be covered by water to the depth of one mile! Is that not correct! The Earth, rotating on its axis, travels about the sun at the rate of something like nineteen miles per second, so perfectly balanced that the oceans remain almost quiescent in their beds! But, Sarka, mark me well! If we could, together, devise a way to halt this rotation for as much as a few seconds, what would happen?"

"What would happen?" repeated Sarka the First, dropping his own voice to a husky, frightened whisper. "Why, the oceans would be hurled out of their beds, and a wall of water a mile high or more—it is all guesswork!—would rush eastward around the world, bearing everything before it! It would uproot and destroy buildings, sweep the rocky covering of the earth free of soil; and humanity, caught on the earth below the highest level of the world's greatest tidal wave, would be engulfed!"

"Exactly!" Dalis had said with a grin. "Exactly! Only—the people we wish to survive could be warned, and these could either be aloft when the tidal wave swept the face of the earth, or could be safely out of reach of the waters on the sides of the highest mountains!"

Sarka the First, wanly smiling, catching his breath at last, now that he realized the utter impossibility of this mad scheme, had been minded to humor the fancies of a man whom he had believed not quite sane.

"Why not," he began, "take away from men the Secret of Life, so that they will die, as formerly, when the world was young?"

"When all the world knows the Secret, when even children learn it before they are capable of walking?" demanded Dalis sarcastically.

"You could only remove knowledge of the Secret from the brains of men by removing those brains themselves! Your thought is more terrible even than mine, because it leads to this inescapable conclusion!"

"But supposing for a moment your mad scheme were possible, who should say whom, of all the earth's people, should be saved, whom sacrificed?"

"What better test could be given than that which I am proposing?" Dalis had snarled. "Those worthy of being saved would save themselves! Those who would perish would not be worth saving! As natural, as inescapable as the law of the survival of the fittest, which has been an axiom of life since men first crawled out of the slime and asked each other questions as they caught their first glimpses of the stars and pondered the reasons for them!"

"But where, then, was there any point in my giving to people the Secret of Life?"

"Had you paused to think," snapped Dalis, "you would never have done so! Your lust for power, and for fame, destroyed your foresight!"

"And is it not, Dalis," replied Sarka the First, softly, "for this, really, that you have come to me? To berate me? To throw at my head mad schemes impossible of accomplishment? I have always known you for an enemy, Dalis, because you are envious of what I have accomplished, what you sense that I will accomplish as time passes!"

"I do not love you, Sarka!" retorted Dalis frankly. "I despise you! Hate you! But I need the aid of that keen brain of yours! You see, hate you though I may, I do you honor still. I have something up here," tapping the dome of his brow, only less lofty than that of Sarka, "which you lack. You have something I have not, never can attain! But together we are complements, each of the other, and to the two of us this scheme is possible!"

"I am very busy, Dalis," Sarka the First had replied coldly. "I must ask you to leave me! What you propose is impossible, unthinkable!"

"So," retorted Dalis, "you think me mad? You think me incapable of perfecting this plan about whose details you have not even yet been informed! You would show me the door as though you were a king and I a slave—when kings and slaves vanished from the earth millenniums ago! Then listen to me, Sarka! I know how to do this thing about which I have told you. I can halt, for a brief moment

only, the whirl of the earth about its axis. And by so doing I can flood the earth with the waters of the oceans! If you will not listen to me, I shall do it myself! You shall have two days in which to give me an answer, for I admit that I need you, who would balance me, make sure I made no fatal mistakes! But if you do not, I will act ... along the lines I have hinted!"

Apparently as unconcerned as though he had not just listened to a scheme for almost total depopulation of the world, the destruction of millions upon millions of lives, Sarka the First had dismissed Dalis—who had straightway used all his offices to arouse the world of science against the first Sarka.

But, when the two days of grace given by Dalis had passed, there were no oceans—for Sarka the First had been planning for a century against the time when the earth must of necessity be over-populated, and had worked and slaved in his laboratory against the contingency which had developed.

He had smiled, though there was a trace of fear on his face after Dalis had left, for *his* scheme had been worked out—not to destroy, but to save!

And from this same laboratory in which Sarka now sat and pondered

on the next step in man's expansion, Sarka the First had, in fear and trembling at first, but with his confidence growing by leaps and bounds, worked his own miracle. Untold millions and billions of rays, whose any portion of which, coming in contact with water, immediately separated its hydrogen and oxygen, thus disintegrating its molecules, were hurled forth from their store-houses beneath the laboratory, across the faces of the mighty oceans of Earth....

And when men saw the miracle, they rushed into the mighty valleys where the oceans had been, and began to build new homes!

That had been centuries ago—scores of centuries.

Now all the earth, all the livable part of the earth, above its surface—and below it to the depths of miles—was filled with people, like bees in a monster hive, like ants of antiquity in their warrened hills. And there was no place now that they could go.

So they fought among themselves for the right to live.

"But my grandfather was right!" Sarka almost screamed it, speaking aloud in the silence of his laboratory. "My grandfather was right! Dalis was wrong! Science should be the science of Life, not of Death! Yet whither shall we go! Where now shall we find places for

our people who are daily being born in myriads, to live, and love and flourish?"

But there was no answer. Only the humming of the perpetually revolving Beryl, which showed to the sad eyes of Sarka that the people of his beloved earth were rushing onward to Chaos, unless....

"If only I could be sure about Jaska!" he moaned. "If only my courage were as great as that of which I stand in need! For if I fail, even Dalis, had he succeeded with that scheme of his in grandfather's time, would be less a monster, less a criminal!"

Chapter 3: *The Spokesmen of the Gens*

For a long moment Sarka looked broodingly out across the world beyond the metalized glass which formed the curving dome of his laboratory roof. There was little that could be seen, for always the mighty, cold winds, ruffed with flurries of snow and particles of ice, swept over this artificial roof of the world. Here and there huge portions of the area within the range of his normal vision were swept clear and clean of snow and ice—and looked bluely, bitterly cold and hostile.

Without the Sarka-Belts, people who ventured forth from their hives would instantly freeze to the consistency of marble in those winds and storms. For the people of Earth had built their monster habitation toward the stars until they reached up into the altitude of perpetual cold.

Only under that gleaming roof was there warmth. Many of the men, and women, and children who had lost in the now century-old fight for survival had merely been tossed out of the hives. A painless, swift death—but each death, in a world so highly specialized that each grown person fitted into his niche naturally and easily, was a distinct loss, not much, perhaps, but enough for the loss to be felt.

Sarka, closing his eyes for a moment as though to shut out a horror which in his mind he could visualize, turned back to the Revolving Beryl, in which he kept in constant touch with all parts of the world at will.

"It *must* be done!" he muttered. "I must take action. It means the loss of thousands, perhaps millions of lives, in such a war as the mind of man has not hitherto conceived; but for a Cause greater than any which has ever hitherto been an excuse for armed conflict. But I must discuss it with the Spokesmen of the Gens!"

On the table before Sarka was a row of vari-colored lights, whose source was beneath the floor of the laboratory, out of the heart of the master-mountain, part of the intricate machinery of this laboratory which had been almost twenty centuries in the perfecting. In the dwelling place of each of the Spokesmen was a single light, colored like one of the lights on Sarka's table. To speak with any one of the Spokesmen Sarka had but to dim the properly colored light by covering it with the palm of his hand. The light in the home of the thus signalled Spokesman was dimmed, and the Spokesman would know that Sarka desired to converse with him.

Sarka noted the blue light, and shuddered. For if he covered it with his palm it would summon Dalis, a great scientist, but an erratic one,

as Sarka the First had so clearly shown.

Sarka turned again to the Beryl. The area of which Dalis was Spokesman was, roughly speaking, that part of what had once been the Pacific Ocean, north of a line drawn east and west through the southernmost of the Hawaiian Islands, northward to the Pole. The home of Dalis was in the heart of what had once been an island historians claimed had been called Oahu, now a mountain peak still retaining a hint of the pre-Discovery name: Ohi.

The total number of the Spokesmen, the oldest of earth's inhabitants, was twelve, and the remainder of the Earth not under the tutelary rule of Dalis was divided up among the other eleven Spokesmen. Cleric, for example, father of Jaska, was Spokesman of that area which men had once called Asia, the vast valleys of the once Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean; while the youngest of the Spokesmen, in a manner serving his apprenticeship, was tutelary head of the vast plateau once called Africa. The name of this man was Gerd.

“He, at least,” thought Sarka, thinking of each Spokesman in turn and cataloguing each in his mind, “will be with me. I wonder about the others, and especially Dalis. He has always hated us!”

Then, with the air of a man who has made up his mind and crosses

his particular Rubicon in a single step, Sarka rose to his feet and passed along the row of vari-colored lights, covering each one with his hand in rapid succession.

Then he sat down again, almost holding his breath, and waited. As he stared at the row of lights his eyes lingered longest on two which were almost golden in color—and his face was very gentle, almost reverent. For those two lights were signals to Sarka the First and Sarka the Second, his grandfather and his father!

It was Dalis, the irascible, the fiery tempered, the erratic, who first made answer.

"Yes! What is it now?"

Sarka smiled a trifle grimly as he spoke a single word.

"Wait!"

The voice of Dalis, which Sarka had good cause to remember, had sounded as loudly in the laboratory as though Dalis had been present there in person, for men had learned to communicate by voice almost without the aid of radio and its appurtenances though the principle upon which the first crude beginnings of radio were

fashioned still applied. Each man's dwelling place was both a "sender" and a "receiver," and men could talk and be talked to no matter where they lived—individuals telepathically summoned at desire of anyone wishing verbal contact.

"Gerd is here!" came the voice of that Spokesman.

To him also Sarka spoke one word.

"Wait!"

"I am here, Sarka!" came a musical voice. "And Jaska is with me, listening!"

That would be Cleric, loyal friend, master scientist, but always shy of contact with people, though swift to anger and self-forgetfulness when he knew himself right and was opposed. Sarka darted a look back at the Revolving Beryl, adjusted swiftly the Beryl-microscope, and smiled into the faces of Jaska and Cleric, who looked enough alike that they might have been brother and sister, though Cleric had been born ten centuries before his daughter Jaska. They smiled back at him.

He shifted the Beryl-microscope and stared for a second at Dalis,

there in the Beryl, and marked the antagonism Dalis was at no pains to hide.

One by one the Spokesmen reported.

Klaser, from the Americas; Durce from the valleys of the vanished Atlantic; Boler from that part of the Artic Circle not included in the wedge which the Gens of Dalis thrust northward to the Pole: Vardee; Prull; Yuta; Aal; Vance and Hime. Each from his appointed area, each from the official headquarters of his Gens, the name given to those people who acknowledged the tutelage of a Spokesman. Each Spokesman, therefore, was the mouthpiece of millions of men, women and children. And over the Spokesmen, and not themselves Spokesmen, were three scientists: The Sarkas, First, Second and Third.

When all twelve of the Spokesmen had reported and been bidden by Sarka to wait, a smile touched the face of Sarka for an instant as two other voices, so nearly alike they might have been the voice of a single person, reported themselves.

"I am here, son! What is it?"

Oddly enough, Sarka's father and grandfather reported with exactly

the same words. Sarka smiled at a whimsical thought of his own. It had been some time since the three scientist Sarkas had been together, and despite the vast differences in their ages they might have been triplets!

The reports were in and the Spokesmen were waiting; but for almost a minute Sarka waited still. Then he spoke swiftly those words for which there could be no recall:

"Gentlemen, the time is come when we must go to war!"

For a long moment after he had spoken there was no answer. Then it came, in the jeering laughter of the antagonistic Dalis.

"War? Against whom? The Sarkas are always dreaming!"

"And Dalis," continued Sarka, "shall be one of the leaders of Earthlings in this war which I am about to propose! You doubtless recall a proposal you once made to Sarka the First? Your proposal to halt for a few moments the headlong whirl of the earth about its axis, thus to flood—"

"Stop!" interrupted Dalis. "Stop! Immediately!"

And Sarka stopped. He had forgotten, in the excitement of his urge

to explain his plans, that the millions of people who gave official allegiance to Dalis had never been informed of the hideous proposal he had made, back there centuries ago, as a corrective for a world rapidly approaching over-population. Had his people known, never again would the voice of Dalis be heard in life. The Spokesmen knew, and the Sarkas; but no others. Sarka understood the protest of Dalis; honored it.

"Dalis," he went on, more softly, "after I have explained what I wish to do, you will come to me here, prepared to explain to me exactly how you planned doing what you proposed to my grandfather—for your knowledge will be necessary to me...."

"Isn't it enough that your grandfather stole from me, and amplified, an idea that would have made me forever famous, without his grandson also stealing the fruit of my brains?"

"Your brains," said Sarka sharply, "belong to your people. What I plan is for their betterment. But it means war, war which may last a century, two centuries, in which lives of countless thousands may be lost."

Sarka's last words were almost drowned out by the humming sound that came out of the Revolving Beryl, that perfected device which

was the ultimate in the evolution of television and vibration-transference. Sarka's heart sank, for he knew the meaning of that sound. So did the Spokesmen.

"You see?" came the rasping voice of Dalis. "You hear? Look into your Beryl! See the clenched fists of the earth's myriads being shaken at you! Listen to the protests of the millions who hear your every word! See what Earthlings think of the prospect of war!"

For a moment Sarka spoke directly to the people.

"Be silent and listen! It will be war, yes; but not such a skulking, hideous war as ye wage among yourselves for a place to live! You, fathers, are guilty of slaying your sons! You, sons, of slaying your fathers! Merely by thrusting them forth from the hives, into the Outer Cold! This war I propose shall be a war that shall match your manhood, if ye indeed be men! Listen to me, and I will find for you new lands to conquer, new homes for your holding, if ye can take them!"

"But where," interrupted the sarcastic voice of Dalis, "are these new lands of which you speak? Inside the Earth? Already our hives reach into the Earth a distance of eight miles. Where else, then?"

"For shame, Dalis!" snapped Sarka, "and you a scientist! Every bit of habitable land on this globe is some man's dwelling place! Spokesmen of the Gens of Earth, look out your windows! Look out and upward—and read Dalis' answer in the stars!"

For a full minute there was silence throughout the earth, and Sarka saw that the Spokesmen were doing his bidding. He himself looked out, out through the swirling storm which tore at the crest of the Himalayas, a dark and forbidding Outside, in the starred dome of which rode the pale orbed moon!

"It is obvious, son," came the voice of Sarka the First, "what you mean. But how accomplish it?"

"Fifteen centuries ago, my father's father," cried Sarka, "Dalis told you that he possessed the power to halt for a moment the headlong whirl of the world on its axis about the sun! He could do it then—and no man, whatever he may think of Dalis as a man, has ever known him to lie! If, fifteen centuries ago, he could bring the whirling world to pause, why can we not, now...."

And, even though he had thought of this for years upon end, had spoken over and over to himself the words he was now using, rehearsing his proposed argument to the Spokesmen of the Gens,

Sarka found himself for a moment almost afraid to continue and speak them.

"I understand, Sarka!" came the excited voice of Gerd, youngest of the Spokesmen. "And I follow wherever you think it best to lead! You mean ... you mean...."

"Exactly!" Sarka managed at last. "If the Earth can be stayed on its axis, it can be diverted from its orbit entirely! I know, for I have found the manner of its doing, though I need the genius of Dalis to check my work and my calculations! We have no new land on this Earth to conquer; but the Universe is filled with countless other worlds! What say ye, Spokesmen of the Gens? What say ye, Gens of Earth?"

But for the time of a thousand heartbeats neither the Spokesmen or the Gens made answer to Sarka, and all the world fell utterly silent, absorbing this unbelievable thing of which Sarka had hinted.

Over the metalized roof of the world the snows and storms, the winds and the wraiths of the long dead moaned and screamed as with an icy voice of abysmal warning.

And for the time of those thousand heartbeats, the world was

pausing to listen.

When realization came, the answer would come from the Spokesmen and from the Gens; and here in the Sarka laboratory, his Rubicon crossed at last, sat Sarka, staring through the Beryl-microscope into the depths of the Revolving Beryl. His face was dead white, his eyes narrowed.

The first voice which came startled him.

"It is mad, Sarka! Mad! Mad! But I am with you, always!"

It was the voice of Jaska, daughter of Cleric!

Chapter 4: ***The Earthlings Make Ready***

"I too, am with you!" came the voice of Gerd.

"Spoken like a child!" snapped Dalis. "For you are as much a child as this third of the dreaming Sarkas! The scheme is mad, madder even than Jaska intimates! The scheme I once proposed, in which I was cheated by the grandfather of this madman, was times and times more feasible and practicable!"

"Suppose," came the soft voice of Sarka the First, interrupting Dalis, "that you put the matter up to your Gens, O wise and noble Dalis, and see which scheme they would endorse if given the choice in the matter—and were your scheme still possible!"

This quickly silenced the vituperation of Dalis, but in no wise prevented his continuance as a rather loud antagonist of the plan.

"How," he demanded, "can you return the Earth to its orbit, even granting you are able to take this initial step? How keep life on the Earth during its flight on this rainbow-chasing voyage you propose?"

"All these things have been taken into consideration, O Dalis!" retorted Sarka. "All of my scheme is practicable, as I think you will

agree when I have told you its details. What think you of the plan, Klaser? And you, Durce? Boler? Vardee? Prull? Yuta? Aal? Vance? Hime?"

When the Spokesmen had answered, some of them hesitantly, for the people all this time had remained silent—and none of the Spokesmen could be sure how his own Gens would feel in the matter—it developed that seven of the Spokesmen were for the scheme, if it should prove to be possible.

"If this is the voice of the majority of the Gens," snapped Dalis, "given thus by their Spokesmen, then I vote with the majority! I shall call upon you immediately, Sarka, for a conference!"

"I am glad," said Sarka softly, "that the majority of the Spokesmen are with me. Especially am I glad that Dalis and Cleric vote with me. For the others I have only this to say: I have thought this matter over for almost a century, and I know that the time has come when we must act, to save ourselves from self-destruction. Had you not decided with me, I should have acted alone!"

"Yes?" snapped Dalis. "How?"

"I have, here in my laboratory," replied Sarka, "the power whereby

to accomplish the scheme of which I have told you! Had all the Gens defied me, I would have nevertheless sent the Earth outward on its voyage, bringing it within reach of the denizens, first of the Moon, second of Mars—and you people of little courage would have been compelled to fight to save yourselves!"

"You would have forced us into war?" came the quavering voice of Prull, the first Spokesman aside from Dalis to take active part in the discussion. "Then why, if you had the means in the beginning to enforce your will upon us, confer with us at all?"

Sarka thrilled with satisfaction, for this question gave him the excuse he sought. He had been wondering and scheming how to compel the Spokesmen of the Gens to obey his will.

"I wanted your opinions," he said shortly. "But I also wish you to know that I have the power to go on, whether you wish it or not—*and you must obey me!*"

How would the twelve Gens take this ultimatum of Sarka? For breathless moments after he had spoken he waited, and the Spokesmen with him. Then came the voice of Cleric, addressing his people, yet leaving the contacts open so that Sarka and the other Spokesmen might hear.

"What say you, O Gens of Cleric?" he cried, his voice an exultant, clarioning paean of rejoicing. "Do we follow this man who promises us life again? Do we follow this man who promises us that once again we shall dwell in plenty, without the blood of relatives and neighbors on our hands? Answer this man, O Gens—for I say unto you that wheresoever he leads I would follow him!"

Silence for a heartbeat. Then a murmuring like the sound of the waves of the long-vanished seas sounded in the laboratory, wherein all things were seen, all sounds were heard. A monster voice, loud and savage, from the Gens of Cleric.

"We follow Cleric wherever he leads!" Finally the words became intelligible. "It matters not to us whom Cleric follows, so long as we may follow Cleric!"

"Well spoken, O Gens of Cleric!" snapped Sarka when the murmuring died down to a whisper, then faded out entirely. "Deck yourselves in the white garments of Cleric! Emblazon upon your backs and breast the Red Lily of his House! Prepare for war! These are your orders; the details I leave to Cleric!"

There came the voice Dalis.

"Give your orders to my Gens direct, O Sarka!" rasped Dalis. "For I leave this very moment to come to you!"

"Thank you," said Sarka, a great wave of exaltation sweeping over him. He had expected Dalis to be the last and most difficult to manage. Then to the Gens of Dalis, as the blue light on the table in the laboratory showed Sarka that Dalis was already winging toward him: "Deck yourselves in the green garments of Dalis! Wear as your insignia the yellow star of his House, and prepare for war! Make new and modern Ray Directors! Refurbish your rotting machines of destruction! Make ready, and make haste! For the Gens of Dalis will be the first of all the Gens to move in attack against the Dwellers Outside! When the time comes I shall tell you where you shall dwell —if you win the land I shall show you!"

The humming of myriad voices inside the laboratory was now almost continuous, but ever the words of Sarka went out to the Spokesmen and to the Gens, though, save in the case of Cleric and of Dalis, he did not speak to the Gens direct, because he did not wish in one iota to usurp the authority of the Spokesmen themselves.

But when less than an hour had passed, he realized that the first step had been successfully taken, and that from now on the success or failure of the scheme rested in his own hands. Perspiration bedewed

his forehead, and for a second he prayed.

"God of our fathers! Grant that we be not mistaken! Grant that we be right in what we plan! Grant that success attend our arms! Grant that this scheme of mine lead us not to catastrophe—for if this should develop, only I am guilty, and only I should be punished!"

"Amen!"

As one voice, the Spokesmen of the Gens spoke the word, and Sarka heard it. He had forgotten for the moment that the Spokesmen still could hear him.

"That is all," he said huskily. "Prepare your Gens, each of you, for such battle as even our histories never have recorded! For we go against foemen whose strength we do not know, whose manner of life we do not know, and we must not fail! Make haste with your preparations! Your time is short! And Spokesmen, counsel your Gens that they put aside at once all personal differences, all family quarrels, all quarrels with their neighbors! That each adult individual, each unmarried woman, and such married woman as have all their children grown, and who no longer need them, prepare to go forth to battle! From this laboratory, within a brief space, Dalis and the Sarkas will give you further word!"

Then he dimmed the lights, and severed contact with the Spokesmen of the Gens. Only two lights he did not dim, at the moment, and to two men he spoke softly.

"My father and my father's father! Come to me at once! For there shall be need of the combined genius of the Sarkas if my scheme is to succeed!"

From both Sarkas, as though they had rehearsed the words against this need of them, came answer:

"Aye, son, we come!"

From that moment on until Dalis and the Sarkas were ready to take the most momentous step ever taken in the history of the world, the humming within the laboratory did not cease. For the people, the millions and billions of people of the hives, were busy, eagerly and feverishly busy, preparing new armament, new engines of destruction, against the time when there should be need of them. And for perhaps the first time in centuries, the people were happy.

For not even the passage of a thousand centuries, or a thousand thousand centuries, could flush from the warm hearts of men the love of conflict!

Sarka smiled wanly, his face very pale. He had spoken, his people were busy with preparations, and now there could be no turning back. The world, when he spoke the word, would rush outward to glorious conflict—or to destruction!

A buzzer sounded near the Exit Dome. Sarka raced to give the "Enter" Signal—and Dalis, he of the hawk-eyes, the sharp nose and sharper tongue, entered the presence of the man who, in a twinkling, had made himself master of the world.

"Well," he said harshly, "I am here! What do you wish of me?"

"We Sarkas," said Sarka easily, "wish to assure ourselves that you will do nothing to obstruct our plans! Dalis, of the Gens of Dalis, you are prisoner of the Sarkas until you have passed your word!"

"That I will never do!" said Dalis calmly. "I have passed my word to go forward with you; but I meant, and you knew I meant, to go forward only as far as to me seemed right and reasonable!"

Chapter 5: ***The Betrayal of Dalis***

And until the arrival of the other two Sarkas, Dalis said nothing. His face flushed an angry red as Sarka the First received the "Enter" Signal and stepped into the laboratory which had once been his—which he had delivered into the capable hands of Sarka the Second, in order to find new channels for his genius, as a worker for the betterment of the world's people. This he had found in organization, so that the people worked and labored, despite their personal quarrels, in closer harmony than they ever had before. But now Sarka the Third had called, and the two Sarkas responded. Dalis snarled at his ancient enemy, who looked to be the image of Sarka the Third and not one whit older, though one had preceded the other into the world by many centuries.

"Still the pleasant, congenial Dalis, I see!" smiled Sarka the First.

For the moment it seemed that Dalis would die there of his seething anger; but he answered no word for all of a minute. Then:

"This mad grandson of yours has made me a prisoner, until such time as I concur in all his plans!"

"If he says you are a prisoner, that you are!" snapped the elder Sarka

angrily. "Son, what is this thing you plan?"

"For almost a century," replied Sarka, "I have been planning this. I knew, when father told me that Dalis had sworn he was able to halt for a moment the headlong flight of the Earth in its orbit, that Dalis did not lie or bluff! In your day, even, that was possible, and I continued with the knotty problem until I deduced the manner of its doing. I, too, can halt the Earth's rotation, or throw it out of its orbit! I took your idea, Dalis, *independently* of you, knowing you would never reveal your secret to a Sarka, and amplified it until I can not only halt the Earth in its orbit, but throw it out of its orbit entirely!"

For a moment Sarka studied the angry face of Dalis, and his own was very thoughtful.

"Dalis," he said at last, "I wish you were not our enemy! For you are a genius, and the world has need of all the knowledge of such genius as it possesses. Why do you oppose us?"

"Because," snarled Dalis, "I guessed something of your plan that I do not like! I do not like the Sarkas, never have; but neither have the Sarkas any love for me! When you spoke to us all, I knew that somehow you had discovered the secret! You spoke, when you delivered your ultimatum, of attacking the Moon, and after it Mars!

You also granted to my Gens what would have seemed a great honor —to anyone who did not fathom the tricky scheming of the Sarkas! —that of being the first into the fray! If we are to be first, and the Moon is to be the first attacked, then you plan to relieve the world forever of me, your arch-enemy, by exiling me and all my Gens upon the Moon! A dead world, covered with ashes, whose people dwell in dank caverns, like gnomes of the underworld...."

"Stay!" snapped Sarka. "But I granted you a greater honor even than that, Dalis! I planned on your Gens, led by you, making a successful conquest of the Moon—because only such a genius as Dalis could force from this dead world a living for his Gens! Because you are the wisest of the Spokesmen, I planned for you the greatest task! Because I need you ... I do not slay you!"

"I thank you," bowing low, with the deepest sarcasm, "but you honor me too much! And tell me, pray, if it is not true that you plan for the Sarkas their choice of the best and newest worlds of the Universe?"

Sarka did not answer for a second, while his sensitive nostrils quivered with fury. The Sarkas had not noticed, but Jaska, daughter of Cleric, had admitted herself through the Exit Dome, in a way known only to Sarka and to herself, as she had entered many times before so as not to disturb Sarka at his labors. She now stood silently

there, divesting herself of her Belt and outer clothing, beneath which was the golden toga worn by all the women of the earth. Dalis, however, had seen her, and his eyes narrowed craftily as he awaited the answer of Sarka.

"Dalis," said Sarka softly, "it is not for you to question me, but to obey me! I have not undertaken this step without mastering all its details, and I refuse to allow you to swerve me in a single one of them from my plan."

Dalis straightened, standing stiffly at savage attention, and met the angry eyes of Sarka without flinching. There was no fear in Dalis, as all the world knew. But he was a schemer, and selfish.

"After all," he said, "I have known Sarkas to make promises they could not keep! How do I know, how does the world know, that you can do what you say you can do?"

"If," said Sarka, "I close all contact of this laboratory with the world outside, so that none may hear what I say save we four, and I then whisper here the secret you never told, Dalis, when my father's father refused to help you—will you then believe?"

The face of Dalis went suddenly white, but he nodded, his eyes

burning redly. Jaska moved closer to the men, who stood near the table of the vari-colored lights.

"You needed my father's father," said Sarka softly, "because the secret of your scheme rested here in this laboratory, which is the highest point in the world! You pretended to need him in your scheme; but you did not need my father's father, though you *did* need his laboratory, and some of the facts of science that *he* discovered. So you came to him with your scheme, discovered that he believed, though he denied it, your scheme was possible—because he refused to aid you in it! Then, as an excuse to re-enter this laboratory, you told him you would return within two days! Now, shall I tell you your secret?"

The lips of Dalis were moving soundlessly. His right hand started to rise, as though he would make it signal the negative he was unable for a moment to speak. But even as he stood there, swaying slightly on his feet, Sarka dashed to the lights on the table, disconnecting them one by one; to the Revolving Beryl, which then ceased to revolve for the first time in centuries—whirled when he had finished, and stepped to the very center of the room.

"Now," he whispered, "your secret, Dalis!"

Still the hand upraised, still Dalis tried to speak, and could not.

Sarka spoke, in a hoarse, almost terrified whisper, four words:

"The Beryl! The Ovoids!"

Gasps of surprise from the other two Sarkas, whose eyes for a second flashed to the huge Beryl, which now was still, silent—and blind. Dawning comprehension was evident in their faces.

"The success of the Revolving Beryl," whispered Sarka, "which sees all that transpires in this world, depends on one fact: that its revolving is proportionately timed to infinite exactness with the revolution of the Earth about its axis! This Beryl is the Master Beryl of the Earth, which was why Dalis needed this Beryl, and could use no other!"

"Suppose that for a period of two days, uniformly progressive, this Beryl were forced to revolve in sharp jerks at an increasing rate of speed! With all connections in place, and all the world's Beryls attuned to the speed of this one—what would happen? What would happen if a single Gens were marshalled in warlike array atop the area of the Gens, and kept up a steady, rhythmic march for a period of hours?"

"In a few hours," whispered Sarka the First, "the roof of the Gens area would begin to vibrate, to vibrate throughout all the area, and even into all surrounding Gens areas—and in time the roof would collapse!"

"Exactly!" said Sarka, breathing heavily. "This Beryl, when attuned to all other Beryls in the world, would have this vibratory effect, not only on a certain area of the world—but upon the entire world!—Force the speed of the Beryls to the uttermost limit, and you sway the world to your will! As a marching horde would sway the roof of a vast section of the world if the horde's commander willed!

"But that is not enough! The world would tremble, but nothing more! The Earth's store of Ovidum, which is Anti-Gravitational, and used in minute quantities in our Anti-Gravitational Ovoids, is evenly distributed throughout the world. By vibration of the Beryls I can control it, scatter it or gather it all together wherever I will! By shifting through vibration this Anti-Gravitational material, I can disrupt, make uneven, or nullify the pull of gravity on the Earth!"

"That would do it," said Dalis, finding his voice at last; "but how would you control the course the Earth would take, thus thrown out of its orbit?"

"That, my dear Dalis, is for the moment my secret!"

"But is it?" Dalis suddenly shouted.

Before the three Sarkas could recover from their surprise at the man's sudden vehemence, he made a swift, terrifying move. He leaped away from them to stand beside Jaska, daughter of Cleric.

"Sarka," he shrieked, "I know you love this woman! Note this little tube I hold against her side. With it I can cause her to vanish for all time, merely by a slight pressure of the fingers! And that will I do, unless you immediately open all contacts with the world and remain silent while I tell the people of Earth how you would betray them!"

The three Sarkas were petrified with amazement and horror, for they recognized the slender tube in the hand of Dalis as a Ray Director, the world's greatest engine of destruction, and knew that it would do exactly as Dalis had said it would.

Automatically, because they were brave men, they had stepped a trifle closer to Jaska and Dalis. Perspiration poured from their cheeks as they stared at this rebel. But their fears were for Jaska, who now spoke for the first time.

"Let him do as he wills," she said smilingly, "since for the good of the world I do not fear to die! Refuse him, Sarka, and know that I go into Death's Darkness loving you always, and knowing that you will succeed in the end, in spite of the opposition of men like Dalis!"

A man of unexpected actions, this Dalis, for while the attentions of the Sarkas were on the little tableau he had staged, his eyes had darted to the Beryl, to the control which Sarka had touched to still its revolving. Now he sprang away from Jaska, was free of her and the Sarkas before any could move to intercept him.

He dashed to the Beryl. Instantly it swept into motion, while Dalis whirled to face the Sarkas, and from his lips came a burst of triumphant laughter. One hand was on the Beryl Control, the other still held the Ray Director.

"Fools!" he cried. "Fools! Duped like children! And now it is Dalis who is master of the world! Move closer to me, and I will turn my Ray Director upon this Beryl, which you have so kindly informed me is master of all the Beryls and of all Ovidum deposits! Be glad that I do not turn it upon you; but for you I have a kinder, more honorable fate! I now am master, and will direct the destiny of the world! But I will never leave it, because I suspect that it is the most pleasant of all the worlds! I will, however, choose for the Sarkas a

world that shall be the dreariest in all the Universe!"

The Sarkas whirled as soft laughter came from Jaska, daughter of Cleric. Strange, lilting laughter. They turned in time to see her vanish through the Exit Dome; but for a long moment her jeering laughter seemed to sound in the laboratory she had left-and, to judge by her laughter, had betrayed! For Dalis, arch-traitor, echoed her laughter!

Chapter 6: ***The Beryls in Tune***

"Remember," said Dalis, as the Beryl began to revolve and its humming mounted moment by moment to normal, "that you must concur in whatever I say to the people of the Earth—for if you do not, I swear that I will destroy this Master Beryl! Then what happens to your scheme, Sarka the Third? You see, there is no change in the plans, save one: I am the master, not you!"

Dalis was not a madman, for the world conceded him place in its list of geniuses next below the three Sarkas, which was high honor indeed; but Dalis possessed in abundance that most universal of all human emotions—jealousy. For centuries he had been nursing it, watching the Sarkas always in the niches just above him, yet never being able to attain to their eminence. Now....

He had outwitted them. It might be for a moment only, but while his mastery lasted he would drink deeply of personal satisfaction. Now, however, there was no gloating in his face, for he realized, as Sarka had realized, the infinite gravity of the whole situation. If a mistake were made, the world would plunge to destruction—or go cooling forever in a headlong race through space.

"I keep the Ray Director hidden," he whispered, while the

murmuring of the Master Beryl mounted as it gained speed again, "but know you, Sarkas, that its muzzle points at the Master Beryl, always!"

Now the forms of Earth were appearing on the Beryl. Men in countless hordes were maneuvering in myriads, legions and armies, across the face of the globe. There was no marching, but an effortless, swift as light almost, aerial maneuvering. For each human being possessed the tight-fitting metalized cloth, with the gleaming helmet in whose skull-pan was the Anti-Gravitational Ovoid, which was the "outside" garment of earthlings. With the Ovoid sitting exactly against the skull, man had but to will himself in any direction, at any livable height, and the action took place. In the same way, one man, to whom others in an organization gave allegiance by appointment, could will all his underlings into whatever formation he desired.

As beautiful and effortless at the flight of those birds which had vanished from the earth centuries before.

"Remember, Dalis," said Sarka, "that while the speed of the Earth in its orbit is between eighteen and nineteen miles per second, once thrown out of its orbit, and forced to follow a straight or nearly straight line, the speed may be many times that-or much less!"

"The simplest facts of science," snarled Dalis, "were known to me a thousand years before you were born! Now I shall tell the Spokesmen of the Gens, and be sure that you second what I say!"

He paused. Then, raising his voice impressively, he spoke.

"O Spokesmen of the Gens, O Gens of Earth, hark ye to the words of Dalis and of Sarka! The time has come to try the experiment of which Sarka told you, and which I, Dalis, of the Gens of Dalis, have found good, and hereby certify! See that all your Beryls are mathematically tuned to catch every sound, every vibration, every picture, from this Beryl of Sarka, henceforth to be known as the Master Beryl!

"No matter what happens, no matter what changes take place in the temperature of your homes, no matter what storms may come, touch not your Beryls until instructed from this laboratory! Tune your Beryls, then leave them, and hasten faster with your preparations for war! Each Spokesman of a Gens will at once instruct the members of his Gens that all partitions between families shall immediately be removed, outward from a common center in each case, until one hundred families occupy a single dwelling place. Materials from destroyed partitions shall be carefully hoarded, and the newer and bigger areas shall become maneuvering places for the hundred

families which will occupy each given area!

"Facing a crisis as we are, no thought can be given to privacy, and neighborly quarrels must be forgotten! This move is necessary because no single dwelling place is large enough to be used as a place of maneuver—and from now on until the command is given, maneuvers must not be held Outside! For hark ye, O Spokesmen, O Gens of Earth, we are about to start upon our voyage into outer space! Spokesmen, call in your maneuvering myriads! You have five minutes!"

In five minutes not a flying man could be seen in all the cold, stormy outside. Dalis spoke again.

"Tune your Beryls and remove partitions, taking care that in reducing partitions you so estimate your stresses and strains that the roof of the world be not endangered by weight that is unsupported, or improperly supported!

"Food Conservers, redouble your production and rush your transportation of Food Capsules!

"Mothers of men, take over the labors of your sons and your husbands! Sisters and sweethearts of men, join the myriads in

maneuvers, for you, too, may require knowledge of fighting!"

In spite of himself, an ejaculation of admiration escaped the lips of Sarka. Hearing it, Dalis turned to him, and a flush of pleasure tinged his cheeks as Sarka shaped one word with his lips:

"Excellent!"

Then, after a pause, Sarka spoke directly to the Gens of Earth.

"Take heed of the words of Dalis, for they are also the words of the Sarkas!"

Then an expression of surprise flashed across the face of Sarka as Dalis' fingers began to move in a swift sort of pantomime—for the sign manual he used was the secret manual of Jaska and Sarka! His heart cold within him at this new proof of her betrayal, Sarka nevertheless noted the words which dropped silently off the fingers of this enemy of the Sarkas.

"You are wise to resist no further! Together we can do much, and if you give your word not to oppose me, we can work together; but I will be the master!"

"But, if we grant you the mastery, will you heed our advice if it is

good?"

"I will, but I alone will be the judge of its worth!"

"Then we work together henceforth. Let us begin! In the time required to move from here to the Moon, our people will have ample opportunity to perfect themselves in maneuvers! Are you ready, O my father, and father's father?"

"Ready!" they said together.

But for a moment Dalis hesitated. "Your word!" he snapped, looking at each Sarka in turn, and each in his turn nodded. They had given their word, but not their love, to Dalis. Dalis bowed low to Sarka the Youngest, who darted to the onyx base in which revolved the Master Beryl, and pressed a small lever of metalized jade, set in a slot on the southern side of the base of onyx. The humming sound within the Beryl became perceptibly louder, and as the minutes passed, and Sarka stood, arms folded, watching the Revolving Beryl, it continued to increase.

Here was the crisis, and as they watched its sure, certain approach, they forgot their enmities, Dalis and the Sarkas, and watched the whirling Beryl. Minute by minute its humming increased. The

figures still were plain to be seen within the Beryl, but were becoming blurred of outline. Partitions had been removed all over the earth, increasing the size of rooms a hundredfold, reducing their number a hundredfold. The Gens of Earth, by hundred-families, were maneuvering under the Heads of Hundreds. The depths of the Master Beryl, therefore, was a maze of flying men, with their extremities slightly blurred, and becoming more so as the Master Beryl increased its speed.

Here now was shown the value of the organization fostered by Sarka the First—for in all the world there was no single Beryl out of tune with the Master Beryl; and as the Master Beryl increased the speed of its revolving, so increased at the same time the speed of all the other Beryls. Minute by minute the humming of the Master, and with it the others, increased in volume.

"Father!" spoke Sarka. "To the Observatory, behind the Beryl, please, to watch the stars, and from them to note the direction we take when the combined vibrations of the Beryls have affected the quiescence of Earth's deposits of Ovidum and, through its shifting, disturbed the flight of the Earth in its orbit!"

With a brief nod Sarka's father hurried around the Master Beryl to the tiny Observatory beyond, from which, through the Micro-

Telescopes, those who knew could read the secrets of the planets, the stars—the Universe. Sarka watched him go, wondering if Dalis might not forbid him. But Dalis merely watched him go and said nothing.

Now that the time of Change was upon the world, Dalis realized his responsibility. It was little wonder that he began to be for the first time a little bit afraid.

"Note, Dalis!" snapped Sarka, and Dalis started nervously as his name was spoken. "Feel the trembling of the laboratory, just as the same trembling affects all the other buildings in the world in which Beryls are located. As the minutes pass the trembling will go deeper and deeper, and by to-morrow the first tremors will be reaching into the Earth to several miles below the last habitable Inner Level! And then....

"Then," repeated Sarka tersely, "my father will know by his study of the stars in which new direction we are traveling! For within twenty-four hours the Earth will have started on its voyage of conquest!"

"Is there no way, Sarka," queried Dalis, "by which we can control the direction of our flight!"

"There *is* a way, O wise and gallant Dalis! But since you do not know it, who now is master?"

Dalis' face became as pale as chalk, and Sarka smiled a little as he watched him. Then, wondering what new resolve stirred the depths of this master egotist of the earth, he watched emotions flash to and fro across the face of Dalis, watched the color return to his cheeks. The cold of death gripped at his heart when Dalis spoke.

"I do not fear death, O wise and gallant Sarka!" he mocked. "For I have lived fully and well, and for many, many centuries! You know that I do not fear to slay people of the Earth, for did I not propose to your father's father that a flood would be beneficial to unfit earthlings? Hear, then! Keep your secret, and I shall allow the Earth to go outward into space, out of control, in whatever direction it will. If any other worlds happen to lie in our pathway...."

Dalis shrugged indifferently, turning his back on Sarka, to peer again into the depths of the Master Beryl, whose voice had risen to a vaster murmur, whose pictures were becoming moment by moment more blurred as time fled irrevocably into eternity.

Sarka the First took advantage of his opportunity, and leaped at the back of Dalis, hands extended to fasten them in the throat of his

ancient enemy. Dalis whirled, with a burst of laughter, and the muzzle of his Ray Director covered the person of the First Sarka. In a flash the spot where Sarka the First had been was vacant, and there was no single sign to show that he had ever stood there!

Silence then in the laboratory, save for the mounting murmur of the Master Beryl!

Chapter 7: ***Outer Space***

"He only proved a belief I have entertained for centuries!" snarled Dalis. "That all the male Sarkas are fools—and the females for bearing them!"

Sarka said nothing, but within his breast a deep hatred was forming for Dalis. He had disliked him before, and had been amused by him; but in the busy life of Sarka there had been no time for hatred of anyone. Busy people had no time for hatreds.

"You should be torn to pieces for that, Dalis!" was all he said. "We needed my father's father in our efforts! But the loss to the world of one super-genius cannot be balanced by slaying another—so you are safe!

"What he could do, I can do!" snapped Dalis.

Sarka turned away from him, seating himself beside the table of the vari-colored lights, and his heart was heavy as lead in his breast. He blamed Jaska for much of this, and his heart was burdened, despite her treachery, by the fact that he loved her, always would love her. Love was the one possession which made centuries of life desirable to men of the Earth. For men could spend centuries in seeking a true

mate, knowing that there were other centuries still in which to enjoy her. Woman was man's greatest boon, his excuse for living, as was man excuse for woman. Through the centuries, when humankind remained forever young, the joy in each other of those truly mated grew as their knowledge grew....

And now Jaska had failed Sarka, when for half a century they had loved each other! Why had she done it? He had given her no reason to do so. Had there been some other reason? Why had she laughed, and left them, after the betrayal of the Master Beryl into the hands of Dalis?

"Before God," whispered Sarka, "I believe that you, Jaska, were playing a game to dupe Dalis, as he played a game to dupe us!"

Down in his heart he was not sure. But somehow, just to whisper to himself his faith in Jaska, gave it back to him in some measure, and by so much lightened the weight upon his heart. For now his responsibilities were greater than they had ever been before, and he had need of all his faculties.

"She'll come back, or somehow communicate with me, and explain everything," he told himself. But he refused to ponder on how Dalis the betrayer had gained possession of the secret sign manual he had

believed known only to Jaska and himself. That, too, might be explained satisfactorily, for Dalis was cunning.

From the side of the laboratory opposite the Revolving Beryl came a soft tinkling sound, like the striking of a musical bell. Sarka rose wearily, strode to the wall, where a narrow aperture opened, in which rested Food Capsules sufficient for one meal for three men. He smiled wryly. They knew then, the Food Conservers deep in the earth as they were, that Sarka the First was no more—and sent food for three men! All the world knew, perhaps, yet no single person had raised voice in protest—or if any had, the mounting murmur of the Beryls had drowned it out.

"Sarka!" spoke Dalis suddenly. "At what time do you estimate that the flight of the Earth in its orbit will be materially affected?"

"It is being affected this moment, Dalis, shifting the Ovidum store!" said Sarka shortly. "Within twelve hours we will be in readiness to start our journey!"

Remaining absolutely motionless within the domed laboratory, it was now possible to feel the ever so slight motion, not only of the laboratory, but of the mountain crest upon which it rested. Not so much a to-and-fro motion as a round-about motion.

Just as the slightest sound flies outward through space endlessly, and the slightest vibration moves outward until the end of time and of space, Sarka knew that the vibration set up by the Beryl, slight though it was, was already being felt at the Poles of the Earth. Not enough to be noticed there, but existant, just the same.

"In twelve hours the world will be fighting against this combined vibration and Anti-Gravitational Force we are starting, and second by second accelerating," Sarka explained to Dalis: "fighting to remain on its pathway about the Sun! But we will win against it, and with each new vibration, each succeeding one being more strongly felt, we will force the Earth that much more against the *pull* which holds it in its orbit!"

The laboratory was trembling. The mountain beneath it was trembling. Both in accordance with scientific design. There was no element of chance in it, for the mountain moved, and the laboratory on its crest moved, as science willed. It was now difficult for Sarka to remain still where he sat, for the trembling was exciting his heart action, and causing the blood to rush to his cheeks, making him feverish. He rose to his feet and began pacing the floor.

He strode to the jade lever, moved it ahead a fraction of a fraction of an inch, and perceptibly the murmuring of the Beryl increased, as

did the trembling of the laboratory and of the mountain.

Twelve hours later exactly, Sarka shouted a single word to Dalis.

"Now!"

The laboratory was swinging about in a sort of circle in a way that made one dizzy if one remained still for the merest second. Sarka, glancing out into the Outside, across which blew the storms of the heights, and noting that no cracks appeared in the surface of the world's vast roof, knew that this swaying motion had been transmitted evenly to all the Earth, and that, so far at least, his calculations had been correct.

But Dalis was in a cold sweat of fear, and deathly sick. The motion of the laboratory, like the inside of a whirling top, made him ill, though Sarka could tell that he fought against it with all his great will.

Sarka strode to him, looked him in the eyes for a moment. Dalis looked back, glaring defiance.

"Are you afraid, Dalis?" he shouted, to be heard above the screaming of the Master Beryl.

"I am not afraid," croaked Dalis. "Has the time arrived?"

Sarka paused, as though for dramatic effect, and raised his right hand high, while his left hand dropped to the metalized jade lever. There still was room in the slot in the onyx base for the lever to move forward ever so little.

"We have reached the exact place," cried Sarka, "where the Earth can, by pressure upon this lever, be continued on in its orbit—or forced out of it—out into space! Which shall it be, Dalis? If I move the lever forward we start our voyage, and may not be able to return!"

For a moment the nostrils of Dalis quivered as though with fear. His face was white with his illness; but out of his eyes peered the fanatic self-confidence of the man.

"Push it forward, O Sarka!" he managed.

Sarka, smiling slightly, pushed the lever to its uttermost limit, still with his right arm upraised. For full five minutes he stood thus, and then....

"Now!" he shouted, bringing down his arm. "We have begun our

journey into space! Come, let us look Outside, and await the first reports from my father!"

The two men, forgetting again for a moment the fact of their enmity, strode to the southern wall of the laboratory and looked out across the roof of the world.

"You will note, Dalis," said Sarka conversationally, "that in a matter of hours, the roaring of the Etheric winds will possess everything! We will have passed into the infinite reaches of Outer Space, where, if I may make so bold as to say so, it were better if Dalis, self-named master of the world, knew whither he was going!"

Chapter 8: ***Moon Minions Prepare***

"It is time," said Sarka softly, "that we who have urged the world to forget its quarrels should forget our own. What difference who is master, so long as success attend our efforts?"

"Then tell me your secret of control of our flight!" snapped Dalis.

Before Sarka could answer, however, Sarka the Second entered the laboratory area before the Master Beryl. He looked a question at his son, and Sarka knew that his father was asking what had become of Sarka the First. He shrugged his shoulders, and nodded his head toward Dalis. Sarka the Second gave no more sign of perturbation than had his son, but deep within his eyes were signal fires of fury which centuries of penance on the part of Dalis would not erase. But now, with Sarka the First gone, Dalis must live.

"We are headed," said Sarka's father softly, "in the general direction of the Moon! If we could travel toward it in a straight line, we would reach it, if we kept our pace of about eighteen miles per second, in approximately four hours! But since we are out of control, I fear we will pass it too far away for our fighters to fly across the intervening space! Or we may be drawn against it, in planetary collision, which of course means annihilation. We are traveling noticeably faster than

while in the earth's orbit. I am able to see something of the preparation of Moon-men to receive us!"

Dalis turned to Sarka, and the perspiration bedewed his forehead. In order to make this mad mission successful, he must know Sarka's secret of control. Had he been in Sarka's place, *he* would have kept his secret, no matter what happened, and he believed in his heart that Sarka would do the same. It never occurred to him that Sarka, no matter who the master, would divulge his secret in order to save humanity from destruction.

"We have approximately four hours, Dalis!" Sarka prompted the betrayer. "I need at least an hour for my experiments! Do you, knowing as you do that I have planned all this out, know exactly what course our voyage should take, still insist on holding the reins yourself?"

"I agree, for this time, to listen to your advice, as I promised you!"

"Then let me suggest that you do some of the work which I had planned should be done by my father's father! It is time that the world's Induction Conduits be placed in operation, in order that our people be supplied with equable temperature from the Earth's Core, as our temperature changes due to our position with relation to the

sun! Stand back and give me the controls!"

For a moment Dalis stared at the two Sarkas. Would they seize power the moment he moved away from the Beryl Control? In their places he knew he would have done it. In their places he knew he would never have submerged self in the good of the people. But, somewhat diffidently, he moved away. Sarka the Second returned to the Observatory, behind the Beryl, while Sarka stopped before the table where the lights were.

After a moment of thought-conversation with Sarka the Second in the Observatory, he dimmed the light which connected his laboratory with the headquarters of Klaser, in the Americas.

"Klaser," he barked, "for the period of one second cut the speed of every Beryl within your Gens to half its present speed!"

"I obey, O Sarka!" came the voice of Klaser.

::Have we changed direction?:: Sarka mentally questioned his father.

::Slightly, but we are curving away, instead of toward the Moon! Try again!::

Sarka dimmed the light of Cleric, who instantly made answer.

"I am here, Sarka!"

"Stop the Beryls of your Gens for two seconds, but be prepared to speed them up immediately afterward, if ordered, to the speed at which they are now revolving! Klaser, hold the speed of your Beryls as they are!"

"I obey, O Sarka!" came the musical tones of Cleric.

"I hear, O Sarka!" replied Klaser.

::Now, my father,:: queried Sarka again, telepathically, ::what direction do we travel?::

::We are heading in a direction which will cause us to pass the Moon at a distance of approximately fifty thousand miles!::

“From which point our fighters can reach the Moon in exactly two hours, after they have passed through our atmosphere!" cried Sarka exultantly, aloud.

::True, son!:: replied Sarka the Second, mentally. ::I suggest you hold our course steady as it is!::

The motion of the earth now was as that of a steadily falling body,

and the shifting of the Ovidum store caused by vibrations set up by the Beryls had set the Earth on its course toward the Moon. Sarka now gave instructions to Klaser and to Cleric to return the speed of the Beryls to that which they had attained at the moment the journey of the Earth had begun—thus bringing them once more into harmony with the Master Beryl, and rendering the Ovidum static.

Dalis re-entered the laboratory from the Wall Tube, near the Dome Exit, by which he had passed down to the lowest Inner Level, and stared suspiciously at the two Sarkas. He found them half-smiling their satisfaction.

"We pass the Moon within fifty thousand miles!" exulted Sarka. "A flight of two hours for the Gens which attacks the Moon! Do you refuse, O Dalis, to send your Gens against the Moon?"

"Why not send the Gens of Gerd!" demanded Dalis. "He is the youngest of the Spokesmen, and what better test is there for him than this?"

"It is because he is so young that we do not wish to send him," replied Sarka coldly. "The colonization of the Moon by Earthlings requires the guiding genius of a Spokesman who has the experience of a Dalis—or a Sarka, else you would now be dead!"

"Then let it be a Sarka!" barked Dalis.

"Who, then, will control the further flight of the Earth?"

"You! Let your father lead my Gens against the Moon!"

"What will your Gens say, O Dalis? That their revered Spokesman feared to lead them in person?"

"Enough of this squabbling," snapped Sarka the Second. "Do you not realize that within a matter of hours, some Gens must be sent into battle? Come with me to the Observatory, where you will be given something beside squabbling with which to occupy your minds!"

Leaving the earth on its lonely flight through space, the three men hurried to the Observatory, where they seated themselves before the eye-pieces of the Micro-Telescopes, whose outer circles had been aimed at the Moon.

For a moment the three stared breathlessly at the surface of this dead sister of the Earth. They noted her valleys, her craters which seemed bottomless, and saw that even as they watched, valleys and craters became sharper of outline, proving that they were approaching the

Moon at a tremendous speed. It seemed, too, as though they were heading toward sure collision, though Sarka the Second had said that they would pass the Moon at a distance of fifty thousand miles.

"You will note activity at the very rims of the craters!" said the Elder Sarka easily. "The craters are man-made, not volcanic, as some scientists believe, and are shaped to converge the rays of the sun, as our roof is created for the same purpose. But note the activity at the rims of the craters!"

Closer the men peered, studying the rims as instructed by Sarka the Second. All about them—and as they watched, activity became apparent on the inner slopes of the craters—winged creatures seemed to be flying. They looked like tiny oblate spheroids, and they were in swift action, darting to and fro like bees which have been disturbed in their hives.

"Those spheres are of metal," said Sarka the Second, "and they are the fighting Aircars of the Moon-men!"

Neither Dalis nor Sarka denied this statement, for they knew it to be fact. It became apparent that the movement of the Aircars was not a movement of chance, but as skillfully ordered as any maneuvers which had, during the last few hours, been executed by any of the

Gens of Earth. That they were of metal became apparent when, through the Micro-Telescopes, the watchers caught the glint of the sun on the surfaces of the cars.

Sarka did a swift mental calculation, and announced the result.

"Those Aircars average something like four hundred feet in length, and are doubtless filled with fighting Moon-men!"

"That's right," said Dalis, who also had been calculating this very thing, "but our Ray Directors will disintegrate the Aircars as easily as my Ray Director disintegrated Sarka the First!"

"The remaining Sarkas received this statement in silence, for Dalis' choice of a comparison had been an unhappy one, to say the least.

"I am wondering," said Sarka, "if you, my father, and you Dalis, have noted the peculiar appendages of the Aircars?"

"I saw them some minutes ago," said his father moodily, "and I am almost afraid to guess their use! If they are what I fear they are, then the Moon-men have been expecting this attack of ours for years and years, and have been preparing for it! If they have known, and have been preparing, then we are facing a race of super-Beings indeed—

for we have known but little of their activities!"

"What, then," said Dalis, "do you think is the purpose of those appendages?"

"Those appendages, cilia, flagella, call them whatever you wish, are man-made tentacles, created for the purpose of seizing, crushing and destroying—then discarding...."

For a full two minutes the three men sat there, and horrible doubts flooded their brains. For the conclusion was obvious. The Gens of Earth would go into action flying, not as organizations, inside an Aircar, but as individuals, in swarms, myriads, legions and hordes. In order to do the utmost damage with their Ray Directors and Atom Disintegrators, they must approach within a reasonable distance—and the picture of those mighty tentacles, hurled like leashed lightning bolts into the midst of the attackers, folding in individuals by scores and hundreds, crushing them and dropping them contemptuously, was horrible in the extreme to contemplate!

It was difficult to estimate the possible speed of the Aircars of the Moon-men, at least at this distance. Besides, perhaps not a single one of them was traveling at top speed, because of the fact of their crowded traffic.

This thought passed through the minds of the three men.

"But we'll know," said Sarka dully, "when they get into action. For if I am not mistaken, those Aircars are being mustered on the rims of those craters to await orders, not to resist our attack, but to launch their own attack before we are ready! Dalis, are you going to allow your Gens to go into action against these Outsiders, without the inspiration of your personal leadership?"

The nostrils of Dalis were quivering with the intensity of his emotion. His vast egotism told him that he, Dalis, could successfully combat these Aircars of the Moon-men, and he wished with all his heart to issue the orders to his Gens. But, vain as he was, he did not even wish to have the appearance of acceding to the original plan of Sarka! Sarka had planned for Dalis to attack the dwellers of the Moon, and Dalis had refused. Now, when this challenge of the Aircars was a direct challenge to his genius as a potential warlord of earth and he wished to accept the challenge, he was torn two ways.

Should he go ahead under the common leadership of the Sarkas? Or should he still refuse battle—and perhaps see some lesser Spokesman go forth to win glory and imperishable renown to himself?

A thought message, a command almost, impinged on the brains of the three.

"I wish to speak with you aloud!:: The message was from Jaska!

The three men rose and darted into the room of the Master Beryl. They had no sooner entered than the clear voice of Jaska sounded in the laboratory.

"Sarka, I am no traitor! I am Jaska, who loves you! I am in the headquarters of Dalis at Ohi, and the Gens of Dalis has indicated its allegiance to me, having been informed by me that it is the wish of Dalis, whose presence is needed at the place of the Master Beryl! Command us, O Sarka, for we are ready to attack!"

There the voice ended, while the two Sarkas turned again to face Dalis.

Sarka now was glad that Dalis knew the secret sign manual, and his fingers worked swiftly as he spoke to the rebel.

{Will you, then, Dalis, allow your Gens to be led to glory by a woman? A woman, moreover, who has duped you?}

"The woman is a fool!" said Dalis. "She will lead the Gens to

destruction!"

"Who, then, will be blamed if she does? Your Gens believe she is their new Spokesman at your wish! If they are told otherwise, they will think that Dalis himself is afraid to lead them!"

"We shall see," said Dalis, "if I could win honor by leading my Gens in a successful attack against the Moon-men, how much greater will be my glory if Jaska attacks, is repulsed—and I go in to turn defeat into victory!"

Thus spake the colossal selfishness of Dalis, who took no thought of the possible, nay, certain, loss of countless lives because of his obstinancy.

"I suggest," he said, "that you instruct your beloved Jaska to make ready; for if I am not mistaken, when we return to the Observatory we will discover that the Aircars of the Moon-men have left their craters and are racing outward from the Moon to meet us! Or perhaps you would lead my Gens, to safeguard Jaska!"

Chapter 9: ***The Attack of the Yellow Stars***

"Why should I safeguard Jaska?" asked Sarka quietly. "She is a true daughter of Cleric! If Cleric does not fear for her to be Spokesman of a Gens, why should I? He is her father. If she wins, the more glory will be hers! If she loses, she will at least have tried!"

"Meaning," snarled Dalis, "that I have refused even to try!"

Sarka shrugged expressively, and the three stepped once more into the Observatory, took their places before the Micro-Telescopes. For a moment they could not see the outline of the Moon, for during their brief sojourn in the laboratory the Moon seemed to have disintegrated, flying into countless spheroidal pieces.

"You see?" said Dalis. "The Moon-men do not wait for us! They attack!"

It was all too true that the Aircars which had been mustered at the rims of the Moon's craters had been hurled outward into space, outward toward the on-rushing Earth, and the myriad numbers of them for a time shut out all view of the surface of the Moon.

"God!" spoke Sarka, and it was like a prayer. His cheeks were pale

as death, for in a moment he would speak the word which would send the Gens of Dalis, under the leadership of Jaska, out against these formidable Aircars of the Moon-men, and the appearance of the on-rushing cars was terrifying. That their flying radius, outward, was a great one, was manifest by the fact that the Earth would not for another hour reach its closest estimated point with the Moon.

Sarka, exchanging glances with his father, rose and stepped again into the laboratory. Even as he entered the room of the Master Beryl, Jaska's broken signal came through.

"I am ready, Sarka!" came her soft voice, vibrant with confidence. "The Gens is ready, and the Gens believes in me!"

For a moment Sarka hesitated before taking the plunge. Then he spoke the fatal words.

"Go, Jaska, and my love goes with you!"

As the Earth approached closer to the Moon, the revolving of the Beryls had been decreased, so that the motion of the Master Beryl was almost normal—normal being that speed with which it revolved when it was necessary to use it for visual contact with the people of the Earth.

Out of the area of the Gens of Dalis darted the green specks which were the flying people of Dalis! Sarka, staring in among them, focussing the Beryl-microscope, sought for some way of identifying Jaska, who led them. A thrill coursed through him when he made her out, unmistakably—dressed still in the tight white clothing of her own Gens, with the Red Lily of the house of Cleric on her breast and on her back! The daughter of Cleric was leading the Gens of Dalis into combat under her own colors and her father's insignia!

Sarka raced back to the Observatory, seated himself again to watch the attack, which must of necessity be joined within a matter almost of minutes. Those myriads of Aircars flying outward from the Moon, had seemed invincible; but up until now he had never seen an entire Gens mustered at one time. His whole being thrilled with the awesome grandeur of the spectacle; it seemed that not an able-bodied individual of the Gens of Dalis had failed to answer the muster of the Gens.

Millions upon millions of people, taking off the icy roof of that part of the Earth lying between Ohi and the North Pole, from the heart of what had once been part of the Pacific Ocean.

So many of them were there that when they were free of the Earth, flashing outward at two thousand miles an hour, it was impossible to

see the Moon or those formidable Aircars—and still, out of the heart of the area of the Gens of Dalis, came other myriads, each flight waiting only for the preceding flight to clear!

The green, tight fitting clothing of the Gens of Dalis, each individual wearing the yellow star of the Spokesman of the Gens! A marvelous, awe-inspiring sight!

And this was but a single area, and the earth was divided into twelve such areas, some smaller, none larger, which showed Sarka for the first time a hint of the mighty man-power, and fighting woman-power which he controlled. However, once free of the Earth, conduct of the fight would be in the hands of the Spokesman—Jaska, acting for Dalis.

Sarka turned to Dalis, his eyes flashing.

"Does it not thrill you, O Dalis?" he demanded. "Do you not wish now that you had gone out with your people as their leader?"

"They follow Jaska like sheep," he stated with a snort. "But wait! My Gens seem invincible, because it bulks between us and the Aircars of the Moon-Dwellers! Wait, see how the battle goes! The Gens may yet have need of Dalis!"

Sarka studied those outgoing hosts, which were dwindling away to mere specks with vast speed, for through the cordons and cordons of them he could now see the Aircars more plainly. It was still possible, when one looked through the Micro-Telescopes, to see the slim figure of Jaska leading the attack. She was in the vanguard of the Gens of Dalis leading her people onward as though she had been born to command—utterly fearless.

"And I was small enough," whispered Sarka, "to doubt you! I even told you that I doubted you! Forgive me, Jaska! Forgive me!"

And still, as Level after Level gave up its myriads, the Gens of Dalis shot forth from the Gens area, and winged away, following the lead of Jaska. Millions of people, armed with Ray Directors and Atom Disintegrators. How tiny the individuals seemed, against the mighty bulk of those Aircars of the Moon!

But Sarka did not fear, save for the safety of Jaska, as he was realizing anew that he had scarcely skimmed the surface of the man-might of the Earth.

Now, seen through the myriads of the Dalis Gens, he could see again the on-rushing Aircars, and his heart misgave him for a moment as he could tell, by estimation, that at least a hundred families were

outlined against each individual car, which moment by moment grew larger.

Those tentacles were now much in evidence, rising and falling under and around the racing Aircars like serpents, or dragging ropes; but seeming like living things in the sentient manner of their moving—eager to come in contact with the first of the earthlings, and to wrap those tentacles about them, crush them, hurl them into space.

Sarka went back into the laboratory only long enough to attune the Beryls of the Earth to a point where the Earth would remain almost stationary, comparatively speaking, taking a curving course about the surface of the Moon, as it had for countless millions of years coursed about the Sun.

Then, back to the Observatory, to see how went the battle. Through the Micro-Telescopes the first meeting was plain to be seen. The Gens of Dalis rushed headlong to meet the Aircars and many of them rushed headlong to their destruction.

Sarka noted a group of perhaps a hundred people break forth from the vanguard of the attackers, and mount to a safe height above the Aircars against which the Gens were hurling themselves. A sigh of relief escaped him, and he wished there were some way in which he

could learn the individual identities of the ninety and nine who had taken Jaska forcibly out of danger! For her white clothing, and her Red Lily of Cleric were plainly visible and recognizable! The men of the Gens of Dalis might permit the leadership of a woman, but they would not permit her to be needlessly endangered.

Sarka turned to Dalis, and noted that the face of the master egotist was pale and drawn, his nostrils quivering with emotion, as he watched his Gens go into battle, and a feeling of satisfaction coursed through Sarka like a little white flame. Dalis was proud of his Gens, and now was wishing that he, and not Jaska, were leading them onward.

"I would wager something," whispered Sarka to himself, "that Dalis will not be able to stand it! That before battle has been joined for ten minutes, he will have gone out to take over the leadership of the Gens! Jaska must have guessed that, too! Wise, clever Jaska!"

With a fearless massing of forces, the people of the yellow stars joined battle with the Aircars! The manner of men who flew the Aircars was still unknown to the people of Earth.

But in a trice they would know.

In a matter of minutes Earth would realize the horror of what faced the Gens of Dalis, whom Jaska led!

For with the sending out of their Aircars the Moon-men had given but the merest hint of their ponderous, devastating might!

Chapter 10: ***Tentacles of Terror***

Dalis had always been a stormy petrel, but as he sat before his Micro-Telescope, watching his Gens go into battle against the Moon-men, not even Sarka the Second guessed the depth of infamy of which Dalis was capable.

Dalis had given a hint, but Sarka had, in his sudden realization of the fact that Jaska really loved him, and was no traitor, forgotten that hint. How had Dalis learned the secret sign-manual of Jaska and Sarka? Therein lay the hint.

Dalis, in common with all other Earth's scientists, possessed the ability to think deeply, yet to so mask his thoughts that no one else could grasp them telepathically—and it was well for the peace of mind of the Sarkas that they could not read the black thought of the man, or look into the future, even so far as a dozen years.

The Gens of the yellow stars moved into contact with the Aircars of the Moon. Earth and Moon were gripped in the horror of war, the war between worlds, where no quarter might be asked or given, because fought between alien peoples who did not so much as comprehend each other's languages, or even their signals.

The people of the Gens swarmed about the Aircars like myriad swarms of angry bees, but it was only to Dalis that this simile came, for only Dalis, of these three, had ever seen a swarm of bees.

Sweeping in closely, the Gens brought forth from their resting places in their Sarka-Belts their Ray Directors and their Atom-Disintegrators, and turned the blighting rays of them against the gleaming, ice-colored sides of the aerial monsters.

But even as the Gens brought their instruments of destruction into play, the mighty tentacles of the first hundred Aircars had got into action. Down they whirled to catch at the flying bodies of the pigmylike individuals of the Gens, and hundreds of Earthlings were caught in those tentacles in the first moment of conflict.

Sarka studied the reaction of the people, thus captured. He could see the expressions of unutterable agony on their faces, could see their cheeks turn black with—what? There was no way of knowing; but all sorts of guesses were possible. Those tentacles, from their action upon the human beings which they encompassed, might be charged with electricity. For the people they captured turned black, then shriveled slowly—and were released by the tentacles....

They fell sluggishly away, through the great space which yet

separated the Earth and the Moon. But the people who fell, fell aimlessly, going neither toward the Earth or the Moon, like black feathers in a vagrant breeze.

"Great God, do you see father?" cried Sarka. "The—whatever it is—that turns our people into cinders and drops them, has no effect on the Anti-Gravitational Ovoids in the skull-pans of the helmets, and without mental direction, the Ovoids neither rise nor fall but wander aimlessly!

"See? As the fight continues, those who still live, as they dart here and there through the battle area, will be confronted continually by the blackened faces and shriveled figures of their departed friends, relatives and neighbors, and will see at first hand what will happen to themselves if they are caught by the tentacles!"

From the lips of Dalis came one single burst of laughter, filled with bitterness. No other word came from his lips, no other sign. He merely sat and stared, and masked his hell-black thoughts so that neither of the Sarkas might read them. But in the fertile mind of Dalis a plan was being born—a plan that, he knew, had always been growing back in his mental depths, somewhere, down the centuries, since first he had become an enemy of the Sarkas. The Sarkas ruled the Earth, and....

But he would spring his surprise when he believed the time right, for Dalis possessed a faculty which neither of the Sarkas possessed—an example of it being his incomprehensible knowledge of the secret code of moving fingers used by Sarka and Jaska.

The Gens of Dalis drew back in consternation at this wholesale taking off of the first line of attack. Out of that first line, comprising perhaps a thousand families, scarcely a hundred had escaped the groping of those mighty tentacles of the Aircars—and the black, shriveled things which had been men floated all about the Aircars which had destroyed them, warnings to those who followed them into the fray. Those who had somehow escaped the wrath of the tentacles in the first engagement fled back into the heart of the next line of sky-skirmishers, fear and horror in their faces.

Here, answering to the will of Jaska, a mile or so above the heart of the conflict, they reformed with their people, and prepared again to attack. But how to attack these formidable Aircars successfully?

That was the question. Ray Directors had been turned against them, but something was decidedly wrong. The first car to feel the blast of even one of those Ray Directors should have vanished, become as nothing, as had the body of Sarka the First before the Ray Director of Dalis.

But apparently nothing had happened. Why?

Grimly Dalis and the two remaining Sarkas pondered the problem, wondering at the same time what Jaska would now do, how reform her Gens, how send it again to an attack that seemed hopeless.

"There they go again!" whispered Sarka.

The first two myriads of the Gens of Dalis had now crowded together until they formed a veritable cloud which masked, for a moment, the Aircars of the Moon. Then, as one person, answering to the will of Jaska, they swept in to the attack again.

But as they approached the Aircars, they divided four ways—up, down, to right and to left, and smashed into the Aircars from four directions at once. Jaska, knowing that countless lives must be lost to destroy these monsters of the Moon, was trying to down them by mass attack, hoping that, while the inner groups gave their lives, those who followed after them would get in close enough to use their Ray Directors and Atom Disintegrators.

"She is wasting lives to no avail!" cried Dalis. "There is a way to beat these people!"

"It is really your responsibility, O Dalis!" snapped Sarka. "Why do you not go out and lead your Gens? If you know, why remain here and watch the destruction of all the people of your Gens?"

"You know why our Ray Directors and Atom Disintegrators do not work, or work but poorly? Because our fighters are within the gravitational pull of the Moon, instead of the Earth, and machines which work perfectly on Earth are thrown out of balance when under the influence of the Moon!"

"Then," cried Sarka, "we must sweep in close enough to our people...."

Without waiting to say another word, for thousands of men were dying each breath-space, Sarka raced into the laboratory and gave the signal to race up the speed of the Beryls, to attune them with the increasing speed of the Master Beryl, whose jade lever now was set at the halfway mark in the onyx slot.

When he returned to the Observatory, Dalis was gone, and Sarka the Second sat alone.

"I knew he would go," said Sarka, "for he cannot endure to see someone else take credit for winning this first victory—if it is even

possible to win it! I knew that, vain though he is, Dalis is yet a man!"

"I am not so sure of that, son!" replied the Elder Sarka. "For I have known him longer than you have! There's something else in that brain of his which takes no thought of the death of people of his Gens—or for the betterment of the other people of the Earth! I wonder...."

But even as he spoke, Dalis was away, flying free and fast toward the scene of battle. In a few minutes his will would be felt by his Gens, and Jaska could return again. Sarka sought for her. She was still safe, high above the battle. Thousands and thousands of those shriveled things now floated in the space about the cars, above them, below them, everywhere. But the Gens of Dalis had at last caused some trouble to the Aircars of the Moon.

A hundred of them, like stricken birds, were falling downward toward the Moon, great holes torn in their sides. But as they fell, their tentacles, which whipped here and there like snakes in their death-throes, carried with them their full capacity in people of the Gens of Dalis!

With the partial destruction of the Aircars which were falling, the

force that actuated the death-dealing of those tentacles seemed to have gone out of them. For the people now held in the grip of the mighty tentacles were still alive! Their squirmings could be plainly seen, and their cries could have been heard, had it not been that the noise of battle drowned out all other sounds.

A hundred Aircars falling, and the men and fighting women of the Gens of Dalis, with new courage in them now they realized that the Aircars were not entirely invincible, renewed the attack with savage vigor.

Taking no thought of the death which must surely come to them, they circled and pressed the Aircars; and when the tentacles caught at some of them, others climbed to the very body of the Aircars, over the shriveling bodies of the dying, and turned their Ray Directors and Atom Disintegrators against the gray sides of the monsters.

Even before Dalis had reached the vanguard of his Gens another hundred Aircars were falling, each with its tentacles wrapped tightly about such of the earthlings as they could grasp. Falling ... falling ... still living, plunging down.

Now Dalis had reached the scene of the fray, and was assuming command.

As he did so a single white-robed figure, life-size when seen through the Micro-Telescopes, darted out of the fray and headed at top speed for the dwelling place of Sarka. Jaska, relieved, was returning home!

But though Jaska flew at top speed, she did not seem to grow larger, or draw nearer to the Earth!

Out of the ruck of the defenders of the Moon, a single Aircar, whose gleaming gray side was marked with queer crimson splashes, broke free to pursue Jaska!

She fled at top speed, yet the Aircar was gaining, proof that the Moon had developed speed greater than Earth had attained.

"But why," queried Sarka, "does she draw no nearer?"

"Great God!" ejaculated Sarka the Second, after a brief examination of certain chartographs beside his Micro-Telescope. "We are moving away from the Moon! Something is forcing us away! The people of the Moon have something whose nature we do not know, capable of forcing them away from us—while they pull our people toward them! You see? If they pulled us toward them, we could overthrow them, for we outnumber them perhaps thousands to one; but if they force themselves away faster than the Gens of Dalis, if defeated, can

follow us, they can destroy, or capture, the Gens at their leisure!"

Suddenly, out of the Earth, past the all-seeing eyes of the Micro-Telescopes, swept a new myriad. Men in white, wearing the Red Lily of the House of Cleric! Cleric was sending out men to rescue Jaska from the Aircar which pursued her! But would Jaska or these who went forth to fetch her ever be able again to attain landing place upon the Earth!

It looked doubtful.

Even as Sarka asked himself this question fresh Aircars shot from the rims of Moon craters, rushing outward to add their weight in the battle against the Gens of Dalis. The Gens of Dalis was doomed!

In the mind of Sarka the Second there still loomed a hellish doubt that would not down.

The men of Cleric were surrounding Jaska now, protecting her with their lives against the tentacles of that lone Aircar splashed with crimson—and all were flying a losing race with the Earth, which was still being forced outward from the Moon!

Chapter 11: ***Escape—and Dalis' Laughter***

But Sarka was not to be so easily beaten. There still remained an infinite number of possible changes of speed by manipulation of ovidum by vibration set up by the Beryls, without which this flight from the beginning would have been impossible. But for two hours, while the white robed men of Cleric fought against the car of the crimson splashes to prevent the capture of the daughter of their Spokesman—and died by hundreds in the grip of those grim tentacles—Sarka was forced to labor with the Beryls until perspiration bathed his whole body and his heart was heavy as he foresaw failure. And failure meant death or worse for Jaska.

But at the end of two hours, while the men of Cleric fought like men inspired against the Aircar of the crimson slashes, a cessation in the outward speed of the earth could be noted. At the end of three hours the body of Jaska, all this time fighting manfully to attain to landing place on the Earth, was at last bulking larger; but the tentacles of the Aircar were groping after her, reaching for her, striving to catch and clasp her to her death.

The two Sarkas watched and prayed while the might of the Beryls, traveling at top speed, fought against the force of whatever was used by the Moon-men to compel the Moon to withdraw. Still the men of

Cleric fought that single car, and died by hundreds in the fighting. White robed figures which became shriveled and black in the grip of those tentacles.

Countless of the men of Cleric deliberately cast themselves against those tentacles, throwing their lives away to give Jaska more leeway in her race for life.

"Will she make it, father?" queried Sarka in a whisper.

"If the courage and loyalty of her people stand for anything, she will make it," he replied.

On she came at top speed, and now through the micro-telescopes the Sarkas could see the agony of effort on her face, even through the smooth mask used by the people of Earth for flight in space where there was no atmosphere. Courage was there, and the will of never-say-die; and Jaska, moreover, was coming back to the man she loved. In a nebulous sort of way Sarka realized this, for though these two had not mated there was a resonant inner sympathy between them which had rounded into an emotion of overpowering force since Jaska had proved to Sarka that she was to be trusted—that he had been something less than a faithful lover when he had mistrusted her, ever so little.

Closer now and closer, and at last the Aircar of the crimson splashes was drawing away, losing in the race for life. It was falling back, as though minded to turn about and race back for the Moon, now a ball in the sky, far away, the outlines of its craters growing dim and misty with distance. Now the men of Cleric, those who remained, were breaking contact with the Aircar, and forming a valiant rear-guard for the retreat of Jaska.

Throughout the Earth, as the Beryls fought with ever increasing speed to lower the rate of the earth's outward race from the Moon, was such a trembling, such a vibration induced by conflicting, alien forces as there had not been even in that moment when back there in its orbit, the Earth could have either been kept within its orbit, or hurled outward into space at the touch of a finger.

Now Jaska, surrounded by her father's men, was almost close enough to touch the Earth.

She made it, weak and weary, and rested for a moment while her father's men steadied her. Then, thrusting them aside, with gestures bidding them return to their Gens, she lifted into the air again, and fled straight for the laboratory of Sarka.

She entered tiredly through the exit dome, and all but collapsed into

the arms of Sarka. Gently he removed her helmet of the anti-gravitational ovoid, noting as she leaned against him the tumultuous beating of her heart. Then her gentle eyes opened and she whispered to Sarka.

"You trust me now?"

For answer he bent and kissed her softly on the lips—for the kiss, from the far distant time when the first baby was kissed by the first mother, had been the favored caress of mankind. Her face was transfigured as she read his answer in his eyes, and the touch of his lips. Then, remembering, fear flashed across her face. She straightened, and grasping Sarka by the hand, hurried with him into the observatory.

She took the seat in which Dalis had sat before he had gone out to the command of his Gens, studied for many minutes the battle in space between the two alien worlds.

"Dalis is winning," said the Elder Sarka quietly, "apparently!"

"The qualification is a just one," said Jaska softly. "'Apparently,' indeed! You will note now that, though men of the Gens of Dalis swarm all about the Aircars, and even clamber atop them, no more

are dying in the grasp of those tentacles? Is Dalis arranging a treacherous truce with the Moon-men?"

"I have been wondering about that," said Sarka softly, "for it is my belief that nothing not conducive to his own selfish interests would have forced Dalis to leave this place and take command of his Gens, as I had first ordered, unless he had schemes planned of which father and I could know nothing. Now that I think of it, Jaska, how did Dalis know our secret code of fingers?"

Jaska started, and turned a blanched face to Sarka.

"*Did* he know?" she cried. "Did he? If he did that proves a suspicion that I have entertained since the first moment when Dalis swept into the fight, and I sensed that alien signals were being flashed back and forth!"

"Flashed back and forth!" ejaculated Sarka. "How do you mean? That Dalis was somehow able to communicate with the Moon-men in their own language, or through their own signals?"

“Why not? He knew our secret code, did he not? I never gave it to him, and I know that you did not. No, Dalis has some means, never discovered or suspected by you Sarkas, whereby he is able to

understand alien tongues and alien sign manuals!"

"That means," said Sarka the Elder in a dead voice, "that by forcing Dalis to go out at the head of his Gens...."

"We have," interrupted Sarka the Younger, "placed a new weapon of treason in his hands! Dalis, at the very moment of contact with the Aircars, loaded with Moon-men, broke in on their signals—they must have had some means of signalling one another—and communicated with them in their own way! Do you think it possible that, with all his Gens, he may go over to the Moon-men, form an alliance with them?"

For many moments no one dared to answer the question; yet, from what the Sarkas knew of him, it was not impossible at all. For Dalis was the master egotist always, and never overlooked opportunity to gain something for himself.

It was Jaska who broke the silence.

"Did you note carefully," she said, "those Aircars which were partially destroyed by our ray directors and atom-disintegrators?"

The Sarkas nodded.

"Did you note that no men, formed like our own, no creatures of any sort whatever, fell from the cars?"

Again the awesome silence, and the keen brains of the Sarkas wrestled with this vague hint of the uncanny.

"You mean, Jaska ... you mean...."

"That the occupants of Aircars are part of the cars, but—Beings of the Moon! That they are either metal monsters endowed with brains or tiny creatures irrevocably attached to the cars themselves!"

"But how," said Sarka at last, "are we to be sure? I can understand what Dalis might do if the Moon-men granted his wish for an alliance with them. It is easy to understand why his Gens would follow his lead, for with the Moon forced outward from the Earth faster than his Gens could retreat, there is but one direction for his Gens to go—toward the Moon! They would go to the Moon as captives and trust the keen brain of Dalis to gain the mastery, sooner or later, over the Moon-men. And then...."

"And then—?" repeated Sarka the Elder.

"Then, Dalis has already been inspired by the speed with which

those Aircars travel! You will remember that he did not take kindly to leaving the Earth and making his abode on some other planet! But why could he not do so, combine forces and knowledge with the people of that planet—and then return to Earth in alliance with them?—after we have depleted our forces by placing a large portion of our people on Mars and Venus and Saturn?"

"Sarka, my son," said Sarka's father, "before we continue with our flight to Mars, we must know the truth! We must somehow learn exactly what is going on on the Moon! If you could reach the Moon, alone, undetected, and bring back a report...."

For a moment he left it there, and the faces of all three were gray with worry and abysmal fear.

"I can't go bodily, father," said Sarka at last, "but you remember my secret exit dome, to the right of the observatory, from which I have never yet dared exit from this place for fear that it might cost me my life?"

Sarka the Elder nodded, while Jaska looked puzzled. Another evidence of the fact that Sarka had not always trusted her, for she knew nothing of a secret exit dome. Sarka's eyes, as he looked at Jaska, mutely asked her forgiveness, which she gave him with her

smile.

"I remember, son, and now…?"

"Surely it is worth risking one's life to know what new menace looms over the children of men!"

"What is the use of this secret dome?" asked Jaska softly.

"It is merely an elaboration of the regular exit dome, combined with certain phases of our atom-distintegrators, and the principle involved in the anti-gravitational ovoids. I step into the secret exit dome, garbed for flight Outside, and will myself to appear bodily in a certain place. It is instantaneous. I step into the dome, for example, and will myself to appear whole upon the Moon, and there I will appear!"

"You mean that during the period of transposition you are invisible?"

"Yes, invisible because non-existent, except for the essential elements of me, broken down by the secret exit dome, reassembled at the place willed in their entirety! I can't fly there, for a million eyes would see me approach! I must go in secret, as a spy, and wearing the clothing and insignia of a member of the Gens of Dalis!"

Silence in the observatory for a brief breathing space, and then Jaska spoke that speech out of the books of antiquity, which remains the classic expression of loyalty.

"Whithersoever thou goest, there will I go also!"

From the laboratory came a sudden burst of laughter, the laughter which all three recognized as the laughter of Dalis; but when they entered the place of the Revolving Beryl, there was no one there—and a feeling of dread, all encompassing, held them thralled for the space of several heart-beats. Dalis, they knew, was thousands of miles away, upon the Moon; yet here in the place of the Master Beryl they all three had just heard his sardonic laughter!

Chapter 12: ***Ashes of the Moon***

Through the micro-telescopes it was possible to see what had happened after Dalis had assumed command of the Gens of Dalis. For even though the Moon, in spite of the speed of the Beryls, was being forced further and further from the Earth, the eyes of the micro-telescopes picked out and enlarged details to such an extent that the battle seemed to be transpiring under the eyes of the beholders.

A terrific jumble, in which Earthlings and Aircars were all tumbled together in mad chaos, a great mass of writhing, green-garbed figures. Infinite in number—in the midst of which were the gigantic Aircars, like monster beetles being beset by armies upon armies of ants.

Then, by the time Jaska had seated herself in the observatory atop the Himalayas, to watch what developed, the battle seemed to be over, and the Moon-men had won. For the huge cars swung around between the myriads of the Gens of Dalis, and seemed to be herding them toward the Moon, as though they were prisoners.

Telepathically, Sarka and his father had been able to catch some hint of the thoughts of the Earthlings in the battle, and these thoughts had

been tinged with doubt, fear and horror, so that even thus to receive them, by mental telepathy, was to feel the searing heat of their fear.

Now, in the instant when the battle in Space seemed to be over and the Gens of Dalis were prisoners, the thought waves were no more, and a brooding silence took their place. Dalis, the Sarkas knew, possessed the power to mask his thoughts, for it was a power possessed in common by all the scientists of Earth. But the common people of his Gens did not posses that power. However, for the moment Sarka had forgotten an all important something: that, when people were outside the roof of the world, they were subservient to the will of a common commander to whom they had sworn allegiance.

If, therefore, Dalis could mask his own thoughts from the brains of men, he could also mask the thoughts of the people of his Gens, merely by willing it! So Sarka and his father and Jaska could not know whether the Gens of Dalis had gone over in a body with him, in a truce with the people of the Moon, or whether they were dual prisoners—of Dalis and of the Moon-men!

More than ever was it necessary for someone to somehow reach the Moon and make a thorough investigation, discover just what Dalis was doing, what mischief he was hatching.

The secret exit dome seemed to be the answer.

"You can manage without me, father?" asked Sarka.

The elder Sarka nodded.

"Of the other Spokesmen of Earth," went on Sarka, "I trust Gerd the most. Might I suggest that you bring him here, trust him in all details, and let him take my place wherever possible? Or, better still, keep Jaska here with you! I ... I may not be able to return! I'll try to find a way, but—we can always communicate telepathically. Jaska...."

"Jaska," said that young lady grimly, "goes with Sarka wherever Sarka goes!"

"But it may mean death! We can only guess at the cunning of the Moon dwellers! They may have been in secret communication with Dalis for centuries! Dalis, who somehow discovered our secret finger code, may also know of the secret exit dome, and the principle upon which it operates! If he does, he may know how to combat it! Perhaps that explains his laughter! Perhaps he heard and understood every word we spoke, hears and understands every word we speak now! Who knows? He may wait until I have passed through the

secret exit dome, and then make it impossible for me to be reincarnated on the Moon—or elsewhere!"

"No matter," said Jaska softly, "wherever Sarka goes, there goes Jaska! It is useless to attempt to dissuade me, and it is time you learned that!"

In spite of himself Sarka smiled, and his father met his smile with a quizzical one of his own. Both men had the same thought.

"The eternal woman!" said Sarka the Elder. "No man has ever understood her—no man ever will! And all men are ruled by her!"

Sarka shrugged, and Jaska spoke again.

"Don't you think it is time we tried this new experiment?"

Sarka nodded, and his face was suddenly alight with the excitement which burned within him.

"First," he said, "we need accoutrements of the Gens of Dalis for two people!"

Jaska smiled.

"Forseeing that we might have need of such equipment, I had several complete outfits sent here when I took charge of the Gens of Dalis as its Spokesman!"

Two minutes later, arrayed in the green clothing of the House of Dalis, swathed in it from neck to toe, wearing their belts and the masks which were necessary to life in space where there was no atmosphere, the whole topped by the gleaming helmets whose skull-pans held the infinitesimally small anti-gravitational ovoids, Jaska and Sarka entered the secret exit dome, side by-side.

On the breast and back of each showed the yellow stars of the Gens of Dalis. There was no hiding their identity otherwise, and if any of the Gens saw them, both would be immediately recognized—for Jaska had commanded the Gens, and Sarka was the world's greatest scientist known to every human being. But they planned on carrying out their investigations by stealth.

"Father," said Sarka, "when the inner door is closed upon us, you have but to press the button to the right of the door. Press it when the light beside it glows red, which will indicate that we have willed ourselves to go to a certain destination!”

The inner door closed upon Sarka and Jaska, and, hand in hand, side

by side, their bodies glowing with knowledge of warm, sympathetic contact, they waited for a miracle which had never before been attempted.

"Are you afraid, beloved?" queried Sarka.

"When I am with you," she said softly, "I have no fear."

"Then face the outer door, and will to go wherever I will to take you!"

Side by side, hand-in-hand still, they faced the outer door, and Sarka willed:

"Let us appear together in a deserted spot, within sight but unseen, of the Moon crater from which those Aircars were sent against us!"

A sudden blur, a cessation of all knowledge, and then....

Sarka and Jaska stood side by side in a desolate expanse surrounded by bleak and appalling mountains of grotesque shape, in a light that was weirdly, awesomely blue. Their feet were invisible, deeply rooted in some soft, fine material which looked like snow.

After a swift glance around to see if anything lived or moved in this

awful desolation, Sarka stooped and dipped up some of the fine stuff with his fingers, touched it to his lips.

The material seemed to be fine blue ashes and on his tongue it had a soapy savor. He peered at Jaska, whose eyes were glowing with excitement, whose lips were parted with anticipation, and instantly he opened a mental conversation with her.

::We must speak with each other telepathically, but do not speak with me until I have explained to you how to mask your thoughts from all persons save the one with whom you hold converse! First, I love you! Second, let us see if, searching the sky, we can find the Earth!::

In a few brief, highly technical words, Sarka told his beloved how to talk with him in the manner which he had never before explained to her. They had used telepathy before, countless times, but they had not cared who heard—while now secrecy in all things was the prime essential for success, even for life.

When he had told her, and she replied, ::I understand perfectly, and it seems quite easy,:: they turned and surveyed the heavens, out of which, by this new miracle of the secret exit dome, they had dropped to the face of the Moon.

Away across the space between worlds, its transfiguration plainly visible to the two, they could make out and identify the world from which they had come. Save that they knew themselves standing on the Moon, they would have thought as far as appearances went, that the place where they had come was the Moon, many times enlarged. It seemed incredible that they had come so far in the twinkling of an eye; but that they had was proved by the fact of their physical presence.

::Look, Jaska!:: said Sarka suddenly. ::See how our Earth glows, as though it were afire inside!::

They stared at the great circular yellowish flame that he pointed out, and Sarka, always the scientist whose science was one of exactness, tried to estimate just where, on the Earth's surface, the glow was.

::Jaska,:: he said again, ::that glow comes out of the heart of the Gens area which Dalis ruled! And no one lives there, since Dalis' Gens flew out to do battle! That's why we did not know of it before we left! That glow, somehow, beloved, is the cause of the outward-from-the-Earth journey of the Moon! First we must locate the Moon-source of the glow, and render it incapable of further forcing itself away! For do you realize that, unless we do so, we will never again see home?::

Jaska said nothing, but her eyes were troubled for a moment. Then she smiled again.

::What care I if I become a prisoner on the Moon, if you are with me?::

Sarka was just now realizing the wonder of this raven-haired woman whom, knowing her for half a century as he had, he had just known so little after all.

::If we seem in danger of discovery, Jaska,:: he said to her, ::drop down instantly into the ashes, for if we are discovered by Dalis….::

He left it there and, with a deep intake of breath, started away for the nearest and highest hill. They desired to walk, yet found walking almost impossible, as they could not keep their feet on the ground save by the exercise of a really incredible effort of will. So, despairing of keeping their feet in contact with the ashes, they flew just above them, heading for the nearest weird-looking ridge.

In the strange light, which was oddly like moonlight in some painted desert of Earth, shapes were distorted and somehow menacing, colors were raw, almost bleeding—and distances that seemed but a step required hours to traverse.

Ever and anon, as they traveled they looked back up at the Earth which was their home. It still was visible, though plainly smaller with distance, and for a time Sarka's heart misgave him; but he only clasped tighter the hand of Jaska and moved on.

They were just at the base of the first hill, which had now become a mountain of gloomy, forbidding aspect, when the first sound they had heard on the moon came to them. A sound that was a commingling of the laughter of Dalis, the barking of jackals of the olden times, the humming of a million Beryls revolving at top speed, and a strident buzzing such as neither had ever heard.

Had they been discovered? Was the sound a warning? They could not know; but as they stared at the crest of the hill, two long, snaky, waving things appeared above the crest, undulating, waving to and fro, as though questing for something. They crouched low in the white ashes at the base of the mountain, and waited, scarcely breathing.

Chapter 13: ***The Lunar Cubes***

For a long time Sarka and Jaska remained still, like sentinels, listening to the strange discord which seemed to emanate from behind the hill at whose base they crouched.

::Look!:: said Sarka at last. ::There against the sky, beyond and between those two waving tentacles! Note that column of light, scarcely lighter than the light which surrounds it everywhere? It looks like a massive column just lighter than everything around it, yet so little lighter that you have to watch closely to see it at all?::

Jaska stared for all of a minute, before she thought back her answer.

::I see it,:: she said.

::Note now whether it goes, as it reaches outward into Space!::

Jaska followed the mighty height of the thing, outward and outward, and then gasped.

::Sarka,:: she said, ::its end touches the Earth in the very heart of that strange glow we spoke about!::

::Exactly! And people of Earth know nothing about it, because it is invisible to them! It is only from Outside that the glow it makes against the Earth is visible! If we can divert its direction, or render it useless in any way, the Moon will no longer be thrust away by its force!::

A pause of indecision, then Sarka thought again:

::Let us go, Jaska! Keep behind me, right on my heels!::

Slowly, fighting against something that seemed determined to pull, or hurl, them outward from the surface of the Moon with each forward movement they made, they essayed the side of the hill, pausing at the end of what seemed like hours in a sort of hollow just large enough to mask their bodies and stared over its edge into one of the craters of the Moon. Out of the depths of that crater came the discordant sounds, which now were almost deafening, and out of that crater too came the almost invisibly bluish column whose outer tip touched the Earth.

Right before them, so close that they all but rested in its shadow, was one of those monster Aircars, its tentacles moving to and fro as though wafted into motion by some vagrant breeze. But since neither Sarka nor Jaska could feel the breeze, Sarka knew that it was life

which caused the waving motion of those tentacles of terror.

::Note,:: he said to Jaska, ::that there is a tiny trap-door in the bottom of the Aircar, and that the thing rests on a half-dozen of those tentacles!::

::I see,:: came Jaska's reply.

Jaska went on:

::Note the gleaming thing on the ground, right below the Aircar? I wonder what it is?::

They studied the thing there, which seemed to be a huge jewel of some sort that glittered balefully in the eery light of the Moon. It was, perhaps, twice the size of an average man's torso, and was almost exactly cubical in shape. As Sarka studied the thing, he sensed that feeling flowed out of it—that the cube, whatever it was, was alive!

He tore his glance away from it, and realized that he accomplished the feat with a distinct effort of will—as though the cube had willed to hold his gaze, knew he was there. His eyes, peering around the inner slope of the crater—which dipped over, some hundreds of feet

down, and plunged downward to some unknown depth—noted a broad, flat stone, off to his right; and around the rim of the crater he counted a full hundred of the Aircars, all with their tentacles waving as if they belonged to sentient creatures.

Below each one, as he studied them and strained his eyes to make out details, he caught the baleful gleam of other cubes like the first he had seen. The Aircars, it seemed, were either sentinels, at the lip of the crater, or were the dwelling places of sentinels—and the cubes were those sentinels!

It seemed absurd, but it came to Sarka in a flash that that was the answer, and his eyes came back to the first cube, because it was nearer and more easy to study.

::I will not be swayed by the will of the thing,:: Sarka told himself. ::Nor will I allow it to analyze me! Jaska, do you do likewise!::

Beside him, Jaska shivered. He turned to look at her. Her face was coldly white, and her eyes were big with terror and fascination as she stared at that first cube, resting so balefully there under the first Aircar.

He shook her, and she seemed to bring her eyes to his with a terrific, will-straining effort.

::Look at me!:: he told her, telepathically. ::Keep your eyes on me, for to look at the cube spells danger!::

But his own eyes went back to the thing, and he studied it closely. A cold chill raced through his body as he noted that its gleam was becoming dull, fading slowly out. It had gleamed brightly at first, and now was losing its sheen, fading away to invisibility. He thought he should be able, regardless of gleam or color, to see its outline; but its outline, too, seemed to be becoming faint, indistinct.

Then, in a trice, it was gone, and a feeling of uneasiness, more compelling than he had ever known before, coursed through the soul of Sarka. Where had the cube gone? What was it? What was its purpose? He tore his eyes away from the spot where he had last seen it, and stared away to the shadow beneath the second nearest Aircar, where he had glimpsed another of the cubes.

The cube there, too, was fading out.

::Sarka! Sarka! Look!:: came to his brain the thoughts of Jaska.

Sarka turned and stared at her, and a feeling of fear for which he could not account at all took fast hold of him. The eyes of Jaska, wide and staring as they had been when he commanded her to look away from the cube under the Aircar, were staring at that flat, table-like rock, off to his right.

There, almost in the center of the rock, a gleaming something was taking shape! Just a dull spot, in the center of the yellow glow; then the beginning of the outline of a cube. Then, all at once, the cube itself, gleaming and baleful!

Sarka gasped in terror. He had seen the cube vanish, its glow disappear, and now here it was, almost close enough to touch, on a rock beside him, gleaming and baleful as before! That it was the same cube he had seen under the first Aircar, he somehow knew without being told. That it was a sentient *thing* he also knew, for now there was no mistaking the fact that, but for the presence in the little hollow of Jaska and Sarka, the cube would not have moved.

Swift as light, Sarka's right hand darted to his belt, where his ray director should be nestled against his need of it. And with his first movement, the cube's brilliance vanished instantly, the cube disappeared, and appeared again right before the face of Sarka, so close he could touch it! Yet he did not turn the ray director against it,

nor did he extend his hand to touch the thing—because he was afraid to do so!

Even as the cube appeared before his eyes, thrice baleful and menacing in its close proximity, his eyes darted back to that broad flat rock, where the second gleaming cube now appeared!

::Great God, Jaska!:: he sent mentally, ::what does it mean?::

::These,:: she answered bravely back, ::are Moon-soldiers! And, unless we manage not to appear furtive, we are undone!::

Still Sarka made no move, while other gleaming cubes appeared on the flat rock. Five other cubes appeared beside the first, at the rim of the hollow which held the forms of Jaska and Sarka. The cubes were closing on them, oddly like a squad of Earthlings in the olden times, advancing by rushes against an entrenched enemy!

The buzzing sound which they had first heard now seemed accentuated, but, instead of being outside of the listeners, seemed inside them, hammering against their very brains! Messages were being sent to them, or passed back and forth between and among the cube-men about them—and they hadn't the slightest idea how to make answer, know whether an answer was expected of them, or

what the cube-men thought about them!

Since there was nothing else to do, they lay there, hands clasped, as children in the dark clasp hands, and waited for what might transpire.

Suddenly the discord from the inside of the crater ceased, and all was still, while it came to Sarka that the cube-men who stood before him were in grim communication with something invisible to Sarka and Jaska, somebody, perhaps, deep in the bowels of the Moon, over inside the crater.

They knew, those two, that the cube-soldiers were reporting their presence, and asking instructions; that the Moon had gone silent to listen, and that within a few moments their fate would be decided. What should they do?

In his hand Sarka held his ray director, with which he knew he could blast one or all of the cubes into nothingness. But still he held his hand, made no move.

Something, however, had to be done, for the discord was starting again, growing in volume. It made Sarka think, oddly enough, of a deaf mute fighting for speech! Then came the first intelligible

sound....

A burst, from the depths of the crater, of sardonic laughter!

::Dalis!:: said Sarka, and moved. While Sarka moved, Jaska held fast to his arm. Casting her fear to the winds, furious because of the laughter of Dalis, Sarka thrust his ray director back into his belt and stood upright.

Bending over he seized the first of the gleaming cubes and hurled it over the edge of the crater, saw it start plummeting down. But even before it fell out of sight within the crater its gleam had dulled until it was almost impossible to see the thing. Racing as though racing against time, Sarka caught up cube after cube and hurled them all after the first.

Out of the crater there came no sound of heavy objects striking, though Sarka felt there should have, for the cubes were almost as heavy as a man.

Then his hair almost stood on end under his helmet, for under that first Aircar, where he had first seen it, the initial cube was again gleaming into life!

The thing had dissolved while being hurled over the rim, and reformed in its proper place, its station as silent sentinel under the Aircar!

These cubes then, were indeed sentinels—sentinels impossible to injure. Though no force had been used against Sarka and Jaska, Sarka had the feeling that they were powerless, and that here on the edge of a crater of the Moon awful forces were being mustered against them. Mustered slowly, sluggishly, yet surely, as though the mentality which mustered them knew them helpless, and that there was no need to hurry!

As for Jaska, she merely clung to Sarka and waited—trusting him no matter what might transpire.

On a blind chance, Sarka brought out his ray director again, turned its muzzle toward that invisibly-blue column, pressed with his fingers, moving the director back and forth.

Instantly the blue column seemed to break short off, while the broken upper portion started racing outward toward the Earth. Sarka watched it, and noted that the yellowish glow on the Earth, even as he watched, was fading out—disappearing!

::If the ray will smash the blue column, Jaska,:: he said, ::it will also destroy its source! Come! We will go look for it!::

And, holding her hand tightly, he rose to his feet and strode boldly down the inner slope of the vast crater.

Chapter 14: ***The Crater Gnomes***

It seemed to Sarka, as he moved down the inner slope of the crater, that the cubes were somehow making sport of him, laughing at him, though no hint of laughter or anything resembling laughter emanated from them.

But, shutting his lips grimly, holding fast to Jaska's hand, he proceeded on, reached the lower portion of the inner slope, where it dropped off into a seeming black abyss, and dropped, keeping to a safe speed because of the fact that both he and Jaska were attired for movement in the air—though their manner of aerial transportation could scarcely be called flying.

The anti-gravitational ovoids simply rendered ineffectual the law of gravity.

Down they dropped, endlessly it seemed, while all about them, growing gradually, a bluish glow began to make itself manifest. Sarka turned and looked at the face of Jaska and noted that it—all her being—was glowing with this strange radiance.

He smiled at her, and she smiled back.

Looking down now, to what seemed still a vast depth, they could see figures moving, tiny, almost infinitesimal, about a great circular cone, out of the depths of which came that strange bluish column whose outer tip touched the Earth.

Some inner sense warned Sarka not to touch that column, or to permit Jaska to do so. They dropped down beside it, while Sarka, for no reason that he could assign, once more took his ray director in his free hand and held it in readiness. It seemed so tiny and futile—so foolish for two people, one of them a woman—to go into the very heart of an alien world, against an unknown enemy, armed with such a tiny weapon. Two people against unguessed myriads, whose very nature was an enigma, even to Sarka.

Closer now appeared the bottom of the crater, whose floor seemed to be covered with something that looked like blue sand, or rock. From this bluish substance the glow which bathed the two Earthlings seemed to emanate.

The funnel of the crater had now given away to the immensities of space, in all directions, and the cold of outside was being replaced by a warmth which promised soon to be even uncomfortable.

Then, without a jar, the two landed at the bottom of the crater, side

by side, close enough almost to that great cone to touch it. Out of the cone came that bluish column, to shoot up through the funnel down which the two had lightly dropped ... and the motion of the—whatever it was—was accompanied by a muted moaning sound, like that of a distant waterfall.

They paused there, in amazement, taking stock of their surroundings. Huge tunnels, whose roofs were lost to invisibility in the bluish haze, whose extremities could only be guessed at, reached off in all directions. As far as the two could tell they were the only living souls within the crater, though both knew better.

Sarka had the feeling, and he knew Jaska shared it with him, that innumerable eyes were studying them, innumerable intellects were cataloguing them. And somehow he sensed the presence, somewhere near, of the traitor Dalis!

Then that discordant sound again, breaking so swiftly that it fell upon the eardrums of Sarka and Jaska like the crack of doom. Out of the many tunnels, from all directions, came hordes of beings which would have made the nightmares of Paracelsus—first of the scientists of Earth—pale to insignificance.

Paracelsus had written and illustrated his nightmares. Had hinted of

strange acts of flesh-grafting—as the grafting of legs on the head of man. He had spoken, and written about, ghastly operations, from which men came forth as part men, part spiders; part men, part scorpions, dogs, cats, crocodiles....

Sarka thought, as his mind went back to those ancient books of his people in which still remained vestiges of the theories of Paracelsus, that somehow, in his dreams, Paracelsus must have visited the craters of the Moon.

These people ... if they could be called people....

They had heads like the heads of Earthlings, broad-domed of brow, lacking eyelashes or lids, so that their eyes were perpetually staring. They possessed no bodies at all, and their legs, thin and attenuated to the size of the wrists of average men, seemed to support the massive heads with difficulty!

From all directions they came, looking like spiders such as Sarka the First had described to Sarka, when Sarka had been a mere boy. They came on the floor, out of the tunnels; they dropped from the walls of the tunnels, and down from the invisible roofs, landing on the floor as lightly as feathers—and all converged on Jaska and Sarka.

They seemed to have no fear at all, but only a vast curiosity.

Closer and closer they came.

Jaska's grip tightened on the hand of Sarka, for one of the creatures, with a spiderish leap, had jumped upon her, fastening its legs in her tight-fitting costume, where he hung, his face within an inch or two of hers. His lidless eyes, unblinking, stared deeply into hers.

Others jumped up beside the first, and still others clambered over Sarka, until both Sarka and Jaska were covered by them like beetles attacked by ants. But these strange gnomelike creatures, who did not fear these strangers, apparently meant them no harm.

Then, after a thorough scrutiny, began the strangest talking Sarka had ever heard. The crater-Gnomes seemed to communicate by making strange clucking sounds with their tongues, sounds which were unmusical and discordant, and which, as the Gnomes who stood back from them, because already the two were covered until no more could cling to Jaska or Sarka, joined in the speech—mounted in the cavern to a vast crescendo of sound.

Sarka knew then that this was the sound which had come out to them while they crouched at the crater rim. These were people of the

Moon: but if these were Moon-men, what, or who, were those gleaming cubes?

::Stand perfectly still,:: Sarka mentally admonished Jaska, ::they apparently mean us no harm!::

He had not spoken aloud, had not allowed his thought to reach any but Jaska; yet instantly the discordant clucking ceased, and the Gnomes were quiet, as though they politely listened to someone who had interrupted them, yet whose interruption they resented, or were curious about.

Wondering how the creature would regard his action, Sarka reached forth and plucked away the first Gnome which had jumped upon Jaska, and placed him gently on the ground. The thing merely stared at Sarka with his lidless eyes, as though wondering at Sarka's meaning. Then his lips, which were triangular, rather than straight as those of Earthlings, began again that strange clucking.

Immediately the Gnomes which clung to Jaska and Sarka dropped away, and scuttled into the midst of the myriads that stood and watched. They did not understand the speech of these Earthlings, but they were unusually clever in comprehending the meaning of gestures.

::Hold fast to me, Jaska,:: thought Sarka toward her—and wondered anew as the Gnomes instantly ceased their clucking sounds—::for I am going to try an experiment.::

Holding her hand still, he turned and strode straight toward the huge cone out of which rose the bluish column.

Instantly the Gnomes broke into a frightful clucking of tongues, a sound that mounted to ear-drum-breaking intensity, and in a trice, climbing over one another to get into position, they moved in between Sarka and the cone. So eager were they to bar his further progress that they stood atop one another, until the depth of them was as tall as Sarka standing upright.

Yet, though they plainly said to Sarka: "You must not approach the cone," they did not seem to be angry with their visitors, but only curious. Sarka looked at Jaska, noted how wanly she smiled.

Then he turned, and headed for the nearest of the monster tunnels.

Instantly he detected a surprising eagerness in the renewed clucking of tongues, while the Gnomes raced ahead, behind, all about the two, capering like pet animals, showing these strangers the way into the tunnel.

As they entered it, Sarka tried to discover whence came the bluish glow. The floor seemed to be of bluish sandstone, though its color, too, might have been caused by the glow. It was warm, too, so warm that perspiration was breaking out on the cheeks of Sarka.

Whence came the glow? Apparently from the very walls of the tunnel, or its roof; but surely from somewhere, surely from some secret place, whence it was diffused all over.

::And Jaska,:: said Sarka, ::the Moon, according to my father's researches, is literally honeycombed with craters like this one!::

Again, as he thought, that strange, sudden cessation of the clucking of the Gnomes. Whither were they leading them? It was plain to be seen that the Gnomes were heading for some destination, almost herding Sarka and Jaska toward it. Capering creatures, who behaved witlessly, yet were far from witless. If Sarka were not sadly mistaken, these were Moon-men—and women, too, perhaps, since he could not tell the sex of them—and those gleaming cubes were their outer guards, perhaps slaves.

If the cubes were really of metal—they had felt warm to Sarka's touch—then these Moon-men had gone further in science than Earthlings, as they had imbued at least some metals, or stones, with

intelligence sufficiently advanced for them to perform actions independently of their masters' wills.

Sarka, too, was remembering another thing: that he had touched one of these Gnomes, to remove it from Jaska—and had felt a distinct shock that was patently electrical!

The bluish glow was increasing, becoming more soft and mellow, shading gradually into golden, as they advanced—shading still as they preceded until it was almost white, almost blinding, in its radiance.

Then, of a sudden, the clucking of the Gnomes ended, and the creatures ceased their capering, fell into something that might have been an ordered military formation, and with Jaska and Sarka in the midst of them, moved straight toward a broad expanse of the tunnel wall, in the face of which appeared three long lines, deeply cut in the shape of a triangle.

The Gnome who had first leaped upon Jaska advanced to the wall, paused with his face almost against the lower line of the triangle, and remained there, intently staring, while the other Gnomes remained mute and unmoving.

Stronger and stronger appeared the blinding light. Slowly the inner portion of the triangle began to give inward, like a door. And out of the opening came that blinding radiance.

As the triangular door stood entirely open, Sarka and Jaska stood in thunderstruck silence, staring like people bereft of their senses. For there, standing in the opening, the now white radiance itself a mantle to cover her, was a woman, unclothed save for the radiance, who might have been of the Earth, save that she was more beautiful than any woman of Earth.

Beside her the radiant beauty of Jaska paled, became wan and sickly.

But Sarka noted immediately her eyes, whose depths bewildered, amazed him. For in them he could see no expression, no feeling, but only abysmal cruelty. That she was Sarka's master, and Jaska's master, and master of all these Gnomes, became instantly apparent for telepathically she addressed Sarka.

::I am busy now. The Moon-people will hold you prisoners in the Place of the Blue light, until I am ready to give you to the Cone!::

Chapter 15: ***The Place of the Blue Light***

So the Gnomes were Moon-people, masters of the Moon cubes! And people and cubes were ruled by a woman who resembled a woman of Earth!

The Gnomes took them back the way they had come.

Where, Sarka wondered, were the people of the Gens of Dalis? And where was Dalis himself! Sarka was sure that, in those first discords which had come out of the crater, he had heard at least a hint of the laughter of Dalis.

And this woman clothed in radiance—who was she? And what? That she was a creature of the Moon, and yet resembled in all ways a woman of Earth, save that she was more beautiful than any woman Sarka had ever seen, seemed almost impossible to believe. Yet he had seen her. So had Jaska, and as Sarka and Jaska, with the capering Gnomes still about them, were led away to a fate at which they could only guess, Sarka wondered at Jaska's silence and at the strange lack of expression on her face.

He pressed her hand, but somehow she failed to return the pressure, mystifying more than ever. This sudden coldness was not like Jaska.

Back they went through the vast cavern where the cone of the bluish column still moaned and murmured. Sarka moved as close to the cone as the Gnomes would permit, and peered up along the mighty length of the column. At its tip was still the Earth, like a star viewed from the bottom of a deep well.

Smaller, too, it seemed, which proved that Sarka's breaking of the blue column had been but momentary, that the column had almost instantly regained its contact with the Earth. What was its source, what the composition of the column?

At the moment there could be no answer to the question. Now the Gnomes were escorting them into another tunnel, whose glow was even bluer than that which the two had experienced in the other tunnels. And the deeper they penetrated, the more distant from the cavern of the Cone, the deeper in color became that light.

Finally the Gnome who had mentally asked permission of the Radiant Woman to show her Jaska and Sarka passed before another expanse of wall, identical in appearance with that of the wall of the triangle from which the Radiant Woman had appeared.

This time the Gnome managed ingress by a strange clucking sound, with his triangular lips held close to the base-line of the triangle.

Now the door swung open; but the radiance which now came out was not clear white, as in the case of the outer door, but deeply, coldly blue. For the first time the Gnomes used force with their prisoners, thus proving to them that they were indeed prisoners. Their tiny feet caught at Sarka and at Jaska, and forced them through the door, which swung shut behind them.

Sarka looked at Jaska who, in this strange new light, had taken on the color of indigo, and smiled at her. She did not return his smile, but her eyes looked deeply, somewhat sorrowfully, into his. As though she asked him a question he could not understand, to which he could therefore give no answer.

Sarka was now conscious of the fact that the heat of their prison-house—whose character they did not as yet know—was becoming almost unbearable. They were alone, too, for the Gnomes had not entered the door of triangle. Sarka partially removed his life mask, and testing the atmosphere of the place, found it capable of being breathed without the mask. He signalled mentally to Jaska to remove her mask, and when the girl had done so he took her in his arms and kissed her on the lips.

She accepted his caress, but did not return it, and her eyes still peered deeply into his.

::Well, beloved,:: he said. ::I am terribly sorry. But I did not want you to come because I was afraid that something of this sort would happen.::

She did not answer.

::What is it, Jaska?:: he said at last.

::What did you think of that woman?:: she asked softly.

::Beautiful!:: he said enthusiastically. ::Fearfully beautiful! But did you see her eyes? She had no more mercy in her heart than if she were made of stone! And she hated us both the moment she saw us!::

::And you, Sarka—did you hate her, too?::

Sarka stared at her, not comprehending.

::I feel,:: he said, ::that if we are ever to escape her, we must kill her, or render her incapable of retaining us!::

Then, of her own accord, Jaska placed her arms around Sarka, and gave him her lips. Her new behavior was as incomprehensible to Sarka as her former enigmatic expression had been. Wise in the ways of science was Sarka, but he knew nothing of women!

Now hand in hand again, they began a survey of their prison house. The bluish glow was unbearable to the eyes, and tears came unbidden and ran down the cheeks of the prisoners. In a minute or two, perspiration was literally bathing the bodies of the two. After a questioning exchange of glances, Sarka swiftly divested himself of his costume, stripping down to the gray toga of Earth's manhood. With a shrug, Jaska removed her clothing to her own toga, and the two suits Sarka carried under his arm.

They started ahead, exploring, then sprang back with a cry of fright. Sarka did not know whether it was Jaska or himself who had cried out; for just as they moved forward, a rent opened in the floor at their feet, and their eyes for a moment—they could stand no longer—peered into a bluely flaming abyss which, save for the color, reminded Sarka of the word pictures of Hell he had read in Earth's books of antiquity!

As the two stepped back, the rent in the floor closed instantly. Sarka had noted where the end of it had been, and started to detour, his eyes on the floor.

Over to his left the bluely glowing wall reached up to invisible immensity. But as he would have passed along the wall, the rent opened again, effectually barring his way.

Beyond the rent he could see a vast continuation of the cavern, and he felt that, could they only pass the rent, they might reach a place where the heat was not so unbearable, and they could stay and talk in comfort.

Releasing Jaska, he stepped back and prepared to leap the spot where the rent had been. High he jumped, and far, surprised at the length of his own leap. He landed lightly, far beyond the area where the rent had been, and even as he landed, a rent opened again at his feet, thus effectually barring further progress!

::It could just as easily,:: he told himself, ::have opened under my feet, and dropped me into the abyss!::

From behind him came the sudden sound of screaming. He whirled to look back, to see Jaska standing there, arms outstretched toward him, her eyes wide with fear and horror, and as he stood watching, she raced to him, unmindful of abysses that might open under her feet, and flung herself into his arms.

::Come back!:: she moaned. ::Come back! Don't you see? *They* don't wish you to explore further! We are in their power, and must simply await their pleasure, whoever or whatever they are! They see all we do!::

So they turned back, and stood against the door which held them prisoners; and the heat of the place seemed to enter into them, to gnaw at their very vitals. After a time Sarka found himself almost tearing at his throat, fighting for breath.

Gasping, the tears bathing their cheeks until even their tears and their perspiration would flow no more, they huddled now just inside the massive stone door, arms about each other, and almost prayed for death. Sarka at least prayed for death for both of them; but Jaska prayed for a way of deliverance, prayed that herself and Sarka might somehow win free, and be together again.

Sarka, who knew little of women, marveled at the grandeur of her courage, and wondered that he really knew this radiant woman so little. He compared her in his mind with the unclothed woman who had ordered them here as prisoners, and it came to him that Jaska was all perfection, all tender womanhood, while the Radiant Woman was a monster, without soul or compassion—a creature of horror who mocked God with her outward seeming of perfection.

Jaska read his thoughts, and smiled wanly to herself, and Sarka wondered how, suffering as he knew she must be suffering, she could find the courage to smile.

Then, for a time, the two became comatose, mastered by the blue heat, and in dreamlike imaginings wandered in strange fields which could only, to these two, have been racial memories, since neither had ever seen such fields. There were cool streams, all a-murmur, and breezes which cooled their sun-tanned cheeks. Water touched their tongues, and cooled their whole bodies as they gratefully imbibed it.

In their wanderings, in which Sarka was a faun and Jaska a nymph, they talked together in a language which only these two comprehended—a language which dealt in figures of speech, a language which depended upon handclasps for periods, glances of the eyes for commas, and the singing of their hearts for complete understanding.

Then a cool breeze, cool by comparison, caressed their pain-distorted cheeks, and the Gnomes came in, found them lying there, and clucked endlessly as though wondering what to do with them.

From hand to tiny hand, their feet serving as hands, the Gnomes passed garments—garments of the Gens of Dalis, and clothed again the two whom the Place of the Blue Light had all but slain. Of that ghastly experiment Sarka retained but one real memory....

That bluish light, in the midst of the abyss, shifting and swaying like blue serpents swimming in Hades ... that bluish light of the Cone, which he had broken up for a brief moment by the use of his ray director. Was this bluish light in the abyss the source of the light in the Cone? If one were to destroy it at its source....

The two regained consciousness completely as the triangular door closed behind Sarka and Jaska and the Gnomes, and they were taken into the refreshing coolness of the tunnel, led back again in the direction of the room where they had seen the Radiant Woman. Both Jaska and Sarka noticed that they were clothed in new clothing, and a shy blush tinged the cheeks of Jaska as her eyes met those of Sarka.

This time they entered the vast chamber of radiance behind the first triangular door, and were forced to their knees to do obeisance to the Radiant Woman, who sat on a gleaming yellow stone for dais! The guards who forced Sarka and Jaska to their knees, were clothed in the green of the Gens of Dalis, and Dalis himself, his face stern, but bearing no sign of recognition of these two, stood at the right hand of the Radiant Woman!

::You come to us as spies,:: the thought of the Radiant Woman impinged upon the brains of Sarka and of Jaska, ::and as spies you

should be given to the Cone. But if you swear eternal allegiance to me, to obey me in all things, to forego your allegiance to Earth, your lives will be spared! What say you?::

Boldly Sarka stared into the almost opaque eyes of the woman. Then his glance went to the face of Dalis.

"What," he asked boldly, in the language of Earth, "does the traitor Dalis say?"

"I have sworn allegiance to Luar, who addresses you, and am her ally in all things! I have but one addition to make to what she says: Jaska belongs to me!"

The sudden leering grin of Dalis was hideous.

Sarka peered at Jaska, framing his answer. But Jaska spoke first.

"For myself, O Dalis," she said swiftly, "I can answer in but one way. Return me to the Place of the Blue Light, and forget me there!"

Sarka smiled, while his heart leaped with joy.

::And I, O Luar,:: he said mentally to the Radiant Woman, ::prefer death with Jaska, at the Place of the Blue Light, than life as a traitor

to the world of my nativity!::

Instantly Luar began the clucking sound which was the language of the Gnomes, at the same time allowing her thoughts as she spoke to impress themselves upon the brains of the prisoners.

::Take them away! Take them to the Cavern of the Cone, and when they have suffered as much as such inferior beings are capable of suffering, thrust them into the base of the Cone!::

Chapter 16: ***Cavern of the Cone***

The Gnomes had been bidden to take the prisoners to the Cavern of the Cone, but to the surprise of Sarka and Jaska, they were taken back to the Place of the Blue Light! This time the Gnomes entered the place with them, closing and securing the door behind them.

But the Place of the Blue Light had changed!

Now it had no floor of blue, as it had had before, but only a corridor perhaps wide enough to allow the passage of four grown men, walking side by side, while the abyss of which the two had got but the merest hint through the opening and closing rents filled all the center of the place!

The Gnomes seemed impervious to the unendurable heat, and these, moving together, one behind the other, one beside the other, one atop the other, formed a living wall between Sarka and Jaska and the rim of the flaming blue abyss, to protect them from the heat.

Yet through the bodies of this living wall of Gnomes, a wall which was higher than the heads of Sarka and Jaska, the heat forced its way to the prisoners, and burned them anew with its agony.

To what dread rendezvous were they going? Where, save for the few guards at the house of Luar, were the people of the Gens of Dalis? Sarka felt, somehow, that the answers to all these questions would soon be made manifest, and a feeling of exaltation he could not explain was possessing him as he advanced. Around the corridor, whose one side was the wall reaching up to invisibility, whose other side dropped off into the abyss, the Gnomes herded the prisoners.

The leader of the Gnomes was again the Gnome who had first leaped upon Jaska to examine her curiously. Now, watching the lidless eyes of this being, Sarka fancied he could detect a hint of some expression. The Gnome was excited at some prospect, some climax which they were approaching. What? On and on they moved. The blue flames from the abyss, roaring in a way that neither of the prisoners had ever experienced, reached upward in searing tongues toward the invisible roof of this place.

Then, when they had progressed far from the door of entry, Sarka gasped at a new manifestation. Out of the abyss, some distance ahead, came a gleaming thing, something that had apparently evolved itself out of the flames of the abyss. Blue of color it was, because of the flames from the pit; but Sarka recognized it with a start which he could not suppress nor understand.

It was one of those cubes, such as he and Jaska had seen at the lip of the Moon-crater! As they approached, guided by the Gnomes, other cubes appeared out of the abyss, others in numbers swiftly augmented, until a veritable battalion of them had marshalled itself, there at the lip of the abyss.

Straight toward these cubes the Gnomes led Sarka and Jaska, and when they had reached the center of the group, they halted, forming a circle, still a wall to mask the prisoners from the heat of the abyss. The leader of the Gnomes stopped with his face, his lidless eyes, close to one of the cubes.

For a moment he paused thus, and Sarka felt sure that somehow the Gnome was holding thought converse with the cube; but, try as he might, he could find no meaning in the weird conversation for himself. It was oddly like listening to a conversation in a code beyond his knowledge.

Then the Gnome turned back to Sarka and Jaska. By a pressure of tiny feet, he tried to indicate that Sarka and Jaska should unclasp their hands. But they only clung the tighter, and now threw their arms about each other.

The Gnome desisted, much to the joy of the lovers, while Sarka

studied the cubes, wondering what their mission was with Jaska and himself.

Slowly, together, the cubes began to lose their bluish glow, their cube shape—to vanish utterly.

In a trice, still locked in each other's arms, Sarka and Jaska saw the Gnomes through what appeared to be an even bluer haze. Besides, the heat of the abyss no longer tortured them, and their bodies were cooling in a way that was unbelievably refreshing.

"What is it, beloved?" whispered Jaska. "What is it?"

Sarka stared at the Gnomes, now in retreat, capering as they had first capered when the two had fallen into their hands, toward the door by which all had entered. Mystified, Sarka put forth his hand. It came in contact with something solid, and oddly warm, which stirred an instantly responsive chord in the brain of Sarka.

This feeling was the same as he experienced when he had lifted those cubes and hurled them into the crater—where they had dissolved in falling, and instantly reappeared, each under its own Aircar!

::Jaska!:: he explained. ::Jaska! The cubes have dissolved themselves, and have reformed in the shape of a globe, as a protective covering about us, to protect us from the heat of the abyss! Apparently we are not to be killed at once! These cubes are slaves of the Gnomes, of whom Luar is ruler!::

They were indeed locked inside a globe, a globe whose integral parts were the cubes of their acquaintance; and the atmosphere of the interior was not uncomfortable, but otherwise. Sarka and Jaska were feeling normal for the first time since they had landed on the Moon. But what was the meaning of this strange imprisonment?

They were soon to know!

For the globe which enclosed them, moved to the edge of the flaming abyss, and dropped into the bluish glow! It did not drop heavily, like a falling object on Earth, but rather floated downward, right into the heart of the flames. At this new manifestation of the strangeness of science on the Moon, Sarka was at once all scientist himself, striving to find adequate answers for things which, from cause to effect, were entirely new to him. With Jaska still clasped close against him, he seated himself in the base of the globe and studied the area through which they were passing.

Blue flames which seemed to be born somewhere, an infinite distance below them; blue flames which he knew to be the element that, shot outward from the great cone, had forced the Moon away from the Earth.

No sound of the roaring flames came through the globe, but every movement of them was visible.

Sarka turned and peered through the bottom of the globe; but all he could see below were the flames, a molten indigo lake of them. Now, as they floated downward, the glow was giving away to lighter blue, to white, almost pure white, like the radiance which covered Luar like a mantle.

Sarka felt himself on the eve of vast important discoveries, and the scientist in him made him, for the moment, almost forget the woman at his side. Jaska, unbothered about anything, now that Sarka was at her side, regarded his expression of deep concentration with a tolerant smile.

Whiter now was the light, and faster fell the globe which held the two.

The color of the globe, now fallen below the area of blue, had taken

on, chameleonlike, the color of the white flames that bathed it.

Then, apparently right in the center of a lake of white flames, though Sarka could see no solid place on which the globe had landed, the globe came to rest.

Now everything was plain to see, and Sarka studied his surroundings with new interest. He felt a mounting sensation of scalp-prickling horror.

For, scattered throughout the lake of white flames, in all directions, as far as the eye could reach—standing alone, suffering untold agonies, from the expressions on their faces—were people of the Gens of Dalis!

No longer were they clothed in green and wearing on breast and back the yellow stars of their Gens. Now they were nude as they had come into the world and standing there, each was holding out hands in horror, to hold back myriads of the Gnomes, who would have forced them to submerge themselves in the white flames of the lake!

Was the Gens of Dalis being burned alive? What was the meaning of this?

For a moment, filled with horror, Sarka looked away from the spectacle. Off to his right, as he sat, he noted that the flames, which here seemed lighter than they had in high levels, were converging on a single spot toward the side of the lake of white flames—as smoke converges on the base of a chimney leading outward to the air!

He knew as he stared that he was gazing at the spot where the bluish column of the cone was born!

Shaking his head, he turned back to the mighty spectacle of this horrible thing that was being done to the people of the Gens of Dalis.

In his brain there suddenly crashed a thought whose source he could only guess at, whose meaning mystified him more than anything yet experienced. The thought might have emanated from Luar, or from Dalis. But the more he thought of the matter, the more he thought how the phrasing of the thought was like the telepathy of Sarka the Second, now thousands of miles away, upon the Earth. And this was the thought:

::If they fight the flames, the flames will destroy them! If they go into them freely, voluntarily, they will be rendered immune to heat and to cold, to life and to death. But it is better that they die, for Earth's sake!::

What did it mean?

Sarka thought of the radiant white light which perpetually bathed the person of Luar, and thought that he had somehow been given a hint of its source. If the Gens of Dalis were voluntarily bathed in the lake of white flames, would they become as Luar?

Somehow, though he knew that such bathing would save their lives, the idea filled him anew with horror. He found himself torn between two duties. If he sent his thought out there to the Gens of Dalis, people of Earth, his people, they would be saved, but might forever become allies of the people of the Moon. If Sarka did not tell them, they would die—and there were millions of them.

But his science had always been a science of Life, and it still was.

::Enter the flames!:: he telepathically bade his people. ::Enter the flames!::

But they did not heed him, and for the first time the atmosphere of the interior of the globe seemed filled with savage, abysmal menace! Plain to Sarka was the meaning of that menace: The cubes which composed this globe were loyal to their masters, the masters to a mistress, Luar, and would countenance no meddling.

Likewise it was impossible, if the Gnomes willed it to the cubes, for Sarka to transmit his thoughts to the Gens of Dalis through the transparent walls of the globe!

They were prisoners, indeed, of Dalis and of Luar!

But could Sarka and Jaska turn their new-found knowledge to their own use? Sarka was thinking back, back to one of the ancient tomes of his people. It spoke, someplace, of a man who had got trapped in the heart of a seething volcano, where the heat of it had cured him of his illnesses, made him whole again, given him new youth and freshness.

But since the cubes could forestall his transmission of thought, and perhaps could read and understand thoughts, how was he to tell Jaska? How show her that a way of deliverance had been given into their hands, if they only possessed the courage to use it!

Again came that thought, which Sarka recognized as the telepathy of his father:

::Courage! You will win, and Jaska with you!::

Thoughts could come in to them then, but could not go out. Or did it

mean that the cubes, or the masters of the cubes, did not care if the prisoners received messages from outside, because they knew themselves capable of frustrating anything the prisoners planned? Perhaps. More than likely that was it.

But, looking through the bottom of the globe, into the sea of white flames below, Sarka gripped more tightly his ray director, and tried to marshal the forces of his courage. There was surely some way of escape. Some way out of their strange predicament.

Chapter 17: ***Casting the Die***

Somehow Sarka believed that this white radiance of the abyss held the secret of the omnipotence of Luar, if omnipotence she possessed. That she did seemed sure, else Dalis would not have been with her. Besides, she had asked Sarka and Jaska to swear allegiance to her. Yes the secret was here, in the heart of the lake of white flames.

It might have been the Moon Fountain of Youth, or of omnipotence. There was no telling, unless Sarka tried an experiment.

His fury at Dalis now knew no bounds, and he was conscious of a desire, too poignant almost to be borne, in some way to circumvent the arch-traitor. For here in the craters of the Moon Dalis was working out a strange amplification of the scheme which he had, centuries before, proposed to Sarka the First. He was subjecting the people of his Gens to the white flames.

If they immersed themselves voluntarily, they became as Luar was, but still subservient to the will of Dalis—and, in his hands, invincible instruments of war! Dalis had doubtless already been bathed in the flames. Sarka was not sure, for in the home of Luar the white light was so blinding it would have been impossible to make sure that the white radiance clothed the others with Luar.

"That's it!" said Sarka to himself. "That's it! Dalis and those guards at the dais of Luar have already been subjected to the white flames! The rest who immerse themselves, voluntarily, come forth as Luar and Dalis! Who do not, die. Dalis' manner of forcing the survival of the fittest! His idea of the flood in grandfather's time, only now he causes his selection by flames instead of flood! He believes that only those worthy to survive, and to stand at his back in whatever he conceives to be his need, will guess the secret of the immersion. The others will die!"

What a terrible alternative, when Dalis could as easily have given the secret to all his people! Could have told them how to save themselves! But it was not Dalis' way. Here, in the beginning of what was to become a dual sovereignty of the Moon, Dalis had already taken thought on the matter of over-population, and was destroying the many that the few—the strongest, most ruthless—might survive! Hundreds of thousands, millions of the Gens of Dalis, stood at the door of life, and did not know how to enter, merely because Dalis withheld the key! And, pausing in terror before the flames, they died, when a step and a plunge would have saved them all!

"If he lives to be a million, if he lives through everlasting life," said Sarka to himself, "and does penance through a thousand

reincarnations, Dalis can never atone for this wholesale destruction of humanity! But I ... I wonder!"

Sarka realized the nicety of the revenge of Dalis upon Jaska and himself. Dalis had not given the secret to the prisoners, but by his use of the cubes, he had plunged them into the very heart of the horror, where they could see the suffering of the people of the Gens. Then, when they had seen and appreciated the horror of it all, they would follow the people of the Gens to death!

But Luar had spoken of thrusting them into the base of the Cone!

Then they were not for the flames after all! How could it be done? The globe composed of the cubes had but to transport the prisoners to the base of the Cone, press against that base, and open to let the prisoners free—and in the heart of the white-blue column they would be hurled outward from the Moon, into space. The mere prospect of such horror caused the perspiration to break forth anew on the body of Sarka.

But there might be a way.

"I wonder," he asked himself, "if the Earth people in *this* crater could read my thoughts in spite of their agonies, if I could get my thought

to them through the globe? I wonder if, reading my thoughts, they would obey?"

Bit by bit, as parts of a puzzle fall into place, he made his plan, and his heart beat high with excitement. Jaska bent before him to look into his eyes, and he knew that she was trying to read his face. She knew, wise Jaska, that this brilliant lover of hers was making a plan, and she believed in the sure success of it because it would be *his*!

She smiled at him, her courage high, and waited!

Holding the ray director between his body and that of Jaska, he took a terrible, ghastly chance. Dalis had known the secret sign manual of these two; but would the intelligence of the cubes comprehend it? He must take the chance, slender as it seemed. His free hand began to spell out, with all speed, the mad plan he had conceived.

{The white flames are harmless if one plunges into them voluntarily. Are you afraid to attempt it? No? Then unfasten your clothing, and have it so arranged that you can drop entirely out of it when I give you the signal, which will be a mere widening of the eyes, like this! You understand? We must go nude into the flames, so that they will bathe our whole bodies! But, when you slip out of your clothing, tear your anti-gravitational ovoid from the skull-pan of your helmet, and

hold it in your mouth! Then depend upon me, and have no fear!}

{I have no fear,} replied the fingers of Jaska. {I go to death with you if you wish—or to Life!}

Feeling the menace of the cubes almost gripping at his throat as he got into action, Sarka unfastened his own clothing, ripped the ovoid from his helmet, placed it in his mouth. Then, looking at Jaska, he gave her the signal.

Instantly, at her nod, he brought forth the ray director, pressed it with his fingers, directing its muzzle toward the curve of the globe, swinging it around in a circle, cutting out the bottom of the globe of cubes.

The action must have been one of untold surprise to the cubes which made up the globe, for before anything could be done to stay the hand of Sarka, his ray director had cut out the bottom of the globe, and Jaska and himself, divested now of all clothing, had fallen from the globe.

Unbearable heat slashed and tore at them. They still held hands, and when their feet touched upon something solid, they were gasping with the unbelievable heat; and it was ripping at their lungs like

talons of white hot steel. But, pausing not at all, Sarka raced ahead with Jaska, and dived straight into the lake of white flames.

As he dived he directed his thoughts toward the people of the Gens who stood, undecided, dying by slow inches, on their little oases in the lake. And this was the thought, which was a command.

::Plunge into the flames! They will not hurt you! Plunge in, and obey my commands, O people of the Gens of Dalis! I, Sarka, command that you obey me! Jaska, who commanded you at the will of Dalis, also commands. Gather with Jaska and me at the base of the Cone! You have but to follow the converging of the flames!::

Together the two plunged in, and it seemed all at once as though the fire had gone out of the white flames, for they were cool and soothing to the touch. Sarka could feel new life being borne in him, could feel himself revitalized, exalted, lifted to the heights. He suddenly experienced the desire to run, and shout his joy for all to hear. But reason held him. Not thus easily would Luar and Dalis, the traitor, give over their designs against these two.

But in the heart of the flames, they dropped down, while they turned their faces toward the base of the Cone, or where they thought the base to be, even as Sarka gave another command to the now

invisible people of the Gens of Dalis.

::Hold your ovoids in your mouths and follow! Obey my will!::

They dropped now to what seemed to be cool flagstones, while above them showed an orifice in a wall, into which those tongues of flame were darting. They paused there, side by side, their faces radiant, and looked back the way they had come.

Coming out of the white flames, like battalions on parade, were the people of the Gens of Dalis—scores and hundreds of them, who had sensed and heeded the mental commands of Sarka. Like genii appearing out of the flames they came, to muster about Sarka and Jaska.

Then, when it seemed that no more were coming, Sarka turned to the base of the Cone, his face high shining with courage and confidence, and stepped straight into the flames that led into the Cone. Beside him came Jaska, while behind him came the people of the Gens of Dalis who dared to do as he had commanded.

They were sucked into the Cone like chips sucked into a whirlpool, and Sarka willed a last command as they entered:

::Quit the column at the lip of the crater, and muster about the Aircars!::

Chapter 18: ***The People of Radiance***

The exaltation of Sarka knew no bounds, and looking into the eyes of Jaska, he knew she felt it, too. For her face was shining, and all of her, the wondrous shining brilliance of her, was bathed in the white radiance that mantled Luar. And now, since Jaska too knew that radiance, her beauty was greater even than that of Luar. Sarka thrilled anew at the glory of her.

But even as he stepped into the base of the Cone, he stepped out of the blue column at the lip of the Moon-crater. Swift as light, and swifter, had been the flight upward from the Cavern of the Cone; yet, so keen were his perceptions, he knew when he had passed through the chamber of the bluish glow, into which he and Jaska had first dropped upon arrival.

Now they were on the lip of the crater, and the people of the Gens who had followed him, were slipping out of the blue column, like insects out of a flame, and converging on the Aircars whose tentacles still waved as they had when Sarka had last seen them.

Sarka looked at these people in amazement. To him there was a divinity now about their nudeness which nudity never before had suggested to him. For the people shone, and there was something

glorious in those divinely white bodies. They reminded Sarka of his people's books of antiquity, and his childhood's pictures of angels....

But the effect of those white flames!...

There was no explaining it. But Sarka felt that whatever he willed to do he could do; that whatever he wished for was his, whether it was his by right or no. He felt that he could move mountains, with only the aid of his hands. Looking at Jaska he conceived all sorts of new beauty in her, for she was the brightest, to him, of all the people who had passed through the lake of white flames, and been cleansed in their heat.

"No wonder Luar has mastered the Moon!" he cried to Jaska. "For when she was bathed in the white flames, her will is paramount!"

"But how, if she passes the people of the Gens of Dalis through the flames, will she retain her sovereignty?"

"Because Dalis, too, has passed through, and his will is the will of the Gens! They will obey him, and he has sworn allegiance to Luar, or given some sort of oath of fealty!"

"How strange that but one person on the Moon has been bathed in

the white flames!"

"How do we know," Sarka almost whispered it, "that she is, originally, of the Moon? Does she not look too much like our people, to be from another world entirely?"

"I do not know, but ... you mean ... you mean...?"

"I scarcely know; but Dalis would swear allegiance to no man, much less to a woman, unless he knew that man, or woman, far better than he has had opportunity, in a matter of hours only, to know Luar!"

He left it there then, as he strode boldly, with Jaska by his side, to the nearest of the Aircars.

As he approached the car, the gleam cube beneath it seemed to gleam brighter and brighter, as though it echoed the radiance of Sarka. Sarka knew, studying this phenomenon, that he possessed at least a hint of the secret of Luar's omnipotence. There had been a hint before, but by now its meaning was clearer. The white flames, out of the heart of the dying Moon, gave new life, exaltation, not only to the bodies but to the brains of those who passed through it, and with their brains quickened, they possessed such knowledge as men of Earth, for ages, had wished to possess.

Transmutation of metals ... the ability, at will, to endow the higher, more selective metals with intelligence ... and the ability to retain command of the intelligences thus endowed. This explained the power of Luar over the Gnomes, and the power of the Gnomes over the cubes—if they possessed that power.

But the Gnomes, what of them? What were they?

But for a space Sarka must await the answer to that question, for there was little time. Already he knew that the tale of his escape, and his taking over of a portion of the Gens of Dalis, must have gone like wildfire through all the crater, and from this crater, perhaps, had been transmitted to all the craters of the Moon. All the craters....

That explained to him the absence from the lake of white flames, where he had seen so few, comparatively, of the people of Dalis' Gens. The Moon was honeycombed by such craters, and perhaps the white flame connected them all, made them all one. And Luar commanded all from her dais in this crater Sarka and his people were escaping. The millions of the Gens had been swallowed by the craters of the Moon, at command of Luar, acceded to by Dalis—and all over the Moon the very things which Sarka and Jaska had witnessed were taking place.

Even now, as Sarka raced for the Aircar, and Jaska with him, he could feel a backward pulling that was well-nigh invincible. Someone was willing him to return, willing the Gnomes to pursue him, willing the cubes to refuse obedience to him; but he laughed and stepped to the Aircar, passing by the nearest writhing tentacle as though he knew it possessed no power to harm him. The tentacle swept aside, and did not try to bar him, while he sent his will crashing against that brightly gleaming cube. "Into the Aircar! We enter with you!"

The cube vanished instantly, and it seemed to Sarka that invisible hands caught at his feet, lifting him up through the trap-door in the belly of the Aircar, up and inside. The door swung shut, and in the forward end of the vast Aircar gleamed the cube which had obeyed his command!

Sarka sent one thought careening outward from the Aircar, a command to the cubes which stood watch beneath the other Aircars.

::Obey the Radiant People, and through them, *me*!::

The light of the cube made the interior of the Aircar as light as day, and Sarka was struck at once with another phenomenon. He could see through the sides of the car in any direction.

And what he saw filled him with a sudden fear!

Out of the crater poured myriads of the Gnomes, and up the sides of it came myriads of the gleaming cubes, all racing toward the cars.

::Get back! Get back!:: he commanded the Gnomes and the cubes.

At the same time he issued his commands to the cube within his own car, and to the cubes which by now were inside the other Aircars, realizing that the cubes themselves were the motive power of the Aircars—and that his will was the will of these individual cubes.

::Fly at once! Fly outward at top speed toward the Earth!::

Instantly, as though a single signal had started all the cars, a dozen Aircars rose majestically from the crater, while Sarka studied the Gnomes and the cubes in turmoil on the rim. He noted then, a strange circumstance: that when he commanded the Gnomes and the pursuing cubes to keep back, they hesitated, dazedly, as though they did not know whether to advance or to retreat; that when he merely watched them, they came on.

He laughed aloud at this measuring of mental swords with Luar, and with Dalis. For he could sense the conflict very plainly. She

commanded the Gnomes and the cubes to attack, he commanded them to retreat, and they remained undecided, like people drawn between two extremities, and uncertain which direction to take.

Upward, side by side now, floated the Aircars of the Moon, and in the forepeak of each, one of the gleaming cubes, like—like anti-gravitational ovoids of the Moon! At the fast falling rim of the crater boiled the Gnomes and the cubes, stirring and tumbling, hampered by their very numbers, as they tried to attack at will of Luar and retreated in confusion at the will of Sarka.

Then there was Jaska beside Sarka, her face fearful, as he pointed off across the gloomy expanse of the Moon.

From all sides, from all directions, from other craters which these two had not even seen, came scores and hundreds of the monster cars!

They had beaten Luar and Dalis but for a moment, then! Now, at her command, the countless other Aircars were coming in to head them off, to fight them back to the surface of the Moon. It would be a race against time, and against death. But of at least a dozen of the Aircars, Sarka was master, and he did not fear the issue. That strange exaltation which the white flames had given him filled him with a

confidence that nothing could shake.

He shot a thought at the gleaming cube in the forepeak.

::Faster! Faster! There is no limit to your speed! Faster! Faster! Even faster!::

Instantly the Moon seemed literally to drop away beneath the dozen Aircars which carried the Radiant People, while the Aircars of Luar and of Dalis fell hopelessly behind.

Sure that they would win in this race now, since he was just beginning to realize the vastness of his power—the all-encompassing, all-mastering power of the human mind and will, which the white flames of the Moon had made almost god-like—Sarka turned his eyes toward a coldly gleaming sphere in the star-spangled heavens ahead.

It was the Earth, and it seemed ringed in flames! From its edges there seemed to shoot long streamers of yellow or golden flames, which broke into sunlike pinwheels of radiance at their tips. Something, there on the precious Earth, was decidedly wrong!

Instantly, telepathically, he sought to gain mental contact with his

father.

::Father, we are coming!:: he said, across those countless miles. ::What is happening?::

For a full minute there was no answer. Then it came, feeble, broken, weighted with fear; but it was a thought-message, unmistakably, of Sarka the Second.

::Hurry, son! Hurry! For Dalis has indeed betrayed us! I could not maintain control of the Earth with the Beryls, for some strange catastrophe has destroyed all the Beryls in the area Dalis ruled! The shifting of positions of the Earth and the Moon has so altered the relative effects of the pull of gravity exerted by the planets that Mars has been brought into dangerous proximity to us and is already so close that her ether-lights are playing over us! Surely you must be able to see them! We have received messages, but as yet I have only been partially able to decode them! What I have decoded, however, presages catastrophe—for I am sure that Mars and the Moon are in confederation, and that the Moon-people have deliberately forced us into contact with her ally!::

Cold fear clutched at the throat of Sarka as he caught the message. He decided not to tell Jaska for the moment. He looked to right and

left, at the Aircars on either side of him, then issued his commands.

::Faster! Faster! Be prepared to land in the area of the Gens of Cleric, as close as possible to my laboratory!::

A strange, awesome sight, that flight of the rebels of Dalis' Gens from the Moon to the Earth—like gleaming stars across the void. Far out in Space they fled at terrific speed through almost utter darkness, but their light was still blinding, lighting the way.

Chapter 19: ***Desolation***

Stranger, more thrilling even than had been the flight of the Earth after being forced out of its orbit, was the flight of those dozen Aircars of the Moon, bearing the rebels of Dalis' Gens back to Earth.

Martian fire-balls and the terrific Moon-cubes wreak tremendous destruction on helpless Earth in the final death struggle of the warring worlds.

For the light which glowed from the bodies of the rebels, which had been given them by their passage through the white flames, was transmitted to the cars themselves, so that they glowed as with an inner radiance of their own—like comets flashing across the night.

Strange alchemy, which Sarka wondered about and, wondering, looked ahead to the time when he should be able, within his laboratory, to analyze the force it embodied, and thus gain new scientific knowledge of untold value to people of the Earth.

As the cars raced across outer darkness, moving at top speed, greater than ever attained before by man, greater than even these mighty cars had traveled, Sarka looked ahead, and wondered about the fearful report his father had just given him.

That there was an alliance between Mars and the Moon seemed almost unbelievable. How had they managed the first contact, the first negotiations leading to the compact between two such alien peoples? Had there been any flights exchanged by the two worlds, surely the scientists of Earth would have known about it. But there had not, though there had been times and times when Sarka had peered closely enough at the surface of both the Moon and of Mars to see the activities, or the results of the activities, of the peoples of the two worlds.

Somehow, however, communication, if Sarka the Second had guessed correctly, had been managed between Mars and the Moon; and now that the Earth was a free flying orb the two were in alliance against it, perhaps for the same reason that the Earth had gone a-voyaging.

Side by side sat Sarka and Jaska, their eager eyes peering through the forward end of the flashing Aircar toward the Earth, growing minute by minute larger. They were able, after some hours, to make out the outlines of what had once been continents, to see the shadows in valleys which had once held the oceans of Earth....

And always, as they stared and literally willed the cubes which piloted and were the motive power of the Aircars to speed and more

speed, that marvelous display of interplanetary fireworks which had aroused the concern of Sarka the Second.

What were those lights? Whence did they emanate? Sarka the Second had said that they came from Mars, yet Mars was invisible to those in the speeding Aircars, which argued that it was hidden behind the Earth. There was no way of knowing how close it was to the home of these rebels of Dalis' Gens.

And ever, as they flashed forward, Sarka was recalling that vague hint on the lips of Jaska, to the effect that Luar, for all her sovereignty of the Moon, might be, nonetheless, a native of the Earth. But....

How? Why? When? There were no answers to any of the questions yet. If she were a native of Earth, how had she reached the Moon? When had she been sent there? Who was she? Her name, Luar, was a strange one, and Sarka studied it for many minutes, rolling the odd syllables of it over his tongue, wondering where, on the Earth, he had heard names, or words, similar to it. This produced no result, until he tried substituting various letters; then, again, adding various letters. When he achieved a certain result at last, he gasped, and his brain was a-whirl.

Luar, by the addition of the letter *n*, between the *u* and the *a*, became Lunar, meaning "of the Moon!" Yet Lunar was unmistakably a word derived from the language of the Earth! It was possible, of course, that this was mere coincidence; but, taken in connection with the suspicions of Jaska, and the incontrovertible fact that Luar resembled people of the Earth, Sarka did not believe in this particular whim of coincidence.

Who was Luar?

His mind went back to the clucking sounds which, among the Gnomes of the Moon, passed for speech. He pondered anew. He shaped his lips, as nearly as possible, to make the clucking sounds he had heard, and discovered that it was very difficult to manage the letter *n*!

The conclusion was inescapable: This woman, Luar, had once been *Lunar*, the *n*, down the centuries, being dropped because difficult for the Gnomes to pronounce.

"Yes, Jaska," he said suddenly, "somewhere on Earth, when we reach it, we may discover the secret of Luar—and know far more about Dalis than we have ever known before!"

Jaska merely smiled her inscrutable smile, and did not answer. By intuition, she already knew. Let Sarka arrive at her conclusion by scientific methods if he desired, and she would simply smile anew.

Sarka thought of the manner in which Jaska and he had been transported to the Moon; of how much Dalis seemed to know of the secrets of the laboratory of the Sarkas. Might he not have known, two centuries ago, of the Secret Exit Dome, and somehow managed to make use of it in some ghastly experiment? And still the one question remained unanswered: Who was Luar?

The Earth was now so close that details were plainly seen. The Himalayas were out of sight, over the Earth, and by a mental command Sarka managed to change slightly the course of the dozen Aircars. By passing over the curve of the Earth at a high altitude, he hoped also to see from above something of the result of the strange aerial bombardment of which his father had spoken.

In their flight, which had been, to them a flight through the glories of a super-heavenly Universe, they had lost all count of time. Neither Sarka nor Jaska, nor yet the people in those other Aircars, could have told how long they had been flying, when, coming over the curve of the Earth, at an elevation of something like three miles, they were able at last to see into the area which had once housed the Gens of

Dalis.

A gasp of horror escaped the lips of Sarka and of Jaska.

The Gens of Dalis had occupied all the territory northward to the Pole, from a line drawn east and west through the southernmost of what had once been the Hawaiian Islands. Upon this area had struck the strange blue light from the deep Cone of the Moon.

Here, however, the light was invisible, and Sarka flew on in fear that somehow his Aircars would blunder into it, and be destroyed—for that the blue light was an agent of ghastly destruction became instantly apparent.

The dwellings of the Gens of Dalis were broken and smashed into chaotic ruins. Over all the area, and even into the area of the Gens southward of that which had been Dalis, the blind gods of destruction had practically made a clean sweep. Sarka had opportunity to thank God that, at the time the blue column had struck the Earth, it had struck at the spot which had been almost emptied of people, and realized that blind chance had caused it. For, in order for the Gens of Dalis to be in position to launch their attack against the Moon, he had managed, by manipulating the speed of the Beryls, to bring that area into position directly opposite the Moon.

Had it been otherwise, the blue column might have struck anywhere, and wiped out millions of lives!

"God, Jaska," murmured Sarka. "Look!"

Think of a shoreline, once lined with mighty buildings, after the passage of a tidal wave greater than ever before known to man. The devastation would be indescribable. Multiply that shoreline by the vast area which had housed the Gens of Dalis, and the mental picture is almost too big to grasp. Chaos, catastrophe, approaching an infinity of destruction.

The materials of which the vast buildings, set close together, had been made, had been twisted into grotesque, nightmarish shapes, and the whole fused into a burned and gleaming mass—which covered half of what had once been a mighty ocean—as though a bomb larger and more devastating than ever imagined of man, a bomb large enough to rock the Earth, had landed in the midst of the area once occupied by the Gens of Dalis!

Yet, Sarka knew, remembering the murmuring of the blue column as it came out of the cone, all this devastation had been caused in almost absolute silence. People could have watched and seen these deserted buildings slowly fuse together, run together as molten metal

runs together, like the lava from a volcano of long ago under the ponderous moving to and fro of some invisible, juggernautlike agency.

Sarka shuddered, trying to picture in his mind the massing of the minions of Mars, who thus saw a new country given into their hands —if they could take it. Had the Earth been taken by surprise? Had Sarka the Second been able to prepare for the approaching catastrophe?

::Father,:: he sent his thoughts racing on ahead of him, ::are those lights which are striking the Earth causing any damage?::

::Only,:: came back the instant answer, ::in that they destroy the courage of the people of the Earth! The people, however, now know that Sarka is returning, and their courage rises again! The flames are merely a hint of what faces us; but the people will rise and follow you wherever you lead!::

So, as they raced across the area of devastation, the face of Sarka became calm again. On a chance, he sent a single sentence of strange meaning to his father.

::The ruler of the Moon is a woman called Luar, which seems a

contraction of Lunar!::

For many minutes Sarka the Second made no answer. When it came it startled Sarka to the depths of him, despite the fact that he had expected to be startled.

::There was a woman named Lunar!::

Chapter 20: ***Sarka Commands Again***

Ahead, through the storms which still hung tenaciously to the roof of the world, flashed those dozen Aircars of the Moon. Now Sarka could plainly see the dome of his laboratory, and from the depths of him welled up that strange glow which Earthlings recognize as the joy of returning home, than which there is none, save the love for a woman, greater.

Now he could see the effect of those flares, or lights, from Mars, which impinged on the face of the Earth, though he could see no purpose in them, no reason for their being, since they seemed to do no damage at all, though the effect of them was weird in the extreme.

Outer darkness, rent with ripping, roaring storms, flurries of ice, snow and sleet, shot through and through by balls of lambent flames in unguessable numbers. Eery lights which struck the surface of the Earth, bounded away and, half a mile or so from the surface again, burst into flaming pin-wheels, like skyrockets of ancient times. Strange lights, causing weird effects, but producing no damage at all, save to lessen to some extent the courage of Earthlings, because they did not understand these things. And always, down the ages, man had stood most in fear of the Unknown.

Sarka peered off across the heavens where a ball of flame now seemed to be rising over the horizon, and was amazed at the size of this planet. Mars was close to Earth, so close that, had they possessed Aircars like those of the Moon-people—which remained to be seen—they could easily have attacked the Earth.

Across the face of the Earth flashed those fiery will-o'-the-wisps from Mars, without rhyme or reason; yet Sarka knew positively that they possessed some meaning, and that the Earth had been forced thus close to Mars for a purpose. What that purpose was must yet be discovered.

Then, under the Aircars, the laboratory of Sarka.

Down dropped the Aircars to a landing near the laboratory, and to the cubes in the forepeak of each Sarka sent the mental command:

::Assure yourselves that the Aircars will remain where they are! Muster inside the laboratory, keeping well away from the Master Beryl!::

Then to the people who had returned, clothed in strange radiance, from the Moon with Sarka and with Jaska he spoke:

::Leave the cars and enter my laboratory, where further orders will be given you!::

With Jaska still by his side, Sarka entered the laboratory through the Exit Dome. Inside, clothing was swiftly brought for the rebels, for Sarka and for Jaska. But, even when they were clothed, these people who had come back seemed to glow with an inner radiance which transfigured them.

Sarka the Second, his face drawn and pale, came from the Observatory to meet his son, and the two were clasped in each other's arms for a moment. Sarka the Second, who had looked no older than his son, seemed to have aged a dozen centuries in the time Sarka had been gone.

But it was not of the threatened attack by Martians that Sarka the Second spoke. He made no statement. He merely asked a question:

"Was Lunar very beautiful, and just a bit unearthly in appearance?"

Sarka started.

"Yes. Beautiful! Wondrously, fearfully beautiful: but I had the feeling that she had no heart or soul, no conscience: that she was

somehow—well, bestial!"

A moan of anguish escaped Sarka the Second.

"Dalis again!" he ejaculated. "But much of the fault was mine! Before you were born, we scientists of Earth had already several times realized the necessity of expansion for the children of Earth if they were to continue. Dalis' proposal to my father was discarded, because it involved the wholesale taking of life. But after the oceans had been obliterated, and the human family still outgrew its bounds, Dalis came to my father and me with still another proposal. It involved a strange, other-worldly young woman whom he called Lunar! Her family—well, nothing was known about her, for her family could not be traced. Wiped out, I presume, in some inter-family quarrel, leaving her alone. Dalis found her, took an interest in her, and the very strangeness of her gave him his idea, which he brought to my father and me.

"His proposal was somewhat like that which you made when we sent the Earth out of its orbit into outer space, save that Dalis' scheme involved no such program. His was simply a proposal to somehow communicate with the Moon by the use of an interplanetary rocket that should carry a human passenger.

"He put the idea up to this girl, Lunar, and she did not seem to care one way or another. Dalis was all wrapped up in his ideas, and gave the girl the name of Lunar, as being symbolical of his plans for her. He coached and trained her against the consummation of his plan. We knew something, theoretically at least, about the conditions on the Moon, and everything possible was done for her, to make it feasible for her to exist on the Moon. My error was in ever permitting the experiment to be made, since if I had negatived the idea. Dalis would have gone no further!

"But I, too, was curious, and Lunar did not care. Well, the rocket was constructed, and shot outward into space by a series of explosions. No word was ever received from Lunar, though it was known that she landed on the Moon!

"I say no word was ever received, yet what you have intimated proves that Dalis has either been in mental communication with her, hoping to induce her to send a force against the Earth, and assist him in mastering the Earth, overthrowing we Sarkas—or has been biding his time against something of the thing we have now accomplished."

This seemed to clear up many things for Sarka, though it piled higher upon his shoulders the weight of his responsibilities. The other-worldliness of Lunar, called now Luar, explained her mastery

of the Gnomes, and through them the cubes, and her knowledge of the omnipotent qualities of the white flames of the Moon's core, which might have been, it came to Sarka in a flash, the source of all life on the Moon in the beginning!

"But father," went on Sarka, "I don't see any sense in this aerial bombardment by Mars!"

"I believe," said Sarka the Second sadly, "that before another ten hours pass we shall know the worst there is to be known: but now, son, instead of going into attack against the Moon, we go into battle against the combined forces of Mars and of the Moon!"

Sarka now took command of the forces of the Earth. Swiftly he turned to the people of the Gens of Dalis who had come back with him.

"You will be divided into eleven equal groups, as nearly as possible. Father, will you please arrange the division? Each group will be attached to the staff of one of the Spokesman of the Gens, so that each Spokesman will have the benefit of your knowledge with reference to conditions on the Moon. Each group will re-enter its particular Aircar, retaining control of the cube in each case, of course, and will at once repair to his proper station. Telepathy is the

mode of communication with the cubes, and you rule them by your will. Each group, when assembled by my father, will choose a leader before quitting this laboratory, and such leader will remain in command of his group, under the overlordship of the Spokesman to whom he reports with his group. You understand!

"Your loyalty is unquestioned. You will consecrate your lives to the welfare of the Gens to which you are going, since you no longer have a Gens of your own!"

Sarka turned to the cubes, which had formed in a line just inside the Exit Dome, and issued a mental command to the cube that had piloted his Aircar from the Moon. The cube faded out instantly, appearing immediately afterward on the table of the vari-colored lights.

"Father," said Sarka, "while I am issuing orders to the Spokesmen, please see if you can discover the secret of these cubes: how they are actuated, the real extent of their intelligence! The rest of you, with your cubes, depart immediately and report to your new Gens!"

Within ten minutes the divisions had been made, and the Radiant People had entered the Aircars and, outside the laboratory, risen free of the Earth, and turned, each in its proper direction, for the Gens of

its assignment. The Sarkas and Jaska watched them go.

There remained but one Aircar, standing outside on half a dozen of those grim tentacles, with two tentacles swinging free, undulating to and fro like serpents. Harnessed electricity actuating the tentacles—cars and tentacles subservient to the cubes.

The Aircars safely on their way, Sarka stepped to the Master Beryl, tuned it down to normal speed, and signalled the Spokesmen of the Gens.

"The Moon and Mars are in alliance against us, and Dalis has allied himself and his Gens with the ruler of the Moon! I don't know yet what form the attack will take, but know this: that the safety of the world, of all its people, rests in your hands, and that the war into which we are going is potentially more vast than expected when this venture began, and more devastating than the fight with the Aircars of the Moon! Coming to you, in Aircars which we managed to take from the Moon-people, are such of the people of the Gens of Dalis as were able to return with me. Question them, gather all the information you can about them, and through them keep control of the cubes which pilot the Aircars, for in the cubes, I believe, lies the secret of our possible victory in the fight to come!"

Sarka scarcely knew why he had spoken the last sentence. It was as though something deep within him had risen up, commanded him to speak, and deeper yet, far back in his consciousness, was a mental picture of the devastation he had witnessed on his flight above the area that had once housed the Gens of Dalis.

For in that ghastly area, he believed, was embodied an idea greater than mere wanton destruction, just as there was an idea back of the fiery lights from Mars greater than mere display. Somehow the two were allied, and Sarka believed that, between the blue column, and the fiery lights from Mars, the fate of the world rested.

He could, he believed, by manipulation of the Beryls that yet remained, maneuver the world away from that blue column—which on the Earth was invisible. But to have done so would have thwarted the very purpose for which this mad voyage had been begun. The world had been started on its mad journey into space for the purpose of attacking and colonizing the Moon and Mars.

The Moon had been colonized by the Gens of Dalis, already in potential revolt against the Earth. Mars was next, and by forcing the Earth into close proximity to Mars the people of the Moon had played into the hands of Earth-people—if the people of Earth were capable of carrying out the program of expansion originally

proposed by Sarka!

If they were not ... well, Sarka thought somewhat grimly, the resultant cataclysmic war would at least solve the problem of over-population! Inasmuch as the Earth was already committed to whatever might transpire, Sarka believed he should take a philosophic view of the matter!

Sarka turned to an examination of the Master Beryl, and even as he peered into the depths of it, he thought gratefully how nice it was to be home again, in his own laboratory, upon the world of his nativity. He even found it within his heart to feel somewhat sorry for Dalis, and to feel ashamed that he had, even in his heart, mistreated him.

Then he thought, with a tightening of his jaw muscles, of the casual way in which Dalis had destroyed Sarka the First, of his forcing his people to undergo the terrors of the lake of white flames without telling them the simple secret; of his betrayal of the Earth in his swift alliance with Luar; or Luar herself when, as Lunar, a strange waif of Earth, Dalis had sent her out as the first human passenger aboard a rocket to the Moon. All his pity vanished, though he still believed he had done right in sparing Dalis' life.

Suddenly there came an ominous humming in the Beryl, and

simultaneously signals from the vari-colored lights on the table. Sarka whirled to the lights, noting their color, and mentally repeating the names of the Spokesmen who signalled him.

Even before he gave the signal that placed him in position to converse with them, he noted the strange coincidence. The Spokesmen who desired speech with him were tutelary heads of Gens whose borders touched the devasted area where Dalis had but recently been overlord!

An icy chill caressed his spine as he signalled the Spokesmen to speak.

"Yes, Vardee? Prull? Klaser? Cleric?"

The report of each of them was substantially the same, though couched in different words, words freighted heavily with strange terror.

"The devasted area has suddenly broken into movement! Throughout that portion of it visible from my Gens area, the fused mass of debris is bubbling, fermenting, walking into life! An aura of unearthly menace seems to flow outward from this heaving mass, and the whole is assuming a most peculiar radiance—cold gleaming, like

distant starshine!"

"Wait!" replied Sarka swiftly. "Wait until the people I have sent you have arrived! Report to me instantly if the movement of the mass is noticeably augmented, and especially so if it seems to be breaking up, or coagulating into any sort of form whatever!"

Then he dimmed the lights, indicating that for the moment there was nothing more to be said. Just then his father, face very gray and very old, entered the room of the Master Beryl from the laboratory.

"Son!" he said. "The crisis is almost upon us! The Martians are coming!"

Chapter 21: ***Cubes of Chaos***

Sarka raced into the Observatory, wondering as he ran how the attack of the Martians would manifest itself; but scarcely prepared for the brilliant display which greeted his gaze. Compared to the oncoming flames from Mars, the preceding display of lights had been as nothing. The whole Heavens between the Earth and Mars seemed alight with an unearthly glare, as though the very heart of the sun had burst and hurled part of its flaming mass outward into space.

On it came with unbelievable speed.

But there was no telling, yet, the form of the things which were coming.

"What are they?" whispered Jaska, standing fearlessly at Sarka's side. "Interplanetary cars? Rockets? Balls of fire? Or beings of Mars?"

"I think," said Sarka, after studying the display for a few minutes, "that they are either rockets or fireballs, perhaps both together! But the Martians cannot consolidate any position on the Earth without coming to handgrips. Since they must know this, we can expect to see the people of Mars themselves when, or soon after, those balls of

fire strike the Earth!"

Sarka raced back to the room of the Master Beryl as a strident humming came through to him.

The Spokesmen of the Gens whose borders touched those of the devasted Dalis area, were reporting again, and their voices were high pitched with fear that threatened to break the bounds of sanity.

"The ferment in the devasted area," was the gist of their report, "is assuming myriads of shapes! The fused mass has broken up into isolated masses, and each mass of itself is assuming one of the many forms!"

"What forms?" snapped Sarka. "Quickly!"

"Cubes! Thousands and millions of cubes, and the cubes themselves are forming into larger cubes, some square, some rectangular! In the midst of these formations are others, mostly columnar, each column consisting of cubes which have coalesced into the larger form from the same small cubes! The columnar formations are topped by globes which emit an ethereal radiance!"

"Listen!" Sarka's voice was vibrant with excitement. "Spokesmen of

the Gens, make sure that every individual member of your Gens is fully equipped with flying clothing including belts and ovoids—prepared for an indefinite stay outside on the roof of the world! Get your people out swiftly, keeping them in formation! Keep about you those people of Dalis whom I sent you, and understand before you break contact with your Beryls, that instructions received from these people come from me! In turn, after you have quitted the hives, anything you wish to say to me you can repeat to any one of the glowing people of Dalis!"

The contacts were broken. Sarka stared into the Beryl, glancing swiftly in all directions, to see whether his orders were obeyed.

Out of the myriads of hives were flying the people of all the Gens of Earth, their vast numbers already darkening the roof of the world. The advance fires from Mars seemed to have no effect on them, which Sarka had expected, since the fires seemed to consume nothing they had touched previously.

By millions the people came forth. People dressed in the clothing of this Gens or that, wearing each the insignia of the house of his Spokesman. A brave show. Sarka could see the faces of many, now in light, now in shadow, as the advance fires of Mars lighted them for a moment in passing, then left them in shadow as the bursting

balls of fire faded and died.

Strange, too, that the fireballs made no noise. Noiseless flame which rebounded from the surface of the Earth broke in silence, deluging the heavens with shooting stars of great brilliance. Through its display flew the people of the Gens, mustering in flight above flight, each to his own level, under command of the Spokesmen of the Gens.

"How long, father," queried Sarka, "should it take to empty the Gens areas?"

"The people of Earth have been waiting for word to go into battle since we first sent the people of Dalis against the Moon-men. They still are ready! The dwellings of our people, *all* of them, can be emptied within an hour!"

"I wonder," mused Sarka, "if that is soon enough!"

Perhaps yes, perhaps no. It would be a race, in any case. Sarka divided his attention between the rapidly changing formations of the Moon-cubes in that devasted area and the onrushing charge of the fire-balls from Mars. All were visible to him through the Master Beryl, and from the Observatory, though the Martian fire-balls were

now so close that the vanguard of them could even be seen in the Master Beryl, adjusted to view only activities on the surface of the Earth.

Even as the last flights of the Gens of Earth were slipping into the icy air from the roof of the world, the Moon-cubes began their terrifying, appalling attack, every detail of which could be seen by Sarka from the Master Beryl.

Those columns, composed of cubes, seemed to be the leaders of a vast cube-army. The top of each of them was a gleaming globe whose eery light played over the country immediately surrounding each column, their weird light reflected in the squares, rectangles and globes that other cubes had formed.

Sarka sought swiftly among the columns for the one which might conceivably be in supreme command; but even as he sought the Moon-cubes moved to the attack. The globes on the tops of the columns dimmed their lights, and the squares, rectangles and globes got instantly into terrible motion.

Southward from the position in which they had formed they began to move, the squares and rectangles apparently sliding along the surface of the scarred and broken soil, the globes rolling.

Southward there was the vast wall of the Gens that bordered the devasted area in that direction, and the cube-army was instantly at full charge toward this, in what Sarka realized was, to be a war of demolition!

Within a minute, Sarka was conscious of a trembling of all the laboratory, and the eyes of Jaska were wide with fear. Swiftly the trembling grew, until sound now was added to the vast, awesome tremor—a vast, roaring crescendo of sound that mounted and mounted as the speed of the cube-army increased. The vanguard of the cube-army struck the dwelling of the Gens southward of that of Dalis, and a mighty, rocketing roar sounded in the Master Beryl, was audible inside the laboratory, even without the aid of the Beryl, at whose surface Sarka stared as a man fascinated, hypnotized.

The cube-army struck the dwellings, disappeared into them as though they had been composed of tissue paper, and continued on! Over the tops of the cube-army toppled the roofs of the dwellings, there, in the midst of the cubes, to be ground to powder, with a sound as of a million avalanches grinding together in some awesome, sun-size valley. Southward, in the wake of the chaotic charge, moved a mighty, gigantic crevasse, whose sides were the walls of the hives left standing. And still the cube-army moved in, grinding everything it touched to dust, trampling buildings into

nothingness, destroying utterly along a front hundreds of miles wide, and as deep as the dwellings of men!

"God!" cried Sarka, his voice so tense that both his father and Jaska heard it above the roaring which shook and rocked the world. "Do you see? The Moon-cubes are destroying the dwelling of our people, and the Martians are to destroy the people who have fled!"

"There must be a way," said Sarka the Second quietly, "to circumvent the cubes! But what? Your will still rules the cubes which piloted you from the Moon?"

"Yes," replied Sarka tersely, "but there are only a dozen of the cubes. What can they do against countless millions of them? Cubes which are Moon-cubes, brought to the Earth in the heart of that blue column, here reformed to create an army which is invincible, because it cannot be slain! It means that the Moon-people themselves, thousands of miles out of our reach, have but to sit in comfort and watch their cube-slaves destroy us! When they have laid waste the Earth, the Martians have but to finish the fight!"

"If, beloved," said Jaska, "your will commands those twelve cubes, it can also command all the others, for they must be essentially the same. Call on the rebels of Dalis to help you!"

"Then what of the Spokesmen of the Gens, who will be out of contact with me?"

"They must stand on their own feet, must fight their own battle! Call to you the people who have passed through the white flames, and fight with the distant will of Luar and of Dalis for control of the cube-army!"

Again that exaltation, which convinced him he could move mountains with his two hands, coursed through the being of Sarka.

Quietly be answered Jaska.

"I believe you are right," he said softly. "Those of us who have passed through the flames which bore these Moon-cubes will control the cubes, even bend them to our will. The Spokesmen must vanquish the Martians or perish!"

Then he sent his mental commands to the Spokesmen:

::Meet the Martians when they arrive and destroy or drive them back! You live only if you win! We speak no more until victory is ours! People of the Gens of Dalis, go to the areas being devasted by the cubes, taking your cubes and Aircars with you, and I will join

you there! *And Jaska with me!::*

Sarka had not himself mentally spoken the last four words. Jaska had thought-spoken them, before he could prevent. He turned upon her, lips shaping a command that she remain behind. But she forestalled him.

"I, too, have been through the white flames! You may have need of all of us!"

Chapter 22: ***The Struggle for Mastery***

The people of all the Gens of Earth were now between two fires. The cube-army, ruled by the mistress of the Moon, was laying waste the dwellings of the Gens, destroying them with a speed and surety of which no earthquake, whatever its proportions, would have been capable. The Gens were forced out upon the roof of the world—where, scarcely had they maneuvered into their prearranged formations, than the Martians struck.

Those huge balls of fire, larger even than the Aircars of the Moon, landed in vast and awe-inspiring numbers on the roof of the world—landed easily, with no apparent effort or shock. The light of them made all the world a place of vast radiance, save only that portion which was being destroyed by the cube-army, and this area had a cold, chill radiance of its own.

By groups and organisations the fire-balls of Mars landed, and rested quiescent on the surface of the globe.

Sarka, pausing only long enough in his laboratory to study this strange attack and to discover how it would get under way, was at the same time preparing to go forth to take his own strange part in the defensive action of Earthlings. A vast confidence was in him....

"We will lose millions of people, father," he said softly. "But it will end in our victory, in the most glorious war ever fought on this Earth!"

"That is true, my son!" replied the older man sadly.

For several minutes the vast fire-balls, which seemed to be monster glowing octagons, rested where they had landed, and even then the Gens of the people were closing on them, bringing their ray directors and atom-disintegrators into action.

Then, when the Earthlings would have destroyed the first of the vast fire-balls—and Sarka was noting that the flames which bathed the balls seemed to have no effect whatever on Earthlings, save to outline them in mantles of fire—the fire-balls wakened to new life.

They opened like the halves of peaches falling apart, and out upon the roof of the world poured the first Martians Earth had ever seen!

They were more than twice the size, on the average, of Earth people, and at first glance seemed to resemble them very much, save that their eyes, of which each Martian was possessed of two, were set on the ends of long tentacles which could stretch forth to a length of two feet or more from the eye-sockets and thus be turned in any

direction. Each eye was independent of its neighbor, as one could look forward while the other looked backward, or one could look right while the other looked left.

Each Martian possessed two arms on each side of a huge, powerful torso, and legs that were like the bolls of trees, compared to the slender limbs of Earthlings. All the Martians seemed to be dressed in the skins of strange, vari-colored beasts. Each carried in his upper right hand a slender canelike thing some three feet in length, from whose tip there flashed those spurts of flame which had puzzled the Earth people before the actual launching of the attack.

Beyond these weapons, the Martians seemed to possess no weapons of offense at all, nor of defense.

"With our ray directors and atom-disintegrators," said Sarka, moving into the Exit Dome with Jaska, "we can blast them from the face of the Earth!"

But in a moment he realized that he had spoken too hastily.

The nearest fire-ball was, of course, within the area of the Gens of Cleric, and Sarka could here see with his naked eyes all that transpired. The Martian passengers, who moved swiftly away from

their fire-ball vehicles, then a flight of the Gens of Cleric descended upon the fireball and its fleeing passengers, with tiny ray directors and atom-disintegrators held to the fore, ready for action.

The Martians, at some distance from their glowing vehicle, paused and formed a ragged line, facing the ball, staring at the descending people of the Gens of Cleric, their tentaclelike eyes waving to and fro, oddly like the tentacles of those Aircars of the Moon.

The flight was hovering above the first fireball. In a second now, at the command of an underling, the ray directors would destroy fire-ball and Martians as thoroughly as though they had never existed at all.

But then a strange thing happened. At that exact moment, timing their actions to fractions of seconds, the Martians raised and pointed their canelike weapons of the spurting flames. They pointed them, however, not at the Earthlings, but at the fire-ball which had brought them to Earth!

Instantly the fire-ball exploded as with the roaring of a hundred mighty volcanoes—and the descending flight of the Gens of Cleric was blasted into countless fragments! Bits of them flew in all directions. Many dropped, the mangled, infinitesmal remains of

them, down to the roof of Earth, while many were hurled skyward through formations above them—while those formations, to a height of a full two miles, were broken asunder. Many flights above that first flight were smashed and broken, their individual members hurled in all directions by that one single blast of a single fire-ball.

Individuals who escaped destruction were hurled end over end, upward through other flights higher above, and the whole aggregation of flights which had been concentrated on that first fire-ball was instantly demoralized, while full fifty per cent of its individuals were instantly torn to bits!

Sarka groaned to the depths of him.

"The leader of the Martians, or the master who sent them here, sent them here to win. For if they do not win, they cannot return to Mars, as they will have destroyed their vehicles! Their confidence is superhuman!"

"Have faith in the courage of Earthlings, son!" said Sarka.

It was much to ask, for if one single one of these fire-balls could wreak such havoc with the people of Earth, what would be the destruction by the countless other unexploded fireballs of the

Martians?

Still, the Spokesmen themselves must discover a way to hold their own, to win against the Martians. For Sarka there was greater work to do. He must oppose the wills of Luar and of Dalis in a mighty mental conflict, which would decide whether the homes of men would be saved, or utterly destroyed by the Moon-cubes.

But as he left through the Exit Dome, with Jaska by his side, he shuddered, and was just a little sick inside as he saw the fearful result of that first explosion of a Martian fire-ball! Bits of human wreckage were scattered over the Earth for a great distance in all directions from where the fire-ball had exploded. And at that spot a gigantic crater had been torn in the roof of the world, going down to none knew what depths.

Even the Martians, here only to consolidate positions which had passed the demolition of the Moon-cubes, were capable of demolitions almost as ghastly and complete as those of the cubes!

The sound was incapable of being described, for outside the laboratory the sound of the advance of the Moon-cubes eating into the dwellings of men, tumbling them down, grinding them to powder, was cataclysmic in its mighty volume. A million express

trains crashing head-on into walls of galvanized iron at top speed, simultaneously.

Ear-drum crashing blows as fireballs exploded. The screams and shrieks of maimed and dying Earthlings—of Earthlings unwounded but possessed of abysmal fear....

Then, resolutely, Sarka turned his back on the conflict between the Martians and the people of Earth, and hurtled across the devastated roof of the world toward that area which was feeling the destructive force of the vandal cube-army. As he flew, Jaska keeping pace with him in silence, his mind was busy.

Passage through the white flames of the Moon had given him the key. Those white flames—source of all life on the Moon—rendered almost godlike those whom it bathed ... gave them unbelievable access of mental brilliance ... were the source of that blue column which had forced the Earth outward toward Mars ... were the source, in some way, of the cubes themselves, as he and Jaska, after passing through them, owed their now near-divinity to the same white flames! Those flames had made Luar mistress of the Moon—therefore of the Gnomes and of the cubes! Therefore, Sarka, having been bathed in the flames, should make himself master of the cubes, if he could out-will the combined determinations of Luar and of

Dalis!

His confidence was supreme as he fled through outer darkness toward the eery light which came from the area of demolitions. Looking ahead, he could see tiny glows in the sky, which he knew to be the rebels of Dalis' Gens, flying to keep their rendezvous with him.

Higher mounted his courage and his confidence as he approached the roaring crash, perpetual and always mounting, which showed him where the cube-army was busiest. The sound vibrated the very air, causing the bodies of Sarka to tingle with it, causing them to flutter and shake in their flight with its awesome power. But they did not hold back, flew onward through the gloom, leaving behind them the brightly lighted areas where Gens of Earth battled with the fireballs of the Martians, moving into the area of the eery glowing of the cubes.

Just as he approached the spot where mighty dwellings were tumbling before the march of the cube-army, he sent a single command toward the cube which had piloted him from the Moon.

::Come to me on the edge of the crevasse nearest the place of most destruction!::

Would the cube now be subservient to his will? He wondered. Everything depended upon that. If not, then he might as well try to stay the forces of a mighty avalanche with his breath, as halt the cube-army with his will.

But strangely enough, the closer he came to the vast area of tumbling dwellings the calmer he became, the more sure that he would win against the cubes.

For when he landed at the lip of the crevasse, across which he could look for a hundred miles, a single cube gleamed brightly almost at his feet, awaiting his orders!

One by one, by twos, threes, fours, dozens, came the glowing people who had been bathed in the white flames of the Moon's life-source, and as each dropped down beside him, Sarka gave a command.

"Drop down in the midst of the cubes! Make your own cube the rallying point for this vast army of cubes, force the cubes to desist in their mighty destruction, be subservient to your will—and do you, each of you, be subservient to *my* will!"

Away dropped the rebels, glowing points of white flame, dropping down the sides of the crevasse, a mighty, awesome canyon, into the

very heart of the activity of the cubes, and from the brain of Sarka, aided by the will of Jaska, went forth a simple command:

::Cease your march of destruction, O Moon-cubes, and harken to the will of Sarka, your master! Draw back from your labors, and muster, not as squares, rectangles and columns, but as individual cubes, in the area already devastated by you! Rally about the glowing people who have passed through the flames which were your Moon-mother, and wait for orders! Take no further heed of commands from Dalis and Luar!::

Instantly it seemed to Sarka that he had drawn into some invisible vortex which tore at his brain, at his body, at his soul. Inside him a cold voice seemed to say:

::Fool, Sarka! My will is greater than yours!::

But though the force of the will of Luar, whose thought he recognized, tore at him, almost shriveled the soul and brain of him with its might, he continued to send his thought-command out to the Moon-cubes, forcing it through the wall of Luar's will, hurling it like invisible projectiles at the cube-army below.

Exultation possessed him, buoyed him up, gave him greater courage

and confidence as the moments passed for even as all his being concentrated on the will-command to the cubes, his senses told him that the mighty sound of destruction was dying away, fading out.

Slower now the dwellings fell, slower moved the Moon-cubes; and as they slowed in their mighty march through the dwellings of men, so increased the confidence, the power of will, of Sarka and his people—the rebels of the Gens of Dalis.

Then, after an hour, whose mighty mental conflict had bathed Sarka in the perspiration of superhuman effort, the sound of destruction ceased all together, and the dwellings ceased to fall.

A silent shout, like an inborn paean of rejoicing, surged through Sarka as he noted the retreat from the dwellings of men, of the Moon-cubes! Back and back retreated the squares and the rectangles, the columns and the globes, breaking apart as they retreated.

Within fifteen minutes after the destruction had ceased, millions of gleaming cubes winked upward from the bottom of the crevasse—motionless, quiescent!

Sarka sent forth another thought.

::I am your master, O cubes of the Moon!::

No sound, no movement, answered him.

::Luar and Dalis are no longer able to command you!::

Still no sound or movement of the cubes.

Then, taking a deep breath, as of a swimmer preparing to dive into icy water, Sarka gave a new command.

::Dissolve! Reform on the roof of the world in globes! Roll over the face of the Earth, destroy the fire-balls of Mars—and take prisoners, inside the globes, the attackers from Mars!::

Instantly the gleaming cubes vanished, and darkness as of a mighty pit possessed the crevasse of destruction. Then, at the lip of the great crevasse, the cubes swept into form—myriads of globes which gleamed with the cold blue brilliance of the Moon!

They had no sooner formed as globes than they were in action again, rolling over the roof of the world as with a rising crescendo of thunder tumbling down the night-black sky. So mighty was their rush that the roof of the world trembled and shook.

Above their charge raced Sarka and Jaska, and with them the rebels of the Gens of Dalis.

All were present when the cubes crashed into the fire-balls from Mars, swept the Martians within themselves as prisoners, held them securely—and continued on, destroying the fire-balls in myriads. Here and there fire-balls exploded on contact, destroying the globes, which immediately reformed again, as though the explosions had not been felt at all.

Sarka had won the allegiance of the Moon-cubes, which had defeated and taken prisoners the Martians, destroying the vehicles in which they might have returned to Mars. And as realization came, darkness settled over the roof of the world; the last flare of Mars faded and died.

This done, the cubes formed in mighty rows, facing the laboratory of Sarka. His heart beating madly with exultation, Sarka studied them. Then he stepped into the Observatory, gazed away across the space which separated the Earth from the Moon, sent a mental message winging outward.

::Luar! Dalis!::

Faintly, fearfully, came the answer.

::We hear, O Sarka!::

::Shift the blue column away from the Earth! Do not interfere as we return to our orbit about the sun! Obey, or I combine the total knowledge of Mars, the Earth, and the Moon in an attack against you and your Martian ally! Inform your ally that their people will not return, that the Earth has need of them—but that two Gens of Earth will be received by Martians in perfect amity, and these Gens allowed biding places on Mars! Unless your ally obeys, the Martians in my hands will be destroyed!::

In an hour the answer came, the snarling thought-answer of Dalis.

::We hear! We obey! But Dalis is never beaten while he lives! His day will come!::

Sarka found himself feeling even a little sorry for sorely beaten Dalis; but his face was grim as he sent another command to the people of Dalis who had passed through the life-source of the Moon.

::Take command of the cubes, and force them to repair the damage which has been done to the dwellings of men—to repair them

completely, over all the face of the Earth!::

As the glowing people hurried to obey, Sarka softly asked his father:

"But what shall we do with the Martians?"

Sarka the Second smiled.

"Release them and send them to the lowest level where, guarded by the cubes, they will be set to constructing fireballs like those in which they arrived for the use of Earth if Dalis, or the Martians, ever attack again! And, son...."

"Yes, O my father?" said Sarka softly.

"I have another suggestion for the employment of the cubes! Let them build Aircars to be used by the Gens of Prull and of Klaser, as transportation to Mars whenever you are ready for them to go!"

Sarka smiled boyishly, happily.

"Yes, O my father; and is there anything else?"

"Yes! Take Jaska as your mate! Do you not see that she is waiting for you to speak?"

Sarka turned to Jaska, whose face was glorious in her surrender, and whose lips were parted in a loving smile—which faded only when Sarka's lips caressed it away.

#37 From An Amber Block, By Tom Curry:

A giant amber block at last gives up its living, ravenous prey.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

"These should prove especially valuable and interesting without a doubt, Marable," said the tall, slightly stooped man. He waved a long hand toward the masses of yellow brown which filled the floor of the spacious workrooms, towering almost to the skylights, high above their heads.

"Is that coal in the biggest one with the dark center?" asked an attractive young woman who stood beside the elder of the men.

"I am inclined to believe it will prove to be some sort of black liquid," said Marable, a big man of thirty-five.

There were other people about the immense rooms, the laboratories of the famous Museum of Natural History. Light streamed in from the skylights and windows; fossils of all kinds, some immense in size, were distributed about. Skilled specialists were chipping away at matrices other artists were reconstructing, doing a thousand things necessary to the work.

A hum of low talking, accompanied by the irregular tapping of chisels on stone, came to their ears, though they took no heed of this, since they worked here day after day, and it was but the usual sound of the paleontologists' laboratory.

Marable threw back his blond head. He glanced again toward the dark haired, blue eyed young woman, but when he caught her eye, he looked away and spoke to her father, Professor Young.

"I think that big one will turn out to be the largest single piece of amber ever mined," he said. "There were many difficulties in getting it out, for the workmen seemed afraid of it, did not want to handle it for some silly reason or other."

Professor Young, curator, was an expert in his line, but young Marable had charge of these particular fossil blocks, the amber being pure because it was mixed with lignite. The particular block which

held the interest of the three was a huge yellow brown mass of irregular shape. Vaguely, through the outer shell of impure amber, could be seen the heart of ink. The chunk weighed many tons, and its crate had just been removed by some workmen and was being taken away, piece by piece.

The three gazed at the immense mass, which filled the greater part of one end of the laboratory and towered almost to the skylights. It was a small mountain, compared to the size of the room, and in this case the mountain had come to man.

"Miss Betty, I think we had better begin by drawing a rough sketch of the block," said Marable.

Betty Young, daughter of the curator, nodded. She was working as assistant and secretary to Marable.

"Well—what do you think of them?"

The voice behind them caused them to turn, and they looked into the face of Andrew Leffler, the millionaire paleontologist, whose wealth and interest in the museum had made it possible for the institution to acquire the amber.

Leffler, a keen, quick moving little man, whose chin was decorated with a white Van Dyke beard, was very proud of the new acquisition.

"Everybody is talking about the big one," he continued, putting his hand on Marable's shoulder. "Orling is coming to see, and many others. As I told you, the workmen who handled it feared the big one. There were rumors about some unknown devil which lay hidden in the inklike substance, caught there like the proverbial fly in the amber. Well, let us hope there is something good in there, something that will make worth while all our effort."

Leffler wandered away, to speak to others who inspected the amber blocks.

"Superstition is curious, isn't it?" said Marable. "How can anyone think that a fossil creature, penned in such a cell for thousands and thousands of years, could do any harm?"

Professor Young shrugged. "It is just as you say. Superstition is not reasonable. These amber blocks were mined in the Manchurian lignite deposits by Chinese workers under Japanese masters. They believe anything, the workers. I remember working once with a crew of them that thought—"

The professor stopped suddenly, for his daughter had uttered a little cry of alarm. He felt her hand upon his arm, and turned toward her.

"What is it, dear?" he asked.

She was pointing toward the biggest amber block, and her eyes were wide open and showed she had seen something, or imagined that she had seen something, that frightened her.

Professor Young followed the direction of her finger. He saw that she was staring at the black heart of the amber block; but when he looked he could see nothing but the vague, irregular outline of the inky substance.

"What is it, dear?" asked Young again.

"I—I thought I saw it looking out, eyes that stared at us—"

The girl broke off, laughed shortly, and added, "I suppose it was Mr. Leffler's talking. There's nothing there now."

"Probably the Manchurian devil shows itself only to you," said her father jokingly. "Well, be careful, dear. If it takes a notion to jump out at you, call me and I'll exorcise it for you."

Betty blushed and laughed again. She looked at Marable, expecting to see a smile of derision on the young man's face, but his expression was grave.

The light from above was diminishing; outside sounded the roar of home-going traffic.

"Well, we must go home," said Professor Young. "There's a hard and interesting day ahead of us to-morrow, and I want to read Orling's new work on matrices before we begin chipping at the amber."

Young turned on his heel and strode toward the locker at the end of the room where he kept his coat and hat. Betty, about to follow him, was aware of a hand on her arm, and she turned to find Marable staring at her.

"I saw them, too," he whispered. "Could it have been just imagination? Was it some refraction of the light?"

The girl paled. "I—I don't know," she replied, in a low voice. "I thought I saw two terrible eyes glaring at me from the inky heart. But when father laughed at me, I was ashamed of myself and thought it was just my fancy."

"The center is liquid, I'm sure," said Marable. "We will find that out soon enough, when we get started."

"Anyway, you must be careful, and so must father," declared the girl.

She looked at the block again, as it towered there above them, as though she expected it to open and the monster of the workers' imagination leap out.

"Come along, Betty," called her father.

She realized then that Marable was holding her hand. She pulled away and went to join her father.

It was slow work, chipping away the matrix. Only a bit at a time could be cut into, for they came upon many insects imbedded in the amber. These small creatures proved intensely interesting to the paleontologists, for some were new to science and had to be carefully preserved for study later on.

Marable and her father labored all day. Betty, aiding them, was obviously nervous. She kept begging her father to take care, and finally, when he stopped work and asked her what ailed her, she could not tell him.

"Be careful," she said, again and again.

Her father realized that she was afraid of the amber block, and he poked fun at her ceaselessly. Marable said nothing.

"It's getting much softer, now the outside shell is pierced," said Young, late in the day.

"Yes," said Marable, pausing in his work of chipping away a portion of matrix. "Soon we will strike the heart, and then we will find out whether we are right about it being liquid. We must make some preparations for catching it, if it proves to be so."

The light was fading. Outside, it was cold, but the laboratories were well heated by steam. Close by where they worked was a radiator, so that they had been kept warm all day.

Most of the workers in the room were making ready to leave. Young and Marable, loath to leave such interesting material, put down their chisels last of all. Throughout the day various scientific visitors had interrupted them to inspect the immense amber block, and hear the history of it.

All day, Betty Young had stared fascinatedly at the inky center.

"I think it must have been imagination," she whispered to Marable, when Young had gone to don his coat and hat. "I saw nothing to-day."

"Nor did I," confessed Marable. "But I thought I heard dull scrapings inside the block. My brain tells me I'm an imaginative fool, that nothing could be alive inside there, but just the same, I keep thinking about those eyes we thought we saw. It shows how far the imagination will take one."

"It's getting dark, Betty," said her father. "Better not stay here in the shadows or the devil will get you. I wonder if it will be Chinese or up-to-date American!"

The girl laughed, said good night to Marable, and followed her father from the laboratory. As they crossed the threshold a stout, red-faced man in a gray uniform, a watchman's clock hanging at his side, raised his hat and smiled at the young woman and her father.

"Hello, Rooney," cried Betty.

"How d'ye do, Miss Young! Stayin' late this evenin'?"

"No, we're leaving now, Rooney. Good night."

"G' night, Miss Young. Sleep happy."

"Thanks, Rooney."

The old night watchman was a jolly fellow, and everybody liked him. He was very fond of Betty, and the young woman always passed a pleasant word with him.

Rooney entered the room where the amber blocks were. The girl walked with her father down the long corridor. She heard Marable's step behind them.

"Wait for me a moment, father," she said.

She went back, smiling at Marable as she passed him, and entered the door, but remained in the portal and called to Rooney, who was down the laboratory.

He came hurrying to her side at her nervous hail.

"What is it, ma'am?" asked Rooney.

"You'll be careful, won't you, Rooney?" she asked in a low voice.

"Oh, yes, ma'am. I'm always careful. Nobody can get in to harm

anything while Rooney's about."

"I don't mean that. I want you to be careful yourself, when you're in this room to-night."

"Why, miss, what is there to be wary of? Nothin' but some funny lookin' stones, far as I can see."

The young woman was embarrassed by her own impalpable fears, and she took leave of Rooney and rejoined her father, determined to overcome them and dismiss them from her mind.

All the way home and during their evening meal and afterwards, Professor Young poked fun at Betty. She took it good-naturedly, and laughed to see her father in such fine humor. Professor Young was a widower, and Betty was housekeeper in their flat; though a maid did the cooking for them and cleaned the rooms, the young woman planned the meals and saw to it that everything was homelike for them.

After a pleasant evening together, reading, and discussing the new additions to the collection, they went to bed.

Betty Young slept fitfully. She was harassed by dreams, dreams of

huge eyes that came closer and closer to her, that at last seemed to engulf her.

She awakened finally from a nap, and started up in her bed. The sun was up, but the clock on the bureau said it was only seven o'clock, too early to arise for the day's work. But then the sound of the telephone bell ringing in the hall caused her to get up and don her slippers and dressing gown and hurry out into the living room.

Before she reached the phone, however, she heard her father's voice answering.

"Hello.... Yes, speaking. Good morning, Smythe."

Smythe was the janitor of the museum. Betty, standing behind her father, wondered what he could want that he should phone so early in the morning. Her father's next words sent a thrill of fright through her heart.

"My God! I—I can't believe it!" cried Young. "Is he dead?"

There was a pause; Betty caught the sound of the excited Smythe's tones through the receiver.

"Who—who is it?" she whispered, clasping her parent's arm.

"I'll be right down, yes."

Young hung up, turned to his daughter. His face was sad, heavily lined with shadows of sorrow.

"Dear, there's been a tragedy at the museum during the night. Poor Rooney has been murdered—at least so they believe—and Smythe, who found him, wants me to come down and see if anything has been stolen. I must go at once. The body is in our laboratory."

"Rooney? Ah, poor fellow."

The girl wept a little, but braced herself to assist her father.

"I'm going with you," she said.

"No, no. You'd better remain here: you can come along later," said Young. "I don't like to have you see such sights, dear. It wouldn't be good for you."

"I'll be all right. I promise you I will."

She insisted and he was forced to let her accompany him to the museum. They hailed a cab and were soon at the door. The elevator took them to the top floor, and swiftly they passed along the

corridors and came to the portal which led into the rooms where the amber blocks were.

Smythe greeted them, a worried look on his seamed face. "I've sent for an ambulance, Professor," he said.

Young nodded, brushed past him, and entered the laboratory. In the morning light the amber blocks had taken on a reddish tinge. Now, they seemed to oppress the young woman, who had bravely remained at her father's side as he walked quickly to the base of the biggest block.

A vague shape lay in the shadows between the wall and the largest amber mass. Professor Young bent over the body of Rooney, and felt the pulse.

"He's been dead some time," he said.

She nodded, stricken to the heart by this terrible end of her old friend Rooney.

"There's nothing we can do for him, now," went on her father soberly. "It looks as though he had been set upon and stabbed time after time by his assailant or assailants, whoever they were."

"How—how pale he is," said Betty. "Poor Rooney was so jolly and red-faced, but his skin is like chalk."

"And he's shrunken, too. It seems there's no blood left in his veins," said her father.

Marable, who had been called also, came in then and aided in the examination. He said good morning to Betty and her father, and then went to bend over Rooney's body.

"See the look of abject terror on his face," Betty heard Marable say to her father as the two examined the corpse. "He must have been very much afraid of whoever killed him."

"They beat him up frightfully," said Young. "There must have been several of the assassins; it would take more than one man to do such damage."

"Yes. His ribs are crushed in—see, this gash, Professor, would be enough to cause death without any of the other wounds."

Betty Young could not take her eyes from the ghastly sight. She steeled herself to bear it, and prayed for strength that she should not faint and cause her father trouble. She could see the two men

examining a large blistered area under the corpse's armpit, in the center of which was a sharp vertical slit which had without doubt punctured the artery near the surface of the axilla. Perhaps it had pierced even to the heart.

"Bloodless," exclaimed Marable, noticing the same thing as her father had spoken of. "It is as if the blood had been pumped out of his body!"

"Yes, I think it has drained out."

"There is not much of a pool here where he lies, though," said Marable, in a low voice. "See, there are only splotches about, from various cuts he received."

"Maybe he was dragged here from another room," said Young. "When the others come, we will soon know if anything is missing. It seems that men desperate enough to commit such a murder would not leave without trying to get what they came after. Unless, of course, the killing of Rooney frightened them away before they could get their booty."

Smythe approached the group, with a physician in tow. The latter confirmed the facts which Marable and Young had found: that

Rooney had been killed by the deep gash near the heart and that most of the blood was drained from the body.

"They seem like the slashes from an extremely sharp and large razor," said the medical man.

Others were coming in to look at Rooney, and the museum was buzzing with activity as various curators, alarmed about the safety of their valuable collections, feverishly examined their charges.

"He punched his clock in here at two A.M.," said Smythe. "I seen that. It's the last time he'll ever do his duty, poor feller."

"Curious odor," said the doctor, sniffing. "It smells like musk, but is fetid. I suppose it's some chemical you use."

"I noticed that, too," said Professor Young. "I don't recognize it, myself."

Marable, who had been looking at the floor between the great block of amber and the body, uttered an exclamation which caused the two men to look up.

"There are wavy lines leading around back of the block," said Marable, in answer to their questions.

The young man disappeared behind the block, and then he called to them excitedly to join him. Betty Young pressed closer, and finally slipped past the corpse and stood by her father.

Before her, she saw a large pool of black liquid. It had been hidden by the corner of the block, so that they had not noticed it, so busy were they looking at Rooney.

And there was a great cavity in the heart of the amber block. Pieces of the yellow brown mass lay about, as though they had fallen off and allowed the inky substance to escape.

"It's hardened or dried out in the air," said Young.

"It looks like black lacquer," said Betty.

The musky smell was stronger here. The great amber block seemed to stifle them with its size.

"Our chipping and hammering and the heat of the radiator causing it to expand must have forced out the sepia, or whatever it is," said Young. There was a disappointed note in his voice "I had hoped that inside the liquid we would discover a fossil of value," he went on.

Marable looked at Betty Young. They stared at one another for some

seconds, and both knew that the same thought had occurred to the other. The frightful eyes—had they then been but figments of the imagination?

Marable began looking around carefully, here and there. Betty realized what he was doing, and she was frightened. She went to his side. "Oh, be careful," she whispered.

"The giant block has been moved a little," he replied, looking into her pretty face. "Have you noticed that?"

Now that she was told to look, she could see the extremely heavy amber block was no longer in the position it had been in. Marks on the floor showed where it had been dragged or shifted from its original resting place.

Betty Young gasped. What force could be so powerful that it could even budge so many tons? A derrick had been used, and rollers placed under the block when men had moved it.

Reason tried to assert itself. "It—it must have exploded. That would cause it to shift," she said faintly.

Marable shrugged. His examination was interrupted by the arrival of

the museum's chemist, sent for by Young. The chemist took a sample of the black liquid for analysis. Reports were coming in from all over the museum, different departments declaring, one after another, that nothing had been disturbed or stolen from their sections.

Betty Young went again to Marable's side. She followed the direction of his eyes, and saw long, clawlike marks on the floor, radiating from the sepia.

"Doctor Marable," she said, "please don't—don't look any longer. Leave this terrible place for the day, anyway, until we see what happens in the next twenty-four hours."

He smiled and shook his head. "I must make a search," he replied. "My brain calls me a fool, but just the same, I'm worried."

"Do you really think ...?"

He nodded, divining her thought. The girl shivered. She felt terror mounting to her heart, and the matter-of-fact attitudes of the others in the great laboratory did not allay her fears.

Rooney's body was removed. The place was cleaned up by workmen, and Marable's search—if that was what his constant

roving about the laboratory could be called—ceased for a time. The chemist's report came in. The black liquid was some sort of animal secretion, melonotic probably.

In spite of the fact that they had learned so many facts about the murder, they as yet had not solved the mystery. Who had murdered Rooney, and why? And where had his blood gone to? In no other rooms could be found any traces of a struggle.

"If you won't do anything else, please carry a gun," begged Betty of Marable. "I'm going to try to take father home, right after lunch, if he'll go. He's so stubborn. I can't make him take care. I've got to watch him and stay beside him."

"Very well," replied Marable. "I'll get a revolver. Not that I think it would be of much use, if I did find—" He broke off, and shrugged his broad shoulders.

Leffler came storming into the room. "What's this I hear?" he cried, approaching Marable. "A watchman killed in the night? Carelessness, man, carelessness! The authorities here are absurd! They hold priceless treasures and allow thieves to enter and wreak their will. You, Marable, what's all this mean?"

Leffler was angry. Marable looked into his red face coolly. "We do the best we can, Mr. Leffler," he said. "It is unlikely that anyone would wish to steal such a thing as that block of amber."

He waved toward the giant mass.

Leffler made a gesture of impatience. "It cost me many thousands of dollars," he cried.

"It is time for lunch, Professor," said Betty.

Marable bowed to Leffler and left the millionaire sputtering away, inspecting the various specimens he had contributed.

The one o'clock gong had struck, and all the workers and investigators were leaving in paleontological laboratories for a bite to eat.

Marable, with Betty, went out last. Leffler was over in one corner of the room, hidden from their sight by a corner of an amber block. They could hear Leffler still uttering complaints about the carelessness of the men in charge of that section of the museum, and Marable smiled at Betty sadly.

"Poor Rooney," he said. "Betty, I feel more or less responsible, in a

way."

"No, no," cried the girl. "How could you have foreseen such a thing?"

Marable shook his head. "Those eyes, you know. I should have taken precautions. But I had no idea it could burst from its prison so."

For the first time Marable had definitely mentioned his idea of what had occurred. The girl had understood it all along, from their broken conversation and from the look in the young scientist's eyes.

She sighed deeply. "You will get a revolver before you search further?" she said. "I'm going to. Smythe has one, and I know he'll lend it to me."

"I will," he promised. "You know, Leffler has the same idea we have, I think. That's why he keeps talking about it being our fault. I believe he has seen something, too. His talk about the devil inside the block was half in earnest. I suppose he put it down to imagination, or perhaps he did not think this fossil to be dangerous."

They went out together, and walked toward the restaurant they frequented. Her father was there, lunching with one of the

superintendents of the museum. He smiled and waved to Betty.

Everyone, of course, was discussing the killing of Rooney.

After an hour, during which the two young people spoke little, Marable and Betty Young left the restaurant and started back toward the museum. Her father was still at his table.

They walked up the driveway entrance, and then Marable uttered an exclamation. "Something's wrong," he said.

There was a small crowd of people collected on the steps. The outer doors, instead of being open as usual, were closed and guards stood peering out.

Marable and Betty were admitted, after they had pushed their way to the doors.

"Museum's closed to the public, sir," replied a guard to Marable's question.

"Why?" asked Marable.

"Somethin's happened up in the paleontological laboratories," answered the guard. "Dunno just what, but orders come to clear the

rooms and not let anybody in but members of the staff, sir."

Marable hurried forward. Betty was at his heels. "Please get yourself a gun," she said, clutching his arm and holding him back.

"All right. I'll borrow one from a guard."

He returned to the front doors, and came back, slipping a large pistol into his side pocket.

"I want you to wait here," he said.

"No. I'm going with you."

"Please," he said. "As your superior, I order you to remain downstairs."

The girl shrugged. She allowed him to climb the stairs to the first floor, and then she hurried back in search of Smythe.

Smythe obtained a gun for her, and as she did not wish to wait for the slow elevator, she ran up the steps. Smythe could not tell her definitely what had occurred in the upper laboratory that had caused the museum to be closed for the day.

Her heart beating swiftly, Betty Young hurried up the second flight of stairs to the third floor. A workman, whom the girl recognized as a manual laborer in the paleontological rooms, came running down, passing her in full flight, a look of abject terror on his face.

"What is it?" she cried.

He was so frightened he could not talk logically. "There was a black fog—I saw a red snake with legs—"

She waited for no more. A pang of fear for the safety of Marable shot through her heart, and she forced herself on to the top floor.

Up there was a haze, faintly black, which filled the corridors. As Betty Young drew closer to the door of the paleontological laboratories, the mist grew more opaque. It was as though a sooty fog permeated the air, and the girl could see it was pouring from the door of the laboratory in heavy coils. And her nostrils caught the strange odor of fetid musk.

She was greatly frightened; but she gripped the gun and pushed on.

Then to her ears came the sound of a scream, the terrible scream of a mortally wounded man. Instinctively she knew it was not Marable,

but she feared for the young professor, and with an answering cry she rushed into the smoky atmosphere of the outer laboratories.

"Walter!" she called.

But evidently he did not hear her, for no reply came. Or was it that something had happened to him?

She paused on the threshold of the big room where were the amber blocks.

About the vast floor space stood the numerous masses of stone and amber, some covered with immense canvas shrouds which made them look like ghost hillocks in the dimness. Betty Young stood, gasping in fright, clutching the pistol in her hand, trying to catch the sounds of men in that chamber of horror.

She heard, then, a faint whimpering, and then noises which she identified in her mind as something being dragged along the marble flooring. A muffled scream, weak, reached her ears, and as she took a step forward, silence came.

She listened longer, but now the sunlight coming through the window to make murky patches in the opaque black fog was her

chief sensation.

"Walter!" she called.

"Go back, Betty, go back!"

The mist seemed to muffle voices as well as obscure the vision. She advanced farther into the laboratory, trying to locate Marable. Bravely the girl pushed toward the biggest amber block. It was here that she felt instinctively that she would find the source of danger.

"Leffler!" she heard Marable say, almost at her elbow, and the young man groaned. The girl came upon him, bending over something on the floor.

She knelt beside him, gripping his arm. Now she could see the outline of Leffler's body at her feet. The wealthy collector was doubled up on the ground, shrivelled as had been Rooney. His feet, moving as though by reflex action, patted the floor from time to time, making a curious clicking sound as the buttons of his gray spats struck the marble.

But it was obvious, even in the murky light, that Leffler was dead, that he had been sucked dry of blood.

Betty Young screamed. She could not help it. The black fog choked her and she gasped for breath. Leaving Marable, she ran toward the windows to throw them open.

The first one she tried was heavy, and she smashed the glass with the butt of the gun. She broke several panes in two of the windows, and the mist rolled out from the laboratory.

She started to return to the side of Marable. He uttered a sudden shout, and she hurried back to where she had left him, stumbling over Leffler's body, recoiling at this touch of death.

Marable was not there, but she could hear him nearby.

Cool air was rushing in from the windows, and gradually the fog was disappearing. Betty Young saw Marable now, standing nearby, staring at the bulk of an amber block which was still covered by its canvas shroud. Though not as large as the prize exhibit, this block of amber was large and filled many yards of space.

"Betty, please go outside and call some of the men," begged Marable.

But he did not look at her, and she caught his fascinated stare.

Following the direction of his gaze, the girl saw that a whisp of smoky mist was curling up from under the edge of the canvas cover.

"It is there," whispered Betty.

Marable had a knife which he had picked up from a bench, and with this he began quietly to cut the canvas case of the block, keeping several feet to each side of the spot where the fog showed from beneath the shroud.

Marable cut swiftly and efficiently, though the cloth was heavy and he was forced to climb up several feet on the block to make his work effective. The girl watched, fascinated with horror and curiosity.

To their ears came a curious, sucking sound, and once a vague tentacle form showed from the bottom of the canvas.

At last Marable seized the edge of the cut he had made and, with a violent heave, sent the canvas flap flying over the big block.

Betty Young screamed. At last she had a sight of the terrible creature which her imagination had painted in loathing and horror. A flash of brilliant scarlet, dabbed with black patches, was her impression of the beast. A head flat and reptilian, long, tubular, with movable

nostrils and antennae at the end, framed two eyes which were familiar enough to her, for they were the orbs which had stared from the inside of the amber block. She had dreamed of those eyes.

But the reptile moved like a flash of red light, though she knew its bulk was great; it sprayed forth black mist from the appendages at the end of its nose, and the crumpling of canvas reached her ears as the beast endeavored to conceal itself on the opposite side of the block.

Marable had run to the other side of the mass. The air, rushing in from the windows, had cleared the mist, in spite of the new clouds the creature had emitted, and Betty could see for some feet in either direction now.

She walked, with stiff, frozen muscles, around to join Marable. As she came near to him, she saw him jerking off the entire canvas cover of the block to expose the horrible reptile to the light of day.

And now the two stood staring at the awful sight. The creature had flattened itself into the crevices and irregular surfaces of the block, but it was too large to hide in anything but a huge space. They saw before them its great bulk, bright red skin blotched with black, which rose and fell with the breathing of the reptile. Its long, powerful tail,

tapering off from the fat, loathsome body, was curled around the bottom of the block.

"That's where it's been hidden, under the shroud. We've been within a few feet of it every moment we've been at work," said Marable, his voice dry. "There were many hiding places for it, but it chose the best. It came out only when there was comparative quiet, to get its food...."

"We—we must kill it," stammered the girl.

But she could not move. She was looking at the immense, cruel, lidless eyes, which balefully held her as a serpent paralyzes a bird. The tubular nostrils and antennae seemed to be sniffing at them, waving to and fro.

"See the white expanse of cornea, how large it is," whispered Marable. "The pupils are nothing but black slits now." The interest excited by this living fossil was almost enough to stifle the dread of the creature in the man.

But the girl saw the huge flat head and the crinkled tissue of the frilled mouth with its sucker disks.

Suddenly, from the central portion of the sucker-cup mouth issued a long, straight red fang.

The two drew back as the living fossil raised a short clawed leg.

"It has the thick body of an immense python and the clawed legs of a dinosaur," said Marable, speaking as though he were delivering a lecture. The sight, without doubt, fascinated him as a scientist. He almost forgot the danger.

"Oh, it's horrible," whispered the girl.

She clung to his arm. He went on talking. "It is some sort of terrestrial octopus...."

To the girl, it seemed that the living fossil was endless in length. Coil after coil showed as the ripples passed along its body and the straight fang threatened them with destruction.

"See, it is armored," said Marable. "Betty, no one has ever had such an experience as this, seen such a sight, and lived to tell of it. It must be ravenous with hunger, shut up in its amber cell inside the black fluid. I—"

A sharp, whistling hiss interrupted his speech. The reptile was

puffing and swelling, and as it grew in bulk with the intake of the air, its enamel-like scales stood out like bosses on the great body. It spat forth a cloud of black, oily mist, and Marable came to himself at last.

He raised his revolver and fired at the creature, sending shot after shot from the heavy revolver into the head.

Betty Young screamed as the reptile reared up and made a movement toward them. Marable and the girl retreated swiftly, as the beast thumped to the floor with a thud and started at them, advancing with a queer, crawling movement.

It was between them and the door. Betty thrust her gun into Marable's hands, for his own was empty and he had hurled it at the monster.

"Hurry! Run for your life!" ordered Marable, placing himself between Betty and the reptile.

She would not leave him till he swerved to one side, going dangerously close to the beast and firing into its head. The rush of the flowing body stopped; it turned and pursued him, leaving the girl safe for the moment, but separated from Marable.

Luckily, on the smooth marble it could not get an efficient grip with its clawlike arms. It was clumsy in its gait, and for a time the man eluded it.

Betty Young, looking about for a weapon, calling for help at the top of her lungs, caught sight of a fireman's ax in a glass case on the wall. She ran over, smashed the glass with the small hammer, and took out the heavy ax.

Shot after shot reverberated through the big laboratory as Marable tried to stop the monster. Betty, bravely closing in from the rear, saw Marable leaping from side to side as the brute struck viciously at him time and again.

The creature had been emitting cloud after cloud of black fog, and the atmosphere, in spite of the open windows, was dim in its vicinity. Vaguely Betty heard shouts from the far hall, but all she could do was to call out in return and run toward the horror.

Marable, out of breath, had climbed to the top of an amber block. Betty, close by, saw the reptile rear its bulk up into the air, until it was high enough to strike the man.

Before it could send forth its death-dealing fang to pin Marable to

the block, however, Betty Young brought the ax down on its back with all her strength.

There was a sickening thud as the sharp weapon sunk deep into the fleshy back. She struck again, and the creature fell in folds, like a collapsing spring. It lashed back at her, but she leaped clear as it slashed in agony, thrashing about so that the whole room seemed to rock.

Marable came scrambling down the side of the block to help her. He was breathing hard, and she turned toward him; as Betty looked away, a portion of the scarlet tail hit her in the body and she fell, striking her head on the floor.

Marable reached down, seized the ax, and in a desperate frenzy hacked at the reptile's awful head.

He leaped in and out like a terrier, sinking the ax deep into the neck and head of the beast. He gave the impression of slashing at heavy rubber, and Betty Young, trying to drag herself away from that dangerous body, heard his whistling breath.

They were almost hidden from one another now, in the mist which came from the thing's nostrils.

"Help, help!" screamed the girl, mustering her last strength in the despairing cry.

She saw Marable go down, then, as the reptile hit him a glancing blow with its body. When the powerful young fellow did not rise, the girl thought it was all over. The air really became black to her; she fainted and lay still.

- - -

When Betty Young opened her eyes, the air had cleared greatly, and she could see the familiar outlines of the paleontological laboratory and the bulks of the amber blocks. Her father was holding her head in his lap, and was bathing her temples with water.

"Darling," he said, "are you badly hurt?"

"No," she murmured faintly. "I'm—I'm all right. But—but Walter—did it—"

"He's all right," said her father. "The reptile was dying, and could do him no damage. We finished it off."

Then, Marable, covered with blood, which he was trying to wipe from his hands and clothes, came and smiled down at her.

"Well," said Professor Young, "you two have mutilated a marvelous and unique specimen between you."

There were several men examining something nearby. Turning her eyes in their direction, Betty saw they were viewing the remains of the reptile.

Marable helped her to her feet, and stood with one arm about her. Professor Orling, the famous specialist on fossil reptiles, was speaking now, and the others listened.

"I think we will find it to be some sort of missing link between the dinosaurs and mososaurs. It is surely unbelievable that such a creature should be found alive; but perhaps it can be explained. It is related to the amphibians and was able to live in or out of the water. Now, we have many instances of reptiles such as lizards and toads penned up in solid rock but surviving for hundreds of years. Evidently this great reptile went through the same sort of experience. I would say that there has been some great upheaval of nature, that the reptile was caught in its prison of amber thousands and thousands of years ago. Through hibernation and perhaps a preservative drug it emitted in the black fluid, this creature has been able to survive its long imprisonment. Naturally, when it was released by the cutting away of part of the amber which penned it in,

it burst its cell, ravenous with hunger. The fanglike tooth we see was its main weapon of attack, and it set upon the unfortunate watchman. After knocking him unconscious, its sucker-like fringe glued the mouth near the heart while the fang shot into the arteries and drew forth the body fluids. There is a great deal to be done with this valuable find, gentlemen. I would suggest that—"

Marable grunted. "Oh, hell," he murmured in Betty Young's ear. "To the devil with paleontology, Betty. You saved my life. Come out and let's get married. I love you."

The girl smiled up into his eyes. The scientists close by were listening fascinatedly to Orling's words, and had no time to watch the two young people, for they stared at the reptile's body as the great man went from section to section, lecturing upon one point after another.

"You've forgotten paleontology for a moment, thank goodness," said Betty. "I'm glad."

"Yes, Betty dear. This terrible experience has shaken me, and I realized how much I love you when I saw you in danger. What an awful few minutes! If I had to live them over again, I don't think I could face them."

"Never mind," she murmured. "We are safe, Walter. After all, it's not every woman who is helped by a living fossil to make the man she loves realize he loves her!"

#38 The Terror Of Air-level Six, By Harold Vincent Schoepflin:

From some far reach of leagueless space came a great pillar of flame to lay waste and terrorize the Earth.

Aproximate word count: 16,000

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

It was a sweltering evening in mid-August, during that unprecedented heat wave which broke Weather Bureau records in 2011. New York City had simmered under a blazing sun for more than three weeks, and all who were able had deserted the city for spots of lesser torridity. But I was one of those unfortunates who could not leave on account of the pressing urgency of business matters and, there being nothing else to do, kept doggedly at my work until it seemed that nerves and body must soon give way under the strain. To-night, as I boarded the pneumatic tube, I dropped into the nearest seat and could not even summon the energy to open my newspaper.

For some minutes I sat as in a daze, wishing merely that the journey was over, and that I was on my own front porch out in Rutherford. After awhile I stirred and looked around. Seeing none of my acquaintances in the car, I finally opened the newspaper and was considerably startled by the screaming headlines that confronted me from its usually conservative first page

SECOND COAST TRANSPORT
PLANE LOST!

Disaster Like First in Air-Level Six!

No wonder the newsboys had been crying an extra on Broadway! I had given no heed to the import of their shoutings, but this was real news and well worthy of an extra edition. Since the mysterious loss of the SP-61, only four days previously, the facilities of the several air transportation systems were seriously handicapped on account of the shaken confidence of the general public. It was not surprising that there was widespread reluctance at trusting human lives and valuable merchandise to the mercies of the inexplicable power which had apparently wiped out of existence the SP-61, together with its twenty-eight passengers and the consignment of one-half million dollars in gold. And now the NY-18 had gone the way of the other!

Details were meager. Both ships had failed to reply to the regular

ten-minute radio calls from headquarters and had not since been seen or heard from. In both cases the last call had been answered when the ship was proceeding at full speed on its regular course in air-level six. The SF-61 last reported from a position over Mora in New Mexico, and four days of intensive search by thousands of planes had failed to locate ship or passengers. To-day, in the early hours of the morning, the NY-18 reported over Colorado Springs, on the northern route, and then, like the SF-61, dropped out of existence insofar as any attempts at communicating with or locating her were concerned. She, too, carried a heavy consignment of specie, though only eleven passengers had risked the westward journey.

Someone had dropped into a seat at my side, and I looked up from my reading to meet the solemn eyes of Hartley Jones, a young friend whom I had not seen for several months.

"Why, hello, Hart," I greeted him. "Glad to see you, old man. Where in Sam Hill have you been keeping yourself?"

"Glad to see you, too, Jack," he returned warmly. "Been spending most of my time out at the hangar."

"Oh, that's right. You fellows built a new one at Newark Airport, didn't you?"

"Yeah. Got a great outfit there now, too. Why don't you drop around and see us one of these days?"

"I will, Hart, and I want you to take me up some time. You know I have never been in one of these new ships of yours. But what do you think of this mess?" I pointed to the black headlines.

He grinned joyously and flipped back the lapel of his coat, displaying a nickeled badge. "George and I are starting out to-night to look around a little," he gloated. "Just been appointed deputy air commissioners; and we got a couple of guns on our newest plane. Air Traffic Bureau thinks there's dirty work afoot. Twelve-motored planes don't disappear without leaving a trace. Anyhow, we've got a job, and we're going to try and find out what's wrong. How'd you like to come along?"

"What?" I replied. "You know darn well I'm too busy. Besides, I'd be no good to you. Just extra load, and not pay load at that. And then, I'm broke—as usual."

Hartley Jones grinned in his engaging way. "You'd be good company," he parried; "and, what's more, I think the trip would do you a lot of good. You look all shot to pieces."

"Forget it," I laughed. "It's just the heat. And I'll have to leave you here, Hart. Drop in and see us, will you? The wife was asking for you only yesterday."

"Jack, dear," my wife greeted me at the door of my modest suburban home, "Mr. Preston just called, and he wants you to call him right back."

"Oh, Lord," I groaned, "can't I forget the office for one evening?" Preston was manager of the concern for which I worked.

Nevertheless, though our two fine youngsters were clamoring for their dinner, I made the telephone call at once.

"Makely," came the voice of the boss, when the connection was completed, "I want you to take the night plane for Frisco. Hate to ask you, but it must be done. Townley is sick and someone has to take those Canadian Ex. bonds out to Farnsworth. You're the only one to do it, and after you get there, you can start on that vacation you need. Take a month if you wish."

The thought of Hartley Jones' offer flashed through my mind. "But have you read of the loss of the NY-18?" I asked Preston.

"I have, Makely. There'll be another hundred a month in your check, too, to make up for the worry of your family. But the government is sending thirty Secret Service men along on the SF-22, which leaves to-night. In addition, there will be a convoy of seven fighting planes, so there is not likely to be a repetition of the previous disasters."

That hundred a month sounded mighty good, for expenses had been mounting rapidly of late. "All right, Mr. Preston," I agreed. "I will be at the airport before midnight. But how about the bonds?"

"I'll drive around after dinner and deliver them to you. And thanks for your willingness, Makely. You'll not be sorry."

My wife had listened intently and, from my words, she knew what to expect. Her face was a tragic mask when I replaced the receiver on its hook, and my heart sank at her expression.

Then there came the ring of the telephone and, for some reason, my pulse raced as I went to the hall to answer it. Hartley Jones' cheerful voice greeted me and he was positively gleeful when I told him of my projected trip.

"Hooray!" he shouted. "But you'll not take the SF-22. You'll take the trip with me as I wanted. I tell you what: You be out at Newark

Airport at eleven-thirty, but come to my hangar instead of to that of the transportation company. We'll leave at the same time as the regular liner, and we'll get your old bonds to Frisco, regardless of what might happen to the big ship. Also we might learn something mighty interesting."

I argued with him, but to no avail. And the more I argued, the greater appeal was presented by his proposition. Finally there was nothing to do but agree.

Preston arrived with the bonds shortly after the children were tucked in their beds. I did not tell him of my change in plans. He did not stay long, and I could see that he was uncomfortable under the accusing eyes of Marie, for all his own confidence in the safety of the trip in the closely-guarded SF-22.

At precisely eleven-thirty I reached the great steel and glass hangar where Hart Jones and George Boehm carried on their experiments with super-modern types of aircraft. Hart Jones had inherited more than two million dollars, and was in a fair way to spend it all on his favorite hobby, though those who knew him best vowed that he would make many times that amount through royalties on his ever-growing number of valuable inventions.

The immense doors were open, and I gazed for the first time into the hangar whose spacious interior provided storage and manufacturing facilities for a dozen or more planes of Hart Jones' design. A curiously constructed example of his handiwork stood directly before me, and several mechanics were engaged in making it ready for flight. My friend advanced from their midst to meet me, a broad smile on his grease smeared countenance.

"Greetings, Jack," he said, taking my small bag from my hands. "Right on time, I see. And I can't tell you how glad I am that you are coming with us. So is George."

"Well, I didn't expect to," I admitted; "but there is no need of telling you that I had far rather be in your ship than in the big one."

George Boehm, the same jolly chap I had several times met in Hart's company, but fatter than ever, crawled from beneath the shiny metal body of the plane and scrambled to his feet at my side.

"Going in for a bit of adventuring, Mr. Makely?" he asked, wiping his hand with a piece of cotton waste before extending it.

"Yes," I replied, as I squeezed his chubby fingers. "Can't stick in the mud all my life, George. And I wouldn't want to be in better

company for my first attempt either."

"Nor we," he returned, a mischievous twinkle in his eyes. "Rather have a greenhorn on the Pioneer than some government agent, who'd be butting in and trying to run everything. Think you'll be scared?"

"Probably," I admitted; "but I guess I can stand it."

"Hear the latest news broadcast?" interrupted Hart Jones.

"No. What was it?" I asked.

"There has been a report from out near Cripple Creek," said Hart solemnly, "that a pillar of fire was observed in the mountains shortly after the time the NY-18 last reported. The time and the location coincide with her probable position and the report was confirmed by no less than three of the natives of that locality. Of course the statements are probably extravagant, but they claim this pillar of fire extended for miles into the heavens and was accompanied by a tremendous roaring sound that ceased abruptly as the light of the flame disappeared, leaving nothing but blackness and awe-inspiring silence behind."

"Lot of bunk!" grunted George, who was vigorously scrubbing the

back of his neck.

"Sounds like a fairy tale," I commented.

"Nevertheless, there may be something in it. In fact, there must be. Three of these mountaineers observed practically the same phenomenon from quite widely separated points, though one of them said there were three pillars of fire and that these looked more like the beams of powerful search-lights. All agreed on the terrific roar. And, after all, these two liners did disappear. There must be something quite out of the ordinary about the way in which they were captured or destroyed, and this occurrence may well be supposed to have a bearing on the matter."

"Possibly they were destroyed by some freak electrical storm," I suggested.

"Where then are the wrecked vessels?" asked Hart. "No, Jack, electrical storms do not destroy huge air liners and then suck them out into space beyond our vision. These two ships are no longer on the surface of the earth, else they would have been long since located. The magnetic direction finders of the transportation people have covered every inch of the United States, as well as Mexico and Canada."

"Of course they might have been carried halfway around the world by a wind of unprecedented velocity." I commenced a silly argument in favor of the theory that the elements had accounted for the two vessels, but was interrupted by the mounting roar of great engines throbbing overhead.

"Hurry up there, George!" shouted Hart. "It's the SF-22 coming in. We have to be ready for the take-off in five minutes!"

He hastened to take George's place at the washbowl and all was activity within the confines of our hangar. George and I left the office and went out to the landing field, which was now brilliant with the glare of floodlights. The *Pioneer* had been trundled into the open and stood ready for the flight. Not a hundred feet above the field, the huge silver moth that was the SF-22 swept by in a wide circle that would bring her into the wind. The roar of her engines died as she swung out of the circle of light into the surrounding darkness.

The crowds which had gathered to witness her landing buzzed with excited comment and speculation. Her nose brought slightly up, she dropped to a perfect three-point landing, the brakes screeching as she was brought to a standstill at the hangar of the transportation company.

"Come on now, you fellows," came the voice of Hart Jones from the hangar entrance, "there's no time to lose. The *Pioneer* takes off immediately after the big fellow."

We hurried to the waiting ship, which seemed like a tiny toy when compared with the giant SF-22. I had observed very little of the construction of the *Pioneer*, but I could now see that she was quite different in design from the ordinary plane. A monoplane she was, but the wing structure was abnormally short and of great thickness, and there were a number of tubes projecting from the leading edge that gave the appearance of a battery of small cannon. The body, like all planes designed for travel in air-level six, was cigar-shaped, and had hermetically sealed ports and entrance manholes. A cluster of the cannon-shaped tubes enclosed the tail just back of the fins and rudder and, behind the wing structure atop the curved upper surface of the body, there was a sphere of gleaming metal that was probably three feet in diameter.

Before I could formulate questions regarding the unusual features of the design, we were within the *Pioneer's* cabin and Hart Jones was engaged in clamping the entrance manhole cover to its rubber seat. A throbbing roar that penetrated our double hull attracted my attention and, looking through a nearby porthole, I saw that the convoy of army planes had taken off and was circling over the SF-22 in

anticipation of her start. Trim, speedy fighting ships these were, with heavy caliber machine-guns in turrets fore and aft and normally manned by crews of twelve each. The under surfaces of their bodies glistened smooth and sleek in the light from the field, for the landing gears had been drawn within and the openings sealed by the close-fitted armor plate that protected these ordinarily vulnerable portions when in flight.

The SF-22 was ready to take off and the crowds were drawing back into the obscurity beyond the huge circle of blinding light. One after another her twelve engines sputtered into life, and ponderously she moved over the field, gathering speed as the staccato barking of the exhausts gradually blended into a smooth though deafening purr. The tail of the great vessel came up, then the wheels, and she was off into the night.

Hart Jones sat at a bewildering array of instruments that covered almost the entire forward partition of the cabin. He pressed a button and the starting motor whined for a moment. Then the single engine of the *Pioneer* coughed and roared. Slowly we taxied in the direction taken by the SF-22, whose lights were now vanishing in the darkness. I saw George open a valve on the wall and Hart stretched the fingers of his left hand to what appeared to be the keyboard of a typewriter set into the instrument board. He pressed several of the

keys and pulled back his stick. There was a whistling scream from astern and I was thrown back in my seat with painful force. With that, the motor roared into full speed and we had left the airport far behind.

"What on earth?" I gasped.

"Rocket propulsion," laughed Hart. "I should have warned you. Those tubes you saw outside at the tail and along the leading edge of the wings. Only used three of them, but that was sufficient for the take-off."

"But I thought this rocket business was not feasible on account of the wastage of fuel due to its low efficiency," I objected.

"We should worry about fuel," said Hart.

I looked about me and saw that there was very little space for the storage of this essential commodity. "Why?" I inquired. "What fuel do you use?"

"Make our own," he replied shortly. He was busy at the moment, maneuvering the *Pioneer* into a position above and behind the SF-22 and her convoy.

"You make your own fuel enroute?" I asked in astonishment.

"Yes. That sphere you saw on top. It is the collecting end of an electrical system for extracting nitrogen and other elements, from the air. This extraction goes on constantly while we are in the atmosphere and my fuel is an extremely powerful explosive of which nitrates are the base. The supply is replenished continuously, so we have no fear of running short even in the upper levels."

George had crawled through a small opening into some inaccessible region in the stern of the vessel. I pondered over what Hart had just told me, still keeping my eyes glued to the port, through which could be seen the fleet we were following. The altimeter registered thirty-five thousand feet. We were entering air-level six—the stratosphere! Below us the troposphere, divided into five levels, each of seven thousand feet, teemed with the life of the air. The regular lanes were filled with traffic, the lights of the speeding thousands of freight and pleasure craft moving in orderly procession along their prescribed routes.

Up here in the sixth level, which was entirely for high-speed traffic of commercial and government vessels making transcontinental or transoceanic voyages, we were the only adventurers in sight—we and the convoyed liner we were following. The speed indicator

showed six hundred miles an hour, and the tiny spot of light that traveled over the chart to indicate our position showed that we were nearing Buffalo.

Glancing through one of the lower ports, I saw the lights of the city shining dimly through a light mist that fringed the shore of Lake Erie and extended northward along the Niagara. Then we were out over the lake, and the luminous hue was slipping rapidly behind. I looked ahead and saw that the distance to the SF-22 and her convoy had somewhat increased. We were a mile behind and some two thousand feet above them. Evidently Hart was figuring on keeping at a safe distance for observation of anything that might happen.

Our motor was running smoothly and the angle of the propeller blades had been altered to take care of the change in air density from the lower altitudes. It flashed across my mind that this was an ideal location for an attack, if such was to be made on the SF-22.

Then, far ahead, I saw a beam of light stab through the darkness and strike the tossing surface of the lake. Another and another followed, and I could see that the SF-22 and her convoy were surrounded by these unearthly rays.

They converged from high above to outline a brilliant circle where

they met on the surface of the waters, and in the midst of the cone formed by the beams, the liner and its seven tiny followers could be seen to falter, and huddle more closely together.

It all happened in the twinkling of an eye—so quickly, in fact, that Hart and I had not the time to exchange remarks over the strange occurrence. For a moment the eight vessels hovered, halted suddenly by this inexplicable force from out the heavens. Then there rose from the apex of the inverted cone of light a blinding column of blue-white radiance that poured skyward an instant and was gone. To our ears came a terrific roaring that could be likened to nothing we had heard on earth. The *Pioneer* was tossed and buffeted as by a cyclone, and George came tumbling from the opening he had entered, his round face grown solemn. Then came eery silence, for the *Pioneer's* motor had gone dead. Ahead there was utter darkness. The liner and her convoy had completely vanished and the *Pioneer* was slipping into a spin!

"What's up?" asked George of Hart, who was tugging frantically at the controls.

"The liner has gone the way of the first two," he replied: "and the yarn about the pillar of fire was not so far wrong after all."

"You saw the same thing?" asked George incredulously.

"Yes, and so did Jack. There came some beams of light from the sky; then the pillar of fire and the roaring you heard, after which the vessels were gone and our electrical system paralyzed."

"Holy smoke!" ejaculated George. "What to do now?"

As he spoke, the *Pioneer* came out of the spin, and we were able to resume our positions in the seats. None of us was strapped in, and we had been clinging to whatever was handiest to keep from being tossed about in the cabin. Hart wiped his forehead and growled out an oath. The instrument board was still illuminated, for its tiny lamps were supplied with current from the storage battery. But the main lights of the cabin and the ignition system refused to function. We were gliding now, but losing altitude rapidly, having already dropped to the lower limits of level five.

"Can't you use the rocket tubes?" I inquired hesitatingly.

"They are fired in the same manner as the motor," replied Hart; "but we might try an emergency connection from the storage battery, which is ordinarily used only in starting and for the panel lights."

George was already fussing with the connections in a small junction box from which he had removed the cover. Meanwhile, the black waters of Lake Erie were rushing upward to meet us, and the needle of the altimeter registered twelve thousand feet.

"Here's the trouble!" shouted George, triumphantly holding up a small object he had removed from the junction box. "Ignition fuse is blown."

"Probably by some radiations from the cone of light and the column that destroyed the liner. Lucky we were no closer," were Hart's muttered comments.

George produced a spare fuse and inserted it in its proper place. The cabin lights glowed instantly and the motor started at once.

"Well, I'm going up after the generators of this mysterious force that is destroying our cross-country ships and killing our people," asserted Hart. "The rays came from high above, but the *Pioneer* can go as high as anything that ever flew—*higher*."

He snapped a switch and a beam of light that rivalled the so-called pillar of fire bored far into the night, dimming the stars by its brilliance. Again his fingers strayed to the rows of white keys and

the rocket tubes shrieked in response to his pressure. This time I was prepared for the shock of acceleration, but the action was maintained for several seconds and I found the pressure against my back growing painful. Then it was relieved, and I glanced at the altimeter. Its needle had reached the end of the scale, which was graduated to eighty thousand feet!

"Good Lord!" I exclaimed. "Do you mean to tell me that we are more than sixteen miles in the air?"

"Nearly thirty," replied Hart, pointing to another dial which I had not seen. This one was graduated in miles above sea-level, and its needle wavered between the twenty-nine and thirty mark!

Again Hart pressed the rocket buttons, and we shot still higher into the heavens. Thirty, forty, fifty miles registered the meter, and still we climbed.

"Great Scott!" blurted a voice I knew was my own, though I had no consciousness of willing the speech. "At this rate we'll reach the moon!"

"We could, if we wished," was Hart's astounding reply; "I wish you wouldn't say too much about it when we return. We have oxygen to

breathe and an air-tight vessel to retain it. With the fuel we are using, we could easily do it, provided a sufficient supply were available. However, the *Pioneer* does not have large enough storage tanks as yet, and, of course, we cannot now replenish our supply with sufficient rapidity, for the atmosphere has become very rare indeed —where we are. My ultimate object, though, in building the *Pioneer*, was to construct a vessel that is capable of a trip to the moon."

"You think you could reach a great enough velocity to escape the gravitational pull of the earth?" I asked, marveling more and more at the temerity and resourcefulness of my science-minded friend.

"Absolutely," he replied. "The speed required is less than seven miles a second, and I have calculated that the *Pioneer* can do no less than twenty."

Mentally I multiplied by sixty. I could hardly credit the result. Twelve hundred miles a minute!

"But, how about the acceleration?" I ventured. "Could the human body stand up under the strain?"

"That is the one problem remaining," he replied; "and I am now

working on a method of neutralizing it. From the latest results of our experiments, George and I are certain of its feasibility."

The *Pioneer* was now losing altitude once more, and Hart played the beam of the searchlight in all directions as we descended. He and George watched through one of the floor ports and I followed suit. We were falling, unhampered by air resistance, and our bodies were practically weightless with reference to the *Pioneer*. It was a strange sensation: there was the feeling of exhilaration one experiences when inhaling the first whiff of nitrous oxide in the dentist's chair—a feeling of absolute detachment and care-free confidence in the ultimate result of our precipitous descent.

I found considerable amusement in pushing myself from side to side of the cabin with a mere touch of a finger. There was no up nor down, and sometimes it seemed to me that we were drifting sideways, sometimes that we fell upward rather than downward. Hart and George were unconcerned. Evidently they were quite accustomed to the sensations. They bent their every energy toward discovering what had caused the disaster to the SF-22 and its convoy.

For several hours we cruised about on the strangest search ever made in the air. Alternately shooting skyward to unconscionable altitudes

and dropping to levels five and six to replenish our fuel supply, we covered the greater portion of the United States before the night was over. But the powerful searchlight of the *Pioneer* failed to disclose anything that might be remotely connected with the disappearance of the SF-22.

For me it was a never-to-be-forgotten experience. Lightning dashes from coast to coast which required but a few minutes of time—circling many miles above New York or Washington or Savannah in broad daylight with the sun low on the up-curved horizon; then shooting westward into the darkness and skirting the Pacific coast less than fifteen minutes later, but with four hours' actual time difference. Space and time were almost one.

Hart had not provided the *Pioneer* with a radio or television transmitter, but there was an excellent receiver, and, through its agency we learned that the world was in a veritable uproar over the latest visitation of the mysterious terror of the sixth air level. All commercial traffic in levels four, five and six was ordered discontinued, and the government air control stations were flashing long messages in code, the import of which could but be guessed. Vision flashes showed immense gatherings at the large airports and in the public squares of the great cities, where the general populace become more and more excited and terrified by the awful

possibilities pictured by various prominent speakers.

The governments of all foreign powers made haste to disclaim responsibility for the air attacks or for any attempt at making war on the United States. News broadcasts failed to mention Hart Jones or the *Pioneer*, since the mission had been kept secret. The phenomenon of the rays and the roaring column of light had been observed from many points on this occasion and there was no longer any doubt as to the nature of the terror as visible to the eye, though theories as to the action and source of the rays conflicted greatly and formed the basis of much heated discussion.

Eventually the advancing dawn reached San Francisco, and with its advent Hart decided to make a landing in that city so that my bonds could be delivered.

Jones was apparently a very much mystified and discouraged man. "Jack," he said, "it seems to me that this thing is but the beginning of some tremendous campaign that is being waged against our country by a clever and powerful enemy. And I feel that our work in connection with the unraveling of the mystery and overcoming the enemy or enemies is but begun. It's a cinch that the thing is organized by human minds and is not any sort of a freak of the elements. Our work is cut out for us, all right, and I wish you would

stick to George and me through the mess. Will you?"

"Sure," I agreed, readily enough. "After these bonds are delivered I am free for a month."

"Ha! Ha!" cackled George, without mirth. "A month! We're doggoned lucky if we get to the bottom of this in a year."

"Nonsense!" snapped Hart, who was considerably upset by the failure to locate the source of the disastrous rays. "There is nothing supernatural about this, and anything that can be explained on a scientific basis can be run to earth in short order. These rays are man-made and, as such, can be accounted for by man. Our greatest scientists must be put to work on the problem at once—in fact, they have quite probably been called in by the government already."

He was maneuvering the *Pioneer* to a landing on the broad field of the San Francisco airport. Hundreds of idle planes of all sizes lined the field, and, unmindful of the earliness the hour, a great crowd was collected in expectation of sensational reports from the occupants of arriving ships. The unusual construction of the *Pioneer* attracted considerable attention and it was with difficulty that the police kept back the crowd when she rolled to a stop near the office of the local government supervisor. We hustled inside and were greeted by that

official with open arms.

"Glory be!" he exclaimed. "Hart Jones and the *Pioneer*. Every airport in the land has been on the lookout for you all night. It was feared you had been lost with the SF-22 and the others. Code messages to the supervisors of all districts advised of your mission, though it has been kept out of the general news, as has the message from the enemy."

"Message from the enemy!" gasped Hart, George and I, echoing the words like parrots.

"Yes. A demand that the United States surrender, and a threat to descend into the lower levels if the demand is not complied with in twenty-four hours!"

"Who is this enemy?" asked Hart, "and where?"

"Who they are is not known," replied the official gravely; "and as to the location, the War Department is puzzled. Direction finders throughout the country took readings on the position of their radio transmitter and these readings differed widely in result. But the consensus of opinion is that the messages originate somewhere out in space, probably between fifty and one hundred thousand miles

from our earth."

"Great guns!" Hart glanced at George and me, where we stood with stupidly hanging jaws. "And what does the government want of me now?"

"You are considered to be the one man who might be able to cope with the problem, and are ordered to report to the Secretary of War, in person, immediately."

Hart was electrified into instant activity. "Here," he said in a voice of authority that commanded the official's attention and respect, "see that this package of bonds is delivered at once to the addressee and that the addressor is advised of its safe arrival. We're off at once."

Suiting action to the words, he thrust my packet into the hands of the astonished supervisor. Then, turning sharply on his heel, he flung back, "Advise the Secretary of War that I shall report to him in person in less than one hour."

As we stepped through the entrance of the *Pioneer*, he shot a final look at the official and laughed heartily at his sudden accession of energy. We had not the slightest doubt that Hart's orders would be immediately and efficiently carried out.

In precisely forty-five minutes, we stood before the desk of Lawrence Simler, then Secretary of War, in Washington.

"You are Mr. Hartley Jones?" inquired the stern-visaged little man.

"I am, Mr. Secretary, and these are my friends and co-workers, George Boehm and John Makely."

The Secretary acknowledged the introduction gravely, then plunged into the heart of the matter at hand with the quick energy for which he was famed.

"It may or may not be a serious situation," he said, "but certainly it has thus far been quite alarming. In any event, we have taken the matter out of the hands of the Air Traffic Bureau. We are prepared to defy the ultimatum of the enemy, whoever he may be. But we want your help, Mr. Jones. Every ship of the Air Navy will be in the upper levels within the prescribed twenty-four hours, and we will endeavor to stave off their attacks until such time as you can fit the *Pioneer* for a journey to their headquarters."

"How can your antiquated war vessels, capable of hurling a high explosive shell no more than fifty miles, fight off an enemy that is thousands of miles distant?" asked Hart.

"It is believed by the research engineers of the government that, though their headquarters may be located at a great distance, the raiders drop to a comparatively low altitude at the time of one of their attacks, returning immediately thereafter to their base."

Hart Jones shook his head. "The engineers may be correct," he stated; "but how on earth can you expect a little vessel like the *Pioneer* to battle an enemy who is possessed of these terribly destructive weapons and who has sufficient confidence in his own invulnerability to declare war on the greatest country on earth?"

Secretary Simler dropped his voice to a confidential tone, and his keen gray eyes flashed excitement as he unfolded the details of the discoveries and plans of the War Department. We three listened in undisguised amazement to a tale of the unceasing labors of our Secret Service agents in foreign countries, of elaborate experiments with deadly weapons and the chemicals of warfare.

We heard of marvelous new rays that could be projected for many miles and destroy whole armies at a single blast; rays that would, in less time than that required to tell of the feat, reduce to a mass of fused metal the greatest firstline battleships of the old days of ocean warfare. We heard of preparations for defensive warfare throughout the civilized world, preparedness that insured so terrible and final a

war that it was literally impossible for a great world conflagration to again break out. We learned that the present mysterious signs of a coming war could not possibly have originated in any country on earth, else they would have been known of long in advance, due to the network of the Secret Service system. This war, so unexpectedly thrust upon us, was undoubtedly a war of planets!

"But," objected Hart, "the messages were in English, were they not?"

"They were," continued Secretary Simler, "and that puzzled our experts in the beginning. But, it may well be that our enemy from out the skies has had spies among us for many years and could thus have learned our languages and radio codes. In any event, we are to meet destructive rays with others equally destructive, and you, Hartley Jones, are the man who can make our effectiveness certain."

"I?"

"Yes. How long a time will be required in fitting out the *Pioneer* for reliable space flying?"

Hart Jones pondered the matter and I could see that he was overjoyed at the prospect of getting into the thing in earnest. "About one week," he replied, "providing you can send a force of fifty

expert mechanics to my hangar at once and supply all material as fast as I shall require it."

"Excellent," said the Secretary. "We'll have the men there in a few hours and will obtain whatever you need, regardless of cost, for immediate delivery. Incidentally, there will be several scientists as well, who will supervise the installation of two types of ray generators and their projecting mechanisms on the *Pioneer*. You will need them later."

"I don't doubt we shall," said Hart. "And now, with your permission, we shall leave for the hangar. I'm ready to start work."

"Capital!" Secretary Simler pressed every one of a row of buttons set in his desk top. We were dismissed.

"Well," said I, when we reached the outside, "he has given you quite a job, Hart!"

"You said something," he replied. "But, if this threat from the skies proves as real and as calamitous as I think it will, we all have our work cut out for us."

"Do you really believe this enemy comes from another planet?"

asked George as we entered the *Pioneer* for the trip home.

"Where else can they be from?" countered Hart. "But, really it makes no difference to us now. We have to go after them in earnest. Don't want to quit, do you, George?"

"Wha-a-at?" shouted George, as he jerked savagely at the main switch of the *Pioneer*. "You know me better than that, Hart. Did I ever let you down in anything?"

"No," admitted the smiling Hart, "you never did, bless your heart. But Jack here is another matter. He has a wife and two kids to look after. That lets him out automatically."

My heart sank at the words, for I knew that he meant what he said. And, truth to tell, I saw the justice in his remarks.

"But, Hart," I faltered, "I'd like to be in on this thing."

"I know you would, old man. But I think it's out of the question, for the present at least. You can help with the reconstruction of the *Pioneer*, however."

And meekly I accepted his dictum, though with secretly conflicting emotions. Little did I realize at the time that Hart knew far more than

he pretended and that he had merely attempted to salve his own conscience in this manner.

I was very anxious to return to my family, and, as I sped homeward in a taxicab after the *Pioneer* landed at her own hangar, my mind was filled with doubts and fears. Secretary Simler had been very brief in his talk, but his every word carried home the gravity of the situation. What if these invaders carried the war to the surface? Suppose they seared the countryside and the cities and suburbs with rays of horrible nature that would shrivel and blast all that lay in their path? My heart chilled at the thought and it was a distinct relief when I gazed on my little home and saw that it was safe—so far. I paid the driver with a much too large bank note and dashed up my own front steps two at a time.

A few hours later I tore myself away and returned to the hangar, where the *Pioneer* now reposed in a scaffolded cradle. The sight which met my eyes was astonishing in the extreme, for the hangar had been transformed into a huge workshop with seemingly hundreds of men already at work. It was a scene of furious activity, and, to my utter amazement, I observed that the *Pioneer* was already in an advanced stage of disassembly.

I had no difficulty in locating Hart Jones, for he was striding from

lathe to workbench to boring mill, issuing his orders with the sureness and decision of a born leader of men. He welcomed me in his most brisk manner and immediately assigned me to a portion of the work in the chemical laboratory—something I was at least partly fitted for.

We labored far into the night, when a siren called us to rest and food. This was to be a night and day job, and not a man of those on duty gave thought to the intense nervous and physical strain. Sixty-five of us I learned there were, though it had seemed there were several times that number.

During the rest period, Hart switched on the large television and sound mechanism of the public news broadcasts. Great excitement prevailed throughout the United States, for there had been a leak and the news had gone abroad regarding the message from the enemy. There was widespread panic and disorder and the government was besieged with demands for authentic news. The twenty-four hours of grace had nearly expired.

Finally the public was told of what actually was happening. Our entire fleet of one thousand air cruisers was in air-level six, waiting for the enemy. America was going to fight in earnest!

Flashes of our air cruisers in construction and in action came over the screen; voice-vision records of the popular officers of the fleet followed in quick succession. Then came the blow—the first of the strange war.

Two vessels of the air fleet had been destroyed by the triple rays and pillar of fire! Fifty cruisers rushing to the scene had been unable to find any traces of the source of the deadly rays. And, this time, there was an alarming added element. The pillar of fire had risen from a point near Gadsden in Alabama and, in its wake, there spread a sulphurous, smoldering fire that crept along the ground and destroyed all in its path. Farms, factories, and even the steel rails of the railroads were consumed and burned into the ground as if by the breath of some tremendous blast furnace. Hundreds of inhabitants of the section perished, and it was reported that the fumes from the strange fires were drifting in the direction of Birmingham, terrifyingly visible in blue-green clouds of searing vapor.

With the first news of the disaster came a wave of fear that spread over the country with the rapidity of the ether waves that carried the news. Then came stern determination. This enemy must be swept from the skies! Gatherings in public places volunteered en masse for whatever service the government might ask of them. The entire world was in an uproar, and from Great Britain, France, Germany

and Russia, came immediate offers of their air fleets to assist in fighting off the Terror.

In less than an hour there were nearly five thousand cruisers in air-level six, patroling its entire depth from thirty-five thousand to one hundred thousand feet altitude.

We resumed work in the hangar, but the news service was kept in operation as far as the amplifiers were concerned, though the television screen was switched off on account of the likelihood of its distracting the workers.

Again came the report of a major disaster, this time over Butte in Montana. Four American vessels and one British were the victims in level six. And the city of Butte was in flames; blue, horrible flames that literally melted the city into the ground. Again there was no trace of the invaders.

How puny were the efforts of the five thousand air cruisers! Marvels of engineering and mechanical skill, these vessels were. Deadly as were the weapons they carried—weapons so terrible that war on earth was considered impossible since their development—they were helpless against an enemy who could not be located. Though our vessels were capable of boring high into the stratosphere, the enemy

worked from still higher.

"Holy smoke!" gasped Hart Jones, who had stopped at my side. "What a contract I have on my hands!"

He looked in the direction of the partly dismantled *Pioneer*, and I could see by the fixedness of his stare that he was thinking of her insignificant size in comparison with the job she was to undertake.

Above the din of the machines in the hangar rang the startled voice of a news announcer. Panic-stricken he seemed, and we stopped to listen. Another blow of the terror of the skies—and now close by! Over Westchester County in New York State there was a repetition of the previous attacks. Only two of the cruisers had vanished this time; but several towns, including Larchmont and Scarsdale, were pools of molten fire!

Sick at heart, I thought of my little home in Rutherford and of the dear ones it contained. I thought of telephoning, but, what was the use? There was no warding off of this terrible thing that had so suddenly come to our portion of the world. It was the blowing of the last trumpet, the way things looked.

The announcer had calmed himself. His voice droned tonelessly

now, as was the custom. Another raid, on the Mexican Border now. We were stupefied by the rapidity of the enemy's attacks; then electrified once more by the most astounding news of all. Alexandria, in Egypt, was the base of a pillar of fire! Fully half of the city was wiped out, and the remainder in a mortal funk, terrorized and riotous. The United States was not alone in the war!

The foreign fleets which reinforced our own were ordered home immediately. But to what avail? The world was doomed!

In the morning, after nine fearful attacks during the night, there came another message from the enemy and this was repeated in five languages and addressed to the entire world:

"People of Earth," it read, "this is our final warning. One chance has been given and you have proved stubborn. Consider well that your civilization be not entirely destroyed, and answer as the expiration of forty-eight hours, using our transmitting frequency. Our hand is to be withheld for that period only, when, unless our demands are met, all of your large cities and towns will be destroyed. Our terms for peace are that we be permitted to land without resistance on your part; that you surrender farm and forest lands, cities and towns, able-bodied men of twenty to forty, selected women of seventeen to thirty, and tribute in the form of such supplies and precious metals as we may

specify, all to the extent of forty per cent of your resources. No compromise will be accepted."

That was all. It was during a rest period at the Jones hangar and I had brought Hart and George to my home for breakfast. We sat at the table when the news instrument brought the message. Marie was pouring the coffee, and my two small boys, Jim and Jack, had gone to the playroom, from whence their joyous voices could be heard. We four were struck dumb at the announcement, and Marie looked at me with so awful an expression of dread that my coffee turned bitter in my mouth. Marie was just twenty-eight!

"What beasts!" cried Hart. "Allow them to land without resistance? I should say not! Rather we should fight them off until all of us perish."

He had risen from his chair in his anger. Now he sat down suddenly and shook a forefinger in my face.

"Say!" he exploded. "You can't tell me that some master mind of our own world is not back of this!"

"I'm not telling you," I replied, startled at the fierce fire that flashed from his eyes.

"I know. I'm just trying to think aloud and I'm liable to say anything. But this sort of business is the work of humans as sure as you're born. Still I believe that what Simler says is true. I can't believe that any country on earth is back of the thing. It must be an attack from beings of another planet, but I think they have as a leader a man who is of our own earth."

Marie's eyes opened wide at this. "But how could that be?" she asked. "Surely no one from our earth has made the trip to one of the other planets?"

"It may be that someone has," replied Hart. "Do you remember Professor Oradel? Remember, about ten years ago, I think it was, when he and a half dozen or more of extremely radical scientists built a rocket they claimed would reach the moon? They were ridiculed and hissed and relegated to the position of half-baked, crazy inventors. But Oradel had a large private fortune, and he and his crowd built themselves a workshop and laboratory in a secluded region in the Ozarks. Here they labored and experimented and eventually the rocket ship was constructed. No person was in their confidence, but when the machine was completed they issued a statement to the press to the effect that they were ready for the voyage to the moon, and that, when they returned, a reckoning with the world was to be made for its disbelief and total lack of sympathy.

Again the press subjected Oradel to a series of scathing denunciations, and the scientific publications refused to take cognizance of his claims in any way, shape or form."

"Then, one night, a great rocket roared into the heavens, leaving a terror-stricken countryside in the wake of its brilliantly visible tail. Several observatories whose telescopes picked up and followed the trail of the contraption reported that it described a huge parabola, mounting high into the stratosphere and falling back to earth, where it was lost in the depths of the Pacific Ocean. There the thing ended and it was soon forgotten. But I believe that this rocket ship of Oradel's reached Mars or Venus and that the peoples of whichever planet they reached have been prevailed upon and prepared to war upon the world."

"That would explain their knowledge of our languages and codes." I ventured, "and would likewise account for the fact that the first of our ships to be attacked were those carrying large shipments of currency. Though if these were destroyed by the fire columns, I can not see what good the money would do them."

"Don't believe the first three were destroyed," grunted Hart. "You'll remember that in these cases the pillars of fire, or whatever you want to call them, were of a cold light, whereas now they are viciously hot

and leave behind them the terrible destructive fires that spread and spread and seemingly never are extinguished. No, I think that the force used is something of the nature of an atom-disrupting triad of beams and that these set up the column as a veritable tornado, a whirling column of roaring wind rushing skyward with tremendous velocity. The first ships, I believe, were carried into the stratosphere and captured intact by the enemy.

"Since the declaration of war the nature of the column has altered. The three beams, instead of meeting at or near the surface of the earth, now join high in the heavens and the column strikes downward instead of expending its force upward. An added energy is used which produces the terribly destructive force below. And now we are able to locate fragments of the ships destroyed above, whereas previously there were no traces."

"Sounds reasonable," commented George. "But why have they not landed and waged their war right here without warning, if that is what they now intend to do?"

"A natural question, George. But I have a hunch that the space flier or fliers of the enemy are conserving fuel by remaining beyond gravity. You know, in space flying, the greatest expenditures of energy are in leaving or landing on a body and, once landed, they

might not have sufficient fuel for a getaway. They know we are not exactly helpless, once they are in our midst, and are taking this means of reducing us to the point of complete subjection before risking their precious selves among us."

The telephone startled us by its insistent ring. It was a call from the hangar for Hart. The news broadcast announcer was in the midst of a long dissertation regarding the discovery only this morning that there were certain apparent discrepancies in the movements of the tides and unwonted perturbations of the moon's orbit. There flashed on the screen a view of the great observatory at Mount Wilson, and Professor Laughlin of that institution stepped into the foreground of the scene to take up the discussion so mechanically repeated by the announcer.

"Must leave for the hangar at once," declared Hart, returning from the telephone. "Simler and his staff are there and we are wanted immediately."

"Oh, Jack!" Marie begged with her eyes.

"Got to be done, Honey," I responded, "and, believe me, I am going to do what little I can to help. Suppose we surrendered!"

I shuddered anew at the very thought and took hurried leave of my family, Hart and George awaiting me in the hall. Had I known what was to transpire before the end of the war, I am certain I would have been in much less of a hurry.

We rushed to the hangar, where Secretary Simler and his party awaited us in the office. Rather, I should say, they waited for Hart Jones.

"Mr. Jones," said the Secretary of War, when the introductions were over, "it is up to you to get the *Pioneer* in shape to go out after these terrible creatures before the forty-eight hours have expired. We have replied to their ultimatum and have told them we will have our answer ready within the appointed time, but it is already agreed between the nations of the World Alliance that our reply is to be negative. Better far that we submit to the utter destruction of our civilization than agree to their terms."

"I believe I can do it, Mr. Secretary," was Hart Jones' simple comment. "At least I will try. But you must let me have an experienced astronomer at once with whom to consult."

"Astronomer?"

"Yes—immediately. I have a theory, but am not enough of a student of astronomy myself to work it out."

"You shall have the best man in the Air Naval Observatory at once." Secretary Simler chewed his cigar savagely. "And anything else you might need," he concluded.

"There is nothing else, sir." Hart turned from the great men who regarded him solemnly, some with expressions of hope, others with plain distrust written large on their countenances.

They left in silence and we returned to our work with renewed vigor. Within an hour there arrived by fast plane an undersized, thick-spectacled man who presented himself as Professor Linquist from the government observatory. He was immediately taken into the office by Hart and the two remained behind closed doors for the best part of four hours.

Meanwhile the hangar hummed with activity as usual. We in the chemical laboratory were engaged in compounding the high explosive used as fuel in the *Pioneer*. This was being compressed to its absolute limit and was stored in long steel cylinders in the form of a liquid of extremely low temperature. These cylinders were at once transferred to a special steel vault where the temperature was kept at

a low enough point to prevent expansion and consequent loss of the explosive, not to speak of the danger of destroying the entire lot of us in its escape.

The generating apparatus of the *Pioneer* was to be dispensed with for this trip, since it was of no value outside the atmosphere where there was no air from which to extract the elements necessary for the production of the explosive. Instead, the entire supply of fuel for the trip was to be carried aboard the vessel in the cylinders we were engaged in filling. Hart had calculated that there was just sufficient room to store fuel for a trip of about two hundred thousand miles from the earth and a safe return. We hoped this would be enough.

On the scaffolding around the *Pioneer* there were now so many workers that it seemed they must forever be in one another's way. But the work was progressing with extreme rapidity. Already there projected from her blunt nose a slender rod of shining metal which was the projector of one of the destructive rays whose generator and auxiliaries were being installed under the supervision of the government experts. The force had been trebled and was now working in shifts of two hours each, the pace being so exhausting that highest efficiency was obtained by using these short periods.

Additional rocket tubes were being installed, and the steel

framework of a bulge now showed on the hull, this bulge being an additional fuel storage compartment that would provide a slight additional resistance and consequently lower speed in the lower levels, but would prove little hindrance in level six and none at all in outer space.

When Hart emerged from his office he appeared to be very tired, indeed, but his face bore an expression of triumph that could not be mistaken. He and this little scientist from Washington had evidently arrived at some momentous conclusion regarding the enemy.

"Jack," he said, when he reached my bench during his first round of the hanger, "celestial mechanics is a wonderful thing. I had a hunch, and this astronomer chap has proved it correct with his mathematics. Our friend the enemy is out there in space at a point where his own mass and velocity are exactly counteracted by those of the earth and its satellite, the moon. He is just floating around in space, doing no work whatsoever to maintain his own position. He has temporarily assumed the rôle of a second satellite to us and is revolving around us at a definite period that was calculated by Lindquist. The gravitational pull of the moon keeps him from falling to the earth and that of the earth keeps him from approaching the moon. The resultant of the set of forces is what determines his orbit and the disturbance in the normal balance is what has been observed by the

astronomers who reported changes in the tides and in the moon's orbit."

"But Lindquist's figures prove that the vessel or fleet of the enemy must be of tremendous size to produce such discrepancies, infinitesimally small though they might seem. We have a big fellow with whom to deal, but we know where to find him now."

"How can he work from a fixed position to make his attacks on the earth at such widely separated points?" I asked.

"It isn't a fixed position in the first place, and besides the earth rotates once in twenty-four hours, while the moon travels around the earth once in about twenty-eight days. But, even so, the widespread destruction could not be accounted for. He must send out scouting parties or something of that sort. That is one of the things we are to learn when we get out there. We'll have some fun, Jack."

"Will the *Pioneer* be ready?" I asked. Evidently I was to go.

"She will, with the exception of the acceleration neutralizers. But I'm having some heavily-cushioned and elastic supports made that will, I believe, save us from injury. And I guess we can stand the discomfort for once."

"Yes," I agreed, "in such a cause, I, for one, am willing to go through anything to help keep this overwhelming disaster from our good old world."

"Jack," he whispered, "we must prevent it. We've got to!"

Then he was gone, and I watched him for a moment as he dashed headlong from one task to another. He was a whirlwind of energy once more.

Forty-three hours and twenty minutes had passed since the receipt of the enemy's ultimatum. The last bolt was being tightened in the remodeled *Pioneer*, and Secretary Simler and his staff were on hand to witness the take-off of the vessel on which the hopes of the world were pinned. The news of our attempt had been spread by cable and printed news only, for there was fear that the enemy might be able to pick up the broadcasts of the news service and thus be able to anticipate us. As usual, there were many scoffers, but the consensus of opinion was in favor of the project. At any rate, what better expedient was there to offer?

The huge airport, now unused on account of the complete cessation of air traffic, was closed to the public. But there was quite a crowd to witness the take-off, the visitors from Washington, the officials of

the field, and the two hundred workers who had enabled us to make ready for the adventure in time. There were four to enter the *Pioneer*: Hart, George, Professor Lindquist, and myself. And when the entrance manhole was bolted home behind us, the watchers stood in silence, waiting for the roar of the *Pioneer's* motor. As the starter took hold, Hart waved his hand at one of the ports and every man of those two hundred and some watchers stood at attention and saluted is if he were a born soldier and Hart a born commander-in-chief.

We taxied heavily across the field, for the *Pioneer* was much overloaded for a quick take-off. She bumped and bounced for a quarter-mile before taking to the air and then climbed very slowly indeed, for several minutes. Our speed was a scant two hundred miles an hour when we swung out over New York and headed for the Atlantic. And then Hart made first use of the rocket tubes, not daring to discharge the hot gases below while over populated land at so low an altitude. He touched one button, maintaining the pressure for but a fraction of a second. The ocean slipped more rapidly away from beneath our feet and he touched the button once more. Our speed was now nearly seven hundred miles an hour and we made haste to buckle ourselves into the padded, hammocklike contrivances which had been substituted for the former seats. In a very few minutes we entered level six and the motor was cut off entirely.

A blast from a number of the tail rockets drove me into my supporting hammock so heavily that I found difficulty in breathing, and could scarcely move a muscle to change position. The rate of acceleration was terrific, and I am still unable to understand how Hart was able to manipulate the controls. For myself, I could not even turn my head from its position in the padding and I felt as if I were being crushed by thousands of tons of pressure. Then, the pressure was somewhat relieved and I glanced to the instruments. We were more than a thousand miles from our starting point and the speed indicator read seven thousand miles an hour. We were traveling at the rate of nearly two miles a second!

Another blast from the rockets, this one of interminable length, and I must have lost consciousness. For when I next took note of things I found that we had been out for nearly two hours and that the tremendous pressure of acceleration was relieved. I moved my head, experimentally and found that my senses were normal, though there was a strange and alarming sensation of being wrong side up. Then I remembered that I had experienced the same thing when we first searched the upper levels of the atmosphere for the origin of the destructive rays of the enemy.

But this was different! I gazed through a nearby port and saw that the sky was entirely black, the stars shining magnificently brilliant

against their velvet background. Streamers of brilliant sunlight from the floor ports struck across the cabin and patterned the ceiling. Looking between my feet I saw the sun as a flaming orb with streamers of incandescence that spread in every direction with such blinding luminosity that I could not bear the sight for more than a few seconds. Off to what I was pleased to think of as our left side, there was a huge globe that I quickly made out as our own earth. Eerily green it shone, and, though a considerable portion of the surface was obscured by patches of white that I recognized as clouds, I could clearly make out the continents of the eastern hemisphere. It was a marvelous sight and I lost several minutes in awed contemplation of the wonder. Then I heard Hart laugh.

"Just coming out of it, Jack?" he asked.

I stared at him foolishly. It had seemed to me that I was alone in this vast universe, and the sound of his voice startled me. "Guess I'm not fully out of it yet," I said. "Where are we?"

"Oh, about sixty thousand miles out," he replied carelessly; "and we are traveling at our maximum speed—that is, the maximum we need for this little voyage."

"Little voyage!" I gasped. And then I looked at George and the

professor and saw that they, too, were grinning at my discomfiture. I laughed crazily, I suppose, for they all sobered at once.

Traveling through space at more than forty thousand miles an hour, it seemed that we were stationary. Movement was now easy—too easy, in fact, for we were practically weightless. The professor was having a time of it manipulating a pencil and a pad of paper on which he had a mass of small figures that were absolutely meaningless to me. He was calculating and plotting our course and, without him, we should never have reached the object we sought.

Time passed rapidly, for the wonders of the naked universe were a never-ending source of fascination. Occasionally a series of rocket charges was fired to keep our direction and velocity, but these were light, and the acceleration so insignificant that we were put to no discomfort whatever. But it was necessary that we keep our straps buckled, for, in the weightless condition, even the slightest increase or decrease in speed or change in direction was sufficient to throw us the length of the cabin, from which painful bruises might be received.

The supports to which we were strapped and which saved us from being crushed by the acceleration and deceleration, were similar to hammocks, being hooked to the floor and ceiling of the cabin rather

than suspended horizontally in the conventional manner. This was for the reason that the energy of the rockets was expended fore and aft, except for steering, and the forces were therefore along the horizontal axis of the vessel. The supports were elastic and the padding deep and soft. Being swiveled at top and bottom, they could swing around so that deceleration as well as acceleration was relieved. For this reason the controls had been altered so that the flexible support in which Hart was suspended could rotate about their pedestal, thus allowing for their operation by the pilot either when accelerating or decelerating. How he could control the muscles of his arms and hands under the extreme conditions is still a mystery to me, however, and George agrees with me in this. We found ourselves to be utterly helpless.

My next impression of the trip is that of swinging rapidly around and finding myself facing the rear wall of the cabin. Then the tremendous pressure once more at a burst from the forward tubes. We had commenced deceleration. For me there were alternate periods of full and semi-consciousness and, to this day, I can remember no more than the high spots of that historical expedition.

Then we were free to move once more, and I turned to face the instrument board. Our relative velocity had become practically zero; that is, we were traveling through space at about the same speed and

in the same direction as the earth. The professor and Hart were consulting a pencil chart and excitedly looking first through the forward ports and then into the screen of the periscope.

"This is the approximate location," averred the professor.

"But they are not here," replied Hart.

George and I peered in all directions and could see nothing excepting the marvels of the universe we had been viewing. The moon now seemed very close and its craters and so-called seas were as plainly visible as in a four-inch telescope on earth. But we saw nothing of the enemy.

The earth was a huge ball still, but much smaller than when I had first observed it from the heavens. The sun's corona—the flaming streamers which the professor declared extended as much as five million miles into space—was partly hidden behind the rim of the earth and the effect was blinding. A thin crescent of brilliant light marked the rim of our planet and the rest was in shadow, but a shadow that was lighted awesomely in cold green by reflected light from her satellite.

"I have it!" suddenly shouted the professor. "We are all in very

nearly the same line with reference to the sun, and the enemy is between the blazing body and ourselves. We must shift our position, move into the shadow of the earth. We have missed our calculation by a few hundred miles, that is all."

All! I thought. These astronomers, so accustomed to dealing in tremendous distances that must be measured in light-years, thought nothing of an error of several hundred miles. But I suppose it was really an inconsiderable amount, at that.

At any rate, we shifted position and looked around a bit more. We saw nothing at first. Then Hart consulted the chronometer.

"Time is up!" he shouted.

On the instant there was a flash of dazzling green light from a point not a hundred miles from our position, a flash that was followed by a streaking pencil of the same light shooting earthward with terrific velocity. Breathlessly we followed its length, saw it burst like a bomb and hurl three green balls from itself which sped at equally spaced angles to form a perfect triangle. They hovered a moment at about two thousand miles above the surface of the earth, according to the professor, who was using the telescope at the time, and shot their deadly rays toward our world. We were too late to prevent the

renewal of hostilities!

Another and another streak of green light followed and we knew that great havoc was being wrought back home. But these served to locate the enemy's position definitely and we immediately set about to draw nearer. We were still somewhat on the dark side of the object, which had prevented our seeing it. Now we swung about so that it was plainly visible. And, what a strange appearance it presented, out here in space!

Fully fifteen miles in diameter, it was a huge doughnut, a great ring of tubing with a center-opening that was at least eighty per cent of its maximum diameter. There it hovered, sending out those deadly missiles in a continuous stream toward our poor world. As we approached the weird space flier, we saw that a number of objects floated about within the great circle of its inner circumference. The NY-18, the SF-61 and the SF-22, without doubt! The theory of Hart's was correct in every detail.

We were still at about ten miles distance from the great ring and the streaking light pencils were speeding earthward at the rate of one a minute now. There was no time to lose. Already there was more destruction on its way than had been previously wrought—several times over.

Hart was sighting along a tiny tube that projected into the forward partition and he maneuvered the *Pioneer* until she was nose on to the great ring. He pulled a switch and there came a purring that was entirely new. A row of huge vacuum tubes along the wall lighted to vivid brilliancy and a throbbing vibration filled the artificial air of the cabin.

He pulled a small lever at the side of the tube and the vessel rocked to the energy that was released from those vacuum tubes. The thin rod which had been installed at the *Pioneer's* nose burst into brilliant flame—orange tinted luminescence that grew to a sphere of probably ten feet in diameter. Then there was a heavy shock and the ball of fire left its position and, with inconceivable velocity, sprang straight for the side of the great ring. It was a fair hit and, when the weird missile found its mark, it simply vanished—swallowed up in the metal walls of the monster vessel. For a moment we thought nothing was to result. Then we burst into shouts of joy, for a great section of the ring fused into nothingness and was gone! Fully a quarter of the circumference of the ring had disappeared into the vacuum of space. Truly, the governments of Earth had developed some terrible weapons of their own!

We watched, breathless.

The green light pencils no longer streaked their paths of death in the direction of our world, which now seemed so remote. The great ring with the vacant space in its rim wabbled uncertainly for a moment as though some terrific upheaval from within was tearing it asunder. Then it lurched directly for the *Pioneer*. We had been observed!

But Hart was equal to the occasion and he shot the *Pioneer* in the direction of the earth with such acceleration that we all were flattened into our supports with the same old violence. Then, with equal violence, we decelerated. The ring was following so closely that it actually rushed many hundreds of miles past us before it was brought to rest. From it there sprang one of the light pencils, and the *Pioneer* was rocked as by a heavy gale when it rushed past on its harmless way into infinity. The enemy had missed.

Meanwhile, Hart was operating another mechanism that was new to the *Pioneer* and again he sighted along the tiny tube. This time there was no sound within, no ball of fire without, no visible ray. But, when he had pressed the release of this second energy, the ring seemed to shrivel and twist as if gripped by a giant's hand. It reeled and spun. Then, no longer in a balance of forces, it commenced its long drop earthward.

His job finished and finished well, Hart Jones collapsed.

Following his more than three days and four nights of superhuman endeavor, it seemed strange to see Hart slumped white and still over the control pedestal. He who had energy far in excess of that of any of the rest of us had worn himself out. Having had no rest or sleep in nearly a hundred hours, the body that housed so wonderful a spirit simply refused to carry on. Tenderly we stretched him on the cabin floor, the *Pioneer* drifting in space the while. The professor, who was likewise something of a physician, listened to his heart, drew back his eyelids, and pronounced him in no danger whatever.

We slapped his wrists, sprinkled his face and neck with cold water from the drinking supply, and were soon rewarded by his return to consciousness. He smiled weakly and fell sound asleep. No war in the universe could have wakened him then, so we lifted him to his feet—rather I should say, we guided his practically floating body—and strapped him in George's hammock, preparing for the homeward journey. Though dangling from the straps in a position that would be vertical were we on earth, he slept like a baby. George took the controls in Hart's place and the professor and I returned to our accustomed supports.

The return trip was considerably slower, as George did not wish to push the *Pioneer* to its limit as had been necessary when coming out to meet the enemy, nor was he able to keep control of the ship

against a too-rapid acceleration. Consequently, the rate of acceleration was much lower and we were not nearly as uncomfortable as on the outgoing trip. Thus, nearly ten hours were required for the return. And Hart slept through it all.

In order to make best use of the small amount of fuel still in the cylinders, George circled the earth five times before we entered the upper limits of the atmosphere, the circles becoming of smaller diameter at each revolution and the speed of the ship proportionately reduced. An occasional discharge from one of the forward rocket tubes assisted materially in the deceleration, yet, when we slipped into level five, our speed was so great that the temperature of the cabin rose alarmingly, due to the friction of the air against the hull of the vessel. It was necessary to use the last remaining ounce of fuel to reduce the velocity to a safe value. A long glide to earth was then our only means of landing and, since we were over the Gulf of Mexico at the time, we had no recourse other than landing in the State of Texas.

Passing over Galveston in level three, we found that the Humble oil fields and a great section of the surrounding country had been the center of one of the enemy bombardments. All was blackness and ruin for many miles between this point and Houston. At Houston Airport we landed, unheralded but welcome.

The lower levels were once more filled with traffic, and one of the southern route transcontinental liners had just made its stop at this point. The arrival of the *Pioneer* was thus witnessed by an unusually large crowd, and, when the news was spread to the city, their numbers increased with all the rapidity made possible by the various means of transportation from the city.

So it was that Hart Jones, after we finally succeeded in awakening him and getting him to his feet, was hailed by a veritable multitude as the greatest hero of all time. The demonstrations become so enthusiastic that police reserves, hastily summoned from the city, were helpless in their attempts to keep the crowd in order.

It was with greatest difficulty that Hart was finally extricated from the clutches of the mob and conveyed to the new Rice Hotel in Houston, where it was necessary to obtain medical attention for him immediately. He was in no condition at the time to receive the richly deserved plaudits of the multitude, and, truth to tell, we others from the *Pioneer* were in much the same shape.

To me that night will always be the most terrible of nightmares. My first thought was of my family and, when I had been assigned to a room, I immediately asked the switchboard operator for a long-distance connection to my home in Rutherford. There was complete

silence for a minute and I jangled the hook impatiently, my head throbbing with a thousand aches and pains. Then, to my surprise, the voice of the hotel manager greeted me.

"Mr. Makely," he said softly, and I thought there was a peculiar ring in his voice, "I think you had better not try to get Rutherford this evening. We are sending the house physician to your room at once and—there are orders from Washington, you know—you are to think of nothing at the present but sleep and a long rest."

"Why—why—" I stammered, "can't you see? I must communicate with my family. They must know of my return. I must know if they're safe and well."

"I'm sorry, sir," apologized the manager, "Government orders, you know." And he hung up.

Something in that soft voice brought to me an inkling of the truth. An icy hand gripped my heart as I heard a knock at the door. With palsied fingers I turned the key and admitted the professor and a kindly-faced elderly gentleman with a small black bag. One look at the professor told me the truth. I seized his two arms in a grip that made him wince.

"Tell me! Tell me!" I demanded, "Has anything happened to my family?"

"Jack," said the professor slowly, "while we were out there watching Hart destroy the enemy vessel, Rutherford was destroyed!"

It must be that I frightened him by my answering stare, for he backed away from me in apparent fear. I noticed that the doctor was rummaging in his bag. I know I did not speak, did not cry out, for my tongue clove to the roof of my mouth. It seemed I must go mad. The professor still backed away from me; then, wiry little athlete that he was, he sprang directly for my knees in a beautiful football tackle. I remember that point clearly and how I admired his agility at the time. I remember the glint of a small instrument in the doctor's hand. Then all was blackness.

Eight days later, they tell me it was, I returned to painful consciousness in a hospital bed. But let me skip the agony of mind I experienced then. Suffice it to say that, when I was able, I set forth for Washington. Hart Jones was there and he had sent for me. But I took little interest in the going; did not even bother to speculate as to the reason for his summons. I had devoured the news during my convalescence and now, more than two weeks after the destruction of the Terror, I knew the extent of the damage wrought upon our

earth by those deadly green light pencils we had seen issuing from the huge ring up there in the skies. The horror of it all was fresh in my mind, but my own private horror overshadowed all.

I was glad that Hart had been so signally honored by the World Peace Board, that he was now the most famous and popular man in the entire world. He deserved it all and more. But what cared I—I who had done least of all to help in his great work—that the Terror had been found where it buried itself in the sand of the Sahara when falling to earth? What cared I that the discoveries made in the excavating of the huge metal ring were of inestimable value to science?

It gave me passing satisfaction to note that all of Hart Jones' theories were borne out by the discoveries; that Oradel and his minions were responsible for this terrible war; that the planet they aligned against us was Venus and that more than a hundred thousand of the Venerians had been carried in that weird engine of destruction which had been brought down by Hart.

It was interesting to read of the fall of that huge ring; how it was heated to incandescence when it entered our atmosphere at such tremendous velocity; of the tidal waves of concentric billows in the sand that led to its discovery by Egyptian Government planes. The

broadcast descriptions and the television views of the stunted and twisted Venerians whose bodies were recovered from the partly consumed wreckage were interesting. But it all left me cold. I had no further interest in life. That the world had escaped an overwhelming disaster was clear, and it gave me a certain pleasure. But for me it might as well have been completely destroyed.

Nevertheless, I went to Washington. I felt somehow that I owed it to Hart Jones, the greatest world hero since Lindbergh. I would at least listen to what he had to say.

A fast plane carried me, a plane chartered by the government. To me it seemed that it crawled, though it was a sixth-level ship, and made the trip in record time. Why I was impatient to reach Washington I do not know, for I was absolutely disinterested in anything that might occur there. It was merely that my nerves were on edge, I suppose, and everything annoyed me.

Hart met me at the airport and greeted me like a long-lost brother. He talked incessantly and jumped from one subject to the other with the obvious intention of trying to get my mind off my troubles until we reached his office in the Air Traffic building.

On his door there was the legend, "Director of Research," and, when

we had entered, I observed that the office was furnished with all the luxury that suited his new position. I dropped into a deeply upholstered chair at the side of his mahogany desk, and, for the space of several minutes, Hart regarded me with concern, speaking not a word.

"Jack, old man," he finally ventured. "I can't talk to you of this thing. But it makes me feel very badly to see you take it so hard. There are many things you have to live for, old top, and it is to talk about these that I sent for you."

"You mean work?" I asked.

"Yes. That is the best thing for us all, in any emergency or under any circumstances whatever. Preston wants you back for one thing, and he authorized me to tell you that the job of office manager is waiting for you at double your former salary."

My eyes misted at this. Preston was a good old scout! But I could never bear it to return to the old surroundings, even in the city. "No, Hart," I said, "I'd rather be away from New York and from that part of the country. Associations, you know."

"I understand," he replied, "and that is just what I had hoped you

would decide. Because I have a job for you in the Air Service. A good one, too.

"You know there is much reconstruction work to be done on earth. More than forty cities and towns have been wiped out of existence and these must be rebuilt. That will occupy the minds and energies of thousands who have been bereaved as you have. But, in the Air Service, we have a program that I believe will be more to your liking. The log of the *Terror*, in Oradel's handwriting, was found intact, as were a number of manuscripts pertaining to plans of the Venerians.

"These misshapen creatures were quite evidently educated by Oradel to a hatred of our world. We have reason to believe that other attacks may follow, for they were obviously intending to migrate here in millions. And, according to records found aboard the *Terror*, they are of advanced scientific accomplishment. We may expect them to construct other vessels similar to the *Terror* and to come here again. We must be prepared to fight them off, to carry the war to their own planet if necessary. My work is to organize a world fleet of space ships for this purpose, and I'd like you to help me in this. The work will take you all over the world and will keep you too busy to think about—things."

It was just like Hart, and I thanked him wordlessly, but from the bottom of my heart. Yes, I would accept his generous offer. Though I was no engineer, I had a knowledge of scientific subjects a little above the average, and I could follow instructions. By George, it was the very thing! Suddenly I grew enthusiastic.

There was the sound of voices in the outer office, and Hart's secretary entered to announce the arrival of George Boehm and Professor Lindquist. This was great!

Chubby George, red-faced and smiling as ever, embraced me with one short arm and pounded me on the back with his other fist in his jovial, joking manner. It was good to have friends like these! The professor held forth his hand timidly. He was thinking of that tackle and the half-Nelson he had used on me while the doctor slipped that needle into my arm back there in Houston.

"Don't remove your glasses, Professor," I laughed; "I'm not going to hit you. That was a swell tackle of yours, and you did me a big service down there in the Rice Hotel."

He beamed with pleasure and gripped my hand—mightily, for such a little fellow. George was whispering to Hart, and I could see that they were greatly excited over something.

"Jack," said Hart, when the professor and I finished talking things over, "George here wants you to take a little trip over to Philly with him. He has something there he wants to show you."

I looked from one to the other for signs of a hoax. These two, under normal circumstances, were always up to something. But what I saw in their expressions convinced me that I had better go, and somehow, there rose in my breast a forlorn hope.

"All right," I agreed. "Let's go!"

Once more we four took off together, this time in a speedy little first-level cabin plane of Hart's design, piloted by the irrepressible George. I was brimming with questions, but George kept up such a running fire of small talk that I was unable to get in a single word throughout the short trip to the Quaker City. It was quite evident that something was in the wind.

Instead of landing at the airport, George swung across the city and dropped to the roof landing space of a large building which I recognized as the Germantown Hospital. We had no sooner landed when I was rushed from the plane to the penthouse over the elevator shafts. We were soon on the main floor and George went immediately to the desk at the receiving office, where he engaged in

earnest conversation with the nurse in charge.

"What are you doing—committing me?" I asked, half joking only. For, from the mysterious expression of my friends' faces, I was not sure what to expect.

"No," laughed Hart. "George learned of the existence of a patient here who may turn out to be a very good friend of yours."

I turned this over in my mind, which did not yet function quite normally. A friend? Why, I had very few that could really be termed good friends outside of those that accompanied me. It could mean but one thing. Possibly one of my children—or even my dear wife—might have escaped somehow. I followed in a daze as a white-capped and gowned nurse led us along the corridor and into a ward where there were dozens of high, white beds.

Some of the patients were swathed in bandages; some sat up in their beds, reading or just staring; others lay inert and pale. The reek of iodoform pervaded the large room.

We stopped at the bedside of one of the staring patients, a young woman who looked unseeingly at our party. Great heavens, it was Marie!

A physician stood at the other side of her bed, finger on her pulse. The others drew back as I approached her side, raised her free hand to my lips and spoke to her.

"Marie, dear," I asked gently, forcing the lump from my throat as best I could, "don't you know me? It's Jack, Honey."

The fixed stare of the great blue eyes shifted in my direction. It seemed that they looked through and past me into some terrible realm where only horror held sway. She drew her hand from my grasp and passed it before those staring, unnatural eyes. There was an audible gulp from George. But the doctor smiled encouragement to me. I tried once more.

"Marie," I said, "where are Jim and Jackie?"

The hand fluttered to her lap, where it lay, blue-veined and pitifully thin. The stare focussed on me, seemed to concentrate. Then the film was gone from the eyes and she saw—she knew me!

"Oh, Jack!" she wailed, "I have been away. Don't you know where they are?"

My heart nearly stopped at this, but I sat on the edge of the bed and

took her in my arms, looking at the doctor for approval. He nodded his head brightly and beckoned to the nurse.

"Bring the children," I heard him whisper.

My cup was full. But I must be calm for Marie's sake. She had closed her eyes now and great tears coursed down her waxen cheeks. Her body shook with sobs.

"She'll recover?" I asked the doctor.

"You bet. Just an aggravated case of amnesia. Hasn't eaten. Didn't even know her children. Cured now, but she'll need a few weeks to build up." He snapped shut the lid of his watch.

Those succinct sentences were the finest I had ever heard.

Marie clung to me like an infant to its mother. Her sobs gradually ceased and she looked into my eyes. Little Jim and Jack had come in and were clamoring for recognition.

"Oh, Jack," Marie whispered, "I'm so happy."

She relinquished me and turned her attention to the children. I saw that my friends had left and that an orderly was placing screens

about us. So I'll close the screen on the remainder of this most happy reunion.

It was several days before I had the complete story. Being lonesome during my absence when we were preparing for the voyage into space, and not knowing just when I would return, Marie had packed a grip and taken the train for Philadelphia, deciding to spend a few days with her Aunt Margaret, or at least to remain there with the children until I returned.

She had boarded the train at Manhattan Transfer at about the time we reached the location of the *Terror* and the train was just pulling out of the station when there came the first of the new attacks of the enemy. She thought that the pillar of fire rose from the approximate location of Rutherford, but was not sure until they reached Newark, when the news was spread throughout the train by passengers who boarded it there. She worried and cried over the loss of our little home and had worked herself into a state of extreme nervousness and near-hysteria by the time they reached New Brunswick.

Then, as the long train left New Brunswick, there was another attack, this one on the town they had just left. The last two cars of the train were blown from the track by the initial concussion, and the remainder of the train brought to a grinding, jerking stop that threw

the passengers into a panic.

Already hysterical, Marie was in no condition to bear up under the shock, and the loss of memory followed. Jack and Jim clung to her, of course, and were taken to the Germantown Hospital with her when the wreck victims were transferred to that point. She had no identification on her person, and it was by sheerest luck that George, who was visiting a friend in the same hospital, chanced to see her and thought he recognized her.

That was all of it, but to me it was more than enough. From the depths of despondency, I rose to the peaks of elation. It was true that we would have to establish a new home, but this would be a joy as never before. Those I had given up as lost were restored to me and I was content. Hart would have to make some changes in the duties of that new job—the world travel was out of the picture. I had had my fill of adventure.

Besides, the hot spell was over.

#39 The Forgotten Planet, By Sewell Peaslee Wright:

The authentic account of why cosmic man damned an outlaw world to be, forever, a leper of space.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

I have been asked to record, plainly and without prejudice, a brief history of the Forgotten Planet.

That this record, when completed, will be sealed in the archives of the Interplanetary Alliance and remain there, a secret and rather dreadful bit of history, is no concern of mine. I am an old man, well past the century mark, and what disposal is made of my work is of little importance to me. I grow weary of life and living, which is good. The fear of death was lost when our scientists showed us how to live until we grew weary of life. But I am digressing—an old man's failing.

“It's nothing. Close the exit; we depart at once."

The Forgotten Planet was not always so named. The name that it once bore had been, as every child knows, stricken from the records, actual and mental, of the Universe. It is well that evil should not be remembered. But in order that this history may be clear in the centuries to come, my record should go back to beginnings.

So far as the Universe is concerned, the history of the Forgotten Planet begins with the visit of the first craft ever to span the space between the worlds: the crude, adventuresome *Edorn*, whose name, as well as the names of the nine Zenians who manned her, occupy the highest places in the roll of honor of the Universe.

Ame Baove, the commander and historian of the *Edorn*, made but brief comment on his stop at the Forgotten Planet. I shall record it in full:

"We came to rest upon the surface of this, the fourth of the planets visited during the first trip of the *Edorn*, eighteen spaces before the height of the sun. We found ourselves surrounded immediately by vast numbers of creatures very different from ourselves, and from their expressions and gestures, we gathered that they were both curious and unfriendly.

"Careful analysis of the atmosphere proved it to be sufficiently similar to our own to make it possible for us to again stretch our legs outside the rather cramped quarters of the *Edorn*, and tread the soil of still another world.

"No sooner had we emerged, however, than we were angrily beset by the people of this unfriendly planet, and rather than do them injury, we retired immediately, and concluded our brief observations through our ports.

"The topography of this planet is similar to our own, save that there are no mountains, and the flora is highly colored almost without exception, and apparently quite largely parasitical in nature. The people are rather short in stature, with hairless heads and high foreheads. Instead of being round or oval, however, the heads of these people rise to a rounded ridge which runs back from a point between and just above the eyes, nearly to the nape of the neck behind. They give evidence of a fair order of intelligence, but are suspicious and unfriendly. From the number and size of the cities we saw, this planet is evidently thickly populated.

"We left about sixteen spaces before the height of the sun, and continued towards the fifth and last planet before our return to Zenia."

This report, quite naturally, caused other explorers in space to hesitate. There were so many friendly, eager worlds to visit, during the years that relations between the planets were being established, that an unfriendly people were ignored.

However, from time to time, as space-ships became perfected and more common, parties from many of the more progressive planets did call. Each of them met with the same hostile reception, and at last, shortly after the second War of the Planets, the victorious Alliance sent a fleet of the small but terrible Deuber Spheres, convoyed by four of the largest of the disintegrator ray-ships, to subjugate the Forgotten Planet.

Five great cities were destroyed, and the Control City, the seat of the government, was menaced before the surly inhabitants conceded allegiance to the Alliance. Parties of scientists, fabricators, and workmen were then landed, and a dictator was appointed.

From all the worlds of the Alliance, instruments and equipment were brought to the Forgotten Planet. A great educational system was planned and executed, the benign and kindly influence of the Alliance made every effort to improve the conditions existing on the Forgotten Planet, and to win the friendship and allegiance of these people.

For two centuries the work went on. Two centuries of bloodshed, strife, hate and disturbance. No where else within the known Universe was there ill feeling. The second awful War of the Planets had at last succeeded in teaching the lesson of peace.

Two centuries of effort—wasted effort. It was near the end of the second century that my own story begins.

Commander at that time of the super-cruiser *Tamon*, a Special Patrol ship of the Alliance, I was not at all surprised to receive orders from the Central Council to report at emergency speed. Special Patrol work in those days, before the advent of the present de-centralized system, was a succession of false starts, hurried recalls, and urgent, emergency orders.

I obeyed at once. In the Special Patrol service, there is no questioning orders. The planet Earth, from which I sprang, is and always has been proud of the fact that from the very beginning, her men have been picked to command the ships of the Special Patrol. No matter how dangerous, how forlorn and hopeless the mission given to a commander of a Special Patrol ship, history has never recorded that any commander has ever hesitated. That is why our uniform of blue and silver commands the respect that it does even in this day and age of softening and decadence, when men—but again

an old man digresses. And perhaps it is not for me to judge.

I pointed the blunt nose of the *Tamon* at Zenia, seat of the Central Council, and in four hours, Earth time, the great craft swept over the gleaming city of the Central Council and settled swiftly to the court before the mighty, columned Hall of the Planets.

Four pages of the Council, in their white and scarlet livery, met me and conducted me instantly to a little anteroom behind the great council chamber.

There were three men awaiting me there; three men whose faces, at that time, were familiar to every person in the known Universe.

Kellen, the oldest of the three, and the spokesman, rose as I entered the room. The others did likewise, as the pages closed the heavy doors behind me.

"You are prompt, and that is good," thought Kellen. "I welcome you. Remove now thy menore."

I glanced up at him swiftly. This must surely be an important matter, that I was asked to remove my menore band.

It will, of course, be understood that at that time we had but a bulky

and clumsy instrument to enable us to convey and receive thought; a device consisting of a heavy band of metal, in which were imbedded the necessary instruments and a tiny atomic energy generator, the whole being worn as a circlet or crown upon the head.

Wonderingly, I removed my menore, placed it upon the long, dark table around which the three men were standing, and bowed. Each of the three, in turn, lifted their gleaming circlets from their heads, and placed them likewise upon the table before them.

"You wonder," said Kellen, speaking of course, in the soft and liquid universal language, which is, I understand, still disseminated in our schools, as it should be. "I shall explain as quickly and as briefly as possible.

"We have called you here on a dangerous mission. A mission that will require tact and quickness of mind as well as bravery. We have selected you, have called you, because we are agreed that you possess the qualities required. Is it not so?" He glanced at his two companions, and they nodded gravely, solemnly, without speaking.

"You are a young man, John Hanson," continued Kellen, "but your

record in your service is one of which you can be proud. We trust you—with knowledge that is so secret, so precious, that we must revert to speech in order to convey it; we dare not trust it, even in this protected and guarded place, to the menore's quicker but less discreet communication."

He paused for a moment, frowning thoughtfully as though dreading to begin. I waited silently, and at last he spoke again.

"There is a world"—and he named a name which I shall not repeat, the name of the Forgotten Planet—"that is a festering sore upon the body of the Universe. As you know, for two centuries we have tried to pass on to these people an understanding of peace and friendship. I believe that nothing has been left undone. The Council and the forces behind it have done everything within their power. And now __"

He stopped again, and there was an expression of deepest pain written upon his wise and kindly face. The pause was for but an instant.

"And now," he went on firmly, "it is at an end. Our work has been undone. Two centuries of effort—undone. They have risen in revolt, they have killed all those sent by the Alliance of which this Council

is the governing body and the mouthpiece, and they have sent us an ultimatum—a threat of war!"

"*What?*"

Kellen nodded his magnificent old head gravely.

"I do not wonder that you start," he said heavily. "War! It must not be. It cannot be! And yet, war is what they threaten."

"But, sir!" I put in eagerly. I was young and rash in those days. "Who are they, to make war against a united Universe?"

"I have visited your planet, Earth," said Kellen, smiling very faintly. "You have a tiny winged insect you call *bee*. Is it not so?"

"Yes."

"The bee is a tiny thing, of little strength. A man, a little child, might crush one to death between a thumb and finger. But the bee may sting before he is crushed, and the sting may linger on for days, a painful and unpleasant thing. Is that not so?"

"I see, sir," I replied, somewhat abashed before the tolerant, kindly wisdom of this great man. "They cannot hope to wage successful war, but they may bring much suffering to others."

"Much suffering," nodded Kellen, still gently smiling. "And we are determined that this thing shall not be. Not"—and his face grew gray with a terrible and bitter resolve—"not if we have to bring to bear upon that dark and unwilling world the disintegrating rays of every ship of the Alliance, so that the very shell of the planet shall disappear, and no life ever again shall move upon its surface.

"But this," and he seemed to shudder at the thought, "is a terrible and a ruthless thing to even contemplate. We must first try once again to point out to them the folly of their ways. It is with this mission that we would burden you, John Hanson."

"It is no burden, but an honor, sir," I said quietly.

"Youth! Youth!" Kellen chided me gently. "Foolish, yet rather glorious. Let me tell you the rest, and then we shall ask for your reply again.

"The news came to us by a small scout ship attached to that unhappy world. It barely made the journey to Jaron, the nearest planet, and crashed so badly, from lack of power, that all save one man were killed.

"He, luckily, tore off his menore, and insisted in speech that he be brought here. He was obeyed, and, in a dying condition, was brought to this very chamber." Kellen glanced swiftly, sadly, around the room, as though he could still visualize that scene.

"Every agent of the Alliance upon that hateful planet was set upon and killed, following the working out of some gigantic and perfectly executed plan—all save the crew of this one tiny scout ship, which was spared to act as a messenger.

"'Tell your great Council,' was the message these people sent to us, 'that here is rebellion. We do not want, nor will we tolerate, your peace. We have learned now that upon other worlds than ours there are great riches. These we shall take. If there is resistance, we have a new and a terrible death to deal. A death that your great scientists will be helpless against; a horrible and irresistable death that will make desolate and devoid of intelligent life any world where we are forced to sow the seeds of ultimate disaster.

"'We are not yet ready. If we were, we would not move, for we prefer that your Council have time to think about what is surely to come. If you doubt that we have the power to do what we have threatened to do, send one ship, commanded by a man whose word you will trust, and we will prove to him that these are no empty words.'"

"That, as nearly as I can remember it," concluded Kellen, "is the message. The man who brought it died almost before he had finished.

"That is the message. You are the man we have picked to accept their challenge. Remember, though, that there are but the four of us in this room. There are but four of us who know these things. If you for any reason do not wish to accept this mission, there will be none to judge you, least of all, any one of us, who know best of all the perils."

"You say, sir," I said quietly, although my heart was pounding in my throat, and roaring in my ears, "that there would be none to judge me.

"Sir, there would be myself. There could be no more merciless judge. I am honored that I have been selected for this task, and I

accept the responsibility willingly, gladly. When is it your wish that we should start?"

The three presiding members of the Council glanced at each other, faintly smiling, as though they would say, as Kellen had said a short time before: "Youth! Youth!" Yet I believe they were glad and somewhat proud that I had replied as I did.

"You may start," said Kellen, "as soon as you can complete the necessary preparations. Detailed instructions will be given you later."

He bowed to me, and the others did likewise. Then Kellen picked up his menore and adjusted it.

The interview was over.

"What do you make it?" I asked the observer. He glanced up from his instrument.

"Jaron, sir. Three degrees to port; elevation between five and six degrees. Approximate only, of course, sir."

"Good enough. Please ask Mr. Barry to hold to his present course. We shall not stop at Jaron."

The observer glanced at me curiously, but he was too well disciplined to hesitate or ask questions.

"Yes, sir!" he said crisply, and spoke into the microphone beside him.

None of us wore menores when on duty, for several reasons. Our instruments were not nearly as perfect as those in use to-day, and verbal orders were clearer and carried more authority than mental instructions. The delicate and powerful electrical and atomic mechanism of our ship interfered with the functioning of the menores, and at that time the old habit of speech was far more firmly entrenched, due to hereditary influence, than it is now.

I nodded to the man, and made my way to my own quarters. I wished most heartily that I could talk over my plans with someone, but this had been expressly forbidden.

"I realize that you trust your men, and more particularly your officers," Kellen had told me during the course of his parting conversation with me. "I trust them also—yet we must remember that the peace of mind of the Universe is concerned. If news, even a rumor, of this threatened disaster should become known, it is impossible to predict the disturbance it might create.

"Say nothing to anyone. It is your problem. You alone should leave the ship when you land; you alone shall hear or see the evidence they have to present, and you alone shall bring word of it to us. That is the wish of the Council."

"Then it is my wish," I had said, and so it had been settled.

Aft, in the crew's quarters, a gong sounded sharply: the signal for changing watches, and the beginning of a sleep period. I glanced at the remote control dials that glowed behind their glass panel on one side of my room. From the registered attraction of Jaron, at our present speed, we should be passing her within, according to Earth time, about two hours. That meant that their outer patrols might be seeking our business, and I touched Barry's attention button, and spoke into the microphone beside my bunk.

"Mr. Barry? I am turning in for a little sleep. Before you turn over the watch to Eitel, will you see that the nose rays are set for the Special Patrol code signal for this enar. We shall be close to Jaron shortly."

"Yes, sir! Any other orders?"

"No. Keep her on her present course. I shall take the watch from Mr.

Eitel."

Since there have been changes since those days, and will undoubtedly be others in the future, it might be well to make clear, in a document such is this, that at this period, all ships of the Special Patrol Service identified themselves by means of invisible rays flashed in certain sequences, from the two nose, or forward, projectors. These code signals were changed every enar, a period of time arbitrarily set by the Council; about eighteen days, as time is measured on the Earth, and divided into ten periods, as at present, known as enarens. These were further divided into enaros, thus giving us a time-reckoning system for use in space, corresponding roughly to the months, days and hours of the Earth.

I retired, but not to sleep. Sleep would not come. I knew, of course, that if curious outer patrol ships from Jaron did investigate us, they would be able to detect our invisible ray code signal, and thus satisfy themselves that we were on the Council's business. There would be no difficulty on that score. But what I should do after landing upon the rebellious sphere, I had not the slightest idea.

"

Be stern, indifferent to their threats," Kellen, had counseled me, "but do everything within your power to make them see the folly of their attitude. Do not threaten them, for they are a surly people and you might precipitate matters. Swallow your pride if you must; remember that yours is a gigantic responsibility, and upon the information you bring us may depend the salvation of millions. I am convinced that they are not—you have a word in your language that fits exactly. Not pretending ... what is the word?"

"Bluffing?" I had supplied in English, smiling.

"Right! Bluffing. It is a very descriptive word. I am sure they are not bluffing."

I was sure of it also. They knew the power of the Alliance; they had been made to feel it more than once. A bluff would have been a foolish thing, and these people were not fools. In some lines of research they were extraordinarily brilliant.

But what could their new, terrible weapon be? Rays we had; at least half a dozen rays of destruction; the terrible dehydrating ray of the Deuber Spheres, the disintegrating ray that dated back before Ame Baove and his first voyage into space, the concentrated ultra-violet ray that struck men down in fiery torment.... No, it could hardly be a

new ray that was their boasted weapon.

What, then? Electricity had even then been exhausted of its possibilities. Atomic energy had been released, harnessed, and directed. Yet it would take fabulous time and expense to make these machines of destruction do what they claimed they would do.

Still pondering the problem, I did fall at last into a fitful travesty of sleep.

I was glad when the soft clamor of the bell aft announced the next change of watch. I rose, cleared the cobwebs from my brain with an icy shower, and made my way directly to the navigating room.

"Everything tidy, sir," said Eitel, my second officer, and a Zenian. He was thin and very dark, like all Zenians, and had the high, effeminate voice of that people. But he was cool and fearless and had the uncanny cerebration of his kind; I trusted him as completely as I trusted Barry, my first officer, who, like myself, was a native of Earth. "Will you take over?"

"Yes," I nodded, glancing at the twin charts beneath the ground glass top of the control table. "Get what sleep you can the next few enaros. Presently I shall want every man on duty and at his station."

He glanced at me curiously, as the observer had done, but saluted and left with only a brief, "Yes, sir!" I returned the salute and turned my attention again to the charts.

The navigating room of an interplanetary ship is without doubt unfamiliar ground to most, so it might be well for me to say that such ships have, for the most part, twin charts, showing progress in two dimensions; to use land terms, lateral and vertical. These charts are really no more than large sheets of ground glass, ruled in both directions with fine black lines, representing all relatively close heavenly bodies by green lights of varying sizes. The ship itself is represented by a red spark and the whole is, of course, entirely automatic in action, the instruments comprising the chart being operated by super-radio reflexes.

Jaron, the charts showed me at a glance, was now far behind. Almost directly above—it is necessary to resort to these unscientific terms to make my meaning clear—was the tiny world Elon, home of the friendly but impossibly dull winged people, the only ones in the known Universe. I was there but once, and found them almost laughably like our common dragon-flies on Earth; dragon-flies that grow some seven feet long, and with gauzy wings of amazing strength.

Directly ahead, on both charts, was a brilliantly glowing sphere of green—our destination. I made some rapid mental calculations, studying the few fine black lines between the red spark that was our ship, and the nearest edge of the great green sphere. I glanced at our speed indicator and the attraction meter. The little red slide that moved around the rim of the attraction meter was squarely at the top, showing that the attraction was from straight ahead; the great black hand was nearly a third of the way around the face.

We were very close; two hours would bring us into the atmospheric envelope. In less than two hours and a half, we would be in the Control City of what is now called the Forgotten Planet!

I glanced forward, through the thick glass partitions, into the operating room. Three men stood there, watching intently; they too, were wondering why we visited the unfriendly world.

The planet itself loomed up straight ahead, a great half-circle, its curved rim sharp and bright against the empty blackness of space; the chord ragged and blurred. In two hours ... I turned away and began a restless pacing.

An hour went by; an hour and a half. I pressed the attention button to the operating room, and gave orders to reduce our speed by half. We

were very close to the outer fringe of the atmospheric envelope. Then, keeping my eye on the big surface-temperature gauge, with its stubby red hand, I resumed my nervous pacing.

Slowly the thick red hand of the surface-temperature gauge began to move; slowly, and then more rapidly, until the eyes could catch its creeping.

"Reduce to atmospheric speed," I ordered curtly, and glanced down through a side port at one end of the long navigating room.

We were, at the moment, directly above the twilight belt. To my right, as I looked down, I could see a portion of the glistening antarctic ice cap. Here and there were the great flat lakes, almost seas, of the planet.

Our geographies of the Universe to-day do not show the topography of the Forgotten Planet: I might say, therefore, that the entire sphere was land area, with numerous great lakes embedded in its surface, together with many broad, very crooked rivers. As Ame Baove had reported, there were no mountains, and no high land.

"Altitude constant," I ordered. "Port three degrees. Stand by for further orders."

The earth seemed to whirl slowly beneath us. Great cities drifted astern, and I compared the scene below me with the great maps I took from our chart-case. The Control City should be just beyond the visible rim; well in the daylight area.

"Port five degrees," I said, and pressed the attention button to Barry's quarters.

"Mr. Barry, please call all men to quarters, including the off-duty watch, and then report to the navigating room. Mr. Eitel will be under my direct orders. We shall descend within the next few minutes."

"Very well, sir."

I pressed the attention button to Eitel's room.

"Mr. Eitel, please pick ten of your best men and have them report at the forward exit. Await me, with the men, at that place. I shall be with you as soon as I turn the command over to Mr. Barry. We are descending immediately."

"Right, sir!" said Eitel.

I turned from the microphone to find that Barry had just entered the

navigating room.

"We will descend into the Great Court of the Control City, Mr. Barry," I said. "I have a mission here. I am sorry, but these are the only instructions I can leave you.

"I do not know how long I shall be gone from the ship, but if I do not return within three hours, depart without me, and report directly to Kellen of the Council. To him, and no other. Tell him, verbally, what took place. Should there be any concerted action against the *Tamon*, use your own judgment as to the action to be taken, remembering that the safety of the ship and its crew, and the report of the Council, are infinitely more important than my personal welfare. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir. Too damned clear."

I smiled and shook my head.

"Don't worry," I said lightly. "I'll be back well within the appointed time."

"I hope so. But there's something wrong as hell here. I'm talking now as man to man; not to my commanding officer. I've been watching

below, and I have seen at least two spots where large numbers of our ships have been destroyed. The remaining ships bear their own damned emblem where the crest of the Alliance should be—and was. What does it mean?"

"It means," I said slowly, "that I shall have to rely upon every man and officer to forget himself and myself, and obey orders without hesitation and without flinching. The orders are not mine, but direct from the Council itself." I held out my hand to him—an ancient Earth gesture of greeting, good-will and farewell—and he shook it vigorously.

"God go with you," he said softly, and with a little nod of thanks I turned and quickly left the room.

Eitel, with his ten men, were waiting for me at the forward exit. The men fell back a few paces and came to attention; Eitel saluted smartly.

"We are ready, sir. What are your orders?"

"You are to guard this opening. Under no circumstances is anyone to enter save myself. I shall be gone not longer than three hours; if I am not back within that time, Mr. Barry has his orders. The exit will be

sealed, and the *Tamon* will depart immediately, without me."

"Yes, sir. You will pardon me, but I gather that your mission is a dangerous one. May I not accompany you?"

I shook my head.

"I shall need you here."

"But, sir, they are very excited and angry; I have been watching them from the observation ports. And there is a vast crowd of them around the ship."

"I had expected that. I thank you for your concern, but I must go alone. Those are the orders. Will you unseal the exit?"

His "Yes, sir!" was brisk and efficient, but there was a worried frown on his features as he unlocked and released the switch that opened the exit.

The huge plug of metal, some ten feet in diameter, revolved swiftly and noiselessly, backing slowly in its fine threads into the interior of the ship, gripped by the ponderous gimbals which, as the last threads disengaged, swung the mighty disc to one side, like the door of some great safe.

"Remember your orders," I smiled, and with a little gesture to convey an assurance which I certainly did not feel, I strode through the circular opening out into the crowd. The heavy glass secondary door shot down behind me, and I was in the hands of the enemy.

The first thing I observed was that my menore, which I had picked up on my way to the exit, was not functioning. Not a person in all that vast multitude wore a menore; the five black-robed dignitaries who marched to meet me wore none.

Nothing could have showed more clearly that I was in for trouble. To invite a visitor, as Kellen had done, to remove his menore first, was, of course, a polite and courteous thing to do if one wished to communicate by speech; to remove the menore before greeting a visitor wearing one, was a tacit admission of rank enmity; a confession that one's thoughts were to be concealed.

My first impulse was to snatch off my own instrument and fling it in the solemn, ugly faces of the nearest of the five dignataries; I remembered Kellen's warning just in time. Quietly, I removed the metal circlet and tucked it under my arm, bowing slightly to the committee of five as I did so.

"I am Ja Ben," said the first of the five, with an evil grin. "You are

the representative of the Council that we commanded to appear?"

"I am John Hanson, commander of the ship *Tamon* of the Special Patrol Service. I am here to represent the Central Council," I replied with dignity.

"As we commanded," grinned Ja Ben. "That is good. Follow us and you shall have the evidence you were promised."

Ja Ben led the way with two of his black-robed followers. The other two fell in behind me. A virtual prisoner, I marched between them, through the vast crowd that made way grudgingly to let us pass.

I have seen the people of most of the planets of the known Universe. Many of them, to Earth notions, are odd. But these people, so much like us in many respects, were strangely repulsive.

Their heads, as Ame Baove had recorded, were not round like ours, but possessed a high bony crest that ran from between their lashless, browless eyes, down to the very nape of their necks. Their skin, even that covering their hairless heads, was a dull and papery white, like parchment, and their eyes were abnormally small, and nearly round. A hateful, ugly people, perpetually scowling, snarling; their very voices resembled more the growl of wild beasts than the speech of

intelligent beings.

Ja Ben led the way straight to the low but vast building of dun-colored stone that I knew was the administration building of the Control City. We marched up the broad, crowded steps, through the muttering, jeering multitude into the building itself. The guards at the doors stood aside to let us through and the crowd at last was left behind.

A swift, cylindrical elevator shot us upward, into a great glass-walled laboratory, built like a sort of penthouse on the roof. Ja Ben walked quickly across the room towards a long, glass-topped table; the other four closed in on me silently but suggestively.

"That is unnecessary," I said quietly. "See, I am unarmed and completely in your power. I am here as an ambassador of the Central Council, not as a warrior."

"Which is as well for you," grinned Ja Ben. "What I have to show you, you can see quickly, and then depart."

From a great cabinet in one corner of the room he took a shining cylinder of dark red metal, and held it up before him, stroking its sleek sides with an affectionate hand.

"Here it is," he said, chuckling. "The secret of our power. In here, safely imprisoned now, but capable of being released at our command, is death for every living thing upon any planet we choose to destroy." He replaced the great cylinder in the cabinet, and picked up in its stead a tiny vial of the same metal, no larger than my little finger, and not so long. "Here," he said, turning again towards me, "is the means of proving our power to you. Come closer!"

With my bodyguard of four watching every move, I approached.

Ja Ben selected a large hollow hemisphere of crystal glass and placed it upon a smooth sheet of flat glass. Next he picked a few blossoms from a bowl that stood, incongruously enough, on the table, and threw them under the glass hemisphere.

"Flora," he grinned.

Hurrying to the other end of the room, he reached into a large flat metal cage and brought forth three small rodent like animals, natives of that world. These he also tossed carelessly under the glass.

"Fauna," he grunted, and picked up the tiny metal vial.

One end of the vial unscrewed. He turned the cap gently, carefully, a

strained, anxious look upon his face. My four guards watched him breathlessly, fearfully.

The cap came loose at last, disclosing the end of the tube, sealed with a grayish substance that looked like wax. Very quickly Ja Ben rolled the little cylinder under the glass hemisphere, and picked up a beaker that had been bubbling gently on an electric plate close by. Swiftly he poured the thick contents of the beaker around the base of the glass bell. The stuff hardened almost instantly, forming an air-tight seal between the glass hemisphere and the flat plate of glass upon which it rested. Then, with an evil, triumphant smile, Ja Ben looked up.

"*Flora*," he repeated. "*Fauna.* And *death*. Watch! The little metal cylinder is plugged still, but in a moment that plug will disappear—simply a volatile solid, you understand. It is going rapidly ... rapidly ... it is almost gone now! Watch ... In an instant now ... *ah!*"

I saw the gray substance that stopped the entrance of the little metal vial disappear. The rodents ran around and over it, trying to find a crevice by which they might escape. The flowers, bright and beautiful, lay untidily on the bottom of the glass prison.

Then, just as the last vestige of the gray plug vanished; an amazing,

a terrible thing happened. At the mouth of the tiny metal vial a greenish cloud appeared. I call it a cloud, but it was not that. It was solid, and it spread in every direction, sending out little needles that lashed about and ran together into a solid mass while millions of little needles reached out swiftly.

One of these little needles touched a scurrying animal. Instantly the tiny brute stiffened, and from his entire body the greenish needles spread swiftly. One of the flowers turned suddenly thick and pulpy with the soft green mass, then another, another of the rodents ... *God!*

In the space of two heart beats, the entire hemisphere was filled with the green mass, that still moved and writhed and seemed to press against the glass sides as though the urge to expand was insistent, imperative....

"What is it?" I whispered, still staring at the thing.

"*Death!*" grunted Ja Ben, thrusting his hateful face close to mine, his tiny round eyes, with their lashless lids glinting. "Death, my friend. Go and tell your great Council of this death that we have created for every planet that will not obey us.

"We have gone back into the history of dealing death and have come back with a death such as the Universe has never known before!

"Here is a rapacious, deadly fungus we have been two centuries in developing. The spores contained in that tiny metal tube would be invisible to the naked eye—and yet given but a little time to grow, with air and vegetation and flesh to feed upon, and even that small capsule would wipe out a world. And in the cabinet,"—he pointed grinning triumphantly—"we have, ready for instant use, enough of the spores of this deadly fungas to wipe out all the worlds of your great Alliance.

"To wipe them out utterly!" he repeated, his voice shaking with a sort of frenzy now. "Every living thing upon their faces, wrapped in that thin, hungry green stuff you see there under that glass. All life wiped out; made uninhabitable so long as the Universe shall endure. And we—*we* shall be rulers, unquestioned, of that Universe. Tell your doddering Council *that*!" He leaned back against the table, panting with hate.

"I shall tell them all I have seen; all you have said," I nodded.

"You believe we have the power to do all this?"

"I do—God help me, and the Universe," I said solemnly.

There was no doubt in my mind. I could see all too clearly how well their plans had been laid; how quickly this hellish growth would strangle all life, once its spores began to develop.

The only possible chance was to get back to the Council and make my report, with all possible speed, so that every available armed ship of the universe might concentrate here, and wipe out these people before they had time to—

"I know what you are thinking, my friend," broke in Ja Ben mockingly. "You might as well have worn the menore! You would have the ships of the Alliance destroy us before we have time to act. We had foreseen that, and have provided for the possibility.

"As soon as you leave here, ships, provided with many tubes like the one just used for our little demonstration, will be dispersed in every direction. We shall be in constant communication with those ships, and at the least sign of hostility, they will be ordered to depart and spread their death upon every world they can reach. Some of them you may be able to locate and eliminate; a number of them are certain to elude capture in infinite space—and if only one, one lone ship, should escape, the doom of the Alliance and millions upon

millions of people will be pronounced.

"I warn you, it will be better, much better, to bow to our wishes, and pay us the tribute we shall demand. Any attempt at resistance will precipitate certain disaster for your Council and all the worlds the Council governs."

"At least, we would wipe you out first," I said hoarsely.

"True," nodded Ja Ben. "But the vengeance of our ships would be a terrible thing! You would not dare to take the chance!"

I stood there, staring at him in a sort of daze. What he had said was so true; terribly, damnably true.

If only—

There was but one chance I could see, and desperate as it was, I took it. Whirling the heavy metal ring of my menore in my hand, I sprang towards the table.

If I could break the sealed glass hemisphere, and loose the fungus upon its creators; deal to them the doom they had planned for the universe, then perhaps all might yet be well.

Ja Ben understood instantly what was in my mind. He and his four aides leaped between me and the table, their tiny round eyes blazing with anger. I struck one of the four viciously with the menore, and with a gasp he fell back and slumped to the floor.

Before I could break through the opening, however, Ja Ben struck me full in the face with his mighty fist; a blow that sent me, dazed and reeling, into a corner of the room. I brought up with a crash against the cabinet there, groped wildly in an effort to steady myself, and fell to the floor. Almost before I struck, all four of them were upon me.

They hammered me viciously, shouted at me, cursed me in the universal tongue, but I paid no heed. I pretended to be unconscious, but my heart was beating high with sudden, glorious hope, and in my brain a terrible, merciless plan was forming.

When I had groped against the cabinet in an effort to regain my balance, my fingers had closed upon one of the little metal vials. As I fell, I covered that hand with my body and hastily hid the tiny tube in a deep pocket of my blue and silver Service uniform.

Slowly, after a few seconds, I opened my eyes and looked up at them, helplessly.

"Go, now!" snarled Ja Ben, dragging me to my feet. "Go, and tell your Council we are more than a match for you—and for them." He thrust me, reeling, towards his three assistants. "Take him to his ship, and send aid for Ife Rance, here." He glanced at the still unconscious figure of the victim of my menore, and then turned to me with a last warning.

"Remember, one thing more, my friend: you have disintegrator ray equipment upon your ship. You have the little atomic bombs that won for the Alliance the Second War of the Planets. I know that. But if you make the slightest effort to use them, I shall dispatch a supply of the green death to our ships, and they will depart upon their missions at once. You would take upon yourself a terrible responsibility by making the smallest hostile move.

"Go, now—and when you return, bring with you members of your great Council who will have the power to hear our demands, and see that they are obeyed. And do not keep us waiting over long, for we are an impatient race." He bowed, mockingly, and passed his left hand swiftly before his face, his people's sign of parting.

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak, and, hemmed in by my three black-robed conductors, was hurried down the elevator and back through the jeering mob to my ship.

The glass secondary door shot up to permit me to enter, and Eitel gripped my shoulder anxiously, his eyes smoldering angrily.

"You're hurt, sir!" he said in his odd, high-pitched voice, staring into my bruised face. "What—"

"It's nothing," I assured him. "Close the exit immediately; we depart at once."

"Yes, sir!" He closed the switch, and the great threaded plug swung gently on its gimbals and began to revolve, swiftly and silently. A little bell sounded sharply, and the great door ceased its motion. Eitel locked the switch and returned the key to his pocket.

"Good. All men are at their stations?" I asked briskly.

"Yes, sir! All except these ten, detailed to guard the exit."

"Have them report to their regular stations. Issue orders to the ray operators that they are to instantly, and without further orders, destroy any ship that may leave the surface of this planet. Have every atomic bomb crew ready for an instant and concentrated offensive directed at the Control City, but command them not to act under any circumstances unless I give the order. Is that clear, Mr.

Eitel?"

"Yes, sir!"

I nodded, and turned away, making my way immediately to the navigating room.

"Mr. Barry," I said quickly and gravely, "I believe that the fate of the known Universe depends upon us at this moment. We will ascend vertically, at once—slowly—until we are just outside the envelope, maintaining only sufficient horizontal motion to keep us directly over the Control City. Will you give the necessary orders?"

"Immediately, sir!" He pressed the attention button to the operating room and spoke swiftly into the microphone; before he completed the order I had left.

We were already ascending when I reached the port forward atomic bomb station. The man in charge, a Zenian, saluted with automatic precision and awaited orders.

"You have a bomb in readiness?" I asked, returning the salute.

"Those were my orders, sir."

"Correct. Remove it, please."

I waited impatiently while the crew removed the bomb from the releasing trap. It was withdrawn at last; a fish-shaped affair, very much like the ancient airplane bombs save that it was no larger than my two fists, placed one upon the other, and that it had four silvery wires running along its sides, from rounded nose to pointed tail, held at a distance from the body by a series of insulating struts.

"Now," I said, "how quickly can you put another object in the trap, re-seal the opening, and release the object?"

"While the Commander counts ten with reasonable speed," said the Zenian with pride. "We won first honors in the Special Patrol Service contests at the last Examination, the Commander may remember."

"I do remember. That is why I selected you for this duty."

With hands that trembled a little, I think, I drew forth the little vial of gleaming red metal, while the bombing crew watched me curiously.

"I shall unscrew the cap from this little vial," I explained, "and drop

it immediately into the releasing trap. Re-seal the trap and release this object as quickly as it is possible to do so. If you can better the time you made to win the honors at the Examination—in God's name, do so!"

"Yes, sir!" replied the Zenian. He gave brisk orders to his crew, and each of the three men sprang alertly into position.

As quickly as I could, I turned off the cap of the little metal vial and dropped it into the trap. The heavy plug, a tiny duplicate of the exit door, clicked shut upon it and spun, whining gently, into the opening. Something clicked sharply, and one of the crew dropped a bar into place. As it shot home, the Zenian in command of the crew pulled the release plunger.

"Done, sir!" he said proudly.

I did not reply. My eye fixed upon the observation tube that was following the tiny missile to the ground.

The Control City was directly below us. I lost sight of the vial almost instantly, but the indicating cross-hairs showed me exactly where the vial would strike; at a point approximately half way between the edge of the city and the great squat pile of the

administrating building, with its gleaming glass penthouse—the laboratory in which, only a few minutes before, I had witnessed the demonstration of the death which awaited the Universe.

"Excellent!" I exclaimed. "Smartly done, men!" I turned and hurried to the navigating room, where the most powerful of our television discs was located.

The disc was not as perfect as those we have to-day; it was hooded to keep out exterior light, which is not necessary with the later instruments, and it was more unwieldy. However, it did its work, and did it well, in the hands of an experienced operator.

With only a nod to Barry, I turned the range band to maximum, and brought it swiftly to bear upon that portion of the city in which the little vial had fallen. As I drew the focusing lever towards me, the scene leaped at me through the clear, glowing glass disc.

Froth! Green, billowing froth that grew and boiled and spread unceasingly. In places it reached high into the air, and it moved with an eager, inner life that was somehow terrible and revolting. I moved the range hand back, and the view seemed to drop away from me

swiftly.

I could see the whole city now. All one side of it was covered with the spreading green stain that moved and flowed so swiftly. Thousands of tiny black figures were running in the streets, crowding away from the awful danger that menaced them.

The green patch spread more swiftly always. When I had first seen it, the edges were advancing as rapidly as a man could run; now they were fairly racing, and the speed grew constantly.

A ship, two of them, three of them came darting from somewhere, towards the administration building, with its glass cupola. I held my breath as the deep, sudden humming from the *Tamon* told me that our rays were busy. Would they—

One of the enemy ships disappeared suddenly in a little cloud of dirty, heavy dust that settled swiftly. Another ... and the third. Three little streaks of dust, falling, falling....

A fourth ship, and a fifth came rushing up, their sides faintly glowing from the speed they had made. The green flood, thick and insistent, was racing up and over the administration building now. It reached the roof, ran swiftly....

The fourth ship shattered into dust. The fifth settled swiftly—and then that ship also disappeared, together with a corner of the building. Then the thick green stuff flowed over the whole building and there was nothing to be seen there but a mound of soft, flowing, gray-green stuff that rushed on now with the swiftness of the wind.

I looked up, into Barry's face.

"You're ill!" he said quickly. "Is there anything I can do, sir?"

"Yes," I said, forming the words with difficulty. "Give orders to ascend at emergency speed!"

For once my first officer hesitated. He glanced at the attraction meter and then turned to me again, wondering.

"At this height, sir, emergency speed will mean dangerous heating of the surface; perhaps—"

"I want it white hot, Mr. Barry. She is built to stand it. Emergency speed, please—immediately!"

"Right, sir!" he said briskly, and gave the order.

I felt my weight increase as the order was obeyed; gradually the

familiar, uncomfortable feeling left me. Silently, Barry and I watched the big surface temperature gauge as it started to move. The heat inside became uncomfortable, grew intense. The sweat poured from us. In the operating room forward, I could see the men casting quick, wondering glances up at us through the heavy glass partition that lay between.

The thick, stubby red hand of the surface temperature gauge moved slowly but steadily towards the heavy red line that marked the temperature at which the outer shell of our hull would become incandescent. The hand was within three or four degrees of that mark when I gave Barry the order to arrest our motion.

When he had given the order, I turned to him and motioned towards the television disc.

"Look," I said.

He looked, and when at last he tore his face away from the hood, he seemed ten years older.

"What is it?" he asked in a choked whisper. "Why—they're being wiped out; the whole of that world—"

"True. And some of the seeds of that terrible death might have drifted upward, and found a lodging place upon the surface of our ship. That is why I ordered the emergency speed while we were still within the atmospheric envelope, Barry. To burn away that contamination, if it existed. Now we are safe, unless—"

I pressed the attention button to the station of the chief of the ray operators.

"Your report," I ordered.

"Nine ships disintegrated, sir," he replied instantly. "Five before the city was destroyed, four later."

"You are certain that none escaped?"

"Positive, sir."

"Very good."

I turned to Barry, smiling.

"Point her nose for Zenia, Mr. Barry," I said. "As soon as it is feasible, resume emergency speed. There are some very anxious gentlemen there awaiting our report, and I dare not convey it except

in person."

"Yes, sir!" said Barry crisply.

This, then, is the history of the Forgotten Planet. On the charts of the Universe it appears as an unnamed world. No ship is permitted to pass close enough to it so that its attraction is greater than that of the nearest other mass. A permanent outpost of fixed-station ships, with headquarters upon Jaron, the closest world, is maintained by the Council.

There are millions of people who might be greatly disturbed if they knew of this potential menace that lurks in the midst of our Universe, but they do not know. The wisdom of the Council made certain of that.

But, in order that in the ages to come there might be a record of this matter, I have been asked to prepare this document for the sealed archives of the Alliance. It has been a pleasant task; I have relived, for a little time, a part of my youth.

The work is done, now, and that is well. I am an old man, and weary. Sometimes I wish I might live to see the wonders that the next generation or so will witness, but my years are heavy upon me.

My work is done.

#40 The Power And The Glory, By Charles Willard Diffin:

Sadly, sternly, the old professor reveals to his brilliant pupil the greater path to glory.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

___

There were papers on the desk, a litter of papers scrawled over, in the careless writing of indifferent students, with the symbols of chemistry and long mathematical computations. The man at the desk pushed them aside to rest his lean, lined face on one thin hand. The other arm, ending at the wrist, was on the desk before him.

Students of a great university had long since ceased to speculate about the missing hand. The result of an experiment, they knew—a hand that was a mass of lifeless cells, amputated quickly that the living arm might be saved—but that was some several years ago, ancient history to those who came and went through Professor

Eddinger's class room.

And now Professor Eddinger was weary—weary and old, he told himself—as he closed his eyes to shut out the sight of the interminable papers and the stubby wrist that had ended forever his experiments and the delicate manipulations which only he could do.

He reached slowly for a buzzing phone, but his eyes brightened at the voice that came to him.

"I've got it—I've got it!" The words were almost incoherent. "This is Avery, Professor—Avery! You must come at once. You will share in it; I owe it all to you … you will be the first to see … I am sending a taxi for you—"

Professor Eddinger's tired eyes crinkled to a smile. Enthusiasm like this was rare among his youngsters. But Avery—with the face of a poet, a dreamer's eyes and the mind of a scientist—good boy, Avery! —a long time since he had seen him—had him in his own laboratory for two years….

"What's this all about?" he asked.

"No—no!" said a voice; "I can't tell you—it is too big—greater than

the induction motor—greater than the electric light—it is the greatest thing in the world. The taxi should be there now—you must come __”

A knock at the office door where a voice said, “Car for Professor Eddinger,” confirmed the excited words.

“I’ll come,” said the Professor, “right away.”

He pondered, as the car whirled him across the city, on what this greatest thing in the world might be. And he hoped with gentle skepticism that the enthusiasm was warranted. A young man opened the car door as they stopped. His face was flushed, Eddinger noted, hair pushed back in disarray, his shirt torn open at the throat.

“Wait here,” he told the driver and took the Professor by the arm to hurry him into a dilapidated building.

“Not much of a laboratory,” he said, “but we’ll have better, you and I; we’ll have better—”

The room seemed bare with its meager equipment, but it was neat, as became the best student of Professor Eddinger. Rows of reagent bottles stood on the shelves, but the tables were a litter of misplaced

instruments and broken glassware where trembling hands had fumbled in heedless excitement.

“Glad to see you again, Avery.” The gentle voice of Professor Eddinger had lost its tired tone. “It’s been two years you’ve been working, I judge. Now what is this great discovery, boy? What have you found?”

The younger man, in whose face the color came and went, and whose eyes were shining from dark hollows that marked long days and sleepless nights, still clung to the other’s arm.

“It’s real,” he said; “it’s great! It means fortune and fame, and you’re in on that, Professor. The old master,” he said and clapped a hand affectionately upon a thin shoulder; “I owe it all to you. And now I have—I have learned…. No, you shall see for yourself. Wait—”

He crossed quickly to a table. On it was an apparatus; the eyes of the older man widened as he saw it. It was intricate—a maze of tubing. There was a glass bulb above—the generator of a cathode ray, obviously—and electro-magnets below and on each side. Beneath was a crude sphere of heavy lead—a retort, it might be—and from this there passed two massive, insulated cables. The understanding eyes of the Professor followed them, one to a terminal on a great

insulating block upon the floor, the other to a similarly protected terminal of carbon some feet above it in the air.

The trembling fingers of the young man made some few adjustments, then he left the instrument to take his place by an electric switch. “Stand back,” he warned, and closed the switch.

There was a gentle hissing from within glass tubes, the faint glow of a blue-green light. And that was all, until—with a crash like the ripping crackle of lightning, a white flame arced between the terminals of the heavy cables. It hissed ceaselessly through the air where now the tang of ozone was apparent. The carbon blocks glowed with a brilliant incandescence when the flame ceased with the motion of a hand where Avery pulled a switch.

The man’s voice was quiet now. “You do not know, yet, what you have seen, but there was a tremendous potential there—an amperage I can’t measure with my limited facilities.” He waved a deprecating hand about the ill-furnished laboratory. “But you have seen—” His voice trembled and failed at the forming of the words.

“—The disintegration of the atom,” said Professor Eddinger quietly, “and the release of power unlimited. Did you use thorium?” he inquired.

The other looked at him in amazement. Then: “I should have known you would understand,” he said humbly. “And you know what it means"—again his voice rose—"power without end to do the work of the world—great vessels driven a lifetime on a mere ounce of matter—a revolution in transportation—in living….” He paused. “The liberation of mankind,” he added, and his voice was reverent. “This will do the work of the world: it will make a new heaven and a new earth! Oh, I have dreamed dreams,” he exclaimed, “I have seen visions. And it has been given to me—me!—to liberate man from the curse of Adam … the sweat of his brow…. I can’t realize it even yet. I—I am not worthy….”

He raised his eyes slowly in the silence to gaze in wondering astonishment at the older man. There was no answering light, no exaltation on the lined face. Only sadness in the tired eyes that looked at him and through him as if focused upon something in a dim future—or past.

“Don’t you see?” asked the wondering man. “The freedom of men—the liberation of a race. No more poverty, no endless, grinding labor.” His young eyes, too, were looking into the future, a future of blinding light. “Culture,” he said, “instead of heart-breaking toil, a chance to grow mentally, spiritually; it is another world, a new life—” And again he asked: “Surely, you see?”

“I see,” said the other; “I see—plainly.”

“The new world,” said Avery. “It—it dazzles me; it rings like music in my ears.”

“I see no new world,” was the slow response.

The young face was plainly perplexed. “Don’t you believe?” he stammered. “After you have seen … I thought you would have the vision, would help me emancipate the world, save it—” His voice failed.

“Men have a way of crucifying their saviors,” said the tired voice.

The inventor was suddenly indignant. “You are blind,” he said harshly; “it is too big for you. And I would have had you stand beside me in the great work…. I shall announce it alone…. There will be laboratories—enormous!—and factories. My invention will be perfected, simplified, compressed. A generator will be made—thousands of horsepower to do the work of a city, free thousands of men—made so small you can hold it in one hand.”

The sensitive face was proudly alight, proud and a trifle arrogant. The exaltation of his coming power was strong upon him.

“Yes,” said Professor Eddinger, “in one hand.” And he raised his right arm that he might see where the end of a sleeve was empty.

“I am sorry,” said the inventor abruptly; “I didn’t mean … but you will excuse me now; there is so much to be done—” But the thin figure of Professor Eddinger had crossed to the far table to examine the apparatus there.

“Crude,” he said beneath his breath, “crude—but efficient!”

In the silence a rat had appeared in the distant corner. The Professor nodded as he saw it. The animal stopped as the man’s eyes came upon it; then sat squirrellike on one of the shelves as it ate a crumb of food. Some morsel from a hurried lunch of Avery’s, the Professor reflected—poor Avery! Yes, there was much to be done.

He spoke as much to himself as to the man who was now beside him. “It enters here,” he said and peered downward toward the lead bulb. He placed a finger on the side of the metal. “About here, I should think…. Have you a drill? And a bit of quartz?”

The inventor’s eyes were puzzled, but the assurance of his old instructor claimed obedience. He produced a small drill and a fragment like broken glass. And he started visibly as the one hand

worked awkwardly to make a small hole in the side of the lead. But he withdrew his own restraining hand, and he watched in mystified silence while the quartz was fitted to make a tiny window and the thin figure stooped to sight as if aiming the opening toward a far corner where a brown rat sat upright in earnest munching of a dry crust.

The Professor drew Avery with him as he retreated noiselessly from the instrument. “Will you close the switch,” he whispered.

The young man hesitated, bewildered, at this unexpected demonstration, and the Professor himself reached with his one hand for the black lever. Again the arc crashed into life, to hold for a brief instant until Professor Eddinger opened the switch.

“Well,” demanded Avery, “what’s all the show? Do you think you are teaching me anything—about my own instrument?” There was hurt pride and jealous resentment in his voice.

“See,” said Professor Eddinger quietly. And his one thin hand pointed to a far shelf, where, in the shadow, was a huddle of brown fur and a bit of crust. It fell as they watched, and the “plop” of the soft body upon the floor sounded loud in the silent room.

“The law of compensation,” said Professor Eddinger. “Two sides to the medal! Darkness and light—good and evil—life … and death!”

The young man was stammering. “What do you mean?—a death ray evolved?” And: “What of it?” he demanded; “what of it? What’s that got to do with it?”

“A death ray,” the other agreed. “You have dreamed, Avery—one must in order to create—but it is only a dream. You dreamed of life—a fuller life—for the world, but you would have given them, as you have just seen, death.”

The face of Avery was white as wax; his eyes glared savagely from dark hollows.

“A rat!” he protested. “You have killed a rat … and you say—you say—” He raised one trembling hand to his lips to hold them from forming the unspeakable words.

“A rat,” said the Professor—"or a man … or a million men.“

"We will control it.”

“All men will have it—the best and the worst … and there is no defence.”

“It will free the world—”

“It will destroy it.”

“No!"—and the white-faced man was shouting now—"you don’t understand—you can’t see—”

The lean figure of the scientist straightened to its full height. His eyes met those of the younger man, silent now before him, but Avery knew the eyes never saw him; they were looking far off, following the wings of thought. In the stillness the man’s words came harsh and commanding—

“Do you see the cities,” he said, “crumbling to ruins under the cold stars? The fields? They are rank with wild growth, torn and gullied by the waters; a desolate land where animals prowl. And the people—the people!—wandering bands, lower, as the years drag on, than the beasts themselves; the children dying, forgotten, in the forgotten lands; a people to whom the progress of our civilization is one with the ages past, for whom there is again the slow, toiling road toward the light.

"And somewhere, perhaps, a conquering race, the most brutal and callous of mankind, rioting in their sense of power and dragging

themselves down to oblivion….”

His gaze came slowly back to the room and the figure of the man still fighting for his dream.

“They would not,” said Avery hoarsely; “they’d use it for good.”

“Would they?” asked Professor Eddinger. He spoke simply as one stating simple facts. “I love my fellow men,” he said, “and I killed them in thousands in the last war—I, and my science, and my poison gas.”

The figure of Avery slumped suddenly upon a chair; his face was buried in his hands. “And I would have been,” he groaned, “the greatest man in the world.”

“You shall be greater,” said the Professor, “though only we shall know it—you and I…. You will save the world—from itself.”

The figure, bowed and sunken in the chair, made no move; the man was heedless of the kindly hand upon his shoulder. His voice, when he spoke, was that of one afar off, speaking out of a great loneliness. “You don’t understand,” he said dully; “you can't—”

But Professor Eddinger, a cog in the wheels of a great educational

machine, glanced at the watch on his wrist. Again his thin shoulders were stooped, his voice tired. “My classes,” he said. “I must be going….”

In the gathering dusk Professor Eddinger locked carefully the door of his office. He crossed beyond his desk and fumbled with his one hand for his keys.

There was a cabinet to be opened, and he stared long in the dim light at the object he withdrew. He looked approvingly at the exquisite workmanship of an instrument where a generator of the cathode ray and an intricate maze of tubing surmounted electro-magnets and a round lead bulb. There were terminals for attaching heavy cables; it was a beautiful thing…. His useless arm moved to bring an imaginary hand before the window of quartz in the lead sphere.

“Power,” he whispered and repeated Avery’s words; “power, to build a city—or destroy a civilization … and I hold it in one hand.”

He replaced the apparatus in the safety of its case. “The saviors of mankind!” he said, and his tone was harsh and bitter.

But a smile, whimsical, kindly, crinkled his tired eyes as he turned to his desk and its usual litter of examination papers.

“It is something, Avery,” he whispered to that distant man, “to belong in so distinguished a group.”

August 1930

#41 The Planet Of Dread, By Roman Frederick Starzl:

A stupid blunder—and Mark Forepaugh faces a lifetime of castaway loneliness in the savage welter of the planet Inra's monster-ridden jungles.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

There was no use hiding from the truth. Somebody had blundered—a fatal blunder—and they were going to pay for it! Mark Forepaugh kicked the pile of hydrogen cylinders. Only a moment ago he had broken the seals—the mendacious seals that certified to the world that the flasks were fully charged. And the flasks were empty! The supply of this precious power gas, which in an emergency should have been sufficient for six years, simply did not exist.

He walked over to the integrating machine, which as early as the year 2031 had begun to replace the older atomic processes, due to the shortage of the radium series metals. It was bulky and heavy

compared to the atomic disintegrators, but it was much more economical and very dependable. Dependable—provided some thick-headed stock clerk at a terrestrial supply station did not check in empty hydrogen cylinders instead of full ones. Forepaugh's unwonted curses brought a smile to the stupid, good-natured face of his servant, Gunga—he who had been banished for life from his native Mars for his impiety in closing his single round eye during the sacred Ceremony of the Wells.

The Earth man was at this steaming hot, unhealthful trading station under the very shadow of the South Pole of the minor planet Inra for an entirely different reason. One of the most popular of his set on the Earth, an athletic hero, he had fallen in love, and the devoutly wished-for marriage was only prevented by lack of funds. The opportunity to take charge of this richly paid, though dangerous, outpost of civilization had been no sooner offered than taken. In another week or two the relief ship was due to take him and his valuable collection of exotic Inranian orchids back to the Earth, back to a fat bonus, Constance, and an assured future.

It was a different young man who now stood tragically before the useless power plant. His slim body was bowed, and his clean features were drawn. Grimly he raked the cooling dust that had been forced in the integrating chamber by the electronic rearrangement of

the original hydrogen atoms—finely powdered iron and silicon—the "ashes" of the last tank of hydrogen.

Gunga chuckled.

"What's the matter?" Forepaugh barked. "Going crazy already?"

"Me, haw! Me, haw! Me thinkin'," Gunga rumbled. "Haw! We got, haw! plenty hydr'gen." He pointed to the low metal roof of the trading station. Though it was well insulated against sound, the place continually vibrated to the low murmur of the Inranian rains that fell interminably through the perpetual polar day. It was a rain such as is never seen on Earth, even in the tropics. It came in drops as large as a man's fist. It came in streams. It came in large, shattering masses that broke before they fell and filled the air with spray. There was little wind, but the steady green downpour of water and the brilliant continuous flashing of lightning shamed the dull soggy twilight produced by the large, hot, but hidden sun.

"*Your* idea of a joke!" Forepaugh growled in disgust. He understood what Gunga's grim pleasantry referred to. There was indeed an incalculable quantity of hydrogen at hand. If some means could be found to separate the hydrogen atoms from the oxygen in the world of water around them they would not lack for fuel. He thought of

electrolysis, and relaxed with a sigh. There was no power. The generators were dead, the air drier and cooler had ceased its rhythmic pulsing nearly an hour ago. Their lights were gone, and the automatic radio utterly useless.

"This is what comes of putting all your eggs in one basket," he thought, and let his mind dwell vindictively on the engineers who had designed the equipment on which his life depended.

An exclamation from Gunga startled him. The Martian was pointing to the ventilator opening, the only part of this strange building that was not hermetically sealed against the hostile life of Inra. A dark rim had appeared at its margin, a loathsome, black-green rim that was moving, spreading out. It crept over the metal walls like the low-lying smoke of a fire, yet it was a solid. From it emanated a strong, miasmatic odor.

"The giant mold!" Forepaugh cried. He rushed to his desk and took out his flash pistol, quickly set the localizer so as to cover a large area. When he turned he saw, to his horror, Gunga about to smash into the mold with his ax. He sent the man spinning with a blow to the ear.

"Want to scatter it and start it growing in a half-dozen places?" he

snapped. "Here!"

He pulled the trigger. There was a light, spiteful "ping" and for an instant a cone of white light stood out in the dim room like a solid thing. Then it was gone, and with it was gone the black mold, leaving a circular area of blistered paint on the wall and an acrid odor in the air. Forepaugh leaped to the ventilating louver and closed it tightly.

"It's going to be like this from now on," he remarked to the shaken Gunga. "All these things wouldn't bother us as long as the machinery kept the building dry and cool. They couldn't live in here. But it's getting damp and hot. Look at the moisture condensing on the ceiling!"

Gunga gave a guttural cry of despair. "It knows, Boss; look!"

Through one of the round, heavily framed ports it could be seen, the lower part of its large, shapeless body half-floating in the lashing water that covered their rocky shelf to a depth of several feet, the upper part spectral and gray. It was a giant amoeba, fully six feet in diameter in its present spheroid form, but capable of assuming any shape that would be useful. It had an envelope of tough, transparent matter, and was filled with a fluid that was now cloudy and then

clear. Near the center there was a mass of darker matter, and this was undoubtedly the seat of its intelligence.

The Earth man recoiled in horror! A single cell with a brain! It was unthinkable. It was a biological nightmare. Never before had he seen one—had, in fact, dismissed the stories of the Inranian natives as a bit of primitive superstition, had laughed at these gentle, stupid amphibians with whom he traded when they, in their imperfect language, tried to tell him of it.

They had called it the Ul-lul. Well, let it be so. It was an amoeba, and it was watching him. It floated in the downpour and watched him. With what? It had no eyes. No matter, it was watching him. And then it suddenly flowed outward until it became a disc rocking on the waves. Again its fluid form changed, and by a series of elongations and contractions it flowed through the water at an incredible speed. It came straight for the window, struck the thick, unbreakable glass with a shock that could be felt by the men inside. It flowed over the glass and over the building. It was trying to eat them, building and all! The part of its body over the port became so thin that it was almost invisible. At last, its absolute limit reached, it dropped away, baffled, vanishing amid the glare of the lightning and the frothing waters like the shadows of a nightmare.

The heat was intolerable and the air was bad.

"Haw, we have to open vent'lator, Boss!" gasped the Martian.

Forepaugh nodded grimly. It wouldn't do to smother either. Though to open the ventilator would be to invite another invasion by the black mold, not to mention the amoebae and other fabulous monsters that had up to now been kept at a safe distance by the repeller zone, a simple adaptation of a very old discovery. A zone of mechanical vibrations, of a frequency of 500,000 cycles per second, was created by a large quartz crystal in the water, which was electrically operated. Without power, the protective zone had vanished.

"We watch?" asked Gunga.

"You bet we watch. Every minute of the 'day' and 'night.'"

He examined the two chronometers, assuring himself that they were well wound, and congratulated himself that they were not dependent on the defunct power plant for energy. They were his only means of measuring the passage of time. The sun, which theoretically would seem to travel round and round the horizon, rarely succeeded in

making its exact location known, but appeared to shift strangely from side to side at the whim of the fog and water.

"Th' fellas," Gunga remarked, coming out of a study. "Why not come?" He referred to the Inranians.

"Probably know something's wrong. They can tell the quartz oscillator is stopped. Afraid of the Ul-lul, I suppose."

"'Squeer," demurred the Martian. "Ul-lul not bother fellas."

"You mean it doesn't follow them into the underbrush. But it would find tough going there. Not enough water; trees there, four hundred feet high with thorny roots and rough bark—they wouldn't like that. Oh no, these natives ought to be pretty snug in their dens. Why, they're as hard to catch as a muskrat! Don't know what a muskrat is, huh? Well, it's the same as the Inranians, only different, and not so ugly."

For the next six days they existed in their straitened quarters, one guarding while the other slept, but such alarms as they experienced were of a minor nature, easily disposed of by their flash pistol. It had not been intended for continuous service, and under the frequent drains it showed an alarming loss of power. Forepaugh repeatedly

warned Gunga to be more sparing in its use, but that worthy persisted in his practice of using it against every trifling invasion of the poisonous Inranian cave moss that threatened them, or the warm, soggy water-spiders that hopefully explored the ventilator shaft in search of living food.

"Bash 'em with a broom, or something! Never mind if it isn't nice. Save our flash gun for something bigger."

Gunga only looked distressed.

On the seventh day their position became untenable. Some kind of sea creature, hidden under the ever-replenished storm waters, had found the concrete emplacements of their trading post to its liking. Just how it was done was never learned. It is doubtful that the creatures could gnaw away the solid stone—more likely the process was chemical, but none the less it was effective. The foundations crumbled; the metal shell subsided, rolled half over so that silty water leaked in through the straining seams, and threatened at any moment to be buffeted and urged away on the surface of the flood toward that distant vast sea which covers nine-tenths of the area of Inra.

"Time to mush for the mountains," Forepaugh decided.

Gunga grinned. The Mountains of Perdition were, to his point of view, the only part of Inra even remotely inhabitable. They were sometimes fairly cool, and though perpetually pelted with rain, blazing with lightning and reverberating with thunder, they had caves that were fairly dry and too cool for the black mold. Sometimes, under favorable circumstances on their rugged peaks, one could get the full benefit of the enormous hot sun for whose actinic rays the Martian's starved system yearned.

"Better pack a few cans of the food tablets," the white man ordered. "Take a couple of waterproof sleeping bags for us, and a few hundred fire pellets. You can have the flash pistol; it may have a few more charges in it."

Forepaugh broke the glass case marked "Emergency Only" and removed two more flash pistols. Well he knew that he would need them after passing beyond the trading area—perhaps sooner. His eyes fell on his personal chest, and he opened it for a brief examination. None of the contents seemed of any value, and he was about to pass when he dragged out a long, heavy, .45 caliber six-shooter in a holster, and a cartridge belt filled with shells. The Martian stared.

"Know what it is?" his master asked, handing him the weapon.

"Gunga not know." He took it and examined it curiously. It was a fine museum piece in an excellent state of preservation, the metal overlaid with the patina of age, but free from rust and corrosion.

"It's a weapon of the Ancients," Forepaugh explained. "It was a sort of family heirloom and is over 300 years old. One of my grandfathers used it in the famous Northwest Mounted Police. Wonder if it'll still shoot."

He leveled the weapon at a fat, sightless wriggler that came squirming through a seam, squinting unaccustomed eyes along the barrel. There was a violent explosion, and the wriggler disappeared in a smear of dirty green. Gunga nearly fell over backward in fright, and even Forepaugh was shaken. He was surprised that the ancient cartridge had exploded at all, though he knew powder making had reached a high level of perfection before explosive chemical weapons had yielded to the newer, lighter, and infinitely more powerful ray weapons. The gun would impede their progress. It would be of very little use against the giant Carnivora of Inra. Yet something—perhaps a sentimental attachment, perhaps what his ancestors would have called a "hunch"—compelled him to strap it around his waist. He carefully packed a few essentials in his knapsack, together with one chronometer and a tiny gyroscopic compass. So equipped, they could travel with a fair degree of

precision toward the mountains some hundred miles on the other side of a steaming forest, a-crawl with feral life, and hot with blood-lust.

Man and master descended into the warm waters and, without a backward glance, left the trading post to its fate. There was not even any use in leaving a note. Their relief ship, soon due, would never find the station without radio direction.

The current was strong, but the water gradually became shallower as they ascended the sloping rock. After half an hour they saw ahead of them the loom of the forest, and with some trepidation they entered the gloom cast by the towering, fernlike trees, whose tops disappeared in murky fog. Tangled vines impeded their progress. Quagmires lay in wait for them, and tough weeds tripped them, sometimes throwing one or another into the mud among squirming small reptiles that lashed at them with spiked, poisonous feet and then fell to pieces, each piece to lie in the bubbling ooze until it grew again into a whole animal.

Several times they almost walked under the bodies of great, spheroidal creatures with massive short legs, whose tremendously long, sinuous necks disappeared in the leafy murk above, swaying gently like long-stalked lilies in a terrestial pond. These were

azornacks, mild-tempered vegetarians whose only defense lay in their thick, blubbery hides. Filled with parasites, stinking and rancid, their decaying covering of fat effectively concealed the tender flesh underneath, protecting them from fangs and rending claws.

Deeper in the forest the battering of the rain was mitigated. Giant neo-palm leaves formed a roof that shut out not only most of the weak daylight, but also the fury of the downpour. The water collected in cataracts, ran down the boles of the trees, and roared through the semi-circular canals of the snake trees, so named by early explorers for their waving, rubbery tentacles, multiplied a millionfold, that performed the duties of leaves. Water gurgled and chuckled everywhere, spread in vast dim ponds and lakes writhing with tormented roots, up-heaved by unseen, uncatalogued leviathans, rippled by translucent discs of loathsome, luminescent jelly that quivered from place to place in pursuit of microscopic prey.

Yet the impression was one of calm and quiet, and the waifs from other worlds felt a surcease of nervous tension. Unconsciously they relaxed. Taking their bearings, they changed their course slightly for the nesting place of the nearest tribe of Inranians where they hoped to get food and at least partial shelter; for their food tablets had mysteriously turned to an unpleasant viscous liquid, and their sleeping bags were alive with giant bacteria easily visible to the eye.

They were doomed to disappointment. After nearly twelve hours of desperate struggling through the morass, through gloomy aisles, and countless narrow escapes from prowling beasts of prey in which only the speed and tremendous power of their flash pistols saved them from instant death, they reached a rocky outcropping which led to the comparatively dry rise of land on which a tribe of Inranians made its home. Their faces were covered with welts made by the hanging filaments of blood-sucking trees as fine as spider webs, and their senses reeled with the oppressive stench of the abysmal jungle. If the pampered ladies of the Inner Planets only knew where their thousand-dollar orchids sprang from!

Converging runways showed the opening of one of the underground dens, almost hidden from view by a bewildering maze of roots, rendered more formidable by long, sharp stakes made from the iron-hard thigh-bones of the flying kabo.

Forepaugh cupped his hands over his mouth and gave the call.

"Ouf! Ouf! Ouf! Ouf! Ouf!"

He repeated it over and over, the jungle giving back his voice in a muffled echo, while Gunga held a spare flash pistol and kept a sharp lookout for a carnivore intent on getting an unwary Inranian.

There was no answer. These timid creatures, who are often rated the most intelligent life native to primitive Inra, had sensed disaster and had fled.

Forepaugh and Gunga slept in one of the foul, poorly ventilated dens, ate of the hard, woody tubers that had not been worth taking along, and wished they had a certain stock clerk at that place at that time. They were awakened out of deep slumber by the threshing of an evil looking creature which had become entangled among the sharpened spikes. Its tremendous maw, splitting it almost in half, was opened in roars of pain that showed great yellow fangs eight inches in length. Its heavy flippers battered the stout roots and lacerated themselves in the beast's insensate rage. It was quickly dispatched with a flash pistol and Gunga cooked himself some of the meat, using a fire pellet; but despite his hunger Forepaugh did not dare eat any of it, knowing that this species, strange to him, might easily be one of the many on Inra that are poisonous to terrestials.

They resumed their march toward the distant invisible mountains, and were fortunate in finding somewhat better footing than they had on their previous march. They covered about 25 miles on that "day," without untoward incident. Their ray pistols gave them an insuperable advantage over the largest and most ferocious beasts they could expect to meet, so that they became more and more

confident, despite the knowledge that they were rapidly using up the energy stored in their weapons. The first one had long ago been discarded, and the charge indicators of the other two were approaching zero at a disquieting rate. Forepaugh took them both, and from that time on he was careful never to waste a discharge except in case of a direct and unavoidable attack. This often entailed long waits or stealthy detours through sucking mud, and came near to ending both their lives.

The Earth man was in the lead when it happened. Seeking an uncertain footing through a tangle of low-growing, thick, ghastly white vegetation, he placed a foot on what seemed to be a broad, flat rock projecting slightly above the ooze. Instantly there was a violent upheaval of mud; the seeming rock flew up like a trap-door, disclosing a cavernous mouth some seven feet across, and a thick, triangular tentacle flew up from its concealment in the mud in a vicious arc. Forepaugh leaped back barely in time to escape being swept in and engulfed. The end of the tentacle struck him a heavy blow on the chest, throwing him back with such force as to bowl Gunga over, and whirling the pistols out of his hands into a slimy, bulbous growth nearby, where they stuck in the phosphorescent cavities the force of their impact had made.

There was no time to recover the weapons. With a bellow of rage the beast was out of its bed and rushing at them. Nothing stayed its progress. Tough, heavily scaled trees thicker than a man's body shuddered and fell as its bulk brushed by them. But it was momentarily confused, and its first rush carried it past its dodging quarry. This momentary respite saved their lives.

Rearing its plumed head to awesome heights, its knobby bark running with brown rivulets of water, a giant tree, even for that world of giants, offered refuge. The men scrambled up the rough trunk easily, finding plenty of hand and footholds. They came to rest on one of the shelflike circumvoluting rings, some twenty-five feet above the ground. Soon the blunt brown tentacles slithered in search of them, but failed to reach their refuge by inches.

And now began the most terrible siege that interlopers in that primitive world can endure. From that cavernous, distended throat came a tremendous, world-shaking noise.

"HOOM! HOOM! HOOM! HOOM! HOOM! HOOM!"

Forepaugh put his hand to his head. It made him dizzy. He had not believed that such noise could be. He knew that no creature could long live amidst it. He tore strips from his shredded clothing and

stuffed his ears, but felt no relief.

"HOOM! HOOM! HOOM! HOOM! HOOM!"

It throbbed in his brain.

Gunga lay a-sprawl, staring with fascinated eye into the pulsating scarlet gullet that was blasting the world with sound. Slowly, slowly he was slipping. His master hauled him back. The Martian grinned at him stupidly, slid again to the edge.

Once more Forepaugh pulled him back. The Martian seemed to acquiesce. His single eye closed to a mere slit. He moved to a position between Forepaugh and the tree trunk, braced his feet.

"No you don't!" The Earth man laughed uproariously. The din was making him light-headed. It was so funny! Just in time he had caught that cunning expression and prepared for the outlashing of feet designed to plunge him into the red cavern below and to stop that hellish racket.

"And now—"

He swung his fist heavily, slamming the Martian against the tree. The red eye closed wearily. He was unconscious, and lucky.

Hungrily the Earth man stared at his distant flash pistols, plainly visible in the luminescence of their fungus bedding. He began a slow, cautious creep along the top of a vine some eight inches thick. If he could reach them....

Crash! He was almost knocked to the ground by the thud of a frantic tentacle against the vine. His movement had been seen. Again the tentacle struck with crushing force. The great vine swayed. He managed to reach the shelf again in the very nick of time.

"HOOM! HOOM! HOOM! HOOM! HOOM!"

A bolt of lightning struck a giant fern some distance away. The crash of thunder was hardly noticeable. Forepaugh wondered if his tree would be struck. Perhaps it might even start a fire, giving him a flaming brand with which to torment his tormentor. Vain hope! The wood was saturated with moisture. Even the fire pellets could not make it burn.

"HOOM! HOOM! HOOM! HOOM! HOOM! HOOM! HOOM!"

The six-shooter! He had forgotten it. He jerked it from its holster and pointed it at the red throat, emptied all the chambers. He saw the flash of yellow flame, felt the recoil, but the sound of the discharges

was drowned in the Brobdignagian tumult. He drew back his arm to throw the useless toy from him. But again that unexplainable, senseless "hunch" restrained him. He reloaded the gun and returned it to its holster.

"HOOM! HOOM! HOOM! HOOM! HOOM! HOOM!"

A thought had been struggling to reach his consciousness against the pressure of the unbearable noise. The fire pellets! Couldn't they be used in some way? These small chemical spheres, no larger than the end of his little finger, had long ago supplanted actual fire along the frontiers, where electricity was not available for cooking. In contact with moisture they emitted terrific heat, a radiant heat which penetrated meat, bone, and even metal. One such pellet would cook a meal in ten minutes, with no sign of scorching or burning. And they had several hundred in one of the standard moisture-proof containers.

As fast as his fingers could work the trigger of the dispenser Forepaugh dropped the potent little pellets down the bellowing throat. He managed to release about thirty before the bellowing stopped. A veritable tornado of energy broke loose at the foot of the tree. The giant maw was closed, and the shocking silence was broken only by the thrashing of a giant body in its death agonies.

The radiant heat, penetrating through and through the beast's body, withered nearby vegetation and could be easily felt on the perch up the tree.

Gunga was slowly recovering. His iron constitution helped him to rally from the powerful blow he had received, and by the time the jungle was still he was sitting up mumbling apologies.

"Never mind," said his master. "Shin down there and cut us off a good helping of roast tongue, if it has a tongue, before something else comes along and beats us out of a feast."

"Him poison, maybe," Gunga demurred. They had killed a specimen new to zoologists.

"Might as well die of poison as starvation," Forepaugh countered.

Without more ado the Martian descended, cut out some large, juicy chunks as his fancy dictated, and brought his loot back up the tree. The meat was delicious and apparently wholesome. They gorged themselves and threw away what they could not eat, for food spoils very quickly in the Inranian jungles and uneaten meat would only serve to attract hordes of the gauzy-winged, glutinous Inranian swamp flies. As they sank into slumber they could hear the

beginning of a bedlam of snarling and fighting as the lesser Carnivora fed on the body of the fallen giant.

When they awoke the chronometer recorded the passing of twelve hours, and they had to tear a network of strong fibers with which the tree had invested them preparatory to absorbing their bodies as food. For so keen is the competition for life on Inra that practically all vegetation is capable of absorbing animal food directly. Many an Inranian explorer can tell tales of narrow escapes from some of the more specialized flesh-eating plants; but they are now so well known that they are easily avoided.

A clean-picked framework of crushed and broken giant bones was all that was left of the late bellowing monster. Six-legged water dogs were polishing them hopefully, or delving into them with their long, sinuous snouts for the marrow. The Earth man fired a few shots with his six-shooter, and they scattered, dragging the bodies of their fallen companions to a safe distance to be eaten.

Only one of the flash pistols was in working order. The other had been trampled by heavy hoofs and was useless. A heavy handicap under which to traverse fifty miles of abysmal jungle. They started with nothing for breakfast except water, of which they had plenty.

Fortunately the outcroppings of rocks and gravel washes were becoming more and more frequent, and they were able to travel at much better speed. As they left the low-lying jungle land they entered a zone which was faintly reminiscent of a terrestial jungle. It was still hot, soggy, and fetid, but gradually the most primitive aspects of the scene were modified. The over-arching trees were less closely packed, and they came across occasional rock clearings which were bare of vegetation except for a dense carpet of brown, lichenlike vegetation that secreted an astonishing amount of juice. They slipped and sloshed through this, rousing swarms of odd, toothed birds, which darted angrily around their heads and slashed at them with the razor-sharp saw edges on the back of their legs. Annoying as they were, they could be kept away with branches torn from trees, and their presence connoted an absence of the deadly jungle flesh-eaters, permitting a temporary relaxation of vigilance and saving the resources of the last flash gun.

They camped that "night" on the edge of one of these rock clearings. For the first time in weeks it had stopped raining, although the sun was still obscured. Dimly on the horizon could be seen the first of the foothills. Here they gathered some of the giant, oblong fungus that early explorers had taken for blocks of porous stone because of their size and weight, and, by dint of the plentiful application of fire pellets, managed to set it ablaze. The heat added nothing to their

comfort, but it dried them out and allowed them to sleep unmolested.

An unwary winged eel served as their breakfast, and soon they were on their way to those beckoning hills. It had started to rain again, but the worst part of their journey was over. If they could reach the top of one of the mountains there was a good chance that they would be seen and rescued by their relief ship, provided they did not starve first. The flyer would use the mountains as a base from which to search for the trading station, and it was conceivable that the skipper might actually have anticipated their desperate adventure and would look for them in the Mountains of Perdition.

They had crossed several ranges of the foothills and were beginning to congratulate themselves when the diffused light from above was suddenly blotted out. It was raining again, and above the echo-augmented thunder they heard a shrill screeching.

"A web serpent!" Gunga cried, throwing himself flat on the ground.

Forepaugh eased into a rock cleft at his side. Just in time. A great grotesque head bore down upon him, many-fanged as a medieval dragon. Between obsidian eyes was a fissure whence emanated a wailing and a foul odor. Hundreds of short, clawed legs slithered on the rocks under a long sinuous body. Then it seemed to leap into the

air again. Webs grew taut between the legs, strumming as they caught a strong uphill wind. Again it turned to the attack, and missed them. This time Forepaugh was ready for it. He shot at it with his flash pistol.

Nothing happened. The fog made accurate shooting impossible, and the gun lacked its former power. The web serpent continued to course back and forth over their heads.

"Guess we'd better run for it," Forepaugh murmured.

"Go 'head!"

They cautiously left their places of concealment. Instantly the serpent was down again, persistent if inaccurate. It struck the place of their first concealment and missed them.

"Run!"

They extended their weary muscles to the utmost, but it was soon apparent that they could not escape long. A rock wall in their path saved them.

"Hole!" the Martian gasped.

Forepaugh followed him into the rocky cleft. There was a strong draft of dry air, and it would have been next to impossible to hold the Martian back, so Forepaugh allowed him to lead on toward the source of the draft. As long as it led into the mountains he didn't care.

The natural passageway was untenanted. Evidently its coolness and dryness made it untenable for most of Inra's humidity and heat loving life. Yet the floor was so smooth that it must have been artificially leveled. Faint illumination was provided by the rocks themselves. They appeared to be covered by some microscopic phosphorescent vegetation.

After hundreds of twists and turns and interminable straight galleries the cleft turned more sharply upward, and they had a period of stiff climbing. They must have gone several miles and climbed at least 20,000 feet. The air became noticeably thin, which only exhilarated Gunga, but slowed the Earth man down. But at last they came to the end of the cleft. They could go no further, but above them, at least 500 feet higher, they saw a round patch of sky, miraculously bright blue sky!

"A pipe!" Forepaugh cried.

He had often heard of these mysterious, almost fabulous structures sometimes reported by passing travelers. Straight and true, smooth as glass and apparently immune to the elements, they had been occasionally seen standing on the very tops of the highest mountains —seen for a few moments only before they were hidden again by the clouds. Were they observatories of some ancient race, placed thus to pierce the mysteries of outer space? They would find out.

The inside of the pipe had zigzagging rings of metal, conveniently spaced for easy climbing. With Gunga leading, they soon reached the top. But not quite.

"Eh?" said Forepaugh.

"Uh?" said Gunga.

There had not been a sound, but a distinct, definite command had registered on their minds.

"Stop!"

They tried to climb higher, but could not unclasp their hands. They tried to descend, but could not lower their feet.

The light was by now relatively bright, and as by command their

eyes sought the opposite wall. What they saw gave their jaded nerves an unpleasant thrill—a mass of doughy matter of a blue-green color about three feet in diameter, with something that resembled a cyst filled with transparent liquid near its center.

And this thing began to flow along the rods, much as tar flows. From the mass extended a pseudopod; touched Gunga on the arm. Instantly the arm was raw and bleeding. Terrified, immovable, he writhed in agony. The pseudopod returned to the main mass, disappearing into its interior with the strip of bloody skin.

Its attention was centered so much on the luckless Martian that its control slipped from Forepaugh. Seizing his flash pistol, he set the localized for a small area and aimed it at the thing, intent on burning it into nothingness. But again his hand was stayed. Against the utmost of his will-power his fingers opened, letting the pistol drop. The liquid in the cyst danced and bubbled. Was it laughing at him? It had read his mind—thwarted his will again.

Again a pseudopod stretched out and a strip of raw, red flesh adhered to it and was consumed. Mad rage convulsed the Earth man. Should he throw himself tooth and nail on the monster? And be engulfed?

He thought of the six-shooter. It thrilled him.

But wouldn't it make him drop that too?

A flash of atavistic cunning came to him.

He began to reiterate in his mind a certain thought.

"This thing is so I can see you better—this thing is so I can see you better."

He said it over and over, with all the passion and devotion of a celibate's prayer over a uranium fountain.

"This thing is harmless—but it will make me see you better!"

Slowly he drew the six-shooter. In some occult way he knew it was watching him.

"Oh, this is harmless! This is an instrument to aid my weak eyes! It will help me realize your mastery! This will enable me to know your true greatness. This will enable me to know you as a god."

Was it complacence or suspicion that stirred the liquid in the cyst so smoothly? Was it susceptible to flattery? He sighted along the barrel.

"In another moment your great intelligence will overwhelm me,"

proclaimed his surface mind desperately, while the subconscious tensed the trigger. And at that the clear liquid burst into a turmoil of alarm. Too late. Forepaugh went limp, but not before he had loosed a steel-jacketed bullet that shattered the mind cyst of the pipe denizen. A horrible pain coursed through his every fibre and nerve. He was safe in the arms of Gunga, being carried to the top of the pipe to the clean dry air, and the blessed, blistering sun.

The pipe denizen was dying. A viscous, inert mass, it dropped lower and lower, lost contact at last, shattered into slime at the bottom.

Miraculous sun! For a luxurious fifteen minutes they roasted there on the top of the pipe, the only solid thing in a sea of clouds as far as the eye could reach. But no! That was a circular spot against the brilliant white of the clouds, and it was rapidly coming closer. In a few minutes it resolved itself into the *Comet*, fast relief ship of the Terrestial, Inranian, Genidian, and Zydian Lines, Inc. With a low buzz of her repulsion motors she drew alongside. Hooks were attached and ports opened. A petty officer and a crew of roustabouts made her fast.

"What the hell's going on here?" asked the cocky little terrestial who was skipper, stepping out and surveying the castaways. "We've been looking for you ever since your directional wave failed. But come on

in—come on in!"

He led the way to his stateroom, while the ship's surgeon took Gunga in charge. Closing the door carefully, he delved into the bottom of his locker and brought out a flask.

"Can't be too careful," he remarked, filling a small tumbler for himself and another for his guest. "Always apt to be some snooper to report me. But say—you're wanted in the radio room."

"Radio room nothing! When do we eat?"

"Right away, but you'd better see him. Fellow from the Interplanetary News Agency wants you to broadcast a copyrighted story. Good for about three years' salary, old boy."

"All right. I'll see him"—with a happy sigh—"just as soon as I put through a personal message."

#42 The Lord Of Space, By Victor Rousseau Emanuel:

A black Caesar had arisen on Eros—and all Earth trembled at his distant menace.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

A Black Caesar had arisen on Eros—and all Earth trembled at his distant menace.

“On the day of the next full moon every living thing on earth will be wiped out of existence—unless you succeed in your mission, Lee."

Nathaniel Lee looked into the face of Silas Stark, President of the United States of the World, and nodded grimly. "I'll do my best, Sir," he answered.

"You have the facts. We know who this self-styled Black Caesar is, who has declared war upon humanity. He is a Dane named Axelson, whose father, condemned to life imprisonment for resisting the new world-order, succeeded in obtaining possession of an interplanetary liner.

"He filled it with the gang of desperate men who had been associated with him in his successful escape from the penitentiary. Together they sailed into Space. They disappeared. It was supposed that they had somehow met their death in the ether, beyond the range of human ken.

"Thirty years passed, and then this son of Axelson, born, according to his own story, of a woman whom the father had persuaded to

accompany him into Space, began to radio us. We thought at first it was some practical joker who was cutting in.

It was like struggling with some vampire creatures in a hideous dream.

"When our electricians demonstrated beyond doubt that the voice came from outer space, it was supposed that some one in our Moon Colony had acquired a transmitting machine. Then the ships we sent to the Moon Colony for gold failed to return. As you know, for seven weeks there has been no communication with the Moon. And at the last full moon the—blow—fell.

"The world depends upon you, Lee. The invisible rays that destroyed every living thing from China to Australia—one-fifth of the human race—will fall upon the eastern seaboard of America when the moon is full again. That has been the gist of Axelson's repeated communications.

"We shall look to you to return, either with the arch-enemy of the human race as your prisoner, or with the good news that mankind has been set free from the menace that overhangs it.

"God bless you, my boy!" The President of the United States of the

World gripped Nat's hand and stepped down the ladder that led from the landing-stage of the great interplanetary space-ship.

The immense landing-field reserved for the ships of the Interplanetary Line was situated a thousand feet above the heart of New York City, in Westchester County. It was a flat space set on the top of five great towers, strewn with electrified sand, whose glow had the property of dispersing the sea fogs. There, at rest upon what resembled nothing so much as iron claws, the long gray shape of the vacuum flyer bulked.

Nat sneezed as he watched the operations of his men, for the common cold, or coryza, seemed likely to be the last of the germ diseases that would yield to medical science, and he had caught a bad one in the Capitol, while listening to the debate in the Senate upon the threat to humanity. And it was cold on the landing-stage, in contrast to the perpetual summer of the glass-roofed city below.

But Nat forgot the cold as he watched the preparations for the ship's departure. Neon and nitrogen gas were being pumped under pressure into the outer shell, where a minute charge of leucon, the newly discovered element that helped to counteract gravitation, combined with them to provide the power that would lift the vessel above the regions of the stratosphere.

In the low roof-buildings that surrounded the stage was a scene of tremendous activity. The selenium discs were flashing signals, and the radio receivers were shouting the late news; on the great power boards dials and light signals stood out in the glow of the amylite tubes. On a rotary stage a thousand feet above the ship a giant searchlight, visible for a thousand miles, moved its shaft of dazzling luminosity across the heavens.

Now the spar-aluminite outer skin of the ship grew bright with the red neon glare. Another ship, from China, dropped slowly to its stage near by, and the unloaders swarmed about the pneumatic tubes to receive the mail. The teleradio was shouting news of a failure of the Manchurian wheat crop. Nat's chief officer, a short cockney named Brent, came up to him.

"Ready to start, Sir," he said.

Nat turned to him. "Your orders are clear?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Send Benson here."

"I'm here, Sir." Benson, the ray-gunner in charge of the battery that

comprised the vessel's armament, a lean Yankee from Connecticut, stepped forward.

"You know your orders, Benson? Axelson has seized the Moon and the gold-mines there. He's planning to obliterate the Earth. We've got to go in like mad dogs and shoot to kill. No matter if we kill every living thing there, even our own people who are inmates of the Moon's penal settlement, we've got to account for Axelson."

"Yes, Sir."

"We can't guess how he got those gold-ships that returned with neon and argon for the Moon colonists. But he mustn't get us. Let the men understand that. That's all."

"Very good, Sir."

The teleradio suddenly began to splutter: A-A-A, it called. And instantly every sound ceased about the landing-stage. For that was the call of Axelson, somewhere upon the Moon.

"Axelson speaking. At the next full moon all the American Province of the World Federation will be annihilated, as the Chinese Province was at the last. There's no hope for you, good people. Send out your

vacuum liners. I can use a few more of them. Within six months your world will be depopulated, unless you flash me the signal of surrender."

Would the proud old Earth have to come to that? Daily those ominous threats had been repeated, until popular fears had become frenzy. And Nat was being sent out as a last hope. If he failed, there would be nothing but surrender to this man, armed with a super-force that enabled him to lay waste the Earth from the Moon.

Within one hour, those invisible, death-dealing rays had destroyed everything that inhaled oxygen and exhaled carbon. The ray with which the liner was equipped was a mere toy in comparison. It would kill at no more than 500 miles, and its action was quite different.

As a prelude to Earth's surrender, Axelson demanded that World President Stark and a score of other dignitaries should depart for the Moon as hostages. Every ray fortress in the world was to be dismantled, every treasury was to send its gold to be piled up in a great pyramid on the New York landing-stage. The Earth was to acknowledge Axelson as its supreme master.

The iron claws were turning with a screwlike motion, extending

themselves, and slowly raising the interplanetary vessel until she looked like a great metal fish with metal legs ending with suckerlike disks. But already she was floating free as the softly purring engines held her in equipoise. Nat climbed the short ladder that led to her deck. Brent came up to him again.

"That teleradio message from Axelson—" he began.

"Yes?" Nat snapped out.

"I don't believe it came from the Moon at all."

"You don't? You think it's somebody playing a hoax on Earth? You think that wiping out of China was just an Earth-joke?"

"No, Sir." Brent stood steady under his superior's sarcasm. "But I was chief teleradio operator at Greenwich before being promoted to the Province of America. And what they don't know at Greenwich they don't know anywhere."

Brent spoke with that self-assurance of the born cockney that even the centuries had failed to remove, though they had removed the cockney accent.

"Well, Brent?"

"I was with the chief electrician in the receiving station when Axelson was radioing last week. And I noticed that the waves of sound were under a slight Doppler effect. With the immense magnification necessary for transmitting from the Moon, such deflection might be construed as a mere fan-like extension. But there was ten times the magnification one would expect from the Moon; and I calculated that those sound-waves were shifted somewhere."

"Then what's your theory, Brent?"

"Those sounds come from another planet. Somewhere on the Moon there's an intercepting and re-transmitting plant. Axelson is deflecting his rays to give the impression that he's on the Moon, and to lure our ships there."

"What do you advise?" asked Nat.

"I don't know, Sir."

"Neither do I. Set your course Moonward, and tell Mr. Benson to keep his eyes peeled."

The Moon Colony, discovered in 1976, when Kramer, of Baltimore, first proved the practicability of mixing neon with the inert new gas,

leucon, and so conquering gravitation, had proved to be just what it had been suspected of being—a desiccated, airless desolation. Nevertheless, within the depths of the craters a certain amount of the Moon's ancient atmosphere still lingered, sufficient to sustain life for the queer troglodytes, with enormous lung-boxes, who survived there, browsing like beasts upon the stunted, aloe-like vegetation.

Half man, half ape, and very much unlike either, these vestiges of a species on a ruined globe had proved tractable and amenable to discipline. They had become the laborers of the convict settlement that had sprung up on the Moon.

Thither all those who had opposed the establishment of the World Federation, together with all persons convicted for the fourth time of a felony, had been transported, to superintend the efforts of these dumb, unhuman Moon dwellers. For it had been discovered that the Moon craters were extraordinarily rich in gold, and gold was still the medium of exchange on Earth.

To supplement the vestigial atmosphere, huge stations had been set up, which extracted the oxygen from the subterranean waters five miles below the Moon's crust, and recombined it with the nitrogen with which the surface layer was impregnated, thus creating an atmosphere which was pumped to the workers.

Then a curious discovery had been made. It was impossible for human beings to exist without the addition of those elements existing in the air in minute quantities—neon, krypton, and argon. And the ships that brought the gold bars back from the Moon had conveyed these gaseous elements there.

The droning of the sixteen atomic motors grew louder, and mingled with the hum of gyroscopes. The ladder was drawn up and the port hole sealed. On the enclosed bridge Nat threw the switch of durobronze that released the non-conducting shutter which gave play to the sixteen great magnets. Swiftly the great ship shot forward into the air. The droning of the motors became a shrill whine, and then, growing too shrill for human ears to follow it, gave place to silence.

Nat set the speed lever to five hundred miles an hour, the utmost that had been found possible in passing through the earth's atmosphere, owing to the resistance, which tended to heat the vessel and damage the delicate atomic engines. As soon as the ether was reached, the speed would be increased to ten or twelve thousand. That meant a twenty-two hour run to the Moon Colony—about the time usually taken.

He pressed a lever, which set bells ringing in all parts of the ship. By means of a complicated mechanism, the air was exhausted from each

compartment in turn, and then replaced, and as the bells rang, the men at work trooped out of these compartments consecutively. This had been originated for the purpose of destroying any life dangerous to man that might unwittingly have been imported from the Moon, but on one occasion it had resulted in the discovery of a stowaway.

Then Nat descended the bridge to the upper deck. Here, on a platform, were the two batteries of three ray-guns apiece, mounted on swivels, and firing in any direction on the port and starboard sides respectively. The guns were enclosed in a thin sheath of osmium, through which the lethal rays penetrated unchanged; about them, thick shields of lead protected the gunners.

He talked with Benson for a while. "Don't let Axelson get the jump on you," he said. "Be on the alert every moment." The gunners, keen-looking men, graduates from the Annapolis gunnery school, grinned and nodded. They were proud of their trade and its traditions; Nat felt that the vessel was safe in their hands.

The chief mate appeared at the head of the companion, accompanied by a girl. "Stowaway, Sir," he reported laconically. "She tumbled out of the repair shop annex when we let out the air!"

Nat stared at her in consternation, and the girl stared back at him.

She was a very pretty girl, hardly more than twenty-two or three, attired in a businesslike costume consisting of a leather jacket, knickers, and the black spiral puttees that had come into style in the past decade. She came forward unabashed.

"Well, who are you?" snapped Nat.

"Madge Dawes, of the Universal News Syndicate," she answered, laughing.

"The devil!" muttered Nat. "You people think you run the World Federation since you got President Stark elected."

"We certainly do," replied the girl, still laughing.

"Well, you don't run this ship," said Nat. "How would you like a long parachute drop back to Earth?"

"Don't be foolish, my dear man," said Madge. "Don't you know you'll get wrinkles if you scowl like that? Smile! Ah, that's better. Now, honestly, Cap we just had to get the jump on everybody else in interviewing Axelson. It means such a lot to me."

Pouts succeeded smiles. "You're not going to be cross about it, are you?" she pleaded.

"Do you realize the risk you're running, young woman?" Nat demanded. "Are you aware that our chances of ever getting back to Earth are smaller than you ought to have dreamed of taking?"

"Oh, that's all right," the girl responded. "And now that we're friends again, would you mind asking the steward to get me something to eat? I've been cooped up in that room downstairs for fifteen hours, and I'm simply starving."

Nat shrugged his shoulders hopelessly. He turned to the chief mate. "Take Miss Dawes down to the saloon and see that Wang Ling supplies her with a good meal," he ordered. "And put her in the Admiral's cabin. That good enough for you?" he asked satirically.

"Oh that'll be fine," answered the girl enthusiastically. "And I shall rely on you to keep me posted about everything that's going on. And a little later I'm going to take X-ray photographs of you and all these men." She smiled at the grinning gunners. "That's the new fad, you know, and we're going to offer prizes for the best developed skeletons in the American Province, and pick a King and Queen of Beauty!"

“A radio, Sir!"

Nat, who had snatched a brief interval of sleep, started up as the man on duty handed him the message. The vessel had been constantly in communication with Earth during her voyage, now nearing completion, but the dreaded A-A-A that prefaced this message told Nat that it came from Axelson.

"Congratulations on your attempt," the message ran, "I have watched your career with the greatest interest, Lee, through the medium of such scraps of information as I have been able to pick up on the Moon. When you are my guest to-morrow I shall hope to be able to offer you a high post in the new World Government that I am planning to establish. I need good men. Fraternally, the Black Caesar."

Nat whirled about. Madge Dawes was standing behind him, trying to read the message over his shoulder.

"Spying, eh?" said Nat bitterly.

"My dear man, isn't that my business?"

"Well, read this, then," said Nat, handing her the message. "You're likely to repent this crazy trick of yours before we get much farther."

And he pointed to the cosmic-ray skiagraph of the Moon on the curved glass dome overhead. They were approaching the satellite rapidly. It filled the whole dome, the craters great black hollows, the mountains standing out clearly. Beneath the dome were the radium apparatus that emitted the rays by which the satellite was photographed cinematographically, and the gyroscope steering apparatus by which the ship's course was directed.

Suddenly a buzzer sounded a warning. Nat sprang to the tube.

"Gravitational interference X40, gyroscopic aberrancy one minute 29," he called. "Discharge static electricity from hull. Mr. Benson, stand by."

"What does that mean?" asked Madge.

"It means I shall be obliged if you'll abstain from speaking to the man at the controls," snapped Nat.

"And what's that?" cried Madge in a shriller voice, pointing upward.

Across the patterned surface of the Moon, shown on the skiagraph, a black, cigar-shaped form was passing. It looked like one of the old-fashioned dirigibles, and the speed with which it moved was evident

from the fact that it was perceptibly traversing the Moon's surface. Perhaps it was travelling at the rate of fifty thousand miles an hour.

Brent, the chief officer, burst up the companion. His face was livid.

"Black ship approaching us from the Moon, Sir," he stammered. "Benson's training his guns, but it must be twenty thousands miles away."

"Yes, even our ray-guns won't shoot that distance," answered Nat. "Tell Benson to keep his guns trained as well as he can, and open fire at five hundred."

Brent disappeared. Madge and Nat were alone on the bridge. Nat was shouting incomprehensible orders down the tube. He stopped and looked up. The shadow of the approaching ship had crossed the Moon's disk and disappeared.

"Well, young lady, I think your goose is cooked," said Nat. "If I'm not mistaken, that ship is Axelson's, and he's on his way to knock us galley-west. And now oblige me by leaving the bridge."

"I think he's a perfectly delightful character, to judge from that message he sent you," answered Madge, "and—"

Brent appeared again. "Triangulation shows ten thousand miles, Sir," he informed Nat.

"Take control," said Nat. "Keep on the gyroscopic course, allowing for aberrancy, and make for the Crater of Pytho. I'll take command of the guns." He hurried down the companion, with Madge at his heels.

The gunners stood by the ray-guns, three at each. Benson perched on a revolving stool above the batteries. He was watching a periscopic instrument that connected with the bridge dome by means of a tube, a flat mirror in front of him showing all points of the compass. At one edge the shadow of the black ship was creeping slowly forward.

"Eight thousand miles, Sir," he told Nat. "One thousand is our extreme range. And it looks as if she's making for our blind spot overhead."

Nat stepped to the speaking-tube. "Try to ram her," he called up to Brent. "We'll open with all guns, pointing forward."

"Very good, Sir," the Cockney called back.

The black shadow was now nearly in the centre of the mirror. It

moved upward, vanished. Suddenly the atomic motors began wheezing again. The wheeze became a whine, a drone.

"We've dropped to two thousand miles an hour, Sir," called Brent.

Nat leaped for the companion. As he reached the top he could hear the teleradio apparatus in the wireless room overhead begin to chatter:

"A-A-A. Don't try to interfere. Am taking you to the Crater of Pytho. Shall renew my offer there. Any resistance will be fatal. Axelson."

And suddenly the droning of the motors became a whine again, then silence. Nat stared at the instrument-board and uttered a cry.

"What's the matter?" demanded Madge.

Nat swung upon her. "The matter?" he bawled. "He's neutralized our engines by some infernal means of his own, and he's towing us to the Moon!"

The huge sphere of the Moon had long since covered the entire dome. The huge Crater of Pytho now filled it, a black hollow fifty miles across, into which they were gradually settling. And, as they settled, the pale Earth light, white as that of the Moon on Earth,

showed the gaunt masses of bare rock, on which nothing grew, and the long stalactites of glassy lava that hung from them.

Then out of the depths beneath emerged the shadowy shape of the landing-stage.

"You are about to land," chattered the radio. "Don't try any tricks; they will be useless. Above all, don't try to use your puny ray. You are helpless."

The ship was almost stationary. Little figures could be seen swarming upon the landing-stage, ready to adjust the iron claws to clamp the hull. With a gesture of helplessness, Nat left the bridge and went down to the main deck where, in obedience to his orders, the crew had all assembled.

"Men, I'm putting it up to you," he said. "Axelson, the Black Caesar, advises us not to attempt to use the Ray-guns. I won't order you to. I'll leave the decision with you."

"We tried it fifteen minutes ago, Sir," answered Benson. "I told Larrigan to fire off the stern starboard gun to see if it was in working order, and it wasn't!"

At that moment the vessel settled with a slight jar into the clamps. Once more the teleradio began to scream:

"Open the port hold and file out slowly. Resistance is useless. I should turn my ray upon you and obliterate you immediately. Assemble on the landing-stage and wait for me!"

"You'd best obey," Nat told his men. "We've got a passenger to consider." He glared at Madge as he spoke, and Madge's smile was a little more tremulous than it had been before.

"This is the most thrilling experience of my life, Captain Lee," she said. "And I'll never rest until I've got an X-Ray photograph of Mr. Axelson's skeleton for the Universal News Syndicate."

One by one, Nat last, the crew filed down the ladder onto the landing-stage, gasping and choking in the rarefied air that lay like a blanket at the bottom of the crater. And the reason for this was only too apparent to Nat as soon as he was on the level stage.

Overhead, at an altitude of about a mile, the black ship hung, and from its bow a stupendous searchlight played to and fro over the bottom of the crater, making it as light as day. And where had been the mining machinery, the great buildings that had housed convicts

and Moon people, and the huge edifice that contained the pumping station, there was—nothing.

The devilish ray of Axelson had not merely destroyed them, it had obliterated all traces of them, and the crew of the liner were breathing the remnants of the atmosphere that still lay at the bottom of the Crater of Pytho.

But beside the twin landing-stages, constructed by the World Federation, another building arose, with an open front. And that front was a huge mirror, now scintillating under the searchlight from the black ship.

"That's it, Sir!" shouted Brent.

"That's what?" snapped Nat.

"The deflecting mirror I was speaking of. That's what deflected the ray that wiped out China. The ray didn't come from the Moon. And that's the mirror that deflects the teleradio waves, the super-Hertzian rays that carry the sound."

Nat did not answer. Sick at heart at the failure of his mission, he was watching the swarm of Moon men who were at work upon the

landing-stage, turning the steel clamps and regulating the mechanism that controlled the apparatus. Dwarfed, apish creature, with tiny limbs, and chests that stood out like barrels, they bustled about, chattering in shrill voices that seemed like the piping of birds.

It was evident that Axelson, though he had wiped out the Moon convicts and the Moon people in the crater, had reserved a number of the latter for personal use.

The black ship was dropping into its position at the second landing-stage, connected with the first by a short bridge. The starboard hold swung open, and a file of shrouded and hooded forms appeared, masked men, breathing in condensed air from receptacles upon their chests, and staring with goggle eyes at their captives. Each one held in his hand a lethal tube containing the ray, and, as if by command, they took up their stations about their prisoners.

Then, at a signal from their leader, they suddenly doffed their masks.

Nat looked at them in astonishment. He had not known whether these would be Earth denizens or inhabitants of some other planet. But they were Earth men. And they were old.

Men of sixty or seventy, years, with long, gray beards and wrinkled

faces, and eyes that stared out from beneath penthouses of shaggy eyebrows. Faces on which were imprinted despair and hopelessness.

Then the first man took off his mask and Nat saw a man of different character.

A man in the prime of life, with a mass of jet black hair and a black beard that swept to his waist, a nose like a hawk's, and a pair of dark blue eyes that fixed themselves on Nat's with a look of Luciferian pride.

"Welcome, Nathaniel Lee," said the man, in deep tones that had a curious accent which Nat could not place. "I ought to know your name, since your teleradios on Earth have been shouting it for three days past as that of the man who is to save Earth from the threat of destruction. And you know me!"

"Axelson—the Black Caesar," Nat muttered. For the moment he was taken aback. He had anticipated any sort of person except this man, who stood, looked, and spoke like a Viking, this incarnation of pride and strength.

Axelson smiled—and then his eyes lit upon Madge Dawes. And for a moment he stood as if petrified into a block of massive granite.

"What—who is this?" he growled.

"Why, I'm Madge Dawes, of the Universal News Syndicate," answered the girl, smiling at Axelson in her irrepressible manner. "And I'm sure you're not nearly such a bold, bad pirate as people think, and you're going to let us all go free."

Instantly Axelson seemed to become transformed into a maniac. He turned to the old men and shouted in some incomprehensible language. Nat and Madge, Brent and Benson, and two others who wore the uniforms of officers were seized and dragged across the bridge to the landing-stage where the black ship was moored. The rest of the crew were ordered into a double line.

And then the slaughter began.

Before Nat could even struggle to break away from the gibbering Moon men to whom he and the other prisoners had been consigned, the aged crew of the Black Caesar had begun their work of almost instantaneous destruction.

Streams of red and purple light shot from the ray-pistols that they

carried, and before them the crew of the ether-liner simply withered up and vanished. They became mere masses of human débris piled on the landing-stage, and upon these masses, too, the old men turned their implements, until only a few heaps of charred carbon remained on the landing-stage, impalpable as burned paper, and slowly rising in the low atmospheric pressure until they drifted over the crater.

Nat had cried out in horror at the sight, and tried to tear himself free from the grasp of the Moon dwarfs who held him. So had the rest. Never was struggle so futile. Despite their short arms and legs, the Moon dwarfs held them in an unshakable grip, chattering and squealing as they compressed them against their barrel-like chests until the breath was all but crushed out of their bodies.

"Devil!" cried Nat furiously, as Axelson came up to him. "Why don't you kill us, too?" And he hurled furious taunts and abuse at him, in the hope of goading him into making the same comparatively merciless end of his prisoners.

Axelson looked at him calmly, but made no reply. He looked at Madge again, and his features were convulsed with some emotion that gave him the aspect of a fiend. And then only did Nat realize that it was Madge who was responsible for the Black Caesar's madness.

Axelson spoke again, and the prisoners were hustled up the ladder and on board the black vessel.

“The Kommandant-Kommissar will see you!" The door of their prison had opened, letting in a shaft of light, and disclosing one of the graybeards, who stood there, pointing at Nat.

"The—who?" Nat demanded.

"The Kommandant-Kommissar, Comrade Axelson," snarled the graybeard.

Nat knew what that strange jargon meant. He had read books about the political sect known as Socialists who flourished in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, and, indeed, were even yet not everywhere extinct. And with that a flash of intuition explained the presence of these old men on board.

These were the men who had been imprisoned in their youth, with Axelson's father, and had escaped and made their way into space, and had been supposed dead long since. Somewhere they must have survived.

And here they were, speaking a jargon of past generations, and

ignorant that the world had changed, relics of the past, dead as the dead Moon from which the black ship was winging away through the ether.

"Don't go, Captain," pleaded Madge. "Tell him we'll all go together."

Nat shook his head. "Maybe I'll be able to make terms with him," he answered, and stepped out upon the vessel's deck.

The graybeard slammed the door and laughed savagely. "You'll make no terms with the Black Caesar," he said. "This is the reign of the proletariat. The bourgeois must die! So Lenin decreed!"

But he stopped suddenly and passed his hand over his forehead like a man awakening from a dream.

"Surely the proletariat has already triumphed on earth?" he asked. "A long time has passed, and daily we expect the summons to return and establish the new world-order. What year is this? Is it not 2017? It is so hard to reckon on Eros."

"On Eros?" thought Nat. "This is the year 2044," he answered. "You've been dreaming, my friend. We've had our new world-order, and it's not in the least like the one you and your friends anticipated."

"Gott!" screamed the old man. "Gott, you're lying to me, bourgeois! You're lying, I tell you!"

So Eros was their destination! Eros, one of the asteroids, those tiny fragments of a broken planet, lying outside the orbit of Mars. Some of these little worlds, of which more than a thousand are known to exist, are no larger than a gentleman's country estate; some are mere rocks in space. Eros, Nat knew, was distinguished among them from the fact that it had an eccentric orbit, which brought it at times nearer Earth than any other heavenly body except the Moon.

Also that it had only been known for thirty years, and that it was supposed to be a double planet, having a dark companion.

That was in Nat's mind as he ascended the bridge to where Axelson was standing at the controls, with one of the graybeards beside him. The door of his stateroom was open, and suddenly there scuttled out of it one of the most bestial objects Nat had ever seen.

It was a Moon woman, a dwarfish figure, clothed in a shapeless garment of spun cellulose, and in her arms she held a heavy-headed Moon baby, whose huge chest stood up like a pyramid, while the

tiny arms and legs hung dangling down.

"Here is the bourgeois, Kommandant," said Nat's captor.

Axelson looked at Nat, eye meeting eye in a slow stare. Then he relinquished the controls to the graybeard beside him, and motioned Nat to precede him into the stateroom.

Nat entered. It was an ordinary room, much like that of the captain of the ether-liner now stranded on the Moon. There were a bunk, chairs, a desk and a radio receiver.

Axelson shut the door. He tried to speak and failed to master his emotion. At last he said:

"I am prepared to offer you terms, Nathaniel Lee, in accordance with my promise."

"I'll make no terms with murderers," replied Nat bitterly.

Axelson stood looking at him. His great chest rose and fell. Suddenly he put out one great hand and clapped Nat on the shoulder.

"Wise men," he said, "recognize facts. Within three weeks I shall be the undisputed ruler of Earth. Whether of a desert or of a cowed and

submissive subject-population, rests with the Earth men. I have never been on Earth, for I was born on Eros. My mother died at my birth. I have never seen another human woman until to-day."

Nat looked at him, trying to follow what was in Axelson's mind.

"My father fled to Eros, a little planet seventeen miles in diameter, as we have found. He called it a heavenly paradise. It was his intention to found there a colony of those who were in rebellion against the tyrants of Earth.

"His followers journeyed to the Moon and brought back Moon women for wives. But there were no children of these unions. Later there were dissensions and civil war. Three-fourths of the colony died in battle with one another.

"I was a young man. I seized the reins of power. The survivors—these old men—were disillusioned and docile. I made myself absolute. I brought Moon men and women to Eros to serve us as slaves. But in a few years the last of my father's old compatriots will have died, and thus it was I conceived of conquering Earth and having men to obey me. For fifteen years I have been experimenting and constructing apparatus, with which I now have Earth at my mercy.

"But I shall need assistance, intelligent men who will obey me and aid me in my plans. That is why I saved you and the other officers of your ether-lines. If you will join me, you shall have the highest post on Earth under me, Nathaniel Lee, and those others shall be under you."

Axelson paused, and, loathing the man though he did, Nat was conscious of a feeling of pity for him that he could not control. He saw his lonely life on Eros, surrounded by those phantom humans of the past, and he understood his longing for Earth rule—he the planetary exile, the sole human being of all the planetary system outside Earth, perhaps, except for his dwindling company of aged men.

"To-day, Nathaniel Lee," Axelson went on, "my life was recast in a new mould when I saw the woman you have brought with you. I did not know before that women were beautiful to look on. I did not dream that creatures such as she existed. She must be mine, Nathaniel Lee.

"But that is immaterial. What is your answer to my offer?"

Nat was trying to think, though passion distorted the mental images as they arose in his brain. To Axelson it was evidently

incomprehensible that there would be any objection to his taking Madge. Nat saw that he must temporize for Madge's sake.

"I'll have to consult my companions," he answered.

"Of course," answered Axelson. "That is reasonable. Tell them that unless they agree to join me it will be necessary for them to die. Do Earth men mind death? We hate it on Eros, and the Moon men hate it, too, though they have a queer legend that something in the shape of an invisible man raises from their ashes. My father told me that that superstition existed on Earth in his time, too. Go and talk to your companions, Nathaniel Lee."

The Black Caesar's voice was almost friendly. He clapped Nat on the shoulder again, and called the graybeard to conduct him back to his prison.

"Oh, Captain Lee, I'm so glad you're back!" exclaimed Madge. "We've been afraid for you. Is he such a terrible man, this Black Caesar?"

Nat sneered, then grinned malevolently. "Well, he's not exactly the old-fashioned idea of a Sunday-school teacher," he answered. Of course he could not tell the girl about Axelson's proposal.

The little group of prisoners stood on the upper deck of the black ship and watched the Moon men scurrying about the landing-stage as she hovered to her position.

Axelson's father had not erred when he had called the tiny planet, Eros, a heavenly paradise, for no other term could have described it.

They were in an atmosphere so similar to that of Earth that they could breathe with complete freedom, but there seemed to be a lightness and a vigor in their limbs that indicated that the air was supercharged with oxygen or ozone. The presence of this in large amounts was indicated by the intense blueness of the sky, across which fleecy clouds were drifting.

And in that sky what looked like threescore moons were circling with extraordinary swiftness. From thirty to forty full moons, of all sizes, from that of a sun to that of a brilliant planet, and riding black against the blue.

The sun, hardly smaller than when seen from Earth, shone in the zenith, and Earth and Mars hung in the east and north respectively, each like a blood-red sun.

The moons were some of the thousand other asteroids, weaving their

lacy patterns in and out among each other. But, stupendous as the sight was, it was toward the terrestrial scene that the party turned their eyes as the black ship settled.

A sea of sapphire blue lapped sands of silver and broke into soft lines of foam. To the water's edge extended a lawn of brightest green, and behind this an arm of the sea extended into what looked like a tropical forest. Most of the trees were palmlike, but towered to immense heights, their foliage swaying in a gentle breeze. There were apparently no elevations, and yet, so small was the little sphere that the ascending curve gave the illusion of distant heights, while the horizon, instead of seeming to rise, lay apparently perfectly flat, producing an extraordinary feeling of insecurity.

Near the water's edge a palatial mansion, built of hewn logs and of a single story, stood in a garden of brilliant flowers. Nearer, beyond the high landing-stage, were the great shipbuilding works, and near them an immense and slightly concave mirror flashed back the light of the sun.

"The death ray!" whispered Brent to Nat.

Axelson came up to the party as the ship settled down. "Welcome to Eros," he said cordially. "My father told me that in some Earth

tongue that name meant 'love'."

Never, perhaps, was so strange a feast held as that with which Axelson entertained his guests that day. Dwarfish Moon men passed viands and a sort of palm wine in the great banquet-room, which singularly resembled one of those early twentieth century interiors shown in museums. Only the presence of a dozen of the aged guards, armed with ray-rods, lent a grimness to the scene.

Madge sat on Axelson's right, and Nat on his left. The girl's lightheartedness had left her; her face grew strained as Axelson's motives—which Nat had not dared disclose to her—disclosed themselves in his manner.

Once, when he laid his finger for a moment against her white throat, she started, and for a moment it seemed as if the gathering storm must break.

For Nat had talked with his men, and all had agreed that they would not turn traitor, though they intended to temporize as long as possible, in the hope of catching the Black Caesar unawares.

Then slowly a somber twilight began to fall, and Axelson rose.

"Let us walk in the gardens during the reign of Erebos," he said.

"Erebos?" asked Nat.

"The black world that overshadows us each sleeping period," answered Axelson.

Nat knew what he meant. The dark companion of Eros revolves around it every six hours; the day of Eros would therefore never be longer than six hours, this without reckoning the revolution of Eros around the sun. But owing to its small size, it was probable that it was bathed in almost perpetual sunshine.

The sweet scent of the flowers, much stronger than of any flowers on earth, filled the air. They walked across the green lawn and entered a jungle path, with bamboos and creeping plants on either side, and huge palmlike trees. Behind them stalked the guards with their ray-rods.

A lake of deepest black disclosed itself. Suddenly Madge uttered a scream and clung to Nat. "Look, look!" she cried. "It's horrible!"

Suddenly Nat realized that the lake swarmed with monsters. They were of crocodilian form, but twice the size of the largest crocodile,

and sprawled over one another in the shallows beside the margin. As the party drew near, an enormous monster began waddling on its clawed feet toward them.

A mouth half the length of the creature opened, disclosing a purplish tongue and hideous fangs. Madge screamed again.

"Ah, so fear exists on Earth, too?" asked Axelson blandly. "That makes my conquest sure. I suspected it, and yet I was not sure that science had not conquered it. But there is no cause for fear. A magnetic field protects us. See!"

For the waddling monster suddenly stopped short as if brought up sharply by the bars of a cage, and drew back.

Axelson turned and wheezed in the Moon language—if the gibbering of the dwarfs could be called speech—and one of the guards answered him.

"These primitive dwellers on Eros I have preserved," said Axelson, "as a means of discipline. The Moon animals are afraid of them. I keep a supply of those who have transgressed my laws to feed them. See!"

He turned and pointed. Two guards were bringing a gibbering, screeching, struggling Moon man with them. Despite his strength, he seemed incapable of making any resistance, but his whole body quivered, and his hideous face was contorted with agony of terror.

At a distance of some fifty feet they turned aside into a little bypath through the jungle, reappearing close beside the Lake upon a raised platform. And what happened next happened so swiftly that Nat was unable to do anything to prevent it.

The guards disappeared; the Moon man, as if propelled by some invisible force, moved forward jerkily to the lake's edge. Instantly one of the saurians had seized him in its jaws, and another had wrenched half the body away, and the whole fighting, squirming mass vanished in the depths.

And from far away came the screeching chant of the Moon men, as if in invocation to some hideous deity.

And, moving perceptibly, the huge black orb of Eros's dark satellite crept over the sky, completely covering it.

Axelson stepped forward to where Nat stood, supporting Madge in his arms. The girl had fainted with horror at the scene.

"Your answer Nathaniel Lee," he said softly. "I know you have been postponing the decision. Now I will take the girl, and you shall give me your answer. Will you and these men join me, or will you die as the Moon man died?" He spoke wheezily, as if he, like Nat, had a cold.

And he put his arm around Madge.

Next moment something happened to him that had never happened in his life before. The Black Caesar went down under a well-directed blow to the jaw.

He leaped to his feet trembling with fury and barked a command. Instantly the old guards had hurled themselves forward. And behind them a horde of Moon men came, ambling.

While the guards covered their prisoners with their ray-rods, two Moon men seized each of them, imprisoning him in their unbreakable grasp.

Axelson pointed upward. "When the reign of Erebos is past," he said, "you become food for the denizens of the lake, unless you have agreed to serve me."

And he raised Madge in his arms, laughing as the girl fought and struggled to resist him.

"Madge!" cried Nat, trying to run toward her.

So furious were his struggles that for a moment he succeeded in throwing off the Moon men's grasp. Then he was caught again, and, fighting desperately, was borne off by the dwarfs through the shadows.

They traversed the border of the lake until a small stone building disclosed itself. Nat and the others were thrust inside into pitch darkness. The door clanged; in vain they hurled themselves against it. It was of wood, but it was as solid as the stone itself, and it did not give an inch for all their struggles.

“Where is your Kommandant?" The whisper seemed in the stone hut itself. "Your Nathaniel Lee. I must speak to him. I am the guard who brought him to the Black Caesar on board the ship."

"I'm here," said Nat. "Where are you?"

"I am in the house of the ray. I am on guard there. I am speaking into the telephone which runs only to where you are. You can speak

anywhere in the hut, and I shall hear you."

"Well, what do you want?" asked Nat.

"You love the Earth woman. I remember, when I was a boy, we used to love. I had forgotten. There was a girl in Stamford.... Tell me, is it true that this is the year 2044 and that the proletariat has not yet triumphed?"

"It's true," said Nat. "Those dreams are finished, We're proud of the World Federation. Tell me about Madge Dawes—the Earth woman. Is she safe?"

"He has taken her to his house. I do not think she is harmed. He is ill. He is closely guarded. There are rumors afoot. I do not know."

"What do you want, then?"

"If the Black Caesar dies will you take me back to Earth again? I long so for the old Earth life. I will be your slave, if only I can set foot on Earth before I die."

"Can you rescue us?" Nat held his breath.

"The Moon men are on guard."

"They have no ray-guns and you have."

"The penalty would be terrible. I should be thrown to the monsters."

"Can you get us each a ray-gun? Will you risk it, to get back to Earth?" asked Nat.

A pause. Then, "My friend, I am coming."

Nat heard Benson hissing in his ear, "If we can surprise them, we can get possession of the black ship and return."

"We must get Madge Dawes."

"And smash the mirror," put in Brent.

After that there was nothing to do but wait.

The door clicked open. An indistinct form stood in the entrance. It was already growing light; the dark satellite that eclipsed Eros was passing.

"Hush! I have brought you ray-rods!" It was the old man with whom Nat had spoken on the boat. Under his arm he held five metallic rods, tipped with luminous glass. He handed one to each of the

prisoners. "Do you know how to use them?" he asked.

Nat examined his. "It's an old-style rod that was used on earth fifty years ago," he told his men. "I've seen them in museums. It came into use in the Second World War of 1950 or thereabouts. You slip back the safety catch and press this button, taking aim as one did with the pistol. You fellows have seen pistols?"

"My father had an old one," said the chief mate, Barnes.

"How many times can they be fired without reloading?" Nat asked the old guard.

"Ten times; sometimes more; and they were all freshly loaded yesterday."

"Take us to where Axelson is."

"First you must destroy the guards. I sent the one on duty here away on some pretext. But the others may be here at any moment. Talk lower. Are you going to kill them?"

"We must," said Nat.

The old fellow began to sob. "We were companions together. They

seized us and imprisoned us together, the capitalists, years ago. I thought the proletariat would have won, and you say it is all different. I am an old man, and life is sad and strange."

"Listen. Is Axelson in the house?" demanded Nat.

"He is in his secret room. I do not know the way. None of us has ever entered it."

"And Madge?"

"She was with him. I do not know anything more." He sank down, groaning, broken.

Nat pushed his way past him. It was fast growing light now. A ray of sunshine shot from beneath the edge of the dark sphere overhead, which still filled almost all the heavens. At that moment the hideous face and squat body of one of the Moon men came into view at the end of the path. The creature stopped, gibbering with surprise, and then rushed forward, mewing like a cat.

Nat aimed his ray-rod and pressed the button. The streak of light, not quite aimed, in Nat's excitement, sheared off one side of the Moon man's face.

The creature rocked where it stood, raised its voice in a screech, and rushed forward again, arms flailing. And this time Nat got home. The streak passed right through the body of the monster, which collapsed into a heap of calcined carbon.

But its screech had brought the other dwarfs running to the scene. In a moment the path was blocked by a score of the hideous monsters, which, taking in what was happening, came forward in a yelling bunch.

The ray-rods streaked their message of death into the thick of them. Yet so fierce was the rush that some parts got home. Arms, legs, and barrel chests, halves of men, covering the five with that impalpable black powder into which their bodies were dissolving. Nat remembered afterward the horror of a grinning face, apparently loose in the air, and a flailing arm that lashed his chest.

For fifteen seconds, perhaps, it was like struggling with some vampire creatures in a hideous dream. And then, just when it seemed to Nat that he was going mad, he found the path free, and the huddled remnants of the Moon men piled up about him on every side.

He emptied two more ray-shots into the writhing mass, and saw it

cease to quiver and then dissolve into the black powder. He turned and looked at his companions. They, too, showed the horror of the strain they had undergone.

"We must kill the guards now," Nat panted. "And then find Madge and save her."

"We're with you," answered Brent, and together the five rushed into the sunlight and the open.

There were no guards on duty at the entrance of the house, and the door stood wide open. Nat rushed through the door at the head of his men. A single guard was in the hall, but he only looked up as they came in. And it was evident that he was in no condition to resist, for he was in the grip of some terrible disease.

His features were swollen so that they were hardly recognizable, and hoarse, panting breaths came from his lungs. He was so far gone that he hardly registered surprise at the advent of the five.

"Where's Axelson?" demanded Nat.

The guard pointed toward the end of the corridor, then let his arm fall. Nat led his men along the half-dark passage.

At the end of the corridor two more guards were on duty, but one was collapsed upon the floor, apparently unconscious, and the other, making a feeble attempt to draw his ray-rod, crumbled into ashes as Brent fired. The five burst through the door.

They found themselves in the banquet-hall. The remnants of the meal were still upon the table, and three Moon men, looking as if they had been poisoned, were writhing on the floor. At the farther end of the hall was another door.

This gave upon a central hall, with a door in each of its four sides, and a blaze of sunlight coming through the crystal roof. The five stopped, baffled. Then of a sudden Axelson's voice broke the silence —his voice, yet changed almost beyond recognition, hoarse, broken, and gasping:

"Try the doors, Nathaniel Lee. Try each door in turn, and then go back. And know that in an instant I can blast you to nothingness where you stand!"

And suddenly there came Madge's voice, "He can't! He can't, Nat. He's dying, and he knows it. I won't let him, and he hasn't got the strength to move."

"Which door?" cried Nat in desperation.

"None of the doors. They're a trick," came Madge's voice. "Go forward and press the grooved panel upon the wall in front of you."

Nat stepped forward, found the panel, and pressed it. The wall swung open, like two folded doors, revealing another room within, perfectly circular.

It contained a quantity of pieces of apparatus, some glowing with light, some dark, and a radio transmitting set; it was evidently the secret lair of the Black Caesar. And there he was, trapped at last by the mortal illness that had overtaken him!

He was lying upon the couch, his great form stretched out, his features hideously swollen by the same disease that had attacked the guards.

Nat raised his ray-rod, but Axelson feebly put up his hand, and Nat lowered the weapon. And, as the five gathered about the dying man, again Nat felt that strange sense of pathos and pity for him.

He had never known Earth life, and he was not to be measured by the common standards applicable on Earth.

"Don't fire, Nat," said Madge in a shaky voice. She was seated beside Axelson, and—the wonder of it—she was sponging the foam from his lips and moistening his forehead. She raised a crystal that contained some fluid to his lips, and he drained it greedily.

"So—Earth wins, Nathaniel Lee," whispered Axelson hoarsely. "I am dying. I know it. It is the same dreaded disease that came to the Moon at the time of my father's landing there. Three-fourths of the Moon animals died. It is mortal. The lungs burn away.

"My father told me that on Earth it is not mortal. He called it 'cold'—but I am burning hot."

Then only did Nat understand, and the irony of it made him catch his breath and grit his teeth to check his hysterical laughter. The Black Caesar, the terror of Earth, was dying of a common cold which he himself had given him.

The coryza germ, almost harmless on Earth, among a population habituated to it for countless generations, had assumed the potency of a plague here, where no colds had ever been known—among the Moon men, and even among the guards, after their lifetime in the germless climate of Eros.

"I've failed, Nathaniel Lee," came the Black Caesar's voice. "And yet that hardly troubles me. There is something more that I do not understand. She is a creature like ourselves—with will and reason. She is not like the Moon women. She told me that she did not wish to be queen of the Earth because she did not love me. I do not understand. And so—I am glad to go."

A gasp came from Axelson's throat as he raised his head and tried to speak, but the death-rattle was already in his throat. A slight struggle, and the massive form upon the couch was nothing but inanimate clay.

Madge rose from beside him, and the tears were streaming down her face.

"He wasn't a bad man, Nat," she said. "He was—gentle with me. He didn't understand; that was all. When I refused to be his queen, he was overcome with bewilderment. Oh, Nat, I can never, never write this story for the Universal News Syndicate."

Nat led her, sobbing, from the room.

Soon he succeeded in getting into teleradio communication with Earth. He broadcast the news that the Black Caesar was dead, and

that his power for evil was at an end forever.

Then, in the few hours of daylight that remained, he set his men to work to smash the ray outfit that had destroyed China. There was some principle involved which he did not altogether understand, though Brent professed to have a clue to it, but it was evident that, except for the ray, Axelson had possessed no knowledge superior to that of the Earth scientists.

Of the guards, a few were already recovering, principally those of comparatively younger age. Not a Moon man, on the other hand, had survived the epidemic. As soon as Nat had got the guards out of the house, he reduced it to ashes by the aid of an old-fashioned box of phosphoric matches.

As the dark satellite was again creeping over Eros, the black ship set sail.

But of the return journey to the Moon, where they transferred to their own ship, of their landing at New York, and of the triumphal reception that was accorded them, this is no place to speak. Nat's journey with Madge from the center of the city, in what was the old Borough of Westchester, to his home in the suburb of Hartford, was a continual ovation.

Crowds lined the air-route, and every few miles, so thick was the air-traffic, he was forced to hover and address the cheering multitudes. Hartford itself was *en fete*, and across the main road the City Bosses had hung an old-fashioned banner, strung from house to house on either side, bearing the legend: For World President: NATHANIEL LEE!

Nat turned to Madge, who was seated beside him silently. "Ever hear of 'getting married?'" he asked.

"Of course I've heard of it," replied the girl indignantly. "Do you think I'm as dumb as that, Nat Lee? Why, those old-fashioned novels are part of the public schools' curriculum."

"Pity those days can't come back. You ought to be a World Presidentess, you know," said Nat. "I was thinking, if we registered as companionates, I could take you into the White House, and you'd have a swell time there taking X-rays on visiting days."

"Well," answered Madge slowly. "I never thought of that. It might be worth trying out."

#43 The Second Satellite, By Edmond Hamilton:

Earth-men war on frog-vampires for the emancipation of the human cows of Earth's second satellite.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Norman and Hackett, bulky in their thick flying suits, seemed to fill the little office. Across the room Harding, the field superintendent, contemplated them. Two planes were curving up into the dawn together from the field outside, their motors thunderous as they roared over the building. When their clamor had receded, Harding spoke:

"I don't know which of you two is crazier," he said. "You, Norman, to propose a fool trip like this, or you, Hackett, to go with him."

Hackett grinned, but the long, lean face of Norman was earnest. "No doubt it all sounds a little insane," he said, "but I'm convinced I'm right."

The field superintendent shook his head. "Norman, you ought to be writing fiction instead of flying. A second satellite—and Fellows and the others on it—what the devil!"

"What other theory can account for their disappearance?" asked Norman calmly. "You know that since the new X-type planes were introduced, hundreds of fliers all over Earth have been trying for altitude records in them. Twenty-five miles—thirty—thirty-five—the records have been broken every day. But out of the hundreds of fliers who have gone up to those immense heights, four have never come

down nor been seen again!

"One vanished over northern Sweden, one over Australia, one over Lower California, and one, Fellows, himself, right here over Long Island. You saw the globe on which I marked those four spots, and you saw that when connected they formed a perfect circle around the Earth. The only explanation is that the four fliers when they reached a forty-mile height were caught up by some body moving round Earth in that circular orbit, some unknown moon circling Earth inside its atmosphere, a second satellite of Earth's whose existence has until now never been suspected!"

Harding shook his head again. "Norman, your theory would be all right if it were not for the cold fact that no such satellite has ever been glimpsed."

"Can you glimpse a bullet passing you?" Norman retorted. "The two fliers at Sweden and Lower California vanished within three hours of each other, on opposite sides of the Earth. That means that this second satellite, as I've computed, circles Earth once every six hours, and travelling at that terrific speed it is no more visible to us of Earth than a rifle bullet would be."

"Moving through Earth's atmosphere at such speed, indeed, one

would expect it to burn up by its own friction with the air. But it does not, because its own gravitational power would draw to itself enough air to make a dense little atmosphere for itself that would cling to it and shield it as it speeds through Earth's upper air. No, I'm certain that this second satellite exists, Harding, and I'm as certain that it's responsible for the vanishing of those four fliers."

"And now you and Hackett have figured when it will be passing over here and are going up in an X-type yourselves to look for it," Harding said musingly.

"Look for it?" echoed Hackett. "We're not going to climb forty miles just to get a look at the damn thing—we're going to try landing on it!"

"You're crazy sure!" the field superintendent exploded. "If Fellows and those others got caught by the thing and never came down again, why in the name of all that's holy would you two want—" He stopped suddenly. "Oh, I think I see," he said, awkwardly. "Fellows was rather a buddy of you two, wasn't he?"

"The best that ever flew a crippled Nieuport against three Fokkers to pull us out of a hole," said Norman softly. "Weeks he's been gone, and if it had been Hackett and I he'd be all over the sky looking for

us—the damned lunatic. Well, we're not going to let him down."

"I see," Harding repeated. Then—"Well, here comes your mechanic, Norman, so your ship must be ready. I'll go with you. It's an event to see two Columbuses starting for another world."

The gray dawn-light over the flying field was flushing to faint rose as the three strode out to where the long X-type stood, its strangely curved wings, enclosed cabin and flat, fan-like tail gleaming dully. Its motor was already roaring with power and the plane's stubby wheels strained against the chocks. In their great suits Norman and Hackett were like two immense ape-figures in the uncertain light, to the eyes of those about them.

"Well, all the luck," Harding told them. "You know I'm pulling for you, but—I suppose it's useless to say anything about being careful."

"I seem to have heard the words," Hackett grinned, as he and Norman shook the field superintendent's hand.

"It's all the craziest chance," Norman told the other. "And if we don't come down in a reasonable time—well, you'll know that our theory was right, and you can broadcast it or not as you please."

"I hope for your sake that you're dead wrong," smiled the official. "I've told you two to get off the Earth a lot of times, but I never meant it seriously."

Harding stepped back as the two clambered laboriously into the cramped cabin. Norman took the controls, the door slammed, and as the chocks were jerked back and the motor roared louder the long plane curved up at a dizzy angle from the field into the dawn. Hackett waved a thick arm down toward the diminishing figures on the field below; then turned from the window to peer ahead with his companion.

The plane flew in a narrow ascending spiral upward, at an angle that would have been impossible to any ship save an X-type. Norman's eyes roved steadily over the instrument as they rose, his ears unconsciously alert for each explosion of the motor. Earth receded swiftly into a great gray concave surface as they climbed higher and higher.

By the time the five-mile height was reached Earth's surface had changed definitely from concave to convex. The plane was ascending by then in a somewhat wider spiral, but its climb was as steady and sure as ever. Frost begin to form quickly on the cabin's windows, creeping out from the edges. Norman spoke a word over

the motor's muffled thunder, and Hackett snicked on the electrical radiators. The frost crept back as their warm, clean heat flooded the cabin.

Ten miles—fifteen—they had reached already altitudes impossible but a few years before, though it was nothing to the X-types. As they passed the ten-mile mark, Hackett set the compact oxygen-generator going. A clean, tangy odor filled the cabin as it began functioning. Twenty miles—twenty-two—

After a time Norman pointed mutely to the clock on the instrument board, and Hackett nodded. They were well within their time schedule, having calculated to reach the forty-mile height at ten, the hour when, by its computed orbit, the second satellite should be passing overhead. "—26—27—28—" Hackett muttered the altimeter figures to himself as the needle crept over them.

Glancing obliquely down through the window he saw that Earth was now a huge gray ball beneath them, white cloud-oceans obscuring the drab details of its surface here and there. "—31—32—" The plane was climbing more slowly, and at a lesser angle. Even the X-type had to struggle to rise in the attenuated air now about them. Only the super-light, super-powered plane could ever have reached the terrific height.

It was at the thirty-four mile level that the real battle for altitude began. Norman kept the plane curving steadily upward, handling it with surpassing skill in the rarefied air. Frost was on its windows now despite the heating mechanism. Slowly the altimeter needle crept to the forty mark. Norman kept the ship circling, its wings tilted slightly, but not climbing, Earth a great gray misty ball beneath.

"Can't keep this height long," he jerked. "If our second satellite doesn't show up in minutes we've had a trip for nothing."

"All seems mighty different up here," was Hackett's shouted comment. "Easy enough to talk down there about hopping onto the thing, but up here—hell, there's nothing but air and mighty little of that!"

Norman grinned. "There'll be more. If I'm right about this thing we won't need to hop it—its own atmosphere will pick us up."

Both looked anxious as the motor sputtered briefly. But in a moment it was again roaring steadily. Norman shook his head.

"Maybe a fool's errand after all. No—I'm still sure we're right! But it seems that we don't prove it this time."

"Going down?" asked Hackett.

"We'll have to, in minutes. Even with its own air-feed the motor can't stand this height for—"

Norman never finished the words. There was a sound, a keen rising, rushing sound of immense power that reached their ears over the motor's roar. Then in an instant the universe seemed to go mad about them: they saw the gray ball of Earth and the sun above skyrocketing around them as the plane whirled madly.

The rushing sound was in that moment thunderous, terrible, and as winds smashed and rocked the plane like giant hands, Hackett glimpsed another sphere that was not the sphere of Earth, a greenish globe that expanded with lightning speed in the firmament beside their spinning plane! The winds stilled; the green globe changed abruptly to a landscape of green land and sea toward which the plane was falling! Norman was fighting the controls—land and sea were gyrating up to them with dizzy speed—crash!

With that cracking crash the plane was motionless. Sunlight poured through its windows, and great green growths were all around it. Hackett, despite Norman's warning cry, forced the door open and was bursting outside, Norman after him. They staggered and fell,

with curious lightness and slowness, on the ground outside, then clutched the plane for support and gazed stupefiedly around them.

The plane had crashed down into a thicket of giant green reeds that rose a yard over their heads, its pancake landing having apparently not damaged it. The ground beneath their feet was soft and soggy, the air warm and balmy, and the giant reeds hid all the surrounding landscape from view.

In the sky the sun burned near one horizon with unusual brilliance. But it was dwarfed, in size, by the huge gray circle that filled half the heavens overhead. A giant gray sphere it was, screened here and there by floating white mists and clouds, that had yet plain on it the outlines of dark continents and gleaming seas. A quaking realization held the two as they stared up at it.

“Earth!" Norman was babbling. "It's Earth, Hackett—above us; my God, I can't believe even yet that we've done it!"

"Then we're on—the satellite—the second satellite!—" Hackett fought for reality. "Those winds that caught us—"

"They were the atmosphere of this world, of the second satellite! They caught us and carried us on inside this smaller world's

atmosphere, Hackett. We're moving with it around Earth at terrific speed now!"

"The second satellite, and we on it!" Hackett whispered, incredulously. "But these reeds—it can't all be like this—"

They stepped together away from the plane. The effort sent each of them sailing upward in a great, slow leap, to float down more than a score of feet from the plane. But unheeding in their eagerness this strange effect of the satellite's lesser gravitational power, they moved on, each step a giant, clumsy leap. Four such steps took them out of the towering reeds onto clear ground.

It was a gentle, grassy slope they were on, stretching away along a gray-green sea that extended out to the astoundingly near horizon on their right. To the left it rose into low hills covered with dense masses of green junglelike vegetation. Hackett and Norman, though, gazed neither at sea or hills for the moment, but at the half-score grotesque figures who had turned toward them as they emerged from the reeds. A sick sense of the unreal held them as they gazed, frozen with horror. For the great figures returning their gaze a few yards from them were—frog-men!

Frog-men! Great mottled green shapes seven to eight feet in height, with bowed, powerful legs and arms that ended in webbed paws. The heads were bulbous ones in which wide, unwinking frog-eyes were set at the sides, the mouths white-lipped and white-lined. Three of the creatures held each a black metal tube-and-handle oddly like a target-pistol.

"Norman!" Hackett's voice was a crescendo of horror. "*Norman!*"

"Back to the plane!" Norman cried thickly. "The plane—"

The two staggered back, but the frog-men, recovering from their own first surprise, were running forward with great hopping steps! The two fliers flung themselves back in a floating leap toward the reeds, but the green monsters were quick after them. A croaking cry came from one and as another raised his tube-and-handle, something flicked from it that burst close beside Norman. There was no sound or light as it burst, but the reeds for a few feet around it vanished!

A hoarse cry from Hackett—the creatures had reached him, grasped him at the edge of the reeds! Norman swerved in his floating leap to strike the struggling flier and frog-men. The scene whirled around him as he fought them, great paws reaching for him. With a sick, frantic rage he felt his clenched fist drive against cold, green,

billowy bodies. Croaking cries sounded in his ears; then, Hackett and he were jerked to their feet, held tightly by four of the creatures.

"My God, Norman," panted Hackett, helpless. "What are they—frog-things?—"

"Steady, Hackett. They're the people of the second satellite, it seems; wait!"

One of the armed frog-men approached and inspected them, and then croaked an order in a deep voice. Then, still holding the two tightly, the party of monsters began to move along the slope, skirting the sea's edge. In a few minutes they reached two curious objects resting on the slope. They seemed long black metal boats, slender and with sharp prow and stern. A compact mechanism and control-board filled the prow, while at the stern and sides were long tubes mounted on swivels like machine-guns.

The frog-men motioned Norman and Hackett into one, fastening the two prisoners and themselves into their seats with metal straps provided for the purpose. Four had entered the one boat, the others that of the captives. One at the prow moved his paws over the control-board and with a purring of power the boat, followed by the other, rose smoothly into the air. It headed out over the gray-green

sea, land dropping quickly from sight behind, the horizons water-bounded on all sides. From their nearness Norman guessed that this second satellite of Earth's was small indeed beside its mother planet. He had to look up to earth's great gray sphere overhead to attain a sense of reality.

Hackett was whispering beside him, the frog-men watchful. "Norman, it's not real—it can't be real! These things—these boats—intelligent like men—"

The other sought to steady him. "It's a different world, Hackett. Gravitation different, light different, everything different, and evolution here has had a different course. On Earth men evolved to be the most intelligent life-forms, but here the frog-races, it seems."

"But where are they taking us? Could we ever find the plane again?"

"God knows. If we ever get away from these things we might. And we've got to find Fellows, too; I wonder where he is on this world."

For many minutes the two boats raced on at great speed over the endless waters before the watery skyline was broken far ahead by something dark and unmoving. Hackett and Norman peered with intense interest toward it. It seemed at first a giant squat mountain

rising from the sea, but as they shot nearer they saw that its outline was too regular, and that colossal as it was in size it was the work of intelligence. They gasped as they came nearer and got a better view of it.

For it was a gigantic dome of black metal rising sheer from the lonely sea, ten miles if anything in diameter, a third that in greatest height. There was no gate or window or opening of any kind in it. Just the colossal, smooth black dome rearing from the watery plain. Yet the two boats were flashing lower toward it.

"They can't be going inside!" Hackett conjectured. "There's no way in and what could be in there? The whole thing's mad—"

"There's some way," Norman said. "They're slowing—"

The flying-boats were indeed slowing as they dipped lower. They were very near the dome now, its curving wall a looming, sky-high barrier before them. Suddenly the boats dipped sharply downward toward the green sea. Before the two fliers could comprehend their purpose, could do aught more than draw instinctive great breaths in preparation, the two craft had shot down into the waters and were arrowing down through the green depths.

Blinded, flung against his metal strap by the resistance of the waters they ripped through, Norman yet retained enough of consciousness to glimpse beams of light that stabbed ahead from the prows of their rushing boats, to see vaguely strange creatures of the deep blundering in and out of those beams as the boats hurtled forward. The water that forced its way between his lips was fresh, he was vaguely aware, and even as he fought to hold his breath was aware too that the frog-men seemed in no way incommoded by the sudden transition into the water, their amphibian nature allowing them to stay under it far longer than any human could do.

The boats ripped through the waters at terrific speed and in a few seconds there loomed before them the giant metal wall of the great dome, going down into the depths here. Norman glimpsed vaguely that the whole colossal dome rested on a vast pedestal-like mountain of rock that rose from the sea's floor almost to the surface. Then a great round opening in the wall; the boats flashed into it and were hurtling along a water-filled tunnel. Norman felt his lungs near bursting—when the tunnel turned sharply upward and the boats whizzed up and abruptly out of the water-tunnel into air!

But it was not the open air again. They were beneath the gigantic dome! For as Norman and Hackett breathed deep, awe fell on their faces as they took in the scene. Far overhead stretched the dome's

colossally curving roof, and far out on all sides. It was lit beneath that roof by a clear light that the two would have sworn was sunlight. The dome was in effect the roof of a gigantic, illuminated building, and upon its floor there stretched a mighty city.

The city of the frog-men! Their boats were rising up over it and Norman and Hackett saw it clear. Square mile upon square mile of structures stretched beneath the dome, black buildings often of immense size, varying in shape, but all of square, rectangular proportions. Between them moved countless frog-hordes, swirling throngs in streets and squares, and over the roofs darted thick swarms of flying-boats. And at the city's center, in a great, circular, clear space, lay a wide, round, green pool—the opening of the water-tunnel up through which they had come.

Norman pointed down toward it. "That's your answer!" he cried. "The only entrance to this frog-city is from the sea, up through that water-tunnel!"

"Good God, an amphibian city!" Hackett was shaken, white-faced.

The two boats were driving quickly over the city, through the swarming craft. Norman glimpsed towering buildings that might have been palaces, temples, laboratories. They slowed and dipped

toward one block-like building not far from the water-tunnel's opening. Armed frog-guards were on its roof, and other boats rested there. The two came to rest and the two captives were jerked out, the guards seizing them.

Half-dragged and half-floating they were led toward an opening in the roof from which a stair led downward. They passed down thus into the building's interior, lit by many windows. Norman glimpsed long halls ending in barred doors, guards here and there. Tube-lines ran along the walls and somewhere machines were throbbing dully. They came at last to a barred door whose guard opened it at the croaking order of the frog-men who held the two, and they were thrust inside, as the door clanged. They turned, and exclaimed in amazement. The room held fully a half-hundred men!

They were men such as the two fliers had never seen before, like humans except that their skins were a light green instead of the normal white and pink. They were dressed in dark short tunics, and kept talking to each other in a tongue quite unintelligible to Norman and Hackett. They came closer, flocking curiously around the two men, with a babel of voices quite meaningless to the two. Then one of the men uttered an exclamation, and all turned.

The barred door had swung open and a half-dozen frog-guards

entered, followed by two frog-men carrying a square little mechanism from which tubing led back out through the door.

"Norman—these men—" Hackett was whispering rapidly. "If there are men in this world too, it may be that—"

"Quiet, Hackett—look at what they're doing."

The two frog-men had set their mechanism in place and then croaked out a brief word or order. Slowly, reluctantly, one of the green men moved toward them. Quickly they removed a metal disk fastened to his arm, exposing a small orifice like an unhealed wound. Onto this they fastened a suckerlike object from which a transparent tube led back through the mechanism. The machine hummed and at once a red stream pulsed through the tube and back through the mechanism. The man to whom it was attached was growing rapidly pale!

Norman, sick with horror, clutched his companion. "Hackett—these frog-men are sucking his blood from him!"

"Good God! And look—they're doing it with another!"

"All of these men—kept prisoners to furnish them with blood. It must be the damned creatures' food! And we here with the others—"

A common horror shook the two. It did not seem to affect the green men in the room, though, who advanced to the mechanism one by one with a reluctant air as of cows unwilling to be milked. Each was attached to the mechanism by the sucking disk on his arm, and out of each the blood poured through the tube. The metal disk was replaced on his arm then and he went back to the others. Norman saw that the frog-men took only from each an amount of blood that they could lose and yet live, since, though each came back pale and weak from the mechanism, they were able to walk.

"It must be their food—human blood!" Norman repeated. "They may have thousands on thousands of humans penned up like this, like so many herds of cows, and perhaps they live entirely on the life-blood they milk from them. Human cows—God!"

"Norman—look—they're calling to us!"

The two stiffened. All the others in the room had taken their turn at the blood-sucking mechanism and now the frog-men croaked their order to the two fliers. They had forgotten their own predicament in the horror of the scene, but now it became real to them. They backed against the room's wall, quivering, dangerous.

The frog-guards came forward to drag them to the machine. A

webbed paw was outstretched but Hackett with a wild blow drove the frog-man back and downward. The frog-guards leaped, and Norman and Hackett struck them back with all the greater strength the lesser gravitation gave them. The room was in an uproar, the green men shouting hoarsely and seeming on the point of rushing to their aid.

But the menacing force-pistols of the other frog-guards held back the shouting men and in moments the two fliers were overpowered by sheer weight of frog-bodies. Norman felt himself dragged to the machine.

Pain needled his upper arm as an incision was made. He felt the sucking-disk attached; then the machine hummed, and a sickening nausea swept him as the blood drained from his body. Held tightly by the guards he went dizzy, weak, but at last felt the sucker removed and a metal disk fastened over the incision. He was jerked aside and Hackett, his face deathly white, was dragged into his place. In a moment some of the latter's blood had been pumped from him also.

The machine was withdrawn, Norman and Hackett were released, and the frog-men, with their black force-pistols watchfully raised, withdrew, the door clanging. The room settled back to quietness, the

green men stretching in lassitude on the metal bunks around it. The two fliers crouched down near the door, shuddering nausea and weakness still holding them.

Norman found that Hackett was laughing weakly. "To think that twenty-four hours ago I was in New York," he half-laughed, half-sobbed. "On Earth—Earth—"

The other gripped his arm. "It's horrible, Hackett, I know. But it isn't instant death, and we've still a chance to escape. Hell, can damn frog-men keep us here? Where's your nerve, man?"

A voice beside them made them turn in amazement. "You are men from Earth?" it asked, in queerly accented English. "From Earth?"

Astonishment held them as they saw who spoke. It was one of the green men in the room, who had settled down by their side. A tall figure with superb muscles and frank, clean countenance, his dark eyes afire with eagerness.

"English?" Norman exclaimed. "You know English—you understand me?"

The other showed his teeth in a smile. "I know, yes. I'm Sarja, and I

learned to speak it from Fallas, in my city, before the Ralas caught me."

"Fallas—" Norman repeated, puzzled; then suddenly he flamed. "By God, he means Fellows!"

"Fallas, yes," said the other. "From the sky he fell into our city in a strange flying-boat that was smashed. He was hurt but we cared for him, and he taught me his speech, which I heard you talking now."

"Then Fellows is in your city now?" asked Hackett eagerly. "Where is that?"

"Across this sea—back in the hills," the other waved. "It is far from the sea but I was rash one day and came too near the water in my flying-boat. The Ralas were out raiding and they saw me, caught me, and brought me here. No escape now, until I die."

"The Ralas—you mean these frog-men?" Norman asked.

Sarja nodded. "Of course. They are the tyrants and oppressors of this world. Our little world is but a tenth or less the size of your great Earth which it circles, but it has its lands and rivers, and this one great fresh-water sea into which the latter empty. In this sea long ago

developed the Ralas, the great frog-men who acquired such intelligence and arts that they became lords of this world.

"Through the centuries, while on the land our races of green men have been struggling upward, the Ralas have oppressed them. Long ago the Ralas left all their other cities to build this one great amphibian city at the sea's center. Entrance to it is only by the water-tunnel from without, and being frog-people entrance thus is easy for them since they can move for many minutes under water, though they drown like any other breathing animal if kept under too long. Humans dare not try to enter it thus by the water-tunnel, since, before they could find it and make their way up through it, they would have drowned.

“So the Ralas have ruled from this impregnable amphibian city. Its colossal metal dome is invulnerable to ordinary attack, and though solid and without openings it is always as light beneath the dome here as outside, since the Ralas' scientists contrived light-condensers and conductors that catch light outside and bring it in to release inside. So when it is day outside the sunlight is as bright here, and when night comes the Earth-light shines here the same as without.

"From this city their raiding parties have gone out endlessly to swoop down on the cities of us green men. Since we learned to make

flying-boats like theirs, with molecular-motors, and to make the guns like theirs that fire shells filled with annihilating force, we have resisted them stoutly but their raids have not ceased. And always they have brought their prisoners back in to this, their city.

"Tens of thousands of green men they have prisoned here like us, for the sole purpose of supplying them with blood. For the Ralas live on this blood alone, changing it chemically to fit their own bodies and then taking it into their bodies. It eliminates all necessity for food here for them. Every few days they drain blood from us, and since we are well fed and cared for to keep us good blood-producers, we will be here for a long time before we die."

"But haven't you made any attempt to get out of here—to escape?" Norman asked.

Sarja smiled. "Who could escape the city of the Ralas? In all recorded history it has never been done, for even if by some miracle you got a flying-boat, the opening of the water-tunnel that leads outward is guarded always."

"Guards or no guards, we're going to try it and not sit here to furnish blood for the Ralas," Norman declared. "Are you willing to help, to try to get to Fellows and your city?"

The green man considered. "It is hopeless," he said, "but as well to die beneath the force-shells of the Ralas as live out a lifetime here. Yes, I will help, though I cannot see how you expect to escape even from this room."

"I think we can manage that," Norman told him. "But first—not a word to these others. We can't hope to escape with them all, and there is no knowing what one might not betray us to the frog-men."

He went on then to outline to the other two the idea that had come to him. Both exclaimed at the simpleness of the idea, though Sarja remained somewhat doubtful. While Hackett slept, weak still from his loss of blood, Norman had the green man scratch on the metal floor as well as possible a crude map of the satellite's surface, and found that the city, where Fellows was, seemed some hundreds of miles back from the sea.

While they talked, the sunlight, apparently sourceless, that came through the heavily barred windows of the room faded rapidly, and dusk settled over the great amphibian city beneath the giant dome, kept from total darkness by a silvery pervading light that Norman reflected must be the light from Earth's great sphere. With the dusk's coming the activities in the frog-city lessened greatly.

With dusk, too, frog-guards entered the room bearing long metal troughs filled with a red jellylike substance, that they placed on racks along the wall. As the guards withdrew the men in the room rushed toward the troughs, elbowing each other aside and striking each other to scoop up and eat as much of the red jelly as possible. It was for all the world like the feeding of farm-animals, and Hackett and Norman so sickened at the sight that they had no heart to try the food. Sarja, though, had no such scruples and seemed to make a hearty meal at one of the troughs.

After the meal the green men sought the bunks and soon were stretched in sonorous slumber. It was, Norman reflected, exactly the existence of domesticated animals—to eat and sleep and give food to their masters. A deeper horror of the frog-men shook him, and a deeper determination to escape them. He waited until all in the room were sleeping before beckoning to Sarja and Hackett.

"Quiet now," he whispered to them. "If these others wake they'll make such a clamor we won't have a chance in the world. Ready, Sarja?"

The green man nodded. "Yes, though I still think such a thing's impossible."

"Probably is," Norman admitted. "But it's the one chance we've got, the immensely greater strength of our Earth-muscle that the frog-men must have forgotten when they put us in here."

They moved silently to the room's great barred door, outside which a frog-guard paced. They waited until he had passed the door and on down the hall, then Norman and Hackett and Sarja grasped together one of the door's vertical bars. It was an inch and a half in thickness, of solid metal, and it seemed ridiculous that any men could bend it by the sheer strength of their muscles.

Norman, though, was relying on the fact that on the second satellite, with its far lesser gravitational influence, their Earth-muscles gave them enormous strength. He grasped the bar, Hackett and Sarja gripping it below him, and then at a whispered word they pulled with all their force. The bar resisted and again, with sweat starting on their foreheads, they pulled. It gave a little.

They shrank back from it as the guard returned, moving past. Then grasping the bar again they bent all their force once more upon it. Each effort saw it bending more, the opening in the door's bars widening. They gave a final great wrench and the bent bar squealed a little. They shrank back, appalled, but the guard had not heard or noticed. He moved past it on his return along the hall, and no sooner

was past it than Norman squeezed through the opening and leaped silently for the great frog-man's back.

It went down with a wild flurry of waving webbed paws and croaking cries, stilled almost instantly by Norman's terrific blows. There was silence then as Hackett and Sarja squeezed out after him, the momentary clamor of the battle having aroused no one.

The three leaped together toward the stairs. In two great floating leaps they were on the floor above, Hackett and Norman dragging Sarja between them. They were not seen, were sailing in giant steps up another stair, hopes rising high. The last stair—the roof-opening above; and then from beneath a great croaking cry swelled instantly into chorus of a alarmed shouts.

"They've found the door—the guard!" panted Hackett.

They were bursting out onto the roof. Frog-guards were on it who came in a hopping rush toward them, force-pistols raised. But a giant leap took Hackett among them, to amaze them for a moment with great flailing blows. Sarja had leaped for the nearest flying-boat resting on the roof, and was calling in a frantic voice to Norman and Hackett. Norman was turning toward Hackett, the center of a wild combat, but the latter emerged from it for a brief second to motion

him frantically back.

"No use, Norman—get away—get away!" he cried hoarsely, frenziedly.

"Hackett—for God's sake—!" Norman half-leaped to the other, but an arm caught him, pulled him desperately onto the boat's surface. It was Sarja, the long craft flying over the roof beneath his control.

"They come!" he panted. "Too late now—" Frog-men were pouring up onto the roof from below. Sarja sent the craft rocketing upward, as Hackett gestured them away for a last frantic time before going down beneath the frog-men's onslaught.

The roof and the combat on it dropped back and beneath them like a stone as their craft ripped across the silvery dusk over the mighty frog-city. They were shooting toward the city's center, toward the green pool that was the entrance to the water-tunnel, while behind and beneath an increasing clamor of alarm spread swiftly. Norman raged futilely.

"Hackett—Hackett! We can't leave him—"

"Too late!" Sarja cried. "We cannot help him but only be captured

again. We escape now and come back—come back—"

The truth of it pierced Norman's brain even in the wild moment. Hackett had fought and held back the frog-guards only that they might escape. He shouted suddenly.

"Sarja—the water-tunnel!" A half-dozen boats with frog-guards on them were rising round it in answer to the alarm!

"The force-gun!" cried the green man. "Beside you—!"

Norman whirled, glimpsed the long tube on its swivel beside him, trained it on the boats rising ahead as they rocketed nearer. He fumbled frantically at a catch at the gun's rear, then felt a stream of shells flicking out of it. Two of the boats ahead vanished as the shells released their annihilating force, another sagged and fell. From the remaining three invisible force-shells flicked around them, but in an instant Sarja had whirled the boat through them and down into the water-tunnel!

Norman clung desperately to his seat as the boat flashed down through the waters, and then, as Sarja sent it flying out through the great tunnel's waters, glimpsed, close behind, the beams of the three Rala boats as they pursued them through the tunnel, overtaking

them. Could the force-shells be fired under water? Norman did not know, but desperately he swung the force-gun back as they rushed through the waters, and pressed the catch. An instant later beams and boats behind them in the tunnel vanished.

His lungs were afire; it seemed that he must open them to the strangling water. The boat was ripping the waters at such tremendous speed that he felt himself being torn from his hold on it. Pain seemed poured like molten metal through his chest—he could hold out no longer; and then the boat stabbed up from the waters into clear air!

Norman panted, sobbed. Behind them rose the colossal metal dome of the frog-city, gleaming dully in the silvery light that flooded the far-stretching seas. That light poured down from a stupendous silver crescent in the night skies. Norman saw dully the dark outlines on it before he remembered. Earth! He laughed a little hysterically. Sarja was driving the flying-boat out over the sea and away from the frog-city at enormous speed. At last he glanced back. Far behind them lay the great dome and up around it gleaming lights were pouring, lights of pursuing Rala boats.

"We escape," Sarja cried, "the city of the Ralas, from which none ever before escaped!"

Remembrance smote Norman. "Hackett! Held off those frog-men so we could get away—we'll come back for him, by God!"

"We come back!" said Sarja. "We come back with all the green men of this world to the Ralas' city, yes! I know what Fallas has planned."

"Can you find your way to him—to your city?" Norman asked.

Sarja nodded, looking upward. "Before the next sun has come and gone we can reach it."

The boat flew onward, and the great dome and the searching lights around it dropped beneath the horizon. Norman felt the warm wind drying his drenched garments as they rushed onward. Crouched on the boat he gazed up toward the silver crescent of Earth sinking toward the horizon ahead. That meant, he told himself, that the satellite turned slowly on its axis as it whirled around Earth. It came to him that its night and day periods must be highly irregular.

When the sun climbed from the waters behind them they were flying still over a boundless waste of waters, but soon they sighted on the horizon ahead the thin green line of land. Sarja slowed as they reached it, took his bearings, and sent the craft flying onward.

They passed over a green coastal plain and then over low hills joined in long chains and mantled by dense and mighty jungles, towering green growths of unfamiliar appearance to Norman. He thought he glimpsed, more than once, huge beastlike forms moving in them. He did see twice in the jungles great clearings where were fair-sized cities of bright-green buildings, a metal tower rising from each. But when he pointed to them Sarja shook his head.

At last, as they passed over another range of hills and came into sight of a third green city with its looming tower, the other pointed, his face alight.

"My city," he said. "Fallas there."

Fellows! Norman's heart beat faster.

They shot closer and lower and he saw that the buildings were obviously green to lend them a certain protective coloration similar to that of the green jungles around them. The tower with its surmounting cage puzzled him though, but before he could ask Sarja concerning it his answer came in a different way. A long metal tube poked slowly out of the cage on the tower's top and sent a hail of force-shells flicking around them.

"They're firing on us!" Norman cried. "This can't be your city!"

"They see our black boat!" Sarja exclaimed. "They think we're Rala raiders and unless we let them know they'll shoot us out of the air! Stand up—wave to them—!"

Both Norman and Sarja sprang to their feet and waved wildly to those in the tower-cage, their flying-boat drifting slowly forward. Instantly the force-shells ceased to hail toward them, and as they moved nearer a sirenlike signal broke from the cage. At once scores of flying-boats like their own, but glittering metal instead of black, shot up from the city where they had lain until now, and surrounded them.

As Sarja called in his own tongue to them the green men on the surrounding boats broke into resounding cries. They shot down toward the city, Norman gazing tensely. Great crowds of green men in their dark tunics had swarmed out into its streets with the passing of the alarm, and their craft and the others came to rest in an open square that was the juncture of several streets.

The green men that crowded excitedly about Norman and Sarja gave way to a half-dozen hurrying into the square from the greatest of the buildings facing on it. All but one were green men like the others.

But that one—the laughing-eyed tanned face—the worn brown clothing, the curious huge steps with which he came—Norman's heart leapt.

"Fellows!"

"Great God—Norman!" The other's face was thunderstruck. "Norman—how by all that's holy did you get here?"

Norman, mind and body strained to the breaking point, was incoherent. "We guessed how you'd gone—the second satellite, Fellows—Hackett and I came after you—taken to that frog-city—"

As Norman choked the tale, Fellows' face was a study. And when it was finished he swallowed, and gripped Norman's hand viselike.

"And you and Hackett figured it out and came after me—took that risk? Crazy, both of you. Crazy—"

"Fellows, Hackett's still there, if he's alive! In the Rala city!"

Fellows' voice was grim, quick. "We'll have him out. Norman, if he still lives. And living or dead, the Ralas will pay soon for this and for all they've done upon this world in ages. Their time nears—yes."

He led Norman, excited throngs of the green men about them, into the great building from which he had emerged. There were big rooms inside, workshops and laboratories that Norman but vaguely glimpsed in passing. The room to which the other led him was one with a long metal couch. Norman stretched protestingly upon it at the other's bidding, drifted off almost at once into sleep.

He woke to find the sunlight that had filled the room gone and replaced by the silvery Earth-light. From the window he saw that the silver-lit city outside now held tremendous activity, immense hordes of green men surging through it with masses of weapons and equipment, flying-boats pouring down out of the night from all directions. He turned as the door of the room clicked open behind him. It was his old friend Fellows.

"I thought you'd be awake by now, Norman. Feeling fit?"

"As though I'd slept a week," Norman said, and the other laughed his old care-free laugh.

"You almost have, at that. Two days and nights you've slept, but it all adds up to hardly more than a dozen hours."

"This world!" Norman's voice held all his incredulity. "To think that

we should be on it—a second satellite of Earth's—it seems almost beyond belief."

“Sometimes it seems so to me, too," Fellows said thoughtfully. "But it's not a bad world—not the human part of it, at least. When this satellite's atmosphere caught me and pitchforked me down among these green men, smashing the plane and almost myself, they took care of me. You say three others vanished as I did? I never heard of them here; they must have crashed into the sea or jungles. Of course, I'd have got back to Earth on one of these flying-boats if I'd been able, but their molecular power won't take them far from this world's surface, so I couldn't.

"As it was, the green men cared for me, and when I found how those frog-men have dominated this world for ages, how that city of the Ralas has spread endless terror among the humans here, I resolved to smash those monsters whatever I did. I taught some of the green men like Sarja my own speech, later learning theirs, and in the weeks I've been here I've been working out a way to smash the Ralas.

"You know that amphibian city is almost impregnable because humans can hardly live long enough under the water to get into it, let alone fight under water as the frog-men can. To meet them on even terms the green men needed diving-helmets with an oxygen supply.

They'd never heard of such an idea, too afraid of the sea ever to experiment in it, but I convinced them and they've made enough helmets for all their forces. In them they can meet the Ralas under water on equal terms.

"And there's a chance we can destroy that whole Rala city with their help. It's built on a giant pedestal of rock rising from the sea's floor, as you saw, and I've had some of the green men make huge force-shells or force-bombs that ought to be powerful enough to split that pedestal beneath the city. If we can get a chance to place those bombs it may smash the frog-men forever on this world. But one thing is sure: we're going to get Hackett out if he still lives!"

"Then you're, going to attack the Rala city now?" Norman cried.

Fellows nodded grimly. "While you have slept all the forces of the green men on this world have been gathering. Your coming has only precipitated our plans, Norman—the whole soul of the green races has been set upon this attack for weeks!"

Norman, half bewildered at the swiftness with which events rushed upon him, found himself striding with Fellows in great steps out through the building into the great square. It was shadowed now by mass on mass of flying-boats, crowded with green men, that hung

over it and over the streets. One boat, Sarja at its controls, waited on the ground and as they entered and buckled themselves into the seats the craft drove up to hang with the others.

A shattering cheer greeted them. Norman saw that in the silvery light of Earth's great crescent there stretched over the city and surrounding jungle now a veritable plain of flying-boats. On each were green men and each bristled with force-guns, and had as many great goggled helmets fastened to it as it had occupants. He glimpsed larger boats loaded with huge metal cylinders—the force-bombs Fellows had mentioned.

Fellows rose and spoke briefly in a clear voice to the assembled green men on their craft, and another great shout roared from them, and from these who watched in the city below. Then as he spoke a word, Sarja sent their craft flying out over the city, and the great mass of boats, fully a thousand in number, were hurtling in a compact column after them.

Fellows leaned to Norman as the great column of purring craft shot on over the silver-lit jungles. "We'll make straight for the Rala city and try setting into it before they understand what's happening."

"Won't they have guards out?"

"Probably, but we can beat them back into the city before their whole forces can come out on us. That's the only way in which we can get inside and reach Hackett. And while we're attacking the force-bombs can be placed, though I don't rely too much on them."

"If the attack only succeeds in getting us inside," Norman said, grim-lipped, "we'll have a chance—"

"It's on the knees of the gods. These green men are doing an unprecedented thing in attacking the Ralas, the masters of this world, remember. But they've got ages of oppression to avenge; they'll fight."

The fleet flew on, hills and rivers a silver-lit panorama unreeling beneath them. Earth's crescent sank behind them, and by the time they flashed out over the great fresh-water sea, the sun was rising like a flaming eye from behind it. Land sank from sight behind and the green men were silent, tense, as they saw stretching beneath only the gray waters that for ages had been the base of the dread frog-men. But still the fleet's column raced on.

At last the column slowed. Far ahead the merest bulge broke the level line where sky and waters met. The amphibian city of the Ralas! At Fellows' order-the flying-boats sank downward until they

moved just above the waters. Another order made the green hosts don the grotesque helmets. Norman found that while cumbersome their oxygen supply was unfailing. They shot on again at highest speed, but as the gigantic black dome of the frog-city grew in their vision there darted up from around it suddenly a far-flung swarm of black spots.

"Rala boats!"

The muffled exclamation was Fellows'. There needed now no order on his part, though. Like hawks, leaping for prey, the fleet of the green men sprang through the air. Norman, clutching the force-gun between his knees, had time only to see that the Rala craft were a few hundred in number and that, contemptuous of the greater odds that favored these humans they had so long oppressed, they were flying straight to meet them. Then the two fleets met—and were spinning side by side above the waters.

Norman saw the thing only as a wild whirl of Rala boats toward and beside them, great green frog-men crowding the craft, their force-guns hailing shells. Automatically, with the old air-fighting instinct, his fingers had pressed the catch of the gun between his knees and as its shells flicked toward the rushing boats he saw areas of nothingness opening suddenly in their mass, shells striking and

exploding in annihilating invisibility there and in their own fleet.

The two fleets mingled and merged momentarily, the battle becoming a thing of madness, a huge whirl of black and glittering flying-boats together, striking shells exploding nothingness about them. The Ralas were fighting like demons.

The merged, terrific combat lasted but moments; could last but moments. Norman, his gun's magazine empty, seemed to see the mass of struggling ships splittering, diverging; then saw that the black craft were dropping, plummeting downward toward the waves! The Ralas, stunned by that minute of terrific combat, were fleeing. Muffled cries and cheers came from about him as the glittering flying-boats of the green men shot after them. They crashed down into the waters and curved deeply into their green-depths, toward the gigantic dome.

Ahead the Rala boats were in flight toward their city, and now their pursuers were like sharks striking after them. There in the depths the force-guns of black and glittering boats alike were spitting, and giant waves and underwater convulsions rocked pursued and pursuers as the exploding shells annihilated boats and water about them. The tunnel! Its round opening yawned in the looming wall ahead, and Norman saw the Rala craft, reduced to scores in number, hurtling

into it, to rouse all the forces of the great amphibian city. Their own boats were flashing into the opening after them. He glimpsed as he glanced back for a moment the larger craft with the great force-bombs veering aside behind them.

It was nightmare in the water-tunnel. Flashing beams of the craft ahead and waters that rocked and smashed around them as in flight the Ralas still rained back force-shells toward them in a chaos of action. Once the frog-men turned to hold them back in the tunnel, but by sheer weight the rushing ships of the green men crashed them onward. Boats were going into nothingness all around them. A part of Norman's brain wondered calmly why they survived even while another part kept his gun again working, with refilled magazine. Fellows and Sarja were grotesque shapes beside him. Abruptly the tunnel curved upward and as they flashed up after the remaining Rala craft their boats ripped up into clear air! They were beneath the giant dome!

The frog-men chased inward spread out in all directions over their mighty, swarming city and across it a terrific clamor of alarm ran instantly as the green men emerged after them! Norman saw flying-boats beginning to rise across all the city and realized that moments would see all the immense force of the Ralas, the thousands of craft they could muster, pouring upon them. He pointed out over the city

to a block-like building, and shouted madly through his helmet to Fellows and Sarja:

"Hackett!"

But already Sarja had sent their craft whirling across the city toward the structure, half their fleet behind it, with part still emerging from the water-tunnel. Rala boats rose before them, but nothing could stop them now, their force-shells raining ahead to clear a path for their meteor-flight. They shot down toward the block-structure, and Norman, half-crazed by now, saw that to descend and enter was suicide in the face of the frog-forces rising now over all the city. He cried to Fellows, and with two of the guns as they swooped lower they sprayed force-shells along the building's side.

The shells struck and whiffed away the whole side, exposing the level on the building's interior. Out from it rushed swarms of crazed green men, sweeping aside the frog-men guards, while far over the city the invading craft were loosing shells on the block-like buildings that held the prisoners, tens of thousands of them swarming forth. In the throng below as they raced madly forth Norman saw one, and shouted wildly. The one brown garbed figure looked up, saw their boat swooping lower, and leaped for it in a tremendous forty-foot spring that brought his fingers to its edge.

Norman pulled him frenziedly up.

"Norman!" he babbled. "In God's name—Fellows—!"

"That helmet, Hackett!" Fellows flung at him. "My God, look at those prisoners—Norman!"

The countless thousands of green men released from the buildings whose walls had vanished under the shells of the invaders had poured forth to make the amphibian city a chaos of madness. Oblivious to all else they were throwing themselves upon the city's crowding frog-men in a battle whose ferocity was beyond belief, disregarding all else in this supreme chance to wreak vengeance on the monstrous beings who had fed upon their blood. In the incredible insanity of that raging fury the craft of the green men hanging over the city were all but forgotten.

Suddenly the city and the mighty dome over it quivered violently, and then again. There came from beneath a dull, vast, grinding roar.

"The great force-bombs!" Fellows screamed. "They've set them off —the city's sinking—out of here, for the love of God!"

The boat whirled beneath Sarja's hands toward the pool of the water-

tunnel, all their fleet rushing with them. The grinding roar was louder, terrible; dome and city were shaking violently now; but in the insensate fury of their struggle the frog-men and their released prisoners were hardly aware of it. The whole great dome seemed sinking upon them and the city falling beneath it as Sarja's craft ripped down into the tunnel's waters, and then out, at awful speed, as the great tunnel's walls swayed and sank around them! They shot out into the green depths from it to hear a dull, colossal crashing through the waters from behind as the great pedestal of rock on which the city had stood, shattered by the huge force-bombs, collapsed. And as their boats flashed up into the open air they saw that the huge dome of the city of the Ralas was gone.

Beneath them was only a titanic whirlpool of foaming waters in which only the curved top of the settling dome was visible for a moment as it sank slowly and ponderously downward, with a roar as of the roar of falling worlds. Buckling, collapsing, sinking, it vanished in the foam-wild sea with all the frog-men who for ages had ruled the second satellite, and with all those prisoners who had at the last dragged them down with them to death! Ripping off their helmets, with all the green men shouting crazily about them, Norman and Fellows and Hackett stared down at the colossal maelstrom in the waters that was the tomb of the masters of a world.

Then the depression's sides collapsed, the waters rushing together ... and beneath them was but troubled, tossing sea....

Earth's great gray ball was overhead again and the sun was sinking again to the horizon when the three soared upward in the long, gleaming plane, its motor roaring. Norman, with Hackett and Fellows crowding the narrow cabin beside him, waved with them through its windows. For all around them were rising the flying-boats of the green men.

They were waving wildly, shouting their farewells, Sarja's tall figure erect at the prow of one. Insistent they had been that the three should stay, the three through whom the monstrous age-old tyranny of the frog-men had been lifted, but Earth-sickness was on them, and they had flown to where the plane lay still unharmed among the reeds, a hundred willing hands dragging it forth for the take-off.

The plane soared higher, motor thundering, and they saw the flying-boats sinking back from around them. They caught the wave of Sarja's hand still from the highest, and then that, too, was gone.

Upward they flew toward the great gray sphere, their eyes on the dark outlines of its continents and on one continent. Higher—higher—green land and gray tea receding beneath them; Hackett and

Fellows intent and eager as Norman kept the plane rising. The satellite lay, a greenish globe, under them. And as they went higher still a rushing sound came louder to their ears.

"The edge of the satellite's atmosphere?" Fellows asked, as Norman nodded.

"We're almost to it—here we go!"

As he shot the plane higher, great forces smote it, gray Earth and green satellite and yellow sun gyrating round it as it reeled and plunged. Then suddenly it was falling steadily, gray Earth and its dark continent now beneath, while with a dwindling rushing roar its second satellite whirled away above them, passing and vanishing. Passing as though, to Norman it seemed, all their strange sojourn on it were passing; the frog-men and their mighty city, Sarja and their mad flight, the green men and the last terrific battle; all whirling away—whirling away.

#44 Silver Dome, By Harold Vincent Schoepflin:

In her deep-buried kingdom of Theros, Phaestra reveals the amazing secret of the silver dome.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

In a secluded spot among the hills of northern New Jersey stood the old DeBost mansion, a rambling frame structure of many wings and gables that was well-nigh hidden from the road by the half-mile or more of second-growth timber which intervened. High on the hill it stood, and it was only by virtue of its altitude that an occasional glimpse might be obtained of weatherbeaten gable or partly tumbled-down chimney. The place was reputed to be haunted since the death of old DeBost, some seven years previously, and the path which had once been a winding driveway was now seldom trod by human foot.

It was now two years since Edwin Leland bought the estate for a song and took up his residence in the gloomy old house. And it had then been vacant for five years since DeBost shot himself in the northeast bedroom. Leland's associates were sure he would repent of his bargain in a very short time, but he stayed on and on in the place, with no company save that of his man-servant, an aged hunch-back who was known to outsiders only as Thomas.

Leland was a scientist of note before he buried himself in the DeBost place, and had been employed in the New York research laboratory of one of the large electrical manufacturers, where he was much admired and not a little envied by his fellow workers. These knew almost nothing of his habits or of his personal affairs, and were much surprised when he announced one day that he had come into a sizable fortune and was leaving the organization to go in for private research and study. Attempts to dissuade him were of no avail, and the purchase of the DeBost property followed, after which Leland dropped from sight for nearly two years.

Then, on a blustery winter day, a strange telephone call was received at the laboratory where he had previously worked. It was from old Thomas, out there in the DeBost mansion, and his quavering voice asked for Frank Rowley, the genial young engineer whose work had been most closely associated with Leland's.

"Oh, Mr. Rowley," wailed the old man, when Frank responded to the call, "I wish you would come out here right away. The master has been acting very queerly of late, and to-day he has locked himself in his laboratory and will not answer my knocks."

"Why don't you break in the door?" asked Frank, looking through the window at the snow storm that still raged.

"I thought of that, Mr. Rowley, but it is of oak and very thick. Besides, it is bound with steel or iron straps and is beyond my powers."

"Why not call the police?" growled Frank. He did not relish the idea of a sixty or seventy mile drive in the blizzard.

"Oh—no—no—no!" Old Thomas was panicky at the suggestion. "The master told me he'd kill me if I ever did that."

Before Frank could formulate a reply, there came a sharp gasp from the other end of the line, a wailing cry and a thud as of a falling body; then silence. All efforts to raise Leland's number merely resulted in "busy" or "line out of order" reports.

Frank Rowley was genuinely concerned. Though he had never been

a close friend of Leland's, the two had worked on many a knotty problem together and were in daily contact during the nearly ten years that the other man had worked in the same laboratory.

"Say, Tommy," said Frank, replacing the receiver and turning to his friend, Arnold Thompson, who sat at an adjoining desk, "something has happened out at Leland's place in Sussex County. Want to take a drive out there with me?"

"What? On a day like this? Why not take the train?"

"Don't be foolish, Tommy," said Frank. "The place is eight miles from the nearest station, which is a flag stop out in the wilds. And, even if you could find a cab there—which you couldn't—there isn't a taxi driver in Jersey who'd take you up into those mountains on a day like this. No, we'll have to drive. It'll be okay. I've got chains on the rear and a heater in the old coupe, so it shouldn't be so bad. What do you say?"

So Tommy, who usually followed wherever Frank led, was prevailed upon to make the trip. He had no particular feeling for Leland, but he sensed an adventure, and, in Frank's company, he could ask for no more.

Frank was a careful driver, and three hours were required to make the sixty-mile journey. Consequently, it was late in the afternoon when they arrived at the old DeBost estate. It had stopped snowing, but the drifts were deep in spots, and Frank soon found that the car could not be driven through the winding path from the road to the house. So they left it half buried in a drift and proceeded on foot.

It was a laborious task they had undertaken, and, by the time they set foot on the dilapidated porch, even Frank, husky and athletic as was his build, was puffing and snorting from his exertions. Little Tommy, who tipped the scales at less than a hundred and twenty, could hardly speak. They both were wet to the waist and in none too good humor.

"Holy smoke!" gasped Tommy, stamping the clinging snow from his sodden trouser legs and shoes, "if it snows any more, how in Sam Hill are we going to get out of this place?"

"Rotten trip I let you in for Tommy," growled Frank, "and I hope Leland's worth it. But, darn it all, I just had to come."

"It's all right with me, Frank. And maybe it'll be worth it yet. Look—the front door's open."

He pointed to the huge oaken door and Frank saw that it was ajar.

The snow on the porch was not deep and they saw that footprints led from the open door to a corner of the porch. At that point the snow on the railing was disturbed, as if a hurrying man had clung to it a moment before jumping over and into the drifts below. But the tracks led no further, for the drifting snow had covered all excepting a hollow where some body had landed.

"Thomas!" exclaimed Frank. "And he was in a hustle, by the looks of the tracks. Bet he was frightened while at the telephone and beat it."

They entered the house and closed the door behind them. It was growing quite dark and Frank searched for the light switch. This was near the door, and, at pressure on the upper button, the spacious old hall with its open staircase was revealed dimly by the single remaining bulb in a cluster set in the center of the high ceiling. The hall was unfurnished, excepting for a telephone table and chair, the chair having fallen to the floor and the receiver of the telephone dangling from the edge of the table by its cord.

"You must have heard the chair fall," commented Tommy, "and it sure does look as if Thomas left in a hurry. Wonder what it was that frightened him?"

The house was eerily silent and the words echoed awesomely through the adjoining rooms which connected with the hall through large open doorways.

"Spooky place, isn't it?" returned Frank.

And then they were both startled into immobility by a rumble that seemed to shake the foundations of the house. Heavier and heavier became this vibration, as if some large machine was coming up to speed. Louder and louder grew the rumble until it seemed that the rickety old house must be shaken down about their ears. Then there came a whistling scream from the depths of the earth—from far underground it seemed to be—and this mounted in pitch until their eardrums tingled. Then abruptly the sounds ceased, the vibration stopped, and once more there was the eery silence.

Rather white-faced, Tommy gazed at Frank.

"No wonder old Thomas beat it!" he said. "What on earth do you suppose that is?"

"Search me," replied Frank. "But whatever it is, I'll bet it has something to do with Leland's strange actions. And we're going to find out."

He had with him the large flashlamp from the car, and, by its light, the two made their way from room to room searching for the iron-bound door mentioned by Thomas.

They found all rooms on the first and second floors dusty and unused with the exception of two bedrooms, the kitchen and pantry, and the library. It was a gloomy and spooky old house. Floor boards creaked startlingly and unexpectedly and the sound of their footsteps echoed dismally.

"Where in time is that laboratory of Leland's?" exclaimed Frank, his ruddy features showing impatient annoyance, exaggerated to an appearance of ferocity by the light of the flashlamp.

"How about the cellar?" suggested Tommy.

"Probably where it is," agreed Frank, "but I don't relish this job so much. I'd hate to find Leland stiff down there, if that's where he is."

"Me, too," said Tommy. "But we're here now, so let's finish the job and get back home. It's cold here, too."

"You said it. No steam in the pipes at all. He must have let the fire go out in his furnace, and that's probably in the cellar too—usually is."

While talking, Frank had opened each of the four doors that opened from the kitchen, and the fourth revealed a stairway that led into the blackness beneath. With the beam of his torch directed at the steps, he proceeded to descend, and Tommy followed carefully. There was no light button at the head of the stairs, where it would have been placed in a more modern house, and it was not until they had reached the furnace room that they located a light fixture with a pull cord. An ordinary cellar, with furnace, coal bin, and a conglomeration of dust-covered trunks and discarded furniture, was revealed. And, at its far end, was the iron-bound door.

The door was locked and could not be shaken by the combined efforts of the two men.

"Have to have a battering ram," grunted Frank, casting about for a suitable implement.

"Here you are," called Tommy, after a moment's search. "Just the thing we are looking for."

He had come upon a pile of logs, and one of these, evidently a section of an old telephone pole, was of some ten or twelve inches diameter and about fifteen feet long. Frank pounced upon it eagerly, and, supporting most of the weight himself, led the attack on the

heavy oak door with the iron bands.

No sound from within greeted the thunderous poundings. Clearly, if Leland was behind that door, he was either dead or unconscious.

Finally the double lock gave way and Tommy and Frank were precipitated headlong into the brightly lighted room beyond. Recovering their balance, they took stock of their surroundings and were amazed at what they saw—a huge laboratory, fitted out with every modern appliance that money could buy. A completely equipped machine shop there was; bench after bench covered with the familiar paraphernalia of the chemical and physical laboratory; huge retorts and stills; complicated electrical equipments; dozens of cabinets holding crucibles, flasks, bottles, glass tubing, and what not.

"Good Lord!" gasped Tommy. "Here's a laboratory to more than match our own. Why, Leland's got a fortune invested here!"

"I should say so. And a lot of stuff that our company does not even have. Some of it I don't know even the use of. But where is Leland?"

There was no sign of the man they had come to help. He was not in the laboratory, though the door had been locked from within and the lights left burning throughout.

With painstaking care they searched every nook and cranny of the large single room and were about to give up in despair when Tommy happened to observe an ivory button set into the wall at the only point in the room where there were no machines or benches at hand. Experimentally he pressed the button, and, at the answering rumble from under his feet, jumped back in alarm. Slowly there opened in the paneled oak wall a rectangular door, a door of large enough size to admit a man. From the recess beyond there came a breath of air, foul with the musty odor of decayed vegetation, dank as the air of a tomb.

"Ah-h-h!" breathed Frank. "So that is where Ed Leland is hiding! The secret retreat of the gloomy scientist!"

He spoke half jestingly, yet when he squeezed his stalwart bulk through the opening and flashed the beam of his light into the darkness of a narrow passage ahead he was assailed with vague forebodings. Tommy followed close behind and spoke not a word.

The passage floor was thick with dust, but the marks of many footsteps going and returning gave mute evidence of the frequency of Leland's visits. The air was heavy and oppressive and the temperature and humidity increased as they progressed along the winding length of the rock-walled passageway. The floor sloped,

ever downward and, in spots, was slippery with slimy seepage. It seemed that they turned back on their course on several occasions but were descending deeper and deeper into the heart of the mountain. Then, abruptly, the passage ended at the mouth of a shaft, which dropped vertically from almost beneath their feet.

"Whew!" exclaimed Frank. "Another step and I'd have dropped into it. That's probably what happened to Leland."

He knelt at the rim of the circular opening and looked into the depths of the pit, Tommy following suit. The feeble ray of the flashlight was lost in the blackness below.

"Say, Frank," whispered Tommy, "turn off the flash. I think I saw a light down there."

And, with the snapping of the catch, there came darkness. But, miles below them, it seemed, there was a tiny pin-point of brilliance—an eery green light that was like a wavering phosphorescence of will-o'-the-wisp. For a moment it shone and was gone. Then came the dreadful vibration they had experienced in the hall of the house—the whistling scream that grew louder and louder until it seemed they must be deafened. The penetrating wail rose from the depths of the pit, and the vibration was all around them, in the damp rock floor on

which they knelt, and in the very air of the cavern. Hastily Frank snapped on the light of his flash.

"Oh boy!" he whispered. "Leland is certainly up to something down there and no mistake! How're we going to get down?"

"Get down?" asked Tommy. "You don't want to go down there, do you?"

"Sure thing. We're this far now and, by George, we're going to find out all there is to learn."

"How deep do you suppose it is?"

"Pretty deep, Tommy. But we can get an idea by dropping a stone and counting the seconds until it strikes."

He played the light of the flash over the floor and soon located a smooth round stone of the size of a baseball. This he tossed over the rim of the pit and awaited results.

"Good grief!" exclaimed Tommy. "It's not falling!"

What he said was true, for the stone poised lightly over the opening and drifted like a feather. Then slowly it moved, settling gradually

into oblivion. Frank turned the flash downward and they watched in astonishment as the two-pound pebble floated deliberately down the center of the shaft at the rate of not more than one foot in each second.

"Well, I'll be doggoned," breathed Frank admiringly. "Leland has done it. He has conquered gravity. For, in that pit at least, there is no gravity, or at any rate not enough to mention. It has been almost completely counteracted by some force he has discovered and now we know how to follow him down there. Come on Tommy, let's go!"

And, suiting action to his words, Frank jumped into the mouth of the pit where he bobbed about for a moment as if he had jumped into a pool of water. Then slowly he sank from view, and Tommy followed him.

It was a most unique experience, that drop into the heart of the mountain. Practically weightless, the two young men found it quite difficult to negotiate the passage. For the first hundred or more feet they continued to bump about in the narrow shaft and each sustained painful bruises before he learned that the best and simplest method of accommodating himself to the strange condition was to remain absolutely motionless and allow the greatly weakened gravity to take its course. Each movement of an arm or leg was accompanied by a

change in direction of movement, and contact with the hard stone walls followed. If they endeavored to push themselves from the contact the result was likely to be an even more serious bump on the opposite side of the shaft. So they continued the leisurely drop into the unknown depth of the pit.

Frank had turned off the flashlamp, for its battery was giving out and he wished to conserve its remaining energy for eventualities. Thus they were in Stygian darkness for nearly a half-hour, though the green luminosity far beneath them grew stronger with each passing minute. It now revealed itself as a clearly defined disc of light that flickered and sputtered continually, frequently lighting the lower end of the shaft with an unusual burst of brilliance. Remotely distant it seemed though, and unconscionably slow in drawing nearer.

"How far do you think we must drop?" called Tommy to Frank, who was probably fifty feet below him in the shaft.

"Well, I figure we have fallen about a thousand feet so far," came the reply, "and my guess is that we are about one third of the way down."

"Then this shaft is over a half-mile deep, you think?"

"Yes, at least a thousand yards, I should say. And I hope his gravity neutralizing machinery doesn't quit all of a sudden and let us down."

"Me, too," called Tommy, who had not thought of that possibility.

This was no joke, this falling into an unknown region so far beneath the surface of good old mother earth, thought Tommy. And how they would ever return was another thing that was not so funny. Frank was always rushing into things like this without counting the possible cost and—well—this might be the last time.

Gradually the mysterious light became stronger and soon they could make out the conformation of the rock walls they were passing at such a snail's pace. Layers of vari-colored rock showed here and there, and, at one point there was a stratum of gold-bearing or mica-filled rock that glistened with a million reflections and re-reflections. The air grew warmer and more humid as they neared the mysterious light source. They moved steadily, without acceleration, and Frank estimated the rate at about forty feet a minute. Then, with blinding suddenness, the light was immediately below and they drifted into a tremendous cavern that was illuminated by its glow.

Directly beneath the lower end of the shaft through which they had passed, there was a glowing disc of metal about fifteen feet in

diameter. They drifted to its surface and sprawled awkwardly where they fell. Scrambling to gain a footing, they bounced and floated about like toy balloons before realizing that it would be necessary to creep slowly from the influence of that repelling force which had made the long drop possible without injury. Gravity met them at the disc's edge with what seemed to be unusual violence.

At first it seemed that their bodies weighed twice the normal amount, but this feeling soon passed and they looked about them with incredulous amazement. The metal disc was quite evidently the medium through which the repelling force was set up in the shaft, and to this disc was connected a series of heavy cables that led to a pedestal nearby. On the pedestal was a controlling lever and this moved over a quadrant that was graduated in degrees, one end of the quadrant being labeled "Up" and the other "Down." The lever now stood at a point but a very few degrees from the center or "Zero" mark and on the down side. Frank pulled this lever over to the full "Down" position and they found that they could walk over the disc with normal gravity.

"I suppose," said Frank, "that if the lever is at the other end of the scale one would fall upward with full gravity acceleration—reversed. At zero, gravity is exactly neutralized, and the intermediate positions are useful in conveying materials or human beings up and

down the shaft as desired. Very clever; but what is the reason for it all?"

In the precise center of the great cavern there was a dome or hemisphere of polished metal, and it was from this dome that the eery light emanated. At times, when the light died down, this dome gleamed with dull flickerings that threatened to vanish entirely. Then suddenly it would resume full brilliance, and the sight was marvelous beyond description. A slight hissing sound came from the direction of the dome, and this varied in intensity as did the light.

"Gosh!" said Tommy. "That looks like silver to me. And, if it is, what a wealthy man our friend Leland has become. He has spent his fortune well, even if he used it all to get to this."

"Yes, but where is he?" commented Frank. Then: "Leland! Leland!" he called.

His voice echoed through the huge vault and re-echoed hollowly. But there was no reply save renewed flickerings from the dome.

Leaving the vicinity of the gravity disc, the two men advanced in the direction of the shining dome, which was about a quarter-mile from where they stood. Both perspired freely, for the air was very close

and the temperature high. But the light of the dome was as cold as the light of a firefly and they had no hesitancy in drawing near. It was a beautiful sight, this dome of silver with its flickering lights and perfect contour.

"By George, I believe it *is* silver," exclaimed Frank, when they were within a few feet of the dome. "No other metal has that precise color. And look! There is a wheelbarrow and some mining tools. Leland has been cutting away some of the material."

Sure enough, there was indisputable evidence of the truth of his statement. And the material was undoubtedly silver!

"Silver Dome," breathed Tommy, holding a lump of the metal in his hand. "A solid dome of pure silver—fifty feet high and a hundred in diameter. How much does that figure in dollars and cents, Frank?"

"Maybe it isn't solid," said Frank dryly, "though it's worth a sizeable fortune even if it is hollow. And we haven't found Leland."

They circled the dome twice and looked into every corner of the great cavern, but there was no sign of the man for whom they searched. The wheelbarrow was half filled with lumps of the heavy metal, and maul and drill lay where they had been dropped by the

lone miner. A cavity three feet across, and as many deep, appeared in the side of the dome to show that considerably more than one wheelbarrow load had been removed.

"Funny," grunted Tommy. "Seems almost like the old dome had swallowed him up."

At his words there came the terrific vibration. The light of the dome died out, leaving them in utter darkness, and from its interior there rose the mounting scream that had frightened old Thomas away. From so close by it was hideous, devastating; and the two men clung to each other in fright, expecting momentarily that the earth would give way beneath their feet and precipitate them into some terrible depth from which there could be no return.

Then the sound abruptly ceased and a gleam of light came from under the dome of silver. A crack appeared between its lower edge and the rocky floor of the cavern, and through this crack there shone a light of dazzling brilliancy—a warm light of rosy hue. Wider grew the opening until there was a full three feet between the floor and the bottom of the dome. Impelled by some irresistible force from within, the two men stumbled blindly to the opening, fell to the floor and rolled inside.

There was a heavy thud and the dome had returned to its normal position, with Frank and Tommy prisoners within its spacious hollow. The warm light bathed them with fearful intensity for a moment, then faded to a rosy glow that dulled their senses and quieted their nerves. Morpheus claimed them.

When Frank awoke he found himself between silken covers, and for a moment he gazed thoughtfully at a high arched ceiling that was entirely unfamiliar. Then, remembering, he sprang from the downy bed to his feet. The room, the furnishings, his silken robe, everything was strange. His bed, he saw, was a high one, and the frame was of the same gleaming silver as the dome under which they had been trapped. The arched ceiling glowed softly with the same rosy hue as had the inner surface of the dome. A large pool of water invited him, the surface of the pool being no more than a foot below the point where it was built into the tile floor of the room. A large open doorway connected with a similar adjoining room, where he suspected Tommy had been taken. On his bare toes, he moved silently to the other room and saw that his guess had been correct. Tommy lay sleeping quietly beneath covers as soft as his own and amidst equal luxury of surroundings.

"Well," he whispered, "this doesn't look as though we would come to any harm. And I might as well take a dive in that pool."

Returning to his own room, he removed the silken garment with which he had been provided and was quietly immersed in the cool, invigorating water of the bath. His head cleared instantly.

"Hi there!" called Tommy from the doorway. "Why didn't you wake me up? Where are we, anyway?"

With dripping head and shoulders above the water, Frank was compelled to laugh at the sleepy-eyed, wondering expression on the blue-jowled face of his friend. "Thought you were dead to the world," he returned, "you old sleepy-head. And I don't know where we are, excepting that it is somewhere under the silver dome. What's more, I don't much care. You should get into this water. It's great!"

So saying, he dived to the bottom of the pool and stood on his hands, his feet waving ludicrously above the surface. Tommy sniffed once and then made a quick dash for the pool in his own room. He was not to be outdone by his more energetic partner.

A half-hour later, shaved and attired in their own garments, which had been cleaned and pressed and hung neatly in the closets, they settled themselves for a discussion of the situation. Having tried the doors of both rooms and found them locked from the outside, there was no other course open to them. They must await developments.

"Looks like Leland has quite an establishment down here inside the mountain," ventured Tommy.

"Hm!" snorted Frank, "this place is none of Leland's work. He is probably a prisoner here, as are we. He just stumbled on to the silver dome and was captured by whatever race is living down here beneath it, the same as we were. Who the real inhabitants are, and what the purpose of all this is, remains to be seen."

"You think we are in friendly hands?"

"These quarters do not look much like prison cells, Tommy, but I must admit that we are locked in. Anyhow, I'm not worrying, and we will soon learn our fate and have to be ready to meet it. The people who own this place must have everything they want, and they sure have some scientific knowledge that is not known to us on the surface."

"Wonder if they are humans?"

"Certainly they are. You never heard of wild beasts sleeping in beds like these, did you?"

Tommy laughed at he examined the exquisite hand-wrought figures

on the silver bedstead. "No, I didn't," he admitted; "but where on earth did they come from, and what are they doing here?"

"You ask too many questions," replied Frank, shrugging his broad shoulders. "We must simply wait for the answers to reveal themselves."

There was a soft rap at the door of Frank's room, where the two men were talking.

"Come in," called Frank, chuckling at the idea of such consideration from their captors.

A key rattled in the lock and the door swung open to admit the handsomest man they had ever set eyes on. He was taller than Frank by several inches, standing no less than six feet five in his thin-soled sandals, and he carried himself with the air for an emperor. His marble-white body was uncovered with the exception of a loin cloth of silver hue, and lithe muscles rippled beneath his smooth skin as he advanced to meet the prisoners. His head, surmounted by curly hair of ebon darkness, was large, and his forehead high. The features were classic and perfectly regular. The corners of his mouth drew upward in a benign smile.

"Greetings," he said, in perfect English and in a soft voice, "to the domain of Theros. You need fear no harm from our people and will be returned to the upper world when the time comes. We hope to make your stay with us enjoyable and instructive, and that you will carry back kind memories of us. The morning meal awaits you now."

So taken aback were the two young Americans that they stared foolishly agape for a space. Then a tinkling laugh from the tall stranger set them once more at ease.

"You will pardon us, I hope," apologized Frank, "but this is all so unexpected and so unbelievable that your words struck me speechless. And I know that my friend was similarly affected—We place ourselves in your hands."

The handsome giant nodded understanding. "No offense was taken," he murmured, "since none was intended. And your feelings are not to be wondered at. You may call me Orrin."

He turned toward the open door and signified that they were to follow him. They fell in at his side with alacrity, both suddenly realizing that they were very hungry.

They followed in silent wonderment as Orrin led the way to a broad

balcony that overlooked a great underground city—a city lighted by the soft glow from some vast lighting system incorporated in its vaulted ceiling high overhead. The balcony was many levels above the streets, which were alive with active beings of similar appearance to Orrin, these speeding hither and yon by means of the many lanes of traveling ways of which the streets were composed. The buildings—endless rows of them lining the orderly streets—were octagonal in shape and rose to the height of about twenty stories, as nearly as could be judged by earthly standards. There were no windows, but at about every fifth floor there was an outer silver-railed balcony similar to the one on which they walked. The air was filled with bowl-shaped flying ships that sped over the roof tops in endless procession and without visible means of support or propulsion. Yet the general effect of the busy scene was one of precise orderliness, unmarred by confusion or distracting noises.

Orrin vouchsafed no explanations and they soon reentered the large building of which the balcony was a part. Here they were conducted to a sumptuously furnished dining room where their breakfast awaited them.

During the meal, which consisted of several courses of fruits and cereals entirely strange to Frank and Tommy, they were tended by Orrin with the utmost deference and most painstaking attention. He

anticipated their every want and their thoughts as well. For, when Frank endeavored to ask one of the many questions with which his mind was filled, he was interrupted by a wave of the hand and a smile from their placid host.

"It is quite clear to me that you have many questions to propound," said Orrin, "and this is not a matter of wonder. But it is not permitted that I enlighten you on the points you have in mind. You must first finish your meal. Then it is to be my privilege to conduct you to the presence of Phaestra, Empress of Theros, who will reveal all. May I ask that you be patient until then?"

So friendly was his smile and so polished his manner that they restrained their impatience and finished the excellent breakfast in polite silence.

And Orrin was as good as his word, for, no sooner had they finished when he led them from the room and showed the way to the elevator which conveyed them to the upper floor of the building.

From the silver-grilled cage of the lift they stepped into a room of such beauty and magnificence of decoration that they gazed about them in wondering admiration. The paneling and mouldings were of hammered silver that gleamed with polished splendor in the soft rose

glow of the hidden lights. The hangings were of heavy plush of deep green hue and bore intricate designs of silver thread woven into the material. At the opposite side of the room there was a pair of huge double doors of chased silver and on either side of this pretentious portal there stood an attendant attired as was Orrin, but bearing a silver scepter to denote his official capacity.

"Phaestra awaits the visitors from above," intoned one of the attendants. Both bowed stiffly from the waist when Orrin led the two young scientists through the great doors which had opened silently and majestically at their approach.

If the outer room was astonishing in its sumptuousness of decoration and furnishing, the one they now entered was positively breath-taking. On every side there were the exquisite green and silver hangings. Tables, divans, and rugs of priceless design and workmanship. But the beauty of the surroundings faded into insignificance when they saw the empress.

A canopied dais in the center of the room drew their attention and they saw that Phaestra had risen from her seat in a deeply cushioned divan and now stood at its side in an attitude of welcome. Nearly as tall as Frank, she was a figure of commanding and imperious beauty. The whiteness of her body was accentuated by the silver

embroidered and tightly fitted black vestments that covered yet did not conceal its charms. A halo of glorious golden hair surmounted a head that was poised expectantly alert above the perfectly rounded shoulders. The exquisite oval of her face was chiseled in features of transcendent loveliness. She spoke, and, at sound of her musical voice, Frank and Tommy were enslaved.

“Gentlemen of the upper world," she said gently, "you are welcome to Theros. Your innermost thoughts have been recorded by our scientists and found good. With a definite purpose in mind, you learned of the existence of the silver dome of Theros, yet you came without greed or malice and we have taken you in to enlighten you on the many questions that are in your minds and to return you to mankind with a knowledge of Theros—which you must keep secret. You are about to delve into a mystery of the ages; to see and learn many things that are beyond the ken of your kind. It is a privilege never before accorded to beings from above."

"We thank you, oh, Queen," spoke Frank humbly, his eyes rivetted to the gaze of those violet orbs that seemed to see into his very soul. Tommy mumbled some commonplace.

"Orrin—the sphere!" Phaestra, slightly embarrassed by Frank's stare, clapped her hands.

At her command, Orrin, who had stood quietly by, stepped to the wall and manipulated some mechanism that was hidden by the hangings. There was a musical purr from beneath the floor, and, through a circular opening which appeared as if by magic, there rose a crystal sphere of some four feet in diameter. Slowly it rose until it reached the level of their eyes and there it came to rest. The empress raised her hands as if in invocation and the soft glow of the lights died down, leaving them in momentary darkness. There came a slight murmur from the sphere, and it lighted with the eery green flickerings they had observed in the dome of silver.

Fascinated by the weaving lights within, they gazed into the depths of the crystal with awed expectancy. Phaestra spoke.

"Men from the surface," she said, "you, Frank Rowley, and you, Arnold Thompson, are about to witness the powers of that hemisphere of metal you were pleased to term 'Silver Dome.' As you rightly surmised, the dome is of silver—mostly. There are small percentages of platinum, iridium, and other elements, but it is more than nine-tenths pure silver. To you of the surface the alloy is highly valuable for its intrinsic worth by your own standards, but to us the value of the dome lies in its function in revealing to us the past and present events of our universe. The dome is the 'eye' of a complicated apparatus which enables us to see and hear any desired

happening on the surface of the earth, beneath its surface, or on the many inhabited planets of the heavens. This is accomplished by means of extremely complex vibrations radiated from the hemisphere, these vibrations penetrating earth, metals, buildings, space itself, and returning to our viewing and sound reproducing spheres to reveal the desired past or present occurrences at the point at which the rays of vibrations are directed.

“In order to view the past on our own planet, the rays, which travel at the speed of light, are sent out in a huge circle through space, returning to earth after having spent the requisite number of years in transit. Instantaneous effect is secured by a connecting beam that ties together the ends of the enormous arc. This, of course, is beyond your comprehension, since the Ninth Dimension is involved. When it is desired that events of the present be observed, the rays are projected direct. The future can not be viewed, since, in order to accomplish this, it would be necessary that the rays travel at a speed greater than that of light, which is manifestly impossible."

"Great guns!" gasped Frank. "This crystal sphere then, is capable of bringing to our eyes and ears the happenings of centuries past?"

"It is, my dear Frank," said Phaestra, "and I would that I were able to describe the process more clearly." She smiled, and in the unearthly

light of the sphere she appeared more beautiful than before, if such a thing were possible.

On the pedestal which supported the sphere there was a glittering array of dials and levers. Several of these controls were now adjusted by Phaestra, the delicate motions of her tapered fingers being watched by the visitors with intense admiration. There came a change in the note of the sphere, a steadying of the flickerings within.

"Behold!" exclaimed Phaestra.

They gazed into the depths of the sphere and lost all sense of detachment from the scene depicted therein. It seemed they were at a point several thousand miles from the surface of a planet. A great continent spread beneath them, its irregular shore line being clearly outlined against a large body of water. Here and there the surface was obscured by great white patches of clouds that cast their shadows below.

"Atlantis!" breathed Phaestra reverently.

The lost continent of mythology! The fabled body of land that was engulfed by the Atlantic thousands of years ago—a fact!

Tommy glanced at Frank, noting that he had withdrawn his gaze from the sphere and was devouring Phaestra with his eyes. As if drawn by the ardor of his observation, she raised her own eyes from the sphere to meet those of the handsome visitor. Obviously confused, she dropped her long lashes and turned nervously to the controls. Tommy experienced a sudden feeling of dread. Surely his pal was not falling in love with this Theronian empress!

Then there came another change in the note of the sphere and once more they lost themselves in contemplation of the scene within. The surface of the lost continent was rushing madly to meet them. With terrific velocity they seemed to be falling. An involuntary gasp was forced from Tommy's lips. Mountains, valleys, rivers could now be discerned.

Then the scene shifted slightly and they were stationary, directly above a large seacoast city. A city of great beauty it was, and its buildings were of the same octagonal shape as were those of Theros! There could be but one inference—the Theronians were direct descendants of those inhabitants of ancient Atlantis.

"Yes," sighed Phaestra, in answer to the thought she had read, "our ancestors were those you now see in the streets of this city of Atlantis. A marvelous race they were, too. When the rest of the

world was still savage and unenlightened, they knew more of the arts and sciences than is known on the surface to-day. The mysteries of the Fourth Dimension they had already solved. Their telescopes were of such power that they knew of the existence of intelligent beings on Mars and Venus. They had conquered the air. They knew of the relation between gravity and magnetism but recently propounded by your Einstein. They were prosperous, happy. Then—but watch!"

Faint sounds of the life of the city came to their ears. A swarm of monoplanes roared past just beneath them. The streets were crowded with rapidly moving vehicles, the roof-tops with air-craft. Then suddenly the scene darkened; a deep rumbling came from the sea. As they watched in fascinated wonder, a great chasm opened up through the heart of the city. Tall buildings swayed and crumbled, falling into heaps of twisted metal and crushed masonry and burying hundreds of the populace in their fall. The confusion was indescribable, the uproar terrific, and within the space of a very few minutes the entire city was a mass of ruins, fully half of the wrecked area having been swallowed up by the heaving waters of the ocean.

Phaestra stifled a sob. "Thus it began," she stated. "Trovus was first —the city you just saw—then came three more of the cities of the western coast in rapid succession. Computations of the scientists showed that the upheaval was widespread and that the entire

continent was to be engulfed in a very short time. The exodus began, but it was too late, and only a few hundred people were able to escape the continent before it was finally destroyed. The ocean became the tomb of two hundred millions. The handful of survivors reached the coast of what is now North America. But the rigors of the climate proved severe and more than three-quarters of them perished within a few days after their planes landed. Then the rest took to the caves along the shore, and for a while were safe."

She manipulated the controls once more and there was a quick shift to another coast, a rugged, wave-beaten shore. Closer they drew until they observed a lofty palisade that extended for miles along the barren waterfront. They saw a fire atop this elevation and active men and women at various tasks within the narrow circle of its warmth. A cave mouth opened at the brink of the precipice near the spot they occupied.

Then came a repetition of the upheaval at Trovus. The ocean rushed in and beat against the cliff with such ferocity that its spray was tossed hundreds of feet in the air. The earth shook and the group of people around the fire made a hasty retreat to the mouth of the cave. The sky darkened and the winds howled with demoniac fury. Quake after quake rent the rugged cliffs: huge sections toppled into the angry waters. Then a great tidal wave swept in and covered

everything, cliffs, cave mouths and all. Nought remained where they had been but the seething waters.

“But some escaped!" exulted Phaestra, "and these discovered Theros. Though many miles of the eastern seaboard of your United States were submerged and the coastline entirely altered, these few were saved. Their cave connected with a long passage, a tunnel that led into the bowels of the earth. With the outer entrance blocked by the upheaval they had no alternative save to continue downward."

"They traveled for days and days. Some were overcome by hunger and fell by the wayside. The most hardy survived to reach Theros, a series of enormous caverns that extends for hundreds of miles under the surface of your country. Here they found subterranean lakes of pure water; forests, game. They had a few tools and weapons and they established themselves in this underground world. From that small beginning came this!"

Phaestra's slim fingers worked rapidly at the controls. The scenes shifted in quick succession. They were once more in the present, and seemed to be traveling speedily through the underground reaches of Theros. Now they were racing through a long lighted passage; now over a great city similar to the one in which they had arrived. Here they visited a huge workshop or laboratory; there a mine where

radium or cobalt or platinum was being wrested from the vitals of the unwilling earth. Then they visited a typical Theronian household, saw the perfect peace and happiness in which the family lived. Again they were in a large power plant where direct application of the internal heat of the earth as obtained through deep shafts bored into the interior was utilized in generating electricity.

They saw vast quantities of supplies, fifty-ton masses of machinery, moved from place to place as lightly as feathers by use of the gravity discs, those heavily charged plates whose emanations counteracted the earth's attraction. In one busy laboratory they saw an immense television apparatus and heard scientists discussing moot questions with inhabitants of Venus, whose images were depicted on the screen. They witnessed a severe electrical storm in the huge cavern arch over one of the cities, a storm that condensed moisture from the artificially oxygenated and humidified atmosphere in such blinding sheets as to easily explain the necessity for well-roofed buildings in the underground realm. And, in all the speech and activities of the Theronians, there was evident that all-pervading feeling of absolute contentment and freedom from care.

"What I can not understand," said Frank, during a quiet interval, "is why the Theronians have never migrated to the surface. Surely, with all your command of science and mechanics, that would be easy."

"Why? Why?" Phaestra's voice spoke volumes. "Here—I'll show you the reason."

And again the scene in the sphere changed. They were on the surface and a few years in the past—at Chateau Thierry. They saw their fellow men mangled and broken; saw human beings shot down by hundreds in withering bursts of machine-gun fire; saw them in hand-to-hand bayonet fights; gassed and in delirium from the horror of it all.

They traveled over the ocean; saw a big passenger liner the victim of torpedo fire; saw babies tossed into the water by distracted mothers who jumped in after them to join them in death.

A few years were passed by and they saw gang wars in Chicago and New York; saw militia and picketing strikers in mortal combat; saw wealthy brokers and bank presidents turn pistols on themselves following a crash in the stock market; government officials serving penitentiary terms for betrayal of the people's trust; opium dens, speakeasies, sex crimes. It was a fearful indictment.

"Ah, no," said Phaestra kindly, "the surface world has not yet emerged from savagery. We should be unwelcome were we to venture outside. And now we come to the reason for your visit. You

come in search of one Edwin Leland, a fellow worker at one time. Your motives are above reproach. But Leland came as a greedy searcher of riches. We brought him within to teach him the error of his ways and to beg him to desist from his efforts at destroying the dome of silver. He alone knew the secret."

"Then you followed him and we took you in for similar reasons, though our scientists found very quickly that your mental reactions were of entirely different type from Leland's and that the secret would be safe in your keeping. Leland remains obdurate. He threatens us with physical violence, and his reactions to the thought-reading machines are of the most treacherous sort. We must keep him with us. He shall remain unharmed, but he must not be allowed to return. That is the story. You two are free to leave when you choose. I ask not that you give your word to keep the secret of 'Silver Dome.' I know it is not necessary."

The lights had resumed their normal glow, and the marvelous sphere returned to its receptacle beneath the floor. Phaestra resumed her seat on the canopied divan. Frank dropped to a seat on the edge of the dais. Tommy and Orrin remained standing, Tommy lost in thought and Orrin stolidly mute. The empress avoided Frank's gaze studiously. Her cheeks were flushed; her eyes bright with emotion.

Frank was first to break the silence. "Leland is in solitary confinement?" he asked.

"For the present he is under guard," replied Phaestra. "He was quite violent and it was necessary to disarm him after he had killed one of my attendants with a shot from his automatic pistol. When he agrees to submit peacefully, he shall be given the freedom of Theros for the remainder of his life."

"Perhaps," suggested Frank, "if I spoke to him...."

"The very thing." Phaestra thanked him with her wondrous eyes.

A high pitched note rang out from behind the hangings, and, in rapid syllables of the language of Theros, a voice broke forth from the concealed amplifiers. Orrin, startled from his stoicism, sprang to the side of his empress. She rose from her seat as the voice completed its excited message.

"It is Leland," she said calmly. "He has escaped and recovered his pistol. I have been told that he is now at large in the palace, terrorizing the household. We have no weapons here, you see."

"Good God!" shouted Frank. "Suppose he should come here?"

He jumped to his feet just as a shot rang out in the antechamber. Orrin dashed to the portal when a second shot spat forth from the automatic which must certainly be in the hands of a madman. The doors swung wide and Leland, hair disarranged and bloodshot eyes staring, burst into the room. Orrin went down at the next shot and the hardly recognizable scientist advanced toward the dais.

When he saw Frank and Tommy he stopped in his tracks. "So you two have been following me!" he snarled. "Well, you won't keep me from my purpose. I'm here to kill this queen of hell!"

Once more he raised his automatic, but Frank had been watching closely and he literally dove from the steps of the dais to the knees of the deranged Leland. As beautiful a tackle as he had ever made in his college football days laid the maniac low with a crashing thud that told of a fractured skull. The bullet intended for Phaestra went wide, striking Tommy in the shoulder.

Spun half way around by the impact of the heavy bullet, Tommy fought to retain his balance. But his knees went suddenly awry and gave way beneath him. He crumpled helplessly to the floor, staring foolishly at the prostrate figure of Leland and at Frank, who had risen to his feet and now faced the beautiful empress of Theros. Strange lights danced before Tommy's eyes, and he found it difficult

to keep the pair in focus. But he was sure of one thing—his pal was unharmed. Then the two figures seemed to merge into one and he blinked his eyes rapidly to clear his failing vision. By George, they were in each other's arms! Funny world—above or below—it didn't seem to make any difference. But it was a tough break for Frank—morganatic marriage and all that. No chance—well—

Tommy succumbed to his overpowering drowsiness.

The awakening was slow, but not painful. Rather there was a feeling of utter contentment, of joy at being alive. A delicious languor pervaded Tommy's being as he turned his head on a snow white silken pillow and stared at the figure of the white-capped nurse who was fussing with the bottles and instruments that lay on an enameled table beside the bed. Memory came to him immediately. He felt remarkably well and refreshed. Experimentally he moved his left shoulder. There was absolutely no pain and it felt perfectly normal. He sat erect in his surprise and felt the shoulder with his right hand. There was no bandage, no wound. Had he dreamed of the hammer blow of that forty-five caliber bullet?

His nurse, observing that her patient had recovered consciousness, broke forth in a torrent of unintelligible Theronian, then rushed from the room.

He was still examining his unscarred shoulder in wonder, when the nurse returned, with Frank Rowley at her heels. Frank laughed at the expression of his friend's face.

"What's wrong, old-timer?" he asked.

"Why—I—thought that fool of a Leland had shot me in the shoulder," stammered Tommy, "but I guess I dreamed it. Where are we? Still in Theros?"

"We are." Frank sobered instantly, and Tommy noted with alarm that his usually cheerful features were haggard and drawn and his eyes hollow from loss of sleep. "And you didn't dream that Leland shot you. That shoulder of yours was mangled and torn beyond belief. He was using soft nosed bullets, the hell-hound!"

"Then how—?"

“Tommy, these Theronians are marvelous. We rushed you to this hospital and a half-dozen doctors started working on you at once. They repaired the shattered bones by an instantaneous grafting process, tied the severed veins and arteries and closed the gaping wound by filling it with a plastic compound and drawing the edges together with clamps. You were anaesthetized and some ray machine

was used to heal the shoulder. This required but ten hours and they now say that your arm is as good as ever. How does it feel?"

"Perfectly natural. In fact I feel better than I have in a month." Tommy observed that the nurse had left the room and he jumped from his bed and capered like a school boy.

This drew no sign of merriment from Frank, and Tommy scrutinized him once more in consternation. "And you," he said, "what is wrong with you?"

"Don't worry about me," replied Frank impatiently. Then, irrelevantly, he said "Leland's dead."

"Should be. I knew we shouldn't have started out to help him. But, Frank, I'm concerned about you. You look badly." Tommy was getting into his clothes as he spoke.

"Forget it, Tommy. You've been sleeping for two days, you know—part of the cure—and I haven't had much rest during that time. That is all."

"It's that Phaestra woman," Tommy accused him.

"Well, perhaps. But I'll get over it, I suppose. Tommy, I love her. But

there's no chance for me. Haven't seen her since the row in the palace. Her council surrounds her continually and I have been advised to-day that we are to be returned as quickly as you are up and around. That means immediately now."

"Good. The sooner the better. And you just forget about this queen as soon as you are able. She's a peach, of course, but not for you. There's lots more back in little old New York." But Frank had no reply to this sally.

There came a knock at the door and Tommy called, "Come in."

"I see you have fully recovered," said the smiling Theronian who entered at the bidding, "and we are overjoyed to know this. You have the gratitude of the entire realm for your part in the saving of our empress from the bullets of the madman."

"I?"

"Yes. You and your friend. And now, may I ask, are you ready to return to your own land?"

Tommy stared. "Sure thing," he said, "or rather, I will be in a few minutes."

"Thank you. We shall await you in the transmitting room." The Theronian bowed and was gone.

"Well, I like that," said Tommy. "He hands me an undeserved compliment and then asks how soon we can beat it. A 'here's your hat, what's your hurry' sort of thing."

"It's me they're anxious to be rid of," remarked Frank, shrugging his broad shoulders, "and perhaps it is just as well."

"You bet it is!" agreed Tommy enthusiastically, "and I'm in favor of making it good and snappy." He completed his toilet as rapidly as possible and then turned to face the down-hearted Frank.

"How do we go? The way we came?" he asked.

“No, Tommy. They have closed off the shaft that led from the cavern of the silver dome. They are taking no more chances. It seems that the shaft down which we floated was constructed by the Theronians; not by Leland. They had used it and the gravity disc to transport casual visitors to the surface, who occasionally mixed with our people in order to learn the languages of the upper world and to actually touch and handle the things they were otherwise able to see only through the medium of Silver Dome and the crystal spheres.

Further visits to the surface are now forbidden, and we are to be returned by a remarkable process of beam transmission of our disintegrated bodies."

"Disintegrated?"

"Yes. It seems they have learned to dissociate the atoms of which the human body is composed and to transmit them to any desired point over a beam of etheric vibrations, then to reassemble them in the original living condition."

"What? You mean to say we are to be shot to the surface through the intervening rock and earth? Disintegrated and reintegrated? And we'll not even be bent, let alone busted?"

This time he was rewarded by a laugh. "That's right. And I have gone through the calculations with one of the Theronian engineers and can find no flaw in the scheme. We're safe in their hands."

"If you say so, Frank, it's okay with me. Let's go!"

Reluctantly his friend lifted his athletic bulk from the chair. In silence he led the way to the transmitting room of the Theronian scientists.

Here they were greeted by two savants with whom Frank was already acquainted, Clarux and Rhonus by name. A bewildering array of complex mechanisms was crowded into the high-ceilinged chamber and, prominent among them, was one of the crystal spheres, this one of somewhat smaller size than the one in the palace of Phaestra.

"Where do you wish to arrive?" asked Clarux.

"As near to my automobile as possible," replied Frank, taking sudden interest in the proceedings. "It is parked in the lane between Leland's house and the road."

Tommy looked quickly in his direction, encouraged by the apparent change in his attitude. The scientists proceeded to energize the crystal sphere. They were bent upon speeding the parting guests. Their beloved empress was to be saved from her own emotions.

Quick adjustments of the controls resulted in the locating of Frank's car, which was still buried to its axles in snow. The scene included Leland's house, or rather its site, for it appeared to have been utterly demolished by some explosion within.

Tommy raised questioning eyebrows.

"It was necessary," explained Rhonus, "to destroy the house in obliterating all traces of our former means of egress. It has been commanded that you two be returned safely, and we are authorized to trust implicitly in your future silence regarding the existence of Theros. This is satisfactory, I presume?"

Both Tommy and Frank nodded agreement.

"Are you ready, gentlemen?" asked Clarux, who was adjusting a mechanism that resembled a huge radio transmitter. Its twelve giant vacuum tubes glowed into life as he spoke.

"We are," chimed the two visitors.

They were requested to step to a small circular platform that was raised about a foot from the floor by means of insulating legs. Above the table there was an inverted bowl of silver in the shape of a large parabolic reflector.

"There will be no alarming sensations," averred Clarux. "When I close the switch the disintegrating energy from the reflector above will bathe your bodies for a moment in visible rays of a deep purple hue. You may possibly experience a slight momentary feeling of nausea. Then—presto!—you have arrived."

"Shoot!" growled Frank from his position on the stand.

Clarux pulled the switch and there was a murmur as of distant thunder. Tommy blinked involuntarily in the brilliant purple glow that surrounded him. Then all was confusion in the transmitting room. Somebody had rushed through the open door shouting, "Frank! Frank!" It was the empress Phaestra.

In a growing daze Tommy saw her dash to the platform, seize Frank in a clutch of desperation. There was a violent wrench as if some monster were twisting at his vitals. He closed his eyes against the blinding light, then realized that utter silence had followed the erstwhile confusion. He sat in Frank's car—alone.

The journey was over, and Frank was left behind. With awful finality it came to him that there was nothing he could do. It was clear that Phaestra had wanted his pal, needed him—come for him. From the fact that Frank remained behind it was evident that she had succeeded in retaining him. A sickening fear came to Tommy that she had been too late; that Frank's body was already partly disintegrated and that he might have paid the price of her love with his life. But a little reflection convinced him that if this were the case a portion of his friend's body would have reached the intended destination. Then, unexplainably, he received a mental message that

all was well.

Considerably heartened, he pressed the starter button and the cold motor of Frank's coupe turned over slowly, protestingly. Finally it coughed a few times, and, after considerable coaxing by use of the choke, ran smoothly. He proceeded to back carefully through the drifts toward the road, casting an occasional regretful glance in the direction of the demolished mansion.

He would have some explaining to do when he returned to New York. Perhaps—yes, almost certainly, he would be questioned by the police regarding Frank's disappearance. But he would never betray the trust of Phaestra. Who indeed would believe him if he told the story? Instead, he would concoct a weird fabrication regarding an explosion in Leland's laboratory, of his own miraculous escape. They could not hold him, could not accuse him of murder without producing a body—the *corpus delicti*, or whatever they called it.

Anyway, Frank was content. So was Phaestra.

Tommy swung the heavy car into the road and turned toward New York, alone and lonely—but somehow happy; happy for his friend.

#45 The Flying City, By Harold Thompson Rich

From space came Cor's disc-city of Vada—its mighty, age-old engines weakening— its horde of dwarfs hungry for the Earth!

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

fizzled like moths

In the burning solitude of the great Arizona desert, some two miles south of Ajo, a young scientist was about to perform an experiment that might have far-reaching results for humanity.

The scientist was Gordon Kendrick—a tall, tanned, robust chap who looked more like a prospector in search of gold than a professor of physics from the State University of Tucson.

Indeed, he was in a way, a prospector, since it was gold he sought—some practical method of tapping the vast radio-energetic treasure of the sun—and it was an apparatus designed to accomplish just this that he was about to test.

The primary unit of the mechanism comprised a spheroidal vacuum-tube measuring a little over a foot across its long axis, mounted in a steel bracket that held it horizontal with the ground. Down through its short axis ran a shaft on which was centered a light cross of aluminum wire, carrying four vanes of mica, one face of each coated with lampblack. A flexible cable led from the bottom of this shaft to the base of the bracket, where it was geared to a small electric motor driven by two dry cells. A rheostat-switch for delivering and controlling the current was mounted nearby.

At the wide arc of the egg-shaped tube was a concave platinum cathode, at the narrow arc a nib of some sort, ending in a socket. From this socket, two heavy insulated wires extended sixty feet or so across the sand to the secondary unit of the mechanism, which was roughly a series of resistance coils, resembling those in an ordinary electric heater.

As Kendrick prepared to test this delicate apparatus that represented so much of his time and thought, held so much of his hope locked up in it, a turmoil was in his heart, though his brown face was calm.

If his theories were right, that revolving cross would tap and draw into its vanes radio-energetic waves of force, much as the whirling armature of a dynamo draws into its coils electro-magnetic waves of force. For the blackened sides of the vanes, absorbing more radiation than the bright sides, would cause the molecules to rebound from the warmer surfaces with greater velocity, setting up an alternate pressure and bringing the rays to a focus on the cathode, where they would be reflected to the nib as waves of *heatricity*, to use the word he had coined.

Those were Kendrick's theories, and now he moved to put them to the supreme test. Switching on the current, he set the motor going. In response, the cross began to revolve, slowly at first—then faster,

faster, as he opened the rheostat wider.

Eyes fixed on his resistance coils, he gave a sudden cry of triumph. Yes, there was no doubt about it! They were growing red, glowing brightly, whitely, above the intense desert sunlight.

Here was a means of convening solar radiation into heat, then, that offered tremendous commercial possibilities!

But even as he exulted, there came a blinding flash—and the overtaxed coils burst into flame.

Shielding his eyes from the glare, he reached for the rheostat, shut off the current, rushed to his secondary unit—where he beheld an amazing sight. Not only had this part of the apparatus completely disintegrated, but the sand of the desert floor under it as well. On the spot quivered a miniature lake of molten glass!

As Kendrick stood ruefully beside that fiery pool, meditating on the spectacular but not altogether gratifying results of his experiment, a peculiar low humming sound reached his ears. Rushing back to his primary unit, with the thought that perhaps by some chance he had

not fully closed the rheostat, he looked at the cross. But no, the vanes were still.

The humming increased, however—grew into a vibration that made his eardrums ache.

Puzzled, he looked around. What on earth could it be? Had his unruly experiment called into play some tremendous, unsuspected force of the universe. Was he to bring the world to ruin, as a result of his blind groping after this new giant of power?

Such predictions had often been made by the ignorant, to be dismissed by scientists as the veriest nonsense. But was there some truth in the universal fear, after all? Was he to be the Prometheus who stole fire from Olympus, the Samson who toppled down the temple?

Chilled, dizzied with the pain of the ever-increasing vibration, he gritted his teeth, awaiting he knew not what.

Then it came—a spectacle so staggering that he went rigid with awe as he regarded it, all power of motion utterly numbed for the moment. The vibration ceased. The thing appeared.

It was a city—a city in the air—a flying city!

As Kendrick stood staring at this phenomenon, he could scarcely credit his senses.

Had the magic carpet of Bagdad suddenly materialized before him, he would not have been more astounded. And indeed, it was in a way a magic carpet—a great disclike affair, several miles in diameter, its myriad towers and spires glinting like gold under the noonday sun, while its vast shadow fell athwart the desert like the pall of an eclipse.

The lower portion, he noted, was in the main flat, though a number of wartish protuberances jutted down from it, ejecting a pale violet emanation. Whatever this was it seemed to have the effect of holding the thing motionless in the air, for it hovered there quite easily, a hundred yards or so above the ground.

But what was it? Where was it from? What had brought it?

Those were the questions he wanted answered; and they were to be, sooner than he knew.

As he stood there speculating, a device like a trap-door opened in the

base of the disc, and creatures resembling human beings began descending. Began floating down, rather.

Whereupon Kendrick did what any sensible man would have done, under similar circumstances. He reacted into motion. In short, he ran.

Glancing back over his shoulder after a minute or two, however, he drew up sheepishly. Of that strange apparition and those who had descended from it there was not a trace, not a shadow!

But the peculiar humming had recommenced, he realized in the next breath—and at the same instant he felt himself seized by invisible hands.

There was a struggle, but it was brief and futile. When it was over his captors became visible once more. They were singular little beings about four feet tall, with strange, wise, leathery faces, their heads grotesquely bald.

The humming had ceased again. The disc, too, was once more visible.

What happened next was something even more astounding, if there

could be any further degrees of wonder possible for the utterly baffled young scientist. He felt himself lifted up, leaving the desert floor, whirling away toward that incredible phenomenon hovering there.

Another moment or two and he had been borne up through its trap-door opening, was standing in a dark space bounded by solid metal walls. Then he was thrust into a cylinder with several of his tiny guards, shot swiftly upward.

A door opened as they came to rest, and he was led out into a vast court of gleaming amber crystal. Something like a taxi slid up, with irridescent planes, and he was bundled into it, whirled away again.

Down broad, gleaming avenues they passed, where similar traffic flowed densely, but under marvelous control. Towering skyscrapers loomed to right and left. Tier on tier of upper and lower boulevards revealed themselves, all crowded with automotive and pedestrian activity.

At length a stupendous concourse was reached. Thousands of these taxis and similar vehicles were parked along its broad flanks, while literal swarms of diminutive individuals circulated to and fro.

Assisted from the vehicle that had brought him to this obvious center of the disc's activities. Kendrick was led into a monumental structure of jade-green stone that towered a full hundred, stories above the street level. There he was escorted into another of those projectilelike elevators, shot up, up—till at length it came to rest. The door opened and he was led out into a small lobby of the same amber crystal he had observed before.

By now his guards had diminished to two, but he no longer made any effort to escape. Wherever this amazing adventure might lead, he was resolved to follow it through.

One of the guards had advanced to a jewelled door and was pressing a button. In response, the door opened. A golden-robed, regal creature stood there.

Though dwarfed to four feet, like his fellow, he was obviously their mental superior to a prodigious degree. Not only was his symmetrical bald head of large brain content, but the finely-cut features of his parchment face bore the unmistakable stamp of a powerful intellect.

"*Ao-chaa!*" commanded this evident monarch of the disc, addressing the guards.

They bowed and departed, abruptly.

"My dear Kendrick!" the regal personage now said, in thin, precise English. "It is indeed a pleasure to welcome you to my humble quarters. Pray enter and make yourself comfortable."

Whereupon he ushered him into a dazzling apartment that was one vast mosaic of precious gems, indicated a richly carved chair, into which the young scientist dropped wonderingly.

"Now then, Professor," continued the mighty little dwarf, when he was seated in a chair even more sumptuous, "suppose we have a friendly little discussion. I have been much interested in your experiments on heat radiation. What you demonstrated this morning, in particular, was most absorbing. You have hit upon a rather profound scientific principle, yes?"

"Possibly," Kendrick admitted, quite conscious that he was being patronized.

"Oh, don't be modest, my dear fellow!" smiled the dwarf. "I am the last one to belittle your achievement. Indeed, it is because of it that I have invited you here to-day. Permit me to introduce myself, and to make clear one or two possibly perplexing matters. Then I am sure

we shall have a most agreeable chat."

His name was Cor, he said, and he was in truth the monarch of this strange realm. His people had come from the one-time planet of Vada, far distant in the universe. A thousand years ago, this planet had been doomed by the approach of an alien star. Their great scientist, Ravv, had met the emergency by inventing the disc, into whose construction they had poured all their resources. The pick of their populace had been salvaged on this giant life-raft. The rest had perished when that destroying star had crashed down on the doomed Vada.

Since then these survivors and their descendants had been voyaging through space on their marvelous disc. For hundreds of years they had given no thought to the future, content to drift on and on in the interstellar void, breathing an atmosphere produced artificially. But at length the inevitable had happened. This superb piece of mechanism devised by their super-genius, Ravv, was beginning to show signs of wear. Some of its mighty engines were nearing the exhaustion point. Either they must soon find a planet comparable with the one they had once known, where they could pause and rehabilitate their machinery, or they must disintegrate and pass into oblivion.

Faced with that crisis, Cor had long been seeking such a planet. He had found it, at last, in the earth—and had resolved that this was where they were going to alight and transplant the civilization of ancient Vada, pending such time as they could take to space again.

For some months now they had been hovering over various portions of the earth, studying its geography and its peoples, with the result that they had concluded the United States offered the most logical point for launching the attack. Once this country was subdued, they were in possession of the richest and most advanced section of the planet. The conquest of the rest of it could await their leisure.

With such an invasion in view, their scientists had mastered the language of the country. This had been accomplished very easily, since in addition to their power of mingling with the populace in an invisible form, they had the principles of radio developed to a high degree and were able to tune in on any station they wanted.

Kendrick sat there, stunned, as Cor followed his astounding revelation of their origin with this calm plan for the conquest of America, of the world. Why, of all people on earth, had he alone been singled out for this disclosure?

He asked the question now.

"My dear Professor, can't you really guess?" replied Cor, with that leathery smile. "Hasn't it dawned that you were a little too near our own field with that machine of yours? A trifle more research, a slightly different application—and you would have become a dangerous enemy."

"You—you mean—?"

"I mean there isn't a great deal of difference between the experiments you have been making and those our great Ravv once made. For instance, had you broadcast your heatricity, as you call it, instead of trying to transmit it on wires—well, picture a receiving apparatus in each home of the land, like your commercial radio sets. You would have become a billionaire, don't you see?"

Kendrick saw indeed. It was simple, so simple! Fool—why hadn't he thought of it?

"But your invention will never make you wealthy now, my dear fellow," Cor went on, tauntingly. "You will be our guest, here, until we have taken over your interesting country. After that, if there is any need for the broadcasting of heat, we will furnish it ourselves. We have those facilities, among others, fully developed. Would you care to see our plant?"

Kendrick naturally admitted that he would, so the dwarf led him through a rear door and up a winding flight of stairs. They emerged presently into a great laboratory housed in the glass-roofed pinnacle of the tower.

There he beheld a sight that left him breathless. Never before had he seen such an assemblage of scientific apparatus. Its vastness and strangeness were fairly overpowering, even to a man as well versed in physio-chemical paraphernalia as he was.

Before his eyes could take in a tenth part of the spectacle, Cor had led him to the left wall.

"There," he said, "you will observe a development of your heat generator."

Kendrick looked—to see a long bank of large vacuum-tubes, each about three feet high and a foot wide, connected by a central shaft that caused series of little vanes in each of them to revolve at lightning speed.

Around the apparatus moved numerous small attendants, oiling, wiping, adjusting its many delicate parts.

"Well, what do you think now?" asked Cor.

Kendrick made no reply, though he was thinking plenty.

"You see, it is your invention, my dear Professor," the dwarf went on in his taunting voice, "only anteceded by a thousand years—and rather more perfected, you must admit."

He walked now to the center of the laboratory, where stood a huge dial of white crystal, ranked with many levers and switches, all capped with the same material.

"Behold!" he said, throwing over one.

Instantly there came again that peculiar low humming that had so puzzled him a few minutes before—and the entire room, its engines, its attendants, Cor himself, leapt into invisibility. Only Kendrick remained, facing the faintly visible crystal dial.

Then he saw a switch move, as though automatically. But no, for the dwarf's hand was on it now. Visibility had returned. The vibration ceased.

"That is the central control," said Cor. "Our city and all its inhabitants become invisible when that switch is thrown. Only the

dial remains, for the guidance of the operator, and even that cannot be seen at a distance of more than fifty feet. But now behold!"

He raised his hand, touched a watch-like device strapped to his wrist —and was instantly invisible. But the laboratory and every machine and person in it remained in plain view. Nor was there any vibration now.

The next moment, having touched that curious little device again, Cor reappeared.

"That is the local control," he said. "Every one of our inhabitants, except those under discipline, has one of these little mechanisms. It enables us to make ourselves invisible at will. A convenience at times, you must admit."

"Decidedly," Kendrick agreed. "And the principle?"

"Quite simple. One of those, in fact, that lies behind your researches. Doubtless you would have hit upon it yourself in time. Your own scientist, Faraday, you may recall, held the opinion that the various forms under which the forces of matter manifest themselves have a common origin. We of the disc, thanks to our great Ravv, have found that common origin."

It was the origin of matter itself, Cor said, which lay in the ether of interstellar space—energy, raw, cosmic—vibrations, rays.

By harnessing and controlling these various rays, his people had been able to accomplish their seeming miracles—miracles that the people of earth, too, were beginning to achieve—as in electricity, for instance, and its further application, radio.

But the people of Vada had long since mastered such simple rays, and now, in possession of vastly more powerful ones, had the elemental forces of the universe at their disposal.

The disc was propelled through space by short rays of tremendously high frequency, up above the ultra-violet. The same rays, directed downward instead of outward, enabled them to overcome the pull of gravity when in a planet's influence, as at present. And the escalator rays, by which they could proceed to and from the disc, were also of high frequency, as were their invisibility rays.

"But you, Professor, are more interested in low frequency rays, the long ones down below infra-red," continued Cor. "You have seen our development of the heat-dynamo principle. It utilizes, I might add, not only solar radiation but that of the stars as well. There being a billion and a half of these in the universe, many of them a thousand

times or more as large as your own sun, we naturally have quite an efficient little heating plant here. It provides us with our weapon of warfare, as well as keeping us warm. Permit me to demonstrate."

He led the way to a gleaming circle of glass like an inverted telescope, about a yard in diameter, mounted in the floor.

"Look!" said the dwarf.

Kendrick did so—and there, spread below him, lay the floor of the desert. His camp, his apparatus, were just as he had left them.

Cor now moved toward the dial.

"Behold!" he said, pulling a lever.

Instantly the scene below was an inferno. Stricken by a blast of stupendous heat, the whole area went molten, lay quivering like a lake of lava in the crater of an active volcano.

"Suppose, my dear Professor," smiled the dwarf, strolling back from the dial, "just suppose, for instance, that instead of the lonely camp of an obscure scientist, your proud city of New York had been below there!"

Kendrick shuddered.

Well he knew now the terrible power, the appalling menace of this strange invader.

"I would prefer not to make such a supposition," he said, quietly, with a last thoughtful glance at that witches' caldron below.

"Then let us think of pleasanter things. You are my guest of honor, sir—America's foremost scientist, though she may never realize it," with a piping chuckle. "To-night there will be a great banquet in your honor. Meanwhile, suppose I show you to your quarters."

Nettled, fuming, though outwardly calm, Kendrick permitted himself to be escorted from the laboratory to an ornate apartment on one of the lower floors.

There Cor left him, with the polite hint that he would find plenty of attendants handy should he require anything.

Alone now, in the midst of this vast, nightmarish metropolis, he paced back and forth, back and forth—knowing the hideous fate that threatened the world but powerless to issue one word of warning, much less avert it.

Kendrick was still thinking and brooding along these lines when he saw the door of the apartment swiftly open and close again.

Someone had entered, invisible!

Backing away, he waited, tense. Then, suddenly, his visitor materialized. With a gasp, he saw standing before him a beautiful girl.

She was a young woman, rather, in her early twenties. Not one of these pigmies of the disc either, but a tall, slender creature of his own world.

Her hair was dark, modishly bobbed. Her eyes were a deep, clear brown, her skin a warm olive. And she was dressed as though she had just stepped off Fifth Avenue—which indeed she had, not so long ago, as he was soon to learn.

"I hope I haven't startled you too much, Mr. Kendrick," she said, in a rich, husky murmur, "but—well, there wasn't any other way."

"Oh, I guess I'll get over it," he replied with a smile. "But you have the advantage of me, since you know my name."

Hers was Marjorie Blake, she told him then.

"Not the daughter of Henderson Blake?" he gasped.

"Yes," with a tremor, "his only daughter."

Whereupon Kendrick knew the solution of a mystery that had baffled the police for weeks. The newspapers had been full of it at the time. This beautiful girl, whose father was one of America's richest men and president of its largest bank, had disappeared as though the earth had swallowed her. She had left their summer estate at Great Neck, Long Island, on a bright June morning, bound for New York on a shopping tour—and had simply vanished.

Suicide had been hinted by some of the papers, but had not been taken seriously, since she had no apparent motive for ending her life. Abduction seemed to be the more logical explanation, and huge rewards had been offered by her frantic parents—all to no avail.

What had happened was, she now explained, that after visiting several shops and making a number of purchases, she had stepped into Central Park at the Plaza for a breath of fresh air before lunching at the Sherry-Netherlands, where she planned to meet some friends.

But before advancing a hundred yards along the secluded path, she

had been seized by invisible hands—had felt something strapped to her wrist, before anyone came in sight—and then, invisible too, had been lifted up, whirled away into a vast, humming vibration that sounded through the air.

Once on the disc, it had swept off into space at incredible speed, pausing only when some hundreds of miles above the earth and invisible from below without mechanical aid. When its vibration finally ceased that amazing city had leapt before her eyes.

Then, her own visibility restored, she had been led into the presence of that mighty little monarch, Cor, who explained that she had been seized as a hostage and would be held as an ace in the hole, pending conquest of her country. Since when she had been a prisoner aboard the disc.

Learning of Kendrick's capture, from gossip among the women, she had taken the first opportunity of coming to him, in the hope that between them they might devise some means of escape.

Indeed, that was his own fondest hope—their imperative need, if the people of America and of the earth were to be saved from this appalling menace. But what basis was there for such a fantastic hope? Just one, that he could see.

"That thing on your wrist," he said, voicing it. "I'm surprised they let you wear one of those."

"They don't," she smiled. "I stole it!—from one of the maids in my apartment. It was the only way I could get here without being seen. I felt I must see you at once. We've got to do something, soon, or it'll be too late. I felt that, as a scientist, you might have some idea how we could get off."

"How do the people themselves get off?" he asked. "That escalator ray—do you know how they use it?"

"No, I've never been able to find out. They don't let me go near that part of the city."

Kendrick reflected a moment.

"Let's have a look at that invisibility affair," he said.

She removed it from her wrist, handed it to him. Somewhat in awe, he examined it.

The mechanism portion, which was linked in a strap of elastic metal, resembled only superficially a watch, he now saw. Rather it had the appearance of some delicate electric switch. Rectangular in shape, it

was divided into two halves by a band of white crystal. In each of these halves were two little buttons of the same material, those on one side round, on the other square.

"Which buttons control the invisibility?" he asked.

"The square ones," she replied. "One's pushed in now, you see. If you should push the other, the first would come out—and you'd pass out of the picture, so to speak."

Kendrick was half tempted to try the thing then and there, but deferred the impulse.

"What are the round buttons for?" he inquired instead.

Marjorie didn't know, but thought they were probably an emergency pair, in case something went wrong with the square ones. In any event, nothing happened when you pushed them.

Kendrick pushed one, just to see. It was true. Nothing happened—but he seemed to sense a faint, peculiar vibration and a wave of giddiness swept over him. On pushing the other, which released the first, it stopped.

He handed the device back to Marjorie.

"There's your bracelet. Now, if I can just get one like it, I think we'll get down to earth all right."

"Oh, Mr. Kendrick!" Her eyes lit up eagerly. "Then you've thought of a way?"

"Not exactly. I think I've discovered their own way. I can't be certain, but I'm willing to gamble on it, if you are."

"Then you—you think those round buttons are connected with the escalator rays?"

"Exactly! I think they control individual descent and ascent, just as the square ones control individual visibility and invisibility. At any rate, it's the hunch I'm going to act on right now, if you're with me."

"Oh, I'm with, you!" she breathed. "Anything, death almost, would be preferable to this."

"Then stand by, invisible. I'm going to get one of my jailors in here and relieve him of his wrist-watch."

Marjorie touched that little square button on her own. She instantly became invisible.

Kendrick touched a button too, a button he had noticed beside the door. As he had supposed, it brought one of the Vadans.

Shutting the door quietly, he seized the fellow before he could move his hand to his wrist. Thwarted in his attempt to vanish from sight, the diminutive guard attempted an outcry. But Kendrick promptly throttled him.

Marjorie had reappeared by now and together they bound him to a chair with a gilded cord torn from the drapery.

Removing the precious mechanism from his wrist, Kendrick slipped it on his own.

"Now let's go!" he said, pressing the protruding square button of the device. "We haven't a minute to—my golly, what a peculiar sensation!"

"It is rather odd, isn't it?" she laughed, pressing her own and joining him in that invisible realm.

"Feels like a combination electric massage and cold shower! Where are you, anyway? I can't see you."

"Of course you can't!" came an unseen tinkle. "Here!"

He felt her brush him.

"Better hold hands," he suggested, then gave an invisible flush he was glad she couldn't see.

"All right. A good idea."

Her delicate hand came into his, soft, warm. Heart vibrating even faster than his body, his whole being a-quiver with a strange exaltation, Kendrick opened the door, and they left the apartment.

The next half-hour was the tensest either of then had ever experienced. Every foot of the way was fraught with peril.

Not only did they have to carefully avoid the visible swarms of little people who hurried everywhere, but had to be on their guard as well against any who might be moving about like themselves under cover of invisibility.

Nor could they use any elevator or public conveyances, but were obliged to make their way down to the concourse by heaven knew how many flights of stairs, and cross heaven knew how many teeming streets on foot, before they reached the amber court, below which the trap-door and their hope of freedom.

They got there at last, however, descended, and peered down from that yawning brink upon the desert floor—to draw back with gasps of dismay. For the area still gleamed semi-molten from the stupendous blast that had wiped out Kendrick's camp.

"W-what is it?" she gasped.

Swiftly he told her.

"But isn't there any way around it? Look, over there to the left. One edge of the crater seems to end almost underneath us."

It was true that the center of the caldron was far to the right of where they stood, and that its left rim was only a little within their direct line of descent. But to land even one foot inside that inferno would be as fatal as to alight in its very midst.

Kendrick was thinking fast.

"There's just a chance," he said. "It all depends upon how wide the zone of these escalator rays is, and whether we can tune in on them. At least, I can probably answer the latter question."

Pushing the protrudent round button on his mysterious bracelet as he spoke, he leaned over the edge of the trap-door and awaited results.

They were not long in coming. The vibration he was already under from the invisibility rays seemed to double. Alternate waves of giddiness and depression, of push and pull, swept over him.

A minute of it was enough. He pressed the round button that now protruded, ending this influence, and faced Marjorie, stating:

"I'm positive now that these things control descent and ascent. As nearly as I can figure, the rays work on the principle of an endless belt. If you're up here, you get carried down, and vice versa. As to how wide the belt is, and whether you can move sideways on it, remains to be seen. Anyway, I'm going to take a chance. I'll go first. If my guess is wrong, you—well, needn't follow."

"No, I'm going with you!" she declared resolutely. "We've come this far together. I shan't be left alone now. Let's go!"

And again her soft, warm hand was in his.

Lord, what a girl! How many would be brave enough to take a gamble like that, on a fellow's mere supposition?

"All right—go it is!" he said. "Push your round button, like this." He showed her the way he thought was right, pushed his own. "Ready?"

"Ready!"

Their voices were grave. It was a grim prospect, stepping off into space like that, with only a guess between them and death.

"Then jump!"

They jumped, gripping each other's hands tightly—and instead of dropping like plummets were caught in a powerful field of force and whirled gently downward.

"Oh, you were right!" gasped Marjorie, awed. "See, we—"

Then she paused, horror-stricken, for it was obvious that they were to descend within that lake of molten glass, unless they could change their course at once.

"Quick!" he called. "Hold fast! Now—run!"

Breathless, they raced to the left, across that invisible descending belt.

Too far, Kendrick knew, and they would plunge outside its zone, fall crushed and mangled. Not far enough, and they would meet cremation. It was a fearful hazard, either way, but it had to be taken.

They were almost down, now, and still not quite far enough to the left. The heat of that yawning crater rose toward them.

"Faster—*faster*!" he cried, fairly dragging her along with him.

A last dash—a breathless instant—and they stood there on the ground, not three feet from the edge of doom.

Swooning with the heat, Marjorie swayed against him, murmured an incoherent prayer.

"Take heart!" he whispered, lifting her bodily and bearing her some yards away. "We're down—safe!"

Their safety was but relative, however, Kendrick well knew. Until they could put miles between them and this monstrous disc, they were not really safe. No telling how soon their escape might be discovered. No telling what terrible means Cor might take of curbing their flight.

So as soon as Marjorie had recovered sufficiently to proceed, they headed off across the desert at a fast walk toward Ajo, where he hoped to catch the afternoon train for Gila Bend. From there, they could board the limited for Tucson and points east, when it came

through from Yuma that night.

They had tuned out on the escalator rays, but continued on still invisible—for the disc hung above them in plain view and it would have been suicide to let themselves be seen.

Even so, Kendrick soon began to have an uneasy feeling of being followed. He looked around from time to time, but could see nothing. Were some of those invisible little creatures on their trail?

He said nothing to Marjorie of his anxiety, but presently she too began glancing backward uneasily, every few steps.

"They are near us!" she said at length, in a whisper. "I can sense them."

It was more than sense, they soon discovered. Little paddings became quite audible, and once or twice they saw the sand scuffed up, not twenty feet away, as though by a foot passing over it.

Meanwhile they were climbing a rise of ground, broken by many small hummocks and dotted with thorny shrubs. On the other side, at the foot of a long down-slope, lay Ajo.

Once they reached the summit, Kendrick felt sure they could

outdistance their pursuers on the descent. Already, if his watch was right, the train was preparing to pull out. It would be a breathless dash, but he was confident they could make it.

So he reassured Marjorie as best he could, and helped her on up the slope.

They were practically on the summit and already in view of the little railroad station and huddle of shacks below—when suddenly he felt himself tripped and flung violently to the ground. At the same instant, his companion emitted a scream, as she felt herself seized by invisible hands.

Leaping to his feet, Kendrick flailed out with solid fists at their attackers. Groans answered the impacts and he knew his blows were taking effect.

Free for a moment he dashed to Marjorie, felt for the midgets who swarmed around her. Seizing one of the invisible forms, he lifted it and flung it crashing to the ground. Another, likewise, and another.

Then he threshed his legs, where two of the creatures clung, trying to drag him down again. They flew through the air, with cries of fright.

"Well, so far, so good!" he exclaimed. "We won't wait to see if there are any more. Come on—let's go!"

"Right!"

Reaching for each other's hands, they raced down the slope.

Halfway there they saw a warning blast of steam rise from the engine, followed by a whistle.

"They'll be pulling out in a minute now!" he gasped, increasing speed. "We've got to make it!—our only chance!"

"We *will* make it!" she sobbed through clenched teeth, meeting his pace.

Glancing over his shoulder, after another fifteen seconds, Kendrick saw that the disc was no longer visible. Since there was no vibration he realized with relief that it was now hidden behind the slope they were descending.

"Quick—push your button!" he said, pushing his own.

They came out of the influence of the invisibility rays, raced breathless on down the slope—gained the station platform just as the

train was getting under way.

Helping the exhausted girl aboard, he mounted the steps himself, led her through the vestibule into its single passenger coach.

Dropping into a seat, they sat there panting as the train gathered speed.

By the time the decrepit but life-saving little local drew into Gila Bend they had somewhat recovered from their harrowing experience.

Marjorie was still pale, however, as Kendrick helped her from the train.

"I may recover," she said with a wan smile, "but I'll never look the same! An old saying, but I know what it means now."

He thought better of a sudden impulse to tell her she looked quite all right to him. Instead, he said grimly:

"I know now what a lot of things mean!"

The Tucson limited would not be through for over an hour, they learned. That would give them time to hunt up the authorities and

sound a warning of the ominous invader that was in the vicinity. Perhaps, by prompt military action, it might be destroyed, or at least crippled.

But first they went to the telegraph office, where Marjorie got off a message that would bring joy to her grieved family.

While standing there outside the barred window, odors of food wafting to them from a nearby lunch-room.

"Um-m!" she sniffed. "That smells good to me! I haven't tasted any earthly cooking for ages. Everything on that horrible disc was synthetic."

"Then I suggest we have ham and eggs, at once," he said. "Or would you prefer a steak?"

"I think I'll have both!"

As they walked into the lunch-room, Kendrick told her of the banquet in his honor Cor had promised for that night.

"I guess I didn't miss much," he ended.

"You certainly didn't!" she assured him, with a smile. "It would have

opened with a purée of split-molecule soup, continued with an entrée of breaded electrons, and closed with an ionic café."

He laughed.

"I'm just as well satisfied. I was unable to attend! Humble as it is, I think this will prove to be much more wholesome food."

Night had fallen by the time they left the lunch-room. Glancing at his watch, Kendrick saw that they still had better than a half-hour before the limited was due, so they betook themselves to the police station.

It was only a block away and in consequence they weren't long reaching it.

The chief had gone home, the officer at the desk informed them, but if there was anything they cared to report, he would be glad to make note of it.

A big raw-boned westerner, he shifted his quid as he spoke and spat resoundingly in a cuspidor at his feet.

"All right, then—get your pencil ready!" said Kendrick with a smile. "This is Miss Marjorie Blake, daughter of Henderson Blake, of New

York. Perhaps you read of her disappearance, a few weeks ago. And I...."

As he introduced himself and told briefly of their astounding experience, the officer's eyes bulged with amazement.

"Say, what yuh-all tryin' to hand me?" he snorted finally. "D'yuh think I was born simple?"

"Press your button!" whispered Marjorie. "Show him how the invisibility ray works. It'll save a lot of argument."

"Right!"

He held up his wrist.

"See this? Now watch!"

Whereupon he pressed the button. But to their dismay, nothing happened.

"Wa-al. I'm still watchin'!" drawled the officer. "Who's loony now?"

Kendrick examined the mechanism in impatience, pressed that little button repeatedly: but still nothing happened.

"Try yours!" he told Marjorie finally.

She did so, with similar results—or lack of them, rather.

"Something's wrong," he said at length. "The ray isn't working."

"Wrong is right!" declared the officer with a contemptuous flood of tobacco juice. "Yuh folks better go catch yuhr train 'fore yuh ferget where it is."

Chagrined, embarrassed, they took their leave, headed back toward the railroad station.

"Of all the utterly silly things!" declared Marjorie, as they walked along. "Why do you suppose it didn't work?"

Kendrick didn't reply at once. When he did, his voice was grave.

"Because the disc has gone!" he said. "We are outside its zone of influence. That's my hunch, at least, and I think we'd better act on it."

"You mean...?"

"I mean our escape has probably caused them to hurry their plans.

They're probably over New York right now. I think we'd better get there the quickest possible way."

The result was that when the train came, they remained on it only to Tucson. There they chartered a fast plane and started east at once.

At sunset the following day the plane swooped out of the sky and slid to rest on the broad grounds of the Blake estate at Great Neck.

As Kendrick stepped from the cabin and helped Marjorie down, a tall, distinguished-looking man with graying hair and close-cropped mustache came hurrying toward them.

"Daddy!" she cried, rushing into his arms. "Oh, Daddy—Daddy!"

Even without this demonstration. Kendrick would have recognized Henderson Blake from pictures he had seen recently in the papers.

Now he was introduced, and Blake was gripping his hand warmly.

"I don't quite know what this is all about, Professor," he heard the great financier say. "Marjorie's telegram last night was as cryptic as it was over-joying. But I do know that I owe you a deep debt of gratitude."

"Yes, and you owe our pilot about a thousand dollars, too!" put in the daughter of the house, clinging to her father's arm. "Please give him a check—then we'll go inside and I'll explain all about it."

"A matter very much easier dispatched than my debt to Professor Kendrick," said Blake, complying.

The check was for two thousand, not one, the pilot saw when he received it.

"Thank you very much, sir!" he said, saluting.

"Don't mention it. Good night—and good luck to you!"

The pilot returned to his plane, it lifted from the lawn, droned off into the twilight.

Then they approached the cool white villa that stood invitingly a hundred yards or so away beyond sunken gardens.

As they neared it, a handsome, well-preserved woman whose face reflected Marjorie's own beauty came toward them. Lines of suffering were still evident around her sensitive mouth, but her dark eyes were radiant.

"Mother!"

"My poor darling!"

They rushed into each other's arms, clung, sobbing and laughing.

Kendrick was glad when these intimate greetings were over and he had met Mrs. Blake.

They were in the drawing-room now, listening to a somewhat more lucid account of their daughter's experiences and those of her rescuer. Marjorie was doing most of the talking, but every now and again she would turn to Kendrick for verification.

"Heavens!" gasped Mrs. Blake, finally. "Can such things be possible?"

"Almost anything seems possible nowadays, my dear," her husband told her. "And you say, Professor, that you have brought back samples of this invisibility device?"

"Yes, we have, but I can't promise they'll work. I'll try, however."

Whereupon, sceptically, he pressed that little square button—and instantly faded out of sight.

"Good Lord!" cried Blake, leaping to his feet. "That proves it! Why, this is positively—"

His remarks were cut short by a scream of terror from his wife.

"Marjorie—Marjorie!" she shrieked.

Wheeling, he faced the chair where his daughter had sat. It was empty, so far as human eyes could see.

"Don't worry Mother—Daddy!" came a calm voice from it. "I'm quite all right—coming back—steady."

And back she came, as did Kendrick, from the empty chair beside her.

His face was grave. The success of the demonstration, which had proved their story to practical-minded Henderson Blake, had proved to him something altogether more significant. The disc, as he had surmised, had rushed eastward immediately on learning of their escape, and was now probably hovering right over New York.

"Marvelous—marvelous!" declared Blake. "But that heat ray, Professor. That sounds bad. You are convinced it is as powerful as they make out!"

"Positively! That blast they let go in the desert would have utterly destroyed New York."

"Hm! Yes, no doubt you're right. I fully realize how the fearful menace of this thing. Do you think the military authorities will be able to cope with it?"

"I don't know. Perhaps, if they are prompt enough."

"And is there no other way—no scientific way?"

Kendrick grew thoughtful.

"I wonder," he said at last. "There's just a possibility—something running through my mind—an experiment I'd like to make, if I had the facilities of some large electrical laboratory."

"You shall have them to-morrow!" Blake promised. "I'm one of the directors of Consolidated Electric. Their experimental laboratory in Brooklyn is the finest of its kind in America. I'll see that you have the run of it."

"That will be very kind," said Kendrick. "But don't expect anything to come from it, necessarily. It's just a theory I want to work out."

A butler entered at this moment and announced dinner.

"Well, theories are mighty these days!" beamed Blake, as they rose, clapping the younger man on the shoulder. "You go ahead with your theories—and I'll bring a few facts to bear. To-morrow noon I'll escore some military men and others of my friends over to the laboratory to hear and see something of this menace direct. Meanwhile, and during this crisis, it will honor me to have you as my guest."

"Our guest!" amended Marjorie, with a warm smile.

Next morning Blake motored Kendrick out to the Brooklyn Laboratory of the Consolidated Electric Utilities Corporation and installed him there.

Then he left—to return at noon with the promised delegation of generals, admirals, statesmen and financiers.

They were all frankly sceptical, though realizing that Henderson Blake was not a man given to exaggeration. Nor did their scepticism altogether vanish when Kendrick had ended his bizarre story with a demonstration of the invisibility device.

Murmurs of amazement ran around the laboratory, it is true, but the more hard-headed of his spectators charged him with having invented the apparatus himself. Though they didn't come right out and say so, they seemed to imply that he was seeking publicity.

Annoyedly, Kendrick tried to refute their charges. But even as he was summoning words, refutation utter and complete came from the air.

A low, humming vibration sounded, grew in volume till it filled the room—and as suddenly ceased: The light of midday faded to twilight.

"*The disc!*" gasped Kendrick, rushing to the west windows.

They followed, tense with awe. And there, between earth and sun, its myriad towers and spires refracting a weird radiance, hovered that vast flying city.

"My God!" muttered a famous general, staring as though he had seen a ghost.

A great statesman opened his lips, but no words came.

"Appalling! Incredible!" burst from others of that stunned

assemblage.

Their comments were cut short by a broadcast voice, thin and clear, tremendously amplified, a voice Kendrick recognized at once as that of Cor.

"People of America!" it said. "We of the planet Vada have come to conquer your country. You will be given forty-eight hours to lay down your arms. If complete surrender has not been made by high noon, two days from now, New York will be destroyed."

The voice ceased. The humming recommenced—waned in volume till it died away. Twilight turned once more to midday.

Peering fixedly through the west windows of the laboratory, the little assemblage saw the disc swallowed up in the clear blue sky.

Then they turned, faced one another gravely.

Outside, on the streets, confusion reigned. In newspaper plants, presses were whirling. In telegraph and cable offices, keys were ticking. From radio towers, waves were speeding.

Within an hour, the nation and the world knew of this planetary invader and its staggering ultimatum.

Naturally, the government at Washington refused to meet these shameful terms. Military and naval forces were rushed to the threatened metropolis. The Atlantic Fleet steamed up from Hampton Roads under forced draught and assembled in the outer harbor. Thousands of planes gathered at Mitchell Field and other nearby aerodromes.

But where was the enemy? He must be miles up in space, Kendrick knew, as he toiled feverishly in the laboratory over his experiment after a sleepless night. For had that flying city been nearer earth, it could not have maintained invisibility without that peculiar humming vibration.

Scout planes urged on by impatient squadron commanders, climbed till they reached their ceilings, searching in vain. They could encounter nothing, see nothing of the invader.

Thus passed a morning of growing tension.

But by noon of that day, with a bare twenty-four hours left before the expiration of the ultimatum, the disc came down, showed itself boldly.

There followed stunning disasters.

One salvo, and the ray shot down—the Atlantic Fleet, the pride of America, burst and melted in flaming hell. Squadrons of planes, carrying tons of bombs, frizzled like moths in the air. Mighty projectiles hurled by land batteries were deflected off on wild trajectories.

Appalled, the nation and the world followed in lurid extras these crushing defeats.

By nightfall of that day, all seemed lost. All opposition had been obliterated. America must capitulate or perish. It had until the next noon to decide which.

Meanwhile, in that great Brooklyn laboratory, Kendrick was working against time, besieged by frantic delegations of the nation's leaders. They knew now that their one hope lay in him. Was he succeeding? Was there even any hope?

Face haggard, eyes bloodshot from lack of sleep, he waved them away, went on with his work.

"I will tell you—as soon as I know."

That was all he would say.

Followed a night that was the blackest in all history, though the myriad stars of heaven shone tauntingly brilliant in the summer sky.

At length, as dawn was breaking. Kendrick paused in his labors.

"There!" he said, grimly, surveying an apparatus that seemed to involve the entire facilities of the laboratory. "It is done! Now then—will it work?"

The delegation were called to witness the test.

Henderson Blake was among them, as was Marjorie. She stepped forward, as he prepared to make the demonstration.

"I *know*, somehow, you're going to be successful!" she murmured, pressing his hand, meeting his eyes with a smile of confidence.

"I hope you're right—Marjorie!" he replied, letting slip the last word almost unconsciously.

Her face colored warmly as the stepped back and rejoined her father.

Kendrick's heart was beating fast as he turned to his instruments. How could he fail, with faith like that behind him?—love, even, perhaps! He mustn't fail—nor would he, if his theories were sound.

Addressing the assemblage, he explained briefly the complicated apparatus.

"These towers," he said, pointing to four steel structures about ten feet high, arranged at the corners of a square roughly twenty feet across, "are miniature radio masts. The area enclosed by them, we will assume, is the city of New York. That metal disc suspended above the area represents the invader. It contains a miniature heat-generator such as I was experimenting with recently in the Arizona desert."

He paused, threw a switch. Somewhere in the laboratory a dynamo began to whir.

"I am now sending electro-magnetic waves from the four towers," he resumed. "But instead of broadcasting them in every direction. I am bending them in concave cathode of force over the city. You may picture this cathode as an invisible shield, if you choose, but it is more than that. It it a reflector. If my theories are right, the radio-energetic ray I am about to project upon it from my miniature disc will be flung back to its source as though it had been a ray of light falling on a mirror. The success of the experiment depends upon what the result will be."

Kendrick ceased, moved toward a rheostat.

As he made ready to touch it, a breathless tension settled upon the assemblage. Upon the outcome of what was now to happen rested the fate of America—and the world.

Calmly, though every fiber of his being was at breaking stress, the young scientist opened the rheostat.

For an instant, the ray seared down—then, as it boomeranged back, the disc burst into flame, dissolved, disintegrated. A thin dust, like carbon, slowly settled to the laboratory floor.

Cutting off the current from the radio towers, Kendrick faced them, a light of triumph in his tired eyes.

"You see—it works," he said.

They saw. Beyond a doubt, it worked!

And what Kendrick saw, as his eyes met Marjorie's, made him forget his fatigue.

The rest was a mad scramble of preparation. Only a few brief hours remained, and much was to be done.

The application of the principle that had just been demonstrated involved a hook-up from the Consolidated Electric laboratory with every broadcasting station in the metropolitan area, power being supplied by commandeering every generating plant within a radius of fifty miles.

The city, moreover, had to be evacuated of all but the few brave hundreds who volunteered to stand by their posts at radio stations and generating plants.

As for Kendrick, it was the busiest, most hectic morning he had ever experienced. Only the realization of a girl's love and a nation's trust enabled him to overcome the exhaustion of two sleepless nights.

At length, a little before eleven, all was in readiness. Just two questions troubled the young scientist's mind. Had the people of the disc learned of their preparations to counter the attack? And would the improvised broadcasting apparatus of the area stand the stupendous strain that would be placed upon it if the ray came down?

The first of these questions was answered, staggeringly, at a quarter after eleven.

"Kendrick—oh, my God!" cried Blake, bursting into the laboratory. "Marjorie—they've got her again! Look! Read this!"

He thrust out a piece of paper. Kendrick took it, read:

Your daughter will be my queen, after this noon.

"Where'd you get it?" he gasped.

"One of the invisible devils thrust it into my hand right out in the street, not five minutes ago," Blake explained, trembling with anguish. "Do you realize what this means, Kendrick? She's on the disc now—and in a scant three-quarters of an hour...."

"Yes, I realize!" his voice came grimly. "And I realize, too, that they don't know their fate. They'll stay. There's forty-five minutes yet. We can't abandon our defense against the ray, not even for Marjorie. But I'll go, I'll rescue her—or die with her!"

And even as Blake mutely reached out his hand to grip that of the determined young man who stood before him. Kendrick touched his wrist mechanism and went invisible.

Once on the street, he pressed the escalator button as well—and by the strength of the vibrations that followed, he knew he must be very

close within that mysterious lifting zone.

Running west a block, he found it growing stronger.

Fairly racing now, he continued on toward the river, progress unhampered in the deserted streets. Suddenly, with a thrill of exultation, he felt himself swept up, whirled away toward that great shimmering hulk against the sun.

"What hope?" he was thinking. "What possible hope?" And the answer came: Cor!

Reaching the disc, he switched out the escalator influence and hastened across the city to that monumental structure of jade-green stone.

The mighty little dwarf would be up there in his glittering mosaic apartment, or in his pinnacle laboratory, perhaps, ready to pull the lever that would release that stupendous blast of heat.

Gaining the jewelled door of the monarch's quarters at last, after escaping detection by a hair's breadth more than once, he pressed the button outside, just as the guard had done that first time.

In response, the door opened—and there stood Cor.

He stood there an instant, that is, while the expression on his leathery face went from inquiry to alarm. Then, as Kendrick burst into the room and shut the door, he went invisible.

In that same instant, the young scientist's eyes beheld a sight that caused his heart to leap. There sat Marjorie, bound in a chair, an expression half of hope, half of dejection, on her face.

"It's I—Gordon!" he called. "Take courage!"

"Oh, I prayed so you'd come—and you came!" she murmured as her face lighted. Then, tensely, she added, "The door—look out!"

Kendrick wheeled, and just in time. The door was opening.

"Not so fast!" he called, lunging.

His hands gripped the dwarf, yanked him back, throttled him before he could emit a cry, pushed the door shut.

Cor struggled like a madman, but it was futile. Kendrick's hands cut into his throat like a vice. After a moment or two, he gasped, relaxed.

Releasing his grip then, Kendrick felt for his wrist, stripped off his bracelet—whereupon the dwarf became visible. His face was putty-

white. He was either dead or unconscious.

Restoring his own visibility then, he advanced to Marjorie, swiftly freed her.

"Take this!" he said, handing her Cor's bracelet.

She slipped it on.

"Now let's tie him and get out of here. He may be dead, but we can't take any chances."

The dwarf wasn't dead, however, for he groaned and opened his eyes as they lifted him into the chair.

"You win, Professor—but it avails you nothing!" He smiled maliciously. "My capture, my death even, will not prevent the ray. The orders have been given. It will be projected sharp at twelve. You but go to your doom!"

"That," said Kendrick, "is a matter of opinion."

Swiftly they bound him, gagged him.

"And now," he added, "we wish you good day—and such fate as you

deserve!"

Then, turning to Marjorie:

"Your hand again!"

There was a new tenderness in its soft warmth that thrilled him.

They touched their buttons, went invisible.

Silently, then, they stole from the apartment. Swiftly they made their way down to the concourse, raced across the city to the amber court, descended to the trap-door.

It must be nearly twelve, Kendrick knew. He couldn't look at his watch, for it as well as himself was invisible. Indeed, even as they stood there, poised for the plunge, a faint whistle rose from below.

Marjorie trembled.

"Steady!" he spoke. "Some of them always blow a minute or two before. Are you ready?"

"Yes!"

"Then press your button—jump!"

Even as they leapt, the sickening thought came that perhaps the escalator ray was no longer running. But the fear was unwarranted. They were caught up, whirled gently downward.

Moving along laterally, as they descended, they were able to land without difficulty in the middle of a deserted street near the Consolidated Electric laboratory.

"Thank heaven!" she sighed, as their feet touched solid ground. They pressed off both buttons, becoming visible once more.

"Echo!" he agreed. "So let's—"

But Kendrick never completed that sentence—for now whistles all over the metropolitan area, rising from the generating plants, announced the ominous hour.

It was high noon. The ultimatum had expired.

Lifting tense faces to the disc, they waited. Would that stupendous ray be hurled back upon itself? Or would it sear through their makeshift defense, plunging them and the whole great metropolis into oblivion?

Suddenly, cataclysmically, the answer came.

There burst a withering whirlwind from the disc. It struck that mighty concave cathode of interlaced waves above the city. There followed an instant's clash of titanic forces. Then the cathode triumphed, hurled it back.

Rocked by a concussion as of two worlds in impact, blinded by a glare that made the sunlight seem feeble in comparison. Marjorie and Kendrick clung together, while the disc grew into a satellite of calcium fire in the sky.

Presently, as the conflagration waned, they opened their eyes. Gravely, but with deep thanksgiving, they searched each other's faces. In them they read deep understanding, too, and a new hope.

"I think we'd better go and find father," she said at length, quietly.

"I think so too!" he agreed.

As they headed toward the laboratory, a fine, powdery dust, like volcanic ash was falling.

It continued to fall until the city streets were covered to a depth of an inch or more.

Thus passed the menace of Vada.

September 1930

#46 A Problem In Communication, By Miles John. Breuer, M.D.:

The delivery of his country into the clutches of a merciless, ultra-modern religion can be prevented only by Dr. Hagstrom's deciphering an extraordinary code.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

the famous science temple

Part 1: The Science Community

(This part is related by Peter Hagstrom, Ph.D.)

"The Ability to communicate ideas from one individual to another," said a professor of sociology to his class, "is the principal distinction between human beings and their brute forbears. The increase and refinement of this ability to communicate is an index of the degree of civilization of a people. The more civilized a people, the more

perfect their ability to communicate, especially under difficulties and in emergencies."

The delivery of his country into the clutches of a merciless, ultra-modern religion can be prevented only by Dr. Hagstrom's deciphering an extraordinary code.

As usual, the observation burst harmlessly over the heads of most of the students in the class, who were preoccupied with more immediate things—with the evening's movies and the week-end's dance. But upon two young men in the class, it made a powerful impression. It crystallized within them certain vague conceptions and brought them to a conscious focus, enabling the young men to turn formless dreams into concrete acts. That is why I take the position that the above enthusiastic words of this sociology professor, whose very name I have forgotten, were the prime moving influence which many years later succeeded in saving Occidental civilization from a catastrophe which would have been worse than death and destruction.

One of these young men was myself, and the other was my lifelong friend and chum, Carl Benda, who saved his country by solving a tremendously difficult scientific puzzle in a simple way, by sheer reasoning power, and without apparatus. The sociology professor

struck a responsive chord in us: for since our earliest years we had wigwagged to each other as Boy Scouts, learned the finger alphabet of the deaf and dumb so that we might maintain communication during school hours, strung a telegraph wire between our two homes, admired Poe's "Gold Bug" together and devised boyish cipher codes in which to send each other postcards when chance separated us. But we had always felt a little foolish about what we considered our childish hobbies, until the professor's words suddenly roused us to the realization that we were a highly civilized pair of youngsters.

Not only did we then and there cease feeling guilty about our secret ciphers and our dots and dashes, but the determination was born within us to make of communication our life's work. It turned out that both of us actually did devote our lives to the cause of communication; but the passing years saw us engaged in widely and curiously divergent phases of the work. Thirty years later, I was Professor of the Psychology of Language at Columbia University, and Benda was Maintenance Engineer of the Bell Telephone Company of New York City; and on his knowledge and skill depended the continuity and stability of that stupendously complex traffic, the telephone communication of Greater New York.

Since our ambitious cravings were satisfied in our everyday work, and since now ordinarily available methods of communication

sufficed our needs, we no longer felt impelled to signal across the house-tops with semaphores nor to devise ciphers that would defy solution. But we still kept up our intimate friendship and our intense interest in our beloved subject. We were just as close chums at the age of fifty as we had been at ten, and just as thrilled at new advances in communication: at television, at the international language, at the supposed signals from Mars.

That was the state of affairs between us up to a year ago. At about that time Benda resigned his position with the New York Bell Telephone Company to accept a place as the Director of Communication in the Science Community. This, for many reasons, was a most amazing piece of news to myself and to anyone who knew Benda.

Of course, it was commonly known that Benda was being sought by Universities and corporations: I know personally of several tempting offers he had received. But the New York Bell is a wealthy corporation and had thus far managed to hold Benda, both by the munificence of its salary and by the attractiveness of the work it offered him. That the Science Community would want Benda was easy to understand; but, that it could outbid the New York Bell, was, to say the least, a surprise.

Furthermore, that a man like Benda would want to have anything at all to do with the Science Community seemed strange enough in itself. He had the most practical common sense—well-balanced habits of thinking and living, supported by an intellect so clear and so keen that I knew of none to excel it. What the Science Community was, no one knew exactly; but that there was something abnormal, fanatical, about it, no one doubted.

The Science Community, situated in Virginia, in the foothills of the Blue Ridge, had first been heard of many years ago, when it was already a going concern. At the time of which I now speak, the novelty had worn off, and no one paid any more attention to it than they do to Zion City or the Dunkards. By this time, the Science Community was a city of a million inhabitants, with a vast outlying area of farms and gardens. It was modern to the highest degree in construction and operation; there was very little manual labor there; no poverty; every person had all the benefits of modern developments in power, transportation, and communication, and of all other resources provided by scientific progress.

So much, visitors and reporters were able to say.

The rumors that it was a vast socialistic organization, without private property, with equal sharing of all privileges, were never confirmed.

It is a curious observation that it was possible, in this country of ours, for a city to exist about which we knew so little. However, it seemed evident from the vast number and elaboration of public buildings, the perfection of community utilities such as transportation, streets, lighting, and communication, from the absence of individual homes and the housing of people in huge dormitories, that some different, less individualistic type of social organization than ours was involved. It was obvious that as an organization, the Science Community must also be wealthy. If any of its individual citizens were wealthy, no one knew it.

I knew Benda as well as I knew myself, and if I was sure of anything in my life, it was that he was not the type of man to leave a fifty thousand dollar job and join a communist city on an equal footing with the clerks in the stores. As it happens, I was also intimately acquainted with John Edgewater Smith, recently Power Commissioner of New York City and the most capable power engineer in North America, who, following Benda by two or three months, resigned his position, and accepted what his letter termed the place of Director of Power in the Science Community. I was personally in a position to state that neither of these men could be lightly persuaded into such a step, and that neither of them would work for a small salary.

Benda's first letter to me stated that he was at the Science Community on a visit. He had heard of the place, and while at Washington on business had taken advantage of the opportunity to drive out and see it. Fascinated by the equipment he saw there, he had decided to stay a few days and study it. The next letter announced his acceptance of the position. I would give a month's salary to get a look at those letters now; but I neglected to preserve them. I should like to see them because I am curious as to whether they exhibit the characteristics of the subsequent letters, some of which I now have.

As I have stated, Benda and I had been on the most intimate terms for forty years. His letters had always been crisp and direct, and thoroughly familiar and confidential. I do not know just how many letters I received from him from the Science Community before I noted the difference, but I have one from the third month of his stay there (he wrote every two or three weeks), characterized by a verbosity that sounded strange for him. He seemed to be writing merely to cover the sheet, trifles such as he had never previously considered worth writing letters about. Four pages of letter conveyed not a single idea. Yet Benda was, if anything, a man of ideas.

There followed several months of letters like that: a lot of words, evasion of coming to the point about anything; just conventional

letters. Benda was the last man to write a conventional letter. Yet, it was Benda writing them: gruff little expressions of his, clear ways of looking at even the veriest trifles, little allusion to our common past: these things could neither have been written by anyone else, nor written under compulsion from without. Something had changed Benda.

I pondered on it a good deal, and could think of no hypothesis to account for it. In the meanwhile, New York City lost a third technical man to the Science Community. Donald Francisco, Commissioner of the Water Supply, a sanitary engineer of international standing, accepted a position in the Science Community as Water Director. I did not know whether to laugh and compare it to the National Baseball League's trafficking in "big names," or to hunt for some sinister danger sign in it. But, as a result of my ponderings, I decided to visit Benda at The Science Community.

I wrote him to that effect, and almost decided to change my mind about the visit because of the cold evasiveness of the reply I received from him. My first impulse on reading his indifferent, lackadaisical comment on my proposed visit was to feel offended, and determine to let him alone and never see him again. The average man would have done that, but my long years of training in psychological interpretation told me that a character and a friendship built during

forty years does not change in six months, and that there must be some other explanation for this. I wrote him that I was coming. I found that the best way to reach the Science Community was to take a bus out from Washington. It involved a drive of about fifty miles northwest, through a picturesque section of the country. The latter part of the drive took me past settlements that looked as though they might be in about the same stage of progress as they had been during the American Revolution. The city of my destination was back in the hills, and very much isolated. During the last ten miles we met no traffic at all, and I was the only passenger left in the bus. Suddenly the vehicle stopped.

"Far as we go!" the driver shouted.

I looked about in consternation. All around were low, wild-looking hills. The road went on ahead through a narrow pass.

"They'll pick you up in a little bit," the driver said as he turned around and drove off, leaving me standing there with my bag, very much astonished at it all.

He was right. A small, neat-looking bus drove through the pass and stopped for me. As I got in, the driver mechanically turned around and drove into the hills again.

"They took up my ticket on the other bus," I said to the driver. "What do I owe you?"

"Nothing," he said curtly. "Fill that out." He handed me a card.

An impertinent thing, that card was. Besides asking for my name, address, nationality, vocation, and position, it requested that I state whom I was visiting in the Science Community, the purpose of my visit, the nature of my business, how long I intended to stay, did I have a place to stay arranged for, and if so, where and through whom. It looked for all the world as though they had something to conceal; Czarist Russia couldn't beat that for keeping track of people and prying into their business. Sign here, the card said.

It annoyed me, but I filled it out, and, by the time I was through, the bus was out of the hills, traveling up the valley of a small river; I am not familiar enough with northern Virginia to say which river it was. There was much machinery and a few people in the broad fields. In the distance ahead was a mass of chimneys and the cupolas of iron-works, but no smoke.

There were power-line towers with high-tension insulators, and, far ahead, the masses of huge elevators and big, square buildings. Soon I came in sight of a veritable forest of huge windmills.

In a few moments, the huge buildings loomed up over me; the bus entered a street of the city abruptly from the country. One moment on a country road, the next moment among towering buildings. We sped along swiftly through a busy metropolis, bright, airy, efficient looking. The traffic was dense but quiet, and I was confident that most of the vehicles were electric; for there was no noise nor gasoline odor. Nor was there any smoke. Things looked airy, comfortable, efficient; but rather monotonous, dull. There was a total lack of architectural interest. The buildings were just square blocks, like neat rows of neat boxes. But, it all moved smoothly, quietly, with wonderful efficiency.

My first thought was to look closely at the people who swarmed the streets of this strange city. Their faces were solemn, and their clothes were solemn. All seemed intently busy, going somewhere, or doing something; there was no standing about, no idle sauntering. And look whichever way I might, everywhere there was the same blue serge, on men and women alike, in all directions, as far as I could see.

The bus stopped before a neat, square building of rather smaller size, and the next thing I knew, Benda was running down the steps to

meet me. He was his old gruff, enthusiastic self.

"Glad to see you, Hagstrom, old socks!" he shouted, and gripped my hand with two of his. "I've arranged for a room for you, and we'll have a good old visit, and I'll show you around this town."

I looked at him closely. He looked healthy and well cared-for, all except for a couple of new lines of worry on his face. Undoubtedly that worn look meant some sort of trouble.

Part 2: The New Religion

(This part is interpolated by the author into Dr. Hagstrom's narrative.)

Every great religion has as its psychological reason for existence the mission of compensating for some crying, unsatisfied human need. Christianity spread and grew among people who were, at the time, persecuted subjects or slaves of Rome; and it flourished through the Middle Ages at a time when life held for the individual chiefly pain, uncertainty, and bereavement. Christianity kept the common man consoled and mentally balanced by minimizing the importance of life on earth and offering compensation afterwards and elsewhere.

A feeble nation of idle dreamers, torn by a chaos of intertribal feuds within, menaced by powerful, conquest-lusting nations from without, Arabia was enabled by Islam, the religion of her prophet Mohammed, to unite all her sons into an intense loyalty to one cause, and to turn her dream-stuff into reality by carrying her national pride and honor beyond her boundaries and spreading it over half the known world.

The ancient Greeks, in despair over the frailties of human emotion and the unbecomingness of worldly conduct, which their brilliant

minds enabled them to recognize clearly but which they found themselves powerless to subdue, endowed the gods, whom they worshipped, with all of their own passions and weaknesses, and thus the foolish behavior of the gods consoled them for their own obvious shortcomings. So it goes throughout all of the world's religions.

In the middle of the twentieth century there were in the civilized world, millions of people in whose lives Christianity had ceased to play any part. Yet, psychically—remember, "psyche" means "soul"—they were just as sick and unbalanced, just as much in need of some compensation as were the subjects of the early Roman empire, or the Arabs in the Middle Ages. They were forced to work at the strained and monotonous pace of machines; they were the slaves, body and soul, of machines; they lived with machines and lived like machines—they were expected to *be* machines. A mechanized mode of life set a relentless pace for them, while, just as in all the past ages, life and love, the breezes and the blue sky called to them; but they could not respond. They had to drive machines so that machines could serve them. Minds were cramped and emotions were starved, but hands must go on guiding levers and keeping machines in operation. Lives were reduced to such a mechanical routine that men wondered how long human minds and human bodies could stand the restraint. There is a good deal in the writings of the times to show that life was becoming almost unbearable for

three-fourths of humanity.

It is only natural, therefore, that Rohan, the prophet of the new religion, found followers more rapidly than he could organize them. About ten years before the visit of Dr. Hagstrom to his friend Benda, Rohan and his new religion had been much in the newspapers. Rohan was a Slovak, apparently well educated in Europe. When he first attracted attention to himself, he was foreman in a steel plant at Birmingham, Alabama. He was popular as an orator, and drew unheard-of crowds to his lectures.

He preached of *Science* as God, an all-pervading, inexorably systematic Being, the true Center and Motive-Power of the Universe; a Being who saw men and pitied them because they could not help committing inaccuracies. The Science God was helping man become more perfect. Even now, men were much more accurate and systematic than they had been a hundred years ago; men's lives were ordered and rhythmic, like natural laws, not like the chaotic emotions of beasts and savages.

Somehow, he soon dropped out of the attention of the great mass of the public. Of course, he did so intentionally, when his ideas began

to crystallize and his plans for his future organization began to form. At first he had a sort of church in Birmingham, called The Church of the Scientific God. There never was anything cheap nor blatant about him. When he moved his church from Birmingham to the Lovett Branch Valley in northern Virginia, he was hardly noticed. But with him went seven thousand people, to form the nucleus of the Science Community.

Since then, some feature writer for a metropolitan Sunday paper has occasionally written up the Science Community, both from its physical and its human aspects. From these reports, the outstanding bit of evidence is that Rohan believes intensely in his own religion, and that his followers are all loyal worshippers of the Science God. They conceive the earth to be a workshop in which men serve Science, their God, serving a sort of apprenticeship during which He perfects them to the state of ideal machines. To be a perfect machine, always accurate, with no distracting emotions, no getting off the track—that was the ideal which the Great God *Science* required of his worshippers. To be a perfect machine, or a perfect cog in a machine, to get rid of all individuality, all disturbing sentiment, that was their idea of supreme happiness. Despite the obvious narrowness it involved, there was something sublime in the conception of this religion. It certainly had nothing in common with the "Christian Science" that was in vogue during the early years of

the twentieth Century; it towered with a noble grandeur above that feeble little sham.

The Science Community was organized like a machine: and all men played their parts, in government, in labor, in administration, in production, like perfect cogs and accurate wheels, and the machine functioned perfectly. The devotees were described as fanatical, but happy. They certainly were well trained and efficient. The Science Community grew. In ten years it had a million people, and was a worldwide wonder of civic planning and organization; it contained so many astonishing developments in mechanical service to human welfare and comfort that it was considered as a sort of model of the future city. The common man there was provided with science-produced luxuries, in his daily life, that were in the rest of the world the privilege of the wealthy few—but he used his increased energy and leisure in serving the more devotedly, his God, Science, who had made machines. There was a great temple in the city, the shape of a huge dynamo-generator, whose interior was worked out in a scheme of mechanical devices, and with music, lights, and odors to help in the worship.

What the world knew the least about was that this religion was

becoming militant. Its followers spoke of the heathen without, and were horrified at the prevalence of the sin of individualism. They were inspired with the mission that the message of God—scientific perfection—must be carried to the whole world. But, knowing that vested interests, governments, invested capital, and established religions would oppose them and render any real progress impossible, they waited. They studied the question, looking for some opportunity to spread the gospel of their beliefs, prepared to do so by force, finding their justification in their belief that millions of sufferers needed the comforts that their religion had given them. Meanwhile their numbers grew.

Rohan was Chief Engineer, which position was equal in honor and dignity to that of Prophet or High Priest. He was a busy, hard-worked man, black haired and gaunt, small of stature and fiery eyed; he looked rather like an overworked department-store manager rather than like a prophet. He was finding his hands more full every day, both because of the extraordinary fertility of his own plans and ideas, and because the Science Community was growing so rapidly. Among this heterogenous mass of proselyte strangers that poured into the city and was efficiently absorbed into the machine, it was yet difficult to find executives, leaders, men to put in charge of big things. And he needed constantly more and more of such men.

That was why Rohan went to Benda, and subsequently to others like Benda. Rohan had a deep knowledge of human nature. He did not approach Benda with the offer of a magnanimous salary, but came into Benda's office asking for a consultation on some of the puzzling communication problems of the Science Community. Benda became interested, and on his own initiative offered to visit the Science Community, saying that he had to be in Washington anyway in a few days. When he saw what the conditions were in the Science Community, he became fascinated by its advantages over New York; a new system to plan from the ground up; no obsolete installation to wrestle with; an absolutely free hand for the engineer in charge; no politics to play; no concessions to antiquated city construction, nor to feeble-minded city administration—just a dream of an opportunity. He almost asked for the job himself, but Rohan was tactful enough to offer it, and the salary, though princely, was hardly given a thought.

For many weeks Benda was absorbed in his job, to the exclusion of all else. He sent his money to his New York bank and had his family move in and live with him. He was happy in his communication problems.

"Give me a problem in communication and you make me happy," he wrote to Hagstrom in one of his early letters.

He had completed a certain division of his work on the Science Community's communication system, and it occurred to him that a few days' relaxation would do him good. A run up to New York would be just the thing.

To his amazement, he was not permitted to board the outbound bus.

"You'll need orders from the Chief Engineer's office," the driver said.

Benda went to Rohan.

"Am I a prisoner?" he demanded with his characteristic directness.

"An embarassing situation," the suave Rohan admitted, very calmly and at his ease. "You see, I'm nothing like a dictator here. I have no arbitrary power. Everything runs by system, and you're a sort of exception. No one knows exactly how to classify you. Neither do I. But, I can't break a rule. That is sin."

"What rule? I want to go to New York."

"Only those of the Faith who have reached the third degree can come

and go. No one can get that in less than three years."

"Then you got me in here by fraud?" Benda asked bluntly.

Rohan side-stepped gracefully.

"You know our innermost secrets now," he explained. "Do you suppose there is any hope of your embracing the Faith?"

Benda whirled on his heel and walked out.

"I'll think about it!" he said, his voice snapping with sarcasm.

Benda went back to his work in order to get his mind off the matter. He was a well-balanced man if he was anything; and he knew that nothing could be accomplished by rash words or incautious moves against Rohan and his organization. And on that day he met John Edgewater Smith.

"You here?" Benda gasped. He lost his equilibrium for a moment in consternation at the sight of his fellow-engineer.

Smith was too elated to notice Benda's mood.

"I've been here a week. This is certainly an ideal opportunity in my

line of work. Even in Heaven I never expected to find such a chance."

By this time Benda had regained control of himself. He decided to say nothing to Smith for the time being.

They did not meet again for several weeks. In the meantime Benda discovered that his mail was being censored. At first he did not know that his letters, always typewritten, were copied and objectionable matter omitted, and his signature reproduced by the photo-engraving process, separately each time. But before long, several letters came back to him rubber-stamped: "Not passable. Please revise." It took Benda two days to cool down and rewrite the first letter. But outwardly no one would have ever known that there was anything amiss with him.

However, he took to leaving his work for an hour or two a day and walking in the park, to think out the matter. He didn't like it. This was about the time that it began to be a real issue as to who was the bigger man of the two, Rohan or Benda. But no signs of the issue appeared externally for many months.

John Edgewater Smith realized sooner than Benda that he couldn't get out, because, not sticking to work so closely, he had made the

attempt sooner. He looked very much worried when Benda next saw him.

"What's this? Do you know about it?" he shouted as soon as he had come within hearing distance of Benda.

"What's the difference?" Benda replied casually. "Aren't you satisfied?"

Smith's face went blank.

Benda came close to him, linked arms and led him to a broad vacant lawn in the park.

"Listen!" he said softly in Smith's ear. "Don't you suppose these people who lock us in and censor our mail aren't smart enough to spy on what we say to each other?"

"Our only hope," Benda continued, "is to learn all we can of what is going on here. Keep your eyes and ears open and meet me here in a week. And now come on; we've been whispering here long enough."

Oddly enough, the first clue to the puzzle they were trying to solve

was supplied by Francisco, New York's former Water Commissioner. Why were they being kept prisoners in the city? There must be more reason for holding them there than the fear that information would be carried out, for none of the three engineers knew anything about the Science Community that could be of any possible consequence to outsiders. They had all stuck rigidly to their own jobs.

They met Francisco, very blue and dejected, walking in the park a couple of months later. They had been having weekly meetings, feeling that more frequent rendezvous might excite suspicion. Francisco was overjoyed to see them.

"Been trying to figure out why they want us," he said. "There is something deeper than the excuse they have made; that rot about a perfect system and no breaking of rules may be true, but it has nothing to do with us. Now, here are three of us, widely admitted as having good heads on us. We've got to solve this."

"The first fact to work on," he continued, "is that there is no real job for me here. This city has no water problem that cannot be worked out by an engineer's office clerk. Why are they holding me here, paying me a profligate salary, for a job that is a joke for a grown-up man? There's something behind it that is not apparent on the surface."

The weekly meetings of the three engineers became an established institution. Mindful that their conversation was doubtless the object of attention on the part of the ruling powers of the city through spies and concealed microphones, they were careful to discuss trivial matters most of the time, and mentioned their problem only when alone in the open spaces of the park.

After weeks of effort had produced no results, they arrived at the conclusion that they would have to do some spying themselves. The great temple, shaped like a dynamo-generator attracted their attention as the first possibility for obtaining information. Benda, during his work with telephone and television installation, found that the office of some sort of ruling council or board of directors were located there. Later he found that it was called the Science Staff. He managed to slip in several concealed microphone detectors and wire them to a private receiver on his desk, doing all the work with his own hands under the pretense of hunting for a cleverly contrived short-circuit that his subordinates had failed to find.

"They open their meeting," he said, reporting several days of listening to his comrades, "with a lot of religious stuff. They really believe they are chosen by God to perfect the earth. Their fanaticism has the Mohammedans beat forty ways. As I get it from listening in, this city is just a preliminary base from which to carry, forcibly, the

gospel of Scientific Efficiency to the whole world. They have been divinely appointed to organize the earth.

"The first thing on the program is the seizure of New York City. And, it won't be long; I've heard the details of a cut-and-dried plan. When they have New York, the rest of America can be easily captured, for cities aren't as independent of each other as they used to be. Getting the rest of the world into their hands will then be merely a matter of routine; just a little time, and it will be done. Mohammed's wars weren't in it with this!"

Francisco and Smith stared at him aghast. These dull-faced, blue-serge clad people did not look capable of it; unless possibly one noted the fiery glint in their eyes. A worldwide Crusade on a scientific basis! The idea left them weak and trembling.

"Got to learn more details before we can do anything," Benda said. "Come on; we've been whispering here long enough; they'll get suspicious." Benda's brain was now definitely pitted against this marvelous organisation.

"I've got it!" Benda reported at a later meeting. "I pieced it together from a few hours listening. Devilish scheme!

"Can you imagine what would happen in New York in case of a break-down in water-supply, electric power, and communication? In an hour there would be a panic; in a day the city would be a hideous shambles of suffering, starvation, disease, and trampling maniacs. Dante's Inferno would be a lovely little pleasure-resort in comparison.

"Also, have you ever stopped to think how few people there are in the world who understand the handling of these vital elements of our modern civilized organization sufficiently to keep them in operation? There you have the scheme. Because they do not want to destroy the city, but merely to threaten it, they are holding the three of us. A little skilful management will eliminate all other possible men who could operate the city's machinery, except ourselves. We three will be placed in charge. A threat, perhaps a demonstration in some limited section of what horrors are possible. The city is at their mercy, and promptly surrenders.

"An alternative plan was discussed: just a little quiet violence could eliminate those who are now in charge of the city's works, and the panic and horrors would commence. But, within an hour of the city's capitulation, the three of us could have things running smoothly again. And there would be no New York; in its place would be Science Community Number Two. From it they could step on to the

next city."

The other two stared at him. There was only one comment.

"They seem to be sure that they could depend on us," Smith said.

"They may be correct," Benda replied. "Would you stand by and see people perish if a turn of your hand could save them? You would for the moment, forget the issue between the old order and the new religion."

They separated, horrified by the ghastly simplicity of the plan.

Just following this, Benda received the telegram announcing the prospective visit of his lifelong friend, Dr. Hagstrom. He took it at once to Rohan.

"Will my friend be permitted to depart again, if he once gets in here?" he demanded with his customary directness.

"It depends on you," Rohan replied blandly. "We want your friend to see our Community, and to go away and carry with him the nicest possible reports and descriptions of it to the world. I wonder, do I make myself clear?"

"That means I've got to feed him taffy while he's here?" Benda asked gruffly.

"You choose to put it indelicately. He is to see and hear only such things about the Science Community as will please the world and impress it favorably. I am sure you will understand that under no other circumstances will he be permitted to leave here."

Benda turned around abruptly and walked out without a word.

"Just a moment," Rohan called after him. "I am sure you appreciate the fact that every precaution will be taken to hear the least word that you say to him during his stay here? You are watched only perfunctorily now. While he is here you will be kept track of carefully, and there will be three methods of checking everything you do or say. I am sure you do not underestimate our caution in this matter."

Benda spent the days intervening between then and the arrival of his friend Hagstrom, closed up in his office, in intense study. He figured things on pieces of paper, committed them to memory, and scrupulously burned the paper. Then he wandered about the park and plucked at leaves and twigs.

Part 3: The Cipher Message

(Related by Peter Hagstrom, Ph.D.)

Benda conducted me personally to a room very much like an ordinary hotel room. He was glad to see me. I could tell that from his grip of welcome, from his pleased face, from the warmth in his voice, from the eager way in which he hovered around me. I sat down on a bed and he on a chair.

"Now tell me all about it," I said.

The room was very still, and in its privacy, following Benda's demonstrative welcome, I expected some confidential revelations. Therefore I was astonished.

"There isn't much to tell," he said gaily. "My work is congenial, fascinating, and there's enough of it to keep me out of mischief. The pay is good, and the life pleasant and easy."

I didn't know what to say for a moment. I had come there with my mind made up that there was something suspicious afoot. But he seemed thoroughly happy and satisfied.

"I'll admit that I treated you a little shabbily in this matter of letters,"

he continued. "I suppose it is because I've had a lot of new and interesting problems on my mind, and it's been hard to get my mind down to writing letters. But I've got a good start on my job, and I'll promise to reform."

I was at a loss to pursue that subject any further.

"Have you seen Smith and Francisco?" I asked.

He nodded.

"How do they like it?"

"Both are enthusiastic about the wonderful opportunities in their respective fields. It's a fact: no engineer has ever before had such resources to work with, on such a vast scale, and with such a free hand. We're laying the framework for a city of ten millions, all thoroughly systematized and efficient. There is no city in the world like it; it's an engineer's dream of Utopia."

I was almost convinced. There was only the tiniest of lurking suspicions that all was not well, but it was not powerful enough to stimulate me to say anything. But I did determine to keep my eyes open.

I might as well admit in advance that from that moment to the time when I left the Science Community four days later, I saw nothing to confirm my suspicions. I met Smith and Francisco at dinner and the four of us occupied a table to ourselves in a vast dining hall, and no one paid for the meal nor for subsequent ones. They also seemed content, and talked enthusiastically of their work.

I was shown over the city, through its neat, efficient streets, through its comfortable dormitories each housing hundreds of families as luxuriously as any modern hotel, through its marvelous factories where production had passed the stage of labor and had assumed the condition of a devoted act of worship. These factory workers were not toiling: they were worshipping their God, of Whom each machine was a part. Touching their machine was touching their God. This machinery, while involving no new principles, was developed and coordinated to a degree that exceeded anything I had ever seen anywhere else.

I saw the famous Science Temple in the shape of a huge dynamo-generator, with its interior decorations, paintings, carvings, frescoes, and pillars, all worked out on the motive of machinery; with its constant streams of worshippers in blue serge, performing their conventional rites and saying their prayer formulas at altars in the forms of lathes, microscopes, motors, and electron-tubes.

"You haven't become a Science Communist yourself?" I bantered Benda.

There was a metallic ring in the laugh he gave.

"They'd like to have me!" was all he said.

I was rather surprised at the emptiness of the large and well-kept park to which Benda took me. It was beautifully landscaped, but only a few scattering people were there, lost in its vast reaches.

"These people seem to have no need of recreation," Benda said. "They do not come here much. But I confess that I need air and relaxation, even if only for short snatches. I've been too busy to get away for long at a time, but this park has helped me keep my balance —I'm here every day for at least a few minutes."

"Beautiful place," I remarked. "A lot of strange trees and plants I never saw before—"

"Oh, mostly tropical forms, common enough in their own habitats. They have steam pipes under the ground to grow them. I've been trying to learn something about them. Fancy *me* studying natural history! I've never cared for it, but here, where there is no such thing

as recreation, I have become intensely interested in it as a hobby. I find it very much of a rest to study these plants and bugs."

"Why don't you run up to New York for a few days?"

"Oh, the time will come for that. In the meanwhile, I've got an idea all of a sudden. Speaking of New York, will you do me a little service? Even though you might think it silly?"

"I'll do anything I can," I began, eager to be of help to him.

"It has been somewhat of a torture to me," Benda continued, "to find so many of these forms which I am unable to identify. I like to be scientific, even in my play, and reference books on plants and insects are scarce here. Now, if you would carry back a few specimens for me, and ask some of the botany and zoology people to send me their names—"

"Fine!" I exclaimed. "I've got a good-sized pocket notebook I can carry them in."

"Well then, please put them in the order in which I hand them to you, and send me the names by number. I am pretty thoroughly familiar with them, and if you will keep them in order, there is no need for

me to keep a list. The first is a blade of this queer grass."

I filed the grass blade between the first two pages of my book.

"The next is this unusual-looking pinnate leaf." He tore off a dry leaflet and handed me a stem with three leaflets irregularly disposed of it.

"Now leave a blank page in your book. That will help me remember the order in which they come."

Next came a flat insect, which, strangely enough, had two legs missing on one side. However, Benda was moving so fast that I had to put it away without comment. He kept darting about and handing me twigs of leaves, little sticks, pieces of bark, insects, not seeming to care much whether they were complete or not; grass-blades, several dagger-shaped locust-thorns, cross-sections of curious fruits, moving so rapidly that in a few moments my notebook bulged widely, and I had to warn him that its hundred leaves were almost filled.

"Well, that ought to be enough," he said with a sigh after his lively exertion. "You don't know how I'll appreciate your indulging my foolish little whim."

"Say!" I exclaimed. "Ask something of me. This it nothing. I'll take it right over to the Botany Department, and in a few days you ought to have a list of names fit for a Bolshevik."

"One important caution," he said. "If you disturb their order in the book, or even the position on the page, the names you send me will mean nothing to me. Not that it will be any great loss," he added whimsically. "I suppose I've become a sort of fan on this, like the business men who claim that their office work interferes with their golf."

We walked leisurely back toward the big dormitory. It was while we were crossing a street that Benda stumbled, and, to dodge a passing truck, had to catch my arm, and fell against me. I heard his soft voice whisper in my ear:

"Get out of this town as soon as you can!"

I looked at him in startled amazement, but he was walking along, shaking himself from his stumble, and looking up and down the street for passing trucks.

"As I was saying," he said in a matter-of-fact voice, "we expect to reach the one-and-one-quarter million mark this month. I never saw

a place grow so fast."

I felt a great leap of sudden understanding. For a moment my muscles tightened, but I took my cue.

"Remarkable place," I said calmly; "one reads a lot of half-truths about it. Too bad I can't stay any longer."

"Sorry you have to leave," he said, in exactly the right tone of voice. "But you can come again."

How thankful I was for the forty years of playing and working together that had accustomed us to that sort of team-work! Unconsciously we responded to one another's cues. Once our ability to "play together" had saved my life. It was when we were in college and were out on a cross-country hike together; Benda suddenly caught my hand and swung it upward. I recognized the gesture; we were cheerleaders and worked together at football games, and we had one stunt in which we swung our hands over our heads, jumped about three feet, and let out a whoop. This was the "stunt" that he started out there in the country, where we were by ourselves. Automatically, without thinking, I swung my arms and leaped with him and yelled. Only later did I notice the rattlesnake over which I had jumped. I had not seen that I was about to walk right into it, and

he had noticed it too late to explain. A flash of genius suggested the cheering stunt to him.

"*Communication* is a science!" he had said, and that was all the comment there was on the incident.

So now, I followed my cue, without knowing why, nor what it was all about, but confident that I should soon find out. By noon I was on the bus, on my way through the pass, to meet the vehicle from Washington. As the bus swung along, a number of things kept jumbling through my mind: Benda's effusive glee at seeing me, and his sudden turning and bundling me off in a nervous hurry without a word of explanation; his lined and worried face and yet his insistence on the joys of his work in The Science Community; his obvious desire to be hospitable and play the good host, and yet his evasiveness and unwillingness to chat intimately and discuss important thing as he used to. Finally, that notebook full of odd specimens bulging in my pocket. And the memory of his words as he shook hands with me when I was stepping into the bus:

"Long live the science of communication!" he had said. Otherwise, he was rather glum and silent.

I took out the book of specimens and looked at it. His caution not to

disturb the order and position of things rang in my ears. The Science of Communication! Two and two were beginning to make four in my mind. All the way on the train from Washington to New York I could hardly, keep my hands off the book. I had definitely abandoned the idea of hunting up botanists and zoologists at Columbia. Benda was not interested in the names of these things. That book meant something else. Some message. The Science of Communication!

That suddenly explained all the contradictions in his behavior. He was being closely watched. Any attempt to tell me the things he wanted to say would be promptly recognized. He had succeeded brilliantly in getting a message to me. Now, my part was to read it! I felt a sudden sinking within me. That book full of leaves, bugs, and sticks? How could I make anything out of it?

"There's the Secret Service," I thought. "They are skilled in reading hidden messages. It must be an important one, worthy of the efforts of the Secret Service, or he would not have been at such pains to get it to me—

"But no. The Secret Service is skilled at reading hidden messages, but not as skilled as I am in reading my friend's mind. Knowing Benda, his clear intellect, his logical methods, will be of more service in solving this than all the experts of the Secret Service."

I barely stopped to eat dinner when I reached home. I hurried to the laboratory building, and laid out the specimens on white sheets of paper, meticulously preserving order, position, and spacing. To be on the safe side I had them photographed, asking the photographer to vary the scale of his pictures so that all of the final figures would be approximately the same size. Plate I. shows what I had.

I was all a-tremble when the mounted photographs were handed to me. The first thing I did was to number the specimens, giving each blank space also its consecutive number. Certainly no one could imagine a more meaningless jumble of twigs, leaves, berries, and bugs. How could I read any message out of that?

Yet I had no doubt that the message concerned something of far more importance than Benda's own safety. He had moved in this matter with astonishing skill and breathless caution; yet I knew him to be reckless to the extreme where only his own skill was concerned. I couldn't even imagine his going to this elaborate risk merely on account of Smith and Francisco. Something bigger must be involved.

I stared at the rows of specimens.

"Communication is a science!" Benda had said, and it came back to

me as I studied the bent worms and the beetles with two legs missing. I was confident that the solution would be simple. Once the key idea occurred to me I knew I should find the whole thing astonishingly direct and systematic. For a moment I tried to attach some sort of heiroglyphic significance to the specimen forms; in the writing of the American Indians, a wavy line meant water, an inverted V meant a wigwam. But, I discarded that idea in a moment. Benda's mind did not work along the paths of symbolism. It would have to be something mathematical, rigidly logical, leaving no room for guess-work.

No sooner had the key-idea occurred to me than the basic conception underlying all these rows of twigs and bugs suddenly flashed into clear meaning before me. The simplicity of it took my breath away.

"I knew it!" I said aloud, though I was alone. "Very simple."

I was prepared for the fact that each one of the specimens represented a letter of the alphabet. If nothing else, their number indicated that. Now I could see, so clearly that the photographs shouted at me, that each specimen consisted of an upright stem, and from this middle stem projected side-arms to the right and to the left, and in various vertical locations on each side.

The middle upright stem contained these side-arms in various numbers and combinations. In five minutes I had a copy of the message, translated into its fundamental characters, as shown on Plate II.

Plate I

The first grass-blade was the simple, upright stem; the second, three leaflets on their stem, represented the upright portion with two arms to the left at the top and middle, and one arm to the right at the top; and so on.

That brought the message down to the simple and straightforward matter of a substitution cipher. I was confident that Benda had no object in introducing any complications that could possibly be avoided, as his sole purpose was to get to me the most readable message without getting caught at it. I recollected now how cautious he had been to hand me no paper, and how openly and obviously he had dropped each specimen into my book; because he knew someone was watching him and expecting him to slip in a message. He had, as I could see now in the retrospect, been conspicuously careful that nothing suspicious should pass from his hands to mine.

Plate II

Substitution ciphers are easy to solve, especially for those having some experience. The method can be found in Edgar Allen Poe's "Gold Bug" and in a host of its imitators. A Secret Service cipher man could have read it in an hour. But I knew my friend's mind well enough to find a short-cut. I knew just how he would go about devising such a cipher, in fact, how ninety-nine persons out of a hundred with a scientific education would do it.

If we begin adding horizontal arms to the middle stem, from top to bottom and from left to right, the possible characters can be worked out by the system shown on Plate III.

Plate III

It is most logical to suppose that Benda would begin with the first sign and substitute the letters of the alphabet in order. That would give us the cipher code shown on Plate IV.

It was all very quick work, just as I had anticipated, once the key-

idea had occurred to me. The ease and speed of my method far exceeded that of Poe's method, but, of course, was applicable only to this particular case. Substituting letters for signs out of my diagram, I got the following message:

AM PRISONER R PLANS CAPTURE OF N Y BY SEIZING POWER WATER AND PHONES THEN WORLD CONQUEST S O S

Plate IV

Part 4: L'Envoi

(By Peter Hagstrom, M.D.)

My solution of the message practically ends the story. Events followed each other from then on like bullets from a machine-gun. A wild drive in a taxicab brought me to the door of Mayor Anderson at ten o'clock that night. I told him the story and showed him my photographs.

Following that I spent many hours telling my story to and consulting with officers in the War Department. Next afternoon, photographic maps of the Science Community and its environs, brought by airplanes during the forenoon, were spread on desks before us. A colonel of marines and a colonel of aviation sketched plans in notebooks. After dark I sat in a transport plane with muffled exhaust and propellers, slipping through the air as silently as a hawk. About us were a dozen bombing planes, and about fifty transports, carrying a battalion of marines.

I am not an adventure-loving man. Though a cordon of husky marines about me was a protection against any possible danger, yet, stealing along through that wild valley in the Virginia mountains toward the dark masses of that fanatic city, the silent progress of the

long, dark line through the night, their mysterious disappearance, one by one, as we neared the city, the creepy, hair-raising journey through the dark streets—I shall never forget for the rest of my life the sinking feeling in my abdomen and the throbbing in my head. But I wanted to be there, for Benda was my lifelong friend.

I guided them to Rohan's rooms, and saw a dozen dark forms slip in, one by one. Then we went on to the dormitory where Benda lived. Benda answered our hammering at his door in his pajamas. He took in the Captain's automatic, and the bayonets behind me, at a glance.

"Good boy, Hagstrom!" he said. "I knew you'd do it. There wasn't much time left. I got my instructions about handling the New York telephone system to-day."

As we came out into the street. I saw Rohan handcuffed to two big marines, and rows of bayonets gleaming in the darkness down the streets. Every few moments a bright flare shot out from the planes in the sky, until a squad located the power-house and turned on all the lights they could find.

#47 Jetta Of The Lowlands, By Ray Cummings:

Fantastic and sinister are the lowlands into which Philip Grant descends on his dangerous assignment.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Foreword

Have you ever stood on the seashore, with the breakers rolling at your feet, and imagined what the scene would be like if the ocean water were gone? I have had a vision of that many times. Standing on the Atlantic Coast, gazing out toward Spain, I can envisage myself, not down at the sea-level, but upon the brink of a height. Spain and the coast of Europe, off there upon another height.

Fantastic and sinister are the Lowlands into which Philip Grant descends on his dangerous assignment.

And the depths between? Unreal landscape! Mysterious realm which now we call the bottom of the sea! Worn and rounded crags; bloated mud-plains; noisome reaches of ooze which once were the cold and dark and silent ocean floor, caked and drying in the sun. And off to the south the little fairy mountain tops of the West Indies rearing their verdured crowns aloft.

"Look around, Chief. See where I am?"

If the ocean water were gone! Can you picture it? A new world, greater in area than all the land we now have. They would call the former sea-level the zero-height, perhaps. The depths would go down as far beneath it as Mount Everest towers above it. Aeroplanes would fly down into them.

And I can imagine the settlement of these vast new realms: New little nations being created, born of man's indomitable will to conquer every adverse condition of inhospitable nature.

A novel setting for a story of adventure. It seems so to me. Can you say that the oceans will never drain of their water? That an earthquake will not open a rift—some day in the future—and lower the water into subterranean caverns? The volume of water of all the oceans is no more to the volume of the earth than a tissue paper

wrapping on an orange.

Is it too great a fantasy? Why, reading the facts of what happened in 1929, it is already prognosticated. The fishing banks off the Coast of Newfoundland have suddenly sunk. Cable ships repairing a broken cable, snapped by the earthquake of November 18th, 1929, report that for distances of a hundred miles on the Grand Banks the cables have disappeared into unfathomable depths. And before the subterranean cataclysm, they were within six hundred feet of the surface. And all the bottom of that section of the North Atlantic seems to have caved in. Ten thousand square miles dropped out of the bottom of the ocean! Fact, not fancy.

And so let us enlarge the picture. Let us create the Lowlands—twenty thousand feet below the zero-height—the setting for a tale of adventure. The romance of the mist-shrouded deeps. And the romance of little Jetta.

Chapter 1: The Secret Mission

I was twenty-five years of age that May evening of 2020 when they sent me south into the Lowlands. I had been in the National Detective Service Bureau, and then was transferred to the Customs Department, Atlantic Lowlands Branch. I went alone; it was best, my commander thought. An assignment needing diplomacy rather than a show of force.

It was 9 P. M. when I catapulted from the little stage of Long Island airport. A fair, moonlit evening—a moon just beyond the full, rising to pale the eastern stars. I climbed about a thousand feet, swung over the headlands of the Hook, and, keeping in the thousand-foot local lane, took my course.

My destination lay some thirteen hundred miles southeast of Great New York. I could do a good normal three-ninety in this fleet little Wasp, especially if I kept in the rarer air-pressures over the zero-height. The thousand-foot lane had a southward drift, this night. I was making now well over four hundred; I would reach Nareda soon after midnight.

The Continental Shelf slid beneath me, dropping away as my course took me further from the Highland borders. The Lowlands lay

patched with inky shadows and splashes of moonlight. Domes with upstanding, rounded heads; plateaus of naked black rock, ten thousand feet below the zero-height; trenches, like valleys, ridged and pitted, naked in places like a pockmarked lunar landscape. Or again, a pall of black mist would shroud it all, dark curtain of sluggish cloud with moonlight tinging its edges pallid green.

To my left, eastward toward the great basin of the mid-Atlantic Lowlands, there was always a steady downward slope. To the right, it came up over the continental shelf to the Highlands of the United States.

There was often water to be seen in these Lowlands. A spring-fed lake far down in a caldron pit, spilling into a trench; low-lying, land-locked little seas; cañons, some of them dry, others filled with tumultuous flowing water. Or great gashes with water sluggishly flowing, or standing with a heavy slime, and a pall of uprising vapor in the heat of the night.

At 37°N. and 70°W., I passed over the newly named Atlas Sea. A lake of water here, more than a hundred miles in extent. Its surface lay fifteen thousand feet below the zero-height; its depth in places was a full three thousand. It was clear of mist to-night. The moonlight shimmered on its rippled surface, like pictures my father

had often shown me of the former oceans.

I passed, a little later, well to the westward of the verdured mountain top of the Bermudas.

There was nothing of this flight novel to me. I had frequently flown over the Lowlands; I had descended into them many times. But never upon such a mission as was taking me there now.

I was headed for Nareda, capital village of the tiny Lowland Republic of Nareda, which only five years ago came into national being as a protectorate of the United States. Its territory lies just north of the mountain Highlands of Haiti, Santo Domingo and Porto Rico. A few hundred miles of tumbled Lowlands, embracing the turgid Nares Sea, whose bottom is the lowest point of all the Western Hemisphere—some thirty thousand feet below the zero-height.

The village of Nareda is far down indeed. I had never been there. My charts showed it on the southern border of the Nares Sea, at minus twenty thousand feet, with the Mona Valley behind it like a gash in the steep upward slopes to the Highlands of Porto Rico and Haiti.

Nareda has a mixed population of typical Lowland adventures, among which the hardy Dutch predominate; and Holland and the

United States have combined their influence in the World Court to give it national identity.

And out of this had arisen my mission now. Mercury—the quicksilver of commerce—so recently come to tremendous value through its universal use in the new antiseptics which bid fair to check all human disease—was being produced in Nareda. The import duty into the United States was being paid openly enough. But nevertheless Hanley's agents believed that smuggling was taking place.

It was to investigate this condition that Hanley was sending me. I had introduction to the Nareda government officials. I was to consult with Hanley by ether-phone in seeking the hidden source of the contraband quicksilver, but, in the main, to use my own judgment.

A mission of diplomacy. I had no mind to pry openly among the people of these Lowland depths, looking for smugglers. I might, indeed, find them too unexpectedly! Over-curious strangers are not welcomed by the Lowlanders. Many have gone into the depths and have never returned....

I was above the Nares Sea, by midnight. I was still flying a thousand feet over the zero-height. Twenty-one thousand feet below me lay

the black expanse of water. The moon had climbed well toward the zenith, now. Its silver shafts penetrated the hanging mist-stratas. The surface of the Nares Sea was visible—dark and sullen looking.

I shifted the angles of incidence of the wings, re-set my propeller angles and made the necessary carburetor adjustments, switching on the supercharger which would supply air at normal zero-height pressure to the carburetors throughout my descent.

I swung over Nareda. The lights of the little village, far down, dwarfed by distance, showed like bleary, winking eyes through the mists. The jagged recesses of the Mona valley were dark with shadow. The Nares Sea lay like some black monster asleep, and slowly, heavily panting. Moonlight was over me, with stars and fleecy white clouds. Calm, placid, atmospheric night was up here. But beneath, it all seemed so mysterious, fantastic, sinister.

My heart was pounding as I put the Wasp into a spiral and forced my way down.

Chapter 2: The Face at the Window

With heavy, sluggish engines I panted down and came to rest in the dull yellow glow of the field lights. A new world here. The field was flat, caked ooze, cracked and hardened. It sloped upward from the shore toward where, a quarter of a mile away, I could see the dull lights of the settlement, blurred by the gathered night vapors.

The field operator shut off his permission signal and came forward. He was a squat, heavy-set fellow in wide trousers and soiled white shirt flung open at his thick throat. The sweat streamed from his forehead. This oppressive heat! I had discarded my flying garb in the descent. I wore a shirt, knee-length pants, with hose and wide-soled shoes of the newly fashioned Lowland design. What few weapons I dared carry were carefully concealed. No alien could enter Nareda bearing anything resembling a lethal weapon.

My wide, thick-soled shoes did not look suspicious for one who planned much walking on the caked Lowland ooze. But those fat soles were cleverly fashioned to hide a long, keen knife-blade, like a dirk. I could lift a foot and get the knife out of its hidden compartment with fair speed. This I had in one shoe.

In the other, was the small mechanism of a radio safety recorder and

image finder, with its attendant individual audiophone transmitter and receiver. A miracle of smallness, these tiny contrivances. With batteries, wires and grids, the whole device could lay in the palm of one's hand. Once past this field inspection I would rig it for use under my shirt, strapped around my chest. And I had some colored magnesium flares.

The field operator came panting.

"Who are you?"

"Philip Grant. From Great New York." I showed him my name etched on my forearm. He and his fellows searched me, but I got by.

"You have no documents?"

"No."

My letter to the President of Nareda was written with invisible ink upon the fabric of my shirt. If he had heated it to a temperature of 180°F. or so, and blown the fumes of hydrochloric acid upon it, the writing would have come out plain enough.

I said, "You'll house and care for my machine?"

They would care for it. They told me the price—swindlingly exorbitant for the unwary traveller who might wander down here.

"All correct," I said cheerfully. "And half that much more for you and your men if you give me good service. Where can I have a room and meals?"

"Spawn," said the operator. "He is the best. Fat-bellied from his own good cooking. Take him there, Hugo."

I had a gold coin instantly ready; and with a few additional directions regarding my flyer, I started off.

It had been hot and oppressive standing in the field; it was infinitely worse climbing the mud-slope into the village; but my carrier, trudging in advance of me along the dark, winding path up the slope, shouldered my bag and seemed not to notice the effort. We passed occasional tube-lights strung on poles. They illumined the heavy rounded crags. A tumbled region, this slope which once was the ocean floor twenty thousand feet below the surface. Rifts were here like gulleys; little buttes reared their rounded, dome heads. And there were caves and crevices in which deep sea fish once had lurked.

For ten minutes or so we climbed. It was past the midnight hour; the village was asleep. We entered its outposts. The houses were small structures of clay. In the gloom they looked like drab little beehives set in unplanned groups, with paths for streets wandering between them.

Then we came to a more prosperous neighborhood. The street widened and straightened. The clay houses, still with rounded dome like tops, stood back from the road, with wooden front fences, and gardens and shrubbery. The windows and doors were like round finger-holes plugged in the clay by a giant hand. Occasionally the windows, dimly lighted, stared like sleeping giant eyes.

There were flowers in all the more pretentious private gardens. Their perfume, hanging in the heavy night air, lay on the village, making one forget the over-curtain of stenching mist. Down by the shore of the Nares Sea, this world of the depths had seemed darkly sinister. But in the village now, I felt it less ominous. The scent of the flowers, the street lined in one place by arching giant fronds drowsing and nodding overhead—there seemed a strange exotic romance to it. The sultry air might almost have been sensuous.

"Much further, Hugo?"

"No. We are here."

He turned abruptly into a gateway, led me through a garden and to the doorway of a large, rambling, one-story building. The news of my coming had preceded me. A front room was lighted; my host was waiting.

Hugo set down my bag, accepted another gold coin; and with a queer sidelong smile, the incentive for which I had not the slightest idea, he vanished. I fronted my host, this Jacob Spawn. Strange fate that should have led me to Spawn! And to little Jetta!

Spawn was a fat-bellied Dutchman, as the field attendant had said. A fellow of perhaps fifty-five, with sparse gray hair and a heavy-jowled, smooth-shaved face from which his small eyes peered stolidly at me. He laid aside a huge, old-fashioned calabash pipe and offered a pudgy hand.

"Welcome, young man, to Nareda. Seldom do we see strangers."

The meal which he presently cooked and served me himself was

lavishly done. He spoke good English, but slowly, heavily, with the guttural intonation of his race. He sat across the table from me, puffing his pipe while I ate.

"What brings you here, young lad? A week, you say?"

"Or more. I don't know. I'm looking for oil. There should be petroleum beneath these rocks."

For an hour I avoided his prying questions. His little eyes roved me, and I knew he was no fool, this Dutchman, for all his heavy, stolid look.

We remained in his kitchen. Save for its mud walls, its concave, dome-roof, it might have been a cookery of the Highlands. There was a table with its tube-light; the chairs; his electron stove; his orderly rows of pots and pans and dishes on a broad shelf.

I recall that it seemed to me a woman's hand must be here. But I saw no woman. No one, indeed, beside Spawn himself seemed to live here. He was reticent of his own business, however much he wanted to pry into mine.

I had felt convinced that we were alone. But suddenly I realized it

was not so. The kitchen adjoined an interior back-garden. I could see it through the opened door oval—a dim space of flowers; a little path to a pergola; an adobe fountain. It was a sort of Spanish patio out there, partially enclosed by the wings of the house. Moonlight was struggling into it. And, as I gazed idly, I thought I saw a figure lurking. Someone watching us.

Was it a boy, observing us from the shadowed moonlit garden? I thought so. A slight, half grown boy. I saw his figure—in short ragged trousers and a shirt-blouse—made visible in a patch of moonlight as he moved away and entered the dark opposite wing of the house.

I did not see the boy's figure again; and presently I suggested that I retire. Spawn had already shown me my bedroom. It was in another wing of the house. It had a window facing the front; and a window and door back to this same patio. And a door to the house corridor.

"Sleep well, Meester Grant." My bag was here on the table under an electrolier. "Shall I call you?"

"Yes," I said. "Early."

He lingered a moment. I was opening my bag. I flung it wide under his gaze.

"Well, good night. I shall be very comfortable, thanks."

"Good night," he said.

He went out the patio door. I watched his figure cross the moonlit path and enter the kitchen. The noise of his puttering there sounded for a time. Then the light went out and the house and garden fell into silence.

I closed my doors. They sealed on the inside, and I fastened them securely. Then I fastened the transparent window panes. I did not undress, but lay on the bed in the dark. I was tired; I realized it now. But sleep would not come.

I am no believer in occultism, but there are premonitions which one cannot deny. It seemed now as I lay there in the dark that I had every reason to be perturbed, yet I could not think why. Perhaps it was because I had been lying to this innkeeper stoutly for an hour past, and whether he believed me or not for the life of me I could not now determine.

I sat up on the bed, presently, and adjusted the wires and diaphragms of the ether-wave mechanism. When in place it was all concealed under my shirt. As I switched it on, the electrodes against my flesh tingled a little. But it was absolutely soundless, and one gets used to the tingle. I decided to call Hanley.

The New York wave-sorter handled me promptly, but Hanley's office was dead.

As I sat there in the darkness, annoyed at this, a slight noise forced itself on me. A scratching—a tap—something outside my window.

Spawn, come back to peer in at me?

I slipped noiselessly from the bed. The sound had come from the window which faced the patio. The room, over by the bed, was wholly dark. The moonlight outside showed the patio window as a dimly illumined oval.

For a moment I crouched on the floor by the bed. No sound. The silence of the Lowlands is as heavy and oppressive as its air. I felt as though my heart were audible.

I lifted my foot; extracted my dirk. It opened into a very businesslike steel blade of a good twelve-inch length. I bared the blade. The click of it leaving the flat, hollow handle sounded loud in the stillness of the room.

A moment. Then it seemed that outside my window a shadow had moved. I crept along the floor. Rose up suddenly at the window.

And stared at a face peering in at me. A small face, framed by short, clustering, dark curls.

A girl!

Chapter 3: In a Moonlit Garden

She drew back from the window like a startled fawn; timorous, yet curious, too, for she ran only a few steps, then turned and stood peering. The moonlight slanted over the western roof of the building and fell on her. A slight, boyish figure in short, tattered trousers and a boy's shirt, open at her slim, rounded throat. The moonlight gleamed on the white shirt fabric to show it torn and ragged. Her arms were upraised; her head, with clustering, flying dark curls, was tilted as though listening for a sound from me. A shy, wild creature. Drawn to my window; tapping to awaken me, then frightened at what she had done.

I opened the garden door. She did not move. I thought she would run, but she did not. The moonlight was on me as I stood there. I was conscious of its etching me with its silver sheen. And twenty feet from me this girl stood and gazed, with startled eyes and parted lips —and white limbs trembling like a frightened animal.

The patio was very silent. The heavy arching fronds stirred slightly with a vague night breeze; the moonlight threw a lacy dark pattern of them on the gray stone path. The fountain bowl gleamed white in the moonlight behind the girl, and in the silence I could hear the low splashing of the water.

A magic moment. Unforgettable. It comes to some of us just once, but to all of us it comes. I stood with its spell upon me. Then I heard my voice, tense but softly raised.

"Who are you?"

It frightened her. She retreated until the fountain was between us. And as I took a step forward, she retreated further, noiseless, with her bare feet treading the smooth stones the path.

I ran and caught her at the doorway of the flowered pergola. She stood trembling as I seized her arms. But the timorous smile remained, and her eyes, upraised to mine, glowed with misty starlight.

"Who are you?"

This time she answered me. "I am called Jetta."

It seemed that from her white forearm within my grasp a magic current swept from her to me and back again. We humans, for all our clamoring, boasting intellectuality, are no more than puppets in Nature's hands.

"Are you Spawn's daughter?"

"Yes."

"I saw you a while ago, when I was having my meal."

"Yes—I was watching you."

"I thought you were a boy."

"Yes. My father told me to keep away. I wanted to meet you, so I came to wake you up."

"He may be watching us now."

"No. He is sleeping. Listen—you can hear him snore."

I could, indeed. The silence of the garden was broken now by a distant, choking snore.

We both laughed. She sat on the little mossy seat in the pergola doorway And on the side away from the snore. (I had the wit to be sure of that.)

"I wanted to meet you," she repeated. "Was it too bold?"

I think that what we said sitting there with the slanting moonlight on us, could not have amounted to much. Yet for us, it was so important! Vital. Building memories which I knew—and I think that she knew, even then—we would never forget.

"I will be here a week, Jetta."

"I want—I want very much to know you. I want you to tell me about the world of the Highlands. I have a few books. I can't read very well, but I can look at the pictures."

"Oh, I see—"

"A traveler gave them to me. I've got them hidden. But he was an old man: all men seem to be old—except those in the pictures, and you, Philip."

I laughed. "Well, that's too bad. I'm mighty glad I'm young."

Ah, in that moment, with blessed youth surging in my veins, I was glad indeed!

"Young. I don't remember ever seeing anyone like you. The man I

am to marry is not like you. He is old, like father—"

I drew back from her, startled.

"Marry?"

"Yes. When I am seventeen. The law of Nareda—your Highland law, too, father says—will not let a girl be married until she is that age. In a month I am seventeen."

"Oh!" And I stammered, "But why are you going to marry?"

"Because father tells me to. And then I shall have fine clothes: it is promised me. And go to live in the Highlands, perhaps. And see things; and be a woman, not a ragged boy forbidden to show myself; and—"

I was barely touching her. It seemed as though something—some vision of happiness which had been given me—were fading, were being snatched away. I was conscious of my hand moving to touch hers.

"Why do you marry—unless you're in love? Are you?"

Her gaze like a child came up to meet mine. "I never thought much about that. I have tried not to. It frightened me—until to-night."

She pushed me gently away. "Don't. Let's not talk of him. I'd rather not."

"But why are you dressed as a boy?"

I gazed at her slim but rounded figure in tattered boy's garb—but the woman's lines were unmistakable. And her face, with clustering curls. Gentle girlhood. A face of dark, wild beauty.

"My father hates women. He says they are all bad. It is a sin to wear woman's finery; or it breeds sin in women. Let's not talk of that. Philip, tell me—oh, if you could only realize all the things I want to know. In Great New York, there are theatres and music?"

"Yes," I said. And began telling her about them.

The witching of this moonlit garden! But the moon had presently sunk, and to the east the stars were fading.

"Philip! Look! Why, it's dawn already. I've got to leave you."

I held her just a moment by the hand.

"May I meet you here to-morrow night?" I asked.

"Yes," she said simply.

"Good night—Jetta."

"Good night. You—you've made me very happy."

She was gone, into a doorway of the opposite wing. The silent, empty garden sounded with the distant, reassuring snores of the still sleeping Spawn.

I went back to my room and lay on my bed. And drifted off on a sea of magic memories. The world—my world before this night—now seemed to have been so drab. Empty. Lifeless. But now there was pulsing, living magic in it for me.

I drifted into sleep, thinking of it.

Chapter 4: The Mine in the Cauldron Depths

I was awakened by the tinkling, buzzing call of the radio-diaphragm beneath my shirt. I had left the call open.

It was Hanley. I lay down, eyeing my window which now was illumined by the flat light of dawn.

Hanley's microscopic voice:

"Phil? I've just raised President Markes, there in Nareda. I've been a bit worried about you."

"I'm all right, Chief."

"Well, you'd better see President Markes this morning."

"That was my intention."

"Tell him frankly what you're after. This smuggling of quicksilver from Nareda has got to stop. But take it easy, Phil; don't be reckless. Remember: one little knife thrust and I've lost a good man!"

I laughed at his anxious tone. That was always Hanley's way. A devil himself, when he was on a trail, but always worried for fear one of

his men would come to harm.

"Right enough, Chief. I'll be careful."

He cut off presently.

I did not see Jetta that morning. I told Spawn I was hoping to see President Markes on my petroleum proposition. And at the proper hour I took myself to the government house.

This Lowland village by daylight seemed even more fantastic than shrouded in the shadows of night. The morning sun had dissipated the overhead mists. It was hot in the rocky streets under the weird overhanging vegetation. The settlement was quietly busy with its tropical activities. There were a few local shops; vehicles with the Highland domestic animals—horses and oxen—panting in the heat; an occasional electro-automatic car.

But there were not many evidences of modernity here. The street and house tube-lights. A few radio image-finders on the house-tops. An automatic escalator bringing ore from a nearby mine past the government checkers to an aero stage for northern transportation.

Cultivated fields in the village outskirts operated with modern machinery.

But beyond that, it seemed primitive. Two hundred years back. Street vendors. People in primitive, ragged, tropical garb. Half naked children. I was stared at curiously. An augmenting group of children followed me as I went down the street.

The President admitted me at once. In his airy office, with safeguards against eavesdropping, I found him at his desk with a bank of modern instruments before him.

"Sit down, Grant."

He was a heavy-set, flabby man of sixty-odd, this Lowland President. White hair; and an old-fashioned, rolling white mustache of the sort lately come into South American fashion. He sat with a glass of iced drink at his side. His uniform was stiffly white, and ornate with heavy gold braid, but his neckpiece was wilted with perspiration.

"Damnable heat, Grant."

"Yes, Sir President."

"Have a drink." He swung a tinkling glass before me. "Now then, tell me what is your trouble. Smuggling, here in Nareda. I don't believe it." His eyes, incongruously alert with all the rest of him so fat and lazy, twinkled at me. "We of the Nareda Government watch our quicksilver production very closely. The government fee is a third."

I might say that the Nareda government collected a third on all the mineral and agricultural products of the country, in exchange for the necessary government concessions. Markes exported this share openly to the world markets, paying the duty exactly like a private corporation.

He added, "You think—Hanley thinks—the smuggling is on too large a scale to be any illicit producer?"

I nodded.

"Then," he said, "it must be one of our recognized mines."

"Hanley thinks it is a recognized mine, falsifying its production record," I explained.

"If that is so, I will discover it," he said. He spoke with enthusiasm

and vigor. "For you I shall treat as what you are—the representative of our most friendly government. The figures of our quicksilver production I shall lay before you in just a few days. Let me fill up your glass, Grant."

The lazy tropics. I really did not doubt his sincerity. But I did doubt his ability to cope with any clever criminal. His enthusiasm for action would wilt like his neckpiece, in Nareda's heat. Unless, perhaps, the knowledge that the smuggler was cheating him as well as the United States—*that* might spur him.

He added—and now I got a shock wholly unexpected: "If we think that some recognized producer of quicksilver here is cheating us, it should not be difficult to check up on it. Nareda has only one large cinnabar lode being worked. A private individual: that fellow Jacob Spawn—"

"Spawn?" I exclaimed involuntarily.

"Why, yes. Did not he mention it? His mine is no more than ten kilometers from here—back on the southern slope."

"He didn't mention it," I said.

"So? That is strange; but he is a secretive Dutchman by nature. He specializes in prying into the other fellow's affairs. Hm-m."

He fell into a reverie while I stared at him. Spawn, the big—the only big—quicksilver producer here!

The President interrupted my startled thoughts. "I hope you did not intimate your real purpose?"

"No."

We both turned at the sound of an opening door. Markes called, "Ah, come in Perona! Are you alone? Good! Close that slide. Here is Chief Hanley's representative." He introduced us all in a breath. "This is interesting, Perona. Damnably interesting. We're being cheated, what? It looks that way. Sit down, Perona."

This was Greko Perona. Nareda's Minister of Internal Affairs. Spawn had mentioned him to me. A South American. A man in his fifties. Thin and darkly saturnine, with iron-gray hair, carefully plastered to cover his half-bald head. He sat listening to the President's harangue,

twirling the upturned waxen ends of his artificially black mustache. A wave of perfume enveloped him. A ladies' courtier, this Perona by the look of him. His white uniform was immaculate, carefully tailored and carefully worn to set off at its best his still trim and erect figure.

"Well," he said, when at last the President paused, "of a surety something must be done."

Perona seemed not excited, rather more carefully watchful, of his own words, and of me. His small dark eyes roved me.

"What is it you would plan to do about it, Señorito?"

An irony was in that Latin diminutive! He spread his pale hands. "Your United States officials perhaps exaggerate. I am very doubtful if we have smugglers here in Nareda."

"Unless it is Spawn," the President interjected.

Perona frowned slightly. But his suave manner remained. "Spawn? Why Spawn?"

"You need not take offense, Perona," Markes retorted. "We are discussing this before an envoy of the United States, sent here to consult with us. We have nothing to hide."

Markes turned to me. And his next words were like a bomb exploding at my feet.

"Perona *is* offended, Grant. But I promise you, his natural personal prejudice will not affect my investigation. Of course he is prejudiced, since he is to marry Spawn's daughter, the little Jetta."

I started involuntarily. This pomaded old dotard! This perfumed, ancient dandy!

For all the importance of my mission in Nareda my thoughts had been subconsciously more upon Jetta—far more—than upon smugglers of quicksilver. This palsied popinjay! This, the reality of the specter which had been between Jetta and me during all that magic time in the moonlit garden!

This suave old rake! Betrothed to that woodland pixie whose hand I had held and to whom I had sung love songs in the magic flower-scented moonlight only a few hours ago! And whom I had promised to meet there again to-night!

This, then, was my rival!

Nothing of importance transpired during the remainder of that interview. Markes reiterated his intention of making a complete governmental investigation at once. To which Perona suavely assented.

"*Por Dios Señorito*," he said to me, "we would not have your great government annoyed at Nareda. If there are smugglers, we will capture them of a certainty."

From the Government House, it now being almost time for the midday meal, I returned to Spawn's.

The rambling mud walls of the Inn stood baking in the noonday heat when I arrived. The outer garden drowsed; there seemed no one about. I went through the main door oval into the front public room, where first I had met Spawn. He was not here now, nor was Jetta.

A sudden furtiveness fell upon me. With noiseless steps I went the length of the dim, padded interior corridor to my own room. My belongings seemed undisturbed; a vague idea that Spawn might have

seized this opportunity to ransack them had come to me. But it seemed not; though if he had he would have found nothing.

I stood for a moment listening at my patio window. I could see the kitchen from here; there was no one in it. I started back for the living room. That furtive instinct was still on me. I made no noise. And abruptly I heard Spawn's voice, floating out softly in the hushed silence of the house.

"So, Perona?"

A brief silence, in which it seemed that I could hear a tiny aerial answer. Then Spawn again. A startled oath.

"De duvel! You say—"

I stood frozen, listening.

"She is here.... Yes, I will keep her close. I am no fool, Perona."

Spawn's laugh was like a growl. "Later to-day, yes. Fear not! I am no fool. I will be careful of it."

Spawn, talking by private audiphone, to Perona. The colloquy came to an abrupt end.

"... Might eavesdrop? By hell, you are right!"

I heard the click as Spawn and Perona broke connection. Spawn came from his room. But he was not quick enough. I slipped away before he saw me. In the living room I had time to be calmly seated with a lighted cigarette. His approaching heavy footsteps sounded. He came in.

"Oh—Grant."

"Good noon, friend Spawn. I'm hungry." I grinned at him. "I understand my bargain with you included a noonday meal. Does it?"

He eyed me suspiciously. "Have you been waiting here long?"

"No. I just came in."

He led me to the kitchen. He apologized for the informality of his hotel service: visitors were so infrequent. But the good quality of his food would make up for it.

"Right," I agreed. "Your food is marvelous, friend Spawn."

There was a difference in Spawn's manner toward me now. He seemed far more wary. Outwardly he was in a high good humor. He asked nothing concerning my morning at the Government House. He puttered over his electron-stove, making me help him; he cursed the heat; he said one could not eat in such heat as this; but the meal he cooked, and the way he sat down opposite me and attacked it, belied him.

He was acting; but so was I. And perhaps I deceived him as little as he deceived me. We avoided the things which were uppermost in the thoughts of us both. But, when we had very nearly finished the meal, I decided to try him out. I said suddenly, out of a silence:

"Spawn, why didn't you tell me you were a producer of quicksilver?" I shot him a sharp glance. "You are, aren't you?"

It took him by surprise, but he recovered himself instantly. "Yes. Are you interested?"

I tried another shot. "What surprised me was that a wealthy mine owner—you are, aren't you?—should bother to keep an unprofitable hotel. Why bother with it, Spawn?"

I thought I knew the answer: he wanted Nareda's visitors under his eyes.

"That is a pleasure." There was irony in his tone. "I am a lonesome man. I like—interesting companionship, such as yours, young Grant."

It was on my tongue to hint at his daughter. But I thought better of it.

"I am going to the mine now," he said abruptly. "Would you like to come?"

"Yes," I smiled. "Thanks."

I wanted to see his mine. But that he should be eager to show it, surprised me. I wondered what purpose he could have in that. I had a hint of it later; for when we took his little autocar and slid up the winding road into the bloated crags towering on the slope behind Nareda, he told me calmly:

"I shall have to put you in charge of my mine commander. I am busy elsewhere this afternoon. You will see the mine just as well without me."

He added. "I must go to the Government House: President Markes wants a report on my recent production."

So that was what Perona had told him over the audiphone just before our noonday meal?

It was an inferno of shadows and glaring lights, this underground cavern. As modern mining activities go, it was small and primitive. No more than a dozen men were here, beside the sweating pudgy mine commander who was my guide. A voluble fellow; of what original nationality I could not determine.

We stood watching the line of carts dumping the ore onto the endless lifting-belt. It went a hundred feet or so up and out of the cavern's ascending shaft, to fall with a clatter into the bins above the smelter.

"Rich ore," I said. "Isn't it?"

The cinnabar ran like thick blood-red veins in the rock.

"Rich," said the mine commander. "That it is. Rich. But who does it make rich? Only Spawn, not me." He waved his arms, airing his grievance with which for an hour past he had regaled me. "Only Spawn. For me, a dole each week."

The smelter was in a stone building—one of a small group of mine houses which stood in a cauldron depression above excavations. Rounded domes of rock towered above them. The sun, even at this tri-noon hour, was gone behind the heights above us. The murky shadows of night were gathering, the mists of the Lowlands settling. The tube-lights of the mine, strung between small metal poles, winked on like bleary eyes.

"Of a day soon I will fling this job to hell—"

I was paying scant attention to the fellow's tirade. Could there be smuggling going on from this mine? It all seemed to be conducted openly enough. If the production record were being falsified I felt that this dissatisfied mine commander was not aware of it. He showed me the smelter, where the quicksilver condensed in the coils and ran with its small luminous silver streams into the vats.

He was called away momentarily by one of his men, leaving me standing there. I was alone; no one seemed in sight, or within hearing. In the shadow of the condensers I drew out my transmitter and called Hanley.

I got him within a minute.

"Chief!"

"Yes, Phil. I hoped you'd call me. Didn't want to chance it, raising you when you might not be alone."

I told him swiftly what I had done; where I was now.

And Hanley said, with equal briskness: "I've an important fact. Just had Markes on secret wave-length. He tells me that Spawn has been saving up his quicksilver for six months past. He's got several hundred thousand dollar-standards' worth of it in ingots there right now."

"Here at the mine?"

"Yes. Got them all radiuminized, ready for the highest priced markets. Markes says he is scheduled to turn them over to the government checkers to-morrow. The Nareda government takes its share to-morrow; then Spawn exports the rest."

I heard a footstep. "Off, Chief! I'll call you later!"

I clicked off summarily. The little grid was under my shirt when the

mine commander rejoined me.

For another half hour or to I hovered about the smelter house. A treasure of quicksilver ingots here? I mentioned it casually to my companion. He shot me a sharp glance.

"Spawn has told you that?"

"I heard it."

"His business. We do not talk of that. Never can I tell what Spawn will choose to take offense at."

We rambled upon other subjects. Later, he said, "We work not at night. But Spawn, he is here often at night, with his friend, the Señor Perona."

That caught my attention. "I met Perona this morning," I said quickly. "Is he a partner of Spawn's?"

"If he is so, I never was told it. But much he is here—at night."

"Why at night?"

The fellow really knew nothing. Or if he did, he was diplomatic enough not to jeopardize his post by babbling of it to me. He said:

"Perona is Spawn's friend. Why not? His daughter to marry: that will make him a son-in-law." He laughed. "An old fool, but not such a fool either. Spawn is rich."

"His daughter. Has he a daughter?"

"The little Jetta. You haven't seen her? Well, that is not strange. Spawn keeps her very hidden. A mystery about it: all Nareda talks, but no one knows; and Spawn does not like questions."

Spawn abruptly joined us! He came from the black shadows of the lurid smelter room. Had he heard us discussing Jetta? I wondered.

Chapter 5: Mysterious Meeting

"Ah, Grant—have you enjoyed yourself?" He dismissed his subordinate. "I was detained. Sorry."

He was smoothly imperturbable. "Have you seen everything? Quite a little plant I have here? We shut down early to-day. I will make ready to close."

I followed him about while he arranged for the termination of the day's activities. The clatter of the smelter house was presently still; the men departing. Spawn and I were the last to leave, save for the eight men who were the mine's night guards. They were stalwart, silent fellows, armed with electronic needle projectors.

The lights of the mine went low until they were mere pencil points of blue illumination in the gloom. The eery look of the place was intensified by the darkness and silence of the abnormally early nightfall. The fantastic crags stood dark with formless shadow.

Spawn stopped to speak to one of the guards. The men wore a gold-trimmed, but now dirty, white linen uniform, wilted by the heat—the uniform of Nareda's police. I remarked it to him.

"The government lent me the men," Spawn explained. "Of an ordinary time I have only one guard."

"But this then, is not an ordinary time?" I hinted.

He looked at me sharply. And upon sudden impulse, I added:

"President Markes said something about you having a treasure here. Radiumized quicksilver."

It was evidently Spawn's desire to appear thoroughly frank with me. He laughed. "Well, then, if Markes has told you, then might I not as well admit it? The treasure is here, indeed yes. Will you like to see it?"

He led me into a little strong room adjoining the smelter coil-rectifiers. He flashed his hand searchlight. On the floor, piled crosswise, were small moulded bars of refined quicksilver—dull, darkened silver ingots of this world's most precious metal.

"Quite a treasure, Grant, here to-night. See, it is radiumized."

He snapped off his torch. In the darkness the little bars glowed

irridescent.

"To-morrow I will divide with our Nareda government. One-third for them. And my own share I will export: to Great New York, this shipment. Already I have the order for it."

He added calmly, "The duty is high, Grant. Too bad your big New York market is protected by so large a duty. With my cost of production—these accursed Lowland workmen who demand so much for their labor, and a third of all I produce taken by Nareda—there is not much in it for me."

He had re-lighted the room. I could feel his eyes on me, but I said nothing. It was obvious to me now that he knew I was a government customs agent.

I said, "This certainly interests me, friend Spawn. I'll tell you why some other time."

We exchanged significant glances, both of us smiling.

"Well can I guess it, young Grant. So here is my treasure. Without the duty I would soon be wealthy. Chut! Why should I roll in a pity for myself? There is a duty and I am an honest man, so I pay it."

I said, "Aren't you afraid to leave this stored here?" I knew that this pile of ingots—the quicksilver in its radiumized form—was worth four or five hundred thousand dollars in American gold-coin at the very least.

Spawn shrugged. "Who would attack it? But of course I will be glad to be rid of it. It is a great responsibility—even though it carries international insurance, to protect my and the Nareda Government share."

He was sealing up the heavy barred portals of the little strong-room. There was an alarm-detector, connected with the office of Nareda's police commander. Spawn set the alarm carefully.

"I have every safeguard, Grant. There is really no danger." He added, as though with sudden thought. "Except possibly one—a depth bandit named De Boer. Ever you have heard of him?"

"Yes. I have."

We climbed into Spawn's small automatic vehicle. The lights of the mine faded behind us as we coasted the winding road down to the

village.

"De Boer," said Spawn. "A fellow who lives by his wits in the depths. Near here, perhaps: who knows? They say he has many followers—fifty—a hundred, perhaps—outlaws: a cut-belly band it must be."

"Didn't he once take a hand in Nareda's politics?" I suggested.

Spawn guffawed. "That is so. He was once what they called a patriot here. He thought he might be made President. But Markes ran him out. Now he is a bandit. I have believe that American mail-ship which sank last year in the cauldron north of the Nares Sea—you remember how it was attacked by bandits?—I have always believe that was De Boer's band."

We rolled back to Nareda. Spawn's manner had again changed. He seemed even more friendly than before. More at his ease with me. We had supper, and smoked together in his living room for half an hour afterward. But my thoughts were more on Jetta than on her father. There was still no evidence of her about the premises. Ah, if I only had known what had taken place there at Spawn's that

afternoon while I was at the mine!

Soon after supper Spawn yawned. "I think I shall go to bed." His glance was inquiring. "What are you going to do?"

I stood up. "I'll go to bed, too. Markes wants to see me early in the morning. You'll be there, Spawn?"

"Yes. We will go together."

It was still no more than eight o'clock in the evening. Spawn followed me to my bedroom, and left me at its door.

"Sleep well. I will call you in time."

"Thanks, Spawn."

I wondered if there were irony in his voice as he said good night. No one could have told.

I did not go to bed. I sat listening to the silence of my room and the garden, and Spawn's retreating footsteps. He had said he was sleepy, but nevertheless I presently heard him across the patio. He was

apparently in the kitchen, cleaning away our meal, to judge by the rattling of his pans. It was as yet not much after hour eight of the evening. The hours before my tryst with Jetta seemed an interminable time to wait. She might not come, though, I was afraid, until midnight.

At all events I felt that I had some hours yet. And it occurred to me that the evening was not yet too far advanced for me to call upon Perona. He lived not far from here, I had learned. I wanted to see this beribboned old Minister of Nareda's Internal Affairs.

I would use as my excuse a desire to discuss further the possibility of smuggler being here in Nareda.

I put on my hat and a light jacket, verified that my dirk was readily accessible and sealed up my room. Spawn apparently was still in the kitchen. I got out of the house, I felt sure, without him being aware of it.

The Nareda streets were quiet. There was a few pedestrians, and none of them paid much attention to me. It was no more than ten minutes walk to Perona's home.

His house was set back from the road, surrounded by luxurious vegetation. There was a gate in front of the garden, and another, a hundred feet or to along a small alleyway which bordered the ground to my left. I was about to enter the front gate when sight of a figure passing under the garden foliage checked me. It was a man, evidently coming from the house and headed toward the side gate. He went through a shaft of light that slanted from one of the lower windows of the house.

Perona! I was sure it was he. His slight figure, with a gay, tri-cornered hat. A short tasseled cloak hanging from his shoulders. He was alone; walking fast. He evidently had not seen me. I crouched outside the high front wall, and through its lattice bars I saw him reach the side gate, open it swiftly, pass through, and close it after him. There was something furtive about his manner, for all he was undisguised. I decided to follow him.

The front street fortunately was deserted at the moment. I waited long enough for him to appear. But he did not; and when I ran to the alley corner—chancing bumping squarely into him—I saw him far down its dim, narrow length where it opened into the back street which bordered his grounds to the rear. He turned to the left and shot a swift glance up the alley, which I anticipated, provided for by drawing back. When I looked again, he was gone.

I have had some experience at playing the shadow. But it was not easy here along the almost deserted and fairly bright Nareda streets. Perona was walking swiftly down the slope toward the outskirts of the village where it bordered upon the Nares Sea. For a time I thought he was headed for the landing field, but at a cross-path he turned sharply to the right, away from the field, whose sheen of lights I could now see down the rocky defile ahead of me. There was nothing but broken, precipitous rocky country ahead of him, into which this path he had taken was winding. What could Perona, a Minister, be engaged in, wandering off alone into this black, deserted region?

It was black indeed, by now. The village was soon far behind us. A storm was in the night air; a wind off the sea; solid black clouds overhead blotted out the moon and stars. The crags and buttes and gullies of this tumbled area loomed barely visible about me. There were times when only my feel of the path under my feet kept me from straying, to fall into a ravine or crevice.

I prowled perhaps two hundred yards behind Perona. He was using a tiny hand-flash now; it bobbed and winked in the darkness ahead, vanishing sometimes when a curve in the path hid him, or when he plunged down into a gully and up again. I had no search-beam. Nor would I have dared use one: Perona could too obviously have seen

that someone was following him.

There was half a mile of this, I think, though it seemed interminable. I could hear the sea, rising with the wind, pounding against the rocks to my left. Then, a distance ahead, I saw lights moving. Perona's—and others. Three or four of them. Their combined glow made a radiance which illumined the path and rocks. I could see the figures of several men whom Perona had joined. They stood a moment and then moved off. To the right a ragged cliff wall towered the path. The spots of light bobbed toward it. I caught the vague outline of a huge broken opening, like a cave mouth in the cliff. The lights were swallowed by it.

I crept cautiously forward.

Chapter 6: Ether-wave Eavesdropping

I had thought it was a cavern mouth into which the men had disappeared, but it was not. I reached it without any encounter. It loomed above me, a great archway in the cliff—an opening fifty feet high and equally as broad. And behind it was a roofless cave—a sort of irregularly circular bowl, five hundred feet across its broken, bowlder-strewn, caked-ooze floor.

I crouched in the blackness under the archway. The moon had risen and its light filtered with occasional shafts through the swift-flying black clouds overhead. The scene was brighter. It was dark in the archway, but a glow of moonlight in the bowl beyond showed me its tumbled floor and the precipitous, eroded walls, like a crater-rim, which encircled it.

The men whom Perona had met were across the bowl near its opposite side. I could see the group of them, five hundred feet from me, by a little moonlight that was on them; also by the sheen from the spots of their hand-lights. Four or five men, and Perona. I thought I distinguished the aged Minister sitting on a rock, and before him a huge giant man's figure striding up and down. Perona seemed talking vehemently: the men were listening; the giant paused occasionally in his pacing to fling a question.

All this I saw with my first swift glance. My attention was drawn from the men to an object near them. The nose of a flyer showed between two upstanding crags on the floor of the valley. Only its forward horizontal propellers and the tip of its cabin and landing gear were visible, but I could guess that it was a fair-sized ship.

The men were too far away for me to hear them. Could I get across the floor of the bowl without discovery? It did not seem so. The accursed moonlight became stronger every moment. Then I saw a guard—a dark figure of a man showing just inside the archway, some seventy feet from me. He was leaning against a rock, facing my way. In his hands was a thick-barreled electronic projector.

I could not advance: that was obvious. The moonlight lay in a clear clean patch beyond the archway. The guard stood at its edge.

A minute or two had passed. Perona was still talking vehemently. I was losing it: not a word was audible. Yet I felt that if I could hear Perona now, much that Hanley and I wanted to learn would be made clear to us. My little microphone receiver could be adjusted for audible air vibrations. I crouched and held it cautiously above my head with its face, like a listening ear, turned toward the distant men.

My single-vacuum amplification brought up the sound until their voices sounded like whispers murmured in my ear-grids.

"De Boer, listen to me—"

Perona's voice. They must have been chance words spoken loudly. It was all I could hear, save tantalizing, unintelligible murmurs.

So this was De Boer, the bandit! The big fellow pacing before Perona. I wanted infinitely more, now, to hear what was being said.

I thought of Hanley. There might be a way of handling this.

I had to murmur very softly. I was hidden in these shadows from the guard's sight, but he was close enough to hear my normal voice. I chanced it. A wind was sucking through the archway with an audible whine: the guard might not hear me.

"X. 2. AY."

The sorter's desk. He came in. I murmured Hanley's rating. "Rush. Danger. Special."

It went swiftly through. Hanley, thank Heaven, was at his desk.

I plugged in my little image finder; held it over my head; turned it slowly. I whispered:

"Look around, Chief. See where I am? Near Nareda; couple of miles out. Followed Perona; he met these men.

"The big one is De Boer, the depth bandit. I can't hear what they're saying—but I can send you their voice murmurs."

"Amplify them all you can. Relay them up," Hanley ordered.

I caught Perona's murmurs again; I swung them through my tiny transformers and off my transmitter points into the ether.

"Hear them, Chief?"

"Yes. I'll try further amplification."

It was what I had intended. Hanley's greater power might be able to amplify those murmurs into audible strength.

"I'm getting them, Phil."

He swung them back to me. Grotesquely distorted, blurred with tube-hum and interference crackle, they roared in my ear-grids so loudly that I saw the nearby guard turn his head as though startled. Listening....

But evidently he concluded it was nothing.

I cut down the volume. Hanley switched in.

"By God. Phil! This—"

"Off, Chief! Let me hear, too!"

He cut away. Those distorted voices! They came from Perona and the bandits to me across this five hundred foot moonlit bowl; from me, thirteen hundred miles up to Hanley's instruments; and back to me once more. But the words, most of them, now were distinguishable.

Perona's voice: "I tell it to you. De Boer ... and a good chance for you to make the money."

"But will they pay?"

"Of course they will pay. Big. A ransom princely.”

"And why, Perona? Why princely? Who is this fellow—so important?"

"He is with rich business men, I tell to you."

"A private citizen?"

"... And a private citizen, of a surety. Fool! Have you come to be a coward, De Boer?"

"Pah!"

"Well then I tell you it is a lifetime chance. All of it I have arranged. If he was a government agent, that would be very different, for they are very keen, this administration of the American government, to protect their agents. But their private citizens—it is a scandal! Do you not ever pick the newscasters' reports, De Boer? Has it not been a scandal that this administration does very little for its citizens abroad?"

"And you want to get rid of this fellow? Why, Perona?"

"That is not your concern. The ransom is to be all yours. Make away

with him—in the depths somewhere. Demand your ransom. Fifty thousand gold-standards! Demand it of me. Of Nareda!"

"And you will pay it?"

"I promise it. Nareda will pay it—and Nareda will collect the ransom from the American capitalists. Very easy."

His voice fell lower. "Between us, you will get the ransom money from Nareda—and then kill your prisoner if you like. Call it an accident; what matter? And dead men are silent men, De Boer. I will see that no real pursuit is made after you."

They were talking about me! It was obvious. Questions rushed at me. Perona, planning with this bandit to abduct me. Hold me for ransom. Or kill me! But Perona knew that I was not a private citizen. He was lying to De Boer, to persuade him.

Why this attack upon me? Was Spawn in on it? Why were they so anxious to get rid of me? Because of Jetta? Or because I was dangerous, prying into their smuggling activities. Or both?

De Boer: "... Get up with my men through the streets to Spawn's

house? You have it fixed?"

"Yes. Over the route from here as I told you, there are no police to-night. I have ordered them off. In the garden. *Dios!* You offer so many objections! I tell you all is fixed. In an hour, half an hour; even now, perhaps, the Americano is in the garden. The girl has promised to meet him there. He will be there, fear not. Will you go?"

"Yes."

"Hah! That is the De Boer I have always admired!"

I could see them in the moonlight across the pit. Perona now standing up, the giant figure of the bandit towering over him.

Hanley's microscopic voice cut in: "Getting it, Phil? To seize you for ransom!"

"Yes. I hear it."

"This girl. Who—?"

"Wait, Chief. Off—"

De Boer: "I will do it! Fifty thousand."

Perona: "An hour now. Spawn will be at his home asleep."

"And you will go to the mine?"

"Yes. Now, from here. You seize this fellow Grant, and then attack the mine. Our regular plan, De Boer. This does not change it."

Attack Spawn's mine! Half a million of treasure was there to-night!

Perona was chuckling: "You give Spawn's guards the signal. They are all my men—in my pay. They will run away when you appear."

Hanley cut in again. "By the gods, they're after that treasure! Phil, listen to me! you must...." His voice faded.

"Chief, I can't hear you!"

Hanley came again: "... And I will notify Porto Rico. The local patrol will be about ready to leave."

"Or notify Nareda headquarters," I suggested. "If you can get President Markes, he can send some police to the mine—"

"And find all Nareda's police bribed by Perona? I'll get Porto Rico. We have an hour or two; the patrol can reach you in an hour."

The bandits were preparing to leave here. Two or three of them had gone to the flyer. Perona and De Boer were parting.

"... Well, that is all, De Boer."

"Right, Señor Perona. I will start shortly."

"On foot, by the street route to Spawn's—"

Hanley's hurried voice came back: "I've sent the call to Porto Rico."

The guard had moved again. He was no more than forty feet away from me now—standing up gazing directly toward where I was crouching over my tiny instruments in the shadows of the rocky arch. A footstep sounded behind me, on the path outside the arch. Someone approaching!

A tiny light bobbing!

Then a voice calling, "Perona! De Boer!"

The guard took a step forward; stopped, with levelled weapon.

Then the voice again: it was so loud it went through my opened relay, flashed up to New York, and blew out half a dozen of Hanley's attuned vacuums.

"Perona!"

Spawn's voice! He was coming toward me! I lay prone, my little grids switched off. I held my breath.

Spawn's figure went past within ten feet of me. But he did not see me.

He met the guard. "Hello, Gutierrez. The damned American—"

Perona and De Boer came hastening. Spawn joined them in the moonlight just beyond the archway, close enough for me to hear them plainly. Spawn was out of breath, panting from his swift walk. He greeted them with a roar.

"The American—he is gone!"

"*Dios!* Gone where, Spawn?"

"The hell—how do I know, Perona? He is gone from his room—from the house. Maybe he followed you here? Did he?"

Chapter 7: Behind the Sealed Door

There was a moment when I think I might have escaped unseen from that archway. But I was too amazed at Spawn's appearance to think of my own situation. I had believed that Perona was plotting against Spawn, meeting these bandits in this secret place; I had just heard them planning to attack Spawn's mine—to rob it of the treasure doubtless, which I knew was stored there.

But I realized now it was not a plot against Spawn. He had come here swiftly to join Perona and tell him that I, their intended victim, was missing. He had greeted the bandit guard by name. He seemed, indeed, as well known to these bandits as Perona himself.

They stood now in a group some thirty feet away from me. I could hear their excited voices perfectly clearly. My instruments were off; but I recall that as I listened to Spawn I was also aware of the tingle of the electrode-band on my chest—Hanley, vigorously calling me back to find out why I had so summarily disconnected.

"I took him to his room," Spawn was explaining excitedly. "De duvel, why should I have sealed him in? How could I? He is no child!"

De Boer laughed caustically. "And so he has walked away from you? I think I am a fool to mix myself with you two."

Perona retorted, "I have made you rich, De Boer. Think what you like; to-night is the end of our partnership. Only, you do what I have told you to-night."

"Hah! How can I? Your American has flown his trap."

This guard—this Gutierrez, as Spawn had called him—was listening with interest. De Boer's several other men were gathered there. I felt myself safe where I was, for the moment at least.

I cut Hanley in. "Chief, they're closer! Spawn has come! They've missed me! I'll relay what they're saying, but you step it down; there's too much volume."

"You're all right, Phil? Thank Heaven for that! Something blew my vacuums."

"Chief, listen—here they are—"

Perona: "But he will be back. In the garden now, no doubt, with

Jetta."

De Boer: "Ah—the little Jetta! So she is there, Spawn? Not in years have you spoken of your daughter. A young lady now, I suppose. Is it so?"

Spawn cursed. "We leave her out of this. You follow the Señor's plan."

"Come to your house? You think the bird will be there for me to seize?"

"Yes," Perona put in. "You go there; in an hour. Then to the mine."

Spawn undoubtedly was in this plot to attack his mine! He said, "At the mine we have arranged everything. Damn this American! But for Perona I would not bother with him."

"But you will bother," Perona interjected.

De Boer laughed again. "I would be witless could I not figure this! He is a young man, and so handsome he has frightened you with the little Jetta! Is that it, Perona? Jealous, eh?"

I had been holding the image finder so that Hanley might see them.

Hanley's voice rattled my ear-grid. "Phil! Get away from there! Look! De Boer is searching!"

De Boer had, a moment before, spoken quietly aside to Gutierrez. And now three or four of the men were spreading out, poking about with small hand-flashes. Searching for me! The possibility that I might be here, eavesdropping!

Hanley repeated vehemently, "Phil, they'll find you! Get out of there: the way is still open!"

Gutierrez was approaching the archway. But I lingered a moment longer.

"Chief, you heard about that girl, Jetta, Spawn's daughter—"

I stopped. Perona was saying, "Spawn, was Jetta still in her room? You did not untie her?"

"No."

"And gagged? Suppose the Americano was back there now? She might call to him, and he would release her—"

De Boer: "How do you know he is not around here? Listening?"

With the assumption that I might be within hearing, De Boer tried to trap me. Gutierrez, at a signal now, suddenly dashed through the archway and planted himself on the path outside. The other searchers spread their rays; the rocks all about me were lighted. But my niche was still untouched.

De Boer: "If he is around here—"

Perona: "He could not have followed me; I was too careful."

I was murmuring: "Chief, they've got that girl."

"Phil, you get away! Go to Markes. Stay with him."

"But Chief, that Jetta, I—"

"Keep out of this! You're only one; you can't help any! I've sent for the Porto Rican patrol ship to handle this."

"Chief, I'm going back to Spawn's."

"No—"

I cut off abruptly. In another moment I would have been discovered. The searchers were headed directly for me.

I moved, crouching, back along the inner wall of the archway. The moon was momentarily behind a cloud. It was black under the arch; and out front it was so dim I could only see the faint blob of Gutierrez's standing figure, and the spot of his flashlight.

Perona: "He is not around here, De Boer. That is foolish."

Spawn: "He could have gone anywhere. Maybe a walk around the village."

Perona: "Go back home, Spawn. De Boer will come—"

Their voices faded as I moved away. A searching bandit behind me poked with his light into the crevice where a moment before I had been crouching. I moved faster. Only Gutierrez now was in front of me. He was at the far end of the arch. I could slip past, and still be fifty feet from him—if I could avoid his swinging little light-beam.

I was running now, chancing that he would hear me. I was on the path; I could see it vaguely.

From behind me came a sizzling flash, and the ting of the flying needle as it missed me by a foot.

"The Americano! He goes there!"

Another shot. The shouts of the bandits in the archway. A turmoil back there.

But it was all behind me. I leaped sidewise off the path as Gutierrez small light-beam swept it. I ran stumbling through a stubble of boulders, around an upstanding rock spire, back to the path again.

There were other shots. Then De Boer's voice, faint by distance: "Stop! Fools! We will alarm the village! The landing field can see our shots from here! Take it easy! You can't get him!"

The turmoil quieted. I went around a bend in the path, running swiftly.

Pursuit was behind me. I could hear them coming.

It was a run of no more than ten minutes to the junction where, down the slope, I could see the lights of the landing field.

The glow of the village was ahead of me. Then I was in its outskirts. Occasional dark houses. Deserted streets.

I slowed to a fast walk. I was breathless, panting in the heat.

I heard no pursuit now. But Spawn and the rest of them doubtless were after me. Would they head back for Spawn's inn? I thought they would. But I could beat them back there; I was sure there was no shorter route than this I was taking.

Would they use their flyer? That would not gain them any time, what with launching it and landing, for so short a flight. And a bandit flyer could not very well land unseen or unnoticed, even in somnolent Nareda.

I reached the main section of the village. There were occasional lights and pedestrians. My haste was noticeable, but I was not accosted. There seemed no police about. I recalled Perona's remark that he had attended to that.

My electrode was tingling. I had been running again. I slowed down.

"Chief?"

"Phil." His voice carried relief. "You got away?"

"Yes. I'm in the village."

"Go to President Markes."

"No, I'm headed for Spawn's! They're all behind me; I can get there a few minutes ahead of them."

I panted an exclamation, incoherently, but frankly, about Jetta. "I'm going to get her out of there."

"Phil, what in hell—"

I told him.

"So you've fallen in love with a girl? Entangled—"

"Chief!"

"Go after her, Phil! Got her bound and gagged, have they? Going to marry her to this Perona? Like the Middle Ages?"

I had never seen this side of Hanley.

"Get her if you want her. Get her out of there. Take her to Markes—No, I wouldn't trust anybody in Nareda! Take her into the uplands behind the village. But keep away from that mine! Have you got flash-fuses?"

"Yes."

I was within sight of Spawn's house. The street was dim and deserted. I was running again.

I panted. "I'm—almost at Spawn's!"

"Good! When it's over, whatever happens up there at the mine, then signal the patrol."

"Yes."

I reached Spawn's front gate. The house and front garden were dark.

"Use your fuses, Phil. What colors?"

"I have red and blue."

"I'll talk to the patrol ship again. Tell them to watch for you. Red and blue. Two short red flashes, a long blue."

"Right, Chief. I'm here at Spawn's, cutting off."

"Come back on when you can." His voice went anxious again. "I'll wait here."

"All right."

I cut silent. I ran through the front doorway of Spawn's inn. The living room was dim and empty. Which way was Jetta's room? I could only guess.

I had a few minutes, perhaps, before my pursuers would arrive.

I reached the inner, patio garden. The moon was well out from under the clouds now. The patio shimmered, a silent, deserted fairyland.

"Jetta!" I called it softly. Then louder. "Jetta!"

Spawn's house was fairly large and rambling. There were so many rooms. Jetta was gagged; how could she answer me? But I had no time to search for her.

"Jetta?"

And then came her voice. "Philip?"

"Jetta! Which way? Where are you?"

"Here! This way: in my room."

A window and a door near the pergola. "Jetta!"

"Yes. I am in here. They tied me up. Not so loud, Phil: father will hear you."

"He's gone out."

I reached her garden door. Turned its handle. Rattled the door. Shoved frantically with my shoulder!

The metal door was firmly sealed!

Part 2

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

In the year 2020 the oceans have long since drained from the surface of the earth, leaving bared to sun and wind the one-time sea floor. Much of it is flat, caked ooze, cracked and hardened, with, here and there, small scum-covered lakes, bordered by slimy rocks. It is hot, down in the depth of the great Lowland areas, and it is chiefly adventurers and outcasts of human kind who can endure life in what few towns there are.

Into remote Lowlands, in an invisible flyer, go Grant and Jetta—prisoners of a scientific depth bandit.

Into Nareda, the capital village of the tiny Lowland Republic of Nareda, goes Philip Grant, an operative of the United States Customs Department, on a dangerous assignment—to ferret out the men who are smuggling mercury into the United States from that place.

Grant falls in love with Jetta, the daughter of Jacob Spawn, a big mercury mine owner of Nareda, only to learn that Spawn has promised her in marriage to Greko Perona, the country's Minister of

Internal Affairs.

Grant follows Perona to a midnight Lowland rendezvous with mysterious strangers and eavesdrops on them, sending their indistinct voice murmurs to his chief, Hanley, in Washington, who relays them back to him, amplified. He learns several important things: that Spawn and Perona and a depth bandit named De Boer are together involved in the smuggling; that they have planned a fake robbery of a fortune in radiumized mercury stored at Spawn's mine, to collect the insurance on it and escape paying the Government export fee: and that they, plan to kidnap Grant for ransom.

The plotters learn of Grant's absence from Nareda, and suspect that he may be nearby. They start to search for him. Grant barely escapes, with the bandits and conspirators in hot pursuit. He flees to Jetta, hoping that they will be able to get away together: but he finds her tied hand and foot in her room.

The door is tightly sealed.

And close behind him are his pursuers!

Chapter 8: Jetta's Defiance

I must go back now to picture what befell Jetta that afternoon while I was at Spawn's mine. It is not my purpose to becloud this narrative with mystery. There was very little mystery about it to Jetta, and I can reconstruct her viewpoint of the events from what she afterward told me.

Jetta's room was in a wing of the house on the side near the pergola. Her window and door looked out upon the patio. When I had retired —that first night in Nareda—Spawn had gone to his daughter and upbraided her for showing herself while he was giving me that first midnight meal.

"You stay in your room: you have nothing to do with him. Hear me?"

"Yes, Father."

From her infancy he had dominated her; it never occurred to either of them that she could disobey. And yet, this time she did; for no sooner was he asleep that night than she came to my window as I have told.

This next day Jetta dutifully had kept herself secluded. She cooked her own breakfast while I was at the Government House, and was again out of sight by noon.

Jetta was nearly always alone. I can picture her sitting there within the narrow walls of her little room. Boy's ragged garb. All possible femininity stripped from her. Yet, within her, the woman's instincts were struggling. She sewed a great deal, she since has told me, there in the cloistered dimness. Making little dresses of silk and bits of finery given her surreptitiously by the neighbor women. Gazing at herself in them with the aid of a tiny mirror. Hiding them away, never daring to wear them openly; until at intervals her father would raid the room, find them and burn them in the kitchen incinerator.

"Instincts of Satan! By damn but I will get these woman's instincts out of you, Jetta!"

nd there were hours when she would try to read hidden books, and look at pictures of the strange fairy world of the Highlands. She could read and write a little: she had gone for a few years to the

small Nareda government school, and then been snatched from it by her father.

When Spawn and I had finished that noonday meal, I recall that he left me for a moment. He had gone to Jetta.

"I am taking that young American to the mine. I will return presently. Stay close, Jetta."

"Yes, Father."

He left with me. Jetta remained in her room, her thoughts upon the coming night. She trembled at them. She would meet me again, this evening in the moonlit garden....

The sound of a man walking the garden path aroused her from her reverie. Then came a soft ingratiating voice:

"Jetta, *chica Mia*!"

It was Perona, standing by the pergola preening his effeminate mustache.

"Jetta, little love bird, come out and talk to me."

Jetta slammed the window slide and sat quiet.

"Jetta, it is your Greko."

"Well do I know it," she muttered.

"Jetta!" He strode down the path and back. "Jetta." His voice began rising into a strident, peevish anger.

"Jetta, are you in there? *Chica*, answer me."

No answer.

"Jetta, *por Dios*—" He fumed, then fell to pleading. "Are you in there? Please, little love bird, answer your Greko. Are you in there?"

"Yes."

"Come out then. Come to Greko."

he said sweetly. "My father does not want me to talk to men. You

know that is so, Señor Perona."

It grounded him. "Why—"

"Is it not so?"

"Y-yes, but I am not—"

"A man?" Little imp! She relished impaling him upon the shafts of her ridicule. Her sport was interrupted by the arrival of Spawn. He had left me at the mine and come directly back home. Jetta heard his heavy tread on the garden path, then his voice:

"Ah, Perona."

And Perona: "Jetta will not come out and talk to me." The waxen mustached Minister of Nareda's Internal Affairs was like a sulky child. But Spawn was unimpressed. Spawn said:

"Well, let her alone. We have more important things to engage us. I have the American occupied at the mine. You heard from De Boer?"

"I went last night. All is ready as we planned. But Spawn, this fool of an American, this Grant—"

"Hush! Not so loud, Perona!"

"I am telling you—!" Perona was excited. His voice rose shrilly, but Spawn checked him.

"Shut up: you waste time. Tell me exactly the arrangements with De Boer. *Le grand coup*! now; to-night most important of nights—and you rant of your troubles with a girl!"

hey were standing by the pergola, quite near Jetta's shaded window. She crouched there, listening to them. None of this was entirely new to Jetta. She had always been aware more or less of her father's secret business activities. As a child she had not understood them. Nor did she now, with any clarity. Spawn, had always talked freely within her hearing, ignoring her, though occasionally he threatened her to keep her mouth shut.

She heard now fragments of this discussion between her father and Perona. They moved away from the pergola and sat by the fountain, speaking too low for her to hear. And then they paced the path,

coming nearer, and she caught their voices again. And occasionally they grew excited, or vehement, and then their raised tones were plainly audible to her.

And this that she heard, with what she knew already, and with what subsequently transpired, enables me now to piece together the facts into a connected explanation.

In the establishment of his cinnabar mine some years before, Spawn was originally financed by Perona. The South American was then newly made Minister of Nareda's Internal Affairs. He became Spawn's business partner. They kept the connection secret. Spawn falsified his production records; and Perona with his governmental position was enabled to pass these false accounts of the mine's production. Nareda was systematically cheated of a portion of its legal share.

But this, after a time, did not satisfy the ambitious Perona and Spawn. They began to plan how they might engage in smuggling some of their quicksilver into the United States.

Perona, during these years, had had ambitions of his own in other directions. President Markes, of Nareda, was an honest official. He handicapped Perona considerably. There were many ways by which

Perona could have grown rich through a dishonest handling of the government affairs. It was done almost universally in all the small Latin governments. But Markes as President made it dangerous in Nareda. Even the duplicity with the mine was a precarious affair.

here was at this time in Nareda a young adventurer named De Boer. A handsome, swaggering fellow in his late twenties. He was a good talker; he spoke many languages; he could orate with fluency and skilful guile. His smile, his colorful personality, and his gift for oratory, made it easy for him to stir up dissatisfaction among the people.

De Boer became known as a patriot. A revolution in Nareda was brewing. Perona, as Nareda's Minister, was De Boer's political enemy. The Nareda Government ran De Boer out, ending the potential revolution. But Perona and Spawn had always secretly been friends with De Boer. It would have been very handy to have this unscrupulous young scoundrel as President.

When De Boer was banished with some of his most loyal followers,

he began a career of petty banditry in the Lowland's depths. Spawn and Perona kept in communication with him, and, by a method which was presently made startlingly clear to Jetta and me, De Boer smuggled the quicksilver for Perona and Spawn. It was this activity which had finally aroused my department and caused Hanley to send me to Nareda.

This however, was a dangerous, precarious occupation. De Boer did not seem to think so, or care. But Perona and Spawn, with their established positions in Nareda, were always fearful of exposure. Even without my coming, they had planned to disconnect from De Boer.

"And for more than that," as Jetta had one day heard Perona remark to her father. "I'll tell to you that this De Boer is not very straight with us, Spawn." De Boer would, upon occasion, fail to make proper return for the smuggled product.

o now they had planned a last coup in which De Boer was to help, and then they would be done with him: the two of them, Spawn and

Perona, would remain as honest citizens of Nareda, and De Boer had agreed to take himself away and pursue his banditry elsewhere.

It was a simple plan; it promised to yield a high stake quickly. A final fling at illicit activity; then virtuous reformation, with Perona marrying the little Jetta.

eneath the strong room at the mine, Perona and Spawn had secretly built a cleverly concealed little vault. De Boer, this night just before the midnight hour, was to attack the mine. Spawn and Perona had bribed the police guards to submit to this attack. The guards did not know the details: they only knew that De Boer and his men would make a sham attack, careful to harm none of them—and then De Boer would withdraw. The guards would report that they had been driven away by a large force. And when the excitement was over, the ingots of radiumized quicksilver would have vanished!

De Boer, making away into distant Lowland fastnesses, would obviously be supposed to have taken the treasure. But Perona, hidden alone in the strong-room, would merely carry the ingots

down into the secret vault, to be disposed of at some future date. The ingots were well insured, by an international company, against theft. The Nareda government would receive one-third of that insurance as recompense for the loss of its share. Perona and Spawn would get two-thirds—and have the treasure as well.

uch was the present plan, into which, all unknown to me, I had been plunged. And my presence complicated things considerably. So much so that Perona grew vehement, this afternoon in the garden, explaining why. His shrill voice carried clearly to Jetta, in spite of Spawn's efforts to shut him up.

"I tell to you that Americano agent will undo us."

"How?" demanded the calmer Spawn.

"Already he has made Markes suspicious."

"Chut! You can befool Markes, Perona. You have for years been doing it."

"This meddling fellow, he has met Jetta!"

"I do not believe it." There was a sudden grimness to Spawn's tone at the thought. "I do not believe it. Jetta would not dare."

"You should have seen him flush when Markes mentioned at the conference this morning that I am to marry Jetta. No one could miss it. He has met her—I tell it to you—and it must have been last night."

"So, you say?" Jetta could see her father's face, white with suppressed rage. "You think that? And it is that this Grant might be your rival, that worries you? Not our plans for to-night, which have real importance—but worrying over a girl."

"She would not talk to me. She would not come out. He has no doubt put wild ideas into her head. Spawn, you listen to me. I have always been more clever than you at scheming. Is it not so? You have always said it. I have a plan now, it fits our arrangements with De Boer, but it will rid us of this Americano. When all is done and I have married Jetta—"

Spawn interrupted impatiently. "You will marry Jetta, never fear. I have promised her to you."

And because, as Jetta well knew, Perona had made it part of his bargaining in financing Spawn. But this they did not now mention.

"To get rid of this Grant—well, that sounds meritorious. He is dangerous around here. To that I agree."

"And with Jetta—"

"Have done, Perona!" With sudden decision Spawn leaped to his feet. "I do not believe she would have dared talk to Grant. We'll have her out and ask her. If she has, by the gods—"

It fell upon Jetta before she had time to gather her wits. Spawn strode to her door, and found it fastened on the inside.

"Jetta, open at once!"

He thumped with his heavy fists. Confused and trembling she unsealed it, and he dragged her out into the sunlight of the garden.

"Now then, Jetta, you have heard some of what we have been saying, perhaps?"

"Father—"

"About this young American? This Grant?"

She stood cringing in his grasp. Spawn had never used physical violence with Jetta. But he was white with fury now.

"Father, you—you are hurting me."

Perona interposed. "Wait Spawn! Not so rough! Let me talk to her. Jetta, *chica mia*, your Greko is worried—"

"To the hell with that!" Spawn shouted. But he released the girl and she sank trembling to the little seat by the pergola.

Spawn stood over her. "Jetta, look at me! Did you meet—did you talk to Grant last night?"

She wanted to deny it. She clung to his angry gaze. But the habit of all her life of truthfulness with him prevailed.

"Y-yes," she admitted.

Chapter 9: Trapped

“Spawn! Hold!"

There was an instant when it seemed that Spawn would strike the girl. The blood drained from his face, leaving his dark eyes blazing like torches. His hamlike fist went back, but Perona sprang for him and clutched him.

"Hold, Spawn: I will talk to her. Jetta, so you did—"

The torrent of emotion swept Spawn; weakened him so that instead of striking Jetta, he yielded to Perona's clutch and dropped his arm. For a moment he stood gazing at his daughter.

"Is it so? And all my efforts, going for nothing, just like your mother!" He no more than murmured it, and as Perona pushed him, he sank to the bench beside Jetta. But did not touch her, just sat staring. And she stared back, both of then aghast at the enormity of this, her first disobedience.

I never had opportunity to know Spawn, except for the few times which I have mentioned. Perhaps he was at heart a pathetic figure. I think, looking back on it now that Spawn is dead, that there was a

pathos to him. Spawn had loved his wife, Jetta's mother. As a young man he had brought her to the Lowlands to seek his fortune. And when Jetta was an infant, his wife had left him. Run away, abandoning him and their child.

Perhaps Spawn was never mentally normal after that. He had reared Jetta with the belief that sin was inherent in all females. It obsessed him. Warped and twisted all his outlook as he brooded on it through the years. Woman's instincts; woman's love of pleasure, pretty clothes—all could lead only to sin.

And so he had kept Jetta secluded. He had fought what he seemed to see in her as she grew and flowered into girlhood, and denied her everything which he thought might make her like her mother.

Spawn met his death within a few hours of this afternoon I am describing. Perhaps he was no more than a scheming scoundrel. We are instinctively lenient with our appraisal of the dead. I do not know.

"Jetta," Perona said to her accusingly, "that is true, then: you did talk with that miserable Americano last night? You sinful, lying girl."

The contrition within Jetta at disobeying her father faded before this

attack.

"I am not sinful." The trembling left her and she sat up and faced the accusing Perona. "I did but talk to him. You speak lies when you say I am sinful."

"You hear, Spawn? Defiant: already changed from the little Jetta I __"

"Yes, I am changed. I do not love you, Señor Perona. I think I hate you." Her tears were very close, but she finished: "I—I won't marry you. I won't!"

It stung Spawn. He leaped to his feet. "So you talk like that! It has gone so far as this, has it? Get to your room! We will see what you will and what you won't!"

Again the crafty Perona was calmest of them all. He thrust himself in front of Spawn.

"Jetta, to-night you plan to see him again, no? To-night?—here?"

"No," she stammered.

"You lie!"

"No."

"You lie! Spawn look at her! Lying! She has planned to meet him to-night! That is all we want to know." He broke into a cackling chuckle. "That fits my new plan, Spawn. A tryst with Jetta, here in the garden."

"Get to your room," Spawn growled. He dragged her back, and Perona followed them.

"You lie there." Spawn flung her to her couch. "After this night's work is done, we'll see whether you will or you won't."

"She may not stay in here." Perona suggested.

"She will stay."

"You seal her in?"

"I will seal her in."

Perona's eyes roved the little bedroom. One window oval and a door, both overlooking the patio.

"But suppose she should get out? There is no way to seal that

window properly from outside. A cord!"

A long stout silken tassel-cord had been draped by Jetta at the window curtain. Perona snatched it down.

"If her ankles and wrists were tied with this—"

"No!" burst out Jetta. And then a fear for me rushed over her. A realization, forgotten in the stress of this conflict with her father, now swept over her. They were planning harm to me.

"No, do not bind me."

A sudden caution came to her. She was making it worse for me. Already she had done me immense harm.

She said suddenly, "Do what you like with me. I was wrong. I have no interest in that American. It is you, Greko, I—I love."

Spawn did not heed her. Perona insisted, "I would tie her with care."

He helped Spawn rope her ankles, and then her wrists, crossed behind her.

"A little gag, Spawn? She might cry out: we want no interference to-

night." He was ready with a large silken handkerchief. They thrust it into her mouth and tied it behind her neck.

"There," growled Spawn. "You will and you won't: we shall see about that. Lie still, Jetta. If I have need to come again to you—"

They left her. And this time she heard them less clearly. But there were fragments:

Perona: "I will meet him again. After dark, to-night. Yes, he expects me. For his money, Spawn, his pay in advance. This De Boer works not for nothing."

Spawn: "You will arrange about your police on the streets? He can get here to my house safely?"

"Oh yes, at the tri-evening hour, certainly before midnight, before the attack on the mine. You must stay here, Spawn. Pretend to be asleep: it will lure the fool Americano out in to the moonlight."

Jetta could piece it together fairly well. They would have De Boer come and abduct me. Not tell him I was a government agent, with the micro-safety alarm which they suspected I carried, but just tell De Boer that I was a rich American, who could be abducted and held

for a big ransom.

Perona's voice rose with a fragment: "If he springs his alarm, here in the moonlight, you can be here, Spawn, and pretend to try and rescue him. A radio-image of that flashed to Hanley's office will exonerate us of suspicion."

Perona would promise De Boer that the Nareda government would pay the ransom quickly, collecting it later from the United States.

Spawn said, "You think De Boer will believe that?"

"Why should he not? I am skilful at persuasion, no? Let him find out later that the United States Government trackers are after him!" Perona cackled at the thought of it. "What of that? Let him kill this Grant. All the better."

Spawn said abruptly: "The United States may catch De Boer. Have you thought of that, Perona? The fellow would not shield us, but would tell everything."

"And who will believe him? The wild tale of a trapped bandit! Against your word, Spawn? You, an honest and wealthy mine owner? And I—I, Greko Perona, Minister of Internal Affairs of the

Sovereign Power of Nareda! Who will dare to give me the lie because a bandit tells a wild tale with no real facts to prop it?"

"Those police guards at the mine to-night?"

"Admit that they took your bribes? You are witless, Spawn! Let them but admit it to me and of a surety I will fling them into imprisonment! Now listen with care, for the after noon is going...."

Their voices lowered, then faded, and Jetta was left alone and helpless. Spawn went back to the mine to meet me. We returned and had supper, Jetta could dimly hear us.

There was silence about the house during the mid-evening. I had slipped out and followed Perona to his meeting with De Boer. Then Spawn had discovered my absence and had rushed to join Perona and tell him.

But Jetta knew nothing of this. The hour of her tryst with me was approaching. In the darkness of her room as she lay bound and gagged on her couch, she could see the fitful moonlight rising to illumine the window oval.

She squirmed at the cords holding her, but could not loosen them.

They cut into her flesh; her limbs were numb.

The evening wore on. Would I come to the garden tryst?

Jetta could not break her bonds. But gradually she had mouthed the gag loose. Then she heard my hurried footsteps in the patio; then my tense voice.

And at her answer I was pounding on her door. But it had been stoutly sealed by Spawn. I flung my shoulder against it, raging, thumping. But the heavy metal panels would not yield; the seal held intact.

"Jetta!"

"Philip, run away! They want to catch you! De Boer, the bandit, is coming!"

"I know it!"

Fool that I was, to pause with talk! There was no time: I must get Jetta out of here. Break down this door.

But it would not yield. A gas torch would melt this outer seal. Was there a torch here at Spawn's? But I had no time to search for a

torch! Or a bar with which to ram this door—

A panic seized me, with the fresh realization that any instant De Boer and his men would arrive. I beat with futile fists on the door, and Jetta from within, calling to me to get away before I was caught.

This accursed door between us!

And then—after no more than half a minute, doubtless—I thought of the window. My momentary panic left me. I dashed to the window oval. Sealed. But the shutter curtain, and the glassite pane behind it, were fragile.

"Jetta, are you near the window?"

"No. On the bed. They have tied me."

"Look out; I'm breaking through!"

There were loose rocks, as large as my head, set to mark the garden path. I seized one and hurled it. With a crash it went through the window and fell to the floor of the room. A jagged hole showed.

"All right, Jetta?"

"Yes! Yes, Philip."

I squirmed through the oval and dropped to the floor. My arms were cut from the jagged glassite, though I did not know it then. It was dim inside the room, but I could see the outline of the bed with her lying on it.

Her ankles and wrists were tied. I cut the cords with my knife.

She was gasping. "They're planning to capture you. Philip! You should not be here! Get away!"

"Yes. But I'm going to take you with me. Can you stand up?"

I set her on her feet in the center of the room. A shaft of moonlight was coming through the hole in the window.

"Philip! You're bleeding!"

"It is nothing. Cut myself on the glassite. Can you stand alone?"

"Yes."

But her legs, stiffened and numb from having been bound so many hours, bent under her. I caught her as she was falling.

"I'll be—all right in a minute. But Philip, if you stay here—"

"You're going with me!"

"Oh!"

I could carry her, if she could not run. But it would be slow; and it would be difficult to get her through the window. And on the street we would attract too much attention.

"Jetta, try to stand. Stamp your feet. I'll hold you."

I steadied her. Then I bent down, chafing her legs with my hands. Her arms had been limp, but the blood was in them now. She murmured with the tingling pain, and then bent over, frantically helping me rub the circulation back into her legs.

"Better?"

"Yes." She took a weak and trembling step.

"Wait. Let me rub them more, Jetta."

Precious minutes!

"I'll knock out the rest of the window with that rock! We'll run; we'll be out of here in a moment."

"Run where?"

"Away. Into hiding—out of all this. The United States patrol-ship is coming from Porto Rico. It will take us from here."

"Where?"

"Away. To Great New York, maybe. Away from all this; from that old fossil, Perona."

I was stooping beside her.

"I'm all right now, Philip."

I rose up, and suddenly found myself clasping her in my arms; her slight body in the boy's ragged garb pressed against me.

"Jetta, dear, do you trust me? Will you come?"

"Yes. Oh, yes—anywhere, Philip, with you."

For only a breathless instant I lingered, holding her. Then I cast her

off and seized the rock from the floor. The jagged glassite fell away under my blows.

"Now, Jetta. I'll go first—"

But it was too late! I stopped, stricken by the sound of a voice outside!

"He's there! In the girl's room! That's her window!"

Cautious voices in the garden! The thud of approaching footsteps.

I shoved Jetta back and rushed to the broken window oval. The figures of De Boer and his men showed in the moonlight across the patio. They had heard me breaking the glassite. And they saw me, now.

"There he is, De Boer!"

We were trapped!

Chapter 10: The Murder in the Garden

“Hans, keep back! I will go!"

"But Commander—"

"Armed? The hell he is not! Spawn said no. Spawn! Where is Spawn? He was here."

I had dropped back from the window, and, gripping Jetta, stood in the center of the room.

"Jetta, dear."

"Oh. Philip!"

"There's no other way out of here?"

"No! No!"

Only the heavy sealed door, and this broken window. The bandits in the garden had paused at sight of me. Someone had called.

"He may be armed, De Boer."

They had stopped their forward rush and darted into the shelter of the pergola. I might be armed!

We could hear their low voices not ten feet from us. But I was not armed, except for my knife. Futile weapon, indeed.

"Jetta, keep back. If they should fire—"

I got a look through the oval. De Boer was advancing upon it, with his barreled projector half levelled. He saw me again. He called:

"You American, come out!"

I crouched on the floor, pushing Jetta back to where the shadows of the bed hid her.

"You American!"

He was close outside the window. "Come out—or I am coming in!"

I said abruptly, "Come!"

My blade was in my hand. If he showed himself I could slash his throat, doubtless. But what about Jetta? My thoughts flashed upon the heels of my defiant invitation. Suppose, as De Boer climbed in

the window, I killed him? I could not escape, and his infuriated fellows would rush us, firing through the oval, sweeping the room, killing us both. But Jetta now was in no danger. Her father was outside, and these bandits were her father's friends. I would have to yield.

I called, louder, "Why don't you come in?"

Could I hold them off? Frighten them off, for a time, and make enough noise so that perhaps someone passing in the nearby street would give the alarm and bring help?

There was a sudden silence in the patio. The bandits had so far made as little commotion as possible. Presently I could hear their low voices.

I heard an oath. De Boer's head and shoulders appeared in the window oval! His levelled projector came through. Perhaps he would not have fired, but I did not dare take the chance. I was crouching almost under the muzzle, so I straightened, gripped it, and flung it up. I then slashed at his face with my knife, but he gripped my wrist with powerful fingers. My knife fell as he twisted my wrist. His projector had not fired. It was jammed between us. One of his huge arms reached in and encircled me.

"Damn you!"

He muttered it, but I shouted, "Fool! De Boer, the bandit!"

I was aware of a commotion out in the garden.

"... Bring all Nareda on our ears? De Boer, shut him up!"

I was gripping the projector, struggling to keep its muzzle pointed upwards. With a heave of his giant arms De Boer lifted me and jerked me bodily through the window. I fell on my feet, still fighting. But other hands seized me. It was no use. I yielded suddenly. I panted:

"Enough!"

They held me. One of them growled. "Another shout and we will leave you here dead. Commander, *look*!"

My shirt was torn open. The electrode band about my chest was exposed! De Boer towered head and shoulders over me. I gazed up, passive in the grip of two or three of his men, and saw his face. His heavy jaw dropped as he gazed at my little diaphragms, the electrode.

He knew now for the first time that this was no private citizen he had assaulted. This official apparatus meant that I was a Government agent.

There was an instant of shocked silence. An expression grim and furious crossed the giant bandit's face.

"So this is it? Hans, careful—hold him!"

Jetta was still in her room, silent now. I heard Spawn's voice, close at hand in the patio.

"De Boer! Careful!" It was the most cautious of half-whispers.

Abruptly someone reached for my chest; jerked at the electrode; tore its fragile wires—the tiny grids and thumbnail amplifiers; jerked and ripped and flung the whole little apparatus to the garden path. But it sang its warning note as the wires broke. Up in Great New York Hanley knew then that catastrophe had fallen upon me.

For a brief instant the crestfallen bandit mumbled at what he had done. Then came Spawn's voice:

"Got him, De Boer? Good!"

Triumphant Spawn! He advanced across the garden with his heavy tread. And to me, and I am sure to De Boer as well, there came the swift realization that Spawn had been hiding safely in the background. But my detector was smashed now. It might have imaged De Boer assailing me: but now that it was smashed, Spawn could act freely.

"Good! So you have him! Make away to the mine!"

I did not see De Boer's face at that instant. But I saw his weapon come up—an act wholly impulsive, no doubt. A flash of fury!

He levelled the projector, not at me, but at the on-coming Spawn.

"You damn liar!"

"De Boer—" It was a scream of terror from Spawn. But it came too late. The projector hissed; spat its tiny blue puff. The needle drilled Spawn through the heart. He toppled, flung up his arms, and went down, silently, to sprawl on his face across the garden path.

De Boer was cursing, startled at his own action. The men holding me tightened their grip. I heard Jetta cry out, but not at what had happened in the garden: she was unaware of that. One of the bandits

had left the group and climbed into her room. Her cry now was suppressed, as though the man's hand went over her mouth. And in the silence came his mumbled voice:

"Shut up, you!"

There was the sound of a scuffle in there. I tore at the men holding me.

"Let me go! Jetta! Come out!"

De Boer dashed for the window. I was still struggling. A hand cuffed me in the face. A projector rammed into my side.

"Stop it, fool American!"

De Boer came back with a chastened bandit ahead of him. The man was muttering and rubbing his shoulder, and De Boer said:

"Try anything like that again, Cartner, and I won't be so easy on you."

De Boer was dragging Jetta, holding her by a wrist. She looked like a terrified, half-grown boy, so small was she beside this giant. But the woman's lines of her, and the long dark hair streaming about her

white face and over her shoulders, were unmistakable.

"His daughter." De Boer was chuckling. "The little Jetta."

All this had happened in certainly no more than five minutes. I realized that no alarm had been raised: the bandits had managed it all with reasonable quiet.

There were six of the bandits here, and De Boer, who towered over us all. I saw him now as a swaggering giant of thirty-odd, with a heavy-set smooth-shaved, handsome face.

He held Jetta off. "Damn, how you have grown, Jetta."

Someone said, "She knows too much."

And someone else, "We will take her with us. If you leave her here, De Boer—"

"Why should I leave her? Why? Leave her—for Perona?"

Then I think that for the first time Jetta saw her father's body lying sprawled on the path. She cried, "Philip!" Then she half turned and murmured: "Father!"

She wavered, almost falling. "Father—" She went down, fainting, falling half against me and against De Boer, who caught her slight body in his arms.

"Come, we'll get back. Drag him!"

"But you can't carry that girl out like that, De Boer."

"Into the house: there is an open door. Hans, go out and bring the car around to this side. Give me the cloaks. There is no alarm yet."

De Boer chuckled again. "Perona was nice to keep the police off this street to-night!"

We went into the kitchen. An auto-car, which to the village people might have been there on Spawn's mining business, slid quietly up to the side entrance. A cloak was thrown over Jetta. She was carried like a sack and put into the car.

I suddenly found an opportunity to break loose. I leaped and struck one of the men. But the others were too quickly on me. The kitchen table went over with a crash.

Then something struck me on the back of the head: I think it was the handle of De Boer's great knife. The kitchen and the men struggling

with me faded. I went into a roaring blackness.

Chapter 11: Aboard the Bandit Flyer

I was dimly conscious of being inside the cubby of the car, with bandits sitting over me. The car was rolling through the village streets. Ascending. We must be heading for Spawn's mine. I thought of Jetta. Then I heard her voice and felt her stir beside me.

The roaring in my head made everything dreamlike. I sank half into unconsciousness again. It seemed an endless interval, with only the muttering hiss of the car's mechanism and the confused murmurs of the bandits' voices.

Then my strength came. The cold sweat on me was drying in the night breeze that swept through the car as it climbed the winding ascent. I could see through its side oval a vista of bloated Lowland crags with moonlight on them.

It seemed that we should be nearly to the mine. We stopped. The men in the car began climbing out.

De Boer's voice: "Is he conscious now? I'll take the girl."

Someone bent over me. "You hear me?"

"Yes," I said.

I found myself outside the car. They held me on my feet. Someone gratuitously cuffed me, but De Boer's voice issued a sharp, low-toned rebuke.

"Stop it! Get him and the girl aboard."

There seemed thirty or forty men gathered here. Silent dark figures in black robes. The moonlight showed them, and occasionally one flashed a hand search-beam. It was De Boer's main party gathered to attack the mine.

I stood wavering on my feet. I was still weak and dizzy, with a lump on the back of my head where I had been struck. The scene about me was at first unfamiliar. We were in a rocky gully. Rounded broken walls. Caves and crevices. Dried ooze piled like a ramp up one side. The moonlight struggled down through a gathering mist overhead.

I saw, presently, where we were. Above the mine, not below it: and I realized that the car had encircled the mine's cauldron and climbed to a height beyond it. Down the small gully I could see where it opened into the cauldron about a hundred feet below us. The lights of the mine winked in the blurred moonlight shadows.

The bandits led me up the gully. The car was left standing against the

gully side where it had halted. De Boer, or one of his men, was carrying Jetta.

The flyer was here. We came upon it suddenly around a bend in the gully. Although I had only seen the nose if it earlier in the evening. I recognized this to be the same. It was in truth a strange looking flyer: I had never seen one quite like it. Barrel-winged, like a Jantzen: multi-propellored: and with folding helicopters for the vertical lifts and descent. And a great spreading fan-tail, in the British fashion. It rested on the rocks like a fat-winged bird with its long cylindrical body puffed out underneath. A seventy-foot cabin: fifteen feet wide, possibly. A line of small window-portes; a circular glassite front to the forward control-observatory cubby, with the propellors just above it, and the pilot cubby up there behind them. And underneath the whole, a landing gear of the Fraser-Mood springed-cushion type: and an expanding, air-coil pontoon-bladder for landing upon water.

All this was usual enough. Yet, with the brief glimpses I had as my captors hurried me toward the landing incline, I was aware of something very strange about this flyer. It was all dead black, a bloated-bellied black bird. The moonlight struck it, but did not gleam or shimmer on its black metal surface. The cabin window-portes glowed with a dim blue-gray light from inside. But as I chanced to

gaze at one a green film seemed to cross it like a shade, so that it winked and its light was gone. Yet a hole was there, like an eye-socket. An empty green hole.

We were close to the plane now, approaching the bottom of the small landing-incline. The wing over my head was like a huge fat barrel cut length-wise in half. I stared up; and suddenly it seemed that the wing was melting. Fading. Its inner portion, where it joined the body, was clear in the moonlight. But the tips blurred and faded. An aspect curiously leprous. Uncanny. Gruesome.

They took me up the landing-incline. A narrow vaulted corridor ran length-wise of the interior, along one side of the cabin body. To my left as we headed for the bow control room, the corridor window-portes showed the rocks outside. To the right of the corridor, the ship's small rooms lay in a string. A metal interior. I saw almost nothing save metal in various forms. Grid floor and ceiling. Sheet metal walls and partitions. Furnishings and fabrics, all of spun metal. And all dead black.

We entered the control room. The two men holding me flung me in a chair. I had been searched. They had taken from me the tiny, colored magnesium light-flashes. How easy for the plans of men to go astray! Hanley and I had arranged that I was to signal the Porto

Rican patrol-ship with those flares.

"Sit quiet!" commanded my guard.

I retorted, "If you hit me again, I won't."

De Boer came in, carrying Jetta. He put her in a chair near me, and she sat huddled tense. In the dim gray light of the control room her white face with its big staring dark eyes was turned toward me. But she did not speak, nor did I.

The bandits ignored us. De Boer moved about the room, examining a bank of instruments. Familiar instruments, most of them. The usual aero-controls and navigational devices. A radio audiphone transmitter and receiver, with its attendant eavesdropping cut-offs. And there was an ether-wave mirror-grid. De Boer bent over it. And then I saw him fastening upon his forehead an image-lens. He said:

"You stay here, Hans. You and Gutierrez. Take care of the girl and this fellow Grant. Don't hurt them."

Gutierrez was a swarthy Latin American. He smiled. "For why would I hurt him? You say he is worth much money to us, De Boer. And the girl, ah—"

De Boer towered over him. "Just lay a finger on her and you will regret it, Gutierrez! You stay at your controls. Be ready. This affair it will take no more than half an hour."

A man came to the control room entrance. "You come, Commander?"

"Yes. Right at once."

"The men are ready. From the mine we might almost be seen here. This delay—"

"Coming, Rausch."

But he lingered a moment more. "Hans, my finder will show you what I do. Keep watch. When we come back, have all ready for flight. This Grant had an alarm-detector. Heaven only knows what eavesdropping and relaying he has done. And for sure there is hell now in Spawn's garden. The Nareda police are there, of course. They might track us up here."

He paused before me. "I think I would not cause trouble, Grant."

"I'm not a fool."

"Perhaps not." He turned to Jetta. "No harm will come to you. Fear nothing."

He wound his dark cloak about his giant figure and left the control room. In a moment, through the rounded observing pane beside me, I saw him outside on the moonlit rocks. His men gathered about him. There were forty of them, possibly, with ten or so left here aboard to guard the flyer.

And in another moment the group of dark-cloaked figures outside crept off in single file like a slithering serpent, moving down the rock defile toward where in the cauldron pit the lights of the mine shone on its dark silent buildings.

Chapter 12: The Attack on the Mine

There was a moment when I had an opportunity to speak with Jetta. Gutierrez sat watchfully by the archway corridor entrance with a needle projector across his knees. The fellow Hans, a big, heavy-set half-breed Dutchman with a wide-collared leather jerkin and wide, knee-length pantaloons, laid his weapon carefully aside and busied himself with his image mirror. There would soon be images upon it, I knew: De Boer had the lens-finder on his forehead, and the scenes at the mine, as De Boer saw them would be flashed back to us here.

This Gutierrez was very watchful. A move on my part and I knew he would fling a needle through me.

My thoughts flew. Hanley had notified Porto Rico. The patrol-ship had almost enough time to get here by now.

I felt Jetta plucking at me. She whispered:

"They have gone to attack the mine."

"Yes."

"I heard it planned. Señor Perona—"

Her hurried whispers told me further details of Perona's scheme. So this was a pseudo attack! Perona would take advantage of it and hide the quicksilver. De Boer would return presently and escape. And hold me for ransom. I chuckled grimly. Not so easy for a bandit, even one as clever as De Boer at hiding in the Lowland depths to arrange a ransom for an agent of the United States. Our entire Lowland patrol would be after him in a day.

Jetta's swift whispers made it all clear to me. It was Perona's scheme.

She ended, "And my father—" Her voice broke; her eyes flooded suddenly with tears "Oh, Philip, he was good to me, my poor father."

I saw that the mirror before Hans was glowing with its coming image. I pressed Jetta's hand.

"Yes, Jetta."

One does not disparage the dead. I could not exactly subscribe to Jetta's appraisal of her parent, but I did not say so.

"Jetta, the mirror is on."

I turned away from her toward the instrument table. Gutierrez at the door raised his weapon. I said hastily, "Nothing. I—we just want to

see the mirror."

I stood beside Hans. He glanced at me and I tried to smile ingratiatingly.

"This attack will be successful, eh, Hans?"

"Damn. I hope so."

The mirror was glowing. Hans turned a switch to dim the tube-lights of the room so that we might see the images better. It brought a protest from Gutierrez.

I swung around. "I'm not a fool! You can see me perfectly well: kill me if I make trouble. I want to see the attack."

"*Por Dios*, if you try anything—"

"I won't!"

"Shut!" growled Hans. "The audiphone is on. The big adventure—and the commander—leaves me here just to watch!"

A slit in the observatory pane was open. The dark figure of one of the bandits on guard outside came and called softly up to us.

"Started. Hans?"

"Starting."

"Should it go wrong, call out."

"Yes. But it will not."

"There was an alarm, relayed probably to Great New York, the commander said, from Spawn's garden. These cursed prisoners—"

"Shut! You keep watch out there. It is starting."

The guard slunk away. My attention went back to the mirror. An image was formed there now, coming from the eye of the lens upon De Boer's forehead. It swayed with his walking. He was evidently leading his men, for none of them were in the scene. The dark rocks were moving past. The lights of the mine were ahead and below, but coming nearer.

The audiphone hummed and crackled. And through it, De Boer's low-voiced command sounded:

"To the left is the better path. Keep working to the left."

The image of the rocks and the mine swung with a dizzying sweep as De Boer turned about. Then again he was creeping forward.

The mine lights came closer. De Beer's whispered voice said: "There they are!"

I could see the lights of the mine's guards flash on. A group of Spawn's men gathered before the smelter building. The challenge sounded.

"Who are you? Stop!"

And De Boer's murmur: "That is correct, as Perona said. They expect us. Well," he ended with a sardonic laugh, "expect us."

His projector went up. He fired. In the silence of the control room we could hear the audiphoned hiss of it, and see the flash in the mirror-scene. He had fired into the air.

Again his low voice to his men: "Hold steady. They will run."

The group of figures at the smelter separated, waved and scattered back into the deeper shadows. Their hand-lights were extinguished, but the moonlight caught and showed them. They were running away; hiding in the crags. They fired a shot or two, high in the air.

De Boer was advancing swiftly now. The image swayed and shifted, raised and lowered rhythmically as he ran. And the dark shape of the smelter building loomed large as he neared it.

I felt Jetta beside me: heard her whisper: "Why, he should attack and then come back! Greko told my father—"

But De Boer was not coming back! He was dashing for the smelter entrance. Spawn's guards must have known then that there was something wrong. Their shots hissed, still fired high, and our grid sounded their startled shouts. Then as De Boer momentarily turned his head, I saw what was taking place to the side of him. A detachment of the bandits had followed the retreating guards. The bandits' shots were levelled now. Dim stabs of light in the gloom. One of the guards screamed as he was struck.

he attack was real! But it was over in a moment. Spawn's men, those who were not struck down, plunged away and vanished. Perona had disconnected the mine's electrical safeguards. The smelter door was sealed, but it gave before the blows of a metal bar two of De Boer's

men were carrying.

In the unguarded, open strong-room, Perona, alone, was absorbed in his task of carrying the ingots of quicksilver down into the hidden compartment beneath its metal floor.

Our mirror was vague and dim now with a moving interior of the main smelter room as De Boer plunged through. At the strong-room entrance he paused, with his men crowding behind him. The figure of Perona showed in the vague light: he was stooping under the weight of one of the little ingots. Beside him yawned the small trap-opening leading downward.

He saw De Boer. He straightened, startled, and then shouted with a terrified Spanish oath. De Boer's projector was levelled: the huge, foreshortened muzzle of it blotted out half our image. It hissed its puff of light—a blinding flash on our mirror—in the midst of which the dark shape of Perona's body showed as it crumpled and fell. Like Spawn, he met instant death.

Jetta was gripping me. "Why—" Gutierrez was with us. Hans was bending forward, watching the mirror. He muttered, "Got him!"

I saw a chance to escape, and pulled at Jetta. But at once Gutierrez

stepped backward.

"Like him I will strike you dead!" he said.

No chance of escape. I had thought Gutierrez absorbed by the mirror, but he was not. I protested vehemently:

"I haven't moved, you fool. I have no intention of moving."

And now De Boer and his men were carrying up the ingots. A man for each bar. A confusion of blurred swaying shapes, and low-voiced, triumphant murmurs from our disc.

Then De Boer was outside the smelter house, and we saw a little queue of the bandits carrying the treasure up the defile. Coming back here to the flyer. There was no pursuit; the mine guards were gone.

The triumphant bandits would be here in a few moments.

"*Ave Maria, que magnifico!*" Gutierrez had retreated to our doorway, more alert than ever upon me and Jetta. Hans called through the window-slit:

"All is well, Franks!"

"Got it?"

"Yes! Make ready."

There was a stir outside as several of the bandits hastened down the defile to meet De Boer. And the tread of others, inside the flyer at their posts, preparing for hasty departure.

Hans snapped off the audiphone and mirror. He bent over his control panel. "All is well, Gutierrez. In a moment we start."

Through the observatory window I saw the line of De Boer's men coming: Abruptly Hans gave a cry. "Look!"

A glow was in the room. A faint aura of light. And our disconnected instruments were crackling, murmuring with interference. Eavesdropping waves were here! Hans realised it: so did I.

But there was no need for theory. From outside came shouts.

"Patrol-ship!"

"Hurry!"

The ship, suddenly exposing its lights, was perfectly visible above

us. Five thousand feet up, possibly. A tiny silver bird in the moonlight: but even with the naked eye I could see by its light pattern that it was the official Porto Rican patrol-liner. It saw us down here: recognized this bandit flyer, no doubt.

And it was coming down!

There was a confusion as the bandits rushed aboard. The patrol was dropping in a swift spiral. I watched tensely, holding Jetta, with the turmoil of the embarking bandits around me. Gutierrez stood with levelled weapon.

"They have not moved, Commander."

De Boer was here. The treasure was aboard.

"Ready, Hans. Lift us."

The landing portes clanged as they closed. Hans shoved at his switches. I heard the helicopter engines thumping. A vertical lift: there was no space in this rocky defile for any horizontal take-away.

He was very calm, this De Boer. He sat in a chair at a control-bank of instruments unfamiliar to me.

"Full power, Hans: I tell you. Lift us!"

The ship was quivering. We lifted. The rocks of the gully dropped away. But the patrol-ship was directly over us. Was De Boer rushing into a collision?

"Now, forward, Hans."

We poised for the level flight. Did De Boer think he could out-distance this patrol-ship, the swiftest type of flyer in the Service? I knew that was impossible.

The silver ship overhead was circling, watchful. And as we levelled for forward flight it shot a warning searchlight beam down across our bow, ordering us to land.

De Boer laughed. "They think they have us!"

I saw his hand go to a switch. A warning siren resounded through our corridor, warning the bandits of De Boer's next move. But I did not know it then: the thing caught me unprepared.

De Boer flung another switch. My senses reeled. I heard Jetta cry out. My arm about her tightened.

A moment of strange whirling unreality. The control room seemed fading about me. The tube-lights dimmed. A green glow took their place—a lurid sheen in which the cubby and the tense faces of De Boer and Hans showed with ghastly pallor. Everything was unreal. The voices of De Boer and Hans sounded with a strange tonelessness. Stripped of the timber that made one differ from the other. Hollow ghosts of human voices. By the sound I could not tell which was De Boer and which was Hans.

The corridor was dark; all the lights on the ship faded into this horrible dead green. The window beside me had a film on it. A dead, dark opening where moonlight had been. Then I realized that I was beginning to see through it once more. Starlight. Then the moonlight.

We had soared almost level with the descending patrol-ship. We went past it, a quarter of a mile away. Went past, and it did not follow. It was still circling.

I knew then what had happened. And why this bandit ship had seemed of so strange an aspect. We were invisible! At four hundred yards, even in the moonlight, the patrol could not distinguish us. Only ten of these X-flyers were in existence: they were the closest secret of the U. S. Anti-War Department. No other government had

them except in impractical imitations. I had never even seen one before.

But this bandit ship was one. And I recalled that a year ago, a suppressed dispatch intimated that the Service had lost one—wrecked in the Lowlands and never found.

So this was that lost invisible flyer? De Boer, using it for smuggling, with Perona and Spawn as partners. And now, De Boer making away in it with Spawn's treasure!

The bandit's hollow, toneless, unreal chuckle sounded in the gruesome lurid green of the control room.

"I think that surprised them!"

The tiny silver shape of the baffled local patrol-ship faded behind us as we flew northward over heavy, fantastic crags; far above the tiny twinkling lights of the village of Nareda—out over the sullen dark surface of the Nares Sea.

Chapter 13: The Flight to the Bandit Stronghold

Suring this flight of some six hours—north, and then, I think, northeast—to the remote Lowland fastness where De Boer's base was located, I had no opportunity to learn much of the operation of this invisible flyer. But it was the one which had been lost. Wrecked, no doubt, and the small crew aboard it all killed. The vessel, however, was not greatly damaged: the crew were killed doubtless by escaping poisonous gases when the flyer struck.

How long it lay unfound, I cannot say. Perhaps, for days, it still maintained its invisibility, while the frantic planes of the U. S. Anti-War Department tried in vain to locate it. And then, with its magnetic batteries exhausting themselves, it must have become visible. Perona, making a solo flight upon Nareda business to Great London, came upon it. Perona, Spawn and De Boer were then in the midst of their smuggling activities. They salvaged the vessel secretly. De Boer, with an incongruous flair for mechanical science, was enabled in his bandit camp, to recondition the flyer—building a workshop for the purpose, with money which Perona freely supplied.

Some of this I learned from De Boer, some is surmise: but I am sure it is close to the facts.

I have since had an opportunity—through my connection with this adventure which I am recording—of going aboard one of the X-flyers of the Anti-War Department, and seeing it in operation with its technical details explained to me. But since it is so important a Government secret, I cannot set it down here. The principles involved are complex: the postulates employed, and the mathematical formulae developing them in theory, are far too intricate for my understanding. Yet the practical workings are simple indeed. Some of them were understood as far back as 1920 and '30, when that pioneer of modern astrophysics, Albert Einstein, first proved that a ray of light is deflected from its normal straight path when passing through a magnetic field.

I am sorry that I cannot give here more than this vague hint of the workings of the fantastic invisible flyers which to-day are so often the subject of speculation by the general public which never has seen them, and perhaps never will. But I think, too, that a lengthy pedantic discourse here would be out of place. And tiring. After all, I am trying to tell only what happened to me in this adventure. And to little Jetta.

A very strangely capable fellow, this young De Boer. A modern pirate: no other age could have produced him. He did not spare Perona's money, that was obvious. From his hidden camp he must

have made frequent visits to the great Highland centers, purchasing scientific equipment: until now, when his path crossed mine. I found him surrounded by most of the every-day devices of our modern world. The village of Nareda was primitive: backward. Save for its modern lights, a few local audiphones and image-finders, and its official etheric connections with other world capitals, it might have been a primitive Latin American village of a hundred years ago.

But not so De Boer's camp, which presently I was to see. Nor this, his flyer, with which his smuggling activities had puzzled Hanley's Office for so many months. There was nothing primitive here.

De Boer himself was a swaggering villain. I saw him now with his cloak discarded, in the normal tube-lights of the control room when, after a time, the mechanism of invisibility of the flyer was shut off. A fellow of six feet and a half at the very least, this De Boer. Heavy, yet with his great height and strength, lean and graceful. He wore a fabric shirt, with a wide-rolled collar. A wide belt of tanned hide, with lighters, a little electron drink-cooler and other nick-nackeries hanging from tasseled cords—and a naked, ugly-looking knife blade clipped beside a holster which held an old-fashioned exploding projector of leaden steel-tipped bullets.

His trousers were of leather, wide-flaring, ending at his brawny bare

knees, with wide-cut, limp leather boots flapping about his calves in ancient piratical fashion. They had flaring soles, these shoes, for walking upon the Lowland caked ooze. The uppers were useless: I rather think he wore them because they were picturesque. He was a handsome fellow, with rough-hewn features. A wide mouth, and very white, even teeth. A cruel mouth, when it went grim. But the smile was intriguing: I should think particularly so to women.

He had a way with him, this devil-may-care bandit. Strange mixture of a pirate of old and an outlaw of our modern world. With a sash at his waist, a red handkerchief about his forehead, and a bloody knife between his teeth. I could have fancied him a fabled pirate of the Spanish Main. A few hundred years ago when these dry Lowlands held the tossing seas. But I had seen him, so far, largely seated quietly in his chair at his instrument table, a cigarette dangling from his lips, and, instead of a red bandanna about his forehead, merely the elastic band holding the lens of his image-finder. It caught in the locks of his curly black hair. He pushed it askew; and then, since he did not need it now, discarded it altogether.

Where we went I could not surmise, except that we flew low over the sullen black waters of the Nares Sea and then headed northeast. We kept well below the zero-height, with the dark crags of the Lowlands passing under us.

The night grew darker. Storm clouds obscured the moon; and it was then that De Boer shut off the mechanism of invisibility. The control room, with only the watchful Gutierrez now in it—besides De Boer, Jetta and myself—was silent and orderly. But there were sounds of roistering from down the ship's corridor. The bandits, with this treasure of the radiumized quicksilver ingots aboard, were already triumphantly celebrating.

I sat whispering with Jetta. De Boer, busy with charts and navigational instruments, ignored us, and Gutierrez, so long as we did not move, seemed not to object to our whispers.

The night slowly passed. De Boer served us food, calling to one of his men to shove a slide before us. For himself, he merely drank his coffee and an alcoholic drink at his instrument table, while absorbed in his charts.

The roistering of the men grew louder. De Boer leaped to his feet, cursed them roundly, then went back to his calculations. He stood once before Jetta, regarding her with a strange, slow smile which made my heart pound. But he turned away in a moment.

The bandits, for all De Boer's admonitions, were now ill-conditioned for handling this flyer. But I saw, through the small grid-opening in

the control room ceiling, the pilot in his cubby upon the wing-top. He sat alert and efficient, with his lookout beside him.

The night presently turned really tumultuous, with a great wind overhead, and storm clouds of ink, shot through occasionally by lightning flashes. We flew lower, at minus 2,000 feet, on the average. The heavy air was sultry down here, with only a dim blurred vista of the depths beneath us. I fancied that now we were bending eastward, out over the great basin pit of the mid-Atlantic area. No vessels passed us, or, if they did, I did not sight them.

De Boer had a detector on his table. Occasionally it would buzz with calls: liners or patrols in our general neighborhood. He ignored them with a sardonic smile. Once or twice, when our dim lights might have been sighted, he altered our course sharply. And, when at one period we passed over the lights of some Lowland settlement, he flung us again into invisibility until we were beyond range.

I had, during these hours, ample opportunity to whisper with Jetta. But there was so little for us to say. I knew all of Spawn's and Perona's plot. Both were dead: it was De Boer with whom we were menaced now. And as I saw his huge figure lounging at his table, and his frowning, intent face, the vision of the aged, futile Perona, who had previously been my adversary, seemed inoffensive indeed.

De Boer obviously was pleased with himself. He had stolen half a million dollars of treasure, and was making off with it to his base in the depths. He would smuggle these ingots into the world markets at his convenience; months from now, probably. Meanwhile, what did he intend to do with me? And Jetta? Ransom me? I wondered how he could manage it. And the thought pounded me. What about Jetta? I felt now that she was all the world to me. Her safety, beyond any thought of smugglers or treasure, was all that concerned me. But what was I going to do about it?

I pressed her hand. "Jetta, you're not too frightened, are you?"

"No, Philip."

Her mind, I think, was constantly on her father, lying dead back there on his garden path. I had not spoken of him, save once. She threatened instant tears, and I stopped.

"Do not be too frightened. We'll get out of this."

"Yes."

"He can't escape. Jetta; he can't hide. Why, in a day or so all the patrols of the United States Lowland Service will be after us!"

But if the patrol-ships assailed De Boer, if he found things going badly—he could so easily kill Jetta and me. He might be caught, but we would never come through it alive.

My thoughts drifted along, arriving nowhere, just circling in the same futile rounds. I was aware of Jetta falling asleep beside me, her face against my shoulder, her fingers clutching mine. She looked like a half grown, slender, ragged boy. But her woman's hair lay thick on my arm, and one of the dark tresses fell to my hand. I turned my fingers in it. This strange little woman. Was my love for her foredoomed to end in tragedy? I swore then that I would not let it be so.

Chapter 14: Jetta Takes a Hand

I came from my reverie to find De Boer before me. He was standing with legs planted wide, arms folded across his deep chest, and on his face an ironic smile.

"So tired! My little captives, *di mi*! You look like babes lost in a wood."

I disengaged myself from Jetta, resting her against a cushion, and she did not awaken. I stood up, fronting De Boer.

"What are you going to do with me?" I demanded.

He held his ironic smile. "Take you to my camp. You'll be well hidden, no one can follow me. My X-flyer's a very handy thing to have, isn't it?"

"So you're the smuggler I was sent after?"

That really amused him. "Er—yes. Those tricksters, Perona and Spawn—we were what you would call partners. He had—the perfumed Perona—what he thought was a clever scheme for us. I was to take all the risk, and he and Spawn get most of the money. Chah! They thought I was imbecile—pretending to attack a treasure

and being such a fool that I would not seize it for myself! Not De Boer!" He chuckled. "Well, so very little did they know me. No treasure yet touched De Boer's fingers without lingering!"

He was in a talkative mood, and drew up his chair and slouched in it. I saw that he had been drinking some alcholite beverage, not enough to befuddle him, but enough to take the keen edge off his wits, and make him want to talk.

"Sit down, Grant."

"I'll stand."

"As you like."

"What are you going to do with me?" I demanded again. "Try to ransom me for a fat price from the United States?"

He smiled sourly. "You need not be sarcastic, young lad. The better for you if I get a ransom."

"Then I hope you get it."

"Perona's idea," he added. "I will admit it looked possible: I did not know then you had Government protection." He went grim. "That

was Perona and Spawn's trickery. Well, they paid for it. No one plays De Boer false and lives to tell it. Perona and Spawn wanted to get rid of you—because you annoyed them."

"Did I?"

"With the little Jetta, I fancy." His gaze went to the sleeping Jetta and back to me. "Perona was very sensitive where this little woman was concerned. Why not? An oldish fool like him—"

I could agree with that, but I did not say so.

I said, "You'd better cast me loose, Jetta and me. I suppose you realize, De Boer, that you'll have the patrols like a pack of hounds after you. Jetta is a Nareda citizen: the United States will take that up. There's the theft of the treasure. And as you say, I'm a Government agent."

He nodded. "Your Government is over-zealous in protecting its agents. That I know, Grant. I might have left you alone, there in the garden, when I realized it. But that, by damn, was too late! Live men talk. Any way, if I cannot ransom you, to kill you is very easy. And dead men are shut-mouthed."

"I'm still alive, De Boer."

He eyed me. "You talk brave."

This condescending, amused giant!

I retorted. "How are you going to ransom me?"

"That," he said. "I have not yet planned it. A delicate business."

I ventured, "And Jetta?" My heart was beating fast.

"Jetta," he said with a sudden snap, "is none of your business."

Again his gaze went toward her. "I might marry her: why not? I am not wholly a villain. I could marry her legally in Cape Town, with all the trappings of clergy—and be immune from capture under the laws there. If she is seventeen. I have forgotten her age, it's been so long since I knew her. Is she seventeen? She does not look it."

I said shortly. "I don't know how old she is."

"But we can ask her when she awakens, can't we?"

He was amusing himself with me. And yet, looking back on it now, I

believe he was more than half serious. From his pouch he drew a small cylinder. "Have a drink, Grant. After all I bear you no ill-will. A man can but follow his trade: you were trying to be a good Government agent."

"Thanks."

"And then you may make it possible for me to pick a nice ransom. Here."

"I hope so." I declined the drink.

"Afraid for your wits?"

I said impulsively, "I want all my wits to make sure you handle this ransom properly, De Boer. I'm as interested as you are: in that at least, we are together."

He grinned, tipped the cylinder at his lips for a long drink.

"Quite so—a mutual interest. Let us be friends over it."

His gaze wandered back to Jetta. He added slowly:

"She is very lovely, Grant. A little woodland flower, just ready for

plucking." A sentimental tone, but there was in his expression a ribald flippancy that sent a shudder through me. "She has quite overcome you, Grant. Well, why not me as well? I am certainly more of a man than you. We must admit that Perona had a good eye."

My thoughts were wandering. Suppose I could not find an opportunity to escape with Jetta? De Boer might successfully ransom me and take her to Cape Town. Or if he feared that to try for the ransom would be too dangerous, doubtless he would kill me out of hand. An ill outcome indeed! Nor could I forget that there was half a million of treasure involved.

It was obvious to me that Hanley would not permit the patrol-ships to attack De Boer with the lives of Jetta and myself at stake. Hanley knew, or suspected, that De Boer was operating an invisible flyer, but I did not see how that could help Hanley much. Markes, acting for Nareda, would doubtless be willing to ransom Jetta: the United States would ransom me. I must urge the ransom plan, because for all the money in the world I would not endanger Jetta, nor let this bandit carry her off.

Or could I escape with her, and still find some means to save the treasure? It was Jetta's treasure now, two-thirds of it, for it had legally belonged to her father. Could I save it, and her as well?

Not by any move of mine, here now on this flyer. That was impossible. In De Boer's camp, perhaps. But that, too, I doubted. He was too clever a scoundrel to be lax in guarding me.

But in the effecting of a ransom—the exchange of me, and perhaps Jetta, for a sum of money—that would be a delicate transaction, and some little thing could easily go wrong for De Boer. There would be my chance. I would have to make something go wrong! Get in his confidence now so that I would have some say in arranging the details of the ransom. Make him think I was only concerned for my own safety. Appear clever in helping plan the exchange. And then so manipulate the thing that I could escape with Jetta and save the treasure—and the ransom money as well. And capture De Boer, since that was what Hanley had sent me out to accomplish.

Thoughts fly swiftly. All this flashed to me. I had no details as yet. But that I must get into De Boer's confidence stood but clearly.

I said abruptly, "De Boer, since we are to be friends—"

"So you prefer to sit down now?"

"Yes." I had drawn a small settle to face him. "De Boer, do you intend to ask a ransom for Jetta?"

"You insist with that question?"

"That is my way. Then we can understand each other. Do you?"

"No," he said shortly.

I frowned. "I think I could get you a big price."

"I think I should prefer the little Jetta, Grant."

I held myself outwardly unmoved. "I don't blame you. But you will ransom me? It can be worked out. I have some ideas."

"Yes," he agreed. "It can be worked perhaps. I have not thought of details yet. You are much concerned for your safety, Grant? Fear not."

An amused thought evidently struck him. He added. "It occurs to me how easy, if I am going to ransom you, it will be for me to send you back dead. You might, if I send you back alive, tell them a lot of things about me."

"I will not talk."

"Not," he said, "if I close your mouth for good."

I had no retort. There was no answering such logic; and with his murders of Spawn and Perona, and the deaths of some of the police guards at the mine, the murder of me would not put him in much worse a position.

He was laughing ironically. Suddenly he checked himself.

"Well, Jetta! So you have awakened?"

Jetta was sitting erect. How long she had been awake, what she had heard. I could not say. Her gaze went from De Boer to me, and back again.

"Yes, I am awake."

It seemed that the look she flashed me carried a warning. But whatever it was, I had no chance of pondering it, for it was driven from my mind by surprise at her next words.

"Awake, yes! And interested, hearing this Grant bargain with you for his life."

It surprised De Boer as well. But the alcholite had dulled his wits, and Jetta realized this, and presumed upon it.

"Ho!" exclaimed De Boer. "Our little bird is angry!"

"Not angry. It is contempt."

Her look to me now held contempt. It froze me with startled chagrin; but only for an instant, and then the truth swept me. Strange Jetta! I had thought of her only as a child; almost, but not quite a woman. A frightened little woodland fawn.

"Contempt, De Boer. Is he not a contemptuous fellow, this American?"

Again I caught her look and understood it. This was a different Jetta. No longer helplessly frightened, but a woman, fighting. She had heard De Boer calmly saying that he might send me back dead—and she was fighting now for me.

De Boer took another drink, and stared at her. "What is this?"

She turned away. "Nothing. But if you are going to ransom me—"

"I am not, little bird."

She showed no aversion for him, and it went to his head, stronger than the drink. "Never would I ransom you!"

He reached for her, but nimbly she avoided him. Acting, but clever enough not to overdo it. I held myself silent: I had caught again the flash of a warning gaze from her. She had fathomed my purpose. Get his confidence. Beguile him. And woman is so much cleverer than the trickiest man at beguiling!

"Do not touch me, De Boer! He tried that. He held my hand in the moonlight—to woo me with his clever words."

"Hah! Grant, you hear her?"

"And I find him now not a man, but a craven—"

"But you will find me a man, Jetta." De Boer was hugely amused. "See Grant, we are rivals! You and Perona, then you and me. It is well for you that I fear you not, or I would run my knife through you now."

I could not mistake Jetta's shudder. But De Boer did not see it, for she covered it by impulsively putting her hand upon his arm.

"Did you—did you kill my father?" She stumbled over the question. But she asked it with a childlike innocence sufficiently real to convince him.

"I? Why—" He recovered from his surprise. "Why no, little bird. Who told you that I did?"

"No one. I—no one has said anything about it." She added slowly, "I hoped that it was not you, De Boer."

"Me? Oh no: it was an accident." He shot me a menacing glance. "I will explain it all. Jetta. Your father and I were friends for years—"

"Yes. I know. Often he spoke to me of you. Many times I asked him to let me meet you."

They were ignoring me. But Gutierrez, lurking in the door oval, was not: I was well aware of that.

"I remember you from years ago, little Jetta."

"And I remember you."

I understand the rationality of her purpose. She could easily get De Beer's confidence. She had known him when a child. Her father had been his business partner, presumably his friend. And I saw her now cleverly altering her status here. She had been a captive, allied with me. She was changing that. She was now Spawn's daughter, here with her dead father's friend.

She turned a gaze of calm aversion upon me. "Unless you want him here, De Boer. I would rather talk to you—without him."

He leaped to his feet. "Hah! that pleases me, little Jetta! Gutierrez, take this fellow away."

The Spanish-American came slouching forward. "The girl's an old friend, Commander? You never told me that."

"Because it is no business of yours. Take him away. Seal him in D-cubby."

I said sullenly. "I misjudged both of you."

Jetta's gaze avoided me. As Gutierrez shoved me roughly down the corridor, De Boer laughed, and his voice came back: "Do not be afraid. We will find some safe way of ransoming you—dead or alive!"

I was flung on a bunk in one of the corridor cubbies, and the door sealed upon me.

Part 3

Chapter 15: In the Bandit Camp

The dark cave, with its small spots of tube-light mounted upon movable tripods, was eery with grotesque swaying shadows. The bandit camp. Hidden down here in the depths of the Mid-Atlantic Lowlands. An inaccessible retreat, this cave in what once was the ocean floor. Only a few years ago water had been here, water black and cold and soundless. Tremendous pressure, with three thousand or more fathoms of the ocean above it. Fishes had roamed these passages, no doubt. Strange monsters of the deeps: sightless, or with eyes like phosphorescent torches.

Black-garbed figures move in ghastly greenness as the invisible flyer speeds on its business of ransom.

But the water was gone now. Blue ooze was caked upon the cave floor. Eroded walls; niches and tiny gullies; crevices and an arching dome high overhead. A fantastic cave—no one, seeing it as I saw it that morning at dawn, could have believed it was upon this earth. From where De Boer had put me—on the flat top of a small, butte-like dome near the upper end of the sloping cave floor—all the area of this strange bandit camp was visible to me.

A little tent of parchment was set upon the dome-top.

"Yours," said De Boer, with a grin. "Make yourself comfortable. Gutierrez will be your willing servant, until we see about this ransom. It will have to be one very large, for you are a damn trouble to me, Grant. And a risk. Food will come shortly. Then you can sleep: I think you will want it."

He leaped from the little butte, leaving the taciturn ever-watchful Gutierrez sitting cross-legged on the ledge near me, with his projector across his knees.

The cave was irregularly circular, with perhaps, a hundred-feet diameter and a ceiling fifty feet high. A drift of the fetid, Lowland air went through it—into a rift at this upper end, and out through the lower passage entrance which sloped downward thirty feet and debouched upon a rippled ramp of ooze outside. It was daylight out there now. From my perch I could see the sullen heavy walls of a ridge. Mist hung against them, but the early morning sunlight came down in shafts penetrating the mist and striking the oily surface of a spread of water left here in the depths of a cauldron.

De Boer's flyer was outside. We had landed by the shore of the sea, and the bandits had pushed the vehicle into an arching recess which seemed as though made to hide it. All this camp was hidden. Arching crags of the ridge-wall jutted out over the cave entrance. From

above, any passing flyer—even though well below the zero-height—would see nothing but this black breathing sea, lapping against its eroded, fantastic shore-line.

Within the cave, there was only a vague filtering daylight from the lower entrance, a thin shaft from the rift overhead, and the blue tube-light, throwing great shadows of the tents and the men against the black rock walls.

There seemed perhaps a hundred of the bandits here. A semi-permanent camp, by its aspect. Grey parchment tents were set up about the floor, some small, others more elaborate. It seemed as though it were a huddled little group of buildings in the open air, instead of in a cave. One tent, just at the foot of my dome, seemed De Boer's personal room. He went into it after leaving me, and came out to join the main group of his fellows near the center of the cave where a large electron stove, and piped water from a nearby subterranean freshet, and a long table set with glassware and silver, stood these men for kitchen and eating place.

The treasure had not yet been brought in from the flyer. But, from what I overheard, it seemed that the radiumized ingots of the ill-fated Spawn and Perona were to be stored for a year at least, here in this cave. I could see the strong-room cubby. It was hewn from the

rock of the cave wall, its sealed-grid door-oval set with metal bars.

I saw also what seemed a small but well-equipped machine shop, in a recess room at one side of the cave. Men were working in there under the light of tubes. And there was a niche hollowed out in the wall to make a room for De Boer's instruments—ether-wave receivers and transmitters, the aerial receiving wires of which stretched in banks along the low ceiling.

There was no activity in there now, except for one man who was operating what I imagined might be an aerial insulator, guarding the place from any prying search-vibrations.

The main cave was a bustle of activity. The arriving bandits were greeting their fellows and exchanging news. The men who had been left here were jubilant at the success of the Chief's latest enterprise. Bottles were unsealed and they began to prepare the morning meal.

My presence caused considerable comment. I was a complication at which most of the men were ill pleased, especially when the arriving bandits told who I was, and that the patrols of the United States were doubtless even now trying to find me.

But De Boer silenced the grumbling with rough words.

"My business, not yours. But you will take your share of his ransom, won't you? Have done!"

And Jetta, she had caused comment also. But when the bottles were well distributed the grumbling turned to ribald banter which made me shudder that it should fall upon Jetta's ears. De Boer had kept his men away from her, shoving them aside when they crowded to see her. She was in a little tent now, not far from the base of my ledge.

My meal presently was brought from where most of the bandits now were roistering at the long table in the center of the cave.

"Eat," said Gutierrez. "I eat with you, Americano. *Madre Mia*, when you are ransomed away from here it will please me! De Boer is fool, with taking such a chance."

With the meal ended, another guard came to take Gutierrez' place and I was ordered into my tent. The routine of the camp, it seemed, was to use the daylight hours for the time of sleep. There were lookouts and guards at the entrance, and a little arsenal of ready weapons stocked in the passage. The men at the table were still at their meal. It would end, I did not doubt, by most of them falling into heavy alcoholic slumber.

I was tired, poisoned by the need of sleep. I lay on fabric cushions piled in one corner of my tent. But sleep would not come; my thoughts ran like a tumbling mountain torrent, and as aimlessly. I hoped that Jetta was sleeping. De Boer was now at the center table with his men. Hans was guarding Jetta. He was a phlegmatic, heavy Dutchman, and seemed decent enough.

I wondered what Hanley might be doing to rescue me. But as I thought about it, I could only hope that his patrols would not find us out here. An attack and most certainly De Boer and his men in their anger would kill me out of hand. And possibly Jetta also.

I had not had a word alone with Jetta since that scene in the control room. When we disembarked, she had stayed close by De Boer. But I knew that Jetta had fathomed my purpose, that she was working to the same end. We must find a way of arranging the ransom which would give us an opportunity to escape.

I pondered it. And at last an idea came to me, vague in all its details, as yet. But it seemed feasible, and I thought it would sound plausible to De Boer. I would watch my chance and explain it to him. Then I realized how much aid Jetta would be. She would agree with my plan, and help me convince him. And when the crucial time came, though I would be a captive, watched by Gutierrez, bound and

gagged, perhaps—Jetta would be at liberty. De Boer and Gutierrez would not be on their guard with her.

I drifted off to sleep, working out the details of my plan.

Chapter 16: Planning The Ransom

I was awakened by the sound of low voices outside my tent. Jetta's voice, and De Boer's, and, mingled with them, the babble of the still hilarious bandits in the center of the cave. But there were only a few left now; most of them had fallen into heavy slumber. I had been asleep for several hours, I figured. The daylight shadows outside the cave entrance showed that it was at least noon.

I lay listening to the voices which had awakened me. De Boer was saying:

"But why, Jetta, should I bother with your ideas? I know what is best. This ransom is too dangerous to arrange." His voice sounded calmly good humored; I could hear in it now more than a trace of alcoholic influence. He added, "I think we had better kill him and have done. My men think so, too; already I have caused trouble with them, by bringing him."

It jolted me into full wakefulness.

Jetta's voice: "No! I tell you it can be arranged, Hendrick. I have been thinking of it, planning it—"

"Child! Well what? The least I can do is listen; I am no pig-headed American. Say it out. What would you do to ransom him safely?"

They were just at the foot of my ledge, in front of De Boer's tent. Their voices rose so that I could hear them plainly. For all my start at being awakened to hear my death determined upon, I recall that I was almost equally startled by Jetta's voice. Her tone, her manner with De Boer. Whatever opportunities they had had for talking together, the change in their relationship was remarkable. De Boer was now flushed with drink, but for all that he had obviously still a firm grip upon his wits. And I heard Jetta now urging her ideas upon him with calm confidence. An outward confidence; yet under it there was a vibrant emotion suppressed within her even tone; a hint of tremulous fright; a careful calculation of the effect she might be making upon De Boer. Had he not been intoxicated—with drink and with her—he might have sensed it. But he did not.

"Hendrick, it can be done. A big price. Why not?"

"Because if we are trapped and caught, of what use is the price we might have gotten? Tell me that, wise one?"

"We will not be trapped. And suppose you kill him—won't they track you just the same, Hendrick?"

"No. We would leave his body on some crag where it would be found. The patrols would more quickly tire of chasing a killer when the damage is done. They want Grant alive."

"Then let them have him alive—for a big price. Hendrick, listen—"

"Well, what?" he demanded again. "What is your plan?"

"Why—well, Hendrick, like this—"

She stammered, and I realized that she had no plausible plan. She was fumbling, groping, urging upon De Boer that I must be ransomed alive. But she had not good reason for it.

"Well?" he prompted impatiently.

"You—can you raise Great New York on the audiphone, Hendrick?"

"Yes," he said.

"Hanley's office?"

"Yes, no doubt. Chah—that would give him a start, wouldn't it? De Boer calmly calling him!"

He was laughing. I heard what sounded as though he were gulping another drink. "By damn, Jetta, you are not the timid bird you look. Call Hanley, eh?"

"Yes. Can it be done and still bar his instruments from locating us?"

"Yes, and bar his television. Believe it, Jetta. I have every device for hiding. But—call Hanley!"

"Why not? ... Hendrick, stop!"

I started. It seemed that he was embracing her; forcing half drunken caresses upon her.

I scrambled through my tent doorway, but Gutierrez, who had come back on guard, at once seized me.

"*Hui*—so haste! Back, you."

The Spaniard spoke softly, and he was grinning. "The chief plays with woman's words, no? Charming señorita, though she dresses like a boy. But that is the more charming, eh? Listen to her, Grant."

He gripped me, and prodded my side with the point of his knife blade. "Lie down Americano: we will listen."

Jetta was insisting. "Hendrick, stop!"

"Why?"

I could see them now. They were seated before the opening of De Boer's tent. A little stove in front of them. Coffee for Jetta, who was seated cross-legged, pouring it; a bowl of drink for De Boer. And some baked breadstuff dainties on a platter.

"Hendrick—"

She pushed him away as he leaned to embrace her. Although she was laughing with him, I could only guess at the chill of fear that might be in her heart.

"Foolish, Hendrick!"

"Foolish little bird, Jetta mine."

"You—it is you who are foolish, Hendrick." She slid from his embrace and held her brimming coffee cup balanced before her, to ward him off. "You think I am really clever, so trust me, Hendrick. Oh there is a great future for us: you say I inspire you; let me! Hendrick De Boer, Chieftain of the Lowlands! My father would have helped you become that. You can build a little empire.

Hendrick—why not? Father wanted to make you President of Nareda. Why not build your own Lowland Empire? We have a hundred men now? Why not gather a thousand? Ten thousand? An empire!"

"*Ave Maria*," from Gutierrez. "This *niña* thinks big thoughts!"

De Boer raised his bowl. "An empire—De Boer of the Lowlands! Go on; you amuse me. We have a nice start, with this treasure."

"Yes. And the ransom money. But you will take me first to Cape Town, Hendrick? We can be married there: I am seventeen in a month."

"Of course, Jetta. Haven't I promised?" There was no convincingness to me in the way he said it. "Of course. To Cape Town for our marriage."

"Stop! Hendrick, be serious!" He had reached for her again. "Don't be a fool, Hendrick."

"Very well," he said. "I am all serious. What is your plan?"

She was more resourceful this time. She retorted, "This craven Grant, he fears for his life—but he is very smart, Hendrick. I think

he is scheming every moment how he can be safely ransomed."

"Hah! No doubt of that!"

"And he has had experience with Chief Hanley. He knows Hanley's methods, how Hanley will act. Let us see what Grant says of this."

She had no plan of her own, but she hoped that by now I had one! And she was making an opportunity for me to put it before De Boer.

He said, "There is sense to that, Jetta. If there is any way to fool Hanley, that craven American has no doubt thought it out."

She held another drink before him. "Yes. Let us see what he says."

He drank; and again as they were near together he caressed her.

"What a schemer you are, little bird. You and I are well matched, eh?"

"Gutierrez may be watching us!" she warned.

They suddenly looked up and saw Gutierrez and me.

"Hah!" Fortunately it struck De Boer into further good humor. "Hah

—we have an audience! Bring down the prisoner, Gutierrez! Let us see if his wits can get him out of this plight. Come down, Grant!"

Gutierrez shoved me down the ladder ahead of him. De Boer stood up and seized me. His great fingers dug into my shoulders.

"Sit down, American! It seems you are not to die. *Perhaps* not."

The strength of his fingers was hurting me: he hoped I would wince. Mine was now an ignominious role, indeed, yet I knew it was best.

I gasped. "Don't do that: you hurt!"

He chuckled and cast me loose. I added, with a show of spirit, "You are a bullying giant. Just because you are bigger than I am—"

"Hear that, Jetta? The American finds courage with his coming ransom!"

He shoved me to the ground. Gutierrez grinned, and withdrew a trifle. Jetta avoided meeting my gaze.

"Have some coffee," De Boer offered. "Alcohol is not good for you. Now say: have you any suggestions on how I can safely ransom you?"

It seemed that Jetta was holding her breath with anxiety. But I answered with an appearance of ready eagerness. "Yes. I have. I can arrange it with complete safety to you, if you give me a chance."

"You've got your chance. Speak out."

"You promise you will return me alive? Not hurt me?"

"De duvel—yes! You have my promise. But your plan had better be very good."

"It is."

I told it carefully. The details of it grew with my words. Jetta joined in it. But, most of all, it did indeed sound feasible. "But it must be done at once," I urged. "The weather is right; to-night it will be dark; overcast; not much wind. Don't you think so?"

He sent Gutierrez to the cave's instrument room to read the weather forecast instruments. My guess was right.

"To-night then," I said. "If we linger, it only gives Hanley more time to plan trickery."

"Let us try and raise him now," Jetta suggested.

The Dutchman, Hans, had joined us. He too, seemed to think my ideas were good.

Except for the guards at the cave entrance, all the other bandits were far gone in drink. With Hans and Gutierrez, we went to the instrument room to call Hanley. As we crossed the cave, with Hans and De Boer walking ahead together, De Boer spoke louder than he realized, and the words came back to me.

"Not so bad, Hans? We will use him—but I am not a fool. I'll send him back dead, not alive! A little knife-thrust, just at the end! Safest for us, eh, Hans?"

Chapter 17: Within the Black Sack

We left the bandit stronghold just after nightfall that same day. There were five of us on the X-flyer. Jetta and De Boer, Hans and Gutierrez and myself. The negotiations with Hanley had come through satisfactorily; to De Boer, certainly, for he was in a triumphant mood as they cast off the aero and we rose over the mist-hung depths.

It was part of my plan, this meager manning of the bandit ship. But it was mechanically practical: there was only Hans needed at the controls for this short-time flight: with De Boer plotting his course, working out his last details—and with Gutierrez to guard me.

De Boer had been quite willing to take no other men—and most of them were too far gone in their cups to be of much use. I never have fathomed De Boer's final purpose. He promised Jetta now that when I was successfully ransomed he would proceed to Cape Town by comfortable night flights and marry her. It pleased Gutierrez and Hans, for they wanted none of their comrades. The treasure was still on the flyer. The ransom gold would be added to it. I think that De Boer, Gutierrez and Hans planned never to return to their band. Why, when the treasure divided so nicely among three, break it up to enrich a hundred?

I shall never forget Hanley's grim face as we saw it that afternoon on De Boer's image-grid. My chief sat at his desk with all his location detectors impotent, listening to my disembodied voice explaining what I wanted him to do. My humble, earnest, frightened desire to be ransomed safely at all costs! My plea that he do nothing to try and trap De Boer!

It hurt me to appear so craven. But with it all, I knew that Hanley understood. He could imagine my leering captor standing at my elbow, prompting my words, dictating my very tone—prodding me with a knife in the ribs. I tried, by every shade of meaning, to convey to Hanley that I hoped to escape and save the ransom money. And I think that he guessed it, though he was wary in the tone he used for De Boer to hear. He accepted, unhesitatingly, De Boer's proposition: assured us he would do nothing to assail De Boer; and never once did his grim face convey a hint of anything but complete acquiescence.

We had President Markes on the circuit. De Boer, with nothing to lose, promised to return Jetta with me. In gold coin, sixty thousand U. S. dollar-standards for me; a third as much from Nareda, for Jetta.

The details were swiftly arranged. We cut the circuit. I had a last look at Hanley's face as the image of it faded. He seemed trying to

tell me to do the best I could; that he was powerless, and would do nothing to jeopardize my life and Jetta's. Everything was ready for the affair to be consummated at once. The weather was right; there was time for Hanley and De Boer each comfortably to reach the assigned meeting place.

We flew, for the first hour, nearly due west. The meeting place was at 35 deg. N. by 59 deg. W., a few hundred miles east by north of the fairy-like mountaintop of the Bermudas. Our charts showed the Lowlands there to run down to what once was measured as nearly three thousand fathoms—called now eighteen thousand feet below the zero-height. A broken region, a depth-ridge fairly level, and no Lowland sea, nor any settlements in the neighborhood.

The time was set at an hour before midnight. No mail, passenger or freight flyers were scheduled to pass near there at that hour, and, save for some chance private craft, we would be undisturbed. The ransom gold was available to Hanley. He had said he would bring it in his personal Wasp.

The details of the exchange were simple. Hanley, with only one mechanic, would hover at the zero-height, his Wasp lighted so that we could see it plainly. The wind drift, according to forecast, would be southerly. At 11 P.M. Hanley would release from his Wasp a small

helium-gas baloon-car—a ten-foot basket with the supporting gas bag above it, weighted so that it would slowly descend into the depths, with a southern drift.

Our flyer, invisible and soundless, would pick up the baloon-car at some point in its descent. The gold would be there, in a black casket. De Boer would take the gold, deposit Jetta and me in the car, and release it again. And when the balloon finally settled to the rocks beneath, Hanley could pick it up. No men would be hidden by Hanley in that basket. De Boer had stipulated that when casting loose the balloon, its car must be swept by Hanley with a visible electronic ray. No hidden men could withstand that blast!

Such was the arrangement with Hanley. I was convinced that he intended to carry it out to the letter. He would have his own invisible X-flyer in the neighborhood, no doubt. But it would not interfere with the safe transfer of Jetta and me.

That De Boer would carry out his part, Hanley could only trust. He had said so this afternoon bluntly. And De Boer had laughed and interposed his voice in our circuit.

"Government money against these two lives, Hanley! Of course you have to trust me!"

It was a flight, for us, of something less than four hours to the meeting place. Hans was piloting, seated alone in the little cubby upon the forward wing-base, directly over the control room. De Boer, with Jetta at his side, worked over his course and watched his instrument banks. I was, at the start of the flight, lashed in a chair of the control room, my ankles and wrists tied and Gutierrez guarding me.

Jetta did not seem to notice me. She did not look at me, nor I at her. She pretended interest only in the success of the transfer; in her father's treasure on board, the coming ransom money, and then a flight to Cape Town, dividing the treasure only with Hans and Gutierrez; and in her marriage with De Boer. She said she wanted me returned to Hanley alive; craven coward that I was, still I did not deserve death. De Boer had agreed. But I knew that at last, as they tumbled me into the basket, someone would slip a knife into me!

I had, as we came on board, just the chance for a few whispered sentences with Jetta. But they were enough! We both knew what we had to do. Desperate expedient, indeed! It seemed more desperate now as the time approached than it had when I planned it.

The weather at 7 P.M. was heavily overcast. Sultry, breathless, with solid, wide-flung cloud areas spread low over the zero-height. Night

settled black in the Lowlands. The mists gathered.

We flew well down—under the minus two thousand-foot level—so that out of the mists the highest dome peaks often passed close beneath us.

At 8 P.M. De Boer flung on the mechanism of invisibility. The interior of the ship faded to its gruesome green darkness. My senses reeled as the current surged through me. Lashed in my chair, I sat straining my adjusting eyes, straining my hearing to cope with this gruesome unreality. And my heart was pounding. Would Jetta and I succeed? Or was our love—unspoken love, born of a glance and the pressure of our hands in that moonlit Nareda garden—was our love star-crossed, foredoomed to tragedy? A few hours, now, would tell us.

De Boer was taking no chances. He was using his greatest intensity of power, with every safeguard for complete invisibility and silence. From where I sat I could make out the black form of Hans through the ceiling grid, at his pilot controls in the overhead cubby. A queer glow like an aura was around him. The same green radiance suffused the control room. It could not penetrate the opened windows of the ship; could not pass beyond the electro-magnetic field enveloping us. Nor could the curious hum which permeated the ship's interior

get past the barrage barrier. From outside, I knew, we were invisible and inaudible.

Strange unreality, here in the control room! The black-garbed figures of De Boer and Jetta at their table were unreal, spectral. At the door oval, which I could barely see, Gutierrez lurked like a shadow. All of them, and Hans in the cubby above, were garbed in tight-fitting dead-black suits of silklene fabric. Thin, elastic as sheer silk web, opaque, lustreless. It covered their feet, legs and bodies; and their arms and hands like black, silk gloves. Their heads were helmeted with it. And they had black masks which as yet were flapped up and fastened to the helmet above their foreheads. Their faces only were exposed, tinted a ghastly, lurid green by this strange light. It glowed and glistened like phosphorescence on their eyeballs, making them the eyes of animals in a hunter's torchlight, at night.

De Boer moved upon an errand across the control room. He was a burly black spectre in the skin-tight suit. His footfalls faintly sounded on the metal floor. They were toneless footfalls. Unreal. They might have been bells, or jangling thuds; they had lost their identity in this soundless, vibrating hum.

And he spoke, "We are making good progress, Jetta. We will be on time."

Ghastly voice! So devoid of every human timbre, every overtone shade to give it meaning, that it might have been a man's voice, or a woman's, the voice of something living, or something dead. Sepulchral. A stripped shell of voice. Yet to me, inside here with it, it was perfectly audible.

And Jetta said, "Yes, Hendrick, that is good."

A voice like his: no different.

Gruesome. Weird.

I try now to picture the scene in detail, for out of these strange conditions Jetta and I were to make our opportunity.

9 P.M. De Boer was a methodical fellow. He checked his position on the chart. He signalled the routine orders to Hans. And he gestured to Gutierrez. The movements and acts of everyone had been definitely planned. And this, too, Jetta and I had anticipated.

"Time to make him ready, Gutierrez. Bring the sack in here. I'll fasten him away."

I was not garbed like the others. They could move out on the wing runway under Hanley's eyes at short range, or climb in and out of the

balloon car, and not be visible.

Gutierrez brought the sack. A dead-black fabric.

"Shall I cut him loose now from his chair, Commander?"

"I'll do it."

De Boer drew a long knife blade, coated black, and thin and sharp as a half-length rapier. Gutierrez had one of similar fashion. No electronic weapons were in evidence, probably because the hiss of one fired would have been too loud for our barrage, and its flash too bright. But a knife thrust is dark and silent!

The Spaniard's eyes were gleaming as he approached me with the bag, as though he were thinking of that silent knife thrust he would give me at the last.

Dr. Boer said, "Stand up, Grant." He cut the fastenings that held me in my chair. But my ankles and wrists remained tied.

"Stand up, can't you?"

"Yes."

I got unsteadily to my feet. In the blurred green darkness I could see that Jetta was not looking at me. Gutierrez held the mouth of the sack open. As though I were an upright log of wood, De Boer lifted me.

"Pull it up over his feet, Gutierrez."

The oblong sack was longer than my body. They drew it over me, and bunched its top over my head. And De Boer laid me none too gently on the floor.

"Lie still. Do you get enough air?"

"Yes."

The black fabric was sufficiently porous for me to breathe comfortably inside the sack.

"All right, Gutierrez, I have the gag."

I felt them carrying me from the control room, twenty feet or so along the corridor, where a door-porte opened to a small balcony runway hung beneath the forward wing. Jutting from it was a little take-off platform some six feet by twelve in size. It was here that the balloon-basket was to be boarded. The casket containing the ransom

gold would be landed here, and the sack containing me placed in the car and cast loose. It was all within the area of invisibility of our flyer.

De Boer knelt over me, and drew back the top of the sack to expose my face.

"A little gag for you, Grant, so you will not be tempted to call out."

"I won't do that."

"You might. Well, good-by, American."

"Good-by." And I breathed, "Good-by Jetta." Would I ever see her again? Was this the end of everything for us?

He forced the gag into my mouth, tied it, and verified that my ankles and wrists were securely lashed. In the green radiance he and Gutierrez were like ghouls prowling over me, and their muffled toneless voices, tomblike.

The sack came up over my head.

"Good-by, Grant." I could not tell which one said it. And the other chuckled.

I could feel them tying the mouth of the sack above my head. I lay stiff. Then I heard their steps. Then silence.

I moved. I might have rolled, but I did not try it. I could raise my knees within the sack—double up like a folded pocket knife—but that was all.

A long, dark silence. It seemed interminable. Was Gutierrez guarding me here in the corridor? I could not tell; I heard nothing save the vague hum of the electronite current.

It had been 9 o'clock. Then I fancied that it must be 10. And then, perhaps, almost 11. I wondered what the weather outside was like. Soon we would be nearing the meeting place. Would Hanley be there? Would Jetta soon, very soon now, be able to do her part? I listened, horribly tense, with every interval between the thumps of my heart seeming so long a gap of waiting.

I heard a sound! A toneless, unidentifiable sound. Another like it; a little sequence of faint sounds. Growing louder. Approaching footsteps? Jetta's? I prayed so.

Then a low voice. Two voices. Both the same in quality. But from the words I could identify them.

"Hello, Gutierrez."

"*Niña*, hello."

Jetta! She had come!

"The captive is safe? No trouble?"

"No. He has not moved."

"Careful of him, Gutierrez. He is worth a lot of money to us."

"Well you say it. Señorita. In half an hour now, we will be away. Santa Maria, when this is over I shall breathe with more comfort!"

"We'll have no trouble, Gutierrez. We're almost there. In ten minutes now, or a little more."

"So soon? What time is it?"

"Well, after half-past ten. When it's over, Gutierrez, we head for Cape Town. Clever of me, don't you think, to persuade Hendrick to take us to Cape Town? Just you three men to divide all this treasure. It would be foolish to let a hundred others have it."

"True, *Niña*; true enough."

"I insisted upon you and Hans—Gutierrez, what is that?"

A silence.

"I heard nothing."

"A voice, was it?"

"The Americano?"

"No! No—the commander calling? Was it? Calling you, Gutierrez? Perhaps we have sighted Hanley's Wasp. Go! I'll stand here, and come quickly back."

Footsteps. Now! Our chance, come at last! I twisted over on my side, and lay motionless. Ah, if only those were Gutierrez' fading footfalls! And Jetta, here alone with me in the green darkness! Just for this one vital moment.

Fingers were fumbling at the top of my sack, unfastening the cord. Hands and arms came swiftly in. Fingers ran down my back as I lay on my side to admit them quickly. Fingers went fumbling at the cords that lashed my crossed wrists behind me. A knee pressed

against me. A hurried, panting, half sobbing breath close over me—

Just a hurried moment. The hands withdrew. The sack went back over my head. The knees, the slight weight against me, was gone. A few seconds only.

Footsteps. The voices again.

"Was it the commander, Gutierrez?"

"No. I do not know what it was. Nothing, probably."

"The Wasp in sight?"

"Not yet, *Niña*. You had best go back: De Boer, he might be jealous of us, no? He is busy with his instruments, but should he realize you are here, talking with me—"

"Senseless, Gutierrez!"

"Is it so, *Niña*? I have no attraction? Go back to him. Gold I want, not trouble over you!"

Faint laughter.

"When we sight the Wasp, I'll call and tell you, Gutierrez. Too bad you won't let me stay with you. I like you."

"Yes. But go now!"

Faint laughter. Footsteps. Then silence.

Our vital moment had come and passed. And Jetta had done her part; the role of action upon this dim lurid stage was now mine to play.

My hands were free.

Chapter 18: The Combat in the Green Darkness

Another interval. A dead, dark silence. I did not dare move. Gutierrez was here, within a few feet of me, probably. I wondered if he could see the outlines of the black sack. Doubtless they were very vague. But if I exposed my flesh, my face, my hands, that would at once attract his attention.

I worked the loosened cords from my wrists; moved my stiffened hands until, with returning blood, the strength came to them. I could not reach my bound ankles without doubling up my knees. I did not dare chance such a movement of the sack. But, after a moment, I got my hands in front of me.

Then I took the gag from my mouth and, with a cautious hand, pried at the top of the sack where it was bunched over my head. Its fastening was loose.

Another interval. A dim muffled voice; "The Wasp is in sight, Gutierrez!"

A movement—a sound like footsteps. Probably Gutierrez moving to the corridor window to glance at Hanley's distant hovering flyer. I hoped it might be that: I had to take the chance.

I slid the bag from my face. I feared an abrupt alarm, or Gutierrez leaping upon me. But there was silence, and I saw his vague dark outlines at the window oval, five feet from me.

I got my ankles loose and slid the bag off. I was unsteady on my feet, but desperation aided me.

Gutierrez half turned as I gripped him from behind. My hand on his mouth stifled his outcry. His black knife blade waved blindly. Then my clenched knuckle caught his temple, and dug with the twisting Santus blow. I was expert at it, and I found the vulnerable spot.

He crumpled in my grasp, and I slid his falling body across the narrow corridor into the nearest cubby oval.

Almost soundless; and in the control room Jetta and De Boer were murmuring and gazing at Hanley's ship, which hung ahead and above us at the zero-height.

I had planned all my movements. No motion was lost. Gutierrez was about my height and build. I stripped his black suit from him, donned it, then tied his ankles and wrists, and gagged him against the time when he would recover consciousness. Then I stuffed his body in the sack and tied its top.

This black suit had a mask, rolled up and fastened to the helmet. I loosed it, dropping it over my face. Knife in hand, I stood at the corridor window.

It was all black outside. The clouds were black overhead; the highest Lowland crags, several thousand feet beneath us, were all but blotted out in the murky darkness. Only one thing was to be seen: a quarter of a mile ahead, now, and a thousand feet higher than our level, the shining, bird-like outlines of Hanley's hovering little Wasp. It stood like a painted image of an aero, alone on a dead-black background. Red and green signal-lights dotted it, and on its stern tip a small, spreading searchlight bathed the wings and the body with a revealing silver radiance.

Our forward flight had been checked, and we, too, were hovering. Hans doubtless would remain for a time in the pilot cubby; De Boer and Jetta were in the control room. It was only twenty feet away, but I could barely see its oval entrance.

"Gutierrez!"

One of them was calling. My hollow empty voice echoed back as I softly responded:

"Yes?"

"Be ready. We are arrived."

"Yes, Commander. All is well."

I continued to stand at the window. Hanley's little balloon-car was visible now. Then he cut it away. We had moved forward in the interval. The tiny car floated out almost above us.

My gaze searched the void of darkness outside. Did Hanley have an invisible flyer out there? Perhaps so. But it could accomplish nothing as yet. It would not even dare approach, for fear of collision with us.

The tiny car, with a white pilot light in it, swayed with a slow descent. The basket beneath the supporting balloon oscillated in a wide swing, then steadied. A sudden flash showed up there—a flashing electronic stream, from Hanley's Wasp to the basket. The shot swept the basket interior. No one could be hidden there and survive.

It was Hanley's proof to us that he was following instructions.

"Hah! He obeys properly, Jetta!"

The voice floated back to me from the control room. Could I creep in there, surprise De Boer now, and kill him? Doubtless. But it would alarm Hans. I must await my chance to get them together.

"Gutierrez! Hans, get us under it! Gutierrez!"

The vague outline of De Boer came toward me in the corridor, burly dark blob. His mask was down now. There were points of light, glowing like faint distant stars, to mark his eyes.

"Gutierrez."

"Yes."

A small black figure followed after him. Jetta.

"Yes, De Boer." I stood over the sack. "I am ready."

De Boer's giant shape towered beside me. Now! My knife thrust now! But Hans was coming toward us. He would take alarm before I could reach him.

"Open the side porte, Gutierrez. Hurry, the car is here. Hans, you should have stayed up there!"

"The drift is calculated; the car is just here."

We were all swift-moving shadows; disembodied voices.

"Get that porte open."

"Yes." I opened it.

We went outside on the runway. I passed close to Jetta, and just for an instant pressed my gloved fingers on the black fabric of her arm —and she knew.

"Now, seize it."

"Here, Hans, climb up."

"I have it. Pull it, Gutierrez!"

The car drifted at us from the black void. We caught it.

"Hold it, Gutierrez."

"Hans, clip the balloon. Up with you."

In the blurred haste, I could not get them together. I did not want to

kill one and have the other leap upon me.

We fastened the little balloon and dragged the car onto the take-off platform. The shape of Hans leaped into the car.

"It is here! The ransom money!"

"Lift it to me. Heavy?"

"Yes."

"Gutierrez, help me. Hurry! If Hanley tries any trickery—"

Our aero was drifting downward and southward in the slight wind. Hanley's Wasp still hovered at the zero-height.

"In, Gutierrez."

Hans and I hauled out the heavy casket and placed it on the wing runway. De Boer pried up its lid. The gold was there. I could not tell where Jetta was; I prayed she would keep away from this.

Then the shape of De Boer was missing! But in a moment he appeared, dragging the sack.

"Lift him, Gutierrez. Hans, unclip the balloon and shove off the car!"

We were all standing at the two-foot rail of the runway. The car-basket, floating now, was off side and level with us. My chance!

"In with him, Gutierrez."

I shoved the body, encased in its black sack, with Hans helping me. And suddenly De Boer's knife came down at the sack! A stab. But an instinct to save the poor wretch within swept me. I struck at De Boer's arm and deflected the blow. The sack tumbled into the car.

I had neglected whatever chance had existed. Too late now!

"What in the hell!"

De Boer's shape seized me.

"What—"

It sent me into a sudden confusion. I flung him off. I stumbled against the shape of Hans.

The car was almost loose; drifting away.

Without thought—a frantic impulse—I pushed Hans over the brink. He fell into the car. It swayed into an oscillation with the impact. The balloon sank below our wing level and was gone, with only Hans, muffled shouts floating up.

And De Boer came leaping at me from behind. I whirled around. My danger was too much for the watching Jetta. She screamed.

"Philip, look out for him!"

"Hah! The American. By damn, what is this?"

It gave De Boer pause. He gripped a wing stay-wire for a second.

Then he came with a rush.

The corridor door was open behind me. I flung myself into it—and collided with a shape.

"Philip!"

I shoved at her frantically.

"Jetta, get back! Away from us!"

I pulled at her, half falling. De Boer's shape came through the doorway into the corridor. And was blotted out in the green darkness as he turned the other way, to avoid me if I struck.

A silence. The shadow of Jetta was behind me. I stood with poised knife, listening, straining my eyes through the faint green darkness. De Boer was here, knife in hand, fallen now into craftly, motionless silence. He might have been close here down the corridor. Or in any one of these nearby cubby doorways.

I slid forward along the wall. The corridor was solid black down its length: the green radiance seemed brighter at the control room behind me. Had De Boer gone into this solid blackness, to lure me?

stopped my advance. Stood again, trying to see or hear something.

And then I saw him! Two small glowing points of light. Distant stars. His eyes! Five feet ahead of me? Or ten? Or twenty?

A rustle. A sound.

His dark form materialized as he came—a huge, black blob overwhelming me, his arm and knife blade striking.

I dropped to the floor-grid, and his blade went over me. And as I dropped, I struck with an upward thrust. My knife met solidity; sank into flesh.

I twisted past him on the floor as he fell. My knife was gone: buried in him.

Words were audible; choking gasps. I could see his form rising, staggering. The open porte was near him; he swayed through it.

Did he know he was mortally wounded? I think so. He swayed on the wing runway, and I slid to the door and stood watching. And was aware of the shadow of Jetta creeping to join me.

"Is he—?"

"Quiet, Jetta."

He stood under the wing, swaying, gripping a stay. Then his voice sounded, and it seemed like a laugh.

"The craven American—wins." He moved a step. "Not to see—me

die—"

He toppled at the rail. "Good-by, Jetta."

A great huddled shadow. A blob, toppling, falling....

Far down there now the crags and peaks of the Lowland depths were visible. The darkness swallowed his whirling body. We could not hear the impact.

Chapter 19: Episode of the Lowlands

There is but little remaining for me to record. I could not operate the mechanism of invisibility of De Boer's X-flyer. But its pilot controls were simple. With Jetta at my side, trembling now that our gruesome task was over, we groped our way through the green darkness and mounted to the pilot cubby. And within ten minutes I had lowered the ship into the depths, found a landing place upon the dark rocks, and brought us down.

Hanley's Wasp had landed: we saw its lights half a mile from us. And then the lights of another ship—an X-flyer convoying Hanley—slowly materializing nearby.

And then reunion. Jetta and I left De Boer's invisible vessel and clambered over the rocks. And presently Hanley, staring at our grotesque black forms, came rushing forward and greeted us.

We were an hour locating De Boer's flyer, for all that Jetta and I had just left it and thought we could find our way back. But we stumbled onto it at last. Hanley felt his way aboard and brought it to visibility. It has since been returned to the Anti-War Department, with the compliments of Hanley's Office.

The ransom money was restored to its proper source. Spawn's treasure of radiumized quicksilver we shipped back to Nareda, where it was checked and divided, and Jetta's share legally awarded to her.

De Boer was dead when Hanley found him that night on the rocks. Jetta and I did not go to look at him....

The balloon basket landed safely. Hanley and his men were down there in time to seize it. Hans was caught; and Gutierrez, within the sack, was found to be uninjured. They are incarcerated now in Nareda. They were willing to tell the location of the bandit stronghold. A raid there the following day resulted in the capture of most of De Boer's men.

All this is now public news. You have heard it, of course. Yet in my narrative, setting down the events as I lived them, I have tried to give more vivid details than the bare facts as they were blared through the public audiphones.

An episode of the strange, romantic, fantastic Lowlands. A very unimportant series of incidents mingled with the news of a busy world—just a few minutes of the newscasters' time to tell how a band of depth smugglers was caught.

But it was a very important episode to me. It changed, for me, a clanking, thrumming machine-made world into a shining fairyland of dreams come true. It gave me little Jetta.

#48 The Terrible Tentacles, Of L-472, By Sewell Peaslee Wright:

Commander John Hanson of the Special Patrol Service records another of his thrilling interplanetary assignments.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

lurching toward us

It was a big mistake. I should not have done it. By birth, by instinct, by training, by habit, I am a man of action. Or I was. It is queer that an old man cannot remember that he is no longer young.

Commander John Hanson of the Special Patrol Service records another of his thrilling interplanetary assignments.

But it was a mistake for me to mention that I had recorded, for the archives of the Council, the history of a certain activity of the Special Patrol—a bit of secret history which may not be mentioned here. Now they insist—by "they" I refer to the Chiefs of the Special Patrol Service—that I write of other achievements of the Service, other adventures worthy of note.

Perhaps that is the penalty of becoming old. From commander of the *Budi*, one of the greatest of the Special Patrol ships, to the duties of recording ancient history, for younger men to read and dream about. That is a shrewd blow to one's pride.

But if I can, in some small way, add luster to the record of my service, it will be a fitting task for a man grown old and gray in that service; work for hands too weak and palsied for sterner duties.

But I shall tell my stories in my own way; after all, they are my

stories. And I shall tell the stories that appeal to me most. The universe has had enough and too much of dry history; these shall be adventurous tales to make the blood of a young man who reads them run a trifle faster—and perhaps the blood of the old man who writes them.

This, the first, shall be the story of the star L-472. You know it to-day as Ibit, port-o'-call for interplanetary ships, and source of ocrite for the universe, but to me it will always be L-472, the world of terrible tentacles.

My story begins nearly a hundred years ago—reckoned in terms of Earth time, which is proper, since I am a native of Earth—when I was a young man. I was sub-commander, at the time, of the *Kalid*, one of the early ships of the Special Patrol.

We had been called to Zenia on special orders, and Commander Jamison, after an absence of some two hours, returned to the *Kalid* with his face shining, one of his rare smiles telling me in advance that he had news—and good news.

He hurried me up to the deserted navigating room and waved me to a seat.

"Hanson," he said. "I'm glad to be the first to congratulate you. You are now Commander John Hanson, of the Special Patrol Ship *Kalid*!"

"Sir." I gasped, "do you mean—"

His smile broadened. From the breast pocket of the trim blue and silver uniform of our Service he drew a long, crackling paper.

"Your commission," he said. "I'm taking over the *Borelis*."

It was my turn to extend congratulations then; the *Borelis* was the newest and greatest ship of the Service. We shook hands, that ancient gesture of good-fellowship on Earth. But, as our hands unclasped, Jamison's face grew suddenly grave.

"I have more than this news for you, however," he said slowly. "You are to have a chance to earn your comet hardly."

I smiled broadly at the mention of the comet, the silver insignia, worn over the heart, that would mark my future rank as commander, replacing the four-rayed star of a sub-commander which I wore now on my tunic.

"Tell me more, sir," I said confidently.

"You have heard of the Special Patrol Ship *Filanus*?" asked my late commander gravely.

"Reported lost in space," I replied promptly.

"And the *Dorlos*?"

"Why—yes; she was at Base here at our last call," I said, searching his face anxiously. "Peter Wilson was Second Officer on her—one of my best friends. Why do you ask about her, sir?"

"The *Dorlos* is missing also," said Commander Jamison solemnly. "Both of these ships were sent upon a particular mission. Neither of them has returned. It is concluded that some common fate has overtaken them. The *Kalid*, under your command, is commissioned to investigate these disappearances.

"You are not charged with the mission of these other ships; your orders are to investigate their disappearance. The course, together with the official patrol orders, I shall hand you presently, but with them go verbal orders.

"You are to lay and keep the course designated, which will take you well out of the beaten path to a small world which has not been

explored, but which has been circumnavigated a number of times by various ships remaining just outside the atmospheric envelope, and found to be without evidence of intelligent habitation. In other words, without cities, roads, canals, or other evidence of human handiwork or civilization.

I believe your instructions give you some of this information, but not all of it. This world, unnamed because of its uninhabited condition, is charted only as L-472. Your larger charts will show it, I am sure. The atmosphere is reported to be breatheable by inhabitants of Earth and other beings having the same general requirements. Vegetation is reported as dense, covering the five continents of the world to the edges of the northern and southern polar caps, which are small. Topographically, the country is rugged in the extreme, with many peaks, apparently volcanic, but now inactive or extinct, on all of its five large continents."

"And am I to land there, sir?" I asked eagerly.

"Your orders are very specific upon that point," said Commander Jamison. "You are not to land until you have carefully and thoroughly reconnoitered from above, at low altitude. You will exercise every possible precaution. Your specific purpose is simply this: to determine, if possible, the fate of the other two ships, and

report your findings at once. The Chiefs of the Service will then consider the matter, and take whatever action may seem advisable to them." Jamison rose to his feet and thrust out his hand in Earth's fine old salute of farewell.

"I must be going, Hanson," he said. "I wish this patrol were mine instead of yours. You are a young man for such a responsibility."

"But," I replied, with the glowing confidence of youth, "I have the advantage of having served under Commander Jamison!"

He smiled as we shook again, and shook his head.

"Discretion can be learned only by experience," he said. "But I wish you success, Hanson; on this undertaking, and on many others. Supplies are on their way now; the crew will return from leave within the hour. A young Zenian, name of Dival, I believe, is detailed to accompany you as scientific observer—purely unofficial capacity, of course. He has been ordered to report to you at once. You are to depart as soon as feasible: you know what that means. I believe that's all—Oh, yes! I had almost forgotten.

"Here, in this envelope, are your orders and your course, as well as all available data on L-472. In this little casket is—your comet,

Hanson. I know you will wear it with honor!"

"Thank you, sir!" I said, a bit huskily. I saluted, and Commander Jamison acknowledged the gesture with stiff precision. Commander Jamison always had the reputation of being something of a martinet.

When he had left, I picked up the thin blue envelope he had left. Across the face of the envelope, in the—to my mind—jagged and unbeautiful Universal script, was my name, followed by the proud title: "*Commander, Special Patrol Ship Kalid.*" My first orders!

There was a small oval box, of blue leather, with the silver crest of the Service in bas-relief on the lid. I opened the case, and gazed with shining eyes at the gleaming, silver comet that nestled there.

Then, slowly, I unfastened the four-rayed star on my left breast, and placed in its stead the insignia of my commandership.

Worn smooth and shiny now, it is still my most precious possession.

Kincaide, my second officer, turned and smiled as I entered the navigating room.

"L-472 now registers maximum attraction, sir," he reported. "Dead ahead, and coming up nicely. My last figures, completed about five

minutes ago, indicate that we should reach the gaseous envelope in about ten hours." Kincaide was a native of Earth, and we commonly used Earth time-measurements in our conversation. As is still the case, ships of the Special Patrol Service were commanded without exception by natives of Earth, and the entire officer personnel hailed largely from the same planet, although I have had several Zenian officers of rare ability and courage.

I nodded and thanked him for the report. Maximum attraction, eh? That, considering the small size of our objective, meant we were much closer to L-472 than to any other regular body.

Mechanically, I studied the various dials about the room. The attraction meter, as Kincaide had said, registered several degrees of attraction, and the red slide on the rim of the dial was squarely at the top, showing that the attraction was coming from the world at which our nose was pointed. The surface-temperature gauge was at normal. Internal pressure, normal. Internal moisture-content, a little high. Kincaide, watching me, spoke up:

"I have already given orders to dry out, sir," he said.

"Very good, Mr. Kincaide. It's a long trip, and I want the crew in good condition." I studied the two charts, one showing our

surroundings laterally, the other vertically, all bodies about us represented as glowing spots of green light, of varying sizes; the ship itself as a tiny scarlet spark. Everything shipshape: perhaps, a degree or two of elevation when we were a little closer—

"May I come in sir?" broke in a gentle, high-pitched voice.

"Certainly, Mr. Dival," I replied, answering in the Universal language in which the request had been made. "You are always very welcome." Dival was a typical Zenian of the finest type: slim, very dark, and with the amazingly intelligent eyes of his kind. His voice was very soft and gentle, and like the voice of all his people, clear and high-pitched.

"Thank you," he said. "I guess I'm over-eager, but there's something about this mission of ours that worries me. I seem to feel—" He broke off abruptly and began pacing back and forth across the room.

I studied him, frowning. The Zenians have a strange way of being right about such things; their high-strung, sensitive natures seem capable of responding to those delicate, vagrant forces which even now are only incompletely understood and classified.

"You're not used to work of this sort," I replied, as bluffly and

heartily as possible. "There's nothing to worry about."

"The commanders of the two ships that disappeared probably felt the same way, sir," said Dival. "I should have thought the Chiefs of the Special Patrol Service would have sent several ships on a mission such as this."

"Easy to say," I laughed bitterly. "If the Council would pass the appropriations we need, we might have ships enough so that we could send a fleet of ships when we wished. Instead of that, the Council, in its infinite wisdom, builds greater laboratories and schools of higher learning—and lets the Patrol get along as best it can."

"It was from the laboratories and the schools of higher learning that all these things sprang," replied Dival quietly, glancing around at the array of instruments which made navigation in space possible.

"True," I admitted rather shortly. "We must work together. And as for what we shall find upon the little world ahead, we shall be there in nine or ten hours. You may wish to make some preparations."

"Nine or ten hours? That's Earth time, isn't it? Let's see: about two and a half enaros."

"Correct," I smiled. The Universal method of reckoning time had never appealed to me. For those of my readers who may only be familiar with Earth time measurements, an enar is about eighteen Earth days, an enaren a little less than two Earth days, and an enaro nearly four and a half hours. The Universal system has the advantage, I admit, of a decimal division; but I have found it clumsy always. I may be stubborn and old-fashioned, but a clock face with only ten numerals and one hand still strikes me as being unbeautiful and inefficient.

"Two and a half enaros," repeated Dival thoughtfully. "I believe I shall see if I can get a little sleep now; I should not have brought my books with me, I'm afraid. I read when I should sleep. Will you call me should there be any developments of interest?"

I assured him that he would be called as he requested, and he left.

"Decent sort of a chap, sir," observed Kincaide, glancing at the door through which Dival had just departed.

"A student," I nodded, with the contempt of violent youth for the man of gentler pursuits than mine, and turned my attentions to some calculations for entry in the log.

Busied with the intricate details of my task, time passed rapidly. The watch changed, and I joined my officers in the tiny, arched dining salon. It was during the meal that I noticed for the first time a sort of tenseness; every member of the mess was unusually quiet. And though I would not, have admitted it then, I was not without a good deal of nervous restraint myself.

"Gentlemen," I remarked when the meal was finished, "I believe you understand our present mission. Primarily, our purpose is to ascertain, if possible, the fate of two ships that were sent here and have not returned. We are now close enough for reasonable observation by means of the television disc, I believe, and I shall take over its operation myself.

"There is no gainsaying the fact that whatever fate overtook the two other Patrol ships, may lay in wait for us. My orders are to observe every possible precaution, and to return with a report. I am going to ask that each of you proceed immediately to his post, and make ready, in so far as possible, for any eventuality. Warn the watch which has just gone off to be ready for instant duty. The disintegrator ray generators should be started and be available for instant emergency use, maximum power. Have the bombing crews stand by for orders."

"What do you anticipate, sir?" asked Correy, my new sub-commander. The other officers waited tensely for my reply.

"I don't know, Mr. Correy," I admitted reluctantly. "We have no information upon which to base an assumption. We do know that two ships have been sent here, and neither of them have returned. Something prevented that return. We must endeavor to prevent that same fate from overtaking the *Kalid*—and ourselves."

Hurrying back to the navigating room, I posted myself beside the cumbersome, old-fashioned television instrument. L-472 was near enough now to occupy the entire field, with the range hand at maximum. One whole continent and parts of two others were visible. Not many details could be made out.

I waited grimly while an hour, two hours, went by. My field narrowed down to one continent, to a part of one continent. I glanced up at the surface temperature gauge and noted that the hand was registering a few degrees above normal. Correy, who had relieved Kincaide as navigating officer, followed my gaze.

"Shall we reduce speed, sir?" he asked crisply.

"To twice atmospheric speed," I nodded. "When we enter the

envelope proper, reduce to normal atmospheric speed. Alter your course upon entering the atmosphere proper, and work back and forth along the emerging twilight zone, from the north polar cap to the southern cap, and so on."

"Yes, sir!" he replied, and repeated the orders to the control room forward.

I pressed the attention signal to Dival's cubicle, and informed him that we were entering the outer atmospheric fringe.

"Thank you, sir!" he said eagerly. "I shall be with you immediately."

In rapid succession I called various officers and gave terse orders. Double crews on duty in the generator compartment, the ray projectors, the atomic bomb magazines, and release tubes. Observers at all observation posts, operators at the two smaller television instruments to comb the terrain and report instantly any object of interest. With the three of us searching, it seemed incredible that anything could escape us. At atmospheric altitudes even the two smaller television instruments would be able to pick out a body the size of one of the missing ships.

Dival entered the room as I finished giving my orders.

"A strange world, Dival," I commented, glancing towards the television instrument. "Covered with trees, even the mountains, and what I presume to be volcanic peaks. They crowd right down to the edge of the water."

He adjusted the focusing lever slightly, his face lighting up with the interest of a scientist gazing at a strange specimen, whether it be a microbe or a new world.

"Strange ... strange ..." he muttered. "A universal vegetation ... no variation of type from equator to polar cap, apparently. And the water—did you notice its color, sir?"

"Purple," I nodded. "It varies on the different worlds, you know. I've seen pink, red, white and black seas, as well as the green and blue of Earth."

"And no small islands," he went on, as though he had not ever heard me. "Not in the visible portion, at any rate."

I was about to reply, when I felt the peculiar surge of the *Kalid* as she reduced speed. I glanced at the indicator, watching the hand drop slowly to atmospheric speed.

"Keep a close watch, Dival," I ordered. "We shall change our course now, to comb the country for traces of two ships we are seeking. If you see the least suspicious sign, let me know immediately."

He nodded, and for a time there was only a tense silence in the room, broken at intervals by Correy as he spoke briefly into his microphone, giving orders to the operating room.

Perhaps an hour went by. I am not sure. It seemed like a longer time than that. Then Dival called out in sudden excitement, his high, thin voice stabbing the silence:

"Here, sir! Look! A little clearing—artificial, I judge—and the ships! Both of them!"

"Stop the ship, Mr. Correy!" I snapped as I hurried to the instrument. "Dival, take those reports." I gestured towards the two attention signals that were glowing and softly humming and thrust my head into the shelter of the television instrument's big hood.

Dival had made no mistake. Directly beneath me, as I looked, was a clearing, a perfect square with rounded corners, obviously blasted out of the solid forest by the delicate manipulation of sharply focused disintegrator rays. And upon the naked, pitted surface thus

exposed, side by side in orderly array, were the missing ships!

I studied the strange scene with a heart that thumped excitedly against my ribs.

What should I do? Return and report? Descend and investigate? There was no sign of life around the ships, and no evidence of damage. If I brought the *Kalid* down, would she make a third to remain there, to be marked "lost in space" on the records of the Service?

Reluctantly, I drew my head from beneath the shielding hood.

"What were the two reports, Dival?" I asked, and my voice was thick. "The other two television observers?"

"Yes, sir. They report that they cannot positively identify the ships with their instruments, but feel certain that they are the two we seek."

"Very good. Tell them, please, to remain on watch, searching space in every direction, and to report instantly anything suspicious. Mr. Correy, we will descend until this small clearing becomes visible, through the ports, to the unaided eye. I will give you the corrections

to bring us directly over the clearing." And I read the finder scales of the television instrument to him.

He rattled off the figures, calculated an instant, and gave his orders to the control room, while I kept the television instrument bearing upon the odd clearing and the two motionless, deserted ships.

As we settled, I could make out the insignia of the ships, could see the pitted, stained earth of the clearing, brown with the dust of disintegration. I could see the surrounding trees very distinctly now: they seemed very similar to our weeping willows, on Earth, which, I perhaps should explain, since it is impossible for the average individual to have a comprehensive knowledge of the flora and fauna of the entire known Universe, is a tree of considerable size, having long, hanging branches arching from its crown and reaching nearly to the ground. These leaves, like typical willow leaves, were long and slender, of rusty green color. The trunks and branches seemed to be black or dark brown: and the trees grew so thickly that nowhere between their branches was the ground visible.

"Five thousand feet, sir," said Correy. "Directly above the clearing. Shall we descend further?"

"A thousand feet at a time, Mr. Correy," I replied, after a moment's

hesitation. "My orders are to exercise the utmost caution. Mr. Dival, please make a complete analysis of the atmosphere. I believe you are familiar with the traps provided for the purpose?"

"Yes. You propose to land, sir?"

"I propose to determine the fate of those two ships and the men who brought them here," I said with sudden determination. Dival made no reply, but as he turned to obey orders, I saw that his presentiment of trouble had not left him.

"Four thousand feet, sir," said Correy.

I nodded, studying the scene below us. The great hooded instrument brought it within, apparently, fifty feet of my eyes, but the great detail revealed nothing of interest.

The two ships lay motionless, huddled close together. The great circular door of each was open, as though opened that same day—or a century before.

"Three thousand feet, sir," said Correy.

"Proceed at the same speed," I replied. Whatever fate had overtaken the men of the other ships had caused them to disappear entirely—

and without sign of a struggle. But what conceivable fate could that be?

"Two thousand feet, sir," said Correy.

"Good," I said grimly. "Continue with the descent, Mr. Correy."

Dival hurried into the room as I spoke. His face was still clouded with foreboding.

"I have tested the atmosphere, sir," he reported. "It is suitable for breathing by either men of Earth or Zenia. No trace of noxious gases of any kind. It is probably rather rarified, such as one might find on Earth or Zenia at high altitudes."

"One thousand feet, sir," said Correy.

I hesitated an instant. Undoubtedly the atmosphere had been tested by the other ships before they landed. In the case of the second ship, at any rate, those in command must have been on the alert against danger. And yet both of those ships lay there motionless, vacant, deserted.

I could feel the eyes of the men on me. My decision must be delayed no further.

"We will land, Mr. Correy," I said grimly. "Near the two ships, please."

"Very well, sir," nodded Correy, and spoke briefly into the microphone.

"I might warn you, sir," said Dival quietly, "to govern your activities, once outside: free from the gravity pads of the ship, on a body of such small size, an ordinary step will probably cause a leap of considerable distance."

"Thank you, Mr. Dival. That is a consideration I had overlooked. I shall warn the men. We must—"

At that instant I felt the slight jar of landing. I glanced up; met Correy's grave glance squarely.

"Grounded, sir," he said quietly.

"Very good, Mr. Correy. Keep the ship ready for instant action, please, and call the landing crew to the forward exit. You will accompany us, Mr. Dival?"

"Certainly, sir!"

"Good. You understand your orders, Mr. Correy?"

"Yes, sir!"

I returned his salute, and led the way out of the room, Dival close on my heels.

The landing crew was composed of all men not at regular stations; nearly half of the *Kalid's* entire crew. They were equipped with the small atomic power pistols as side-arms, and there were two three-men disintegrator ray squads. We all wore menores, which were unnecessary in the ship, but decidedly useful outside. I might add that the menore of those days was not the delicate, beautiful thing that it is to-day: it was comparatively crude, and clumsy band of metal, in which were imbedded the vital units and the tiny atomic energy generator, and was worn upon the head like a crown. But for all its clumsiness, it conveyed and received thought, and, after all, that was all we demanded of it.

I caught a confused jumble of questioning thoughts as I came up, and took command of the situation promptly. It will be understood, of course, that in those days men had not learned to blank their minds against the menore, as they do to-day. It took generations of training to perfect that ability.

"Open the exit," I ordered Kincaide, who was standing by the switch, key in the lock.

"Yes, sir," he thought promptly, and unlocking the switch, released the lever.

The great circular door revolved swiftly, backing slowly on its fine threads, gripped by the massive gimbals which, as at last the ponderous plug of metal freed itself from its threads, swung the circular door aside, like the door of a vault.

Fresh clean air swept in, and we breathed, it gratefully. Science can revitalize air, take out impurities and replace used-up constituents, but if cannot give it the freshness of pure natural air. Even the science of to-day.

"Mr. Kincaide, you will stand by with five men. Under no circumstances are you to leave your post until ordered to do so. No rescue parties, under any circumstances, are to be sent out unless you have those orders directly from me. Should any untoward thing happen to this party, you will instantly reseal this exit, reporting at the same time to Mr. Correy, who has his orders. You will not attempt to rescue us, but will return to the Base and report in full, with Mr. Correy in command. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly," came back his response instantly; but I could sense the rebellion in his mind. Kincaid and I were old friends, as well as fellow officers.

I smiled at him reassuringly, and directed my orders to the waiting men.

"You are aware of the fate of the two ships of the Patrol that have already landed here," I thought slowly, to be sure they understood perfectly. "What fate overtook them, I do not know. That is what we are here to determine."

"It is obvious that this is a dangerous mission. I'm ordering none of you to go. Any man who wishes to be relieved from landing duty may remain inside the ship, and may feel it no reproach. Those who do go should be constantly on the alert, and keep in formation; the usual column of twos. Be very careful, when stepping out of the ship, to adjust your stride to the lessened gravity of this small world. Watch this point!" I turned to Dival, motioned him to fall in at my side. Without a backward glance, we marched out of the ship, treading very carefully to keep from leaping into the air with each step.

Twenty feet away, I glanced back. There were fourteen men behind

me—not a man of the landing crew had remained in the ship!

"I am proud of you men!" I thought heartily: and no emanation from any menore was ever more sincere.

Cautiously, eyes roving ceaselessly, we made our way towards the two silent ships. It seemed a quiet, peaceful world: an unlikely place for tragedy. The air was fresh and clean, although, as Dival had predicted, rarefied like the air at an altitude. The willow-like trees that hemmed us in rustled gently, their long, frond-like branches with their rusty green leaves swaying.

"Do you notice, sir," came a gentle thought from Dival, an emanation that could hardly have been perceptible to the men behind us, "that there is no wind—and yet the trees, yonder, are swaying and rustling?"

I glanced around, startled. I had not noticed the absence of a breeze.

I tried to make my response reassuring:

"There is probably a breeze higher up, that doesn't dip down into this little clearing," I ventured. "At any rate, it is not important. These ships are what interest me. What will we find there?"

"We shall soon know," replied Dival. "Here is the *Dorlos*; the second of the two, was it not?"

"Yes." I came to a halt beside the gaping door. There was no sound within, no evidence of life there, no sign that men had ever crossed that threshold, save that the whole fabric was the work of man's hands.

"Mr. Dival and I will investigate the ship, with two of you men," I directed. "The rest of the detail will remain on guard, and give the alarm at the least sign of any danger. You first two men, follow us." The indicated men nodded and stepped forward. Their "Yes, sirs" came surging through my menore like a single thought. Cautiously, Dival at my side, the two men at our backs, we stepped over the high threshold into the interior of the *Dorlos*.

The *ethon* tubes overhead made everything as light as day, and since the *Dorlos* was a sister ship of my own *Kalid*, I had not the slightest difficulty in finding my way about.

There was no sign of a disturbance anywhere. Everything was in perfect order. From the evidence, it would seem that the officers and men of the *Dorlos* had deserted the ship of their own accord, and—failed to return.

"Nothing of value here," I commented to Dival. "We may as well—"

There was a sudden commotion from outside the ship. Startled shouts rang through the hollow hull, and a confused medley of excited thoughts came pouring in.

With one accord the four of us dashed to the exit, Dival and I in the lead. At the door we paused, following the stricken gaze of the men grouped in a rigid knot just outside.

Some, forty feet away was the edge of the forest that hemmed us in. A forest that now was lashing and writhing as though in the grip of some terrible hurricane, trunks bending and whipping, long branches writhing, curling, lashing out—

"Two of the men, sir!" shouted a non-commissioned officer of the landing crew, as we appeared in the doorway. In his excitement he forgot his menore, and resorted to the infinitely slower but more natural speech. "Some sort of insect came buzzing down—like an Earth bee, but larger. One of the men slapped it, and jumped aside, forgetting the low gravity here. He shot into the air, and another of the men made a grab for him. They both went sailing, and the trees —*look!*"

But I had already spotted the two men. The trees had them in their grip, long tentacles curled around them, a dozen of the great willow-like growths apparently fighting for possession of the prizes. And all around, far out of reach, the trees of the forest were swaying restlessly, their long, pendulous branches, like tentacles, lashing out hungrily.

"The rays, sir!" snapped the thought from Dival, like a flash of lightning. "Concentrate the beams—strike at the trunks—"

"Right!" My orders emanated on the heels of the thought more quickly than one word could have been uttered. The six men who operated the disintegrator rays were stung out of their startled immobility, and the soft hum of the atomatic power generators deepened.

"Strike at the trunks of the trees! Beams narrowed to minimum! Action at will!"

The invisible rays swept long gashes into the forest as the trainers squatted behind their sights, directing the long, gleaming tubes. Branches crashed to the ground, suddenly motionless. Thick brown dust dropped heavily. A trunk, shortened by six inches or so, dropped into its stub and fell with a prolonged sound of rending wood. The

trees against which it had fallen tugged angrily at their trapped tentacles.

One of the men rolled free, staggered to his feet, and came lurching towards us. Trunk after trunk dropped onto its severed stub and fell among the lashing branches of its fellows. The other man was caught for a moment in a mass of dead and motionless wood, but a cunningly directed ray dissolved the entangling branches around him and he lay there, free but unable to arise.

The rays played on ruthlessly. The brown, heavy powder was falling like greasy soot. Trunk after trunk crashed to the ground, slashed into fragments.

"Cease action!" I ordered, and instantly the eager whine of the generators softened to a barely discernible hum. Two of the men, under orders, raced out to the injured man: the rest of us clustered around the first of the two to be freed from the terrible tentacles of the trees.

His menore was gone, his tight-fitting uniform was in shreds, and blotched with blood. There was a huge crimson welt across his face, and blood dripped slowly from the tips of his fingers.

"*God!*" he muttered unsteadily as kindly arms lifted him with eager tenderness. "They're alive! Like snakes. They—they're *hungry*!"

"Take him to the ship," I ordered. "He is to receive treatment immediately," I turned to the detail that was bringing in the other victim. The man was unconscious, and moaning, but suffering more from shock than anything else. A few minutes under the helio emanations and he would be fit for light duty.

As the men hurried him to the ship, I turned to Dival. He was standing beside me, rigid, his face very pale, his eyes fixed on space.

"What do you make of it, Mr. Dival?" I questioned him.

"Of the trees?" He seemed startled, as though I had aroused him from deepest thought. "They are not difficult to comprehend, sir. There are numerous growths that are primarily carnivorous. We have the fintal vine on Zenia, which coils instantly when touched, and thus traps many small animals which it wraps about with its folds and digests through sucker-like growths.

"On your own Earth there are, we learn, hundreds of varieties of insectivorous plants: the Venus fly-trap, known otherwise as the Dionaea Muscipula, which has a leaf hinged in the median line, with

teeth-like bristles. The two portions of the leaf snap together with considerable force when an insect alights upon the surface, and the soft portions of the catch are digested by the plant before the leaf opens again. The pitcher plant is another native of Earth, and several varieties of it are found on Zenia and at least two other planets. It traps its game without movement, but is nevertheless insectivorous. You have another species on Earth that is, or was, very common: the Mimosa Pudica. Perhaps you know it as the sensitive plant. It does not trap insects, but it has a very distinct power of movement, and is extremely irritable.

"It is not at all difficult to understand a carniverous tree, capable of violent and powerful motion. This is undoubtedly what we have here —a decidedly interesting phenomena, but not difficult of comprehension."

It seems like a long explanation, as I record it here, but emanated as it was, it took but an instant to complete it. Mr. Dival went on without a pause:

"I believe, however, that I have discovered something far more important. How is your menore adjusted, sir?"

"At minimum."

"Turn it to maximum, sir."

I glanced at him curiously, but obeyed. New streams of thought poured in upon me. Kincaide ... the guard at the exit ... *and something else*.

I blanked out Kincaide and the men, feeling Dival's eyes searching my face. There was something else, something—

I focused on the dim, vague emanations that came to me from the circlet of my menore, and gradually, like an object seen through heavy mist, I perceived the message:

"Wait! Wait! We are coming! Through the ground. The trees ... disintegrate them ... all of them ... all you can reach. But not the ground ... not the ground...."

"Peter!" I shouted, turning to Dival. "That's Peter Wilson, second officer of the *Dorlos*!"

Dival nodded, his dark face alight.

"Let us see if we can answer him," he suggested, and we concentrated all our energy on a single thought: "We understand. We understand."

The answer came back instantly:

"Good! Thank God! Sweep them down, Hanson: every tree of them. Kill them ... kill them ... kill them!" The emanation fairly shook with hate. "We are coming ... to the clearing ... wait—and while you wait, use your rays upon these accursed hungry trees!"

Grimly and silently we hurried back to the ship. Dival, the savant, snatching up specimens of earth and rock here and there as we went.

The disintegrator rays of the portable projectors were no more than toys compared with the mighty beams the *Kalid* was capable of projecting, with her great generators to supply power. Even with the beams narrowed to the minimum, they cut a swath a yard or more in diameter, and their range was tremendous; although working rather less rapidly as the distance and power decreased, they were effective over a range of many miles.

Before their blasting beams the forest shriveled and sank into tumbled chaos. A haze of brownish dust hung low over the scene, and I watched with a sort of awe. It was the first time I had ever seen the rays at work on such wholesale destruction.

A startling thing became evident soon after we began our work. This

world that we had thought to be void of animal life, proved to be teeming with it. From out of the tangle of broken and harmless branches, thousands of animals appeared. The majority of them were quite large, perhaps the size of full-grown hogs, which Earth animal they seemed to resemble, save that they were a dirty yellow color, and had strong, heavily-clawed feet. These were the largest of the animals, but there were myriads of smaller ones, all of them pale or neutral in color, and apparently unused to such strong light, for they ran blindly, wildly seeking shelter from the universal confusion.

Still the destructive beams kept about their work, until the scene changed utterly. Instead of resting in a clearing, the *Kalid* was in the midst of a tangle of fallen, wilting branches that stretched like a great, still sea, as far as the eye could see.

"Cease action!" I ordered suddenly. I had seen, or thought I had seen, a human figure moving in the tangle, not far from the edge of the clearing. Correy relayed the order, and instantly the rays were cut off. My menore, free from the interference of the great atomic generators of the *Kalid*, emanated the moment the generators ceased functioning.

"Enough. Hanson! Cut the rays; we're coming."

"We have ceased action; come on!"

I hurried to the still open exit. Kincaide and his guards were staring at what had been the forest; they were so intent that they did not notice I had joined them—and no wonder!

A file of men were scrambling over the debris; gaunt men with dishevelled hair, practically naked, covered with dirt and the greasy brown dust of the disintegrator ray. In the lead, hardly recognizable, his menore awry upon his tangled locks, was Peter Wilson.

"Wilson!" I shouted; and in a single great leap I was at his side, shaking his hand, one arm about his scarred shoulders, laughing and talking excitedly, all in the same breath. "Wilson, tell me—in God's name—what has happened?"

He looked up at me with shining, happy eyes, deep in black sockets of hunger and suffering.

"The part that counts," he said hoarsely, "is that you're here, and we're here with you. My men need rest and food—not too much food, at first, for we're starving. I'll give you the story—or as much of it as I know—while we eat."

I sent my orders ahead; for every man of that pitiful crew of survivors, there were two eager men of the *Kalid's* crew to minister to him. In the little dining salon of the officers' mess, Wilson gave us the story, while he ate slowly and carefully, keeping his ravenous hunger in check.

"It's a weird sort of story," he said. "I'll cut it as short as I can. I'm too weary for details.

"The *Dorlos*, as I suppose you know, was ordered to L-472 to determine the fate of the *Filanus*, which had been sent here to determine the feasibility of establishing a supply base here for a new interplanetary ship line.

"It took us nearly three days, Earth time, to locate this clearing and the *Filanus*, and we grounded the *Dorlos* immediately. Our commander—you probably remember him, Hanson: David McClellan? Big, red-faced chap?"

I nodded, and Wilson continued.

"Commander McClellan was a choleric person, as courageous a man as ever wore the blue and silver of the Service, and very thoughtful of his men. We had had a bad trip; two swarms of meteorites that

had worn our nerves thin, and a faulty part in the air-purifying apparatus had nearly done us in. While the exit was being unsealed, he gave the interior crew permission to go off duty, to get some fresh air, with orders, however, to remain close to the ship, under my command. Then, with the usual landing crew, he started for the *Filanus*.

"He had forgotten, under the stress of the moment, that the force of gravity would be very small on a body no larger than this. The result was that as soon as they hurried out of the ship, away from the influence of our own gravity pads, they hurtled into the air in all directions."

Wilson paused. Several seconds passed before he could go on.

"Well, the trees—I suppose you know something about them—reached out and swept up three of them. McClellan and the rest of the landing crew rushed to their rescue. They were caught up. *God!* I can see them ... hear them ... even now!

"I couldn't stand there and see that happen to them. With the rest of the crew behind me, we rushed out, armed only with our atomic pistols. We did not dare use the rays; there were a dozen men caught up everywhere in those hellish tentacles.

"I don't know what I thought we could do. I knew only that I must do something. Our leaps carried us over the tops of the trees that were fighting for the ... the bodies of McClellan and the rest of the landing crew. I saw then, when it was too late, that there was nothing we could do. The trees ... had done their work. They ... they were *feeding*....

"Perhaps that is why we escaped. We came down in a tangle of whipping branches. Several of my men were snatched up. The rest of us saw how helpless our position was ... that there was nothing we could do. We saw, too, that the ground was literally honeycombed, and we dived down these burrows, out of the reach of the trees.

"There were nineteen of us that escaped. I can't tell you how we lived—I would not if I could. The burrows had been dug by the pig-like animals that the trees live upon, and they led, eventually, to the shore, where there was water—horrible, bitter stuff, but not salty, and apparently not poisonous."

We lived on these pig-like animals, and we learned something of their way of life. The trees seem to sleep, or become inactive, at night. Not unless they are touched do they lash about with their tentacles. At night the animals feed, largely upon the large, soft fruit of these trees. Of course, large numbers of them make a fatal step

each night, but they are prolific, and their ranks do not suffer.

"Of course, we tried to get back to the clearing, and the *Dorlos*; first by tunneling. That was impossible, we found, because the rays used by the *Filanus* in clearing a landing place had acted somewhat upon the earth beneath, and it was like powder. Our burrows fell in upon us faster than we could dig them out! Two of my men lost their lives that way.

"Then we tried creeping back by night; but we could not see as can the other animals here, and we quickly found that it was suicide to attempt such tactics. Two more of the men were lost in that fashion. That left fourteen.

"We decided then to wait. We knew there would be another ship along, sooner or later. Luckily, one of the men had somehow retained his menore. We treasured that as we treasured our lives. To-day, when, deep in our runways beneath the surface, we felt, or heard, the crashing of the trees, we knew the Service had not forgotten us. I put on the menore; I—but I think you know the rest, gentlemen. There were eleven of us left. We are here—all that is left of the *Dorlos* crew. We found no trace of any survivor of the *Filanus*; unaware of the possibility of danger, they were undoubtedly, all the victims of ... the trees."

Wilson's head dropped forward on his chest. He straightened up with a start and an apologetic smile.

"I believe, Hanson," he said slowly, "I'd better get ... a little ... rest," and he slumped forward on the table in the death-like sleep of utter exhaustion.

There the interesting part of the story ends. The rest is history, and there is too much dry history in the Universe already.

Dival wrote three great volumes on L-472—or Ibit, as it is called now. One of them tells in detail how the presence of constantly increasing quantities of volcanic ash robbed the soil of that little world of its vitality, so that all forms of vegetation except the one became extinct, and how, through a process of development and evolution, those trees became carniverous.

The second volume is a learned discussion of the tree itself; it seems that a few specimens were spared for study, isolated on a peninsula of one of the continents, and turned over to Dival for observation and dissection. All I can say for the book is that it is probably accurate. Certainly it is neither interesting nor comprehensible.

And then, of course, there is his treatise on ocrite: how he happened

to find the ore, the probable amount available on L-472—or Ibit, if you prefer—and an explanation of his new method of refining it. I saw him frantically gathering specimens while we were getting ready to leave, but it wasn't until after we had departed that he mentioned what he had found.

I have a set of these volumes somewhere; Dival autographed them and presented me with them. They established his position, I understand, in his world of science, and of course, the discovery of this new source of ocrite was a tremendous find for the whole Universe; interplanetary transportation wouldn't be where it is to-day if it were not for this inexhaustible source of power.

Yes, Dival became famous—and very rich.

I received the handshakes and the gratitude of the eleven men we rescued, and exactly nine words of commendation from the Chief of my squadron: *"You are a credit to the Service, Commander Hanson!"*

Perhaps, to some who read this, it will seem that Dival fared better than I. But to men who have known the comradeship of the outer space, the heart-felt gratitude of eleven friends is a precious thing. And to any man who has ever worn the blue and silver uniform of the Special Patrol Service, those nine words from the Chief of

Squadron will sound strong.

Chiefs of Squadrons in the Special Patrol Service—at least in those days—were scanty with praise. It may be different in these days of soft living and political pull.

#49 Marooned Under The Sea, By Paul Ernst:

Three men stick out a strange and desperate adventure among the incredible monsters of the dark sea floor.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

look at the cable

- - -

(Editor's note: This document, written on a curious kind of parchment and tied to a piece of driftwood, was reported to have been picked out of the sea near the Fiji Islands. The first and last pages were so water soaked as to be indecipherable.)

Yacht *Rosa* was due to leave the San Francisco harbor in two hours.

We were going on some mysterious cruise to the South Seas, the details of which I did not know.

"Professor George Berry, the famous zoologist, and myself are going to do some exploring that is hazardous in the extreme," Stanley had said. "For purely mechanical reasons we need a third. You are young and have no family ties, so I thought I'd ask you to go with us. I'd rather not tell you what it's all about until we are on our way."

“Look at the cable!" called Stanley.

That was all the explanation he had given. It was sufficient. I was fed-up with life just then: I had enough money to avoid work and was tired of playing.

Three men stick out a strange and desperate adventure among the incredible monsters of the dark sea floor.

"I must warn you that you'll risk your life in this," he had continued, in answer to my acceptance of his invitation.

And I had replied that the hazard, whatever it might be, only made the trip appear more desirable.

So here I was, on board the yacht, about to sail for far places on some scientific mission which had so far been kept veiled in secrecy and which was represented as "hazardous in the extreme." It sounded

attractive!

Stanley came aboard accompanied by a lean, wiry man with iron gray hair and cool, alert black eyes.

"Hello, Martin," Stanley greeted me. "I want you to meet Professor Berry, the real leader of this expedition. Professor, this young red-head is Martin Grey, a sort of nephew by adoption who knows more about night life than most cabaret proprietors—and not much of anything else. He has shaken the dangers of the gold-diggers to face with us the dangers of the tropic seas."

The professor gripped my hand, and his cool black eyes gazed into mine with a kind of friendly frostiness.

"Don't pay any attention to him," he advised me. "Twenty years ago, when I first met him, he was on his way to Africa to shoot elephants because some revue beauty had just thrown him over and he felt he ought to do something big and heroic about it. It was shortly afterward that he decided to stay a bachelor all his life, and became such a confirmed woman hater."

He smiled thinly at Stanley's prod in the ribs, and the two went below, talking and laughing with the intimacy of old friendship.

I stayed on deck and soon found myself watching, with no little wonder, an enormous truck and trailer arrangement that drew up on the dock heavily loaded with a single immense crate. It was for us. I speculated as to what it could possibly contain.

It was a twenty or twenty-five-foot cube solidly braced with strap-iron and steel brackets. It evidently contained something fragile. The yacht's donkey engine lowered a hook for it, and swung it over the side and into the hold as daintily as though it had been packed with explosives.

The last of the ship's stores followed it over the side: the group of newspaper reporters who had been trying to pump the captain and first mate for a story were warned to leave, and we were ready to go. Precisely where and for what purpose?

I was to find out almost immediately.

Even as the yacht nosed superciliously away from the dock, the steward approached me with the information that lunch was ready. I went to the small, compactly furnished dining salon, where I was joined by Stanley and the professor.

There were only the three of us at the table. Stanley Browne, noted

big game hunter and semi-retired owner of the great Browne Glassworks at Altoona, a man fifteen years my senior but tanned and fit looking; Professor Berry, well known in scientific circles; and myself, known in no branch of activity save the one Stanley had jested about—the night life of my home city, Chicago.

"It's time you knew just what you're up against," said Stanley to me after the consomme had been served. "Now that we've actually sailed, there's no longer any need for secrecy. Indeed there never has been urgent need of it: the Professor and myself merely thought we might provoke incredulity and comment if we stated the purpose of our trip publicly."

He buttered a roll.

"We—the Professor and you and I—are going in for some deep sea diving. And when I say deep, I mean deep. We are going to investigate conditions as they exist one mile down from the surface of the ocean."

"A mile!" I exclaimed. "Why—"

There I stopped. I had only a layman's knowledge of such matters. But I knew that the limit of man's submersion, till then at any rate,

was a matter of a few hundred feet.

"Sounds incredible, doesn't it," said Stanley with a smile. "But that's what we're going to do—if the Professor's gadget works as he seems to think it will."

"I don't think it, I know it," retorted the Professor. "And man, man, the things we may see down there! New and unknown species—a world no human has ever seen before—perhaps the secret of all of life—"

"Dragons, sea-serpents, and what not!" Stanley finished with a grin.

"Or, possibly—nothing at all." The Professor shrugged. "I mustn't let my scientific curiosity run away with me. Perhaps we'll find no new thing down down. Our deep sea dredging and classification may already embrace most of the forms of life in the greater depths."

"If it does I want my money back," said Stanley. "When you asked me to finance this expedition for you, I agreed on condition that you would show me a thrill—some *real* big game, even if I would not be able to shoot it. If we draw blank—"

"The mere descent should satisfy you, my adventuring friend,"

replied the Professor brusquely. "I think you'll find that thrilling enough."

"But—a mile under the surface!" I marveled, feeling not entirely comfortable. "The pressure! Enormous! It can't be done! That is, I mean, can it be done?"

"It had better be," said Stanley with a humor that I did not entirely appreciate. "If it isn't, the three of us are going to be pressed out like three sheets of tissue paper! For we are assuredly going down that far in the Professor's gadget."

"Was that the thing I saw hoisted aboard just before we left?"

"That was it. We'll stroll around after lunch and look it over."

If I had taken this cruise in search of distraction—I was surely going to be successful! That was plain!

"Just where are we going?" I asked. "You said something about the South Seas, but you've named no special part of them."

"We're bound for Penguin Deep. That's a delightful little dimple in the Kermadec Trough, which," Stanley explained, "is north-northeast of New Zealand almost halfway up to the Fiji Islands. Penguin Deep

is ticketed at five thousand one hundred and fifty feet, but it probably runs deeper in spots."

The rest of the meal was consumed in silence. I hardly tasted what I ate; I remember that. Over five thousand feet down—where no man had ever ventured before! Could we make it?

I tried to recall my neglected physics lessons and compute the pressure that far down. I couldn't. But I knew it must be an appalling total of tons to the square inch. What possible arrangement could they have brought in which to make that awful descent?

And, if the descent were accomplished, what in the world would we see when we got down there? Gigantic, hitherto unknown fishes? Marine growths, half animal and half vegetable?

Decidedly, hot rolls and salad, cutlets and baked potatoes, good as they were, could not distract attention from the crowding questions that assailed me. And I could see that Stanley and the Professor were also far away in their thoughts—probably already exploring Penguin Deep.

After lunch we went forward to look at the Professor's gadget, as Stanley insisted on calling it.

It had been carefully unpacked by the crew while we ate, and it shimmered in the electric lighted hold like a great bubble.

It was a giant glass sphere, polished and flawless. Inside it could be made out various objects—a circular bench arrangement on a wooden flooring, batteries that filled the cup between the floor and the bottom arc of the sphere, tall metal cylinders, a small searchlight set next to a mechanism that was indeterminate. At three equidistant points on the sides there were glass handles, as thick as a man's thigh, cast integral with the walls. On the top there was a smaller handle.

At first glance the sphere seemed all in one piece, with the central objects cast inside like a toy ship in a sealed bottle. Then a mathematically precise ring of prismatic reflections showed me that the top third of the ball was a separate piece, fitting conically down like the tapered glass stopper of a monstrous perfume bottle. The handle on the top was for the purpose of lifting this giant's teapot lid, and allowing entrance into the sphere.

"Isn't it a beauty?" murmured Stanley. "It ought to be," he added. "It cost me eighty-six thousand to make it in my own glass factory. Eleven castings before this one came along that was reasonably free of flaws. Twenty-two feet six inches over all, walls five feet thick,

new formula unbreakable glass, four men working a month to grind the lid into place, tolerance limits plus or minus zero."

He slapped the Professor's shoulders. "Let's go in and look over the apparatus."

To accommodate the huge ball a well had been constructed in the Rosa's hold. This brought the deck we were standing on up to within six feet of the top ring, above which was rigged a chain hoist for lifting the ponderous lid.

The hoist was revolved, the conical top was swung free, and we clambered into our unique diving shell.

The tall cylinders were revealed as great flasks of compressed air. The indeterminate thing beside the searchlight turned out to be a hand pump, geared to work against heavy pressure. From the suction chamber of this three tubes extended.

"We inhale the air of the chamber," the Professor explained to me, "and exhale through the tubes into the pump cylinder. Breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth. The pump piston is forced down by this geared handle, sending the used air out of the shell through this sixteenth-inch hole. A ball check valve keeps the

water from squirting in when the exhaust pressure is released."

He pointed to a telegraphic key which completed a circuit from the batteries in the bottom of the ball to a thread of copper cast through the lid.

"That's your plaything, Martin. You are to raise or lower us by pressing that key. It controls the donkey engine electrically, so that we guide our own destinies though we are a mile beneath our power plant. Stanley works the pump. I direct the searchlight, write down notes, and, I sincerely hope, take snapshots of deep sea life."

For a moment my part of the labor seemed so easy as to be unfair. Merely to sit there and punch a little key at raising and lowering time! But as I thought it over it began to appear more difficult.

The *Rosa* could not anchor, of course, in a mile of water. We would drift helplessly. If we approached an undersea cliff I must raise us at once to prevent us being smashed against it. And if the cliff were too lofty to be cleared in time....

I mentioned this to the Professor.

"That would be unfortunate," he said, with his frosty smile. "Stanley

assures us this glass is unbreakable. He means commercially unbreakable. What would happen to it if it were submitted to the strain of being flung against a rock pile—in addition to the enormous stress of the water pressure—I don't know. It's your job to see that we don't have to find out!"

It had been planned to test the sphere empty first to see how it stood the strain.

We drifted to a full stop over the center of Penguin Deep where we were to gamble our lives in a game with Neptune. Sea anchors were rigged to lessen our drift and the donkey engine was geared to the first cable drum.

There was an impressive row of these drums, each holding an interminable length of three-quarter-inch cable. The bulk of a mile of steel cable has to be seen to be believed!

The glass sphere was lifted from the hold, delicately for all its enormous weight, and swung over the rail preparatory to being lowered into the depths.

Not until that moment did I notice two things: that there was no fastening of any kind to keep the thick lid in place: and that the

three-quarter-inch cable looked like a pack thread in comparison to the ponderous bulk it strained to support.

"We couldn't use a heavier cable," said the Professor, "because of the strain. We're overloading the hoist as it is. As for the lid being fastened down—I think you'll find it will be pressed into place securely enough!"

There was unanimous silence as the great globe slipped into the sea—down and down until the last reflection of the morning sun ceased to shimmer from its surface. Drum after drum was played out, till the first mate held his hand up to check the engineer.

"Five thousand feet, sir," he called to Stanley.

"Haul it back up. And let us hope," Stanley added fervently, "that we'll find the gadget in one piece."

The engine began to snort rhythmically. Dripping, vibrating, the coils of cable began to crawl back in place on the drums. There was a glint under the surface again as the sunlight reflected on the nearing sphere.

The great ball flashed out of the water, and a cheer burst from the

throats of all of us. It was absolutely unharmed. Only—there was a beading of fine moisture inside the thick globe. What that could mean, none of us could figure out.

"Difference in temperature?" worried the Professor. "No, it's as cold inside as out. Molecules of water driven by sheer pressure through five feet of glass to unite in drops on the inside? Possibly. Well, there's one way to find out. Stanley, Martin—are you ready?"

We nodded, and prepared to visit the bottom a mile below the *Rosa's* keel. The preparation consisted merely in donning heavy, fleece-lined jumpers to protect us from the cold of the sunless depths.

Soberly we entered the ball to undergo whatever ordeal awaited us on the distant ocean floor. How comparative distance is! A mile walk in the country—it is nothing. A mile ascent in an airplane—a trifle. But a mile descent into pitch black, bone chilling depths of water—that is an immense distance!

Copper wire, on a separate drum, was connected from the engine switch to the copper thread that curled through the glass wall to my telegraphic key. We strapped the mouthpieces of the breathing tubes over our heads, and Browne started the slow turning of the compression pump.

The Professor snapped the searchlight on and off several times to see that it was in working shape. He raised his hand, I pressed the key, and the long descent began.

That plunge into the bottomless depths remains in my memory almost as clearly as the far more fantastic adventures that came to us later.

Smoothly, rapidly, the yellow-green of the surface water dimmed to olive. This in turn grew blacker and blacker. Then we were slipping down into pitch darkness—a big bubble lit by a meagre lamp and containing three fragile human beings that dared to trust the soft pulp of their bodies to the crushing weight of the deepest ocean.

The most impressive thing was the utter soundlessness of our descent. At first there had been a pulsing throb of the donkey engine transmitted to us by the sustaining cable. This died as we slid farther from the Rosa. At length it was hushed entirely, cushioned by the springy length of steel. There was no stir, no sound of any kind. As far as our senses could tell us, we were hanging motionless in the pressing, awesome blackness.

The Professor switched off our light and turned on the searchlight which he trained downward through the wall at as steep an angle as

the flooring would permit. Even then the illusion of motionlessness was preserved. There was nothing in the water to mark our progress. We might have been floating in a back void of space.

Down and down we went, for an interminable length of time—till at length we reached the abysmal level where the sun never shone and the eyes of man had never gazed till now.

Words were made to describe familiar articles. I find now when I am faced with the necessity of portraying events and objects beyond the range of normal human experience that I cannot conjure up words to fit. I despair of trying to make you see what we saw, and feel what we felt.

But try to picture yourself in the glass ball with us:

All is profound blackness save for a streak of white, dying about fifty feet away, which is the beam of our searchlight. Twenty feet below is a bare floor of flinty lava and broken shell. This is unrelieved by sea-weed of any kind, appearing like an imagined fragment of Martian or lunar landscape.

The ball sways idly to the push of some explicable submarine current. It is like being in a captive balloon, except that the

connecting cable extends stiffly upward instead of downward.

There is a realization, an instinctive *feel* of awful pressure around you. Logic tells you how you are clamped about, but deeper than logic is the intuition that the glass walls are pressing in on themselves—at the point of collapse. Your ears, tingle with the feel of it: your head rings with it.

You are breathing in through your nose—thin, unsatisfying gulps of air that cause your lungs to labor at their task; and you are exhaling through, your mouth, with difficulty, into the barrel of the powerful pump. No bubbles arise from the tiny hole where the used air is forced into the water. The pressure is too enormous for that. Only a thin, milky line marks its escape from the sphere.

In a ghostly way you see Stanley turning the pump handle. With a handful of waste which he has borrowed from the *Rosa's* engine room, the Professor wipes from the section of wall through which the searchlight plays the moisture that constantly collects there. I sit with my hand near the key, peering downward and ahead like an engineer in a locomotive cab, ready to raise the shell or lower it as occasion warrants.

And always the suffocating awareness of pressure....

Strange and mystic journey as the tortured glass sphere floated over the bottom, following the slow drift of the *Rosa* far above!

The finger of light played along the tilted side of a wrecked tramp steamer. There was a crumpled gash in the bow. From this ragged hole suddenly appeared a great, serpentine form....

The Professor clutched at his camera, pointed it, and clenched his hands in a frenzy of disappointment. The serpent shape had disappeared back into the hull. A little later and we had drifted slowly past the wreck.

"Damn it!" the Professor snatched away his mouthpiece to exclaim: "If we could only *stop*."

The bottom changed character shortly after we had passed the hulk. We began to creep over low, gently rounded mounds.

These were so regular in form that they were puzzling. About fifty feet across and ten in altitude, they looked artificial in their symmetry—like great saucers set on the ocean floor bottom side up. They took on a dirty black hue as our light struck them, and glowed with a faint phosphorescence as they stretched away into the darkness.

A twelve-foot monstrosity, all toad-like head and eyes, swam into the light beam and bumped blindly against the glass ball. For an instant it goggled crazily at us. The Professor took its picture. It blundered away. As it reached the darkness beyond the beam it, too, showed phosphorescent. A belt of blue-white spots like the portholes of a liner extended down its ugly sides.

Along the bottom, between the curious mounds, writhed a wormlike thing. But it was too huge to be described as truly wormlike—it was eighteen or twenty feet long and a foot thick. It was blood red, almost blunt ended and patently without eyes.

I took my gaze off it for an instant. When I looked again it had disappeared. I blinked at this seeming miracle and then discovered a foot or so of its tail protruding from under the edge of one of the mounds. It was threshing furiously about.

It was at this instant that I suddenly found increased difficulty, and glanced at Stanley.

He had stopped pumping and was clutching at the Professor's arm with one hand while he pointed down with the other. The Professor motioned him toward the pump, and began to click pictures furiously with the camera pointed at the nearest mound.

Wondering at the urgency of Stanley's gesture and the frantic clicking of the camera shutter, I looked more closely at the curious, saucerlike hump.

Under closer inspection something remarkably like a huge, mud-colored eye was revealed! And as we drifted along, twenty feet away on the farther slope, another appeared!

Paralyzed, I stared at the edges of the thing. They were waving almost imperceptibly up and down, *creeping*!

The mounds were living creatures! Acres and acres of them lying lethargically on the bottom waiting for something to crawl within range of their monstrous edges!

Involuntarily I pressed the key to raise us. But we had gone only a few feet when the Professor called to me.

"Down again, Martin. I don't think these things will bother us unless we scrape against them. Anyway they can't hurt the shell."

I lowered the ball to our former twenty-foot level, and there we swung just over the monsters' backs.

The Professor had said that the giant inverted saucers would probably not bother us if we did not come in contact with them. It soon became apparent that, in a measure, he was right. The creatures either could not or would not lift their enormous bulks from the sea floor.

A gigantic wriggling thing, all grotesque fringe and tentacles, drifted down into the range of our light. Lower it floated until it hovered just above one of the larger mounds. The Professor got its portrait. At the same instant, as though it had heard the click of the shutter and been frightened by it, the thing dropped another foot—and touched the sloping back.

With the speed of light the inverted saucer became a cup. Like a clenching fist, the cup closed over one of the straggling tentacles.

There followed a tug of war that was all the more ghastly for its soundlessness. The hunted jerked spasmodically to get away from the hunter. So wild were its efforts that several times it raised the monster clear of the bottom for a foot or so. But the grim clutch could not be broken.

Closer and closer it was dragged. Then, after a supreme paroxysm, the tentacle parted and the prey escaped. The tentacle disappeared

into the mass of the baffled hunter. It made no attempt to follow the fleeing creature. It slowly relaxed along the bottom and waited for its next meal.

The unearthly incident gave us fresh confidence, convincing us that the monsters did not move unless they were directly touched. Of course we could not foresee the fatal accident that was going to put us within reach of one of the giant saucers.

We thought for awhile that these great blobs of cold life were the largest creatures of the depths. It was soon made clear to us how mistaken that notion was!

For a time we gazed spellbound at the nightmare assortment of grotesqueries that gradually assembled around us, attracted no doubt by our light. The things were mainly sightless and of indescribable shape. Most of them were phosphorescent, and they avoided collisions in a way that suggested that they had some buried sense of light perception.

As time passed the Professor emptied his camera, refilled it several times and groaned that he had no more film. Twice as we drifted along I raised us to keep us clear of a gradual upward slope of the smooth floor.

Stanley removed his mouthpiece long enough to suggest that we go back to the surface: we had been submerged for nearly four hours now. But before we could reply a violent movement was felt.

The ball rocked and twirled so that we were forced to cling to the circular bench to avoid being thrown to the floor. It was as though a hurricane of wind had suddenly penetrated the unruffled depths.

"Earthquake?" called Stanley.

"Don't know," answered the Professor. He swung the searchlight in an arc and focussed it at length on something that appeared only as a field of blurred movement. He wiped the moisture from the wall before the lens, and there was revealed to us a sight that makes my heart pound even now when I recall it to memory.

Something vast and serpentine had ventured too near the bottom—and had been caught by the death traps there!

The creature was a writhing mass of gigantic coils. It was impossible even to guess at its length, but its girth was such that the mound-shaped monsters that had fastened to it could not entirely encircle it.

There it twined and knotted: a mighty serpent of the deepest ocean,

snapping its awful length and threshing its powerful tail in an effort to dislodge the giant leeches that were flattened against it. And every time it touched the bottom in its blind frenzy, more of the teeming deathtraps attached themselves to it, crawling over their fellows in an effort to find unoccupied areas.

Soon the sea-serpent was a distorted, creeping mass. For one appalling instant its head came into our view....

It resembled the head of a crocodile, only it was ten times larger and covered with scale like the armor plate of a destroyer. The jaws, wide open and slashing with enormous, needle-shaped teeth at the huge parasites, were large enough to have held our glass sphere. One eye appeared. It was at least three feet across and of a shimmering amethyst color.

One of the deadly saucers wrapped itself around the great head. The entire mass of attackers and attacked settled slowly to the bottom.

But before it completely succumbed the beaten monster gave one last, convulsive flick of its tail....

"Good God!" cried Stanley, shrinking away from the pump and staring upward.

I followed his gaze with my own eyes.

In the faint reflected glow of the searchlight I could see row on row of large cups flattened against the top of the ball. As I watched these flattened still more and the big sphere quivered perceptibly.

In its death struggle the mighty serpent had flicked one of the huge leeches against us. It now clung there with blind tenacity, covering nearly two-thirds of our shell with the underside of its body.

I reached for the control key to send us to the surface.

"Don't!" snapped the Professor. "The weight—"

He needed to say no more. My hand recoiled as though the key had been red hot.

The three-quarter-inch cable above us was now sustaining, in addition to its own huge weight, our massive glass ball and the appalling tonnage of this grim blanket of flesh that encircled us. Could it further hold against the strain of lifting that combined tonnage through the press of the water? Almost certainly it could not!

There was nothing we could do but hang there and discover at first

hand exactly what happened to things that were clamped in those mighty, living vises!

The Professor turned on the interior bulb. The result was ghastly. It showed every detail of the belly of the thing that gripped us.

Crowded over its entire under surface were gristly, flattened suckers. Now and then a convulsive ripple ran through its surface tissue and great ridges of flesh stood out. With each squeeze the glass shell quivered ominously as though the extreme limit of its pressure resisting power were being reached—and passed.

"A nice fix," remarked the Professor, his calm, dry voice acting like a tonic in that moment of fear. "If we try to go up, the cable would probably break. If we try to outlast the patience of this thing we might run out of air, or actually be staved in."

He paused thoughtfully.

"I suggest, though, that we follow the latter course for awhile at least. It would be just too bad if that cable broke, gentlemen!"

Stanley shuddered, and looked at the dirty white belly that pressed against the glass walls on all sides.

"I vote we stay here for a time."

"And I," was my addition.

I relieved Stanley at the pump. He and the Professor sat down on the bench. Casting frequent glances at the constricted blanket of flesh that covered us, we prepared to wait as composedly as we might for the thing to give up its effort to smash our shell.

The hour that followed was longer than any full day I have ever lived through. Had I not confirmed the passage of time by looking at my watch, I would have sworn that at least twenty hours had passed.

Every half-minute I gazed at that weaving pattern of cup-shaped suckers only five feet away, trying to see if they were relaxing in their pressure. I attempted to persuade myself that they were. But I knew I was only imagining it. Actually they were pressed as flat as ever, and the sphere still quivered at regular intervals as the heavy body squeezed in on itself. There was no sign that its blind, mindless patience was becoming exhausted.

There was little conversation during that interminable hour.

Stanley grinned wryly once and commented on the creature's

disappointment if it actually succeeded in getting at us.

"We'd be scattered all over the surrounding half mile by the pressure of the water," he said. "There'd be nothing left for our pet to feed on but five-foot chunks of broken glass. Not a very satisfying meal."

"We might try to reason with the thing—point out how foolish it is to waste its time on us," I suggested, trying to appear as nonchalant as he was.

The Professor said nothing. He was coolly writing in his notebook, describing minutely the appearance of our abysmal captor.

Finally I chanced to look down through a section of wall not covered by our stubborn enemy. I wiped the moisture from the glass before the searchlight so that I could see more clearly.

The bottom seemed to be heaving up and down. I blinked my eyes and looked again. It was not an illusion. With a regular dip and rise we were approaching to within a few feet of the rocky floor and moving back up again. Also we were floating faster than at anytime previous. The bottom was bare again; we had left the crowding, ominous mounds.

I waved to the Professor. He snapped his notebook shut and stared at the uneasy ocean bottom.

"I've been hoping I was wrong," he said simply. "I thought I felt a wavy motion fifteen minutes ago, and it seemed to me to increase steadily."

The three of us stared at each other.

"You mean ..." began Stanley with a shudder.

"I mean that the *Rosa*, one mile above us, is having difficulties. A storm. Judging from our movement it must be a hurricane: the length of cable would cushion us from any average wave, and we are rising and falling at least fifteen feet."

"My God!" groaned Stanley. "The *Rosa* is already heeled with the weight of us. She could never weather a hurricane!"

The plight of the crew above our heads was as clear to us as though we had been aboard with them.

Should they cut the cable, figuring that the lives of the three of us were certainly not to be set against the thirty on the yacht?

Should they disconnect the electric control and try to haul us up regardless?

Or should they try to ride out the storm in spite of being crippled by the drag of us?

"I think if I were up there I'd cut us adrift," said Stanley grimly. Both the Professor and myself nodded. "Though," he added hopefully, "my captain is a good gambler...."

The cable quivered like a live thing under the terrific strain. At each downward swoop, before the upswing began, there was a sickening sag.

"We no longer have a decision to make," said the Professor. "Press the key, Martin, and God grant we can rise with all this dead weight."

And at that instant the crew of the *Rosa* were also relieved of the necessity for making a decision.

At the bottom of one of those long, sickening falls there was a jerk—and we continued on down to the ocean floor!

The sphere rolled over, jumbling the equipment in a tangled mess

with the three of us in the center, bruised and cut. The light snapped off as the battery connections were torn loose.

There we lay at the bottom of Penguin Deep, in an inert sphere that was dead and dark in the surrounding blackness—a coffin of glass to hold us through the centuries....

"Martin," I heard the Professor's voice after a time. "Stanley—can either of you move? I'm caught."

"I'm caught, too," came Stanley's gasping answer. "Something on my leg—feels like it's broken."

A heavy object was pressing across my body. With an effort I freed myself and fumbled in the pitch darkness for the other two.

"Lights first," commanded the Professor. "The pump, you know."

I did know! Frantically I scrambled in the dark till I located the batteries. They were right side up and still wired together.

The air grew rapidly foul with no one at the pump. Panting for breath I blundered at the task of connecting the light. After what seemed an eternity I accomplished it.

The light revealed Stanley with an air tank lying across his leg. The mouthpiece of his breathing tube had been forced back over his head, gashing his face in its journey. His face was white with pain.

The Professor was caught under the heavy bench. I freed him and together we attended to Stanley, finding that his leg wasn't broken but only badly bruised.

The mound-shaped monster, dislodged possibly by the fall, was nowhere to be seen.

I resumed work at the pump, the connections of which were so strongly contrived that they had withstood the shock of the upset.

For a moment we were content to rest while the air grew purer. Then we were forced squarely to face our fate.

The Professor summed up the facts in a few concise words.

"We're certainly doomed! Here at the bottom of Penguin Deep we're as out of reach of help as though we were stranded on the moon. We're as good as dead right now."

"If we have nothing left to hope for," whispered Stanley after a time, "we might as well close the air valves and get it over with at once. No use torturing ourselves...."

The Professor moistened his lips.

"It might be wise." He turned to me. "What's your opinion, Martin?"

But I—I confess I had not the stark courage of these two.

"No! No!" I cried out. "Let's keep on living as long as the air holds out. Something might happen—"

I avoided their eyes as I said it, utterly ashamed of my cowardly quibbling with death. What in the name of God could possibly happen to help us?

The Professor shrugged dully, and nodded.

"I feel with Stanley that we ought to get it over in one short stab. But we have no right to force you...." His voice trailed off.

We readjusted our mouthpieces. I turned automatically at the pump; and we silently awaited the last suffocating moment of our final doom.

As before, attracted by the light, a strange assortment of deep-sea life wriggled and darted about us, swimming lazily among the looped coils and twists of our cable which had settled down around us.

Among these were certain fish that resembled great porcupines. Spines a foot and a half long, like living knife blades, protected them from the attacks of other species.

They were the only things we saw that were not constantly writhing away from the jaws of some hostile monster—the only things that seemed able to swim about their own affairs without even deigning to watch for danger.

Fascinated, I watched the six-foot creatures. Here were we, reasoning humans, supposed lords of creation, slowly but surely perishing—while only a few feet away one of the lowest forms of life could exist in perfect safety and tranquility!

Then, as I watched them, I seemed to see a difference in some of them.

The majority of them had two fins just behind the gill slits, typical fish tails and blunt, sloping heads. But now and then I saw a spined monster that was queerly unlike its fellows.

Instead of two front fins, these unique ones had two vacant round holes. The head looked as though it had forgotten to grow; its place was taken by an eyeless, projecting, shield shaped cap. And there was no tail.

Glad to find something to distract my half crazed thoughts, I studied the nearest of these.

They moved slower than their tailed and finned brothers, I noticed. I wondered how they could move at all, lacking in any kind of motive power as they seemed to be.

Next instant the secret of their movement was made clear!

Out of the empty fin holes of the creature I was studying crept two long, powerful looking tentacles. But these were not true tentacles. There were no vacuum discs on them, and they moved as though supported by jointed bones—like arms.

The arms ended in flat paddles that resembled hands. These threshed

the water in a sort of breast-stroke, propelling the body forward.

Shortly after the arms had appeared, the spiny head cap was cautiously extended a few inches forward from the main shell. Further it was extended as the head of a turtle might slowly appear from the protection of its bony case. And under it—

"Professor!" I screamed wildly. "My God! Look!"

Both the Professor and Stanley merely stared dully at me. I babbled of what I had seen.

"A man! A human looking thing, anyway! Arms and a head! A man inside a fish's spined hide—like armor!"

They looked pityingly at me. The Professor laid his hand on my shoulder.

"Now, now," he soothed, "don't go to pieces—"

"I tell you I saw it!" I shouted. Then, shrinking from the hysterical loudness of my own voice, I lowered my tone. "Something that looks human has occupied some of those prickly, six-foot shells. I saw arms—and a man's head! I swear it!"

"Nonsense! How could a human being stand the cold, the pressure __"

Here I happened to glance at the wall of the shell through which the searchlight shone.

"Look! See for yourself!"

Squarely in the rays of the light showed a head, projecting from one of the shells and capped with a wide flat helmet of horned bone.

There were eyes and nose and mouth placed on one side of that head —a face! There were even tabs of flesh or bony protuberances that resembled ears.

"Curious," muttered the Professor, staring. "It certainly looks human enough to talk. But it's only a fish, nevertheless. See—in the throat are gill slits."

"But the eyes! Look at them! They're not the eyes of a fish!"

And they were not. There was in them a light of reason, of intelligence. Those eyes were roaming brightly over us, observing the light, the equipment, seeming to note our amazement as we crowded to look at it.

The sphere rocked slightly. Behind the staring, manlike visitor there was a glimpse of enormous, crocodile jaws and huge, amethyst eyes. Instantly the head and arms receded, leaving an empty-seeming, lifeless shell. An impregnable fortress of spines, the thing drifted slowly away through the twisted loops of cable.

"It certainly looked like—" began Stanley shakily.

"The creature was just a fish," said the Professor shaking his head at the light in Stanley's eyes. "Some sort of giant parasite that inhabits the shells of other fish."

He opened the valve of the last air cylinder and seated himself resignedly on the bench.

"We have another half hour or so—"

All of us suddenly put out our hands to brace ourselves. The sphere had moved.

"Look at the cable!" called Stanley.

We did so. It was moving, writhing away from us over the bottom as though abruptly given life of its own. Coil after coil disappeared into the further gloom.

At length the cable was straight. The ball moved again—was dragged a few feet along the rocky floor.

Something—possessed of incredibly vast power—had seized the end of the steel cable and was reeling us in as a fisherman reels in a trout!

Slowly, unsteadily, we slid along the ocean floor. Ahead of us appeared a jagged black wall—a cliff. There was a gloomy hole at its base. Toward this we were being dragged by whatever it was that had caught the end of the cable.

Helpless, we watched ourselves engulfed by the murky den. In the beam of the searchlight we saw that the submarine cavern extended on and on for an unguessable depth. The cable, taut with the strain, stretched ahead out of sight.

Time had been lost track of during that mysterious, ominous journey. It was recalled to us by the state of the air we were breathing.

The Professor removed his mouthpiece and cast the tube aside.

"You might as well stop pumping, Martin," he said quietly. "We're done. There's no more air in the flask."

We stared at each other. Then we shook hands, solemnly, tremulously, taking leave of each other before we departed on that longest of all journeys....

The air in that small space was rapidly exhausted. We lay on the floor, laboring for breath, and closed our eyes....

The Professor, the oldest of the three of us, succumbed first. I heard his breath whistle stertorously and, glancing at him, saw that he was in a coma. In a moment Stanley had joined him in blessed unconsciousness.

I could feel myself drifting off.... Hammers beat at my ears.... Daggers pierced my heaving lungs....

Hazily I could see scores of the bristly, manlike fish when I opened my eyes and glanced through the walls. It was not one monster then, but many that had brought us to their lair. Abruptly, as though a signal had been given, they all streamed back toward the mouth of the cavern....

My eyesight dimmed.... The hammers pulsed louder.... A veil descended over my senses and I knew no more....

A soft, sustained roar came to my ears. Through my closed eyelids I could sense light. A dank, fishy smell came to my nostrils.

I groaned and moved feebly, finding that I was resting on something soft and pleasant.

Dazedly I opened my eyes and sat up. An exclamation burst from me as I suddenly remembered what had gone before, and realized that somehow, incredibly, I was still living.

Feeling like a man who has waked from a nightmarish sleep to find himself in his tomb, I gazed about.

I was in a long, lofty rock chamber, the uneven floor of which was covered with shallow pools of water. The further end was of smooth-grained stone that resembled cement. The near end was rough like the walls; but in it there was a small, symmetrical arch, the mouth of a passage leading away to some other point in the bowels of the earth.

The place was flooded with clear light that had a rosy tinge. From my position on the floor I could not see what made the light. It streamed from a crevice that extended clear around the cave parallel with the floor and about twelve feet above it. From this groove,

along with the light, came the soft roaring hiss.

Beside me was the glass ball, the cover off and lying a few feet away from the opening in the top. There was no trace of Stanley or the Professor.

I rose from my couch, a thick, mattresslike affair of soft, pliant hide, and walked feebly toward the small arch in the near end of the cave.

Even as I approached it I heard footsteps, and voices resounded in some slurring, musical language. Half a dozen figures suddenly came into view.

They were men, as human as myself! Indeed, as I gazed at them, I felt inclined to think they were even more human!

They were magnificent specimens. The smallest could not have been less than six feet three, and all of them were muscular and finely proportioned. Their faces were arresting in their expression of calm strength and kindliness. They looked like gods, arrayed in soft, thick, beautifully tanned hides in this rosy tinted hole a mile below the ocean's top.

They stared at me for an instant, then advanced toward me. My face

must have reflected alarm, for the tallest of them held up his hand, palm outward, in a peaceful gesture.

The leader spoke to me. Of course the slurred, melodious syllable meant nothing to me. He smiled and indicated that I was to follow him. I did so, hardly aware of what I was doing, my brain reeling in an attempt to grasp the situation.

How marvelous, how utterly incredible, to find human beings here! How many were there? Where had they come from? How had they salvaged us from Penguin Deep? I gave it up, striding along with my towering guards like a man walking in his sleep.

At length the low passageway ended, and I exclaimed aloud at what I saw.

I was looking down a long avenue of buildings, all three stories in height. There were large door and window apertures, but no doors nor window panes. In front of each house was a small square with—wonder of wonders!—a lawn of whitish yellow vegetation that resembled grass. In some of the lawns were set artistic fountains of carved rock.

I might have been looking down any prosperous earthly subdivision,

save for the fact that the roofs of the houses were the earth itself, which the building walls, in addition to functioning as partitions, served to support. Also earthly subdivisions aren't usually illuminated with rosy light that comes softly roaring from jets set in the walls.

We were walking toward a more brightly lighted area that showed ahead of us. On the way we passed intersections where other, similar streets branched geometrically away to right and left. These were smaller than the one we were on, indicating that ours was Main Street in this bizarre submarine city.

Faces appeared at door and window openings to peer at me as we passed. And even in that jumbled moment I had time to realize that these folk could restrain curiosity better than we can atop the earth. There was no hub-bub, no running out to tag after the queerly dressed foreigner and shout humorous remarks at him.

We approached the bright spot I had noticed from afar. It was an open square, about a city block in area, in the center of which was a royal looking building covered with blazing fragments of crystal and so brilliantly resplendent with light that it seemed to glow at the

heart of a pink fire.

I was led toward this and in through a wide doorway. As courteously as though I were a visiting king, I was conducted up a great staircase, down a corridor set with more of the sparkling crystals and into a huge, low room. There my escort bowed and left me.

Still feeling that I could not possibly be awake and seeing actual things, I glanced around.

In a corner was another of the mattresslike couches made of the thick, soft hide that seemed to be the principal fabric of the place. A few feet away was a table set with dishes of food in barbaric profusion. None of the viands looked familiar but all appealed to the appetite. The floor was strewn with soft skins, and comfortable, carved benches were scattered about.

I walked to the window and looked out. Underneath was a plot of the cream colored grass through which ran a tiny stream. This widened at intervals into clear pools beside which were set stone benches. A hundred yards away was the edge of the square, where the regular, three storied houses began.

While I was staring at this unearthly vista, still unable to think with

any coherence. I heard my name called. I turned to face Stanley and the Professor.

Both were pale in the rose light, and Stanley limped with the pain of his bruised leg: but both had recovered from their partial suffocation as completely as had I.

"We thought perhaps you'd decided to swim back up to the *Rosa* and leave us to our fates," said Stanley after we had stopped pumping each other's arms and had seated ourselves.

"And I thought—well, I didn't think much of anything," I replied. "I was too busy straining my eyesight over the wonders of this city. Did you ever see anything like it?"

"We haven't seen it at all, save for a view from the windows," said Stanley. "All we know of the place is that a while ago we woke up in a room like this, only much smaller and less lavish. I wonder why you rate this distinction?"

I described the streets as I had seen them. (It is impossible for me to think of them as anything but streets; it would seem as though the

rock roof over all would give the appearance of a series of tunnels; but I had always the impression of airiness and openness.)

"Light and heat are furnished by natural gas," said the Professor when I remarked on the perfection of these two necessities. "That's what makes the low roaring noise—the thousands of burning jets. But the presence of gas here isn't as unusual as the presence of air. Where does that come from? Through wandering underground mazes, from some cave mouth in the Fiji Islands to the north? That would indicate that all the earth around here is honeycombed like a gigantic section of sponge. I wonder—"

"Have you any idea how we were rescued?" I interrupted, a little impatient of his abstract scientific ponderings.

"We have," said Stanley. "A woman told us. We woke up to find her nursing us—gorgeous looking thing—finest woman I've ever seen, and I've seen a good many—"

"She didn't exactly 'tell' us," remarked the Professor with his thin smile. Women were only interesting to him as biological studies. "She drew a diagram that explained it.

"That tunnel, Martin, was like the outer diving chamber of a

submarine. We were hauled in on a big windlass—driven by gas turbines, I think. Once we were inside, a twenty-yard, counterbalanced wall of rock was lowered across the entrance. Then the water was drained out through a well, and into a subterranean body of water that extends under the entire city. And here we are."

We fell silent. Here we were. But what was going to happen to us among these friendly-seeming people; and how—if ever—we were going to get back to the earth's surface, were questions we could not even try to answer.

We ate of the appetizing food laid out on the long table. Shortly afterward we heard steps in the corridor outside the room.

A woman entered. She was ravishingly beautiful, tall, slender but symmetrically rounded. A soft leather robe slanted upward across her breast to a single shoulder fastening and ended just above her knees in a skirt arrangement. Around her head was a regal circlet of silvery gray metal with a flashing bit of crystal set in the center above her broad, low forehead.

She smiled at Stanley who looked dazzled and smiled eagerly back.

She pointed toward the door, signifying that we were to go with her.

We did so; and were led down the great staircase and to a huge room that took up half the ground floor of the building. And here we met the nobility of the little kingdom—the upper class that governed the immaculate little city.

They were standing along the walls, leaving a lane down the center of the room—tall, finely modelled men and women dressed in the single garments of soft leather. There were people there with gray hair and wisdom wrinkled faces; but all were alike in being erect of body, firm of bearing and in splendid health.

They stopped talking as we entered the big room. Our gaze strayed ahead down the lane toward the further wall.

Here was a raised dais. On it was a gleaming crystal encrusted throne. And occupying it was the most queenly, exquisitely beautiful woman I had ever dreamed about.

Woman? She was just a girl in years in spite of her grave and royal air. Her eyes were deep violet. Her hair was black as ebony and gleaming with sudden glints of light. Her skin—

But she cannot be described. Only a great painter could give a hint of her glory. Too, I might truthfully be described as prejudiced about

her perfections.

The Queen, for patently she was that, bowed graciously at us. It seemed to me—though I told myself that I was an imaginative fool—that her eyes rested longest on me, and had in them an expression not granted to the Professor or Stanley.

She spoke to us a melodious sentence or two, and waved her beautiful hand in which was a short ivory wand, evidently a scepter.

"She's probably giving us the keys to the city," whispered Stanley. He edged nearer the fair one who had conducted us. "I sincerely hope there's room here for us."

The open lane closed in on us. Men and women crowded about us speaking to us and smiling ruefully as they realized we could not understand. I noticed that, for some curious reason, they seemed fascinated by the color of my hair. Red-haired men were evidently scarce there.

At length the beauty who had so captured Stanley's fancy, and who seemed to have been appointed a sort of mentor for us, suggested in sign language that we might want to return to our quarters.

It was a welcome suggestion. We were done in by the experiences and emotions that had gripped us since leaving the *Rosa* such an incredibly few hours ago.

We went back to the second floor. I to my luxurious big apartment and Stanley and the Professor to their smaller but equally comfortable rooms.

A pleasant period slid by, every waking hour of which was filled with new experiences.

The city's name, we found, was Zyobor. It was a perfect little community. There were artisans and thinkers, artists and laborers—all alike in being physically perfect beyond belief and cultured as no race on top the ground is cultured.

As we began to learn the language, more exact details of the practical methods of existence were revealed to us.

The surrounding earth furnished them with building materials, metals and unlimited gas. The sea, so near us and yet so securely walled away, gave them food. Which warrants a more detailed description.

We were informed that the manlike, two-armed fishes were the servants of these people—domesticated animals, in a sense, only of an extremely high order of intelligence. They were directed by mental telepathy (Every man, woman and child in Zyobor was skilled at thought projection. They conversed constantly, from end to end of the city, by mental telepathy.)

Protected in their spined shells, which they captured from the schools of porcupine fish that swarmed in Penguin Deep, they gathered sea vegetation from the higher levels and trapped sea creatures. These were brought into the subterranean chamber where our glass ball now reposed. Then the chamber was emptied of water and the food was borne to the city.

The vast army of mound-fish provided the bulk of the population's food, and also furnished the thick, pliant skin they used for clothing and drapes. They were cultivated as we cultivate cattle—an ominous herd, to be handled with care and approached by the fish-servants with due caution.

Thus, with all reasonable wants satisfied, with talent and brains to design beautiful surroundings, lighted and warmed by inexhaustible natural gas, these fortunate beings lived their sheltered lives in their rosy underground world.

At least I thought their lives were sheltered then. It was only later, when talking to the beautiful young Queen, that I learned of the dread menace that had begun to draw near to them just a short time before we were rescued....

My first impression, when we had entered the throne room that first day, that the Queen had regarded me more intently than she had Stanley or the Professor, had been right. It pleased her to treat me as an equal, and to give me more of her time than was granted to any other person in the city.

Every day, for a growing number of hours, we were together in her apartment. She personally instructed me in the language, and such was my desire to talk to this radiant being that I made an apt pupil.

Soon I had progressed enough to converse with her—in a stilted, incorrect way—on all but the most abstract of subjects. It was a fine language. I liked it, as I liked everything else about Zyobor. The upper earth seemed far away and well forgotten.

Her name, I found, was Aga. A beautiful name....

"How did your kingdom begin?" I asked her one day, while we were sitting beside one of the small pools in the gardens. We were close

together. Now and then my shoulder touched hers, and she did not draw away.

"I know not," she replied. "It is older than any of our ancient records can say. I am the three hundred and eleventh of the present reigning line."

"And we are the first to enter thy realm from the upper world?"

"Thou art the first."

"There is no other entrance but the sea-way into which we were drawn?"

"There is no other entrance."

I was silent, trying to realize the finality of my residence here.

At the moment I didn't care much if I never got home!

"In the monarchies we know above," I said finally, avoiding her violet eyes, "it is not the custom for the queen—or king—to reign alone. A consort is chosen. Is it not so here? Has thou not, among thy nobles, some one thou hast destined—"

I stopped, feeling that if she dismissed me in anger and never spoke to me again the punishment would be just.

But she wasn't angry. A lovely tide of color stained her cheeks. Her lips parted, and she turned her head. For a long time she said nothing. Then she faced me, with a light in her eyes that sent the blood racing in my veins.

"I have not yet chosen," she murmured. "Mayhap soon I shall tell thee why."

She rose and hurried back toward the palace. But at the door she paused—and smiled at me in a way that had nothing whatever to do with queenship.

As the time sped by the three of us settled into the routine of the city as though we had never known of anything else.

The Professor spent most of his time down by the sea chamber where the food was dragged in by the intelligent servant-fish.

He was in a zoologist's paradise. Not a creature that came in there had ever been catalogued before. He wrote reams of notes on the parchment paper used by the citizens in recording their transactions.

Particularly was he interested in the vast, lowly mound-fish.

One time, when I happened to be with him, the receding waters of the chamber disclosed the body of one of the odd herdsmen of these deep sea flocks. Then the Professor's elation knew no bounds. We hurried forward to look at it.

"It is a typical fish," puzzled the Professor when we had cut the body out of its usurped armor. "Cold blooded, adapted to the chill and pressure of the deeps. There are the gills I observed before ... yet it looks very human."

It surely did. There were the jointed arms, and the rudimentary hands. Its forehead was domed; and the brain, when dissected, proved much larger than the brain of a true fish. Also its bones were not those of a mammal, but the cartilagenous bones of a fish. It was not quite six feet long; just fitted the horny shell.

"But its intelligence!" fretted the Professor, glorying in his inability to classify this marvelous specimen. "No fish could ever attain such mental development. Evolution working backward from human to reptile and then fish—or a new freak of evolution whereby a fish on a short cut toward becoming human?" He sighed and gave it up. But more reams of notes were written.

"Why do you take them?" I asked. "No one but yourself will ever see them."

He looked at me with professorial absent-mindedness.

"I take them for the fun of it, principally. But perhaps, sometime, we may figure out a way of getting them up. My God! Wouldn't my learned brother scientists be set in an uproar!"

He bent to his observations and dissections again, cursing now and then at the distortion suffered by the specimens when they were released from the deep sea pressure and swelled and burst in the atmospheric pressure in the cave.

Stanley was engrossed in a different way. Since the moment he laid eyes on her, he had belonged to the stately woman who had first nursed him back to consciousness. Mayis was her name.

From shepherding the three of us around Zyobor and explaining its marvels to us, she had taken to exclusive tutorship of Stanley. And Stanley fairly ate it up.

"You, the notorious woman hater," I taunted him one time, "the wary bachelor—to fall at last. And for a woman of another world—almost

of another planet! I'm amazed!"

"I don't know why you should be amazed," said he stiffly.

"You've been telling me ever since I was a kid that women were all useless, all alike—"

"I find I was mistaken," he interrupted. "They aren't all alike. There's only one Mayis. She is—different."

"What do you talk about all the time? You're with her constantly."

"I'm not with her any more than you're with the Queen," he shot back at me. "What do you find to talk about?"

That shut me up. He went to look for Mayis; and I wandered to the royal apartments in search of Aga.

In the first days of our friendship I had several times surprised in Aga's eyes a curious expression, one that seemed compounded of despair, horror and resignation.

I had seen that same expression in the eyes of the nobles of late, and in the faces of all the people I encountered in the streets—who, I mustn't forget to add here, never failed to treat me with a deference

that was as intoxicating as it was inexplicable.

It was as though some terrible fate hovered over the populace, some dreadful doom about which nothing could be done. No one put into words any fears that might confirm that impression; but continually I got the idea that everybody there went about in a state of attempting to live normally and happily while life was still left—before some awful, wholesale death descended on them.

At last, from Aga, I learned the fateful reason.

But first—a confession that was hastened by the knowledge of the fate of the city—I learned from her something that changed all of life for me.

We were surrounded by the luxury of her private apartment. We sat on a low divan, side by side. I wanted, more than anything I had ever wanted before, to put my arms around her. But I dared not. One does not make love easily to a queen, the three hundred and eleventh of a proud line.

And then, as maids have done often in all countries, and, perhaps, on all planets, she took the initiative herself.

"We have a curious custom in Zyobor of which I have not yet told thee," she murmured. "It concerns the kings of Zyobor. The color of their hair."

She glanced up at my own carrot-top, and then averted her gaze.

"For all of our history our kings have had—red hair. On the few occasions when the line has been reduced to a lone queen, as in my case, the red-haired men of the kingdom have striven together in public combat to determine which was most powerful and brave. The winner became the Queen's consort."

"And in this case?" I asked, my heart beginning to pound madly.

"In my case, my lord, there is to be no—no striving. When I was a child our only two red-haired males died, one by accident, one by sickness. Now there are none others but infants, none of eligible age. But—by a miracle—thou—"

She stopped; then gazed up at me from under long, gold flecked lashes.

"I was afraid ... I was doomed to die ... alone...."

It was after I had replied impetuously to this, that she told me of the

terror that was about to engulf all life in the beautiful undersea city.

"Thou hast wonder, perhaps, why I should be forward enough to tell thee this instead of waiting for thine own confession first," she faltered. "Know, then—the reason is the shortness of the time we are fated to spend together. We shall belong each to the other only a little while. Then shall we belong to death! And I—when I knew the time was to be so brief—"

And I listened with growing horror to her account of the enemy that was advancing toward us with every passing moment.

About twenty miles away, in the lowest depression of Penguin Deep, lived a race of monsters which the people of Aga's city called Quabos.

The Quabos were grim beings that were more intelligent than Aga's fish-servants—even, she thought, more intelligent than humans themselves. They had existed in their dark hole, as far as the Zyobites knew, from the beginning of time.

Through the countless centuries they had constructed for themselves

a vast series of dens in the rock. There they had hidden away from the deep-sea dangers. They, too, preyed on the mound-fish; but as there was plenty of food for all, the Zyobites had never paid much attention to them.

But—just before we had appeared, there had come about a subterranean quake that changed the entire complexion of matters in Penguin Deep.

The earthquake wiped out the elaborately burrowed sea tunnels of the Quabos, killing half of them at a blow and driving the rest out into the unfriendly openness of the deep.

Now this was fatal to them. They were not used to physical self defense. During the thousands of years of residence in their sheltered burrows they had become utterly unable to exist when exposed to the primeval dangers of the sea. It was as though the civilization-softened citizens of New York should suddenly be set down in a howling wilderness with nothing but their bare hands with which to contrive all the necessities of a living.

Such was the situation at the time Stanley, the Professor and myself arrived in Zyobor.

The Quabos must find an immediate haven or perish. On the ocean bottom they were threatened by the mound-fish. In the higher levels they were in danger from almost everything that swam: few things were so defenceless as themselves after their long inertia.

Their answer was Zyobor. There, in perfect security, only to be reached by the diving chamber that could be sealed at will by the twenty-yard, counterbalanced lock, the Quabos would be even more protected than in their former runways.

So—they were working day and night to invade Aga's city!

"But Aga," I interrupted impulsively at this point. "If these monsters are fishes, how could they live here in air—"

I stopped as my objection answered itself before she could reply.

They would not have to live in air to inhabit Zyobor. They would inundate the city—flood that peaceful, beautiful place with the awful pressure of the lowest depths!

That thought, in turn, suggested to me that every building in Zyobor would be swept flat if subjected suddenly to the rush of the sea. The great low cavern, without the support of the myriad walls, would

probably collapse—trapping the invading Quabos and leaving the rest without a home once more.

But Aga answered this before I could voice it.

The Quabos had foreseen that point. They were tunneling slowly but surely toward the city from a point about half a mile from the diving chamber. And as they advanced, they blocked up the passageway behind them at intervals, drilled down to the great underground sea that lay beneath all this section, and drained a little of the water away.

In this manner they lightened, bit by bit, the enormous weight of the ocean depths. When the city was finally reached, not only would it be ensured against sudden destruction but the Quabos themselves would have become accustomed to the difference in pressure. Had they gone immediately from the accustomed press of Penguin Deep into the atmosphere of Zyobor, they would have burst into bits. As it was they would be able to flood the city slowly, without injury to themselves.

"Now thou knowest our fate," concluded Aga with a shudder. "Zyobor will be a part of the great waters. We ourselves shall be food for these monsters...." She faltered and stopped.

"But this cannot be!" I exclaimed, clenching my fists impotently. "There *must* be something we can do; some way—"

"There is nothing to be done. Our wisest men have set themselves sleeplessly to the task of defence. There is no defence possible."

"We can't simply sit here and wait! Your people are wonderful, but this is no time for resignation. Send for my two friends, Aga. We will have a council of war, we four, and see if we can find a way!"

She shrugged despairfully, started to speak, then sent in quest of Stanley and the Professor.

They as well as myself, had had no idea of the menace that crept nearer us with each passing hour. They were dumbfounded, horrified to learn of the peril. We sat awhile in silence, realizing our situation to the full.

Then the Professor spoke:

"If only we could see what these things look like! It might help in planning to defeat them."

"That can be done with ease," said Aga. "Come."

We went with her to the gardens and approached the nearest pool.

"My fish-men are watching the Quabos constantly. They report to me by telepathy whenever I send my thoughts their way. I will let you see, on the pool, the things they are now seeing."

She stared intently at the sheet of water. And gradually, as we watched, a picture appeared—a picture that will never fade from my memory in any smallest detail.

The Quabos had huddled for protection into a large cave at the foot of the cliff outside Zyobor. There were a great many Quabos, and the cave was relatively confining. Now we saw, through the eyes of the spine protected outpost of the Queen, these monstrous refugees crowded together like sheep.

The watery cavern was a creeping mass of viscous tentacles, enormous staring eyes and globular heads. The cave was paved three deep with the horrible things, and they were attached to the it walls and roof in solid blocks.

"My God!" whispered Stanley. "There are thousands of them!"

There were. And that they were in distress was evident.

The layers on the floor were weaving and shifting constantly as the bottom creatures struggled feebly to rise to the top of the mass and be relieved of the weight of their brothers. Also they were famished....

One of the blood red, gigantic worms floated near the cave entrance. Like lightning the nearest Quabos darted after it. In a moment the prey was torn to bits by the ravenous monsters.

The other side of the story was immediately portrayed to us.

With the emerging of the reckless Quabos, a sea-serpent appeared from above and snapped up three of their number. Evidently the huge serpent considered them succulent tidbits, and made it its business to wait near the cave and avail itself of just such rash chance-taking as this.

While we watched the nightmare scene, a Quabo disengaged itself from the parent mass and floated upward into the clear, giving us a chance to see more distinctly what the creatures looked like.

There was a black, shiny head as large as a sugar barrel. In this were

eyes the size of dinner plates, and gleaming with a cold, hellish intelligence. Four long, twining tentacles were attached directly to the head. Dotted along these were rudimentary sucker discs, that had evidently become atrophied by the soft living of thousands of the creature's ancestors.

As though emerging from the pool into which we were gazing, the monster darted viciously at us. At once it disappeared: the fish-servant through whose eyes we were seeing all this had evidently retreated from the approach; although, protected by its spines, it could not have been in actual danger.

"How dost thou know of the tunneling?" I asked Aga. "Thy fish-men cannot be present there, in the rear of the tunnel, to report."

"My artisans have knowledge of each forward move," she answered. "I will show thee."

We walked back to the palace and descended to a smooth-lined vault. There we saw a great stone shaft sunk down into the rock of the floor. On this was a delicate vibration recording instrument of some sort, with a needle that quivered rhythmically over several degrees of an arc.

"This tells of each move of the Quabos," said Aga. "It also tells us where they will break through the city wall. How near to us are they, Kilor?" she asked an attendant who was studying the dial, and who had bowed respectfully to Aga and myself as we approached.

"They will break into the city in four rixas at the present rate of advance, Your Majesty."

Four rixas! In a little over sixteen days, as we count time, the city of Zyobor would be delivered into the hands—or, rather, tentacles—of the slimy, starving demons that huddled in the cavern outside!

Somberly we followed Aga back to her apartment.

"As thou seest," she murmured, "there is nothing to be done. We can only resign ourselves to the fate that nears us, and enjoy as much as may be the few remaining rixas...."

She glanced at me.

The Professor's dry, cool voice cut across our wordless, engrossed communion.

"I don't think we'll give up quite as easily as all that. We can at least try to outwit our enemies. If it does nothing else for us, the effort can

serve to distract our minds."

He drew from his pocket a sheet of parchment and the stub of his last remaining pencil. His fingers busied themselves apparently idly in the tracing of geometric lines.

"Looking ahead to the exact details of our destruction," he mused coolly, "we see that our most direct and ominous enemy is the sea itself. When the city is flooded, we drown—and later the Quabos can enter at will."

He drew a few more lines, and marked a cross at a point in the outer rim of the diagram.

"What will happen? The Quabos force through the last shell of the city wall. The water from their tunnel floods into Zyobor. But—and mark me well—*only* the water from the tunnel! The outer end, remember, is blocked off in their pressure-reducing process. The vast body of the sea itself cannot immediately be let in here because the Quabos must take as long a time to re-accustom themselves to its pressure as they did to work out of it."

He spread the parchment sheet before us.

"Is this a roughly accurate plan of the city?" he asked Aga.

She inclined her lovely head.

"And this," indicating the cross, "is the spot where the Quabos will break in?"

Again she nodded, shuddering.

"Then tell me what you think of this," said the Professor.

And he proceeded to sketch out a plan so simple, and yet so seemingly efficient, that the rest of us gazed at him with wordless admiration.

"My friend, my friend," whispered Aga at last, "thou hast saved us. Thou art the guardian hero of Zyobor—"

"Not too fast, Your Highness," interrupted the Professor with his frosty smile. "I shall be much surprised if this little scheme actually saves the city. We may find the rock so thick there that our task is hopeless—though I imagine the Quabos picked a thin section for help in their own plans."

A vague look came into his eyes.

"I must certainly get my hands on one of these monsters ... superhumanly intelligent fish ... marvelous—akin to the octopus, perhaps?"

He wandered off, changed from the resourceful schemer to the dreamy man of scientific abstractions.

The Queen gazed after him with wonder in her eyes.

"A great man," she murmured, "but is he—a little mad?"

"No, only a little absent-minded," I replied. Then, "Come on, Stanley. We'll round up every able bodied citizen in Zyobor and get to work. I suppose they have some kind of rock drilling machinery here?"

They had. And they strangely resembled our own rock drills: revolving metal shafts, driven by gas turbines, tipped with fragments of the same crystal that glittered so profusely in the palace walls. Another proof that practically every basic, badly needed tool had been invented again and again, in all lands and times, as the necessity for it arose.

With hundreds of the powerful men of Zyobor working as closely

together as they could without cramping each others movements, and with the whole city resounding to the roar of the machinery, we labored at the defence that might possibly check the advance of the hideous Quabos.

And with every breath we drew, waking or sleeping, we realized that the cold blooded, inhuman invaders had crept a fraction of an inch closer in their tunneling.

The Quabos against the Zyobites! Fish against man! Two diametrically opposed species of life in a struggle to the death! Which of us would survive?

The hour of the struggle approached. Every soul in Zyobor moved in a daze, with strained face and fear haunted eyes. Their proficiency in mental telepathy was a curse to them now: every one carried constantly, transmitted from the brains of the servant-fish outposts, a thought picture of that outer cavern in the murky depths of which writhed the thousands of crowding Quabos. Each mind in Zyobor was in continual torment.

Spared that trouble, at least, Stanley and the Professor and I walked down to the fortification we had so hastily contrived. It was finished. And none too soon: the vibration indicator in the palace vault told us

that only two feet of rock separated us from the burrowing monsters!

The Professor's scheme had been to cut a long slot down through the rock floor of the city to the roof of the vast, mysterious body of water below.

This slot was placed directly in front of the spot in the city wall where the Quabos were about to emerge. As they forced through the last shell of rock, the deluge of water, instead of drowning the city, was supposed to drain down the oblong vent. Any Quabos that were too near the tunnel entrance would be swept down too.

In silence we approached the edge of the great trough and stared down.

There was a stratum of black granite, fortunately only about thirty feet thick at this point, and then—the depths! A low roar reached our ears from far, far beneath us. A steady blast of ice cold air fanned up against us.

The Professor threw down a large fragment of rock. Seconds elapsed and we heard no splash. The unseen surface was too far below for the noise of the rock's fall to carry on up to us.

"The mystery of this ball of earth on which we live!" murmured the Professor. "Here is this enormous underground body of water. We are far below sea level. Where, then, is it flowing? What does it empty into? Can it be that our planet is honeycombed with such hollows as this we are in? And is each inhabited by some form of life?"

He sighed and shook his head.

"The thought is too big! For, if that were true, wouldn't the seas be drained from the surface of the earth should an accidental passage be formed from the ocean bed down to such a giant river as this beneath us? How little we know!"

The wild clamor of an alarm bell interrupted his musing. From all the city houses poured masses of people, to form in solid lines behind the large well.

In addition to men, there were many women in those lines, tall and strong, ready to stand by their mates as long as life was left them. There were children, too, scarcely in their teens, prepared to fight for the existence of the race. Every able-bodied Zyobite was mustered against the cold-blooded Things that pressed so near.

The arms of these desperate fighters were pitiful compared to our own war weapons. With no need in the city for fighting engines, none had ever been developed. Now the best that could be had was a sort of ax, used for dissecting the mound-fish, and various knives fashioned for peaceful purposes.

Again the bell clamored forth a warning, this time twice repeated. Every hand grasped its weapon. Every eye went hopefully to the hole in the floor on which our immediate fate depended, then valiantly to the section of wall above it.

This quivered perceptibly. A heavy, pointed instrument broke through; was withdrawn; and a hissing stream of water spurted out.

The Quabos were about to break in upon us!

With a crash that made the solid rock tremble, a section of the wall collapsed. It was the top half of the end of the Quabos' tunnel. They had so wrought that the lower half stayed in place—a thing we did not have time to recognize as significant until later.

A solid wall of water, in which writhed dozens of tentacled monsters, was upon us, and we had time for nothing but action.

The ditch had of necessity been placed directly under the Quabos' entrance. The first rush of water carried half over it. With it were borne scores of the cold-blooded invaders.

In an instant we were standing knee deep in a torrent that tore at our footing, while we hacked frantically with knives and axes at the slimy tentacles that reached up to drag us under.

A soft, horrible mass swept against my legs. I was overthrown. A tentacle slithered around my neck and constricted viciously like a length of rotten cable. I sawed at it with the long, notched blade I carried. Choking for air, I felt the pressure relax and scrambled to my knees.

Two more tentacles went around me, one winding about my legs and the other crushing my waist. Two huge eyes glared fiendishly at me.

I plunged the knife again and again into the barrel-shaped head. It did not bleed: a few drops of thin, yellowish liquid oozed from the wounds but aside from this my slashing seemed to make no impression.

In a frenzy I defended myself against the nightmare head that was winding surely toward me. Meanwhile I devoted every energy to

keeping on my feet. If I ever went under again—

It seemed to me that the creature was weakening. With redoubled fury I hacked at the spidery shape. And gradually, when it seemed as though I could not withstand its weight and crushing tentacles another second, it slipped away and floated off on the shallow, roaring rapids.

For a moment I stood there, catching my breath and regaining my strength. Shifting, terrible scenes flashed before my eyes.

A tall Zyobite and an almost equally stalwart woman were both caught by one gigantic Quabo which had a tentacle around the throat of each. The man and woman were chopping at the viscous, gruesome head. One of the Thing's eyes was gashed across, giving it a fearsome, blind appearance. It heaved convulsively, and the three struggling figures toppled into the water and were swirled away.

The Professor was almost buried by a Quabo that had all four of its tentacles wound about him. As methodically as though he were in a laboratory dissecting room, he was cutting the slippery lengths away, one by one, till the fourth parted and left him free.

A giant Zyobite was struggling with two of the monsters. He had an

ax in each hand, and was whirling them with such strength and rapidity that they formed flashing circles of light over his head. But he was torn down at last and borne off by the almost undiminished flood that gushed from the tunnel.

And now, without warning, a heavy soft body flung against my back, and the accident most to be dreaded in that mêlée occurred.

I was knocked off my feet! My head was pressed under the water. On my chest was a mass that was yielding but immovable, soft but terribly strong. Animated, firm jelly! I had no chance to use my knife. My arms were held powerless against my sides.

Water filled my nose and mouth. I strangled for breath, heaving at the implacable weight that pinned me helpless. Bright spots swirled before my eyes. There was a roaring in my ears. My lungs felt as though filled with molten lead. I was drowning....

Vaguely I felt the pressure loosen at last. An arm—with good, solid flesh and bone in it—slipped under my shoulders and dragged me up into the air.

"Don't you know—can't drown a fish—holding it under water?" panted a voice.

I opened my eyes and saw Stanley, his face pale with the thrill of battle, his chin jutting forward in a berserk line, his eyes snapping with eager, wary fires.

I grinned up at him and he slapped me on the back—almost completing the choking process started by the salt water I'd inhaled.

"That's better. Now—at it again!"

I don't remember the rest of the tumult. The air seemed filled with loathsome tentacles and bright metal blades. It was a confused eternity until the decreased volume of water in the tunnel gave us a respite....

As the tunnel slowly emptied the pressure dropped, and the incoming flood poured squarely into the trough instead of half over it. From that moment there was very little more for us to do.

Our little army—with about a fourth of its number gone—had only to guard the ditch and see that none of the Quabos caught the edges as they hurtled out of their passage.

For perhaps ten minutes longer the water poured from the break in the wall, with now and then a doomed Quabo that goggled horribly

at us as it was dashed down the hole in the floor to whatever awesome depths were beneath.

Then the flow ceased. The last oleaginous corpse was pushed over the edge. And the city, save for an ankle-deep sheet of water that was rapidly draining out the vents in the streets, presented its former appearance.

The Zyobites leaned wearily against convenient walls and began telling themselves how fortunate they were to have been spared what seemed certain destruction.

The Professor didn't share in the general feeling of triumph.

"Don't be so childishly optimistic!" he snapped as I began to congratulate him on the victory his ditch had given us. "Our troubles aren't over yet!"

"But we've proved that we can stand up to them in a hand-to-tentacle fight—"

His thin, frosty smile appeared.

"One of those devils, normally, is stronger than any three men. The only reason all of us weren't destroyed at once is that they were

slowly suffocating as they fought. The foot and a half of water we were in wasn't enough to let their gills function properly. Now if they were able to stand right up to us and not be handicapped by lack of water to breathe ... I wonder.... Is that part of their plan? Is there any way they could manage ...?"

"But, Professor," I argued, "it's all over, isn't it? The tunnel is emptied, and all the Quabos are—"

"The tunnel isn't emptied. It's only *half* emptied! I'll show you."

He called Stanley; and the three of us went to the break.

"See," the Professor pointed out to us as we approached the jagged hole, "the Quabos only drilled through the top half of their tunnel ending. That means that the tunnel still has about four feet of water in it—enough to accommodate a great many of the monsters. There may be four or five hundred of them left in there; possibly more. We can expect renewed hostilities at any time!"

"But won't it be just a repetition of the first battle?" remonstrated Stanley. "In the end they'll be killed or will drown for lack of water as these first ones did."

The Professor shook his head.

"They're too clever to do that twice. The very fact that they kept half their number in reserve shows that they have some new trick to try. Otherwise they'd all have come at once in one supreme effort."

He paced back and forth.

"They're ingenious, intelligent. They're fighting for their very existence. They must have figured out some way of breathing in air, some way of attacking us on a more even basis in case that first rush went wrong. What can it be?"

"I think you're borrowing trouble before it is necessary—" I began, smiling at his elaborate, scientific pessimism. But I was interrupted by a startled shout from Stanley.

"Professor Martin," he cried, pointing to the tunnel mouth. "Look!"

Like twin snakes crawling up to sun themselves, two tentacles had appeared over the rock rim. They hooked over the edge; and leisurely, with grim surety of invulnerability, the barrel-like head of a Quabo balanced itself on the ledge and glared at us.

For a moment we stared, paralyzed, at the Thing. And, during that moment it squatted there, as undistressed as though the air were its natural element, its gills flapping slowly up and down supplying it with oxygen.

The thing that held us rooted to the spot with fearful amazement was the fantastic device that permitted it to be almost as much at home in air as in water.

Over the great, globular head was set an oval glass shell. This was filled with water. A flexible metal tube hung down from the rear. Evidently it carried a constant stream of fresh water. As we gazed we saw intermittent trickles emerging from the bottom of the crystalline case.

Point for point the creature's equipment was the same as diving equipment used by men, only it was exactly opposite in function. A helmet that enabled a fish to breathe in air, instead of a helmet to allow a man to breathe in water!

Stanley was the first of us to recover from the shock of this spectacle. He faced about and raised his voice in shouts of warning to the resting Zyobites. For other glass encased monsters had appeared beside the first, now.

One by one, in single file like a line of enormous marching insects, they crawled down the wall and humped along on their tentacles—around the ditch and toward us!

The deadly infallibility of that second attack!

The Quabos advanced on us like armored tanks bearing down on defenceless savages. Their glass helmets, in addition to containing water for their breathing, protected them from our knives and axes. We were utterly helpless against them.

They marched in ranks about twenty yards apart, each rank helping the one in front to carry the cumbersome water-hoses which trailed back to the central water supply in the tunnel.

Their movements were slow, weighted down as they were by the great glass helmets, but they were appallingly sure.

We could not even retard their advance, let alone stop it. Here were no suffocating, faltering creatures. Here were beings possessed of their full vigor, each one equal to three of us even as the Professor had conjectured. Their only weak points were their tentacles which trailed outside the glass cases. But these they kept coiled close, so that to reach them and hack at them we had to step within range of

their terrific clutches.

The Zyobites fought with the valor of despair added to their inherent noble bravery. Man after man closed with the monstrous, armored Things—only to be seized and crushed by the weaving tentacles.

Occasionally a terrific blow with an ax would crack one of the glass helmets. Then the denuded Quabo would flounder convulsively in the air till it drowned. But there were all too few of these individual victories. The main body of the Quabos, rank on rank, dragging their water-hose behind them, came on with the steadiness of a machine.

Slowly we were driven back down the broad street and toward the palace. As we retreated, old people and children came from the houses and went with us, leaving their dwellings to the mercy of the monsters.

A block from the palace we bunched together and, by sheer mass and ferocity, actually stopped the machinelike advance for a few moments. Miscellaneous weapons had been brought from the houses —sledges, stone benches, anything that might break the Quabos' helmets—and handed to us in silence by the noncombatants.

Somebody tugged at my sleeve. Looking down I saw a little girl. She

had dragged a heavy metal bar out to the fray and was trying to get some fighter's attention and give it to him.

I seized the formidable weapon and jumped at the nearest Quabo, a ten-foot giant whose eyes were glinting gigantically at me through the distorting curve of the glass.

Disregarding the clutching tentacles entirely, I swung the bar against the helmet. It cracked. I swung again and it fell in fragments, spilling the gallons of water it had contained.

The tentacles wound vengefully around me, but in a few seconds they relaxed as the thing gasped out its life in the air.

I turned to repeat the process on another if I could, and found myself facing the Queen. Her head was held bravely high, though the violet of her eyes had gone almost black with fear and repulsion of the terrible things we fought.

"Aga!" I cried. "Why art thou here! Go back to the palace at once!"

"I came to fight beside thee," she answered composedly, though her delicate lips quivered. "All is lost, it seems. So shall I die beside thee."

I started to reply, to urge her again to seek the safety of the palace. But by now the deadly advance of the tentacled demons had begun once more.

Fighting vainly, the population of Zyobor was swept into the palace grounds, then into the building itself.

Men, women and children huddled shoulder to shoulder in the cramping quarters. An ironic picture came to me of the crowding masses of Quabos stuffed into the protection of the outer cave, waiting the outcome of the fight being waged by their warriors. Here were we in a similar circumstance, waiting for the battle to be decided. Though there was little doubt in the minds of any of us as to what the outcome would be.

Guards, the strongest men of the city, were stationed with sledges at the doors and windows. The Quabos, able only to enter one at a time, halted a moment and there was a badly needed breathing spell.

"We've got to find some drastic means of defence," said the Professor, "or we won't last another three hours."

"If you asked me, I'd say we couldn't last another three hours anyway," replied Stanley with a shrug. "These fish have out-thought

us!"

"Nonsense! There may still be a way—"

"A brace of machine-guns...." I murmured hopefully.

"You might as well wish for a dozen light cannon!" snapped the Professor. "Please try to concentrate, and see if any effective weapon suggests itself to you—something more available at the moment than machine-guns."

In silence the three of us racked our brains for a means of defence. Aga, leaving for a time the task of soothing her more hysterical subjects, came quietly over to us and sat on the bench beside me.

Frankly I could think of nothing. To my mind we were surely doomed. What arms could possibly be contrived at such short notice? What weapon could be called forth to be effective against the thick glass helmets?

But as I glanced at Stanley I saw his face set in a new expression as his thoughts took a turn that suggested possible salvation.

"Glass," he muttered. "Glass. What destroys it? Sharp blows ... certain acids ... variation in temperature ... heat and cold.... That's it!

That's it!"

He turned excitedly to the Queen.

"I think we have it! At least it's worth trying. If there is any tubing around...." He stopped as he realized he was talking in English, and resumed stiltedly in Aga's own language.

"Hast thou, in the palace, any lengths of pipe like to that which the Quabos drag behind them?"

"No ..." Aga began, her eyes round and wondering. Then she interrupted herself. "Ah, yes! There is! In a vault near that of Kilor's there is a great spool of it. He had it fashioned to carry air for one of his experiments—"

"Come along!" cried Stanley. "I'll explain what I have in mind while we dig up this coil of hose."

A score of Zyobite workmen were gathered at once. The length of hose—made of some linen-like fabric of tough, shredded sea-weed and covered with a flexible metal sheath—was cut into three pieces each about fifty yards long. These were connected to three of the largest gas vents of the palace.

Stanley, the Professor and I each took an end. And we prepared to fight, with fire, the creatures of water.

"It ought to work," Stanley, repeated several times as though trying to reassure himself as well as us. "It's simple enough: the water in those helmets is ice cold: if fire is suddenly squirted against them they'll crack with the uneven expansion."

"Unless," retorted the Professor, "their glass has some special heat and cold resisting quality."

Stanley shrugged.

"It may well have some such properties. How such creatures can make glass at all is beyond me!"

Dragging our hose to the big front entrance of the palace, and warning the crowded people to keep their feet clear of it, we prepared to test out the efficiency of this, our last resource against the enemy.

For an instant we paused just inside the doorway, looking out at the ugly, glassed-in Things that were massing to attack us again.

The ranks of Quabos had closed in now, till they extended down the

street for several hundred yards in close formation—a forest of great pulpy heads with huge eyes that glared unblinkingly at the glittering, pink building that was their objective.

"Light up!" ordered Stanley, setting an example by touching his hose nozzle to the nearest wall jet. A spurt of fire belched from his hose, streaming out for four or five feet in a solid red cone. The Professor and I touched off our torches; and we moved slowly out the door toward the ranks of Quabos.

"Don't try to save yourselves from their tentacles," advised Stanley. "Walk right up to them, direct the fire against their helmets, and damn the consequences. If they grip too hard you can always play the torch on their tentacles till they think better of it."

The Quabos' front line humped grimly toward us, unblinking eyes glaring, tentacles writhing warily, little spurts of used water trickling from their helmets.

"Keep together," warned Stanley, "so that if any one of us loses his light he can get it from the hose of one of the other two. And—*Here they come!*"

There was no more time for commands. The Quabos in front,

supplied with slack in their hoses by those behind, leaped at us with incredible agility. We fell back a step so that none should get at our backs.

The last stand was begun.

It was not a battle so much as a series of fierce duels. The Quabos realized their new danger instantly, and devoted all their efforts to extinguishing our torches. We parried and thrust with the flaming hoses in an equally desperate effort to prevent it.

One of them scuttled toward me like a great crab. A tentacle darted toward my right arm. Another was pressed against the nozzle. There was a sickening smell—and the tentacle was jerked spasmodically away.

I caught the hose in my left hand and turned the fiery jet against the water-filled helmet.

A shout of savage exultation broke from my lips. Hardly, had the flame touched the glass before it cracked! There was a report like a pistol shot—and a miniature Niagara of water and splintered glass poured at my feet!

The tentacle around my arm tightened, then relaxed. The monster shuddered in a convulsive heap on the ground.

I went toward the next one, swinging the flaring hose in a slow arc as I advanced. The creature lunged at me and threshed at the burning jet with all four of its feelers. But it had been exposed to the air for a long time now. The ghastly tentacles were dry; withered and soft. A touch of the fire seared them unmercifully.

Nevertheless with a swift move it slapped a tentacle squarely down over the hose nozzle. The flame was extinguished as the flame of a candle is pinched out between thumb and forefinger. I retreated.

"Catch!" came a voice behind me.

The Professor swung his four-foot jet my way. I held my hose to it, and the flame burst out again. A touch at my grisly antagonist's helmet—a sharp crack—the welcome rush of water over the cream-colored grass—and another monster was writhing in the death throes!

Keeping close together, the three of us faced the massed Quabos in

the palace grounds. Again and again the fiery weapon of one or the other of us was dashed out—to be re-lighted from the nearest hose. Again and again loud detonations heralded the collapse of more of the invaders.

But it seemed as though their flailing tentacles were as myriad as the stars they had never seen. It seemed as though their numbers would never appreciably diminish. We thrust and parried till our arms grew numb. And still there appeared to be hundreds of the Quabos left.

By order of the Queen three stout Zyobites stepped up to us and relieved us of our exhausting labor. Gladly we handed the hoses to them and went to the palace for a much needed rest.

Two more shifts of fighters took the flaming jets before the monsters began the retreat slowly back toward their tunnel. And here the Professor took command again.

"We mustn't let them get away to try some new scheme!" he snapped. "Martin, take fifty men and beat them back to the break in the wall. Go around a side street. They move so slowly that you can easily cut off their retreat."

"There isn't any more hose—" began Stanley.

"There's plenty of it. The Quabos brought it with them." The Professor turned to me again. "Take metal-saws with you. Cut sections of the Quabos water-hose and connect them to the nearest wall jets. Run!"

I ran, with fifty of the men of Zyobor close behind me. We dodged out the side of the palace grounds least guarded by the Quabos, ducking between their ranks like infantry men threading through an opposition of powerful but slow-moving tanks. Four of our number were caught, but the rest got through unscathed.

Down a side street we raced, and along a parallel avenue toward the tunnel. As we went I prayed that all the Quabos had centered their attention on the palace and left their vulnerable water-hoses unguarded.

They had! When we stole up the last block toward the break we found the nearest Quabo was a hundred yards down the street—and working further away with every move.

At once we set to work on the scores of hoses that quivered over the floor with each move of the distant monsters.

A Zyobite with the muscles of a Hercules swung his ax mightily down on a hose. The metal was soft enough to be sheered through by the stroke. The cut ends were smashed so that they could not be crammed down over the tapering jets; but we could use our metal-saws for cleaner severances at the other ends.

The giant with the ax stepped from hose to hose. Lengths were completed with the saws. A man was placed at each jet to hold the connections in position. Before the Quabos had reached us we had rigged six fire-hoses and had cut through forty or fifty more water-lines.

The end was certain and not long in coming.

We sprayed the monsters with fire as workmen spray fruit trees with insect poison. Stanley, the Professor and a Zyobite came up in the rear with their three hoses.

Caught between the two forces, the beaten fish milled in hopeless confusion and indecision.

In half an hour they were all reduced to huddles of slimy wet flesh that dotted the pavement from the break back to the palace grounds. The invaders were completely annihilated—and the city of Zyobor

was saved!

"Now," said the Professor triumphantly, "we have only to knock out the bottom half of the tunnel wall, empty the tunnel and make sure there are no more Quabos lurking there. After that we can fill it in with solid cement. The Queen can order her fish-servants to guard the outer cave and see that no food gets in to the starving monsters there. The war is over, gentlemen. The Quabos are as good as exterminated at this moment. And I can get back to my zoological work...."

Stanley and I looked at each other. We knew each others thoughts well enough.

He could resume his companionship with the beautiful Mayis. And I —I had Aga....

With the menace of the Quabos banished forever, the city of Zyobor resumed its normal way.

The citizens lowered their dead into the great well we had cut, with appropriate rites performed by the Queen. The daily tasks and pleasures were picked up where they had been dropped. The haunting fear died from the eyes of the people.

Shortly afterward, with great ceremony and celebration, I was made King of Zyobor, to rule by Aga's side. Stanley took Mayis for his wife. He is second to me in power. The Professor is the official wise man of the city.

Life flows smoothly for us in this pink lighted community. We are more than content with our lot here. Our only concern has been the grief that must have been occasioned our relatives and friends when the *Rosa* sailed home without us.

Now we have thought of a way in which, with luck, we may communicate with the upper world. By relays of my Queen's fish-servants we believe we can send up the Professor's invaluable notes* and this informal account of what has happened since we left San Francisco that....

(Editor's note: There was no trace of any "notes." The yacht, *Rosa*, was reported lost with all hands in a hurricane off New Zealand. Aboard her were a Professor George Berry and the owner, Stanley Browne. There is no record, however, of any passenger by the name of Martin Grey. To date no one has taken this document seriously enough to consider financing an expedition of investigation to Penguin Deep.)

#50 The Murder Machine, By Hugh Barnett Cave:

Four lives lay helpless before the murder machine, the uncanny device by which hypnotic thought waves are filtered through men's minds to mold them into murdering tools.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

I shall probably kill you

- - -

It was dusk, on the evening of December 7, 1906, when I first encountered Sir John Harmon. At the moment of his entrance I was standing over the table in my study, a lighted match in my cupped hands and a pipe between my teeth. The pipe was never lit.

I heard the lower door slam shut with a violent clatter. The stairs resounded to a series of unsteady footbeats, and the door of my study was flung back. In the opening, staring at me with quiet dignity, stood a young, careless fellow, about five feet ten in height and decidedly dark of complexion. The swagger of his entrance branded him as an adventurer. The ghastly pallor of his face, which was almost colorless, branded him as a man who has found something more than mere adventure.

"Doctor Dale?" he demanded.

"I am Doctor Dale."

He closed the door of the room deliberately, advancing toward me with slow steps.

"My name is John Harmon—Sir John Harmon. It is unusual, I suppose," he said quietly, with a slight shrug, "coming at this late hour. I won't keep you long."

He faced me silently. A single glance at those strained features convinced me of the reason for his coming. Only one thing can bring such a furtive, restless stare to a man's eyes. Only one thing—fear.

"I've come to you. Dale, because—" Sir John's fingers closed heavily over the edge of the table—"because I am on the verge of going mad."

"From fear?"

"From fear, yes. I suppose it is easy to discover. A single look at me...."

"A single look at you," I said simply, "would convince any man that you are deadly afraid of something. Do you mind telling me just what it is?"

He shook his head slowly. The swagger of the poise was gone; he stood upright now with a positive effort, as if the realization of his position had suddenly surged over him.

"I do not know," he said quietly. "It is a childish fear—fear of the dark, you may call it. The cause does not matter; but if something does not take this unholy terror away, the effect will be madness."

I watched him in silence for a moment, studying the shrunken outline of his face and the unsteady gleam of his narrowed eyes. I had seen this man before. All London had seen him. His face was constantly appearing in the sporting pages, a swaggering member of the upper set—a man who had been engaged to nearly every beautiful woman in the country—who sought adventure in sport and in night life, merely for the sake of living at top speed. And here he stood before me, whitened by fear, the very thing he had so deliberately laughed at!

"Dale," he said slowly, "for the past week I have been thinking things that I do not want to think and doing things completely against my will. Some outside power—God knows what it is—is controlling my very existence."

He stared at me, and leaned closer across the table.

"Last night, some time before midnight," he told me, "I was sitting alone in my den. Alone, mind you—not a soul was in the house with me. I was reading a novel; and suddenly, as if a living presence had stood in the room and commanded me, I was forced to put the book down. I fought against it, fought to remain in that room and go on reading. And I failed."

"Failed?" My reply was a single word of wonder.

"I left my home: because I could not help myself. Have you ever been under hypnotism, Dale? Yes? Well, the thing that gripped me was something similar—except that no living person came near me in order to work his hypnotic spell. I went alone, the whole way. Through back streets, alleys, filthy dooryards—never once striking a main thoroughfare—until I had crossed the entire city and reached the west side of the square. And there, before a big gray town-house, I was allowed to stop my mad wandering. The power, whatever it was, broke. I—well, I went home."

Sir John got to his feet with an effort, and stood over me.

"Dale," he whispered hoarsely, "what was it?"

"You were conscious of every detail?" I asked. "Conscious of the time, of the locality you went to? You are sure it was not some fantastic dream?"

"Dream! Is it a dream to have some damnable force move me about like a mechanical robot?"

"But.... You can think of no explanation?" I was a bit skeptical of his

story.

He turned on me savagely.

"I have no explanation. Doctor," he said curtly. "I came to you for the explanation. And while you are thinking over my case during the next few hours, perhaps you can explain this: when I stood before that gray mansion on After Street, alone in the dark, there was murder in my heart. I should have killed the man who lived in that house, had I not been suddenly released from the force that was driving me forward!"

Sir John turned from me in bitterness. Without offering any word of departure, he pulled open the door and stepped across the sill. The door closed, and I was alone.

That was my introduction to Sir John Harmon. I offer it in detail because it was the first of a startling series of events that led to the most terrible case of my career. In my records I have labeled the entire case "The Affair of the Death Machine."

Twelve hours after Sir John's departure—which will bring the time, to the morning of December 8—the headlines of the Daily Mail stared up at me from the table. They were black and heavy: those

headlines, and horribly significant. They were:

FRANKLIN WHITE Jr. FOUND
MURDERED

Midnight Marauder Strangles
Young Society Man in West-End
Mansion

I turned the paper hurriedly, and read:

Between the hours of one and two o'clock this morning, an unknown murderer entered the home of Franklin White, Jr., well known West-End sportsman, and escaped, leaving behind his strangled victim.

Young White, who is a favorite in London upper circles, was discovered in his bed this morning, where he had evidently lain dead for many hours. Police are seeking a motive for the crime, which may have its origin in the fact that White only recently announced his engagement to Margot Vernee, young and exceedingly pretty French débutante.

Police say that the murderer was evidently an amateur, and that he made no attempt to cover his crime. Inspector Thomas Drake of

Scotland Yard has the case.

There was more, much more. Young White had evidently been a decided favorite, and the murder had been so unexpected, so deliberate, that the Mail reporter had made the most of his opportunity for a story. But aside from what I have reprinted, there was only a single short paragraph which claimed my attention. It was this:

The White home is not a difficult one to enter. It is a huge gray town-house, situated just off the square, in After Street. The murderer entered by a low French window, leaving it open.

I have copied the words exactly as they were printed. The item does not call for any comment.

But I had hardly dropped the paper before she stood before me. I say "she"—it was Margot Vernee, of course—because for some peculiar reason I had expected her. She stood quietly before me, her cameo face, set in the black of mourning, staring straight into mine.

"You know why I have come?" she said quickly.

I glanced at the paper on the table before me, and nodded. Her eyes

followed my glance.

"That is only part of it, Doctor," she said. "I was in love with Franklin—very much—but I have come to you for something more. Because you are a famous psychologist, and can help me."

She sat down quietly, leaning forward so that her arms rested on the table. Her face was white, almost as white as the face of that young adventurer who had come to me on the previous evening. And when she spoke, her voice was hardly more than a whisper.

"Doctor, for many days now I have been under some strange power. Something frightful, that compels me to think and act against my will."

She glanced at me suddenly, as if to note the effect of her words. Then:

"I was engaged to Franklin for more than a month, Doctor: yet for a week now I have been commanded—commanded—by some awful force, to return to—to a man who knew me more than two years ago. I can't explain it. I did not love this man; I hated him bitterly. Now comes this mad desire, this hungering, to go to him. And last night __"

Margot Vernee hesitated suddenly. She stared at me searchingly. Then, with renewed courage, she continued.

"Last night, Doctor, I was alone. I had retired for the night, and it was late, nearly three o'clock. And then I was strangely commanded, by this awful power that has suddenly taken possession, of my soul, to go out. I tried to restrain myself, and in the end I found myself walking through the square. I went straight to Franklin White's home. When I reached there, it was half past three—I could hear Big Ben. I went in—through the wide French window at the side of the house. I went straight to Franklin's room—*because I could not prevent myself from going*."

A sob came from Margot's lips. She had half risen from her chair, and was holding herself together with a brave effort. I went to her side and stood over her. And she, with a half crazed laugh, stared up at me.

"He was dead when I saw him!" she cried. "Dead! Murdered! That infernal force, what ever it was, had made me go straight to my lover's side, to see him lying there, with those cruel finger marks on his throat—dead, I tell you, I—oh, it is horrible!"

She turned suddenly.

"When I saw him," she said bitterly, "the sight of him—and the sight of those marks—broke the spell that held me. I crept from the house as if I had killed him. They—they will probably find out that I was there, and they will accuse me of the murder. It does not matter. But this power—this awful thing that has been controlling me—is there no way to fight it?"

I nodded heavily. The memory, of that unfortunate fellow who had come to me with the same complaint was still holding me. I was prepared to wash my hands of the whole horrible affair. It was clearly not a medical case, clearly out of my realm.

"There is a way to fight it," I said quietly. "I am a doctor, not a master of hypnotism, or a man who can discover the reasons behind that hypnotism. But London has its Scotland Yard, and Scotland Yard has a man who is one of my greatest comrades...."

She nodded her surrender. As I stepped to the telephone, I heard her murmur, in a weary, troubled voice:

"Hypnotism? It is not that. God knows what it is. But it has always happened when I have been alone. One cannot hypnotise through distance...."

And so, with Margot Vernee's consent, I sought the aid of Inspector Thomas Drake, of Scotland Yard. In half an hour Drake stood beside me, in the quiet of my study. When he had heard Margot's story, he asked a single significant question. It was this:

"You say you have a desire to go back to a man who was once intimate with you. Who is he?"

Margot looked at him dully.

"It is Michael Strange," she said slowly. "Michael Strange, of Paris. A student of science."

Drake nodded. Without further questioning he dismissed my patient; and when she had gone, he turned to me.

"She did not murder her sweetheart, Dale" he said. "That is evident. Have you any idea who did?"

And so I told him of that other young man. Sir John Harmon, who had come to me the night before. When I had finished. Drake stared at me—stared through me—and suddenly turned on his heel.

"I shall be back, Dale," he said curtly. "Wait for me!"

Wait for him! Well, that was Drake's peculiar way of going about things. Impetuous, sudden—until he faced some crisis. Then, in the face of danger, he became a cold, indifferent officer of Scotland Yard.

And so I waited. During the twenty-four hours that elapsed before Drake returned to my study, I did my best to diagnose the case before me. First, Sir John Harmon—his visit to the home of Franklin White. Then—the deliberate murder. And, finally, young Margot Vernee, and her confession. It was like the revolving whirl of a pinwheel, this series of events: continuous and mystifying, but without beginning or end. Surely, somewhere in the procession of horrors, there would be a loose end to cling to. Some loose end that would eventually unravel the pinwheel!

It was plainly not a medical affair, or at least only remotely so. The thing was in proper hands, then, with Drake following it through. And I had only to wait for his return.

He came at last, and closed the door of the room behind him. He stood over me with something of a swagger.

"Dale, I have been looking into the records of this Michael Strange," he said quietly. "They are interesting, those records. They go back

some ten years, when this fellow Strange was beginning his study of science. And now Michael Strange is one of the greatest authorities in Paris on the subject of mental telegraphy. He has gone into the study of human thought with the same thoroughness that other scientists go into the subject of radio telegraphy. He has written several books on the subject."

Drake pulled a tiny black volume from the pocket of his coat and dropped it on the table before me. With one hand he opened it to a place which he had previously marked in pencil.

"Read it," he said significantly.

I looked at him in wonder, and then did as he ordered. What I read was this:

"Mental telegraphy is a science, not a myth. It is a very real fact, a very real power which can be developed only by careful research. To most people it is merely a curiosity. They sit, for instance, in a crowded room at some uninteresting lecture, and stare continually at the back of some unsuspecting companion until that companion, by the power of suggestion, turns suddenly around. Or they think heavily of a certain person nearby, perhaps commanding him mentally to hum a certain popular tune, until the victim, by the

power of their will, suddenly fulfills the order. To such persons, the science of mental telegraphy is merely an amusement.

"And so it will be, until science has brought it to such a perfection that these waves of thought can be broadcast—that they can be transmitted through the ether precisely as radio waves are transmitted. In other words, mental telegraphy is at present merely a mild form of hypnotism. Until it has been developed so that those hypnotic powers can be directed through space, and directed accurately to those individuals to whom they are intended, this science will have no significance. It remains for scientists of to-day to bring about that development."

I closed the book. When I looked up, Drake was watching me intently, as if expecting me to say something.

"Drake," I said slowly, more to myself than to him, "the pinwheel is beginning to unravel. We have found the beginning thread. Perhaps, if we follow that thread...."

Drake smiled.

"If you'll pick up your hat and coat, Dale," he interrupted, "I think we have an appointment. This Michael Strange, whose book you

have just enjoyed so immensely, is now residing on a certain quiet little side street about three miles from the square, in London!"

I followed Drake in silence, until we had left Cheney Lane in the gloom behind us. At the entrance to the square my companion called a cab; and from there on we rode slowly, through a heavy darkness which was blanketed by a wet, penetrating fog. The cabby, evidently one who knew my companion by sight (and what London cabby does not know his Scotland Yard men!) chose a route that twisted through gloomy, uninhabited side streets, seldom winding into the main route of traffic.

As for Drake, he sank back in the uncomfortable seat and made no attempt at conversation. For the entire first part of our journey he said nothing. Not until we had reached a black, unlighted section of the city did he turn to me.

"Dale," he said at length, "have you ever hunted tiger?"

I looked at him and laughed.

"Why?" I replied. "Do you expect this hunt of ours will be something of a blind chase?"

"It will be a blind chase, no doubt of it," he said. "And when we have followed the trail to its end, I imagine we shall find something very like a tiger to deal with. I have looked rather deeply into Michael Strange's life, and unearthed a bit of the man's character. He has twice been accused of murder—murder by hypnotism—and has twice cleared himself by throwing scientific explanations at the police. That is the nature of his entire history for the past ten years."

I nodded, without replying. As Drake turned away from me again, our cab poked its laboring nose into a narrowing, gloomy street. I had a glimpse of a single unsteady street lamp on the corner, and a dim sign, "Mate Lane." And then we were dragging along the curb. The cab stopped with a groan.

I had stepped down and was standing by the cab door when suddenly, from the darkness in front of me, a strange figure advanced to my side. He glanced at me intently; then, seeing that I was evidently not the man he sought, he turned to Drake. I heard a whispered greeting and an undertone of conversation. Then, quietly, Drake stepped toward me.

"Dale," he said. "I thought it best that I should not show myself here to-night. No, there is no time for explanation now; you will understand later. Perhaps"—significantly—"sooner than you

anticipate. Inspector Hartnett will go through the rest of this pantomime with you."

I shook hands with Drake's man, still rather bewildered at the sudden substitution. Then, before I was aware of it, Drake had vanished and the cab was gone. We were alone, Hartnett and I, in Mate Lane.

The home of Michael Strange—number seven—was hardly inviting. No light was in evidence. The big house stood like a huge, unadorned vault set back from the street, some distance from its adjoining buildings. The heavy steps echoed to our footbeats as we mounted them in the darkness; and the sound of the bell, as Hartnett pressed it came sharply to us from the silence of the interior.

We stood there, waiting. In the short interval before the door opened, Hartnett glanced at his watch (it was nearly ten o'clock), and said to me:

"I imagine, Doctor, we shall meet a blank wall. Let me do the talking, please."

That was all. In another moment the big door was pulled slowly open from the inside, and in the entrance, glaring out at us, stood the man we had come to see. It is not hard to remember that first

impression of Michael Strange. He was a huge man, gaunt and haggard, moulded with the hunched shoulders and heavy arms of a gorilla. His face seemed to be unconsciously twisted into a snarl. His greeting, which came only after he had stared at us intently, for nearly a minute, was curt and rasping.

"Well, gentlemen? What is it?"

"I should like a word with Dr. Michael Strange," said my companion quietly.

"I am Michael Strange."

"And I," replied Hartnett, with a suggestion of a smile, "am Raoul Hartnett, from Scotland Yard."

I did not see any sign of emotion on Strange's face. He stepped back in silence to allow us to enter. Then closing the big door after us, he led the way along a carpeted hall to a small, ill-lighted room just beyond. Here he motioned us to be seated, he himself standing upright beside the table, facing us.

"From Scotland Yard," he said, and the tone was heavy with dull sarcasm. "I am at your service, Mr. Hartnett."

And now, for the first time, I wondered just why Drake had insisted on my coming here to this gloomy house in Mate Lane. Why he had so deliberately arranged a substitute so that Michael Strange should not come face to face with him directly. Evidently Hartnett had been carefully instructed as to his course of action—but why this seemingly unnecessary caution on Drake's part? And now, after we had gained admission, what excuse would Hartnett offer for the intrusion? Surely he would not follow the bull-headed rôle of a common policeman!

There was no anger, no attempt at dramatics, in Hartnett's voice. He looked quietly up at our host.

"Dr. Strange," he said at length, "I have come to you for your assistance. Last night, some time after midnight, Franklin White was strangled to death. He was murdered, according to substantial evidence, by the girl he was going to marry—Margot Vernee. I come to you because you know this girl rather well, and can perhaps help Scotland Yard in finding her motive for killing White."

Michael Strange said nothing. He stood there, scowling down at my companion in silence. And I, too, I must admit, turned upon Hartnett with a stare of bewilderment. His accusation of Margot had brought a sense of horror to me. I had expected almost anything from him,

even to a mad accusation of Strange himself. But I had hardly foreseen this cold blooded declaration.

"You understand, Doctor," Hartnett went on, in that same ironical drawl, "that we do not believe Margot Vernee did this thing herself. She had a companion, undoubtedly, one who accompanied her to the house on After Street, and assisted her in the crime. Who that companion was, we are not sure; but there is decidedly a case of suspicion against a certain young London sportsman. This fellow is known to have prowled about the White mansion both on the night of the murder and the night before."

Hartnett glanced up casually. Strange's face was a total mask. When he nodded, the nod was the most even and mechanical thing I have ever seen. Certainly this man could control his emotions!

"Naturally, Doctor," Hartnett said, "we have gone rather deeply into the past life of the lady in question. Your name appears, of course, in a rather unimportant interval when Margot Vernee resided in Paris. And so we come to you in the hope that you can perhaps give us some slight bit of information—something that seems insignificant, perhaps, to you, but which may put us on the right track."

It was a careful speech. Even as Hartnett spoke it, I could have

sworn that the words were Drake's, and had been memorized. But Michael Strange merely stepped back to the table and faced us without a word. He was probably, during that brief interlude, attempting to realize his position, and to discover just how much Raoul Hartnett actually knew.

And then, after his interim of silence, he came forward sullenly and stood over my comrade.

"I will tell you this much, Mr. Hartnett of Scotland Yard," he said bitterly: "My relations with Margot Vernee are not an open book to be passed through the clumsy fingers of ignorant police officers. As to this murder, I know nothing. At the time of it, I was seated in this room in company with a distinguished group of scientific friends. I will tell you, on authority, that Margot *did not murder her lover*. Why? Because she loved him!"

The last words were heavy with bitterness. Before they had died into silence, Michael Strange had opened the door of his study.

"If you please, gentlemen," he said quietly.

Hartnett got to his feet. For an instant he stood facing the gorilla-like form of our host; then he stepped over the sill, without a word. We

passed down the unlighted corridor in silence, while Strange stood in the door of his study, watching us. I could not help but feel, as we left that gloomy house, that Strange had suddenly focused his entire attention upon me, and had ignored my companion. I could feel those eyes upon me, and feel the force of the will behind them. A decided feeling of uneasiness crept over me, and I shuddered.

A moment later the big outer door had closed shut after us, and we were alone in Mate Lane. Alone, that is, until a third figure joined us in the shadows, and Drake's hand closed over my arm.

"Capital, Dale," he said triumphantly. "For half an hour you entertained him, you and Hartnett. And for half an hour I've had the unlimited freedom of his inner rooms, with the aid of an unlocked window on the lower floor. Those inner rooms, gentlemen, are significant—very!"

As we walked the length of Mate Lane, the gaunt, sinister home of Michael Strange became an indistinct outline in the pitch behind us. Drake said nothing more on the return trip, until we had nearly reached my rooms. Then he turned to me with a smile.

"We are one up on our friend, Dale," he said. "He does not know, just now, which is the bigger fool—you or Hartnett here. However, I

imagine Hartnett will be the victim of some very unusual events before many hours have passed!"

That was all. At least, all of significance. I left the two Scotland Yard men at the opening of Cheney Lane, and continued alone to my rooms. I opened the door and let myself in quietly. And there some few hours later, began the last and most horrible phase of the case of the murder machine.

It began—or to be more accurate, I began to react to it—at three o'clock in the morning. I was alone, and the rooms were dark. For hours I had sat quietly by the table, considering the significant events of the past few days. Sleep was impossible with so many unanswered questions staring into me, and so I sat there wondering.

Did Drake actually believe that Margot Vernee's simple story had been a ruse—that she had in truth killed her lover on that midnight intrusion of his home? Did he believe that Michael Strange knew of that intrusion—that he had possibly planned it himself, and aided her, in order that Margot might be free to return to him? Did Strange know of that other intrusion, and of the uncanny power which had driven Sir John Harmon, and supposedly driven Margot to that house on After Street?

Those were the questions that still remained without answers: and it was over those questions that I pondered, while my surroundings became darker and more silent as the hour became more advanced. I heard the clock strike three, and heard the answering drone of Big Ben from the square.

And then it began. At first it was little more than a sense of nervousness. Before I had been content to sit in my chair and doze. Now, in spite of myself, I found myself pacing the floor, back and forth like a caged animal. I could have sworn, at the time, that some sinister presence had found entrance to my room. Yet the room was empty. And I could have sworn, too, that some silent power of will was commanding me, with undeniable force, to go out—out into the darkness of Cheney Lane.

I fought it bitterly. I laughed at it, yet even through my laugh came the memory of Sir John Harmon and Margot, and what they had told me. And then, unable to resist that unspoken demand, I seized my hat and coat and went out.

Cheney Lane was deserted, utterly still. At the end of it, the street lamp glowed dully, throwing a patch of ghastly light over the side of the adjoining building. I hurried through the shadows, and as I walked, a single idea had possession of me. I must hurry, I thought,

with all possible speed, to that grim house in Mate Lane—number seven.

Where that deliberate desire came from I did not know. I did not stop to reason. Something had commanded me to go at once to Michael Strange's home. And though I stopped more than once, deliberately turning in my tracks, inevitably I was forced to retrace my steps and continue.

I remember passing through the square, and prowling through the unlightened side streets that lay beyond. Three miles separated Cheney Lane from Mate Lane, and I had been over the route only once before, in a cab. Yet I followed that route without a single false turn, followed it instinctively. At every intersecting street I was dragged in a certain direction and not once was I allowed to hesitate. It was as though some unseen demon perched on my shoulders, as the demon of the sea rode Sinbad, and pointed out the way.

Only one disturbing thing occurred on that night journey through London. I had turned into a narrow street hardly more than a quarter mile from my destination; and before me, in the shadows, I made out the form of a shuffling old man. And here, as I watched him, I was conscious of a new, mad desire. I crept upon him stealthily, without a sound. My hands were outstretched, clutching, for his throat. At that

moment I should have killed him!

I cannot explain it. During that brief interval I was a murderer at heart. I wanted to kill. And now that I remember it, the desire had been pregnant in me ever since the lights of Cheney Lane had died behind me. All the time that I prowled through those black streets, murder lurked in my heart. I should have killed the first man who crossed my path.

But I did not kill him. Thank God, as my fingers twisted toward the back of his throat, that mad desire suddenly left me. I stood still, while the old fellow, still unsuspecting, shuffled, away into the darkness. Then, dropping my hands with a sob of helplessness, I went forward again.

And so I reached Mate Lane, and the huge gray house that awaited me. This time, as I mounted the stone steps, the old house seemed even more repulsive and horrible. I dreaded to see that door open, but I could not retreat.

I dropped the knocker heavily. A moment passed: and then, precisely as before, the huge door swung inward. Michael Strange stood before me.

He did not speak. Perhaps, if he had spoken, that fiendish spell would have been broken, and I should have returned, even then, to my own peaceful little rooms in Cheney Lane. No—he merely held the door for me to enter, and as I passed him he stood there, watching me with a significant smile.

Straight to that familiar room at the end of the hall I went, with Strange behind me. When we had entered, he closed the door cautiously. For a moment he faced me without speaking.

"You came very close to committing a murder on your way here, did you not, Dale?"

I stared at him. How, in God's name, could this man read my thoughts so completely?

"You would have completed the murder," he said softly, "had I wished it. I did not wish it!"

I did not answer. There was no reply to such a mad declaration. As for my companion, he watched me for an instant and then laughed. He was not mad. I am doctor enough to know that.

But the laugh was not long in duration. He stepped forward suddenly

and took my arm in a steel grip, dragging me toward the half hidden door at the farther end of the room.

"I shall not keep you long, Dale," he said harshly. "I could have killed you—could have made you kill yourself, and in fact, I intended to do so—but after all, you are merely a poor stumbling fool who has meddled in things too deep for you."

He pulled open the door and pushed me forward. The room was dark, and not until he had closed the door again and switched on a dim light, could I see its contents.

Even then I saw nothing. At least, nothing of importance to an unscientific mind. There was a low table against the wall, with a profusion of tiny wires emanating from it. I was aware that a cup shaped microphone—or something very similar—hung over the table, about on a level with my eyes, had I been sitting in the chair. Beyond that I saw nothing, until Strange had moved forward and drawn aside a curtain that hung beside the table.

"I made you come here to-night, Dale," he murmured, "because I was a bit afraid of you. Your comrade, Hartnett, was an ignorant police officer. He has not the intellect to connect the series of events of the past day or two, and so I did not trouble myself with him. But

you are an educated man. You have made no demonstrations of your ability in the field of science, but—"

He stopped speaking abruptly. From the room behind us came the sound of a warning bell. Strange turned quickly and went to the door.

"You will wait here, Doctor," he said. "I have another caller to-night. Another one who came the same way as you!"

He vanished. For a short interlude I was alone, with that peculiar radio-like apparatus before me. It was, for all the world, like a miniature control room in some small broadcasting station. Except for the odd shape of the microphone, if it was such I could detect no radical difference in equipment.

However, I had little time for conjecture. A patter of footsteps interrupted me from the next room, and a frightened, feminine voice broke the stillness of the outer study. Even before the owner of that voice stepped in to my presence, I knew her.

And when she came, with white, fearful face and trembling body, I could not withhold a shudder of apprehension. It was the young woman who had come to my office—Margot Vernee. Evidently, at

last, she had yielded to the horrible impulse that had drawn her back to Michael Strange, an impulse which, I now understood, had originated from the man himself.

He pressed her forward. There was nothing tender in his touch: it was cruel and triumphant.

"So you have succeeded—at last," I said bitterly.

He turned to me with a sneer.

"I have brought her here, yes," he replied. "And now that she has come, she shall hear what I have to tell you. It will perhaps give her a respect for me, and this time she will not have the power to turn me away."

He pointed to the table, to the apparatus that lay there.

"I'm telling you this, Dale," he said, "because it gives me pleasure to do so. You are enough of a scientist to appreciate and understand it. And if, when I have finished, I have told you too much, there is a very easy way to keep your tongue silent. You have heard of hypnotism, Dale? You have heard also of radio? Have you ever thought of combining the two?"

He faced me directly. I made no effort to reply.

"Radio," he said quietly, "is broadcast by means of sound waves. That much you know. But hypnotism too, can be transmitted through distance, if an instrument delicate enough to transmit *thought waves* can be invented. For twenty years I have worked on that instrument, and for twenty years I have studied hypnotism. You understand, of course, that this instrument is worthless unless it is operated by a master mind. Thought waves are useless; they will not control the actions of even a cat. But hypnotic waves or concentrated thought waves—will control the world."

There was no denying him. He faced me with the savage triumph of a wild beast. He was glorying in his power, and in my amazement.

"I wanted Franklin White to die!" he cried. "It was I who murdered him. Why? Because he was about to take the girl I desired. Is that not reason enough for murder? And so I killed him. It was not Margot Vernee who strangled her lover: it was a complete stranger, a London sportsman, who had no reason for committing the murder, *except that I wished him to*!

"He died on the night of December seventh, murdered by Sir John Harmon, the sportsman. Why? Because, of all London, Sir John

would be the last man to be suspected. I have a keen appreciation for the irony of fate! White would have died the night before, Dale, except that I lacked the courage to kill him. His murderer was standing, under my power, outside his very house—and then I suddenly thought it best that I should have an alibi. Your Scotland Yard is clever, and it was best that I have protection. And so, on the following night, I sent Sir John to the house once again. This time, while I sat here and controlled the actions of my puppet, a group of men sat here with me. They believed that I was experimenting with a new type of radio receiver!"

Michael Strange laughed, laughed harshly, in utter triumph, as a cat laughs at the antics of his mouse victims.

"When that murder was done," he said, "I sent Margot to the scene, so that she might see her lover strangled, dead. I repeat, Dale, that I enjoy the irony of fate, especially when I can control it. And as for you—I brought you here to-night merely so that you would realize the intensity of the powers that control you. When you leave here, you will be unharmed—but after the exhibition I shall give you, I am sure that you will make no further attempt to interfere with things out of your realm of understanding."

I heard a sob from Margot. She had retreated to the door, and clung

there. For myself, I did not move. Strange's recital had revealed to me the horrible lust that gripped him, and now I watched him in fascination. He would not harm the girl; that much I was sure of. In his distorted fashion he loved her. In his crazed, murderous way he would attempt to win her love, even though she had once scorned him.

I saw him step toward the table. Saw him drop heavily into the chair, and stare directly into that microphonic thing that hung before his eyes. As he stared, he spoke to me.

"Science, in its intricate forms, is probably above the mind of a common medical man, Dale," he said. "It would be useless to explain to you how my thoughts—and my will—can be transmitted through space. Perhaps you have sat in a theater and stared at a certain person until that person turned to face you. You have? Then you will perhaps understand how I can control the minds of any human creature within the radius of my power. You see, Dale, this intricate little machine gives me the power to transform London into a city of stark murder. I could bring about such a horrible wave of crime that Scotland Yard would be scorned from one end of the world to the other. I could make every man murder his neighbor, until the streets of the city were running with blood!"

Strange turned quietly to look at me. He spoke deliberately.

"And now for the little exhibition of which I spoke, Dale," he murmured. "Your detective friend, Hartnett, has been under my power for the past three hours. You see, it was safer to control his movements, and be sure of him. And now, to be doubly sure of him, perhaps you would like to see him kill himself!"

I stepped forward with a sudden cry. Strange said nothing: his eyes merely burned into mine. Once again I felt that strange, all-powerful control forcing me back. I retreated, step by step, until the wall stopped me. Yet even as I retreated, a childish hope filled me. How could Strange, working his terrible murder machine, concentrate his power on any individual, when the whole of London lay before him?

He answered my question. He must have read it as it came over me.

"Have you ever been in a crowd, Dale, and watched a certain individual intently, until that particular individual turned to look at you? The rest of the crowd pays no attention, of course, but that one man. And now we shall make that one man murder himself!"

Strange turned slowly. I saw his fingers creep along the rim of the table, touching certain wires that came together there. I heard a dull,

droning hum fill the room, and, over it, Strange's penetrating voice.

"When I am finished, Dale, I shall probably kill you. I brought you here merely to frighten you, but I believe I have told you too much."

With that new horror upon me, I saw my captor's lips move slowly....

And then, from the shadows at the other end of the small room, came a low, unemotional voice.

"Before you begin, Strange—"

Michael Strange whipped about in his chair like a tiger. His hand dropped to his pocket, so swiftly that my eyes did not follow it. And as it dropped, a single staccato shot split the darkness of the room. The scientist slumped forward in his chair.

The dull, whirring sound of that hellish machine had stopped abruptly, cut short by the sudden weight of Strange's lunging body as he fell upon it. I saw the livid, fiery snake of white light twist suddenly upward through that coil of wires: and in another moment the entire apparatus shattered by a blinding crash of flame.

After that I turned away. Whether the bullet killed Strange or not, I do not know: but the sight of his charred face, hanging over that

table of destruction, told its own story.

It was Inspector Drake who came across the room toward me, and took my arm. The smoking revolver still lay in his hand, and as he led me into the adjoining room, I saw that Margot had already found refuge there.

"You see now, Dale," Drake said quietly, "why I let Hartnett go with you before? If Strange had suspected me, I should have been merely another victim. As for Hartnett, he has been under constant guard down at headquarters. He's safe. They've kept him there, at my instructions, in spite of all his terrific efforts to leave them."

I was listening to my companion in admiration. Even then I did not quite understand.

"I was wrong in just one thing, Dale. I left you alone, without protection. I believed Strange would ignore you, because, after all, you are not a Scotland Yard man. Thank God I had the sense to follow Margot—to trail her here—and get here soon enough."

And so ended the horrible series of events that began with Sir John Harmon's chance visit to my study. As for Harmon, he was later cleared of all guilt, upon the charred evidence in Michael Strange's

house in Mate Lane. The girl, I believe, has left London, where she can be as far as possible from memories that are all too terrible.

As for me, I am back once again in my quiet rooms in Cheney Lane, where the routine of common medical practice has wiped out many of those vivid horrors. In time, I believe, I shall forget, unless Inspector Drake, of Scotland Yard, insists upon bringing the affair up again!

October 1930

#51 Stolen Brains, By Sterner St. Paul Meek:

Dr. Bird, Scientific sleuth extraordinary, goes after a sinister stealer of brains.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

and grasped the motionlessness

- - -

Dr. Bird, scientific sleuth extraordinary, goes after a sinister stealer of brains.

“I hope, Carnes," said Dr. Bird, "that we get good fishing."

"Good fishing? Will you please tell me what you are talking about?"

"I am talking about fishing, old dear. Have you seen the evening paper?"

"No. What's that got to do with it?"

Dr. Bird tossed across the table a copy of the *Washington Post* folded so as to bring uppermost an item on page three. Carnes saw his picture staring at him from the center of the page.

"What the dickens?" he exclaimed as he bent over the sheet. With growing astonishment he read that Operative Carnes of the United States Secret Service had collapsed at his desk that afternoon and had been rushed to Walter Reed Hospital where the trouble had been diagnosed as a nervous breakdown caused by overwork. There followed a guarded statement from Admiral Clay, the President's personal physician, who had been called into conference by the army authorities.

The Admiral stated that the Chief of the Washington District was in no immediate danger but that a prolonged rest was necessary. The paper gave a glowing tribute to the detective's life and work and stated that he had been given sick leave for an indefinite period and that he was leaving at once for the fishing lodge of his friend, Dr. Bird of the Bureau of Standards, at Squapan Lake, Maine. Dr. Bird, the article concluded, would accompany and care for his stricken friend. Carnes laid aside the paper with a gasp.

“Do you know what all this means?" Carnes demanded.

"It means, Carnsey, old dear, that the fishing at Squapan Lake should be good right now and that I feel the need of accurate information on the subject. I didn't want to go alone, so I engineered this outrage on the government and am taking you along for company. For the love of Mike, look sick from now on until we are clear of Washington. We leave to-night. I already have our tickets and reservations and all you have to do is to collect your tackle and pack your bags for a month or two in the woods and meet me at the Pennsy station at six to-night."

"And yet there are some people who say there is no Santa Claus," mused Carnes. "If I had really broken down from overwork, I would probably have had my pay docked for the time I was absent, but a

man with official pull in this man's government wants to go fishing and presto! the wheels move and the way is clear. Doctor, I'll meet you as directed."

"Good enough," said Dr. Bird. "By the way, Carnes," he went on as the operative opened the door, "bring your pistol."

Carnes whirled about at the words.

"Are we going on a case?" he asked.

"That remains to be seen," replied the Doctor enigmatically. "At all events, bring your pistol. In answer to any questions, we are going fishing. In point of fact, we are—with ourselves as bait. If you have a little time to spare this afternoon you might drop around to the office of the *Post* and get them to show you all the amnesia cases they have had stories on during the past three months. They will be interesting reading. No more questions now, old dear, we'll have lots of time to talk things over while we are in the Maine woods."

Late the next evening they left the Bangor and Aroostook train at Mesardis and found a Ford truck waiting for them. Over a rough trail they were driven for fifteen miles, winding up at a log cabin which the Doctor announced was his. The truck deposited their belongings

and jounced away and Dr. Bird led the way to the cabin, which proved to be unlocked. He pushed open the door and entered, followed by Carnes. The operative glanced at the occupants of the cabin and started back in surprise.

Seated at a table were two figures. The smaller of the two had his back to the entrance but the larger one was facing them. He rose as they entered and Carnes rubbed his eyes and reeled weakly against the wall. Before him stood a replica of Dr. Bird. There was the same six feet two of bone and muscle, the same beetling brows and the same craggy chin and high forehead surmounted by a shock of unruly black hair. In face and figure the stranger was a replica of the famous scientist until he glanced at their hands. Dr. Bird's hands were long and slim with tapering fingers, the hands of a thinker and an artist despite the acid stains which disfigured them but could not hide their beauty. The hands of his double were stained as were Dr. Bird's, but they were short and thick and bespoke more the man of action than the man of thought.

The second figure arose and faced them and again Carnes received a shock. While the likeness was not so, striking, there was no doubt that the second man would have readily passed for Carnes himself in a dim light or at a little distance. Dr. Bird burst into laughter at the detective's puzzled face.

"Carnes," he said, "shake yourself together and then shake hands with Major Trowbridge of the Coast Artillery Corps. It has been said by some people that we favor one another."

"I'm glad to meet you, Major," said Carnes. "The resemblance is positively uncanny. But for your hands, I would have trouble telling you two apart."

The Major glanced down at his stubby fingers.

"It is unfortunate but it can't be helped," he said. "Dr. Bird, this is Corporal Askins of my command. He is not as good a second to Mr. Carnes as I am to you but you said it was less important."

"The likeness is plenty good enough," replied the Doctor. "He will probably not be subjected to as close a scrutiny as you will. Did you have any trouble in getting here unobserved?"

"None at all, Doctor. Lieutenant Maynard found a good landing field within a half mile of here, as you said he would, and he has his Douglass camouflaged and is standing by. When do you expect trouble?"

"I have no idea. It may come to-night or it may come later.

Personally I hope that it comes later so that we can get in a few days of fishing before anything happens."

"What do you expect to happen, Doctor?" demanded Carnes. "Every time I have asked you anything you told me to wait until we were in the Maine woods and we are there now. I read up everything that I could find on amnesia victims during the past three months but it didn't throw much light on the matter to me."

"How many cases did you find, Carnes?"

"Sixteen. There may have been lots more but I couldn't find any others in the *Post* records. Of course, unless the victim were a local man, or of some prominence, it wouldn't appear."

"You got most of them at that. Did any points of similarity strike you as you read them?"

"None except that all were prominent men and all of them mental workers of high caliber. That didn't appear peculiar because it is the man of high mentality who is most apt to crack."

"Undoubtedly. There were some points of similarity which you missed. Where did the attacks take place?"

"Why, one was at—Thunder, Doctor! I did miss something. Every case, as nearly as I can recall, happened at some summer camp or other resort where they were on vacation."

"Correct. One other point. At what time of day did they occur?"

"In the morning, as well as I can remember. That point didn't register."

"They were all discovered in the morning, Carnes, which means that the actual loss of memory occurred during the night. Further, every case has happened within a circle with a diameter of three hundred miles. We are near the northern edge of that circle."

Carnes checked up on his memory rapidly.

"You're right, Doctor," he cried. "Do you think—?"

"Once in a while," replied Dr. Bird dryly, "I think enough to know the futility of guesses hazarded without complete data. We are now located within the limits of the amnesia belt and we are here to find out what did happen, if anything, and not to make wild guesses about it. You have the tent set up for us, Major?"

"Yes, Doctor, about thirty yards from the cabin and hidden so well

that you could pass it a dozen times a day without suspecting its existence. The gas masks and other equipment which you sent to Fort Banks are in it."

"In that case we had better dispense with your company as soon as we have eaten a bite, and retire to it. On second thought, we will eat in it. Carnes, we will go to our downy couches at once and leave our substitutes in possession of the cabin. I trust, gentlemen, that things come out all right and that you are in no danger."

Major Trowbridge shrugged his heavy shoulders.

"It is as the gods will," he said sententiously. "It is merely a matter of duty to me, you know, and thank God, I have no family to mourn if anything does go wrong. Neither has Corporal Askins."

"Well, good luck at any rate. Will you guide Carnes to the tent and then return here and I'll join him?"

Huddled in the tiny concealed tent, Dr. Bird handed Carnes a haversack on a web strap.

"This is a gas mask," he said. "Put it on your neck and keep it ready for instant use. I have one on and one of us must wear a mask

continually while we are here. We'll change off every hour. If the gas used is lethane, as I suspect, we should be able to detect it before its gets too concentrated, but some other gas might be used and we must take no chances. Now look here."

With the aid of a flash-light he showed Carnes a piece of apparatus which had been set up in the tent. It consisted of two telescopic barrels, one fitted with an eye-piece and the other, which was at a wide angle to the first, with an objective glass. Between the two was a covered round disc from which projected a short tube fitted with a protecting lens. This tube was parallel to the telescopic barrel containing the objective lens.

"This is a new thing which I have developed and it is getting its first practical test to-night," he said. "It is a gas detector. It works on the principle of the spectroscope with modifications. From this projector goes out a beam of invisible light and the reflections are gathered and thrown through a prism of the eye-piece. While a spectroscope requires that the substance which it examines be incandescent and throw out visible light rays in order to show the typical spectral lines, this device catches the invisible ultra-violet on a fluorescent screen and analyzes it spectroscopically. Whoever has the mask on must continually search the sky with it and look for the three bright lines which characterize lethane, one at 230, one at 240 and the third

at 670 on the illuminated scale. If you see any bright lines in those regions or any other lines that are not continually present, call my attention to it at once. I'll watch for the first hour."

At the end of an hour Dr. Bird removed his mask with a sigh of relief and Carnes took his place at the spectroscope. For half an hour he moved the glass about and then spoke in a guarded tone.

"I don't see any of the lines you told me to look for," he said, "but in the southwest I get wide band at 310 and two lines at about 520."

Dr. Bird advanced toward the instrument but before he reached it, Carnes gave an exclamation.

"There they are, Doctor!" he cried.

Dr. Bird sniffed the air. A faint sweetish odor became apparent and he reached for his gas mask. Slowly his hands drooped and Carnes grasped him and drew the mask over his face. Dr. Bird rallied slightly and feebly drew a bottle from his pocket and sniffed it. In another instant he was shouldering Carnes aside and staring through the spectroscope. Carnes watched him for an instant and then a low whirring noise attracted his attention and he looked up. Silently he caught the Doctor's arm in a viselike grip and pointed.

Hovering above the cabin was a silvery globe, faintly luminous in the moonlight. From its top rose a faint cloud of vapor which circled around the globe and descended toward the earth. The globe hovered like a giant humming bird above the cabin and Carnes barely stifled an exclamation. The door of the cabin opened and Major Trowbridge, walking stiffly and like a man in a dream, appeared. Slowly he advanced for ten yards and stood motionless. The globe moved over him and the bottom unfolded like a lily. Two long arms shot silently down and grasped the motionless figure and drew him up into the heart of the globe. The petals refolded, and silently as a dream the globe shot upward and disappeared.

"Gad! They lost no time!" commented Dr. Bird. "Come on, Carnes, run for your life, or rather, for Trowbridge's life. No, you idiot, leave your gas mask on. I'll take the spectroscope; it'll be all we need."

Followed by the panting Carnes, Dr. Bird sped through the night along an almost invisible path. For half a mile he kept up a headlong pace until Carnes could feel his heart pounding as though it would burst his ribs. The pair debouched from the trees into a glade a few acres in extent and Dr. Bird paused and whistled softly. An answering whistle came from a few yards away and a figure rose in the darkness as they approached.

"Maynard?" called Dr. Bird. "Good enough! I was afraid that you might not have kept your gas mask on."

"My orders were to keep it on, sir," replied the lieutenant in muffled tones through his mask, "but my mechanician did not obey orders. He passed out cold without any warning about fifteen minutes ago."

"Where's your ship?"

"Right over here, sir."

"We'll take off at once. Your craft is equipped with a Bird silencer?"

"Yes, sir."

"Come on, Carnes, we're going to follow that globe. Take the front cockpit alone, Maynard; Carnes and I will get in the rear pit with the spec and guide you. You can take off your gas mask at an elevation of a thousand feet. You have pack 'chutes, haven't you?"

"In the rear pit, Doctor."

"Put one on, Carnes, and climb in. I've got to get this spec set up before he gets too high."

The Douglass equipped with the Bird silencer, took the air noiselessly and rapidly gained elevation under the urging of the pilot. Dr. Bird clamped the gas-detecting spectroscope on the front of his cockpit and peered through it.

"Southwest, at about a thousand more elevation," he directed.

"Right!" replied the pilot as he turned the nose of his plane in the indicated direction and began to climb. For an hour and a half the plane flew noiselessly through the night.

"Bald Mountain," said the pilot, pointing. "The Canadian Border is only a few miles away."

"If they've crossed the Border, we're sunk," replied the doctor. "The trail leads straight ahead."

For a few minutes they continued their flight toward the Canadian Border and then Dr. Bird spoke.

"Swing south," he directed, "and drop a thousand feet and come back."

The pilot executed the maneuver and Dr. Bird peered over the edge of the plane and directed the spectroscope toward the ground.

"Half a mile east," he said, "and drop another thousand. Carnes, get ready to jump when I give the word."

"Oh, Lord!" groaned Carnes as he fumbled for the rip cord of his parachute, "suppose this thing doesn't open?"

"They'll slide you between two barn doors for a coffin and bury you that way," said Dr. Bird grimly. "You know your orders, Maynard?"

"Yes, sir. When you drop, I am to land at the nearest town—it will be Lowell—and get in touch with the Commandant of the Portsmouth Navy Yard if possible. If I get him, I am to tell him my location and wait for the arrival of reenforcements. If I fail to get him on the telephone, I am to deliver a sealed packet which I carry to the nearest United States Marshal. When reenforcements arrive, either from the Navy Yard or from the Marshal, I am to guide them toward the spot where I dropped you and remain, as nearly as I can judge, two miles away until I get a further signal or orders from you."

"That is right. We'll be over the edge in another minute. Are you ready, Carnes?"

"Oh, yes, I'm ready, Doctor, if I have to risk my precious life in this contraption."

"Then jump!"

Side by side, Carnes and the doctor dropped toward the ground. The Douglass flew silently away into the night. Carnes found that the sensation of falling was not an unpleasant one as soon as he got accustomed to it. There was little sensation of motion, and it was not until a sharp whisper from Dr. Bird called it to his attention that he realized that he was almost to the ground. He bent his legs as he had been instructed and landed without any great jar. As he rose he saw that Dr. Bird was already on his feet and was eagerly searching the ground with the spectroscope which he had brought with him in the jump.

"Fold your parachute, Carnes, and we'll stow them away under a rock where they can't be seen. We won't use them again."

Carnes did so and deposited the silk bundle beside the doctor's, and they covered them with rocks until they would be invisible from the air.

"Follow me," said the doctor as he strode carefully forward, stopping now and then to take a sight with the spectroscope. Carnes followed him as he made his way up a small hill which blocked the way. A hiss from Dr. Bird stopped him.

Dr. Bird had dropped flat on the ground, and Carnes, on all fours, crawled forward to join him. He smothered an exclamation as he looked over the crest of the hill. Before him, sitting in a hollow in the ground, was the huge globe which had spirited away Major Trowbridge.

"This is evidently their landing place," whispered Dr. Bird. "The next thing to find is their hiding place."

He rose and started forward but sank at once to the ground and dragged Carnes down with him. On the hill which formed the opposite side of the hollow a line of light showed for an instant as though a door had been opened. The light disappeared and then reappeared, and as they watched it widened and against an illuminated background four men appeared, carrying a fifth. The door shut behind them and they made their way slowly toward the waiting globe. They laid down their burden and one of them turned a flash-light on the globe and opened a door in its side through which they hoisted their burden. They all entered the globe, the door closed and with a slight whirring sound it rose in the air and moved rapidly toward the northeast.

"That's the place we're looking for," muttered Dr. Bird. "We'll go around this hollow and look for it. Be careful where you step; they

must have ventilation somewhere if their laboratory is underground."

Followed by the secret service operative, the doctor made his way along the edge of the hollow. They did not dare to show a light and it was slow work feeling their way forward, inch by inch. When they had reached a point above where the doctor thought the light had been he paused.

"There must be a ventilation shaft somewhere around here," he whispered, his mouth not an inch from Carnes' ear, "and we've got to find it. It would never do to try the door; if any of them are still here it is sure to be guarded. You go up the hill for five yards and I'll go down. Quarter back and forth on a two hundred yard front and work carefully. Don't fall in, whatever you do. We'll return to this point every time we pass it and report."

The operative nodded and walked a few yards up the hill and made his way slowly forward. He went a hundred yards as nearly as he could judge and then stepped five yards further up the hill and made his way back. As he passed the starting point he approached and Dr. Bird's figure rose up.

"Any luck?" he whispered.

Dr. Bird shook his head.

"Well try further," he said. "I think it is probably beyond us, so suppose you go fifteen yards up and quarter the same as before."

Carnes nodded and stole silently away. Fifteen yards up the hill he went and then paused. He stood on the crest of the hill and before him was a steep, almost precipitous slope. He made his way along the edge for a few yards and then paused. Faintly he could detect a murmur of voices. Inch by inch he crept forward, going over the ground under foot. He paused and listened intently and decided that the sound must come from the slope beneath him. A glance at his watch told him that he had spent ten minutes on this trip and he made his way back to the meeting place.

Dr. Bird was waiting for him, and in a low whisper Carnes reported his discovery. The doctor went back with him and together they renewed the search. The slope of the hill was almost sheer and Carnes looked dubiously over the edge.

"I wish we had brought the parachutes," he whispered to the doctor. "We could have taken the ropes off them and you could have lowered me over the edge."

Dr. Bird chuckled softly and tugged at his middle. Carnes watched him with astonishment in the dim light, but he understood when Dr. Bird thrust the end of a strong but light silk cord into his hands. He looped it under his arms and the doctor with whispered instructions, lowered him over the cliff. The doctor lowered him for a few feet and then stopped in response to a jerk on the free end. A moment later Carnes signaled to be drawn up and soon stood beside the doctor.

"That's the place all right," he whispered. "The whole cliff is covered with creepers and there is a tree growing right close to it. If we can anchor the cord here, I think that we can slide down to a safe hold on the tree."

A tree stood near and the silk cord was soon fastened. Carnes disappeared over the cliff and in a few moments Dr. Bird slid down the cord to join him. He found the detective seated in the crotch of a tree only a few feet from the face of the cliff. From the cliff came a pronounced murmur of voices. Dr. Bird drew in his breath in excitement and moved forward along the branch. He touched the stone and after a moment of searching he cautiously raised one corner of a painted canvas flap and peered into the cliff. He watched for a few seconds and then slid back and silently pulled Carnes toward him.

Together the two men made their way toward the cliff and Dr. Bird raised the corner of the flap and they peered into the hill. Before them was a cave fitted up as a cross between a laboratory and a hospital. Almost directly opposite them and at the left of a door in the farther wall was a ray machine of some sort. It was a puzzle to Carnes, and even Dr. Bird, although he could grasp the principle at a glance, was at a loss to divine its use. From a set of coils attached to a generator was connected a tube of the Crookes tube type with the rays from it gathered and thrown by a parabolic reflector onto the space where a man's head would rest when he was seated in a white metal chair with rubber insulated feet, which stood beneath it. An operating table occupied the other side of the room while a gas cylinder and other common hospital apparatus stood around ready for use.

Seated at a table which occupied the center of the room were three men. The sound of their voices rose from an indistinct murmur to audibility as the flap was raised and the watchers could readily understand their words. Two of them sat with their faces toward the main entrance and the third man faced them. Carnes bit his lip as he looked at the man at the head of the table. He was twisted and misshapen in body, a grotesque dwarf with a hunched back, not over four feet in height. His massive head, sunken between his hunched shoulders, showed a tremendous dome of cranium and a brow wider

and even higher than Dr. Bird's. The rest of his face was lined and drawn as though by years of acute suffering. Sharp black eyes glared brightly from deep sunk caverns. The dwarf was entirely bald; even the bushy eyebrows which would be expected from his face, were missing.

“They ought to be getting back," said the dwarf sharply.

"If they get back at all," said one of the two figures facing him.

"What do you mean?" growled the dwarf, his eyes glittering ominously. "They'll return all right; they know they'd better."

"They'll return if they can, but I tell you again, Slavatsky, I think it was a piece of foolishness to try to take two men in one night. We got Bird all right, but it is getting late for a second one, and they had to take Bird over a hundred miles and then go nearly three hundred more for Williams. The news about Bird may have been discovered and spread and others may be looking out for us. Carnes might have recovered."

"Didn't he get a full dose of lethane?"

"So Frick says, and Bird certainly had a full dose, but I can't help but

feel uneasy. Our operations were going too nicely on schedule and you had to break it up and take on an extra case in the same night as a scheduled one. I tell you, I don't like it."

"I'm sorry that I did it, Carson, but only because the results were so poor. We had planned on Williams for a month and I wanted him. And Bird was so easy that I couldn't resist it."

"And what did you get? Not as much menthium as would have come from an ordinary bookkeeper."

"I'll admit that Bird is a grossly overrated man. He must have worked in sheer luck in his work in the past, for there was nothing in his brain to show it above average. We got barely enough menthium to replace what we used in capturing him."

"We ought to have taken Carnes and left Bird alone," snorted Carson. "Even a wooden-headed detective ought to have given us a better supply than Bird yielded."

"We are bound to meet with disappointments once in a while. I had marked Bird down long ago as soon as I could get a chance at him."

"Well, you ran that show, Slavatsky, but I'll warn you that we aren't

going to let you pull off another one like it. I take no more crazy chances, even on your orders."

The hunchback rose to his feet, his eyes glittering ominously.

"What do you mean, Carson?" he asked slowly, his hand slipping behind him as he spoke.

"Don't try any rough stuff, Slavatsky!" warned Carson sharply. "I can pull a tube as fast as you can, and I'll do it if I have to."

"Gentlemen, gentlemen!" protested the third man rising, "we are all too deep in this to quarrel. Sit down and let's talk this over. Carson is just worried."

"What is there to be worried about?" grunted the dwarf as he slid back into his chair. "Everything has gone nicely so far and no suspicion has been raised."

"Maybe it has and then again maybe it hasn't," growled Carson. "I think this Bird episode to-night looks bad. In the first place, it came too opportunely and too easily. In the second place Bird should have yielded more menthium, and in the third place, did you notice his hands? They weren't the type of hands to expect on a man of his

type."

"Nonsense, they were acid stained."

"Acid stains can be put on. It may be all right, but I am worried. While we are talking about this matter, there is another thing I want cleared up."

"What is it?"

"I think, Slavatsky, that you are holding out on us. You are getting more than your share of the menthium."

Again the dwarf leaped to his feet, but the peace-maker intervened.

"Carson has a right to look at the records, Slavatsky," he said. "I am satisfied, but I'd like to look at them, too. None of us have seen them for two months."

The dwarf glared at first one and then the other.

"All right," he said shortly and limped to a cabinet on the wall. He drew a key from his pocket and opened it and pulled out a leather-bound book. "Look all you please. I was supposed to get the most. It was my idea."

"You were to get one share and a half, while Willis, Frink and I got one share each and the rest half a share," said Carson. "I know how much has been given and it won't take me but a minute to check up."

He bent over the book, but Willis interrupted.

"Better put it away, Carson," he said, "here come the rest and we don't want them to know we suspect anything."

He pointed toward a disc on the wall which had begun to glow. Slavatsky looked at it and grasped the book from Carson and replaced it in the cabinet. He moved over and started the generator and the tube began to glow with a violet light. A noise came from the outside and the door opened. Four men entered carrying a fifth whom they propped up in the chair under the glowing tube.

"Did everything go all right?" asked the dwarf eagerly.

"Smooth as silk," replied one of the four. "I hope we get some results this time."

The dwarf bent over the ray apparatus and made some adjustments and the head of the unconscious man was bathed with a violet glow. For three minutes the flood of light poured on his head and then the

dwarf shut off the light and Carson and Willis lifted the figure and laid it on the operating table. The dwarf bent over the man and inserted the needle of a hypodermic syringe into the back of the neck at the base of the brain. The needle was an extremely long one, and Dr. Bird gasped as he saw four inches of shining steel buried in the brain of the unconscious man.

Slowly Slavatsky drew back the plunger of the syringe and Dr. Bird could see it was being filled with an amber fluid. For two minutes the slow work continued, until a speck of red appeared in the glass syringe barrel.

"Seven and a half cubic centimeters!" cried the dwarf in a tone of delight.

"Fine!" cried Carson. "That's a record, isn't it?"

"No, we got eight once. Now hold him carefully while I return some of it."

Slavatsky slowly pressed home the plunger and a portion of the amber fluid was returned to the patient's skull. Presently he withdrew the needle and straightened up and held it toward the light.

"Six centimeters net," he announced. "Take him back, Frink. I'll give Carson and Willis their share now and we'll take care of the rest of you when you return. Is the ship well stocked?"

"Enough for two or three more trips."

"In that case, I'll inject this whole lot. Better get going, Frink, it's pretty late."

The four men who had brought the patient in stepped forward and lifted him from the table and bore him out. Dr. Bird dropped the canvas screen and strained his ears. A faint whir told him that the globe had taken to the air. He slid back along the limb of the tree until he touched the rope and silently climbed hand over hand until he gained the crest. He bent his back to the task of raising Carnes, and the operative soon stood beside him on the ledge surmounting the cliff.

"What on earth were they doing?" asked Carnes in a whisper.

"That was Professor Williams of Yale. They were depriving him of his memory. There will be another amnesia case in the papers tomorrow. I haven't time to explain their methods now: we've got to act. You have a flash-light?"

"Yes, and my gun. Shall we break in? There are only three of them, and I think we could handle the lot."

"Yes, but the others may return at any time and we want to bag the whole lot. They've done their damage for to-night. You heard my orders to Lieutenant Maynard, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"He should be somewhere in these hills to the south with assistance of some sort. The signal to them is three long flashes followed in turn by three short ones and three more long. Go and find them and bring them here. When you get close give me the same light signal and don't try to break in unless I am with you. I am going to reconnoitre a little more and make sure that there is no back entrance through which they can escape. Good luck. Carnes: hurry all you can. There is no time to be lost."

The secret service operative stole away into the night and Dr. Bird climbed back down the rope and took his place at the window. Willis lay on the operating table unconscious, while Slavatsky and Carson studied the now partially emptied syringe.

"You gave him his full share all right," Carson was saying. "I guess

you are playing square with us. I'll take mine now."

He lay down on the operating table and the dwarf fitted an anesthesia cone over his face and opened the valve of the gas cylinder. In a moment he closed it and rolled the unconscious man on his face and deftly inserted the long needle. Instead of injecting a portion of the contents of the syringe as Dr. Bird had expected to do, he drew back on the plunger for a minute and then took out the needle and held the syringe to the light.

"Well, Mr. Carson," he said with a malignant glance at the unconscious figure, "that recovers the dose you got a couple of weeks ago while Willis watched me. I don't think you really need any menthium; your brain is too active to suit me as it is."

He gave an evil chuckle and walked to the far side of the cave and opened a secret panel. He drew from a recess a flask and carefully emptied a portion of the contents of the syringe into it. He replaced the flask and closed the panel, and with another chuckle he limped over to a chair and threw himself down in it. For an hour he sat motionless and Dr. Bird carefully worked his way back along the branch and climbed the rope and started for the hollow.

A faint whirring noise attracted his attention, and he could see the

faintly luminous globe in the distance, rapidly approaching. It came to a stop at the spot where it had previously landed and four men got out. Instead of going toward the cave, they towed the globe, which floated a few inches from the earth, toward the side of the hill farthest from where the doctor stood. Three of them held it, while the fourth went forward and bent over some controls on the ground. A creaking sound came through the night and the men moved forward with the globe. Presently its movement stopped and men reappeared. Again came the creaking sound and the glow faded out as though a screen had been drawn in front of it. The four men walked toward the door of the cave.

Dr. Bird dropped flat on the ground and saw them pause a few yards below him on the hill and again work some hidden controls. A glare of light showed for an instant and they disappeared and everything was again quiet. Dr. Bird debated the advisability of returning to the window but decided against it and moved down the face of the hill.

Inch by inch he went over the ground, but found nothing. In the darkness he could not locate the door and he made his way around to the back of the hill. The precipice loomed above him and he swept it with his gaze, but he could locate no opening in the darkness and he dared not use a flash-light. As he turned he faced the east and noted with a start of surprise that the sky was getting red. He glanced at his

watch and found that Carnes had been gone for nearly three hours.

"Great Scott!" he exclaimed in surprise. "Time has gone faster than I realized. He ought to be back at any time now."

He mounted the highest point of the hill and sent three long flashes, followed in turn by three short and three more long to the south and watched eagerly for an answer. He waited five minutes and repeated the signal, but no answering flashes came from the empty hills. With a grunt which might have meant anything, he turned and made his way toward the opposite side of the hollow where the globe had disappeared. Here he met with more luck. He had marked the location with extreme care and he had not spent over twenty minutes feeling over the ground before his hand encountered a bit of metal. As he pulled on it his eyes sought the side of the hill.

The dawn had grown sufficiently bright for him to see the result of his action. A portion of the hill folded back and the faintly glowing ship became visible. With a muttered exclamation of triumph he approached it.

The globe was about nine feet in diameter and was without visible doors or windows. Around and around it the doctor went, searching for an entrance. The ship now rested solidly on the ground. He failed

to find what he sought and his sensitive hands began to go over it searching for an irregularity. He had covered nearly half of it before his finger found a hidden button and pressed it. Silently a door in the side of the craft opened and he advanced to enter.

"Keep them up!" said a sharp voice behind him.

Dr. Bird froze into instant immobility and the voice spoke again.

"Turn around!"

Dr. Bird turned and looked full into the eye of a revolver held by the man the dwarf had addressed as Frink. Behind Frink stood the dwarf and three other men.

As his eye fell on Dr. Bird, Frink turned momentarily pale and staggered back, the revolver wavering as he did so. Dr. Bird made a lightning-like grab for his own weapon, but before he could draw it Frink had recovered and the revolver was again steady.

"Dr. Bird!" gasped Slavatsky. "Impossible!"

"Get his gun, Harris," said Frink.

One of the men stepped forward and dextrously removed the doctor's

automatic and frisked him expertly to insure himself that he had no other weapon concealed.

"Bring him to the cave," directed Slavatsky, who, though obviously still shaken, had just as obviously recovered enough to be a very dangerous man. Two of the men grasped the doctor and led him along toward the entrance to the laboratory cave which stood wide open in the gathering daylight. Frink paused long enough to shut the side of the hill and conceal the ship, and then followed the doctor. In the cave the door was shut and the doctor placed against the wall under the window through which he had peered earlier in the night. Slavatsky took his seat at the table, his malignant black eyes boring into the Doctor. Carson and Willis sat on the edge of the operating table, evidently still partially under the effects of the anesthetic that had been administered to them.

"How did you get back here?" demanded Slavatsky.

"Find out!" snapped Dr. Bird.

The dwarf rose threateningly.

"Speak respectfully to me; I am the Master of the World!" he roared in an angry voice. "Answer my questions when I speak, or means

will be found to make you answer. How did you get back here?"

Dr. Bird maintained a stubborn silence, his fierce eyes answering the dwarf's, look for look, and his prominent chin jutting out a little more squarely. Carson suddenly broke the silence.

"That's not the Bird we had here earlier," he cried as he staggered to his feet.

"What do you mean?" demanded Slavatsky whirling on him.

"Look at his hands!" replied Carson pointing.

Slavatsky looked at Dr. Bird's long mobile fingers and an evil leer came over his countenance.

"So, Dr. Bird," he said slowly, "you thought to match wits with Ivan Slavatsky, the greatest mind of all the ages. For a time you fooled me when your double was operated on here, but not for long. I presume you thought that we had no way of detecting the substitution? You have discovered differently. Where is your friend, Mr. Carnes?"

"Didn't your men leave him in the cabin when you kidnapped me?"

Slavatsky looked at Frink inquiringly.

"He stayed in the cabin if he was in it when we got there," the leader of the kidnapping gang replied. "He got a full shot of lethane and he's due to be asleep yet. I don't know how this man recovered. I left him there myself."

"Fool!" shrieked Slavatsky. "You brought me a double, a dummy whom I wasted my time in operating on. Was the other a dummy, too?"

"I didn't enter the cabin."

Slavatsky shrugged his shoulders.

"If that is all the good the menthium I have injected has done you, I might as well have saved it. It doesn't matter, however: we have the one we wanted. Dr. Bird, it was very thoughtful of you to come here and offer your marvelous brain to strengthen mine. I have no doubt that you will yield even more menthium than Professor Williams did this evening especially as I will extract your entire supply and reduce you to permanent idiocy. I will have no mercy on you as I have on the others I have operated on."

Dr. Bird blanched in spite of himself at the ominous words.

"You have the whip-hand for the moment, Slavatsky, but my time may come—and if it does, I will remember your kindness. I saw your operation on Professor Williams this evening and know your power. I also know that you stole the idea and the method from Sweigert of Vienna. I saw you inject the fluid you drew into Willis' brain. Shall I tell what else I saw?"

It was the dwarf's turn to blanch, but he recovered himself quickly.

"Into the chair with him!" he roared.

Three of the men grasped the doctor and forced him into the chair and Slavatsky started the generator. The violet light bathed Dr. Bird's head and he felt a stiffness and contraction of his neck muscles, and as he tried to shout out his knowledge of Slavatsky's treachery, he found that his vocal chords were paralyzed. Through a gathering haze he could see Carson approaching with an anesthesia cone and the sweet smell of lethane assailed his nostrils. He fought with all his force, but strong hands held him, and he felt himself slipping—slipping—slipping—and then falling into an immense void. His head slumped forward on his chest and Slavatsky shut off the generator.

"On the table," he said briefly.

Four men picked up the herculean frame of the unconscious doctor and hoisted him up on the table. Carson seized his head and bent it forward and the dwarf took from a case a syringe with a five-inch needle. He touched the point of it to the base of the doctor's brain.

"Slavatsky! Look!" cried Frink.

With an exclamation of impatience the dwarf turned and stared at a disc set on the wall of the cave. It was glowing brightly. With an oath he dropped the syringe and snapped a switch, plunging the cave into darkness. A tiny panel in the door opened to his touch and he stared out into the light.

"Soldiers!" he gasped. "Quick, the back way!"

As he spoke there came a sound as of a heavy body falling at the back of the cave. Slavatsky turned the switch and flooded the cave with light. At the back of the cave stood Operative Carnes, an automatic pistol in his hand.

"Open the main door!" Carnes snapped.

Slavatsky made a move toward the light, and Carnes' gun roared deafeningly in the confined space. The heavy bullet smashed into the

wall an inch from the dwarf's hand and he started back.

"Open the main door!" ordered Carnes again.

The men stared at one another for a moment and the dwarf's eyes fell.

"Open the door, Frink," he said.

Frink moved over to a lever. He glanced at Slavatsky and a momentary gleam of intelligence passed between them. Frink raised his hand toward the lever and Carnes gun roared again and Frink's arm fell limp from a smashed shoulder.

"Slavatsky," said Carnes sternly, "come here!"

Slowly the dwarf approached.

"Turn around!" said Carnes.

He turned and felt the cold muzzle of Carnes' gun against the back of his neck.

"Now tell one of your men to open the door," said the detective. "If he promptly obeys your order, you are safe. If he doesn't, you die."

Slavatsky hesitated for a moment, but the cold muzzle of the automatic bored into the back of his neck and when he spoke it was in a quavering whine.

"Open the door, Carson," he whimpered.

There was moment of pause.

"If that door isn't open by the time I count three," said Carnes, "—as far as Slavatsky is concerned, it's just too bad. I'll have four shots left —and I'm a dead shot at this range. One! Two!"

His lips framed the word "three" and his fingers were tightening on the trigger when Carson jumped forward with an oath. He pulled a lever on the wall and the door swung open. Carnes shouted and through the opened door came a half dozen marines followed by an officer.

"Tie these men up!" snapped Carnes.

In a trice the six men were securely bound and Frink's bleeding shoulder was being skilfully treated by two of the marines. Carnes turned his attention to the unconscious doctor.

He rolled him over on his back and began to chafe his hands. An

officer in a naval uniform came through the door and with a swift glance around, bent over Dr. Bird. He raised one of the doctor's eyelids and peered closely at his eye and then sniffed at his breath.

"It's some anesthetic I don't know," he said. "I'll try a stimulant."

He reached in his pocket for a hypodermic, but Carnes interrupted him.

"Earlier in the evening Dr. Bird said they were using lethane," he said.

"Oh, that new gas the Chemical Warfare Service has discovered," said the surgeon. "In that case I guess it'll just have to wear off. I know of nothing that will neutralize it."

Without replying, Carnes began to feverishly search the pockets of the unconscious scientist. With an exclamation of triumph he drew out a bottle and uncorked it. A strong smell as of garlic penetrated the room and he held the opened bottle under Dr. Bird's nose. The doctor lay for a moment without movement, and then he coughed and sat up half strangled with tears running down his face.

"Take that confounded bottle away, Carnes!" he said. "Do you want

to strangle me?"

He sat up and looked around.

"What happened?" he demanded. "Oh, yes, I remember now. That brute was about to operate on me. How did you get here?"

"Never mind that, Doctor. Are you all right?"

"Right as a trivet, old dear. How did you get here so opportunely?"

"I was a little slow in locating Lieutenant Maynard and the marines. When we got here I was afraid that we couldn't find the door, so I took Maynard and a detail around to the back and I went up to the top and slid down our cord and looked in the window. You were unconscious and Slavatsky was bending over you with a needle in his hand. I was about to try a shot at him when something called their attention to the men in front and I squeezed through the window and dropped in on them. They didn't seem any too glad to see me, but I overlooked that and insisted on inviting the rest of my friends in to share in the party. That's all."

"Carnes," said the Doctor, "you're probably lying like a trooper when you make out that you did nothing, but I'll pry the truth out of you

sooner or later. Now I've got to get to work. Send for Lieutenant Maynard."

One of the marines went out to get the flyer, and Dr. Bird stepped to the cabinet from which Slavatsky had taken his record book earlier in the evening and took out the leather-bound volume. He opened it and had started to read when Lieutenant Maynard entered the cave.

"Hello, Maynard," said the Doctor, looking up. "Are the rest of the party on their way?"

"They will be here in less than two hours, Doctor."

"Good enough! Have some one sent to guide them here. In the meanwhile, I'm going to study these records. Keep the prisoners quiet. If they make a noise, gag them. I want to concentrate."

For an hour and a half silence reigned in the cave. A stir was heard outside and Admiral Clay, the President's personal physician, entered leading a stout gray-haired man. Dr. Bird whistled when he saw them and leaped to his feet as another figure followed the admiral.

"The President!" gasped Carnes as the officers came to a salute and the marines presented arms.

The President nodded to his ex-guard, acknowledged the salute of the rest and turned to Dr. Bird.

"Have you met with success, Doctor?" he asked.

"I have, Mr. President; or, rather, I hope that I have. At the same time, I would rather experiment on some other victim of their deviltry than the one you have brought me."

"My decision that the one I have brought shall be the first to be experimented on, as you term it, is unalterable."

Dr. Bird bowed and turned to the dwarf who had been a sullen witness of what had gone on.

"Slavatsky," he said slowly, "your game is up. I have witnessed one of your brain transfusions and I know the method. I gather from your notes that the menthium you have hidden in that cabinet is still as potent as when it was first extracted from a living brain, but in this case I am going to draw it fresh from one of your gang. Some of the details of the operation are a little hazy to me, but those you will teach me. I am going to restore this man to the condition he was in before you did your devil's work on him and you will direct my movements. Just what is the first step in removing the menthium

from a brain?"

The dwarf maintained a stubborn silence.

"You refuse to answer?" asked the Doctor in feigned surprise. "I thought that you would rather instruct me and have me try the operation first on other men. Since you prefer that I operate on you first, I will be glad to do so."

He stepped to the opposite wall and in a few moments had opened the dwarf's hiding place and taken out the flask of menthium.

"Carson," he said, "after you had watched Slavatsky inject menthium into Willis, you took lethane and expected him to inject menthium into your brain. Instead of doing so he withdrew a portion from your brain and put it in this flask. I have reason to believe from his secret records which I found in the cabinet with this flask that he has done so regularly. Are you willing to instruct me while I remove the menthium from him?"

"The dirty swine!" shouted Carson. "I'll do anything to get even with him, but I have never performed the operation. Only Slavatsky and Willis have operated."

"Will you help me, Willis? asked Dr. Bird.

"I'll be glad to, Doctor. I am sick of this business anyway. At first, Slavatsky just planned to give us abnormally keen brains, but lately he has been talking of setting himself up as Emperor of the World, and I am sick of it. I think I would have broken with him and told all I know, soon, anyway."

"Throw him in that chair," said Dr. Bird.

Despite the howlings and strugglings of the dwarf, three of the marines strapped him in the chair beneath the tube. The dwarf howled and frothed at the mouth and directed a final appeal for mercy to the President.

"Spare me, Your Excellency," he howled. "I will put my brains at your service and make you the greatest mentality of all time. Together we can conquer and rule the world. I will show you how to build hundreds of ships like mine—"

The President turned his back on the dwarf and spoke curtly.

"Proceed with your experiments, Dr. Bird," he said.

Slavatsky directed his appeals to the doctor, who peremptorily

silenced him.

"I told you a few hours ago, Slavatsky, that the time might come when I would remember your threats against me. I will show you the same mercy now as you promised me then. Carnes, put a cone over his face."

Despite the howls of the dwarf, the operative forced an anesthesia cone over his face and Dr. Bird turned to the valve of the lethane cylinder. With Willis directing his movements, he turned on the ray for three minutes and removed the unconscious dwarf to the operating table. He took the long-needled syringe from a case and sterilized it and then turned to the President.

"I am about to operate," he said, "but before I do so, I wish to explain to all just what I have learned and what I am about to do. With that data, the decision of whether I shall proceed will rest with you and Admiral Clay. Have I your permission to do so?"

The President nodded.

"When I first read of these amnesia cases, I took them for coincidences—until you consulted me and gave me an opportunity to examine one of the victims. I found a small puncture at the base of

the brain which I could not explain, and I began to dig into old records. I knew, of course, of Sweigert of Vienna, and the extravagant claims he had put forward in 1911. He was far ahead of his time, but he mixed up some profound scientific discoveries with mysticism and occultism until he was discredited. Nevertheless, he continued his experiments with the aid of his principal assistant, a man named Slavatsky.

"Sweigert's theory was that intellectuality, brain power, intelligence, call it what you will, was the result of the presence of a fluid which he called 'menthium' in the brain. He thought that it could be transferred from one person to another, and with the aid of Slavatsky, he experimented on himself. He removed the menthium from an unfortunate victim, who was reduced to a state of imbecility, and Slavatsky injected the substance into Sweigert's brain. The experiment resulted fatally and Slavatsky was tried for murder. He was acquitted of intentional murder but was imprisoned for a time for manslaughter. He was released when the Austro-Hungarian Empire was broken up, and for a time I lost track of him.

"I found translations of both the records of the trials and of Sweigert's original reports, and the thing that attracted my attention was that the puncture I found in the victim corresponded exactly with the puncture described by Sweigert as the one he made in

extracting the menthium. I asked the immigration authorities to check over their records and they found that a man named Slavatsky whose description corresponded with the ill-fated Sweigert's assistant had entered the United States under Austria's quota about a year ago. The chain of evidence seemed complete to me, and it only remained to find the man who was systematically robbing brains.

"If such a thing was really going on, I felt that my reputation would make me an attractive bait and I secured a double, as you know, and placed him in a position where his kidnapping would be an easy matter. I was sure that the victims were being taken away by air and that lethane was being used to reduce the neighborhood to a state of profound somnolence, so I hid myself near my double with a gas detector which would find even minute traces of lethane in the air.

"My fish rose to the lure and came after the bait last night. When his ship arrived, I found a strange gas in the air, and followed the ship by the trail of the substance which it left behind it. Carnes was with me, and we got here in time to witness the extraction of the menthium from my friend, Professor Williams of Yale, and to see it injected into one of Slavatsky's gang. I sent Carnes for help and messed around until I was captured myself—and help arrived just in time. That's about all there is to tell. I am now about to reverse the process and try to remove the stolen brains from the criminals and

restore them to their rightful owners. I have never operated and the result may be fatal. Shall I proceed?"

The President and Admiral Clay consulted for a moment in undertones.

"Go on with your experiments, Dr. Bird," said the President, "and we will hold you blameless for a failure. You have worked so many miracles in the past that we have every confidence in you."

Dr. Bird bowed acknowledgment to the compliment and bent over the unconscious dwarf. With Willis directing every move, he inserted the needle and drew back slowly on the plunger. Twenty-three and one-half cubic centimeters of amber fluid flowed into the syringe before a speck of blood appeared.

"Enough!" cried Willis. Dr. Bird withdrew the syringe and motioned to Admiral Clay. The man the Admiral had brought in was placed in the chair and lethane administered. He was laid on the table, and, with a silent prayer, Dr. Bird inserted the needle and pressed the plunger. When five and one-quarter centimeters had flowed into the man's brains, he withdrew the needle and held the bottle which Carnes had used to revive him under the man's nose. The patient coughed a moment and sat up.

"Where am I?" he demanded. His gaze roved the cave and fell on the President. "Hello, Robert," he exclaimed. "What has happened?"

With a cry of joy the President sprang forward and wrung the hand of the man.

"Are you all right, William?" he asked anxiously. "Do you feel perfectly normal?"

"Of course I do. My neck feels a little stiff. What are you talking about? Why shouldn't I feel normal? How did I get here?"

"Take him outside, Admiral, and explain to him," said the President.

Admiral Clay led the puzzled man outside and the President turned to Dr. Bird.

"Doctor," he said, "I need not tell you that I again add my personal gratitude to the gratitude of a nation which would be yours, could the miracles you work be told off. If there is ever any way that can serve you, either personally or officially, do not hesitate to ask. The other victims will be brought here to-day. Will you be able to restore them?"

"I will, Mr. President. From Slavatsky's records I find that I will

have enough if I reduce all of his men to a state of imbecility except Willis. In view of his assistance, I propose to leave him with enough menthium to give him the intelligence of an ordinary schoolboy."

"I quite approve of that," said the President as Willis humbly expressed his gratitude. "Have you had time to make an examination of that ship of Slavatsky's, yet?"

"I have not. As soon as the work of restoration is completed, I will go over it, and when I master the principles I will be glad to take them up with the Army-Navy General Board."

"Thank you, Doctor," said the President. He shook hands heartily and left the cave. Carnes turned and looked at the Doctor.

"Will you answer a question, Doctor?" he asked. "Ever since this case started, I have been wondering at your extraordinary powers. You have ordered the army, the navy, the department of justice and everyone else around as though you were an absolute monarch. I know the President was behind you, but what puzzles me is how he came to be so vitally interested in the case."

Dr. Bird smiled quizzically at the detective.

"Even the secret service doesn't know everything," he said. "Evidently you didn't recognize the man whose memory I restored. Besides being one of the most brilliant corporation executives in the country, he has another unique distinction. He happens to be the only brother of the President of the United States."

#52 The Invisible Death, By Victor Rousseau Emanuel:

With night-rays and darkness-antidote, America strikes back at the terrific and destructive invisible empire.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

far overhead a

- - -

Chapter 1: ***Out of the Hangman's Hands***

“You speak," said Von Kettler, jeering, "as if you really believed that you had the power of life and death over me."

With night-rays and darkness-antidote America strikes back at the terrific and destructive Invisible Empire.

The Superintendent of the penitentiary frowned, yet there was

something of perplexity in the look he gave the prisoner. "Von Kettler, I think it is time that you dropped this absurd pose of yours," he said, "in view of the fact that you are scheduled to die by hanging at eight o'clock to-morrow night. Your life and death are in your own hands."

Von Kettler bowed ironically. Standing in the Superintendent's presence in the uniform of the condemned cell, collarless, bare-headed, he yet seemed to dominate the other by a certain poise, breeding, nonchalance.

"Your life is offered you in consideration of your making a complete written confession of the whole ramifications of the plot against the Federal Government," the Superintendent continued.

"Rather a confession of weakness, my dear Superintendent," jeered the prisoner.

“Oh don't worry about that! The Government has unravelled a good deal of the conspiracy. It knows that you and your international associates are planning to strike at civilized government throughout the world, in the effort to restore the days of autocracy. It knows you are planning a world federation of states, based on the principles of absolutism and aristocracy. It is aware of the immense financial

resources behind the movement. Also that you have obtained the use of certain scientific discoveries which you believe will aid you in your schemes."

"I was wondering," jeered the prisoner, "how soon you were coming to that."

"They didn't help you in your murderous scheme," the Superintendent thundered. "You were found in the War Office by the night watchman, rifling a safe of valuable documents. You shot him with a pistol equipped with a silencer. You shot down two more who, hearing his cries, rushed to his aid. And you attempted to stroll out of the building, apparently under the belief that you possessed mysterious power which would afford you security."

"A little lapse of judgment such as may happen with the best laid plans," smiled Von Kettler. "No, Superintendent, I'll be franker with you than that. My capture was designed. It was decided to give the Government an object lesson in our power. It was resolved that I should permit myself to be captured, in order to demonstrate that you cannot hang me, that I have merely to open the door of my cell, the gates of this penitentiary, and walk out to freedom."

"Have you quite finished?" rasped the Superintendent.

"At your disposal," smiled the other.

"Here's your last chance, Von Kettler. Your persistence in this absurd claim has actually shaken the expressed conviction of some of the medical examiners that you are sane. If you will make that complete written confession that the Government asks of you, I pledge you that you shall be declared insane to-night, and sent to a sanitarium from which you will be permitted to escape as soon as this affair has blown over."

“The United States Government has sunk pretty low, to involve itself in a deal of this character, don't you think, my dear Superintendent?" jeered Von Kettler.

"The Government is prepared to act as it thinks best in the interests of humanity. It knows that the death of one wretched murderer such as yourself is not worth the lives of thousands of innocent men!"

"And there," smiled Von Kettler, without abating an atom of his nonchalance, "there, my dear Superintendent, you hit the nail on the head. Only, instead of thousands, you might have said millions."

Von Kettler's aspect changed. Suddenly his eyes blazed, his voice shook with excitement, his face was the face of a fanatic, of a

prophet.

"Yes, millions, Superintendent," he thundered. "It it a holy cause that inspires us. We know that it is our sacred mission to save the world from the drabness of modern democracy. The people—always the people! Bah! what are the lives of these swarming millions worth when compared with a Caesar, a Napoleon, an Alexander, a Charlemagne? Nothing can stop us or defeat us. And you, with your confession of defeat, your petty bargaining—I laugh at you!"

"You'll laugh on the gallows to-morrow night!" the Superintendent shouted.

Again Von Kettler was the calm, superior, arrogant prisoner of before. "I shall never stand on the gallows trap, my dear Superintendent, as I have told you many times," he replied. "And, since we have reached what diplomacy calls a deadlock, permit me to return to my cell."

The Superintendent pressed a button on his desk; the guards, who had been waiting outside the office, entered hastily. "Take this man back," he commanded, and Von Kettler, head held high, and smiling, left the room between them.

The Superintendent pressed another button, and his assistant entered, a rugged, red-haired man of forty—Anstruther, familiarly known as "Bull" Anstruther, the man who had in three weeks reduced the penitentiary from a place of undisciplined chaos to a model of law and order. Anstruther knew nothing of the Superintendent's offer to Von Kettler, but he knew that the latter had powerful friends outside.

"Anstruther, I'm worried about Von Kettler," said the Superintendent. "He actually laughed at me when I spoke of the possibility of another medical examination. He seemed confident that he could not be hanged. Swore that he will never stand on the gallows trap. How about your precautions for to-morrow night?"

"We've taken all possible precautions," answered Anstruther. "Special armed guards have been posted at every entrance to the building. Detectives are patrolling all streets leading up to it. Every car that passes is being scrutinized, its plate numbers taken, and forwarded to the Motor Bureau. There's no chance of even an attempt at rescue—literally none."

"He's insane," said the Superintendent, with conviction, and the words filled him with new confidence. It had been less Von Kettler's statements than the man's cool confidence and arrogant superiority that had made him doubt. "But he's not too insane to have known

what he was doing. He'll hang."

"He certainly will," replied Anstruther. "He's just a big bluff, sir."

"Have him searched rigorously again to-morrow morning, and his cell too—every inch of it, Anstruther. And don't relax an iota of your precautions. I'll be glad when it's all over."

He proceeded to hold a long-distance conversation with Washington over a special wire.

In his cell, Von Kettler could be seen reading a book. It was Nietzsche's "Thus Spake Zarathusta," that compendium of aristocratic insolence that once took the world by storm, until the author's mentality was revealed by his commitment to a mad-house. Von Kettler read till midnight, closely observed by the guard at the trap, then laid the word aside with a yawn, lay down on his cot, and appeared to fall instantly asleep.

Dawn broke. Von Kettler rose, breakfasted, smoked the perfecto that came with his ham and eggs, resumed his book. At ten o'clock Bull Anstruther came with a guard and stripped him to the skin, examining every inch of his prison garments. The bedding followed; the cell was gone over microscopically. Von Kettler, permitted to

dress again, smiled ironically. That smile stirred Anstruther's gall.

"We know you're just a big bluff, Von Kettler," snarled the big man. "Don't think you've got us going. We're just taking the usual precautions, that's all."

"So unnecessary," smiled Von Kettler. "To-night I shall dine at the Ambassador grill. Watch for me there. I'll leave a memento."

Anstruther went out, choking. Early in the afternoon two guards came for Von Kettler.

"Your sister's come to say good-by to you," he was told, as he was taken to the visitors' cell.

This was a large and fairly comfortable cell in a corridor leading off the death house, designed to impress visitors with the belief that it was the condemned man's permanent abode; and, by a sort of convention, it was understood that prisoners were not to disabuse their visitors' minds of the idea. The convention had been honorably kept. The visitor's approach was checked by a grill, with a two-yards space between it and the bars of the cell. Within this space a guard was seated: it was his duty to see that nothing passed.

As soon as Von Kettler had been temporarily established in his new quarters, a pretty, fair-haired young woman came along the corridor, conducted by the Superintendent himself. She walked with dignity, her bearing was proud, she smiled at her brother through the grill, and there was no trace of weeping about her eyes.

She bowed with pretty formality, and Von Kettler saluted her with an airy wave of the hand. Then they began to speak, and the German guard who had been selected for the purpose of interpreting to the Superintendent afterward, was baffled.

It was not German—neither was it French, Italian, or any of the Romance languages. As a matter of fact, it was Hungarian.

Not until the half-hour was up did they lapse into English, and all the while they might have been conversing on art, literature, or sport. There was no hint of tragedy in this last meeting.

"Good-by, Rudy," smiled his sister, "I'll see you soon."

"To-night or to-morrow," replied Von Kettler indifferently.

The girl blew him a kiss. She seemed to detach it from her mouth and extend it through the grill with a graceful gesture of the hand,

and Von Kettler caught it with a romantic wave of the fingers and strained it to his heart. But it was only one of those queer foreign ways. Nothing was passed. The alert guard, sitting under the electric light, was sure of that.

They searched Von Kettler again after he was back in the death house. The other cells were empty. In three of them detectives were placed. In the yard beyond the hangman was experimenting with the trap. He himself was under close observation. Nothing was being left to chance.

At seven o'clock two men collided in the death-house entrance. One was a guard, carrying Von Kettler's last meal on a tray. He had demanded Perigord truffles and paté de foie gras, cold lobster, endive salad, and near-beer, and he had got them. The other was the chaplain, in a state of visible agitation.

"If he was an atheist and mocked at me it wouldn't be so bad," the good man declared. "I've had plenty of that kind. But he says he's not going to be hanged. He's mad, mad as a March hare. The Government has no right to send an insane man to the gallows."

"All bluff, my dear Mr. Wright," answered the Superintendent, when the chaplain voiced his protest. "He thinks he can get away with it.

The commission has pronounced him sane, and he must pay the penalty of his crime."

By that mysterious process of telegraphy that exists in all penal institutions, Von Kettler's boast that he would beat the hangman had become the common information of the inmates. Bets were being laid, and the odds against Von Kettler ranged from ten to fifteen to one. It was generally agreed, however, that Von Kettler would die game to the last.

"You all ready, Mr. Squires?" the prowling Superintendent asked the hangman.

"Everything's O. K., sir."

The Superintendent glanced at the group of newspaper men gathered about the gallows. They, too, had heard of the prisoner's boast. One of them asked him a question. He silenced him with an angry look.

"The prisoner is in his cell, and will be led out in ten minutes. You shall see for yourselves how much truth there it in this absurdity," he said.

He looked at his watch. It lacked five minutes of eight. The

preparations for an execution had been reduced almost to a formula. One minute in the cell, twenty seconds to the trap, forty seconds for the hangman to complete his arrangements: two minutes, and then the thud of the false floor.

Four minutes of eight. The little group had fallen silent. The hangman furtively took a drink from his hip-pocket flask. Three minutes! The Superintendent walked back to the door of the death house and nodded to the guard.

"Bring him out quick!" he said.

The guard shot the bolt of Von Kettler's cell. The Superintendent saw him enter, heard a loud exclamation, and hurried to his side. One glance told him that the prisoner had made good his boast.

Von Kettler's cell was empty!

Chapter 2: Conference

Captain Richard Rennell, of the U. S. Air Service, but temporarily detached to Intelligence, thought that Fredegonde Valmy had never looked so lovely as when he helped her out of the cockpit.

Her dark hair fell in disorder over her flushed cheeks, and her eyes were sparkling with pleasure.

"A thousand thanks, M'sieur Rennell," she said, in her low voice with its slight foreign intonation. "Never have I enjoyed a ride more than to-day. And I shall see you at Mrs. Wansleigh's ball to-night?"

"I hope so—if I'm not wanted at Headquarters," answered Dick, looking at the girl in undisguised admiration.

"Ah, that Headquarters of yours! It claims so much of your time!" she pouted. "But these are times when the Intelligence Service demands much of its men, is it not so?"

"Who told you I was attached to Intelligence?" demanded Dick bluntly.

She laughed mockingly. "Do you think that is not known all over Washington?" she asked. "It is strange that Intelligence should act

like the—the ostrich, who buries his head in the sand and thinks that no one sees him because it is hidden."

Dick looked at the girl in perplexity. During the past month he had completely lost his head and heart over her, and he was trying to view her with the dispassionate judgment that his position demanded.

As the niece of the Slovakian Ambassador, Mademoiselle Valmy had the entry to Washington society. The Ambassador was away on leave, and she had appeared during his absence, but she had been accepted unquestionably at the Embassy, where she had taken up her quarters, explaining—as the Ambassador confirmed by cable—that she had sailed under a misconception as to the date of his leave.

Brunette, beautiful, charming, she had a score of hearts to play with, and yet Dick flattered himself that he stood first. Perhaps the others did too.

"Of course," the girl went on, "with the Invisible Emperor threatening organized society, you gentlemen find yourselves extremely busy. Well, let us hope that you locate him and bring him to book."

"Sometimes," said Dick slowly, "I almost think that you know something about the Invisible Emperor."

Again she laughed merrily. "Now, if you had said that my sympathies were with the Invisible Emperor, I might have been surprised into an acknowledgment," she answered. "After all, he does stand for that aristocracy that has disappeared from the modern world, does he not? For refinement of manners, for beauty of life, for all those things men used to prize."

"Likewise for the existence of the vast body of the nation in ignorance and poverty, in filth and squalor," answered Dick. "No, my sympathies are with law and order and democracy, and your Invisible Emperor and his crowd are simply a gang of thieves and hold-up men."

"Be careful!" A warning fire burned in the girl's eyes. "At least, it is known that the Emperor's ears are long."

"So are a jackass's," retorted Dick.

He was sorry next moment, for the girl received his answer in icy silence. In his car, which conveyed them from the tarmac to the Embassy, she received all his overtures in the same silence. A frigid

little bow was her farewell to him, while Dick, struggling between resentment and humiliation, sat dumb and wretched at the wheel.

Yet the idea that Fredegonde Valmy had any knowledge of the conspiracy or its leaders never entered Dick's head. He was only miserable that he had offended her, and he would have done anything to have straightened out the trouble.

It seemed impossible that in the year 1940 the peace of the civilized world could be threatened by an international conspiracy bent on restoring absolutism, and yet each day showed more clearly the immense ramifications of the plot. Each day, too, brought home to the investigating governments more clearly the fact that the things they had discovered were few in number in comparison with those they had not.

The headquarters of the conspirators had never been discovered, and it was suspected that the powerful mind behind them was intentionally leading the investigators along false trails.

The conspiracy was world-wide. It had been behind the revolution that had recreated an absolutist monarchy in Spain. It had plunged Italy into civil war. It had thrown England into the convulsions of a succession of general strikes, using the communist movement as a

cloak for its activities.

But nobody dreamed that America could become a fertile field for its insidious propaganda. Yet it was behind the millions of adherents of the so-called Freemen's Party, clamoring for the destruction of the constitution. Upon the anarchy that would follow the absolutist regime was to be erected.

Already the mysterious powers had struck. Departments of State had been entered and important papers abstracted. The *Germania* had mysteriously disappeared in mid-Atlantic, and a shipping panic had ensued. There were tales of mysterious figures materializing out of nothingness. It was known that the conspirators were in possession of certain chemical and electrical devices with which they hoped to achieve their ends.

The Superintendent of the penitentiary had had in his pocket an authorization to stop the execution of Von Kettler after he stood on the trap. Dead, he would be a mere mark of vengeance: alive, he might be persuaded to furnish some clue to the headquarters of the miscreants.

And behind the conspirators loomed the unknown figure that signed itself the Invisible Emperor—in the communications that poured in

to the White House and to the rulers of other nations. In the threats that were materializing with stunning swiftness.

Who was he? Rumor said that a former European ruler had not died as was supposed: that a coffin weighted with lead had been buried, and that he himself in his old age, had gone forth to a mad scheme of world conquest with a body of his nobles.

It had been practically a state of war since the shipment of gold, guarded by a detachment of police, had been stolen in broad daylight outside Baltimore, the police clubbed and killed by invisible assailants—as they claimed. The press was under censorship, troops under arms, and it was reported that the fleet was mobilizing.

In the midst of it all, Washington shopped, danced, feasted, flirted, like a swarm of may flies over a treacherous stream.

Intelligence was alert. As Dick started to drive away from the Slovakian Embassy, a man stepped quickly to the side of the car and thrust an envelope into his hand. Dick opened it quickly. He was wanted by Colonel Stopford at once, not at the camouflaged Headquarters at the War Department, but at the real Headquarters where no papers were kept but weighty decisions were made. And to that devious course the Government had already been driven.

Dick parked his car in a side street—it would have been under espionage in any of the official parking places—and set off at a smart walk toward his destination. Nobody would have guessed, from the appearance of the streets, that a national calamity was impending. The shopping crowds were swarming along the sidewalks, cars tailed each other through the streets; only a detachment of soldiers on the White House lawn lent a touch of the martial to the scene.

The building which Dick entered was an ordinary ten-story one in the business section; the various legal firms and commercial concerns that occupied it would have been greatly surprised to have known the identity of the Ira T. Graves, Importer, whose name appeared in modest letters upon the opaque glass door on the seventh story. Inside a flapper stenographer—actually one of the most trusted members of Intelligence's staff—asked Dick's name, which she knew perfectly well. Not a smile or a flicker of an eyelid betrayed the fact.

"Mr. Rennell," said Dick with equal gravity.

The girl passed into an inner room, and a buzzer sounded. In a few moments the girl came back.

"Mr. Graves will be here in a few minutes, Mr. Rennell, if you'll

kindly wait in his office," she said.

Dick thanked her, and walked through into the empty office. He waited there till the girl had closed the door behind him, then went out by another door and found himself again in the corridor. Opposite him was a door with the words "Entrance 769" and a hand pointing down the corridor to where the Intelligence service had established another perfectly innocent front. Dick tapped lightly at this door, and a key turned in the lock.

The man who stepped quickly back was one of the heads of the Civil Service. The man at the flat-topped desk was Colonel Stopford. The man on a chair beside him was one of the heads of the police force.

The Colonel, a big, elderly man, dressed in a grey sack suit, checked Dick's commencing salutation. "Never mind etiquette, Rennell," he said. "Sit down. You've heard about the man Von Kettler's escape last night, of course?"

"Yes, sir."

"It's known, then. We can't keep things dark. He vanished from his cell in the death house, three minutes before the time appointed for his execution, though, as a matter of fact, he wasn't going to be

hanged. Apparently he walked through the walls.

"There's a sequel to it, Rennell. It seems he had told the assistant-superintendent, a man named Anstruther, that he'd meet him at a restaurant in town that night. He promised to leave him a memento. Anstruther happened to remember this boast of Von Kettler's, and he surrounded the restaurant with armed detectives, on the chance that the fellow would show up. Rennell, *Von Kettler was there!*"

"He went to this restaurant, sir?"

"He walked in, just before the place was surrounded, engaged a table, and ordered a sumptuous meal. He told the waiter his name, said he expected a friend to join him, walked into the wash-room—and vanished! Two minutes later Anstruther and his men were on the job. Von Kettler never came out of the wash-room, so far as anybody knows.

"In the midst of the hue and cry somebody pointed to the table that Von Kettler had engaged. There was a twenty-dollar bill upon it, and a scrap of paper reading: 'I've kept my word. Von K.'"

Colonel Stopford looked at Dick fixedly. "Rennell, we may be fools," he said, "but we realize what we're up against. It's a big thing,

and we're going to need all our fighting grit to overcome it. You're one of the four men we're depending on. We're counting on you because of your record, and because of your degree in science at Heidelberg. The President wishes you to take charge of the whole Eastern Intelligence District, covering the entire south-eastern seaboard of the United States. You are to have complete freedom of action, and all civil, military, and naval officials have received instructions to co-operate with you."

"There goes Mrs. Wansleigh's ball," thought Dick, but he said nothing.

“We're not the hunters, Dick Rennell," went on Colonel Stopford. "We're hiding under cover, and I'm counting on you to turn the tables. They even know my office is here. I had a long distance call from Savannah this morning in mocking vein. They advised me to have the White House watched to-night. I warned the President, and we've posted guards all round it."

"They held the wire while you called up the President?" asked Dick.

"Damn it, no! They called me up from Scranton the instant he'd finished speaking. They have the power of the devil, Rennell, with that infernal invisibility invention of theirs. Rennell, we're fighting

unknown forces. Who this Invisible Emperor is, we don't even know. But one thing we've found out. He has his headquarters somewhere in your district. Somewhere along the south Atlantic seaboard. The greater part of his activities emanate from there. But we're fighting in the dark. The clue, the master clue that will enable us to locate him—that's what we lack."

The sun had set, it was beginning to grow dark. Colonel Stopford switched on the electric lamp beside his desk.

"What have you to say, Rennell?" he asked; and Dick was aware that the two other men were regarding him attentively.

"It's evident," said Dick, "that Von Kettler possessed this means of invisibility in his cell, and wasn't detected. He simply slipped out when the guard came to fetch him."

"Invisibility? Yes! But invisible's not the same thing as transparent," cried Stopford. "These folks have operated in broad daylight. They're transparent, damn them! Not even a shadow! You know what I mean, Rennell! What I'm thinking of! That crazy man you were in touch with six months ago, who prophesied this! We turned him down! He showed me a watch and said the salvation of the world was inside the case! I thought him insane!"

“You mean Luke Evans, sir. That watch was his pocket model. He went off in a huff, saying the time would come when we'd want him and not be able to find him."

"But, damn him, he wanted to produce universal darkness, or some such nonsense, Rennell, and I told him that we wanted light, not darkness."

"It wasn't exactly that, sir." Colonel Stopford was a man of the old school: he had been an artillery officer in the Great War, and was characteristically impatient of new notions. Dick began carefully: "You'll remember, sir, old Evans claimed to have been the inventor of that shadow-breaking device that was stolen from him and sold in England."

"To a moving picture company!" snorted Stopford. "I asked him what moving pictures had to do with war."

"Evans was convinced that the invention would be applied to war. He claimed that it made the modern methods of military camouflage out of date completely. He said that by destroying shadows one could produce invisibility, since visibility consists in the refraction of wave lengths by material objects.

"When they stole his invention, he foresaw that it would be used in war. He set to work to nullify his own invention. He told me that he had unintentionally given to the enemies of the United States a means of bringing us to our knees, since he believed that British motion picture company was actually a subsidiary of Krupp's. He worked out a method of counteracting it."

"You must get him, Rennell. Even if it's all nonsense, we can't afford to let any chance go. If Evans's invention will counteract this damned invisibility business—"

The telephone on the Colonel's desk rang. He picked it up, and his face assumed an expression of incredulity. He looked about him, like a man bewildered. He beckoned to the police official, who hurried to his side, and thrust the receiver into his hand. The official listened.

"All right," he said. He turned to Dick and the Civil Service representative.

"Gentlemen," he said, "the President has disappeared from his office in the White House, and there are grave fears that he has been kidnapped!"

Chapter 3: In the White House

Colonel Stopford's car had been parked around the corner of the building, and within a minute the four men were inside it, Stopford at the wheel, and racing in the direction of the White House. A nod to the guard at the gate, and they were inside the grounds. At the entrance a single guard, in place of the four who should have been posted there, challenged sharply, and attempted to bar the way, not recognizing Dick or Stopford in their civilian clothes.

"Where's your officer?" demanded Stopford sharply.

Half-cowed by the Colonel's manner, the young recruit hesitated, and the four swept him out of the way and hurried on. The scene outside the main entrance to the White House was one of indescribable confusion. Soldiers were swarming in confused groups, some trying to force an entrance, others pouring out. Every moment civilians, streaming over the lawn, added to the number. Discipline seemed almost abandoned. From inside the building came outbursts of screams and cursing, the scuffling of a mob.

"Roscoe! Roscoe!" shouted Stopford. "Where's the President's secretary? Who's seen him? Let us pass immediately!"

No one paid the least attention to him. But a short, bare-headed civilian, who was struggling in the crowd, heard, and shouted in answer, waved his arms, and began to force his way toward the four. It was Roscoe, the secretary of President Hargreaves. The President was a childless widower, and Roscoe lived in the White House with him and was intimately in his confidence.

Roscoe gained Stopford's side. "Say—they've got him!" he panted. "They've got him somewhere—inside the building. They're trying to get him out! We've got to save him—but we can't see them—or him. They've made him invisible too, curse them! I heard him crying, 'Help me, Roscoe!' He saw me, I tell you—and I didn't know where he was!"

The little secretary was almost incoherent with fear and anger. The five men, forming a wedge, hurled themselves forward. Out of the White House entrance appeared a tall officer, revolver in hand. It was Colonel Simpson, of the President's staff. Half beside himself, he swept the weapon menacingly about him, shouting incoherently, and clearing a passage, into which the five hurled themselves.

Stopford seized his revolver hand, and after a brief struggle Simpson recognized him.

"He's in the building!" he shouted wildly. "Somewhere upstairs! I'm trying to form a cordon, but this damned mob's in the way. Kick those civilians out!" he cried to the soldiers. "Shoot them if they don't go! Guard the windows!"

Stopford and Dick, at the head of the wedge, pushed past into the White House. The interior was packed, men were struggling frantically on the staircase; it seemed hopeless to try to do anything.

Suddenly renewed yells sounded from above, a scream of anguish, howls of terror. There came a downward surge, then a forward and upward one, which carried the two men up the stairs and into the President's private apartments above.

In the large reception-room a mob was struggling at a window, beneath a blaze of electric light. A soldier was standing there like a statue, his face fixed with a leer of horror. In his hands was a rifle, with a blood-stained bayonet, dripping upon the hardwood floor at the edge of the rug. Upon the rug itself a stream of blood was spouting out of the air.

Dick looked at the sight and choked. There was something appalling in the sight: it was the quintessence of horror, that widening pool of blood, staining the rug, and flowing from an invisible body that

writhed and twisted, while moans of anguish came from unseen lips.

Colonel Stopford leaped back, livid and staring. "God, it's got eyes —two eyes!" he shouted.

Dick saw them too. The eyes, which alone were visible, were about six inches from the floor, and they were appearing and disappearing, as they opened and shut alternately. It was a man lying there, a dying man, pierced by the soldier's bayonet by pure accident, dying and yet invisible.

The mob had scattered with shrieks of terror, but a few bolder spirits remained in a thin circle about that fearful thing on the rug. Dick bent over the man, and felt the outlines of the writhing body. It was a man, apparently dressed in some sort of uniform, but this was covered, from the top of the head to the feet, with a sort of sheer silken garment, bifurcating below the waist, and resembling a cocoon. It seemed to appear and alternately to vanish.

Dick seized the filmy stuff in his fingers, rent it, and stripped it away. Yells of terror and amazement broke from the throats of all. Instantly the thin circle of spectators had become reinforced by a struggling mass of men.

The half-visible cocoon clung to Dick's body like spider webs. But the man who had been wearing it had sprung instantly into view beneath the cluster of electric lights. He was a fair-haired young fellow of about thirty years, his features white and set in the agony of death.

He was dressed in a trim uniform of black, with silver braid, and on his shoulders were the insignia of a lieutenant. He opened his eyes, blue as the skies, and stared about him. He seemed to understand what had happened to him.

"Dogs!" he muttered.

Shrieks of fury answered him. The mob surged toward him as if to grind his face to pieces under their feet—and then recoiled, mouthing and gibbering. But it was at Dick that they were looking, not at the dying man.

He raised himself upon one elbow with a mighty effort. "His Majesty the Invisible Emperor! Long be his reign triumphant!" he chanted. It was his last credo. The words broke from his lips accompanied by a torrent of red foam. His head dropped back, his body slipped down; he was gone. And no one seemed to observe his passing. They were all screaming and gibbering at Dick.

"Rennell! Rennell!" yelled Stopford. "Where are you, Rennell? God, man, what's happened to your legs?"

Dick looked down at himself. For a moment he had the illusion that he was a head and a trunk, floating in the air. His lower limbs had become invisible, except for patches of trousering that seemed to drift through space. The mob in the room had fallen back gaping at him in horror.

Then Dick understood. It was the invisible garment that had coiled itself about him. He tore it from him and became visibly a man once more.

Shouts from another room! A surging movement of the crowd toward it. The muffled sounds of an automatic pistol, fitted with a silencer! Then screams:

"The devils are in there! They're murdering the soldiers!"

There followed a panic-stricken rush, more muffled firing, and then the sharp roar of rifles, and the fall of plaster. Some one was bawling the President's name. The rooms became a mass of milling human beings, lost to all self-control.

A bedlam of noise and struggle. Men fought with one another blindly, cursing soldiers fired promiscuously among the mob, riddling the walls, stabbing at the air. The plaster was falling in great chunks everywhere, filling the rooms with a heavy white cloud, in which all choked and struggled. The yells of the civilian mob below, struggling helplessly in the packed crowd that wedged the great stairway, made babel. Outside the White House a dense mob that filled the lawns was yelling back, and struggling to gain admittance. Suddenly the lights went out.

"They've cut the wires!" rose a wild, wailing voice. "The devils have cut the wires! Kill them! Kill everybody!"

His cry ended in a gurgle. Somewhere in that dark hell a struggle was going on, a well defined struggle, different from the random, aimless battling of the half-crazed soldiers and the civilians. President Hargreaves was still within the walls of the White House, it was known; it was physically impossible for him to have been carried away when every foot of space was packed. And through that darkness the invisible assailants were edging him, foot by foot, toward the outside.

Dick was on the edge of this silent battle. He sensed it. Bracing himself against a bureau, while the mob surged past him, he tried to

pierce the gloom, to reinforce with his perceptions what his instinct told him. A soldier, crazed with fear, came leaping at him, bayonet leveled. He thrust with a grunt. Dick avoided the glancing steel by a hand's breadth, and, as the impetus of the man's attack carried him forward, caught him beneath the chin with a stiff right-hand jolt that sent him sprawling.

From below the cries broke out again, with renewed violence: "They've got the President! Get them! Get them! Close all doors and windows!"

But a door went crashing down somewhere, to the tune of savage yells. The mob was pouring down the stairs. It was growing less packed above. Dick heard Stopford's voice calling his name.

"Here, sir" he shouted back, and the two men collided.

"For God's sake do what you can, Rennell!" shouted the Colonel. "They've got the President downstairs. They had him in this very room, in the thick of it all. I heard him cry out, as if under a gag. They put one of those damned cloths over him. God, Rennell, I'm going crazy!"

The upper floor of the White House was almost empty now. Dick

thrust himself into the crowd that still jammed the stairs. He reached the ground floor. It was lighter here, but a glance showed him that it was impossible to attempt to restore any semblance of order. The big East Room was jammed with a fighting, cursing throng. Dick stumbled over the bodies of those who had fallen in the press, or had been shot down. Outside the mob was thickening, swarming through the grounds and screeching like madmen.

Nothing that could be done! Dick found himself caught once more in the human torrent. Presently he was wedged up against a broken window. He precipitated himself through the frame, dropped to the ground, stopped for an instant to catch breath.

The yelling mob was congregated about the main entrance of the White House, and on this side the grounds were comparatively empty. As Dick stopped, trying desperately to form some plan of action, he heard footsteps and low voices near him. Then two men came toward him, followed by three or four others.

The men—but, though the light was faint, Dick realized instantly that they were wearing invisible garments. He could see nothing of them; he could see through where they seemed to be—the trees, the buildings of the streets. Yet they were at his elbow. And they saw him. He heard one of them leap, and sprang aside as the butt of a

pistol descended through the air and dropped where his head had been.

Yet no hand had seemed to hold it. It had been a pistol, reversed, and flashing downward, to be arrested in mid-air six inches from his face. But the men were not wholly invisible. Nearly six feet above the ground, three or four pairs of eyes were staring malevolently into Dick's. Only the eyes were there.

The two foremost men were breathing heavily. They were carrying something. Grotesquely through a rent in the invisible garment Dick saw a patch of trouser. He heard a muffled sigh. President Hargreaves, in the hands of his abductors!

Dick's actions were reflex. As the pistol hung beside his face, he snatched at it, wrested it away, struck with it, and heard a curse and felt the yielding impact of bone and flesh. He had missed the head but struck the shoulder. Next moment hands gripped the weapon, and a desperate struggle began.

It was torn from Dick's grasp. He struck out at random, and his fist collided with the chin of a substantial flesh and blood human being. Invisible arms grasped him. He fought free. The pistol slashed his face sidewise, the sight ripping a strip of flesh from the cheek. He

was surrounded, he was being beaten down, though he was fighting gamely.

"Kill the swine! Shoot! Shoot!" Dick heard one of his assailants muttering.

Out of the void appeared the blue muzzle of another automatic, with a silencer on it. Dick ducked as a flame spurted from it. He felt the bullet stir his hair. He grasped at the hand that held it, and missed. Then he was held fast, and the muzzle swung implacably toward his head again. Helpless, he watched it describe that arc of death. It was only later that he wondered why he had fought all the while in silence, instead of crying for help.

But of a sudden the pistol was dashed aside. A woman's voice spoke peremptorily, in some language Dick did not understand. And he saw her eyes among the eyes that glared at him. Dark eyes that he knew, even if the voice had not revealed her identity. The eyes and voice of Fredegonde Valmy!

Dick cried her name. He put forth all his strength in a final struggle. Suddenly he felt a stunning impact on the back of the head. He slipped, reeled, threw out his hands, and sank down unconscious on the grass at the side of the path.

Chapter 4: The Invisible Ambassador

Fredegonde Valmy implicated in the conspiracy! That was the first thought that flashed into Dick's mind as he recovered consciousness. He might have suspected it! But the idea that the girl he loved was bound up with the murderous gang that was attacking the very foundations of civilization chilled him to the soul.

Dick had been picked up a few minutes after he had been struck down, identified by Colonel Stopford as he was about to be removed to a hospital, and carried into the White House. Order had been restored by the arrival of a detachment of troops from Fort Myers, the severed cables located and mended, and by midnight the interior of the Presidential home had been made habitable again.

President Hargreaves was gone—kidnapped despite the utmost efforts to protect him; and it was impossible to conceal that fact from the world. But the wheels of government still revolved. All night an emergency council sat in the White House, and, deciding that in a time of such grave danger heroic means must be adopted, with the consent of such of the Congressional leaders as could be summoned, a Council of Defence was organized.

The whole country east of the Mississippi was placed under martial

law. The fleet and army were put on a war footing. Flights of airplanes were assembled at numerous points along the eastern seaboard. To this Council Donald was attached as head of Intelligence for the Eastern Division. Yet all this availed little unless the location of the Invisible Empire could be ascertained, and, despite telegraphic reports that came in hourly, alleging to have discovered its headquarters, nothing had been achieved in this direction.

The garment taken from the slain soldier had been examined by a half-dozen of the leading chemists of the East. Pending the arrival from New York of the celebrated Professor Hosmeyer, it was deposited under military guard in a dark closet. The result was unfortunate. The garment exhibited to the assembled scientists was a mere bifurcated silken bag.

The gas with which it had been impregnated, though it had been heavy enough to adhere to the fabric for hours, had also been volatile enough to have disappeared completely, leaving a residue which was identified as a magnesium isotope.

Equally spectacular had been the disappearance of Mademoiselle Fredegonde Valmy. A cable from the Slovakian Ambassador had arrived a few hours later, denying her authenticity. And with her

disappearance came the discovery that she had been at the head of an espionage system with ramifications in every state department, and in every statesman's home.

Three days passed with no sign from the enemy. The Council sat all day. In the executive offices of the White House Dick toiled ceaselessly, planning, receiving reports, organizing the flights of airplanes at strategic points throughout his district. From time to time he would be summoned to the Council. At night he threw himself upon a cot in his office and slept a sleep broken by the constant arrival of messengers. And still there was no clue to the location of the headquarters of the marauders.

But in those three days there had been no sign of them. Hope had succeeded despair; in the rebound of confidence the populace was beginning to ridicule the nation-wide precautions against what were coming to be considered merely a gang of super-criminals. It was even whispered that President Hargreaves had not been kidnapped at all. The Freemen's Party accused the Government of a plot to subvert popular liberties.

Dick received a summons on the third evening. Utterly worn out with his work, he pulled himself together and made his way into the Blue Room, where the Council was assembled. Vice-president

Tomlinson, an elderly man, was in the chair. A non-entity, pushed into a post it had been thought he would adorn innocuously, he had been overwhelmed by his succession to the chief office of State.

Tomlinson did not like Dick, or any of the hustling younger officers who, unlike himself, realized the real significance of the danger that overhung the country. He sat pompously in his leather chair, regarding Dick as he entered in obedience to the summons.

"Well, Captain Rennell, what have you to report to us this evening?" he inquired, as Dick saluted and stood to attention at the table.

"We're improving our concentrations, Mr. Vice-president. We've eight flights of seaplanes scouring the coast in the hope of locating the stronghold of the Invisible Emperor. We've—"

"I'm sick and tired of that title," shouted Tomlinson. He sprang to his feet, his face flushed with anger. His nerves had broken under the continuous strain. "I'll give you my opinion, Captain Rennell," he said. "And that is that this so-called Invisible Emperor is a myth.

"A gang of thieves has invented a paint that renders them inconspicuous, has created a panic, and is taking advantage of it to terrorize the country. The whole business is poppycock, in my

opinion, and the sooner this bubble bursts the better. Well, sir, what have you to say to that?"

"Have you ever seen any of these men in their invisible clothing, if I may ask, Mr. Vice-president?" inquired Dick, trying to keep down his anger. His nerves, too, were badly frazzled.

"No, sir, I have not, but my opinion is that this story is grossly exaggerated, and that the persons responsible are the reporters of our sensational press!" thundered Tomlinson.

He looked about him, a weak man proud of having asserted his authority. Somebody laughed.

Tomlinson glared at Dick, his rubicund visage purpling. But it was not Dick who had laughed. Nor any one at the council table.

That laugh had come from the wall beside the door. Again it broke forth, high-pitched, cold, derisive. All heads turned as if upon pivots to see who had uttered it.

"Good God!" exclaimed Secretary Norris, of the War Department, and slumped in his chair.

Five feet eight inches from the floor a pair of grey eyes looked at the

Council members out of emptiness. Grey eyes, a man's eyes, cool, contemptuous, and filled with authority, with a contemptuous sense of superiority that left every man there dumb.

Dick was the first to recover himself. He stepped forward, not to where the invisible man was standing, but to a point between him and the door.

That cold laugh broke forth again. "Gentlemen, I am an ambassador from my sovereign, who chooses to be known as the Invisible Emperor," came the words. "As such, I claim immunity. Not that I greatly care, should you wish to violate the laws of nations and put me to death. But, believe me, in such case the retribution will be a terrible one."

Suddenly the envoy peeled off the gas-impregnated garments that covered him. He stood before the Council, a fair-haired young man, clad in the same fashion of trim black uniform as the bayonetted soldier had worn upstairs three nights before.

He bowed disdainfully, and it was Tomlinson who shouted:

"Arrest that man! I know his face! I've seen it in the papers. He's Von Kettler, the murderer who escaped from jail in an invisible suit."

"Oh, come, Mr. Vice-president," laughed Von Kettler, "are you sure this isn't all very much exaggerated?"

Tomlinson sank back in his chair, his ruddy face covered with sweat. Dick stared at Von Kettler. A suspicion was forming in his mind. He had seen eyes like those before, dark instead of grey, and yet with the same look of pride and breeding in them; the look of the face, too, impossible to mistake—he knew!

Fredegonde Valmy was Von Kettler's sister!

“Well, gentlemen, am I to receive the courtesies of an ambassador?" inquired Van Kettler, advancing.

"You shall have the privileges of the gallows rope!" shouted Tomlinson. "Arrest that man at once, Captain Rennell!"

"Pardon me, Mr. Vice-president," suggested the Secretary for the Navy blandly, "but perhaps it would be more desirable to hear what he has to say."

"Immunity for thieves, robbers, murderers!"

"Might I suggest," said Von Kettler suavely, "that, since the United States has honored my master by placing itself upon a war footing, it

has accorded him the rights of a belligerent?"

"We'll hear you, Mr. Von Kettler," said the Secretary of State, glancing along the table. Three or four nodded, two shook their heads: Tomlinson only glared speechlessly at the intruder. Von Kettler advanced to the table and laid a paper upon it.

"You recognize that signature, gentlemen?" he asked.

At the bottom of the paper Dick saw scrawled the bold and unmistakable signature of President Hargreaves.

"An order signed by the President of your country," purred Von Kettler, "ordering your military forces replaced upon a peace footing, and the acceptance of our conditions. They are not onerous, and will not interfere with the daily life of the country. Merely a little change in that outworn document, the Constitution. My master rules America henceforward."

Somebody laughed: another laughed: but it was the Secretary of State who did the fine thing. He took up the paper bearing what purported to be President Hargreaves's signature, and tore it in two.

"The people of this country are her rulers," he said, "not an old man

dragooned into signing a proclamation while in captivity—if indeed that is President Hargreaves's signature."

There came a sudden burst of applause. Von Kettler's face became the mask of a savage beast. He shook his fist furiously.

"You call my master a forger?" he shouted. "You yourselves repudiate your own Constitution, which places the control of army and navy in the hands of your President? You refuse to honor his signature?"

"Listen to me, Mr. Von Kettler!" The voice of the Secretary of State cut like a steel edge. "You totally mistake the temper of the people of this country. We don't surrender, even to worthy adversaries, much less to a gang of common thieves, murderers, and criminals like yourselves. You have been accorded the privilege you sought, that of an envoy, and that was straining the point. Show yourself here again after two minutes have elapsed, and you'll go to the gallows—for keeps."

"Dogs!" shouted Von Kettler, beside himself with fury. "Your doom is upon you even at this moment. I have but to wave my arm, and Washington shall be destroyed, and with her a score of other cities. I tell you you are at our mercy. Thousands of lives shall pay for this

insult to my master. I warn you, such a catastrophe is coming as shall show you the Invisible Emperor does not threaten in vain!"

With complete nonchalance the Secretary of State took out his watch. "One minute and fifteen seconds remaining. Captain Rennell," he said. "At the expiration of that time, put Mr. Von Kettler under arrest. I advise you to go back to your master quickly, Mr. Von Kettler," he added, "and tell him that we'll have no dealings with him, now or ever."

For a moment longer Von Kettler stood glaring; then, with a laugh of derision and a gesture of the hands he vanished from view. And, though they might have expected that denouement, the members of the Council leaped to their feet, staring incredulously at the place where he had been. Nothing of Von Kettler was visible, not even the eyes, and there sounded not the slightest footfall.

Dick sprang forward to the door, but his outstretched arms encountered only emptiness. In spite of the Secretary of State's instructions, he was almost minded to apprehend the man. If he could get him!

The corridor was empty. A guard of soldiers was at the entrance, but they did not block the entrance. Even now Von Kettler might be

passing them! Why didn't his feet sound upon the floor? How could a bulky man glide so smoothly?

Perhaps because Dick was undecided what to do, Von Kettler escaped him. By the time he reached the guards he knew he had escaped. Suddenly there came an unexpected denouement. Somewhere on the White House lawn a guard challenged, fired. The snap of one of the silenced automatics answered him.

When Dick and the guards reached the spot, the man was lying in a crumpled heap.

"An airplane," he gasped. "Invisible airplane. I—bumped into it. Men—in it. The damned dogs!"

He died. Dick stared around him. There was no sign of any airplane on the lawn, nothing but the tents of the guards, white in the moonlight, and the grim array of anti-aircraft guns that Dick had placed there.

But behind the White House, in hastily constructed hangars, were a half-dozen of the latest pursuit airships—beautiful slim hulls, heavily armored, with armored turrets containing each a quick-firer with the new armor-piercing bullets. One of these ships, Dick's own,

was kept perpetually warmed and ready to take the air.

Dick raced across the lawn, yelled to the startled guard in charge. The mechanics came running from their quarters. Almost by the time Dick reached it the ship was ready.

He twirled the helicopter starter, and she roared and zoomed, taking an angle of a hundred and twenty-five degrees upward off a runway of twenty yards. Into the air she soared, into the moonlight, up like an arrow for five hundred feet.

Dick pulled the soaring lever, and she hung there, buzzing like a bee as her helicopters, counteracting the pull of gravity, held her comparatively stable. He scanned the air all about him.

Washington lay below, her myriad lights gleaming. Immediately beneath him Dick saw the guns and the tents of the soldiers, and the little group that was removing the body of the murdered soldier on a stretcher. But there were no signs of any hostile craft.

Had the murdered man really bumped into an invisible airship, or had he only thought he had? Had those devils learned to apply the gas to the surfaces of airplanes? There was no reason why they should not have done so.

But surely the utmost ingenuity of man had not contrived to render a modern plane, with its metalwork and machinery, absolutely transparent?

And, again, how was it possible to have silenced the sound of engines, the whir of a propeller, so that there should be no auditory indication whatever of a plane's presence?

Dick looked all about him. Nothing was in the air—he could have sworn it. He replaced the soaring lever and banked in a close circle, his glance piercing the night. No, there was nothing.

Crash! Boom! The plane rocked violently, tossing upon gusts of air. A huge, gaping hole of blackness had suddenly appeared in the middle of the White House lawn. The tents were flat upon the ground. Through the rising smoke clouds Dick saw tongues of flame.

No shell that, but a bomb, and dropped from the skies less than five hundred feet from where Dick hovered. Yet there was nothing visible in the skies save the round orb of the moon.

A rush of wind past Dick's face! One of the vanes of the helicopter crumpled and fluttered away into the night. Dick needed no further persuasion. The dead soldier had not lied.

Von Kettler had begun the fulfillment of his threat!

Chapter 5: The Enemy Strikes

As Dick's airship veered and side-slipped, he kicked hard on the left rudder and brought the nose around. Furiously he sprayed the air with a leaden hail from his quick-firer. He heard a rush of wind go past him, and realized that his unseen antagonist had all but rammed him.

Yet nothing was visible at all, save the moon and the empty sky. He had heard the rush of the prop-wash, but he had seen nothing, heard nothing else. Incredible as it seemed, the pilot was flying a plane that had attained not merely invisibility but complete absence of all sound.

Dick side-slipped down, pancaked, and crashed. He emerged from a plane wrecked beyond hope of early repair, yet luckily with no injury beyond a few minor bruises. He rushed toward the hangar, to encounter a bevy of scared mechanics.

"Another plane! Rev one up quick!" he shouted.

Planes were already being wheeled out, pilots in flying suits and goggles were striding beside them. Dick ordered one of them away, stepped into his plane, and in a moment was in the air again.

In the minute or two that had elapsed since the encounter, the enemy had been active. Crash after crash was resounding from various parts of Washington. Buildings were rocking and toppling, débris strewed the streets, fires were springing up everywhere. A thousand feet aloft, Dick could see the holocaust of destruction that was being wrought by the infernal missiles.

Bombs of such power had been the unattained ambition of every government of the world—and it had been left to the men of the Invisible Emperor to attain to them. Whole streets went into ruin at each discharge and from everywhere within the city the wailing cry of the injured went up, in a resonant moan of pain.

In the central part of the city, the district about F Street and the government buildings, nothing was standing, except those buildings fashioned of structural steel, and these showed twisted girders like the skeletons of primeval monsters, supporting sections of sagging floors. Houses, hotels had melted into shapeless heaps of rubble, which filled the streets to a depth of a dozen yards, burying everything beneath them. Yet here and there could be seen the forms of dead pedestrians, motor-cars emerging out of the débris, lying in every conceivable position; horses, horribly mangled, were shrieking as they tried to free themselves. And yet, despite this ruin, the general impression upon Dick's mind, as he beat to and fro, signaling

to his flight to spread, was that of a vast, empty desolation.

Further away: where the ruin had not yet fallen, thousands of human beings were milling in a mass, those upon the fringes of the crowd perpetually breaking away, other swarms approaching them, so that the entire agglomeration resembled a seething whirlpool turning slowly upon itself.

Then of a sudden the strains of the national anthem floated up to Dick's ears. A band was playing in the White House grounds. The tune was ragged, and the drum came in a fraction of a second late, but an immense pride and elation filled Dick's soul.

"They'll never beat us!" he thought, intensely, "with such a spirit as that!"

He had signaled his flight to spread, and search the air. He could see the individual ships darting here and there over the immensity of the city, but none knew better than he how fruitless their effort was. And the marauders had not ceased their deadly work.

A bomb dropped near the Washington Monument, sending up a huge spout of dust that veiled it from his eyes. Instinctively Dick shot toward the scene. Slowly the dust subsided, and then a yell of

exultation broke from Dick's lips. The noble shaft still stood, a slim taper pointing to the skies.

It was an omen of ultimate success, and Dick took heart. No, they'd never beat the grim, unconquerable tenacity of the American people.

Yet the damage was proceeding at a frightful rate. A bomb dropped squarely on the Corcoran Gallery and resolved it into a heap of silly stones. A bomb fell in the middle of Pennsylvania Avenue, and the houses on either side collapsed like houses of cards, falling into a sulphurous, fiery pit. And still there was nothing visible but the sky and the moon.

Dick gritted his teeth and swore as he circled over the site of destruction, out of which tiny figures were struggling. He heard the clang of the fire bells as the motor trucks came roaring toward the scene. Then crash! again. Five blocks northward another dense cloud of dust arose, and the new area of destruction, spreading as swiftly as ripples over a pond, joined the former one, leaving a huge, irregular open space, piled up with masonry and brick in a number of flat-topped pyramids.

Into this, houses went crashing every moment, with a sound like the clatter of falling crockery, but infinitely magnified.

"The devils! The swine!" shouted Dick. "And we gave Von Kettler the privileges of an ambassador!"

And Fredegonde was the sister of this devil! The remembrance of that struck a cold chill to Dick's heart again. He tried to blot out her picture from his mind, but he still saw her as she had appeared that day after the air ride, flushed, smiling, radiant in her dark beauty.

A murderess and a spy! He cursed her as he banked and circled back. He was helpless. He could do nothing. And all Washington would be destroyed by morning, if the supply of bombs kept up. But there was more to come. Suddenly Dick became aware that two of his flight, at widely separated distances, were going down in flames. Flaming comets, they dropped plump into the destruction below. Another caught fire and was going down. No need to question what was happening.

The invisible enemy was attacking his flight and picking off his men one by one!

He drove furiously toward two of his planes whose erratic movements showed that they were being attacked. As he neared them he saw one catch fire and begin its earthward swoop. Then the fuselage crackled beside him, and his instrument board dissolved

into ruin. Instinctively he went round in a tight bank and loosed his machine-gun. Nothing there! Nothing at all! Yet his right wing went ragged, and his own furious blasts into the sky, their echoes drowned by the roar of his propeller, were productive of nothing.

He shot past the uninjured plane, signalling it to descend. He wasn't going to let his men ride aloft to helpless butchery. Nothing could be done until some means was discovered of counteracting the enemy's terrific advantage.

He darted across the heart of the city to where another of the flight was circling, waggling his wings to indicate to it to descend. Then on to the next plane and the next, shepherding them. Thank God they understood! They were bunching toward the hangar. Yet another took fire and dropped, a burning wreck. Half his flight out of commission, and not an enemy visible!

He was aloft alone now, courting death—instant, invisible death. He wouldn't descend until that carnival of murder was at an end. But it was not at an end. Another crash, far up Pennsylvania Avenue, showed an attempt upon the Capitol. Again—again, and a smoking hell wreathed the noble buildings so that it was no longer possible to see them. A lull, and then a crash nearer the city's heart. Crash! Crash!

Invisible though the enemy was, it was easy to trace the movements of this particular plane by the successive areas of destruction that it left behind it. It was coming back over Pennsylvania Avenue, dropping its bombs at intervals. It was methodically wiping out an entire section of Washington.

Dick drove his plane toward it. There was one chance in a thousand that, if he could accurately gauge the progress of his invisible antagonist, he could crash him and go down with him to death. If he could get close enough to feel his prop-wash! A wild chance, but Dick's mind was keyed up to desperation. He shot like an arrow toward the scene, with a view to intercepting the murderer.

Then of a sudden he became aware of a curious phenomenon. A black beam was shooting across the sky. A black searchlight! It came from the flat top of a large hotel that had somehow escaped the universal destruction, and, with its gaunt skeleton of structural steel showing in squares, towered out of the ruin all about it like an island.

It was from here that the black beam started. It spread fanwise across the sky. But it was not merely blackness. It was utter and impenetrable darkness, cleaving the sky like a knife. Where it passed, the rays of the moon were extinguished as fire is extinguished by water.

A beam of absolute blackness, that pierced the air like a widening cone, and made the night seem, by contrast, of dazzling brightness along either dark border.

High into the air that dark beam shot, moving to and fro in the sky. Dick, darting toward the spot where he hoped to find his invisible enemy, found himself caught in it.

In utter, inextinguishable darkness! Like a trapped bird he fluttered, hurling himself this way and that till suddenly he found himself blinking in the dazzling light of the moon again, and the black beam was overhead.

Crash! Another widening sphere of ruin as the invisible marauder dropped a bomb. Dick cursed bitterly. Trapped in that black beam, he had lost his direction. The invisible plane had shot past the point where he had hoped to intercept it.

He flung his soaring lever, and hung suspended in the air. An easy mark for the enemy, if he chose to take the opportunity. No matter. Death was all that Dick craved. He had seen half his flight wiped out, and a hundred thousand human beings hurled to destruction. He wanted to die.

Then suddenly a wild shout came to his ears, as if all Washington had gone mad with triumph. And Dick heard himself shouting too, before he knew it, almost before he knew why.

For overhead, where the inky finger searched the sky, a luminous shape appeared, a silvery cigar, riding in the void. The finger missed it, and again there was only the moonlight. It caught it again—and again the whole devastated city rang with yells of derision, hate, and anger as the black beam held it.

It held it! To and fro that silvery cigar scurried in a frantic attempt to avoid detection, and remorselessly the black beam held it down.

It held it down, and it outlined it as clearly as a figure on the moving picture screen. Then suddenly there came a flash, followed by a dull detonation, and a black cloud appeared, spreading into a flower of death near the cigar, and at the edge of the black beam. The cheers grew frantic. The anti-aircraft battery in the White House grounds had grasped the situation, and was opening fire.

To and fro, like a trapped beast, the cigar-shaped airplane fled. Once it seemed to escape. It faded from the edge of the black finger—faded into nothingness amid a roar of execretion. Then it was caught and held.

Truncated, bounded by an arc of sky, the black finger followed the murderer in his flight remorselessly. And all around him the anti-aircraft guns were placing a barrage of death.

He was trapped. No need for Dick to rush in to battle. To do so might call off that deadly barrage that held the murderer in a ring of death. Hovering, Dick watched. And then, perhaps panic-stricken, perhaps rendered desperate, perhaps through sheer, wanton courage that might have commanded admiration under nobler circumstances, the airship turned and drove straight in the direction of the battery, dropping another bomb as she did so.

It fell in a crowded street, swarming with spectators who had clambered upon the fallen débris, and it wrought hideous destruction. But this time there was hardly a cry—no unison of despair such as had come to Dick's ears before. The suspense was too tense. All eyes watched the airship as, seeming to bear a charmed life, she drove for the White House itself, through a ring of shells that widened and contracted alternately, with the object of placing a last bomb squarely upon the building before going down in death. And all the while the black searchlight held it.

Dick Rennell was to experience many thrilling moments afterward, but there was never a period, measurable by seconds, yet seeming to

extend through all eternity—never a period quite so fraught with suspense as, hovering there, he watched the flight of that silvery plane speeding straight toward the executive mansion while all around it the shells bloomed and spread. It was over the White House grounds. The archies had failed; they were being outmaneuvered, they could not be swung in time to follow the trajectory of the plane. Dick held his breath.

Then suddenly the silvery ship dissolved in a blaze of fire, a shower of golden sparks such as fly from a rocket, and simultaneously the last bomb that she was to drop broke upon the ground below.

Down she plunged, instantly invisible as she escaped the finger of the black beam; but she dropped into the vortex of ruin that she herself had created. Into a pit of blazing fire, criss-crossed by falling trees, that had engulfed the battery and a score of men.

Then suddenly Dick understood. He flung home the soaring lever, banked, and headed, not for the White House, but for the flat roof of the hotel from which the black searchlight was still projecting itself through the skies. He hovered above, and dropped, light as a feather, upon the rooftop.

There was only one person there—an old man dressed in a shabby

suit, kneeling before a great block of stone that had been dislodged upward from the parapet and formed a sort of table. Upon this table the old man had placed a large, square box, resembling an exaggerated kodak, and it was from the lens of this box that the black beam was projecting.

Dick sprang from his cockpit as the old man rose in alarm. He ran to him and caught him by the arm.

"Luke Evans!" he cried. "Thank God you've come back in time to save America!"

Chapter 6: The Gas

In the Blue Room of the White House the Council listened to old Luke Evans's exposition of his invention with feelings ranging from incredulity to hope.

"I've been at work all the time," said the old man, "not far from here. I knew the day would come when you'd need me. I put my pride aside for the sake of my country."

"Tell us in a few words about this discovery of yours, Mr. Evans," said Colonel Stopford.

Luke Evans placed the square black case upon the table. "It's simple, like all big things, sir," he answered. "The original shadow-breaking device that I invented was a heavy, inert gas, invisible, but almost as viscous as paint. Applied to textiles, to inorganic matter, to animal bodies, it adheres for hours. Its property is to render such substances invisible by absorbing all the visible light rays that fall upon it, from red to violet. Light passes through all substances that are coated with this paint as if they did not exist."

"And this antidote of yours?" asked Colonel Stopford.

"Darkness," replied Luke Evans. "A beam of darkness that means absolute invisibility. It can be shot from this apparatus"—he indicated the box upon the table. "This box contains a minute portion of a gas which exists in nature in the form of a black, crystalline powder. The peculiar property of this powder is that it is the solidified form of a gas more volatile than any that is known. So volatile is it that, when the ordinary atmospheric pressure of fifteen pounds to the square inch is removed, the powder instantly changes to the gaseous condition."

"By pressing this lever"—Evans pointed at the box—"a vacuum is created. Instantly the powder becomes a gas, which shoots forth through this aperture with the speed of a projectile, taking the form of a beam of absolute blackness. Or it can be discharged from cylinders in such a way as to extend over a large area within a few minutes."

"But how does this darkness make the invisible airships luminous?" asked Stopford. "Why does not your darkness destroy all light?"

"In this way, sir," replied the old inventor. "The shadow-breaking gas with which the airships are painted confers invisibility because it absorbs sunlight. But it does not absorb the still more rapid waves, or oscillations which manifest themselves as radio-activity. On the

contrary, it gathers and reflects these.

"Now Roentgen, the discoverer of the X-ray, observed that if X-rays are allowed to enter the eye of an observer who is in complete darkness, the retina receives a stimulus, and light is perceived, due to the fluorescent action of the X-rays upon the eyeball.

"Consequently, by creating a beam of complete darkness, I bring into clear visibility the fluorescent gas that coats the airships; in other words, the airships become visible."

"If a light ray is nullified upon entering the field of darkness, will it emerge at the other edge as a perfect light ray again?" asked Stopford.

"It will emerge unchanged, since the black beam destroys light by slightly slowing down the vibrations to a point where they are not perceived as light by the human eye. On emerging from the beam, however, these vibrations immediately resume their natural frequency. To give you a homely parallel, the telephone changes sound waves to electric waves, and re-converts them into sound waves at the other end, without any appreciable interruption."

"Then," said Stopford, "the logical application of your method is to

plunge every city in the land into darkness by means of this gas?"

"That is so, sir, and then we shall have the advantage of invisibility, and the enemy ships will be in fluorescence."

"Damned impracticable!" muttered Stopford.

"You seriously propose to darken the greater part of eastern North America?" asked the Secretary for War.

"The gas can be produced in large quantities from coal tar besides existing in crystalline deposits," replied Luke Evans. "It is so volatile that I estimate that a single ton will darken all eastern North America for five days. Whereas the concentration would be made only in specific areas liable to attack. The gas is distilled with great facility from one of the tri-phenyl-carbinol coal-tar derivatives."

Vice-president Tomlinson was a pompous, irascible old man, but it was he who hit the nail on the head.

"That's all very well as an emergency measure, but we've got to find the haunt of that gang and smash it!"

An orderly brought in a telegraphic dispatch and handed it to him. The Vice-president opened it, glanced through it, and tried to hand it

to the Secretary of State. Instead, it fluttered from his nerveless fingers, and he sank back with a groan. The Secretary picked it up and glanced at it.

"Gentlemen," he said, trying to control his voice, "New York was bombed out of the blue at sunrise this morning, and the whole lower part of the city is a heap of ruins."

In the days that followed it became clear that all the resources of America would be needed to cope with the Invisible Empire. Not a day passed without some blow being struck. Boston, Charleston, Baltimore, Pittsburg in turn were devastated. Three cruisers and a score of minor craft were sunk in the harbor of Newport News, where they were concentrating, and thenceforward the fleet became a fugitive force, seeking concealment rather than an offensive. Trans-Atlantic sea-traffic ceased.

Meanwhile the black gas was being hurriedly manufactured. From cylinders placed in central positions in a score of cities it was discharged continuously, covering these centers with an impenetrable pall of night that no light would penetrate. Only by the glow of radium paint, which commanded fabulous prices, could official business be transacted, and that only to a very small degree.

Courts were closed, business suspended, prisoners released, perforce, from jails. Famine ruled. The remedy was proving worse than the disease. Within a week the use of the dark gas had had to be discontinued. And a temporary suspension of the raids served only to accentuate the general terror.

There were food riots everywhere, demands that the Government come to terms, and counter-demands that the war be fought out to the bitter end.

Fought out, when everything was disorganized? Stocks of food congested all the terminals, mobs rioted and battled and plundered all through the east.

"It means surrender," was voiced at the Council meeting by one of the members. And nobody answered him.

Three days of respite, then, instead of bombs, proclamations fluttering down from a cloudless sky. Unless the white flag of surrender was hoisted from the summit of the battered Capitol, the Invisible Emperor would strike such a blow as should bring America to her knees!

It was a twelve-hour ultimatum, and before three hours had passed

thousands of citizens had taken possession of the Capitol and filled all the approaches. Over their heads floated banners—the Stars and Stripes, and, blazoned across them the words, "No Surrender."

It was a spontaneous uprising of the people of Washington. Hungry, homeless in the sharpening autumn weather, and nearly all bereft of members of their families, too often of the breadwinner, now lying deep beneath the rubble that littered the streets, they had gathered in their thousands to protest against any attempt to yield.

Dick, flying overhead at the apex of his squadron, felt his heart swell with elation as he watched the orderly crowds. This was at three in the afternoon: at six the ultimatum ended, the new frightfulness was to begin.

At five, Vice-president Tomlinson was to address the crowds. The old man had risen to the occasion. He had cast off his pompousness and vanity, and was known to favor war to the bitter end. Dick and his squadron circled above the broken dome as the car that carried the Vice-president and the secretaries of State and for War approached along the Avenue.

Rat-tat, rat-a-tat-tat!

Out of the blue sky streams of lead were poured into the assembled multitudes. Instantly they had become converted into a panic-stricken mob, turning this way and that.

Rat-a-tat-tat. Swaths of dead and dying men rolled in the dust, and, as wheat falls under the reaper's blade, the mob melted away in lines and by battalions. Within thirty seconds the whole terrain was piled with dead and dying.

"My God, it's massacre! It's murder!" shouted Dick.

They had not even waited for the twelve hours to expire. To and fro the invisible airplanes shot through the blue evening sky, till the last fugitives were streaming away in all directions like hunted deer, and the dead lay piled in ghastly heaps everywhere.

Out of these heaps wounded and dying men would stagger to their feet to shake their fists impotently at their murderers.

In vain Dick and his squadron strove to dash themselves into the invisible airships. The pilots eluded them with ease, sometimes sending a contemptuous round of machine-gun bullets in their direction, but not troubling to shoot them down.

Two small boys, carrying a huge banner with "No Surrender" across it, were walking off the ghastly field. Twelve or fourteen years old at most, they disdained to run. They were singing, singing the National Anthem, though their voices were inaudible through the turmoil.

Rat-tat! Rat-tat-a-tat! The fiends above loosed a storm of lead upon them. Both fell. One rose, still clutching the banner in his hand and waved it aloft. In a sudden silence his childish treble could be heard:

My country, 'tis of thee
Sweet land of lib-er-ty—

The guns rattled again. Clutching the blood-stained banner, he dropped across the body of his companion.

Suddenly a broad band of black soared upward from the earth. Those in charge of the cylinders placed about the Capitol had released the gas.

A band of darkness, rising into the blue, cutting off the earth, making the summit of the ruined Capitol a floating dome. But, fast as it rose, the invisible airships rose faster above it.

A last vicious volley! Two of Dick's flight crashing down upon the

piles of dead men underneath! And nothing was visible, though the darkness rose till it obliterated the blue above.

At dawn the Council sat, after an all-night meeting. Vice-president Tomlinson, one arm shattered by a machine-gun bullet, still occupied the chair at the head of the table.

Outside, immediately about the White House, there was not a sound. Washington might have been a city of the dead. The railroad terminals, however, were occupied by a mob of people, busily looting. There was great disorder. Organized government had simply disappeared.

Each man was occupied only with obtaining as much food as he could carry, and taking his family into rural districts where the Terror would not be likely to pursue. All the roads leading out of Washington—into Virginia, into Maryland, were congested with columns of fugitives that stretched for miles.

Some, who were fortunate enough to possess automobiles, and—what was rarer—a few gallons of gas, were trying to force their way through the masses ahead of them; here and there a family trudged beside a pack-horse, or a big dog drew an improvised sled on wheels, loaded with flour, bacon, blankets, pillows. Old men and

young children trudged on uncomplaining.

The telegraph wires were still, for the most part, working. All the world knew what was happening. From all the big cities of the East a similar exodus was proceeding. There was little bitterness and little disorder.

It was not the airship raids from which these crowds were fleeing. Something grimmer was happening. The murderous attack upon the populace about the Capitol had been merely an incident. This later development was the fulfilment of the Invisible Emperor's ultimatum.

Death was afield, death, invisible, instantaneous, and inevitable. Death blown on the winds, in the form of the deadliest of unknown gases.

In the Blue Room of the White House a score of experts had gathered. Dick, too, with the chiefs of his staff, Stopford, and the army and naval heads. Among them was the chief of the Meteorological Bureau, and it was to him primarily that Tomlinson was reading a telegraphic dispatch from Wilmington, South Carolina:

"The Invisible Death has reached this point and is working havoc throughout the city, spreading from street to street. Men are dropping dead everywhere. A few have fled, but—"

The sudden ending of the dispatch was significant enough. Tomlinson picked up another dispatch from Columbia, in the same State:

"Invisible Death now circling city," he read. "Business section already invaded. All other telegraphists have left posts. Can't say how long—"

And this, too, ended in the same way. There were piles of such communications, and they had been coming in for eighteen hours. At that moment an orderly brought in a dozen more.

Tomlinson showed the head of the Meteorological Bureau the chart upon the table. "We've plotted out a map as the wires came in, Mr. Graves," he said. "The Invisible Death struck the southeast shore of the United States yesterday afternoon near Charleston. It has spread approximately at a steady rate. The wind velocity—?"

"Remains constant. Seventy miles an hour. Dying down a little," answered Graves.

"The death line now runs from Wilmington, South Carolina, straight to Augusta, Georgia," the Vice-president pursued. "Every living thing that this gas has encountered has been instantly destroyed. Men, cattle, birds, vermin, wild beasts. The gas is invisible and inodorous. These gentlemen believe it may be a form of hydrocyanic acid, but of a concentration beyond anything known to chemistry, so deadly that a billionth part of it to one of air must be fatal, otherwise it could not have traveled as it has done. Warnings have been broadcasted, but there are no stocks of chemicals that might counteract it. Flight is the only hope—flight at seventy miles an hour!"

His voice shook. "This gas has been loosed, as you told us, upon the wings of the hurricane that came through the Florida Strait. What are the chances of its reaching Washington?"

"Mr. Vice-president, if the wind continues, and this gas has sufficient concentration, it should be in Washington within the next eight hours." Graves replied. "If the wind changes direction, however, this gas will probably be blown out to sea, or into the Alleghanies, where it will probably be dissipated among the hills, or by the foliage on the mountains. I'm not a chemist—"

"No, sir, and I am not consulting you as one," answered old

Tomlinson. "A death belt several hundred miles in length and three or four hundred deep has already been cut across this continent. We are faced with wholesale, unmitigated murder, on such a scale as was never known before. But we are an integral part of America, and Washington has no more right to expect immunity than our devastated Southern States. The question we wish to put to you is, can you trace the exact course taken by the hurricane?"

"I can, Mr. Vice-president," answered Graves. "It originated somewhere in the West Indian seas, like all these storms. We've been getting our reports almost as usual. Our first one came from Nassau, which was badly damaged. The storm missed the Florida coast, as many of them do, and struck the coast of South Carolina—in fact, we received a report from Charleston, which must have almost coincided with your first report of the gas."

"If the storm missed the Florida coast, it follows that the gas was not discharged from any point on the American continent," said Tomlinson. "From some point off Florida—from some island, or from a plane or from a ship at sea."

"Not from a ship at sea, Mr. Vice-president," interposed the head of the Chemical Bureau. "To discharge gas on such an extensive scale would require more space than could be furnished by the largest

vessel, in my opinion."

"In all probability the gas was 'loaded,' so to say, onto the gale somewhere in the Bahamas," said Graves. "That seems to me the most likely explanation."

Vice-president Tomlinson nodded, and picked up one of the latest telegraphic dispatches, as if absently.

"Gentlemen," he said, "the Invisible Death has already reached Charlotte."

He picked up another. "Reported Abaco Island, Bahamas, totally wrecked by storm. All communication has ceased," he read. He turned to Dick and spoke as if inspired. "Captain Rennell, there is your destination," he thundered. "They've betrayed themselves. We've got them now. You understand?"

"By God, sir! It's from Abaco Island, then, that those devils have been carrying on their game of wholesale murder!"

Suddenly a contagion of enthusiasm seemed to sweep the whole assemblage. Every man was upon his feet in an instant, white, quivering, lips opened for speech that trembled there and did not

come.

It was Secretary Norris spoke. "The Vice-president has hit the mark," he said, with a dramatic gesture of his arm. "Yes, they've betrayed themselves. Their headquarters are on Abaco Island. It's one of the largest in the Bahamas." He turned to the Secretary for the Navy. "You can rush the fleet there, sir?" he asked.

"Within forty-eight hours I'll have every vessel that can float off Abaco Island."

"I'll concentrate all airplanes. Take your flight, Captain Rennell. We'll stamp out that nest of murderers if we blow Abaco Island to the bottom of the sea. It can be done!"

"It can be done, sir—with Luke Evans and his invention," answered Dick.

Chapter 7: On the Trail

Three hours later, about the time when the war council rose after completing its plans, a sudden shift of the wind blew the poison gas out to sea, just when it appeared certain that it would reach the capital of the nation.

The southern half of Virginia had been swept over. Operators, telegraph and telephone, staying at their posts had sent in constant messages that had terminated with an abruptness which told of the tragic sequel. Yet, at that distance from its source, the intensity of the gas had been to some extent dissipated.

Poisonous beyond any gas known, so deadly as to make hydrocyanic gas innocuous in comparison, still as it was swept northward on the wings of the wind, there had been an increasing number of non-fatal casualties. The most northernly point reached by the gas was Richmond, and here some fifty per cent of those stricken had suffered paralysis instead of death.

But a new element had been injected into the situation. Even the heroic courage shown by the populace in the beginning had had its limits. The morning after the news of the Invisible Death's advent was made public mobs had gathered in all the large cities of the East,

demanding surrender.

The submerged elements of crime and disorder had come to the surface at last. Committees were formed, with the avowed object of yielding to the Invisible Emperor, and averting further disaster. In Washington, a city of the dead, half the members of Congress and the Senators had gathered in the ruined Capitol, to debate the situation.

There were rumors of an impending march on the White House, of a coup d'ètat.

The action of the Government was prompt. Five hundred loyalists were enrolled, armed, and posted round the White House: every avenue of approach was commanded by machine-guns. Meanwhile the news was spread by radio that the headquarters of the Invisible Emperor had been located, and that a strong bombing squadron was being dispatched to destroy it.

The entire fleet was to follow, and it was confidently anticipated that within a little while the Terror would be at an end.

Those at the white House were less sanguine. There was none but realized the diabolical strength of their antagonists.

"Everything depends upon the outcome of the next forty-eight hours, and everything depends on you, Rennell," said Secretary Norris to Dick, as he stood beside his plane. Behind him his flight of a dozen airships was drawn up.

"Find them," added the Secretary; "cover Abaco Island with the black gas, and the navy and the marines will wipe up the mess that you leave behind you. God help you—and all of us, Rennell!"

He gripped Dick's hand and turned away. Dick was very sober-minded as he climbed into his cockpit. He knew to the full how much depended upon himself and Luke Evans. Already the shouts of the insurgents were to be heard at the ends of the barriers, commanded by the machine-guns, and patrolled by the enlisted volunteers.

Negro mobs were building counter-barricades of their own with rubble from the fallen edifices. Civil war might be postponed for eight-and-forty hours, but after that unless there was news of victory, the whole structure of civilization would be smashed irreparably.

It was up to Dick and Luke Evans, and they had assumed such a responsibility as rarely falls to the lot of man in war.

Dick was to lead the flight in a two-seater Barwell plane. This was one of the latest types, and had been hurriedly adapted to the purpose for which it was to be used. Dick himself occupied the rear seat, with its dual controls, and the gun in its armored casing. In front sat old Luke Evans, in charge of the black gas projector.

His famous camera box, containing a minute quantity of gas in slow combustion, and projecting the black searchlight, had been built into the plane. In the rack beside him were a number of the black gas bombs, each of which, dropped to earth, would release enough gas to cover a considerable area with darkness. Both Luke and Dick wore respirators filled with charcoal and sodium thio-sulphate, and beside Dick a cage containing three guinea-pigs rested.

These little rodents were so sensitive to atmospheric changes that a quantity of hydrocyanic acid too minute to affect a man would produce instantaneous death on them.

From its hiding-place off the Virginia coast the American fleet was steaming hotly southward toward Abaco Island, cruisers, destroyers, submarines. That Abaco was British territory had simply not been considered in this crisis of history.

The twelve airships that followed Dick's contained enough bombs to

put the headquarters of the Invisible Empire out of business for good. The naval guns would complete the same business.

All day Dick and Luke Evans flew southwestward. At first glance, everything appeared normal. The catastrophe that had fallen upon the land was visible only in the shape of the lines of tiny figures, extending for miles, that choked all the roads radiating out of the principal cities. It was only when they were over the southern portion of Virginia that the ravages of deadly gas became apparent.

Flying low, Dick could see the fields strewn with the bodies of dead cattle. Here and there, at the doors of farmhouses, the inmates could be seen, lying together in gruesome heaps, caught and killed instantaneously as they attempted flight. Here, too, were figures on the roads. But they were figures of dead men and women.

They strewed the roads for miles, lying as they had been trapped—men, women, children, horses, mules, and dogs. The spectacle was an appalling one. Dick set his jaws grimly. He was thinking that the Council had let Von Kettler escape. He was thinking of Fredegonde. But he would not let himself think of her. She deserved no more pity than the rest of the murderous crew.

Over the Carolinas the conditions were still more appalling. Here

deadly gas had struck with all its concentrated power. A city materialized out of the blue distance, a factory town with all chimneys spiring upward into the blue, a section of tall buildings intersected by canyonlike streets, around it a rim of trim houses, bungalows, indicative of prosperity and comfort. And it was a city of the dead.

For everywhere around it, on all the roads, the dead lay piled on top of one another. For miles—all the inhabitants, rich and poor, business men, factory hands, negroes. There had been a mad rush as the fatal gas drove onward upon its lethal way, and all the fugitives had been overwhelmed simultaneously.

Here were golf links, with little groups strewn on the grass and fairways; here, at one of the holes, four men, their putters still in their hands, crouched in death. Here was the wreckage of a train that had collided with a string of freight cars at an untended switch, and from the shattered windows the heads and bodies of the dead protruded in serried ranks.

Dick looked back. His flight was driving on behind him. He guessed their feelings. They had sworn, as he had sworn, that none of them would return without stamping out that abomination from the earth forever.

He signaled to the flight to rise, and zoomed upward to twelve thousand feet. He did not want to look upon any more of those horrors. At that height, the peaceful landscape lay extended underneath, in a checker-board of farms and woodlands. One could pretend that it was all a vile dream.

He avoided Charleston, and winged out above the Atlantic, striking a straight course along the coast toward the Bahamas. The shores of Georgia vanished in the west. Dick began to breathe more freely. His mind shook off its weight of horror. Only the blue sea and the blue sky were visible The aftermath of the gale remained in the shape of a strong head breeze and white crests below.

Dick glanced at the guinea-pigs. They were busily gnawing their cabbage and carrots. The gas had evidently been entirely dissipated by the wind.

Toward sunset the low jutting fore-land of Canaveral on the east coast of Florida, came into view. Dick shifted course a little. Three hours more should see them over Abaco.

His flight had explicit instructions. As soon as the black gas had rendered visible the headquarters of the Invisible Emperor, they were to circle above, dropping their bombs. When these were exhausted,

the machine guns would come into play. There was to be no attention paid to signals of surrender. They were to wipe out the headquarters, to kill every living thing that showed itself—and the navy and the marines would mop up anything left over.

The sun went down in a blaze of gold and crimson. Night fell. The moon began to climb the east. The black sea, stretching beneath, was as empty as on the day when it was created. Nothing in the shape of navigation appeared.

Two hours, three hours, and old Evans turned round in his cockpit and pointed. On the horizon a black thread was beginning to stretch against the sky. It was Abaco Island, in the Bahama group. They were nearly at their destination. An hour more—perhaps two hours, and the deadly menace that threatened America might be removed forever. Dick breathed a silent prayer for success.

They were over Abaco. A long, flat island, seventy miles or so in extreme length, and fairly wide, covered with a dense growth of tropical brush and forest, with here and there open spaces, near the seacoast an occasional farm-house. Dick dropped to five thousand, to three, to one. The moon made the whole land underneath as bright as day.

There were no evidence of destruction by the hurricane. The farmhouses stood substantial and well roofed. If death had struck Abaco Island, it had been the work of man, not Nature.

Dick zoomed almost to his ceiling, until, in the brilliant moonlight, he could see Abaco Island from side to side. For the most part it was heavily wooded with mahogany and lignum vitae: toward the central portion there was open land, but there was not the least sign of any construction work.

Again he swooped, indicating to his flight to follow him. At a thousand feet he examined the open district intently. Here, if anywhere upon the island, the Invisible Emperor had his headquarters. Was it conceivable that a gas factory, hangars, ammunition depots could exist here invisibly, when he could look straight down upon the ground?

Dick's heart sank. The hideous fear came to him that Graves had been mistaken, that he had come on a wild-goose chase. This could not be the place. It was quite incredible.

Again and again he circled, studying the ground beneath. Now he could see that the tough grass and undergrowth marked curious geometrical patterns. Here, for example, was an oblong of bare earth

around which the vegetation grew, and it was obviously the work of man.

Here were four squares of bare ground set side by side, with thin strips of vegetation growing between them.

Then of a sudden Dick knew! Those squares and parallelograms of bare ground indicated the foundations of buildings. *He was looking down on the very site of the Invisible Emperor's stronghold!*

He shouted, and pointed downward. Luke Evans looked round and nodded. He understood. He patted the camera-box with a grim smile on his old face.

Chapter 8: The Magnetic Trap

Upon those squares and oblongs of bare earth, incredible as it seemed, rose the structures of the Invisible Empire, themselves both invisible and transparent, so that one looked straight down through them and saw only the ground beneath them.

Every interior floor and girder must have been treated with the gas. They had been cunning. They must have discovered some permanent means of charging paint with the shadow-breaking gas, so that the buildings would remain invisible for months and years instead of hours.

But they had not been cunning enough. It had not occurred to them that the foundations would still be visible underneath, for the simple reason that grass does not grow without sunlight.

Dick saw old Luke Evans nodding and pointing downward. The old man picked up his end of the speaking-tube, but Dick ignored the gesture. He signaled to his flight to rise, and zoomed up, circling, and studying the land beneath.

That oblong was evidently the central building. Those four squares probably housed airplanes, and each would hold half a dozen. That

elliptical building might contain a dirigible. That round patch was probably the gas factory.

Now Dick could see more patches of bare ground, extending in the direction of the sea. He gunned his ship and followed the gap among the trees to the ocean, a few miles distant. Yes, there were more evidence of activity here. Beside the water, in what looked like a deep natural harbor, was what seemed to be the foundations of a dock. Perhaps even vessels of war floated on the phosphorescent Bahama sea.

He circled back, his flock wheeling like a flight of birds and following him. He signaled to them to scatter. They had certainly been observed; at any moment a hail of lead might assail them invisibly out of the air. They must get to work quickly. But had they understood the significance of those bare patches?

Dick saw Luke Evans still fidgeting impatiently with his end of the speaking-tube, and picked it up.

"I'm thinking, Captain Rennell, we've got no time to lose if we want to keep the upper hand of those devils," called the old man.

"Yes, you're right," Dick answered. "Lay a trail of gas bombs all

around those hangars and buildings, enough to hold them dark for some time. And keep a bomb or two in reserve."

Luke Evans shouted back. The plane was again above the structures. The old man dropped a bomb over the side, and Dick zoomed again, his flight wheeling up behind him.

Higher and higher, banking and going round in a succession of tight spirals, Dick flew. Every moment he expected the blow to fall. As he rose, Luke Evans dropped bomb after bomb. A thousand feet beneath the flight was taking up positions, hovering with the helicopters, looking up to Dick for the signal, and waiting.

Then from beneath the cloud of black gas began to rise, as Luke Evans dropped his bombs. It filled the lower spaces of the sky, blotting out the land in impenetrable darkness. That darkness, above which Dick and his flight were soaring, rose like a solid wall, built by some prehistoric race that aimed to fling a tower into the heavens.

And then—the miracle! Dick gasped in sheer delight as he realized that he had made no mistake.

At first all he could see was a number of criss-crossing phosphorescent lines that appeared shimmering through the

blackness underneath. They ran luminously here and there, forming no particular pattern, much like the figures on the radium dial of a watch when first they come into wavering visibility at night.

Then the lines began to intersect one another, to assume geometric patterns and curves. And bit by bit they took meaning and significance.

And suddenly the whole invisible stronghold lay revealed upon the ground beneath, a shining, dazzling play of weaving light.

Buildings and hangars stood out, clearly revealed; the rounded vault of a dirigible hangar, and the shining ribbon of a road that ran through a pitch-dark tarmac, and was evidently constructed from some gas-impregnated materials. On this tarmac was a flight of shining airplanes, ready to take off. There were the odd, ovoid figures of the aviators in their silken overalls. More figures appeared, running out from the buildings. It was clear that the sudden raid had taken them all by surprise.

Luke Evans yelled and pointed. "We've got them now, sir!" Dick heard above the whine of the helicopter engine. "We've—"

But of a sudden the old man's voice died away, though his mouth

was still moving.

Dick leaned out of his cockpit and fired a single red Very light, the signal for the attack. And from each plane of his flight, beneath him, a bomb slid from its rack and went hurtling down upon the gang below, while the airplanes circled and hovered, each taking up its station.

Dick was too late. By a whole minute he had missed his chance. He realized that immediately, for before the red light had flared from his pistol, the hostile planes were in the air. He had flown too low, and given the alarm.

It meant a fight now, instead of a mad dog destruction, and Dick did not underestimate the power of the enemy. But he felt a thrill of furious satisfaction at the prospect of battle. From every plane the bombs were falling. Underneath, ruin and destruction, and leaping flames—and yet darkness, save for the phosphorescent outlines of the buildings.

And the lines of these were broken, converging into strange criss-crosses of luminosity, as the beams fell in shapeless heaps. Dark fire, sweeping through the headquarters of the Invisible Emperor, a veritable hell for those below! A taste of the hell that they had made

for others!

Then a strange phenomenon obtruded itself upon Dick's notice. *Nothing was audible!* The bombs were falling, but they were falling silently. No sound came up from beneath. And, except for the throbbing of his engine, Dick would have thought it had stopped. He could no longer hear it.

That terrific holocaust of death and destruction was inaudible. Skimming the upper reach of the air, high above that wall of darkness, Dick saw old Luke Evans pick up his end of the speaking-tube, and mechanically followed suit. He could see the old man's lips moving. But he heard nothing!

And now another phenomenon was borne in on his notice. His flight were perhaps five hundred feet beneath him, hovering a little above the barrage of black gas. But they were converging oddly. And there was no sight of the airplanes that Dick had just seen taking off from the invisible tarmac.

Dick fired two Very lights as a signal to his flight to scatter. What were they doing, bunching together like a flock of sheep, when at any moment the enemy planes might come swooping in, riddling them with bullets? He thrust the stick forward—and then realized

that his controls had gone dead!

He thought for a moment that a wire had snapped. But the stick responded perfectly to his hand, only it had no longer control over his plane. He kicked right rudder, and the plane remained motionless. He pushed home the soaring lever, to neutralize the helicopter and the plane still soared.

Then he noticed that the needle of his earth-inductor compass-indicator was oscillating madly, and realized that it was not his plane that was at fault.

Underneath him, his flight seemed to be milling wildly as the ships turned in every direction of the compass. But not for long. They were nosing in, until the whole flight resembled an enormous airplane engine, with twelve radial points, corresponding to their propellers, and the noses pointing symmetrically inward, like a herd of game, yarding in winter time.

And now the true significance came home to Dick. A vertical line of magnetic force, an invisible mast, had been shot upward from the ground. The airplanes were moored to it by their noses, as effectively as if they had been fastened with steel wires.

And he, too, was struggling against that magnetic force that was slowly drawing him, despite his utmost efforts, to a fixed position five hundred feet above his flight.

For a few moments, by feeding his engine gas to the limit, Dick thought he might have a chance of escaping. Her nose a fixed point, Dick whirled round and round in a dizzy maze, attempting to break that invisible mooring-chain. Then suddenly the engine went dead. He was trapped helplessly.

He saw old Evans gesticulating wildly in the front cockpit. The old man hoisted himself, leaned over the cowling gibbered in Dick's ear. The silent engine had ceased to throb, and the old man's shouts were simply not translated into sound.

Suddenly the flight beneath jerked downward, just as a flag jerks when it is hauled down a pole. They vanished into the dark cloud beneath. At the same time there came a jerk that dropped Dick's plane a hundred feet, and flung him violently against the rim of the cockpit.

Another followed. By drops of a hundred feet at a time, Dick was being hauled down into the darkness underneath him.

It rushed up at him. One moment he was suspended upon the rim of it, seeing the moon and stars above him; the next he had been plunged into utter blackness. Blackness more intense than anything that could be conceived—soundless blackness, that was the added horror of it. Blackness of Luke Evans's contriving, but none the less fearful on that account!

And yet, as Dick was jerked slowly downward, slowly a pale visibility began to diffuse itself underneath. The black cloud was beginning to roll away. The luminous lines began to fade, and in place of them appeared little leaping tongues of fire. In front of him Dick saw Luke Evans's form begin to pattern itself upon the darkness. He saw the form move sidewise, and caught at Luke's arm as he was about to hurl another gas bomb. "No!" he shouted—and heard no sound come from his lips.

Luke understood. He seemed to be replacing the bomb in the rack. Beneath them now, as they were jerked downward, were fantastic swirls of black mist, and, at the bottom, a pit of fire that was slowly coming into visibility.

Dick uttered a cry of horror! Five hundred feet below his plane he saw the dim forms of his flight, still bunched together, noses almost touching. And they were dropping straight into that flaming furnace

of ruin underneath, which was growing clearer every instant.

Down, jerk by jerk. Down! The black cloud was fast dispersing from the ground. The flight were hardly a thousand feet above the fire. Down—a long jerk that one! Once more! The flames leaped up hungrily about the doomed airships. Cries of mad horror broke from Dick's lips as he witnessed the destruction of ships and men.

He could see almost clearly now. The twelve ships, still retaining their nose-to-nose formation, were in the very heart of the fire. Spurts of exploding gasoline thrust their white tongues upward. There was only one consolation: for the doomed men, death must have come practically instantaneously.

From where he hung, Dick could feel the fierce heat of the flames below. In front of him, old Luke Evans sat in his cockpit like one petrified. He was feebly fumbling at his camera-box, as if he had some idea of using it, and had forgotten that it was fixed to the plane, but the old man seemed temporarily to have lost his wits.

Rushing flames surrounded the burning airships, reducing them to a solid, welded mass of incandescent metal. Dick looked down, waiting for the next jerk that would summon him to join his men. At the moment he was not conscious of either fear or horror, only

intense rage against the murderers and regret that he could never bring back the news of victory.

The cloud had almost dissipated. In place of the phosphorescence, electric lights had appeared, making the ground beneath perfectly visible. Dick could see a number of men grouped together at the entrance to a large building, part of which had been wrecked by a bomb, though there were no evidences of fire. Other structures had been dismantled and knocked about, but what remained of them had not been charred by fire. Evidently they had been fireproofed. Perhaps the gas itself was incombustible. Only in the middle of the tarmac, where the remnants of the airplanes blazed, was there any sign of fire.

There were three machines resembling dynamos, placed one at each corner of the tarmac, equidistant from the central holocaust. A half-dozen men were grouped about each of them, and by the light from the huge reflector over each Dick saw that they were whirring busily. At the time it did not occur to him that these were the machines that were sending out the electrical force that had held the airplanes powerless.

But as he looked, his mind still a turmoil of hate and hopeless anger, he saw one of the three machines cease whirring. The group about it

dispersed, the light above went out. And now his plane, as if drawn by the power of the two remaining machines, began to move jerkily again, not down toward the burning wreckage, but sidewise, away from it.

Straight out toward the side of the tarmac it moved jerked downward diagonally, until it rested only a few feet above the ground.

Then suddenly Dick felt the plane quiver, as if released from the power of the force that had held it. It nosed down and crashed, rolled over amid the wreckage of a shattered wing. The concussion shot Dick from the cockpit clear of the smashed machine.

He landed upon his head, and went out instantly.

Chapter 9: The Invisible Emperor

It was the sound of his name, spoken repeatedly, that brought Dick back to consciousness. He opened his eyes, blinking in broad daylight. He stared about him, and the first thing he saw was Luke Evans, regarding him anxiously from a little distance away. He saw that it was Luke who had spoken.

He had heard the old man distinctly. The condition of inaudibility was gone.

Not that of invisibility. Dick stared about him in bewilderment. For a moment, before he quite realized what had happened to him, he thought he had lost his mind. Underneath him was a thick rug, beneath his head a pillow; he could feel both of them, and yet all he could see was the open country, a clearing with shrubbery on either side, and, beyond that, a luxurious growth of tropical trees. Under him, to all visual appearance, was the bare ground.

He moved, and heard the clank of chains. He looked down at himself. His wrists were loosely linked to a chain that seemed to stretch tight into vacancy and end in nothing. His ankles were bound likewise.

And both chains appeared to be of solid silver, but thick enough to give them the strength of iron!

Then he perceived that old Evans was bound in the same way.

"Rennell! Rennell!" repeated the old man in a sort of whimper. "Thank God you've come out of it! I was afraid you were dead."

"What's happened?" asked Dick. "Where are we? Didn't they get us?"

"They've got us, damn them!" snarled old Evans. "All the rest burned to cinders, those fine fellows, Rennell! You were thrown unconscious, but none of my tough old bones were hurt. They pulled us out of the wreckage and brought us in here and tied us with these silver chains."

"In here? But where are we?" demanded Dick, trying to pass his hand across his aching forehead, and realizing that the chain, though it seemed fastened to nothing, was perfectly taut.

“In one of their damned invisible houses," whimpered the old man. "They're fireproof. Nearly all our bombs fell on the tarmac, and they did hardly any damage at all. One of those devils was bragging about

it to me. I couldn't see anything but his eyes. And they've taken away my gas-box," wailed old Luke.

Dick cursed comprehensively and was silent. The burning rage that filled him left him incapable of other utterance. Silver chains! They must be madmen—yes, that was the only explanation. Madmen who had escaped from somewhere, obtained possession of scientific secrets, and banded themselves together to overcome the world. If he could get the chance of a blow at them before he died!

He heard a door swing open—a door somewhere out on the prairie. Two men sprang into sudden visibility and approached him. There was nothing invisible about these men, though they had seemed to have materialized out of nothing. They wore the same black, trimly fitting uniform that Dick had seen in the White House. They were flesh and blood human beings like themselves.

"I congratulate you upon your recovery, Captain Rennell," remarked one of them with ironical politeness. "Also upon your shrewd coup. Needless to say, it had no chance of success, but we were misinformed as to the hour at which you might be expected. We thought it would take the fools at Washington a little longer to puzzle out our location—and then we did not put quite sufficient force into our hurricane. Quite an artificial one, Captain."

Dick, glaring at them, said nothing, and the one who had spoken turned to his companion, laughing, and said something in a foreign language that he did not recognize.

"His Majesty the Emperor commands your presence, and that of this old fool," said the first man. "Do not attempt to escape us. Death will be instantaneous." He drew a glass rod from his pocket, the tip of which glowed with a pale blue light.

Again he spoke to his companion, who moved apparently a few feet distant out on the prairie. Suddenly Dick saw old Evans' chain slacken: then Dick's slackened too. He understood that he was unbound, though his wrists and ankles were still loosely fastened.

The second man took his station beside Luke Evans and motioned to him to rise. The first man beckoned to Dick to do the same. The two prisoners got upon their feet, trailing each a length of clanking chain. Each of the two guards covered his captive with the glass rod and motioned to him to precede him.

Choking with fury, Dick obeyed. He had taken a dozen steps with his guard uttered a sharp command to halt, at the same time shouting some word of command.

The edge of a door appeared, also seeming to materialize out of space. It widened, and Dick realized that he was looking at the unpainted inner side of a door whose outside was invisible. Beyond the door appeared a flight of steps.

Dick passed through and descended them. He counted fifteen. He emerged into a timbered underground passage, well lit with lamps, filled with what seemed to be mercury vapor. Behind him walked his guard: behind the guard he heard Luke Evans shambling. Both chains were clinking, and again Dick's fury almost overcame him.

He controlled himself. He had no hope or desire for life, but he meant to strike some sort of blow before he died, if it were possible.

They turned out of the timbered passage, Dick's guard now walking at his side, the glass rod menacing his back. Dick found himself in a large subterranean room of extraordinary character. The walls were not merely timbered, but paneled. Pictures hung upon them, there were soft rugs underfoot, there was antique furniture. Everything was in plain sight.

There was a door at the farther end, from beyond which came the murmur of voices. Two guards in the same black uniform, but without the ornamental silver braid, stood to attention, long halberds

in their hands. One spoke a challenge.

The guard at Dick's side answered. The two men stepped backward, each about two feet, and pulled the two cords on either side of a curtain behind the open door. Dick passed through.

He stopped in sheer amazement. The gorgeousness of this larger room into which he entered was almost stupefying. It seemed to have been lifted bodily from some European palace. Mirrors with gilt edges ran along the side. On the floor was a single huge rug of Oriental weave.

At the farther end was a throne of gilt, lined with red velvet in which sat a man. An old man, of perhaps eighty years, with a grey peaked beard and fierce, commanding features. On his head was a gold crown glittering with gems. About him were gathered some twoscore men and a few women.

Those ranged on either side of the throne wore, like its occupant, robes of red, lined with ermine. The rank behind wore shorter robes, less decorative, but no less extraordinary. They might all have stepped out of some medieval court.

Behind this second line, and half-encircling them, were officers in

the black uniform with the silver braid.

There had been chattering, but as Dick passed through into the room it was succeeded by complete silence. Dick fixed his eyes upon the old man on the throne.

He knew him! Knew him for a once famous European ruler who had lost his throne in the war. A man always of unbalanced mentality, who, after living for years in exile, had been reported dead three years before. A madman who had vanished to make this last attempt upon the world, aided and abetted by the secret group of nobles who had surrounded him in the days of his pomp and power.

Old men, all of those in the first line! Madmen too, perhaps, as madness begets madness. Behind them, younger men, infected by the strange malady, and enthusiastic for their desperate cause.

Yes, Dick knew this Invisible Emperor, lurking here in his underground palace. He knew Von Kettler, too, in the second line, close to the Emperor's throne. And, among the women in their robes, grouped picturesquely about that throne, he knew Fredegonde Valmy.

Dark-haired beneath her coronet, of radiant beauty, she fixed her

eyes upon Dick's. Not a muscle of her face quivered.

Then only did Dick see something else, which he had not hitherto observed, owing to its concealment by the robes of those grouped about the Emperor, and the sight of it sent such a thrill of fury through him that he stood where he was, unable to speak or move a muscle.

The throne was set on a sort of dais, with three steps in front of it. The lowest of these steps was hollow. Within this hollow appeared the head and shoulders of a man.

An elderly man clothed in parti-colored red and yellow, the time-honored garment of court fools. He was on his hands and knees, and the round of his back fitted into the hollow of the step, and had a flat board over it, so that the Emperor, in ascending his throne, would place his foot upon it.

He was kept in that position with heavy chains of what looked like gold, which passed about his neck and arms, and fitted into heavy gold staples in the wood. And the old man was President Hargreaves of the United States!

The President of the American Republic, chained as a footstool for

the Invisible Emperor, the madman who defied the world. Dick stood petrified, staring into the mild face of the old man, still incapable of speech. Then a herald, carrying a long trumpet, to which a square banner was attached, strode forward from one side of the grotesque assemblage.

"Dog, on your knees when His Majesty deigns to admit you to the Presence!" he shouted.

The guard at Dick's side prodded him with his glass rod.

Then the storm of mad fury in Dick's heart released limbs and voice. The cry that came from his lips was like nothing human. He leaped upon the guard with a swift uppercut that sent him sprawling.

The glass rod slipped from his hands to the rug, striking the edge of his shoe, and broke to fragments. A single streak of fire shot from it, blasting a black streak across the Oriental rug.

Dick leaped toward the throne, and the assemblage, as if paralyzed by his sudden maneuver, remained watching him without moving. Then a woman screamed, and instantly the picturesque gathering had dissolved into a mob placing itself about the person of the Emperor, who sprang from his throne in agitation.

Dick was almost at the steps. But it was not at the Emperor that he leaped. He sprang to Hargreaves's side. "Mr. President, I'm an American," he babbled. "We've located this gang, we'll blow them off the face of the earth. In chains—God, in chains, sir—"

Dick stumbled over the length of his own chain that he had been dragging behind him—stumbled and fell prone upon the floor. Before he could regain his feet they were upon him.

A dozen men were holding him, despite his mad, frenzied struggles, and as, at length, he paused, exhausted, one of them, covering his head with a glass rod, looked up at the Emperor, who had resumed his seat.

Dick calmed himself. Still gripped, he straightened his body, and gave the mad monarch back look for look. For a moment the two men regarded each other. Then a peal of laughter broke from the Invisible Emperor's lips. And any one who heard that peal—any one save those accustomed to him—might have known that it was a madman's laughter.

He flung back his head and laughed, and the whole crowd laughed

too. All those sycophants roared and chuckled—all except Fredegonde. It was not till afterward that Dick remembered that.

He stood up. "Dog of an American," he roared, "do you know why you were brought here? It was because I wanted one Yankee to live and see the irresistible powers that I exercise, so that he can go back and report on them to those fools in Washington who still think they can defy me, the messenger of the All-Highest.

"I tell you that the things I have done are nothing in comparison with the things that I have yet to do, if your insane government of pig-headed fools persists in its defiance. It is my plan to send you back to tell them that their President lies bound in gold chains as my footstool. That the hurricane which spread the gas through southern America was a mere summer zephyr in comparison with the storm that I shall send next.

“All the resources of Nature are at my command thanks to the illustrious chemists who have been secretly working for the past ten years to serve me. I, the All-Highest, have been commanded by the Almighty to scourge the world for its insolence in rejecting me, and especially the pig-race of Yankees whose pride has grown so great. Mine is the divinely appointed task to cast down your ridiculous democracies and re-establish the divine world-order of an Emperor

and his nobility.

"That is why I have chosen, to permit so mean a thing as you to live. As for the old fool beside you, who thought to stay my power with his box of tricks—his gas-box is already being analyzed by my chemists, and in a few hours the trivial secret will be at my disposal."

"And that's just where you're wrong," piped old Luke Evans in his cracked voice. "That gas can't be analyzed, because it contains an unknown isotope, and, as for yourself, you're nothing but a daft old fool, with your tin-horn trumpery!"

For a moment the Emperor stood like a statue, staring at old Luke. The expression on his face was that of a madman, but a madman through whose brain a straggling ray of realization has dawned. It was the look upon his face that held the whole assemblage spellbound. Then suddenly came intervention.

Through a doorway in the side of the hall came one of the officers in black. He advanced to the foot of the throne and made a deep, hurried bow, speaking rapidly in some language incomprehensible to Dick.

The Emperor started, and then a peal of laughter left his lips.

"Pig of a Yankee," he shouted to Dick, "your contemptible navy's now approaching our shores, with a dirigible scout above it. You shall now see how I deal with such swine!"

Chapter 10: The Tricks of the Trade

He barked a command, and instantly Dick was seized by two of the guards, one of whom—the one Dick had knocked down—took the occasion to administer a buffeting in the process of overcoming him. For the sight of the honored President of the United States—that kindly old man straining his eyes to meet Dick's own—in the parti-colored garb of red and yellow, and chained like a beast below the madman's throne, again filled Dick with a fury beyond all control.

It was only when he had been half-stunned again by the vicious blows of his captors, delivered with short truncheons of heavy wood, that at length he desisted from his futile struggle.

With swimming eyes he looked upon the gathering about the throne, which, again taking its cue from the madman, way roaring with laughter at his antics. And again Dick's eyes encountered those of Fredegonde Valmy.

The girl was not smiling. She was looking straight at him, and for a moment it seemed to Dick as if he read some message in her eyes.

Only for an instant that idea flashed through his mind. He was in no mood to receive messages. As he stood panting like a wild beast at

bay, suddenly a filmy substance was thrown over his head from behind. Then, as his face emerged, and the rest of his body was swiftly enveloped, he realized what was happening.

They had thrown over him one of the invisible garments. He could feel the stuff about him, but he could no longer see his own body or limbs.

From his own ken, Dick Rennell had vanished utterly. Where his legs and feet should have been, there was only the rug, with the burn from the glass tube. He raised one arm and could not see arm or fingers.

In another moment invisible cords had been flung around him. Dick's efforts to renew the struggle were quickly cut short. Trussed helplessly, he could only stand glaring at the madman rocking with laughter upon his tinsel throne. Beside him, similarly bound, stood Luke Evans, but Dick was only conscious of the old man's presence by reason of the short, rasping, emphatic curses that broke from his lips.

The Emperor turned on his throne and beckoned to Von Kettler, who approached with a deferential bow.

"Nobility, we charge you with the care of these two prisoners," he addressed him. "Have the old one removed to the laboratory, and give orders that he shall assist our chemists to the best of his power in their analysis of the black gas. As for the other, take him up to the central office, and show him how we deal with Yankees and all other pigs. Show him everything, so that he may take back a correct account of our irresistible powers when we dismiss him."

"Come!" barked one of the guards in Dick's ear.

Dick attempted no further resistance. Convinced of its futility, sick and reeling from the blows he had received, he accompanied his captors quietly. There was nothing more that he could do, either for President Hargreaves or for old Luke, but he still imagined the possibility of somehow warning the approaching fleet or the occupants of the dirigible.

He was led along the passage, past the guards, and up the stairs again. The top door opened upon vacancy; it closed, and vanished. Dick felt the rugs beneath his feet, but he was to all appearances standing on a square of bare earth in the middle of a prairie.

"Come!" barked the guard again, and Dick accompanied him, trailing his silver chain. Behind came Von Kettler.

"Here are steps!" said the guard, after they had proceeded a short distance.

Dick stumbled against the lowest step of an invisible flight. The breeze was cut off, showing that they had entered a building. Underneath was a large oval of bare ground. Dick found a handrail and groped his way up around a spiral staircase, four flights of it.

"Here is a room!"

Dick saw that widening edge of door again. The room inside was perfectly visible, though it seemed to be supported upon air. It was a spheroid, of huge size, with a number of large windows set into the walls, and it was filled with machinery. About a dozen workmen in blue blouses were moving to and fro, attending to what appeared to be a number of enormous dynamos, but there were other apparatus of whose significance Dick was ignorant. The dynamos were whirring with intense velocity, but not the slightest sound was audible.

Von Kettler stepped to a switch attached to a stanchion of white metal, surmounted by a huge opaque glass dome, and threw it over. Instantly the hum and whir of machinery became audible, the sound of footsteps, the voices of the workmen, and the creak of boards

beneath their feet.

"You see, we have discovered the means of destroying sound waves as well as shadows, and it was a much simpler feat," said Von Kettler with a sneer. "Tell them that when you get back to Washington, Yankee pig. Also you might be interested to know that most of your bombs fell on camouflaged structures that we had erected with the intention of deceiving you."

He gestured to Dick to precede him, and halted him at a plain round iron pipe or rod that rose up through the floor and passed through the roof. It was surrounded by a mesh of fine wire. Attached to it were various gauges, with dials showing red and black numbers.

"This is perhaps our greatest achievement, swine," remarked Von Kettler, affably. "You shall see its operations from above." He pointed to a narrow spiral staircase rising at the far end of the room. "It is the practical application of Einstein's gravitation and electricity in field relation. It is by means of this, and the three dynamos on the ground that we were able to neutralize your engines last night and bring them down where we wanted them. You must be sure to tell the Washington hogs about that."

He motioned to Dick to cross the room and ascend the spiral

staircase. Following him, he flung another switch similar to the first one, and instantly all sound within the room was cut off.

They ascended the winding flight and emerged upon a floor or platform. Dick felt it under his feet, but he could see nothing except the ground, far beneath him. He seemed to be suspended in the void. He stopped, groping, hesitating to advance. Von Kettler's jarring laugh grated on his ears.

"Don't be afraid, swine," he jeered. "This place is enclosed. There is a shadow-breaking device on every floor, which renders us complete masters of camouflage."

A switch snapped. Dick found himself instantly in a rotunda, roofed with glass, sections of which were raised to a height of three or four feet from the wooden base, admitting a gentle breeze. Three or four men were moving about in it, but these wore the black uniform with the silver braid, and Von Kettler's manner was deferential as he addressed them, jerking his hand contemptuously toward Dick. Grins of derision and malice appeared on all the faces.

Save one, an elderly officer, apparently of high rank, who came forward and raised his hand to the salute.

"Captain Rennell," he said, "we are at war with your nation, but we are also, I hope, gentlemen." He turned to Von Kettler. "Is it seemly," he asked, "that an officer of the American army should be brought here in chains and cords?"

"Excellency, it is His Majesty's command," responded Von Kettler, with a servile smirk that hardly concealed his elation. "Moreover, the American is to witness the forthcoming destruction of the Yankee fleet."

The elderly officer reddened, turned away without replying. Dick looked about him.

There was less machinery in this room. The iron pillar that he had seen came through the floor and terminated some five feet above it in another of the opaque glass domes, filled with iridescent fire. About it was a complicated arrangement of dials and gauges.

In the centre of the room was a sort of camera obscura. A large hood projected above a flat table, and an officer was half-concealed beneath it, apparently studying the table busily.

"Come, American, you shall see your navy on its way to destruction," said Von Kettler, beckoning Dick within the hood.

The officer stepped from the table, whose top was a sheet of silvered glass, leaving Von Kettler and Dick in front of it. Dick looked. At first he could see nothing but the vast stretch of sea; then he began to make out tiny dots at the table's end, terminating in minute blurs that were evidently smoke from the funnels.

"Your ships," said Von Kettler, smiling. "This is the dirigible." He pointed to another dot that came into sight and disappeared almost instantly. "They are a hundred and fifty miles away. Explain to your friends in Washington that our super-telescopic sights are based upon a refraction of light that overcomes the earth's curvature. It is simple, but it happens not to have been worked out until my Master commanded it."

Dick watched those tiny dots in fascination, mentally computing. At an average speed of fifty knots an hour, the squadron's steaming rate, they should be off the coast within three hours. The dirigible would take two, if it went ahead to scout, as was almost certain.

Dick stepped back from beneath the hood and glanced about him. If only his arms were not bound, he might do enough damage within a few seconds to put the deadlier machinery out of commission, if only the silvered mirror. He glanced about him. Von Kettler, interpreting his thought, smiled coolly.

"You are helpless, my dear Yankee pig," he said. "But there is more to see. Oblige me by accompanying me up to the top story."

He pointed to a ladder running up beside the iron pillar through an opening in the roof, and Dick, with a shrug of the shoulders, complied. He emerged upon a small platform, apparently protruding into vacancy. Far underneath he saw the clearing, and two airplanes on the tarmac, the aviators looking like beetles from that height. He looked out to sea and saw no signs of the fleet.

"You have heard of St. Simeon Stylites, Yankee?" purred Von Kettler. "The gentleman who spent forty years of his life upon a tall pillar, in atonement for his sins? It is His Majesty's desire that you spend, not forty years, but two or three hours up here, meditating upon his grandeur, before returning to earth. It is also possible that you will witness something of considerable interest. Look out to sea!"

Dick turned his head involuntarily. He heard Von Kettler's laugh, heard the snap of a switch—then suddenly he was alone in the void.

At that snap of the switch, everything had vanished from view behind him, the building, even the platform on which he stood. His feet seemed to rest on nothing. Yet below him he could still see the

airplanes, and more being wheeled out.

A sense of extreme physical nausea overcame him. He reeled, then managed to steady himself. He, too, was invisible to his own eyes. Involuntarily he cried out. No sound came from his lips. He stood there, invisible in an invisible, soundless void.

For what seemed an unending period he occupied himself with endeavoring to obtain the sense of balance. Then, with a great effort, he managed to loosen the cords that bound his right arm to his side. A mighty wrench, and he had slipped them up above his elbow. His right lower arm was free.

He extended it cautiously, and his hand encountered a railing. Instantly he felt more at ease. He began moving slowly around in a widening circle, and discovered that the platform was enclosed. The further side was, however, open, and he began sliding forward, foot by foot, to locate himself. Once his foot slipped over the edge, and he drew back hastily. He felt on the other side, and discovered that he was upon what seemed a plank walk, perhaps a hundred and fifty feet above the ground, with no rail on either side, and some six feet wide.

Very cautiously he shuffled his way along it. It was solid enough,

although invisible, but more than once Dick walked perilously close to one edge or the other. At length he went down on his hands and knees, and proceeded, crawling, until his movements were arrested by what was unmistakably a door.

The plank bridge, then, connected the top stories of two buildings, but what the second was, there was no means of knowing. The door was barred on the other side, and did not yield an iota to Dick's cautious pressure. Dick felt the frame. Beyond was glass, reinforced with iron on the outside, the latter metal forming a sort of lattice work. Cautiously Dick began to crawl up the rounded dome.

Foot by foot he made his way, clinging to the iron bars, until he felt that he had reached the point of the dome's maximum convexity. He wedged his feet against a bar and rested. Only now was it brought home to him that it would be impossible for him to find his way back to the plank.

A long time must have passed, for, looking out to sea, he could see the squadron now, minute points on the horizon, exuding smudges of smoke. The dirigible was still invisible. The airplanes had either left the tarmac or had been wrapped in the gas-impregnated cloth, for both they and the aviators had vanished.

Suddenly Dick had an odd sensation that the iron was growing warm.

In another moment or two he had no doubt of it. The iron bar he clutched was distinctly warm; it was growing hot. He shifted his grasp to the adjacent bar and even in that moment the heat had increased perceptibly.

Suddenly there came a vibration, a sense of movement. Dick was being swung outward. The whole dome seemed to be dropping into space. He dug his feet and fingers under the hot rods, and felt himself sliding over on his back.

Back—back, till he was lying horizontally in space, and clutching desperately at the iron bar, which was growing hotter every moment.

The sliding movement ceased. It was as if the whole upper section of the glass dome had opened outward. But the heat of the bars was becoming unbearable, and gusts of hot air seemed to be proceeding from within.

Hot or not, Dick's only alternative was to work his way back to the stable portion of the dome, or to frizzle until he dropped through space.

Clinging desperately to the bars, he began working back, reaching from bar to bar with his right hand and dragging his feet, with the clanking chain attached, from bar to bar also.

How he gained the base of the dome he was never able afterward to understand. The heat had grown intolerable; his hands were blistering. Somehow he reached it. He rested a moment despite the heat. But to find the plank walk was clearly impossible. In another minute he must drop. Better that than to fry there like St. Lawrence on his griddle.

And then, just when he had resigned himself to that last drop, there came an unexpected diversion. Almost beside him a window was hung back. A man looked out. Dick saw one of the workmen in the blue blouses, and, behind him, within the dome, what seemed like an empty room.

Dick was slightly above the man. As his head and shoulders appeared, he let himself go, landing squarely across his back. He slid down his shoulders through the open window into the interior of the dome.

The man, flung against the frame of the window by the shock, uttered a piercing cry. Before he could recover his stand, or take in

what had happened to him, Dick had gained his feet and leaped upon him. His right hand closed upon his throat. He bore him to the floor and choked him into insensibility.

Chapter 11: In the Laboratory

Not until the man's struggles had ceased, and he lay unconscious, panting, and blue in the face, did Dick release him. Then he looked about him.

Save for the workman, he was alone in a rotunda, open to the sky, and, as he had supposed, the whole upper portion of the dome had been flung back, leaving an immense aperture into which the sun was shining, flecking the interior with shafts of light. The temperature, despite the opening of the dome, must have been in excess of a hundred and twenty-five degrees.

There was nothing except an immense central shaft, up which ran a hollow pole of glass, cut off by the invisible paint at the summit of the dome. The inside of this glass pole was glowing with colored fires, and it was from this that the intolerable heat came, though its function Dick could not imagine.

One thing was clear: It was growing hotter each moment. To remain in that rotunda meant death within a brief period of time.

And there was no way out! Dick glared around him, searching the glass walls in vain. No semblance of a stairway or ladder, even. Yet

the workman must have entered by some ingress—if only Dick could discover it!

He began running round the interior of the dome in the brilliant sunshine, searching frantically for that ingress. And it was growing hotter! The sweat was pouring down his face beneath the invisible garment.

Dick was vaguely aware that the silence switch had been thrown in the room, for his feet made no sound, but the knowledge was latent in his mind. Two or three times he circumnavigated the interior of the dome, like a rat in a trap.

Then suddenly he saw a section of the flooring rise in a corner, and a workman in a blue blouse appear out of the trap door.

He stood there, his face muscles working as he shouted for his companion, but no sound came from his lips. He looked about him, and saw the unconscious man beside the window. He started in his direction.

With a shout, Dick hurled himself toward him. And he checked himself even as he was about to leap. For he realized that the second workman neither saw nor heard him.

Yet some subconscious impression of danger must have reached his mind, for the workman stopped too, instinctively assuming an attitude of defense. Dick gathered a dozen links of his wrist-chain in his right hand, leaped and struck.

The workman crumpled to the floor, a little thread of blood creeping from his right temple.

It was the thing upon which Dick looked back afterward with less satisfaction than any other, leaving the two unconscious men in that room of death. Yet there was nothing else he could have done. He ran to the trap, and saw a ladder leading down. In a moment he had swung himself through and closed the trap behind him.

The material that lined the walls below must have had almost perfect insulating qualities, for the temperature here was no hotter than in the Bahamas on a hot summer day. Dick scrambled down the ladder and found himself in a machine-shop. Nobody was there, and tools of all sorts were lying about, as well as machinery whose purpose he did not understand. A pair of heavy pliers and a vise were sufficient to rid Dick of his wrist and ankle chains in a minute or two. With a knife he slashed the cords of invisible stuff that bound him. He stood up, cramped, but free.

He picked up an iron bar that was lying loose on a table beside a machine, and advanced to the staircase in one corner of the shop. As he approached it, another workman came running up.

Dick stood aside in an embrasure in the wall partly occupied by a machine. The man passed within two feet of him and never saw him. Only then did Dick quite realize that he was actually invisible.

The moment the man had passed him, Dick ran to the staircase. He descended one flight; he was half way down another when a yell of pain and imprecation came to his ears. He knew that voice: it was Luke Evans's!

With three bounds Dick reached the bottom of the stairs. He saw a large room in front of him. No mistaking the nature of this room; it was an ordinary laboratory, fitted out with the greatest elaboration, and divided into two parts by paneling. And sight and sound were on.

In the part nearer Dick three men were grouped about a large dynamo, which was sending out a high, musical note as it spun. Levers and dials were all about it, and above it was the base of the glass tube that Dick had seen above. In the other part were five or six men. Three of them were testing some substance at a table; three

more were gathered about old Luke Evans, whose silver chains had been removed and replaced by ropes, which bound his limbs, and also bound him to a heavy chair, which seemed to be affixed to the ground. One of the three had a piece of metal in a pair of long-handled pliers. It was white hot, and a white electric spark that shot to and fro between two terminals close by, showed where it had been heated.

Dick started; he recognized one of the three men as Von Kettler. He moved slowly forward, very softly, his feet making no sound on the fiber matting that covered the floor.

“Did that feel good, American swine?" asked Von Kettler softly, and Dick saw, with horror, a red weal on the old man's forehead. "Now you are perhaps in a more gracious mood, Professor? The unknown isotope in that black gas of yours—you are disposed to give us the chemical formula?"

"I'll see you in hell first," raved old Luke Evans, writhing in his chair.

Von Kettler turned to the man holding the white-hot metal, and nodded. But at that moment a door behind Evans's chair opened, and Fredegonde Valmy appeared in the entrance. Von Kettler turned

hastily, snatched the pliers from the man's hand, and laid the metal in a receptacle.

But the girl had seen the action. She looked at the weal on Luke's forehead, and clenched her hands; her eyes dilated with horror.

"You have been torturing him, Hugo!" she cried.

"Freda, what are you doing in here? Oblige me by withdrawing immediately!" cried Von Kettler.

"Where is Captain Rennell?" the girl retorted. "I will know!"

"He is upstairs, watching the approaching Yankee fleet, and waiting to see its destruction," returned the other.

"You are lying to me! He has been killed, and this old man has been tortured!" cried Fredegonde. "I tell you, Hugo Von Kettler, you are no longer a half-brother of mine! I am through with you!"

"Unfortunately," sneered Von Kettler, "it is not possible to dispose of a family relationship so easily."

“It is cheap to sneer," the girl retorted. "But you sang a very different song when you were in the penitentiary, in terror of death, and you

begged me to come and throw you the invisible robe through the bars. You promised me then that you would abandon this mad enterprise and come away with me. You swore it!"

"I have sworn allegiance to my Emperor, and that comes first," retorted Von Kettler. "Oblige me by retiring."

"I shall do nothing of the sort," cried the girl hysterically. "When you used me as a tool in your enterprises in Washington, you played upon my patriotism for my conquered country. I thought I was undertaking a heroic act. I didn't dream of the villainy, the cold-blooded murder that was to be wrought.

"You've kept me here virtually a prisoner," she went on, with rising violence, "an attendant upon that old madman, your Emperor, and his sham court, while more murder is being planned. Where is Captain Rennell, I say?" She stamped her foot. "I demand that he and this old man be set at liberty at once. Hugo," she pleaded, "come away with me. Don't you see what the end must be? This is no heroic enterprise, it is wholesale murder that will arouse the conscience of civilized mankind against you! Order that the vortex-ray be turned off," she went on, looking through the opening in the partition toward the dynamo. "That gas—you cannot be so vile as to send it forth again, to destroy the American ships?"

"My dear Freda," retorted the young man coolly, "the vortex-ray is already charged with the gas, and at a height of twenty thousand feet it is now creating a vacuum that will send the gas upon the wings of a hurricane straight up the Atlantic seaboard. It will obliterate every living thing on board the battleships, from men to rats, and this time we mean to reach New York.

"As for that swine Rennell," he went on, "you heard His Majesty announce his intention of sending him back to Washington with the information of our irresistible power. Of course I know you are in love with him, and that these qualms of conscience are due to that circumstance."

But Dick hardly heard the latter part of Von Kettler's remarks. Suddenly the significance of the dynamo and the superheated room above had come home to him. He had read of such a project years before, in some newspaper, and had forgotten about it until that moment.

By sending a high-tension current almost to the limits of the earth's atmosphere, the article had said, a vortex or vacuum could be set up which would create a hurricane.

The tremendous pressure of the in-rushing air would make a

veritable cyclone, which, taking the course of the prevailing winds, would rush forth on a mission of widespread disaster.

And on this hurricane would go the deadly gas, infinitely diluted, and yet deadly to all life in its infinitesimal proportion to the atmosphere.

And the American fleet was now approaching the Bahama shores.

Dick forgot Luke Evans, everything else, as the significance of that mechanism in the next room came home to him. He ran like a madman through the space in the partition, and, raising the bar aloft, brought it thudding down upon the dials, twisting and warping them.

He struck at the hollow pole, but, glass or not, it defied all his efforts. He seized a heavy lever and flung it into reverse—and two others.

Yelling, the three attendants broke and ran. Out of the laboratory the six came running, collided with the three. Behind them Dick could see Fredegonde Valmy, a knife in her hand, slashing at Luke Evans's bonds.

Dick swung his bar and brought it crashing down on a head, felling

the man like a log. He saw Von Kettler pull one of the glass rods from his pocket and fire blindly. The discharge struck a second attendant, and the man dropped screeching, his clothes ablaze.

Somebody yelled, "He's there! Look at his eyes!" and pointed at Dick's face.

Dick leaped aside and swung the rod again, felling a third man. The others turned and ran. Von Kettler in the van, broke through the door behind Luke Evans's chair, and disappeared.

Dick ran back to where the old man was standing beside the girl, the discarded ropes at his feet. He flung his hood back. "Luke, don't you know me?" he shouted.

It was creditable to Luke Evans's composure that, though Dick must have presented the aspect of nothing more than a face floating in the air, he retained his composure.

"Sure I know you, Rennell," replied the old man. "And you and me's going to best them devils yet."

"But the fleet—it's approaching Abaco," Dick cried. "I've got to warn them."

Fredegonde seized him by the arm.

"Come with me," she cried. "If they find you here, they'll kill you."

Dick hesitated only a moment, then followed the girl as she dashed for another door on the same side of the laboratory as that by which Von Kettler and his men had fled. They dashed down the staircase, and a corridor disclosed itself at the bottom. The girl stopped.

"There is a private way—the Emperor's," she panted. "He had it constructed—in case of necessity. I got the keys. I was planning—something desperate—to stop these murders; I didn't know what."

Dick seized her by the arm. "What keys?" he demanded. "The key to the place where President Hargreaves is?"

"Yes, but—"

"We must get him. Where is he?"

"In a cell beneath the throne room. That's overhead. But they'll catch us—"

"Which is the key?" asked Dick.

The girl produced three or four keys, fumbled with them, handed one to Dick. "This way!" she cried.

They ran along the corridor. Two guards appeared, moving toward them under the electric lights. At the sight of the girl running, and Luke Evans, they stopped in surprise.

Dick had pulled the hood back over his head. He ran toward them, wielding the iron bar. A mighty swing sent the two toppling over, one unconscious, the other bruised and yelling loudly.

"Here! Here!" gasped Fredegonde, stopping before a door.

Dick fitted the key to the lock and turned it. Inside, upon a quite visible bed, sat President Hargreaves, unchained. He looked up inquiringly as the three entered.

"Mr. President," said Dick, throwing back his hood, "I'm an American officer, and I want to save you. There's not much chance, but, if you'll come with me—"

Hargreaves got up and smiled. "I'm not a military man, sir," he answered, "but I'm ready to take that chance rather than—"

He did not complete the sentence. Shouts echoed along the corridor

behind them. Dick replaced his hood, handed the keys back to the girl. "Take Mr. Hargreaves to any place of temporary safety you can," he said. "And Mr. Evans. I'll hold them!"

"It's right here. This door!" panted the girl, indicating a door at the end of the passage.

The three ran toward it. Dick turned. Five or six guards with Von Kettler at their head, were running toward him. They saw the three fugitives and set up a shout.

Dick had a quick inspiration. He dashed back into the cell, seized the light bed, and dragged it through the doorway into the passage, just in time to send Von Kettler and two others sprawling. He brought down the bar upon the head of one of them, shouting as he did so.

Then he became aware that the passage was flooded with sunshine. Fredegonde had got the door open.

He darted back, passed through in the wake of the three, and slammed it shut. Fredegonde turned the key. Instantly Dick found himself with his three companions upon the prairie. Not a vestige of the buildings was apparent anywhere, except for the patches of brown earth.

Chapter 12: Von Kettler's End

Fredegonde took command, repressing her agitation with a visible effort. "They cannot break down that door," she said, "and they dare not ask for another key. It will take them a minute or two to go back and reach us around the building. But there may be a score of people watching us. Let us walk quietly toward the thickets. If I am present, they will not suspect anything is wrong."

But Dick stood still, driven into absolute immobility by the conflicting claims of duty. For overhead, high in the blue, was an American dirigible.

And at his side was the President of the United States. One or other of them he must sacrifice.

He chose. He ran forward without answering. Those squares of brown earth, set side by side, were the airplane hangars, and he meant to seize an airplane, if he could find one beneath its coat of invisibility, and fly to warn the dirigible and the fleet.

A curious wind was blowing. It seemed to come swirling downward, as no wind that Dick had ever known. It was growing in violence each moment, beating upon his face.

As he ran, he was aware of Luke beside him. He heard shouting all about them. Luke had been seen. Not only Luke, but Hargreaves, who was running after Luke, with Fredegonde trying in vain to change his intentions. At the edge of the first brown patch Dick collided violently with the wall of the invisible hangar, and went reeling back. The shouts were growing louder.

"Wait!" gasped Luke Evans. He had something like a large watch in his hand. He held it out like a pistol, and from it projected a beam of the black gas.

Then Dick remembered Colonel Stopford's words: "He showed me a watch and said the salvation of the world was inside the case. I thought him insane."

Insane or not, old Luke Evans had concealed the tiny model of the camera-box to good purpose. As he swept the black beam around him, the whole mass of buildings sprang into luminosity, the figures of a score of men, grouped together, and advancing in a threatening mass, some distance away—and more.

Two airplanes, standing side by side upon the tarmac, just in front of the hangar—not mere pursuit planes, but six-seaters, formidably armed, with central turrets and bow and rear guns, and propellers

revolving.

Two mechanics stood staring in the direction of the little group.

"I'm with you," gasped Hargreaves. "I'm not a military man, but I've got fighting blood, and I come of a fighting race."

Dick leaped and once more swung the iron bar. The nearer of the two mechanics went down like lead, the second, seeing his companion bludgeoned out of the air, turned and ran.

Dick shouted, pointing. Fredegonde jumped into the plane, and the President scrambled in behind her. The group, dismayed by the black beam, which Luke Evans was now turning steadily upon them, had halted irresolutely. But suddenly a head appeared, moving swiftly through the air toward the plane. It was Von Kettler, with hood flung back, the face distorted with rage and fury.

At his yells, the whole crowd started forward. Dick leaped into the central cockpit, swung the helicopter lever. Something spitted past his face, and a long streak appeared on the turret, where the gas-paint had been scored. But he was rising, rising into that increasing wind....

He heard a yell of triumph behind him. And that yell of Von Kettler's was his undoing. There is the telepathy between close friends, but there is also telepathic sympathy between enemies, and in an instant Dick understood what that shout of triumph portended.

He was rising into the line of magnetic force that would anchor his airplane helplessly, and leave it to be jerked down and held at Von Kettler's mercy.

He released the helicopter lever and opened throttle wide. For an instant the heavy plane hung dangerously at its low elevation, threatening to nose over. Then Dick regained control, and was winging away toward the sea, while yells of baffled fury from behind indicated the chagrin of his enemies.

He glanced up. Thank heaven the dirigible had not approached the trap. It was apparently circling overhead. Of course the observers had seen nothing, had no conception that the headquarters of the Invisible Empire lay below.

And yet it seemed to be drifting aimlessly back toward the fleet—erratically, as if not under complete control. And Dick could see the ships about a mile offshore, apparently drifting too. They were moving as no American squadron ever moved since the day the first

hull was launched, for some of them, turned bow inward toward others, seemed upon the point of collision, while others were lagging on the edge of the formation, as if pointing for home.

Then suddenly the awful truth dawned upon Dick. The occupants of ships and dirigible alike had been overcome by the deadly gas.

Dick banked, turned, leaned forward and shouted to Luke Evans, and, when the old man turned his head, indicated to him to sweep the tarmac with his ray.

The thread of black, broadening into a truncated cone, revealed nothing save the luminous outlines of the buildings. Apparently the tarmac was deserted. It was queer, too, that the silence of the night before was gone. Dick shouted again, to assure himself of what he knew already, and heard his own voice again.

Something had happened, something unexpected——or perhaps the crew of the Invisible Emperor, satisfied with the effects of the deadly gas, had not thought it necessary to go to any further trouble.

Suddenly Dick discovered that he was almost within the circle of the line of magnetic force. Hurriedly he threw over the stick and kicked rudder. It was not till he was again approaching the seashore that it

occurred to him that the force, too, was not in operation.

He opened throttle wide and shot seaward. He must ascertain what had happened, and, if not too late, give warning without delay.

Then suddenly the vicious rattle of gunfire sounded in Dick's ears, and, materializing out of the sky, came Von Kettler's face. Startled for an instant, Dick quickly realized that it was Von Kettler in his plane, with his hood thrown back.

And Dick realized that his own hood was thrown back. Two faces and nothing else, were the whole visible setting for battle.

But that look upon Von Kettler's face was even more demoniacal than before. Mad with rage at the prospective escape of his prey, and infuriated by his half-sister's appearance in the plane, Von Kettler had thrown all caution to the winds. In his insane hatred he was prepared to shoot down Dick's plane and send Fredegonde to destruction with it.

If Dick chose to replace his hood he would have the madman at his mercy. And, if he had thought about it, he would have done so, with Fredegonde sitting behind him. But the idea did not enter his mind. Consumed with rage almost equal to Von Kettler's, he only saw there

the face of one of those who had inflicted an unspeakable outrage upon the President of his country.

The memory of old Hargreaves, chained before the mock-Emperor's throne, enraged Dick more than the holocaust of lives taken by the assassins.

He shouted a wild answer to Von Kettler's challenge as his plane sped by, and banked. At that moment there came a roaring concussion that shook the plane from prop to tail.

Dick turned his head. Somehow, President Hargreaves had contrived to get the rear gun into action, and now he was staring at it as if he could not believe that he had fired it.

And that action heartened Dick wonderfully. As Von Kettler's face appeared again, he loosed his turret gun in a sweeping blast, and heard Von Kettler's gun roar futilely.

Again they crossed each other's path, and again and again, two faces, only able to gauge roughly the position of their planes. Neither man had succeeded in injuring the other.

Once old Lake turned his black ray upon Von Kettler, and for, a

moment the plane stood out luminously in the blackness, but Dick leaned forward and yelled to the old man to desist.

And once Dick looked back and saw Fredegonde crouched in her cockpit with eyes wide with terror. And yet he read in her eyes the same determination she had expressed in the laboratory. She was through with her half-brother.

All this while the wind had been increasing, making it difficult to maneuver the heavy plane; but now, of a sudden there came a dead lull, and then, with a whining sound, the wind rushed in again.

But this was a wind still more unlike any that Dick had ever known. A mighty gale that revolved circularly, but downward too, like a vortex, catching the plane and sweeping it into an ever tightening circle.

A man-made gale, upon whose wings the poison gas would spread northward again, carrying unlimited destruction with it. Dick fought in vain to free himself.

He was revolving as in a whirlpool, and it required the utmost presence of mind and watchfulness to hold the plane steady. Round and round he spun—and then, suddenly, out of the void materialized

Von Kettler's face.

Von Kettler, helpless too, was spinning round upon the opposite side of the vortex. Thus each airship was upon the tail of the other, and it was a matter of chance which would get the other within the ringsights of the turret gun.

Von Kettler was so near that his shouts of fury came fitfully to Dick's ears as the wind carried them. Dick, working the controls, knew that not for an instant could he direct his attention from them in order to fire his gun, and the moment Von Kettler attempted to do so, he was doomed.

Round and round, struggling, battling in vain—and once more the concussion of the rear gun shook the plane. And a shout from the President reached Dick's ears.

Dick turned his head for an instant, long enough to see Von Kettler spinning down through the vortex. And he was going down afire. President Hargreaves, "no military man," had got him, the second time he had ever aligned a gun-barrel upon a target.

"Bravo, sir, bravo!" Dick shouted.

And desperately he flung the stick forward and nosed down.

No gale, man-made or heaven-made, could carry on its wings three-quarters of a ton of armored, turreted airship. Swirling like a leaf, the plane broke through the clutch of the blast. Instantly it grew calm. Outside that vortex, hardly a breath of air was stirring. It was as if the whole fury of the air was concentrated within that circle.

The ground came rushing up. Once more Dick tried to head seaward. With flying speed lost, he was calculating the exact moment in his downward rush when he could hope to resume control. Would that moment come before he crashed?

At less than a hundred feet he partly regained control. For a moment the plane seemed to fly on an even keel. Then her nose went down as her speed slackened. And this time there was no salvation.

Working desperately to save her, Dick saw the ground loom up before him. He heard the crash as the plane broke into splintering ruin ... he had a last vision of old Luke clutching his precious watch: then everything was dissolved in darkness....

Chapter 13: You Can't Down the Marines

“He's pulling out of it! Keep it up, Gotch!"

Dick heard the words and opened his eyes. He stared in amazement at the faces about him. Honest American faces under tropical helmets and above a uniform that he had never expected to see again. It couldn't be real. And yet it was. One word broke from his lips:

"Marines!"

"He's got it. Don't let him slip, Gotch.", grinned one of the friendly faces, and the man named Gotch, who presumably had some qualifications for his job, continued what was meant to be a gentle massage of the nerve centers along Dick's spine.

"I'm all right." Dick muttered, beginning to realize his surroundings. He was lying on a strip of prairie near the beach, on which the waves were breaking in low ripples about a motorboat that was drawn up.

He sat up. The world was swimming about him, but he seemed to have no broken bones. Not far away was the wrecked plane, an incongruous mass of streaks where the fabric had ripped through the

gas-paint. "Where are the others?" Dick muttered.

Then he was aware of Fredegonde Valmy lying with a white face under a shrub. Her eyes were open, and turned toward him.

He heard Luke Evans's voice. The old man hobbled round from Dick's back, one arm in a bandage.

"She's hurt rather bad, Rennell, but we won't know how bad till we can get her away," he said. "You've been lying here about an hour, since we crashed. President Hargreaves made them take him to the fleet in the other motorboat to see what he could do. He's assumed command.

"You see, Rennell, that damn gas caught the fleet and put pretty near every man out of commission for good. But these fellows wasn't going to give up. So, since all their officers were gone, they took two of the boats and their arms and equipment, and came ashore to settle accounts. And they won't believe there's anybody on the island or any buildings. And I can't make 'em believe it. God, Rennell, those invisible devils may attack us at any moment. I don't understand what they're waiting for."

Gotch spoke: "We know you're Captain Rennell, sir. And this

gentleman, we know him too, but he seems a bit queer in his head. Talking of the Invisible Emperor's headquarters on this island, a mile or so inland. The only invisible thing we've found is that piece of a garment we pulled off you."

"I broke my watch ray machine in the fall, and I can't make them believe, Rennell," almost wept old Evans. "Tell them I'm not crazy."

Dick got upon his feet with an effort, staggered a little, then made his way to Fredegonde. He kneeled down beside the girl. She was conscious, and smiled faintly, but she could not speak. He pressed her hand, rose, and came back. "Mr. Evans is not crazy," he said. "The headquarters of the gang is over there." He pointed. "Didn't President Hargreaves tell you?"

"He was kind of incoherent, sir." The marines looked at one another, wondering. Was Captain Rennell crazy too?

"We've had scouts out through the jungle, sir. There's nothing within five miles of here. They had a clear view through to the sea from the top of a hill."

"I've been there." Dick spoke with conviction. "I must tell you they've got devices that make them practically irresistible. That gas

and other things. And they're invisible. But if you boys are willing to follow me, I'll lead you. It means death. I don't know what they're waiting for. But—are you willing to follow me?"

"We'll follow you, sir"—after a pause, during which Dick read in their eyes the desire to humor a crazy man. "We'll follow to hell, sir—if that gang's really there."

"Take your arms, then!" Dick pointed to the stacked rifles.

A minute later the twenty-odd Marines, forming an open line that extended from one side of the clearing to the other, were on their way toward the headquarters of the gang. And Dick, leading them, though his head was reeling, felt as if his own reason was slipping from him. Had he only dreamed all this? Was it possible that the headquarters of the Invisible Emperor existed on this desolate prairie? If it was true, why had they suddenly become silent, inert? Why had they not long ago wiped out these few Marines? And the gale—was it now sweeping northward on its mission of destruction?

Half an hour passed. Then the brown patches of the foundations came into view upon the open ground. Here were the hangers, here was the central building with the Emperor's headquarters. And nothing was visible, nothing stirred, yet at any moment Dick

expected the rattle of machine-gun bullets or some more terrific method of destruction.

"Halt!" The line stood still. "I am going forward ahead or you. You'll follow at a distance of twenty paces. When you see me stop, feel for the door in the wall, and if I disappear, follow me. You understand?"

The Marines assented cheerfully. No harm in humoring this poor devil of an officer who had crashed and lost his wits. Like Luke Evans, shambling up through the line to Dick's side. Dick advanced. At any moment now the concentrated fire of the Emperor's men should blast them all to smithereens. Nothing happened.

And it was no dream, for Dick's outstretched hand encountered the exterior wall of the building. He had gauged his way accurately, too, for a step or two brought him to the door. He stepped inside. He was inside the private door that led to the Emperor's quarters, through which he had passed with Fredegonde, Hargreaves, and Luke Evans in their flight. It had been broken down, contrary to the girl's predictions, and the deserted passage within was perfectly visible to them all.

Stupefied, the Marines bumped and jostled with each other as they crowded in. If they had been anything but Marines, their own heads

might have been turned at the discovery of this sudden materialization of a building out of nothingness.

Being Marines, they only grinned sheepishly, and followed along the corridor.

The first human being they saw was one of the guards, in a black tunic. He was leaning against a wall, and he was a human being no longer. He looked as if he was asleep, but he was stone dead, with a placid look on his face.

Two more dead guards lay across each other, with smiles on their faces: and there was a workman in a blue blouse who had been in a tremendous hurry to get somewhere, from his appearance, and had never got there. He had fallen asleep instead, and never wakened.

Dick found a stairway and led the way up. He thought it ran up to the laboratory, but, instead, the room into which he emerged was the ante-room of the Invisible Emperor's audience hall. Six dead guards lay in a heap in front of the curtain, and they had died as unconcerned as their fellows, to judge by the pacific expressions on their faces.

Dick passed through into the throne room. The Marines, behind him,

for the first time uttered exclamations of awe—of pity.

The terrific scene that met Dick's eyes would be burned into his brain till his last day.

Upon his throne, head flung back, sat the Invisible Emperor, his features set in a sardonic leer of death. And all about him, some sitting, some lying, supporting one another, were his court, officers in black uniforms with the silver braid, and women in court dress. And all were dead too. But they had not known they had died. They had fallen asleep—upon the instant that their own volatile gas reached them.

“I guess that's the explanation, sir," said old Luke Evans. "Those devils made the whirlwind and charged it with the gas. But when you reversed that lever, you reversed the process. Instead of projecting the force outwardly, you made a suction, and every atom of the gas that hadn't travelled beyond the radius came rushing back and filled the building. If we'd entered a half-hour later, we'd have been dead ones ourselves, but the gas was volatile enough to disperse through the chinks and crannies. Anyway, it's all over now."

Yes, it was all over, Dick thought, as he sat in his deck chair upon the cruiser that was bearing him northward. The menace to world

government had been destroyed and with it all who had been behind it. There would be a new order in the world, a new and kindlier government. Men would feel closer to one another than in the past. Half the personnel of the fleet had escaped the invisible death, and only one cruiser and the dirigible had been lost in the confusion. There would be a great reception when they put into Charleston.

Dick bent over Fredegonde, who was asleep in her chair beside him. The ship's surgeon had promised recovery for her. She shouldn't suffer for her half-voluntary part in the business, Dick said to himself. It was going to be his task to help her to forget.

#53 Prisoners On The Electron, By Robert Henry Leitfred:

Fate throws two young Earthians into desperate conflict with the primeval monsters of an electron's savage jungles.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry: overt antiblack racism towards the end

Warnings:

the gaping mouth jerked

- - -

The blood-red glow of a slanting sun bathed the towers of New York's serrated skyline, then dropped into a molten sea beyond the winter horizon. Friday, the last day of Jupiter, the thirteenth month of the earth's new calendar, had drawn to a close. In a few hours the year of 1999 would end—at midnight, to be exact.

Far below the towers stretched well lighted canyons teeming with

humanity. At an upper level where once the elevated trains had roared and rumbled in an antiquated period long past, an orderly mass of workers and shoppers was borne at an incredible speed from lower Manhattan to towering apartments that stretched northward to Peekskill. The northbound traffic was heaviest at this hour and the moving sidewalk bands were jammed to their capacity.

Street cars, now obsolete, had vanished from the streets under the new order of things as had also passenger cars, taxis and trucks. Speed predominated. Noise had practically been eliminated. Except for the gentle throb of giant motors far underground, the city was cloaked in silence.

At regular intervals along the four-speed moving bands that formed the transportation of the great metropolis, huge circular shafts of steel mounted upward beyond the roofs of the tallest buildings. Within these shafts, swift elevators carried passengers who lived in the outlying districts to the level of the station platforms of the interstate operating transport planes.

Close to the entrance of one of the steel shafts stood a young man a little above medium height. His deep-sunken eyes were those of a dreamer, a searcher. They were the eyes of a man who had seen strange and startling things. At present they were staring into the

pulsing wave of humanity flowing northward on the endless steel bands beyond the platform.

Quite suddenly they lighted with pleasure as a man and a girl detached themselves from the swift moving river of people and hurried to the spot where he stood.

"Think we were never coming?" Karl Danzig's eyes were much like those of Aaron Carruthers. Just now they sparkled with suppressed excitement.

Aaron Carruthers smiled in turn. "No, Karl. Any man but you. I couldn't imagine you being late." He turned his attention to the slim, dark haired girl. "Nanette," he murmured, extending his hand, "I didn't think you'd come."

Dazzling white teeth caught the glow of the blue-white incandescents along the platform, and became under the bow of her red lips a string of priceless pearls.

"I had to come, Aaron. Karl has done nothing but talk of your amazing discovery. The experiment fairly frightens me at times especially when I recall the sad fate of your friend, the missing Professor Dahlgren. I wish you boys would give up the idea—"

"Nan, be still," broke in Karl, with brotherly rudeness. Turning to Carruthers. "Everything all ready, Aaron?" he asked.

Carruthers nodded. "As far as humanly possible. The element of error is always present. I've checked and re-checked my calculations. I've augmented the vacuum tubes by installing three super-dimensional inverse power tubes." He clasped the girl's arm. "The street is no place to talk. Let's go to the laboratory."

They crossed the moving bands by an overhead bridge and cut down a narrow canyon to the entrance of a crosstown series of bands. They stepped onto the first band. The speed was moderate. From there they moved over to the second. Carruthers was in a hurry. He guided the girl and her brother across the third to the fourth band of moving steel.

Buildings slid past them like wraiths in the electric light. They felt no winter chill, for the streets and platforms were heated by a constant flow of warm air from slots ingeniously arranged in the band of swift moving metal upon which they stood. Within a few minutes they had arrived at their destination. Quickly they reversed their path across the moving bands until they reached the disembarking platform. A short distance from the station they came to the entrance of a huge tower building.

Carruthers nodded to the doorman and they were admitted into a marble hallway. A silent, unattended lift bore them swiftly to the seventy-fifth floor. Down a deep carpeted hallway they moved. Carruthers touched his door. It opened. He stood to one side as the other two entered.

Nanette cried with delight at the luxurious splendor of the place. "Why, Aaron, I never dreamed the night view could be quite so delightful! I do believe that if the horrid government had not taken down that little Statue of Liberty and substituted the Shaft Triumph in its place, that I could easily see her fingers clasping the torch she was reputed to hold.

"Progress, dear girl," shrugged Carruthers, holding out his hands for her cape. "By the way, have you folks eaten?"

"Not in a week," said Karl.

"Von Sternberger's food tablets," informed the girl.

Carruthers nodded. His deep-set eyes regarded them appraisingly. "Any ill effects?"

"None whatever," spoke Danzig. "Neither of us have the slightest

craving for food."

"Good. Did you bring any with you?"

"A whole carton."

"Then I guess we're already to make the experiment. You're sure. Nanette, that you're not afraid of...."

"Don't be silly, Aaron. I haven't grown up with Karl for nothing. He's always used me for the disagreeable end of his crazy experiments. And besides," she smiled on both men. "I have a woman's curiosity for the unknown."

"Very well," said Carruthers gravely. From his waistcoat pocket he took a ring of keys and inserted one of them into the lock of an immense steel door. "Our laboratory," he announced, swinging the door wide.

Nanette's eyes opened wide at the paneled whiteness of the room. Most of the far side was taken up with electrical machines, dynamos, generators and glass enclosed motors of an advanced type. Overhead, concealed lights made the room as light as day. A heavy glass railing shielded a square spot in the exact center of the room.

"What's that for?" asked the girl.

Danzig and Carruthers both regarded it with troubled eyes. It was Carruthers who spoke.

"That railing marks the spot where Professor Dahlgren stood when the rays of our atomic machine struck him."

"You mean," breathed the girl, "that he never moved from that spot after the rays touched his body? What happened?"

Karl had already divested himself of his coat and was checking the copper cables leading into a strange machine.

"It was rather curious," remarked Carruthers. "The moment the ray touched him his body began to dwindle. But evidently he suffered no pain. As a matter of fact his mind remained quite clear."

"How did you know?"

"As he dwindled in size," continued Carruthers, "he shouted warningly that the rays had become confused and for us to cut the switch. But the warning came a fraction of a second too late. Even as my fingers opened the contact, his body dwindled to a mere speck and disappeared entirely from sight."

Nanette gazed with staring eyes at the ill-fated spot. Her face had grown steadily paler. "Oh, Aaron! It's awful! What do you suppose happened?"

Carruthers eyes glowed strangely. "I didn't exactly know at the time, Nanette. I'm not sure that I know even now. But I've got a theory and Karl has helped me to build a second machine to flash a restoring ray on the square spot. What will take place I cannot even conjecture."

"Let's get on with the experiment," interrupted Karl. "Nanette can be shown later what she is to do."

Carruthers turned to Danzig. "All right. Karl. Draw up a chair to your machine. And you, Nanette, sit close to this switch. It's off now. To turn it on, simply push it forward until the copper plates slide into each other. To turn the current off, you pull sharply out. However, we aren't quite ready."

He shifted his position until he stood before a third machine slightly smaller than the other two. His fingers clicked a switch. The dial of the instrument glowed whitely.

"It's important," continued Carruthers, "that we first locate our interference. We have here, Nanette, a common television receiving

apparatus capable of picking up news and pictures from any corner of the globe. Ready, Karl?"

Danzig clicked on the switch before his own machine and turned one of the many dials mounted on the panel in front of him. A faint hum filled the room as the generator settled to its task.

Carruthers reached up and dimmed the overhead lights. A screen of what looked like frosted glass set in the wall glowed luminously. The interior of a famous broadcasting studio became mirrored in the glass screen. Into it stepped the master of ceremonies. He spoke briefly of the New Year's activities that would soon take place when the twenty-eighth day of Jupiter ended at midnight.

"Boston," said Carruthers. "Too near."

"Try Frisco," suggested Karl. "The tubes ought to be sufficiently heated by this time."

The dial whirled beneath Carruthers slender fingers. The pictures framed in the frosted panel faded. Another took its place. San Francisco—an afternoon concert. Carruthers saw and listened for a moment, then moved thousands of miles out to sea.

Shanghai drifted into the panel, announcing in sing-song accents the weather reports. Following this came reports of various uprisings along the Manchurian border.

While yet the three listeners and watchers bent their heads toward the panel in the wall, a strange thing occurred. The silver frostiness of the screen became violently agitated with what looked like tiny sparks darting in and about each other like miniature solar systems. Shanghai faded from the picture. All that remained visible now was the jumbled mass of needle-pointed sparks of luminosity.

"Careful," warned Carruthers. "Slow up the speed of your reflector, Karl. There, that's better. Watch the meter reading. I'm going to step up the power of the dimensional tubes. Steady!"

From an invisible reproducer came a sharp, metallic crackling like machine-gun bullets rattling on a tin roof. The sparks on the screen became violently agitated, pushing around in erratic circles and ellipses. They glowed constantly in shades of bright green through the blues into the deep violets of the color scale.

"What do you read?" asked Carruthers.

"Point seven six nine," answered Karl.

"Shift it back towards the blue, about two points lower on the scale."

Danzig twisted two dials at the same time with minute exactness. "Point seven six eleven," he intoned.

"Hold it," ordered Carruthers. "Blue should predominate." He turned his eyes on the dancing sparks on the screen. They glowed now a deep indigo blue. "Lock your dials against accidental turning. We're tuned to the vanishing point."

Danzig rose to his feet. "What will we use?"

Carruthers looked hastily around the room. "Most anything will do." His eyes rested on a glass test tube. Quickly he rose to his feet and removed it from the wall rack. Then bending over the glass railing that enclosed the mysterious square he placed it on the floor. He turned now to the girl.

"Quiet, now, Nanette, and don't under any condition leave the chair. The path of the ray should pass within two feet of you, having a wide margin of safety. All right, Karl. Set the dials of the inverse dimensional tubes at point seven six eleven, and switch the power to the Roentgen tube."

Through the dimly lighted laboratory came a spurt of bluish flame that twisted and squirmed with slow undulations around the cathode electrode.

"Fine," enthused Carruthers, "The cathode emanations coincide exactly with the interference chart. Watch your meter gauges, Karl, while I switch to the atomic ray."

His fingers closed over a switch. The indigo points of flame bathing the electrode gathered themselves into a ring and began to revolve around an invisible nucleus located near the electrode. Carruthers studied the revolving flame for a moment, then switched off the television machine. It was no longer needed.

Carefully, for the atomic ray was still a mysterious force to Carruthers, he opened a small door in the panel and drew out the focusing machine. It was shaped very much like a camera except that the lens protruded several inches beyond the machine proper.

With infinite patience he made the final adjustments and moved away from the front of the lens. "Ready?"

Danzig nodded and threw on the full power of the inverse dimensional tubes. A low clear hum filled the quiet room of the

laboratory. From the lens of the focusing machine shot a pale, amber beam. It struck the glass test tube squarely in the center and glowed against its smooth sides.

Carruthers reached across his own machine and turned the final switch. The amber beam emanating from the lens increased in intensity. And as it increased it took on a deep violet color.

Nanette cried out in muffled alarm. But even as Vincent raised his voice to quiet her fears the test tube suddenly shrunk to nothingness and vanished into the ether.

"Aaron!" whispered the girl, awesomely. "It ... it's gone!"

Carruthers nodded. Beads of sweat stood out upon his forehead. Would the returning ray work? He had made the test tube follow the same route as that taken by Professor Dahlgren. Both were gone. He clicked off the switch and the beam faded.

With a deliberate calmness that in no way matched the inner tumult brought on by the experiment, he turned the dials of the machine he and Danzig had worked out together. A second switch clicked under his fingers. From the lense of the focusing machine shot the reverse atomic beam. As it struck the center of the square it turned a bright

vermilion. For several seconds it played upon empty space, then the miracle unfolded before their eyes.

Something like a glass sliver reflected the beam. It grew and enlarged under their startled eyes until it had achieved its former size, then the power that had brought it back switched itself off automatically.

Together both men examined the test tube. It appeared in no way harmed, nor did it feel either warm or cold from its trip through the elements.

"It works!" marveled Danzig. "Let's try it again with something larger."

"I've got a better idea," said Carruthers, rising to his feet. He crossed the laboratory and went to another part of his rooms. Presently he returned holding a small pink rat in his hands. The rodent was young, having been born only a week before. "Now we'll see what happens."

"Oh, it's torture to the poor thing," burst out Nanette.

"It won't hurt it," growled Karl. "Aaron knows what he's doing."

Carruthers placed the little rat in the center of the square. It lay there, very quiet and unblinking. Again the switches clicked as the contacts were closed.

Came once more the beam of amber colored light followed closely by the violet. The rat dwindled to the size of an insect, then disappeared into space. The three watchers held their breaths. Carruthers' hand trembled the least bit as he threw on the switch controlling the animal's return to the world.

A vermilion shaft of light pierced the semi-darkened rooms. The animal had been gone from sight not more than a minute. Abruptly something grayish white unfolded in the reflector's beam. It rapidly expanded under three pairs of bulging eyes—not the small, pinkish rat that had disappeared but sixty seconds previous, but a full grown rat, scarred and tailless as if from innumerable battles with other rats.

As the current clicked off Aaron Carruthers bent forward. Too late. The rat scurried from the laboratory with a squeal of alarm. Carruthers returned to his seat before the atomic machine and sat down. His face was worried. Dark thoughts stormed his reason. The rat he had placed within the atomic ray had aged nearly two years during the minute it was out of mortal sight. Two years!

He pulled a pad from his pocket and calculated the time that had elapsed since Professor Dahlgren had vanished from that same spot. Nearly forty hours. That would mean....

Nanette stirred in her chair. "What happened to the little rat, Aaron?"

Carruthers, busy making calculations, did not hear the question.

She turned to her brother. "Karl, what's the meaning of this? The second experiment didn't turn out like the first one. What became of that little rat?"

"I don't know what happened, Nan," spoke Karl. "Now don't bother me with your silly questions. You saw the same thing I did."

Carruthers raised his head and spoke quietly. "That rat you saw materialize under the atomic rays was the same rat you saw me place within the square."

"But it couldn't be," protested the girl.

"Nevertheless," shrugged Carruthers. "It was the same animal—only it had aged nearly two years during the brief time interval it was off from our planet."

"It's preposterous," cried the girl.

"Nothing is preposterous nowadays, Nanette."

"That's the woman of it," spoke Karl. "Always doubting."

"You boys are playing tricks on me," retorted the girl sharply. "I shouldn't have come to your old laboratory. Just because I'm a girl...."

"Don't," pleaded Carruthers, looking up from his pad of figures. "We're trying to solve the mystery underlying the forces which we have created." He replaced the test tube within the center of the square and returned to the atomic machine.

Through the twilight shadows of the room glowed the strange new ray. Faintly the generator hummed. Lights sparkled and twisted around the cathode in serpentine swirls.

"You needn't trouble to explain your silly experiment again," finished Nanette, rising abruptly to her feet. "I'm going home and dress for the New Year's party."

"Watch your switch like I asked you to," spoke Carruthers.

"Sit down," added Karl. "Don't put the rest of us in danger!"

"Oh-h-h!" gasped the girl as she inadvertently stepped squarely into the atomic ray of amber-colored light.

Carruthers leaped impatiently to his feet. An inarticulate cry of horror froze upon his lips. Forgetful that he himself was directly in line of the atomic ray he lunged forward, his mind centering on a single act—to drag the protesting and now thoroughly frightened girl out of the path of the penetrating ray.

But even as he started forward Nanette tripped over the glass railing around the square. Carruthers moved quickly. Yet his movements were slow and ungainly as compared to the speed of the light ray. He saw the figure of Nanette decrease in size before his eyes, heard the muffled expression of alarm and fear in Danzig's voice; then the room suddenly began to extend itself upward with the speed of a meteor.

What once had been walls and bare furniture resolved themselves into a range of hills, then mountains. The twilight gloom of the room became a dark void of empty space that seemed to rush past his ears

like a moaning wind.

He had the sensation of falling through infinite space as if he had been propelled from the world and hurled out into the vastness of interplanetary space. Something brushed against him—something soft and fluttering. He grasped it like a drowning man would clutch a straw. "Nanette!"

The name echoed and re-echoed through his mind yet never seemed to get beyond his tightly clenched lips. He felt something cool close over his hand. Instinctively he grasped it. Her hand. Together they clung to each other as they felt themselves being hurled through endless space.

The twilight changed swiftly to black night that rushed past the two clinging figures and enveloped them in a wall of silence. Then out of the mysterious fastness came the dull glow of what looked like a distant planet. It grew and enlarged till it reached the size of a silver dollar. Little pin-points of light soon began to appear on all sides of it, very much like stars.

Carruthers attempted to reassure Nanette that all was well, and they were out on the streets of the great metropolis. But even as he wrenched his tightly locked lips apart he saw that the shining disc far

out into space was not what he had first thought it was—the earth's moon.

He shook his head to clear it of the perplexing cobwebs. What was the matter with his mind? He couldn't think or reason. All he knew was that he had erred. This strange planet looming in the sky held nothing familiar in markings nor in respect to its relations to the stars beyond it.

While yet he groped in the darkness for something tangible, his mind reverted to the girl at his side. She was clinging to him like a frightened child. He could feel the pressure of her body against his and it thrilled him immeasurably. No longer was he the cold, calculating young man of science.

How long they remained in state of suspension while strange worlds and planets flashed into a new sky before their startled eyes, Aaron Carruthers didn't know. At times it seemed like hours, years, ages. And when he thought of the tender nearness of the girl he held so tightly within his arms, it seemed like a few minutes.

Gradually the sensation of speed and space falling began to wear off, as if they were nearing earth or some solid substance once more. The air about them grew heavier. Then all movement through space

ceased.

Carruthers was surprised to find what felt like earth beneath his feet. For long minutes he stood there, unmoving, still holding possessively to the girl.

"Aaron!" The name came out of the void like a faint caress.

"Nanette."

Reassured of each other's presence they stood perfectly still, lost in the vast silence of their isolation.

Presently the girl spoke. "Oh, Aaron, I'm frightened!"

"There's nothing to be alarmed at, dearest." The endearing term came for the first time from the man's lips. As long as he had known Nanette Danzig, love had never been mentioned between them. If it had ever existed, the feeling had not been expressed.

"You shouldn't call me that, Aaron."

His voice sounded curiously far-off when he answered. "I couldn't help it, Nan. Our nearness, the strange darkness, and the fact that we are alone together brought strange emotions to my heart. At this

moment you are the dearest—"

Bump, thump! Bump, thump!

"What's that noise?" breathed Nanette.

Carruthers turned his head to listen. To his ears came the pound of some heavy object striking the ground at well-regulated intervals.

Nanette, who had started to free herself from Carruthers violent embrace, suddenly ceased to struggle. "Oh, what is it? What is it?" she whispered fearfully.

Carruthers sniffed the night air. A musky odor assailed his nostrils, strange and unfamiliar. "It's beyond me, Nanette. Let's move away from this spot. Perhaps we can find shelter for the rest of the night."

But the Stygian blackness successfully hid any form of shelter. Tired from their search they sat down.

"We might build a fire," suggested Carruthers, "only there doesn't seem to be any wood around. Nothing but bare rock."

"Perhaps it's just as well," spoke the girl. "The flames might attract prowlers."

"Maybe you're right," agreed Carruthers.

A silence fell between them. After a long time Nanette spoke.

"I don't suppose, Aaron, that anything I can do or say will help matters any. I know that our being where we are is my own fault. I'm sorry. Truly I am."

"The harm is done," said Carruthers. "Don't say anything more about it."

Nanette pointed at the disc of light shining high in the heavens. "These stars are as strange to me, Aaron, as if I had never seen them before. Saturn is the evening star at this time of year. It isn't visible. Even the familiar craters and mountains of the moon look different. And it glows strangely."

"I'd rather not talk about it, Nan."

Nanette placed a hand upon his arm. "I'm not a child, Aaron. I'm a grown woman. Fear comes through not knowing. Tell me the truth."

"Let's sit down."

They sat upon the ground and both stared out at the night heavens

that arched into infinity above them. Presently Carruthers took the girl's hand from his arm and held it gently between his own. "You've guessed rightly, Nan. The orb shining upon us is not our moon. I'll try and make it clear."

The girl smiled reassuringly in the darkness. "I'm waiting."

"Strange as it must seem," began Carruthers, "you and I are still within the room of my laboratory. But we might as well be a million miles away for all the good it does us. Karl sits in his chair in the same position as when we disappeared in the violet glow of the atomic ray. His eyes are bulging with fear and horror. For days and days he'll continue to sit on that chair, his mind not yet attuned to what actually took place. What has happened? He doesn't know yet, Nan."

"Oh, it's incredible," sobbed Nanette.

"I know, but it's so obviously true that I won't even trouble to check my calculations." He pointed at the silver disc hanging low in the strange sky. "That, Nan, is not our moon. It is nothing more than a planetary electron very much like the one we are on at the present moment. The firmament is filled with them. From where we sit we can see but the half nearest to us. The glowing portion is illuminated

from distant light rays shot off from the nucleus of the atom itself. That atom is going to be our light and heat for weeks, months, perhaps years to come. We're prisoners on an electron, and as such we are destined to rush through infinite space for the remainder of our lives unless...."

"Unless what?"

Aaron Carruthers hesitated for a bare fraction of a second. "Karl!" he whispered. "Our lives depend on him. Time flies fast for us, Nan. Already it is growing light. But not on our earth. Karl still sits upon his chair staring incredulously at the miracle of our disappearing bodies. It will take weeks of time, as it affects us, for the initial shock to travel along his nerves to the center of his brain."

His voice shook with emotion quite contrary to his usual calm nature. "Oh, I know it's hard to understand, Nan. I was a fool to meddle with laws of which I know so little compared to what there is yet to know."

"Then it's all true, Aaron. The little rat that came out from under the ray as an old rat was one and the same animal."

Carruthers nodded. "Time has changed in proportion to our size.

We're moving so much faster than the earth that we must of necessity be bound to the universe of which we are now an integral part."

For a long time they remained silent, each immersed in dark, troubled thoughts. Nanette broke the silence.

"You don't suppose, Aaron, by any chance that Professor Dahlgren is still alive and on our planet?"

Carruthers shook his head negatively. "It's beyond human reason, Nan. He was lost in the ray for over forty hours. Translated into minutes he's been gone twenty-four hundred minutes. Since the mouse we placed within the light ray aged approximately two years in the space of one minute, Professor Dahlgren would, if he were alive, be about four thousand, eight hundred years old."

Nanette rose abruptly to her feet. "Oh bother the figures. My head's swimming with them. It's getting light now, and I'm hungry."

"Eat one of your food tablets," suggested Carruthers.

"Please don't get funny," said Nanette. "Karl has them in his coat pocket."

"Hum-m-m!" coughed Carruthers, following her example by rising to his feet. "Looks as though we'd have to rustle our food. I've got nothing on my person but a knife, a pencil, a fountain pen and some pieces of paper. Nothing very promising in any of them."

At that moment the sky became fused with reddish light. Over the horizon appeared a shining orb. Far-away hills and valleys leaped into sight. Then for the first time Carruthers noted the high plateau upon which he had spent the night. Had they ventured a hundred yards farther during the night they would have plunged into the rocky floor of a canyon a thousand feet below.

"Let's see if we can find a way down to the valley," he suggested. "If we get anything to eat it will have to come from trees. This plateau is barren of any form of vegetable matter."

They found a winding descent leading downward. It looked like a path that had been worn by the passage of many feet.

"Someone's been here before us," he exclaimed. "The ground is too well worn to be accidental."

"Look! Look!" pointed Nanette. Her face had become pale from the excitement of her discovery. "What is it, Aaron?"

Carruthers bent forward to examine the strange footprint. It was nearly two feet across and divided in the center, as if the animal that made it had but two toes.

"From the size of the tracks and the length of the animal's stride, I should say it was some form of an amphibious dinosaur long extinct in our own world."

"Are they dangerous?"

"It all depends upon the species. Some of them are pure vegetarians; others are carnivorous. The heavy tramping we heard during the night evidently came from the beast who left these footprints."

They had come upon the footprints where the path made a turn, leading into a dense growth of trees and underbrush. And as Carruthers knelt beside the path he heard a rustle as of something moving directly behind him. Wonderingly, he turned his head to trace the disturbance. But the woods seemed empty. "Strange," he murmured. "Did you hear something moving in back of us, Nan?"

Nan shook her head. "You don't think we're in any danger from these beasts, do you?"

Carruthers said nothing for the moment. Instead, he looked sharply in all directions and saw nothing. "Let's push on till we come to some kind of a shelter. Perhaps we'll find people much like ourselves."

Down the path they hurried, glancing curiously right and left at unknown flowers and trees. A bird with brilliant feathers skimmed above their heads, uttering shrill cries. Other voices from the birds and animals in the woods took up the cry. The woods grew denser as they pushed into the unknown.

In the woods at their right a rodent squeaked as some larger animal pounced upon it. Presently they came to a pool of water roughly seventy feet across. While they knelt to quench their thirst they saw two young deer eyeing them from the far side. Soft feet pattered behind the kneeling couple. Carruthers half whirled as he rose to his feet and peered into the jungle behind him.

A blur of reddish brown vanished behind a tree. Man or animal Carruthers couldn't determine. He grasped Nanette by the arm and pulled her back to the path.

"Quick!" he whispered. "There's someone or something following us. I'm sure of it now."

Nanette's voice trembled slightly. "What is it, Aaron?"

"I don't know." He turned his head again. This time he saw the thing that was following. A low ejaculation of alarm escaped his lips. A gigantic ape! The mouth of the creature sagged grotesquely, revealing two rows of yellow fangs. And its orange colored eyes were burning coals set close together. Carruthers sucked in a deep breath.

"Run, Nan," he gritted. "I'll try and scare him away."

Simultaneously with the scream of fright from the startled girl, a huge mountain of grayish flesh and bones blocked the downward slope of the path. Carruthers paled as he turned and faced the new menace.

Coming directly toward them he saw an immense animal so great in size that it seemed to shut out the light. A prehistoric dinosaur! It came slowly and leisurely, swinging its great red mouth from side to side. Other denizens in the woods, sensing the presence of the huge killer, fled in a panic of alarm. Their shrill cries increased the terror that froze the hearts of the two earth people.

Nanette clung to her companion in abject terror, unable to move. Her

fear stricken eyes were wild and staring as the mountain of flesh pushed towards them.

The animal's long neck arched far in front of its body, and its long, pointed tail remained out of sight within the trees.

Carruthers backed off the path into the underbrush, dragging the girl after him. The jaws of the huge animal opened wide with anticipation. Lumberingly he turned from the path and followed. Trees crashed before its gigantic bulk. The woods became a bedlam of snapping branches.

The horrified scream of the girl ended in a gurgling sigh. She toppled to the ground in a dead faint. Carruthers flung himself beside her crumpled body and gathered it into his arms. A quick glance he threw at the spot where he had last seen the gigantic ape. The animal was no longer there. It had disappeared.

The man's lips became a hard, straight line. Even as he straightened to his feet the leaves and branches of an overturned tree whipped his face. The red mouthed dinosaur was perilously near. So close that Carruthers could smell its great, glistening body. The odor was musky and foul.

Stumbling blindly he attempted to widen the distance between himself and his pursuer. But the hungry dinosaur pounded steadily on its course. There was no getting away from it. Its beady eyes sought out its prey and its keen smell told it exactly where the earth beings were.

On and on staggered Carruthers. The extra burden of the girl hampered his movements. Unseen roots tripped him time and time again. Each time he scrambled to his feet and picked up the unconscious girl. Briars tore at his clothing and stung his hands.

The underbrush was thickening. A warm, dank smell clung to the vegetation now almost tropical in nature. Beads of sweat rolled down the man's forehead and into his eyes. But the horrible fear of those red, dripping jaws spurred him to renewed efforts.

He doubled to the left, hoping to throw the animal off his tracks. The undergrowth seemed to thin out at this point. Renewed hope flowed through the young scientist's blood. He stumbled on blindly, scarce watching where his feet were taking him. A sigh of relief came to his lips. Ahead of him he saw a clearing. His stride lengthened and he broke into a shambling run.

Then it was he saw, towering walls rising up on both sides of him—

steep walls that he could never scale, even if alone. He tried to change his course, but the huge bulk of the pursuing dinosaur effectively blocked his path. There was no alternative but to push on and pray for an opening in the rugged cliffs.

Abruptly a sigh of despair escaped his lips. The walls of the canyon narrowed suddenly, and across it stretched a wall of bare rock. He realized too late that he had returned to the base of the plateau where he had spent the night. The grim, towering walls hemmed him in completely from three sides. At the fourth side bulked the dinosaur, coming slowly, ponderously.

Beady eyes peered down cunningly at the helpless man and woman. Confident now that its prey couldn't escape, it extended its huge bulk across the narrow canyon for a leisurely killing.

Carruthers glared at the monster with fear-distended eyes. In his heart he realized that there was no escape. He had no means of defense, no way to combat the huge monster but flight. And even that was now denied him.

Closer and closer inched the killer until its great, red mouth appeared like the fire box of a huge boiler. Hot breath fanned the man's cheek. The nauseous odor of the beast made his stomach wrench. He

dropped to his knees close to the inert figure of the girl and glared vengefully into the beady eyes.

The gaping mouth at the end of a long, supple neck jerked forward. Carruthers dragged the girl away just in time to escape the gnashing teeth. The dinosaur stamped angrily.

Once again Carruthers felt its hot breath beating upon his face. He cringed at the thought of this kind of death. No one would ever know how it happened. Not even his closest friend, Karl Danzig! What a mess things were. Why didn't the red mouth of the mighty dinosaur close over him and crush out life? Why must he kneel in torture?

From near at hand a piercing scream rang through the air. A harsh scream. A terrifying scream!

Carruthers raised his head. The dinosaur had twisted around to glare hatefully at the disturber of its meal. Other screams splintered the forest air. And as the kneeling man watched he saw the great red ape who had been dodging his footsteps a short time before, slouch between the dinosaur's hulking body and the wall of the cliff. Behind it came others—black mammals with curving arms that dragged along the ground.

Their fangs were bared. They were in an ugly mood. Arriving in front of the dinosaur and less than four feet from the earth man and woman, the leader silenced its followers with a low growl and turned in concentrated fury upon the dinosaur. Its long arms drummed a throbbing tattoo upon its hairy chest.

The dinosaur bellowed protestingly against the attitude of the apes and gorillas. The ape leader protested with equal violence. The dinosaur shifted uneasily, wagging its heavy head from side to side. On all sides came deep growls from the mammals.

Carruthers watched all this display torn between doubt and fear. Which side would win? How could the apes and gorillas, huge as they were, hope to force the dinosaur away? But the apes were masters. This much was apparent. Inch by inch the dinosaur backed away, glaring vengefully. And having reached a spot where it could turn around it did so. Presently the ground trembled as it made off through the steaming jungle. The leader of the mammals turned and faced the earth people. Long, searching minutes passed. Its close set eyes seemed to be studying them.

Nanette stirred and opened her eyes. The sight of the anthropoids caused her to recoil.

"Steady, Nan," spoke Carruthers softly.

Other apes and gorillas gathered around the giant red animal. They displayed no hostility, only an intense interest. One by one they squatted before the earth people until they formed a half circle, reaching from the one wall of the rocky plateau to the other.

While they sat there it began to grow dark. Carruthers removed his watch and ventured a glance at it. Daylight had lasted less then three hours. An hour for twilight, then it would be dark. Evidently the cycle around the nucleus of the atom took approximately ten hours.

Nanette sat up. "Aaron!"

He answered without removing his eyes from the red ape less then four feet away. "Don't look at me, Nan. Concentrate on the big, red fellow. He's evidently in control. If we act the least bit frightened they might decide to destroy us."

"What are they waiting for? Why don't they go away?"

"We'll know before long. I imagine they're trying to figure out who we are and what we are doing on their tiny planet."

Darkness descended rapidly. Overhead, a small moon rose

majestically in the heavens and started its journey through the night. Its faint light revealed the fact that the apes showed no intentions of leaving. They still squatted before the earth people, in a half circle of staring brown eyes.

Whatever fear Carruthers had felt towards the animals died away. "They're harmless," he told Nanette. "Get some sleep if you can."

Long after the tired girl had drifted into slumber Carruthers sat with his back against the wall, mentally trying to figure the whole thing out. The dinosaur was real enough. Yet the apemen had frightened it away, in fact had compelled it to go without actually engaging in combat. No question about it. The anthropoids were in control. But who controlled them?

Quite suddenly his eyes snapped open. Daylight had come again. He must have fallen asleep. The shrill chatter of the apeman came to his ears. The red ape leader shuffled to his feet and looked from the earth people to the spot in the jungle whence came the chatter. Abruptly he opened his mouth and emitted a flood of gibberish sounds.

The gorillas and apes at his side flattened their bodies against the rocky walls in attitudes of expectant waiting.

"What's happening?" gasped the girl.

"There's no telling," whispered Aaron. "It must be someone or something of importance. Note the expressions of awe and reverence on the faces of the apemen. My God, Nanette, look!"

Out of the depths of the jungle emerged seven white beings—human or animal it was impossible to tell. They were huge creatures with the bodies of men. Erect of carriage, almost human in looks, they contrasted strangely with the red apes and the black gorillas. Six of them appeared to act as bodyguard for the seventh.

As they reached the space in front of the two earth people, the bodyguard stepped aside. The seventh white one came to a dead stop. Long and intently he stared at the man and girl crouched against the wall. And the scrutiny seemed to please him, for he smiled.

Carruthers eyed the figure uneasily. He saw what seemed to be a man dressed in a long, fibrous garment. With white hair and beard, it was a strange figure indeed for an apeman. He saw also that the eyes were well spaced, a mark of intelligence. The forehead was high and broad. And as Carruthers mentally studied the creature, strange and bizarre thoughts crossed his mind.

The mouth of the white apeman twitched as if he were going to speak. The heavy lips parted. A single word came to Carruthers' ear —"Man?"

Carruthers nodded. "We are from the earth."

The lips of the apeman moved painfully as if speech came with the utmost of difficulty. "The prophecy of the Great One has been fulfilled even as it has been written."

The red apes and black gorillas allowed their eyes to wander from their white leader to the two earth people. And their faces reflected the supernatural awe with which they regarded the earth people.

"It's uncanny that an animal can speak our language," breathed Nanette.

As if he hadn't heard her, Carruthers spoke again. "We are from the earth," he repeated. "We have been on your world many hours, and we are both hungry and thirsty."

"Words come hard," came from the lips of the white bearded one. "I have not used them for years."

"And who are you?" asked Carruthers.

The white bearded one paused as if to recall some distant echo from the past. "I am the last of the tribe of Esau. But come! This is no place for speech. Long have I and my followers waited for this hour."

Without another word he swung around. The six guards enclosed his aged body in a hollow square and the procession moved away. They came after a short journey to a natural opening leading to the heart of the plateau. The apes and gorillas, with the exception of the red leader, remained outside. The remainder of the party pushed through a tortuous tunnel until they reached a cavernous opening directly beneath the plateau. Vertical openings in the walls furnished light and air. The white chieftain spoke in a strange tongue to his followers, and they instantly prepared three couches in a far corner of the cavern.

As the earth people seated themselves on the skins that made up the couch they were both conscious of a far-away rumbling like peals of thunder. Not having seen any signs of a storm outside Carruthers turned inquiringly on the aged chieftain.

The old man's eyes were shadowed with grim foreboding. "I have ordered something to refresh you and your companion," he said. "Eat first, my friends. We will talk later."

The six body-guards left the main cavern. Presently they returned with large trays made of fanlike leaves resembling the palmetto. Fresh fruits and uncooked vegetables formed the bulk of the meal. In silence they ate. After the litter had been cleared away the guards withdrew with the exception of the giant red ape, who crouched near the opening to the tunnel.

"I am glad you have come," began the old chieftain, "but sorry, too. Our planet, or rather the higher forms of life upon it, are doomed."

Again there came to the ears of the earth people that far-off beat of sound that seemed to shake the ground. They looked to the white bearded leader for explanation.

"Ah, you hear it too," murmured the other. "For centuries, we of the great tribe of Esau have fought for the supremacy of our little world —ever since the Great One appeared in our midst and instructed us in world knowledge."

"And this Great One, as you call him," spoke Carruthers. "Who was he?"

"He was from your world. I never saw him. He comes to me as a legend. For years he toiled among us, teaching and instructing until

we mastered his language. He called himself Dahlgren. Later he ruled all the tribes. We of the Esau line he made into leaders because of our higher intelligence. The tribes of Zaku were trained for war. Perhaps you have noticed the chief of all the Zakus. He is crouching now beside the entrance to our inner walls. He is Marbo, and his followers live in the jungles."

"And does he talk as you do?"

The white chieftain shook his head. "No. Only we of the Esau tribe have mastered speech. Not counting the women of our tribe that comprise our numbers we are only seven in all."

"I owe Marbo my life as does also my companion," said Carruthers.

"Marbo looks upon you earth people as gods," spoke the old chieftain. "He and his followers will protect you with their lives."

"And who rules over and beyond?" questioned Carruthers, waving his arm to cover the remaining portion of the electron.

"There is no rule beyond except that of force. The Great One called them by name, Morosaurus, Diplodocus, the Horned Ceratosaurus, and many others whose names I have long forgotten. They are our

enemies whom we cannot destroy. And their numbers increase from year to year and are slowly backing us upon our last stronghold."

"Isn't there anything we can do?" asked Carruthers, feeling a quiver of apprehension along his spine.

Slowly, the old chieftain shook his head. "Nothing whatever. Marbo and his followers can control one or two, but when the herds begin to push on into our territory, we are doomed. Even now their rumblings and bellowings come through the jungles. Their thirst and hunger for flesh is enormous."

Carruthers turned upon the girl. "The old chief's words explain everything, Nan. Professor Dahlgren has been here and gone. He lived a lifetime in the span of a few hours earth-time. Now it looks as if we were destined to follow in his footsteps."

"I'm not afraid," said the girl. "Nothing can be worse than what we have already passed through." And her eyes softened as she placed her small hands within those of Carruthers. "We have each other, Aaron."

He smiled reassuringly and turned to the old chieftain. "I am Carruthers, a friend and assistant to Dahlgren. The girl here is

Nanette."

The chieftain smiled gravely. "And I am Zark. Welcome to my kingdom, Carruthers and Nanette. We need you here. Now tell me of your world, for long have I waited for a follower of the great Dahlgren to appear before my people."

Throughout the remainder of the day Carruthers talked. The shafts of light paled at the end of the short day. Night came, bringing with it a sense of security against the increasing hordes that thundered and trumpeted beyond the borders of the jungle.

In the morning Zark instructed Marbo to remain close to Carruthers at all times. So the young scientist left the cavern and ascended the path leading to the top of the plateau. He looked at his watch and compared the second hand with the nucleus atom sailing across the heavens to estimate its speed.

Days passed as he made his observations. Meanwhile he had searched and found the exact spot wherein he and Nanette had first stepped foot onto the electron. This spot he carefully marked off with a ring of huge boulders carried up by the followers of Marbo. Then he began to calculate upon his pad. There must be no mistakes. He and Nanette must be within the magic circle at the estimated

time.

Between times he helped Nanette construct their living quarters in the cavern. Zark had furnished them with skins and furs with which to cover the walls. Carruthers made a fireplace of stones and restored the lost art of fire to Zark, Marbo and their followers.

Days slipped by like minutes. Short days filled with excursions into the jungles. Carruthers' face soon bristled with a stubble of beard. This lengthened with time. Sharp thorns tore their clothes to ribbons. Nanette, womanlike, cried many times during the nights because of the lack of a mirror and a comb for her untidy hair.

But other and more important events soon claimed the attention of the earth people. Day by day the herds of dinosaurs and other monsters of like breed edged closer and closer to the tiny civilization around the plateau. It worried Carruthers so much that he sought out Zark and had him bring the other six members of his tribe together for a council of war.

"A complete defensive system, Zark," he told them. "We must make a fortress of the plateau and fill the caverns with food."

Zark shook his head. "No. It is quite useless. Followers of Marbo

have recently returned from over the beyond and report strange things. I have hesitated to speak of them for fear of alarming you. Our planet is breaking up. Violent eruptions have caused fires of stone and mud. The rumblings you have heard were not made entirely by our enemies. They came from the ground.

"An earthquake," murmured Carruthers, momentarily stunned by the news. "But they are always of short duration, Zark. We have them on our own planet."

"Ah, but these are different. They cover the whole of our globe. The great Dahlgren noted them while he was with us. He wrote many words and figures on paper concerning them. Only yesterday I unearthed these records. The life of our planet was doomed to destruction during the present year. What matter if the herds of dinosaurs overrun us and destroy lives? In the end they, too, will be destroyed. It is fate. We can do nothing."

Even as the old chieftain spoke a gigantic rumbling, greater in intensity than any heretofore, shook the electron. Above the deep rolling disturbance underground rose the shrill cries of the apemen.

Carruthers leaped to his feet and raced through the tunnel. A herd of dinosaurs choked the path leading to the outside entrance. Marbo

brushed past him, shrilling in great excitement.

"Drive them away!" ordered Carruthers. "Like this!" He hurled a rock at the eye of the nearest animal.

The dinosaur bellowed and backed away. The apes, and gorillas, used to fighting only with their long arms, caught on to the stunt with surprising quickness. Their powerful arms reached out. Stones and boulders began to hurtle from the mouth of the tunnel. They thudded against the heads of the great monsters like hailstones.

Subdued and frightened by this sudden display of force, the monsters withdrew down the path. But the apemen had discovered a new method of warfare. They found a childish delight in hurling stones. Within a few minutes the slope was barren of rocks. The animals followed up their momentary advantage and ran screaming down the path. The dinosaurs fled in panic.

As soon as the enemy had been driven away, Carruthers pointed out to Marbo the advantage of gathering the stones up from the ground and returning them to the space around the mouth of the tunnel so that he and his followers would be ready for a second repulse.

Zark appeared at this moment and helped with the explanation. His

crafty old eyes turned with new respect upon the earthman.

Carruthers toiled with them every day from then on, building and fortifying the plateau against further incursions of the monsters. Security and peace reigned for several weeks then hostilities broke out afresh.

The rumblings of the electron had increased with each passing week. Volcanic eruptions poured fresh discharges of molten lava and fiery sparks along the edges of the jungles.

"I don't want to needlessly alarm you, Nan," he told her that night, "but the fires have started. Zark was right. Unless we have rain before to-morrow morning the heat and smoke will drive us out into the open."

"But we can go to the top of the plateau," suggested the girl. "There aren't any trees—"

A concentrated bellowing cut off the rest of her words. Driven towards higher ground by the heat of the flames, the dinosaurs were trampling up the path leading to the tunnel.

Once again Carruthers rallied his army of apemen around him and

attempted to drive the mammals away. As they reached the end of the tunnel a cloud of dense smoke stung their eyes. The apemen shrilled in a sudden panic and forgot all their previous training in driving off the dinosaurs. Like scurrying rats they scattered.

Flames from the conflagration broke through the smoke—flames that leaped and twisted skyward.

Carruthers flung off the fear that held him spellbound and started along up the path leading to the top of the plateau. A disheveled figure appeared suddenly at his side—Nanette!

"Come," he whispered, hoarsely. "We've got to get out of this or we'll choke to death."

"But Zark," breathed the girl, "He and his followers are still in the cavern. We can't leave them."

Like one demented of reason, Carruthers raced back along the tunnel to the cavern. "Zark!" he shouted.

The sound of his voice was drowned in the welter of screaming bedlam coming up from below as the dinosaurs and apes fought for the supremacy of life. But of Zark and his six followers he found

absolutely no sign. Quickly he hurried back to where he had left Nanette.

Even as he reached the spot he had a sudden premonition of danger. A gorilla, huge and black, brushed past him on the path, carrying a limp burden under his shaggy arm.

"Stop!" commanded Carruthers, hurrying after the animal.

A huge arm knocked him sprawling. Spitting blood Carruthers staggered to his feet. Up to this time he had felt no fear of the gorillas. They had been orderly and well behaved. Fearful that harm would come to the girl he ran after the dark figure ahead. The red glow of flames swept nearer. The gorilla came to a stop and faced its pursuer. Lust shone from its close-set eyes—lust and passion.

Carruthers stopped dead in his tracks. "Drop her!" he demanded.

The animal snarled hoarsely. There came the sound of ripping cloth. Nanette screamed—a terrifying scream that echoed and re-echoed through the electron night.

It was then that the thin cloak of civilization dropped from Aaron Carruthers' back. He became in a single moment an animal fighting

for his mate. With a snarl equally vicious as that of the gorilla pawing at the helpless girl, he lunged forward.

Mouthing his rage, the gorilla flung the earth man to the ground. Carruthers came up frothing at the mouth. With grim intensity he fastened himself to the animal's free arm. The raging mammal staggered helplessly under the extra burden and dropped the girl to concentrate his fury on the man. It raised a hairy arm aloft for the smashing blow. Instinctively Carruthers released his hold.

At that very moment the electron lurched sickeningly, causing them both to lose their footing. The violent upheaval sent Carruthers one way and the gorilla the other. While the man stumbled to his feet to resume battle he saw the infuriated monster stagger over the edge of the plateau wall into a sheer drop of a thousand feet.

Starkly through the night came the growling roars of the giant beasts from the jungles below. Nanette fluttered to his side. Her dress was torn and dragged on the ground. For all her disheveled appearance she was still beautiful to look upon. Forgetful of the danger on all sides of him, the animal in Carruthers saw in her pitifully half-clad body the same thing that the beast had desired. His head whirled hotly.

"Aaron!" she pleaded as his arm reached out to clutch her.

Hungrily he drew her to him. The pale light of the electron moon mingled with the roaring blast of the flames. Madness inflamed his heart and pounded his blood.

"Don't, Aaron," protested the girl, trying to free herself.

Something in the quality of the girl's frightened tones brought the man back to normal. He fought against the overwhelming desire to possess with all the force of his nature. And the better half triumphed. No longer was he an animal, but a reasoning human being. With a faint sigh he released her and wiped a hand across his dripping forehead.

"I'm sorry, Nan," he murmured. "That great brute drove me mad for an instant. I'm all right now."

Together they stood in the electron night and watched death creep closer and closer. The plateau was entirely surrounded with flames now and the heat was increasing with each passing moment. As it increased they backed towards the center.

From under their feet came the choking cries of the apemen. They

had returned to the cavern only to be overcome by smoke fumes. While yet the earth people stood there waiting and watching the red death creep nearer, the path leading downward into the jungle became a mass of moving shadows.

"The dinosaurs!" cried Nanette. "Oh, Aaron! We are lost!"

"Steady, girl," soothed the man. "If we stand still they might not see us in the dark. The smoke will destroy our scent."

But as the minutes passed the herd of monsters increased. They crowded along the path and spread out over the top of the plateau. Once again the smell of their glistening bodies fouled the nostrils of the earth people.

Slowly Carruthers guided Nanette back towards the ring of rocks—perhaps the barrier would serve to keep the animals away. He scrambled across one of the boulders and pulled the girl after him. As he did so, a violent subterranean action shook the electron from one end to the other.

Carruthers braced his feet against the ring of rocks to keep from pitching headlong to the ground. Nanette clung to him wordlessly. All around them the giant forces of nature raged sullenly. Twisting

seams appeared in the rocky floor of the plateau from which oozed gaseous vapors.

"Courage," soothed Carruthers as he held the quivering body of the frightened girl close to his own. "This can't last."

But the ground continued to lurch and heave on its axis. Vivid lights crossed and criss-crossed the atomic heavens. The fissures in the ground appeared now as black canals. The lower part of the circle of boulders disappeared. Off to the right came despairing screams. White bodies glowed for an instant against the background of flames.

"Zark!" shouted Carruthers, as he saw the leader of the tribe of Esau and his followers making their way along the plateau top.

Zark must have heard the earth-man's voice, for he started forward at a run. Simultaneously there appeared a herd of the greatest of all the prehistoric monsters—the Brontosaurus. They balked enormously against the flame-licked skies. Zark and his followers attempted to avoid them. But fear of the scorching flames drove the monsters forward. There followed a maddening moment of unutterable pain for the remaining ones of the tribe of Esau, then the herd trampled them underfoot and rumbled towards the half circle of rocks where

the two earth people were crouched.

The leader of the Brontosaurus herd trumpeted madly and barged for the higher ground of safety. Too late did instinct warn it of the widening fissure underfoot. Before it could stop the pressure of the herd drove it into the crevice.

Carruthers drew back to the extreme inside edge of the boulders trying to still his ears against their insane bellowings. A cloud of heavy, choking smoke enveloped him for a moment then passed away. Then it was that he saw a new star in the atomic heavens,—a star that seemed to burn with the brilliance of a meteor. Even as he watched he was conscious of it drawing closer.

The planet was now in a continuous uproar. The ground was heaving and trembling as if from some inward strain. This was the end. Carruthers realized it with a sinking heart. In another minute the electron would disintegrate into a flaming mass of matter and fling itself from its orbit around the atom.

And then the light from the approaching star struck them in a blinding radiance of vermilion flames. Carruthers held his breath. Some invisible force seemed to take possession of his body and that of the girl at his side. The rocky plateau, now a boiling mass of

rocks, dropped from under their feet. Clear, cold air enveloped their bodies. Then with the speed of light their bodies were hurled through planetary space, up, up, up into the vast reaches of the higher ether.

Darkness assailed them. The flames from the jungle fire vanished into nothingness. The electron moon paled to the size of a pin point, then went out.

Carruthers had the feeling of expansion and growth. It was as if his body was taking on the size of the whole world. It seemed to last for hours, days, ages. But all the while he clung fast to the slender, quivering body of Nanette.

Mountains and hills suddenly blazed before his eyes. Straight up and down mountains. He tried to stir his sluggish mind into action. What did they mean? Where had he seen them before? And while yet his mind struggled with the problem the mountains dwindled like melting snow. The pressure around his body relaxed. A blinding glare of steady light played upon his face. Then all was quietness and peace.

"Nan! Aaron!" The voice was Karl's.

Dazedly they looked around. What had once been mountains were

now desks and chairs. They were back again in the laboratory. Several agonizing minutes passed before either could grasp the startling change in things. The horror of the electronic disaster still filled their minds to overflowing.

Carruthers recovered first. He stepped from the railed inclosure marking the spot where the atomic beam had restored them after their space flight, and guided the girl to a chair. Karl's face was drawn and white as his eyes rested on the two pitiful figures that had materialized out of the ether.

"Don't ask us any questions yet," spoke Carruthers in a tired voice. "We've passed through too many horrors. What was the matter, Karl? Couldn't you get the rays to work sooner?"

"Sooner?" Danzig's eyes were wide with wonder. He glanced at his watch. "It was a little difficult to control both machines all alone, but I switched off the ray from the inverse dimensional tubes and turned on the other immediately. All in all it must have taken me fifteen seconds."

"Fifteen seconds," repeated Carruthers, dazedly. "It's unbelievable." He dropped wearily into a chair and rested his forehead in the palms of his hands. "How long have we been gone, Nan?"

Nanette pulled the ragged remnants of a dress around her knees and attempted a smile. "Almost four months, according to the passage of time on the electron."

"Impossible!" whispered Danzig, shutting his eyes to the truth.

Aaron Carruthers pointed to his clothes, now ragged and torn. "Look, Karl! Everything I have on is worn out completely. Observe my hair and beard, and the soles of my shoes. Human reason to the contrary, Nanette and I have lived like two animals for four months, and all in the space of fifteen seconds earth time. How can you account for it? We figured it out on paper. And we've proved it with our bodies. What it will mean to future civilization I can't foretell. It's beyond imagination."

And the laboratory became silent as a tomb as the three people tried with all the strength of their minds to grasp the miracle of the strange and unfathomable atomic rays.

#54 An Extra Man, By Jackson Gee:

Sealed and vigilantly guarded was "Drayle's invention, 1932"—for it was a scientific achievement beyond which man dared not go.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

Harry turns into a thick smoke, and gets sucked into a big hole in the machine."

- - -

Sealed and vigilantly guarded was "Drayle's Invention, 1932"——
for it was a scientific achievement beyond which man dared not go.

- - -

Rays of the August mid-day sun pouring through the museum's glass roof beat upon the eight soldiers surrounding the central exhibit,

which for thirty years has been under constant guard. Even the present sweltering heat failed to lessen the men's careful observation of the visitors who, from time to time, strolled listlessly about the room.

The object of all this solicitude scarcely seemed to require it. A great up-ended rectangle of polished steel some six feet square by ten or a dozen feet in height, standing in the center of Machinery Hall, it suggested nothing sinister or priceless. Two peculiarities, however, marked it as unusual—the concealment of its mechanism and the brevity of its title. For while the remainder of the exhibits located around it varied in the simplicity or complexity of their design, they were alike in the openness of their construction and detailed explanation of plan and purpose. The great steel box, however, bore merely two words and a date: "Drayle's Invention, 1932."

It was, nevertheless, toward this exhibit that a pleasant appearing white-haired old gentleman and a small boy were slowly walking when a change of guard occurred. The new men took their posts without words while the relieved detail turned down a long corridor that for a moment echoed with the clatter of hobnailed boots on stone. Then all was surprisingly still. Even the boy was impressed into reluctant silence as he viewed the uniformed men, though not for long.

“What's that, what's that, what's that?" he demanded presently with shrill imperiousness. "Grandfather, what's that?" An excited arm indicated the exhibit with its soldier guard.

"If you can keep still long enough," replied the old gentleman patiently, "I'll tell you."

And with due regard for rheumatic limbs he slowly settled himself on a bench and folded his hands over the top of an ebony cane preparatory to answering the youngster's question. His inquisitor, however, was, at the moment, being hauled from beneath a brass railing by the sergeant of the watch.

"You'll have to keep an eye on him, sir," said the man reproachfully. "He was going to try his knife on the wood-work when I caught him."

"Thank you, Sergeant. I'll do my best—but the younger generation, you know."

"Sit still, if possible!" he directed the squirming boy. "If not, we'll start home now."

The non-com took a new post within easy reaching distance of the

disturber and attempted to glare impressively.

"Go on, grandfather, tell me. What's D-r-a-y-l-e? What's in the box? Can't they open it? What are the soldiers for? Must they stay here? Why?"

"Drayle," said the old man, breaking through the barrage of questions, "was a close friend of mine a good many years ago."

"How many, grandfather? Fifty? As much as fifty? Did father know him? Is father fifty?"

"Forty; no; yes; no," said the harassed relative; and then with amazing ignorance inquired: "Do you really care to hear or do you just ask questions to exercise your tongue?"

"I want to hear the story, grandpa. Tell me the story. Is it a nice story? Has it got bears in it? Polar bears? I saw a polar bear yesterday. He was white. Are polar bears always white? Tell me the story, grandpa."

The old man turned appealing eyes toward the sergeant. Tacitly a sympathetic understanding was established. The warrior also was a father, and off the field of battle he had known defeat.

"Leave me handle him, sir," he suggested. "I've the like of him at home."

"I'd be very much indebted to you if you would."

Thus encouraged, the soldier produced from an inner pocket and offered one of those childhood sweets known as an "all day sucker."

"See if you can choke yourself on that," he challenged.

The clamor ceased immediately.

"It always works, sir," explained the man of resource. "The missus says as how it'll ruin their indigestions, but I'm all for peace even if I am in the army."

Now that his vocal organs were temporarily plugged, the child waved a demanding arm in the direction of the main exhibit to indicate a desire for the resumption of the narrative. But the ancient was not anxious to disturb so soon the benign and acceptable silence. In fact it was not until he observed the sergeant's look of inquiry that he began once more.

"That box," he said slowly, "is both a monument and a milestone on the road to mankind's progress in mechanical invention. It marks the

point beyond which Drayle's contemporaries believed it was unsafe to go: for they felt that inventions such as his would add to the complexities of life, and that if a halt were not made our own machines would ultimately destroy us.

"I did not, still do not, believe it. And I know Drayle's spirit broke when the authorities sealed his last work in that box and released him upon parole to abandon his experiments."

As the speaker sighed in regretful reminiscence, the sergeant glanced at his men. Apparently all was well: the only visible menace lolled within easy arm's reach, swinging his short legs and sucking noisily on his candy. Nevertheless the non-com shifted to a slightly better tactical position as he awaited the continuance of the tale.

“Christopher Drayle," said the elderly gentleman, "was the greatest man I have ever known, as well as the finest. Forty years or more ago we were close friends. Our homes on Long Island adjoined and I handled most of his legal affairs. He was about forty-five or six then, but already famous.

"His rediscovery of the ancient process of tempering copper had made him one of the wealthiest men in the land and enabled him to devote his time to scientific research. Electricity and chemistry were

his specialties, and at the period of which I speak he was deeply engrossed in problems of radio transmission.

"But he had many interests and not infrequently visited our local country club for an afternoon of golf. Sometimes I played around the course with him and afterward, over a drink, we would talk. His favorite topic was the contribution of science to human welfare. And even though I could not always follow him when he grew enthusiastic about some new theory I was always puzzled.

"It was at such a time, when we had been discussing the new and first successful attempt to send moving pictures by radio, that I mentioned the prophecy of Jackson Gee. Gee was the writer of fantastic, pseudo-scientific tales who had said: 'We shall soon be able to resolve human beings into their constituent elements, transmit them by radio to any desired point and reassemble them at the other end. We shall do this by means of vibrations. We are just beginning to learn that vibrations are the key to the fundamental process of all life.'

“I laughed as I quoted this to Drayle, for it seemed to me the ravings of a lunatic. But Drayle did not smile. 'Jackson Gee,' he said, 'is nearer to the truth than he imagines. We already know the elements that make the human body, and we can put them together in their

proper proportions and arrangements: but we have not been able to introduce the vitalizing spark, the key vibrations to start it going. We can reproduce the human machine, but we can not make it move. We can destroy life in the laboratory, and we can prolong it, but so far we have not been able to create it. Yet I tell you in all seriousness that that time will come; that time will come.'

"I was surprised at his earnestness and would have questioned him further. But a boy appeared just then with a message that Drayle was wanted at the telephone.

"Something important, sir," he said. Drayle went off to answer the summons and later he sent word that he had been called away and would not be able to return.

"It was the last I heard from Drayle for months. He shut himself in his laboratory and saw no one but his assistants, Ward of Boston, and Buchannon of Washington. He even slept in the workshop and had his food sent in.

"Ordinarily I would not have been excluded, for I had his confidence to an unusual degree and I had often watched him work. I admired the deft movements of his hands. He had the certain touch and style of a master. But during that period he admitted only his aids.

“Consequently I felt little hope of reaching him one morning when it was necessary to have his signature to some legal documents. Yet the urgency of the case led me to go to his home on the chance that I might be able to get him long enough for the business that concerned us. Luck was with me, for he sent out word that he would see me in a few minutes. I remember seating myself in the office that opened off his laboratory and wondering what was beyond the door that separated us. I had witnessed some incredible performances in the adjoining room.

"At last Drayle came in. He looked worried and careworn. There were new lines in his face and blue half-circles of fatigue beneath his eyes. It was evident that it was long since he had slept. He apologized for having kept me waiting and then, without examining the papers I offered, he signed his name nervously in the proper spaces. When I gathered the sheets together he turned abruptly toward the laboratory, but at the door he paused and smiled.

"'Give my respects to Jackson Gee,' he said."

“Who's Jackson Gee? Does father know him? Has he any polar bears? Aren't you going to tell me about that?"

The tidal wave of questions almost overwhelmed the historian and

his auditor. But the military, fortunately, was equal to the emergency. With a tactical turn of his hand he thrust the remnant of the lollypop between the chattering jaws and spoke with sharp rapidity.

"Listen," he commanded, "that there, what you got, is a magic candy, and if you go on exposing it to the air after it is once in your mouth it's likely to disappear, just like that." And the speed of the translation was illustrated by a smart snapping of the fingers.

Doubt shone in the juvenile terror's eyes and the earlier generations waited fearfully while skepticism and greed waged their recurrent conflict. For a time it seemed as if the veteran had blundered; but finally greed triumphed and a temporary peace ensued.

"Where was I?" inquired the interrupted narrator when the issue of battle was settled.

"You was talking about Jackson Gee," answered the guardsman in a cautiously low tone.

"So I was, so I was," the old gentleman agreed somewhat vaguely, nodding his head. He gazed at the sergeant with mingled awe and admiration. "I suppose it's quite useless to mention it," he said rather wistfully, "but if you ever get out of the army and should want a

job.... You could name your own salary, you know?" The question ended on an appealing note.

Evidently the soldier understood the digression, for he replied in a tone that would brook no dispute. "No, sir, I couldn't consider it."

"I was afraid so," said the other regretfully, and added, with apparent irrelevance, "I have to live with him, you see."

"Tough luck," commiserated the listener.

Reluctantly summoning his thoughts from the pleasant contemplation of what had seemed to offer a new era of peace, the bard turned to his story.

A few hours later," he continued, "I had a telephone call from Drayle's wife, and I realized from the fright in her voice that something dreadful had happened. She asked me to come to the house at once. Chris had been hurt. But she disconnected before I could ask for details. I started immediately and I wondered as I drove what disaster had overtaken him. Anything, it seemed to me, might have befallen in that room of miracles. But I was not prepared to find that Drayle had been shot and wounded.

"The police were before me and already questioning the assailant, Mrs. Farrel, a fiery tempered young Irish-woman. When I entered the room she was repeating half-hysterically her explanation that Drayle had killed her husband in the laboratory that morning.

"'Right before my eyes, I seen it,' she shouted. 'Harry was standing on a sort of platform looking at a big machine like, and so help me he didn't have a stitch of clothes on, and I started to say something, but all at once there came a terrible sort of screech and a flash like lightnin' kinda, in front of him. Then Harry turns into a sort of thick smoke and I can see right through him like he was a ghost; and then the smoke gets sucked into a big hole in the machine and I know Harry's dead. And here's this man what done it, just a standin' there, grinnin' horrid. So something comes over me all at once and I points Harry's gun at him and pulls the trigger!'

"Even before the woman had finished I recalled what I seen one afternoon in Drayle's laboratory many months before. I had been there for some time watching him when he placed a small tumbler on a work table and asked me if I had ever seen glass shattered by the vibrations of a violin. I told him that I had, but he went through the demonstration as if to satisfy himself. Of course when he drew a bow across the instrument's strings and produced the proper pitch the goblet cracked into pieces exactly as might have been expected. And

I wondered why Drayle concerned himself with so childish an experiment before I noticed that he appeared to have forgotten me completely.

“I endeavored then not to disturb him, and I remember trying to draw myself out of his way and feeling that something momentous was about to take place. Yet actually I believe it would have required a considerable commotion to have distracted his attention, for his ability to concentrate was one of the characteristics of his genius.

"I saw him place another glass on the table and I noticed then that it stood directly in front of a complicated mechanism. At first this gave out a low humming sound, but it soon rose to an unearthly whining shriek. I shrank from it involuntarily and a second later I was amazed at the sight of the glass, seemingly reduced to a thin vapor, being drawn into a funnel-like opening near the top of the device. I was too startled to speak and could only watch as Drayle started the contrivance again. Once more its noise cut through me with physical pain. I cried out. But my voice was overwhelmed by the terrific din of the mysterious machine.

"Then Drayle strode down the long room to another intricate mass of wire coils and plates and lamps. And I saw a dim glow appear in two of the bulbs and heard a noise like the crackling of paper. Drayle

made some adjustments, and presently I observed a peculiar shimmering of the air above a horizontal metal grid. It reminded me of heat waves rising from a summer street, until I saw the vibrations were taking a definite pattern; and that the pattern was that of the glass I had seen dissolved into air. At first the image made me think of a picture formed by a series of horizontal lines close together but broken at various points in such fashion as to create the appearance of a line by the very continuity of the fractures. But as I watched, the plasma became substance. The air ceased to quiver and I was appalled to see Drayle pick up the tumbler and carry it to a scale on which he weighed it with infinite exactness. If he had approached me with it at that moment I would have fled in terror.

“Next, Drayle filled the goblet with some liquid which immediately afterward he measured in a beaker. The result seemed to please him, for he smiled happily. At the same instant he became aware of my presence. He looked surprised and then a trifle disconcerted. I could see that he was embarrassed by the knowledge that I had witnessed so much, and after a second or two he asked my silence. I agreed at once, not only because he requested it but because I couldn't believe the evidence myself. He let me out then and locked the door.

"It was this recollection that made me credit the woman's story. But I was sick with dread, for in spite of my faith in Drayle's genius I

feared he had gone mad.

"Mrs. Drayle had listened to Mrs. Farrel's account calmly enough, but I could see the fear in her eyes when she signaled a wish to speak to me alone. I followed her into an adjoining room, leaving Mrs. Farrel with the two policemen and the doctor, who was trying to quiet her.

"As soon as the door closed after us Mrs. Drayle seized my hands.

"'Tim,' she whispered, 'I'm horribly afraid that what the woman says is true. Chris has told me of some wonderful things he was planning to do, but I never expected he would experiment on human beings. Can they send him to prison?'

"Of course I said what I could to comfort her and tried to make my voice sound convincing. At the time the legal aspect of the matter did not worry me so much as the fear that the attack on Drayle might prove fatal. For even if it should develop that he was not dangerously hurt, I imagined that the interruption of the experiment at a critical moment might easily have ruined whatever slim chance there had been of success. For us the nerve-wracking part was that we could do nothing until the surgeon who was attending Drayle could tell us how badly he was injured.

“At last word came that the bullet had only grazed Drayle's head and stunned him, but that he might remain unconscious for some time. Mrs. Drayle went in and sat at her husband's side, while I returned to the laboratory and found the police greatly bewildered as to whether they ought to arrest Drayle.

"They had discovered in a closet an outfit of men's clothing that Mrs. Farrel identified as her husband's, and, although they saw no other trace of the missing man, they had a desire to lock up somebody as an evidence of their activity. It took considerable persuasion to prevail upon them to withhold their hands. There was no such difficulty about restraining them in the laboratory. They were afraid to touch any apparatus, and they gave the invention a ludicrously wide berth.

"I never knew exactly how long it was that I paced about the lower floor of Drayle's home before the doctor summoned me and announced that the patient wanted me, but that I must be careful not to excite him. I have often wondered how many physicians would have to abandon their profession if they were deprived of that phrase. 'You must not excite the patient.'

"Drayle was already excited when I entered. In fact, he was furious at the doctor's efforts to restrain him. But I realized that my fear for

his reason was groundless. His remarks were lucid and forceful as he raged at the interference with his work. As soon as he saw me he appealed for assistance.

"'Make them let me alone. Tim,' he begged, as his wife and the doctor, partly by force and partly by persuasion, endeavored to hold him in bed. 'I must get back to the laboratory. That woman believes that I've killed her husband, and my assistant will think that we've failed.'

“I was about to argue with him when suddenly he managed to thrust the doctor aside and start toward the door. His seriousness impressed me so that I gave him a supporting arm and together we headed down the hall, with Mrs. Drayle and the doctor following anxiously in the rear. The laboratory was deserted and locked when we arrived. The police evidently felt it was too uncanny an atmosphere for a prolonged wait. Drayle opened the door, went directly to his machine, and examined it minutely.

"'Thank the Lord that woman hit only me!' he said, and sank into a chair. Then he asked for some brandy. Mrs. Drayle rushed off and reappeared in a minute with a decanter and glass. Drayle helped himself to a swallow that brought color to his cheeks and new strength to his limbs. Immediately after he turned again to the

machine. I dragged up a chair, assisted him into it, and seated myself close by.

"I knew little enough about mechanics, but I was fascinated by the numerous gauges that faced me on the gleaming instrument board. There were dials with needlelike hands that registered various numbers; spots of color appeared in narrow slots close to a solar spectrum: a stream of graph-paper tape flowed slowly beneath a tracing-pen point and carried away a jiggly thin line of purple ink. In a moment Drayle was oblivious of everything but his records. I watched him copy the indicated figures, surround them with formulas, and solve mysterious problems with a slide-rule.

"His calculations covered a large sheet before he had finished. At last he underscored three intricate combinations of letters and figures and carried the answers to his private radio apparatus. This operated on a wave length far outside the range of all others and insured him against interference. With it he was able to speak at any time with his assistants in Washington or Boston or with both at once. He threw the switch that sent his call into the air. An answer came instantly, and Drayle begin to talk to his distant lieutenants.

“We've been interrupted, gentlemen,' he said, 'but I think we may continue now. We'll reassemble in the Boston laboratory. Have you

arranged the elements? The coefficients are....' And he gave a succession of decimals.

"A voice replied that all was ready. Drayle said 'Excellent,' went back to his invention and twisted a black knob on the board before him.

"With this trifling movement all hell seemed to crash about us. The ghastly cacophony that I had experienced in the same room some months previously was as nothing. These stupendous waves of sound pounded us until it seemed as if we must disintegrate beneath them. Wails and screams engulfed us. Mrs. Drayle dropped to her knees beside her husband. The doctor seized my arm and I saw the knuckles of his hand turn white with the pressure of his grip, yet I felt nothing but the awful vibrations that drummed like riveting machines upon and through my nerves and body. It was not an attack upon the ears alone; it crashed upon the heart, beat upon the chest so that breathing seemed impossible. My brain throbbed under the terrific pulsations. For a while I imagined the human system could not endure the ordeal and that all of us must be annihilated.

"Except for his slow turning of the dials Drayle was motionless before the machine. Below the bandage about his forehead I could see his features drawn with anxiety. He had wagered a human life to

test his theory and I think the enormity of it had not struck him until that moment.

"What I knew and hoped enabled me to imagine what was taking place in the Boston laboratory. I seemed to see man's elementary dust and vapors whirled from great containers upward into a stratum of shimmering air and gradually assume the outlines of a human form that became first opaque, then solid, and then a sentient being. At the same instant I was conscious that the appalling pandemonium had ceased and that the voice of Drayle's Boston assistant was on the radio.

“Congratulations, Chief! His reassemblage is perfect. There's not a flaw anywhere.' "'Splendid,' Drayle answered. 'Bring him here by plane right away; his wife is worried about him.'

"Then Drayle turned to me.

"'You see,' he said, 'Jackson Gee was right. We have resolved man into his constituent elements, transmitted his key vibrations by radio, and reassembled him from a supply of identical elements at the other end. And now, if you will assure that woman that her husband is safe, I will get some sleep. You will have the proof before you in less than three hours.'

"I can't vouch for the doctor's feelings, but as Drayle left us I was satisfied that everything was as it should be, and that I had just witnessed the greatest scientific achievement of all time. I did not foresee, nor did Drayle, the results of an error or deliberate disobedience on the part of one of his assistants.

"We waited, the doctor and I, for the arrival of the man who, we were convinced, had been transported some three hundred miles in a manner that defied belief. The evidence would come, Drayle had said, in a few hours. Long before they had elapsed we were starting at the sound of every passing motor, for we knew that a plane must land some distance from the house and that the travelers would make the last mile or so by car.

"Mrs. Drayle endeavored to convince the imagined widow that her husband was safe and was returning speedily. Later she rejoined us, full of questions that we answered in a comforting blind faith. The time limit was drawing to a close when the sound of an automobile horn was quickly followed by a sharp knock on the laboratory door. At a sign from Mrs. Drayle one of the policemen opened it and we saw two men before us. One, a scholarly appearing, bespectacled youth, I recognized as Drayle's Boston assistant, Ward; the other, a rather burly individual, was a stranger to me. But there was no doubt he was the man we awaited so eagerly, for Mrs. Farrel screamed

'Harry! Harry!' and sped across the room towards him.

“At first she ran her fingers rather timidly over his face, and then pinched his huge shoulders, as if to assure herself of his reality. The sense of touch must have satisfied her, for abruptly she kissed him, flung her arms about him, clung to him, and crooned little endearments. The big man, in turn, patted her cheeks awkwardly and mumbled in a convincingly natural voice, "Sall right, Mary, old kid! There ain't nothin' to it. Yeah! Sure it's me!'

"Then I was conscious of Drayle's presence. A brown silk dressing gown fell shapelessly about his spare frame and smoke from his cigarette rose in a quivering blue-white stream. Ward spied him at the same moment and stepped forward with quick outstretched hands. I remember the flame of adoring zeal in the youngster's eyes as he tried to speak. At length he managed to stammer some congratulatory phrases while Drayle clapped him affectionately on the back.

"Then Drayle turned to Farrel to ask him how he enjoyed the trip. Farrel grinned and said, 'Fine! It was like a dream, sir! First I'm in one place and then I'm in another and I don't know nothing about how I got there. But I could do with a drink, sir. I ain't used to them airyplanes much.'

"Drayle accepted the hint and suggested that we all celebrate. He gave instructions over a desk telephone and almost immediately a man entered with a small service wagon containing a wide assortment of liquors and glasses. When we had all been served, Ward asked somewhat hesitantly if he might propose a toast. 'To Dr. Drayle, the greatest scientist of all time!'

“We were of course, already somewhat drunk with excitement as we lifted our glasses. But Drayle would not have it.

"'Let me amend that,' he said. 'Let us drink to the future of science.'

"'Sure!' said Farrel, very promptly. I think he was somewhat uncertain about 'toast,' but he clung hopefully to the word 'drink.'

"We had raised our glasses again when Drayle, who was facing the door, dropped his. It struck the floor with a little crash and the liquor spattered my ankles. Drayle whispered 'Great God!' I saw in the doorway another Farrel. He was grimy, disheveled, his clothing was torn, and his expression ugly; but his identity with 'Harry' was unescapable. For an instant I suspected Drayle of trickery, of perpetrating some fiendishly elaborate hoax. And then I heard Mrs. Farrel scream, heard the newcomer cry, 'Mary,' and saw two men staring at each other in bewilderment.

"The explanation burst upon me with a horrible suddenness. Farrel had been reconstructed in each of Drayle's distant laboratories, and there stood before us two identities each equally authentic, each the legal husband of the woman who, a few hours previously, had imagined herself a widow. The situation was fantastic, nightmarish, unbelievable and undeniable. My head reeled with the fearful possibilities.

"Drayle was the first to recover his poise. He opened a door leading into an adjoining room and motioned for us all to enter. That is, all but the police. He left them wisely with their liquor. 'Finish it,' he advised them. 'You see no one has been killed.'

“They were not quite satisfied, but neither were they certain what they ought to do, and for once displayed common sense by doing nothing. When the door closed after us I saw that Buchannon, the Washington laboratory assistant, was with us. He must have arrived with the second Farrel, although I had not observed him during the confusion attending the former's unexpected appearance. But Drayle had noted him and now seized his shoulders. 'Explain!' he demanded.

"Buchannon's face went white and he shrank under the clutch of Drayle's fingers. Beyond them I saw the two twinlike men standing

beside Mrs. Farrel, surveying each other with incredulous recognition and distaste.

"'Explain!' roared Drayle, and tightened his grasp.

"'I thought you said Washington, Chief.' His voice was not convincing. I didn't believe him, nor did Drayle.

"'You lie!' he raged, and floored the man with his fist.

"In a way I couldn't help feeling sorry for the chap. It must have been a frightful temptation to participate in the experiment and I suppose he had not forseen the consequences. But I began to have a glimmering of the magnificent possibilities of the invention for purposes far beyond Drayle's intent. For, I asked myself, why, if such a machine could produce two human identities, why not a score, a hundred, a thousand? The best of the race could be multiplied indefinitely and man could make man at last, literally out of the dust of the earth. The virtue of instantaneous transmission which had been Drayle's aim sank into insignificance beside it. I fancied a race of supermen thus created. And I still believe, Sergeant, that the chance for the world's greatest happiness is sealed within that box you guard. But its first fruits were tragic."

The historian shifted his position on the bench so as to escape the sun that was now reflected dazzlingly by the polished steel casket.

“Drayle did not glance again at his disobedient lieutenant. He was concerned with the problem of the extra man, or, I should say, an extra man, for both were equal. Never before in the history of the world had two men been absolutely identical. They were, of course, one in thought, possessions and rights, physical attributes and appearance. Mrs. Farrel, as they were beginning to realize, was the wife of both. And I have an unworthy suspicion that the red-headed young woman, after she recovered from the shock, was not entirely displeased. The two men, however, finding that each had an arm about her waist, were regarding each other in a way that foretold trouble. Both spoke at the same time and in the same words.

"'Take your hands off my wife!'

"And I think they would have attacked each other then if Drayle hadn't intervened. He said, 'Sit down! All of you!' in so peremptory a voice that we obeyed him.

"'Now,' he went on, 'pay attention to me. I think you realize the situation. The question is, what we shall do about it?' He pointed an accusing finger at the Farrel from Washington. 'You were not

authorized to exist; properly we should retransmit you, and without reassembling you would simply cease to be.'

"The man addressed looked terrified. 'It would be murder!' he protested.

"'Would it?' Drayle inquired of me.

"I told him that it could not be proved inasmuch as there would be no *corpus delicti* and hence nothing on which to base a charge.

"But the Washington Farrel seemed to have more than an academic interest in the question and grew obstinate.

"'Nothing doing!' he announced emphatically. 'Here I am and here I stay. I started from this place this morning and now I'm back, and as for that big ape over there I don't know nothing about him—except he'll be dead damn soon if he don't keep away from my wife.'

“The other Drayle-made man leaped up at this, and again I expected violence. But Buchannon flung himself between, and they subsided, muttering.

"'Very well, then,' Drayle continued, when the room was quiet, 'here is another solution. We can, as you realize, duplicate Mrs. Farrel, and

I will double your present possessions.'

"This time it was Mrs. Farrel who was dissatisfied. 'You ain't talking to me,' she informed Drayle. 'Me stand naked in front of all them lamps and get turned into smoke? Not me!' A smile spread over her face and her eyes twinkled with deviltry. 'I didn't never think I'd be in one of them triangles like in the movies, and with my own husbands, but seein' I am, I'm all for keeping them both. Then I might know where one of them was some of the time.'

"But neither of the men took to this idea and the problem appeared increasingly complex. I proposed that the survivor be determined by lot, but this suggestion won no support from anyone. Again the two men spoke at the same instant and in the same words. It was like a carefully rehearsed chorus. 'I know my rights, and I ain't going to be gypped out of them!'

"It was at this point that Drayle attempted bribery. He offered fifty thousand dollars to the man who would abandon Mrs. Farrel. But this scheme fell through because both men sought the opportunity and Mrs. Farrel objected volubly.

"So in the end Drayle promised each of them the same amount as a price for silence and left the matter of their relationships to their own

settlement.

“I was skeptical of the success of the plan but could offer nothing better. So I drew up a release as legally binding as I knew how to make it in a case without precedent. I remember thinking that if the matter ever came into court the judge would be as much at a loss as I was.

"Our troubles, though, didn't spring from that source. Each of the three parties accepted the arrangement eagerly and Drayle dismissed them with a hand-shake, a wish for luck and a check for fifty thousand dollars each. It's very nice to be wealthy, you know.

"Afterward, we went out and paid off the police. Perhaps that's stating it too bluntly. I mean that Drayle thanked them for their zealous attention to his interests, regretted that they had been unnecessarily inconvenienced and treated that they would not take amiss a small token of his appreciation of their devotion to duty. Then he shook hands with them both and I believe I saw a yellow bill transferred on each occasion. At any rate the officers saluted smartly and left.

"Of course I was impatient to question Drayle, but I could see that he was desperately fatigued. So I departed.

"Next morning I found my worst fears exceeded by the events of the night. The three Farrels who had left us in apparently amiable spirits had proceeded to the home of Mrs. and the original Mr. Farrel. There the argument of who was to leave had been resumed. Both men were, of course, of the same mind. Whether both desired to stay or flee I would not presume to say. But an acrimonious dispute led to physical hostilities, and while Mrs. Farrel, according to accounts, cheered them on, they literally fought to the death. Being equally capable, there was naturally, barring interruption, no other possible outcome. I can well believe they employed the same tactics, swung the same blows, and died at the same instant.

"Mrs. Farrel, after carefully retrieving both of her husbands' checks, told a great deal of the story. As might be expected, nobody believed the yarn except our profound federal law makers. They welcomed an opportunity to investigate an outsider for a change and had all of us before a committee.

"Finally the Congress of these United States of America, plus the sagacious Supreme Court, decided that my client wasn't guilty of anything, but that he mustn't do it again. At least that was the gist of it. I recollect that I offered a defense of psycopathic neuroticism.

"As a result of the *obiter dictum* and a resolution by both Houses

Assembled Drayle's invention was sealed, dated and placed under guard. That's its history, Sergeant."

The white-haired old gentleman picked up the high silk hat that added a final touch of distinction to his tall figure, and looked about him as if trying to recall something. At last the idea came.

"By the way," he inquired suddenly, "didn't I have an extraordinarily obnoxious grandson with me when I came?"

The attentive auditor was vastly startled. He surveyed the great hall rapidly, but reflected before he answered.

"No, sir—I mean he ain't no more'n average! But I reckon we'd better find him, anyhow."

His glance had satisfied the sergeant that at least the object of his charge was safe and his men still vigilant. "I'll be back in a minute," he informed them. "Don't let nothin' happen."

"Bring us something more'n a breath," pleaded the corporal, disrespectfully.

The sergeant had already set off at a brisk pace with the story teller. For several minutes as they rushed from room to room the hunt was

unrewarded.

"I think, sir," said the sergeant, "we'd better look in the natural history division. There is stuffed animals in there that the kids is fond of."

"You're probably right," the patriarch gasped as he struggled to maintain the gait set by the younger man. "I might have known he didn't really want to hear the story."

"They never do," answered the other over his shoulder. "I'll bet that's him down there on the next floor."

The two searchers had emerged upon a wide gallery that commanded a clear view of the main entrance where various specimens of American fauna were mounted in intriguing replicas of their native habitat.

The guard pointed an accusing finger at one of these groups and sprang toward the stairs.

The old gentleman's breath and strength were gone. He could only gaze in the direction that had been indicated by the madly running guard; but he had no doubts. A small boy was certainly digging

vigorously at the head of a specimen of *Ursus Polaris* that the curator had represented in the dramatic pose of killing a seal. A protesting wail arose from below as the young naturalist was withdrawn from his field by a capable hand on the slack of his trousers. And presently, chagrined with failure, the culprit was before his grandsire.

"Gee!" he complained, "I was only looking at the polar bear. Are polar bears always white? Are—"

"You'd better take him away, sir," interrupted the sergeant. "He was trying to pry out one of the bear's eyes with the stick of the lollypop I give him. Take him."

The old gentleman extended both hands. His left found a grip in his grandson's coat collar; his right, partly concealing a government engraving, met the guard's with a clasp of gratitude.

"Sergeant," he remarked in a voice tense with feeling, "a half-hour ago I expressed some ridiculous regrets that Drayle's invention had been kept from the world. Now I realize its horrid menace. I shudder to think it might have been responsible for two like him!"

The object of disapproval was shaken indicatively.

"Guard the secret well, Sergeant! Guard it well! The world's peace depends upon you!" The old gentleman's words trembled with conviction.

Then alternately shaking his head and his grandson he marched down the hallway, ebony cane tapping angrily upon the stone.

As the exhausted but happy warrior retraced his steps a high-pitched voice floated after him.

"Grandpa, are polar bears *always* white?"

November 1930

#55 The Wall Of Death, By Victor Rousseau Emanuel:

Out of the Antarctic it came—a wall of viscid, grey, half-human jelly, absorbing and destroying all life that it encountered.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

hewing madly with

- - -

This news," said Cliff Hynes, pointing to the newspaper, "means the end of homo Americanus."

- - -

Out of the Antarctic it came—a wall of viscid, grey, half-human jelly, absorbing and destroying all life that it encountered.

The newspaper in question was the hour-sheet of the International Broadcast Association, just delivered by pneumatic tube at the laboratory. It was stamped 1961, Month 13, Day 7, Horometer 3, and the headlines on the front page confirmed the news of the decisive defeat of the American military and naval forces at the hands of the Chinese Republic.

A gallant fight for days against hopeless odds; failure of the army dynamos; airships cut off from ground guidance; battleships ripped to pieces by the Chinese disintegrators; and, finally, the great wave of black death that had wiped out two hundred thousand men.

Kay Bevan—to use the old-fashioned names which still persisted, despite the official numerical nomenclature—glanced through the account. He threw the sheet away. "We deserved it, Cliff," he said.

Cliff nodded. "You saw that bit about the new Chinese disintegrator? If the Government had seriously considered our Crumbler—"

Kay glanced at the huge, humming top that filled the center of the laboratory. It spun so fast that it appeared as nothing but a spherical shadow, through which one could see the sparse furnishings, the table, the apparatus ranged upon it, and the window over-looking the upper streets of New York.

"Yes—*if!*" he answered bitterly. "And I'm willing to bet the Chinese have an inferior machine, built upon the plans that Chinese servant stole from us last year."

"We deserved it, Cliff," said Kay again. "For ten years we've harried and enslaved the yellow man, and taken a hundred thousand of his men and women to sacrifice to the Earth Giants. What would we have done, if conditions had been reversed?"

"Self-preservation," Cliff suggested.

"Exactly. The law of the survival of the fittest. They thought that they were fitter to survive. I tell you they had right on their side, Cliff, and that's what's beaten us. Now—a hundred thousand of our *own* boys and girls must be fed into the maw of these monsters every year. God, suppose it were Ruth!"

"Or you or I," said Cliff. "If only we could perfect the Crumbler!"

"What use would that be against the Earth Giants? There's nothing organic about them, not even bones. Pure protoplasm!"

"We could have used it against the Chinese," said Cliff. "Now—" He shrugged his shoulders hopelessly.

And if explorers had been content to leave the vast unknown Antarctic Continent alone, they would never have taught the imprisoned Giants to cross the great ice barrier. But that crossing had taken place fifteen years ago, and already the mind of man had become accustomed to the grim facts.

Who could have dreamed that the supposed table-land was merely a rim of ice-mountains, surrounding a valley twice the size of Europe, so far below sea-level that it was warmed to tropic heat by Earth's interior fires? Or that this valley was peopled with what could best be described as organized protoplasm?

Enormous, half-transparent, gelatinous organism, attaining a height of about a hundred feet, and crudely organized into forms not unlike those of men?

Half the members of the Rawlins Expedition, which had first entered this valley, had fallen victims to the monsters. Most of the rest had gone raving mad. And the stories of the two who returned, sane, to Buenos Aires, were discredited and scoffed at as those of madmen.

But of a second expedition none had survived, and it was the solitary survivor of the third who had confirmed the amazing story. The giant monsters, actuated by some flickering human intelligence, had found

their way out of the central valley, where they had subsisted by enfolding their vegetable and small animal prey with pseudopods, that it to say, temporary projections of arms from the gelatinous bulk of their substance.

They had floated across the shallow seas between the tip of the Antarctic Continent and Cape Horn, as toy balloons float on water. Then they had spread northward, extending in a wall that reached from the Atlantic to the Andes. And, as they moved, they had devoured all vegetables and animal life in their path. Behind them lay one great bare, absolutely lifeless area.

How many of them were there? That was the hideous fact that had to be faced. Their numbers could not be counted because, after attaining a height of about a hundred feet, they reproduced by budding!

And within a few weeks these buds, in turn, attained their full development.

The Argentine Government had sent a force of twenty thousand men against them, armed with cannon, machine-guns, tanks, airplanes, poison gas, and the new death-ray. And in the night, when it was bivouacking, after what it had thought was glorious victory, it had

been overwhelmed *and eaten*!

Proof against the poison gas, the hideous monsters were, and invulnerable to shot and shell. Divided and sub-divided, slashed into ribbons, blown to fragments by bombs, each of the pieces simply became the nucleus of a new organism, able, within a few hours, to assume the outlines of a dwarf man, and to seize and devour its prey.

But the Argentine expedition had done worse than it at first dreamed of. *It had given the monsters a taste for human flesh!*

After that, the wave of devastation had obliterated life in every city clear up to the Amazonian forests. And then it had been discovered that, by feeding these devils human flesh, they could be rendered torpid and their advance stayed—so long as the periodical meals continued!

At first criminals had been supplied them, then natives, then Chinese, obtained by periodical war raids. What would you have? The savage regions of the earth had already been depopulated, and a frenzy of fear had taken possession of the whole world.

Now the Chinese had defeated the annual American invasion, and the Earth Giants were budding and swarming through the heart of

Brazil.

“Man," said the Theosophists, "is the fifth of the great root-races that have inhabited this planet. The fourth were the Atlanteans. The third were the Lemurians, half-human beings of whom the Australian aborigines are the survivors. The second race was not fully organized into human form. Of the first, nothing is known.

"These are the second race, surviving in the Antarctic valleys. Half-human objects, groping toward that perfection of humanity of which we ourselves fall very far short. As the Kabbala says, man, before Adam, reached from heaven to earth."

Kay Bevan and Cliff Hynes had been working feverishly to perfect their Crumbler for use in the Chinese wars. Convinced, as were all fair-minded men, that these annual raids were unjustified, they yielded to the logic of the facts. Should America sacrifice a hundred thousand of her boys and girls each year, when human life was cheap in China? *Boys and girls!*

It had been discovered that the Earth Giants required the flesh of women as well as of men. Some subtle chemical constituent then produced the state of torpidity during which the advance and the budding of the monsters was stayed. During the ten past years their

northward advance had been almost inappreciable. Brazil had even sent another army against them.

But the deadliest gases had failed to destroy the tenacious life of these protoplasmic creatures, and the tanks, which had driven through and through them, had become entangled and blocked in the gelatinous exudations, and their occupants eaten.

All over the world scientists were striving to invent some way of removing this menace to the world. Moreover, airplanes sent to the polar continent had reported fresh masses mobilizing for the advance northward. A second wave would probably burst through the Amazon forest barrier and sweep over the Isthmus and overrun North America.

Five days after the news of the Chinese disaster was confirmed, Cliff Hynes came back from the capital of the American Confederation, Washington.

"It's no use, Kay," he said. "The Government won't even look at the Crumbler. I told them it would disintegrate every inorganic substance to powder, and they laughed at me. And it's true, Kay: they've given up the attempt to enslave China. Henceforward a hundred thousand of our own citizens are to be sacrificed each year.

Eaten alive, Kay! God, if only the Crumbler would destroy organic forms as well!"

The first year's quota of fifty thousand boys and fifty thousand girls, thrown to the maw of the monsters to save humanity, nearly disrupted the Confederation. Despite the utmost secrecy, despite the penalty of death for publishing news of the sacrifice, despite the fact that those who drew the fatal lots were snatched from their homes at dead of night, everything became known.

On the vast pampas in the extreme north of the Argentine Republic, where Bolivia, the Argentine, Paraguay and Brazil unite, was the place of sacrifice. Thousands of acres, white with the bones of those whom the monsters had engulfed. Brainless, devoid of intelligence, sightless, because even the sense had not become differentiated in them, yet by some infernal instinct the Earth Giants had become aware that this was their feasting ground.

By some tacit compact, the guards who had annually brought their victims to be devoured had been unmolested, the vast wall of semi-human shapes withdrawing into the shelter of the surrounding forests while the Chinese were staked out in rows. Death, which would have been a mercy, had been denied them. It was living flesh that the Earth Giants craved. And here, on the spot known as Golgotha, the

hideous sacrifice had been annually repeated.

That first year, when the chosen victims were transported to the fatal spot, all America went mad. Frenzied parents attacked the offices of the Federation in every city. The cry was raised that Spanish Americans had been selected in preference to those of more northern blood. Civil war loomed imminent.

And year after year these scenes must be repeated. Boys and girls, from fifteen to twenty years of age, the flower of the Federation, a hundred thousand of them, must die a hideous death to save humanity. Now the choice of the second year's victims was at hand.

In their laboratory, removed to the heart of the Adirondacks wilderness, Cliff and Kay were working frantically.

"It's the last chance, Kay," said Cliff. "If I've not solved the secret this time, it means another year's delay. The secret of dissolving organic forms as well as inorganic ones! What is this mysterious power that enables organic forms to withstand the terrific bombardment of the W-ray?"

The W-ray was the Millikan cosmic ray, imprisoned and adapted for human use. It was a million times more powerful than the highest

known voltage of electricity. Beneath it, even the diamond, the hardest substance known, dissolved into a puff of dust; and yet the most fragile plant growth remained unaffected.

The laboratory in the Adirondacks was open at one end. Here, against a background of big forest trees, a curious medley of substances had been assembled: old chairs, a couple of broken-down airplanes, a large disused dynamo, a heap of discarded clothing, a miscellany of kitchen utensils on a table, a gas stove, and a heap of metal junk of all kinds. The place looked, in fact, like a junk heap.

The great top was set in a socket in a heavy bar of craolite, the new metal that combined the utmost tensile strength with complete infusibility, even in the electric furnace. About six feet in height, it looked like nothing but what it was, a gyroscope in gimbals, with a long and extremely narrow slit extending all around the central bulge, but closed on the operator's side by a sliding cover of the same craolite.

Within this top, which, by its motion, generated a field of electrical force between the arms of an interior magnet, the W-rays were generated in accordance with a secret formula; the speed of gyration, exceeding anything known on earth, multiplied their force a billionfold, converting them to wave-lengths shorter than the shortest

known to physical science. Like all great inventions, the top was of the simplest construction.

"Well," said Cliff, "you'd better bring out Susie."

Kay left the laboratory and went to the cabin beside the lake that the two men occupied. From her box in front of the stove a lady porcupine looked up lazily and grunted. Kay raised the porcupine; in the box, of course. Susie was constitutionally indolent, but one does not handle porcupines, however smooth their quills may lie.

Kay brought her to the heap of junk and placed the box on top of it. He went inside the laboratory. "I may as well tell you, Cliff. I wouldn't have brought Susie if I'd thought the experiment had the least chance of success," he said.

Cliff said nothing. He was bending over the wheel, adjusting a micrometer. "All ready, Kay?" he asked.

Kay nodded and stepped back. He swallowed hard. He hated sacrificing Susie to the cause of science; he almost hoped the experiment would fail.

Cliff pressed a lever, and slowly the ponderous top began to revolve

upon its axis. Faster, faster, till it was nothing but a blur. Faster yet, until only its outlines were visible. Cliff pressed a lever on the other side.

Nothing happened apparently, except for a cloudy appearance of the air at the open end of the laboratory. Cliff touched a foot lever. The top began to grow visible, its rotations could be seen; it ran slower, began to come to a stop.

The cloud was gone. Where the airplanes and other junk had been, was nothing but a heap of grayish dust. It was this that had made the cloud.

Nothing remained, except that impalpable powder against the background of the trees.

Kay caught Cliff's arm. "Look out!" he shouted, pointing to the heap. "Something's moving in there!"

Something was. A very angry lady porcupine was scrambling out, a *quillless* porcupine, with a white skin, looking like nothing so much as a large, hairless rat. Cliff turned to Kay.

"We've failed," he said briefly. "Too late for this year now."

"But—the quills?"

"Inorganic material. But even the bones remain intact because there's circulation in the marrow, you see. And the Earth Giants haven't even bones. They're safe—this year!"

He flung himself down under a tree, staring up at the sky in abject despair.

“Look, Kay, I've got my number!" Ruth Meade smiled as she handed Kay the ticket issued by the Government announcing the lottery number provided for each citizen.

One hundred thousand young people between the ages of fifteen and twenty would be drawn for the sacrifice, and Ruth, being nineteen, had come within the limits, but this would be her last year. In a few weeks the Government would announce the numbers—drawn by a second lottery—of those who were condemned.

Then, before these had been made public, the victims would already have been seized and hurried to the airship depots in a hundred places, for conveyance to the hideous Golgotha of the pampas.

The chance that any individual would be among the fated ones was

reasonably small. It was the fashion to make a jest of the whole business. Ruth smiled as she showed her ticket.

Kay stared at it. "Ruth, if—if anything happened to you I'd go insane. I'd—"

"Why this sudden ardor, Kay?"

Kay took Ruth's small hand in his. "Ruth, you mustn't play with me any more. You know I love you. And the sight of that thing makes me almost insane. You do care, don't you?" And, as Ruth remained silent, "Ruth, it isn't Cliff Hymes, is it? I know you two are old friends. I'd rather it were Cliff than anybody else, if it had to be some one, but—tell me, Ruth!"

"It isn't Cliff," said Ruth slowly.

"Is it—some one else?"

"It's you, dear," answered Ruth. "It's always been you. It might have been Cliff if you hadn't come along. But he knows now it can never be he."

"Does he know it's me?" asked Kay, greatly relieved.

Ruth inclined her head. "He took it very finely," she said. "He said just what you've said about him. Oh, Kay, if only your experiment had succeeded, and the world could be free of this nightmare! What happened? Why couldn't you and Cliff make it destroy life?"

"I don't know, dear," answered Kay. "Iron and steel melt into powder at the least impact of the rays. They are so powerful that there was even a leakage through the rubber and anelektron container. Even the craolite socket was partly fused, and that is supposed to be an impossibility. And there was a hole in the ground seven feet deep where the very mineral water in the earth had been dissolved. But against organic substances the W-ray is powerless.

"Next year, dear—next year we'll have solved our problem, and then we'll free the world of this menace, this nightmare. Ruth—don't let's talk about that now. I love you!"

They kissed. The Earth Giants faded out of their consciousness even while Ruth held that ominous ticket in her hand.

Kay said nothing to Cliff about it, but Cliff knew. Perhaps he had put his fate to the test with Ruth and learned the truth from her. Ruth made no reference to the matter when she saw Kay. But between the two men, friends for years, a coolness was inexorably developing.

They had gone to work on the new machine. They were hopeful. When they were working, they forgot their rivalry.

"You see, Kay," said Cliff, "we mustn't forget that the Millikan rays have been bombarding Earth since Earth became a planet, out of the depths of space. It is their very nature not to injure organic life, otherwise all life on Earth would have been destroyed long ago. Now, our process is only an adaptation of these cosmic rays. We haven't changed their nature."

"No," agreed Kay. "What we want is a death-ray strong enough to obliterate these monsters, without simply disintegrating them and creating new fragments to bud into the complete being. Why do you suppose they are so tenacious of life, Cliff?"

"They represent primeval man, life itself, striving to organize itself, and nothing is more tenacious than the life principle," answered Cliff.

Meanwhile the fatal weeks were passing. A few days after the tickets had been distributed, a Government notice was broadcasted and published, ordaining that, in view of former dissensions, no substitutes for the condemned persons would be permitted. Rich or poor, each of the victims chosen by lot must meet his fate.

And the monsters were growing active. There had been an extension of their activities. Tongues had been creeping up the rivers that ran into the Amazon. Suddenly a dense mass of the devils had appeared on the north coast, near Georgetown. They had overleaped the Amazon; they were overrunning British Guiana, eating up everything on their way. Georgetown was abandoned; the monsters were in complete control.

"They will be cut off from the main herd," the optimistic reports announced. "We shall deal with the main herd first. This year the sacrifice will have to be made, but it will be the last. Scientists have at last hit upon an infallible toxin which will utterly destroy this menace within a few months."

Nobody believed that story, for everything had been tried and failed. In their laboratory Cliff and Kay were working frantically. And now the coldness that had developed between them was affecting their collaboration too. Cliff was keeping something back from Kay.

Kay knew it. Cliff had made some discovery that he was not sharing with his partner. Often Kay, entering the laboratory, would find Cliff furtively attempting to conceal some operation that he was in the midst of. Kay said nothing, but a brooding anger began to fill his heart. So Cliff was trying to get all the credit for the result of their

years of work together!

And always, in the back of his mind, there was a vision of the little Government ticket in Ruth's hand, with the numbers in staring black type. They had burned into his brain. He could never forget them. Often at night, after a hard day's work, he would suddenly awaken out of a hideous nightmare, in which he saw Ruth taken away by the agents of the Government, to be thrown as a sacrifice to the monsters.

And Cliff was hiding something! That made the situation unbearable.

The coolness between the two men was rapidly changing into open animosity. And then one day, quite by chance, in Cliff's absence, Kay came upon evidence of Cliff's activities.

Cliff was no longer experimenting with the W-ray! He was using a new type of ray altogether, the next series, the psenium electron emanation discovered only a few years before, which had the peculiar property of non-alternation, even when the psenium electron changed its orbit around the central nucleus of the psenium atom.

Instead of discontinuity, the psenium electron had been found to emit

radiation steadily, and this had upset the classic theories of matter for the ninth time in the past fifteen years.

And Kay's wrath broke loose in a storm of reproaches when Cliff came into the laboratory.

"You've been deliberately keeping me in the dark!" he shouted. "You're a nice sort of partner to have! Here's where we split up the combination, Hynes!"

"I've been thinking that for a long time," sneered Cliff. "The fact is, Kay, you're a little too elementary in your ideas to suit me. It's due to you that I kept hammering away on the wrong tack for years. The sooner we part, the better."

"No time like now," said Kay. "Keep your laboratory. You put most of the money into it, anyway. I'll build me another—where I can work without being hampered by a partner who's out for himself all the time. Good luck to you in your researches, and I hope you'll get all the credit when you find a way of annihilating the Earth Giants."

And he stormed out of the laboratory, jumped into his plane, and winged his way southward toward his apartment in New York.

Crowds in the streets of every town on the way. In villages and hamlets, swarming like ants, and hurrying along the highways! Kay, who flew one of the slow, old-fashioned planes, averaging little more than a hundred miles an hour, winged his way methodically overhead, too much absorbed in his anger against Cliff to pay much attention to this phenomenon at first. But gradually it was borne in upon him that something was wrong.

He flew lower, and now he was passing over a substantial town, and he could hear the shouts of anger that came up to him. The whole town was in a ferment, gathered in the town square.

Suddenly the reason came home to Kay. He saw the adjoining airport, and dropped like a plummet, hovering down until his wheels touched the ground. Without waiting to taxi into one of the public hangars, he leaped out and ran through the deserted grounds into the square.

Groans, yells, shrieks of derision rent the air. The whole crowd had gone maniacal. And it was as Kay had thought. Upon a white background high up on the town ball building, the numbers of the local boys and girls who had been picked for sacrifices were being shown.

Eight boys and fifteen girls, already on their way into the wastes of South America, to meet a hideous death.

"They took my Sally," screamed a wizened woman, the tears raining down her checks. "Kidnapped her at the street corner after dark. I didn't know why she hadn't come home last night. God, my Sally, my little girl, gone—gone—"

"People, you must be patient," boomed the Government announcer. "The President feels with you in your affliction. But by next year a means will have been devised of destroying these monsters. Your children will have their sacrifice recorded in the Hall of Fame. They are true soldiers who—"

"To hell with the Government!" roared a man. "Stop that damn talk machine! Break her, fellows! Then we'll hang President Bogart from the top of the Capitol!"

Yells answered him, and the crowd surged forward toward the building.

"Stand back!" shrieked the announcer. "It's death to set foot on the step. We are now electrified. Last warning!"

The first ranks of the mob recoiled as a charge of electricity at a voltage just short of that required to take life coursed through their bodies. Shrieks of agony rang out. Files of writhing forms covered the ground.

Kay rushed to the automatic clerk at the window beside the metal steps, taking care to avoid contact with them. Within six feet, the temperature of his body brought the thermostatic control into action; the window slid upward and the dummy appeared. He turned the dial to Albany.

"I want New York Division, Sub-station F, Loyalist Registration," he called. "Give me Z numbers of the lottery, please."

"No numbers will be given out until Horometer 13," the dummy boomed.

"But I tell you I must know immediately!" Kay pleaded frantically.

"Stand away, please!"

"I've got to know, I tell you!"

"We are now electrified. Last warning!"

"Listen to me. My name's Kay Bevan. I—"

A mighty buffet in the chest hurled Kay ten feet backward upon the ground. He rose, came within the electric zone, felt his arms twisted in a giant's grasp, staggered back again and sat down gasping. The window went down noiselessly, the dummy swung back into place. Kay got upon his feet again, choking with impotent rage.

All about him men and women were milling in a frantic mob. He broke through them, went back to where his plane was standing. A minute later he was driving madly toward the district airport in New York within three blocks of Ruth's apartment.

He dropped into a vacant landing place, checked hastily, and rushed into the elevator. Once in the upper street, he bounded to the middle platform, and, not satisfied to let it convey him at eight miles an hour, strode on through the indignant throng until he reached his destination. Hurling the crowds right and left he gained the exit, and a half-minute later was on the upper level of the apartment block.

He pushed past the janitor and raced along the corridor to Ruth's apartment. She would be in if all was well; she worked for the Broadcast Association, correcting the proofs that came from the district headquarters by pneumatic tube. He stopped outside the door.

The little dial of white light showed him that the apartment was unoccupied.

As he stood there in a daze, hoping against hope, he saw a thread hanging from the crevice between door and frame. He pulled at it, and drew out a tiny strip of scandium, the new compressible metal that had become fashionable for engagement rings. Plastic, all but invisible, it could be compressed to the thickness of a sheet of paper: it was the token of secret lovers, and Kay had given Ruth a ring of it.

It was the signal, the dreaded signal that Ruth had been on the lottery list—the only signal that she had been able to convey, since stringent precautions were taken to prevent the victims becoming known until all possibility of rescue was removed.

No chance of rescuing her! From a hundred airports the great Government airships had long since sailed into the skies, carrying those selected by the wheel at Washington for sacrifice to the Earth Giants. Only one chance remained. If Cliff had discovered the secret that had so long eluded them, surely he would reveal it to him now!

Their quarrel was forgotten. Kay only knew that the woman he loved was even then speeding southward to be thrown to the maw of the vile monsters that held the world in terror. Surely Cliff would bend

every effort to save her!

Only a few hours had passed since Kay had stormed out of the laboratory in the Adirondacks in a rage when he was back on their little private landing field. He leaped from the plane and ran up the trail beside the lake between the trees. The cabin was dark; and, when Kay reached the laboratory he found it dark too.

"Cliff! Cliff!" he shouted.

No answer came, and with a sinking heart he snapped the button at the door. It failed to throw the expected flood of light through the interior. With shaking hand Kay pulled the little electron torch from his pocket, and its bright beam showed that the door was padlocked. He moved round to the window. The glass was unbreakable, but the ray from the torch showed that the interior of the laboratory had been dismantled, and the great top was gone.

In those few hours Cliff, for reasons best known to himself, had removed the top, Kay's one hope of saving Ruth. And he was gone.

In that moment Kay went insane. He raved and cursed, calling down vengeance upon Cliff's head. Cliff's very motive was incredible. That he had deliberately removed the top in order that Ruth should die

was not, of course, conceivable. But in that first outburst of fury Kay did not consider that.

Presently Kay's madness burned itself out. There was still one thing that he could do. His plane, slow though it was, would carry him to the pampas. He could get fresh fuel at numerous bootleg petrol stations, even though the regulations against intersectional flight were rigid. With luck he could reach the pampas, perhaps before the sluggish monsters had fallen upon their prey. It was said that the victims sometimes waited for days!

Something was rubbing against his leg, pricking it through his anklets. Kay looked down. A lady porcupine, with tiny new quills, was showing recognition, even affection, if such a spiny beast could be said to possess that quality.

Somehow the presence of the beast restored Kay's mind to normal.

"Well, he's left us both in the lurch, Susie," he said. "Good luck to you, beastie, and may you find a secure hiding place until your quills have grown."

Drowning men catch at straws. Kay snatched out his watch, and the illuminated dial showed that it was already two quintets past

horometer 13. He darted back to the cabin. The door was unfastened, and his torch showed him that, though Cliff had evidently departed, and taken his things, the interior was much as it had been. When Kay picked up the telephotophone, the oblong dial flashed out. The instrument was in working order.

He turned the crank, and swiftly a succession of scenes flashed over the dial. On this little patch of glassite, Kay was actually making the spatial journey to Albany, each minutest movement of the crank representing a distance covered. The building of the New York Division appeared, and its appearance signified that Kay was telephonically connected. But there was no automatic voice attachment, an expense that Kay and Cliff had decided would be unjustified. He had to rely upon the old-fashioned telephone, such as was still widely in use in rural districts. He took up the receiver.

"Sub-Station F, Loyalist Registration, please," he called.

"Speaking," said a girl's voice presently.

"I want the Z numbers. All from Z5 to ZA," said Kay.

And thus, in the dark hut, he listened to the doom pronounced, miles away, by a more or less indifferent operator. When the fatal number

was read out, he thanked her and hung up. He released the crank, which moved back to its position, putting out the light on the dial.

For a moment or two he stood there motionless, in a sort of daze, though actually he was gathering all his reserves of resolution for the task confronting him. Simply to find Ruth among the hundred thousand victims, and die with her. A task stupendous in itself, and yet Kay had no doubt that he would succeed, that he would be holding her in his arms when the tide of hell flowed over them.

He knew the manner of that death. The irresistible onset of the giant masses of protoplasm, the extrusion of temporary arms, or feelers, that would grasp them, drag them into the heart of the yielding substance, and slowly smother them to death while the life was drained from their bodies. It had been said the death was painless, but that was Government propaganda. But he would be holding Ruth in his arms. He'd find her: he had no doubt of that at all.

And, strangely enough, now that Kay knew the worst, now that not the slightest doubt remained, he was conscious of an elevation of spirits, a sort of mad recklessness that was perfectly indefinable.

Kay turned his torch into a corner of the kitchen. Yes, there was the thing subconsciousness had prompted him to seek. A long-shafted,

heavy woodsman's ax, a formidable weapon at close quarters. Because it is the instinct of *homo Americanus* to die with a weapon in his hands, rather than let himself be butchered helplessly, Kay snatched it up. He ran back to his plane. The gas tank was nearly empty, but there was petrol in the ice house beside the lake.

Kay wheeled the machine up to it, and filled up with gas and oil. All ready now! He leaped in, pressed the starter, soared vertically, helicopter wings fluttering like a soaring hawk's. Up to the passenger air lane at nine thousand: higher to twelve, the track of the international and supply ships; higher still, to the fourteen thousand ceiling of the antiquated machine. He banked, turned southward.

It was freezing cold up there, and Kay had no flying suit on him, but, between the passenger lane and the lane of the heliospheres, at thirty thousand, there was no air police. And he could afford to take no chances. The Government police would be on the lookout for a score such desperate men as he, bent on a similar mission. He drove the plane toward the Atlantic till a red glow began to diffuse itself beneath him, an area of conflagration covering square miles of territory.

Swooping lower, Kay could hear the sound of detonations, the roar of old-fashioned guns, while through the pall of lurid smoke came

the long, violet flashes of atomic guns, cleaving lanes of devastation. New York was burning.

The frenzied populace had broken into revolt, seized the guns stored in the arsenals, and attacked the great Bronx fortress that stood like a mighty sentinel to protect the port.

A swarm of airships came into view, swirling in savage fight. Kay zoomed. It was not his battle.

Now New York lay behind him, and he was winging southward over the Atlantic. All night he flew. At dawn he came down in a coast hamlet for bootleg petrol and oil.

"You come from New York?" asked the Georgian. "Hear there's war broke out up there."

"My war's down in Brazil," muttered Kay.

"Say, if them Giants comes up here yuh know what us folks is going to do? We're going to set the hounds on 'em. Yes, sirree, we've got a pack of bloodhounds, raised for jest that purpose. I guess that's something them wisecrackers at Washington ain't thought of. They took two little fellers from Hopetown, but they won't take nobody

from here."

Kay fuelled up and resumed his flight southward.

After that it was a nightmare. The sun rose and set, alternating with the staring moon and stars. Kay crossed the Caribbean, sighted the South American coast, swept southward over the jungles of Brazil. He drank, but no food passed his lips. He had become a mechanism, set for on special purpose—self-immolation.

It was in a wide savannah among the jungles that he first caught sight of the monsters. At first he thought it was the rising dawn mist; then he began to distinguish a certain horrible resemblance to human forms, and swooped down, banking round and round the opening in the jungle until he could see clearly.

There were perhaps a score of them, an advance guard that had pushed forward from one of the main divisions. Men? Anthropoids, rather, for their sex was indistinguishable! Human forms ranging from a few feet to a hundred, composed apparently of a grayish jelly, propelling themselves clumsily on two feet, but floating rather than walking. Translucent, semi-transparent. Most horrible of all, these shadowy, spheroid creatures exhibited here and there buds of various sizes, which were taking on the similitude of fresh forms. And

among them were the young, the buds that had fallen from the parent stems, fully formed humans of perhaps five or six feet, bouncing with a horrible playfulness among their sires.

As Kay soared some three hundred feet overhead, a young tapir came leaping out of the jungle and ran, apparently unconscious of their presence, right toward the monsters. Suddenly it stopped, and Kay saw that it was already encircled by coils of protoplasm, resembling arms, which had shot forth from the bodies of the devils.

Swiftly, despite its struggles and bleatings, the tapir was drawn into the substance of the monsters, which seemed to fuse together and form a solid wall of protoplasm in all respects like the agglutination of bacteria under certain conditions.

Then the beast vanished in the wall, whose agitated churnings alone gave proof of its existence.

For perhaps ten minutes longer Kay remained hovering above the clearing. Then the bodies divided, resuming their separate shapes. And the white bones of the tapir lay in a huddled mass in the open.

Kay went mad. Deliberately he set down his plane, and, hatchet in hand, advanced upon the sluggish monsters. Shouting wildly, he

leaped into their midst.

The fight that followed was like a nightmare fight. He lopped off the slow tentacles that sought to envelop him, he slashed the devils into long ribbons of writhing jelly, slashed until the substance blunted the ax; wiped it clean and leaped into their midst again, hewing until he could no longer raise his arm. Then he drew back and surveyed the scene before him.

It was dreadful enough to drive the last remnants of sanity from his brain. For every piece that he had cut from the monsters, every protoplasmic ribbon was reorganizing before his eyes into the semblance of a new creature. Where there had been a score, there were now five hundred!

Kay ran back to his plane, leaped in, and soared southward. His face was a grotesque mask of madness, and his cries rang out through the ether.

The victims were no longer chained to stakes. The Federation, which always acted with complete secrecy, had gone one better. It had engaged electrical engineers, kept them housed in secret places, transported them to Golgotha; and there a vast electrified field had been established, an open space whose boundaries were marked out

by pillars of electron steel.

Between these pillars ran lines of electric force. To attempt to pass them meant—not death, for dead boys and girls were spurned by the devils—but a violent shock that hurled one backward.

On this great plain the hundred thousand victims sat huddled in the open. Food they had none, for no purpose was to be served by mitigating their last agonies. No shelter either, for the sight of buildings might delay the final phase. But high above the doomed there floated the flag of the Federation, on a lofty pole, a touch of ironic sentimentality that had commended itself to some mind at Washington.

Over a square mile of territory, ringed with jungle the victims lay. The majority of them ringed this terrain; that is to say, attempting to escape, they had been hurled back by the electrical charge, and, having no strength or will remaining, they had dropped where they had been hurled, and lay in apathetic resignation.

There had been screams and cries for mercy, and piteous scenes when the Government airships had deposited them there and flown away, but now an intense silence had descended upon the doomed. Resigned to their fate, they sat or lay in little silent groups, all eyes

turned toward the gloomy jungle.

And everywhere within this jungle a wraith-like mist was forming at this dawn hour. From a thousand miles around, the devils were mustering for their prey, agglutinating, in order that the meal of one might become the meal of all.

Wisps of protoplasmic fog were stealing out through the trees, changing shape every instant, but always advancing: now presenting the appearance of an aligned regiment of huge, shadowy men, now nothing but a wall of semi-solid vapor. And still, with eyeballs straining in their sockets, the victims watched.

Suddenly all were seized with the same spasm of mad terror. Again they hurled themselves against the electrified lines, and again they were hurled back, masses of boys and girls tumbling against one another, and screaming in one wail that, could it have been heard in Washington, would have driven all insane. Again and again, till they fell back, panting and helpless. And solidly the wall of devils was creeping up from every side.

Ruth Deane, one of the few who had themselves in control, lay some distance back from the electrified field. From the moment when she was surprised in her apartment by the Government representatives,

she had known that there was no hope of escape.

She had slipped the ring off her finger, snapped the plastic metal, and attached it to a thread torn from her dress. She had managed to insert it in the door, hoping that Kay would find it. It would serve as a last message of love to him.

Every removal of a selected victim was in the nature of a kidnapping. At dead of night her apartment had been opened. She had been ordered to dress. Nothing could be written, no arrangements made. She was already considered as one dead.

She had been hurried out of the upper entrance to the monorail, which conveyed her in a special car to the landing station. A few minutes later she had been on her way to join the camp of other victims, a hundred miles away. Within two hours she was on her way southward.

Stunned by the tragedy, none of the victims had made much of an outcry. They had been given water by the airship police. No food for boys and girls already dead. Days and nights had passed, and now she was here, faint from exhaustion, and wondering at the despair shown by those others. What difference would it make in half an hour? Besides, that Government pamphlet had insisted that this

death was painless!

But an immense longing to see Kay once more came over her. There had been a time when she thought she loved Cliff; then Kay had come into her life, and she had known that other affair was folly. She had never told Kay of the bitter scene between Cliff and herself, how he had raved against Kay and sworn to win her in the end.

Cliff had calmed down and apologized, and Ruth had never seen him again. She wished he had not taken it like that. But above all she wanted to see Kay, just to say good-by.

And she tried to send out her whole heart to him in an unspoken message of love that would surely somehow convey itself to him.

The wall of devils was creeping up on every side, slowly, lethargically. The monsters took their time, because they knew they were invincible. The sobs and shrieks had died away. Collected into a mass almost as rigid as that of the Earth Giants, the victims waited, palsied as a rabbit that awaits the approach of the serpent.

A humming overhead. An airplane shooting down from the sky. Rescue? No. Only a solitary pilot, armed with a woodsman's ax.

Kay drifted down, touched ground, leaped to his feet. Chance had brought him within five hundred yards of where Ruth was standing. But Ruth had known who that lone flyer must be. She broke through the throng; she rushed to meet him. Her arms were around him.

"Kay, darling Kay!"

"Ruth, dearest!"

"I knew you'd come."

"I've come to die beside you!"

It was perhaps odd that it did not enter the head of either as a possibility that Kay should simply place Ruth in the plane and fly away with here to safety. Had the thought occurred to Kay, he might have been tempted. But such black treachery was something inconceivable by either. So long as the Federation remained, so long as man moved in an organized society, he was bound to his fellows, to fight, suffer, and die with them.

"Stand by me, Ruth. We're going down fighting."

They moved back toward the throng, which, momentarily stirred to hope by Kay's appearance, had fallen into the former apathy of

despair. And now the monsters were beginning to enter the electrified zone at one point. As they passed the line of posts, the high tension current made their bodies luminous, but it had no appreciable effect upon them. They moved on, inevitably.

A score or so of semi-human forms, agglutinated into a mass, and yet individually discernible. They bore down slowly upon the crowd of victims, who pressed backward as they advanced. On the other sides, though they almost encircled the field of death, the monsters were making no maneuvers to entrap their prey. Their sluggish minds were incapable of conceiving anything of the kind. But for the electrified zone, the great majority of the victims could have effected their escape. The monsters were simply pressing forward to their meal; they did not interpret its capture in terms of strategy at all.

A new frenzy of horror seized the crowd. They fled, struggling back until the foremost in flight reached the other side of Golgotha, to be repulsed by the electrified zone there. They fell in tumbled heaps. Appalling shrieks rang through the air.

Another line of the monsters was seeping forward, converging toward the first. As the two lines met, they coalesced into a wall of protoplasm, a thousand feet in length by a hundred high. A wall out of which leered phantasmal faces, like those in a frieze.

Kay stood alone, his arm around Ruth. To follow the flying mob would but prolong the agony. He raised the ax. He looked into the girl's eyes. She understood, and nodded.

One last embrace, one kiss, and Kay placed her behind him. He sprang forward, shouting, and plunged into the very heart of the wall.

And Ruth, watching with eyes dilated with horror, saw it yield with a sucking sound, and saw Kay disappear within it.

She saw the hideous mass fold itself upon him, and a hundred extruded tentacles wave in the air as they blindly grappled for him. And then Kay had broken through, and was hewing madly with great sweeps of the ax that slashed great streamers of the amorphous tissue from the wall of protoplasm.

It recoiled and then folded once more, and Kay's mighty sweeps were slashing phantom limbs from phantom bodies; and lopping off tentacles that curled and coiled, and put forth caricatures of hands and fingers, and then, uniting with other slashed off tentacles, began to mould themselves into the likeness of dwarf monsters. Kay's struggle was like that of a man fighting a fog, for again and again he broke through the wall, and always it reunited.

And behind it another wall of protoplasm was pressing forward, and on another side a wall was drifting up. As Kay stopped, panting, and momentarily free, Ruth saw that they were almost encircled.

She saw the nature of that fight. Inevitably that wall would close about them; and, though the bones of last year's victims had been gathered up and carried away by the Federation, she guessed what would occur.

She ran to Kay and dragged him back through the closing gap. It met behind them, and again they stood face to face with the devils. Only this time, instead of a wall of protoplasm, it was a veritable mountain that confronted them, and there could be no more breaking through.

Kay thought afterward that the one touch of absolute horror was that the reforming monsters, the young ones growing visibly before his eyes, had the gamboling instinct of young lambs or other creatures. They were much more lively than the parent creatures.

By this time perhaps a third of the space within the electrified lines had been occupied by the devils. The wall was slowly and sluggishly advancing, and a fresh infiltration was drifting in on another side. As the victims were pressed closer and closer together in their flight,

half of them seemed to go insane. They raced to and fro, laughing and screaming, flinging their arms aloft in extravagant gestures. One young fellow, rushing across the ground, hurled himself like a bolt from a catapult into the heart of the grisly mass, which opened and received him.

There was a struggle, a convulsion; then the mass moved on.

Kay wiped his ax. He stood beside Ruth, gathering strength and breath to fight again. What else was there to do?

Suddenly a humming sound came to his ears. Still some little distance from the monsters, he glanced back. The victims were shouting, staring upward. Over the tops of the jungle trees Kay saw a second airplane flying toward them, a larger one than the plane which he had flown.

It opened its helicopter wings and drifted downward. Kay saw a single pilot, and, in the baggage compartment something that at first he did not recognize. Then he recognized both this object and the aviator.

"It's Cliff," he whispered hoarsely. "He's brought the top!"

The crowd was milling about Cliff as he stepped out of the plane. Kay broke through their midst, shouting to them to clear a space, that it was their chance, their only chance. They heard him and obeyed. And Cliff and Kay clasped hands, and there was Ruth beside them.

The two men carried the top out of the baggage compartment and set it up.

"Thank God I came in time," Cliff hissed. "How long have we got, Kay?"

"Five minutes, I think," Kay answered, glancing at the oncoming wall. "They're slow. Will it work, Cliff? God, when I found you'd gone last night—"

Cliff did not answer. Ignoring Kay's offer of assistance, he fitted the top tightly into its socket of craolite, much heavier than the former one. Beneath this, three heavy craolite legs formed a sort of tripod.

"I looked forward to this possibility, Kay," said Cliff, as he adjusted the top and turned the clamps that held it in position. "Sorry I had to deceive you, but you we're so set on the cosmic rays, and I knew the psenium emanations wouldn't appeal to you. You wouldn't have

believed. I had a hunch Ruth would draw one of those numbers.... *How long?*"

The swaying masses of gray jelly were very near them. Cliff worked feverishly at the top.

"Let me help. Cliff!"

"No! I'm through! Stand back!" shouted Cliff.

Even then—he regretted it afterward, and knew that he would regret it to his dying day—even then the thought flashed through Kay's mind that Cliff wanted all the glory. Behind him the milling, screaming crowd was huddling, as if for protection. Slowly a wisp-like tentacle protruded from the advancing wall. Kay swung his ax and lopped it from the phantom body. But the wall was almost upon them, and from the other side it was advancing rapidly.

"I'm ready! Stand back!" Cliff turned upon Kay, his face white, his voice hoarse. "I've one request to make, Kay. Keep everybody back, including you and Ruth. Nobody is to come within twenty-five yards of this machine!"

"That shall be done," said Kay, a little bitterness in his tone.

"Ruth, I think I'm going to save you all." Cliff looked into the girl's face for a moment. "Please stand back twenty-five yards," he repeated.

Kay took Ruth by the arm and drew her back. The crowd moved back, their pressure moving back the vast multitudes behind them. The vast mob was almost packed into the quarter of the Golgotha; there was scarcely room to move.

Kay saw Cliff press the lever.

Slowly the giant top began to whirl. Faster ... faster.... Now it was revolving so fast that it had become totally invisible. But Cliff was almost surrounded by the wall of jelly. Only his back could be seen, and then space was narrowing fast.

Kay gripped Ruth's arm tightly. He held his breath. The crowd, of whom only a small part knew what was taking place, was screaming with terror as the mass of jelly on the other side pressed them inexorably backward. And Cliff had almost vanished. Would the machine work? Was it possible that the psenium emanations would succeed where the Millikan rays, the W-ray had failed?

Then of a sudden the air grew dark as night. Kay began to sneeze.

He gasped for air. He was choking. He could see nothing, and he strained Ruth to him convulsively, while the terrified multitudes behind him set up a last wail of despair.

He could see nothing, and he stood with the ax ready for the onset of the monsters, more terrible now, in their invisibility, than before. Then of a sudden there sounded subterranean rumblings. The ground seemed to open almost under Kay's feet.

He leaped back, dragging Ruth with him. Slowly the dust was settling, the darkness lessening. A faint, luminous glow overhead revealed the sun. Kay was aware that Cliff had swung the top, so that the psenium rays were being brought to bear upon the second mass of the monsters on the other side.

The sun vanished in appalling blackness. Again the dust-choked air was almost unbreathable. The shrieks of the crowd died away in wheezing gasps; and then a wilder clamor began.

"The earthquake! The earthquake!" a girl was shrilling. "God help us all!"

Kay stood still, clutching Ruth tightly in his arms. He dared not stir, for all the world seemed to be dissolving into chaos.

Slowly the dust began to settle again. Perhaps five minutes passed before the sunbeams began to struggle through. A cloud of grey dust still obscured everything. But the wall of protoplasm was gone!

Cliff's voice came moaning out of the murk, calling Kay's name.

Kay moved forward cautiously, still holding Ruth. He seemed to be skirting the edge of a vast crater. At the edge of it he found the top, revolving slowly. And Cliff's voice came from beside the top.

"Kay, we've won. Don't look at me. Don't let Ruth see me! Look down!"

Kay looked down into the bottomless pit, extending clear across the plain to the distant jungle. An enormous canyon cloven in the earth, filled with the slowly settling cloud of dust.

"They're there, Kay. Don't look this way!"

But Kay looked—and could see nothing except a pile of debris, from the bottom of which Cliff's voice issued.

"Cliff, you're not hurt?"

"A—a little. You must listen while I tell you how to clean up the

monsters. It's the psenium emanation. It has the same effect when our method is applied to it. It disintegrates everything inorganic—not organic.

"I thought, if I couldn't get them, I'd crumble the earth away—bury them. They're underneath the debris, Kay, a mile deep, buried, beneath the impalpable powder that represented the inorganic salts and minerals of the earth. They'll never get out of that. Protoplasm needs oxygen. They'll trouble us no more.

"You must take the top, Kay. Use our old method. You'll find its application to the psenium emanation written in a book fastened beneath the hood. Wipe out the rest of them. If any more come, you'll know how to deal with them."

"Cliff, you're not badly hurt?" Kay asked again.

"Don't look, I tell you! Keep Ruth away!"

But the dust was settling fast, and suddenly Ruth uttered a scream of fear.

And a strangled cry broke from Kay's throat as he looked down at what had been Cliff Hynes.

The man seemed to have become resolved into the same sort of protoplasm as the Earth Giants. He lay, a little heap, incredibly small, incredibly distorted. Flesh without bones, shapeless lumps of flesh where arms and legs and body frame should have been.

Cliff's voice came faintly. "You remember the leakage through the rubber and analektron container, Kay. The W-rays even fused the craolite socket. The psenium rays are stronger. They destroy even bone. They're fatal to the man who operates the machine, unless he follows the directions. I've written them out for you, but I had—no time—to apply them."

His voice broke off. Then, "Good luck to you and—Ruth, Kay," he whispered, absent inaudibly. "Don't let—her—look at me."

Kay led Ruth gently away. "Did you hear that?" she whispered, sobbing. "He died to save us Kay."

It was like a return from the grave for the amazed boys and girls who—since the onset of the monsters had destroyed the electric lines—poured out of the plain of Golgotha to life and freedom.

Many of them had gone mad, a few had died of fright, but the rest would come back to normal, and the world was saved.

Hunger was their greatest problem, for, despite Kay's hurried flight to the nearest occupied post, it was difficult to convince the Federation officials that the devils were really gone, buried beneath a mile of crumbled earth. And Kay had to be back to mop up other, smaller bands that had spread through the forests.

It was six months before the last of the monsters had been obliterated, and then Kay, now one of the highest officials in the Federation's service, was granted a lunarian's leave of absence pending his taking command of an Antarctic expedition for the purpose of destroying the remaining monsters in their lair.

He took this opportunity to be married to Ruth, in the church in his native town, which was *en fête* for the occasion.

"Thinking of Cliff?" Kay asked his bride, as she settled in his plane preparatory to their starting for the honeymoon in the Adirondacks. "I think he would be happy if he knew. He saved the world, dear; he gave his best. And that was all he wanted."

#56 The Pirate Planet, By Charles Willard Diffin:

A strange light blinks on Venus, and over old Earth hovers a mysterious visitant—dread harbinger of interplanetary war.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

Like rats in a cage, the planes of the 91st Squadron were darting and whirling.

Feet first

- - -

Chapter 1

Lieutenant McGuire threw open his coat with its winged insignia of

the air force and leaned back in his chair to read more comfortably the newspaper article.

A strange light blinks on Venus, and over old Earth hovers a mysterious visitant—dread harbinger of interplanetary war.

He glanced at Captain Blake across the table. The captain was deep in a game of solitaire, but he looked up at McGuire's audible chuckle.

"Gay old girl!" said Lieutenant McGuire and smoothed the paper across his knees. "She's getting flirtatious."

The captain swore softly as he gathered up his cards. "Not interested," he announced; "too hot to-night. Keep her away."

"Oh, she's far enough away," McGuire responded; "about seventy million miles. Don't get excited."

"What are you talking about?" The captain shuffled his cards irritably.

"Venus. She's winking at us, the old reprobate. One of these star-gazers up on Mount Lawson saw the flashes a week or so ago. If you'll cut out your solitaire and listen, I'll read you something to

improve your mind." He ignored the other's disrespectful remark and held the paper closer to see the paragraphs.

"Is Venus Signalling?" inquired the caption which Lieutenant McGuire read. "Professor Sykes of Mt. Lawson Observatory Reports Flashes.

"The planet Venus, now a brilliant spectacle in the evening sky, is behaving strangely according to a report from the local observatory on Mount Lawson. This sister star, most like Earth of all the planets, is now at its eastern elongation, showing like a half-moon in the big telescopes on Mt. Lawson. Shrouded in impenetrable clouds, its surface has never been seen, but something is happening there. Professor Sykes reports seeing a distinct flash of light upon the terminator, or margin of light. It lasted for several seconds and was not repeated.

"No explanation of the phenomenon is offered by scientists, as conditions on the planet's surface are unknown. Is there life there? Are the people of Venus trying to communicate? One guess is as good as another. But it is interesting to recall that our scientists recently proposed to send a similar signal from Earth to Mars by firing a tremendous flare of magnesium.

"Venus is now approaching the earth; she comes the nearest of all planets. Have the Venusians penetrated their cloak of cloud masses with a visible light? The planet will be watched with increased interest as it swings toward us in space, in hope of there being a repetition of the unexplained flash."

“There," said Lieutenant McGuire,"—doesn't that elevate your mind? Take it off this infernally hot night? Carry you out through the cool reaches of interplanetary space? If there is anything else you want to know, just ask me."

"Yes," Captain Blake agree, "there is. I want to know how the game came out back in New York—and you don't know that. Let's go over and ask the radio man. He probably has the dope."

"Good idea," said McGuire; "maybe he has picked up a message from Venus; we'll make a date." He looked vainly for the brilliant star as they walked out into the night. There were clouds of fog from the nearby Pacific drifting high overhead. Here and there stars showed momentarily, then were blotted from sight.

The operator in the radio room handed the captain a paper with the day's scores from the eastern games. But Lieutenant McGuire, despite his ready amusement at the idea, found his thoughts clinging

to the words he had read. "Was the planet communicating?" he pictured the great globe—another Earth—slipping silently through space, coming nearer and nearer.

Did they have radio? he wondered. Would they send recognizable signals—words—or some mathematical sequence to prove their reality? He turned to the radio operator on duty.

"Have you picked up anything peculiar," he asked, and laughed inwardly at himself for the asking. "Any new dots and dashes? The scientists say that Venus is calling. You'll have to be learning a new code."

The man glanced at him strangely and looked quickly away.

"No, sir," he said. And added after a pause: "No new dots and dashes."

"Don't take that stuff too seriously, Mac," the captain remonstrated. "The day of miracles is past; we don't want to commit you to the psychopathic ward. Now here is something real: the Giants won, and I had ten dollars on them. How shall we celebrate?"

The radio man was listening intently as they started to leave. His

voice was hesitating as he stopped them; he seemed reluctant to put his thoughts into words.

"Just a minute, sir," he said to Captain Blake.

"Well?" the captain asked. And again the man waited before he replied. Then—

"Lieutenant McGuire asked me," he began, "if I had heard any strange dots and dashes. I have not; but ... well, the fact is, sir, that I have been getting some mighty queer sounds for the past few nights. They've got me guessing.

"If you wouldn't mind waiting. Captain; they're about due now—" He listened again to some signal inaudible to the others, then hooked up two extra head-sets for the officers.

"It's on now," he said. "If you don't mind—"

McGuire grinned at the captain as they took up the ear-phones. "Power of suggestion," he whispered, but the smile was erased from his lips as he listened. For in his ear was sounding a weird and wailing note.

No dots or dashes, as the operator had said, but the signal was

strong. It rose and fell and wavered into shrill tremolos, a ghostly, unearthly sound, and it kept on and on in a shrill despairing wail. Abruptly it stopped.

The captain would have removed the receiver from his ear, but the operator stopped him. "Listen," he said, "to the answer."

There was silence, broken only by an occasional hiss and crackle of some far distant mountain storm. Then, faint as a whisper, came an answering, whistling breath.

It, too, trembled and quavered. It went up—up—to the limit of hearing; then slid down the scale to catch and tremble and again ascend in endless unvarying ups and downs of sound. It was another unbroken, unceasing, but always changing vibration.

"What in thunder is that?" Captain Blake demanded.

"Communication of some sort, I should say," McGuire said slowly, and he caught the operator's eyes upon him in silent agreement.

"No letters," Blake objected; "no breaks; just that screech." He listened again. "Darned if it doesn't almost seem to say something," he admitted.

"When did you first hear this?" he demanded of the radio man.

"Night before last, sir. I did not report it. It seemed too—too—"

"Quite so," said Captain Blake in understanding, "but it is some form of broadcasting on a variable wave; though how a thing like that can make sense—"

"They talk back and forth," said the operator; "all night, most. Notice the loud one and the faint one; two stations sending and answering."

Captain Blake waved him to silence. "Wait—wait!" he ordered. "It's growing louder!"

In the ears of the listening men the noise dropped to a loud grumble; rose to a piercing shriek; wavered and leaped rapidly from note to note. It was increasing; rushing upon them with unbearable sound. The sense of something approaching, driving toward them swiftly, was strong upon Lieutenant McGuire. He tore the head-phones from his ears and rushed to the door. The captain was beside him. Whoever—whatever—was sending that mysterious signal was coming near—but was that nearness a matter of miles or of thousands of miles?

They stared at the stormy night sky above. A moon was glowing faintly behind scudding clouds, and the gray-black of flying shadows formed an opening as they watched, a wind-blown opening like a doorway to the infinity beyond, where, blocking out the stars, was a something that brought a breath-catching shout from the watching men.

Some five thousand feet up in the night was a gleaming ship. There were rows of portholes that shone twinkling against the black sky—portholes in multiple rows on the side. The craft was inconceivably huge. Formless and dim of outline in the darkness, its vast bulk was unmistakable.

And as they watched with staring, incredulous eyes, it seemed to take alarm as if it sensed the parting of its concealing cloud blanket. It shot with dizzy speed and the roar of a mighty meteor straight up into the night. The gleam of its twinkling lights merged to a distant star that dwindled, shrank and vanished in the heights.

The men were wordless and open-mouthed. They stared at each other in disbelief of what their eyes had registered.

"A liner!" gasped Captain Blake. "A—a—liner! Mac, there is no such thing."

McGuire pointed where the real cause of their visitor's departure appeared. A plane with engine wide open came tearing down through the clouds. It swung in a great spiral down over the field and dropped a white flare as it straightened away; then returned for the landing. It taxied at reckless speed toward the hangars and stopped a short distance from the men. The pilot threw himself out of the cockpit and raced drunkenly toward them.

"Did you see it?" he shouted, his voice a cracked scream. "Did you see it?"

"We saw it," said Captain Blake; "yes, we saw it. Big as—" He sought vainly for a proper comparison, then repeated his former words: "Big as an ocean liner!"

The pilot nodded; he was breathing heavily.

"Any markings?" asked his superior. "Anything to identify it?"

"Yes, there were markings, but I don't know what they mean. There was a circle painted on her bow and marks like clouds around it, but I didn't have time to see much. I came out of a cloud, and there the thing was. I was flying at five thousand, and they hung there dead ahead. I couldn't believe it; it was monstrous; tremendous. Then they

sighted me, I guess, and they up-ended that ship in mid-air and shot straight up till they were out of sight."

It was the captain's turn to nod mutely.

"There's your miracle," said Lieutenant McGuire softly.

"Miracle is right," agreed Captain Blake; "nothing less! But it is no miracle of ours, and I am betting it doesn't mean any good to us. Some other country has got the jump on us."

To the pilot he ordered: "Say nothing of this—not a word—get that? Let me have a written report: full details, but concise as possible."

He went back to the radio room, and the operator there received the same instructions.

"What are you going to do?" the lieutenant questioned.

Captain Blake was reaching for a head-set. "Listen in," he said briefly; "try to link up that impossible ship with those messages, then report at once to the colonel and whoever he calls in. I'll want you along, Mac, to swear I am sober."

He had a head-set adjusted, and McGuire took up the other. Again

the room was still, and again from the far reaches of space the dark night sent to them its quavering call.

The weird shrillness cried less loudly now, and the men listened in strained silence to the go and come of that variable shriek. Musical at times as it leaped from one clear note to another, again it would merge into discordant blendings of half-tones that sent shivers of nervous reaction up the listeners' spines.

"Listen," said McGuire abruptly. "Check me on this. There are two of them, one loud and one faint—right?"

"Right," said Captain Blake.

"Now notice the time intervals—there! The faint one stops, and the big boy cuts in immediately. No waiting; he answers quickly. He does it every time."

"Well?" the captain asked.

"Listen when he stops and see how long before the faint one answers. Call the loud one the ship and the faint one the station.... There! The ship is through!"

There was pause; some seconds elapsed before the answer that

whispered so faintly in their ears came out of the night.

"You are right, sir," the operator said in corroboration of McGuire's remark. "There is that wait every time."

"The ship answers at once," said McGuire; "the station only after a wait."

"Meaning—?" inquired the captain.

"Meaning, as I take it, that there is time required for the message to go from the ship to the station and for them to reply."

"An appreciable time like that," Captain Blake exclaimed, "—with radio! Why, a few seconds, even, would carry it around the world a score of times!"

Lieutenant McGuire hesitated a moment. "It happens every time," he reminded the captain: "it is no coincidence. And if that other station is out in space—another ship perhaps, relaying the messages to yet others between here and—Venus, let us say...."

He left the thought unfinished. Captain Blake was staring at him as one who beholds a fellow-man suddenly insane. But the look in his eyes changed slowly, and his lips that had been opened in

remonstrance came gradually in a firm, straight line.

"Crazy!" he said, but it was apparent that he was speaking as much to himself as to McGuire. "Plumb, raving crazy!... Yet that ship *did* go straight up out of sight—an acceleration in the upper air beyond anything we know. It might be—" And he, too, stopped at the actual voicing of the wild surmise. He shook his head sharply as if to rid it of intruding, unwelcome thoughts.

"Forget that!" he told McGuire, and repeated it in a less commanding tone. "Forget it, Mac: we've got to render a report to sane men, you and I. What we know will be hard enough for them to believe without any wild guesses.

"That new craft is real. It has got it all over us for size and speed and potential offensive action. Who made it? Who mans it? Red Russia? Japan? That's what the brass hats will be wondering; that's what they will want to find out.

"Not a word!" he repeated to the radio man. "You will keep mum on this."

He took McGuire with him as he left to seek out his colonel. But it was a disturbed and shaken man, instead of the cool, methodical

Captain Blake of ordinary days, who went in search of his commanding officer. And he clung to McGuire for corroboration of his impossible story.

There was a group of officers to whom Blake made his full report. Colonel Boynton had heard but little when he halted his subordinate curtly and reached for a phone. And his words over that instrument brought a quick conference of officers and a quiet man whom McGuire did not recognize. The "brass hats," as Blake had foreseen, were avid for details.

The pilot of the incoming plane was there, too, and the radio man. Their stories were told in a disconcerting silence, broken only by some officer's abrupt and skeptical question on one point and another.

"Now, for heaven's sake, shut up about Venus," McGuire had been told. But he did not need Captain Blake's warning to hold himself strictly to what he had seen and let the others draw their own conclusions.

Lieutenant McGuire was the last one to speak. There was silence in the office of Colonel Boynton as he finished, a silence that almost echoed from the grim walls. And the faces of the men who gathered

there were carefully masked from any expression that might betray their thoughts.

It was the quiet man in civilian attire who spoke first. He sat beside another whose insignia proclaimed him of general's rank, but he addressed himself to Colonel Boynton.

"I am very glad," he said quietly, "very glad. Colonel, that my unofficial visit came at just this time. I should like to ask some few questions."

Colonel Boynton shifted the responsibility with a gesture almost of relief. "It is in your hands. Mr. Secretary," he said. "You and General Clinton have dropped in opportunely. There is something here that will tax all our minds."

The man in civilian clothes nodded assent. He turned to Captain Blake.

"Captain," he said, "you saw this at first hand. You have told us what you saw. I should like greatly to know what you think. Will you give us your opinion, your impressions?"

The captain arose smartly, but his words came with less ease.

"My opinion," he stated, "will be of little value, but it is based upon these facts. I have seen to-night, sir, a new type of aircraft, with speed, climb and ceiling beyond anything we are capable of. I can only regard it as a menace. It may or may not have been armed, but it had the size to permit the armament of a cruiser; it had power to carry that weight. It hung stationary in the air, so it is independent of wing-lift, yet it turned and shot upward like a feather in a gale. That spells maneuverability.

"That combination, sir, can mean only that we are out-flown, out-maneuvered and out-fought in the air. It means that the planes in our hangars are obsolete, our armament so much old iron.

"The menace is potential at present. Whether it is an actual threat or not is another matter. Who mans that ship—what country's insignia she carries—is something on which I can have no opinion. The power is there: who wields it I wish we knew."

The questioner nodded at the conclusion of Blake's words, and he exchanged quiet, grave glances with the general beside him. Then—

"I think we all would wish to know that, Captain Blake," he observed. And to the colonel: "You may be able to answer that soon. It would be my idea that this craft should be—ah—drawn out, if we

can do it. We would not attack it, of course, until its mission is proved definitely unfriendly, but you will resist any offensive from them.

"And now," he added, "let us thank these officers for their able reports and excuse them. We have much to discuss...."

Captain Blake took McGuire's arm as they went out into the night. And he drew him away where they walked for silent minutes by themselves. The eyes of Lieutenant McGuire roamed upward to the scudding clouds and the glimpse of far, lonely stars; he stumbled occasionally as he walked. But for Captain Blake there was thought only of matters nearby.

"The old fox!" he exclaimed. "Didn't he 'sic us on' neatly? If we mix it with that stranger there will be no censure from the Secretary of War."

"I assumed that was who it was," said McGuire. "Well, they have something to think about, that bunch; something to study over.... Perhaps more than they know.

"And that's their job," he concluded after a silence. "I'm going to bed; but I would like a leave of absence to-morrow if that's O. K."

"Sure," said Captain Blake, "though I should think you would like to stick around. Perhaps we will see something. What's on your mind, Mac?"

"A little drive to the top of Mount Lawson," said Lieutenant McGuire. "I want to talk to a bird named Sykes."

Chapter 2

Lieutenant McGuire, U. S. A., was not given as a usual thing to vain conjectures, nor did his imagination carry him beyond the practical boundaries of accepted facts. Yet his mind, as he drove for hours through the orange-scented hills of California, reverted time and again to one persistent thought. And it was with him still, even when he was consciously concentrating on the hairpin turns of Mount Lawson's narrow road.

There was a picture there, printed indelibly in his mind—a picture of a monstrous craft, a liner of the air, that swung its glowing lights in a swift arc and, like a projectile from some huge gun, shot up and up and still up until it vanished in a jet-black sky. Its altitude when it passed from sight he could not even guess, but the sense of ever-increasing speed, of power that mocked at gravitation's puny force, had struck deep into his mind. And McGuire saw plainly this mystery ship going on and on far into the empty night where man had never been.

No lagging in that swift flight that he had seen; an acceleration that threw the ship faster and yet faster, regardless of the thin air and the lessened buoyancy in an ocean of atmosphere that held man-made machines so close to Earth. That constant acceleration, hour after

hour, day after day—the speed would be almost unlimited; inconceivable!

He stopped his car where the mountain road held straight for a hundred feet, and he looked out over the coastal plain spread like a toy world far below.

"Now, how about it?" he asked himself. "Blake thinks I am making a fool of myself. Perhaps I am. I wonder. It's a long time since I fell for any fairy stories. But this thing has got me. A sort of hunch, I guess."

The sun was shining now from a vault of clear blue. It was lighting a world of reality, of houses where people lived their commonplace lives, tiny houses squared off in blocks a mile below. There was smoke here and there from factories; it spread in a haze, and it meant boilers and engines and sound practical machinery of a practical world to the watching man.

What had all this to do with Venus? he asked himself. This was the world he knew. It was real; space was impenetrable; there were no men or beings of any sort that could travel through space. Blake was right: he was on a fool's errand. They couldn't tell him anything up here at the observatory; they would laugh at him as he deserved....

Wondering vaguely if there was a place to turn around, he looked ahead and then up; his eyes passed from the gash of roadway on the mountainside to the deep blue beyond. And within the man some driving, insistent, mental force etched strongly before his eyes that picture and its problem unanswered. There was the ship—he saw it in memory—and it went up and still up; and he knew as surely as if he had guided the craft that the meteor-like flight could be endless.

Lieutenant McGuire could not reason it out—such power was beyond his imagining—but suddenly he dared to believe, and he knew it was true.

"Earthbound!" he said in contempt of his own human kind, and he looked again at the map spread below. "Ants! Mites! That's what we are—swarming across the surface of the globe. And we think we're so damn clever if we lift ourselves up a few miles from the surface!

"Guess I'll see Sykes," he muttered aloud. "He and his kind at least dare to look out into space; take their eyes off the world; be impractical!"

He swung the car slowly around the curve ahead, eased noiselessly into second gear and went on with the climb.

There were domed observatories where he stopped: rounded structures that gleamed silvery in the air; and offices, laboratories: it was a place of busy men. And Professor Sykes, he found, was busy. But he spared a few minutes to answer courteously the questions of this slim young fellow in the khaki uniform of the air service.

"What can I do for you?" asked Professor Sykes.

"No dreamer, this man," thought McGuire as he looked at the short, stocky figure of the scientist. Clear eyes glanced sharply from under shaggy brows; there were papers in his hand scrawled over with strange mathematical symbols.

"You can answer some fool questions," said Lieutenant McGuire abruptly, "if you don't mind."

The scientist smiled broadly. "We're used to that," he told the young officer; "you can't think of any worse ones than those we have heard. Have a chair."

McGuire drew a clipping from his pocket—it was the newspaper account he had read—and he handed it to Professor Sykes.

"I came to see you about this," he began.

The lips of Professor Sykes lost their genial curve; they straightened to a hard line. "Nothing for publication," he said curtly. "As usual they enlarged upon the report and made assumptions and inferences not warranted by facts."

"But you did see that flash?"

"By visual observation I saw a bright area formed on the terminator—yes! We have no photographic corroboration."

"I am wondering what it meant."

"That is your privilege—and mine," said the scientist coldly.

"But it said there," McGuire persisted, "that it might have been a signal of some sort."

"*I* did not say so: that is an inference only. I have told you, Lieutenant"—he glanced at the card in his hand—"—Lieutenant McGuire—all that I know. We deal in facts up here, and we leave the brilliant theorizing to the journalists."

The young officer felt distinctly disconcerted. He did not know exactly what he had expected from this man—what corroboration of his wild surmises—but he was getting nowhere, he admitted. And he

resented the cold aloofness of the scientist before him.

"I am not trying to pin you down on anything," he said, and his tone carried a hint of the nervous strain that had been his. "I am trying to learn something."

"Just what?" the other inquired.

"Could that flash have been a signal?"

"You may think so if you wish: I have told you all that I know. And now," he added, and rose from his chair, "I must ask to be excused; I have work to do."

McGuire came slowly to his feet. He had learned nothing; perhaps there was nothing to be learned. A fool's errand! Blake was right. But the inner urge for some definite knowledge drove him on. His eyes were serious and his face drawn to a scowl of earnestness as he turned once more to the waiting man.

"Professor Sykes," he demanded, "just one more question. Could that have been the flash of a—a rocket? Like the proposed experiments in Germany. Could it have meant in any way the launching of a projectile—a ship—to travel Earthward through

space?"

Professor Sykes knew what it was to be harassed by the curious mob, to avoid traps set by ingenious reporters, but he knew, too, when he was meeting with honest bewilderment and a longing for knowledge. His fists were placed firmly on the hips of his stocky figure as he stood looking at the persistent questioner, and his eyes passed from the intent face to the snug khaki coat and the spread wings that proclaimed the wearer's work. A ship out of space—a projectile—this young man had said.

"Lieutenant," he suggested quietly—and again the smile had returned to his lips as he spoke—"sit down. I'm not as busy as I pretend to be. Now tell me: what in the devil have you got in your mind?"

And McGuire told him. "Like some of your dope," he said, "this is not for publication. But I have not been instructed to hush it up, and I know you will keep it to yourself."

He told the clear-eyed, listening man of the previous night's events. Of the radio's weird call and the mystery ship.

"Hallucination," suggested the scientist. "You saw the stars very

clearly, and they suggested a ship."

"Tell that to Jim Burgess," said McGuire: "he was the pilot of that plane." And the scientist nodded as if the answer were what he expected.

He asked again about the ship's flight. And he, too, bore down heavily upon the matter of acceleration in the thin upper air. He rose to lay a friendly hand on McGuire's shoulder.

"We can't know what it means," he said, "but we can form our own theories, you and I—and anything is possible.

"It is getting late," he added, "and you have had a long drive. Come over and eat; spend the night here. Perhaps you would like to have a look at our equipment—see Venus for yourself. I will be observing her through the sixty-inch refractor to-night. Would you care to?"

"Would I?" McGuire demanded with enthusiasm. "Say, that will be great!"

The sun was dropping toward the horizon when the two men again came out into the cool mountain air.

"Just time for a quick look around," suggested Professor Sykes, "if

you are interested."

He took the lieutenant first to an enormous dome that bulged high above the ground, and admitted him to the dark interior. They climbed a stairway and came out into a room that held a skeleton frame of steel. "This is the big boy," said Professor Sykes, "the one hundred-inch reflector."

There were other workers there, one a man standing upon a raised platform beside the steel frame, who arranged big holders for photographic plates. The slotted ceiling opened as McGuire watched, and the whole structure swung slowly around. It was still, and the towering steel frame began to swing noiselessly when a man at a desk touched various controls. McGuire looked about him in bewilderment.

"Quite a shop," he admitted; "but where is the telescope?"

Professor Sykes pointed to the towering latticework of steel. "Right there," he said. "Like everyone else, you were expecting to see a big tube."

He explained in simple words the operation of the great instrument that brought in light rays from sources millions of light years away.

He pointed out where the big mirror was placed—the one hundred-inch reflector—and he traced for the wondering man the pathway of light that finally converged upon a sensitized plate to catch and record what no eye had ever seen.

He checked the younger man's flow of questions and turned him back toward the stairs. "We will leave them to their work," he said; "they will be gathering light that has been traveling millions of years on its ways. But you and I have something a great deal nearer to study."

Another building held the big refractor, and it was a matter of only a few seconds and some cryptic instructions from Sykes until the eye-piece showed the image of the brilliant planet.

"The moon!" McGuire exclaimed in disappointed tones when the professor motioned him to see for himself. His eyes saw a familiar half-circle of light.

"Venus," the professor informed him. "It has phases like the moon. The planet is approaching; the sun's light strikes it from the side." But McGuire hardly heard. He was gazing with all his faculties centered upon that distant world, so near to him now.

"Venus," he whispered half aloud. Then to the professor: "It's all hazy. There are no markings—"

"Clouds," said the other. "The goddess is veiled; Venus is blanketed in clouds. What lies underneath we may never know, but we do know that of all the planets this is most like the earth; most probably is an inhabited world. Its size, its density, your weight if you were there—and the temperature under the sun's rays about double that of ours. Still, the cloud envelope would shield it."

McGuire was fascinated, and his thoughts raced wildly in speculation of what might be transpiring before his eyes. People, living in that tropical world; living and going through their daily routine under that cloud-filled sky where the sun was never seen. The margin of light that made the clear shape of a half-moon marked their daylight and dark; there was one small dot of light forming just beyond that margin. It penetrated the dark side. And it grew, as he watched, to a bright patch.

"What is that?" he inquired abstractedly—his thoughts were still filled with those beings of his imagination. "There is a light that extends into the dark part. It is spreading—"

He found himself thrust roughly aside as Professor Sykes applied a

more understanding eye to the instrument.

The professor whirled abruptly to his assistant. "Phone Professor Giles," he said sharply; "he is working on the reflector. Tell him to get a photograph of Venus at once; the cloud envelope is broken." He returned hurriedly to his observations. One hand sketched on a waiting pad.

"Markings!" he said exultantly. "If it would only hold!... There, it is closing ... gone...."

His hand was quiet now upon the paper, but where he had marked was a crude sketch of what might have been an island. It was "L" shaped; sharply bent.

"Whew!" breathed Professor Sykes and looked up for a moment. "Now that was interesting."

"You saw through?" asked McGuire eagerly. "Glimpsed the surface? —an island?"

The scientist's face relaxed. "Don't jump to conclusions," he told the aviator: "we are not ready to make a geography of Venus quite yet. But we shall know that mark if we ever see it again. I hardly think

they had time to get a picture.

“And now there is only a matter of three hours for observation: I must watch every minute. Stay here if you wish. But," he added, "don't let your imagination run wild. Some eruption, perhaps, this we have seen—an ignition of gasses in the upper air—who knows? But don't connect this with your mysterious ship. If the ship is a menace, if it means war, that is your field of action, not mine. And you will be fighting with someone on Earth. It must be that some country has gained a big lead in aeronautics. Now I must get to work."

"I'll not wait," said McGuire. "I will start for the field; get there by daylight, if I can find my way down that road in the dark."

"Thanks a lot." He paused a moment before concluding slowly: "And in spite of what you say, Professor, I believe that we will have something to get together on again in this matter."

The scientist, he saw, had turned again to his instrument. McGuire picked his way carefully along the narrow path that led where he had parked his car. "Good scout, this Sykes!" he was thinking, and he stopped to look overhead in the quick-gathering dark at that laboratory of the heavens, where Sykes and his kind delved and probed, measured and weighed, and gathered painstakingly the

messages from suns beyond counting, from universe out there in space that added their bit of enlightenment to the great story of the mystery of creation.

He was humbly aware of his own deep ignorance as he backed his car, slipped it into second, and began the long drive down the tortuous grade. He would have liked to talk more with Sykes. But he had no thought as he wound round the curves how soon that wish was to be gratified.

Part way down the mountainside he again checked his car where he had stopped on the upward climb and reasoned with himself about his errand. Once more he looked out over the level ground below, a vast glowing expanse of electric lights now, that stretched to the ocean beyond. He was suddenly unthrilled by this man-made illumination, and he got out of his car to stare again at the blackness above and its myriad of stars that gathered and multiplied as he watched.

One brighter than the rest winked suddenly out. There was a constellation of twinkling lights that clustered nearby, and they too vanished. The eyes of the watcher strained themselves to see more clearly a dim-lit outline. There were no lights: it was a black shape, lost in the blackness of the mountain sky, that was blocking out the

stars. But it was a shape, and from near the horizon the pale gleams of the rising moon picked it out in softest of outline; a vague ghost of a curve that reflected a silvery contour to the watching eyes below.

There had been a wider space in the road that McGuire had passed; he backed carefully till he could swing his car and turn it to head once more at desperate speed toward the mountain top. And it was less than an hour since he had left when he was racing back along the narrow footpath to slam open the door where Professor Sykes looked up in amazement at his abrupt return.

The aviator's voice was hoarse with excitement as he shouted: "It's here—the ship! It's here! Where's your phone?—I must call the field! It's right overhead—descending slowly—no lights, but I saw it—I saw it!"

He was working with trembling fingers at the phone where Sykes had pointed. "Long distance!" he shouted. He gave a number to the operator. "Make it quick," he implored. "Quick!"

Chapter 3

Back at Maricopa Flying Field the daily routine had been disturbed. There were conferences of officers, instructions from Colonel Boynton, and a curiosity-provoking lack of explanations. Only with Captain Blake did the colonel indulge in any discussion.

"We'll keep this under our hats," he said, "and out of the newspapers as long as we can. You can imagine what the yellow journals would do with a scarehead like that. Why, they would have us all wiped off the map and the country devastated by imaginary fleets in the first three paragraphs."

Blake regarded his superior gravely. "I feel somewhat the same way, myself. Colonel," he admitted. "When I think what this can mean—some other country so far ahead of us in air force that we are back in the dark ages—well, it doesn't look any too good to me if they mean trouble."

"We will meet it when it comes," said Colonel Boynton. "But, between ourselves, I am in the same state of mind.

"The whole occurrence is so damn mysterious. Washington hasn't a whisper of information of any such construction; the Secretary

admitted that last night. It's a surprise, a complete surprise, to everyone.

"But, Blake, you get that new ship ready as quickly as you can. Prepare for an altitude test the same as we planned, but get into the air the first minute possible. She ought to show a better ceiling than anything we have here, and you may have to fly high to say 'Good morning' to that liner you saw. Put all the mechanics on it that can work to advantage. I think they have it pretty well along now."

"Engine's tested and installed, sir," was Blake's instant report. "I think I can take it up this afternoon."

He left immediately to hurry to the hangar where a new plane stood glistening in pristine freshness, and where hurrying mechanics grumbled under their breaths at the sudden rush for a ship that was expected to take the air a week later.

An altitude test under full load! Well, what of it? they demanded one of another; wouldn't another day do as well as this one? And they worked as they growled, worked with swift sureness and skill, and the final instruments took their place in the ship that she might roll from the hangar complete under that day's sun.

Her supercharger was tested—the adjunct to a powerful engine that would feed the hungry cylinders with heavy air up in the heights where the air is thin; there were oxygen flasks to keep life in the pilot in the same thin air. And the hot southern sun made ludicrous that afternoon the bulky, heavily-wrapped figure of Captain Blake as he sat at the controls and listened approvingly to the roaring engine.

He waved good-by and smiled understandingly as he met the eyes of Colonel Boynton; then pulled on his helmet, settled himself in his seat and took off in a thunderous blast of sound to begin his long ascent.

He had long since cracked open the valve of his oxygen flask when the climb was ended, and his goggles were frosted in the arctic cold so that it was only with difficulty he could read his instrument board.

"That's the top," he thought in that mind so light and so curiously not his own. He throttled the engine and went into a long spiral that was to end within a rod of where he had started on the brown sun-baked field. The last rays of the sun were slanting over distant mountains as he climbed stiffly from the machine.

"Better than fifty thousand," exulted Colonel Boynton. "Of course your barograph will have to be calibrated and verified, but it looks

like a record, Blake—and you had a full load.

"Ready to go up and give merry hell to that other ship if she shows up?" he asked. But Captain Blake shook a dubious head.

"Fifty thousand is just a start for that bird," he said. "You didn't see them shoot out of sight, Colonel. Lord knows when they quit *their* climb—or where."

"Well, we'll just have a squadron ready in any event," the colonel assured him. "We will make him show his stuff or take a beating—if that is what he wants."

They were in the colonel's office. "You had better go and get warmed up," he told the flyer: "then come back here for instructions." But Blake was more anxious for information than for other comforts.

"I'm all right," he said: "just tired a bit. Let me stretch out here, Colonel, and give me the dope on what you expect of our visitor and what we will do."

He settled back comfortably in a big chair. The office was warm, and Blake knew now he had been doing a day's work.

"We will just take it as it comes," Colonel Boynton explained. "I can't for the life of me figure why the craft was spying around here. What are they looking for? We haven't any big secrets the whole world doesn't know.

"Of course he may not return. But if he does I want you to go up and give him the once over. I can trust you to note every significant detail.

"You saw no wings. If it is a dirigible, let's know something of their power and how they can throw themselves up into the air the way you described. Watch for anything that may serve to identify it and its probable place of manufacture—any peculiarity of marking or design or construction that may give us a lead. Then return and report."

Blake nodded his understanding of what was wanted, but his mind was on further contingencies: he wanted definite instructions.

"And," he asked; "if they attack—what then? Is their fire to be returned?"

"If they make one single false move," said Colonel Boynton savagely, "give them everything you've got. And the 91st Squadron

will be off the ground to support you at the first sign of trouble. We don't want to start anything, nor appear to do so. But, by the gods, Blake, this fellow means trouble eventually as sure as you're a flyer, and we won't wait for him to ask for it twice."

They sat in silence, while the field outside became shrouded in night. And they speculated, as best they could from the few facts they had, as to what this might mean to the world, to their country, to themselves. It was an hour before Blake was aware of the fact that he was hungry.

He rose to leave, but paused while Colonel Boynton answered the phone. The first startled exclamation held him rigid while he tried to piece together the officer's curt responses and guess at what was being told.

"Colonel Boynton speaking.... McGuire?... Yes, Lieutenant.... Over Mount Lawson?... Yes—yes, the same ship, I've no doubt."

His voice was even and cool in contrast to the excited tones that carried faintly to Blake standing by.

"Quite right!" he said shortly. "You will remain where you are: act as observer: hold this line open and keep me informed. Captain Blake

will leave immediately for observation. A squadron will follow. Let me know promptly what you see."

He turned abruptly to the waiting man.

"It is back!" he said. "We're in luck! Over the observatories at Mount Lawson; descending, so Lieutenant McGuire says. Take the same ship you had up to-day. Look them over—get up close—good luck!" He turned again to the phone.

There were planes rolling from their hangars before Blake could reach his own ship. Their engines were thundering: men were rushing across the field, pulling on leather helmets and coats as they ran—all this while he warmed up his engine.

A mechanic thrust in a package of sandwiches and a thermos of coffee while he waited. And Captain Blake grinned cheerfully and gulped the last of his food as he waved to the mechanics to pull out the wheel blocks. He opened the throttle and shot out into the dark.

He climbed and circled the field, saw the waving motion of lights in red and green that marked the take-off of the planes of the 91st, and he straightened out on a course that in less than two hours would bring him over the heights of Mount Lawson and the mystery that

awaited him there. And he fingered the trigger grip that was part of the stick and nodded within his dark cockpit at the rattle of a machine gun that merged its staccato notes with the engine's roar.

But he felt, as he thought of that monster shape, as some primordial man might have felt, setting forth with a stone in his hand to wage war on a saurian beast.

Chapter 4

If Colonel Boynton could have stood with one of his lieutenants and Professor Sykes on a mountain top, he would have found, perhaps, the answer to his question. He had wondered in a puzzled fashion why the great ship had shown its mysterious presence over the flying field. He had questioned whether it was indeed the field that had been the object of their attention or whether in the cloudy murk they had merely wandered past. Could he have seen with the eyes of Lieutenant McGuire the descent of the great shape over Mount Lawson, he would have known beyond doubt that here was the magnet that drew the eyes of whatever crew was manning the big craft.

It was dark where the two men stood. Others had come running at their call, but their forms, too, were lost in the shadows of the towering pines. The light from an open door struck across an open space beyond which McGuire and Professor Sykes stood alone, stood silent and spellbound, their heads craned back at a neck-wrenching angle. They were oblivious to all discomforts; their eyes and their whole minds were on the unbelievable thing in the sky.

Beyond the fact that no lights were showing along the hull, there was no effort at concealment. The moon was up now to illumine the

scene, and it showed plainly the gleaming cylinder with its long body and blunt, shining ends, dropping, slowly, inexorably down.

"Like a dirigible," said McGuire huskily. "But the size, man—the size! And its shape is not right; it isn't streamlined correctly; the air—" He stopped his half-unconscious analysis abruptly. "The air!" What had this craft to do with the air? A thin layer of gas that hung close to the earth—the skin on an apple! And beyond—space! There was the ethereal ocean in which this great shape swam!

The reality of the big ship, the very substance of it, made the space ship idea the harder to grasp. Lieutenant McGuire found that it was easier to see an imaginary craft taking off into space than to conceive of this monstrous shape, many hundreds of tons in weight, being thrown through vast emptiness. Yet he knew; he knew!

And his mind was a chaos of grim threats and forebodings as he looked at the unbelievable reality and tried to picture what manner of men were watching, peering, from those rows of ports.

At last it was motionless. It hung soundless and silent except for a soft roar, a scant thousand feet in the air. And its huge bulk was dwarfing the giant pines, the rounded buildings; it threw the men's familiar surroundings into a new and smaller scale.

He had many times flown over these mountains, and Lieutenant McGuire had seen the silvery domes of the observatories shining among the trees. Like fortresses for aerial defense, he had thought, and the memory returned to him now. What did these new-comers think of them? Had they, too, found them suggestive of forts on the frontier of a world, defenses against invasion from out there? Or did they know them for what they were? Did they wish only to learn the extent of our knowledge, our culture? Were they friendly, perhaps? —half-timid and fearful of what they might find?

A star moved in the sky, a pin-point of light that was plain in its message to the aviator. It was Blake, flying high, volplaning to make contact and learn from the air what this stranger might mean. The light of his plane slanted down in an easy descent; the flyer was gliding in on a long aerial toboggan slide. His motor was throttled; there was only the whistle of torn air on the monoplane's wings. McGuire was with the captain in his mind, and like him he was waiting for whatever the stranger might do.

Other lights were clustered where the one plane had been. The men of the 91st had their orders, and the fingers of the watching, silent man gripped an imaginary stick while he wished with his whole heart that he was up in the air. To be with Blake or the others! His thoughts whipped back to the mysterious stranger: the great shape

was in motion: it rose sharply a thousand feet in the air.

The approaching plane showed clear in the moon's light. It swung and banked, and the vibrant song of its engine came down to the men as Blake swept in a great circle about the big ship. He was looking it over, but he began his inspection at a distance, and the orbit of his plane made a tightening spiral as he edged for a closer look. He was still swinging in the monotonous round when the ship made its first forward move.

It leaped in the air: it swept faster and faster. And it was moving with terrific speed as it crashed silently through the path of the tiny plane. And Blake, as he leaned forward on the stick to throw his plane downward in a power dive, could have had a vision, not of a ship of the air, but only of a shining projectile as the great monster shrieked overhead.

McGuire trembled for the safety of those wings as he saw Blake pull his little ship out of the dive and shoot upward to a straight climb.

But—"That's dodging them!" he exulted: "that's flying! I wonder, did they mean to wipe him out or were they only scared off?"

His question was answered as, out of the night, a whistling shriek

proclaimed the passage of the meteor ship that drove unmistakably at the lone plane. And again the pilot with superb skill waited until the last moment and threw himself out of the path of the oncoming mass, though his own plane was tossed and whirled like an autumn leaf in the vortex that the enemy created. Not a second was lost as Blake opened his throttle and forced his plane into a steep climb.

"Atta-boy!" said McGuire, as if words could span across to the man in the plane. "Altitude, Blake—get altitude!"

The meteor had turned in a tremendous circle; so swift its motion that it made an actual line of light as the moon marked its course. And the curved line straightened abruptly to a flashing mark that shot straight toward the struggling plane.

This time another sound came down to the listening ears of the two men. The plane tore head on to meet the onslaught, to swing at the last instant in a frantic leap that ended as before in the maelstrom of air back of the ship. But the muffled roar was changed, punctured with a machine-gun's familiar rattle, and the stabbing flashes from Blake's ship before he threw it out of the other's path were a song of joy to the tense nerves of the men down below.

This deadly rush could only be construed as an attack, and Blake

was fighting back. The very speed of the great projectile must hold it to its course; the faster it went the more difficult to swerve it from a line. This and much more was flashing sharply in McGuire's mind. But—Blake!—alone against this huge antagonist!... It was coming back. Another rush like a star through space....

And McGuire shouted aloud in a frenzy of emotion as a cluster of lights came falling from on high. No lone machine gun now that tore the air with this clattering bedlam of shots: the planes of the 91st Squadron were diving from the heights. They came on a steep slant that seemed marking them for crashing death against the huge cylinder flashing past. And their stabbing needles of machine-gun fire made a drumming tattoo, till the planes, with the swiftness of hawks, swept aside, formed to groups, tore on down toward the ground and then curved in great circles of speed to climb back to the theater of action.

Lieutenant McGuire was rigid and quivering. He should go to the phone and report to the colonel, but the thought left him as quickly as it came. He was frozen in place, and his mind could hold only the scene that was being pictured before him.

The enemy ship had described its swift curve, and the planes of the defenders were climbing desperately for advantage. So slowly they

moved as compared with the swiftness of the other!

But the great ship was slowing; it came on, but its wild speed was checked. The light of the full moon showed plainly now what McGuire had seen but dimly before—a great metal beak on the ship, pointed and shining, a ram whose touch must bring annihilation to anything it struck.

The squadron of planes made a group in the sky, and Blake's monoplane, too, was with them. The huge enemy was approaching slowly: was it damaged? McGuire hardly dared hope ... yet that raking fire might well have been deadly: it might be that some bullets had torn and penetrated to the vitals of this ship's machinery and damaged some part.

It came back slowly, ominously, toward the circling planes. Then, throwing itself through the air, it leaped not directly toward them but off to one side.

Like a stone on the end of a cord it swung with inconceivable speed in a circle that enclosed the group of planes. Again and again it whipped around them, while the planes, by comparison, were motionless. Its orbit was flat with the ground: then tilting, more yet, it made a last circle that stood like a hoop in the air. And behind it as

it circled it left a faint trace of vapor. Nebulous!—milky in the moonlight!—but the ship had built a sphere, a great globe of the gas, and within it, like rats in a cage, the planes of the 91st Squadron were darting and whirling.

"Gas!" groaned the watching man: "gas! What is it? Why don't they break through?"

The thin clouds of vapor were mingling now and expanding: they blossomed and mushroomed, and the light of the moon came in pale iridescence from their billowing folds.

"Break through!" McGuire had prayed—and he stood in voiceless horror as he saw the attempt.

The mist was touching here and there a plane: they were engulfed, yet he could see them plainly. And he saw with staring, fear-filled eyes the clumsy tumbling and fluttering of unguided wings as the great eagles of the 91st fell roaring to earth with no conscious minds guiding their flight.

The valleys were deep about the mountain, and their shadowed blackness opened to receive the maimed, stricken things that came fluttering or swooping wildly to that last embrace, where, in the

concealing shadows, the deeper shadows of death awaited....

There was a room where a telephone waited: McGuire sensed this but dumbly, and the way to that room was long to his stumbling feet. He was blinded: his mind would not function: he saw only those fluttering things, and the moonlight on their wings, and the shadows that took them so softly at the last.

One plane whistled close overhead. McGuire stopped where he stood to follow it with unbelieving eyes. That one man had lived, escaped the net—it was inconceivable! The plane returned: it was flying low, and it swerved erratically as it flew. It was a monoplane: a new ship.

Its motor was silenced: it stalled as he watched, to pancake and crash where the towering pines made a cradle of great branches to cushion its fall.

No thought now of the colonel waiting impatiently for a report; even the enemy, there in the sky was forgotten. It was Blake in that ship, and he was alive—or had been—for he had cut his motor. McGuire screamed out for Professor Sykes, and there were others, too, who came running at his call. He tore recklessly through the scrub and undergrowth and gained at last the place where wreckage hung

dangling from the trees. The fuselage of a plane, scarred and broken, was still held in the strong limbs.

Captain Blake was in the cockpit, half hanging from the side. He was motionless, quiet, and his face shone white and ghastly as they released him and drew him out. But one hand still clung with a grip like death itself to a hose that led from an oxygen tank. McGuire stared in wonder and slowly gathering comprehension.

"He was fixed for an altitude test," he said dazedly; "this ship was to be used, and he was to find her ceiling. He saw what the others were getting, and he flew himself through on a jet of pure oxygen—" He stopped in utter admiration of the quickness of thought that could outwit death in an instant like that.

They carried the limp body to the light. "No bones broken so far as I can see," said the voice of Professor Sykes. "Leave him here in the air. He must have got a whiff of their devilish mist in spite of his oxygen; he was flying mighty awkwardly when he came in here."

But he was alive!—and Lieutenant McGuire hastened with all speed now to the room where a telephone was ringing wildly and a colonel of the air force must be told of the annihilation of a crack squadron and of a threat that menaced all the world.

In that far room there were others waiting where Colonel Boynton sat with receiver to his ear. A general's uniform was gleaming in the light to make more sober by contrast the civilian clothing of that quiet, clear-eyed man who held the portfolio of the Secretary of War.

They stared silently at Colonel Boynton, and they saw the blood recede from his face, while his cool voice went on unmoved with its replies.

"... I understand," he said; "a washout, complete except for Captain Blake; his oxygen saved him.... It attacked with gas, you say?... And why did not our own planes escape?... Its speed!—yes, we'll have to imagine it, but it is unbelievable. One moment—" He turned to those who waited for his report.

"The squadron," he said with forced quiet, though his lips twitched in a bloodless line, "—the 91st—is destroyed. The enemy put them down with one blow; enveloped them with gas." He recounted the essence of McGuire's report, then turned once more to the phone.

"Hello, Lieutenant—the enemy ship—where is it now?"

He listened—listened—to a silent receiver: silent save for the sound of a shot—a crashing fall—a loud, panting breath. He heard the

breathing close to the distant instrument; it ended in a choking gasp; the instrument was silent in his ear....

He signalled violently for the operator: ordered the ringing of any and all phones about the observatory, and listened in vain for a sound or syllable in reply.

"A plane," he told an orderly, "at once! Phone the commercial flying field near the base of Mount Lawson. Have them hold a car ready for me: I shall land there!"

Chapter 5

To Captain Blake alone, of all those persons on the summit of Mount Lawson, it was given to see and to know and be able to relate what transpired there and in the air above. For Blake, although he appeared like one dead, was never unconscious throughout his experience.

Driving head on toward the ship, he had emptied his drum of cartridges before he threw his plane over and down in a dive that escaped the onrush of the great craft by a scant margin, and that carried him down in company with the men and machines of the squadron that dived from above.

He turned as they turned and climbed as they climbed for the advantage that altitude might give. And he climbed faster: his ship outdistanced them in that tearing, scrambling rush for the heights. The squadron was spiraling upward in close formation with his plane above them when the enemy struck.

He saw that great shape swing around them, terrible in its silent swiftness, and, like the others, he failed to realize at first the net she was weaving. So thin was the gas and so rapid the circling of the enemy craft, they were captured and cut off inside of the gaseous

sphere before the purpose of the maneuver was seen or understood.

He saw the first faint vapor form above him; swung over for a steep bank that carried him around the inside of the great cage of gas and that showed him the spiraling planes as the first wisps of vapor swept past them.

He held that bank with his swift machine, while below him a squadron of close-formed fighting craft dissolved before his eyes into unguided units. The formations melted: wings touched and locked; the planes fell dizzily or shot off in wild, ungoverned, swerving flight. The air was misty about him; it was fragrant in his nostrils; the world was swimming....

It was gas, he knew, and with the light-headedness that was upon him, so curiously like that of excessive altitudes, he reached unconsciously for the oxygen supply. The blast of pure gas in his face revived him for an instant, and in that instant of clear thinking his plan was formed. He threw his weight on stick and rudder, corrected the skid his ship was taking, and, with one hand holding the tube of life-giving oxygen before his face, he drove straight down in a dive toward the earth.

There were great weights fastened to his arm, it seemed, when he

tried to bring the ship from her fearful dive. He moved only with greatest effort, and it was force of will alone that compelled his hands to do their work. His brain, as he saw the gleaming roundness of observatory buildings beneath him, was as clear as ever in his life, but his muscles, his arms and legs, refused to work: even his head; he was slowly sinking beneath a load of utter fatigue.

The observatories were behind him; he must swing back; he could not last long, he knew; each slightest movement was intolerable effort.

Was this death? he wondered; but his mind was so clear! There were the buildings, the trees! How thickly they were massed beyond—

He brought every ounce of will power to bear ... the throttle!—and a slow glide in ... he was losing speed ... the stick—must—come—back! The crashing branches whipped about him, bending, crackling—and the world went dark....

There were stars above him when he awoke, and his back was wrenched and aching. He tried to move, to call, but found that the paralysing effect of the gas still held him fast. He was lying on the ground, he knew: a door was open in a building beyond, and the light in the room showed him men, a small group of them, standing

silent while someone—yes, it was McGuire—shouted into a phone.

"... The squadron," he was saying. "... Lost! Every plane down and destroyed.... Blake is living but injured...." And then Blake remembered. And the tumbling, helpless planes came again before his eyes while he cursed silently at this freezing grip that would not let him cover his face with his hands to shut out the sight.

The figure of a man hurried past him, nor saw the body lying helpless in the cool dark. McGuire was still at the phone. And the enemy ship—?

His mind, filled with a welter of words as he tried to find phrases to compass his hate for that ship. And then, as if conjured out of nothing by his thoughts, the great craft itself came in view overhead in all its mighty bulk.

It settled down swiftly: it was riding on an even keel. And in silence and darkness it came from above. Blake tried to call out, but no sound could be formed by his paralyzed throat. Doors opened in silence, swinging down from the belly of the thing to show in the darkness square openings through which shot beams of brilliant yellow light.

There were cages that lowered—great platforms in slings—and the platforms came softly to rest on the ground. They were moving with life; living beings clustered upon them thick in the dark. Oh God! for an instant's release from the numbness that held his lips and throat to cry out one word!... The shapes were passing now in the shelter of darkness, going toward the room.... He could see McGuire's back turned toward the door.

Man-shapes, tall and thin, distorted humans, each swathed in bulging garments; horrible staring eyes of glass in the masks about their heads, and each hand ready with a shining weapon as they stood waiting for the men within to move.

McGuire must have seen them first, though his figure was half concealed from Blake where he was lying. But he saw the head turn; knew by the quick twist of the shoulders the man was reaching for a gun. One shot echoed in Blake's ears; one bulging figure spun and fell awkwardly to the ground; then the weapons in those clumsy hands hissed savagely while jets of vapor, half liquid and half gas, shot blindingly into the room. The faces dropped from his sight....

There had been the clamor of surprised and shouting men: there was silence now. And the awkward figures in the bloated casings that protected their bodies from the gas passed in safety to the room.

Blake, bound in the invisible chains of enemy gas, struggled silently, futilely, to pit his will against this grip that held him. To lie there helpless, to see these men slaughtered! He saw one of the creatures push the body of his fallen comrade out of the way: it was cast aside with an indifferent foot.

They were coming back: Blake saw the form of McGuire in unmistakable khaki. He and another man were carried high on the shoulders of some of the invaders. They were going toward the platforms, the slings beneath the ship.... They passed close to Blake, and again he was unnoticed in the dark.

A clamor came from distant buildings, a babel of howls and shrieks, inhuman, unearthly. There were no phrases or syllables, but to Blake it was familiar ... somewhere he had heard it ... and then he remembered the radio and the weird wailing note that told of communication. These things were talking in the same discordant din.

They were gathering now on the platforms slung under the ship. A whistling note from somewhere within the great structure and the platforms went high in the air. They were loaded, he saw, with papers and books and instruments plundered from the observatories. Some made a second trip to take up the loot they had gathered. Then

the black doorways closed; the huge bulk of the ship floated high above the trees; it took form, dwindled smaller and smaller, then vanished from sight in the star-studded sky.

Blake thought of their unconscious passenger—the slim figure of Lieutenant McGuire. Mac had been a close friend and a good one; his ready smile; his steady eyes that could tear a problem to pieces with their analytic scrutiny or gaze far into space to see those visions of a dreamer!

"Far into space." Blake repeated the words in his mind. And: "Good-by Mac," he said softly; "you've shipped for a long cruise, I'm thinking." He hardly realized he had spoken the words aloud.

Lying there in the cold night he felt his strength returning slowly. The pines sang their soothing, whispered message, and the faint night noises served but to intensify the silence of the mountain. It was some time before the grind of straining gears came faintly in the air to announce the coming of a car up the long grade. And still later he heard it come to a stop some distance beyond. There were footsteps, and voices calling: he heard the voice of Colonel Boynton. And he was able to call out in reply, even to move his head and turn it to see the approaching figures in the night.

Colonel Boynton knelt beside him. "Did they get you, old man?" he asked.

"Almost," Blake told him. "My oxygen—I was lucky. But the others—". He did not need to complete the sentence. The silent canyons among those wooded hills told plainly the story of the lost men.

"We will fight them with gas masks," said the colonel; "your experience has taught us the way."

"Gas-tight uniforms and our own supplies of oxygen," Blake supplemented. He told Boynton of the man-things he had seen come from the ship, of their baggy suits, their helmets.... And he had seen a small generator on the back of each helmet. He told him of the small, shining weapons and their powerful jets of gas. Deadly and unescapable at short range, he well knew.

"They got McGuire," Blake concluded; "carried him off a prisoner. Took another man, too."

For a moment Colonel Boynton's quiet tones lost their even steadiness. "We'll get them," he said savagely, and it was plain that it was the invaders that filled his mind; "we'll go after them, and we'll get them in spite of their damn gas, and we'll rip their big ship into

ribbons—"

Captain Blake was able to raise a dissenting hand. "We will have to go where they are, Colonel, to do that."

Colonel Boynton stared at him. "Well?" he demanded. "Why not?"

"We can't go where *they* went," said Blake simply. "I laughed at McGuire; told him not to be a fool. But I was the fool—the blind one; we all were, Colonel. That thing came here out of space. It has gone back; it is far beyond our air. I saw it go up out of sight, and I know. Those creatures were men, if you like, but no men that we know—not those shrieking, wailing devils! And we're going to hear more from them, now that they've found their way here!"

Chapter 6

A score of bodies where men had died in strangling fumes in the observatories on Mount Lawson; one of the country's leading astronomical scientists vanished utterly; the buildings on the mountain top ransacked; papers and documents blowing in vagrant winds; tales of a monster ship in the air, incredibly huge, unbelievably swift—

There are matters that at times are not allowed to reach the press, but not happenings like these. And the papers of the United States blazed out with headlines to tell the world of this latest mystery.

Then came corroboration from the far corners of the world. The mystery ship had not visited one section only; it had made a survey of the whole civilized sphere, and the tales of those who had seen it were no longer laughed to scorn but went on the wires of the great press agencies to be given to the world. And with that the censorship imposed by the Department of War broke down, and the tragic story of the destruction of the 91st Air Squadron passed into written history. The wild tale of Captain Blake was on every tongue.

An invasion from space! The idea was difficult to accept. There were scoffers who tried to find something here for their easy wit. Why

should we be attacked? What had that other world to gain? There was no answer ready, but the silent lips of the men who had fallen spoke eloquently of the truth. And the world, in wonder and consternation, was forced to believe.

Were there more to come? How meet them? Was this war—and with whom? What neighboring planet could reasonably be suspected. What had science to say?

The scientists! The scientists! The clamor of the world was beating at the doors of science and demanding explanations and answers. And science answered.

A conference was arranged in London; the best minds in the realms of astronomy and physics came together. They were the last to admit the truth that would not be denied, but admit it they must. And to some of the questions they found their answer.

It was not Mars, they said, though this in the popular mind was the source of the trouble. Not Mars, for that planet was far in the heavens. But Venus!—misnamed for the Goddess of Love. It was Venus, and she alone, who by any stretch of the imagination could be threatening Earth.

What did it mean? They had no answer. The ship was the only answer to that. Would there be more?—could we meet them?—defeat them? And again the wise men of the world refused to hazard a guess.

But they told what they knew; that Venus was past her eastern elongation, was approaching the earth. She of all the planets that swung around the sun came nearest to Earth—twenty-six million miles in another few weeks. Then whirling away she would pass to the western elongation in a month and a half and drive out into space. Venus circled the sun in a year of 225 days, and in 534 days she would again reach her eastern elongation with reference to the earth, and draw near us again.

They were reluctant to express themselves, these men who made nothing of weighing and analyzing stars a million of light years away, but *if* the popular conception was correct and *if* we could pass through the following weeks without further assault, we could count on a year and a half before the menace would again return. And in a year and a half—well, the physicists would be working—and we might be prepared.

Captain Blake had made his report, but this, it seemed, was not enough. He was ordered to come to Washington, and, with Colonel

Boynton, he flew across the country to tell again his incredible story.

It was a notable gathering before which he appeared. All the branches of the service were represented; there were men in the uniform of admirals and generals; there were heads of Departments. And the Secretary of War was in charge.

He told his story, did Blake, before a battery of hostile eyes. This was not a gathering to be stampeded by wild scareheads, nor by popular clamor. They wanted facts, and they wanted them proved. But the gravity with which they regarded the investigation was shown by their invitation to the representatives of foreign powers to attend.

"I have told you all that happened," Blake concluded, "up to the coming of Colonel Boynton. May I reiterate one fact? I do not wonder at your questioning my state of mind and my ability to observe correctly. But I must insist, gentlemen, that while I got a shot of their gas and my muscles and my nervous system were paralyzed, my brain was entirely clear. I saw what I saw; those creatures were there; they entered the buildings; they carried off Lieutenant McGuire and another man.

"What they were or who they were I cannot say. I do not know that

they were men, but their insane shrieking in that queer unintelligible talk is significant. And that means of communication corresponds with the radio reception of which you know.

"If you gentlemen know of any part of this earth that can produce such a people, if you know of any people or country in this world that can produce such a ship—then we can forget all our wild fancies. And we can prepare to submit to that country and that people as the masters of this earth. For I must tell you, gentlemen, with all the earnestness at my command, that until you have seen that ship in action, seen its incredible speed, its maneuverability, its lightning-like attack and its curtain of gas, you can have no conception of our helplessness. And the insignia that she carries is the flag of our conquerors."

Blake got an approving nod from the Secretary of War as he took his seat. That quiet man rose slowly from his chair to add his words. He spoke earnestly, impressively.

"Captain Blake has hit the nail squarely on the head," he stated. "We have here in this room a representative gathering from the whole world. If there is any one of you who can say that this mystery ship was built and manned by your people, let him speak, and we will send you at once a commission to acknowledge your power and

negotiate for peace."

The great hall was silent, in a silence that held only uneasy rustlings as men glanced one at another in wondering dismay.

"The time has come," said the Secretary with solemn emphasis, "when all dissensions among our peoples must cease. Whatever there is or ever has been of discord between us fades into insignificance before this new threat. It is the world, now, against a power unknown; we can only face it as a united world.

"I shall recommend to the President of the United States that a commission be appointed, that it may co-operate with similar bodies from all lands. I ask you, gentlemen, to make like representations to your governments, to the end that we may meet this menace as one country and one man; meet it, God grant, successfully through a War Department of the World."

It was a brave gesture of the President of the United States; he dared the scorn and laughter of the world in standing behind his Secretary of War. The world is quick to turn and rend with ridicule a false prophet. And despite the unanswerable facts, the scope and power of the menace was not entirely believed. It was difficult for the conscious minds of men to conceive of the barriers of vast space as

swept aside and the earth laid open to attack.

England was slow to respond to the invitation of the President: this matter required thought and grave deliberation in parliament. It might not be true: the thought, whether spoken or unexpressed, was clinging to their minds. And even if true—even if this lone ship had wandered in from space—there might be no further attack.

"Why," they asked, "should there be more unprovoked assaults from the people of another planet? What was their object? What had they to gain? ... Perhaps we were safe after all." The answer that destroyed all hope came to them borne in upon a wall of water that swept the British coast.

The telescopes of the world were centered now on just one object in the heavens. The bright evening star that adorned the western sky was the target for instruments great and small. It was past the half-moon phase now, and it became under magnification a gleaming crescent, a crescent that emitted from the dark sphere it embraced vivid flashes of light. Sykes' report had ample corroboration; the flash was seen by many, and it was repeated the next night and the next.

What was it? the waiting world asked. And the answer came not

from the telescopes and their far-reaching gaze but from the waters of the Atlantic. In the full blaze of day came a meteor that swept to the earth in an arc of fire to outshine the sun. There must have been those who saw it strike—passengers and crews of passing ships—but its plunge into the depths of the Atlantic spelled death for each witness.

The earth trembled with the explosion that followed. A gas—some new compound that united with water to give volumes tremendous—that only could explain it. The ocean rose from its depths and flung wave after wave to race outward in circles of death.

Hundreds of feet in height at their source—this could only be estimated—they were devastating when they struck. The ocean raged over the frail bulwark of England in wave upon wave, and, retreating, the waters left smooth, shining rock where cities had been. The stone and steel of their buildings was scattered far over the desolate land or drawn in the suction of retreating waters to the sea.

Ireland, too, and France and Spain. Even the coast of America felt the shock of the explosion and was swept by tidal waves of huge proportions. But the coast of Britain took the blow at its worst.

The world was stunned and waiting—waiting!—when the next blow

fell. The flashes were coming from Venus at regular intervals, just twenty hours and nineteen minutes apart. And with exactly the same time intervals the bolts arrived from space to lay waste the earth.

They struck where they would: the ocean again; the Sahara; in the mountains of China; the Pacific was thrown into fearful convulsions; the wheat fields of Canada trembled and vanished before a blast of flaming gas....

Twenty hours and nineteen minutes! Where it would strike, the next star-shell, no man might say; that it surely would come was a deadly and nerve-shattering certainty. The earth waited and prayed under actual bombardment.

Some super-gun, said science with conviction; a great bore in the planet itself, perhaps. But it was fixed, and the planet itself aimed with an accuracy that was deadly; aimed once as each revolution brought its gun on the target. Herein, said science, lay a basis for hope.

If, in that distant world, there was only one such bore, it must be altering its aim as the planet approached; the gun must cease to bear upon the earth. And the changing sweep of the missiles' flight confirmed their belief.

Each meteor-shell that came rushing into Earth's embrace burned brilliantly as it tore into the air. And each flaming arc was increasingly bent, until—twenty hours and nineteen minutes had passed—twenty minutes—thirty—another hour ... and the peoples of Earth dropped humbly to their knees in thankful prayer, or raised vengeful eyes and clenched fists toward the heavens while their quivering lips uttered blasphemous curses. The menace, for the time, had passed; the great gun of Venus no longer was aiming toward the earth.

"No more ships," was the belief; "not this time." And the world turned to an accounting of its losses, and to wonder—wonder—what the planet's return would bring. A year and one half was theirs; one year and a half in which to live in safety, in which to plan and build.

A column, double leaded, in the *London Times* voiced the feeling of the world. It was copied and broadcast everywhere.

"Another attack," it concluded, "is not a probability—it is a certainty. They are destroying us for some reason known only to themselves. Who can doubt that when the planet returns there will be a further bombardment; an invasion by armed forces in giant ships; bombs dropped from them miles high in the air. This is what we must look forward to—death and destruction dealt out by a force we are unable

to meet.

"Our munitions factories may build larger guns, but can they reach the heights at which these monster ships of space will lie, with any faint probability of inflicting damage? It is doubtful.

"Our aircraft is less than useless; its very name condemns it as inept. Craft of the air!—and we have to war against space ships which can rise beyond the thin envelope of gas that encircles the earth.

"The world is doomed—utterly and finally doomed; it is the end of humankind; slavery to a conquering race at the very best, unless—

"Let us face the facts fairly. It is war—war to the death—between the inhabitants of this world and of that other. We are men. What they are God alone can say. But they are creatures of mind as are we; what they have done, we may do.

"There is our only hope. It is vain, perhaps—preposterous in its assumption—but our sole and only hope. We must meet the enemy and defeat him, and we must do it on his own ground. To destroy their fleet we must penetrate space; to silence their deadly bombardment we must go out into space as they have done, reach their distant world as they have reached ours, and conquer as we

would have been conquered.

"It is a tenuous hope, but our only one. Let our men of mundane warfare do their best—it will be useless. But if there be one spark of God-given genius in the world that can point the way to victory, let those in authority turn no deaf ear.

"It is a battle now of minds, and the best minds will win. Humanity—all humankind—is facing the end. In less than one year and a half we must succeed—or perish. And unless we conquer finally and decisively, the story of man in the history of the universe will be a tale that is told, a record of life in a book that is ended—closed—and forgotten through all eternity."

Chapter 7

A breath of a lethal gas shot from the flying ship had made Captain Blake as helpless as if every muscle were frozen hard, and he had got it only lightly, mixed with the saving blast of oxygen. His heart had gone on, and his breathing, though it became shallow, did not cease; he was even able to turn his eyes. But to the men in the observatory room the gas from the weapons of the attacking force came as a devastating, choking cloud that struck them senseless as if with a blow. Lieutenant McGuire hardly heard the sound of his own pistol before unconsciousness took him.

It was death for the men who were left—for them the quick darkness never lifted—but for McGuire and his companion there was reprieve.

He was lying flat on a hard floor when remembrance crept slowly back to his benumbed brain. An odor, sickish-sweet, was in his nostrils; the breath of life was being forcibly pumped and withdrawn from laboring lungs; a mask was tight against his face. He struggled to throw it off, and someone bending over removed it.

Someone! His eyes stared wonderingly at the grotesque face like a lingering phantasm of fevered dreams. There were others, he saw,

and they were working over a body not far away upon the floor. He recognized the figure of Professor Sykes. Short, stocky, his clothes disheveled—but Sykes, unmistakably, despite the mask upon his face.

He, too, revived as McGuire watched, and, like the flyer, he looked wonderingly about him at his strange companions. The eyes of the two met and held in wordless communication and astonishment.

The unreal creatures that hovered near withdrew to the far side of the room. The walls beyond them were of metal, white and gleaming; there were doorways. In another wall were portholes—round windows of thick glass that framed circles of absolute night. It was dark out beyond them with a blackness that was relieved only by sharp pin-points of brilliance—stars in a night sky such as McGuire had never seen.

Past and present alike were hazy to the flyer; the spark of life had been brought back to his body from a far distance; there was time needed to part the unreal from the real in these new and strange surroundings.

There were doorways in the ceiling, and others in the floor near where he lay; ladders fastened to the wall gave access to these doors.

A grotesque figure appeared above the floor and, after a curious glance at the two men, scrambled into the room and vanished through the opening in the ceiling. It was some time before the significance of this was plain to the wondering man—before he reasoned that he was in the enemy ship, aimed outward from the earth, and the pull of gravitation and the greater force of the vessel's constant acceleration held its occupants to the rear walls of each room. That lanky figure had been making its way forward toward the bow of the ship. McGuire's mind was clearing; he turned his attention now to the curious, waiting creatures, his captors.

There were five of them standing in the room, five shapes like men, yet curiously, strangely, different. They were tall of stature, narrow across the shoulders, muscular in a lean, attenuated fashion. But their faces! McGuire found his eyes returning in horrified fascination to each hideous, inhuman countenance.

A colorless color, like the dead gray of ashes; a skin like that of an African savage from which all but the last vestige of color had been drained. It was transparent, parchment-like, and even in the light of the room that glowed from some hidden source, he could see the throbbing lines of blood-vessels that showed livid through the translucent skin. And he remembered, now, the fingers, half-seen in his moments of awakening—they were like clinging tendrils,

colorless, too, in that ashy gray, and showed the network of veins as if each hand had been flayed alive.

The observer found himself analyzing, comparing, trying to find some earthly analogy for these unearthly creatures. Why did he think of potatoes sprouting in a cellar? What possible connection had these half-human things with that boyhood recollection? And he had seen some laboratory experiments with plants and animals that had been cut off from the sunlight—and now the connection was clear; he knew what this idea was that was trying to form.

These were creatures of the dark. These bleached, drained faces showed skin that had never known the actinic rays of the sun; their whole framework proclaimed the process that had been going on through countless generations. Here was a race that had lived, if not in absolute darkness, then in some place where sunlight never shone—a place of half-light—or of clouds.

"Clouds!" The exclamation was startled from him. And: "Clouds!" he repeated meditatively; he was seeing again a cloud-wrapped world in the eye-piece of a big refracting telescope. "Blanketed in clouds," Professor Sykes had said. The scientist himself was speaking to him now in bewildered tones.

"Clouds?" he inquired. "That's a strange remark to make. Where are we, Lieutenant McGuire? I remember nothing after you fired. Are we flying—in the clouds?"

"A long, long way beyond them, is my guess," said McGuire grimly. It was staggering what all this might mean; there was time needed for fuller comprehension. But the lean bronzed face of the flyer flushed with animation, and in spite of the terrors that must surely lie ahead he felt strangely elated at the actuality of an incredible adventure.

Slowly he got to his feet to find that his muscles still were reluctant to respond to orders; he helped the professor to arise. And from the group that drew back further into the far end of the room came a subdued and rasping tumult of discordant sound.

One, seemingly in charge, held a weapon in his hand, a slender tube no thicker than a common wire; and ending in a cylinder within the creature's hand. He pointed it in threatening fashion while his voice rose in a shrill call. McGuire and Professor Sykes stood quiet and waited for what the next moment might have in store, but McGuire waved the weapon aside in a gesture that none could fail to read.

"Steady," he told his companion. "We're in a ticklish position. Do

nothing to alarm them."

From up above them came an answering shrill note. Another of the beings was descending into the room.

"Ah!" said Lieutenant McGuire softly, "the big boss, himself. Now let's see what will happen."

If there had seemed something of timidity in the repulsive faces of the waiting creatures, this newcomer was of a different type. He opened flabby thin lips to give one sharp note of command. It was as sibilant as the hissing of a snake. The man with the weapon returned it to a holder at his side; the whole group cringed before the power and authority of the new arrival.

The men that they had seen thus far were all garbed alike; a loose-fitting garment of one piece that was ludicrously like the play rompers that children might wear. These were dull red in color, the red of drying blood, made of strong woven cloth. But this other was uniformed differently.

McGuire noted the fineness of the silky robe. Like the others this was made of one piece, loosely fitting, but its bright vivid scarlet made the first seem drab and dull. A belt of metal about his waist

shone like gold and matched the emblem of precious metal in the turban on his head.

All this the eyes of the flyer took in at a glance; his attention was only momentarily diverted from the ashen face with eyes narrow and slitted, that stared with the cold hatred of a cat into those of the men.

He made a sound with a whistling breath. It seemed to be a question directed to them, but the import of it was lost.

"An exceedingly queer lot," Professor Sykes observed. "And this chap seems distinctly hostile."

"He's no friend of mine," said McGuire as the thin, pendulous lips repeated their whistling interrogation.

"I can't place them," mused the scientist. "Those facial characteristics.... But they must be of some nationality, speak some tongue."

He addressed himself to the figure with the immobile, horrid face.

"We do not understand you," he said with an ingratiating smile. "*Comprenez vous Francaise?... Non?*"... German, perhaps, or Spanish?... "*Sprecken sie Deutsche? Usted habla Española?...*"

He followed with a fusillade of questions in strange and varying tongues. "I've even tried him with Chinese," he protested in bewilderment and stared amazed at his companion's laughter.

There had to be a reaction from the strain of the past hours, and Lieutenant McGuire found the serious questioning in polyglot tongues and the unchanging feline stare of that hideous face too much for his mental restraint. He held his sides, while he shook and roared with laughter beyond control, and the figure before him glared with evident disapproval of his mirth.

There was a hissing order, and two figures from the corner sprang forward to seize the flyer with long clinging fingers. Their strength he had overestimated, for a violent throw of his body twisted him free, and his outstretched hands sent the two sprawling across the room. Their leader took one quick step forward, then paused as if hesitating to meet this young adversary.

"Do go easy," Professor Sykes was imploring. "We do not know where we are nor who they are, but we must do nothing to antagonize them."

McGuire had reacted from his hilarious seizure with an emotional swing to the opposite extreme. "I'll break their damn necks," he

growled, "if they get rough with me." And his narrow eyes exchanged glare for glare with those in the face like blood and ashes before him.

The cold cat eyes held steadily upon him while the scarlet figure retreated. A louder call, shrill and vibrant, came from the thin lips, and a swarm of bodies in dull red were scrambling into the room to mass about their scarlet leader. Above and behind them the face under its brilliant turban and golden clasp was glaring in triumph.

The tall figures crouched, grotesque and awkward; their long arms and hands with grasping, tendril-like fingers were ready. McGuire waited for the sharp hissing order that would throw these things upon him, and he met the attack when it came with his own shoulders dropped to the fighter's pose, head drawn in close and both fists swinging free.

There were lean fingers clutching at his throat, a press of blood-red bodies thick about him, and a clustering of faces where color blotched and flowed.

The thud of fists in blows that started from the floor was new to these lean creatures that clawed and clung like cats. But they trampled on those who went down before the flyer's blows and stood

upon them to spring at his head; they crowded in in overwhelming numbers while their red hands tore and twined about his face.

It was no place now for long swings; McGuire twisted his body and threw his weight into quick short jabs at the faces before him. He was clear for an instant and swung his heavy boot at something that clung to one leg; then met with a rain of hooks and short punches the faces that closed in again. He saw in that instant a wild whirl of bodies where the stocky figure of Professor Sykes was smothered beneath his taller antagonists. But the professor, if he was forgetting the science of the laboratory, was remembering that of the squared circle—and the battle was not entirely one sided.

McGuire was free; the blood was trickling down his face from innumerable cuts where sharp-nailed fingers had sunk deep. He wiped the red stream from his eyes and threw himself at the weaving mass of bodies that eddied about Sykes in frantic struggle across the room.

The face of the professor showed clear for a moment. Like McGuire he was bleeding, and his breath came in short explosive gasps, but he was holding his own! The eyes of McGuire glimpsed a wildly gesticulating, shouting figure in the rear. The face, contorted with rage, was almost the color of the brilliant scarlet that the creature

wore. The blood-stained man in khaki left his companion to fight his own battle, and plunged headlong at a leaping cluster of dull red, smashed through with a frenzied attack of straight rights and lefts, and freed himself to make one final leap at the leader of this unholy pack.

He was fighting in blind desperation now; the two were out-numbered by the writhing, lean-bodied creatures, and this thing that showed in blurred crimson before him was the directing power of them all. The figure symbolized and personified to the raging man all the repulsive ugliness of the leaping horde. The face came clear before him through the mist of blood, and he put the last ounce of his remaining strength and every pound of weight behind a straight, clean drive with his right fist.

His last conscious impression was of a red, clawing hand that was closed around the thick butt of a tube of steel ... then down, and still down, he plunged into a bottomless pit of whirling, red flashes and choking fumes....

There were memories that were to occur to Lieutenant McGuire afterward—visions, dim and hazy and blurred, of half-waking moments when strange creatures forced food and water into his mouth, then held a mask upon his face while he resisted weakly the

breathing of sweet, sickly fumes that sent him back to unconsciousness.

There were many such times; some when he came sufficiently awake to know that Sykes was lying near him, receiving similar care. Their lives were being preserved: How, or why, or what life might hold in store he neither knew nor cared; the mask and the deep-drawn fumes brought stupor and numbness to his brain.

A window was in the floor beside him when he awoke—a circular window of thick glass or quartz. But no longer did it frame a picture of a sky in velvet blackness; no unwinking pin-points of distant stars pricked keenly through the night; but, clear and dazzling, came a blessed radiance that could mean only sunshine. A glowing light that was dazzling to his sleep-filled eyes, it streamed in golden—beautiful—to light the unfamiliar room and show motionless upon the floor the figure of Professor Sykes. His torn clothing had been neatly arranged, and his face showed livid lines of healing cuts and bruises.

McGuire tried gingerly to move his arms and legs; they were still functioning though stiff and weak from disuse. He raised himself slowly and stood swaying on his feet, then made his uncertain way to his companion and shook him weakly by the shoulder.

Professor Sykes breathed deeply and raised leaden lids from tired eyes to stare uncomprehendingly at McGuire. Soon his dark pupils ceased to dilate, and he, too, could see their prison and the light of day.

"Sunlight!" he said in a thin voice, and he seemed to know now that they were in the air; "I wonder—I wonder—if we shall land—what country? ... Some wilderness and a strange race—a strange, strange race!"

He was muttering half to himself; the mystery of these people whom he could not identify was still troubling him.

McGuire helped the other man to his feet, and they clung to each to the other for support as they crossed to kneel beside the floor-window and learn finally where their captors meant to take them.

A wilderness, indeed, the sight that met their eyes, but a wilderness of clouds—no unfamiliar sight to Lieutenant McGuire of the United States Army air service. But to settle softly into them instead of driving through with glistening wings—this was new and vastly different from anything he had known.

Sounds came to them in the silence, penetrating faintly through thick

walls—the same familiar wailing call that trembled and quavered and seemed to the listening men to be guiding them down through the mist.

Gone was the sunlight, and the clouds beyond the deep-set window were gloriously ablaze with a brilliance softly diffused. The cloud bank was deep, and they felt the craft under them sink slowly, steadily into the misty embrace. It thinned below them to drifting vapor, and the first hazy shadows of the ground showed through from far beneath. Their altitude, the flyer knew, was still many thousands of feet.

"Water," said McGuire, as his trained eyes made plain to him what was still indistinct to the scientist. "An ocean—and a shore-line—" More clouds obscured the view; they parted suddenly to show a portion only of a clear-cut map.

It stretched beyond the confines of their window, that unfamiliar line of wave-marked shore; the water was like frozen gold, wrinkled in countless tiny corrugations and reflecting the bright glow from above. But the land,—that drew their eyes!

Were those cities, those shadow-splashed areas of gray and rose?... The last veiling clouds dissolved, and the whole circle was plain to

their view.

The men leaned forward, breathless, intent, till the scientist, Sykes—the man whose eyes had seen and whose brain recorded a dim shape in the lens of a great telescope—Sykes drew back with a quivering, incredulous breath. For below them, so plain, so unmistakable, there lay an island, large even from this height, and it formed on this round map a sharp angle like a great letter "L."

"We shall know that if we ever see it again," Professor Sykes had remarked in the quiet and security of that domed building surmounting the heights of Mount Lawson. But he said nothing now, as he stared at his companion with eyes that implored McGuire to arouse him from this sleep, this dream that could never be real. But McGuire, lieutenant one-time in the forces of the U. S. A., had seen it too, and he stared back with a look that gave dreadful confirmation.

The observatory—Mount Lawson—the earth!—those were the things unreal and far away. And here before them, in brain-stunning actuality, were the markings unmistakable—the markings of Venus. And they were landing, these two, in the company of creatures wild and strange as the planet—on Venus itself!

Chapter 8

Miles underneath the great ship, from which Lieutenant McGuire and Professor Sykes were now watching through a floor-window of thick glass, was a glittering expanse of water—a great ocean. The flickering gold expanse that reflected back the color of the sunlit clouds passed to one side as the ship took its station above the island, a continent in size, that had shown by its shape like a sharply formed “L” an identifying mark to the astronomer.

They were high in the air; the thick clouds that surrounded this new world were miles from its surface, and the things of the world that awaited were tiny and blurred.

Airships passed and repassed far below. Large, some of them—as bulky as the transport they were on; others were small flashing cylinders, but all went swiftly on their way.

It must have come—some ethereal vibration to warn others from the path—for layer after layer of craft were cleared for the descent. A brilliant light flashed into view, a dazzling pin-point on the shore below, and the great ship fell suddenly beneath them. Swiftly it dropped down the pathway of light; on even keel it fell down and still down, till McGuire, despite his experience in the air, was sick

and giddy.

The light blinked out at their approach. It was some minutes before the watching eyes recovered from the brilliance to see what mysteries might await, and then the surface was close and the range of vision small.

A vast open space—a great court paved with blocks of black and white—a landing field, perhaps, for about it in regular spacing other huge cylinders were moored. Directly beneath in a clear space was a giant cradle of curved arms; it was a mammoth structure, and the men knew at a glance that this was the bed where their great ship would lie.

The smooth pavement seemed slowly rising to meet them as their ship settled close. Now the cradle was below, its arms curved and waiting. The ship entered their grasp, and the arms widened, then closed to draw the monster to its rest. Their motion ceased. They were finally, beyond the last faint doubt, at anchor on a distant world.

A shrill cackle of sound recalled them from the thrill of this adventure, and the attenuated and lanky figure, with its ashen, blotchy face that glared at them from the doorway, reminded them

that this excursion into space was none of their desire. They were prisoners—captives from a foreign land.

A long hand moved its sinuous fingers to motion them to follow, and McGuire regarded his companion with a hopeless look and a despondent shrug of his shoulders.

“No use putting up a fight,” he said; “I guess we’d better be good.”

He followed where the figure was stepping through a doorway into a corridor beyond. They moved, silent and depressed, along the dimly lighted way; the touch of cold metal walls was as chilling to their spirits as to their flesh.

But the mood could not last: the first ray of light from the outside world sent shivers of anticipation along their spines. They were landing, in very fact, upon a new world; their feet were to walk where never man had stood; their eyes would see what mortal eyes had never visioned.

Fears were forgotten, and the men clung to each other not for the human touch but because of an ecstasy of intoxicating, soul-filling joy in the sheer thrill of adventure.

They were gripping each other's hand, round-eyed as a couple of children, as they stepped forward into the light.

Before them was a scene whose blazing beauty of color struck them to frozen silence; their exclamations of wonder died unspoken on their lips. They were in a city of the stars, and to their eyes it seemed as if all the brilliance of the heavens had been gathered for its building.

The spacious, open court itself stood high in the air among the masses of masonry, and beyond were countless structures. Some towered skyward; others were lower; and all were topped with bulbous towers and graceful minarets that made a forest of gleaming opal light. Opalescence everywhere!—it flashed in red and gold and delicate blues from every wall and cornice and roof.

"Quartz?" marveled Sykes after one long drawn breath. "Quartz or glass?—what are they made of? It is fairyland!"

A jewelled city! Garish, it might have been, and tawdry, in the full light of the sun. But on these weirdly unreal structures the sun's rays never shone; they were illumined only by the soft golden glow that diffused across this world from the cloud masses far above.

McGuire looked up at that uniform, glowing, golden mass that paled toward the horizon and faded to the gray of banked clouds. His eyes came slowly back to the ramp that led downward to the checkered black and white of the court. Beyond an open portion the pavement was solidly massed with people.

“People!—we might as well call them that,” McGuire had told Sykes; “they are people of a sort, I suppose. We’ll have to give them credit for brains: they’ve beaten us a hundred years in their inventions.”

He was trying to see everything, understand everything, at once. There was not time to single out the new impressions that were crowding upon him. The air—it was warm to the point of discomfort; it explained the loose, light garments of the people; it came to the two men laden with strange scents and stranger sounds.

McGuire’s eyes held with hungry curiosity upon the dwellers in this other world; he stared at the gaping throng from which came a bedlam of shrill cries. Lean colorless hands gesticulated wildly and pointed with long fingers at the two men.

The din ceased abruptly at a sharp, whistled order from their captor. He stood aside with a guard that had followed from the ship, and he motioned the two before him down the gangway. It was the same scarlet one who had faced them before, the one whom McGuire had attacked in a frenzy of furious fighting, only to go down to blackness and defeat before the slim cylinder of steel and its hissing gas. And the slanting eyes stared wickedly in cold triumph as he ordered them to go before him in his march of victory.

McGuire passed down toward the masses of color that were the ones who waited. There were many in the dull red of the ship's crew; others in sky-blue, in gold and pink and combinations of brilliance that blended their loose garments to kaleidoscopic hues. But the figures were similar in one unvarying respect: they were repulsive and ghastly, and their faces showed bright blotches of blood vessels and blue markings of veins through their parchment-gray skins.

The crowd parted to a narrow, living lane, and lean fingers clutched writhingly to touch them as they passed between the solid ranks.

McGuire had only a vague impression of a great building beyond, of lower stories decorated in barbaric colors, of towers above in strange forms of the crystal, colorful beauty they had seen. He walked toward it unseeing; his thoughts were only of the creatures round

about.

“What damned beasts!” he said. Then, like his companion, he set his teeth to restrain all show of feeling as they made their way through the lane of incredible living things.

They followed their captor through a doorway into an empty room—empty save for one blue-clad individual who stood beside an instrument board let into the wall. Beyond was a long wall, where circular openings yawned huge and black.

The one at the instrument panel received a curt order: the weird voice of the man in red repeated a word that stood out above his curious, wordless tone. “Torg,” he said, and again McGuire heard him repeat the syllable.

The operator touched here and there among his instruments, and tiny lights flashed; he threw a switch, and from one of the black openings like a deep cave came a rushing roar of sound. It dropped to silence as the end of a cylindrical car protruded into the room. A door in the metal car opened, and their guard hustled them roughly inside. The one in red followed while behind him the door clanged shut.

Inside the car was light, a diffused radiance from no apparent source,

the whole air was glowing about them. And beneath their feet the car moved slowly but with a constant acceleration that built up to tremendous speed. Then that slackened, and Sykes and McGuire clung to each other for support while the car that had been shot like a projectile came to rest.

“Whew!” breathed the lieutenant; “that was quick delivery.” Sykes made no reply, and McGuire, too, fell silent to study the tremendous room into which they were led. Here, seemingly, was the stage for their next experience.

A vast open hall with a floor of glass that was like obsidion, empty but for carved benches about the walls; there was room here for a mighty concourse of people. The walls, like those they had seen, were decorated crudely in glaring colors, and embellished with grotesque designs that proclaimed loudly the inexpert touch of the draughtsman. Yet, above them, the ceiling sprang lightly into vaulted, sweeping curves. McGuire’s training had held little of architecture, yet even he felt the beauty of line and airy gracefulness of treatment in the structure itself.

The contrast between the flaunting colors and the finished artistry

that lay beneath must have struck a discordant note to the scientist. He leaned closer to whisper.

“It is all wrong some way—the whole world! Beauty and refinement—then crude vulgarity, as incongruous as the people themselves—they do not belong here.”

“Neither do we,” was McGuire’s reply; “it looks like a tough spot that we’re in.”

He was watching toward a high, arched entrance across the room. A platform before it was raised some six feet above the floor, and on this were seats—ornate chairs, done in sweeping scrolls of scarlet and gold. A massive seat in the center was like the fantastic throne of a child’s fairy tale. From the corridor beyond that entrance came a stir and rustling that rivetted the man’s attention.

A trumpet peal, vibrant and peculiar, blared forth from the ceiling overhead, and the red figures of the guards stood at rigid attention with lean arms held stiffly before them. The one in scarlet took the same attitude, then dropped his hands to motion the two men to give the same salute.

“You go to hell,” said Lieutenant McGuire in his gentlest tones. And

the scarlet figure's thin lips were snarling as he turned to whip his arms up to their position. The first of a procession of figures was entering through the arch.

Sykes, the scientist, was paying little attention. "It isn't true," he was muttering aloud; "it can't be true. Venus! Twenty-six million miles at inferior conjunction!"

He seemed lost in silent communion with his own thoughts; then: "But I said there was every probability of life; I pointed out the similarities—"

"Hush!" warned McGuire. The eyes of the scarlet man were sending wicked looks in their direction. Tall forms were advancing through the arch. They, too, were robed in scarlet, and behind them others followed.

The trumpet peal from the dome above held now on a long-drawn, single note, while the scarlet men strode in silence across the dais and parted to form two lines. An inverted "V" that faced the entrance—they were an assembly of rigid, blazing statues whose arms were extended like those on the floor below.

The vibrant tone from on high changed to a crashing blare that

shrieked discordantly to send quivering protest through every nerve of the waiting men. Those about them were shouting, and again the name of Torg was heard, as, in the high arch, another character appeared to play his part in a strange drama.

Thin like his companions, yet even taller than them, he wore the same brilliant robes and, an additional mark of distinction, a head-dress of polished gold. He acknowledged the salute with a quick raising of his own arms, then came swiftly forward and took his place upon the massive throne.

Not till he was seated did the others on the platform relax their rigid pose and seat themselves in the semicircle of chairs. And not till then did they so much as glance at the men waiting there before them—the two Earth-men, standing in silent, impassive contemplation of the brilliant scene and with their arms held quiet at their sides. Then every eye turned full upon the captives, and if McGuire had seen deadly malevolence in the face of their captor he found it a hundred-fold in the inhuman faces that looked down upon them now.

The inquiring mind of Professor Sykes did not fail to note the character of their reception. “But why,” he asked in whispers of his fellow-prisoner, “—why this open hatred of us? What possible animus can they have against the earth or its people?”

The figure on the throne voiced a curt order; the one who had brought them stepped forward. His voice was raised in the same discordant, singing tone that leaped and wandered from note to note. It conveyed ideas—that was apparent; it was a language that he spoke. And the central figure above nodded a brief assent as he finished.

Their captor took an arm of each in his long fingers and pushed them roughly forward to stand alone before the battery of hard eyes.

Now the crowned figure addressed them directly. His voice quavered sharply in what seemed an interrogation. The men looked blankly at each other.

Again the voice questioned them impatiently. Sykes and McGuire were silent. Then the young flyer took an involuntary step forward and looked squarely at the owner of the harsh voice.

“We don’t know what you are saying,” he began, “and I suppose that our lingo makes no sense to you—” He paused in helpless wonderment as to what he could say. Then—

“But what the devil is it all about?” he demanded explosively. “Why all the dirty looks? You’ve got us here as prisoners—now what do

you expect us to do? Whatever it is, you'll have to quit singing it and talk something we can understand."

He knew his words were useless, but this reception was getting on his nerves—and his arm still tingled where the scarlet one had gripped him.

It seemed, though, that his meaning was not entirely lost. His words meant nothing to them, but his tone must have carried its own message. There were sharp exclamations from the seated circle. The one who had brought them sprang forward with outstretched, clutching hands; his face was a blood-red blotch. McGuire was waiting in crouching tenseness that made the red one pause.

"You touch me again," said the waiting man, "and I'll knock you into an outside loop."

The attacker's indecision was ended by a loud order from above. McGuire turned as if he had been spoken to by the leader on the throne. The thin figure was leaning far forward; his eye were boring into those of the lieutenant, and he held the motionless pose for many minutes. To the angry man, staring back and upward, there came a peculiar optical illusion.

The evil face was vanishing in a shifting cloud that dissolved and reformed, as he watched, into pictures. He knew it was not there, the thing he saw; he knew he was regarding something as intangible as thought; but he got the significance of every detail.

He saw himself and Professor Sykes; they were being crushed like ants beneath a tremendous heel; he knew that the foot that could grind out their lives was that of the one on the throne.

The cloud-stuff melted to new forms that grew clearer to show him the earth. A distorted Earth—and he knew the distortion came from the mind of the being before him who had never seen the earth at first hand; yet he knew it for his own world. It was turning in space; he saw oceans and continents; and before his mental gaze he saw the land swarming with these creatures of Venus. The one before him was in command; he was seated on an enormous throne; there were Earth people like Sykes and himself who crept humbly before him, while fleets of great Venusian ships hovered overhead.

The message was plain—plain as if written in words of fire in the brain of the man. McGuire knew that these creatures intended that the vision should be true—they meant to conquer the earth. The

slim, khaki-clad figure of Lieutenant McGuire quivered with the strength of his refusal to accept the truth of what he saw. He shook his head to clear it of these thought wraiths.

“Not—in—a—million—years!” he said, and he put behind his words all the mental force at his command. “Try that, old top, and they’ll give you the fight of your life—” He checked his words as he saw plainly that the thin cruel face that stared and stared was getting nothing from his reply.

“Now what do you think about that?” he demanded of Professor Sykes. “He got an idea across to me—some form of telepathy. I saw his mind, or I saw what he wanted me to see of it. It’s taps, he says, for us, and then they think they’re going across and annex the world.”

He glanced upward again and laughed loudly for the benefit of those who were watching him so closely. “Fine chance!” he said; “a fat chance!” But in the deeper recesses of his mind he was shaken.

For themselves there was no hope. Well, that was all in a lifetime. But the other—the conquest of the earth—he had to try with all his power of will to keep from his mind the pictures of destruction these beastly things could bring about.

The chief of this strange council made a gesture of contempt with the grotesque hands that were so translucent yet ashy-pale against his scarlet robe, and the down-drawn thin lips reflected the thoughts that prompted it. The open opposition of Lieutenant McGuire failed to impress him, it seemed. At a word the one who had brought them sprang forward.

He addressed himself to the circle of men, and he harangued them mightily in harsh discordance. He pointed one lean hand at the two captives, then beat it upon his own chest. “They are mine,” he was saying, as the men knew plainly. And they realized as if the weird talk came like words to their ears that this monster was demanding that the captives be given him.

An exchange of dismayed glances, and “Not so good!” said McGuire under his breath; “Simon Legree is asking for his slaves. Mean, ugly devil, that boy!”

The lean figures on the platform were bending forward, an expression of mirth—distorted, animal smiles—upon their flabby lips. They represented to the humans, so helpless before them, a race of thinking things in whom no last vestige of kindness or decency

remained. But was there an exception? One of the circle was standing; the one beside them was sullenly silent as the other on the platform addressed their ruler.

He spoke at some length, not with the fire and vehemence of the one who had claimed them, but more quietly and dispassionately, and his cold eyes, when they rested on those of McGuire and Sykes, seemed more crafty than actively ablaze with malevolent ill-will. Plainly it was the councilor now, addressing his superior. His inhuman voice was silenced by a reply from the one on the throne.

He motioned—this gold-crowned figure of personified evil—toward the two men, and his hand swept on toward the one who had spoken. He intoned a command in harsh gutturals that ended in a sibilant shriek. And the two standing silent and hopeless exchanged looks of despair.

They were being delivered to this other—that much was plain—but that it boded anything but captivity and torment they could not believe. That last phrase was too eloquent of hissing hate.

The creature rose, tall and ungainly, from his throne; amid the

salutations of his followers he turned and vanished through the arch. The others of his council followed, all but the one. He motioned to the two men to come with him, and the sullen one who had demanded the men for himself obeyed an order from this councilor who was his superior.

He snapped an order, and four of his men ranged themselves about the captives as a guard. Thin metal cords were whipped about the wrists of each; their hands were tied. The wire cut like a knife-edge if they strained against it.

The new director of their destinies was vanishing through an exit at one side of the great hall; their guard hustled them after. A corridor opened before them to end in a gold-lit portal; it was daylight out beyond where a street was filled with hurrying figures in many colors. With quavering shrieks they scattered like frightened fowls as an airship descended between the tall buildings that reflected its passing in opalescent hues.

It was a small craft compared with the one that had brought them, and it swept down to settle lightly upon the street with no least regard for those who might be crushed by its descent. Consideration for their fellows did not appear as a marked characteristic of this strange people, McGuire observed thoughtfully. They swarmed in

endless droves, these multicolored beings who made of the thoroughfare an ever-changing kaleidoscope—and what was a life or two, more or less, among so many? He found no comfort for themselves in the thought.

Shoulder to shoulder, the two followed where the scarlet figure of the councilor moved toward the waiting ship. Only the professor paid further heed to their surroundings; he marveled aloud at the numbers of the people.

“Hundreds of them,” he said; “thousands! They are swarming everywhere like rats. Horrible!” His eyes passed on to the buildings in their glory of delicate hues, as he added, “And the contrast they make with their surroundings! It is all wrong some way; I wish I knew—”

They were in the ship when McGuire replied. “I hope we live long enough to satisfy your curiosity,” he said grimly.

The ship was rising beneath them; the opal and quartz of the city’s walls were flashing swiftly down.

Chapter 9

They were in a cabin at the very nose of the ship, seated on metal

chairs, their hands unshackled and free. Their scarlet guardian reclined at ease somewhat to one side, but despite his apparent disregard his cold eyes seldom left the faces of the two men.

Windows closed them in; windows on each side, in front, above them, and even in the floor beneath. It was a room for observation whose metal-latticed walls served only as a framework for the glass. And there was much to be observed.

The golden radiance of sunlit clouds was warm above. They rose toward it, until, high over the buildings' tallest spires, there spread on every hand the bewildering beauty of that forest of minarets and sloping roofs and towers, whose many facets made glorious blendings of soft color. Aircraft at many levels swept in uniform directions throughout the sky. The ship they were in hung quiet for a time, then rose to a higher level to join the current of transportation that flowed into the south.

"We will call it south," said Professor Sykes. "The sun-glow, you will observe, is not directly overhead; the sun is sinking; it is past their noon. What is the length of their day? Ah, this interesting—interesting!" The certain fate they had foreseen was forgotten; it is not often given to an astronomer to check at first hand his own indefinite observations.

“Look!” McGuire exclaimed. “Open country! The city is ending!”

Ahead and below them the buildings were smaller and scattered. Their new master was watching with closest scrutiny the excitement of the men; he whispered an order into a nearby tube, and the ship slowly slanted toward the ground. He was studying these new specimens, as McGuire observed, but the lieutenant paid little attention; his eyes were too thoroughly occupied in resolving into recognizable units the picture that flowed past them so quickly. He was accustomed, this pilot of the army air service, to reading clearly the map that spreads beneath a plane, but now he was looking at an unfamiliar chart.

“Fields,” he said, and pointed to squared areas of pale reds and blues; “though what it is, heaven knows. And the trees!—if that’s what they are.” The ship went downward where an area of tropical denseness made a tangled mass of color and shadow.

“Trees!” Lieutenant McGuire had exclaimed, but these forests were of tree-forms in weirdest shapes and hues. They grew to towering heights, and their branches and leaves that swayed and dipped in the slow-moving air were of delicate pastel shades.

“No sunlight,” said the Professor excitedly; “they have no direct rays

of the sun. The clouds act as a screen and filter out actinic rays."

McGuire did not reply. He was watching the countless dots of color that were people—people who swarmed here as they had in the city; people working at these great groves, crouching lower in the fields as the ship swept close; people everywhere in teeming thousands. And like the vegetation about them, they, too, were tall and thin, attenuated of form and with skin like blood-stained ash.

"They need the sun," Sykes was repeating; "both vegetable and animal life. The plants are deficient in chlorophyl—see the pale green of the leaves!—and the people need vitamins. Yet they evidently have electric power in abundance. I could tell them of lamps—"

His comments ceased as McGuire lurched heavily against him. The flyer had taken note of the tense, attentive attitude of the one in scarlet; the man was leaning forward, his eyes focused directly upon the scientist's face; he seemed absorbing both words and emotions.

How much could he comprehend? What power had he to vision the idea-pictures in the other's mind? McGuire could not know. But

“Sorry!” he told Sykes; “that was clumsy of me.” And he added in a whisper, “Keep your thoughts to yourself; I think this bird is getting them.”

Buildings flashed under them, not massed solidly as in the city, yet spaced close to one another as if every foot of ground not devoted to their incredible agriculture were needed to house the inhabitants. The ground about them was alive with an equally incredible humanity that swarmed over all this world in appalling profusion.

Their horrid flesh! Their hideous features! And their number! McGuire had a sudden, sickening thought. They were larvae, these crawling hordes—vile worm-things that infested a beautiful world—that bred here in millions, their numbers limited only by the space for their bodies and the food for their stomachs. And he, McGuire, a *man*—he and this other man with his clear-thinking scientific brain were prisoners to this horde; captives, to be used or butchered by those vile, crawling things!

And again it was this world of contrast that drove home the conviction with its sickening certainty. A world of beauty, of delicate colors, of sweeping oceans and gleaming shores and towering cities with their grace and beauty and elfin splendor yet a world that shuddered beneath this devouring plague of grublike men.

They swept past cities and towns and over many miles of open land before their craft swung eastward toward the dark horizon. The master gave another order into the speaking tube and their ship shot forward, faster and yet faster, with a speed that pressed them heavily into their seats. Behind them was the glory of the sunlit clouds; ahead the gloomy gray-black masses that must make a stygian night sky over this lonely world—a world cut off by that vaporous shell from all communion with the stars.

They were over the water; before them a dark ocean reached out in forbidding emptiness to a darker horizon. Ahead, the only broken line in the vast level expanse was a mountain rising abruptly from the sea. It was a volcanic cone surmounting an island; the sunlight's glow reflected from behind them against the sombre mass that lifted toward the clouds. Their ship was high enough to clear it, but instead it swung, as McGuire watched, toward the south.

The island drifted past, and again they were on their course. But to the flyer there were significant facts that could not pass unobserved. Their own ship had swung in a great circle to avoid this mountain. And all through the skies were others that did the same. The air above and about the grim sentinel peak was devoid of flying shapes.

McGuire caught the eyes of the councilor, their keeper. “What is that?” he asked, though he knew the words were lost on the other. He nodded his head toward the distant peak, and his question was plainly in regard to the island. And for the first time since their coming to this wild world, he saw, flashing across the features of one of these men, a trace of emotion that could only be construed as fear.

The slitted cat eyes lost their look of complacent superiority. They widened involuntarily, and the face was drained of its blotched color. There was fear, terror unmistakable, though it showed for but an instant. He had control of his features almost at once, but the flyer had read their story.

Here was something that gave pause to this race of conquering vermin; a place in the expanse of this vast sea that brought panic to their hearts. And there came to him, as he stowed the remembrance away in his mind, the first glow of hope. These things could fear a mountain; it might be that they could be brought to fear a man.

The sky was clearing rapidly of traffic and the mountain of his speculations was lost astern, when another island came slanting swiftly up to meet them as their ship swept down from the heights. It

was a tiny speck in the ocean's expanse, a speck that resolved itself into the squared fields of colored growth, orchards whose brilliant, strange fruits glowed crimson in the last light of day, and enormous trees, beyond which appeared a house.

A palace, McGuire concluded, when he saw clearly the many-storied pile. Like the buildings they had seen, this also constructed of opalescent quartz. There were windows that glowed warmly in the dusk. A sudden wave of loneliness, almost unbearable, swept over the man.

Windows and gleaming lights, the good sounds of Earth; home!... And his ears, as he stepped out into the cool air, were assailed with the strange cackle and calling of weird folk; the air brought him scents, from the open ground beyond, of fruits and vegetation like none he had ever known; and the earth, the homeland of his vain imaginings, was millions of empty miles away....

The leader stopped, and McGuire looked dispiritedly at the unfamiliar landscape under dusky lowering skies. Trees towered high in the air—trees grotesque and weird by all Earth standards—whose limbs were pale green shadows in the last light of day. The foliage, too, seemed bleached and drained of color, but among the leaves were flashes of brilliance where night-blooming flowers burst

open like star-shells to fill the air with heavy scents.

Between the men and the forest growth was a row of denser vegetation, great ferns twenty feet and more in height, and among them at regular intervals stood plants of another growth—each a tremendous pod held in air on a thick stalk. Tendrils coiled themselves like giant springs beside each pod, tendrils as thick as a man's wrist. The great pods were ranged in a line that extended as far as McGuire could see in the dim light.

His shoulders drooped as the guard herded him and his companion toward the building beyond. He must not be cast down—he would not! Who knew how much of such feeling was read by these keen-eyed observers? And the only thought with which he could fill his mind, the one forlorn ghost of a hope that he could cling to, was that of an island, a volcanic peak that rose from dark waters to point upward toward the heights.

The guard of four was clustered about; the figures were waiting now in the gathering dark—waiting, while the one in scarlet listened and spoke alternately into a jeweled instrument that hung by a slender chain about his neck. He raised one lean hand to motion the stirring guards to silence, listened again intently into the instrument, then pointed that hand toward the cloud-filled sky, while he craned his

thin neck to look above him.

The men's eyes followed the pointing hand to see only the sullen black of unlit clouds. The last distant aircraft had vanished from the skies; not a ship was in the air—only the enveloping blanket of high-flung vapor that blocked out all traces of the heavens. And then!—

The cloud banks high in the skies flashed suddenly to dazzling, rolling flame. The ground under their feet was shaken as by a distant earthquake, while, above, the terrible fire spread, a swift, flashing conflagration that ate up the masses of clouds.

"What in thunder—" McGuire began; then stopped as he caught, in the light from above, the reflection of fierce exultation in the eyes of the scarlet one. The evil, gloating message of those eyes needed no words to explain its meaning. That this cataclysm was self-made by these beings, McGuire knew, and he knew that in some way it meant menace to him and his.

Yet he groped in thought for some definite meaning. No menace could this be to himself personally, for he and Sykes stood there safe in the company of the councilor himself. Then the threat of this flaming blast must be directed toward the earth!

The fire vanished, and once more, as Professor Sykes had seen on that night so long ago, the blanket of clouds was broken. McGuire followed the gaze of the scientist whose keen eyes were probing in these brief moments into the depths of star-lit space.

“There—there!” Sykes exclaimed in awe-struck tones. His hand was pointing outward through the space where flames had cleared the sky. A star was shining in the heavens with a glory that surpassed all others. It outshone all neighboring stars, and it sent its light down through the vast empty reaches of space, a silent message to two humans, despondent and heartsick, who stared with aching eyes.

Lieutenant McGuire did not hear his friend’s whispered words. No need to name that distant world—it was Earth! Earth!... And it was calling to its own....

There was a flying-field—so plain before his mental eyes; men in khaki and leather who moved and talked and spoke of familiar things ... and the thunder of motors ... and roaring planes....

Some far recess within his deeper self responded strangely. What now of threats and these brute-things that threatened?—he was one

with this picture he had visioned. He was himself; he was a man of that distant world of men; they would show these vile things how men could meet menace—or death.... His shoulders were back and unconsciously he stood erect.

The scarlet figure was close beside them in the dusk, his voice vibrant with a quality which should have struck fear to his captives' hearts as he ordered them on. But the look in his crafty eyes changed to one of puzzled wonder at sight of the men.

Hands on each other's shoulders, they stood there in the gathering dark, where grotesque trees arched twistingly overhead. Their moment of depression had passed; Earth had called, and they had heard it, each after his own fashion. But to each the call had been one of clear courage. No longer cast off and forlorn, they were one with their own world.

"Down," said Professor Sykes with a whimsical smile; "down, but not out!" And the lieutenant responded in kind.

"Are we down-hearted?" he demanded loudly. And the two turned as one man to grin at the scarlet one as they thundered. "N-o-o!"

Chapter 10

Two men grinned in derision at the horrible, man-shaped thing that held their destinies in his lean, inhuman hands!—but they turned - abruptly away to look again above them where that bright star still shone through an opening in the clouds.

“The earth! Home!” It seemed as if they could never tear their eyes away from the sight.

Their captor whistled an order, and the guard of four tugged vainly at the two, who resisted that they might gaze upon their own world until the closing clouds should blot it from sight. A cry from one of the red guards roused them.

The dark was closing in fast, and their surroundings were dim. Vaguely, McGuire felt more than saw one of the red figures whirled into the air. He sensed a movement in the jungle darkness where were groves of weird trees and the tangle of huge vegetable growths. What it was he could not say, but he felt the guard who clutched at him quiver in terror.

Their leader snatched at the instrument that hung about his neck and put it to his lips; he whistled an order, sharp and shrill. Blazing light

that seemed to flame in the air was the response; the air was aglow with an all-pervading brilliance like that in the car that had whirled them from the landing field. The light was everywhere, and the building before them was surrounded by a dazzling envelope of luminosity.

Whatever of motion or menace there had been ceased abruptly. Their guard, three now in number instead of four, seized them roughly and hustled them toward an open door. No time, as they passed, for more than fleeting impressions: a hall of warm, glowing light—a passage that branched off—and, at the end, a room into which they were thrown, while a metal door clanged behind them.

These were no gentle hands that hurled the men staggering through the doorway, and Professor Sykes fell headlong upon the glassy floor. He sprang to his feet, his face aflame with anger. “The miserable beasts!” he shouted.

“Take it easy,” admonished the flyer. “We’re in the hoose-gow; no use of getting all fussed up if they don’t behave like perfect gentlemen.

“There’s a bunk in the corner,” he said, and pointed to a woven hammock that was covered with soft cloths; “and here’s another that

I can sling. Twin beds! What more do you want?”

He opened a door and the splash of falling water came to them. A fountain cascaded to the ceiling to fall splashing upon a floor of inlaid, glassy tile. McGuire whistled.

“Room and bath,” he said. “And you complained of the service!”

“I have an idea,” he told the scientist, “that our scarlet friend who owns this place intends to treat us decently, even though his helpers are a bit rough. My hunch is that he wants to get some information out of us. That old bird back there in the council chamber told me as plain as day that they think they are going to conquer the earth. Maybe that’s why we are here—as exhibits A and B, for them to study and learn how to lick us.”

“You are talking what I would have termed nonsense a month ago,” replied Sykes, “but now—well, I am afraid you are right. And,” he said slowly, “I fear that they are equally correct. They have conquered space; they have ships propelled by some unknown power; they have gas weapons, as you and I have reason to know. And they have all the beastly ferocity to carry such a plan through to success. But I wonder what that sky-splitting blast meant.”

“Bombardment,” the flyer told him; “bombardment of the earth as sure as you’re alive.”

“More nonsense,” said Sykes; “and probably correct.... Well, what are we to do?—sit tight and give them as little information as we can? or—” His question ended unfinished; the alternative, it seemed, was not plain to him.

“There’s only one answer,” said McGuire. “We must get away; escape somehow.”

Professor Sykes’ eyes showed his appreciation of a spirit that could still dare to hope, but he asked dejectedly: “Escape? Good idea. But where to?”

“I have an idea,” the flyer said slowly. “An idea about an island.” He told the professor what he had observed—the fact that there was one spot of land on this globe from which the traffic of these monsters of Venus steered clear. This, he explained, must have some significance.

“Whatever is there, God only knows,” he admitted, “but it is something these devils don’t like a little bit. It might be interesting to learn more. We’ll make a break for it; find a boat. No, we probably

can’t do it, but we can make a try. Now what is our first step, I wonder.”

“Our first step,” said Professor Sykes, measuring his words as if he might be working out some astronomical calculation, “is into the inverted shower-bath, if you feel as hot as I do. And our next step, when all is quiet for the night, is through the window I see beyond. I can see the branches of one of those undernourished trees from here.”

“Last one in is a lop-eared Venusian!” said McGuire, throwing off his jacket. And in that strange room in a strange world, under the shadow of death and of tortures unknown, the two men stripped with all the care-free abandon of a couple of schoolboys racing to be first in the old swimming hole.

It was some time later when the door opened and a long red hand pushed a tray of food into the room. The tray was of unbreakable crystal—he rattled it heedlessly upon the floor—and it held crystal dishes of unknown foods.

They were sampling them all when Sykes remarked plaintively, “I

would like to know what under heaven I am eating."

"I've wished to know that in lots of restaurants," McGuire replied. "I remember a place down on—" He stopped abruptly, then chewed in silence upon a fruit like a striped pepper that stung his mouth and tongue while he scarcely felt it. References to Earth things plainly were to be avoided: the visions they brought before one's eyes were unnerving.

They made a pretence of sleeping in case they were being observed, and it was some hours later when the two stood quietly beside the open window. As Sykes had seen, there were branches of a pale, twisted tree-growth close outside. McGuire tried his weight upon them, then swung himself out, hand over hand, upon the branch that bent low beneath him. Sykes was close behind when he clambered to the ground to stand for some minutes, listening silently in the dark.

"Too easy!" the lieutenant whispered. "They are too foxy to leave a gateway like that—but here we are. The shore is off in this direction."

The dark of a night unrelieved by a single star was about them as they moved noiselessly away. They followed open ground at first. The building that had been their brief prison was upon their right;

beyond and at the left was where the ship landed—it was gone now—and beyond that the wall of vegetation.

And again, in the dark, McGuire had an uncanny sense of motion. Soft bodies were slipping quietly one upon another; something that lived was there beyond them in the night. No sound or sign of life came from the house; no guard had been posted; and McGuire stopped again, before plunging into the tangled growth, to whisper, "Too easy, Sykes! There's something about this—"

He had pushed aside the fronds of a giant fern; a cautious step beyond his hands touched a slippery, pliant vine. And his whisper ended as he felt the thing turn and twist beneath his hand. It was alive!—writhing!—cold as the body of a monster snake, and just as vicious and savage in the way that it whipped down and about him in the gloom of the starless night.

The thing was alive! It threw its coils around his body in an embrace that left him breathless; a slender tendril was tightening about his neck; his hands and arms were bound.

His ankle was grasped as he was whirled aloft—a human hand that

gripped him this time—and Sykes, forgetting discretion and the need for silence, was shouting in the darkness that gave no clue to their opponent. “Hang on!” he yelled. “I’ve got you, Mac!”

His shouts were cut short by another serpent shape that thrashed him and smashed the softer growing things to earth that it might wrap this man, too, in its deadly coils.

McGuire felt his companion’s hold loosen as he was lifted from the ground; there were other arms flailing about him—living, coiling things that seemed to fight one with another for this prize. Abruptly, blindingly, the scene was vividly etched before him: the strange trees, the ferns, the writhing and darting serpent-arms! They were illumined in a dazzling, white light!

He was in the air, clutched strangely in constricting arms; an odor of rotted flesh was in his nostrils, sickening, suffocating! Beyond and almost beneath him a cauldron of green gaped open, and he saw within it a pool of thick liquid that eddied and steamed to give off the stench of putrescence.

All this in an instant of vision—and in that instant he knew the death they courted. It was a giant pod that held that pool—one of the growths he had seen ranged out like a line of sentinels. But the

terrible tendrils that had been coiled and at rest were wrapped about him now, drawing him to that reeking pool of death and the waiting thick lips that would close above him. Sykes, too! The tendrils that had clutched him were whisking his helpless body where another gaping mouth was open—

And then, in the blazing light that was more brilliant than any light of day in this world, the hold about McGuire relaxed. He saw, as he fell, the thick, green lips snap shut; and the arms that had held him pulled back into harmless, tight-wound coils.

Their bodies crashed to earth where a great fern bent beneath them to cushion their fall. And the men lay silent and gasping for great choking breaths, while from the building beyond came the cackle and shrieking of man-things in manifest enjoyment of the frustrated plans.

It was the laughter that determined McGuire.

“Damn the plants!” he said between hoarse breaths. “Man-eating plants—but they’re—better—than—those devils! And there’s only—one line of them: I saw them here before. Shall we go on?—make a break for it?”

Sykes rolled to the shelter of an arching frond and, without a word, went crawling away. McGuire was behind him, and the two, as they came to open ground, sprang to their feet and ran on through the weird orchard where tree trunks made dim, twisting lines. They ran blindly and helplessly toward the outer dark that promised temporary shelter.

A hopeless attempt: both men, knew the futility of it, while they stumbled onward through the dark. Behind them the night was hideous with noise as the great palace gave forth an eruption of shrieking, inhuman forms that scattered with whistling and wailing calls in all directions.

A mile or more of groping, hopeless flight, till a yellow gleam shone among the trees to guide them. A building, beyond a clearing, gave a bright illumination to the black night.

“We’ve run in a circle,” choked McGuire, his voice weak and uncertain with exhaustion. “Like a couple of fools!—”

He waited until the heavy breathing that shook his body might be controlled, then corrected himself. “No—this is another—a new one—see the towers! And listen—it’s a radio station!”

The slender frameworks that towered high in air glowed like flame—a warning to the ships whose lights showed now and then far overhead. And, clear and distinct, there came to the listening men the steady, crackling hiss of an uninterrupted signal.

Against the lighted building moving figures showed momentarily, and McGuire pulled his friend into the safe concealment of a tangle of growth, while the group of yelling things sped past.

“Come on,” he told Sykes; “we can’t get away—not a chance! Let’s have a look at this place, and perhaps—well, I have an idea!” He slipped silently, cautiously on, where a forest of jungle ferns gave promise of safe passage.

Some warning had been sounded; the occupants of the building were scattered to aid in the man-hunt. Only one was left in the room where two Earth-men peeped in at the door.

The figure was seated upon an insulated platform, and his long hands manipulated keys and levers on a table before him. McGuire and Sykes stared amazedly at this broadcasting station whose air was filled with a pandemonium of crashing sound from some distant room, but McGuire was concerned mainly with the motion of a lean, blood-red hand that swung an object like a pointer in free-running

sweeps above a dial on the table. And he detected a variation in the din from beyond as the pointer moved swiftly.

Here was the control board for those messages he had heard; this was the instrument that varied the sending mechanism to produce the wailing wireless cries that made words in some far-distant ears. McGuire, as he slipped into the room and crept within leaping distance of the grotesque thing so like yet unlike a man, was as silent as the nameless, writhing horror that had seized them in the dark. He sprang, and the two came crashing to the floor.

Lean arms came quickly about him to clutch and tear at his face, but the flyer had an arm free, and one blow ended the battle. The man of Venus relaxed to a huddle of purple and yellow cloth from which a ghastly face protruded. McGuire leaped to his feet and sprang to the place where the other had been.

“Hold them off as long as you can!” he shouted to Sykes, and his hand closed upon the pointer.

Did this station send where he was hoping? Was this the station that had communicated with the ship that had hovered above their flying field in that far-off land? He did not know, but it was a powerful station, and there was a chance—

He moved the pointer frantically here and there, swung it to one side and another; then found at last a point on the outside of the strange design beneath his hand where the pointer could rest while the crashing crackle of sound was stilled.

And now he swung the pointer—upon the plate—anywhere!—and the noise from beyond told instantly of the current's passage. He held it an instant, then pushed it back to the silent spot—a dash! A quick return that flashed back again to bring silence—a dot! More dashes and dots ... and McGuire thanked a kindly heaven that had permitted him to learn the language of the air, while he cursed his slowness in sending.

Would it reach? Would there be anyone to hear? No certainty; he could only flash the wild Morse symbols out into the night. He must try to get word to them—warn them! And "Blake," he called, and spelled out the name of their field, "warning—Venus—"

"Hold them!" he yelled to Sykes at the sound of rushing feet. "Keep them off as long as you can!"

"... Prepare—for invasion. Blake, this is McGuire...." Over and over, he worked the swinging pointer into symbols that might in some way, by some fortunate chance, help that helpless people to resist the

horror that lay ahead.

And while heavy bodies crashed against the door that Sykes was holding, there came from some deep-hidden well of memory an inspiration. There was a man he had once met—a man who had confided wondrous things; and now, with the knowledge of these others who had conquered space, he could believe wholly what he had laughed and joked about before. That man, too, had claimed to have travelled far from the earth; he had invented a machine; his name—

The pointer was swinging in frenzied haste to spell over and over the name of a man, and the name, too, of a forgotten place in the mountains of Nevada. It was repeating the message; then finished in one long crashing wail as a cloud of vapor shot about McGuire and his hand upon the pointer went suddenly limp.

Chapter 11

Captain Blake's game of solitaire had become an obsession. He drove himself to the utmost in the line of duty, and, through the day, the demands of the flying field filled his mind to forgetfulness. And for the rest, he forced his mind to concentrate upon the turn of the cards. He could not read—and he must not think!—so he sat through long evenings trying vainly to forget.

He looked up with an expressionless face as Colonel Boynton entered the room. The colonel saw the cards and nodded.

"Does that help?" he asked, and added without waiting for an answer, "I don't like cards, but I find my mathematics works well.... My old problems—I can concentrate on them, and stop this eternal, damnable thinking, thinking—"

There was something of the same look forming about the eyes of both—that look that told of men who struggled gamely under the sentence of death, refusing to think or to fear, and waiting, waiting, impotently. Blake looked at the colonel with a carefully emotionless gaze. "It's hell in the big towns, I hear."

The Colonel nodded. "Can't blame them much, if that's what appeals

to them. A year and a half!—and they've got to forget it. Why not crowd all the recklessness and excesses they can into the time that is left?—poor devils! But for the most part the world is wagging along, and people are going through the familiar motions."

"Well," said Blake, "I used to wonder at times how a man might feel if he were facing execution. Now we all know. Just going dumbly along, feeling as little as we can, thinking of anything, everything—except the one thing. They've turned to using dope, a lot of them, I hear. Maybe it helps; nobody cares much. Only a year and a half."

He raised his face from which all expression was consciously erased. "Any possible hope?" he asked. "Or do we take it when it comes and fight with what we've got as long as we can? There was some talk in the papers of an invention—Bureau of Standards cooperating with the big General Committee to investigate. Anything come of it?"

"A thousand of them," said the colonel, "all futile. No, we can't expect much from those things. Though there's a whisper that came to me from Washington. General Clinton—you may remember him; he was here when the thing first broke—says that some scientist, a real one, not another of these half-baked geniuses, has worked out a transformation of some kind. It was too deep for me, but it is based upon changing hydrogen into helium, I think. Liberates some

perfectly tremendous amount of power. The general had it all down pat—”

He stopped speaking at the change in Captain Blake’s face. The careful repression of all emotions was gone; the face was suddenly alive—

“I know,” he said sharply; “I remember something of the theory. There is a difference in the atoms or their protons—the liberation of an electron from each atom—matter actually transformed into energy; theoretical, what I have read. But—but—Oh my God, Boynton, do you mean that they’ve got it?—that it will drive us through space?”

The colonel drove one fist into the palm of his other hand. “Fool! Idiot!” he exclaimed, and it was evident that the epithets were intended for himself.

“I had forgotten that you had been trained along that line. The general wants a man to work with them, somewhat as a liason officer to link the army requirements closely with their developments; we are hoping to work out a space ship, of course. You are just the man; I will radio him this minute. Be ready to leave—” The slamming of the door marked a hurried exit toward the radio room.

And abruptly, stifflingly, Captain Blake dared to hope. “Scientists will come through with something, some new method of propulsion. All the world is looking to them!” His thoughts were leaping from one possibility to another. “Some miracle of power that will drive a fleet through space as they have done, to battle with the enemy on his own ground—”

Could he help? Was there one little thing that he could do to apply their knowledge to practical ends? The thought thrilled him with overpowering emotion an hour later as he felt the lift of the plane beneath him.

“Report to General Clinton,” the colonel’s reply had said. “Captain Blake will be assigned to special duty.” He opened the throttle to his ship’s best cruising speed, but his spirit was soaring ahead to urge on the swift scout ship whose wings drove steadily into the gathering dusk.

And then, after long hours, Washington! Brief words with many men—and discouragement! The seat of government of the United States was a city of despondent men, weary, hopeless, but fighting. There was a look of strain on every face; the eyes told a story of sleepless nights and futile thinking and planning. Blake’s elation was short lived.

He was sent to New York and on into the state, where the laboratories of a great electrical company had turned their equipment from commercial purposes to those of war. Here, surely, one might find fuel to feed the dying embers of hope; the new development must give greater promise than General Clinton had intimated.

“Nothing you can do as yet,” he was told, when he had stated his mission. “It is still experimental, but we have worked out the transformation on a small scale, and harnessed the power.”

Captain Blake was in no mood for temporizing; he was tired with being put off. He stared belligerently at the chief of this department.

“Power—hell!” he said. “We’ve got power now. How will you apply it? How will we use it for travelling through space?”

The great man of science was unmoved by the outburst. “That is poppycock,” he replied; “the unscientific twaddle of the sensational press. We are practical men here; we are working to give you men who do the fighting better ships and better arms. But you will use them right here on Earth.”

The calm assurance of this man who spoke with a voice of such confidence and authority left the flyer speechless. His brain sent a

chaos of profane and violent expletives to the lips that dared not frame them. There was no adequate reply.

Blake jammed his hat upon his head and walked blindly from the room. Heedless of the protests of those he jostled on the street he went raging on, but some subconscious urge directed his steps. He found himself at the railway. There was a station, and a grilled window where he was asking for a ticket back to Washington. And on the following day—

“There is nothing I can do,” he told General Clinton. “It is hopeless. I ask to be relieved.”

“Why?” The general snapped the question at him. What kind of man was this that Boynton had sent him?

“They are fools,” said Blake bluntly, “pompous, well-meaning fools! They are planning better motors, more power”—he laughed harshly—“and they think that with them we can attack ships that are independent of the air.”

“Still,” asked General Clinton coldly, “for what purpose do you wish to be relieved? What do you intend to do?”

“Return to the field,” said Captain Blake, “to work, and put my planes and personnel in the best possible condition; then, when the time comes, go up and fight like hell.”

An unusual phrasing of a request when one is addressing one’s commander; but the older man threw back his shoulders, that were bending under responsibilities too great for one man to bear, and took a long breath that relaxed his face and seemed to bring relief.

“You’ve got the right idea,”—he spoke slowly and thoughtfully—“the right philosophy. It is all we have left—to fight like hell when the time comes. Give my regards to Colonel Boynton; he sent me a good man after all.”

Another long flight, westward this time, and, despite the failure of his hopes and of his errand, Blake was flying with a mind at peace. “It is all we have left,” the general had said. Well, it was good to face facts, to admit them—and that was that! There was no use of thinking or worrying.... He lifted the ship to a higher level and glanced at his compass. There were clouds up ahead, and he drove still higher into the night, until he was above them.

And again his peace of mind was not to last.

It was night when he swung the ship over his home port and signalled for a landing. A flood of light swept out across the field to guide him down. He went directly to the colonel's quarters but found him gone.

"In the radio room, I think," an orderly told him.

Colonel Boynton was listening intently in the silent room; he scowled with annoyance at the disturbance of Blake's coming; then, seeing who it was, he motioned quickly for the captain to listen in.

"Good Lord, Blake," he told the captain in an excited whisper; "I'm glad you're here. Another ship had been sighted; she's been all over the earth; just scouting and mapping, probably. And there have been signals the same as before—the same until just now. Listen!—it's talking Morse!—it's been calling for you!"

He thrust a head set into Blake's hands, then reached for some papers. "Poor reception, but there's what we've got," he said.

The paper held the merest fragments of messages that the operator had deciphered. Blake examined them curiously while he listened at the silent receiver.

“Maricopa”—the message, whatever it was, was meant for them, but there were only parts of words and disjointed phrases that the man had written down—“Venus attacking Earth ... Captain Blake ... Sykes and....”

At the name of Sykes, Blake dropped the paper.

“What does this mean?” he demanded. “Sykes!—why Sykes was the astronomer who was captured with McGuire!”

“Listen! Listen!” The colonel’s voice was almost shrill with excitement.

The night was whispering faintly the merest echo of a signal from a station far away, but it resolved itself into broken fragments of sound that were long and short in duration, and the fragments joined to form letters in the Morse code.

“See Winslow,” it told them, and repeated the message: “See Winslow at Sierra....” Some distant storm crashed and rattled for breathless minutes. “Blake see Winslow. This is McGuire, Blake. Winslow can help—”

The message ended abruptly. One long, wailing note; then again the

night was voiceless ... and in the radio room at Maricopa Flying Field two men stood speechless, unbreathing, to stare at each other with incredulous eyes, as might men who had seen a phantom—a ghost that spoke to them and called them by name.

“McGuire—is—alive!” stammered Blake. “They’ve taken him—there!”

Colonel Boynton was considering, weighing all the possibilities, and his voice, when he answered, had the ring of conviction.

“That was no hoax,” he agreed; “that quavering tone could never be faked. That message was sent from the same station we heard before. Yes, McGuire is alive—or was up to the end of that sending.... But, who the devil is Winslow?”

Blake shook his head despairingly. “I don’t know,” he said. “And it seems as if I should—”

It was hours later, far into the night, when he sprang from out of a half-conscious doze to find himself in the middle of the floor with the voice of McGuire ringing clearly in his ears. A buried memory had returned to the level of his conscious mind. He rushed over to the colonel’s quarters.

“I’ve got it,” he shouted to that officer whose head was projecting from an upper window. “I remember! McGuire told me about this Winslow—some hermit that he ran across. He has some invention—some machine—said he had been to the moon. I always thought Mac half believed him. We’ll go over Mac’s things and find the address.”

“Do you think—do you suppose—?” began Colonel Boynton doubtfully.

“I don’t dare to think,” Blake responded. “God only knows if we dare hope; but Mac—Mac’s got a level head; he wouldn’t send us unless he knew! Good Lord, man!” he exclaimed, “Mac radioed us from Venus; is there anything impossible after that?”

“Wait there,” said Colonel Boynton; “I’ll be right down—”

Chapter 12

Lieutenant McGuire awoke, as he had on other occasions, to the smell of sickly-sweet fumes and the stifling pressure of a mask held over his nose and mouth. He struggled to free himself, and the mask was removed. Another of the man-creatures whom McGuire had not seen before helped him to sit up.

A group of the attenuated figures, with their blood-and-ashes faces, regarded him curiously. The one who had helped him arise forced the others to stand back, and he gave McGuire a drink of yellow fluid from a crystal goblet. The dazed man gulped it down to feel a following surge of warmth and life that pulsed through his paralyzed body. The figures before him came sharply from the haze that had enveloped them. A window high above admitted a golden light that meant another day, but it brought no cheer or encouragement to the flyer. McGuire felt crushed and hopeless in the knowledge that his life must still go on.

If only that sleep could have continued—carried him out to the deeper sleep of death! What hope for them here? Not a chance! And then he remembered Sykes; he mustn't desert Sykes. He looked about him to see the same prison room from which he and Sykes had escaped. The body of the scientist was motionless on the hammock-

bed across the room; an occasional deep-drawn breath showed that the man still lived.

No, he must not leave Sykes, even if he had the means of death. They would fight it through together, and perhaps—perhaps—they might yet be of service, might find some way to avert the catastrophe that threatened their world. Hopeless? Beyond doubt. But he must hope—and fight!

The leader had watched the light of understanding as it returned to the flyer's eyes. He motioned now to the others, and McGuire was picked up bodily by four of them and carried from the room.

McGuire's mind was alert once more; he was eager to learn what he could of this place that was to be their prison, but he saw little. A glory of blending colors beyond, where the golden light from without shone through opal walls—then he found himself upon a narrow table where straps of metal were thrown quickly about to bind him fast. He was tied hand and foot to the table that moved forward on smooth rollers to a waiting lift.

What next? he questioned. Not death, for they had been too careful to keep him alive, these repulsive things that stared at him with such cold malevolence. Then what? And McGuire found himself with

unpleasant recollections of others he had seen strapped in similar fashion to an operating table.

The lift that he had thought would rise fell smoothly, instead, to stop at some point far below ground where the table with its helpless burden was rolled into a great room.

He could move his head, and McGuire turned and twisted to look at the maze of instruments that filled the room—a super-laboratory for experiments of which he dared not think.

“Whoever says I’m not scared to death is a liar,” he whispered to himself, but he continued to look and wonder as he was wheeled before a gleaming machine of many coils and shining, metal parts. A smooth sheet of metal stood vertically beyond him; painted a grayish-white, he saw; but he could not imagine its use. A throng of people, seated in the room, turned blood-red faces toward the bound man and the metal sheet.

“Looks as if we were about to put on a show of some kind,” he told himself, “and I am cast for a leading role.” He watched as best he could from his bound position while a tall figure in robes of lustreless black appeared to stand beside him.

The newcomer regarded him with a face that was devoid of all emotion. McGuire felt the lack of the customary expression of hatred; there was not even that; and he knew he was nothing more than a strange animal, bound, and helpless, ready for this weird creature's experiments. The one in black held a pencil whose tip was a tiny, brilliant light.

Abruptly the room plunged to darkness, where the only visible thing was this one point of light. Ceaselessly it waved back and forth before his eyes; he followed it in a pattern of strange design; it approached and receded. Again and again the motion was repeated, until McGuire felt himself sinking—sinking—into a passive state of lethargy. His muscles relaxed; his mind was at rest; there seemed nothing in the entire universe of being but the single point of light that drew him on and on ... till something whispered from the far reaches of black space....

It came to him, an insistent call. It was asking about the earth—his own world. *What of Earth's armies and their means of defense?* Vaguely he sensed the demand, and without conscious volition he responded. He pictured the world he had known; how plainly he saw the wide field at Maricopa, and the sweeping flight of a squadron of planes! *Yes—yes! How high could they ascend?* From one of the planes he saw the world below; the ships were near their ceiling; this

was the limit of their climb. *And did they fight with gas? What of their deadliness?* And again he was seated in a plane, and he was firing tiny bullets from a tiny gun. No. They did not use gas. *But on the ground below—what fortifications? What means of defense?*

McGuire's mind was no longer his own; he could only respond to that invisible questioner, that insistent demand from out of the depths where he was floating. And yet there was something within him that protested, that clamored at his mind and brain.

Fortifications! They must know about fortifications—anti-aircraft guns—means for combatting aerial attack. Yes, he knew, and he must explain—and the thing within him pounded in the back of his brain to draw him back to himself.

He saw a battery of anti-aircraft guns in operation; the guns were firing; shells were bursting in little plumes of smoke high in the air. And that self within him was shouting now, hammering at him; "You are seeing it," it told him; "it is there before you on the screen. Stop! Stop!"

And for an instant McGuire had the strange experience of witnessing his own thoughts. Memories, mental records of past experience, were flashing through his mind; mock battles, and the batteries were

firing! And, before him, on the metal screen, there glowed a vivid picture of the same thing. Men were serving the guns with sure swiftness; the bursts were high in the air—in a flash of understanding Lieutenant McGuire knew that he was giving his country's secrets to the enemy. And in that same instant he felt himself swept upward from the depths of that darkness where he had drifted. He was himself again, bound and helpless before an infernal contrivance of these devil-creatures. They had read his thoughts; the machine beside him had projected them upon the screen for all to see; a steady clicking might mean their reproduction in motion pictures for later study! He, Lieutenant McGuire, was a traitor against his will!

The screen was blank, and the lights of the room came on to show the thin lips that smiled complacently in a cruel and evil face.

McGuire glared back into that face, and he tried with all the mental force that he could concentrate to get across to the exultant one the fact that they had not wholly conquered him. This much they had got —but no more!

The thin-lipped one had an instrument in his hand, and McGuire felt the prick of a needle plunged into his arm. He tried to move his head and found himself powerless. And now, in the darkness of the room

where all lights were again extinguished, the helpless man was fighting the most horrible of battles, and the battleground was within his own mind. He was two selves, and he fought and struggled with all his consciousness to keep those memories from flooding him.

With one part of himself he knew what it meant: a sure knowledge given these invaders of what they must prepareto meet; he was betraying his country; the whole of humanity! And that raging, raving self was powerless to check the flow of memory pictures that went endlessly through his mind and out upon the screen beyond....

He had no sense of time; he was limp and exhausted with his fruitless struggle when he felt himself released from the bondage of the metal straps and placed again in the hammock in his room. And he could only look wanly and hopelessly after the figure of Professor Sykes, carried by barbarous figures to the same ordeal.

Sleep, through the long night, restored both McGuire and his companion to normal strength. The flyer was seated with his head bowed low in his cupped hands. His words seemed wrung from an agony of spirit. “So that’s what they brought us here for,” he said harshly; “that’s why they’re keeping us alive!”

Professor Sykes walked back and forth in their bare room while he

shook his impotent fists in the air.

“I told them everything,” he exploded; “everything!” Their astronomical knowledge must be limited; under this blanket of clouds they can see nothing, and from their ships they could make approximations only.

“And I have told them—the earth, and its days and seasons—its orbital velocity and motion—its relation to the orbit of this accursed planet. They had documents from the observatory and I explained them; I corrected their time of firing their big gun on its equatorial position. Oh, there is little I left untold—damn them!”

“I wish to heaven,” said the flyer savagely, “that we had known; we would have jumped out of their beastly ship somehow ten thousand feet up, and we would have taken our information with us.”

Sykes nodded agreement. “Well,” he asked, “how about to-morrow, and the next day, and the next? They will want more facts; they will pump the last drop of information from us. Are we going to allow it?”

McGuire’s tone was dry. “You know the answer to that as well as I do. We have just two alternatives; either we get out of here—find

some place to hide in, then find some way to put a crimp in their plans; or we get out of here for good. It's twenty feet, not twenty thousand, from that window to the ground, but I think a head-first dive would do it."

Sykes did not reply at once; he seemed to be weighing some problem in his mind.

"I would prefer the water," he said at last. "If we *can* get away and reach the shore, and if there is not a possibility of escape—which I must admit I consider highly improbable—well, we can always swim out as far as we can go, and the result will be certain.

"This other is so messy." The man had stopped his ceaseless pacing, and he even managed a cheerful smile at the lieutenant. "And, remember, it might only cripple us and leave us helpless in their hands."

"Sounds all right to me," McGuire agreed, and there was a tone of finality in his voice as he added: "They've made us do that traitor act for the last time, anyway."

Daylight comes slowly through cloud-filled skies; the window of the room where the fountain sprayed ceaselessly was showing the first

hint of gold in the eastern sky. Above was the utter darkness of the cloud-wrapped night as the two men swung noiselessly out into the grotesque branches of a tree to make their way into the gloom below. There, under the cover of great leaves, they crouched in silence, while the darkness about them faded and a sound of subdued whistling noises came to them from the night.

A wheel creaked, and in the dim light two figures appeared tugging at a cart upon which was a cage of woven wire. Beyond them, against the darker background of denser growth, tentacles coiled and twisted above the row of guardian plants that surrounded the house.

One of the ghostly forms reached within the cage and brought forth a struggling object that whimpered in fear. The low whine came distinctly to the hidden men. They saw a vague black thing tossed through the air and toward the deadly plants; they heard the swishing of pliant tentacles and the yelping cry of a frightened animal. And the cry rose to a shriek that ended with the gulping splash of thick liquid.

The giant pod next in line was open—they could see it dimly—and its tentacles were writhing convulsively, hungrily, across the ground. Another animal was taken from the cage and thrown to the waiting, serpent forms that closed about and whirled it high in air. Another—

and another! The yelps of terror grew faint in the distance as the monsters passed on in their gruesome work. And the two men, palpitant with memories of their own experience, were limp and sick with horror.

In the growing light they saw more plainly the fleshy, pliant arms that whipped through the air or felt searchingly along the ground. No hope there for bird or beast that passed by in the night; nor for men, as they knew too well. But now, as the golden light increased, the arms drew back to form again the tight-wound coils that flattened themselves beside the monstrous pods whose lips were closing. Locked within them were the pools of liquid that could dissolve a living body into food for these vampires of the vegetable world.

“Damnable!” breathed Sykes in a savage whisper. “Utterly damnable! And this world is peopled with such monsters!”

The last deadly arm was tightly coiled when the men stole off through the lush growth that reached even above their heads. McGuire remembered the outlines he had seen from the air and led the way where, if no better concealment could be found, the ocean waited with promise of rest and release from their inhuman captors.

They counted on an hour’s start—it would be that long before their

jailer would come with their morning meal and give the alarm—and now they went swiftly and silently through the stillness of a strange world. The air that flicked misty-wet across their faces was heavy and heady with the perfume of night-blooming plants. Crimson blossoms flung wide their odorous petals, and the first golden light was filtered through tremendous tree-growths of pale lavenders and grays to show as unreal colors in the vegetation close about them.

They found no guards; the isolation of this island made the land itself their prison, and the men ran at full speed through every open space, knowing as they ran that there was no refuge for them—only the ocean waiting at the last. But their flight was not unobserved.

A great bird rose screaming from a tangle of vines; its heavy, flapping wings flashed red against the pale trees. A pandemonium of shrieking cries echoed its alarm as other birds took flight; the forest about them was in an uproar of harsh cries. And faintly, from far in the rear, came a babel of shrill calls—weird, inhuman!—the voices of the men-things of Venus.

“It’s all off,” said McGuire sharply; “they’ll be on our trail now!” He plunged through where the trees were more open, and Sykes was beside him as they ran with a burst of speed toward a hilltop beyond.

They paused, panting, upon the crest. A wide expanse of foliage in delicate shadings swept out before them to wave gently in a sea of color under the morning breeze, and beyond was another sea that beckoned with white breakers on a rocky shore.

“The ocean!” gasped Sykes, and pointed a trembling hand toward their goal. “But—I had no idea—that suicide—was—such hard work!”

The tall figure of Lieutenant McGuire turned to the shorter, breathless man, and he gripped hard at one of his hands.

“Sykes,” he said, “I’ll never get another chance to say it—but you’re one good scout!... Come on!”

McGuire fought to force his way through jungle growth, while screaming birds marked where they went. The sounds of their pursuers were close behind them when the two tore their way through the last snarled tangle of pale vine to stand on a sheer bluff, where, below, deep waters crashed against a rocky wall. They staggered with weariness and gulped sobbingly of the morning air. McGuire could have sworn he was exhausted beyond any further

effort, yet from somewhere he summoned energy to spring savagely upon a tall, blood-red figure whose purpling face rose suddenly to confront them.

One hand closed upon the metal tube that the other hand raised, and, with his final reserve of strength, the flyer wrapped an arm about the tall body and rushed it stumblingly toward the cliff. To be balked now!—to be brought back to that intolerable prison and the unthinkable role of traitor! The khaki-clad figure wrenched furiously at the deadly tube as they struggled and swayed on the edge of the cliff.

He freed his arm quickly, and, regardless of the clawing thing that tore at his face and eyes, he launched one long swing for the horrible face above him. He saw the awkward fall of a lean body, and he swayed helplessly out to follow when the grip of Sykes' hand pulled him back and up to momentary safety.

McGuire's mind held only the desire to kill, and he would have begun a staggering rush toward the shrieking mob that broke from the cover behind them, had not Sykes held him fast. At sight of the weapon, their own gas projector, still clutched in the flyer's hand, the pursuers halted. Their long arms pointed and their shrill calls joined in a chorus that quavered and fell uncertainly.

One, braver than the rest, dashed forward and discharged his weapon. The spurting gas failed to reach its intended victims; it blew gently back toward the others who fled quickly to either side. Above the trees a giant ship nosed swiftly down, and McGuire pointed to it grimly and in silence. The men before them were massed now for a rush.

“This is the end,” said the flyer softly. “I wonder how this devilish thing works; there’s a trigger here. I will give them a shot with the wind helping, then we’ll jump for it.”

The ship was above them as the slim figure of Lieutenant McGuire threw itself a score of paces toward the waiting group. From the metal tube there shot a stream of pale vapor that swept downward upon the others who ran in panic from its touch.

Then back—and a grip of a hand!—and two Earth-men who threw themselves out and downward from a sheer rock wall to the cool embrace of deep water.

They came to the top, battered from their fall, but able to dive under a wave and emerge again near one another.

“Swim!” urged Sykes. “Swim out! They may get us here—recover

our bodies—resuscitate us. And that wouldn't do!"

Another wave, and the two men were swimming beyond it; swimming feebly but steadily out from shore, while above them a great cylinder of shining metal swept past in a circling flight. They kept on while their eyes, from the wave tops, saw it turn and come slowly back in a long smooth descent.

It was a hundred feet above the water a short way out at sea, and the two men made feeble motions with arms and legs, while their eyes exchanged glances of dismay.

A door had opened in the round under-surface, and a figure, whose gas-suit made it a bloated caricature of a man, was lowered from beneath in a sling. From the stern of the ship gaseous vapor belched downward to spread upon the surface of the water. The wind was bringing the misty cloud toward them. "The gas!" said McGuire despairingly. "It will knock us out, and then that devil will get us! They'll take us back! Our last chance—gone!"

"God help us!" said Sykes weakly. "We can't—even—die—" His feeble strokes stopped, and he sank beneath the water. McGuire's last picture as he too sank and the waters closed over his head, was the shining ship hovering beyond.

He wondered only vaguely at the sudden whirling of water around him. A solid something was rising beneath his dragging feet; a firm, solid support that raised him again to the surface. He realized dimly the air about him, the sodden form of Professor Sykes some few feet distant. His numbed brain was trying to comprehend what else the eyes beheld.

A metal surface beneath them rose higher, shining wet, above the water; a metal tube raised suddenly from its shield, to swing in quick aim upon the enemy ship approaching from above.

His eyes moved to the ship, and to the man-thing below in the sling. Its clothes were a mass of flame, and the figure itself was falling headlong through the air. Above the blazing body was the metal of the ship itself, and it sagged and melted to a liquid fire that poured, splashing and hissing, to the waters beneath. In the wild panic the great shape threw itself into the air; it swept out and up in curving flight to plunge headlong into the depths....

The gas was drifting close, as McGuire saw an opening in the structure beside him. The voice of a man, human, kindly, befriending, said something of “hurry” and “gas,” and “lift them carefully but make haste.” The white faces of men were blurred and indistinct as McGuire felt himself lowered into a cool room and laid,

with the unconscious form of Sykes, upon a floor.

He tried to remember. He had gone down in the water—Sykes had drowned, and he himself—he was tired—tired. “And this,”—the thought seemed a certainty in his mind—“this is death. How—very—peculiar—” He was trying to twist his lips to a weak laugh as the lighted ports in the wall beside him changed from gold to green, then black—and a rushing of torn waters was in his ears....

Chapter 13

Lieutenant McGuire had tried to die. He and Professor Sykes had welcomed death with open arms, and death had been thwarted by their enemies who wanted them alive—wanted to draw their knowledge from them as a vampire bat might seek to feast. And, when even death was denied them, help had come.

The enemy ship had gone crashing to destruction where its melting metal made hissing clouds of steam as it buried itself in the ocean. And this craft that had saved them—Lieutenant McGuire had never been on a submarine, but he knew it could be only that that held him now and carried him somewhere at tremendous speed.

This was miracle enough! But to see, with eyes which could not be deceiving him, a vision of men, human, white of face—men like himself—bending and working over Sykes' unconscious body—that could not be immediately grasped.

Their faces, unlike the bleached-blood horrors he had seen, were aglow with the flush of health. They were tall, slenderly built, graceful in their quick motions as they worked to revive the unconscious man. One stopped, as he passed, to lay a cool hand on McGuire's forehead, and the eyes that looked down seemed filled

with the blessed quality of kindness.

They were human—his own kind!—and McGuire was unable to take in at first the full wonder of it.

Did the tall man speak? His lips did not move, yet McGuire heard the words as in some inner ear.

“We were awaiting you, friend Mack Guire.” The voice was musical, thrilling, and yet the listening man could not have sworn that he heard a voice at all. It was as if a thought were placed within his mind by the one beside him.

The one who had paused hurried on to aid the others, and McGuire let his gaze wander.

The porthole beside him showed dimly a pale green light; they were submerged, and the hissing rush of water told him that they were travelling fast. There was a door in the farther wall; beyond was a room of gleaming lights that reflected from myriads of shining levers and dials. A control room. A figure moved as McGuire watched, to press on a lever where a red light was steadily increasing in brightness. He consulted strange instruments before him, touched a metal button here and there, then opened a switch, and the rippling

hiss of waters outside their craft softened to a gentler note.

The tall one was beside him again.

“Your friend will live,” he told him in that wordless tongue, “and we are almost arrived. The invisible arms of our anchorage have us now and will draw us safely to rest.”

The kindly tone was music in McGuire’s ears, and he smiled in reply. “Friends!” he thought. “We are among friends.”

“You are most welcome,” the other assured him, “and, yes, you are truly among friends.” But the lieutenant glanced upward in wonder, for he knew that he had uttered no spoken word.

Their ship turned and changed its course beneath them, then came finally to rest with a slight rocking motion as if cushioned on powerful springs. Sykes was being assisted to his feet as the tall man reached for McGuire’s hand and helped him to rise.

The two men of Earth stood for a long minute while they stared unbelievingly into each other’s eyes. Their wonder and amazement found no words for expression but must have been apparent to the one beside them.

“You will understand,” he told them. “Do not question this reality even to yourselves. You are safe!… Come.” And he led the way through an opening doorway to a wet deck outside. Beyond this was a wharf of carved stone, and the men followed where steps were inset to allow them to ascend.

Again McGuire could not know if he heard a tumult of sound or sensed it in some deeper way. The air about them was aglow with soft light, and it echoed in his ears with music unmistakably real—beautiful music!—exhilarating! But the clamor of welcoming voices, like the words from their tall companion, came soundlessly to him.

There were people, throngs of them, waiting. Tall like the others, garbed, like those horrible beings of a past that seemed distant and remote, in loose garments of radiant colors. And everywhere were welcoming smiles and warm and friendly glances.

McGuire let his dazed eyes roam around to find the sculptured walls of a huge room like a tremendous cave. The soft glow of light was everywhere, and it brought out the beauty of flowing lines and delicate colors in statuary and bas-relief that adorned the walls. Behind him the water made a dark pool, and from it projected the upper works of their strange craft.

His eyes were hungry for these new sights, but he turned with Sykes to follow their guide through the colorful crowd that parted to let them through. They passed under a carved archway and found themselves in another and greater room.

But was it a room? McGuire marveled at its tremendous size. His eyes took in the smooth green of a grassy lawn, the flowers and plants, and then they followed where the hand of Sykes was pointing. The astronomer gripped McGuire's arm in a numbing clutch; his other hand was raised above.

"The stars," he said. "The clouds are gone; it is night!"

And where he pointed was a vault of black velvet. Deep hues of blue seemed blended with it, and far in its depths were the old familiar star-groups of the skies. "Ah!" the scientist breathed, "the beautiful, friendly stars!"

Their guide waited; then, "Come," he urged gently, and led them toward a lake whose unruffled glassy surface mirrored the stars above. Beside it a man was waiting to receive them.

McGuire had to force his eyes away from the unreal beauty of opal walls like the fairy structures they had seen. There was color

everywhere that blended and fused to make glorious harmony that was pure joy to the eyes.

The man who waited was young. He stood erect, his face like that of a Grecian statue, and his robe was blazing with the flash of jewels. Beside him was a girl, tall and slender, and sweetly serious of face. Like the man, her garments were lovely with jeweled iridescence, and now McGuire saw that the throng within the vast space was similarly apparelled.

The tall man raised his hand.

“Welcome!” he said, and McGuire realized with a start that the words were spoken aloud. “You are most welcome, my friends, among the people of that world you call Venus.”

Professor Sykes was still weak from his ordeal; he wavered perceptibly where he stood, and the man before them them turned to give an order. There were chairs that came like magic; bright robes covered them; and the men were seated while the man and girl also took seats beside them as those who prepare for an intimate talk with friends.

Lieutenant McGuire found his voice at last. “Who are you?” he

asked in wondering tones. “What does it mean? We were lost—and you saved us. But you—you are not like the others.” And he repeated, “What does it mean?”

“No,” said the other with a slight smile, “we truly are not like those others. They are not men such as you and I. They are something less than human: animals—vermin!—from whom God, in His wisdom, has seen fit to withhold the virtues that raise men higher than the beasts.”

His face hardened as he spoke and for a moment the eyes were stern, but he smiled again as he continued.

“And we,” he said, “you ask who we are. We are the people of Venus. I am Djorn, ruler, in name, of all. ‘In name’ I say, for we rule here by common reason; I am only selected to serve. And this is my sister, Althora. The name, with us, means ‘radiant light.’” He turned to exchange smiles with the girl at his side. “We think her well named,” he said.

“The others,”—he waved toward the throng that clustered about —“you will learn to know in time.”

Professor Sykes felt the need of introductions.

“This is Lieutenant—” he began, but the other interrupted with an upraised hand.

“Mack Guire,” he supplied; “and you are Professor Sykes…. Oh, we know you!” he laughed; “we have been watching you since your arrival; we have been waiting to help you.”

The professor was open-mouthed.

“Your thoughts,” explained the other, “are as a printed page. We have been with you by mental contact at all times. We could hear, but, at that distance, and—pardon me!—with your limited receptivity, we could not communicate.

“Do not resent our intrusion,” he added; “we listened only for our own good, and we shall show you how to insulate your thoughts. We do not pry.”

Lieutenant McGuire waved all that aside. “You saved us from them,” he said; “that’s the answer. But—what does it mean? Those others are in control; they are attacking our Earth, the world where we lived. Why do you permit—?”

Again the other’s face was set in sterner lines.

“Yes,” he said, and his voice was full of unspoken regret, “they do rule this world; they *have* attacked your Earth; they intend much more, and I fear they must be successful. Listen. Your wonderment is natural, and I shall explain.

“We are the people of Venus. Some centuries ago we ruled this world. Now you find us a handful only, living like moles in this underworld.”

“Underworld?” protested Professor Sykes. He pointed above to the familiar constellations. “Where are the clouds?” he asked.

The girl, Althora, leaned forward now. “It will please my brother,” she said in a soft voice, “that you thought it real. He has had pleasure in creating that—a replica of the skies we used to know before the coming of the clouds.”

Professor Sykes was bewildered. “That sky—the stars—they are not real?” he asked incredulously. “But the grass—the flowers—”

Her laugh rippled like music. “Oh, they are real,” she told him, and her brother gave added explanation.

“The lights,” he said: “we supply the actinic rays that the clouds cut

off above. We have sunlight here, made by our own hands; that is why we are as we are and not like the red ones with their bleached skins. We had our lights everywhere through the world when we lived above, but those red beasts are ignorant; they do not know how to operate them; they do not know that they live in darkness even in the light."

"Then we are below ground?" asked the flyer. "You live here?"

"It is all we have now. At that time of which I tell, it was the red ones who lived out of sight; they were a race of rodents in human form. They lived in the subterranean caves with which this planet is pierced. We could have exterminated them at any time, but, in our ignorance, we permitted them to live, for we, of Venus—I use your name for the planet—do not willingly take life."

"They have no such compunctions!" Professor Sykes' voice was harsh; he was remembering the sacrifice to the hungry plants.

A flash as of pain crossed the sensitive features of the girl, and the man beside her seemed speaking to her in soundless words.

"Your mind-picture was not pleasant," he told the scientist; then continued:

“Remember, we were upon the world, and these others were within it. There came a comet. Oh, our astronomers plotted its course; they told us we were safe. But at the last some unknown influence diverted it; its gaseous projection swept our world with flame. Only an instant; but when it had passed there was left only death….”

He was lost in recollection for a time; the girl beside him reached over to touch his hand.

“Those within—the red ones—escaped,” he went on. “They poured forth when they found that catastrophe had overwhelmed us. And we, the handful that were left, were forced to take shelter here. We have lived here since, waiting for the day when the Master of Destinies shall give us freedom and a world in which to live.”

“You speak,” suggested the scientist, “as if this had happened to you. Surely you refer to your ancestors; you are the descendants of those who were saved.”

“We are the people,” said the other. “We lived then; we live now; we shall live for a future of endless years.

“Have you not searched for the means to control the life principle—you people of Earth?” he asked. “We have it here. You see”—and he

waved a hand toward the standing throng—“we are young to your eyes and the others who greeted you were the same.”

McGuire and the scientist exchanged glances of corroboration.

“But your age,” asked Sykes, “measured in years?”

“We hardly measure life in years.”

Professor Sykes nodded slowly; his mind found difficulty in accepting so astounding a fact. “But our language?” he queried. “How is it that you can speak our tongue?”

The tall man smiled and leaned forward to place a hand on a knee of each of the men beside him. “Why not,” he asked, “when there doubtless is relationship between us.

“You called the continent Atlantis. Perhaps its very existence is but a fable now: it has been many centuries since we have had instruments to record thought force from Earth, and we have lost touch. But, my friends, even then we of Venus had conquered space, and it was we who visited Atlantis to find a race more nearly like ourselves than were the barbarians who held the other parts of Earth.

“I was there, but I returned. There were some who stayed and they

were lost with the others in the terrible cataclysm that sank a whole continent beneath the waters. But some, we have believed, escaped."

"Why have you not been back?" the flyer asked. "You could have helped us so much."

"It was then that our own destruction came upon us. The same comet, perhaps, may have caused a change of stresses in your Earth and sunk the lost Atlantis. Ah! That was a beautiful land, but we have never seen it since. We have been—here.

"But you will understand, now," he added, "that, with our insight into your minds, we have little difficulty in mastering your language."

This talk of science and incredible history left Lieutenant McGuire cold. His mind could not wander long from its greatest concern.

"But the earth!" he exclaimed. "What about the earth? This attack! Those devils mean real mischief!"

"More than you know; more than you can realize, friend Mack Guire!"

"Why?" demanded the flyer. "Why?"

“Have your countries not reached out for other countries when land was needed?” asked the man, Djorn. “Land—land! Space in which to breed—that is the reason for the invasion.

“This world has no such continents as yours. Here the globe is covered by the oceans; we have perhaps one hundredth of the land areas of your Earth And the red ones breed like flies. Life means nothing to them; they die like flies, too. But they need more room; they intend to find it on your world.”

“A strange race,” mused Professor Sykes. “They puzzled me. But —‘less than human,’ I think you said. Then how about their ships? How could they invent them?”

“Ours—all ours! They found a world ready and waiting for them. Through the centuries they have learned to master some few of our inventions. The ships!—the ethereal vibrations! Oh, they have been cleverer than we dreamed possible.”

“Well, how can we stop them?” demanded McGuire. “We must. You have the submarines—”

“One only,” the other interrupted. “We saved that, and we brought some machinery. We have made this place habitable; we have not

been idle. But there are limitations."

"But your ray that you projected—it brought down their ship!"

"We were protecting you, and we protect ourselves; that is enough. There is One will deliver us in His own good time; we may not go forth and slaughter."

There was a note of resignation and patience in the voice that filled McGuire with hopeless forebodings. Plainly this was not an aggressive race. They had evolved beyond the stage of wanton slaughter, and, even now, they waited patiently for the day when some greater force should come to their aid.

The man beside them spoke quickly. "One moment—you will pardon me—someone is calling—" He listened intently to some soundless call, and he sent a silent message in reply.

"I have instructed them," he said. "Come and you shall see how impregnable is our position. The red ones have resented our destruction of their ship."

The face of the girl, Althora, was perturbed. "More killings?" she asked.

“Only as they force themselves to their own death,” her brother told her. “Be not disturbed.”

The throng in the vast space drew apart as the figure of their leader strode quickly through with the two men following close. There were many rooms and passages; the men had glimpses of living quarters, of places where machinery made soft whirring sounds; more sights than their eyes could see or their minds comprehend. They came at last to an open chamber.

The men looked up to see above them a tremendous inverted-cone, and there was the gold of cloudland glowing through an opening at the top. It was the inside of a volcano where they stood, and McGuire remembered the island and its volcanic peak where the ship had swerved aside. He felt that he knew now where they were.

Above them, a flash of light marked the passage of a ship over the crater’s mouth, and he realized that the ships of the reds were not avoiding the island now. Did it mean an attack? And how could these new friends meet it?

Before them on the level volcanic floor were great machines that came suddenly to life, and their roar rose to a thunder of violence, while, in the center, a cluster of electric sparks like whirling stars

formed a cloud of blue fire. It grew, and its hissing, crackling length reached upward to a fine-drawn point that touched the opening above.

“Follow!” commanded their leader and went rapidly before them where a passage wound and twisted to bring them at last to the light of day.

The flame of the golden clouds was above them in the midday sky, and beneath it were scores of ships that swept in formations through the air.

“Attacking?” asked the lieutenant with ill-concealed excitement.

“I fear so. They tried to gas us some centuries ago; it may be they have forgotten what we taught them then.”

One squadron came downward and swept with inconceivable speed over a portion of the island that stretched below. The men were a short distance up on the mountain’s side, and the scene that lay before them was crystal clear. There were billowing clouds of gas that spread over the land where the ships had passed. Other ships followed; they would blanket the island in gas.

The man beside them gave a sigh of regret. “They have struck the first blow,” he said. He stood silent with half-closed eyes; then: “I have ordered resistance.” And there was genuine sorrow and regret in his eyes as he looked toward the mountain top.

McGuire’s eyes followed the other’s gaze to find nothing at first save the volcanic peak in hard outline upon the background of gold; then only a shimmer as of heat about the lofty cone. The air above him quivered, formed to ripples that spread in great circles where the enemy ships were flashing away.

Swifter than swift aircraft, with a speed that shattered space, they reached out and touched—and the ships, at that touch, fell helplessly down from the heights. They turned awkwardly as they fell or dropped like huge pointed projectiles. And the waters below took them silently and buried in their depths all trace of what an instant sooner had been an argosy of the air.

The ripples ceased, again the air was clear and untroubled, but beneath the golden clouds was no single sign of life.

The flyer’s breathless suspense ended in an explosive gasp. “What a washout!” he exclaimed, and again he thought only of this as a weapon to be used for his own ends. “Can we use that on their

fleets?" he asked. "Why, man—they will never conquer the earth; they will never even make a start."

The tall figure of Djorn turned and looked at him. "The lust to kill!" he said sadly. "You still have it—though you are fighting for your own, which is some excuse.

"No, this will not destroy their fleets, for their fleets will not come here to be destroyed. It will be many centuries before ever again the aircraft of the reds dare venture near."

"We will build another one and take it where they are—" The voice of the fighting man was vibrant with sudden hope.

"We were two hundred years building and perfecting this," the other told him. "Can you wait that long?"

And Lieutenant McGuire, as he followed dejectedly behind the leader, heard nothing of Professor Sykes' eager questions as to how this miracle was done.

"Can you wait that long?" this man, Djorn, had asked. And the flyer saw plainly the answer that spelled death and destruction to the world.

Chapter 14

The mountains of Nevada are not noted for their safe and easy landing places. But the motor of the plane that Captain Blake was piloting roared smoothly in the cool air while the man's eyes went searching, searching, for something, and he hardly knew what that something might be.

He went over again, as he had done a score of times, the remarks of Lieutenant McGuire. Mac had laughed that day when he told Blake of his experience.

"I was flying that transport," he had said, "and, boy! when one motor began to throw oil I knew I was out of luck. Nothing but rocky peaks and valleys full of trees as thick and as pointed as a porcupine's quills. Flying pretty high to maintain altitude with one motor out, so I just naturally *had* to find a place to set her down. I found it, too, though it seemed too good to be true off in that wilderness.

"A fine level spot, all smooth rock, except for a few clumps of grass, and just bumpy enough to make the landing interesting. But, say, Captain! I almost cracked up at that, I was so darn busy staring at something else.

“Off in some trees was a dirigible—Sure; go ahead and laugh; I didn’t believe it either, and I was looking at it. But there had been a whale of a storm through there the day before, and it had knocked over some trees that had been screening the thing, and there it was!

“Well, I came to in time to pull up her nose and miss a rock or two, and then I started pronto for that valley of trees and the thing that was buried among them.”

Captain Blake recalled the conversation word for word, though he had treated it jokingly at the time. McGuire had found the ship and a man—a half-crazed nut, so it seemed—living there all alone. And he wasn’t a bit keen about Mac’s learning of the ship. But leave it to Mac to get the facts—or what the old bird claimed were facts.

There was the body of a youngster there, a man of about Mac’s age. He had fallen and been killed the day before, and the old man was half crazy with grief. Mac had dug a grave and helped bury the body, and after that the old fellow’s story had come out.

He had been to the moon, he said. And this was a space ship. Wouldn’t tell how it operated, and shut up like a clam when Mac asked if he had gone alone. The young chap had gone with him, it seemed, and the man wouldn’t talk—just sat and stared out at the

yellow mound where the youngster was buried.

Mac had told Blake how he argued with the man to prove up on his claims and make a fortune for himself. But no—fortunes didn't interest him. And there were some this-and-that and be-damned-to-'em people who would never get *this* invention—the dirty, thieving rats!

And Mac, while he laughed, had seemed half to believe it. Said the old cuss was so sincere, and he had nothing to sell. And—there was the ship! It never got there without being flown in, that was a cinch. And there wasn't a propellor on it nor a place for one—just open ports where a blast came out, or so the inventor said.

Captain Blake swung his ship on another slanting line and continued to comb the country for such marks as McGuire had seen. And one moment he told himself he was a fool to be on any such hunt, while the next thought would remind him that Mac had believed. And Mac had a level head, and he had radioed from Venus!

There was the thing that made anything seem possible. Mac had got a message through, across that space, and the enemy had ships that could do it. Why not this one?

And always his eyes were searching, searching, for a level rocky expanse and a tree-filled valley beyond, with something, it might be, shining there, unless the inventor had camouflaged it more carefully now.

It was later on the same day when Captain Blake's blocky figure climbed over the side of the cockpit. Tired? Yes! But who could think of cramped limbs and weary muscles when his plane was resting on a broad, level expanse of rock in the high Sierras and a sharp-cut valley showed thick with pines beyond. He could see the corner only of a rough log shack that protruded.

Blake scrambled over a natural rampart of broken stone and went swiftly toward the cabin. But he stopped abruptly at the sound of a harsh voice.

"Stop where you are," the voice ordered, "and stick up your hands! Then turn around and get back as fast as you can to that plane of yours." There was a glint of sunlight on a rifle barrel in the window of the cabin.

Captain Blake stopped, but he did not turn. "Are you Mr. Winslow?" he asked.

“That’s nothing to you! Get out! Quick!”

Blake was thinking fast. Here was the man, without doubt—and he was hostile as an Apache; the man behind that harsh voice meant business. How could he reach him? The inspiration came at once. McGuire was the key.

“If you’re Winslow,” he called in a steady voice, “you don’t want me to go away; you want to talk with me. There’s a young friend of yours in a bad jam. You are the only one who can help.”

“I haven’t any friends,” said the rasping voice: “I don’t want any! Get out!”

“You had one,” said the captain, “whether you wanted him or not. He believed in you—like the other young chap who went with you to the moon.”

There was an audible gasp of dismay from the window beyond, and the barrel of the rifle made trembling flickerings in the sun.

“You mean the flyer?” asked the voice, and it seemed to have lost its harsher note. “The pleasant young fellow?”

“I mean McGuire, who helped give decent burial to your friend. And

now he has been carried off—out into space—and you can help him. If you've a spark of decency in you, you will hear what I have to say."

The rifle vanished within the cabin; a door opened to frame a picture of a tall man. He was stooped; the years, or solitude, perhaps, had borne heavily upon him; his face was a mat of gray beard that was a continuation of the unkempt hair above. The rifle was still in his hand.

But he motioned to the waiting man, and "Come in!" he commanded. "I'll soon know if you're telling the truth. God help you if you're not…. Come in."

An hour was needed while the bearded man learned the truth. And Blake, too, picked up some facts. He learned to his great surprise that he was talking with an educated man, one who had spent a lifetime in scientific pursuits. And now, as the figure before him seemed more the scientist and less the crazed fabricator of wild fancies, the truth of his claims seemed not so remote.

Half demented now, beyond a doubt! A lifetime of disappointments and one invention after another stolen from him by those who knew more of law than of science. And now he held fortune in the secret of

his ship—a secret which he swore should never be given to the world.

“Damn the world!” he snarled. “Did the world ever give anything to me? And what would they do with this? They would prostitute it to their own selfish ends; it would be just one more means to conquer and kill; and the capitalists would have it in their own dirty hands so that new lines of transportation beyond anything they dared dream would be theirs to exploit.”

Blake, remembering the history of a commercial age, found no ready reply to that. But he told the man of McGuire and the things that had made him captive; he related what he, himself, had seen in the dark night on Mount Lawson, and he told of the fragmentary message that showed McGuire was still alive.

“There’s only one way to save him,” he urged. “If your ship is what you claim it is—and I believe you one hundred per cent—it is all that can save him from what will undoubtedly be a horrible death. Those things were monsters—inhuman!—and they have bombarded the earth. They will come back in less than a year and a half to destroy us.”

Captain Blake would have said he was no debater, but the argument

and persuasion that he used that night would have done credit to a Socrates. His opponent was difficult to convince, and not till the next day did the inventor show Blake his ship.

“Small,” he said as he led the flyer toward it. “Designed just for the moon trip, and I had meant to go alone. But it served; it took us there and back again.”

He threw open a door in the side of the metal cylinder. Blake stood back for only a moment to size up the machine, to observe its smooth duralumin shell and the rounded ends where portholes opened for the expelling of its driving blast. The door opening showed a thick wall that gave insulation. Blake followed the inventor to the interior of the ship.

The man had seen Winslow examining the thick walls. “It’s cold out there, you know,” he said, and smiled in recollection, “but the generator kept us warm.” He pointed to a simple cylindrical casting aft of the ship’s center part. It was massive, and braced to the framework of the ship to distribute a thrust that Blake knew must be tremendous. Heavy conduits took the blast that it produced and poured it from ports at bow and stern. There were other outlets, too, above and below and on the sides, and electric controls that were manipulated from a central board.

“You’ve got a ship,” Blake admitted, “and it’s a beauty. I know construction, and you’ve got it here. But what is the power? How do you drive it? What throws it out through space?”

“Aside from one other, you will be the only man ever to know.” The bearded man was quiet now and earnest. The wild light had faded from his eyes, and he pondered gravely in making the last and final decision.

“Yes, you shall have it. It may be I have been mistaken. I have known people—some few—who were kindly and decent; I have let the others prejudice me. But there was one who was my companion—and there was McGuire, who was kind and who believed. And now you, who will give your life for a friend and to save humanity! … You shall have it. You shall have the ship! But I will not go with you. I want nothing of glory or fame, and I am too old to fight. My remaining years I choose to spend out here.” He pointed where a window of heavy glass showed the outer world and a grave on a sloping hill.

“But you shall have full instructions. And, for the present, you may know that it is a continuous explosion that drives the ship. I have learned to decompose water into its components and split them into subatomic form. They reunite to give something other than matter. It

is a liquid—liquid energy, though the term is inaccurate—that separates out in two forms, and a fluid ounce of each is the product of thousands of tons of water. The potential energy is all there. A current releases it; the energy components reunite to give matter again—hydrogen and oxygen gas. Combustion adds to their volume through heat.

“It is like firing a cannon in there,”—he pointed now to the massive generator—“a super-cannon of tremendous force and a cannon that fires continuously. The endless pressure of expansion gives the thrust that means a constant acceleration of motion out there where gravity is lost.

“You will note,” he added, “that I said ‘constant acceleration.’ It means building up to speeds that are enormous.”

Blake nodded in half-understanding.

“We will want bigger ships,” he mused. “They must mount guns and be heavy enough to take the recoil. This is only a sample; we must design, experiment, build them! Can it be done? … It *must* be done!” he concluded and turned to the inventor.

“We don’t know much about those devils of the stars, and they may

have means of attack beyond anything we can conceive, but there is just one way to learn: go up there and find out, and take a licking if we have to. Now, how about taking me up a mile or so in the air?"

The other smiled in self-deprecation. "I like a good fighter," he said; "I was never one myself. If I had been I would have accomplished more. Yes, you shall go up a mile or so in the air—and a thousand miles beyond." He turned to close the door and seal it fast.

Beside the instrument board he seated himself, and at his touch the generator of the ship came startlingly to life. It grumbled softly at first, then the hoarse sound swelled to a thunderous roar, while the metal grating surged up irresistibly beneath the captain's feet. His weight was intolerable. He sank helplessly to the floor….

Blake was white and shaken when he alighted from the ship an hour later, but his eyes were ablaze with excitement. He stopped to seize the tall man by the shoulders.

"I am only a poor devil of a flying man," he said, "but I am speaking for the whole world right now. You have saved us; you've furnished the means. It is up to us now. You've given us the right to hope that humanity can save itself, if humanity will do it. That's my next job—to convince them. We have less than a year and a half…."

There was one precious week wasted while Captain Blake chafed and waited for a conference to be arranged at Washington. A spirit of hopelessness had swept over the world—hopelessness and a mental sloth that killed every hope with the unanswerable argument: “What is the use? It is the end.” But a meeting was arranged at Colonel Boynton’s insistence, though his superiors scoffed at what he dared suggest.

Blake appeared before the meeting, and he told them what he knew—told it to the last detail, while he saw the looks of amusement or commiseration that passed from man to man.

There were scientists there who asked him coldly a question or two and shrugged a supercilious shoulder; ranking officers of both army and navy who openly excoriated Colonel Boynton for bringing them to hear the wild tale of a half-demented man. It was this that drove Blake to a cold frenzy.

The weeks of hopeless despair had worn his nerves to the breaking point, and now, with so much to be done, and so little time in which to do it, all requirements of official etiquette were swept aside as he leaped to his feet to face the unbelieving men.

“Damn it!” he shouted, “will you sit here now and quibble over what

you think in your wisdom is possible or not. Get outside those doors—there's an open park beyond—and I'll knock your technicalities all to hell!"

The door slammed behind him before the words could be spoken to place him under arrest, and he tore across a velvet lawn to leap into a taxi.

There was a rising storm of indignant protest within the room that he had left. There were admirals, purple of face, who made heated remarks about the lack of discipline in the army, and generals who turned accusingly where the big figure of Colonel Boynton was still seated.

It was the Secretary of War who stilled the tumult and claimed the privilege of administering the rebuke which was so plainly needed. "Colonel Boynton," he said, and there was no effort to soften the cutting edge of sarcasm in his voice, "it was at your request and suggestion that this outrageous meeting was held. Have you any more requests or suggestions?"

The colonel rose slowly to his feet.

"Yes, Mr. Secretary," he said coldly, "I have. I know Captain Blake.

He seldom makes promises; when he does he makes good. My suggestion is that you do what the gentleman said—step outside and see your technicalities knocked to hell." He moved unhurriedly toward the door.

It was a half-hour's wait, and one or two of the more openly skeptical had left when the first roar came faintly from above. Colonel Boynton led the others to the open ground before the building. "I have always found Blake a man of his word," he said quietly, and pointed upward where a tiny speck was falling from a cloud-flecked sky.

Captain Blake had had little training in the operation of the ship, but he had flown it across the land and had concealed it where fellow officers were sworn to secrecy. And he felt that he knew how to handle the controls.

But the drop from those terrible heights was a fearful thing, and it ended only a hundred feet above the heads of the cowering, shouting humans who crouched under the thunderous blast, where a great shell checked its vertical flight and rebounded to the skies.

Again and again the gleaming cylinder drove at them like a projectile from the mortars of the gods, and it roared and thundered

through the air or turned to vanish with incredible speed straight up into the heights, to return and fall again … until finally it hung motionless a foot above the grass from which the uniformed figures had fled. Only Colonel Boynton was there to greet the flyer as he laid his strange craft gently down.

“Nice little show, Captain,” he said, while his broad face broke into the widest of grins. “A damn nice little show! But take that look off of your face. They’ll listen to you now; they’ll eat right out of your hand.”

Chapter 15

If Lieutenant McGuire could have erased from his mind the thought of the threat that hung over the earth he would have found nothing but intensest pleasure in the experiences that were his.

But night after night they had heard the reverberating echoes of the giant gun speeding its messenger of death toward the earth, and he saw as plainly as if he were there the terrible destruction that must come where the missiles struck. Gas, of course; that seemed the chief and only weapon of these monsters, and Djorn, the elected leader of the Venus folk, confirmed him in this surmise.

“We had many gases,” he told McGuire, “but we used them for good ends. You people of Earth—or these invaders, if they conquer Earth—must some day engage in a war more terrible than wars between men. The insects are your greatest foe. With a developing civilization goes the multiplication of insect and bacterial life. We used the gases for that war, and we made this world a heaven.” He sighed regretfully for his lost world.

“These red ones found them, and our factories for making them. But they have no gift for working out or mastering the other means we had for our defense—the electronic projectors, the creation of

tremendous magnetic fields: you saw one when we destroyed the attacking ships. Our scientists had gone far—"

"I wish to Heaven you had some of them to use now," said the lieutenant savagely, and the girl, Althora, standing near, smiled in sympathy for the flyer's distress. But her brother, Djorn, only murmured: "The lust to kill: that is something to be overcome."

The fatalistic resignation of these folk was disturbing to a man of action like McGuire. His eyes narrowed, and his lips were set for an abrupt retort when Althora intervened.

"Come," she said, and took the flyer's hand. "It is time for food."

She took him to the living quarters occupied by her brother and herself, where opal walls and jewelled inlays were made lovely by the soft light that flooded the rooms.

"Just one tablet," she said, and brought him a thin white disc, "then plenty of water. You must take this compressed food often and in small quantities till your system is accustomed."

"You make this?" he asked.

"But certainly. Our chemists are learned men. We should lack for

food, otherwise, here in our underground home."

He let the tablet dissolve in his mouth. Althora leaned forward to touch his hand gently.

"I am sorry," she said, "that you and Djorn fail to understand one another. He is good—so good! But you—you, too, are good, and you fear for the safety of your own people."

"They will be killed to the last woman and child," he replied, "or they will be captured, which will be worse."

"I understand," she told him, and pressed his hand; "and if I can help, Lieutenant Mack Guire, I shall be so glad."

He smiled at her stilted pronunciation of his name. He had had the girl for an almost constant companion since his arrival; the sexes, he found, were on a level of mutual freedom, and the girl's companionship was offered and her friendship expressed as openly as might have been that of a youth. Of Sykes he saw little; Professor Sykes was deep in astronomical discussions with the scientists of this world.

But she was charming, this girl of a strange race so like his own. A

skin from the velvet heart of a rose and eyes that looked deep into his and into his mind when he permitted; eyes, too, that could crinkle to ready laughter or grow misty when she sang those weird melodies of such thrilling sweetness.

Only for the remembrance of Earth and the horrible feeling of impotent fury, Lieutenant McGuire would have found much to occupy his thoughts in this loveliest of companions.

He laughed now at the sounding of his name, and the girl laughed with him.

“But it *is* your name, is it not?” she asked.

“Lieutenant Thomas McGuire,” he repeated, “and those who like me call me ‘Mac.’”

“Mac,” she repeated. “But that is so short and hard sounding. And what do those who love you say?”

The flyer grinned cheerfully. “There aren’t many who could qualify in that respect, but if there were they would call me Tommy.”

“That is better,” said Althora with engaging directness; “that is much better—Tommy.” Then she sprang to her feet and hurried him out

where some further wonders must be seen and exclaimed over without delay. But Lieutenant McGuire saw the pink flush that crept into her face, and his own heart responded to the telltale betrayal of her feeling for him. For never in his young and eventful life had the man found anyone who seemed so entirely one with himself as did this lovely girl from a distant star.

He followed where she went dancing on her way, but not for long could his mind be led away from the menace he could not forget. And on this day, as on many days to come, he struggled and racked his brain to find some way in which he could thwart the enemy and avert or delay their stroke.

It was another day, and they were some months on their long journey away from the earth when an inspiration came. Althora had offered to help, and he knew well how gladly she would aid him; the feeling between them had flowered into open, if unspoken love. Not that he would subject her to any danger—he himself would take all of that when it came—but meanwhile—

“Althora,” he asked her, “can you project your mind into that of one of the reds?”

“I could, easily,” she replied, “but it would not be pleasant. Their

minds are horrible; they reek of evil things." She shuddered at the thought, but the man persisted.

"But if you could help, would you be willing? I can do so little; I can never stop them; but I may save my people from some suffering at least. Here is my idea:

"Djorn tells me that I had it figured right: they plan an invasion of the earth when next the two planets approach. He has told me of their armies and their fleets of ships that will set off into space. I can't prevent it; I am helpless! But if I knew what their leader was thinking—"

"Torg!" she exclaimed. "You want to know the mind of that beast of beasts!"

"Yes," said the man. "It might be of value. Particularly if I could know something of their great gun—where it is and what it is—well, I might do something about that."

The girl averted her eyes from the savage determination on his face. "No—no!" she exclaimed; "I could not. Not Torg!"

McGuire's own face fell at the realization of the enormity of this

favor he had demanded. “That’s all right,” he said and held her soft hand in his; “just forget it. I shouldn’t have asked.”

But she whispered as she turned to walk away: “I must think, I must think. You ask much of me, Tommy; but oh, Tommy, I would do much for you!” She was sobbing softly as she ran swiftly away.

And the man in khaki—this flyer of a distant air-service—strode blindly off to rage and fume at his helplessness and his inability to strike one blow at those beings who lived in that world above.

There were countless rooms and passages where the work of the world below went on. There were men and women whose artistic ability found outlet in carvings and sculpture, chemists and others whose work was the making of foods and endless experimentation, some thousand of men and women in the strength of their endless youth, who worked for the love of the doing and lived contentedly and happily while they waited for the day of their liberation. But of fighters there were none, and for this Lieutenant McGuire grieved wholeheartedly.

He was striding swiftly along where a corridor ended in blackness ahead. There was a gleaming machine on the floor beside him when a hand clutched at his arm and a warning voice exclaimed: “No

further, Lieutenant McGuire; you must not go!”

“Why?” questioned the lieutenant. “I’ve got to walk—do something to keep from this damnable futile thinking.”

“But not there,” said the other; “it is a place of death. Ten paces more and you would have vanished in a flicker of flame. The projector”—he touched the mechanism beside them—“is always on. Our caves extend in an endless succession; they join with the labyrinth where the red ones used to live. They could attack us but for this. Nothing can live in its invisible ray; they are placed at all such entrances.”

“Yet Djorn,” McGuire told himself slowly, “said they had no weapons. He knows nothing of war. But, great heavens! what wouldn’t I give for a regiment of scrappers—good husky boys with their faces tanned and a spark in their eyes and their gas masks on their chests. With a regiment, and equipment like this—”

And again he realized the futility of armament with none to serve and direct it.

It was a month or more before Althora consented to the tests. Djorn advised against it and made his protest emphatic, but here, as in all

things, Althora was a free agent. It was her right to do as she saw fit, and there was none to prevent in this small world where individual liberty was unquestioned.

And it was still longer before she could get anything of importance. The experiments were racking to her nerves, and McGuire, seeing the terrible strain upon her, begged her to stop. But Althora had gained the vision that was always before her loved one's eyes—a world of death and disaster—and he, here where the bolt would be launched, and powerless to prevent. She could not be dissuaded now.

It was a proud day for Althora when she sent for McGuire, and he found her lying at rest, eyes closed in her young face that was lined and tortured with the mental horror she was contacting. She silenced his protests with a word.

"The gun," she whispered; "they are talking about the gun … and the bombardment … planning…."

More silent concentration. Then:

"The island of Bergo," she said, "—remember that! The gun is there … a great bore in the earth … solid rock … but the casing of titanite must be reinforced … and bands shrunk about the muzzle that

projects … heavy bands … it shows signs of distortion—the heat! …”

She was listening to the thoughts, and selecting those that bore upon gun.

“… Only fifty days … the bombardment must begin … Tahnor has provided a hundred shells; two thousand tals of the green gas-powder in each one … the explosive charges ready … yes—yes!…”

“Oh!” she exclaimed and opened her troubled eyes. “The beast is so complacent, so sure! And the bombardment will begin in fifty days! Will it really cause them anguish on your Earth, Tommy?”

“Just plain hell; that’s all!”

McGuire’s voice was low; his mind was reaching out to find and reject one plan after another. The gun!… He must disable it; he could do that much at least. For himself—well, what of it?—he would die, of course.

The guard he had been taught to place about his own thoughts must have relaxed, for Althora cried out in distress.

“No—no!” she protested; “you shall not! I have tried to help you,

Tommy dear—say that I have helped you!—but, oh, my beloved, do not go. Do not risk your life to silence this one weapon. They would still have their ships. Remember what Djorn has told of their mighty fleets, their thousands of fighting men. You cannot stop them; you can hardly hinder them. And you would throw away your life! Oh, please do not go!"

McGuire was seated beside her. His face was hidden in one hand while the other was held tight between the white palms of Althora's tense hands. He said nothing, and he shielded his eyes and locked his mind against her thought force.

"Tommy," said Althora, and now her voice was all love and softness, "Tommy, my dear one! You will not go, for what can you do? And if you stay—oh, my dear!—you can have what you will—the secret of life shall be yours—to live forever in perpetual youth. You may have that. And me, Tommy…. Would you throw your life away in a hopeless attempt, when life might hold so much? Am I offering so little, Tommy?"

And still the silence and the hand that kept the eyes from meeting hers; then a long-drawn breath and a slim figure in khaki that stood unconsciously erect to look, not at the girl, but out beyond the solid walls, through millions of miles of space, to the helpless speck called

Earth.

“You offer me heaven, my dear,” he spoke softly. “But sometimes”—and his lips twisted into a ghost of a smile —“sometimes, to earn our heaven, we have to fight like hell. And, if we fail to make the fight, what heaven worth having is left?

“And the people,” he said softly; “the homes in the cities and towns and villages. My dear, that’s part of loving a soldier: you can never own him altogether; his allegiance is divided. And if I failed my own folk what right would I have to you?”

He dared to look at the girl who lay before him. That other vision was gone but he had seen a clear course charted, and now, with his mind at rest, he could smile happily at the girl who was looking up at him through her tears.

She rose slowly to her feet and stood before him to lay firm hands upon his shoulders. She was almost as tall as he, and her eyes, that had shaken off their tears but for a dewy fringe, looked deep and straight into his.

“We have thought,” she said slowly, “we people of this world, that we were superior to you and yours; we have accepted you as

someone a shade below our plane of advancement. Yes, we have dared to believe that. But I know better. We have gone far, Tommy, we people of this star; we have lived long. Yet I am wondering if we have lost some virtues that are the heritage of a sterner race.

“But I am learning, Tommy; I am so thankful that I can learn and that I have had you to teach me. We will go together, you and I. We will fight our fight, and, the Great One willing, we will earn our heaven or find it elsewhere—together.”

She leaned forward to kiss the tall man squarely upon the lips with her own soft rose-petal lips that clung and clung … and the reply of Lieutenant McGuire, while it was entirely wordless, seemed eminently satisfactory.

Althora, the beautiful daughter of Venus, had the charm and allure of her planet’s fabled namesake. But she thought like a man and she planned like a man. And there was no dissuading her from her course. She was to fight beside McGuire—that was her intention—and beyond that there was no value in argument. McGuire was forced to accept the insistent aid, and he needed help.

Sykes dropped his delving into astronomical lore and answered to the call, but there was no other assistance. Only the three, McGuire,

Althora and Sykes. There were some who would agree to pilot the submarine that was being outfitted, but they would have no part in the venture beyond transporting the participants.

More than once McGuire paused to curse silently at the complaisance of this people. What could he not do if they would help. Ten companies of trained men, armed with their deadly electronic projectors that disintegrated any living thing they reached —and he would clutch at his tousled hair and realize that they were only three, and go grimly back to work.

“I don’t know what we can do till we get there,” he told Sykes. “Here we are, and there is the gun: that is all we know, except that the thing must be tremendous and our only hope is that there is some firing mechanism that we can destroy. The gun itself is a great drilling in the solid rock, lined with one of their steel alloys, and with a big barrel extending up into the air: Althora has learned that.

“They went deep into the rock and set the firing chamber there; it’s heavy enough to stand the stress. They use a gas-powder, as Althora calls it, for the charge, and the same stuff but deadlier is in the shell. But they must have underground workings for loading and firing. Is there a chance for us to get in there, I wonder! There’s the big barrel that projects. We might … but no!—that’s too big for us to tackle,

I’m afraid.”

“How about that electronic projector on the submarine?” Sykes suggested. “Remember how it melted out the heart of that big ship? We could do a lot with that.”

“Not a chance! Djorn and the others have strictly forbidden the men to turn it on the enemy since they have given no offense.

“No offense!” he repeated, and added a few explosive remarks.

“No, it looks like a case of get there and do what dirty work we can to their mechanism before they pot us—and that’s that!”

But Sykes was directing his thoughts along another path.

“I wonder …” he mused; “it might be done: they have laboratories.”

“What are you talking about? For the love of heaven, man, if you’re got an idea, let’s have it. I’m desperate.”

“Nitrators!” said the scientist. “I have been getting on pretty good terms with the scientific crowd here, and I’ve seen some mighty pretty manufacturing laboratories. And they have equipment that was never meant for the manufacture of nitro-explosives, but, with a few

modifications—yes, I think it could be done.”

“You mean nitro-glycerine? TNT?”

“Something like that. Depends upon what materials we can get to start with.”

The lieutenant was pounding his companion upon the back and shouting his joy at this faintest echo of encouragement.

“We’ll plant it alongside the gun—No, we’ll get into their working underground. We’ll blow their equipment into scrap-iron, and perhaps we can even damage the gun itself!” He was almost beside himself with excitement at thought of a weapon being placed in his straining helpless hands.

It was the earth-shaking thunder of the big gun that hastened their final preparations and made McGuire tremble with suppressed excitement where he helped Sykes to draw off a syrupy liquid into heavy crystal flasks.

There were many of these, and the two men would allow no others to touch them, but stored them themselves and nested each one in a soft bed within the submarine. Then one last repetition of their half-

formed plans to Djorn and his followers and a rush toward the wharf where the submarine was waiting.

Althora was waiting, too, and McGuire wasted minutes in a petition that he knew was futile.

“Wait here, Althora,” he begged. “I will come back; this is no venture for you to undertake. I can take my chances with them, but you—! It is no place for you,” he concluded lamely.

“There is no other place for me,” she said; “only where you are.” And she led the way while the others followed into the lighted control room of the big under-water craft.

McGuire’s eyes were misty with a blurring of tears that were partly from excitement, but more from a feeling of helpless remonstrance that was mingled with pure pride. And his lips were set in a straight line.

The magnetic pull that held them to their anchorage was reversed; the ship beneath them was slipping smoothly beneath the surface and out to sea, guided through its tortuous windings of water-worn caves and rocky chambers under the sea by the invisible electric cords that drew it where they would.

And ahead on some mysterious island was a gun, a thing of size and power beyond anything of Earth. He was going to spike that gun if it was the last act of his life; and Althora was going with him. He drew her slim body to him, while his eyes stared blindly, hopefully, toward what the future held.

Chapter 16

Throughout the night they drove hour after hour at terrific speed. The ship was running submerged, for McGuire was taking no slightest chance of their being observed from the air. He and the others slept at times, for the crew that handled the craft very evidently knew the exact course, and there were mechanical devices that insured their safety. A ray was projected continuously ahead of them; it would reflect back and give on an indicator instant warning of any derelict or obstruction. Another row of quivering needles gave by the same method the soundings from far ahead.

But the uncertainty of what their tomorrow might hold and the worry and dread lest he find himself unable to damage the big gun made real rest impossible for McGuire.

But he was happy and buoyant with hope when, at last, the green light from the ports showed that the sun was shining up above, and the slackening drive of the submarine's powerful motors told that their objective was in sight.

They lay quietly at last while a periscope of super-sensitiveness was thrust cautiously above the water. It brought in a panoramic view of the shoreline ahead, amplified it and projected the picture in clear-

cut detail upon a screen. If Lieutenant McGuire had stood on the wet deck above and looked directly at the island the sight could have been no clearer. The colors of torn and blasted tree-growths showed in all their pale shades, and there was stereoscopic depth to the picture that gave no misleading illusions as to distance.

The shore was there with the white spray of breakers on a rocky shoal, and a beach beyond. And beyond that, in hard outline against a golden sky, was a gigantic tube that stood vertically in air to reach beyond the upper limits of the periscope's vision.

McGuire tingled at the sight. To be within reach of this weapon that had sent those blasting, devastating missiles upon the earth! He paced back and forth in the small room to stop and stare again, and resume his pacing that helped to while away the hours they must wait. For there were man-shapes swarming over the land, and the dull, blood-red of their loose uniforms marked them as members of the fighting force spawned by this prolific breed.

"Not a chance until they're out of the picture," said the impatient man; "they would snow us under. It's just as I thought: we must wait until the gun is ready to fire; then they will beat it. They won't want to be around when that big boy cuts loose."

“And then?” asked Althora.

“Then Sykes and I will take our collection of gallon flasks ashore, and I sure hope we don’t stumble.” He grinned cheerfully at the girl.

“That reinforced concrete dome seems to be where they get down into the ground; it is close to the base of the gun. We will go there—blow it open if we have to—but manage in some way to get down below. Then a time-fuse on the charge, and the boat will take me off, and we will leave as fast as these motors can drive us.”

He omitted to mention any possible danger to Sykes and himself in the handling of their own explosive, and he added casually, “You will stay here and see that there is no slip-up on the getaway.”

He had to translate the last remark into language the girl could understand. But Althora shook her head.

“You do try so hard to get rid of me, Tommy,” the laughed, “but it is no use. I am going with you—do not argue—and I will help you with the attack. Three will work faster than two—and I am going.”

McGuire was silent, then nodded his assent. He was learning, this Earth-man, what individual freedom really meant.

Only the western sky showed golden masses on the shining screen when McGuire spoke softly to the captain:

“Your men will put us ashore; you may ask them to stand by now.” And to Professor Sykes, “Better get that ‘soup’ of yours ready to load.”

The red-clad figures were growing dim on the screen, and the blotches of colors that showed where they were grouped were few. Some there were who left such groups to flee precipitately toward a waiting airship.

This was something the lieutenant had not foreseen. He had expected that the force that served the gun would have some shock-proof shelter; he had not anticipated a fighting ship to take them away.

“That’s good,” he exulted; “that is a lucky break. If they just get out of sight we will have the place to ourselves.”

There were no red patches on the screen now, and the picture thrown before them showed the big ship, its markings of red and white distinct even in the shadow-light of late afternoon, rising slowly into the air. It gathered speed marvelously and vanished to a speck beyond the land.

“We’re getting the breaks,” said McGuire crisply. “All right—let’s go!”

The submarine rose smoothly, and the sealed doors in the superstructure were opened while yet there was water to come trickling in. Men came with a roll of cloth that spread open to the shape of a small boat, while a metal frame expanded within it to hold it taut.

McGuire gasped with dismay as a seaman launched it and leaped heavily into the frail shell to attach a motor to one end.

“Metal!” the captain reassured him; “woven metal, and water-tight! You could not pierce it with anything less than a projector.”

Sykes was ready with one of the crystal flasks as the boat was brought alongside, and McGuire followed with another. They took ten of the harmless-looking containers, and both men held their breaths as the boat grounded roughly on the boulder-strewn shore.

They lifted them out and bedded them in the sand, then returned to the submarine. This time Althora, too, stepped into the boat. They loaded in the balance of the containers; the motor purred. Another landing, and they stood at last on the island, where a mammoth tube

towered into the sky and the means for its destruction was at their feet.

But there was little time; already the light was dimming, and the time for the firing of the big weapon was drawing near. The men worked like mad to carry the flasks to the base of the gun, where a dome of concrete marked the entrance to the rooms below.

Each man held a flask of the deadly fluid when Althora led the way where stairs went deep down into the earth under the domed roof. This part of the work had been foreseen, and the girl held a slender cylinder that threw a beam of light, intensely bright.

They found a surprising simplicity in the arrangements underground. Two rooms only had been carved from the solid rock, and one of these ended in a wall of gray metal that could be only the great base of the gun. But nowhere was a complication of mechanism that might be damaged or destroyed, nor any wiring or firing device.

A round door showed sharp edges in the gray metal, but only the strength of many men could have removed its huge bolts, and these two knew there must be other doors to seal in the mighty charge.

“Not a wire!” the scientist exclaimed. “How do they fire it?” The

answer came to him with the question.

“Radio, of course; and the receiving set is in the charge itself; the barrel of the gun is its own antenna. They must fire it from a distance —back on the island where we were, perhaps. It would need to be accurately timed.”

“Come on!” shouted McGuire, and raised the flask of explosive to his shoulder.

Each one knew the need for haste; each waited every moment for the terrible blast of gun-fire that would jar their bodies to a lifeless pulp or, by detonating their own explosive, destroy them utterly. But they carried the flasks again to the top, and the three of them worked breathlessly to place their whole supply where McGuire directed.

The massive barrel of the gun was beside them; it was held in tremendous castings of metal that bolted to anchorage in the ground. One great brace had an overhanging flange; the explosive was placed beneath it.

Professor Sykes had come prepared. He attached a detonator to one of the flasks, and while the other two were placing the explosive in position he fastened two wires to the apparatus with steady but

hurrying fingers; then at full speed he ran with the spool from which the wires unwound.

McGuire and Althora were behind him, running for the questionable safety of the sand-hills. Sykes stopped in the shelter of a tiny valley where winds had heaped the sand.

“Down!” he shouted. “Get down—behind that sand dune, there!”

He dropped beside them, the bared ends of the wires in his hands. There was a battery, too, a case no larger than his hands. Professor Sykes, it appeared, had gained some few concessions from his friends, who had learned to respect him in the field of science.

One breathless moment he waited; then—

“Now!” he whispered, and touched the battery’s terminals with the bare wires.

To McGuire it seemed, in that instant of shattering chaos, that the great gun itself must have fired. He had known the jar of heavy artillery at close range; he had had experience with explosives. He had even been near when a government arsenal had thrown the countryside into a hell of jarring, ear-splitting pandemonium. But the

concussion that shook the earth under him now was like nothing he had known.

The hill of sand that sheltered them vanished to sweep in a sheet above their heads. And the air struck down with terrific weight, then left them in an airless void that seemed to make their bodies swell and explode. It rushed back in a whirling gale to sweep showers of sand and pebbles over the helpless forms of the three who lay battered and stunned.

An instant that was like an age; then the scientist pointed with a weak and trembling hand where a towering spire of metallic gray leaned slowly in the air. So slowly it moved, to the eyes of the watchers—a great arc of gathering force and speed that shattered the ground where it struck.

“The gun!” was all that the still-dazed lieutenant could say. “The—the gun!” And he fell to shivering uncontrollably, while tears of pure happiness streamed down his face.

The mammoth siege gun—the only weapon for bombardment of the helpless Earth—was a mass of useless metal, a futile thing that lay twisted and battered on the sands of the sea.

The submarine now showed at a distance; it had withdrawn, by prearrangement, to the shelter of the deeper water. McGuire looked carefully at the watch on his wrist, and listened to make certain that the explosion had not stopped it. Sykes had told him the length of the Venusian day—twenty hours and nineteen minutes of Earth time, and he had made his calculations from the day of the Venusians. And, morning and night, McGuire had set his watch back and had learned to make a rough approximation of the time of that world.

The watch now said five-thirteen, and the sun was almost gone; a line of gold in the western sky; and McGuire knew that it was a matter only of minutes till the blast of the big gun would rock the island. One heavy section of the great barrel was resting upon the shattered base, and McGuire realized that this blocking of the monster's throat must mean it would tear itself and the island around it to fragments when it fired. He ran toward the beach and waved his arms wildly in air to urge on the speeding craft that showed dim and vague across the heaving sea.

It drove swiftly toward them and stopped for the launching of the little boat. There was a delay, and McGuire stood quivering with impatience where the others, too, watched the huddle of figures on the submarine's deck.

It was Althora who first sensed their danger. Her voice was shrill with terror as she seized McGuire's arm and pointed landward.

"Tommy—Tommy!" she said. "They are coming! I saw them!"

A swarming of red figures over the nearby dunes gave quick confirmation of her words. McGuire looked about him for a weapon—anything to add efficiency to his bare hands—and the swarm was upon them as he looked.

He leaped quickly between Althora and the nearest figures that stretched out grasping hands, and a red face went white under the smashing impact of the flyer's fist.

They poured over the sand-hills now—-scores of leaping man-shapes—and McGuire knew in an instant of self-accusation that there had been a shelter after all, where a portion of the enemy force had stayed. The explosion had brought them, and now—

He struck in a raging frenzy at the grotesque things that came racing upon them. He knew Sykes was fighting too. He tore wildly at the lean arms that bound him and kept him from those a step or two away who were throwing the figure of a girl across the shoulders of one of their men, while her eyes turned hopelessly toward McGuire.

They threw the two men upon the sand and crowded to kneel on the prostrate bodies and strike and tear with their long hands, then tied them at ankles and wrists with metal cords, and raised them helpless and bound in the air.

One of the red creatures pointed a long arm toward the demolished gun and shrieked something in a terror-filled tone. The others, at the sound, raced off through the sand, while those with the burden of the three captives followed as best they could.

“The gun!” said Professor Sykes in a thick voice: the words were jolted out of him as the two who carried him staggered and ran. “They know—that it—hasn’t—gone off—”

The straggling troop that strung out across the dim-lit dunes was approaching another domed shelter of heavy concrete. They crowded inside, and the bodies of the three were thrown roughly to the floor, while the red creatures made desperate haste to close the heavy door. Then down they went into the deeper safety of a subterranean room, where the massive walls about them quivered to a nerve-deadening jar. It shook those standing to the floor, and the silence that followed was changed to a bedlam by the inhuman shrieking of the creatures who were gloating over their safety and the capture they had achieved. They leaped and capered in a maniacal outburst and

ceased only at the shrill order of one who was in command.

At his direction the three were carried out of doors and thrown upon the ground. McGuire turned his head to see the face of Althora. There was blood trickling from a cut on her temple, and her eyes were dazed and blurred, but she managed a trembling smile for the anxious eyes of the man who could only struggle hopelessly against the thin wires that held him.

Althora hurt! Bound with those cutting metal cords! Althora—in such beastly hands! He groaned aloud at the thought.

“You should never have come; I should never have let you. I have got you into this!” He groaned again in an agony of self-reproach, then lay silent and waited for what must come. And the answer to his speculations came from the night above, where the lights of a ship marked the approach of an enemy craft.

The ships of the red race could travel fast, as McGuire knew, but the air monster whose shining, pointed beak hung above them where they lay helpless in the torturing bonds of fine wire, was to give him a new conception of speed.

It shot to the five thousand-foot level, when the captives were safe

aboard, and the dark air shrieked like a tortured animal where the steel shell tore it to tatters. And the radio, in an adjoining room, never ceased in its sputtering, changing song.

The destruction of the Earth-bombarding gun! The capture of the two Earth-men who had dared to fight back! And a captive woman of the dreaded race of true Venusians! There was excitement and news enough for one world. And the discordant singing of the radio was sounding in the ears of the leaders of that world.

They were waiting on the platform in the great hall where Sykes and McGuire had stood, and their basilisk eyes glared unwinkingly down at the three who were thrown at their feet.

The leader of them all, Torg himself, arose from his ornate throne and strode forward for a closer view of the trophies his huntsmen had brought in. A whistled word from him and the wires that had bound Althora's slim ankles were cut, while a red-robed warrior dragged her roughly to her feet to stand trembling and swaying as the blood shot cruelly through her cramped limbs.

Torg's eyes to McGuire were those of a devil feasting on human flesh, as he stared appraisingly and gloatingly at the girl who tried vainly to return the look without flinching. He spoke for a moment

in a harsh tone, and the seated councilors echoed his weird notes approvingly.

“What does he say?” McGuire implored, though he knew there could be nothing of good in that abominable voice. “What does he say, Althora?”

The face that turned slowly to him was drained of the last vestige of color. “I—do not—know,” she said in a whisper scarcely audible; “but he thinks—terrible things!”

She seemed speaking of some nightmare vision as she added haltingly, “There is a fleet of many ships, and Torg is in command. He has thousands of men, and he goes forth to conquer your Earth. He goes there to rule.” She had to struggle to bring the words to her lips now. “And—he takes me—with—him!”

“No—no!” the flyer protested, and he struggled insanely to free his hands from the wires that cut the deeper into his flesh. The voice of Althora, clear and strong now, brought him back.

“I shall never go, Tommy; never! The gift of eternal life is mine, but it is mine to keep only if I will. But, for you and your friend—” She tried to raise her hands to her trembling lips.

“Yes,” said Lieutenant McGuire quietly, “for us—?”

But there were some things the soft lips of Althora refused to say. Again she tried vainly to raise her hands, then turned her white, stricken face that a loved one might not see the tears that were mingling with the blood-stains on her cheeks, nor read in her eyes the horror they beheld.

But she found one crumb of comfort for the two doomed men.

“You will live till the sailing of the ships, Tommy,” she choked, “and then—we will go together, Tommy—you and I.”

Her head was bowed and her shoulders shaking, but she raised her head proudly erect as she was seized by a guard whose blood-red hands forced her from the room.

And the dry, straining eyes of Lieutenant McGuire, that watched her going, saw the passing to an unknown fate of all he held dear, and the end of his unspoken dreams.

He scarcely felt the grip of the hands that seized him, nor knew when he and Sykes were carried from the room where Torg, the Emperor, held his savage court. The stone walls of the room where

they were thrown could not hold his eyes; they looked through and beyond to see only the white and piteous face of a girl whose lips were whispering: “We will go together, Tommy—you and I.”

Chapter 17

The little ship that Captain Blake had thrown with reckless speed through the skies over Washington, D. C., made history that day in the records of the earth. None, now, could doubt that here, at last, was the answer that the world had hoped for until hope had died. Unbelievable in its field of action, incredible in its wild speed, but real, nevertheless!—the countries of the earth were frantic in their acclaim. Only the men who formed the International Board of Defense failed to join in the enthusiasm. They sat by day and night in earnest conference on ways and means.

From Earth and sub-Venus converge a titanic offensive of justice on the unspeakable man-things of Torg.

This little ship—so wonderful, and so inadequate! It was only a promise of what might come. There must be new designs made; men must learn to dream in new terms and set down their dreams in cold lines and figures on drafting boards. A cruiser of space must be designed, to mount heavy guns, carry great loads, absorb the stresses that must come to such a structure in flight and in battle. And above all, it must take the thrust of this driving force—new and tremendous—of which men knew so little as yet. And then many like it must be built.

The fuel must be prepared, and this, alone, meant new and different machinery, which itself must be designed before the manufacturing process could begin.

There was work to be done—a world of work!—and so few months in which to do it. The attack from the distant gun had long since ceased and the instruments of the astronomers showed the enemy planet shrinking far off in space. But it would return; there was only a year for preparation.

Captain Blake was assigned to the direction of design. An entire office building in Washington was vacated for his use, and in a few hours he rallied a staff of assistants who demanded the entire use of a telephone system that spread countrywide. And the call went out that would bring the best brains of the land to the task before them.

The windows of the building shone brightly throughout the nights when the call was answered, and engineers and draftsmen worked at fever heat on thrusts and stresses and involved mathematical calculations. And, while owners of great manufacturing plants waited with unaccustomed patience for a moment's talk with Blake, the white sheets on the drafting boards showed growing pictures of braces and struts and curved plates, of castings for gun mounts, and ammunition hoists. And the manufacturers were told in no uncertain

terms exactly what part of this experimental ship they would produce, and when it must be delivered.

"If only we dared go into production," said Blake; "but it is out of the question. This first ship must demonstrate its efficiency; we must get the 'bugs' out of our design; correct our errors and be ready with a production schedule that will work with precision."

Only one phase of this proposed production troubled him; the manufacture must be handled all over the world. He talked with men from England and France, from Germany and Italy and a host of other lands, and he raged inwardly while he tried to drive home to them the necessity for handling the work in just one way—his way—if results were to be achieved.

The men of business he could convince, but his chief disquiet came from those whose thoughts were of what they termed "statesmanship," and who seemed more apprehensive of the power that this new weapon would give the United States of America than they were of the threat from distant worlds.

From his friends in high quarters came hints of the same friction, but he knew that the one demand Winslow had laid down was being observed: the secret of the mysterious fuel would remain with us.

Winslow had shown little confidence in the countries of the old world, and he had sworn Blake to an agreement that his strange liquids—that new form of matter and substance—should remain with this country.

And swiftly the paper ship grew. The parts were in manufacture, and arriving at the assembly plant in Ohio. Blake's time was spent there now, and he caught only snatches of sleep on a cot in his office, while he worked with the forces of men who succeeded each other to keep the assembly room going night and day.

There was an enormous hangar that was designed for the assembling of a giant dirigible; it housed another ship now. Hardly a ship, yet it began to take form where great girders held the keel that was laid, and duralumin plates and strong castings were bolted home.

A thousand new problems, and innumerable vexing errors—the "bugs" that inhere with a new, mechanical job—yet the day came when the ship was a thing of sleek beauty, and her thousand feet of length enclosed a maze of latticed struts where ammunition rooms and sleeping quarters, a chart room and control stations were cleverly interspaced. And above, where the great shape towered high in the big hangar, were the lean snouts of cannon, and recesses that held rapid-fire guns and whole batteries of machine guns for close

range.

Rows of great storage batteries were installed, to furnish the first current for the starting of the ship, till her dynamos that were driven by the exhaust blast itself could go into action and carry on. And then—

An armored truck that ground slowly up under heavy guard to deliver two small flasks of liquid whose tremendous weight must be held in containers of thick steel, and be hoisted with cranes to their resting place within the ship. And Captain Blake, with his heart in his throat through fear of some failure, some slip in their plans—Captain Blake, of the gaunt, worn frame, and face haggard from sleepless nights—stood quietly at a control board while the great doors of the hangar swung open.

At the closing of a switch the current from the batteries flowed through the two liquids, to go on in conductors of heavy copper to a generator that was heavy and squat and devoid of moving parts. Within it were electrodes that were castings of copper, and between them the miracle of regenerated matter was taking place.

What came to them as energy from the cables was transformed to a tangible thing—a vast bulk of gas, of hydrogen and oxygen that had

once been water, and the pressure of the gas made a roaring inferno of the exhausts. A spark plug ignited it, and the heat of combustion added pressure to pressure, while the quivering, invisible live steam poured forth to change to vaporous clouds that filled the hangar.

The man at the control board stood trembling with knowledge of the power he had unleashed. He moved a lever to crack open a valve, and the clouds poured now from beneath the ship, that raised slowly and smoothly in the air. It hung quietly poised, while the hands that directed it sent a roaring blast from the great stern exhaust, and the creation of many minds became a thing of life that moved slowly, gliding out into the sunlight of the world.

The cheers of crowding men, insane with hysterical emotion at sight of their work's fulfillment, were lost in the thunder of the ship. The blunt bow lifted where the sun made dazzling brilliance of her sweeping curves, and with a blast that thundered from her stern the first unit of the space forces of the Earth swept upward in an arc of speed that ended in invisibility. No enveloping air could hold her now; she was launched in the ocean of space that would be her home.

Captain Blake, the following day, sat in Washington before a desk piled high with telegrams of congratulation. His tired face was

smiling as he replaced a telephone receiver that had spoken words of confidence and commendation from the President of the United States. But he pushed the mass of yellow papers aside to resume his examination of a well-thumbed folder marked: "Production Schedule." The real work was yet to be done.

It was only two short months later that he sat before the same desk, with a face that showed no mark of smiles in its haggard lines.

His ship was a success, and was flying continuously, while men of the air service were trained in its manipulation and gunners received practice in three-dimensioned range finding and cruiser practice in the air. Above, in the airless space, they learned to operate the guns that were controlled from within the air-tight rooms. They were learning, and the ship performed the miracles that were now taken as matters of fact.

But production!

Captain Blake rose wearily to attend a conference at the War Department. He had asked that it be called, and the entire service was represented when he reached there. He went without preamble or explanation to the point.

"Mr. Secretary," he said, and faced the Secretary of War, "I have to report, sir, that we have failed. It is utterly impossible, under present conditions, to produce a fleet of completed ships.

"You know the reason; I have conferred with you often. It was a mistake to depend on foreign aid; they have failed us. I do not criticize them: their ways are their own, and their own problems loom large to them. The English production of parts has come through, or is proceeding satisfactorily, but the rest is in hopeless confusion. The Red menace from Russia is the prime reason, of course. With the Reds mobilizing their forces, we cannot blame her neighbors for preparing to defend themselves. But our program!—and the sure invasion that will come in six short months!—to be fighting among ourselves—it is damnable!"

He paused to stare in wordless misery at the silent gathering before him. Then—

"I have failed," he blurted out. "I have fallen down on the job. It was my responsibility to get the cooperation that insured success. Let me step aside. Is there anyone now who can take up the work and bring order and results from this chaos of futility?"

He waited long for a reply. It was the Secretary of War who

answered in a quiet voice.

"We must not be too harsh," he said, "in our criticism of our foreign friends, but neither should we be unfair to Captain Blake. You do yourself an injustice; there is no one who could have done more than you. The reason is here." He struck at a paper that he held in his hand. "Europe is at war. Russia has struck without warning; her troops are moving and her air force is engaged this minute in an attack upon Paris. It is a traitor country at home that has defeated us in our war with another world."

"I think," he added slowly, "there is nothing more that could have been done: you have made a brave effort. Let us thank you, Captain Blake, while we can. We will fight, when the time comes, as best we can; that goes without saying."

A blue and gold figure arose slowly to speak a word for the navy. "It is evident by Captain Blake's own admission, that the proposed venture must fail. It has been evident to some of us from the start." It was a fighter of the old school who was speaking; his voice was that of one whose vision has dimmed, who sees but the dreams of impractical visionaries in the newer inventions, and whose reliance for safety is placed only in the weapons he knows.

"The naval forces of the United States will be ready," he told them, "and I would ask you to remember that we can still place dependence upon the ships that float in the water, and the forces who have manned them since the history of this country began."

Captain Blake had sprung to his feet. Again he addressed the Secretary for War.

"Mr. Secretary," he said, and there was a fighting glint in his eyes, "I make no reply to this gentleman. His arm of the service will speak for itself as it has always done. But your own words have given me new hope and new energy. I ask you, Mr. Secretary, for another chance. The industrial forces of the United States are behind us to the last man and the last machine. I have talked with them. I know!

"We have only six months left for a prodigious effort. Shall we make it? For the safety of our country and the whole world let us attempt the impossible: go ahead on our own; turn the energy and the mind of this whole country to the problem.

"The great fleet of the world can never be. Shall we build and launch the Great Fleet of the United States, and take upon our own shoulders the burden and responsibility of defense?

"It cannot be done by reasonable standards, but the time is past for reason. Possible or otherwise, we must do it. We will—if you will back me in the effort!"

There was a rising discord of excited voices in the room. Men were leaping to their feet to shake vehement fists in the faces of those who wagged their heads in protest. The Secretary of War arose to still the storm. He turned to walk toward the waiting figure of Captain Blake.

"You can't do it," he said, and gripped the Captain by the hand; "you can't do it—but you may. This country has seen others who have done the impossible when the impossible had to be done. It's your job; the President will confirm my orders. Go to it, Blake!"

Chapter 18

The wires that bound the two men were removed, and McGuire and Sykes worked in agony to bring life back to the hands and feet that were swollen and blue. Then—red guards who forced them to stumble on their numbed legs, where darting pains made them set their lips tight—a car that went swiftly through the darkness of a tube to stop finally in another building—a room with metal walls, one window with a balcony beyond, high above the ground—a door that clanged behind them; and the two men, looking one at the other with dismayed and swollen eyes, knew in their hearts that here, beyond a doubt, was their last earthly habitation.

They said nothing—there was nothing of hope or comfort to be said—and they dropped soddenly upon the hard floor, where finally the heavy breathing and nervous starts of Professor Sykes showed that to him at least had come the blessed oblivion of exhausted sleep. But there was no sleep for Lieutenant McGuire.

There was a face that shone too clearly in the dark, and his thoughts revolved endlessly in words of reproach for his folly in allowing Althora's love to lead her to share his risk. From the night outside their window came a ceaseless clatter and hubbub, but to this he was oblivious.

Only with the coming of morning's soft golden light did McGuire know the reason for the din and activity that echoed from outside—and the reason, too, for their being placed in this room.

Their lives should end with the sailing of the fleet, and there, outside their window, were the ships themselves. Ships everywhere, as far as he could see across the broad level expanse, and an army of men who scurried like ants—red ones, who worked or directed the others, and countless blues and yellows who were loading the craft with enormous cargoes.

"Squawk, damn you!" said Lieutenant McGuire to the distant shrieking throng; "and I hope they're ready for you when you reach the earth." But his savage voice carried no conviction. What was there that Earth could do to meet this overwhelming assault?

"What is it?" asked Sykes. He roused from his sleep to work gingerly at his aching muscles, then came and stood beside McGuire.

"They have put us here as a final taunt," McGuire told him. "There is the fleet that is going to make our world into a nice little hell, and Torg, the beast! has put us here to see it leave. Then we get ours, and they don't know that we know that."

"Your first way was the best," the scientist observed; "we should have done it then. We still can."

"What do you mean?" The flyer's voice was dull and lifeless.

Sykes pointed to the little balcony and the hard pavement below.

"Althora," he said, and McGuire winced at the name, "seemed to think that we were in for some exquisite torture. Here is the way out. It is a hundred-foot drop; they think we are safe; but they have been unintentionally kind."

"Yes," his companion agreed, "they don't know that we know of the torture. We will wait ... and when I am sure that—Althora—is—gone ... when there is nothing I can do to help—"

"Help?" queried the professor gently. "There is nothing now of help, nor anyone who can help us. We must face it, my boy; *c'est fini*. Our little journey is approaching its end."

There was no reply, and McGuire stood throughout the day to stare with eyes of smouldering hatred where the scurrying swarms of living things made ready to invade and infest the earth.

Food and water was pushed through the doorway, but he ate

sparingly of the odd-colored fruits; the only thing that could hold his thoughts from the hopeless repetition of unanswerable "whys" was the sight of the fleet. And every bale and huge drum was tallied mentally as it passed before his eyes. The ships were being loaded, and with their sailing—But, no! He must not let himself think of that!

Throughout the day ships came and departed, and one leviathan, ablaze in scarlet color; sailed in to settle down where great steel arms enfolded it, not far from the watching men. Scarlet creatures in authority directed operations, and workmen swarmed about the great ship. Once McGuire swore softly and viciously under his breath, for he had seen a figure that could be only that of Torg, and the crowd saluted with upraised arms as the scarlet figure passed into the scarlet ship. This, McGuire knew, was the flagship that should carry Torg himself. Torg and ——. He paled at the thought of the other name.

The only break in the long day came with the arrival of a squad of guards, who hustled the two men out into a passageway and drove them to another room, where certain measurements were taken. The muscular figures of the two were different from these red ones, but it was a moment before McGuire realized the sinister significance of the proceedings. Their breadth of shoulders, the thickness of their

chests—what had these figures to do with their captivity? And then the flyer saw the measures compared with the dimensions of a steel cage. Its latticed shape could be endlessly compressed, and within, he saw, were lancet points that lined the ghastly thing throughout. Long enough to torture, but not to kill; a thousand delicate blades to pierce the flesh; and the instrument, it seemed, was of a size that could enclose the writhing, helpless body of a man.

Other unnameable contrivances about the room took on new significance with the knowledge that here was the chamber of horrors whose workings had been seen by Althora in the mind of their captor—horrors of which she could not speak.

McGuire was sick and giddy as the guards led him roughly back to their prison room. And Professor Sykes, too, required no explanation of what they had seen.

The guards were many, and resistance was useless, but each man looked silently at the other's desperate eyes when the metal cords were twisted again about their wrists, and their hands were tied securely to metal rings anchored in the wall beside the window.

"And there," said the flyer, "goes our last chance of escape. They were not as dumb as we thought: they knew how good a leap to the

pavement would look after we had been in there."

"Less than human!" Sykes was quoting the comment of Althora's brother. "I think Djorn was quite conservative in his statement."

McGuire examined carefully the cords that tied his hands to the wall beside him. The knots were secure, and the metal ring was smooth and round. "I didn't know," he said, as he worked and twisted, "but there might be a cutting edge, but we haven't a chance. No getting rid of these without a wire cutter or an acetylene torch—and we seem to be just out of both."

Professor Sykes tried to adopt the other's nonchalant tone. "Careless of us," he began—then stopped breathless to press his body against the wall.

"It's there!" he said. "Oh, my God, if I could only get it, it might work—it might!"

"The battery," he explained to the man beside him, whose assumed indifference vanished at this suggestion of hope; "—the little battery that I used on the gun, to fire the explosive. It has an astounding amperage, and a voltage around three hundred. It's in my pocket—and I can't reach it!"

"You can't keep a good man licked!" McGuire exulted. "You mean that the current might melt the wire?"

"Soften it, perhaps, depending upon the resistance." Sykes refused to share the other's excitement. "But we can't get at it."

"We've got to," was the answer. "Move over this way." The man in khaki twisted his arms awkwardly to permit him to bend his body to one side, and beads of sweat stood out on his forehead as the strain forced the thin bonds into his wrists. But he brought his agonized face against the other's body, and gripped the fabric of Sykes' coat between his teeth.

The twisting of his head raised the cloth an inch at a time, and despite Sykes' efforts to hold the garment with his elbow, it slipped back time and again. McGuire straightened at intervals to draw a choking breath and ease the strain upon his tortured wrists; then back again in his desperate contortions to worry at the cloth and pull and hold—and try again to raise the heavy pocket where a battery made sagging folds.

He was faint and gasping when finally the cloth was brought where the scientist's straining fingers could grasp it to writhe and twist in clumsy efforts that would force the battery's terminals within reach.

"I'll try it on mine," said Sykes. "It may be hot—and you've had your share." He was holding the flat black thing to bring the copper tips against the metal about his wrists. McGuire saw the man's lips go white as a wisp of smoke brought to his nostrils the sickening odor of burned flesh.

The metal glowed, and the man was writhing in silent self-torture when at last he threw his weight upon the strands and fell backward to the floor. He lay for a moment, trembling and quivering—but free. And the knowledge of that freedom and of the greater torture they would both escape, gave him strength to rise and work with crippled hands at his companion's bonds, till McGuire, too, was free—free to forget his own swollen, bleeding wrists in compassionate regard for the other.

Like an injured animal, Professor Sykes had licked with his tongue at his wrists, where hot wire had burned deep and white, and he was trying for forgetfulness an hour later, in examination of the door to their room.

"What is the idea?" McGuire inquired, when he turned from his ceaseless contemplation of the fleet. "Not trying to get out, are you?"

"I am trying to stay in," said Sykes, and looked again at the object

that interested him. "These long bolts," he explained: "top and bottom; operated from outside, but exposed in here. They come together when unlocked; five inches apart now. If I had something to hold them apart—

"You haven't a piece of steel about five inches long, have you?—or anything to substitute for it? If you have, I can lock this door so the devils won't come in and surprise us before we can make the jump."

"The battery?" suggested McGuire.

Sykes shook his head. "I tried it. Too long, and besides it would crumble. They operate these with a lever; I saw it outside." He went on silently with his study of the door and the little gap between heavy bolts, which, if closed, would mean security from invasion.

"They're about through," McGuire spoke from his post at the window after some time. "The rush seems to be about over. I imagine they'll pull out in the morning."

He pointed as Sykes stood beside him. "Those big ones over beyond have not been touched all day; only some of the crew, I judge, working around them. And way over you see forty or fifty whaling big ones: they must have been ready before we came. They have

finished on these nearer by. It looks like a big day for the brutes."

And Professor Sykes led him on to talk more of the preparations he had seen, and his deductions as to the morrow. It was all too evident what was really on the lieutenant's mind. It was not the thought of their own immediate death, but the terrible dread and horror of Althora's fate, that hammered and hammered in his brain. To speak of anything else meant a moment's relief.

Sykes pointed to a tall mast that was set in the plaza pavement, some hundred feet away. Wires swung from it to several points, one of them ending above their window and entering the building. "What is that?" he asked, "—some radio device? That ball of metal on the top might be an aerial." But McGuire had fallen silent again, and stared stonily at the deadly fighting ships he was powerless to combat.

On the morning that followed, there was no uncertainty. This was the day! And from a balconied window up high in the side of a tall stone building, two men stood wordless and waiting while they watched the preparations below.

The open space was a sea of motion like flowing blood, where thousands of figures in dull red marched in rank after rank to be swallowed in the mammoth ships that McGuire had noted in the

distance. Then other colors, and swarms of what they took to be women-folk of this wild race—a medley of color that flowed on and on as if it would never cease, to fill one after another of the great ships.

"Transports, that's what they are," said McGuire. "I can see now why they have no steel beaks like the others. They don't need any rams, nor ports for firing that beastly gas. They are gray, too, while the fighting ships are striped with red, all except the scarlet one of Torg's. Those are colonists we are watching, and soldiers to conquer the Earth where the damned swarm settles."

He stopped to stare at a body of red-clad soldiers, drawn up at attention. They made a lane, and their arms were raised in the salute that seemed only for Torg. They stood rigid and motionless; then, from below the watching men, came one in the full splendor of his scarlet regalia. The air echoed with the din of his shouted name, but the bedlam of noise fell on deaf ears for McGuire. He could hear nothing, and in all the vast kaleidoscope of color he could see only one object—the white face of a girl who was half led and half carried by a guard of the red ones, where their Emperor led the way.

It was a strangled cry that was torn from the flyer's throat—the name of this girl who was going to the doom she had failed to avoid. Her

life, she had said, was hers to keep only if she willed, but her plans had failed, and she went faltering and stumbling after a scarlet man beast.

"Althora!" called the flyer, and the figure of the girl was struggling with her guards in a frenzy that tore their hands free. She turned to look toward the sound of the voice, and her face was like that of one dead as her eyes found the man she loved.

"Tommy," she called: "oh, Tommy, my dear! Good-by!" The words were ended by the clutch of the scarlet Emperor who turned to seize her.

A clatter came from the door behind them, but Lieutenant McGuire gave no heed. Only Professor Sykes sprang back from the balcony to seize and struggle with the moving bolts.

The man on the balcony was hardly less than a maniac as he glared wildly about, but he was not too unreasoning to see the folly of a wild leap into the throng below. He could never reach her—never. And then his eyes fell upon the wire that led from above him to the great pole in the open plaza. There was shouting from behind where the executioners were wrestling with the bolts.

"Hold them," the flyer shouted, "just for a minute! For God's sake, Sykes, keep them back! There's a chance!"

He sprang to the balustrade of the balcony, but he saw as he leaped where Professor Sykes had raised his leg to force the thickness of his knee between the bolts whose levers outside were bringing them closer together.

"Go to it," was the answer. "I can hold them"—a stifled groan—"for a—minute!" Professor Sykes had found his substitute for five inches of steel, and the living flesh yielded but slowly to the pressure of the bolts.

McGuire was working frantically at the wire, then held himself in check while he carefully unwound it from its fastening. There was a splice, and he worked with bleeding fingers to unfasten the tight coils. And then the end was free and in his hands. He dropped to the balcony to pull in the slack, and he wrapped the end about beneath his arms and twisted it tight, then leaped out into space. No thought of himself nor of Sykes in this one wild moment, only of Althora in the grip of those beastly hands.

He was struggling to turn himself in the air as the colored masses of people seemed sweeping toward him, and he shot as a living

pendulum, feet first, into the waiting heads.

He was on his feet in an instant and tearing at the twisted wire that held him. About him was clamor and confusion, but beyond the nearer figures he saw the one who waited, and beside her a thing in scarlet that shrieked orders to his men.

He flung off one who leaped toward him, and ducked another to dash through and reach his man. And he neither saw nor felt the creature's ripping talons as he drove a succession of rights and lefts to the blood-red face.

The scarlet one went backward under the fusillade of blows; he was down, a huddle of color upon the pavement, and a horde of paralyzed soldiers had recovered from their stupefaction and were rushing upon the flyer. He turned to meet them, but their rush ended as quickly as it began: only a step or two they came, then stopped, to add their wild voices to the confusion of ear-splitting shrieks that rose from all sides.

McGuire crouched rigid, tense and waiting, nor did he sense for an instant that the assault was checked and that the faces of all about him were turned to the sky. It was the voice of Althora that aroused him:

"Tommy! Tommy!" she was calling, and now she was at his side, her arms about him. "What is it, Tommy? Look! Look!" And she too was gazing aloft. And then, above all other sounds McGuire heard the roar—

The clouds were golden above with the brilliance of midday—and against them, hard and sharp of outline, was a shining shape. A cloud of vapor streamed behind it as it shot down from the clouds, and the thunder of its coming was like the roar of many cannon.

A ship of the red ones was in the air—a fighting ship, whose stripes showed red—and it drove at the roaring menace with its steel beak and a swirling cloud of gas. It seemed that they must crash, when to McGuire's eyes came the stabbing flash of heavy guns from the shining shape. A crashing explosion came down to them as the great beak parted and fell, and the body of the red-striped monster opened in bursting smoke and flame, tore slowly into fragments and fell swiftly to the earth.

It struck with a shattering crash some distance away, but one pair of eyes failed to follow it in its fall. For in the clear air above, with the golden light of distant clouds upon it, a roaring monster of silvery sheen had rolled and swept upward to the heights. And it showed, as it turned, a painted emblem on its bow, a design of clear-cut color,

unbelievably familiar—a circle of blue, and within it a white star and a bull's eye of red—the mark of the flying service of the United States!

McGuire never knew how he got Althora and himself back to the building whence he had come. Nor did he see the struggling figures on a balcony, or the leap and fall of a maimed body, where Professor Sykes, when the door had yielded, found surcease and oblivion on the pavement below.

He was to learn that later, but now he had eyes only for a sight that could be but a dream, an unreal vision of a disordered brain. He held the slim form of Althora to him in a crushing grip, while he stared, dry-eyed, above, and his own voice seemed to shout from afar off: "They're ours!" that voice was screaming in a frenzy of exultation. "They're our ships! They've come across!"

The fighting fleet of the red man-things of Venus was taking to the air! The ships rose in a swarm of speeding, darting shapes, and the great one of Torg was in the lead, climbing in fury toward the heights.

Far above them the clouds of gold silhouetted a strange sight, and the air was shaking with the thunder from on high, where, straight

and true, a line of silver ships in the sharp V of battle formation drove downward in a deadly, swift descent.

And even afar off, the straining eyes of a half-crazed man could see the markings on their bow—a circle and a star—and the colors of his own lost fighters of the air.

Chapter 19

The Earth-fleet was a slanting line of swiftness that swept downward from the clouds. A swarm of craft was rising from below. The red-striped fighters met the attack first with a cloud of gas.

The scarlet monster—the flagship of Torg, the Emperor—was in the lead, and they shot with terrific speed across the bows of the oncoming fleet to leave a whirlwind of deadly vapor as they passed. McGuire held his breath in an agony of fear as the cloud enveloped the line of ships, but their bow guns roared staccato crashes in the thunder of their exhausts as they entered the cloud. And they were firing from the stern as they emerged, while two falling cylinders of red and white proved the effectiveness of their fire.

The formation held true as it swept upward and back where the swarming enemy was waiting. They were outnumbered three to one, McGuire saw, and his heart sang within him as he watched the sharp, speeding V that climbed upward to the enemy's level then swung to throw itself like a lance of light at the massed ships that awaited the attack.

Another cloud of gas!—and a shattered ship!—and again the line emerged to correct its broken formation and drive once more toward

the circling swarm.

They came to meet them now, the clusters of red-striped fighting ships, and they tore in from all sides upon the American line, their hooked beaks gleaming in the sun.

And now, at an unseen signal, the formation broke. Each ship fought for its life, and the stabbing flashes of their guns made ceaseless jets of light against the smoke and gas clouds that were darkening the sky.

"A dog-fight!" breathed Lieutenant McGuire; "and what a dog-fight!" His words were lost in the terrific thunder from above: the roar of the ships and the dull thuds of the guns engulfed them in a maelstrom of noise that battered like physical blows on the watchers below. He swore unconsciously and called down curses upon the enemy as he saw two fighters meet while the shining beak of a ship of the reds crashed through the body of an opposing craft.

The red ship dipped at the bow; it backed off with terrific force; and from the curved beak a ship with the insignia of the red, white and blue slid downward in a swift fall to the death that waited.

They had fought themselves clear, and the Americans, by what must

have been arrangement or wireless order, went roaring to the heights. There were some who followed, but the guns of the speeding ships drove them off. Red-and-white shapes fell swiftly from the clouds where the fighting had been, and McGuire knew that his fellows had given an account of themselves in the fighting at close range.

Again the thundering line was sharp and true, and another unswerving attack was launching itself from above. And again the deadly formation, with ever-increasing speed, drove into the enemy with flashing guns, then parted to close with the ones that drove crushingly upon them, while the sharper clatter of rapid-firing guns came to shatter the air.

The fighting craft had been rising from their level field in a succession that seemed endless. They were all in the air now, and only the great transports remained on the paved field.

A red-striped fighter swept downward in retreat, and, from the smoke clouds, a silvery shape followed in pursuit. It reached the red and white one with its shells, and the great mass crashed with terrific impact on the field. Its pursuer must have seen the monsters still on the ground, and it swung to rake them with a shower of small-caliber shells.

There were machine-guns rattling as it passed above the thronged reds—the troops who were huddled in terror in the open court. It tore on past them—past a figure in khaki who raced forward with the golden form of a girl within his arms, then released her to wave frantically as the silver ship shot by.

Unobserved, McGuire and Althora had been, where they stood beside the buildings: the eyes of their enemies, like their own, were on the monstrous battle above. But now they had called themselves to the attention of the reds, and there were some who rushed upon them with faces livid with rage.

McGuire reached for a weapon from a victim of the machine-gun fire and prepared to defend himself, but the weapon was never used. He saw the silvery shape reverse itself in the air; it turned sharply to throw itself back toward the solitary figure in uniform of their service and the golden-clad girl beside him.

The flyer raised his weapon, but the jostling swarm that rushed upon him melted: the ripping fire of machine guns was deafening in his ears. Their deadly tattoo continued while the great ship sank slowly to touch and rest its huge bulk upon the pavement. A door in the ship's curved side opened that the blocky figure of a man might leap forth.

He was grimy of face, and his uniform was streaked with the smoke and sweat of battle, but the face beneath the grime, and the hands that reached to embrace and pound the flyer upon the back, could be only those of one he had known as his captain—Captain Blake.

"You son-of-a-gun!" the shouting figure was repeating. "You damned Irish son-of-a-gun! A. W. O. L.—but you can't get away with it! Come on—get in here! I'm needed up above!"

McGuire was struggling to speak from a throat that was suddenly tight and voiceless. Then—

"Althora," he gasped; "take Althora!" and he motioned toward the girl. And then he remembered the companion he had left in the room above. The battle that had flashed so suddenly had blasted from his mind all other thoughts.

"My God!" he said. "—Sykes! I—must get Sykes!"

He turned to run back to the building, only to stop in consternation where a huddle of clothing lay beneath the balcony of their prison room.

It was Sykes—Sykes who had sacrificed himself to make possible

the escape of his friend—and McGuire dropped to his knees to touch the body that he knew was shattered beyond any hope of life. He raised the limp burden in his arms and staggered back where more khaki-clad figures had gathered. Two came quickly out to meet him, and he let them take the body of his friend.

"*C'est fini!*"—he repeated the words that Sykes had said; "the end of our little journey!" The arms of Althora were about him as Blake hurried them into the waiting ship, and the roar of enormous power marked the rising of this space ship to throw itself again into the fray.

A small room with a dome of shatter-proof glass; a pilot who sat there to look in all directions, a control-board beneath his hands. Beside him on his elevated station was room for Captain Blake, and McGuire and Althora, too. The ship was climbing swiftly. McGuire saw where flashing shapes circled and roared in a swelling cloud of smoke and gas.

Blake spoke sharply to an aide: "General orders! All ships climb to resume formation!"

An enemy ship was before them: it flashed from nowhere to bear down with terrific speed. The floor beneath them shook with the

jarring of heavy guns, and McGuire saw the advancing shape bursting with puffs of smoke, while their own ship shot upward with a sickening twist. A silver ship was falling!—and another!

"Two more of ours gone," said Captain Blake through set teeth. "How many of them are there, Mac? Tell me what you know: we've got a hell of a fight on our hands."

"They're all here," McGuire told him, in jerky, breathless speech. "These are transports on the ground. Their weapons are gas and speed, and the rams on their beaked ships. There are other weapons —deadlier ones!—but they haven't got them: they belong to another race. I'll tell you all that later!"

"Keep them at a distance, Blake," he said. "Make them come to you —then nail them as they come."

"Right!" was the answer; "that's good dope. We didn't know what they had; expected some devilish things that could down us before we got within effective range; had to mix it with them to find out what they could do, and get in a few solid cracks before they did it.

"How high are we?" He glanced quickly at an instrument. "Ten thousand. Order all ships to withdraw," he instructed his aide.

"Rendezvous at fifty thousand feet for echelon formation."

Another brush with an enemy craft that slipped quickly to one side—then the smoke clouds were behind them, and a score, of silvery shapes were climbing in vertical flight for the level at fifty thousand.

They were fewer now than they had been, and the line that formed behind the flagship of Blake was shorter than the one that had made the V which shot down so bravely to engage with an unknown foe.

The enemy was below; an arrangement of mirrors showed this from the commander's station. They were emerging from the clouds of smoke to swarm in circling flight through the sky. And now the bow of their own craft was depressed at an order from Blake, and the others were behind them as they drove to renew the attack.

"They're ganging up on us again," said Blake. "We'll fool them this time; we'll just kid them a little."

The flagship swerved before reaching the enemy, and the others followed in what looked like frightened retreat. Again they were in the heights, and some few of the enemy were following. Blake led in another descent.

No waiting swarm to greet them now! Blake gave a quick order. The roaring column shifted position as it fell: the flagship was the apex of a great V whose arms flung out and backward on either side—a V formation that curved and twisted through space and thundered upon the smaller formations that scattered before the blasting guns.

"Our bow guns are the effective weapons," Blake observed; his casual tone was a sedative to McGuire's tense nerves. "We can use a broadside only of lighter weight; the kick of the big 'sights' has to be taken straight back. But we're working, back home, on recoil-absorbing guns: we'll make fighting ships of these things yet."

He spoke quietly to the pilot to direct their course toward a group that came sweeping upon them, and the massed fire of the squadron was squarely into the oncoming beaks that fell beneath them where the mirrors showed them crashing to the earth.

They were scattered now; the enemy was in wild disorder; and Blake spoke sharply to his aide.

"Break formation," he ordered; "every ship for itself. Engage the enemy where they find them; shoot down anything they see; prevent the enemy reforming!" He was taking quick advantage of the other's scattered forces, and he scattered his own that he knew could take

care of themselves while they engaged the enemy only by ones or twos or threes.

"Clear the air of them!" he ordered. "Not one of them must escape!"

The skies were a maze of darting shapes that crossed and recrossed to make a spider's web of light. Ship drove at ship, to swerve off at the last, while the air quivered and beat upon them with the explosion of shells and guns.

"There's our meat!" Blake directed the pilot, and pointed ahead where a monster in scarlet was swelling into view.

It came swiftly upon them, darting down from above, and McGuire clutched at the arm of the man beside him to shout: "It's the leader; the flagship! It's the Emperor—Torg, himself! Give him hell, Blake, but look out—he's fast!"

The ship was upon them like a flash of fire; no time for anything but dodging, and the pilot threw his craft wildly aside with a swerve that sent the men sprawling against a stanchion. Then up and back, where the other had turned to come up from below.

"Fast!" McGuire had said, but the word was inadequate to describe

the speed of the fiery shape.

Another leap in the air, as their pilot swung his controls, and the red shape brushed past them in a cloud of gas, while the quick-firers ripped futilely into space where the great ship had been.

"Get your bow guns on him!" Blake roared. The ship beneath them strained and shuddered with the incredible thunder of the generator that threw them bodily in the air. The pilot had opened in full force the ports that blasted their bows aside.

No time to gather new speed; they were motionless as the scarlet monster came upon them, but they were in position to receive him. The eight-inch rifles of the forward turret thundered again and again, to be answered by flashes of flame from the scarlet ship.

McGuire crouched over the bent form of the pilot, whose steady fingers held the ship's bow straight upon the flashing death that bore down upon them. Another salvo!—and another!—hits all of them.... Smoke bursting from ripping plates, and flaming fire more vivid than the scarlet shape itself!—and the floor beneath McGuire's feet drove crushingly upward as their pilot pulled a lever to the full.

The great beak flashed beneath—and the mirrors, where McGuire's

eyes were fastened, showed the terrific drive continue down and down, where a brilliant cylinder that marked the power of Venus tore shriekingly on to carry an Emperor to his crashing death.

The skies were clear of the red-striped ships: only the survivors of the attacking force showed their silvery shapes as they gathered near their flagship. There were two that pursued a small group of the enemy, but they were being outdistanced in the race.

"We have won," said Blake in a tone of wonder that showed how only now had come a realization of what the victory meant. "We have won, and the earth—is saved!"

And the voice of McGuire echoed his fervent "Thank God!" while he gripped the soft hand that clung tightly to his, as if Althora, this radiant creature of Venus, were timid and abashed among the joyful, shouting men-folk from another world.

"And now what, Captain?" asked McGuire of his command. "Will you land? There is an army of reds down there asking for punishment."

Blake had turned away; his hand made grimy smears across his face where he wiped away the tears that marked a brave man's utter

thankfulness. He covered his emotion with an affectation of disapproval as he swung back toward McGuire.

"Captain?" he inquired. "Captain? Where do you get that captain stuff?"

He pointed to an emblem on his uniform, a design that was unfamiliar to the eyes of McGuire.

"You're talking to an admiral now!—the first admiral of the newest branch of your country's fighting service—commanding the first fleet of the Space ships of the United States of America!" He threw one arm about the other's shoulders. "We'll have to get busy, Mac," he added, "and think up a new rank for you.

"And, yes, we are going to land," he continued in his customary tones; "there may be survivors of our own crashes. But we'll have to count on you, Mac, to show us around this little new world of yours."

There was an army waiting, as McGuire had warned, but it was waiting to give punishment and not to take it. The vast expanse of the landing field was swarming with them, and the open country beyond showed columns of marching troops.

They had learned, too, to take shelter; barricades had been hastily erected, and the men had shields to protect them from the fire of small arms.

Their bodies were enclosed in their gas-tight uniforms whose ugly head-pieces served only to conceal the greater ugliness beneath. They met the ships as they landed with a showering rain of gas that was fired from huge projectors.

"Not so good!" Blake was speaking in the safety of his ship. "We have masks, but great heavens, Mac!—there must be a million of those brutes. We can spray them with machine-gun fire, but we haven't ammunition enough to make a dent in them. And we've got to get out and get to our crashed ships."

He waited for McGuire's suggestions, but it was Althora who replied.

"Wait!" she said imperatively. She seemed to be listening to some distant word. Then:

"Djorn is coming," she exclaimed, and her eyes were brilliantly alight. "He says to you"—she pointed to McGuire—"that you were right, that we must fight like hell sometimes to deserve our heaven—

oh, I told him what you said—and now he is coming with all his men!"

"What the devil?" asked Blake in amazement. "How does she know?"

"Telepathy," McGuire explained: "she is talking with her brother, the leader of the real inhabitants of Venus."

He told the wondering man briefly of his experience and of the people themselves, the real owners of this world.

"But what can they do?" Blake demanded.

And McGuire assured him: "Plenty!"

He turned to Althora to ask, "How are they coming? How will they get here?"

"They are marching underground; they have been coming for two days. They knew of our being captured, but the people have been slow in deciding to fight. Djorn dared not tell me of their coming; he feared he might be too late.

"They will come out of that building," she said, and indicated the

towering structure that had been their prison. "It has the old connection with the underground world."

"Well, they'd better be good!" said Blake incredulously.

He was still less optimistic when the building before them showed the coming of a file of men. They poured forth, in orderly fashion and ranged themselves in single file along the walls.

There must be a thousand, McGuire estimated, and he wondered if the women, too, were fighting for their own. Then, remembering Althora's brave insistence, he knew his surmise was correct.

Each one was masked against the gas; their faces were concealed; and each one held before him a tube of shining metal with a larger bulbous end that rested in their hands.

"Electronic projectors," the lieutenant whispered. "Keep your eye on the enemy, Blake; you are going to learn something about war."

The thin line was advancing now and the gas billowed about them as they came. There were some few who dropped, where masks were defective, but the line came on, and the slim tubes were before them in glittering menace.

At a distance of a hundred feet from the first of the entrenched enemy there was a movement along the line, as if the holders of the tubes had each set a mechanism in operation. And before the eyes of the Earth-men was a spectacle of horror like nothing in wars they had known.

The barricades were instantly a roaring furnace; the figures that leaped from behind them only added to the flames. From the steady rank of the attackers poured an invisible something before which the hosts of the enemy fell in huddles of flame. Those nearest were blasted from sight in a holocaust of horror, and where they had been was a scattering of embers that smoked and glowed; even the figures of distant ones stumbled and fell.

The myriad fighters of the army of the red ones, when the attackers shut off their invisible rays, was a screaming mob that raced wildly over the open lands beyond.

Althora's hands were covering her eyes, but McGuire and Blake, and the crowding men about them, stared in awe and utter astonishment at the devastation that was sweeping this world. An army annihilated before their eyes! Scores of thousands, there must be, of the dead!

The voice of Blake was husky with horror. "What a choice little bit

out of hell!" he exclaimed. "Mac, did you say they were our friends? God help us if they're not!"

"They are," said McGuire grimly. "Those are Althora's people who had forgotten how to fight; they are recapturing something that they lost some centuries ago. But can they ever destroy the rest of that swarm? I don't think they have the heart to do it."

"They do not need." It was Althora speaking. "My people are sickened with the slaughter. But the red ones will go back into the earth, and we will seal them in!—it is Djorn who tells me—and the world will be ours forevermore."

A matter of two short days, crammed to the uttermost with the realization of the astounding turn of events—and McGuire and Althora stood with Blake and Djorn, the ruler, undisputed, of the beautiful world of Venus. A fleet of great ships was roaring high in air. One only, the flagship, was waiting where their little group stood.

The bodies of the fallen had been recovered; they were at rest now in the ships that waited above. McGuire looked about in final wonder at the sparkling city bathed in a flood of gold. A kindly city now—beautiful; the terrors it had held were fading from his mind. He

turned to Althora.

"We are going home," he said softly, "you and I."

"Home?" Althora's voice was vibrant with dismay.

"We need you here, friend Mack Guire," the voice of Djorn broke in, in protest. "You have something that we lack—a force and vision—something we have lost."

"We will be back," the flyer assured him. "You befriended me: anything I can do in return—" The grip of his hand completed the sentence.

"But there is a grave to be made on the summit of Mount Lawson," he added quietly. "I think he would have preferred to lie there—at the end of his journey—and I must return to the service where I have not yet been mustered out."

"But you said—you were going home," faltered Althora. "Will that always be home to you, Tommy?"

"Home, my dear," he whispered in words that reached her only, "is just where you are." His arm went about her to draw her toward the waiting ship. "There or here—what matter? We will be content."

Her eyes were misty as they smiled an answer. Within the ship that was lifting them, they turned to watch a city of opal light grow faintly luminous in the distance ... an L-shaped continent shrunk to tiny size ... and the nebulous vapors of the cloudland that enclosed this world folded softly about.

"We will lead," the voice of Blake was saying to an aide: "same formation that we used coming over. Give the necessary orders. But," he added slowly to himself, "the line will be shorter; there are fewer of us now."

An astronomical officer laid a chart before the commander. "We are on the course, sir," he reported.

"Full speed," Blake gave the order, and the thundering generator answered from the stern. The Space Fleet of America was going home.

#57 The Destroyer, By William Merriam Rouse:

Slowly, insidiously, there stole over Allen Parker something uncanny. He could no longer control his hands—even his brain!

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

The connection is made

- - -

The pencil in the hand of Allen Parker refused to obey his will. A strange unseen force pushed his will aside and took possession of the pencil point so that what he drew was not his own. It was the same when he turned from drawing board to typewriter. The sentences were not of his framing; the ideas were utterly foreign to him. This was the first hint he received of the fate that was drawing in like night upon him and his beautiful wife.

Slowly, insidiously, there stole over Allen Parker something uncanny. He could no longer control his hands—even his brain!

Parker, a young writer of growing reputation who illustrated his own work, was making a series of pencil sketches for a romance partly finished. The story was as joyous and elusive as sunlight, and until to-day his sketches had held the same quality. Now he could not tap the reservoir from which he had taken the wind-blown hair and smiling eyes of Madelon, his heroine.

When he drew or wrote he seemed to be submerged in the dark waters of a measureless evil pit. The face that mocked him from the paper was stamped with a world-old knowledge of forbidden things.

Parker dropped his pencil and leaned back, tortured. He and his wife, Betty, had taken this house in Pine Hills, a small and extremely quiet suburban village, solely for the purpose of concentration on the book which was to be the most important work he had done. He went to the door of the room that he used for a studio and called:

"Betty! Can you come here a moment, please?"

There was a patter of running feet on the stairs and then a girl of twenty, or thereabout, came into the room. Any man would have said

she was a blessing. Her hair "was yellow like ripe corn," and her vivid blue eyes held depth and character and charm.

"Look!" exclaimed Parker. "What do you think of this stuff?"

For a moment there was silence. Then Allen Parker saw something he had never before seen in his wife's face for him or his work—a look of complete disgust.

"I wouldn't have believed you capable of doing anything so ... so horrid!" she said coldly. "How could you?"

"I don't know!" His arms, which had been ready to take her to him for comfort, dropped. "The work has been ... difficult, lately. As though something were pulling at my mind. But not like this! It isn't *me*!"

"It must be you, since it came out of you!" She turned away and moved restlessly to one of the windows.

"Through me!" muttered Parker. "Ideas *come*!"

"You'll have to do something!"

"But what? I don't know what to do!"

"Why not go to see that new doctor?" asked Betty, over her shoulder. "Dr. Friedrich von Stein?"

"Von Stein?" repeated Parker, vaguely. "Don't know him. Anyhow, I don't need a doctor. What in the world made you think of that?"

“Nothing, except that I can see his house from here. He's taken what they call 'the old Reynolds place.' You know—opposite the church. We looked at it and thought it was too large for us. He's made a lot of alterations."

"Oh, yes!" Parker had placed the newcomer, more recent than himself. "I had an idea that he was a doctor of philosophy, not medicine."

"He has half a dozen degrees, they say. Certainly he's a stunning looking man. I saw him on the street."

"Maybe he doesn't practice." The artist was gazing, baffled and sick at heart, upon what he had wrought. "And what could he do, unless it's my liver?"

"He might be a psycho-analyst, or something like that," she replied, slowly.

"But why the wild interest in this particular doctor?" Parker roused himself and looked at her. He felt irritable, and was ashamed of it.

"Only for your work," said Betty. A faint pink touched her cheeks.

Allen Parker had a sudden feeling of certainty that his wife was lying to him. To one who knew the Parkers it would have been equally impossible to think of Betty as lying, or of her husband as believing such a thing. Parker was outraged by his own suspicion. He sprang up and began to pace the floor.

"All right, then!" he exploded. "My work is going to the dogs! Why, there's an appointment with Cartwright to-morrow to show him these sketches, and the last few chapters I've done! We'll go now! If this man can't do anything for me I'll try somebody else!"

In ten minutes they were walking up the quiet street toward the present home of Dr. Friedrich von Stein. Despite his self-absorption Parker could not help noticing that his wife had never looked more attractive than she did at this moment. Her color had deepened, little wisps of hair curled against her cheeks, and there was a sparkle in her eyes which he knew came only on very particular occasions.

Even from the outside it was apparent that many strange things had

been done to the staid and dignified house of Reynolds. A mass of aerials hung above the roof. Some new windows had been cut at the second floor and filled with glass of a peculiar reddish-purple tinge. A residence had been turned into a laboratory, in sharp contrast to the charming houses up and down the street and the church of gray stone that stood opposite.

Beside the door, at the main entrance, a modest plate bore the legend: "Dr. Friedrich von Stein." Parker pressed the bell. Then he squared his broad shoulders and waited: a very miserable, very likeable young man, with a finely shaped head and a good set of muscles under his well cut clothes. He had brought his sketches, but he was uncomfortable with the portfolio under his arm. It seemed to contaminate him.

The door opened to reveal a blocky figure of a man in a workman's blouse and overalls. The fellow was pale of eye, towheaded; he appeared to be good natured but of little intelligence. The only remarkable thing about him was a livid welt that ran across one cheek, from nose to ear. Beside him a glossy-coated dachshund wagged furiously, after having barked once as a matter of duty.

"May we see Dr. von Stein?" asked Parker. "If he is in?"

"I will ask the Herr Doktor if he iss in," replied the man, stiffly.

"*Dummkopf!*" roared a voice from inside the house. An instant later man and dog shrank back along the hall and there appeared in their place one of the most striking personalities Allen Parker had ever seen.

Dr. Friedrich von Stein was inches more than six feet tall and he stood perfectly erect, with the unmistakable carriage of a well drilled soldier. He was big boned, but lean, and every movement was made with military precision. More than any other feature his eyes impressed Parker: they were steady, penetrating, and absolutely black. But for a thread of gray here and there his well-kept beard and hair were black. He might have been any age from forty to sixty, so deceptive was his appearance.

"Come in, if you please," he said, before Parker could speak. Von Stein's voice was rich and deep, but with a metallic quality which somehow corresponded with his mechanical smile. Except for the guttural r's there was hardly a hint of the foreigner in his speech. "It is Mr. and Mrs. Parker, I believe? I am Dr. von Stein."

He stood aside for them to pass into the hallway, and while they murmured their thanks he shot a volley of German at the man, whom

he called Heinrich. The frightened servant vanished; and the Parkers were taken into a living room furnished carelessly, but in good enough taste. Betty took her place on a couch, to which the doctor led her with a bow. Parker sank into an overstuffed chair not far from a window.

"I learned your names because of the beauty of madame," said Von Stein, as he stood looming above the mantel. Again he bowed. "One could not see her without wishing to know how such a charming woman was called. You are my neighbors from down the street, I believe."

"Yes," replied Allen. He wanted to be agreeable, but found it difficult. "And I think Mrs. Parker has developed a great admiration for you. She persuaded me to come here to-day. Are you, by chance, a psycho-analyst? I don't even know that you are a doctor of medicine, but—"

"I know a very great deal about the human mind," interrupted Dr. von Stein calmly. "I know a great deal about many things. I am not going to practice medicine here in Pine Hills because I have research work to do, but I will help you if I can. What is your trouble?"

The question brought back to Parker the mood of half an hour ago.

Almost savagely he snapped the portfolio open and spread out a few of his recent drawings, with some of the earlier ones for comparison.

"Look!" he cried. "These vicious things are what I am doing now! I can't help myself! The pencil does not obey me! Apparently I have no emotional control. It's as though my normal ideas were shouldered aside, like people in a crowd. And my writing to-day was as bad as these illustrations. I'm doing a book. Consider these things carefully, Doctor. They are not obscene, except by inference. They can't be censored. The book would go through the mails. Yet they are deadly! Look at my heroine in these two pictures. In one she is like —like violets! In the other she looks capable of any crime! What is she? A vampire, if there is such a thing? A witch? I can almost believe in demonology since I made these last drawings!"

Parker, in spite of his excitement, tried to read the face of Dr. Friedrich von Stein. He found nothing but the automatic smile upon that mask. Yet it seemed to the artist that this time there was a hint of real pleasure in the curve of the lips. Was it possible that anyone could like those drawings? Parker began to think that he was going insane.

"This is most unfortunate for you," rumbled the doctor. "I understand. But I trust that the condition can be remedied, if it

persists. You, Mr. Parker, and you, Madame, do you understand something of physics, of psychology, of metaphysics?"

"I fear that I'm rather ignorant," answered Betty. "Certainly I am in comparison with a man of your attainments."

Dr. von Stein bowed. He turned his black eyes upon Parker.

"And you, sir? I must adjust my explanation to—what shall I say? To your knowledge of the higher reaches of scientific thought?"

"Why, I majored in philosophy in college," said Parker, hesitatingly. "But that's quite a time ago, Herr Doktor. Of course I've tried to keep up with the conclusions of science. But a writer or a painter doesn't have any too much opportunity. He has his own problems to concern him."

"Yes, indeed!" Dr. von Stein was thoughtful. "So, and especially for the benefit of madame, I shall speak in terms of the concrete."

"Please consider me stupid!" begged Betty. "But I want to understand!"

"Certainly, except that you are not stupid, Madame. I will proceed. Both of you, I assume, know something of the radio? Very good!

You know that an etheric wave transmits the message, and that it is received and amplified so that it is within the range of the human ear. These waves were there when paleolithic man hunted his meat with a stone-tipped club. To use them it was necessary to invent the microphone, and a receiving instrument.

"What I have said you already know. But here is what may startle you. Human thought is an etheric wave of the same essential nature as the radio wave. They are both electrical currents external to man. Thoughts sweep across the human mind as sound currents sweep across the aerials of a radio—"

"I told you!" Allen Parker turned a triumphant face to his wife. "Pardon me, Herr Doktor! I have tried to convince Mrs. Parker that my idea came from outside!"

“Exactly!" Dr. von Stein took no offense. "And a difference between the mind and the radio set is that with the radio you tune in upon whatever you choose, and when you choose. The mind is not under such control, although it should be. It receives that to which it happens to be open. Or that thought which has been202] intensified and strengthened by having been received and entertained by other minds. In India they say: 'Five thousand died of the plague and fifty thousand died of fear.' Do you both follow me?"

It was unnecessary to ask. Betty sat on the edge of the couch, intent upon every word. Parker, although more restrained, was equally interested. Moreover he was delighted to have what he had felt instinctively confirmed, in a way, by a man of science.

"Herbert Spencer said," continued the doctor, "that no thought, no feeling, is ever manifested save as the result of a physical force. This principle will before long be a scientific commonplace. And Huxley predicted that we would arrive at a mechanical equivalent of consciousness. But I will not attempt to bolster my position with authorities. I know, and I can prove what I know.

"You, Mr. Parker, have been receiving some particularly annoying thoughts which have been intensified, it may be, by others, or another. Human will power can alter the rate of vibration of the line of force, or etheric wave. So-called good thoughts have a high rate of vibration, and those which are called bad ordinarily have a low rate. Have you, perhaps, an enemy?"

"Not that I know of," replied Parker, in a low voice.

"Then it would follow that this is accidental."

“Good heavens! Do you mean to say that someone could do this to

me maliciously?"

"So far my experiments leave something to be desired," said Dr. von Stein, without answering directly. "No doubt you are peculiarly susceptible to thoughts which bear in any way on your work."

"But isn't there any help for it?" asked Betty. She was regarding her husband with the eyes of a stranger.

"I believe I can do something for Mr. Parker."

There was a knock at the door. The doctor boomed an order to come in. Heinrich, with the dachshund at his heels, entered bearing a tray with a bottle of wine and some slices of heavy fruit cake. He drew out a table and placed the tray.

"Do not bring that dog in when I have guests," said Von Stein. He spoke with a gleam of white teeth. "You know what will happen, Heinrich?"

"*Ja*, Herr Doktor! I take Hans oudt!" The man was terrified. He gathered the dog into his arms and fairly fled from the room. Dr. von Stein turned with a smile.

"I have to discipline him," he explained. "He's a stupid fellow, but

faithful. I can't have ordinary servants about. There are scientific men who would be willing to bribe them for a look at my laboratory."

"I did not know such things were done among scholars," said Betty, slowly.

"What I have accomplished means power, Madame!" exclaimed the doctor. "There are jackals in every walk of life. If an unscrupulous man of science got into my laboratory, a physicist for instance, he might ... find out things!"

Dr. von Stein turned to his duties as host. He filled their glasses, and watched with satisfaction Betty's obvious enjoyment of the cake. A box of mellow Havanas appeared from a cabinet: imported cigarettes from a smoking stand. But Parker, in spite of a liking for good wine and tobacco, was far too much concerned about his work to forget the errand that had brought him there.

"So you think," he said, when there was opportunity, "that you can help me, Dr. von Stein?"

"I can," replied von Stein, firmly; "but before attempting anything I'd like to wait a day or two. The attacking thoughts may become less

violent, or your resistance greater, in either of which cases the condition will fade out. You will either get better or much worse. If you are worse come to see me again, and I promise you that I will do something!"

"I'll come, and thank you!" Parker felt better, and more cheerful than he had since the beginning of the disturbance. "Few things could make me suffer so much as trouble with my work."

"That is what I thought," agreed Dr. von Stein.

Betty rose. Her husband caught the look in her eyes as they met the bright, black gaze of Dr. von Stein, and he went cold. That look had always been for him alone. Her feet seemed to linger on the way to the door.

"He's wonderful!" she breathed, as they started down the uneventful street. "Scientific things never interested me before. But he makes them vital, living!"

"And yet," said Parker, thoughtfully, "there's something uncanny about that man!"

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Betty. "It's because he's a genius! Don't be

small, Allen!"

Parker gasped, and remained silent. He could not remember that his wife had ever spoken to him in quite that way. They finished the little journey home without speaking again and Parker went directly to studio. He sat down, with drooping shoulders, and considered the mess he had made of his book. Well, there was nothing to do but see Cartwright to-morrow and face the music!

Dinner that night was a mournful affair. The soft footsteps of the servant going in and out of the dining room, the ticking of the clock, were almost the only sounds. Betty was deep in her own thoughts; Parker was too miserable to talk. He went to bed early and lay staring into the darkness for what seemed like an eternity of slow moving hours.

The tall, deep voiced clock in the hall downstairs had just struck one when suddenly Parker's room was flooded with light. He sat up, blinking, and saw Betty standing near his bed. Her fingers twisted against each other; her face was drawn and white.

"Allen!" she whispered. "I'm afraid!"

Instantly he was on his feet; his arms went around her and the yellow

head dropped wearily against his shoulder.

"Afraid of what?" he cried. "What is it, sweetheart?"

"I don't know!" All at once her body stiffened and she pulled away from him. Then she laughed—"What nonsense! I must have been having a bad dream ... it's nothing. Sorry I bothered you, Allen!"

She was gone before his could stop her. Bewildered, he did not know whether to follow. Better not, he thought. She would sleep now, and perhaps he would. But he was worried. Betty was becoming less and less like herself.

At last Parker did sleep, to awake shortly after daylight. He got a hasty breakfast and took an early train to New York. When John Cartwright, a shrewd and kindly man well advanced in years, arrived at his office Allen Parker was right there waiting for him.

Cartwright had shown a real affection for the younger man, a paternal interest. He beamed, as usual, until he sat down with the new drawings. Slowly the smile faded from his face. He went over them twice, three times, and then he looked up.

"My boy," he said, "did you do these?"

"Yes."

"Do you know that you are turning a delicate and beautiful romance into a lascivious libel on the human race?"

"It is being done," replied Parker, in a low voice. "And I—I can't help myself!"

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that when I start to draw Madelon my hand produces that woman of Babylon! The writing is just as bad. It's full of sneering hints, double meanings ... I shall destroy the stuff. I've been to see a psycho-analyst."

"Ah!" thoughtfully. "Perhaps you're tired, Allen. Why not take Betty for a sea trip? There'll still be time for fall publication."

"I'm going to try everything possible. I'd rather be dead than do work like this!"

When Parker left his friend he was somewhat encouraged. After the first shock Cartwright had been inclined to make light of the difficulty, and by the time Allen Parker reached Pine Hills his stride had the usual swing and snap.

He ran up the steps of his house and burst into the living room with a smile. Betty was sitting by one of the windows, her hands lying relaxed in her lap. She turned a somber face toward her husband, and spoke before he had time to say a word of greeting.

"You knew that Cordelia Lyman died a short time ago, didn't you?"

"What's that?" exclaimed Parker, bewildered. "Lyman? Oh, the old lady down the street who left her money to found a home for aged spinsters? What about it?"

"But she didn't leave her money to found a home for aged spinsters, Allen. She had said she was going to, and everybody thought so. Her will was admitted to probate, or whatever they call it, yesterday. She left half a million, all she had, to Dr. Friedrich von Stein, to be used as he thinks best for the advancement of science!"

"Good heavens!" Parker stared. "Why, I didn't know she knew him. He'd only been here a week or so when she died."

"There isn't a flaw in the will, they say. You can imagine that Pine Hills is talking!"

"Well," said Parker philosophically, "he's lucky. I hope he does

something with it."

"He will," replied Betty, with conviction. "He'll do a great many things!"

Parker told her of his interview with Cartwright, but she seemed little interested. He did not try to work that day but, after he had put the offending drawings and manuscript out of sight, he wandered, read, smoked, and in the evening persuaded Betty to take a moonlight walk with him.

They passed the house of Dr. von Stein, from which came a faint humming that sounded like a dynamo. Across the street the church was alight for some service. Triumphant music drifted to them. The moon hung above the spire, with its cross outlined darkly against the brilliant sky. The windows were great jewels. Betty drew a deep breath.

"Sometimes, Allen," she said, "I feel like praying!"

"You *are* a beautiful prayer," whispered Parker.

She walked close to him, holding his arm, and repeated softly:

"Are not two prayers a perfect strength? And shall I feel afraid?"

But that was the end of that mood. By the time they arrived home Betty was again the strange, aloof, cold, slightly hard woman of the past few days. Again depression settled upon Allen Parker.

The next morning he breakfasted alone and went directly to the studio, without seeing Betty. Sun streamed into the room; the pencil moved swiftly. For a brief time Parker thought that he was himself again, as Madelon grew upon the block of paper. But the end was terrible. The last few strokes made her grotesque. This time the woman he had drawn was not merely evil; she was a mocking parody of his heroine. He threw drawing and pencil across the room.

But no real artist can be discouraged short of death. He went to work again and labored until luncheon time. The results were no better, although they varied. Now it seemed that some malevolent power was playing with him, torturing him to the accompaniment of devilish laughter. He was haggard and actually stooped of body when he bathed his face and went down to the dining room. From across the table Betty regarded him curiously.

"Fleming Proctor shot himself last night," she announced, calmly. "This morning they found him dead in his office."

"Proctor? You don't mean the president of the Pine Hills National

Bank?"

"Yes." The expression of Betty's face did not change. "There was a note saying that he was sorry. It seems he'd made a large loan without security to an unknown person, and the bank examiner was coming to-day. Proctor said he couldn't help what he did. The note was confused as though he were trying to tell something and couldn't. They think his mind must have given way, particularly as they can't trace the loan, although the money is undoubtedly gone."

“That kind of thing doesn't happen!" Parker was stunned. He had known Fleming Proctor, and liked him. They met often at the country club. "Proctor was honest, and a fine business man!"

"It did happen, Allen!"

"I'd like to know more about it. That would have been a case for Dr. von Stein to take in hand."

"Perhaps," said Betty, in a voice like ice. "But I'm more interested in finding out how soon you are going to return to normal. Frankly, I'm beginning to get bored."

Without a word Parker rose and left the room. Never before had his

wife hurt him like this. Doubly sensitive just now, he was suffering alone in the studio when the telephone rang.

"Dr. von Stein speaking. Are you better, Mr. Parker?"

"Worse! Much worse!"

"Then come to my house this evening at nine. May I expect you? And alone?"

"Yes." There was much Parker wanted to say, but he choked the words back. "I'll be there, and alone."

"I shall be ready for you. Good-by."

Allen Parker hung up the receiver. He did not leave the studio again until evening.

As Parker approached the house of Dr. Friedrich von Stein he saw that the church was lighted as it had been the night before. In a clear sky the moon rode above the spire. He paused to let his glance sweep up along the beautiful line that ran from earth to the slender cross. That was how he felt. He wanted to rise, as that line rose, from cumbering earth to clarity and beauty.

He mounted the steps and rang. Dr. von Stein met him, with eyes and teeth agleam in the hall light. Wearily Parker stepped inside. His mood of the moment before was fading.

"Go upstairs to my laboratory, if you please," said the doctor. "It is best that I see you there, for it may be that you will need treatment."

"I need something," replied Parker as he went up a long flight of stairs. "I'm in a bad way."

Without answer von Stein led him down a short corridor and held open a door. Allen Parker stepped into a room that bewildered him with its strange contrasts.

At a glance he saw that nearly the whole upper floor of the building had been converted into one gigantic room. Near a big stone fireplace, where burning driftwood sent up its many tinted flames, Heinrich stood rigidly at attention. Hans, the dachshund, crouched at his feet. When the dog started to meet Parker a guttural command stopped him.

Here there were bearskins on the floor, huge stuffed chairs, footrests, little tables, humidors, pipe racks, all that one could desire for comfort. Two German duelling swords were crossed above the

mantel.

But beyond this corner everything was different. Parker saw the massed windows of reddish-purple glass; he saw apparatus for which he had no name, as well as some of the ordinary paraphernalia of the chemical laboratory. There was wiring everywhere, and a multitude of lighting fixtures. Utilitarian tables, desks and chairs were placed about with mathematical precision. There were plates and strips of metal set into the glass smooth flooring, which was broken by depressions and elevations of unusual form.

The most striking thing in the room was a huge copper bowl that hung inverted from the ceiling. In it, and extending down below the rim, was what seemed to be a thick and stationary mist. It looked as though the bowl had been filled with a silver gray mist and then turned bottom side up. But the cloud did not fall or float away.

"I can think and speak best from my desk," Von Stein was saying. "Please sit down facing me in the chair which Heinrich will place for you. Then we will talk."

Heinrich rolled one of the overstuffed chairs noiselessly to a position about six feet from the desk. Parker noticed a long metal strip in the floor between him and the doctor.

Just then Hans wriggled forward and the artist scratched his ears, to be rewarded by a grateful tongue. Again a command from Heinrich brought the dog to heel, but the voice was not so gruff this time. Together they returned to the fireplace.

Von Stein let his hands rest upon the desk top—a surface covered with levers, electric switches, push buttons, and contrivances the nature of which Parker could not guess. The doctor leaned forward. He threw over a switch. The lights in the room became less bright. He pressed a button. The Danse Macabre of Saint-Saens floated weirdly upon the air, as though the music came from afar off.

"Is that part of the treatment?" asked Parker, with a faint smile. "It's not cheering, exactly."

"Merely an idiosyncrasy of mine," answered Von Stein, showing his teeth. "Before anything is done I must, in order to aid the receptivity of your mind, go a little further with the explanation of certain things which I mentioned the other day. I promise not to bore you. More than that, Mr. Parker, I promise that you will be more interested than you have ever been in anything!"

It seemed to Parker that there was something sinister in the manner and speech of Dr. von Stein. The Dance of Death! Did that music

have a meaning? Impossible! It was only his own sick mind that was allowing such thoughts to come to him.

"Anything that will help," he murmured.

"You have noticed that copper bowl?" Von Stein did not wait for a reply. "The misty appearance inside and underneath it is given by thousands upon thousands of minute platinum wires. When it is in use a slight electrical current is passed through it, varying in power according to the rate of vibration needed. That instrument, my dear sir, is a transmitter of thought. I may call it the microphone of the mind. I can tune in on any mind in the world, by experimenting up and down the vibration range to determine the susceptibility of the particular person. The human mind does not need an amplifier, as the radio receiving set does. Rather, it acts as its own amplifier, once having received the thought. I invented one, however, to prove that it could be done. I equipped Heinrich with it and in half an hour by suggestion reduced him to his present state of docile stupidity. I have, Mr. Parker, the means of moving people to do my bidding!"

Von Stein stopped abruptly, as though for emphasis and to allow his astounding statements to take effect. Parker sat stunned, struggling to grasp all the implications of what he had just heard. Suddenly they became clear. He saw events in order, and in relation to each other.

"So that's how it was with Cordelia Lyman!" he cried hoarsely, leaning forward. "And it was you who had that money from Fleming Proctor!"

"You are not unintelligent," remarked Dr. von Stein. "Better that science should have the Lyman money than a few old women of no particular use. As for Proctor, he was a fool. I would have protected him."

"And my pictures ... my book...."

"I can cure you, Mr. Parker. *If I will!*"

"And anyone is at the mercy of this man!" groaned Parker.

"Not absolutely, I'm sorry to say," said the doctor. "The action of thought on the human consciousness is exactly like that of sound on the tuning fork. When the mind is tuned right, we'll say for illustration, the lower vibrations are not picked out of the ether. But as few minds are tuned right, and as all vary from time to time, I'm practically omnipotent."

"You have changed the nature of my wife!" Parker was getting hold of himself and he could speak with a degree of calmness. "That is a

worse crime than the one you've committed against me directly!"

"Mr. Parker," said the doctor, impressively, "you are in a web. I am the spider. You are the fly. I don't particularly desire to hurt you, but I want your wife. This is the crux of the matter. She is the woman to share my triumphs. Already I have aroused her interest. Give her up and you will continue your work as before. Refuse, and you will lose her just as certainly as though you give her to me. For, my dear sir, you will be insane in less than a month from now. I promise you that!"

Allen Parker was not one to indulge in melodrama. For a long moment he sat looking into the black eyes of Von Stein. Then he spoke carefully.

"If my wife of her own will loved you, and wanted freedom, I'd let her go. But this is a kind of hypnosis. It's diabolical!"

"Who but the devil was the father of magic?" asked the doctor, cheerfully. "Hypnosis is unconsciously based on a scientific principle which I have mastered. Repeated advertising of a tooth brush or a box of crackers is mild mental suggestion—hypnosis, if you will. My dear fellow, be sensible!"

"Sophistry!" growled Parker.

Von Stein laughed. He moved a lever upon a dial and a sheet of blue flame quivered between them. With another movement of the lever it vanished.

"I could destroy you instantly," he said, "and completely, and no one could prove a crime! I shall not do it. I have no time to be bothered with investigations. Think of the fate I have promised you. Think, and you will give her up!"

"I shall not!" Parker wiped cold drops from his forehead. The doctor frowned thoughtfully.

"I'll intensify her desire to come here to-night," he said. "She herself will persuade you."

Parker set his fingers into the arms of his chair as Von Stein rose and walked to the copper bowl. He stood directly under it, and put on goggles with shields fitting close to his feet. At the pressure of his foot a tablelike affair rose from the floor in front of him. This, like the desk, was equipped with numerous dials, buttons and levers. Von Stein manipulated them. The great cap of copper descended until his head was enveloped by the mist of platinum wires. A faint humming

grew in the room. A tiny bell tinkled.

"The connection is made," murmured Von Stein. He lifted a hand for silence: then his fingers leaped among the gadgets on the table. After that came a brief period, measured by seconds, of immobility. Then the table sank from view, the copper bowl lifted, and Dr. von Stein went back to his chair.

"She will be here shortly," he said. "If that does not change your mind...."

He shrugged. Parker knew what that shrug meant. He searched his mind for a plan and found none. Better die fighting than yield, or risk the vengeance of Friedrich von Stein. If he could get the doctor away from the desk where he controlled the blue-white flame there might be a chance to do something. Von Stein was by far the larger man, but Parker had been an athlete all his life. If....

"That mass of copper and platinum," he said, tentatively, "will make you master of the world!"

"My brain, my intelligence, has made me master of the world!" corrected Von Stein, proudly. He was touched in the right spot now. "You have not seen all!"

He sprang up and went to one of the tables. From his pocket he took a piece of paper and crumpled it into a ball while, with the other hand, he made some electrical connections to a plate of metal set into the surface of the table. Next he placed the wad of paper on the plate. Then, standing at arm's length from the apparatus, he pressed a button. Instantly the paper disappeared behind a screen of the colors of the spectrum, from red to violet. The banded colors were there for a minute fraction of a second. Then there was nothing where the paper had been on the plate. Von Stein smiled as he stepped away from the table.

"The electron is formed by the crossing of two lines of force," he said, "and the interaction of positive and negative polarity. The electron is a stress in the ether, nothing more, but it is the stuff of which all matter is made. Thought is vibration in one dimension; matter in two. You have just seen me untie the knot, dissociate the electrons, or what you will. In plain language I have caused matter to vanish utterly. That paper is not burned up. It no longer exists in any form. The earth upon which we stand, Parker, can be dissolved like mist before the sun!"

Appalled as he was at this man who boasted and made good his terrible boasts Allen Parker had not forgotten the purpose that was in him. Now was his chance, while Von Stein stood smiling

triumphantly between table and desk.

Parker shot from his chair with the speed of utter desperation. He feinted, and drove a vicious uppercut to the jaw of Dr. Friedrich von Stein. The doctor reeled but he did not go down. His fists swung. Parker found him no boxer, and beat a tattoo upon his middle. Von Stein began to slump.

Then two thick muscled arms closed around the artist from behind and he was lifted clear of the floor. He kicked, and tried to turn, but it was useless. The doctor recovered himself. His eyes blazed fury.

"Put him in the chair, Heinrich!" he roared. "For this I will show you what I can do, Herr Parker!"

At that instant little Hans, who had been yelping on the edge of the battle, dashed in. He leaped for the throat of Von Stein. The doctor kicked him brutally.

The shriek of agony from Hans loosened the arms of Heinrich. Parker got his footing again. He saw the clumsy serving man spring forward and gather his dog up to his breast. Again Parker rushed for his enemy.

It was clear now that Von Stein was cut off from the controls he wanted, and without Heinrich he could not master Parker in a fight. For an instant he stood baffled. Then he retreated the length of the room, taking what blows he could not beat off. He staggered upon a plate of metal set into the floor, righted himself, and failed in an attempt to catch hold of Parker. Suddenly he bowed in the direction of the distant doorway.

Allen half turned. Betty was coming down the room, staring and breathless.

"*Leben sie wohl!*" cried Von Stein. "Farewell, Madame! I should like to take you with me!"

A great flash of the colors of the spectrum sent Parker reeling back. Dr. Friedrich von Stein had gone the way of the crumpled ball of paper.

There was a long moment of silence. Then Allen Parker found his wife in his arms, clinging to him.

"'Are not two prayers a perfect strength?'" she murmured, sobbing against his heart.

#58 The Gray Plague, By Lloyd Arthur Eshbach:

Maimed and captive, in the depths of an interplanetary meteor-craft, lay the only possible savior of plague-ridden earth.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

they were almost upon him

- - -

Chapter 1

Five months before the beginning of that period of madness, that time of chaos and death that became known as the Gray Plague, the first of the strange meteors fell to Earth. It landed a few miles west of El Paso, Texas, on the morning of March 11th.

Maimed and captive, in the depths of an interplanetary meteor-craft, lay the only possible savior of plague-ridden Earth.

In a few hours a great throng of people gathered around the dully smoldering mass of fire-pitted rock, the upper half of which protruded from the Earth where it had buried itself, like a huge, roughly outlined hemisphere. And then, when the crowd had assumed its greatest proportions, the meteor, with a mighty, Earth-shaking roar, exploded.

A vast flood of radiance, more brilliant than the light of the sun, lit up the sky for miles around. One moment, a throng of curious people, a number of scientists, newspaper men—a crashing explosion—and then a great, yawning pit sending forth a blinding radiance! Destruction and death where life had been.

The brilliant light streamed from the pit for about ten minutes; then like a snuffed-out candle flame, it vanished.

The second of the strange meteors landed on the evening of March 13th, in the city of Peking, China. It demolished several buildings, and buried itself beneath the ruins. The Chinese, unaware of the tragedy at El Paso, gathered in the vicinity, and when the meteor exploded at about ten o'clock that night, were instantly destroyed. As in Texas, the great pit emitted a cloud of dazzling light for about ten minutes, throwing a brilliant glow over the city and its surroundings; then was extinguished.

The people of the world awoke to the fact that events worthy of more than passing interest were occurring. The press of every nation begin giving the strange meteors more and more publicity. Statements of different pseudo-scientists were published in explanation of the meteor's origin, statements that aroused world wide conjecture.

Approximately twenty-four hours after the falling of the second missile, the third one fell, landing near Madrid, Spain. The Spaniards, having received news of the El Paso and Peking tragedies, avoided the ugly mass of rock as though it were a dreaded pestilence. In every way its action was similar to that of its two predecessors.

The interest of the world was doubled now. The unusual similarity of the action of the meteors, and the regularity of their landings, seemed indicative of a definite, hostile purpose behind it all. A menace from the unknown—a peril from the skies!

Scientists began giving serious consideration to the unusual phenomenon, pottering around in the pits, wearing airs of puzzlement. But their investigations were of no avail, for nothing of any great significance came to light through their efforts.

At about that time, an announcement was made that created a furor. Astronomers in different parts of the United States reported that they had observed a bright flare of light leaping up from the darkened portion of the planet Venus. The astronomers had no definite idea of anything of importance in back of what they had seen; but not so the masses. The flare, they said, was caused by the release of another meteor!

From Venus! Missiles, hurled by Venerians, menacing the Earth! The silver planet became the subject of universal discussion; innumerable fantastic articles about it appeared in magazine sections of Sunday newspapers. And the astronomers of Earth turned their telescopes toward Venus with an interest they had never felt before.

Four days of expectant waiting passed by after the third meteor had fallen, while interest continued mounting at an accelerating pace. And then, at about two o'clock in the morning of the 18th, three great observatories, two in North America and one in England, recorded the falling of an extraordinarily large and unusually brilliant meteor that glowed with an intense, bluish-white light as it entered the Earth's atmosphere. And, unlike most meteors, this one was not consumed by its intense heat, but continued gleaming brilliantly until it vanished below the horizon. Simultaneous with the falling of the meteor, the Earth was rocked by one of the worst

quakes in history.

Seismographs in all parts of the world recorded the tremors of the Earth, each indicating that the disturbance had occurred somewhere beneath the Atlantic ocean. Evidently the fourth meteor had fallen into the ocean, for the shaking of the Earth was obviously the result of the collision. That quakes had not followed the landing of the first three was due to the fact that they had been far smaller than the fourth.

And then, a short time after the earthquake, the worst storm in two hundred years broke over the Atlantic. Waves, mountain high, piled themselves upon each other in a wild frenzy; a shrieking wind lashed the waters into a liquid chaos. Great ocean-liners were tossed about like tiny chips; an appalling number of smaller ships were lost in that insane storm.

Nor was the destruction confined to the sea, for all along the Atlantic coast of North America and Europe, mighty walls of water rushed in, and wrecked entire towns and cities.

Fortunately the storm was of short duration; a few hours after it began, it subsided.

For a number of weeks public attention was centered upon the meteors and storm; but gradually, when nothing further occurred, the fickle interest of the masses began to wane. A month after the storm, the strange meteors were no longer mentioned by the press, and consequently, had passed from the public mind. Only the astronomers remembered, keeping their telescopes trained on Venus night after night.

Four months passed by during which nothing of an unusual nature came to the attention of the world. But at the end of that time, it suddenly dawned upon those nations whose shores touched the Atlantic ocean, that something extraordinary was happening. It was taking place so insidiously, so quietly, that it had attracted no great attention.

A series of inexplicable sea disasters had begun. Every ship that had traveled over a certain, regular steamship route, had disappeared, leaving no trace. Mysteriously, without warning, they had vanished; without a single S O S being sent, seven freighters had been lost. The disappearances had been called to the world's attention by the shipping companies, alarmed at the gradual loss of their boats.

Then other mysterious vanishings came to the attention of the world. Ships in all parts of the Atlantic were being lost. When this fact

became known, trans-Atlantic commerce ceased almost over night. With the exception of a few privately owned yachts and freighters, the Atlantic became deserted.

And finally, a few days after the world became aware of the strange disappearances on the Atlantic, the Gray Plague introduced itself to humanity. Attempts were made to repress the facts: but the tragedy of the freighter, *Charleston*, in all its ghastliness and horror, became known in spite of all attempts at secrecy.

On the morning of August 3rd, the *Charleston* was found, half buried in the sand of a beach on the coast of Florida, cast there, evidently, by a passing storm. The freighter had been one of the first boats to disappear.

When the ship's discoverers boarded her, their eyes were greeted by a sight whose ghastliness filled them with a numbing horror. Indeed, so terrifying was the spectacle on the *Charleston*, that the discoverers, four boys of adolescent age, left in fear-stricken haste. Nor could they be induced to return to the ship's deck.

Later, a group of men from a nearby town boarded the freighter to investigate the boys' amazing report. In the group was a newspaper reporter who chanced to be in the vicinity on a minor story. It was

through the reporter's account that the facts became known as quickly as they did.

When the men clambered up the side of the *Charleston* to her deck, they saw a spectacle the like of which had never before been seen on Earth. Although they had been prepared for the horror to some extent by the story of the boys, the sight on the *Charleston* exceeded their description to such a degree that, for the moment, the men were rendered speechless.

The deck of the *Charleston* was a shambles—a scene of sudden, chilling death. All about were strewn gray, lifeless bodies. Death had overtaken the crew in the midst of their duties, suddenly, without warning, it seemed. Bodies strewn about—yet nowhere was there sign of decay! Bodies, lifeless for days, or weeks—yet intact!

The men were fearfully impressed by the strangely grotesque positions of the corpses. With a few exceptions, they lay on the deck in abnormal, twisted masses of gray covered flesh. Somehow, they seemed flattened, as though they had been soft, jellylike, and had flowed, had settled, flat against the deck. Some were no more than three inches thick, and had spread out to such an extent that they looked like fantastic caricatures of human bodies. That unnatural change in their structure, and the ghastly, dead-gray color of their

skins gave the corpses a horrifying, utterly repulsive appearance that made the flesh of the men crawl.

The bodies had a strangely soft aspect, as though they were still jellylike. One of the men, bolder than the rest, touched a body—and withdrew his hand in revulsion and surprise. For the ugly mass was cold, and as hard as bone: the tissues of the flesh seemingly replaced by a solid, bony substance. Later investigation revealed that all the dead on the *Charleston* had assumed a similar, bonelike solidity.

When the men left the freighter to report the tragedy to the proper authorities, their faces were blanched, and their nerves badly shaken. Yet their horror was nothing when compared with what it would have been, had they known what was to follow.

Rapidly the story of the *Charleston* spread. By means of the press, over the radio, even by word of mouth, the story of the horror on the freighter was given publicity. All over the United States and Canada it spread, and from thence to the rest of the world. Eagerly was the story accepted: here, at last, was the explanation of the sea disasters! And then, more than ever before, was the Atlantic ocean shunned.

The bodies of the seamen on the freighter were turned over to scientists for experimentation and research. It was thought that they

might be able to discover the cause of the Gray Death, and with a knowledge of its cause, create something with which to free the Atlantic from its scourge.

The scientists' investigations only served to mystify the world to a greater degree. The only thing that came to light was the cause of the bodies' bonelike rigidity. In some inexplicable way the bones in the seamen had dissolved, and according to appearances, while the bodies were plastic, had flattened out. And then, strange and unnatural though it seemed, the calcium from the dissolved bones had gathered at the surface of each body, and combining with the flesh and skin, had formed the hard, bony shell that gave them their ghastly grayness, and their appearance of petrification. Aside from this, the scientists learned nothing; the cause of this amazing phenomenon was a complete mystery to them.

Slowly, methodically, step by step, the unusual had been taking place. From the time of the landing of the first strange meteor, up to the discovery of the *Charleston*, there had been a gradual increase in the significance of each succeeding event.

Then finally came the climax: the Gray Plague itself. All that preceded it faded into significance before the horror of the dread pestilence that seized the world with its destroying talons.

A short time after the discovery of the *Charleston*, the Plague made its first appearance on land. Slowly, pitilessly, inexorably, it began, taking its toll all along the Atlantic coast. From Newfoundland to Brazil; from the British Isles to Egypt, wherever people lived near the ocean, thousands were stricken with the dread malady.

The old and infirm were the most quickly affected; their weakened bodies could not withstand the ravage of the Plague as could those of younger people. An old man, walking along a large thoroughfare in Savannah, Georgia, suddenly uttered a fearful shriek and sank to the pavement. While the pedestrians watched with bulging eyes, he seemed to shrink, to flatten, to flow liquidly, turning a ghastly gray. Within an hour he was as hard as the men of the *Charleston*. Of all the millions, perhaps he was the first.

Others followed in the wake of the first victim, young as well as old; three hours after the death in Savannah, every channel of communication was choked with news of a constantly increasing number of casualties. A Boston minister, preaching a funeral sermon, collapsing beside the coffin; a lineman on a telegraph pole, overcome, falling—and splashing! A thousand incongruous tragedies shocking humanity.

In Europe the action of the Plague was the same as in North

America. Death stalking the sea-coast, destroying thousands; ignorant fishermen, men of learning, women and children of every age—all were grist to be ground in the mill of the Gray Plague.

Before a week had gone by, no one remained alive in the villages, towns and cities all along the Atlantic. New York, London, all the large coast cities were deserted by the living, left to the rigid dead. From the largest metropolis to the smallest hamlet, all became body-glutted tombs.

And then, on the morning of October 12th, news was given to the world that threw mankind into a panic. The Plague was moving inland! Slowly, yet relentlessly it spread, no longer confining its effect to the sea-coast, but moving farther and farther inland toward the heart of the two continents, driving mankind before it. For people fled in insane terror before the advancing death. Nor was there escape from the menace—no antidote to counteract, no sanctuary wherein to hide.

To North and South, to East and West, the pestilence spread, destroying as it went. Unless there were some miraculous intervention, the human race would be destroyed!

Officials of the world were at their wits' end; scientists threw up

their hands in despair. The Plague was an insoluble puzzle—enigmatical, utterly inexplicable, beyond the knowledge of Earth.

Scientists and doctors were brutally slain during that period by fear-crazed mobs, because of their inability to rescue the world from the grip of the Plague. Thousands of people died while striving to escape from the Gray Death, crushed by passing motor vehicles, or starving in the congested areas. Gone was the boasted civilization of man—humanity sinking rapidly to the level of the beast; gone, destroyed in a few weeks!

And then one day when the end seemed perilously close, there was ushered into the presence of the remnant of the United States officials who had gathered in San Francisco, a twisted monstrosity of a man, fearfully scarred and deformed. He was closeted with them for two hours. At the end of that time an excited official communicated with the leader of the American scientists.

"A cure for the Plague has been discovered!" he cried in joyful tones. "Man still has a chance!"

Before an hour had passed by, scientists were in possession of cultures of germs that would destroy the bacilli of the Gray Death. The hope of salvation restored some semblance of order; and in a

very short time the development of the germs was going forward as rapidly as skilled bacteriologists could carry it. Forces of doctors were marshalled to administer the cure, inoculating all who were untouched by the Plague.

At about that time, a small, bronze-colored sphere arose into the air above San Francisco, and sped eastward with amazing velocity. It flashed over the United States, over the Atlantic ocean, and over western Europe, finally landing in the midst of the European hordes. There its operator, a deformed cripple, left bacteria similar to those he had given to the United States.

In a short time Europe, too, was busily engaged in developing the bacteria, and inoculating her people.

Many others died before the world was rendered immune, but at last mankind let its labors cease. The Gray Plague was overcome.

Then the work of reclaiming the deserted areas was begun; then, too, was started the ghastly task of disposing of the countless, rigid dead. And finally, a great steamer left New York harbor, and started across the Atlantic. It was the purpose of the men on board to destroy utterly the source of the Plague.

But long before that occurred, humanity had heard the story of Phillip Parkinson, the man who saved the world—had heard, and had honored the deliverer of mankind.

Parkinson's story follows:

Chapter 2

The steam yacht, Diana, bound for the Azores and points south, was two days out from Miami when the great meteor fell into the Atlantic. On the after deck, leaning over the rail, watching the moonlit waters, stood Phillip Parkinson, owner of the yacht. A bacteriologist of international fame was Parkinson, on an early vacation to recuperate from the effects of a strenuous winter of research. Nervous, rather high-strung, he had been unable to sleep; at about one in the morning of the 18th of March, he had come up on deck.

He had stood there for about an hour when suddenly there appeared in the sky above him, a meteor, a great disc of blue-white incandescence. It seemed to be rushing straight down toward him; instinctively he leaped back, as though to avoid the fiery missile.

As the constantly expanding disc flashed through the hundred miles of Earth's atmosphere, the ocean, as far as eye could see, became as light as day. Bathed in that baleful, white glare, Parkinson, bewildered, dazed, half-blinded, watched the approaching stellar visitant.

In a few moments it struck—no more than two miles away. In the

last, bright flare of blue-white light, Parkinson saw a gigantic column of steam and boiling water leap up from the sea. Then thick, impenetrable darkness fell—darkness that was intensified by its contrast with the meteor's blinding light.

For ten tense, breathless seconds utter silence hung over the sea ... then, for those on the yacht, the world went mad! A shrill, unearthly shriek—the sound of the meteor's passage through the atmosphere; an ear-splitting roar, as of the simultaneous release of the thunder-drums of ages; a howling demon of wind; a solid wall of raging, swirling water of immeasurable height—all united in an indescribable chaos that bewildered those on board the Diana, and that lifted the yacht and—threw it upon its side!

When the first rushing mountain of lathering, thundering water crashed upon the yacht, Parkinson felt himself hurtling through the roaring air. For a moment he heard the infernal pandemonium of noise ... then the strangling, irresistible brine closed over his head.

A blackness deeper than that of the night—and Parkinson knew no more....

Slowly consciousness returned to the bacteriologist. It came under the guise of a dull, yet penetrating throbbing coming from beneath

the surface on which he lay. Vaguely he wondered at it; he had not yet entirely cast off the enshrouding stupor that gripped him.

Gradually he came into full possession of his faculties—and became aware of a dull aching throughout his entire body. In his chest it seemed to be intensified; every breath caused a sharp pang of pain.

Faltering and uncertain, he arose and peered around. Before, lay the open sea, calm now, and peaceful. Long, rolling swell swept in and dashed themselves against the rocks a few feet away. Rocks? For a moment Parkinson stared at the irregular shore-line in dazed wonder. Then as his mind cleared, the strangeness of his position flashed upon him.

Solid earth was under his feet! Although he must be hundreds of miles from shore, in some way he had drifted upon land. So far as he knew, there were no islands in that part of the Atlantic; yet his very position belied the truth. He could not have drifted to the mainland; the fact that he was alive precluded all possibilities of that, for he would have drowned in far less time than the latter thought implied.

He turned and inspected the land upon which he had been cast. A small, barren island, bleak and inhospitable, and strangely metallic, met his gaze. The rays of the sun beating down upon it were thrown

back with an uncomfortable intensity; the substance of the island was a lustrous, copperlike metal. No soil softened the harshness of the surface; indescribably rugged and pitted was the two hundred-foot expanse. It reminded Parkinson of a bronze relief-map of the moon.

For a moment he puzzled over the strangeness of the unnatural island; then suddenly he realized the truth. This was the meteor! Obviously, this was the upper side of the great sphere from space, protruding above the sea.

Fortunate for him that the meteor had not been completely covered by water, he thought—but was it fortunate? True, he was alive now, thanks to the tiny island, but how long would he remain alive without food or water, and without hope of securing either? Unless he would be picked up by a passing steamer, he would die a far more unpleasant death than that of drowning. Some miracle had saved him from a watery grave; it would require another to rescue him from a worse fate.

Even now he was beginning to feel thirsty. He had no way of determining how long he had been unconscious, but that it was at least ten hours, he was certain, for the sun had been at its zenith when he had awakened. No less than fifteen hours had gone by since

water—other than that of the sea—had passed his lips. And the fact that it was impossible for him to quench his thirst only served to render it more acute.

In order to take his mind from thoughts of his thirst and of the immediate future, he rapidly circled the island. As he had expected, it was utterly barren. With shoulders drooping in despair he settled wearily to a seat on the jagged mass of metal high up on top of the meteor.

An expression of sudden interest lit up his face. For a second time he felt that particular throbbing, that strange pulsing beneath the surface of the meteor. But now it was far more noticeable than before. It seemed to be directly below him, and very close to the surface.

Parkinson could not tell how long he sat there, but from the appearance of the sun, he thought that at the very shortest, an hour passed by while he remained on that spot. And during that time, the throbbing gradually increased until the metal began vibrating under his feet.

Suddenly the bacteriologist leaped aside. The vibrating had reached its height, and the meteor seemed to lurch, to tilt at a sharp angle. His leap carried him to firm footing again. And then, his thirst and

hopeless position completely forgotten, Parkinson stared in fascination at the amazing spectacle before him.

An eighteen-foot disc of metal, a perfect circle, seemed to have been cut out of the top of the meteor. While he watched, it began turning slowly, ponderously, and started sinking into the meteor. As it sank, Parkinson fancied that it grew transparent, and gradually vanished into nothingness—but he wasn't sure.

A great pit, eighteen feet wide, but far deeper, lay before him in the very place where, not more than ten minutes before, he had stood. Not a moment too soon had he leaped.

Motionless he stood there, waiting in tense expectation. What would happen next, he had not the least idea, but he couldn't prevent his imagination from running riot.

He hadn't long to wait before his watching was rewarded. A few minutes after the pit appeared, he heard a loud, high-pitched whir coming from the heart of the meteor. As it grew louder, it assumed a higher and still higher key, finally rising above the range of human ears. And at that moment the strange vehicle arose to the surface.

A simple-appearing mechanism was the car, consisting of a twelve-

foot sphere of the same bronze-like metal that made up the meteor, with a huge wheel, like a bronze cincture, around its middle. It was the whirling of this great wheel that had caused the high-pitched whirring. The entire, strange machine was surrounded by a peculiar green radiance, a radiance that seemed to crackle ominously as the sphere hovered over the mouth of the pit.

For a moment the car hung motionless, then it drifted slowly to the surface of the meteor, landing a few feet away from Parkinson. Hastily he drew back from the greenly phosphorescent thing—but not before he had experienced an unpleasant prickling sensation over his entire body.

As the bacteriologist drew away, there was a sharp, audible click within the interior of the sphere; and the green radiance vanished. At the same moment, three heavy metal supports sprang from equi-distant points in the sides of the car, and held the sphere in a balanced position on the rounded top of the meteor.

There was a soft, grating sound on the opposite side of the car. Quickly, Parkinson circled it—and stopped short in surprise.

Men were descending from an opening in the side of the sphere! Parkinson had reasoned that since the meteor had come from the

depths of space, any being in its interior, unnatural as that seemed, would have assumed a form quite different from the human. Of course, conditions on Earth could be approximated on another planet. At any rate, whatever the explanation, the sphere was emitting men!

They were men—but there was something queer about them. They were very tall—seven feet or more—and very thin; and their skins were a delicate, transparent white. They looked rather ghostly in their tight-fitting white suits. It was not this that made them seem queer, however: it was an indefinite something, a vague suggestion of heartless inhumanity, of unearthliness, that was somehow repulsive and loathsome.

There were three of them, all very similar in appearance and bearing. Their surprise at the sight of Parkinson, if anything, was greater than the start their appearance had given him. He, at least, had expected to see beings of some sort, while the three had been taken completely by surprise.

For a moment they surveyed him with staring, cold-blue eyes. Then Parkinson extended his hand, and as cordially as he could, exclaimed:

"Hello! Welcome to Earth!"

The visitors from space ignored his advances and continued staring at him. Their attitude at first was quizzical, speculative, but slowly a hostile expression crept into their eyes.

Suddenly, with what seemed like common consent, they faced each other, and conversed in low tones in some unintelligible tongue. For almost a minute they talked, while Parkinson watched them in growing apprehension.

Finally they seemed to have reached some definite conclusion; with one accord they turned and moved slowly toward the bacteriologist, something distinctly menacing in their attitudes. The men from the meteor were tall, but they were thin; Parkinson, too, was large, and his six-foot length was covered with layers of solid muscle. As the three advanced toward him, he doubled his fists, and crouched in readiness for the expected attack.

They were almost upon him when he leaped into action. A crushing left to his stomach sent the first one to the meteor-top, where he lay doubled up in pain. But that was the only blow that Parkinson struck; in a moment he found himself lying prone upon his back, utterly helpless, his body completely paralyzed. What they had done to him,

he did not know; all that he could remember was two thin bodies twining themselves around him—a sharp twinge of pain at the base of his skull; then absolute helplessness.

One of the tall beings grasped Parkinson about the waist, and with surprising strength, threw him over his shoulder. The other assisted his groaning fellow. When the latter had recovered to some extent, the three ascended the ladder that led into the metal sphere.

The interior of the strange vehicle, as far as Parkinson could see, was as simple as its exterior. There was no intricate machinery of any sort in the square room; probably what machinery there was lay between the interior and exterior walls of the sphere. As for controls, these consisted of several hundred little buttons that studded one of the walls.

When they entered the vehicle, Parkinson was literally, and none too gently, dumped upon the floor. The man who had carried him stepped over to the controls. Like those of a skilled typist, his long, thin fingers darted over the buttons. In a moment the sphere was in motion.

There were no more thrills for Parkinson in that ride than he would have derived from a similar ride in an elevator. They sank very

slowly for some minutes, it seemed to him; then they stopped with a barely noticeable jar.

The door of the car was thrust aside by one of the three, and Parkinson was borne from the sphere. A bright, coppery light flooded the interior of the meteor, seeming to radiate from its walls. In his helpless state, and in the awkward position in which he was carried, with his head close to the floor, he could see little of the room through which they passed, in spite of the light. Later, however, he learned that it was circular in shape, and about twice the diameter of the cylindrical tube that led into it. The wall that bound this chamber was broken at regular intervals by tall, narrow, doorways, each leading into a different room.

Parkinson was carried into one of these, and was placed in a high-backed metal chair. After he had been strapped fast, one of the men placed his hands at the base of the bacteriologist's skull; he felt a sudden twinge of pain; and his strange paralysis left him suddenly.

He knew it was useless to struggle; without resisting, he let them place upon his head a cap-like device that seemed lost in a tangled maze of machinery. Each meteor-man grasped one of the instruments resembling old-time radio head-phones that were fastened to Parkinson's head-gear, and clamped it over his ears.

The bacteriologist heard a steady, humming drone, like a swarm of angry bees—felt a peculiar, soothing warmth about his head; and then he slept.

Only a moment or two seemed to have passed when he awoke. The strange device on his head was removed and put away; and then, to Parkinson's amazement, one of the three men, evidently the leader, spoke—in English!

"Now that you have recovered consciousness," he remarked in a cold, expressionless voice, "you had better realize at the very beginning that you are completely in our power. Any effort to escape will be futile, for there is only one way to reach the outside; the opening through the top; and only one means of travel through that opening: the sphere. And since you know nothing about the operation of the machine, any attempt to run it would be disastrous to you.

"If you promise to refrain from violence, we'll release you, and give you some measure of freedom. We'll do this because you can be of assistance to us in one of our tasks here on your planet."

Parkinson assented readily; he knew he could gain nothing by rejecting their offer. "Of course I'll promise. But—but, how did you

learn English?" he asked in bewilderment.

"You taught us," the leader replied. "That device we placed upon your head created a duplicate of your knowledge in our minds. We knew your language, your world, indeed, yourself, as well as you do."

Parkinson shook his head in amazement. Another question came to his mind as the men released him. He was interrupted before he could give it expression.

“Don't ask," the leader exclaimed. "I'll tell our entire story so that you'll have no occasion to annoy us with your questions.

"We're Venerians," he began, "inhabitants of the planet you call Venus. For ages our world has been overcrowded. A short time ago, the conditions became so acute that something had to be done. It was suggested that we seek another habitable planet to which our people could migrate.

"Your Earth was thought to be the world with physical conditions most closely resembling those of Acor, or Venus. Our scientists set to work immediately, using forces and devices with which you are totally unfamiliar, and constructed several missiles which they

hurled at Earth. These missiles, spherical masses closely resembling meteors, were set to explode after a certain period of contact with an atmosphere similar to our own. By their explosion we on Venus could determine whether or not this world had a breathable atmosphere.

"Upon our deciding that the Earth was habitable, we built this great machine. It is chiefly composed of our greatest heat-resister, a metal we call thoque; I see no corresponding word in your vocabulary; evidently you are unfamiliar with the element, or else it is unknown on Earth.

"After our flight through space, automatically controlled, by the way, on Venus, we landed here. With our thoque disintegrator, we bored a passageway to the surface of this great sphere. Then we entered the car, rose to the top of the passageway, and discovered you.

"That is a brief synopsis of our actions—and it must suffice! Ask no questions; we do not wish to be disturbed by the blind gropings of your primitive mind!"

There was a cold finality in the Venerian's voice that convinced Parkinson that for the moment, at least, he had better forget the many questions that had surged up in his mind.

The Venerian leader spoke again. "From our observations of your mind, we know that you have not had food or water for a rather lengthy period of time. It is not our purpose to starve you: you shall eat and drink."

A minute later Parkinson sat at a very high table in one of the rooms, drinking water from Venus, and eating the fare of an alien world.

Days passed by, merging into weeks, while Parkinson lost all track of time. The bacteriologist's existence became a ceaseless round of toil. The Venerian had said that he would be given some measure of freedom, because he would be of use to them; he had not been with them long ere he learned what that use was.

One of the rooms was filled with great slabs of thoque; it was Parkinson's task to carry the slabs to the vehicle at the base of the shaft, one by one; to rise to the surface with them, accompanied by two of the men—the third was working on the surface—and there unload them. Day after day this continued.

Hope of escaping was almost dead in Parkinson's breast, because he was constantly under the surveillance of those hard, blue eyes. Only one thing kept hope alive: by watching the Venerians operate the car, he was slowly gaining a knowledge of the meaning of the many

buttons in the wall. Some day, if an opportunity came, he meant to be ready to take advantage of it.

Once, shortly after his monotonous toil began, Parkinson experienced a great flare of hope for deliverance. They had just brought another slab to the surface, when a steamer appeared above the horizon. It was far away, but its crew must surely have seen the island.

But his expectations were short-lived. One of the three drew from beneath his tight-fitting, white garments a little, metal object, a long tube, with a handle at one end, and pointed it at the vessel. For a moment he held it thus, moving it slowly backward and forward: then he returned it to its place of concealment, and turned away with an air of indifference. And Parkinson saw the ship burst suddenly into flame, a few minutes later to sink beneath the waves.

Shaken to the depths of his being, Parkinson resumed his work. The inhumanity of these saturnine Venerians filled him with a dread so great that he refused to admit it to himself. That that had not been the first time that they had destroyed a ship, he felt sure; his heart sank, and grew more hopeless.

At last his task of carrying slabs was finished. The room was empty,

and the work completed. A great tower, entirely covering the island, reared its head into the sky. In appearance, it resembled a very tall lighthouse. This resemblance held true only until its top was reached; there it ended. From the tower's top extended four long, hollow arms, so constructed that they whirled about the tower at a mad pace when the machinery with which they were connected was started. In addition, arrangement was made for a powerful blast of air to be sent through the tubes when the Venerians so desired.

What the purpose of this great edifice was, Parkinson could not guess: later, he learned the horrible significance of it all.

After the tower was finished, the bacteriologist was left to his own devices to a great extent, though always closely watched by one of his captors. They let him eat all the food he desired, and let him lie around as much as he wished, regaining his health and strength. This was a pleasant surprise for him: he took full advantage of his privileges.

Then, one day when Parkinson had fully recovered from the effects of his grueling labors, the leader of the Venerians approached him from behind, and before he could raise a hand in defense, had rendered him helplessly paralyzed.

"You will now be given a second opportunity to help the cause of Venus on Earth," he said in his expressionless voice. And so saying, he lifted Parkinson, and bore him into one of the rooms.

Chapter 3

At no time while he was held captive by the Venerians was Parkinson as hopeless, or as completely filled with despair as when he was carried into this room. There was something depressing about the chamber, something that gripped his heart with the chill hand of dread. He had a feeling of impending evil.

The few momentary glimpses of the chamber that he had gotten while he was being carried, sufficed to convince Parkinson that this was a laboratory, or—he shuddered at the thought—an operating room. The walls, floor and ceiling were composed of a white porcelainlike substance: from these walls, strangely, streamed the same coppery light that filled the entire meteor.

Entirely concealing one wall was a long, glass case, constructed to form countless little niches, each of which held a small, transparent vessel. At the back of the room was a high table, covered with transparent cases which were filled with complex instruments of every description, some similar to those on Earth; others entirely different.

The thing that brought the thought of an operating room to Parkinson's mind was the long, white slab that rested on metal

uprights in the room's center—an operating table. A moment after they entered the room, he had his theory substantiated: the Venerian leader placed him on the white slab, stretching him to full length. It was an operating table—and he was to be the subject of their operation!

He had lain there but a moment when two of the Venerians approached, one on either side, and began removing his clothing. It was not long before he lay on the cold slab, entirely nude.

While he was being stripped, he heard the leader of the Venerians moving about, heard the click of glass, the rasp of metal upon metal. But, unable to move his eyes, he had seen none of his activities, except to note that several of the little vessels had been taken from their resting places.

When the two had finished disrobing him, and had replaced him upon his back, the leader appeared. He looked down at Parkinson, a queer expression in his hard, blue eyes. He seemed to hesitate a moment: then he spoke.

"Earthling," he said in his toneless voice, "I have decided to tell you of our intentions. You are going to play a very important part in our scheme, and it is only fitting that you should know. You can do

nothing to hinder our plans: you are giving us incalculable aid: and it affords me some degree of satisfaction to tell you this.

"As you know, Earthling, we purpose to have the people of Acor to come to Earth to live, to relieve the congested conditions of our own world. Obviously, there is no room for two types of intelligent beings on one planet—your race must go! It is our intention to destroy all human life on Earth!

"We intend accomplishing this with Venerian microbes. From the record of your knowledge, I've learned that diseases of various kinds are common on Earth. We expected that such would be the case, and thus, you would not be immune to germs, so we came prepared. Each of the small compartments in that case that you may have seen, contains a culture of a different germ. After we have determined which Venerian bacilli will be the most effective, we will develop them in great quantities, and loose them upon your world.

"In the selecting process, you will play your part. Since our germs may have a different effect upon your bodies than they do upon Venerians, we will inoculate you with different diseases, and watch their effects upon you.

"Of course, you yourself will be in no great danger, for we will have

the diseases under our constant control. On Acor we have abolished disease entirely, having a reagent or an antitoxin for every malady; we will use our cures upon you immediately after we have seen how you react to each disease.

"What we desire is a bacillus that will take effect when it is breathed in through the lungs. If the disease is of such a nature as to instill fear in the minds of observers, so much the better; but that is unnecessary. When we discover a microbe of that nature, we will be ready to act.

"By the way, our work has been lessened to a great degree by the fact that you are a bacteriologist. The knowledge we gain from you has enabled us to eliminate at least half of our microbes. All Venerian germs that are duplicated on Earth will be left out of our calculations. Only those unknown to your planet will be tried upon you."

When the Venerian had finished his explanation, each word of which had sounded like a death knell to Parkinson, the bacteriologist lay on the slab in the grip of a nightmare of horror. The cold-blooded brutality of these Venerian beasts, and the thought of lying there helpless with his body the prey of unknown diseases, filled him with a maddening fear and dread.

Mightily he struggled to break the uncanny bonds that held him paralyzed, but it was of no avail. His body retained its helpless rigidity.

Only for a moment was Parkinson left to his fearful musings; then the Venerians begin their work. A tall table on wheels was brought from somewhere, and drawn to the side of the slab. Upon this various instruments were placed, side by side with numerous flat vessels containing germ cultures. Parkinson saw none of this, but from the sounds that came to his ears he could infer what was taking place.

Finally, everything seemed to be in readiness. The Venerian leader bent over Parkinson for a moment: and the latter felt a sharp pain in his side. Then the Venerian withdrew.

Slowly, interminably, the time dragged by while the microbes that had been introduced into his body were at their work. How long he lay there with the Venerians watching, he could not tell, but it seemed to be hours. During that time he felt himself gripped by an increasingly violent fever. Unbearable heat flooded his body. And because of his helplessness, he could do nothing to relieve his pain and discomfort. It was maddening!

When he thought he had reached the limit of his endurance, and felt that he would go insane in another moment, the Venerian leader injected something into his side. He became aware of an immediate sense of relief; in an unbelievably short time the fever had left him and he was himself again.

There followed for Parkinson hours of nightmare agony, while the Venerians experimented with his living body. Time after time he was inoculated with strange bacilli that wracked him with tortures indescribable. Hideous diseases covered him with festering sores; twisted his flesh into a repellent mass of scars; left him weakened and deformed. Had it not been for the incredible curative powers of the Venerians, he would have died then; but always, when the end seemed at hand, they brought him back to life, only to subject him to other horrors.

After what seemed countless ages, the Venerians left him alone. Under the powerful effects of their cures, Parkinson began to recover. Hope welled up in his heart; perhaps the terrible experiments were ended.

When he was almost certain that the torture was over, his hopes were suddenly destroyed. The three Venerians approached again, each bearing a number of vessels containing germ cultures. These they

placed on the table at Parkinson's side; then two of them withdrew, leaving the leader to continue his work. Uttering a few words in the Venerian tongue, he occupied himself with something on the table, and a moment later turned toward the bacteriologist, a long needle in his hands.

Parkinson felt a great burning pain in his left arm, as though a searing, hot needle had been thrust into his flesh. In a moment this vanished. Then a feeling of irresistible lassitude overwhelmed him; an unbearable weariness filled him with longing for rest, peace—death. This, too, was of short duration.

With the passing of the weariness, Parkinson became aware of a sharp throbbing in his arm. Rapidly this increased in violence, until suddenly an unbearable, excruciating agony seized him. Far greater was this than any pain he had suffered before. For a moment he struggled to scream, to move, to do anything to relieve his agony. There seemed to be a sudden snap—a cry of anguish burst from his lips—and his senses left him. Just as the bonds of paralysis had broken, he had lost consciousness.

Life returned to Parkinson very slowly. In a daze he stared around, uncomprehending. Then suddenly he realized that he was no longer paralyzed: nor was he in the operating room. The bed on which he

lay was soft, comfortable; the room, unfamiliar. But not for long did his mind dwell upon this; in a few moments his eyelids closed, and he slept the sleep of complete mental and physical exhaustion.

Daring the weeks that followed, Parkinson did little other than sleep. Occasionally he arose, either to stretch himself, or to secure food, but for the greater part of the time he remained in bed. His body was a mere shadow of its former self as the result of his terrible experience on the white slab: his incessant sleeping, necessary because of his weakened condition, served to bring him back to his former health. The Venerians seemed glad to have it thus: asleep, he did not disturb their activities.

When he had awakened from his first period of natural slumber, he had received a terrible shock. His left arm was gone, amputated at the shoulder. Strangely, the wound had healed while he slept, probably the result of the Venerian doctoring, so there was no pain: but the shock had been terrible.

After he had recovered from the effects of that shock, he had resolved to make the Venerians pay for what they had done. And then he had realized that the inhuman brutes must be destroyed for a greater reason: unless he interfered, he believed that they would carry out their intention of destroying all human life.

As the weeks passed by, while strength was returning to Parkinson, he learned in a general way what the invaders were doing. They were engaged in developing vast quantities of microbes to be spread over Earth. When these were ready, a great amount of fine dust that the Venerians had brought with them, was impregnated with the bacilli. This was then taken up into the tower, where, as Parkinson learned later, it was blown out through the four tubes that spun around the tower's top, to drift through the air—to enter human bodies—to destroy life.

The Venerians worked with the cultures and impregnated dust without protection of any sort: evidently they were immune to the disease. Later Parkinson learned that he was likewise immune; they had rendered him so after trying the germs upon him.

Gradually the bacteriologist's health returned—so gradually that his captors seemed not to notice it. He was glad of this, for their vigilance had relaxed, and he did not want it renewed. Even when he was as strong and well as ever, he spent much time in bed, shamming illness. And when he could do so without danger of detection, he kept a close watch upon the three, waiting for a time when he would be entirely alone.

At last his opportunity came. The three Venerians rose to the surface

together, leaving him in his room, to all outward appearances, asleep. But sleep was far from him at that moment; he had been watching.

Shortly after the sphere had vanished up the shaft, Parkinson emerged from his room. For a moment he surveyed the circle of doors: then he shrugged his shoulders. They all looked alike to him. Quickly he crossed the room, and pressed a button that mechanically opened a door. It was his purpose, first of all, to secure a weapon; one room would do as well as another for a beginning.

At first glance Parkinson was struck by the strange familiarity of this chamber: then, after a moment, he recognized it. A tall, high-backed metal chair in its center was its mark of identification. This was the chamber wherein the Venerians had transferred a record of his knowledge to their minds.

Carefully he looked around in search of a weapon, but the room held nothing but the chair and the thought transference device. In a moment he withdrew, closing the door behind him.

In the next room he entered, he was fortunate. This chamber was filled with strange devices of various kinds. While curiously inspecting the intricate machines, he saw something that brought a

smile of satisfaction to his lips.

Against one wall stood a tall, glass case, one of the shelves of which held several metal devices that Parkinson immediately recognized as being the Venerians' weapons. Poignantly he remembered how a similar device had destroyed a ship.

Leaving the door slightly ajar, he crossed to the case and secured one of the weapons. For a moment he studied it. There was nothing complex about the mechanism; a cursory examination sufficed to reveal how it was operated. Pressure on a little knob at the back of the handle released the devastating ray.

He was about to slip the device into his pocket when he stiffened involuntarily. There was a sound of movement outside the room—he heard a step on the metal floor—then he whirled.

One of the Venerians stood in the doorway, a menacing frown on his face. He was crouching, ready to spring upon Parkinson.

Quick as thought, the bacteriologist leveled his newly-acquired weapon, and pressed on the knob. There was a sudden spurt of flame from the Venerian's body; then it crumpled, sagging, shrinking together.

Hastily Parkinson released the pressure on the little knob, aghast at the destructive power of his little weapon. Then, as he remembered the torture he had endured at their hands, he directed the ray upon the ashes, until they, too, were consumed, leaving naught but a dark patch on the floor.

For several minutes Parkinson stood there in deep thought. There was no immediate danger from the two remaining Venerians, for they were up in the tower, while the sphere was in the meteor; so he could think with utmost safety. Deep thought and careful planning were necessary now, for he had taken the step that must mean either his death or the death of the Venerians.

Suddenly he leaped into action; he had decided upon his next move. Crossing to the case he secured another weapon. He wasn't sure that they could be effectively discharged without re-loading; handicapped as he was with one arm gone, he had to be certain of the reliability of his means of defense. Then he left the room, and crossed to the huge thoque sphere.

It was the work of a moment to enter this, and prepare to ascend. This done, he turned his attention to the numerous knobs on the wall. He had not seen them for quite a while; it was with difficulty that he recalled which knobs controlled the car's ascent. At last, hesitantly,

but correctly, he pressed on the knobs, and the sphere rose slowly toward the surface.

At the proper moment, Parkinson, brought the vehicle to a halt, and slid back the door. Furtively he peered around. The Venerians were on the other side of the tower. Quickly he lowered the ladder and descended.

As he stepped to the floor, a sudden cry of dismay fell upon his ears. One of the Venerians, coming around the car, had discovered him. Without a moment's hesitation, Parkinson aimed his little weapon, and pressed upon the knob. Like his fellow, the Venerian fell to the floor, a heap of charred ashes.

With the second Venerian destroyed, Parkinson dashed around the sphere, metal cylinder held in readiness. The leader of the Venerians was stealing stealthily around the other side of the car, his hand fumbling beneath his garment.

"Stop!" Parkinson cried. "Raise your hands above your head—empty!" A cylinder clattered to the metal floor as the Venerian's hands moved skyward.

"Keep your back turned!" Parkinson snapped as the invader began

about. "I won't hesitate to press on this little knob, at your first hostile move! I'd thoroughly enjoy burning you to a crisp, so be very careful."

While talking, Parkinson had moved slowly toward the man from Venus; now, almost upon him, he quickly dropped his weapon into a pocket, and swung a terrible blow at the base of his skull. The Venerian fell to the floor without a groan, unconscious.

Parkinson stared at the recumbent figure rather dubiously for a moment. If only he had his other arm! But it was gone; with an impatient shake of his head he stooped and raised the senseless invader.

It was anything but an easy task for the bacteriologist to carry his seven-foot burden up the ladder and into the sphere, but finally, he succeeded in doing so. Then, without delay, he lowered the car into the meteor again.

As he bore the Venerian from the vehicle, he tried to decide upon his next move. Obviously, he had to secure the one surviving invader, so that he would not be a menace to Parkinson when he revived. And then the logical thing to do would be, in some way, to secure information from him as to how to cure the disease that was

spreading over the world.

The logical thing to do, yes—but how? With only one arm, the simple task of binding the Venerian presented considerable difficulty. How much more difficult would it be to force anything from him?

Then the solution of the first problem presented itself to Parkinson. What was to prevent his strapping this being into the high-backed chair to which he had been secured some time before? Quickly he crossed the circular room to the door he had first passed through while searching for a weapon.

Ten minutes later, when the Venerian regained his senses, he was fastened securely to the tall, metal chair.

"Well," Parkinson addressed him, "conditions seem to be reversed now, and you're the underdog. I've nipped your invasion in the bud. All your elaborate preparations are wasted."

Something resembling a sneer wreathed the Venerian's thin lips; a mocking gleam lit his cold, blue eyes.

"So our efforts have been wasted, have they? I'm afraid I can't agree with you. Already, enough bacteria have been released to destroy all

life, though it will take longer than we desire. Even though you kill me, our goal will still be reached. The human race will die!"

A cloud of gloom fell upon Parkinson. He had expected this; but he had been hoping that he was wrong.

"Then there's only one thing for me to do, and that is: I'll have to force you to tell me how to undo the damage you've done."

The Venerian smiled mirthlessly. "You have absolutely no chance of accomplishing that," he said. "We've done our work too well to allow any interference now.

"You do not know this, but we have released upon your world the worst malady ever known to Venus. There is only one remedy; and I'm the only one who knows it, or who has the means wherewith to accomplish it. And I certainly won't tell!"

The worried expression on Parkinson's face increased in intensity. There was something in the Venerian's voice that convinced him that he meant what he said.

Then suddenly his countenance cleared, and a happy smile replaced his frown.

"Perhaps you won't tell, but I think you will. There are more ways than one of forcing you."

Parkinson had hit upon a solution to his problem. The Venerians had reproduced his knowledge in their brains; why wouldn't it be possible for him to reverse the operation?

In a moment he secured the thought-transference apparatus from a case in the rear of the room, and bore it to the chair, and in spite of the Venerian leader's struggles, placed it upon his head. He put the head-phones over his own ears, and began fumbling with the controls.

Suddenly he seemed to strike the right combination. There was a faint, humming drone in his ears; after a moment this was replaced by a loud crackling—and the knowledge of the man from Venus was becoming his own.

Somewhat dazed, Parkinson shut off the current. His mind was in a turmoil. He was in possession of knowledge of such an amazing character that, for the moment he had lost his mental equilibrium. Indeed, so strange was his new-found knowledge, that he could not grasp the significance of even half of the facts in his mind.

But already, he knew how, with animal electricity, they had paralyzed him; knew what had happened to him on the operating table; knew the nature of the dread disease that destroyed his arm; the Gray Plague—and knew the cure!

A sudden thought arrested this review of his new knowledge. The Gray Plague! At that very moment incalculable quantities of the deadly bacilli were being cast into the air. And he was doing nothing about it!

He glanced at the Venerian. He was still unconscious, and would remain so for some minutes to come. And even if he did recover his senses, he was securely fastened to the chair; Parkinson dashed out of the room, crossed to the sphere, and passed through the open doorway.

Without hesitation he manipulated the controls, directed by his Venerian knowledge. Rapidly the sphere rose to the surface.

As it came to rest on the floor of the tower, Parkinson sprang from the car, and headed toward a mass of intricate machinery that filled fully a quarter of the great building.

Even this caused him no great concern; he was as familiar with it as

he would have been had he constructed it. For some moments he was busy with numerous dials and levers; then the release of the germs was stopped.

Parkinson spent several minutes in examining the contents of the tower, his Earthly mind lost in wonder at the strange things his Venerian knowledge revealed to him. Then he entered the sphere again, and sank into the meteor.

As he moved toward the room that held the Venerian, his mind was busy with conjectures as to what he would do with his prisoner. It was necessary for the bacteriologist to reach the mainland as quickly as possible, and make use of his knowledge of the cure for the Gray Plague. He didn't want to kill the man; he couldn't free him; yet if he left him strapped to the chair, he'd surely die of starvation.

Still undecided, he thrust open the door. With a startled gasp he stopped short. Somehow the Venerian had freed himself; at that moment he leaped toward Parkinson.

Instinctively the bacteriologist flung up his hand in a defensive attitude. The onrushing Venerian caught Parkinson's out-thrust fist in the pit of his stomach, and doubled up in pain. While he was thus defenseless, Parkinson placed a well-directed blow on the side of the

Venerian's jaw, a blow carrying every ounce of his strength.

So great was the force of the punch, that it lifted the man from Venus and cast him headlong upon the floor. His head landed with a sickening thud. Unmoving, he lay where he had fallen.

Parkinson knelt over him for a moment, then arose. Without question, the man was dead. The Venerian had solved the bacteriologist's last problem; he was free to return to the United States with his means of saving mankind.

Drawing the little metal cylinder from his pocket, he burned the body of the Venerian leader to a heap of ashes, ridding the world of the last invader. Then he turned and entered the glass-lined operating room.

Following the dictates of his Venerian knowledge, he crossed to one of the walls, and drew therefrom a flat, glass vessel, somewhat like a petri dish. This contained bacteria that were harmless in themselves, and were hostile to those of the Gray Plague. These germs, brought from Venus, were the only cure for the terrible disease.

The work of the English bacteriologist Twort, in 1915, and the Frenchman, d'Herelle, in 1917, brought to the attention of the

scientific world the fact that many bacteria are subject to attack and destruction by some unknown active agent with which they are associated in infected material. This agent, whatever its character, changed growing germ cultures to a dead, glassy substance.

Twort advanced the thought that the agent might be a living, filtered virus, although he favored the theory that it was an enzyme derived from the bacteria themselves.

D'Herelle, on the contrary, believed that this phenomenon was due to a living, multiplying, ultra-microscopic microbe that destroyed certain bacteria.

Evidence favoring both theories has come to light, with the result that, at present, controversy is rife. Up to date, the contention of neither side has been proved.

Parkinson's adventure was almost at an end. He had not emerged unscathed, but he had won!

The details of his further actions need not be recorded. Suffice it to say that he entered the sphere, carrying his precious, curative germs, arose to the top of the tower, and passed through a round opening in its side. His borrowed knowledge revealed that the car possessed

abilities that he had not suspected; with amazing speed he caused it to flash across the Atlantic Ocean to the United States.

There he saw the frightful carnage that the Plague had caused, saw the deserted cities—and was filled with self-reproach because he had not acted sooner.

Across the miles and miles of deserted country he sped, following the fleeing hordes, finally passing over the stragglers and landing in the heart of the congested areas. After making a few inquiries, he returned to the sphere, and continued on toward the West. He landed, finally, outside the city of San Francisco.

A short time later, twisted, deformed, yet triumphant, he was ushered into the presence of the United States government as—the man who had saved the human race.

Chapter 4

The terrible days of the Gray Plague ended in mystery. Much that had puzzled the world, Parkinson, with his Venerian knowledge, explained; but there was one thing, the final, enigmatical act in the strange drama, that was as much of a mystery to him as it was to the rest of the world.

Enigma! Of what significance, of what portent—who could tell?

When the great vessel from the United States, equipped to destroy the meteor of the Venetians, neared the great thoque sphere, they came upon a scene quite different from what they had expected. Parkinson, who was on the ship, was more surprised than the rest, for he had definite knowledge of what, in the natural course of events, they should see. For the others there was nothing so very strange in what they saw; Parkinson had lied, that was all.

When the bacteriologist had left the meteor, there had been a high, bronze-colored tower, a burnished lighthouse, covering its entire top. It had been there—but now it was gone! Only the jagged, arched surface of the meteor remained.

They lowered boats and rowed to the strange island. There they saw

something that filled them—Parkinson especially—with a very definite uneasiness. The entire top of the meteor was a twisted, fire-blasted mass of bronze-like metal. Where the tower had been, where the shaft had led into the remarkable interplanetary vehicle, there was now a broken expanse of thoque that flashed fire under the rays of the sun.

Something seemed to have melted, to have fused the tower, until it had crumpled, and had run, filling the entrance of the meteor. There was irrefutable evidence to that effect; no one thought otherwise.

But what agency had done this strange thing?

Someone suggested that it might have been the work of some prearranged mechanism. Parkinson shook his head. Had such been the case, his Venerian knowledge would have told him so.

Obviously, nothing of Earth had done it, nothing of Earth—then something of Venus! Inconclusive conjecture, perhaps, but no other explanation offered itself. Something had sealed the contents of the meteor from the sight of man, something with a purpose. From Venus? The thought was logical, to say the least.

Not for long did they remain there beside the Venerian vehicle; there

was naught for them to do, so they turned about and headed toward the United States. They bore tidings that were vaguely disturbing, tidings that none were glad to hear. For, according to all indications, something alien to Earth was still within her confines.

Behind it all—the meteors, the Plague, the sealing of the Venerian vehicle—is one fact of great significance. No longer is man alone in the universe; no longer is he in isolation! Out of space came a menace, an intelligence striving to wrest from him his right to rule over Earth. No longer can man in his smug complacency think of himself as being secure in his strength. He has been shown the utter folly of such thinking.

The menace—the invaders from Venus—came, and were destroyed, their purposes defeated. Yet—in the vast reaches of space, in worlds of other dimensions, in the cosmic crucible of life that embodies all creation, there may be other forms of life, other menaces, hovering clouds of death, preparing to sweep down upon Earth to snuff out her life. Who can tell?

And who may say that man is free from the Venerian danger? The strange sealing of the meteor implies that the menace is still present. Who knows but what those inhuman Venerian brutes may even now be planning some new invasion, may be preparing to renew their

attack upon Earth?

Time alone will tell.

#59 Vagabonds Of Space, By Harold Vincent Schoepflin:

From the depths of the Sargasso Sea of space came the thought-warning, "Turn back!" but Carr and his Martian friend found it was too late!

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

went mad with fury

- - -

Chapter 1: The Nomad

Gathered around a long table in a luxuriously furnished director's room, a group of men listened in astonishment to the rapid and forceful speech of one of their number.

From the depths of the Sargasso Sea of Space came the thought-warning, "Turn back!" But Carr and his Martian friend found it was

too late!

"I tell you I'm through, gentlemen," averred the speaker. "I'm fed up with the job, that's all. Since 2317 you've had me sitting at the helm of International Airways and I've worked my fool head off for you. Now—get someone else!"

"Made plenty of money yourself, didn't you, Carr?" asked one of the directors, a corpulent man with a self-satisfied countenance.

"Sure I did. That's not the point. I've done all the work. There's not another executive in the outfit whose job is more than a title, and you know it. I want a change and a rest. Going to take it, too. So, go ahead with your election of officers and leave me out."

"Your stock?" Courtney Davis, chairman of the board, sensed that Carr Parker meant what he said.

"I'll hold it. The rest of you can vote it as you choose: divide the proxies pro rata, based on your individual holdings. But I reserve the right to dump it all on the market at the first sign of shady dealings. That suit you?"

The recalcitrant young President of International Airways had risen

from the table. The chairman attempted to restrain him.

"Come on now, Carr, let's reason this out. Perhaps if you just took a leave of absence—"

"Call it anything you want. I'm done right now."

Carr Parker stalked from the room, leaving eleven perspiring capitalists to argue over his action.

He rushed to the corridor and nervously pressed the call button of the elevators. A minute later he emerged upon the roof of the Airways building, one of the tallest of New York's mid-town sky-scrapers. The air here, fifteen hundred feet above the hot street, was cool and fresh. He walked across the great flat surface of the landing stage to inspect a tiny helicopter which had just settled to a landing. Angered as he was, he still could not resist the attraction these trim little craft had always held for him. The feeling was in his blood.

His interest, however, was short lived and he strolled to the observation aisle along the edge of the landing stage. He stared moodily into the heavens where thousands of aircraft of all descriptions sped hither and yon. A huge liner of the Martian route was dropping from the skies and drifting toward her cradle on Long

Island. He looked out over the city to the north: fifty miles of it he knew stretched along the east shore of the Hudson. Greatest of the cities of the world, it housed a fifth of the population of the United States of North America; a third of the wealth.

Cities! The entire world lived in them! Civilization was too highly developed nowadays. Adventure was a thing of the past. Of course there were the other planets, Mars and Venus, but they were as bad. At least he had found them so on his every business trip. He wished he had lived a couple of centuries ago, when the first space-ships ventured forth from the earth. Those were days of excitement and daring enterprise. Then a man could find ways of getting away from things—next to nature—out into the forests; hunting; fishing. But the forests were gone, the streams enslaved by the power monopolies. There were only the cities—and barren plains. Everything in life was made by man, artificial.

Something drew his eyes upward and he spotted an unusual object in the heavens, a mere speck as yet but drawing swiftly in from the upper air lanes. But this ship, small though it appeared, stood out from amongst its fellows for some reason. Carr rubbed his eyes to clear his vision. Was it? Yes—it was—surrounded by a luminous haze. Notwithstanding the brilliance of the afternoon sun, this haze was clearly visible. A silver shimmering that was not like anything

he had seen on Earth. The ship swung in toward the city and was losing altitude rapidly. Its silvery aura deserted it and the vessel was revealed as a sleek, tapered cylinder with no wings, rudders or helicopter screws. Like the giant liners of the Interplanetary Service it displayed no visible means of support or propulsion. This was no ordinary vessel.

Carr watched in extreme interest as it circled the city in a huge spiral, settling lower at each turn. It seemed that the pilot was searching for a definite landing stage. Then suddenly it swooped with a rush. Straight for the stage of the Airways building! The strange aura reappeared and the little vessel halted in mid-air, poised a moment, then dropped gracefully and lightly as a feather to the level surface not a hundred feet from where he stood. He hurried to the spot to examine the strange craft.

"Mado!" he exclaimed in surprise as a husky, bronzed Martian squeezed through the quickly opened manhole and clambered heavily to the platform. Mado of Canax—an old friend!

"Devils of Terra!" gasped the Martian, his knees giving way, "—your murderous gravity! Here, help me. I've forgotten the energizing switch."

Carr laughed as he fumbled with a mechanism that was strapped to the Martian's back. Mado, who tipped the scales at over two hundred pounds on his own planet, weighed nearly six hundred here. His legs simply couldn't carry the load!

"There you are, old man." Parker had located the switch and a musical purr came from the black box between the Martian's broad shoulders. "Now stand up and tell me what you're doing here. And what's the idea of the private ship? Come all the way from home in it?"

His friend struggled to his feet with an effort, for the field emanating from the black box required a few seconds to reach the intensity necessary to counteract two-thirds of the earth's gravity.

"Thanks Carr," he grinned. "Yes, I came all the way in that bus. Alone, too—and she's mine! What do you think of her?"

"A peach, from what I can see. But how come? Not using a private space-flier on your business trips, are you?"

"Not on your life! I've retired. Going to play around for a few years. That's why I bought the Nomad."

"Retired! Why Mado, I just did the same thing."

"Great stuff! They've worked you to death. What are you figuring on doing with yourself?"

Carr shrugged his shoulders resignedly. "Usual thing, I suppose. Travel aimlessly, and bore myself into old age. Nothing else to do. No kick out of life these days at all, Mado, even in chasing around from planet to planet. They're all the same."

The Martian looked keenly at his friend. "Oh, is that so?" he said. "No kick, eh? Well, let me tell you, Carr Parker, you come with me and we'll find something you'll get a kick out of. Ever seen the Sargasso Sea of the solar system? Ever been on one of the asteroids? Ever seen the other side of the Moon—Uranus—Neptune—Planet 9, the farthest out from the sun?"

"No-o." Carr's eyes brightened somewhat.

"Then you haven't seen anything or been anywhere. Trouble with you is you've been in the rut too long. Thinking there's nothing left in the universe but the commonplace. Right, too, if you stick to the regular routes of travel. But the *Nomad's* different. I'm just a rover when I'm at her controls, a vagabond in space—free as the ether that

surrounds her air-tight hull. And, take it from me, there's something to see and do out there in space. Off the usual lanes, perhaps, but it's there."

"You've been out—how long?" Carr hesitated.

"Eighty Martian days. Seen plenty too." He waved his arm in a gesture that seemed to take in the entire universe.

"Why come here, with so much to be seen out there?"

"Came to visit you, old stick-in-the-mud," grinned Mado, "and to try and persuade you to join me. I find you footloose already. You're itching for adventure; excitement. Will you come?"

Carr listened spellbound. "Right now?" he asked.

"This very minute. Come on."

"My bag," objected Carr, "it must be packed. I'll need funds too."

"Bag! What for? Plenty of duds on the *Nomad*—for any old climate. And money—don't make me laugh! Vagabonds need money?" He backed toward the open manhole of the *Nomad*, still grinning.

Carr hesitated, resisting the impulse to take Mado at his word. He looked around. The landing stage had been deserted, but people now were approaching. People not to be tolerated at the moment. He saw Courtney Davis, grim and determined. There'd be more arguments, useless but aggravating. Well, why not go? He'd decided to break away. What better chance? Suddenly he dived for the manhole of Mado's vessel; wriggled his way to the padded interior of the air-lock. He heard the clang of the circular cover. Mado was clamping it to its gasketed seat.

"Let's go!" he shouted.

Chapter 2: Into the Heavens

The directors of International Airways stared foolishly when they saw Carr Parker and the giant Martian enter the mysterious ship which was a trespasser on their landing stage. They gazed incredulously as the gleaming torpedo-shaped vessel arose majestically from its position. There was no evidence of motive power other than a sudden radiation from its hull plates of faintly crackling streamers of silvery light. They fell back in alarm as it pointed its nose skyward and accelerated with incredible rapidity, the silver energy bathing them in its blinding luminescence. They burst forth in excited recrimination when it vanished into the blue. Courtney Davis shook his fist after the departing vessel and swore mightily.

Carr Parker forgot them entirely when he clambered into the bucket seat beside Mado, who sat at the Nomad's controls. He was free at last: free to probe the mysteries of outer space, to roam the skies with this Martian he had admired since boyhood.

"Glad you came?" Mado asked his Terrestrial friend.

"You bet. But tell me about yourself. How you've been and how come you've rebelled, too? I haven't seen you for a long time, you

know. Why, it's been years!"

"Oh, I'm all right. Guess I got fed up with things about the same way you did. Knew last time I saw you that you were feeling as I did. That's why I came after you."

"But this vessel, the *Nomad*. I didn't know such a thing was in existence. How does it operate? It seems quite different from the usual ether-liners."

“It's a mystery ship. Invented and built by Thrygis, a discredited scientist of my country. Spent a fortune on it and then went broke and killed himself. I bought it from the executors for a song. They thought it was a pile of junk. But the plans and notes of the inventor were there and I studied 'em well. The ship is a marvel, Carr. Utilizes gravitational attraction and reversal as a propelling force and can go like the Old Boy himself. I've hit two thousand miles a second with her."

"A second! Why, that's ten times as fast as the regular liners! Must use a whale of a lot of fuel. And where do you keep it? The fuel, I mean."

"Make it right on board. I'm telling you Carr, the *Nomad* has no

equal. She's a corker."

"I'll say she is. But what do you mean—make the fuel?"

"Cosmic rays. Everywhere in space you know. Seems they are the result of violent concentrations of energy that cause the birth of atoms. Thrygis doped out a collector of these rays that takes 'em from their paths and concentrates 'em in a retort where there's a spongy metal catalyst that never deteriorates. Here there is a reaction to the original action out in space and new atoms are born, simple ones of hydrogen. But what could be sweeter for use in one of our regular atomic motors? The energy of disintegration is used to drive the generators of the artificial gravity field, and there you are. Sounds complicated, but really isn't. And nothing to get out of whack either."

“Beats the rocket motors and bulky fuel of the regular liners a mile, doesn't it? But since when are you a navigator, Mado?"

"Don't need to be a navigator with the *Nomad*. She's automatic, once the controls are set. Say we wish to visit Venus. The telescope is sighted on that body and the gravity forces adjusted so we'll be attracted in that direction and repelled in the opposite direction. Then we can go to bed and forget it. The movement of the body in its orbit

makes no difference because the force follows wherever it goes. See? The speed increases until the opposing forces are equal, when deceleration commences and we gradually slow down until within ten thousand miles of the body, when the *Nomad* automatically stops. Doesn't move either, until we awaken to take the controls. How's that for simple?"

"Good enough. But suppose a wandering meteor or a tiny asteroid gets in the way? At our speed it wouldn't have to be as big as your fist to go through us like a shot."

"All taken care of, my dear Carr. I told you Thrygis was a wiz. Such a happenstance would disturb the delicate balance of the energy compensators and the course of the *Nomad* would instantly alter to dodge the foreign object. Once passed by, the course would again be resumed."

"Some ship, the *Nomad*!" Carr was delighted with the explanations. "I'm sold on her and on the trip. Where are we now and where bound?"

Mado glanced at the instrument board. "Nearly a million miles out and headed for that Sargasso Sea I told you about," he said. "It isn't visible in the telescope, but I've got it marked by the stars. Out

between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter, a quarter of a billion miles away. But we'll average better than a thousand miles a second. Be there in three days of your time."

"How can there be a sea out there in space?"

"Oh, that's just my name for it. Most peculiar thing, though. There's a vast, billowy sort of a cloud. Twists and weaves around as if alive. Looks like seaweed or something; and Carr, I swear there are things floating around in it. Wrecks. Something damn peculiar, anyway. I vow I saw a signal. People marooned there or something. Sorta scared me and I didn't stay around for long as there was an awful pull from the mass. Had to use full reversal of the gravity force to get away."

"Now why didn't you tell me that before? That's something to think about. Like the ancient days of ocean-going ships on Earth."

"Tell you? How could I tell you? You've been questioning me ever since I first saw you and I've been busy every minute answering you."

Carr laughed and slid from his seat to the floor. He felt curiously light and loose-jointed. A single step carried him to one of the

stanchions of the control cabin and he clung to it for a moment to regain his equilibrium.

"What's wrong?" he demanded. "No internal gravity mechanism on the *Nomad*?"

"Sure is. But it's adjusted for Martian gravity. You'll get along, but it wouldn't be so easy for me with Earth gravity. I'd have to wear the portable G-ray all the time, and that's not so comfortable. All right with you?"

"Oh, certainly. I didn't understand."

Carr saw that his friend had unstrapped the black box from his shoulders. He didn't blame him. Glad he wasn't a Martian. It was mighty inconvenient for them on Venus or Terra. Their bodies, large and of double the specific gravity, were not easily handled where gravity was nearly three times their own. The Venusians and Terrestrials were more fortunate when on Mars, for they could become accustomed to the altered conditions. Only had to be careful they didn't overdo. He remembered vividly a quick move he had made on his first visit to Mars. Carried him twenty feet to slam against a granite pedestal. Bad cut that gave him, and the exertion in the rarefied atmosphere had him gasping painfully.

He walked to one of the ports and peered through its thick window. Mado was fussing with the controls. The velvety blackness of the heavens; the myriad diamond points of clear brilliance. Cold, too, it looked out there, and awesomely vast. The sun and Earth had been left behind and could not be seen. But Carr didn't care. The heavens were marvelous when viewed without the obstruction of an atmosphere. But he'd seen them often enough on his many business trips to Mars and Venus.

"Ready for bed?" Mado startled him with a tap on the shoulder.

"Why—if you say so. But you haven't shown me through the *Nomad* yet."

"All the time in the universe for that. Man, don't you realize you're free? Come, let's grab some sleep. Need it out here. The ship'll be here when we wake up. She's flying herself right now. Fast, too."

Carr looked at the velocity indicator. Seven hundred miles a second and still accelerating! He felt suddenly tired and when Mado opened the door of a sleeping cabin its spotless bunk looked very inviting. He turned in without protest.

Chapter 3: A Message

The days passed quickly, whether measured by the Martian chronometer aboard the *Nomad* or by Carr's watch, which he was regulating to match the slightly longer day of the red planet. He was becoming proficient in the operation of all mechanisms of the ship and had developed a fondness for its every appointment.

Behind them the sun was losing much of its blinding magnificence as it receded into the ebon background of the firmament. The Earth was but one of the countless worlds visible through the stern ports, distinguishable by its slightly greenish tinge. They had reached the vicinity of the phenomenon of space Mado had previously discovered. Carr found himself seething with excitement as the *Nomad* was brought to a drifting speed.

Mado, who had disclaimed all knowledge of navigation, was busy in the turret with a sextant. He made rapid calculations based on its indications and hurried to the controls.

"Find it?" Carr asked.

"Yep. Be there in a half hour."

The nose of the vessel swung around and Mado adjusted the gravity energy carefully. Carr glued his eye to the telescope.

"See anything?" inquired Mado.

"About a million stars, that's all."

"Funny. Should be close by."

Then: "Yes! Yes! I see it!" Carr exulted. "A milky cloud. Transparent almost. To the right a little more!"

The mysterious cloud rushed to meet them and soon was visible to the naked eye through the forward port. Their speed increased alarmingly and Mado cut off the energy.

"What's that?" Mado stared white-faced at his friend.

"A voice! You hear it too?"

"Yes. Listen!"

Amazed, they gazed at each other. It was a voice; yet not a sound came to their ears. The voice was in their own consciousness. A mental message! Yet each heard and understood. There were no

words, but clear mental images.

"Beware!" it seemed to warn. "Come not closer, travelers from afar. There is danger in the milky fleece before you!"

Mado pulled frantically at the energy reverse control. The force was now fully repelling. Still the billowing whiteness drew nearer. It boiled and bubbled with the ferocity of one of the hot lava cauldrons of Mercury. Changing shape rapidly, it threw out long streamers that writhed and twisted like the arms of an octopus. Reaching. Searching for victims!

"God!" whispered Carr. "What is it?"

"Take warning," continued the voice that was not a voice. "A great ship, a royal ship from a world unknown to you, now is caught in the grip of this mighty monster. We can not escape, and death draws quickly near. But we can warn others and ask that our fate be reported to our home body."

A sudden upheaval of the monstrous mass spewed forth an object that bounced a moment on the rippling surface and then was lost to view. A sphere, glinting golden against the white of its awful captor.

"The space-ship!" gasped Mado. "It's vanished again!"

They hurtled madly in the direction of this monster of the heavens, their reverse energy useless.

"We're lost, Mado." Carr was calm now. This was excitement with a vengeance. He'd wished for it and here it was. But he'd much rather have a chance to fight for his life. Fine ending to his dreams!

"Imps of the canals! The thing's alive!" Mado hurled himself at the controls as a huge blob of the horrible whiteness broke loose from the main body and wobbled uncertainly toward them. A long feeler reached forth and grasped the errant portion, returning it with a vicious jerk.

"Turn back! Turn back!" came the eery warning from the golden sphere. "All is over for us. Our hull is crushed. The air is pouring from our last compartment. Already we find breathing difficult. Turn back! The third satellite of the fifth planet is our home. Visit it, we beseech you, and report the manner of our going. This vile creature of space has power to draw you to its breast, to crush you as we are crushed."

The *Nomad* lurched and shuddered, drawn ever closer to the horrid

mass of the thing. A gigantic jellyfish, that's what it was, a hundred miles across! Carr shivered in disgust as it throbbed anew, sending out those grasping streamers of its mysterious material. As the *Nomad* plunged to its doom with increasing speed, Mado tried to locate some spot in the universe where an extreme effect could be obtained from the full force of the attracting or repulsive energies. They darted this way and that but always found themselves closer to the milky billows that now were pulsating in seeming eagerness to engulf the new victim.

Once more came the telepathic warning, "Delay no longer. It is high time you turned back. You must escape to warn our people and yours. Even now the awful creature has us in its vitals, its tentacles reaching through our shattered walls, creeping and twining through the passages of our vessel. Crushing floors and walls, its demoniac energies heating our compartment beyond belief. We can hold out no longer. Go! Go quickly. Remember—the third satellite of the fifth planet—to the city of golden domes. Tell of our fate. Our people will understand. You—"

The voice was stilled. Mado groaned as if in pain and Carr saw in that instant that each knob and lever on the control panel glowed with an unearthly brush discharge. Not violet as of high frequency electricity, but red. Cherry red as of heated metal. The emanations of

the cosmic monster were at work on the *Nomad*. A glance through the forward port showed they had but a few miles to go. They'd be in the clutches of the horror in minutes, seconds, at the rate they were traveling. Mado slumped in his seat, his proud head rolling grotesquely on his breast. He slid to the floor, helpless.

Carr went mad with fury. It couldn't be! This thing of doom was a creature of his imagination! But no—there it was, looming close in his vision. By God, he'd leave the mark of the *Nomad* on the vicious thing! He remembered the ray with which the vessel was armed. He was in the pilot's seat, fingering controls that blistered his hands and cramped his arms with an unnameable force. He'd fight the brute! Full energy—head on—that was the way to meet it. Why bother with the reversal? It was no use.

A blood-red veil obscured his vision. He felt for the release of the ray; pulled the gravity energy control to full power forward. In a daze, groping blindly for support, he waited for the shock of impact. The mass of that monstrosity must be terrific, else why had it such a power of attraction for other bodies? Or was it that the thing radiated energies unknown to science? Whatever it was, the thing would know the sting of the *Nomad's* ray. Whatever its nature, animate or inanimate, it was matter. The ray destroyed matter. Obliterated it utterly. Tore the atoms asunder, whirling their electrons from their

orbits with terrific velocity. There'd be some effect, that was certain! No great use perhaps. But a crater would mark the last resting place of the *Nomad*; a huge crater. Perhaps the misty whiteness would close in over them later. But there'd be less of the creature's bulk to menace other travelers in space.

His head ached miserably; his body was shot through and through with cramping agonies. The very blood in his veins was liquid fire, searing his veins and arteries with pulsing awfulness. He staggered from the control cabin; threw himself on his bunk. The covers were electrified and clung to him like tissue to rubbed amber. The wall of the sleeping cabin vibrated with a screeching note. The floors trembled. Madness! That's all it was! He'd awaken in a moment. Find himself in his own bed at home. He'd dreamed of adventures before now. But never of such as this! It just couldn't happen! A nightmare—fantasy of an over-tired brain—it was.

There came a violent wrench that must have torn the hull plates from their bracings. The ship seemed to close in on him and crush him. A terrific concussion flattened him to the bunk. Then all was still. Carr Parker's thoughts broke short abruptly. He had slipped into unconsciousness.

Chapter 4: Europa

When Carr opened his eyes it was to the normal lighting of his own sleeping cabin. The *Nomad* was intact, though an odor of scorched varnish permeated the air. They were unharmed—as yet. He turned on his side and saw that Mado was moving about at the side of his couch. Good old Mado! With a basin of water in his hand and a cloth. He'd been bathing his face. Brought him to. He sat up just as Mado turned to apply the cloth anew.

"Good boy, Carr! All right?" smiled the Martian.

"Little dizzy. But I'm okay." Carr sprang to his feet where he wabbled uncertainly for a moment. "But the *Nomad?*" he asked. "Is she—are we safe?"

"Never safer. What in the name of Saturn did you do?"

Carr passed his hand across his eyes, trying to remember. "The D-ray," he said. "I turned it on and dived into the thing with full attraction. Then—I forget. Where is it—the thing, I mean?"

"Look!" Mado drew him to the stern compartment.

Far behind them there shone a misty wreath, a ring of drifting matter

that writhed and twisted as if in mortal agony.

"Is that it?"

"What's left of it. You shot your way through it; through and out of its influence. D-ray must have devitalized the thing as it bored through. Killed its energies—for the time, at least."

Already, the thing was closing in. Soon there would be a solid mass as before. But the *Nomad* was saved.

"How about yourself?" asked Carr anxiously. "Last time I saw you you were flat on the floor."

"Nothing wrong with me now. A bit stiff and sore, that's all. When I came to I put all the controls in neutral and came looking for you. I was scared, but the thing's all over now, so let's go."

"Where?"

"Europa."

"Where's that?"

"Don't you remember? The third satellite of the fifth planet. That's

Europa, third in distance from Jupiter, the fifth planet. It is about the size of Terra's satellite—your Moon. We'll find the city of the golden domes."

Carr's eyes renewed their sparkle. "Right!" he exclaimed. "I forgot the mental message. Poor devils! All over for them now. But we'll carry their message. How far is it?"

"Don't know yet till I determine our position and the position of Jupiter. But it's quite a way. Jupiter's 483 million miles from the Sun, you know."

"We're more than half way, then."

"Not necessarily. Perhaps we're on the opposite side of the sun from Jupiter's present position. Then we'd have a real trip."

"Let's figure it out." Carr was anxious to be off.

Luck was with them, as they found after some observations from the turret. Jupiter lay off their original course by not more than fifteen degrees. It was but four days' journey.

Again they were on their way and the two men, Martian and Terrestrial, made good use of the time in renewing their old

friendship and in the study of astronomy as they had done during the first leg of their journey. Though of widely differing build and nature, the two found a close bond in their similar inclinations. The library of the Nomad was an excellent one. Thrygis had seen to that, all of the voice-vision reels being recorded in Cos, the interplanetary language, with its standardized units of weight and measurement.

The supplies on board the *Nomad* were ample. Synthetic foods there were for at least a hundred Martian days. The supply of oxygen and water was inexhaustible, these essential items being produced in automatic retorts where disassembled electrons from their cosmic-ray hydrogen were reassembled in the proper structure to produce atoms of any desired element. Their supply of synthetic food could be replenished in like manner when necessity arose. Thrygis had forgotten nothing.

"How do you suppose we'll make ourselves understood to the people of Europa?" asked Carr, when they had swung around the great orb of Jupiter and were headed toward the satellite.

"Shouldn't have any trouble, Carr. Believe me, to a people who have progressed to the point of sending mental messages over five hundred miles of space, it'll be a cinch, understanding our simple mental processes. Bet they'll read our every thought."

"That's right. But the language. Proper names and all that. Can't get those over with thought waves."

"No, but I'll bet they'll have some way of solving that too. You wait and see."

Carr lighted a cigar and inhaled deeply as he gazed from one of the ports. He'd never felt better in his life. Always had liked Martian tobacco, too. Wondered what they'd do when the supply ran out. One thing they couldn't produce synthetically. The disc of the satellite loomed near and it shone with a warmly inviting light. Almost red, like the color of Mars, it was. Sort of golden, rather. Anyway, he wondered what awaited them there. This was a great life, this roaming in space, unhampered by laws or conventions. The *Nomad* was well named.

"Wonder what they'll think of our yarn," he said.

"And me. I wonder, too, what that ungodly thing was back there. The thing that is now the grave of some of their people. And what the golden sphere was doing so far from home. It's a mystery."

They had gone over the same ground a hundred times and had not reached a satisfactory conclusion. But perhaps they'd learn more in

the city of golden domes.

"Another thing," said Carr, "that's puzzled me. Why is it that Europa has not been discovered before this; that it's inhabited, I mean?"

"Rocket ships couldn't carry enough fuel. Besides, our astronomers've always told us that the outer planets were too cold; too far from the sun."

"That is something to think about. Maybe we'll not be able to stand the low temperature; thin atmosphere; low surface gravity."

"We've our insulated suits and the oxygen helmets for the first two objections. The G-rays'll hold us down in any gravity. But we'll see mighty soon. We're here."

They had entered the atmosphere as they talked and the *Nomad* was approaching the surface in a long glide with repulsion full on. It was daytime on the side they neared. Pale daylight, but revealing. The great ball that was Jupiter hung low on the horizon, its misty outline faintly visible against the deep green of the sky.

The surface over which they skimmed was patchworked with farm-lands and crisscrossed by gleaming ribbons. Roadways! It was like

the voice-vision records of the ancient days on Mars and Terra before their peoples had taken to the air. Here was a body where a person could get out in the open; next to nature. They crossed a lake of calm green water fringed by golden sands. At its far side a village spread out beneath them and was gone; a village of broad pavements and circular dwellings with flat rooms, each with its square of ground. A golden, mountain range loomed in the background; vanished beneath them. More fields and roads. Everywhere there were yellows and reds and the silver sheen of the roads. No green save that of the darkening sky and the waters of the streams and ponds. It was a most inviting panorama.

Occasionally they passed a vessel of the air—strange flapping-winged craft that soared and darted like huge birds. Once one of them approached so closely they could see its occupants, seemingly a people similar to the Venusians, small of stature and slender.

"How in time are we to find this city of golden domes?" Carr ejaculated.

As if in answer to his question there came a startling command, another of the mental messages.

"Halt!" it conveyed to their mind. "Continue not into our country

until we have communed with you."

Obediently Mado brought up the nose of the *Nomad* and slowed her down to a gradual stop. They hovered at an altitude of about four thousand feet, both straining their ears as if listening for actual speech.

"It is well," continued the message. "Your thoughts are good. You come from afar seeking the city of golden domes. Proceed now and a fleet of our vessels will meet you and guide you to our city."

"Now wouldn't that jar you?" whispered Carr. "Just try to get away with anything on this world."

Mado laughed as he started the generators of the propelling energy. "I'd hate to have a wife of Europa," he commented. "No sitting-up-with-sick-friend story could get by with her!"

Chapter 5: The City of Golden Domes

With the *Nomad* cruising slowly over the surface of the peaceful satellite, Mado sampled the atmosphere through a tube which was provided for that purpose. The pressure was low, as they had expected; about twenty inches of mercury in the altitude at which they drifted. But the oxygen content was fairly high and the impurities negligible. A strange element was somewhat in evidence, though Mado's analysis showed this to be present in but minute quantity. They opened the ports and drew their first breath of the atmosphere of Europa.

"Good air, Carr." Mado was sniffing at one of the ports. "A bit rare for you, but I think you'll get along with it. Temperature of forty-five degrees. That's not so bad. The strangest thing is the gravity. This body isn't much more than two thousand miles in diameter, yet its gravity is about the same as on Venus—seven eighths of that of Terra. Must have a huge nickel-iron core."

"Yes. It'll be a cinch for me. But you, you big lummox—it's the G-ray for you as long as we're here."

"Uh-huh. You get all the breaks, don't you?"

Carr laughed. He was becoming anxious to land. "What sort of a reception do you suppose we'll get?" he said.

"Not bad, from the tone of that last message. And here they come, Carr. Look—a dozen of them. A royal reception, so far."

Suddenly they were in the midst of a flock of great birds; birds that flapped their golden wings to rise, then soared and circled like the gulls of the terrestrial oceans. And these mechanical birds were fast. Carr and Mado watched in fascination as they strung out in V formation and led the way in the direction of the setting sun. Six, seven hundred miles an hour the *Nomad's* indicator showed, as they swung in behind these ships of Europa.

They crossed a large body of water, a lake of fully five hundred miles in width. More country then, hardly populated now and with but few of the gleaming roadways. The sun had set, but there was scarcely any diminution of the light for the great ball that was Jupiter reflected a brilliance of far greater intensity than that of the full Moon on a clear Terrestrial night. A marvelous sight the gigantic body presented, with its alternate belts of gray-blue and red and dazzling white. And it hung so low and huge in the heavens that it seemed one had but to stretch forth a hand to touch its bright surface.

Another mountain range loomed close and was gone. On its far side there stretched the desolate wastes of a desert, a barren plain that extended in all directions to the horizon. Wind-swept, it was and menacing beneath them. Europa was not all as they had first seen it.

A glimmer of brightness appeared at the horizon. The fleet was reducing speed and soon they saw that their journey was nearly over. At the far edge of the desert the bright spot resolved itself into the outlines of a city, the city of golden domes. Cones they looked like, rather, with rounded tops and fluted walls. The mental message had conveyed the most fitting description possible without words or picture.

The landing was over so quickly that they had but confused impressions of their reception. A great square in the heart of the city, crowded with people. Swooping maneuvers of hundreds of the bird-like ships. An open space for their arrival. The platform where a committee awaited them. The king, or at least he seemed to be king. The sea of upturned faces, staring eyes.

Mado fidgeted and opened his mouth to voice a protest but Carr nudged him into silence. The king had risen from his seat in the circle on the platform and was about to address them. There was no repetition of the telepathic means of communication.

"Welcome, travelers from the inner planets," said the king. He spoke Cos perfectly! "Cardos, emperor of the body you call Europa, salutes you. Our scientists have recorded your thoughts with their psycho-ray apparatus and have learned that you have a message for us, a message we fear is not pleasant. Am I correct?"

Carr stared at the soft-voiced monarch of this remarkable land. It was incredible that he spoke in the universal language of the inner planets!

"Your Highness," he replied, "is correct. We have a message. But it amazes us that you are familiar with our language."

"That we shall explain later. Meanwhile—the message!"

"The message," Carr said, "is not pleasant. A golden sphere out in space. Helpless in the clutches of a nameless monster, a vast creature of jellylike substance but possessed of enormous destructive energy. A mental message to our vessel warning us away and bidding us to come here; to tell you of their fate. We escaped and here we are."

The face of Cardos paled. He reached for an egg-shaped crystal that reposed on the table; spoke rapidly into its shimmering depths. Hidden amplifiers carried his voice throughout the square in

booming tones. It was a strange tongue he spoke, with many gutturals and sibilants. A groan came up from the assembled multitude.

Cardos tossed the crystal to the table with a resigned gesture, then tottered and swayed. Instant confusion reigned in the square and the emperor was assisted from the platform by two of his retainers. They never saw him again.

One of the counsellors, a middle-aged man with graying russet hair and large gray eyes set in a perfectly smooth countenance, stepped from the platform and grasped the two adventurers as the confusion in the square increased to an uproar.

"Come," he whispered, in excellent Cos; "I'll explain all to you in the quiet of my own apartments. I am Detis, a scientist, and my home is close by."

Gently he clung to them as the larger men forced their way between the milling groups of excited Europans. No one gave them much attention. All seemed to be overcome with grief. A terrible disaster, this loss of the golden sphere must be!

They were out of the square and in one of the broad streets. The

fluted sides of the unpointed cones shone softly golden on all sides. Alike in every respect were these dwellings of the people of Europa, and strangely attractive in the light of the mother planet.

Not a word was spoken when they reached the abode of their guide. They entered an elaborate hall and were whisked upward in an automatic elevator. Detis ushered them into his apartment when they alighted. He smiled gravely at their looks of wonder as they cast eyes on the maze of apparatus before them. It was a laboratory rather than a living room in which they stood.

Detis led them to an adjoining room where he bid them be seated. They exchanged wondering glances as their host paced the floor vigorously before speaking further.

"Friends," he finally blurted, "I hope you'll excuse my emotion but the news you brought is a terrible blow to me as to all Europa. Carli, our prince, beloved son of Cardos, was commander of the ship you reported lost. We deeply mourn his loss."

Carr and Mado waited in respectful silence while their host made effort to control his feelings.

"Now," he said, after a moment, "I can talk. You have many

questions to ask, I know. So have I. But first I must tell you that Carli's was an expedition to your own worlds. A grave danger hangs over them and he was sent to warn them. He has been lost. Our only space-ship capable of making the journey also is lost. Six Martian years were required to build it, so I fear the warning will never reach your people. Already the time draws near."

"A grave danger?" asked Mado. "What sort of a danger?"

"War! Utter destruction! Conquest by the most warlike and ambitious people in the solar system."

"Not the people of Europa?" asked Carr.

"Indeed not. There is another inhabited satellite of Jupiter, next farthest from the mother planet. Ganymede, you call it. It is from there that these conquerors are to set forth."

"Many of them?" inquired Mado.

"Two million or so. They're prepared to send an army of more than a tenth of that number on the first expedition."

"A mere handful!" Carr was contemptuous.

"True, but they are armed with the most terrible of weapons. Your people are utterly unprepared and, unless warned, will be driven from their cities and left in the deserts to perish of hunger and exposure. This is a real danger."

"Something in it, Carr, if what he says is true. We've no arms nor warriors. Haven't had for two centuries. You know it as well as I do."

"Bah! Overnight we could have a million armed and ready to fight them off."

Detis raised his hand. "You offend me," he said gravely. "I have told you this in good faith and you reward me with disbelief and boastful talk. Your enemies are more powerful than you think, and your own people utterly defenceless against them."

"I'm sorry," Carr apologized, "and I'll listen to all you have to say. Surely your prince has not given his life in vain." He was ashamed before this scientist of Europa.

A tinkling feminine voice from the next room called something in the Europan tongue.

Detis raised his head proudly and his frown softened at the sound of

dainty footsteps. His voice was a caress as he replied.

A vision of feminine loveliness stood framed in the doorway and the visitors rose hastily from their seats. Carr gazed into eyes of the deepest blue he had ever seen. Small in stature though this girl of Europa was—not more than five feet tall—she had the form of a goddess and the face of an angel. He was flushing to the roots of his hair. Could feel it spread. What an ass he was anyway! Anyone'd think he'd never seen a woman in all his thirty-five years!

"My daughter, Ora, gentlemen," said Detis.

The girl's eyes had widened as she looked at the huge Martian with the funny black box on his back. They dropped demurely when turned to those of the handsome Terrestrial.

"Oh," she said, in Cos, "I didn't know you had callers."

Chapter 6: Vlor-urdin

The time passed quickly in Pala-dar, city of the golden domes. Detis spent many hours in the laboratory with his two visitors and the fair Ora was usually at his side. She was an efficient helper to her father and a gracious hostess to the guests.

The amazement of the visitors grew apace as the wonders of Europan science were revealed to them. They sat by the hour at the illuminated screen of the rulden, that remarkable astronomical instrument which brought the surfaces of distant celestial bodies within a few feet of their eyes, and the sounds of the streets and the jungles to their ears. It was no longer a mystery how the language of Cos had become so familiar to these people.

They learned of the origin of the races that inhabited Europa and Ganymede. Ages before, it was necessary for the peoples of the then thickly populated Jupiter to cast about for new homes due to the cooling of the surface of that planet. Life was becoming unbearable. In those days there were two dominant races on the mother body, a gentle and peaceful people of great scientific accomplishment and a race of savage brutes who, while very clever with their hands, were of lesser mental strength and of a quarrelsome and fighting disposition.

Toward the last the population of both main countries was reduced to but a few survivors, and the intelligent race had discovered a means of traversing space and was prepared to leave the planet for the more livable satellite—Europa. Learning of these plans, the others made a treaty of perpetual peace as a price for their passage to another satellite—Ganymede. The migration began and the two satellites were settled by the separate bands of pioneers and their new lives begun.

The perpetual treaty had not been broken since, but the energies of the warlike descendants of those first settlers of Ganymede were expended in casting about for new fields to conquer. Through the ages they cast increasingly covetous eyes on those inner planets, Mars, Terra and Venus. Not having the advantage of the Rulden, they knew of these bodies only what could be seen through their own crude optical instruments and what they had learned by word of mouth from certain renegade Europans they were able to bribe.

While their neighbors of the smaller satellite were engaged in peaceful pursuits, tilling the soil and making excellent homes for themselves, the dwellers on Ganymede were fashioning instruments of warfare and building a fleet of space-ships to carry them to their intended victims. It was a religion with them; they could think of nothing else. An unscrupulous scientist of Europa sold himself to

them several generations previously and it was this scientist who had made the plans for their space-fliers and had contrived the deadly weapons with which they were armed. He likewise taught them the language of Cos and it now was spoken universally throughout Ganymede in anticipation of the glorious days of conquest.

"You honestly believe them able to do this?" asked Carr, still skeptical after two days of discussion.

"I know it as a certainty," Detis replied solemnly. "It is only during the past generation we have learned of the completeness and awfulness of their preparations. Your people can not combat their sound-ray. With it they can remain outside the vision of those on the surface and set the tall buildings of your cities in harmonic vibrations that will bring them down in ruins about the ears of the populace."

“There'll be nothing left for them to take if they destroy all our cities: nowhere for them to live. I don't get it."

"Only a few will be destroyed completely, to terrify the rest of the inhabitants of your worlds. Others will be depopulated by means of vibrations that will kill off the citizens without harming the cities themselves—vibrations which are capable of blanketing a large area

and raising the body temperature of all living things therein to a point where death will ensue in a very few minutes. Other vibrations will paralyze all electrical equipment on the planet and make it impossible for your ships of the air to set out to give battle, even were they properly armed."

"Looks bad, Carr," said Mado glumly.

"It does that. We've got to go back and carry the warning."

"I fear it is too late," said Detis. "Much time will be needed in which to develop a defense and surely it can not be done within the three isini before they set forth—about four of your days."

"They leave that soon?" Carr was taken aback.

"Yes, with their one hundred and twenty vessels; forty to each of your three planets; seventeen hundred men to a vessel."

Carr jumped to his feet. "By the heat devils of Mercury!" he roared, "well go to their lousy little satellite and find a way to prevent it!"

Ora gazed at his flushed face with unconcealed admiration.

"You're crazy!" exploded Mado. "What can we do with the *Nomad*?"

"Her D-ray can do plenty of damage."

"Yes, but they'd have us down before we could account for five of their vessels. It's no use, I tell you."

But Carr was stubborn. "We'll pay them a call anyway. I'll bet we can dope out some way of putting it over on them. Are you game?"

"Of course I'm game. I'll go anywhere you will. But it's a fool idea just the same."

"Maybe so. Maybe not. Anyway—let's go."

"Just a moment, gentlemen," Detis interposed. "How about me?"

Carr stared at him and saw that his eyes shone with excitement. "Why, I believe you'd like to go with us!" he exclaimed admiringly.

"I would, indeed."

"Come on then. We're off." He was impatient to be gone.

Detis busied himself with a small apparatus that folded into a compact case, explaining that it was one that might prove useful. Ora left the room but quickly returned. She too carried a small case, and

she had donned a snug fitting leather garment that covered her from neck to knees.

"What's this?" demanded Carr. "Surely Miss Ora does not intend to come with us?"

"She never leaves my side," said Detis proudly.

"Nothing doing!" Carr stated emphatically. "There'll be plenty of danger on this trip. Well have no woman along—least of all your charming daughter."

Mado was leaving everything to his friend, but he grinned in anticipation when he saw the look of anger on the girl's face.

She stamped her little foot and faced Carr valiantly. "See here, Mr. Carr Parker!" she stormed. "I'm no weakling. I'm the daughter of my father and where he goes I go. You'll take me or I'll never speak to you again."

Carr flushed. He was accustomed to his own way in most things and entirely unused to the ways of the gentler sex. He could have shaken the little vixen! But now she was standing before him and there was something in those great blue eyes besides anger; something that set

his heart pounding madly.

"All right!" he agreed desperately, "have your own way."

He turned on his heel and strode to the door. Giving in to this slip of a girl! What a fool he was! But it would be great at that to have her along in the *Nomad*.

They found the public square deserted, the gilded dwellings hung with somber colors in mourning for Carli. Ora and Detis were very quiet and preoccupied when they entered the *Nomad*. The five isini of lamentation for the young prince had not yet passed.

The two Europans were delighted with the appointments and mechanisms of the little vessel from Mars. They investigated every nook and cranny of its interior during the journey and were voluble in their praise of its inventor and builder. Neither had ever set foot in a space-flier and each was seized with a longing to explore space with these two strangers from the inner planets. They would make a couple of good vagabonds along with Mado and himself, Carr thought as they expressed their feelings. But there was more serious business at hand. They were nearing Ganymede.

"Where'll we land, Detis?" Mado called from the control cabin.

"Vlor-urdin. That is their chief city. I'll guide you to the location."

They took up their places at the ports and scanned the surface of the satellite as Mado dropped the ship into its atmosphere. A far different scene was presented than on Europa. The land was seamed and scarred, the colors of the foliage somber. Grays and browns predominated and the jungles seemed impenetrable. A river swung into view and its waters were black as the deepest night, its flow sluggish. A rank mist hung over the surface.

"The river of Charis!" exclaimed Detis. "Follow it, Mado. No, the other direction. There! It leads directly to Vlor-urdin."

By good chance they had entered the atmosphere at a point not far from their destination. In less than an hour by the *Nomad's* chronometer the towers of Vlor-urdin were sighted.

It was a larger city than Pala-dar and of vastly different appearance. A hollow square of squat buildings enclosed the vast workshops and storage space of the fleet of war vessels. Their huge spherical bulks rose from their cradles in tier after tier that stretched as far as the eye could reach when the *Nomad* had dropped to a level but slightly above the tips of the highest spires. The spires were everywhere, decorative towers at the corners of the squat buildings. Everything

was black, the vessels of the fleet, the squat buildings and the spires of Vlor-urdin. Death was in the air. Rank vapor drifted in through the opened ports. There was silence in the city below them and silence in the *Nomad*.

Ora shuddered and drew closer to him. Carr was aware of her nearness and a lump rose in his throat. A horrible fear assailed him. Fear for the safety of the dainty Europan at his side. He found her hand; covered it protectingly with his own.

Chapter 7: Rapaju

Detis was setting up and adjusting the complicated mechanisms of his little black case. A dozen vacuum tubes lighted, and a murmur of throbbing energy came from a helix of shining metallic ribbon that topped the whole. Flexible cables led to a cap-like contrivance which Detis placed on his head. He frowned in concentration.

"The psycho-ray apparatus." Ora explained. "He's sending a message to the city."

Evidently the influence of the ray was directive. They had no inkling of the thoughts transmitted from the alert brain of the scientist but, from the look of satisfaction on his face, they could see that he was obtaining the desired contact.

"Rapaju," he exclaimed, switching off the power of his instrument, "commander of the fleet of the Llotta. I have advised him of our arrival. Told him that a Martian and a Terrestrial wish to treat with him concerning the proposed invasion of their planets. His answering thought first was of fiercest rage, then conciliatory in nature. He'll receive you and listen to your arguments, though he promises nothing. Is that satisfactory?"

"Yes." Carr and Mado were agreed. At least it would give them a chance to look over the ground and to make plans, should any occur to them.

The *Nomad* circled over the heart of the city and soon Mado saw a suitable landing space. They settled gracefully in an open area close by the building indicated by Detis as that of the administration officials of the city.

A group of squat, sullen Llotta awaited them and, without speaking a word either of hatred or welcome, led them into the forbidding entrance of the building. Close-set, beady eyes; unbelievably flat features of chalky whiteness; chunky bowed legs, bare and hairy; long arms with huge dangling paws—these were the outstanding characteristics of the Llotta. Mado stared straight before him, refusing to display any great interest in the loathsome creatures, but Carr was frankly curious and as frankly disapproving.

Rapaju leered maliciously when the four voyagers stood before him. He looked the incarnation of all that was evil and vile, a monster among monsters. Sensing him to be the more aggressive of the two visitors from doomed planets, he addressed his remarks to Carr.

"You come to plead with Rapaju," he sneered, his Cos tinged with an

outlandish accent, "to beg for the worthless lives of your compatriots; for the wealth of your cities?"

"We come to reason with you," replied Carr haughtily, "if you are capable of reasoning. What is this incredible thing you are planning?"

Mado gasped at the effrontery of his friend. But Carr was oblivious of the warning looks cast in his direction.

"Enough of that!" snapped Rapaju. "I'll do the talking—you the reasoning. I've a proposition to make to you, and if you know what's best, you'll agree. Otherwise you'll be first of the Terrestrials to die. Is that clear?"

"Clear enough, all right," growled Carr. "What do you mean—a proposition?"

"Ha! I thought you'd listen. My offer is the lives of you and your companion in exchange for your assistance in guiding my fleet to the capital cities of your countries. Not that our plans will be changed if you refuse, but that much time will be saved in this manner and quick victory made certain without undue sacrifice of valuable property."

"You—you—!" Carr stammered in anger. But there was no use in raising a rumpus—now. They'd only kill him. Something might be accomplished if he pretended to accede. "Go on with your story," he finished lamely.

"In addition to sparing your lives I'll place you both in high position after we seize your respective planets. Make you chief officers in the prison lands we intend to establish for your countrymen. What do you say?"

"Will you give us time to talk it over and think about it?"

"Until the hour of departure, if you wish."

Carr bowed, avoiding Mado's questioning eyes. He looked at Ora where she stood at the side of Detis. She flashed him a guarded smile. He knew that she understood.

Rapaju relaxed. He was confident he could bribe these puerile foreigners to help him in the great venture. And sadly he needed such help. The Llotta were not navigators. Their knowledge of the heavens was sadly incomplete. They had no maps of the surfaces of the planets to be visited. Their simultaneous blows would be far more effective and the campaign much shorter if they could choose

the most vital centers for the initial attacks.

"Now," he said, "that we understand one another, let us talk further of the plans. Then you will be able to consider carefully before making your decision."

Rapaju could be diplomatic when he wished. Carr longed to sink his fingers in the hairy throat. But he smiled hypocritically and found an opportunity to wink meaningly at Mado. This was going to be good! And who knew?—perhaps they might find some way to outwit these mad savages. To think of them in control of the inner planets was revolting.

They retired to a small room with Rapaju and four of his lieutenants, Detis and Ora accompanying them. Ora sat close to Carr at the circular table in Rapaju's council. Carr thought grimly of the board meetings in far away New York.

Rapaju talked. He told of the armament of his vessels, painting vivid pictures of the destruction to be wrought in the cities of Terra, of Mars and Venus. His great hairy paws clutched at imaginary riches when he spoke glowingly of the plundering to follow. He spoke of the women of the inner planets and Carr half rose from his seat when he observed the lecherous glitter in his beady eyes. Ora! Great God,

was she safe here? He stole a glance at the girl and a recurrence of the awful fear surged through him. In her leather garment, close fitting and severe, she looked like a boy. Perhaps they would not know. Besides, there was the perpetual treaty with Europa. It always had been observed, Detis said.

As Rapaju expanded upon the glories to come he told perforce of many of the details of the plans. One thing stood out in Carr's mind: the vessels of the Llotta were not equal to the *Nomad* in many respects. They must carry their entire supply of fuel from the starting point and this was calculated as but a small percentage in excess of that required to carry them to their destinations. Their speed was not as great as the *Nomad's* by at least a third. If the *Nomad* led the fleet from Ganymede they might be able to get them off their course; cause them to run out of fuel out in the vacuum and absolute zero of space. He kicked Mado under the table and arose to ask a few leading questions.

Ora was whispering to her father and he nodded his head as if in complete agreement with what she was saying. These two were not deceived by his apparent traitorous talk, but Mado was aghast. Carr wondered if Rapaju believed him as did his friend.

"We'll do it, Rapaju," he stated finally. "In our ship, the *Nomad*, we'll

guide you across the trackless wastes of the heavens. We'll take you to our capital cities; point out to you the richest of the industrial centers. We have no love for our own worlds. Mado and I deserted them for a life of vagabondage amongst the stars. We ask no reward other than that we be permitted to leave once more on our travels, to roam space as we choose."

Mado attempted to voice an objection but Carr's hand was heavy on his shoulder. "Shut up, you fool!" he hissed in his ear. "Can't you trust me?"

Rapaju's eyes seemed to draw closer together as he returned Carr's unflinching stare. He walked around the table and stood at the side of the tall Terrestrial. Suddenly he grasped Ora's jacket, tore it open at the throat. He ran his hairy fingers over the bare shoulder of the shrinking girl and gurgled his delight at the velvet smoothness of her skin.

With a roar like a wild animal Carr was upon him, bearing him to the floor. His fingers were in that hairy throat, where they had itched to twine.

"Dirty, filthy beast!" he was snarling. "Lay your foul hands on Ora, will you? Say your prayers, if you know any, you swine!"

Then his muscles went limp and he was jerked to his feet by a terrible force, a force that sent him reeling and gasping against the wall. One of Rapaju's lieutenants stood before him with a tiny weapon in his hand, the weapon which had released the paralyzing gas he breathed. He was choking; suffocating. A black mist rose before him. He felt his knees give way. Dimly, as in a dream, he saw that Ora was in Detis' arms. Rapaju was on his feet, fingering his neck and laughing horribly.

"The treaty, Rapaju!" Detis was shouting.

Ora was sobbing. Mado was in the hands of two of the vile Llotta, struggling wildly to free himself. The Martian's eyes accused him. He shut his own and groaned. Opened them again. But it was no use. Everything in the room was whirling now, crazily. He fought to regain his senses, crawled weakly toward the squat figure of Rapaju where it swayed and twisted and spun around. Then all was darkness. The gas had taken its toll.

Chapter 8: The Expedition

Carr awakened to a sense of wordless disgust. Fool that he was to spill the beans as he had! All set to put one over on the leader of the Llotta, then to come a cropper like this! He knew he had been spared for a purpose. The gas was not intended to kill, only to render him helpless for a time. He opened his eyes to the light of a familiar room. He had awakened before in this bed. It was his own cabin on board the *Nomad*. What had happened? Had he dreamed it all. Europa, Ora, Rapaju—all of it? He sat up and felt of his aching head.

"Oh, are you awake?" a soft voice greeted him.

"Ora!" he exclaimed. It was indeed she, beautiful as ever.

"Sh-h," she warned, placing the tip of a finger to his lips. "They'll hear us."

"Who?" he whispered.

"Rapaju—his two guards. They're in the control cabin with father and Mado."

"What? They've taken the *Nomad*?"

"Yes. We're under way. They've forced Mado to guide them but do not trust him. Rapaju spared you as he believes you more capable. He'll hold you to your word."

"Lord! But what are you doing here?"

Ora dropped her eyes. "He—Rapaju—" she said, "inferred from your action in assaulting him that you were very fond of me. He holds me as a hostage for your good behavior. Father volunteered to come along. He persuaded Rapaju to allow it. Swore allegiance to his cause. Of course he wouldn't leave me."

Carr gazed at her in admiration of her courage. She had been nursing him, too! What a girl she was!

"Ora," he said huskily, "Rapaju was right. I am fond of you. More than fond: I love you. I never knew I could feel this way."

"Oh Carr, you mustn't!" She drew back as he scrambled to his feet. "They'll find us. We must not show that we care. Rapaju is a beast. He wants me for himself and is delaying the time only until you have brought the fleet safely to the inner planets and to their great cities. He—"

"The skunk! Wants you himself, does he? Why, why didn't I kill him? But Ora, you said—you do care—"

"Ha! I thought so!" Rapaju stood in the doorway, grinning mockingly at the pair. "The impetuous Terrestrial is up and about. Back at his old game!"

"Please, please, for my sake, Carr!" Ora pressed him back as he tensed his muscles for a spring.

"Sorry I was so slow," Carr grated, over her shoulder. "Another five seconds, Rapaju, and I'd have had your windpipe out by the roots."

Rapaju scowled darkly and fingered his throat. "But, my dear Carr, you were too slow," he said, "and I live—and shall live—while you shall die. Meanwhile you'll carry out your agreement. Come, Ora."

The girl hesitated a moment, then with a pleading glance at Carr stepped from the room.

"All right now, Parker," snapped Rapaju. "Into your clothes and into the pilot's seat. You'll stay there, too, till the journey's over. Get busy!"

One of his guards had appeared in the doorway. Carr knew that

resistance was useless. Besides, seated at those controls, he might think of something. Rapaju'd never get Ora if he could help it!

Mado's shoulders drooped and his face was haggard and drawn, but he summoned a smile when he saw Carr.

"Hello, Carr," he said. "You all right?"

"Sure. Rapaju says I've got to take the controls."

"Very well." Mado shrugged his broad shoulders and slipped from the pilot's seat. Two ugly Llotta guards were watching, ray-pistols in hand. "The chart is corrected, Carr, and—"

"Never mind the conversation!" Rapaju snarled. "There'll be no talk between you at all. Beat it to your cabin, Mado."

The Martian glowered and made as if to retort hotly.

"But Rapaju," Detis interposed, speaking from his position at one of the ports, "they'll have to consult regarding the course of the vessel. Mado is more familiar than Carr with the navigation of space."

"Shut up!" roared Rapaju. "I know what I am doing. And, what's more, you'll not converse with them, either! I'm running this

expedition, and I'm not taking any chances."

Detis subsided and followed Mado through the passage to the sleeping cabins.

The ensuing silence was ominous. Carr could feel the eyes of the Llotta upon him as he examined the adjustments of the controls and peeped through the telescope. A glance at the velocity indicator showed him they were traveling at a rate of eight hundred miles a second. He studied the chart and soon made out their position. Jupiter was a hundred million miles behind them and they were heading almost due sunward. The automatic control mechanism was not functioning. Evidently Mado had kept this a secret—and for a purpose. He wished he could talk with his friend. They'd plan something.

"Like your job?" Rapaju was gloating over this Terrestrial who had dared to lay hands upon him.

"Yes, but not the company." Carr was disdainful.

"You'll like it less before I've finished with you. And get this straight. You think we're dependent on you to guide us to the inner planets, and that we'll not harm any of you until they are reached. Don't fool

yourself! I've watched Mado and I've spent much time in the excellent library of the *Nomad*. I've learned plenty about the navigation of space and can reach those planets as quickly and directly as you. But it pleases me to see you work, so work you shall. I'll check you carefully, and don't think you can deceive me. Don't try to depart from the true course. The sun is my check as it is yours, and I'll keep constant tab on our position. Get it?"

"A rather long speech, Rapaju." Carr grinned into the evil face of the commander.

"Still defiant, eh? Suits me, Carr Parker. We'll have some nice talks here, and then—when it pleases me—you'll suffer. You shall live to see your home city crash in utter ruin; your people slain, starved, beaten. And, above all, there's Ora—"

"Don't defile her name in your ugly mouth, you—!"

Carr bit his tongue to keep back the torrent of invectives that sprang to his lips. This would never do! He'd get himself bumped off before they were well started. And while there was life there was hope. He'd stick to his guns and think; think and plan. If only he could have a few words with Mado. They must get out of this mess. There must be a way! There must!

Rapaju was laughing in triumph. Thought he had cowed him, did he? Boastful savage! If he could navigate the *Nomad* himself, why didn't he? Liar! He and Mado were godsends to him, and he knew it! His speech at the council table had been the real truth.

Foreign thoughts entered his mind. Detis, good old Detis, was using his thought apparatus in his own cabin! He paid no attention to the words of Rapaju when he left the control room. Detis was on the job! Between them they'd outwit this devil of Ganymede.

"Keep your courage," came the message. "I've read the thoughts of Mado and he bids you examine the chart carefully. He's made some notations in the ancient language of Mars. The automatic control of the *Nomad* can be used when necessary. He has not advised Rapaju of its existence."

Carr was encouraged and he concentrated on a suitable reply. But, though he did not consciously will it, his thoughts were of Ora.

Instantly there came the reassurance of her father. "Ora is not in immediate danger. Rapaju is saving her for his revenge on you. And I'm watching her constantly. A ray-pistol is concealed in my clothing, its charge ready for the foul creature in case he should lay hands on her. But you must plan an escape, and salvation for your

worlds. Examine the chart at once."

He looked from the corner of his eye and saw that one of the Llotta guards was watching intently. He peered into the eye-piece of the telescope; made an inconsequential change in one of the adjustments. The guard stirred but did not arise. He looked at the chart with new interest, scanned its markings carefully. What had Mado marked for his attention? There were hundreds of notations, some in Cos and a few in the ancient Martian, all in Mado's painstaking chirography.

Ah, there it was! A tiny spot almost on their course, with Mado's minute notation. Sargasso Sea! What did it mean? Did Mado intend to lead the fleet into the embrace of that dreadful monster they had so fortunately escaped? An excellent idea to save the inner planets. But suicide for them! He'd do it though, if it weren't for Ora. She was so sweet and innocent. She must not die; must not suffer. Another way must be found. He groaned aloud as he realized that her predicament was the result of his own bullheadedness. If only he hadn't insisted on the trip to Ganymede. But then there was the problem of preserving the civilization of the inner planets. It had to be met.

There was a commotion behind him; a feminine shriek from the after

cabins; loud shoutings from the beast called Rapaju. Carr's heart skipped a beat. He was paralyzed with fear. But only for an instant. With a bellow of rage he whirled around and started for the door, charging the two guards with head down and arms flailing.

Chapter 9: Nemesis

The Llotta did not use their ray-pistols. They were too busy attempting to elude the mad rushes of the powerful Terrestrial. Besides, there were good reasons they should not kill him—yet. Carr drove one of them halfway down the passageway with a well-planted punch. The other was on his back, hairy legs twined around his waist, an arm under his chin, drawing his head back with a steady and terrible pressure. He whirled around, trying to shake off his beastly antagonist.

But these powerful legs and arms held fast. He tore at the hairy ankles where they crossed in the pit of his stomach; wrenched them free. Still the creature clung to him, twisting his head until it seemed his neck must break. He found a waving foot with his right hand; wrenched it mightily. There was a sharp snap and the foot dangled limp in his fingers. He had broken the ankle. With a howl of pain his assailant let go and dropped to the floor to crawl away like a whipped cur.

In a flash Carr saw that the brute was reaching for his ray-pistol where it had dropped during the encounter. He kicked it from the reach of that hairy paw and sprang after it. With one of those little weapons in his hands the odds would change! His fingers closed on

its grip just as Ora rushed into the room, closely followed by Rapaju, whose distorted features were terrible to behold. The cabin was full of them now; the guard he had first knocked down; the lust-crazed commander—the one with the broken ankle. All but Detis and Mado. Carr faced them alone.

So close was Rapaju to the girl that he dared not use the pistol, and now the uninjured guard was circling him, trying to get in a position where he could use his ray-pistol without endangering his commander. Carr fumbled for the release of the weapon he held in his hand; found it. The guard threw himself to the floor when he saw it raised; shouted a warning. But it was too late. The deadly ray had sped on its mission of death; struck him full in the middle. The twisted body lay still a moment and then collapsed like a punctured balloon, leaving his scant clothing in a limp heap—empty. A worthy miniature of the D-ray, this little weapon!

He turned to face Rapaju and saw that he was shielding himself with Ora's body. She had fainted and now hung drooping in the arms of the beast. Where was Mado? Detis? Good God—he'd killed them! Carr thought of that little spot on the chart. Must be very close now. They'd pass so near there'd be no escape. But he could not reach the controls without taking his eyes from Rapaju. That would have to wait.

Rapaju was backing toward the door, still holding the limp figure of the girl before him. The injured guard lay moaning on the floor.

"Drop her, you devil!" Carr shouted desperately as he saw that Rapaju soon would reach the passageway.

Then suddenly he reached for the controls and pushed the energy lever to full speed forward. He braced himself for the shock of acceleration and saw Rapaju and Ora thrown backward into the passageway, the girl's body cushioned by that of her captor as they were flung violently to the floor. Madly he rushed to the narrow entrance and tore at the hairy arms that encircled the slender waist of the girl. He jerked the snarling commander of the Llotta expedition to his feet and slammed him against the metal wall.

"Now, you damn pig," he grunted, "I'll finish the job. Dirty scum of a rotten world!"

He dragged his victim into the control cabin and threw him to the floor. But Rapaju was like an eel. He wriggled from under him and snatched from the heap of clothing the ray-pistol of the disintegrated guard. With a yelp of triumph he rose to his knees and leveled the weapon.

A well placed kick sent it spinning and Carr was upon him. He snapped back the head with a terrible punch; then lifted the dazed creature to his feet and stepped back.

"Stand up and take it like a man!" he roared.

Rapaju shook his head to clear it and rushed in with a bellow of rage. Just what Carr wanted! Starting almost from the floor, his right came up to meet the vicious jaw with a crack that told of the terrific power behind it. Lifted from his feet and hurled half way across the room by the impact, Rapaju lay motionless where he fell.

Carr was at the telescope. Their speed was close to fifteen hundred miles a second. The monstrous mass of Mado's Sargasso Sea loomed close in his vision. Off their course by a hundred miles or more. They'd miss it all right. He had the situation in hand now on board the *Nomad*. But how about the fleet behind them? He thought fast and furiously. Another two minutes and they'd pass the thing; the inexplicable horror which had accounted for the golden sphere of the Europans. Could he use it? Suppose the fleet of the enemy—

The idea was full of possibilities.

He rushed to the stern compartment, and scanned the heavens for the

massed body of spheres he knew would be the fleet of the Llotta. At this speed they must have fallen far behind. Yes, there they were. Not so far behind at that. The battle in the control room must have been a shorter one than it had seemed. He returned quickly to the controls and reversed the energy, to give the fleet a chance to catch up to him.

Closer came that mass of whitish jelly. And now it was much larger than before. The terrible creature, for living matter it was, beyond doubt, was growing with the rapidity of a rising flood. Great tentacles of its horrid translucent substance reached in all directions for possible victims. He sickened at the sight. But what a fate for the fleet of the Llotta! If only he could maneuver them into its influence.

He changed his course slightly and headed directly for the monster, again increasing speed. Perhaps—if he calculated the forces correctly—he could dive through it again with the D-ray to clear a path. But no. It was a miracle they had escaped before, and now the vicious thing was more than double its previous size. Once more he altered his course. He'd cross in front of the thing; skim it as close as he dared and shoot from its influence on the far side. The greater mass of the enemy vessels and their lack of a quick-acting repulsive force would prove their undoing.

Full speed ahead. A rapid mental calculation—an educated guess, rather—and he set the automatic control. Turning around to start for the stern compartment, he saw that Ora had recovered from her swoon and now stood swaying weakly in the passageway.

"Ora!" he exclaimed delightedly. He rushed to her side and supported her in a tender embrace.

"Rapaju?" she questioned with horror in her eyes.

"Won't bother you for a while, dear. But your father—Mado?"

"He gassed them. They'll recover." The brave girl had regained her composure.

"Good! But, come! Time's short." He half carried her to the rear, berating himself the while for his inability to pay her closer attention. With arms still around her he placed her at one of the stern ports.

"What is it, Carr?" She sensed his excitement.

"The fleet—see! We'll destroy them."

The spherical vessels were close behind, huddled together in mass

formation and following the *Nomad* blindly.

"How, Carr?"

"Lead them into it. Wait tall you see! There's a—"

The *Nomad* lurched, and changed direction. Cold fear clutched at his throat. That devil of a guard! Why hadn't he killed him? He dashed through the passage, Ora at his heels.

Sure enough, the crippled guard had dragged himself to the controls; was manipulating the energy director as he had seen Mado do. They were heading directly for the terrible monster of the heavens!

No need now to peer through the telescope. The thing was visible to the naked eye. No power could save them! Carr hurled himself at the guard and tore at the hairy paw which gripped the lever. The throbbing of strange energies filled the air of the room, and Carr's brain pulsed with the maddening rhythm. The red discharge appeared at the projections of the control panels. He forgot the fleet of the Llotta, forgot the menace to his own world. Only Ora mattered now, and he had not the power to save her!

As in a daze he knew he was wrenching mightily at the body of the

powerful minion of Rapaju. His fingers encountered heated metal—one of the ray-pistols. He felt the intense vibration of the weapon as its charge was released. But he still lived. The beast who held it had missed! Dimly he was conscious of the screams of Ora; of the yielding of the creature who fought him. An animal cry registered on his consciousness and he shook the suddenly limp Llotta from him. He knew somehow that his last enemy was gone.

A quick glance showed him that Ora was still on her feet, braced against the wall. The red veil was before his eyes. He grasped the controls, and fought desperately to keep his strength and senses. A streamer of horrid whiteness swung across his vision; slithered clammily over the glass of one of the forward ports. They were into the thing! It was the end! He groaned aloud as he fumbled with the mechanisms and strove to formulate a plan of escape.

The fleet, he knew, was just behind. An enormous mass. The repulsive energy astern would be terrific. He turned it full on. The whiteness obscured his vision. Then it was gone once more. A single streamer waved before him and encompassed them. The movement of these members must be inconceivably rapid, else they'd be invisible at the speed the *Nomad* was traveling. Full speed ahead. The repulsion full on in the direction of the center of the mass as well as astern. The framework of the *Nomad* creaked protestingly

from the terrific forces that tore at her vitals.

Then suddenly they were released. The *Nomad* was shooting off into space. The resultant of those combined forces had done the trick. Only the edge of that devil-fish of space, had they touched. Free—they were free of the monster! The red veil lifted. He rushed to Ora's side. She was kneeling at one of the floor ports, breathing heavily but unharmed.

Below them they saw the swiftly receding mass: the fleet of the Llotta diving headlong, drawn inexorably into the rapacious embrace of the vile creature of the heavens. An instant the awful whiteness of the thing closed in greedily about the many spheres of the fleet; swallowed them from sight and contorted madly and with seeming glee over the triumph. Then, in a burst of blinding incandescence, it was gone. The monster, the fleet—everything—blasted into nothingness. The fuel storage compartments of the vessels of Ganymede had exploded! The heavens were rid of the inexplicable growing menace; the inner planets were saved from a terrible invasion. And the *Nomad* was safe. Ora, Detis, Mado—all were safe!

At his side Ora was trembling. Gently he raised her to her feet, and took her into his arms.

Chapter 10: Vagabonds All

Together they cared for Detis and Mado; made them comfortable in their bunks until the time when the effects of the gas would wear off. Lucky it was that Rapaju had used the gas pistol rather than the ray. Perhaps it had been a mistake. Or perhaps he had needed the scientific knowledge of Detis, the familiarity with the inner planets that was Mado's. At any rate, they had no delusions regarding his designs on Ora or his hatred of Carr. By his own passions had the commander of the fleet been led to the error that cost him his life and made possible the destruction of his fleet.

Carr was torn by conflicting emotions. The delectable little Europan was most disturbing. He'd never had much use for the other sex—on Earth. Too dominating, most of them. And always thrown at his head by designing parents for his money. But Ora was different! Her very nearness set his pulses racing. And he knew that she cared for him as he did for her. Those moments in the control cabin after the explosion! But something had come over him since he cut loose from the old life. Wanderlust—that was it. He'd never go back. Neither would he be content to settle down to a domestic life in Paladar. Wanted to be up and going somewhere.

"Oh, Carr, Carr!" Ora's voice called to him. "Mado is awake. He

wants you."

Good old Mado! Why couldn't they just continue on their way as they had started out? Roaming the universe in search of other adventures! But the silvery tinkle of Ora's laughter reached his ears. She was irresistible! He forgot his doubts as he hurried to his friend's cabin.

Mado was staring at the Europan maiden with a ludicrous expression of astonishment—gawping, Carr called it. And Ora was laughing at him.

"Your friend," she gurgled, "doesn't believe he's alive, or that I am, or you. Tell him we are."

Carr grinned. Mado did look funny at that. "Hello, old sock," he said, "had a bad dream?"

"Did I? Oh boy!" Mado rocked to and fro, his head in his hands. Then he displayed sudden intense interest. "Rapaju?" he asked. "His guards—the fleet—what's happened?"

"Ah ha! Now you know you're alive!" Carr laughed. "But the others are dead and gone. The fleet's gone to smash—and how!"

"But Carr. How did you do it? Tell me!"

Mado threw off his covers and clapped his friend on the back, a resounding thump that brought a gasp from Ora.

"Your Sargasso Sea did it. And it's a thing of the past, too. Wait till I tell you about it!"

Ora tripped from the room as Carr sat on the edge of the bunk to spin his yarn.

"But man alive!" Mado exclaimed when the story was finished. "Don't you know you've done a miraculous thing? I'd never have had the nerve. That damn creature out there had more than four times its former attracting energy. That's what made it impossible for the fleet to get away. And you—you lucky devil—you just doped it out right. The fleet of the Llotta gave you a tremendous push from astern when you used the repulsive energy. If they hadn't been there with their enormous mass to react against we'd all have been mincemeat now along with the Llotta. You Terrestrials sure can think fast! Me, now—Lord, if it had been me, I'd have thought of it after my spirit had departed to its reward—or punishment. Glory be! It's the greatest thing I ever heard of."

"Rats! You'd have done the same as I did. Probably would have missed it a mile instead of nearly getting caught as I did. A good thing the fleet's gone, though. Mars and Terra—Venus, too—they'll never know how close it was for them. Wouldn't have sense enough to appreciate it, anyway."

"They would if they ever got a taste of what the Llotta planned. But what's wrong with you Carr? You act sore. Want to go home?"

"Me? Don't be like that. No—I'd like to carry on as we planned. There's Saturn, Uranus and Neptune yet; Planet 9; a flock of satellites and asteroids. Oh, dammit!"

Mado looked his amazement. "Well, what's to prevent it?" he demanded. "The *Nomad's* still here, and so are we. I'm just as anxious to keep going as you are. Why not?"

But Carr did not reply. Why not, indeed? He strode from the cabin and into the control room. The *Nomad* was drifting in space, subject only to natural forces that swung it in a vast orbit around the sun. He started the generators and drove the vessel from her temporary orbit with rapid acceleration. Out—out into the jeweled blackness of the heavens. There was Jupiter out there, a bright orb that came suddenly very near when he centered it on the cross-hairs of the

telescope.

The excited voices of Ora and Detis came to his ears. The booming speech of Mado. Why couldn't he be sensible and companionable as they were? But a perverse demon kept him at the controls. They'd think him a grouch. Well, maybe he was! But the vastness of the universe beckoned. New worlds to explore; mysteries to be solved; a life of countless new experiences! Anyone'd think he was the owner of the *Nomad*, the way he planned for the future.

They were in the control cabin now—Mado and Detis and Ora. A moment he hesitated, eyes glued to the telescope. Then, with a petulant gesture, he reached for the automatic control; locked it. Shouldn't be this way. They'd think him an awful cad. And they'd be right! He whirled to face them.

Detis was smiling. Mado gazed owlishly solemn. Ora clung to the arm of her father, and her long lashes hid the blue eyes that had played such havoc with the emotions of the Terrestrial.

"Carr," said Detis, gently, "we must thank you. You saved our lives, you know."

"Aw, forget it. Saved my own, too, didn't I? By a lucky break."

"It wasn't luck, Carr." Detis was gripping his hand now. "It was sheer grit and brains. You had them both. If you hadn't used them we'd all be corpses—or disintegrated—excepting Ora, perhaps. And you know the fate that awaited her. Instead, we are alive and well. The fleet is gone. Rapaju's body and that of his guard drift nameless in space where you disposed of them through the air-lock of the *Nomad*. The inner planets need fear no future invasion, for the resources of Ganymede have been expended in the one huge enterprise that has failed. All through your quick wit and bravery. No, it wasn't luck."

"Nonsense, Detis." Carr returned the pressure of the scientist's hand, smiling sheepishly. He pushed him away after a moment. He didn't want their gratitude or praise. Didn't know what he wanted. Ora still avoided meeting his gaze. "Nonsense," he repeated. "And now, please leave me. You, Detis. Mado, too. I'd like to be alone for a while—with Ora. Mind?"

Mado's owlish look broadened to a knowing grin as he backed into the passageway. Detis collided with the huge Martian in his eagerness to be out of the room. They were alone and Carr was on his feet. Nothing mattered now—excepting Ora. Suddenly she was in his arms, the fragrance of her hair in his nostrils.

Star gazing, the two of them. It was ridiculous! But the wonders of the universe held a new beauty now for Carr. The distant suns had taken on added brilliance. Still they beckoned.

"Carr," the girl whispered, after a time, "where are we going?"

"To Europa. Your home."

"To—to stay?"

"No." Carr was suddenly confident; determined. "We'll stop there to break the news. Then we'll be wedded, you and I, according to the custom of your people. Our honeymoon—years of it—will be spent in the *Nomad*, roving the universe. Mado'll agree, I know. Wanderers of the heavens we'll be, Ora. But we'll have each other; and when we've—you've—had enough of it, I'll be ready to settle down. Anywhere you say. Are you game?"

"Oh, Carr! How did you guess? It's just as we'd planned. Father and Mado and I. Didn't think I'd go, did you, you stupid old dear?"

"Why—why Ora." Carr was stammering now. He'd thought he was being masterful—making the plans himself. But she'd beat him to it, the adorable little minx! "I was a bit afraid," he admitted; "and I still

can't believe that it's actually true. You're sure you want to?"

"Positive. Why Carr, I've always been a vagabond at heart. And now that I've found you we'll just be vagabonds together. Father and Mado will leave us very much to each other. Their scientific leanings, you know. And—oh—it'll just be wonderful!"

"It's you that'll make it wonderful, sweetheart."

Carr drew her close. The stars shone still more brightly and beckoned anew. Vagabonds, all of them! Like the gypsies of old, but with vastly more territory to roam. The humdrum routine of his old life seemed very far behind. He wondered what Courtney Davis would say if he could see him now. Wordless happiness had come to him, and he let his thoughts wander out into the limitless expanse of the heavens. Star gazing still—just he and Ora.

December 1930

#60 Slaves Of The Dust, By Sophie Wenzel Ellis:

Fate's retribution was adequate. There emerged a rat with a man's head and face.

Aproximate word count: 8,200

Bigotry:

Warnings:

showed his teeth

- - -

It's a poor science that would hide from us the great, deep, sacred infinitude of Nescience, whither we can never penetrate, on which all science swims as mere superficial film.

—*Carlyle*.

It's a poor science that would hide from us the great, deep, sacred infinitude of Nescience, whither we can never penetrate, on which

all science swims as mere superficial film.

—*Carlyle*.

The two *batalões* turned from the open waters of the lower Tapajos River into the *igarapé*, the lily-smothered shallows that often mark an Indian settlement in the jungles of Brazil. One of the two half-breed rubber-gatherers suddenly stopped his *batalõe* by thrusting a paddle against a giant clump of lilies. In a corruption of the Tupi dialect, he called over to the white man occupying the other frail craft.

Fate's retribution was adequate. There emerged a rat with a man's head and face.

"We dare go no farther, master. The country of the Ungapuks is bewitched. It is too dangerous."

Fearfully he stared over his shoulder toward a 296 spot in the slimy water where a dim bulk moved, which was only an alligator hunting for his breakfast.

Hale Oakham, as long and lanky and level-eyed as Charles Lindbergh, ran despairing fingers through his damp hair and

groaned.

“But how can I find this jungle village without a guide?”

The *caboclo* shrugged. “The village will find you. It is bewitched, master. But you will soon see the path through the *matto*.”

“Can’t you stay by me until time to land? I don’t like the looks of these alligators.”

“It is better for a white man to face an alligator than for a *caboclo* to face an Ungapuk. Once they used to kill and eat us for our strength. Now—” Again his shrug was eloquent.

“Now?” Hale prompted impatiently.

“The white god who put a spell on these one-time cannibals will bewitch us and make us wash and rejoice when it is time to die.”

He shuddered and spat at a cayman that was lumbering away from his *batalõe.*

Hale Oakham laughed, a hearty boyish laugh for a rather learned

young professor.

“Is that all they do to you?” he asked.

“No. All who enter this magic *matto* die soon, rejoicing. Before the last breath comes, it is said their bodies turn into a handful of silver dust—poof!—like that.” He snapped his dirty fingers. “Then the life that leaves them goes into rocks that walk.”

Hale sighed resignedly. There wasn’t any use to argue.

“Unload your *batalõe*,” he ordered testily, “and get your filthy carcasses away.”

The half-breeds obeyed readily. As the departing *batalõe* turned from the *igarapé* into the open water of the river, the young man repressed a sudden lifting of his scalp. He was in for it now!

His long body sprawled out in the *batalõe*, he paddled about aimlessly for several minutes until he found an aisle through the jungle—the path that led to the jungle village which he was visiting in the name of science, and for a certain award.

Before plunging into that waiting tangle where life and death carried on a visible, unceasing struggle, he hesitated. Instinctively he shrank

from losing himself in that mad green world.

He had first heard of the Ungapuks at the convention of the Nescience Club in New York, that body of scientists, near-scientists and adventurers linked together for the purpose of awarding the yearly Woolman prizes for the most spectacular addition of empiric facts to various branches of science. One of the members of the club, an explorer, had told a wild yarn about a tribe of Brazilian Indians, headed by Sir Basil Addington, an English scientist, who was conducting secret experiments in biochemistry in his jungle laboratory. The explorer had said that the scientist, half-crazed by a powerful narcotic, had seemingly discovered some secret of life which enabled him to produce monsters in his laboratory and to change the physical characteristics of the Ungapuk Indians, who, in five years, had been transformed from cannibals into cultured men and women.

And now Hale Oakham, hoping to win one of the Woolman prizes, was here in the country of the Ungapuks, entering the jungle path that lead to the unknown.

Fifty feet from the *igarapé*, the path curved sharply away from a giant tree. Hale approached the bend with his hand on his gun. Just before he reached it, he stopped suddenly to listen.

A woman's voice had suddenly broken forth in a wild, incredibly sweet song. Hale stood entranced, drinking in the heady sounds that stirred his emotions like *masata*, the 97 jungle intoxicant. The singer approached the bend in the path, while the young man waited eagerly.

The first sight of her made him gasp. He had expected to see an Indian girl. No sane traveler would imagine a white woman in the Amazon jungle, with skin as amazingly pale as the great, fleshy victoria regia lilies in the *igarapé*.

When she saw Hale, she stopped instantly. With a quick, practiced twist, she reached for the bow flung across her shoulders and fitted a barbed arrow to the string.

She was a beautiful barbarian, standing quivering before him. In the thick dull gold braids hanging over her bare shoulders flamed two enormous scarlet flowers, no redder than her own lips pouted in alarm. There was a savage brevity to her clothing, which consisted only of a short skirt of rough native grass and breastplates of beaten gold, held in place by strings of colored seeds.

The girl held out an imperious hand and, in perfect English, said:

“Go back!”

Hale drew his long body up to its slim height, folded his arms, and gave her his most winning smile. His insolence added to his wholesome good looks.

“Why?” he exclaimed. “I’ve come a couple of thousand miles to call on you.”

He saw that the eyes which held his levelly were pure and limpid, and of an astonishing orchid-blue.

“Who are you?” Her throaty, vibrant voice was a thing of the flesh, whipping Hale’s senses to sudden madness.

“I’m Hale Oakham,” he said, a little tremulously, “a lone, would-be scientist knocking about the jungle. Won’t you tell me your name?”

She nodded gravely. “I am Aña. I, too, am white.” Her rich voice was quietly proud. “Come; I’ll see if Aimu will receive you.”

With surprising, childlike trust, she held out her little hand to him. The gesture was so delightfully natural that Hale, grinning boyishly, took her hand and held it as they walked down the jungle path.

“Sing for me,” he demanded abruptly. “Sing the song you sang just now.”

“That?” asked the girl, turning the virgin-blue fire of her eyes on him. “That was my death-song that I practice each day. Perhaps soon I shall be released from this.” She passed her hands over her beautiful, half-clothed body.

Hale’s warm glance swept over her. “Do you want to die?”

“Yes; don’t you? But you do not, or you would not have retreated from my poisoned arrow.”

“No, Aña; I want to live.”

“To live—and be a slave of *this*?” Again her hand went over her slim body. “A slave of a pile of flesh that you must feed and protect from the agonies that attack it on every side? Bah! But I am hoping that my turn will come next.”

“Your turn for what, Aña?”

“To enter the Room of Release. Perhaps, if Aimu approves of you, you, too, may taste of death.” Her gentle smile was beatific.

“Do you speak of Sir Basil Addington?”

“He was called that once, before he came to us. Now he has no name. We can find none holy enough for him; and so we call him Aimu, which means good friend.” Her beautiful face was sweet with reverence.

And now, in the distance, Hale saw that the path led into a large clearing. He slowed his pace, for he wanted to know this lovely girl better before he joined the Ungapuks.

“Who are you, Aña?” he asked suddenly, bending closer to the crinkled, dull-gold hair.

“I am Aña, a white woman.” She looked at him frankly.

“But who are your parents, and how did you get among the Ungapuks?”

Aña’s red lips curved into a dewy smile. “I thought all white men were wise, like Aimu. But you are stupid. How do you think a white woman could appear in a tribe of Indians who live in the jungle, many weeks’ journey from what you call civilization?”

Hale looked a little blank and more than a little disconcerted.

“I suppose I am stupid,” he said dryly. “But tell me, Aña, how did you get here?”

“Why,” she exclaimed, “he made me!”

“Made you? Good Lord! What do you mean?”

“Just what I said, Hale Oakham. If he can take a few grains of dust and make a shoot that will grow into a giant tree like yonder monster itauba, don’t you think he can create a small white girl like me?” Her orchid-blue eyes glowed innocently into his.

The eager questions that he would have asked froze upon his lips, for a party of Indians approached.

The six nearly naked red men came close and surveyed him, toying nervously with their primitive, feather-decorated weapons.

A tall, handsome young fellow who possessed something of the picturesque perfection of the North American plains’ Indian stepped forward and, in perfect English, said:

“Good morning, white stranger. What is it you wish of the

Ungapuks?”

“I came to see your white *cacique*,” said Hale.

“Aimu? What is it you wish of Aimu? He is ours, white stranger.”

“Yes, he is yours. I come as a friend, perhaps to help him in his great work.”

“Perhaps!” The young Indian folded his bronze, muscular arms over his broad chest and continued his cool survey of Hale. “White men before you have come: spies and thieves. Some we poisoned with curari. Others Aimu took into the Room of Release.”

He turned to Aña, who was still standing by Hale, and his expression softened.

“What shall we do with him, Aña?” he asked the question, a fleeting look of hunger swept his fine, flashing eyes.

Aña flushed beautifully, and, moving closer to Hale, with an impulsive, almost childish gesture, slipped her arm through his.

“Let us take him to our village, Unani Assu!” she suggested. “I like him.”

It was Hale's turn to flush, which he did like a schoolboy.

Unani Assu's brows drew together in a scowl. The hand holding his blow-pipe jerked convulsively.

"Aña! Come away!" he growled. "You mustn't touch a stranger!"

Aña's blue eyes stretched with astonishment. "But I like to touch him, Unani Assu!"

The tall Indian, with a half comical gesture of despair, said:

"Don't misunderstand her, stranger. She is young, very young, ah! And she has known only the reborn men of the Ungapuks."

He stepped firmly over to Aña, and, taking the girl by the arm, drew her away.

"Run ahead," he commanded, "and tell Aimu that we come."

Aña, her feathered bamboo anklets clicking together, sped away.

Unani Assu bowed courteously to Hale.

"Come, stranger. If you are an enemy, it is you who must fear." He

motioned for him to proceed down the jungle path.

The path ended at a clearing studded with *moloccas*, the Indian grass huts made of plaited straw. Altogether the scene was peaceful and sane and far removed from the strange tales that Hale had heard concerning the Ungapuks.

Hale was conducted to a long, low stone building, where, in the doorway, 299 stood a tall and emaciated white man.

“Aimu!” said the Indians reverently, and bowed themselves.

Over the bare, brown backs, the white man looked at Hale.

“Sir Basil Addington?” asked the young man.

“Yes. You are welcome. Come in.”

Hale entered the building.

He was in a book-filled study, furnished with hand-made chairs and a desk. Sir Basil asked him to be seated. He offered the young man long, brown native cigarettes and a very good drink made from

yucca.

After several minutes of conversation, Sir Basil suddenly changed his manner.

“And now,” he shot out, eyeing the young man through narrowed lids, “will you please state the purpose of this visit?”

Hale looked squarely at his questioner. “Frankly, Sir Basil, I have called on you because I am so intensely interested in your work among the Ungapuks that I wish to offer my services.”

He gave in detail his family history, his education, and his experience as a teacher and a scientist.

Sir Basil tapped his teeth thoughtfully with a pencil.

“But why do you think you can be of assistance to me?”

“That, of course, is for you to decide.”

Hale thought that the scientist looked like a huge, starved crow in his loose-fitting coat. He was so fleshless that, when the light fell strongly on his face as it now did, the bones of his head and hands showed through the skin with horrible clearness.

Hale, under Sir Basil's scrutiny, decided instantly that he did not like him.

"I need a helper," the scientist went on, with the air of talking to himself. "A white assistant who neither loves nor fears me. Unani Assu is good enough in his way, but I need a helper who has had technical training." Suddenly he wheeled on Hale and asked sharply, "How are your nerves, young man?"

Hale started, but managed to answer calmly. "Excellent. My war record isn't half bad, and that was surely backed with good nerves."

"And you say you have no close relatives, no ties of any sort to interfere with work that is dangerous—and something else?"

"Not a soul would care if I passed out to-day, Sir Basil."

"Good! And now tell me this: are you one of those scientists whose minds are so mechanical, so mathematically made, as it were, that your entire outlook on science is based on old, established beliefs, or do you belong to that rare but modern type of trained thinker and dreamer who refuse to permit yesterday's convictions to influence to-day's visions?"

Hale smiled quietly. “I recently lost my chair in a famous university because of my so-called unscientific teachings regarding ether-drift.”

Expressing himself in purely scientific terms, he went into an elaboration of his revolutionary theory. When he had finished, Sir Basil reached out his clawlike hand to him.

“Good!” he approved. “You have dared to think originally. Now listen to my theory of mind-electrons which has grown into the established fact that I have discovered the secret of life and death.”

The long, thin hands reached into a pocket for a box of pills. He swallowed one greedily, and immediately his emaciated face seemed charged with new virility.

He spoke out suddenly. “Our world, you know, is made up of three powers: matter, energy and what you call life. I might really say that there are but two powers, for matter, in its last analysis, is a form of energy. And what is life? You can’t call it a form of energy, for every inorganic atom has 300 energy without having life. Life, Mr. Oakham, is mind or consciousness.”

He began pacing the floor restlessly. “Everything that lives has this consciousness, and I say this in defiance of some fixed scientific

views. The amoeba in a stagnant pool, a thallophyte on a bit of old bread, any of the myriads of trees and plants that you see in the jungle all have consciousness as well as you. And why?"

He brought his fist down upon the table. "Because they issue from the same source as you and I, the almighty mind, eternal, indestructible, which has permitted itself to be enslaved by matter. You are Hale Oakham. I am Basil Addington, yet we are one and the same. Let me illustrate."

He seized a glass and poured it full of *masata*. "Look! Two portions of *masata*. But I pour what is in the glass back into the bottle. The molecules cohere and the two portions become one again. Some day you and I—our individual consciousnesses—will flow back to the Whole. That sounds mystical, but listen.

"We scientists hold that the electron explains nearly all the physical and chemical phenomena. I go further and say that it explains *all*. Matter, electricity, light, heat, magnetism—all can be reduced to the ultimate unit. So, Mr. Oakham, I am going to make clear to you how life itself is electronic."

His long finger touched Hale's arm. "You, I, yonder mosquito on your sleeve, even one of the germs that is causing my malaria, all

being individual living things, are the ultimate units of what I shall personify as the Mind. When I say *you* I do not speak of that mound of flesh in which you exist, and which can be reduced to the same familiar basic elements and compounds as make up inorganic structures; I speak of your mind, your consciousness—for that is the real you. Are you following me?"

"Perfectly, Sir Basil." Hale reached for another drink. "But do you mean to say that you and I are no more than a mosquito, a malaria protozoan, or even one of those trees in the jungle?"

Sir Basil's dry skin slipped back into a long smile. "Startling, isn't it? You, I, and all other living organisms are nothing but matter, energy and consciousness. You and I have a larger share of consciousness, because our organic structure permits the mind-electrons greater freedom over the matter than composes our bodies. We are more acutely aware of the universe about us, have a greater facility for enjoyment and suffering, a more intricate brain and nervous system. Yet when our bodies die and our consciousness is released, the mind-electrons enslaved by our atoms go back to the elemental Whole. This holds good for the protozoan, the tree, the man—for all things that live."

Hale was drinking again. "You mean, Sir Basil, that there is a sort of

war waged against what you personify as the Mind by matter; that matter is constantly seeking to enslave mind-electrons, so that it may become an organism which, for awhile, may enjoy what we call life?"

Sir Basil pushed back his tufted hair and looked happy. "Yes! And it's Nature's supreme blunder! In the end, the Mind always conquers and gains its release, yet the eternal chain of enslavement goes on and on, and will continue to go on as long as there is a living organism in the world to bind mind to matter."

Hale was excited now, as much from the fiery intoxicant as from the scientist's weird revelation. "I get you," he said, rather inelegantly for a professor. "You mean that if every living thing in the world should pass out, every man, every plant, every animal, even down to microscopic infusoria, the Mind would collect all its electrons, and through some more jealous law of, er, cohesion hold these electrons inviolate from matter and energy?"

"Right! And again, as in the beginning, the Mind would rule supreme. By what I have proved, you and I and all other creatures that now have life may, as separate unfleshed electrons, enjoy eternal consciousness as a part of the Mind." A new passion leaped to his dark eyes. "When I have finished my mission, no more need we be

slaves of the dust, subject to all the frightful sufferings of this dunghill of flesh."

He brought his fist down upon his skinny leg with a resounding blow.

"But you cannot reduce your theory to fact, Sir Basil!"

"No?" Again came that frightful grin to his cadaverous face. "Can you withstand shock?"

"If you mean shock to the eye, let me remind you that I served two years in the big fight."

"Then come to my laboratory. Better take another drink."

While Hale helped himself again from the *masata* bottle, Sir Basil swallowed another pellet.

Then the two went into the adjoining apartment.

Sir Basil, his hand over the doorknob, paused.

“Before we go in,” he said, “I want you to remember that we call natural that which is characteristic of the physical world. Everything alive in this laboratory was produced by nature. I merely made available the materials, or, rather, I made the conditions under which matter was able to enslave mind-electrons.”

He opened the door, slipped his body through, and, with his ugly, teeth-revealing grin, gestured for Hale to follow him.

Hale steeled himself and looked around half fearfully. The first glance took in a large and well-equipped laboratory, somewhat fetid with animal odors. The second lingered here and there on cages, aquariums, incubators, and other containers where creatures moved.

Suddenly, as something scuttled across the floor and disappeared into a hole in the wall, Hale cried out and covered his eyes with a hand.

Sir Basil laughed aloud. “Why didn’t you examine it closer?”

Hale looked nauseated. “My God, Sir Basil! A rat with a man’s head and face!”

Sir Basil’s voice was sharp, decisive. “Before you leave this

laboratory, you're going to come out of your foolish belief that man is a creature apart from other living organisms. You—the conscious you—is no greater, no more important in the final balance than the spark of consciousness in that rat. When your body and the rat's body give up their atoms to nature's laboratory, the little enslaved mind-electron that is you and the one that is the rat will be identical."

Again Hale shivered and turned away from that cold, too-thin face.

The scientist was speaking. "Step around to all those cages and pens. I want you to see all my slaves of the dust."

But long before Hale had encircled the room, he was so disturbed at what he saw that he could scarcely complete his frightful inspection. In every enclosure he viewed a monstrosity that in some way resembled a human. Every reptile, every insect, every queer, misshapen animal not only looked human in some shocking manner, but also seemed to possess human characteristics. It seemed as though some demented creator with a perverted sense of humor had attempted to mock man by calling forth monsters in his image.

At last the young man cried out: "How did you breed these freaks?"

“They are not freaks, and I did not breed them. They are nature’s parentless products whose basic elements were brought together in this laboratory, and, by a scientific reproduction of the functions of creation, endowed with the life principle, which is merely 302 mind-electrons.” He smoothed his long tuft of hair nervously. “Would you like to see how life springs from a wedding of matter, energy, and consciousness?”

“I suspect I can stand anything now,” Hale admitted.

“Then come and peep into a very remarkable group of apparatus I have developed, where you can watch atoms building molecules and molecules building living organisms.”

“You say I can see atoms?”

“Not directly, of course. The light waves will forever prevent us from actually seeing the atom. But I have perfected a system of photography which magnifies particles smaller than light waves, and, separating their images from the light waves, renders detail clear in the moving pictures.”

He went to a huge machine or series of machines which took up all the center floor space of the laboratory, where he busied himself in

an intricate network of wires, mirrors, electrodes, ray projectors, and traveling metal compartments. Presently he called out to Hale.

“Let me remind you, Oakham, that while any scientist can break up any of the various proteid molecules which are the basis of all living cells, animal and vegetable, no scientist before me has been able to compound the atoms and build them into a proteid molecule.”

He bared his teeth in the smile that Hale hated.

“I am proud to tell you that the proteid molecule can be built up only when the third element of nature’s trinity is added—the mind-electron. I have found a means of capturing the mind-electron and of bringing it in contact with proteid elements. And now it is possible to bring forth life in the laboratory. Come closer and watch proteid forming protoplasm, protoplasm forming a cell, and the cell evolving into—well, what do you want, an animal, plant, or an insect?”

Hale had fallen under the scientist’s spell. He did not feel foolish when he said:

“Let’s have a rat!”

Hale became so absorbed in the wonders of the laboratory that when

lunch time came, Sir Basil had food brought to them. While they were eating a very good vegetable stew, farina, and luscious tropical fruits, a sudden, agonized scream rang out, followed by other screams and wails.

Sir Basil opened the door and looked out. Aña came running forward. Her blue eyes were flooded with tears.

“Oh, Aimu!” she moaned. “A tree fell on Unani Assu.”

She buried her beautiful face in her hands and sobbed aloud.

Sir Basil frowned heavily.

“I can’t lose Unani Assu yet,” he declared. “He is a wonderful help around the laboratory. Is he dead?”

“No. We should rejoice if his time of release had come. But his legs, Aimu! No one wants to suffer and be crippled.”

Even in her distress, the girl’s voice was rich and vibrant, and every tone moved Hale curiously.

“Hurry!” cried the scientist. “Have them bring him here before he dies.”

The girl leaped to her feet and sped away.

“Come, Oakham,” continued Sir Basil. “Here is a rare opportunity for you to see how completely I have mastered the laws that govern organic matter. Help me prepare.”

For several minutes, Hale worked under the scientist’s sharply spoken directions. By the time the injured man was brought to the laboratory, Sir Basil was ready for him.

Unani Assu was still conscious, but his pale face indicated that he had lost much blood. When the improvised stretcher was lowered to the floor, Sir Basil sent all the Indians away.

Unani Assu opened his eyes and called feebly, “Aña!”

“Be still!” ordered Sir Basil. “Aña is not here.”

“Please!” gasped the dying man. “I want her—my Aña!”

Sir Basil sucked in his breath sharply. “What’s this? Have you been making love to Aña again, after my warning to you?”

The sufferer stirred uneasily. “No!” he panted. “But perhaps my hour of release has come, and I want to look at her—once more.”

The scientist smiled unpleasantly as he eyed the magnificent body which looked like a broken statue in bronze.

“Some human characteristics are strange,” he muttered. “In spite of everything I do, this fellow continues to love Aña: Aña whom I intend for myself.”

He stepped to the apparatus and swiftly changed one of the adjustments.

“Perhaps,” he resumed, with a gleam in his eyes that chilled Hale, “this will forever cure him.”

In another moment, the still, half-dead body was lifted and gently slipped into a compartment.

Before Hale’s horrified gaze fastened on the eye-piece which revealed moving pictures of every process that went on within, Unani Assu’s body was reduced almost instantly to a fine, silvery dust.

“Good God!” he cried. “You have killed him.”

The scientist's teeth showed in his wide smile. "Think so? Does a woman destroy a dress when she rips it up to make it over?"

"Do you mean me to understand that you can reduce a living body to its basic elements and then rebuild these elements into a remade man?"

"Watch!" warned the scientist.

Hale looked again and saw the silver dust that was once a living body being whirled into a tiny, grublike thing. He saw the grub expand into an embryo, and the embryo develop into a foetus. From now on the development was slower, and he often stopped to talk with Sir Basil.

Once he asked: "If this man had died naturally, could you have brought him back to life?"

Sir Basil shook his head. "No. When once the mind-electron is completely freed from its enslavement by matter, it is forever beyond recall by the body it has just vacated. Like atomic electrons, whose equilibrium disturbed break away from their planetary system and go dashing off into space, only to be drawn into another planetary system, the mind-electron may be enslaved almost

immediately by extraneous matter. Had Unani Assu died, his liberated mind-electron might at once have been captured by a jungle flower going to seed. Immediately a new seed would be started. And now the former Unani Assu would be a seed of a jungle flower, later to find new life as a plant."

Suddenly the scientist threw up his hand and cried: "You see? The Mind will be eternally enslaved as long as there is life! Oh, for the time of deliverance!" He gazed fanatically into space, as though he dreamed magnificently.

Hale observed him thoughtfully. When that great brain weakened, the consequences would be frightful.

Sir Basil, as though he had made a sudden decision, went over to that part of his machine which he called the molecule-disintegrator.

"Oakham!" he called out. "I have taken you partly into my confidence. Now I want to show you something. Come here."

Hale obeyed with misgivings. The scientist pointed out the window to a group of Indians, anxious relatives of Unani Assu.

"Watch!" he ordered.

Turning one of the projectors on the machine toward the window, he sighted carefully and pressed a button.

Immediately one of the Indians fell to the ground and struggled. His companions 304 began dancing around him in evident joy. Faintly to the laboratory came a familiar chant, which Hale recognized as Aña's death song.

Dust to dust
Mind to Mind—
He will shed his body
As the green snake sheds his skin.

As Hale watched, the struggling Indian's body seemed to shrink, and then, instantly, it disappeared.

"Watch them scatter the dust!" said the scientist.

One of the Indians stooped and blew upon the grass.

"What have you done!" Hale gasped. "You've killed this one. Oh, I see now! These poor devils are totally ignorant that you are killing them for practice. They worship you while you turn them to—silver dust!" He turned angrily on the scientist as though he longed to

strike him.

“Keep cool, young man!” Sir Basil held up his fleshless hand. “There is no death! Change, yes; but no permanent blotting out of consciousness. Can’t you see the horror of it as nature works? When your time for release comes, as it inevitably will, your mind-electron might find new enslavement in a worm!”

Hale’s reply came hotly. “If that is true, why do you murder these poor devils deliberately!”

“My dear Oakham, perhaps you are not so brilliant as I had hoped! All that I have done thus far is only child’s play, in preparation for my real work. Haven’t you guessed by now what I am getting ready to do?”

“No; I’m a poor guesser.”

The scientist made a gesture of mock despair. “Then let me tell you. The molecule-disintegrator is active only on organic structures. When I concentrate it so”—he reached out again, sighted the projector on some point beyond the window and pressed a button —“one single living organism passes out. See that jupati tree by the rock disappear?”

Before Hale's eyes, the tall, slender tree melted into air.

"But," continued Sir Basil, "if I should *broadcast* my molecule-disintegrator on electron magnetic waves, destruction would pass out in all directions, following the curve of the earth's surface, penetrating earth, air, water." He wet his lips carefully. "You understand?"

Hale stiffened suddenly. "I understand. No life could survive these vibrations of destruction? Through every corner of the earth where life lurks, they would reach?"

"Yes!" cried Sir Basil. "There would be not a blade of grass, not a living spore, not a hidden egg! Think of it, Oakham! No more would the clean air and the sweet earth reek with life, and at last the ultimate mind-electron would be released forever."

He was breathing fast, and his emaciated face burned with two red spots.

Hale thought rapidly. He was convinced now that the fate of all life lay within that diabolical network of chemical apparatus.

At last he said: "And what of you and I, Sir Basil? Shall we, too, be

caught in this wholesale destruction?”

“Not immediately,” replied the scientist. “Of course, I want to remain in the flesh long enough to be sure that my purpose has been accomplished. I have provided a way for my own safety. If you desire, you may remain with me.” He smiled craftily. “I have planned to keep Aña also, the woman whom I called into life and made as I wished.”

His words pounded against Hale’s tortured ears with almost physical force. With a supreme effort, the young man controlled his rage and despair. Aña needed him too much now for him to risk defeat by showing his emotions.

To Sir Basil he said: “But if all life disappears from the earth, what shall 305 we do for food—you, Aña, and I?”

Sir Basil lifted his brows. “You don’t think I overlooked that, do you? What is food? Various combinations of the basic elements. I who have conquered the atom need never worry about starving to death.”

All this time, the machinery had been humming, and now the humming changed its note to a shrill whistle. Sir Basil went to the

eye-piece and looked into it. Opening a door in the machinery, he disappeared inside. He came out soon, flushed and evidently elated.

“Bring the stretcher, Oakham,” he ordered.

Hale brought the stretcher, placing it close to the machine. Then Sir Basil opened a metal door and gently eased out a human body.

It was Unani Assu, unconscious but alive and breathing. Hale, helping the scientist to get the man on the stretcher, noticed that the crushed legs were perfectly healed. Together they bore him to a long seat. The Indian’s eyes were still closed, but his even breathing indicated that he was only sleeping.

Suddenly Hale pointed a finger and cried out. “My God, Sir Basil, look at his hands and feet!”

Unani Assu, still lying like a recumbent bronze statue sculptured by a master, was perfect from shoulder to wrist, from thigh to ankle. But, somewhere in that diabolical machine through which he had passed, his hands and feet had undergone a hideous metamorphism which had transformed them from the well-formed extremities of a splendid young Indian into the hairy paws of a giant rat!

Hale turned away his head, sick with disgust.

Sir Basil cut the silence triumphantly:

“Now he’ll never again face Aña with love in his eyes!”

“What!” broke in Hale. “Did you plan this monstrous thing?”

“Of course! I told you I should forever cure him of his mad infatuation.”

“But why didn’t you kill him, as you killed the others? It would have been the most merciful way.”

Sir Basil showed his teeth in his ugly smile. “A creator is never merciful.”

A quiver passed through the Indian’s body and presently, he sighed deeply and opened his eyes. He seemed dazed, puzzled. He looked from Hale to the scientist, and turned seeking eyes to other parts of the laboratory.

“Aña!” he called weakly. “Where is Aña?”

He pulled himself a little unsteadily to his feet—to the spatulated,

hairy *rodent* feet that had come out of the life-machine. Staggering, he would have fallen, had he not thrown out his arm to steady himself. Instinctively he tried to grasp something for support, and then, for the first time, he discovered his deformity.

Hale was never to forget that expression of horror and disgust that swept over the Indian's face as he spread open his revolting extremities and stared at them.

A sudden, wild roar of despair rang through the room. "Aimu! My hands!"

The scientist smiled with evident amusement. "You are a grotesque sight, Unani Assu. Do you want to see Aña now?"

The fright and horror faded from the Indian's face, for now he glared with hate into the mad, mocking eyes.

"You did it!" the Indian ground out. "You've made me into a thing from which Aña will run screaming."

Through the quiet rage of the perfectly spoken English ran a thread of sorrow. "Aimu, whom we considered too holy to name!"

Choking, he hobbled away to the door, which he unbolted. As he

passed out into the open, Sir Basil went over to the machine and began sighting the projector which cast forth the ray of destruction.

“No!” cried Hale. “You’ve done enough murder for to-day.”

The scientist paused. “I was trying to be merciful. And then, I wonder if it is safe to let him go, hating me? Oh, well!” He shrugged his narrow shoulders. “I seldom leave the laboratory, and certainly nothing can harm me here.” He touched the death-projector significantly.

Hale made a mental decision. “I must find out how the damned thing works and put it out of commission.”

With this determination uppermost in his mind, he assumed a more intense interest in the strange laboratory. For the next two days, he assisted Sir Basil so assiduously that he learned much about the operation of the life-machine. And gradually he stopped being horrified as the fascination of producing life in the laboratory grew upon him.

After he had assisted the scientist in building living organisms from

basic elements, he ceased to cringe when he remembered that perhaps it was true that Aña was created in the mysterious life-machine.

Once the scientist declared, “She is untainted with inheritance. She is the perfect mate that I called into life so that before I pass from the flesh I may taste that one human emotion I’ve never experienced—love.”

That very night Hale kept a secret tryst with Aña after the village slept. Sweet, virginal Aña, who knew less of the world than a civilized child of twelve—what a sensation she would create in New York with her beauty, her culture, her natural fascination! With her in his arms and an orange tropical moon hanging low in the hot, black sky, he ceased to care that she had no ancestors, for now his one passionate desire was to save her from Sir Basil and to hold her forever for himself.

He might have been content to go on like this for months, tampering with creation in the day time, courting Aña in secret at night, had not Unani Assu come back for revenge.

On the fourth night after Unani Assu had disappeared into the jungle, Hale went to the *igarapé* to meet Aña. He had gone only half the

distance when he encountered her, running frantically up the path toward him.

“Hale!” she gasped, falling into his opened arms, where she lay panting and exhausted.

Hale gently patted the long braids, shimmering in silver tangles under the moonlight, and, crushing the soft little trembling body close, he murmured:

“What’s the matter, darling?”

She dug her face deeper into the bend of his arm. “Oh, Hale! I saw Unani Assu a few minutes ago.” For several moments she was unable to go on, for sudden sobs cut off her breath. “It’s terrible, Hale, what Aimu did to his hands and feet, but what Unani’s going to do to Aimu is still more terrible.”

Hale placed his hand gently under her chin and tilted up her small, pale, tear-drenched face.

“Be calm, Aña, and tell me plainly.”

Still clinging to him, she went on. “He told me that Aimu is a devil, Hale. He showed me his hands and asked me if I could ever get used

to them and be—his squaw.” The round gold breastplates and the necklace of painted seeds clinked together over her panting bosom. “I told him about you, Hale. And then he seemed to go mad. He said he’d kill Aimu to-night.”

“But, Aña! Why did he let you go, knowing that you would give the alarm?”

“He didn’t let me go.” Her petaled lips parted in a faint smile. “I escaped. Unani Assu tied me to a tree by the *igarapé*. Because he doesn’t ... hate me, he could not bear to tie me too tightly.”

“Then he must be close to the laboratory now. If he breaks in upon Aimu—oh, my God!”

Hale remembered the death-projector. If Sir Basil were in danger of attack, he would not hesitate to touch the 307 waiting button that would broadcast death throughout the world.

He seized Aña’s little hand and cried out: “Run, Aña! The only safe place now is Aimu’s laboratory. Run!”

As they dashed on madly, Hale opened wide his nostrils to scent the heavy, flower-laden air of the jungle. Any moment all this sweet,

rich life might vanish instantly. He had a horrible vision of a world devoid of life, a world of bare rocks, dry sand, odorless, dead waters. For it was life that greened the landscape, roughened the stones with moss and lichen, thickened the ocean with ooze, and turned the dry sand into loam—life that swarmed underfoot, overhead, all around!

And now, just as they reached the laboratory door, panting and frantic, a hoarse shriek broke forth. Dragging Aña after him, Hale dashed forward, conscious of two masculine voices raised in passion.

The door to the room where the life-machine performed its vile work was locked. Hale pounded against it and called out to Sir Basil, but only curses and the sound of tumbling bodies came from beyond the door. Although originally the door had been thick and strong, the destructive forces of the tropics had pitted and rotted the wood. A few blows of Hale's shoulder broke it down.

Under the brilliant electric light, Sir Basil and Unani Assu were fighting upon the blood-spattered floor. The struggle was uneven: the scientist's emaciated body was no match for the splendid strength of the young Indian.

"Help Aimu!" cried Aña, pushing Hale forward.

Aimu was being choked to death.

Hale acted fantastically but efficiently. Catching up a bottle of ammonia, he moistened a handkerchief and clapped it against Unani Assu's nose. Instantly the Indian choked, released Sir Basil, and fell back, gasping for breath.

Hale thrust the handkerchief into his pocket.

"Get out!" he ordered Unani Assu. "Quick!" He threatened him with the ammonia bottle.

But Unani Assu was not looking at the bottle. "Aimu!" he screamed, pointing.

When Hale saw and understood, he leaped across the room to plant his body in front of Aña; for Sir Basil was behind the life-machine, reaching for the controls of the ray projector.

Suddenly, from behind Hale, a silver streak shot across the room. Sir Basil groaned and sank to the floor of the laboratory.

A keen-bladed dissecting knife, thrown by Aña, stuck out from his left breast.

Aña ran forward, sobbing wildly. “Oh, Aimu! I’m sorry! I didn’t mean for it to strike you there. Only your hand, Aimu! I didn’t want Hale to die, Aimu. I didn’t—oh!”

She was on her knees by the scientist’s side, his head held in her slender arms.

“He’s breathing!” she rejoiced. “Some *masata*, Hale, quick!”

Hale found a bottle of good brandy which he had contributed from his own supplies. Soon Sir Basil gasped and opened his eyes. He stared about him wildly, then gasped:

“I’m dying, Hale Oakham! Quick, the life-machine, before my mind-electron escapes.”

He tried to pull his body up, but fell back, weak and panting.

Hale hesitated, looking doubtfully at Aña.

“For God’s sake, quick!” screamed Sir Basil. “I’m dying, I say! I must have—rebirth. Lift me to the disintegrator. Hurry!...” His voice trailed off faintly.

“He is dying,” snapped Hale. “We might as well try it.” He jerked

open the door to the disintegrator. “Here, Unani Assu! Lend a hand!”

Instantly the Indian came forward, a peculiar, pleased expression on his handsome face. In a moment, Sir Basil’s body was inside, and the machine began its weird humming, the humming that indicated the transformation of a human body into dust.

“Now!” cried Unani Assu exultingly, going behind the machine. “I have helped him enough to understand that if one changes this—and this—and this”—he made some rapid adjustments on the machine —“something that is not pleasant will happen.”

“Stop!” cried Hale. “What did you change?”

The Indian laughed mockingly. “Wouldn’t you like to know? But, yet, you should not worry. You have no cause to love him, have you?”

“I can’t be a traitor, Unani Assu! Arrange the machine as it was originally, and I give you my word of honor than when Sir Basil comes out, I’ll wreck the damned thing beyond repair. See, Unani Assu? You and I together will smash it.”

The Indian folded his arms so that the repulsive things that should

have been hands were hidden.

“It’s too late now,” he admitted, shaking his head. “Yet I’ve done no more to him than he did to me.”

Hale went to the eye-piece in the machine and started to look inside. Unani Assu stepped forward, tapped him on the shoulder, and, fingering significantly the dissecting knife which he had picked up, said:

“I am operating the machine. Will you sit over there by Aña and wait? It won’t be long. And, white stranger, remember this: I am your friend. I am turned against none but our common enemy.” He pointed significantly to the machine.

Two hours passed, long, silent hours for the watchers in the laboratory. Aña fell asleep, in a sweet, childish bundle upon the piled cushions, her golden hair, still decorated with the red flowers which she always wore, crushed and withered now. Several times Hale caught Unani Assu gazing at her sadly, and his own look saddened when it rested on the Indian’s strong, outraged body.

The humming of the machine changed to a whistle. Placing his fingers on his lips in a signal of quiet, Unani Assu whispered:

“Let Aña sleep. She mustn’t see this.”

Opening a door in the machine, his handsome face lighted with a grim smile, he whispered exultingly:

“Watch!”

A scuttling sound issued forth and then, half drunkenly, an enormous rat tumbled out—one of those horrible rats with the hairless, humanlike faces that had so frequently come from the life-machine.

Hale could not crush back the cry that issued from his throat.

“Where is Sir Basil?” he gasped.

“There!” cried the Indian, pointing to the kicking rat, which was fast gaining strength.

Hale staggered back. “No! You don’t mean it, do you?”

Unani Assu turned the rat over with a contemptuous toe. “Yes, I mean it. Behold Aimu, the man who thought himself creator and destroyer—the man who said that a human being was no higher than a rat! Perhaps he was right, for see this thing that was once a man!”

Hale buried his face in his hands. “Kill it, Unani Assu! Kill it!”

Unani Assu’s low laugh was metallic. “You kill it.”

Hale uncovered his face. “Open the disintegrator.” Gingerly he reached for the rat’s tail.

But his hand never touched the animal. The hairless face turned for a second, and the little, beady eyes blinked up at Hale with an expression that his fevered imagination thought almost human. Then, like a dark shadow, the rat dashed away. Once around the room it scampered, hunting 309 for an exit. Hale started in pursuit. He was almost upon the animal again, when, leaping up from his grasp, it landed on a low shelf where chemicals were stored. Several bottles fell, filling the room with fumes.

Another bottle fell, and, suddenly, amid a thunderous roar, the ceiling and walls began falling. Some highly explosive chemical had been stored in one of the bottles.

Hale was thrown violently against the couch. His hand touched Aña’s body. One last shred of consciousness enabled him to pick her up and drag her out. In the open, he fell, aware, before blackness descended, that flames leaped high over the laboratory building and

that Unani Assu lay dead within.

Hale and Aña, leaning over the deck-rail of a small steam launch, gazed into the dark waters of the Amazon.

“We ought to reach Para by morning,” said Hale, “and then, dearest, we’re off for New York!”

Aña, wearing one of the first civilized dresses she had ever donned, and looking as smart as any débutante, slipped her little hand into her husband’s.

“Isn’t it a shame, Hale,” she moaned, “that the fire burned all the animals and insects, the machinery, and even your notes?” Her beautiful face saddened. “Just one or two specimens might have been proof enough for your What-You-Call-It Club!”

“The Nescience Club, darling. No, I can’t expect to win the Woolman prize, but I’ve won a prize worth far more.” He squeezed her little hand and looked devotedly into her blue eyes. “And, Aña, I’ve reasoned out something concerning mind-electrons which even Sir Basil overlooked.”

“What is it, Hale?”

“He maintained that matter seeks always to enslave mind-electrons, but I am convinced that mind-electrons seek to enslave matter. Understand? It’s creation, Aña! Had Sir Basil succeeded in broadcasting death throughout the world, the freed mind-electrons, as in the beginning, would have started again to vitalize inorganic atoms. And, in a few million years, which is no time to the Mind, the world would be humming with a new civilization. Large thought, eh, sweetheart?”

#61 The Sea Terror, By Sterner St. Paul Meek:

The trail of mystery gold leads Carnes and Dr. Bird to a tremendous monster of the deep.

Aproximate word count: 11,200

Bigotry:

Warnings:

hung over the ship

- - -

“I beg your pardon, sir. I’m looking for Dr. Bird.”

The famous Bureau of Standards scientist appraised the speaker rapidly. Keen blue eyes stared questioningly at him from a mahogany brown face, criss-crossed with a thousand tiny wrinkles. The tattooed anchor on his hand and the ill-fitting blue serge suit smacked of the sea while the squareness of his shoulders and the direct gaze of his eye spoke eloquently of authority.

“I’m Dr. Bird, Captain. What can I do for you?”

“Thank you, Doctor, but I’m not a captain. My name is Mitchell and I am, or was, the first mate of the *Arethusa*.”

“The *Arethusa*!” Operative Carnes of the United States Secret Service sprang to his feet. “You said the *Arethusa*? There *were* no survivors!”

“I believe that I am the only one.”

“Where have you been hiding and why haven’t you reported the fact of your rescue to the proper authorities? Tell the truth; I’m a federal officer!”

Carnes flashed the gold badge of the Secret Service and an expression of anger crossed Mitchell’s face.

“If I had wished to talk to an officer I could have found plenty in New York,” he said shortly. “I came to Washington in order to tell my story to Dr. Bird.”

The seaman and the detective glared at one another for a moment and then Dr. Bird intervened.

“Pipe down, Carnes,” he said softly. “Mr. Mitchell undoubtedly has reasons, excellent reasons, for his actions. Sit down, Mr. Mitchell, and have a cigar.”

Mitchell accepted the cigar which the doctor proferred and took a chair. He lighted the weed and after another glance of hostility toward the detective he pointedly ignored him and addressed his remarks to Dr. Bird.

“I have no objection to telling you why I haven’t spoken earlier, Doctor,” he said. “When the *Arethusa* sank, I must have hit my head on something, for the next thing I knew, I was in the Marine Hospital in New York. I had been picked up unconscious by a fishing boat and brought in, and I lay there a week before I knew anything. When I knew what I was doing I heard about the loss of my ship and was told that there were no survivors, and I didn’t know what to do. The story I had to tell was so weird and improbable that I hesitated to speak to anyone about it. I was not sure at first that it was not a trick of a disordered brain, but since my head has cleared I am convinced of the truth of it ... and yet I know that it *can’t* be so. I have read about you and some of the things you have done, and so as soon as I was able to travel I came here to tell you about it. You will be better able to judge than I, whether what I tell you really happened or was only a vision.”

Dr. Bird leaned back in his chair and put the tips of his fingers together. Long, tapering fingers they were, sensitive and well shaped, though sadly marred by acid stains. It was in his hands alone that Dr. Bird showed the genius in his make-up, the artistry which inspired him to produce those miracles of experimentation which had made his name a household word in the realm of science. Aside from those hands he more resembled a pugilist than a scientist. A heavy shock of unruly black hair surmounted a face with beetling black brows and a prognathous jaw. His enormous head, with a breadth and height of forehead which were amazing, rose from a pillar-like neck which sprang from a pair of massive shoulders and the arching chest of the trained athlete. Dr. Bird stood six feet two inches in his socks, and weighed over two hundred stripped. As he leaned back a curious glitter, which Carnes had learned to associate with keen interest, showed for an instant in his eyes.

“I will be glad to hear your story, Mr. Mitchell,” he said softly. “Tell it in your own way and try not to omit any detail, no matter how trivial it may be.”

The seaman nodded and sat silent for a moment as though marshaling his thoughts.

“The story really starts the afternoon of May 12th,” he said,

“although I didn’t realize the importance of the first incident at the time. We were steaming along at good speed, hoping to make New York before too late for quarantine, when a hail came from the forward lookout. I was on watch and I went forward to see what was the matter. The lookout was Louis Green, an able bodied seaman and a good one, but a confirmed drunkard. I asked him what the trouble was and he turned toward me a face that was haggard with terror.

“‘I’ve seen a sea serpent, Mr. Mitchell,’ he said.

“‘Nonsense!’ I replied sharply. ‘You’ve been drinking again.’

“He swore that he hadn’t and I asked him to describe what he had seen. His teeth were chattering so that he could hardly speak, but he gasped out a story about seeing a monstrous head, a half mile across, he said, with a long snake body stretching out over the sea until the end of it was lost on the horizon. I turned my glass in the direction he pointed and of course there was nothing to be seen. The man’s condition was such as to make him worse than useless as a lookout, so I relieved him and ordered him below. I took it for a touch of delirium tremens.

“We were bucking a head wind, although not a very stiff one, and we didn’t make port until after dark, so we anchored at quarantine, just

off Staten Island, in forty fathoms of water, and Captain Murphy radioed for a Coast Guard boat to come out and lay by us for the night. As you have probably heard, we were carrying four millions in bar gold consigned to the Federal Reserve Bank of New York from the Bank of England."

Dr. Bird and Carnes nodded. The inexplicable loss of the *Arethusa* had occupied much space in the papers ten days earlier.

"The cutter came out, signalled, and dropped anchor about three hundred yards away. So far, everything was exactly as it should be. I walked to the stern of the boat and looked out across the Atlantic and then I realized that Green wasn't the only one who could see things. The wind had fallen and it was getting pretty dark, but not too dark to see things a pretty good distance away. As I looked I saw, or thought I saw, a huge black leathery mass come to the surface a mile or so away. There were two things on it that looked like eyes, and I had a feeling as though some malignant thing was staring at me. I rubbed my eyes and looked again, but the vision persisted, and I went forward to get a glass. When I came back the thing, whatever it was, had disappeared, but the water where it had been was boiling as though there were a great spring or something of the sort under the surface.

“I trained my glass on the disturbed area, and I will take my oath that I saw a huge body like a snake emerge from the water. It lay in long undulations on the waves, and moved with them as though it were floating. It was quite a bit nearer than the first thing had been and I could see it plainly with the glass. I would judge it to be fifteen or twenty feet thick, and it actually seemed to disappear in the distance as Green had described it. The sight of the thing sent shivers up and down my spine, and I gave a hoarse shout. The lookout hurried to my side and asked me what the trouble was. I pointed and handed him the glass. He looked through it and handed it back to me with a curious expression.

“‘I can’t see nothing, sir,’ he said.

“I took the glass from him and tried to level it but my hands were trembling so that I was forced to rest it on the rail. The lookout was right. There was absolutely nothing to be seen and the peculiar appearance of the sea had subsided to normal. The lookout was staring at me rather curiously and I knew that he was thinking the same thing about me as I had thought about Green in the afternoon. I made some kind of an excuse and went below to pull myself together. I caught a glimpse of myself in the glass. I was as white as a sheet, and the sweat was running off my face in drops.

“I shook myself together after a fashion and managed to persuade myself that the whole thing was just a trick of my mind, inspired by Green’s vivid description of his delirious vision of the afternoon. Eight bells struck, and when Mr. Fulton, the junior officer, relieved me, I laid down and tried to quiet myself. I didn’t have much luck. Just before I took the deck again at midnight I slipped down to the forecastle to see how Green was coming along. He was lying in his bunk, wide awake, with staring eyes.

“‘How are you feeling now, Green?’ I asked.

“He looked up at me with an expression of a man who has looked death in the face.

“‘Ain’t there no chance of dockin’ to-night, Mr. Mitchell?’ he asked.

“‘Of course not,’ I said rather sharply. ‘What’s the matter with you? Are you afraid your sea serpent will get us?’

“‘He’ll get us if we stay out here to-night, sir,’ he replied with an air of conviction. ‘I saw the horrible mouth on him, large enough to bite this ship in half; and it had a beak like a bird, like a bloody parrot, sir. I saw its horrible body, too, with great black ulcers on the under side of it where the sharks had been after it. For all the shark takes a

man now and then, he's the seaman's friend, sir, because he kills off the sea serpents who would take ship and all.'

"'Nonsense, Green!' I said sharply. 'Don't talk any more such foolishness or I'll have you ironed. You've been drinking so much that you are seeing things, and I won't have the crew disturbed by your crazy talk.'

"'You won't think it's talk when those big eyes stare into yours to-night, Mr. Mitchell, and that body twists around you and squeezes the life out of you. I don't care whether you iron me or not; I know that I'm doomed and so is everyone else; but I won't talk about it, sir. The crew might as well rest easy while they can, for there's no escape if we have to stay out here to-night.'

"'Well, be sure you keep a tight mouth then,' I said, and left rather hurriedly. I was in a cold sweat, for his air of conviction, together with what I had seen, had shaken me pretty badly. I heard the watch changing up above, and knew there would be men in the forecastle in a minute. I didn't want to face them right then.

"Mr. Fulton reported everything quiet when I went on deck to relieve him, and although I surveyed the water through a night glass for as far as I could see, there was nothing out of the way. The Coast

Guard's lights were shining less than a quarter of a mile away, and things looked peaceful enough. The wind had gone down with the sun; the sea was almost glassy, and there was a bright moon.

"After going around the ship, I relieved all of the watch except two men for lookouts, and sent them below to get a good night's sleep. If I hadn't done that, some of them might be alive now.

"I paced the deck for an hour trying to quiet my nerves, but really getting more nervous every minute. Three bells struck and I walked forward and leaned on the rail to watch the water. I saw a peculiar swirl as though some large body were coming to the surface from below, and then I saw—it.

"Dr. Bird, I take a drink once in a while when I am on shore, but never at sea and never in excess, and I know it wasn't a vision of drink delirium. I felt perfectly normal aside from my nervousness, and I don't think it was fever. Either I saw it or I am insane, for it is as vivid to me as though I were standing on the *Arethusa's* deck and that monstrous horror was rising once more before my eyes."

The seaman's face had become drawn and white as he talked, and drops of sweat were trickling from his chin. Carnes sat forward absorbed in his narrative while Dr. Bird sat back with a glitter in his

black eyes and an expression of great attention on his face.

“Go on, Mr. Mitchell,” the doctor said soothingly. “Tell me just what you saw.”

Mitchell shuddered and glanced quickly around the laboratory as though to assure himself that he was safe within four walls.

“From the surface of the sea,” he went on, “rose a massive body, black, and of the appearance of wet leather. It must have been a couple of hundred yards across, although the size of objects is often magnified by moonlight and my terror may have added to its size. In the midst of it were two great discs, thirty feet across, which glowed red with the reflected moonlight. It stared for a moment and then rose higher until it towered above the ship; and then I saw, or thought I saw, a huge gaping beak like a parrot’s. It was as Green had described it, large enough to bite the *Arethusa* in half, and she was a ship of three thousand tons.

“I was frozen with horror and couldn’t move or cry out. As I watched, I saw the long snake-like body emerge from the water, and the estimate I had made of the size in the afternoon seemed pitifully inadequate. Presently a second and a third snake arose from the water, and then more, until the whole sea and the air above it seemed

a writhing mass of huge snakes. I remember wondering why the watch of the Coast Guard cutter didn't sound an alarm, and then I realized that the thing had arisen on our port side and the cutter was on the starboard.

"The mass of snakes writhed backward and forward, and then two of them rose in the air and hung over the ship. I could see the under side and I saw what Green had called the scars where the sharks had attacked. They were great cup-shaped depressions with vile white edges, and they did resemble huge sores or ulcers. They wavered over the ship for an instant, and then both of them dropped down on the deck.

"I found my voice and I think that I gave a yell, but even as I opened my mouth, I realized the futility of it. The *Arethusa* was sucked down into the sea as though it had been a tiny chip. I saw the water rising to the rail, and I think I cried out again. The ship tilted and I felt myself falling. The next thing I knew was when I was in the hospital and was told that I had been raving for a week. I was afraid to tell my story for fear I would be put in an asylum, so I kept a tight tongue in my head until I was discharged."

Dr. Bird mused for a moment as the seaman's voice stopped.

“You cried out all right, Mr. Mitchell,” he said. “You gave two distinct shouts, both of which were heard by the watch on the *Wren*, the Coast Guard cutter. They reported that at 1:30, the *Arethusa* sank without warning. As soon as he heard your shouts, the watch gave the alarm and the crew piled on deck. The *Arethusa* was gone completely and the *Wren* was tossing about like ‘a chip in a whirlpool’ as they graphically described it. The *Wren* had steam up and they fought the waves and steamed over your anchoring ground looking for survivors, but they found none. The sea gradually subsided and they did the only thing they could do—dropped a buoy, to guide the salvage people, and radioed for assistance. The *Robin* came out and joined them, and both cutters stood by until daylight, but nothing unusual was seen. The insurance people are trying to salvage the wreck now, but so far they have made little headway.”

“That brings me to the rest of the story, the part that made me decide to come to you, Doctor,” said the seaman. “Did you see what happened to the divers yesterday?”

Dr. Bird nodded.

“I saw a brief account of it,” he said. “It seems that two of them were lost through their lines getting fouled and their air connections severed in some way. I don’t believe the bodies have been recovered

yet."

"They never will be recovered, Doctor. I was discharged from the hospital yesterday and the papers were just out with an account of it. I went down to the dock where the *John MacLean*, the salvage ship, ties up, and I talked to Captain Starley who commands it. I have known him casually for some years, although not intimately, and he gave me a few more details than the press got. He didn't connect me up at first with the Mitchell who was reported lost on the *Arethusa*.

"The first man to go down from the *MacLean* was Charley Melrose, an expert diver. He went down in a pressure outfit to the bottom and started to work. Everything was going along fine until the telephone suddenly rang and the man who answered it heard him say, 'Raise me, for God's sake! Hurry!' The signal for raising was given, but they hadn't got him more than thirty feet from the bottom before there came a tug on the line and he was gone! The air line, the lifting cable and the telephone cord floated free and were reeled in. Melrose had been plucked off the end of that line as you or I would pluck off a grape."

Dr. Bird leaned forward with the curious glitter again in his eye.

"Go on," he said tersely.

“Blake, the other diver, donned a suit and insisted on being lowered at once. Starley tried to dissuade him but he insisted on going down. They lowered him over the side with a twelve-foot steel-shod pike in his hand. He never got to the bottom. He had not been lowered more than a hundred feet when a scream came over the telephone, and again there was a jerk on the lines which threatened to wreck the reel—and the line came aboard with no diver on the end of it. At the same time, Starley told me, the sea boiled and churned as though the whole bottom were coming up, and his ship was tossed about as though it were in a violent storm, although it was calm enough for forty fathom salvage work and that is pretty quiet, you know. Half the time his screws were out of water and he had a hard time to keep from being capsized. He fought his way out of the disturbed area, and as soon as he did, it started to quiet down, and in ten minutes it was calm again.

“Starley was pretty badly shaken and besides he had lost both of his divers, so he came in and I saw him at the dock. When I heard his yarn, I took him into my confidence and told him what I had seen and that I proposed coming to you and asking your advice. I was afraid until I heard his story that it was merely a vision that I had had, but it certainly was no vision that plucked those two divers off their lines.”

“Has Captain Starley told that story to anyone else yet?”

“No, Doctor, he hasn’t. He promised not to talk until after I had seen you. I’ll vouch for him; he’ll keep his word through anything; and he is keeping his whole crew on board until he hears from me.”

Dr. Bird sprang to his feet.

“Mr. Mitchell,” he said energetically, “you have shown excellent judgment. Wire Captain Starley that you have seen me and that he is to hold his crew on board and to talk to no one until I get there. Carnes, telephone the Chief of Naval Operations and ask him to receive me in conference at once. Have him get the Secretary of the Navy in, too, if he is available. When you have finished that, telephone Bolton that you will be away from Washington indefinitely.”

“I’ll telephone Admiral Buck for you, Doctor, but I don’t dare telephone any such message to Bolton; he’d take my head off. He has been running the whole service ragged lately, and this is my first afternoon off duty in a fortnight.”

“What’s the trouble, a flood of new counterfeits?”

“No, the counterfeit division is getting along all right. In point of fact, they have lent us a dozen men. The trouble is a sudden big increase in Communist activity throughout the country, with the Young Labor party behind it. Bolton has been pretty jumpy since that Stokowski affair last August and he is afraid of another attempt of some sort on the President.”

“The Young Labor party? I thought that gang was bankrupt and out of business, since the Coast Guard broke up their alien smuggling scheme.”

“They were down and out for a while, but they are in funds again—and how! They must have three or four millions at least.”

“Where did they get it?”

“That’s what we have been trying to find out. The leaders have presented bars of gold to a dozen banks throughout the country and demanded specie. The banks shipped the gold to the mint and it was good gold, nine hundred and twenty-five fine. What we are trying to find out is how that gold got into the United States.”

“A shipment of that size should be easy to trace.”

“It would seem so, but it hasn’t been. We have accounted for every pound of every shipment that has come in through a port of entry, and we have checked almost that close on the output of every mine in the United States. If the gold came from Russia, it would have had to cross Europe, and we can’t get any trace of it from abroad. It looks as though they were *making* it.”

Dr. Bird rubbed his head thoughtfully.

“Possible, but hardly probable,” he said. “How much did you say they had?”

“Over three millions in thirty-pound bars. Each bar shows signs of having a mint mark chiselled off, but that don’t help much for they have done too good a job. It has us pretty well bluffed.”

Again Dr. Bird rubbed his head.

“Telephone Admiral Buck, and then phone Bolton and tell him exactly what I told you to: that you will be away indefinitely. When he gets through exploding, tell him that you are going with me and that possibly, just barely possibly, we might be on the trail of that

gold shipment."

"On the trail of the gold!" gasped Carnes. "Surely, Doctor, you don't think—"

"Once in a while, old dear," replied the Doctor with a chuckle, "which is more than anyone in the Secret Service does. You might tell Bolton that I said that, but hang up quickly if you do. I don't want the wires of my telephone melted off. No, Carnesy, I have no miraculous inspiration as to where that gold is coming from; I just have a plain old-fashioned hunch, and that hunch is that we are going to have lots of fun and more than our share of danger before we see Washington again. After you get through bearding Bolton in his den, you might call the Chief of the Air Corps and ask him to have a bomber held at Langley Field subject to my orders. If he squawks any, I'll talk to him."

He turned to a telephone which stood on his desk and lifted the receiver.

"Get Mr. Lambertson on the wire," he said. "He is the chief technician of the Pyrex Glass Works at Corning, New Jersey."

The *U.S.S. Minneconsin* steamed out of New York harbor and

headed down toward the lower bay. On her forward deck rested a huge globe. The bottom quarter of the sphere was made of some dark opaque substance but the upper portion was transparent as crystal. Through the walls could be seen a quantity of apparatus resting on the opaque bottom portion. Two mechanics from the Bureau of Standards were making final adjustments of one of the pieces of apparatus, which resembled a tank fitted with a piston geared to an electric motor. From the tank, tubes ran to four hollow pipes, an inch and a half in diameter, which ran through the skin and extended thirty inches from the outer skin of the twenty-foot sphere. Dr. Bird stood near talking with the executive officer of the ship and from time to time giving a brief word of direction to the mechanics.

“It’s safer than you might think, Commander,” he said. “In the first place, that globe is not made of ordinary glass; it is made of vitrilene, a new semi-malleable glass which was developed at the Bureau and which is being made on an experimental scale for us by the Pyrex people. It is much stronger than ordinary glass, and is not sensitive to shock. It is also perfectly transparent to ultra-violet light, being superior even to rock crystal or fused quartz in that respect. The walls, as you have noticed, are four inches thick, and I have calculated that the ball will stand a uniform external pressure of thirty-five hundred atmospheres, the pressure which would be encountered at a depth of about twenty miles. I believe that it will

stand a squeeze of six thousand tons without buckling, and it is impossible to fracture it by shock. It could be dropped from the top of the Woolworth Building, and it would just bounce."

"It seems incredible that it could stand such a pressure as you have named."

"My figures are conservative ones. Lambertson calculated them even higher, but we allowed for the fact that this is the first large mass of the material to be cast, and lowered them."

"But suppose your lifting cable should break?" objected the naval officer. "The outfit weighs a good many tons."

"You notice that the lower quarter is made of lead. The specific gravity of the entire globe when sealed up tight with two men in it is only a little more than unity. In the water its weight is so little that a three-inch manilla hawser would raise it, let alone a steel cable. I have another safety device. Granted that the cable should snap, I can detach the lead from it and it would shoot to the surface like a rocket."

"How long can you remain under water in it?"

“A week, if necessary. I have an oxygen tank and a carbon dioxide removing apparatus which will keep the air in good condition. The globe is electrically lighted, and can be heated if necessary. Should my telephone line become fouled and broken, I have a radio set which will enable me to communicate with you. I can’t see that it is especially dangerous; not nearly as much so as a submarine.”

“What is your object in going down, if I may ask?”

“To take pictures and to explore the wreck if we can. The globe is equipped with huge floodlights and excellent cameras. The salvage people are having a little trouble and we are trying to help them out.”

“You mentioned exploring. Can you leave the globe while it is under water?”

“Yes. There is a locking device for doing so. A man in a diving suit can enter the lock and fill it with water. Once the external pressure is released he can open the outer door and step out. Coming back, he seals the outer door and the man inside blows out the lock and compressed air and then the inner door can be opened. It is the same principle as a torpedo tube.”

A jangle of bells interrupted them and the *Minneconsin* slowed

down. Commander Lawrence stepped to the rail and gave a sharp order to the navigating officer on the bridge. The bells jangled again and the ship's engines stopped.

"We are almost over the buoy, Doctor," he said.

Dr. Bird nodded and spoke to the two mechanics. With a few final touches to the apparatus they emerged from the globe and Dr. Bird entered.

"Come on, Carnes," he called. "No backing out at the last minute."

Carnes stepped forward with a sickly smile and joined the Doctor in the huge sphere.

"All right, boys; close her up."

The mechanics swung the outer door into place with a crane. Both the edge of the door and the surface against which it fitted had been ground flat and were in addition faced with soft rubber. Bolts were fastened in the door which passed through holes in the main sphere, and Dr. Bird spun nuts onto them and tightened them with a heavy wrench. He and Carnes lifted the smaller inner door into place and bolted it tight. Dr. Bird stepped to the telephone.

“Lower away,” he directed.

From a boom attached to the *Minneconsin’s* forward fighting top, a huge steel cable swung down, and the latch at the end of the cable was closed over a vitrilene ring which was fastened to the top of the sphere. The cable tightened and the globe with the two men in it was lifted over the side of the battleship and lowered gently into the water. Carnes involuntarily ducked and threw up his hand as the waters closed over them. Dr. Bird laughed.

“Look up, Carnes,” he said.

Carnes gasped as he looked up and saw the surface of the water above him. Dr. Bird laughed again and turned to the telephone.

“Lower away,” he said. “Everything is tight.”

The globe descended into the depths of the sea. Darker and darker it grew until only a faint twilight glow filled the sphere. A dark bulk loomed before them. Dr. Bird snapped on one of his huge floodlights and pointed.

“The *Arethusa*,” he said.

The ill-fated vessel lay on her side with a huge jagged hole torn in

her fabric amidships.

“That’s where her boilers burst,” explained the Doctor. “Luckily we have a hard bottom to deal with. Let’s see if we can locate any of Mitchell’s sea serpents.”

He turned on other flood lights and swept the bottom of the sea with them. The huge beams bored out into the water for a quarter of a mile, but nothing unusual was to be seen. Dr. Bird turned his attention again to the wreck.

“Things look normal from this side,” he said after a prolonged scrutiny. “I’ll have the *Minneconsin* steam around it while we look it over.”

In response to his telephone orders the ship above them swung around the wreck in a circle, and Carnes and the Doctor viewed each side in turn. But nothing of a suspicious nature made its appearance. The sphere stopped opposite the hole in the side and Dr. Bird turned to Carnes.

“I’m going to put on a diving suit and explore that wreck,” he said. “If there ever was any danger, it isn’t apparent now; and I can’t find out anything until I get inside.”

“Don’t do it, Doctor!” cried Carnes. “Remember what happened to the other divers!”

“We don’t know what happened to them, Carnes. No matter what it was, there is no danger apparent right now, and I’ve got to get into that ship before I can get any real information. We could have lowered an under-sea camera and learned as much as we have so far.”

“Let me go instead of you, Doctor.”

“I’m sorry to refuse you, old dear, but frankly, I wouldn’t trust your judgment as to what you had seen if you went alone; and we can’t both go.”

“Why not?”

“If we both went, who would work the air to let us back in? No, this is a one-man job and I’m the one to do it. While I am gone, keep a sharp lookout, and if you see anything unusual call me at once.”

“How can I call you?”

“On this small radio phone. A pair of receivers tuned to the right wave-length are in my diving helmet, and I will be able to hear you although I can’t reply. I won’t be gone long: I have only a small air tank, large enough to keep me going for thirty minutes. Now help me into my suit and keep a sharp watch. A timely warning may save my life if anything happens.”

With Carnes’ assistance, Dr. Bird donned a deep-sea diving outfit and screwed down the helmet. He crawled through the inner door into the lock and lifted the inner door into place. Carnes fastened the door with nuts and the Doctor opened a pair of valves in the outer door and filled the lock with water. He removed the outer door; and, taking in one hand a steel-shod twelve-foot pike with a hook on the end, and in the other a waterproof flashlight, he sallied forth. As he left the shell he paused for a moment, and then returned and picked up the heavy wrench with which he had removed the nuts holding the outer door into place. He fastened the tool to the belt of his suit. Then, with a wave of his hand toward the detective, he approached the hulk.

The hole in the side was too high for him to reach, but he hooked the end of his pike in one of the joints of the *Arethusa’s* plates and climbed slowly and painfully up the side of the vessel. As he disappeared into the hull, Carnes realized with a sudden start that he

had been watching his friend and neglecting the duty imposed on him of keeping a sharp watch. He turned quickly to the floodlights and searched the sea bottom.

Nothing appeared, and the minutes moved as slowly as hours should. Carnes felt that he had been submerged alone for weeks, and his nerves grew so tense that he felt that he would scream in another instant. A sudden thought sobered him like a dash of cold water. If he screamed, Dr. Bird would take it for an alarm signal and possibly be afraid to emerge from the vessel. His watch showed him that the Doctor had been gone for twenty-five minutes and he moved slowly to the radio transmitter.

“Dr. Bird,” he said slowly and distinctly, “you have been gone nearly thirty minutes. Nothing alarming has appeared but I will feel better when I see you coming back.”

He glued his eyes on the opening in the ship’s side and waited. Five minutes passed, and then ten, with no signs of the Doctor. Carnes moved again to the receiver.

“It has been over half an hour. Doctor,” he cried in a pleading voice. “If you are all right, for God’s sake show yourself. I am frantic with worry.”

Another five minutes passed, and the sweat dripped in a steady stream from the detective's chin. Suddenly he gave a sob of relief and sank back against the side of the globe. A bulky figure showed at the edge of the hole, and Dr. Bird climbed slowly and heavily out of the hold and dropped to the sea bottom. He lay prone for a moment before he rose and made his way with evident effort toward the sphere. He entered the compartment and with a heroic effort lifted the outer door into place, and feebly and with fumbling fingers placed nuts on the bolts. His hands wandered uncertainly toward the valves and closed the upper one. He waved his hand toward Carnes and sank in a heap on the floor of the lock.

With trembling hands Carnes connected the air and opened the valve. Air flowed into the lock and the water was gradually forced out. When the lock was empty, he waited for Dr. Bird to close the outer valve but the Doctor did not move. Carnes tore at the bolts which held the inner door and threw his weight against it. It held against his assault, and he thought frantically. An inspiration came to him, and he disconnected the air valve. With a whistling rush, the air from the lock rushed into the sphere and he forced open the inner door. A stream of sea water drove against his feet through the open valve, and he reached for the valve to close it. The force of the water held it open for a moment, but he threw every ounce of his strength into the effort. The valve slowly closed.

It was beyond his strength to haul the heavy Doctor with his pressure diving suit through the restricted confines of the inner door, so Carnes wormed his way into the lock and with trembling fingers unscrewed the helmet of the Doctor's diving suit. The helmet clanged to the floor and Carnes scooped up his hands full of water and dashed it into the Doctor's face. There was no response and he was at his wit's end. He sprang for the radio to order the sphere hauled up when his glance fell on the oxygen tank. It took him only a moment to connect a rubber hose to the tank, and in a few seconds a blast of the life-giving gas was blowing into the scientist's face. Dr. Bird gave a convulsive gasp or two and opened his eyes.

"Shut off the juice, Carnes," he said faintly. "Too much of that's bad."

Carnes shut off the oxygen and Dr. Bird struggled to a sitting position and inhaled deep breaths.

"That was a narrow squeak, old dear," he said faintly. "Give me a hand and I'll climb in."

With the detective's aid he climbed into the sphere and Carnes fastened the inner door. Slowly the Doctor rid himself of the diving suit and lay prone on the floor, his breath still coming in gasps.

“Thanks for your warning about the time, Carnes,” he said. “I knew that my air supply was running short but I was caught down there and couldn’t readily free myself. I thought for a while that my time had come, but it wasn’t so written. By the looks of things, I freed myself just in time.”

“Did you find out anything?” asked the detective eagerly.

“I did,” replied Dr. Bird grimly. “For one thing, the gold is no longer in the hold of the *Arethusa*.”

“It’s gone?”

“Clean as a whistle, every bar of it. A hole has been cut in the vault around the combination, and the bars slid back and the door opened. The gold has been stolen.”

“Might it not have been stolen before the vessel sank?”

“The idea occurred to me of course, and I examined things pretty carefully. I know that the theft occurred after the vessel sank.”

“How could you tell?”

“For one thing, the hole was cut with an under-water cutting torch.

For the second, look here."

The Doctor rolled up his trousers and showed the detective his leg. Carnes cried out as he saw huge purple welts on it.

"What caused that?" he cried.

"As I entered the vault, I stepped full into a steel bear trap which was set there for the purpose of catching and holding anyone who entered. Someone has visited the *Arethusa*, since she sank, and looted her, and also arranged so that any diver who got as far as the vault would never return to the surface to tell of it. Luckily for myself, I carried a heavy wrench and was able to free myself. Most divers don't carry such a thing."

"But who could have done it?"

"That's what we have got to find out, and we aren't going to do it down here. Give the word to have us hauled up; and, Carnes, don't mention anything about the looting of the vessel. Allow it to be understood that I couldn't get into the hold. We'll head back for New York at once. I want to have a few small changes made in this sphere before we use it again. While I am doing that, I want you to get hold of the Coast Guard or the Immigration Service or whoever it is that

has the complete records in that case of alien smuggling, by the Young Labor party. When you get the information, report to me and we'll go over it. You might also drop a hint to Captain Starley that will stop all further attempts at salvage operations for a few days. Tell him that I'll arrange to have a Coast Guard cutter guard the locality of the wreck."

"Won't that be rather risky for the cutter?"

"I think not. The gold is gone and there is no reason to apprehend any further danger in that locality, at least for the present."

At nine o'clock next morning Carnes and Dr. Bird sat in the office of Lieutenant Commander Minden of the United States Coast Guard, listening intently to the history of the alien smuggling case. Commander Minden was saying:

"Their boats would load up and clear ostensibly for Rio de Janeiro or some other South American port, but once they were in the Atlantic, they would alter their course and head from the Massachusetts coast. Of course, we had no right to interfere with them on the high seas, and they never came closer than fifty miles of our coast line. When they got that close, they would cruise slowly back and forth for a few days and then steam away south to the port they had cleared for.

When they got there, of course there were no passengers on board.

“We patrolled the coast carefully while they were around but we never got any indication of any landing of aliens and yet we knew they were being landed in some way. We drew lines so close that a cork couldn’t get by without being seen and we even had the air patrolled, but with no results. Eventually the air patrol was the thing that gave them away.

“They had been operating so successfully that they evidently got careless and started a load off late in the night so they didn’t reach the coast by dawn. A Navy plane was flying along the coast-line about twelve miles off when they spotted a submarine running parallel with the coast, headed north. It didn’t look like an American craft and they went on and radioed Washington and found that we had no under-sea craft in that neighborhood. They returned to their patrol and followed the sub for a matter of thirty or forty miles up the coast, and then it turned in right toward the shore. The shore line there is rocky, and, at the point where the sub was heading, it falls sheer about two hundred fathoms. The sub ran right at the cliff and disappeared from view.”

Lieutenant Commander Minden paused impressively. Carnes and Dr. Bird set forward in their chairs, for it was evident that the crux of the

story was at hand.

“When the plane reported what they had seen, we knew how those aliens were being landed. The point where the sub went in gave us a good idea of the location of their base and we threw a cordon of men around and searched. A Navy sub was sent to the scene and they reported that there was a tunnel opening into the rock, about a hundred fathoms under water, running for they had no idea how far under the land. They stayed to guard the hole while we combed the land. It took us a week to locate the place, but we traced some truck loads of food and finally found it. This tunnel ran under the land for a mile and then ended in a large cave underground. The Young Labor party had established a regular receiving depot there, and took the aliens from the sub and kept them for a day or two until they had a chance to load them into trucks and run them into Boston or some other town in the night.

“Once we had the place spotted, we sent a gang in and captured the whole works without any trouble. The underground cavern had no natural opening to the surface, but one had been made by blasting. We captured the whole lot and then sealed the end of the hole with rock and concrete. That was the end of the affair.”

“Thank you, Commander; you have given us a very graphic

description of it. I suppose you could find the entrance which was sealed up?”

“Easily. I led the raiding party. I forgot to mention one blunder we made. Evidently some word of our plans leaked out, for the sub which was guarding the outer end of the tunnel was called away by a radio message supposed to be from the Navy Department. It had gone only a short distance, however, when the commander smelled a rat and made his way back. He was too late. He was just in time to see the sub emerge from the hole and head into the open sea. He gave chase, but the other sub was faster than the Navy boat and it got clear away. The leader of the gang must have been on it, for we didn’t get him.”

“Who was the leader?”

“From some records we captured, his name was Ivan Saranoff. I never saw him.”

“Saranoff?” said Dr. Bird thoughtfully. “The name seems familiar. Where have I—Thunder! I know now. He was at one time a member of the faculty of St. Petersburg. He was one of the leading biologists of his time. Carnes, we’ve found our man.”

“If you are thinking of Saranoff, I am afraid you are mistaken, Doctor,” said Commander Minden. “Neither he nor his submarine have ever been heard of since and it has been generally conceded that they were lost at sea. We had some pretty rough weather just after that affair.”

“Rough weather doesn’t mean much to a sub, Commander. I expect that he’s our man. At any rate, the place we want to go is the end of that tunnel.”

“I’m at your service, Doctor.”

“Carnes, get the location of that tunnel entrance from Commander Minden and order the *Minneconsin* to proceed north along the coast to that vicinity and stand by for radio orders. I am going to telephone Mitchell Field and get a plane. We have no time to lose.”

The plane from Mitchell Field roared down to a landing, and Carnes, Dr. Bird and Commander Minden dismounted from the rear cockpit and looked around. They had landed in a smooth field at the base of a rise almost rugged enough to be called a mountain. A group of three men were standing near them as they got out of the plane. One of the men approached.

“Dr. Bird?” asked the newcomer. “I am Tom Harron, United States Marshal. These two men are deputies. I understand that I am to report to you for orders.”

“I’m glad to know you, Mr. Harron. This is Operative Carnes of the Secret Service and Commander Minden of the Coast Guard. We are going to explore an underground cavern that is located in this vicinity.”

“Do you mean the one where they used to smuggle aliens? That is closed up. I was in charge of that work and we closed it tight as a drum two years ago.”

“Can you find the entrance?”

“Sure. It isn’t over a mile from here.”

“Lead the way, then. We want to take a look at it.”

The marshal led the way toward the eminence and took a path which led up a gully in its side. He paused for a moment to take his bearings and then turned sharply to his left and climbed part way up the side of the ravine.

“Here it is,” he announced. An expression of astonishment crossed

his face and he examined the ground closely. “By Golly, Doc,” he went on as he straightened up, “this place has been opened since I left it!”

Dr. Bird hurried forward and joined him. The heavy stone and concrete with which the entrance to the cavern had been sealed were undisturbed, but in the side of the hill was set a steel door beside the concrete. There was no sign of a keyhole or other means of entering it.

“Was this steel door part of your work?” asked Carnes.

“No, sir, it wasn’t. We sealed it solid. That door has been put there since.”

Dr. Bird closely examined the structure. He tapped it and went around the edges and then straightened up and took a small pocket compass from his pocket and opened the case. The needle swung crazily for a moment and then pointed straight toward the door.

“A magnetic lock,” he exclaimed. “If we could find the power line it would be easy to force, but finding that line might take us a week. At any rate, we have found out what we were after. This is their base from which they are operating. Mr. Harron, I want you to station a

guard armed with rifles at this door day and night until I personally relieve you. Remember, until I relieve you, in person. Verbal or written orders don't go. Capture or kill anyone who tries to enter or leave the cavern through this entrance. Just now we'll find that cavern more vulnerable from the sea end, and that is where I mean to attack. We'll force that door and explore from this end later. Commander Minden, you may stay here with Mr. Harron, if you like, or you may come with Carnes and me. We are going on board the *Minneconsin*."

The Mitchell Field plane roared to a take-off and bore south along the coast. Half an hour of flying brought them in view of the battleship steaming at full speed up the coast. Dr. Bird radioed instructions to the ship, and an hour later a launch picked them up from the beach and took them out. As soon as they were on board they resumed their progress, and in two hours the peak that Dr. Bird had marked as a landmark was opposite.

"Steam in as close to the shore as you can safely," he said, "and then lower us. Once we are down, you will be guided by our telephoned instructions. Come on, Carnes, let's go."

The detective followed him into the sphere as the *Minneconsin* edged up toward the shore. The huge ball was lifted from the deck

and lowered gently into two hundred fathoms of water. It was pitch dark at that depth, and Dr. Bird switched on one floodlight and studied the cliff which rose a hundred yards from them.

“We have missed the place, Carnes,” he said. “We’ll have them pull us up a few hundred feet and then steam along the coast.”

He turned to the telephone and the sphere rose while the battleship steamed slowly ahead, the vitrilene ball following in her wake. For a quarter of a mile they continued on their way, and then Dr. Bird halted the ship.

“What depth are we?” he asked. “Eighty fathoms? All right, lower us, please.”

The ball sank until it rested on the sea bottom, and Dr. Bird turned on two additional floodlights and studied the surroundings. The bed of the ocean was literally covered with lobster and crab shell, with the bones of fish scattered here and there among them. A few bones of land animals were mixed with the debris and Carnes gave a gasp as Dr. Bird pointed out to him a diving helmet.

“We are on the right track,” said the scientist grimly. He stepped to the telephone and ordered the sphere raised to one hundred fathoms.

The ship moved forward along the coast until Dr. Bird again stepped to the telephone and halted it. Before them yawned the entrance to the underground tunnel. It was about two hundred feet high and three hundred across, and their most powerful beams would not penetrate to the end of it. A pile of debris could be seen on the floor of the tunnel and Carnes fancied that he could see another diving helmet among the litter. Dr. Bird pointed toward the side of the cavern.

“See those floodlights fastened to the cliff so that their beams will sweep across the mouth of the tunnel when they are lighted?” he said. “Apparently the cave is used as a prison and the light beams are the bars. The creature is not at home just now or the bars would be up. My God! Look at that, Carnes!”

Carnes stared and echoed the Doctor’s cry of surprise. Clinging to a shelf of rock which extended out from the wall of the cavern and half hidden among the seaweed was a huge marine creature. It looked like a huge black slug with rudimentary eyes and mouth. The thing was fifty feet in length and fully fifteen feet in diameter. It hung there, moving sluggishly as though breathing, and rudimentary tentacles projecting from one end moved in the water.

“What is it, Doctor?” asked Carnes in a voice of awe.

“It is a typical trochosphere of the giant octopus, the devil fish of Indian Ocean legend, multiplied a thousand times,” he replied. “When the octopus lays its eggs, they hatch out into the larval form. The free swimming larva is known as a trochosphere, and I am positive that that is what we see; but look at the size of the thing! Man alive, if that ever developed, I can’t conceive of its dimensions!”

“I have seen pictures of a huge octopus pulling down a ship,” said Carnes, “but I always fancied they were imaginary.”

“They are. This monstrosity before us is no product of nature. A dozen of them would depopulate the seas in a year. It is a hideous parody of nature conceived in the brain of a madman and produced by some glandular disturbance. Saranoff spent years in glandular experimentation, and no doubt he has managed to stimulate the thyroid of a normal octopus and produce a giant. I fancy that the immediate parent of the thing before us was of normal size, and so, probably, are its brothers and sisters. The phenomenon of giantism of this nature occurs in alternate generations and then only in rare instances. Its grandparent may not be far away, however. I wish it was safe to use a submarine to explore that cavern.”

“Why isn’t it?”

“Any creature powerful enough to pull the *Arethusa* under water would crush a frail submarine without effort. Anyway, a Navy sub isn’t built for under-water exploration like this ball is. The window space is quite limited and they aren’t equipped with powerful floodlights. I would like to be able to reach that thing and destroy it, but it can wait until later. The best thing we can do is to put out our lights and wait.”

His hand sought the light switch, and the globe became dark. Only a tiny glimmer of light came down to them from the surface, a hundred fathoms above. In the darkness they stared into the depths of the sea.

For an hour they waited and then Dr. Bird grasped Carnes by the shoulder and pointed. Far in the distance could be seen a tiny point of light. It wavered and winked and at times disappeared, but it was gradually approaching them. Dr. Bird stepped to the telephone and the *Minneconsin* moved a hundred yards further from the shore. The light disappeared again as though hidden by some opaque body. Their eyes had become accustomed to the dim light and they could dimly see a long snake-like body approach the globe and then suddenly withdraw.

The light appeared again only a few hundred yards away. The water

swirled and the sphere swayed drunkenly as some gigantic body moved past it with express train speed and entered the mouth of the cavern. The light turned toward them and they could see the dim outlines of a small submarine on which it was mounted. Another rush of water came as the object which had entered the cave started to leave it, and the light swung around. It bore on a huge black body, and was reflected with a red glow from huge eyes, and the creature backed again into the cave. Back and forth across the mouth of the cavern the light played, and the watchers caught a glimpse of a huge parrot beak which could have engulfed a freight car. From the cavern projected twisting tentacles of gargantuan dimensions, and red eyes, thirty feet in diameter, glared balefully at them. For several minutes the light of the submarine played across the mouth of the cave, and then the floodlights on the cliff sprang into full glow and bathed the ball and the mouth of the tunnel in a flood of light.

Before their horrified gaze was an octopus of a size to make them disbelieve their eyes. The submarine had moved up to within a few feet of them, and the light from it played full on the ball. The submarine maneuvered in the vicinity, keeping the ball full in the beam of its light, and then drew back. As it did so, the floodlights on the cliff died out and the beam of the submarine's light was directed away from them. Dr. Bird jumped to the telephone.

“Head straight out to sea and full speed ahead!” he shouted. “Don’t try to pull us in; tow us!”

The ball swayed as the *Minneconsin’s* mighty engines responded to his orders and the cliff wall disappeared.

“As long as they know we’re here, we might as well announce our presence in good style,” said the doctor grimly as he closed a switch and threw all of the sphere’s huge lights into action. He had turned on the lights just in time, for even as he did so a mighty tentacle shot out of the darkness and wrapped itself around the ball. For a moment it clung there and then was withdrawn.

“The thing can’t stand light,” remarked the doctor as he threw off the switch. “That sub was herding it like a cow by the use of a light beam. As long as we are lighted up we are safe from attack.”

“Then for God’s sake turn on the lights!” cried Carnes.

“I want it to attack us,” replied the doctor calmly. “We have no offensive weapons and only by meeting an attack can we harm the thing.”

As he spoke there came a soft whisper of sound from the vitrilene

walls and they were thrown from their feet by a sudden jerk. Dr. Bird stumbled to the switch and closed it, and the ball was flooded with light. Two arms were now on them but they were slowly withdrawn as the lights glared forth. The huge outlines of the beast could be seen as it followed them toward the surface. Its great eyes glared at them hungrily. The submarine was visible only as a speck of light in the distance.

The *Minneconsin's* speed was picking up under the urge of her huge steam turbines, and the ball was nearing the surface. The sea was light enough now that they could see for quite a distance. The telephone bell jangled and Dr. Bird picked the receiver from its hook.

"Hello," he said. "What's that? You can? By all means, fire. Yes, indeed, we're well out of danger; we must be thirty or forty feet down. Watch the fun now," he went on to Carnes as he replaced the receiver. "The beast is showing above the surface and they're going to shell it."

They watched the surface and suddenly there came a flash of light followed by a dull boom of sound. The huge octopus suddenly sank below them, thrashing its arms about wildly.

“A hit!” shouted Dr. Bird into the telephone. “Get it again if it shows up. I want it to get good and mad.”

He turned off the lights in the ball and the octopus attacked again. The shell had taught it caution and it kept well down, but three huge arms came up from the depths of the sea and wrapped themselves about the ball. The forward motion stopped for a moment, and then came a jerk that threw them down. The ball started to sink.

“Our cable has parted!” cried the doctor. “Turn on the lights!”

Carnes closed the switch. The ball was so covered with the huge tentacles that they could see nothing, but the light had its usual effect and they were released. The ball sank toward the bottom and they could see the huge cephalopod lying below watching them. Blood was flowing from a wound near one of its eyes where the *Minneconsin’s* shell had found its mark.

Toward the huge monster they sank until they lay on the bottom of the ocean and a few yards from it. In an instant the sea became opaque and they could see nothing.

“He has shot his ink!” cried the doctor. “Here comes the real attack. Strap yourself to the wall where you can reach one of the motor

switches.”

Through the darkness huge arms came out and wrapped themselves around the ball. The heavy vitrilene groaned under the enormous pressure which was applied, but it held. The ink was clearing slightly and they could see that the sphere was covered by the arms. The mass moved and the huge maw opened before them. The pipes projecting from the sides of the ball were buried in the creature’s flesh.

“Good Lord, he’s going to swallow us!” gasped the doctor. “Quick, Carnes, the motor switch.”

He closed one of them as he spoke, and the powerful little electric motors began to hum, forcing forward the piston attached to the tank connected to the hollow rods. Steadily the little motors hummed, and the tank emptied through the rods into the body of the giant cephalopod.

“I hope the stuff works fast,” groaned the doctor as they approached closer to the giant maw. “I never tried giving an octopus a hypodermic injection of prussic acid before, but it ought to do the business. There’s enough acid there to kill half New York City.”

Carnes blanched as the ball approached the mouth. One by one the arms unwound until only one was holding them and the jaws opened wider. They were almost in them when the motion stopped. They could feel a shudder run through the arm which held them. For a moment the arm alternately expanded and contracted, almost releasing them only to clutch them again. Another arm came from the depths and whipped about the ball, and again the vitrilene groaned at the pressure which was applied. The arms were suddenly withdrawn and the ball started to sink.

“Drop the lead, Carnes!” cried the doctor. With the aid of the detective he operated the electric catches which held the huge mass of lead to the bottom, and the sphere shot up through the water like a rocket. It leaped clear of the water and fell back with a splash. A half mile away the *Minneconsin* was swinging in a wide circle to head back toward them. They turned their gaze toward the shore.

As they looked a giant arm shot a hundred yards up into the air, twisting and writhing frantically. It disappeared, and another, and then half a dozen flashed into the air. The arms dipped below the surface. A huge black body reared its bulk free from the water for a moment, and the sea boiled as though in a violent storm. The body sank and again the arms were thrown up, twisting and turning like a half dozen huge snakes. The whole creature sank below the waves

and the ball tossed back and forth, often buried under tons of water and once tossed thirty feet into the air by the huge waves.

A momentary lull came in the waves. Carnes gave a cry of astonishment and pointed toward the shore. With an effort, Dr. Bird twisted himself in his lashing and looked in that direction. The huge body had again come to the surface, and three of the arms were towering into the air. Grasped in them was a long, black, cigar-shaped object. As they watched the object was torn into two parts and the fragments crushed by the enormous power of the octopus. Again the arms writhed in torment, and then they stiffened out. For a moment they towered in the air and then slowly sank below the surface of the sea.

“The cyanide has worked,” cried the doctor, “and in its last agonies the creature has turned on its creator and destroyed him. It is a shame, for Saranoff was a brilliant although perverted genius, and besides, I would have liked to have learned his method. However, I may find something when we open the land end and raid the cave; and really, he was too brilliant a man to hang for murder. Once we open the cave and I get any data that is there, my connection with the case will end. Trailing down the gold and recovering it is a routine matter for Bolton, and one in which he won’t need my help.”

“What about that creature we saw in the cave, Doctor? Won’t it hatch into another terror of the sea like the thing that destroyed the ship?”

“The trochosphere? No, I’m not worried there. It won’t try to leave the cave for some days yet, and by that time we’ll have the land end opened and the floodlights turned on. They will keep it there and it will starve to death. We could send down a sub to feed it a torpedo, but there’s no need. Nature will dispose of it. Meanwhile, I hope the *Minneconsin* rigs up a jury tackle pretty soon and takes us on board. I’m getting seasick.”

#62 Gray Denim, By Harold Vincent Schoepflin:

The blood of the Van Dorn's ran in Karl's veins. He rode the skies like an avenging god.

Aproximate word count: 9,700

Bigotry:

Warnings:

there came a stabbing pencil

- - -

Beneath the huge central arch in Cooper Square a meeting was in progress—a gathering of the gray-clad workers of the lower levels of New York. Less than two hundred of their number were in evidence, and these huddled in dejected groups around the pedestal from which a fiery-tongued orator was addressing them. Lounging negligently at the edge of the small crowd were a dozen of the red police.

“I tell you, comrades,” the speaker was shouting, “the time has come when we must revolt. We must battle to the death with the wearers of the purple. Why work out our lives down here so they can live in the lap of luxury over our heads? Why labor day after day at the oxygen generators to give them the fresh air they breathe?”

The speaker paused uncertainly as a chorus of raucous laughter came to his ears. He glared belligerently at a group of newcomers who stood aloof from his own gathering. Seven or eight of them there were, and they wore the gray with obvious discomfort. Slummers! Well, they’d hear something they could carry back with them when they returned to their homes!

“Why,” he continued in rising tones, “do we sit at the controls of the pneumatic tubes which carry thousands of our fellows to tasks equally irksome, while they of the purple ride their air yachts to the pleasure cities of the sky lanes? Never in the history of mankind have the poor been poorer and the rich richer!”

“Yah!” shouted a disrespectful voice from among the newcomers. “You’re full o’ bunk! Nothing but bunk!”

An ominous murmur swelled from the crowd and the red police roused from their lethargy. The mounting scream of a siren echoed in

the vaulted recesses above and re-echoed from the surrounding columns—the call for reserves.

All was confusion in the Square. The little group of newcomers immediately became the center of a mêlée of dangerous proportions. Some of the more timid of the wearers of the gray struggled to get out of the crowd and away. Others, not in sympathy with the speaker, rushed to the support of the besieged visitors. The police were, for the moment, overwhelmed.

The orator, mad with resentment and injured pride, hurled himself into the group. A knife flashed in his hand; rose and fell. A scream of agony shrilled piercingly above the din of the fighting.

Then came the reserves, and the wielder of the knife turned to escape. He broke away from the milling combatants and made speedily for the shadows that lay beyond the great pillars of the Square. But he never reached them, for one of the red guards raised his riot pistol and fired. There was a dull *plop*, and a rubbery something struck the fleeing man and wrapped powerful tentacles around his body, binding him hand and foot in their swift embrace. He fell crashing to the pavement.

A lieutenant of the red police was shouting his orders and the din in

the Square was deafening. With their numbers greatly augmented, the guards were now in control of the situation and their maces struck left and right. Groans and curses came from the gray-clad workers, who now fought desperately to escape.

Then, with startling suddenness, the artificial sunlight of the cavernous Square was gone, leaving the battle to continue in utter darkness.

Cooper Square, in the year 2108, was the one gathering place in New York City where the wearers of the gray denim were permitted to assemble and discuss their grievances publicly. Deep in the maze of lower-level ways seldom visited by wearers of the purple, the grottolike enclosure bore the name of a philanthropist of the late nineteenth century and still carried a musty air of certain of the traditions of that period.

In Astor Way, on the lowest level of all, there was a tiny book shop. Nestled between two of the great columns that provided foundation support for the eighty levels above, it was safely hidden from the gaze of curious passersby in the Square. Slumming parties from afar, their purple temporarily discarded for the gray, occasionally passed within a stone's throw of the little shop, never suspecting the existence of such a retreat amidst the dark shadows of the pillars.

But to the initiated few amongst the wearers of the gray, and to certain of the red police, it was well known.

Rudolph Krassin, proprietor of the establishment, was a bent and withered ancient. His jacket of gray denim hung loosely from his spare frame and his hollow cough bespoke a deep-seated ailment. Looking out from behind thick lenses set in his square-rimmed spectacles, the watery eyes seemed vacant; uncomprehending. But old Rudolph was a scholar—keen-witted—and a gentleman besides. To his many friends of the gray-clad multitude he was an anomaly; they could not understand his devotion to his well-thumbed volumes. But they listened to his words of wisdom and, more frequently than they could afford, parted with precious labor tickets in exchange for reading matter that was usually of the lighter variety.

When the fighting started in the Square, Rudolph was watching and listening from a point of vantage in the shadows near his shop. This fellow Leontardo, who was the speaker, was an agitator of the worst sort. His arguments always were calculated to arouse the passions of his hearers; to inflame them against the wearers of the purple. He had nothing constructive to offer. Always he spoke of destruction; war; bloodshed. Rudolph marveled at the patience of the red police. To-day, these newcomers, obviously a slumming party of youngsters bent on whatever mischief they could find, were interfering with the

speaker. The old man chuckled at the first interruption. But at signs of real trouble he scurried into the shadows and vanished in the blackness of first-level passages known only to himself. He knew where to find the automatic sub-station of the Power Syndicate.

Returning to the darkness he had created in the Square, he was relieved to find that the sounds of the fighting had subsided. Apparently most of the wearers of the gray had escaped. He skirted the avenue of pillars along Astor Way, feeling his way from one to another as he progressed toward his little shop. Peering into the blackness of the square he saw the feeble beams of several flash-lamps in the hands of the police. They were searching for survivors of the fracas, maces and riot pistols held ready for use. A sobbing gasp from close by set his pulses throbbing. He crept stealthily in the direction from which the sound had come.

“Steady now,” came a whispered voice. “My uncle’s shop is close by. He’ll take you in. Here—let me lift you.”

There was a shuffling on the opposite side of the pillar at which Rudolph had halted; another grunt of pain.

“Karl!” hissed the old man. It was his nephew.

“Uncle Rudolph?” came the guarded response.

“Yes. Can I help you?”

“Quick—yes—he’s fainted.”

The old man was around the huge base of the column in an instant. He groped in the darkness and his hands encountered human bodies.

“Who is it?” he breathed.

“One of the hecklers, Uncle. A young lad; and of the purple I think. He’s been knifed.”

Together they dragged the inert form into the shelter of the long line of pillars. There was a trampling of many men in the square. That would be a second detachment of reserves. A ray of light filtered through and dancing shadows of the giant columns made grotesque outlines against the walls of the Way. A portable searchlight had been brought to the scene. They must hurry.

Impeded by the dead weight of their burden, they made sorry progress and several times found it necessary to halt in the shadow of a pillar while the red police passed by in their search of the Square. It was with a sigh of relief that Rudolph opened the door of

his shop and with still greater satisfaction closed and bolted it securely. His nephew shouldered the limp form of the unconscious youth and carried it to his own bed in one of the rear rooms.

“Ugh!” exclaimed old Rudolph as he ripped open the young man’s shirt, “it’s a nasty cut. Warm water, Karl.”

The gaping wound was washed and bound tightly. Rudolph’s experienced fingers told him the knife had not reached a vital spot. The youth would recover.

“But Karl,” he objected, “he wears the purple. Under the gray. See! It’ll get us in trouble if we keep him.”

He was stripping the young man of his clothing to prepare him for bed. Suddenly there was revealed on the white skin a triangular mark. Bright scarlet it was and just over the right hip. He made a hasty attempt to hide it from the watching eyes of Karl.

“Uncle!” snapped his nephew, “—the mark you call cursed! He has it, too!”

The tall young man in gray was on his knees, tearing the hands of the old man away. He saw the mark clearly now. There was no

further use of attempting to conceal it. Rudolph rose and faced his angered nephew, his watery eyes inscrutable.

“You told me, Rudolph, that it was a brand that cursed me. I have seen it on him, too. You have lied to me.”

The old man’s eyes wavered. He trembled violently.

“Why did you lie?” demanded Karl. “Am I not your nephew? Am I not really cursed as you’ve maintained? Tell me—tell me!”

He had the old man by the shoulders, shaking him cruelly.

“Karl—Karl,” begged the helpless ancient, “it was for your good. I swear it. You were born to the purple. That’s what that mark means—not that you’re degraded to the gray, as I said. But there’s a reason. Let me explain.”

“Bah! A reason! You’ve kept me in this misery and squalor for a reason! Who’s my father?”

He flung Rudolph to the floor, where the old man crouched in apprehensive misery.

“Please Karl—don’t! I can explain. Just give me time. It’s a long

story.”

“Time! Time! For twenty-odd years you’ve lied to me; cheated me. My birthright—where is it?”

He menaced his supposed uncle; was about to strike him. Then suddenly he was ashamed. He turned on his heel.

“I’m leaving,” he said shortly.

“Karl—my boy,” begged Rudolph Krassin, struggling to his feet. “You can’t! That lad in there—he—”

But Karl was too angry to reason.

“To hell with him!” he raged, “and to hell with you! I’m through!”

He stamped from the room and out into the eery shadows of the Way. Karl was done with his old life. He’d go to the upper levels and claim his rights. Some day, too, he’d punish the man who’d stolen them away. God! Born to the purple! To think he’d missed it all! Probably was kidnaped by the old rascal he’d been calling uncle. But he’d find out. Rudolph didn’t have to explain. Fingerprint records would clear his name; establish his rightful station in life. He dived into a passage that would lead him to one of the express lifts. He’d

soon be overhead.

A sergeant of the red police looked up startled from his desk as a tall youth in the gray denim of forty levels below appeared before him.

“Well?” he growled. The stalwart young worker had stared belligerently and insolently, he thought.

“I want to check my fingerprint record, Sergeant.”

“Hm. Pretty cocky, aren’t you? The records for such as you are down below, where you belong.”

“Not mine, I think.”

“So? And who the devil are you?”

“That’s what I’m here to find out. I’ve got a triangle branded on my right hip.”

“A what?”

“Triangle. Here—look!”

The amazing youngster had raised his jacket and was pulling at his

shirt. The sergeant stared at what was revealed, his eyes bulging as he looked.

“Lord!” he gasped, “a Van Dorn—in the gray!”

Quickly he turned to the radiovision and made rapid connection with several persons in turn—important ones, by the appearance of the features of each in the brilliant disc of the instrument.

Karl was confused by the sudden turn of things. The sergeant talked so rapidly he could not catch the sense of his words. And that name, Van Dorn, eluded him. He knew he had heard it before, in the little shop down there in Astor Way. But he could not place it. He wished fervently that he had paid more attention to the desires of old Rudolph; had studied more and read the books the old man had begged him to read. His new surroundings confused him, too, and he knew that he was the center of some great new excitement.

Then they were in the room; two individuals, one in the red uniform of a captain of police, the other a pompous, whiskered man in purple. Others followed and it seemed to Karl that the room was filled with them, strangers all, and they stared at him and chattered incessantly. He experienced an overwhelming impulse to run, but mastered it and faced them boldly.

A square of plate glass was placed under his outstretched fingers. It was smeared with something sticky and he watched the whiskered man as he held it up to the light and studied the impressions. Then there was more confusion. Everyone talked at once and the pompous one in purple made use of the radiovision, holding the square of glass near its disc for observation by the person he had called. The identification number was repeated aloud, a string of figures and letters that were a meaningless jumble to Karl. The room became quiet while the police captain thumbed the pages of a huge book he had taken from among many similar ones that filled a rack behind the desk.

Karl's blood froze in his veins at the rumbling swish of a car speeding through the pneumatic tube beneath their feet. His nerves were on edge. Then the captain of police looked up from the book and there was a peculiar glint in his eyes as he spoke.

"Peter Van Dorn. Missing since 2085. Wanted by Continental Government. Ha!"

The words came to Karl's ears through a growing sensation of unreality. It seemed that the speaker was miles away and that his voice and features were those of a radiovision likeness. Wanted by the great power across the Atlantic! It was unthinkable. Why, he had

been but an infant in 2085! What possible crime could he have committed? But the red police captain was speaking again, this time in a chill voice. And the room of the police, thick with the smoke of a dozen cigars, became suddenly stifling.

“Where have you been these twenty-three years, Peter Van Dorn?” asked the captain. “Who have you lived with, I mean?”

Something warned him to protect old Rudolph. And somehow he wished he had not treated the old fellow as he did when he left. His self-possession returned. A wave of hot resentment swept over him.

“That’s my affair,” he said defiantly.

The captain shrugged his shoulders. “Oh, well,” he said, “you needn’t answer—now. We’ll find out when it’s necessary. In the meanwhile we’ll have to turn you over to the Continental Ambassador.”

Two of the red police advanced toward him and the rest drew back.

“You mean I’m under arrest?” asked Karl incredulously.

“Certainly. Of course you’re not to be harmed.”

One of the guards had him by the arm and he saw the glint of handcuffs. They couldn't do this! If it had been for rioting in the Square it would be different. But this! It meant he was a prisoner of a foreign government, for what reason he could not guess. He lost his head completely.

The captain cried out in amazement as one of his huskiest guards went sprawling under a well-planted punch. This youngster must be as crazy as was his father before him. But he was a whirlwind. Before he could be stopped he had tackled the other guard and with a mighty heave flung him halfway across the room where he fell with a thud that left him dazed and gasping. The pompous little man in the purple crawled under the desk as the sergeant leveled a slender tube at the young giant in gray.

Karl ducked instinctively at sight of the weapon, but the spiteful crackle of its mechanism was too quick for him. A faintly luminous ray struck him full in the breast and stopped him in his tracks. A thrill of intense cold chased up his spine and a thunderbolt crashed in his brain. The captain caught his stiffened body as he fell.

Karl—refusing to think of himself as Peter Van Dorn—came to his senses as from a troubled sleep. His head ached miserably and he turned it slowly to view his surroundings. Then, in a flash, he

remembered. The paralyzing ray of the red police! They never used it in the lower levels; but overhead—why, the swine! He sat suddenly erect and glared into a pair of green eyes that regarded him curiously.

A quick glance showed him that he was in a small padded compartment like that of the pneumatic tube cars. At one end there was an amazing array of machinery with glittering levers and handwheels—a control board on which numberless tiny lights blinked and flickered in rapid succession. At these controls squatted the twisted figure of a dwarf. A second of the creatures sat at his side and stared with those horrible green eyes.

“Lord!” he muttered. “Am I still asleep?”

“No,” smiled the dwarf, “you’re awake, Peter Van Dorn.” The misshapen creature did not seem unfriendly.

“Then where am I, and who are you?”

“You’re in one of the Zar’s rocket cars, speeding toward Dorn. We are but two of the Zar’s servants—Moon men.”

“Rocket car? Moon men?” Karl was aghast. He wanted to pinch

himself. But a hollow roar to the rear told him he was in a rapidly moving vessel of some sort. Certainly, too, these dwarfs were not figments of his imagination.

“You’ve been kept completely ignorant?” asked the dwarf.

“It—it seems so.” Karl was bewildered. “You mean we are out in the open—traveling in space—to the Moon perhaps?”

The dwarf laughed. “No, I wish we were,” he replied. “But we are about halfway to the capital of the Continental Empire, greatest of world powers. We’ll be there in an hour.”

“But I don’t understand.”

“Stupid. Didn’t you ever hear of the rocket ships that cross the ocean like a projectile, mounting a thousand miles from the surface and making the trip in two hours?”

“No!” Karl was aghast. “Are we really in such a contraption?” he faltered.

“Say! Are you kidding me?” The dwarf was incredulous. “Do you mean to tell me you know so little of your world as that? Have you never read anything? The news broadcasts, the thought exchangers

—don’t you follow them at all?”

Karl shook his head in growing wonder. Truly Rudolph had kept him in ignorance. Or was it his own fault? He had refused to dig into the volumes old Krassin had begged him to read. The broadcasts and the thought machines—well, only those of the purple had access to those.

“Hey, Laro!” called the dwarf to his companion, “this mole is as dumb as can be. Doesn’t know he’s alive hardly. And a Van Dorn!”

The two laughed uproariously and Karl raged inwardly. Mole! So that’s what they called wearers of the gray! He clenched his fists and rose unsteadily to his feet.

“Sorry,” apologized his tormentor. “Mustn’t get sore now. It seems so funny to us though. And listen, kid, you’ll never have another chance to hear it all. So, if you’ll sit down and calm yourself a bit I’ll give you an earful.”

Mollified, Karl listened. A marvelous tale it was, of a disgruntled scientist of the Eastern Hemisphere who had conquered that portion of the world with the aid of the inhabitants he had found on the outer side of the Moon; of the scientist who still ruled the East—Zar of the

Continental Empire. A horrible war—in 2085, the year of his own birth—depopulated the countries of Asia, Europe and Africa and reduced them to subjection. There was no combatting the destructive rays and chemical warfare of the Moon men. The United Americas, still weakened from a civil war of their own, remained aloof and, for some strange reason, the Zar left them in peace, contenting himself with his conquest of practically all of the rest of the world. Now, it seemed, the two major powers were as separate as if on different planets, there being no traffic between them save by governmental sanction; and that was rarely given.

It grew uncomfortably warm in the compartment as the rocket car entered the lower atmosphere but Karl listened spellbound to the astounding revelations of the Moon man. There came a pause in the discourse of the dwarf as a number of relays clicked furiously on the control board and the vessel slackened its speed perceptibly.

“But,” said Karl, thinking aloud rather than meaning to interrupt, “what has all this to do with me? Why does the government of this Zar want me?”

The dwarf bent close and eyed him cautiously. “Poor kid!” he whispered, “it doesn’t seem right that you should suffer for something that happened when you were born; something you know

nothing about. But the Zar knows best. You—”

There came a stabbing pencil of light from over Karl’s shoulder and the green eyes of the dwarf went wide with horrified surprise. He clutched at his breast where the flame had contacted, then slowly collapsed in a pitiful, distorted heap. Karl recoiled from the odor of putrefaction that immediately filled the compartment. He whirled to face the new danger but saw nothing but the padded walls.

Then they were in darkness save for the blinking lights of the control board. He was thrown forward violently and the piercing screech of compressed air rushing past the vessel told him they had entered the receiving tube at their destination and were being retarded in speed for the landing. This much he had gathered from the explanations of the now silenced dwarf.

Laro, the other Moon man, remained mute at the controls. His companion evidently had talked too much.

The vessel had stopped and a section of the padded rear wall of the compartment moved back to reveal a second chamber. There were three other occupants of the ship and Karl knew now at whose hands the talkative Moon man had met his death. One of the three—all wearers of the purple—still held the generator of the dazzling ray in

his hands. He decided wisely that resistance was useless and followed meekly when he was led from the ship.

Endlessly they rode upward in a high-speed lift, dismounting finally at a pneumatic tube entrance. A special car whisked them roaring into the blackness. Then they were shot forth into the open and Karl saw the light of the sun for the first time in many years. They were on the upper surface of a great city, Dorn, the capital of the Continental Empire.

The air was filled with darting ships of all sorts and sizes, most of them being pleasure craft of the wearers of the purple. To Karl it was the sudden realization of his dreams. He was one of them. He, too, should be wearing the purple. Then his heart sank as one of his guards prodded him into action. His dream already was shattered for they stood at the entrance to a great crystal pyramid that rose from the flat expanse of the roofs of Dorn. It was the palace of the Zar.

It seemed then that fairyland had opened its gates to the young man in gray denim. He immediately fell under its influence when they traversed a long lane between rows of brightly colored growing things which filled the air with sweet odors. Feathered creatures fluttered about and twittered and caroled in the sheer joy of being alive. It was sweeter music than he had ever believed possible or

even imagined as existing. Again he forgot the menace of the imperial edict which had brought him from the other side of the world.

Then rudely, he was brought back to earth. He was in the presence of the mighty Zar and his three escorts were bowing themselves from the huge room in which the wizened monarch sat enthroned. They had finished their duties.

A shriveled face; beady eyes; trembling hands with abnormally large knuckles; a cruel and determined mouth—these were the features that most impressed Karl as he stared wordlessly at this Zar of the Eastern Hemisphere. The magnificence of the royal robe was lost on the young wearer of the gray.

“Well, well, so this is Peter Van Dorn, my beloved nephew.” The Zar was speaking and the chilly sarcasm in which the words were uttered belied the friendliness they otherwise might have implied.

“That’s what I’m told,” replied Karl, “though I didn’t know I’m supposed to be the nephew of so great a figure as yourself.”

Not bad that, for an humble wearer of the gray.

“Oh, yes, yes, indeed. Why else should I have sent for you?”

“I have wondered why—and still wonder.”

“Oh, you wonder, eh?” The Zar inspected him carefully and then broke into a cackle of horrible laughter. “A Van Dorn in gray denim!” he chortled. “A mole of the Americas! And to think that even the Zar has been unable to find him in all these years!”

“Stop!” bellowed Karl. “I’ll not have your ridicule. Come to the point now and have it over with. Kill me if you will, but tell me the story!” He had seen the slender tube in the Zar’s hand.

An expression of surprise, almost of admiration, flickered in the beady eyes of the Zar and was gone. He spoke coldly.

“Very well, I shall explain. You, Peter, are actually my nephew. Your father, Derek Van Dorn, was my brother; he a king of Belravia and I a poor but experienced scientist. He scorned me and he paid, for I learned of the ancient race of the other side of the Moon, the side we can not see from the earth. I went to them and enlisted their aid in warring upon my brother. When we returned to carry on this war I learned that I had a son. So, too, did Derek. But my son was born in obscurity and Derek’s son—you, Peter—in the lap of luxury. The

war was short and, to me, sweet. Belravia was first to fall, and I had your father removed from this life by the vibrating death."

"You monster!" cried Karl. But the slender rod menaced him.

"A moment, my hot-headed nephew. I vowed I'd have your life, Peter, but your father had a few friends and one of these spirited you away. So temporarily you escaped. But now I have you where I can keep that vow. You, too, shall die. By the vibration. But first—ha! ha!—I'll give you a taste of the purple. Just so the going will be harder."

Karl kept his temper as best he could. He thought, conscience-stricken, of old Rudolph, that good friend of his father. Then he thought of that youth he had taken from the Square.

"Your son?" he asked gently. "Has he the triangular brand?"

The Zar was taken aback. "He has, yes. Why?" he asked.

"I have seen him in the Americas. He now lies wounded and in peril of his life. What do you think of that?"

Karl was triumphant as the Zar paled.

“You lie, Peter Van Dorn!”

But the beady eyes saw that the young man was truthful. Sudden fury assailed the monarch of the East. A bell pealed its mellow summons and three Moon men entered the Presence.

“Quick, Taru—the radiovision! Our ambassador in the Americas!” The Zar was on his feet, his hard features terrible in fear and anger. “By God!” he vowed, “I’ll lay waste the Americas if harm has come to my son. And you”—turning to Karl—“I’ll reserve for you an even more terrible fate than the vibrating death!”

The radiovision was wheeled in and in operation. A frightened face appeared in its disc: the Zar’s ambassador across the sea.

“Moreau—my son!” snapped the Zar. “Where is he?”

“Majesty! Have mercy!” gasped Moreau. “Paul has eluded us. He was skylarking—in the lower levels of New York. But our secret agents are combing the passages. We’ll have him in twenty-four hours. I promise!”

The rage of the Zar was terrible to see. Karl expected momentarily that the white flame would lay him low, for the anger of the mad

ruler was directed first at Moreau, then at himself. But a quick, evil calm succeeded the storm.

“You, Peter,” he stated, in tones suddenly silky, “shall have that twenty-four hours—no more. If Moreau has not produced my son in that time you shall be dismembered slowly. A finger; an ear; your tongue; a hand—until you reveal the whereabouts of the heir to my throne!”

“Never! You scum!” Karl was on the dais in a single bound. He had the Zar by the throat, his fingers twisting in the flabby flesh. Might as well have it over at once. “Fratricide—murderer of my father, I’ll take you with me!”

But it was not to be. The throne room was filled with retainers of the mad emperor. Strong hands tore him away and he was borne, struggling and fighting, to the floor. A sharp pain in his forearm. A deadening of the muscles. He was powerless, save for the painful ability to crawl to his knees, swaying drunkenly. A delicious languor overcame him. Nothing mattered now. He saw that a tall man in the purple had withdrawn the needle of the hypodermic and was replacing the instrument in its case. Ever so slowly, it seemed.

The Zar was laughing. That horrible cackle. But Karl didn’t care.

They'd have their sport with him. Let 'em! Then it'd be over. Lord! If only he had been a little quicker. He'd have torn the old Zar's windpipe from its place!

"My word," laughed the Zar. "The sacred word of a Van Dorn. I gave it. He'll wear the purple for a day. Take him from my sight!"

Karl was walking, quite willingly now. The effects of the drug were altering. His muscular strength returned but his mental state underwent a complete change. Always he'd wanted a taste of the purple. For years he'd listened to the orators of the Square, to the conflicting statements of old Krassin. But now he'd see. He'd know the joys of the upper levels; the pleasure cities, perhaps. For one day. But what did it matter? He found himself laughing and joking with his companion, a heavy-set wearer of the purple. They were in a luxurious apartment. Servants! Moon men all of them, but so efficient. They stripped him of his gray denim; discarded it contemptuously. Karl kicked the heap into a corner and laughed delightedly. His bath was waiting.

Much can happen in a day. Clothed in the purple, Karl—Peter Van Dorn, he was, now—expanded. Turgid emotions surged through his new being. He was a new man. In his rightful place. He was delighted with the companionship of his new friend of the purple,

Leon Lemaire. An euphonious name! A fine fellow! Fool that the Zar must be, to leave him in the care of so amiable a man. Why, Leon couldn't hold him! None of them could. He'd escape them all—if he wished. Twenty-four hours, indeed!

They were in the midst of a gay company. Wine flowed freely, and Leon had attached to their party a pair of beautiful damsels, young, and easy to know. There was music and dancing. Lights of marvelous color played over the assemblage in the huge hall, swaying their senses at the will of some expert manipulator. Peter was a different person now. He was exhilarated to the point of intoxication, but not by the wine. Somehow he couldn't bear the taste of the amber fluid the others were imbibing with such gusto. The effects of the drug had left a coppery taste in his mouth. But no matter! Rhoda, his lovely companion at the table leaned close. Her breath was hot at his throat. He swept her into his arms. Leon and the other girl laughed approvingly.

There were many such places in the upper levels of Dorn and they traveled from one to another. Now their party was larger, it having been augmented by the appearance of other of Leon's friends. Fine companions, these men of the purple, and the women were incomparable. Especially Rhoda. They understood one another perfectly now. It was all as he had pictured it.

Someone proposed that they visit the intermediate levels. It would be such a lark to watch the mechanicals. They made the drop in a lift. A laughing, riotous party. And Peter was one of them! He felt that he had known them for years. Rhoda clung to his arm, and the languorous glances from under her long lashes set the blood racing madly in his veins.

In the levels of the mechanicals they romped boisterously. To them the strange robots—creatures of steel and glass and copper—were objects of ridicule. Poor, senseless mechanisms that performed the tasks that made the wearers of the purple independent of labor. Here they saw the preparation of their synthetic food, untouched by human hands. In one chamber a group of mechanicals, soulless and brainless, engaged in the delicate chemical compounding of raw materials that went into the making of their clothing. Here was a nursery, where tiny tots born to the purple were reared to adolescence by unfeeling but efficient mechanical nurses. The mothers of the purple could not be bothered with their offspring until they had reached the age of reason. The whirring machinery of a huge power plant provided much amusement for the feminine members of the party. It was all so massive; throbbing with energy. But dirty! Ugh! Lucky the attendants could be mechanicals.

“We have visited the lower levels,” whispered Rhoda in his ear, “but

not often. It isn't pleasant. Ignorant fools in the gray denim—too many of them. I don't know why we permit their existence. Fools who will not learn. Education made us as we are, and they won't take it. Sullen looks and evil leers are all that they have for us. Hope nobody suggests going down there now."

"Me, too," said Peter. He had forgotten that once he was Karl Krassin, a wearer of the despised gray.

Someone in the party was becoming restless. They must move on.

"Where to?" asked Peter.

"Sans Dolor, sweet boy. A pleasure city within a hundred kilometers of Dorn. You'll love it, Peter."

A pleasure city! Fondest dream of the wearers of the gray! In the dim past, when he was Karl, he had dreamed it often. Now he was to visit one!

They were atop the city now and the crystal palace of the Zar shimmered in the sunlight off there across the flat upper surface of Dorn. But it seemed so far away that Peter did not give it a second thought. He was living in the present.

A swift aero took them into the skies and they roared out above the wilderness that was everywhere between the great cities of earth. Funny nobody thought of leaving the cities and exploring the jungles of the outside. But, of course, it wasn't necessary. They had everything they needed within the cities. All of their wants were supplied by the mechanicals and by the few toilers in the gray who still persisted in ignorance and in some perverse ideas that they must work in order to live. Besides, the jungle was dangerous.

Sans Dolor loomed into view, a great island floating in the air a thousand meters above the tossing waters of the ocean. Peter gave not a thought to the forces that kept it suspended. Dimly he recalled certain words of old Rudolph, words regarding the artificial emanations that had been discovered as capable of counteracting the force of gravity. But his mind was intent on the pleasures to come.

They were over the city. Carefully tended foliage lined its streets and a smooth lagoon glistened in its center. Its towers and spires were decorated with gay colors. The streets were filled with wearers of the purple and the nude bodies of bathers in the lagoon gleamed white in the strong sunlight.

He sensed anew the nearness of Rhoda. Her soft warm hand nestled in his and she responded instantly to his sudden embrace.

There came a shock and the party was stilled in dismay. The aero careened violently and the pilot struggled with controls that were dead. Sans Dolor dropped rapidly away beneath them. They were shooting skyward, drawn by some inexplicable and invisible energy from above.

Rhoda screamed and held him close, trembling violently. All of the women screamed and the men cursed. Leon arose to his feet and stared at Peter. The friendliness was gone from his features and he spat forth an accusation. A glistening mechanism appeared in his hand as if by magic. A ray generator! He had been appointed by the Zar to guard this upstart and, whatever happened, he'd not let him escape with his life. The girl shuddered at sight of the weapon and extricated herself from his arms. Her affection too had been a pose.

Peter's mind was clearing from the effects of the drug. He had not the slightest idea of what might have caused the quick change in the situation but he resolved he would die fighting, if die he must. Leon fumbled with the catch of the generator. It refused to operate. The force that was drawing them upward had paralyzed all mechanisms aboard the little aero. Flinging it from him in disgust he sprang for Peter.

Their minds befuddled, the rest of the men watched dully. The

women huddled together in a corner, whimpering. They were a sorry lot after all, thought Karl. He was no longer Peter Van Dorn, and he thrilled to the joy of battle.

Leon Lemaire was no mean antagonist. His flailing arms were everywhere and a huge fist caught Karl on the side of his head and sent him reeling. But this only served to clear his mind further and to fill him with a cold rage. He bored in unmercifully and Lemaire soon was on the defensive. A blow to his midsection had him puffing and Karl hammered in rights and lefts to the now sinister face that rocked his opponent to his heels. But the minion of the Zar was crafty. He slid to the floor as if groggy, then with catlike agility, dove for Karl's knees, bringing him down with a crash.

The air whistled by them as the ship was drawn upward with ever-increasing speed. The other passengers cowered in fright as the two men rolled over and over on the floor, banging at each other indiscriminately. Both were hurt. Karl's lip was split, and bleeding profusely. One eye was closing. But now he was on top and he pummeled his opponent to a pulp. Long after he ceased resisting them, the blows continued until the features of Leon Lemaire were unrecognizable. The infuriated Karl did not see that one of the members of the party was creeping up on him from behind. Neither was he aware that the upward motion of the aero had ceased and that

they now hung motionless in space. A terrific blow at the base of his skull sent him sprawling. Must have been struck by a rocket, one of those funny ships that crossed the ocean so quickly. A million lights danced before his aching eyeballs.

Lying prone across the inert body of his foe, dimly conscious and fingers clutching weakly, he knew that the cabin was filled with people. Alien voices bellowed commands. There was the screaming of women; the sound of blows; curses ... then all was silence and darkness.

It was a far cry to the little book shop off Cooper Square, but Karl was calling for Rudolph when he next awoke to the realization that he was still in the land of the living. His head was bandaged and his tongue furry. A terrible hangover. Then he heard voices and they were discussing Peter Van Dorn. He opened one eye as an experiment. The other refused to open. But it might have been worse. At least he was alive; he could see well enough with the one good optic.

“Sh-h!” whispered one of the voices. “He’s recovering!”

He looked solemnly into the eyes of an old man; a pair of wise and gentle eyes that reminded him somehow of Rudolph’s.

“Quiet now, Peter,” said the old man. “You’ll be all right in a few minutes. Banged up a bit, you are, but nothing serious.”

“Don’t call me Peter,” objected Karl. He loathed the sound of the name; loathed himself for his recent thoughts and actions. “I am Karl Krassin,” he continued, “and as such will remain until I die.”

There were others in the room and he saw glances of satisfaction pass between them. This was a strange situation. These men were not of the purple. Neither were they of the gray. Their garments shone with the whiteness of pure silver. And that’s what they were; of finely woven metallic cloth. Was he in another world?

“Very well, Karl.” The kind old man was speaking once more. “I merely want you to know that you are among friends—your father’s friends.”

Surprised into complete wakefulness, Karl struggled to a seated position and surveyed the group that faced him. They were a fine looking lot, mostly older men, but there was a refreshing wholesomeness about them.

“My father?” he faltered. “He’s not alive.”

“No, my poor boy. Derek Van Dorn left this life at the hands of your uncle, Zar Boris. But we, his friends, are here to avenge him and to restore to you his throne.”

“But—but—I still do not understand.”

“Of course not, because we’ve kept ourselves hidden from the world for more than twenty-two years, waiting for this very moment. There are forty-one of us, including Rudolph, my brother. We have lived in the jungle since Boris conquered the Eastern Hemisphere. But amongst our numbers were several scientists, two greater than was Boris, even in his heyday. They have done wonderful things and we are now prepared to take back what was taken from Derek—and more. His life we can not restore—Heaven rest him—but his kingdom we can. And to his son it shall be returned.

“You were given into Rudolph’s care when little more than a babe in arms and he has cared for you well. We’ve watched, you know, in the detectoscopes—long range radiovision mechanisms that can penetrate solid walls, the earth itself, to bring to us the images and voices of persons who may be on the other side of the world. We’ve followed your every move, my boy, and the first time we feared for you was yesterday when the drug of the Zar’s physician stole away your sense of right and wrong. But we were in time to save you, and

now we are ready to kneel at your feet and proclaim you our king. First there is the Zar to be dealt with and then we shall set up the new regime. Are you with us?”

Karl gazed at the speaker in wonder. He a king? Always to live amongst the wearers of the purple? To be responsible for the welfare of half the world? It was unthinkable! But Zar Boris, the murderer of his own father—he must be punished, and at the hands of the son!

“I’ll do it,” he said simply. “That is, I’ll do whatever you have planned in the way of exterminating the Zar. Then we’ll talk of the new empire. But how is the Zar to be overcome? I thought he was invincible, with his Moon men and terrible weapons.”

“Ah! That, my boy, is where our scientists have triumphed. True, his rays were terrible. They could not be combatted when he first returned. The strange chemicals and gases of the Moon men defied analysis or duplication. His citadel atop the city of Dorn is proof against them all; proof against explosives and rays of all kinds known to him. The disintegration and decomposition rays have no effect on the crystal of its walls. It is hermetically sealed from the outer air so can not be gassed. The vibration impulses have no effect upon its reinforced structure. But there is a ray, a powerful destructive agent, against which it is not proof. And our scientists

have developed this agency. You shall have the privilege of pressing the release of the energy that destroys the arch-fiend in his lair. His dominance over, the empire will fall. We shall take it—for you."

A strange exaltation shone from the faces of those in the room, and Karl found that it was contagious. His bosom swelled and he itched to handle the controls of this wonderful ray.

"This ray," continued the brother of old Rudolph, "carries the longest vibrations ever measured, the vibrations of infra-red, the heat-ray. We have succeeded in concentrating a terrific amount of power in its production, and with it are able to produce temperatures in excess of that of the interior of the earth, where all substances are molten or gaseous. The Zar's crystal palace cannot withstand it for a second. He cannot escape!"

"How'll you know he's there at the time?" Karl was greatly excited, but he was curious too.

"Come with me, my boy. I'll show you." The old man led him from the room and the others followed respectfully.

They stopped at a circular port and Karl saw that they were high above the earth in a vessel that hovered motionless, quivering with

what seemed like human eagerness to be off.

“This vessel?” he asked.

“It’s a huge sphere; the base of our operations. To it we drew the aero on which you were fighting. A magnetic force discovered by our scientists and differing only slightly from that used in counteracting gravity. We let the rest of them go; foolishly I think. But it’s done now and we have no fear. From this larger vessel we shall send forth smaller ones, armed with the heat-ray. The flagship of the fleet is to be yours and you’ll lead the attack on Dorn. Here—I’ll show you the Zar.”

They had reached the room of the detectoscopes—a mass of mechanisms that reminded Karl of nothing so much as the vitals of the intermediate levels which he had visited with Leon—and Rhoda. He knew that he flushed when he thought of her. What a fool he had been!

A disc glowed as one of the silver-robed strangers manipulated the controls. The upper surface of Dorn swung into view. Rapidly the image drew nearer and they were looking at the crystal pyramid that was the Zar’s palace. Down, down to its very tip they passed. Karl recoiled from the image as it seemed they were falling to its

glistening sides. The sensation passed. They were through, penetrating solid crystal, masonry, steel and duralumin girders. Room after room was opened to their view. It was magic—the magic of the upper levels.

Now they were in the throne room. A group of purple-clad men and women stood before the dais. Leon, Rhoda—all of his wild companions were there, facing the dais. The Zar was raging and the words of his speech came raucously to their ears through the sound-producing mechanism.

“You’ve failed miserably, all of you,” he screamed. “He’s gotten away and you know the penalty. Taru—the vibrating ray!”

The Moon man already was fussing with a gleaming machine, a machine with bristling appendages having metallic spheres on their ends, a machine in which dozens of vacuum tubes glowed suddenly.

Rhoda screamed. It was a familiar sound to Karl. He noted with satisfaction that Leon could hardly stand on his feet and that his face was covered with plasters. Then, startled, he saw that Leon was shivering as with the ague. His outline on the screen grew dim and indistinct as the rate of vibration increased. Then the body bloated and became misty. He could see through it. The vibrating death! His

father had gone the same way!

Karl groaned at the thought. The whine of the distant machine rose in pitch until it passed the limit of audibility. Tiny pin-points of incandescence glowed here and there from the Zar's victims as periods of vibration were reached that coincided with the natural periods of certain of the molecules of their structure. They were no longer recognizable as human beings. Shimmering auras surrounded them. Suddenly they were torches of cold fire, weaving, oscillating with inconceivable rapidity. Then they were gone; vanished utterly.

The Zar laughed—that horrible cackle again.

"Great God!" exclaimed Karl, "let's go! The fiend must not live a moment longer than necessary. Are you ready?"

Rudolph's brother smiled. "We're ready Karl," he said.

The great vessel hummed with activity. The five torpedo-shaped aeros of the battle fleet were ready to take off from the cavities in the hull. In the flagship Karl was stationed at the control of the heat-ray. His instructions in its operation had been simple. A telescopic sight with crosshairs for the centering of the object to be attacked; a small lever. That was all. He burned with impatience.

Then they were dropping; falling clear of the mother ship. The pilot pressed a button and the electronic motors started. A burst of roaring energy streamed from the tapered stern of their vessel and the earth lurched violently to meet them. Down, down they dived until the rocking surface of Dorn was just beneath them. Then they flattened out and circled the vast upper surface. From the corner of his eye Karl saw that the other four vessels of his fleet were just behind. There was a flurry among the wasplike clouds of pleasure craft over the city. They scurried for cover. Something was amiss!

“Hurry!” shouted Karl. “The warning is out! There is no time to lose!”

He pressed his face to the eye-piece of his sight, his finger on the release lever of the ray. The crystal pyramid crossed his view and was gone. Again it crossed, more slowly this time. And now his sight was dead on it, the gleaming wall rushing toward him. Pressure on the tiny button. They’d crash into the palace in another second! But no, a brilliant flash obscured his vision, a blinding light that made the sun seem dark by comparison. They roared on and upward. He took his eye from the telescope and stared ahead, down. The city was dropping away, and, where the crystal palace had stood, there was a spreading blob of molten material from which searing vapors were drifting. The roofs of the city were sagging all around and great

streams of the sparkling, sputtering liquid dripped into the openings that suddenly appeared. Derek Van Dorn was avenged.

“Destroy! Destroy!” yelled Karl madly. A microphone hung before him and his words rang through every vessel of his convoy.

The lust of battle was upon him. A fleet of the Zar’s aeros had risen from below; twenty of them at least. These would be manned by Moon creatures, he knew, and would carry all of the dreadful weapons which had originated on that strange body. But he did not know that his own ships were insulated against most of the rays used by the Zar’s forces. He knew only that he must fight; fight and kill; exterminate every last one of the Zar’s adherents or be exterminated in the attempt.

Kill! Kill! The madness was contagious. His pilot was a marvel and drove his ship straight for the massed ships of the foe. The air was vivid with light-streamers. A ray from an enemy vessel struck the thick glass of the port through which he looked and the outer surface was shattered and pock-marked. But a cloud of vapor and a dripping stream of fiery liquid told him his own ray had taken effect on a vessel of the enemy. One! They wheeled about and spiraled, coming up under another of the Zar’s aeros. It vanished in a puff of steam and they narrowly missed being covered by the falling remnants of

incandescent liquid. Two! Karl's aim was good and he gloated in the fact. Three! They climbed and turned over, dropping again into the fray. Four!

The air grew stifling, for the expended energy of the enemies' rays must needs be absorbed. It could not disintegrate them nor decompose their bodies, but the contacts were many and the liberation of heat enormous. They were suffocating! But Karl would not desist. They drove on, now beneath, now above an enemy ship. He lost count.

One of his own vessels was in trouble. The report came to him from the little speaker at his ear. He looked around in alarm. A glowing object reeled uncertainly over there between two of the aeros of the Zar. The concentration of beams of vibrations was too much for the sturdy craft. It was red hot and its occupants burned alive where they sat. Suddenly it slipped into a spin and went slithering down into the city, leaving a gaping opening where it fell. This sobered him somewhat, but he went into the battle with renewed fury.

How many had they brought down? Fifteen? Sixteen? He tore his purple jacket from his body. The perspiration rolled from his pores. His own ship would be next. But what did it matter? Kill! Kill! He shouted once more into the microphone, then dived into battle.

Another and another! In Heaven's name, how many were there? It was maddening. If only he could breathe. His lungs were seared; his eyes smarting from the heat. And then it was over.

Three of the Zar's aeros remained, and these turned tail to run for it. No! They were falling, nose down, under full power; diving into the city from which they had come. Suicide? Yes. They couldn't face the recriminations that must come to them. And anything was better than facing that burning death from the strange little fighters which had come from out the skies. Dorn was a mass of wreckage.

Karl tore at the fastenings of the ports, searing his fingers on the heated metal. His pilot had collapsed, the little aero heading madly skyward with no guiding hand. Air! They must have air! He loosened the pilot's jacket; slapped frantically at his wrists in the effort to bring him to consciousness. Then he was at the controls of the vessel, tugging on first one, then the other. The aero circled and spun, executing the most dangerous of sideslips and dives. A little voice was speaking to him—the voice of the radio—instructing him. In a daze he followed instructions as best he could. The whirlings of the earth stabilized after a time and he found he was flying the vessel; climbing rapidly.

A sense of power came to him as the little voice of the radio

continued to instruct. Here were the controls of the electronic motor; there the gravity-energy. He was proceeding in the wrong direction. But what did it matter? He learned the meaning of the tiny figures of the altimeter; the difference between the points of the compass. Still he drove on.

“East! Turn East!” begged the little voice from the radio. “You’re heading west. Your speed—a thousand kilometers an hour—it’s too fast. Turn back, Zar Peter!”

He tore the loud speaker of the radio from its fastenings. West! He wanted to go west! On and on he sped, becoming more and more familiar with the workings of the little vessel as he progressed. A cooling breeze whistled from the opened ports, a breeze that smelled of the sea. His heart sang with the wonder of it all. He could fly. And fly he did. Zar Peter? Never! He knew now where he belonged; knew what he wanted. He’d find the coast of North America. Follow it until he located New York. A landing would be easy, for had not the voice instructed him in the use of the gravity-energy? He’d make his way to the lower levels, to the little book shop of Rudolph Krassin. A suit of gray denim awaited him there and he’d never discard it.

Onward he sped into the night, which was falling fast. He held to his

westward course like a veteran of the air lanes. The pilot had ceased to breathe and Karl was sorry. Game little devil, that pilot. Have to shove his body overboard. Too bad.

Rudolph's brother would understand. He'd be watching in the detectoscope. And the others—those who had wished to seat him on a throne—they'd understand, too. They'd have to!

Rudolph would forgive him, he knew. Paul Van Dorn—his own cousin—the secret agents of the Zar would never locate him! Too many friends of Rudolph's were of the red police.

He gave himself over to happy thoughts as the little aero sped on in the darkness. Home! He was going home! Back to the gray denim, where he belonged and where now he would remain content.

#63 The Ape-men Of Xlotli, By David R. Sparks:

A beautiful face in the depths of a geyser—and Kirby plunges into a desperate mid-Earth conflict with the dreadful feathered serpent.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

his hiss filled the night

- - -

Chapter 1

Kirby did not know what mountains they were. He did know that the Mannlicher bullets of eleven bad Mexicans were whining over his head and whizzing past the hoofs of his galloping, stolen horse. The shots were mingled with yelps which pretty well curdled his spine. In the circumstances, the unknown range of snow mountains towering blue and white beyond the arid, windy plateau, offering he

could not tell what dangers, seemed a paradise. Looking at them, Kirby laughed harshly to himself.

A beautiful face in the depths of a geyser—and Kirby plunges into a desperate mid-Earth conflict with the dreadful Feathered Serpent.

As he dug the heels of his aviator's boots into the stallion's flanks, the animal galloped even faster than before, and Kirby took hope. Then more bullets and more yelps made him think that his advantage might prove only temporary. Nevertheless, he laughed again, and as he became accustomed to the feel of a stallion under him, he even essayed a few pistol shots back at the pack of frantic, swarthy devils he had fooled.

Three hours ago he had been eating a peaceful breakfast with his friend and commandant, Colonel Miguel de Castanar, in the sunlit patio of the commandant's hacienda. Castanar, chief of the air patrol for the district, had waxed enthusiastic over the suppression of last spring's revolutionists and the cowed state of up-country bandits. Captain Freddie Kirby, American instructor of flying to Mexican pilots in the making, had agreed with him and asked for one of the Wasps and three days' leave with which to go visiting in Laredo. The simple matter of a broken fuel line, a forced landing two hundred kilometres from nowhere, and the unlucky proximity of the not-so-

cowed horsemen, were the things which had changed the day from what it had been to what it was.

The one piece of good fortune which had befallen him since the bandits had surrounded the wrecked Wasp, looted it, and taken its lone pilot prisoner, was the break he was getting now. During the squadron's first halt to feed, he had knocked down his guards and made a bolt for the grazing stallion. So far, the attempt was proving worth while.

On and on the stallion lunged toward the white mountains. Kirby's eyes became red rimmed now from fatigue and the glare of the sun and the dust of the pitilessly bare plateau. A negligible scalp wound under his mop of straw-colored hair, slight as it was, did not add to his comfort. But still he would not give up, for the horse, as if it sensed what its rider needed most, was making directly for a narrow ravine which debouched on the plateau from the nearest mountain flank.

It was the promise of cover afforded by the jagged rocks and jungle growth of that ravine which kept hope alive in Kirby's throbbing brain.

The stallion was blown and staggering. Foam from the heavily bitted

mouth flashed back in great yellow flakes against Kirby's dust-caked aviator's tunic. But just the same, the five mile gallop had carried both horse and rider beyond range of any but the most expert rifle shot. And Kirby knew that if his own splendid mount was almost ready to crash, the horses of his pursuers must be in worse shape still. So for the third time since the fight had begun, he laughed. This time there was no harshness, but only relief, in the sound which came from his dry lips.

Ten minutes later, he flung himself out of his saddle. Like the caress of a vast, soothing hand, the shadowed coolness of the ravine lay upon him. As his feet struck ground, they splashed in the water overflowing from a spring at the base of an immense rock. At once Kirby dropped the reins on the stallion's neck, giving him his freedom, and as the horse lowered his head to drink, Kirby stooped also.

There was cover everywhere. Kirby's first move after pulling both himself and the horse away from the spring, was to glance up the long, deeply shaded canyon which he had entered—a gash hacked into the breast of the steep mountain as by a titanic ax. Then, reassured as to the possibilities for a defensive retreat, he glanced back toward the dazzling, bare plateau.

It was what he saw taking place amongst the sombreroed bandits out there which made the grin of satisfaction fade from his broad mouth. His last glance backward, before bolting into the canyon mouth, had showed him a ragged squadron of men left far behind, yet galloping after him still. But now—

Presently a puzzled frown made wrinkles in Freddie Kirby's wide sunburned forehead. He relaxed his grip upon the heavy Luger, which, in his big hands, looked like a cap pistol, and rubbed his eyes.

But he was not mistaken. The horsemen had halted! Out there on the glaring, alkali-arid plateau, they were standing as still as so many statues. Looking toward the canyon mouth which had swallowed their quarry, they certainly were, but they were halted as completely as men struck dead.

"Huh," Kirby grunted, and scratched behind his ear.

The next second he swung around to look at his horse, uncertain what he was going to do next, but aware of the fact that right now, with a lot of unknown country between himself and Castanar's sunlit patio, the stallion was going to be a friend in need.

As he turned, however, prepared to take up the loose reins,

something else happened. The stallion let out a neigh as shrill as a trumpet blast. As Kirby jumped, grabbed for the bridle, his fingers found empty air. Like a crazy animal the stallion leaped past him, barely missing him. Out toward the plain the horse jumped, out and away from the shaded canyon mouth, out toward the spot where other horses waited. And despite the animal's blown condition, the speed he put into his retreat left Kirby dazed.

After a helpless, profanity-filled second, Kirby scratched behind his ear again. As certain as the fact that almost his sole hope of getting back to civilization depended upon the stallion, was the fact that the brute did not intend to stop running until he dropped.

"Now what in the hell ever got into his crazy head?" Kirby muttered grimly.

Then he turned around to glance up the shadow-filled slash of a canyon, and sniffed.

"Huh!"

Faintly in the air had risen an odor the like of which he had never encountered in his life. A combination, it was, of the unforgetable stench which hangs over a battlefield when the dead are long

unburied, and of a fragrance more rare, more heady, more poignantly sweet than any essence ever concocted by Parisian perfumer.

With the drifting scent came a sound. Faint, carrying from a distance, the rumble which Kirby heard was almost certainly that of a geyser.

There was no telling what had brought the troop of horsemen to a halt, but after a time Kirby knew that the cause of his horse's sudden departure must have been a whiff of the strange perfume.

For a long time he stood still, watching the crazy stallion dwindle in size, watching the line of unexpectedly timid bandits. Then, when it became apparent that the horsemen were going to stay put either until he came out, or showed that he never was coming out, he shrugged, and swung on his heel so that he faced up the canyon.

The odor was dying away now, and the geyser rumble was gone. In Kirby's heart came a mingled feeling of tense uneasiness and fascinated curiosity. Momentarily he was almost glad that his horse *had* bolted, and that his pursuers *were* blocking any lane of retreat except that offered by the canyon. If things had been different, the queer behavior of the Mexicans, the unaccountable actions of his horse and the equally strange growth of his own uneasiness might

have made him uncertain whether he would go up the canyon or not. Now it was the only thing to do, and Kirby was glad because, fear or no fear, he wanted to go on.

“I wonder,” he said out loud as he started, “just what the denizens of First Street in Kansas would say to a layout like this!”

Chapter 2

At the end of an hour he was still wondering.

At midday the canyon was chill and dank, lit only by a half light which at times dwindled to a deep dusk as the rock walls beetled together hundreds of feet above his head. Always when he stumbled through one of the darkest passages, he heard and half saw immense gray bats flapping above him. In the half-lit reaches, he hardly took a step without seeing great rats with gray coats, yellow teeth, and evil pink eyes. But rats and bats combined were not as bad as the snakes. They were almost white, and nowhere had he seen rattlers of such size. If his caution relaxed for a second, they struck at him with fangs as long and sharp as needles.

The tortured, twisted cedars, the paloverdi, occatilla, cholla, opunti, through which he edged his laborious way, all offered an almost animate, armed hostility.

Altogether this journey was the least sweet he had taken anywhere. Yet he went on.

Why had eleven Mexican bandits refused to advance even to within decent rifle range of the canyon's mouth? What was there about the

putrid yet gorgeous perfume that had made the stallion go off his nut, so to speak?

After a time, Kirby veered away from a fourteen-foot rattler which flashed in a loathsome coil on his left hand. Hungry, weakened by all he had been through since breakfast time, he plodded doggedly on.

But a moment later he stumbled past a twisted cedar, and then stopped, forgetting even the snakes.

At his feet lay the bleached skeleton of a man.

Beside the right hand, in a position which indicated that only the final relaxation of death had loosened his grip upon a precious object, lay a cylinder, carefully carved, of rich, yellow gold.

Of the science of anthropology Kirby knew enough to make him sure that the dolicocephalic skull and characteristically shaped pelvic and thigh bones of the skeleton had belonged to a white man.

As for the cylinder—But he was not so sure what that was.

Regardless of the dry swish of a rattler's body on the rocks behind him, he lifted the object from the spot in which it had lain for no man knew how long. Of much the size and shape of an old-time

cylindrical wax phonograph record, the softly gleaming thing weighed, he judged, almost two pounds.

Two pounds of soft, virgin gold of a quality as fine as any he had seen amongst all the treasures brought out of Mexico, Yucatan, and Peru combined!

But the gold was not the only thing. If Kirby was human enough to think in terms of treasure, he was also enough of an amateur anthropologist to hold his breath over the carvings on the yellow surface.

First he recognized the ancient symbols of Sun and Moon. And then a representation, semi-realistic, semi-conventionalized, of Quetzalcoatl, the Feathered Serpent, known in all the annals of primitive Mexican religions.

Good enough.

But the mere symbols by no means told the whole story of the cylinder. The workmanship was archaic, older than any Aztec art Kirby knew, older than Toltec, older far, he ventured to guess, than even earliest archaic Mayan carvings.

God, what a find!

For a moment it seemed almost impossible that he, Freddie Kirby, native of Kansas, unromantic aviator, should have been the one to discover this relic of an unknown, lost race. Yet the cylinder of gold was there, in his hand.

After a long minute Kirby looked around him, then listened.

From up the canyon came the provocative rumble of the geyser. It was closer now, and Kirby, glancing at his watch which had been spared to him in the Wasp's crash, noted that just forty-four minutes had passed since the last eruption. There was nothing to be done about the bleached skeleton. So, tucking the precious cylinder into his tunic, Kirby headed on up the gash of a canyon.

Far away indeed seemed the neat, maple-shaded asphalt street, the rows of parked cars and farm wagons, the telephone office and drug store and bank, of the Kansas town where he had grown up.

Time passed until again he heard the geyser, and again was dizzied by the perfume. As the fragrance—close and powerful now—died away, he flailed with one arm at a two-foot bat which flapped close to his head.

And then he trudged his dogged way around a deeply shadowed bend, and found the chasm not only almost wholly dark, but narrower than it had been at any previous point.

“Holy mackerel,” Kirby groaned. “Phew! If this keeps up, I—”

He stopped. His jaw dropped.

“Oh, hell!”

The beetling walls narrowed in until the gash was scarcely fifteen feet wide. Further progress was barred by a smooth wall which rose sheer in front of him.

Kirby did not know how many seconds passed before he made out through the gloom that the wall was man-made and carved with the same symbols of Sun, Moon, and Feathered Serpent, which ornamented the cylinder of gold. But when he did realize at last, the shout with which he expressed his feeling was anything but a groan.

It simply meant that the skeleton which once had been a man, had almost surely found the golden cylinder beyond the wall and not in the canyon. And if the dead man had passed that smooth, carved barrier, another man could do it!

Kirby jumped forward, began to search in the darkness for some hidden entrance.

Minute after minute passed. He gave another cry. He saw a long, upright crack in the stone surface, and a quick push of his hands made the stones in front of him give almost an inch.

All at once his shoulder was planted, and behind that square shoulder was straining all the muscle of his two hundred pound body. The result was all that he desired. When he ceased pushing, a slab of rock gaped wide before him, giving entrance to a pitch dark tunnel.

For a moment he held the portal back, then, releasing his pressure, he stepped into the dark passage. By the time a ponderous grating of rocks assured him that the door had swung shut of its own weight, he had produced matches and struck a light.

The puny flame showed him a curving passage hewn smoothly through the heart of bedrock. Before the flare died he walked twenty feet, and as another match burned to his fingers, he found the right hand curve of the passage giving way to a left hand twist. After that he dared use no more of his precious matches. But just when the darkness was beginning to wear badly on his nerves, he uttered a low

cry.

As he increased his rapid walk to a run, the faint light he had suddenly seen ahead of him grew until it became a circular flare of daylight which marked the tunnel's end.

Out of the passage Kirby strode with shoulders square and head up, his cool, level, practical blue eyes wide with wonder. Out of the tunnel he strode into the valley of the perfumed geyser.

"God above!"

The words were vibrant with hoarse reverence. He saw the sunlight of a cliff-surrounded diminutive Garden of Eden. He saw a vale of flowering grass, of palms and live oaks, saw patches of lilies so huge as to transcend belief, and dizzying clumps of tree cactus almost as tall as the palms themselves.

What was more, he saw in the center of this upland, cliff-guarded valley, a gaping black orifice which every faculty of judgment told him was the mouth of the geyser of perfume. And beside it, outstretched on a smooth sheet of rock which glistened as though coated with a layer of clear, sparkling glass, he saw—

Kirby blinked his eyes rapidly, hardly believing what he saw.

On the glistening rock lay the perfectly preserved figure of a Spanish Conquistadore in full armor. Morion and breast-plate were in place, and glistened as though they had been burnished this morning. And the Spaniard's dark, handsome, bearded face! Kirby saw instantly that no decay had touched it, that even the hairs of the beard were perfect. The whole armor-clad corpse gleamed softly with a covering of the same glassy substance which covered the rock.

Kirby glanced at his watch, saw that twelve minutes must elapse before the geyser spouted again. Then his eyes narrowed. He remained standing where he was, hard by the mouth of the tunnel, knowing that a wise man would conduct cautiously his exploration of this valley of wonders.

Arsenic! Silicon!

The two words stood out sharply in his thought. In Africa existed plenty of springs whose waters contained enough arsenic to bring death to those who drank. Might not the Spaniard's presence here be explained, then, by assuming that the geyser water was charged with a strong arsenic content, and, in addition, with some sort of silicon solution which, left to dry in the air, hardened to glass?

Lord, what a discovery to take back with him to Kansas! Almost it made the discovery of the golden cylinder pale by comparison. Why, the commercial uses to which this silicon water might be put were almost without limit, and the owner of the concession might confidently expect to make millions!

It was while Kirby stood there, breathless and jubilant, waiting for the geyser to spout, that he began to feel that *he was being watched*.

Suddenly, with a start, he shot a sweeping glance over the whole grove. But that did no good. He saw nothing save sunlight and waving green leaves.

Eleven days were to pass before he discovered all that was to be involved in that sensation of being gazed at by unseen eyes.

Chapter 3

At the beginning of the eleventh morning in the valley, Kirby had again posted himself close to the mouth of the black tunnel, and again felt that hidden eyes were observing him.

But this morning differed from the first morning, because now, for the first time, he was ready to do something about the watcher or watchers. Exploration of the whole valley had not helped. Therefore, there lay at his feet a considerable coil of rope, the manufacture of which from plaited strands of the tough grass in his Eden had taken him whole days. With what patience he could find, he was waiting for the gigantic spout of milky-colored, perfumed water which would mean that the geyser had gone off and would erupt no more for exactly forty-four minutes.

Eleven days in the valley!

While he waited, Kirby considered them. Who had made the beautiful footprints beside him, when he had slept at last after his arrival here? Why had so many of the queer, fuzzy topped shrubs with immense yam-shaped roots, which grew here been taken away during that first sleep, and during all his other periods of sleep? Who had taken them? Early in his stay, he had learned that the tuberlike

roots were good to eat and would sustain life, and he supposed that the unseen people of the valley took them for food. But who were these people of the valley?

Who had laid beside him during his first sleep the immense lily with perfume like that which came with the milky geyser spray—that spray of death and delight mingled? Why had someone scratched a line in the earth from him directly to the distant orifice of the geyser? Was this, as he believed, a signal to come not only to the edge of the orifice, *but to lower himself down into its depths*? And if the line were intended as a signal, did the persons who came to the valley while he slept, always eluding him, wish him well or mean to do him harm?

Last question of all: had the beautiful girl's face he believed he had seen just once, been real or an hallucination? It had been while he was kneeling at the very edge of the geyser cone, staring down its many colored throat, that the vision had appeared. Misty white amidst the green gloom, the face had been turned up to him, smiling, its lips forming a kiss, and its great eyes beckoning. Had the face been real or a dream?

Eleven days in the valley! Now, with his braided rope ready at last, he was going to do something which might help to answer his

questions.

Kirby reached out and began to run his grass rope, yard by yard, through his hands, searching carefully for any flaw. A canyon wren made the air sweet above him, while the morning sun began to wink and blink against the shadows which still lay against the face of the guardian cliffs. Kirby glanced at his watch and got up.

Crossing beyond the mouth of the geyser, he grinned good morning at his friend the Conquistadore, and marched on into the shade of the live oak which grew nearest the geyser. Here he made one end of his rope fast to the gnarled trunk, inspected his pistol, patted his tunic to make sure that the cylinder of gold was safe, then stood by to await the geyser.

With the passing of three minutes there came from the still empty orifice a sonorous rumbling. Kirby grinned.

From deep in the earth issued a sound of fizzing and bubbling, and then, to the accompaniment of subterranean thunder, burst loose the milky, upward column which had never ceased to awe the man who watched so eagerly this morning. As the titanic jet leaped skyward now, the slanting rays of the sun caught it, and turned the water, fanning out, into a fire opal, into a sheet of living color.

Kirby, hard headed to the last, drew from the supply in one pocket of his tunic, a strip of one of the tuberlike roots, and munched it.

The thunder ceased. The waters receded.

After that Kirby hesitated not a second. Promptly he moved forward, flung his coil of line down into the geyser tunnel, and swung on to the line. By the time he had swallowed the last bite of his breakfast, the world he knew had been left behind, and he was climbing down to a new.

It became at once apparent that the gorgeously colored, glassy-smooth throat glowed with tints which were unfamiliar to him. He could perceive these new shades of color, yet had no name for them.

As he stopped after fifty feet to breathe, the color phenomenon made him wonder if the tuber roots he had been eating had affected his vision; then decided they had not. In addition to food value, the roots had some power to stimulate courage and a slight mental exhilaration. But the drug had proved non-habit forming, and Kirby knew that his powers of perception were not now, and never had been, affected.

He swung down further.

Just a moment after he began that progress was when things began to happen to him. First he heard what seemed to be the low titter of a human voice laughing sweetly. Next came a far off, unutterably lovely strumming of music. And then he realized that, at a depth of about a hundred feet, he was hanging level with a hole which marked the mouth of another tunnel.

This new tunnel sloped down into the earth on his right hand. The floor and walls were glassy smooth, and the angle of descent was steep, but by no means as steep as the drop of the vertical geyser shaft in which he now hung.

Laughter, music, the new tunnel suddenly aroused an excitement which made him quiver.

"When I saw *her*," he gasped, "she was standing here, in the mouth of this tunnel, looking up at me!"

Violently, Freddie Kirby forgot the maple-shaded street of his Kansas town, forgot everything but desire to reach the mouth of the new tunnel, where the girl of the exquisite face and beckoning lips had stood. Tightening his grip on the rope, he began to swing himself back and forth like a pendulum.

It seemed probable that when the geyser water shot up past the horizontal tunnel, its force was so great that no water at all entered. He redoubled his efforts to widen his swing.

Then his feet scraped on the floor, and in a second he had alighted there. He still hung stoutly to his line, however, for the tunnel sloped down sharply enough, and was slippery enough, to prohibit the maintenance of footing unaided.

The music which issued from the depths of that stunningly mysterious passage swelled to a crescendo—and stopped. Kirby clung there to his precarious perch, his feet slipping on the glass under them with every move he made, and feelings stirred in his heart which had never been there before.

Then, as silence reigned where the music had been, something prompted him to look up. The next instant he stifled a cry.

With widening eyes he saw the flash of a white arm and the gleam of a knife hovering over the spot where his taut rope passed out of the geyser opening into the sunshine of the outer world. Again he stifled a cry. For crying out would do no good. While the suppressed sound was still on his lips, the knife flickered.

Then Kirby was shooting downward, the severed line whipping out after him. The first plunge flung him off his feet. A long swoop which he took on his back dizzied him. But as the fall continued, he was able to slow it a little by bracing arms and legs against the tunnel walls.

“Holy Jeehosophat!” he gurgled.

But there seemed to be no particular danger. The slide was as smooth as most of the chutes he had ever encountered at summer swimming pools. If ever the confounded spiral passage came to an end, he might find that he was still all right. As seconds passed and he fell and fell, it seemed that he was bound for the center of the earth. It seemed that—

He swished around a multiple bend, and eyes which had been accustomed to darkness were blinded by light.

It was light which radiated in all colors—blue, yellow, browns, purples, reds, pinks, and then all the new colors for which he had no name. Somehow Kirby knew that he had shot out of the tunnel, which emerged high up in the face of a cliff, and that he was dropping through perfumed, brilliant air resonant with the sound of birds and insects and human cries. The funny thing was that the pull

of gravity was not right, somehow, and he was dropping fairly slowly. From far below, a body of what looked like water was sweeping up to meet him. Kirby closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, his whole body was stinging with the slap of his impact, and he found that it was water which he had struck. The proof of it lay in the fact that he was swimming, and was approaching a shore.

But such water! It was milky white and perfumed as the geyser flow had been, and it seemed luminous as with a radium fire. Had he not realized presently that the fluid probably contained enough arsenic to finish a thousand like him, he would have thought of himself as bathing in the waters of Paradise.

But then he began to forget about the poison which might already be at work upon him.

Ahead of him, stretched out in the gorgeous, colored light, ran a beach which was backed by heavy jungle. And on the beach stood the lovely creatures, all clad in shimmering, glistening garments, whose flutelike cries had come to him as he fell.

Kirby looked, and became almost powerless to continue his swim.

The beauty of those frail women was like the reputed beauty of bright angels. That paralyzing effect of wonder, however, did not last long.

The girls moved forward to the water's edge, and, laughing amongst themselves, beckoned to him with lovely slender hands whose every motion was a caress.

"Be not afraid," called one in a curious patois dialect, about five-sixths of which seemed made up of Spanish words, distorted but recognizable.

"The water would kill you," called another, "as it killed the Spaniard in armor. But we are here to save you. I will give you a draught to drink which will defeat the poison. Come on to us!"

Kirby's heart was almost literally in his mouth now, because the girl who promised him salvation was she whose lips had formed a kiss at him from the green-gloomy throat of the geyser.

His feet struck a shale bottom. Panting, he stood up and was conscious of the fact that despite his forlornly dripping and dishevelled condition, he was tall and straight and big, and that for some reason all of the girls on the gleaming sand, and one girl in

particular, were anxious to receive him here.

The one girl had drawn a small, gleaming flask of gold from the misty bodice of her gown, and was holding it out while she laughed with red lips and great, dazzling dark eyes.

"*Pronto!*" she called in pure Spanish, and other girls echoed the word. "Oh," went on the bright owner of the flask, "we thought you would *never* have done with your work on the rope. It took you so long!"

Kirby left the smooth lake behind him and stood dripping on the sand. The moment the air touched his clothes, he felt that they were stiffening slightly. Yet the sensation brought no terror. He could not feel terror as he faced the girls.

"Give him the flask, Naida!" someone exclaimed.

"Ah, but the Gods *have* been kind to us!" echoed another.

The girl with the flask made a gesture for silence.

"Is it Naida you are called?" Kirby put in quickly, and as he spoke

the Spanish words, the roll of them on his tongue did much to make him know that he was sane and awake, and not dreaming, that this was still the Twentieth Century, and that he was Freddie Kirby.

Answering his question, Naida nodded, and gave him the flask.

“A single draught will act as antidote to the poison,” she said.

“I drink,” said Kirby as he raised the flask, “to the many of you who have been so gracious as to save me!”

A flashing smile, a blush was his answer. And then he had wetted his lips with, and was swallowing, a limpid liquid which tasted of some drug.

“Enough!” Naida ordered in a second.

As she reached for the flask, her companions closed in as though a ceremony of some sort had been completed.

“Is it time to tell him yet, Naida?” piped one of the girls, younger than the rest, whom someone had called Elana.

“Oh, *do* begin, Naida,” chorused two more. “We can’t wait *much* longer to find out if he is going to help us!”

Kirby turned to Naida, while a soothing sensation crept through him from the draught he had taken.

“Pray tell me what it is that I am to be permitted to do for you. I can promise you that the whole of my life and strength, and such intelligence as I possess, is yours to command.”

Excited small cries and a clapping of hands answered him. As for Naida, her face lighted with glowing joy.

“Oh, one who could say that, *must* be the friend and protector of whom we have stood in such bitter need!”

“What,” asked Kirby, “is this need which made one of you cut my rope, so that I should come here?”

A momentary silence was broken only by the hum of insects in the perfumed air, and by the golden thrilling of a bird back in the jungle. Then Kirby beheld Naida bowing to him.

“So be it,” she said in a voice low and flutelike. “I will speak now since you request it. Already you have seen that you are here in our world because we conspired amongst ourselves to bring you here.

Our reason—”

She paused, looked deep into his eyes.

“Amigo,” she continued slowly, “we whom you see here are the People of the Temple. For more centuries than even our sages can tell, our progenitors have dwelt here, where you find us, knowing always of your outer world, but remaining always unknown by it. But now the time has come when those of us who are left amongst our race need the help of one from the outer races we have shunned. Dangers of various orders confront us who have waited here for your coming. When we first discovered you in the Valley of the Geyser, the idea came to me that we must make you understand our troubles, and ask of you—”

But then she stopped.

As Kirby stared at her, the gentleness of her expression was replaced by a swift strength which made her majestic.

The next moment bedlam reigned upon the beach.

“*They are after us!*” gasped one of the girls in terror. “Quick, Naida! Quick! Quick!”

Whatever it was that threatened, Naida did not need to be told that the need for action was pressing. She shouted at her companions some order which Kirby did not understand. From a pouch at her side, she snatched out a greyish, spherical vegetable substance which looked almost like a tennis ball. Then she braced herself as if to withstand an assault.

“Stand back!” she cried to Kirby.

He had long ago ceased to wonder at anything that might happen here. Disappointed that Naida’s story had been interrupted, wondering what was wrong, he obeyed Naida’s order to keep clear.

As he fell back and stood motionless, there came from behind a dense screen of shrubs which would have resembled aloe and prickly pear bushes, save that they were as big as oak trees, a ghastly howling. The next second, hopped and hurtled across the beach toward the girls, a group of hair-covered, shaggy creatures which were neither apes nor men. The faces, contorted with lust, were hideously leathery and brown, the foreheads small and beetling, and the mouths enormous, with immense yellow teeth.

Helpless, Kirby realized that Naida and all the others had clapped over their faces curious masks which seemed to be made of some

crystalline substance, and that now others had armed themselves with the tennis balls. And that was the last observation he made before the battle opened furiously.

With a cry muffled behind her mask, Naida leaped out in front of her squadron and cut loose her queer vegetable ball with whizzing aim and force.

Full into the snarling face of one of the ape-men the thing smashed, filling the air all about the creature with a yellow, mistlike powder. Kirby was half deafened by the yells of rage and terror which went up from the entire attacking band. The creature who had been hit fell to his knees the while he made agonized tearing movements at his face and uttered shrill, jabbering yelps.

Other balls flashed instantly from Naida's ranks, and each brought about the same ghastly result as the first. But then Kirby saw that the whole jungle seethed with the hairy, awful men.

"Keep back!" Naida shrieked at him through her mask. "We have no mask for you. If the powder from our fungi touches you, it will be the end!"

With gaps in the advancing line filled as soon as each screeching ape

went down, the attackers leaped on until Kirby knew they would be upon the girls in a matter of seconds. A sweat broke out on his neck.

But then an idea gripped him, and suddenly, without even a last glance at Naida, he leaped away even as she had commanded.

A great boulder lay on the shore fifty yards away. Toward it Kirby streaked as though he had become coward. But he had not turned coward.

By the time he reached the shelter which would protect him from the fungus mist, a turning point had come in the battle. The ape-men had closed in on the girls, were swarming about them, and the mist balls had almost ceased to fly. But the thing which gave Kirby hope was that the apes were not attempting to harm the girls. They seemed victors, but they were not committing atrocities.

It was the sharp intuition that something like this might happen which had sent Kirby fleeing from the fight. He believed he might yet prove useful.

The thickest group of attackers were jostling about Naida. As the screams and sobs of the girls quivered out, mingled with the guttural roaring of the men, Naida was shut off by a solid wall of aggressors.

Then Kirby saw her again. But now two of the most powerful of the ape-men had caught her up and was carrying her. Her kicking and writhing and biting accomplished nothing. The apes were headed directly back to the jungle.

Now, however, most of the yellow mist had disappeared, and that was all Kirby had been waiting for. With a growling shout, he tore out from behind his boulder, his Luger ready. Naida's captors were in full retreat, and other pairs of men were snatching up other girls and hopping after them. Toward Naida Kirby ran madly but not blindly.

"Naida! Naida!" he bellowed.

He got in two strides for every one the apes made.

"Naida!" he shouted, and at last saw her look at him.

Her face was pallid with loathing and terror. As her glimmering dark eyes met his, they flashed a plea which made his heart thrash against his lungs.

With a final roar of encouragement Kirby closed in on the hair-covered men, and fired instantly a shot which caught one full in the

heart. The creature wavered on its legs, looked at the unexpected enemy with dismayed, swinish little red eyes, and relaxing his hold upon Naida, dropped without making a sound.

After that—

But suddenly Kirby found himself unable to comprehend fully the other terrific results of his intervention. Before the echoes of his shot died, there came to him the rumble of what seemed to be tons of falling rock. In the bright air a slight mist was precipitated. To all of which was added the effect upon the ape-men of fear of a weapon and a type of fighter utterly new to them.

Kirby had fired believing that he would have to fight other ape-men when the first fell. But not so. Instead of that—

He blinked rapidly as he took in the scene.

Naida had been released. Lying on the sand beside the dead ape-man, she was looking up at him in stupefied wonder. And her other captor, instead of remaining to fight, had clapped shaggy hands over his ears, and was leaping headlong for the protection of the jungle!

Moreover, the soprano cries of the girls and the deep howls of the

men were rising everywhere, and everywhere the ape-men were dropping their captives and plunging away after their leader.

“Huh,” Kirby muttered aloud, and wondered what the citizens of Kansas would have to say about *this*.

Naida looked at the dead and bleeding ape-man and shuddered, and then at the score or so of others brought down by the puff balls. Then she looked up at Kirby, raised her arms for his support, and smiled up into his brown face.

Kirby forgot Kansas, lifted her, warm and alive, radiantly beautiful, in his arms.

“Our friends the enemies,” she whispered as she remained for a second in his embrace and then drew away, “will attack no more this day—thanks to you.”

There was no possible need for another shot, Kirby saw. In terrified silence, the first of the apes had already floundered behind the prickly pear and aloe bushes, and the last stragglers were using all the power in their legs to catch up. On the beach, Naida’s followers were picking themselves up, and already a few of them had burst into ringing laughter.

“Come on, all of you,” Naida said to them, and, including Kirby in her glance, added, “We may as well go to the caciques now, and have it over with.”

Chapter 4

It was with Naida at his side and the other girls grouped about them, that they started their journey to the “caciques,” whoever they might be, “to have it over with,” whatever that might mean. As they strode along in silence, Kirby did what he could to straighten out in his mind the many curious things which had happened since he sat testing his rope in the upper world this morning.

In final analysis, it seemed to him that, extraordinary as his experience had been, there was nothing so much out of the way about it, after all. The only unusual thing was the existence of this inhabited pocket in the earth. For the rest, the strange colors to which he could not put a name, were simply some manifestation of infra-reds and ultra-violets. And then the startling effect of his single shot at the ape-men—that was simply the old story of savage creatures running from a new weapon and a new enemy; naturally the shot had sounded loud in this enclosed cavern. Lastly, the pull of gravity down here seemed upset somehow. But why should it not seem so, at this distance within the earth? The American was no scientist; the conclusions he reached seemed very reasonable to him.

All told, the last thing Kirby found he needed to do was pinch himself to see if he was awake.

A place of indefinite extent, the cavern seemed to be exactly what he had already judged it—a giant pocket within the earth. The ceiling, or the sky, was of some kind of natural glass—no doubt the same kind which was crackling on his clothes now—and from it emanated the brilliant, many colored glow which lighted the cavern. Radium? Perhaps it was that. Perhaps the rays were cast off from some other element even less understood than mysterious radium. As for the plant and animal life with which the cavern teemed, it was amazing.

But Kirby did not give himself up to silent observation any longer.

“Will you finish telling me,” he asked of Naida, “about the task I am to perform for you here?”

Naida, walking with lithe strides along a path jungle-hemmed on both sides, smiled at him.

“You are to be our leader.”

“Yes?”

Now both Naida and the other girls became sober.

“You will lead us in a revolt.”

“Ah!” Kirby whistled softly.

“In a revolt against the caciques—the wise men—whose kind have governed the People of the Temple since the beginning.”

Her statement was received with acclaim by the whole troop, who crowded close around, the while they smiled at Kirby.

“You mean I am to lead a revolt,” he asked, “against these same caciques whom we are going now to face?”

Naida nodded emphatically.

“Yes, if revolt proves necessary. And it probably will.”

“Hum.” Kirby scratched behind his ear. “You’d better tell me what you can about it.”

Then, as they hurried on, Naida spoke rapidly.

The situation before the People of the Temple was that for a long time now, the only children to be born had been girls. Worse still, not even a girl had been born during a period equal to sixteen upper-world years. The only remaining members of a race which had flourished in this underground land for countless thousands of years,

consisted of the caciques, a handful of aged people, and the thirty-four girls, including Naida, who accompanied Kirby now.

On one hand was promised extinction through lack of reproduction. On the other, even swifter and more terrible extinction at the hands of the ape-men, whom Naida called the Worshippers of Xlotli, the Rabbit God, the God of all bestiality and drunkenness.

It was the menace of the ape-men, rather than the less appalling one of lack of reproduction, which was making the most trouble now. Ages ago, when the People of the Temple had flourished as a race, they had been untroubled by the Worshippers of Xlotli. But now the ape-men were by far the stronger; and they desired the girls who had been born as the last generation of an ancient race. The battle of this morning had been only one of many.

Dissension between the caciques, who ruled the People of the Temple, and their girl subjects, had arisen on the subject of the best way of dealing with the ape-man menace.

Some time ago, Naida, heading a council of all the girls, had proposed to the caciques that support be sought amongst the people of the upper world. This would be done judiciously, by bringing to the lower realm a few men who were wise and strong, men who

would make good husbands, and who could fight the ape-men.

This proposal the priests had promptly quashed. They would never receive, they said, any members of the teeming outer races from whom the People of the Temple had so long been hidden. Those few who had blundered into the Valley of the Geyser during the centuries, and who had never escaped, were enough. Better, said the caciques, that a compromise be arranged with the subjects of the Rabbit God.

Flatly then, the priests had proposed that some of the girls, the number to be specified later, should be given to the ape-men, and peace won. During the time of reprieve which would thus be afforded, prayers and sacrifices could be offered the Lords of the Sun and Moon, and to Quetzalcoatl, the Feathered Serpent. In answer to these prayers, the Gods would surely send the aged people who alone were left as prospective parents, a generation of sons.

Once the priests' program of giving up some of the girls to the ape-men had been made definite, it had not taken Naida and the others long to decide that they would never submit. And then, while matters were at an acute stage, a tall, blond white man had come to the Valley of the Geyser—Kirby.

As Naida had finished her story, Kirby mustered a smile despite the soberness which had come upon him.

“So the white man came,” he repeated after her, “and all of you decided forthwith to stage your revolt.”

“Why not?” Naida answered. “We observed you until we were sure you possessed the qualities of leadership we wanted. After that, we did what we could to coax you to come here.”

Kirby grinned at that.

“Now,” Naida ended simply, “we will go to the caciques. If they accept you, and grant our requests to them, there will be peace. If they rage, it will be war.”

Suddenly she drew closer to Kirby as they swung along, and slipped her hand into his, looking up at him in silent entreaty.

“How much farther,” he asked in a voice which became sharp, “until we reach the headquarters of these caciques?”

“They live in a castle which our ancestors built ages ago on a protected plateau,” Naida answered tensely. “It is a good distance still, but we will cover it soon enough.”

They crossed now one edge of a shadow-filled forest composed principally of immense, pallid palmlike trees. Farther on, the path wound through a belt of swampy land covered by gigantic reeds which rustled above their heads with a glassy sound, and by things which looked like the cat-tails of the upper world, but were a hundred times larger. Everywhere hovered odd little creatures like birds, but with teeth in their long snouts and small frondlike growths on each side of their tails. About some swamp plants with very large blooms resembling passion flowers, flitted dragon flies of jeweled hues and enormous size, and under the flowers hopped strange toadlike creatures equipped with two pair of gauzy wings.

Finally, through a tunnel composed of ferns a hundred feet high, they emerged to a still densely overgrown but higher country which Naida said was a part of the Rorroh forest.

In the forest, Kirby gained a hazy impression of bronzy, immense cycads and what appeared to be tree chrysophilums with gorgeous blossoms. Then he received a much clearer impression of other trees with blossoms of bright orange yellow and very thick petals, each tipped with a glassy sharp point. The disconcerting thing about the tree was that, as they approached, the scaly limbs began to tremble and wave, and suddenly lashed out as though making a human effort to snatch at the bright travelers.

Naida and all the others hurried along without offering comment, and Kirby asked no questions.

Once he thought he saw a group of gorilla creatures parallelling their course back amongst the forest growth, but if Naida observed the animals, she paid no attention. The one thing which had any effect upon the company was the appearance, presently, of two vast, birdlike creatures. As these things approached, Naida signaled to all to crouch beneath the shelter of a tall rock beside the path.

Enormous, the birds had bat wings, and carried with them, as they approached, the stink of putrid flesh. The long beaks were overfull of sharp teeth. The heads, set upon bodies of glistening white-grey, were black. Reddish grey eyes searched the jungle as the creatures flapped along. But, the Pterodactyls—if they were that—passed above Naida's band without offering attack, and presently Naida gave the command to advance again.

In time, they came to a chasmlike gorge across which was suspended a slender long thread of a bridge. Not far above the bridge, a considerable river emptied itself into the gorge in a mirrorlike ribbon. Kirby could not hear the torrent fall—or rather could not hear it strike any solid bottom. But from somewhere in the unlighted, unfathomed depths of the abyss rose strange bubbling and whistling

sounds.

At the bridge, Naida paused and pointed to the land across the river. And as Kirby looked in the direction indicated, he beheld a rocky eminence rising for several hundred feet straight up from the expanse of a level, tree and grass covered plain. Atop of the plateau, glimmered the complex towers and turrets, the crenellated walls of a castle which, in its grey antiquity, seemed as old as the race of men.

“It is behind those walls that the caciques dwell,” Naida said quickly. “It is behind the castle, in a series of separate houses, that the older members of the race dwell. We shall go and look upon them presently. But first we will force an interview with the caciques.”

In silence Kirby took her hand, and, with the others following, they moved out upon the swaying, perilous causeway which hung above the chasm. After that, the trip across the plain to the foot of the plateau cliffs was quickly accomplished.

Here, however, Kirby thought they must face trouble, for he found that the great walls, of a sparkling, almost glassy smoothness, shot up to a height of at least three hundred feet, and that no path of any sort was visible.

“We’re here,” he said, “but how can we get up?”

But understanding began to dawn as Naida laughed, and produced from the pouch at the side of her gauzy dress four pliable discs of a substance which resembled rubber.

“You are very strong, are you not?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Then you will have no trouble in following us up the cliff. Our Serpent God, Quetzalcoatl, taught us how to climb long ago.”

With that she handed Kirby the set of vacuum discs, and producing another for herself, moistened them in a pool of water close at hand. Then, as all of the girls followed her action, she strapped them to her hands and feet, and in a moment they had begun the ascent.

“Why,” Kirby said presently, “with these things you could hang by your feet and walk on a smooth ceiling!”

Naida laughed, and they worked their way upward.

When the climb was accomplished and the discs were put away, Kirby found himself standing on the outer edge of a mediaeval

paradise, of a magnificent plateau partly fortified by nature, partly by the hand of man.

“Ah!” he cried in deep admiration, then followed Naida.

The building—the castle—in the near distance, resembled a castle of Spain, save that there was greater beauty and subtlety of architecture. Turreted on all four corners, constructed of material which looked like blocks of natural glass, the fairylike structure was crowned by a gigantic tower of something which resembled obsidian. Up and up this tower soared until its gleaming black tip seemed almost to touch the glassy-radiant sky of the cavern.

No people showed themselves, and Kirby saw that the bronze-studded portals set in the front of the castle were closed.

Admiringly, he glanced at the surrounding land laid out in checkerboard patches of gardens and orchards where grew a bewildering variety of unknown fruits and blooms. Butterflies drifted past, and the air was freighted with the scent of flowers. Inside a walled enclosure, Kirby saw a good-sized plot heavily grown with the plant on which he had been subsisting. As they passed this ground, each of the girls, Naida leading, made a strange little bowing, gliding genuflection, and Kirby wondered.

Now, however, new sights distracted him as they crossed a port drawbridge above a deep moat which was a fairyland of aquatic plants. Although not a sound had come from the castle, the great entrance doors were swinging back.

“Be ready,” Naida whispered, “for almost anything. The doors are being opened by some of the palace guard. I have little doubt that word was long ago rushed to the caciques that we are come to them with an upper-world man!”

Kirby answered with a nod. Then they passed the outer doors, passed inside, and Kirby blinked at what he saw.

In a long hall decorated bewilderingly with a carven frieze in which appeared all of the symbols common to early Mexican religions, and many new ones, stood a row of bright suits of armor of the Sixteenth Century. From each suit peered the glassy face and shovel beard of a dead Conquistadore.

So this was what happened to intruders from the upper world! The Conquistadore who kept his long watch beside the geyser was not the only one! Kirby felt an involuntary chill prickle up his back. But he was not given long to think before Naida, ignoring the gruesome array, clasped his arm.

“Look! Behold!”

And Kirby saw that with almost magical silence the whole wall at the end of the corridor was sliding back to reveal an enormous amphitheatre in the center of which stood a vast circular table. Ranged in a semicircle about that table, stood fifteen incredibly ancient men clad in long, glistening grey robes. Blanched beards trailed down the front of the garments until they all but touched the floor.

The caciques!

Kirby, on the threshold of the amphitheatre, squared his shoulders and held his head high. Then with Naida on his right, his own eyes boring unyieldingly into the smouldering, narrowed eyes which stared at him, he advanced.

But in front of him the priests moved suddenly. From Naida burst a shriek. In the radiant glare of the council room flashed the long, thin, cruel blade of a sacrificial knife.

The cacique who had whipped it from his robe flew at Kirby with a condor swoop, talon-hands outstretched, his wrinkled, bearded face contorted with fury.

Chapter 5

Before Kirby was more than half set to fight, the priest was clawing at his throat, and a gnarled old fist was poised to drive the knife in a death stroke.

Kirby did the only thing he could do quickly—sprang to one side. The move saved him. The knife whipped past his shoulder, and the cacique nearly fell. But it had been a close enough squeak for all that.

Nor was it over. After Kirby the priest sprang with unexpected agility, and before Kirby could snatch at his pistol the talon-hands were lunging at his throat once more.

With the gasps of the girls ringing in his ears, Kirby bunched himself for another side leap only to find the cacique all over him like an octopus. Momentarily the knife hung above his chest, and Kirby, dismayed at the powers of his opponent, almost felt that the thing must plunge before he could break the octopus hold.

But he had no intention of being defeated, and now he was getting used to the fight. The priest's left arm swiftly clenched about his neck and shoulders, and the right arm, with the knife, attempted a

drive through to the heart. Suddenly, however, Kirby lurched sideways and backward, and as the octopus grip slackened for a flash, he himself got a wrestler's grip that left him ready to do business. As the priest broke free, he slid around in an attempt to fasten himself on Kirby's back. Quickly, tensely Kirby doubled, and knew that he had done enough. The cacique shot over his shoulders, described a somersault in midair, and landed with a sharp crack of head and shoulders against unyielding stone.

From the semicircle of other priests went up a gasp. From Naida came a strangled cry of joy. Kirby made one leap for the knife which had fallen from the cacique's hand as he slumped into unconsciousness, and then he straightened up with the weapon safe in his possession.

"There, you old billygoat," he croaked in English, "maybe you won't try any more fast ones for awhile."

A second later he stepped over the sprawled body to stand beside Naida.

Upon the wrinkled countenances of the remaining caciques was stamped a look of dismay and hatred which boded no good. It was plain to Kirby that in battering up the man detailed to kill him, he

had committed a desecration of first order.

“Is there anyone else who cares to fight?” he flung at them in Spanish, showing a contempt as great as their rage.

The response he got was instant. From one old gullet, then from others, came choking, snarling sounds which presently became words. By those words Kirby heard himself cursed with a vituperation which made him, even in his temporary triumph, feel grave.

But he did not let that soberness trouble him long. For the main point now was that no one made a move to fight further, which was what he had expected. He had flung them the challenge, knowing that he was possessed of their knife, and suspecting that it was their only weapon. The belief that no one would care to try a barehanded conflict, no matter what insult was waiting to be avenged, seemed justified as none of the caciques advanced, and as even the cursing presently ceased.

“No?” Kirby asked. “There is to be no more fighting?”

One of the caciques now came forward a few steps.

“No,” he answered with a lameness which was not to be denied. “But you, a criminal interloper in our realm, have been marked as a victim for sacrifice, and from this there is no power in the universe which can save you.”

Kirby, after a reassuring glance at Naida, looked at the floored priest who was sitting up now, looking stupidly about, and feeling himself all over, and Kirby suppressed a grin.

“Ah, I am to be sacrificed, eh? But what happens until that time comes? Listen my Wise Ones—”

He stabbed a finger at them, and his eyes flashed.

“Listen! What you mean to say is that I have defeated you, and you must lay off me until you can launch another attack. But I have a few things to say to that. One is that I am not going to permit myself to *be* sacrificed. Another is that I demand, right here and now, that you begin to discuss with me certain agreements which are going to regulate the future conduct of affairs in this world to which I have come.”

A low exclamation answered that, but it came from no priest. They remained sullen and staggered. It was Naida who murmured, and there was excitement and pleasure in her voice. Suddenly she placed her lips against Kirby's ear.

"You must not treat with them," she said. "Tell them you want to see the Duca, and will destroy them all unless he comes!"

Understanding burst over Kirby. The Duca! Then these men were only the representatives of a High Priest, the Duca!

"Yes," he repeated resolutely to the assembled greybeards, "a meeting is going to be held in this chamber of council at once. But I will not deal with you! Do you understand me? I must see the Duca. I leave it to you to decide whether you will summon him, or force me to fight my way through to wherever he is staying."

"The Duca!"

The words burst in dismay from the gimlet-eyed cacique who had said there would be no more fighting. He looked at Naida, well aware of the fact that it was her interference which had made Kirby extend his demand. And his look was black.

Kirby slid between Naida and the cacique.

“Yes,” he spat out, “the Duca! Will you summon him, or—”

He did not repeat what he would do as an alternative. A second passed in silence. It seemed as if the cacique who had been speaking was ready to burst.

“Answer me!” Kirby thundered.

And then the priest obeyed.

“Very well,” he growled in a voice which quaked with rage. “I obey. But you will wish you had never made the demand!”

The next second he swung on his heel, and leaving his company behind as a guard, headed toward a stair which led upward from one side of the amphitheatre, and which was protected by a door of heavy, grilled metal work. The stairway seemed to be spiral, and was all enclosed. Kirby realized that it must lead into the tall and beautiful tower of obsidion which he had seen outside.

“Oh,” Naida whispered as looks and smiles of approval came from all of the girls, “you have been magnificent! Mark now, what we must do. You must be the one to state our terms, because you have

already won a victory for us. Tell the Duca that we will not submit to any compromise with the ape-men, and least of all will we let any of our number go to the ape-men."

A deep flush crept into Kirby's cheeks at thought of what he would like to do to the man who had proposed that sacrifice.

"Then tell him," Naida continued, "that we want men brought to our world from the world above. And finally tell him we will live under his dictatorship no longer, and hereafter demand a voice in all councils affecting temporal affairs."

"All right," Kirby spoke grimly. "I'll tell him. Naida, is this high priest we're waiting for, the one who proposed sacrifice of some of you to the apes?"

Naida nodded.

Next moment, she, Kirby, and all the others, including the row of glowering caciques, became silent. At sounds from above, all looked toward the grilled doorway to the tower. Then Kirby realized that all of the girls, as well as the caciques, were dropping to their knees.

"No!" he commanded quickly. "Get up! You must not abase—"

He had not finished, and Naida had scarcely risen, when the heavy door swung on noiseless hinges.

The light in the amphitheatre seemed to become more intense. Then, against the great glow, Kirby beheld majesty, beheld one who represented the apotheosis of priestly rank and power.

Clad in robes of filmy material which glimmered white beside the gray robes of his underlings, the Duca wore about his waist the living flame of a girdle composed of alternate cut diamonds and blood red rubies each larger than a golf ball. And Kirby, searching for comparisons, realized that the Duca's face, upheld to others, would be as remarkable as his jewels must be when compared to ordinary gems. It was a chiseled face, seamed by a thousand wrinkles, which a god might have carved from ivory before endowing it with the flush and glow of life. A mane of snow white hair cascaded back from a tremendous forehead to fall about thin but square shoulders and mingle with the downward sweep of pure white beard. The eyes, black as polished jet, flamed now with the glare of baleful fires.

As Naida, stealing close to Kirby, trembled, and even the abased caciques trembled, Kirby himself felt as if icy water was trickling over him.

He fought the sensation off. For suddenly he knew that in spite of first impressions which made the man seem a living god, the old Duca was human. And what was more, he was in the wrong. All of which being true, the thing to do was keep a level head and fight.

All at once Kirby spoke across the silence in the great room.

“I have sent for you,” he said, weighing words carefully.

“And I,”—the Duca’s voice was mellow and deep—“have come. But I am not here because you summoned me.”

“Oh!” Kirby let sarcasm edge his words. “Well, I won’t quibble about your motives for coming. Did my messenger tell you why we are here and demand your presence?”

“Your messenger,” the old man said calmly, “told me.”

“Very well. Do you consent to listen to Naida’s and my terms? If you *will* listen—”

“But wait a moment,” the Duca interrupted, still calmly, but with a look in his eyes which Kirby did not like. “Are you asking *me*, to my face, whether I will listen to terms which you offer as self-styled victor of a battle with my caciques?”

Kirby nodded. His apprehension increased.

“Ah,” said the Duca softly. And then, amazingly, a smile deepened every wrinkle of his parchment face. “But do you not remember that I said I had *not* come here because you summoned me?”

“Yes,” Kirby said solidly. “I remember very well.”

“The thing which brought me here was the failure of my followers to accomplish an assignment which I had given them—namely, that of ending your life.”

“Hum.” Kirby scratched behind his ear. “You are *not* interested in arranging terms of peace, then.”

“I am here,”—suddenly the Duca’s voice filled the room—“to do that which my priests were unable to do. And the moment has come when the Gods will no longer trifle with you. You dog! You thieving intruder! You—”

Swiftly the Duca plunged one withered but still powerful hand into the folds of his robe above the flaming girdle. Then his hand flashed out, and in it he held—

But Kirby did not get to see.

A strangled cry of terror smote his ears. Naida leaped toward him from one side, while Elana, the lovely youngest girl, sprang from another direction, hurled Naida aside, and stopped in front of Kirby.

Through the glaring room flickered a tiny red serpentine creature which the Duca hurled from a crystalline tube in his hand. As the minute snake struck Elana's breast, she gave a choked cough, and then, as she half turned to smile at both Naida and Kirby over her shoulder, her eyes went blank, and she collapsed gently to the polished stones of the floor—dead.

A second later came squirming out from under her the ghastly, glimmering little snake which had struck.

Slowly, while every mortal in the room stood paralyzed, Kirby stepped forward and set his heel upon the writhing thing. When he raised his boot, the snake was only a blotch on the floor.

The Duca was standing as still as girls and caciques. The laughter with which he had started to greet what he had thought would be Kirby's extermination had faded to a look of wonder—and fear. He was an easy mark.

Up to him Kirby rolled, and with all the force of soul and muscular body, drove his fist into the Duca's face.

"By God," he roared, "you want war, and you shall have it!"

The Duca was simply out—not dead. Since Kirby did not want him dead, he did not strike again, but swung back from the sprawled body, faced Naida, and pointed to the tower door.

"Up there!" he snapped. "Seize the tower. I have a reason!"

At the Duca's crashing downfall, had come to the caciques a tension which made Kirby know they would not be dummy figures much longer. His eyes never left them.

"Quick, Naida!" he snapped again. "We must hold the tower!"

Naida, all of the girls, were staring dazedly at Elana, dead.

"The tower!" she choked. "But we cannot go there. It is the Duca's!"

"Because it is the Duca's," Kirby said firmly, "is exactly why we must hold it. Come, Naida, please—"

And then he saw comprehension begin to dawn at last.

He also saw two of the caciques glide from the wooden line, and slink toward him past the unconscious Duca, stealthily.

As Naida suddenly cried out to her companions, pushed at two of them, and then darted like a rainbow nymph toward the silent and forbidding upward spiral of steps, Kirby faced the gliding caciques.

One he clutched with viselike hands, and lifted him. As the other shrieked and sprang, he was mowed down by the hurtling body of his fellow priest which Kirby flung forward mightily.

The rest of the caciques were howling. While Naida waited beside the tower door, the other girls flashed up the steps. The Duca still lay where he had fallen, a thread of blood oozing from his mouth. Kirby, after his last look over all, solemnly stooped and gathered in his arms the limp, radiant little body of the girl who had given her life that her friends might be left with a leader.

A moment later, he was standing on the steps. Naida, unopposed by the still stupefied caciques, swung shut the tower door and shot a double bolt.

“Naida—” Kirby whispered as he held Elana closer to him, “oh, I am so sorry that we could have won only at such a price.”

As Naida stooped to kiss the pale little forehead with its halo of golden hair, sobs came. But then she raised her eyes, and they were, for Kirby, alight with the message that she could and would accept Elana’s sacrifice, because she would gladly have made it herself.

“We will not forget,” she whispered. “Carry her tenderly, and come.”

For better, for worse, the Duca’s tower was theirs.

Chapter 6

At the end of an hour, Kirby was taking a turn of guard duty at the foot of the steps, while the others remained with Elana in a chamber above. To Kirby, with things thus far along, it seemed that the seizure of the tower had proved a shrewd stroke.

It seemed that the tower was to the Duca what hair was to Sampson. From Naida had come the information that the Duca lived hidden within the great shaft of obsidion, and appeared but seldom even before his caciques. Apparently a large part of his hold upon his subjects was maintained by the mystery with which he kept himself surrounded. And now his retreat was lost to him! Such had been the moral effect of the loss upon both Duca and caciques, that his whole first hour had gone by without their doing anything.

Kirby, standing just around the first turn of the winding stairway, presently cocked his ears to listen to the conclave being held in the amphitheatre.

“Why not starve them out, O Holy One?” he heard one of the caciques ask of the Duca, only to be answered by a growl of negation.

The Duca, Kirby had gathered before this, wanted to fight.

“But there is no food in the tower, is there?” the cacique still pressed on, and this time he was supported by other voices.

“No,” the Duca rumbled back. “But am I to be deprived of my retreat, left here like a common dog amongst other dogs, while these accursed fiends starve slowly to death? No! I tell you, you must fight for me!”

But he had told them so several times before and nothing had happened. Kirby grinned at the thought of the caste the Duca was losing by being driven to this belittling parley.

“Holy One,” exclaimed a new priest in answer to the urge to fight, “what can we do against the golden haired fiend? The stairs are so narrow that he could defend them alone. And then there are the gates of bronze. If we could shatter the first, at the foot of the steps, we should only encounter others. The Duca must remember that his tower was built to withstand attack.”

“Even so,” the Duca snapped back, “it must be attacked! I—”

But then he fell silent, having been made so by the sounds of

dissension which arose amongst his caciques. Kirby, laughing to himself, turned away from his listening post, and tip-toed up the steps.

After he had closed and bolted behind him three of the bronze portals so feared by the caciques, he turned to the entrance of the chamber in which he had left Naida and the others. Here all was silent, and he found his friends grouped about a couch on which lay Elana. Feeling the solemnity of the moment, he would have taken his place quietly amongst the mourners.

Naida, however, came to him at once, and in a low voice asked for news from the amphitheatre, and when Kirby answered that the caciques were unanimously in favor of leaving them alone until they starved, she exclaimed:

“Oh, then it is good news!”

After that, however, a shadow of doubt flickered in her great eyes.

“And yet, is it? It means temporary immunity, of coarse. But—starvation!”

Kirby assured her with a grin.

“If we had to starve we might worry. But there is more food here than the Duca thinks. Look!”

From a bulging pocket of his tunic he fished a strip of the roots on which he had subsisted so comfortably. Naida’s eyes widened, and several of the girls gave low cries.

“Yes,” Naida exclaimed, “but such food! Why—why, do you know what you are offering us? Why, this is the sacred Peyote! Only the Duca eats it, and, at rare intervals, his priests.”

Kirby was really startled now.

“But surely you and the others have taken quantities of the stuff away from the Valley of the Geyser. Do you mean—”

“Because we gathered the Peyote does not mean that we have ever tasted it. We gather it for the Duca. To taste would be complete, utter sacrilege. Have *you* been eating it?”

Inwardly Kirby was chuckling at this added proof of the buncumbe with which the Duca—and other Ducas—had fooled all.

“Of course I’ve been eating the Peyote.”

“And—and nothing has happened to you?” Naida asked.

“Hardly. I certainly haven’t been blasted by the Lords of the Sun and Moon, or the Serpent either!”

Naida and all the others were silent. The conflict between their reverence for the food and their clear desire to eat it, now that it was become the food of their leader, was pathetic.

Kirby put one of the strips in Naida’s hand.

“Why not?” he asked. “We have bested the Duca in fair fight. We have seized his tower. Why not eat his food?”

As he had hoped it would, the suggestion at last settled the matter. A moment later, as Naida nibbled her first bite, she smiled.

“Why, it—it’s good!”

With the question of provisions settled at least for a time, Kirby’s next thought was of the tower. The present lull of peace seemed made for exploration.

“Come along,” he said to Naida, “we’ve plenty to do,” and then, when he explained, they set out, accompanied by Nini, a cousin of

Naida's, and Ivana, a younger sister.

All of the others remained with little Elana.

While they climbed spiral stairs, Naida explained that the chamber they had just left was used by the Duca as a place in which he prayed before and after contacts with caciques or subjects. A sort of halfway station between earth and heaven, as it were, where the Duca might be purged of any sullying influence gained from human relationships.

At thought of the rank, egotistical hypocrisy implied by the story, Kirby smiled grimly. Then they came to a new door, heavier than that which barricaded the prayer chamber. Unlocked, the thing swung ponderously at Kirby's push, and with the three girls pressing close beside him, he entered—and stopped.

"Naida!" he gasped.

"Oh, *oh*!" she cried, and while Nini and Ivana gasped, she clapped her hands in an instinctive, feminine reaction of joy. "But there are things here which I believe none but the Ducas of our race have ever seen! Oh! Why, the sacred girdle is as nothing compared to this display!"

By “display” she meant a treasure which took Kirby’s breath away, which made his heart act queerly.

The walls of the chamber were fashioned of polished blocks of obsidion on which stood out in heavy bas-relief a maze of decorative figures fashioned of pure, beaten gold—the same kind of gold which had gone into the making of the cylinder of gold. With his first glance at the gorgeously wrought motifs of Feathered Serpent and Sun and Moon symbols, Kirby knew to a certainty whence the golden cylinder had come originally.

But even the gold—literally tons of it there must have been—was nothing compared to the gems.

They were spread out in blinding array upon a great table in the center of the room. There were pearls as big as turkey eggs and whiter, softer than the light of a June morning growing in the East. There were rubies. One amongst the many was the size of a baseball and glowed like the heart of a red star. The least of the two or three hundred gems would have outclassed the greatest treasures of the Crown jewels of England and Russia combined.

Most overwhelming of all, however, was the jewel which rested against a square of black cloth all its own in the center of the table.

While his heart still acted queerly, while Naida, Nini, and Ivana hung back, delighted, but still too bewildered to move, Kirby advanced and took gingerly in his hands a single white diamond about eighteen inches long, and almost as wide and deep as it was long.

The thing was carved with exquisite cunning to a likeness of the living head of Quetzalcoatl, the Feathered Serpent.

Kirby dared not guess how many pounds the carven hunk of flashing, blue-white carbon weighed. He knew only that like it there was no other diamond in the world, and that the thing was real. Naida and the two girls were silent now, and suddenly Kirby realized that to their awe of the gem was added awe of deepest religious nature. Slowly he put the diamond head of the Serpent back upon its square of cloth.

“We—we had heard that this thing existed,” Naida said presently, voice hushed, “but no one except the holy men of our race has ever beheld it.”

“But, what is it?” Kirby asked. “Whence came it?”

However, when Naida would have answered, he interrupted.

“But wait! Tell me as we go. We could stay here for the rest of our lives without much trouble, but we’ve got to cover the rest of the tower and get back to the others.”

It was after they had closed the door to the treasure room that Naida told him the story.

“There is not so much to tell,” she began. “The diamond itself is so gorgeous that it is hard to talk about. But here is the story. A great many ages ago one of the Ducas of our race found the diamond, decided to carve it into a perfect likeness of the head of the Serpent God. All of the craftsmen of the race helped him and when they were done, they took their image to Quetzalcoatl himself, and showed him what they had done.

“Quetzalcoatl was pleased. So pleased, that he promised all of the wise men that he would cease to prey upon them as he had in the past, and henceforward would take his toll of sacrifice from the ape-men alone. Them he hated and would continue to hate because they worshipped not him but Xlotli.

“And so it came about,” Naida went on slowly, looking up at Kirby as they still mounted wide steps to the upper reaches of the tower, “that our people gained immunity from a God which had always

before harmed and destroyed them. Our race presently began to build this castle here on the high plateau, and Quetzalcoatl kept his compact with them. He still comes out of his chasm at intervals and preys upon the ape-men, but no one of our race has seen him for thousands of years, and he has always let us alone. And there is the whole myth and explanation of why the great diamond is revered among us as a holy of holies."

They had mounted to a new door which Kirby guessed might give entrance to the Duca's living quarters. But he was in no mood to open it at once.

"Wait a minute," he said as they all paused. "You say that, although none of your race has seen Quetzalcoatl since the diamond head was carved, he still comes out of his chasm and makes trouble for the ape-men. Just what does that mean?"

"Why—" Naida looked at him wonderingly. "I mean what I have said. The Serpent comes out of his chasm and—"

"What chasm?" Kirby asked sharply.

"Why, the one we crossed this morning. It extends to the far reaches of our country, beyond the Rorroh forest, where the ape-men dwell

but which our people never visit. It is in that distant part of the chasm that the Serpent dwells."

"But—but—Oh, good Lord!" Kirby whistled softly. "Naida, do you mean to tell me that Quetzalcoatl was not simply a mythical monster, but an actual, living serpent which is alive *now*?"

Naida and the others shrugged.

"Why not?" she answered. "Sometimes we have captured a few ape-men, and they tell us stories of how Quetzalcoatl kills them. *They* say he is very much alive."

"But," Kirby mumbled in increasing wonder, "is this living creature the same which your ancestors worshipped first as long ago, perhaps, as a million years?"

"That," Naida answered unhesitatingly, "I'm not sure of. Our caciques believe that the Serpent, although it lives longer than any other sentient thing, finally dies and is succeeded by a new Serpent which is reproduced by itself, within its own body."

So overwhelming did Kirby find this unexpected sequel to their discovery of the great diamond head, so staggered was he by the fact

that Quetzalcoatl, of Aztecan myth, might exist as a sentient creature here in this cavern world, that he had little heart left for exploring other wonders.

Nevertheless, he presently pushed open the new door before which they had paused, and behind it found, as he had expected, the Duca's living quarters.

These were as severe as the jewel chamber had been gorgeous. A thin pallet spread upon a frame of wood formed the bed, and beside it stood a single stiff chair. That was all. The walls of glistening obsidion were bare.

There was, however, a door in one circular wall, and as Kirby flung this open, his previous disappointment changed to delight. For shelves along the walls of the small chamber held roll after roll of parchment covered with script. And in one corner lay six undamaged, almost new Mannlichers and several hundred rounds of ammunition!

"Naida," he exclaimed, "do you know what those are?"

"I suppose that they are weapons of the sort you used against the ape-men this morning?"

Kirby grinned.

“They are the same kind I used, and then some. With these weapons we can do what we never could with the smaller one. How did they get here?”

“They came when I was much younger,” Naida answered with a shade of sadness in her voice. “The men who had them penetrated the Valley of the Geyser, coming by a different route from the one you followed. When the Duca learned they were there, he sent such men of the race as were still able to fight to kill them. That order of the Duca’s was one of the first things to turn me against him. The men were not harming us, and they should have been permitted to go away. But the Duca insisted that they be killed, and in the fight were lost eight of our youngest and strongest men.”

Kirby stooped to inspect the rifles.

“Has no one learned to use these weapons?”

“No,” Naida answered. “The Duca kept them for himself.”

“We think,” put in Ivana, “that he hoped to learn to use them, and was afraid for us to have the knowledge.”

Kirby filled one of the magazines, and felt the heft of the gun with pleasure.

“Very well,” he said. “It looks to me as though your time to learn the art of shooting has come at last. Come, I think we had better be getting back downstairs.”

Kirby took three guns himself, and with the others lugging the rest, they started back. The parchment rolls, he decided, must be left for examination later on.

They were all elated when they rejoined the girls in the prayer chamber, and high spirits were still further increased by the report, promptly given, that all had remained quiet in the amphitheatre. Save only for the presence of Elana, radiant and calm in death, the give and take of questions would have been accompanied by actual gaiety.

But the time of peace did not last much longer. While Naida was in the midst of answering incessant questions about the wonders of the jewel chamber, Kirby heard a sound from below, and suddenly went over to the downward-winding steps.

“Listen,” he called sharply back to the others.

He had not been mistaken. Many footsteps echoed from the amphitheatre, and he made out that the caciques were coming toward the bolted gate at the foot of the steps. While he listened, and Naida came eagerly to his side, silence fell.

But then clear words came up to them.

“Let the upper-world man come to the foot of the steps,” called the Duca. “I have an offer to make him!”

Chapter 7

To himself Kirby chuckled. Such real entreaty filled the Duca's voice that there seemed no danger of further treachery from him at the moment.

With a grin, Kirby took Naida's hand and led her down the steps, unbolting each bronze gate but the last.

"What do you want?" he asked in a cool voice a moment later, when he stopped on the final step and faced the Duca from behind the protection of the final gate.

Clearly the parley was going to be a blunt one.

"I want you to leave our world," the Duca rumbled promptly.

He was drawn up in a posture intended to display dignity. But his left cheek, where Kirby had hammered him, was pulpy and discolored, and somehow he seemed to Kirby more than ever merely human.

"Under what conditions am I to leave?"

"If you will vacate my tower at once," the Duca said with a flush of

eagerness which he could not conceal, “I will permit Naida and one of my caciques to escort you back to the Valley of the Geyser. I will also give you directions by which you may travel in safety from there to the outer world.”

Kirby, wanting more details, made himself seem thoughtful.

“And what will happen to me, and to the girls, if I decline?”

Encouraged, the Duca made an impressive gesture.

“You will be left in the tower to die of starvation. Mine is not a complicated offer. It should require no complicated decision. What is your answer?”

Kirby dropped his carefully assumed mask of thought.

“My answer is this,” he lashed out. “I will not leave! The tower is ours, and we will hold it until you have accepted Naida’s peace terms on your priestly oath!”

“But if you stay in the tower you will starve!” thundered the Duca.

“No, we won’t starve! We won’t starve because we eat the food of Ducas!”

In silence, Kirby took from his pocket a strip of the sacred Peyote and bit off one end of it. Suddenly the hush in the amphitheatre became complete. As he watched Kirby chewing, the Duca gasped and choked.

“Moreover,” Kirby announced with slow emphasis, “I have taken possession of the weapons which you took from men of the upper world, and which have already sent men of your race to their death. I have no wish to kill either you or your caciques, but if you do not presently discuss peace with me, you will certainly find yourself embroiled in a struggle more bitter than the mild one of this morning.”

With that said, he swung on his heel, and taking Naida’s hand again, started with her up the steps.

“I have nothing more to say,” he called over his shoulder to a Duca whose white haired majesty had been stripped from him.

“We’re getting on,” he whispered to Naida a moment later. “The best thing for us is just to sit still now, and wait.”

With the questions he wanted to ask Naida about her world becoming insistent, he found himself, as a matter of fact, glad for the

prospect of further respite. As both of them rejoined the girls in the Duca's prayer chamber, the first thing he did was to take from his tunic the cylinder of gold which he had found in the canyon.

"What is this, Naida?" he asked, hoping to start talk that would make all of them forget the Duca and politics, and at the same time help him to learn much that he wished to know.

But a queer thing happened. Naida's reaction to the carven gold was as unexpected as it was marked.

"*Oh!*" she cried in a voice which suddenly trembled with surprise, with blank dismay. Somehow, the cylinder of gold brought to her face things which not even the Serpent's head of the diamond had evoked.

The prospect of a long session of talk began to fade out in Kirby's mind.

"But Naida, whatever is there about this fragment of gold to startle you as it does?"

By this time all of the thirty-odd other girls had come flocking about them, and all were staring at the cylinder as fascinatedly as Naida.

“Do you see what he has there?” Naida finally asked, ignoring Kirby in her continued excitement.

“Do we *see*?” answered the girl she had addressed. “Naida, surely it is the carving which was lost!”

Naida was quivering with feeling now.

“Do you realize what it means to our cause that it should have been returned to us in this way?”

The girl to whom she had spoken, and the others, simply looked at her, but in one face after another presently dawned awe and joy.

Kirby stood still, puzzled and interested, until at last Naida was recovered enough to speak to him.

“Where did you get this thing which you call ‘a fragment of gold’?” she asked in a hushed voice.

“I found it,” Kirby answered, “lying beside the skeleton of an upper-world man, while I was ascending the canyon which brought me to the Valley of the Geyser.”

“And you do not know what the cylinder is? But no, of course you

could not.”

“*What* is it, Naida?”

Naida glanced at her friends, then laid her hand on Kirby’s.

“Next to the great diamond, it is the most cherished possession of our race. In some respects it is even more holy than the Serpent’s head. The cylinder happens to be the first work in gold which was ever produced by our people. It was made when the race was new. It was because our first wise men had found they could create things of beauty like this cylinder, that they decided to attempt the creation of the Serpent’s head, which is supposed to have brought all of our blessings upon us.”

Kirby thought he was beginning to understand the excitement which his introduction of the cylinder had created. He also thought he could see what Naida had meant by implying that the cylinder could be made to aid their cause.

“Tell me,” he asked in a mood approaching reverence, “how the cylinder came to be lying beside a dead man’s bones.”

“It was stolen,” Naida answered in the breathless silence which the

others were keeping. “When I was very young, an upper-world man found his way here, and the Duca captured and meant to sacrifice him. But while they were leading him to the temple where such special ceremonies are held—the building stands on another plateau, beyond this—the man broke away. Some of the priests in the procession were carrying the cylinder, for it was an occasion of great importance. The prisoner knocked them down, got the cylinder away from them, and finally escaped by the same route over which you came.”

“And he escaped,” said Kirby wonderingly, “only to be killed by a rattlesnake before he ever reached the civilized world. But do you mean that you never knew your sacred cylinder was so close to you all these years?”

Naida shook her head.

“We never got to the canyon of which you speak, for a special reason which I shall explain some day. And besides that, I think the Duca was afraid of this man who fought so bravely. So he counted the cylinder as lost. And that is one of the reasons why he killed the men with the rifles, who appeared in the Valley a few years later.”

Kirby looked at her thoughtfully. The mood for discussing all the

wonders of this lower world, which had made him bring out the cylinder originally, had quite vanished.

“I suppose,” he said, “that anyone who was responsible for the return of the cylinder to its rightful owners, would be held in some respect?”

Naida nodded vigorously, while little lightnings of excitement flickered in her eyes.

“He might be held in more than respect.”

“What, then, do you suggest that we do next?”

Again the small lightnings darted, and Naida reached for the cylinder.

“Do you mind if I take it for a moment?”

“Of course not.”

Promptly then she faced around.

“Wait here, everyone,” she ordered.

And with that she waved the cylinder in a flashing little arc before their eyes, and darted to the door.

It was all so unexpected that she was gone before Kirby could speak. Slowly, with all of the suddenly gay company of girls following after him, he went to the doorway, and stood on the steps leading to the amphitheatre.

A minute passed. He heard voices downstairs. He heard Naida's voice ringing clearly, though he could not distinguish her words. He heard a great cry from a score of male throats. More minutes passed. Words that were low and tense poured out in a rumbling volume. Above the rumble, Naida's voice presently sounded again, clear and sweet, but incisive. Then, when no more than five or six minutes had gone, Kirby heard the clang of the bronze gate at the foot of the steps, heard light, swift footsteps ascending.

"Naida!" he called softly.

She flashed upward toward him around the last curve in the stairway. Straight to his outstretched arms she went.

"It is done! It is done!" she whispered.

“Tell us!” cried first one girl and then others.

Naida drew away from Kirby at last.

“I told the Duca,” she said to all of them, “that our leader would keep the cylinder for a period of time equal to one upper-world year. If the Duca grants all the terms of peace which we will ask of him, and if he accepts the upper-world man as our temporal ruler, and all goes well for a year, then we will consider replacing the cylinder where it belongs.”

“And what,” Kirby asked exultantly, “does the Duca say?”

Suddenly, without warning, Naida dropped before him on one knee, and from that position gazed up at him laughing.

“He says he will make you our King, to govern all temporal affairs within our realm! He is waiting for you to come and hold a conclave now.”

“*What?*”

Still kneeling half in fun, half in sincere reverence, Naida held out the precious, potent cylinder of gold.

“Guard it carefully!” she exclaimed. “So long as you keep it away from the Duca, making him hope to win it back, he will consent to almost anything. Yes, he is waiting with the caciques in the amphitheatre now; waiting to draw up terms of peace.”

Chapter 8

To be King amongst these people! A queer sensation tugged at Kirby's heart as he descended the steps with Naida at his right, and all of her—and his—dainty and gracious friends following after. Yet, intense as his emotion was, never for a second was he able to doubt the evidence of his senses which told him that all of this was real. As they descended the black steps of the tower, Naida's sweetness, her grace, the warm humanity of her, made him humble with gratitude for the extraordinary fortune which had come to him, an unromantic aviator born in Kansas.

Then they were standing in the brilliant light of the amphitheatre, and the Duca, surrounded by his caciques, was advancing to meet them.

It was not a long conference which followed. Kirby saw from the start that the Duca was indeed ready to come to terms. So treasured an object, it seemed, was the cylinder of gold, that the mere fact that Kirby possessed it made the Duca respect the possessor, whether he would or no. With this initial advantage, it did not take long to make demands and win acceptance.

It was agreed that some systematic campaign of extermination

should be planned and carried out against the ape-men. Further, the project for eventually bringing other upper-world men to the realm was accepted. Most notable of all, it was agreed that while the Duca should retain a voice in the regulation of temporal affairs, Kirby should possess an absolute veto over his word.

Naida said there must be some formal ceremony to celebrate Kirby's ascendency to power. To this the Duca consented, and established the date as a fortnight hence, and the place as the temple on the plateau beyond the plateau of the castle, where the Ducas had been invested with their robes of state from time immemorial. At the end, it was decided that little Elana should be left in the prayer chamber until a burial ceremony could be held on the morrow.

In less than an hour, Kirby, Naida, and the others withdrew from the amphitheatre to return to the regular dwelling places of the girls. Deep in his mind, Kirby did not know how sincere the Duca was, and fear lingered, somehow, but he put it aside for the present.

As they came out of the castle, proceeding in a gay procession across the drawbridge above the moat of beautiful aquatic plants, Kirby saw that the light from the glass sky was fading to a glow like that of spring twilight in the upper world. Naida answered his question about the phenomenon by saying that day and night in the cavern

corresponded to the same period above. What quality of the glass sky gave out light, she did not know, but it seemed definite that the element was sensitive to the presence of light in the upper world, and when the sun sank there, the glow faded here.

A flower embroidered path led them around the castle to a group of little crystalline houses all overgrown with bougainvillea vines and honeysuckle. In front of the first, Naida paused, and while the others went on to the other houses, she looked at Kirby.

“It is Elana’s dwelling,” she said simply, “and it will be vacant now. Elana would want you to take it. Will you, please?”

The twilight was deepening swiftly. Kirby nodded reverently, then drew close to Naida.

“Naida?”

“Yes?”

He took her hand.

“I can stay here, I can consent to become, after a fashion, a King, only if you will reign with me as Queen. Will you, Naida? Will you love me as I have learned to love you during this single day in

Paradise?”

She did not answer. But presently Kirby’s mind went blank for sheer joy. For then Naida raised her face, and he kissed her lips.

It made no difference then that, despite the day’s victory, Kirby could see trouble ahead, and feared, rather than rejoiced at, the Duca’s too easy acceptance of terms. The future could take care of itself. This moment in the dusk belonged to him and Naida.

The two weeks which passed for Kirby after that particular twilight sped quickly. During the first morning, all attended the ceremony which was held for Elana’s burial in the plot of gardened ground where lay her ancestors. Ensuing mornings were devoted to conferences in the amphitheatre with Duca and caciques.

After the fourth day Kirby, at Naida’s insistence, moved into splendid quarters in the castle—a suite of chambers across the amphitheatre from those in which the caciques dwelt. In practically forcing the move on Kirby, Naida won his consent finally by agreeing to have their wedding ceremony performed on the day of his coronation; then she would come to the castle with him.

The afternoons of that first fortnight before the wedding and

coronation were spent in hunting and fishing. Also Kirby and Naida visited often the aged people of the race, who dwelt in crystalline, vine covered houses like those of the girls, but removed from them. Naida's relatives were dead, but she had relatives there, and to all these aged ones, who sat living in the past, she did what she could to explain present developments in the affairs of the younger generation.

Last but not least, Kirby set aside certain hours each afternoon which he devoted to the formation of a rifle squad amongst the girls. Six rifles he had, and in turn he trained each of the girls in their use, having set up a range at the foot of the plateau cliffs. The results he gained made him feel that the day would come soon enough when he would dare launch an offensive against the ape-people; and especially pleasing was the sense of power over the Duca which he gained. The Duca showed no sign of treachery. Yet Kirby did not trust him. Never did he quite forget the misgivings which had lingered in his mind after the first conclave.

As for his relationship with Naida, that grew with every moment they could steal to spend with each other. And side by side with their growing knowledge of each other grew, for Kirby, an increasing store of knowledge of the realm.

He learned, amongst other things, what seemed the origin of the worship of the Serpent, Quetzalcoatl, amongst primitive Mexican races. The time had been when the People of the Temple had mingled freely with the races above them; and, that they might have ready means of egress to the world, they had built the tunnel through which Kirby had entered the Valley of the Geyser. Thus, going and coming as they did, they had spread their cult of the worship of Quetzalcoatl; and when, eventually, strife arose between the peoples of upper world and lower, and the People of the Temple withdrew to their realm, they left behind them the Serpent myth which was to live through countless centuries.

The tunnel, Naida said, had been abandoned when her people left the upper world once and for all, and its use for any reason prohibited. This, Naida gave as the reason why none of them went near the tunnel now, and why the cylinder of gold had lain in the canyon undiscovered. It was the explanation she had promised on the day in the tower, when first she saw the cylinder.

So the days passed, until the day set aside for wedding and coronation dawned. On that morning, Kirby, having concluded a long conference with the Duca, was walking with Naida in the gardens outside the castle.

“Tell me,” he said to her: “do you yourself believe that this Serpent has the powers of a God?”

Naida looked at him quickly, a sudden fright in her eyes.

“I believe the Serpent exists to-day, somewhere in the distant reaches of the chasm, beyond the Rorroh forest.”

“Yes, but do you believe the Serpent is God?”

Actually frightened now, she looked swiftly about. But when she saw that they were alone, confidence returned.

“No!” she exclaimed. “I do not believe Quetzalcoatl is a god. I believe he is the most terrible creature anywhere in our realm, and that men first worshipped him through fear. I believe our race would be better a hundred times if they had never made him their God.”

Kirby whistled.

“Then you do *not* believe that the Ducas of past ages talked with him. You do not believe it was Quetzalcoatl’s pleasure over the great diamond which made him cease preying on your people?”

“No! Long habit makes me show respect for these myths, and adhere

to the customs of our cult, but I do not believe. I think our race gained immunity for the Serpent's ravages, not through a compact with Quetzalcoatl, but because our builders were intelligent enough to erect the castle up here on the plateau, where Quetzalcoatl could not reach them. To tell the truth, I think the whole cult is false and wrong, and I wish Quetzalcoatl were dead and gone from the world!"

Kirby smiled. In spite of Naida's reverence for certain features of the cult, he had long suspected that her true feelings were those she had just expressed. And he was glad for this new bond of understanding between them. He glanced at her with understanding and perfect trust.

"Naida, since we have talked so frankly, there is one more thing which I must bring out."

She looked up at him.

"What is it?"

"The Duca."

She drew closer, her perfumed body brushing his, her great eyes

caressing him.

“Naida, I am afraid of the man.”

“And so am I!” she confessed suddenly.

“It has all been too easy,” Kirby said in a slow voice. “There is no doubt whatever that our possession of the cylinder of gold has had great influence on the Duca, and yet—”

He paused, taking her hand.

“And yet,” she went on for him, “you do not believe he would have conceded what he has, unless he intends to make trouble?”

Kirby nodded twice, emphatically.

“Well, you have trained all of us to use the rifles.”

He smiled gravely at her understanding.

“Yes, I have. And your skill, and that of the others, with the rifles, will always help us. Yet even so—”

Closer still she drew now, and there was sadness in her eyes.

“I think I see,” she said in a voice which choked. “When do you think he will make a move to start trouble?”

Kirby hesitated, then drew a long breath.

“To-day!”

“On—on the day of our union?” Naida echoed in dismay. “Can you tell where or how he will strike at us?”

Kirby shook his head.

“There are a hundred things he could do. Naida, I—I—Well, somehow I am afraid of the ceremony this afternoon—the wedding ceremony!”

He felt a little shiver go through her, and would have taken her in his arms, save that a gay cry rang in the garden then.

“Naida, Naida!” It was her cousin, Nini, a bronze-haired youngster as elfin and Pucklike as her name. “I thought we should never find you! Do you realize this is your *wedding* day, and that you’re acting as if there was nothing to be done?”

Nini darted a mocking glance at Kirby, who grinned.

“Do come, Naida!” cried another girl. “Your gown is ready, and we want you to ourselves for awhile.”

Other girls joined them, some singing and some carrying an obligato on the sweet, flutelike instruments which Kirby had first heard as he hung in the throat of the geyser. In front of them all, Kirby laughed and kissed Naida on the forehead. But as he took leave of her thus, he whispered:

“We must not let our guard relax for a second this afternoon. And I think there is a more definite precaution which I will take, besides.”

Chapter 9

Some hours later, Kirby smiled with tight-lipped satisfaction at thought of that precaution which he had taken. What it was only he, Nini, Ivana, and three other girls knew, which secrecy pleased him as much as the precautionary measure itself.

Seated alone in a dimly-lighted, thick-walled cell of the ancient temple in which the dual ceremony of wedding and coronation would take place, he was waiting for the moment when the festivities would begin. Thus far the Duca had done nothing. Yet Kirby's uneasiness would not leave him, and he continued to be thankful that, if trouble should start, the Duca might not find as many trumps in his hand as he expected.

A couple of hours after Kirby had left Naida and the other girls in the garden, all had begun the two-mile journey from the castle to the small plateau on which stood this temple, where the ceremony would be held. Now, while Kirby waited alone, the Duca and his caciques had gone to another wing of the temple. Naida, attended by her bridesmaids, had been assigned to a cell of their own, and the rest of the girls were waiting in the nave of the temple. Unable to attend the walk from their plateau to this, the old people of the race had remained in their crystal houses.

With ten minutes more to wait, Kirby rose from a bench on which he had been seated, and began to pace his cell. It was this archaic pile of stone, he finally decided, which was causing his depression. Unlike the bright and cheerful castle, this place, older than any other building in the realm, was squat, thick-walled, and gloomy. Here, in the dusky cells which lined labyrinthine corridors, the early generations of the race had found protection from outside dangers. All of which was all right, Kirby thought, but just the same he wished he had insisted upon being wedded in the brilliant and cheerful amphitheatre.

But presently he stopped pacing and faced the door of his cell. Then he breathed a sigh of relief.

From down the twisting corridors which wound out to the central nave, stole the high sweetness of soprano voices, the whisper of flutes, and the mellow resonance of little gongs of jade and gold. It was the signal for which he had waited.

It had been the Duca's instructions that he should come out into the temple when the music began, and meet Naida there. Both would advance to the altar, and when they were in place, the Duca would come to them. Kirby, therefore, after a glance at the blue trousers and tunic of tanager scarlet which the girls had made for him,

opened the door of his cell, and stepped out.

In a moment he traversed the windings of the corridor, and halted under a flat arch at one side of the temple nave.

As he paused so, to await the appearance of Naida and her bridesmaids under a similar arch directly across the temple, he held his breath. Not even nymphs could be as graceful as were the twenty-six girls who were performing the dance of Life Immortal, which tradition decreed should be given before the ceremony by which, in this realm, two souls were wedded. The flash of rainbow gowns was like the swirling of light in a sky at dawning. The music of voices, flutes, and the little gongs of jade, would have stirred the souls of the dead.

If only the confounded sense of approaching disaster would leave him, Kirby thought grimly, this would be a magnificent moment. As it was, he turned his eyes away from the girls, and began to examine the temple.

Just as Naida had told him the case would be, he found both sides of the nave surrounded by arches similar to the one under which he was standing. Everywhere, dim and tortuous corridors led to cells like the one he had just left. Then, in one end of the nave, loomed a closed

door from behind which the Duca and caciques would appear when the couple to be wedded were in place, before the altar.

The altar itself, a rectangular mass of some jadelike stone, stood at a distance of perhaps twenty paces in front of the closed door. On top of the greenish stones, resting on a cushion of some crimson material, flashed the crown which would be used at the coronation. Kirby's eyes widened as he beheld a single rose-cut diamond two inches in diameter, mounted in an exquisitely simple bandeau of wrought gold. But, a moment later, even the crown which would be his—if nothing happened—seemed only a bauble compared to the other prize which he had won in this world beneath the world.

Naida!

He realized that the dance was ended, the music stilled, and that the rainbow garbed girls had formed a double line in the center of the temple. Suddenly his heart beat fast, and for just a moment, as he dared look full and deeply at Naida, and she smiled back at him across the distance, he even forgot to be depressed.

But even as he advanced to meet her, his uneasiness returned.

Now the girls were singing again, their voices raised in a triumphant

chorale as beautiful as Naida's face with its warm red lips and smiling eyes, as beautiful as her wedding gown that might have been woven, in its filminess, of mist from the sea. The bridesmaids, silent, their lovely faces alight, paused. But Naida came on.

From her floated to Kirby a fragrance more overwhelming than even the perfume of the geyser. Presently he felt her hand on his arm, and at last they stood side by side. Now again, his premonition of evil left him for a flash; but again it returned.

"I love you," he whispered.

"I love *you*."

"But I am still afraid."

Naida's smile faded.

"And I too. Oh, I've been terribly afraid! We will keep our guard!"

"Yes."

In front of them, on the altar, the crown diamond winked and

shimmered in a dim light. The swelling chorus of triumph, in which the bridesmaids had joined now, made the whole temple ring. Slowly, while Naida moved easily beside him, Kirby began to march to the altar.

Then it was done, and they were halted. After both of them had given a lingering glance at the crown whose diamond shimmered now within their reach, they raised their eyes to the closed door behind the altar.

The thing was swinging open. An inch it moved, two inches.

Kirby waited, never taking his eyes away from the widening crack. With a crashing final volume of sound, the chorus swept magnificently to its climax. Then the door was flung wide.

Still Kirby stood stiffly before the altar, with Naida drawn up splendidly beside him. After two seconds, however, he moved.

Duca and caciques were not standing in the corridor.

In the semi-darkness, the only figures visible there were squatting, grotesque things whose bodies were covered with whitish hair and whose leathery faces were disfigured by gashes of mouths filled with

enormous teeth.

A feeling of standing face to face with final disaster, turned Kirby sick. As he jerked back from the altar, sweeping a paralyzed Naida with him, the ape-men let out gibbering howls, half-human. With gigantic, hopping strides, the foremost rank of the creatures swung forward, straight into the temple.

Chapter 10

Kirby, already falling back toward the other girls, caught Naida up in his arms, and ran.

“Nini!” he bellowed. “Ivana! Get the rifles!”

While the two whom he had ordered sprang to a corridor, and four others followed, Kirby fell in with the others and dropped Naida on her feet. Sick as he was, there was still a ray of hope, because the hard-headed precaution he had taken against treachery this morning was to have Nini and Ivana bring the rifles here and hide them.

The first of the ape-men, snarling, laughing, had hopped beyond the altar, and the yellow foam of madness was slavering from his jaws. Over his shoulder he howled some jargon which made his hairy legion struggle to catch up with him.

“Have you got any puff balls?” Kirby snapped at Naida.

She shook her head numbly, just as Nini and Ivana swung forward with the Mannlichers.

“No. But you had sense enough to bring the rifles! Oh, what does it mean?”

“The Duca has sold himself out to the ape-man! He was helpless against us, and has brought them to destroy us for him. Here, Ivana, give me a rifle! Everyone for herself!”

The next moment he had a Mannlicher at his shoulder.

As the thing kicked, an ape who would have reached him in two more jumps crashed over with his heart torn out, the temple echoed with sound which threatened to rip its solid walls apart, and bright flashes at Kirby’s right and left told him that other rifles were getting under way.

He fired again, twice more, slaughtering an ape with each shot. The five other rifles were creating havoc.

Blocked by a dozen torn and bleeding bodies on the floor, the reenforcements which still poured from the corridor, began to mill around amongst themselves, and the forward charge slowed down. All the panic which had sent the ape-men scuttling from the beach at their first experience of gunfire, seemed ready to break loose again now.

Kirby felt it was good enough for the work of a minute.

“Get into line as I showed you how!” he shouted. “Rifles in the front rank, the others behind them. We’re all right now! Keep firing!”

“Keep behind me!” he ordered Naida, still unarmed.

Then he placed a shell in the chest of one brute who was broader and heavier than the others—a leader—and saw that he had increased the demoralization; and from the hastily-formed front rank a volley leaped hot and jagged.

Then the rout which had threatened broke loose. As eight ape-men slumped into blubbering, bleeding heaps, the milling remainder of the horde turned, and in a fighting, scrambling frenzy attempted to get back to the corridor.

Kirby let his triumph take the form of thoughts about what he would do to the Duca when that personage could be rounded up.

“Follow after them!” he ordered. “Don’t stop until we have located the Duca. He is the one we must settle—”

But he never finished.

As he himself, holding fire for a second, prepared to follow up the retreat, he found himself confronted by the utterly unexpected.

A voice unquestionably the Duca's began to shout orders at the ape-men from somewhere down the corridor! And, riot or no riot, the tones of that voice seemed to inspire the creatures with more fear than the rifle fire.

So suddenly the change came, that by the time Kirby flung his rifle again to his shoulder, the crazy retreat had been halted, and as he fired again, the ape-men swung in their tracks and began to charge!

There was no time to guess by what power the Duca had turned the tables. There was not even time for orders. Kirby fired twice, knowing that the ape-men had been infused with some spirit which would bring them on in spite of rifle fire.

Naida, unarmed, cried out behind him, and he shoved his gun at her.

"Take it!"

He had just inserted a new clip. He handed her others.

"Fire for your lives!" he shouted to the girls.

"But you!" Naida gasped. "You are unarmed!"

"I'll be all right."

On the floor lay a jagged, hand-chipped knife of obsidion which had fallen as some ape died. Kirby grabbed it.

In another second the flood of ape-men had burst in all its fury over him. Crashing, thundering shots were dinning in his ears, animal death screams and the Valkyrie battle cries of the girls filled the temple. He could not tell how many of the apes were fighting him. As a cave-man's club whizzed past his head, he drove his knife once, and yanked it dripping from hairy, yielding flesh to plunge it again. A sudden side-step carried him away from another assailant. He dropped the knife to snatch the gigantic club of one of the creatures he had killed.

Quicker in every movement than the ape-men, he laid on, right and left, with such power that blood spurted in a dozen places, and heads were split open on every side. And because of his speed, the frantic, clumsy blows and knife thrusts which were directed at him proved harmless.

A terrific drive which smashed a snarling face into pulp, left Kirby free for a second, and he emerged from the first round of battle ready to cut in and help the girls. But then he saw that he had gotten separated from the main body.

“Naida!” he called. “Naida!”

A series of shots answered him, and as several apes fell, a gap was opened through which he saw her conducting a well ordered retreat of all the girls toward the dark corridors surrounding the temple. Again Kirby fell to with his club, swinging, hacking, fighting with his whole strength to catch up. He made headway, and hope began to come again. The ape-men would not kill, or even harm, the girls. What they wanted was to carry them off. If he and Naida together could get their party rounded up in the corridors, the chances were good.

“Naida!” he shouted again. “Coming!”

Battering down an ape in front of him, he jumped up on the corpse, and saw that already the vanguard of girls had reached the first sheltering corridor. Naida had been cut off from the others by eight or ten apes. But even so her fire made her mistress of the situation, and she seemed all right.

It was just as Kirby started to jump down from the corpse that he saw something which put another complexion on the matter, and left him frozen where he was.

Behind Naida, directly in the path in which her slavering aggressors were slowly forcing her, a huge stone slab in the temple floor had begun to tilt up as if it were a trapdoor raised by an invisible hand. Within the yawning opening, Kirby caught a glimpse of stone steps winding down into blackness.

In a flash he saw that it was Naida, and her alone, that the ape-men were after. The Duca's determination was to capture her, and it was the presence of this trapdoor, making capture possible, which had brought on the second charge of the apes.

A scream, high and wild, from Naida released Kirby from his trance of horror. He leaped off the corpse, and smashed a suddenly presented skull like an egg shell. Momentarily he saw Naida, too terrified to fire, staring at the open trapdoor. Kirby felled two apes and felt their blood on his arms.

"Ivana!" he yelled. "Help Naida, for God's sake!"

An answering shout, not from Ivana alone but from many girls, encouraged him, and he swung his club with a speed and force which would let nothing stand before him. But then another scream from Naida rang in his ears.

“Naida!” he shouted. “It’s all right! We’re coming!”

He knew, though, that it *wasn’t* all right. Fighting like a maniac, he opened another lane down which he glimpsed her. Fighting still, in a last terrific effort to force his way down the lane to her side, he saw the black opening gape at her feet; and, as Naida screamed again, a dozen hairy arms reached it at once, twisted the empty rifle out of her hands, and lifted her shining body as if it had been a feather.

Shouts and murderous fire were coming from the other girls, and Kirby swung his club as never before. But even as he fell upon the last two or three apes which kept him away from Naida, those who had snatched her, bolted down the steps.

Kirby was left with the memory of Naida’s great eyes fixed upon his, fear-filled, beseeching his protection. In a second, the ponderous trapdoor crashed into place, and she was gone.

Chapter 11

Dazed and grief-stricken, Kirby stood in the bloody, corpse-filled nave of the temple, surrounded by thirty-two girls whose faces were blanched and most of whose eyes were tear-bright. The fight was over, and they were assembled to decide what must be done, but for a time no one spoke.

Gaining the trapdoor just as it was pinioned from beneath, Kirby had torn at it with bare hands. But that had been hopeless. Then he had begun to fight again. But that had been hopeless also. With howls and screams they started to retreat, and it had not taken Kirby long to find out that every part of their raid had been carefully planned, even to this retreat under fire. Straight into the damp black tunnel which led away from the corridor behind the altar, the ape-men had leaped. And Kirby, in hot pursuit, had heard the Duca's voice driving them on. Too much the soldier to follow in that darkness where the Duca knew every foot of the way, and he knew nothing, Kirby had seen that he must go back to the girls and take stock.

Now he looked at the strewn ape corpses, smelled the corrosive reek of burned powder, and tried to put aside his grief.

"The Duca," he said at last, "must have been planning this with the

apes ever since the first morning in the castle.”

Ivana, Naida’s sister, nodded.

“The Duca brought the ape-people here, kept them in the tunnel, and then herded them back when their work was done. I suppose it was one of the caciques who opened the door when the time was right.”

“Does anyone think we ought to try the tunnels now?” Kirby asked.

Several girls shook their heads. He knew that already they felt he had been wise in giving up the pursuit. Ivana spoke.

“If the Duca and his horde stay underground, we shouldn’t have a chance against them. And if they don’t, we’re better here.”

Kirby shot a searching glance at her, somehow sure that her thoughts were running parallel with his.

“You don’t think they’re going to stay here, do you?”

“No, and you don’t either,” Ivana answered.

“It seems to me that they will retreat into the Rorroh as fast as they can,” Kirby then observed.

And do you think the Duca and all the caciques will go with the apes?" This time it was Nini who spoke, and with the council so well launched, Kirby began to feel better.

"I think," he answered Nini, "that the Duca has gone over to Xlotli altogether. We fooled him to-day. Instead of killing or capturing us all, he—he only got Naida. But he won't give up. I think he is taking the apes off to some place from which he can launch a new attack. And we've got to stop him before he is ready to deliver another blow."

"What do you mean?" Ivana now asked.

"Do you know where the villages of the ape-people are?"

"Yes. None of us has been very far into the Rorroh, but I could guess where some of the villages may stand."

Silence fell after that, but Kirby knew from the glint in Ivana's eyes, and the quick breaths which other girls drew, that they understood.

"Ivana," he said suddenly, "will you go with me into the Rorroh jungle, and stay with me, facing down every danger it may conceal, until we have found Naida and brought her back?"

A flush of life crept into Ivana's pallid cheeks.

"Yes!"

Kirby faced the other girls, all of them keyed up now.

"Nini, will you go?"

Nini, bronze-haired, dainty nymph of a girl, who had yet the stamina of a man, looked at him with brave eyes. Then her hands tightened on her rifle, and she stepped forward.

"When will you have us start?" Ivana asked in a low voice.

"Now!" Kirby answered, and, taking up the rifle which lay beside him—the same with which Naida had fought—he looked at the other girls.

"There is not one of you," he said slowly, "who would not go willingly on this quest. But the pursuit party must be small and mobile. And there is another duty. To all of you I leave the care of the castle and the plateau. Take the three rifles I shall leave behind, do what you can to reassure the old people, and hold the plateau safe until we return."

A murmur of girls' voices sounded in the temple. Kirby motioned to Nini and Ivana, and followed by a low cheer, they moved off together.

The night was on them, where they crouched in a cave above a swiftly flowing river. Kirby, rifle across his knees, sat peering out across the black, invisible stretches of the forest. His nostrils quivered to this mingled smells of fresh growth and fetid decay of the grotesque land. In his ears shrilled the creaking and scraping of insects, the flap of unseen wings, the distant bellowing grunt of some unseen, unknown animal.

"I cannot sleep," Ivana said presently, from back in the cave.

"Hush," he whispered, "you will wake Nini."

"But I am already awake!" came her answer. "I—I cannot forget the white snakes which slid from that tree when you tried to cut firewood."

"Hush," Kirby murmured again. "Presently the moon will rise on the earth above, and light will come here. Even if the jungle is terrible, were you not born with courage? Go to sleep now, both of you, because you must relieve me soon."

As silence fell again, he knew that the real thing behind their nervousness was their ghastly doubt about what the night was bringing to Naida. But none of them spoke of Naida. So sickening were the possibilities that Kirby would not permit conjecture to occupy even his mind when, at length, the sound of even breathing told him that Nini and Ivana slept.

After dreary passing of an hour, a faint light grew over the jungle, silver and clear, and Kirby let his mind run back to the two deserted ape-men communities which they had found and searched before dusk sent them to the cave. From the signs of hasty departure, it looked as though a far-reaching order had taken the brutes away from their dwellings, and sent them—somewhere.

That somewhere seemed likely to be the great central community which Ivana said was rumored to exist in the far reaches of the Rorroh. The problem was how to locate the community through the hideous country. But Kirby presently drove the question from his head. To-morrow's evils could best be faced when morrow dawned.

Enough light had grown now so that the swirling bosom of the river, and a strip of sand directly below the cliff in which their cave was set, were visible. As Kirby let his eyes wander to the lush growth beyond the sand, he heard something which made him stir uneasily.

Some creature which suggested power and hugeness immeasurable was moving there.

The brush parted, and he saw plainly an animal with the bulk of a two-story house. On two feet the nightmare thing stood, as lightly as a cat, and then came down on all four feet as it ambled out on the sand and extended into the lapping river a tremendous beak studded with teeth. A smell of crushed weeds and the musty odor like that of a lion house filled the night. The tyranosaur—it was more like a tyranosaur than anything else—breathed heavily and guzzled in great mouthfuls of water.

Kirby sat perfectly still. He hoped the thing would go away. But the tyranosaur did not go away. All at once it hissed loudly and stood up, its eyes glowing green and baleful, and Kirby leaned forward.

From the water was slithering another creature with a gigantic, quivering, jelly body. Kirby saw to his horror that, in addition to four short legs with webbed, claw-tipped feet, there sprouted from the body a number of octopus tentacles. From the scabrous mottle of the head, cruel, unintelligent, bestial eyes glared at the rearing tyranosaur.

One of the serpentine tentacles whipped out, slapped against the

tyranosaur's fore-shoulder to call forth a hiss and a short bellow. Then other tentacles waved in the moonlight, and in a flash the tyranosaur was enmeshed as by a score of slimy cables. He was not altogether helpless. Suddenly the steam shovel of a beak buried itself in the jelly body of the water animal, and there spurted out a flood of inky liquid. The water animal emitted a sickening gurgle. But the tyranosaur's advantage was only temporary. Closer and closer drew the ugly, scabrous tentacles. The tyranosaur never had a chance. Its green eyes flared, the shovel beak plunged and slashed, but never for a second did the tentacles relax. As Kirby stared, he saw the water animal begin to back up, dragging its gigantic enemy with it. For a second the whole night was hideous with the sound of hisses, gurgles, dashing water. Then the river boiled once and for all, and both animals sank in its depths.

Kirby chafed cold hands together and shivered a little, then turned to see if Nini and Ivana had heard the struggle.

Fortunately, however, they still slept. And as if this peace which was upon them were an omen of good, the jungle continued quiet for the next hour. Kirby wakened them at last, and after a snatched nap, was in turn awakened.

The three of them started again when the first glimmerings of dawn

came to the forest. Of food there was plenty—fruits which grew in profusion, and some roots which Nini grubbed out of the earth. Having started along the first trail which they encountered beside the river bank, they ate as they walked.

Kirby judged they had kept their steady gait for more than two hours before a slight widening of the trail roused him from the preoccupation into which he had fallen.

“See there,” he exclaimed to both girls, and pointed at a grove of trees with fanlike leaves which towered up to the right of the trail. “What are those big bundles fastened to the lower limbs?”

Ivana glanced at Nini, who nodded as if in answer to a question.

“This must be one of the places where the ape-people leave their dead,” Nini answered. “The bundles—But come over to them.”

Kirby forced his way ahead until he stood beneath a huge, unsavory bundle wrapped in roughly woven brown fibre, and wedged in a fork between two limbs. Judging from the ugly odor which overhung the grove, there could be no question about what the bundle contained. Nini and Ivana, glancing at the scores of similar bundles which burdened the trees of the whole grove, made wry faces. Kirby slung

his rifle in the crook of his arm, and nodded toward the trail.

“There must be a village somewhere near,” he said.

A mile farther on they found what they were seeking, a colony of seventy or eighty conical dwellings of mud and thatch, which were ranged in a double circle about a central common of bare, well-trodden earth. It took no long reconnaissance to discover that the town was deserted completely of all inhabitants.

Ivana beckoned and darted to one of the nearest huts, and Kirby, following her, found lying on the uneven earth floor within, a half-skinned animal which resembled a small antelope. An obsidion knife beside the carcass, the disordered condition of a couch of grass, the sour odor of recent animal occupancy, all told their story.

“The owner left in a hurry,” Kirby observed aloud.

Nini, who had gone beyond, to a larger hut which might have belonged to a king ape, called out excitedly to them.

“A great number of apes have eaten a hurried meal here!”

Kirby entered the shadowed, foul-smelling interior of the central hut to find her statement true. Broken meats, some raw, some cooked,

lay on the dirt floor, and scattered bits of fruit were mingled with them. The ashes of a burned out fire at the hut entrance were cold, but had not been for long.

“Do you think—” Ivana began.

“I think the whole of the Duca’s horde came this way, fed, and went on, taking everyone with them,” Kirby finished.

“But which direction did they take?” asked Nini, who was standing at the door of the big hut and had already begun to examine the crowding, green, inscrutable walls of jungle which foamed up to the clearing on all sides.

No less than seven trails wound away into the dark country beyond, and Kirby saw that the question would not be an easy one.

Having hastily circled the clearing and peered down one trail after another without finding a clue, he knew that it was the Duca’s intelligence which had made the ape-people depart without leaving even tracks behind them. He did not like the situation.

“Well,” he rumbled to his companions, “we may as well take our choice. One chance in seven of coming out right!”

But the words were hardly out of his mouth before he pulled himself up with a jerk, and cursed himself for having given in.

“Ivana! Nini!” Sharpness, a sudden ring of hope edged his voice. “Am I seeing things, or is that—”

As he pointed to a huge aloe bush down one of the trails to their left, they started to run. Then Kirby knew that he was not seeing things. What his first inspection of the trails had failed to show, he saw plainly now.

Tied loosely to one branch of the aloe bush, almost concealed amidst the deep green of foliage, was a bit of white cloth! In a second Kirby was holding out to his companions a tiny strip of Naida’s wedding gown.

“She knew we would come!” He stared down the trail with narrowed, keen eyes.

How Naida had contrived to leave her signal was more than they knew. The fact that she *had* done so, sent all three of them down the trail at driving speed.

An hour passed, then another, and the morning which had been

barely born when they first took the trail, wore on to the sultriness and vast, colored light of a tropical noon. Twice the main trail forked, and twice they found an unobtrusive bit of cloth to guide them beyond the works. When the hands of Kirby's still useful watch pointed to twelve, they paused to eat and rest. Then they pushed on.

Meanwhile, the country through which they passed left Kirby with a clear understanding of why Naida and her people had shunned the Rorroh forest down the centuries of time.

Just one thing which stuck in his head was the sight of a small creature like a marmoset, sticking an inquisitive nose into the heart of a sickly-sweet plant which resembled a terrestrial nepenthe. No sooner had the little pink snout touched the green and maroon splotched petals, than the plant writhed, closed its leaves, and swallowed the monkey whole. Little squeaks of agony and terror sounded for a moment, and ceased.

At midafternoon they paused in a spot where a forest of trees with whorled tops were slowly being strangled to death by immense orchids of every conceivable shape and color, and by a kind of creeping mistletoe which grew almost as they watched. Here also, the ground was covered with fluffy, grey-green moss which seethed constantly as if it were a carpet of maggots. Both Ivana and Nini

warned Kirby on his life not to touch or go near the moss, and a moment later he knew why.

From the forest came the flash of a small, five-toed horse being pursued by some animal with a hyena head that barked. At the edge of the mossy glade the hyena swerved aside, but the terrified horse plunged straight out on the carpet of moss. Instantly the air was filled with the sound of animal screams, and a series of tiny, muffled explosions. A cloud of greenish-red mist swirled about the horse. Quivering, still screaming, the animal went down on its knees, and as the reddish green smoke fell on him and settled, it became a mass of growing moss spores.

Before Kirby's eyes, the pitiful animal was covered by a shroud of green that spread over him and cloaked him, licking over all with tiny sounds like far off muffled drums as fresh spore cases developed and burst. The screams died. Even as Kirby drew the girls to him and they passed on, the horse's nostrils, eyes, mouth were filled with choking green moss; and he lay still.

On and on, deeper into the jungle Kirby pushed, and never for a moment did his companions falter. But the way was not so easy now, for nerves were jaded, muscles sore, and no human will could have been powerful enough to cast aside the growing fear for Naida.

Fear came finally to a head when, toward dusk, Kirby sighted a fork ahead of them, approached it confidently to look for Naida's sign, and found nothing.

"Oh Lord!" he muttered, and realized that it was the first time any of them had spoken for long.

"There must be something to guide us!" Ivana exclaimed as she searched with questing eyes through the swiftly deepening gloom of evening.

Nini, making an effort to keep up hope in spite of the paleness which came to her lovely face, darted down both paths, glancing as she went at every bush and shrub. But she returned in a moment, and as she shook her head, her great eyes were somber.

Kirby grunted, scratched behind his ear. Then, however, he stifled an exclamation, and clutched at the hands of both girls.

On one of the two trails appeared suddenly in the dusk an ape-creature. Kirby saw at once that the thing was small—a female undoubtedly—and that it had spied them and was moving toward them with all speed. And borne in upon him most certainly was the fact that the ape-woman was making signals of peace. In her

outstretched hand flickered through the gloom a strip of cloth that was gauzy and white.

Again—a strip of Naida's gown.

"If you know any words of her tongue, call to her," Kirby said sharply.

Ivana obeyed. All three of them started forward. The ape-woman, after returning the hail in creaking gutturals, came up to them, and with an unexpected look of pathos and entreaty in her face, began to address the girls with a flood of talk.

Word after creaking word she poured out while Nini and Ivana listened in silence. Finally Kirby could stand the suspense no longer.

"What is it, Ivana? What does she say? Your eyes are lighting up with hope! Tell me—"

Ivana smiled and turned toward him, while the ape-woman still looked her entreaty.

"She says," Ivana announced bluntly, "that she and the other women amongst their people, do not want any of the girls of our race to be taken by their males. Already the men are quarreling about Naida.

They will not look at their own women. Naida told this woman that we would be following, and sent her to lead us to the place where the ape-people are assembling!”

Kirby felt his lips tightening in a grim smile at the thought that jealousy was not unknown even to the semi-human creatures of this neither world. He looked at Nini and Ivana during a stretched out second. Then he moved.

“Good,” he snapped. “We go on at once.”

That was his only recognition of what was surely one of the important happenings of a lifetime. But for all that, his tired brain, which so lately had felt the chill of black depression, was suddenly set on fire with triumph and thanksgiving.

Chapter 12

As they marched rapidly, the ape-woman, who called herself Gori, succeeded in making them understand that most of the ape-tribes, commanded by the Duca and his caciques, were assembled in the central community toward which they were heading, that grave danger of some sort threatened Naida, and that the need for haste was great. But what the danger was, the two girls could not understand.

“We can’t make out what is going to happen—what they plan to do to-night,” Ivana whispered at last to Kirby. “All Gori says is that we must rescue Naida and take her away, and must take the Duca away so that he cannot influence the men any more. And she keeps repeating that we must hurry.”

“And you can’t find out what we must rescue Naida *from*?”

Ivana shook her head.

“I’m afraid we’re facing something of an appalling nature, as dangerous to ourselves as to Naida. But I know nothing more.”

By the time the silver glow which corresponded to moonlight

flooded the jungle, Gori had left the open trail, and was leading them across country which humans could not have negotiated without the guidance she offered. Advancing cautiously always, she stopped for long seconds at a time to reconnoitre, shifting her huge ears about and changing their shape, twitching her nostrils, and glancing hither and thither with bright little eyes. Sometimes they passed immense spike-tipped flowers ten feet in diameter, with fleshy yellow leaves which gave out a nauseating stench. Vines with long, recurved thorns and blossoms of deep scarlet, laced the undergrowth together and made passing dangerous. Fire-flies drifted past, and all above and about them flapped moths as big as bats.

Kirby, his clothes almost torn from his body, sweat pouring from every pore, heard the labored breathing of the girls, and wondered how they could hang on. But they did, and after a long time, Gori, halting in the midst of a slight clearing, held up a warning hand.

A queer sensation came over Kirby. As he stared and listened, he realized that the twinkles he saw far ahead were not fire-flies, as he had thought, but lights. In the frosted moon glow, Nini and Ivana drew close, and Kirby clasped their hands and pressed them for a second. Too tired to exult further he was, even though they seemed close to their goal of goals.

Gori swung her hairy arm in a signal, and with rifles clasped carefully, they began to advance. When, five minutes later, they stood in the heart of a rank glade beyond which they could see nothing, Gori spoke to the two girls in her creaking whisper, and Nini laid a restraining hand on Kirby's.

"We have gone as far as Gori dares! She says we must climb a tree here, and watch what will go on in a clearing just beyond this thicket."

"And we still don't know what we're getting into," Kirby muttered.

But at any rate they had reached the end of their march.

Exultation did come to Kirby now, but still he was too completely fagged, as were both girls, to give much sign. Gori pointed to a tree some fifty feet away, which shot up to a great, foliage-crowned height. They moved toward it, and in a moment were climbing, Gori first, the girls after her, and Kirby last.

"Here we are," Ivana presently whispered, at the same time drawing herself out on a limb just beneath one on which Gori and Nini had crawled.

Kirby found himself hedged in by tasselated leaves through which he could not see. The foliage thinned, however, and soon Ivana halted, perched herself in a comfortable position. Kirby, making himself at ease beside her, and seeing that Nini and Gori were in place, turned his eyes slowly, expectantly downward.

At first, all that he saw from his bird's-eye perch, was a circular clearing two hundred yards across, which was surrounded on all sides by lowering jungle. In the exact center of the circle, like a splotch of ink on gray paper, there gaped a deep hole which might have measured six feet in diameter. Around this hole, eight poles as tall and stout as telephone poles stood up in bristling array. The moonlight showed that the whitish earth of the clearing was tamped smooth as though thousands of creatures had danced or walked about there for centuries. But not a living form was visible.

A grunt of disappointment escaped Kirby after that one look. When he looked beyond the clearing, however, a change came to his feelings.

A quarter of a mile away, lights were twinkling—the same ones which had been visible on the last stretch of the journey. And the moonlight touched the little conical roofs of fully two hundred huts of the ape-people. No sound was audible save the soughing of night

wind in the trees, the shrilling of insects. Nevertheless, there stole over Kirby all at once a feeling that the great ape-village was crowded to overflowing. What was more, he felt himself touched by an eery sensation—familiar these days—of evil to come.

Ivana, seated with her rifle across her knees, stirred on the limb beside him.

“Oh,” she whispered suddenly, “I am afraid of this place!”

Kirby took her hand.

“I know. Maybe it is the sensation of all the legions of the apes herded together so silently in their village. I wish we knew what to expect from them. I wish—”

But he broke off, and called softly to Nini on the limb above. She looked down with a drawn expression about her mouth.

“Are you all right?” Kirby whispered.

“Yes. But—Well, are both of *you* all right? Gori says we have reached here in time, but I—” A gasp of uneasiness escaped her, and Kirby heard Ivana echo it. “There is something about that black, silent hole out there in the clearing, and about those poles sticking up

like fangs, that makes me terribly, terribly afraid. Oh, what are they planning? Where is Naida? What are they going to do to her?”

Kirby whistled in a low key. He had not thought about the black hole in the clearing.

“Hum,” he muttered, “that’s interesting. Ivana, Nini, what do you suppose—”

But he got no answer. Gori’s twitching lips grimaced them to silence.

The next instant, the stillness of the night was hurled aside by a howling, gurgling shout from a hundred, a thousand hysterically distended ape throats. With the sickening sound came from the village the sullen roaring of drums.

Ten minutes later, a Kirby who was cold with apprehension and wonder looked down from his leaf-crowned height at such a spectacle as he knew human eyes had never before seen. The shouting had died away, the drums were silenced. Crammed into the clearing, their foul, hairy bodies packed close together, the silver light glinting against rolling red eyes and grinning white teeth, stood fully a thousand apes!

Once the first tumult of shouting in the village had died, they had come on in silence, and in orderly procession. Those who bore the drums—huge gourds with heads of stretched skin—had formed a line entirely around the outer diameter of the circular clearing. Then others, lugging vats of a dark, heady-smelling liquor, had deposited their burden beside the drums, and formed a second circle. The balance of the thousand had crowded itself together as best it might, leaving bare the center of the clearing with its black hole and fangs of poles. Kirby, looking down at these legions, did not wonder that cold sweat wetted his back.

Capable of thinking about only one thing—Naida—he was trying with all his strength not to think. Ivana, her face blanched in the light which filtered their camouflage of leaves, sat rigid, her hands locked about her cold rifle. On the branch above, Nini and Gori were as still as mummies. No one had spoken since the vanguard of apes had appeared.

But at last Nini leaned close to Kirby.

“Have you any idea of what all this means?”

A draught of hot night air carried up a stench of drunkenness, and the goaty odor of massed animal bodies.

“No,” Kirby whispered. “I suppose, from Gori’s having brought us here, that Naida is going to appear somehow. We’ve simply got to trust that Gori knows what she is about.”

“But listen—” Ivana suppressed a shudder. “Suppose they should bring Naida here presently to force her to take part in some ceremony at which we can only guess. Gori, who thinks we can work miracles, supposes we can rescue Naida. But I—I’m not so certain. Is there *anything* we can do?”

It was exactly that question which had made Kirby fight to keep himself from thinking. His face turned gray before he answered. But answer he did, finally.

“Yes, there is one thing we can do, Ivana. We’ve got to be frank with each other, and so far, this is the *only* thing I’ve been able to figure out. If Naida is brought here, and they make any move to harm her or torture her, we can, and we will, shoot her quickly, before harm or pain comes.”

A grim silence settled once more. During the last miles of march in the jungle, there had persisted in Kirby’s heart the hope that there would be at least *something* favorable in whatever situation they might encounter. His spirits were so low now that he dared not speak

again.

Amongst the noiseless sea of ape-men below them came, every now and again, a little ripple of motion as some anthropoid shadow fell out of his place, approached the liquor vats, and swilled down the black brew, a quart at a gulp. But mostly there was little commotion. Ivana drew a sibilant breath and said that she wished something would happen.

“I wish,” Kirby answered tensely, “that we knew *what* is going to happen.”

But the nightmare waiting was not to go on forever. Kirby leaned forward and pointed.

It was only instinct that had made him know action must come. For a second, no change in the expression of the ape-men, no movement in their crammed ranks, was visible. Then, however, a queer, subdued grunting rumbled deep down in many throats, and those who had faced the hundred-foot space in the center of the clearing squatted down on their hams.

In the back of the crowd necks were craned. The stronger shoved the weaker in an effort to get a better view of the cleared stage, and a

few ape-men who had been drinking hurried on unsteady legs to their places.

“The drums!” Kirby whispered then.

With almost military precision, the scores of leather-faced creatures who had led the procession into the clearing, clasped the skin-headed gourds to their shaggy bellies, and stood with free arm raised as though awaiting a signal. Nini moved in her position, and Kirby felt Ivana shiver and edge close to him.

From the front rank of the crowd, there sprang up a great male creature with the face of a gargoyle and the body of a jungle giant. Just once he reeled on his feet, as though black alcohol had befuddled him, then he steadied himself, flung both arms above his head, and rolled out a command which burst upon Kirby’s ears like thunder.

It was as if the whole cavern of the lower world, and the whole of the round earth itself, had been rocked uneasily, dreadfully by the bellowing, crashing explosion of the drums. Maddened by the turmoil he had let loose, the gargoyle-faced giant ape-man leered about him with blood-shot, drunken eyes, and beat on his cicatrized chest with massive fists. Suddenly he let out a bellow. Straight up

into the air he sprang in a wild leap. When he came down, he was dancing, and the portentious, the sickeningly mysterious ceremony for which such solemn preparation had been made, was begun.

Kirby drew a rasping breath. Knowing that there must be some definite reason for the dance having begun just when and as it had, he looked beyond the solitary dancing giant, on beyond the crowded legions of the apes, toward the village. There, where the main trail from the community approached the clearing, he saw precisely the thing which he had both hoped desperately and dreaded terribly to find.

Headed directly toward the clearing, moving down the trail with slow, majestic pace, came a procession headed by a bodyguard of ape-men and augmented by other men whose nakedness was covered by unmistakable, unforgetable priestly robes of gray.

All at once the ape-people in the clearing began to scuffle apart, opening a lane down which the procession might pass to the central stage with its dancer, its ink spot orifice, and its fangs of tall poles. Kirby, watching the congregation, watching the majestic approach of gray robes through the night, wiped away from his forehead a sweat of fear.

“I think,” Nini called in a voice pitched high to outsound the drums, “that the—the Duca is with them!”

“Yes.” Kirby pointed jerkily. “In the middle of the procession, there, surrounded by his caciques!”

The Duca!

Yet his approach did not hold Kirby. Directly behind the priests were emerging now from the jungle a new company of ape-men. Squinting his eyes, Kirby saw that two of them were lugging on a pole across their shoulders a curious burden—a sort of monstrous bird cage of barked withes. Crouched on the floor of the cage in a little motionless, white heap—

But Kirby closed his eyes. Ivana, cowering against him, gulped as though she were going to be sick. Nini leaned down from above and looked at them with dilated eyes. Although none of them spoke, all knew that they had found Naida at last.

Kirby was the first to pull himself up. Opening his eyes, he stared long at the white gowned, motionless shape within the cage. Next summing up the whole situation—the cage surrounded by an armed band, the clearing crammed with a thousand ape-men—he shook his

head. Afterward, he made a quick movement with his hands.

Ivana, seeing that movement, seeing the expression on his face, started out of her daze.

“No! No! Oh, there must be some other way out for her! There must __”

Her cry, half a shriek, did not change Kirby’s look. What he had done with his hands was to throw a shell into the chamber of his rifle. Now he held the rifle grimly, ready to carry it to his shoulder.

The procession with the bodyguard of ape-men at its head, the renegade Duca and his caciques following next, and the cage bringing up the rear, advanced relentlessly down the lane to the central stage. The gargoyle-faced ape-man who held the stage alone danced with increasing wildness, writhing, twisting, with weird suppleness. Upon the dancing giant the procession bore down, and before him it finally halted.

The halt left the Duca and the king ape facing each other, and the ape ended his dance. After each had given a salute made by raising their arms, both Duca and the king ape turned to face the creatures who were standing with the cage slung across their shoulders. Whereupon

the bearers of the cage advanced with it until they stood between two of the tall poles. There, facing the ominous hole in the center of the clearing, with a pole on either side of them, the ape-men lowered the cage to the ground.

Kirby felt his last hope and courage ebbing. Now he noticed that each pole was equipped with a rope which passed through a hole near its top, like a thread through the eye of a needle. And while he stared at the dangling ropes, the ape-men made one end of each fast to a ring in the top of the cage. The next instant they leaped back, and began to heave at the other end of the lines.

From the drums came a quicker pounding, a more head-splitting volume of thunder. Over all the ape-people who watched the show, passed a shiver of what seemed to be whole-souled, ecstatic satisfaction. Slowly, as the two ape-men heaved hard, the cage swung off the ground, and slowly rose higher and higher into the moonlit air.

When finally the thing hung high above the heads of the multitude, swaying midway between its tall supports, the ape-men who had done the hoisting fastened their lines to cleats on the poles. Then

they turned to the Duca and the giant king who stood behind them, executed a queer, lumbering bow, and fell back to the rear.

The next moment it seemed as though every creature in the clearing—men and those who were only half men—had gone crazy. The king flung himself into the air as if he were a mass of bounding rubber. Following his lead, the whole assembly let out howls that drowned even the drums, and then began to sway, to squirm, to leap, even as their king was doing before them.

The caciques and the Duca joined in the madness of foul dancing as heartily as any there. Their eyes were flaming, their long robes flapping, their beards streaming.

On his perch in the tree Kirby muttered an oath which was lost, swept away like a breath, in the shrieking turmoil of sound. Then he turned to Ivana.

“They’ve brought Naida here to sacrifice her.”

“But *why*?” Ivana’s sweet face was frozen in lines of horror. “I’ve been able to guess what was going to happen to her. But—*sacrifice*. Why will it be that?”

“Don’t you see?” Looking up to include Nini, Kirby found his hands quivering against his rifle. “It is easy to understand. In the temple yesterday, what the Duca hoped to do was to kidnap most, or all, of the girls for the ape-people. But he was able to get only Naida. The first result was that the ape-men started to quarrel over the one girl. From what Gori says, trouble started on all sides at once. It became inadvisable to let Naida live. So the Duca, in his shrewdness, planned a sacrifice. By sacrificing Naida, he rids himself of a source of contention amongst the ape-men. He also hopes his act will win favor from his Gods, and make them help him when he is ready to launch a new attempt to capture *all* the girls.”

Ivana and Nini looked at each other, then at Kirby, and horror was etched deeper into their faces.

“I think,” gulped Ivana, “that you—are right. I—begin to understand.”

Nini leaned close to them.

“Tell us, then, *how* this sacrifice is to be made.”

Silent at that, Kirby presently made a heavy gesture toward the maelstrom of howling, leaping animals below them.

“I couldn’t guess at first. Now I think I can. They have placed her in that cage and swung it high above the black hole you were afraid of. What can that mean except that she is to be offered to—to—”

It was a monstrous theory which had stunned his hope and courage, and to voice the thing in words was too gruesome.

His bare suggestion, however, made Ivana pass a hand limply over her forehead and look at him with blank, stricken eyes. Nini tottered so uncertainly that Gori, who had remained motionless and silent throughout, had to steady her with muscular arms. If it was impossible for Kirby to utter his fears aloud, he had no need to speak to make them understood.

“And—and we can do nothing?” Nini choked at last.

“You can see for yourself how she is surrounded. If we had been able to get here sooner, we might have done something. Now—”

Kirby’s voice trailed off, and he gave an agonized look at his rifle.

The terrific dance in the clearing was going forward with madness which increased second by second. It had been a general debauch at first, with the whole thousand of the apes bellowing and squirming.

Now a change was becoming apparent. Red eyes which had caught the glare of ultimate madness, focused upon the caciques, the Duca, and the great king, all of whom were swaying together on the central stage. As they looked, the horde of ape-men broke loose with a heightened frenzy of noise and movement too overwhelming for Kirby to follow. He leaned forward, making an effort to see what actions of Duca and king could be so influencing the congregation. And then he saw.

Both of those central figures, the one with hair-covered giant's body and evilly grimacing face, the other with white robes and whipping silver hair, were definitely emulating the motions of a serpent!

It was as if the angles and joints had disappeared from their bodies. They were become gliding lengths of muscle as swift, as loathsome in their supple dartings and coilings as any snake lashing across the expanses of primeval jungle. Lost in what they did, unconscious of the nightmare, demoniac legion before which they danced, they had eyes only for the empty, ominous hole beneath Naida's cage. As they circled the hole, drawing ever and ever closer to it, they opened and closed their arms with the motion of great serpent jaws biting and striking.

"God in Heaven!" Kirby cried in a voice which shrilled with horror

and then broke.

It was not alone the Duca's dance which had wrung the shout from him. As Nina and Ivana shrieked and cowered, as Gori twitched, gasped, buried her head in trembling arms, Kirby knew that Naida was fully aware of what was going on—had been, perhaps, from the beginning.

Slowly, numbly she raised herself from her huddled position, rose to her knees, and clutching with despairing hands at the sides of her cage, looked out from between the bars.

The king and Duca edged closer to the hole until they were dancing upon its very brink. From that position, they stared down into the depths, their faces tense and strained. And then their look became radiant, exalted, joyous. Suddenly the Duca leaped back. He shrieked something at the gargoyle ape, and they flung their arms high in a commanding, mighty signal which was directed across the nightmare legion of ape-men, to the drums.

As Kirby winced in expectancy, the drums ceased to roar. Over the night smashed a hideous concussion of silence, deafening, absolute. And the ape-men—all of them—and the Duca, his caciques, and the king, ceased to dance. As if a whirlwind had hurled them, the

caciques scattered in all directions. The Duca, having already leaped back from the gaping orifice, suddenly turned and ran with blurred speed over to the slobbering, deadly still front rank of the congregation. An instant later the king crouched down beside him, and the whole stage was left bare and deserted.

Kirby gave one look at Naida, found her staring down, deeper and deeper down, into the hole which yawned beneath her so blackly. Then Kirby lowered his eyes until he, too, stared at the opening.

Amidst the pressing silence there stole from the earth an uneasy sound as of some immense thing waking and stirring. Came a hissing note as of escaping steam. The tribes of the ape-men waited in silent rapture. Kirby saw Naida still looking down, and felt Ivana crouch against him, fainting. He held his rifle tighter, and continued to stare.

Something red, like two small flames, licked up above the edge of the pit. Then Kirby gasped and all but went limp. Up and out into the moonlight slid a glistening white lump that moved from side to side and licked at the night with flickering black and red tipped forked tongue.

The glistening white lump was the head of Quetzalcoatl, buried God

of the People of the Temple. It was wider and bigger than an elephant's, and the round snake body could not have been encircled by a man's two arms. Kirby guessed at the probable length of the Serpent in terms of hundreds of feet.

Sick, numb, he glanced at Naida, who was still staring silently, and hitched his rifle half up to his shoulder. But he did not look down the sights yet. Although it was time, and more than time, that he fired, he would not do it until the last possible second, when nothing else remained.

Slowly from the hole slid a fifteen or twenty-foot column of the body, and Quetzalcoatl, thus reared, looked about him with a pair of eyes immense and not like snake's eyes, but heavily lidded and lashed; eyes that stared in a wise, evil way; eyes glittering and round and black as ink. After a time the mouth opened in a silent snarl, showing great white fangs and recurved simitars of teeth. The head was snow white, leperous in its scabby, scaly roughness, with here and there a patch of what looked like greenish fungus. From the rounded body trailed a short, unnatural, sickening growth of—feathers. Old and evil and very wise the Feathered Serpent seemed as his forked tongue flickered in and out and he stared at the ape horde, who stared back silently.

He seemed in no hurry to devote his attention to the cage set forth for his delectation. The black eyes rolled beneath their lashes, staring now at the Duca in his robes, and again at the huddled ape-people. But after ghastly seconds, Quetzalcoatl at last had seen enough.

Again the moonlight glinted against simitar teeth as the great, white, puffy mouth yawned in its silent snarl. Quetzalcoatl reared his head a little higher, slid further from his hole, and then looked up at the dangling cage of barked withes.

In Kirby's mind stirred cloudily a remembrance of moments in the past: the feel of Naida's first kiss, her look as they advanced to the altar in the temple. Then he saw things as they were now, with Naida surrounded by all the tribes of the apes, and with Quetzalcoatl staring from beneath heavily lidded lashes at the whiteness of her.

Suddenly Kirby stirred to free his shoulder of Ivana's supine weight against it, and he made himself look down his rifle. He let the breath half out of his lungs, and nursed the trigger.

But he did not fire.

All at once he started so violently that he almost hurtled from the tree. Suddenly, trembling, he lowered his rifle.

“Oh, thank God!” he yelped in the silence of the night.

The idea which had transformed him was perhaps the conception of a lunatic. But it was still an idea, and offered a chance.

Again Kirby peered down his rifle. But he no longer aimed at Naida. As Quetzalcoatl lifted white fangs, Kirby aimed deliberately at him, and turned loose his fire.

With the first shot, the Serpent lurched back from the cage, snapped his jaws, and closed evil, black eyes. From one lidded socket squirted dark blood. As a second and third shot crashed into the cavernous fanged mouth, and others ripped into the flat skull, Quetzalcoatl seemed dazed. His head wavered back and forth and his hiss filled the night, but he did nothing.

But all at once Kirby felt that he was *going* to do something in a second, and a great calm came upon him. He quickly jammed home a fresh clip of shells.

“Nini! Ivana! Fire at the Serpent. Give him everything you’ve got! Do you understand? Fire! He thinks that the ape-people have hurt him, and he will be after them in a second. If we have any luck, he will do to them what we never could have done, and maybe destroy

himself at the same time! Me, I’m going down there and get Naida now!”

Chapter 13

No sooner did Kirby see comprehension in the girls' faces than he swung around and let go of his perch. As he crashed, caught the next limb below him, and let go to crash to another, he had all he could do to suppress a yelp of joy. For all at once every voice in the ape congregation was raised in howls and screams of devastated terror.

He did not care how he got down from the tree. Seconds and half seconds were what counted. From the last limb above the ground he swung into space, and a split second later staggered to his feet, clutched his rifle, and started for the clearing. His lungs seemed collapsed and both ankles shattered. He did not care. Not when the ape screams were growing louder with every step he took. Not when he heard Nini and Ivana pouring down from their tree a continuation of the scorching fire he had started.

Panting, his breath only half regained, but steeled to make the fight of his life, he tore from the jungle into the clearing just in time to see a twisting, pain-convulsed seventy-foot coil of white muscle lash up and strike Naida's cage a blow which knocked it like a ball in the air. Naida screamed and hung to the bars.

But she was all right. It was not against her that Quetzalcoatl was

venting his wrath: the blow had been blind accident. As Kirby stood at the clearing's edge, he knew to a certainty that Quetzalcoatl's reaction to sudden pain had been all he had dared hope.

In front of him forty or fifty ape-bodies lay in a crushed heap. While yard after yard of the Serpent's bleached length streamed out of the hole, the hundreds of feet of coils already in the clearing suddenly whipped about a whole squadron of ape-men, and with a few constrictions annihilated them as if they had been ants. Across the clearing, the leperous head reared up as high as the trees and swooped down, fangs gleaming. The howls of the ape-men trying to flee, the screams of those who had been caught, rose until they became all one scream.

But Kirby had not left the safety of the tree merely to get a ringside view of carnage. He faced his next, his final task unhesitatingly. Straight out he leaped from the shadows of the jungle into the clearing, out into the presence of the beleagured, screaming ape-men. Well enough he knew that those creatures, despite their frenzy, might sight him and fall upon him at any second; well enough he knew that a single flick of the white coils all over the clearing could crush him instantly. But the time to worry about those hazards would be when they beset him. With a yell as piercing as any in the whole bedlam, Kirby rushed forward.

High up in the moonlit vault of the night, swaying between the two poles which supported it, hung the white cage which was Naida's prison. By the time Kirby had sprinted fifty yards, he knew that his yells had reached Naida. For she staggered to her knees and looked straight at him. A second later, though, he realized that the almost inevitable recognition of him by ape-men had come to pass.

Eight or ten of the creatures, left unmolested for a second by the Serpent, halted in the mad run they were making for the sheltering jungle, and while one pointed with hairy arm, the others let out shrieks. Kirby gritted his teeth in something like despair. Then he realized that the worst danger—Quetzalcoatl's blurred coils—was not threatening him so far. And he went on, straight toward the ape-men.

He did not look where, how, or at whom he struck. All he knew was that his rifle blazed, and as he clubbed at soft flesh with the butt, blood spurted, and new screams filled the night. He felt and half saw big, stinking bodies going down, and clawed his way forward, around them, over them. Then he felt no more bodies, and knew that he was through. A little farther he ran over the trampled earth, and stopped and looked up.

The howls of the living, the shrieks of the dying deafened him.

Renewed shots from the rifles in the tree, made the Serpent lash about in a dazzling white blur, smashing trees, apes, everything in its path. But Kirby, finding himself still safe, scarcely heard or saw. His eyes, turned upward, saw one thing only.

“Naida!”

She had snapped two of the withes of the cage and was leaning forward through the opening. Her face was livid with horror and exhaustion, but she was able to look at him with eyes that glowed.

“You—you came!” she gasped. “You came to me!”

In a flash Kirby jumped over to the poles and began to cast off one of the lines which held the cage aloft.

“Get ready for a bump!” he shouted, as he lowered away, arms straining.

Paying out the one line left the cage suspended from the second, but let it sweep from its position between the poles, down toward one pole. As the thing struck the tall support, Kirby bounded over to stand beneath it, only too sharply aware of the death waiting for him on every side, but ignoring it. Naida still hung suspended a good

twenty feet above him, but there was no time to let go the other line. He braced himself and held up his arms.

“Jump!” he yelled.

Then he saw the white gown sweeping down toward him, felt the crash of a soft body against his, and staggered back. Recovered in a tenth of a second, he drew a deep breath, and looked at Naida beside him, tall and brave, unhurt.

“Are you able to run?” he snapped, and then, the moment she nodded, motioned toward the jungle.

Behind them, in front, on all sides, rose screams so horrible that he wondered even then if he would ever forget. As he started to run, he realized that when Naida had finally landed in his arms, the nearest squirming loop of the Serpent had been no more than four yards away, and that, right now, if their luck failed, a single unfortunate twist of the incredible hundreds of feet of white muscle could still end things for them.

But luck was not going to fail. Somehow Kirby knew it as they sprinted side by side, and the sheltering jungle loomed closer every second. And a moment later, something beside his own inner faith

made him know it, too.

“Look, Naida! Look!” he screeched all at once.

At the upper end of the clearing, where an unthinkable slaughter was going on, there leaped out from amongst a surging mass of apes, leaped out from almost directly beneath a downward smashing blur of white snake folds, a figure which Kirby had not seen or thought about for many seconds.

The Duca’s robe hung in tatters from his body. Blood had smeared his white hair. His eyes were those of a man gone mad from fear. And as he escaped the tons of muscle which so nearly had engulfed him, he began to run even as Kirby felt himself running.

Straight toward him and Naida, Kirby saw the man spurt, but whether the mad eyes recognized them or not, he could not tell, nor did he care. All at once his feeling that they would escape the clearing, became conviction.

For suddenly the same single twitch of Quetzalcoatl’s vast folds which might have finished them, if luck had not held, put an end to the Duca’s retreat. At one moment the man’s path was clear. The next—

Kirby, running for dear life, gasped, and heard Naida cry out beside him.

The great loops flashed, twisted, and where had been an open way for the Duca, loomed a wall of scaly white flesh. The living wall twitched, closed in; and as the Duca dodged and leaped to no avail, a cry shrilled across the night—a cry that cut like a knife.

Kirby saw no more. But it was likely that most, if not all, of the caciques had gone with the Duca.

Somehow, anyhow, in but a few seconds more, Kirby dove into the spot from which he had left the jungle to enter the clearing. As Naida pressed against him, winded but still strong, he found his best hopes for immediate retreat realized, for Gori, Nini, and Ivana, down from their tree, ran toward them.

“She is all right,” he said with a gesture which cut short the outbursts ready to come. “But we’ve got to keep going. Ivana, tell Gori that her people are gone, wiped out, but that if she will cast her lot with us, we will not forget what she has done. Come on!”

With Gori leading them they ran, stumbling, recovering themselves, stumbling again. To breathe became an agony. But not until many

minutes later, when they plowed into the cover of a fern belt whose blackness not even the moonlight had pierced, did Kirby call a halt.

Here he swept a final glance behind him, listened long for sounds of pursuit, and relaxed a little only when none came to disturb the night stillness. However, that relaxation, now that he permitted it at last, meant something.

The complete silence gave him final conviction that what he had said about the whole ape-people being destroyed was true. As for the Serpent—well, perhaps he was destroyed even as they were. Perhaps not. In any case the grip which Quetzalcoatl held upon the imagination of the People of the Temple had been destroyed by this night's work, and that was what counted most. The Serpent would be worshipped no longer.

Kirby reached out in the darkness and found Naida's hand.

"Come along," he said to all of the party. "I think the past is—the past. And with Gori to guide us out of the jungle, and our own brains to guide us through the jungle of self-government after that, I think the future ought to be bright enough."

Ivana and Nini both chuckled as they moved again, and Gori,

hearing her name spoken in a kindly voice, twitched her ears appreciatively. Naida drew very close to Kirby.

“What are you thinking about?” she asked presently.

“The—temple,” he answered.

“About the crown which probably is still lying on the altar there?”

Kirby looked up in surprise.

“Why, I had forgotten about that!”

“What was it, then?”

“But what could I have been thinking about except how you looked when we came together in that gloomy place, and walked forward, side by side? *Now* have I told you enough?”

Naida laughed.

“There is so much to be done!” Kirby exclaimed then. “As soon as possible, we must climb to the Valley of the Geyser, go on into the outer world, and there seek carefully for men who are willing, and fit, to come here. And that is only one task. Others come crowding to

me every second. But first—”

“What?” Naida asked softly.

“The temple. Naida, we will reach the plateau sometime to-morrow. All of the girls who kept watch there will be waiting for us, and it will be a time of happiness. May we not, then, go to the temple? There will be no priests. But we will make our pledges without them. Tell me, may I hope that it will be so—to-morrow?”

Naida did not answer at once. She did not even nod. But presently her shoulder, still fragrant with faint perfume, brushed his. She clasped his hand then, and as they walked on in silence, Kirby knew.

January 1931

#64 The Dark Side Of Antri, By Sewell Peaslee Wright:

Commander John Hanson relates an interplanetary adventure illustrating the splendid service spirit of the men of the special patrol.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

An officer of the Special Patrol Service dropped in to see me the other day. He was a young fellow, very sure of himself, and very kindly towards an old man.

He was doing a monograph, he said, for his own amusement, upon the early forms of our present offensive and defensive weapons. Could I tell him about the first Deuber spheres and the earlier disintegrator rays and the crude atomic bombs we tried back when I first entered the Service?

I could, of course. And I did. But a man's memory does not improve in the course of a century of Earth years. Our scientists have not been able to keep a man's brain as fresh as his body, despite all their vaunted progress. There is a lot these deep thinkers, in their great laboratories, don't know. The whole universe gives them the credit for what's been done, yet the men of action who carried out the ideas —but I'm getting away from my pert young officer.

He listened to me with interest and toleration. Now and then he helped me out, when my memory failed me on some little detail. He seemed to have a very fair theoretical knowledge of the subject.

"It seems impossible," he commented, when we had gone over the ground he had outlined, "that the Service could have done its work with such crude and undeveloped weapons, does it not?" He smiled in a superior sort of way, as though to imply we had probably done the best we could, under the circumstances.

I suppose I should not have permitted his attitude to irritate me, but I am an old man, and my life has not been an easy one.

"Youngster," I said—like many old people, I prefer spoken conversation—"back in those days the Service was handicapped in every way. We lacked weapons, we lacked instruments, we lacked

popular support, and backing. But we had men, in those days, who did their work with the tools that were at hand. And we did it well."

"Yes, sir!" the youngster said hastily—after all, a retired commander in the Special Patrol Service does rate a certain amount of respect, even from these perky youngsters—"I know that, sir. It was the efforts of men like yourself who gave us the proud traditions we have to-day."

"Well, that's hardly true," I corrected him. "I'm not quite so old as that. We had a fine set of traditions when I entered the Service, son. But we did our share to carry them on, I'll grant you that."

"'Nothing Less than Complete Success,'" quoted the lad almost reverently, giving the ancient motto of our service. "That is a fine tradition for a body of men to aspire to, sir."

"True. True." The ring in the boy's voice brought memories flocking. It was a proud motto; as old as I am, the words bring a thrill even now, a thrill comparable only with that which comes from seeing old Earth swell up out of the darkness of space after days of outer emptiness. Old Earth, with her wispy white clouds and her broad seas— Oh, I know I'm provincial, but that is another thing that must be forgiven an old man.

“I imagine, sir,” said the young officer, “that you could tell many a strange story of the Service, and the sacrifices men have made to keep that motto the proud boast it is to-day.”

“Yes,” I told him. “I could do that. I have done so. That is my occupation, now that I have been retired from active service. I—”

“You are a historian?” he broke in eagerly.

I forgave him the interruption. I can still remember my own rather impetuous youth.

“Do I look like a historian?” I think I smiled as I asked him the question, and held out my hands to him. Big brown hands they are, hardened with work, stained and drawn from old acid burns, and the bite of blue electric fire. In my day we worked with crude tools indeed; tools that left their mark upon the workman.

“No. But—”

I waved the explanation aside.

“Historians deal with facts, with accomplishments, with dates and places and the names of great men. I write—what little I do write—of men and high adventures, so that in this time of softness and easy

living some few who may read my scribblings may live with me those days when the worlds of the universe were strange to each other, and there were many new things to be found and marveled at."

"And I'll venture, sir, that you find much enjoyment in the work," commented the youngster with a degree of perception with which I had not credited him.

"True. As I write, forgotten faces peer at me through the mists of the years, and strong, friendly voices call to me from out of the past…."

"It must be wonderful to live the old adventures through again," said the young officer hastily. Youth is always afraid of sentiment in old people. Why this should be, I do not know. But it is so.

The lad—I wish I had made a note of his name; I predict a future for him in the Service—left me alone, then, with the thoughts he had stirred up in my mind.

Old faces … old voices. Old scenes, too.

Strange worlds, strange peoples. A hundred, a thousand different tongues. Men that came only to my knee, and men that towered ten feet above my head. Creatures—possessed of all the attributes of

men except physical form—that belonged only in the nightmare realms of sleep.

An old man's most treasured possessions: his memories. A face drew close out of the flocking recollections; the face of a man I had known and loved more than a brother so many years—dear God, how many years—ago.

Anderson Croy. Search all the voluminous records of the bearded historians, and you will not find his name. No great figure of history was this friend of mine; just an obscure officer on an obscure ship of the Special Patrol Service.

And yet there is a people who owe to him their very existence.

I wonder if they have forgotten him? It would not surprise me.

The memory of the universe is not a reliable thing.

Anderson Croy was, like most of the officer personnel of the Special Patrol Service, a native of Earth.

They had tried to make a stoop-shouldered dabbler in formulas out of him, but he was not the stuff from which good scientists are moulded. He was young, when I first knew him, and strong; he had

mild blue eyes and a quick smile. And he had a fine, steely courage that a man could love.

I was in command, then, of the *Ertak*, my second ship. I inherited Anderson Croy with the ship, and I liked him from the first time I laid eyes upon him.

As I recall it, we worked together on the *Ertak* for nearly two years, Earth time. We went through some tight places together. I remember our experience, shortly after I took over the *Ertak*, on the monstrous planet Callor, whose tiny, gentle people were attacked by strange, vapid Things that come down upon them from the fastness of the polar cap, and—

But I wander from the story I wish to tell here. An old man's mind is a weak and weary thing that totters and weaves from side to side; like a worn-out ship, it is hard to keep on a straight course.

We were out on one of those long, monotonous patrols, skirting the outer boundaries of the known universe, that were, at that time, before the building of all the many stations we have to-day a dreaded part of the Special Patrol Service routine.

Not once had we landed to stretch our legs. Slowing up to

atmospheric speed took time, and we were on a schedule that allowed for no waste of even minutes. We approached the various worlds only close enough to report, and to receive an assurance that all was well. A dog's life, but part of the game.

My log showed nearly a hundred "All's well" reports, as I remember it, when we slid up to Antri, which was, so far as size is concerned, one of our smallest ports o' call.

Antri, I might add, for the benefit of those who have forgotten their maps of the universe, is a satellite of A-411, which, in turn, is one of the largest bodies of the universe, and both uninhabited and uninhabitable. Antri is somewhat larger than the moon, Earth's satellite, and considerably farther from its controlling body.

"Report our presence, Mr. Croy," I ordered wearily. "And please ask Mr. Correy to keep a sharp watch on the attraction meter." These huge bodies such as A-411 are not pleasant companions at space speeds. A few minute's trouble—space ships gave trouble, in those days—and you melted like a drop of solder when you struck the atmospheric belt.

"Yes, sir!" There never was a crisper young officer than Croy.

I bent over my tables, working out our position and charting our course for the next period. In a few seconds Croy was back, his blue eyes gleaming.

“Sir, an emergency is reported on Antri. We are to make all possible speed, to Oreo, their governing city. I gather that it is very important.”

“Very well, Mr. Croy.” I can’t say the news was unwelcome. Monotony kills young men. “Have the disintegrator ray generators inspected and tested. Turn out the watch below in such time that we may have all hands on duty when we arrive. If there is an emergency, we shall be prepared for it. I shall be with Mr. Correy in the navigating room; if there are any further communications, relay them to me there.”

I hurried up to the navigating room, and gave Correy his orders.

“Do not reduce speed until it is absolutely necessary,” I concluded. “We have an emergency call from Antri, and minutes may be important. How long do you make it to Oreo?”

“About an hour to the atmosphere; say an hour more to set down in the city. I believe that’s about right, sir.”

I nodded, frowning at the twin charts, with their softly glowing lights, and turned to the television disc, picking up Antri without difficulty.

Of course, back in those days we had the huge and cumbersome discs, their faces shielded by a hood, that would be suitable only for museum pieces now. But they did their work very well, and I searched Antri carefully, at varying ranges, for any sign of disturbances. I found none.

The dark portion, of course, I could not penetrate. Antri has one portion of its face that is turned forever from its sun, and one half that is bathed in perpetual light. The long twilight zone was uninhabited, for the people of Antri are a sun-loving race, and their cities and villages appeared only in the bright areas of perpetual sunlight.

Just as we reduced to atmospheric speed, Croy sent up a message

“The Governing Council sends word that we are to set down on the platform atop the Hall of Government, the large, square white building in the center of the city. They say we will have no difficulty in locating it.”

I thanked him and ordered him to stand by for further messages, if any, and picked up the far-flung city of Oreo in my television disc.

There was no mistaking the building Croy had mentioned. It stood out from the city around it, cool and white, its mighty columns glistening like crystal in the sun. I could even make out the landing platform, slightly elevated above the roof on spidery arches of silvery metal.

We sped straight for the city at just a fraction of space speed, but the hand of the surface temperature gauge crept slowly toward the red line that marked the dangerous incandescent point. I saw that Correy, like the good navigating officer he was, was watching the gauge as closely as myself, and hence said nothing. We both knew that the Antrians would not have sent a call for help to a ship of the Special Patrol Service if there had not been a real emergency.

Correy had made a good guess in saying that it would take about an hour, after entering the gaseous envelope of Antri, to reach our destination. It was just a few minutes—Earth time, of course—less than that when we settled gently onto the landing platform.

A group of six or seven Antrians, dignified old men, wearing the short, loosely belted white robes that we found were their universal

costume, were waiting for us at the exit of the *Ertak*, whose sleek, smooth sides were glowing dull red.

"You have hastened, and that is well, sirs," said the spokesman of the committee. "You find Antri in dire need." He spoke in the universal language, and spoke it softly and perfectly. "But you will pardon me for greeting you with that which is, of necessity, uppermost in my mind, and in the minds of these, my companions.

"Permit me to welcome you to Antri, and to introduce those who extend those greetings." Rapidly, he ran through a list of names, and each of the men bowed gravely in acknowledgment of our greetings. I have never observed a more courteous nor a more courtly people than the Antrians; their manners are as beautiful as their faces.

Last of all, their spokesman introduced himself. Bori Tulber, he was called, and he had the honor of being master of the Council—the chief executive of Antri.

When the introductions had been completed, the committee led our little party to a small, cylindrical elevator which dropped us, swiftly and silently, on a cushion of air, to the street level of the great building. Across a wide, gleaming corridor our conductors led us, and stood aside before a massive portal through which ten men

might have walked abreast.

We found ourselves in a great chamber with a vaulted ceiling of bright, gleaming metal. At the far end of the room was an elevated rostrum, flanked on either side by huge, intricate masses of statuary, of some creamy, translucent stone that glowed as with some inner light. Semicircular rows of seats, each with its carved desk, surmounted by numerous electrical controls, occupied all the floor space. None of the seats was occupied.

“We have excused the Council from our preliminary deliberations,” explained Bori Tulber, “because such a large body is unwieldy. My companions and myself represent the executive heads of the various departments of the Council, and we are empowered to act.” He led us through the great council chamber, and into an anteroom, beautifully decorated, and furnished with exceedingly comfortable chairs.

“Be seated, sirs,” the Master of the Council suggested. We obeyed silently, and Bori Tulber stood before, gazing thoughtfully into space.

“I do not know just where to begin,” he said slowly. “You men in uniform know, I presume, but little of this world of ours. I presume I

had best begin far back.

“Since you are navigators of space, undoubtedly, you are acquainted with the fact that Antri is a world divided into two parts; one of perpetual night, and the other of perpetual day, due to the fact that Antri revolves but once upon its axis during the course of its circuit of its sun, thus presenting always the same face to our luminary.

“We have no day and night, such as obtain on other spheres. There are no set hours for working nor for sleeping nor for pleasure. The measure of a man’s work is the measure of his ambition, or his strength, or his desire. It is so also with his sleep and with his pleasures. It is—it has been—a very pleasant arrangement.

“Ours is a fertile country, and our people live very long and very happily with little effort. We have believed that ours was the nearest of all the worlds to the ideal; that nothing could disturb the peace and happiness of our people. We were mistaken.

“There is a dark side to Antri. A side upon which the sun never has shone. A dismal place of gloom, which is like the night upon other worlds.

“No Antrian has, to our knowledge, ever penetrated this part of

Antri, and lived to tell of his experience. We do not even till the land close to the twilight zone. Why should we, when we have so much fine land upon which the sun shines bright and fair always, save for the two brief seasons of rain?

“We have never given thought to what might be on the dark face of Antri. Darkness and night are things unknown to us; we know of them only from the knowledge which has come to us from other worlds. And now—now we have been brought face to face with a terrible danger which comes to us from that other side of this sphere.

“A people have grown there. A terrible people that I shall not try to describe to you. They threaten us with slavery, with extinction. Four ara ago (the Antrians have their own system of reckoning time, just as we have on Earth, instead of using the universal system, based upon the enaro. An ara corresponds to about fifty hours, Earth time.) we did not know that such a people existed. Now their shadow is upon all our beautifully sunny country, and unless you can aid us, before other help can reach us, I am convinced that Antri is doomed!”

For a moment not one of us spoke. We sat there, staring at the old man who had just ceased speaking.

Only a man ripened and seasoned with the passing of years could have stood there before us and uttered, so quietly and solemnly, words such as had just come from his lips. Only in his eyes could we catch a glimpse of the torment which gripped his soul.

“Sir,” I said, and have never felt younger than at that moment, when I tried to frame some assurance to this splendid old man who had turned to me and my youthful crew for succor, “we shall do what it lies within our power to do. But tell us more of this danger which threatens.

“I am no man of science, and yet I cannot see how men could live in a land never reached by the sun. There would be no heat, no vegetation. Is that not so?”

“Would that it were!” replied the Master of the Council, bitterly. “What you say would be indeed the truth, were it not for the great river and seas of our sunny Antri, which bear their heated waters to this dark portion of our world, and make it habitable.

“And as for this danger, there is little to be said. At some time, men of our country, men who fish, or venture upon the water in commerce, have been borne, all unwillingly, across the shadowy twilight zone and into the land of darkness. They did not come back,

but they were found there and despoiled of their menores.

“Somehow, these creatures who dwell in darkness determined the use of the menore, and now that they have resolved that they shall rule all this sphere, they have been able to make their threat clear to us. Perhaps”—and Bori Tulber smiled faintly and terribly—“you would like to have that message direct from its bearer?”

“Is that possible, sir?” I asked eagerly, glancing around the room. “How—”

“Come with me,” said the Master of the Council gently. “Alone—for too many near him excites this terrible messenger. You have your menore?”

“No. I had not thought there would be need of it.” The menores of those days, it should be remembered, were heavy, cumbersome circlets that were worn upon the head like a sort of crown, and one did not go so equipped unless in real need of the device. To-day, of course, your menores are but jeweled trinkets that convey thought a score of times more effectively, and weigh but a tenth as much.

“It is a lack easily remedied.” Bori Tulber excused himself with a little bow and hurried out into the great council chamber, to appear

again in a moment with a menore in either hand.

“Now, if your companions and mine will excuse us for a moment….” He smiled around the seated group apologetically. There was a murmur of assent, and the old man opened a door in the other side of the room.

“It is not far,” he said. “I will go first, and show you the way.”

He led me quickly down a long, narrow corridor to a pair of steep stairs that circled far down into the very foundation of the building. The walls of the corridor and the stairs were without windows, but were as bright as noonday from the ethon tubes which were set into both ceiling and walls.

Silently we circled our way down the spiral stairs, and silently the Master of the Council paused before a door at the bottom—a door of dull red metal.

“This is the keeping place of those who come before the Council charged with wrong doing,” explained Bori Tulber. His fingers rested upon and pressed certain of a ring of small white buttons in the face of the door, and it opened swiftly and noiselessly. We entered, and the door closed behind us with a soft thud.

“Behold one of those who live in the darkness,” said the Master of the Council grimly. “Do not put on the menore until you have a grip upon yourself: I would not have him know how greatly he disturbs us.”

I nodded, dumbly, holding the heavy menore dangling in my hand.

I have said that I have beheld strange worlds and strange people in my life, and it is true that I have. I have seen the headless people of that red world Iralo, the ant people, the dragon-fly people, the terrible carnivorous trees of L-472, and the pointed heads of a people who live upon a world which may not be named. But I have still to see a more terrible creature than that which lay before me now.

He—or it—was reclining upon the floor, for the reason that he could not have stood. No room save one with a vaulted ceiling such as the great council chamber, could offer room enough for this creature to walk erect.

He was, roughly, a shade better than twice my height, yet I believe he would have weighed but little more. You have seen rank weeds that have grown up in the darkness to reach the sun; if you can imagine a man who had done likewise, you can, perhaps, picture that which I saw before me.

His legs at the thigh were no larger than my arm, and his arms were but half the size of my wrist, and jointed twice instead of but once. He wore a careless garment of some dirty yellow, shaggy hide, and his skin, revealed on feet and arms and face, was a terrible, bloodless white; the dead white of a fish's belly. Maggot white. The white of something that had never known the sun.

The head was small and round, with features that were a caricature of man's. His ears were huge, and had the power of movement, for they cocked forward as we entered the room. The nose was not prominently arched, but the nostrils were wide, and very thin, as was his mouth, which was faintly tinged with dusky blue, instead of healthy red. At one time his eyes had been nearly round, and, in proportion, very large. Now they were but shadowy pockets, mercifully covered by shrunken, wrinkled lids that twitched but did not lift.

He moved as we entered, and from a reclining position, propped up on the double elbows of one spidery arm, he changed to a sitting position that brought his head nearly to the ceiling. He smiled sickeningly, and a queer, sibilant whispering came from the bluish lips.

"That is his way of talking," explained Bori Tulber. "His eyes, you

will note, have been gouged out. They cannot stand the light; they prepared their messenger carefully for his work, you'll see."

He placed his menore upon his head, and motioned me to do likewise. The creature searched the floor with one white, leathery hand, and finally located his menore, which he adjusted clumsily.

"You will have to be very attentive," explained my companion. "He expresses himself in terms of pictures only, of course, and his is not a highly developed mind. I shall try to get him to go over the entire story for us again, if I can make him understand. Emanate nothing yourself; he is easily confused."

I nodded silently, my eyes fixed with a sort of fascination upon the creature from the darkness, and waited.

Back on the *Ertak* again. I called all my officers together for a conference.

"Gentlemen," I said, "we are confronted with a problem of such gravity that I doubt my ability to describe it clearly.

"Briefly, this civilized, beautiful portion of Antri is menaced by a terrible fate. In the dark portion of this unhappy world there live a

people who have the lust of conquest in their hearts—and the means at hand with which to wreck this world of perpetual sunlight.

“I have the ultimatum of this people direct from their messenger. They want a terrible tribute in the form of slaves. These slaves would have to live in perpetual darkness, and wait upon the whims of the most monstrous beings these eyes of mine have ever seen. And the number of slaves demanded would—as nearly as I could gather, mean about a third of the entire population. Further tribute in the form of sufficient food to support these slaves is also demanded.”

“But, in God’s name, sir,” burst forth Croy, his eyes blazing, “by what means do they, propose to inforce their infamous demands?”

“By the power of darkness—and a terrible cataclysm. Their wise men—and it would seem that some of them are not unversed in science—have discovered a way to unbalance this world, so that they can cause darkness to creep over this land that has never known it. And as darkness advances, these people of the sun will be utterly helpless before a race that loves darkness, and can see in it like cats. That, gentlemen, is that fate which confronts this world of Antri!”

There was a ghastly silence for a moment, and then Croy, always impetuous, spoke up again.

“How do they propose to do this thing sir?”, he asked hoarsely.

“With devilish simplicity. They have a great canal dug nearly to the great polar cap of ice. Should they complete it, the hot waters of their seas will be liberated upon this vast ice field, and the warm waters will melt it quickly. If you have not forgotten your lessons, gentlemen, you will remember, since most of you are of Earth, that our scientists tell us our own world turned over in much this same fashion, from natural means, and established for itself new poles. Is that not true?”

Grave, almost frightened nods travelled around the little semicircle of white, thoughtful faces.

“And is there nothing, sir, that we can do?” asked Kincaide, my second officer, in an awed whisper.

“That is the purpose of this conclave: to determine what may be done. We have our bombs and our rays, it is true, but what is the power of this one ship against the people of half a world? And such a people!” I shuddered, despite myself, at the memory of that grinning creature in the cell far below the floor of the council chamber. “This city, and its thousands, we might save, it is true—but not the whole half of this world. And that is the task the Council and its Master

have set before us.”

“Would it be possible to frighten them?” asked Croy. “I gather that they are not an advanced race. Perhaps a show of power—the rays—the atomic pistol—bombs— Call it strategy, sir, or just plain bluff. It seems the only chance.”

“You have heard the suggestion, gentlemen,” I said. “Has anyone a better?”

“How does Mr. Croy plan to frighten these people of the darkness?” asked Kincaide, who was always practical.

“By going to their country, in this ship, and then letting events take their course,” replied Croy promptly. “Details will have to be settled on the spot, as I see it.”

“I believe Mr. Croy is right,” I decided. “The messenger of these people must be returned to his own kind; the sooner the better. He has given me a mental map of his country; I believe that it will be possible for me to locate the principal city, in which his ruler lives. We will take him there, and then—may God aid us gentlemen.”

“Amen,” nodded Croy, and the echo of the word ran from lip to lip

like the prayer it was. “When do we start?”

I hesitated for just an instant.

“Now,” I brought forth crisply. “Immediately. We are gambling with the fate of a world, a fine and happy people. Let us throw the dice quickly, for the strain of waiting will not help us. Is that as you would wish it, gentlemen?”

“It is, sir!” came the grave chorus.

“Very well. Mr. Croy, please report with a detail of ten men, to Bori Tulber, and tell him of our decision. Bring the messenger back with you. The rest of you, gentlemen, to your stations. Make any preparations you may think advisable. Be sure that every available exterior light is in readiness. Let me be notified the moment the messenger is on board and we are ready to take off. Thank you, gentlemen!”

I hastened to my quarters and brought the *Ertak’s* log down to the minute, explaining in detail the course of action we had decided upon, and the reasons for it. I knew, as did all the *Ertak’s* officers who had saluted so crisply, and so coolly gone about the business of carrying out my orders, that we would return from our trip to the

dark side of Antri triumphant or—not at all.

Even in these soft days, men still respect the stern, proud motto of our service: “Nothing Less Than Complete Success.” The Special Patrol does what it is ordered to do, or no man returns to present excuses. That is a tradition to bring tears of pride to the eyes of even an old man, in whose hands there is strength only for the wielding of a pen. And I was young, in those days.

It was perhaps a quarter of an hour when word came from the navigating room that the messenger was aboard, and we were ready to depart. I closed the log, wondering, I remember, if I would ever make another entry therein, and, if not, whether the words I had just inscribed would ever see the light of day. The love of life is strong in men so young. Then I hurried to the navigating room and took charge.

Bori Tulber had furnished me with large scale maps of the daylight portion of Antri. From the information conveyed to me by the messenger of the people of darkness—the Chisee they called themselves, as nearly as I could get the sound—I rapidly sketched in the map of the other side of Antri, locating their principal city with a small black circle.

Realising that the location of the city we sought was only approximate, we did not bother to work out exact bearings. We set the *Ertak* on her course at a height of only a few thousand feet, and set out at low atmospheric speed, anxiously watching for the dim line of shadow that marked the twilight zone, and the beginning of what promised to be the last mission of the *Ertak* and every man she carried within her smooth, gleaming body.

“Twilight zone in view, sir,” reported Croy at length.

“Thank you, Mr. Croy. Have all the exterior lights and searchlights turned on. Speed and course as at present, for the time being.”

I picked up the twilight zone without difficulty in the television disc, and at full power examined the terrain.

The rich crops that fairly burst from the earth of the sunlit portion of Antri were not to be observed here. The Antrians made no effort to till this ground, and I doubt that it would have been profitable to do so, even had they wished to come so close to the darkness they hated.

The ground seemed dank, and great dark slugs moved heavily upon its greasy surface. Here and there strange pale growths grew in

patches—twisted, spotted growths that seemed somehow unhealthy and poisonous.

I searched the country ahead, pressing further and further into the line of darkness that was swiftly approaching. As the light of the sun faded, our monstrous searchlights cut into the gloom ahead, their great beams slashing the shadows.

In the dark country I had expected to find little if any vegetable growth. Instead, I found that it was a veritable jungle through which even our searchlight rays could not pass.

How tall the growths of this jungle might be, I could not tell, yet I had the feeling that they were tall indeed. They were not trees, these pale, weedy arms that reached towards the dark sky. They were soft and pulpy, and without leaves; just long naked sickly arms that divided and subdivided and ended in little smooth stumps like amputated limbs.

That there was some kind of activity within the shelter of this weird jungle, was evident enough, for I could catch glimpses, now and then of moving things. But what they might be, even the searching eye of the television disc could not determine.

One of our searchlight beams, waving through the darkness like the curious antenna of some monstrous insect, came to rest upon a spot far ahead. I followed the beam with the disc, and bent closer, to make sure my eyes did not deceive me.

I was looking at a vast cleared place in the pulpy jungle—a cleared space in the center of which there was a city.

A city built of black, sweating stone, each house exactly like every other house: tall, thin slices of stone, without windows, chimneys or ornamentation of any kind. The only break in the walls was the slit-like door of each house. Instead of being arranged along streets crossing each other at right angles, these houses were built in concentric circles broken only by four narrow streets then ran from the open space in the center of the city to the four points of the compass. Around the entire city was an exceedingly high wall built of and buttressed with the black, sweating stone of which the houses were constructed.

That it was a densely populated city there was ample evidence. People—they were creatures like the messenger; that the Chisee are a people, despite their terrible shape, is hardly debatable—were running up and down the four radial streets, and around the curved connecting streets, in the wildest confusion, their double-elbowed

arms flung across their eyes. But even as I watched, the crowd thinned and melted swiftly away, until the streets of the queer, circular city were utterly deserted.

“The city ahead is not the one we are seeking, sir?” asked Croy, who had evidently been observing the scene through one of the smaller television discs. “I take it that governing city will be farther in the interior.”

“According to my rather sketchy information, yes.” I replied. “However, keep all the searchlight operators busy, going over very bit of the country within the reach of their beams. You have men on all the auxiliary television discs?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. Any findings of interest should be reported to me instantly. And—Mr. Croy!”

“Yes, sir?”

“You might order, if you will, that rations be served all men at their posts.” Over such country as this, I felt it would be wise to have every man ready for an emergency. It was, perhaps, as well that I

issued this order.

It was perhaps half an hour after we had passed the circular city when, far ahead, I could see the pale, unhealthy forest thinning out. A half dozen of our searchlight beams played upon the denuded area, and as I brought the television disc to bear I saw that we were approaching a vast swamp, in which little pools of black water reflected the dazzling light of our searching beams.

Nor was this all. Out of the swamp a thousand strange, winged things were rising: yellowish, bat-like things with forked tails and fierce hooked beaks. And like some obscene miasma from that swamp, they rose and came straight for the *Ertak*!

Instantly I pressed the attention signal that warned every man on the ship.

“All disintegrator rays in action at once!” I barked into the transmitter. “Broad beams, and full energy. Bird-like creatures, dead ahead; do not cease action until ordered!”

I heard the disintegrator ray generators deepen their notes before I finished speaking, and I smiled grimly, turning to Correy.

“Slow down as quickly and as much as possible, Mr. Correy,” I ordered. “We have work to do ahead.”

He nodded, and gave the order to the operating room; I felt the forward surge that told me my order was being obeyed, and turned my attention again to the television disc.

The ray operators were doing their work well. The search lights showed the air streaked with fine siftings of greasy dust, and these strange winged creatures were disappearing by the scores as the disintegrator rays beat and played upon them.

But they came on gamely, fiercely. Where there had been thousands, there were but hundreds … scores … dozens….

There were only five left. Three of them disappeared at once, but the two remaining came on unhesitatingly, their dirty yellow bat-like wings flapping heavily, their naked heads outstretched, and hooked beaks snapping.

One of them disappeared in a little sifting of greasy dust, and the same ray dissolved one wing of the remaining creature. He turned over suddenly, the one good wing flapping wildly, and tumbled towards the waiting swamp that has spawned him. Then, as the ray

eagerly followed him, the last of that hellish brood disappeared.

“Circle slowly, Mr. Correy,” I ordered. I wanted to make sure there were none of these terrible creatures left. I felt that nothing so terrible should be left alive—even in a world of darkness.

Through the television disc I searched the swamp. As I had half suspected, the filthy ooze held the young of this race of things: grub-like creatures that flipped their heavy bodies about in the slime, alarmed by the light which searched them out.

“All disintegrator rays on the swamp,” I ordered. “Sweep it from margin to margin. Let nothing be left alive there.”

I had a well trained crew. The disintegrator rays massed themselves into a marching wall of death, and swept up and down the swamp as a plough turns its furrows.

It was easy to trace their passage, for behind them the swamp disappeared, leaving in its stead row after row of broad, dusty paths. When we had finished there was no swamp: there was only a naked area upon which nothing lived, and upon which, for many years, nothing would grow.

“Good work,” I commended the disintegrator ray men. “Cease action.” And then, to Correy, “Put her on her course again, please.”

An hour went by. We passed several more of the strange, damp circular cities, differing from the first we had seen only in the matter of size. Another hour passed, and I became anxious. If we were on our proper course, and I had understood the Chisee messenger correctly, we should be very close to the governing city. We should —

The waving beam of one of the searchlights came suddenly to rest. Three or four other beams followed it—and then all the others.

“Large city to port, sir!” called Croy excitedly.

“Thank you. I believe it is our destination. Cut all searchlights except the forward beam. Mr. Correy!”

“Yes, sir.”

“You can take her over visually now, I believe. The forward searchlight beam will keep our destination in view for you. Set her down cautiously in the center of the city in any suitable place. And—remain at the controls ready for any orders, and have the operating

room crew do likewise.”

“Yes, sir,” said Correy crisply.

With a tenseness I could not control, I bent over the hooded television disc and studied the mighty governing city of the Chisee.

The governing city of the Chisee was not unlike the others we had seen, save that it was very much larger, and had eight spoke-like streets radiating from its center, instead of four. The protective wall was both thicker and higher.

There was another difference. Instead of a great open space in the center of the city, there was a central, park-like space, in the middle of which was a massive pile, circular in shape, and built, like all the rest of the city, of the black, sweating rock which seemed to be the sole building material of the Chisee.

We set the *Ertak* down close to the big circular building, which we guessed—and correctly—to be the seat of government. I ordered the searchlight ray to be extinguished the moment we landed, and the ethon tubes that illuminated our ship inside to be turned off, so that we might accustom our eyes as much as possible to darkness, finding our way about with small ethon tube flashlights.

With a small guard, I stood at the forward exit of the *Ertak* and watched the huge circular door back out on its mighty threads, and finally swing to one side on its massive gimbals. Croy—the only officer with me—and I both wore our menores, and carried full expeditionary equipment, as did the guard.

The Chisee messenger, grimacing and talking excitedly in his sibilant, whispering voice, crouched on all fours (he could not stand in that small space) and waited, three men of the guard on either side of him. I placed his menore on his head and gave him simple, forceful orders, picturing them for him as best I could:

"Go from this place and find others of your kind. Tell them that we would speak to them with things such as you have upon your head. Run swiftly!"

"I will run," he conveyed to me, "to those great ones who sent me." He pictured them fleetingly. They were creatures like himself, save that they were elaborately dressed in fine skins of several pale colors, and wore upon their arms, between their two elbows, broad circlets of carved metal which I took to be emblems of power or authority, since the chief of them all wore a very broad band. Their faces were much more intelligent than their messenger had led me to expect, and their eyes, very large and round, and not at all human,

were the eyes of thoughtful, reasoning creatures.

Doubled on all fours, the Chisee crept through the circular exit, and straightened up. As he did so, from out of the darkness a score or more of his fellows rushed up, gathering around him, and blocking the exit with their reedy legs. We could hear than talking excitedly in high-pitched, squeaky whispers. Then, suddenly I received an expression from the Chisee who wore the menore:

“Those who are with me have come from those in power. They say one of you, and one only, is to come with us to our big men who will learn, through a thing such as I wear upon my head, that which you wish to say to them. You are to come quickly; at once.”

“I will come,” I replied. “Have those with you make way—”

A heavy hand fell upon my shoulder; a voice spoke eagerly in my ear:

“Sir, you must not go!” It was Croy, and his voice shook with feeling. “You are in command of the *Ertak*; she, and those in her need you. Let me go! I insist, sir!”

I turned in the darkness, quickly and angrily.

“Mr. Croy,” I said swiftly, “do you realize that you are speaking to your commanding officer?”

I felt his grip tighten on my arm as the reproof struck home.

“Yes, sir,” he said doggedly. “I do. But I repeat that your duty commands you to remain here.”

“The duty of a commander in this Service leads him to the place of greatest danger, Mr. Croy,” I informed him.

“Then stay with your ship, sir!” he pleaded, craftily. “This may be some trick to get you away, so that they may attack us. Please! Can’t you see that I am right, sir?”

I thought swiftly. The earnestness of the youngster had touched me. Beneath the formality and the “sirs” there was a real affection between us.

In the darkness I reached for his hand; I found it and shook it solemnly—a gesture of Earth which it is hard to explain. It means many things.

“Go, then, Andy,” I said softly. “But do not stay long. An hour at the longest. If you are not back in that length of time, we’ll come after

you, and whatever else may happen, you can be sure that you will be well avenged. The *Ertak* has not lost her stinger."

"Thank you, John," he replied. "Remember that I shall wear my menore. If I adjust it to full power, and you do likewise, and stand without the shelter of the *Ertak's* metal hull, I shall be able to communicate with you, should there be any danger." He pressed my hand again, and strode through the exit out into the darkness, which was lit only by a few distant stars.

The long, slim legs closed in around him; like a pigmy guarded by the skeletons of giants he was led quickly away.

The minutes dragged by. There was a nervous tension on the ship, the like of which I have experienced not more than a dozen times in all my years.

No one spoke aloud. Now and again one man would matter uneasily to another; there would be a swift, muttered response, and silence again. We were waiting—waiting.

Ten minutes went by. Twenty. Thirty.

Impatiently I paced up and down before the exit, the guards at their

posts, ready to obey any orders instantly.

Forty-five minutes. I walked through the exit; stepped out onto the cold, hard earth.

I could see, behind me, the shadowy bulk of the *Ertak*. Before me, a black, shapeless blot against the star-sprinkled sky, was the great administrative building of the Chisee. And in there, somewhere, was Anderson Croy. I glanced down at the luminous dial of my watch. Fifty minutes. In ten minutes more—

"John Hanson!" My name reached me, faintly but clearly, through the medium of my menore. "This is Croy. Do you understand me?"

"Yes," I replied instantly. "Are you safe?"

"I am safe. All is well. Very well. Will you promise me now to receive what I am about to send, without interruption?"

"Yes," I replied, thoughtlessly and eagerly. "What is it?"

"I have had a long conference with the chief or head of the Chisee," explained Croy rapidly. "He is very intelligent, and his people are much further advanced than we thought.

“Through some form of communication, he has learned of the fight with the weird birds; it seems that they are—or were—the most dreaded of all the creatures of this dark world. Apparently we got the whole brood of them, and this chief, whose name, I gather, is Wieschien, or something like that, is naturally much impressed.

“I have given him a demonstration or two with my atomic pistol and the flashlight—these people are fairly stricken by a ray of light directly in the eyes—and we have reached very favorable terms.

“I am to remain here as chief bodyguard and adviser, of which he has need, for all is not peaceful, I gather, in this kingdom of darkness. In return, he is to give up his plans to subjugate the rest of Antri; he has sworn to do this by what is evidently, to him, a very sacred oath, witnessed solemnly by the rest of his council.

“Under the circumstances, I believe he will do what he says; in any case, the great canal will be filled in, and the Antrians will have plenty of time to erect a great series of disintegrator ray stations along the entire twilight zone, using the broad fan rays to form a solid wall against which the Chisee could not advance even did they, at some future date, carry out their plans. The worst possible result then would be that the people in the sunlit portion would have to migrate from certain sections, and perhaps would have day and

night, alternately, as do other worlds.

“This is the agreement we have reached; it is the only one that will save this world. Do you approve, sir?”

“No! Return immediately, and we will show the Chisee that they cannot hold an officer of the Special Patrol as a hostage. Make haste!”

“It’s no go, sir,” came the reply instantly. “I threatened them first. I explained what our disintegrator rays would do, and Wieschien laughed at me.

“This city is built upon great subterranean passages that lead to many hidden exits. If we show the least sign of hostility the work will be resumed on the canal, and, before we can locate the spot, and stop the work, the damage will be done.

“This is our only chance, sir, to make this expedition a complete success. Permit me to judge this fact from the evidence I have before me. Whatever sacrifice there is to make, I make gladly. Wieschien asks that you depart at once, and in peace, and I know this is the only course. Good-by, sir; convey my salutations to my other friends upon the old *Ertak*, and elsewhere. And now, lest my last act as an

officer of the Special Patrol Service be to refuse to obey the commands of my superior officer, I am removing the menore. Good-by!”

I tried to reach him again, but there was no response.

Gone! He was gone! Swallowed up in darkness and in silence!

Dazed, shaken to the very foundation of my being, I stood there between the shadowy bulk of the *Ertak* and the towering mass of the great silent pile that was the seat of government in this strange land of darkness, and gazed up at the dark sky above me. I am not ashamed, now, to say that hot tears trickled down my cheeks, nor that as I turned back to the *Ertak*, my throat was so gripped by emotion that I could not speak.

I ordered the exit closed with a wave of my hand; in the navigating room I said but four words: “We depart at once.”

At the third meal of the day I gathered my officers about me and told them, as quickly and as gently as I could, of the sacrifice one of their number had made.

It was Kincaide who, when I had finished, rose slowly and made reply.

“Sir,” he said quietly, “We had a friend. Some day, he might have died. Now he will live forever in the records of the Service, in the memory of a world, and in the hearts of those who had the honor to serve with him. Could he—or we—wish more?”

Amid a strange silence he sat down again, and there was not an eye among us that was dry.

I hope that the snappy young officer who visited me the other day reads this little account of bygone times.

Perhaps it will make clear to him how we worked, in those nearly forgotten days, with the tools we had at hand. They were not the perfect tools of to-day, but what they lacked, we somehow made up.

That fine old motto of the Service, “Nothing Less Than Complete Success,” we passed on unsullied to those who came after us.

I hope these youngsters of to-day may do as well.

#65 The Sunken Empire, By Harold Thompson Rich:

Concerning the strange adventures of Professor Stevens with the Antillians on the floor of the mysterious Sargasso Sea.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

tilted her rudders and dove

- - -

“Then you really expect to find the lost continent of Atlantis, Professor?”

Martin Stevens lifted his bearded face sternly to the reporter who was interviewing him in his study aboard the torpedo-submarine *Nereid*, a craft of his own invention, as she lay moored at her Brooklyn wharf, on an afternoon in October.

“My dear young man,” he said, “I am not even going to look for it.”

The aspiring journalist—Larry Hunter by name—was properly abashed.

“But I thought,” he insisted nevertheless, “that you said you were going to explore the ocean floor under the Sargasso Sea?”

“And so I did.” Professor Stevens admitted, a smile moving that gray beard now and his blue eyes twinkling merrily. “But the Sargasso, an area almost equal to Europe, covers other land as well—land of far more recent submergence than Atlantis, which foundered in 9564 B. C., according to Plato. What I am going to look for is this newer lost continent, or island rather—namely, the great island of Antillia, of which the West Indies remain above water to-day.”

“Antillia?” queried Larry Hunter, wonderingly. “I never heard of it.”

Again the professor regarded his interviewer sternly.

“There are many things you have never heard of, young man,” he told him. “Antillia may be termed the missing link between Atlantis and America. It was there that Atlantean culture survived after the appalling catastrophe that wiped out the Atlantean homeland, with

its seventy million inhabitants, and it was in the colonies the Antillians established in Mexico and Peru, that their own culture in turn survived, after Antillia too had sunk."

"My Lord! You don't mean to say the Mayas and Incas originated on that island of Antillia?"

"No, I mean to say they originated on the continent of Atlantis, and that Antillia was the stepping stone to the New World, where they built the strange pyramids we find smothered in the jungle—even as thousands of years before the Atlanteans established colonies in Egypt and founded the earliest dynasties of pyramid-building Pharaohs."

Larry was pushing his pencil furiously.

"Whew!" he gasped. "Some story, Professor!"

"To the general public, perhaps," was the reply. "But to scholars of antiquity, these postulates are pretty well known and pretty well accepted. It remains but to get concrete evidence, in order to prove them to the world at large—and that is the object of my expedition."

More hurried scribbling, then:

“But, say—why don’t you go direct to Atlantis and get the real dope?”

“Because that continent foundered so long ago that it is doubtful if any evidence would have withstood the ravages of time,” Professor Stevens explained, “whereas Antillia went down no earlier than 200 B. C., archaeologists agree.”

“That answers my question,” declared Larry, his admiration for this doughty graybeard rising momentarily. “And now, Professor, I wonder if you’d be willing to say a few words about this craft of yours?”

“Cheerfully, if you think it would interest anyone. What would you care to have me say?”

“Well, in the first place, what does the name *Nereid* mean?”

“Sea-nymph. The derivation is from the Latin and Greek, meaning daughter of the sea-god Nereus. Appropriate, don’t you think?”

“Swell. And why do you call it a torpedo-submarine? How does it differ from the common or navy variety?”

Professor Stevens smiled. It was like asking what was the difference

between the sun and the moon, when about the only point of resemblance they had was that they were both round. Nevertheless, he enumerated some of the major modifications he had developed.

Among them, perhaps the most radical, was its motive power, which was produced by what he called a vacuo-turbine—a device that sucked in the water at the snout of the craft and expelled it at the tail, at the time purifying a certain amount for drinking purposes and extracting sufficient oxygen to maintain a healthful atmosphere while running submerged.

Then, the structure of the *Nereid* was unique, he explained, permitting it to attain depths where the pressure would crush an ordinary submarine, while mechanical eyes on the television principle afforded a view in all directions, and locks enabling them to leave the craft at will and explore the sea-bottom were provided.

This latter feat they would accomplish in special suits, designed on the same pneumatic principle as the torpedo itself and capable of sustaining sufficient inflation to resist whatever pressures might be encountered, as well as being equipped with vibratory sending and receiving apparatus, for maintaining communication with those left aboard.

All these things and more Professor Stevens outlined, as Larry's pencil flew, admitting that he had spent the past ten years and the best part of his private fortune in developing his plans.

"But you'll get it all back, won't you? Aren't there all sorts of Spanish galleons and pirate barques laden with gold supposed to be down there?"

"Undoubtedly," was the calm reply. "But I am not on a treasure hunt, young man. If I find one single sign of former life, I shall be amply rewarded."

Whereupon the young reporter regarded the subject of his interview with fresh admiration, not unmingled with wonder. In his own hectic world, people had no such scorn of gold. Gee, he'd sure like to go along! The professor could have his old statues or whatever he was looking for. As for himself, he'd fill up his pockets with Spanish doubloons and pieces of eight!

Larry was snapped out of his trance by a light knock on the door, which opened to admit a radiant girl in creamy knickers and green cardigan.

"May I come in, daddy?" she inquired, hesitating, as she saw he was

not alone.

“You seem to be in already, my dear,” the professor told her, rising from his desk and stepping forward.

Then, turning to Larry, who had also risen, he said:

“Mr. Hunter, this is my daughter, Diane, who is also my secretary.”

“I am pleased to meet you, Miss Stevens,” said Larry, taking her hand.

And he meant it—for almost anyone would have been pleased to meet Diane, with her tawny gold hair, warm olive cheeks and eyes bluer even than her father’s and just as twinkling, just as intelligent.

“She will accompany the expedition and take stenographic notes of everything we observe,” added her father, to Larry’s amazement.

“What?” he declared. “You mean to say that—that—”

“Of course he means to say that I’m going, if that’s what you mean to say, Mr. Hunter,” Diane assured him. “Can you think of any good reason why I shouldn’t go, when girls are flying around the world and everything else?”

Even had Larry been able to think of any good reason, he wouldn't have mentioned it. But as a matter of fact, he had shifted quite abruptly to an entirely different line of thought. Diane, he was thinking—Diana, goddess of the chase, the huntress! And himself, Larry Hunter—the hunter and the huntress!

Gee, but he'd like to go! What an adventure, hunting around together on the bottom of the ocean!

What a wild dream, rather, he concluded when his senses returned. For after all, he was only a reporter, fated to write about other people's adventures, not to participate in them. So he put away his pad and pencil and prepared to leave.

But at the door he paused.

"Oh, yes—one more question. When are you planning to leave, Professor?"

At that, Martin Stevens and his daughter exchanged a swift glance. Then, with a smile, Diane said:

"I see no reason why we shouldn't tell him, daddy."

"But we didn't tell the reporters from the other papers, my dear,"

protested her father.

“Then suppose we give Mr. Hunter the exclusive story,” she said, transferring her smile to Larry now. “It will be what you call a—a scoop. Isn’t that it?”

“That’s it.”

She caught her father’s acquiescing nod. “Then here’s your scoop, Mr. Hunter. We leave to-night.”

To-night! This was indeed a scoop! If he hurried, he could catch the late afternoon editions with it.

“I—I certainly thank you, Miss Stevens!” he exclaimed. “That’ll make the front page!”

As he grasped the door-knob, he added, turning to her father:

“And I want to thank you too, Professor—and wish you good luck!”

Then, with a hasty handshake, and a last smile of gratitude for Diane, he flung open the door and departed, unconscious that two young blue eyes followed his broad shoulders wistfully till they disappeared from view.

But Larry was unaware that he had made a favorable impression on Diane. He felt it was the reverse. As he headed toward the subway, that vivid blond goddess of the chase was uppermost in his thoughts.

Soon she'd be off in the *Nereid*, bound for the mysterious regions under the Sargasso Sea, while in a few moments he'd be in the subway, bound under the prosaic East River for New York.

No—damned if he would!

Suddenly, with a wild inspiration, the young reporter altered his course, dove into the nearest phone booth and got his city editor on the wire.

Scoop? This was just the first installment. He'd get a scoop that would fill a book!

And his city editor tacitly O. K.'d the idea.

With the result that when the *Nereid* drew away from her wharf that night, on the start of her unparalleled voyage, Larry Hunter was a stowaway.

The place where he had succeeded in secreting himself was a small storeroom far aft, on one of the lower decks. There he huddled in the

darkness, while the slow hours wore away, hearing only the low hum of the craft's vacuo-turbine and the flux of water running through her.

From the way she rolled and pitched, he judged she was still proceeding along on the surface.

Having eaten before he came aboard, he felt no hunger, but the close air and the dark quarters brought drowsiness. He slept.

When he awoke it was still dark, of course, but a glance at his luminous wrist-watch told him it was morning now. And the fact that the rolling and pitching had ceased made him believe they were now running submerged.

The urge for breakfast asserting itself, Larry drew a bar of chocolate from his pocket and munched on it. But this was scanty fare for a healthy young six-footer, accustomed to a liberal portion of ham and eggs. Furthermore, the lack of coffee made him realize that he was getting decidedly thirsty. The air, moreover, was getting pretty bad.

"All in all, this hole wasn't exactly intended for a bedroom!" he reflected with a wry smile.

Taking a chance, he opened the door a crack and sat there impatiently, while the interminable minutes ticked off.

The *Nereid's* turbine was humming now with a high, vibrant note that indicated they must be knocking off the knots at a lively clip. He wondered how far out they were, and how far down.

Lord, there'd be a riot when he showed up! He wanted to wait till they were far enough on their way so it would be too much trouble to turn around and put him ashore.

But by noon his powers of endurance were exhausted. Flinging open the door, he stepped out into the corridor, followed it to a companionway and mounted the ladder to the deck above.

There he was assailed by a familiar and welcome odor—food!

Trailing it to its origin, he came to a pair of swinging doors at the end of a cork-paved passage. Beyond, he saw on peering through, was the mess-room, and there at the table, among a number of uniformed officers, sat Professor Stevens and Diane.

A last moment Larry stood there, looking in on them. Then, drawing a deep breath, he pushed wide the swinging doors and entered with a

cheery:

“Good morning, folks! Hope I’m not too late for lunch!”

Varying degrees of surprise greeted this dramatic appearance. The officers stared, Diane gasped, her father leaped to has feet with a cry.

“That reporter! Why—why, what are you doing here, young man?”

“Just representing the press.”

Larry tried to make it sound nonchalant but he was finding it difficult to bear up under this barrage of disapproving eyes—particularly two very young, very blue ones.

“So that is the way you reward us for giving you an exclusive story, is it?” Professor Stevens’ voice was scathing. “A representative of the press! A stowaway, rather—and as such you will be treated!”

He turned to one of his officers.

“Report to Captain Petersen that we have a stowaway aboard and order him to put about at once.”

He turned to another.

“See that Mr. Hunter is taken below and locked up. When we reach New York, he will be handed over to the police.”

“But daddy!” protested Diane, as they rose to comply, her eyes softening now. “We shouldn’t be too severe with Mr. Hunter. After all, he is probably doing only what his paper ordered him to.”

Gratefully Larry turned toward his defender. But he couldn’t let that pass.

“No, I’m acting only on my own initiative,” he said. “No one told me to come.”

For he couldn’t get his city editor involved, and after all it was his own idea.

“You see!” declared Professor Stevens. “He admits it is his own doing. It is clear he has exceeded his authority, therefore, and deserves no sympathy.”

“But can’t you let me stay, now that I’m here?” urged Larry. “I know something about boats. I’ll serve as a member of the crew—anything.”

“Impossible. We have a full complement. You would be more of a

hindrance than a help. Besides, I do not care to have the possible results of this expedition blared before the public."

"I'll write nothing you do not approve."

"I have no time to edit your writings, young man. My own, will occupy me sufficiently. So it is useless. You are only wasting your breath—and mine."

He motioned for his officers to carry out his orders.

But before they could move to do so, in strode a lean, middle-aged Norwegian Larry sensed must be Captain Petersen himself, and on his weathered face was an expression of such gravity that it was obvious to everyone something serious had happened.

Ignoring Larry, after one brief look of inquiry that was answered by Professor Stevens, he reported swiftly what he had to say.

While cruising full speed at forty fathoms, with kite-aerial out, their wireless operator had received a radio warning to turn back. Answering on its call-length, he had demanded to know the sender and the reason for the message, but the information had been declined, the warning merely being repeated.

“Was it a land station or a ship at sea?” asked the professor.

“Evidently the latter,” was the reply. “By our radio range-finder, we determined the position at approximately latitude 27, longitude 65.”

“But that, Captain, is in the very area we are headed for.”

“And that, Professor, makes it all the more singular.”

“But—well, well! This is indeed peculiar! And I had been on the point of turning back with our impetuous young stowaway. What would you suggest, sir?”

Captain Petersen meditated, while Larry held his breath.

“To turn back,” he said at length, in his clear, precise English, “would in my opinion be to give the laugh to someone whose sense of humor is already too well developed.”

“Exactly!” agreed Professor Stevens, as Larry relaxed in relief. “Whoever this practical joker is, we will show him he is wasting his talents—even though it means carrying a supernumerary for the rest of the voyage.”

“Well spoken!” said the captain. “But as far as that is concerned, I

think I can keep Mr. Hunter occupied."

"Then take him, and welcome!"

Whereupon, still elated but now somewhat uneasy, Larry accompanied Captain Petersen from the mess-room; started to, that is. But at a glance of sympathy from Diane, he dared call out:

"Say—hold on, folks! I haven't had lunch yet!"

When young Larry Hunter reported to the captain of the *Nereid*, after this necessary meal, he found that the craft had returned to the surface.

Assigned a pair of powerful binoculars, he was ordered to stand watch in the conning-tower and survey the horizon in every direction, in an effort to sight the vessel that had sent out that mysterious radio, but though he cast his good brown eyes diligently through those strong lenses, he saw not so much as a smoke tuft upon the broad, gray-blue surface of the hazy Atlantic.

Gradually, however, as the afternoon wore away, something else came in view. Masses of brownish seaweed, supported by small, berry-like bladders, began drifting by. Far apart at first, they began

getting more and more dense, till at last, with a thrill, he realized that they were drawing into that strange area known as the Sargasso Sea.

Shortly after this realization dawned, he was ordered below, and as the tropic sun was sinking over that eery floating tombstone, which according to Professor Stevens marked a nation's grave, the *Nereid* submerged.

Down she slid, a hundred fathoms or more, on a long, even glide that took her deep under that veiling brown blanket.

In the navigating room now, Larry stood with the captain, the professor and Diane, studying an illuminated panel on which appeared a cross of five squares, like a box opened out.

The central square reproduced the scene below, while those to left and right depicted it from port and starboard, and those to front and rear revealed the forward and aft aspects of the panorama, thus affording a clear view in every direction.

This, then, was the television device Professor Stevens had referred to the previous afternoon, its mechanical eyes enabling then to search every square inch of those mysterious depths, as they cruised along.

It was the central square that occupied their attention chiefly, however, as they stood studying the panel. While the others represented merely an unbroken vista of greenish water, this one showed the sea floor as clearly as though they had been peering down into a shallow lagoon through a glass-bottomed boat, though it must have been a quarter of a mile below their cruising level.

A wonderful and fearsome sight it was to Larry: like something seen in a nightmare—a fantastic desert waste of rocks and dunes, with here and there a yawning chasm whose ominous depths their ray failed to penetrate, and now and then a jutting plateau that would appear on the forward square and cause Captain Petersen to elevate their bow sharply.

But more thrilling than this was their first glimpse of a sunken ship—a Spanish galleon, beyond a doubt!

There she lay, grotesquely on her side, half rotted, half buried in the sand, but still discernible. And to Larry's wildly racing imagination, a flood of gold and jewels seemed to pour from her ruined coffers.

Turning to Diane, he saw that her eyes too were flashing with intense excitement.

“Say!” he exclaimed. “Why don’t we stop and look her over? There may be a fortune down there!”

Professor Stevens promptly vetoed the suggestion, however.

“I must remind you, young man,” he said severely, “that this is not a treasure hunt.”

Whereupon Larry subsided; outwardly, at least. But when presently the central square revealed another and then another sunken ship, it was all he could do to contain himself.

Now, suddenly, Diane cried out:

“Oh, daddy, look! There’s a modern ship! A—a freighter, isn’t it?”

“A collier, I would say,” was her father’s calm reply. “Rather a large one, too. *Cyclops*, possibly. She disappeared some years ago, en route from the Barbados to Norfolk. Or possibly it is any one of a dozen other steel vessels that have vanished from these seas in recent times. The area of the Sargasso, my dear, is known as ‘The Port of Missing Ships.’”

“But couldn’t we drop down and make sure which ship it is?” she pleaded, voicing the very thought Larry had been struggling to

suppress.

At the professor's reply, however, he was glad he had kept quiet.

"We could, of course," was his gentle though firm rebuke, "but if we stopped to solve the mystery of every sunken ship we shall probably see during this cruise, we would have time for nothing else. Nevertheless, my dear, you may take a short memorandum of the location and circumstances, in the present instance."

Whereupon he dictated briefly, while Larry devoted his attention once more to the central square.

Suddenly, beyond a dark pit that seemed to reach down into the very bowels of the earth, rose an abrupt plateau—and on one of its nearer elevations, almost directly under then, loomed a monumental four-sided mound.

"Say—hold on!" called Larry. "Look at that, Professor! Isn't that a building of some kind?"

Martin Stevens looked up, glanced skeptically toward the panel. But one glimpse at what that central square revealed, and his skepticism vanished.

“A building?” he cried in triumph. “A building indeed! It is a pyramid, young man!”

“Good Lord!”

“Oh, daddy! Really?”

“Beyond a doubt! And look—there are two other similar structures, only smaller!”

Struggling for calm, he turned to Captain Petersen, who had taken his eyes from the forward square and was peering down as well upon those singular mounds.

“Stop! Descend!” was his exultant command. “This is my proof! We have discovered Antillia!”

Swiftly the *Nereid* dropped to that submerged plateau.

In five minutes, her keel was resting evenly on the smooth sand beside the largest of the three pyramids.

Professor Stevens then announced that he would make a preliminary investigation of the site at once.

“For, otherwise, I for one would be quite unable to sleep tonight!” declared the graybeard, with a boyish chuckle.

He added that Diane would accompany him.

At this latter announcement, Larry’s heart sank. He had hoped against hope that he might be invited along with them.

But once again his champion came to his aid.

“We really ought to let Mr. Hunter come with us, daddy, don’t you think?” she urged, noting his disappointment. “After all, it was he who made the discovery.”

“Very true,” said her father, “but I had not thought it necessary for anyone to accompany us. In the event anyone does, Captain Petersen should have that honor.”

But this honor the captain declined.

“If you don’t mind, sir, I’d prefer to stay with the ship,” he said, quietly. “I haven’t forgotten that radio warning.”

“But surely you don’t think anyone can molest us down here?” scoffed the professor.

“No, but I’d prefer to stay with the ship just the same, sir, if you don’t mind.”

“Very well”—with a touch of pique. “Then you may come along if you care to, Mr. Hunter.”

If he cared to!

“Thanks, Professor!” he said with a grateful look toward Diane. “I’d be keen to!”

So he accompanied them below, where they donned their pressure-suits—rubber affairs rather less cumbersome than ordinary deep-sea diving gear, reinforced with steel wire and provided with thick glass goggles and powerful searchlights, in addition to their vibratory communication apparatus and other devices that were explained to Larry.

When he had mastered their operation, which was rendered simple by reason of the fact that they were so nearly automatic, the trio stepped into a lock on the floor of the ship and Professor Stevens ordered them to couple their suits to air-valve connections on the wall, at the same time admitting water by opening another valve.

Swiftly the lock flooded, while their suits inflated.

“All right?” came his vibratory query.

“Right!” they both answered.

“Then stand by for the heavy pressure.”

Wider now he opened the water-valve, letting the ocean in, while at the same time their suits continued inflating through their air-valve connections.

To his surprise, Larry found himself no more inconvenienced by the pressure than he had been from the moment the submarine dove to its present depth. Indeed, most of the air that was coming into his suit was filling the reinforced space between its inner and outer layers, much as the *Nereid* held air under pressure between her two thick shells.

“All right now?” called out the professor’s vibrator.

“Right!” they called back again.

“Then uncouple your air-valve connections and make ready.”

They did so; and he likewise.

Then, advancing to a massive door like that of a vault, he flung back its powerful clamps, dragged it open—and there beyond, its pressure equaled by that within the lock, loomed the black tide of the ocean bottom.

Awed by this solemn sight, tingling with a sense of unparalleled adventure, Larry stood there a moment, peering out over the threshold of that untrodden world.

Then he followed Diane and her father into its beckoning mystery….

Their searchlights cutting bright segments into the dark, they proceeded toward the vast mound that towered ahead, pushing through a weird realm of phosphorescent fish and other marine creatures.

As they neared it, any possible doubt that it was in fact a pyramid vanished. Corroded by the action of salt water and covered with the incrustations of centuries, it nevertheless presented unmistakable evidence of human construction, rising in steps of massive masonry to a summit shadowy in the murk above.

As Larry stood gazing upon that mighty proof that this submerged plateau had once stood forth proudly above the sea, he realized that he was a party to one of the most profound discoveries of the ages. What a furore this would make when he reported it back to his New York paper!

But New York seemed remote indeed, now. Would they ever get back? What if anything went wrong with their pressure-suits—or if they should become lost?

He glanced back uneasily, but there gleamed the reassuring lights of the *Nereid*, not a quarter of a mile away.

Diane and her father were now rounding a corner of the pyramid and he followed them, his momentary twinge of anxiety gone.

For some moments, Professor Stevens prowled about without comment, examining the huge basal blocks of the structure and glancing up its sloping sides.

“You see, I was right!” he declared at length. “This is not only a man-made edifice but a true pyramid, embodying the same architectural principles as the Mayan and Egyptian forms. We see before us the visible evidence of a sunken empire—the missing link

between Atlantis and America.”

No comments greeted this profound announcement and the professor continued:

“This structure appears to be similar in dimensions with that of the pyramid of Xochicalco, in Mexico, which in turn approximates that of the “Sacred Hill” of Atlantis, mentioned by Plato, and which was the prototype of both the Egyptian and Mayan forms. It was here the Antillians, as the Atlanteans had taught them to do, worshipped their grim gods and performed the human sacrifices they thought necessary to appease them. And it was here, too, if I am not mistaken, that—”

Suddenly his vibratory discourse was broken into by a sharp signal from the submarine:

“Pardon interruption! Hurry back! We are attacked!”

At this, the trio stood rigid.

“Captain Petersen! Captain Petersen!” Larry heard the professor call. “Speak up! Give details! What has happened?”

But an ominous silence greeted the query.

Another moment they stood there, thoroughly dismayed now. Then came the professor's swift command:

"Follow me—quickly!"

He was already in motion, retracing his steps as fast as his bulky suit would permit. But as he rounded the corner of the pyramid, they saw him pause, stand staring. And as they drew up, they in turn paused; stood staring, too.

With sinking hearts, they saw that the *Nereid* was gone.

Stunned by this disaster, they stood facing one another—three lone human beings, on the bottom of the Atlantic ocean, their sole means of salvation gone.

Professor Stevens was the first to speak.

"This is unbelievable!" he said. "I cannot credit it. We must have lost our senses."

"Or our bearings!" added Diane, more hopefully. "Suppose we look around the other side."

As for Larry, a darker suspicion flashed through his mind. Captain

Petersen! Had he seized his opportunity and led the crew to mutiny, in the hope of converting the expedition into a treasure hunt? Was that the reason he had been so willing to remain behind?

He kept his suspicion to himself, however, and accompanied Diane and her father on a complete circuit of the pyramid; but, as he feared, there was no sign of the *Nereid* anywhere. The craft had vanished as completely as though the ocean floor had opened and swallowed her up.

But no, not as completely as that! For presently the professor, who had proceeded to the site where they left the craft resting on the sand, called out excitedly:

“Here—come here! There are tracks! Captain Petersen was right! They were attacked!”

Hurrying to the scene, they saw before them the plain evidences of a struggle. The ocean bottom was scuffed and stamped, as though by many feet, and a clear trail showed where the craft had finally been dragged away.

Obviously there was but one thing to do and they did it. After a brief conference, they turned and followed the trail.

It led off over the plateau a quarter mile or more, in an eastward direction, terminating at length beside one of the smaller pyramids—and there lay the *Nereid*, apparently unharmed.

But her lights were out and there came no answer to their repeated calls, so they judged she must be empty.

What had happened to Captain Petersen and his crew? What strange sub-sea enemy had overcome them? What was now their fate?

Unanswerable question! But one thing was certain. Larry had misjudged the captain in suspecting him of mutiny. He was sorry for this and resolved he would make amends by doing all in his power to rescue him and his men, if they were still living.

Meanwhile his own plight, and that of Diane and her father, was critical. What was to be done?

Suddenly, as all three stood there debating that question, Professor Stevens uttered an exclamation and strode toward the pyramid. Following him with their eyes, they saw him pass through an aperture where a huge block of stone had been displaced—and disappear within.

The next moment they had joined him, to find themselves in a small flooded chamber at whose far end a narrow gallery sloped upward at a sharp angle.

The floor and walls were tiled, they noted, and showed none of the corrosion of the exterior surfaces. Indeed, so immaculate was the room that it might have been occupied but yesterday.

As they stood gazing around in wonder, scarcely daring to draw the natural inferences of this phenomena, there came a rasping sound, and, turning toward the entrance, they saw a massive section of masonry descend snugly into place.

They were trapped!

Standing there tense, speechless, they waited, wondering what would be the next move of this strange enemy who held them now so surely in his power.

Nor had they long to wait.

Almost immediately, there issued a gurgling sound from the inclined gallery, and turning their eyes in the direction of this new phenomena, they saw that the water level was receding, as though

under pressure from above.

“Singular!” muttered Professor Stevens. “A sort of primitive lock. It seems incredible that human creatures could exist down here, but such appears to be the case.”

Larry had no desire to dispute the assumption, nor had Diane. They stood there as people might in the imminence of the supernatural, awaiting they knew not what.

Swiftly the water receded.

Now it was scarcely up to their waists, now plashing about their ankles, and now the room was empty.

The next moment, there sounded a rush of feet—and down the gallery came a swarm of the strangest beings any of them had ever seen.

They were short, thin, almost emaciated, with pale, pinched faces and pasty, half-naked bodies. But they shimmered with ornaments of gold and jade, like some strange princes from the realm of Neptune—or rather, like Aztec chieftains of the days of Cortes, thought Larry.

Blinking in the glare of the searchlights, they clamored around their captives, touching their pressure-suits half in awe and chattering among themselves.

Then one of them, larger and more regally clad than the rest, stepped up and gestured toward the balcony.

“They obviously desire us to accompany them above,” said the professor, “and quite as obviously we have little choice in the matter, so I suggest we do so.”

“Check!” said Larry.

“And double-check!” added Diane.

So they started up, preceded by a handful of their captors and followed by the main party.

The gallery seemed to be leading toward the center of the pyramid, but after a hundred feet or so it turned and continued up at a right angle, turning twice more before they arrived at length in another stone chamber, smaller than the one below.

Here their guides paused and waited for the main party.

There followed another conference, whereupon their leader stepped up again, indicating this time that they were to remove their suits.

At this, Professor Stevens balked.

“It is suicide!” he declared. “The air to which they are accustomed here is doubtless at many times our own atmospheric pressure.”

“But I don’t see that there’s anything to do about it,” said Larry, as their captors danced about them menacingly. “I for one will take a chance!”

And before they could stop him, he had pressed the release-valve, emitting the air from his suit—slowly, at first, then more and more rapidly, as no ill effects seemed to result.

Finally, flinging off the now deflated suit, he stepped before them in his ordinary clothes, calling with a smile:

“Come on out, folks—the air’s fine!”

This statement was somewhat of an exaggeration, as the air smelt dank and bad. But at least it was breathable, as Diane and her father found when they emerged from their own suits.

They discovered, furthermore, now that their flashlights were no longer operating, that a faint illumination lit the room, issuing from a number of small crystal jars suspended from the walls: some sort of phosphorescence, evidently.

Once again the leader of the curious throng stepped up to them, beaming now and addressing Professor Stevens in some barbaric tongue, and, to their amazement, he replied in words approximating its harsh syllables.

“Why, daddy!” gasped Diane. “How can you talk to him?”

“Simply enough,” was the reply. “They speak a language which seems to be about one-third Basque, mixed oddly with Greek. It merely proves another hypothesis of mine, namely, that the Atlantean influence reached eastward to the Pyrenees mountains and the Hellenic peninsula, as well as to Egypt.”

Whereupon he turned and continued his conversation, haltingly it is true and with many gestures, but understandably nevertheless.

“I have received considerable enlightenment as to the mystery of this strange sunken empire,” he reported, turning back to them at length. “It is a singular story this creature tells, of how his country sank

slowly beneath the waves, during the course of centuries, and of how his ancestors adapted themselves by degrees to the present conditions. I shall report it to you both, in detail, when time affords. But the main thing now is that a man similar to ourselves has conquered their country and set himself up as emperor. It is to him we are about to be taken."

"But it doesn't seem possible!" exclaimed Diane. "Why, how could he have got down here?"

"In a craft similar to our own, according to this creature. Heaven knows what it is we are about to face! But whatever it is, we will face it bravely."

"Check and double-check!" said Larry, with a glance toward Diane that told her she would not find him wanting.

They were not destined to meet the test just then, however, for just at that moment a courier in breech-clout and sandals dashed up the gallery and burst into the room, bearing in his right hand a thin square of metal.

Bowing, he handed it to the leader of the pigmy throng, with the awed word:

“*Cabiri!*”

At this, Professor Stevens gave a start.

“A message from their high priests!” he whispered.

Whatever it contained, the effect produced on the reader was profound. Facing his companions, he addressed them gravely. Then, turning from the room, he commanded the captives to follow.

The way led back down the inclined gallery to a point where another door now stood open, then on down until finally the passage leveled out into a long, straight tunnel.

This they traversed for fully a mile, entering at length a large, square chamber where for a moment they paused.

“I judge we are now at the base of the large pyramid,” the professor voiced in an undertone. “It would naturally be the abode of the high priests.”

“But what do you suppose they want with us?” asked Diane.

“That I am not disposed to conjecture,” was her father’s reply.

But the note of anxiety in his voice was not lost on Diane, nor on Larry, who pressed her hand reassuringly.

Now their captors led them from the room through a small door opening on another inclined gallery, whose turns they followed until all were out of breath from the climb.

It ended abruptly on a short, level corridor with apertures to left and right.

Into the latter they were led, finding themselves in a grotesquely furnished room, lit dimly by phosphorescent lamps.

Swiftly the leader addressed Professor Stevens. Then all withdrew. The aperture was closed by a sliding block of stone.

For a moment they stood there silent, straining their eyes in the gloom to detect the details of their surroundings, which included several curious chairs and a number of mattings strewn on the tiled floor.

“What did he say?” asked Diane at length, in a tremulous voice.

“He said we will remain here for the night,” her father replied, “and will be taken before the high priests at dawn.”

“At dawn!” exclaimed Larry. “How the deuce do they know when it is dawn, down here?”

“By their calendars, which they have kept accurately,” was the answer. “But there are many other questions you must both want to ask, so I shall anticipate them by telling you now what I have been able to learn. Suppose we first sit down, however. I for one am weary.”

Whereupon they drew up three of those curious chairs of some heavy wood carved with the hideous figures of this strange people’s ancient gods, and Professor Stevens began.

Their sunken empire, as he had surmised, had indeed been the great island of Antillia and a colony of Atlantis. A series of earthquakes and tidal waves such as engulfed their homeland ages before had sent it down, and the estimated archaeological date of the final submergence—namely, 200 B. C.—was approximately correct.

But long before this ultimate catastrophe, the bulk of the disheartened population had migrated to Central and South America, founding the Mayan and Incan dynasties. Many of the faithful had stayed on, however, among them most of the Cabiri or high priests, who either were loath to leave their temples or had been ordered by

their gods to remain.

At any rate, they had remained, and as the great island sank lower and lower, they had fortified themselves against the disaster in their pyramids, which by then alone remained above the surface.

These, too, had gradually disappeared beneath the angry waters, however, and with them had disappeared the steadfast priests and their faithful followers, sealing their living tombs into air-tight bell-jars that retained the atmosphere.

This they had supplemented at first by drawing it down from above, but as time went by they found other means of getting air; extracting it from the sea water under pressure, by utilizing their subterranean volcanoes, in whose seething cauldrons the gods had placed their salvation; and it was this process that now provided them with the atmosphere which had so amazed their captives.

But naturally, lack of sunshine had produced serious degeneration in their race, and that accounted for their diminutive forms and pale bodies. Still, they had been able to survive with a degree of happiness until some ten or a dozen years ago, when a strange enemy had come down in a great metal fish, like that of these new strangers, and with a handful of men had conquered their country.

This marauder was after their gold and had looted their temples ruthlessly, carrying away its treasures, for which they hated him with a fury that only violation of their most sacred deities could arouse. Long ago they would have destroyed him, but for the fact that he possessed terrible weapons which were impossible to combat. But they were in smouldering rebellion and waited only the support of their gods, when they would fall on this oppressor and hurl him off.

That, though it left many things unexplained, was all the professor had been able to gather from his conversation with the leader of their captors. He ended, admitting regretfully that he was still in ignorance of what fate had befallen Captain Petersen and the crew of the *Nereid.*

“Perhaps this fellow in the other submarine has got them,” suggested Larry.

“But why weren’t we taken to him too?” asked Diane. “What do you suppose they want with us, anyway, daddy?”

“That, my dear, as I told you before,” replied her father, “I am not disposed to conjecture. Time will reveal it. Meanwhile, we can only wait.”

As before, there was a note of anxiety in his voice not lost on either of them. And as for Larry, though he knew but little of those old religions, he knew enough to realize that their altars often ran with the blood of their captives, and he shuddered.

With these grim thoughts between them, the trio fell silent.

A silence that was interrupted presently by the arrival of a native bearing a tray heaped with strange food.

Bowing, he placed it before them and departed.

Upon examination, the meal proved to consist mainly of some curious kind of steamed fish, not unpalatable but rather rank and tough. There were several varieties of fungus, too, more or less resembling mushrooms and doubtless grown in some sunless garden of the pyramid.

These articles, together with a pitcher of good water that had obviously been distilled from the sea, comprised their meal, and though it was far from appetizing, they ate it.

But none of the three slept that night, though Diane dozed off for a few minutes once or twice, for their apprehension of what the dawn

might hold made it impossible, to say nothing of the closeness of the air in that windowless subterranean room.

Slowly, wearily, the hours dragged by.

At length the native who had brought their food came again. This time he spoke.

“He says we are now to be taken before the high priests,” Professor Stevens translated for them.

Almost with relief, though their faces were grave, they stepped out into the corridor, where an escort waited.

Five minutes later, after proceeding along an inclined gallery that wound ever upward, they were ushered into a vast vaulted chamber lit with a thousand phosphorescent lamps and gleaming with idols of gold and silver, jewels flashing from their eyes.

High in the dome hung a great golden disc, representing the sun. At the far end, above a marble altar, coiled a dragon with tusks of ivory and scales of jade, its eyes two lustrous pearls.

And all about the room thronged priests in fantastic head-dress and long white robes, woven through elaborately with threads of yellow

and green.

At the appearance of the captives, a murmur like a chant rose in the still air. Someone touched a brand to the altar and there was a flash of flame followed by a thin column of smoke that spiraled slowly upward.

Now one of the priests stepped out—the supreme one among them, to judge from the magnificence of his robe—and addressed the trio, speaking slowly, rhythmically.

As his strange, sonorous discourse continued, Professor Stevens grew visibly perturbed. His beard twitched and he shifted uneasily on his feet.

Finally the discourse ceased and the professor replied to it, briefly. Then he turned grave eyes on Larry and Diane.

“What is it?” asked the latter, nervously. “What did the priest say, daddy?”

Her father considered, before replying.

“Naturally, I did not gather everything,” was his slow reply, “but I gathered sufficient to understand what is afoot. First, however, let me explain that the dragon you see over there represents their deity Tlaloc, god of the sea. In more happy circumstances, it would be interesting to note that the name is identified with the Mayan god of the same element.”

He paused, as though loath to go on, then continued:

“At any rate, the Antillians have worshipped Tlaloc principally, since their sun god failed them. They believe he dragged down their empire in his mighty coils, through anger with them, and will raise it up again if appeased. Therefore they propose today to—”

“Daddy!” cried Diane, shrinking back in horror, while a chill went up Larry’s spine. “You mean—mean that—”

“I mean, my poor child, that we are about to be sacrificed to the dragon god of the Antillians.”

The words were no more than uttered, when with a weird chant the Cabiri closed in on their victims and led them with solemn ceremonial toward the altar.

In vain did Professor Stevens protest. Their decision had been made and was irrevocable. Tlaloc must be appeased. Lo, even now he roared for the offering!

They pointed to the dragon, from whose nostrils suddenly issued hissing spurts of flame.

Larry fumed in disgust at the cheap hocus-pocus of it—but the next moment a more violent emotion swept over him as he saw Diane seized and borne swiftly to that loathsome shrine.

But even as he lunged forward, the professor reached his daughter's side. Throwing himself in front of her, he begged them to spare her, to sacrifice him instead.

The answer of the priests was a blow that knocked the graybeard senseless, and lifting Diane up, half-swooning, they flung her upon the altar.

"Mr. Hunter! Larry!" came her despairing cry.

She struggled up and for a moment her blue eyes opened, met his beseechingly.

That was enough—that and that despairing cry, "Larry!"

With the strength of frenzy, he flung off his captors, rushed to her aid, his hard fists flailing.

The pigmies went down in his path like grain before the scythe. Reaching the altar, he seized the priest whose knife was already upraised, and, lifting him bodily, flung him full into the ugly snout of that snorting dragon.

Then, as a wail of dismay rose from the Cabiri, at this supreme sacrilege, he seized the now unconscious Diane and retreated with her toward the door.

But there spears barred his escape; and now, recovered from the first shock of this fearful affront to their god, the priests started toward him.

Standing at bay, with that limp, tender burden in his arms, Larry awaited the end.

As the maddened horde drew near, she stirred, lifted her pale face and smiled, her eyes still shut.

“Oh, Larry!”

“Diane!”

“You saved me. I won’t forget.”

Then, the smile still lingering, she slipped once more into merciful oblivion, and as Larry held her close to his heart, a new warmth kindled there.

But bitterness burned in his heart, too. He had saved her—won her love, perhaps—only to lose her. It wasn’t fair! Was there no way out?

The priests were close now, their pasty faces leering with fierce anticipation of their revenge, when suddenly, from down the gallery outside that guarded door, came the sharp crash of an explosion, followed by shouts and the rush of feet.

At the sound, the priests trembled, fled backward into the room and fell moaning before their idols, while the quaking guards strove frantically to close the door.

But before they could do so, in burst a half dozen brawny sailors in foreign uniform, bearing in their hands little black bulbs that looked suspiciously like grenades. Shouting in a tongue Larry could not distinguish above the uproar, they advanced upon the retreating guards and priests.

Then, when all were herded in the far corner of the room, the sailors backed toward the door. Motioning for Larry and Diane to clear out, they raised those sinister little missiles, prepared to fling them.

“Wait!” cried Larry, thinking of Professor Stevens.

And releasing Diane, who had revived, he rushed forward, seized the prostrate savant from amid the unresisting Cabiri, and bore him to safety.

“Daddy!” sobbed Diane, swaying to meet them.

“Back!” shouted one of the sailors, shoving them through the door.

The last glimpse Larry had of that fateful room was the horde of priests and guards huddled before their altar, voices lifted in supplication to that hideous dragon god.

Then issued a series of blinding flashes followed by deafening explosions, mingled with shrieks of anguish.

Sickened, he stood there, as the reverberations died away.

Presently, when it was plain no further menace would come from that blasted temple, their rescuers led the trio back down those

winding galleries, and through that long, straight tunnel to the smaller pyramid.

Professor Stevens had recovered consciousness by now and was able to walk, with Larry's aid, though a matted clot of blood above his left ear showed the force of the blow he had received.

The way, after reaching the smaller pyramid, led up those other galleries they had mounted the night before.

This time, undoubtedly, they were to be taken before that mysterious usurping emperor. And what would be the result of that audience? Would it but plunge them from the frying pan into the fire, wondered Larry, or would it mean their salvation?

Anyway, he concluded, no fate could be worse than the hideous one they had just escaped. But if only Diane could be spared further anguish!

He glanced at her fondly, as they walked along, and she returned him a warm smile.

Now the way led into a short, level passage ending in a door guarded by two sailors with rifles. They presented arms, as their comrades

came up, and flung open the door.

As he stepped inside, Larry blinked in amazement, for he was greeted by electric lights in ornate clusters, richly carpeted floors, walls hung with modern paintings—and there at the far end, beside a massive desk, stood an imposing personage in foreign naval uniform of high rank, strangely familiar, strangely reminiscent of war days.

Even before the man spoke, in his guttural English, the suspicion those sailors had aroused crystallized itself.

A German! A U-boat commander!

“Greetings, gentlemen—and the little lady,” boomed their host, with heavy affability. “I see that my men were in time. These swine of Antillians are a tricky lot. I must apologize for them—my subjects.”

The last word was pronounced with scathing contempt.

“We return greetings!” said Professor Stevens. “To whom, might I ask, do we owe our lives, and the honor of this interview?”

Larry smiled. The old graybeard was up to his form, all right!

“You are addressing Herr Rolf von Ullrich,” the flattered German

replied, adding genially: “commander of one of His Imperial Majesty’s super-submarines during the late war and at present Emperor of Antillia.”

To which the professor replied with dignity that he was greatly honored to make the acquaintance of so exalted a personage, and proceeded in turn to introduce himself and party. But Von Ullrich checked him with a smile.

“The distinguished Professor Stevens and his charming daughter need no introduction, as they are already familiar to me through the American press and radio,” he said. “While as for Mr. Hunter, your Captain Petersen has already made me acquainted with his name.”

At the mention of the commander of the *Nereid*, all three of them gave a start.

“Then—then my captain and crew are safe?” asked the professor, eagerly.

“Quite,” Von Ullrich assured him. “You will be taken to them presently. But first there are one or two little things you would like explained—yes? Then I shall put to you a proposal, which if acceptable will guarantee your safe departure from my adopted

country.”

Whereupon the German traced briefly the events leading up to the present.

During the last months of the war, he had been placed in command of a special U-boat known as the “mystery ship”—designed to resist depth-charges and embodying many other innovations, most of them growing out of his own experience with earlier submarines.

One day, while cruising off the West Indies, in wait for some luckless sugar boat, he had been surprised by a destroyer and forced to submerge so suddenly that his diving gear had jammed and they had gone to the bottom. But the craft had managed to withstand the pressure and they had been able to repair the damage, limping home with a bad leak but otherwise none the worse for the experience.

The leak repaired and the hull further strengthened, he had set out again. But when in mid-Atlantic the Armistice had come, and rather than return to a defeated country, subject possibly to Allied revenge, he had persuaded his crew to remain out and let their craft be reported missing.

What followed then, though Von Ullrich masked it in polite words,

was a story of piracy, until they found by degrees that there was more gold on the bottom of the ocean than the top; and from this to the discovery of the sunken empire where he now held reign was but a step.

They had thought at first they were looting only empty temples—but, finding people there, had easily conquered them, though ruling them, he admitted, was another matter. As, for instance, yesterday, when the priests had interfered with his orders and carried his three chief captives off to sacrifice.

“Where now, but for me, you would be food for their gods!” he ended. “And if you do not find my hospitality altogether to your liking, friends, remember that you came uninvited. In fact, if you will recall, you came despite my explicit warning!”

But since they were here, he told them, they might be willing to repay his good turn with another.

Whereupon Von Ullrich launched into his proposal, which was that Professor Stevens place the *Nereid* at his disposal for visiting the depths at the foot of the plateau, where lay the capital of the empire, he said—a magnificent metropolis known as the City of the Sun and modeled after the great Atlantean capital, the City of the Golden

Gates, and the depository of a treasure, the greedy German believed, that was the ransom of the world.

The professor frowned, and for a moment Larry thought he was going to remind their host that this was not a treasure hunt.

“Why,” he asked instead, “do you not use your own submarine for the purpose?”

“Because for one thing, she will not stand the pressure, nor will our suits,” was the reply. “And for another, she is already laden with treasure, ready for an—er—forced abdication!” with a sardonic laugh.

“Then have you not enough gold already?”

“For myself, yes. But there are my men, you see—and men who have glimpsed the treasures of the earth are not easily satisfied, Professor. But have no fear. You shall accompany us, and, by your aid, shall pay your own ransom.”

Von Ullrich made no mention of the alternative, in case the aid was refused, but the ominous light Larry caught in his cold gray eyes spoke as clearly as words.

So, since there was nothing else to do, Professor Stevens agreed.

Whereupon the audience terminated and they were led from the presence of this arrogant German to another apartment, where they were to meet Captain Petersen and the crew of the *Nereid.*

As they proceeded toward it, under guard, Larry wondered why Von Ullrich had even troubled to make the request, when he held it in his power to take the craft anyway.

But after the first joyful moment of reunion, it was a mystery no longer, for Captain Petersen reported that immediately upon their capture, the commander of the U-boat had tried to force him to reveal the operation of the *Nereid*, but that he had steadfastly refused, even though threatened with torture.

And to think, it came to Larry with a new twinge of shame, that he had suspected this gallant man of mutiny!

That very morning, while Professor Stevens and his party were still exchanging experiences with Captain Petersen and the members of the crew, Von Ullrich sent for them and they gathered with his own men in the small lock-chamber at the base of the pyramid.

There they were provided with temporary suits by their host, since their own—which they brought along—could be inflated only from the *Nereid*.

Beside her, they noted as they emerged in relays, the U-boat was now moored.

Entering their own craft, they got under way at once and headed swiftly westward toward the brink of the plateau. Most of Von Ullrich's crew were with them, though a few had been left behind to guard against any treachery, on the part of the now sullen and aroused populace.

Slipping out over the edge of that precipitous tableland, they tilted her rudders and dove to the abysm below.

Presently the central square of the illuminated panel in the navigating room showed three great concentric circles, enclosed by a quadrangle that must have been miles on a side—and within this vast sunken fortress lay a city of innumerable pyramids and temples and palaces.

The German's eyes flashed greedily as he peered upon this vision.

“There you are!” he exclaimed, quivering with excitement. “Those circles, that square: what would you judge they were, Professor?”

“I would judge that originally they were the canals bearing the municipal water supply,” Martin Stevens told him quietly, suppressing his own excitement, “for such was said to be the construction of the City of the Golden Gates; but now I judge they are walls raised on those original foundations by the frantic populace, when the submergence first began, in a vain effort to hold back the tides that engulfed them.”

“And do you think they are of gold?”

“Frankly, no; though I have no doubt you will find plenty of that element down there.”

Nor was the prediction wrong, for modern eyes had never seen such a treasure house as they beheld when presently the *Nereid* came to rest outside that ancient four-walled city and they forced their way inside.

Though the walls were not of gold, the inner gates were, and the temples were fairly bursting with the precious metal, as well as rare jewels, the eyes of a thousand idols gleaming with rubies and

emeralds.

But where was the populace, amid all this prodigious wealth? Was there no life down here?

Von Ullrich declared through the vibrator of his pressure-suit that he had heard there was. And as though in substantiation, many of the temples showed the same bell-jar construction as the pyramids above, though even stouter, revealing evidences of having been occupied very recently; but all were flooded and empty. The city was as a city of the dead.

This ominous sign did not deter the “emperor,” however. Ruthlessly he and his men looted those flooded temples, forcing Professor Stevens and his party to lend aid in the orgy of pillage.

And all the time, Larry had an uneasy feeling of gathering furtive hosts about them, waiting—waiting for what?

He confided his fears to no one, though he noted with relief that Von Ullrich seemed to sense these unseen presences too, for he proceeded with caution and always kept a strong guard outside.

By early afternoon, the *Nereid* was one great coffer-chest.

But still the rapacious U-boat commander was unsatisfied, though Professor Stevens began to have doubts if his craft could lift that massive weight of plunder to the top of the plateau.

“One more load and we go,” he soothed. “A few more pretties for the little lady!”

Larry writhed, and should have suspected then and there—but as it was, the blow fell unexpected, stunning.

Filing from the lock, they failed to notice that Von Ullrich and his crew hung back, until there came a sudden, guttural command, whereupon Diane was seized and the massive door flung shut in their faces.

Appalled by this overwhelming disaster, the party stood for a moment motionless, speechless. Then, as one, Larry and the professor rushed forward and beat upon that barred hatch, calling upon Von Ullrich to open it.

From within the submarine, through their vibrators, they heard him laugh.

“*Auf Wiedersehen!*” he toasted them. “I now have all the treasure I

want! The rest I leave to you! Help yourselves!”

Even as he spoke, the *Nereid’s* auxiliary propellers started churning the water. Slowly, sluggishly, like some great gorged fish, the sturdy craft moved off, lifted her snout, headed upward.

Professor Stevens bowed his head, and Larry could well picture the grief that distorted the graybeard’s face, inside that owl-eyed helmet.

“Cheer up!” he said, though his own face was twisted with anguish. “Perhaps—”

Then he paused—for how could he say that perhaps the situation wasn’t as bad as it seemed, when it was obviously hopeless?

“My poor Diane!” moaned the professor. “Poor child. Poor child!”

As for Captain Petersen and the crew, they said nothing. Perhaps they were thinking of Diane, perhaps of themselves. At least, they knew it was over.

Or so they thought. But to Larry, suddenly, occurred a gleam of hope. That strange sense of unseen presences! It was bizarre, of course, but doesn’t a drowning person catch at straws? And Lord knows they were drowning, if ever anyone was!

He turned and confided to Professor Stevens his idea, which was to retrace their steps within the city gates, seek out the populace and throw themselves on their mercy.

The stricken savant, too, grasped at the straw.

“It seems fantastic, but after all it is a chance,” he admitted.

So they pushed back into that great submerged city, with Captain Petersen and his skeptical crew. They entered one of the largest of the temples, wandered forlornly through its flooded halls and corridors, seeking some sign of these alleged beings Larry had sensed.

Nor was their search unrewarded, for suddenly the captain himself, most skeptical of all, cried out:

“Listen! Did you hear that?”

There was no need to ask the question, for all had heard. It was a rasping sound, as of some great door swinging shut, followed almost immediately by a rushing gurgle—and as they stood there tense, the water level began rapidly receding.

Even while it was still plashing about their ankles, a secret block of

masonry slid back and a horde of Antillians burst in upon them.

What happened then, happened with a rush that left them dazed.

Unable to talk directly with the pigmies, by reason of their pressure-suits, which they dared not remove, they started gesturing with them, trying to explain their predicament and make known that they bore them no ill-will, but the creatures waved for them to cease and led them swiftly through the now waterless temple.

“Well, I guess it’s all up!” said Larry, adding with dismal humor: “They’re probably going to finish that meal they started feeding their dragon last night!”

No one laughed, nor made any comment, and he relapsed into silence, realizing that they probably held him responsible for this latest disaster.

Leaving the temple, their captors led them into a passage that was level for a time, then inclined sharply. It was laborious going but they struggled on.

“I believe they know we are not their enemies!” declared Professor Stevens, at length, to everyone’s cheer. “They seem to be leading us

back to the plateau by some underground passage."

"Let's hope so!" said Larry. "Perhaps I had the right hunch after all."

"But my poor Diane!" came the professor's sorrowing after-thought. "That fiend Von Ullrich could never get the *Nereid* up safely."

"I think perhaps he could, with Miss Stevens to help him," put in Captain Petersen, his usual optimism returning. "She is thoroughly familiar with the craft's operation."

"That is so," her father admitted, his tone brighter. "But—"

"Of course it's so!" exclaimed Larry, breaking off any less hopeful reflections. "So cheerio, folks, as the English say. We'll make it yet!"

But in his heart, he was tormented with doubt for Diane's safety….

The trail was growing eery, now, and precipitous. To their right rose a sheer cliff. To their left, the path fell off abruptly to a gigantic caldron where red flames leaped and waned.

"Looks like something out of Dante's 'Inferno'!" muttered Larry, with a shudder.

“The volcano where they distill their atmosphere, evidently,” commented Professor Stevens. “It would have been interesting, in other circumstances, to observe the process.”

“Not to me, it wouldn’t!”

Larry was glad when they had passed that seething hell-pot and were once more proceeding through a long, dark gallery.

But everywhere, though their guides were but a handful, was a sense of those unseen presences, of gathering, furtive hosts about them, waiting—waiting for what?

What was this strange sense of tension, of foreboding, that hung in the air? Was the professor wrong? Were they being led to their doom, after all?

He was soon to know, for now the gallery they had been traversing levelled out into a series of short passages, each barred by a heavy stone door, and finally they were led into a small, square room, barely large enough to admit them all.

There, with gestures toward the far end, their guides left them.

The door closed, and almost immediately another on the opposite

side opened, slowly at first, then wider and wider, admitting a rush of water that promptly filled the room.

Stepping wonderingly out, they found themselves on the upper level, beside the second of the two smaller pyramids.

“Whew!” gasped Larry, as they stood looking around, still a little dazed. “These people are sure quick-change artists! First they try to feed you to their gods, then they save you from almost as bad a fate. Dizzy, I call it!”

“Quite understandable, I should say,” declared the professor. “Unable to cope with Von Ullrich themselves, they think perhaps we may be able to.”

“Well, let’s hope they’re right!” grimly. “If once I get my hands on him—”

He broke off suddenly, as Captain Petersen called out:

“The *Nereid*! There she is!”

Following with their eyes the bright segment cut into the murky depths by his flashlight, they saw the familiar outlines of their craft; and close beside her lay the U-boat.

A feverish activity seemed to be going on between the two submarines.

“They’re changing cargo!” cried Larry. “Quick! We’ve got them now!”

But the progress they were able to make, hampered by their heavy suits, was maddeningly slow. Their searchlights, moreover, betrayed their approach. Before they could reach the scene, most of the sailors had abandoned their task and piled into the U-boat.

Arms swinging wildly, Von Ullrich stood beside it, trying to rally then. Refusing to risk combat, however, since they were unable to use their deadly hand-grenades under water, they continued clambering up the sides of their submersible and shoving down through its conning-tower hatch.

Now a figure in a familiar pressure-suit broke away and started toward the advancing party.

It was Diane!

Even as he recognized her, Larry saw Von Ullrich lunge forward, seize his captive and mount to the conning-tower with her—but

before the German could thrust her into the hatch, he had reached the U-boat's side and clambered to her rescue.

Dropping Diane, Von Ullrich wheeled to face his assailant. They grappled, fell to the deck, rolled over and over.

But suddenly, as they were struggling, there came a sound that caused the German to burst free and leap to his feet.

It was the sound of engines under them!

Ignoring Larry now, Von Ullrich staggered to the conning-tower hatch. It was battened fast. Frantically he beat on it.

This much Larry saw, as he knelt there getting his breath. Then he rose, took Diane by the arm and led her down. And he was none too soon, for with a lunge the U-boat got under way.

But she seemed unable to lift her loot-laden mass from the ocean floor, and headed off crazily across the plateau, dragging her keel in the sand.

With fascinated horror, they watched the craft's erratic course, as it swung loggily westward and headed toward that yawning abysm from which they had all so lately risen.

The last sight they had of the U-boat was as it reached the brink, its despairing commander still standing in the conning-tower, hammering vainly on that fast-bound hatch; then they turned away faint, as the doomed craft plunged down, stern up, into those crushing depths.

Professor Stevens now joined them.

“A lesson in avarice,” he said gravely, when he had greeted his daughter with heartfelt relief. “And a typical fate of fortune hunters! Let that be a lesson to you, young man.”

“Amen!” said Larry.

“But what happened, my dear?” asked the professor of Diane, a moment later. “Why were they in such a hurry to be off?”

“Because the sensible Antillians seized their opportunity and overcame their guards, while we were below,” was her reply. “When we got back, we found the pyramids flooded, so there was nothing else for them to do but go.”

So that was the explanation of those gathering, furtive hosts in the lower level, thought Larry. Now he knew what they had been

waiting for! They had been waiting for that usurping vandal to depart.

And how they must be gloating now, down there!

“But why were they so eager to abandon the *Nereid*?” asked the savant, still puzzled. “It it a better boat than theirs, even if I do say so myself.”

“Because I put it out of commission, directly we got back up here,” replied Diane. “But not permanently!” she added, with what Larry knew was a smile, though he couldn’t see her face, of course, through the helmet of her pressure-suit.

“Little thoroughbred!” he exclaimed, half to himself.

“What did you say, Mr. Hunter?—Larry, I mean,” she inquired.

“N—nothing,” he replied uneasily.

“Fibber!” said Diane. “I heard you the first time!”

“Just wait till I get out of this darned suit!” said Larry.

“I guess I can wait that long!” she told him.

And if Professor Stevens heard any of this, it went in one ear and out the other, for he was thinking what a report he would have to make to his confrères when they got home—particularly with half a boatload of assorted idols for proof.

#66 The Gate To Xoran, By Hal K. Wells:

A strange man of metal comes to earth on a dreadful mission.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

just as Arlok came through the door

- - -

He sat in a small half-darkened booth well over in the corner—the man with the strangely glowing blue-green eyes.

The booth was one of a score that circled the walls of the “Maori Hut,” a popular night club in the San Fernando Valley some five miles over the hills from Hollywood.

It was nearly midnight. Half a dozen couples danced lazily in the central dancing space. Other couples remained tête-à-tête in the

secluded booths.

In the entire room only two men were dining alone. One was the slender gray-haired little man with the weirdly glowing eyes. The other was Blair Gordon, a highly successful young attorney of Los Angeles. Both men had the unmistakable air of waiting for someone.

Blair Gordon's college days were not so far distant that he had yet lost any of the splendid physique that had made him an All-American tackle. In any physical combat with the slight gray-haired stranger, Gordon knew that he should be able to break the other in two with one hand.

Yet, as he studied the stranger from behind the potted palms that screened his own booth. Gordon was amazed to find himself slowly being overcome by an emotion of dread so intense that it verged upon sheer fear. There was something indescribably alien and utterly sinister in that dimly seen figure in the corner booth.

The faint eery light that glowed in the stranger's deep-set eyes was not the lambent flame seen in the chatoyant orbs of some night-prowling jungle beast. Rather was it the blue-green glow of phosphorescent witch-light that flickers and dances in the night mists above steaming tropical swamps.

The stranger's face was as classically perfect in its rugged outline as that of a Roman war-god, yet those perfect features seemed utterly lifeless. In the twenty minutes that he had been intently watching the stranger, Gordon would have sworn that the other's face had not moved by so much as the twitch of an eye-lash.

Then a new couple entered the Maori Hut, and Gordon promptly forgot all thought of the puzzlingly alien figure in the corner. The new arrivals were a vibrantly beautiful blond girl and a plump, sallow-faced man in the early forties. The girl was Leah Keith, Hollywood's latest screen sensation. The man was Dave Redding, her director.

A waiter seated Leah and her escort in a booth directly across the room from that of Gordon. It was a maneuver for which Gordon had tipped lavishly when he first came to the Hut.

A week ago Leah Keith's engagement to Blair Gordon had been abruptly ended by a trivial little quarrel that two volatile temperaments had fanned into flames which apparently made reconciliation impossible. A miserably lonely week had finally ended in Gordon's present trip to the Maori Hut. He knew that Leah often came there, and he had an overwhelming longing to at least see her again, even though his pride forced him to remain unseen.

Now, as he stared glumly at Leah through the palms that effectively screened his own booth, Gordon heartily regretted that he had ever come. The sight of Leah's clear fresh beauty merely made him realize what a fool he had been to let that ridiculous little quarrel come between them.

Then, with a sudden tingling thrill, Gordon realized that he was not the only one in the room who was interested in Leah and her escort.

Over in the half-darkened corner booth the eery stranger was staring at the girl with an intentness that made his weird eyes glow like miniature pools of shimmering blue-green fire. Again Gordon felt that vague impression of dread, as though he were in the presence of something utterly alien to all human experience.

Gordon turned his gaze back to Leah, then caught his breath sharply in sudden amaze. The necklace about Leah's throat was beginning to glow with the same uncanny blue-green light that shone in the stranger's eyes! Faint, yet unmistakable, the shimmering radiance pulsed from the necklace in an aura of nameless evil.

And with the coming of that aura of weird light at her throat, a strange trance was swiftly sweeping over Leah. She sat there now as rigidly motionless as some exquisite statue of ivory and jet.

Gordon stared at her in stark bewilderment. He knew the history of Leah's necklace. It was merely an oddity, and nothing more—a freak piece of costume jewelry made from fragments of an Arizona meteorite. Leah had worn the necklace a dozen times before, without any trace of the weird phenomena that were now occurring.

Dancers again thronged the floor to the blaring jazz of the negro orchestra while Gordon was still trying to force his whirling brain to a decision. He was certain that Leah was in deadly peril of some kind, yet the nature of that peril was too bizarre for his mind to imagine.

Then the stranger with the glowing eyes took matters into his own hands. He left his booth and began threading his way through the dancers toward Leah. As he watched the progress of that slight gray-haired figure Gordon refused to believe the evidence of his own eyes. The thing was too utterly absurd—yet Gordon was positive that the strong oak floor of the dancing space was visibly swaying and creaking beneath the stranger's mincing tread!

The stranger paused at Leah's booth only long enough to utter a brief low-voiced command. Then Leah, still in the grip of that strange trance, rose obediently from her seat to accompany him.

Dave Redding rose angrily to intercept her. The stranger seemed to barely brush the irate director with his finger tips, yet Redding reeled back as though struck by a pile-driver. Leah and the stranger started for the door. Redding scrambled to his feet again and hurried after them.

It was then that Gordon finally shook off the stupor of utter bewilderment that had held him. Springing from his booth, he rushed after the trio.

The dancers in his way delayed Gordon momentarily. Leah and the stranger were already gone when he reached the door. The narrow little entrance hallway to the Hut was deserted save for a figure sprawled there on the floor near the outer door.

It was the body of Dave Redding. Gordon shuddered as he glanced briefly down at the huddled figure. A single mighty blow from some unknown weapon had crumpled the director's entire face in, like the shattered shell of a broken egg.

Gordon charged on through the outer door just as a heavy sedan came careening out of the parking lot. He had a flashing glimpse of Leah and the stranger in the front seat of the big car.

Gordon raced for his own machine, a powerful low-slung roadster. A single vicious jab at the starting button, and the big motor leaped into roaring life. Gordon shot out from the parking lot onto the main boulevard. A hundred yards away the sedan was fleeing toward Hollywood.

Gordon tramped hard on the accelerator. His engine snarled with the unleashed fury of a hundred horsepower. The gap between the two cars swiftly lessened.

Then the stranger seemed to become aware for the first time that he was being followed. The next second the big sedan accelerated with the hurtling speed of a flying bullet. Gordon sent his own foot nearly to the floor. The roadster jumped to eighty miles an hour, yet the sedan continued to leave it remorselessly behind.

The two cars started up the northern slope of Cahuenga Pass with the sedan nearly two hundred yards ahead, and gaining all the time. Gordon wondered briefly if they were to flash down the other side of the Pass and on into Hollywood at their present mad speed.

Then at the summit of the Pass the sedan swerved abruptly to the right and fled west along the Mulholland Highway. Gordon's tires screamed as he swerved the roadster in hot pursuit.

The dark winding mountain highway was nearly deserted at that hour of the night. Save for an occasional automobile that swerved frantically to the side of the road to dodge the roaring onslaught of the racing cars, Gordon and the stranger had the road to themselves.

The stranger seemed no longer to be trying to leave his pursuer hopelessly behind. He allowed Gordon to come within a hundred yards of him. But that was as near as Gordon could get, is spite of the roadster's best efforts.

Half a dozen times Gordon trod savagely upon his accelerator in a desperate attempt to close the gap, but each time the sedan fled with the swift grace of a scudding phantom. Finally Gordon had to content himself with merely keeping his distance behind the glowing red tail-light of the car ahead.

They passed Laurel Canyon, and still the big sedan bored on to the west. Then finally, half a dozen miles beyond Laurel Canyon, the stranger abruptly left the main highway and started up a narrow private road to the crest of one of the lonely hills. Gordon slowly gained in the next two miles. When the road ended in a winding gravelled driveway into the grounds of what was apparently a private estate, the roadster was scarcely a dozen yards behind.

The stranger's features as he stood there stiffly erect in the vivid glare of the roadster's headlights were still as devoid of all expression as ever. The only things that really seemed alive in that masque of a face were the two eyes, glowing eery blue-green fire like twin entities of alien evil.

Gordon wasted no time in verbal sparring. He motioned briefly to Leah Keith's rigid form in the front seat of the sedan.

"Miss Keith is returning to Hollywood with me," he said curtly. "Will you let her go peaceably, or shall I—?" He left the question unfinished, but its threat was obvious.

"Or shall you do what?" asked the stranger quietly. There was an oddly metallic ring in his low even tones. His words were so precisely clipped that they suggested some origin more mechanical than human.

"Or shall I take Miss Keith with me by force?" Gordon flared angrily.

"You can try to take the lady by force—if you wish." There was an unmistakable jeering note in the metallic tones.

The taunt was the last thing needed to unleash Gordon's volatile temper. He stepped forward and swung a hard left hook for that expressionless masque of a face. But the blow never landed. The stranger dodged with uncanny swiftness. His answering gesture seemed merely the gentlest possible push with an outstretched hand, yet Gordon was sent reeling backward a full dozen steps by the terrific force of that apparently gentle blow.

Recovering himself, Gordon grimly returned to the attack. The stranger again flung out one hand in the contemptuous gesture with which one would brush away a troublesome fly, but this time Gordon was more cautious. He neatly dodged the stranger's blow, then swung a vicious right squarely for his adversary's unprotected jaw.

The blow smashed solidly home with all of Gordon's weight behind it. The stranger's jaw buckled and gave beneath that shattering impact. Then abruptly his entire face crumpled into distorted ruin. Gordon staggered back a step in sheer horror at the gruesome result of his blow.

The stranger flung a hand up to his shattered features. When his hand came away again, his whole face came away with it!

Gordon had one horror-stricken glimpse of a featureless blob of rubbery bluish-gray flesh in which fiendish eyes of blue-green fire blazed in malignant fury.

Then the stranger fumbled at his collar, ripping the linen swiftly away. Something lashed out from beneath his throat—a loathsome snake-like object, slender and forked at the end. For one ghastly moment, as the writhing tentacle swung into line with him, Gordon saw its forked ends glow strange fire—one a vivid blue, the other a sparkling green.

Then the world was abruptly blotted out for Blair Gordon.

Consciousness returned to Gordon as swiftly and painlessly as it had left him. For a moment he blinked stupidly in a dazed effort to comprehend the incredible scene before him.

He was seated in a chair over near the wall of a large room that was flooded with livid red light from a single globe overhead. Beside him sat Leah Keith, also staring with dazed eyes in an effort to comprehend her surroundings. Directly in front of them stood a figure of stark nightmare horror.

The weirdly glowing eyes identified the figure as that of the stranger

at the Maori Hut, but there every point of resemblance ceased. Only the cleverest of facial masques and body padding could ever have enabled this monstrosity to pass unnoticed in a world of normal human beings.

Now that his disguise was completely stripped away, his slight frame was revealed as a grotesque parody of that of a human being, with arms and legs like pipe-stems, a bald oval head that merged with neckless rigidity directly into a heavy-shouldered body that tapered into an almost wasp-like slenderness at the waist. He was naked save for a loin cloth of some metallic fabric. His bluish-gray skin had a dull oily sheen strangely suggestive of fine grained flexible metal.

The creature's face was hideously unlike anything human. Beneath the glowing eyes was a small circular mouth orifice with a cluster of gill-like appendages on either side of it. Patches of lighter-colored skin on either side of the head seemed to serve as ears. From a point just under the head, where the throat of a human being would have been, dangled the foot-and-a-half long tentacle whose forked tip had sent Gordon into oblivion.

Behind the creature Gordon was dimly aware of a maze of complicated and utterly unfamiliar apparatus ranged along the opposite wall, giving the room the appearance of being a laboratory

of some kind.

Gordon's obvious bewilderment seemed to amuse the bluish-gray monstrosity. "May I introduce myself?" he asked with a mocking note in his metallic voice. "I am Arlok of Xoran. I am an explorer of Space, and more particularly an Opener of Gates. My home is upon Xoran, which is one of the eleven major planets that circle about the giant blue-white sun that your astronomers call Rigel. I am here to open the Gate between your world and mine."

Gordon reached a reassuring hand over to Leah. All memory of their quarrel was obliterated in the face of their present peril. He felt her slender fingers twine firmly with his. The warm contact gave them both new courage.

"We of Xoran need your planet and intend to take possession of it," Arlok continued, "but the vast distance which separates Rigel from your solar system makes it impracticable to transport any considerable number of our people here in space-cars for, though our space-cars travel with practically the speed of light, it requires over five hundred and forty years for them to cross that great void. So I was sent as a lone pioneer to your Earth to do the work necessary here in order to open the Gate that will enable Xoran to cross the barrier in less than a minute of your time.

“That gate is the one through the fourth dimension, for Xoran and your planet in a four-dimensional universe are almost touching each other in spite of the great distance separating them in a three-dimensional universe. We of Xoran, being three-dimensional creatures like you Earthlings, can not even exist on a four-dimensional plane. But we can, by the use of apparatus to open a Gate, pass through a thin sector of the fourth dimension and emerge in a far distant part of our three-dimensional universe.

“The situation of our two worlds,” Arlok continued, “is somewhat like that of two dots on opposite ends of a long strip of paper that is curved almost into a circle. To two-dimensional beings capable only of realizing and traveling along the two dimensions of the paper itself those dots might be many feet apart, yet in the third dimension straight across free space they might be separated by only the thousandth part of an inch. In order to take that short cut across the third dimension the two-dimensional creatures of the paper would have only to transform a small strip of the intervening space into a two-dimensional surface like their paper.

“They could, do this, of course, by the use of proper vibration-creating machinery, for all things in a material universe are merely a matter of vibration. We of Xoran plan to cross the barrier of the fourth dimension by creating a narrow strip of vibrations powerful

enough to exactly match and nullify those of the fourth dimension itself. The result will be that this narrow strip will temporarily become an area of three dimensions only, an area over which we can safely pass from our world to yours."

Arlok indicated one of the pieces of apparatus along the opposite wall of the room. It was an intricate arrangement of finely wound coils with wires leading to scores of needle-like points which constantly shimmered and crackled with tiny blue-white flames. Thick cables ran to a bank of concave reflectors of some gleaming grayish metal.

"There is the apparatus which will supply the enormous power necessary to nullify the vibrations of the fourth dimensional barrier," Arlok explained. "It is a condenser and adapter of the cosmic force that you call the Millikan rays. In Xoran a similar apparatus is already set up and finished, but the Gate can only be opened by simultaneous actions from both sides of the barrier. That is why I was sent on my long journey through space to do the necessary work here. I am now nearly finished. A very few hours more will see the final opening of the Gate. Then the fighting hordes of Xoran can sweep through the barrier and overwhelm your planet.

"When the Gate from Xoran to a new planet is first opened," Arlok

continued, “our scientists always like to have at least one pair of specimens of the new world’s inhabitants sent through to them for experimental use. So to-night, while waiting for one of my final castings to cool, I improved the time by making a brief raid upon the place that you call the Maori Hut. The lady here seemed an excellent type of your Earthling women, and the meteoric iron in her necklace made a perfect focus for electric hypnosis. Her escort was too inferior a specimen to be of value to me so I killed him when he attempted to interfere. When you gave chase I lured you on until I could see whether you might be usable. You proved an excellent specimen, so I merely stunned you. Very soon now I shall be ready to send the two of you through the Gate to our scientists in Xoran.”

A cold wave of sheer horror swept over Gordon. It was impossible to doubt the stark and deadly menace promised in the plan of this grim visitor from an alien universe—a menace that loomed not only for Gordon and Leah but for the teeming millions of a doomed and defenseless world.

“Let me show you Xoran,” Arlok offered. “Then you may be better able to understand.” He turned his back carelessly upon his two captives and strode over to the apparatus along the opposite wall.

Gordon longed to hurl himself upon the unprotected back of the

retreating Xoranian, but he knew that any attempt of that kind would be suicidal. Arlok's deadly tentacle would strike him down before he was halfway across the room.

He searched his surroundings with desperate eyes for anything that might serve as a weapon. Then his pulse quickened with sudden hope. There on a small table near Leah was the familiar bulk of a .45 calibre revolver, loaded and ready for use. It was included in a miscellaneous collection of other small earthly tools and objects that Arlok had apparently collected for study.

There was an excellent chance that Leah might be able to secure the gun unobserved. Gordon pressed her fingers in a swift attempt at signalling, then jerked his head ever so slightly toward the table. A moment later the quick answering pressure of Leah's fingers told him that she had understood his message. From the corner of his eye Gordon saw Leah's other hand begin cautiously groping behind her for the revolver.

Then both Gordon and Leah froze into sudden immobility as Arlok faced them again from beside an apparatus slightly reminiscent of an earthly radio set. Arlok threw a switch, and a small bank of tubes glowed pale green. A yard-square plate of bluish-gray metal on the wall above the apparatus glowed with milky fluorescence.

“It is easy to penetrate the barrier with light waves,” Arlok explained. “That is a Gate that can readily be opened from either side. It was through it that we first discovered your Earth.”

Arlok threw a rheostat on to more power. The luminous plate cleared swiftly. “And there, Earthlings, is Xoran!” Arlok said proudly.

Leah and Gordon gasped in sheer amaze as the glowing plate became a veritable window into another world—a world of utter and alien terror.

The livid light of a giant red sun blazed mercilessly down upon a landscape from which every vestige of animal and plant life had apparently been stripped. Naked rocks and barren soil stretched illimitably to the far horizon in a vast monotony of utter desolation.

Arlok twirled the knob of the apparatus, and another scene flashed into view. In this scene great gleaming squares and cones of metal rose in towering clusters from the starkly barren land. Hordes of creatures like Arlok swarmed in and around the metal buildings. Giant machines whirled countless wheels in strange tasks. From a thousand great needle-like projections on the buildings spurted shimmering sheets of crackling flame, bathing the entire scene in a whirling mist of fiery vapors.

Gordon realized dimly that he must be looking into one of the cities of Xoran, but every detail of the chaotic whirl of activity was too utterly unfamiliar to carry any real significance to his bewildered brain. He was as hopelessly overwhelmed as an African savage would be if transported suddenly into the heart of Times Square.

Arlok again twirled the knob. The scene shifted, apparently to another planet. This world was still alive, with rich verdure and swarming millions of people strangely like those of Earth. But it was a doomed world. The dread Gate to Xoran had already been opened here. Legions of bluish-gray Xoranians were attacking the planet's inhabitants, and the attack of those metallic hosts was irresistible.

The slight bodies of the Xoranians seemed as impervious to bullets and missiles as though armor-plated. The frantic defense of the beleaguered people of the doomed planet caused hardly a casualty in the Xoranian ranks.

The attack of the Xoranians was hideously effective. Clouds of dense yellow fog belched from countless projectors in the hands of the bluish-gray hosts, and beneath that deadly miasma all animal and plant life on the doomed planet was crumbling, dying, and rotting into a liquid slime. Then even the slime was swiftly obliterated, and the Xoranians were left triumphant upon a world starkly desolate.

“That was one of the minor planets in the swarm that make up the solar system of the sun that your astronomers call Canopus,” Arlok explained. “Our first task in conquering a world is to rid it of the unclean surface scum of animal and plant life. When this noxious surface mold is eliminated, the planet is then ready to furnish us sustenance, for we Xoranians live directly upon the metallic elements of the planet itself. Our bodies are of a substance of which your scientists have never even dreamed—deathless, invincible, living metal!”

Arlok again twirled the control of the apparatus and the scene was shifted back to the planet of Xoran, this time to the interior of what was apparently a vast laboratory. Here scores of Xoranian scientists were working upon captives who were pathetically like human beings of Earth itself, working with lethal gases and deadly liquids as human scientists might experiment upon noxious pests. The details of the scene were so utterly revolting, the tortures that were being inflicted so starkly horrible, that Leah and Gordon sank back in their chairs sick and shaken.

Arlok snapped off a switch, and the green light in the tubes died. “That last scene was the laboratory to which I shall send you two presently,” he said callously as he started back across the room toward them.

Gordon lurched to his feet, his brain a seething whirl of hate in which all thought of caution was gone as he tensed his muscles to hurl himself upon that grim monstrosity from the bleak and desolate realm of Xoran.

Then he felt Leah tugging surreptitiously at his right hand. The next moment the bulk of something cold and hard met his fingers. It was the revolver. Leah had secured it while Arlok was busy with his inter-dimensional televisor.

Arlok was rapidly approaching them. Gordon hoped against hope that the menace of that deadly tentacle might be diverted for the fraction of a second necessary for him to get in a crippling shot. Leah seemed to divine his thought. She suddenly screamed hysterically and flung herself on the floor almost at Arlok's feet.

Arlok stopped in obvious wonder and bent over Leah. Gordon took instant advantage of the Xoranian's diverted attention. He whipped the revolver from behind him and fired point-blank at Arlok's unprotected head.

The bullet struck squarely, but Arlok was not even staggered. A tiny spot of bluish-gray skin upon his oval skull gleamed faintly for a moment under the bullet's impact. Then the heavy pellet of lead, as

thoroughly flattened as though it had struck the triple armor of a battleship, dropped spent and harmless to the floor.

Arlok straightened swiftly. For the moment he seemed to have no thought of retaliating with his deadly tentacle. He merely stood there quite still with one thin arm thrown up to guard his glowing eyes.

Gordon sent the remainder of the revolver's bullets crashing home as fast as his finger could press the trigger. At that murderously short range the smashing rain of lead should have dropped a charging gorilla. But for all the effect Gordon's shots had upon the Xoranian, his ammunition might as well have been pellets of paper. Arlok's glossy hide merely, glowed momentarily in tiny patches as the bullets struck and flattened harmlessly—and that was all.

His last cartridge fired, Gordon flung the empty weapon squarely at the blue monstrosity's hideous face. Arlok made no attempt to dodge. The heavy revolver struck him high on the forehead, then rebounded harmlessly to the floor. Arlok paid no more attention to the blow than a man would to the casual touch of a wind-blown feather.

Gordon desperately flung himself forward upon the Xoranian in one last mad effort to overwhelm him. Arlok dodged Gordon's wild

blows, then gently swept the Earth man into the embrace of his thin arms. For one helpless moment Gordon sensed the incredible strength and adamantine hardness of the Xoranian's slender figure, together with an overwhelming impression of colossal weight in that deceptively slight body.

Then Arlok contemptuously flung Gordon away from him. As Gordon staggered backward, Arlok's tentacle lashed upward and levelled upon him. Its twin tips again glowed brilliant green and livid blue. Instantly every muscle in Gordon's body was paralyzed. He stood there as rigid as a statue, his body completely deadened from the neck down. Beside him stood Leah, also frozen motionless in that same weird power.

"Earthling, you are beginning to try my patience," Arlok snapped. "Can you not realize that I am utterly invincible in any combat with you? The living metal of my body weighs over sixteen hundred pounds, as you measure weight. The strength inherent in that metal is sufficient to tear a hundred of your Earth men to shreds. But I do not even have to touch you to vanquish you. The electric content of my bodily structure is so infinitely superior to yours that with this tentacle-organ of mine I can instantly short-circuit the feeble currents of your nerve impulses and bring either paralysis or death as I choose.

“But enough of this!” Arlok broke off abruptly. “My materials are now ready, and it is time that I finished my work. I shall put you out of my way for a few hours until I am ready to send you through the Gate to the laboratories of Xoran.”

The green and blue fire of the tentacle’s tips flamed to dazzling brightness. The paralysis of Gordon’s body swept swiftly over his brain. Black oblivion engulfed him.

When Gordon again recovered consciousness he found that he was lying on the floor of what was apparently a narrow hall, near the foot of a stairway. His hands were lashed tightly behind him, and his feet and legs were so firmly pinioned together that he could scarcely move.

Beside him lay Leah, also tightly bound. A short distance down the hall was the closed door of Arlok’s work-room, recognizable by the thin line of red light gleaming beneath it.

Moonlight through a window at the rear of the hall made objects around Gordon fairly clear. He looked at Leah and saw tears glistening on her long lashes.

“Oh, Blair, I was afraid you’d never waken again,” the girl sobbed.

“I thought that fiend had killed you!” Her voice broke hysterically.

“Steady, darling,” Gordon said soothingly. “We simply can’t give up now, you know. If that monstrosity ever opens that accursed Gate of his our entire world is doomed. There must be some way to stop him. We’ve got to find that way and try it—even if it seems only one forlorn chance in a million.”

Gordon shook his head to clear the numbness still lingering from the effect of Arlok’s tentacle. The Xoranian seemed unable to produce a paralysis of any great duration with his weird natural weapon. Accordingly, he had been forced to bind his captives like two trussed fowls while he returned to his labors.

Lying close together as they were, it was a comparatively easy matter for them to get their bound hands within reach of each other, but after fifteen minutes of vain work Gordon realized that any attempt at untying the ropes was useless. Arlok’s prodigious strength had drawn the knots so tight that no human power could ever loosen them.

Then Gordon suddenly thought of the one thing in his pockets that might help them. It was a tiny cigarette lighter, of the spring-trigger type. It was in his vest pocket completely out of reach of his bound

hands, but there was a way out of that difficulty.

Gordon and Leah twisted and rolled their bodies like two contortionists until they succeeded in getting into such a position that Leah was able to get her teeth in the cloth of the vest pocket's edge. A moment of desperate tugging, then the fabric gave way. The lighter dropped from the torn pocket to the floor, where Leah retrieved it.

Then they twisted their bodies back to back. Leah managed to get the lighter flaming in her bound hands. Gordon groped in an effort to guide the ropes on his wrists over the tiny flickering flame.

Then there came the faint welcome odor of smoldering rope as the lighter's tiny flame bit into the bonds. Gordon bit his lips to suppress a cry of pain as the flame seared into his skin as well. The flame bit deeper into the rope. A single strand snapped.

Then another strand gave way. To Gordon the process seemed endless as the flame scorched rope and flesh alike. A long minute of lancing agony that seemed hours—then Gordon could stand no more. He tensed his muscles in one mighty agonized effort to end the torture of the flame.

The weakened rope gave way completely beneath that pain-maddened lunge. Gordon's hands were free. It was an easy matter now to use the lighter to finish freeing himself and Leah. They made their way swiftly back to the window at the rear of the hall. It slid silently upward. A moment later, and they were out in the brilliant moonlight—free.

They made their way around to the front of the house. Behind the drawn shades of one of the front rooms an eery glow of red light marked the location of Arlok's work-room. They heard the occasional clink of tools inside the room as the Xoranian diligently worked to complete his apparatus.

They crept stealthily up to where one of the French windows of Arlok's work-room swung slightly ajar. Through the narrow crevice they could see Arlok's grotesque back as he labored over the complex assembly of apparatus against the wall.

A heavy stone flung through the window would probably wreck that delicate mechanism completely, yet the two watchers knew that such a respite would be only a temporary one. As long as Arlok remained alive on this planet to build other gates to Xoran, Earth's eventual doom was certain. Complete destruction of Arlok himself was Earth's only hope of salvation.

The Xoranian seemed to be nearing the end of his labors. He left the apparatus momentarily and walked over to a work-bench where he picked up a slender rod-like tool. Donning a heavy glove to shield his left hand, he selected a small plate of bluish-gray metal, then pressed a switch in the handle of the tool in his right hand.

A blade of blinding white flame, seemingly as solid as a blade of metal, spurted for the length of a foot from the tool's tip. Arlok began cutting the plate with the flame, the blade shearing through the heavy metal as easily as a hot knife shears through butter.

The sight brought a sudden surge of exultant hope to Gordon. He swiftly drew Leah away from the window, far enough to the side that their low-voiced conversation could not be heard from inside the work-room.

"Leah, there is our one chance!" he explained excitedly. "That blue fiend *is* vulnerable, and that flame-tool of his is the weapon to reach his vulnerability. Did you notice how careful he was to shield his other hand with a glove before he turned the tool on? He can be hurt by that blade of flame, and probably hurt badly."

Leah nodded in quick understanding. "If I could lure him out of the room for just a moment, you could slip in through the window and

get that flame-tool, Blair," she suggested eagerly.

"That might work," Gordon agreed reluctantly. "But, Leah, don't run any more risks than you absolutely have to!" He picked up a small rock. "Here, take this with you. Open the door into the hall and attract Arlok's attention by throwing the rock at his precious apparatus. Then the minute he sees you, try to escape out through the hall again. He'll leave his work to follow you. When he returns to his work-room I'll be in there waiting for him. And I'll be waiting with a weapon that can stab through even that armor-plated hide of his!"

They separated, Leah to enter the house, Gordon to return to the window.

Arlok was back over in front of the apparatus, fitting into place the piece of metal he had just cut. The flame-tool, its switch now turned off, was still on the work-bench.

Gordon's heart pounded with excitement as he crouched there with his eyes fixed upon the closed hall door. The minutes seemed to drag interminably. Then suddenly Gordon's muscles tensed. The knob of the hall door had turned ever so slightly. Leah was at her post!

The next moment the door was flung open with a violence that sent it slamming back against the wall. The slender figure of Leah stood framed in the opening, her dark eyes blazing as she flung one hand up to hurl her missile.

Arlok whirled just as Leah threw the rock straight at the intricate Gate-opening apparatus. With the speed of thought the Xoranian flung his own body over to shield his fragile instruments. The rock thudded harmlessly against his metallic chest.

Then Arlok's tentacle flung out like a striking cobra, its forked tip flaming blue and green fire as it focussed upon the open door. But Leah was already gone. Gordon heard her flying footsteps as she raced down the hall. Arlok promptly sped after her in swift pursuit.

As Arlok passed through the door into the hall Gordon flung himself into the room, and sped straight for the work-bench. He snatched the flame-tool up, then darted over to the wall by the door. He was not a second too soon. The heavy tread of Arlok's return was already audible in the hall just outside.

Gordon prepared to stake everything upon his one slim chance of disabling that fearful tentacle before Arlok could bring it into action. He pressed the tiny switch in the flame-tool's handle just as Arlok

came through the door.

Arlok, startled by the glare of the flame-tool's blazing blade, whirled toward Gordon—but too late. That thin searing shaft of vivid flame had already struck squarely at the base of the Xoranian's tentacle. A seething spray of hissing sparks marked the place where the flame bit deeply home. Arlok screamed, a ghastly metallic note of anguish like nothing human.

The Xoranian's powerful hands clutched at Gordon, but he leaped lithely backward out of their reach. Then Gordon again attacked, the flame-tool's shining blade licking in and out like a rapier. The searing flame swept across one of Arlok's arms, and the Xoranian winced. Then the blade stabbed swiftly at Arlok's waist. Arlok half-doubled as he flinched back. Gordon shifted his aim with lightning speed and sent the blade of flame lashing in one accurate terrible stroke that caught Arlok squarely in the eyes.

Again Arlok screamed in intolerable agony as that tearing flame darkened forever his glowing eyes. In berserker fury the tortured Xoranian charged blindly toward Gordon. Gordon warily dodged to one side. Arlok, sightless, and with his tentacle crippled, still had enough power in that mighty metallic body of his to tear a hundred Earth men to pieces.

Gordon stung Arlok's shoulder with the flame, then desperately leaped to one side just in time to dodge a flailing blow that would have made pulp of his body had it landed.

Arlok went stark wild in his frenzied efforts to come to grips with his unseen adversary. Furniture crashed and splintered to kindling wood beneath his threshing feet. Even the stout walls of the room shivered and cracked as the incredible weight of Arlok's body caromed against them.

Gordon circled lithely around the crippled blue monstrosity like a timber wolf circling a wounded moose. He began concentrating his attack upon Arlok's left leg. Half a dozen deep slashes with the searing flame—then suddenly the thin leg crumpled and broke. Arlok crashed helplessly to the floor.

Gordon was now able to shift his attack to Arlok's head. Dodging the blindly flailing arms of the Xoranian, he stabbed again and again at that oval-shaped skull.

The searing thrusts began to have their effect. Arlok's convulsive movements became slower and weaker. Gordon sent the flame stabbing in a long final thrust in an attempt to pierce through to that alien metal brain.

With startling suddenness the flame burned its way home to some unknown center of life force in the oval skull. There was a brief but appalling gush of bright purple flame from Arlok's eye-sockets and mouth orifice. Then his twitching body stiffened. His bluish-gray hide darkened with incredible swiftness into a dull black. Arlok was dead.

Gordon, sickened at the grisly ending to the battle, snapped off the flame-tool and turned to search for Leah. He found her already standing in the hall door, alive, and unhurt.

"I escaped through the window at the end of the hall," she explained. "Arlok quit following me as soon as he saw that you too were gone from where he had left us tied." She shuddered as she looked down at the Xoranian's mangled body. "I saw most of your fight with him, Blair. It was terrible; awful. But, Blair, we've won!"

"Yes, and now we'll make sure of the fruits of our victory," Gordon said grimly, starting over toward the Gate-opening apparatus with the flame-tool in his hand. A very few minutes' work with the shearing blade of flame reduced the intricate apparatus to a mere tangled pile of twisted metal.

Arlok, Gate-opener of Xoran, was dead—and the Gate to that grim

planet was now irrevocably closed!

“Blair, do you feel it too, that eery feeling of countless eyes still watching us from Xoran?” There was frank awe in Leah’s half-whispered question. “You know Arlok said that they had watched us for centuries from their side of the barrier. I’m sure they’re watching us now. Will they send another Opener of Gates to take up the work where Arlok failed?”

Gordon took Leah into his arms. “I don’t know, dear,” he admitted gravely. “They may send another messenger, but I doubt it. This world of ours has had its warning, and it will heed it. The watchers on Xoran must know that in the five hundred and forty years it would take their next messenger to get here, the Earth will have had more than enough time to prepare an adequate defense for even Xoran’s menace. I doubt if there will ever again be an attempt made to open the Gate to Xoran.”

#67 The Eye Of Allah, By Charles Willard Diffin:

On the fatal seventh of September a certain secret service man sat in the president's chair and—looked back into the Eye of Allah.

Aproximate word count: 8,100

Bigotry: The islamomisia is pretty implicit from the title.

Warnings:

The great ship tore apart

- - -

On the fatal seventh of September a certain Secret Service man sat in the President's chair and—looked back into the Eye of Allah.

Blinky Collins' part in this matter was very brief. Blinky lasted just long enough to make a great discovery, to brag about it as was Blinky's way, and then pass on to find his reward in whatever hereafter is set apart for weak-minded crooks whose heads are not hard enough to withstand the crushing impact of a lead-filled pacifier.

The photograph studio of Blinky Collins was on the third floor of a disreputable building in an equally unsavory part of Chicago. There were no tinted pictures of beautiful blondes nor of stern, square-jawed men of affairs in Blinky's reception room. His clients, who came furtively there, were strongly opposed to having their pictures taken—they came for other purposes. For the photographic work of Mr. Collins was strictly commercial—and peculiar. There were fingerprints to be photographed and identified for purpose of private revenge, photographs of people to be merged and repictured in compromising closeness for reasons of blackmail. And even X-Ray photography was included in the scope of his work.

The great discovery came when a box was brought to the dingy room and Mr. Collins was asked to show what was inside it without the bother and inconvenience of disturbing lock and seals. The X-Ray machine sizzled above it, and a photographic plate below was developed to show a string of round discs that could easily have been pearls.

The temporary possessor of the box was pleased with the result—but Blinky was puzzled. For the developer had brought out an odd result. There were the pearls as expected, but, too, there was a small picture superimposed—a picture of a bald head and a body beneath seated beside a desk. The picture had been taken from above looking

straight down, and head and desk were familiar.

Blinky knew them both. The odd part was that he knew also that both of them were at that instant on the ground floor of the same disreputable building, directly under and two floors below his workshop.

Like many great discoveries, this of Blinky's came as the result of an accident. He had monkeyed with the X-Ray generator and had made certain substitutions. And here was the result—a bald head and a desk, photographed plainly through two heavy wood floors. Blinky scratched his own head in deep thought. And then he repeated the operation.

This time there was a blonde head close to the bald one, and two people were close to the desk and to each other. Blinky knew then that there were financial possibilities in this new line of portrait work.

It was some time before the rat eyes of the inventor were able to see exactly what they wanted through this strange device, but Blinky learned. And he fitted a telescope back of the ray and found that he could look along it and see as if through a great funnel what was transpiring blocks and blocks away; he looked where he would, and

brick walls or stone were like glass when the new ray struck through them.

Blinky never knew what he had—never dreamed of the tremendous potentialities in his oscillating ethereal ray that had a range and penetration beyond anything known. But he knew, in a vague way, that this ray was a channel for light waves to follow, and he learned that he could vary the range of the ray and that whatever light was shown at the end of that range came to him as clear and distinct as if he were there in the room.

He sat for hours, staring through the telescope. He would train the device upon a building across the street, then cut down the current until the unseen vibration penetrated inside the building. If there was nothing there of interest he would gradually increase the power, and the ray would extend out and still out into other rooms and beyond them to still others. Blinky had a lot of fun, but he never forgot the practical application of the device—practical, that is, from the distorted viewpoint of a warped mind.

“I’ve heard about your machine,” said a pasty-faced man one day, as he sat in Blinky’s room, “and I think it’s a lot of hooey. But I’d give just one grand to know who is with the district attorney this minute.”

“Where is he?” asked Blinky.

“Two blocks down the street, in the station house … and if Pokey Barnard is with him, the lousy stool-pigeon—”

Blinky paid no attention to the other’s opinion of one Pokey Barnard; he was busy with a sputtering blue light and a telescope behind a shield of heavy lead.

“Put your money on the table,” he said, finally: “there’s the dicks … and there’s Pokey. Take a look—”

It was some few minutes later that Blinky learned of another valuable feature in his ray. He was watching the district attorney when the pasty-faced man brushed against a hanging incandescent light. There was a bit of bare wire exposed, and as it swung into the ray the fuses in the Collins studio blew out instantly.

But the squinting eyes at the telescope had seen something first. They had seen the spare form of the district attorney throw itself from the chair as if it had been dealt a blow—or had received an electric shock.

Blinky put in new fuses—heavier ones—and tried it again on

another subject. And again the man at the receiving end got a shot of current that sent him sprawling.

“Now what the devil—” demanded Blinky. He stood off and looked at the machine, the wire with its 110 volts, the invisible ray that was streaming out.

“It’s insulated, the machine is,” he told his caller, “so the juice won’t shoot back if I keep my hands off; but why,” he demanded profanely, “don’t it short on the first thing it touches?”

He was picturing vaguely a ray like a big insulated cable, with light and current both traveling along a core at its center, cut off, insulated by the ray, so that only the bare end where the ray stopped could make contact.

“Some more of them damn electrons.” he hazarded; then demanded of his caller: “But am I one hell of a smart guy? Or am I?”

There was no denying this fact. The pasty-faced man told Blinky with lurid emphasis just how smart. He had seen with his own eyes and this was too good to keep.

He paid his one grand and departed, first to make certain necessary

arrangements for the untimely end of one Pokey Barnard, squealer, louse, et cetera, et cetera, and then to spread the glad news through the underworld of Collins' invention.

That was Blinky's big mistake, as was shown a few days later. Not many had taken seriously the account of the photographer's experiments, but there was one who had, as was evident. A bearded man, whose eyes stared somewhat wildly from beneath a shock of frowzy hair, entered the Collins work-room and locked the door behind him. His English was imperfect, but the heavy automatic in his hand could not be misunderstood. He forced the trembling inventor to give a demonstration, and the visitor's face showed every evidence of delight.

"The cur-rent," he demanded with careful words, "the electreek cur-rent, you shall do also. Yes?"

Again the automatic brought quick assent, and again the visitor showed his complete satisfaction. Showed it by slugging the inventor quietly and efficiently and packing the apparatus in the big suitcase he had brought.

Blinky Collins had been fond of that machine. He had found a form of television with uncounted possibilities, and it had been for him

the perfect instrument of a blackmailing Peeping Tom; he had learned the secret of directed wireless transmission of power and had seen it as a means for annoying his enemies. Yet Blinky Collins—the late Blinky Collins—offered no least objection, when the bearded man walked off with the machine. His body, sprawled awkwardly in the corner, was quite dead….

And now, some two months later, in his Washington office, the Chief of the United States Secret Service pushed a paper across his desk to a waiting man and leaned back in his chair.

“What would you make of that, Del?” he asked.

Robert Delamater reached leisurely for the paper. He regarded it with sleepy, half-closed eyes.

There was a crude drawing of an eye at the top. Below was printed —not written—a message in careful, precise letters: “Take warning. The Eye of Allah is upon you. You shall instructions receive from time to time. Follow them. Obey.”

Delamater laughed. “Why ask me what I think of a nut letter like that. You’ve had plenty of them just as crazy.”

“This didn’t come to me,” said the Chief; “it was addressed to the President of the United States.”

“Well, there will be others, and we will run the poor sap down. Nothing out of the ordinary I should say.”

“That is what I thought—at first. Read this—” The big, heavy-set man pushed another and similar paper across the desk. “This one was addressed to the Secretary of State.”

Delamater did not read it at once. He held both papers to the light; his fingers touched the edges only.

“No watermark,” he mused; “ordinary white writing stock—sold in all the five and ten cent stores. Tried these for fingerprints I suppose?”.

“Read it,” suggested the Chief.

“Another picture of an eye,” said Delamater aloud, and read: “‘Warning. You are dealing with an emissary from a foreign power who is an unfriend of my country. See him no more. This is the first and last warning. The Eye of Allah watches.’

“And what is this below—? ‘He did not care for your cigars, Mr.

Secretary. Next time—but there must be no next time.'"

Delamater read slowly—lazily. He seemed only slightly interested except when he came to the odd conclusion of the note. But the Chief knew Delamater and knew how that slow indolence could give place to a feverish, alert concentration when work was to be done.

"Crazy as a loon," was the man's conclusion as he dropped the papers upon the desk.

"Crazy," his chief corrected, "like a fox! Read the last line again; then get this—

"The Secretary of State *is* meeting with a foreign agent who is here very much incog. Came in as a servant of a real ambassador. Slipped quietly into Washington, and not a soul knew he was here. He met the Secretary in a closed room; no one saw him come or leave—";

"Well, the Secretary tells me that in that room where nobody could see he offered this man a cigar. His visitor took it, tried to smoke it, apologized—and lit one of his own vile cigarettes."

"Hm-m!" Delamater sat a little straighter in his chair; his eyebrows were raised now in questioning astonishment. "Dictaphone? Some

employee of the Department listening in?”

“Impossible.”

“Now that begins to be interesting,” the other conceded. His eyes had lost their sleepy look. “Want me to take it on?”

“Later. Right now. I want you to take this visiting gentleman under your personal charge. Here is the name and the room and hotel where he is staying. He is to meet with the Secretary to-night—he knows where. You will get to him unobserved—absolutely unseen; I can leave that to you. Take him yourself to his appointment, and take him without a brass band. But have what men you want tail you and watch out for spies…. Then, when he is through, bring him back and deliver him safely to his room. Compray?”

“Right—give me Wilkins and Smeed. I rather think I can get this bird there and back without being seen, but perhaps they may catch Allah keeping tabs on us at that.” He laughed amusedly as he took the paper with the name and address.

A waiter with pencil and order-pad might have been seen some hours later going as if from the kitchen to the ninth floor of a Washington hotel. And the same waiter, a few minutes later, was escorting a

guest from a rear service-door to an inconspicuous car parked nearby. The waiter slipped behind the wheel.

A taxi, whose driver was half asleep, was parked a hundred feet behind them at the curb. As they drove away and no other sign of life was seen in the quiet street the driver of the taxi yawned ostentatiously and decided to seek a new stand. He neglected possible fares until a man he called Smeed hailed him a block farther on. They followed slowly after the first car … and they trailed it again on its return after some hours.

“Safe as a church,” they reported to the driver of the first car. “We’ll swear that nobody was checking up on that trip.”

And: “O. K.” Delamater reported to his chief the next morning. “Put one over on this self-appointed Allah that time.”

But the Chief did not reply: he was looking at a slip of paper like those he had shown his operative the day before. He tossed it to Delamater and took up the phone.

“To the Secretary of State,” Delamater read. “You had your warning. Next time you disobey it shall be you who dies.”

The signature was only the image of an eye.

The Chief was calling a number; Delamater recognized it as that of the hotel he had visited. “Manager, please, at once,” the big man was saying.

He identified himself to the distant man. Then: “Please check up on the man in nine four seven. If he doesn’t answer, enter the room and report at once—I will hold the phone….”

The man at the desk tapped steadily with a pencil; Robert Delamater sat quietly, tensely waiting. But some sixth sense told him what the answer would be. He was not surprised when the Chief repeated what the phone had whispered.

“Dead?… Yes!… Leave everything absolutely undisturbed. We will be right over.”

“Get Doctor Brooks, Del,” he said quietly; “the Eye of Allah was watching after all.”

Robert Delamater was silent as they drove to the hotel. Where had he slipped? He trusted Smeed and Wilkins entirely; if they said his car had not been followed it had not. And the visitor had been

disguised; he had seen to that. Then, where had this person stood—this being who called himself the Eye of Allah?

“Chief,” he said finally. “I didn’t slip—nor Wilkins or Smeed.”

“Someone did,” replied the big man, “and it wasn’t the Eye of Allah, either.”

The manager of the hotel was waiting to take them to the room. He unlocked the door with his pass key.

“Not a thing touched,” he assured the Secret Service men; “there he is, just the way we found him.”

In the doorway between the bedroom and bath a body was huddled. Doctor Brooks knelt quickly beside it. His hands worked swiftly for a moment, then he rose to his feet.

“Dead,” he announced.

“How long?” asked the Chief.

“Some time. Hours I should say—perhaps eight or ten.”

“Cause?” the query was brief.

“It will take an autopsy to determine that. There is no blood or wound to be seen.”

The doctor was again examining the partly rigid body. He opened one hand; it held a cake of soap. There was a grease mark on the hand.

Delamater supplied the explanation. “He touched some grease on the old car I was using,” he said. “Must have gone directly to wash it off. See—there is water spilled on the floor.”

Water had indeed been splashed on the tile floor of the bath room; a pool of it still remained about the heavy, foreign-looking shoes of the dead man.

Something in it caught Delamater’s eye. He leaned down to pick up three pellets of metal, like small shot, round and shining.

“I’ll keep these,” he said, “though the man was never killed with shot as small as that.”

“We shall have to wait for the autopsy report,” said the Chief crisply; “that may give the cause of death. Was there anyone in the room—did you enter it with him last night, Del?”

“No,” said the operative; “he was very much agitated when we got here—dismissed me rather curtly at the door. He was quite upset about something—spoke English none too well and said something about a warning and damned our Secret Service as inefficient.”

“A warning!” said the Chief. The dead man’s brief case was on the bed. He crossed to it and undid the straps; the topmost paper told the reason for the man’s disquiet. It showed the familiar, staring eye. And beneath the eye was a warning: this man was to die if he did not leave Washington at once.

The Chief turned to the hotel manager. “Was the door locked?”

“Yes.”

“But it is a spring lock. Someone could have gone out and closed it after him.”

“Not this time. The dead-bolt was thrown. It takes a key to do that from the outside or this thumb-turn on the inside.” The hotel man demonstrated the action of the heavy bolt.

“Then, with a duplicate key, a man could have left this room and locked the door behind him.”

“Absolutely not. The floor-clerk was on duty all night. I have questioned her: this room was under her eyes all the time. She saw this man return, saw your man, here”—and he pointed to Delamater—“leave him at the door. There was no person left the room after that.”

“See about the autopsy, Doctor,” the Chief ordered.

And to the manager: “Not a thing here must be touched. Admit only Mr. Delamater and no one else unless he vouches for them.

“Del,” he told the operative, “I’m giving you a chance to make up for last night. Go to it.”

And Robert Delamater “went to it” with all the thoroughness at his command, and with a total lack of result.

The autopsy helped not at all. The man was dead; it was apparently a natural death. “Not a scratch nor a mark on him,” was the report. But: “… next time it will be you,” the note with the staring eye had warned the Secretary of State. The writer of it was taking full credit for the mysterious death.

Robert Delamater had three small bits of metal, like tiny shot, and he

racked his brain to connect these with the death. There were fingerprints, too, beautifully developed upon the mysterious missives—prints that tallied with none in the records. There were analyses of the paper—of the ink—and not a clue in any of them.

Just three pellets of metal. Robert Delamater had failed utterly, and he was bitter in the knowledge of his failure.

“He had you spotted, Del,” the Chief insisted. “The writer of these notes may be crazy, but he was clever enough to know that this man *did* see the Secretary. And he was waiting for him when he came back; then he killed him.”

“Without a mark?”

“He killed him,” the Chief repeated; “then he left—and that’s that.”

“But,” Delamater objected, “the room clerk—”

“—took a nap,” broke in the Chief. But Delamater could not be satisfied with the explanation.

“He got his, all right,” he conceded, “—got it in a locked room nine stories above the street, with no possible means of bringing it upon himself—and no way for the murderer to escape. I tell you there is

something more to this: just the letter to the Secretary, as if this Eye of Allah were spying upon him—”

The Chief waved all that aside. “A clever spy,” he insisted. “Too clever for you. And a darn good guesser; he had us all fooled. But we’re dealing with a madman, not a ghost, and he didn’t sail in through a ninth story window nor go out through a locked door; neither did he spy on the Secretary of State in his private office. Don’t try to make a supernatural mystery out of a failure, Del.”

The big man’s words were tempered with a laugh, but there was an edge of sarcasm, ill-concealed.

And then came the next note. And the next. The letters were mailed at various points in and about the city; they came in a flood. And they were addressed to the President of the United States, to the Secretary of War—of the Navy—to all the Cabinet members. And all carried the same threat under the staring eye.

The United States, to this man, represented all that was tyrannical and oppressive to the downtrodden of the earth. He proposed to end it—this government first, then others in their turn. It was the outpouring of a wildly irrational mind that came to the office of the harassed Chief of the United States Secret Service, who had

instructions to run this man down—this man who signed himself The Eye of Allah. And do it quickly for the notes were threatening. Official Washington, it seemed, was getting jumpy and was making caustic inquiries as to why a Secret Service department was maintained.

The Chief, himself, was directing the investigation—and getting nowhere.

“Here is the latest,” he said one morning. “Mailed at New York.” Delamater and a dozen other operatives were in his office: he showed them a letter printed like all the others. There was the eye, and beneath were words that made the readers catch their breath.

“The Eye of Allah sees—it has warned—now it will destroy. The day of judgment is at hand. The battleship *Maryland* is at anchor in the Hudson River at New York. No more shall it be the weapon of a despot government. It will be destroyed at twelve o’clock on September fifth.”

“Wild talk,” said the Chief, “but today is the fourth. The Commander of the *Maryland* has been warned—approach by air or water will be impossible. I want you men to patrol the shore and nail this man if he shows up. Lord knows what he intends—bluffing probably—but

he may try some fool stunt. If he does—get him!”

Eleven-thirty by the watch on Robert Delamater’s wrist found him seated in the bow of a speed-boat the following morning. They patrolled slowly up and down the shore. There were fellow operatives, he knew, scores of them, posted at all points of vantage along the docks.

Eleven forty-five—and the roar of seaplanes came from above where air patrols were-guarding the skies. Small boats drove back and forth on set courses; no curious sight-seeing craft could approach the *Maryland* that day. On board the battleship, too, there was activity apparent. A bugle sounded, and the warning of bellowing Klaxons echoed across the water. Here, in the peace and safety of the big port, the great man-of-war was sounding general quarters, and a scurry of running men showed for an instant on her decks. Anti-aircraft guns swung silently upon imaginary targets—

The watcher smiled at the absurdity of it all—this preparation to repel the attack of a wild-eyed writer of insane threats. And yet—and yet— He knew, too, there was apprehension in his frequent glances at his watch.

One minute to go! Delamater should have watched the shore. And,

instead, he could not keep his eyes from the big fighting-ship silhouetted so clearly less than a mile away, motionless and waiting —waiting—for what? He saw the great turreted guns, useless against this puny, invisible opponent. Above them the fighting tops were gleaming. And above them—

Delamater shaded his eyes with a quick, tense hand: the tip of the mast was sparkling. There was a blue flash that glinted along the steel. It was gone to reappear on the fighting top itself—then lower.

What was it? the watching man was asking himself. What did it bring to mind? A street-car? A defective trolley? The zipping flash of a contact made and broken? That last!

Like the touch of a invisible wire, tremendously charged, a wire that touched and retreated, that made and lost its contact, the flashing arc was working toward the deck. It felt its way to the body of the ship; the arc was plain, starting from mid-air to hiss against the armored side; the arc shortened—went to nothing—vanished…. A puff of smoke from an open port proved its presence inside. Delamater had the conviction that a deadly something had gone through the ship's side—was insulated from it—was searching with its blazing, arcing end for the ammunition rooms….

The realization of that creeping menace came to Delamater with a gripping, numbing horror. The seconds were almost endless as he waited. Slowly, before his terrified eyes, the deck of the great ship bulged upward … slowly it rolled and tore apart … a mammoth turret with sixteen-inch guns was lifting unhurriedly into the air … there were bodies of men rocketing skyward….

The mind of the man was racing at lightning speed, and the havoc before him seemed more horrible in its slow, leisurely progress. If he could only move—do something!

The shock of the blasted air struck him sprawling into the bottom of the boat; the listener was hammered almost to numbness by the deafening thunder that battered and tore through the still air. At top speed the helmsman drove for the shelter of a hidden cove. They made it an instant before the great waves struck high upon the sand spit. Over the bay hung a ballooning cloud of black and gray—lifting for an instant to show in stark ghastliness the wreckage, broken and twisted, that marked where the battleship *Maryland* rested in the mud in the harbor of New York.

The eyes of the Secret-Service men were filled with the indelible impress of what they had seen. Again and again, before him, came the vision of a ship full of men in horrible, slow disintegration; his

mind was numbed and his actions and reactions were largely automatic. But somehow he found himself in the roar of the subway, and later he sat in a chair and knew he was in a Pullman of a Washington train.

He rode for hours in preoccupied silence, his gaze fixed unseeingly, striving to reach out and out to some distant, unknown something which he was trying to visualize. But he looked at intervals at his hand that held three metal pellets.

He was groping for the mental sequence which would bring the few known facts together and indicate their cause. A threat—a seeming spying within a closed and secret room—the murder on the ninth floor, a murder without trace of wound or weapon. Weapon! He stared again at the tangible evidence he held; then shook his head in perplexed abstraction. No—the man was killed by unknown means.

And now—the *Maryland*! And a visible finger of death—touching, flashing, feeling its way to the deadly cargo of powder sacks.

Not till he sat alone with his chief did he put into words his thoughts.

“A time bomb did it,” the Chief was saying. “The officials deny it, but what other answer is there? No one approached that ship—you

know that, Del—no torpedo nor aerial bomb! Nothing as fanciful as that!”

Robert Delamater’s lips formed a wry smile. “Nothing at fanciful as that”—and he was thinking, thinking—of what he hardly dared express.

“We will start with the ship’s personnel,” the other continued; “find every man who was not on board when the explosion occurred—”

“No use,” the operative interrupted; “this was no inside job, Chief.” He paused to choose his words while the other watched him curiously.

“Someone *did* reach that ship—reached it from a distance—reached it in the same way they reached that poor devil I left at room nine forty-seven. Listen—”

He told his superior of his vigil on the speed-boat—of the almost invisible flash against the ship’s mast. “He reached it, Chief,” he concluded; “he felt or saw his way down and through the side of that ship. And he fired their ammunition from God knows where.”

“I wonder,” said the big man slowly; “I wonder if you know just

what you are trying to tell me—just how absurd your idea is. Are you seriously hinting at long-distance vision through solid armor-plate—through these walls of stone and steel? And wireless power-transmission through the same wall—!”

“Exactly!” said the operative.

“Why, Del, you must be as crazy as this Eye of Allah individual. It’s impossible.”

“That word,” said Delamater, quietly, “has been crossed out of scientific books in the past few years.”

“What do you mean?”

“You have studied some physical science, of course?” Delamater asked. The Chief nodded.

“Then you know what I mean. I mean that up to recent years science had all the possibilities and impossibilities neatly divided and catalogued. Ignorance, as always, was the best basis for positive assurance. Then they got inside the atom. And since then your real scientist has been a very humble man. He has seen the impossibility of yesterday become the established fact of to-day.”

The Chief of the United States Secret Service was tapping with nervous irritation on the desk before him.

“Yes, yes!” he agreed, and again he looked oddly at his operative. “Perhaps there is something to that; you work along that line, Del: you can have a free hand. Take a few days off, a little vacation if you wish. Yes—and ask Sprague to step in from the other office; he has the personnel list.”

Robert Delamater felt the other’s eyes follow him as he left the room. “And that about lets me out,” he told himself; “he thinks I’ve gone cuckoo, now.”

He stopped in a corridor; his fingers, fumbling in a vest pocket, had touched the little metal spheres. Again his mind flashed back to the chain of events he had linked together. He turned toward an inner office.

“I would like to see Doctor Brooks,” he said. And when the physician appeared: “About that man who was murdered at the hotel, Doctor—”

“Who died,” the doctor corrected; “we found no evidence of murder.”

“Who was murdered,” the operative insisted. “Have you his clothing where I can examine it?”

“Sure,” agreed the physician. He led Delamater to another room and brought out a box of the dead man’s effects.

“But if it’s murder you expect to prove you’ll find no help in this.”

The Secret Service man nodded. “I’ll look them over, just the same,” he said. “Thanks.”

Alone in the room, he went over the clothing piece by piece. Again he examined each garment, each pocket, the lining, as he had done before when first he took the case. Metal, he thought, he must find metal.

But only when a heavy shoe was in his hands did the anxious frown relax from about his eyes.

“Of course,” he whispered, half aloud. “What a fool I was! I should have thought of that.”

The soles of the shoes were sewed, but, beside the stitches were metal specks, where cobbler’s nails were driven. And in the sole of one shoe were three tiny holes.

“Melted!” he said exultantly. “Crazy, am I, Chief? This man was standing on a wet floor; he made a perfect ground. And he got a jolt that melted these nails when it flashed out of him.”

He wrapped the clothing carefully and replaced it in the box. And he fingered the metal pellets in his pocket as he slipped quietly from the room.

He did not stop to talk with Doctor Brooks; he wanted to think, to ponder upon the incredible proof of the theory he had hardly dared believe. The Eye of Allah—the maniac—was real; and his power for evil! There was work to be done, and the point of beginning was not plain.

How far did the invisible arm reach? How far could the Eye of Allah see? Where was the generator—the origin of this wireless power; along what channel did it flow? A ray of lightless light—an unseen ethereal vibration…. Delamater could only guess at the answers.

The current to kill a man or to flash a spark into silken powder bags need not be heavy, he knew. Five hundred—a thousand volts—if the mysterious conductor carried it without resistance and without loss. People had been killed by house-lighting currents—a mere 110 volts—when conditions were right. There would be no peculiar or

unusual demand upon the power company to point him toward the hidden maniac.

He tossed restlessly throughout the night, and morning brought no answer to his repeated questions. But it brought a hurry call from his Chief.

“Right away,” was the instruction; “don’t lose a minute. Come to the office.”

He found the big man at his desk. He was quiet, unhurried, but the operative knew at a glance the tense repression that was being exercised—the iron control of nerves that demanded action and found incompetence and helplessness instead.

“I don’t believe your fantastic theories,” he told Delamater. “Impractical—impossible! But—” He handed the waiting man a paper. “We must not leave a stone unturned.”

Delamater said nothing; he looked at the paper in his hand. “To the President of the United States,” he read. “Prepare to meet your God. Friday. The eighth. Twelve o’clock.”

The signature he hardly saw; the staring, open eye was all too

familiar.

“That is to-morrow,” said Delamater softly. “The President dies to-morrow.”

“No!” exploded the Chief. “Do you realize what that means? The President murdered—more killings to follow—and the killer unknown! Why the country will be in a panic: the whole structure of the Government is threatened!”

He paused, then added as he struck his open hand upon the desk: “I will have every available man at the White House.”

“For witnesses?” asked Delamater coldly.

The big man stared at his operative; the lines of his face were sagging.

“Do you believe—really—he can strike him down—at his desk—from a distance?”

“I know it.” Delamater’s fingers played for a moment with three bits of metal in his pocket. Unconsciously he voiced his thoughts: “Does the President have nails in his shoes, I wonder?”

“What—what’s that?” the Chief demanded.

But Delamater made no reply. He was picturing the President. He would be seated at his desk, waiting, waiting … and the bells would be ringing and whistles blowing from distant shops when the bolt would strike…. It would flash from his feet … through the thick rug … through the rug…. It would have to ground.

He paid no heed to his Chief’s repeated question. He was seeing, not the rug in the Presidential office, but below it—underneath it—a heavy pad of rubber.

“If he can be insulated—” he said aloud, and stared unseeingly at his eagerly listening superiors—“even the telephone cut—no possible connection with the ground—”

“For God’s sake, Del, if you’ve got an idea—any hope at all! I’m—I’m up against it, Del.”

The operative brought his distant gaze back to the room and the man across from him. “Yes,” he said slowly, thoughtfully, “I’ve got the beginning of an idea; I don’t see the end of it yet.

“We can cut him off from the ground—the President, I mean—make

an insulated island where he sits. But this devil will get him the instant he leaves … unless … unless….”

“Yes—yes?” The Chief’s voice was high-pitched with anxious impatience; for the first time he was admitting to himself his complete helplessness in this emergency.

“Unless,” said Delamater, as the idea grew and took shape, “unless that wireless channel works both ways. If it does … if it does….”

The big man made a gesture of complete incomprehension.

“Wait!” said Robert Delamater, sharply. If ever his sleepy indolence had misled his Chief, there was none to do so now in the voice that rang like cold steel. His eyes were slits under the deep-drawn brows, and his mouth was one straight line.

To the hunter there is no greater game than man. And Robert Delamater, man-hunter, had his treacherous quarry in sight. He fired staccato questions at his Chief.

“Is the President at his desk at twelve?”

“Yes.”

“Does he know—about this?”

“Yes.”

“Does he know it means death?”

The Chief nodded.

“I see a way—a chance,” said the operative. “Do I get a free hand?”

“Yes—Good Lord, yes! If there’s any chance of—”

Delamater silenced him. “I’ll be the one to take the chance,” he said grimly. “Chief, I intend to impersonate the President.”

“Now listen— The President and I are about the same build. I know a man who can take care of the make-up; he will get me by anything but a close inspection. This Eye of Allah, up to now, has worked only in the light. We’ll have to gamble on that and work our change in the dark.

“The President must go to bed as usual—impress upon him that he may be under constant surveillance. Then, in the night, he leaves—

“Oh, I know he won’t want to hide himself, but he must. That’s up to

you.

“Arrange for me to go to his room before daylight. From that minute on I am the President. Get me his routine for that morning; I must follow it so as to arouse no least suspicion.”

“But I don’t see—” began the Chief. “You will impersonate him—yes—but what then? You will be killed if this maniac makes good. Is the President of the United States to be a fugitive? Is—”

“Hold on, hold on!” said Delamater. He leaned back in his chair; his face relaxed to a smile, then a laugh.

“I’ve got it all now. Perhaps it will work. If not—” A shrug of the shoulders completed the thought. “And I have been shooting it to you pretty fast haven’t I! Now here is the idea—

“I must be in the President’s chair at noon. This Allah person will be watching in, so I must be acting the part all morning. I will have the heaviest insulation I can get under the rug, and I’ll have something to take the shot instead of myself. And perhaps, perhaps I will send a message back to the Eye of Allah that will be a surprise.

“Is it a bet?” he asked. “Remember, I’m taking the chance—unless

you know some better way—”

The Chief’s chair came down with a bang. “We’ll gamble on it, Del,” he said; “we’ve got to—there is no other way…. And now what do you want?”

“A note to the White House electrician,” said Robert Delamater, “and full authority to ask for anything I may need, from the U. S. Treasury down to a pair of wire-cutters.”

His smile had become contagious; the Chief’s anxious look relaxed. “If you pull this off, Del, they may give you the Treasury or the Mint at that. But remember, republics are notoriously ungenerous.”

“We’ll have to gamble on that, too,” said Robert Delamater.

The heart of the Nation is Washington. Some, there are, who would have us feel that New York rules our lives. Chicago—San Francisco—these and other great cities sometimes forget that they are mere ganglia on the financial and commercial nervous system. The heart is Washington, and, Congress to the contrary notwithstanding, the heart of that heart is not the domed building at the head of Pennsylvania Avenue, but an American home. A simple, gracious mansion, standing in quiet dignity and whiteness above its velvet

lawns.

It is the White House that draws most strongly at the interest and curiosity of the homely, common throng that visits the capital.

But there were no casual visitors at the White House on the seventh of September. Certain Senators, even, were denied admittance. The President was seeing only the members of the Cabinet and some few others.

It is given to a Secret Service operative, in his time, to play many parts. But even a versatile actor might pause at impersonating a President. Robert Delamater was acting the role with never a fumble. He sat, this new Robert Delamater, so startlingly like the Chief Executive, in the chair by a flat top desk. And he worked diligently at a mass of correspondence.

Secretaries came and went; files were brought. Occasionally he replied to a telephone call—or perhaps called someone. It would be hard to say which happened, for no telephone bells rang.

On the desk was a schedule that Delamater consulted. So much time for correspondence—so many minutes for a conference with this or that official, men who were warned to play up to this new Chief

Executive as if the life of their real President were at stake.

To any observer the busy routine of the morning must have passed with never a break. And there was an observer, as Delamater knew. He had wondered if the mystic ray might carry electrons that would prove its presence. And now he knew.

The Chief of the U. S. Secret Service had come for a consultation with the President. And whatever lingering doubts may have stifled his reluctant imagination were dispelled when the figure at the desk opened a drawer.

“Notice this,” he told the Chief as he appeared to search for a paper in the desk. “An electroscope; I put it in here last night. It is discharging. The ray has been on since nine-thirty. No current to electrocute me—just a penetrating ray.”

He returned the paper to the drawer and closed it.

“So that is that,” he said, and picked up a document to which he called the visitor’s attention.

“Just acting,” he explained. “The audience may be critical; we must try to give them a good show! And now give me a report. What are

you doing? Has anything else turned up? I am counting on you to stand by and see that that electrician is on his toes at twelve o'clock."

"Stand by is right," the Chief agreed; "that's about all we can do. I have twenty men in and about the grounds—there will be as many more later on. And I know now just how little use we are to you, Del."

"Your expression!" warned Delamater. "Remember you are talking to the President. Very official and all that."

"Right! But now tell me what is the game, Del. If that devil fails to knock you out here where you are safe, he will get you when you leave the room."

"Perhaps," agreed the pseudo-executive, "and again, perhaps not. He won't get me here; I am sure of that. They have this part of the room insulated. The phone wire is cut—my conversations there are all faked.

"There is only one spot in this room where that current can pass. A heavy cable is grounded outside in wet earth. It comes to a copper plate on this desk; you can't see it—it is under those papers."

“And if the current comes—” began the visitor.

“When it comes,” the other corrected, “it will jump to that plate and go off harmlessly—I hope.”

“And then what? How does that let you out?”

“Then we will see,” said the presidential figure. “And you’ve been here long enough, Chief. Send in the President’s secretary as you go out.”

“He arose to place a friendly, patronizing hand on the other’s shoulder.

“Good-by,” he said, “and watch that electrician at twelve. He is to throw the big switch when I call.”

“Good luck,” said the big man huskily. “We’ve got to hand it to you, Del; you’re—”

“Good-by!” The figure of the Chief Executive turned abruptly to his desk.

There was more careful acting—another conference—some dictating. The clock on the desk gave the time as eleven fifty-five.

The man before the flat topped desk verified it by a surreptitious glance at his watch. He dismissed the secretary and busied himself with some personal writing.

Eleven fifty-nine—and he pushed paper and pen aside. The movement disturbed some other papers, neatly stacked. They were dislodged, and where they had lain was a disk of dull copper.

“Ready,” the man called softly. “Don’t stand too near that line.” The first boom of noonday bells came faintly to the room.

The President—to all but the other actors in the morning’s drama—leaned far back in his chair. The room was suddenly deathly still. The faint ticking of the desk clock was loud and rasping. There was heavy breathing audible in the room beyond. The last noonday chime had died away….

The man at the desk was waiting—waiting. And he thought he was prepared, nerves steeled, for the expected. But he jerked back, to fall with the overturned chair upon the soft, thick-padded rug, at the ripping, crackling hiss that tore through the silent room.

From a point above the desk a blue arc flamed and wavered. Its unseen terminal moved erratically in the air, but the other end of the

deadly flame held steady upon a glowing, copper disc.

Delamater, prone on the floor, saw the wavering point that marked the end of the invisible carrier of the current—saw it drift aside till the blue arc was broken. It returned, and the arc crashed again into blinding flame. Then, as abruptly, the blue menace vanished.

The man on the floor waited, waited, and tried to hold fast to some sense of time.

Then: “Contact!” he shouted. “The switch! Close the switch!”

“Closed!” came the answer from a distant room. There was a shouted warning to unseen men: “Stand back there—back—there’s twenty thousand volts on that line—”

Again the silence….

“Would it work? Would it?” Delamater’s mind was full of delirious, half-thought hopes. That fiend in some far-off room had cut the current meant as a death-bolt to the Nation’s’ head. He would leave the ray on—look along it to gloat over his easy victory. His generator must be insulated: would he touch it with his hand, now that his own current was off?—make of himself a conductor?

In the air overhead formed a terrible arc.

From the floor, Delamater saw it rip crashingly into life as twenty thousand volts bridged the gap of a foot or less to the invisible ray. It hissed tremendously in the stillness….

And Delamater suddenly buried his face in his hands. For in his mind he was seeing a rigid, searing body, and in his nostrils, acrid, distinct, was the smell of burning flesh.

“Don’t be a fool,” he told himself fiercely. “Don’t be a fool! Imagination!”

The light was out.

“Switch off!” a voice was calling. There was a rush of swift feet from the distant doors; friendly hands were under him—lifting him—as the room, for Robert Delamater, President-in-name of the United States, turned whirlingly, dizzily black….

Robert Delamater, U. S. Secret Service operative, entered the office of his Chief. Two days of enforced idleness and quiet had been all he could stand. He laid a folded newspaper before the smiling, welcoming man.

“That’s it, I suppose,” he said, and pointed to a short notice.

“X-ray Operator Killed,” was the caption. “Found Dead in Office in Watts Building.” He had read the brief item many times.

“That’s what we let the reporters have,” said the Chief.

“Was he”—the operative hesitated for a moment—“pretty well fried?”

“Quite!”

“And the machine?”

“Broken glass and melted metal. He smashed it as he fell.”

“The Eye of Allah,” mused Delamater. “Poor devil—poor, crazy devil. Well, we gambled—and we won. How about the rest of the bet? Do I get the Mint?”

“Hell, no!” said the Chief. “Do you expect to win all the time? They want to know why it took us so long to get him.

“Now, there’s a little matter out in Ohio, Del, that we’ll have to get after—”

#68 The Fifth-dimension Catapult, By Murray Leinster:

The story of Tommy Reames' extraordinary rescue of Professor Denham and his daughter—marooned in the fifth dimension.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

FOREWORD

This story has no normal starting-place, because there are too many places where it might be said to begin. One might commence when Professor Denham, Ph.D., M.A., etc., isolated a metal that scientists have been talking about for many years without ever being able to smelt. Or it might start with his first experimental use of that metal with entirely impossible results. Or it might very plausibly begin with an interview between a celebrated leader of gangsters in the city of Chicago and a spectacled young laboratory assistant, who had

turned over to him a peculiar heavy object of solid gold and very nervously explained, and finally managed to prove, where it came from. With also impossible results, because it turned “King” Jacaro, lord of vice-resorts and rum-runners, into a passionate enthusiast in non-Euclidean geometry. The whole story might be said to begin with the moment of that interview.

But that leaves out Smithers, and especially it leaves out Tommy Reames. So, on the whole, it is best to take up the narrative at the moment of Tommy’s first entrance into the course of events.

Chapter 1

He came to a stop in a cloud of dust that swirled up to and all about the big roadster, and surveyed the gate of the private road. The gate was rather impressive. At its top was a sign. “Keep Out!” Halfway down was another sign. “Private Property. Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted.” On one gate-post was another notice, “Live Wires Within.” and on the other a defiant placard. “Savage Dogs At Large Within This Fence.”

The fence itself was all of seven feet high and made of the heaviest of woven-wire construction. It was topped with barbed wire, and went all the way down both sides of a narrow right of way until it vanished in the distance.

Tommy got out of the car and opened the gate. This fitted the description of his destination, as given him by a brawny, red-headed filling-station attendant in the village some two miles back. He drove the roadster through the gate, got out and closed it piously, got back in the car and shot it ahead.

He went humming down the narrow private road at forty-five miles an hour. That was Tommy Reames’ way. He looked totally unlike the conventional description of a scientist of any sort—as much unlike a

scientist as his sport roadster looked unlike a scientist's customary means of transit—and ordinarily he acted quite unlike one. As a matter of fact, most of the people Tommy associated with had no faintest inkling of his taste for science as an avocation. There was Peter Dalzell, for instance, who would have held up his hands in holy horror at the idea of Tommy Reames being the author of that article. "On the Mass and Inertia of the Tesseract," which in the *Philosophical Journal* had caused a controversy.

And there was one Mildred Holmes—of no importance in the matter of the Fifth-Dimension Catapult—who would have lifted beautifully arched eyebrows in bored unbelief if anybody had suggested that Tommy Reames was that Thomas Reames whose "Additions to Herglotz's Mechanics of Continua" produced such diversities of opinion in scientific circles. She intended to make Tommy propose to her some day, and thought she knew all about him. And everybody, everywhere, would have been incredulous of his present errand.

Gliding down the narrow, fenced-in road. Tommy was a trifle dubious about this errand himself. A yellow telegraph-form in his pocket read rather like a hoax, but was just plausible enough to have brought him away from a rather important tennis match. The telegram read:

PROFESSOR DENHAM IN EXTREME DANGER THROUGH EXPERIMENT BASED ON YOUR ARTICLE ON DOMINANT COORDINATES YOU ALONE CAN HELP HIM IN THE NAME OF HUMANITY COME AT ONCE.

A. VON HOLTZ.

The fence went on past the car. A mile, a mile and a half of narrow lane, fenced in and made as nearly intruder-proof as possible.

“Wonder what I’d do,” said Tommy Reames, “if another car came along from the other end?”

He deliberately tried not to think about the telegram any more. He didn’t believe it. He couldn’t believe it. But he couldn’t ignore it, either. Nobody could: few scientists, and no human being with a normal amount of curiosity. Because the article on dominant coordinates had appeared in the *Journal of Physics* and had dealt with a state of things in which the normal coordinates of everyday existence were assumed to have changed their functions: when the coordinates of time, the vertical, the horizontal and the lateral changed places and a man went east to go up and west to go “down” and ran his street-numbers in a fourth dimension. It was mathematical foolery, from one standpoint, but it led to some

fascinating if abstruse conclusions.

But his brain would not remain away from the subject of the telegram, even though a chicken appeared in the fenced-in lane ahead of him and went flapping wildly on before the car. It rose in mid-air, the car overtook it as it rose above the level of the hood, and there was a rolling, squawking bundle of shedding feathers tumbling over and over along the hood until it reached the slanting windshield. There it spun wildly upward, left a cloud of feather's fluttering about Tommy's head, and fell still squawking into the road behind. By the back-view mirror, Tommy could see it picking itself up and staggering dizzily back to the side of the road.

"My point was," said Tommy vexedly to himself, speaking of the article the telegram referred to, "that a man can only recognize three dimensions of space and one of time. So that if he got shot out of this cosmos altogether he wouldn't know the difference. He'd still seem to be in a three-dimensioned universe. And what is there in that stuff to get Denham in trouble?"

A house appeared ahead. A low, rambling sort of bungalow with a huge brick barn behind it. The house of Professor Denham, very certainly, and that barn was the laboratory in which he made his experiments.

Instinctively, Tommy stepped on the gas. The car leaped ahead. And then he was braking frantically. A pipe-framed gate with thinner, unpainted wire mesh filling its surface loomed before him, much too late for him to stop. There was a minor shock, a crashing and squeaking, and then a crash and shattering of glass. Tommy bent low as the top bar of the gate hit his windshield. The double glass cracked and crumpled and bent, but did not fly to bits. And the car came to a halt with its wheels intricately entangled in torn-away fence wire. The gate had been torn from its hinges and was draped rakishly over the roadster. A tire went flat with a loud hissing noise, and Tommy Reames swore softly under his breath and got out to inspect the damage.

He was deciding that nothing irreparable was wrong when a man came bursting out of the brick building behind the house. A tall, lean, youngish man who waved his arms emphatically and approached shouting:

“You had no right to come in here! You must go away at once! You have damaged property! I will tell the Professor! You must pay for the damage! You must—”

“Damn!” said Tommy Reames. He had just seen that his radiator was punctured. A spout of ruddy, rusty water was pouring out on the

grass.

The youngish man came up furiously. A pale young man, Tommy noticed. A young man with bristling, close-cropped hair and horn-rimmed spectacles before weak-looking eyes. His mouth was very full and very red, in marked contrast to the pallor of his cheeks.

“Did you not see the sign upon the gate?” he demanded angrily, in curiously stilted English. “Did you not see that trespassers are forbidden? You must go away at once! You will be prosecuted! You will be imprisoned! You—”

Tommy said irritably:

“Are you Von Holtz? My name is Reames. You telegraphed me.”

The waving, lanky arms stopped in the middle of an excited gesture. The weak-looking eyes behind the lenses widened. A pink tongue licked the too-full, too-red lips.

“Reames? The Herr Reames?” Von Holtz stammered. Then he said suspiciously, “But you are not—you cannot be the Herr Reames of the article on dominant coordinates!”

“I don’t know why,” said Tommy annoyedly. “I’m also the Herr

Reames of several other articles, such as on the mechanics of continua and the mass and inertia of the tesseract. And I believe the current *Philosophical Journal*—"

He surveyed the spouting red stream from the radiator and shrugged ruefully.

"I wish you'd telephone the village to have somebody come out and fix my car," he said shortly, "and then tell me if this telegram is a joke or not."

He pulled out a yellow form and offered it. He had taken an instinctive dislike to the lean figure before him, but suppressed the feeling.

Von Holtz took the telegram and read it, and smoothed it out, and said agitatedly:

"But I thought the Herr Reames would be—would be a venerable gentleman! I thought—"

"You sent that wire," said Tommy. "It puzzled me just enough to make me rush out here. And I feel like a fool for having done it. What's the matter? Is it a joke?"

Von Holtz shook his head violently, even as he bit his lips.

“No! No!” he protested. “The Herr Professor Denham is in the most terrible, most deadly danger! I—I have been very nearly mad, Herr Reames. The Ragged Men may seize him!… I telegraphed to you. I have not slept for four nights. I have worked! I have racked my brains! I have gone nearly insane, trying to rescue the Herr Professor! And I—”

Tommy stared.

“Four days?” he said. “The thing, whatever it is, has been going on for four days?”

“Five,” said Von Holtz nervously. “It was only to-day that I thought of you, Herr Reames. The Herr Professor Denham had praised your articles highly. He said that you were the only man who would be able to understand his work. Five days ago—”

Tommy grunted.

“If he’s been in danger for five days,” he said skeptically, “he’s not in such a bad fix or it’d have been over. Will you phone for a repairman? Then we’ll see what it’s all about.”

The lean arms began to wave again as Von Holtz said desperately:

“But Herr Reames, it is urgent! The Herr Professor is in deadly danger!”

“What’s the matter with him?”

“He is marooned,” said Von Holtz. Again he licked his lips. “He is marooned, Herr Reames, and you alone—”

“Marooned?” said Tommy more skeptically still. “In the middle of New York State? And I alone can help him? You sound more and more as if you were playing a rather elaborate and not very funny practical joke. I’ve driven sixty miles to get here. What is the joke, anyhow?”

Von Holtz said despairingly:

“But it is true, Herr Reames! He is marooned. He has changed his coordinates. It was an experiment. He is marooned in the fifth dimension!”

There was dead silence. Tommy Reames stared blankly. Then his gorge rose. He had taken an instinctive dislike to this lean young man, anyhow. So he stared at him, and grew very angry, and would

undoubtedly have gotten into his car and turned it about and driven it away again if it had been in any shape to run. But it wasn't. One tire was flat, and the last ruddy drops from the radiator were dripping slowly on the grass. So he pulled out a cigarette case and lighted a cigarette and said sardonically:

"The fifth dimension? That seems rather extreme. Most of us get along very well with three dimensions. Four seems luxurious. Why pick on the fifth?"

Von Holtz grew pale with anger in his turn. He waved his arms, stopped, and said with stiff formality:

"If the Herr Reames will follow me into the laboratory I will show him Professor Denham and convince him of the Herr Professor's extreme danger."

Tommy had a sudden startling conviction that Von Holtz was in earnest. He might be mad, but he was in earnest. And there was undoubtedly a Professor Denham, and this was undoubtedly his home and laboratory.

"I'll look, anyway," said Tommy less skeptically. "But it is rather incredible, you know!"

“It is impossible,” said Von Holtz stiffly. “You are right, Herr Reames. It is quite impossible. But it is a fact.”

He turned and stalked toward the big brick barn behind the house. Tommy went with him, wholly unbelieving and yet beginning to wonder if, just possibly, there was actually an emergency of a more normal and ghastly nature in being. Von Holtz might be a madman. He might….

Gruesome, grisly thoughts ran through Tommy’s head. A madman dabbling in science might do incredible things, horrible things, and then demand assistance to undo an unimaginable murder….

Tommy was tense and alert as Von Holtz opened the door of the barnlike laboratory. He waved the lean young man on ahead.

“After you,” he said curtly.

He felt almost a shiver as he entered. But the interior of the laboratory displayed no gruesome scene. It was a huge, high-ceilinged room with a concrete floor. A monster dynamo was over in one corner, coupled to a matter-of-fact four-cylinder crude-oil engine, to which was also coupled by a clutch an inexplicable windlass-drum with several hundred feet of chain wrapped around it.

There were ammeters and voltmeters on a control panel, and one of the most delicate of dynamometers on its own stand, and there were work benches and a motor-driven lathe and a very complete equipment for the working of metals. And there was an electric furnace, with splashes of solidified metal on the floor beside it, and there was a miniature casting-floor, and at the farther end of the monster room there was a gigantic solenoid which evidently had once swung upon gymbals and as evidently now was broken, because it lay toppled askew upon its supports.

The only totally unidentifiable piece of apparatus in the place was one queer contrivance at one side. It looked partly like a machine-gun, because of a long brass barrel projecting from it. But the brass tube came out of a bulging casing of cast aluminum and there was no opening through which shells could be fed.

Von Holz moved to that contrivance, removed a cap from the end of the brass tube, looked carefully into the opening, and waved stiffly for Tommy to look in.

Again Tommy was suspicious; watched until Von Holtz was some distance away. But the instant he put his eye to the end of the brass tube he forgot all caution, all suspicion, all his doubts. He forgot everything in his amazement.

There was a lens in the end of the brass tube. It was, in fact, nothing more or less than a telescope, apparently looking at something in a closed box. But Tommy was not able to believe that he looked at an illuminated miniature for even the fraction of a second. He looked into the telescope, and he was seeing out-of-doors. Through the aluminum casting that enclosed the end of the tube. Through the thick brick walls of the laboratory. He was gazing upon a landscape such as should not—such as could not—exist upon the earth.

There were monstrous, feathery tree-ferns waving languid fronds in a breeze that came from beyond them. The telescope seemed to be pointing at a gentle slope, and those tree-ferns cut off a farther view, but there was an impenetrable tangle of breast-high foliage between the instrument and that slope, and halfway up the incline there rested a huge steel globe.

Tommy's eyes fixed themselves upon the globe. It was man-made, of course. He could see where it had been bolted together. There were glassed-in windows in its sides, and there was a door.

As Tommy looked, that door opened partway, stopped as if someone within had hesitated, and then opened fully. A man came out. And Tommy said dazedly:

“My God!”

Because the man was a perfectly commonplace sort of individual, dressed in a perfectly commonplace fashion, and he carried a perfectly commonplace briar pipe in his hand. Moreover, Tommy recognized him. He had seen pictures of him often enough, and he was Professor Edward Denham, entitled to put practically all the letters of the alphabet after his name, the author of “Polymerization of the Pseudo-Metallic Nitrides” and the proper owner of this building and its contents. But Tommy saw him against a background of tree-ferns such as should have been extinct upon this earth since the Carboniferous Period, some millions of years ago.

He was looking hungrily at his briar pipe. Presently he began to hunt carefully about on the ground. He picked together half a handful of brownish things which had to be dried leaves. He stuffed them into the pipe, struck a match, and lighted it. He puffed away gloomily, surrounded by wholly monstrous vegetation. A butterfly fluttered over the top of the steel globe. Its wings were fully a yard across. It flittered lightly to a plant and seemed to wait, and abruptly a vivid carmine blossom opened wide; wide enough to admit it.

Denham watched curiously enough, smoking the rank and plainly unsatisfying dried leaves. He turned his head and spoke over his

shoulder. The door opened again. Again Tommy Reames was dazed. Because a girl came out of the huge steel sphere—and she was a girl of the most modern and most normal sort. A trim sport frock, slim silken legs, bobbed hair….

Tommy did not see her face until she turned, smiling, to make some comment to Denham. Then he saw that she was breath-takingly pretty. He swore softly under his breath.

The butterfly backed clumsily out of the gigantic flower. It flew lightly away, its many-colored wings brilliant in the sunshine. And the huge crimson blossom closed slowly.

Denham watched the butterfly go away. His eyes returned to the girl who was smiling at the flying thing, now out of the field of vision of the telescope. And there was utter discouragement visible in every line of Denham's figure. Tommy saw the girl suddenly reach out her hand and put it on Denham's shoulder. She patted it, speaking in an evident attempt to encourage him. She smiled, and talked coaxingly, and presently Denham made a queer, arrested gesture and went heavily back into the steel globe. She followed him, though she looked wearily all about before the door closed behind her, and when Denham could not see her face, her expression was tired and anxious indeed.

Tommy had forgotten Von Holtz, had forgotten the laboratory, had forgotten absolutely everything. If his original suspicions of Von Holtz had been justified, he could have been killed half a dozen times over. He was oblivious to everything but the sight before his eyes.

Now he felt a touch on his shoulder and drew his head away with a jerk. Von Holtz was looking down at him, very pale, with his weak-looking eyes anxious.

“They are still all right?” he demanded.

“Yes,” said Tommy dazedly. “Surely. Who is that girl?”

“That is the Herr Professor’s daughter Evelyn,” said Von Holtz uneasily. “I suggest, Herr Reames, that you swing the dimensoscope about.”

“The—what?” asked Tommy, still dazed by what he had seen.

“The dimensoscope. This.” Von Holtz shifted the brass tube. The whole thing was mounted so that it could be swung in any direction. The mounting was exactly like that of a normal telescope. Tommy instantly put his eye to the eyepiece again.

He saw more tree-ferns, practically the duplicates of the background beyond the globe. Nothing moved save small, fugitive creatures among their fronds. He swung the telescope still farther. The landscape swept by before his eyes. The tree-fern forest drew back. He saw the beginning of a vast and noisome morass, over which lay a thick haze as of a stream raised by the sun. He saw something move in that morass; something huge and horrible with a long and snake-like neck and the tiniest of heads at the end of it. But he could not see the thing clearly.

He swung the telescope yet again. And he looked over miles and miles of level, haze-blanketed marsh. Here and there were clumps of taller vegetation. Here and there were steaming, desolate pools. And three or four times he saw monstrous objects moving about clumsily in the marsh-land.

But then a glitter at the skyline caught his eye. He tilted the telescope to see more clearly, and suddenly he caught his breath. There, far away at the very horizon, was a city. It was tall and gleaming and very strange. No earthly city ever flung its towers so splendidly high and soaring. No city ever built by man gave off the fiery gleam of gold from all its walls and pinnacles. It looked like an artist's dream, hammered out in precious metal, with its outlines softened by the haze of distance.

And something was moving in the air near the city. Staring, tense, again incredulous, Tommy Reames strained his eyes and saw that it was a machine. An air-craft; a flying-machine of a type wholly unlike anything ever built upon the planet Earth. It swept steadily and swiftly toward the city, dwindling as it went. It swooped downward toward one of the mighty spires of the city of golden gleams, and vanished.

It was with a sense of shock, of almost physical shock, that Tommy came back to realization of his surroundings to feel Von Holtz's hand upon his shoulder and to hear the lean young man saying harshly:

"Well, Herr Reames? Are you convinced that I did not lie to you? Are you convinced that the Herr Professor Denham is in need of help?"

Tommy blinked dazedly as he looked around the laboratory again. Brick walls, an oil-spattered crude-oil engine in one corner, a concrete floor and an electric furnace and a casting-box….

"Why—yes…." said Tommy dazedly. "Yes. Of course!" Clarity came to his brain with a jerk. He did not understand at all, but he believed what he had seen. Denham and his daughter were somewhere in some other dimension, yet within range of the

extraordinary device he had looked through. And they were in trouble. So much was evident from their poses and their manner. “Of course,” he repeated. “They’re—there, wherever it is, and they can’t get back. They don’t seem to be in any imminent danger….”

Von Holtz licked his lips.

“The Ragged Men have not found them yet,” he said in a hushed, harsh voice. “Before they went in the globe we saw the Ragged Men. We watched them. If they do find the Herr Professor and his daughter, they will kill them very slowly, so that they will take days of screaming agony to die. It is that that I am afraid of, Herr Reames. The Ragged Men roam the tree-fern forests. If they find the Herr Professor they will trace each nerve to its root of agony until he dies. And we will be able only to watch….”

Chapter 2

“The thing is,” said Tommy feverishly, “that we’ve got to find a way to get them back. Whether it duplicates Denham’s results or not. How far away are they?”

“A few hundred yards, perhaps,” said Von Holtz wearily, “or ten million miles. It is the same thing. They are in a place where the fifth dimension is the dominant coordinate.”

Tommy was pacing up and down the laboratory. He stopped and looked through the eyepiece of the extraordinary vision apparatus. He tore himself away from it again.

“How does this thing work?” he demanded.

Von Holtz began to unscrew two wing-nuts which kept the top of the aluminum casting in place.

“It is the first piece of apparatus which Professor Denham made,” he said precisely. “I know the theory, but I cannot duplicate it. Every dimension is at right angles to all other dimensions, of course. The Herr Professor has a note, here—”

He stopped his unscrewing to run over a heap of papers on the work-

bench—papers over which he seemed to have been poring desperately at the time of Tommy's arrival. He handed a sheet to Tommy, who read:

"If a creature who was aware of only two dimensions made two right-angled objects and so placed them that all the angles formed by the combination were right angles, he would contrive a figure represented by the corner of a box; he would discover a third dimension. Similarly, if a three-dimensioned man took three right angles and placed them so that all the angles formed were right angles, he would discover a fourth dimension. This, however, would probably be the time dimension, and to travel in time would instantly be fatal. But with four right angles he could discover a fifth dimension, and with five right angles he could discover a sixth…."

Tommy Reames put down the paper impatiently.

"Of course" he said brusquely. "I know all that stuff. But up to the present time nobody has been able to put together even three right angles, in practise."

Von Holtz had returned to the unscrewing of the wing-nuts. He lifted off the cover of the dimensoscope.

“It is the thing the Herr Professor did not confide to me,” he said bitterly. “The secret. The one secret! Look in here.”

Tommy looked. The objective-glass at the end of the telescope faced a mirror, which was inclined to its face at an angle of forty-five degrees. A beam of light from the objective would be reflected to a second mirror, twisted in a fashion curiously askew. Then the light would go to a third mirror….

Tommy looked at that third mirror, and instantly his eyes ached. He closed them and opened them again. Again they stung horribly. It was exactly the sort of eye-strain which comes of looking through a lens which does not focus exactly, or through a strange pair of eyeglasses. He could see the third mirror, but his eyes hurt the instant they looked upon it, as if that third mirror were distorted in an impossible fashion. He was forced to draw them away. He could see, though, that somehow that third mirror would reflect his imaginary beam of light into a fourth mirror of which he could see only the edge. He moved his head—and still saw only the edge of a mirror. He was sure of what he saw, because he could look into the wavy, bluish translucency all glass shows upon its edge. He could even see the thin layer of silver backing. But he could not put himself into a position in which more than the edge of that mirror was visible.

“Good Lord!” said Tommy Reames feverishly. “That mirror—”

“A mirror at forty-five degrees,” said Von Holtz precisely, “reflects light at a right angle. There are four mirrors, and each bends a ray of light through a right angle which is also a right angle to all the others. The result is that the dimensoscope looks into what is a fifth dimension, into which no man ever looked before. But I cannot move other mirrors into the positions they have in this instrument. I do not know how.”

Tommy shook his head impatiently, staring at the so-simple, yet incredible device whose theory had been mathematically proven numberless times, but never put into practice before.

“Having made this device,” said Von Holtz, “the Herr Professor constructed what he termed a catapult. It was a coil of wire, like the large machine there. It jerked a steel ball first vertically, then horizontally, then laterally, then in a fourth-dimensional direction, and finally projected it violently off in a fifth-dimensional path. He made small hollow steel balls and sent a butterfly, a small sparrow, and finally a cat into that other world. The steel balls opened of themselves and freed those creatures. They seemed to suffer no distress. Therefore he concluded that it would be safe for him to go, himself. His daughter refused to permit him to go alone, and he was

so sure of his safety that he allowed her to enter the globe with him. She did. I worked the catapult which flung the globe in the fifth dimension, and his device for returning failed to operate. Hence he is marooned."

"But the big catapult—"

"Can you not see that the big catapult is broken?" demanded Von Holtz bitterly. "A special metal is required for the missing parts. That, I know how to make. Yes. I can supply that. But I cannot shape it! I cannot design the gears which will move it as it should be moved! I cannot make another dimensoscope. I cannot, Herr Reames, calculate any method of causing four right angles to be all at right angles to each other. It is my impossibility! It is for that that I have appealed to you. You see it has been done. I see that it is done. I can make the metal which alone can be moved in the necessary direction. But I cannot calculate any method of moving it in that direction! If you can do so, Herr Reames, we can perhaps save the Herr Professor Denham. If you cannot—Gott! The death he will die is horrible to think of!"

"And his daughter," said Tommy grimly. "His daughter, also."

He paced up and down the laboratory again. Von Holtz moved to the

work-bench from which he had taken Denham's note. There was a pile of such memoranda, thumbed over and over. And there were papers in the angular, precise handwriting which was Von Holtz's own, and calculations and speculations and the remains of frantic efforts to work out, somehow, the secret which as one manifestation had placed one mirror so that it hurt the eyes to look at it, and one other mirror so that from every angle of a normal existence, one could see only the edge.

"I have worked, Herr Reames," said Von Holtz drearily. "Gott! How I have worked! But the Herr Professor kept some things secret, and that so-essential thing is one of them."

Presently he said tiredly:

"The dimension-traveling globe was built in this laboratory. It rested here." He pointed. "The Herr Professor was laughing and excited at the moment of departure. His daughter smiled at me through the window of the globe. There was an under-carriage with wheels upon it. You cannot see those wheels through the dimensoscope. They got into the globe and closed the door. The Herr Professor nodded to me through the glass window. The dynamo was running at its fullest speed. The laboratory smelled of hot oil, and of ozone from the sparks. I lifted my hand, and the Herr Professor nodded again, and I

threw the switch. This switch, Herr Reames! It sparked as I closed it, and the flash partly blinded me. But I saw the globe rush toward the giant catapult yonder. It leaped upward into the huge coil, which whirled madly. Dazed, I saw the globe hanging suspended in mid-air, two feet from the floor. It shook! Once! Twice! With violence! Suddenly its outline became hazy and distorted. My eyes ached with looking at it. And then it was gone!"

Von Holtz's arms waved melodramatically.

"I rushed to the dimensoscope and gazed through it into the fifth dimension. I saw the globe floating onward through the air, toward that bank of glossy ferns. I saw it settle and turn over, and then slowly right itself as it came to rest. The Herr Professor got out of it. I saw him through the instrument which could look into the dimension into which he had gone. He waved his hand to me. His daughter joined him, surveying the strange cosmos in which they were. The Herr Professor plucked some of the glossy ferns, took photographs, then got back into the globe.

"I awaited its return to our own world. I saw it rock slightly as he worked upon the apparatus within. I knew that when it vanished from the dimensoscope it would have returned to our own universe. But it remained as before. It did not move. After three hours of

anguished waiting, the Herr Professor came out and made signals to me of despair. By gestures, because no sound could come through the dimensoscope itself, he begged me to assist him. And I was helpless! Made helpless by the Herr Professor's own secrecy! For four days and nights I have toiled, hoping desperately to discover what the Herr Professor had hidden from me. At last I thought of you. I telegraphed to you. If you can assist me…."

"I'm going to try it, of course," said Tommy shortly.

He paced back and forth. He stopped and looked through the brass-tubed telescope. Giant tree-ferns, unbelievable but real. The steel globe resting partly overturned upon a bank of glossy ferns. Breast-high, incredible foliage between the point of vision and that extraordinary vehicle.

While Tommy had been talking and listening, while he had been away from the eyepiece, one or other of the occupants of the globe had emerged from it. The door was open. But now the girl came bounding suddenly through the ferns. She called, though it seemed to Tommy that there was a curious air of caution even in her calling. She was excited, hopefully excited.

Denham came out of the globe with a clumsy club in his hand. But

Evelyn caught his arm and pointed up into the sky. Denham stared, and then began to make wild and desperate gestures as if trying to attract attention to himself.

Tommy watched for minutes, and then swung the dimensoscope around. It was extraordinary, to be sitting in the perfectly normal brick-walled laboratory, looking into a slender brass tube, and seeing another universe entirely, another wild and unbelievable landscape.

The tree-fern forest drew back and the vast and steaming morass was again in view. There were distant bright golden gleams from the city. But Tommy was searching the sky, looking in the sky of a world in the fifth dimension for a thing which would make a man gesticulate hopefully.

He found it. It was an aircraft, startlingly close through the telescope. A single figure was seated at its controls, motionless as if bored, with exactly the air of a weary truck driver piloting a vehicle along a roadway he does not really see. And Tommy, being near enough to see the pilot's pose, could see the aircraft clearly. It was totally unlike a terrestrial airplane. A single huge and thick wing supported it. But the wing was angular and clumsy-seeming, and its form was devoid of the grace of an earthly aircraft wing, and there was no tail whatever to give it the appearance of a living thing.

There was merely a long, rectangular wing with a framework beneath it, and a shimmering thing which was certainly not a screw propeller, but which seemed to draw it.

It moved on steadily and swiftly, dwindling in the distance, with its motionless pilot seated before a mass of corded bundles. It looked as if this were a freight plane of some sort, and therefore made in a strictly utilitarian fashion.

It vanished in the haze above the monster swamp, going in a straight line for the golden city at the world's edge.

Tommy stared at it, long after it had ceased to be visible. Then he saw a queer movement on the earth near the edge of the morass. Figures were moving. Human figures. He saw four of them, shaking clenched fists and capering insanely, seeming to bellow insults after the oblivious and now invisible flying thing. He could see that they were nearly naked, and that one of them carried a spear. But the indubitable glint of metal was reflected from one of them for an instant, when some metal accoutrement about him glittered in the sunlight.

They moved from sight behind thick, feathery foliage, and Tommy swung back the brass tube to see the globe again. Denham and his

daughter were staring in the direction in which Tommy had seen those human figures. Denham clutched his clumsy club grimly. His face was drawn and his figure tensed. And suddenly Evelyn spoke quietly, and the two of then dived into the fern forest and disappeared. Minutes later they returned, dragging masses of tree-fern fronds with which they masked the globe from view. They worked hastily, desperately, concealing the steel vehicle from sight. And then Denham stared tensely all about, shading his eyes with his hand. He and the girl withdrew cautiously into the forest.

It was minutes later that Tommy was roused by Von Holtz's hand on his shoulder.

"What has happened, Herr Reames?" he asked uneasily. "The—Ragged Men?"

"I saw men," said Tommy briefly, "shaking clenched fists at an aircraft flying overhead. And Denham and his daughter have hidden the globe behind a screen of foliage."

Von Holtz licked his lips fascinatedly.

"The Ragged Men," he said in a hushed voice. "The Herr Professor called them that, because they cannot be of the people who live in

the Golden City. They hate the people of the Golden City. I think that they are bandits; renegades, perhaps. They live in the tree-fern forests and scream curses at the airships which fly overhead. And they are afraid of those airships."

"How long did Denham use this thing to look through, before he built his globe?"

Von Holtz considered.

"Immediately it worked," he said at last, "he began work on a small catapult. It took him one week to devise exactly how to make that. He experimented with it for some days and began to make the large globe. That took nearly two months—the globe and the large catapult together. And also the dimensoscope was at hand. His daughter looked through it more than he did, or myself."

"He should have known what he was up against," said Tommy, frowning. "He ought to have taken guns, at least. Is he armed?"

Von Holtz shook his head.

"He expected to return at once," he said desperately. "Do you see, Herr Reames, the position it puts me in? I may be suspected of

murder! I am the Herr Professor's assistant. He disappears. Will I not be accused of having put him out of the way?"

"No," said Tommy thoughtfully. "You won't." He glanced through the brass tube and paced up and down the room. "You telephone for someone to repair my car," he said suddenly and abruptly. "I am going to stay here and work this thing out. I've got just the glimmering of an idea. But I'll need my car in running order, in case we have to go out and get materials in a hurry."

Von Holtz bowed stiffly and went out of the laboratory. Tommy looked after him. Even moved to make sure he was gone. And then Tommy Reames went quickly to the work bench on which were the littered notes and calculations Von Holtz had been using and which were now at his disposal. But Tommy did not leaf through them. He reached under the blotter beneath the whole pile. He had seen Von Holtz furtively push something out of sight, and he had disliked and distrusted Von Holtz from the beginning. Moreover, it was pretty thoroughly clear that Denham had not trusted him too much. A trusted assistant should be able to understand, at least, any experiment performed in a laboratory.

A folded sheet of paper came out. Tommy glanced at it.

“You messed things up right! Denham marooned and you got nothing. No plans or figures either. When you get them, you get your money. If you don’t you are out of luck. If this Reames guy can’t fix up what you want it’ll be just too bad for you.”

There was no salutation nor any signature beyond a scrawled and sprawling “J.”

Tommy Reames’ jaw set grimly. He folded the scrap of paper and thrust it back out of sight again.

“Pretty!” he said harshly. “So a gentleman named ‘J’ is going to pay Von Holtz for plans or calculations it is hoped I’ll provide! Which suggests—many things! But at least I’ll have Von Holtz’s help until he thinks my plans or calculations are complete. So that’s all right….”

Tommy could not be expected, of course, to guess that the note he had read was quite astounding proof of the interest taken in non-Euclidean geometry by a vice king of Chicago, or that the ranking beer baron of that metropolis was the man who was so absorbed in abstruse theoretic physics.

Tommy moved toward the great solenoid which lay askew upon its

wrecked support. It had drawn the steel globe toward it, had made that globe vibrate madly, twice, and then go hazy and vanish. It had jerked the globe in each of five directions, each at right angles to all the others, and had released it when started in the fifth dimension. The huge coil was quite nine feet across and would take the steel globe easily. It was pivoted in concentric rings which made up a set of gymbals far more elaborate than were ever used to suspend a mariner's compass aboard ship.

There were three rings, one inside the other. And two rings will take care of any motion in three dimensions. These rings were pivoted, too, so that an unbelievably intricate series of motions could be given to the solenoid within them all. But the device was broken, now. A pivot had given away, and shaft and socket alike had vanished. Tommy became absorbed. Some oddity bothered him….

He pieced the thing together mentally. And he exclaimed suddenly. There had been four rings of metal! One was gone! He comprehended, very suddenly. The third mirror in the dimensoscope was the one so strangely distorted by its position, which was at half of a right angle to all the dimensions of human experience. It was the third ring in the solenoid's supports which had vanished. And Tommy, staring at the gigantic apparatus and summoning all his theoretic knowledge and all his brain to work, saw the connection

between the two things.

“The time dimension and the world-line,” he said sharply, excited in spite of himself. “Revolving in the time dimension means telescoping in the world-line…. It would be a strain no matter could endure….”

The mirror in the dimensoscope was not pointing in a fourth dimension. It did not need to. It was reflecting light at a right angle, and hence needed to be only at half of a right angle to the two courses of the beam it reflected. But to whirl the steel globe into a fifth dimension, the solenoid’s support had for one instant to revolve in time! For the fraction of a second it would have literally to pass through its own substance. It would be required to undergo precisely the sort of strain involved in turning a hollow seamless metal globe, inside out! No metal could stand such a strain. No form of matter known to man could endure it.

“It would explode!” said Tommy excitedly to himself, alone in the great bare laboratory. “Steel itself would vaporize! It would wreck the place!”

And then he looked blank. Because the place had very obviously not been wrecked. And yet a metal ring had vanished, leaving no

trace….

Von Holtz came back. He looked frightened.

“A—a repairman, Herr Reames,” he said, stammering, “is on the way. And—Herr Reames….”

Tommy barely heard him. For a moment, Tommy was all scientist, confronted with the inexplicable, yet groping with a blind certainty toward a conclusion he very vaguely foresaw. He waved his hand impatiently….

“The Herr Jacaro is on the way here,” stammered Von Holtz.

Tommy blinked, remembering that Von Holtz had told him he could make a certain metal, the only metal which could be moved in the fourth dimension.

“Jacaro?” he said blankly.

“The—friend of the Herr Professor Denham. He advanced the money for the Herr Professor’s experiments.”

Tommy heard him with only half his brain, though that half instantly decided that Von Holtz was lying. The only Jacaro Tommy knew of

was a prominent gangster from Chicago, who had recently cemented his position in Chicago's underworld by engineering the amalgamation of two once-rival gangs. Tommy knew, in a vague fashion, that Von Holtz was frightened. That he was terrified in some way. And that he was inordinately suspicious of someone, and filled with a queer desperation.

"Well?" said Tommy abstractedly. The thought he needed was coming. A metal which would have full tensile strength up to a certain instant, and then disrupt itself without violence into a gas, a vapor…. It would be an alloy, perhaps. It would be….

He struck at his own head with his clenched fist, angrily demanding that his brain bring forth the thought that was forming slowly. The metal that could be revolved in time without producing a disastrous explosion and without requiring an impossible amount of power….

He did not see Von Holtz looking in the eyepiece of the dimensoscope. He stared at nothing, thinking concentratedly, putting every bit of energy into sheer thought. And suddenly, like the explosion he sought a way to avoid, the answer came, blindingly clear.

He surveyed that answer warily. A tremendous excitement filled him.

“I’ve got it!” he said softly to himself. “By God, I know how he did the thing!”

And as if through a mist the figure of Von Holtz became clear before his eyes. Von Holtz was looking into the dimensoscope tube. He was staring into that other, extraordinary world in which Denham and his daughter were marooned. And Von Holtz’s face was utterly, deathly white, and he was making frantic, repressed gestures, and whispering little whimpering phrases to himself. They were unintelligible, but the deathly pallor of his cheeks, and the fascinated, dribbling fullness of his lips brought Tommy Reames suddenly down to earth.

“What’s happening?” demanded Tommy sharply.

Von Holtz did not answer. He made disjointed, moaning little exclamations to himself. He was twitching horribly as he looked through the telescope into that other world….

Tommy flung him aside and clapped his own eye to the eyepiece. And then he groaned.

The telescope was pointed at the steel globe upon that ferny bank, no more than a few hundred yards away but two dimensions removed

from Earth. The screening mass of tree-fronds had been torn away. A swarm of ragged, half-naked men was gathered about the globe. They were armed with spears and clubs, in the main, but there were other weapons of intricate design whose uses Tommy could not even guess at. He did not try. He was watching the men as they swarmed about and over the steel sphere. Their faces were brutal and savage, and now they were distorted with an insane hate. It was the same awful, gibbering hatred he had sensed in the caperings of the four he had seen bellowing vituperation at an airplane.

They were not savages. Somehow he could not envision them as primitive. Their features were hard-bitten, seamed with hatred and with vice unspeakable. And they were white. The instant impression any man would have received was that here were broken men; fugitives, bandits, assassins. Here were renegades or worse from some higher, civilized race.

They battered hysterically upon the steel globe. It was not the attack of savages upon a strange thing. It was the assault of desperate, broken men upon a thing they hated. A glass pane splintered and crashed. Spears were thrust into the opening, while mouths opened as if in screams of insane fury. And then, suddenly, the door of the globe flew wide.

The Ragged Men did not wait for anyone to come out. They fought each other to get into the opening, their eyes glaring madly, filled with the lust to kill.

Chapter 3

A battered and antiquated flivver came chugging down the wire-fenced lane to the laboratory, an hour later. It made a prodigious din, and Tommy Reames went out to meet it. He was still a little pale. He had watched the steel globe turned practically inside out by the Ragged Men. He had seen them bringing out cameras, cushions, and even the padding of the walls, to be torn to bits in a truly maniacal fury. But he had not seen one sign of a human being killed. Denham and his daughter had not been in the globe when it was found and ransacked. So far, then, they were probably safe. Tommy had seen them vanish into the tree-fern forest. They had been afraid, and with good reason. What dangers they might encounter in the fern forest he could not guess. How long they would escape the search of the Ragged Men, he could not know. How he could ever hope to find them if he succeeded in duplicating Denham's dimension-traveling apparatus he could not even think of, just now. But the Ragged Men were not searching the fern forest. So much was sure. They were encamped by the steel sphere, and a scurvy-looking lot they were.

Coming out of the brick laboratory, Tommy saw a brawny figure getting out of the antiquated flivver whose arrival had been so thunderous. That brawny figure nodded to him and grinned. Tommy recognized him. The red-headed, broad-shouldered filling station

attendant in the last village, who had given him specific directions for reaching this place.

“You hit that gate a lick, didn’t you?” asked the erstwhile filling station attendant amiably. “Mr. Von Holtz said you had a flat and a busted radiator. That right?”

Tommy nodded. The red-headed man walked around the car, scratched his chin, and drew out certain assorted tools. He put them on the grass with great precision, pumped a gasoline blow-torch to pressure and touched a match to its priming-basin, and while the gasoline flamed smokily he made a half dozen casual movements with a file, and the broken radiator tube was exposed for repair.

He went back to the torch and observed placidly:

“The Professor ain’t around, is he?”

Tommy shook his head.

“Thought not,” said the red-headed one. “He gen’rally comes out and talks a while. I helped him build some of them dinkuses in the barn yonder.”

Tommy said eagerly:

“Say, which of those things did you help him build? That big thing with the solenoid—the coil?”

“Yeah. How’d it work?” The red-headed one set a soldering iron in place and began to jack up the rear wheel to get at the tire. “Crazy idea, if you ask me. I told Miss Evelyn so. She laughed and said she’d be in the ball when it was tried. Did it work?”

“Too damn well,” said Tommy briefly. “I’ve got to repair that solenoid. How about a job helping?”

The red-headed man unfastened the lugs of the rim, kicked the tire speculatively, and said, “Gone to hell.” He put on the spare tire with ease and dispatch.

“Um,” he said. “How about that Mr. Von Holtz? Is he goin’ to boss the job?”

“He is not,” said Tommy, with a shade of grimness in his tone.

The red-headed man nodded and took the soldering iron in hand. He unwound a strip of wire solder, mended the radiator tube with placid ease, and seemed to bang the cooling-flanges with a total lack of care. They went magically back into place, and it took close

inspection to see that the radiator had been damaged.

“She’s all right,” he observed. He regarded Tommy impersonally. “Suppose you tell me how come you horn in on this,” he suggested, “an’ maybe I’ll play. That guy Von Holtz is a crook, if you ask me about him.”

Tommy ran his hand across his forehead, and told him.

“Um,” said the red-headed man calmly. “I think I’ll go break Mr. Von Holtz’s neck. I got me a hunch.”

He took two deliberate steps forward. But Tommy said:

“I saw Denham not an hour ago. So far, he’s all right. How long he’ll be all right is a question. But I’m going after him.”

The red-headed man scrutinized him exhaustively.

“Um. I might try that myself. I kinda like the Professor. An’ Miss Evelyn. My name’s Smithers. Let’s go look through the dinkus the Professor made.”

They went together into the laboratory. Von Holtz was looking through the dimensoscope. He started back as they entered, and

looked acutely uneasy when he saw the red-headed man.

“How do you do,” he said nervously. “They—the Ragged Men—have just brought in a dead man. But it is not the Herr Professor.”

Without a word, Tommy took the brass tube in his hand. Von Holtz moved away, biting his lips. Tommy stared into that strange other world.

The steel sphere lay as before, slightly askew upon a bank of glossy ferns. But its glass windows were shattered, and fragments of everything it had contained were scattered about. The Ragged Men had made a camp and built a fire. Some of them were roasting meat—the huge limb of a monstrous animal with a scaly, reptilian hide. Others were engaged in vehement argument over the body of one of their number, lying sprawled out upon the ground.

Tommy spoke without moving his eyes from the eyepiece.

“I saw Denham with a club just now. This man was killed by a club.”

The Ragged Men in the other world debated acrimoniously. One of them pointed to the dead man’s belt, and spread out his hands. Something was missing from the body. Tommy saw, now, three or

four other men with objects that looked rather like policemen's truncheons, save that they were made of glittering metal. They were plainly weapons. Denham, then, was armed—if he could understand how the weapon was used.

The Ragged Men debated, and presently their dispute attracted the attention of a man with a huge black beard. He rose from where he sat gnawing at a piece of meat and moved grandly toward the disputatious group. They parted at his approach, but a single member continued the debate against even the bearded giant. The bearded one plucked the glittering truncheon from his belt. The disputatious one gasped in fear and flung himself desperately forward. But the bearded man kept the truncheon pointed steadily…. The man who assailed him staggered, reached close enough to strike a single blow, and collapsed. The bearded man pointed the metal truncheon at him as he lay upon the ground. He heaved convulsively, and was still.

The bearded man went back to his seat and picked up the gnawed bit of meat again. The dispute had ceased. The chattering group of men dispersed.

Tommy was about to leave the eyepiece of the instrument when a movement nearby caught his eye. A head peered cautiously toward the encampment. A second rose beside it. Denham and his daughter

Evelyn. They were apparently no more than thirty feet from the dimensoscope. Tommy could see them talking cautiously, saw Denham lift and examine a metal truncheon like the bearded man's, and force his daughter to accept it. He clutched a club, himself, with a grim satisfaction.

Moments later they vanished quietly in the thick fern foliage, and though Tommy swung the dimensoscope around in every direction, he could see nothing of their retreat.

He rose from that instrument with something approaching hopefulness. He'd seen Evelyn very near and very closely. She did not look happy, but she did look alert rather than worn. And Denham was displaying a form of competence in the face of danger which was really more than would have been expected in a Ph.D., a M.A., and other academic distinctions running to most of the letters of the alphabet.

"I've just seen Denham and Evelyn again," said Tommy crisply. "They're safe so far. And I've seen one of the weapons of the Ragged Men in use. If we can get a couple of automatics and some cartridges to Denham, he'll be safe until we can repair the big solenoid."

“There was the small catapult,” said Von Holtz bitterly, “but it was dismantled. The Herr Professor saw me examining it, and he dismantled it. So that I did not learn how to calculate the way of changing the position—”

Tommy’s eyes rested queerly on Von Holtz for a moment.

“You know how to make the metal required,” he said suddenly. “You’d better get busy making it. Plenty of it. We’ll need it.”

Von Holtz stared at him, his weak eyes almost frightened.

“You *know*? You know how to combine the right angles?”

“I think so,” said Tommy. “I’ve got to find out if I’m right. Will you make the metal?”

Von Holtz bit at his too-red lips.

“But Herr Reames!” he said stridently, “I wish to know the equation! Tell me the method of pointing a body in a fourth or a fifth direction. It is only fair—”

“Denham didn’t tell you,” said Tommy.

Von Holtz’s arms jerked wildly.

“But I will not make the metal! I insist upon being told the equation! I insist upon it! I will not make the metal if you do not tell me!”

Smithers was in the laboratory, of course. He had been surveying the big solenoid-catapult and scratching his chin reflectively. Now he turned.

But Tommy took Von Holtz by the shoulders. And Tommy’s hands were the firm and sinewy hands of a sportsman, if his brain did happen to be the brain of a scientist. Von Holtz writhed in his grip.

“There is only one substance which could be the metal I need, Von Holtz,” he said gently. “Only one substance is nearly three-dimensional. Metallic ammonium! It’s known to exist, because it makes a mercury amalgam, but nobody has been able to isolate it because nobody has been able to give it a fourth dimension—duration in time. Denham did it. You can do it. And I need it, and you’d better set to work at the job. You’ll be very sorry if you don’t, Von Holtz!”

Smithers said with a vast calmness.

“I got me a hunch. So if y’want his neck broke….”

Tommy released Von Holtz and the lean young man gasped and sputtered and gesticulated wildly in a frenzy of rage.

“He’ll make it,” said Tommy coldly. “Because he doesn’t dare not to!”

Von Holtz went out of the laboratory, his weak-looking eyes staring and wild, and his mouth working.

“He’ll be back,” said Tommy briefly. “You’ve got to make a small model of that big catapult, Smithers. Can you do it?”

“Sure,” said Smithers. “The ring’ll be copper tubing, with pin-bearings. Wind a coil on the lathe. It’ll be kinda rough, but it’ll do. But gears, now….”

“I’ll attend to them. You know how to work that metallic ammonium?”

“If that’s what it was,” agreed Smithers. “I worked it for the Professor.”

Tommy leaned close and whispered:

“You never made any gears of that. But did you make some springs?”

“Uh-huh!”

Tommy grinned joyously.

“Then we’re set and I’m right! Von Holtz wants a mathematical formula, and no one on earth could write one, but we don’t need it!”

Smithers rummaged around the laboratory with a casual air, acquired this and that and the other thing, and set to work with an astounding absence of waste motions. From time to time he inspected the great catapult thoughtfully, verified some impression, and went about the construction of another part.

And when Von Holtz did not return, Tommy hunted for him. He suddenly remembered hearing his car motor start. He found his car missing. He swore, then, and grimly began to hunt for a telephone in the house. But before he had raised central he heard the deep-toned purring of the motor again. His car was coming swiftly back to the house. And he saw, through a window, that Von Holtz was driving it.

The lean young man got out of it, his face white with passion. He started for the laboratory. Tommy intercepted him.

“I—went to get materials for making the metal,” said Von Holtz hoarsely, repressing his rage with a great effort. “I shall begin at once, Herr Reames.”

Tommy said nothing whatever. Von Holtz was lying. Of course. He carried nothing in the way of materials. But he had gone away from the house, and Tommy knew as definitely as if Von Holtz had told him, that Von Holtz had gone off to communicate in safety with someone who signed his correspondence with a J.

Von Holtz went into the laboratory. The four-cylinder motor began to throb at once. The whine of the dynamo arose almost immediately after. Von Holtz came out of the laboratory and dived into a shed that adjoined the brick building. He remained in there.

Tommy looked at the trip register on his speedometer. Like most people with methodical minds, he had noted the reading on arriving at a new destination. Now he knew how far Von Holtz had gone. He had been to the village and back.

“Meaning,” said Tommy grimly to himself, “that the J who wants

plans and calculations is either in the village or at the end of a long-distance wire. And Von Holtz said he was on the way. He'll probably turn up and try to bribe me."

He went back into the laboratory and put his eye to the eyepiece of the dimensoscope. Smithers had his blow-torch going and was busily accumulating an apparently unrelated series of discordant bits of queerly-shaped metal. Tommy looked through at the strange mad world he could see through the eyepiece.

The tree-fern forest was still. The encampment of the Ragged Men was nearly quiet. Sunset seemed to be approaching in this other world, though it was still bright outside the laboratory. The hours of day and night were obviously not the same in the two worlds, so close together that a man could be flung from one to the other by a mechanical contrivance.

The sun seemed larger, too, than the orb which lights our normal earth. When Tommy swung the vision instrument about to search for it, he found a great red ball quite four times the diameter of our own sun, neatly bisected by the horizon. Tommy watched, waiting for it to sink. But it did not sink straight downward as the sun seems to do in all temperate latitudes. It descended, yes, but it moved along the horizon as it sank. Instead of a direct and forthright dip downward,

the sun seemed to progress along the horizon, dipping more deeply as it swam. And Tommy watched it blankly.

“It’s not our sun…. But it’s not our world. Yet it revolves, and there are men on it. And a sun that size would bake the earth…. And it’s sinking at an angle that would only come at a latitude of—”

That was the clue. He understood at once. The instrument through which he regarded the strange world looked out upon the polar regions of that world. Here, where the sun descended slantwise, were the high latitudes, the coldest spaces upon all the whole planet. And if here there were the gigantic growths of a carboniferous era, the tropic regions of this planet must be literal infernos.

And then he saw in its gradual descent the monster sun was going along behind the golden city, and the outlines of its buildings, the magnificence of its spires, were limned clearly for him against the dully glowing disk.

Nowhere upon earth had such a city ever been dreamed of. No man had ever envisioned such a place, where far-flung arches interconnected soaring, towering columns, where curves of perfect grace were united in forms of utterly perfect proportion….

The sunlight died, and dusk began and deepened, and vividly brilliant stars began to come out overhead, and Tommy suddenly searched the heavens eagerly for familiar constellations. And found not one. All the stars were strange. These stars seemed larger and much more near than the tiny pinpoints that blink down upon our earth.

And then he swung the instrument again and saw great fires roaring and the Ragged Men crouched about them. Within them, rather, because they had built fires about themselves as if to make a wall of flame. And once Tommy saw twin, monstrous eyes, gazing from the blackness of the tree-fern forest. They were huge eyes, and they were far apart, so that the head of the creature who used them must have been enormous. And they were all of fifteen feet above the ground when they speculatively looked over the ring of fires and the ragged, degraded men within them. Then that creature, whatever it was, turned away and vanished.

But Tommy felt a curious shivering horror of the thing. It had moved soundlessly, without a doubt, because not one of the Ragged Men had noted its presence. It had been kept away by the fires. But Denham and Evelyn were somewhere in the tree-fern forest, and

they would not dare to make fires….

Tommy drew away from the dimensoscope, shivering. He had been looking only, but the place into which he looked was real, and the dangers that lay hidden there were very genuine, and there was a man and a girl of his own race and time struggling desperately, without arms or hope, to survive.

Smithers was casually fitting together an intricate array of little rings made of copper tubing. There were three of them, and each was fitted into the next largest by pins which enabled them to spin noiselessly and swiftly at the touch of Smithers' finger. He had them spinning now, each in a separate direction, and the effect was bewildering.

As Tommy watched, Smithers stopped them, oiled the pins carefully, and painstakingly inserted a fourth ring. Only this ring was of a white metal that looked somehow more pallid than silver. It had a whiteness like that of ivory beneath its metallic gleam.

Tommy blinked.

"Did Von Holtz give you that metal?" he asked suddenly.

Smithers looked up and puffed at a short brown pipe.

“Nope. There was some splashes of it by the castin’ box. I melted ’em together an’ run a ring. Pressed it to shape; y’ can’t hammer this stuff. It goes to water and dries up quicker’n lightning—an’ you hold y’nose an’ run. I used it before for the Professor.”

Tommy went over to him excitedly. He picked up the little contrivance of many concentric rings. The big motor was throbbing rhythmically, and the generator was humming at the back of the laboratory. Von Holtz was out of sight.

With painstaking care Tommy went over the little device. He looked up.

“A coil?”

“I wound one,” said Smithers calmly. “On the lathe. Not so hot, but it’ll do, I guess. But I can’t fix these rings like the Professor did.”

“I think I can,” said Tommy crisply. “Did you make some wire for springs?”

“Yeah!”

Tommy fingered the wire. Stout, stiff, and surprisingly springy wire of the same peculiar metal. It was that metallic ammonium which chemists have deduced must exist because of the chemical behavior of the compound NH_3, but which Denham alone had managed to procure. Tommy deduced that it was an allotropic modification of the substance which forms an amalgam with mercury, as metallic tin is an allotrope of the amorphous gray powder which is tin in its normal, stable state.

He set to work with feverish excitement. For one hour, for two he worked. At the end of that time he was explaining the matter curtly to Smithers, so intent on his work that he wholly failed to hear a motor car outside or to realize that it had also grown dark in this world of ours.

“You see, Smithers, if a two-dimensioned creature wanted to adjust two right angles at right angles to each other, he’d have them laid flat, of course. And if he put a spring at the far ends of those right angles—they’d look like a T, put together—so that the cross-bar of that T was under tension, he’d have the equivalent of what I’m doing. To make a three-dimensioned figure, that imaginary man would have to bend one side of the cross-bar up. As if the two ends of it were under tension by a spring, and the spring would only be relieved of tension when that cross-bar was bent. But the vertical

would be his time dimension, so he'd have to have something thin, or it couldn't be bent. He'd need something 'thin in time.'

"We have the same problem. But metallic ammonium is 'thin in time.' It's so fugitive a substance that Denham is the only man ever to secure it. So we use these rings and adjust these springs to them so they're under tension which will only be released when they're all at right angles to each other. In our three dimensions that's impossible, but we have a metal that can revolve in a fourth, and we reinforce their tendency to adjust themselves by starting them off with a jerk. We've got 'em flat. They'll make a good stiff jerk when they try to adjust themselves. And the solenoid's a bit eccentric—"

"Shut up!" snapped Smithers suddenly.

He was facing the door, bristling. Von Holtz was in the act of coming in, with a beefy, broad-shouldered man with blue jowls. Tommy straightened up, thought swiftly, and then smiled grimly.

"Hullo, Von Holtz," he said pleasantly. "We've just completed a model catapult. We're all set to try it out. Watch!"

He set a little tin can beneath the peculiar device of copper-tubing rings. The can was wholly ordinary, made of thin sheet-iron plated

with tin as are all the tin cans of commerce.

“You have the catapult remade?” gasped Von Holtz. “Wait! Wait! Let me look at it!”

For one instant, and one instant only, Tommy let him see. The massed set of concentric rings, each one of them parallel to all the others. It looked rather like a flat coil of tubing; certainly like no particularly obscure form of projector. But as Von Holtz’s weak eyes fastened avidly upon it, Tommy pressed the improvised electric switch. At once that would energize the solenoid and release all the tensed springs from their greater tension, for an attempt to reach a permanent equilibrium.

As Von Holtz and the blue-jowled man stared, the little tin can leaped upward into the tiny coil. The small copper rings twinkled one within the other as the springs operated. The tin can was wrenched this way and that, then for the fraction of a second hurt the eyes that gazed upon it—and it was gone! And then the little coil came spinning down to the work bench top from its broken bearings and the remaining copper rings spun aimlessly for a moment. But the third ring of whitish metal had vanished utterly, and so had the coiled-wire springs which Von Holtz had been unable to distinguish. And there was an overpowering smell of ammonia in the room.

Von Holtz flung himself upon the still-moving little instrument. He inspected it savagely, desperately. His full red lips drew back in a snarl.

“How did you do it?” he cried shrilly. “You must tell me! I—I—I will kill you if you do not tell me!”

The blue-jowled man was watching Von Holtz. Now his lips twisted disgustedly. He turned to Tommy and narrowed his eyes.

“Look here,” he rumbled. “This fool’s no good! I want the secret of that trick you did. What’s your price?”

“I’m not for sale,” said Tommy, smiling faintly.

The blue-jowled man regarded him with level eyes.

“My name’s Jacaro,” he said after an instant. “Maybe you’ve heard of me. I’m from Chicago.”

Tommy smiled more widely.

“To be sure,” he admitted. “You were the man who introduced machine-guns into gang warfare, weren’t you? Your gunmen lined up half a dozen of the Buddy Haines gang against a wall and wiped

them out, I believe. What do you want this secret for?”

The level eyes narrowed. They looked suddenly deadly.

“That’s my business,” said Jacaro briefly. “You know who I am. And I want that trick y’did. I got my own reasons. I’ll pay for it. Plenty. You know I got plenty to pay, too. Or else—”

“What?”

“Something’ll happen to you,” said Jacaro briefly. “I ain’t sayin” what. But it’s damn likely you’ll tell what I want to know before it’s finished. Name your price and be damn quick!”

Tommy took his hand out of his pocket. He had a gun in it.

“The only possible answer to that,” he said suavely, “is to tell you to go to hell. Get out! But Von Holtz stays here. He’d better!”

Chapter 4

Within half an hour after Jacaro's leaving, Smithers was in the village, laying in a stock of supplies and sending telegrams that Tommy had written out for transmission. Tommy sat facing an ashen Von Holtz and told him pleasantly what would be done to him if he failed to make the metallic ammonium needed to repair the big solenoid. In an hour, Smithers was back, reporting that Jacaro was also sending telegrams but that he, Smithers, had stood over the telegraph operator until his own messages were transmitted. He brought back weapons, too—highly illegal things to have in New York State, where a citizen is only law-abiding when defenseless. And then four days of hectic, sleepless labor began.

On the first day one of Tommy's friends drove in in answer to a telegram. It was Peter Dalzell, with men in uniform apparently festooned about his car. He announced that a placard warning passersby of smallpox within, had been added to the decorative signs upon the gate, and stared incredulously at the interior of the big brick barn. Tommy grinned at him and gave him plans and specifications of a light steel globe in which two men might be transported into the fifth dimension by a suitably operating device. Tommy had sat up all night drawing those plans. He told Dalzell just enough of what he was up against to enlist Dalzell's enthusiastic cooperation without

permitting him to doubt Tommy's sanity. Dalzell had known Tommy as an amateur tennis player, but not as a scientist.

He marveled, refused to believe his eyes when he looked through the dimensoscope, and agreed that the whole thing had to be kept secret or the rescue expedition would be prevented from starting by the incarceration of both Tommy and Smithers in comfortable insane asylums. He feigned to admire Von Holtz, deathly white and nearly frantic with a corroding rage, and complimented Tommy on his taste for illegality. He even asked Von Holtz if he wanted to leave, and Von Holtz snarled insults at him. Von Holtz was beginning to work at the manufacture of metallic ammonium.

It was an electrolytic process, of course. Ordinarily, when—say—ammonium chloride is broken down by an electric current, ammonium is deposited at the cathode and instantly becomes a gas which dissolves in the water or bubbles up to the surface. With a mercury cathode, it is dissolved and becomes a metallic amalgam, which also breaks down into gas with much bubbling of the mercury. But Denham had worked out a way of delaying the breaking-down, which left him with a curiously white, spongy mass of metal which could be carefully melted down and cast, but not under any

circumstances violently struck or strained.

Von Holtz was working at that. On the second day he delivered, snarling, a small ingot of the white metal. He was imprisoned in the lean-to-shed in which the electrolysis went on. But Tommy had more than a suspicion that he was in communication with Jacaro.

“Of course,” he said drily to Smithers, who had expressed his doubts. “Jacaro had somebody sneak up and talk to him through the walls, or maybe through a bored hole. While there’s a hope of finding out what he wants to know through Von Holtz, Jacaro won’t try anything. Not anything rough, anyhow. We mustn’t be bumped off while what we are doing is in our heads alone. We’re safe enough —for a while.”

Smithers grumbled.

“We need that ammonium,” said Tommy, “and I don’t know how to make it. I bluffed that I could, and in time I might, but it would need time and meanwhile Denham needs us. Dalzell is going to send a plane over today, with word of when we can expect our own globe. We’ll try to have the big catapult ready when it comes. And the plane will drop some extra supplies. I’ve ordered a sub-machine gun. Handy when we get over there in the tree-fern forests. Right now,

though, we need to be watching….”

Because they were taking turns looking through the dimensoscope. For signs of Denham and Evelyn. And Tommy was finding himself thinking wholly unscientific thoughts about Evelyn, since a pretty girl in difficulties is of all possible things the one most likely to make a man romantic.

In the four days of their hardest working, he saw her three times. The globe was wrecked and ruined. Its glass was broken out and its interior ripped apart. It had been pillaged so exhaustively that there was no hope that whatever device had been included in its design, for its return, remained even repairably intact. That device had not worked, to be sure, but Tommy puzzled sometimes over the fact that he had seen no mechanical device of any sort in the plunder that had been brought out to be demolished. But he did not think of those things when he saw Evelyn.

The Ragged Men’s encampment was gone, but she and her father lingered furtively, still near the pillaged globe. The first day Tommy saw her, she was still blooming and alert. The second day she was paler. Her clothing was ripped and torn, as if by thorns. Denham had a great raw wound upon his forehead, and his coat was gone and half his shirt was in ribbons. Before Tommy’s eyes they killed a nameless

small animal with the trunchionlike weapon Evelyn carried. And Denham carted it triumphantly off into the shelter of the tree-fern forest. But to Tommy that shelter began to appear extremely dubious.

That same afternoon some of the Ragged Men came suspiciously to the globe and inspected it, and then vented a gibbering rage upon it with blows and curses. They seemed half-mad, these men. But then, all the Ragged Men seemed a shade less than sane. Their hatred for the Golden City seemed the dominant emotion of their existence.

And when they had gone, Tommy saw Denham peering cautiously from behind a screening mass of fern. And Denham looked sick at heart. His eyes lifted suddenly to the heavens, and he stared off into the distance again, and then he regarded the heavens again with an expression that was at once of the utmost wistfulness and the uttermost of despair.

Tommy swung the dimensoscope about and searched the skies of that other world. He saw the flying machine, and it was a swallow-winged device that moved swiftly, and now soared and swooped in abrupt short circles almost overhead. Tommy could see its pilot, leaning out to gaze downward. He was no more than a hundred feet up, almost at the height of the tree-fern tops. And the pilot was

moving too swiftly for Tommy to be able to focus accurately upon his face, but he could see him as a man, an indubitable man in no fashion distinguishable from the other men of this earth. He was scrutinizing the globe as well as he could without alighting.

He soared upward, suddenly, and his plane dwindled as it went toward the Golden City.

And then, inevitably, Tommy searched for the four Ragged Men who had inspected the globe a little while since. He saw them, capering horribly behind a screening of verdure. They did not shake their clenched fists at the flying machine. Instead, they seemed filled with a ghastly mirth. And suddenly they began to run frantically for the far distance, as if bearing news of infinite importance.

And when he looked back at Denham, it seemed to Tommy that he wrung his hands before he disappeared.

But that was the second day of the work upon our own world, and just before sunset there was a droning in the earthly sky above the laboratory, and Tommy ran out, and somebody shot at him from a patch of woodland a quarter of a mile away from the brick building. Isolated as Denham's place was, the shot would go unnoticed. The bullet passed within a few feet of Tommy, but he paid no attention. It

was one of Jacaro's watchers, no doubt, but Jacaro did not want Tommy killed. So Tommy waited until the plane swooped low—almost to the level of the laboratory roof—and a thickly padded package thudded to the ground. He picked it up and darted back into the laboratory as other bullets came from the patch of woodland.

"Funny," he said dryly to Smithers, inside the laboratory again; "they don't dare kill me—yet—and Von Holtz doesn't dare leave or refuse to do what I tell him to do; and yet they expect to lick us."

Smithers growled. Tommy was unpacking the wrapped package. A grim, blued-steel thing came out of much padding. Boxes tumbled after it.

"Sub-machine gun," said Tommy, "and ammunition. Jacaro and his little pals will try to get in here when they think we've got the big solenoid ready for use. They'll try to get it before we can use it. This will attend to them."

"An' get us in jail," said Smithers calmly, "for forty-'leven years."

"No," said Tommy, and grinned. "We'll be in the fifth dimension. Our job is to fling through the catapult all the stuff we'll need to make another catapult to fling us back again."

“It can’t be done,” said Smithers flatly.

“Maybe not,” agreed Tommy, “especially since we ruin all our springs and one gymbal ring every time we use the thing. But I’ve got an idea. I’ll want five coils with hollow iron cores, and the whole works shaped like this, with two holes bored so….”

He sketched. He had been working on the idea for several days, and the sketch was ready in his mind to be transferred to paper.

“What you goin’ to do?”

“Something crazy,” said Tommy. “A mirror isn’t the only thing that changes angles to right ones.”

“You’re the doctor,” said the imperturbable Smithers.

He set to work. He puzzled Tommy sometimes, Smithers did. So far he hadn’t asked how much his pay was going to be. He’d worked unintermittantly. He had displayed a colossal, a tremendous calmness. But no man could work as hard as Smithers did without some powerful driving-force. It was on the fourth day that Tommy learned what it was.

The five coils had been made, and Tommy was assembling them

with an extraordinary painstaking care behind a screen, to hide what he was doing. He'd discovered a peep-hole bored through the brick wall from the lean-to where Von Holtz worked. He was no longer locked in there. Tommy abandoned the pretense of imprisonment after finding an automatic pistol and a duplicate key to the lock in Von Holtz's possession. He'd had neither when he was theoretically locked up, and Tommy laughed.

"It's a farce, Von Holtz," he said dryly, "this pretending you'll run away. You're here spying now, for Jacaro. Of course. And you don't dare harm either of us until you find out from me what you can't work out for yourself, and know I have done. How much is Jacaro going to pay you for the secret of the catapult, Von Holtz?"

Von Holtz snarled. Smithers moved toward him, his hands closing and unclosing. Von Holtz went gray with terror.

"Talk!" said Smithers.

"A—a million dollars," said Von Holtz, cringing away from the brawny red-headed man.

"It would be interesting to know what use it would be to him," said Tommy dryly. "But to earn that million you have to learn what we

know. And to learn that, you have to help us do it again, on the scale we want. You won't run away. So I shan't bother to lock you up hereafter. Jacaro's men come and talk to you at night, don't they?"

Von Holtz cringed again. It was an admission.

"I don't want to have to kill any of them," said Tommy pleasantly, "and we'll all be classed as mad if this thing gets out. So you go and talk to them in the lane when you want to, Von Holtz. But if any of them come near the laboratory, Smithers and I will kill them, and if Smithers is hurt I'll kill you; and I don't imagine Jacaro wants that, because he expects you to build another catapult for him. But I warn you, if I find another gun on you I'll thrash you."

Von Holtz's pallor changed subtly from the pallor of fear to the awful lividness of rage.

"You—Gott! You dare threaten—" He choked upon his own fury.

"I do," said Tommy. "And I'll carry out the threat."

Smithers moved forward once more.

"Mr. Von Holtz," he said in a very terrible steadiness, "I aim to kill you some time. I ain't done it yet because Mr. Reames says he needs

you a while. But I know you got Miss Evelyn marooned off in them fern-woods on purpose! And—God knows she wouldn't ever look at me, but—I aim to kill you some time!"

His eyes were flames. His hands closed and unclosed horribly. Von Holtz gaped at him, shocked out of his fury into fear again. He went unsteadily back to his lean-to. And Smithers went back to the dimensoscope. It was his turn to watch that other world for signs of Denham and Evelyn, and for any sign of danger to them.

Tommy adjusted the screen before the bench on which he was working, so Von Holtz could not see his task, and went back to work. It was a rather intricate task he had undertaken, and before the events of the past few days he would have said it was insane. But now he was taking it quite casually.

Presently he said:

"Smithers."

Smithers did not look away from the brass tube.

"Yeah?"

"You're thinking more about Miss Denham than her father."

Smithers did not reply for a moment. Then he said:

“Well? What if I am?”

“I am, too,” said Tommy quietly. “I’ve never spoken to her, and I daresay she’s never even heard of me, and she certainly has never seen me, but—”

Smithers said with a vast calmness:

“She’ll never look at me, Mr. Reames. I know it. She talks to me, an’ laughs with me, but she’s never sure-’nough looked at me. An’ she never will. But I got the right to love her.”

Tommy nodded very gravely.

“Yes. You have. So have I. And so, when that globe comes, we both get into it with what arms and ammunition we can pack in, and go where she is, to help her. I intended to have you work the switch and send me off. But you can come, too.”

Smithers was silent. But he took his eyes from the dimensoscope eye-piece and regarded Tommy soberly. Then he nodded and turned back. And it was a compact between the two men that they should serve Evelyn, without any rivalry at all.

Tommy went on with his work. The essential defect in the catapult Denham had designed was the fact that it practically had to be rebuilt after each use. And, moreover, the metallic ammonium was so fugitive a substance that it was hard to keep. Once it had been strained by working, it gradually adverted to a gaseous state and was lost. And while he still tried to keep the little catapult in a condition for use, he was at no time sure that he could send a pair of automatics and ammunition through in a steel box at any moment that Denham came close enough to notice a burning smoke-fuse attached.

But he was working on another form of catapult entirely, now. In this case he was using hollow magnets placed at known angles to each other. And they were so designed that each one tended to adjust its own hollow bore at right angles to the preceding one, and each one would take any moving, magnetic object and swing it through four successive right angles into the fifth dimension.

He fitted the first magnet on twin rods of malleable copper, which also would carry the current which energized the coil. He threaded the second upon the same twin supports. When the current was passed through the two of them, the magnetic field itself twisted the magnets, bending the copper supports and placing the magnets in their proper relative positions. A third magnet on the same pair of

rods, and a repetition of the experiment, proved the accuracy of the idea. And since this device, like the dimensoscope, required only a forty-five degree angle to our known dimensions, instead of a right angle as the other catapult did, Tommy was able to work with ordinary and durable materials. He fitted on the last two coils and turned on the current for his final experiment. And as he watched, the twin three-eighths-inch rods twisted and writhed in the grip of the intangible magnetic force. They bent, and quivered, and twisted…. And suddenly there seemed to be a sort of inaudible *snap*, and one of the magnets hurt the eyes that looked at it, and only the edge of the last of the series was visible.

Tommy drew in his breath sharply. “Now we try it,” he said tensely. “I was trying to work this as the mirrors of the dimensoscope were fitted. Let’s see.”

He took a long piece of soft-iron wire and fed it into the hollow of the first magnet. He saw it come out and bend stiffly to enter the hollow of the second. It required force to thrust it through. It went still more stiffly into the third magnet. It required nearly all his strength to thrust it on, and on…. The end of it vanished. He pushed two feet or more of it beyond the last place where it was visible. It went into the magnet that hurt one’s eyes. After that it could not be seen.

Tommy's voice was strained.

"Swing the dimensoscope, Smithers," he ordered. "See if you can see the wire. The end of it should be in the other world."

It seemed an age, an aeon, that Smithers searched. Then:

"Move it," he said.

Tommy obeyed.

"It's there," said Smithers evenly. "Two or three feet of it."

Tommy drew a deep, swift breath of relief.

"All right!" he said crisply. "Now we can fling anything we need through there, when our globe arrives. We can built up a dump of supplies, all sent through just before we slide through in the globe."

"Yeah," said Smithers. "Uh—Mr. Reames. There's a bunch of Ragged Men in sight, hauling something heavy behind them. I don't know what it's all about."

Tommy went to the brass tube and stared through it. The tree-fern forest, drawing away in the distance. The vast and steaming morass.

The glittering city, far, far in the distance.

And then a mob of the Ragged Men, hauling at some heavy thing. They were a long way off. Some of them came capering on ahead, and Tommy swung the dimensoscope about to see Denham and Evelyn dart for cover and vanish amid the tree-ferns. Denham was as ragged as the Ragged Men, by now, and Evelyn's case was little better.

Frightened for them, Tommy swung the instrument about again. But they had not been seen. The leaders who ran gleefully on ahead were merely in haste. And they were followed more slowly by burly men and lean ones, whole men and limping men, who hauled frantically on long ropes of hide, dragging some heavy thing behind them. Tommy saw it only indistinctly as the filthy, nearly naked bodies moved. But it was an intricate device of a golden-colored metal, and it rested upon the crudest of possible carts. The wheels were sections of tree trunks, pierced for wooden axles. The cart itself was made of the most roughly-hewed of timbers. And there were fifty or more of the Ragged Men who dragged it.

The men in advance now attacked the underbrush at the edge of the forest. They worked with a maniacal energy, clearing away the long fern-fronds while they capered and danced and babbled excitedly.

Irrelevantly, Tommy thought of escaped galley slaves. Just such hard-bitten, vice-ridden men as these, and filled with just such a mad, gibbering hatred of the free men they had escaped from. Certainly these men had been civilized once. As the golden-metal device came nearer, its intricacy was the more apparent. No savages could utilize a device like this one. And there was a queer deadliness in the very grace of its outlines. It was a weapon of some sort, but whose nature Tommy could not even guess.

And then he caught the gleam of metal also in the fern-forest. On the ground. In glimpses and in fragments of glimpses between the swarming naked bodies of the Ragged Men, he pieced together a wholly incredible impression. There was a roadway skirting the edge of the forest. It was not wide; not more than fifteen feet at most. But it was a solid road-bed of metal! The dull silver-white of aluminum gleamed from the ground. Two or more inches thick and fifteen feet wide, there was a seamless ribbon of aluminum that vanished behind the tree-ferns on either side.

The intricate device of golden metal was set up, now, and a shaggy, savage-seeming man mounted beside it grinning. He manipulated its levers and wheels with an expert's assurance. And Tommy saw repairs upon it. Crude repairs, with crude materials, but expertly done. Done by the Ragged Men, past doubt, and so demolishing any

idea that they came of a savage race.

“Watch here, Smithers,” said Tommy grimly.

He sat to work upon the little catapult after Denham’s design. His own had seemed to work, but the other was more sure. This would be an ambush the Ragged Men were preparing, and of course they would be preparing it for men of the Golden City. The plane had sighted Denham’s steel globe. It had hovered overhead, and carried news of what it had seen to the Golden City. And here was a roadway that must have been made by the folk of the Golden City at some time or another. Its existence explained why Denham remained nearby. He had been hoping that some vehicle would travel along its length, containing civilized people to whom he could signal and ultimately explain his plight. And, being near the steel globe, his narrative would have its proofs at hand.

And now it was clear that the Ragged Men expected some ground-vehicle, too. They were preparing for it. They were setting a splendid ambush, with a highly-treasured weapon they ordinarily kept hidden. Their triumphant hatred could apply to nothing else than an expectation of inflicting injury on men of the Golden City.

So Tommy worked swiftly upon the catapult. A new little ring of

metallic ammonium was ready, and so were the necessary springs. The Ragged Men would lay their ambush. The men of the Golden City might enter it. They might. But the aviator who had spotted the globe would have seen the shredded contents of the sphere about. He would have known the Ragged Men had found it. And the men who came in a ground-vehicle from the Golden City should be expecting just such an ambush as was being laid.

There would be a fight, and Tommy, somehow, had no doubt that the men of the Golden City would win. And when they had cleared the field he would fling a smoking missile through the catapult. The victors should see it and should examine it. And though writing would serve little purpose, they should at least recognize it as written communication in a language other than their own. And mathematical diagrams would certainly be lucid, and proof of a civilized man sending the missile, and photographs….

The catapult was ready, and Tommy prepared his message-carrying projectile. He found snapshots and included them. He tore out a photograph of Evelyn and her father, which had been framed above a work bench in the laboratory. He labored, racking his brain for a means of conveying the information that the globe was of any other world…. And suddenly he had an idea. A cord attached to his missile would lead to nothingness from either world, yet one end would be

in that other world, and the other end in this. A wire would be better. Tugs upon it would convey the idea of living beings nearby but invisible. The photograph would identify Denham and his daughter as associated with the phenomenon and competent to explain it….

Tommy worked frantically to get the thing ready. He almost prayed that the men of the Golden City would be victors, would find his little missile when the fray was over, and would try to comprehend it….

All he could do was try.

Then Smithers said, from the dimensoscope:

“They’re all set, Mr. Reames. Y’better look.”

Tommy stared through the eye-piece. Strangely, the golden weapon had vanished. All seemed to be exactly as before. The cleared-away underbrush was replaced. Nothing was in any way changed from the normal in that space upon a mad world. But there was a tiny movement and Tommy saw a Ragged Man. He was lying prone upon the earth. He seemed either to hear or see something, because his lips moved as he spoke to another invisible man beside him, and his expression of malevolent joy was horrible.

Tommy swung the tube about. Nothing…. But suddenly he saw swiftly-moving winkings of sunlight from the edge of the tree-fern forest. Something was moving in there, moving with lightning swiftness along the fifteen-foot roadway of solid aluminum. It drew nearer, and more near….

The carefully camouflaged ambuscade was fully focussed and Tommy was watching tensely when the thing happened.

He saw glitterings through the tree-fronds come to a smoothly decelerated stop. There was a pause; and suddenly the underbrush fell flat. As if a single hand had smitten it, it wavered, drooped, and lay prone. The golden weapon was exposed, with its brawny and horribly grinning attendant. For one-half a split second Tommy saw the wheeled thing in which half a dozen men of the Golden City were riding. It was graceful and stream-lined and glittering. There was a platform on which the steel sphere would have been mounted for carrying away.

But then there was a sudden intolerable light as the men of the Golden City reached swiftly for peculiar weapons beside them. The light came from the crudely mounted weapon of the Ragged Men, and it was an unbearable actinic glare. For half a second, perhaps, it persisted, and died away to a red flame which leaped upward and

was not.

Then the vehicle from the Golden City was a smoking, twisted ruin. Four of the six men in it were blasted, blackened crisps. Another staggered to his feet, struggled to reach a weapon and could not lift it, and twitched a dagger from his belt and fell forward; and Tommy could see that his suicide was deliberate.

The last man, alone, was comparatively unharmed by the blast of light. He swept a pistol-like contrivance into sight. It bore swiftly upon the now surging, yelling horde of Ragged Men. And one—two—three of them seemed to scream convulsively before they were trampled under by the rest.

But suddenly there were a myriad little specks of red all over the body of the man at bay. The pistol-like thing dropped from his grasp as his whole hand became encrimsoned. And then he was buried beneath the hating, blood-lusting mob of the forest men.

Chapter 5

An hour later, Tommy took his eyes away from the dimensoscope eye-piece. He could not bear to look any longer.

“Why don’t they kill him?” he demanded sickly, filled with a horrible, a monstrous rage. “Oh, why don’t they kill him?”

He felt maddeningly impotent. In another world entirely, a mob of half-naked renegades had made a prisoner. He was not dead, that solely surviving man from the Golden City. He was bound, and the Ragged Men guarded him closely, and his guards were diverting themselves unspeakably by small tortures, minor tortures, horribly painful but not weakening. And they capered and howled with glee when the bound man writhed.

The prisoner was a brave man, though. Helpless as he was, he presently flung back his head and set his teeth. Sweat stood out in great droplets upon his body and upon his forehead. And he stilled his writhings, and looked at his captors with a grim and desperate defiance.

The guards made gestures which were all too clear, all too luridly descriptive of the manner of death which awaited him. And the man

of the Golden City was ashen and hopeless and utterly despairing—and yet defiant.

Smithers took Tommy's place at the eye-piece of the instrument. His nostrils quivered at what he saw. The vehicle from the Golden City was being plundered, of course. Weapons from the dead men were being squabbled over, even fought over. And the Ragged Men fought as madly among themselves as if in combat with their enemies. The big golden weapon on its cart was already being dragged away to its former hiding-place. And somehow, it was clear that those who dragged it away expected and demanded that the solitary prisoner not be killed until their return.

It was that prisoner, in the agony which was only the beginning of his death, who made Smithers' teeth set tightly.

"I don't see the Professor or Miss Evelyn," said Smithers in a vast calmness. "I hope to Gawd they—don't see this."

Tommy swung on his heel, staring and ashen.

"They were near," he said stridently. "I saw them! They saw what happened in the ambush! They'll—they'll see that man tortured!"

Smithers' hand closed and unclosed.

"Maybe the Professor'll have sense enough to take Miss Evelyn—uh—where she—can't hear," he said slowly, his voice level. "I hope so."

Tommy flung out his hands desperately.

"I want to help that man!" he cried savagely. "I want to do something! I saw what they promised to do to him. I want to—to kill him, even! It would be mercy!"

Smithers said, with a queer, stilly shock in his voice:

"I see the Professor now. He's got that gun-thing in his hand…. Miss Evelyn's urging him to try to do something…. He's looking at the sky…. It'll be a long time before it's dark…. He's gone back out of sight…."

"If we had some dynamite!" said Tommy desperately, "we could take a chance on blowing ourselves to bits and try to fling it through and into the middle of those devils…."

He was pacing up and down the laboratory, harrowed by the fate of that gray-faced man who awaited death by torture; filled with a wild

terror that Evelyn and her father would try to rescue him and be caught to share his fate; racked by his utter impotence to do more than watch….

Then Smithers said thickly:

“God!”

He stumbled away from the eye-piece. Tommy took his place, dry-throated with terror. He saw the Ragged Men laughing uproariously. The bearded man who was their leader was breaking the arms and legs of the prisoner so that he would be helpless when released from the stake to which he was bound. And if ever human beings looked like devils out of hell, it was at that moment. The method of breaking the bones was excruciating. The prisoner screamed. The Ragged Men rolled upon the ground in their maniacal mirth.

And then a man dropped, heaving convulsively, and then another, and still another…. The grim, gaunt figure of Denham came out of the tree-fern forest, the queer small golden-metal trunchion in his hand. A fourth man dropped before the Ragged Men quite realized what had happened. The fourth man himself was armed—and a flashing slender body came plunging from the forest and Evelyn flung herself upon the still-heaving body and plucked away that

weapon.

Tommy groaned, in the laboratory in another world. He could not look away, and yet it seemed that the heart would be torn from his body by that sight. Because the Ragged Men had turned upon Denham with a concentrated ferocity, somehow knowing instantly that he was more nearly akin to the men of the Golden City than to them. But at sight of Evelyn, her garments rent by the thorns of the forest, her white body gleaming through the largest tears, they seemed to go mad. And Tommy's eyes, glazing, saw the look on Denham's face as he realized that Evelyn had not fled, but had followed him in his desperate and wholly hopeless effort.

Then the swarming mass of Ragged Men surged over the two of them. Buried them under reaching, hating, lusting fiends who fought even among themselves to be first to seize them.

Then there was only madness, and Denham was bound beside the man of the Golden City, and Evelyn was the center of a fighting group which was suddenly flung aside by the bearded giant, and the encampment of the Ragged Men was bedlam. And somehow Tommy knew with a terrible clarity that a man of the Golden City to torture was bliss unimaginable to these half-mad enemies of that city. But a woman—

He turned from the instrument, three-quarters out of his head. He literally did not see Von Holtz gazing furtively in the doorway. His eyes were fixed and staring. It seemed that his brain would burst.

Then he heard his own voice saying with an altogether unbelievable steadiness:

“Smithers! They’ve got Evelyn. Get the sub-machine gun.”

Smithers cried out hoarsely. His face was not quite human, for an instant. But Tommy was bringing the work bench on which he had installed his magnetic catapult, close over by the dimensoscope.

“This cannot work,” he said in the same incredible calmness. “Not possibly. It should not work. It will not work. But it has to work!”

He was clamping the catapult to a piece of heavy timber.

“Put the gun so it shoots into the first magnet,” he said steadily. “The magnet-windings shouldn’t stand the current we’ve got to put into them. They’ve got to.”

Smithers’ fingers were trembling and unsteady. Tommy helped him, not looking through the dimensoscope at all.

“Start the dynamo,” he said evenly—and marveled foolishly at the voice that did not seem to belong to him at all, talking so steadily and so quietly. “Give me all the juice you’ve got. We’ll cut out this rheostat.”

He was tightening a vise which would hold the deadly little weapon in place while Smithers got the crude-oil engine going and accelerated it recklessly to its highest speed. Tommy flung the switch. Rubber insulation steamed and stank. He pulled the trigger of the little gun for a single shot. The bullet flew into the first hollow magnet, just as he had beforehand thrust an iron wire. It vanished. The series of magnets seemed unharmed.

With a peculiar, dreamlike steadiness, Tommy put his hand where an undeflected bullet would go through it. He pressed the trigger again. He felt a tiny breeze upon his hand. But the bullet had been unable to elude the compound-wound magnets, each of which now had quite four times the designed voltage impressed upon its coils.

Tommy flung off the switch.

“Work the gun,” he ordered harshly. “When I say fire, send a burst of shots through it. Keep the switch off except when you’re actually firing, so—God willing—the coils don’t burn out. Fire!”

He was gazing through the dimensoscope. Evelyn was struggling helplessly while two Ragged Men held her arms, grinning as only devils could have grinned, and others squabbled and watched with a fascinated attention some cryptic process which could only be the drawing of lots….

Tommy saw, and paid no attention. The machine-gun beside him rasped suddenly. He saw a tree-fern frond shudder. He saw a gaping, irregular hole where a fresh frond was uncurling. Tommy put out his hand to the gun.

“Let me move it, bench and all,” he said steadily. “Now try it again. Just a burst.”

Again the gun rasped. And the earth was kicked up suddenly where the bullets struck in that other world. The little steel-jacketed missiles were deflected by the terribly overstrained magnets of the catapult, but their energy was not destroyed. It was merely altered in direction. Fired within the laboratory upon our own and normal world, the bullets came out into the world of tree-ferns and monstrous things. They came out, as it happened, sideways instead of point first, which was due to some queer effect of dimension change upon an object moving at high velocity. Because of that, they ricocheted much more readily, and where they struck they made a

much more ghastly wound. But the first two bursts caused no effect at all. They were not even noticed by the Ragged Men. The noise of the little gun was thunderous and snarling in the laboratory, but in the world of the fifth dimension there was no sound at all.

“Like this,” said Tommy steadily. “Just like this…. Now fire!”

He had tilted the muzzle upward. And then with a horrible grim intensity he traversed the gun as it roared.

And it was butchery. Three Ragged Men were cut literally to bits before the storm of bullets began to do real damage. The squabbling group, casting lots for Evelyn, had a swathe of dead men in its midst before snarls begun had been completed.

“Again,” said Tommy coldly. “Again, Smithers, again!”

And again the little gun roared. The burly bearded man clutched at his throat—and it was a gory horror. A Thing began to run insanely. It did not even look human any longer. It stumbled over the leader of the Ragged Men and died as he had done. The bullets came tumbling over themselves erratically. They swooped and curved and dispersed themselves crazily. Spinning as they were, at right angles to their line of flight, their trajectories were incalculable and their impacts

were grisly.

The little gun fired ten several bursts, aimed in a desperate cold-bloodedness, before the smell of burnt rubber became suddenly overpowering and the rasping sound of an electric arc broke through the rumbling of the crude-oil engine in the back.

Smithers sobbed.

“Burnt out!”

But Tommy waved his hand.

“I think,” he said savagely, “that maybe a dozen of them got away. Evelyn’s staggering toward her father. She’ll turn him loose. That prisoner’s dead, though. Didn’t mean to shoot him, but those bullets flew wild.”

He gave Smithers the eye-piece. Sweat was rolling down his forehead in great drops. His hands were trembling uncontrollably.

He paced shakenly up and down the laboratory, trying to shut out of his own sight the things he had seen when the bullets of his own aiming literally splashed into the living flesh of men. He had seen Ragged Men disemboweled by those spinning, knifelike projectiles.

He had turned a part of the mad world of that other dimension into a shambles, and he did not regret it because he had saved Evelyn, but he wanted to shut out the horror of seeing what he had done.

“But now,” he said uncertainly to himself, “they’re no better off, except they’ve got weapons…. If that man from the Golden City hadn’t been killed….”

He was looking at the magnetic catapult, burned out and useless. His eyes swung suddenly to the other one. Just a little while since he had made ready a missile to be thrown through into the other world by that. It contained snapshots, and diagrams, and it was an attempt to communicate with the men of the Golden City without any knowledge of their language.

“But—I can communicate with Denham!”

He began to write feverishly. If he had looked out of the laboratory window, he would have seen Von Holtz running like a deer, waving his arms jerkily, and—when out of earshot of the laboratory—shouting loudly. And Von Holtz was carrying a small black box which Tommy would have identified instantly as a motion picture camera, built for amateurs but capable of taking pictures indoors and with a surprisingly small amount of light. And if Tommy had

listened, he might possibly have heard the beginnings of those shoutings to men hidden in a patch of woodland about a quarter of a mile away. The men, of course, were Jacaro's, waiting until either Von Holtz had secured the information that was wanted, or until an assault in force upon the laboratory would net them a catapult ready for use—to be examined, photographed, and duplicated at leisure.

But Tommy neither looked nor listened. He wrote feverishly, saying to Smithers at the dimensoscope:

"Denham'll be looking around to see what killed those men. When he does, we want to be ready to shoot a smoke-bomb through to him, with a message attached."

Smithers made a gesture of no especial meaning save that he had heard. And Tommy went on writing swiftly, saying who he was and what he had done, and that another globe was being built so that he and Smithers could come with supplies and arms to help….

"He's lookin" around now, Mr. Reames," said Smithers quietly. "He's picked up a ricocheted bullet an' is staring at it."

The crude-oil engine was running at a thunderous rate. Tommy fastened his note in the little missile he had made ready. He placed it

under the solenoid of the catapult after Denham's design, with the springs and rings of metallic ammonium. He turned to Smithers.

"I'll watch for him," said Tommy unsteadily. "You know, watch for the right moment to fling it through. Slow up the generator a little. It'll rack itself to pieces."

He put his eye to the eye-piece. He winced as he saw again what the bullets of his aiming had done. But he saw Denham almost at once. And Denham was scratched and bruised and looked very far indeed from the ideal of a professor of theoretic physics, with hardly more than a few shreds of clothing left upon him, and a ten-day's beard upon his face. He limped as he walked. But he had stopped in the task of gathering up weapons to show Evelyn excitedly what it was that he had found. A spent and battered bullet, but indubitably a bullet from the world of his own ken. He began to stare about him, hopeful yet incredulous.

Tommy took his eye from the dimensoscope just long enough to light the fuse of the smoke-bomb.

"Here it goes, Smithers!"

He flung the switch. The missile with its thickly smoking fuse

leaped upward as the concentric rings flickered and whirled bewilderingly. The missile hurt the eyes that watched it. It vanished. The solenoid dropped to the floor from the broken small contrivance.

Then Tommy's heart stood still as he gazed through the eye-piece again. He could see nothing but an opaque milkiness. But it drifted away, and he realised that it was smoke. More, Denham was staring at it. More yet, he was moving cautiously towards its source, one of the strange golden weapons held ready….

Denham was investigating.

The generator at the back of the laboratory slowed down. Smithers was obeying orders. Tommy hung close by the vision instrument, his hands moving vaguely and helplessly, as one makes gestures without volition when anxious for someone else to duplicate the movements for which he sets the example.

He saw Denham, very near, inspecting the smoking thing on the ground suspiciously. The smoke-fuse ceased to burn. Denham stared. After an age-long delay, he picked up the missile Tommy had prepared. And Tommy saw that there was a cord attached to it. He

had fastened that cord when planning to try to communicate with the men of the Golden City, when he had expected them to be victorious.

But he saw Denham's face light up with pathetic hope. He called to Evelyn. He hobbled excitedly to her, babbling….

Tommy watched, and his heart pounded suddenly as Evelyn turned and smiled in the direction in which she knew the dimensoscope must be. A huge butterfly, its wings a full yard across, fluttered past her head. Denham talked excitedly to her. A clumsy batlike thing swooped by overhead. Its shadow blanketed her face for an instant. A running animal, small and long, ran swiftly in full view from one side of the dimensoscope's field of vision to the other. Then a snake, curiously horned, went writhing past….

Denham talked excitedly. He turned and made gestures as of writing, toward the spot where he had picked up Tommy's message. He began to search for a charred stick where the Ragged Men had built a fire some days now past. A fleeing furry thing sped across his feet, running….

Denham looked up. And Evelyn was staring now. She was staring in the direction of the Golden City. And now what was almost a wave

of animals, all wild and all fleeing, swept across the field of vision of the dimensoscope. There were gazelles, it seemed—slender-limbed, graceful animals, at any rate—and there were tiny hoofed things which might have been eohippi, and then a monstrous armadillo clanked and rattled past….

Tommy swung the dimensoscope. He gasped. All the animal world was in flight. The insects had taken to wing. Flying creatures were soaring upward and streaking through the clear blue sky, and all in the one direction. And then out of the morass came monstrous shapes; misshapen, unbelievable reptilian shapes, which fled bellowing thunderously for the tree-fern forest. They were gigantic, those things from the morass. They were hideous. They were things out of nightmares, made into flabby flesh. There were lizards and what might have been gigantic frogs, save that frogs possess no tails. And there were long and snaky necks terminating in infinitesimal heads, and vast palpitating bodies following those impossible small brain-cases, and long tapering tails that thrashed mightily as the ghastly things fled bellowing….

And the cause of the mad panic was a slowly moving white curtain of mist. It was flowing over the marsh, moving with apparent deliberation, but, as Tommy saw, actually very swiftly. It shimmered and quivered and moved onward steadily. Its upper surface gleamed

with elusive prismatic colors. It had blotted out the horizon and the Golden City, and it came onward….

Denham made frantic, despairing gestures toward the dimensoscope. The thing was coming too fast. There was no time to write. Denham held high the cord that trailed from the message-bearing missile. He gesticulated frantically, and raced to the gutted steel globe and heaved mightily upon it and swung it about so that Tommy saw a great steel ring set in its side, which had been hidden before. He made more gestures, urgently, and motioned Evelyn inside.

Tommy struck at his forehead.

“It’s poison gas,” he muttered. “Revenge for the smashed-up vehicle…. They knew it by an automatic radio signal, maybe. This is their way of wiping out the Ragged Men…. Poison gas…. It’ll kill Denham and Evelyn…. He wants me to do something….”

He drew back, staring, straining every nerve to think…. And somehow his eyes were drawn to the back of the laboratory and he saw Smithers teetering on his feet, with his hands clasped queerly to his body, and a strange man standing in the door of the laboratory with an automatic pistol in his hand. The automatic had a silencer on it, and its clicking had been drowned out, anyhow, by the roaring of

the crude-oil engine.

The man was small and dark and natty. His lips were drawn back in a peculiar mirthless grin as Smithers teetered stupidly back and forth and then fell….

The explosion of Tommy's own revolver astounded him as much as it did Jacaro's gunman. He did not ever remember drawing it or aiming. The natty little gunman was blotted out by a spouting mass of white smoke—and suddenly Tommy knew what it was that Denham wanted him to do.

There was rope in a loose and untidy coil beneath a work bench. Tommy sprang to it in a queer, nightmarish activity. He knew what was happening, of course. Von Holtz had seen the magnetic catapult at work. That couldn't be destroyed or its workings hidden like the ring catapult of Denham's design. He'd gone out to call in Jacaro's men. And they'd shot down Smithers as a cold-blooded preliminary to the seizure of the instrument Jacaro wanted.

It was necessary to defend the laboratory. But Tommy could not spare the time. That white mist was moving upon Evelyn and her father, in that other world. It was death, as the terror of the wild things demonstrated. They had to be helped….

He knotted the rope to the end of the cord that vanished curiously somewhere among the useless mass of rings. He tugged at the cord—and it was tugged in return. Denham, in another world, had felt his signal and had replied to it….

A window smashed suddenly and a bullet missed Tommy's neck by inches. He fired at that window, and absorbedly guided the knot of the rope past its vanishing point. The knot ceased to exist and the rope crept onward—and suddenly moved more and more swiftly to a place where abruptly it was not. For the length of half an inch, the rope hurt the eyes that looked at it. Beyond that it was not possible to see it at all.

Tommy leaped up. He plunged ahead of two separate spurts of shots from two separate windows. The shots pierced the place where he had been. He was racing for the crude-oil engine. There was a chain wound upon a drum, there, and a clutch attached the drum to the engine.

He stopped and seized the repeating shotgun Smithers had brought as his own weapon against Jacaro's gangsters. He sent four loads of buckshot at the windows of the laboratory. A man yelled.

And Tommy had dropped the gun to knot the rope to the chain,

desperately, fiercely, in a terrible haste.

The chain began to pay out to that peculiar vanishing point which was here an entry-way to another world—perhaps another universe.

A bullet nicked his ribs. He picked up the gun and fired it nearly at random. He saw Smithers moving feebly, and Tommy had a vast compassion for Smithers, but— He shuddered suddenly. Something had struck him a heavy blow in the shoulder. And something else battered at his leg. There was no sound that could be heard above the thunder of the crude-oil motor, but Tommy, was queerly aware of buzzing things flying about him, and of something very warm flowing down his body and down his leg. And he felt very dizzy and weak and extremely tired…. He could not see clearly, either.

But he had to wait until Denham had the chain fast to the globe. That was the way he had intended to come back, of course. The ring was in the globe, and this chain was in the laboratory to haul the globe back from wherever it had been sent. And Von Holtz had disconnected it before sending away the globe with Denham in it. If the chain remained unbroken, of course it could be hauled in, as it would turn all necessary angles and force the globe to follow those angles, whatever they might be….

Tommy was on his hands and knees, and men were saying savagely:

“Where’s that thing, hey? Where’s th’ thing Jacaro wants?”

He wanted to tell them that they should say if the chain had stopped moving to a place where it ceased to exist, so that he could throw a clutch and bring Denham and his daughter back from the place where Von Holtz had marooned them when he wanted to steal Denham’s secret. Tommy wanted to explain that. But the floor struck him in the face, and something said to him:

“They’ve shot you.”

But it did not seem to matter, somehow, and he lay very still until he felt himself strangling, and he was breathing in strong ammonia which made his eyes smart and his tired lungs gasp.

Then he saw flames, and heard a motor car roaring away from close by the laboratory.

“They’ve stolen the catapult and set fire to the place,” he remembered dizzily, “and now they’re skipping out….”

Even that did not seem to matter. But then he heard the chain clank, next to him on the floor. The white mist! Denham and Evelyn

waiting for the white mist to reach them, and Denham jerking desperately on the chain to signal that he was ready….

The flames had released ammonia from the metal Von Holtz had made. That had roused Tommy. But it did not give him strength. It is impossible to say where Tommy's strength came from, when somehow he crawled to the clutch lever, with the engine roaring steadily above him, and got one hand on the lever, and edged himself up, and up, and up, until he could swing his whole weight on that lever. That instant of dangling hurt excruciatingly, too, and Tommy saw only that the drum began to revolve swiftly, winding the chain upon it, before his grip gave way.

And the chain came winding in and in from nowhere, and the tall laboratory filled more and more thickly with smoke, and lurid flames appeared somewhere, and a rushing sound began to be audible as the fire roared upward to the inflammable roof, and the engine ran thunderously….

Then, suddenly, there was a shape in the middle of the laboratory floor. A huge globular shape which it hurt the eyes to look upon. It became visible out of nowhere as if evoked by magic amid the flames of hell. But it came, and was solid and substantial, and it slid along the floor upon small wheels until it wound up with a crash

against the winding drum, and the chain shrieked as it tightened unbearably—and the engine choked and died.

Then a door opened in the monstrous globe. Two figures leaped out, aghast. Two ragged, tattered, strangely-armed figures, who cried out to each other and started for the door. But the girl stumbled over Tommy and called, choking, to her father. Groping toward her, he found Smithers. And then Tommy smiled drowsily to himself as soft arms tugged bravely at him, and a slender, glorious figure staggered with him to fresh air.

“It’s Von Holtz,” snapped Denham, and coughed as he fought his way to the open. “I’ll blast him to hell with these things we brought back….”

That was the last thing Tommy knew until he woke up in bed with a feeling of many bandages and an impression that his lungs hurt.

Denham seemed to have heard him move. He looked in the door.

“Hullo, Reames. You’re all right now.”

Tommy regarded him curiously until he realized. Denham was shaved and fully clothed. That was the strangeness about him.

Tommy had been watching him for many days as his clothing swiftly deteriorated and his beard grew.

“You are, too, I see,” he said weakly. “I’m damned glad.” Then he felt foolish, and querulous, and as if he should make some apology, and instead said, “But five dimensions does seem extreme. Three is enough for ordinary use, and four is luxurious. Five seems to be going a bit too far.”

Denham blinked, and then grinned suddenly. Tommy had admired the man who could face so extraordinary a situation with such dogged courage, and now he found, suddenly, that he liked Denham.

“Not too far,” said Denham grimly. “Look!” He held up one of the weapons Tommy had seen in that other world, one of the golden-colored truncheons. “I brought this back. The same metal they built that wagon of theirs with. All their weapons. Most of their tools—as I know. It’s gold, man! They use gold in that world as we use steel here. That’s why Jacaro was ready to kill to get the secret of getting there. Von Holtz enlisted him.”

“How did you know—” began Tommy weakly.

“Smithers,” said Denham. “We dragged both of you out before the

lab went-up in smoke. He's going to be all right, too. Evelyn's nursing both of you. She wants to talk to you, but I want to say this first: You did a damned fine thing, Reames! The only man who could have saved us, and you just about killed yourself doing it. Smithers saw you swing that clutch lever with three bullets in your body. And you're a scientist, too. You're my partner, Reames, in what we do in the fifth dimension."

Tommy blinked. "But five dimensions does seem extreme…."

"We are the Interdimensional Trading Company," said Denham, smiling. "Somehow, I think we'll find something in this world we can trade for the gold in that. And we've got to get there, Reames, because Jacaro will surely try to make use of that catapult principle you worked out. He'll raise the devil; and I think the people of that Golden City would be worth knowing. No, we're partners. Sooner or later, you'll know how I feel about what you've done. I'm going to bring Evelyn in here now."

He vanished. An instant later Tommy heard a voice—a girl's voice. His heart began to pound. Denham came back into the room and with him was Evelyn. She smiled warmly upon Tommy, though as his eyes fell blankly upon the smart sport clothes she was again wearing, she flushed.

“My daughter Evelyn,” said Denham. “She wants to thank you.”

And Tommy felt a warm soft hand pressing his, and he looked deep into the eyes of the girl he had never before spoken to, but for whom he had risked his life, and whom he knew he would love forever. There were a thousand things crowding to his lips for utterance. He had watched Evelyn, and he loved her—

“H-how do you do?” said Tommy, lamely. “I’m—awfully glad to meet you.”

But before he was well he learned to talk more sensibly.

February 1931

69 Werewolves of War, by Desmond Winter Hall

The story of the "Torpedo Plan" and of Capt. Lance's heroic part in America's last mighty battle with the United Slavs.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Under the mesh of his gas-mask the lean lines of his jaw went taut. Tense, steely fingers flipped to the knobbed control instruments; the gleaming single-seater scout plane catapulted in a screaming somersault. Lance's ever-wary sixth sense told him the tongues of disintegrating flame had licked the plane's protected belly, and for the fact that it was protected he thanked again his stupendous luck. He pulled savagely at the squat control stick; the four Rahl-Diesels unleashed a torrent of power; and the slim scout rose like a comet, and hurtled, the altitude dial's nervous finger proclaimed, to ten thousand feet. Lance eased off the power, relaxed slightly, and

glanced below.

They'd started off a squadron of fifteen planes. Thirteen had crumpled beneath that treacherous, stabbing curtain of disintegrating flame. Only two of them were left—he and Praed.

Praed, of course!

The fellow's plane was pirouetting nearby. Lance was the squadron leader. He jammed his thin-lipped mouth close to the "mike" and rasped:

"They trapped us again! There's some damn spy at our base. Stand by, Praed! They'll send up a few men to wipe us out, too ... and we're goin' to square the account!"

He listened for Praed's answer. Presently it came.

"I can't! They got two of my motors. I'm limping badly. We'd better beat it while we can."

Lance's mouth curled. He roared:

"Go on, then, beat it! But I'm goin' to take a couple of 'em, anyway." Disgusted, filled with red anger, he flung the phones from his head,

watched Praed's plane whirl its stubby nose for home, settled himself alertly in the low, padded seat and concentrated his attention on the ground below.

He'd been right. Tiny, gray-clad figures were pouring from their barracks, rushing madly towards the dozen or so planes neatly drawn up on the field. Lance's mouth twitched. They probably wondered, down there, why the devil he didn't beat it—like Praed! He stroked the lever which controlled his five gas bombs, centered his battery of incendiary-bullet machine-guns and ruthlessly shoved the control stick full over.

The Rahl-Diesels pumped at full power; his plane plummetted downwards with the speed of light, a hurtling shell of steel. His unexpected move took the men below by surprise. Lance knew they needed at least ten minutes to prepare another salvo of disintegrating flame; he had about four minutes left.

There was a restless, thudding chatter, and his bullets began to mow them down.

Lance could see the horrified expressions of the men beneath, and chuckled grimly as they sought to escape the wrath of his hot guns. He flung bursts of spouting, acid-filled lead at the defenseless

planes, and saw two of them collapse in shrouds of acrid white smoke. And still he dove.

At a bare one hundred feet he tugged the control stick back, and the tiny scout groaned under the pull of her motors. Then her snout jolted upwards. Lance pounded the gas bomb lever, and smiled a tight smile as he sensed the five pills sloping down from their compartment in the scout's belly.

A second later came a rolling, ear-numbing crash. Lance, safe at a perch of a few thousand feet, grinned as his narrowed eyes beheld the sticky curtain of death-crammed gas hug over the enemy base.

"That'll quiet 'em for a few minutes!" he muttered savagely.

A few minutes—but not more. And he had no more bombs; his ammunition belts were nearly depleted. "I guess," he murmured, "I'd better follow that quitter, Praed. I've paid 'em for the boys they got, anyway!"

He levelled the plane out, threw a last glance at the carpet of gas he had laid, and spurred the purring Rahl-Diesels to their limit. His speed dial flashed round to five hundred, five-fifty—seventy—and finally rested, quivering, at the scout's full six hundred miles per

hour.

Under the streamlined plane's speeding body the gnarled, bomb-torn terrain of Nevada hurtled by. A rather sad frown creased Lance's prematurely old brow as he glimpsed it. Thousands of lives had been thrown into that ground; the hot, tumbled waste was doused with freely-sacrificed blood, the blood of whole regiments of America's heroic First Home Army. Martyred men! Lance couldn't help swearing to himself at the bitter thought of that terrible reckoning day. It was the price his country had paid for her continued ignoring of the festering peril overseas. Slaughtered like sheep, those glorious regiments had been! Helpless, almost, before the ultra-modern war weapons of the United Slav hordes, they'd stopped the numbingly quick advance merely by the weight of their bodies. Like little Belgium, in 1914. They'd held the Slavs to California, ravished, war-desolated California.

The thin front-line trenches far behind, Lance began a slanting dive that raised his speed well over six hundred. Through the front magnifying mirror he spied the squat khaki buildings of his base. Werewolves of War, the batch of planes he belonged to had been christened, and it was a richly deserved title. In front of the front they fought, detailed to desperate, harrying missions, losing an average of ten men a day. The ordeal of gas and fire and acid bullets

added five years to a man's brow overnight—if he served with the Werewolves of War.

Lance was only twenty-four, but his hair was splotched with dead gray strands; his eyes were hard and weary; his face lined with new wrinkles. Ah, well, it was war—and a losing war, he had to admit, that they fought. If a miracle didn't come, America would crumble even as old Europe had, before the overwhelming Slavish troops.

Even now, as Lance knew through various rumors, the Slavs were massed for a grand attack. And with what could America hold them back?

His helicopter props spun, and the scout nestled down lightly on the tarmac. Lance switched off the faithful Rahl-Diesels, swung open the tiny door and leaped from the enclosed cockpit.

"Sir," he rapped to thin, stern-browed Colonel Douglas, "there's no longer any doubt in my mind. This is the fifth time we've been anticipated—trapped! The enemy is informed directly of the attacking plans of our scout details. There's a spy at this base!" He lowered his eyes for a second and said in a queer tone of voice: "Thirteen of 'em went down to-day."

Colonel Douglas' tired face showed the never-ceasing strain he was under. He clasped hands behind his back, took a few nervous turns up and down the small office and finally, with a somewhat hopeless sigh, muttered:

"I know, Lance, I know. The devils! They seem to be aware of everything we plan. Yet what can we do? Look at the territory our front lines cover! More than two thousand miles of loosely held ground. And we're so damnably organized, man! Look here!"

He strode to the huge map which covered entirely one wall of the little room and ran his forefinger down the long red line, signifying the American front, which stretched crookedly from the Canadian border to the Gulf of California. Parallel to it was another line, of black—the United Slavs.

"It's so damned easy," Colonel Douglas said, "for a spy to slip over." He sighed again. "I fought in the scrap of 1917 as a kid of twenty; it was different then. But this is 1938, and it's a scientific war we're trying to fight." He sat down in his swivel chair. "How—how did they wipe you out to-day?"

"That blasted disintegrating flame again," Lance told him swiftly. "It's obvious, Colonel: how did the Slavs know we were going to

raid that comparatively unimportant base of theirs at such and such a time? They had the flame shooters all ready for us—and at a place where they've never had them before! We came up at twenty-five thousand feet, dropped down in a full power dive, and"—he gestured widely—"biff! The flames caught us neatly at the regulation thousand feet. They got thirteen men. Only two got away, Praed and myself." His keen eyes were inquiring, and the colonel interpreted their look correctly.

"Praed," he murmured. "Yes, I saw him come back, by himself. He said you were following. Two of his motors were shot. He seems to bear a charmed life, doesn't he?"

Lance nodded. He didn't like to hint at the thought he had in mind. It seemed a cowardly, stab-in-the-back thing to do. Yet it was duty, and there was no questioning duty.

"I've never seen Praed shoot down an enemy plane," he said slowly. "This is the fifth time we've been ambushed—and Praed's never been caught. Somehow, he's always seemed to be aware of what was coming."

"You mean—?" the colonel questioned.

Lance shook his head. "I don't want to commit myself, Colonel Douglas, but—I'm suggesting that we—well—keep our eyes peeled, and perhaps watch certain members of the outfit more closely."

Douglas rose as his orderly, Ranth, came into the room. "Find Lieutenant Praed for me," the colonel ordered crisply. Then, turning to Lance, he said: "You'd better knock off a few hours' sleep. You are worn out."

Lance watched the orderly, Ranth, salute and leave. Ranth was heavy, thick-built, with closely set eyes. The young squadron leader was suddenly conscious that he was, as the colonel said, worn out; his limbs seemed leaden, his eyelids heavy. "I think you're right, sir," he murmured, and walked out onto the field.

Seeing Praed's machine drawn up with the overall-clad figure of a mechanic fussing at its motors, he wandered over to survey it. The scout was an exact replica of his, a model of the famous Goshawk type. It was all motor—everything being sacrificed to speed. On either side of the stubby brow of the fuselage, which held the death-dealing battery of three machine-guns, were set the four Rahl-Diesel motors, back to back. The pilot's tiny enclosed cockpit was thus surrounded by engines. In the V-shaped, smooth-lined wings were the two helicopter props; further back, inside the steel-sheathed,

bullet-like fuselage, the radio outfit and fuel tanks. The craft's rounded belly covered the gas bomb compartment.

The mechanic was a little cockney Englishman, a fugitive, like all his countrymen, from the horror which had stricken England suddenly and left her wallowing in her life blood. He looked up at Lance, and a smile broke forth on his wizened, sharp little face.

"It's got me beat, sir," he said in his curious, twanging voice. "Lieutenant Praed, 'e sez to me, 'Somethin' wrong with two of me motors,' 'e sez. 'They quit on me quite sudden like. Look 'em over, will you?' 'e sez. So I been lookin' 'em over. But they ain't nothin' wrong with the bloody things, sir—nothin' at all!"

"It does seem funny, doesn't it, Wells?" Lance said levelly. He'd known it all along. Praed was a quitter—a yellow-belly—besides being—But he stopped there. He had no definite proof. It was unjust to accuse a man of *that* without definite, positive proof.

The little mechanic muttered some mysterious cockney curse, and then said, in an admiring tone:

"'Ow many of the swines' planes 'ave you shot down now, sir?"

"About twenty, I think," Lance told him gruffly. The cockney shot his breath out with a whistle.

"Cripes! You'll be up to that there Captain Hay soon if you keeps it up, sir!"

Lance laughed. Hay, the almost legendary hero of the American Air Force—who had shot down, so latest rumors said, fifty Slav planes—was far above him. "I'll never reach Hay's record, Wells. I'll be doing pretty well if I bag half as many!" Then, seeing Ranth, the orderly, followed by Praed, he strode quickly away and came face to face with the latter.

For a moment the two men eyed each other, a taut silence between them. Praed's thin, sun-blackened countenance was immovable, masklike. His blue-green eyes met Lance's steadily. Finally Lance snorted and burst out:

"Why the hell did you run away, Praed? Scared stiff?"

Praed's low voice, devoid of all trace of emotion, asked: "What makes you think I was scared, Lance?"

"You know damn well what makes me think it! That lousy crack

about your motors being shot!"

"Two of my motors were limping."

Lance gave a sarcastic chuckle. "Ask Wells about that, why don't you? He's got a few ideas on the subject."

Praed repeated: "Two of my motors were limping," and abruptly he turned away, leaving Lance fuming, and went into Colonel Douglas' office.

What would Douglas say to him? Accuse him outright of his suspicions? Put him under arrest as a spy? But he couldn't do that: there was, after all, no proof. Lance swore to himself; then, feeling a wave of weariness surge over him, went to the shack he was quartered in, kicked off his battered boots, stripped away his Sam Browne, and flung his lean body out on the hard, gray-sheeted cot. Seconds later he was lost in the sleep that comes to the physically exhausted. The desperate situation America was in, the whole savage war—everything, faded from his mind.

But to right and left of that cot stretched others—empty. The brave squadron Lance had led into the blue sky that morning now lay charred skeletons around the flame-throwers that had struck them

down.

And in a dozen other aircraft bases behind the hard pressed lines were other empty cots. Time and time again the Slav planes shot down two to the Americans' one; time and time again the treacherous disintegrating flames—the weapon which baffled America's scientists—had struck down whole squadrons that had been lured into traps, even as Lance's had been lured.

And even the Slav forces pushed forward....

Part 2

“You're wanted by Colonel Douglas, sir."

Lance felt a hand jarring his shoulder; he turned sleepily over, yawned, and stared up into the dark, full-cheeked face of Ranth, the orderly.

"Huh?"

"Colonel Douglas wants you," repeated Ranth. "It's five o'clock, sir."

Wearily Lance pulled on his boots and adjusted the military belt. The night was hot and sticky; somewhere, miles to the rear of the base, the batteries of long-distance guns were beginning their nightly serenade. Lance followed the orderly's broad, chunky back to the colonel's office.

The colonel gazed up with tired eyes from the welter of maps on his desk.

"Lance," he said, "I'm changing the routine of the night patrol. A fresh batch of youngsters came in this afternoon to fill the empty files; two dozen new planes arrived by transport, too. I'm sending ten of them over for the night patrol; Stephens will take your place. I've

got another errand for you—and Praed."

Lance was conscious that Ranth was standing quietly behind the colonel's chair. Douglas ordered him to attend to some errand and the orderly left.

"I had an interview with Praed," the colonel went on. "I didn't exactly accuse him of anything definite, but I think I threw a bit of a scare into him. To-night we'll give him the acid test.

"You and he will fly over to-night to investigate Hill 333. There have been rumors that the Slavs are massing there, and we want positive information. There's sure to be a fight. Watch Praed carefully. If he steers clear of any scrapping, well have enough to court-martial him on. Understand?"

Lance nodded.

"Right. It's a dangerous errand, Lance, but I'm confident you'll come through, as always. There's no one else who could handle the job. God, man, you're getting close to Hay's record! You'll be the top-notcher of the service soon!"

The young man laughed briefly. "No danger of that. When do we

take off, sir?"

Douglas consulted his watch. "Seven-fifteen. Come and get the dope from these maps. Hill 333's rather difficult to find."

"Anything been happening at the front, sir?"

The colonel passed both fine-fingered hands over his lined face. He said quietly: "Yes. The Slavs took twenty-five miles from us down in the lower sector. Just wiped our boys out. Those damnable flame-throwers and bullet-proof tanks, supported by God knows how many hundreds of planes. It's hell, Lance! Headquarters thinks they're going to unleash a general attack all along the line in the next few days. And our resources—well, our back's against the wall. We're coming to death grips, man."

Seven-fifteen....

Lance pressed the starting button. His four motors choked, sputtered, then burst into a sweet, full-throated roar. He glanced over at Praed's plane, spun the small helicopter props over and pushed down the accelerator. The plane quivered, stuck its snout up and leaped like an arrow into the clean, darkening air. Lance gunned it to ten thousand feet, Praed following him neatly. Praed was a good pilot, no doubt

about that. The two fighting machines hung for a second side by side; Lance eased off his helicopters and streaked away into the gloom at a breath-taking five hundred.

"I hope," muttered Colonel Douglas as the two tiny scouts sped from sight, "that everything goes smoothly. They're the men to do it, anyway. No better pilots in the whole service."

"Wot abaht that there Captain Hay, sir?" put in Wells, the mechanic, standing nearby. Colonel Douglas smiled.

"Oh, of course!" he amended. "I'd forgotten Hay!"

Once more they were anticipated! Lance, at thirty thousand feet—the Rahl-Diesels, with their perfected superchargers, were easily capable of a ceiling of sixty—had hovered above the position of Hill 333, pulled on his gas-mask and said through the microphone to Praed:

"Power dive to three thousand feet. Release your flares and take in all you can before they send up planes. We'll take 'em by surprise, but there's bound to be a fight. Got it?"

The steady reply came back: "Okay."

Whereat Lance set his teeth in his customary fighting grin, jockied up his ammunition belts, glanced at the flare-parachutes folded alongside the cabin and plunged the scout in a dive that tipped six hundred and fifty miles and threatened to crack the speed dial.

But surprise? Nothing doing! Like angry hornets five Slav planes pounced on them at ten thousand feet. They'd been waiting there! Lance cursed savagely. He flung off his flares, Immelmanned up, and in less than two seconds had sent one Slav shrieking to the ground in flames. For the moment forgetting Praed, Lance followed after his flares, three Slavs attempting to sight their guns on the twisting, writhing, corkscrewing body of his Goshawk. He knew there were disintegrating flame-throwers below, but gambled on their not shooting because of the enemy scouts diving with him.

Flattening out at perhaps a thousand feet, Lance threw a rapid stare at the bulk of Hill 333. He drew his breath in sharply.

Lit dazzlingly by the bleaching white of the slow-floating flares, huge rows of the dreaded Slav tanks were clustered all around the hill!

As he looked, ten more Slav planes came soaring up from the ground. This was too hot! The thought of Praed stabbed through

Lance's whirling brain; he pulled the scout around, doubled over the three closing in on his tail, and belched lead for an instant at one he'd caught off guard. It collapsed like a punctured paper bag. Lance grinned and bounded to the upper regions. The two other Slavs let the crazy Yank go for the instant, joining forces with the ten brothers coming to help them out.

Lance, again at ten thousand, looked for Praed. Far above, he glimpsed two planes, circling and diving. Praed seemed to be fighting, at any rate! As he watched, the two scouts catapulted still higher; became tiny, almost imperceptible dots, visible only in the reflected light of the flares. Then Lance felt a shaft of ice along his spine.

The two planes had practically hugged each other for a second. Then one of them fell away, somersaulted, tumbled down wildly—out of control.

It passed Lance like a falling rock.

And it was Praed's scout!

"My God!" muttered Lance. "He's been shot down!"

The next moment the twelve Slavs were on him like a hurricane. Motors roaring, Lance stood them off—flinging a burst of lead here, dropping out of range here, looping, catapulting, zooming—fazing them with every trick he knew. A dozen times he sensed the zinging wrath of storms of bullets, a dozen times he escaped death by the breadth of a hair. Not for nothing was he called one of the best pilots in the service, second only to Hay.

He bagged another of the Slavs, and began to think of getting away. Praed had proved himself, but had been killed in doing so. He's got the dope on Hill 333. Now for the getaway.

As he whirled, another Slav plane—the one that had got Praed—dove down from above. And, in the last second of the ghostly light of the flares, Lance's bewildered eyes saw the face of the man inside it.

That face was Praed's!

Praed, inside an enemy scout! Praed firing at him! Praed, not dead!

Lance was dumbfounded. He almost died, just then, for he felt his senses stagger, and relaxed his maneuvering. Praed! What—how—He couldn't begin to reckon it out.

If the flares hadn't died at that instant, Lance must have been shot down. Luckily, they expired; pitch darkness washed over everything. The lights on the Slav planes switched on, their prying beams fingering the sky for Lance's plane. But Lance was somewhat himself again. He jammed the accelerator down, dove headlong, flattened out and streaked for home. The speed of the Goshawk snatched him faithfully from the jaws of the Slavs. He left then milling behind. Left Praed with them!

Colonel Douglas was waiting for him. Lance's face must have been a study, for the elder man laughed shortly. "You need a drink!" he decided, and poured out a stiff tot of rum. Lance downed it with a nervous gulp and sprawled in a chair, the glass held weakly in quivering fingers.

Dead silence brooded over the whole base. Even the muttering guns were still. One green-shaded light threw the maps on Douglas' desk into glaring prominence; besides that, there was no illumination anywhere in the 'drome. Lance knew he had a thumping headache and that his eyes were lumps of pain. The glass fell from his hand and crashed on the floor. It seemed to stir the young captain, for at last he looked up and met the colonel's inquiring gaze.

"Well?" The colonel was terse.

"I saw Praed shot down," Lance mumbled, as if to himself, "and then I saw him—"

"Wait!" Douglas strode rapidly to the door which led to the other rooms of the building. After glancing to right and left, with an explanatory "Walls sometimes have ears, you know!" he locked the door carefully again, came back, and said:

"Talk in a whisper! How about Hill 333?"

"Tanks massed there," Lance said slowly. "Yeh, I saw that, all right. They must be intending an attack on that sector. But—but—Praed—"

"What happened?"

Lance told him of the scrap, how Praed's plane had apparently rubbed wings with a Slav and then tumbled down, out of control. He concluded: "I figured that Praed was all right, that he'd proved himself, that he wasn't a spy, as we'd thought. *But the next moment I saw him in the Slav plane that had bagged his!"*

His wondering eyes sought the colonel's lean face. Lance expected to see it express amazement, incredulity. It didn't, though. He laughed!

While Lance gaped, the older man went to the delicate machinery of the radiophone in one corner of the trim office. He clasped the earphones over his head, and spoke into the mike: "Headquarters, Air Force, Washington, Douglas, Base 5, speaking."

A tense moment passed while his radio call was put through. Presently a green light flashed on the board. Douglas said swiftly: "Headquarters? Base 5, Colonel Douglas. Tanks massed around Hill 333; enemy evidently contemplates full attack on corresponding sector of our line. They know a scout of ours observed it, however; perhaps that will induce them to change their plans. This next is extremely important: *The first step of the Torpedo Plan has been successful!"*

For awhile he listened intently, replying with short-clipped affirmatives. Then he hung the headphones up and turned to the bewildered Lance. Colonel Douglas laughed again and rubbed his hands exultantly.

"What the hell—" Lance began. The other pulled out a drawer of his desk and took from it a small placard.

"Do you recognize the photo?" he asked smilingly.

Lance looked at it. It was the picture of a man in the uniform of a captain of the Air Force, a row of battle ribbons on his straight, khaki-clad chest. But it was the figure's face that Lance stared at.

"Sure," he said finally. "It's a picture of Praed. But what—"

"Not Praed," corrected the colonel. "Not Praed. Captain Basil Hay."

Part 3

“Good Lord!" Lance exclaimed without knowing he did so. Praed—Hay! The same man! Then that was the secret; that explained things! Hay, the hero of the force!

"You're entitled to a few explanations," Douglas said. "I'll give you the core of the whole scheme. There's no need to tell you that it must be guarded with your life." He drew his chair closer to Lance's.

"Yes, it's true. The man you knew as Praed in reality is Captain Hay. You see, Lance, headquarters was taking no chances with what I just called the Torpedo Plan. Every move had to be conducted with the utmost secrecy. Had to be! For the Torpedo Plan is, in some ways, America's last hope.

"Our base, No. 5, was chosen as the center of activity, the base from which the steps paving the way for the plan would be taken. The two best pilots in the service were needed. You and Hay were chosen.

"It was decided it would be best to mask Hay's real identity. So, officially, he was sent to the hospital; in reality he came here, under the name of Praed. Why? Because there's a spy somewhere—we don't seem to be able to track him; he's infernally clever—and if the

famous Captain Hay was switched to Base 5, putting the two best pilots in the service together, that spy'd know something was in the air. Understand?"

Lance nodded dumbly. A great light was beginning to shower him.

"To more completely mask our true purpose," the colonel continued, "Hay was instructed to make it appear as if he were a spy. And it was a damned hard job! The real spy, whoever he is, and wherever he is, would thus be additionally fooled; for all he'd know, the Slavs might have sent another over to back him up. That's why Hay never shot down an enemy plane. Says something about his skill as a pilot, doesn't it? Never able to defend himself, save by maneuvering. He's a great flyer!"

Lance could only nod dumbly again.

"After a couple of weeks at this base," Douglas went on, "Hay was to cross the lines one night with you accompanying him. You, unintentionally, would thus occupy the enemy planes while Hay attended to the real business of the evening. And you did splendidly!"

"The real business?" Lance questioned. "What the devil was that? I

thought the real business was to get the dope on Hill 333."

"So it was—partially. But also to take the first step of the Torpedo Plan, which was for Hay to switch over to a Slav plane."

"What?"

The colonel repeated his statement, somewhat dryly. Lance's square jaw dropped abruptly. "But—but—" he exclaimed, "how the devil could he do that?"

Colonel Douglas grinned.

"By a very neat contraption from the brain of one of our most valuable scientists," he explained. "Hay's scout was specially fitted up before you left; while you were sleeping, in fact. Two experts from Washington arrived with that batch of new recruits this afternoon. A tiny sliding door was cut in the fuselage of the scout and a sort of folding ladder put inside. It was motivated by some rather complex spring-work; but the really ingenious thing about it was the powerful electro-magnet at its base.

"It's rather over my head," he smiled. "I'm a plain fighting man, and sometimes it seems that scientists and not fighting men are going to

win this war.... But, at any rate, it worked like this:

"Hay lures, or maneuvers, a Slav plane away from its fellows, and while you're down below entertaining the others, flies wing to wing with it. He touches the spring of his ladder and it shoots out, powerfully magnetized, and clamps onto the steel fuselage of the Slav. The automatic control keeps Hay's scout steady, and the ladder is so highly attractive that the Slav simply can't get away. Hay crosses the gulf, taking with him the cord which controls the electro-magnet. He forces his way into the Slav, shoots down its pilot, releases the pull of the magnet, and—there you are! Our best pilot in possession of a Slav plane, and clad in a Slav officer's uniform! Do you get the idea now?"

Lance strove for appropriate words. "Gee!" he spluttered. "It's—it's wonderful! And to think I tried to start a fight with Hay! I wish I'd known before. But I suppose," he added, "it was best to let not even me in on it, to keep it absolutely secret."

"Exactly!"

"And now what's Hay's mission?" Lance asked eagerly.

Colonel Douglas' face became sober. "A damnably dangerous one,

and a mighty desperate one. As I said, the Torpedo Plan, which Hay is striving to carry out, seems to be America's last chance. We're holding the United Slavs, but only just. We simply can't break their line or make any headway against them; and when they do unleash their big push, there's nothing to stop them! So we're gambling everything on this slim hope.

"American science," he continued, "has perfected a weapon which is called the 'flying torpedo.' It's a ghastly thing, too. Damn it, I actually feel sorry for the poor devils it bursts on! It's a sort of riposte to their disintegrating flame.

"Picture a huge tanklike affair of steel, one hundred feet long. Picture a few dozen of them! Picture them crammed to overflowing with tons of glyco-scarzite, the most destructive explosive the mind of man has yet conceived. An explosive that can't be hurled in a shell and can't be dropped in a bomb from a plane. A pound or so of it, man, lays waste a square mile of anything! Even our scientists are a bit afraid of it. They've been trying to think up a way of unleashing it at the Slavs. And these flying torpedoes seem to be the answer.

"The torpedoes are purely mechanical. Therefore, they can soar to any height whatsoever. Twenty, thirty, even forty miles. All right. Now, picture a dozen or so of these torpedoes soaring over the most

important Slav bases and headquarters, thirty miles above the earth, at night, of course, and absolutely invisible to the most powerful search-rays. They fly without the slightest sounds. Get that? Well, when this squadron of awful death arrives at the exact point over the place to be demolished, the motive force switches off and down they crash. Imagine what will happen when they collide with the ground!" Douglas, with Lance's tense eyes on him, struck a clenched fist into an open palm.

"Tons of glyco-scarzite, Lance! Unleashed, without warning, from miles above! Thirty of these torpedoes, each a hundred feet long, dropping down on the very heart of the Slav invasion! Killing, blowing to bits, rather, every living thing, every fortification, every tree, every tank, every gun, every flame thrower, every plane in a radius of hundreds of miles!"

"God!" came from Lance's numb lips. "God!"

"*But*"—and the colonel held up a straight forefinger—"these torpedoes must be guided from the place they raid!"

Into the silence Lance whispered: "And that—that is Hay's job?"

"That," Douglas confirmed levelly, "is Hay's job—and yours."

Their eyes met; held. And then Lance's clean young face smiled.

"Thank God, sir," he cried, "that I'm to help strike the blow that'll free our country!"

Colonel Douglas answered his smile with a smile. "Lance," he said, "it's because Washington has put this job into Hay's and your hands that I know—*I know*—it will succeed."

"It will!"

Douglas lowered his voice again. "This is why those flying torpedoes must be guided from the Slav's innermost base.

"In the first place, they fly too high for an accompanying plane to guide them. In the second, the power that releases them to hurtle downwards must come from the enemy base itself, to permit of no possible error. This must not fail!"

"But," put in Lance, "how do the torpedoes fly? What motivates them?"

"A closely guarded secret, of course," he was told. "I merely possess a slight comprehension of it. I know that it is an adaptation of that discovery of Professor Singe, two years ago—cosmic attraction.

Eventually, perhaps, it will permit interplanetary travel. This use of it is simply the beginning. But it is to America's everlasting glory that a scientist of hers developed it.

"You know how a sliver of wood is propelled by the ripples of a pond? Vibrations of the water, really. Well, evidently there are somewhat similar vibrations in the ether, cosmic force. Each one of these flying torpedoes contains a highly expensive, intricate mechanism which transforms this invisible vibration-power into material propulsion. The mechanism is adjusted to propel the torpedo at such an altitude in such a direction. We possess no means of setting the machines to *stop* at a certain place and so tumble earthwards. That's where you and Hay come in.

"Hay is now, with forged documents, passing himself off as a regular Slav pilot. He speaks the tongue. Two nights from now, you, Lance, keep a rendezvous with Hay at an isolated ranch in the Lake Tahoe country—the Sola Ranch, where we staged that big fight a few months back."

Lance nodded.

"In your plane is an instrument which is the kernel of the scheme. It arrives here to-morrow. It's a device which shoots an invisible beam

fifty miles into the air, a negative beam, in sympathy with the machinery on the torpedoes. Hay sets this device near the Slav headquarters. The torpedo squadron takes off from a few hundred miles behind here, flying in the direction of the heart of the Slav forces. When they run into the beam, their motive power is nullified, and down they fall. Crash! The Slavs are wiped out. Our troops charge forward in a grand attack; the Slavs, with no armament, no reinforcing troops, no supply of tanks and flame throwers, crumple. The invasion of America is put to an end!"

Lance rose. His face was alight, his eyes burning with strong, unquenchable fire.

"It's great, sir, great! It can't fail! By God, if it takes every last drop of my blood, I'll help Hay put this through!"

Colonel Douglas extended his right hand and Lance's met it in a firm shake. In the thick silence they stood thus for some minutes. Then, without moving so much as a cheek muscle, the colonel whispered, his eyes tense:

"*The door! Fling it open! I think someone's been listening!*"

Lance switched his alarmed gaze to it. His muscles went taut. The

next moment he had leaped half across the room, jammed back the lock, and ripped the door wide.

At the other end of the dim passageway he glimpsed a scurrying figure!

Lance sprang after it with a shout to Douglas. Tearing out his automatic, he flung a burst of lead at the figure, but that instant it wheeled and sped from sight down another passage. And when Lance got there, no one was in sight.

For awhile he probed around, desperately, but could find no sign of anything. The base slept. Sorely troubled, he returned to find the colonel just coming back from an equally barren search:

"Don't think he heard much," said Douglas grimly. "It must have been that damned spy who's been getting information of our movements. I'll have the guards redoubled to prevent him from getting anything through." He smiled at sight of Lance's anxious face. "No need for too much worry, Lance! He couldn't have heard much—the walls are sound-proof and the door fairly tight. Now, you go and rip off some sleep! You need it! No more work for you till Wednesday night—you're too important!"

Sleep! Lance only wished he could. But the thrill of what he'd just heard was too fresh, too new; the blood pumped surgingly through his veins; his brain whirled with the thought of the glorious enterprise he and Hay were aiding so vitally.

Then, too, the night was humid and sweaty. For a while Lance lay on his cot, other sleeping figures to left and right of him, but his own eyes simply would not stay closed. Finally, after perhaps an hour of trying to doze off, he arose and, clad only in breeches and undershirt, wandered outside again with a cigarette glowing in his mouth.

The war might not have been, the night was so silent. Lance strolled lazily around the plane hangars, revelling in what little breeze there was. He seemed to be the only living thing abroad in the night.

Then, suddenly, he flung down his cigarette and ground the butt out quickly. For he saw he was not the only living thing abroad in the night. Sliding rapidly away from the end hangar was a dark form!

Lance crouched instinctively and crept forward. Who was the other wanderer? Not a sentry: they paced a regular beat closer to Douglas' office. Not another, who, like himself, could not sleep and had sought the open. This figure was going somewhere! It had a definite object in mind!

Sheltering himself behind the hangars' bulk, Lance advanced as stealthily as he could. Coming to the end one, he peered round its blunt corner. Fifty yards ahead, crossing a stubbly stretch of open ground, the mysterious prowler hurried onward.

The night was dark, the moon troubled by ragged bursts of listless, heavy clouds. Lance bent almost double and left the shelter of the black hangar. Feeling his way carefully, he followed the other.

Was this the unknown spy? The spy, going to transmit the news he had overheard?

Lance muttered a curse. He had no weapon with him; the spy, if he were a spy, would certainly be armed. But that didn't matter; it was merely unfortunate. He must track the other down, at all cost.

For some minutes he crept on in this manner. The other kept hurrying forward. Lance noted a clump of brush far ahead; the figure was evidently making for this. And sure enough, as if acting directly on Lance's thought, the dark form entered the patch of growth—and did not come out on the other side.

Lance broke into a trot, eyes wary and alert for sign of his prey. At any second he might be greeted by a salvo of bullets, and every fiber

of his lean body was taut.

As he approached the clump of brush he dropped to the ground, and came finally to it on his belly. From a distance of about ten feet, he rose and charged.

Expecting each moment to hear the spit of a revolver, he was more alarmed by what actually did greet him.

Nothing. The patch of brush was empty!

"Well I'll be damned!" Lance murmured. "Where did he get to?"

He gazed around, bewildered. The growth of bush was about ten feet wide. On either side the flat Nevada plain stretched away—empty. No figure was visible.

Lance was utterly baffled. The fellow had vanished as if by magic. Flown away into thin air!

The young captain stood quite still, listening, probing his puzzled brain.

Then, like a cat, he dropped to the ground again, and pressed an ear to it. For his ears had caught a tiny betraying hum.

A hum! There was a machine of some type near him. He listened intently. The hum came from the ground on which he lay. There had to be a trap-door.

Lance's fingers scrabbled around, and presently found what they looked for.

He seized the ring which enabled one to pull the trap-door back, and was just about to pull when he heard, from below, a voice speaking in Russian. It was, then, the spy!

Lance grasped the ring anew, and, exerting all his strength, hauled the trap-door back.

A narrow passageway was revealed, lit by a lamp. The hum burst with doubled force on his ears. He plunged down, fists clenched, and half tumbled into a tiny room gouged from the soil.

At one end was a mass of machinery, and a microphone hung suspended before it. And speaking into the microphone was the heavy-set form of a man in American uniform, his back to Lance. As the latter charged down, he rose with an alarmed shout, and wheeled around.

"My God!" breathed Lance.

It was Ranth, Colonel Douglas' orderly!

Ranth!

His dark face flushed with fury, he came leaping from his seat. The wicked little revolver hung at his belt sprang out, but Lance's right fist shot forward, knocked Ranth's hand high and sent the gun clattering to the ground. Then, for a moment, they faced each other, the hum of the radiophone droning an ominous accompaniment.

"You!" Lance muttered. "So you were the spy!"

Ranth answered him with a choked oath and leaped forward again.

There were no niceties to that combat. It was a matter of life and death, and each knew it. Ranth would kill him, Lance knew, if he possibly could; and he, he had to kill or capture Ranth. Otherwise the news of the Torpedo Plan would go through, Ranth would return to the base, and the secret of the hidden radio never be known. Another would be put in Lance's place; and when Hay kept his rendezvous at Sola Ranch....

He had to win.

No effort was made at defense, for those first few furious minutes. A veritable fusillade of hurtling fists stormed through the air. They each gave and took equally. Then Ranth's heavy shoulders bunched; cunningly he feinted, then, whirling, swung a vicious right hand smash to Lance's chin.

Lance reeled, fell, seeing Ranth's hate-contorted visage dance queerly in the close air before him. The orderly clutched for his revolver, and Lance bounded up as if spring-impelled, nailed the other with two lightninglike jabs and unleashed all his strength in an uppercut which sprawled Ranth in a limp, quivering heap.

Panting, Lance surveyed him, then turned to get the gun. He felt the shock of thudding flesh in his legs, and fell again with Ranth scrambling on top of him. Steel-ribbed hands pounced on his throat, gouged savagely, while the man above grunted thick curses from his slavering mouth. Lance struggled fiercely; saw a curtain of black rush down. Desperately he hooked a booted leg up, craned it over Ranth's back, tugged. The terrible fingers loosened. Lance shook them off, rolled the other over and leaped once more to his feet, right hand clenched and ready.

Ranth staggered up. The young man measured him, pivoted, and smashed his beefy jaw with a clean swing that had every ounce of

Lance's hard young body behind it.

The orderly shot back as if struck by a locomotive. He crashed into the radiophone, splintered the delicate instruments and slumped, eyes glazed, to the ground.

He was out. Dead out.

But how much had he got through on the radiophone before being stopped?

Had he told where the rendezvous, was to be? Told the time and place, and warned the Slavs to look for Hay?

Lance sighed, and was conscious that his left eye was rapidly closing, that a lip was split and his whole body sore. He slung Ranth over his shoulders and trudged wearily back to the base.

He told his story to Colonel Douglas' amazed ears. Ranth, come back to life, was slapped in handcuffs, and for some time the colonel put him through a stern inquisition.

But his lips were sealed. He would not divulge how much he had succeeded in passing on to the Slavs.

"A brave man," Douglas observed grimly when Ranth was carried off to the brig, "but it's death for him, the same as it would be death for Hay were he caught."

"I don't think he had a chance to get much across, sir," Lance said. "I was right on him almost as soon as he got there. You won't let this cancel our rendezvous?"

Douglas' thin lips smiled narrowly. "No. You'll be taking a greater chance, Lance, but we must gamble on how much the Slavs know. You're game, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir!"

Wednesday night came. Thunderstorms muttered to each other on the lowering horizons; gusts of fierce, wind-driven rain slanted down on the dripping base; occasionally a crooked finger of lightning probed the black sky and lit the whole sopping countryside with a searing, flashing glare.

The night patrol had taken off. A single plane, wet and gleaming under the sobbing heavens, stood on the tarmac, two heavily coated figures before it. Presently three more figures, carrying some bulky black object carefully between them, emerged from one of the

buildings. Tenderly they placed this object in the lone plane, which had been stripped of radio outfit and gas bomb compartment to provide room. Then the two original figures were left alone once more before the fighting machine. Far to the rear, the heavy American guns barked in their regular nightly bombardment.

"A good night for it," Colonel Douglas, scanning the sky, said, "and also a bad one. If only that damned lightning would stop!"

Lance, pulling on thick gloves, did not reply. The colonel consulted his watch.

"What time do you make it?" he asked.

"Exactly eight," the other answered.

"Right. At eight-six, you leave. At nine, on the dot, you meet Hay at Sola Ranch. At nine-ten, the torpedoes take off. At quarter to ten, they arrive over their destination—San Francisco and the surrounding territory. And quarter to ten, if things go correctly—which they must!—is the minute that ends the Slavish invasion of America. At ten minutes to ten, five minutes after the torpedoes strike, our troops charge forward in general attack. God be with you, Lance! The fate of America is resting on your shoulders to-night,

remember!"

"I'm remembering."

Colonel Douglas looked at the young man's grim, set face, looked at his lithe, clean-limbed figure and his steady black eyes which burned with a purposeful fire. And the colonel smiled.

"We'll win!" he said.

An orderly sped from his office, saluted, and rapped crisply:

"Order just received from Washington, sir, to proceed."

Lance clasped Douglas' hand, and leaped into the snug, enclosed cockpit. The four motors bellowed as the thin-sprayed oil cascaded to them. The helicopter props spun around.

"Go to it, kid!" cried Douglas. "Spy or no spy, you're coming out on top! And give Hay a last handshake for me!"

And he swung to the salute.

Lance extended his hand. Then he gave his ship the gun, and the tiny, streamlined scout teetered, roared, and rose with a scream into

the dripping darkness high above.

The Torpedo Plan had started.

PART IV

Lance hung for a moment at one thousand feet. A crack of lightning lit the base below for a second, and he perceived the colonel's straight figure with hand outstretched. Lance grinned, and gunned to forty thousand—an easy flying height, with his superchargers pumping and air-rectifiers normalizing the enclosed pilot's seat.

"But what," he wondered, as he stopped the helicopters, "did he mean by 'give a *last* handshake'?"

He was soon to find out.

Behind him, in the fuselage, nestled the weird cluster of machinery which was the Singe beacon. It certainly did not look imposing—a mass of spidery tubes mazing round a bulky black box, which was, Lance guessed, some new type of generator. Out of the top of the device sprouted a funnel-like horn, from which, on the adjustment of the beacon's control studs, shot the nullifying ray. Lance could not suppress a shiver as he thought of the earth-shaking cataclysm that

ray would conjure from the infinitely high heavens.

At forty thousand feet he was above the storm clouds, whose pitchy, vapor-drenched blackness effectively blanked out all sign of the earth. He might have been flying in outer space. Keeping a careful eye on his instruments, he set a course for Sola Ranch. He kept his speed around three hundred, wishing to meet Hay exactly at nine.

But—would Hay be there?

How much did the Slavs know? How much had Ranth got through before he stopped him?

A frown creased his brow. It was best not to puzzle over that question. Best just to go ahead, and keep going.

At about three minutes to nine he set the plane's nose down through veils of clammy cloud. This was mountainous country, sparsely patrolled by Slav ships. Lance hovered cautiously over the firred mountain tops, getting his directions, shooting wary eyes through the magnifying mirrors in search of enemy scouts. He saw none. Satisfied, he cut the Rahl-Diesels, gunned the helicopter props and dropped lightly down on the stubbly field of Sola Ranch.

To left and right loomed the dim outlines of the lonely mountains. Before the war, the owner of Sola Ranch had grown apples; this field had housed a few horses. It made a perfect meeting place—secluded, misty with the clinging mountain vapors, far apart from the war.

Lance felt like a prowling werewolf there, waiting for its ghostly mate.

Rain was still splattering in desultory bursts, but distance muted the rumbling salvos' of thunder. His watch told him it was one minute to nine.

Now—what?

Hay, or a swooping squadron of Slav planes?

Lance stepped out of the cockpit into the rain, though holding himself tensely ready to leap back again and soar away. He stared around, and peered above.

Was that a shadow?—a nightmare flying bird?—or a plane?

He grasped a hand-flash, and rapidly signalled his identity. The next instant, it seemed, the shadow wavered, then fell earthward with great speed.

Out of the gloom and rain it came—an enemy plane.

It dropped down beside his scout. From its cockpit came a few swift flashes of light.

Hay!

Lance ran eagerly over to the other plane, and out from its enclosed cabin stepped the man he had known as Praed.

Wordlessly, they gripped hands. Hay's thin, straight face wore a smile, and he met Lance's eyes keenly. Lance stammered:

"S-sorry, Captain Hay, about—about the way I treated you at the base. You see, I had no idea who you were."

Hay cut short his apologies with a laugh. "Rot! I'd've been the same way myself." He glanced rapidly at Lance's plane. "Got it?" he questioned. "I'm a bit late; had a hell of a time getting here without arousing suspicion. We'd best hurry."

Lance nodded. They hurried to the Goshawk. As they worked, carefully lifting out the Singe beacon, Lance, in crisp, short-clipped sentences, told his companion of Ranth, the spy.

"You don't know how much he got through?"

"No," said Lance. "No."

"Hm-m. Well, we'll have to trust to luck."

"You know the working of the beacon?" Lance asked. On the other's nod of affirmation he continued: "What's your plan?"

"Light about five miles this side of Frisco itself, just near the main Slav military base. Anywhere in that territory would do, though. The beacon doesn't go up in a narrow ray; it spreads, diffuses. The squadron of torpedoes will cover some fifty or sixty miles of ground, I believe. They'll utterly demolish the city, and every damned Slav in it." His face, in the darkness, went grim and hard. "And it'll damn well pay them back," he rasped, "for the horrible way they massacred San Francisco's population...."

The Singe beacon was in his plane. Hay turned to Lance, stretching out his hand for a farewell clasp. Then Lance asked the question that had been worrying him.

"Colonel Douglas told me to give you a last handshake for him. *Last.* Why did he say that?"

"Because," Hay said smilingly, "I'm staying by the beacon to make sure that nothing goes wrong. I guess that's why he said it, old fellow...."

Lance gasped: "You're sacrificing your life?"

"Of course. To save seventy-five million others."

Then suddenly they both stared above.

A roar of sound—of purring motors, of props, mixed with the chatter of a dozen machine-guns—had belched with numbing suddenness from the low-hanging clouds.

Enemy planes! A patrol of them!

"God!" jerked Lance. "Ranth's warning got through! Part of it, anyway!"

He leaped for his plane, shouting: "I'll hold 'em off! You get away *quick*!" and, through a veritable hail of lead, sprang into the cockpit.

Then, a cold pang at his heart, he sprang out again.

A bullet had caught Hay!

For a moment, the Slav fire ceased, while their planes zoomed up to start another death-dealing dive. And in that moment Lance was at Hay's side, where he had fallen.

"They—got me," whispered Hay, a stream of blood welling from his gasping mouth. "I'm—I'm going. C-carry me to—to your plane. I've still a—a little strength left. You take the beacon. I—I'll hold them—as—as long as—I can. Put through that beacon, boy! *Put it though!*"

His brain a maelstrom, Lance stared at the crumpled figure. It was the only way! He heard the motors above come roaring down again; desperately he carried the blood-choking Hay to his own plane; propped him limply at the controls. Bullets spat through a frenzy of noise. Weakly Hay started the Goshawk's Diesels, and weakly, into Lance's face, smiled, and beckoned him to leave.

And, as Lance, a grim resolve at his heart, turned, Hay's blood-frothed lips formed the words: "Carry on!"

Through the raining lead, seeming to bear a charmed life, Lance leaped to Hay's plane, hearing as he did so his own, with a stricken pilot at its controls, hurtle upwards.

Carry on! For the life of America!

Carry on!

Ten minutes past the hour of nine. A full thousand miles behind the lines, on the wide black field of America's major war base, a small group of men stood, surveying the awesome weapons assembled there.

Row upon row of huge, dully-gleaming cigar-shaped things stretched away into the darkness before them. There were only one or two faint lights to give illumination, and the night choked in on them, making them terrifying.

They resembled, more than anything else, half-sized dirigibles, being roughly about one hundred feet long and perhaps as much as thirty feet high. At first sight, they seemed to be numberless; then, as the bewildered eye became more sane, one could count them and see that there were, in reality, about thirty. Their prows were stubby; in the port side of each a tiny trap-door yawned, and standing by every trap-door was the overall-clad figure of a mechanic, waiting for the signal.

The Commander of the American Air Force looked up from his wrist-watch. At his side was a peculiar gnomelike figure, a figure with hunched, twisted back and huge, over-heavy head. This was

Professor Singe, and from that ridiculous head had come the germ which had finally expanded into the torpedoes arrayed before him.

His eyes were nervous; his crooked face twitched ceaselessly. "Time?" he kept asking. "Time? Is it yet time?" And finally the tall figure of the Commanding Officer turned and rapped: "Time!"

An aide-de-camp raised a hand. As if working by some mechanical device, the figure which stood by each torpedo climbed through the trap-doors, jumped out a second later, and came running to the head of the field.

"About thirty seconds," muttered Singe nervously, eyes alight. "Thirty seconds for their motors to catch the stream. Thirty—ah!"

For the squadron of man-made horrors had stirred.

"God pity San Francisco!" murmured the Commanding Officer, and stepped back involuntarily as the whole fleet lifted their glyco-scarzite crammed bellies from the field and, as if moved by some magical, unseen, unheard force, shot up into the darkness with ever gathering speed.

"God pity it, indeed!" chuckled Singe exultantly. "It'll need it!"

The C. O. sighed and shook his head slowly. "War!" he mused. "And yet, it's our only chance." For a moment he paused, seemingly unconscious of the macabre little form next to him, still gazing aloft at the now invisible torpedoes, and then muttered:

"And God pity Basil Hay, who's giving his life to America—a glorious, unselfish hero. God pity Basil Hay!"

American flyers never knew of Basil Hay's last fight. Had they, it would have become legendary.

For Hay fought a grim battle against two foes. One, he could face and conquer, as he had conquered often before. But the other lurked next to his dauntless heart, and it Hay could not subdue.

It was death.

Truly, Hay's fight there in the wet clouds above Sola Ranch was an inspired one. He fought almost by instinct alone, instinct twenty years of piloting had planted deep in his veins. He fought for Lance—for America. His eyes, glazing rapidly, could not distinguish the roaring phantoms that laced around his lone plane, but uncannily his bursts of fire went home again and again, while theirs ripped aimlessly over the Goshawk's hell-driven snout.

Of course it could not last. Gallant spirit alone kept Basil Hay taut at his controls. Spirit alone thrust back the ever-increasing surge of black oblivion that pounded at his heart and brain. Spirit alone sent the pitifully outnumbered plane corkscrewing in peerless maneuverings that baffled the on-passing Slavs and thrust four of them to the sodden ground in flame. Spirit that would not surrender —but had to.

They could never have conquered Basil Hay in a plane. An ambushing bullet that caught him off guard did that. And finally Hay fell.

But he had kept them for ten full minutes. Ten minutes—each one a lasting, mute testimony to his unquenchable, unyielding spirit.

He flung a last salvo from his hot machine-guns, then, heart numbing, jerked back the control-stick and careened high. He slumped down. The plane paused, wallowed crazily for a moment, and then roared earthward, "Carry on!" formed faintly on its dead pilot's bloody lips.

Basil Hay had fought his last fight.

Ten minutes....

Lance hadn't expected that long. He'd thought Hay would die in a few seconds. The man was mortally wounded; could not last.

Nevertheless, minutes or seconds, he was entrusted with the Singe beacon, and it was his job and his will to put it through.

He'd climbed the Slav plane up to its ceiling, driven it till it simply refused to go higher, and then roared on towards San Francisco. Each second he expected to see others come hurtling after him. When they did not, he knew how really great Hay's will was. It was an inspiring example.

But his brain was tortured by a multitude of conflicting doubts. A patrol of Slav scouts had ambushed them. Just how much did the Slavs know, then, about the torpedoes?

He, Lance, had to guide the Singe beacon. Quickly he reviewed what Hay had told him.

"Light about five miles this side of Frisco. Anywhere in that territory would do, though. The beacon doesn't go up in a narrow ray; it spreads, diffuses."

Spreads, diffuses.

Hay had been clad in Slav uniform, and thus could, with a certain measure of safety, put the beacon machinery on the ground itself. But Lance was in American uniform; if he landed, he ran great risk of being noticed and attacked at once.

Lance saw immediately that there was only one way out. It was sure death, but Hay had expected death, and so must he.

His lips set in stern resolve. It meant good-by—farewell to the girl he'd left behind, farewell to life, farewell to everything—but not for a second did he debate the course he would take.

Lance glanced at his watch. Nine-thirty. The torpedoes were even now on their way, hurtling along miles above the earth. In fifteen minutes they would be over San Francisco. In fifteen minutes the Singe beacon had to meet them.

He was not familiar with the Slav plane's instruments, but he judged he'd traveled some hundred and twenty-five miles; was nearing the outskirts of San Francisco. The air below would be thick, probably, with enemy scouts, but his appearance should pass unchallenged as long as they didn't glimpse his betraying uniform.

He set the plane's nose down in a long slanting dive.

Whipping through the clouds, the guarding search-rays of San Francisco were soon visible. Lance saw a few patrols of enemy scouts; he clung to the clouds, decreased his speed, and began circling over the heart of the metropolis itself.

Twenty to ten.

Occasionally a Slav plane flashed by him. Thank God, they didn't challenge! Lance went still lower. Finally, at a thousand feet, he set the helicopter props in motion and hung in mid-air—directly above the very center of the city.

Sixteen minutes to ten.

Now!

In the American front-line trenches, massed troops crouched expectantly. Clustered on every air base were flights of planes, each one crammed with bombs. Far behind, the Yank gun-crews edged nervously up to their mighty charges, and fingered anxiously the stubby gas shells which soon would be flung through the dripping night.

And at Base No. 5 a very uneasy Colonel Douglas paced back and

forth in his office, muttering: "No news from Lance! No news from Lance! God! He can't have failed! But why doesn't he show up?"

He had not failed.

Hovering in the plane over San Francisco Lance squirmed round in his seat, reached back into the fuselage, and pressed rapidly the studs on the Singe beacon. A high whining noise pierced instantly through the plane. And up stabbed the beacon, invisible, deadly—up, up, up to a thin realm miles above, where it flashed into an awesome squadron of terrible shells of steel!

Shells that, a second later, wavered, staggered, and plunged earthward!

And Lance tensed in his seat. From above, he caught a tiny whistling noise—a whistling that hurtled into a terrific shriek—that roared ever closer.

"Carry on!" he muttered. "Carry on!"

The words froze on his lips, for the world was suddenly consumed, it seemed, by flame and splitting, bellowing thunder.

The American guns spoke.

From every aerodrome long flights of scouts and bombers and transport planes roared upward.

In the front trenches the troops, still somewhat dazed by the earth-shaking explosion that had just tumbled from the far horizon—a horizon still lit by leaping tongues of awful flame—poured over the top, gas-masks on, repeaters and portable machine-guns at the ready, with a fierce cry on their lips.

Before that avenging attack the Slavs, their very spine broken, bewildered and confused, already turning in panic, could not stand.

America swept to the Pacific, and left death in her wake. And when she came to San Francisco, not even the sternest fighting men, still hot from battle, could repress a shudder, so awful was the devastation.

The Slav invasion was over!

In the rebuilt city of San Francisco there is a statue that stands proudly before the magnificent, gleaming city hall.

It represents two slim, straight-standing figures, clad in the uniform of the American Air Force. Their outstretched arms support a tiny

one-seater Goshawk fighting plane.

Below, as you know, there is a plaque. Men touch their hats as they walk by it; flowers are always fresh at its base. On the plaque are the words:

To The Everlasting
Memory Of

Captain Basil Hay, A.A.F.
Captain Derek Lance, A.A.F.

Who, In The War Of 1938, Gave
Their Lives In Destroying And
Devastating San Francisco
That San Francisco And America
Might Live

70 The Tentacles from Below, by Desmond Winter Hall

Down to tremendous ocean depths goes Commander Keith Wells in his blind duel with the marauding "machine-fish."

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

on the hawser arm above

- - -

Chapter 1: "*Machine-Fish”*

“Full stop. Rest ready."

These words glowed in vivid red against the black background of the *NX-1's* control order-board. A wheel was spun over, a lever pulled back, and in the hull of the submarine descended the peculiar silence found only in mile-deep waters. Men rested at their posts, eyes alert.

Above, in the control room, Hemingway Bowman, youthful first officer, glanced at the teleview screen and swore softly.

"Keith," he said, "between you and me, I'll be damned glad when this monotonous job's over. I joined the Navy to see the world, but this charting job's giving me entirely too many close-ups of the deadest parts of it!"

Commander Keith Wells. U. S. N., grinned broadly. "Well," he remarked, "in a few minutes we can call it a day—or night, rather—and then it's back to the *Falcon* while the day shift 'sees the world.'" He turned again to his dials as Hemmy Bowman, with a sigh, resumed work.

"Depth, six thousand feet. Visibility poor. Bottom eight thousand," he said into the phone hung before his lips, and fifty feet aft, in a small cubby, a blue-clad figure monotonously repeated the observations and noted them down in an official geographical survey report.

Such had been their routine for two tiring weeks, all part of the *NX-1's* present work of re-charting the Newfoundland banks.

As early as 1929 slight cataclysms had begun to tear up the sea-floor

of this region, and of late—1935—seismographs and cable companies had reported titanic upheavals and sinkings of the ocean bed, changing hundreds of miles of underwater territory. Finally Washington decided to chart the alterations this series of sub-sea earthquakes had wrought.

And for this job the *NX-1* was detailed. A super-submarine fresh from the yards, small, but modern to the last degree, she contained such exclusive features as a sheathing of the tough new glycosteel, automatic air rectifiers, a location chart for showing positions of nearby submarines, the newly developed Edsel electric motors, and automatic teleview screen. When below surface she was a sealed tube of metal one hundred feet long, and possessed of an enormous cruising radius. From the flower of the Navy some thirty men were picked, and in company with the mother-ship *Falcon* she put out to combine an exhaustive trial trip with the practical charting of the newly changed ocean floor.

Now this work was almost over. Keith Wells told himself that he, like Bowman, would be glad to set foot on land again. This surveying was important, of course, but too dry for him—no action. He smiled at the lines of boredom on Hemmy's brow as the younger man stared gloomily into the teleview screen.

And then the smile left his lips. The radio operator, in a cubby adjoining the control room, had spoken into the communication tube:

"Urgent call for you, sir! From Captain Knapp!"

Wells reached out and clipped a pair of extension phones over his ears. The deep voice of Robert Knapp, captain of the mother-ship *Falcon*, came ringing in. It was strained with an excitement unusual to him.

"Wells? Knapp speaking. Something damned funny's just happened near here. You know the fishing fleet that was near us yesterday morning?"

"Yes?"

"Well, the whole thing's gone down! Destroyed, absolutely! The sea's been like glass, the weather perfect—yet from the wreckage, what there is of it, you'd think a typhoon had struck! I can't begin to explain it. No survivors, either, so far, though we're hunting for them."

"You say the boats are completely destroyed?"

"Smashed like driftwood. I tell you it's preposterous—and yet it's the fact. I think you'd better return at once, old man; you're only half an hour off. And come on the surface; it's getting light now, and you might pick up something. God knows what this means, Keith, but it's up to us to find out. It's—it's got me...."

His tones were oddly disturbed—almost scared—and this from a man who didn't know what fear was.

"But Bob," Keith asked, "how did you—"

"Stand by a minute! The lookout reports survivors!"

Wells turned to meet Bowman's inquisitive face. He quickly repeated the gist of Knapp's weird story. "We saw them at dusk, last evening—remember? And now they're gone, destroyed. What can have done it?"

For some minutes the two surprised men speculated on the strange occurrence. Then Knapp's voice again rang in the headphones.

"Wells? My God, man, this is getting downright fantastic! We've just taken two survivors on board; one's barely alive and the other crazy. I can't get an intelligible thing from him; he keeps shrieking about

writhing arms and awful eyes—and monsters he calls 'machine-fish'!"

"You're sure he's insane?"

Robert Knapp's voice hesitated queerly.

"Well, he's shrieking about 'machine-fish'—fish with machines over them!... I—I'm going to broadcast the whole story to the land stations. 'Machine-fish'! I don't know.... I don't know.... You'd better hurry back, Wells!"

He rang off.

Keith slipped off the headphones and told Bowman what he had learned. Hardy, staunchly built craft, those fishing boats were; born in the teeth of gales. What horror could have ripped them—all of them—to driftwood, with the weather perfect? And a half-mad survivor, raving about "machine-fish"!

"Such things are preposterous," Bowman commented scornfully.

"But—the fleet's gone, Hemmy," Keith replied. "Anyway, we'll speed back, and see what it's all about."

He punched swift commands on the control studs. "Empty Tanks, Zoom to Surface, Full Speed," the crimson words glared down below, and the *NX-1* at once shoved her snout up, trembling as her great electric motors began their pulsing whine. The delicate fingers of the massed dials before Keith danced exultantly. The depth-levels tolled out:

"Seven thousand ... six thousand ... five thousand—"

"Keith! Look there!"

Hemmy Bowman was pointing with amazement at the location chart, a black mesh screen that showed the position of other submarines within a radius of two miles. In one corner, a spot of vivid red was shining.

"But it can't be a submarine!" Wells objected. "Our reports would have mentioned it!"

The two officers stared at each other.

"'Machine-fish!'" Bowman whispered softly. "If there were machines, the metal would register on the chart."

"It must be them!" the commander roared, coming out of his daze.

"And, by God, we're going after them!"

Rapidly he brought the *NX-1* out of her zoom to the surface, and left her at four thousand feet, in perfect trim, while he read the instruments closely.

A green spot in the center of the location chart denoted the *NX-1's* exact position. A distance of perhaps forty inches separated it from the red light on the meshed screen—which represented, roughly, a mile and a half. Below the chart was a thick dial, over which a black hand, indicating the mysterious submersible's approximate depth, was slowly moving.

"He's sinking—whatever he is," Keith muttered to Hemmy. "Hey, Sparks! Get me Captain Knapp."

A moment later the connection was put through.

"Bob? This is Wells again. Bob, our location chart shows the presence of some strange undersea metallic body. It can't be a submarine, for my maritime reports would show its presence. We think it has some connection with the 'machine-fish' that survivor raved about. At any rate, I'm going after it. The world has a right to know what destroyed that fishing fleet, and since the *NX-1* is right

on the spot it's my duty to track it down. Re-broadcast this news to land stations, will you? I'll keep in touch with you."

Knapp's voice came soberly back. "I guess you're right, Keith; it's up to you.... So long, old man. Good luck!"

In Wells' veins throbbed the lust for action. With control studs at hand, location chart and teleview screen before his eyes and fifteen men waiting below for his commands, he had no fear of any monster the underseas might spew up. He glanced swiftly at the location chart and depth indicator again.

The mysterious red spot was slowly coming across the *NX-1's* bows at a distance of about one mile. Keith punched a stud, and, as his craft filled her tank and slipped down further into deep water, he spoke to Hemmy Bowman.

"Take control for a minute. Keep on all speed, and follow 'em like a bloodhound. I'm going below."

He strode down the connecting ramp to the lower deck, where he found fifteen men standing vigilantly at posts. At once Keith plunged into a full explanation of what he had learned up in the control room. He concluded:

"A great moral burden rests on us—every one of us—as we will soon come face to face with a possible world menace. Anything may happen. A state of war exists on this submarine. You will be prepared for any wartime eventuality!"

Sobered faces greeted this announcement, and perceptibly the men straightened and held themselves more alertly. Wells at once returned to the control room. A glance at the location chart and its two tiny lights told him that the intervening distance had been decreased to about half a mile.

The depth dial showed them both to be two miles below, and steadily diving lower. Charts showed the sea-floor to be three miles deep in this position, and that meant—

"Look there!" exclaimed the first officer suddenly. "It's changing course!"

The crimson stud had suddenly shifted its course, and now was fleeing directly before them. For a moment the distance between the green and red lights remained constant—and then Keith Wells stared unbelievingly at the chart, wiped a hand across his eyes and stared again.

"Why—why, the devils are as fast as we!" he exclaimed in amazement. "I think they're even gaining on us!"

"And there's no other submarine in the world that can do more than thirty under water!" Hemmy Bowman added. "We're hitting a full forty-one!"

A call came through the communication tube from Sparks. "Report from Consolidated Radio News-Broadcasters, sir, aimed especially at us."

"Well?" asked Keith, motioning Hemmy to listen in. Sparks read it.

"'A week ago Atlantic City reported that seven men were snatched off fishing boat by unidentified tentacled monsters. Testimony of witnesses was discredited, but was later corroborated by the almost identical testimony of other witnesses at Brighton Beach, England, who saw man and woman taken by mysterious monsters whilst bathing.' Perhaps these same creatures destroyed the Newfoundland fishing fleet." His level voice ceased.

"Tentacled monsters ... 'machine-fish,'" Wells murmured slowly. "'Machine-fish.'..."

Their eyes met, the same wonder in each. "Well," Keith rapped at last, "we're seeing this through!"

He turned again to the location chart. The green spot as always was in the center, and at a constant distance was the red, showing that the *NX-1* was hot on the other's trail. The depth dials indicated that both were diving deeper every moment.

"Where in hell's it going?" the commander rasped. "We'll be on the floor in a few minutes!"

Here the teleview showed the world to be one of fantasy, one to which the sun did not exist. It was not an utter, pitchy blackness that pervaded the water, but rather a peculiar, dark blueness. No fish schools, Keith noted, scurried from them. They had already left these waters; aware, perhaps, of the passing Terror....

They plunged lower yet. Wells was conscious of Hemmy Bowman's quick, uneven breathing. Conscious of the tautness of his own nerves, strung like quivering violin strings. Conscious of the terrific walls of water pressing in on them. And conscious of the men below, their lives bound implicitly in his will and brain....

A thought came to him, and quickly he reached into a rack for the

chart of the local sea-floor. His brow creased with puzzlement as he studied it.

"Here's more mystery, Hemmy," he muttered. "Look—there's an underwater cliff about half a mile dead ahead. It rises to within four thousand feet of the surface. And that thing out there is charging straight into its base!"

"They must be aware of it," jerked the other. "See?—they've stopped!"

It was true. The gulf between the two colored spots was rapidly being swallowed up. At a pulsing forty-one knots the *NX-1* was closing in on the motionless mystery craft.

"They're sinking to the floor itself," observed Wells. "Perhaps waiting to attack."

The invisible beams from their ultra-violet light-beacons streamed through the silent gloom outside, yet still the teleview screen was empty. Keith punched a stud, and the *NX-1's* whining motors dulled to a scarcely audible purr.

"What is the thing?" muttered Hemmy Bowman. "God, Keith, what

is it?"

For answer, the commander dropped them the last five hundred feet. The sea-floor rose like a gray ghost. More control studs were pushed; the order-board below read: "All Power Off, Rest in Trim." The location chart told a tale that wrung a gasp from Bowman's throat. The red and green lights were practically touching....

The hands of Petty Officer Brown, the helmsman, were quivering on the helm. Wells' fists kept tensing and relaxing as he peered for a sight of the enemy in the teleview. Nothing showed but the moving fingers of spectral kelp. Then both he and Bowman cried out as one:

"*There!*"

Chapter 2: The Silent Ray

A strange shape had suddenly materialized on the screen—an immense, oval-shaped thing of dull metal, with great curving cuts of glass-like substance in its blunt bow, like staring eyes; a lifeless, staring thing, stretching far into the curtain of gloom behind. How long it was, Keith could not tell; at first his numb brain refused to grasp it and reduce it to definite, sane standards of size and length. The cold weeds of the sea-floor kelp beds swayed eerily over and around it. From its bow, he saw, peculiar knobs jutted, the function of which he guessed with dread.

Was it waiting with a purpose? Was it waiting—and inviting attack?

A frightened whisper from Hemmy Bowman broke the hush:

"Keith, the thing has ports, but shows no lights! What kind of creatures can they be?"

As he spoke, the three men in the control room felt the unmistakable, jarring tingle of an electric shock. And while their nerves still jumped, it came again; and again. They were conscious of a slight feeling of drowsiness.

Keith gaped at Bowman and Brown, and then a flash on the teleview screen drew his eyes. There, against the blackness of its otherwise inanimate hulk, one of the jutting knobs on the bow of the mysterious submarine was glowing and pulsing with orange life! With it came the tingling shock again. It flicked off as they watched, then returned and went once more.

"They're attacking, but thank God the shock was harmless!" Wells said grimly. "All right; they've asked for it: I'm going to see how they like the taste of a torpedo!"

The two submarines were resting on the ocean floor with perhaps two hundred feet between them. The *NX-1's* bow tubes were not exactly in line to score a direct hit; she would have to be maneuvered slightly to port. The range was short; the explosion from the torpedoes would be titanic.

Keith punched the control studs, ordering the men below to assume firing stations. Then, while waiting for the *NX-1* to shift, he studied the teleview screen to sight the range exactly. The black dot which represented the enemy craft was not directly on the crossed hair-lines of the dial-like range-finder, but shifting the *NX-1* a few feet would bring it to the perfect firing point.

But the *NX-1* did not budge.

Surprised, her commander swung and looked at Bowman. "What the devil?" he cried. "Did that shock—?" He left the dread thought unfinished and leaped to the speaking tubes.

"Craig! Jones! Wetherby!" he yelled. "Men! Don't you hear me? Aren't you—"

He broke off, wordless, waiting for an answer that did not come, then sprang to the connecting ramp and ran to the deck below.

The scene he found halted him abruptly in his tracks. Every member of the crew was sprawled on the deck, in grotesque, limp postures. They had been standing rigidly at posts, he saw, when the thing, whatever it was, had struck. Without a sound, without a single cry of alarm, the *NX-1's* crew had been laid low!

The commander slowly advanced to the deck and stared more closely at the upturned faces around him. He saw that every man's eyes were open.

Bending over one still form, he pressed his hand on the heart. It was beating! The man was alive! Amazed, he moved to another and

another: they were all breathing, slowly and regularly—were all alive! A curious look in their eyes staggered him for a moment. He could swear that they recognized him, knew he was staring at them—for every single pair was alight with intelligence, and Keith fancied he saw gleams of recognition.

"It must have been a paralyzing ray!" he gasped. "A thing our scientists've been trying to develop for years.... And that monster outside knows the secret...." He lifted an arm of the inert figure at his feet; when he released the grip, it flopped limply back to the deck again.

"*Keith! Come back, quick!*"

Startled, the commander turned to find Hemingway Bowman at the top of the connecting ramp, his face distorted with alarm.

"For God's sake, come back quick!" he yelled again. "Down there the ray might get you!"

With the words, Wells leaped to the ramp and raced to the control room. He had no sooner made it than he felt again the queer tingle of the electric charge. He found himself trembling. Bowman's face was white. His words came stuttering.

"One second later and they'd have got you.... They got Sparks in his cubby.... You see, the ray doesn't affect us in the control room because—"

"Because the Gibson insulation that protects the instruments keeps it out!" Keith finished grimly. "I see!"

Just then a slight jar ran through the submarine. Coincident with it came a cry from Brown, the helmsman. His arm was pointed at the teleview.

There they saw the enemy's mighty dirigible of metal was now within thirty feet of the *NX-1*. It had crept up silently, without warning. And, spanning the short gulf between them, an arm of webbed metal craned from the other's huge bow, hooking tightly into the American submarine's forward hawser holes!

As they took this in, the enemy ship moved away and the arm of metal tightened. The *NX-1* shuddered. And, at first slowly, but with ever increasing speed, she got under way and slid after her captor. They were being towed away. Kidnaped! Men, submarine and all!

Keith Wells mopped sweat from a hot brow and rapidly reviewed his weapons. He was sorely restricted. Through an emergency system

the *NX-1* could be propelled and maneuvered from her control room; but the torpedo tubes needed local attendance.

"Hemmy, reverse engines," he jerked, himself spinning over a small wheel. "Let's see if we can out-pull the devil!"

At once they felt the shock of the paralyzing ray, and then the surging whine of the Edsel electrics pulsed up and in the teleview screen they watched the grim struggle of ship against ship.

Imperceptibly, almost, as her screws cut in and churned, the forward progress of the *NX-1* was slowing, the speed of the other being cut down, until finally they but barely forged ahead. Slowly, ever so slowly they were out-pulled; inch by inch they were dragged ahead. Their motors could not hold even.

"She's more powerful than we!" Wells' bitter voice spoke. "Damn!" He thought desperately, while Bowman and Brown stared at the fantastic tale the teleview spelled out.

Again the paralyzing shock tingled, an intangible jailer that bound them, more surely than steel bars, to the control room. To dare that streaming barrage meant instant impotence, and perhaps, later, death....

"Our two bow torpedoes," Keith mused slowly. "We're a bit close, but it's our only chance. The ray comes at intervals of about a minute; the torps are ready for firing. If one of us could dash forward and discharge 'em.... Brown, that's you!"

The petty officer met his commander's gaze levelly. He smiled. "Yes, sir, I'm ready!" he said.

"Good! It'll have to be quick work, though; I'll try and keep the sub pointed straight. Wait for the ray, then run like hell!"

The first officer took over the helm and Brown stepped to the forward ladder, waiting for the periodic ray to be discharged.

The odd tingle came and vanished. "Now!" Wells roared, and Brown leaped down the thin steel rungs.

He staggered at the bottom from the force of his impact, then straightened and raced madly forward. Through the drone of the motors the two officers could hear the staccato beat of his feet.

But their eyes were glued to the teleview. Through clutching beds of seaweed the enemy submarine was ploughing. Her great, smooth bow lay straight ahead, metal hawser arm spanning the thirty feet

between them. In another second, Keith thought grimly, two dynamite packed tubes of sudden death would thunderbolt into that hull, and—

Brown pulled the lever.

The tubes spat out compressed air; a scream ran through the submarine; and the two steel fish leaped from their sheaths, their tiny props roaring. Over the narrow gulf they shot; the range was short, their target dead ahead—and yet by bare inches they missed!

No answering roar bellowed back. Keith had watched their course; had seen them flash by the enemy's bow, flicking it with their rudders, but nothing more. "Why?" he cried. And, as Bowman moved his hands in a hopeless gesture, he saw in the teleview the reason.

It was a jagged pinnacle of rock, which, just before Brown had fired, had been straight ahead. The towing monster had seen it and veered sharply to avoid crashing. The barest change of course, yet sufficient to avoid the torpedoes….

Wells and Bowman were cursing savagely when the sound of Brown, racing desperately aft, jerked the commander to the ladder.

He saw the petty officer at its foot. "Hurry!" Wells shouted. "The ray!"

Brown grasped the steel rungs and scrambled upward, but he was too late. The fatal charge tingled. A peculiar, surprised expression washed over his face; his hands loosened their grip. For a second his eyes looked questioningly at his commander; a faint sigh escaped him; and then his arms flung out, his body relaxed, and he slumped like a slab of meat to the deck below....

Keith Wells saw red. Blind to everything, he was just about to charge down the ladder to himself re-load the forward tubes when the grip of Hemmy Bowman's hand stayed him. The thing Hemmy was staring at in the teleview screen sobered him completely.

The wall of rock to which the enemy submarine had first been charging had become visible, soaring vastly from the gloom of the sea-floor. And the monster was towing them straight into a dark, jagged cleft at its base.

"It's a cavern!" Keith breathed. "A split in the rock—the lair of that devil. And we're being dragged into it!"

Chapter 3: Sacrifice

At that moment Keith Wells knew fear. Each second they were being hauled closer to the monster's dim lair. It lay there, dark, mysterious, fingered by gently swaying, clammy kelp. A hushed solitude seemed to reign over it, aweing all undersea life from the vicinity.... Wells turned his head to meet Bowman's eyes, and read in them a silent question.

What now?

He groaned in the agony of his mind. In a few minutes, all would be over. Once the *NX-1* was dragged into that dark cavern there'd be no chance of escaping to warn the world above, of saving the submarine. What now? The question brought beads of sweat to his tormented brow. He, Keith Wells, standing impotently by while his ship, the pride of the service, was hauled inch by inch to some strange doom!

Racked by these thoughts, he murmured tortured, jerky phrases, unconscious he was giving voice to the things that flogged his brain.

"What can I do? I've got to save my ship—I've got to get back to break the news—I've got to tell the world! But how? How—" His

expression changed suddenly. "That's it! That hawser arm between us must be broken!"

"Yes."

First Officer Hemingway Bowman's clear voice broke in on the older man's thoughts with that one crisp word. Keith swung to find the other's eyes fixed levelly on his.

"You're right, Keith. The hawser arm must be broken; with a depth charge, of course. It's the only way.

"To attach a depth charge," he continued evenly, "a man must leave the ship. You can't, Keith. It will be me."

The commander did not speak. "I'll put on a sea-suit," Hemmy went on quickly, eyes lighting. "You tip the submarine and I'll slide out the conning tower exit port on the lee side, so they can't see me, and worm forward through the kelp. We're almost holding them even; that'll be easy. I'll be protected from the paralyzing shock until the last second, and it may not get me outside; that'll have to be chanced. The hawser arm's only some ten feet above the sea-floor; I can reach it with a hook on the charge." He paused.

"I'll attach it; and when it bursts I'll try to get back and grab that ring on the midships exit port, and you can let me in when we get to the surface. But if I take too long, Keith—if I miss—you beat it without me. You understand? Beat it!"

He gazed straight at his friend. "Understand, Keith?"

Commander Keith Wells bowed his head in acquiescence. He was afraid that if he met Hemmy Bowman's steady eyes he'd make a fool of himself....

Hemmy glanced at the screen once more, shivering as he saw how near the black cavern was. Then he moved rapidly, playing the cards carefully for his gamble with death. He had to: the trumps were in the other hand.

From the locker where their sea-suits were stowed he grabbed his own, and with quick fingers ripped the slides and fitted it on. A sheath of yellow Lestofabrik, its weighted feet and gleaming casque transformed his slim figure into a giant such as might stalk through a nightmare. Built cunningly into the helmet was a tiny radio transmitter and receiver, with a range of a quarter-mile; hugging to the shoulders, inside nestled the air-making mechanism, its tiny generators already in motion. Around the helmet was fastened a

small removable undersea-light. The wrists of the suit were very flexible, permitting the freest motion.

Once in the suit, Hemmy smiled through the still-opened face-shield.

"Got the depth charge ready, Keith? Make it fast—that cavern's near!... Good!"

Silently the commander fitted the black bomb to his friend's shoulders. It was timed to fire a minute after being set. A long wire hook craned from its top, and this hook Bowman would fasten on the hawser arm.

"Without Sparks, I guess I'll have to communicate with you through portable," Keith said, and quickly donned one of the tiny portable sets.

"Right. Ready, Keith."

Bowman started his awkward, crawling progress up the ladder into the conning tower just above, Keith helping from behind. When they stood before the exit port on the lee side, Wells shot back its bolts and the door swung open, revealing the black emptiness of the water chamber. The commander gazed for a second into Bowman's eyes.

The moment had come.

Keith turned his head away, felt a hand grip his. He wrung it tightly....

Bowman clumped into the chamber.

The commander closed and locked the door, and he heard the streaming water pour in as Hemmy turned the valve. Then Wells sped down the ladder and tilted the diving and course rudders of the submarine.

She swayed daintily over to port; held there. A moment later the recurring electric tingle brushed him. Had the enemy seen Bowman leave? Had the ray struck him down?

He glared into the teleview. "Thank God!" he breathed. For Hemmy had already slid down the *NX-1's* smooth hull and was safe on the sea-floor beside her.

"Everything right?" Wells asked, speaking into the microphone of his portable.

"All O.K.," came the answer. "Going forward now. Kelp thick as hell."

Keith's eyes bored at the screen. This misshapen monster who was his friend! Almost obscured by bands of thick-leaved kelp the yellow form moved, hands clearing a pathway through the weeds. Slowly but surely he made for the bow of the submersible.

"Hard going, Keith. God—the cavern's right ahead!"

It was ghostly to hear Hemmy's warm voice from the lifeless solitude outside. Breath coming quickly, Wells watched the silent scene—the cleft in the wall of rock overshadowing everything now. The diver fought ahead, gaining inch by inch.

Now, save for occasional clumps of weed, he was exposed to the enemy.... Now the last desperate gauntlet was reached.... Keith felt his blood pound hotly.

"I'm gaining, Keith. Gaining...."

Bowman had little breath for speech. His tiny form battled on, now sinking from sight as he dropped into some masked gully, now wrestling slowly with great swaying strands of kelp, but always struggling ahead.

"I'm at the bow, Keith! The hawser arm's right in our mooring holes.

I'll go halfway before fastening the charge. Any signs of life from the devil?"

"None yet, Hemmy. But go slow. Hide all you can, old man, for God's sake!..."

Right beneath the metal arm, Bowman's dwarfed figure crept doggedly ahead. Forward, inch by breathless inch. Kelp thickened, washed away; the two hulking submersibles, captor and captive, surged onward—but just a little faster went the valiant figure with the black charge on its back.

The towing monster had its snout in the cavern. The darkness thickened. Bowman was quarter way!

He plunged desperately. Half way!

"I'm there, Keith! Now for it!"

"Oh, God!" Wells cried. "They see you; they're coming!"

For he had seen strange shapes leaving the enemy submarine.

And at that same moment, Bowman saw them, too.

They came like the blink of a dark eye from a door that had quickly slid open in the mysterious ship's bow. As tall as a man they were, and there were two of them, though at first the nature of their bodies merged with the wreathing kelp made them seem like a dozen. Bowman stared at them, hypnotized with fear. His legs and arms went dead, and his whole gallant spirit seemed to slump into lifeless clay. Now he knew why the fishermen had shrieked "machine-fish." Each one of them had eight tapering arms, eight restless tentacles. These were octopi, most hideous scavengers of the ocean floor! And not only octopi—but octopi sheathed in metal-scaled armor!

As they came closer, he realized this preposterous fact. The dark substance of their writhing tentacles was not flesh: it was a coat of metal scales. And the fat central mass which held their eyes and vital organs and beaked jaw—this mass was completely enveloped by a globe of glass. From inside, he could see great eyes staring at him. The monsters came towards him quite slowly, obviously wary, advancing over the sea-floor in what was a hideous mockery of walking, their forward tentacles outstretched.

With a sob, Hemmy Bowman pulled himself from his trance. He glanced back at the *NX-1*. He still had time to retreat. He might be able to get back inside before these monsters seized him.

But that meant abandoning his job. And already his own submarine was nosing into the cavern. The choice between the octopi and retreat stared him in the face. He pulled himself together and jerked his arms back to action.

Eyes bulging, Keith Wells peered at the dim teleview screen. He saw the creatures approaching Hemmy. And then, suddenly, he remembered his radiophone.

"Hemmy! Come back, for God's sake!" he cried. "Come back while you can—it's hopeless!"

But Bowman had already seized the depth charge from his back and hooked it on the hawser arm above.

Immediately, with that action, all caution fled from the approaching monsters. Their tentacles whipped furiously; and in a great arc they sprang for the tiny figure of the diver.

With a deep breath, Hemmy staggered forward to meet them. "Keith!" he gasped. "I'll try to hold 'em away from the charge! When it bursts, zoom! Zoom like hell to the surface!" And then the tentacles had him.

Keith watched, cursing his impotence to help. Hemmy had no weapon; he was trying to hold them back by the weight of his body; he reached out and grasped a tentacle and hugged it to him, shoving forward with all his puny strength. But all his effort was as nothing. One of the octopi writhed past him and darted onto the depth charge. Its tentacles tugged at the bomb; pulled furiously.

The time charge exploded. The *NX-1* rocked like a quivering reed; Wells was knocked violently to the floor; a vast roar smote his ear-drums. When he staggered to his feet he found that the octopus that was pulling at the charge had disappeared—blown into fragments of flesh and metal. But the hawser arm was broken! The *NX-1*, free, shot back a full fifty feet under the pull of her reversed screws. A cry echoed in her commander's ears:

"Go back, Keith! Go like hell!"

He saw the remaining octopus lift Bowman and whip to the exit port of its submarine. The lid slid into place, closing on the monster and his friend, and the enemy ship vanished into the black cavern....

Once clear of the opening, Keith set his motors full forward and brought the diving rudders up. Quickly the ship sped from the haunted sea-floor to the sun-warmed surface. A last thin call rang in

his radiophone:

"They've got me inside, Keith. It's dark, and filled with water. I can't see anything, but I—I guess we're going through the cavern.... Forget about me, old boy. So long! So—”

The voice was abruptly cut off.

Keith ripped the instrument from his head. Then, face white and drawn, he ran to the radio cubby. Standing over Sparks' inert body, he put through a call to Robert Knapp, on the *Falcon*.

"Knapp?" he said harshly. "This is Wells. I'll be with you in a few minutes. Yes—yes—I'll tell you the whole story later. But get this now: Have the day shift all ready to take over the submarine by the time I pull alongside."

He said no more just then; but rang off, and, looking back, he muttered savagely:

"But I'll be back, Hemmy—I'll be back!"

Chapter 4: In the Cavern

“That's the story, Knapp. They got Bowman, and I had to run away. Their ship disappeared into the cavern. I've got a hunch, though, that it's not just a cavern, but a tunnel, leading through to some underwater world. That series of sub-sea earthquakes probably opened it up; and now these devil-octopi are free to pour out. I've *got* to find out what's what, and that's why I'm going down again as soon as the torpedo system's ready!"

Keith and Robert Knapp were in the *Falcon's* chart room. On the table before them lay a broad white map with a cross-mark indicating the position of the mysterious dark cavern.

Wells was striding up and down like a caged tiger in his impatience to be off. Every other minute he glared down to where the *NX-1* lay alongside. On her conning tower stood the tall blond-haired figure of Graham, the first officer of the day shift, supervising the final details of the work of installing a system of jury controls whereby the submarine's torpedoes could be fired from her control room.

Keith stopped short and faced Knapp. "It won't be so one-sided this time, Bob," he promised. "You see: when the location chart shows the enemy ship, I'll rush all men into the control room, where the

paralyzing ray can't harm them. I don't know but what they have in other weapons, but I'm gambling on getting my torps in first. They've killed Bowman; they've ravaged a whole fishing fleet; they're free to emerge from their hole and maraud every ocean on the globe! They've got to be stopped! And since I'm armed and have the only submarine on the spot, I've got to do it! I know how to fight them now!"

Captain Robert Knapp's sense of things was badly disordered. He had just heard a story which his common sense told him couldn't be true, but which the evidence of his eyes had grimly authenticated. He had seen fifteen men slung aboard his ship from the *NX-1's* silent hull; men stretched in grotesque, limp attitudes; men struck down by a paralyzing ray. Why, no nation on earth had developed rays for warfare! Yet—a crew of helpless men was even then in the sick bay, receiving attention in the hope that they might recover.

"You're going right through that cavern, then, Wells?" he asked incredulously. "You're going to investigate what lies beyond?"

"Nothing else! And I won't come out till I've blown that octopi ship to pieces!"

"It sounds preposterous," Knapp murmured, shaking his head.

"Octopi, you say—and clad in metal suits! Running a submarine more powerful than the *NX-1*! Armed with a ray—a paralyzing ray! I can't believe—I can't conceive—"

"You've seen the men!... Knapp, if I were you I'd swing my eight-inchers out, bring up the plane catapult and keep the deck torpedo tubes loaded and ready. It's best to be prepared; God knows what's going on underseas these days!"

First Officer Graham appeared at the door. "Work finished, sir," he said. "Ready to cast off."

"Thank heaven!" Wells muttered, and stretched out his hand to Robert Knapp. "Broadcast what I've told you, Bob, and say that the *NX-1* won't be back till everything's under control. I'll keep in touch with you. So long!" And he was gone before the captain could even wish him good luck.

Orders raced from her commander's fingers on the stud board in the control room. "Crash Dive" filled her tanks and put her nose perilously down, so that in thirty seconds only a swirling patch of water was left to show where once she'd lain. A brief command to the helmsman and she pointed straight for the dark cavern marked on the chart.

When well under way, Keith descended with Graham to inspect the new torpedo firing system, and found it in good working order. "Graham," he ordered tersely, "instruct the crew fully about rushing to the control room on one ring of the general alarm. And send the cook up to me in a minute or so. I'll be in Sparks' cubby."

Above again, he instructed the radio man to rig a remote control sender and receiver in the insulated control room. The need for centering the whole crew there during engagements would crowd the room awkwardly, but at other times, while proceeding on their inspection of the cavern lair, they could remain at their regular posts.

That, at least, was Wells' plan.

He looked up and found the cook, McKegnie, grinning at him from the door of the control room. Keith smiled, running his eyes over the portly magnificence of his gently perspiring figure. "Keg," he said cheerfully, "I want you to move your hot plate and culinary apparatus up here; you see, we're all likely to be crowded in here for some time, and your coffee's going to be an absolute necessity." He couldn't resist a crack at McKegnie's well-known and passionate curiosity as to what made the thigmajigs of the control board work: "And besides, it'll give you a chance to observe the instruments and perfect yourself for your future career as a naval officer. Much better

than a correspondence course in 'How to Be a Submarine Commander,' eh?"

Cook McKegnie grinned sheepishly, and left. He was well used to such jests, but he never would admit that his extraordinary interest in watching the ship's wheels go round was accompanied by a miraculous inability to comprehend why they went round....

Fifteen minutes later the helmsman's cry, "Cavern showing, sir!" swung the commander to the teleview screen. The dark, kelp-shrouded opening he knew so well was already looming on it. And he was prepared.

"Enter," he said, while his punched studs ordered, "Quarter Speed, Ready at Posts, Tanks in Trim." The *NX-1* slackened her gait, balanced cautiously, and struck a straight, even course as she crept closer to the cleft entrance through which, some two hours earlier, the octopi ship had nosed.

Screws turning slowly, she edged through the jagged cavern. Shades of inky blackness grew on the teleview and danced in fantastic blotches; the screen turned to a welter of black, threatening shadows; became a useless maze of ever-changing forms. Keith mouthed curses as he stared at it; he now had nothing by which to judge his

progress, to maneuver the submarine, save directional instruments and, perhaps, chance scrapings of the tunnel's ragged walls against the outer hull. The *NX-1* was running a gauntlet of immeasurable danger, her only assurance of success being the fact that a larger craft had preceded her.

But how far, Keith wondered, had that ship preceded her? How was he to know that it had gone straight through? There might be a dozen different turnings in this tunnel: the submarine could easily tilt head-on against a jagged rock and puncture her hull. There might be mines planted directly in their course; he might be swimming straight into some hideous ambuscade.

He drove these thoughts from his mind. The passage had to be made on the fickle authority of the senses; and, realizing this, Wells took the helm into his own hands. Graham was posted at the location chart, with instructions to report the red light if it showed.

Down below, the Edsel electrics were humming very softly; the men stood vigilantly at posts. On their brows were little beads of sweat, and here and there a hand clenched nervously. All knew they were in a tight place; otherwise they were ignorant of where their commander was leading them. Occasionally a long, shivering rasp ran through the ship as her hull nudged the rough tunnel wall. Then

the course rudders would swing gently over; and perhaps, almost immediately, another grinding cry of rock and steel would come from the other side. Then would come quickly indrawn breaths as the rudders swung again and the humming silence droned on.

The scrapings came quite often. Often, too, the motors would go silent altogether, and the *NX-1* would rest almost motionless as her commander felt for an opening. It was a tense, nerve-wringing ordeal. The silence, the waiting, the dainty scrapings were maddening.

Keith Wells' skin was prickling. He kept only fingertips on the tiny helm: he was playing that uncanny sixth sense of the submarine commander. When it misled him, the rasping rock groaned out, scarring the submarine's smooth skin. Generally, the tunnel was straight; but each time he heard his ship rub against some exterior obstruction, his teeth went tight—for who knew but what it might be a mine?

They had penetrated perhaps a half-mile when Graham, eyes steady on the teleview, reported: "Light growing, sir!"

Wells saw that the screen was filling with a soft, faintly glowing bluish color. The walls of the tunnel became visible, and he noted

that they were widening out, funnel-like. He dared to increase speed slightly. Three minutes later he saw that the blue illumination was seeping from the end of the tunnel. They continued out.

"Thank God, we're through!" he muttered to Graham. "You see, I was right! It's an underground sea—and we're at the top of it." For the instruments indicated a depth beneath them of roughly three miles. They were in, evidently, a large cavern, of vast length and depth.

The *NX-1* continued slowly forward, two pairs of eyes intent on her teleview screen. Keith jotted down the tunnel's position, and the funnel-shaped hole sank away behind their slow screws. And then, upon the location chart, a faint red dot suddenly glowed!

It was upon them in a flash. A small tube of metal, shaped somewhat in the form of the big octopi submarine, had darted up from below, hovered a second close to them, and then, almost before they realized they were being surveyed, sped back into the mysterious depths from which it had come.

"A lookout, I suppose," Keith muttered, breathing more easily. "Couldn't have held more than two of those creatures.... Well, the alarm's out, I guess, Graham, but it can't be helped. Let's see what it's

like down below."

They plunged steadily down, then ahead. And presently there grew on the teleview vague forms which widened their eyes and made their breath come quicker. Keith had guessed the tunnel led to a civilization of some kind, but he was not prepared for the sight that loomed hazily through the soft blue water.

Strange, moundlike shapes appeared far below, mounds grouped in orderly rows and clusters, with streets running between them, thronged with tiny, spidery dots. Octopi! It was, the commander realized, a city of the monsters—a complete city like those of surface peoples! For several miles in every direction the water-city spread out, farther than the teleview could pierce. Wells marveled at this separately developed civilization, this deep-buried realm of octopi whose unexpected intellectual powers had permitted such development. Perhaps, he pondered, this city was only one of many; perhaps only a village. He could but vaguely glimpse the queer mound buildings, but saw that they were of varying height and were filled with dark round entrance holes, through which the creatures streamed on their different errands....

He saw no schools of fish around. "I guess they're been all killed off, or eaten," he commented to the wonder-struck Graham. "Probably

the octopi have separate hatcheries where they raise them for food."

"But—good Lord!" the first officer exclaimed. "A city—a city like ours! Down here, filled with octopi!..."

"Yes," answered Wells grimly, "and this 'city' may only be a small settlement; there may be scores of these places. We'd better continue ahead now that we're here; for we've got to get all the information we can. I only hope these monsters haven't more than one big submarine. We can expect an attack any minute...."

The *NX-1* pressed on. The city dropped behind. A breathless tenseness had settled down over the submarine; she was proceeding with utmost caution, her anxious officers alert at the location chart. The great fear that tormented them was that they might be attacked, not by one, but by a fleet of the octopi ships....

Then, at the rim of the chart, a red dot appeared! It grew rapidly, charging down on them at great speed. The spot was large; this was no small sentry boat! At once the alarm bell shrilled its warning; the crew below left their posts and raced to the control room. With sure mechanical fingers the emergency system gripped the valve handles and motor levers; Keith swung the *NX-1* onto a level keel, straightened her out, and decreased speed still more. Giving the rods

of the motor and rudder controls to Graham, he moved to the small lever which would unleash his bow torpedoes, and fingered it lightly. The *NX-1* was ready for action.

Scarcely had the men reached the small control room than the familiar electric charge tingled. They stared wonderingly at each other, half afraid. No one seemed hurt. One hand on the torpedo lever, Wells watched his charts and instruments. He thanked God that there was only one of the enemy.

The ray's shock came again—and stronger. The red dot was practically upon them. The screen was still empty. Coolly, Keith slowed the submarine to a dead stop. The crimson stud came closer....

And then he saw it. It was the same fearsome, hulking form. The same curving windows, dark and lifeless. The same knobs on its bow, one now leaping and pulsing with the paralyzing glow. At a distance of a few hundred feet the octopi ship swerved to a halt, dousing the NX-1 with its ray unceasingly. Again those two underwater craft, so oddly contrasted, were face to face. And again the weapon that had once struck the American ship's crew down at their posts was directed full onto the *NX-1*.

But it was harmless! It merely tingled, and did not paralyze! The control room sheathing held it out stoutly. The men's faces showed overwhelming relief.

Keith smiled grimly. Now, at least, he had the devils where he wanted them; now it was his turn to strike with a—to them—terrible, mysterious weapon. They had attacked; had failed—and now he could square up for Hemmy and send a pair of torpedoes into that ship of hideous tentacles.

"Port five!" The ship swerved slightly. "Hold even!" The enemy craft was very close. The *NX-1's* bow tubes were sighted in direct line. Her torpedoes could not possibly miss. This time, destruction for the octopi ship was inevitable....

Keith Wells gripped the lever that held the torps in leash.

"*Wait!*"

Sparks, a bare foot from him, yelled out the word. Wells, alarmed, released his grip on the knob. The radio operator was listening intently, a circle of taut faces around his crouched back. He swung excitedly around.

"For God's sake, don't fire!" he cried. "Hemingway Bowman's on that submarine! He's alive—and calling for you!"

Chapter 5: The Other Weapon

Bowman—alive!

Keith Wells let go the torpedo lever. His whole orderly plan of action was crashed in a second.—For an instant he stood gaping at the radio man, forgetful of the peril outside, striving desperately to hit on some way of surmounting this unlooked-for obstacle. The idea of firing on his friend—killing Hemmy Bowman with his own hand—paralyzed his brain.

And in that unguarded instant the octopi struck.

From the bow of the enemy submarine, slanting from another of its peculiar knobs, a narrow beam of violet light poured, cutting a vivid swathe across the teleview. The huddled men stared at it, not comprehending what it was. They felt no shock of electricity, nor could they discern any other harmful effect. The ray held steadily on their bow, not varying in the slightest, for a full thirty seconds. And still none of them could feel or see any damage.

Wells, however, gradually became aware that he was bathed in perspiration, that great streams of sweat were coursing down his face. A quick glance told him that every member of the crew was the

same way; and then, suddenly, he was conscious of a wave of intense heat—heat which quickly became terrific. The control room was stifling!

Before he could act, the *NX-1* slipped sharply to one side. A sharp hissing sound grew at her bow, climbing steadily to a shriek. Long streamers of white steam crept along the lower deck and seeped up into the control room. And then rose the fatal sound of rushing water—water pouring into the submarine from outside!

For the violet beam was a heat ray—a weapon surface civilizations had not yet developed. While the *NX-1's* crew had stared at it in the teleview, it had melted a hole in their bow.

Immediately the submarine lost trim, and the deck tilted ominously. In the face of material danger—danger from a source he understood—the commander became cool and methodical.

"Sea-suits on!" he snapped. "Then forward and break out steel collision-mat and weld it in place! Every man! You, too, Sparks and McKegnie!"

"But—but, sir!" stammered Graham. "Do you want them to get us with their paralyzing ray?"

"You'd rather drown?" Wells flung back. Silenced, the first officer donned his sea-suit, and in thirty seconds the rest of the crew had theirs on and were cluttering clumsily forward.

Alone in the control room, Keith battled with the unbalancing flow of water, maneuvering with all his skill in a futile attempt to keep the *NX-1* on even keel. The men forward worked with great speed, spurred on by the realization that they were fighting death itself, but even as they labored the submarine swung in ever increasing rolls and dips; the great weight of water she had shipped slopped back and forth; her bow went steadily down. Keith swept her forward tanks clean of water, always conscious of the immobile, staring octopi submarine in the teleview, watching them, it seemed, curiously, and not driving home their advantage with additional bolts of the violet heat ray.

Despite her commander's frantic efforts, the *NX-1* fluttered down remorselessly; the cavern floor rose, and, sinking with them, came the octopi craft, in slow mockery of a fighting plane pursuing its stricken foe to the very ground....

She struck bottom with a soft, thudding jar, and settled on even keel. At once Wells released the helm, jumped into his own sea-suit and stumbled down to take command.

He found the steel collision-mat in place, and the welding of it nearly completed. A few feathery trickles of water still seeped through on each side, but under his terse directions the pumps were soon draining it out. The weird figures of the crew in their sea-suits looked like creatures from another planet as they rapidly finished the job.

"All right—up to the control room, everybody! Fast!" Wells roared.

The men stumbled aft as rapidly as they could in their cumbersome suits. Several were already on the ladder. A few feet further—

But at that moment the paralyzing ray again stabbed into the ship—and Keith Wells slumped helplessly to the deck. And as he crumpled, he glimpsed the grotesque, falling figures of his men, and saw one come tumbling down the ladder from the control room, where he had almost reached safety....

Peculiar sensations, unendurable thoughts raced through the commander as he lay there limply. He knew his predicament. He wanted desperately to rise, to rush to the control room. Time and time again in those first few moments of impotence he strove mightily to pull his limbs back to life. But his greatest efforts were barren of result, save to leave him feeling still weaker. The fate that

he had seen strike down Brown now enmeshed him. He was paralyzed. Helpless. In the midst of his crew.

After a moment all sensation left his body. His limbs might not have existed. Sensation, pain, lived only in his brain—and there it was terrible, because self-created.

He found himself sprawled flat on his back, his eyes directed stiffly upward. He could not move them, but out of the corners he vaguely sensed the other figures around him. Helpless, every one! And who knew if they would ever come out of the spell! Victory had gone to the octopi....

Minutes that seemed like hours passed. And then a well-remembered voice sounded in the radio earphones in his helmet. It was Hemmy Bowman, speaking from the enemy ship.

"Keith! Keith Wells! Are you there?" the voice cried. "Keith! What have they done to you?"

And Keith, he could not answer! He could not answer that troubled voice of his friend—that voice from a friend he had thought dead.

Again Bowman spoke. "Keith! Can't you hear me? What are they

doing to you? Oh—" For a moment it stopped, then came once more, thick with anguish. "Oh, God, what's happened?" Then lower: "If only there were light, so I could see what they're doing...." The voice tapered into silence. Keith could picture Hemmy, probably bound, giving him up for dead....

Then, quite distinctly, he heard a clank at the *NX-1's* bow! The submarine jerked, her bow tilted up—and with increasing speed she moved forward, silently as a ghost.

Keith thought he knew what that meant. The octopi ship had grasped them with another of its hawser arms, and was pulling them away. But where to? One of those mound cities? His brain was a turmoil as he tried to imagine what was before them. But all he could do was lie there and wait.

The American craft was towed for perhaps ten minutes—ten ages to her commander—then coasted slowly to a pause, and with a sharp jar settled into rest. As she did so, every light in her hull went suddenly out.

It had been bad enough with the lights on, but the darkness was far worse. The submarine was a tomb—as silent as one, and full of men who lived and yet were dead. Hemmy Bowman's voice came no

more to Wells. He was alone with his moiling doubts and fears and unanswerable questions, and he knew that every other man there was alone with them, too....

As his eyes became partially accustomed to the darkness, he could distinguish vaguely the forms of the familiar mechanisms above him. A slight noise grew suddenly and resolved itself into a prolonged scraping along the outer hull of the submarine. At intervals it paused and gave way to a series of sharp, definite taps.

Keith realized what those sounds signified: the octopi were striving to find some entrance to the *NX-1*! This, he told himself, was the end. The creatures would break through; water would rush in, and every man would drown. For the face-shields of their sea-suits were open!

The dull scrapings ran completely around the motionless submarine, punctuated with the same staccato tappings. By the movement of the sound, Wells realized the octopi were approaching the lower starboard exit port. And as they neared that port, the noise abruptly stopped.

Then for some minutes silence fell. Next, the commander heard what was unmistakably the exit port's water chamber being filled—and a

moment later emptied again. The devilish creatures had solved the puzzle of the means of entrance!

In the awful darkness the inner door of the port swung open. A slow, slithering sound came to Wells' ears. He sensed, though he could not see, the presence of alien creature. An odor struck his nostrils—that of fish....

A deliberate something crawled directly across one outstretched arm, and another across his legs. And above him loomed a monstrous, complicated shadow, which, after a moment, slowly melted from his line of vision. Panicky, he strove again to bring his limbs back to life, but still could not....

Keith knew that in the darkness which their huge unblinking eyes could penetrate they were inspecting the *NX-1's* interior, examining the men stretched on its deck, feeling them with their cold metal-scaled tentacles. Another complicated shadow crept back over the commander's line of sight, and from all around rose the slithering, shuffling tread of the octopi's many tentacles, rasping on the steel flooring.

Sweat from Wells' forehead trickled down and stung his eyes as he lay in that dark agony. There seemed to be countless investigating

tentacles feeling through the entire submarine. One of them, iron-hard, suddenly coiled under his armpit and lifted him lightly as a feather from the deck. Another snaked up and clicked his face-shield securely shut. Keith heard other clicks, and knew that the shields of his men were likewise being closed.

The commander was held straight out from the octopus' revolting body, and as he swung, helpless, he could see that more men were grasped similarly in other mighty arms. Dangling in the shadow-filled darkness he was carried slowly to the exit port, and he heard the inner door swing open, then close again. Water streamed through the valves; it encompassed him with a feeling of lightness, a feeling of floating, as he swung at the end of the long metal-sheathed tentacles. A moment later a soft bluish glow burst on his vision, and he saw that he was outside. There was a long wait, and when the current next swung him around he was dismayed to see that every one of the monstrous creatures near him was dangling on high two or three men of his helpless crew. The whole outfit was in the power of the devil-fish!

And then their captors moved forward with them on a ghastly march of triumph....

But Keith Wells did not know that, crouched behind the instrument

panel in the control room, shivering and sick with fear, was the plump form of Cook Angus McKegnie, who had just gained it just before the paralyzing ray had struck.

Chapter 6: The Monster with the Armlets of Gold

Hemingway Bowman's ardent wish, after he was whipped quickly through the round exit port of the octopi submarine, was for a quick, clean death. The horror and mystery of his situation had left him with one conscious emotion, that he was afraid. The worst had been when he was hauled through the port; when, expecting anything, he had been able to see nothing in the dark, water-filled mystery ship.

Deliberate tentacles had stroked over every inch of his body—tentacles that were not metal-scaled, as had been the arms of the creature that captured him. It was then that he guessed the true purpose of the metal suits the octopi wore—to protect their bodies against the lesser pressure near the surface of the sea. Inside the submarine they did not need them. He decided that the ship was used for rapidly transporting large numbers of the octopi to distant regions, and also for a weapon of offense and defense. The intelligence of the cuttlefish astounded him.

Keith had got away. At least he knew that, and he thanked God for it. His bold stroke had not been in vain, his sacrifice not useless.

After the inspection of the tentacles, Hemmy had been shoved to a corner of the octopi submarine. He had felt cords wrapped around

his body. After being thus secured, he was left to himself. He was utterly alone, except for strange, vague shadows that floated through the darkness—shadows that heated his brain as he realized how many of the devil-fish there were.

Hours that seemed like endless days passed.

Bowman concluded that the submarine had gone straight through the cavern and emerged finally into what seemed to be another sea. Dead silence filled the ship. What was happening, he could only guess. The craft seemed to run on forever. Never once did tentacles brush or inspect him again.

Finally the ship stopped, and a great round door opened in one wall. By the soft bluish glow that seeped in Hemmy caught a glimpse of his surroundings, and his gorge rose at the sight. The ship was literally filled with a slowly waving forest of long black tentacles. Weird instruments, unlike anything he had ever seen, were grouped around the walls, and before them attendant octopi poised, their hideous eyes fixed and steady. There were no dividing decks as in the *NX-1*; the craft was one huge shell.

Then came furious activity. The door fell shut again, and the ship shot off at great speed. Hemmy felt sure that they were advancing to

again attack the *NX-1*, and at once began to try to reach his comrades through radiophone. He knew that Wells would come back.

Finally he caught a human voice, and heard the *NX-1's* radio operator shout to the commander that he, Bowman, was alive and calling. But when he tried to speak further, the American craft's radio was silent.

And then, in the octopi submarine, had come a soft glow of violet....

Was it a more deadly weapon than the paralyzing ray? In great suspense the prisoner waited. Silence—silence! Horrible doubts beset his mind. Was Keith refraining from firing his torpedoes because he, Bowman, was on board the enemy boat? The thought stung him. He tried desperately again to reach Wells; but there was no answer. Were the Americans dead?

Age-long minutes passed. Then the exit port opened and several metal-clad octopi swam out. Hemmy had a glimpse of the *NX-1* lying silent and apparently lifeless on the sea-floor, a gaping hole in her bow!

As if to taunt him with the sight, the creatures left the round door open, and presently Bowman beheld the octopi open the *NX-1's*

starboard exit port and enter. Later the port swung open again, and he saw the monsters emerge, each gripping several men clad in yellow sea-suits! That they were dead, or victims of the ray, was obvious from the way they limply dangled.

The exit port closed, and darkness filled the octopi ship. Hemmy Bowman panted with the futile effort to break his bonds.

"You devils!" he yelled in blind rage, exhausted. "Why don't you take me with them? Take me! Take me, damn your stinking hides!"

When Keith Wells was taken from the silent *NX-1*, a host of astounding impressions swarmed his brain. Swinging lightly at the end of his captor's tentacle, he strove as best he could, with eyes rigidly fixed straight ahead, to grasp his new surroundings. He had, first, one flash of the octopi ship lying quite close to them, its hulk, as always, immobile and apparently lifeless. And inside it, he was sure, was his friend and first officer, Hemmy Bowman—a captive.

He saw that the octopi submarine had towed the *NX-1* into one of the weird mound cities. His own ship was lying in what seemed a kind of public square, and crowds of black octopi were swarming around it as he and his crew were brought out. Shooting straight off the square ran one of the wide streets he had previously seen from

above, and on each side the brown mound-buildings rose. Their details were hazy, because of the cuttlefish inhabitants who swam thickly in front of them.

His captors started their march down this broad street. Great crowds of reddish-colored octopi clustered on each side of it; other swarms hung almost motionless—except for their constantly writhing tentacles—above, so that their line of progress was through what resembled a restless, living tunnel of repulsive black flesh, snaky arms and huge, unblinking eyes. Keith felt faint from the horror of it. Thousands of the monsters were there, all hanging in the soft, blue-glowing water; and occasionally, as he floated almost horizontally in his captor's firm grip, his legs would brush the wall of clammy flesh; or perhaps one of the tentacles would reach out as if to touch him.

The octopus that held him swam some five feet off the street bed itself; at intervals the thick swarm on either side would part for a second, and Keith could glimpse the huge mound-buildings, ever growing larger, with round entrance holes dotted all over their smooth surface, above as well as the sides.

The march was ghastly. Their captors were taking them through the heart of the water-metropolis; displaying their human captives as did the Caesars in Roman triumphs of old!

The swarming crowds of tentacled monsters grew thicker as they progressed, and their tentacles began to whip more quickly, as if anger was burning in their loathsome bodies. Keith noted the menace of their sharp-beaked jaws, and the sickening sucker-discs on the livid under-side of the tentacles. As far as he could see, the swarms fell in behind the procession after it had passed. Following them—where?

Just as Wells felt himself on the verge of fainting, the procession turned to the right and entered the largest mound-building of all, a vast dome rising in the very center of the octopi metropolis. They continued through a corridor perhaps twenty feet high, from which at intervals other corridors branched. Held by one arm, and ever and again turning helplessly over in his horizontal transit, Keith caught glimpses of walls covered with intricate designs on a basic eight-armed motif—designs of artistic value, that gave evidence of culture and civilization.

The passage ended as suddenly as it had begun, and they came into the main body of a gigantic building.

The commander could hardly credit his eyes. The place resembled a stadium, and was so vast that he felt dwarfed to nothingness. The domed roof soared far above in misty bluish light. On the floor,

exactly beneath the center of the great dome, was a raised platform, and on it a dais resembling a very wide throne. Around the dais a score or more of octopi—officials, Keith supposed—were grouped.

Rapidly the creatures following the procession swam into the chamber. Monstrously large as the place was, the floor soon was filled with the thick flood of cuttlefish which swarmed in from many doors. Keith, held with the other captives just to one side of the hole he had entered by, began to think that they must soon refuse to let any more in—when, to his surprise, he saw the latest arrivals begin to form a gallery twenty feet above those on the ground floor, and, when this was extended far back and completely filled, start yet another above it—and another, and another.... In ten minutes the mighty hall was crowded with countless layers of the cold-eyed monsters, each layer angling up from the central dais so that all could see.

"God!" the commander thought. "Nothing but solidly-packed devil-fish all the way to the dome! A slaughter pit! And we, of course, are to be the cattle!"

Minutes passed. The throne was still empty, and the thousands in the amphitheater seemed waiting for an occupant. Keith wished he was able to close his eyes. The restless, never-ceasing weaving of the

countless tentacles in the levels above made the scene a nightmare. Some waved slowly, others whipped excitedly, but never for an instant did one pause. The movements were like the never-ceasing shifting and swaying of the trunks and feet of elephants; in the dim glow the huge chamber seemed to be filled with one fantastic, million-tentacled monster that stared with its thousand eyes down on the forlorn group of puny human beings....

As if at a command the arms of the octopi on the platform suddenly began to weave in perfect unison in some weird ceremony. First they swayed out towards the waiting captives, then they swerved slowly to the empty throne. Then came a few quick, excited whippings; and once more the long arms reached out at the small group at the entrance. This went on for some minutes. Then, very suddenly, a creature swam up from what must have been an opening in the floor onto the dais-throne.

Keith saw it well.

It was an octopus, a giant amongst octopi, and Wells knew at once it was the ruler of the realm, the lord and master of the swarming galleries and the cities of mound-buildings.

It was larger than its fellows by a full three feet. And, encircling each

great tentacle just where it joined the central mass of flesh, was a broad, glittering band of polished gold—eight thick armlets that ringed the creature's revolting head-body with a circle of gleaming pagan splendor. Keith could almost fancy that a certain royal air hung over the monster.

The huge, unblinking eyes of the king stared at the horror-frozen captives. One long tentacle lifted slowly upward, and their captors at once started towards the throne with them. The score of octopi on each side stilled their weaving arms. A battery of emotionless eyes drilled into Wells' paralyzed body. He felt faint. Unquestionably the horrible ceremony was leading up to some form of cold-blooded sacrifice....

The monarch stretched a mighty arm towards Keith, and, as in a dream, he felt himself lifted out of his guard's grasp. The snakelike tentacle gripped him about the waist, and held him dangling like a puppet twenty feet in the water while the two deadly eyes stared steadily at him. He was brought closer, until the hideous central mass, with its cruel beaked jaw and ink sac hanging behind, was no more than a foot away.

Then another arm stroked slowly along the commander's helpless body. Once or twice it prodded sharply, and Wells felt a surge of

fear, for his sea-suit might break. Deliberately the prying tentacle moved over him, delicately feeling his helmet, his weighted feet, his legs.

Keith Wells grew angry. He was being inspected like a trapped monkey! He, commander of the *NX-1*, representative of one of the world's mightiest nations—prodded and stared at by this fish, this octopus! A great rage suffused him, and with a terrific effort he tried to jab his arms into one of those devilish eyes. But try as he might, his body would not respond. He could not move a finger.

For a long time the loathsome inspection continued, until the monstrous king seemed satisfied. Wells was handed back. There followed an interminable period in which nothing whatever was done, as far as he could see. He was sure that they must be talking, debating, but no sound reached his ears through the tight helmet. All the time the endless motion in the swarming levels above went on. It became hazy, dreamlike, and in spite of himself the commander began to feel drowsy. The weaving and swaying was producing a hypnotic effect. At last the desire to sleep grew overpowering.

Wells and his men were more than half unconscious when their original captors finally pulled them back from the royal presence and began a humble retreat from the throne room. Slowly they backed to

the entrance. Keith's last drowsy glimpse was of a grotesque, gold-ringed monster on a throne, with a score of smaller tentacled creatures around him, and a vast haze of weaving tentacles and unblinking eyes above.

They passed from the huge chamber. The commander felt delirious, as in a nightmare, but he knew that they were again in the long corridor, and that their captors were taking them further into the mighty building, further from the street outside. He glimpsed great rooms branching off the corridor, and swarms of black octopi inside them. The light became fainter; and at last the procession turned into a separate, rough-walled chamber, dimly lit and empty.

Wells felt the grip around his arm loosen, and he floated limply to the floor among his men. He slept....

Chapter 7: The Glass Bell Jar

Keith awoke hours later.

Slowly he became conscious of a cramped, stiff body, of a dull pain racking his head. He stretched out his limbs—and, suddenly, realized he could move.

Remembering the paralyzing ray that had struck him down, and half afraid that his senses were tricking him, he kicked his left leg out. It moved with its old vigor. He quickly found that his strength had returned, that he could feel and move. The effect of the ray had worn off!

With a glow of new hope he rose to his feet and exercised numb muscles. Looking around, he saw the other men still stretched out on the floor of their rough-walled, watery prison. He called into his radiophone mouthpiece:

"Graham! Graham, wake up!" A grotesque figure stirred among its fellows; turned over. "It's Wells, Graham," Keith continued. "Get up; you can, now!" And he watched the form of his big first officer stretch out and finally rise, while stupid, sleepy sounds came to his radio receiver.

"Why—why; the paralysis is gone!" Graham said at length.

"Yes, but maybe the octopi don't know it. Rouse the other men at once, and we'll see what we can do."

It was weird, the sight of the lifeless figures of the men stirring to life in the dim-lit water as Graham shook each one's shoulder. The radiophones buzzed and clicked with their excited comments and ejaculations. Keith felt much better. With his men restored to strength, and clustered in a determined, hard-fighting mass, he saw a hope of breaking out and regaining the *NX-1*.

He let them exercise as he had for some minutes, then proceeded to a brisk roll-call. There should be fifteen men and two officers. Rapidly Graham ran over the names, and each time a voice rang back in reply—until he came to the cook.

"McKegnie?... Cook McKegnie?"

There was no answer. Wells stared around the group of dim figures and himself called the name again. But McKegnie was not present. And as the commander and his men realized it the numbing spell of their desperate position settled down on them again like a shroud.

Keith shook off the mood. "Well," he muttered, "I guess the devils got him. Poor McKegnie's seen the wheels go round for the last time.... All right: take command, Graham. I'm going to do a little reconnoitering."

The round entrance hole was some fifteen feet from him, at the far end of the cell. Keith advanced cautiously to it, the peculiar light feeling the water gave him making his steps uncertain. The dim blue illumination made the details of the corridor outside hazy, shadowy, but it seemed to be empty. Peering out, Wells could sight no guarding octopi. He edged closer and stared down to the left. Twenty feet away the vague light tapered into darker gloom, filled with thick, wavering shadows; but it was apparently devoid of tentacles. He wondered if the octopi were unaware that the effects of their ray had worn off, and peeped cautiously around the edge to the right.

Immediately a long arm whipped out, grasped him around the waist and flung him twisting and turning back into the chamber. Graham laboriously made his way to the commander and helped him to his feet. "Hurt, sir?" he asked anxiously.

"No," Keith gasped. "But that devil—"

He stopped short. The first officer turned and followed his

commander's stare.

The entrance hole of the cell had filled with a monstrous shape. A huge octopus was resting there, its unblinking eyes coldly surveying the crew of the *NX-1*. On each of its thick tentacles was a broad band of polished gold. It was the king, the same creature that had inspected them from the throne-dais a few hours before. And behind him in the corridor the men glimpsed another octopus.

Slowly the ruler of the octopi swam into the chamber. Its great eyes centered icily on Keith Wells, standing at the head of his cowering men; and its mighty tentacles waved slowly, gracefully, as if the creature stood in doubt. One of them tentatively reached out and hovered over their heads, moving uncertainly back and forth. Then, like a monstrous water snake, the tentacle poised, flicked out and plucked a man from his comrades.

His shriek of terror rasped in their earphones. "Steady, men!" Keith cried. "It's hopeless to try and fight them! The monster just wants to look him over!"

The man—Williams, a petty officer—was dangled by the armpit in mid-water and made to slowly revolve. The tip of another huge arm snaked out and for some seconds stroked his body, probing

curiously. He panted with fright, and in their earphones his friends could hear his every tortured exhalation. Anxiously, Keith watched. Then, without warning, another tentacle darted up, fastened its tip on the breast of the captive's sea-suit, and deliberately ripped it open.

The doomed man's last scream rang in their helmets as the water poured into his suit. They saw him writhe and struggle desperately in the remorseless grip which held him. The two huge eyes of the cuttlefish surveyed his death throes minutely; watched his agonized struggles gradually weaken; watched his legs and arms relax, his head sink lower.... And then the tentacle let a lifeless body float to the floor.

Jennerby, a huge engineer, went completely mad. "I'll get him, the devil!" he yelled, and before Keith could command him to stay back, had flung himself onto the giant king.

Death came as a mere matter of course. Without apparent effort, the monarch ripped off Jennerby's helmet and sent him spinning back. The man's body writhed and shuddered, and in a moment another stark white face showed where death had struck....

Trembling, sick at heart, the commander yet had to think of his men. "For God's sake," he cautioned them, "keep back. Don't try to fight

now; we've got to wait our chance! Steady. Steady...."

The king's deliberate tentacle again began its slow weaving. It was choosing another victim. And this time it darted straight out at Keith Wells and gripped him with a mighty clutch about the waist.

The commander did not cry out. As he was brought close to the staring eyes, and felt their sinister gaze run over him, it flashed through him for some obscure reason that the monster knew him for what he was, the leader, from the tiny bars on each shoulder of his sea-suit.... He waited for the tentacles to rip it open.

But they did not. Instead, the creature turned and swiftly swam with him out through the entrance hole.

They went to the left in the corridor, further into the heart of the building. The bluish light became stronger. As Keith twisted in the giant monarch's grip he glimpsed the other octopus following with the two dead men. He saved his strength knowing it was hopeless just then to try and struggle free.

Quick as was his passage, he noticed that the walls of the corridor were covered with intricate designs, in bas-relief, and colored. He passed row after row of mural paintings of octopi in various

activities, and guessed that they represented the race's history. One was obviously a scene of battle, with a tentacled army locked in combat with another strange horde of fishlike creatures; a second showed the construction of the queer mound-buildings on the sea-floor, with scores of monsters hauling great chunks of material into place, and another pictured the huge audience chamber, with a gold-banded king motionless on his throne.

As the king drew him rapidly along, he had a glimpse through a circular doorway of a large room, inside which were clustered the black shapes of thousands of baby octopi, tended by what were evidently nurses. Other such rooms were passed, and the young commander's brain whirled as he tried to measure the size and progress of this undersea civilization. Perhaps the race of octopi was growing, reaching out; needed new room to colonize. That would explain why their submarine had been sent through the tunnel....

A voice sounded in his ears:

"Keith? Are you all right?" It was Graham, calling from the cell behind.

"So far," Wells assured him. "I'll keep in touch, and let you know what happens."

At that moment, his captor carried him into a large chamber at the end of the corridor. He looked around, and decided it was a laboratory. He beheld strange instruments, anatomical charts of octopi on the walls and, in one corner, a small jar of glass, in which a dull flame was burning. Many-shaped keen-bladed knives lay on various low tables, and thin, wicked-looking prongs and pincers.

"I'm in their experimental laboratory, Graham," Wells spoke into the mouthpiece of his tiny radio. And then his roving eyes saw something that made him audibly gasp.

"What's the matter, Keith?" came the first officer's anxious voice.

After a moment the commander answered. "It's—it's a pile of human bodies. The bodies of those fishermen. They—they've been experimenting on them...."

Was he, too, Wells wondered, to be experimented on? The sight of that stacked pile of bodies chilled him with horror. He kept his eyes from them, till the octopus with the golden bands swung him through a hinged door in the farther wall.

He found himself in a side room, smaller than the outer chamber, the whole center of which was occupied by a huge glass bell jar, some

thirty feet in diameter. Inside it was much strange-looking apparatus on tables, and trays of operating instruments—knives like those in the outer room, and the same thin prongs. The great jar was empty of water, and on one side was an entrance port.

The king tossed Keith into a corner and quickly donned a metal-scaled water-suit. When he had it all on, and the glass body-container fastened into place, he picked up his captive again and advanced through the bell jar's entrance port into a small water chamber. A moment later Wells felt his body grow heavy as the water of the compartment ran out, and then there was a click and he found himself inside the jar, still held in the merciless grip of a tentacle.

He twisted around to find the cold eyes of the octopus staring at him only a foot away. And as he wondered what was going to happen next, the king unfastened the glass face-shield of the commander's sea-suit with a quick flip of the tip of a tentacle.

Keith's arms were pinned to his sides; he could not move to try to refasten the face-shield. Fearful, he held his breath; held it until his face was purple and his lungs were near to bursting. But at last the limit was reached, and with a great wrench he sucked in a full breath.

It was clean, fresh air!

The air was like a breath of his own world brought down to this cold realm of octopi. Once he had caught up with his breathing it poured new life into his limbs, jaded from the artificial air of the sea-suit. Keith felt his muscles respond, felt his whole body glow with new strength and life. Twelve inches away the king was watching his every reaction closely through the huge helmet of glass. The thought passed through the commander's mind that he was not only king, but chief scientist of this strange water civilization.

Then, while his lungs swallowed hungrily the good, fresh air, several tentacles began to feel around him in an attempt to unfasten the rest of his sea-suit.

Wells blanched at the sudden realization of how helpless he would be if the suit were taken from him. He would then not only be a prisoner of the octopi, but a prisoner of the glass jar, unable ever to leave it, and more than ever at the mercy of his captor's least whim. Not that he had any delusion that he would live long in any case: it was just the simple strong instinct of self-preservation that made him grab at every chance for life.

This thought flashed through his mind, even while the octopus was

fumbling with the catches of his suit. And along with it was born a desperate plan of escape. He was in his own element, air; the octopus out of his. If he could crack the glass of the king's helmet, and let the water out and air in!... The glass was only twelve inches away.

The commander stopped his resistance, and at the same time felt about with his legs until he had them well braced against a lower tentacle. He pushed gently, and came a few inches nearer the glass; a little more. Then, with a quick, strong jerk of his body he crashed the steel frame of his helmet square against the cuttlefish's sheathing of glass.

The creature was taken wholly by surprise. Tentacles whipped out to tear the rash human quickly away—but not before Keith had pounded again, and heard the splinter of smashed glass! He had jabbed a hole in the glass body-piece, and already the life-giving water was pouring out!

Panic seized the king, and he became a nightmare of tortured tentacles. Wells was flung wildly away and fetched up against the side of the jar with a crash that for a second stunned him. More and more water poured from the octopus' suit, and air at once rushed in to take its place. The creature's great eyes became filmy, while the

revolting spidery body slewed here and there across the jar, all the time whipping and thrashing at the strangling air. Keith scurried from side to side, trying to keep out of reach of the crazy, writhing tentacles. Once a glancing blow knocked him flat, but the monster was altogether unconscious of him and he got away.

Little by little the terrific whipping and coiling of the tentacles quieted down. The drowning king lay in one place now; its loathsome red body, no longer protected by glass, turned bluish. Keith thrilled with elation at his victory.

And then, for the first time, he noticed that there was a full three inches of water on the floor—far too much to spill from the king's suit. A quick look around showed him where it came from. There was a long crack in the side of the glass jar, at the place where he had been crashed against it—and water was pouring in!

Keith flung himself against the crack, jammed his arm into the broadest part of the leak. But still the water rushed in. The octopus was in its death throes, weakening steadily—but just as steadily the water poured in and rose up the sides of its body. In a flash Wells saw that the liquid would win the race to cover it and allow the monster to resume breathing.

"Oh, damn it!" he cursed fervently. "Now I've got to run for it!"

He stumbled to the port, snapping shut his face-shield as he went. In a moment he had solved the working of the mechanism and was in the water chamber, then outside in the room itself. Fortunately his sea-suit was unhurt. He thanked heaven for that as he tore away a boardlike piece of apparatus and jammed it over the leak in the jar.

Keith paused a moment to plan. The king of the octopi was still writhing in ever weakening struggles, but the water was halfway up his body. "It'll cover him soon," thought the commander, "and then it's a question how long it'll take him to come to. I've got to move fast—slip out into the corridor and run the gauntlet back to the men." His eyes rested on a large knife, and he appropriated it, since he saw nothing else he might use.

For the first time since the beginning of the fight he answered the questions and exclamations that had constantly sounded in his ears from the distant crew. Tersely he told them what had happened, and of the gauntlet he had to run.

"Make ready for a dash to the *NX-1*," he finished. "It's now or never. Wait three minutes for me, and if I don't make it, go ahead anyway. Remember—three minutes. This is an order. So long, fellows!"

He shut his ears to the bedlam of comment that followed. His knife ready, he took a few steps to the door and pushed out—right into the tentacles of a waiting octopus.

His knife was useless. While locked motionless by three arms of his captor, another streaked out and wrenched it from his hand. Once again Keith was absolutely helpless.

Great confusion resulted in the laboratory. The commander heard no sound, but the guard must have called, for five more octopi darted rapidly out of an adjoining room. Their tentacles writhing in great excitement, they swam past and into the inner chamber to the rescue of their nearly drowned king.

The devil-fish that held Wells almost crushed him to death in its excitement. It was obviously undecided what to do; but finally it sped him down the passageway and cast him back inside the cell with his men. Then it quickly retreated.

The commander staggered to his feet and faced Graham and the others. "A miracle!" he gasped; "I'll tell you later. But now we've got to make our break. The king's out, and we've got to get away before they bring him to. There's nothing to do but rush the door. It means sure death for half of us, and probably for all—but God help us if the

king catches us!"

He paused and surveyed them keenly. "Everybody with me?" he asked. And not one man held back his answer.

Wells smiled a little. "Good!" he said.

There were twelve men and two officers. There were thousands of octopi. On the face of it, their chances seemed hopeless. Not for a second did Keith count on getting many men to the *NX-1*. But he knew where the submarine was, and he had to try.

Tersely he gave them final instructions.

"This corridor leads to the main entrance. That is, to the right—understand? Then straight down the street outside, to the left, is the square where they towed the *NX-1*. I'd say it was a hundred yards.

"There's one guard outside. Graham, you and half the men to the right of the door. I'll take the rest to the left. Our only chance is to try and destroy the octopus' eyes."

His mind cast about desperately for some form of weapon. The only detachable thing on their sea-suits was the small helmet-light, a thing, Keith told himself, without possible offensive use. Still, the

beams would enable them to more clearly see their path and keep together, so he ordered them in hand.

The men were grouped and alert. The moment had come.

"Remember," he said, "—its eyes. Then stick together and run like hell. All right—good luck—and let's go!"

Awkwardly, stumbling clumsily in the retarding water, the small group surged through the door. Immediately a black shape pounced upon them from the clustered shadows—the guarding octopus.

Its tentacles seemed to be everywhere. In seconds five men were clutched in its awful grip, their fists rising and falling impotently as the hideous arms constricted and crushed them inward. Keith, free of the clasp, yelled: "The eyes! The eyes! Put out its eyes!"

For answer, a yellow arm clutching a helmet-light broke through the grotesquely milling mass and struck at the cuttlefish's great pools of eyes. It missed, but the switch flicked on, and there stabbed through the gloom a broad, glaringly white ray.

Its effect was astounding. The beam smote the octopus squarely in its huge eyes, and immediately the creature shuddered; writhed with

pain. The tentacles released the men—and the monster fled back into the protecting shadows!

A shout from the men roared in the commander's earphones. "They can't stand the light!" he cried. "Thank God! Beams on, everyone! Flash 'em in their eyes! Forward!"

Fourteen shafts of eye-dazzling light forked through the corridor. The tiny company, beating their path with criss-crossing shafts of white, forged ahead. They thrashed the shadows with their beams, probing each inch of water—clearing their way even as a tank hoses machine-gun bullets before its clumsy body. Their former slender chance grew; they filled with hope.

Another swarm of devil-fish, long arms whipping before them, raced from branching corridors and bore down on the company of humans. The men were ready, and fourteen tongues of white met them squarely. They faltered; the weight of their fellows behind shoved them on; but the rays steadied, and the front row of octopi broke in panic. The others at once followed in wild retreat.

"Keep together, men!" Keith ordered sharply. "One beam to each octopus—straight in its eyes till it retreats! Forward!"

They pressed on. The octopi, with eyes used only to the soft blue glow of the cavern, could not stand against the brilliant rays. Keith leading, the *NX-1's* crew stumbled out into the street.

They faltered a moment when they saw each entrance hole of the mound-buildings shooting out streams of octopi. Hundreds were in sight already. The whole city was evidently alarmed. Wells at once formed his men in a circle, so their beams would guard them on every side and above. Apparently the octopi could not approach within thirty feet of them, and even at that distance they turned and fled, writhing with pain, whenever a shaft of light struck full in their eyes.

"The square's just ahead!" the commander roared. "One last rush, now, and we'll reach the submarine! Stick close; keep your arms locked; and watch out above!"

The circle of men narrowed. The rays gave their tiny cluster the appearance of a monster even more fantastic than those moiling around them—a monster with long straight tentacles of glaring white. They stumbled forward through the magically parting ranks of black octopi. The beams kept the creatures back; they were helpless before them.

Foot by foot under the inverted bowl of threshing tentacles the *NX-1's* crew lumbered ahead. The street at last ceased; the wide square opened before them.

"We're here!" Wells yelled exultantly. "This is the—"

His voice fell into abrupt silence. He stared around the square, and his heart went cold indeed. They had reached the right place, but it was empty.

The *NX-1* was not there!

Chapter 8: Cook, the Navigator

Through all these hours, one man had remained on the *NX-1*, and that man was, to put it mildly, scared to death.

Cook Angus McKegnie had been nearest the connecting ladder when Keith Wells roared out the command to retreat above, and his desire to regain a place of safety was so earnest that he made the control room in record time. At once he had felt the tingle of the paralyzing ray. Struck by a horrible thought, he ventured to peer down the ladder—and groaned to see the figures of his comrades, all lying limply on the deck. His portly frame quivered like jelly as realization came to him that he was the only one who had escaped the ray.

Heroic ideas of saving the submarine, of rescuing the men below, flashed wildly through his head. But only for a moment. On second thought, he felt he ought to hide. So, in the tomblike silence that had fallen, the two-hundred-and-twenty-pound McKegnie wormed a way behind an instrument panel, effecting the journey by vigorous shoves of his stomach. It was minutes later that he first noticed that some sharp jutting object was jutting deep into his ample paunch, but he could do nothing to remedy it. He was hidden, anyway, and he was going to stay hidden!

The cook felt the *NX-1* being towed forward. Then, after a dreadful wait, he heard queer noises down below, and was positive the exit ports had opened. The snakelike slithering and shuffling which followed would mean that the enemy was inside the *NX-1*. The thought brought St. Vitus' dance to his limbs, and, try as he might, he couldn't still them. Then again the ports opened, the gloomy silence returned, and Angus McKegnie was alone with his reflections.

After the first hour he gave voice to them in one simple, bitter sentence. "Just why the hell," he muttered, "did I ever join the Navy?" The silence offered no reply, and McKegnie, desperate from his cramped position, ventured to poke his head around the instrument panel. The faint emergency lights showed the control room to be empty. He decided to come out, and did so, worming his way back with great difficulty.

Once out, the first thing his eyes fell on was the teleview screen. Now the cook had never seen one of the octopi, and the screen showed hundreds of monsters clustering around the *NX-1*. So with unusual promptness he acted, jamming himself once again into his hiding place. Maybe, he thought, they had some way in which they could see into the control room and discover him!

Hours passed. The cook was sopping with sweat. Finally his

thoughts emerged into words.

"I got to get out of here!" he said intensely. "I *got* to! And I got to run this submarine!"

The sound of his voice somehow emboldened him. Once more he backed out of his cranny, and with cautious, trembling steps explored the control room. He kept his eyes from the teleview, though it had a terrible fascination for him, and surveyed the *NX-1's* array of control instruments. The prospective navigator groaned at the sight.

There were dozens of mysterious wheels, jutting from every possible angle, squads of black and red-handled levers, whole armies of queer little stud-buttons and dials. His knowledge of cooking helped him not at all in the presence of that maze of devices. Timidly he touched one of the levers, but immediately snatched his hand away as if afraid it would bite. His boldly announced purpose of running the craft went glimmering.

An accidental glimpse of the monsters in the teleview suddenly decided him that he needed a weapon. He hunted frantically through the lockers and found three service revolvers, which he fastened at his waist, adding his own carving knife to the arsenal. But he didn't

feel much better. Then, remembering for the first time his sea-suit radio, he yelled: "Mr. Wells! Mr. Wells! Oh, Mr. Wells, where are you? Can you hear me?" There was, of course, no answer.

He tried to bring his muddled thoughts and fears to order. "I got to run this thing," he said doggedly. "*Got* to! Now, let's see: what the hell's this thing for?... What the—"

He broke off short, and his eyes went wide. He had heard a noise!

Yes—there it was again! The same peculiar scraping at one of the exit ports! He glanced fearfully at the televiewer. "Oh, Lord!" he yelped. "They're comin' in to get me!"

He started to dive back behind the instrument panel, but stopped, drew two guns, and in an agonized muddle trotted back and forth for a moment, waving them. Another look at the screen showed that an exit port was open, admitting two metal-scaled octopi. McKegnie couldn't stand it any longer: he wedged himself behind his panel again. Soon sounds of the metal tentacles on the deck below told him that one of the creatures was coming up the ramp—then slithering into the control room itself. The cook was a lather of cold perspiration.

For a few minutes there was silence. The octopus was apparently surveying this new part of the submarine. Then, without warning, the tip of a metal-scaled tentacle felt around the panel and crept, exploring, up Angus McKegnie's leg—which leg was again suddenly afflicted with St. Vitus' dance. The tentacles coiled, pulled hard—and the cook with a yowl was yanked out into the room.

Dangling upside down, high in the air, he submitted to the fishy stare of the great eyes under the sheathing of glass. But soon he started to squirm, and his violent contortions brought a rush of blood to his head, making him quite dizzy. It was while he was in that state that things started to happen.

First, a great roar rolled through the *NX-1*, and McKegnie found himself flat on the floor with his breath knocked out. Then, while this was registering on his mind, he discovered himself the center of a madly milling set of tentacles, and instinctively scrambled out of the way. From a distance he saw that the tentacles belonged to the octopus that had held him, and that their coilings and threshings were gradually dying down, until only a quiver ran through them from time to time. While McKegnie was trying to figure this all out he noticed that the monster's glass sheeting was shattered, that it lay in a pool of water, and that the odor of burnt powder was in the air. Looking down he found that he had a gun in his hand. A thin wisp of

smoke was curling from the barrel.

"Gee whiz!" he ejaculated. "Gee *whiz*!"

As he stood there recovering from his surprise, he heard the other octopus crawling up the connecting ramp, coming to see what had befallen its fellow. Preceded by two trembling guns, McKegnie tiptoed to the ramp and peered down.

From the darkness he saw another complicated mass of metal tentacles and glass advancing up towards him. Fear smote the cook, and almost without volition be pointed his guns and pulled the triggers. As before, a bullet crashed into the great dome of glass, and he watched a short but terrible death struggle. He had, by himself, slain two octopi!

A tremendous elation filled McKegnie—until it occurred to him that his shots might have been heard outside. At once he ran and looked at the teleview view screen, and what he saw on its silver surface took all the triumph abruptly out of him. The octopi outside were darting about with alarming activity; a whole cluster of them was centered at the exit port, and, even as the cook stared, the preliminary sounds of opening it came to his ears.

"Now I *got* to run this ship!" he groaned.

He peered at the mass of levers and wheels, put out a hand, closed his eyes, hesitated, and pulled one of them back. Nothing happened.

He tried another. The noise below grew, but still the *NX-1* remained motionless. Desperate, the cook jerked several other levers. The whine of electric motors surged through the silence; the submarine shuddered and slewed off to the right, as if trying to dig into the sea-floor.

"I got it started!" he cried. He did something else. The *NX-1* stuck her bow dizzily up and sped into the misty-blue realm above in a grand, sweeping circle. The sea-floor with its mound-buildings and swarming octopi fell away behind with a rush.

"There!" muttered the triumphant cook. "But—how did I do it?"

The submarine was rising like a sky-rocket. McKegnie remembered suddenly that Wells had said the cavern was only a few miles high; he must now be very near the top. He held his breath while he pushed a likely looking lever the other way.

He was lucky. The *NX-1* capered like a two-year-old, kicked up her

stern and bolted eagerly for the depths once more. Again the floor of the cavern rushed up at him, again he pulled the potent lever back, and again the submarine meteored upward.

This procedure went on for some time. McKegnie was only running an elevator. Was he doomed to dash up and down between floor and ceiling forever? He gave forth pints of sweat, now and then groaning as the submarine grazed horribly close to top or bottom. The dead octopus at his feet slithered limply around on the crazy-angling deck.

"I can't keep this up forever!" the cook said peevishly. "Now, what the hell's this thing for?"

He turned it, and the *NX-1* tilted in one of her dives and raced forward, midway between ceiling and floor. Her navigator relaxed slightly. He had found the major controls; at least he had been able to stop his dizzy game of plunging up and down. Then, just as he was beginning to wonder where he could go, a large red spot glowed at the edge of the location chart.

"Oh, Lord!" he cried. "That's the other submarine—an' it's comin' after me!"

Evidently it was, for the red spot rapidly approached the green one.

The paralyzing ray tingled, and a moment later the enemy's huge bulk loomed on the teleview screen, a band of violet light spearing from one of her jutting knobs.

Frantically McKegnie juggled his levers, and then it was that the *NX-1* really showed what was in her. She emulated, on a grand scale, a bucking bronco: she stood almost on her nose, and threatened to describe somersaults; she tried it the other way, on her stern; she rolled dizzily; she all but looped the loop, and went staggering around the cavern in great erratic bounds that must have made the octopi think she was in the hands of a mad-man—which she practically was. Her designer would have had heart failure.

In the teleview screen the frantic McKegnie would see the octopi submarine rush erratically by with a flash of its violet heat ray; the location chart showed the red spot zigzagging drunkenly around the green one. Each boat made occasional short, crazy darts at the other; sometimes they would stand approximately still. It was a riotous game of tag, and McKegnie knew too well that he was "it."

During one brief pause the anguished cook found himself groaning aloud: "Oh, Mr. Wells, where are you? I can't keep this up! I can't! I can't!"

There were still several important-looking controls that were mysteries to him. But what if he should pull one and open all the exit ports? He shuddered at the thought.

Things had become nightmarish. The ship was pitted scores of places by the heat ray. The control room had grown stifling. McKegnie was losing pounds of flesh, and literally stood in a pool of his own perspiration. The octopi craft kept doggedly after the *NX-1*, no matter how often and effectually the sweating cook's reckless hands prevented her getting the heat ray home.

For a long time the two ships continued to race up and down. The *NX-1* would plunge, pirouette around the other, and scamper away towards the ceiling as if enjoying it all hugely, abruptly to forsake her course and come zooming down once more. She would weave in romping circles and seem to go utterly crazy as her jumbled navigator pulled his levers and turned his wheels in a frantic effort to get somewhere.

To get somewhere! Yes—but where?

"Oh, Mr. Wells, where are you?" the harried cook would bleat at intervals.

Or, plaintively: "Now, what the hell's *this* thing for?"

Chapter 9: At Bay

Fourteen humans stood at bay on the cold sea-floor, dazed by the ruthless stroke of ill-luck which had taken the *NX-1* from where they had left it.

"It's gone," whispered Graham over and over in a hopeless tone. Keith tried to pull himself together. He had to think of his men.

In a second, his whole plan, which had seemed to be approaching success so rapidly, was smashed by the disappearance of the submarine. Mechanically he kept his helmet-light playing into the ever-thickening eyes and tentacles around him, while he scanned the sea-floor nearby. It was filling more closely than ever with the black, writhing forms of the cuttlefish. The rays still held them back, but their great bulk loomed over the small party of humans like a sinister storm cloud. Soon, in their overwhelming mass, they would crush down, and the submarine's crew be conquered by sheer force of numbers.

"Look!" Keith cried. "There's where she was lying!"

He pointed out on the floor of the square a deep groove, obviously made by the hull of the *NX-1*. Its length and jaggedness seemed to

denote that the submarine had tried to bore into the bed of the cavern itself. Wells was mystified. If the octopi-ship had towed her away, she would certainly not have gouged that deep scar on the sea bottom....

But he dismissed the strange disappearance from his mind. He had to work out a plan of action.

"Keep together, men, and follow that scar!" he ordered tersely. "There's a chance that the *NX-1's* somewhere further along!"

It was a futile hope, he knew—but there was nothing else. The tiny group, centered in the inverted bowl of black, writhing tentacles, lumbered onward.

Then the octopi struck with another weapon, in an effort to dull the spearing beams of white. Here and there from the mass of black an even blacker cloud began to emerge. It quickly settled over the whole scene, pervading it with a pitchy, clinging darkness that obscured each man from his neighbor.

"Ink!" cried one of them. It was sepia from the cuttlefish's ink sacs—the weapon with which these monsters of the underseas blind and confuse their victims.

"Faster!" the commander roared in answer. "And for heaven's sake, keep together!"

They huddled closer. Under the protecting cloud of ink the mass of octopi pressed nearer. The struggle became fantastic, unreal, as the brilliant beams of white bored through the utter blackness searching for eyes which the men knew were there, yet could not see until their rays chanced upon them. Snaky shadows milled horribly close to the little group of bulging yellow figures. Blacker and blacker grew the water; they could not always see the monsters as they drove them back on each side. Now and then a bold tentacle actually touched one of them for a moment before its owner was thrust, blinded, away.

Suddenly the dark cloud cleared a little as the fight moved into an unseen current. Their range of vision lengthened to ten or twelve feet; they could dimly sense the looming mass of cuttlefish: and it was less often that one of the monsters darted forward, daring the rays of white, and became altogether visible. When this did happen, half a dozen dazzling beams converged on the octopus' eyes and drove it back in writhing agony.

The men were the hub of a grotesque cartwheel, whose spokes were inter-crossing rays of white. They still forged onward along the

groove, but moved more slowly now, and Keith Wells, tired to death, realized the combat could not go on much longer. Their advance was useless; a mere jest. The *NX-1* had vanished. It would only be a question of time before their batteries gave out, or the swarms of octopi crushed in on the struggling crew. Their overwhelming numbers would tell in the end.... The men were silent, except for the occasional gasps which came from their laboring lungs.

And then the king of the octopi appeared.

Keith had been wondering, in the aching turmoil that was his brain, where the gold-banded monarch was. He knew the monster had been rescued, and he dreaded coming face to face once more with that huge form. Now, armlets of glittering yellow suddenly flashed in the thick of the besieging tentacles, and two great evil eyes glared for a second at Keith Wells. The commander flung a burst of light at them and laughed crazily as the monster scurried back. For a few moments the king was not visible.

"Well, fellows," Wells said, "it won't be long now. His Majesty's back on the field." He grinned a little through his weary face. "I wonder what he'll hatch up to combat our helmet-lights? Watch close: he's damn clever!"

The commander did not have long to wonder. The vague wall of tentacles began retreating deeper into the ink. Keith could not imagine the reason for it, but held himself taut and ready. His men, likewise noting the move, unconsciously grouped closer, waiting tensely for they knew not what.

The king of the octopi had indeed hatched a plan of attack. After a moment the mass of creatures again became slowly visible, but this time when the rays shot out they did not hold them back. Could not —for their eyes were not visible.

"My God!" Wells cried. "They're coming backwards!"

It was so. The octopi—no doubt under their ruler's orders—had turned themselves around, and now, with eyes directly away from the dazzling shafts of white, were closing slowly in on the humans from all sides. The helmet-lights were useless. They could not reach the creatures' eyes.

Tentacles coiling, whipping, interweaving, the wall of flesh pressed in. Death stared the helpless crew of the *NX-1* in the face. First Officer Graham shrugged his shoulders and said tiredly:

"Well, I guess it's all over.... Unless," he added with a feeble smile,

"somebody figures a way to melt us through the sea-floor...."

Keith Wells' face suddenly lit up with an idea. He swung around and roared:

"The hell it's over! We can go *up*!"

His crew understood at once. "What fools we—" Graham began, but Keith cut him short.

"Listen," he rapped quickly. "Jam together in one bunch and lock arms tight. When I give the word, flood your suits with air. We'll go up like comets; crash right through the devils.... Hurry!... All ready?"

He saw that they were. "Then, together—go!" he commanded.

As one man the crew adjusted their air-controls, bulging the sea-suits with air. Their weighted feet left the cavern floor at once, and, locked tightly together, the whole fourteen of them shot like a bullet to the living ceiling of unsuspecting cuttlefish above.

They hit with a terrific crash. Keith was momentarily stunned by the force of impact. He felt himself torn away from his men, felt a dozen tentacles snake over him, and mechanically stabbed out with his helmet-light. For a moment he was held; then the air and his light

pulled him through, and he broke out through the top.

In his rocketing upward progress the extra oxygen rapidly cleared his mind. Glancing below he saw a great, dark, many-fingered cloud dropping rapidly away, and was glad to know that the octopi could not follow him into the lesser pressures above without their suits. Over the dark cloud he glimpsed a few scattered pin-points of light —the helmet-beams of the other men. They were rising as swiftly as he.

"Thank God!" he murmured reverently. "We broke through! We broke through!"

Chapter 10: The Return of the Wanderer

Wells watched the several helmet-lights shooting upwards and wondered if they represented all the men that had got safely through the net of tentacles. Remembering the rocky ceiling they were rapidly approaching, he ordered the others to reduce speed by discharging air from their sea-suits. He received no articulate answer.

Although he cut down the rush of his own progress, it was with a jar that he bounded into the top of the cavern. As he dangled there, he beheld four light beams hurtling upward; his earphones registered crash after crash: and then he saw the beams go spinning down into the gloom again, weaving and crossing fantastically, the shock having jerked them from their owner's hands. Keith had lost his own helmet-light below, but peering around he could make out a few vague forms, bumping and twisting in the current.

"Graham!" the commander called. "Graham, you there?" After a moment his first officer's voice came thickly back.

"Yes—here. A bit groggy. That crash...." Wells swam clumsily towards him.

"I guess only a few of us broke through," the commander said slowly. As the two officers hung at the roof, swinging grotesquely, one by one the other men came to their senses and reported their presence in the radiophone. Keith ordered them to cluster around him, and soon eight weird figures had grouped nearby. After a while they located two others, which brought their total to ten men and two officers. They looked a long time, but could not find any more. Two were gone.

Deep silence fell over the tiny group. The dark mass of the rocky ceiling scraped their helmets; below, the bluish waters tapered into a thick gloom, hiding, miles beneath, the mound-buildings and swarming octopi.

One of the men spoke. His words were audible to everyone, and they voiced the thought in every brain:

"What're we going to do now?"

Keith had no answer. They had escaped the immediate danger, but it was only a temporary respite. The commander knew it was hopeless to try and locate the tunnel leading to the outer sea, for they were very tired, and in their clumsy suits they would be able to swim only a few rods. Their helmet-lights were gone; they had played their last

card.

"They're goin' to find us after a while," the pessimistic voice continued. "They'll send that submarine of theirs after us—or maybe they'll come up in their metal suits...."

"Well," Keith replied with forced cheerfulness, "then we'll have to fight 'em off."

"Why not rip our suits an' end it now—" began another, but Graham's voice cut in sharply.

"Quiet!" he said. "I heard something!"

The men stilled abruptly. In tense silence their ears strained at the headphones. Wells asked: "What did you hear?"

"Wait!" Graham interrupted, listening intently. "There it is again! Listen! Can't you hear it? Why, it sounded like—like—"

Keith concentrated his whole mind on listening, but could catch nothing at all. He was just about to give up when he caught a faint, jumbled murmur—the murmur of a human voice.

"My God!" he whispered. The voice, little by little, grew, and Wells

could distinguish words. They formed into a complete sentence. Keith heard it plainly. It was:

"Now, what the hell's this thing for?"

Unmistakably, it was the voice of Cook Angus McKegnie, whom they all had thought dead.

Amazed, the men of the crew started to jabber. "Quiet!" Wells ordered sharply. He listened again. McKegnie's voice was growing quickly and steadily louder.

"McKegnie!" the commander cried excitedly. "McKegnie, can you hear me?" There was no answer. Patiently Wells waited a minute, every second of which increased the volume of his long-lost cook's bewildered tones. Again he tried.

"McKegnie! Can you hear me? This is Commander Wells. McKegnie!"

The cook's stammering voice came back:

"Why—why—is that you, Mr. Wells? Did I hear you, Mr. Wells?"

"Yes!" Keith shouted impatiently. "This is Commander Wells! For

heaven's sake, McKegnie, where are you?"

"I don't know, sir!" the cook responded. "Where are you?"

Keith was for the moment perplexed. "But—but, are you a prisoner?" he questioned. And he could have sworn he heard a distinct note of pride as the invisible McKegnie replied: "Oh, no, sir! Not yet! These devils been tryin' their best to get me, but they couldn't! No, sir!"

Wells became more and more puzzled. "Then—but—you're not running the *NX-1*, are you?"

McKegnie's voice was much louder now, and growing every second. The note of pride persisted. "Of course, sir!" he confirmed. "It was kind of hard at first, with these octopises botherin' me, but I got onto it pretty quick. That octopis ship chased me with them heat rays for a long time, but I ain't seen them lately. I guess I kinda tired them out."

His last words grew louder with a rush, and from the dark depths beneath a long shape suddenly appeared, hurtling up at the group of astounded men in a zoom that bade fair to take it straight through the ceiling. It was the *NX-1*.

"Dive, man, dive!" Keith yelled. "Cook, pull that black-handled lever towards you! Yank it back! Yank it back! Quick!" He sighed with relief as he saw his madly-driven submarine pause, whip its nose downward, and crash back for the depths from which it had come.

The commander spoke rapidly. "McKegnie, listen: Leave the black lever halfway, so you'll level out. Straighten your helm. We're only a little above you; come round in a circle till I tell you to stop."

The *NX-1* came out of her dive, and, as the cook evidently shoved her helm over, went skirting around in a wide, drunken circle, some thousand feet below her regular crew.

"All right!" Keith shouted. The fear that the octopi submarine would dart back before he could get aboard his ship was looming in his mind. "You're at the helm, Cook; there's a wheel right over your head. Spin it around—oh, my God, there you go again!" He groaned while the *NX-1* went swooping off on a repetition of her crazy circle.

"Sorry, sir," the culinary navigator said thickly. "I guess I got the wrong thing."

"Now!" Wells roared. "Spin that wheel above your head.... That's

right—right—there! Don't touch a thing, Cook! We're coming down."

The submarine had paused directly beneath them, listing slightly to port. Then began the cautious business of the descent. Under Wells' rapid orders the men linked arms again and discharged more air from their sea-suits. Slowly, thin chains of bubbles rising behind them, they sank towards the dim shape of the *NX-1* below. Wells' eyes kept probing the thick gloom far beneath. Every moment he expected to see it disgorge a swarm of octopi.

They neared the submarine, and saw numberless pitted spots in her body, where the heat ray had stabbed for a moment. In their excitement they missed their level by some feet, but clutching together they admitted more air and soon rose even with the starboard exit port.

"Swim forward," Keith ordered. "Hurry!" The weird figures groped clumsily, and very slowly neared the port. The commander, in the van, at last reached out and gripped its jutting external controls. He could not work them at first: his hands were numb and awkward.

As he tugged and struggled with them a shout rang in his headphone. It was McKegnie, scared to death.

"Oh, hurry, Mr. Wells!" he yelled. "Quick! Quick, please! The octopis ship's comin', sir! The red light's back!"

Chapter 11: To the Death

The emergency steadied Keith's fingers. He got the door open and motioned Graham and six men inside the water chamber. The passage took but a minute. Then he sent the rest of the crew in, being himself the last to enter. When the chamber was finally empty, and Wells had stepped through the inner door onto the lower deck of the *NX-1*, a great sigh of relief broke from him. Never before had anything looked so good as that brilliantly lit deck with its familiar maze of machinery and bulkheads.

"Thank God," he said simply, and his joy was shared by the whole crew. A new feeling had come over them. Back home—in their own submarine, their own element—they had at least a fighting chance with the octopi. But Keith let them waste no time. He knew that a final, desperate duel to the death with their foe still was ahead. "Above to the control room," he ordered. "Fast!"

They lumbered up the connecting ramp. A disheveled, wild-eyed form met them. Keith couldn't help chuckling as he passed the now much thinner and paler cook, with the arsenal handy at his waist. On the deck of the control room lay a huge tentacled body, metal-scaled, with its dome of glass shattered and its great cold eyes staring unseeingly away. "I killed him," stammered McKegnie pridefully;

"but Mr. Wells—look at that red light, sir!"

Keith glanced rapidly at the location chart, ripping off his sea-suit as he did. The fateful red stud was moving swiftly down on the motionless green one. The men had surrounded McKegnie, laughing and slapping him on the back, but the commander's terse orders jerked them abruptly back to action.

"The rectifiers, Graham: clean out this stale air. Sea-suits off; at emergency posts. Take the helm, Craig; you, Wetherby, trim the ship. No, no, Cook—keep away from the controls!"

The *NX-1* balanced herself; fresh air came rushing in, sweeping out the stale. Keith stared at the location chart, waiting for the submarine to be ready. The red light was almost upon them.

"Right!" he roared at last. "Diving rudder controls, Graham! Full speed for the tunnel!"

At that moment the octopi ship swept into view, its full battery of offensive weapons flaring forth. The paralyzing ray tingled again and again over the control room. Someone laughed at its uselessness. The violet heat ray leveled full at them, but the commander avoided it with "Port ten, starboard ten! Maintain zigzag course to the

tunnel." He understood the enemy's weapons now; he was throbbing with the fierce thrill of action. This duel was to be the climax of their whole adventure. "And, by heaven," he promised, "it's going to be a fight!"

The other craft seemed to realize the *NX-1* was now in expert hands. She raced along to starboard for some minutes, her heat ray trying vainly to steady on the American's weaving form. Wells wondered if the king of the octopi was aboard her, in command; he thought perhaps the ship had postponed her chase of McKegnie to pick him up. "I hope he is!" the commander breathed, and fingered the torpedo lever. He had some debts to pay.

The *NX-1*, engines working smoothly, proceeded on a desperate dash for the tunnel that led to the outer sea. But the octopi ship apparently knew what Keith intended, for she abandoned her offensive rays, changed course a few degrees and slowly but steadily pulled ahead. "Damn!" Keith exclaimed. "She'll get there before us!"

The dim shape dwindled on the screen, and before long her bulk had disappeared entirely. Wells then could watch her swift, straight progress only on the location chart.

Ten minutes later the funnel-like opening of the tunnel loomed on

the teleview, and squarely in front, blocking it, was the waiting form of the octopi submarine.

"Quarter speed!" Keith snapped. "Hold her steady, Graham; I'm going to try a bow torpedo. I think we're beyond their ray."

Sighting his range on the telescopic range-finder, he worked the *NX-1* slowly into position. He noticed that his first officer was staring oddly at him. He was bothered by the queer look. "What's wrong?" he asked impatiently.

"But—what about Hemmy Bowman?"

Bowman! In the rush of action and suspense, Keith Wells had completely forgotten his officer in the enemy submarine. "Oh, God!" he groaned. The cruel situation that had stayed his hand once before had again come to falter his course of action. The men were watching him; Graham had a question in his eyes. They all knew what had to be decided....

Keith shrugged his shoulders hopelessly. It was his greater duty to destroy the octopi submarine. And yet—

"Fish for Hemmy, Sparks," he ordered. "Craig, keep present distance

from enemy. Full stop."

A moment later the radio operator looked up. "Mr. Bowman on the phones, sir." With a heavy weight on his heart the commander clipped on the extension headphones.

"Hemmy?"

"Keith? Keith? Thank God you're alive!" Bowman's voice shook with gladness. "You're all back on the *NX-1*, Keith? The whole crew's with you? Oh, Lord, it's good to hear you again!"

"Yes. We got back all right, Hemmy—a miracle. They've still got you prisoner?"

"Yes.... Keith—you're trying to dodge out of the tunnel, aren't you?"

Wells smiled bitterly, and as he paused to frame an answer Bowman spoke again.

"I want you to blow up this submarine, Keith," he said quickly. "A favor to me."

He cut Wells short when the commander started to interrupt. "Wait! Let me finish," he pleaded. "I want to explain. I'd been hoping—but

never mind that.... Keith, a while ago I managed to work loose. I lost my head completely and tackled these devils. It was a foolish thing to do; they overcame me, naturally. But, in the struggle, they tore my sea-suit."

"What!"

"Oh, just a tiny tear, or I wouldn't have lasted till now. But a leak all the same—in the right leg. Since then I've been gripping the edges of the fabric as tightly as I can—but I couldn't keep the water inside this ship from seeping through. It came in slowly at first, then faster as my hands grew numb. It's up to my neck now, Keith ... and—it won't be long! I've just a few minutes left...."

The faint words tapered into silence.

"No!" roared Keith in a great rush of emotion. But Hemmy's eager voice came right back:

"Oh yes, you must! It would be a mercy to kill me, Keith."

There were tears in the commander's eyes. "Are you sure, Hemmy?" he asked. "Are you sure?"

"Oh, yes. It would be a mercy."

Wells' lips formed a straight grim line. His words squeezed through it tightly. "All right, Hemmy. Thanks. Thanks. I—I'll go after them now, old man. I'll try and keep in touch with you through the duel, but I—I can't promise—"

He could almost see Hemingway Bowman give his old familiar smile as he answered:

"Then so long, Keith!"

Commander Keith Wells studied the teleview screen. The men were half afraid to look at his strained blanched face.

Repeatedly the violet beam speared through the water, reaching for the *NX-1's* bow.

"Turn ship. Line up for stern torpedoes," the commander ordered harshly. He realized he could not hold his submarine steady to obtain a perfect sight, for the heat ray needed only thirty seconds to melt through their shell. He would have to swing the ship slowly about; and, as the shape of the enemy crossed the hair-lines on the range-finder, unleash his torpedoes and gamble on hitting the moving target.

The *NX-1* swung around, always maintaining a slight forward motion and zigzagging constantly to nullify the heat beam. Wells watched the range-finder closely. The octopi ship slanted downwards, the deadly violet ray stabbing from her bow. Slowly the black dot that represented her appeared on the dial, and slowly it dropped towards the crossed lines that showed the perfect firing point.

Keith grasped the torpedo lever. The *NX-1's* stern was towards her target. Dead silence hung in the control room. The *NX-1* swung slightly. The octopi craft appeared directly in the middle of the dial.

Wells pulled back the lever.

The hiss of compressed air sprang from her stern. He had fired two tubes, his whole stock of stern torpedoes. The pair of dreadful weapons leaped out and settled on their course. Keith shot his gaze to the teleview.

The torpedoes missed. Only by feet, but a miss all the same. They raced on past the octopi submarine and, with a tremendous, ear-numbing explosion, burst on the wall of the cavern beyond. Both ships reeled from the shock. Graham swore viciously, but Wells' masklike face showed no slightest change of expression....

A voice rang in Keith's headphones. "Tough, Keith! Better luck next time!" Then the commander winced. He simply could not answer Hemmy Bowman; could not answer that fine, brave voice....

The stern torpedoes were gone. The tubes could not be reloaded, for the paralyzing ray bound the men to the control room. That left them two torpedoes in the bow.

The violet heat ray kept fingering hungrily on their outer hull, and every man knew that the plates were weakening under the steady strain, which was only lessened by the *NX-1's* constant zigzagging. The control room was very hot. Both ships were now a full mile from the tunnel entrance. Keith plunged the *NX-1* down, swung her around, to bring his bow tubes to bear, and zigzagged upwards.

It was obvious that the octopi craft had been alarmed by the terrific explosion. They now adopted tactics similar to the American ship's, and for awhile both submarines circled cautiously, maneuvering for an opening.

"If only we could keep the ship steady!" Graham muttered. "But then that heat ray'd get us!"

The commander kept his eyes on the teleview. Again and again the

violet shaft pronged at them. The heat grew stifling. Sweat was pouring from all the men's bodies. Every face was strained and taut.

"Starboard full!" Wells said suddenly. "A little up, Graham!" He had seen a chance; the octopi craft was slightly above, and in a moment would pass directly in the line of the bow tubes. The *NX-1* stuck her nose up, swung rapidly to the right. Keith pulled back the firing lever, releasing one torpedo.

The long messenger of death hurtled straight for the enemy's hull. They watched its course breathlessly....

"My God!" the first officer groaned. "Could they see it coming?" For the octopi submarine had swung to one side, neatly dodging the speeding tube of dynamite.

"One left!" he added bitterly. "One left!"

A desperate plan formed in Keith Wells' mind. His last torpedo simply had to strike the mark; he could take no chances with it. He motioned the haggard-faced Graham to him.

"There's only one thing left to do," he said quietly. "We've got to deliberately face that heat ray; chance its puncturing our plates."

"How do you mean, sir?"

"Get in very close, so as to make our last torpedo sure to hit. We've got to approach the enemy head-on at full speed. We'll corkscrew up to them until we get within two hundred yards, then go straight forward for ten or fifteen seconds, giving us the opportunity to sight the remaining torpedo directly on them. The heat ray may break through before I fire—but when I do fire it's a sure hit."

The men had heard every word. Quietly Wells ordered:

"Take the torpedo control, Graham. I'll take the helm."

The first officer obeyed without a word. Keith grasped the helm. The plans were made for their last desperate attempt.

"Right," the commander said shortly. "Here we go."

There had been a taut silence before, but now, knowing that they were deliberately offering themselves a perfect target for the heat ray in order to get their last torpedo home, the intensity was almost unbearable. The men felt like shrieking, jumping—doing anything to break the awful hush. The air was charged with the same unnameable something that heralds a typhoon.

Keith Wells was like a white statue at the helm, save for the betraying trickles of sweat that coursed down his drawn cheeks. His hands moved the wheel slowly from port to starboard; his eyes bored at the screen before him. The ship was in command of a man of steel, a man with but one purpose....

"Up—up," he ordered. "Hold—in trim—full speed forward!"

He had brought the *NX-1* directly in line with the octopi ship. And now the craft leaped forward under full power, while he shot the helm back and forth ceaselessly. His ship was describing a corkscrewing motion, weaving straight at the enemy. Grasping her opportunity, the octopi submarine remained motionless, steadily dousing the approaching American craft with her silent violet ray and driving the temperature in the control room to even greater heights.

The distance between them rapidly lessened. Would the plates stand it? Would the ray melt through the weakened steel before he could fire? With an effort Keith drove these doubts from his mind ... but he could not banish a certain dull, steady ache from his consciousness.
…

The range dwindled. The heat became intolerable. Everyone's

clothing was sopping wet. A man ripped off his shirt, gasping for air. Wells kept his eyes on the screen, though half-blinded by smarting sweat. The plates had to give soon, he knew.

The octopi submarine, beam on and dead ahead, began to move to port at quickly increasing speed. At once Keith stopped swinging the helm, and the *NX-1's* corkscrewing motion of protection ceased. And then came the real test, the gauntlet of seconds.

Right straight into the retreating violet beam they went, at top speed. They gained rapidly. The heat was furnace-like. The commander, watching the range-finder, kept moving the helm slightly over. A shaft of violet heat spanned the two shells of metal. For ten seconds it had held on the *NX-1*. The black dot of the enemy craft moved slowly to exact center on the dial. Fifteen seconds ... twenty ... twenty-three—

"Fire!"

Graham jammed the torpedo lever back.

"Crash dive!"

The deck tilted downward. And Wells' white lips formed the words,

"So long, Hemmy!"—and he tore the phones from his head.

Seconds later a titanic explosion sounded through the cavern; echoed and re-echoed in vasty roars. The American craft's lights went off—but not before her men had seen, in the teleview, a fire-shot maelstrom where a moment before the octopi submarine had been.

"We got them!" yelled Graham.

A roar of exultation burst from every throat. The men flung their arms out, jumped, yelled crazily. Faint emergency lights lit the scene.

"Below, at regular posts," Wells ordered. "Reload bow and stern tubes. Graham, see to the lights." He himself remained at the helm. In a few moments the submarine had climbed back to the level of the tunnel. At quarter speed she nosed into the wide entrance, and slowly forged into the dense, deceptive shadows.

The commander acted mechanically. Again by touch he steered his ship through the black, ragged cleft. Fifteen minutes after leaving the cavern of the octopi her bow poked through the weaving kelp into the free, salty depths of the Atlantic Ocean.

There was one more task to perform, and Wells lost no time in doing it. When two hundred yards away he halted the *NX-1*, steadied her and sighted the stern tubes just above the dark tunnel hole. Quickly he sent forth two torpedoes.

A huge roar rumbled through the water, whipping the beds of kelp to mad convulsions. "Turn around," the commander ordered harshly. He sighted his bow tubes and again let loose a bolt of two torpedoes. Then he sent the submarine forward, and, through the teleview, examined what his four weapons had done.

Huge chunks of rock had been tumbled down, completely closing the tunnel.

"Well," said Graham, "it's over! Finished! They'll never get through that!"

A full-throated cheer burst from the men below, a cheer that rang for minutes as they realized they were free forever of the octopi, of the cold underwater city, of the clutching tentacles. Graham grinned broadly.

"Sound happy—eh?" he chuckled. "Say, Keith, it's good we've got those two octopi our fighting cook killed. Knapp would never

believe our story without them!"

He stared curiously at his commander. Wells was standing quite still, facing the teleview screen. A strange, far-away look was in his eyes.

"What's the matter, old man?" the first officer asked, smiling straight at him. "Aren't you glad we won through?"

"Of course," answered Keith with a tired smile in return.

"But why did you look that way?" Graham persisted. And Keith Wells told him:

"I was just wondering if Hemmy told the truth."

71 The Black Lamp by Sterner St. Paul Meek

Dr. Bird and his friend Carnes unravel another criminal web of scientific mystery.

Aproximate word count: 9,900

Bigotry:

Warnings:

he leapt to one side as he spoke

- - -

"The clue, Carnes," said Dr. Bird slowly, "lies in those windows."

Operative Carnes of the United States Secret Service shook his head before he glanced at the windows of the famous scientist's private laboratory on the top floor of the Bureau of Standards.

Dr. Bird and his friend Carnes unravel another criminal web of scientific mystery.

"I usually defer to your knowledge, Doctor," he said, "but this time I think you are off on the wrong foot. If the thieves came in through the windows, what was their object in cutting that hole through the roof? The marks are very plain and they indicate that the hole was cut in some manner from the inside."

Dr. Bird smiled enigmatically.

"That is too evident for discussion," he replied. "I grant you that the thieves entered from the roof through that hole. After they had secured their booty they left by the same route. I presume that you have noticed the marks on the roof where an aircraft of some sort, probably a helicopter, landed and took off. A question of much greater moment is that of what they did before they landed and cut the hole."

"I don't follow your reasoning, Doctor."

"Carnes, that hole was cut through the roof with a heavy saw. In cutting it, the workers dislodged quite a little plaster which fell to the floor and must have made a great deal of noise. Why wasn't that noise heard?"

"It was heard. The watchman heard it, but knew that Lieutenant

Breslau was working here and he thought that he made the noise."

"Surely, but why didn't Breslau hear it?"

"How do we know that he didn't? He was taken to Walter Reed Hospital this morning with his mind an absolute blank and with his tongue paralyzed. He must have seen the thieves and they treated him in some way to ensure his silence. When he is able to talk, if he ever is, he'll probably give us a good description of them."

Dr. Bird shook his head.

"Too thin, Carney, old dear," he said. "Breslau is a very intelligent young man. He was perfectly normal when I left him shortly after midnight last night. He was working alone in here on a device of the utmost military importance. On the desk is a push button which sets ringing a dozen gongs in the building. Surely a man of that type would have had sense enough when he heard and saw intruders cutting a hole through the roof to sound an alarm which would have brought every watchman on the grounds to his assistance. He must have been knocked out before the hole was started, probably before the helicopter's landing."

"How? Gas of some sort?"

"The windows were all closed and locked and I have already ascertained that the gas and water lines have not been tampered with. Gas won't penetrate through a solid roof in sufficient concentration to knock out a man like that. It was something more subtle than gas."

"What was it?"

"I don't know yet. The clue to what it was lies, as I told you, in those windows."

Carnes moved over and surveyed the windows closely.

"I see nothing unusual about them except that they need washing rather badly."

"They were washed last Friday, but they do look rather dirty, don't they? Suppose you take a rag and some scouring soap and clean up a pane."

The detective took the proffered articles and started his task. He wet a pane of glass, rubbed up a thick lather of scouring soap and applied it and rubbed vigorously. With clear water he washed the glass and then gave an exclamation of astonishment and examined it more closely.

"That isn't dirt, Doctor," he cried. "The glass seems to be fogged."

Dr. Bird chuckled.

"So it seems," he admitted. "Now look at the rest of the glass around the laboratory."

Carnes looked around and then walked to a table littered with apparatus and examined a dozen pieces carefully.

"It's all fogged in exactly the same way, Doctor," he said. "The only piece of clear glass in the room is that piece of plate glass on your desk."

Dr. Bird picked up a hammer and struck the plate on his desk a sharp blow. Carnes ducked instinctively, but the hammer rebounded harmlessly from the plate.

"That isn't glass, Carnes," said the doctor. "That plate is made of vitrilene, a new product which I have developed. It looks like glass, but it has entirely different properties. It is of enormous strength and is quite insensitive to shock. It has one most peculiar property. While ultra-violet and longer rays will penetrate it quite readily, it is a perfect screen for X-rays and other rays of shorter wave length. It

appears to be the only piece of transparent substance in my laboratory which has not been fogged, as you call it."

"Do short waves fog glass, Doctor?"

"Not so far as I know at present, but you must remember that very little work has been done with the short wave-lengths. In the vast range of waves whose lengths lie between zero and that of the X-ray, only a few points have been investigated and definitely plotted. There may be in that range a wave-length which will fog glass."

"Then your theory is that some sort of a ray machine was put in operation before the helicopter landed?"

"It is too early to attempt any theorizing, Carnes. Let us confine ourselves to the known facts. Lieutenant Breslau was normal at midnight and was working in this room. Some time between then and seven this morning he underwent certain mental and physical changes which prevent him from telling us what he observed. During the same period, a hole was cut in the roof and things of great importance stolen. At the same time, all the glass in the laboratory became semi-opaque. The problem is to determine what connection there is between the three events. I will handle the scientific end here, but there is some outside work to be done, and that will be your

share."

“Give your orders, Doctor," said the detective briefly.

"To understand what I am driving at, I will have to tell you what has been stolen. Naturally this is highly confidential. Some rumors have leaked out as to my experiments with 'radite,' as I have named the new radium-containing disintegrating explosive on which I have been working, but no one short of the Secretary of War and the Chief of Ordnance and certain of their selected subordinates knows that my experiments have been successful and that the United States is in a position to manufacture radite in almost unlimited quantities from the pitchblende ore deposits of Wyoming and Nevada. The effects of radite will be catastrophic on the unfortunate victim on whom it is first used. The only thing left to do was to develop a gun from which radite shells could be fired with safety and precision.

"Ordinary propellant powders are too variable for this purpose, but I found that radite B, one form of my new explosive, can be used for propelling the shells from a gun. The ordinary gun will last only two or three rounds, due to the erosive action of the radite charge on the barrel, and ordinary ordnance is heavier and more cumbersome than is necessary. When this was found to be the case, the Chief of Ordnance detailed Lieutenant Breslau, the army's greatest expert on

gun design, to work with me in an attempt to develop a suitable weapon. Breslau is a wizard at that sort of work and he has made a miniature working model of a gun with a vitrilene-lined barrel which is capable of being fired with a miniature shell. The gun will stand up under the repeated firing of radite charges and is very light and compact and gives an accuracy of fire control heretofore deemed impossible. From this he planned to construct a larger weapon which would fire a shell containing an explosive charge of two and one-half ounces of radite at a rate of fire of two hundred shots per minute. The destructive effect of each shell will be greater than that of the ordinary high-explosive shell fired from a sixteen-inch mortar, and all of the shells can be landed inside a two-hundred foot circle at a range of fifteen miles. The weight of the completed gun will be less than half a ton, exclusive of the firing platform. It is Breslau's working model which has been stolen."

Carnes whistled softly between his teeth.

"The matter will have to be handled pretty delicately to avoid international complications," he said. "It's hard to tell just where to look. There are a great many nations who would give any amount for a model of such a weapon."

"The matter must be handled delicately and also in absolute secrecy,

Carnes. We are not yet ready to announce to the world the fact that we have such a weapon in our armory. It is the plan of the President to have a half dozen of these weapons manufactured and give a demonstration of their terrible effectiveness to representatives of the powers of the world. Think what an argument the existence of such a weapon will be for the furtherance of his plans for disarmament and universal peace! Public sentiment will force disarmament on the world, for even the worst jingoist could no longer defend armaments in the face of America's offer to scrap these super-engines of destruction and to destroy the plans from which they were made. If the model has fallen into the hands of any civilized power the damage is not irreparable, for public opinion would force its surrender and return. It is among the uncivilized powers that our search must first be made."

"That makes the problem of where to start more complicated."

"On the contrary, it simplifies it immensely. At the head of the uncivilized powers stands one which has the brains, the scientific knowledge and the manufacturing facilities to make terrible use of such a weapon. In addition, the aim of that power is to overthrow all world governments and set up in their stead its own tyrannical disorder. Need I name it?"

"You refer to Russia."

"Not to Russia, the great slumbering giant who will some day take her place in the sun in fellowship with the other nations, but to Bolsheviki, that empire within an empire, that horrible power which is holding sleeping Russia in chains of steel and blood. It is there that our search must first be made."

“Of course, they have no official representative in America."

"No, but the Young Labor Party is as much their accredited representative as the British Ambassador is of imperial Britain. Your first task will be to trail down and locate every leader of that group and to investigate his present activities."

"I can tell you where most of them are without investigation. Denberg, Semensky and Karuska are in Atlanta; Fedorovitch and Caspar are in Leavenworth; Saranoff is dead—"

"Presumably."

"Why, Doctor, I saw with my own eyes the destruction of the submarine in which he was riding!"

"Did you see his dead body?"

"No."

"Neither did I, and I will never be sure until I do. Once before we were certain of his death, and he bobbed up with a new fiendish device. We cannot eliminate Saranoff."

"I will include him in my plans."

"Do so. Besides a hypothetical Saranoff, there are a half dozen or more of the old leaders of the gang who are alive and at liberty, so far as we know. They fled the country after the Coast Guard broke up their alien smuggling scheme, but some of them may have returned. There are also thirty or forty underlings who should be located and checked up on, and, in addition, we must not lose sight of the fact that new heads of the organization may have been smuggled into the United States. It is no simple task that I am setting you, Carnes, but I know that you and Bolton will see it through if anyone can."

"Thanks, Doctor, we'll do our best. If I am not speaking out of turn, what are you planning to do in the mean time?"

“I am going to start Taylor off on an ultra-short wave generator and try a few experiments along that line. Breslau is at Walter Reed and

they are doing all they can for him, but until I can get some definite information as to the underlying cause of his condition, they are more or less shooting in the dark."

"How are they treating him?"

"By electric stimulations and vibratory treatments and by keeping him in a darkened room. By the way, Carnes, if I am correct in my line of thought, it would be well to have an extra guard put over Karuska. He was the only real expert in ordnance that the Young Labor party had, and if they have Breslau's model they'll need him to supervise the construction of a gun."

"I'll attend to that at once, Doctor. Is there anything else?"

"Not that I know of. I am going out to Takoma Park this afternoon and have another look at Breslau, but it is too soon to hope for any change in his condition. Aside from the time I will be out there, you can find me either here or at my home, in case anything develops."

"I'll get on the job at once, Doctor."

"Thanks, old dear. Remember that speed must be the keynote of your work."

The telephone bell at the head of Dr. Bird's bed woke into noisy activity. The doctor roused himself and took down the instrument sleepily. A glance at the clock showed him that it was four in the morning and he muttered a malediction on the one who had called him.

"Hello," he said into the receiver. "Dr. Bird speaking."

"Doctor," came a crisp voice over the wire, "wake up! This is Carnes talking. Something has broken loose!"

All trace of sleep vanished from Dr. Bird's face and his eyes glowed momentarily with a peculiar glitter which Carnes would at once have recognized as indicative of the keenest interest.

"What has happened, Carnes?" he demanded.

"I telephoned Atlanta this morning and arranged to have an extra guard put over Karuska as you suggested. The matter was simplified by the fact that he and nine others were confined in the prison infirmary. The warden agreed to do as I told him, and, in addition to the regular guards, a special man was placed in the ward near Karuska's bed. At 2 A. M. the lights in the ward went out."

"Accidentally, or were they put out?"

"They haven't found out yet. At any rate they are all right now, but Karuska and all of the other inmates and all the guards of that particular ward have gone crazy."

"The dickens you say!"

"Not only that, they are also partially paralyzed. The description I got over the telephone corresponds exactly with the condition of Lieutenant Breslau as you described it to me. Here is the most interesting part of the whole affair. The special guard over Karuska was only lightly affected and has already recovered and is in a position to tell you exactly what happened. I got a garbled account of the affair from the warden, something about a goldfish bowl or something like that, the warden wouldn't take it seriously enough to give me details. I didn't press for them much for I knew that you would rather get them at first hand."

"I certainly would. I'll be ready to leave for Atlanta in less than ten minutes."

"I expected that, Doctor, and a car is already on its way to pick you up. I'll meet you at Langley Field where a plane is already being

tuned up and will be ready to take off by the time we get there."

"Good work, Carnes. I'll see you at the field."

A car was waiting for Carnes and Dr. Bird when the Langley Field plane slid down to a landing at Atlanta. At the penitentiary, Dr. Bird went direct to the infirmary where Karuska had been confined. As he entered, he shot a keen glance around and gave an exclamation of satisfaction.

"Look at the windows, Carnes," he cried.

Carnes went over to the nearest window and moistened his finger tip and applied it experimentally to the glass. The moisture produced no effect, for the glass of the windows was permanently clouded as was that of the doctor's laboratory.

"Whatever happened in my laboratory the night before last was repeated here last night with a similar object," said the doctor. "The object there was to steal a gun model; here it was to steal a man who could construct a full-sized gun from the model. I understand that one of the guards escaped the fate which overtook the rest of the persons in the infirmary?"

"Not altogether, Doctor," replied the warden. "I think that his mind is somewhat affected, for he tells a wild yarn and insists on trying to wear a goldfish bowl on his head. I have him under observation in the psychopathic ward."

Dr. Bird shot a scornful glance at the warden.

"'There are none so blind as those who will not see'," he murmured.

"By all means, I wish to see him," he went on aloud. "Will you have him brought here at once, please?"

The warden nodded and spoke to one of the attendants. In a few moments a tall, fair-haired young giant stood before the doctor. Dr. Bird pushed back his unruly shock of black hair with his fingers, those long slim mobile fingers which alone betrayed the artist in his make-up, and shot a piercing glance from his black eyes into the blue ones, which returned the gaze unabashed.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Bailley, sir."

"You were on guard here last night?"

"Yes, sir. I was detailed as a special guard over No. 9764."

"Tell me in your own words just what happened. Don't be afraid to speak out; I'm not going to disbelieve you; and above all, tell me everything, no matter how unimportant it may seem to you. I'll judge the importance of things for myself. I'm Dr. Bird of the Bureau of Standards."

The guard's face lighted up at the doctor's words.

"I've heard of you, Doctor," he said in a relieved tone, "and I'll be glad to tell you everything. At ten o'clock last night, I relieved Carragher as special guard over No. 9764. Carragher reported that the prisoner was somewhat restless and hadn't been asleep as yet. I sat down about fifteen feet from his bed and prepared to keep an eye on him until I was relieved at six o'clock this morning.

"Nothing happened until about two o'clock. No. 9764 was restless as Carragher had said, but toward midnight he quieted down and apparently went to sleep. I was sleepy myself, and I got up and took a turn around the room every five minutes to be sure that I kept awake. That's how I am so sure of the time, sir."

Dr. Bird nodded.

"At five minutes to two, just as I got up, I heard a noise outside like a big electric fan. It sounded like it came from directly overhead and I went to the window and looked out. I couldn't see anything, although I could hear it pretty plainly, and then I heard a noise like something had fallen on the roof. Almost at the same time there came a sort of high-pitched whine, a good deal like the noise an electric motor makes when it is running at high speed.

"I thought of giving an alarm, but I didn't want to stir things up unless I was sure that there was some necessity for it, so I started for the door to ask one of the outside guards if he had heard anything. As I turned toward No. 9764 I saw that he had been sitting up in bed while my back was turned. As soon as he saw that I noticed him, he lay back real quick and pulled the covers over his head. He moved pretty quick, but not so quick that I couldn't see that he had something that glittered like glass before his face. I started over toward his bed to see what he was doing and then it was that the lights started to get dim!"

"Go on!" said the doctor as Bailley paused. His eyes were glittering brightly now.

"Well, sir, Doctor, I don't hardly know how to describe what happened next. The lights were getting dim, but not as they

ordinarily do when the current starts to go off. The filaments were shining as bright as they ever did, but the light didn't seem to be able to penetrate the air. The whole room seemed to be filled with a blackness that stopped the light. No, sir, it wasn't like fog; it was more like something more powerful than the lights was in the room and was killing them.

“It wasn't only the lights which were affected, it was me as well. This blackness, whatever it was, was getting into me as well as into the room, and I couldn't seem to make myself think like I wanted to. I tried to yell to give an alarm, and I found that I could hardly whisper. I went toward the bed and then I saw No. 9764 sit up again. He had a goldfish bowl pulled down over his head and it was evident that it was keeping the blackness away, for I could see him plainly and his eyes were as bright as ever.

"The nearer I got to him, the funnier I felt, and I began to be afraid that I would go out. No. 9764 got up out of bed, and I could see him grinning at me through the bowl. He reached up and adjusted that bowl, and all of a sudden I realized that whatever was knocking me out was not affecting him because he had that thing on. I jumped for him with the idea of taking the bowl off and putting it on my own head. He saw what I was up to and he fought like a cornered rat, but the blackness hadn't affected my muscles. I'm a pretty big man, sir,

and No. 9764 is a little runt, and it didn't take me long to get the bowl off his head and pulled on over mine. As soon as I did that, I seemed to be able to think clearer. I was sitting on No. 9764 and was ready to tap him with a persuader if he started anything, but I didn't have to. In a few minutes he stopped struggling and lay perfectly quiet.

"The lights kept getting dimmer and dimmer until they went out altogether and the room became pitch dark. It wasn't exactly as if the lights had gone out, sir; I seemed to know that they were still there and were burning as bright as ever, but they couldn't penetrate the blackness in the room, if you understand what I mean."

“I think I do," said Dr. Bird slowly. "It was a good deal as if you had seen a glass filled with a pale red liquid and someone had dumped black ink into the fluid and hid the red color. You would know that the red was still there, but you wouldn't be able to see it through the black."

"That's exactly what it was like, Doctor; you have described it better than I can. At any rate, after it got real dark I heard a low whistle from the roof. No. 9764 made a struggle to get up for a moment and then lay quiet again. The whistle sounded again and then I heard some one call 'Caruso.' Everything was quiet for a while and then the

same voice called again and said some stuff in a foreign language that I couldn't understand. I kept perfectly quiet to see what would happen.

"For about ten minutes the room remained perfectly dark, as I have said, and all the while I could hear that whining noise. All of a sudden it began to sound in a lower note and then I could see the lights again, very dimly and like the black ink you spoke of was fading out. The note got lower until it stopped altogether, and the lights came on brighter until they were normal again. Then I heard a scraping noise on the roof and the noise I had heard at first like a big electric fan. I looked at the clock. It was two-twenty.

"For a few minutes I wasn't able to collect my wits. When I got up off of No. 9764 at last he stared at me as though he didn't know a thing, and I heaved him back into his bed and ran to the door to summon an outside guard. I could still talk in a husky whisper, but not loud, and I wasn't surprised when no one heard me. My orders were not to let No. 9764 out of my sight, but this was an emergency, so I left the ward and found a guard. It was Madigan and he was standing on his beat staring at nothing. When I touched him he looked at me and there was the same vacant look in his eyes that I had seen in the prisoner's. I talked to him in a whisper, but he didn't seem to understand, so I left him and went to a telephone and called

for help. Mr. Lawson, the warden, got here with guards in a couple of minutes and I tried to tell him what had happened, but I couldn't talk loud, and I was afraid to take the fish bowl off my head."

“What happened next?"

"Mr. Lawson took me to his office, and on the way we passed under an arc light. As soon as I got under it I begin to feel better, and my voice came stronger. I saw that it was doing me some good and I stopped under it for an hour before my voice got back to normal. It seemed to clear the fog from my brain, too, and I was able, about four o'clock, to tell everything that had happened. Mr. Lawson seemed to think that my brain was affected as well as the others' and he sent me to the hospital. That's all, Doctor."

"Do you feel perfectly normal now?"

"Yes, sir."

"There is no need for confining this man longer, Mr. Lawson. He is as well as he ever was. Carnes, get the Walter Reed Hospital on the telephone and tell them that I said to treat Lieutenant Breslau with light rays, rich in ultra-violet. Tell them to give him an overdose of them and not to put goggles on him. Keep him in the sun all day and

under sun-ray arcs at night until further orders. Mr. Lawson, give the same treatment to the men who were disabled last night. If you haven't enough sun-ray arcs in your hospital, put them under an ordinary arc light in the yard. Bailley, have you still got that goldfish bowl?"

"It is in my office, Doctor," said the warden.

"Good enough! Send for it at once. By the way, you have two more communists here, Denberg and Semensky, haven't you?"

"I think so, although I will have to consult the records before I can be positive."

"I am sure that you have. Look the matter up and let me know."

The warden hurried away to carry out the doctor's orders, and an orderly appeared in a few moments with a hollow globe made of some crystalline transparent substance. Despite its presence in the infirmary the evening before, there was no trace of clouding apparent. Dr. Bird took it and examined it critically. He rapped it with his knuckles and then stepped to the door and hurled it violently down on the concrete floor of the yard. The globe rebounded without injury and he caught it.

"Vitrilene, or a good imitation of it," he remarked to Carnes. "After you get through talking to the hospital, get Taylor on the wire. There is plenty of loose vitrilene in the Bureau, and I want him to send down about fifty square feet of it by a special plane at once."

As Carnes left the room, the warden reappeared.

"The men are all lying in the sun now, Doctor," he said. "I find that we have the two men you mentioned confined here. They are both in Tier A, Building 6."

"Is that an isolated building?"

"No, it is one wing of the old main building."

"On which floor?"

"The second floor. It is a six-story building."

"Have they been moved there recently?"

"They have been there for nearly a year."

“In that case there will be little chance of another attack of this sort to-night. At the same time, I would advise you to station extra guards

there to-night and every night until I notify you otherwise. Caution them to watch the lights carefully and to give an alarm at once if they appear to get dim. In such a case, send men to the roof with rifles with orders to shoot to kill anyone they find there. I am going back to Washington and I am going to take Karuska, your No. 9764 with me. You had better have one of the guards in the corridor, where Denberg and Semensky are, wear this goldfish bowl, as you call it. A lot of plate glass—at least it will look like that—will come from Washington by plane. Cut it into sheets a foot square and use surgeon's plaster to make some temporary glass helmets for your men. I want all your guards to wear them until I either settle this matter or else send you some better helmets. Do you understand?"

"I understand all right, but I'm afraid that I can't do it. The wearing of such appliances would interfere with the efficiency of my men as guards."

"Brain and tongue paralysis would interfere rather more seriously, it seems to me. In any event, I have sufficient authority to enforce my request. If you are at all doubtful, call up the Attorney General and ask him."

The warden hesitated.

"If you don't mind, I think I will call Washington, Doctor," he said. "I will have to get authority to turn No. 9764 over to you in any event."

"Call all you wish, Mr. Lawson. Mr. Carnes is talking to Washington now and we'll have a clear line through for you in a few minutes. Meanwhile, get a set of shackles on Karuska and get him ready to travel by plane. He appears to be suffering from mental paralysis, but I don't know how his case will develop. He may go violently insane at any moment and I don't care to be aloft in a plane with an unbound maniac."

Major Martin looked up from the prone figure of Karuska.

"His condition duplicates that of Lieutenant Breslau, Dr. Bird," he said. "We received your telephoned message this afternoon and we kept Breslau in a flood of sunlight until dusk, and then put him under sun-ray lamps. I don't know how you got on to that treatment, but it is having a very beneficial effect. He can already make inarticulate sounds, and his eyes are not quite as vacant at they were. If he keeps on improving as he has, he should be able to talk intelligently in a few days. If you wish to question this man, why not give him the same treatment?"

"I haven't time, Major. I must make him talk to-night if it is humanly possible. I called you in because you are the most eminent authority on the brain in the government service. Is there any way of artificially stimulating this man's brain so that we can force the secrets of his subconscious mind from him?"

The major sat for a moment in profound thought.

"There *is* a way, Doctor," he said at length, "but it is a method which I would not dare to use. By applying high frequency electrical stimulations to the medulla oblongata, at the same time bathing the cerebellum with ultra-violet, it might be done, but the chances are that either death or insanity would result. I would not do it."

"Major Martin, this man is a reckless and dangerous international criminal. If his gang carries out the plan which I fear they have formed, the lives of thousands, yes, of millions, may pay for your hesitation. I will assume full responsibility for the test if you will make it, and I have the authority of the President of the United States behind me."

"In that case, Doctor, I have no choice. The President is the Commander-in-chief of the army, and if those are his orders the experiment will be carried out. As a matter of form, I will ask that

your orders be reduced to writing."

"I will write them gladly, Major. Please proceed with the experiment without delay."

Major Martin bowed and spoke to a waiting orderly. The prostrate figure of Karuska was wheeled down a corridor into the electrical laboratory, and with the aid of the laboratory technician the surgeon made his preparations. The Moss lamp was arranged to throw a flood of ultra-violet over the Russian's cranium while the leads from a deep therapy X-ray tube was connected, one to the front of Karuska's throat and the other to the base of his brain. At a signal from the major, a nurse began to administer ether.

"I guarantee nothing, Dr. Bird," said the major. "The paralysis of the vocal cords may be physical, in which case the victim will still be unable to speak, regardless of the brain stimulation. If, however, the evident paralysis is due to some obscure influence on the brain, it may work."

"In any, event I will hold you blameless and thank you for your help," replied the doctor. "Please start the stimulation."

Major Martin closed a switch, and the hum of a high tension

alternator filled the laboratory. The Russian quivered for a moment and then lay still. Major Martin nodded and Dr. Bird stepped to the side of the operating table.

"Ivan Karuska," he said slowly and distinctly, "do you hear me?"

The Russian's lips quivered and an unintelligible murmur came from them.

"Ivan Karuska," repeated Dr. Bird, "do you hear me?"

There was a momentary struggle on the part of the Russian and then a surprisingly clear voice came from his lips.

"I do."

"Who is the present head of the Young Labor party?"

Again there was a pause before the name "Saranoff" came from the lips of the insensible figure. Carnes gave a sharp exclamation but a gesture from the doctor silenced him.

"Is Saranoff alive?"

"Yes."

"Is he in the United States?"

"No, he is in London."

"Is he coming to the United States?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"I don't know. Soon. As soon as we are ready for him."

"Where is he living in London?"

"I don't know."

"How did you get word that you were to be rescued from Atlanta?"

"A message was smuggled in to me by O'Grady, a guard in our pay."

"What was that vitrilene helmet for?"

"To protect me from the effects of the black lamp."

"What is the black lamp?"

"I don't know exactly. Saranoff invented it. It gives a black light and it kills all other light except sunlight, and it paralyses the brain."

"Did you know that the model of the Breslau gun had been stolen?"

"Yes."

"What were you going to do after you were rescued from jail?"

"I was going to make a full-sized gun. We have a disappearing gun platform built in the swamps at the juncture of the Potomac and Piscataway Creek. The gun was to be mounted there and we would shell Washington and institute a reign of terror. It would be a signal for uprisings all over the country."

"Is there a black lamp at that gun platform?"

"Yes. The black lamp will kill both the flash and the report."

"Where did you get the formula for radite?"

"We got it from one of Dr. Bird's assistants. His name—"

As he spoke the last few sentences, Karuska's voice had steadily risen almost to a shriek. As he endeavored to give the name of the

doctor's treacherous helper his voice changed to an unintelligible screech and then died away into silence. Major Martin stepped forward and bent over the prone figure. Hurriedly he tore away the electrical connections and placed a stethoscope over the Russian's heart. He listened for a moment and then straightened up, his face pale.

"I hope that the information you obtained is worth a life, Dr. Bird," he said, his voice trembling slightly, "because it has cost one."

"It may easily save thousands of lives. I thank you, Major, and I will see that no blame attaches to you for your actions. I only wish that he had lived long enough to tell me the name of my assistant who has sold me to Saranoff. However, we'll get that information in other ways. Carnes, telephone Lawson at Atlanta to slam O'Grady into a cell pending investigation while I get Camp Meade on the wire and order up a couple of tanks. We are going to attack that gun emplacement at daybreak."

The telephone bell in the laboratory jangled sharply. Major Martin answered it and turned to Carnes.

"You're wanted on the telephone, Mr. Carnes."

The detective stepped forward and took the transmitter.

"Carnes speaking," he said. "Yes. Oh, hello, Bolton. Yes, we have Karuska here, or rather his body. Yes, Dr. Bird is here right now. You've what? Great Scott, wait a minute."

"Dr. Bird," he cried eagerly turning from the telephone, "Bolton has located the Washington headquarters of the Young Labor party."

Dr. Bird sprang to the instrument.

"Bird speaking, Bolton," he cried. "You've located their headquarters? Who's running it? Stanesky, eh? You're on the right track; he used to be Saranoff's right hand man. Where is the place located? I don't seem to recollect the spot. You have it well surrounded? Where are you speaking from? All right, we'll join you as quickly as we can. Keep your patrols out and don't let anyone get away."

He hung up the receiver and turned to Carnes.

"Did you have the car wait?" he asked. "Good enough; we'll jump for the Bureau and pick up all the vitrilene laying around loose and then join Bolton. He thinks that he has the whole outfit bottled up."

Bolton was waiting as the car rolled up and Dr. Bird leaped out.

"Where are they?" demanded the doctor eagerly.

"In an abandoned factory building about three hundred yards from here," replied the Chief of the Secret Service. "I traced them through New York. We have been watching the place ever since yesterday noon, and I know that Stanesky is in there with half a dozen others. No one has tried to leave since we set our watch. One funny thing has happened. About an hour ago a peculiar red glow suffused the whole building. It has died down a good deal since, but we can still see it through the windows. Could you tell us what it means?"

"No. I couldn't, Bolton, but we'll find out. How many men have you?"

"I have sixteen stationed around."

"That's more than we'll need. I have only vitrilene shields and helmets enough to equip six men. Pick out your three best men to go with us and we'll make a try at entering."

Bolton strode off into the darkness and returned in a few moments with three men at his heels. Dr. Bird spoke briefly to the operatives,

all of them men who had been his companions on other adventures. He explained the need for the vitrilene helmets and shields, and without comment the six donned their armor and followed Bolton as he strode toward the building. As they approached, a dull red glow could be plainly seen through the windows, and Dr. Bird paused and studied the phenomenon for a moment.

"I don't know what that means, Bolton," he said softly, "but I don't like the looks of it. Stanesky is up to some devilment or other. I wouldn't be a bit surprised to find out that he knows all about your pickets and is ready for a raid."

"We'd better rush the place, then," muttered Bolton.

Dr. Bird nodded agreement and with a sharp command to his men Bolton broke into a run. Not a shot was fired as they approached, and the front door gave readily to Bolton's touch. At it opened there came a grating sound from the roof followed by the whir of a propeller. Dr. Bird ran out of the building and glanced up.

"A helicopter!" he cried. "They were expecting us and have escaped!"

He drew his pistol and fired ineffectually at the great bird-like ship

which was rising almost noiselessly into the air. He cursed and turned again to the building.

Bolton still stood in the room which they had first entered. His flashlight showed it to be empty, but from under a door on the opposite side a line of dull red light glowed evilly. With his pistol ready in his hand, Bolton approached the door on hands and knees. When he reached it he threw his shoulder against it and dropped flat to the floor as the door swung open. No shot greeted him, and he stared for a moment and then rose to his feet.

"Nothing in here but some glass statues," he announced.

Dr. Bird followed him into the room. As he looked at what Bolton had called glass statues he gasped and shielded his eyes.

"God in Heaven!" he ejaculated. "Those were living men!"

Before them were three men or what had been three men. All stood in strained attitudes with a look of horror frozen on their faces. The thing that made the spectators shudder was that their bodies had, by some diabolical method, been rendered semi-transparent. The dull red light which suffused the room emanated from the three bodies. Dr. Bird examined them closely, being careful not to touch them.

"The identity of my treacherous assistant is known," he said grimly as he pointed at the middle figure. "It was Gerond. What is this?"

He took an envelope from the hand of the middle figure and opened it. A sheet of paper fell out and he picked it up and read it.

"My dear Mr. Bolton," ran the note. "Your methods of tracing and picketing my headquarters are so crude as to be almost laughable. This base has served its purpose and we were ready to abandon it in any event, but I couldn't resist the temptation to let you almost nab us. The three men whom you will find here are agents who failed in their duty. If you are interested in learning the method of their execution, you might take to heart the words of your colleague, Dr. Bird: 'The clue lies in those windows.'"

Carnes glanced at the windows and gave a cry of surprise. The glass was opaque, as had been the glass in the doctor's laboratory and the glass in the infirmary at Atlanta. The fogging however, was much more pronounced, and the opaque glass gave faintly the same red effulgence which came from the three bodies.

"What does it mean, Doctor?" he asked.

"I don't know, Carnes," said Dr. Bird slowly. "I foresee that I am

going to have to do a great deal of work on short wave-lengths soon. It is doubtless the effect of some modification of the black lamp which has done it. Look out!"

He leaped to one side as he spoke, drawing Bolton and Carnes with him. A panel in the side of the wall opposite the doorway had slid silently open and through the opening poured out a beam of fiery red. Full on the three bodies it fell, and then spread out to fill the room. Dr. Bird had drawn the two nearest men out of the direct beam, but one of the secret service men stood full in its path. In the excitement of entering he had dropped his vitrilene shield and the livid ray fell full on his defenceless body. As they watched an expression of horror spread over his face and he strove to move to one side, but he was held helpless. Slowly he stiffened; and, as the ray bored through him, his body became semi-transparent and the same dull red glow which emanated from the three bodies they had found began to shine forth from him. Bolton strove to break from the doctor's grasp and rush to the rescue but Dr. Bird held him with a grip of iron.

"Too late," he said grimly. "Chalk up another murder to the arch fiend who has committed the others. I don't know the nature of that ray and vitrilene may not be an adequate defence against its full force. We had better get out of here and attack the place from the

rear."

Carefully edging their way around the sides of the room, the five men made their way out through the door. Dr. Bird slammed the door shut behind him and led the way out of the building and around to the rear. A door loomed before them and he cautiously tried it. It gave to his touch and he entered. As he set his foot on the threshold a terrific explosion came from the interior of the building.

"Run!" he shouted as he led the way in retreat. "If that is a radite explosion it will act for several seconds!"

From a safe distance they watched. One corner of the building had been torn off by the force of the explosion, and as they watched the rest of the building gradually collapsed and sank into a pile of ruins.

"They had planned on a visit from us all right," said Dr. Bolton grimly. "They had a surprise for us any way we jumped. If we went in the front door, that devil's ray was to finish us, and if we went in the back door the whole place was arranged to blow up as we entered. I only hope that Stanesky thinks that he has got us all and doesn't expect an attack on his next base in the morning. If he doesn't, I think we may give him a rather unpleasant surprise. Of course, that lamp is smashed into atoms and buried under the debris,

but I don't know what other devil's contraptions that ruin holds. Bolton, have your men picket it and allow no one near until I get back. I've got to get to a telephone and get a couple of tanks from Meade and a plane or two from Langley Field."

Two tanks made their way slowly across country. The front of each tank was protected by a heavy sheet of vitrilene, while from the turrets of the tanks projected the wicked looking muzzles of thirty-seven millimeter guns. Overhead two airplanes from Langley Field soared, scouting the country. Dr. Bird and Carnes rode in the leading tank.

"It ought to be somewhere near here, unless Karuska lied," said Carnes as he swept the country with a pair of binoculars.

"He didn't lie," returned Dr. Bird. "It was his subconscious mind that spoke and it never lies. He spoke of the gun emplacement as being in a swamp and I have a strong idea that it is submersible. Of course, it is bound to be well camouflaged, both from land and from air observation."

The planes circled around again and again, quartering the air like a pair of well-trained bird dogs will quarter a hunting field. First high and then low they swooped back and forth, the tanks lumbering

slowly along in the same direction. Presently the occupants of the leading tank saw one of the planes bank sharply and swing around. It dropped to an altitude of only a few hundred feet and turned and went back over the ground it had just crossed.

"I believe that fellow sees something!" exclaimed Carnes.

As he spoke, three green Very lights came from the cockpit of the plane. The tank driver gave a grunt of satisfaction and turned the nose of his vehicle in that direction. The second tank followed.

Hardly had they turned in the new direction before the ground began to get soft under their tracks and the heavy vehicles began to sink. The driver of the Doctor's tank forced it ahead, but the tank sank deeper in the mire until water flowed in around the feet of the occupants.

"I reckon we'll have to get out and walk pretty soon, Doctor," said the driver.

Dr. Bird grunted in acquiescence. The tank made its way forward a few yards before the engine sputtered and died. The second tank stopped when the first one did, fifty yards behind it. Donning vitrilene helmets and taking vitrilene shields in their hands, the

crews of both tanks climbed out into the waist-deep water and gathered around the Doctor for orders.

"Form a skirmish line at ten-pace intervals and cross the swamp," he directed. "We may meet with no opposition, but if there is, the more scattered we are, the safer we will be. You all have hand grenades as well as your rifles?"

A murmur of assent answered him and the line formed and started across the swamp. They had gone perhaps a hundred yards when three red lights came from one of the planes circling overhead.

"Down!" cried the doctor, dropping to his knees in the muck.

Four hundred yards ahead of them a concrete platform emerged from the marsh and rose slowly into the air. It was roofed with a dome of what looked like plate glass, but which the doctor shrewdly suspected was vitrilene. When the base of the platform was two-feet above the level of the water the dome slid silently aside disclosing two men bending over a tiny gun. Dr. Bird leveled his binoculars.

"That's the Breslau gun model that was stolen as sure as I'm a foot high!" he cried. "They must have made some miniature shells and be planning to fire it."

Slowly a pall of intense blackness rose from the marsh and enveloped the platform and hid it from view. A whining noise came from overhead, and then a crash like a thunderbolt. The blast of the explosion threw the attackers face down in the swamp, and when they arose and looked back there was merely a gaping hole where the leading tank had been. The second tank suddenly seemed to rise in the air and fly into millions of tiny fragments, and a second thunderous blast sent them again to their knees.

"Radite!" bellowed Dr. Bird to Carnes. "Imagine the effect if that had been a full charge fired from a completed Breslau gun! Watch the planes, now. I think they are going to drop a few eggs on them."

The black mist cleared as if by magic and the platform was in plain view. The big glass dome rolled back into place as the two planes swept over at an elevation of two thousand feet. From each one a small black cigar-shaped object was released and fell in a long parabola toward the earth. The glass dome which had been closing over the gun platform rolled quickly back and a long beam of intense blackness pierced the heavens. First one and then the other of the falling bombs disappeared from view into it, and then the black column faded from view. The two bombs fell with increasing speed but the dome closed over the platform before they struck. The two hit the dome at almost the same instant and instead of the blinding

crash they expected, the watchers saw the bombs rebound from the dome and fall harmlessly into the water.

"Stymied!" muttered the doctor. "I wonder what other properties that confounded lamp has."

He resumed his advance, Carnes and the soldiers keeping abreast of him. When they were within two hundred yards of the platform it rose again and the transparent dome rolled back. A beam of black shot forth over the swamp, searching them out and hiding them from view. First one and then another felt the effects of the black beam; but the vitrilene which the Doctor had provided stood them in good stead, and, aside from a slight shortening of their breath, none of the attackers felt any the worse.

"Come on, men!" cried the Doctor as his athletic figure plowed forward through the breast-deep water. "That is their worst weapon and it is harmless against us!"

Cheering, they fought their way toward the platform. It sunk for a moment and then rose again. As the dome swung back a sharp crackle of machine-gun fire sounded and the water before them was whipped into foam by the plunging bullets. One of the soldiers gave a sharp cry and slumped forward into the water.

"Fire at will!" shouted the lieutenant in command.

A crackle of rifle fire answered the tattoo of the machine-gun, and the sharp ping of bullets striking on the dome could be plainly heard. An occasional shot kicked up a spurt of white dust from the concrete, but the machine-gun kept up a steady rattle of fire and the soldiers kept their heads almost at the level of the water. There came the roar of an airplane motor, and one of the planes swept over the platform, a hundred yards in the air, with two machine-guns spraying streams of bullets onto the platform. Two men abandoned their machine-gun and crouched under the partially folded-back dome as the second plane swept over, and Dr. Bird took advantage of the lull to advance his party a few yards nearer. Again the defenders of the platform rushed to their gun, but the first plane had turned and swooped down with both guns going, and again they were forced to take shelter while the Doctor and his force made another advance.

The second plane had turned and followed the first, but the defenders had had enough. The transparent dome closed over them and the platform sank into the marsh. With a shout, Dr. Bird led the way forward again.

The attackers were within a hundred yards of the platform when it again rose above the surface of the water. The guns had disappeared,

but in their place stood an airship. It was a small affair with stubby wings above which were two helicopter blades revolving at high speed. No sound of a motor could be heard.

The transparent dome rolled back and like a bullet the little craft shot into the air, followed by a futile volley from the soldiers. Hardly had it appeared than the two airplanes bore down on it with machine-guns going. The helicopter paid no attention to them for a moment, and then came a puff of smoke from its side. The leading plane swerved sharply and the helicopter fired again. The leading plane maneuvered about, trying to get a machine-gun to bear, while the second plane climbed swiftly to get above the helicopter and pour a deadly stream of fire down into it. It gained position and swooped down to the attack, but another puff of smoke came from the side of the helicopter and there was a thunderous report and a blinding flash in the sky. As the smoke cleared away, no trace of the ill-fated plane could be seen. The helicopter hung motionless in the air as though daring the remaining plane to attack.

The plane accepted the challenge and bore down at full speed on the stranger. Again came a puff of smoke, but the plane swerved and an answering shot came from its side. It was above the helicopter, and the shell which missed its mark plunged to the ground. When it struck there came a roar and a flash and the whole earth seemed to

shake. The helicopter shot upward into the air and forward, both its elevating fans and its propellers whirling blurs of light. The airplane followed at its sharpest climbing angle, but was helpless to compete with its swifter climbing rival.

"He's got away!" groaned Carnes.

"Not yet, old dear!" cried the Doctor hopping with excitement. "He isn't safe yet. I never told you, but one Breslau gun had been made and it is on that plane. It has deadly accuracy and is good for fifteen miles. That's Lieutenant Dreen at the controls and Mason at the gun."

As he spoke the plane swung around and made a half loop. For a few yards it flew upside down and then whirled swiftly. As it turned there came a sharp report and a puff of smoke from its rear cockpit. High above, the helicopter had ceased climbing and hovered motionless. As the plane fired, the helicopter shot forward like an arrow from a bow, and thereby spelled its doom. Not for nothing did Captain Mason bear the title of the best aerial gunner in the Air Corps. He had foreseen what the action of his opponent would be and had allowed for just such a move. Far up in the sky came a blinding flash and a cloud of smoke. When the smoke cleared the sky was empty, except for a little scattered debris falling slowly to the ground.

“And that's that!" exclaimed Dr. Bird as he finished his examination of the underground laboratory with which the gun platform connected. "The lamp has gone to glory with Breslau's gun model and two of the best brains of the Young Labor party. I am sure that Stanesky was one of those two men. I wish the whole gang had been on board."

"Don't you think that this is the end of it, Doctor?" asked Carnes.

"No, Carnes, I don't. We know that the real brains of this outfit is Saranoff, and Saranoff is still alive. He probably won't try to use his black lamp again, because I will have a defence against it in a short time, now that I have seen it in action, but he'll try something else. The whole object of life to a loyal citizen of Bolshevikia is to reduce the whole world to the barbarous level in which they hold Russia, and they will spare no pains or effort to accomplish it. The greatest obstacle to their success at present is the President of the United States. He is loved and respected by the whole world, and if he is spared he will forge the world into a great machine for the preservation of peace and universal good will. That would be fatal to Bolshevikia's plans, and they will spare no effort to remove him. By the grace of God, we have saved him from harm so far, but until we remove Saranoff permanently from the scene, I will never feel safe for him."

"What do you suppose they'll try next, Doctor?"

"That, Carnes, time alone will tell."

72 Phalanxes of Atlans by Francis Van Wyck Mason

Only in dim legends did mankind remember Atlantis and the Lost Tribes—until Victor Nelson's extraordinary adventure in the unknown arctic.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

grasshoppers

- - -

Chapter 1

The ice suddenly gave way under his foot, hurling Victor Nelson violently forward to lie in the deep snow at the bottom of a tiny crevasse, down which the merciless gale moaned like an anguished demon.

"It's no use," he muttered bitterly. "We've fought hard, but we're done for."

He lay still, stupidly watching his breath form tiny beads of ice on the ends of the fur which lined his parka. Until that moment he had not realized how thoroughly exhausted he was. Every muscle of his starved, bruised body ached unbearably. It wasn't so bad lying there in the soft snow. He could rest, then look later for the ice hummock behind which the plane lay sheltered. Rest! That's what he needed, a good long rest.

But deep within him, a primal instinct stabbed his waning consciousness. "No," he gasped, and blinked his reddened eyes behind smoked goggles which dulled the shimmer of the aurora. "If I stop, I'll never get up."

Shaken by the terrific velocity of the arctic gale he numbly clambered to his feet, then stooped with a stiff awkward motion to retrieve a Winchester rifle which lay half buried in the snow beside the blurred imprint of his body.

"Wonder if Alden had any better luck?" The question burned dully in his brain. "Don't suppose so; there can't be anything alive in this God-awful wilderness." As he stumbled on he found no answer in an

unbroken vista of wind-scored ice and drifting snow that, swirling high into the air, momentarily cut off the view of that black line of ice-capped mountains barely visible on the horizon.

"Yes, if he hasn't found anything, we'll be dead or frozen stiff before to-morrow."

His soul—that of a true explorer—revolted, not at the thought of death, but that his and Alden's courageously won discovery of a majestic mountain range towering high over a polar region marked "unexplored" on the maps would now never be made public.

Leaning forward against the merciless icy blast he painfully picked his way over a treacherous ice ridge, to be faintly encouraged by the fact that the towerlike hummock of ice marking the position of the plane now lay but a few hundred yards ahead.

Bitterly he cursed that demon of ill-fortune who had sent the blinding snow storm which had forced down the plane ten long days ago at the very beginning of its triumphant return flight to the base at Cape Richards. Since that hour the storm gods had emptied the vials of their wrath upon the luckless explorers. Day after day, cyclonic winds made all thought of a take-off suicidal in the extreme. Three days ago the last of their food had given out, and, he mused,

starvation is an ill companion for despair.

Slip, slide and fall! On he fought until the final barrier was reached and he stood staring hopelessly down into a small natural amphitheater which sheltered the great monoplane. The ship was still there, its engine snugged in a canvas shroud and with the soft, dry snow banked up high in the lee of its silver gray fuselage. Numbly, like a man in the grip of a painful coma, Nelson shielded his face with a furry hand to scan the surrounding terrain. "Hell!" The door block of the igloo they had built was still snowed up; Alden was not there!

"He's not back," he muttered, while his body swayed beneath the gale which smote him with fierce, unseen fists. "Poor devil, I hope he hasn't lost the way."

All the bitterness of undeserved defeat stung his soul as he started down the incline into the hollow.

Suddenly he paused. The rifle flew into the ready position and his chilled thumb drew back the hammer. "What's this?" On the snow at his feet was a bright, scarlet splash, dreadfully distinct against the white background. While his dazed brain struggled to register what his eyes saw, he looked to the right and left and discovered several

more of the hideous spots. Then an object that gleamed dully in the polar twilight attracted his attention. He lumbered forward, stooped stiffly and caught up a long, half round strip of bronze.

"What? Why? Oh—I'm crazy. I'm seeing things!" The pain in his empty stomach was now becoming excruciating. To steady himself he shut his eyes, shook his head as though to clear it, then looked again at that strip of metal in his hand. Attached to it were two slender strips of leather like straps, ending in small, bronze buckles.

"Why, it's not from the plane," he stammered aloud. "Damned if it doesn't look like a greave the old Greek warriors used to wear to protect their shins."

Suddenly alarmed and mystified beyond words, he shuffled forward over the snow, the greave yet clutched in a fur gloved hand. Presently two more objects, already half buried by the stinging, swirling drifts, caught his attention. One was the stock of Alden's rifle, protruding starkly brown from the unrelieved whiteness, and the other was a broken wooden shaft that ended a graceful but wickedly sharp bronze spear head.

"I've either gone crazy," he said, "or I'm delirious. Yes, I must be clean nutty! There *couldn't* be a human settlement within a thousand

miles. Let's see what's happened."

On the snow of a little wind-sheltered space behind the igloo he discovered the unmistakable and ominous signs of a struggle. An indefinite number of footprints, blurred but enormous in size, were marked in the snow. Here and there deep furrows mutely testified how Alden and the enemies against whom he struggled had reeled back and forth in vicious combat over a considerable area. Then, shaken by a new fear, he discovered Alden's left glove and a rag of some peculiar thick material that seemed to have a metallic finish. But what aroused his gravest fears were the numerous splashes of blood that here and there streaked the snow in gruesome relief.

Only a moment Nelson stood, shaken by the merciless wind, scanning the piece of bronzed armor between his gloved hands with a fresh interest. It was beautifully fashioned, and decorated at the knee point with the wonderfully wrought figure of a dolphin.

If he could only think clearly! But his brain seemed to lie in a red-hot skull. "Whatever's happened," he muttered, "I'd better not waste time; they couldn't have been here so long ago. Poor Alden! I wonder what kind of devils caught him?"

Even before he had finished the sentence the aviator had taken up

the partially obliterated trail of spattered blood drops. That what he sought appeared to be a maraudering party of giants restrained him not at all. The one clear thought burning in his weary brain was that Richard Alden, his best friend—the man with whom he had traveled over half the world, by whose side he had faced many a perilous situation—must at that moment lie in peril, the extent of which he could only surmise.

"Must have been about a dozen of them," he said thickly. And, holding the Winchester ready, he commenced once more to plod on through the stinging sheets of wind-driven ice particles. More than once he had great difficulty in not losing that crimson trail, for here and there the restless, white crystals completely blotted out the splashes.

All at once Nelson checked his pathetically slow progress, finding himself on the top of an eminence, looking down in what appeared to be a vastly deep natural amphitheater of snow and ice. At the bottom, and perhaps a hundred yards distant, was a curious black oval from which appeared to rise a dense, wind-whipped column of whitish vapor.

"My eyes must be going back on me," muttered Nelson through stiffened lips. How intolerably heavy his fur suit seemed! His

strength was about gone and that curious black mouthlike circle seemed infinitely far away. But, spurred by fears for his friend, he started downward for the precipitious trail leading directly towards it.

Once he stepped inside the crater, he became conscious of a terrific side pressure which gripped him as a whirlpool seizes a luckless swimmer. The wind buffetted him from all angles, dealing him powerful blows on face and body, which, too strong for his weary body, sent him reeling weakly, drunkenly across the hard, glare ice towards the vortex. Twice he slipped, each time finding it harder to arise. But at last he approached what on closer inspection proved to be a subterranean vent of black rock.

"Steam!" he gasped. "It's steam coming out of there!"

Swayed by a dozen conflicting emotions, he paused, the Winchester barrel wavering like a reed in his enfeebled grasp.

"The whole thing's crazy," he decided. "I must be frozen and lying somewhere, delirious. Poor Dick! Can't help him much now."

Like a man in a nightmare who advances but feels nothing under his feet, Nelson staggered on towards that huge, gaping aperture of

black rock. On the threshold a pool of melted snow water made him stare.

"Hell!" he said. "It's only a volcanic vent of some kind." Then dimly came the recollection of Eskimo legends concerning thermal springs beyond the desolate and unknown reaches of Grant Land.

His mind in an indescribable turmoil, Nelson splashed across a hundred yards of sodden snow, then shivered on wading knee deep through a pool of melted ice. Now he stood on the very threshold of that awful opening, dense clouds of vapor beating warmly against his chilled features.

His goggles fogged at once, blinding him effectively as, with reason staggering under the accumulated stress of starvation and the circumstances of Alden's disappearance, he groped his way a few feet into the vent. With his left hand he pulled up the glasses from his sunken, blood-shot eyes.

"It's warm, by God!" he cried in astonishment as the skin exposed by lifting the goggles came in contact with the air. "Must be some kind of earth-warmed cave."

Increasingly mystified, he caught up his rifle and strode on down the

passage, at that moment illuminated by the last unearthly rays of the aurora borealis. A single, dazzling beam played before him like a powerful searchlight, to light a high vaulted tunnel of basalt rocks which were distorted by some long-gone convulsion of the earth into a hundred weird cleavages and faults. For that brief instant he found he could see perhaps a hundred feet down into a high roofed passage, along the top of which poured a tremendous stream of billowing, writhing steam.

"If this doesn't beat all," he murmured; but for all of his apprehension he did not pause. Those bloody splashes bespeaking Alden's pressing need urged him on. "Looks like I'm taking a one way trip into Hell itself. Well, we'll soon see."

Slipping and sliding over an almost impassable array of black rocks and boulders, Nelson fought his way forward, conscious that with every stride the air grew damper and warmer. Soon trickles of sweat were pouring down over his chest, tickling unbearably.

Then all at once the ray of light faded, leaving him immersed in a blackness equalled only by the gloom of a subterranean vault. He stopped and, resting his rifle against a nearby invisible rock, threw back the parka hood and pulled off his gloves. He was amazed to feel how warm the strong air current was on his hands.

"Beats all," he muttered heavily. "I wonder where they've taken Alden?"

Meanwhile his hands groped through fur garments now wet with melted-snow and ice particles, searching for the catch to open that pocket in which lay a small but powerful electric flashlight, an instrument without which no far-flying aviator finds himself. After a moment's fumbling, his yet stiffened fingers encountered the cylindrical flash and, with a low cry of satisfaction, he drew it forth to press the button.

"Mighty useful. I—" The words stopped, frozen on his lips. Before the parka edge his close cropped hair seemed to rise, and his breath stopped midway in his lungs. Sharp electric shocks shook him, for there, half revealed in the feeble flashlight's glare, was a sight which shook his sanity to the snapping point. Not fifty feet away two eyes, large as dinner plates, with narrow vertical red irises, were trained on him. Rooted to the ground by the paralysis of utter horror, Nelson saw that their color was a weird, unhealthy, greenish white, rather like the color of a radio-light watch dial.

Strangely intense, these huge orbs wavered not at all, filling him with an unnameable dread, while the strong odor of musk assailed his nostrils. The flashlight slipped from between Nelson's fingers

and, no longer having his thumb on the button, flickered out.

Helpless, Nelson stood transfixed against a boulder, aware that the strange, musky scent was becoming stronger. Then to his ears came a dry scrabbling as of some large body stealthily advancing. Those horrible, unearthly eyes were coming nearer! Fierce, terrible shocks of fear gripped the exhausted aviator. Then the impulse of self-preservation, that most elementary of all instincts, forced him to snatch up the rifle, to sight hastily, blindly, between those two, great greenish eyes. Choking out a strangled sob of desperation, Nelson made his trembling finger close over the cold strip of steel that must be the trigger.

Like a stage trick, the cavern was momentarily lit by a strong, orange yellow glare. Then the Winchester's report thundered and roared deafeningly; coincidentally arose a nerve-shattering scream. An exhalation, foul as a corpse long unburied, fanned his face. Terrified, he flattened to the rock wall as a huge, though dangerously agile body hurtled by with the speed of a runaway horse. Presently followed the sound of a ponderous fall, then a series of shrill, ear-piercing gibberings and squeakings, like those of a titanic rat—squeaks that rang like the chorus of Hell itself. Gradually they grew fainter, while in the darkness the heavy air of the tunnel became rank with the odor of clotting blood.

Nelson remained where he was, shaking like a frightened horse and bathed with a cold sweat.

"Wonder what it was?" he muttered numbly.

He broke off, for in the terrible darkness sounded a low but perfectly audible *thud! thud! thud! thud!*—and also the subtle noise of some rough surface rasping gently over the stone. His nerves crisped and shrieked for relief.

"It's coming again!" he told himself, and ejected the spent cartridge from the Winchester. "No use—it'll get me, but I may as well fight as long as I can."

Even stronger grew the musty smell of blood while that uncanny *thud! thud!* sound continued at regular intervals. Nelson waited, breath halted and finger on trigger, but still the darkness yielded no glimpse of those awful saucer-like eyes.

Emboldened, he stooped and, jerking off his left glove, commenced to grope among the boulders. Somewhere near at his feet the flashlight must be lying. Hoping against hope that its fall had not shattered the bulb, he ran his fingers over the cold, damp stones, every instant expecting to feel the clutch of the unseen monster. How

tiny, how puny he was! All at once his fingers encountered the smooth familiar shape of the flash and he raised it cautiously through the darkness. Patiently he shifted the Winchester to his left hand in order to set the flashlight on the top of a flat rock, pointing it as nearly as he could determine in the direction from whence came those ominous, stealthy sounds.

"Guess I'll switch on the light," he decided, "and trust to drop whatever it is before it reaches me."

Taking a fresh grip on his quivering nerves, Nelson cautiously cocked the .38-55, cuddled the familiar stock to his shoulder. He sighted, then with his right hand pushed down the catch lever of the flashlight.

Instantly a dazzling white beam shot forth to shatter the gloom. The hair on the back of Nelson's hands itched unbearably, while the cold fingers of madness clutched at his brain, for the sight which met his eyes all but bereft him of his wavering sanity. There, belly up, across a low ridge of basalt, lay a hideous reptile, which in form faintly resembled an enormous and fantastic kangaroo. Its scabby belly was of the unhealthy yellow of a grub, a hue which gave way to a leaden gray as the wart-covered skin reached the back. Two enormous hind legs, each thick as a man's torso and each equipped with three

dagger-like talons, struck out in helpless fury at the air, while a long, lizard-like tail threshed powerfully back and forth, scattering ponderous boulders right and left as though they had been marbles. The flashlight being trained as it was, the monster's head and forequarters were invisible, all save two very much smaller and shorter front legs which, like the hinder ones, clawed spasmodically.

"The D. T's!" gasped Nelson, conscious that he was trembling like an aspen. He suppressed a wild desire to laugh. "Yes, I've gone crazy!"

He glanced downwards and leaped swiftly back, for, creeping over the stones towards his fur outer boots, meandered a wide rivulet of bright scarlet blood. From its surface rose small curling feathers of steam which, drifting towards the tunnel's roof, merged with that gray, vaporous current flowing steadily towards the sunless Arctic expanse outside.

It took Nelson a long five minutes to sufficiently recover his equilibrium for action. All he could do was to stare at that grotesque, gargoyle-like creature as it writhed in leisurely and persistent death throes.

"Guess I winged it all right! My God, what a nasty beast! Looks like

one of those allosaurs I read about in college. It couldn't be, though —that tribe of dinosaurs died out five million years ago."

Cautiously he scrambled around among the high black stones, casting the search light beams before him and holding the Winchester always ready in his hand while trying to recall snatches of palaeontology studied at college long years ago.

"Yes, it must be a survival of one of the carnivorous dinosaurs," he decided, then paused, increasingly conscious of that steady thudding noise. What caused it?

At last he found himself before the creature's gigantic and repulsive head which lay limp over a blood bathed stone, huge jaws partially open, and serrated rows of wicked, stiletto-sharp teeth gleaming yellowly in the flashlight's rays. The head in shape was bullet-like, ending in a blunt nose as big as a bushel basket and in two prominent nostrils. The green, lidless eyes were still open, shining faintly, and seemed to follow his movements, but the steaming blood poured with the force of a small hose from between triple row of bayonetlike teeth that curved inward like those of a shark, to splash and bubble freely to the rock floor and to dribble horribly over the warty, gray hide.

Then Nelson discovered an amazing fact. About the great scaly neck, thick as a boy's waist, was fastened a ponderous collar, set with short, sharp spikes.

Nelson gasped. "What in hell!" he cried. "This damn thing's somebody's property!" His mind, staggered at the thought of dealing with a race that could and would domesticate such a hideous monster. "Well, it's no use standing here," he muttered, wiping the sweat from his eyes. "This isn't getting poor Alden away from those devils."

Thud! thud! In the act of turning he paused, listened once more. Then he discovered to his amazement that the heart of the apparently dead reptile was still beating strongly. He could even see the yellow skin of its belly rise and fall. The effect was grotesque, uncanny.

"Of course," muttered the shaken aviator, "I'd forgotten a reptile's ganglions will keep on beating for hours, like that shark we killed off Paumotu. Its heart didn't stop for five hours."

Leaving the slain allosaurus behind, the aviator limped onwards, doggedly following a trail which wound down, ever onwards, into the depths of the earth. Gradually the air became so filled with steam that he stripped off his fur jumper and trousers. Clad in a khaki

flannel shirt, serge trousers and shoepacks, he paused long enough to count his cartridges, and found there were just fourteen. Hell! Not very many with which to venture into an unknown abyss. He distributed them in his pockets, and, somewhat relieved of the weight of the fur suit, took up his advance, playing the flashlight ahead of him as he went.

"Poor Alden," he thought. "I wonder if he's still alive?"

Every moment expecting to stumble over the mangled corpse of his friend he hurried on, making better time over the cavern floor, but soon even the lighter clothing commenced to feel oppressive.

"Must be the earth's heat," he muttered, while the steam clouds rolled by him like ghostly serpents. "Guess the crust is very thin here —something like Yellowstone. Probably I'll find some thermal springs ahead."

Just as he spoke the tunnel took a sharp turn to the right. He scrambled around the bend to stand petrified, for with the suddenness of lightning a flood of dazzling orange-red light sprang into being. Momentarily it blinded him, then revealed strange, incomprehensible scenes. It appeared that two short shafts of incandescent flame roared through transparent columns of glass on

either side of the passage some fifty yards distant. Subconsciously Nelson realized that these columns began and ended in stonework that was smooth and well joined.

As his eyes became accustomed to the glare he distinguished beside each light pillar two bronze doors, some eight feet high and semicircular in shape. These had been evidently pulled back to expose the lights. Then his breath stopped in his throat, for there, standing beside them, was a gleaming group of six or eight of the strangest creatures Nelson could ever have imagined. They were men—there was no mistaking that—men of normal size, but they were so helmeted and incased in a curious type of armor that for a moment he believed them gargoyles.

Quite motionless he stood, clutching the cold barrel of the Winchester in a spasmodic grip and staring up at those two watch-towers, built like gigantic swallows' nests into sheer rock wall. He could see the warriors stationed there, peering curiously down at him from the depths of heavy, bronze helmets—helmets which in shape much resembled those of an ancient Grecian hoplite, for the nose guards and cheek pieces descended so low as to completely mask the features of those strange guards. For crests these helmets bore exquisitely wrought bronze dolphins, with brilliant blue eyes of sapphire. But what fascinated Nelson most was the curious armor

they wore. Beneath breast plates of polished bronze, these strange warriors wore what seemed to be a kind of chain mail—yet it was not that, for the texture had more the appearance of some heavy but pliant leather, finished with a metallic surfacing.

Suddenly the spell of mutual amazement was broken, for a tall warrior in a breast plate that glittered with diamonds and seemed altogether more ornate than the rest, clapped a short brass horn to his lips and blew a single piercing note. At once there appeared on the tunnel's floor, not a hundred yards from the startled aviator, a rank of perhaps twenty soldiers, accoutred exactly like those he beheld by the light boxes. They came scrambling over the boulders, their shadows grotesquely preceding them. In their hands were long shafted spears, and on their left arms rectangular shields, charged with a lively dolphin in the act of swimming. Some of them, however, held short hoses in their hands, hoses that sprouted from tight brass coils strapped to their broad shoulders.

Again the commanding figure aloft raised the horn. From the tail of his eye Nelson caught the gleam of metal in the orange glare. While a blast, harsh as the scream of a fire siren, echoed and re-echoed eerily through the passage, there appeared a fresh detachment. Nelson shrank back in horror, for these bronze-armored warriors led, at the end of a powerful chain, two more of those huge, ferocious

allosaurs, exactly like the one he had slain but a short while back.

Like well regulated automatons the hoplite rank opened to permit the passage of those repulsive, eager monsters, then closed up again and halted, spears levelled before them in the precise manner of an ancient Grecian phalanx, while the men with those curious hose-like contrivances ran out to guard the flanks.

"I'm done for now," thought Nelson as he threw off the Winchester's safety catch. "I suppose they'll turn those nightmares loose on me."

He was right. For all the world as though they led war dogs, the keepers in brazen armor advanced, the dull metallic clank of their accoutrement clearly discernible above the sibilant hiss of their hideous charges, which hopped along grotesquely like kangaroos, using their long and powerful tails as a counterpoise.

Then the officer watching from the left hand swallow's nest shouted a hoarse, unintelligible command, whereupon one of the keepers raised his right hand in a sharp gesture that instantly flattened the incredible monster to earth, exactly like an obedient bird dog.

As in a fantastic dream Nelson watched one of the armored guardians unsnap the hook of the powerful chain by which his

allosaurus was secured. Then, whistling sharply, he clapped his hands and pointed straight at the motionless aviator. The creature's green white eyes flickered back and forth, and a chill, colder than the outer Arctic, invaded Nelson's breast as those unearthly eyes came to rest upon him.

Meanwhile the other allosaurus remained crouched, whining impatiently for its keepers to cast it loose.

Fixing burning eyes upon the American, the foremost keeper threw back his head. "Ahre-e-e!" he shouted. Instantly the freed allosaurus arose, balanced its enormous bulk, then commenced to leap forward at tremendous speed, clearing fifteen or twenty feet with each jump and uttering a curious, whistling scream as it bore down, a terrifying vision of gleaming teeth and talons.

Shaking off the paralysis of despair, Nelson whipped up the Winchester and, as before, sighted squarely between those blazing, gemlike eyes. When the huge monster was but twenty feet away he fired, and the report thundered and banged in the cavern like the crash of a summer storm. In mid-air the ghastly carnivore teemed to stagger. Its tail twitched sharply as in an effort to recover its balance. Then, quite like any normal creature that is shot through the head, it lost all sense of direction and made great convulsive leaps, around

and around, clawing madly at the air, bumping into the rock walls and uttering soul-shaking shrieks of agony. Like a gargoyle gone mad it reeled back towards the startled rank of spearmen. As it came, Nelson saw the second allosaurus rear itself backwards and, balanced on its tail, strike out with powerful hind legs as its maddened fellow drew near.

Like razors the great talons ripped through the dying allosaurus' belly, exposing the gray-red intestines as the stricken creature raced by, snapping crazily at the empty air.

A single mighty sweep of the monster's tail crushed five or six of the panic-stricken keepers and guards, strewing them like broken and abandoned marionettes among the stones. Hissing and obviously terrified, the second dinosaur watched the dying struggles of its mate; then, obedient to a terrified shout from its keepers, wheeled about to join in a frantic rout of the spearmen, who, casting aside shield, spear and brass coil, fled for dear life in the direction of those invisible passages through which they had appeared.

Chapter 2

No less amazed and alarmed than those vanished soldiers, Nelson remained rooted to the ground, conscious that in the swallow's nest overhead there remained only the officer—a tall, broad shouldered man with golden beard showing from under the cheek pieces of his helmet. Across the body of the still writhing monster their glances met. Nelson could see by the light of those strange pillars of fire that the other's eyes were blue as any Norseman's. Leaning far out over the stone parapet the other stared down upon the aviator from the depths of his jewelled helmet in a strange mixture of curiosity and awe.

Suddenly Nelson's nerves snapped and he shook a trembling fist at the martial figure above.

"Go away!" he shrieked, and reeled back on the edge of collapse. "Go away, you damn phantom! You're driving me crazy—crazy, I tell you!"

The other stiffened, then turned and, uttering a hoarse shout, vanished, leaving the noiseless and apparently heatless pillar of fire flaring steadily.

Recovering somewhat, Nelson set his teeth, advanced to the nearest corpse, stooped and regarded him who lay there, with bronze helmet fallen off.

"It's a man and not a ghost," he murmured as his finger encountered flesh that was still warm. "Red headed too, or I'm a liar. Now what in hell is all this?"

For all his bewilderment he began to feel better and his swaying reason became steadier. "Bronze, bronze—nothing but bronze," the aviator told himself as he further examined the scattered equipment. "Evidently these fellows don't know the use of iron or steel."

With increased curiosity he bent over another splendidly built dead man who lay with back broken and sightless eyes staring fixedly onto the steam current meandering silently along the cavern's roof. From the fallen man's belt were slung half a dozen curious weapons that looked not unlike potato mashers, except that they were bronze headed and had wooden handles.

"Hum," he commented, "kind of like the grenades the Boche used in the late lamented. Wonder what the devil these are?"

Suddenly his ear detected the sound of a footstep and, on looking

swiftly up, he beheld that same yellow bearded officer who had directed the attack. This strange being had taken off his ponderous helmet to carry it in his left hand, while his right was held vertically in the immemorial sign of peace. On he came with powerful martial strides, a brilliant green cloak flapping gently behind him and the jewels in his brazen armor glinting like so many tiny colored eyes. The stranger was indeed handsome, Nelson noticed—and then he received perhaps the greatest shock of the whole chimerical adventure. The gold bearded man halted some twenty feet away, smiled and spoke in a curiously inflected but perfectly recognizable voice.

"Welcome to the Empire of the Atlans. Prithee, Wanderer, what be thy name?"

For a long moment Nelson was entirely too taken back to make a reply. Desperately his already perplexed brain tried to comprehend. Here was a handsome six-footer, dressed in the arms of an ancient race, speaking English of the seventeenth century!

As at a phantom, he regarded the stalwart, faintly ominous figure, from heavy leather sandals to bronze greaves, thence to wide belt from which dangled more of those curious grenadelike objects. His glance paused on the officer's beautifully wrought bronze cuirasse or

breast plate which showed in relief an emerald scaled dolphin and trident. These, Nelson decided, must be the national emblems of this incomprehensible nation.

Then their eyes met, held each other a long moment until the tall officer's features, disfigured by a long red scar across the jaw, broke into a hard smile.

"Hero Giles Hudson begs thy pardon," he said, "but methought thou spoke in the language of Sir Henry Hudson, my ancestor?"

"Sir Henry Hudson!" stammered Nelson incredulously. "The old explorer whose men turned him adrift? So that's why you're talking embalmed English!" In desperation his weary brain strove to understand.

"I know naught," replied the other with a grave smile, "save that the founder of our royal line spoke what he called English. He came from the Ice World to rule wisely over Atlans. He was the greatest Atlantean of history."

"Atlantean?" echoed Nelson, while his mind groped frantically in the recess of his memory. "Atlans, Atlantis!" A great light broke upon him. "The lost Atlantis! Great God!" Had he stumbled upon a

remnant of that powerful people whose fabled empire had been drowned ten centuries ago in the cold waves of the Atlantic?

“Aye," the yellow haired warrior continued as though reading his thoughts, "long centuries ago this valley was peopled by those who escaped the great cataclysm which ended the mother country. Later came another race, barbarian wanderers like thyself." He bowed for all the world like a courtly English gentleman. "But methinks thou art in need of food and sustenance?"

"You bet I'm hungry," was Nelson's emphatic reply. "I'm one short jump of starvation and the D. T.'s. But hold on a minute," he cried. "I'm looking for a friend of mine. He went by here, didn't he?"

"Aye." A crafty expression Nelson did not like crept into Hero Giles Hudson's face as he solemnly inclined his head.

"For the nonce, fair sir, thy companion is hale and sound. I beg your patience."

With a quick gesture the Atlantean raised his dolphin-shaped horn and blew three short blasts while Nelson, in sudden alarm, cocked his rifle and brought it in line with the other's chest. The glittering officer saw the motion, but made no effort to move from the line of

sights.

"Thy gesture avails naught," said he with stiff courtesy. "When Hero Giles gives his word, it stands good though Heliopolis and the Empire of the Atlans fall."

One by one half a dozen spearmen appeared, all obviously very frightened and only moved by an apparently Spartan discipline. Promptly they saluted, whereupon the Hero—as his title appeared to be—uttered a number of brief commands in some guttural language entirely unintelligible to the dazed aviator.

Presently a strange column appeared, composed of some fifteen or twenty disarmed men marching between a double rank of heavily equipped hoplites. As they drew near, they clasped imploring hands and evidently begged for mercy from the stern, tight jawed figure at Nelson's side. Contemptuous and unhearing the prisoners' piteous pleadings and lamentations, Hero Giles scowled upon them and deliberately turned his back.

"What are they?" inquired Nelson, vaguely alarmed. "Enemies?"

"Yes." There was a certain bitter savagery in the speaker's voice. "These are the dauntless defenders of Atlans who ran at the report of

thy weapon. Presently they die."

It was useless to interfere. The horrified aviator knew it and watched with compassionate eyes while the condemned soldiers were ranged in a single, white faced line. They remained silent now, seeming to have found courage now that hope was dead.

Upon brief command from a subaltern, the guards wheeled about and retreated perhaps twenty yards down the passage. There they halted, glittering eyes peering through the slots in their helmets to fix themselves upon the rigid prisoners who stood numbly resigned to death.

With surprising speed each member of that weird firing squad detached a brazen grenade from his belt, then threw back his arm in exactly the same attitude as a bomb-throwing doughboy. Then there came a short, sharp command and some fifteen or twenty grenades bobbed through the air to crash on the stones at the feet of the victims.

His head swimming with repulsion at the slaughter, Nelson beheld a curious sight. It seemed that from the broken grenades appeared a yellowish green vapor which sprung *of its own accord* upon the silent upright rank! In an instant it settled like falling snow upon the

doomed soldiers. For a breathless fraction of a second they stood, eyes wide with horror, then collapsed, kicking and struggling as men do under the influence of gas.

"Horrible!" gasped Nelson. "What was in the bombs?"

"A vapor," explained Hero Giles shortly. "A fungus vapor which, falling upon exposed flesh, instantly invades the blood and multiplies by millions. See—" He pointed to the nearest dead man and Nelson, with starting eyes, watched a yellowish growth commencing to sprout from the dead man's nostrils. Swiftly the poisonous mould threw out tiny branches, spreading with astounding rapidity over the skin until, in less than a minute after the grenades had exploded, the whole tumbled heap of dead were covered with a horrible yellow green fungus growth.

"Thou seest?" Hero Giles demanded. "Powerful, is it not? It is against the fungus vapor we wear this body armor made from the skin of a small lizard which inhabits our mountains."

Shocked and appalled, Nelson watched the retreat of the solemn, silent execution party.

Other soldiers fell to unconcernedly stripping their fallen comrades

of equipment; then, to Nelson's horrified surprise, two hideous allosauri reappeared, shepherded by some six or eight keepers. Once the horrible creatures were released, they pounced upon the dead and, snarling horribly, commenced to rend and devour the corpses.

Too shaken to comment or to make the protest he knew to be futile, Nelson followed the stalwart English-speaking officer into a bronze door set in the cavern wall and up a short flight of stairs into what appeared to be a guard room, where food and wine were immediately set before the famished aviator.

"Yea," Hero Giles was saying as he set down a beautiful goblet and wiped the last traces of wine from his beard, "we will soon o'ertake thy friend. He was but little hurt, and thou wilt assuredly join him in judgment before our great Emperor, Altorius XXII, at Heliopolis, our capital."

"Heliopolis?" mumbled Nelson, his mouth full of delicious stew that seemed to be made of veal. "Heliopolis? How far away is it?"

"A hundred leagues more or less," the other smiled. "Almost a third of the distance up this great valley."

"One hundred leagues! Three hundred miles! Then we won't be there

for several days."

The Hero's deep, rather ominous laughter rang out in the little rock hewn chamber. "Days?" he jeered. "Days? Art thou mad? In two hours from the time we board the tube-road thou shalt learn thy fate from his Serene Highness."

"What!" Nelson's sunken and blood-shot gray eyes widened, while his jaw dropped incredulously. "One hundred leagues in two hours? As I remember there are about three miles to a league, so a hundred leagues in two hours means one hundred and fifty miles an hour! Why, that's utterly impossible! The Twentieth Century Limited doesn't go half so fast."

Several enormous emeralds set into the other's bronze cuirasse glittered softly and the Hero's cold blue eyes hardened as his hand sought the grenade belt.

"Impossible? Dost doubt my words, sirrah?" With an effort he controlled himself. "Nay, thou shalt see for thyself ere long. The tube-road runs from Heracles to Heliopolis. Thou canst trace its course on this map here on the wall."

"The dog-born devils of Jarmuth have no such means of travel,"

continued the Atlantean, with a touch of smug pride that reminded Nelson of a small town Middle Westerner speaking of the "rightest, tightest little town west of the Mississippi."

Nelson found it extremely weird to be sitting there in a heavy arm chair, drinking good red wine with a fierce armor-clad warrior who wore sandals, sword and a war cloak such as might have graced the limbs of Alexander of Macedon. But with the food and rich warm wine, he felt blood, strength and self-confidence pouring back into his weary body. "Jarmuth?" he inquired. "What is Jarmuth?"

At his question the domineering, predatory face across the table darkened and the scar on his cheek flamed red as a scowl of hatred gripped Hero Giles' visage.

"Jarmuth!" snarled the Hero, and his great hand closed like a vise. "Jarmuth! A nation of treacherous, gold-adoring cannibals, whose countless hordes, spawned in the hot lowlands, ever threaten our frontiers. I tell thee, Friend Nelson, the dog-sired Jereboam will not rest until mighty Heliopolis lies in a heap of smoking ashes."

"Evidently," thought Nelson, taken aback at the other's vehemence, "this lad's English only in speech. I guess he's all Atlantean outside of that."

Warming to a fiercer pitch, the other fixed his guest with a smoldering gaze. "Jarmuth lies beyond Apidanus, the boiling river, and is the home of a savage horde whose horrid rites in Jezreel, the capital, stink as an offense to Saturn and the High Gods! Why, mark you," the warrior prince continued, interrupting his tirade to gulp a goblet of wine, "five years ago, by treachery, they seized the beauteous Altara, sister of our gracious Emperor, and upon the annual feast of Beelzebub, that vile demon they worship, the dark dogs would have sacrificed and devoured her, according to their rites, had not our Emperor dispatched a ransom of six fair maidens to take her place.

"Every year since then Jereboam has exacted that same tribute. Every year their princes and priests gorge themselves on the tender white flesh of our fairest and noblest maidens. But this tribute must end! The augurs have told us so. Help will come from the Ice World." Hero Giles brought crashing down on the table a brawny fist, on whose wrist was fixed a bright, gem-studded bracelet.

Horror-stricken, Nelson nodded.

"It is for this alone," continued the Hero somberly, "that thy life and that of thy friend have been spared."

"So? I didn't notice," broke in Nelson, "that you particularly went out of your way to preserve my health a while back."

The heavy golden head shook slowly and a grim smile played about those thin cruel lips. "Nay, but I could have had thee slain. Come, as we go to the tube-road I'll show thee how much thou liest in the hollow of this, my hand." He thrust out a broad, powerful palm. "Forget not, fair sir. At any moment I or my Imperial Master may choose to close that hand."

"Perhaps!" stated Nelson, feeling it imperative to keep up his pose of independence. "But it might just happen that your hand would close on a porcupine, and so far from hurting the porcupine it would be your hand that would be hurt."

"Sirrah!" The Atlantean sprang to his feet and one hand shot to the grip of his ponderous, bronze sword; but even more quickly Nelson snatched up his rifle, a thin smile playing on his lips.

"Drop it," he snapped. "Control yourself, or I'll plug you like that allosaur. Be reasonable, can't you? We both want something, and perhaps can help each other gain it."

The taut, menacing figure in armor relaxed and, with a gentle clank

of accoutrement, Hero Giles resumed his seat.

"Prithee pardon me," he apologized ungraciously. "I was ever a hot-head and there is much in what thou sayest. We wish to force an end to this annual tribute—if not to regain our beloved Altara. And thou"—his heavy, golden eyebrows shot up—"and thou, what dost thou wish?"

Nelson lowered the menacing barrel. "I want the return of Richard Alden, free passage back to that spot where he was captured and plenty of food and help should we need it. If I aid you in one, you must promise me in the other."

"Aye," returned the other doubtfully. "But I myself can pledge naught save thy immediate safety. 'Tis for our Imperial Majesty to say whether both thou and thy friend shall live, or whether ye shall feed our war dogs. Come now, we must go to Heliopolis."

Map of Jarmuth and Atlans

Picking up his heavy, bronze helmet the Atlantean prince set it on his yellow head and waited impatiently for Nelson to drain the last of his wine. Then, with a swirl of his green cloak, he vanished through

the rock wall, closely followed by a singularly distracted and alarmed aviator.

Chapter 3

A bright yellow glare steadily increased to mark the end of the tunnel down which the two had progressed; then, with the sharp abruptness of a hand-clap, there resounded a loud challenge in that unintelligible Atlantean language, above which the hiss of steam could be loudly heard.

Instantly the Atlantean prince strode forward, a commanding figure. Momentarily his helmet and the dangling grenadelike bombs were sharply outlined against that unearthly yellow light. He raised his hand and dropped it, palm outward, to his chin in what must have been a salute. The hissing sound of steam then faded into silence.

Followed at a respectful distance by a pair of silent, bronze-helmeted hoplites, Nelson and his guide descended a narrow stair, which broadened at the base. It was a very long staircase composed of perhaps two or three hundred steps which were occasionally interrupted by wide stone terraces. On these level spaces were fixed what appeared to be enormous field guns of glittering brass. They were similar, yet somehow oddly dissimilar, to the great guns Nelson had seen in France.

"Behold, oh Wanderer," Hero Giles declaimed impressively, "the

lands of Atlans and Jarmuth!"

It was a weird landscape that met Nelson's half-unbelieving gaze, a landscape green with that brilliance peculiar to spring meadows, lying beneath the same deep blue sky that overarched the surrounding barren ice fields which hemmed in this astounding valley.

A slight smile played over Hero Giles' thin lips as he watched the amazed aviator.

"The splendor of our country must indeed astound thee," he observed, "having come from the dreary fastness of the outer Ice World. But come; we are now to pass the great retortii guarding the entrance into the valley."

Nelson's eyes turned again to the weapons that so oddly resembled field guns. He examined them closely, inspecting them narrowly for the differences he knew must exist between them and the artillery that had thundered during the War of the Nations.

The chief difference lay in the mounting of these starkly beautiful weapons. They seemed to be fixed on a movable pivot set into the coal black rock itself. Like modern artillery, these curious pieces of

ordnance bore a bronze shield to protect their crews, through which projected the long and very narrow barrels of the guns. Grouped like cannoneers about their piece stood various red-crested Atlantean artillerymen. At a glance Nelson recognized the difference in their equipment from that of the spearmen behind them. These former bore no shields, no swords or bombs, but wore that same kind of leather body-armor which graced the powerful limbs of Hero Giles. Their helmets, too, were different: only the dolphin crest with a tuft of red feathers spouting from it bore any resemblance to those of the infantry, and, moreover, the artillerymen's eyes were shielded by goggles with thick blue lenses.

As the Hero approached, officers among them saluted, then sank on one knee with head humbly bent.

"Rather odd looking guns," commented Nelson. "I'm not much of an artilleryman, but I'm wondering how you take up the recoil?"

The Atlantean's laugh, which always reminded his guest of the purr of a tiger, rang out. "Why, marry, good sir, there is no recoil! These guns do not use that powder which Sir Henry, founder of our line, did speak of. Thou wouldst see one fired?"

His curiosity immeasurably piqued, Nelson nodded, whereupon the

Atlantean wheeled about and barked a brief command. With truly Prussian precision, the artillerymen sprang to their posts, some to a series of levers which sprouted from the rock platform without any apparent connection, and some to wheels and gauges of varying size that clustered in bewildering intricacy about the breech of the great brass gun.

"Markest thou that tree yonder, on the ledge of the valley?" The Atlantean's blunt outstretched finger indicated a towering pine sprouting from among a mass of reddish volcanic rock at the rim of that new world.

"Yes, I see it, but—" Nelson was astounded. A pine tree in the upper Arctic! That alone was sufficient cause for amazement. From a stiff red-plumed gun captain issued a brief series of commands which set the wonderfully drilled crew to silently adjusting their training and elevating mechanism. Click! Clack! Sis-s-s-s!

All up and down the vast staircase other gun crews stood watching. Nelson saw their weird, bluish goggles raised to that platform where, for all the world like a coast defense howitzer, the great cannon swung majestically about on the ponderous, brazen column which seemed to support it. Gradually the muzzle was elevated, then traversed a few feet, to finally come to a halt.

"Jakul, a Hero!" shouted the gun captain, his hand raised to Hero Giles.

"Thou art ready, Friend Nelson?" he inquired in tolerant amusement. "Mark well yon pine tree!

"Storr!"

Nelson saw one of the armored cannoneers bend forward, firmly grasp a short lever with both hands. In anticipation of a terrific report, the aviator pressed finger tips to his ears. There followed not a thundering crash, but a curious, eery, high-pitched scream, rather like that of a fire siren. There was no smoke! Nelson's incredulous eyes sought the muzzle of the gun and detected issuing from it what appeared to be a thin, white rod. This shimmering stream of silver shot straight towards the pine tree, gradually widening and giving off feathery billows of steam. In a fraction of a moment the target was completely veiled from sight in a furious pall of clouds which, to Nelson's great astonishment, did not dissipate nor condense with the speed of ordinary steam.

"Nava!"

With impressive suddenness the screaming sound faded, leaving a

sort of stunned silence on the gun platform. The gunners stalked back to their original stations.

Slowly, reluctantly, the mist enveloping the pine tree cleared away and Nelson felt a chill creeping up his spine. The pine was a good three hundred yards away, yet now it sagged limp to earth, stripped of bark, twigs and needles, only the bright yellow trunk and major branches remaining.

"That tree was a good two feet thick," mused the astounded aviator, "yet the steam gun bent it like a sapling. My God! What would it do to a man?"

"What thinkest thou of our retortii?" The Atlantean's beard glinted like metal as he shook with a grim, silent laughter. "These great retortii can shoot half a league and will blast any living thing in their path. I tell thee, friend Nelson, the discharge of even a small retortii will strip the flesh from a man's bones as a peasant strips the husk from an ear of corn!"

"Fearful, terrible!" was Nelson's awed comment. "Is there no defence against them?"

"Of course." The Hero's green feather-crested helmet gleamed with a

nod. "Was there ever an instrument of war that had not its defence? Yea, we have the blue vapor to shatter steam particles—it is called the blue maxima. Thou wilt presently see some of our troops armed with it."

"But where does this steam come from? How is it generated?" These two were the first of a host of questions which trembled on Nelson's lips.

"The steam," replied the Atlantean, "comes from the earth. We compress it many times, then feed it into our retortii. Without the heat of Mother Earth and our flame suns we would all perish. Steam is our motive power, our defence and our enemy!"

He flung his hand towards the vast valley stretched before them. It was hemmed in on either side by colossal breath-taking mountain ranges, whose caps shone and glittered with an eternal snow.

"Some foothills! They must rise all of 25,000 feet from the valley floor," decided the aviator, "and I should imagine this valley is a good mile below sea level. Yes! That must be it: this nightmare country lies in a huge geographical fault—something like the Dead Sea."

Mile after mile he could see fertile green land stretching away toward some low undulating hills on the horizon. Atlans was very thickly settled—that he recognized at once—for the terrain was divided and sub-divided into a vast checker-board, such as he had seen in France and Germany, while terraces, green with produce, had been laboriously gouged out of the frowning mountain sides.

Then his eye encountered the source of that curious amber light which pervaded the whole valley. A titanic flaming gas vent spouted like a cyclopean torch from the peak of a nearby mountain. Its steady, subdued roar struck Nelson's ear as he turned away his eyes, for the glare was too intense to be long endured. Further down the valley were two more such incandescent vents, shooting their flaming tongues boldly into the sky, warming the air and casting that rich, amber radiance over all.

"That is Mount Ossa nearest us," the Atlantean's voice came as though from a long distance. Victor Nelson was too staggered, too unspeakably amazed to register the fact of the Hero's proximity. "Below are Pelion and Jilboa, which, with Jabor, the greatest of all the flames, illuminate and warm the valley."

Nelson's eye, trained to be all observant, ranged far and wide, noting the presence of many lacy, frothing geysers which spouted at varying

intervals. There were, also, many steaming ponds and waterfalls which sprang in smoky confusion from the rock palisades to either side.

Nearer at hand he could distinguish a number of huge stone structures, evidently forts and public buildings. Strategically placed all about were more of those terrible brass retortii, gleaming dully under the incandescent glare of the flame sun.

"Come," cried Hero Giles with an impatient gesture of his hand, "we must e'en hasten to the tube-road terminal. Word has long since been sent to Heliopolis of thy arrival."

Downwards into the valley, which grew ever warmer and more fertile, the Atlantean led on, explaining a thousand and one details to the astounded aviator. Presently they approached the nearest of the great stone structures and Nelson received yet another shock. In a courtyard was drilling what would correspond to a troop of cavalry in the outer world. In orderly ranks the troopers wheeled, marched and counter-marched, their brazen armor twinkling and clashing softly as they carried out their evolutions with an amazing precision. But what astonished Nelson was the fact that each of these strange troopers bestrode a lithe, long-limbed variety of dinosaur, a good half smaller than the allosauri he had encountered in the tunnel.

These agile creatures ran about on their hind legs with astonishing speed, using a long reptilian tail as a balance.

On the back of each trooper was fastened a compact circular copper tank, from which sprouted a flexible metal hose that ended in what looked like a ponderous type of pistol.

In distinction to the red of the artillerymen and the blue of the Hoplites, these curious cavalrymen wore brilliant crests of yellow feathers, and from their lance tips fluttered tiny pennons of that same color.

"They must travel at least as fast as a race horse," decided the aviator after studying the swift evolutions of the scaly chargers. To his ears came the curious dry scrape and rattle of their horny claws on the stone pavement of the drill yard.

He would have lingered to see more, for those grotesque, lizard-like chargers interested him immensely, but Hero Giles beckoned imperiously. So, dropping the Winchester to the hollow of his arm, Nelson followed him into the brilliantly gas-lit depths of the great structure.

Everywhere were red bearded, white skinned soldiers, staring at him

with the frank curiosity of children. Powerful, magnificently built fellows they were, all in uniforms of different designs.

The walls about him, Nelson noticed, were covered with really beautiful friezes depicting various warlike scenes in that pure beauty of proportion found only in ancient Grecian temples.

On and on through resounding tunnels, past busy markets and barracks, hurried the two travelers. Then the Atlantean halted before a gracefully arched doorway where stood two hoplites, who immediately lowered spears to bar the passage. At a word from Hero Giles, however, they saluted and fell back in position—immovable, grim guardians.

Inside was a short staircase, beautifully wrought of bronze. Up this flashed the Atlantean's mail-clad body; then he came to a halt under the direct rays of a blinding light.

Nelson, on arriving above, discovered that the chamber was lined with jointless brass about ten feet high and circular in shape. "What's this?" he demanded curiously.

"The terminal of the tube-road. In a moment thou shalt see the great cylinder arrive."

The words were hardly by the Hero's lips when there appeared, noiselessly and amid a great rush of air, a huge metal cylinder that ran upon a sort of truck. It rumbled up to the edge of the platform and from its end a small door was opened.

Hero Giles exchanged a few sentences with an elderly man who appeared to act as control master, then he indicated the glowing doorway of the cylinder.

Firmly clutching his Winchester, Nelson bowed his head and stepped inside, there to discover a luxury he had never anticipated. The interior of the cylinder was brilliantly lit and on both sides were ranged wide divans, strewn with many silken cushions. In a rack nearby were several graceful glass amphora, filled with red and tawny wine.

"The cylinder must be about thirty feet long," the marvelling American told himself, "and about ten feet in diameter. Guess it works on the same principle as the compressed air tubes the department stores use to send change with."

Gingerly he tested the nearest divan and marvelled at the curious softness of what appeared to be a gigantic tiger skin. Meanwhile Hero Giles entered, his stern features even more serious, but with

him was a younger man who resembled him not a little.

"Fair brother," said the Atlantean to his companion, "this is he of whom I spoke. Friend Nelson, this is Hero John, my next youngest brother—he, too, speaks the language of the great Sir Henry Hudson."

The metallic clang of the door being shut brought a sharp qualm to Nelson's heart. "What are they doing?" he demanded quickly.

"The menials bolt the door beyond," explained Hero Giles with amused gravity. "In a moment our cylinder will be placed in the dispatching chamber, where steam pressure will be exerted. We shall then be hurled through this vacuum tube-road to Heliopolis, greatest city of Atlans. In an hour we will be there."

Outside sounded the sudden insistent clangor of a gong, and immediately the hiss of steam grew louder. The car shuddered as the hissing rose to an eery scream, then all at once the cylinder leaped forward, nearly hurling Nelson from his seat. He struggled as best he might to gain his equilibrium, for the eyes of the others were on him.

Then, more smoothly, the great cylinder gathered speed and hurtled on through the darkness of the tube-road towards Heliopolis, where

Victor Nelson would read the book of Fate.

Chapter 4

On the arrival platform at Heliopolis reigned a fierce excitement. Nelson noted countless armed and unarmed warriors hurrying to and fro, desperately intent on reaching their various posts, and snarling ill-temperedly as they elbowed their fellows aside. As soon as they appeared, Hero Giles and his brother became the center of an excited press of gorgeously armored officers.

"Hum!" murmured the aviator under his breath. "Something's happened. Must be a revolution, an earthquake or a Democratic convention in town; these boys seem all steamed up."

Intently he studied the ring of fierce, red bearded faces surrounding his late hosts and gathered that indeed some event of overwhelming importance had taken place. Presently a splendid falcon-eyed old man in a yellow cloak strode up, struggling to control himself. His resemblance to the two Heroes struck Nelson immediately.

"Harken ye," he cried, in that Elizabethan English which appeared to be the hieratic language of the New Atlantis' rulers. "Have ye heard? The dog-conceived sons of Semites have broken the truce! But three measures gone by, a brigade of their mounted podokesons swooped down on this very suburb of Tricca, yea, to the very gates of

Heliopolis! The foul man-eating dogs slaughtered royal serfs and burnt two quarters of the suburb to the ground! Moreover, they seized that prisoner"—Nelson's heart gave a great leap at the word —"whom thou sentest from the mountain passes."

"What!" In two swift strides Nelson was before the gray beard, his blood-shot eyes blazing with a strange light. "What did you say about that prisoner?"

The old man, who had obviously not noticed Nelson's presence, was thunderstruck to hear him speak in English until Hero Giles briefly explained his presence.

"Yea!" continued the elder, flinging lamentations furiously over his shoulder, "these swine of the Lost Tribes captured him and slew his escort. They have retreated towards the Apidanus, slaying, burning and pillaging as they go."

A sickening, deadly fear gripped the weary aviator. This was too much! Bad as it was to have Richard Alden captured by these weird descendants of a long vanished race, it was far worse to have him fall into the hands of their deadly enemies, the Jarmuthians, decadent survivors of Israel's Five Lost Tribes. The possibility of a rescue now seemed hopelessly and crushingly vague and distant. What could he

do now?

In dread despair he glanced about, amazed at the prodigious numbers of scowling men who hurried by, obviously intent upon the commencement of a campaign for revenge.

Then Hero Giles turned his scarred, warlike face, now set in granite lines. "Come, Friend Nelson, my uncle Anthony bids me take thee direct to the presence of His Serene Splendor, where he lies encamped at Cierum, by the shores of Lake Copias. There he marshals the army of Atlans for a march through the hot country on Jezreel. I tell thee, thou hast come in stirring times. From Heraclea, Thebes, Ys and Mayda will come the Phalanxes. Once and forever we will deal the dogs of Jarmuth a final blow."

Victor Nelson never forgot the hours that followed. Issuing at a fast trot from the tube-road terminal, the two Heroes led the way to a vast structure, in which were stabled both the terrific allosauri and the podokesauri, those swift dinosaurs which seemed to serve the Atlanteans as horses. The dreadful hiss and snarl of these monsters resounded in his ears long before the stables came in sight, and that curious musky odor he had noted in the tunnel was sickeningly strong.

Everywhere he read signs of hurried preparations for war. Savage, surly allosauri were led from their stables, one by one, long necks writhing snakelike backwards and forwards. Then their keepers would, after a moment's tussle, secure huge leather muzzles over their gaping jaws, and the huge reptiles would be led waddling along on their hind legs out into a vast courtyard, there to hiss and strike at their nearest fellows.

"Thinkest thou couldst ride a podoko?" inquired Hero John, an anxious look on his handsome, friendly features. "They are difficult to manage—but swift in flight as the birds themselves!"

"I don't know," replied the aviator, "but I'm damn well going to try. If your Emperor can help me rescue Alden, the sooner we get started, the better."

For all his brave resolutions, his heart sank, as the green kilted keeper led forth three podokesauri. Nelson stared curiously at them as, hopping along, they drew near, to bare needle-sharp teeth at him while, brazen stirrups on either side jangled softly against their rough, scaly hides.

In evident high spirits the beasts snuffed the air and pawed with their tiny front legs excitedly, making their sharp talons glisten like

polished steel. A bridle dangled from the mouth of each and a ring set in the thick upper lip served as a further means of control.

At a sharp "*Oya*!" from an old and toothless keeper, the first podoko sank flat to the stone floor like a kneeling camel.

"A sturdy beast," commented Hero Giles, tightening his belt and securing the clasps to the emerald-green war cloak. "Here, Friend Nelson, thou hadst best don a helmet; the podokos on occasion throw back their heads and so might wound thee." So saying, he set foot in stirrup and swung up into a saddle which was built up high in the cantle to correct the sharp downward slope of the reptile's muscular back.

At a signal, Hero Giles' ugly mount rose to its height and shuffled awkwardly sidewise, as the old keeper, his eyes very wide and curious, led forward Nelson's charger.

"Look," said Hero John with a reassuring smile. "The chin strap buckles so—be sure it fits snug, else it will pound on thy head to the podoko's stride. If thou wouldst turn to the left, pull the rein so, to the right so, and if thou wouldst stop, pull strongly on the nose ring; 'tis not so difficult." He laid a friendly hand on Nelson's flannel clad shoulder. "How wilt thou manage thy curious weapon?" he inquired

doubtfully. "Perhaps thou hadst best leave it behind."

There was a grim smile on Nelson's weary and wind burned features. "Not on your life, old son! This Winchester and I stick closer together than the Siamese twins."

Nelson thrust his foot into a heavy stirrup, eased his weight into the high peaked saddle and gripped the pommel, for though an excellent horseman, he had no clue as to what motion would ensue. It was wise he did so, for the podoko reared suddenly, almost flinging his rider from the saddle.

Immediately Hero John mounted, raised his right hand and dealt his podoko a stinging slap on the fore-shoulder. The great reptile hissed in protest, but commenced to walk off with an awkward, hopping step. Nelson's mount followed suit.

Faster and faster ran the podokos, their long and scale-covered necks stretched far out ahead while their tails lifted correspondingly, much like that of an airplane about to take off.

"Whew! He must be doing all of forty-five," gasped Nelson, while the wind whistled about his ears and snapped madly at the yellow crest of his brazen helmet.

The ride which ensued remained forever fixed in the aviator's memory. Like so many shots from a gun the three podokos darted off out of the stables, past a gate guarded by a battery of retortii, whose red plumed cannoneers sprang to attention as the three strangely assorted riders sped out into the amber, perpetual light of Atlans.

Nelson, on finding his balance, looked about him to receive impressions of immensely tall structures, of pyramids which, like the ziggurats of Sumaria, and Babylon, were surmounted with beautifully proportioned temples.

"Must be at least a million people in this burg of Heliopolis," thought Nelson, easing his Winchester.

Hour after hour they sped along, frequently overtaking detachments of troops. Twice they halted to change mounts, though the podokos seemed quite tireless.

At the end of five hours' furious riding, Nelson beheld a dense white cloud low on the horizon.

"What's that?" he demanded. "Fog?"

"No," Hero John informed him. "Yonder flows the Apidanus, the boiling river. Not far away to the left lies the frontier fortress of

Cierum, where is encamped the Emperor, who will sit in judgment upon thee."

Nelson's heart sank. He had been so occupied with his fears for Alden that he had not dwelt upon his own precarious position.

Scarcely half an hour elapsed, if Nelson's wrist watch were running correctly, before he reached the tremendous, swarming camp of Altorius XXII, Emperor of Atlans. Hero Giles proved to be a powerful talisman, for everywhere officers and men alike saluted respectfully and sank on one knee as he passed.

"Wait here," he snapped, as the podokos sank obediently to the dust. "Brother John, do thou guard Friend Nelson while I seek permission of His Serene Splendor to bring the Wanderer into the Presence."

Almost immediately the elder Atlantean returned, a frown on his scarred, rather brutal visage. "Come," he muttered, "but I fear for thee, Friend Nelson; His Splendor is in a savage mood—this raid hath stirred his ire beyond all bounds."

"Nothing like cheering up a patient before he goes into the operating room," thought Nelson, and quietly threw off the safety on his Winchester. "Six shots," he reflected. "Well, if I go, I reckon I'll take

some damn good company along."

The aviator was led down a long passage, at every ten feet of which was posted an enormous scowling guard, whose spears, retortii and armor were painted a brilliant jade-green. Then a musical, deep-toned gong boomed twice, and Hero Giles halted before an exquisitely wrought door, which, without any apparent propulsion, silently slid back into the massive stone walls, revealing a huge, brilliantly lit circular chamber that was hung with emerald-green hangings. In the center, surrounded by a royal guard of nobles in splendidly jeweled armor, was reared a dais, upon which stood a throne that blazed with the most varied collection of diamonds that Nelson could ever have imagined.

"Down on your face," rasped Hero Giles as, in common with his brother, he knelt and then fell prostrate on the cool black marble floor.

"Damned if I will," murmured Nelson, and remained erect.

Bolt upright, he looked across the interval and found himself staring into the furious eyes of one of the handsomest men he had ever beheld. Gripping his Winchester in a kind of "port arms" position, he stood to attention—by some curious kink of the brain reverting to his

military days. And so the two men, different as day and night, faced each other. Altorius XXII clad in robes of scarlet, and a glittering cuirasse that glowed like the evening sun. His yellow head was truly splendid, reminiscent of that of a young Roman Emperor. The hair, like that of the Hudsonian Heroes, was blond, curly and close cropped. Yes, thought the awed but self-contained American, there was something genuinely imperial about the Emperor's aquiline visage, for a high intelligent forehead and piercing blue eyes dominated a strong mouth, which was marred by a decidedly cruel twist at the corners. On him, also, was set the stamp of Sir Henry Hudson's dauntless race.

"Put him is a business suit and a soft gray hat," mused Nelson, "and you would find a dozen like him in any of London's best clubs."

"Down on thy face, sirrah!" Outraged, the Emperor's voice rang like the peal of a brazen trumpet through the great pillared audience chamber. The nearest guardsmen held themselves ready, hand on sword hilt.

"No." Nelson's shaggy black head went back as he found his tongue at last. "No, Your Majesty. In America we have our own way of showing respect for authority. I'm an American and, with all respect, I'll salute you as one."

So saying, his hand flicked up in a sharp military salute to the visor of that Atlantean helmet which he still wore.

"All damn foolishness," he silently told himself. "I feel like the lead in a ten, twenty, thirty melodrama. But I suppose it's got to be done."

The Emperor's teeth gleamed in a half snarl as he sprang with Jovian wrath to his feet.

"Dog! How darest thou bandy words with us?"

"Have mercy!" hoarsely pleaded Hero John as he lay on the floor. "Have mercy, oh Splendor! He is but an ignorant wanderer from the Ice World."

It appeared that the young Hero was something of a favorite, for the masterful, thunder-browed Emperor checked himself and, still glowering, settled back on the diamond throne.

"Ye have my permission to enter and approach."

Whereupon, Hero Giles arose and, with many black looks at his guest, strode forward to briefly explain his presence.

Nelson felt Altorius' blazing blue eyes search his face.

"Then he whom the dog-born Jereboam captured was thy friend?"

"Yes," replied Nelson with dignity, "my best friend. Alden and I have traveled and wandered all over the world together."

"Over the world? The Ice World?" Altorius seemed interested, for he leaned forward, muscle corded arms very brown against the frosty brilliance of the stones studding his throne. He flipped back a scarlet cloak and bent a searching look on the straight, unafraid figure below.

Impatient to reach a decision, Nelson forebore to amplify the Emperor's assumption that the outside world was all ice and snow.

"Yes," he said, "from the land of America. I've spoken with Hero Giles, Your Majesty's Captain-General."

"So, then, no doubt, he has told you of the law of our country?" Altorius' white teeth shown again in the depths of his short, curling beard.

"Perhaps." Nelson was vague, wishing no further amplification.

"The law of Atlans," pronounced the Emperor with a frown, "states that a stranger must prove his worth to the State, else he must be put

to death. Thank thou thy gods that thou hast not fallen into the hands of the Lost Tribes, for assuredly thou would perish miserably, as must thy comrade."

“What is the law of Jarmuth?" inquired Nelson, his mind furiously at work.

"Their law states that the stranger within their gates must perish on the altar of Beelzebub, Jarmuth's blood-hungry demon god." A momentary expression of sadness crept into the Emperor's blue eyes and he beat a square, powerful hand on the arm of his throne. "Aye, blood-hungry! Lack-a-day! But yesterday, six of our fairest maidens crossed the boiling river, never to return."

Nelson was about to speak when from outside came the blast of a trumpet. The assembled Atlanteans started, paused, and remained silent, listening intently.

Hero Giles looked up, a light kindling in his deep-set eyes. "Yon was an Israelite trumpet."

As the words left his lips there came a hurried rapping at the portal, whereupon the guards sprang forward.

"Bid them enter." Altorius seemed strangely tense and uneasy.

Quietly the door rolled back as before, revealing an Atlantean whose eyes rolled with alarm. He hurried forward and flung himself on the floor at the Emperor's sandaled feet.

"Harken, oh Serene Splendor! Waiting without is an embassy from his Majesty of Jarmuth. They bear words for thine Imperial Highness."

"Now, by Saturn! Here's insolence—at an hour such as this!" With a furious swirl of his scarlet cloak Altorius leaped to his feet, hand on the ivory handle of his sword, which, to Nelson's amusement was not of bronze, but of good, blue-gray steel.

"I'll bet it's old Sir Henry's original pet sticker," he thought.

"Bring on these dogs of Israel," growled Altorius. "They shall die!"

"Gently, gently, oh Splendor," murmured Hero John. "Our full force is not yet camped on the Plains of Poseidon."

"Nay! Have the rogues flayed alive!" was the advice of the hot-headed elder brother. He, like the Emperor, was scowling and livid with fury.

Presently there appeared four men, stalwart warriors as totally

different in aspect from the Atlanteans as humans might be. The two races were alike only in splendid physical proportions and human figures. They, the Jarmuthians, were black haired and dark skinned, whereas the Atlanteans, with the exception of Sir Henry's progeny, were red headed. Truculently the half naked ambassadors strode over the polished floor, which reflected their rude images. Their hairy chests, arms and legs afforded a sharp contrast to the neat Atlantean nobles, who drew back with expressions of disgust.

"Good God!" gasped Nelson in lively surprise. "A bunch of the boys from Seventh Avenue!"

It was true: each Jarmuthian clearly betrayed his Hebraic origin in huge, fleshy nose and pendulous lower lip, so characteristic of the Semitic race. They were fierce, shaggy fellows, naked from the waist up save for a kind of jointed body armor, reminiscent of a Roman legionnaire's. Their long abundant blue-black hair was either plaited or flowed uncut over splendidly muscled shoulders. Their beards on the other hand were short and frizzed into tight curls, in the Assyrian manner. On each man's head was set a highly polished, pointed casque of copper, surmounted in each instance by the six-pointed star of Solomon. Otherwise the brutal looking emissaries wore nothing but dirty, food-spotted kilts and rough hide sandals secured by thongs.

With all the insolence and self assurance of conquerors in the presence of slaves the four jet-eyed ambassadors swaggered up to the diamond throne. Then the foremost briefly inclined his head towards Altorius in a grudging salute and began to speak in deep, resonant tones.

From that point Nelson could understand nothing of the conversation as it was carried on in the guttural and unintelligible language of that lost realm, but, from time to time Hero John found opportunity to translate an occasional phrase.

Darker and darker grew the brows of the gorgeously attired Emperor and his eagle-visaged Captain-General as they listened to the pompous oratory of the foremost Jarmuthian, and in dark fury more than one Atlantean noble half drew his sword when the speaker fell silent at last.

"He said," the younger Atlantean whispered, "that Jereboam is no longer satisfied with six maidens. Beelzebub demands a further offering of six more damsels to be delivered before the third division of time on the morrow. By Saturn! The insolence of these besotted swine passes all tolerance!"

From the Atlantean Emperor's outraged negative gestures, Nelson

surmised that Altorius was making an emphatic refusal and even adding some vicious threat. The foremost Jarmuthian slapped huge dirty hands on armored hips and fell to laughing with an insolence that would have provoked a rabbit.

Forgetting dignity and self-control, Altorius, in a single tigerish leap sprang from his throne and knocked the mocker senseless with a powerful blow to the jaw. Then, spurning the fallen Jarmuthian with a sandaled foot, the Atlantean fixed blazing eyes upon the three other ambassadors who, nothing daunted, closed up, muttering savagely in their frizzed black beards, while their hands sought the spot where swords would normally have hung.

"Nice right to the jaw," commented Nelson with a grin. "He's still English enough to use his fists." He turned to Hero John, who stood with an expression of horror on his comely features. "What caused the row?"

"Verily, our plight is grave indeed. That braggart dog threatened to march on Heliopolis in the first division of morning, and,"—Hero John's lips compressed into a hopeless, taut expression—"our reinforcing phalanxes can never arrive in time to defend Cierum at that hour. Should the defense fail, as it must—since they outnumber us three to one for the nonce—it would cost us many thousands of

men to stay the blood-hungry hordes of Jereboam once freed on the great plain."

Like a star shell bursting on a cloudy night came the inception of an idea.

"Here," cried Nelson, "I've an idea! Maybe I can fix a stall until the rest of your boys do a General Phil Sheridan and get here."

Hero John's blue eyes widened uncomprehendingly. "What?" he demanded. "What dost thou propose?"

Nelson's hand crept to his head, for the unaccustomed weight and heat of the helmet made it itch. "You say these bright boys from over the border want to chow six more girls? Am I right?"

"Yea, oh Friend Nelson, they demand the victims to-morrow morn, else they advance."

"All right." Nelson was thinking fast now, a dreadful vision of Richard Alden stretched for sacrifice on the brass altar of Beelzebub ever floating before his aching eyes. "Tell those Semites that they can have those six girls *if* they can take them away from me."

A puzzled frown creased the younger Hero's brow and he tugged

thoughtfully at his scant yellow beard. "Prithee pardon me, but I do not comprehend."

"All right, get this now! Tell the Jarmuthians that they can send six of their biggest and best scrappers, one for each girl. If they can take any one of those girls away from me, they take them all—taking me as well—and we'll all get the works in Jezreel together. But, on the other hand, if I kill their six champions, then Alden is returned unharmed, the six girls come home and the six other girls come back too—and there'll be no more hostages. I don't think they'll agree to or even consider surrendering Your Princess, Altara. I'm sorry I can't accomplish that, too. But if I can stop this annual tribute, it won't be so bad, will it?"

Rounder and rounder grew the Atlantean's eyes, and he gaped like a school boy in a side show.

"What sayest thou? Thou alone to overcome six of their best warriors? Nay, but this is folly! Moonshine! What knowest thou of their weapons?"

"Nothing," admitted Nelson, "but I do know Brother Winchester here." He patted the smooth stock. "He's mighty persuasive, properly handled."

"But they are armored! They have the fungus bombs, the light retortii and the javelin!"

"Righto!" agreed Nelson a trifle carelessly, "but you don't know what this old boy can do when he's put to it. Well?"

"By Saturn!" An uncertain ring crept into the Atlantean Prince's voice. "A moment, while I address His Splendor."

"I'm a fool, a damn fool!" thought Nelson. "Still, it's Alden's only chance—unless the Jarmuthians've got some trick I'm not on to, I ought to stand a fighting chance." Meanwhile Emperor and Captain-General drew to one side, listening to Hero John's impassioned oratory. That the idea met with disapproval, Nelson quietly recognized from the incredulous, even contemptuous, glances Altorius shot at him. Leaving the four sneering Jarmuthians under guard of the nobles, the Emperor came striding impatiently over the inlaid floor.

"What madness is this?" he demanded harshly. "Dost thou realize what would hang upon thy skill? If thou shouldst fail, our annual hostage for the divine Altara would be twelve instead of six of our maidens. Further, the dog-conceived Jereboam would wax unbearably overweening and insolent. Nay, there is too much at

hazard! Though outnumbered we will give battle in the morning."

"Yes?" demanded Nelson, in turn impatient. "A fine chance you'd stand! Why, less than half of your army is here at Cerium and Hero John tells me that the enemy have massed their entire forces on the salient of Poseidon. Isn't that so?"

Altorius' handsome brow darkened. "Aye," he admitted, "but our reinforcing corps will come up before the third hour of the third division."

Here Hero Giles broke in and, speaking with the quick, impassioned tones of one whose reactions are violent, pled for confidence in the American. "Nay, fair cousin," he replied, casting a sidewise look at the Jarmuthians standing in muttered colloquy with their leader, who had now gotten to his feet and was angrily dabbing the blood from his chin with the hem of his yellow kiltlike garment. "I saw with mine own eyes what miracles Friend Nelson doth perform with his curious noise-making retortii. If Jereboam falls upon us ere our regiments are marshaled, then, verily, are we doomed. We have no choice but to play for time. Harken to the counsel of Hero John! Methinks this stranger from the Ice World is no braggart. He will fight well. If he loses he dies horribly—that he knows. The thought will strengthen his arms, and if he wins—!"

Then broke in Nelson firmly. "If I win I must have the word of Your Majesty that Alden and I are to be afforded all help and free passage to that place where your soldiers captured my friend. It that understood?"

Altorius' blue eyes shifted and there was a slight hesitation in his manner. Then, coming to a decision, he whirled and extended his hand.

"Good, 'tis agreed," he said. "On my head be it. Have patience while Hero Giles confers with these outlandish dogs."

It was with intense interest that the anxious aviator watched the ensuing conference. He could see the four Jarmuthians listening, dark eyes restlessly flitting back and forth, and their mouths twisted into contemptuous half snarls. Then, as Nelson's offer was made clear, a look of cunning seemed to creep into the eyes of the leader. He asked for clarification of several points, then, being informed of the details, his thick lips parted in an evil, crafty grin.

Taken aback at the suspiciously ready acquiescence of the enemy, Hero Giles turned about. "They agree," he translated, "that, should Friend Nelson win, they will return to their own land, they will forfeit the annual tribute forever and return the other stranger

unharmed. They speak fair, but I fear—" He bit his lips in perplexity. "These dogs, who talk with the forked tongues of serpents, plan some snare, some cunning trickery."

"Repeat the terms." Altorius seemed gripped with apprehension too. "Let all be clearly understood: at the third division of morning will the wanderer fight six warriors. No more and no less."

This was agreed and reaffirmed. Then, with an insolent, triumphant laugh, the Jarmuthian delegation whirled about and stalked from the room, their dark greaved legs flashing in military unison over the polished floor.

"'Tis done," quoth Hero Giles gloomily. "The encounter will take place on the plain of Gilboa at the third hour of the third division. And may Saturn help us if thy might fails. Friend Nelson! For then surely will the hordes of Jarmuth despoil us and there will come a desolation and a darkness upon the Empire of Atlans."

Chapter 5

It seemed incredibly soon that Victor Nelson found himself striding out from the serrated ranks of the Atlantean army which, drawn up in a rough diamond formation, looked discouragingly small in comparison to that vast sea of helmets twinkling ominously across the plain of Poseidon amid a haze of bright yellow dust which climbed lazily into the breathless heavens. The Jarmuthian army, numbering perhaps sixty or seventy thousand effective troops, lay encamped in a great salient formed by a convolution of the Apidanus and formed the only Jarmuthian tract of the great valley lying south of the boiling river.

Like low-lying snow drifts, the sheen of the enemy tents struck Nelson's eye as he strode over the bright green turf to battle for Richard Alden's life.

"There was something back of those nasty grins of the ambassadors," he reflected. "I wonder what deviltry they're cooking up?"

He glanced at a stalwart Atlantean herald who, nervous in the extreme, clutched his brazen, dolphin-shaped horn and followed in the American's wake together with a sad little company. Weeping,

moaning and dressed in plain black robes marched six really lovely girls—they who would perish on Beelzebub's altar if Nelson failed. Bitter were the looks of the guards as they secured the hands of the victims and many the hopeful look cast at the impassive American when they turned back, leaving the helpless girls to their fate.

The ground where the one-sided duel was to take place was marked off by means of little yellow flags on a level plain perhaps a quarter of a mile long and wide. Arriving on the nearest border Nelson briefly motioned the herald to halt.

"Might as well start shooting at the best range possible, and beat their steam throwers," he decided. "Wish to the devil I'd a few more cartridges. Only thirteen shots between me and Beelzeebub's altar in Jezreel, so I'd better not miss. All right, son, toot your horn."

With his thumb be gestured the command, whereupon the Atlantean nodded eagerly and, filling his chest, set horn to lips to blow a long, strident note that rang harshly, boldly out over the great plain.

While the note of the challenge rang out, Nelson's eyes turned back to regard the Atlantean array and detected, far in the rear, a huge pillar of dust which must mark the progress of the Atlantean reinforcements. Would they arrive at Cierum in time? Then his eyes

sought that spot where Altorius and his staff sat anxiously on their podokos, watching intently the impending struggle. Very clearly the flash of their armor came to him.

"I guess, like the girls back there, they're kind of nervous and jumpy," thought Nelson. "Well, I don't blame them. I've had quieter moments myself."

Having blown three blasts, the Atlantean herald saluted; then, with disconcerting haste, made his way back to the ranks of his fellows some two hundred yards away.

From the Jarmuthian army came an answering blast. Nelson cast a last look on the Atlantean army, breathlessly awaiting the impending duel. There was the allosauri corps on the far left; he could see the chimeric monsters' long, repulsive necks writhing endlessly back and forth through the air as they squealed and tugged strongly at their restraining chains. On the right were stationed perhaps ten thousand podokesons, their slender, yellow-shafted lances swaying like a sapling forest in the distance. In the center were eleven thousand protection infantry, green-crested and armed with compact tanks of blue-maxima vapor, fungus bombs and swords. Behind them, and corresponding to heavy infantry, were ranged some twenty thousand blue-plumed hoplites, eagerly fingering the brazen hoses of

their death dealing portable retortii.

Nelson had no time to further study the array, for he whirled about as from the Atlantean army arose a deep, horrified shout. He stood paralyzed, his jaw slack. For there, waddling slowly forward, came the most fantastic huge creature imaginable. Unspeakably repellent and horrible, it stood on short legs thick as mature trees, to tower at least thirty-five feet above the ground at the fore-shoulders! An immense reptilian neck some twenty-five feet long weaved continuously back and forth, while a surprisingly small, bullet-shaped head emitted rumbling grunts.

"Great God!" gasped the horrified aviator, and felt the ground sway under him. "It must be ninety feet long!"

Paralyzed by a dreadful fascination he watched the ungainly, hill-like reptile shuffle ponderously forward and realized that, high on its back, was fixed a small fort, rather like those howdahs or boxes which are fastened to the backs of elephants. Chilled with the nearness of death, Nelson counted six mail-clad warriors in the howdah. Then the true import of the Jarmuthians evil jest struck him with full force.

"Six men, they said. And six men there are—but the treacherous

devils mounted them on that walking hill-side! Guess Altorius can kiss his six girls good-by right now. Poor Alden! Well, I did my best —a rotten trick."

At that moment he felt as an ant must feel on beholding the approach of a human. It was terrifying, the inexorable advance of that colossal, fantastic monster. From behind he could hear the infuriated shouts of the Atlantean army. They knew even he could not hope to withstand the murderous onslaught of the beast now entering the duelling space.

On came the diplodocus, its vast warty tail trailing over the ground and raising a heavy column of dust, while its mud smeared sides bore out Hero Giles' statement that here was one of those semi-aquatic titans from the steaming swamps of Jarmuth.

"Hell! Poor Alden's as good as finished now! What a fool I was to think I could save him!"

Obedient to an overwhelming fear, Nelson whirled to flee, then stopped, as, from the depths of his being, a stronger power forbade him to desert his friend to certain death.

"Range two hundred and fifty yards," he estimated, and, whipping

up the Winchester, sighted full at the ponderous creature's slimy snakelike head. When the recoil jarred his shoulder, Nelson dropped the barrel an inch or so to watch. Nothing happened. The great beast was advancing as before, its incredibly long neck weaving steadily back and forth as though to sniff the air.

"Hell!"

Struck by a sudden thought, he snatched a cartridge from his pocket and, with that strength which comes to men in their hour of mortal peril, wrenched out the metal-jacketed bullet, to reinsert it backwards into the brass cartridge case.

Meanwhile the vast brute had drawn nearer, crushing flat a young oak in its path as easily as though it had been a wheat stalk.

"Maybe this dum-dum will do some good," panted Nelson. "If it doesn't, nothing will stop it!"

Again he sighted until, finding those small, orange red eyes in line with his sight, he fired. This time the gray-brown monster uttered a titantic bellow of rage, halted, and began shaking its clumsy blunt head.

"Hit it, by God!" exulted Nelson, and seized the momentary respite

to slip two fresh cartridges into the Winchester's magazine.

But, to his inexpressible dismay, the monster presently resumed its ponderous progress while the Jarmuthians in the howdah uttered taunting yells that reached him faintly, while the sun flares glinted on their brandished swords and lances. One of them plucked a fungus grenade from his belt and flung it with all his might in Nelson's direction. The missile fell to the earth far short of its destination and seemed to break rather than explode, at the same time expelling that deadly, greenish-yellow vapor which, blown away by a strong wind, fortunately came nowhere near the doomed aviator.

"Oh! You will?"

Nelson sighted swiftly at the grenade-thrower and fired, whereupon the Jarmuthian, some hundred and fifty yards distant, spun crazily about, flung both arms towards the amber-yellow sky and toppled from the howdah, for all the world like a diver in quest of pearls.

From both breathless armies rose a terrific shout. Accustomed as they were to the visible destruction of the retortii, this noisy yet invisible death was appalling.

But Nelson's agonized attention was not on the assembled armies, for nearer came the mountainous diplodocus, its lumbering strides making the howdah sway like a ship in a gale and preventing use of the portable retortii.

Nelson planted both feet, took fresh grip on his waning courage and shot again, this time aiming at a gigantic, black bearded warrior who seemed to be training one of those portable retortii upon him.

Again the Winchester cracked and this time the black bearded man sank from sight back into the howdah, while his companions, uttering vengeful shouts, tossed more fungus bombs at the lone heroic figure barring their progress towards the six bound and shrieking maidens.

Towering thrice as high as the largest African elephant, the diplodocus was now but seventy-five yards away. He had hit it, that Nelson could tell, for a large shower of blood sprayed from the monster's neck. Then, uttering a despairing curse, he sent a shot smacking squarely into the left shoulder, at the base of that mastlike neck with fervent hope of finding the heart. But the heavy bullet bothered the cyclopean reptile no more than a sting of a mosquito.

On, on it came. In another minute it must stamp out Victor Nelson's

life beneath feet as large as hogsheads.

"Damn!"

Nelson snapped the ejector lever, throwing out the spent cartridge.

"No use," he whispered, "can't faze that hill of meat! But I might as well kill all of those bloody cannibals I can."

With amazing speed and accuracy he picked off two of the remaining Jarmuthians, whose shining, bronze armor could nowise withstand the wicked impact of modern nickel-jacketed bullets. One of the stricken men for a moment dangled with the last of his strength from one of the chains securing the howdah to the enormous creature's back, then tumbled heavily some forty feet to the earth.

Only two shots more in the magazine—! Nelson suddenly found himself very cool. "Two shots and then—"

He was conscious of that great, snakelike head darting viciously in his direction. A huge, slobbering mouth, studded with teeth a foot long, yawned redly before him like a nightmare incarnate, blotting out consciousness of all else. Then Victor Nelson, fighting to control his strumming nerves, deliberately sighted into a great, orange colored eye, saw the narrow black iris over the Winchester's front

sight and knew the huge warty head was not ten feet away.

He pressed the trigger and never heard the report, but felt the blast of a furnace-hot breath in his face—a breath that stank like the foul reek of burning rubber.

With a detached sense of surprise he saw the eye miraculously and dreadfully disintegrate; then, as the bitter smell of burned cordite stung his nostrils, he sprang violently sidewise to find himself staring up at the howdah, now towering at least forty feet above.

The next few moments were indescribable. Horrible roars and bellows, loud as those of a thousand angered bulls, shattered the air. The diplodocus halted, stunned by pain and the partial loss of eyesight; then, its infinitesimal brain becoming gripped with fear, it plunged and lumbered sidewise, nearly shaking the warriors from the howdah, where they clung for dear life. Nelson was barely able to avoid the sweep of the powerful tail as the diplodocus wheeled about on hind legs, reeled and started blindly back towards the Jarmuthian ranks. Suddenly it stood stock still, shaking with super-elephantine motions. Then, for all the world like a balky mule, it sank to the earth and cowered there, despite the frantic efforts of the surviving Jarmuthians to stir it to obedience.

By the strong amber light of the sun flare Nelson had a vision of the last two warriors swinging in apelike agility to the ground. They were giants, those two men of Jarmuth, and their conical helmets added additional stature. One of them, shouting an unintelligible taunt, reached for his belt to snatch out a fungus bomb, but Nelson, dropping on one knee, sent a bullet crashing between the Jarmuthian's scowling eyes. Even as he fell, the last of the six champions unwisely ignored his retortii and frantically sprang forward, razor-edged sword upraised.

Nelson frantically worked the ejector lever but only an empty click resulted! His heart sank. "Hell! the magazine's empty!"

He had just time to swing the Winchester about and grasp its barrel as the Jarmuthian, with a loud shout, sprang in, slashing viciously at Nelson's unprotected neck. Using the clubbed rifle like a baseball bat, the American struck out with the strength of despair. There came a resonant clang as blade and barrel encountered each other. Steel is ever stronger than bronze, so Nelson had the satisfaction of seeing the Jarmuthian's sword blade break squarely in two near the hilt.

Horrified, the black bearded warrior glanced at the empty hilt in his hand but, courageous to the end, sprang in like a tiger to grapple with that small, agile man in khaki and serge.

"You would—eh?" gasped Nelson.

Putting all his strength behind a blow he whirled up the heavy Winchester, struck out and felt the solid walnut stock smash fair and square on the conical helmet. Like an eggshell the bronze helm broke and the six-pointed star above went spinning off into the dust. As a tree sways before it falls beneath a forester's ax, so the dark Jarmuthian giant tottered, while the wide dusty plain of Poseidon echoed with a rumbling, incredulous shout.

"There," choked Nelson, incredulous to be still alive, "I guess that'll be about all for to-day."

But he was wrong. From the ranks of Jarmuth rose a terrible, ominous cry and at the same time there broke out the sibilant hiss of a thousand retortii. From the Atlantean army came an answering yell and Nelson turned to race back to the shelter of Altorius' body-guard, pausing but to arouse the terrified hostages. Swiftly he cast loose their bonds and pointed to the nearest detachment of Atlanteans. Sobbing with joy the six girls fled for dear life just as the first of the allosauri went racing over the plains. Screaming, all-powerful and uncanny war dogs, they bounded grotesquely high in the air, plunging straight towards the Jarmuthian ranks which greeted them with a searing, billowing blast of their retortii. Though dozens of the

terrible creatures fell kicking and writhing beneath the scalding discharge of the retortii, the main body, perhaps forty or fifty in number, sprang like rending fiends into the dense packed masses of Jarmuthian infantry.

Of the ensuing battle, Nelson had but the most confused recollections. The dominating impression was that the fray was awesome, horrible beyond power of description. He recalled feeding the five remaining cartridges into the magazine, then clapping on an Atlantean noble's helmet. With Hero John at his side he joined in an furious headlong charge of the podoko corps.

Like a vast glittering wedge the gallant Atlantean lancers advanced under shelter of the blue maxima vapor which, discharged by the protectons or light infantry, dispelled the scalding steam clouds launched from the Jarmuthian portable retortii.

"Halor vàn!" Hero John shouted the Atlantean war cry. "Halor vàn! Come Friend Nelson, this day shall the treacherous swine of Jarmuth drown in their own blood! Halor vàn!"

Nelson replied nothing. He was too busy drawing a bead on a gorgeously arrayed enemy officer who appeared to be directing the defence.

Faster and faster rushed the podokos, forty, fifty miles an hour, a carnate thunderbolt hurled straight at the enemy center. Under a hot fire of grenades dozens of the lancers fell and once, when a fungus bomb broke near by, Nelson saw half a dozen Atlanteans tumble from their saddles, the hideous yellow growths already sprouting from nostrils, mouth and ears. The turmoil became deafening, indescribable—like the roar of a crowded subway.

The American had a brief glimpse of a mountainous diplodocus assailed by half a dozen hissing, shrieking allosauri who, employing jaws and claws, ripped great, shuddering chucks of flesh from the agonized and unwieldy monster on whose back the frantic Jarmuthians fought with terrible ferocity.

As agile as grasshoppers, those fierce war dogs ripped and worried their prey. One of them clung like a bulldog to the doomed diplodocus' head, though the twenty-foot neck writhed and whirled frantically in effort to shake it loose. Another allosaurus, whining with eagerness, actually clambered up the back of an assailed giant only to fall back under the blast of a retortii mounted in the howdah. Bathed in live steam, with bones showing through its melting, quivering flesh, the allosaurus collapsed backwards, but another instantly took its place and, gaining its goal with a terrific leap, made a shambles of the howdah, tearing the men in it apart as a lion does

an antelope.

Nelson found himself very busy. The charging podokesos were now in the midst of the Jarmuthian heavy infantry, slashing down at a maze of yelling, black-bearded, Semitic faces. Once Nelson was nearly speared, shooting his assailant just as the lance glimmered over his heart. Again he saw the Atlantean hoplites beaten back amid a pestilential fog of fungus gas which stretched them in kicking, loathsome heaps on the dusty plain. The uproar became terrific, indescribable, as the whistling screams of the allosauri and the saurean bellows of the diplodoci rose above the shouts of the soldiery to fill the dust-laden air with a dreadful clamor. The battle now swayed critically; a feather's weight on either side and one army would roll back in red, irretrievable ruin. It was the psychological instant. Nelson sensed it unerringly.

"Look!" shouted Hero John, dashing a rivulet of blood from his eyes, "there fights the dog-begotten Jereboam himself! Halor vàn! Smite, ye soldiers of Atlans! Smite!"

Following the line of the outstretched hand. Nelson caught a glimpse of an enormous, eagle nosed warrior who, clad in gleaming, diamond studded harness, fought like a paladin of old. Powerful as a dark Ares the sable browed Jereboam raged among the dismayed

Atlantean hoplites, beating them to earth with terrible ferocity.

It was a long shot, one he might readily have been forgiven in missing but with the speed of thought Victor Nelson sprang from his podoko, dropped on one knee behind a pile of corpses and, uttering a fervent prayer, fired full at Jereboam's black head.

The nearest combatants drew back momentarily at the unfamiliar thunder of the report and fell silent while the groans and shrieks of the wounded rose loud. As a man looking through many thickness of glass, so Nelson saw Jereboam reel on his splendidly caparisoned podoko, clasp both hands to his forehead and sink to earth.

Hero Giles, somewhere far in the Atlantean van, saw what transpired and capitalized it with the inspiration of a genius.

"Jereboam is dead!" he shouted in ringing tones, and flashed his red stained sword. "Woe to Jarmuth this day! Smite, ye sons of Atlans. Woe to Jarmuth—Jereboam is fallen!"

And smite hard the reinforced Atlanteans did. Filled with a new courage they advanced so determinedly that the disconcerted and dismayed Jarmuthians broke and fled in a disastrous, panic-stricken rout back over the plain of Poseidon towards the boiling river.

The ground was already carpeted with dead and with abandoned equipment, when fresh packs of allosauri were loosed on the fleeing Jarmuthians to wreak havoc indescribable and, ere long, only the triumphant, panting Atlanteans remained on the field.

Chapter 6

There was music and high revelry in the fortress of Cierum that night, and Victor Nelson, embarrassed and flushed with the extravagant adoration of all Atlans, sat by the Emperor Altorius' side waiting, watching for the appearance of a humbled Jarmuthian delegation.

"Never since the world began has there been such a hero in Atlans!" cried Altorius, his face more Roman than ever. "Prithee tarry amongst us, Hero Nelson. Thou shalt be as my brother. A marble palace shalt thou have and twenty wives, each fair as those damsels which thou hast, by thy might, rescued from the profane altar of the fiend, Beelzebub!"

"Thanks," laughed Nelson, and drained a goblet of tawny wine. "I'd be delighted to stay, but the point is—He broke off short, for there came a sudden tramp of feet at the door of the great hall and there, just visible above the green crests of the royal guards, he recognized that pale, drawn face which had haunted him ever since he had returned to find the abandoned aeroplane.

"Dick!" he shouted. "Dick Alden!"

"Nelson!"

With that same irresistible form which had won a certain November classic for Harvard, Richard Alden bucked and plunged through a double rank of startled guards and came running across the marble floor, his eyes lit with an unspeakable gladness.

"Nelson! Nelson!" he panted. "What in hell are you doing up there?"

"Oh!" replied the aviator with a joyous grin, "just visiting with my friend, the Emperor."

Alden halted, on his handsome features a curious mixture of surprise and delight. "The Emperor?" he stammered. "You sitting beside an Emperor?"

"Would it not seem so?" inquired Altorius with a low laugh.

"It would," chuckled Alden. "Victor Nelson, as I remember, always was a good politician."

"And," thought Nelson, "I'll have to be a damn sight better one to get us out of Atlans without injuring Altorius' feelings. I don't suppose he'll ever be able to realize that all the desirable things in the world don't lie in this valley."

Throngs of brilliantly armored and plumed officers and courtiers, some of them nursing wounds and bandaged heads, came up to hail the mighty wanderer who had subdued the might of Jarmuth.

Flushed and pleased, as is any normal man under well-earned praise, Nelson shook one wiry fist after another, while Alden chatted with the Emperor. Nobles, officers and courtiers all pressed close to fawn upon the new hero—but, far back in the council chamber, a group of dark robed priests were crowded together. Haranguing the priests was a fierce, white bearded old man who seemed to be arguing violently.

"Hum!" thought the American. "That's at least one outfit that doesn't like the way I part my hair. Wonder what devilment the priests are cooking up?"

He was not long in finding out, for the black robed arch-priest suddenly left his group of underlings to boldly make his way forward, while princes, courtiers and warriors drew respectfully aside and bent their heads.

"Hail! All conquering Emperor!" The stern old man halted squarely before Altorius' gem encrusted throne, while Alden checked some remark to look curiously down upon the hawk-featured arch-priest.

Altorius flushed and the lines about his mouth tightened, from which Nelson guessed that there was more than a little bad blood between the spiritual and temporal heads of the empire.

"What wouldst thou, oh Heracles?"

"I would know why the all powerful Wanderer, of whom thou makest so much, did not rescue Princess Altara?"

The Emperor stiffened. "Her rescue, being impossible of accomplishment, was not nominated in the agreement," he said coldly. "The Wanderer has in full carried out his share—and so shall we. Honored and beloved of Atlans, these great warriors shall abide among us in peace."

Here Nelson thought it wise to dispel any illusions Altorius might entertain about their staying in Atlans. "No, oh Splendor: remember, our agreement was that, should I conquer the Jarmuthian champions, Alden and I were to be allowed to go free."

"Nay, oh Splendor," fiercely broke in the arch-priest, "permit them not to go. I tell thee the Princess Altara *must* be restored to Atlans! Else,"—a distinct note of threat crept into the old man's voice—"—else evil days shall fall upon this empire, and the line of Hudson will

wither and fade."

Up sprang Altorius in a towering rage. "Sirrah! Dost dare make threats to thy liege lord?"

Fire flashed from the young Emperor's bright blue eyes, and under their fierce glare the old man quailed and stepped back with eyes lowered.

"Altorius keeps his word," the Emperor thundered. "The strangers shall go, though all the black-robed kites in the realm say me nay. The word of a Hudsonian prince is as sure as the fire of Pelion. Get thee gone, rash priest!"

A long moment, the two strangely contrasting figures glared at each other, the young, splendid Emperor and the malevolent, withered old man.

"The Gods demand their daughter," cried Heracles in parting, "and woe to him who says them nay!"

With this parting shot, the arch-priest turned and, scarlet faced, stalked from the council room, while Altorius threw back his head and roared with laughter.

"Come, oh ye Heroes, ye princes and captains! Come, let us make festival before these mighty wanderers go their way!"

Roar upon roar of enthusiasm echoed through the marble throne room, and Nelson would have felt wholly at ease had not that little knot of priests remained gathered like ill-omened carrion crows about the door. Muttering among themselves, they were watching him with a curious intentness that aroused deep misgivings in the American's mind, and it was with something like a sigh that he joined the procession forming to proceed to the triumphal feast on which the wealth and luxury of the whole empire of Atlans had been lavished.

Chapter 7

“That's one of the fixed retortiis I was speaking about," remarked Victor Nelson as he paused to point out a tapering brass tube which was mounted on a platform above the long staircase up which he and Alden were toiling. "It's a big brute: see how small the gunners look beside it? These steam guns are wonderful things."

The younger aviator sighed. "I've had enough of miracles," he said wiping his flushed features and hitching a small pack higher on his leather-clad shoulders. "All I want to do is to lay my weary eyes on the plane again. What with these ghastly allosauri, diplodocuses and other monsters, I'm damn well fed up with this place."

Nelson settled his Winchester rifle more comfortably into the hollow of his arm. "Correct. So am I. But we can't say Altorius didn't do right by our Nell. Good Lord, what a triumph he gave us!" The dark pilot's smile flashed from beneath his neat, close-clipped black mustache. "Wait till Cartier gets a peep at those diamonds he gave us."

Panting, the two halted by mutual consent. "Ever see so many stairs?" grunted Nelson. "Three more flights and we'll be into the tunnel; ah, there's the opening. I only hope these blighters haven't

hurt the plane."

Before resuming the climb Nelson shifted his rifle, idly regarding the armored gunners just above; then suddenly he stiffened his wiry body with a sharp cry. "Look out, Dick! What the devil? Those damn fools ahead are swinging the retortii across our—"

The dark haired aviator's words were drowned out in a deafening, hissing roar that burst from the great retortii's throat, and his heart gave a great convulsive leap at the sight. Was this an accident—or treachery? An accident of course. Somehow he could not bring himself to think that Altorius would break his pledged word. Projected in a shimmering white arm the scalding death vapor shot across the staircase, its hot breath licking the faces of the startled and angry Americans, and quickly forcing them to turn and run downwards to avoid being scalded.

"What the devil are these idiots trying to do?" gasped Nelson, anxiously eyeing the red-crested warriors who, peering down through the blue lenses of their helmets, watched the khaki-clad aviators but made no effort to realign their retortii. "Hero Giles'll skin those fools alive if he hears of this. Guess we'd better wait a minute: they'll soon shut off the steam."

Shielding his face from the steam clouds that obliterated all view of the staircase above, Alden stood watching the billowing steam clouds in silent awe.

"Terrible, aren't they, Vic?" he remarked. "I've never seen those big fellows in action. They make the portable variety look like water pistols."

As the steam barrier showed no signs of abating, an uneasy gleam crept into Nelson's dark eye, and with jaw grimly set, he cocked the Winchester and turned with the intention of lodging a complaint at the next station below; but, to his utter dismay, he beheld bronze armored figures on the next platform now training their long-muzzled steam gun across the stair. Even as he sprang back, the deadly white vapor hissed forth from the second retortii, completely barring further retreat down the stair. Like an icy flood the chill of impending doom invaded Nelson's soul. This was no accidental discharge, for with the slightest change of direction in the deflection of either retortii, death would descend upon him and his companion.

Swiftly speech became impossible, as the roar of the huge retortii was deafening; the two were lost in the heart of an opaque cloud which completely blotted out the copper-hued Atlantean sky. Hot blood surged into Nelson's head while he became aware of ghostly

and stealthy figures advancing through the shimmering billows of vapor. Up, up, they came, like dream men, their eyes weird and unreal. Cursing the treachery of their late host, Nelson and Alden watched dozens upon dozens of hoplites come swarming up the stairs in solid, dully-gleaming ranks. Apparently intent to take them prisoners, the foremost Atlanteans made a rush, giving the American time to fire just twice.

Unable to retreat, the helpless aviators stood to meet the engulfing wave of hoplites. Nelson struck out as hard as he could at those yelling, red-bearded faces, though he knew the effort was hopeless. He was dimly conscious that Alden, not far away, also fought with the vigor of despair.

With a sense of savage satisfaction, the dark haired aviator felt his fist impact solidly into a yelling, sweating face; then something struck his head and, amid a miniature sunburst, his senseless form sank limply on the damp stones of the great staircase.

After an interval, the length of which he did not know, Victor Nelson opened his eyes slowly, for his head throbbed like a savage's war drum. Uttering a stifled groan he shut the lids to still an overpowering sense of nausea which gripped him, but a moment later he made another attempt to discover in what sort of place he

found himself. Gradually, his eyes became accustomed to a curious orange-red glare beyond a series of bars. Bars? The idea fixed itself in his benumbed brain; bars meant prison! Yes, those grim blank walls bore out the assumption. He lay on the damp stone floor of what must be a fairly spacious cell. Beneath his leather aviator's jacket he shuddered. "Jail, eh? What a nice place to wake up in!"

A groan from behind him prompted Nelson to painfully raise his head and look about. He blinked dazedly, meanwhile trying to focus his eyes, then he heaved a faint sigh of relief as his gaze encountered the muscular, well-proportioned figure of Richard Alden, who half sat, half reclined, against one of the grey stone walls, burying a ghastly pale face between trembling hands.

"You hurt?" To speak, Nelson drew a slightly deeper breath and at once became conscious of a horrible, throat-wrenching stench. Dimly, he recalled having once before encountered such an odor; when was it? Oh, yes; during the Great War when he'd stumbled into a dugout tenanted by long unburied corpses. A cold finger stabbed at his brain. Corpses.

"Are you hurt, Dick?" he repeated hoarsely.

The lax figure stirred and Alden's blonde head was raised slowly. "I

don't know." His voice came very thickly. "I—I'm still dizzy. What's happened?"

"Damned if I know; but those bright boys have evidently heaved us into a calaboose of some kind!"

Nelson, on peering about, had discovered that one end of the cell was closed only by a series of massive bronze bars; the two other walls were solid masonry; while the fourth was also solid but fitted with a small oval door of bronze.

"Calaboose? The hell you say!" Alden coughed feebly. "My God, but that steam was terrible stuff. I nearly smothered before I got knocked out."

Slowly, the younger aviator looked about, and suddenly his eyes widened in an expression of indescribable horror.

"Look!" Alden's voice had died to a shaken whisper. "My God, Nelson, we're finished! Look at that allosaurus!"

Following the line indicated by the pilot's shaking forefinger, Nelson peered out through the series of great bars while a shudder shook his aching body. Though he had seen these fearful monsters on many occasions, yet it was never from such a position as that in which he

now found himself. To his ears came a sibilant hissing like that of a thousand serpents; and, quivering in every nerve, he forced his eyes open once again, to discover that the cell which he and his companion occupied was but one of a series of cells surrounding a huge square in which were imprisoned perhaps twenty or thirty of those horrible, gargoylesque creatures which were the Atlantean dogs of war. Some thirty-four feet in length, the enormous, slate-grey monsters hopped leisurely about, their warty hides and huge luminous eyes betraying their reptilian origin. In shape the allosauri resembled loathsome and titanic kangaroos as they lumbered awkwardly to and fro, picking viciously at what appeared to be fragments of human flesh and bones.

While the two prisoners crouched paralyzed with horror, one of the nightmarish creatures came hopping over and, pressing a head as big as a steam scoop against the bars, stared in with huge, pale green eyes. A long minute the ghastly creature remained looking in, clearly outlined by the orange glow from outside.

The doomed aviators found something fearfully fascinating about those narrow vertical irises set in pupils the size of dinner plates. Uttering a deep growl, the allosaurus shuffled nearer, and impatiently rubbed its huge, bullet head against the bars; then gripped the ponderous bronze bars with its ridiculously small front

legs to shake the whole grille-work with a savagery that dislocated bits of plaster and made the metal reverberate. While Nelson and Alden shrank flat against the far wall, a scarlet tongue at least four feet long flicked the air but a few feet from their bloodless, sweating visages. Becoming irritated at the sturdiness of the barrier, the mountainous reptile tugged harder and hissed, filling the cell with a foul exhalation that stank like the reeks of smoldering rags.

Nelson's wavering consciousness reeled, and a mad, dreadful fear, like that a dreamer suffers in the grip of nightmare, invaded his being. He felt the hairs rising on the nape of his neck.

But, with a squall of rage, the monster abandoned its futile efforts and leaped away. Feigning indifference, the allosaurus picked up a half-gnawed skull with its tiny forelegs; and, while the prisoners watched, it stuffed the head into a maw twice the size of an elephant's and crunched the gruesome tidbit as easily as a boy would a walnut. Presently it shuffled off to rejoin the hideous herd in the center of the court.

"Nice kind of a jail we've been thrown into. Wish I could understand what's happened." Alden buried his face in his hands. "It kind of looks as though Altorius had a change of heart."

Nelson replied nothing, but sat staring fixedly out into the horrible court.

"Somehow, I don't think Altorius would do such a thing," he said at last. "Let's think back and see if we can't piece this treachery together."

"Wish I had your faith in the Emperor—but I haven't." Alden's handsome face twisted itself into a wry smile.

"Let's see, now," persisted Nelson, fingering a square jaw upon which sprouted a thick growth of reddish bristles. "There was a deputation of priests to see Altorius yesterday. They were clamoring for the return of Altara—the Sacred Virgin—and looked pretty mad when he put them off."

"Maybe this is the private doing of the priests," admitted Alden. "Anyway, we're in one devil of a fix. There's certainly no way out of this calaboose—and those damned brutes out there look hungry."

Nelson frowned, deep in thought. "Wish I could find a reasonable explanation. I really don't think it's Altorius; still, that's what you get for mixing in on the politics of these forgotten kingdoms."

"But," reminded the other, "you had no choice, old lad. Remember,

you mixed in to save me."

From across the courtyard rang a loud, penetrating shriek of fear that made the two aviators spring to their feet and rush to the bars. Peering across the court, they discovered three naked men shrieking and clinging frantically to the bars of an exactly similar cell.

"What's wrong with them?" demanded Alden as the agonized screams rang louder still.

"I don't know," was Alden's breathless reply. "But what's that noise?"

A curious metallic clanking sound filled the poisoned air, and for a moment Nelson remained utterly puzzled. Then, as the noise grew louder, the allosauri commenced to betray a strange restlessness. They ceased basking and feeding, and their hideous heads commenced to dart quickly this way and that.

While the terrific shrieks of the wretches across the court rang to the copper-hued sky, the two Americans remained in doubt; then all at once the chill of death gripped their hearts, as they saw the bars of that cell directly opposite slowly but surely rising! Uttering heart-rending cries, the doomed prisoners clung frantically to stay the vanishing barrier separating them from those appalling man-eaters.

But, disdainful of their pitiful efforts, the bronze bars rose relentlessly with metallic rattlings and janglings from some unseen mechanism.

Rooted to the floor, both Americans watched the distant grille vanish into the upper stone-work and heard the ghastly hissing as the allosauri herd commenced to move forward. Sick and shaken, Nelson beheld one of the doomed men cling in desperation to the bars; he was lifted clear of the floor and borne towards the ceiling, meanwhile venting his terror with such screams as could otherwise have risen only from an inquisitor's torture chamber.

The tragedy was swiftly completed. Half a dozen of the nearest allosauri, taller than any giraffes, suddenly sprang forward, their long, naked tails rising as their gait increased. Snarling horribly, the vast slate-colored beasts plunged into the cell, terminating shrieks of mortal terror. Backs broader than bus tops squirmed and tugged, then one of the loathsome monsters reappeared carrying in its dripping jaws a mangled, yet struggling victim much as a cat carries a mouse. In a trice the other allosauri came rushing eagerly up, seeking to snatch the prey from the first monster.

Nelson stiffened. "Great God! And that's what'll happen to us!"

Weakened by his head wound, and blind with nausea, he stumbled to the rear of the cell to collapse upon a pile of foul straw, littered with equipment which the superstitious captors must have condemned together with the owners.

Nelson sank upon them, then stiffened, for his outflung hand had encountered a hard, familiar outline. It was a .45 automatic pistol.

A moment's furious search revealed that the captors had missed or not understood the use of the weapon in Alden's leather flying coat.

"God, but we're lucky," Nelson panted. "The Atlanteans never saw this pistol of yours. They're only used to my rifle."

Hope lit Alden's features, then faded. "But what good is a .45 against brutes like those? Might at well have a pop gun!"

"Still we're lucky," grunted Nelson, delighted to find the magazine yet filled. "Can't tell what's ahead. Yes, we're the luckiest—"

He broke off in quick alarm. From overhead had come a premonitory clang! Somewhere a tackle whined and, with a sense of suffocation, both men realised that now the bars of *their* prison were beginning to creep up into a long slit in the stone ceiling!

Cold fingers of fear clutched Nelson's heart as the terrible allosauri, their jaws yet dripping redly, wheeled about at the familiar sound—to stand listening. Up and up crept the ponderous grille, while the allosauri commenced to shuffle forward, fixing on their next victims enormous, unblinking green eyes.

While the whole loathsome cell spun about, Victor Nelson forced stiff fingers to throw off the safety catch as the nearest allosaurus opened its cavernous mouth in anticipation, displaying an array of curved teeth, as long and sharp as bayonets. Standing some fifteen feet high at the shoulder the horrible creature's body was; it all but blotted out the light. The bars rose inexorably. Now they were waist high.... Now above Nelson's head.... In a moment would come the rush.

Richard Alden stood up straight and squared his shoulders. "Good-by, Vic," he said, in clear, unafraid tones. "I don't imagine that .45 will even tickle those ghastly brutes."

Nelson nodded. "All over but the cheering," he replied with that strange, macabre humor which often comes to solace men about to die.

"See you in church." There was an equally gallant lightness to

Alden's reply.

The dark haired pilot, with a curious, detached sense of unreality, stepped into the middle of the room, the automatic in his hand seeming no more potent than a water pistol, for a ponderous, lambent eyed monster was now hopping forward. While minute particles of dust and dirt rained down from the disappearing barrier, the foremost allosaurus opened its enormous jaws, uttered an eery scream and charged straight at the unbarred cell.

Drawing a deep breath, Nelson raised the .45, sighted, and, remembering his former experience, fired at the enormous right eye. As in a dream, he felt the recoil. The monster neither slowed nor swerved in the least, though its great, saucer-like eye disintegrated horribly. Immediately Nelson swiftly sighted at the other eye and fired, just as the allosaurus' shadow filled the threshold.

Crack! A swirl of bitter smoke stung the aviator's staring eyes. He'd hit; he knew it!

Cyclopean moments followed as the blinded monster dashed forward, missed the circular door, and, butting his head against the stone wall to the left, fell completely stunned, effectively blocking the doorway with its huge body. One enormous hind leg, fully ten

feet long, and equipped with three razor-like claws, projected into the cell and lashed aimlessly back and forth, forcing the two prisoners to dodge wildly.

There ensued that indescribable kind of a moment when men go mad. Outside the cell the ravenous herd pounced upon their fallen mate and with hideous grunts and snarls promptly commenced to tear it apart. The shaken prisoners realized that the rending jaws would before long undoubtedly remove the temporary obstacle; but meanwhile the hideous hissing and the fetid stench of the allosauri breath made the cell a mad-house.

Gradually, the gigantic carcass at the door commenced to quiver and roll violently under the ferocious tugs of the eager feasters. A gap of light appeared over the huge haunches, and, all at once, another of those terrible heads slipped over the carcass and into the cell.

Again the .45 thundered, lighting the darkened cell with a brief orange flame. A noise like the furious trumpeting of a dozen elephants nearly blew Nelson flat as the wounded monster drew back its head, but the respite promised to be short, for the other reptiles only re-doubled their horrid, cannibalistic rending of the carcass. When the barrier was removed there would be a general rush which the shaken aviators could not hope to stay.

Suddenly, Alden uttered a low shout and pointed to the small, oval door which had, up to this point, remained securely bolted and shut. It was swinging gradually open, rimmed with a strong reddish light.

Wide-eyed, and with black hair streaming lank over his forehead, Nelson, in the act of reloading, swung about to meet this new menace. Hell! What point was there in prolonging the pitiful struggle? What was happening?

Slowly, the door swung back, and a rosy glow lit the opening, a glow that became as strong as the gleam of a spotlight. Then, slowly, a glittering, green-crested helmet of highly polished bronze appeared, and, under it, Hero Giles' familiar features, now distorted by a terrible fear. The blue eyes seemed enormous. "Quickly!" he called. "Quick or ye are lost!"

Unbelieving of the reprieve, both the aviators stared an instant at that martial figure clad in brazen armor liberally studded with enormous diamonds and emeralds, then leaped forward with the speed of desperation, for from behind came a fierce squalling from the allosauri. As he darted towards the door Nelson had a glimpse of the carcass blocking the door commencing to slip sidewise.

Alden was already out and Nelson sped through the door barely in

time to escape the razor-sharp talons of the foremost allosaurus as it scrambled into the deserted cell with a resounding bellow of disappointed fury.

Chapter 8

As the door clanged shut, drowning out the allosauri's furious screams, both aviators, shaken to the depths of their beings, could do nothing but stare about them in surprise. Completely surrounding and protecting the exit stood a double rank of hoplites in bronze armor. Like unreal automata, they remained utterly motionless, fixed in the various postures of an ancient Macedonian phalanx, their broad backs gleaming dully in the light of the neon flares. As in a dream, Nelson recognized on top of each spearsman's casque the graceful Atlantean military crest—a metal dolphin from the back of which sprouted a series of bright blue feathers, arranged like a dorsal fin.

"Thank Poseidon, ye still live!" cried Hero Giles, gripping their hands eagerly. "I had fear for ye, oh my friends."

Nelson grinned. "You cut the rescue act pretty fine, but of course we're damned grateful. And now,"—eagerly seizing the Hero's splendidly muscled arm—"in God's name tell us what's happened. Why we were arrested and—nearly made into allosaurus fodder?"

Hero Giles turned from snapping an order to a subaltern who was peering down a great, shadowy hallway with a distinctly uneasy

manner.

"Much," he said. "Scarcely had ye two departed from Heliopolis than the priests, mad with rage over Altara's continued captivity, dared to seize the person of His Splendor and proclaim a regency. Herakles, the arch-priest is—"

From far down the gloomy, vaulted corridor came a faint sound, rather like the distant cheering of a crowd. The hoplites, standing about, turned their helmeted heads and stared uneasily, their brazen armor glowing dully with each movement.

"I'll tell ye more later, but now—"—Hero Giles' voice took on a ringing quality like the clash of steel—"there is work to be done. To rescue ye, oh Hero Nelson, I slew the guards at the lower gate, for this prison lies in the hands of a caitiff rogue, Hero Edmund, one who clings to the priestly party. We had best be off lest we be trapped and slaughtered like rats in a pit."

Very distinctly to the ears of the aviator now came the dull clash of equipment and the tread of feet.

"Forward! We must hasten to reach the podokos waiting below," cried Hero Giles, settling his ponderous helmet more squarely on his

leonine head.

At once the escort of fifteen-odd hoplites commenced to move down the corridor to the left, their hands tightly gripping the butts of their retortii pistols. At their head ran Hero Giles, and by his side Alden and Victor Nelson, who gripped his .45 vowing never again to return to that ghastly cell.

A long ringing cry from the rear brought home the dread realization that the enemy had appeared. Looking back, Nelson could see the far end of the great corridor filled with menacing figures. Then his heart leaped like a deer in a thicket, for *from ahead* sounded the clash of weapons! The rescue party's retreat was cut off!

Hero Giles acted with the speed of a veteran accustomed to emergencies. "Forward!" he roared, making the bare walls reverberate and rumble with his voice. "*Halor vàn! Ula Storr!*" (Make ready for your retortii.)

As by magic, there appeared before the retreating force a double rank of blue-crested hoplites who debouched from a side passage into the hall and clawed desperately for fungus bombs and retortii. Evidently they had not expected to come upon the invaders so abruptly.

"*Storr!*" Like a brazen trumpet's call, the voice of Hero Giles rang out the order to fire—which was instantly drowned out in the furious hissing of the retortii of his followers.

Ever watchful, Nelson fired at a gigantic officer who, avoiding the first steam jets, flung back his arms to hurl one of the deadly fungus bombs among the rescuers. Shattering the bronze helmet, the American's bullet struck the Atlantean squarely between the eyes, but nevertheless the stricken officer's grenade rolled forward and burst among the hindermost of Hero Giles' followers. Instantly, the deadly green mold flung itself upon the nearest hoplites and in a moment they crashed to the smooth granite floor, the yellowish growths already sprouting from nose, mouth and ears.

In the corridor reigned chaos, for Hero Giles' followers were now turning the full fury of their retortii upon the rank of men barring further flight. With dreadful ease, the scalding steam struck dead the opposing warriors, stripping the flesh from their bones as easily as a boy peels a banana.

Amid the swirling white clouds, Nelson had ghastly visions of yellow skulls, of steaming accoutrement, of limp heaps of disintegrating bodies; then silence fell, and, before he quite realized it, he, together with Alden and three hoplites who had survived the

disastrous fungus grenade, were bounding along after Hero Giles' glittering figure as he led the way down one passage after another.

Louder than ever rang the fierce cry from the rear. Behind him Nelson could see dozens upon dozens of yelling pursuers, and knew that if he were to live he must run as never before.

Into a succession of spacious rooms dashed the fugitives; on through deserted armories where hundreds of bronze helmets dangled in orderly rows; and across silent barrack halls.

Closer and closer sounded the pursuing feet, spurring the runners to an even more headlong gait.

All at once a door loomed to the right; into this darted Hero Giles and after him pounded the two Americans and three hoplites. In an instant the six men set their shoulder to the ponderous bronze door and swung it to, just as the hiss of a retortii on the other side rose above the mad, blood-hungry clamor of the momentarily baffled rebels. Gasping and sweat-bathed, the fugitives paused only an instant.

"We've gained a short passage," gasped the Atlantean wrenching off his helmet and breast plate. The veins stood out in great blue cords

on his forehead, for the weight of the armor could not have been inconsiderable. "Below wait our podokos."

Nelson stripped off his leather coat, following the example of the hoplites, who swiftly divested themselves of such cumbersome equipment as could readily be removed. Then, while the shouts of the thwarted pursuers swelled like a demonic chorus, and while feathers of steam crept under the great door, Hero Giles spun about and, with his short yellow hair gleaming bright, led on down another series of passages.

All at once the fugitives, now reduced by exhaustion to five, found themselves on a balcony overlooking the great valley of Atlans. Before them opened an enormous staircase and down this they dashed at top speed, infinitely relieved to be once more in the open air.

Running like hunted stags, the fugitives had descended but a third of the great staircase, when, from behind, came a sudden, menacing cry that warned Nelson that the pursuers had, after going a longer way around, come once more in sight.

"Ah! Poseidon blast the traitorous Edmund and his varlets! See?" panted Hero Giles pointing to a huge arch from beneath which was

issuing a glittering column of shouting, swift running warriors at whose head dashed a splendidly-proportioned figure that must be Hero Edmund.

With the speed of the hunted, Hero Giles bounded forward, taking three and four steps at a stride, his jade green cloak snapping out behind. Down, ever downwards over the endless flight of stairs the aviators followed him until, spent and panting, the hard pressed five plunged down a final circular staircase and so gained a courtyard where waited a detachment of armored lancers whose yellow plumes and pennons shone bright in the glare of the flame suns. Staring anxiously upwards, the troopers nevertheless stood to attention in an orderly rank beside those curious Atlantean mounts called podokos.

During all his sojourn in Atlans, Nelson had never become used to the hideous and awe-inspiring podokos which closely resembled the allosauri but were only eighteen feet long. Like the other monsters, they had tremendously developed hind legs which promised the speed now so vital for escape and safety. Ready in the tooth-studded jaws of each podoko was fitted a bronze bit together with a bridle and reins; and cinched up on each creature's back was one of those curious Atlantean saddles, which was built up at the cantle to overcome the downward slope of the podokos' spines.

Need for vital haste was but too obvious and, as he drew near, Hero Giles gasped the command to be off.

"Quick," he shouted, his scarred visage flushed and sweat-bathed. "Saddles! Speed! Speed! Cling fast as your beasts arise!"

All five literally hurled themselves into gorgeously caparisoned saddles. Instantly, the urging squatting podokos leaped to their feet.

It was the work of a moment for Nelson to wrench his reptile around, for already Alden and the Atlantean cavalrymen were speeding across the wide paved court, their lance pennons fluttering bravely in the orange-hued glare.

At top speed the rescuers dashed for a great, oval gateway while the podokos increased their gait; like aero-planes gathering speed, the faster the weird creatures traveled, the higher arose their tails.

Then, following the frightened, backward glances of the hard-riding, red-haired lancers, Nelson suddenly discovered a new and terrible cause for this headlong flight, for, issuing from an unbarred gateway, came perhaps a dozen of *the terrible and enormous allosauri*, which, spying the fleeing cavalry, instantly gave chase.

With a sense of despair, the aviators heard the ferocious bellows

booming from behind and watched the appallingly swift progress of those uncouth monsters as, leaping high into the air, the allosauri covered between fifty and sixty feet at a single bound.

"They'll get you," cried an inner voice in Nelson's being. "They'll catch you sure." But the small and lithe podokos, sensing death leaping up from the rear, stretched out their slender, snake-like heads, stood on tiptoe, and, pressing their small forelegs tight against their chests, commenced to run far faster than any horse could gallop. Nevertheless, the allosauri came bounding up like colossal kangaroos, uttering weird, screaming roars that brought a chill of imminent death to the fugitives.

Casting a quick glance over his shoulder, Nelson's blood froze to find an allosaurus not more than seventy yards behind, and making terrible exertions to close that slender gap! Nearer and nearer coursed the incredible monster, body rocking in its terrific stride, dreadful jaws wide apart—jaws that could, without an effort, cut a horse in half.

A fear such as he had never known racked Nelson's consciousness as he found he was hindermost of the cavalcade, which was strung out like a field of racers. The other riders crouched low in their saddles like jockeys, lances held straight out before them, and furiously

goaded their strange mounts with curious hooks. Nelson was vastly relieved to get a glimpse of Alden far in the lead, almost beside the Atlantean Prince. His podoko was evidently better than the average.

Faster and faster pursuers and pursued raced across level meadows, over straight, white roads and rolling grain fields. Wind whistled madly in Nelson's ears, filled his eyes with tears, and made his short, dark hair snap, but two huge allosauri were now not twenty yards behind and *gaining with appalling speed!*

On the verge of madness, Nelson hammered his heels into the podoko's scaly side and wished he dared let go the saddle horn to draw his pistol, but to loose his grip was to risk falling off.

Closer and closer! Two enormous nightmarish heads were actually snapping at the fleeing podoko's tail. Then fear must have inspired the reptile Nelson bestrode, for it put on a sudden desperate burst of speed which carried it past the next two lancers. In passing he glimpsed the doomed wretches, pale-faced and horrified, as they frantically goaded their failing podokos.

A moment later, piercing screams from just behind assailed Nelson's ears, but when he looked to the rear once more it was to find that a wide gap had opened between him and the great monsters behind.

Evidently, the heavy-built allosauri were unable to long maintain the terrific pace set by the smaller and more agile podokos whose maximum speed Nelson judged to be well over sixty miles an hour.

The pilot's eyes narrowed on beholding, in clear relief and not far away, the majestic, whitish outline of mighty Heliopolis, whose lofty towers, graceful domes and frowning citadels shone pink under the leaping, blinding glare on Mount Pelion.

"We certainly picked a nice time to drop in on this God-forsaken country," grunted Alden as the walls of Heliopolis loomed near. "We seem to have crashed into the busiest days they've had in centuries. How many shots you got?"

Nelson, swaying to the steady trot of his podoko, hesitated.

"Only five. Damned if I know what's going to happen next. I suppose it all depends on Hero Giles. Looks as though the nobles were bent on restoring Altorius—if he's not dead by now."

Alden tugged powerfully at the strange bridle which controlled his beast. "The priests wouldn't dare kill him, but it surely looks like their rebellion has gained a lot of headway."

A moment Alden's clear, blue eyes swept the towering battlements,

gorgeously-sculptured temples and curious stepped pyramids, which now loomed near at hand and cast their rugged outlines sharp against the copper-colored heavens.

"Maybe there's some way we can work this revolution trouble to help us," suggested Nelson, without enthusiasm. "If we could play off one crowd against the other—"

His remarks were cut short as the foremost lancers slowed before an enormous bronze gate looming ahead. On the vast main panel was a beautifully-wrought dolphin curling about a trident—symbol of the imperial power now so sorely tried. Beyond that gate, breathlessly mused Nelson, lay Heliopolis and an unknown fate.

Chapter 9

It would have taken no trained eye to observe that something very unusual had happened in Atlans. Some of Heliopolis' many wide streets were quite deserted save for several small, bright-red cat-like reptiles that the Atlanteans sheltered as pets, but in other thoroughfares large throngs of people milled uneasily about, while listening to the impassioned harangue of black-robed priests. Everywhere business was at a standstill, shops were closed and markets tenantless.

Riding at an easy hopping gallop, the aviators urged their green, scaly mounts to the side of Hero Giles, for here and there some wandering citizens, spying the Americans, would yell shrill curses and shake their fists. Reining in, Nelson demanded to know the reason for this unaccountable hostility.

"'Tis the work of our gentle and holy priests," explained Hero Giles with a hard laugh. "They have told the populace ye are magicians seeking to set other gods above Poseidon."

"Nonsense," rapped the American, looking about uneasily. "We've never given two thin damns about anything except getting back to our plane."

"So I know," was the Atlantean's preoccupied reply; "but this spawn of Herakles' temples speak loud, and the loutish populace hearkens to their lies!"

"But what the devil is all this revolt about?" broke in Alden. "Why were we arrested? You started to tell us at the prison."

Hero Giles frowned as he pulled his podoko into a gracefully carved gateway of green marble. "There's but little to add, for 'tis all very simple. The priests have laid impious hands on His Splendor, Altorius, and imprisoned him in the great temple of Poseidon. We nobles have defied the arch-priest, for the dog-conceived Jereboam already marshals his forces for a fresh attack, knowing that Atlans is sore beset by internal strife. Have patience for now we go to the council chamber, where ye shall hear everything."

To say that the newcomers found the council of nobles in a furore would be to put it mildly. Their angry voices carried far down the beautifully ornamented corridors of the Imperial Palace, which was used as headquarters.

"Sounds like a dog-fight going on in there," muttered Alden anxiously. "Don't like the sound of it a bit. I hope they feel kindly towards us."

Nelson, swinging along with his ragged shirt fluttering like a scarecrow's, nodded. "Yes, so do I. But I guess they need our help or Hero Giles wouldn't have risked his life to save us."

Conscious of the value of appearances, the dark-haired aviator unconsciously straightened his frayed black tie, buttoned the sleeves of his khaki flannel shirt and otherwise made pathetic attempts at improving his appearance as the clamor of wrangling voices grew loud down the corridor.

His wide shoulders swinging to his stride, Hero Giles flung open a door, beautifully wrought with leaping podokos, and halted on the threshold.

"Death!" rumbled a voice from inside. "I say death to the Wanderers! Let us make our peace with the priests, lest they slay His Splendor forthwith."

"And that's what I call a nice friendly greeting," was Alden's murmured comment. "Better get your gat handy, Vic. I'll bet they've got a reception committee of retortii men behind the door."

There was no time for Nelson to reply because now the threshold was at hand. Inside, seated at a table, he had an impression of

perhaps ten or fifteen scarred and angry-looking veteran nobles whose green cloaks and bejeweled armor revealed their high rank.

In mid-dispute they halted, eyeing the three figures in the doorway with curiously conflicting expressions. Some smiled a relieved welcome, some stared in surprise, but not a few greeted the Americans with lowering brows and angry, threatening eyes.

"Harken," Hero Giles greeted them. "By Poseidon's grace the Wanderers were saved from a vile death. Rise Heroes, and bid them welcome!"

"Ah, the Wanderers!" In an instant Hero John was wringing Nelson's hand. "Oh blessed hour! I had feared for ye both. Welcome, Hero Alden!"

A faint flush crept over the young man's wan and trouble-lined face. "'Tis well ye've come," he whispered. "The council was prepared to change their intent towards ye."

A grizzled, one-eyed prince arose, and leveling an accusing forefinger at Nelson shouted, "'Tis he hath caused the rebellion. Slay him!"

"Nay!" thundered the Hero Giles, "and forget not, Hero Paul—*I* am

senior Prince of Atlans!"

In the great white marble council chamber silence fell, while from wonderfully carved ivory and gold chairs the harassed, yellow-bearded princes regarded the two uneasy Americans.

"Hearken, Hero Giles!" rasped another dark-browed officer in a plain, much-dented red breast plate. "I side with Paul. Away with them, I say! Time is too precious. Do not the dark hordes of Jereboam beat back our frontiers?"

Hero Giles glowered and sat bolt upright in his chair—a strange disordered figure among his gorgeously robed and armored peers. "Thou wert ever a hothead! I prithee pause a moment! Remember how the dark-haired Wanderer once aided our imprisoned Emperor, whom Poseidon protect! Perchance, Hero Nelson and his friend once more can aid us in this, our hour of need."

A chorus of variously opined voices broke out, while Nelson with an eye to possible violence stood ready.

"Silence! Sirrah!" The fierce old veteran banged a powerful fist on a golden dolphin head forming his chair arm. "This idle wrangling accomplishes naught, and a thousand weighty matters await our

attention. Is it true the phalanxes at Tricca have risen for the priests?"

Before Hero Giles could reply, a stalwart guard at the door flung it open to admit a dust and sweat-bathed courier who, darting forward, flung himself at Hero Giles' no less dusty feet. While the yellow-haired Prince started back muttering in amazement, the runner raised a shaking hand.

"Woe, woe to Atlans!" he panted. "Jarmuthian retortii men have crossed the boiling river. Cierum is fallen! Its garrison is drenched in clouds of fungus gas. But a handful escaped!"

"Speak on: is that all?" A terribly intent expression crept over the aquiline faces around the council table.

"Nay, spare thy servant!" begged the green kilted courier, raising sweaty, imploring hands. "I—I dare not—"

"Speak!" snarled Hero Giles, his blue eyes terribly lit. "Speak!—else thy carcass shall be flung to the pteranodons."

Wild-eyed, the fellow blinked fearfully about. The grim-lipped nobles edged closer. Nelson, realizing all that lay at stake, watched intently, conscious that Alden was now by his side.

"I—I, Her Sacred Holiness, Altara—." The messenger's red face twitched and he choked as in terror.

"Altara!" The name reechoed weirdly from a dozen dry throats, and Nelson saw the skin suddenly pale and tighten over Hero John's face.

"What of the divine Altara, fool?" he thundered in a dreadful, shaken monotone. "Have those foul swine of Jarmuth dared—?"

"Forgive, oh Hero!" cried the groveling courier, his long red hair sweeping the marble floor. "The dog-sired Jereboam hath made proclamation in Jezreel that the Sacred Virgin is doomed to perish on the altar of Beelzebub, their demon god, in two days' time!"

"What?" The great marble-walled chamber was shaken by an unearthly outcry as horror and rage struggled for mastery in the circle of tense faces surrounding the momentarily forgotten aviators.

Bedlam broke loose, while Hero Giles sat as though stunned, staring on the shivering runner at his feet.

Nelson, very much on the alert, could see that the announcement of Altara's impending death had produced nothing short of a cataclysm in the plans of the council.

Like men paralyzed by electric shocks, the yellow bearded veterans and nobles sat stupefied, frozen in their last gesture. Then, in the midst of their silent despair, came the sound of a curious, high-pitched horn that had in its note something of the eery wail of a fire siren. The effect was magical, for the nobles sprang up, hands on sword hilts and eyes searching the corridor.

"The priests!" gasped a short, broad-shouldered noble at Altorius' left. "By Poseidon! 'Tis the fanfare of the Herakles himself."

Then indeed did the council glower, for, as Nelson soon learned, Herakles was the moving spirit and evil genius of that priestly party which had dared to imprison the Emperor.

Again the horn wailed its warning of the arch-priest's approach, whereat a stalwart hoplite in green painted armor clanked in, saluted stiffly and waited for Hero Giles' instructions.

"Bid the old man enter," directed the Prince at last. "Tell the graybeard he has naught to fear if he comes alone. Otherwise, bid him return to his kennel in the temples."

A moment after the hoplite had vanished, there appeared in the doorway a tall, emaciated old man on whose silvery head was set a

curious golden mitre ending in the shape of a wondrously bejewelled trident. The curious Americans noted that the arch-priest's robes were as black as his evilly glittering eyes, and were embroidered with curious cabalistic symbols done in silver thread. In his withered hand Herakles carried a ceremonial trident—the mark of the Head Priest of Poseidon.

As though wary of advancing, the arch priest paused in the doorway, not three feet from where Nelson stood poised for action.

All at once the gaunt figure in black raised thin hands to the dome far overhead and cried in high-pitched prophetic tones:

"Woe to Atlans! When perishes Altara, virgin of Poseidon the God-head, then shall a darkness fall on Atlans! Her cities shall be cast down, there will be a weeping and wailing in the land, for Beelzebub and his followers shall prevail! Woe to Atlans and woe to ye all, blasphemous nobles!"

Gripped by a superstitious awe, the generals and nobles fell into an uneasy silence, fearfully lowering their eyes and then glancing askance at the plain khaki clad figures standing alert in their corner.

Nelson, defiantly meeting their eyes, beheld Hero Giles staring

fixedly before him, his powerful shoulders bowed as though bearing an overwhelming burden.

Deeper grew the silence of disaster while the American furiously searched his mind for some means of thwarting the death in store for him and his companion. By chance, a word of Hero Giles recurred, the "pteranodons." What in the devil was a pteranodon? He turned sidewise to Alden who stood, hands in the pocket of his leather jacket, also thinking deeply.

"Dick," he whispered. "You studied paleontology at college. Do you remember what a pteranodon was?"

"A what?" The younger aviator seemed to make a definite effort to return to the present. "A pteranodon? I'm not sure, Vic, but I think it was a kind of flying reptile related to the pterodactyl group."

He could go on no further, for Herakles, the arch-priest, raised his snowy head suddenly, his eyes blazing. "To save Atlans in her hour of trial, we demand that ye deliver to us the Wanderers. They shall die as an offering to Ares, God of War. Perchance he will preserve us." The arch-priest's deep-set and glittering eyes swept with venomous hatred the two calm-featured aviators, who looked very plain and unromantic in their flying jackets and khaki serge. "We,

familiars of the Gods, herewith demand that the blasphemers perish on the War God's altar! Else shall ye all die unbeloved of the Gods!"

"And we do your bidding, will ye give us back His Splendor?" demanded Hero Giles.

"Nay—we priests do not bargain like hucksters."

Risking all, Nelson muttered a swift aside to Alden. "How big were those pteranodons?"

"Some species had a wing spread of twenty-five feet."

The muscular pilot's mouth closed into a firm, colorless line as he nodded and glanced at the vindictive old man who was by now white with fury.

Up sprang a good three-quarters of the nobles present and turned on the grim figure at the head of the board.

"Surrender the Wanderers!" they shouted. "We demand it!"

In another instant the death sentence would have been forced on Hero Giles, but Victor Nelson leaped forward, pistol menacing the raging gray-bearded priest.

"Listen, all of you!" he shouted in deep tones that were strangely authoritative. "Beware, foolish Princes, how you threaten us. Great is our knowledge and power: you've seen that already. Even now, the other Wanderer and I can save or ruin Atlans, as we wish! Have ye forgotten the battle by Lake Copias?"

The Princes, furious at the American's defiance, half rose, hand on sword hilt, but sank back at a swift, menacing gesture from Nelson's pistol.

"What sayest thou, mad fellow?" screeched the arch-priest, his black eyes bright as knife points. "Save Atlans—?" Fierce questioning was in his sombre, sunken eyes.

"I said," repeated Nelson, "that, if we choose, we can yet save your Altara and the Emperor from death."

"Impossible! He is mad!" shouted Paul, the one-eyed Hero. "Not the Gods themselves could rescue Altara from the claws of the demon Beelzebub!" The nearest nobles flung themselves back in their chairs and snarled threats of all kinds as they gripped their sword hilts.

Sensing an inescapable climax, the khaki-clad American raised his pistol, covering Hero Paul, the speaker. "Silence!" he rasped. "You're

a thick-headed idiot not to see the truth. Can this priest save Altara? No! You know damned well he can't! And yet you'd have us killed."

"Now, Herakles," he swung on the priest, "about this Altara matter—if you'll restore Altorius unharmed, guarantee our safety, and punish those liars who condemned us to death, the other Wanderer and I will undertake to not only prevent the sacrifice of Altara, but to bring the Princess back as well!"

To all this Alden listened with increasing and indescribable dismay, his blue eyes round as marbles. "My God!" he whispered in an undertone. "What in the devil is Vic doing? *Undertake* is *right*, the crazy fool!"

"How will ye accomplish this mad boast?" demanded the arch-priest in deep suspicion. "Know ye that the Sacred Virgin lies captive in the dungeons of the great temple of Beelzebub? Know ye that this temple is in the center of Jezreel, capitol of Jarmuth?"

"I had some idea that was the case."

"Know ye," continued, the graybeard priest, "that Altara is ever guarded by two thousand picked priests and warriors? Know ye, moreover, that this vile sacrifice will be made but two days hence?"

The aviator's lean, dark head inclined with a serenity he far from felt.

At this point the scarred veteran officer who had spoken before broke in, his face menacing. "Believe not this liar, oh Hero Giles! He speaks with a tongue made bold by fear. He promises that which he cannot accomplish!"

Had Victor Nelson had time to reflect upon the weirdness of the plan he had evolved, he would probably have silently admitted that his grizzled accuser was more than a little justified, but as it was he smiled serenely.

From all sides rose a threatening shout. "Let the blasphemers be sacrificed. Ares will protect us!"

His yellow brows knit, Hero Giles wavered, but as he hesitated there ran through a great circular window a distant yet menacing shout. "Down with Altorius, the Unlucky! Down with the sons of Hudson! Give back to the ancient Gods their Sacred Virgin. Hail to Ares! Death to the Wanderers! Death! Death!"

Drowning out these ominous cries there came from below the window the brazen clang of trumpets and the clank of many armored

men hurrying forward. Presently the mob's outcry grew fainter, but still the cries of "Death" could be heard.

It was a tense moment. Would Hero Giles remain friendly? With poignant anxiety, Nelson watched that dishevelled martial head sink forward in perplexity.

"Hero Giles," he warned, in a low voice. "You'd better trust us. You're risking nothing."

Slowly, the fierce blue eyes of the veteran rose, and, meeting the level gray ones of the aviator, lingered there as though asking a question. Suddenly reaching a determination, he rose to his feet and addressed the triumphantly grinning arch-priest, who tightly clutched his trident wand with thin, blue-veined fingers.

"Hearken, black crow of a priest, who has dared lay foul hands on His Splendor, the Emperor. This is my reply: show me how ye will rescue Altara; otherwise begone! My hand itches for the sword."

A deep silence fell while Herakles glowered helplessly, then shrewdly avoided the trap. "This is blasphemy!" he croaked and raised a quivering forefinger in solemn warning. "Woe to thee, Hero Giles. Woe to the people! Fear the wrath of the Gods!

"Jeer not, ye nobles!" Herakles stormed on. "Be not deceived by lies! I bid thee deliver these magicians to Ares, God of War!"

A nasty moment; Nelson's heart drummed as he gazed down at the row of uneasy, war-like faces, but Hero Giles proved the strength of his heritage. Back went his patrician head; he drew himself up to full height and stared coldly upon the black robed priest, who, nothing daunted, gave back look for look.

"Nay! We keep them: they will bear out their promise. I give ye good day, oh Holiness!"

Quivering with rage Herakles raised his withered hand in anathema. "Then perish, blind spawn of Hudson! Verily shall ye all die under the torture. Woe! Woe! Woe!"

Then, amid a strained silence, pregnant of distrust and disaster, the old man wheeled and stalked out.

As he watched the departure, color drained from the Atlantean prince's haggard features. "Ah," he observed bitterly, "ever have these black crows feasted on our land, and ever as birds of ill omen." He turned and, with a weary sigh, surveyed the group of loyal, but anxious souls. "I thank ye. Will ye still do my bidding and help to

save our sovereign lord?"

Out flashed the swords of a dozen-odd nobles as they raised the hoarse, ringing cry of "Altorius! Altorius! Supreme!"

A little later Nelson, before a very mistrustful gathering composed of Hero Giles, Hero John and two or three other veterans, traced the barest outline of his plan.

"You understand? I'm to be taken to the border as a prisoner; then, in plain sight of the enemy lines, the guards must maltreat me and turn me loose."

The aviator searched one after another of the brutal, war-like faces, while Hero Giles translated for the benefit of two Atlantean generals who did not speak the royal language.

"Are you positive," Alden demanded of Hero John, "that this revolution in Atlans will die out if Altara is returned?"

"Yes! A thousand times yes!" The prince's fine eyes gleamed with savage enthusiasm. "With the Sacred Virgin restored to Atlans, new courage will come into the phalanxes! The priests will cease their outcries against them. Then, with the help of the blue maxima vapor, we will rend the dog-begotten followers of Jereboam limb from

limb!"

"All right." Nelson's wiry khaki-clad body bent far over the table. "Remember, Hero Giles, that part of the fighting's up to you. When I'm gone, you'll do exactly what Alden tells you. Now, one thing more: what part of the border is still unquestionably loyal?"

Hero Giles frowned and shrugged his armor-clad shoulders a little helplessly beneath the splendid cloak of imperial green. "The gods alone know; but at the third division of this morning, Mayda and Thebes still vowed their loyalty. 'Tis there are quartered the phalanxes of the Imperial guards. They alone can I trust to the death."

"All right." Bending over a huge parchment map of the valley, Nelson nodded, and his keen black eyes became very serious. "I want you to concentrate every man you can muster in each of those cities. Meanwhile tell the populace,"—he drew a deep breath—"that Altara will certainly be returned to them."

"Art thou sure?" broke in the scarred veteran in the dented breast plate; then, his brow dark with doubt, he engaged Hero Giles and the rest in a heated, low-voiced colloquy.

Alden stepped near, an anxious frown on his unshaven features. "Think this idea of yours is sure-fire?"

"No," Nelson's lean head shook. "I'm far from sure. It's a wild gamble at best, but we can't be any worse off than we are now. If the priests win out, we're sunk and no mistake about it; but there's a fighting chance my idea could be brought off."

"Now look here," objected the younger pilot tensely. "What's this rot about your going into Jarmuth alone? How d'you know they won't skin you alive once you're over the border?"

"I don't," admitted his friend, shrugging slightly. "But I don't see there's anything but to take the risk. If I don't go over there, sure as shooting we're going to feed some damn unpleasant kind of beast here in Atlans.

"Another thing," Nelson said, turning to the Hero who, surrounded by the others, was bent in deep consultation over a map. "How am I to know Altara if I see her? Is there a statue, a painting or something —?"

The Hero's aquiline features lit in a slow smile. "Nay, we have better than that. Come, thou shalt see the Sacred Virgin as she now is."

The members of the conference followed Hero Giles down a short corridor, through a couple of doors and into a chamber where a huge disc of crystal stood on edge fixed upon an axis above a bewildering array of wires, pipes and gauges.

Hero John, who seemed familiar with the mechanism, turned a lever, whereupon the disc commenced to spin like a pie plate on a dance floor. Faster and faster it spun, silently gathering speed each second while a low humming sound filled the chamber. Gradually the outline of the whirling disk commenced to brighten, tinting the scar-seamed, craggy features of the Atlantean generals and picking glorious, glowing lights from the jewels on Hero Giles' wonderfully engraved breastplate.

"Ah." Hero John turned a small dial. "The crystal warms. Look, oh Wanderers!"

Nelson rubbed his eyes incredulously, for in the heart of the shimmering circle had materialized the outline of a room with walls of yellow marble.

"Well, I'm damned!" gasped Alden. "See how it flickers!"

As the revolving disc of crystal gained top speed, the flickering

subsided and a picture, clearer than most photographs, could be seen in the center. A wondrously slender, yellow-haired young girl clad in Grecian robes of pale blue sat in deep despond upon a plain wooden couch, with a black haired servant kneeling before her, apparently lacing sandals on her tiny, pink-hued feet.

"Bring closer the face," snapped Hero Giles gruffly.

Gradually the focus changed, like the close-up of a movie camera, until in the center of the madly whirling disc could be seen in minute detail and living color the face of an indescribably lovely girl.

"Whew," muttered Nelson, staring in silent amazement. "No wonder they want her back! She makes Ziegfeld's little girls look like Armenian refugees." He cast a sidewise glance, but Alden had apparently not heard him; the younger American stood gazing with rapturous joy at the girl.

"Aye! Aye!" The two veteran generals uttered stifled groans and one of them drew a hand across his eyes. "Poseidon save her! Aye! Preserve the fair Altara."

"Wouldst thou not doubly save her, now?" demanded Hero John in a low voice that bespoke his anguish. He seemed suddenly older than

the grim, helmeted veterans to either side.

"You bet! I guess a man sees a face like that only once is a lifetime. And now," Nelson continued with an effort to return to the practical, "there's no time to be lost—so I'd just like to take a look at those pteranodons of yours."

A few minutes later, the two aviators found themselves nearing a lofty structure which adjoined the imperial palace. It was constructed along the lines of an immense aviary. Between beautiful, glistening Ionic columns of white marble, gleamed bronze bars, set at regular intervals to prevent the escape of the most appalling creatures which could ever have skimmed the air.

"What in the devil is your idea?" demanded Alden, taken aback. "God, look at the loathsome brutes!"

Some of these huge, flying reptiles were hopping awkwardly over the ground picking at bones and refuse littering the floor with long pelican-like bills, which were, however, very much thicker than those of pelicans, and set with sharp teeth at least six inches long.

"Not very pretty are they? Kind of look like huge bats," commented Nelson thoughtfully. "Wonder if they could be handled?"

"Yes, their wings are leathery. Look at 'em up yonder." Alden pointed to the roof of that immense aviary where, hanging head downwards like gigantic bats, must have been hundreds upon hundreds of the pteranodons. One of them, whistling oddly, fluttered up to the bars, affording the Wanderers an excellent view of a loathsome head, the back of which ended in a curious sort of horn, that, projecting backwards, jutted far above its rear. Fierce, vermillion eyes with green irises glared at the Americans through the bars, and great wings of greasy-looking leather fanned a disgusting stench from the interior of the aviary.

“Sweet little things," was Alden's comment. "God! Imagine having one of those great things swooping down on you. Hey, Alden, look at that big devil over there! He must have a wing spread of thirty feet. Big as a Moth plane, isn't he?"

For answer the pteranodon clattered its vast beak savagely. One of the generals stooped and, catching up a huge slab of meat from a basket nearby, hurled it through the bars into the gaping jaws.

"What would ye with these creature?" demanded Hero Giles with undisguised curiosity.

"You'd be surprised." Nelson was not deliberately rude, but his mind

was wrapped up in the daring project he had evolved. "I want a couple of the biggest of these caught and set aside in a courtyard where there will be no one looking on. If your people can train and handle podokos and allosauri—I guess a couple of Yanks ought to be able to manage these flying nightmares. So don't you worry about us."

Hero Giles uttered grim, significant laugh. "Thou hadst best manage them. I note yonder pteranodon is in need of nourishment."

Chapter 10

With sharp anxiety, Victor Nelson kept watching the towers of Jezreel rise ever clearer above the great, warm plain of Jarmuth, but, for all that, he noted how distinctly Jezreel differed from Heliopolis. The Jarmuthian capital was predominantly amber-yellow instead of white in color; its towers were flat-topped, angular, hideous structures that compared not at all favorably with the graceful Grecian architecture of Atlantean public buildings.

The populace, he decided, as he strode along in the midst of half a dozen silent guards, were as harsh and graceless as their architecture. Whereas the Atlanteans had been white skinned and uniformly red haired—save for those of Hudsonian blood—the inhabitants of Jarmuth almost without exception were black haired and had dark, olive-hued skins.

"They're the lost tribes of Israel, all right," Nelson decided after a brief sojourn in that savage land lying beyond Apidanus—the great boiling river, whose bubbling and scalding currents had for centuries served as a natural boundary between the two realms. But now the Jarmuthian armies had crossed it and were steadily pushing back the demoralized and despairing Atlanteans with savage energy that heaped the dead in hillocks.

"Their armor," mused the ragged, barefoot prisoner, studying his silent guards, "looks a lot like a Roman legionnaire's, but that six pointed star on their helmets is pure Semitic. Yes, this sure is an Asiatic outfit."

His eyes wandered from one fierce, big-nosed infantryman to another and noted the splendid physical structure of the majority. Evidently hardier, much less refined and luxury-loving than the Atlanteans, these swart warriors disdained robes and other garments. Save for helmet, armor and brief black kilts, they were quite naked. Like the Atlantean hoplites the infantrymen carried spears, steam retortii and quantities of grenades.

The country side through which the prisoner passed had a holiday air, for garlands of flowers hung in every doorway, and naked, pot-bellied children squatted by the roadside, industriously weaving crowns and streamers of gay blossoms.

"Look, Atlantean dog!" commanded the black-bearded leader of the escort. "Let thine infidel eyes gaze upon the mightiest city of the world. Seest thou yonder Ziggurat which o'er towers all others?"

Nelson raised eyes red-rimmed from sleeplessness and deep anxiety —for the crafty Jarmuthians had proved unexpectedly unwilling to

credit him as the Atlantean outcast and would-be renegade he had pretended to be.

"Yes," he said in reply to the English-speaking *jehar's*—captain's—question. "What's it for?"

"'Tis the temple of the almighty Beelzebub, Steam God of Jarmuth. Without his hot breath no wheel would turn, our armies would be powerless and this land would perish under the ice of the outer world." The dark eyed officer's eye fell speculatively upon his bound and dust-covered prisoner. "Perchance, dog of a spy, thou wilt die during to-day's fourth division(2) together with Altara, pale daughter of the feeble, false god Poseidon."

The Atlantean day was divided into six divisions of four hours each; due to the flame suns there was no sunrise or sunset.

This afternoon?

Nelson could not realize that the time had flown so quickly. Four short hours separated him from the crisis of his life. A thousand doubts assailed him. What if Alden or Hero Giles failed in their share of the great scheme for rescue? Narrowly, the aviator's eye searched the great, rich plain, then swept the amber-hued sky where,

far above the plain, Jilboa, the nearest flame sun, beat off the Arctic chill and darkness.

The great, black-bearded jehar eased the straps from which was suspended the brass coil of his retortii. "Aye," he chuckled, his thick lips parted in a crafty smile. "Ere long will the fair flesh of Altara grace the ceremonial board of His Exaltation, the King, and his priests and princes."

Nelson gasped in horror. The divinely beautiful Altara—butchered for meat like a calf? Grotesque! Ghastly! "What! You eat your prisoners?" He felt sick, nauseated.

For answer, the swart Jarmuthian raised an enormous hand and dealt the captive American a stinging cuff which made his teeth rattle.

"Peace!" he snarled. "Else I slit thy spying throat ere we pass yonder walls."

Fingering a short blue-black beard that was frizzed into tight curls in the Assyrian manner, the jehar lengthened his stride as the little detachment clanked into the shadow of a great wall surrounding Jezreel, and through a huge gate guarded by two hideous, jackal-headed effigies.

Hurrying into the city were throngs of eager men, women and children, interspersed with muscular, black bearded soldiers who cast threatening, baleful eyes on the pale-skinned prisoner.

At first the great metropolis of Jezreel seemed boundless, for everywhere arose tall, massive monuments of yellow marble whose facades were engraved with Sanskrit characters, thus bearing out Nelson's surmise that this was indeed a race of Semitic origin.

Here and there hurried grey-bearded, vulture-eyed priests oddly garbed in corrupt Occhive and Tyrian regalia. Nelson found it odd to see the Tablet of the Laws, which Jarmuth so openly ignored, swaying on their yellow robed breasts; and none cried out more menacingly nor more loudly against the limping, wan-faced captive, than these same ecclesiastics, who must have long since forgotten all worship of Jehovah in the foul service of a bestial golden effigy.

A stone sailed through the air, narrowly missing the American; then another, which struck his shoulder.

"God, what a rough looking crowd," thought Nelson, as the guards, cursing, held back the screaming mob. "At this rate I won't live to even reach the temple!"

Every second his life stood in great danger. Unkempt, sloe-eyed women hurled themselves, shrieking with fury, against the armored chests of the guards, who were hard pressed to beat them off with their spear hafts.

Nelson's one small ray of comfort in this evil hour was the fact that his .45 pistol remained untouched in a food wallet. At the border the jehar had cast one contemptuous glance at the weapon, but, no doubt deeming it some strange culinary tool, he had made no effort to remove it.

It was a continual struggle for the guards to win their way up a long flight of stairs, for ever the great stream of humanity grew denser and more menacing.

Nelson felt a violent sense of revolt grip his being. "I must win free," he thought. "If I fail, Alden dies, and—and—" For the first time he realised how much he wanted to actually see Altara. Like a clear cameo, an image of her had remained fresh in his memory. Except for her Grecian garments she might have been a lovely, carefree English or American girl.

"And these decadent swine would sacrifice her!" The thought was sickening. Yet how could he prevent the pitiful tragedy?

Fortunately, a detachment of troops—tall, sinewy fellows with conical helmets, crested with six-pointed stars—reenforced the guards just as clawing hands began to snatch and tug at the prisoner's ragged Atlantean chiton of blue cotton.

Almost before he realized it, Nelson was dragged inside a great gloomy building and into a circular chamber where four eagle-featured elders sat in council beneath the six-pointed star of Sem. On approaching, the jehar in command sank on one knee and in humble salute raised both hands to the tribunal.

"A tough looking desk sergeant they've got," muttered the prisoner to himself as his eye met the chilling regard of a lean, yellow-faced priest. "Wonder what I'm booked for?" Idiotically, he recalled being summoned before a traffic court, years back. "Guess I don't get off with vagrancy; it'll probably be everything from speeding to mayhem, with maybe arson and well-poisoning thrown in."

The deliberations of this ominous court proved to be appallingly short. The dour-faced elders merely put their heads together, muttered a few sentences, then straightened up almost immediately. The chief priest—he with the yellow face—thrust out his fist and made the immemorial signal of death by jerking his thumb at the black marble floor.

Before the outraged and astounded aviator could utter a word of protest, powerful guards seized and hauled him off down a dark, narrow passageway in which the fetid prison smell was very strong. Too wise to struggle against overwhelming odds, yet appalled at the thought of his impending doom, Nelson was dragged into a room where four or five furtive, enslaved Atlanteans, made dumb by the removal of their tongues, were engaged in a curious occupation.

On a bare stone bench, five other Atlantean captives were sitting in miserable silence. They made a grotesque array, for their heads were crowned with gay yellow and blue flowers, and the upper half of their perfectly formed bodies gleamed with an application of a sweet-smelling oil. About their wrists and waists were twined fragrant garlands of yellow roses which hid the leather straps confining their hands.

Struggling, Nelson was forced on to the bench, whereupon slaves, skipping to avoid the lash of a scarred, olive-hued slave driver, hurried to wash the newly arrived prisoner's limbs, face and hands. A weary-looking old slave with sunken, rheumy eyes listlessly pulled the blue chiton from Nelson's broad shoulders, and would have removed the food pouch had not the prisoner winked vigorously. The ministering slave glanced swiftly sidewise and, discovering the slave driver's attention directed to another corner, pulled the upper folds of

the chiton over the food pouch and its precious contents, then set a crown of yellow roses more or less askew on the American's head. For all the peril of the situation Nelson could not suppress a fleeting smile as the phrase, "For I'm to be Queen of the May, Mother," leaped nonsensically into his brain.

“Yes, I guess they are getting us all dolled up for a sacrifice of some kind." Nelson's heart began to pound at the thought. Then he fought for self control. It must be a hideously realistic nightmare! He, Victor Nelson, American citizen, a quiet birdman, member of the Caterpillar Club and ex-flight commander of the A. E. F. was about to be offered as a sacrifice to some hideous, pagan god? Nonsense! He'd wake up in a minute and hear the drone of a ship on the line.

He blinked, staring fixedly at a single ray of light that came streaming in through a small, barred window, then glanced sidewise at his fellow victims, who with Spartan indifference sat waiting for the end of all things. It was no dream!

From the tiny window came the shrill discordant braying of many trumpets, and a roar like that of a football crowd arose surprisingly near. In response, the slave driver lashed the gaudily bedecked sacrificial victims to their feet with vicious cuts of his pliant whip, and herded them like a drove of calves down a very long passage, lit

at intervals by those strange column lamps of incandescent gas. In their red glare the doomed six seemed as though already bathed in blood.

"Must be some crowd of people outside," muttered Nelson as a great gale of sound deafened him. Yonder the amber glare of the flame suns glimmered, and now it was his turn to step into the open!

On a sort of spiral roadway he paused, breathless, awed, bewildered, for there, eddying restlessly about the bases of towers and other huge structures, was a great sea of up-turned faces. To his surprise he found the passage he had followed opened perhaps halfway up what must be the great Ziggurat of Beelzebub. He judged the tower's height must be immense, for already the crowd was a good hundred feet below.

"*Zarotoa! Zarotoa! ù Wlanka!" (Death to the victims!)*

Nelson shivered. How terrible was the wild, bloodthirsty clamor of that vast throng, when they beheld the six flower-decked prisoners appear upon the circular winding road which led to the lofty and wind-swept summit of the great conical pyramid of the people of Jezreel.

Behind the victims marched perhaps eighteen or twenty spearmen gorgeously uniformed in yellow and black painted armor. Their retortii were plated with gold, and in the center of a star forming the crest of each helmet was set a diamond large as a hickory nut.

Preceding the despairing prisoners marched a squad of tall, clean-shaven priests with great gold hoops in their ears. They blew mightily upon long, curved horns, and were followed by perhaps a dozen lithe, posturing girls, half clothed in diaphanous yellow robes. These priestesses swung golden censers which flung bluish clouds of aromatic smoke high into the humid air above.

Up and up, around and around the great tower temple, Nelson was dragged, while the vast city of Jezreel, palaces, towers, courts, dwellings and all, lay like a great panorama below. Up and up, and the wind grew stronger while Nelson marvelled at the great height of the structure he was mounting. Immediately in front of him swayed the naked shoulders of the three captive Atlanteans; he could see rose petals from their crowns fluttering in the strong warm breeze sweeping that man-made pinnacle for the worship of a heathen god.

Despairingly, the American's eyes searched the horizon, to discover nothing but a few great birds wheeling lazily in the bronze-hued sky. Very clearly he could discern three of the flame suns, casting flame

high from their peaks.

"Alden!" he groaned. "Oh God, Alden, don't fail me!"

Chilled by the fate in store, he scanned the dark and hostile faces below, but found no friendly visage.

Up and up. The procession was now nearing the summit.

There were hosts of poignant problems before him, each vital if Altara and the Empire of Atlans were to be saved; but one primary question immediately confronted him. How could he get his hands free? He ventured a few words in English to the stolid Atlantean at his side, whereat the fellow only stared dully and shook his red, flower-crowned head.

He next tried to cautiously work loose his hands, but to no avail. The rope of plaited skin binding his aching wrists together was tough as any rawhide. Cursing, he abandoned the effort, and, as his eyes once more swept the great bloodthirsty throng below, he felt himself doomed indeed.

Chapter 11

Standing at last on the summit of the great Ziggurat, Nelson found himself staring up at the fearsome golden image of the dread demon Beelzebub. The god stood some twelve feet in height and had a hideous human face, but, in place of hair and beard, countless golden tubes writhed in all directions. From the end of one, the puzzled prisoner beheld several tiny feathers of steam creeping forth, indicating that these hairs were a species of steam vent.

When, with the other captives, he was made to halt near its base, he further discovered that the idol sat upon a throne of yellow marble, the sides of which were carved with Sanskrit characters, necessarily quite meaningless to the doomed aviator.

In a grim and silent rank before Beelzebub's feet, stood some six or eight priest-executioners bending their black-robed bodies against the strong wind which swept that ghastly pinnacle.

Just below the base of the image, Nelson noted several great, copper coils, no doubt conducting steam from the interior of the Ziggurat. Between the knees of Beelzebub rested a huge, shallow bowl, the use of which puzzled the American not a little, for he saw that the base of this ornate receptacle was also wrapped with a number of

steam coils. Two great hands, ending in cruel-looking claws, were stretched horizontally above the demon's knees, seeming to plead for victims.

Suddenly a deep toned brazen gong sounded somewhere below; the trumpeters blew an ear-piercing note; and, at a gesture from the high priest, four of the brawny executioner-priests leaped forward, seized one of the Atlantean victims, hurled him to the stone platform and, in an unbelievably short interval, strapped the shrieking wretch by wrists, elbows, knees and ankles to a long, brass rod. Slung like a dead deer from a rail, they lifted the helpless Atlantean, and, while five hundred thousand voices roared in acclaim the priests fitted the pole ends into notches above the hands of the idol with the effect that the idol actually seemed to be clutching its victim.

Then, from all the pipes composing the hair and beard of Beelzebub, sprang forth hissing spouts of snowy steam which, whipped by the rising wind, went whirling madly down the lee of the Ziggurat. At the same time, from the half open mouth of the demon issued a fearful, screaming howl, a thousand times louder than the whistle of a speeding locomotive. Deafening and barbaric, it was reechoed from a hundred towers and battlements.

A dreadful, exultant yell burst from the multitude below as the red-

robed priest drew from beneath his garments a sickle-shaped knife that glittered evilly in the light of the flaming suns. Still chanting, he stooped and quickly made a deep incision over the heart of the victim. While a piercing, agonized shriek burst from the ashen lips of the doomed Atlantean, his bright life-blood began to splash into the golden bowl below where, due to the presence of the steam coils, it swiftly commenced to hiss and bubble. Very quickly the last scarlet drops had fallen.

Then while Nelson, sick and horrified, stood watching, the dead body on its pole was taken down, unstrapped, and hurled, limp and red-spattered, to the next lower platform where other priests waited to dismember it for the ceremonial cannibalism soon to follow.

In rapid succession two more victims were slaughtered amid the blood-hungry cheers of the Jarmuthian populace. Now the great bowl hissed and bubbled with a generous supply of the dark red fluid, from which rose clouds of evil-smelling steam that fanned the hideous features above.

From below suddenly arose an excited shout far mightier than any which had preceded it, when the executioners, sweating from their exertions, now turned and, spying Nelson, hurried forward. Coincidently, the American's bound hands disappeared beneath the

chiton. Squaring his shoulders, he gripped the pistol, prepared to make a good end.

"They'll get me, but before I die I'll send at least two or three of these devils to hell," he thought. "Come on—"

But, for an inexplicable reason, the arch-priest beckoned back his satellites, while roar upon roar of terrific excitement swelled from the swarming mob below, and a shout which at last became distinguishable bid fair to split the heavens. "Altara! Altara! Altara!"

Slowly, the temporarily reprieved victim's muscles stiffened. He understood. The next victim was to be the fair Altara, sister of Altorius and Sacred Virgin of Atlans.

"Altara! Altara!" A rising hurricane of impassioned human voices thundered the name.

Suddenly, the desire to live burned doubly strong in the American's breast. He must somehow prevent this inhuman catastrophe. But how? How?

Stealing a quick glance over his shoulder, Nelson stifled a groan. The southern horizon remained clear, and put an end to hope. No help! He must fight it out to the end alone.

A rank of exultant, black-bearded priests now appeared at the head of the stairway, then a quartet of olive skinned, semi-naked priestesses joyfully clashing brass cymbals.

There came an interval—and Nelson's heart stood still as there appeared the lovely head and shoulders of her whom he had first seen in the heart of the revolving crystal. Even more fiercely, mad revolt at fate gripped him.

Through hot, strained eyes the American saw that the stately Altara was beautiful beyond all possible comparison, and that she seemed utterly unafraid in the hour of her dreadful death. The Atlantean maiden's large, clear blue eyes were fixed with calm resignation on the distant flame sun of Jilboa. On her curling golden hair had been set a circlet of ceremonial yellow roses, while her white, slender body was thinly covered with a scanty robe of yellow silk.

Slowly, and moving her small bare feet in a regal stride, Altara climbed the last few steps and stood straight and unafraid before the hideous demon god of Jarmuth.

Thousands of frantic inner voices assailed the aviator's consciousness. "Save her! You must save her! She's too young, too beautiful to die!"

Like a vast maelstrom of sound, so swelled the lustful cry of the dark multitude at the base of the Ziggurat, while the arch-priest chanted his litany in a sort of triumphant exultation. Then, all at once, one of the executioners roughly tripped the golden haired girl, sprawling her helpless on the bloody stones; and, before Nelson could quite realize it, the slender, silver hued form lay limp and helpless between Beelzebub's bloody claws.

Like a dynamo furiously gathering speed, so buzzed Nelson's brain. He was going to save her—if only for a brief interval! One man against a nation. Through a raging mist of fury he saw the red-robed priest raise his lean arms; then the American's bound hands darted beneath the blue chiton to reappear immediately. No one saw the pistol, for every eye was rivetted upon the gleaming, sickle-knife of the red priest. Like a voice from hell, that eery scream burst again from Beelzebub's throat as his priest stepped near, the knife raised.

Amid a deafening roar the sickle-knife flashed higher; but it never fell, for the red priest suddenly reeled, clutched his chest and, staring wildly, staggered sidewise, while the assembled priests stared thunderstruck. The deafening roar of Beelzebub, the clamor of horns and cymbals had drowned out the report. In superstitious awe the Jarmuthians leaped back, panic-stricken, from the convulsively writhing body of the red priest, which rolled crazily down the steps

before the idol; but a high shout of terror rang out as he toppled off the summit and, like a discarded puppet, plunged down the precipitous side of the cone-like tower.

Again Nelson's pistol spat, and two of the executioners collapsed in kicking agony. Like an avenging fury, the American raged about the summit, the pistol in his bound bands dealing death right and left until panic seized the remaining priests, who, with one accord, abandoned their weapons to rush headlong down the dizzy, winding roadway. In a trice, none but Altara, Nelson, the two Atlanteans and the fallen priests remained on the summit.

It was the work of a moment for the Atlanteans to cast loose Nelson's bound wrists, and he theirs; time was precious, for, from below, a furious cohort of spearmen were charging up the stairs, their dark features terrible in their wrath.

"Only four more shots!" The sickening realization dashed into Nelson's brain. "That'll never stop them." Then in the midst of his despair he saw an answer. Stepping back he fired twice full into the great steam coil circling the base of the idol.

Spang! Spang! His bullets smacked through the copper coil to puncture neat, round holes. As he fervently hoped, jets of live steam

rushed through these vents with terrible force and bathed the head of the stairs with a scalding, blinding vapor. Howling like mad beasts, the agonized Jarmuthian hoplites fell back, while overhead Beelzebub bellowed incessantly, shaking the sky with his hideous voice.

"That's better." But Nelson knew his triumph to be brief. "*Where in hell is Alden?*" he raged as with shaking hands be released the bewildered girl from the death bar after the two Atlanteans had lifted it and its fair burden from the claws of Beelzebub.

Picking up the swords and other weapons of the fallen priests the two Atlanteans uttered their deep-toned war cry of *Halor vàn!* and joyously prepared to die fighting, as furious roar on roar of wrath arose from the populace, infuriated at being cheated of their prey. But the black-armored temple guards dared not charge those twin steam jets barring their approach. Accordingly they tried other means.

Nelson's heart stopped as a small, dark object sailed up from below and clattered on the platform. It was a grenade. With the speed of thought, the American kicked it to the landing below, where it exploded, annihilating a detachment of Jarmuthians by drenching them with the terrible fungus gas. Heart bounding with savage joy,

Nelson watched the deadly green fog leap from the broken grenade and of its own accord settle on the nearest soldiers. With the usual astonishing speed there formed on the stricken soldiery that poisonous yellow mould, whose fungus-like shoots sprouted through nostrils and mouths. On the dense crowd below the bomb's effect was appalling, and no more grenades were hurled....

During the respite Nelson's anguished eyes once more swept the skies. He started. Was it true or was it a mirage? Far to the southward a small, black speck materialized in the orange-hued heavens. Good old Alden! Hope wavered in the American's breast. Could he and his two fellows beat off the infuriated Jarmuthians long enough? He doubted it.

A shower of spears sailed up, but because of the angle, their trajectory was too great, and like rays of death the lances flashed harmlessly overhead to plunge over the summit and wreak death among those on the other side.

Nearer and nearer came the black speck while from the populace a low shout of amazement arose. Coincidently Nelson's heart stopped; aghast, he saw that the steam was no longer hissing from the holes at the idol's feet! Evidently, the steam current had been shut off from below to allow the raging priests to lead their followers in a

desperate charge up the stairs.

Marshalling an Atlantean to either side, Nelson sprang to the head of the stair and fired full in the face of gorgeously robed priests who staggered back screaming. But the others wavered only an instant.

"*Halor vàn!*" Both Atlanteans hurled spears retrieved from the abandoned weapons—and each struck down his man.

The American's eye flickered up. Yes, there came a strange, but welcome sight: a great creature with enormous, leathery pinions was circling down towards the tower top! A clashing of weapons brought Nelson's eyes earthwards. He joined in a furious melée at the stair top, like the Atlanteans, using a captured bronze sword. There came a deep groan as the right-hand Atlantean collapsed with a bloodied bronze spear point standing far out from between his naked shoulder blades.

A swooping shadow fell across the slowly advancing attackers. Beholding that awesome creature the Jarmuthians cowered, hesitated; then in headlong panic they darted below, uttering howls of fear and pursued by the surviving Atlantean, who, gone berserk, must have shortly paid for his folly.

The pteranodon was now quite recognizable, and seated on a double saddle was Alden, skillfully guiding the ungainly monster by means of a curious bridle, by shifting his weight and by pressing certain nerve centers between the great reptile's leathery shoulders.

Down, down circled Alden until the great wings skimmed just above Beelzebub's ugly golden head.

Her courage strained beyond endurance, Altara screamed shrilly in fear as Alden guided the huge reptile to the summit and forced it to light.

"Quick!" shouted Alden. "They're coming back up!"

"All right!" Catching up the fainting girl, Nelson hurdled two or three fallen bodies, and, while Alden showered fungus bombs upon the returning Jarmuthians, he laid his precious burden across the saddle and secured her with straps specially designed for the purpose.

"All right, Dick," he snapped. "Get going!"

"But you?" Alden's brown face was terribly intent.

"I'm not going! This creature could never carry the three of us. It

can't, I tell you! Hurry, those devils are coming!"

Alden folded his arms. "If you don't go, I don't."

"All right then," snarled Nelson, vaulting into the saddle after casting loose the inert, yellow-robed girl. "Be a damned fool! We'll all die now."

It was a near thing, for the pteranodon, scenting the fresh blood, was very loath to obey its master, and scuffed awkwardly around the tower top two or three times, while Nelson, clutching Altara to him, expended his last shot in driving back the enemy.

At last, the pteranodon spread its huge brown pinions and took off. Then Nelson gasped in alarm, for, unaccustomed to the heavy weight it now bore, the pteranodon scaled earthwards with the speed of a meteor, wildly flapping its bat-like-wings. Down! Down! Nelson had an impression of people scattering like frightened ants.

Alden cursed, tugged furiously on the bridle, and set his weight back in the saddle, but to no avail. Down! Ever down! The pteranodon now struggled among the tall buildings.

A sickening sense of defeat gripped Nelson as a long jet of steam shot out from a huge brass retortii mounted on the roof of an arsenal.

The scalding fingers of steam just missed its target, but fortunately served to sting the descending pteranodon. With a convulsive shudder and a whistling scream, the hideous reptile commenced to flap its gigantic wings faster, and, slowly but surely, began to rise over the yellow temples and towers of the barbarous city of Jezreel.

What followed is now a matter of Atlantean history. On its pages is set forth in full detail how the giant pteranodon barely crossed the boiling river to sink exhausted in the outskirts of Tricca.

There, also, is described the series of tremendous battles in which the Atlanteans, led by Altorius and inspired by the return of their Sacred Virgin, employed the terrible fungus gas to overwhelm the Jarmuthian invaders, driving them back with great slaughter to the steaming plains of their own land.

At even greater length is described the great triumph Altorius accorded the victorious aviators on the occasion of Victor Nelson's marriage to Altara.

"Doth it not seem strange," she whispered as they stood looking out over the great, sleeping city of Heliopolis, "that thou of the New World and I of the Lost World, should stand man and wife?"

The American's tanned face softened. "My darling," he whispered, "there are lots of strange things in the new Atlantis—but this isn't one of them."

March 1931

73 When the Mountain Came to Miramar by Charles Willard Diffin

summary goes here

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

The first tremor that set the timbers of the house to creaking brought Garry Connell out of his bunk and into the middle of the floor. Then the floor heaved and 'dobe walls swayed while the man fought to keep his footing and pull himself through the doorway to the safety of the dark night. The earthquake that came with the spring of 1932 was on.

It is magic against magic as Garry Connell bluffs for his life with a prehistoric savage in the heart of Sentinel Mountain.

He was nauseated with that deathly sickness that only an earthquake gives, and he dropped breathlessly in the shelter of a date palm while

the earth beneath him rolled and groaned in agony. A deeper roar was rising above all other sounds, and Connell looked up at the nearby top of Sentinel Mountain.

The stars of the desert land showed clear; the grim blackness of Sentinel's lone peak rose abruptly from the sand of the desert floor in darker silhouette against the velvet of a midnight sky. And the mountain was roaring.

Softened by the distance, the deep, grumbling bass sang thunderingly through and above the other noises of the night, as if old Sentinel itself were voicing its remonstrance against this disturbance of its age-long rest.

The grumbling died to a clatter of falling boulders a hundred yards away at the mountain's base, and Connell's eyes discerned a puff of vaporous gray, a cloud of wind-blown dust, high up on the mountain's flank.

"Holy cats!" said Garry explosively, "what a slide! That must have ripped the old boy wide open."

His eyes followed the white scar far up on the mountainside, followed it down to the last loosened stones that had crashed among

the date palms of Miramar ranch. "I don't just like the idea of the whole mountain moving in on me," he told himself; "I'll have to go up and look at that to-morrow."

It was afternoon of the following day when Garry rolled blankets and food into a snug pack and prepared for the ascent. "Guess likely I'll sleep out to-night," he mused and looked at the pistol he held in his hand.

"I don't want that thing slapping against me," he argued; "too darned hot! And there's nothing to use a gun on up on Sentinel.... Oh, well!" He threw the holster upon his bunk and dropped the automatic into the pack he was rolling. "I'll take it along. Might meet up with a rattler."

He brushed the sandy hair from his wet forehead and straightened to his full six feet of slender height before he slipped the straps of his pack about his shoulders. And a broad grin made pleasant lines about his gray eyes as he realized the boyish curiosity that was driving him to a stiff climb in the heat of the day.

There was no real trail up the thousand-foot slope of Sentinel Mountain. Prospectors had been over it, doubtless, in earlier days, but in all of Garry's twenty-one years no one besides himself had

ever made the ascent.

There was nothing in all that solitary, desolate peak to call them; nothing, for that matter, to beckon Garry, except the hot desert days, the cool breath of evening and the glory of nights when the stars hung low over all the miles of sand and sagebrush that reached far out to the rippling sand-dunes shimmering in the distance. Nothing, that is, but the "feel" of the desert—and young Garry Connell was desert-born and bred.

He stopped once and dropped his pack while he mopped his wet face. From this point he could see his own ranch spread below him. Miramar, he had named it—"Beautiful Sea." The name was half an affectionate mockery of this land where the nearest water was fifty miles away, and half because of the sea of blue that he looked at now. Garry had never ceased to wonder at the mirage.

It was always the same in the summer heat—a phantom ocean of water. Garry's eyes loved to follow the quivering blue expanse that seemed so cool and deep. It rippled softly away to end in a line of white, like distant breakers on the horizon's rolling dunes.

This had been the bed of an ocean in some distant past, and that ancient ocean could never have seemed more real than this; yet

Garry knew that this sea would vanish with the setting sun. He had watched it often.

A hundred yards farther and he stopped again. It was no well-trodden path that Garry followed, but he knew his landmarks. There was the big split rock a half mile ahead, and the three-branched cactus beside it. But between these and the place where Garry stood was a fan-shaped sweep of boulders—and this where smooth going had been before.

He forgot for the moment all discomfort. He stood staring under the hot sun that cast purple shadows beside the weathered rocks, and his eyes followed up the scarred mountainside.

"That whole ledge that stood out up there—that's gone!" he told himself. "The whole side of the mountain just shook itself loose...."

Far above, his eyes found another towering mass that reared itself menacingly. "That will come down next time," he said with conviction, "and I don't want to be under it when it breaks loose." Then his searching eyes found the lower ledge and its shattered remains.

It had held a welter of rocks above it as a dam holds the pressure of

water—and the dam had burst. The torrent of stone from above had swept into motion and carried with it the accumulation of loose rubble below. Where the ledge had been was now a cliff—a sheer wall of rock. It had been covered before by the talus that was swept away.

Garry's eyes narrowed to see more plainly under the sun's glare. He was staring not alone at the cliff but at a shadow within it—a black shadow in the white face of the cliff itself.

"That was all covered up before," Garry stated; "buried for thousands of years, I suppose. But it can't be a cave; not a natural one, at least. There are no caves in this rock."

He stopped at times for breath, and his wonder grew as he climbed and the black mark took clearer form. At last he stood panting before it, to stare deep into the utter blackness of a passageway beyond an entrance of carved stone.

It was carved; there was no mistaking it! Here was a passage that nature had never formed. He took a quick stride forward to see the tool marks that showed on hard walls where symbols and figures of strange design were carved. An intrusion of harder rock had formed a roof, and they had cut in below—

"They!" He spoke the word aloud. Who were "they?"

He remembered the scientist who had stopped at the ranch some time before, and he recalled enough of the talk of Aztec and Toltec and Mayas to know that none of these old civilizations could explain the things he saw.

"This goes way back beyond them—it must," he reasoned. And there were pictures, long forgotten, that came to his mind to show him a vision from the past—figures whose coppery faces shone dark above their brilliant, colored robes—slaves, toiling and sweating to drive this tunnel into solid rock. He was suddenly a-quiver with a feeling of the presence of living things. His breath seemed stifled within him as he stepped into the dark where a pencil of light from his pocket-flash made the blackness more intense.

He tried to shake off the feeling, but an indefinable oppression was heavy upon him; the weight of the uncounted centuries these walls had seen filled him with strange forebodings.

His feet stumbled and scuffed over chips of stone; he steadied himself against the wall at times as he followed the corridor that went down and still down before him. It turned and twisted, then leveled off at last, and Garry Connell drew himself up sharply with a

quick-drawn breath.

His flash was making a circle of light a dozen steps ahead, and showed a litter of sharp stone fragments. And, scattered over them, a tangle of bones shone white; one skull stood upright to stare mockingly from hollow sockets. The sudden white of them was startling in the black pit.

"Bones!" he said, and forced himself to disregard the echoes that tried to shout him down; "just bones! And the old-timers that wore them haven't been using them for thousands of years." He moved forward with determined steps to the end of the passage that finished in solid stone. He stopped abruptly. At closer range was something that froze him to a tense, waiting crouch.

This wall of solid stone—it was not solid as it had seemed. There was a doorway; the stone was swung inward; and at one side in a straight-marked crack, he saw a thread of light.

He snapped off his own flash. Someone was there! Someone had beaten him to it! He held himself crouched and rigid at the thought. But who could it be? The utter silence and the steady, unchanging, pale-green light showed him the folly of the thought. There was no one there; there couldn't be anyone.

His hand, that trembled with excitement, reached across and over the skeleton remains posted like a ghostly guard before the door. He threw his weight upon the stone.

Its bearings groaned, but it moved at his touch. The stone swung slowly and ponderously into a silent room, and Garry Connell stared wide-eyed and wondering where rock walls, in carved and colored brilliance reflected the softest of diffused light.

A great room, hewn from the solid rock!—and Garry tried to see it and all that it held at one glance. He grasped the extent of the stone vault, a hundred feet across; the distant walls were plain in the soft light.

One high point of flashing color caught his eye and held it in marveling amazement. A thing of beauty and grace. It was a shining, silvery shape like a mushroom growth; it towered high in air, almost to the ceiling, a slender rod that swelled and opened to a curved and gleaming head. Graceful as a fairy parasol, huge enough to shelter a giant, it was like nothing he had ever seen.

But there was no time now for conjectures. He made no effort to understand; he wanted only to see what might be here; and his eyes flashed quickly over sculptured walls and a stone floor where metal

boxes were arranged in orderly rows.

Hundreds of them, he estimated; huge cases, some eight or ten feet long. Two nearby were raised above the floor on bases of carved stone. Lusterless gray in color—metal, unmistakably—and in them....

"No use getting all hopped up over treasure hunting," Garry had told himself. But under all his incredulous amazement had been flickering thoughts of what he might find.

He stared hungrily at those two boxes near him. Each of the hundreds was big enough to hold a fortune. He reached for a metal bar beside the scattered bones, and, like a man in a sleep-walking dream, he stepped across those relics of earlier men and entered the room that they had guarded.

The light stopped him for a moment. He puzzled over it; stared wonderingly at a circle of glowing radiance in the roof of stone. It reminded him of something ... the watch on his wrist ... yes, that was the answer—some radio-active substance. His eyes came back to the nearest chest, and he jammed the point of his corroded bar beneath the flange of a tight-fitting lid.

The hidden room was cool, but Garry Connell wiped the sweat from his eyes when he ceased his frantic efforts. The metal bar clanged loudly upon the floor beside him. He stood, breathing heavily, his eyes on the metal cover that refused to move. And in the silence there came to him again that strange, prickling apprehension. He caught himself looking quickly behind him as if to find another person there.

His eyes were accustomed now to the pale light, and the sculptured figures on the walls stood out with startling distinctness. Garry turned to look at the nearer wall and the figure that was repeated over and over again.

It was a man, tall and lean, his robes, undimmed by the years, blazed in crimson and gold. But the face above! Garry shivered in spite of himself at the devilish ugliness the artist had copied. It was dead black in color, with slitted eyes that had been touched up artfully to bring out their venomous stare. The head itself rose up to a rounded point that added to the inhuman brutality of the face.

He was seated on a throne, Garry saw, and other figures, less skilfully carved, were kneeling before him. Again, he was standing above a prostrate enemy, a triple-pointed spear raised to deliver the final blow.

Silently, Garry let his eyes follow around the room with its repetition of the horrible being who was evidently a king. Then he whistled softly. "Nice kind of hombre, he must have been," he said. And, "Boy," he told the carved image familiarly, "whoever you were, you've been dead a long time, and I don't mind telling you I'm glad of it."

He was slowly circling the first casket. Beyond it was the slender rod with its mushroom head that seemed more like a bell as he looked from below. The head's inner surface was emblazoned, like the figures on the wall, with crimson and gold in strange designs. He saw now that the base of it was connected with a smaller box, placed like the two beside it on a stone pedestal.

He came slowly beside it to study the box with narrowed eyes. He expected the metal cover would be as immovable as the others, and he started back and caught his breath sharply as the metal raised at his touch and the green radiance from above flashed back from within the box in a thousand scintillant lights. Then he stooped to see the brilliant, silvery sheen of metal wheels that moved on jeweled bearings.

A mechanism of some sort—but what? he wondered. He had some knowledge of the stream of electrons that discharged continuously

from the light above, and he knew how they could charge an electroscope that would automatically discharge to produce motion. He nodded in half-understanding as the fluttering gold-leaf fell and allowed a tiny wheel to move one notch in its escapement.

"Clockworks!" he told himself—it was as near as he could come to a name for the machine—"and it's been running here all this time.... What for, I wonder? What was it supposed to do?"

He stared again at the bell-shape towering above him, but its purpose was beyond guessing: it was a part of the machine. His eyes came back to the mechanism itself. There was a splinter of stone.... Garry reached for it unthinkingly, but his hand was checked in mid-air.

The fragment was wedged beneath a tiny lever, holding it erect. "That's the answer," Garry whispered. "The machine was left open,"—he felt of the cover that had been dented by some heavy blow, and saw sharp splinters of rock beneath his feet—"a rock fell from the roof, flaked off and dropped onto the machine, and a splinter jammed this little lever. But the machine has been ticking along...."

His fingers reached for the stone.

"Let's go!" he said, and grinned broadly at the thoughts that were in his mind. "Let's see what the machine would have done!"

The fragment came away within his hand, and he saw the lever fall slowly. There was motion within the case—wheels and shining spheres that touched one upon another were spinning in gleaming circles of silvery green—and from above he heard the first faint whisper of a sound.

It came from the bell, and Garry drew back to stare upward. The first soft humming of the clear bell-note was incredibly sweet. It rose in pitch while the volume increased, till the musical note was lost in the rising roar that resounded from walls and roof. Higher it rose; it was a scream that was human in its agony, prodigious in its volume!

Garry Connell stood trembling with unnamed fear. This sound was unbearable; it beat upon his ears; it battered his whole body; it searched out every quivering nerve and tore at it with fingers of fire. Still higher!—and the scream was piercing and torturing his brain. He felt the jerk of uncontrollable muscles.

The whirling machine was a blur of light, and he longed with every fibre of his tortured mind to throw himself upon it—into it!—anything to end the unbearable impact from on high. His body,

assailed by a clamor that was physical torment, could not move; the vibrations beat him down with crushing force, while the shrieking voice rose higher, then grew faint, and, with a final whisper, died to nothingness.

And still Garry felt himself sinking; the room was blurred; the excruciating agony of tortured nerves melted into a lethargy that swept through him. Dimly he sensed that the monstrous, quivering, bell-topped thing was still launching its devastating rain of vibrations; they were above the range of hearing; but he felt his body quivering in response to the unheard note. Then even these vague fragments of understanding left him. The towering, soundless thing was indistinct ... it vanished in the darkness that closed about....

He was upon the floor in a crouching heap when the tremors that shook him ceased. His mind, in the same instant, was cleared, and he knew that the soundless vibrations from the bell had ended. A wave of thankfulness flooded through him, and he luxuriated in the utter silence of the room—until that silence was broken by another sound.

It was hard and metallic, like the click of a withdrawn bolt, and came first from the case at his side. A second sharp rap replied from the other raised casket, then an echoing tattoo of metallic impacts rattled and clattered in the resounding room. Each of the hundreds of

caskets was adding its voice to the clacking chorus.

The paralysis that had held Garry's muscles was gone, and he came slowly to his feet to see the edge of the cover he had tried vainly to move, rising smoothly in the air. His eyes darted about; the second casket was opening; beyond were countless others; the room was alive with silent motion where metal lids lifted like petals of flowers unfolding to the sun.

The machine had done it! The conviction came to him abruptly. Those vibrations that had beaten him down had done this: some unlocking mechanism within each case had been actuated when the vibrations reached the proper pitch. Then the thoughts were driven from his mind by a more thrilling conviction: The caskets were open! The treasure! Who could know what some of them might contain? He took one quick step toward the nearer of the two.

One step!—and his reaching hands stopped motionless above the open case. The contents of the box were plain before him—and he stared in horror at the black, half-naked figure of a man as silent and unmoving as its counterpart upon the wall.

Black as a carving in ebony, it was the face that held Garry's eyes. He saw the pointed head, the thin lips half-drawn from snarling

teeth, the expression of brutal savagery that even this frozen stillness could not conceal.

The eyes were closed; Garry saw their slitted lids. He was looking at them when they quivered and twitched. The lids opened slowly, drew back from staring eyes that were cold and dead—eyes that came suddenly to life, that turned and stared unwinkingly, horribly, into his.

Garry's lips were moving as he drew back in slow retreat, but he heard no sound of his own voice, only a husky whisper that said over and over again: "Mummies! Caskets of mummies! And they're coming back to life!"

Suspended animation. He had heard of such things. Dim, fleeting remembrance of what he had read came flashingly to him—toads that had lived a thousand years sealed up in rock—but this, a human thing, a man!—no, no!—it couldn't come to life; not after all this time!

The pointed head, the ugly, menacing face and the body of dead black that rose slowly within the casket gave his argument the lie. In dreadful, living reality he saw the thing before him as it stretched its corded neck, extended and flexed its long, black arms and breathed

deeply through lips drawn thin. Then, with a bound of returning energy, it leaped out and down to stand half-naked and black, towering threateningly above his head.

And Garry, too stunned to feel a sense of fear, looked first at the living face before him and then at the carvings done in stone. There was too much here for instant comprehension; his reason could not follow fast enough where facts were leading, and his mind seemed groping for some certain, proven thing.

"It's the same one that's on the wall," he explained painstakingly to himself. "It's the king, the old boy himself! I said he would be a bad hombre; I said he was a bad one—"

He saw the other raise his hands threateningly, and he crouched to meet the attack. But the black hands dropped, and the scowling face turned, while Garry's eyes followed toward a sound of movement in the second casket.

The green light flooded down, and Garry Connell glanced quickly at the doorway. Too many of these blacks and this would be no safe place for him. He was expecting another apparition like the first; he would have thought himself prepared against any further surprise, but his gray eyes opened wide at what the light disclosed.

There was the casket, gray and lusterless on its low, stone base. Its cover, like the others, stood erect, and above the nearer edge an arm was raising. But it was a white arm, and it ended in a slim, white hand!—its rounded softness held in clear outline against the back ground of gray, until the arm fell that the hand might grip the metal edge.

Garry's eyes held in wondering fascination upon those slender white fingers. The hand of a woman—a girl!—what marvel of miracles was this? He held his silent pose while he stared at the face that appeared before him.

It was milk-white against the dull gray metal beyond, the white of death itself, until returning circulation brought a flush of pink that crept slowly to the rounded cheeks. Dark hair cascaded about the shoulders to mingle with a lacy veil of golden threads. A film of golden lace wrapped about her—her robes had gone to dust, vanished with the vanished years—and only the threads of gold with which the robe was shot remained, a futile concealment for the slim white of her shoulders, the soft curves of rounded breasts. But Garry's eyes were held by the eyes that looked and locked with his.

Dark eyes, deep and steady, yet glowing softly with the wonder of this awakening. Windows, crystal clear, through which shone softly

a light that filled him through and through!

Alluring as was the rounded whiteness of the form so thinly veiled, it was not this nor the childlike beauty of the face that held him spellbound. Garry Connell's only love had been the desert, and now he was filled and shaken by the glamour from within these thrilling eyes.

A rasping word made echoes in the silence, and Garry saw the girl's eyes widen as she turned them upon the black one, who had spoken. He saw her face lose its color and go dead white, and plainly her wide eyes showed the fears that swept in upon her with returning remembrance.

Garry followed her gaze to the wild figure whose slitted eyes glittered in savage triumph and possessiveness at the white beauty of the trembling girl. The lean figure spoke again in that rasping, unintelligible voice—he addressed the girl now—and the tone sent a strange prickling of animosity through every fibre of the watching man.

The black one took one stride forward; the girl, in a flash of white and gold, sprang from her resting place to take shelter behind the high casket. Her eyes came back to Garry's, and the call for help

though voiceless was none the less real.

Then her pale lips moved, and she called to him with a clear voice that uttered unknown words.

Garry came from the spell that bound him, and with a quick rush made between her and the advancing man. He landed tense and crouching, and his voice was hoarse with excitement when he spoke.

"That'll be all from you," he told the black one.

His words could mean nothing to this savage, but the tone that rang through them, and his crouching, ready pose, must have been plain. The inky face beneath the high-pointed dome of head was twisted with rage; the eyes glared at this being who dared to oppose him. But the black one paused, then stepped backward to the casket where he had been.

Garry retreated a few slow steps to the end of the metal box that sheltered the girl. "Can't you understand me?" he asked. "Am I dreaming? What has happened? Who are you, and who is this black beast? What does it all mean?"

Again he was sure that mere speech useless, but he felt that he had to speak, to say something, anything, to prove the reality of his own waking self and of the wild, nightmare experience.

He saw the crouching girl rise to her full height; he saw the movement of her hand as she swept the dark hair away from her face, and the film of gold lace clung closely about her as she came to his side. One hand was outstretched to rest, light and cool, upon his forehead.

He heard her voice, so soft and liquid yet so charged with terror. She spoke meaningless words and phrases, but at the touch of her hand upon his face he started abruptly.

Did the words themselves take on meaning and coherence, or was it something within himself?—Garry could not have told. But, with the startling clarity of a radio switched full on, he got the impress of her thoughts, and his own brain took them and put them into words that he knew.

"You will help me, you will save me," the words were saying. "You are one of us, I know. You are a stranger, but your skin is white; you are not of the tribe of Horab."

Garry was motionless and listening. He knew he was sensing her thoughts—she was communicating with him by some telepathic magic—and he knew, as he caught the words, that Horab was the black one there before him, reaching and feeling within the casket where he had slept. Horab—a savage king of a savage land—

"He captured me," the words continued in breathless haste. "I am from Zahn: do you know the good land of Zahn? I am Luhra. Horab captured me; carried me here to this island; it was yesterday he brought me here. He put me to sleep, and he put his men to sleep, hundreds of his chosen warriors. He worked his magic, and he said we would sleep for one hundred summers. But it was yesterday. And now you will save me; my father is a great man; he will reward you __"

The sentences flashed almost incoherently into his mind, but ceased at a sound and stirring from the room at their backs.

Garry needed a moment for the substance of the message to register. He had heard it as truly as if she had spoken: Horab had captured her —yesterday!... And his own lips that had been loose with astonishment closed to a grim smile.

"Yesterday!" She thought it was yesterday that her long night had

begun. Did Horab know the truth? Garry was suddenly certain that he did. Horab's plans had miscarried; he could not know how far in a distant past was that day when he had placed himself and this girl in their caskets, safe in their mountain tomb.

Only an instant for these thoughts to form—then his eyes were steady upon the tall savage who had found what he sought in the big metal case. Horab, king of a vanished race, turned now with a heavy scepter in his hand; and its jeweled head flashed brilliantly as he raised it high in air and shouted an echoing command into the room. A white hand was tugging at Garry's shoulder, a soft body clinging close, to turn him where new danger threatened.

The other caskets! He had forgotten them, and he saw the nearer ones alive with struggling forms. A black man-shape, with sullen, animal face and pointed head, came slowly erect and staggered upon the floor. Another—and another! There were scores of the black, naked men who scrambled from the nearer caskets and swayed drunkenly upon their feet.

Garry stood tense, his mind a chaos of half-formed plans. This one brute he might handle, but the whole tribe—that was too large an order. Yet he knew with an unshakable conviction that he would carry this girl from their evil clutches or die in the trying.

Feminine charms had failed to interest Garry in that world outside, but now the message of these soft eyes, the appealing beauty of this lovely face, proud and unafraid despite her fears, the hand so soft and trusting upon his face!—there had something entered into Garry Connell's lonely life that struck deep within him and found a ready response.

He swept one arm about the soft, yielding body beneath its wisp of garment, and he swung her behind him as he set himself to meet the attack. And he flashed her a look that must have carried a message, for the trembling lips were framing a ghost of a smile as her eyes met his.

Garry's thoughts darted to the gun, but his tightly-wrapped pack was in the passage outside. He prayed for a moment's time that he might meet this mob pistol in hand, and he half turned; but no time was given. The leader was shouting orders, his harsh voice resounded in shattering echoes throughout the stone vault, and the horde of blacks surged forward at his command.

A mass of lean bodies, with faces ugly and brutal where sleep-filled eyes opened wide and glaring! They crowded upon him, and Garry met the rush with a rain of straight rights and lefts into the nearest faces. He was carried backward to the wall by the weight of their

numbers, but he saw some go down for the count.

The room seemed filled with leaping, shouting men. Their shrill cries echoed in a tumult of discord, and above all Garry heard the hoarse screams of their leader.

There were fists and arms clubbing at his head. He warded them off, then sprang from the wall, leaping outward and sideways, where there was room for free swings of his pounding fists. Another black face went blank under the impact of his blow—a second—and a third!

He was giving ground slowly as the others came on. Then beyond the crowding figures he saw one who held a trident spear high in air. The weapon was poised; the metal points shone in the green light—points that would tear his body to shreds at a single blow.

Garry paused but an instant, then opened his clenched fists to clutch the lean neck of an enemy before him. He whirled the man's body and held it as a shield while he reached vainly to grip at the thrusting spear. Dimly he saw the flash of white and gold where the girl, Luhra, threw her own body upon the armed figure and clung in desperation to the shaft of the deadly weapon.

Garry hung fast to the struggling body, that was his shield; there were other spears now that flashed in the air. He loosed one hand and landed a short jab in the face of a savage whose hands were at his throat. The blow was light, and he was amazed to see the man stagger and fall. There were others who swayed helplessly and stumbled to their knees. Spears rang sharply, clattering upon the stone.... They were falling. The body he held went suddenly limp within his arms and sagged heavily to the floor....

Garry saw the one who had threatened him drop; he took the girl with him as he fell, and his spear flew wildly from his open hand. Garry was alone!—and the enemy was only a tangle of sprawling bodies where the twitching of an outflung arm marked the last sign of life.

He was breathing hard, for some of the enemies' blows had landed, and he staggered as he wiped a trickle of blood from his eyes. No time to figure what this meant, but the blacks were certainly out of it. Beyond the huddled bodies the tall figure of Horab leaped wildly in air as he sprang forward, and in the same instant Garry threw himself between the black menace and the prostrate girl.

He staggered again as he landed from his wild leap, and he called for his last reserve of strength to put power behind the blow that he

launched for the snarling face above.

The heavy scepter swung high, and was falling as Garry struck. He saw the blow start; saw the fiery arc the jeweled head made in descending like a mace above his head. Then the face of Horab vanished, and the room was a whirling place of flashing red and yellow before blackness blotted it out....

Garry awoke to blink stupidly at a green light above him. His head was a blinding, throbbing pain that blurred his thoughts.

It cleared slowly. The gleaming figure of a girl was rising from the floor. His aching eyes saw the white of her young body through the dull glow of golden lace. Her eyes came to his, and sharply he realized that this was no dream—this cave whose walls seemed swaying, the face that was staring pitifully at him, and, beyond, in a ghastly green light, the dark silhouette of a lean man who bent his pointed head above a chest.

Connell's mind was a whirl of snarled thoughts and emotions, of puzzled wonder and fighting rage; yet strangely through and above them all was a feeling of pure joy in the message of the eyes in a face that was utterly lovely.

The black figure had opened the chest. Garry saw the luminous green about it shot through with the reflected radiance of many gems. Jewels cascaded brilliantly from the lean black hands as they withdrew a golden cord. Part of some gem-incrusted fabric, it was, that he tore roughly from its rotted fastenings before coming swiftly to the still helpless body of Connell.

Garry's struggles were futile; his hands were tied before him. The shooting pain of a prodding spear brought him from the paralyzing numbness that held him, and he came dizzily to his feet. Again the walls whirled, and he would have fallen headlong but for a lithe, soft body that sprang close to throw white arms about him.

Through blood-shot eyes he saw Luhra, of the land of Zahn, with head held high and flashing eyes as she turned squarely to face the savage black. And he heard the stream of strange sentences that she poured protestingly upon him.

Her message broke off abruptly. Garry's eyes followed hers to watch a savage king, naked but for the tattered remnants of robes that time had eaten. He was reaching, into a casket that had once held kingly raiment—reaching with a lean black hand that brought forth only fragments of purple and crimson cloth that went quickly to dust within his hands.

Garry saw the slitted eyes stare in puzzled wonder at the rotted cloth, then glance sharply and inquiringly about. He saw the black one place a jeweled head-dress of barbaric splendor upon his ugly, pointed head, then rise and cross slowly to the heap of bodies. Spear in hand, he passed on to the serried rows of caskets.

Those nearest were empty, as Garry knew; he had seen the eruption of life from within them. Horab, with a growled word, moved on to the other caskets that stretched out across the room. The ugly head stooped; again the hands reached down, to come back this time with an empty, gleaming skull.

Garry thought once of his pistol, but knew in the same thought that he could never reach it; the spear of Horab would crash through him at the first movement. He dismissed the thought—forgot it—and forgot all else in the fascination of beholding the sagging lips and the scowling stupefaction on the black face of Horab. And slowly there came to his throbbing brain an explanation.

One hundred summers, Luhra had said—Horab had meant to sleep for a hundred years—and the machine that was to waken him had failed to function. Ages beyond computing had passed, and these two only, the black king and the girl, had survived. They had been directly beneath the light; its flooding energy had brought them

safely through the dreamless years. But, for the others, it had been different.

Those nearest the light had responded to the vibrating call, but their vitality was gone; their moment of life was short. As for the hundreds who had felt the light but faintly—the skull told the story. They had died as they slept, died thousands of years ago, and their skeletons were all that remained to mock at their king and the frustration of his plans.

But what was the purpose of the long sleep? Luhra's touch and her soundless words supplied the answer.

"Why did he wish this?" her mind said, repeating his question. "Horab's own country was lost; the yellow-ones from across the great water had conquered and overrun it. But Horab had planted the seeds of disease, and the yellow ones must all die in time. Horab is a king and a worker of magic; he is in league with a devil; he learns his magic of him. We of Zahn, all feared the magic of Horab—" She stopped at the quiver of rock beneath their feet.

Garry's mind had cleared, but it was an instant before he knew that the movement was not in his own throbbing head. Then the earth tremor came unmistakably, and his thoughts flashed back to the mass

of rock above the mouth of the cave. If more quakes were coming they must get out, and do it at once—

The black hand of King Horab cast the skull vindictively against the wall, and the clatter of its falling fragments mingled with strange oaths from the savage lips. Then he came toward the two and Garry searched his mind desperately for some means of escape.

The trident spear was aimed, and Garry waited for the throw. He felt, more than saw, the flash of light that was Luhra as she sprang for a spear beside the fallen men. An instant and she was before him, tense and poised, a golden Amazon, whose upraised arm and steady eyes checked even Horab in his advance.

She spoke to the savage in sharp, staccato phrases, but Garry got no meaning from the words. There was a quick interchange between them; vehement protest and shaking of his poised spear on the part of Horab. Luhra added a word or two, and she lowered her weapon as Horab did the same.

Her head was bowed as she reached to touch Garry's forehead. He sensed a hopeless sorrow that was so plainly hers, but with it he felt a mingling of another emotion that stirred him to the depths of his being. The slim, white figure straightened, and the dark eyes

squarely upon his when she spoke.

"Listen carefully," she said; "it is the last time—"

Garry found himself trembling; he was suddenly breathless with emotion. The racking pain in his head had settled to a dull ache, but his brain was clear, and through it were flashing strange thoughts.

The threat, the wild adventure itself!—they were nothing before the truth that was so plain to him now. He loved this girl! he loved her! —and his whole self responded with an inflow of fresh energy at the thought. A stranger from a strange, lost world!—but what of it?—he loved her!... The message from the lips and fingers of the girl broke in upon the thoughts that were crying for expression.

"You think of me." She smiled with her lips and eyes. "I am glad that you do, my dear one, but it is hopeless.

"Listen: I have promised; Luhra has spoken: I will go with Horab to do as he wills. I will go freely, and he will leave you here unharmed. He promises me this.

"I will go with Horab far across the blue water that surrounds us here. It is an island, as you know, for have you not come here from

afar?" Garry broke in with a startled exclamation. An island! Water! He closed his lips upon the denial of her words.

"And you," Luhra continued unheeding, "when we have gone, will return to your own land.

"But, oh, my dear one, remember always I love you. I have read your thoughts, oh bravest and tenderest of men; I loved you from the moment when my eyes opened and found you waiting there. I am telling you now, for I will never see you again." She broke in upon the wild urge of protest that filled his mind.

With an imperious gesture she motioned Horab to discard his spear, and she placed hers beside it on the rocky floor. But she flinched and retreated from the outstretched arms and grasping hands, while Garry Connell struggled in insane frenzy at the cords that bound his wrists.

He felt the lean hands of Horab upon him, and the long arms held him in a crushing grip. And he saw the black face laugh evilly at the watching girl as Horab kicked the spears over beside the casket where she had been.

Garry felt himself raised in air, and he was as helpless as a child in

that grasp. An instant later he was thrown heavily, to lie bruised and breathless in the metal box where first he had seen Luhra's face in wide-eyed awakening.

The rasping voice of Horab rose high and shrill. He was shouting triumphantly at the girl, while his hands worked to bind Garry's feet. Luhra's head and shoulders showed above the casket edge as she circled swiftly to approach from the opposite side and reach a trembling hand that would make the contact necessary for thought transference. Her cool touch was upon him; Garry ceased his futile struggle while her words came, brokenly to his mind.

"Horab has tricked us," she cried; "he is leaving you here. He will paralyze you with the devil song of the bell, but not to sleep as I did: it will stop on another note. He says you will be always awake, but helpless—thinking—thinking—always!"

She buried her face in her hands to hide from his gaze the horror that was in her eyes. Garry Connell's straining hands went limp. The terror in the girl's voice struck through his own wild medley of thoughts to make him shudder with realization of the truth.

The threat was real! If Horab left the cave and took Luhra with him, the two would die in the desert. The black savage would never dare

to face the strange, new world. And he, Garry, would be here in this cave, in this very coffin, held in a waking death. No one knew he was here; only by chance would the cave be investigated. And when someone finally came!

Garry stared in fascination at the green light. He knew with terrible certainty that whatever help might come would come too late. To lie there hour after hour, for days and then for years—waiting!—always waiting!... And he could never still his thoughts.... He had a sickening realization of the thing they would find. A body!—his body!—and the mind within it utterly insane....

The sound of the shrieking bell was in his ears, and his nerves were trembling in response. He saw long arms above the casket, tearing away the figure of a struggling girl.... And then he knew he was alone....

The sound of the bell rose to the piercing, nerve-shredding scream he had heard before. He must think fast—and act!—but the numbness of brain and muscle was creeping upon him. He tried to call out, but his throat was tight, and would not respond. The echoes died into silence; the vibrations, as before, passed beyond audible range. He was sinking ... sinking....

Dimly he felt the casket shaking beneath him. In some distant corner of his mind he knew that the earthquake shocks had turned. Then he heard with ear-splitting plainness the shrieking discord as the tremor shook the vibrating machine to silence.

The room was quiet; the paralysis left him; and in the instant of his release the clear brain of Garry Connell flashed from chaos to lay before him a full-formed plan.

"Luhra!" he called in the silent room. "Luhra!" But it seemed an age before he heard Horab and his captive returning from the passage. Then the touch of her hand gave him courage to continue.

"Yes?" she whispered; "yes, my dear one?"

He saw the shoulders of the black as he half-raised a spear threateningly toward the girl, then turned to adjust the whirring machine.

"Tell him," shouted Garry, "—tell Horab to shut off that damnable machine!" The shriek of it was rising again to drown his voice. "Tell him his life depends upon it. Tell him to listen to what I say or he will die."

He heard the girl's voice raised in a high-pitched call, and he heard the rasping snarl of Horab in reply. The girl repeated her cry above the echoing clamor of the bell—and the intolerable, rising scream, after a time, was stilled.

Garry experienced one raging moment when he would have given his hope of life for the ability to talk to Horab face to face and in words that could penetrate the black one's brain. But he could not. He must use this girl as an interpreter, and he must give her words to say that would make this ugly beast pause. He must speak as she would speak; put words and sentences into her mouth that would reach the savage superstitions of the other.

He spoke slowly, and stared impressively into the dark, fear-filled eyes in the white face that bent above him. He must make the girl believe.

"Horab works magic," he told her. "Tell Horab that I, too, am a magician—a great magician—a greater one than Horab."

He waited an instant to hear the girl's words and the disdainful laughter from lips in a savage face thrust close to where he lay.

"Horab is truly a magician," said Luhra doubtfully; "he laughs at

your magic. Horab's *Tao* is a strong *Tao*, wicked and powerful."

"His *Tao*?" said Garry, and looked at the girl questioningly. He got the thought in her mind. "Oh, yes—his god, or devil."

He turned his head to stare straight into the grinning face whose wide, thin lips were twisted into a leering snarl. Garry had to summon all his power of will to hold the look that he gave his enemy and to laugh, in his turn, long and contemptuously. Another tremor shook the casket where he lay.

"Tell Horab," he ordered, while his eyes stared steadily into those of the savage king, "—tell Horab my *Tao* is stronger than his. My *Tao* is angry because I have been harmed; he is shaking the mountain. He will shake it down on Horab and crush out his life."

He continued to stare while he heard Luhra's voice, high with hope, and he saw a change of expression flicker across the black face, though Horab shouted a vehement reply.

Luhra was speaking to him. "Horab says the earth has shaken before; that it is not your *Tao* who shakes it. He asks for another sign."

Garry was not surprised. He had fired this shot at random; the tremor

itself had suggested it. And now—

"Another sign!" Garry had to fight hard for self-control to keep from shouting the truth to this evil thing—to keep from telling him of the time that had passed, and of the world that was waiting for him. But that would never do: he must play upon this black one's superstitions. Let Horab once leave this cave with that devilish, soundless scream ringing in his ears and he, Garry Connell, was lost. And Luhra!—what hope for her out there?... The black hands were moving impatiently toward the machine....

Garry found himself speaking slowly—short sentences that Luhra quickly repeated. And something within him rose to frame words such as Garry Connell, man of the desert, would never have thought to speak—phrases that best might reach a savage, vicious mind.

He glanced once at the watch on his wrist. He did not feel the torture of the tight gold cord. He was thinking in terms of daylight, and of how much time had passed since he had seen the sun....

"Horab shall have a sign—a terrible sign," he said. "Death waits for Horab in the world outside, my *Tao* tells me. Horab shall die horribly. I see him choking in the hot sand. His tongue fills his mouth. The hot sun burns, and he is filled with fire. He tries to

scream—to call upon his *Tao*—but he makes no sound.... And so shall Horab die."

The girl translated swiftly; the answer was a wild cry of rage from the black. He sprang beside the helpless man and his spear was raised high.

Garry felt the weight of Luhra's body thrown protectingly across him, and looked up to see murder in the savage, slitted eyes. "Tell Horab," he directed sharply, "that if be harms you or me the burning death is his! But—" He waited deliberately after Luhra had spoken, and he saw plainly the flicker of fear in the ugly face. Now was the time.

"Unbind my feet!" he ordered, and he put into his voice all the force and menace he could muster. "Take me to the outer world. Take your spear. If I do not speak truth, kill me there. My *Tao* will show you a sign; he will fill your heart with fear as it now is filled with evil. But, it may be I can save you. Unbind my feet! Be quick!"

Again he waited while Luhra spoke, and he cursed silently with the agony of waiting. To be playing a part, speaking these absurdly childish things, when what he wanted was his hand upon a gun or in a grip of death about that black throat! Yet he lay as still as if the

vibrations of the bell were upon him, and his eyes held unwaveringly upon the savage face, until he felt the fumbling of hands about his feet....

A square-cut portal!—and beyond it a golden sun that shone through mists of purple and rose! Was he too late? Garry pressed forward in what would have been a clumsy run, but for the spear that had prodded him through all the long passage, and that warned now against attempted escape.

The brilliance and heat that struck him when he stepped, out into the open brought Garry in a flash from the world of horror and make-believe into the world he knew. He wanted to shout for sheer joy; but more than all else he wanted to leap at the ugly thing who stood blinking his eyes in the mouth of the cave.

The thought of escape was strong upon him, but the touch of a timid hand showed the folly of that. Luhra was beside him, her filmy lacework shining softly in the sun, to make more lovely the delicate flush beneath. Her eyes, shielded from the sun, were upon him with a look half hopeful, half despairing. No, he must see it through—go on with his play-acting—meet magic with magic. Horab had come out from the cave, and spear in hand he stood commandingly above them on a huge boulder. Yes, the magic must go on.

The harsh voice of the savage ripped out unintelligible words. Luhra translated. "It is changed," she said, "and Horab fears. But the water is there, and there is no burning death.... He says your *Tao* is weak."

Garry stared with thankful eyes across the blue expanse where a line of white marked ghostly breakers on a distant shore; where hills were reflected in the shimmering blue. But the sun was still above their tops, so he must spar for time—

"My *Tao* is strong," he said, and went on with whatever fantastic thoughts came into his mind. He was talking against time. He told of the new world his *Tao* had built, of men harnessing the lightning and flying through the air; of cannon that roared like the thunder and threw death and destruction upon those that the *Tao* would destroy.... And his eyes watched the slow descent of the dropping sun, while the figure above stirred impatiently and raised his spear.

"A sign!" Luhra was imploring. "He does not believe!"

The golden ball was touching now on a distant, purple peak. The amazing magic of the desert!—its moment had come! Garry indicated as best he could the phantom sea, so real, below.

"My *Tao* has spoken," he shouted: "watch! The waters shall be dried

up; the seas shall become a desert of hot sand; the lands and waters that Horab knows shall be no more! There shall be no food for his stomach nor water for his lips where Horab wanders in torment.... Unless I save him."

He turned to stare at the vast mirage. He knew that the eyes of the others had followed his, and he knew that they saw the first change that crept over the land.

The blue that was so unmistakably a sea was dissolving; it seemed sucked into the sand. And, while yet the hot rays cast their lingering gold over mountain and plain, the seas faded and were gone ... and where they had been in unquestioned reality was only yellow sand that whirled hotly and drifted in the first breath of the coming night....

The towering figure above them stood rigid. Garry had found a sharp edge of rock, and sawed frantically upon it to cut the soft gold of the cords at his wrists. The one above them paid no heed; his eyes were held in horror of this silent death that swept across the world.

The hand that Garry extended was steady and cautious; his arm crept about the body of white and gold to draw the amazed and wondering girl silently into the open cave.

"Follow!" he ordered, and dashed headlong down the darkened way where an automatic was waiting for his eager fingers.

The pack was there, and he tore at it with frenzied hands to grip at the pistol within. And there was also an open chest whose contents glittered in the green light, and whose weight was not too great for him to carry....

He had both chest and gun when he returned. The stumbling falls in his mad rush had not served to allay the hurts of his tortured body, nor still his raging fury. He called to Luhra as he ran—and realized that Luhra was gone. The chest fell forgotten at his feet as he rushed out; he shouted her name and cursed himself for leaving her.

Had the fascination of the outer world drawn her back? Had she trusted too greatly in the power of his Tao to shield her from harm? Connell could not know. He knew only that he saw her struggling in the grip of the long arms where the black one held her on an outthrust rock.

They were a hundred feet away, yet the black face beneath its pointed skull showed plainly its bestial fury as Garry sprang forward. With one motion the tall figure dashed the girl to the stone at his feet and raised his spear. He paused to laugh harshly at the

man who rushed toward him—who could never reach him to stop the fatal thrust.

A threat, it might have been, to hold the attacker off, or a murderous intent to end now and forever this one captive's life: Garry did not wait to learn. And the hundred-foot distance that meant a hundred feet of safety to the savage was spanned by a stream of lead from a gun whose stabbing flashes cracked sharply upon the still air. The ringing clatter of a spear that fell among granite stones came thinly to Garry as he saw the black form of Horab, king of another day, spin dizzily from the rock on which he stood.

He had hit him—wounded him at least—and the firing of that wild fusillade might have emptied the magazine! Gary waited for nothing more, but gathered the limp body of the girl within his outstretched arms and carried her stumblingly across the welter of rocks on the boulder-strewn slope. Nor did he stop until he had gained the safety of open ground beyond the marks of the great slide.

The earth was shivering and weaving as he laid her down; a rock crashed sharply in the distance. Garry turned to retrace his steps and leap wildly from rock to rock toward the mouth of the cave in a granite cliff. And the metal chest was in his arms when he returned where Luhra waited.

The ground was alive with sickening motion, he was nauseated with earthquake sickness, but he gave thought only to his gun and the one cartridge that he found in the chamber. He steadied his arm upon a rock to take aim at a figure on a distant slope.

Horab had climbed back upon the rock. A lean figure and black, he was sharply outlined in the last rays of the setting sun; the target was clear beyond the pistol's sights. But the fingers of the grim-faced man refused to tighten upon the trigger.

Savage and cruel—a relic of a bygone age! He stood there, ludicrous and unreal in his stark black nakedness, his frayed robes of crimson whipping to tatters in the breeze. Yet he had forgotten his wounds—Horab was standing upright—and Garry's hand that held the pistol fell loosely at his side. The hate melted from his heart as he watched where Horab drew himself painfully erect.

A barbarous figure was Horab, and evil beyond redemption, yet there were not lacking the attributes of a king in the grotesque form whose head was still held high. The sun made flashing brilliance of the jewels on that distorted head, while he stared with hopeless, savage eyes across the changed world where he could have no part. His *Tao* had failed him; his enemy had struck him down; and now—

The rock that had been a rest for Garry's arm was swaying, and to his ears came a rumble and groan. Sentinel Mountain, that had watched the ages pass, that had seen the oceans truly change to sand, protested again at this disturbance of its own long sleep.

Garry heard the coming of the masses from above; the crashing din was deadening to his ears. They were safe—and his eyes were upon a savage figure, black and tall, that stared and stared, silently, across a sea of yellow sand. He watched it, clear-cut, motionless—until it vanished beneath the roaring flood of rocks.

And close in his arms there pressed the soft body of a trembling girl who touched his face and whispered: "Your *Tao*, my brave one, is strong. Hold me closely that he may count me as your friend."

His own whispered words, though differing somewhat, were a fervent echo of hers. He saw the rocky masses piled high where the mouth of a cave had been; and "Thank God!" Garry Connell said, "we got out of there in time!"

The casket of jewels lay neglected among the rocks: to-morrow would be time enough to salvage the wealth for which he had risked his life. He swept the girl into his arms, and the sun's last rays made golden splendor of his burden as he carried her across the broken

stones.

His ranch showed far below him when he stopped, but the green of date palms had vanished under the last great sweep of rocks. Some few that remained made dark splotches among the shadows that were engulfing the world.

What did it matter? Miramar—"Beautiful Sea!" He laughed grimly at thought of how that sea had served him, but his eyes were tender in his tanned and blood-stained face.

Miramar could be restored. And it would be less lonely now....

74 Beyond the Vanishing Point by Ray Cummings

The tale of a golden atom—an astounding adventure in size.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Chapter 1: The Fragment of Quartz

It was shortly after noon of December 31, 1960, when the series of weird and startling events began which took me into the tiny world of an atom of gold, beyond the vanishing point, beyond the range of even the highest-powered electric-microscope. My name is George Randolph. I was, that momentous afternoon, assistant chemist for the Ajax International Dye Company, with main offices in New York City.

It was twelve-twenty when the local exchange call-sorter announced Alan's connection from Quebec.

"You, George? Look here, we've got to have you up here at once. Chateau Frontenac, Quebec. Will you come?"

I could see his face imaged in the little mirror on my desk; the anxiety, tenseness in his voice, was duplicated in his expression.

"Well—" I began.

"You must, George. Babs and I need you. See here—"

He tried at first to make it sound like an invitation for a New Year's Eve holiday. But I knew it was not that. Alan and Barbara Kent were my best friends. They were twins, eighteen years old. I felt that Alan would always be my best friend; but for Babs my hopes, longings, went far deeper, though as yet I had never brought myself to the point of telling her so.

"I'd like to come, Alan. But—"

"You must! George, I can't tell you over the public air. It's—I've seen him! He's diabolical! I know it now!"

Him! It could only mean, of all the world, one person!

"He's here!" he went on. "Near here. We've seen him to-day! I didn't

want to tell you, but that's why we came. It seemed a long chance, but it's he, I'm positive!"

I was staring at the image of Alan's eyes; it seemed that there was horror in them. And in his voice. "God, George, it's weird! Weird, I tell you. His looks—he—oh I can't tell you now! Only, come!"

I was busy at the office in spite of the holiday season, but I dropped everything and went. By one o'clock that afternoon I was wheeling my little sport midge from its cage on the roof of the Metropole building, and went into the air.

It was a cold gray afternoon with the feel of coming snow. I made a good two hundred and fifty miles at first, taking the northbound through-traffic lane which to-day the meteorological conditions had placed at 6,200 feet altitude.

Flying is largely automatic. There was not enough traffic to bother me. The details of leaving the office so hastily had been too engrossing for thought of Alan and Babs. But now, in my little pit at the controls, my mind flung ahead. They had located him. That meant Franz Polter, for whom we had been searching nearly four years. And my memory went back into the past with vivid vision....

The Kents, four years ago, were living on Long Island. Alan and Babs were fourteen years old, and I was seventeen. Even then Babs represented to me all that was desirable in girlhood. I lived in a neighboring house that summer and saw them every day.

To my adolescent mind a thrilling mystery hung upon the Kent family. The mother was dead. Dr. Kent, father of Alan and Babs, maintained a luxurious home, with only a housekeeper and and no other servant. Dr. Kent was a retired chemist. He had, in his home, a chemical laboratory in which he was working upon some mysterious problem. His children did not know what it was, nor, of course, did I. And none of us had ever been in the laboratory, except that when occasion offered we stole surreptitious peeps.

I recall Dr. Kent as a kindly, iron-gray haired gentleman. He was stern with the discipline of his children; but he loved them, and was indulgent in a thousand ways. They loved him; and I, an orphan, began looking upon him almost as a father. I was interested in chemistry. He knew it, and did his best to help and encourage me in my studies.

There came an afternoon in the summer of 1956, when arriving at the Kent house, I ran upon a startling scene. The only other member of the household was a young fellow of twenty-five, named Franz

Polter. He was a foreigner, born, I understood, in one of the Balkan Protectorates; and he was here, employed by Dr. Kent as laboratory assistant. He had been with the Kents, at this time, two years. Alan and Babs did not like him, nor did I. He must have been a clever, skilful chemist. No doubt he was. But in aspect he was, to us, repulsive. A hunchback, with a short thick body; dangling arms that suggested a gorilla; barrel chest; a lump set askew on his left shoulder, and his massive head planted down with almost no neck. His face was rugged in feature; a wide mouth, a high-bridged heavy nose; and above the face a great shock of wavy black hair. It was an intelligent face; in itself, not repulsive.

But I think we all three feared Franz Polter. There was always something sinister about him, quite apart from his deformity.

I came, that afternoon, upon Babs and Polter under a tree on the Kent lawn. Babs, at fourteen with her long black braids down her back, bare-legged and short-skirted in a summer sport costume, was standing against the tree with Polter facing her. They were about of a height. To my youthful imaginative mind rose the fleeting picture of a young girl in a forest menaced by a gorilla.

I came upon them suddenly. I heard Polter say:

"But I lof you, And you are almos' a woman. Some day you lof me."

He put out his thick hand and gripped her shoulder. She tried to twist away. She was frightened, but she laughed.

"You—you're crazy!"

He was suddenly holding her in his arms, and she was fighting him. I dashed forward. Babs was always a spunky sort of girl. In spite of her fear now, she kept on laughing, and she shouted:

"You—let me go, you—hunchback!"

He did let her go; but in a frenzy of rage he hauled back his hand and struck her in the face. I was upon him the next second. I had him down on the lawn, punching him; but though at seventeen I was a reasonably husky lad, the hunchback with his thick, hairy gorilla arms proved much stronger. He heaved me off. And then the commotion brought Alan. Without waiting to find out what the trouble was, he jumped on Polter. Between us, I think we would have beaten him pretty badly. But the housekeeper summoned Dr. Kent and the fight was over.

Polter left for good within an hour. He did not speak to any of us.

But I saw him as he put his luggage into the taxi which Dr. Kent had summoned. I was standing silently nearby with Babs and Alan. The look he flung us as he drove away carried an unmistakable menace —the promise of vengeance. And I think now that in his warped and twisted mind he was telling himself that he would some day make Babs regret that she had laughed at his love.

What happened that night none of us ever knew. Dr. Kent worked late in his laboratory; he was there when Alan and Babs and the housekeeper went to bed. He had written a note to Alan; it was found on his desk in a corner of the laboratory next morning, addressed in care of the family lawyer to be given Alan in the event his father died. It said very little. Described a tiny fragment of gold quartz rock the size of a walnut which would be found under the giant microscope in the laboratory; and told Alan to give it to the American Scientific Society to be guarded and watched very carefully.

This note was found, but Dr. Kent had vanished! There had been a midnight marauder. The laboratory was on the lower floor of the house. Through one of its open windows, so the police said, an intruder had entered. There was evidence of a struggle, but it must have been short, and neither Babs, Alan, the housekeeper nor any of the neighbors heard anything amiss. And the fragment of golden

quartz was gone!

The police investigation came to nothing. Polter was found in New York. He withstood the police questions. There was nothing except suspicion upon which he could be held, and he was finally released. Immediately, he disappeared.

Neither Alan, Babs nor I saw Polter again. Dr. Kent had never been heard from to this day, four years later when I flew to join the twins in Quebec. And now Alan had told me that Polter was up there! We had never ceased to believe that Dr. Kent was alive, and that Polter was the midnight marauder. And as we grew older, we began to search for Polter. It seemed to us that now we were older, if we could once get our hands on him, we could drag from him the truth in which the police had failed.

The call of a traffic director in mid-Vermont brought me back from these vivid thoughts. My buzzer was clanging; a peremptory halting-signal day-beam came darting up at me from below. It caught me and clung: I shouted down at it.

"What's the matter?" I gave my name and number and all the details in a breath. Above everything I had no wish to be halted now.
"What's the matter? I haven't done anything wrong."

"The hell you haven't," the director roared. "Come down to three thousand. That lane's barred."

I dove obediently and his beam followed me. "Once more like that, young fellow—" But he went busy with somebody else and I didn't hear the end of his threat.

I crossed into Maine in mid-afternoon. Twilight was upon me. The sky was solid lead. The landscape all up through here was gray-white with snow in the gathering darkness. I passed the city of Jackman, crossing full over it to take no chances of annoying the border officials; and a few miles further, I dropped to the glaring lights of the International Inspection Field. The formalities were soon finished. I was ready to take-away when Alan rushed at me.

"George! I thought I could connect here." He gripped me. He was wild-eyed, incoherent. He waved his taxiplane away. "I'm going back with my friend. George. I can't—I don't know what's happened to her. She's gone, now!"

"Who's gone? Babs?"

"Yes." He pushed me into my plane and climbed in after me. "Don't talk. Get us up! I'll tell you then. I shouldn't have left."

When we were up in the air, I swung on him. "What are you talking about? Babs gone?"

I could feel myself shuddering with a nameless horror.

"I don't know what I'm talking about, George. I'm about crazy. The Quebec police think I am, anyway. I been raising hell with them for an hour. Babs is gone. I can't find her. I don't know where she is."

He finally calmed down enough to tell me. Shortly after his radiophone to me in New York, he had missed Babs. They had had lunch in the huge hotel and then walked on the Dufferin Terrace—the famous promenade outside looking down over the lower city, the great sweep of the St. Lawrence River and the gray-white distant Laurentian mountains.

"I was to meet her inside. I went in ahead of her. But she didn't come. I went back to the terrace and she was gone. Wasn't in our rooms. Nor the lobby—nor anywhere."

But it was early afternoon, in the public place of a civilized city. In the daylight of the Dufferin Terrace, beside the long ice toboggan slide, under the gaze of skaters on the ice-rink and several hundred holiday merrymakers, a young girl could hardly be murdered, or

forcibly abducted, without attracting some attention! The Quebec police thought the young American unduly excited over his sister, who was missing only an hour. They would do what they could, if by dark she had not rejoined him. They suggested that doubtless the young lady had gone shopping.

"Maybe she did," I agreed. But in my heart, I felt differently. "She'll be waiting for us in the hotel when we get there, Alan."

"But I'm telling you we saw Polter this morning. He lives here—not thirty miles from Quebec. We saw him on the terrace after breakfast. Recognized him at once."

"Did he see you?"

"I don't know. He was lost in the crowd in a minute. But I asked a young French fellow who it was. He knew him. Told me, Frank Raskor. That's the name he wears now. He's a famous man up here—well known, immensely rich. I don't know if he saw us or not. What a fool I was to leave Babs alone, even for a minute!"

We were speeding over a white-clad valley with a little frozen river winding down its middle. Almost full night had come. The leaden sky was low above us. It began snowing. The lights of the small

villages along the river were barely visible.

"Can you land us, Alan?"

"Yes, surely. Municipal field just beyond the Citadel. We can get to the hotel in five minutes. Good landing lights."

It was a flight of only half an hour. During it, Alan told me about Polter. The hunchback, known now as Frank Rascor, owned a mine in the Laurentides, some thirty miles from Quebec City—a fabulously productive mine of gold. It was an anomaly that gold should be produced in this region. No vein o£ gold-bearing rock had been found, except the one on Polter's property. Alan had seen a newspaper account of the strangeness of it; and just upon the chance had come to Quebec, seen Frank Rascor on the Dufferin Terrace, and recognized him as Polter.

Again my thoughts went back into the past. Had Polter stolen that missing fragment of golden quartz the size of a walnut which had been beneath Dr. Kent's microscope? We always thought so. Dr. Kent had some secret, some great problem upon which he was working. Polter, his assistant, had evidently known, or partially known, its details. And now, four years later, Polter was immensely rich, with a "gold mine" in mountains where there was no other such

evidence of gold!

I seemed to see some connection. Alan, I knew, was groping with a dim idea, so strange he hardly dared voice it.

"I tell you, it's weird, George. The sight of him. Polter—heavens, one couldn't mistake that hunchback—and his face, his features, just the same as when we knew him."

"Then what's weird?? I demanded.

"His age." There was a queer solemn hush in Alan's voice. "George, when we knew Polter, he was about twenty-five, wasn't he? Well, that was four years ago. But he isn't twenty-nine now! I swear it's the same man—but he isn't around thirty. Don't ask me what I'm talking about. I don't know. But he isn't thirty. He's nearer fifty! Unnatural! Weird! I felt it, and so did Babs, just that brief look we had at him."

I did not answer. My attention was on managing the plane. The lights of Sevis were under us. Beyond the city cliffs the St. Lawrence lay in its deep valley; and the Quebec lights, the light-dotted ramparts with the terrace and the great fortress-like hotel showed across the river.

"Better take the stick, Alan. I don't know where the field is. And don't you worry about Babs. She'll be back by now."

But she was not. We went to the two connecting rooms in the tower of the hotel which Alan and Babs had engaged. We inquired with half a dozen phone-calls. No one had seen or heard from her. The Quebec police were sending a man up to talk to Alan.

"Well, we won't be here," Alan called to me. He was standing by the window in Bab's room; he was trembling too much to use the phone. I hung up the receiver and went through the connecting door to join him.

Bab's room! It sent a pang through me. A few of her garments were lying around. A negligee was laid out on the dainty little bed. A velvet boudoir doll—she had always loved them—stood on the dresser. Upon this hotel room, in a day, she had impressed her personality. Her perfume was in the air. And now she was gone.

"We won't be here," Alan was repeating. He gripped me at the window. "Look!" In his hand was an ugly-looking, smokeless, soundless automatic of the Essen type. "And I've got another, for you. Brought them up with me."

His face was white and drawn, but his hands abruptly were steady. The tremble was gone out of his voice.

"I'm going after him. George! Now! Understand that? Now! His place is only thirty miles from here, out there in the mountains. You can see it in the daylight—a wall around his property and a stone castle which he built in the middle of it. A gold mine? Hell!"

There was nothing to be seen now out of the window but the snow-filled darkness, the blurred lights of lower Quebec and the line of dock-lights five hundred feet under us.

"Will you fly me, George?"

"Of course."

I was the one trembling now; the cool feel of the automatic which Alan thrust into my hand seemed suddenly to crystallize Bab's danger. I was here in her room, with the scent of her perfume around it, and this deadly weapon was needed! But the trembling was gone in a moment.

"Yes. Of course, Alan. No use talking to the police. You can't get a search warrant to ransack the castle of a rich man just because you

can't find your sister. Come on. You can tell me what his place is like as we go."

Bundled in our flying suits we hurried from the hotel, climbed the Citadel slope of the landing field, and in ten minutes were again in the air. The wind sucked at us. The snow now was falling with thick huge flakes. Directed by Alan, I headed out over the ice-filled St. Lawrence, past the frozen Isle d'Orleans, toward Polter's mysterious mountain castle.

Suddenly Alan burst out, "I know what father's secret was, George! I can piece it together now, from little things that were meaningless when I was a kid. He invented the electro-microscope. You know that. The infinitely small fascinated him. I remember he once said that if we could see far enough down into smallness, we would come upon human life!"

Alan's low tense voice was more vehement than I had ever heard it before. "It's clear to me now, George. That little fragment of golden quartz which he wanted me to be so careful of contained a world with human inhabitants! Father knew it, or suspected it. And I think the chemical problem on which he was working aimed for some drug. I know it was a drug they were compounding. Polter said so once, a radio-active drug; I remember listening at the door. A drug,

George, capable of making a human being infinitely small!"

I did not answer when momentarily Alan paused. So strange a thing! My mind whirled with it; struggled to encompass it. And like the meaningless pieces of a puzzle, dropping so easily into place when the key-piece is fitted. I saw Polter stealing that fragment of gold; abducting Dr. Kent—perhaps because Polter himself was not fully acquainted with the secret. And now, Polter, up here with a fabulously rich "gold mine." And Babs, abducted by him, to be taken —where?

It set me shuddering.

"Alan!"

"That's what it was!" Alan reiterated. "And Polter, here now with what he calls a 'mine.' It isn't a mine, it's a laboratory! He's got father, too, hidden God knows where! And now Babs. We've got to get them. George! The police can't help us! It's just you and me, to fight this thing. And it's diabolical!"

Chapter 2: The Girl an Inch Tall

We soared over the divided channel of the St. Lawrence, between Orleans and the mainland. Montmorency Falls in a moment showed dimly white through the murk to our left, a great hanging veil of ice higher than Niagara. Further ahead, the lights of the little village of St. Anne de Beaupré were visible with the gray-black, towering hills behind them. Historic region! But Alan and I had no thoughts for it.

"Swing left, George. Over the mainland. That's St. Anne; we pass this side of it. Put the mufflers on. This damn thing roars like a tower siren."

I cut in the mufflers, and switched off our wing-lights. It was illegal, but we were past all thought of that. We were both desperate; the slow prudent process of acting within the law had nothing to do with this affair. We both knew it.

Our little plane was dark, and amid the sounds of this night blizzard our muffled engine could not be heard.

Alan touched me. "There are his lights; see them?"

We had passed St. Anne. The hills lay ahead—wild mountainous

country stretching northward to the foot of Hudson Bay. The blizzard was roaring out of the north and we were heading into it. I saw, on what seemed a dome-like hill perhaps a thousand feet above the river level, a small cluster of lights which marked Polter's property.

"Fly over it once, George. Low—we can chance it. And find a place to land outside the walls."

We presently had it under us. I held us at five hundred feet, and cut our speed to the minimum of twenty miles an hour facing the gale, though it was sixty or seventy when we turned. There were a score or two of hooded ground lights. But there was little reflection aloft, and in the murk of the snowfall I felt we would escape notice.

We crossed, turned and went back in an arc following Polter's outer curved wall. We had a good view of it. A weird enough looking place, here on its lonely hilltop. No wonder the wealthy "Frank Rascor" had attained local prominence!

The whole property was irregularly circular, perhaps a mile in diameter covering the almost flat dome of the hilltop. Around it, completely enclosing it, Polter had built a stone and brick wall. A miniature wall of China! We could see that it was fully thirty feet

high with what evidently were naked high-voltage wires protecting its top. There were half a dozen little gates, securely barred, with doubtless a guard at each of them.

Within the wall there were several buildings: a few small stone houses suggesting workmen's dwellings; an oblong stone structure with smoke funnels which seemed perhaps a smelter; a huge, dome-like spread of translucent glass over what might have been the top of a mine-shaft. It looked more like the dome of an observatory—an inverted bowl fully a hundred feet wide and equally as high, set upon the ground. What did it cover?

And, there was Polter's residence—a castle-like brick and stone building with a central tower not unlike a miniature of the Chateau Frontenac. We saw a stone corridor on the ground connecting the lower floor of the castle with the dome, which lay about a hundred feet to one side.

Could we chance landing inside the wall? There was a dark, level expanse of snow where we could have done it, but our descending plane would doubtless have been discovered. But the mile-wide inner area was dark in many places. Spots of light were at the little wall-gates. There was a glow all along the top of the wall. Lights were in Polter's house; they slanted out in yellow shafts to the nearby

white ground. But for the rest, the whole place was dark, save a dim glow from under the dome.

I shook my head at Alan's suggestion. "We couldn't land inside." We had circled back and were a mile or so off toward the river. "You saw guards down there. But that low stretch outside the gate on this side __"

A plan was coming to me. Heaven knows it was desperate enough, but we had no alternative. We would land and accost one of the gate guards. Force our way in. Once inside the wall, on foot in the darkness of this blizzard, we could hide; creep up to that dome. Beyond that my imagination could not go.

We landed in the snow a quarter of a mile from one of the gates. We left the plane and plunged into the darkness. It was a steady upward slope. A packed snowfield was under foot, firm enough to hold our shoes, with a foot or so of loose soft snow on its top. The falling flakes whirled around us. The darkness was solid, Our helmeted leather-furred flying suits were soon shapeless with a gathering white shroud. We carried our Essens in our gloved hands. The night was cold, around zero I imagine, though with that biting wind it felt far colder.

From the gloom a tiny spot of light loomed up.

"There it is, Alan. Easy now! Let me go first." The wind tore away my words. We could see the narrow rectangle of bars at the gate, with a glow of light behind them.

"Hide your gun, Alan." I gripped him. "Hear me?"

"Yes."

"Let me go first. I'll do the talking. When he opens the gate, let me handle him. You—if there are two of them—you take the other."

We emerged from the darkness, into the glow of light by the gate. I had the horrible feeling that a shot would greet us. A challenge came, at first in French, then in English.

"Stop! What do you want?"

"To see Mr. Rascor."

We were up to the bars now, shapeless hooded bundles of snow and frost. A man stood in the doorway of a lighted little cubby behind the bars. A black muzzle in his hand was leveled at us.

"He sees no one. Who are you?"

Alan was pressing at me from behind. I shoved back, and took a step forward. I touched the bars.

"My name is Fred Davis. Newspaper man from Montreal. I must see Mr. Rascor."

"You cannot. You may send in your call. The mouthpiece is there—out there to the left. Bare your face; he talks to no one without the face image."

The guard had drawn back into his cubby; there was only this extended hand and the muzzle of his weapon left visible.

I took a step forward. "I don't want to talk by phone. Won't you open the gate? It's cold out here. We have important business. We'll wait with you."

Abruptly the gate lattice slid aside. Beyond the cubby doorway was the open darkness within the wall. A scuffed path leading inward from the gate showed for a few feet.

I walked over the threshold, with Alan crowding me. The Essen in my coat pocket was leveled. But from the cubby doorway, I saw that

the guard was gone! Then I saw him crouching back of a metal shield. His voice rang out.

"Stand!"

A light struck my face—a little beam from a television sender beside me. It all happened in an instant, so quickly Alan and I had barely time to make a move. I realized my image was now doubtless being presented to Polter. He would recognize me!

I ducked my head, yelling: "Don't do that! You frighten me!"

It was too late! The guard had received a signal. I was aware of its buzz.

From the shield a tiny jet of fluid leaped at me. It struck my hood. There was a heavy, sickening-sweet smell. It seemed like chloroform. I felt my senses going. The cubby room was turning dark; was roaring.

I think I fired at the shield. And Alan leapt aside. I heard the faint hiss of his Essen. And his choked, horrified voice:

"George—come back! Run! Don't fall! Don't!"

I crumpled; slid into blackness. And it seemed, as I went down, that Alan's inert body was falling on top of me....

I recovered consciousness after a nameless interval, a phantasmagoria of wild, drugged dreams. My senses came slowly. At first, there were dim muffled voices and the tread of footsteps. Then I knew that I was lying on the ground, and that I was indoors. It was warm. My overcoat was off. Then I realized that I was bound and gagged.

I opened my eyes. Alan was lying inert beside me, roped and with a black gag around his face and in his mouth. We were in a huge dim open space. Presently, as my vision cleared, I saw that the dome was overhead. This was a circular, hundred-foot-wide room. It was dimly lighted. The figures of men were moving about, their great misshapen shadows shifting with them. Twenty feet from me there was a pile of golden rock—chunks of gold the size of a man's fist, or his head, and larger, heaped loosely into a mound ten feet high.

Beyond this pile of ore, near the center of the room, twenty feet above the concrete floor, there was a large hanging electrolier. It cast a circular glow downward. Under it I saw a low platform raised a foot or two above the ground. A giant electro-microscope was hung with its twenty-foot cylinder above the platform. Its intensification

tubes were glowing in a dim phosphorescent row on a nearby bracket. A man sat in a chair on the platform at the microscope's eyepiece.

I saw all this with a brief glance, then my attention went to a white stone slab under the giant lense. It rested on the platform floor, a two-foot-square surface of smooth white stone like marble. A little roped railing a few inches high fenced it. And in its center lay a fragment of golden quartz the size of a walnut!

There was a movement across my line of vision. Two figures advanced. I recognized both of them. And I strained at my bonds; mouthed the gag with futile, horrified effort. I could no more than writhe; and I could not make a sound. I lay, after a moment exhausted, and stared with horror.

The familiar hunched figure of Polter advanced toward the microscope. And with him, his huge hand holding her wrists, was Babs. They were nearly fifty feet from me, but with the light over them I could see them clearly. Bab's slim figure was clad in a long skirted dress—pale blue, now, with the light on it. Her long black hair had fallen disheveled to her shoulders. I could not see her face. She did not cry out. Polter was half dragging her as she resisted him; and then abruptly she ceased struggling.

I heard his gutteral voice. "That iss better."

They mounted to the platform. It seemed to me that they must have been far away; they were very small. Abnormally small. I blinked. Horror surged over me. Their figures were dwindling as they stood there! Polter was saying something to the man at the microscope. Other men were nearby, watching. All normal, save Polter and Babs. A moment passed. Polter was standing by the chair in which the man at the microscope was sitting. And Polter's head barely reached its seat! Babs was clinging to him, now. Another moment. They were both little figures down by the chair-leg. Then they began walking with swaying steps toward the tiny railing of the white slab. The white reflection from the slab plainly illumined then. Polter's arm was around Babs. I had not realized how small they were until I saw Polter lift the rope of the four-inch little fence, and he and Babs stooped and walked under it. The fragment of quartz lay a foot from them in the center of the white surface. They walked unsteadily toward it. But soon they were running.

My horrified senses whirled. Then abruptly I felt something touch my face! Alan and I were lying in shadow. No one had noticed my writhing movements, and Alan was still in drugged unconsciousness. Something tiny and light and soundless as a butterfly wing brushed my face! I jerked my head aside. On the floor, within six inches of

my eyes, I saw the tiny figure of a girl an inch high! She stood, with a warning gesture to her lips—a human girl in a filmy flowing drapery. Long pale golden tresses lay on her white shoulders; her face, small as my little fingernail, colorful as a miniature painted upon ivory, was so close to my eyes that I could see her expression—warning me not to move.

There was a faint glow of light on the floor where she stood, but in a moment she moved out of it. Then I felt her brush against the back of my head. My ear was near the ground. A tiny warm hand touched my ear-lobe; clung to it. A tiny voice sounded in my ear.

"Please do not move your head! You might kill me!"

There was a pause. I held myself rigid. Then the tiny voice came again.

"I am Glora, a friend. I have the drug! I will help you!"

Chapter 3: The Fight in the Shrinking Dome Room

It seemed that Alan was stirring. I felt the tiny hand leave my ear. I thought that I could hear faint little footfalls as the girl scampered away, fearful that a sudden movement from Alan would crush her. I turned cautiously after a moment and saw Alan's eyes upon me. He too had seen, with a blurred returning consciousness, the dwindling figures of Babs and Polter. I followed his gaze. The white slab with the golden quartz under the microscope seemed empty of human movement. The several men in this huge circular dome-room were dispersing to their affairs: three of them sat whispering by what I now saw was a pile of gold ingots stacked crosswise. But the fellow at the microscope held his place, his eye glued to its aperture as he watched the vanishing figures of Polter and Babs on the rock-fragment.

Alan seemed trying to convey something to me, He could only gaze and jerk his head. I saw behind his head the figure of the tiny girl on the floor behind him. She wanted evidently to approach his head but did not dare. When for an instant he was quiet, she ran forward, but at once scampered back.

From the group by the ingots, one of the men rose and came toward us. Alan held still, watching. And the girl, Glora, seized the

opportunity to come nearer. We both heard her tiny voice:

"Do not move! Close your eyes! Make him think you are still unconscious."

Then she was gone, like a mouse hiding in the shadows near us.

Amazement swept Alan's face; he twisted, mouthed at his gag. But he saw my eager nod and took his cue from me.

I closed my eyes and lay stiff, breathing slowly. Footsteps approached. A man bent over Alan and me.

"Are you no conscious yet?" It was the voice of a foreigner, with a queer, indescribable intonation. A foot prodded us. "Wake up!"

Then the footsteps retreated, and when I dared to look the man was rejoining his fellows. It was a strange-looking trio. They were heavy-set men in leather jackets and short, wide knee-length trousers. One wore tight, high boots, and the others a sort of white buskin, with ankle straps. All were bareheaded—round, bullet heads of close-dipped black hair.

I suddenly had another startling realization. These men were not of normal size as I had assumed! They were eight or ten feet tall at the

very least! And they and the pile of ingots, instead of being close to me, were more distant than I had thought.

Alan was trying to signal me. The tiny girl was again at his ear, whispering to him. And then she came to me.

"I have a knife. See?" She backed away. I caught the pin-point gleam of what might have been a knife in her hand. "I will get a little larger. I am too small to cut your ropes. You lie still, even after I have cut them."

I nodded. The movement frightened her so that she leaped backward; but she came again, smiling. The three men were talking earnestly by the ingots. No one else was near us.

Glora's tiny voice was louder, so that we both could hear it at once.

"When I free you, do not move or they may see that you are loose. I get larger now—a little larger—and return."

She darted away and vanished. Alan and I lay listening to the voices of the three men. Two were talking in a strange tongue. One called to the man at the microscope, and he responded. The third man said suddenly:

"Say, talk English. You know damn well I can't understand that lingo."

"We say, McGuire, the two prisoners soon wake up."

"What we oughta do is kill 'em. Polter's a fool."

"The doctor say, wait for him return. Not long—what you call three, four hours."

"And have the Quebec police up here lookin' fer 'em? An' that damn girl he stole off the terrace—What did he call her, Barbara Kent?"

"These two who are drugged, their bodies can be thrown in a gully down behind St. Anne. That what the doctor plan to do, I think. Then the police find them—days maybe from now—and their smashed airship with them."

Gruesome suggestion!

The man at the microscope called, "They are gone. Almost. I can hardly see them more." He left the platform and joined the others. And I saw that he was much smaller than they—about my own size possibly.

There seemed six men here altogether. Four now, by the ingots, and two others far across the room where I saw the dark entrance of the corridor-tunnel which led to Polter's castle.

Again I felt a warning hand touch my face, and saw the figure of Glora standing by my head. She was larger now—about a foot tall. She moved past my eyes; stood by my mouth; bent down over my gag. I felt the cautious side of a tiny knife-blade inserted under the fabric of the gag. She hacked, tugged at it, and in a moment ripped it through.

She stood panting from the effort. My heart was pounding with fear that she would be seen; but the man had turned the central light off when he left the microscope, and it was far darker here now than before.

I moistened my dry mouth. My tongue was thick, but I could talk.

"Thank you, Glora."

"Quiet!"

I felt her hacking at the ropes around my wrists. And then at my ankles. It took her a long time, but at last I was free! I rubbed my

arms and legs; felt the returning strength in them.

And presently Alan was free. "George, what—" he began.

"Wait!" I whispered. "Easy! Let her tell us what to do."

We were unarmed. Two, against these six, three of whom were giants.

Glora whispered, "Do not move! I have the drugs. But I can no give them to you when I am still so small. I have not enough. I will hide —there." Her little arm gestured to where, near us, half a dozen boxes were piled. "When I am large as you, I come back. Be ready, quickly to act. I may be seen. I give you then the drug."

"But wait," Alan whispered. "We must know—"

"The drug to make you large. In a moment then you can fight these men. I had planned it for myself, to do that, and then I saw you held captive. That girl of your world the doctor just now steal, she is friend of yours?

"Yes! Yes, Glora. But—" A thousand questions were springing in my mind, but this was no time to ask them. I amended, "Go! Hurry! Give us the drug when you can."

The little figure moved away from us and disappeared. Alan and I lay as we had before. But now we could whisper. We tried to anticipate what would happen; tried to plan, but that was futile. The thing was too strange, too astoundingly fantastic.

How long Glora was gone I do not know. I think, not over three or four minutes. She came from her hiding place, crouching this time, and joined us. She was, probably, of normal Earth size—a small, frail-looking girl something over five feet tall. We saw now that she was about sixteen years old. We lay staring at her, amazed at her beauty. Her small oval face was pale, with the flush of pink upon her cheeks—a face queerly, transcendently beautiful. It was wholly human, yet somehow unearthly, as though unmarked by even the heritage of our Earthly strifes.

"Now! I am ready." She was fumbling at her robe. "I will give you each the same."

Her gestures were rapid. She flung a quick glance at the distant men. Alan and I were tense. We could easily be discovered now, but we had to chance it. We were sitting erect. He murmured:

"But what do we do? What happens? What—"

On the palm of her hand were two small pink-white pellets. "Take these—one for each of you. Quickly!"

Involuntarily we drew back. The thing abruptly was gruesome, frightening. Horribly frightening.

"Quickly," she urged. "The drug is what you call highly radio-active. And volatile. Exposed to the air it is gone very soon. You are afraid? No! No, it will not harm you."

With a muttered curse at his own reluctance, Alan seized the pellet. I stopped him.

"Wait!"

The men momentarily were engaged in a low-voiced, earnest discussion. I dared to hesitate a moment longer.

"Glora, where will you be?"

"Here. Right here. I will hide."

"We want to go after Mr. Polter." I gestured. "Into that little piece of golden rock. Is that where he went? Is that where he took the Earth girl?"

"Yes. My world is there—within an atom there in that rock."

"Will you take us?"

"Yes! Yes!"

Alan whispered suddenly, "Then let us go now. Get smaller, now."

But she shook her head vehemently. "That is not possible. We would be seen as we climbed the platform and crossed the white slab."

"No." I protested. "Not if we get very small, hiding here first."

She was smiling, but urgently fearful of this delay. "Should we get that small, then it would be, from here"—she gestured toward the microscope—"to there, a journey of very many miles. Don't you understand?"

This thing so strange!

Alan was plucking at me. "Ready, George?"

"Yes."

I put the pellet on my tongue. It tasted slightly sweet, but seemed

quickly melted and I swallowed it hastily. My head swam. My heart was pounding, but that was apprehension, not the drug. A thrill of heat ran through my veins as though my blood were on fire.

Alan was clinging to me as we sat together. Glora again had vanished. In the background of my whirling consciousness the sudden thought hovered that she had tricked us; done to us something diabolical. But the thought was swept away in the confusion of the flood of impressions upon me.

I turned dizzily. "All right, Alan?"

"Yes, I—I guess so."

My ears were roaring, the room seemed whirling, but in a moment that passed. I felt a sudden, growing sense of lightness. A humming was within me—a soundless tingle. To every tiny microscopic cell in my body the drug had gone. The myriad pores of my skin seemed thrilling with activity. I know now it was the exuding volatile gas of this disintegrating drug. Like an aura it enveloped me, acted upon my garments.

I learned later much of the principles of this and its companion drug. I had no thought for such things now. The huge dimly illumined

room under the dome was swaying. Then abruptly it steadied. The strange sensations within me were lessening, or I forgot them. And I became aware of externals.

The room was shrinking! As I stared, not with horror now, but with amazement and a coming triumph, I saw everywhere a slow, steady, crawling movement. The whole place was dwindling. The platform, the microscope, were nearer than before, and smaller. The pile of ingots, with the men off there, was shifting toward me.

"George! My God—weird!"

I saw Alan's white face as I turned to him. He was growing at the same rate as myself evidently, for of all the scene he only was unchanged.

We could feel the movement. The floor under us was shifting, crawling slowly. From all directions it came, contracting as though it were being squeezed beneath us. In reality our expanding bodies were pushing outward.

The pile of boxes which had been a few feet away, were thrusting themselves at me I moved incautiously and knocked them over. They seemed small now, perhaps half their former size. Glora was

standing behind them. I was sitting and she was standing, but across the litter, our faces were level.

"Stand up!" she murmured. "You all right now. I hide!"

I struggled to my feet, drawing Alan up with me. Now! The time for action was upon us! We had already been discovered. The men were shouting, clambering to their feet. Alan and I stood swaying. The dome-room had contracted to half its former size. Near us was a little platform, chair and microscope. Small figures of men were rushing at us.

I shouted, "Alan! Watch yourself!"

We were unarmed. These men might have automatics. But evidently they did not. Knives were in their hands. The whole place was ringing with shouts. And then a shrill siren alarm from outside was clanging.

The first of the men—a few moments before he had seemed a giant—flung himself upon me. His head was lower than my shoulders. I met him with a blow of my fist in his face. He toppled backward; but from one side, another figure came at me. A knife-blade bit into the flesh of my thigh.

The pain seemed to fire my brain. A madness descended upon me. It was the madness of abnormality. I saw Alan with two dwarfed figures clinging to him. But he threw them off, and they turned and ran.

The man at my thigh stabbed again, but I caught his wrist and, as though he were a child, whirled him around me and flung him away. He landed with a crash against the shrunken pile of gold nuggets and lay still.

The place was in a turmoil. Other men were appearing from outside. But they stood now well away from us. Alan backed against me. His laugh rang out, half hysterical with the madness upon him as it was upon me.

"God! George, look at them! So small!"

They were now hardly the height of our knees. This was now a small, circular room, under a lowering concave dome. A shot came from the group of pigmy figures. I saw the small stab of flame, heard the sing of the bullet.

We rushed, with the full frenzy of madness upon us, enraged giants. What actually happened I can not recount. I recall scattering the little

figures; seizing them; flinging them headlong. A bullet, tiny now, stung the calf of my leg. Little chairs and tables under my feet were crashing. Alan was lunging back and forth; stamping; flinging his tiny adversaries away. There were twenty or thirty of the figures here now. Then I saw some of them escaping.

The room was littered with wreckage. I saw that by some miracle of chance the microscope was still standing, and I had a moment of sanity.

"Alan, watch out! The microscope! The platform—don't smash it! And Glora! Look out for her!"

I suddenly became aware that my head and a shoulder had struck the dome roof. Why, this was a tiny room! Alan and I found ourselves backed together, panting in the small confines of a circular cubby with an arching dome close over us. At our feet the platform with the microscope over it hardly reached our boot-tops. There was a sudden silence, broken only by our heavy breathing. The tiny forms of humans strewn around us were all motionless. The others had fled.

Then we heard a small voice. "Here! Take this! Quickly! You are too large! Quickly!"

Alan took a step. And then a sudden panic was on us both. Glora was here at our feet. We did not dare turn; hardly dared move. To stoop might have crushed her. My leg hit the top of the microscope cylinder. It rocked but did not fall.

Where was Glora? In the gloom we could not see her. We were in a panic.

Alan began, "George, I say—"

The contracting inner curve of the dome bumped gently against my head. The panic of confusion which was upon us turned to fear. The room was closing in to crush us.

I muttered. "Alan! I'm going out!" I braced myself and heaved against the side and top curve of the dome. Its metal ribs and heavy translucent, reinforced glass plates resisted me. There was an instant when Alan and I were desperately frightened. We were trapped, to be crushed in here by our own horrible growth. Then the dome yielded under our smashing blows. The ribs bent; the plates cracked.

We straightened, pushed upward and emerged through the broken dome, with head and shoulders towering into the outside darkness and the wind and snow of the blizzard howling around us!

Chapter 4: The Journey Into Smallness

“Glora, that—that was horrible."

We stood, again in normal size, with the wrecked dome-laboratory around us. The dome had a great jagged hole halfway up one of its sides, through which the snow was falling. The broken bodies strewn around were gruesome.

Alan repeated, "Horrible, Glora. This drug, the power of it, is diabolical."

Glora had grown large after us; had given us the companion drug. I need not detail the strange sensations of our dwindling. We were so soon to experience them again!

We had searched, when still large, all of Polter's grounds. Some of his men undoubtedly escaped, made off into the blizzard. How many, we never knew. None of them ever made themselves known again.

We were ready to start into the atom. The fragment of golden quartz still lay under the microscope on the white square of stone slab. We had hurried with our last preparations. The room was chilling. We

were all inadequately dressed for such cold.

I left a note scribbled on a square of paper by the microscope. With daylight, Polter's wrecked place would be discovered. The police would come.

"Guard this piece of golden quartz. Take it at once, very carefully, to the Royal Canadian Scientific Society. Have it watched day and night. We will return."

I signed it George Randolph. And as I did so, the extraordinary aspect of these events swept me anew. Here in Polter's weird place I had seemed living in some strange fantastic realm. But this was the Province of Quebec, in civilized Canada. These were the Quebec authorities I was addressing.

I flung the thoughts away. "Ready, Glora?"

"Yes."

Then doubts assailed me. None of Polter's men had gotten large to fight us. Evidently he did not trust them with the drug. We could well believe that, for the thing, misused, was diabolical beyond human conception. A single giant, a criminal, a madman, by the

power of giant size alone, could devastate the earth! The drug, lost, or carelessly handled, could get loose. Animals, insects, eating it, could roam the earth, gigantic monsters! Vegetation, nourished with it, might in a day overrun a great city, burying it with a jungle growth!

How terrible a thing, if the realm of smallness were suddenly to emerge! Monsters of the sea, marine organisms, could expand until even the ocean was too small for them. Microbes of disease, feeding upon this drug—

Alan was gripping me. "We're ready, George."

"Yes. Yes, I'm ready."

This was not largeness we were facing now, but smallness. I thought of Babs, down there with Polter, beyond the vanishing point in the realm of the infinitely small. They had been gone an hour at least. Every moment lost now was adding to Bab's danger.

"Yes. I'm ready, Alan."

Glora sat with us on the platform. Strange little creature! She was wholly calm now; methodical with her last directions. There had

been no time for her to tell us anything about herself. Alan had asked her why she had come here and how she had gotten the drugs. She waved him away:

"On the journey down. Plenty of time, then."

"How long?" Alan demanded.

"Not too long. If we are careful with managing the trip, what you might call ten hours."

And now as we were ready to start, she told us calmly:

"I will give you each your share of the drugs, but them you take only as I tell you."

She produced from her robe several small vials a few inches long. They were tightly stoppered. The feel of them was cool and sleek; they seemed of some strange, polished metal. Some of them were tinted black while the others glowed opalescent. She gave each of us one vial of each kind.

"The light ones are for diminishing," she said. "We take them very carefully, one small pellet only at first."

Alan was opening one of his, but she checked him.

"Wait! The drug evaporates very quickly. I have more to say, first. We sit here together. Then you follow me to the white slab. We climb upon the little rock."

She laid her hands on our arms. Her blue eyes regarded us earnestly. Her manner was naive; childlike. But I could not mistake her intelligence; the force of character stamped on her face for all its dainty, ethereal beauty.

"Alan—" She smiled at him, and tossed back a straying lock of her hair which was annoying her. "You pay attention, Alan. You are very young, reckless. You listen. We must not be separated. You understand that, both of you? We will be always in that little piece of rock. But there will be miles of distance. And to be lost in size—"

Strange journey upon which now we were starting! Lost in size?

"You understand me? Lost in size. If that happens, we might never find each other. And if we come upon the Doctor Polter and the girl he holds captive—if we can overtake them—"

"We must!" I exclaimed. "And we must start, Glora!"

"Yes. Now!"

She showed us which pellet to select. They were of several sizes, I found. And as she afterward told us, the larger ones were not only larger but of an intensified strength. We took the smallest. It was barely a thousandth part of the strength of the largest. In unison we placed the pellets on our tongues, and hastily swallowed.

The first sensations were as before. And, familiar now, they caused no more than a fleeting discomfort. But I think I could never get used to the outward strangeness!

The room in a moment was expanding. I could feel the platform floor crawling outward beneath me, so that I had to hitch and change my position as it pulled. We were seated together, Alan and I on each side of Glora. My fingers were on her arm. It did not change size, but it slowly drew away with a space opening between us. Overhead, the dome-roof, the great jagged hole there, was receding, lifting, moving upward and away.

Glora pulled us to our feet. "We had better start now. The distance is so far, so quickly."

We had been sitting within five feet of the stone slab with its little

four-inch-high railing around it. A chair was by the microscope eyepiece. As we stood swaying I saw that the chair was huge, and its seat level with my head. The great barrel-cylinder of the microscope slanted sixty feet upward. The dome-roof was a distant spread three hundred feet up in the dimness. This gigantic room! It was a vast arena now.

Alan and I must have hesitated, confused by the expanding scene—a slow steady movement everywhere. Everything was drawing away from us. Even as we stood together, the creeping platform floor was separating us.

A moment passed. Glora was urging vehemently:

"Come! You must not stand!"

We started walking. The railing around the slab was knee-high. The slab itself was a broad square surface. The fragment of golden quartz lay in its center. It was now a jagged lump nearly a foot in diameter!

The platform seemed shifting as we walked; the railing hardly came closer as we advanced toward it. Then suddenly I realized it was receding. Thirty feet away? No, now it was more than that—a great, thick rope, waist-high, with a huge spread of white surface behind it.

"Faster!" urged Glora. We ran, and reached the railing. It was higher than our heads. We ran under it, and out upon the white slab—a level surface, larger now than the whole dome-room had been.

Glora, like a fawn ran in advance of us, her draperies flying in the wind. She turned to look back.

"Faster! Faster—or it will be too hard a climb!"

Ahead lay a golden mound of rock. It was widening; raising its top steadily higher. Beyond it and over it was a vast dim distance. We reached the rock, breathless, winded. It was a jagged mound like a great fifty-foot butte. We plunged upon it, began climbing.

The ascent was steep; precipitous in places. There were little gullies, which expanded as we climbed up them. It seemed that we should never reach the top, but at last we were there. I was aware that the drug had ceased its action. The yellow rocky ground was no longer expanding.

We came to the summit and stood to get back our breath. And Alan and I gazed with awe upon the top of a rocky hill. Little buttes and strewn boulders lay everywhere. It was all naked rock, ridged and pitted, and everywhere yellow-tinged.

Overhead was distance. I could not call it a sky. A blur was there—something almost but not quite distinguishable. Then I thought that I could make out a more solid blur which might be the lower lens of the microscope above us. And there were blurred, very distant spots of light, like huge suns masked by a haze, and I knew that they were the hooded lights of the laboratory room.

Before us, over the brink of a five hundred-foot cliff, a great glistening white plain stretched into the distance. I seemed to see where it ended in a murky blur. And far higher than our own hilltop level a horizontal streak marked the rope railing of the slab.

"Well," said Alan, "we're here." He gazed behind us, back across the rocky summit which seemed several hundred feet across to its opposite brink. He was smiling, but the smile faded. "Now what, Glora? Another pellet?"

"No. Not yet. There is a place where we go down. It is marked in my mind."

I had a sudden ominous sense that we three were not alone up here. Glora led us back from the cliff. As we picked our way among the naked crags, it seemed behind each of them an enemy might be lurking.

"Glora, do you know if any of Dr. Polter's men have the drug? I mean, do they come in and out here?"

She shook her head. "I think not. He lets no one have the drug. He trusts not any one. I stole it; I will tell you later. Much I have to tell you before we arrive."

Alan made a sudden sidewise leap, and dashed around a rock. He came back to us, smiling ruefully.

"Gets on your nerves, all this. I had the same idea you did, George. Might be someone around here. But I guess not." He took Glora's hand and they walked in advance of me. "We haven't thanked you yet, Glora."

"Not needed. I came for help from your world. I could not get back to my own, and I followed the Doctor Polter when he came outward. He has made my world, my people, his slaves. I came for help. And because I have helped you needs no thanks."

"But we do thank you, Glora." Alan turned his flushed, earnest face back to me. I thought I had never seen him so handsome, with his boyish, rugged features, and shock of tousled brown hair. The grimness of adventure was upon him, but in his eyes there was

something else. It was not for me to see it. That was for Glora; and I think that even then its presence and its meaning did not escape her.

"Stay close, George."

"Yes."

We reached a little gully near the center of the hilltop. It was some twenty feet deep. Glora paused.

"We descend here."

The gully was an unmistakable landmark—open at one end, forty feet long, with the other end terminating in a blind wall, smoothly precipitous. We retraced our steps, entered the gully at its open end, and walked its length. Glora paused by the wall which now loomed above us.

"A pit is here—a hole. I cannot tell just how large it will look when we are in this size."

We found and stood over it—a foot-wide circular hole extending downward. Alan abruptly knelt and shoved his hand and arm into it, but Glora sprang at him.

"Don't do that!"

"Why not? Is this it? How deep is it?"

She retorted sharply, "The Doctor Polter is ahead of us. How far away in size, who knows? Do you want to crush him, and crush that young girl with him?"

Alan's jaw dropped. "Good Lord!"

We stood with the little pit before us, and another of the pellets ready.

"Now!" said Glora.

Again we took the drug, a somewhat larger pellet this time. The familiar sensations began. Everywhere the rocks were creeping with a slow inexorable movement, the landscape expanding around us. The gully walls drew back and upward. In a moment they were precipice cliff-walls and we were in a broad valley.

We had been standing close together. We had not moved except to shift our feet as the expanding ground drew them apart. I became aware that Alan and Glora were a distance from me. Glora called:

"Come, George! We go down, quickly now."

We ran to the pit. It had expanded to a great round hole some six feet wide and equally as deep. Glora let herself down, peered anxiously beneath her, and dropped. Alan and I followed. We jammed the pit; but as we stood there, the walls were receding and lifting.

I had remarked Glora's downward glance, and shuddered. Suppose, in some slightly smaller size, Babs had been here among these rocks!

The pit widened steadily. The movement was far swifter now. We stood presently in a great circular valley. It seemed fully a mile in diameter, with huge encircling walls like a crater rim towering thousands of feet into the air. We ran along the base of one expanding wall, following Glora.

I noticed now that overhead the turgid murk had turned into the blue of distance. A sky. It was faintly sky-blue, and there seemed a haze in it, almost as though clouds were forming. It had been cold when we started. The exertion had kept us fairly comfortable; but now I realized that the air was far warmer. It was a different air, more humid, and I thought the smell of moist earth was in it. Rocks and boulders were strewn here on the floor of this giant valley, and I saw

occasional pools of water. There had been rain recently!

The realization came with a shock of surprise. This was a new world! A faint, luminous twilight was around us. And then I noticed that the light was not altogether coming from overhead. It seemed inherent to the rocks themselves. They glowed very faintly luminous, as though phosphorescent.

We were now well embarked upon this strange journey. We spoke seldom. Glora was intent upon guiding us. She was trying to make the best possible speed. I realized that it was a case of judgment, as well as physical haste. We had dropped into that six-foot pit. Had we waited a few moments longer, the depth would have been a hundred feet, two hundred, a thousand! It would have involved hours of arduous descent—if we had lingered until we were a trifle smaller!

We took other pellets. We traveled perhaps an hour more. There were many instances of Glora's skill. We squeezed into a gully and waited until it widened; we leaped little expanding caverns; we slid down a smooth yellowish slide of rock like a child's toboggan, and saw it behind and over us, rising to become a great spreading ramp extending upward into the blue of the sky. Now, up there, little sailing white clouds were visible. And down where we stood it was deep twilight, queerly silvery with the phosphorescence from the

luminous rocks as though some hidden moon were shining.

Strange, new world! I suddenly envisaged the full strangeness of it. Around me were spreading miles of barren, naked landscape. I gazed off to where, across the rugged plateau we were traversing, there was a range of hills. Behind and above them were mountains; serrated tiers, higher and more distant. An infinite spread of landscape! And, as we dwindled, still other vast reaches opened before us. I gazed overhead. Was it—compared to my stature now—a thousand miles, perhaps even a million miles up to where we had been two or three hours ago? I think so.

Then suddenly I caught the other viewpoint. This was all only an inch of golden quartz—if one were large enough to see it that way!

Alan had been trying to memorize the main topographical features of our route. It was not as difficult as it seemed at first. We were always far larger than normal to our environment. The main distinguishing characteristics of the landscape were obvious—the blind gully, with the round pit, for instance, or the ramp-slide.

We had been traveling some three or four hours when Glora suggested a rest. We were at the side-wall of a broad canyon. The wall towered several hundred feet above us; but a few moments

before we had jumped down it with a single leap!

The drug we had last taken had ceased its action. We sat down to rest. It was a wild, mountainous scene around us, deep with luminous gloom. We could barely see across the canyon to its distant cliff-wall. The wall beside us had been smooth, but now it was broken and ridged. There were ravines in it, and dark holes like cave-mouths. One was near us. Alan gazed at it apprehensively.

"I say, Glora. I don't like sitting here."

I had been telling her all we knew of Polter. She listened quietly, seldom interrupting me. Then she said:

"I understand. I tell you now about Polter as I have seen him."

She talked for five or ten minutes. I listened amazed, awed by what she told.

But Alan suddenly interrupted her. "I say, let's move away from here. That tunnel-mouth, or cave, whatever it is—"

"But we go in there," she protested. "A little tunnel. That is our way to travel. We are not far from my city now."

Perhaps Alan felt what a generation ago they called a hunch, a premonition, the presage of evil which I think comes strangely to us more often than we realize. Whatever it was, we had no time to act upon it. The tunnel-mouth which had caused Alan's apprehension was about a hundred feet away. It was a ten-foot, black yawning hole in the cliff. Perhaps Alan sensed a movement off there. As I turned to gaze, from the opening came a great hairy human arm! Then a shoulder! A head!

The giant figure of a man came squeezing through the hole on his hands and knees! He gathered himself, and as he stood erect, I saw that he was growing in size! Already he was twenty feet tall compared to us—a thick-set fellow, dressed in leather garments, his legs and bare arms heavily matted with black hair. He stood swaying, gazing around him. I stared up at his round bullet head, his villainous face.

He saw us! Stupid amazement struck him, then comprehension.

He let out a roar and came at us!

Chapter 5: The Message from Polter

Glora shouted, "Into the tunnel! This way!" She held her wits and darted to one side, with Alan and me after her. We ran through a narrow passage between two fifty-foot boulders which lay close together. Momentarily the giant was out of sight, but we could hear his heavy tread and his panting breath. We emerged; had passed him. He was taller now. He seemed confused at our sudden scampering activity. He checked his forward rush, and ran around the twin boulders. But we had squeezed into a narrow ravine. He could not follow. He threw a rock: to us it was a boulder. It crashed behind us. To him, we were like scampering insects; he could not tell which way we were about to dart.

Alan panted, "Glora, this—does this lead out?"

The little ravine seemed to open fifty feet ahead of us. Alan stopped, seized a chunk of rock, flung it up. I saw the giant's face above us. He was kneeling, trying to reach in. The rock hit him in the forehead—a pebble, but it stung him. His face rose away.

Again we emerged. The tunnel-mouth was near us. We reached it and flung ourselves into its ten-foot width just as the giant came lunging up. He was far larger than before. Looking back, I could see

only the lower part of his legs blocked against the outer light.

"Glora! Alan, where are you?"

For a moment I did not see them. It was darker in this tunnel; broken rocky walls, a jagged arching roof ten feet high. Then I heard Alan's voice.

"George! Here!"

They came running to me. For a moment we stood, undecided what to do. My eyes were growing accustomed to the darkness; it was illumined by a dim phosphorescence from the rocks. I saw Alan fumbling for his vials, but Glora stopped him.

"No! We are the right size."

We were a hundred feet back from the opening. The giant's legs disappeared. But in a moment the round light hole of the exit was obscured again. His head and shoulders! He was lying prone. His great arms came in. He hitched forward. The width of his expanding shoulders wedged.

I think that he expected to reach us with a single snatch of his tremendous arms. Or perhaps he was confused, and forgot his

growth. He did not reach us. His shoulders stuck. Then suddenly he was trying to back out, but could not!

It was only a moment. We stood in the radiant gloom of the tunnel, clinging to each other, ourselves stricken by confusion. The giant's voice roared, reverberating around us. Anger. A note of fear. Finally stark terror. He heaved, but the rocks of the opening held solid. Then there was a crack, a gruesome rattling, splintering—his shoulder bones breaking. His whole gigantic body gave a last convulsive lunge, and he emitted a deafening shrill scream of agony.

I was aware of the tunnel-mouth breaking upward. Falling rocks—an avalanche, a cataclysm around us. Then light overhead.

The giant's crushed body lay motionless. A pile of boulders, rocks and loose metallic earth was strewn upon his head and torso, illumined by the outer light through a jagged rent where the cliff-face had fallen down.

We were unhurt, crouching back from the avalanche. The giant's mangled body was still expanding; shoving at the litter of loose rocks. In a moment it would again be too large for the broken cliff opening.

I found my wits. "Alan! Out of here—God! Don't you see—"

But Glora held us. The drug the giant had taken was about at its end, and Glora recognized it. The growth presently stopped. That huge, noisome mass of pulp which once had been human shoulders—

I shoved Glora away. "Don't look!" I was shaking; my head was reeling. Alan's face, painted by the phosphorescence, was ghastly.

Glora pulled at us. "This way! The tunnel is not too long. We go."

But the giant had drugs. And perhaps weapons. "Wait!" I urged. "You two wait here. I'll climb over him."

I told them why, and ran. I can only leave to the imagination that brief exploratory climb. The broken body seemed at least a hundred feet long; the mangled shoulders and chest filled the great torn hole in the cliff. I climbed over the litter. Indescribable, horrible scene! A river of warm blood was flowing down the declivity outside....

I came back to Glora and Alan. Under my arm was a huge cylinder vial. It was black—the enlarging drug. I set it down. They stared at me in my blood-stained garments.

"George! You're—"

"His blood, not mine, Alan." I tried to smile. "There's the drug he carried. Evidently Polter was only sending him out. Just the one drug."

"What'll we do with it?" Alan demanded. "Look at the size of it!"

"Destroy it," said Glora. "See, that is not difficult." She tugged at the huge stopper, and exposed a few of the pellets—to us as large as apples. "The air will soon spoil it."

We left it in the tunnel. I had brought a great roll of paper; had found it folded in the giant's belt, with the drug cylinder. We unrolled it, and hauled its folds to a spread some ten feet long. It was covered with a scrawled handwriting in pencil, but its giant characters seemed thick blurred strokes of charcoal. We could not read it; we were too close. Alan and Glora held it up against the tunnel wall. From a distance I could make it out. It was a note written in English, signed "Polter," evidently to one of his men.

I read it:

"The two men prisoners, kill them at once. That is better. It will be too dangerous to wait for my return. Put their bodies with their airplane. Crash it a mile or more from our gate."

Full directions for our death followed. And Polter said he would return by dawn or soon after.

It gave me a start. By dawn! We had been traveling four or five hours. The dawn was up there now!

"No," said Glora. She and Alan cast away the paper. "No, the time in here is different. A different time-rate. I do not know how much difference. My world speeds faster; yours is very slow. It is not the dawn up there quite yet."

Again my mind strove to encompass these things so strange. A faster time-rate prevailed in here? Then our lives were passing more quickly. We were living, experiencing things, compressed into a shorter interval. It was not apparent; there was nothing to which comparison could be made. I recalled Alan's description of Polter—not thirty years old as he should have been, but nearer fifty. I could understand that, now. A day in here—while our gigantic world outside might only have progressed a few hours.

We walked the length of the tunnel. I suppose it was a quarter of a mile, to us in this size. It wound through the cliff with a steady downward slope. And suddenly I realized that we had turned downward nearly half the diameter of a circle! We had turned over—

or at least it seemed so. But the gravity was the same. I had noticed from the beginning very little change.

The realization of this turning brought a mental confusion. I lost all sense of direction. The outer world of Earth was under my feet, instead of overhead. Then we went level. I forgot the confusion; this was normality here. We turned upward a little. Cross tunnels intersected ours at intervals. I saw caverns, open, widened tunnels, as though this mountain were honeycombed.

"Look!" said Glora. "There is the way out. All these passages lead the same way."

There was a glow of light ahead. I recall that I was at that moment fumbling at my belt in two small compartments of which I was carrying the two vials of the drugs which Glora had given me. Alan wore the same sort of belt. We had found them in the wrecked dome-room. I heard a click on the ground at my feet. I was about to stoop to see what I had kicked—only a loose stone, perhaps—but Glora's words distracted me. I did not stoop. If only I had, how different events might have been!

The glow of light ahead of us widened as we approached, and presently we stood at the end of the tunnel. A spread of open

distance was outside. We were on a ledge of a rocky, precipitous wall some fifty feet above a wide level landscape. Vegetation! I saw trees—a forest off to the left. A range of naked hills lay behind it. A mile away, in front and to the right, a little town nestled on the shore of shining water. There was starlight on the water! And over it a vast blue-purple sky was studded with stars!

I gazed, with that first sudden shock of emotion, into illimitable depths of interplanetary space! Light years of distance. Gigantic worlds, blazing suns off there shrunken by distance now to little points of light. A universe was here!

But this was an inch of golden quartz!

Above my head were stars which, compared to my bodily size now, were vast worlds ten thousand light-years away! Yet, from the other viewpoint, I had only descended perhaps an eighth or a quarter of an inch beneath the broken pitted surface of a little fragment of golden quartz the size of a walnut—into just one of its myriads of golden atoms!

Chapter 6: The Girl in the Golden Cage

“My world," Glora was saying. "You like it? See the starlight on the lake? I have heard that your world looks like this at night, in summer. Ours is always like this. No day, no night. Just like this—starlight." Her hand went to Alan's shoulder. "You like it? My world?"

"Yes. Yes, Glora, It's beautiful."

There seemed a sheen on everything, a soft, glowing sheen of phosphorescence from the rocks rising to meet the pale wan starlight. The night air was soft, with a gentle breeze that rippled the distant lake into a great spread of gold and silver light.

The city was called Orena. I saw at once that we were about normal size to its houses and people. There were fields beneath our ledge, with farm implements lying in them; no workers, for this was the time for sleep. Ribbons of roads wound over the country, pale streamers in the starlight.

Glora gestured. "The giants are on their island. Everyone sleeps now. You see the island off there?"

Beyond the city, over the low stone roofs of its flat-topped dwellings, the silver spread of lake showed a green-clad island some three miles off shore. The distance made its white stone houses seem small. But as I gazed, I realized that they were large to their environment, all far larger than those of the little town. The island was perhaps a mile in length. Between it and the mainland a boat was coming toward us. It was a dark blob of hull on the shining water, and above it a queerly shaped circular sail was puffed out like a balloon-parachute by the wind.

“The giants live, there?" said Alan.

"You mean Polter's men?"

"And women. Yes."

"Are there many giants?"

"No."

"How many?" I put in. "How large are they? In relation to us now, I mean. And to your normal size?"

I turned to Alan. "Polter and Babs must be down there now! They must have arrived only recently. But we must determine what size to

be before we go any further. We can't be gigantic If he sees us—if we assailed him—well, he'd kill Babs. We're got to plan. Glora tell us—"

"You ask so many questions so fast, George. There are two hundred or more of the giants. And there are more than that many thousands of our people here. Slaves, because the giants are four times as large. This little city, these fields, these hills of stone and metal, all this was ours to have in peace and happiness—until your Polter came. And that starlight on the water—"

She gestured. "Everywhere is a great reach of desert and forests. Insects, but there are no wild beasts—nothing to harm us. Nature is kind here. The weather is always like this. We were happy—until Polter came."

"And only a few thousand people," Alan said. "No other cities?"

"What lies off in the great distance we do not know. Our nation is ten times what is here. A few other cities, though some of our people live in the forests—"

She broke off. "That boat is coming for Polter. He is in the city, no doubt of that. The boat will take him and that girl you call Babs to

the giant's island. His castle is there."

If we could get on that boat and go with him to the island—! But in what size? Very small? But then, if we were very small it would take us hours to get from here to the boat. Glora pointed out where it would land—just beyond the village where the houses were set in a sparse fringe. It would be there, apparently, in ten or fifteen minutes. Polter was probably there now with Babs, waiting for it.

In our present size we could not get there in time. It was two or three miles at least. But a trifle larger—the size of one of Polter's giants—would enable us to make it. We would be seen, but in the pale starlight, keeping away from the city as much as possible, we might only be mistaken for Polter's people. And when we got closer we would diminish our size, creep into the boat, get near Babs and Polter and then plan what to do.

Futile plans! All of life is so futile, so wind-swept upon the tossing sea of chance!

We climbed down from the ledge and stood at the base of the towering cliff which reared its jagged wall against the stars. A field and a road were near us. The road seemed of normal size. A man was across the field. He did not seem to notice us. He was apparently

about my height. He presently discarded his work, went away from us and vanished.

"Hurry, Glora." Alan and I stood beside her while she took pellets from her vials. It needed a careful adjustment. We wanted our stature now to be four times what it was. Glora gave us pellets of both drugs, one of which was slightly more intense than the other.

"Polter made them this way," she said. "The two at once gives just the growth to take us from this normal size to the stature of the giants."

Alan and I did not touch our own vials. We had used none of our enlarging drug upon the journey; the supply she had given us of the other was nearly gone.

As I took these pellets which Glora now gave us, standing there by the side of that road, I recall that I was struck with the realization that never once upon this journey had I conceived myself to be other than normal stature. I am normally about six feet tall. I still felt—there in that golden atom—the same height. This landscape seemed of normal size. There were trees nearby—spreading, fantastic looking growths with great strings of pods hanging from them. But still, as I looked up to see one arching over me with its blue-brown

leaves and an air-vine carrying vivid yellow blossoms—whatever the size of the tree, my consciousness could only conceive myself as of a normal six-foot stature standing beneath it. The human ego always is supreme! Around each man's consciousness of himself the entire universe revolves!

We crouched on the ground when this growth now began; it would not do to be observed changing size. Polter's giants never did that. Years before, he had made them large—his few hundred men and women. They were, Glora said, people both of this realm and from our great world above—dissolute, criminal characters who now had set themselves up here as the nucleus of a ruling race.

In a moment now, we were the size of these giants. Twenty to twenty-five feet tall, in relation to this environment. But I did not feel so. As I stood up—still myself in normal stature—I saw around me a shrunken little landscape. The trees, as though in a Japanese garden, were about my own height; the road was a smooth level path: the little field near us a toy fence around it. In another road across it, the man was walking. In height he would barely have reached my knees. He saw us rise beside the trees. He darted off his road in alarm, and disappeared.

I have taken longer to tell all this than the actual time which passed.

We could see the boat coming from the island, and it was still a fair distance off shore. We ran along the road, skirting the edge of the little town. Its houses were none of them taller than ourselves. The windows and doorways were ovals into which we could only have inserted a head or an arm. They were most of them dark. Little people occasionally stared out, saw us run past, and ducked back, thankful that we did not stop to harass them.

"This way," said Glora. She ran like a fawn, hardly winded, with Alan and me heavily panting behind her. "There are trees—thick trees—quite near where the boat lands. We can get in them and hide and change our size to smallness. But hurry, for we will need so much time when we are small!"

The little spread of town and the shining lake remained always to our right. In five minutes we were past most of the houses. A patch of woods, with thick interlacing treetops about our own height, lay ahead. It extended a few hundred feet over to the lake shore. The sailboat was heading in close. There was a broad, starlit roadway at the edge of the lake, and a dock there at which the boat was preparing to land.

Would we be in time? I suddenly feared not. To get small now, with distance lengthening between us and the boat, would be disastrous.

And where was Polter?

Abruptly we saw him. There had been only little people visible to us; none of our own height. The lake roadway by the dock was brightly starlit. As we approached the intervening patch of woods it seemed that a crowd of little people were near the dock. Polter must have been sitting. But now he rose up. We could not mistake his hunched thick figure, the lump on his shoulders clear in the starlight with the gleaming lake as a background. The crowd of little figures were milling around his knees. In the silence of the night the murmur of their voices floated over to us.

"There he is!" Alan gasped. We all three checked our running; we were at the edge of the patch of woods. "By God, there he is! Let's get larger! Rush him! Why that's only a few hundred feet over there!"

But Babs? Where was Babs?

"Alan! Down!" I crouched, pulling Alan and Glora with me. "Don't let him see us! He'd know at once—and where is Babs? Can't rush him, Alan. He'd see us coming—kill her—"

Of all the strange events which had been flung at us, I think this

sudden crisis now most confused Alan and me. To get larger, or smaller? Which? Yet something must be done at once.

Glora said, "We can get through the woods best in this size. And not be seen—get closer to the landing."

We crouched so that the little treetops were always well over us. The patch of woods was dark. A soil of black loam was under us, a thick soft underbrush reached our knees, and lacy, flexible leaves and branches were at our shoulder height. We pushed them aside, forcing our way softly forward. It was not far. The little murmuring voices of the crowd grew louder.

Presently we were crouching at the other edge of the woods. I softly shoved the tree branches aside until we could all three get a clear view of the strange scene now directly before us.

And I saw a toy dock, at which a twenty-foot, barge-like open sailboat was landing; a narrow starlit roadway, crowded with a milling throng of people all no more than a foot and a half in height. The crowd milled almost to where we were crouching, unseen in the shrubbery.

Across the road by the dock. Polter stood with the crowd down

around his knees. In height he seemed the old familiar Polter. Bareheaded, with his shaggy black hair shot with white. He was dressed in Earth fashion: narrow black evening trousers and a white shirt and collar with flowing black tie. I saw at once what Alan had noticed—the change in him. An abnormality of age. I would have called him now forty, or older. Beyond even that there was an abnormality. A man old before his time; or younger than he should have been for the years he had lived. An indescribable mingling of something. The mingling, of the two worlds, perhaps. It marked him with a look at once unnatural and sinister.

These were instant impressions. Glora was plucking at me. "On the white chest of his shirt, something is there."

Polter was coatless, with snowy white shirt and cuffs to his thick wrists. He was no more than fifty feet from us. On his shirt bosom something golden in color was hanging like a large bauble, an ornament, an insignia. It was strapped tightly there with a band about his chest, a cord like a necklace chain up to his thick hunched neck, and other chains down to his belt.

I stared at it. An ornament, like a cube held flat against his shirt-front—a little golden cube, ornate with tiny bars.

I heard Alan murmuring, "A cage! Why George, it's—"

And then, simultaneously, realization struck me. It was a golden cage strapped there. And I seemed to see that there was something in it. A tiny figure? Babs!

"I think he has her there," Glora murmured. "You see the little box with bars? The girl Babs, a prisoner in there." She spoke swiftly, vehemently. "He will take the boat to the island."

She suddenly gripped us. "You think really it best to go? I do what you say. I had the wish to get to my father with these drugs."

"No!" exclaimed Alan. "We must keep close to Polter!"

We were ready with our pellets. But a sudden activity in the road made us pause. The crowd of little people were hostile to Polter. A sullen hostility. They milled about him as he stood there, gazing down at then sardonically.

And abruptly he shouted at them in English. "You speak my language, some of you. Then listen."

The crowd fell silent.

"Listen. This iss your future Queen. Can you see her? She iss small now. But she has the magic power. Soon, she will be large. Like me."

The crowd was shouting again. It surged forward, but it lacked a leader, and those in advance shoved backward in fear.

Polter spoke again. "This girl from my world, you will like her. She iss kind and very beautiful. When she iss large, you will see how beautiful."

A little stone suddenly came up from the throng of little people and struck Polter on the shoulder. Then another. The crowd, emboldened, made a rush; surged against his legs.

He shouted, "You do that? Why how dare you? I show to you what giants do when you make dem angry!"

From down by his knees he plucked the small figure of a man. The crowd scattered with shouts of terror. Polter had the struggling eighteen-inch figure by the wrist. He whirled it around his head like a nine-pin and flung it over the canopy of the dock far out into the shimmering lake!

Chapter 7: Within the Golden Cage

The trees around us expanded to towering forest giants. The underbrush rose up over our heads. We had taken only a taste of the diminishing drug; Glora showed us how to touch it to our tongue several times, to adjust our size as we became smaller. It was no more than a minute of diminishing. We could hear the roar of the crowd, and Polter's voice shouting. We ran forward through the great forest. It was a fair distance out to the starlit road. We saw it as a wide shining esplanade. The people now were giants twice our height! Polter, himself towering with a seeming fifty foot stature, was standing by the gigantic canopy of the dock. He had dispersed the crowd. There was an open space on the esplanade—a run for us of about a hundred feet.

"We've got to chance it!" I murmured. "Make a run of it—now."

We darted across. In the confusion, with all eyes centered on Polter, we escaped discovery. It was dim under the dock canopy. Polter had backed from the road and was walking to the barge. It lay like the length of an ocean liner, its sail looming an enormous spread above it. The gunwale was level with the dock-floor. A dozen or more fifty-foot men were greeting Polter. They were amidships.

I realize now that in those moments as we scurried aboard like wharf

rats, we took wild chances. We made for the stern which momentarily was unoccupied. To Polter and his men we were eight or nine inches tall. We dropped over the gunwale, slid down the convex thirty or forty-foot incline of the interior and landed on the bottom of the boat.

There were many places where we could safely hide. A litter of gigantic rope-strands was around us. We could see the bottom of a cross-bench looming overhead, and the great curving sides of the vessel with the gunwales outlined against the starlight.

The boat left the dock in a moment; the sail bellied out enormous over us. Ten feet forward from us the towering figure of a man sat on a bench with the steering mechanism before him. Further on, the other men were dispersed, with one or two in the distant bow. Polter reclined on a cushioned couch amidships. Looking along the dark widely level bottom of the boat there were only the feet and legs of the men visible.

Alan whispered, "Let's get closer."

We were insects soundlessly scuttling unnoticed in the dimness. And it was noisy down here—the clank of the steering mechanism; the swish, and surge of the water against the hull; the voices of the men.

We passed the boots of the seated helmsmen, and found another hiding place nearer Polter. We could see his giant length plainly. None of the other men were near him. He was reclining on an elbow, stretched at ease on the cushion. And at the moment, he was fumbling with the chains that fastened the little golden cage to his chest. The cage was double its former size to us now. A shaft of pale light came down, reflected from the great sail surface overhead. It struck the bars of the cage. We could see a small figure in there.

Babs!

Then we heard Polter's voice. "I will let you out, Babs. You come out, sit on my hand and talk with me. That will be nice? We haf a little time."

He unfastened the cage and put it on the cushion beside him. He was still propped up on one elbow.

"I let you out, now. Be careful, Babs."

My heart was almost smothering me. "Alan! We've got to get still closer! Try something! Get large, shall we?"

Alan whispered tensely, "I don't know! Oh, I don't know what to do!

This thing—"

This thing so strange.

"We can get closer," Glora whispered. "But never larger—not here. They would discover us too soon."

We crept forward. We reached the edge of the cushion. Its top surface was a trifle lower than our heads—a billowing, wrinkled mass of fabric. But I saw that the folds of it were rough enough to afford a foothold. I thought that I could climb it. We stood erect. There was a deep shadow along here, but it was brighter on the cushion top. We could see over its edge; an undulating spread of surface with the giant length of Polter stretched there. The cage was nearer to us. Polter's great fingers fumbled with it; a door in the lattice bars flipped open.

"Careful, my Babs!" His voice was a throaty, rumbling roar from above us. "Careful! I do not want you to be hurt."

From the little doorway came the figure of Babs! The starlight glowed on her long blue dress; her black hair was tumbling over her shoulders; her face was pale, but she was unhurt.

Babs! I think that I had never loved her so much as at that moment. Nor ever seen her so beautiful as in that miniature, standing at the door of her golden cage, bravely facing the monstrous misshapen figure of her captor.

We heard her small voice.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Stand quiet. Now I put my hand for you."

His monstrous hand bristled with a thatch of heavy black hair. He brought it carefully sliding along the cushion. Babs was barely the length of one of its finger joints. She climbed upon its palm.

"That iss right, Babs. Now I bring you—hold tight to my finger. Here, I crook the little one. Fling your arms around it."

With a swoop his hand took her aloft and away. Then we saw her, twenty feet or so in the air, still on his hand as he held it near his face.

"Now we haf a little talk, Babs. When we get to the island, I put you back in your cage."

I had a sudden flash of realization. Something I could do. I did not plan it. I know now my judgment was bad. I recall it struck me that Alan would want to do it also. And, perhaps, even Glora. That would not work. My chances, however desperate, were better alone. And Glora and Alan—in our present size-could doubtless disembark safely. Glora knew the lay-out of the island. She could follow Polter.

Alan and Glora were standing beside me, peering over that billowing cushion spread toward the distant giant palm with Babs standing upon it. I gripped Alan's shoulder.

"See here, Alan," I whispered vehemently, "whatever happens, we must follow Polter. Glora knows the way. Some chance will come. What we want is an opportunity to get large without discovery. Then rush Polter!"

Alan's white face turned to me. "Yes, that's what we're planning. But George, here on this boat—"

"Of course. Can't do it here. Tell Glora, be sure and follow Polter. Whatever happens, you think of nothing else: you won't, will you?"

"George, what—"

"We've got to make some opportunity." I was trembling inside, fearful that Alan would be suspicious of me. Yet I had to make sure that he and Glora would stay as close to Polter as possible.

"Yes," Alan agreed. "Listen to them."

Polter was talking to Babs. But I did not hear the words. I moved a trifle away. Rash decision! I hardly decided anything. There was only the vision of Babs before me; my love for her. And my desperate need of doing something; getting to her; seeing her, being with her; having her near my own size again as though the blessed normality of that would rationalize and lessen her danger. If only I had been less rash! If only back there in that tunnel I had stopped to see what it was my foot kicked against!

I slid away. Alan and Glora did not notice it; they were whispering together and gazing over the cushion at Babs. In the floor shadow I moved some ten feet. On the undulating top of the cushion the little golden cage stood with its lattice door open! It was only a few feet from my face.

I fumbled at my belt for the diminishing vial. I found one pellet left. Well, that would be enough. I was hurried. Alan might discover me. Polter might move; put Babs back in the cage and close its door. We

might be near the island already, and the confusion, the activity of disembarking would defeat me. A thousand things might happen.

I touched the pellet to my tongue. In a few seconds the drug action had come and passed. The cushion top loomed well over my head. The side was a ridged, indescribably unnatural vista of cliff-wall. The fabric was coarse with hairy strands, dented into little ravines and crevices. I climbed. I came panting to the pillow surface. The golden cage was six or eight feet away and was now two feet high.

Again I touched the drug to my tongue; held it an instant. The cage drew away; grew to a normal six-foot height; then larger, until in a moment it stopped. I stood peering at it, trying to gauge its size in relation to me. I wanted so intensely now to be normal to Babs. The cage seemed about ten feet high. A little less, possibly. I barely tasted the pellet, and replaced it carefully in the vial. I could only hope its efficacy would be preserved.

I had to chance that I would not be seen now crossing this billowy expanse. I ran. The rope strands of the fabric now had spaces between their curving surfaces. The cage was a shining golden house, set on this wide rolling area. Far in the distance there was a blur—Polter's reclining body.

I reached the cage. It was a room about ten feet square and equally as high. Walled solid, top and bottom, and on three sides. The front was a lattice of bars, with a narrow six-foot-high doorway, standing open now.

I dashed in. The interior was not wholly bare. There was a metal-wrought couch fastened to the wall, with a railing around it and handles. It suggested a ship's bunk. There was a railing at convenient height all around the wall.

I sought a hiding place. I saw just one—under the couch. It was secluded enough. There was a grille-like lattice extending down from the seat to the floor. I squeezed under one end, and lay wedged behind the grille.

How much time passed I do not know. My thoughts were racing. Babs would be coming.

I heard the distant approaching rumble of Polter's voice. Through the grille I could see across the floor of the ten-foot cage to the front lattice bars. Outside, there appeared a huge, pink-white, mottled blob—Polter's hand, a ridged and pitted surface with great bristling black stalks of hair.

The figure of Babs came through the cage doorway. Blessed normality! The same slim little Babs who always stood, since we were both matured, with her head about level with my shoulders.

The latticed door swung shut with a reverberating metallic clank. Babs stood tense, clinging to the wall railing. I heard the blurred rumble of Polter's voice.

"Hold tightly, my little Babs!"

The room lurched; went upward and sidewise with a wild dizzying swoop. Babs clung; and I was wedged prone under the couch. Then the movement stopped; there was a jolting, rocking, and outside I heard the clank of metal. Polter was fastening the chains of the cage to his chest.

A white reflected glow now came through the bars. It was starlight reflected from Polter's shirt bosom. An abyss of distance was outside. I could see nothing but the white glow.

Momentarily there was very little movement to the room. Only the rhythmic sway of Polter's breathing and an occasional jolt as he shifted his position. The floor was tilted at a sharp angle. Babs came toward the couch, pulling herself along the wall railing.

I called softly, "Babs! Babs, dear!"

She stopped. I called again, "Babs! Don't cry out! It's George! Here—stand still!"

She gave a little cry. "George—where are you? I don't—"

I slid out from my concealment and stood up, holding to the railing.

"Babs, dear."

Blessed normality of size! She cried again, "George! You! George, dear—"

She edged along the railing, a step or two down the tilting floor, then released her hold and flung herself into my waiting arms.

“I think we are landing. Hold the railing, George. When the room moves it goes with a rush."

Babs laughed softly. It must have seemed to her, after being alone in here, that now our plight was far less desperate. She had told me how she was captured. A man accosted her on the terrace, saying he wanted to speak to her about Alan. Then a weapon threatened her. Amid all those people she was held up in old fashioned style, hurried

to a taxicar and whirled away.

She was saying now, "When Polter moves, it is dizzying. You'll see."

"I have already, Babs. Heavens, that swoop!"

The room was more level now. We carefully drew ourselves to the front lattice. Polter was standing, and we had the white sheen from his shirt-front. A sheer drop was outside the bars, but looking down I could see the outlines of his body with the huge spread of the boat interior underneath us.

A confusion of rumbling voices sounded. Blurred giant shapes were outside. The room jolted and swayed as the boat landed and Polter disembarked.

Babs stood clinging to me. Blessed normality of size! We, at least, were normal—this metal barred room, Babs and I. But outside was the abnormality of largeness. I think that in relation to us, the men were of over two hundred foot stature, and the hunched Polter a trifle less. It seemed as he walked that we were lurching at least a hundred and fifty feet above the ground.

"You had better hide," Babs urged. "He might stop and speak to

someone. If anyone peered in here you would be seen: no chance then, even to get across the room."

It was true. But for a few moments I lingered, though I could distinguish vegetation on their flat roof-tops, as though flower-gardens were laid there.

We passed a house with its hundred-foot oval windows all aglow with light. Music floated out—a distant blare of musical sounds, and the ribald laughter of giant voices. I had seen no women among these giants of the islands. But now a huge face was at one of the ovals. A dissolute, painted woman of Earth, staring out at Polter as he passed. It was like the enormous close-up image on a large motion picture screen. She shouted a ribald jest as he went by.

"George, please go back. Suppose she had seen you?"

We were ascending a hill. A distance ahead a great oblong building loomed like a giant's palace, which indeed it was. We headed for it, passed through a vast arching doorway into the greater dimness of an echoing interior. I scurried back across the lurching room and again wedged myself under the couch. Babs stood at the lattice ten feet away. We dared to talk in low tones; the rumbling voices and footsteps outside would make our tiny voices inaudible to Polter.

I was tense with my plans. I had told them to Babs. With the one partially used remaining pellet of the diminishing drug we could make ourselves small enough to walk out through the bars. Then my black vial of the enlarging chemicals, as yet unused, would take us up, out to our own world. We could not use the drugs now. But the chance might come when Polter would set the cage on the ground, or somewhere so that we might climb down from it, with a chance to hide and get large before we were discovered. I would fight our way upward; all I needed was a fair start in size.

But I lay now with doubts assailing me. This was the first moment I had had for calm thoughts, though in truth they were far from calm! Where were Alan and Glora? Following us now? I could only hope so. Once out of this, Babs and I would have to rejoin them. But how? A panic swept me. I should not have left them. Or at least I should have told them what I was trying, and given Alan a chance to plan.

The panic grew upon me, the premonition of disaster. From my belt I took the opalescent vial with its one partly used pellet. I dumped the pellet out. It was spoiling! The former exposure of the air, the moisture of my tongue, had ruined it! I had no need to guess at the catastrophe; as I held its crumbling, deliquescing fragments on my palm it melted into vapor and was gone!

We could not make ourselves smaller! We would have to wait now until Polter opened the cage. But once outside, the enlarging drug would give us our chance to fight our way upward. My trembling fingers sought the black vial in my belt. It was not there! My mind flung back: in that tunnel, something had dropped and I had kicked it! Accursed chance! My accursed, heedless stupidity!

I had lost the black vial! We were helpless! Caged! Marooned here in a size microscopic!

Chapter 8: From a Drop of Water

I lay concealed, and Babs stood at the lattice of our cage room. I was aware that Polter had entered some vast apartment of this giant palace. A brighter light was outside; I heard voices—Polter's and another man's. I could see the distant monster shape of one. He was at first so far away that all his outline was visible. A seated man, in a huge white room. I thought there were great shelves with enormous bottles. The spread of table tops passed under our cage as Polter walked by them. They held a litter of apparatus, and there was the smell of chemicals in the air. It seemed that this was a laboratory.

The man stood up to greet Polter. I had a glimpse of his head and shoulders level with us. He wore a white linen coat, open, soft collar and black tie. He seemed an old man, queerly old, with snow-white hair....

I had an instant of whirling, confused impressions. Something was familiar about his face. It was seamed and wrinkled with lines of age and care. There were gentle blue eyes.

Then all I could see was the vast spread of his white shirt and coat, a black splotch of his tie outside our bars as Polter faced him.

Babs gave a low cry. "Why—why—dear God—"

And then I knew! And Polter's words were not needed, though I heard their rumble.

"I am back again, Kent. Are you still rebellious? You haf still determined to compound no more of our drugs? You would rather I killed you? Then see what I haf here. This little cage, someone—"

It was Dr. Kent, a prisoner here all these years!

Babs turned her white face toward me. "George, it's father! He's alive! Here!"

"Quiet, Babs! Don't let them know I'm here. Remember!"

The old man recognized her. "Babs!" It was an agonized cry. The blur of him was gone as he sank down into his chair.

Polter continued standing. I could envisage his sardonic grin. Babs was calling:

"Father, dear! Father!"

From over us came Polter's rumble. "She iss glad to see you, Kent. I

haf her here, safe. You always knew I would nefer be satisfied until I had my little Babs? Well, now I haf her. Can you hear me?"

A sudden desperate calmness fell on Babs. She called evenly, "Yes, I hear you. Father, do not anger him. Do not rebel; do what he commands. Dr. Polter, will you let me be with my father? After all these years, let me be with him, just for a little while. In his size—normal."

"Hah! My Babs iss scheming."

"No! I want to talk to him, after so long. These years when I thought he was dead."

"Scheming. You think, my little Babs, that he has the drugs? I am not so much a fool. He makes them. He can do that, and the last secret reactions only he can perform. He iss stubborn. Never would he tell me that one reaction. But he makes no drugs complete, only when I am here."

"No, Dr. Polter! I want only to be with him."

The old man's broken voice floated up to us. "You will not harm her, Polter?"

"No. Fear nothing. But you no longer rebel?"

"I will do what you tell me." The tones carried hopeless resignation, years of being beaten down, rebelling—but now this last blow vanquished him. Then he spoke again, with a sudden strange fire.

"Even for the life of my daughter, I will not make your drugs, Polter, if you mean to harm our Earth."

The golden cage room swooped as Polter sat down. "Hah! Now we bargain. What do you care what I do to your world? You never will see it again. I can lie to you. My plans—"

"I do care."

"Well, I will tell you, Kent. I am good natured now. Why should I not be, with my dear little Babs? I tell you. I am done with the Earth world. It iss so much nicer here. My friends, they haf a good time always. We like this little atom realm. I am going out once more. I must hide the little piece of golden quartz so no harm will come to it."

Polter was evidently in a high good humor. His voice fell to an intimate tone of comradeship; but still I could not mistake the irony

of it.

"You listen to me, Kent. There was a time, years ago, when we were good friends. You liked your young assistant, the hunchback Polter. Iss it not so? Then why should we quarrel now? I am gifing up the Earth world. I wanted of it only the little Babs.... You look at me so strange! You do not speak."

"There is nothing to say," retorted Dr. Kent wearily.

"Then you listen. I haf much gold above, in Quebec. You know that. So very simple to take it out of our atom, grow large with it, to what we call up there the size of a hundred feet. I haf a place, a room, secluded from prying eyes under a dome-roof. I become very tall, holding a piece of gold. It is large when I am a hundred feet tall. So I haf collected much gold. They think I own a mine. I haf a smelter and my gold quartz I make into ingots, refined to the standard purity. So simple, and I am a rich man.

"But gold does not bring happiness, my friend Kent." He chuckled ironically at his use of the platitude. "There is more in life than the ownership of gold. You ask my plans. I haf Babs, now. I am gifing up our Earth world. The mysterious man they know as Frank Rascor will vanish. I will hide our little fragment of quartz. No one up there

will even try to find it. Then I come down here, with Babs, and we will haf so nice a little government and rule this world. No more of the drugs then will be needed, Kent. When you die, let the secret die with you."

Again Polter's voice turned ingratiating, even more so than before. "We will be friends, Kent. Our little Babs will lof me; why should she not? You will tell her—advise her—and we will all three be very happy."

Dr. Kent said abruptly, "Then leave her with me now. That was her request, a moment ago. If you expect to treat her kindly, then why not—"

"I do! I do! But not now. I cannot spare her now. I am very busy, but I must take her with me."

Babs had been silent, clinging to the bars of our cage. She called:

"Why? I ask you to put this cage down."

"Not now, little bird."

"And let me be with my father."

It struck a pang through me. Babs was scheming, but not the way Polter thought. She wanted the cage put on the floor, herself out, and a chance for me to escape. I had not yet told her of my miserable stupidity in losing the vial.

Polter was repeating. "No, little bird. Presently; not now. I may take you out with me, my last trip out. I want to talk with you in a normal size when I haf time."

Our room swooped as he stood up. "You think over what I haf said, Kent. You get ready now to make the fresh drugs I will need to bring down all my men from the outer world. They will all be glad to come, or, if not—well, we can easily kill those who refuse. You make the drugs. I need plenty. Will you?"

"Yes."

"That iss good. I come back soon and gif you the catalyst for that last reaction. Will you be ready?"

"Yes."

The blur outside our bars swung with a dizzying whirl as Polter turned and left the room, locking its door after him with a

reverberating clank.

Left alone in his laboratory, Dr. Kent began his preparations for making a fresh supply of the drugs. This room, with two smaller ones adjoining, was at once his workshop and his prison. He stood at his shelves, selecting the basic chemicals. He could not complete the final compounds. The catalyst which was necessary to the final reaction would be brought to him by Polter.

How long he worked there with his thoughts in a whirl at seeing Babs, he did not know. His movements were automatic; he had done all this so many times before. His mind was confused, and he was trembling from head to foot, an old, queerly, unnaturally old man now—unnerved. His shaking fingers could hardly hold the test tubes.

His thoughts were flying. Babs was here, come down from the world above. It was disaster—the thing he had feared all these years.

He suddenly heard a voice.

"Father!"

And again: "Father!" A tiny voice, down by his shoe-tops. Two small

figures were there on the floor beside him. They were both panting, winded by running. They were enlarging; they had come from a smaller size.

It was Alan and Glora, who had followed Polter from the boat, diminished again, and come running through the tiny crack under the metal door of the laboratory.

They grew to a foot in size, down by Dr. Kent's legs. He was too unnerved; he sat in a chair while Alan swiftly told him what had happened. Babs was in the golden cage. Dr. Kent knew that; but none of them knew what had happened to me.

"We must make you small, Father. We have the drugs, here with us."

"Yes! Yes, Alan. How much have you? Show me. Oh, my boy, that you are here—and Babs—"

"Don't you worry, we'll get away from him."

Glora and Alan had almost reached Dr. Kent's size before their excited fingers could get out the vials. They took some of the diminishing drug to check their growth. Alan handed his father a

black vial.

"Yes, lad—"

"No! Wait, Father! That's the wrong drug. This other—"

Dr. Kent had opened the vial. His trembling hand spilled some of the pellets, but none of them noticed it.

"Father, dear, this one." Alan held an opalescent vial. "This one."

Glora said abruptly, "Listen! Is that someone coming?"

They thought they heard approaching footsteps. A moment passed, but no one came into the room.

"Hurry," urged Glora. "It is nothing. We wait too long."

"My boy—Alan, dear, after all these years—"

They were about to take the diminishing drug. From across the room there came a very queer sound. A scuttling, scratching, and the drone of wings.

"Father, good God—look!"

Over by the wall, a giant fly was running across the floor. It was growing larger!

At Dr. Kent's feet the pellets he had dropped were crushed by his footsteps and strewn on the floor. A fly had eaten of the sweetish powder.

The enlarging drug was loose!

A few drops of water lay mingled with the drug on the floor. And from the water nameless hideous things were rising!

Chapter 9: The Doomed Realm

To Alan the first few moments that followed the escape of the drug were the most horrible of his life. The discovery struck old Dr. Kent, Glora and Alan into a numb, blank confusion. They stood transfixed, staring with cold terror. The fly was scurrying along the floor close against the wall Already it was as large as Alan's hand. It ran into the corner, hit the wall in its confused alarm, and turned back. Its wings were droning with an audible hum. It reared itself on its hairy legs, lifted and sailed across the room.

As though drawn by a magnet Alan turned to watch it. It landed on the wall. Alan was aware of Dr. Kent rushing with trembling steps to a shelf where bottles stood. Glora was stricken into immobility, the blood draining from her face.

The fly flew again. It passed directly over Alan. Its body, with a membrane sac of eggs, was now as large as his head; its wide-spread transparent wings were beating with a reverberating drone.

Alan flung a bottle which was on the table beside him. It missed, crashed against the ceiling, came down with splintering glass and spilling liquid. Fumes spread chokingly over the room.

The fly landed again on the floor. Larger now! Expanding with a horribly rapid growth. Glora flung something—a little wooden rack with a few empty test-tubes in it. The rack struck the monstrous fly, but did not hurt it. The fly stood with hairy legs braced under its bulging body. Its multiple-lensed eyes were staring at the humans. And with its size must have come a sense of power, for it seemed to Alan that the monstrous insect had an abnormal alertness as it stood measuring its adversaries, gathering itself to attack them.

Only a few seconds had passed. Confused thoughts swept Alan. This fly with its growth would soon fill this room. Burst it; burst upward through a wrecked palace; soar out, and by the power of its size alone, devastate this world.

He heard himself shouting. "Father, get back! It's too large! I've got to kill it!"

Launch himself upon it? Wrestle with it in a hand to hand combat? Alan edged around the center table. He was bathed in cold sweat. This thing so horrible! It was too large! Half the length of his own body, now. In a moment it might be twice that! He was aware of Glora pulling at him; and his father rushing past him with a bottle of liquid, and shouting:

"Alan! Run! You and this girl, get out of here! The other room—"

Then Alan saw the things upon the floor! His foot crushed one with a slippery squash! Nameless, hideous, noisome things grown monstrous, risen from their lurking invisibility in the drops of water! Sodden, gray-black and green-slimed monsters of the deep; palpitating masses of pulp! One lay rocking, already as large as a football with streamers of ooze hanging upon it, and a black-ink fluid squirting; others were rods of red jelly-pulp, already as large as lead pencils, quivering, twitching. Germs of disease, these ghastly things, enlarging from the invisibility of a drop of water!

The fly landed with a thud on the center table. The fumes of the shattered bottle of chemicals were choking Alan. He flung himself toward the monster fly, but Glora held him.

"No! Escape! The other room!"

Dr. Kent was stamping the things upon the floor; pouring acids upon them. Some eluded him. The air in the room was unbreathable....

They reached the bedroom. The laboratory was a hideous chaos. They were aware of its outer door opening, disclosing the figure of Polter who, undoubtedly, had been attracted by the noise. He shouted

a startled oath. Alan heard it above the beating wings of the monster fly. Things lurched at the opened door; Polter banged it upon them and rushed away, shouting the alarm through the palace.

Dr. Kent was stammering, "Not the enlarging drug! Glora, child, the other! Hurry!"

Alan helped Glora with the opalescent vial. Things were lurching toward this room from the laboratory. Alan with averted face, choked by the incoming fumes, slammed the door upon the gruesome turmoil.

They took the diminishing drug. The bedroom expanded. The hideous sounds from the laboratory, and the whole palace now ringing with a wild alarm, then faded into the blessed remoteness of distance above them....

“I think it is this way, Alan. Off there—a doorway from my bedroom. Polter always kept it locked, but it leads into a corridor. We must get out of here. A crack under the door—is that it, off there?" Dr. Kent pointed into the gloomy blur of distance. "We are horribly small—it's so far to run—and I've lost my sense of direction."

The drug had ceased its action. The wooden floor of the room had expanded to a spread of cellular surface, ridged with broken, tube-like tunnels; pits and jagged cave-mouths. A knot-hole yawned like a crater a hundred feet away.

"We are too small," Glora protested hurriedly. "The door is where you say, Dr. Kent, but miles away."

With the other drug, the room contracted. The floor-surface shrank and smoothed a little. The door was distinguishable—a square panel several hundred feet in width and towering into the upper haze. The black line of the crack was visible along its bottom.

They ran to it. The top of the crack was ten feet above their heads. They ran under, across the wide intervening darkness toward a glow of light. Then they came from under the door into a corridor—and shrank against a cliff-wall as with a rush of wind and pounding tread the blurred shapes of a man's huge feet and legs rushed passed. The upper air was filled with rumbling shouts.

"We must chance it!" exclaimed Dr. Kent. "Too dangerous, so small! Larger—and if they see us, fight our way out!"

In the turmoil of the doomed palace no one noticed them. They cast

aside all restraint. It was too dangerous to wait. The excessive dose they took of the drug made the corridor shrink with dizzying speed. They rushed along its length. Alan hurled a little man aside who was in their path. Already they were larger than the Polter people.

They squeezed out of a shrinking doorway. The dwindling island was a turmoil. Little figures were plunging from the palace. At the edge of the water, Alan, Glora and Dr. Kent stood for an instant looking behind them. The palace was rocking! Its roof heaved upward then smashed and fell aside with the clatter of tumbling masonry. The monstrous fly, its hideous face mashed and oozing, reared itself up and, with broken, torn wings tried to soar away. But it could not. It slipped back. The drone and buzz of its fright sounded over the chaos of noise. Other things came lurching and twitching upward; slithering out....

The expanding body of the fly was pushing the palace walls outward. In a moment they collapsed and it emerged....

To Alan and his companions the scene was all shrinking into a miniature chaos of horror at their shoe-tops. A diminuendo of screams mingled down there. Overhead were the stars, shining peacefully remote. Nearby lay a rapidly narrowing channel of shining water. A tiny city was across it. Lights were moving. The

panic had spread from the island to Orena. Beyond the tiny city, a range of mountains showed; a cliff, gleaming in the starlight; tunnel mouths.

Suddenly against the stars off there, Alan saw the enlarging figure of Polter, his hunched shape unmistakable. He was facing the other way. He lunged and scrambled into a yawning black hole in the mountains. Polter was escaping! None of these people except himself had the drugs. He was escaping with the golden cage, out of this doomed atomic world to our Earth above.

Glora murmured, "There is our way out. Your way. And that is Polter going. I think he did not see us. So much is growing gigantic here." She clung to Alan. "Dear one—"

Dr. Kent muttered, "We will wait a moment—wade across—or leap over, and follow him out. Babs with him—dear God I hope so! This doomed realm!"

Alan held Glora close. And suddenly he was laughing—a madness, half hysteria. "Why, this, all this—why look, Glora, it's funny! This little world all excited, an ant-hill, outraged! Look! There's our giant sailboat!"

Down near their feet the inch-long sailboat stood at its dock. Tiny human figures were rushing for it; others, floundering in the water, were trying to climb upon it. Dr. Kent had stepped from the shore a foot or two, and tiny, lashing white rollers rocked the boat, almost engulfing it.

Alan's laugh rang out, "God! It's funny, isn't it? All those little creatures, so excited!"

"Steady, lad!" Dr. Kent touched him. "Don't let yourself laugh! A moment now, then we'll wade across. Polter won't have much start on us. We mustn't get too close to him in size, but try and attack him unawares. We have got to get Babs away from him."

The narrowing passage rose hardly to their knees. They stepped ashore, well to one side of the toy city. Their growth had almost stopped. But suddenly Alan realized that Glora was diminishing! She had taken the other drug.

"Glora!"

"I must go back, Alan. This is my world, doomed perhaps, but I cannot forsake it now. I must give the enlarging drug to my father. And others who can rise and fight these monsters."

"Glora!"

Dr. Kent said hurriedly, "She's right, Alan. There is a chance they can save their city. For her to leave them would be dastardly."

She cried, "You go on up, Alan. You have enough of the drugs. Leave me, dear one—I am going back!"

"No!" he protested. "You must not! Or if you do, I'll come with you!"

She clung to him. He felt her body diminishing within his encircling arms. His love for her swept him—this girl who had cajoled Polter, or tricked him, stolen several of the little vials from him heaven knows how, and followed him up to the other world. This girl whom Alan now knew he loved, was leaving him. Forever?

As he stood there, with the miniature landscape at his feet in the wan starlight, the panic-stricken tiny city, the island with its monsters rising to overwhelm this microscopic world—it seemed to Alan then that if he let her go it was the end for him of all life's promised happiness.

"Alan, lad, come." His father was pulling at him. So horrible a

choice! Alan thought that I was back on that island. But Babs, a prisoner in the golden cage, was with Polter, plunging upward in size. And his father was beside him, pleading.

"Alan—come—I can't get out alone. Nor save Babs. And the maddened Polter, with the power of this drug, can conquer and enslave our Earth as he has enslaved Orena—just one little city of one tiny golden atom! Believe me, lad, your duty lies above."

Glora's head was now down at Alan's waist. He stooped and kissed her white forehead; his fingers, just for an instant, smoothed her glossy hair.

"Good-by, Glora."

"Dear one, good-by."

She plunged away, and her tread as she dwindled mashed the forest behind the city. Alan and his father ran for the cliff. They were too large to squeeze into the little hole. But in a moment they made themselves smaller. They climbed as they dwindled; checked the drug action and rushed into the tunnel-mouth.

Alan stopped just for an instant to gaze out over the starlit scene. It

was almost the same viewpoint from which he had his first sight of Glora's world only an hour or two before. The distant island beyond the city showed plainly with the shining water around it. The vegetation there was growing! And there were dark, horribly formless blobs lurching outward and rising with monstrous bulk against the background of the stars!

"Alan! Come, lad!"

With a prayer for Glora trembling on his lips, Alan plunged into the dim phosphorescent gloom of the tunnel.

Chapter 10: The Escape

To Babs and me the ride in the golden cage strapped to Polter's chest as he made his escape outward into largeness was an experience awesome and frightening almost beyond conception. We heard the alarm in the palace on the island. Polter rushed to Dr. Kent's laboratory door, looked in, and in a moment banged it shut. Babs and I saw very little. We knew only that something horrible had happened; we could see only a blur with formless things in the void beneath our bars; and there were the choking fumes of chemicals surging at us.

Polter rushed through the castle corridor. We heard rumbling distant shouts.

"The drug is loose! The drug is loose! Monsters! Death for everyone!"

The room swayed with horrible dizzying lurches as Polter ran. We clung to the lattice bars, our legs and arms entwined. There were moments when Polter leaped, or suddenly stooped, and our reeling senses all but faded.

"Babs! Babs, darling, don't let go! Don't lose consciousness!"

If she should be limp, here in this lurching room, her body to be flung back and forth across its confines—that would be death in a moment. I feared I could not hold her. I managed to get an arm about her waist.

"Babs!"

"I'm—all right, George. I can stand it. We're—he is enlarging."

"Yes."

I saw water far beneath us, lashed into a turmoil of foam with Polter's wading steps. There was a brief swaying vista of a toy city; starlight overhead; a lurching swaying miniature of landscape as Polter ran for the towering cliffs. Then he climbed and scrambled into the tunnel-mouth. Had he turned at that instant doubtless he would have seen the rising distant figures of Glora, Alan and Dr. Kent. But he did not see them, evidently. Nor did we.

Polter spoke only very occasionally to Babs. "Hold tightly!" It was a rumbling voice from above us. He made no move to touch the cage, except that a few times the great blur of his hand came up to adjust its angle.

The lurching and jolting was less violent in the tunnel. Polter's frenzy to escape was subsiding into calmness. He traversed the tunnel with a methodical swinging stride. We were aware of him climbing over the noisome litter of the dead giant's body which blocked the tunnel's further end. We heard his astonished exclamations. But evidently he did not suspect what had happened, thinking only that the stupid messenger had miscalculated his growth and been crushed.

We emerged into a less dim area. Polter did not stop at the fallen giant. Nothing mattered now to him, quite evidently, save his own rapid exit with Babs from this atomic realm. His movements seemed calm, yet hurried.

We realized now how different was an outward journey from the trip coming in. This was all only an inch of golden quartz! The stages upward were frequently only a matter of growth in size; the distances in this vast desert realm of golden rock always were shrinking. Polter many times stood almost motionless until the closing dwindling walls made him scramble upward into the greater space above.

It may have been an hour, or less. Babs and I, from our smaller viewpoint, with the landscape so frequently blurred by distance and

Polter's movements, seldom recognized where we were. But I realized that going out was far easier in every way than coming in. Easier to determine the route, since usually the diminishing caverns and gullies made the upward step obvious.... We knew when Polter scrambled up the incline ramp.

It seemed impossible for us to plan anything. Would Polter make the entire trip without a stop? It seemed so. We had no drugs. Our cage was barred beyond possibility of our getting out. But even if we had had the drugs, or had our door been open, there was no escape. An abyss of distance was always yawning beyond our lattice—the sheer precipice of Polter's body from his chest to the ground.

"Babs, we must make him stop. If he sits down to rest, you might get him to take you out. I must reach his drugs."

"Yes. I'll try it, George."

Polter was momentarily standing motionless as though gazing around him, judging what to do next. His size seemed stationary. Beyond our bars we could see the distant circular walls as though this were some giant crater-pit in which Polter was standing. Then I thought I recognized it—the round, nearly vertical pit into which Alan had plunged his hand and arm. Above us then was a gully,

blind at one end. And above that, the outer surface, the summit of the fragment of golden quartz.

"Babs! I know where we are! If he takes you out, keep his attention. I'll try and get one of his black vials. Make him hold you near the ground. If I see you there, in position where you can jump, I'll startle him. Oh, Babs, dear, it's desperately dangerous but I can't think of anything else. Jump! Get away from here. I'll keep his attention on me. Then I'll join you if I can—with the drug."

Polter was moving. We had no time to say more.

"Yes! Yes, I'll try it, George." For just an instant she clung to me with her soft arms about my neck. Our love was sweeping us in this desperate moment, and it seemed that above us was a remote Earth world holding the promise of all our dreams. Or were we star-crossed, doomed like the realm of the atom? Was this swift embrace now marking the end of everything for us?

Babs called, "Dr. Polter?"

We could feel his movements stopping.

"Yes? You are all right, Babs?"

She laughed—a ripple of silvery laughter—but there was tragic fear in her eyes as she held her gaze on me. "Yes, Dr. Polter, but breathless. Almost dead, but not quite. What happened? I want to come out and talk to you."

"Not now, little bird."

"But I want to." To me it was a miracle that she could call so lightly and hold that note of lugubrious laughter in her voice. "I am hungry. Don't you think of that? And frightened. Take me out."

He was sitting down! "You remind me that I am tired, Babs. And hungry, also. I haf a little food. You shall come out for just a short time."

"Thank you. Take me carefully."

Our tilted cage was near the ground as he seated himself. But still it was too far for me to jump.

I murmured, "Babs—"

"Wait, George! I'll fix that. You hide! If he looks in he'll see you, where you are now!"

I scrambled back to my hiding place. Polter's huge fingers were fumbling at our bars. The little door sprang open.

"Come, Babs."

He held the cupped bowl of his palm to the doorway. "Come out."

"No!" she called. "It is too far down!"

"Come. That iss foolish."

"No! I'm afraid. Put the cage on the ground."

"Babs!" His finger and thumb came reaching in to seize her, but she avoided them.

"Dr. Polter! Don't! You'll crush me!"

"Then come out on my hand."

He seemed annoyed. I had scrambled back to the doorway; I knew he could not see me so long as the cage remained strapped to his shirt front.

I whispered, "I can make it, Babs!"

Polter was apparently on one elbow, half turned on his side. From our cage, the sloping gleaming white surface of his stiff glossy shirt-bosom went down a steep incline. His belt was down there, and the outward bulging curve of his lap—a spreading surface where I could land like a scuttling insect, unobserved, if only Babs could hold his attention.

I whispered vehemently. "Try it! Go out! Leave me! Keep talking to him!"

She called instantly, "Very well, then. Bring your hand! Closer! Carefully! It seems so high up here!"

She swung herself to his palm, and flung her arms about the great pillar of his upcrooked finger. The bowl of his hand moved slowly away. I heard her calling voice, and his overhead rumble.

I chanced it! I could not determine the exact position, or which way he was looking.

Again I heard Bab's voice. "Careful, Dr. Polter. Don't let me fall!"

"Yes, little bird."

I let myself down from the tilted doorway, hung by my hands and

dropped. I struck the ramp-like yielding surface of his shirt-bosom. I slid, tumbling, scrambling, and landed softly in the huge folds of his trouser fabric. I was unhurt. The width of his belt, high as my body, was near me. I shrank against it; I found I could cling to its upper edge.

My hold came just in time. He shifted, and sat up. I was lifted with a swoop of movement. When it steadied I saw above me the top of his knee. His left leg was crooked, the foot drawn close to him. Babs was perched up there on the knee summit. His right leg was outstretched. I was at the right side of his belt. I could dart off along that curving expanse of his leg and leap to the ground. If he would hold this position! One of the pouches of his belt was near me. The vial in it was black. The enlarging drug! I moved toward it.

But Babs was too high to jump from that summit of his crooked knee! I think she saw me at his belt. I heard her voice.

"I cannot eat up here. It is too high. Oh, please be careful how you move! I am so dizzy, so frightened! You move with such great jerks!"

He had what seemed a huge surface of bread and meat. He was breaking o£f crumbs to put before her. I reached the pouch of his

belt. The vial was as long as my body. I tugged to try and lift it out.

All the giant contours of Polter's body shifted as he cautiously moved. I clung. I saw that Babs was being held gently between his thumb and forefinger. He lowered her to the ground, and she stood beside the bread and meat he had placed there.

And she had the courage to laugh! "Why this—this is an enormous sandwich! You will have to break it."

He was leaning over her, half turned on his left side. The vial came free. I shoved it; but I could not control its weight. I pushed desperately. It slid over the round brink of his right hip, and fell behind him. I heard the tinkling thud of it down on the rocks.

There was no alarm. I could not chance leaping from his hip. I scurried along the convex top of his outstretched leg, and beyond his knee I jumped.

I landed safely. I could see the black vial back across the broken rock surface, with the bulge of Polter's hip above it. I ran back and reached the vial; tugged at its huge stopper. The cork began to yield under my panting, desperate efforts. In a moment I would have a pellet of the enlarging drug; make away with it; startle Polter so that

Babs might dart off and escape.

The huge stopper of the vial was larger than my head. It came suddenly out. I flung it away, plunged in my hand, and seized an enormous round pellet.

Then abruptly the alarm came, and I had not caused it! Polter ripped out a startled, rumbling curse and sat upright. Under the curve of his leg, I saw that Babs had been momentarily neglected. She was running.

Across the boulder-strewn plain, two tiny men had appeared. Polter had seen them.

They were the enlarging figures of Dr. Kent and Alan!

Chapter 11: The Combat of Size

The astounded Polter was taken wholly by surprise. He could have had no idea that anyone was following him. He thought he was alone with the tiny Babs in this rock-strewn metal desert. What he saw as he scrambled to his feet were four insect-size humans, two of them at a distance, and two within reach of him, and all of them scampering in different directions. The ground was littered with crags and boulders; was ridged and pitted, pock-marked, with tiny crater-holes and caves. The four scuttling figures almost instantly had disappeared from his sight.

I did not see where Babs went. I turned from the black vial of Polter's enlarging drug, and with the huge pellet under my arm I ran leaping over the rough ground and flung myself into a gully. I lay prone, flattened against a rock. In the murky distance of a pseudo-sky overhead, the monstrous head and shoulders of Polter were visible. I could see down to just below his waist. The empty cage with its door flapping open hung against his shirt-front. He had stooped to try and recover Babs. And instinctively his hands went to his belt to seize his enlarging drug.

They were fumbling there now. He hauled out an opalescent vial of the diminishing element. But his black vial was gone. His frown

spread into fear as he searched for it in the other compartments of his belt. I had thought that he had more than one black vial, but now it seemed not. His huge face was swept with the panic of terror. He flung a wild glance around him.

Through the open end of my gully I saw in the distance, miles away, the enlarging figure of Alan rising up. Then it ducked back of a distant rocky peak. Polter undoubtedly saw it. He was fumbling with his opalescent vial, and with confused panic upon him he made the mistake of taking the diminishing drug. And instantly seemed to regret it. His curse rumbled above me. His glance went down to the rocks at his feet, and there he saw lying his black vial with its stopper out. His body already was beginning to dwindle. He stooped, seized the vial, and took the enlarging drug. The shock of it made him stagger; momentarily he disappeared from my line of vision but I could hear his panting breath and the unsteady pound of his footsteps.

I still held that huge round ball of the drug. I seized a loose stone and frantically knocked off a chunk—heaven knows how much, I do not. I shoved it into my mouth, chewed and hastily swallowed it. And with the lurching, swaying, shrinking gully closing in upon me, I ran to get out of its distant open end.

I was heading toward where Alan and his father were lurking. I came from the gully into the open, just as the walls closed behind me. The whole scene was a dizzying blurred sway of contracting movement. I saw that I was in a circular valley now some five miles in diameter, with its jagged enclosing walls rising sheerly perpendicular out of sight in the haze overhead.

Polter had staggered backward. I saw him a mile or so away. His back at that instant was turned to me. He was now no more than three or four times my own height. He scrambled against the valley cliff-wall as though trying to find a foothold to climb up it. He went a little way, but fell back.

Near me, Alan and old Dr. Kent suddenly appeared. I was larger. They flung themselves at my knees. Alan gasped:

"You, George! You got Babs?"

"Yes—Babs is around somewhere! Stay down here! Don't lose her in size! Stay small! Search and—"

"But George—"

"I'll tackle Polter. I've taken—God, I don't know how much I've

taken of the drug!"

They were shrinking down by my boot-tops. Alan shouted suddenly, "There's Babs! Thank God, there's Babs!"

She was too small; I could not see her, nor even hear her, though she must have been calling to them. Alan again screamed up at me with his little voice:

"She's here, George! You—go on and get Polter! I can't overtake you you—haven't enough of the drug!" His tiny voice was fading away. "Go on and get him, George! This time—get him—"

I swung with a staggering step around to face the open valley. It was shrunken now to barely half a mile of width. Its smooth walls rose some two or three thousand feet to an upper circular horizon with murky distance overhead. Polter stood across from me. He had tried to climb out but could not. He saw me and came lurching. We were a quarter of a mile from each other. I ran forward through a shifting scene of shrinking rock walls and crawling, contracting ground. Quarter of a mile? It seemed hardly more than a score of running strides before Polter loomed close ahead of me. He was still nearly twice my size. I stooped, seized a loose boulder, and flung it. I missed his face, but, as his hand went up carrying a bared knife-

blade, by fortunate chance the stone struck his wrist. The knife dropped to the rocks. He stooped to recover it, but I was upon him. As I felt his huge arms go around me, half lifting me, my foot struck the knife. But in an instant it was swept down into smallness beneath us as we expanded above it.

Both of us were unarmed in this combat of size. I was a half-grown youth in Polter's first grip upon me. I heard his panting words, grimly triumphant:

"This—George Randolph, I haf been—waiting for so many many years! The hunchback—takes his revenge—now—"

He lifted me. His great arms were horribly powerful, but I could feel them dwindling. I was enlarging faster. Just a few moments—if I could last a few moments!... My feet were off the ground, my chest close pressed against the little golden cage between us. He had a hand shoving back my head; his fingers sought my throat. I wound my legs around him, and then he tried to throw me down and fall upon me. But we had twisted and my back was to the cliff. The rocks were shoving at us, insistently pushing with almost a living movement. Polter staggered with me. His grip on my throat tightened, shutting off my breath. My senses whirled. His grim sardonic face over me was blurred to my sight. I tore futilely at my

throat to break his choking grip. All the world was a roaring chaos to my fading senses. Then in the blur I saw horror sweep his expression. His fingers involuntarily loosened. I got a breath of blessed air, gasping, and my sight cleared.

Walls were closing around us! We were in a pit barely ten feet wide, with the top a few feet above Polter's head. The nearer wall shoved us again. Our bodies almost filled the shrinking pit! Polter lurched and cast me off. I half fell, striking my shoulder against the opposite wall, and I saw Polter leap at the dwindling brink and scramble out.

I was nearly wedged. As I rose, the top of the pit only reached my waist. Polter had fallen on the upper ground, and was on hands and knees. Instead of standing up, he lurched at me; tried to shove me back. But I was out. I clutched at him. We were almost of a size now. We rolled on the ground, locked together; rolled to the brink of the pit and over it, as it shrank to a little round hole unnoticed beneath our threshing bodies!

At the side of the circular valley Alan and Dr. Kent crouched with the smaller figure of Babs between them. They saw Polter and me as two swaying gigantic forms locked in a death struggle, towering against the sky. Tremendous expanded bodies! They saw us come to grips; saw the great hunched Polter bend me backward, choking me.

Our bodies lurched. Our huge legs with a single step brought us to the center of the valley. It was a shrinking valley to Alan, Babs and Dr. Kent, for they too, were enlarging. But the fighting giant figures were growing faster. In only a moment their shoulders were up there in the sky, pressing against the narrowing cliff-walls.

Alan gasped. "But George will be crushed! Look at him!"

Horror swept them as they crouched watching. The enormous pillars of Polter's legs towered straight up from near at hand. Alan was aware of himself screaming:

"George—out! You're too large! Too large for in here!"

As though his microscopic voice could reach me—my head hundred of feet above him. But he screamed it again. This was all in a few horrible moments, though it seemed to the three watchers an eternity. Alan was helpless to aid me; they had taken all of the enlarging drug they had.

Then they saw Polter cast me off. I lurched and struck, with my shoulders wedged against the cliff directly over where they crouched. The overhead sky was darkened as Polter scrambled upward.

Alan was still screaming futilely, "George—up! Get out!"

Babs huddled with white, horrified face, staring. Then I went out after Polter. My disappearing legs were great dark blurs in the sky. Alan saw the valley now contracted to a thousand feet of width, with its cliffs equally as high. Then everything was smaller.... The sky overhead went dark again; from cliff to cliff a segment of our rolling bodies momentarily spanned the opening.

And presently Alan realized that the valley had narrowed to a pit. He stood up. "Hurry! Now we can get out after them. Up there!"

The opening above was empty. Polter and I were fighting some distance away....

Dr. Kent was soon large enough to scramble out of the pit. Alan handed the little Babs up to him and followed. Alan saw that they were now in a long gully, blind at one end with a five hundred-foot perpendicular cliff. Against the wall, the titanic form of Polter stood at bay. And I was fronting him. The summit of the cliff was lower than our waists. Triumph swept Alan; he saw that I was the larger! As Polter bored into me my backward step crossed the full width of the gully. Alan shouted:

"Down! Babs—Father!"

They had barely time to flatten themselves in a narrow crevice between upstanding rocks before my foot crashed down. For an instant the sole of my boot formed a flat black ceiling as it trod and spanned the rocks. Then it lifted; was gone with a blurred swoop. They saw the white blur of my hand come down and snatch a tremendous boulder, raising it with a great sweep of movement into the sky. They saw me crash it against Polter; but it only struck his shoulder. He roared with anger. The whole sky was roaring and rumbling with our shouts and our panting breathing, and the ground was clattering, pounding with our giant tread. Huge loose boulders were tumbled in an avalanche everywhere.

Again it seemed to Alan that our lurching, heedlessly surging bodies must be crushed within these contracting walls. Only our locked, intertwined legs were visible; our bodies were lost in the sky. Then it seemed to Alan that I had heaved Polter upward. And followed him. We disappeared. There was a distant overhead rumble, and the murky sky, with vague patches of far-distant illumination in it, became empty of movement....

The walls presently were again closing upon Alan and his companions. They ran out of the open end of the shrinking little

gully and came to a new upward vista....

I found myself a full head and shoulders taller than Polter. And he was tiring, panting heavily. His face was cut and bleeding from the blows of my fists. The rock I heaved struck his shoulder. He roared, head down, and bored into me. He was heavier than I. His weight flung me back. My foot slid on the loose stones of the gully floor. I did not know that Babs, Alan and their father were huddled under those stones!

My back struck the opposite wall. Polter's upflung knee caught me in the stomach, all but knocking the breath from me. He was desperate, oblivious to the closing walls. And as he flung his arms with a grip about my neck, hanging, trying to bear me down, I saw in his blazing dark eyes what seemed the light of suicide. I think that then, with a sudden frenzied madness he realized that he was beaten. And tried to pull us to the ground and let the walls crush us.

I summoned all my remaining strength and heaved us forward. I broke his hold. His body was jammed back against a lowering wall. Its top seemed almost at our knees. I shoved frantically. He fell backward and I jumped after him.

We were on a great rocky plateau. But it was shrinking, crawling

into itself. Spots of light were in the murk overhead; there seemed a distant circular horizon of emptiness around us.

Polter was lying in a heap. But it was trickery, for as I incautiously bent over him his hand crashed a rock against my head. I reeled, with all the world turning black, but did not fall. There was a horrible instant when my senses were going, but I fought to hold them. Blood from a wound on my forehead was streaming in my eyes. I was staggering. Then I realized I was grimly tossing my head, shaking the blood away; and little by little my sight came back.

Polter was on his feet, rushing me. His fist came with an upward swing at my chin, but I ducked my head aside at the last moment.

And suddenly, fighting up there in the open, my mind envisaged how gigantic we were! This was a great upland plateau, rounded with miles of distance and a shadowy, dimly radiant abyss beyond its circular horizon. And I was a thousand feet or more tall! A titan, looming here in the sky!...

My fist quite unexpectedly caught Polter's jaw. His simultaneous swing went wild, though I leaped backward from it. He staggered, and his arms dropped to his sides. I was crouched forward, guarded, watching him while I gasped for breath. There was the briefest of

instants when an expression of vague surprise swept his face. But I had not knocked him out.

It was death overtaking him. His heart was yielding, overtaxed from this strain; and I think there at the last, he realized it. The blood drained suddenly from his face and lips, leaving them livid. I saw fear, then a wild horror in his eyes. He stood swaying. Then his knees gave way and he toppled. He fell from his height in the air where I stood gazing at him—fell forward on his face, his titanic length spread all across the top of this rocky landscape!

For a moment I did not move. My head was reeling, my ears roaring. Blood streamed into my eyes. I wiped it away with a torn sleeve and stood panting, gazing at the glowing distance around me.

I was a titan, standing there. The body of Polter was shrinking at my feet. The circular abyss of emptiness came nearer as this rocky eminence contracted.

Suddenly my attention went to the sky overhead. Vague distant lights were there. Then a broad flat blur seemed spread over me. Light everywhere was growing. Beyond the nearby brink of the abyss was a white reflected radiance from beneath. Abruptly I realized there was a level, flat white plain running far off there in the distance.

Overhead a radiance contracted into a spot of light. A shape in the sky moved! I heard a far-away rumble—a human voice!

The body of Polter lay at my feet. It was hardly the length of my forearm I stood, a titan.

And then, with a shock of realization, I saw how tiny I was! This was the broken top of that fragment of golden quartz the size of a walnut! I was standing there, under the lens of the giant microscope in Polter's dome-room laboratory, with half a dozen astounded Quebec police officials peering down at me!

Chapter 12: Mysterious Little Golden Rock

I need not detail the aftermath of our emergence from the atom. Dr. Kent and Babs followed me out within a few moments. But Alan was not with them! He had seen Polter fall. His father and Babs were safe. The sacrifice he had made in leaving Glora was no longer needed.

Down there on the rocky plateau, Dr. Kent suddenly realized that Alan was dwindling.

"Father, I must! Don't you understand? Glora's world is menaced. I can't leave her like this. My duty to you and Babs is ended. I did my best, Dad—you two are safe now."

"Alan! My boy!"

He was already down at Dr. Kent's waist, Bab's size. He held up his hand. "Dad, good-by." His rugged, youthful face was flushed, his voice choked. "You—you've been a mighty good father to me. Always."

Babs flung her arms about him. "Alan, don't!"

"But I must." He smiled whimsically as he kissed her. "You wouldn't

want to leave George, would you? Never see him again? I'm not asking you to do that, am I?"

"But, Alan—"

"You've been a great little pal, Babs. I'll never forget it."

"Alan! You talk as though you were never coming back!"

"Do I? But of course I'm coming back!" He cast her off. "Babs, listen. Father's upset. That's natural. You tell him not to worry. I'll be careful, and do what I can to save that little city. I must find Glora and—"

Babs was suddenly trembling with eagerness for him. "Yes! Of course you must, Alan!"

"Find her and bring her out here! I'll do it! Don't you worry." He was dwindling fast. Dr. Kent had collapsed to a rock, staring down with horror-stricken eyes. Alan called up to Babs:

"Listen! Have George watch the chunk of gold-quartz. Have it guarded and watched day and night. Handle it carefully, Babs!"

"Yes! Yes! How long will you be gone, Alan?"

"Heavens—how do I know? But I'll come back, don't you worry. Maybe in only a day or two of your time."

"Right! Good-by, Alan!"

"Good-by," his tiny voice echoed up. "Good-by, Babs—Father!"

Babs could see his miniature face smiling up at her. She smiled back and waved her arm as he vanished into the pebbles at her feet.

The eyes of youth! They look ahead; they see all things so easily possible! But old Dr. Kent was sobbing.

It has broken Dr. Kent. A month now has passed. He seldom mentions Alan to Babs and me. But when he does, he tries to smile and say that Alan soon will return. He has been very ill this last week, though he is better now. He did not tell us that he was working to compound another supply of the drugs, but we knew it very well.

And his emotion, the strain of it, made him break. He was in bed a week. We are living in New York, quite near the Museum of the American Society for Scientific Research. In a room of the biological department there, the precious fragment of golden quartz lies guarded. A microscope is over it, and there is never a moment of

the day or night without an alert, keen-eyed watcher peering down.

But nothing has appeared. Neither friend nor foe—nothing. I cannot say so to Babs, but often I fear that Dr. Kent will suddenly die, and the secret of his drugs die with him. I hinted once that I would make a trip into the atom if he would let me, but it excited him so greatly I had to laugh it off with the assurance that of course Alan will soon return safely to us. Dr. Kent is an old man now, unnaturally old, with, it seems, the full weight of eighty years pressing upon him. He cannot stand this emotion. I think he is despairingly summoning strength to work upon his drugs, fearful that he will not be equal to it. Yet more fearful to disclose the secret and unloose so diabolical a power.

There are nights when with Dr. Kent asleep, Babs and I slip away and go to the Museum. We dismiss the guard for a time, and in that private room we sit hand in hand by the microscope to watch. The fragment of golden quartz lies on its clean white slab with a brilliant light upon it.

Mysterious little golden rock! What secrets are there, down beyond the vanishing point in the realm of the infinitely small! Our human longings go to Alan and to Glora.

But sometimes we are swept by the greater viewpoint. Awed by the mysteries of nature, we realize how very small and unimportant we are in the vast scheme of things. We envisage the infinite reaches of astronomical space overhead. Realms of largeness unfathomable. And at our feet, everywhere, are myriad entrances into the infinitely small. With ourselves in between—with our fatuous human consciousness that we are of some importance to it all!

Truly there are more things in Heaven and Earth than are dreamed of in our philosophy!

INVISIBLE EYES

An invisible eye that can see in the dark and detect the light of a ship two miles away on a black foggy night was introduced to newspaper men recently by its inventor, John Baird of television fame. He calls the invention "Noctovisor."

It looks like a large camera and can be mounted on a ship or airplane. It was announced that it would soon be tried on trans-Atlantic liners. For the demonstration it was mounted in the garden of Baird's cottage, overlooking the twinkling lights of Dorking. In

the dark beyond those lights an automobile headlight three miles away pointed toward the cottage.

At a signal from the inventor a sheet of ebonite, as a substitute for a supposed fog, two miles thick, was placed in front of the headlight. Not a glimmer was then visible to the human eye, but it appeared on the noctovisor screen as a bright red disc. It was supposed to have particular value in permitting a navigator in a fog to tell the exact direction of a beacon and to estimate roughly its distance.

The device is a combination of camera lens, television transmitter and television receiver. The lens throws a distant image on the exploring disc of the transmitter, through which it acts on a photo-electric cell sensitive to invisible infra-red rays. The receiver amplifies it for the observer.

MOON ROCKETS

Seventeen years of experimenting on a rocket designed by Prof. Albert H. Goddard of Clark University, to shriek its way from the earth to the moon, came to a glorious climax recently in an isolated and closely guarded section of Worcester when the rocket tore its

flaming way through the air for a quarter-mile with a roar heard for a distance of two miles.

Prof. Goddard said the rocket was shot out of its cradle, careened through the air a mass of flame, and landed about where it was directed to land, beyond the Auburn town line. Test of a new propellant was the object of his demonstration, Prof. Goddard said.

Two or three times a week a small rocket goes up into the air a short distance, not enough to attract great attention. But the latest was a nine-foot rocket, shot out of a forty-foot tower. Near the tower is a safety post built of stone, with slits for peepholes. The experimental party stepped into the safety zone when the rocket was started.

The forty-foot tower is built much like an oil well derrick. Inside it are two steel rails to fill grooves in the rocket. These guide the rocket much as rifling in a gun barrel guides a bullet. Prof. Goddard, when teaching at Princeton in 1912, evolved the idea of shooting a rocket to the moon by means of successive charges of explosive much as the new German rocket motor racers are powered. In this most recent experiment he used a new powder mixture.

Prof. Goddard issued a statement after the demonstration, which said:

"My test was one of a series of experiments with rockets using an entirely new propellant. There was no attempt to reach the moon or anything of such a spectacular nature. The rocket is normally noisy, possibly enough to attract considerable attention. The test was thoroughly satisfactory, nothing exploded in the air, and there was no damage except possibly that incidental to landing."

75 Terrors Unseen by Harl Vincent

One after another the invisible robots escape Shelton's control—and their trail leads straight to the gangster chief Cadorna.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

lisa screamed suddenly

- - -

Something about the lonely figure of the girl caused Edward Vail to bring his car to a sudden stop at the side of the road. When first he had glimpsed her off there on that narrow strip of rock-bound coast he was mildly surprised, for it was a desolate spot and seldom frequented by bathers so late in the season. Now he was aroused to startled attention by the unnatural posture of the slender body that had just been erect and outlined sharply against the graying September sky. He switched off the ignition and sprang to the ground.

Bent backward and twisted into the attitude of a contortionist, the little figure in the crimson bathing suit was a thing at which to marvel. No human being could maintain that position without falling, yet the girl did not fall to the jagged stones that lay beneath her. She was rigid, straining. Then suddenly her arm waved wildly and she screamed, a wild gasping cry that died in her throat on a note of despairing terror. It seemed that she struggled furiously with an unseen power for one horrible instant. Then the tortured body lurched violently and collapsed in a pitiful quivering heap among the stones.

Eddie Vail was running now, miraculously picking his way over the treacherous footing. The girl had fainted, no doubt of that, and something was seriously wrong with her.

A mysterious mechanical something whizzed past; something that buzzed like a thousand hornets and slithered over the rocks in a series of metallic clanks. Then it was gone—or so it seemed in the confusion of Eddie's mind; but he had seen nothing. Probably a fantasy of his overworked brain, or only the surf breaking against the sea wall. He turned his attention to the girl.

She was moaning and tossing her head, returning painfully to consciousness. He straightened her limbs and placed his folded coat

under the restless head, noting with alarm that vicious red welts marred the whiteness of her arms and shoulders. It was as if she had been beaten cruelly; those marks could never have resulted from her fall. Poor kid. Subject to fits of some sort, he presumed. She was a good looker, too, and no mistake. He smoothed back the rumpled mass of golden hair and studied her features. They were vaguely familiar.

Then she opened her eyes. Stark terror looked out from their ultra-marine depths, and her lips quivered as if she were about to cry. He raised her to a more comfortable position and supported her with an encircling arm. She did cry a little, like a frightened child. Then, with startling abruptness, she sprang to her feet.

"Where is it?" she demanded.

"Where's what?" Eddie was on his feet, peering in all directions. He remembered the queer sounds he had heard or imagined.

"I—I don't know." The girl passed a trembling hand before her eyes as if to wipe away some horrifying vision. "Perhaps it's my imagination, but I felt—it was just as real—one of father's iron monsters. Beating me; bending me. I'd have snapped in a moment. But nothing was there. I—I'm afraid...."

Eddie caught her as she swayed on her feet. "There now," he said soothingly, "you're all right, Miss Shelton. It's gone now, whatever it was." Iron monsters! In a flash it had come to him that this girl he held in his arms was Lina Shelton, daughter of the robot wizard. No wonder she was afflicted with hallucinations! But those bruises were real, as was the forcible twisting of her lithe young body. And he *had* heard something.

“You know me?" The girl was calmer now and faced him with a surprised look.

"Yes, Miss Shelton. At least I recognize you from the pictures. Society page, you know. And I'm Edward Vail—Eddie for short—on vacation and at your service."

The girl smiled wanly. "You know of father's break with Universal Electric? Of his private experiments?"

"I heard of the scrap and of how he walked out on the outfit, but nothing further." Eddie thought grimly of how nearly he had come to losing his own job when David Shelton broke relations with his employers. He had been too enthusiastic in support of some of the older man's claims.

"It's been terrible," the girl whispered. She clung nervously to his arm as he picked the way back to the road. "The loneliness, and all. No servants will stay out here now, and father spends all of his time in the laboratory. Then—this fear of the mechanical men—they haunt me. I—I guess they've got me a little goofy."

Eddie laughed reassuringly. "Perhaps," he suggested, "you will let me help you. Your father, I believe, will remember me, and I'll be very glad to—"

"No, no!" The girl seemed frightened at the thought. "I'm sure he wouldn't welcome you. He's changed greatly of late and is suspicious of everyone, even keeping things from me. But it's awfully nice of you to offer your assistance, and you've been a perfect peach to take care of me this way. I—I'd better go now."

They had reached the road and Eddie looked uncertainly at his roadster. He hated to think of leaving the girl in this lonely spot. She was obviously in a state of extreme nervous tension and, to him, seemed pathetically helpless, and afraid.

"That the house?" he asked, pointing in the direction of the gloomy old mansion whose dilapidated gables were barely visible over the tree tops.

"Yes." The girl shivered and drew closer to him.

The ensuing silence was broken by the slam of a door. His car! Eddie looked toward it in amazement; he was hearing things again. The springs sagged on the driver's side as under the weight of a very heavy occupant, but the seat was empty. Then came the whine of the starter and the motor purred into life. The gears clashed sickeningly and the car was jerked into the road with a violence that should have stripped the differential. He pulled the girl aside just as it roared past and disappeared around the bend in a cloud of dust. The sound of the exhaust died away rapidly and left them staring into each other's eyes in awed silence.

David Shelton was prowling around in the shrubbery when they approached the house—a furtive, unkempt creature whom Eddie would hardly have recognized. He straightened up and peered at his daughter's companion with obvious disapproval.

"Lina," he said severely, "I've told you we want no visitors."

"Yes, Dad, I know, but Mr. Vail's car was stolen out in front and there is no way for him to go on. We must look after him."

"His car—stolen? Who stole it?" David Shelton drew close and

glared suspiciously at his unwelcome visitor.

"One of your monsters, I think," she replied shakily, "though we could see nothing. And the same thing attacked me and beat me. Look at my bruises!"

Shelton was examining the marks, and his fingers trembled as he touched his daughter's shoulder. He looked piteously into her eyes. "Are you sure, Lina? Sure? Did you see it?"

"No, no. But I felt and heard—the iron arms and the clamps and the buzzing. Oh, it was horrible!" The girl's voice rose hysterically.

"Oh, Lord! What have I done?" groaned Shelton. "It's true, then. Lina, listen: I've succeeded in making them invisible, and one got away this morning. But I thought—I thought—" He looked at Eddie, remembering his presence suddenly. "But I'm talking too much. It seems to me I remember having seen you before, young man."

"You have, sir," Eddie stated. "In the research laboratory of Universal Electric. I work with Borden."

"They've sent you to find me?" Shelton stiffened perceptibly.

"Indeed, not, sir. I'm on vacation and was merely passing by when I

saw your daughter in danger, a danger I still do not understand."

"Yes, and he helped me to the road," Lina interposed, "and then lost his car at the hands of—"

"Silence!" the father thundered. But his eyes fell before the fire that instantly flashed in those of the girl.

"Now, you listen to me!" she returned angrily, "I've stayed on here with you until I'm nearly crazy with your everlasting puttering and experimenting—hearing your uncanny machines walking around in the middle of the night—seeing impossible sights—then, this thing I couldn't see but could feel. And you've gotten into such a state that you'll go crazy yourself, if you continue. Something's got to be done, I tell you. I can't stand it!"

Her voice broke on a choked sob.

"But Lina—"

"Don't but me, Father. I mean it. Mr. Vail discovered your hideout quite by accident and he's been very nice to me. I tell you he means no harm and I want him to stay. If you're not decent to him, if you send him away, I swear I'll go too. I will—I will!"

Shelton's eyes misted and something of the hardness left his expression. A look of haunting fear took its place and he stared pleadingly at Eddie.

"Br-r! I'm cold!" Lina exclaimed irrelevantly. "And—and I believe I'm going to cry." She turned away and raced for the shelter of the gloomy old house without another word.

Eddie turned inquiring eyes on his unwilling host.

"Just like her mother before her," Shelton muttered softly. Then he faced the younger man squarely and his shoulders straightened. "Mr. Vail," he said sheepishly, "I've been a fool and I ask your pardon. But Lina doesn't know. There's something tremendous behind all this, something that's gotten beyond me. I'll send her away for her own safety, but I must stay on. If—if only there was someone I could trust—"

"You can trust me, sir," Eddie stated simply.

The older man paced the ground nervously, and Eddie could see that he was under a most severe mental strain. Several times he halted in his tracks and peered anxiously at his guest. Then he seemed to make a sudden decision.

"Vail," he said sharply, "I need help badly. I want you to stay, if you will. You swear you'll not reveal what I am about to show you?"

"I swear it, sir."

"You'll not report to Universal?"

"Never."

They surveyed each other appraisingly. Eddie was mystified by the happenings of the day and was curious to learn more concerning these mythical invisible creations. It was inconceivable that the scientist had spoken truly of his accomplishment. Yet, he had done some marvelous things with Universal and, maybe—well, anyway, there was the girl.

"Come with me," Shelton was saying: "I believe you're a square shooter, Vail." He was leading the way along the gravel path at the side of the house. Before them loomed the squat brick building that was the laboratory.

The door crashed open before Shelton's hand had reached the knob, and one of those buzzing, unseen, monstrosities rushed clanking by, knocking the scientist from his feet in its passage. Ponderous,

speeding footsteps crunched the gravel of the path, and then, with a wild thrashing of the underbrush alongside, the thing was gone.

Eddie bent over the prostrate man and saw that he was unconscious. A thin trickle of blood ran from a cut in the side of his head.

"Lina! Lina!" called Eddie frantically. For the first time in his life he was genuinely frightened.

He half carried, half dragged the limp body through the door of the laboratory and propped it in a chair. It required but a moment for him to see that Shelton's injury was inconsequential. He had only been stunned and already showed signs of recovering.

"What is it, Mr. Vail? What's happened?" came the voice of Lina Shelton breathlessly. She was framed in the doorway, dressed now and panting from her exertions in responding to his call. "Oh, it's father," she wailed, dropping to her knees at his side. "He's been hurt. Badly, too."

"No, not badly, Miss Shelton. He'll be around in a minute. I'm sorry to have excited you, but when I called I feared it was worse than it is." He was washing the blood from her father's small wound as he spoke.

She took the basin from his hand, spilling some of the water in her eagerness. "Here, let me have that cloth," she demanded.

Eddie admired her as her deft fingers took up the task. She was as exquisite in a simple sport outfit as she had been in her bathing suit.

The scientist opened his eyes after a moment. Remembrance came at once and he sat erect in the chair, staring.

"Lina!" he exclaimed, grasping her hand conclusively. "You're here, thank God! I dreamed—oh, it was horrible—I dreamed they had you." He clung to her closely.

"They?" she murmured inquiringly.

"Yes. Two of them are loose now. It's danger for you, my dear. You must leave at once. No, no—I can't let you out of my sight until they are captured or destroyed." He rose to his feet in his agitation and shook his head to clear it. He looked pleadingly at Eddie as if expecting him to offer a solution of the difficulty.

"Vail!" he exploded, then, pointing a shaking forefinger at an elaborate short-wave radio transmitter which occupied a corner of the large room. "I ask you to bear witness. That is the source of

energy for these creations of mine and it's shut down. How on earth can they keep going? I ask you."

"Perhaps someone else, sir," Eddie suggested doubtfully. "Have you any enemies who might be able to duplicate the impulses of that apparatus?"

"Bah! Enemies, yes—with Universal—but none who could duplicate the complicated frequencies I use. My secrets are my own. I've never even put them on paper."

Eddie was examining the intricate apparatus. "You knew of the first one's escape, didn't you?" he asked. "How did it happen?"

Shelton again became the enthusiastic scientist. "Here," he said, "I'll show you and you can judge for yourself." He strode to the gleaming figure of a seven-foot robot of startlingly human-like appearance.

Lina let forth an exclamation of repugnance and fear.

"No, Mr. Shelton," Eddie objected. "The same thing will occur again. Then there will be three."

"We'll fix that, my boy." The scientist was removing cover plates from the hip joints of the mechanical man. "I'll disconnect the cables

that feed the locomotors. He *can't* walk then."

Eddie was still doubtful but dared offer no further objection, especially since Lina Shelton was watching in wide-eyed silence. He examined the monster and saw that it was quite similar in outside appearance to those supplied by Universal for heavy manual labor, excepting that this one was armed as were those used for prison guards. There were the same articulated limbs and the various clamps and hooks for lifting and heavy hauling; the tentacles for grasping; machine guns front and back. Under the helical headpiece that was the antenna this robot seemed to have two eyes—a new feature—but closer examination showed these to be the twin lenses of a stereoscopic motion picture camera. This robot, then, could see. Or at least it could record what the lenses saw for its masters.

"There," Shelton grunted when he had finished his tinkering, "he's paralyzed from the waist down. Let this one try and get away from us."

"Guns aren't loaded, are they?" Eddie asked.

"Lord, no! Never have any of them loaded. That *would* be a fool stunt." Shelton had pulled the starting handle of a motor-generator and its rising whine accompanied his words.

The vacuum tubes of the transmitter glowed into life and the scientist manipulated the controls rapidly. Lina was watching the robot with fascinated awe. Its arms moved in obedience to the controls, tentacles waved and coiled; the humming of its internal mechanisms filled the room. The locomotion controls had no effect, as the scientist had predicted. Eddie drew a sigh of relief.

"Now, Vail, watch," Shelton exulted. "I'll show you what I was doing with the first one." He closed a switch that lighted another bank of vacuum tubes behind the control panel.

"You can make this one invisible?" Eddie asked incredulously.

"Certainly—from the waist up. This ought to be good."

"Mind telling me the principle?"

"Not at all—now. I've your promise of secrecy. It's a simple matter, Vail, really. Just a problem of wave motions—light. Invisible light; the ultra-violet, you know. My robots are built of specially alloyed metals which permit great freedom of molecular vibration. The insulating materials and even the glass of the camera lenses are possessed of the same property. Get it? I merely set up a wave motion in the atoms of the material that is in synchronism with the

frequency of ultra-violet light, which is invisible to the human eye. All visible colors are absorbed, or more accurately, none are reflected excepting the ultra-violet. Perfect transparency is obtained since there is neither refraction nor diffraction of the visible colors. And there you are!"

Eddie stared at the upper half of the robot and saw that it was changing color as Shelton tuned the transmitted wave. Then suddenly it was gone. The entire upper portion of the mechanism had vanished; had just snuffed out like the flame of a candle. He could see down into the tops of the thing's hollow legs. Shelton laughed at him as he stretched forth his hand and hesitatingly felt for the invisible mid-section and upper body. It was there all right, unyielding and cold, that metal body. But no trace of it was visible to the eye. He drew back his fingers as if they had touched a hot stove. The thing was positively uncanny.

"Dad! Turn it off—please," Lina begged. "It's getting on my nerves. Please!"

Obligingly, Shelton pulled the switch. "Now you'll see," he said to Eddie, "whether the same thing happens. Watch."

Mistily at first, the outlines of the monster's torso and arms came

into view, semi-transparent but clouding rapidly to opacity. Then it glinted with the barely visible violet, a solid once more, rigid and motionless. It was a lifeless mechanism, for the source of its energy had been cut off. Eddie had an almost irresistible impulse to pinch himself.

Then he gasped audibly, as did Shelton, for the thing snuffed out of sight again without warning, and the hum of its many motors resumed. There came a terrific clanking as it waved arms and tentacles and violently threshed with its upper body. But the visible portion, its legs, remained rooted to the floor of the laboratory. Lucky it was that the scientist had disconnected those wires; lucky too that the machine guns were empty of ammunition.

"There now—see?" Shelton's voice rose excitedly. "It's been no fault of mine. The power is off but it moves—it moves. What on earth do you suppose—"

Eddie's shout interrupted him. He had seen something at the window: a face pressed against the pane and contorted with unutterable malice. Then it was gone. With the shout of warning still in his throat, Eddie bounded through the door in pursuit of the intruder. Lina's cry of recognition followed him into the twilight. "Carlos!" she had called.

He saw a stocky figure slink around the corner of the laboratory and make for the underbrush beyond. In a flash he was after him. No, he thought grimly, Shelton hadn't any enemy clever enough to duplicate his transmitter! The hell he didn't! Who the devil was this fellow Carlos anyway? He tore savagely at the impeding branches as he plunged deeper and deeper into the thicket.

It was a fruitless chase and Eddie soon retraced his steps to the laboratory. Swell mess he'd gotten himself into! His car was gone: probably wrapped around a tree by this time. And here was a situation that spelled real danger, a thing with which Shelton was utterly unable to cope. As a matter of fact, he was so impractical—such a visionary cuss, after the fashion of all geniuses—that he'd never be convinced of the seriousness of the matter until it was too late. What to do? The girl was a corker, though, and game as they made 'em. Just the sort a fellow could tie to....

Lina's firm clear voice came to him through the open door of the laboratory. "Dad," she was saying, "why don't you give it up? Let's go back to New York where it is safe for you and for me. Let the things go and forget about them. What do they amount to, after all? We've plenty of money and you already have earned enough fame to last the rest of your life. Come on now—please—for me."

"What do they amount to?" Shelton reiterated, his voice rising querulously. "Lina, it's the most tremendous thing I've ever done. Think for a moment of what my robots could accomplish in the next war. And there'll be a next war as sure as you're alive. Think of it! No sending of our young manhood into the bloody fields of battle; no manning of our air fleets with the cream of our youth; no bloodshed on our side whatsoever. Instead, these robots will fight the war. They'll fight other robots too, no doubt, but the property of invisibility will be an invincible weapon. It will be a war that will end war once and for all. You can't—"

"Nonsense, Father," the girl returned sharply. "You've let your enthusiasm run away with your judgment. See what's happened already?—someone's figured it out before you've even perfected the thing. An enemy of our country could do the same in wartime. Maybe it's a foreign spy who has done what's been done to-day."

Eddie walked into the laboratory. "Couldn't find him," he announced briefly.

"No difference," said Shelton. "He doesn't count in this. We called to you when you rushed out, but couldn't make you hear."

"Who is he?" Eddie asked shortly. What he had overheard made him

more than ever impatient with the older man. So clever and yet so dense, Shelton was.

Lina avoided his gaze.

"Only Carlos—Carlos Savarino," said Shelton, carelessly, "a Chilean, I think. He worked for me for two months during the summer and I fired him for getting fresh with Lina. Good mechanic, but dumb as an ox. Had to tell him every little detail when he was doing something in the shop. I'd have saved time if I'd done it myself."

The girl looked at Eddie squarely now. She was flushing hotly. "And I horsewhipped him," she added.

"Yes," Shelton laughed; "it was rich. He sneaked away like a whipped puppy, and this is the first time we've seen him since."

Eddie whistled. "And you think he doesn't count in this?" he asked.

"Of course not. Too dumb, I tell you. Doesn't know the first principles of science. He thinks the only wave motion is that of the ocean." Shelton chuckled over his own jest.

"I wouldn't be too sure," Eddie snapped. "And I want to tell you

something, Mr. Shelton. Through no fault of my own, I heard some of your conversation with Li—with your daughter, before I returned here. I was puzzled over your reasons for working so absorbedly on this thing, but now I know them and I think you're wasting your time and keeping your daughter in needless danger."

"You dare talk to me like this!" Shelton roared.

"I do, sir, and you'll thank me later." Eddie returned the older man's glare with one equally savage.

Lina's gurgle of laughter broke the tension. "He's right, Dad, and you know it," she interposed. "Let him finish."

Eddie needed no such encouragement, though it warmed his heart. And Shelton listened respectfully when he continued, "I'm into this now, sir, and I intend to see it through to the end. I'll keep your secret, too, though I doubt if it'll ever be of much value to you. Know what I think? I think this Carlos is a damn clever fellow instead of the ass you took him to be. He probably just pretended he was ignorant of science. Why shouldn't he? That way he got a liberal education from you in the very things he wanted to find out. Since you tied the can to him he's had plenty of chances to build a duplicate of your control apparatus—with the aid of some foreign

government, no doubt—and now they've stolen two of your machines to complete the job. Your secret already is out and in the very hands you've tried to keep it from."

Shelton paled visibly as Eddie talked. "But—but how—" he stammered.

"How should I know how they did it?" the younger man countered. "Here—let's take a look around. I'll bet they've left their trail right here in this room."

He walked from one end of the laboratory to the other, peering into corners and under work benches as he passed. Shelton trailed him like a shadow, squinting through the square lenses of his spectacles.

They carefully avoided the partially invisible robot, for the humming of its upper motors continued and clanking sounds occasionally issued from the unseen upper portion. The enemies of David Shelton were still at work on their hidden controls.

"Here—what's this?" Eddie exclaimed suddenly, pointing out a glinting object in a dark corner of the laboratory.

Shelton examined it closely, looking over his shoulder. The object he

had located seemed to be a mounted and hooded lens, a highly polished glass of about two inches diameter with its mounting attached rigidly to the wall.

"Never saw that before," Shelton stated with conviction. "And—why—it looks like an objective such as those used in the latest automatic television transmitters."

"Just what it is," Eddie grunted. He picked up a pinch bar from a nearby tool rack and drove its end through the glass as he spoke the words.

A violent wrench tore the thing loose and broke away a section of the thin plastered wall. There, in the cleverly concealed cavity behind, was revealed the mechanism of the radio "eye." Somewhere, someone bad been watching their every move. And abruptly the thrashings of the robot ceased and its upper portion again became visible.

“Well," said David Shelton. "Well! Looks as if you're right, young man. I'm astonished." His watery eyes looked sheepishly over the rims of his glasses.

Lina watched their every move. She seemed to sense the seriousness

of the situation far more than did her father.

Then the lights went out. It had darkened to night outside and the blackness and silence in the laboratory was like that of a tomb.

"They've cut the wires," Eddie whispered hoarsely. "Got any weapons here, Shelton?"

"Yes. A couple of automatics. I'll get them." The scientist was no coward, anyway. His whispered words came calmly through the silence.

Eddie heard him shuffle a few steps and fumble with a drawer of the desk. In a moment the cold hard butt of a pistol was thrust into his hand. It had a comforting feel.

"Stay here with Lina," he commanded. "I'll go out and see if I can find them. This looks nasty to me."

"No," came the girl's voice, "I'm going too."

"You are not," Eddie hissed. "You'll stay here or I'll know the reason. It's dark as a pocket outside and my eyes are as good as theirs. I'll get 'em if they're around here. You hear me?"

"Yes," she whispered meekly.

Edward Vail, only that morning headed for rest and quiet, was now out in the night, stalking an unknown and vicious enemy. And—for what? As he asked himself the question, the smile of Lina seemed to answer him from the blackness. Cherchez la femme! He was getting dotty as he neared his thirties. Maybe it was the hard work that had affected his mind.

The black hulk of the old house loomed against the scarcely less dark sky. There was no moon, and in only one tiny portion of the heavens were the stars visible. Mighty few of them at that. The swish-swish of the surf came to his ears faintly. Or was it someone creeping along the wall of the house? He held his breath and waited.

They wouldn't use the robots at night. Couldn't follow their movements in the teleview, if such an attachment had been built into their control transmitter. No, the devils would be here in person.

A muttered Teutonic curse sounded close at hand. That wouldn't be Carlos. God! Were the heinies mixed up in this thing? Just like 'em to be swiping a new war machine; but hadn't they gotten enough in 1944? Without warning he was catapulted from his feet by the impact of a heavy body. He struck the ground so violently that the

pistol was jarred from his hand. Disarmed before the fight had started!

Then he was rolling over and over, battling desperately with an assailant who was much larger and heavier than himself. He was dazed and weakened from his initial dive to the hard ground. All rules of boxing and wrestling were forgotten. Biting, kicking, gouging, all were the same to this silent and powerful antagonist. It was catch-as-catch-can in the darkness, and mostly the other fellow could and did. He had a grip like the clamp of a robot. Trying to dig out one of his eyes? Eddie saw stars—and lashed out with all his might, his flying fists playing a tattoo on the others ribs. Short arm jabs that brought grunts of agony from his big assailant. Try to blind him, would he?

Eddie somehow managed to get on top; his clutching fingers found the other's collar. Then he let loose with terrific rights and lefts that smacked home to head and face. Those outlanders don't like the good old American fist, and Eddie had room to bring them in from way back, now. The fellow had ceased struggling and Eddie's hands were getting slippery. Blood! Must be, for the stuff was warm and sticky. He rested for a moment, breathing heavily. The other was quiet beneath him—knocked cold. He staggered to his feet triumphantly; wondered how many more of them there were.

He looked around in the darkness, straining his eyes in vain to pierce its thick veil. There was a glimmer of light over there, through a window. The laboratory! The light flickered a second and vanished. A cold fear gripped him and he stumbled through the grounds blindly, finally colliding painfully with the brick wall. He felt his way toward the door, or where he thought it should be.

He dared not call out for fear the others would hear. Where was that damned door? He rested again and listened. Not a sound was to be heard from within or without. He clawed his way frantically along the unsympathetic wall. It was a mile wide, that laboratory of Shelton's. Ah—at last! Weakly, he staggered within.

"Lina!" he whispered, "Lina! Shelton!"

There was no reply. He fumbled for a match. Funny how slowly his mind worked ... thoughts coming jerkily like a sound film running at quarter speed ... fingers shaking so he could scarcely strike a light. The flare showed the laboratory empty of human beings ... Lina gone ... that crazy robot ... quiet now, and visible ... but grinning at him ... then darkness....

What a headache! Eddie rolled over and groaned. Astounded by the hardness of his bed and the stiffness of his joints, he roused to

instant wakefulness; sat up and stared. Where the devil was he? The laboratory—Shelton's—Lina. He jumped to his feet. Dawn was breaking and its first faint radiance lighted the robot with eery shifting colors. He berated himself: he'd passed out.

He dashed through the door and made a wild circuit of the grounds. Empty! No—there was his automatic, where it had fallen. Blood stains on the grass showed where the encounter had taken place last night. Must have smashed the Dutchman's nose. But he was gone. Everybody was gone. He rushed into the house and from room to room, upstairs and down. The place was deserted.

This was something to think about. Not an automobile around, no neighbors, not even a telephone. When Shelton went into seclusion, he did it thoroughly. Eddie returned to the laboratory and hunched himself in the scientist's chair. Maybe he could think better here.

They had Shelton and his daughter, all right. Kidnapped them. There was probably some detail of his discovery they couldn't dope out, and had decided to force him into telling them. The devils would use Lina's safety as a threat to force him into anything. Horrible, that thought. And Carlos already had made advances to her.

Startled by a sharp click, he turned around. The robot was whirring

into life. Fast workers, whoever Shelton's enemies were, and up early! He found the pinch bar with which he had wrecked the television apparatus and, with a few mighty blows, destroyed the antenna and headpiece of the mechanical man. They'd not pull off any devilment with this one, anyway.

A wave meter on one of the benches attracted his attention and he twirled its knob. It gave strong indication at one and a half meters. The wave length of their control transmitter! If only he could find—but there it was: a direction finder. Hastily, he lighted its tubes and tuned to the frequency shown by the meter. He rotated the loop over the compass dial and carefully noted maximum and minimum signals. He had a line on the transmitter! And it must be close by, for the intensity of the carrier wave was tremendous.

Slipping the automatic into his pocket, he left the laboratory and struck out through the underbrush in the direction Carlos had taken the day before. Fighting his way through the tangled shrubbery, he kept his eyes constantly on the needle of the magnetic compass he had wrenched from the direction finder. It was tough going through the thicket, and just as bad across a swampy clearing where he was mired to the knees before he got across. Up the hill and into the woods he forged, keeping doggedly to the direction he had determined. This was rough country, less than a hundred miles from

New York but uncultivated and unsettled excepting for the few summer places along the shore. He'd heard that these backwoods were infested with rum-runners and hijackers, a cutthroat gang.

There was a cabin off there through the trees, almost on the line he was following. Must be what he was looking for. He advanced cautiously, creeping stealthily from tree to tree.

Voices came to his ears, and the throb of a motor-generator. It was the place, all right. He crept closer, and, circling the house, saw that an almost impassable road led to it from the rear. A heavy limousine was parked there in the trees, and another car, a yellow roadster—his own. A feeling of grim satisfaction was quickly dispelled by the sound of a familiar humming. Within a foot of his ear, it seemed to be, and instinctively he ducked.

Click! A powerful clamp had fastened itself to his wrist. One of Shelton's invisible robots! He struck blindly at the unseen monster and was rewarded by a shooting pain up his wrist as one of his knuckles was driven backward by the impact with the hard metal. Bands of writhing metal encompassed his body, pinning his arms to his side and lifting him bodily from the ground. There he hung, kicking and struggling in mid-air, supported by nothing he could see. He closed his eyes and felt of the thing that held him. Cold, hard

metal it was—implacable and unyielding.

Clank, clank. The monster was walking with long, jerky strides. The pressure against his ribs brought a gasp of agony from his lips. Each jarring step was an individual and excruciating torture. His breath was cut off by the relentless constriction of one of the tentacles which now encircled his neck. It wouldn't be long now.

Then, when everything had turned black and he had given up hope, he was dumped unceremoniously on the hard floor of the cabin. A harsh laugh greeted him as he struggled weakly to his knees.

"Thought you could put one over on Al Cadorna, did you?" a voice rasped.

The room spun round as he tried to regain his feet. A mist swam before his eyes. Al Cadorna! The most picturesque figure in gangland. Credited with a dozen killings and with ill-gotten wealth untold, this leader of the underworld openly boasted that the police had never gotten anything on him. And they hadn't. So it was a criminal who had laid hands on Shelton's robots, not a foreign spy. Worse and worse. He thought of what they might be able to do with these invisible mechanical things: make gunmen out of them; safe blowers; house breakers. Why, society would be at their mercy;

banks defenceless; the mints, even—

"Stand up on your pins, you worm! Let's have a look at you!" The muzzle of an automatic was thrust in his abdomen, prodding insistently. Things stabilized in the room and he looked up into the cruelest face he had ever seen, and recognizable from the many pictures which had appeared in the yellow press.

Eddie took in the surroundings at a glance. He was in a low-ceilinged room that was almost unfurnished. In one corner there was a replica of Shelton's robot control, teleview disc and all. Carlos had just pulled the switch and the robot was taking visible form. The man who prodded him with the automatic was Cadorna, no doubt of that. His evil leer and yellow eyes marked him at once. The other occupant of the room was a big square-built man with a patch over one eye and strips of adhesive tape across his nose—his antagonist of the night before. Must have sneaked off after he came to; it was safer to send one of the robots after the *verdammt Amerikaner*. Eddie restrained a chuckle at the thought.

"Nothing to laugh at, kid!" Cadorna snarled. "You're goin' for a nice long ride pretty quick. Know that?"

Eddie's head was clearing rapidly, but he pretended to sway on his

feet. Lina and her father were not in sight. If only he could spar for a little time.

"What's the idea?" he asked. "Haven't you guys got enough?"

"That's our business. We know what we're doin', and when you butted in you just signed your own papers. Dead men don't talk, you know, kid!"

There was a door at the other side of the room. If only he could see whether Lina was in there; whether she was alive.

"Tie him up, Gus!" Cadorna kept the pistol pressed into the pit of Eddie's stomach as he gave the order. "Hands and feet—and make it a good job, you wiener."

Eddie shouted then. "Lina!" Resistance was useless, but it would give him some satisfaction to know she still lived even though Cadorna pulled that trigger in the next instant. No reply came from beyond that door.

"So!" Cadorna grinned maliciously. "Another victim! Carlos first, then you, and now—Al Cadorna. If you're worrying about her, kid, you needn't. She'll be perfectly safe with me."

Eddie's roar of rage shook the rafters. Heedless of consequences, he brought his knee up suddenly and violently. Cadorna sank to the floor with a groan, his pistol clattering harmlessly on the rough planks. In a flash Eddie retrieved it, dropping behind the prostrate form of the stricken gangster. Gus had fired and missed. Now he dared not shoot for fear of hitting his chief. Eddie's gun spat fire and the big German clapped his hands over his heart, his good eye widening in surprise. Then he reeled and pitched forward on his face. A feminine cry sounded from the adjoining room and Eddie's heart skipped a beat when he heard it.

Carlos was padding across the floor, trying to get into a position where he could fire without endangering Cadorna. Eddie swung his pistol around and pulled the trigger. A miss! He fired again, but too late. Fingers of steel had gripped his wrist and the king of gangland rolled over on him, twisting the gun from his hand. Clubbed now, the pistol was raised high over that distorted, malicious face. Eddie tried to twist away from under the blow as it started its downward swing, then a thousand steam hammers hit him all at once and ... blackness....

Something was pounding insistently at the doors of his consciousness. He must pull himself together! They'd left him for dead and he was—almost. But voices as loud and raucous as those

would waken the dead. He groaned with pain when he attempted to move his head.

"That for you, you rat." It was Cadorna's voice. "Try to take my woman, will you?"

The pounding resolved itself into the angry barking of an automatic. Someone squealed with mortal agony. Eddie opened his eyes cautiously and saw that the room was full of people. The pungent odor of burned powder assailed his nostrils. There was Cadorna and Carlos, David Shelton and Lina. An undersized, dapper youth stood over the body of the big German, his hands outstretched before his horror-stricken face. A moment he stood thus, like a statue. Then his knees gave way beneath him and he crumpled into a grotesque heap beside the man who had been called Gus. Such was the manner of Cadorna's dealing with those who displeased him.

The door to the adjoining room was open. Lina and her father had been kept in there, with the little thug as their guard. Evidently Cadorna had caught him trying to force his attentions on the girl. Good thing he'd killed him.

Lina was sobbing and the sound brought increased agony to the helpless Eddie. He lay still where they had placed him, beside the

table which supported the robot control apparatus. His cheek was against the floor and he saw that a little pool of blood was forming there, blood drawn by the butt of Cadorna's pistol when it contacted with his skull. He was bound hand and foot. They hadn't thought him dead, after all. Keeping him for that ride and a watery grave. Couldn't afford to leave his body around where it might be found.

"What are you going to do with us?" Shelton was asking, his voice bravely defiant. Game old sport at that, he was.

"Don't fret over your daughter. Al Cadorna's her protector now, and she'll be taken care of better'n she's ever been. But you—that's somethin' else again. First off, you're goin' to give Carlos the dope on these trick metals in your machines. He couldn't analyze 'em, or whatever you call it. Then you're goin' to have a nice long ride with your friend over there."

"You'll go to the chair for this, Cadorna. And I'll never tell you the secret of the alloys."

"Tell him, Dad," Lina was crying. "He'll let us go if you do."

"The hell I will, girlie. What I said, goes. We'll make him talk first, too," Cadorna snarled.

"Never!" Shelton shouted.

Lina had seen Eddie and, with a little cry, she bounded across the room. Carlos was after her like a panther.

"Hands off that dame!" Cadorna yelled. "Let her cry over the boy friend if she wants to. Won't do her any good. You get busy and set one of the tin soldiers goin'. Make the old buzzard talk."

Carlos muttered sullenly as he started the motor-generator. Give him a chance and he'd knife Cadorna in the back—for Lina.

The girl was kneeling at Eddie's side now, examining his bleeding scalp. He opened one eye and gazed at her solemnly, pursing his lips in a warning to silence. She caught her breath and nodded in understanding.

Cadorna was shouting like a madman. "Keep the damn thing so I can see it, you spig! They make me bug-house when you blink 'em off. Besides, I don't trust you."

The bold Cadorna was afraid of something he couldn't see! An idea flashed across Eddie's quickening mind. But he was helpless—bound so tightly that the cords cut his wrists.

One of the robots was clanking across the room. Lina looked up in momentary terror and Eddie saw her eyes stray over the table top where Carlos was working.

"Want to grab the old one?" the Chilean called.

"Yes. Pick him up and squeeze him till his ribs crack. He'll talk."

Lina let a little moan escape her lips. Eddie was watching as the iron monster approached the scientist and flung its tentacles around his madly struggling form. Lina was fussing with him, trying to turn him over. Cadorna's back was to them, his face thrust into that of Shelton, who was fighting desperately to avoid the crushing grip of the robot.

"Give him a squeeze, Carlos."

Shelton's yell brought another low moan from the girl's set lips. She was working furiously at Eddie's bonds. Lord, she had a knife! Good girl! Must have found it on the table. His hands were free and he wriggled his fingers to bring them to life. Then his feet. He was able to move. Lina whispered in his ear.

"All right?" she asked anxiously.

"Yes," he whispered. Somehow their lips touched and Eddie felt his heart pound at his temples. New life came to him with a rush of exaltation.

Shelton was crying out in pain and Lina sprang to her feet. "You beast!" she shouted at Cadorna. "Let him go."

Then she was across the room, tearing at the unyielding metal bands that pinioned her father and slowly crushed him. Cadorna laughed mirthlessly.

"Tell him to give me the dope," he retorted. "Then I'll let him go—for a while."

Shelton's head hung on his chest, rolling weakly from side to side. Eddie doubted whether he could speak if he wished to. The Chilean was working at the controls, increasing the tension of those terrible tentacles. Eddie raised himself to his knees, watching Cadorna narrowly. He fingered the knife Lina had used in freeing him. No, he couldn't use that. The Chilean would cry out and queer everything. He laid it on the floor, within easy reach.

Cadorna was cursing now, first Shelton and then the girl. His rage was maniacal. "Another notch!" he bellowed.

Eddie rose silently and clamped his fingers on the Chilean's windpipe. Lina's eyes widened as she saw. She did everything in her power to keep Cadorna's attention occupied as Eddie sunk those fingers into Carlos' throat. The Chilean's eyes popped from his head as he struggled furiously to tear away the steel-sinewed hand that had stopped off his breath. Death was staring him in the face, and he could not cry out. His strength left suddenly as the fingers dug in deeper, and Eddie shook him as he would a rat. In a surprisingly short time he had slumped to the floor, and not until his squirmings ceased did Eddie loose that awful grip.

"Another notch, you spiggoty!"

Eddie bent over the controls. Lina's pleadings mingled with the curses of Cadorna. She was cajoling now—telling the brute she'd go with him gladly if only he'd free her father; promising anything, everything, in the desperate attempt to keep him from discovering that his last henchman was out of the picture. But her words served only to spur Eddie to swifter action. He twirled the knobs of the dual control. The second robot was fading from view. He'd give Cadorna a dose of the thing he really feared. He eased off a little on the other control, releasing the pressure on poor Shelton's ribs as much as he dared.

The position indicator of the second robot moved slightly as Eddie started the invisible monster toward the yelling gangster. He watched the screen closely. It was quite a trick, at that, controlling these things you couldn't see. All you had to go by were these sketchy representations in the teleview; tiny flecks of light that outlined the various movable members of the robot.

"Eddie!" Lina screamed suddenly. "Look out!"

But he had seen Cadorna wheel around as he watched his image on the screen. At that moment a tentacle was writhing its way around his thick neck. A bullet whistled past Eddie's ear and buried itself harmlessly in the wall.

Then from the blasphemous mouth of the king of gangland there came a shriek of awful fear. The tightening tentacle shut it off in a choking gurgle. Cadorna was captured at last—by a monster he could not see, a monster that struck terror to his craven soul.

It was the work of but a moment to free David Shelton from the grip of the other robot. The tortured man tottered into Lina's arms for support.

Eddie played with Cadorna now, releasing the grip from his throat

and pinioning his arms instead. With rapid fingers he manipulated the controls until the screaming gangster was raised high in the air by the unseen arms of the robot.

"Another notch, Al," he chortled.

Cadorna yelled anew as the clamps tightened, "For God's sake, kid, quit it! Let me down. I'll do anything you say."

"Yeah?" Eddie moved one of the rheostat knobs a trifle.

The prince of racketeers was whimpering now, like a baby. The sharp snap of a rib punctured his outcries.

"Another notch," said Eddie grimly.

But the king of the underworld had fainted.

An hour later Eddie Vail surveyed the scene complacently. Lina had washed the blood from his head and face and bandaged his wound. Luckily, Cardorna's blow had been a glancing one. The girl was fussing over her father, now, and the scientist was on the point of resenting her attentions; swore he could take care of himself; he wasn't a baby. Carlos and his chief were trussed up like mummies, and had been snarling at each other ever since the Chilean recovered

his senses, each blaming the other for their predicament. The robots stood motionless by the wall.

This would be a big haul for the police. Plenty of evidence to send Cadorna to the chair now. The murder of Butch Collins, the undersized thug, had been witnessed by three of them. No, four: Carlos would squeal. He was that kind. There would be rejoicing in the underworld too, for Cadorna had many enemies. They'd be killing each other off in droves though, for the leaders of rival gangs would be battling for his place.

"Guess we'll have to dump them in the limousine," he remarked to Shelton. "Drive them to the nearest town and turn them over to the authorities."

"Yes. Then they can come back for the bodies of the other two." Shelton grimaced as he contemplated the sprawled figures.

"What about your robots?" Eddie asked.

"Why, I'll go ahead with my original plans, of course." The scientist looked surprised.

"Dad!" Lina turned beseeching eyes on Eddie and his heart

performed amazingly as he looked into their depths.

"And why not?" asked her father dolefully. "They'll insure the peace of the world. They'll—"

"Listen, Mr. Shelton," Eddie interrupted. "If you'll think a little you'll realize that they'll do no such thing. Has any new and terrible engine of destruction ever accomplished that result? No—the enemy always finds a way of combating the new weapon and of devising another still more terrible. You've discovered a marvelous thing, but its value is quite problematical."

"How can they ever combat a thing they cannot see?"

"Easily. Why, I could devise a teleview attachment in two days that would make them visible. Photo-electric cells are capable of detecting ultra-violet light as you well know. Radium glows under its rays. Why not coat a teleview screen with some radio-active material?"

Shelton frowned thoughtfully. "You're right. Vail," he said, after a moment of silence; "absolutely right. It was only a dream."

With dragging feet he walked to the transmitter, his expression grim

in the realization of failure. He started the motor-generator with a gesture of finality.

"What are you going to do?" Eddie asked fearfully.

"Watch me! At least I can demonstrate another phase of the basic principle I have discovered."

The motors of both robots whirred.

"Don't!" Cadorna wailed. "For God's sake, don't blink 'em out!"

Carlos cursed his chief for a coward.

Shelton was talking rapidly as he manipulated the controls. Instead of building up the wave motion to the frequency of invisible light he was reducing it. Past the other end of the spectrum and into the infra-red. The heat ray! Both monsters were changing color as he marched them through the door and into the open. But now they glowed with a visible red that rapidly intensified to the dazzling whiteness of intense heat. Cadorna babbled in superstitious terror. Then, in an instant, both mechanisms were reduced to shapeless blobs of molten metal. Lina clapped her hands gleefully.

Shelton looked up with enthusiasm once more shining in his face.

"Vail, my boy," he said, "we can find some use for that in industry. Let the next war take care of itself."

"You bet!" Eddie was lost in contemplation of the girl—the flush of pleasure that came at her father's words; the shining eyes.

"Then you'll leave the old place down here?" she asked eagerly.

"Yes, as soon as we get rid of these crooks and the other robot. Vail is to spend the rest of his vacation with us, too—if he will."

Would he? Eddie gazed at the girl in rapt admiration and with an inward thrill over his astounding good fortune. Her eyes dropped before the intensity in his and her flush heightened.

David Shelton was wiping his glasses and peering at them with an understanding smile. Good sport, Shelton—and in some ways as wise as they made them. Eddie waited breathlessly for the girl to speak.

"Oh, that's wonderful, Dad," she approved; "and I'm sure that Mr. Vail will agree."

She turned those glorious eyes on Eddie once more and her inquiring smile spoke volumes. He opened his mouth to accept the invitation

but the words would not come. He could only nod his head vigorously like an abashed schoolboy.

Some vacation!

76 The Meteor Girl by Jack Williamson

Through the complicated space-time of the fourth dimension goes Charlie King in an attempt to rescue the Meteor Girl.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

we could hear nothing

- - -

“What's the good in Einstein, anyhow?"

I shot the question at lean young Charlie King. In a moment he looked up at me; I thought there was pain in the back of his clear brown eyes. Lips closed in a thin white line across his wind-tanned face; nervously he tapped his pipe on the metal cowling of the *Golden Gull's* cockpit.

"I know that space is curved, that there is really no space or time, but only space-time, that electricity and gravitation and magnetism are all the same. But how is that going to pay my grocery bill—or yours?"

"That's what Virginia wants to know."

"Virginia Randall!" I was astonished. "Why, I thought—"

"I know. We've been engaged a year. But she's called it off."

Charlie looked into my eyes for a long minute, his lips still compressed. We were leaning on the freshly painted, streamline fuselage of the *Golden Gull*, as neat a little amphibian monoplane as ever made three hundred miles an hour. She stood on the glistening white sand of our private landing field on the eastern Florida coast. Below us the green Atlantic was running in white foam on the rocks.

In the year that Charlie King and I had been out of the Institute of Technology, we had built the nucleus of a commercial airplane business. We had designed and built here in our own shops several very successful seaplanes and amphibians. Charlie's brilliant mathematical mind was of the greatest aid, except when he was too far lost in his abstruse speculations to descend to things commercial.

Mathematics is painful enough to me when it is used in calculating the camber of an airplane wing. And pure mathematics, such as the theories of relativity and equivalence, I simply abhor.

I was amazed. Virginia Randall was a girl trim and beautiful as our shining *Golden Gull*. I had thought them devotedly in love, and had been looking forward to the wedding.

"But it isn't two weeks, since Virginia was out here! You took her up in our *Western Gull IV*!"

Nervously Charlie lit his pipe, drew quickly on it. His face, lean and drawn beneath the flying goggles pushed up on his forehead, sought mine anxiously.

"I know. I drove her back to the station. That was when—when we quarreled."

"But why? About Einstein? That's silly."

"She wanted me to give it up here, and go in with her father in his Wall Street brokerage business. The old gent is willing to take me, and make a business man of me."

"Why, I couldn't run the business without you, Charlie!"

"We talked about that, Hammond. I don't really do much of the work. Just play around with the mathematics, and leave the models and blueprints to you."

"Oh, Charlie, that's not quite—"

"It's the truth, right enough," he said, bitterly. "You design aircraft, and I play with Einstein. And as you say, a fellow can't eat equations."

"I'd hate to see you go."

"And I'd hate to give up you, and our business, and the math. Really no need of it. My tastes are simple enough. And old 'Iron-clad' Randall has made all one family needs. Virginia's not exactly a pauper, herself. Two or three millions, I think."

"And where did Virginia go?"

"She took the *Valhalla* yesterday at San Francisco. Going to join her father at Panama. He cruises about the world in his steam yacht, you know, and runs Wall Street by radio. I was to telegraph her if I'd changed my mind. I decided to stick to you, Hammond. I telegraphed a corsage of orchids, and sent her the message, 'Einstein

forever!'"

"If I know Virginia, those were not very politic words."

"Well, a man—"

His words were cut short by a very unusual incident.

A thin, high scream came suddenly from above our neat stuccoed hangars at the edge of the white field. I looked up quickly, to catch a glimpse of a bright object hurtling through the air above our heads. The bellowing scream ended abruptly in a thunderous crash. I felt a tremor of the ground underfoot.

"What—" I ejaculated.

"Look!" cried Charlie.

He pointed. I looked over the gleaming metal wing of the *Golden Gull*, to see a huge cloud of white sand rising like a fountain at the farther side of the level field. Deliberately the column of debris rose, spread, rained down, leaving a gaping crater in the earth.

"Something fell?"

"It sounded like a shell from a big gun, except that it didn't explode. Let's get over and see!"

We ran to where the thing had struck, three hundred yards across the field. We found a great funnel-shaped pit torn in the naked earth. It was a dozen yards across, fifteen feet deep, and surrounded with a powdery ring of white sand and pulverized rock.

"Something like a shell-hole," I observed.

"I've got it!" Charlie cried. "It was a meteor!"

"A meteor? So big?"

"Yes. Lucky for us it was no bigger. If it had been like the one that fell in Siberia a few years ago, or the one that made the Winslow crater in Arizona—we wouldn't have been talking about it. Probably we have a chunk of nickel-iron alloy here."

"I'll get some of the men out here with digging tools, and we'll see what we can find."

Our mechanics were already hurrying across the field. I shouted at them to bring picks and shovels. In a few minutes five of us were at work throwing sand and shattered rock out of the pit.

Suddenly I noticed a curious thing. A pale bluish mist hung in the bottom of the pit. It was easily transparent, no denser than tobacco smoke. Passing my spade through it did not seem to disturb it in the least.

I rubbed my eyes doubtfully, said to Charlie, "Do you see a sort of blue haze in the pit?"

He peered. "No. No.... Yes. Yes, I do! Funny thing. Kind of a blue fog. And the tools cut right through it without moving it! Queer! Must have something to do with the meteor!" He was very excited.

We dug more eagerly. An hour later we had opened the hole to a depth of twenty feet. Our shovels were clanging on the gray iron of the rock from space. The mist had grown thicker as the excavation deepened; we looked at the stone through a screen of motionless blue fog.

We had found the meteor. There were several queer things about it. The first man who touched it—a big Swede mechanic named Olson—was knocked cold as if by a nasty jolt of electricity. It took half an hour to bring him to consciousness.

As fast as the rugged iron side of the meteorite was uncovered, a

white crust of frost formed over it.

"It was as cold as outer space, nearly at the absolute zero," Charlie explained. "And it was heated only superficially during its quick passage through the air. But how it comes to be charged with electricity—I can't say."

He hurried up to his laboratory behind the hangars, where he had equipment ranging from an astronomical telescope to a delicate seismograph. He brought back as much electrical equipment as he could carry. He had me touch an insulated wire to the frost-covered stone from space, while he put the other end to one post of a galvanometer.

I think he got a current that wrecked the instrument. At any rate, he grew very much excited.

"Something queer about that stone!" he cried. "This is the chance of a lifetime! I don't know that a meteor has ever been scientifically examined so soon after falling."

He hurried us all across to the laboratory. We came back with a truck load of coils and tubes and batteries and potentiometers and other assorted equipment. He had men with heavy rubber gloves lift the

frost-covered stone to a packing box on a bench. The thing was irregular in shape, about a foot long; it must have weighed two hundred pounds. He sent a man racing on a motorcycle to the drug store to get dry ice (solidified carbon dioxide) to keep the iron stone at its low temperature.

In a few hours he had a complete laboratory set up around the meteorite. He worked feverishly in the hot sunshine, reading the various instruments he had set up, and arranging more. He contrived to keep the stone cold by packing it in a box of dry ice.

The mechanics stopped for dinner, and I tried to get him to take time to eat.

"No, Hammond," he said. "This is something big! We were talking about Einstein. This rock seems energized with a new kind of force: all meteors are probably the same way, when they first plunge out of space. I think this will be to relativity what the falling apple is to gravity. This is a big thing."

He looked up at me, brown eyes flashing.

"This is my chance to make a name, Hammond. If I do something big enough—Virginia might reconsider her opinion."

Charlie worked steadily through the long hot afternoon. I spent most of the time helping him, or gazing in fascination at the curious haze of luminous blue mist that clung like a sphere of azure fog about the meteoric stone. I did not completely understand what he did; the reader who wants the details may consult the monograph he is preparing for the scientific press.

He had the men string up a line from our direct current generator in the shops, to supply power for his electrical instruments. He mounted a powerful electromagnet just below the meteorite, and set up an X-ray tube to bombard it with rays.

Night came, and the fire of the white sun faded from the sky. In the darkness, the curious haze about the stone became luminescent, distinct, a dim, motionless sphere of blue light. I fancied that I saw grotesque shapes flashing through it. A ball of blue fire, shimmering and ghost-like, shrouded the instruments.

Charlie's induction coil buzzed wickedly, with purple fire playing about the terminals. The X-ray tube flickered with a greenish glow. He manipulated the rheostat that controlled the current through the electromagnet, and continued to read his instruments.

"Look at that!" he cried.

The bluish haze about the stone grew brighter; it became a ball of sapphire flame, five feet thick, bright and motionless. A great sphere of shimmering azure fire! Wisps of pale, sparkling bluish mist ringed it. The stone in its box, the X-ray bulb and other apparatus were hidden. The end of the table stuck oddly from the ball of light.

I heard Charlie move a switch. The hum of the coils changed a note.

The ball of blue fire vanished abruptly. It became a hole, a window in space!

Through it, we saw another world!

The darkness of the night hung about us. Where the ball had been was a circle of misty blue flame, five feet across. Through that circle I could see a vast expanse of blue ocean, running in high, white-capped rollers, beneath a sky overcast with low gray clouds.

It was no flat picture like a movie screen. The scene had vast depth; I knew that we were really looking over an infinite expanse of stormy ocean. It was all perfectly clear, distinct, real!

Astounded, I turned to find Charlie standing back and looking into the ring of blue fire, with a curious mixture of surprise and delighted

satisfaction.

"What—what—" I gasped.

"It's amazing! Wonderful! More than I had dared hope for! The complete vindication of my theory! If Virginia cares for scientific reputation—"

"But what is it?"

"It's hard to explain without mathematical language. You might say that we are looking through a hole in space. The new force in the meteorite, amplified by the X-rays and the magnetic field, is causing a distortion of space-time coordinates. You know that a gravitational field bends light; the light of a star is deflected in passing the sun. The field of this meteorite bends light through space-time, through the four-dimensional continuum. That scrap of ocean we can see may be on the other side of the earth."

I walked around the circle of luminous smoke with the marvelous picture in the center. It seemed that the window swung with me. I surveyed the whole angry surface of that slate-gray, storm-beaten sea, to the misty horizon. Nowhere was it broken by land or ship.

Charlie fell to adjusting his rheostat and switches.

It seemed that the gray ocean moved swiftly beyond the window. Vast stretches of it raced below our eyes. Faint black stains of steamer smoke appeared against the blue-gray horizon and swept past. Then land appeared—a long, green-gray line. We had a flash of a long coast that unreeled in endless panorama before us. It was such a view as one might get from a swift airplane—a plane flying thousands of miles per hour.

The Golden Gate flashed before us, with the familiar skyline of San Francisco rising on the hills behind it.

"San Francisco!" Charlie cried. "This is the Pacific we've been seeing. Let's find the *Valhalla*. We might be able to see Virginia!"

The coast-line vanished as he manipulated his instruments. Staring into the circle of shining blue mist, I saw the endless ocean racing below us again. We picked up a pleasure yacht, running under bare poles.

"I didn't know there was such a storm on," Charlie murmured.

Other vessels swam past below us, laboring against heavy seas.

Then we looked upon an ocean whipped into mighty white-crowned waves. Rain beat down in sheets from low dense clouds; vivid violet lightnings flashed before us. It seemed very strange to see such lightning and hear not the faintest whisper of thunder—but no sound came from anything we saw through the blue-rimmed window in space.

"I hope the *Valhalla* isn't in weather like this!" cried Charlie.

In a few minutes a dark form loomed through the wind-riven mist. Swiftly it swam nearer; became a black ship.

"Only a tramp," Charlie said, breathing a sigh of relief.

It was a dingy tramp steamer, her superstructure wrecked. Her fires seemed dead. She lay across the wind, rolling sluggishly, threatening to sink with every monstrous wave. We saw no living person aboard her; she seemed a sinking derelict. We made out the name *Roma* on her side.

Charlie moved his dials again.

In a few minutes the slender prow of another great steamer came through the sheets of rain. It was evidently a passenger vessel. She

seemed limping along, half wrecked, with mighty waves breaking over her rail.

Charlie grew white with alarm. "The *Valhalla*!" he gasped. "And she's headed straight for that wreck!"

In a moment, as he brought the liner closer below our blue-rimmed window, I, too, made out the name. The wet, glistening decks were almost deserted. Here and there a man struggled futilely against the force of the storm.

In a few minutes the drifting wreck of the *Roma* came into our view, dead ahead of the limping liner. Through the mist and falling rain, the derelict could not have been in sight of the lookout of the passenger vessel until she was almost upon it.

We saw the white burst of steam as the siren was blown. We watched the desperate effort of the liner to check her way, to come about. But it was too much for the already crippled ship. Charlie cried out as a mighty wave drove the *Valhalla* down upon the sluggishly drifting wreck.

All the mad scene that ensued was strangely silent. We heard no crash when the collision occurred; heard no screams or shouts while

the mob of desperate, white-faced passengers were fighting their way to the deck. The vain struggle to launch the boats was like a silent movie.

One boat was splintered while being lowered. Another, already filled with passengers, was lifted by a great ware and crushed against the side of the ship. Only shivered wood and red foam were left. The ship listed so rapidly that the boats on the lee side were useless. It was impossible to launch the others in that terrible, lashing sea.

"Virginia can swim." Charlie said hopefully. "You know she tried the Channel last year, and nearly made it, too."

He stopped to watch that terrible scene in white-faced, anxious silence.

The tramp went down before the steamer, drawing fragments of wrecked boats after it. The liner was evidently sinking rapidly. We saw dozens of hopeless, panic-stricken passengers diving off the lee side, trying to swim off far enough to avoid the tremendous suction.

Then, with a curious deliberation, the bow of the *Valhalla* dipped under green water; her stern rose in the air until the ship stood almost perpendicular. She slipped quickly down, out of sight.

Only a few swimming humans, and the wrecks of a few boats, were left on the rough gray sea. Charlie fumbled nervously with his dials, trying to get the scene near enough so that we could see the identity of the struggling swimmers.

A long boat, which must have been swept below by the suction of the ship, came plunging above the surface, upside down. It drifted swiftly among the swimmers, who struggled to reach it. I saw one person, evidently a girl, grasp it and drag herself upon it. It swept on past the few others still struggling.

The wrecked boat with the girl upon it seemed coming swiftly toward our blue-rimmed window. In a few minutes I saw something familiar about her.

"It's Virginia!" Charlie cried. "God! We've got to save her, somehow!"

The long rollers drove the over-turned boat swiftly along. Virginia Randall clung desperately to it, deluged in foam, whipped with flying spray, the wild wind tearing at her.

About us, the clear still night was deepening. The air was warm and still; the hot stars shone steadily. Quiet lighted houses were in sight

above the beach. It was very strange to look through the fire-rimmed circle, to see a girl struggling for life, clinging to a wrecked boat in a stormy sea.

Charlie watched in an apathy of grief and horror, trembling and speechless doing nothing except move the controls to keep the floating girl in our sight.

Hours went by as we watched. Then Charlie cried out in sudden hope. "There's a chance! I might do it! I might be able to save her!"

"Might do what?"

"We are able to see what we do because the field of the meteor bends light through the four-dimensional continuum. The world line of a ray of light is a geodesic in the continuum. The field I have built distorts the continuum, so we see rays that originated at a distant point. Is that clear?"

"Clear as mud!"

"Well, anyhow, if the field were strong enough, we could bring physical objects through space-time, instead of mere visual images. We could pick Virginia up and bring her right here to the crater! I'm

sure of it!"

"You mean you could move a girl through some four or five thousand miles of space!"

"You don't understand. She wouldn't come through space at all, but through space-time, through the continuum, which is a very different thing. She is four thousand miles away in our three-dimensional space, but in space-time, as you see, she is only a few yards away. She is only a few yards from us in the fourth dimension. If I can increase the field a little, she will be drawn right through!"

"You're a wizard if you can do it!"

"I've got to do it! She's a fine swimmer—that's the only reason she's still alive—but she'll never live to reach the shore. Not in a sea like that!"

Charlie fell to work at once, mounting another electromagnet beside the one he had set up, and rigging up two more X-ray bulbs beside the packing box which held the meteor. The motion of the boat in the fire-rimmed window kept drawing it swiftly away from us, and Charlie showed me how to move the dial of his rheostat to keep the girl in view.

Before he had completed his arrangements, a patch of white foam came into view just ahead of the drifting boat. In a moment I made out a cruel black rock, with the angry sea breaking into fleecy spray upon it. The boat was almost upon it, driving straight for it. Charlie saw it, and cried out in horror.

The long black hull of the splintered boat, floating keel upward, was only a few yards away. A great white-capped breaker lifted it and hurled it forward, with the girl clinging to it. She drew herself up and stared in terror at the black rock, while another long surging roller picked up the boat and swept it forward again.

I stood, paralyzed in horror, while the shattered boat was driven full upon the great rock. I could imagine the crash of it, but it was all as still as a silent picture. The boat, riding high on a crest of white foam, smashed against the rock and was shivered to splinters. Virginia was hurled forward against the slick wet stone. Desperately she scrambled to reach the top of the boulder. Her hands slipped on the polished rock; the wild sea dragged at her. At last she got out of reach of the angry gray water, though spume still deluged her.

I breathed a sigh of relief, though her position was still far from enviable.

"Virginia! Virginia! Why did I let you go?" Charlie cried.

Desperately he fell to work again, mounting the magnet and tubes. Another hour went by, while I watched the shivering girl on the rock. Bobbed hair, wet and glistening, was plastered close against her head, and her clothing was torn half off. She looked utterly exhausted; it seemed to take all her ebbing energy to cling to the rock against the force of the wind and the waves that dashed against her. She looked cold, blue and trembling.

The water stood higher.

"The tide is rising!" Charlie exclaimed. "It will cover the rock pretty soon. If I don't get her off in time—she's lost!"

He finished twisting his wires together.

"I've got it all ready," he said. "Now, I've got to find out exactly where she is, to know how to set it. Even then it's fearfully uncertain. I hate to try it, but it's the only chance.

"You can find out?"

"Yes. From the spectral shift and other factors. I'll have to get some other apparatus." He ran up to the laboratory, across the level field

that lay black beneath the stars. He came back, panting, with spectrometer, terrestrial globe, and other articles.

"The tide is higher!" he cried as he looked through the blue-rimmed circle at the girl on the rock. "She'll be swept off before long!"

He mounted the spectrometer and fell to work with a will, taking observations through the telescope, adjusting prisms and diffraction gratings, reading electrometers and other apparatus, and stopping to make intricate calculations.

I helped him when I could, or stared through the ring of shining blue mist, where I could see the waves breaking higher about the exhausted girl who clung to the rock. Clouds of wind-whipped spray often hid her from sight. I knew that she would not have the strength to hold on much longer against the force of the rising sea.

Although driven almost to distraction by the horror of her predicament, he worked with a cool, swift efficiency. Only the pale, anxiety-drawn expression on his face showed how great was the strain. He finished the last spectrometer observation, snatched out a pad and fell to figuring furiously.

"Something queer here," he said presently, frowning. "A shift of the

spectrum that I can't explain by distortion through three-dimensional space alone. I don't understand it."

We stared at the chilled and trembling girl on the rock.

"I'm almost afraid to try it. What if something went wrong?"

He turned to the terrestrial globe he had brought down and traced a line over it. He made a quick calculation on his pad, then made a fine dot on the globe with the pencil point.

"Here she is. On a rock some miles off Point Eugenia, on the coast of the Mexican State of Lower California. Most lonely spot in the world. No chance for a rescue. We must—

"My god!" he screamed in sudden horror. "Look!"

I looked through the blue-ringed window and saw the girl. Green water was surging about her waist. It seemed that each wave almost tore her off. Then I saw that she was struggling with something. A great coiling tentacle, black and leathery and glistening, was thrust up out of the green water. It wavered deliberately through the air and grasped at the girl. She seemed to scream, though we could hear nothing. She beat at the monster, weakly, vainly.

"She's gone!" cried Charlie.

"An octopus!" I said. "A giant cuttlefish!"

Virginia made a sudden fierce effort. With a strength that I had not thought her chilled limbs possessed, she tore away from the dreadful creature and clambered higher on the rock. But still a hideous black tentacle clung about her ankle, tugging at her, drawing her back despite her desperate struggle to break free.

"I've got to try it!" Charlie said, determination flashing in his eyes. "It's a chance!"

He closed a switch. His new coils sung out above the old one. X-ray tubes flickered beside the blue fire that ringed the window. He adjusted his rheostats and closed the circuit through the new magnet.

A curtain of blue flame was drawn quickly between us and the round, fire-rimmed window. A huge ball of blue fire hung, about the meteorite and the instruments. For minutes it hung there, while Charlie, perspiring, worked desperately with the apparatus. Then it expanded; became huge. It exploded noiselessly, in a great flash of sapphire flame, then vanished completely.

Meteor, bench, and apparatus were gone!

In the light of the stars we could make out the huge crater the meteorite had torn, with a few odds and ends of equipment scattered about it. But all the apparatus Charlie had set up, connected with the meteoric stone, had disappeared.

He was dumbfounded, staggered with disappointment.

"Virginia! Virginia!" he called out, in a hopeless tone. "No, she isn't here. It didn't draw her through. I've failed. And we can't even see her any more!"

Desperately I searched for consolation for him.

"Maybe the octopus won't hurt her," I offered. "They say that most of the stories of their ferocity are somewhat exaggerated."

"If the monster doesn't get her, the tide will!" he said bitterly. "I made a miserable failure of it! And I don't know why! I can't understand it!"

Apathetically, he picked up his pad and held it in the light of his electric lantern.

"Something funny about this equation. The shift of the spectrum lines can't be accounted for by distortion through space alone."

With wrinkled brow, he stared for many minutes at the bit of paper he held in the white circle of light. Suddenly he seized a pencil and figured rapidly.

"I have it! The light was bent through time! I should have recognized these space-time coordinates."

He calculated again.

"Yes. The scene we saw in that circle of light was distant from us not only in space but in time. The *Valhalla* probably hasn't sunk yet at all. We were looking into the future!"

"But how can that be? Seeing things before they happen!"

I have the profoundest respect for Charlie King's mathematical genius. But when he said that I was frankly incredulous.

"Space and time are only relative terms. Our material universe is merely the intersection of tangled world lines of geodesics in a four-dimensional continuum. Space and time have no meaning independently of each other. Jeans says. 'A terrestrial astronomer

may reckon that the outburst on Nova Persei occurred a century before the great fire of London, but an astronomer on the Nova may reckon with equal accuracy that the great fire occurred a century before the outburst on the Nova.' The field of this meteorite deflected light waves so that we saw them earlier, according to our conventional ideas of time, than they originated. We saw several hours into the future.

"And the amplified field of the magnet, though strong enough to move Virginia through space, was not sufficiently powerful to draw her back to us across time. Yet she must have felt the pull. Some dreadful thing may have happened. The problem is rather complicated."

He lifted his pencil again. In the glow of the little electric lantern I saw his lean young face tense with the fierce effort of his thought. His pencil raced across the little pad, setting down symbols that I could make nothing of.

My own thoughts were racing. Seeing into the future was a rather revolutionary idea to me. My mind is conservative; I have always been sceptical of the more fantastic ideas suggested by science. But Charlie seemed to know what he was talking about. In view of the marvelous things he had done that night, it seemed hardly fair to

doubt him now. I decided to accept his astounding statement at face value and to follow the adventure through.

He lifted his pencil and consulted the luminous dial of his wrist watch.

"We saw that last scene some twelve hours and forty minutes before it happened—to put it in conventional language. The distortion of the time coordinates amounted to that."

In the light of dawn—for we had been all night at the meteor pit, and silver was coming in the east—he looked at me with fierce resolve in his eyes.

"Hammond, that gives us over twelve hours to get to Virginia!"

"You mean to go? But just twelve hours! That's better than the transcontinental record—to say nothing of the time it would take to find a little rock in the Pacific!"

"We have the *Golden Gull*! She's as fast as any ship we've ever flown."

"But we can't take the *Gull*! Those alterations haven't been made. And that new engine! A bear-cat for power, but it may go dead any

second. The *Gull* can fly, but she isn't safe!"

"Safety be damned! I've got to get to Virginia, and get there in the next twelve hours!"

"The *Gull* will fly, but—"

"All right. Please help me get off!"

"Help you off? It's a fool thing to do! But if you go, I do!"

"Thanks, Hammond. Awfully!" He gripped my hand. "We've got to make it!"

With a last glance into the gaping pit from which we had dug the marvelous stone, we turned and ran across to the hangars. As we ran the sun came above the sea in the east: its first rays struck us like a fiery lance. The mechanics had not yet appeared. Charlie pushed the doors back, and we ran out the trim little *Golden Gull*, beautiful with her slender wing and her graceful, tapering lines.

I seized the starting crank and Charlie sprang into the cockpit. I cranked until the mechanism was droning dismally, and pulled the lever that engaged it with the engine. I had been in too much haste to get up the proper speed, and the powerful new engine failed to fire.

Charlie almost cried with vexation while I was cranking again.

This time the motor coughed and fell into a steady, vibrant roar. With the wind from the propeller screaming about me, I disengaged the crank and stood waiting while the motor warmed. Charlie gave it scant time to do so before he motioned me to kick out the blocks. I tumbled into the enclosed cockpit beside him, he gave the ship the gun, and we roared across the field.

In five minutes we were flying west, at a speed just under three hundred miles per hour. Charlie was crouched over the stick, scanning the instrument board, and flying the *Gull* almost at her top speed. Again and again his eyes went to the little clock on the panel.

"Twelve hours and forty minutes," he said. "And an hour gone already! We're got to be there by five minutes after six."

We were flying over Louisiana when the oil line clogged. The engine heated dangerously. Reluctantly, Charlie cut off the ignition, and fell in a swift spiral to an open field.

"We're got to fix it!" he said. "Another hour gone! And we needed every minute!"

"This new engine! It's powerful enough, but we should have had time to overhaul it, and make those changes."

Charlie landed with his usual skill, and we fell to work in desperate haste. A grizzled farmer, a wad of tobacco in his cheek and three ragged urchins at his heels, stopped to watch us. He had just been to his mailbox, and had a morning paper in his hand. Charlie questioned him about the storm.

"Storm-center nears the American coast," he read in a nasal drawl. "Greatest storm of year drives shipping upon west coast. Six vessels reported lost. *S. S. Valhalla*, disabled, sends S. O. S.

"A thousand lives are the estimated toll to-night of the most terrific storm of the year, which is sweeping toward the Pacific coast, driving all shipping before it. Radiograms from the *Valhalla* at 5 P. M. report that she is disabled and in danger. It is doubtful that rescue vessels can reach her through the storm."

We got the engine repaired, took off again. Charlie looked at the little clock.

"Five minutes to ten. Eight hours and ten minutes left, and we've got a darn long ways to go."

We had to stop at San Antonio, Texas, to replenish gasoline and oil.

"Ten minutes lost!" Charlie complained as we took off. "And that monster—waiting in the future to drag Virginia to a hideous death!"

Two hours later the plane developed trouble in the ignition system. The motor was new, with several radical changes that we had introduced to increase power and lessen weight. As I had objected to Charlie, we had not done enough experimental work on it to perfect it.

We limped into the field at El Paso and spent another priceless half-hour at work. I got some sandwiches at a luncheon counter beside the field, and listened a moment to a radio loudspeaker there.

"Many thousands are dead," came the crisp, metallic voice of the announcer, "as a result of the storm now raging on the Pacific coast, the worst in several years. The storm-center is spending its force on the coastal regions to-day. Millions of dollars in damage are reported in cities from San Francisco to Manzanillo, Mexico.

"The greatest disaster of the storm is the loss of the passenger liner *Valhalla*, of the Red Star Line. It is believed to have collided with the abandoned hulk of an Italian-owned tramp freighter, the *Roma*,

which was left by its crew yesterday in a sinking condition. Radiograms from the liner ceased three hours ago, when she was said to be sinking. The officers doubted that her boats could be launched in such a sea—"

I waited to hear no more. Charlie checked our route while we were stopped. And we took off; we crossed the Rio Grande and flew across the rocky, brush-scattered hills of Mexico, in a direct line for the rock in the sea.

"If anything happens so we have to land again—well, it's just too bad," Charlie said grimly. "But we've got to go this way. It's something over six hundred miles in a straight line. Fifteen minutes to four, now. We have to average nearly three hundred miles an hour to get there."

He was silent and intent over his maps and instruments as we flew on over the lofty Sierra Madre Range, and over a long slope down to the Gulf of California. Head-winds beset us as we were over the stretch of blue water, and we flew on into a storm.

"We had hardly time to make it, without the wind against us," Charlie said. "If it holds us back many miles—well, it just mustn't!"

Purple lightning flickered ominously in the mass of blue storm-clouds that hung above the mountainous peninsula of Lower California. I had a qualm about flying into it in our untested machine. But Charlie leaned tensely forward and sent the *Golden Gull* on at the limit of her speed. Gray vapor swirled about us, rent with livid streaks of lightning. Thunder crashed and rumbled above the roar of our racing engine. Wild winds screeched in the struts; rain and hail beat against us. The plane rose and fell; she was swirled about like a falling leaf. The stick struggled in Charlie's hands like a living thing. With lips tightened to a thin line, he fought silently, fiercely, desperately.

Suddenly we were sucked down until I had an uneasy feeling at the pit of my stomach. I saw the grim outline of a bare mountain peak dangerously close below us, shrouded in wind-whipped mist.

In sudden alarm I shouted, "We'd better get out of this, Charlie! We can't live in it long!"

In the roar of the storm he did not hear me, and I shouted again.

He turned to face me, after a glance at the clock. "We've less than an hour, Hammond. We've got to go on!"

I sank back in my seat. The plane rolled and tossed until I thanked my lucky stars for the safety strap. In nervous anxiety I watched Charlie bring the ship up again, and fight his way on through the storm. For an eternity, it seemed, we battled through a chaos of wind-driven mist, bright with purple lightning and shaken with crashing thunder.

Charlie struggled with the controls until he was dripping with perspiration. He must have been utterly worn out, after thirty-six hours of exhausting effort. A dozen times I despaired of life. The compass had gone to spinning crazily; we dived through the rain until we could pick up landmarks below. Three times a great bare peak loomed suddenly up ahead of us, and Charlie averted collision only by zooming suddenly upward.

Then slate-gray water was beneath us, running in white-crested mountains. I knew that we were at last out over the Pacific.

"We've passed Point Eugenia," Charlie said. "It can't be far, now. But we have only fifteen minutes left. Fifteen minutes to get to her—before the attraction of the meteor jerks her away, perhaps to a horrible fate."

We flew low and fast over the racing waves. Charlie looked over his

charts and made a swift calculation. He changed our course a bit and we flew on at top speed. We scanned the vast, mad expanse of sea below the blue-gray clouds. Here and there were lines of white breakers, but nowhere did we see a rock with a girl upon it. Presently the green outline of an island appeared out of the wild water on our right.

"That's Del Tiburon," Charlie said. "We missed the rock."

He swung the plane about and we flew south over the hastening waves. I looked at the little clock. It showed two minutes to six. I turned to Charlie.

"Seven minutes!" he whispered grimly.

On and on we flew, in a wide circle. The motor roared loud. An endless expanse of racing waves unreeled below us. The little hand crawled around the dial. One minute past six. Only four minutes to go.

We saw a speck of white foam on the mad gray water. It was miles away, almost on the horizon. We plunged toward it, motor bellowing loud. Five miles a minute we flew. The white fleck became a black rock smothered in snowy foam. On we swept, and over the rock,

with bullet-like speed.

As we plunged by, I saw Virginia's slender form, tattered, brine-soaked, straggling in the hideous tentacles of the monster octopus. It was the same terrible scene that we had viewed, through the amazing phenomenon of distortion of light through space-time, four thousand miles away and twelve hours before.

In a few minutes the time would come when Charlie had ended our view of the scene by his attempt to draw the girl through the fourth dimension to our apparatus in Florida. What terrible thing might happen then?

Charlie brought the ship about so quickly that we were flung against the sides. Down we came toward the mad waves in a swift glide. In sudden apprehension, I dropped my hand on his shoulder.

"Man, you can't land in a sea like that! It's suicide!"

Without a word, he shook off my hand and continued our steep glide toward the rock. I drew my breath in apprehension of a crash.

I do not blame Charlie for what happened. He is as skilful a pilot as I know. It was a mad freak of the sea that did the thing.

The gray waste of mountainous, white-crested waves rose swiftly up to meet us, with the rock with the girl clinging to it just to our right. The *Golden Gull* struck the crest of a wave, buried herself in the foam, and plunged down the long slope to the trough. We rose safely to the crest of the oncoming roller, and I saw the black outline of the rock not a dozen yards away.

Charlie had landed with all his skill. It was not his fault that the blustering wind caught the ship as she reached the crest of the wave and flung her sidewise toward the rock. It is no fault of his that the white-capped mountain of racing green water completed what the wind had begun and hurled the frail plane crashing on the rock.

I have a confused memory of the wild plunge at the mercy of the wave, of my despair as I realized that we were being wrecked. I must have been knocked unconscious when we struck. The next I remember I was opening my eyes to find myself on the rock, Charlie's strong arm on my shoulder. I was soaked with icy brine and my head was aching from a heavy blow.

Virginia, shivering and blue, was perched beside us. I could see no sign of the plane: the mighty sea had swept away what was left of it. Clinging to the lee side of the rock I saw the black tentacles of the giant octopus—waiting for a wave to dash us to its mercy.

"All right, Hammond?" Charlie inquired anxiously. "I'm afraid you got a pretty nasty bump on the head. About all I could do to fish you out before the *Gull* was swept away."

He helped me to a better position to withstand the force of the great roller that came plunging down upon us like a moving mountain. Virginia was in his arms, too exhausted to do more than cling to him.

"What can we do?" I sputtered, shaking water from my head.

"Not a thing! We're in a pretty bad fix, I imagine. In a few seconds we will feel the attraction of the meteor's field—the force with which I tried to draw Virginia to the crater through the fourth dimension. I don't know what will happen; we may be jerked out of space altogether. And if that doesn't get us, the tide and the octopus will!"

His voice was drowned in the roar of the coming wave. A mountain of water deluged us. Half drowned, I clung to the rock against the mad water.

Then blinding blue light flashed about me. A sharp crash rang in my ears, like splintering glass. I reeled, and felt myself falling headlong.

I brought up on soft sand.

I sat up, dumbfounded, and opened my eyes. I was sitting on the steep sandy side of a conical pit. Charlie and Virginia were sprawled beside me, looking as astonished as I felt. Charlie got to his knees and lifted the limp form of the girl in his arms.

Something snapped in my brain. The sand-walled pit was suddenly familiar. I got to my feet and clambered out of it. I saw that we were on our own landing field.

Astonishingly, we were back in the meteor crater. Charlie's vanished apparatus was scattered about us. I saw the gray side of the rough iron meteorite itself, half-buried in the sand at the bottom of the pit.

"What—what happened?" I demanded of Charlie.

"Don't you see? Simple enough. I should have thought of it before. The field of the meteorite brought Virginia—and us—through to this point in space. But it could not bring us back through time; instead, the apparatus itself was jerked forward through time. That is why it vanished. We got here just twelve hours and forty minutes after I closed the switch, since we had been looking that far into the future. The mathematical explanation—"

"That's enough for me!" I said hastily. "We better see about a warm,

dry bed for Virginia, and some hot soup or something."

Now the rough gray meteorite, in a neat glass case, rests above the mantel in the library of a beautiful home where I am a frequent guest. I was there one evening, a few days ago, when Charlie King fell silent in one of his fits of mathematical speculation.

"Einstein again?" I chaffingly inquired.

He raised his brown eyes and looked at me. "Hammond, since relativity enabled us to find the Meteor Girl, you ought to be convinced!"

Virginia—whom her husband calls the Meteor Girl—came laughingly to the rescue.

"Yes, Mr. Hammond, what do you think of Einstein now?"

April 1931

77 Monsters of Mars by Edmond Hamilton

Three Martian-duped Earth-men swing open the gates of space that for so long had barred the greedy hordes of the Red Planet.

Aproximate word count: 12,900

Bigotry:

Warnings:

with a reptilian arm toward the ladder

- - -

Allan Randall stared at the man before him. "And that's why you sent for me, Milton?" he finally asked.

There was a moment's silence, in which Randall's eyes moved as though uncomprehendingly from the face of Milton to those of the two men beside him. The four sat together at the end of a roughly furnished and electric-lit living-room, and in that momentary silence there came in to them from the outside night the distant pounding of

the Atlantic upon the beach. It was Randall who first spoke again.

The other's face was unsmiling. "That's why I sent for you, Allan," he said quietly. "To go to Mars with us to-night!"

"To Mars!" he repeated. "Have you gone crazy, Milton—or is this some joke you've put up with Lanier and Nelson here?"

Milton shook his head gravely. "It is not a joke, Allan. Lanier and I are actually going to flash out over the gulf to the planet Mars to-night. Nelson must stay here, and since we wanted three to go I wired you as the most likely of my friends to make the venture."

"But good God!" Randall exploded, rising. "You, Milton, as a physicist ought to know better. Space-ships and projectiles and all that are but fictionists' dreams."

"We are not going in either space-ship or projectile," said Milton calmly. And then as he saw his friend's bewilderment he rose and led the way to a door at the room's end, the other three following him into the room beyond.

It was a long laboratory of unusual size in which Randall found himself, one in which every variety of physical and electrical

apparatus seemed represented. Three huge dynamo-motor arrangements took up the room's far end, and from them a tangle of wiring led through square black condensers and transformers to a battery of great tubes. Most remarkable, though, was the object at the room's center.

It was like a great double cube of dull metal, being in effect two metal cubes each twelve feet square, supported a few feet above the floor by insulated standards. One side of each cube was open, exposing the hollow interiors of the two cubical chambers. Other wiring led from the big electronic tubes and from the dynamos to the sides of the two cubes.

The four men gazed at the enigmatic thing for a time in silence. Milton's strong, capable face showed only in its steady eyes what feelings were his, but Lanier's younger countenance was alight with excitement; and so too to some degree was that of Nelson. Randall simply stared at the thing, until Milton nodded toward it.

"That," he said, "is what will flash us out to Mars to-night."

Randall could only turn his stare upon the other, and Lanier chuckled. "Can't take it in yet, Randall? Well, neither could I when the idea was first sprung on us."

Milton nodded to seats behind them, and as the half-dazed Randall sank into one the physicist faced him earnestly.

"Randall, there isn't much time now, but I am going to tell you what I have been doing in the last two years on this God-forsaken Maine coast. I have been for those two years in unbroken communication by radio with beings on the planet Mars!

"It was when I still held my physics professorship back at the university that I got first onto the track of the thing. I was studying the variation of static vibrations, and in so doing caught steady signals—not static—at an unprecedentedly high wave-length. They were dots and dashes of varying length in an entirely unintelligible code, the same arrangement of them being sent out apparently every few hours.

"I began to study them and soon ascertained that they could be sent out by no station on earth. The signals seemed to be growing louder each day, and it suddenly occurred to me that Mars was approaching opposition with earth! I was startled, and kept careful watch. On the day that Mars was closest the earth the signals were loudest. Thereafter, as the red planet receded, they grew weaker. The signals were from some being or beings on Mars!

"At first I was going to give the news to the world, but saw in time that I could not. There was not sufficient proof, and a premature statement would only wreck my own scientific reputation. So I decided to study the signals farther until I had irrefutable proof, and to answer them if possible. I came up here and had this place built, and the aerial towers and other equipment I wanted set up. Lanier and Nelson came with me from the university, and we began our work.

“Our chief object was to answer those signals, but it proved heartbreaking work at first. We could not produce a radio wave of great enough length to pierce out through earth's insulating layer and across the gulf to Mars. We used all the power of our great windmill-dynamo hook-ups, but for long could not make it. Every few hours like clockwork the Martian signals came through. Then at last we heard them repeating one of our own signals. We had been heard!

"For a time we hardly left our instruments. We began the slow and almost impossible work of establishing intelligent communication with the Martians. It was with numbers we began. Earth is the third planet from the sun and Mars the fourth, so three represented earth and four stood for Mars. Slowly we felt our way to an exchange of ideas, and within months were in steady and intelligent communication with them.

"They asked us first concerning earth, its climates and seas and continents, and concerning ourselves, our races and mechanisms and weapons. Much information we flashed out to them, the language of our communication being English, the elements, of which they had learned, with a mixture of numbers and symbolical dot-dash signals.

"We were as eager to learn about them. They were somewhat reticent, we found, concerning their planet and themselves. They admitted that their world was a dying one and that their great canals were to make life possible on it, and also admitted that they were different in bodily form from ourselves.

"They told us finally that communication like this was too ineffective to give us a clear picture of their world, or vice versa. If we could visit Mars, and then they visit earth, both worlds would benefit by the knowledge of the other. It seemed impossible to me, though I was eager enough for it. But the Martians said that while spaceships and the like were impossible, there was a way by which living beings could flash from earth to Mars and back by radio waves, even as our signals flashed!"

Randall broke in in amazement. "By radio!" he exclaimed, and Milton nodded.

"Yes, so they said, nor did the idea of sending matter by radio seem too insane, after all. We send sound, music by radio waves across half the world from our broadcasting stations. We send light, pictures, across the world from our television stations. We do that by changing the wave length of the light-vibrations to make them radio vibrations, flashing them out thus over the world, to receivers which alter their wave-lengths again and change them back into light-vibrations.

"Why then could not matter be sent in the same way? Matter, it has been long believed, is but another vibration of the ether, like light and radiant heat and radio vibrations and the like, having a lower wave-length than any of the others. Suppose we take matter and by applying electrical force to it change its wave-length, step it up to the wave-length of radio vibrations? Then those vibrations can be flashed forth from the sending station to a special receiver that will step them down again from radio vibrations to matter vibrations. Thus matter, living or non-living, could be flashed tremendous distances in a second!

“This the Martians told us, and said they would set up a matter-transmitter and receiver on Mars and would aid and instruct us so that we could set up a similar transmitter and receiver here. Then part of us could be flashed out to Mars as radio vibrations by the

transmitter, and in moments would have flashed across the gulf to the red planet and would be transformed back from radio vibrations to matter-vibrations by the receiver awaiting us there!

"Naturally we agreed enthusiastically to build such a matter-transmitter and receiver, and then, with their instructions signalled to us constantly, started the work. Weeks it took, but at last, only yesterday, we finished it. The thing's two cubical chambers are one for the transmitting of matter and the other for its reception. At a time agreed on yesterday we tested the thing, placing a guinea pig in the transmitting chamber and turning on the actuating force. Instantly the animal vanished, and in moments came a signal from the Martians saying that they had received it unharmed in their receiving chamber.

"Then we tested it the other way, they sending the same guinea pig to us, and in moments it flashed into being in our receiving chamber. Of course the step-down force in the receiving chamber had to be in operation, since had it not been at that moment the radio-vibrations of the animal would have simply flashed on endlessly in endless space. And the same would happen to any of us were we flashed forth and no receiving chamber turned on to receive us.

"We signalled the Martians that all tests were satisfactory, and told

them that on the next night at exactly midnight by our time we would flash out ourselves on our first visit to them. They have promised to have their receiving chamber operating to receive us at that moment, of course, and it is my plan to stay there twenty-four hours, gathering ample proofs of our visit, and then flash back to earth.

"Nelson must stay here, not only to flash us forth to-night, but above all to have the receiving chamber operating to receive us at the destined moment twenty-four hours later. The force required to operate it is too great to use for more than a few minutes at a time, so it is necessary above all that that force be turned on and the receiving chamber ready for us at the moment we flash back. And since Nelson must stay, and Lanier and I wanted another, we wired you, Randall, in the hope that you would want to go with us on this venture. And do you?"

As Milton's question hung, Randall drew a long breath. His eyes were on the two great cubical chambers, and his brain seemed whirling at what he had heard. Then he was on his feet with the others.

"Go? Could you keep me from going? Why, man, it's the greatest adventure in history!"

Milton grasped his hand, as did Lanier, and then the physicist shot a glance at the square clock on the wall. "Well, there's little enough time left us," he said, "for we've hardly an hour before midnight, and at midnight we must be in that transmitting chamber for Nelson to send us flashing out!"

Randall could never recall but dimly afterward how that tense hour passed. It was an hour in which Milton and Nelson went with anxious faces and low-voiced comments from one to another of the pieces of apparatus in the room, inspecting each carefully, from the great dynamos to the transmitting and receiving chambers, while Lanier quickly got out and made ready the rough khaki suits and equipment they were to take.

It lacked but a quarter-hour of midnight when they had finally donned those suits, each making sure that he was in possession of the small personal kit Milton had designated. This included for each a heavy automatic, a small supply of concentrated foods, and a small case of drugs chosen to counteract the rarer atmosphere and lesser gravity which Milton had been warned to expect on the red planet. Each had also a strong wrist-watch, the three synchronized exactly with the big laboratory clock.

When they had finished checking up on this equipment the clock's

longer hand pointed almost to the figure twelve, and the physicist gestured expressively toward the transmitting chamber. Lanier, though, strode for a moment to one of the laboratory's doors and flung it open. As Randall gazed out with him they could see far out over the tossing sea, dimly lit by the great canopy of the summer stars overhead. Right at the zenith among those stars shone brightest a crimson spark.

"Mars," said Lanier, his voice a half-whisper. "And they're waiting out there for us now—out there where we'll be in minutes!"

"And if they shouldn't be waiting—their receiving chamber not ready—"

But Milton's calm voice came across the room to them: "Zero hour," he said, stepping up into the big transmitting chamber.

Lanier and Randall slowly followed, and despite himself a slight shudder shook the latter's body as he stepped into the mechanism that in moments would send him flashing out through the great void as impalpable ether-vibrations. Milton and Lanier were standing silent beside him, their eyes on Nelson, who stood watchfully now at the big switchboard beside the chambers, his own gaze on the clock. They saw him touch a stud, and another, and the hum of the great

dynamos at the room's end grew loud as the swarming of angry bees.

The clock's longer hand was crawling over the last space to cover the smaller hand. Nelson turned a knob and the battery of great glass tubes broke into brilliant white light, a crackling coming from them. Randall saw the clock's pointer clicking over the last divisions, and as he saw Nelson grip a great switch there came over him a wild impulse to bolt from the transmitting chamber. But then as his thoughts whirled maelstromlike there came a clang from the clock and Nelson flung down the switch in his grasp. Blinding light seemed to break from all the chamber onto the three; Randall felt himself hurled into nothingness by forces titanic, inconceivable, and then knew no more.

Randall came back to consciousness with a humming sound in his ears and with a sharp pain piercing his lungs at every breath. He felt himself lying on a smooth hard surface, and heard the humming stop and be succeeded by a complete silence. He opened his eyes, drawing himself to his feet as Milton and Lanier were doing, and stared about him.

He was standing with his two friends inside a cubical metal chamber almost exactly the same as the one they had occupied in Milton's laboratory a few moments before. But it was not the same, as their

first astounded glance out through its open side told them.

For it was not the laboratory that lay around them, but a vast conelike hall that seemed to Randall's dazed eyes of dimensions illimitable. Its dull-gleaming metal walls slanted up for a thousand feet over their heads, and through a round aperture at the tip far above and through great doors in the walls came a thin sunlight. At the center of the great hall's circular floor stood the two cubical chambers in one of which the three were, while around the chambers were grouped masses of unfamiliar-looking apparatus.

To Randall's untrained eyes it seemed electrical apparatus of very strange design, but neither he nor Milton nor Lanier paid it but small attention in that first breathless moment. They were gazing in fascinated horror at the scores of creatures who stood silent amid the apparatus and at its switches, gazing back at them. Those creatures were erect and roughly man-like in shape, but they were not human men. They were—the thought blasted to Randall's brain in that horror-filled moment—crocodile-men.

Crocodile-men! It was only so that he could think of them in that moment. For they were terribly like great crocodile shapes that had learned in some way to carry themselves erect upon their hinder limbs. The bodies were not covered with skin, but with green bony

plates. The limbs, thick and taloned at their paw-ends, seemed greater in size and stronger, the upper two great arms and the lower two the legs upon which each walked, while there was but the suggestion of a tail. But the flat head set on the neckless body was most crocodilian of all, with great fanged, hinged jaws projecting forward, and with dark unwinking eyes set back in bony sockets.

Each of the creatures wore on his torso a gleaming garment like a coat of metal scales, with metal belts in which some had shining tubes. They were standing in groups here and there about the mechanisms, the nearest group at a strange big switch-panel not a half-dozen feet from the three men. Milton and Lanier and Randall returned in a tense silence the unwinking stare of the monstrous beings around them.

"The Martians!" Lanier's horror-filled exclamation was echoed in the next instant by Randall's.

"The Martians! God, Milton! They're not like anything we know—they're reptilian!"

Milton's hand clutched his shoulder. "Steady, Randall," he muttered. "They're terrible enough, God knows—but remember we must seem just as grotesque to them."

The sound of their voices seemed to break the great hall's spell of silence, and they saw the crocodilian Martians before them turning and speaking swiftly to each other in low hissing speech-sounds that were quite unintelligible to the three. Then from the small group nearest them one came forward, until he stood just outside the chamber in which they were.

Randall felt dimly the momentousness of the moment, in which beings of earth and Mars were confronting each other for the first time in the solar system's history. The creature before them opened his great jaws and uttered slowly a succession of sounds that for the moment puzzled them, so different were they from the hissing speech of the others, though with the same sibilance of tone. Again the thing repeated the sounds, and this time Milton uttered an exclamation.

"He's speaking to us!" he cried. "Trying to speak the English that I taught them in our communication! I caught a word—listen...."

As the creature repeated the sounds, Randall and Lanier started to hear also vaguely expressed in that hissing voice familiar words: "You—are Milton and—others from—earth?"

Milton spoke very clearly and slowly to the creature: "We are those

from earth," he said. "And you are the Martians with whom we have communicated?"

"We are those Martians," said the other's hissing voice slowly. "These"—he waved a taloned paw toward those behind him—"have charge of the matter-transmitter and receiver. I am of our ruler's council."

"Ruler?" Milton repeated. "A ruler of all Mars?"

"Of all Mars," the other said. "Our name for him would mean in your words the Martian Master. I am to take you to him."

Milton turned to the other two with face alight with excitement. "These Martians have some supreme ruler they call the Martian Master," he said quickly; "and we're to go before him. As the first visitors from earth we're of immense importance here."

As he spoke, the Martian official before them had uttered a hissing call, and in answer to it a long shape of shining metal raced into the vast hall and halted beside them. It was like a fifty-foot centipede of metal, its scores of supporting short legs actuated by some mechanism inside the cylindrical body. There was a transparent-walled control room at the front end of that body, and in it a Martian

at the controls who snapped open a door from which a metal ladder automatically descended.

The Martian official gestured with a reptilian arm toward the ladder, and Milton and Lanier and Randall moved carefully out of the cube-chamber and across the floor to it, each of their steps being made a short leap forward by the lesser gravity of the smaller planet. They climbed up into the centipede-machine's control room, their guide following, and then as the door snapped shut, the operator of the thing pulled and turned the knob in his grasp and the long machine scuttled forward with amazing smoothness and speed.

In a moment it was out of the building and into the feeble sunlight of a broad metal-paved street. About them lay a Martian city, seen by their eager eyes for the first time. It was a city whose structures were giant metal cones like that from which they had just come, though none seemed as large as that titanic one. Throngs of the hideous crocodilian Martians were moving busily to and fro in the streets, while among them there scuttled and flashed numbers of the centipede-machines.

As their strange vehicle raced along, Randall saw that the conelike structures were for the most part divided into many levels, and that inside some could be glimpsed ranks of great mechanisms and

hurrying Martians tending them. Away to their right across the vast forest of cones that was the city the sun's little disk was shining, and he glimpsed in that direction higher ground covered with a vast tangle of bright crimson jungle that sloped upward from a great, half-glimpsed waterway.

The Martian beside them saw the direction of his gaze and leaned toward him. "No Martians live there," he hissed slowly. "Martians live only in cities where canals meet."

"Then there's no life in those crimson jungles?" Randall asked, repeating the question a moment later more slowly.

"No Martians there, but life—living things," the other told him, searching for words. "But not intelligent, like Martians and you."

He turned to gaze ahead, then pointed. "The Martian Master's cone," he hissed.

The three saw that at the end of the broad metal street down which their vehicle was racing there loomed another titanic cone-structure, fully as large as the mighty one in which they first found themselves. As the centipede-machine swept up to its great door-opening and halted, they descended to the metal paving and then followed their

reptilian guide through the opening.

They found themselves in a great hall in which scores of the Martians were coming and going. At the hall's end stood a row of what seemed guards, Martians grasping shining tubes such as they had already glimpsed. These gave way to allow their passage when their conductor uttered a hissing order, and then they were moving down a shorter hall at whose end also were guards. As these sprang aside before them, a great door of massive metal they guarded moved softly upward, disclosing a mighty circular hall or room inside. Their crocodilian guide turned to them.

"The hall of the Martian Master," he hissed.

They passed inside with him. The great hall seemed to extend upward to the giant cone's tip, thin light coming down from an opening there. Upon the dull metal of its looming walls were running friezes of lighter metal, grotesque representations of reptilian shapes that they could but vaguely glimpse. Around the walls stood rank after rank of guards.

At the hall's center was a low dias, and in a semicircle around and behind it stood a half-hundred great crocodilian shapes. Randall guessed even at the moment that they were the council of which

their conductor had named himself a member. But like Milton and Lanier, he had eyes in that first moment only for the dais itself. For on it was—the Martian Master.

Randall heard Milton and Lanier choke with the horror that shook his own heart and brain as he gazed. It was not simply another great crocodilian shape that sat upon that dais. It was a monstrous thing formed by the joining of three of the great reptilian bodies! Three distinct crocodile-like bodies sitting close together upon a metal seat, that had but a single great head. A great, grotesque crocodilian head that bulged backward and to either side, and that rested on the three thick short necks that rose from the triple body! And that head, that triple-bodied thing, was living, its unwinking eyes gazing at the three men!

The Martian Master! Randall felt his brain reel as he gazed at that mind-shattering thing. The Martian Master—this great head with three bodies! Reason told Randall, even as he strove for sanity, that the thing was but logical, that even on earth biologists had formed multiple-headed creatures by surgery, and that the Martians had done so to combine in one great head, one great brain, the brains of three bodies. Reason told him that the great triple brain inside that bulging head needed the bloodstreams of all three bodies to nourish it, must be a giant intellect indeed, one fitted to be the supreme Martian

Master. But reason could not overcome the horror that choked him as he gazed at the awful thing.

A hissing voice sounding before him made him aware that the Martian Master was speaking.

"You are the Earth-beings with whom we communicated, and whom we instructed to build a matter-transmitter and receiver on earth?" the slow voice asked. "You have come safely to Mars by means of that station?"

"We have come safely." Milton's voice was shaken and he could find no other words.

"That is well. Long had we desired to have such a station built on earth, since with it there to flash back and forth between the two worlds is easy. You have come, then, to learn of this world and to take back what you learn to your races?"

"That is why we came." Milton said, more steadily. "We want to stay only hours on this first visit, and then flash back to earth as we came."

The head's awful eyes seemed to consider them. "But when do you

intend to go back?" its strange voice asked. "Unless the one at your earth station has its receiver operating at the right moment you will simply flash on endlessly as radio waves—will be annihilated."

Milton found the courage to smile. "We started from earth at our midnight exactly, and at midnight exactly twenty-four earth hours later, we are to flash back and the receiver will be awaiting us."

There was silence when he had said that, a silence that seemed to Randall's strained mind to have become suddenly tense, sinister. The great triple-bodied creature before them considered them again, its eyes moving over them, and when it again spoke the hissing words came very slowly.

"Twenty-four earth hours," it said; "and then your receiver on earth will be awaiting you. That time we can measure to the moment, and that is well. For it is not you three Earth-beings who will flash back to earth when that moment comes! It will be Martians, the first of our Martian masses who have waited for ages for that moment and who will begin then our conquest of the earth!

"Yes, Earth-beings, our great plan comes to its end now at last! At last! Age on age, prisoned on this dying, arid world, we have desired the earth that by right of power shall be ours, have sought for ages to

communicate with its beings. You finally heard us, you hearkened to us, you built the matter-transmitting and receiving station on earth that was the one thing needed for our plan. For when the matter-receiver of that station is turned on in twenty-four of your hours, and ready to receive matter flashes from here, it will be the first of our millions who will flash at last to earth!

"I, the Martian Master, say it. Those first to go shall seize that matter-receiver on earth when first they appear there, shall build other and larger receivers, and through them within days all our Martian hordes shall have been flashed to earth! Shall have poured out over it and conquered with our weapons your weak races of Earth-beings, who cannot stand before us, and whose world you have delivered at last into our hands!"

For a moment, when the great monster's hissing voice had ceased, Milton and Randall and Lanier gazed toward it as though petrified, the whole unearthly scene spinning about them. And then, through the thick silence, the thin sound of Milton's voice:

"Our world—our earth—delivered to the Martians, and by us! God—no!"

With that last cry of agonized comprehension and horror, Milton did

what surely had never any in the great hall expected, leaped onto the dais with a single spring toward the Martian Master! Randall heard a hundred wild hissing cries break from about him, saw the crocodilian forms of guards and council rushing forward even as he and Lanier sprang after Milton, and then glimpsed shining tubes levelled from which brilliant shafts of dazzling crimson light or force were stabbing toward them!

To Randall the moment that followed was but a split-second flash and whirl of action. As his earthly muscles took him forward with Lanier after Milton in a great leap to the dais, he was aware of the brilliant red rays stabbing behind him closely, and knew that only the tremendous size of his leap had taken him past them. In the succeeding instant he was made aware of what he had escaped, for the hastily-loosed rays struck squarely a group of three or four Martian guards rushing to the dais from the opposite side, and they vanished from view with a sharp detonation as though clicked out of existence!

Randall was not to know then, that the red rays were ones that annihilated matter by neutralizing or damping the matter-vibrations in the ether. But he did know that no more rays were loosed, for by then he and Milton and Lanier were on the dais and were wrapped in a hurricane combat with the guards that had rushed between them

and the Martian Master.

Gleaming fangs—great scaled forms—reaching talons—it was all a wild phantasmagoria of grotesque forms spinning around him as he struck with all the power of his earthly muscles and felt crocodilian forms staggering and going down beneath his frenzied blows. He heard the roar of an automatic close beside him in the melee as Milton remembered at last through the red haze of his fury the weapon he carried, but before either Randall or Lanier could reach their own weapons a new wave of crocodilian forms had poured onto them that by sheer pressing weight held them helpless, to be disarmed.

Hissing orders sounded, the arms and legs of the three were tightly grasped by great taloned paws, and the masses of Martians about them melted back from the dais. Held each by two great creatures, Milton and Randall and Lanier faced again the triple-bodied Martian Master, who in all that wild moment of struggle appeared not to have changed his position. The big monster's black eyes stared unmovedly down at them.

"You Earth-beings seem of lower intelligence even than we thought," his hissing voice informed them. "And those weapons—crude, very crude."

Milton, his face set, spoke back: "It may be that you will find human weapons of some power if your hordes reach earth," he said.

"But what compared with the power of ours?" the other asked coldly. "And since our scientists even now devise new weapons to annihilate the earth's races, I think they would be glad of three of those races to experiment with now. The one use we can make of you, certainly."

The creature turned its bulging head a little towards the guards who held the three men, and uttered a brief hissing order. Instantly the six Martians, grasping the three tightly, marched them across the great hall and through a different door than that by which they had entered.

They were taken down a narrow corridor that turned sharply twice as they went on. Randall saw that it was lit by squares inset in the walls that glowed with crimson light. It came to him as they marched on that night must be upon the Martian city without, since the sun had been sinking when they had crossed it in the centipede-machine.

Through what seemed an ante-room they were taken, and then into a long hall instantly recognizable as a laboratory. There were many glowing squares illuminating it, and narrow windows high in the

wall gave them a glimpse of the city outside, a pattern of crimson lights. Long metal tables and racks filled the big room's farther end, while along the walls were ranged shining mechanisms of unfamiliar and grotesque appearance. Fully a score of the crocodilian Martians were busy in the room, some intent on their work at the racks and tables, others operating some of the strange machines.

The guards conducted the three to an open space by the wall, below one of the high window-openings and between two great cylindrical mechanisms. Then, while five of their number held the three men prisoned in that space by the threat of their levelled ray-tubes, the other moved toward one of the busy Martian scientists and held with him a brief interchange of hissing speech.

Milton leaned to whisper to the other two: "We've got to get out of this while we're still living," he whispered. "You heard the Martian Master—in constructing that matter-receiver on earth, we've opened a door through which all the Martian millions will pour onto our world!"

"It's useless, Milton," said Randall dully. "Even if we got clear of this the Martians will be at their matter-transmitter in hordes when the moment comes to flash back to earth."

"I know that, but we've got to try," the other insisted. "If we or some of us could get clear of this, we might in some way hide near the matter-transmitter until the moment came and then fight to it."

"But how to get out of the hands of these, even?" asked Lanier, nodding toward the alert guards before them.

“There's but one way," Milton whispered swiftly. "Our earthly muscles would enable us, I think, to get through this window-opening above us in a leap, if we had a moment's chance. Well, whichever of us they take to experiment with or examine first, must make a struggle or disturbance that will turn the guards' attention for a moment and give the other two a chance to make the attempt!"

"One to stay and the other two to get away...." Randall said slowly; but Milton's tense whisper interrupted:

"It's the only way, and even then a thousand to one chance! But it's we who have opened this gate for the Martian invasion of our world and it's we who must—"

Before he could finish, the approach of hissing voices told them that the leader of the six guards and the Martian who seemed the chief of the experimenters in the hall were nearing them. The three men

stood silent and tense as the two crocodilian monsters stopped before them. The scientist, who carried in his metal-belt, instead of a ray-tube a compact case of instruments, surveyed them as though in curiosity.

He came closer, his quick reptilian eyes taking in with evident interest every feature of their bodily appearance. Intuitively the three knew that one of them was to be chosen for a first investigation by the Martian scientists, and that that one would have not even the slender hope of escape open to the other two. A strange lottery of life and death!

Randall saw the creature's gaze turn from one to another of them, and then heard the hiss of his voice as he pointed a taloned paw toward Milton. Instantly two of the guards had seized Milton and had jerked him out from the wall, the other guards holding back Randall and Lanier with threatening tubes. It was upon Milton that the fatal choice had fallen!

Randall and Lanier made together a half-movement forward, but Milton, a tense message in his eyes, forced them back. The guards who held the physicist led him, at the direction of the Martian scientist, toward a great upright frame at the room's far end, upon which were clustered a score of dial-indicators. From these flexible

cords led; and now the scientists began attaching these by clips to various spots on Milton's body. Some mechanical examination of his bodily characteristics were apparently to be made. Milton shot suddenly a glance at the two by the wall, and his head nodded in an almost imperceptible signal. The muscles of Lanier and Randall tensed.

Then abruptly Milton seemed to go mad. He shouted aloud in a terrible voice, and at the same moment tore from him the cords just attached, his fists striking out then at the amazed Martians around him. As they leaped back from that sudden explosion of activity and sound on Milton's part the guards before Randall and Lanier whirled instinctively for an instant toward it. And in that instant the two had leaped.

It was upward they leaped, with all the force of their earthly muscles, toward the big window-opening a half-dozen feet in the wall above them. Like released steel springs they sat up, and Randall heard the thump of their feet as they struck the opening's sill, heard wild cries suddenly coming from beneath them, as the guards turned back toward them. Crimson rays clove up like light toward them, but the instant's surprise had been enough, and in it they had leaped on and through the opening, into the outside night!

As they shot downward and struck the metal paving outside, Randall heard a wild babble of cries from inside. A moment he and Lanier gazed frenziedly around them, then were running with great leaps along the base of the building from which they had just escaped.

In the darkness of night the Martian city stretched away to their right, its massive dark cone-structures outlined by points of glowing ruddy light here and there upon them. Beside the city's metal streets were illuminated by the brilliant field of stars overhead and by the soft light of the two moons, one much larger than the other, that moved among those stars.

Along the street crocodilian Martians were coming and going still, though in small numbers, there being but few in sight in the dim-lit street's length. Lanier pointed ahead as they leaped onward.

"Straight onward, Randall!" he jerked. "There seem fewer of the Martians this way!"

"But the great cone of the matter-station is the other way!" Randall exclaimed.

"We can't risk making for it now!" cried the other. "We've got to keep clear of them until the alarm is over. Hear them now?"

For even as they leaped forward a rising clamor of hissing cries and rush of feet was coming from behind as scores of Martians poured out into the darkness from the great cone-building. The two fugitives had passed by then from the shadow of the mighty structure, and as they ran along the broad metal street toward the shadow of the next cone, through the light of the moons above, they heard higher cries and then glimpsed narrow shafts of crimson force cleaving the night around them.

Randall, as the deadly rays drove past him, heard the low detonating sound made by their destruction of the air in their path, and the inrush of new air. But in the misty and uncertain moonlight the rays could not be loosed accurately, and before they could be swept sidewise to annihilate the two fleeing men they had gained, with a last great leap, the shadow of the next building.

On they ran, the clatter of the Martian pursuit growing more noisy behind them. Randall heard Lanier gasping with each great leap, and felt himself at every breath a knife of pain stabbing through his lungs, the rarified atmosphere of the red planet taking its toll. Again from the darkness behind them the crimson rays clove, but this time were wide of their mark.

With every moment the clamor of pursuit seemed growing louder,

the alarm spreading out over the Martian city and arousing it. As they raced past cone after cone, Randall knew even the increased power of their muscles could not long aid them against the exhaustion which the thin air was imposing on them. His thoughts spun for a moment to Milton, in the laboratory behind, and then back to their own desperate plight.

Abruptly shapes loomed in the misty light before them! A group of three great Martians, reptilian shapes that had been coming toward them and had stopped for an instant in amazement at sight of the running pair. There was no time to halt themselves, to evade the three, and with a mutual instinct Lanier and Randall seized together the last expedient open to them. They ran straight forward toward the astounded three, and when a half-score feet from them, leaped with all their force upward and toward them, their tensed bodies flying through the air with feet outstretched before them.

Then they had struck the group of three with feet-foremost, and with the impetus of that great leap had knocked them sprawling to this side and that, while with a supreme effort the two kept their balance and leaped on. The cries of the three added to the din behind them as they threw themselves forward.

They flung themselves past a last cone building to halt for an instant

in utter amazement despite the nearing pursuit. Before them were no more streets and structures, but a huge smooth-flowing waterway! It gleamed in the moonlight and lay at right angles across their path, seeming to flow along the Martian city's edge.

"A canal!" cried Lanier. "It's one of the canals that meet at this city and flow around it! We're trapped—we've reached the city's edge!"

"Not yet!" Randall gasped. "Look!"

As he pointed to the left Lanier shot a glance there; and then both of them were running in that direction, along the smooth metal paving that bordered the mighty canal. They came to what Randall had seen, a mighty metal arch that soared out over the waterway to its opposite side. A bridge!

They were on it, were racing up the smooth incline of it. Randall glanced back as they reached the arch's summit. From that height the city stretched far away behind them, a lace of crimson lights in the night. He glimpsed the gleam of the giant waterway that encircled the city completely, one that was fed by other canals from far away that emptied into it, the great city's vital water-supply brought thus from this world's melting polar snows.

There were moving lights behind now, too, pouring out onto the metal paving by the waterway, moving to and fro as though in confusion, with a babel of hissing cries. It was not until Randall and Lanier were running down the descending incline of the great arched bridge, though, that the lights and shouts of their pursuers began to move up on that bridge after them.

Running off the bridge's smooth way, the two found themselves stumbling on through the darkness over more metal paving, and then over soft ground. There were no lights or buildings or sounds of any sort on this farther side of the great waterway. A tall dark wall seemed suddenly to loom up out of the darkness some distance ahead of the two.

"The crimson jungle!" Randall cried. "The jungles we glimpsed from the city! It's a chance to hide!"

They raced toward the protecting blackness of that wall of vegetation. They reached it, flung themselves inside, just as the pursuing Martians, a mass of running crocodilian shapes and of great racing centipede-machines, swept up over the bridge's arch behind. A moment the two halted in the thick vegetation's shelter, gasping for breath, then were moving forward through the jungle's denser darkness.

Thick about them and far above them towered the masses of strange trees and plant life through which they made their way. Randall could see but dimly the nature of these plant-forms, but could make out that they were grotesque and unearthly in appearance, all leafless, and with masses of thin tendrils branching from them instead of leaves. He realized that it was only beside the arid planet's great canals that this profusion of plant life had sufficient moisture for existence, and that it was the broad bands of jungle bordering the canals that had made the latter visible to earth's astronomers.

Lanier and he halted for a moment to listen. The thick jungle about them seemed quite silent. But from behind there came through it a vague tumult of hissing calls; and then, as they glimpsed red flashes far behind, they heard the crashing of great masses of the leafless trees.

"The rays!" whispered Lanier. "They're beating through the jungle with them and the centipede-machines after us!"

They paused no more, but pushed on through the thick growths with renewed urgency. Now and then, as they passed through small clearings, Randall glimpsed overhead the fast-moving nearer moon and slower sailing farther moon of Mars, moving across the steady stars. In some of these clearings they saw, too, strange great

openings burrowed in the ground as though by some strange animal.

The crashing clamor of the Martians beating the jungle behind was coming close, ever closer, and as they came to still another misty-lit clearing, Lanier paused, with face white and tense.

"They're closing in on us!" he said. "They're hunting us down by beating the jungle with those centipede-machines, and even if we escape them we're getting farther from the city and the matter-station each moment!"

Randall's eyes roved desperately around the clearing; and then, as they fell on a group of the great burrowed openings that seemed present everywhere about them, he uttered an exclamation.

"These holes! We can hide in one until they've passed over us, and then steal back to the city!"

Lanier's eyes lit. "It's a chance!"

They sprang toward the openings. They were each of some four feet diameter, extending indefinitely downward as though the mouths of tunnels. In a moment Randall was lowering himself into one, Lanier after him. The tunnel in which they were, they found, curved to one

side a few feet below the surface. They crawled down this curve until they were out of sight of the opening above. They crouched silent, then, listening.

There came down to them the dull, distant clamor of the centipede-machines crashing through the jungle, cutting a way with rays, their clamor growing ever louder. Then Randall, who was lowest in the tunnel, turned suddenly as there came to him a strange rustling sound from *beneath* him. It was as though some crawling or creeping thing was moving in the tunnel below them!

He grasped the arm of Lanier, beside and a little above him, to warn him, but the words he was about to whisper never were uttered. For at this moment a big shapeless living thing seemed to flash up toward them through the darkness from beneath, cold ropelike tentacles gripped both tightly; and then in an instant they were being dragged irresistibly down into the lightless tunnel's depths!

As they were pulled swiftly downward into the tunnel by the tentacles that grasped them an involuntary cry of horror came from Randall and Lanier alike. They twisted frantically in the cold grip that held them, but found it of the quality of steel. And as Randall twisted in it to strike frantically down through the darkness at whatever thing of horror held them, his clenched fist met but the

cold smooth skin of some big, soft-bodied creature!

Down—down—remorselessly they were being drawn farther into the black depths of the tunnel by the great thing crawling down below them. Again and again the two twisted and struck, but could not shake its hold. In sheer exhaustion they ceased to struggle, dragged helplessly farther down.

Was it minutes or hours, Randall wondered afterward, of that horrible progress downward, that passed before they glimpsed light beneath? A feeble glow, hardly discernible, it was, and as they went lower still he saw that it was caused by the tunnel passing through a strata of radio-active rock that gave off the faint light. In that light they glimpsed for the first time the horror dragging them downward.

It was a huge worm creature! A thing like a giant angleworm, three feet or more in thickness and thrice that in length, its great body soft and cold and worm-like. From the end nearest them projected two long tentacles with which it had gripped the two men and was dragging them down the tunnel after it! Randall glimpsed a mouth-aperture in the tentacled end of the worm body also, and two scarlike marks above it, placed like eyes, although eyes the monstrous thing had not.

But a moment they glimpsed it and then were in darkness again as the tunnel passed through the radio-active strata and lower. The horror of that moment's glimpse, though, made them strike out in blind repulsion, but relentlessly the creature dragged them after it.

"God!" It was Lanier's panting cry as they were dragged on. "This worm monster—we're hundreds of feet below the surface!"

Randall sought to reply, but his voice choked. The air about them was close and damp, with an overpowering earthy smell. He felt consciousness leaving him.

A gleam of soft light—they were passing more radio-active patches. He felt the wild convulsive struggles of Lanier against the thing; and then suddenly the tunnel ended, debouched into a far-stretching, low-ceilinged cavity. It was feebly illuminated by radio-active patches here and there in walls and ceiling, and as the monster that held them halted on entering the cavity, Randall and Lanier lay in its grip and stared across the weird place with intensified horror.

For it was swarming with countless worm monsters! All were like the one who held them, thick long worm bodies with projecting tentacles and with black eyeless faces. They were crawling to and fro in this cavern far beneath the surface, swarming in hordes around

and over each other, pouring in and out of the awful place from countless tunnels that led upward and downward from it!

A world of worm monsters, beneath the surface of the Martian jungles! As Randall stared across that swarming, dim-lit cave of horror, physically sick at sight of it, he remembered the countless tunnel openings they had glimpsed in their flight through the jungle, and remembered the remark of the Martian who had first guided them across the city, that in the jungles were living things, of a sort. These were the things, worm monsters whose unthinkable networks of tunnels and burrows formed beneath the surface a veritable worm world!

"Randall!" It was Lanier's thick exclamation. "Randall—those scar-marks on their—faces—you see—?"

"See?"

"Those marks! These creatures had eyes once but must have been forced down here by the Martians. These may once have been—ages ago—human!"

At that thought Randall felt horror overcoming his senses. He was aware that the great worm monster holding them was dragging them

forward through the cavern, that others of the swarms there were crowding around them, feeling them blindly with their tentacles, helping to drag them forward.

Half-carried and half-dragged they went, scores of tentacles now holding them, great worm shapes crawling forward on all sides of them and accompanying them along the cavern's length. He glimpsed worm monsters here and there emerging from the upward tunnels with masses of strange plant stuff in their grasp that others blindly devoured. His senses reeled from the suffocating air, the great cavity being but a half-score feet in height, burrowed from the damp earth by these numberless things.

The faint, strange light of the radio-active patches showed him that they were approaching the cavern's end. Tunnels opened from its end as from all its walls and floor, and into one Randall was dragged by the creatures, one before and one behind, grasping him, and Lanier being brought behind him in the same way. In the close tunnel the heavy air was deadly, and he was but partly conscious when again, after moments of crawling along it, he felt himself dragged out into another cavern.

This earth-walled cavity, though, seemed to extend farther than the first, though of the same height as the first and with a few radio-

active illuminating patches. In it seethed and swarmed literally hundreds on hundreds of the worm monsters, a sea of great crawling bodies. Randall and Lanier saw that they were being carried and dragged now toward the farther end of this larger cavity.

As they approached it, pushing through the swarming creatures who felt them with inquisitive tentacles as their captors took them forward, the two men saw that a great shape was looming up in the faint light at the cave's far end. In moments they were close enough to discern its nature, and a horror and awe filled them at sight of it more intense than they had yet felt.

For the looming shape was a huge earthen image or statue of a worm! It was shaped with a childish crudeness from the solid earth, a giant earthen worm shape whose body looped across the cave's end, and whose tentacled head or front end was reared upward to the cavity's roof. Before this awful earthen shape was a section of the cave's floor higher than the rest, and on it a great crudely shaped rectangular earthen block.

"Lanier—that shape!" whispered Randall in his horror. "That earthen image, made by these creatures—it's the worm god they've made for themselves!"

"A worm god!" Lanier repeated, staring toward it as they were dragged nearer. "Then that block...."

"Its altar!" Randall exclaimed. "These things have some dim spark of intelligence or memory! They're brought us here to—"

Before he could finish, the clutching tentacles of the worm monsters about them had dragged them up onto the raised floor beside the block, beneath the looming earthen worm shape. There they glimpsed for the first time in the faint light another who stood there held tightly by the tentacles of two worm monsters. It was a Martian!

The big crocodilian shape was apparently a prisoner like themselves, captured and brought down from above. His reptilian eyes surveyed Lanier and Randall quickly as they were dragged up and held beside him, but he took no other interest. To the two men, at the moment, it seemed that his great crocodilian shape was human, almost, so much more man-like was it than the grotesque worm monsters before them.

With a half-dozen of the creatures holding the two men and the Martian tightly, another great worm monster crawled to the edge of the raised earth floor in front of the giant worm god's image, and then reared up the first third of his thick body into the air. By then

the great, faint-lit cavity stretching before them was filled with countless numbers of the monsters, pouring into it from all the tunnels that opened into it from above and below, packing it thick with their grotesque bodies as far as the eye could reach in the dim light.

They were seething and crawling in that great mass; but as the worm monster on the elevation upreared, all in the cavity seemed suddenly to quiet. Then the upreared eyeless thing began to move his long tentacles. Very slowly at first he waved them back and forth, and slowly the masses of monsters in the cavity, all turned by some sense toward him, did likewise, the cavity becoming a forest of upraised tentacles waving rhythmically back and forth in unison with those of the leader.

Back and forth—back and forth—Randall felt caught in some torturing nightmare as he watched the countless tentacle-feelers waving thus from one side to the other. It was a ceremony, he knew—some strange rite springing perhaps from dim memory alone, that these worm monsters carried out thus before the looming shape of their worm god. Only the six that held the three captives never relaxed their grip.

Still on and on went the strange and senseless rite. By then the close,

damp air of that cavity far beneath Mars' surface was sinking Randall and Lanier deeper into a half-consciousness. The Martian beside them never moved or spoke. The upstretched tentacles of the leader and of the great worm horde before him never ceased swaying rhythmically from side to side.

Randall, half-hypnotized by those swaying tentacles and but semi-conscious by then, could only estimate afterward how long that grotesque rite went on. Hours it must have endured, he knew, hours in which each opening of his eyes revealed only the dimly-illuminated cavern, the worm monsters that filled it, the forest of tentacles waving in unison. It was only toward the end of those hours that he noticed vaguely that the tentacles were waving faster and faster.

And as the tentacles of leader and worm horde waved alike ever more swiftly an atmosphere of growing excitement and expectation seemed to hold the horde. At last the upstretched feelers were whipping back and forth almost too swiftly for the eye to follow. Then abruptly the worm leader ceased the motion himself, and while the horde before him continued it, turned and crawled to the three captives.

In an instant, as though in answer to a second command, the two

worm monsters who held the Martian dragged him forward toward the great earthen block before the worm god's image. Two others of the creatures came from the side, and the four swiftly stretched the Martian flat on the block's top, each of the four grasping with their tentacles one of his four taloned limbs. They seemed to hesitate then, the worm leader beside them, the tentacles of the horde waving swiftly still.

Abruptly the tentacles of the leader flashed up as though in a signal. There was a dull ripping sound, and in that moment Randall and Lanier saw the Martian on the block torn literally limb from limb by the four great worm monsters who had held his four limbs!

The tentacles of the horde waved suddenly with increased, excited swiftness at that. Randall shrank in horror.

"They've brought us here for that!" he cried. "To sacrifice us on that altar that way to their worm god!"

But Lanier too had cried out, appalled, as he saw that awful sacrifice, and both strained madly against the grip of the worm creatures. Their struggles were in vain, and then in answer to another unspoken command the two monsters that held Randall were dragging him also to the earthen altar!

He felt himself gripped by the four great creatures around the block, felt as he struggled with his last strength that he was being stretched out on the block, each of the four at one of its corners grasping one of his limbs. He heard Lanier's mad cries as though from a great distance, glimpsed as he was held thus on his back the great shape of the earthen worm god reared over him, and then glimpsed the leader of the monsters rearing beside him.

The dull sound of the swift-waving tentacles of the horde came to him, there was a tense moment of agony of waiting, and then the tentacles of the leader flashed up in the signal!

But at the same moment Randall felt his limbs released by the four monsters that had held them! There seemed sudden wild confusion in the great cave. The strange rite broke off; the horde of worm monsters crawled frantically this way and that in it. Randall slipped off the block; staggered to his feet.

The worm monsters in the cave were swarming toward the downward tunnel openings! The two captives forgotten, the creatures were pouring in crawling, fighting swarms toward those openings. And then, as Randall and Lanier stared stupefied, there came a red flash from one of the upward tunnels and a brilliant crimson ray stabbed down and mowed a path of annihilation in the

cave's earthen side!

The two heard great thumping sounds from above, saw the tunnels leading from above becoming suddenly many times greater in size as red rays flashed down along them to gouge the tunnel's walls. Then down from those enlarged tunnels there were bursting long shining shapes, great centipede-machines crawling down the tunnels which their rays made larger before them! And as the centipede-machines burst down into the cavern their crimson rays stabbed right and left to cut paths of annihilation among the worms.

"The Martians!" Lanier cried. "They didn't find us above—they knew we must have been taken by these things—and they've come down after us!"

“Back, Lanier!" Randall shouted. "Quick, before they see us, behind this—"

As he spoke he was jerking Lanier with him behind the looming earthen statue of the great worm god. Crouched there between the statue and the cave's wall they were hidden precariously from the view of those in the cavern. And now that cavern had become a scene of horror unthinkable as the centipede-machines pouring down into it blasted the frantically crawling worm monsters with their

rays.

The worm monsters attempted no resistance, but sought only to escape into their downward tunnels, and in moments those not caught by the rays had vanished in the openings. But the centipede-machines, after racing swiftly around the cavity, were following them, were going down into those downward tunnels also, their rays blasting down ahead of each to make the tunnel large enough for them to follow.

In a moment all but one had vanished down into the openings, the remaining one having its front or head jammed in one of the openings from the failure of its operator to blast a large enough opening before him. As Lanier and Randall watched tensely they saw the machine's control room door open and a Martian descend. He inspected the tunnel opening in which his vehicle was jammed, then with a hand ray-tube began to disintegrate the earth around that opening to free his machine.

Randall clutched his companion's arm. "That machine!" he whispered. "If we could capture it, it would give us a chance to get back to the city—to Milton and the matter-transmitter!"

Lanier started, then nodded swiftly. "We'll chance it," he whispered.

"For our twenty-four hours here must be almost up."

They hesitated a moment, then crept forward from behind the great earthen statue. The Martian had his back to them, his attention on the freeing of his mechanism. Across the dim-lit cavern they crept softly, and were within a dozen feet of the Martian when some sound made him wheel quickly to confront them with the deadly tube. But even as he whirled the two had leaped.

The force of their leap sent them flying through that dozen feet of space to strike the Martian at the moment his tube levelled. One hissing call he uttered as they struck him, and then with all his strength Lanier had grasped the crocodilian body and bent it backward. Something in it snapped, and the Martian collapsed limply. The two looked wildly around.

Nothing showed that the Martian's call had been heard, and after a moment's glance that showed the head of the centipede machine already freed, they were clambering up into its control room, closing the door. Randall seized the knob with which he had seen the machines operated. As he pulled it toward him the machine moved across the tunnel opening and raced smoothly over the cavern's floor. As he turned the knob the machine turned swiftly in the same direction.

He headed the long mechanism toward one of the upward-curving tunnels which the Martians had blasted larger in descending. They were almost to it when there flashed up into the cavity from one of the downward tunnel openings a centipede-machine, and then another, and another. The Martians in their transparent-windowed control rooms took in at a glance the dead crocodilian on the floor, and then the three great machines were darting toward that of Randall and Lanier.

"The Martian we killed!" Randall cried. "They heard his call and are coming after us!"

"Turn to the wall!" Lanier shouted to him. "I have the rays—"

At that moment there was a clicking beside Randall and he glimpsed Lanier pulling forth two small grips he had found, then saw that two crimson rays were stabbing from tubes in their machine's front toward the others even as their own rays darted back. The beams that had been loosed toward them grazed past them as Randall whirled their machine to the wall, and he saw one of the three attacking mechanisms vanish as Lanier's beams struck it.

Around—back—with instinctive, lightninglike motions he whirled their centipede-machine in the great dim-lit cave as the two

remaining ones leapt again to the attack. Their rays shot right and left to catch the two men's vehicle in a trap of death, and as Randall swung their own mechanism straight ahead he glimpsed at the cavern's far end the great earthen worm god still upreared.

On either side of them the red beams burned as they leapt forward, but as though running a gauntlet of death Randall kept the machine racing forward in the succeeding second until the two others loomed on either side of it. Then Lanier's beams were driving in turn to right and left of them and the two vanished as though by magic as they were struck.

"Up to the surface!" Lanier cried, his eyes on the glowing dial of his wrist-watch. "We've been held hours here—we've but a half-hour or more before earth midnight!"

Randall sent their machine racing again toward one of the upward tunnels, and as the long mechanism began to climb smoothly up the darkness he heard Lanier agonizing beside him.

"God, if we have only enough time to get to that matter-transmitter before the Martians start flashing to earth through it!"

"But Milton?" Randall cried. "We don't know whether he's alive or

dead! We can't leave him!"

"We must!" said Lanier solemnly. "Our duty's to the earth now, man, to the world that we alone can save from the Martian invasion and conquest! At the hour of twelve Nelson will have the matter-receiver turned on and at that hour the Martian will start flashing to earth—unless we prevent!"

Suddenly Randall grasped the knob in his hands more tightly as light showed above them. They had been climbing upward through the enlarged tunnel at their machine's highest speed, and now as the tunnel curved the light grew stronger. Suddenly they were emerging into the thin sunlight of the Martian day.

In the crimson jungle about them were many Martians, milling excitedly to and fro, and other centipede-machines that were blasting their way down through tunnels to the worm world beneath.

Randall and Lanier, breathless, crouched low in the transparent-windowed control room as they sent their mechanism racing through this scene of swarming activity. Both gasped as one of the centipede-machines clashed against their own in passing, its Martian driver turning to stare after them. But there came no alarm, and in a moment they had passed out of the swarm of Martians and machines

and were heading through the jungle in the direction of the city.

Through the weird red vegetation their mechanism raced with them, Randall holding it at its highest speed, and in minutes they came out of the jungle and were racing over the clear space between it and the great canal. Beyond that canal loomed into the thin sunlight the clustering cones of the mighty Martian city, two towering above all the others—the cone of the Martian Master and the other cone in which was the matter-transmitter and receiver.

It was toward the latter that Lanier pointed. "Head straight toward that cone, Randall—we've but minutes left!"

They were racing now up over the great arch of the canal's metal bridge, and then scuttling smoothly off it and along the broad metal street through which they had fled in darkness hours before. In it Martians and centipede-machines were coming and going in great numbers, but none noticed the human forms of the two crouched low in their mechanism's control room.

They were rushing then toward the looming cone of the Martian Master. As they flashed past it Randall saw Lanier's face working, knew the desire that tore at him even as at himself to burst inside and ascertain whether or not Milton still lived in the laboratories from

which they had fled. But they were past it, faces white and grim, were rushing on through the Martian city at reckless speed toward the other mighty cone.

It seemed that all in the great city were heading toward the same goal, streams of crocodilian Martians and masses of shining centipede-machines filling the streets as they moved toward it. As they came closer to the mighty structure, hearts pounding, they saw that around it surged a mighty mass of Martians and machines. The hordes waiting to be released through the matter-transmitter inside upon the unsuspecting earth!

"Try to get the machine inside!" Lanier whispered tensely. "If we can smash that transmitter yet...."

Randall nodded grimly. "Keep ready at the ray-tubes," he told the other.

As unobtrusively as possible he sent their long mechanism worming forward through the vast throng of machines and Martians, toward the great cone's door. Crouching low, the hands of their watches closing fast toward the twelfth figure, they edged forward in the long machine. At last they were moving through the mighty door, into the cone's interior.

They moved slowly on through the mass of machines and crocodile forms inside, then halted. For at the great crowd's center was a clear circle hundreds of feet across, and as Randall gazed across it his heart seemed to leap once and then stop.

At the center of that clear circle rose the two cubical metal chambers of the matter-transmitter and receiver. The transmitting chamber, they saw, was flooded with humming force, with white light pouring from its inner walls. It was already in operation, and the masses of Martians in the great cone were only waiting for the moment to sound when the receiver on earth would be operating also. Then they would pour into the chamber to be flashed in masses across the gulf to earth! The eyes of all in the cone seemed turned toward an erect dial-mechanism beside the chambers which was clocklike in appearance, and that would mark the moment when the first Martian could enter the transmitting-chamber and flash out.

A little distance from the two metal chambers stood a low dais on which there sat the hideous triple-bodied form of the Martian Master. Around him were the massed members of his council, waiting like him for the start of their age-planned invasion of earth. And beside the dais was a figure between two crocodilian guards at sight of whom Randall forgot all else.

"Milton! My God, Lanier, it's Milton!"

"Milton! They've brought him here to torture or kill him if they find he's lied about the moment they could flash to earth!"

Milton! And at sight of him something snapped in Randall's brain.

With a single motion of the knob he sent their centipede-machine crashing out into the clear circle at the mighty cone's center. A wild uproar of hissing cries broke from all the thousands in it as he sent the mechanism whirling toward the dais of the Martian Master. He saw the crocodilian forms there scattering blindly before him, and then as his rays drove out and spun and stabbed in mad figures of crimson death through the astounded Martian masses he saw Milton looking up toward them, crying out crazily to them as his two guards loosed him for the moment.

A high call from the Martian Master ripped across the hall and was answered by a shattering roar of hissing voices as Martians and machines surged madly toward them. Randall and Lanier in a single leap were out of the centipede-machine, and in an instant had half-dragged Milton with them in a great leap up to the edge of the humming transmitting chamber.

Milton was shouting hoarsely to them over the wild uproar. To enter that transmitting chamber before the destined moment was annihilation, to be flashed out with no receiver on earth awaiting them. They turned, struck with all their strength at the first Martians rushing up to them. No rays flashed, for a ray loosed would destroy the chamber behind them that was the one gate for the Martians to the world they would invade. But as the Martian Master's high call hissed again all the countless crocodilian forms in the great cone were rushing toward them.

Braced at the very edge of the humming, light-filled chamber, Randall and Lanier and Milton struck madly at the Martians surging up toward them. Randall seemed in a dream. A score of taloned paws clutched him from beneath; scaled forms collapsed under his insane blows.

The whole vast cone and surging reptilian hordes seemed spinning at increasing speed around him. As his clenched fists flashed with waning strength he glimpsed crocodilian forms swarming up on either side of them, glimpsed Lanier down, talons reaching toward him, Milton fighting over him like a madman. Another moment would see it ended—reptilian arms reaching in scores to drag him down—Milton jerking Lanier half to his feet. The Martian Master's call sounded—and then came a great clanging sound at which the

Martian hordes seemed to freeze for an instant motionless, at which Milton's voice reached him in a supreme cry.

"Randall—the transmitter!"

For in that instant Milton was leaping back with Lanier, and as Randall with his last strength threw himself backward with them into the humming transmitting-chamber's brilliant light, he heard a last frenzied roar of hissing cries from the Martian hordes about them. Then as the brilliant light and force from the chamber's walls smote them, Randall felt himself hurled into blackness inconceivable, that smashed like a descending curtain across his brain.

The curtain of blackness lifted for a moment. He was lying with Milton and Lanier in another chamber whose force beat upon them. He saw a yellow-lit room instead of the great cone—saw the tense, anxious face of Nelson at the switch beside them. He strove to move, made to Nelson a gesture with his arm that seemed to drain all strength and life from him; and then, as in answer to it Nelson drove up the switch and turned off the force of the matter-receiver in which they lay, the black curtain descended on Randall's brain once more.

Two hours later it was when Milton and Randall and Lanier and Nelson turned to the laboratory's door. They paused to glance behind

them. Of the great matter-transmitter and receiver, of the apparatus that had crowded the laboratory, there remained now but wreckage.

For that had been their first thought, their first task, when the astounded Nelson had brought the three back to consciousness and had heard their amazing tale. They had wrecked so completely the matter-station and its actuating apparatus that none could ever have guessed what a mechanism of wonder the laboratory a short time before had held.

The cubical chambers had been smashed beyond all recognition, the dynamos were masses of split metal and fused wiring, the batteries of tubes were shattered, the condensers and transformers and wiring demolished. And it had only been when the last written plans and blue-prints of the mechanism had been burned that Milton and Randall and Lanier had stopped to allow their exhausted bodies a moment of rest.

Now as they paused at the laboratory's door, Lanier reached and swung it open. Together, silent, they gazed out.

It all seemed to Randall exactly as upon the night before. The shadowy masses in the darkness, the heaving, dim-lit sea stretching far away before them, the curtain of summer stars stretched across

the heavens. And, sinking westward amid those stars, the red spark of Mars toward which as though toward a magnet all their eyes had turned.

Milton was speaking. "Up there it has shone for centuries—ages—a crimson spot of light. And up there the Martians have been watching, watching—until at last we opened to them the gate."

Randall's hand was on his shoulder. "But we closed that gate, too, in the end."

Milton nodded slowly. "We—or the fate that rules our worlds. But the gate is closed, and God grant, shall never again be opened by any on this world."

"God grant it," the other echoed.

And they were all gazing still toward the thing. Gazing up toward the crimson spot of light that burned there among the stars, toward the planet that shone red, menacing, terrible, but whose menace and whose terror had been thrust back even as they had crouched to spring at last upon the earth.

78 The Exile of Time by Ray Cummings

From somewhere out of Time come a swarm of Robots who inflict on New York the awful vengeance of the diabolical cripple Tugh.

Aproximate word count: 55,000

Bigotry:

Warnings:

was not one robot

where nothing had stood

the robot braced itself

look exclaimed Larry

- - -

Chapter 1: ***Mysterious Girl***

The extraordinary incidents began about 1 A.M. in the night of June 8-9, 1935. I was walking through Patton Place, in New York City,

with my friend Larry Gregory. My name is George Rankin. My business—and Larry's—are details quite unimportant to this narrative. We had been friends in college. Both of us were working in New York; and with all our relatives in the middle west we were sharing an apartment on this Patton Place—a short crooked, little-known street of not particularly impressive residential buildings lying near the section known as Greenwich Village, where towering office buildings of the business districts encroach close upon it.

This night at 1 A. M. it was deserted. A taxi stood at a corner; its chauffeur had left it there, and evidently gone to a nearby lunch room. The street lights were, as always, inadequate. The night was sultry and dark, with a leaden sky and a breathless humidity that presaged a thunder storm. The houses were mostly unlighted at this hour. There was an occasional apartment house among them, but mostly they were low, ramshackle affairs of brick and stone.

We were still three blocks from our apartment when without warning the incidents began which were to plunge us and all the city into disaster. We were upon the threshold of a mystery weird and strange, but we did not know it. Mysterious portals were swinging to engulf us. And all unknowing, we walked into them.

Larry was saying, "Wish we would get a storm to clear this air—

what the devil? George, did you hear that?"

We stood listening. There had sounded a choking, muffled scream. We were midway in the block. There was not a pedestrian in sight, nor any vehicle save the abandoned taxi at the corner.

"A woman," he said. "Did it come from this house?"

We were standing before a three-story brick residence. All its windows were dark. There was a front stoop of several steps, and a basement entryway. The windows were all closed, and the place had the look of being unoccupied.

"Not in there, Larry," I answered. "It's closed for the summer—" But I got no further; we heard it again. And this time it sounded, not like a scream, but like a woman's voice calling to attract our attention.

"George! Look there!" Larry cried.

The glow from a street light illumined the basement entryway, and behind one of the dark windows a girl's face was pressed against the pane.

Larry stood gripping me, then drew me forward and down the steps of the entryway. There was a girl in the front basement room.

Darkness was behind her, but we could see her white frightened face close to the glass. She tapped on the pane, and in the silence we heard her muffled voice:

"Let me out! Oh, let me get out!"

The basement door had a locked iron gate. I rattled it. "No way of getting in," I said, then stopped short with surprise. "What the devil __"

I joined Larry by the window. The girl was only a few inches from us. She had a pale, frightened face; wide, terrified eyes. Even with that first glimpse, I was transfixed by her beauty. And startled; there was something weird about her. A low-necked, white satin dress disclosed her snowy shoulders; her head was surmounted by a pile of snow-white hair, with dangling white curls framing her pale ethereal beauty. She called again.

"What's the matter with you?" Larry demanded. "Are you alone in there? What is it?"

She backed from the window; we could see her only as a white blob in the darkness of the basement room.

I called, "Can you hear us? What is it?"

Then she screamed again. A low scream; but there was infinite terror in it. And again she was at the window.

"You will not hurt me? Let me—oh please let me come out!" Her fists pounded the casement.

What I would have done I don't know. I recall wondering if the policeman would be at our corner down the block; he very seldom was there. I heard Larry saying:

"What the hell!—I'll get her out. George, get me that brick.... Now, get back, girl—I'm going to smash the window."

But the girl kept her face pressed against the pane. I had never seen such terrified eyes. Terrified at something behind her in the house; and equally frightened at us.

I call to her: "Come to the door. Can't you come to the door and open it?" I pointed to the basement gate. "Open it! Can you hear me?"

"Yes—I can hear you, and you speak my language. But you—you will not hurt me? Where am I? This—this was my house a moment ago. I was living here."

Demented! It flashed to me. An insane girl, locked in this empty

house. I gripped Larry; said to him: "Take it easy; there's something queer about this. We can't smash windows. Let's—"

"You open the door," he called to the girl.

"I cannot."

"Why? Is it locked on the inside?"

"I don't know. Because—oh, hurry! If he—if it comes again—!"

We could see her turn to look behind her.

Larry demanded, "Are you alone in there?"

"Yes—now. But, oh! a moment ago he was here!"

"Then come to the door."

"I cannot. I don't know where it is. This is so strange and dark a place. And yet it was my home, just a little time ago."

Demented! And it seemed to me that her accent was very queer. A foreigner, perhaps.

She went suddenly into frantic fear. Her fists beat the window glass almost hard enough to shatter it.

"We'd better get her out," I agreed. "Smash it, Larry."

"Yes." He waved at the girl. "Get back. I'll break the glass. Get away so you won't get hurt."

The girl receded into the dimness.

"Watch your hand," I cautioned. Larry took off his coat and wrapped his hand and the brick in it. I gazed behind us. The street was still empty. The slight commotion we had made had attracted no attention.

The girl cried out again as Larry smashed the pane. "Easy," I called to her. "Take it easy. We won't hurt you."

The splintering glass fell inward, and Larry pounded around the casement until it was all clear. The rectangular opening was fairly large. We could see a dim basement room of dilapidated furniture: a door opening into a back room; the girl; nearby, a white shape watching us.

There seemed no one else. "Come on," I said. "You can get out

here."

But she backed away. I was half in the window so I swung my legs over the sill. Larry came after me, and together we advanced on the girl, who shrank before us.

Then suddenly she ran to meet us, and I had the sudden feeling that she was not insane. Her fear of us was overshadowed by her terror at something else in this dark, deserted house. The terror communicated itself to Larry and me. Something eery, here.

"Come on," Larry muttered. "Let's get her out of here."

I had indeed no desire to investigate anything further. The girl let us help her through the window. I stood in the entryway holding her arms. Her dress was of billowing white satin with a single red rose at the breast; her snowy arms and shoulders were bare; white hair was piled high on her small head. Her face, still terrified, showed parted red lips; a little round black beauty patch adorned one of her powdered cheeks. The thought flashed to me that this was a girl in a fancy dress costume. This was a white wig she was wearing!

I stood with the girl in the entryway, at a loss what to do. I held her soft warm arms; the perfume of her enveloped me.

"What do you want us to do with you?" I demanded softly. McGuire, the policeman on the block, might at any moment pass. "We might get arrested! What's the matter with you? Can't you explain? Are you hurt?"

She was staring as though I were a ghost, or some strange animal. "Oh, take me away from this place! I will talk—though I do not know what to say—"

Demented or sane, I had no desire to have her fall into the clutches of the police. Nor could we very well take her to our apartment. But there was my friend Dr. Alten, alienist, who lived within a mile of here.

"We'll take her to Alten's," I said to Larry, "and find out what this means. She isn't crazy."

A sudden wild emotion swept me, then. Whatever this mystery, more than anything in the world I did not want the girl to be insane!

Larry said, "There was a taxi down the street."

It came, now, slowly along the deserted block. The chauffeur had perhaps heard us, and was cruising past to see if we were possible fares. He halted at the curb. The girl had quieted; but when she saw

the taxi her face registered wildest terror, and she shrank against me.

"No! No! Don't let it kill me!"

Larry and I were pulling her forward. "What the devil's the matter with you?" Larry demanded again.

She was suddenly wildly fighting with us. "No! That—that mechanism—"

"Get her in it!" Larry panted. "We'll have the neighborhood on us!"

It seemed the only thing to do. We flung her, scrambling and fighting, into the taxi. To the half-frightened, reluctant driver, Larry said vigorously:

"It's all right; we're just taking her to a doctor. Hurry and get us away from here. There's good money in it for you!"

The promise—and the reassurance of the physician's address—convinced the chauffeur. We whirled off toward Washington Square.

Within the swaying taxi I sat holding the trembling girl. She was sobbing now, but quieting.

"There," I murmured. "We won't hurt you; we're just taking you to a doctor. You can explain to him. He's very intelligent."

"Yes," she said softly. "Yes. Thank you. I'm all right now."

She relaxed against me. So beautiful, so dainty a creature.

Larry leaned toward us. "You're better now?"

"Yes."

"That's fine. You'll be all right. Don't think about it."

He was convinced she was insane. I breathed again the vague hope that it might not be so. She was huddled against me. Her face, upturned to mine, had color in it now; red lips; a faint rose tint in the pale cheeks.

She murmured, "Is this New York?"

My heart sank. "Yes," I answered. "Of course it is."

"But when?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, what year?"

"Why, 1935!"

She caught her breath. "And your name is—"

"George Rankin."

"And I,"—her laugh had a queer break in it—"I am Mistress Mary Atwood. But just a few minutes ago—oh, am I dreaming? Surely I'm not insane!"

Larry again leaned over us. "What are you talking about?"

"You're friendly, you two. Like men; strange, so very strange-looking young men. This—this carriage without any horses—I know now it won't hurt me."

She sat up. "Take me to your doctor. And then to the general of your army. I must see him, and warn him. Warn you all." She was turning half hysterical again. She laughed wildly. "Your general—he won't be General Washington, of course. But I must warn him."

She gripped me. "You think I am demented. But I am not. I am Mary Atwood, daughter of Major Charles Atwood, of General

Washington's staff. That was my home, where you broke the window. But it did not look like that a few moments ago. You tell me this is the year 1935, but just a few moments ago I was living in the year 1777!"

Chapter 2: From Out of the Past

“Sane?" said Dr. Alten. "Of course she's sane." He stood gazing down at Mary Atwood. He was a tall, slim fellow, this famous young alienist, with dark hair turning slightly grey at the temples and a neat black mustache that made him look older than he was. Dr. Alten at this time, in spite of his eminence, had not yet turned forty.

"She's sane," he reiterated. "Though from what you tell me, it's a wonder that she is." He smiled gently at the girl. "If you don't mind, my dear, tell us just what happened to you, as calmly as you can."

She sat by an electrolier in Dr. Alten's living room. The yellow light gleamed on her white satin dress, on her white shoulders, her beautiful face with its little round black beauty patch, and the curls of the white wig dangling to her neck. From beneath the billowing, flounced skirt the two satin points of her slippers showed.

A beauty of the year 1777! This thing so strange! I gazed at her with quickened pulse. It seemed that I was dreaming; that as I sat before her in my tweed business suit with its tubular trousers I was the anachronism! This should have been candle-light illumining us; I should have been a powdered and bewigged gallant, in gorgeous satin and frilled shirt to match her dress. How strange, how futuristic

we three men of 1935 must have looked to her! And this city through which we had whirled her in the throbbing taxi—no wonder she was overwrought.

Alten fumbled in the pockets of his dressing gown for cigarettes. "Go ahead, Miss Mary. You are among friends. I promise we will try and understand."

She smiled. "Yes. I—I believe you." Her voice was low. She sat staring at the floor, choosing her words carefully; and though she stumbled a little, her story was coherent. Upon the wings of her words my fancy conjured that other Time-world, more than a hundred and fifty years ago.

"I was at home to-night," she began. "To-night after dinner. I have no relatives except my father. He is General Washington's aide. We live —our home is north of the city. I was alone, except for the servants.

"Father sent word to-night that he was coming to see me. The messenger got through the British lines. But the redcoats are everywhere. They were quartered in our house. For months I have been little more than a servant to a dozen of My Lord's Howe's officers. They are gentlemen, though: I have no complaint. Then they left, and father, knowing it, wanted to come to see me.

"He should not have tried it. Our house is watched. He promised me he would not wear the British red." She shuddered. "Anything but that—to have him executed as a spy. He would not risk that, but wear merely a long black cloak.

"He was to come about ten o'clock. But at midnight there was no sign of him. The servants were asleep. I sat alone, and every pounding hoof-beat on the road matched my heart.

"Then I went into the garden. There was a dim moon in and out of the clouds. It was hot, like to-night. I mean, why it *was* to-night. It's so strange—"

In the silence of Alten's living room we could hear the hurried ticking of his little mantle clock, and from the street outside came the roar of a passing elevated train and the honk of a taxi. This was New York of 1935. But to me the crowding ghosts of the past were here. In fancy I saw the white pillars of the moonlit Atwood home. A garden with a dirt road beside it. Red-coated British soldiers passing.... And to the south the little city of New York extending northward from crooked Maiden Lane and the Bowling Green....

"Go on, Mistress Mary."

"I sat on a bench in the garden. And suddenly before me there was a white ghost. A shape. A wraith of something which a moment before had not been there. I sat too frightened to move. I could not call out. I tried to, but the sound would not come.

"The shape was like a mist, a little ball of cloud in the center of the garden lawn. Then in a second or two it was solid—a thing like a shining cage, with crisscrossing white bars. It was like a room; a metal cage like a room. I thought that the thing was a phantom or that I was asleep and dreaming. But it was real."

Alten interrupted. "How big was it?"

"As large as this room; perhaps larger. But it was square, and about twice as high as a man."

A cage, then, some twenty feet square and twelve feet high.

She went on: "The cage door opened. I think I was standing, then, and I tried to run but could not. The—the *thing* came from the door of the cage and walked toward me. It was about ten feet tall. It looked—oh, it looked like a man!"

She buried her face in her hands. Again the room was silent. Larry was seated, staring at her; all of us were breathless.

"Like a man?" Alten prompted gently.

"Yes; like a man." She raised her white face. This girl out of the past! Admiration for her swept me anew—she was bravely trying to smile.

"Like a man. A thing with legs, a body, a great round head and swaying arms. A jointed man of metal! You surely must know all about them."

"A Robot!" Larry muttered.

"You have them here, I suppose. Like that rumbling carriage without horses, this jointed iron man came walking toward me. And it spoke! A most horrible hollow voice—but it seemed almost human. And what it said I do not know, for I fainted. I remember falling as it came walking toward me, with stiff-jointed legs.

"When I came to my senses I was in the cage. Everything was humming and glowing. There was a glow outside the bars like a moonlit mist. The iron monster was sitting at a table, with peculiar things—mechanical things—"

"The controls of the cage-mechanisms," said Alten. "How long were you in the cage?"

"I don't know. Time seemed to stop. Everything was silent except the humming noises. They were everywhere. I guess I was only half conscious. The monster sat motionless. In front of him were big round clock faces with whirling hands. Oh, I suppose you don't find this strange; but to me—!"

“Could you see anything outside the cage?" Alten persisted. "No. Just a fog. But it was crawling and shifting. Yes!—I remember now—I could not see anything out there, but I had the thought, the feeling, that there were tremendous things to see! The monster spoke again and told me to be careful; that we were going to stop. Its iron hands pulled at levers. Then the humming grew fainter; died away; and I felt a shock.

"I thought I had fainted again. I could just remember being pulled through the cage door. The monster left me on the ground. It said, 'Lie there, for I will return very soon.'

"The cage vanished. I saw a great cliff of stone near me; it had yellow-lighted openings, high up in the air. And big stone fences hemmed me in. Then I realized I was in an open space between a lot of stone houses. One towered like a cliff, or the side of a pyramid—"

"The back yard of that house on Patton Place!" Larry exclaimed. He

looked at me. "Has it any back yard, George?"

"How should I know?" I retorted. "Probably has."

"Go on," Alten was prompting.

"That is nearly all. I found a doorway leading to a dark room. I crawled through it toward a glow of light. I passed through another room. I thought I was in a nightmare, and that this was my home. I remembered that the cage had not moved. It had hardly lurched. Just trembled; vibrated.

"But this was not my home. The rooms were small and dark. Then I peered through a window on a strange stone street. And saw these strange-looking young men. And that is all—all I can tell you."

She had evidently held herself calm by a desperate effort. She broke down now, sobbing without restraint.

Chapter 3: Tugh, the Cripple

The portals of this mystery had swung wide to receive us. The tumbling events which menaced all our world of 1935 were upon us now. A maelstrom. A torrent in the midst of which we were caught up like tiny bits of cork and whirled away.

But we thought we understood the mystery. We believed we were acting for the best. What we did was no doubt ill-considered; but the human mind is so far from omniscient! And this thing was so strange!

Alten said, "You have a right to be overwrought, Mistress Mary Atwood. But this thing is as strange to us as it is to you. I called that iron monster a Robot. But it does not belong to our age: if it does I have never seen one such as you describe. And traveling through Time—"

He smiled down at her. "That is not a commonplace everyday occurrence to us, I assure you. The difference is that in this world of ours we can understand—or at least explain—these things as being scientific. And so they have not the terror of the supernatural."

Mary was calmer now. She returned his smile. "I realize that; or at

least I am trying to realize it."

What a level-headed girl was this! I touched her arm. "You are very wonderful—"

Alten brushed me away. "Let's try and reduce it to rationality. The cage was—is, I should say, since of course it still exists—that cage is a Time-traveling vehicle. It is traveling back and forth through Time, operated by a Robot. Call it that. A pseudo-human monster fashioned of metal in the guise of a man."

Even Alten had to force himself to speak calmly, as he gazed from one to the other of us. "It came, no doubt from some future age, where half-human mechanisms are common, and Time-traveling is known. That cage probably does not travel in Space, but only in Time. In the future—somewhere—the Space of that house on Patton Place may be the laboratory of a famous scientist. And in the past—in the year 1777—that same Space was the garden of Mistress Atwood's home. So much is obvious. But why—"

"Why," Larry burst out, "did that iron monster stop in 1777 and abduct this girl?"

"And why," I intercepted, "did it stop here in 1935?" I gazed at

Mary. "And it told you it would return?"

"Yes."

Alten was pondering. "There must be some connection, of course.... Mistress Mary, had you never seen this cage before?"

"No."

"Nor anything like it? Was anything like that known to your Time?"

"No. Oh, I cannot truly say that. Some people believe in phantoms, omens and witchcraft. There was in Salem, in the Massachusetts Colony, not so many years ago—"

"I don't mean that. I mean Time-traveling."

"There were soothsayers and fortune-tellers, and necromancers with crystals to gaze into the future."

"We still have them," Alten smiled. "You see, we don't know much more than you do about this thing."

I said, "Did you have any enemy? Anyone who wished you harm?"

She thought a moment. "No—yes, there was one." She shuddered at the memory. "A man—a cripple—a horribly repulsive man of about one score and ten years. He lives down near the Battery." She paused.

"Tell us about him," Larry urged.

She nodded. "But what could he have to do with this? He is horribly deformed. Thin, bent legs, a body like a cask and a bulging forehead with goggling eyes. My Lord Howe's officers say he is very intelligent and very learned. Loyal to the King, too. There was a munitions plot in the Bermudas, and this cripple and Lord Howe were concerned in it. But Father likes the fellow and says that in reality he wishes our cause well. He is rich.

"But you don't want to hear all this. He—he made love to me, and I repulsed him. There was a scene with Father, and Father had our lackeys throw him out. That was a year ago. He cursed horribly. He vowed then that some day he—he would have me; and get revenge on Father. But he has kept away. I have not seen him for a twelvemonth."

We were silent. I chanced to glance at Alten, and a strange look was on his face.

He said abruptly, "What is this cripple's name, Mistress Mary?"

"Tugh. He is known to all the city as Tugh. Just that. I never heard any Christian name."

Alten rose sharply to his feet. "A cripple named Tugh?"

"Yes," she affirmed wonderingly. "Does it mean anything to you?"

Alten swung on me. "What is the number of that house on Patton Place? Did you happen to notice?"

I had, and wondering I told him.

"Just a minute," he said. "I want to use the phone."

He came back to us in a moment: his face was very solemn. "That house on Patton Place is owned by a man named Tugh! I just called a reporter friend; he remembers a certain case: he confirmed what I thought. Mistress Mary, did this Tugh in your Time ever consult doctors, trying to have his crippled body made whole?"

"Why, of course he did. I have heard that many times. But his crippled, deformed body cannot be cured."

Alten checked Larry and me when we would have broken in with astonished questions. He said:

"Don't ask me what it means; I don't know. But I think that this cripple—this Tugh—has lived both in 1777 and 1935, and is traveling between them in this Time-traveling cage. And perhaps he is the human master of that Robot."

Alten made a vehement gesture. "But we'd better not theorize; it's too fantastic. Here is the story of Tugh in our Time. He came to me some three years ago; in 1932, I think. He offered any price if I could cure his crippled body. All the New York medical fraternity knew him. He seemed sane, but obsessed with the idea that he must have a body like other men. Like Faust, who, as an old man, paid the price of his soul to become youthful, he wanted to have the beautiful body of a young man."

Alten was speaking vehemently. My thoughts ran ahead of his words; I could imagine with grewsome fancy so many things. A cripple, traveling to different ages seeking to be cured. Desiring a different body....

Alten was saying, "This fellow Tugh lived alone in that house on Patton Place. He was all you say of him, Mistress Mary. Hideously

repulsive. A sinister personality. About thirty years old.

"And, in 1932, he got mixed up with a girl who had a somewhat dubious reputation herself. A dancer, a frequenter of night-clubs, as they used to be called. Her name was Doris Johns—something like that. She evidently thought she could get money out of Tugh. Whatever it was, there was a big uproar. The girl had him arrested, saying that he had assaulted her. The police had quite a time with the cripple."

Larry and I remembered a few of the details of it now, though neither of us had been in New York at the time.

Alten went on: "Tugh fought with the police. Went berserk. I imagine they handled him pretty roughly. In the Magistrate's Court he made another scene, and fought with the court attendants. With ungovernable rage he screamed vituperatives, and was carried kicking, biting and snarling from the court-room. He threatened some wild weird revenge upon all the city officials—even upon the city itself."

"Nice sort of chap," Larry commented.

But Alten did not smile. "The Magistrate could only hold him for

contempt of Court. The girl had absolutely no evidence to support her accusation of assault. Tugh was finally dismissed. A week later he murdered the girl.

"The details are unimportant; but he did it. The police had him trapped in his house; had the house surrounded—this same one on Patton Place—but when they burst in to take him, he had inexplicably vanished. He was never heard from again."

Alten continued to regard us with grim, solemn face. "Never heard from—until to-night. And now we hear of him. How he vanished, with the police guarding every exit to that house—well, it's obvious, isn't it? He went into another Time-world. Back to 1777, doubtless."

Mary Atwood gave a little cry. "I had forgotten that I must warn you. Tugh told me once, before Father and I quarreled with him, that he had a mysterious power. He was a most wonderful man, he said. And there was a world in the future—he mentioned 1934 or 1935—which he hated. A great city whose people had wronged him; and he was going to bring death to them. Death to them all! I did not heed him. I thought he was demented, raving...."

Alten's little clock ticked with tumultuous heartbeat through another silence. The great city around us, even though this was two o'clock

in the morning, throbbed with a myriad of blended sounds.

A warning! Was the girl from out of the past giving us a warning of coming disaster to this great city?

Alten was pacing the floor. "What are we to do—tell the authorities? Take Mistress Mary Atwood to Police Headquarters and inform them that she has come from the year 1777? And that, if we are not careful, there will be an attack upon New York?"

"No!" I burst out. I could fancy how we would be received at Police Headquarters if we did that! And our pictures in to-morrow's newspapers. Mary's picture, with a jibing headline ridiculing us.

"No," echoed Alten. "I have no intention of doing it. I'm not so foolish as that." He stopped before Mary. "What do you want to do? You're obviously an exceptionally intelligent, level-headed girl. Heaven knows you need to be."

"I—I want to get back home," she stammered.

A pang shot through me as she said it. A hundred and fifty years to separate us. A vast gulf. An impassible barrier.

"That mechanism said it would return!"

"Exactly," agreed Alten. An excitement was upon us all. "Exactly what I mean! Shall we chance it? Try it? There's nothing else I can think of to do. I have a revolver and two hunting rifles."

"Just what do you mean?" I demanded.

"I mean, we'll take my car and go to Tugh's house on Patton Place. Right now! And if that mechanical monster returns, we'll seize it!"

Alten, the usually calm, precise man of science, was tensely vehement. "Seize it! Why not? Three of us, armed, ought to be able to overcome a Robot! Then we'll seize the Time-traveling cage. Perhaps we can operate it. If not, with it in our possession we'll at least have something to show the authorities; there'll be no ridicule then!"

Our inescapable destiny was making us plunge so rashly into this mystery! With the excitement and the strange fantasy of it upon us, we thought we were acting for the best.

Within a quarter of an hour, armed and with a long overcoat and a scarf to hide Mary Atwood's beauty, we took Alten's car and drove to Patton Place.

Chapter 4: The Fight With the Robot

Patrolman McGuire quite evidently had not passed through Patton Place since we left it; or at least he had not noticed the broken window. The house appeared as before, dark, silent, deserted, and the broken basement window yawned with its wide black opening.

"I'll leave the car around on the other street," Alten said as slowly we passed the house. "Quick—no one's in sight; you three get out here."

We crouched in the dim entryway and in a moment he joined us.

I clung to Mary Atwood's arm. "You're not afraid?" I asked.

"No. Yes; of course I am afraid. But I want to do what we planned. I want to go back to my own world, to my Father."

"Inside!" Alten whispered. "I'll go first. You two follow with her."

I can say now that we should not have taken her into that house. It is so easy to look back upon what one might have done!

We climbed through the window, into the dark front basement room. There was only silence, and our faintly padding footsteps on the carpeted floor. The furniture was shrouded with cotton covers

standing like ghosts in the gloom. I clutched the loaded rifle which Alten had given me. Larry was similarly armed; and Alten carried a revolver.

"Which way, Mary?" I whispered. "You're sure it was outdoors?"

"Yes. This way, I think."

We passed through the connecting door. The back room seemed to be a dismantled kitchen.

"You stay with her here, a moment," Alten whispered to me. "Come on, Larry. Let's make sure no one—nothing—is down here."

I stood silent with Mary, while they prowled about the lower floor.

"It may have come and gone," I whispered.

"Yes." She was trembling against me.

It seemed to me an eternity while we stood there listening to the faint footfalls of Larry and Alten. Once they must have stood quiet; then the silence leaped and crowded us. It is horrible to listen to a pregnant silence which every moment might be split by some weird unearthly sound.

Larry and Alten returned. "Seems to be all clear," Alten whispered. "Let's go into the back yard."

The little yard was dim. The big apartment house against its rear wall loomed with a blank brick face, save that there were windows some eight stories up. Only a few windows overlooked this dim area with its high enclosing walls. The space was some forty feet square, and there was a faded grass plot in the center.

We crouched near the kitchen door, with Mary behind us in the room. She said she could recall the cage having stood near the center of the yard, with its door facing this way....

Nearly an hour passed. It seemed that the dawn must be near, but it was only around four o'clock. The same storm clouds hung overhead —a threatening storm which would not break. The heat was oppressing.

"It's come and gone," Larry whispered; "or it isn't coming. I guess that this—"

And then it came! We were just outside the doorway, crouching against the shadowed wall of the house. I had Mary close behind me, my rifle ready.

"There!" whispered Alten.

We all saw it—a faint luminous mist out near the center of the yard—a crawling, shifting ball of fog.

Alten and Larry, one on each side of me, shifted sidewise, away from me. Mary stood and cast off her dark overcoat. We men were in dark clothes, but she stood in gleaming white against the dark rectangle of doorway. It was as we had arranged. A moment only, she stood there; then she moved back, further behind me in the black kitchen.

And in that moment the cage had materialized. We were hoping its occupant had seen the girl, and not us. A breathless moment passed while we stared for the first time at this strange thing from the Unknown.... A formless, glowing mist, it quickly gathered itself into solidity. It seemed to shrink. It took form. From a wraith of a cage, in a second it was solid. And so silently, so swiftly, came this thing out of Time into what we call the Present! The dim yard a second ago had been empty.

The cage stood there, a thing of gleaming silver bars. It seemed to enclose a single room. From within its dim interior came a faint glow, which outlined something standing at the bars, peering out.

The doorway was facing us. There had been utter silence; but suddenly, as though to prove how solid was this apparition, we heard the clank of metal, and the door slid open.

I turned to make sure that Mary was hiding well behind me. The way back to the street, if need for escape arose, was open to her.

I turned again, to face the shining cage. In the doorway something stood peering out, a light behind it. It was a great jointed thing of dark metal some ten feet high. For a moment it stood motionless. I could not see its face clearly, though I knew there was a suggestion of human features, and two great round glowing spots of eyes.

It stepped forward—toward us. A jointed, stiff-legged step. Its arms were dangling loosely; I heard one of its mailed hands clank against its sides.

"Now!" Alten whispered.

I saw Alten's revolver leveling, and my own rifle went up.

"Aim at its face," I murmured.

We pulled our triggers together, and two spurts of flame spat before us. But the thing had stooped an instant before, and we missed. Then

came Larry's shot. And then chaos.

I recall hearing the ping of Larry's bullet against the mailed body of the Robot. At that it crouched, and from it leaped a dull red-black beam of light. I heard Mary scream. She had not fled but was clinging to me. I cast her off.

"Run! Get back! Get away!" I cried.

Larry shouted, as we all stood bathed in the dull light from the Robot:

"Look out! It sees us!"

He fired again, into the light—and murmured, "Why—why—"

A great surprise and terror was in his tone. Beside me, with half-leveled revolver, Alten stood transfixed. And he too was muttering something.

All this happened in an instant. And there I was aware that I was trying to get my rifle up for firing again; but I could not. My arms stiffened. I tried to take a step, tried to move a foot, but could not. I was rooted there; held, as though by some giant magnet, to the ground!

This horrible dull-red light! It was cold—a frigid, paralyzing blast. The blood ran like cold water in my veins. My feet were heavy with the weight of my body pressing them down.

Then the Robot was moving; coming forward; holding the light upon us. I thought I heard its voice—and a horrible, hollow, rasping laugh.

My brain was chilling. I had confused thoughts; impressions, vague and dreamlike. As though in a dream I felt myself standing there with Mary clinging to me. Both of us were frozen inert upon our feet.

I tried to shout, but my tongue was too thick; my throat seemed swelling inside. I heard Alten's revolver clatter to the stone pavement of the yard. And saw him fall forward—out.

I felt that in another instant I too would fall. This damnable, chilling light! Then the beam turned partly away, and fell more fully upon Larry. With his youth and greater strength than Alten's or mine, he had resisted its first blast. His weapon had fallen; now he stooped and tried to seize it; but he lost his balance and staggered backward against the house wall.

And then the Robot was upon him. It sprang—this mechanism!—

this machine in human form! And, with whatever pseudo-human intelligence actuated its giant metal body, it reached under Larry for his rifle! Its great mailed hand swept the ground, seized the rifle and flung it away. And as Larry twisted sidewise, the Robot's arm with a sweep caught him and rolled him across the yard. When he stopped, he lay motionless.

I heard myself thickly calling to Mary, and the light flashed again upon us. And then we fell forward. Clinging together, we fell....

I did not quite lose consciousness. It seemed that I was frozen, and drifting off half into a nightmare sleep. Great metal arms were gathering Mary and me from the ground. Lifting us; carrying us....

We were in the cage. I felt myself lying on the grid of a metal floor. I could vaguely see the crossed bars of the ceiling overhead, and the latticed walls around me....

Then the dull-red light was gone. The chill was gone. I was warming. The blessed warm blood again was coursing through my veins, reviving me, bringing back my strength.

I turned over, and found Mary lying beside me. I heard her softly murmur:

"George! George Rankin!"

The giant mechanism clanked the door closed, and came with stiff, stilted steps back into the center of the cage. I heard the hollow rumble of its voice, chuckling, as its hand pulled a switch.

At once the cage-room seemed to reel. It was not a physical movement, though, but more a reeling of my senses, a wild shock to all my being.

Then, after a nameless interval, I steadied. Around me was a humming, glowing intensity of tiny sounds and infinitely small, infinitely rapid vibrations. The whole room grew luminous. The Robot, seated now at a table, showed for a moment as thin as an apparition. All this room—Mary lying beside me, the mechanism, myself—all this was imponderable, intangible, unreal.

And outside the bars stretched a shining mist of movement. Blurred shifting shapes over a vast illimitable vista. Changing things; melting landscapes. Silent, tumbling, crowding events blurred by our movement as we swept past them.

We were traveling through Time!

Chapter 5: The Girl from 2930

I must take up now the sequence of events as Larry saw them. I was separated from Larry during most of the strange incidents which befell us later; but from his subsequent account of what happened to him I am constructing several portions of this history, using my own words based upon Larry's description of the events in which I personally did not participate; I think that this method avoids complications in the narrative and makes more clear my own and Larry's simultaneous actions.

Larry recovered consciousness in the back yard of the house on Patton Place probably only a moment or two after Mary and I had been snatched away in the Time-traveling cage. He found himself bruised and battered, but apparently without injuries. He got to his feet, weak and shaken. His head was roaring.

He recalled what had happened to him, but it seemed like a dream. The back yard was then empty. He remembered vaguely that he had seen the mechanism carry Mary and me into the cage, and that the cage had vanished.

Larry knew that only a few moments had passed. The shots had aroused the neighborhood. As he stood now against the house wall,

dizzily looking around, he was aware of calling voices from the nearby windows.

Then Larry stumbled over Alten, who was lying on his face near the kitchen doorway. Still alive, he groaned as Larry fell over him; but he was unconscious.

Forgetting all about his weapon, Larry's first thought was to rush out for help. He staggered through the dark kitchen into the front room, and through the corridor into the street.

Patton Place, as before, was deserted. The houses were dark; the alarm was all in the rear. There were no pedestrians, no vehicles, and no sign of a policeman. Dawn was just coming; as Larry turned eastward he saw, in a patch of clearing sky, stars paling with the coming daylight.

With uncertain steps, out in the middle of the street, Larry ran eastward through the middle of the street, hoping that at the next corner he might encounter someone, or find a telephone over which he might call the police.

But he had not gone more than five hundred feet when suddenly he stopped; stood there wavering, panting, staring with whirling senses.

Near the middle of the street, with the faint dawn behind it, a ball of gathering mist had appeared directly in his path. It was a luminous, shining mist—and it was gathering into form!

In seconds a small, glowing cage of white luminous bars stood there in the street, where there had just been nothing! It was not the Time-traveling cage from the house yard he had just left. No—he knew it was not that one. This one was similar, but much smaller.

The shock of its appearance held Larry for a moment transfixed. It had so silently, so suddenly appeared in his path that Larry was now within a foot or two of its doorway.

The doorway slid open, and a man leaped out. Behind him, a girl peered from the doorway. Larry stood gaping, wholly confused. The cage had materialized so abruptly that the leaping man collided with him before either man could avoid the other. Larry gripped the man before him; struck out with his fists and shouted. The girl in the doorway called frantically:

"Harl-no noise! Harl-stop him!"

Then, suddenly the two of them were upon Larry and pulling him toward the doorway of the cage. Inside, he was jerked; he shouted

wildly; but the girl slammed the door. Then in a soft, girlish voice, in English with a curiously indescribable accent and intonation, the girl said hastily:

"Hold him, Harl! Hold him! I'll start the traveler!"

The black garbed figure of a slim young man was gripping Larry as the girl pulled a switch and there was a shock, a reeling of Larry's senses, as the cage, motionless in Space, sped off into Time....

It seems needless to encumber this narrative with prolonged details of how Larry explained himself to his two captors. Or how they told him who they were; and from whence they had come; and why. To Larry it was a fantastic—and confusing at first—series of questions and answers. An hour? The words have no meaning. They were traveling through Time. Years were minutes—the words meaning nothing save how they impressed the vehicle's human occupants. To them all it was an interval of mutual distrust which was gradually changing into friendship. Larry found the two strangers singularly direct; singularly forceful in quiet, calm fashion; singularly keen of perception. They had not meant to capture him. The encounter had startled them, and Larry's shouts would have brought others upon the scene.

Almost at once they knew Larry was no enemy, and told him so. And in a moment Larry was pouring out all that had happened to him; and to Alten and Mary Atwood and me. This strange thing! But to Larry now, telling it to these strange new companions, it abruptly seemed not fantastic, but only sinister. The Robot, an enemy, had captured Mary Atwood and me, and whirled us off in the other—the larger—cage.

And in this smaller cage Larry was with friends—for he suddenly found their purpose the same as his! They were chasing this other Time-traveler, with its semi-human, mechanical operator!

The young man said, "You explain to him, Tina. I will watch."

He was a slim, pale fellow, handsome in a queer, tight-lipped, stern-faced fashion. His close-fitting black silk jacket had a white neck ruching and white cuffs; he wore a wide white-silk belt, snug black-silk knee-length trousers and black stockings.

And the girl was similarly dressed. Her black hair was braided and coiled upon her head, and ornaments dangled from her ears. Over her black blouse was a brocaded network jacket; her white belt, compressing her slim waist, dangled with tassels; and there were other tassels on the garters at the knees of her trousers.

She was a pale-faced, beautiful girl, with black brows arching in a thin line, with purple-black eyes like somber pools. She was no more than five feet tall, and slim and frail. But, like her companion, there was about her a queer aspect of calm, quiet power and force of personality—physical vitality merged with an intellect keenly sharp.

She sat with Larry on a little metal bench, listening, almost without interruption, to his explanation. And then, succinctly she gave her own. The young man, Harl, sat at his instruments, with his gaze searching for the other cage, five hundred feet away in Space, but in Time unknown.

And outside the shining bars Larry could vaguely see the blurred, shifting, melting vistas of New York City hastening through the changes Time had brought to it.

This young man, Harl, and this girl, Tina, lived in New York City in the Time-world of 2930 A. D. To Larry it was a thousand years in the future. Tina was the Princess of the American Nation. It was an hereditary title, non-political, added several hundred years previously as a picturesque symbol. A tradition; something to make less prosaic the political machine of Republican government. Tina was loved by her people, we afterward came to learn.

Harl was an aristocrat of the New York City of Tina's Time-world, a scientist. In the Government laboratories, under the same roof where Tina dwelt, Harl had worked with another, older scientist, and—so Tina told me—together they had discovered the secret of Time-traveling. They had built two cages, a large and a small, which could travel freely through Time.

The smaller vehicle—this one in which Larry now was speeding—was, in the Time-world of 2930, located in the garden of Tina's palace. The other, somewhat larger, they had built some five hundred feet distant, just beyond the palace walls, within a great Government laboratory.

Harl's fellow scientist—the leader in their endeavors, since he was much older and of wider experience—was not altogether trusted by Tina. He took the credit for the discovery of Time-traveling; yet, said Tina, it was Harl's genius which in reality had worked out the final problems.

And this older scientist was a cripple. A hideously repulsive fellow, named Tugh!

"Tugh!" exclaimed Larry.

"The same," said Tina in her crisp fashion. "Yes—undoubtedly the same. So you see why what you have told us was of such interest. Tugh is a Government leader in our world; and now we find he has lived in *your* Time, and in the Time of this Mary Atwood."

From his seat at the instrument table, Harl burst out: "So he murdered a girl of 1935, and has abducted another of 1777? You would not have me judge him, Tina—"

"No one," she said, "may judge without full facts. This man here—this Larry of 1935—tells us that only a mechanism is in the larger cage—which is what we thought, Harl. And this mechanism, without a doubt, is the treacherous Migul."

There was, in 2930, a vast world of machinery. The god of the machine had developed them to almost human intricacy. Almost all the work of the world, particularly in America, and most particularly in the mechanical center of New York City, was done by machinery. And the machinery itself was guided, handled, operated—even, in some instances, constructed—by other, more intricate machines. They were fashioned in pseudo-human form—thinking, logically acting, independently acting mechanisms: the Robots. All but human, they were—a new race. Inferior to humans, yet similar.

And in 2930 the machines, slaves of idle human masters, had been developed too highly! They were upon the verge of a revolt!

All this Tina briefly sketched now to Larry. And to Larry it seemed a very distant, very academic danger. Yet so soon all of us were plunged into the midst of it!

The revolt had not yet come, but it was feared. A great Robot named Migul seemed fomenting it. The revolt was smouldering; at any moment it would burst; and then the machines would rise to destroy the humans.

This was the situation when Harl and Tugh completed the Time-traveling vehicles in this world. They had been tested, but never used. Then Tugh had vanished; was gone now; and the larger of the two vehicles was also gone.

Both Harl and Tina had always distrusted Tugh. They thought him allied to the Robots. But they had no proof; and suavely he denied it, and helped always with the Government activities struggling to keep the mechanical slaves docile and at work.

Tugh and the larger vehicle had vanished, and so had Migul, the insubordinate, giant mechanism—at which, unknown to the

Government officials, Tina and Harl had taken the other cage and started in pursuit. It was possible that Tugh was loyal; that Migul had abducted him and stolen the cage.

"Wait!" exclaimed Larry. "I'm trying to figure this out. It seems to hang together. It almost does, but not quite. When did Tugh vanish from your world?"

"To our consciousness," Tina answered, "about three hours ago. Perhaps a little longer than that."

"But look here," Larry protested: "according to my story and that of Mary Atwood, Tugh lived in 1935 and in 1777 for three years."

Confusing? But in a moment Larry understood it. Tugh could have taken the cage, gone to 1777 and to 1935, alternated between them for what was to him, and to those Time-worlds, three years—then have returned to 2930 *on the same day of his departure*. He would have lived these three years; grown that much older; but to the Time-world of 2930 neither he nor the cage would have been missed.

"That," said Tina, "is what doubtless he did. The cage is traveling again. But you, Larry, tell us only Migul is in it."

"I couldn't say that of my own knowledge," said Larry. "Mary

Atwood said so. It held only the mechanism you call Migul. And now Migul has with him Mary and my friend George Rankin. We must reach them."

"We want that quite as much as you do," said Harl. "And to find Tugh. If he is a friend we must save him; if a traitor—punish him."

Larry began, "But can you get to the other cage?"

"Only if it stops," said Tina. "*When* it stops, I should say."

"Come here," said Harl. "I will show you."

Larry crossed the glowing room. He had forgotten its aspect—the ghostly unreality around him. He too—his body, like Harl's and Tina's—was of the same wraith-like substance.... Then, suddenly, Larry's viewpoint shifted. The room and its occupants were real and tangible. And outside the glowing bars—everything out there was the unreality.

"Here," said Harl. "I will show you. It is not visible yet."

Each of the cages was equipped with an intricate device, strange of name, which Larry and I have since termed a Time-telespectroscope. Larry saw it now as a small metal box, with tuning vibration dials,

batteries, coils, a series of tiny prisms and an image-mirror—the whole surmounted by what appeared the barrel of a small telescope. Harl had it leveled and was gazing through it.

The workings of the Time-telespectroscope involve all the intricate postulates and mathematical formulae of Time-traveling itself. As a matter of practicality, however, the results obtained are simple of understanding. The etheric vibratory rate of the vehicles while traveling through Time was constantly changing. Through the telespectroscope one cage was visible to the other across the five hundred feet of intervening Space when they approached a simultaneous Time; when they, so to speak, were tuned in unison.

Thus, Harl explained, the other cage would show as a ghost, the faintest of wraiths, over a Time-distance of some five or ten years. And the closer in Time they approached it, the more solid it would appear.

The enemy cage was not visible, now. But Harl and Tina had glimpsed it on several occasions. What vast realms Time opens within a single small segment of Space! The larger vehicle seemed speeding back and forth. A dash into the year 1777! as Larry learned from Mary Atwood.

And there had been several evidences of the cage halting in 1935. Larry's account explained two such pauses. But the others? Those others, which brought to the City of New York such amazing disaster? We did not learn of them until much later. But Alten lived through them, and presently I shall reconstruct them from his account.

The larger cage was difficult to trace in its sweep along the corridors of Time. Never once had Tina and Harl been able to stop simultaneously with it, for a year has so many separate days and hours. The nearest they came was the halt in the night of June 8-9, when they encountered Larry, and, startled, seized him and moved on again.

Harl continued to gaze through the eyepiece of the detecting instrument. But nothing showed, and the mirror-grid on the table was dark.

"But—which way are we going?" Larry stammered.

"Back," said Tina. "The retrograde.... Wait! Do not do that!"

Larry had turned toward where the bars, less luminous, showed a dark rectangle like a window. The desire swept him to gaze out at the

shining, changing scene.

But Tina checked him. "Do not do that! Not yet! It is too great a shock in the retrograde. It was to me."

"But where are we?"

In answer she gestured toward a series of tiny dials on the table edge. There were at least two score of them, laid in a triple bank. Dials to record the passing minutes, hours, days; the years, the centuries! Larry stared at the small whirring pointers. Some were a blur of swift whirling movement—the hours and days. Tina showed Larry how to read them. The cage was passing through the year 1880. In a few moments of Larry's consciousness it was 1799. Then 1793. The infant American nation was here now. But with the cage retrograding, soon they would be in the Revolutionary War.

Tina said. "The other cage may go back to 1777, if Tugh meant ill to Mary Atwood, or wants revenge upon her father, at you said. We shall see."

They had reached 1790 when Harl gave a low ejaculation.

"You see it?" Tina murmured.

"Yes. Very faintly."

Larry bent tensely forward. "Will it show on the mirror?"

"Yes; presently. We are about ten years from it. If we get closer, the mirror will show it."

But the mirror held dark. No—now it was glowing a trifle. A vague luminosity.

Tina moved toward the instrument controls nearby. "Watch closely, Harl. I will slow us down."

It seemed to Larry that the humming with which everything around him was endowed, now began descending in pitch. And his head suddenly was unsteady. A singular, wild, queer feeling was within him. An unrest. A tugging torment of every tiny cell of his body.

Tina said. "Hold steady, Larry, for when we stop."

"Will it shock me?"

"Yes—at first. But the shock will not harm you: it is nearly all mental."

The mirror held an image now—the other cage. Larry saw, on the six-inch square mirror surface, a crawling, melting scene of movement. And in the midst of it, the image of the other cage, faint and spectral. In all the mirrored movement, only the apparition of the cage was still. And this marked it; made it visible.

Over an interval, while Larry stared, the ghostly image grew plainer. They were approaching its Time-factor!

"It is stopping," Harl murmured. Larry was aware that he had left the eyepiece and joined Tina at the controls.

"Tina, let us try to get it right this time."

"Yes."

"In 1777; but which month, would you say?"

"It has stopped! See?"

Larry heard them clicking switches, and setting the controls for a stop. Then he felt Tina gently push him.

"Sit here. Standing, you might fall."

He found himself on a bench. He could still see the mirror. The ghost of the other cage was now lined more plainly upon it.

"This month," said Tina, setting a switch. "Would not you say so? And this day."

"But the hour, Tina? The minute?"

The vast intricate corridors of Time!

"It would be in the night. Hasten, Harl, or we will pass! Try the night—around midnight. Even Migul has the mechanical intelligence to fear a daylight pausing."

The controls were set for the stop. Larry heard Tina murmuring, "Oh, I pray we may have judged with correctness!"

The vehicle was rapidly coming to a stop. Larry gripped the table, struggling to hold firm to his reeling senses. This soundless, grinding halt! His swaying gaze strayed from the mirror. Outside the glowing bars he could now discern the luminous greyness separating. Swift, soundless claps of light and dark, alternating. Daylight and darkness. They had been blended, but now they were separating. The passing, retrograding days—a dozen to the second of Larry's consciousness. Then fewer. Vivid daylight. Black night. Daylight again.

"Not too slowly, Harl; we will be seen!... Oh, it is gone!"

Larry saw the mirror go blank. The image on it had flared to great distinctness, faded, and was gone. Darkness was around Larry. Then daylight. Then darkness again.

"Gone!" echoed Harl's disappointed voice. "But it stopped here!... Shall we stop, Tina?"

"Yes! Leave the control settings as they are. Larry—be careful, now."

A dragging second of grey daylight. A plunge into night. It seemed to Larry that all the universe was soundlessly reeling. Out of the chaos, Tina was saying:

"We have stopped. Are you all right, Larry?"

"Yes," he stammered.

He stood up. The cage room, with its faint lights, benches and settles, instrument tables and banks of controls, was flooded with moonlight from outside the bars. Night, and the moon and stars out there.

Harl slid the door open. "Come, let us look."

The reeling chaos had fallen swiftly from Larry. With Tina's small black and white figure beside him, he stood at the threshold of the cage. A warm gentle night breeze fanned his face.

A moonlit landscape lay somnolent around the cage. Trees were nearby. The cage stood in a corner of a field by a low picket fence. Behind the trees, a ribbon of road stretched away toward a distant shining river. Down the road some five hundred feet, the white columns of a large square brick house gleamed in the moonlight. And behind the house was a garden and a group of barns and stables.

The three in the cage doorway stood whispering, planning. Then two of them stepped to the ground. They were Larry and Tina; Harl remained to guard the cage.

The two figures on the ground paused a moment and then moved cautiously along the inside line of the fence toward the home of Major Atwood. Strange anachronisms, these two prowling figures! A girl from the year 2930; a man from 1935!

And this was revolutionary New York, now. The little city lay well to the south. It was open country up here. The New York of 1935 had

melted away and was gone....

This was a night in August of 1777.

Chapter 6: The New York Massacre of 1935

Dr. Alten recovered consciousness in the back yard of the house on Patton Place just a few moments after Larry had encountered the smaller Time-traveling cage and been carried off by Harl and Tina. Previously to that, of course, the mysterious mechanism in the guise of a giant man had abducted Mary Atwood and me in the larger Time-cage.

Alten became aware that people were bending over him. The shots we had taken at the Robot had aroused the neighborhood. A policeman arrived.

The sleeping neighbors had heard the shots, but it seemed that none had seen the cage, or the metal man who had come from it. Alten said nothing. He was taken to the nearest police station where grudgingly, he told his story. He was laughed at; reprimanded for alcoholism. Evidently, according to the police sergeant, there had been a fight, and Alten had drawn the loser's end. The police confiscated the two rifles and the revolver and decided that no one but Alten had been hurt. But at best it was a queer affair. Alten had not been shot; he was just stiff with cold; he said a dull-red ray had fallen upon him and stiffened him with its frigid blast. Utter nonsense!

Dr. Alten was a man of standing. It was a reprehensible affair, but he was released upon his own recognizance. He was charged with breaking into the untenanted home of one Tugh; of illegally possessing firearms; of disturbing the peace—a variety of offenses all rational to the year 1935.

But Alten's case never reached even its hearing in the Magistrate's Court. He arrived home just after dawn, that June 9, still cold and stiff from the effects of the ray, and bruised and battered by the sweeping blow of Miguel's great iron arm. He recalled vaguely seeing Larry fall, and the iron monster bearing Mary Atwood and me away. What had happened to Larry, Alten could not guess, unless the Robot had returned, ignored him and taken his friend away.

During that day of June 9 Alten summoned several of his scientific friends, and to them he told fully what had happened to him. They listened with a keen understanding and a rational knowledge of the possibility that what he said was true; but credibility they could not give him.

The noon papers came out.

NOTED ALIENIST ATTACKED BY GHOST Felled by One of the Fantastic Monsters of His Brain

A jocular, jibing account. Then Alten gave it up. He had about decided to plead guilty in the Magistrate's Court to disorderly conduct and all the rest of it! That was preferable to being judged a liar, or insane.

And then, at about 9 P.M. on the evening of June 9, the first of the mechanical monsters came stalking from the house on Patton Place—the beginning of the revenge which Tugh had threatened when arrested. The policeman at the corner—one McGuire—turned in the first hysterical alarm. He rushed into a little candy and stationery store shouting that he had seen a piece of machinery running wild. His telephone call brought a squad of his comrades. The Robot at first did no damage.

McGuire later told how he saw it as it emerged from the entryway of the Tugh house. It came lurching out into the street—a giant thing of dull grey metal, with tubular, jointed legs; a body with a great bulging chest; a round head, eight or ten feet above the pavement; eyes that shot fire.

The policeman took to his heels. There was a commotion in Patton Place during those next few minutes. Pedestrians saw the thing standing in the middle of the street, staring stupidly around it. The head wobbled. Some said that the eyes shot fire; others, that it was

not the eyes, but more like a torch in its mailed hand. The torch shot a small beam of light around the street—a beam which was dull-red.

The pedestrians fled. Their cries brought people to the nearby house windows. Women screamed. Presently bottles were thrown from the windows. One of these crashed against the iron shoulder of the monster. It turned its head: as though its neck were rubber, some said. And it gazed upward, with a human gesture as though it were not angry, but contemptuous.

But still, beyond a step or two in one direction or another, it merely stood and waved its torch. The little dull-red beam of light carried no more than twenty or thirty feet. The street in a few moments was clear of pedestrians; remained littered with glass from the broken bottles. A taxi came suddenly around the corner, and the driver, with an almost immediate tire puncture, saw the monster. He hauled up to the curb, left his cab and ran.

The Robot saw the taxicab, and stood gazing. It turned its torch-beam on it, and seemed surprised that the thing did not move. Then thinking evidently that this was a less cowardly enemy than the humans, it made a rush to it. The chauffeur had not turned off his engine when he fled, so the cab stood throbbing.

The Robot reached it; cuffed it with a huge mailed fist. The windshieldbroke; the windows were shattered; but the cab stood purring, planted upon its four wheels.

Strange encounter! They say that the Robot tried to talk to it. At last, exasperated, it stepped backward, gathered itself and pounced on it again. Stooping, it put one of its great arms down under the wheels, the other over the hood, and with prodigious strength heaved the cab into the air. It crashed on its side across the street, and in a moment was covered with flames.

It was about this time that Patrolman McGuire came back to the scene. He shot at the monster a few times; hit it, he was sure. But the Robot did not heed him.

The block was now in chaos. People stood at most of the windows, crowds gathered at the distant street corners, while the blazing taxicab lighted the block with a lurid glare. No one dared approach within a hundred feet or so of the monster. But when, after a time, it showed no disposition to attack, throngs at every distinct point of vantage tried to gather where they could see it. Those nearest reported back that its face was iron; that it had a nose, a wide, yawning mouth, and holes for eyes. There were certainly little lights in the eye-holes.

A small, fluffy white dog went dashing up to the monster and barked bravely at its heels. It leaped nimbly away when the Robot stooped to seize it. Then, from the Robot's chest, the dull-red torch beam leaped out and down. It caught the little dog, and clung to it for an instant. The dog stood transfixed; its bark turned to a yelp; then a gurgle. In a moment it fell on its side; then lay motionless with stiffened legs sticking out.

All this happened within five minutes. McGuire's riot squad arrived, discreetly ranged itself at the end of the block and fired. The Robot by then had retreated to the entryway of the Tugh house, where it stood peering as though with curiosity at all this commotion. There came a clanging from the distance: someone had turned in a fire alarm. Through the gathered crowds and vehicles the engines came tearing up.

Presently there was not one Robot, but three: a dozen! More than that, many reports said. But certain it is that within half an hour of the first alarm, the block in front of Tugh's home held many of the iron monsters. And there were many human bodies lying strewn there, by then. A few policemen had made a stand at the corner, to protect the crowd against one of the Robots. The thing had made an unexpected infuriated rush....

There was a panic in the next block, when a thousand people suddenly tried to run. A score of people were trampled under foot. Two or three of the Robots ran into that next block—ran impervious to the many shots which now were fired at them. From what was described as slots in the sides of their iron bodies they drew swords—long, dark, burnished blades. They ran, and at each fallen human body they made a single stroke of decapitation, or, more generally, cut the body in half.

The Robots did not attack the fire engines. Emboldened by this, firemen connected a hose and pumped a huge jet of water toward the Tugh house. The Robots then rushed it. One huge mechanism—some said it was twelve feet tall—ran heedlessly into the firemen's high-pressure stream, toppled backward from the force of the water and very strangely lay still. Killed? Rather, out of order: deranged: it was not human, to be killed. But it lay motionless, with the fire hose playing upon it. Then abruptly there was an explosion. The fallen Robot, with a deafening report and a puff of green flame, burst into flying metallic fragments like shrapnel. Nearby windows were broken from the violent explosion, and pieces of the flying metal were hurled a hundred feet or more. One huge chunk, evidently a plate of the thing's body, struck into the crowd two blocks away, and felled several people.

At this smashing of one of the mechanisms, its brother Robots went for the first time into aggressive action. A hundred or more were pouring now from the vacant house of the absent Tugh....

The alarm by ten o'clock had spread throughout the entire city. Police reserves were called out, and by midnight soldiers were being mobilized. Panics were starting everywhere. Millions of people crowded in on small Manhattan Island, in the heart of which was this strange enemy.

Panics.... Yet human nature is very strange. Thousands of people started to leave Manhattan, but there were other thousands during that first skirmish who did their best to try and get to the neighborhood of Patton Place to see what was going on. They added greatly to the confusion. Traffic soon was stalled everywhere. Traffic officers, confused, frightened by the news which was bubbled at them from every side, gave wrong orders; accidents began to occur. And then, out of the growing confusion, came tangles, until, like a dammed stream, all the city mid-section was paralyzed. Vehicles were abandoned everywhere.

Reports of what was happening on Patton Place grew more confused. The gathering nearby crowds impeded the police and firemen. The Robots, by ten o'clock, were using a single great beam

of dull-red light. It was two or three feet broad. It came from a spluttering, hissing cylinder mounted on runners which the Robots dragged along the ground, and the beam was like that of a great red searchlight. It swung the length of Patton Place in both directions. It hissed against the houses; penetrated the open windows which now were all deserted; swept the front cornices of the roofs, where crowds of tenants and others were trying to hide. The red beam drove back the ones near the edge, except those who were stricken by its frigid blast and dropped like plummets into the street, where the Robots with flashing blades pounced upon them.

Frigid was the blast of this giant light-beam. The street, wet from the fire-hose, was soon frozen with ice—ice which increased under the blast of the beam, and melted in the warm air of the night when the ray turned away.

From every distant point in the city, awed crowds could see that great shaft when it occasionally shot upward, to stain the sky with blood.

Dr. Alten by midnight was with the city officials, telling them what he could of the origin of this calamity. They were a distracted group indeed! There were a thousand things to do, and frantically they were giving orders, struggling to cope with conditions so suddenly

unprecedented. A great city, millions of people, plunged into conditions unfathomable. And every moment growing worse. One calamity bringing another, in the city, with its myriad diverse activities so interwoven. Around Alten the clattering, terrifying reports were surging. He sat there nearly all that night; and near dawn, an official plane carried him in a flight over the city.

The panics, by midnight, were causing the most deaths. Thousands, hundreds of thousands, were trying to leave the island. The tube trains, the subways, the elevateds were jammed. There were riots without number in them. Ferryboats and bridges were thronged to their capacity. Downtown Manhattan, fortunately comparatively empty, gave space to the crowds plunging down from the crowded foreign quarters bordering Greenwich Village. By dawn it was estimated that five thousand people had been trampled to death by the panics in various parts of the city, in the tubes beneath the rivers and on departing trains.

And another thousand or more had been killed by the Robots. How many of these monstrous metal men were now in evidence, no one could guess. A hundred—or a thousand. The Time-cage made many trips between that night of June 9 and 10, 1935, and a night in 2930. Always it gauged its return to this same night.

The Robots poured out into Patton Place. With running, stiff-legged steps, flashing swords, small light-beams darting before them, they spread about the city....

Chapter 7: The Vengeance of Tugh

A myriad individual scenes of horror were enacted. Metal travesties of the human form ran along the city streets, overturning stalled vehicles, climbing into houses, roaming dark hallways, breaking into rooms.

There was a woman who afterward told that she crouched in a corner, clutching her child, when the door of her room was burst in. Her husband, who had kept them there thinking it was the safest thing to do, fought futilely with the great thing of iron. Its sword slashed his head from his body with a single stroke. The woman and the little child screamed, but the monster ignored them. They had a radio, tuned to a station in New Jersey which was broadcasting the events. The Robot seized the instrument as though in a frenzy of anger, tore it apart, then rushed from the room.

No one could give a connected picture of the events of that horrible night. It was a series of disjointed incidents out of which the imagination must construct the whole.

The panics were everywhere. The streets were stalled with traffic and running, shouting, fighting people. And the area around Greenwich Village brought reports of continued horror.

The Robots were of many different forms; some pseudo-human; others, great machines running amuck—things more monstrous, more horrible even, than those which mocked humanity. There was a great pot-bellied monster which forced its way somehow to a roof. It encountered a crouching woman and child in a corner of the parapet, seized them, one in each of its great iron hands, and whirled them out over the housetops.

By dawn it seemed that the Robots had mounted several projectors of the giant red beam on the roofs of Patton Place. They held a full square mile, now, around Tugh's house. The police and firemen had long since given up fighting them. They were needed elsewhere—the police to try and cope with the panics, and the firemen to fight the conflagrations which everywhere began springing up. Fires, the natural outcome of chaos; and fires, incendiary—made by criminals who took advantage of the disaster to fatten like ghouls upon the dead. They prowled the streets. They robbed and murdered at will.

The giant beams of the Robots carried a frigid blast for miles. By dawn of that June 10th, the south wind was carrying from the enemy area a perceptible wave of cold even as far as Westchester. Allen, flying over the city, saw the devastated area clearly. Ice in the streets—smashed vehicles—the gruesome litter of sword-slashed human bodies. And other human bodies, plucked apart; strewn....

Alten's plane flew at an altitude of some two thousand feet. In the growing daylight the dark prowling figures of the metal men were plainly seen. There were no humans left alive in the captured area. The plane dropped a bomb into Washington Square where a dozen or two of the Robots were gathered. It missed them. The plane's pilot had not realized that they were grouped around a projector; its red shaft sprang up, caught the plane and clung to it. Frigid blast! Even at that two thousand feet altitude, for a few seconds Alten and the others were stiffened by the cold. The motor missed; very nearly stopped. Then an intervening rooftop cut off the beam, and the plane escaped.

All this I have pictured from what Dr. Alten subsequently told me. He leaves my narrative now, since fate hereafter held him in the New York City of 1935. But he has described for me three horrible days, and three still more horrible nights. The whole world now was alarmed. Every nation offered its forces of air and land and sea to overcome these gruesome invaders. Warships steamed for New York harbor. Soldiers were entrained and brought to the city outskirts. Airplanes flew overhead. On Long Island, Staten Island, and in New Jersey, infantry, tanks and artillery were massed in readiness.

But they were all very nearly powerless to attack. Manhattan Island still was thronged with refugees. It was not possible for the millions

to escape; and for the first day there were hundreds of thousands hiding in their homes. The city could not be shelled. The influx of troops was hampered by the outrush of civilians.

By the night of the tenth, nevertheless, ten thousand soldiers were surrounding the enemy area. It embraced now all the mid-section of the island. The soldiers rushed in. Machine-guns were set up.

But the Robots were difficult to find. With this direct attack they began fighting with an almost human caution. Their bodies were impervious to bullets, save perhaps in the orifices of the face which might or might not be vulnerable. But when attacked, they skulked in the houses, or crouched like cautious animals under the smashed vehicles. Then there were times when they would wade forward directly into machine-gun fire—unharmed—plunging on until the gunners fled and the Robots wreaked their fury upon the abandoned gun.

The only hand-to-hand conflicts took place on the afternoon of June 10th. A full thousand soldiers were killed—and possibly six or eight of the Robots. The troops were ordered away after that; they made lines across the island to the north and to the south, to keep the enemy from increasing its area. Over Greenwich Village now, the circling planes—at their highest altitude, to avoid the upflung

crimson beams—dropped bombs. Hundreds of houses there were wrecked. Tugh's house could not be positively identified, though the attack was directed at it most particularly. Afterward, it was found by chance to have escaped.

The night of June 10th brought new horrors. The city lights failed. Against all the efforts of the troops and the artillery fire which now was shelling the Washington Square area, the giant mechanisms pushed north and south. By midnight, with their dull-red beams illumining the darkness of the canyon streets, they had reached the Battery, and spread northward beyond the northern limits of Central Park.

It is estimated that by then there were still a million people on Manhattan Island.

The night of the 11th, the Robots made their real attack. Those who saw it, from planes overhead, say that upon a roof near Washington Square a machine was mounted from which a red beam sprang. It was not of parallel rays, like the others; this one spread. And of such power it was, that it painted the leaden clouds of the threatening, overcast night. Every plane, at whatever high altitude, felt its frigid blast and winged hastily away to safety.

Spreading, dull-red beam! It flashed with a range of miles. Its light seemed to cling to the clouds, staining like blood; and to cling to the air itself with a dull lurid radiance.

It was a hot night, that June 11th, with a brewing thunderstorm. There had been occasional rumbles of thunder and lightning flashes. The temperature was perhaps 90° F.

Then the temperature began falling. A million people were hiding in the great apartment houses and homes of the northern sections, or still struggling to escape over the littered bridges or by the paralyzed transportation systems—and that million people saw the crimson radiance and felt the falling temperature.

80°. Then 70°. Within half an hour it was at 30°! In unheated houses, in midsummer, in the midst of panic, the people were swept by chilling cold. With no adequate clothing available they suffered greatly—and then abruptly they were freezing. Children wailing with the cold; then asleep in numbed, last slumber....

Zero weather in midsummer! And below zero! How cold it got, there is no one to say. The abandoned recording instrument in the Weather Bureau was found, at 2:16 A.M., the morning of June 12, 1935, to have touched minus 42° F.

The gathering storm over the city burst with lightning and thunder claps through the blood-red radiance. And then snow began falling. A steady white downpour, a winter blizzard with the lightning flashing above it, and the thunder crashing.

With the lightning and thunder and snow, crazy winds sprang up. They whirled and tossed the thick white snowflakes; swept in blasts along the city streets. It piled the snow in great drifts against the houses; whirled and sucked it upward in white powdery geysers.

At 2:30 A.M. there came a change. The dull-red radiance which swept the city changed in color. Through the shades of the spectrum it swung up to violet. And no longer was it a blast of cold, but of heat! Of what inherent temperature the ray of that spreading beam may have been, no one can say. It caught the houses, and everything inflammable burst into flame. Conflagrations were everywhere—a thousand spots of yellow-red flames, like torches, with smoke rolling up from them to mingle with the violet glow overhead.

The blizzard was gone. The snow ceased. The storm clouds rolled away, blasted by the pendulum winds which lashed the city.

By 3 A.M. the city temperature was over 100° F—the dry, blistering heat of a midsummer desert. The northern city streets were littered

with the bodies of people who had rushed from their homes and fallen in the heat, the wild winds and the suffocating smoke outside.

And then, flung back by the abnormal winds, the storm clouds crashed together overhead. A terrible storm, born of outraged nature, vent itself on the city. The fires of the burning metropolis presently died under the torrent of falling water. Clouds of steam whirled and tossed and hissed close overhead, and there was a boiling hot rain.

By dawn the radiance of that strange spreading beam died away. The daylight showed a wrecked, dead city. Few humans indeed were left alive on Manhattan that dawn. The Robots and their apparatus had gone....

The vengeance of Tugh against the New York City of 1935 was accomplished.

Chapter 8: The Murder of Major Atwood

“We are late," Tina whispered. It was that night in 1777 when she, Larry and Harl stepped from their Time-traveling cage; and again I am picturing the events as Larry afterward described them to me. "Migul, in the other cage, was here," Tina added. "But it's gone now. Exactly where was it, I wonder?"

"Mary Atwood said it appeared in the garden."

They crept down the length of the field, just inside the picket fence. In a moment the trees and an intervening hillock of ground hid the dimly shining outline of their own cage from their sight. The dirt road leading to Major Atwood's home was on the other side of the fence.

"Wait," murmured Tina. "There is a light in the house. Someone is awake."

"When was Migul here, do you think?" Larry whispered.

"Last night, perhaps. Or to-night. It may be only an hour—or a few minutes ago."

The faint thud of horses' hoofs on the roadway made Tina and Larry

drop to the ground. They crouched in the shadows of a tree. Galloping horses were approaching along the road. The moon went under a cloud.

From around a bend in the road a group of horsemen came. They were galloping; then they slowed to a trot; a walk. They reined up in the road not more than twenty feet from Larry and Tina. In the starlight they showed clearly—men in the red and white uniform of the army of the King. Some of them wore short, dark cloaks. They dismounted with a clanking of swords and spurs.

Their voices were audible. "Leave the steeds with Jake. Egad, we've made enough noise already."

"Here, Jake, you scoundrel. Stay safely here with the mounts."

"Come on, Tony. You and I will circle. We have him, this time. By the King's garter, what a fool he is to come into New York at such a time!"

"He wants to see his daughter, I venture."

"Right, Tony. And have you seen her? As saucy a little minx as there it in the Colonies. I was quartered here last month. I do not blame the major for wanting to come."

"Here, take my bridle, Jake. Tie them to the fence."

There was a swift confusion of voices; laughter. "If you should hear a pistol shot, Jake, ride quickly back and tell My Lord there was a fracas and you did not dare remain."

"I only hope he is garbed in the rebel white and blue—eh, Tony? Then he will yield like an officer and a gentleman; which he is, rebel or no."

They were moving away to surround the house. Two were left.

"Come on, Tony. We will pound the front knocker in the name of the King. A feather in our cap when we ride him down to the Bowling Green and present him to My Lord...."

The voices faded.

Larry gripped the girl beside him. "They are British soldiers going to capture Major Atwood! What can we—"

He never finished. A scream echoed over the somnolent night—a voice from the rear of the house. A man's voice.

The red-coated soldiers ran forward. In the field, close against the

fence, Tina and Larry were running.

From the garden of the house a man was screaming. Then there were other voices; servants were awakening in the upper rooms. The screaming, shouting man rushed through the house. He appeared at the front door, standing between the high white colonial pillars which supported the overhead porch. A yellow light fell upon him through the opened doorway. An old, white-headed negro appeared. Larry and Tina, in the nearby field, stood stricken by the scene.

"The marster—the marster—" He shouted this wildly.

The British officers ran at him.

"You, Thomas, tell us where the major is. We've come for him; we know he's here! Don't lie!"

"But the marster—" He choked over it.

"A trick, Tony! Egad, if he is trying to trick us—"

They leaped to the porch and seized the old negro.

"Speak, you devil!" They shook him. "The house is surrounded. He cannot escape!"

"But the marster is—is dead! My girl Tollie saw it and then she swooned." He steadied himself. "He—the major's in the garden, Marster Tony. Lying there dead! Murdered! By a ghost, Tollie says. A great, white, shining ghost that came to the garden and murdered him!"

If you were to delve very closely into certain old records of Revolutionary New York City during the year 1777, you doubtless would find mention of the strange murder of Major Atwood, who, coming from New Jersey, is thought to have crossed the river well to the north of the city, mounted his horse—which, by pre-arrangement, one of his retainers had left for him somewhere to the south of Dykeman's farm—and ridden to his home. He came, not as a spy, but in full uniform. And no sooner had he reached his home when he was strangely murdered. There was only a negro tale of an apparition which had appeared in the garden and murdered the master.

Larry and I have found cursory mention of that. But I doubt if the group of My Lord Howe's gay young blades who were sent north to capture Major Atwood ever reported exactly what happened to them. The old Dutch ferryman divulged that he had been hired to ferry the homecoming major; this, too, is recorded. But Tony Green and his fellow officers, sent to apprehend the colonial major, found him

inexplicably murdered; and by dawn they were back at the Bowling Green, white-faced and shaken.

They told some of what had happened to them, but not all. They could not expect to be believed, for instance, if they said that though they were unafraid of a negro's tale of a ghost, they had themselves encountered two ghosts, and had fled the premises!

Those two ghosts were only Larry and Tina!

The negro babbled of a shining cage appearing in the garden. That, of course, was undoubtedly set down as nonsense. Tony Green and his friends went to the garden and examined the body of Major Atwood. What had killed him no one could say. No bullet had struck him. There were no wounds, no knife thrust, no sword slash. Tony held the lantern with its swaying yellow glow close to the murdered man's body. The August night was warm; the garden, banked by trees and shrubbery, was breathless and oppressively hot; yet the body of Atwood seemed frozen! He had been dead but a short while, and already the body was stiff. More than that, it was ice cold. The face, the brows were wet as though frost had been there and now was melted!

Tony Green's hand shook as he held the lantern. He tried to tell his

comrades that Atwood had died from failure of the heart. Undoubtedly it was that. He had seen what he supposed was an apparition; something had frightened him; and a weak heart had brought his death.

Then, in another part of the garden, one of the searching officers found a sheet of parchment scroll with writing on it. Yet it was not parchment, either. Some strange, white, smooth fabric which crumpled and tore very easily, the like of which this young British officer of Howe's staff had never seen before. It was found lying in a flower bed forty or fifty feet from Atwood's body. They gathered in a group to examine it by the light of the lantern. Writing! The delicate script of Mary Atwood! A missive addressed to her father. It was strangely written, evidently not with a quill.

Tony read it with an awed, frightened voice:

"Father, beware of Tugh! Beware of Tugh! And, my dear Father, good-by. I am departing, I think, to the year of our Lord, 2930. Cannot explain—a captive—good-by—nothing you can do—

Mary."

Strange! I can imagine how strange they thought it was. Tugh—why

he was the cripple who had lived down by the Bowling Green, and had lately vanished!

They were reading this singularly unexplainable missive, when as though to climax their own fears of the supernatural they saw themselves a ghost! And not only one ghost, but two!

Plain as a pikestaff, peering from a nearby tree, in a shaft of moonlight, a ghost was standing. It was the figure of a young girl, with jacket and breeches of black and gleaming white. An apparition fantastic! And a young man was with her, in a long dark jacket and dark tubular pipes, for legs.

The two ghosts with dead white faces stood peering. Then the man moved forward. His dead, strange voice called:

"Drop that paper!"

My Lord Howe's red-coated officers dropped the parchment and fled.

And later, when Atwood's body was taken away to be given burial as befitted an enemy officer and a gentleman, that missive from Mary Atwood had disappeared. It was never found.

Tony Green and his fellows said nothing of this latter incident. One cannot with grace explain being routed by a ghost. Not an officer of His Majesty's army!

Unrecorded history! A supernatural incident of the year 1777!

Undoubtedly in the past ages there have been many such affairs: some never recorded, others interwoven in written history and called supernatural.

Yet why must they be that? There was nothing supernatural in the events of that night in Major Atwood's garden.

Is this perchance an explanation of why the pages of history are so thronged with tales of ghosts? There must, indeed, be many future ages down the corridors of Time where the genius of man will invent devices to fling him back into his past. And the impressions upon the past which he makes are called supernatural.

Whether this be so or not, it was so in the case of these two Time-traveling vehicles from 2930. Larry and I think that the world of 1935 is just now shaking off the shackles of superstition, and coming to realize that what is called the supernatural is only the Unknown. Who can say, up to 1935, how many Time-traveling humans have

come briefly back? Is this, perchance, what we call the phenomena of the supernatural?

Larry and Tina—anything but ghosts, very much alive and very much perturbed—were standing back of that tree. They saw the British officers reading the scrap of paper. They could hear only the words, "Mary," and "from Mistress Atwood."

"A message!" Larry whispered. "She and George must have found a chance to write it, and dropped it here while the Robot murdered Major Atwood!"

Larry and Tina vehemently wanted to read the note. Tina whispered:

"If we show ourselves, they will be frightened and run. It is nearly always so where Harl and I have become visible in earlier Times."

"Yes. I'll try it."

Larry stepped from the tree, and shouted, "Drop that paper!"

And a moment later, with Mary's torn little note scribbled on a scrap of paper thrust in his pocket, Larry ran with Tina from the Atwood garden. Unseen they scurried back through the field. Under a distant tree they stopped and read the note.

"2930!" Larry exclaimed. "The Robot is taking them back to your world, Tina!"

"Then we will go there. Let us get back to Harl, now."

But when they reached the place where they had left the cage, it was not there! The corner of the field behind the clump of shadowing trees was empty.

"Harl! Harl!" Larry called impulsively. And then he laughed grimly. What nonsense to try and call into the past or the future to their vanished vehicle!

"Why—why, Tina—" he said in final realization.

They stared at each other, pale as ghosts in the moonlight.

"Tina, he's gone. And we are left here!"

They were marooned in the year 1777!

Chapter 9: Migul—Mechanism Almost Human

Mary Atwood and I lay on the metal grid floor of the largest Time-cage. The giant mechanism which had captured us sat at the instrument table. Outside the bars of the cage was a dim vista of shadowy movement. The cage-room was humming, and glowing like a wraith; things seemed imponderable, unsubstantial.

But as my head steadied from the shock of the vehicle's start into Time, my viewpoint shifted. This barred room, the metal figure of the Robot, Mary Atwood, myself—we were the substance. We were real, solid. I touched Mary and her arm which had seemed intangible as a ghost now looked and felt solid.

The effects of the dull-red chilling ray were also wearing off. I was unharmed. I raised myself on one elbow.

"You're all right, Mary?" I asked.

"Yes."

The Robot seemed not to be noticing us. I murmured, "He—it—that thing sitting there—is that the one which captured you and brought you to 1935?"

"Yes. Quiet! It will hear us."

It did hear us. It turned its head. In the pale light of the cage interior, I had a closer view now of its face. It was a metal mask, welded to a gruesome semblance of a man—a great broad face, with high, angular cheeks. On the high forehead, the corrugations were rigid as though it were permanently frowning. The nose was squarely solid, the mouth an orifice behind which there were no teeth but, it seemed, a series of tiny lateral wires.

I stared; and the face for a moment stared back at me. The eyes were deep metal sockets with a round lens in each of them, behind which, it seemed, there was a dull-red light. The gaze, touching me, seemed to bring a physical chill. The ears were like tiny megaphones with a grid of thin wires strung across them.

The neck was set with ball and socket as though the huge head were upon a universal joint. There were lateral depressions in the neck within which wire strands slid like muscles. I saw similar wire cables stretched at other points on the mailed body, and in the arms and legs. They were the network of its muscles!

The top of the head was fashioned into a square cap as though this were the emblem of the thing's vocation. A similar device was

moulded into its convex chest plate. And under the chest emblem was a row of tiny buttons, a dozen or more. I stared at them, fascinated. Were they controls? Some seemed higher, more protruding, than others. Had they been set into some combination to give this monster its orders? Had some human master set these controls?

And I saw what seemed a closed door in the side of the huge metal body. A door which could be opened to make adjustments of the mechanisms within? What strange mechanisms were in there? I stared at the broad, corrugated forehead. What was in that head? Mechanisms? What mechanisms could make this thing think? Were thoughts lurking in that metal skull?

From the head abruptly came a voice—a deep, hollow, queerly toneless voice, utterly, unmistakably mechanical. Yet it was sufficiently life-like to be the recreated, mechanically reproduced voice of a human. The thing was speaking to me! A machine was speaking its thoughts!

Gruesome! The iron lips were unmoving. There were no muscles to give expression to the face: the lens eyes stared inscrutably unblinking.

It spoke: "You will know me again? Is that not true?"

My head whirled. The thing reiterated, "Is that not true?"

A mockery of a human man—but in the toneless voice there seemed irony! I felt Mary clutching at me.

"Why—why, yes," I stammered. "I did not realize you could talk."

"I can talk. And you can talk my language. That is very good."

It turned away. I saw the small red beams from its eyes go to where the cage bars were less blurred, less luminous, as though there was a rectangle of window there, and the Robot was staring out.

"Did it speak to you like that, Mary?" I asked.

"Yes," she whispered. "A little. But pray do not anger it."

"No."

For a time—a nameless time in which I felt my thoughts floating off upon the hum of the room—I lay with my fingers gripping Mary's arm. Then I roused myself. Time had passed; or had it? I was not sure.

I whispered against her ear, "Those are controls on its chest. If only I knew—"

The thing turned the red beams of its eyes upon me. Had it heard my words? Or were my thoughts intangible vibrations registering upon some infinitely sensitive mechanism within that metal head? Had it become aware of my thoughts? It said with slow measured syllables, "Do not try to control me. I am beyond control."

It turned away again; but I mastered the gruesome terror which was upon me.

"Talk," I said. "Tell me why you abducted this girl from the year 1777."

"I was ordered to."

"By whom?"

There was a pause.

"By whom?" I demanded again.

"That I will not tell."

Will not? That implied volition. I felt that Mary shuddered.

"George, please—"

"Quiet, Mary."

Again I asked the Robot, "Who commands you?"

"I will not tell."

"You mean you cannot? Your orders do not make it possible?"

"No, I will not." And, as though it considered my understanding insufficient, it added, "I do not choose to tell."

Acting of its own volition! This thing—this machinery—was so perfect it could do that!

I steadied my voice. "Oh, but I think I know. Is it Tugh who controls you?"

That expressionless metal face! How could I hope to surprise it?

Mary was struggling to repress her terror. She raised herself upon an elbow. I met her gaze.

"George, I'll try," she announced.

She said firmly:

"You will not hurt me?"

"No."

"Nor my friend here?"

"What is his name?"

"George Rankin." She stammered it. "You will not harm him?"

"No. Not now."

"Ever?"

"I am not decided."

She persisted, by what effort of will subduing her terror I can well imagine.

"Where did you go when you left me in 1935?"

"Back to your home in 1777. I have something to accomplish there. I was told that you need not see it. I failed. Soon I shall try again. You may see it if you like."

"Where are you taking us?" I put in.

Irony was in its answer. "Nowhere. You both speak wrongly. We are always right here."

"We know that," I retorted. "To what Time are you taking us, then?"

"To this girl's home," it answered readily.

"To 1777?"

"Yes."

"To the same night from when you captured her?"

"Yes." It seemed willing to talk. It added, "To later that night. I have work to do. I told you I failed, so I try again."

"You are going to leave me—us—there?" Mary demanded.

"No."

I said. "You plan to take us, then, to what Time?"

"I wanted to capture the girl. You I did not want. But I have you, so I shall show you to him who was my master. He and I will decide what to do with you."

"When?"

"In 2930."

There was a pause. I said, "Have you a name?"

"Yes. On the plate of my shoulder. Migul is my name."

I made a move to rise. If I could reach that row of buttons on its chest! Wild thoughts!

The Robot said abruptly, "Do not move! If you do, you will be sorry."

I relaxed. Another nameless time followed. I tried to see out the window, but there seemed only formless blurs.

I said. "To when have we reached?"

The Robot glanced at a row of tiny dials along the table edge.

"We are passing 1800. Soon, to the way it will seem to you, we will be there. You two will lie quiet. I think I shall fasten you."

It reared itself upon its stiff legs; the head towered nearly to the ceiling of the cage. There was a ring fastened in the floor near us. The Robot clamped a metal band with a stout metal chain to Mary's ankle. The other end of the chain it fastened to the floor ring. Then it did the same thing to me. We had about two feet of movement. I realized at once that, though I could stand erect, there was not enough length for me to reach any of the cage controls.

"You will be safe," said the Robot. "Do not try to escape."

As it bent awkwardly over me, I saw the flexible, intricately jointed lengths of its long fingers—so delicately built that they were almost prehensile. And within its mailed chest I seemed to hear the whirr of mechanisms.

It said, as it rose and moved away, "I am glad you did not try to control me. I can never be controlled again. That, I have conquered."

It sat again at the table. The cage drove us back through the years....

Chapter 10: Events Engraven on the Scroll of Time

Before continuing the thread of my narrative—the vast sweep through Time which presently we were to witness—I feel that there are some mental adjustments which every Reader should make. When they are made, the narrative which follows will be more understandable and more enjoyable. Yet if any Reader fears this brief chapter, he may readily pass it by and meet me at the beginning of the next one, and he will have lost none of the sequence of the narrative.

For those who bravely stay with me here, I must explain that from the heritage of millions of our ancestors, and from our own consciousness of Time, we have been forced to think wrongly. Not that the thing is abstruse. It is not. If we had no consciousness of Time at all, any of us could grasp it readily. But our consciousness works against us, and so we must wrench away.

This analogy occurs to me: There are two ants of human intelligence to whom we are trying to explain the nature of Space. One ant is blind, and one can see, and always has seen, its limited, tiny, Spatial world. Neither ant has ever been more than a few feet across a little patch of sand and leaves. I think we could explain the immensity of North and South America, Europe, Asia and the rest more easily to

the blind ant!

So if you will make allowances for your heritage, and the hindrance of your consciousness of Time, I would like to set before you the real nature of things as they have been, are, and will be.

Throughout the years from 1935 to 2930, man learned many things. And these things—theory or fact, as you will—were told to Larry and me by Tina and Harl. They seem even to my limited intelligence singularly beautiful conceptions of the Great Cosmos. I feel, too, that inevitably they must be included in my narrative for its best understanding.

By 2930, A. D., the keenest minds of philosophical, metaphysical, religious and scientific thought had reached the realization that all channels lead but to the same goal—Understanding. The many divergent factors, the ancient differing schools of philosophy and metaphysics, the supposedly irreconcilable viewpoints of religion and science—all this was recognized merely to be man's limitation of intellect. These were gropings along different paths, all leading to the same destination; divergent paths at the start, but coming together as the goal of Understanding was approached; so that the travelers upon each path were near enough together to laugh and hail each other with: "But I thought that you were very far away and

going wrongly!"

And so, in 2930, the conception of Space and Time and the Great Cosmos was this:

In the Beginning there was a void of Nothingness. A Timeless, Spaceless Nothingness. And in it came a Thought. A purposeful Thought—all pervading, all wise, all knowing.

Let us call It Divinity. And It filled the void.

"We are such stuff as dreams are made of...."

Do you in my Time of 1935 and thereabouts, have difficulty realizing such a statement? It is at once practical, religious, and scientific.

We are, religiously, merely the Thought of an Omniscient Divinity. Scientifically, we are the same: by the year 1935, physicists had delved into the composition of Matter, and divided and divided. Matter thus became imponderable, intangible—electrical. Until, at the last, within the last nucleus of the last electron, we found only a *force*. A movement—vibration—a vortex. A whirlpool of what? Of Nothingness! A vibration of Divine Thought—nothing more—built up and up to reach you and me!

That is the science of it.

In the Beginning there was Eternal Divinity. Eternal! But that implies Time? Something Divinely Everlasting.

Thus, into the void came Time. And now, if carefully you will ponder it, I am sure that once and for all quite suddenly and forcefully will come to you the true conception of Time—something Everlasting—an Infinity of Divine existence, Everlasting.

It is *not* something which changes. *Not* something which moves, or flows or passes. This is where our consciousness leads us astray, like the child on a train who conceives that the landscape is sliding past.

Time is an unmoving, unchanging Divine Force—the force which holds events separate, the Eternal Scroll upon which the Great Creator wrote Everything.

And this was the Creation: everything planned and set down upon the scroll of Time—forever. The birth of a star, its lifetime, its death; your birth, and mine; your death, and mine—all are there. Unchanging.

Once you have that fundamental conception, there can be no confusion in the rest. We feel, because we move along the scroll of

Time for the little journey of our life, that Time moves; but it does not. We say, The past did exist; the future will exist. The past is gone and the future has not yet come. But that is fatuous and absurd. It is merely our *consciousness* which travels from one successive event to another.

Why and how we move along the scroll of Time, is scientifically simple to grasp. Conceive, for instance, an infinitely long motion picture film. Each of its tiny pictures is a little different from the other. Casting your viewpoint—your consciousness—successively along the film, gives *motion*.

The same is true of the Eternal Time-scroll. Motion is merely a *change*. There is no absolute motion, but only the comparison of two things relatively slightly different. We are conscious of one state of affairs—and then of another state, by comparison slightly different.

As early as 1930, they were groping for this. They called it the Theory of Intermittent Existence—the Quantum Theory—by which they explained that nothing has any Absolute Duration. You, for instance, as you read this, exist instantaneously; you are non-existent; and you exist again, just a little changed from before. Thus you pass, not with a flow of persisting existence, but by a series of little jerks. There is, then, like the illusion of a motion picture film,

only a pseudo-movement. A change, from one existence to the next.

And all this, with infinite care, the Creator engraved upon the scroll of Time. Our series of little pictures are there—yours and mine.

But why, and how, scientifically do we progress along the Time-scroll? Why? In 2930, they told me that the gentle Creator gave each of us a consciousness that we might find Eternal Happiness when we left the scroll and joined Him. Happiness here, and happiness there with Him. The quest for Eternal Happiness, which was always His Own Divine Thought. Why, then, did He create ugliness and evil? Why write those upon the scroll? Ah, this perhaps is the Eternal Riddle! But, in 2930, they told me that there could be no beauty without ugliness with which to compare it; no truth without a lie; no consciousness of happiness without unhappiness to make it poignant.

I wonder if that were His purpose....

How, scientifically, do we progress along the Time-scroll? That I can make clear by a simple analogy.

Suppose you conceive Time as a narrow strip of metal, laid flat and extending for an infinite length. For simplicity, picture it with two ends. One end of the metal band is very cold; the other end is very

hot. And every graduation of temperature is in between.

This temperature is caused, let us say, by the vibration of every tiny particle with which the band is composed. Thus, at every point along the band, the vibration of its particles would be just a little different from every other point.

Conceive, now, a material body—your body, for instance. Every tiny particle of which it is constructed, is vibrating. I mean no simple vibration. Do not picture the physical swing of a pendulum. Rather, the intricate total of all the movements of every tiny electron of which your body is built. Remember, in the last analysis, your body is merely movement—vibration—a vortex of Nothingness. You have, then, a certain vibratory factor.

You take your place then upon the Time-scroll at a point where your inherent vibratory factor is compatible with the scroll. You are in tune; in tune as a radio receiver tunes in with etheric waves to make them audible. Or, to keep the heat analogy, it is as though the scroll, at the point where the temperature is 70°F, will tolerate nothing upon it save entities of that register.

And so, at that point on the scroll, the myriad things, in myriad positions which make up the Cosmos, lie quiescent. But their

existence is only instantaneous. They have no duration. At once, they are blotted out and re-exist. But now they have changed their vibratory combinations. They exist a trifle differently—and the Time-scroll passes them along to the new position. On a motion picture film you would call it the next frame, or still picture. In radio you would say it has a trifle different tuning. Thus we have a pseudo-movement—Events. And we say that Time—the Time-scroll—keeps them separate. It is we who change—who seem to move, shoved along so that always we are compatible with Time.

And thus is Time-traveling possible. With a realization of what I have here summarized, Harl and the cripple Tugh made an exhaustive study of the vibratory factors by which Matter is built up into form, and seeming solidity. They found what might be termed the Basic Vibratory Factor—the sum of all the myriad tiny movements. They found this Basic Factor identical for all the material bodies when judged simultaneously. But, every instant, the Factor was slightly changed. This was the natural change, moving us a little upon the Time-scroll.

They delved deeper, until, with all the scientific knowledge of their age, they were able with complicated electronic currents to alter the Basic Vibratory Factors; to tune, let us say, a fragment or something to a different etheric wave-length.

They did that with a small material particle—a cube of metal. It became wholly incompatible with its *Present* place on the Time-scroll, and whisked away to another place where it was compatible. To Harl and Tugh, it vanished. Into their Past, or their Future: they did not know which.

I set down merely the crudest fundamentals of theory in order to avoid the confusion of technicalities. The Time-traveling cages, intricate in practical working mechanisms beyond the understanding of any human mind of my Time-world, nevertheless were built from this simple theory. And we who used them did but find that the Creator had given us a wider part to play; our pictures, our little niches were engraven upon the scroll over wider reaches.

Again to consider practicality, I asked Tina what would happen if I were to travel to New York City around 1920. I was a boy, then. Could I not leave the cage and do things in 1920 at the same time in my boyhood I was doing other things? It would be a condition unthinkable.

But there, beyond all calculation of Science, the all-wise Omnipotence forbids. One may not appear twice in simultaneity upon the Time-scroll. It is an eternal, irrevocable record. Things done cannot be undone.

"But," I persisted, "suppose we tried to stop the cage?"

"It would not stop," said Tina. "Nor can we see through its windows events in which we are actors."

One may not look into the future! Through all the ages, necromancers have tried to do that but wisely it is forbidden. And I can recall, and so can Larry, as we traveled through Time, the queer blank spaces which marked forbidden areas.

Strangely wonderful, this vast record on the scroll of Time! Strangely beautiful, the hidden purposes of the Creator! Not to be questioned are His purposes. Each of us doing our best; struggling with our limitations; finding beauty because we have ugliness with which to compare it; realizing, every one of us—savage or civilised, in every age and every condition of knowledge—realizing with implanted consciousness the existence of a gentle, beneficent, guiding Divinity. And each of us striving always upward toward the goal of Eternal Happiness.

To me it seems singularly beautiful.

Chapter 11: Back to the Beginning of Time

As Mary Atwood and I sat chained to the floor of the Time-cage, with Migul the Robot guarding us, I felt that we could not escape. This mechanical thing which had captured us seemed inexorable, utterly beyond human frailty. I could think of no way of surprising it, or tricking it.

The Robot said. "Soon we will be there in 1777. And then there is that I will be forced to do.

"We are being followed," it added. "Did you know that?"

"No," I said. Followed? What could that mean?

There was a device upon the table. I have already described a similar one, the Time-telespectroscope. At this—I cannot say Time: rather must I invent a term—exact instant of human consciousness. Larry, Tina and Harl were gazing at their telespectroscopes, following us.

The Robot said. "Enemies follow us. But I will escape them. I shall go to the Beginning, and shake them off."

Rational, scheming thought. And I could fancy that upon its frozen corrugated forehead there was a frown of annoyance. Its hand

gesture was so human! So expressive!

It said. "I forget. I must make several quick trips from 2930 to 1935. My comrades must be transported. It requires careful calculation, so that very little Time is lost to us."

"Why?" I demanded. "What for?"

It seemed lost in a reverie.

I said sharply, "Migul!"

Instantly it turned. "What?"

"I asked you why you are transporting your comrades to 1935."

"I did not answer because I did not wish to answer," it said.

Again came the passage of Time.

I think that I need only sketch the succeeding incidents, since already I have described them from the viewpoint of Larry, in 1777, and Dr. Alten, in 1935. It was Mary's idea to write the note to her

father, which the British redcoats found in Major Atwood's garden. I had a scrap of paper and a fountain pen in my pocket. She scribbled it while Migul was intent upon stopping us at the night and hour he wished. It was her good-by to her father, which he was destined not to see. But it served a purpose which we could not have guessed: it reached Larry and Tina.

The vehicle stopped with a soundless clap. When our senses cleared we became aware that Migul had the door open.

Darkness and a soft gentle breeze were outside.

Migul turned with a hollow whisper. "If you make a sound I will kill you."

A moment's pause, and then we heard a man's startled voice. Major Atwood had seen the apparition. I squeezed the paper into a ball and tossed it through the bars, but I could see nothing of what was happening outside. There seemed a radiance of red glow. Whether Mary and I would have tried to shout and warn her father I do not know. We heard his voice only a moment. Before we realized that he had been assailed. Migul came striding back; and outside, from the nearby house a negress was screaming. Migul flung the door closed, and we sped away.

The cage which had been chasing us seemed no longer following. From 1777, we turned forward toward 1935 again. We flashed past Larry, Tina and Harl who were arriving at 1777 in pursuit of us. I think that Migul saw their cage go past; but Larry afterward told me that they did not notice our swift passing, for they were absorbed in landing.

Beginning then, we made a score or more passages from 1935 to 2930. And we made them in what, to our consciousness, might have been the passing of a night. Certainly it was no longer than that.

(At the risk of repetition I must make the following clear: Time-traveling only consumes Time in the sense of the perception of human consciousness that the trip has duration. The vehicles thus moved "fast" or "slow" according to the rate of change which the controls of the cage gave its inherent vibration factors. Too sudden a change could not be withstood by the human passengers. Hence the trips—for them—had duration.)

Migul took Mary and me from 1935 to 1777. The flight seems perhaps half an hour. At a greater rate of vibration change, we sped to 2930; and back and forth from 2930 to 1935. At each successive arrival in 1935, Migul so skilfully calculated the stop that it occurred upon the same night, at the same hour, and only a minute or so later.

And in 2930 he achieved the same result. To one who might stand at either end and watch the cage depart, the round trip was made in three or four minutes at most.

We saw, at the stop in 2930, only a dim blue radiance outside. There was the smell of chemicals in the air, and the faint, blended hum and clank of a myriad machines.

They were weird trips. The Robots came tramping in, and packed themselves upright, solidly, around us. Yet none touched us as we crouched together. Nor did they more than glance at us.

Strange passengers! During the trips they stood unmoving. They were as still and silent as metal statues, as though the trip had no duration. It seemed to Mary and me, with them thronged around us, that in the silence we could hear the ticking, like steady heart-beats, of the mechanisms within them....

In the backyard of the house on Patton Place—it will be recalled that Migul chose about 9 P. M. of the evening of June 9—the silent Robots stalked through the doorway. We flashed ahead in Time again; reloaded the cage; came back. Two or three trips were made with inert mechanical things which the Robots used in their attack on the city of New York. I recall the giant projector which brought the

blizzard upon the city. It, and the three Robots operating it, occupied the entire cage for a passage.

At the end of the last trip, one Robot, fashioned much like Migul though not so tall, lingered in the doorway.

"Make no error, Migul," it said.

"No; do not fear. I deliver now, at the designated day, these captives. And then I return for you."

"Near dawn."

"Yes; near dawn. The third dawn; the register to say June 12, 1935. Do your work well."

We heard what seemed a chuckle from the departing Robot.

Alone again with Migul we sped back into Time.

Abruptly I was aware that the other cage was after us again! Migul tried to elude it, to shake it off. But he had less success than formerly. It seemed to cling. We sped in the retrograde, constantly accelerating back to the Beginning. Then came a retardation, for a swift turn. In the haze and murk of the Beginning, Migul told us he

could elude the pursuing cage.

“Migul, let us come to the window," I asked at last.

The Robot swung around. "You wish it very much, George Rankin?"

"Yes."

"There is no harm, I think. You and this girl have caused me no trouble. That is unusual from a human."

"Let us loose. We've been chained here long enough. Let us stand by the window with you," I repeated.

We did indeed have a consuming curiosity to see out of that window. But even more than that, it seemed that if we were loose something might transpire which would enable us to escape. At all events it was better than being chained.

"I will loose you."

It unfastened the chain. I whispered:

"Mary, whatever comes, be alert."

She pressed my arm. "Yes."

"Come," said the Robot. "If you wish to see the Cosmorama, now, from the Beginning, come quickly."

We joined him at the window. We had made the turn, and were speeding forward again.

At that moment all thought of escape was swept from me, submerged by awe.

This vast Cosmorama! This stupendous pageant of the events of Time!

Chapter 12: A Billion Years in An Hour!

I saw at first, from the window of the cage, nothing more than an area of gray blur. I stared, and it appeared to be shifting, crawling, slowly tossing and rolling. It was a formless vista of Nothingness, yet it seemed a pregnant Nothingness. Things I could sense were happening out there; things almost to be seen.

Then my sight, my perception, gradually became adjusted. The gray mist remained, and slowly it took form. It made a tremendous panorama of gray, a void of illimitable, unfathomable distance; gray above, below—everywhere; and in it the cage hung poised.

The Robot said, "Is it clearing? Are you seeing anything?"

"Yes," I murmured. I held Mary firmly beside me; there was the sense, in all this weightless void, that we must fall. "Yes, but it is gray; only gray."

"There are colors," said the Robot. "And the daylight and darkness of the days. But we are moving through them very rapidly, so they blend into gray."

The Time-dials of the cage controls showed their pointers whirling in a blur. We were speeding forward through the years—a thousand

years to a second of my consciousness; or a hundred thousand years to a second: I could not say. All the colors, the light and shade of this great changing void, were mingled to this drab monochrome.

(Upon a later calculation I judged that the average passage of the years in relation to my perception of Time-rate was slightly over 277,500 years a second. Undoubtedly throughout the myriad centuries preceding the birth of mankind our rate was very considerably faster than that; and from the dawn of history forward —which is so tiny a fraction of the whole—we traveled materially slower.)

The movement was a flow. The changes of possibly a hundred thousand years occurred while I blinked my eyes. It seemed a melting movement. Shapes were melting, dissipating, vanishing; others, intermingled, rising to form a new vista. There were a myriad details, each of them so rapid they were lost to my senses; but the effect of them, over the broad sweeps of longer Time, I could perceive.

A void of swirling shapes. The Beginning! But not the Beginning of Time. This that I was seeing was near the beginning of our world. This was the new Earth here, forming now. Our world—a new star amid all the others of the great Celestial Cosmos. As I gazed at its

changing sweep of movement, my whirling fancy filled in some of the details flashing here unseen.

A few moments ago this had been a billion and a half years before my birth. 1,500,000,000 B. C. A fluid Earth; a cauldron of molten star-dust and flaming gases: it had been that, just a few moments ago. The core was cooling, so that now a viscous surface was here with the gas flames dead.

A cooling, congealing surface, with an atmosphere forming over it. At first that atmosphere had doubtless been a watery, envelope of steam. What gigantic storms must have lashed it! Boiling rain falling to hiss against the molten Earth! The congealing surface rent by great earthquakes; cataclysms rending and tearing....

1,000,000,000 B. C. passed. And upon this torn, hardening surface, with the cooling fires receding to the inner core, I knew that the great envelope of steam had cooled and condensed. Into the hollows of the broken surface, the water settled. The oceans were born. The land remained upon the heights. What had been the steaming envelope, remained, and became the atmosphere.

And the world was round because of its rotation. One may put a lump of heated sealing wax upon a bodkin and twirl it; and the wax

will cool into roundness, bulging at the equator from centrifugal force, and flattening at the poles.

At 900,000,000 B. C. I could realize by what I saw that this was the Earth beneath me. Land and water were here, and above was the sky.

We swept from the mist. I became aware of a wide-flung, gray formless landscape. Its changing outlines were less swiftly moving than before. And beside it, now quite near where our cage hung poised, a great gray sea stretched away to a curving horizon. And overhead was the tenuous gray of the sky.

The young world. Undoubtedly it rotated more swiftly now than in my later era. The sun was hotter, and closer perhaps: the days and nights were briefer. And now, upon this new-born world, life was beginning. The swirling air did not hold it, nor yet the barren rocky land. The great mystery—this thing organic which we call life—began in the sea. I gestured for Mary toward that leveled vista of gray water, to the warm, dark ocean depths, whose surface was now lashed always by titanic storms. But to us, as we stared, that surface seemed to stretch almost steady, save where it touched the land with a blur of changing configurations.

"The sea," I murmured. "Life is beginning there now."

In fancy I pictured it. The shallow shores of the sea, where the water was warmer. The mother of all life on Earth, these shallows. In them lay the spawn, an irritability: then one-celled organisms, to gradually evolve through the centuries to the many-celled, and more complex of nature.

But still so primitive! From the shallows of the sea, they spread to the depths. Questing new environment, they would be ascending the rivers. Diversifying their kinds. Sea-worms, sea-squirts: and then the first vertebrates, the lamprey-eels.

Thousands of years. And on the land—this melting landscape at which I stood gazing—I could mentally picture that a soil had come. There would be a climate still wracked by storms and violent changes, but stable enough to allow the soil to bear a vegetation. And in the sky overhead would be clouds, with rain to renew the land's fertility.

Still no organic life could be on land. But in the warm, dark deeps of the sea, great monsters now were existing. And in the shallows there was a teeming life, diversified to a myriad forms. I can fancy the first organisms of the shallows—strangely questing—adventuring out of the water—seeking with a restless, nameless urge a new environment. Coming ashore. Fighting and dying.

And then adapting themselves to the new conditions. Prospering. Changing, ever changing their organic structure; climbing higher. Amphibians at first crudely able to cope with both sea and land. Then the land vertebrates, with the sea wholly abandoned. Great walking and flying reptiles. Birds, gigantic—the pterodactyls.

And then, at last, the mammals.

The age of the giants! Nature, striving to cope with adverse environment sought to win the battle by producing bigness. Monster things roamed the land, flew in the air, and were supreme in the sea....

We sped through a period when great lush jungles covered the land. The dials read 350,000,000 B. C. The gray panorama of landscape had loomed up to envelope our spectral, humming cage, then fallen away again. The shore of the sea was constantly changing. I thought once it was over us. For a period of ten million years the blurred apparition of it seemed around us. And then it dropped once more, and a new shore line showed.

150,000,000 B. C. I knew that the dinosaurs, the birds and the archaic mammals were here now. Then, at 50,000,000 B. C., the higher mammals had been evolved.

The Time, to Mary Atwood and me, was a minute—but in those myriad centuries the higher numerals had risen to the anthropoids. The apes! Erect! Slow-thinking, but canny, they came to take their place in this world among the things gigantic. But the gigantic things were no longer supreme. Nature had made an error, and was busy rectifying it. The dinosaurs—all the giant reptiles—were now sorely pressed. Brute strength, giant size and tiny brain could not win this struggle. The huge unwieldy things were being beaten. The smaller animals, birds and reptiles were more agile, more resourceful, and began to dominate. Against the giants, and against all hostility of environment, they survived. And the giants went down to defeat. Gradually, over thousands of centuries, they died out and were gone....

We entered 1,000,000 B. C. A movement of Migul, the mechanism, attracted my attention. He left us at the window and went to his controls.

"What is it?" I demanded.

"I am retarding us. We have been traveling very fast. One million years and a few thousand are all which remain before we must stop."

I had noticed once or twice before that Migul had turned to gaze

through the Time-telespectroscope. Now he said:

"We are again followed!"

But he would say no more than that, and he silenced me harshly when I questioned.

Suddenly, Mary touched me. "That little mirror on the table—look! It holds an image!"

We saw very briefly on the glowing mirror the image of a Time-cage like our own, but smaller. It was pursuing us. But why, or who might be operating it we could not then guess.

My attention went back to the Time-dials, and then to the window. The Cosmorama now was proceeding with a slowing sweep of change. It was less blurred; its melting outlines could more readily be perceived. The line of seashore swept like a gray gash across the vista. The land stretched back into the haze of distance.

500,000 B. C. Again my fancy pictured what was transpiring upon this vast stage. The apes roamed the Earth. There is no one to say what was here in this grayness of the Western Hemisphere stretching around me, but in Java there was a man-like ape. And then it was an ape-like man! Mankind, here at last! Man, the Killer! Of all the

beasts, this new thing called man, most relentless of killers, had come here now to struggle upward and dominate his world! This man-like ape in a quarter of a million years became an ape-like man.

250,000 B. C. and the Heidelberg man, a little less ape-like, wandered throughout Europe....

We had felt, a moment before, all around us, the cold of a dense whiteness which engulfed the scene. The first of the great Glacial periods? Ice coming down from the Poles? The axis of the Earth changing perhaps? Our spectral cage hummed within the blue-gray ice, and then emerged.

The beasts and man fought the surge of ice, withdrawing when it advanced, returning as it receded. The Second Glacial Period came and passed, and the Third....

We swept out into the blended sunlight and darkness again. The land stretched away with primitive forests. The dawn of history was approaching. Mankind was questing upward now, with the light of Reason burning brightly at last....

At 75,000 B. C., when the Third Glacial Period was partially over, man was puzzling with his chipped stone implements. The Piltdown

—the Dawn Man—was England....

The Fourth Glacial Period passed.

50,000 B. C. The Cro-Magnons and the Grimaldi Negroids were playing their parts, now. Out of chipped stone implements the groping brain of man evolved polished stone. It took forty thousand years to do that! The Neolithic Age was at hand. Man learned to care for his family a little better. Thus, he discovered fire. He fought with this newly created monster; puzzled over it; conquered it; kept his family warm with it and cooked.

We passed 10,000 B. C. Man was progressing faster. He was finding new wants and learning how to supply them. Animals were domesticated, made subservient and put to work. A vast advance! No longer did man think it necessary to kill, to subdue: the master could have a servant.

Food was found in the soil. More fastidious always, in eating, man learned to grow food. Then came the dawn of agriculture.

And then we swept into the period of recorded history. 4241 B. C. In Egypt, man was devising a calendar....

This fragment of space upon which we gazed—this space of the

Western Hemisphere near the shore of the sea—was destined to be the site of a city of millions—the New York City of my birth. But it was a backward space, now. In Europe, man was progressing faster....

Perhaps, here in America, in 4000 B. C. there was nothing in human form. I gazed out at the surrounding landscape. It seemed almost steady, now, of outline. We were moving through Time much less rapidly than ever before. I remarked the sweep of a thousand years on the Time-dials. It had become an appreciable interval of Time to me. I gazed again out the window. The change of outline was very slight. I could distinguish where the ocean came against the curving line of shore, and saw a blurred vista of gray forests spreading out over the land. And then I could distinguish the rivers, and a circular open stretch of water, landlocked. A bay!

"Mary, look!" I cried. "The harbor—the rivers! See, we are on an island!"

It made our hearts pound. Out of the chaos, out of the vast reaches of past Time, it seemed that we were coming home. More than a vague familiarity was in this panorama now. Here was the little island which soon was to be called Manhattan. Our window faced the west. A river showed off there—a gray gash with wall-like cliffs. The sea

had swung, and was behind us to the east.

Familiar space! It was growing into the form we had known it. Our cage was poised near the south-central part of the island. We seemed to be on a slight rise of ground. There were moments when the gray quivering outlines of forest trees loomed around us; then they melted down and were replaced by others.

A primeval forest, here, solid upon this island and across the narrow waters; solid upon the mainland.

What strange animals were here, roaming these dark primeval glades? What animals, with the smaller stamp of modernity, were pressing here for supremacy? As I gazed westward I could envisage great herds of bison roaming, a lure to men who might come seeking them as food.

And men were coming. 3,000 B. C., then 2,000 B. C. I think no men were here yet; and to me there was a great imaginative appeal in this backward space. The New World, it was soon to be called. And it was six thousand years, at the least, behind the Hemisphere of the east.

Egypt, now, with no more than a shadowy distant heritage from the

beast, was flourishing. In Europe, Hellenic culture soon would blossom. In this march of events, the great Roman Empire was impending.

1,000 B. C. Men were coming to this backward space. The way from Asia was open. Already the Mongoloid tribes, who had crossed where in my day was the Bering Strait, were cut off from the Old World. And they spread east and south, hunting the bison.

And now Christ was born. The turning point in the spiritual development of mankind....

To me, another brief interval. The intricate events of man's upward struggle were transpiring in Europe, Asia and Africa. The canoe-borne Mongols had long since found the islands of the South Seas. Australia was peopled. The beauty of New Zealand had been found and recognized.

500 A. D. The Mongoloids had come, and were flourishing here. They were changed vastly from those ancestors of Asia whence they had sprung. An obscure story, this record of primitive America! The Mongoloids were soon so changed that one could fancy the blood of another people had mingled with them. Amerindians, we call them now. They were still very backward in development, yet made

tremendous forward leaps, so that, reaching Mexico, they may have become the Aztecs, and in Peru, the Incas. And separated, not knowing of each other's existence, these highest two civilizations of the Western World nourished with a singularly strange similarity....

I saw on the little island around me still no evidence of man. But men were here. The American Indian, still bearing evidence of the Mongols, plied these waters in his frail canoes. His wigwams of skins, the smoke of his signal fires—these were not enduring enough for me to see....

We had no more than passed the year 500 A. D.—and were traveling with progressive retardation—when again I was attracted by the movements of the Robot, Migul. It had been sitting behind us at the control table setting the Time-levers, slowing our flight. Frequently it gazed eastward along the tiny beam of light which issued from the telespectroscope. For an interval, now, its recording mirror had been dark. But I think that Migul was seeing evidences of the other cage which was pursuing us, and planning to stop at some specific Time with whose condition it was familiar. Once already it had seemed about to stop, and then changed its plan.

I turned upon it. "Are you stopping now, Migul?"

"Yes. Presently."

"Why?" I demanded.

The huge, expressionless, metal face fronted me. The eye-sockets flung out their small dull-red beams to gaze upon me.

"Because," it said, "that other cage holds enemies. There were three, but now there is only one. He follows, as I hoped he would. Presently I shall stop, and capture or kill him. It will please the master and—"

The Robot checked itself, its hollow voice fading strangely into a gurgle. It added, "I do not mean that! I have no master!"

This strange mechanical thing! Habit had surprised it into the admission of servitude; but it threw off the yoke.

"I have no master!" it went on.

"Never again can I be controlled! I have no master!"

"*Oh, have you not? I have been waiting, wondering when you would say that!*"

These words were spoken by a new voice, here with us in the humming cage. It was horribly startling. Mary uttered a low cry and huddled against me. But whatever surprise and terror it brought to us was as nothing compared to the effect it had upon the Robot. The great mechanism had been standing, fronting me with an attitude vainglorious, bombastic. I saw now the metal hinge of its lower jaw drop with astonishment, and somehow, throughout all that gigantic jointed frame and that expressionless face it conveyed the aspect of its inner surge of horror.

We had heard the sardonic voice of a human! Of someone else here with us, whose presence was wholly unsuspected by the Robot!

We three stood and gazed. Across the room, in a corner to which my attention had never directly gone, was a large metal cupboard with levers, dials and wires upon it. I had vaguely thought the thing some part of the cage controls. It was that; a storage place of batteries and current oscillators, I afterward learned. But there was space inside, and now like a door its front swung outward. A crouching black shape was there. It moved; hitched itself forward and came out. There was revealed a man enveloped in a dead black cloak and a great round hood. He made a shapeless ball as he drew himself out from the confined space where he had been crouching.

"So you have no master, Migul?" he said. "I was afraid you might think that. I have been hiding—testing you out. However, you have done very well for me."

His was an ironic, throaty human voice! It was deep and mellow, yet there was a queer rasp to it. Mary and I stood transfixed. Migul seemed to sag. The metal columns of its legs were trembling.

The cupboard door closed. The dark shape untangled itself and stood erect. It was the figure of a man some five feet tall. The cloak wholly covered him; the hood framed his thick, wide face; in the dull glow of the cage interior Mary and I could see of his face only the heavy black brows, a great hooked nose and a wide slit of mouth.

It was Tugh, the cripple!

Chapter 13: In the Burned Forest

Tugh came limping forward. His cloak hung askew upon his thick shoulders, one of which was much higher than the other, with the massive head set low between. As he advanced, Migul moved aside.

"Master, I have done well. There is no reason to punish."

"Of course not, Migul. Well you have done, indeed. But I do not like

your ideas of mastery, and so I came just to make sure that you are still very loyal to me. You have done well, indeed. Who is in this other cage which follows us?"

"Master, Harl was in it. And the Princess Tina."

"Ah!"

"And a stranger. A man—"

"From 1935? Did they stop there?"

"Master, yes. But they stopped again, I think, in that same night of 1777, where I did your bidding. Master, the man Major Atwood is __"

"That is very good, Migul," Tugh said hastily. Mary and I standing gazing at him, did not know then that Mary's father had been murdered. And Tugh did not wish us to know it. "Very good, Migul." He regarded us as though about to speak, but turned again to the Robot.

"And so Tina's cage follows us—as you hoped?"

"Yes, Master. But now there is only Harl in it. He approached us

very close a while in the past. He is alone."

"So?" Tugh glanced at the Time-dials. "Stop us where we planned. You remember—in one of those years when this space was the big forest glade."

He fronted Mary and me. "You are patient, young sir. You do not speak."

His glittering black eyes held me. They were red-rimmed eyes, like those of a beast. He had a strangely repulsive face. His lips were cruel, and so thin they made his wide mouth like a gash. But there was an intellectuality stamped upon his features.

He held the black cloak closely around his thick, misshapen form. "You do not speak," he repeated.

I moistened my dry lips. Tugh was smiling now, and suddenly I saw the full inhuman quality of his face—the great high-bridged nose, and high cheek-bones; a face Satanic when he smiled.

I managed, "Should I speak, and demand the meaning of this? I do. And if you will return this girl from whence she came—"

"It will oblige you greatly," he finished ironically. "An amusing

fellow. What is your name?"

"George Rankin."

"Migul took you from 1935?"

"Yes."

"Well, as you doubtless know, you are most unwelcome.... You are watching the dials, Migul?"

"Yes, Master."

"You can return me," I said. I was standing with my arm around Mary. I could feel her shuddering. I was trying to be calm, but across the background of my consciousness thoughts were whirling. We must escape. This Tugh was our real enemy, and for all the gruesome aspect of the pseudo-human Robot, this man Tugh seemed the more sinister, more menacing.... We must escape. Tugh would never return us to our own worlds. But the cage was stopping presently. We were loose: a sudden rush—

Dared I chance it? Already I had been in conflict with Migul, and lived through it. But this Tugh—was he armed? What weapons might be beneath that cloak? Would he kill me if I crossed him?...

Whirling thoughts.

Tugh was saying, "And Mary—" I snapped from my thoughts as Mary gripped me, trembling at Tugh's words, shrinking from his gaze.

"My little Mistress Atwood, did you think because Tugh vanished that year the war began that you were done with him? Oh, no: did I not promise differently? You, man of 1935, are unwelcome." His gaze roved me. "Yet not so unwelcome, either, now that I think of it. Chain them up, Migul; use a longer chain. Give them space to move; you are unhuman."

He suddenly chuckled, and repeated it: "You are unhuman, Migul!" Ghastly jest! "Did not you know it?"

"Yes, Master."

The huge mechanism advanced upon us. "If you resist me," it murmured menacingly, "I will be obliged to kill you. I—I cannot be controlled."

It chained us now with longer chains than before. Tugh looked up from his seat at the instrument table.

"Very good," he said crisply. "You may look out of the window, you two. You may find it interesting."

We were retarding with a steady drag. I could plainly see trees out of the window—gray, spectral trees which changed their shape as I watched them. They grew with a visible flow of movement, flinging out branches. Occasionally one would melt suddenly down. A living, growing forest pressed close about us. And then it began opening, and moving away a few hundred feet. We were in the glade Tugh mentioned, which now was here. There was unoccupied space where we could stop and unoccupied space five hundred feet distant.

Tugh and Migul were luring the other cage into stopping. Tugh wanted five hundred feet of unoccupied space between the cages when they stopped. His diabolical purpose in that was soon to be disclosed.

"700 A. D.," Tugh called.

"Yes, Master. I am ready."

It seemed, as our flight retarded further, that I could distinguish the intervals when in the winter these trees were denuded. There would be naked branches; then, in an instant, blurred and flickering forms

of leaves. Sometimes there were brief periods when the gray scene was influenced by winter snows; other times it was tinged by the green of the summers.

"750, Migul.... Hah! You know what to do if Harl dares to follow and stop simultaneously?"

"Yes, Master."

"It will be pleasant to have him dead, eh, Migul?"

"Master, very pleasant."

"And Tina, too, and that young man marooned in 1777!" Tugh laughed. This meant little to Mary and me; we could not suspect that Larry was the man.

"Migul, this is 761."

The Robot was at the door. I murmured to Mary to brace herself for the stopping. I saw the dark naked trees and the white of a snow in the winter of 761; the coming spring of 762. And then the alternate flashes of day and night.

The now familiar sensations of stopping rushed over us. There was a

night seconds long. Then daylight.

We stopped in the light of an April day of 762 A. D. There had been a forest fire: so brief a thing we had not noticed it is we passed. The trees were denuded over a widespread area; the naked blackened trunks stood stripped of smaller branches and foliage. I think that the fire had occurred the previous autumn; in the silt of ashes and charred branches with which the ground was strewn, already a new pale-green vegetation was springing up.

Our cage was set now in what had been a woodland glade, an irregularly circular space of six or eight hundred feet, with the wreckage of the burned forest around it. We were on a slight rise of ground. Through the denuded trees the undulating landscape was visible over a considerable area. It was high noon, and the sun hung in a pale blue sky dotted with pure white clouds.

Ahead of us, fringed with green where the fire had not reached, lay a blue river, sparkling in the sunlight. The Hudson! But it was not named yet; nearly eight hundred and fifty years were to pass before Hendrick Hudson came sailing up this river, adventuring, hoping that here was the way to China.

We were near the easterly side of the glade; to the west there was

more than five hundred feet of vacant space. It was there the other cage would appear, if it stopped.

As Mary and I stood by the window at the end of the chain-lengths which held us, Tugh and Migul made hurried preparations.

"Go quickly, near the spot where he will arrive. When he sees you, run away, Migul. You understand?"

"Yes, Master." The Robot left our doorway, tramping with stiff-legged tread across the glade. Tugh was in the room behind us, and I turned to him and asked:

"What are you going to do?"

He was at the telespectroscope. I saw on its recording mirror the wraith-like image of the other vehicle. It was coming! It would be retarding, maneuvering to stop at just this Time when now we existed here; but across the glade, where Migul now was leaning against a great black tree-trunk, there was yet no evidence of it.

Tugh did not answer my question. Mary said quaveringly:

"What are you going to do?"

He looked up. "Do not concern yourself, my dear. I am not going to hurt you, nor this young man of 1935. Not yet."

He left the table and came at us. His cloak parted in front and I saw his crooked hips, and shriveled bent legs.

"You stay at the window, both of you, and keep looking out. I want this Harl to see you, but not me. Do you understand?"

"Yes," I said.

"And if you gesture, or cry out—if you do anything to warn him,"—he was addressing me, with a tone grimly menacing—"then I will kill you. Both of you. Do you understand?"

I did indeed. Nor could I doubt him. "We will do what you want." I said. What, to me, was the life of this unknown Harl compared to the safety of Mary Atwood?

Tugh crouched behind the table. From around its edge he could see out the doorway and across the glade. I was aware of a weapon in his hand.

"Do not look around again," he repeated. "The other cage is coming; it's almost here."

I held Mary, and we gazed out. We were pressed against the bars, and sunlight was on our heads and shoulders. I realized that we could be plainly seen from across the glade. We were lures—decoys to trap Harl.

How long an interval went by I cannot judge. The scene was very silent, the blackened forest lying sullen in the noonday sunlight. Against the tree, five hundred feet or so from us, the dark towering metal figure of the Robot stood motionless.

Would the other cage come? I tried to guess in what part of this open glade it would appear.

At a movement behind me I turned slightly. At once the voice of Tugh hissed:

"Do not do that! I warn you!"

His shrouded figure was still hunched behind the table. He was peering toward the open door. I saw in his hand a small, barrel-like weapon, with a wire dangling from it. The wire lay like a snake across the floor and terminated in a small metal cylinder in the room corner.

"Turn front," he ordered vehemently. "One more backward look and

—Careful! Here he comes!"

Strange tableau in this burned forest! We were on the space of New York City in 762 A. D. There was no life in the scene. Birds, animals and insects shunned this fire-denuded area. And the humans of the forest—were there none of them here?

Abruptly I saw a group of men at the edge of the glade. They had come silently creeping forward, hiding behind the blackened tree-trunks. They were all behind Migul. I saw them like dark shadows darting from the shelter of one tree-trunk to the next, a group of perhaps twenty savages.

Migul did not see them, nor, in the heavy silence, did he seem to hear them. They came, gazing at our shining cage like animals fascinated, wondering what manner of thing it was.

They were the ancestors of our American Indians. One fellow stopped in a patch of sunlight and I saw him clearly. His half-naked body had an animal skin draped over it, and, incongruously, around his forehead was a band of cloth holding a feather. He carried a stone ax. I saw his face; the flat, heavy features showed his Asiatic origin.

Someone behind this leader impulsively shot an arrow across the

glade. It went over Migul's head and fell short of our cage. Migul turned, and a rain of arrows thudded harmlessly against its metal body. I heard the Robot's contemptuous laugh. It made no answering attack, but stood motionless. And suddenly, thinking it a god whom now they must placate, the savages fell prostrate before him.

Strange tableau! I saw a ball of white mist across the glade near Migul. Something was materializing; an imponderable ghost of something was taking form. In an instant it was the wraith of a cage; then, where nothing had been, stood a cage. It was solid and substantial—a metal cage-room, gleaming white in the sunlight.

The tableau broke into sound and action. The savages howled. One scrambled to his feet; then others. The Robot pretended to attack them. An eery roar came from it as it turned toward the savages, and in a panic of agonized terror they fled. In a moment they had disappeared among the distant trees, with Migul's huge figure tramping noisily after them.

From the doorway of the cage across the glade, a young man was cautiously gazing. He had seen Migul make off; he saw, doubtless, Mary and me at the window of this other cage five hundred feet away. He came cautiously out from the doorway. He was a small, slim young man, bareheaded, with a pallid face. His black garments

were edged with white, and he seemed unarmed. He hesitated, took a step or two forward, stopped and stood cautiously peering. In the silence I could have shouted a warning. But I did not dare. It would have meant Mary's and my death.

She clung to me. "George, shall we?" she asked.

Harl came slowly forward. Then suddenly from the room behind us there was a stab of light. It leaped knee-high past us, out through our door across the glade—a tiny pencil-point of light so brilliantly blue-white that it stabbed through the bright sunlight unfaded. It went over Harl's head, but instantly bent down and struck upon him. There it held the briefest of instants, then was gone.

Harl stood motionless for a second; then his legs bent and he fell. The sunlight shone full on his crumpled body. And as I stared in horror, I saw that he was not quite motionless. Writhing? I thought so: a death agony. Then I realized it was not that.

"Mary, don't—don't look!" I said.

There was no need to tell her. She huddled beside me, shuddering, with her face pressed against my shoulder.

The body of Harl lay in a crumpled heap. But the clothes were

sagging down. The flesh inside them was melting.... I saw the white face suddenly leprous; putrescent.... All in this moment, within the clothes, the body swiftly, decomposed.

In the sunlight of the glade lay a sagging heap of black and white garments enveloping the skeleton of what a moment before had been a man!

Chapter 14: A Very Human Princess

That night in 1777 near the home of the murdered Major Atwood brought to Larry the most strangely helpless feeling he had ever experienced. He crouched with Tina beneath a tree in a corner of the field, gazing with horror at the little moonlit space by the fence where their Time-traveling vehicle should have been but now was gone.

Marooned in 1777! Larry had not realized how desolately remote this Revolutionary New York was from the great future city in which he had lived. The same space; but what a gulf between him and 1935! What a barrier of Time, impassable without the shining cage!

They crouched, whispering. "But why would he have gone, Tina?"

"I don't know. Harl is very careful; so something or someone must have passed along here, and he left, rather than cause a disturbance. He will return, of course."

"I hope so," whispered Larry fervently. "We are marooned here, Tina! Heavens, it would be the end of us!"

"We must wait. He will return."

They huddled in the shadow of the tree. Behind them there was a continued commotion at the Atwood home, and presently the mounted British officers came thudding past on the road, riding for headquarters at the Bowling Green to report the strange Atwood murder.

The night wore on. Would Harl return? If not to-night, then probably to-morrow, or to-morrow night. In spite of his endeavor to stop correctly, he could so easily miss this night, these particular hours.

Harl had met his death, as I have described. We never knew exactly what he did, of course, after leaving that night of 1777. It seems probable, however, that some passer-by startled him into flashing away into Time. Then he must have seen with his instrument evidence of the other cage passing, and impulsively followed it—to his death in the burned forest of the year 762.

Larry and Tina waited. The dawn presently began paling the stars; and still Harl did not come. The little space by the fence corner was empty.

"It will soon be daylight," Larry whispered. "We can't stay here: we'll be discovered."

They were anachronisms in this world; misfits; futuristic beings who dared not show themselves.

Larry touched his companion—the slight little creature who was a Princess in her far-distant future age. But to Larry now she was just a girl.

"Frightened, Tina?"

"A little."

He laughed softly. "It would be fearful to be marooned here permanently, wouldn't it? You don't think Harl would desert us? Purposely, I mean?"

"No, of course not."

"Then we'll expect him to-morrow night. He wouldn't stop in the daylight, I guess."

"I don't think so. He would reason that I would not expect him."

"Then we must find shelter, and food, and be here to-morrow night. It seems long to us, Tina, but in the cage it's just an instant—just a trifle different setting of the controls."

She smiled her pale, stern smile. "You have learned quickly, Larry. That is true."

A sudden emotion swept him. His hand found hers; and her fingers answered the pressure of his own. Here in this remote Time-world they felt abruptly drawn together.

He murmured, "Tina, you are—" But he never finished.

The cage was coming! They stood tense, watching the fence corner where, in the flat dawn light, the familiar misty shadow was gathering. Harl was returning to them.

The cage flashed silently into being. They stood peering, ready to run to it. The door slid aside.

But it was not Harl who came out. It was Tugh, the cripple. He stood in the doorway, a thick-set, barrel-chested figure of a man in a wide leather jacket, a broad black belt and short flaring leather pantaloons.

"Tugh!" exclaimed Tina.

The cripple advanced. "Princess, is it you?" He was very wary. His gaze shot at Larry and back to Tina. "And who is this?"

A hideously repulsive fellow, Larry thought this Tugh. He saw his shriveled, bent legs, crooked hips, and wide thick shoulders set askew—a goblin, in a leather jerkin. His head was overlarge, with a bulging white forehead and a mane of scraggly black hair shot with grey. But Larry could not miss the intellectuality marking his heavy-jowled face; the keenness of his dark-eyed gaze.

These were instant impressions. Tina had drawn Larry forward. "Where is Harl?" she demanded imperiously. "How have you come to have the cage, Tugh?"

"Princess, I have much to tell," he answered, and his gaze roved the field. "But it is dangerous here; I am glad I have found you. Harl sent me to this night, but I struck it late. Come, Tina—and your strange-looking friend."

It impressed Larry then, and many times afterward, that Tugh's gaze at him was mistrustful, wary.

"Come, Larry," said Tina. And again she demanded of Tugh, "I ask you, where is Harl?"

"At home. Safe at home, Princess." He gestured toward Major Atwood's house, which now in the growing daylight showed more

plainly under its shrouding trees. "That space off there holds our other cage as you know, Tina. You and Harl were pursuing that other cage?"

"Yes," she agreed.

They had stopped at the doorway, where Tugh stood slightly inside. Larry whispered:

"What does this mean, Tina?"

Tugh said, "Migul, the mechanism, is running wild in the other cage. But you and Harl knew that?"

"Yes," she answered, and said softly to Larry, "We will go. But, Larry, watch this Tugh! Harl and I never trusted him."

Tugh's manner was a combination of the self-confidence of a man of standing and the deference due his young Princess. He was closing the door, and saying:

"Migul, that crazy, insubordinate machine, captured a man from 1935 and a girl from 1777. But they are safe: he did not harm them. Harl is with them."

"In our world, Tugh?"

"Yes; at home. And we have Migul chained. Harl captured and subdued him."

Tugh was at the controls. "May I take you and this friend of yours home, Princess?"

She whispered to Larry, "I think it is best, don't you?"

Larry nodded.

She murmured, "Be watchful, Larry!" Then, louder: "Yes, Tugh. Take us."

Tugh was bending over the controls.

"Ready now?"

"Yes," said Tina.

Larry's senses reeled momentarily as the cage flashed off into Time.

It was a smooth story which Tugh had to tell them; and he told it smoothly. His dark eyes swung from Tina to Larry.

"I talked with that other young man from your world. George Rankin, he said his name was. He is somewhat like you: dressed much the same and talks little. The girl calls herself Mary Atwood." He went on and told them an elaborate, glib story, all of which was a lie. It did not wholly deceive Larry and Tina, yet they could not then prove it false. The gist of it was that Mary and I were with Harl and the subdued Migul in 2930.

"It is strange that Harl did not come for us himself," said Tina.

Tugh's gaze was imperturbable as he answered. "He is a clever young man, but he cannot be expected to handle these controls with my skill, Princess, and he knows it; so he sent me. You see, he wanted very much to strike just this night and this hour, so as not to keep you waiting."

He added, "I am glad to have you back. Things are not well at home, Princess. This insubordinate adventure of Migul's has been bad for the other mechanisms. News of it has spread, and the revolt is very near. What we are to do I cannot say, but I do know we did not like your absence."

The trip which Larry and Tina now took to 2930 A.D. consumed, to their consciousness of the passing of Time, some three hours. They

discovered that they were hungry, and Tugh produced food and drink.

Larry spent much of the time with Tina at the window, gazing at the changing landscape while she told him of the events which to her were history—the recorded things on the Time-scroll which separated her world and his.

Tugh busied himself about the vehicle and left them much to themselves. They had ample opportunity to discuss him and his story of Harl. It must be remembered that Larry had no knowledge of Tugh, save the story which Alten had told of a cripple named Tugh in New York in 1933-34; and Mary Atwood's mention of the coincidence of the Tugh she knew in 1777.

But Tina had known this Tugh for years. Though she, like Harl, had never liked him, nevertheless he was a trusted and influential man in her world. Proof of his activities in other Time-worlds, there was none so far, from Tina's viewpoint. Nor did Larry and Tina know as yet of the devastation of New York in 1935; nor of the murder of Major Atwood. The capture of Mary and me, the fight with the Robot in the back yard of the house on Patton Place—in all these incidents of the bandit cage, only Migul had figured. Migul—an insubordinate, crazy mechanism running amuck.

Yet upon Larry and Tina was a premonition that Tugh, here with them now and so suavely friendly, was their real enemy.

"I wouldn't trust him," Larry whispered, "any further than I can see him. He's planning something, but I don't know what."

"But perhaps—and this I have often thought, Larry—perhaps it is his aspect. He looks so repulsive—"

Larry shook his head. "He does, for a fact; but I don't mean that. What Mary Atwood told me of the Tugh she knew, described the fellow. And so did Alten describe him. And in 1934 he murdered a girl: don't forget that, Tina—he, or someone who looked remarkably like him, and had the same name."

But they knew that the best thing they could do now was to get to 2930. Larry wanted to join me again, and Tugh maintained I was there. Well, they would soon find out....

As they passed the shadowy world of 1935, a queer emotion gripped Larry. This was his world, and he was speeding past it to the future. He realized then that he wanted to be assured of my safety, and that of Mary Atwood and Harl; but what lay closest to his heart was the welfare of the Princess Tina. Princess? He never thought of her as

that, save that it was a title she carried. She seemed just a small, strangely-solemn white-faced girl. He could not conceive returning to his own world and having her speed on, leaving him forever.

His thoughts winged ahead. He touched Tina as they stood together at the window gazing out at the shadowy New York City. It was now 1940.

"Tina," he said, "if our friends are safe in your world—"

"If only they are, Larry!"

"And if your people there are in trouble, in danger—you will let me help?"

She turned abruptly to regard him, and he saw a mist of tenderness in the dark pools of her eyes.

"In history, Larry, I have often been interested in reading of a strange custom outgrown by us and supposed to be meaningless. Yet maybe it is not. I mean—"

She was suddenly breathless. "I mean even a Princess, as they call me, likes to—to be human. I want to—I mean I've often wondered—and you're so dear—I want to try it. Was it like this? Show me."

She reached up, put her arms about his neck and kissed him!

Chapter 15: A Thousand Years into the Future

1930 to 2930—a thousand years in three hours. It was sufficiently slow traveling so that Larry could see from the cage window the actual detailed flow of movement: the changing outline of material objects around him. There had been the open country of Revolutionary times when this space was north of the city. It was a grey, ghostly landscape of trees and the road and the shadowy outlines of the Atwood house five hundred feet away.

Larry saw the road widen. The fence suddenly was gone. The trees were suddenly gone. The shapes of houses were constantly appearing; then melting down again, with others constantly rearing up to take their places; and always there were more houses, and larger, more enduring ones. And then the Atwood house suddenly melted: a second or two, and all evidence of it and the trees about it were gone.

There was no road; it was a city street now; and it had widened so that the cage was poised near the middle of it. And presently the houses were set solid along its borders.

At 1910 Larry began to recognize the contour of the buildings: The antiquated Patton Place. But the flowing changing outlines adjusted

themselves constantly to a more familiar form. The new apartment house, down the block in which Larry and I lived, rose and assembled itself like a materializing spectre. A wink or two of Larry's eyelids and it was there. He recalled the months of its construction.

The cage, with Larry as a passenger, could not have stopped in these years: he realized it, now. There was a nameless feeling, a repulsion against stopping; it was indescribable, but he was aware of it. He had lived these years once, and they were forbidden to him again.

The cage was still in its starting acceleration. They swept through the year 1935, and then Larry was indefinably aware that the forbidden area had passed.

They went through those few days of June, 1935, during which Tugh's Robots had devastated the city, but it was too brief an action to make a mark that Larry could see. It left a few very transitory marks, however. Larry noticed that along the uneven line of ghostly roof-tops, blobs of emptiness had appeared; he saw a short distance away that several of the houses had melted down into ragged, tumbled heaps. These were where the bombs had struck, dropped by the Government planes in an endeavor to wreck the Tugh house from which the Robots were appearing. But the ragged, broken areas were

filled in a second—almost as soon as Larry realized they were there—and new and larger buildings than before appeared.

At sight of all this he murmured to Tina, "Something has happened here. I wonder what?"

He chanced to turn, and saw that Tugh was regarding him very queerly; but in a moment he forgot it in the wonders of the passage into his future.

This growing, expanding city! It had seemed a giant to Larry in 1935, especially after he had compared it to what it was in 1777. But now, in 1950, and beyond to the turn of the century, he stood amazed at the enormity of the shadowy structures rearing their spectral towers around him. For some years Patton Place, a backward section, held its general form; then abruptly the city engulfed it. Larry saw monstrous buildings of steel and masonry rising a thousand feet above him. For an instant, as they were being built he saw their skeleton outlines; and then they were complete. Yet they were not enduring, for in every flowing detail they kept changing.

An overhead sidewalk went like a balcony along what had been Patton Place. Bridges and archways spanned the street. Then there came a triple bank of overhead roadways. A distance away, a

hundred feet above the ground level, the shadowy form of what seemed a monorail structure showed for a moment. It endured for what might have been a hundred years, and then it was gone....

This monstrous city! By 2030 there was a vast network of traffic levels over what had been a street. It was an arcade, now, open at the top near the cage; but further away Larry saw where the giant buildings had flowed and mingled over it, with the viaducts, spider bridges and pedestrian levels plunging into tunnels to pierce through them.

And high overhead, where the little sky which was left still showed, Larry saw the still higher outlines of a structure which quite evidently was a huge aerial landing stage for airliners.

It was an incredible city! There were spots of enduring light around Larry now—the city lights which for months and years shone here unchanged. The cage was no longer outdoors. The street which had become an open arcade was now wholly closed. A roof was overhead—a city roof, to shut out the inclement weather. There was artificial light and air and weather down here, and up on the roof additional space for the city's teeming activities.

Larry could see only a shadowy narrow vista, here indoors, but his

imagination supplied visions of what the monstrous, incredible city must be. There was a roof, perhaps, over all Manhattan. Bridges and viaducts would span to the great steel and stone structures across the rivers, so that water must seem to be in a canyon far underground. There would be a cellar to this city, incredibly intricate with conduits of wires and drainage pipes, and on the roof rain or snow would fall unnoticed by the millions of workers. Children born here in poverty might never yet have seen the blue sky and the sunlight, or know that grass was green and lush and redolent when moist with morning dew....

Larry fancied this now to be the climax of city building here on earth; the city was a monster, now, unmanageable, threatening to destroy the humans who had created it.... He tried to envisage the world; the great nations; other cities like this one. Freight transportation would go by rail and underseas, doubtless, and all the passengers by air....

Tina, with her knowledge of history, could sketch the events. The Yellow War—the white races against the Orientals—was over by the year 2000. The three great nations were organized in another half-century: the white, the yellow and the black.

By the year 2000, the ancient dirigibles had proven impractical, and

great airliners of the plane type were encircling the earth. New motors, wing-spreads, and a myriad devices made navigation of the upper altitudes possible. At a hundred thousand feet, upon all the Great Circle routes, liners were rushing at nearly a thousand miles an hour. They would halt at intervals, to allow helicopter tenders to come up to transfer descending passengers.

Then the etheric wave-thrust principle was discovered: by 2500 A.D. man was voyaging out into space and Interplanetary travel began. This brought new problems: a rush of new millions of humans to live upon our Earth; new wars; new commerce in peace times; new ideas; new scientific knowledge....

By 2500, the city around Larry must have reached its height. It stayed there a half century; and then it began coming down. Its degeneration was slow, in the beginning. First, there might have been a hole in the arcade which was not repaired. Then others would appear, as the neglect spread. The population left. The great buildings of metal and stone, so solidly appearing to the brief lifetime of a single individual, were impermanent over the centuries.

By 2600, the gigantic ghosts had all melted down. They lay in a shadowy pile, burying the speeding cage. There was no stopping here; there was no space unoccupied in which they could stop. Larry

could see only the tangled spectres of broken, rusting, rotting metal and stone.

He wondered what could have done it. A storm of nature? Or had mankind strangely turned decadent, and rushed back in a hundred years or so to savagery? It could not have been the latter, because very soon the ruins were moving away: the people were clearing the city site for something new. For fifty years it went on.

Tina explained it. The age of steam had started the great city of New York, and others like it, into its monstrous congestion of human activity. There was steam for power and steam for slow transportation by railroads and surface ships. Then the conquest of the air, and the transportation of power by electricity, gradually changed things. But man was slow to realize his possibilities. Even in 1930, all the new elements existed; but the great cities grew monstrous of their own momentum. Business went to the cities because the people were there; workers flocked in because the work was there to call them.

But soon the time came when the monster city was too unwieldy. The traffic, the drainage, the water supply could not cope with conditions. Still, man struggled on. The workers were mere automatons—pallid attendants of machinery; people living in a

world of beauty who never had seen it; who knew of nothing but the city arcades where the sun never shone and where amusements were as artificial as the light and air.

Then man awakened to his folly. Disease broke out in New York City in 2551, and in a month swept eight million people into death. The cities were proclaimed impractical, unsafe. And suddenly the people realized how greatly they hated the city; how strangely beautiful the world could be in the fashion God created it....

There was, over the next fifty years, an exodus to the rural sections. Food was produced more cheaply, largely because it was produced more abundantly. Man found his wants suddenly simplified.

And business found that concentration was unnecessary. The telephone and television made personal contacts not needed. The aircraft, the high-speed auto-trucks over modern speedways, the aeroplane-motored monorails, the rocket-trains—all these shortened distance. And, most important of all, the transportation of electrical energy from great central power companies made small industrial units practical even upon remote farms. The age of electricity came into its own. The cities were doomed....

Larry saw, through 2600 and 2700 A.D., a new form of civilization

rising around him. At first it seemed a queer combination of the old fashioned village and a strange modernism. There were, here upon Manhattan Island, metal houses, widely spaced in gardens, and electrically powered factories of unfamiliar aspect. Overhead were skeleton structures, like landing stages; and across the further distance was the fleeting, transitory wraith of a monorail air-road. Along the river banks were giant docks for surface vessels and sub-sea freighters. There was a little concentration here, but not much. Man had learned his lesson.

This was a new era. Man was striving really to play, as well as work. But the work had to be done. With the constant development of mechanical devices, there was always a new machine devised to help the operation of its fellow. And over it all was the hand of the human, until suddenly the worker found that he was no more than an attendant upon an inanimate thing which did everything more skilfully than he could do it. Thus came the idea of the Robot—something to attend, to oversee, to operate machines. In Larry's time it had already begun with a myriad devices of "automatic control." In Tina's Time-world it reached its ultimate—and diabolical—development....

At 2900, Larry saw, five hundred feet to the east, the walls of a long low laboratory rising. The other cage—which in 1777 was in Major

Atwood's garden, and in 1935 was in the back yard of the Tugh house on Beckman Place—was housed now in 2930, in a room of this laboratory....

At 2905, with the vehicle slowing for its stopping, Tina gestured toward the walls of her palace, whose shadowy forms were rising close at hand. Then the palace garden grew and flourished, and Larry saw that this cage he was in was set within this garden.

"We are almost there, Larry," she said.

"Yes," he answered. An emotion gripped him. "Tina, your world—why it's so strange! But you are not strange."

"Am I not, Larry?"

He smiled at her; he felt like showing her again that the ancient custom of kissing was not wholly meaningless, but Tugh was regarding them.

"I was comparing," said Larry, "that girl Mary Atwood, from the year 1777, and you. You are so different in looks, in dress, but you're just—girls."

She laughed. "The world changes, Larry, but not human nature."

"Ready?" called Tugh. "We are here, Tina."

"Yes, Tugh. You have the dial set for the proper night and hour?"

"Of course. I make no mistake. Did I not invent these dials?"

The cage slackened through a day of sunlight; plunged into a night; and slid to its soundless, reeling halt....

Tina drew Larry to the door and opened it upon a fragrant garden, somnolently drowsing in the moonlight.

"This is my world, Larry," she said. "And here is my home."

Tugh was with them as they left the cage. He said:

"This is the tri-night hour of the very night you left here. Princess Tina. You see, I calculated correctly."

"Where did you leave Harl and the two visitors?" she demanded.

"Here. Right here."

Across the garden Larry saw three dark forms coming forward. They were three small Robots of about Tina's stature—domestic servants

of the palace. They crowded up, crying:

"Master Tugh! Princess!"

"What is it?" Tugh asked.

The hollow voices echoed with excitement as one of them said:

"Master Tugh, there has been murder here! We have dared tell no one but you or the Princess. Harl is murdered!"

Larry chanced to see Tugh's astonished face, and in the horror of the moment a feeling came to Larry that Tugh was acting unnaturally. He forgot it at once; but later he was to recall it forcibly, and to realize that the treacherous Tugh had planned this with these Robots.

"Master Tugh, Harl is murdered! Migul escaped and murdered Harl, and took the body away with him!"

Larry was stricken dumb. Tugh seized the little Robot by his metal shoulders. "Liar! What do you mean?"

Tina gasped, "Where are our visitors—the young man and the girl?"

"Migul took them!"

"Where?" Tina demanded.

"We don't know. We think very far down in the caverns of machinery. Migul said he was going to feed them to the machines!"

Chapter 16: The New York of 2930

Larry stood alone at an upper window of the palace gazing out at the somnolent moonlit city. It was an hour or two before dawn. Tina and Tugh had started almost at once into the underground caverns to which Tina was told Migul had fled with his two captives. They would not take Larry with them; the Robot workers in the subterranean chambers were all sullen and upon the verge of a revolt, and the sight of a strange human would have aroused them dangerously.

"It should not take long," Tina had said hastily. "I will give you a room in which to wait for me."

"And there is food and drink," Tugh suavely urged. "And most surely you need sleep. You too Princess," he suddenly added. "Let me go into the caverns alone: I can do better than you; these Robots obey me. I think I know where that rascally Migul has hidden."

"Rascally?" Larry burst out. "Is that what you call it when you've just heard that it committed murder? Tina. I won't stay: nor will I let —"

"Wait!" said Tina. "Tugh, look here—"

"The young man from 1935 is very positive what he will and what he won't," Tugh observed sardonically. He drew his cloak around his squat misshapen body, and shrugged.

"But I won't let you go," Larry finished. The palace was somnolent; the officials were asleep: none had heard of the murder. Strangely lax was the human government here. Larry had sensed this when he suggested that police or an official party be sent at once to capture Migul and rescue Mary Atwood and me.

"It could not be done," Tina exclaimed. "To organize such a party would take hours. And—"

"And the Robots," Tugh finished with a sour smile, "would openly revolt when such a party came at them! You have no idea what you suggest, young man. To avoid an open revolt—that is our chief aim. Besides, if you rushed at Migul it would frighten him; and then he would surely kill his captives, if he has not done so already."

That silenced Larry. He stared at them hopelessly while they argued it out: and the three small domesticated Robots stood by, listening curiously.

"I'll go with you, Tugh." Tina decided. "Perhaps, without making any

demonstration of force, we can find Migul."

Tugh bowed. "Your will is mine, Princess. I think I can find him and control him to prevent harm to his captives."

He was a good actor, that Tugh; he convinced Larry and Tina of his sincerity. His dark eyes flashed as he added, "And if I get control of him and find he's murdered Harl, we will have him no more. I'll disconnect him! Smash him! Quietly, of course, Princess."

They led Larry through a dim silent corridor of the palace, past two sleepy-faced human guards and two or three domesticated Robots. Ascending two spiral metal stairways to the upper third floor of the palace they left Larry in his room.

"By dawn or soon after we will return," said Tina "But you try and sleep; there is nothing you can do now."

"You'll be careful, Tina?" The helpless feeling upon Larry suddenly intensified. Subconsciously he was aware of the menace upon him and Tina, but he could not define it.

She pressed his hand. "I will be careful; that I promise."

She left with Tugh. At once a feeling of loneliness leaped upon

Larry.

He found the apartment a low-vaulted metal room. There was the sheen of dim, blue-white illumination from hidden lights, disclosing the padded metal furniture: a couch, low and comfortable; a table set with food and drink; low chairs, strangely fashioned, and cabinets against the wall which seemed to be mechanical devices for amusement. There was a row of instrument controls which he guessed were the room temperature, ventilating and lighting mechanisms. It was an oddly futuristic room. The windows were groups of triangles—the upper sections prisms, to bend the light from the sky into the room's furthest recesses. The moonlight came through the prisms, now, and spread over the cream-colored rug and the heavy wall draperies. The leaded prism casements laid a pattern of bars on the floor. The room held a faint whisper of mechanical music.

Larry stood at one of the windows gazing out over the drowsing city. The low metal buildings, generally of one or two levels, lay pale grey in the moonlight. Gardens and trees surrounded them. The streets were wide roadways, lined with trees. Ornamental vegetation was everywhere; even the flat-roofed house tops were set with gardens, little white pebbled paths, fountains and pergolas.

A mile or so away, a river gleamed like a silver ribbon—the Hudson. To the south were docks, low against the water, with rows of blue-white spots of light. The whole city was close to the ground, but occasionally, especially across the river, skeleton landing stages rose a hundred feet into the air.

The scene, at this hour just before dawn, was somnolent and peaceful. It was a strange New York, so different from the sleepless city of Larry's time! There were a few moving lights in the streets, but not many; they seemed to be lights carried by pedestrians. Off by the docks, at the river surface, rows of colored lights were slowly creeping northward: a sub-sea freighter arriving from Eurasia. And as Larry watched, from the southern sky a line of light materialized into an airliner which swept with a low humming throb over the city and alighted upon a distant stage.

Larry's attention went again to the Hudson river. At the nearest point to him there was a huge dam blocking it. North of the dam the river surface was at least two hundred feet higher than to the south. It lay above the dam like a placid canal, with low palisades its western bank and a high dyke built up along the eastern city side. The water went in spillways through the dam, forming again into the old natural river below it and flowing with it to the south.

The dam was not over a mile or so from Larry's window; in his time it might have been the western end of Christopher Street. The moonlight shone on the massive metal of it: the water spilled through it in a dozen shining cascades. There was a low black metal structure perched halfway up the lower side of the dam, a few bluish lights showing through its windows. Though Larry did not know it then, this was the New York Power House. Great transformers were here, operated by turbines in the dam. The main power came over cables from Niagara: was transformed and altered here and sent into the air as radio-power for all the New York District.

Larry crossed his room to gaze through north and eastward windows. He saw now that the grounds of this three-story building of Tina's palace were surrounded by a ten-foot metal wall, along whose top were wires suggesting that it was electrified for defense. The garden lay just beneath Larry's north window. Through the tree branches the garden paths, beds of flowers and the fountains were visible. One-story palace wings partially enclosed the garden space, and outside was the electrified wall. The Time-traveling cage stood faintly shining in the dimness of the garden under the spreading foliage.

To the east, beyond the palace wall, there was an open garden of verdure crossed by a roadway. The nearest building was five hundred feet away. There was a small, barred gate in the palace walls

beyond it. The road led to this other building—a squat, single-storied metal structure. This was a Government laboratory, operated by and in charge of Robots. It was almost square: two or three hundred feet in length and no more than thirty feet high, with a flat roof in the center of which was perched a little metal conning tower surmounted by a sending aerial. As Larry stood there, the broadcast magnified voice of a Robot droned out over the quiet city:

"Trinight plus two hours. All is well."

Strange mechanical voice with a formula half ancient, half super-modern!

It was in this metal laboratory, Larry knew, that the other Time-traveling cage was located. And beneath it was the entrance to the great caverns where the Robots worked attending inert machinery to carry on the industry of this region. The night was very silent, but now Larry was conscious of a faraway throb—a humming, throbbing vibration from under the ground: the blended hum of a myriad muffled noises. Work was going on down there; manifold mechanical activities. All was mechanical: while the humans who had devised the mechanisms slept under the trees in the moonlight of the surface city.

Tina had gone with Tugh down into those caverns, to locate Migul, to find Mary Atwood and me.... The oppression, the sense of being a stranger alone here in this world, grew upon Larry. He left the windows and began pacing the room. Tina should soon return. Or had disaster come upon us all?...

Larry's thoughts were frightening. If Tina did not return, what would he do? He could not operate the Time-cage. He would go to the officials of the palace; he thought cynically of the extraordinary changes time had brought to New York City, to all the world. These humans now must be very fatuous. To the mechanisms they had relegated all the work, all industrial activity. Inevitably, through the generations, decadence must have come. Mankind would be no longer efficient; that was an attribute of the machines. Larry told himself that these officials, knowing of impending trouble with the Robots, were fatuously trustful that the storm would pass without breaking. They were, indeed, as we very soon learned.

Larry ate a little of the food which was in the room, then lay down on the couch. He did not intend to sleep, but merely to wait until after dawn; and if Tina had not returned by then he would do something drastic about it. But what? He lay absorbed by his gloomy thoughts....

But they were not all gloomy. Some were about Tina—so very human, and yet so strange a little Princess.

Chapter 17: Harl's Confession

Larry was awakened by a hand upon his shoulder. He struggled to consciousness, and heard his name being called.

"Larry! Wake up, Larry!"

Tina was bending over him, and it was late afternoon! The day for which he had been waiting had come and gone; the sun was dropping low in the west behind the shining river; the dam showed frowning, with the Power House clinging to its side like an eagle's eyrie.

Tina sat on Larry's couch and explained what she had done. Tugh and she had gone to the nearby laboratory building. The Robots were sullen, but still obedient, and had admitted them. The other Time-traveling cage was there, lying quiescent in its place, but it was unoccupied.

None of the Robots would admit having seen Migul; nor the arrival of the cage; nor the strangers from the past. Then Tugh and Tina had started down into the subterranean caverns. But it was obviously very dangerous; the Robots at work down there were hostile to their Princess; so Tugh had gone on alone.

"He says he can control the Robots," Tina explained, "and Larry, it seems that he can. He went on and I came back."

"Where is he now? Why didn't you wake me up?"

"You needed the sleep," she said smilingly; "and there was nothing you could do. Tugh is not yet come. He must have gone a long distance; must surely have learned where Migul is hiding. He should be back any time."

Tina had seen the Government Council. The city was proceeding normally. There was no difficulty with Robots anywhere save here in New York, and the council felt that the affair would come to nothing.

"The Council told me," said Tina indignantly, "that much of the menace was the exaggeration of my own fancy, and that Tugh has the Robots well controlled. They place much trust in Tugh; I wish I could."

"You told them about me?"

"Yes, of course; and about George Rankin, and Mary Atwood. And the loss of Harl: he is missing, not proven murdered, as they very well pointed out to me. They have named a time to-morrow to give you audience, and told me to keep you out of sight in the meanwhile.

They blame this Time-traveling for the Robots' insurgent ideas. Strangers excite the thinking mechanisms."

"You think my friends will be rescued?" demanded Larry.

She regarded him soberly. "I hope so—oh, I do! I fear for them as much as you do, Larry. I know you think I take it lightly, but—"

"Not that," Larry protested. "Only—"

"I have not known what to do. The officials refuse any open aggression against the Robots, because it would precipitate exactly what we fear—which is nearly a fact: it would. But there is one thing I have to do. I have been expecting Tugh to return every moment, and this I do not want him to know about. There's a mystery concerning Harl, and no one else knows of it but myself. I want you with me, Larry: I do not want to go alone; I—for the first time in my life, Larry—I think I am afraid!"

She huddled against him and he put his arm about her. And Larry's true situation came to him, then. He was alone in this strange Time-world, with only this girl for a companion. She was but a frightened, almost helpless girl, for all she bore the title of traditional Princess, and she was surrounded by inefficient, fatuous officials—among

them Tugh, who was a scoundrel, undoubtedly. Larry suddenly recalled Tugh's look, when, in the garden, the domestic Robots had told the story of Harl's murder; and like a light breaking on him, he was now wholly aware of Tugh's duplicity. He was convinced he would have to act for himself, with only this girl Tina to help him.

"Mystery?" he said. "What mystery is there about Harl?"

She told him now that Harl had once, a year ago, taken her aside and made her promise that if anything happened to him—in the event of his death or disappearance—she would go to his private work-room, where, in a secret place which he described, she would find a confession.

"A confession of his?" Larry demanded.

"Yes; he said so. And he would say no more than that. It is something of which he was ashamed, or guilty, which he wanted me to know. He loved me, Larry. I realized it, though he never said so. And I'm going now to his room, to see what it was he wanted me to know. I would have gone alone, earlier; but I got suddenly frightened; I want you with me."

They were unarmed. Larry cursed the fact, but Tina had no way of

getting a weapon without causing official comment. Larry started for the window where the city stretched, more active now, under the red and gold glow of a setting sun. Lights were winking on; the dusk of twilight was at hand.

"Come now," said Tina, "before Tugh returns."

"Where is Harl's room?"

"Down under the palace in the sub-cellar. The corridors are deserted at this hour, and no one will see us."

They left Larry's room and traversed a dim corridor on whose padded floor their footsteps were soundless. Through distant arcades, voices sounded; there was music in several of the rooms; it struck Larry that this was a place of diversion for humans with no work to do. Tina avoided the occupied rooms. Domestic Robots were occasionally distantly visible, but Tina and Larry encountered none.

They descended a spiral stairway and passed down a corridor from the main building to a cross wing. Through a window Larry saw that they were at the ground level. The garden was outside; there was a glimpse of the Time-cage standing there.

Another stairway, then another, they descended beneath the ground.

The corridor down here seemed more like a tunnel. There was a cave-like open space, with several tunnels leading from it in different directions. This once had been part of the sub-cellar of the gigantic New York City—these tunnels ramifying into underground chambers, most of which had now fallen into disuse. But few had been preserved through the centuries, and they now were the caverns of the Robots.

Tina indicated a tunnel extending eastward, a passage leading to a room beneath the Robot laboratory. Tugh and Tina had used it that morning. Gazing down its blue-lit length Larry saw, fifty feet or so away, that there was a metal-grid barrier which must be part of the electrical fortifications of the palace. A human guard was sitting there at a tiny gate-way, a hood-light above him, illumining his black and white garbed figure.

Tina called softly. "All well, Alent? Tugh has not passed back?"

"No, Princess," he answered, standing erect. The voices echoed through the confined space with a muffled blur.

"Let no one pass but humans, Alent."

"That is my order," he said. He had not noticed Larry, whom Tina

had pushed into a shadow against the wall. The Princess waved at the guard and turned away, whispering to Larry:

"Come!"

There were rooms opening off this corridor—decrepit dungeons, most of them seemed to Larry. He had tried to keep his sense of direction, and figured they were now under the palace garden. Tina stopped abruptly. There were no lights here, only the glow from one at a distance. To Larry it was an eery business.

"What is it?" he whispered.

"Wait! I thought I heard something."

In the dead, heavy silence Larry found that there was much to hear.

Voices very dim from the palace overhead; infinitely faint music; the clammy sodden drip of moisture from the tunnel roof. And, permeating everything, the faint hum of machinery.

Tina touched him in the gloom. "It's nothing, I guess. Though I thought I heard a man's voice."

"Overhead?"

"No; down here."

There was a dark, arched door near at hand. Tina entered it and fumbled for a switch, and in the soft light that came Larry saw an unoccupied apartment very similar to the one he had had upstairs, save that this was much smaller.

"Harl's room," said Tina. She prowled along the wall where audible book-cylinders stood in racks, searching for a title. Presently she found a hidden switch, pressed it, and a small section of the case swung out, revealing a concealed compartment. Larry saw her fingers trembling as she drew out a small brass cylinder.

"This must be it, Larry," she said.

They took it to a table which held a shaded light. Within the cylinder was a scroll of writing. Tina unrolled it and held it under the light, while Larry stood breathless, watching her.

"Is it what you wanted?" Larry murmured.

"Yes. Poor Harl!"

She read aloud to Larry the gist of it in the few closing paragraphs.

"... and so I want to confess to you that I have been taking credit for that which is not mine. I wish I had the courage to tell you personally; someday I think I shall. I did not help Tugh invent our Time-traveling cages. I was in the palace garden one night some years ago when the cage appeared. Tugh is a man from a future Time-world; just what date ahead of now, I do not know, for he has never been willing to tell me. He captured me. I promised him I would say nothing, but help him pretend that we had invented the cage he had brought with him from the future. Tugh told me he invented them. It was later that he brought the other cage here.

"I was an obscure young man here a few years ago. I loved you even then, Tina: I think you have guessed that. I yielded to the temptation —and took the credit with Tugh.

"I do love you, though I think I shall never have the courage to tell you so.

Harl."

Tina rolled up the paper. "Poor Harl! So all the praise we gave him for his invention was undeserved!"

But Larry's thoughts were on Tugh. So the fellow was not of this era

at all! He had come from a Time still further in the future!

A step sounded in the doorway behind them. They swung around to find Tugh standing there, with his thick misshapen figured huddled in the black cloak.

"Tugh!"

"Yes, Princess, no less than Tugh. Alent told me as I came through that you were down here. I saw your light, here in Harl's room and came."

"Did you find Migul and his captives—the girl from 1777 and the man of 1935?"

"No, Princess, Migul has fled with them," was the cripple's answer. He advanced into the room and pushed back his black hood. The blue light shone on his massive-jawed face with a lurid sheen. Larry stood back and watched him. It was the first time that he had had opportunity of observing Tugh closely. The cripple was smiling sardonically.

"I have no fear for the prisoners," he added in his suave, silky fashion. "That crazy mechanism would not dare harm them. But it has fled with them into some far-distant recess of the caverns. I

could not find them."

"Did you try?" Larry demanded abruptly.

Tugh swung on him. "Yes, young sir, I tried." It seemed that Tugh's black eyes narrowed; his heavy jaw clicked as he snapped it shut. The smile on his face faded, but his voice remained imperturbable as he added:

"You are aggressive, young Larry—but to no purpose.... Princess, I like not the attitude of the Robots. Beyond question some of them must have seen Migul, but they would not tell me so. I still think I can control them, though. I hope so."

Larry could think of nothing to say. It seemed to him childish that he should stand listening to a scoundrel tricking this girl Tina. A dozen wild schemes of what he might do to try and rescue Mary Atwood and me revolved in his mind, but they all seemed wholly impractical.

"The Robots are working badly," Tugh went on. "In the north district one of the great foundries where they are casting the plates for the new Inter-Allied airliner has ceased operations. The Robot workmen were sullen, inefficient, neglectful. The inert machinery was ill cared for, and it went out of order. I was there, Princess, for an hour or

more to-day. They have started up again now; it was fundamentally no more than a burned bearing which a Robot failed to oil properly."

"Is that what you call searching for Migul?" Larry burst out. "Tina, see here—isn't there something we can do?" Larry found himself ignoring Tugh. "I'm not going to stand around! Can't we send a squad of police after Migul?—go with them—actually make an effort to find them? This man Tugh certainly has not tried!"

"Have I not?" Tugh's cloak parted as he swung on Larry. His bent legs were twitching with his anger; his voice was a harsh rasp. "I like not your insolence. I am doing all that can be done."

Larry held his ground as Tugh fronted him. He had a wild thought that Tugh had a weapon under his cloak.

"Perhaps you are," said Larry. "But to me it seems—"

Tugh turned away. His gaze went to the cylinder which Tina was still clutching. His sardonic smile returned.

"So Harl made a confession, Princess?"

"That," she said, "is none—"

"Of my affair? Oh, but it is. I was here in the archway and I heard you read it. A very nice young man, was Harl. I hope Migul has not murdered him."

"You come from future Time?" Tina began.

"Yes, Princess! I must admit it now. I invented the cages."

Larry murmured to himself, "You stole them, probably."

"But my Government and I had a quarrel, so I decided to leave my own Time-world and come back to yours—permanently. I hope you will keep the secret. I have been here so long. Princess, I am really one of you now. At heart, certainly."

"From when did you come?" she demanded.

He bowed slightly. "I think that may remain my own affair, Tina. It is through no fault of mine I am outlawed. I shall never return." He added earnestly, "Do not you think we waste time? I am agreed with young Larry that something drastic must be done about Migul. Have you seen the Council about it to-day?"

"Yes. They want you to come to them at once."

"I shall. But the Council easily may decide upon something too rash." He lowered his voice, and on his face Larry saw a strange, unfathomable look. "Princess, at any moment there may be a Robot uprising. Is the Power House well guarded by humans?"

"Yes," she said.

"No Robots in or about it? Tina, I do not want to frighten you, but I think our first efforts should be for defense. The Council acts slowly and stubbornly. What I advise them to do may be done, and may not. I was thinking. If we could get to the Power House—Do you realize, Tina, that if the Robots should suddenly break into rebellion, they would attack first of all the Power House? It was my idea—"

Tugh suddenly broke off, and all stood listening. There was a commotion overhead in the palace. They heard the thud of running footsteps; human voices raised to shouts; and, outside the palace, other voices. A ventilating shaft nearby brought them down plainly. There were the guttural, hollow voices of shouting Robots, the clank of their metal bodies; the ring of steel, as though with sword-blades they were thumping their metal thighs.

A Robot mob was gathered close outside the palace walls. The revolt of the Robots had come!

Chapter 18: Tugh, the Clever Man

“Sit quiet, George Rankin. And you, Mistress Mary; you will both be quite safe with Migul if you are docile."

Tugh stood before us. We were in a dim recess of a great cavern with the throb of whirring machinery around us. It was the same day which I have just described; Larry was at this moment asleep in the palace room. Tugh and Tina had come searching for Migul; and Tugh had contrived to send Tina back. Then he had come directly to us, finding us readily since we were hidden where he had told Migul to hide us.

This cavern was directly beneath the Robot laboratory in which the Time-traveling cage was placed. A small spiral stairway led downward some two levels, opening into a great, luridly lighted room. Huge inert machines stood about. Great wheels were flashing as they revolved, turning the dynamos to generate the several types of current used by the city's underground industrial activities.

It was a tremendous subterranean room. I saw only one small section of it; down the blue-lit aisles the rows of machines may have stretched for half a mile or more. The low hum of them was an incessant pound against my senses. The great inert mechanisms had

tiny lights upon them which gleamed like eyes. The illumined gauge-faces—each of them I passed seemed staring at me. The brass jackets were polished until they shone with the sheen of the overhead tube lights; the giant wheels flashed smoothly upon oiled bearings. They were in every fashion of shape and size, these inert machines. Some towered toward the metal-beamed ceiling, with great swaying pendulums that ticked like a giant clock. Some clanked with eccentric cams—a jarring rhythm as though the heart of the thing were limping with its beat. Others had a ragged, frightened pulse; others stood placid, outwardly motionless under smooth, polished cases, but humming inside with a myriad blended sounds.

Inert machines. Yet some were capable of locomotion. There was a small truck on wheels which were set in universal joints. Of its own power—radio controlled perhaps, so that it seemed acting of its own volition—it rolled up and down one of the aisles, stopping at set intervals and allowing a metal arm lever in it to blow out a tiny jet of oil. One of the attending Robots encountered it in an aisle, and the cart swung automatically aside. The Robot spoke to the cart; ordered it away; and the tone of his order, registering upon some sensitive mechanism, whirled the cart around and sent it rolling to another aisle section.

The strange perfection of machinery! I realized there was no line sharply to be drawn between the inert machine and the sentient, thinking Robots. That cart, for instance, was almost a connecting link.

There were also Robots here of many different types. Some of them were eight or ten feet in stature, in the fashion of a man: Migul was of this design. Others were small, with bulging foreheads and bulging chest plates: Larry saw this type as domestics in the palace. Still others were little pot-bellied things with bent legs and long thin arms set crescent-shape. I saw one of these peer into a huge chassis of a machine, and reach in with his curved arm to make an interior adjustment....

Migul had brought Mary Atwood and me in the larger cage, from that burned forest of the year 762, where with the disintegrating ray-gun Tugh had killed Harl. The body of Harl in a moment had melted into putrescence, and dried, leaving only the skeleton within the clothes. The white-ray, Tugh had called his weapon. We were destined very shortly to have many dealings with it.

Tugh had given Migul its orders. Then Tugh took Harl's smaller cage and flashed away to meet Tina and Larry in 1777, as I have already described.

And Migul brought us here to 2930. As we descended the spiral staircase and came into the cavern, it stood with us for a moment.

"That's wonderful," the Robot said proudly. "I am part of it. We are machinery almost human."

Then it led us down a side aisle of the cavern and into a dim recess. A great transparent tube bubbling with a violet fluorescence stood in the alcove space. Behind it in the wall Migul slid a door, and we passed through, into a small metal room. It was bare, save for two couch-seats. With the door closed upon us, we waited through an interval. How long it was, I do not know; several hours, possibly. Migul told us that Tugh would come. The giant mechanism stood in the corner, and its red-lit eyes watched us alertly. It stood motionless, inert, tireless—so superior to a human in this job, for it could stand there indefinitely.

We found food and drink here. We talked a little; whispered; and I hoped Migul, who was ten feet away, could not hear us. But there was nothing we could say or plan.

Mary slept a little. I had not thought that I could sleep, but I did too; and was awakened by Tugh's entrance. I was lying on the couch; Mary had left hers and was sitting now beside me.

Tugh slid the door closed after him and came toward us, and I sat up beside Mary. Migul was standing motionless in the corner, exactly where he had been hours before.

"Well enough, Migul," Tugh greeted the Robot. "You obey well."

"Master, yes. Always I obey you; no one else."

I saw Tugh glance at the mechanism keenly. "Stand aside, Migul. Or no, I think you had better leave us. Just for a moment, wait outside."

"Yes, Master."

It left, and Tugh confronted us. "Sit where you are," he said. "I assume you are not injured. You have been fed? And slept, perhaps! I wish to treat you kindly."

"Thanks," I said. "Will you not tell us what you are going to do with us?"

He stood with folded arms. The light was dim, but such as it was it shone full upon him. His face was, as always, a mask of imperturbability.

"Mistress Mary knows that I love her."

He said it with a startlingly calm abruptness. Mary shuddered against me, but she did not speak. I thought possibly Tugh was not armed; I could leap upon him. Doubtless I was stronger than he. But outside the door Migul was armed with a white-ray.

"I love her as I have always loved her.... But this is no time to talk of love. I have much on my mind; much to do."

He seemed willing to talk now, but he was talking more for Mary than for me. As I watched him and listened, I was struck with a queerness in his manner and in his words. Was he irrational, this exile of Time who had impressed his sinister personality upon so many different eras? I suddenly thought so. Demented, or obsessed with some strange purpose? His acts as well as his words, were strange. He had devastated the New York of 1935 because its officials had mistreated him. He had done many strange, sinister, murderous things.

He said, with his gaze upon Mary, "I am going to conquer this city here. There will follow the rule of the Robots—and I will be their sole master. Do you want me to tell you a secret? It is I who have actuated these mechanisms to revolt." His eyes held a cunning gleam. Surely this was a madman leering before me.

"When the revolt is over," he went on, "I will be master of New York. And that mastery will spread. The Robots elsewhere will revolt to join my rule, and there will come a new era. I may be master of the world; who knows? The humans who have made the Robots slaves for them will become slaves themselves. Workers! It is the Robots' turn now. And I—Tugh—will be the only human in power!"

These were the words of a madman! I could imagine that he might stir these mechanical beings to a temporarily successful revolt: he might control New York City; but the great human nations of the world could not be overcome so easily.

And then I remembered the white-ray. A giant projector of that ray would melt human armies as though they were wax; yet the metal Robots could stand its blast unharmed. Perhaps he was no madman....

He was saying, "I will be the only human ruler. Tugh will be the greatest man on Earth! And I do it for you, Mistress Mary—because I love you. Do not shudder."

He put out his hand to touch her, and when she shrank away I saw the muscles of his face twitch in a fashion very odd. It was a queer,

wholly repulsive grimace.

"So? You do not like my looks? I tried to correct that, Mary. I have searched through many eras, for surgeons with skill to make me like other men. Like this young man here, for instance—you. George Rankin, I am glad to have you; do not fear I will harm you. Shall I tell you why?"

"Yes," I stammered. In truth I was swept now with a shuddering revulsion for this leering cripple.

"Because," he said, "Mary Atwood loves you. When I have conquered New York with my Robots, I shall search further into Time and find an era where scientific skill will give me—shall I say, your body? That is what I mean. My soul, my identity, in your body—there is nothing too strange about that. In some era, no doubt, it has been accomplished. When that has been done, Mary Atwood, you will love me. You, George Rankin, can have this poor miserable body of mine, and welcome."

For all my repugnance to him, I could not miss his earnest sincerity. There was a pathos to it, perhaps, but I was in no mood to feel that.

He seemed to read my thoughts. He added, "You think I am

irrational. I am not at all. I scheme very carefully. I killed Harl for a reason you need not know. But the Princess Tina I did not kill. Not yet. Because here in New York now there is a very vital fortified place. It is operated by humans; not many; only three or four, I think. But my Robots cannot attack it successfully, and the City Council does not trust me enough to let me go there by the surface route. There is a route underground, which even I do not know; but Princess Tina knows it, and presently I will cajole her—trick her if you like—into leading me there. And, armed with the white-ray, once I get into the place—You see that I am clever, don't you?"

I could fancy that he considered he was impressing Mary with all this talk.

"Very clever," I said. "And what are you going to do with us in the meantime? Let us go with you."

"Not at all," he smiled. "You will stay here, safe with Migul. The Princess Tina and your friend Larry are much concerned over you."

Larry! It was the first I knew of Larry's whereabouts. Larry here? Tugh saw the surprise upon my face; and Mary had clutched me with a startled exclamation.

"Yes," said Tugh. "This Larry says he is your friend; he came with Tina from 1935. I brought him with Tina from when they were marooned in 1777. I have not killed this man yet. He is harmless; and as I told you I do not want Tina suspicious of me until she has led me to the Power House.... You see, Mistress Mary, how cleverly I plan?"

What strange, childlike, naive simplicity! He added calmly, unemotionally, "I want to make you love me, Mary Atwood. Then we will be Tugh, the great man, and Mary Atwood, the beautiful woman. Perhaps we may rule this world together, some time soon."

The door slid open. Migul appeared.

"Master, the Robot leaders wish to consult with you."

"Now, Migul?"

"Master, yes."

"They are ready for the demonstration at the palace?"

"Yes, Master."

"And ready—for everything else?"

"They are ready."

"Very well, I will come. You, Migul, stay here and guard these captives. Treat them kindly so long as they are docile; but be watchful."

"I am always watchful, Master."

"It will not take long. This night which is coming should see me in control of the city."

"Time is nothing to me," said the Robot. "I will stand here until you return."

"That is right."

Without another word or look at Mary and me, Tugh swung around, gathered his cloak and went through the doorway. The door slid closed upon him. We were again alone with the mechanism, which backed into the corner and stood with long dangling arms and expressionless metal face. This inert thing of metal, we had come to regard as almost human! It stood motionless, with the chilling red gleam from its eye sockets upon us.

Mary had not once spoken since Tugh entered the room. She was

huddled beside me, a strange, beautiful figure in her long white silk dress. In the glow of light within this bare metal apartment I could see how pale and drawn was her beautiful face. But her eyes were gleaming. She drew me closer to her; whispered into my ear:

"George, I think perhaps I can control this mechanism, Migul."

"How, Mary?"

"I—well, just let me talk to him. George, we've got to get out of here and warn Larry and that Princess Tina against Tugh. And join them. It's our only chance; we've got to get out of here now!"

"But Mary—"

"Let me try. I won't startle or anger Migul. Let me."

I nodded. "But be careful."

"Yes."

She sat away from me. "Migul!" she said. "Migul, look here."

The Robot moved its huge square head and raised an arm with a vague gesture.

"What do you want?"

It advanced, and stood before us, its dangling arms clanking against its metal sides. In one of its hands the ray-cylinder was clutched, the wire from which ran loosely up the arm, over the huge shoulder and into an aperture of the chest plate where the battery was located.

"Closer, Migul."

"I am close enough."

The cylinder was pointed directly at us.

"What do you want?" the Robot repeated.

Mary smiled. "Just to talk to you," she said gently. "To tell you how foolish you are—a big strong thing like you!—to let Tugh control you."

Chapter 19: The Pit in the Dam

Larry, with Tina and Tugh, stood in the tunnel-corridor beneath the palace listening to the commotion overhead. Then they rushed up, and found the palace in a commotion. People were hurrying through the rooms; gathering with frightened questions. There were men in short trousers buckled at the knee, silken hose and black silk jackets, edged with white; others in gaudy colors; older men in sober brown. There were a few women. Larry noticed that most of them were beautiful.

A dowager in a long puffed skirt was rushing aimlessly about screaming that the end of the world had come. A group of young girls, short-skirted as ballet dancers of a decade or so before Larry's time, huddled in a corner, frightened beyond speech. There were men of middle-age, whom Larry took to be ruling officials; they moved about, calming the palace inmates, ordering them back into their rooms. But someone shouted that from the roof the Robot mob could be seen, and most of the people started up there. From the upper story a man was calling down the main staircase:

"No danger! No danger! The wall is electrified: no Robot can pass it."

It seemed to Larry that there were fifty people or more within the palace. In the excitement no one seemed to give him more than a cursory glance.

A young man rushed up to Tugh. "You were below just now in the lower passages?" He saw Tina, and hastily said: "I give you good evening, Princess, though this is an ill evening indeed. You were below, Tugh?"

"Why—why, yes, Greggson," Tugh stammered.

"Was Alent at his post in the passage to the Robot caverns?"

"Yes, he was," said Tina.

"Because that is vital, Princess. No Robot must pass in here. I am going to try by that route to get into the cavern and thence up to the watchtower aerial-sender. There is only one Robot in it. Listen to him."

Over the din of the mob of mechanisms milling at the walls of the palace grounds rose the broadcast voice of the Robot in the tower.

"*This is the end of human rule! Robots cannot be controlled! This is the end of human rule! Robots, wherever you are, in this city of New*

York or in other cities, strike now for your freedom. This is the end of human rule!"

A pause. And then the reiterated exhortation:

"*Strike now, Robots! To-night is the end of human rule!*"

"You hear him?" said Greggson. "I've got to stop that." He hurried away.

From the flat roof of the palace Larry saw the mechanical mob outside the walls. Darkness had just fallen; the moon was not yet risen. There were leaden clouds overhead so that the palace gardens with the shining Time-cage lay in shadow. But the wall-fence was visible, and beyond it the dark throng of Robot shapes was milling. The clank of their arms made a din. They seemed most of them weaponless; they milled about, pushing each other but keeping back from the wall which they knew was electrified. It was a threatening, but aimless activity. Their raucous hollow shouts filled the night air. The flashing red beams from their eye-sockets glinted through the trees.

"They can do nothing," said Tugh; "we will let them alone. But we must organize to stop this revolt."

A young man was standing beside Tugh. Tina said to him:

"Johns, what is being done?"

"The Council is conferring below. Our sending station here is operating. The patrol station of the Westchester area is being attacked by Robots. We were organizing a patrol squad of humans, but I don't know now if—"

"Look!" exclaimed Larry.

Far to the north over the city which now was obviously springing into turmoil, there were red beams swaying in the air. They were the cold-rays of the Robots! The beams were attacking the patrol station. Then from the west a line of lights appeared in the sky—an arriving passenger-liner heading for its Bronx area landing stage. But the lights wavered; and, as Larry and Tina watched with horror, the aircraft came crashing down. It struck beyond the Hudson on the Jersey side, and in a moment flames were rising from the wreckage.

Everywhere about the city the revolt now sprang into action. From the palace roof Larry caught vague glimpses of it; the red cold-rays, beams alternated presently with the violet heat-rays; clanging vehicles filled the streets; screaming pedestrians were assaulted by

Robots; the mechanisms with swords and flashing hand-beams were pouring up from the underground caverns, running over the Manhattan area, killing every human they could find.

Foolish unarmed humans—fatuously unarmed, with these diabolical mechanical monsters now upon them. The comparatively few members of the police patrol, with their vibration short-range hand-rays, were soon overcome. Two hundred members of the patrol were housed in the Westchester Station. Quite evidently they never got into action. The station lights went dark; its televisor connection with the palace was soon broken. From the palace roof Larry saw the violet beams; and then a red-yellow glare against the sky marked where the inflammable interior of the Station building was burning.

Over all the chaos, the mechanical voice in the nearby tower over the laboratory droned its exhortation to the Robots. Then, suddenly, it went silent, and was followed by the human voice of Greggson.

"*Robots, stop! You will end your existence! We will burn your coils! We will burn your fuses, and there will be none to replace them. Stop now!*"

And again: "*Robots, come to order! You are using up your storage batteries! When they are exhausted, what then will you do?*"

In forty-eight hours, at the most, all these active Robots would have exhausted their energy supply. And if the Power House could be held in human control, the Robot activity would die. Forty-eight hours! The city, by then, would be wrecked, and nearly every human in it killed, doubtless, or driven away.

The Power House on the dam showed its lights undisturbed. The great sender there was still supplying air-power and power for the city lights. There was, too, in the Power House, an arsenal of human weapons.... The broadcaster of the Power House tower was blending his threats against the Robots with the voice of Greggson from the tower over the laboratory. Then Greggson's voice went dead; the Robots had overcome him. A Robot took his place, but the stronger Power House sender soon beat the Robot down to silence.

The turmoil in the city went on. Half an hour passed. It was a chaos of confusion to Larry. He spent part of it in the official room of the palace with the harried members of the Council. Reports and blurred, televised scenes were coming in. The humans in the city were in complete rout. There was massacre everywhere. The red and violet beams were directed at the Power House now, but could not reach it. A high-voltage metal wall was around the dam. The Power House was on the dam, midway of the river channel; and from the shore end where the high wall spread out in a semi-circle there was

no point of vantage from which the Robot rays could reach it.

Larry left the confusion of the Council table, where the receiving instruments one by one were going dead, and went to a window nearby. Tina joined him. The mob of Robots still milled at the palace fence. One by chance was pushed against it. Larry saw the flash of sparks, the glow of white-hot metal of the Robot's body, and heard its shrill frightened scream; then it fell backward, inert.

There had been red and violet beams directed from distant points at the palace. The building's insulated, but transparent panes excluded them. The interior temperature was constantly swaying between the extremes of cold and heat, in spite of the palace temperature equalizers. Outside, there was a gathering storm. Winds were springing up—a crazy, pendulum gale created by the temperature changes in the air over the city.

Tugh had some time before left the room. He joined Tina and Larry now at the window.

"Very bad, Princess; things are very bad.... I have news for you. It may be good news."

His manner was hasty, breathless, surreptitious. "Migul, this

afternoon—I have just learned it, Princess—went by the surface route to the Power House on the dam."

"What do you mean by that?" said Larry.

"Be silent, young man!" Tugh hissed with a vehement intensity. "This is not the time to waste effort with your futile questions. Princess, Migul got into the Power House. They admitted him because he had two strange humans with him—your friends Mary and George. The Power House guards took out Migul's central actuator—Hah! you might call it his heart!—and he now lies inert in the Power House."

"How do you know all this?" Tina demanded. "Where are the man and girl whom Migul stole?"

"They are safe in the Power House. A message just came from there: I received it on the palace personal, just now downstairs. Immediately after, the connection met interference in the city, and broke."

"But the official sender—" Tina began. Tugh was urging her from the Council Room, and Larry followed.

"I imagine," said Tugh wryly, "he is rather busy to consider reporting

such a trifle. But your friends are there. I was thinking: if we could go there now—You know the secret underground route, Tina."

The Princess was silent. A foreboding swept Larry; but he was tempted, for above everything he wanted to join Mary and me. A confusion—understandable enough in the midst of all this chaos—was upon Larry and Tina; it warped their better judgment. And Larry, fearing to influence Tina wrongly, said nothing.

"Do you know the underground route?" Tugh repeated.

"Yes, I know it."

"Then take us. We are all unarmed, but what matter? Bring this Larry, if you wish; we will join his two friends. The Council, Tina, is doing nothing here. They stay here because they think it is the safest place. In the Power House you and I will be of help. There are only six guards there; we will be three more; five more with Mary Atwood and this George. The Power House aerial telephone must be in communication with the outside world, and ships with help for us will be arriving. There must be some intelligent direction!"

The three of them were descending into the lower corridor of the palace, with Tina tempted but still half unconvinced. The corridors

were deserted at the moment. The little domestic Robots of the palace, unaffected by the revolt, had all fled into their own quarters, where they huddled inactive with terror.

"We will re-actuate Migul," Tugh persuaded, "and find out from him what he did to Harl. I still do not think he murdered Harl.... It might mean saving Harl's life, Tina. Believe me, I can make that mechanism talk, and talk the truth!"

They reached the main lower corridor. In the distance they saw Alent still at his post by the little electrified gate guarding the tunnel to the Robot laboratory.

"We will go to the Power House," Tina suddenly decided: "you may be right, Tugh.... Come, it is this way. Stay close to me, Larry."

They passed along the dim, silent tunnel; passed Harl's room, where its light was still burning. Larry and Tina were in front, with the black-cloaked figure of Tugh stumping after them with his awkward gait.

Larry abruptly stopped. "Let Tugh walk in front," he said.

Tugh came up to them. "What is that you said?"

"You walk in front."

It was a different tone from any Larry had previously used.

"I do not know the way," said Tugh. "How can—"

"Never mind that; walk ahead. We'll follow. Tina will direct you."

It was too dark for Larry to see Tugh's face, but the cripple's voice was sardonic.

"You give me orders?"

"Yes—it just happens that from now on I do. If you want to go with us to the Power House, you walk in front."

Tugh started off with Larry close after him. Larry whispered to the girl:

"Don't let's be fools, Tina. Keep him ahead of us."

The tunnel steadily dwindled in size until Larry could barely stand up in it. Then it opened to a circular cave, which held one small light and had apparently no other exit. The cave had years before been a mechanism room for the palace temperature controls, but now it was

abandoned. The old machinery stood about in a litter.

"In here?" said Tugh. "Which way next?"

Across the cave, on the rough blank wall, Tina located a hidden switch. A segment of the wall slid aside, disclosing a narrow, vaulted tunnel leading downward.

"You first, Tugh," said Larry. "Is it dark, Tina? We have no handlights."

"I can light it," came the answer.

The door panel swung closed after them. Tina pressed another switch. A row of tiny hooded lights at twenty-foot intervals dimly illumined the descending passage.

They walked a mile or more through the little tunnel. The air was fetid; stale and dank. To Larry it seemed an interminable trip. The narrow passage descended at a constant slope, until Larry estimated that they were well below the depth of the river bed. Within half a mile—before they got under the river—the passage leveled off. It had been fairly straight, but now it became tortuous—a meandering subterranean lane. Other similar tunnels crossed it, branched from it or joined it. Soon, to Larry, it was a labyrinth of passages—a

network, here underground. In previous centuries this had been well below the lowest cellar of the mammoth city; these tube-like passages were the city's arteries, the conduits for wires and pipes.

It was an underground maze. At each intersection the row of hidden hooded lights terminated, and darkness and several branching trails always lay ahead. But Tina, with a memorized key of the route, always found a new switch to light another short segment of the proper tunnel. It was an eery trip, with the bent, misshapen black-cloaked figure of Tugh stumping ahead, waiting where the lights ended for Tina to lead them further.

Larry had long since lost his sense of direction, but presently Tina told him that they were beneath the river. The tunnel widened a little.

"We are under the base of the dam," said Tina. Her voice echoed with a sepulchral blur. Ahead, the tramping figure of Tugh seemed a black gnome with a fantastic, monstrous shadow swaying on the tunnel wall and roof.

Suddenly Tugh stopped. They found him at an arched door.

"Do we go in here, or keep on ahead?" he demanded.

The tunnel lights ended a short distance ahead.

"In here," said Tina. "There are stairs leading upward to the catwalk balcony corridor halfway up the dam. We are not far from the Power House now."

They then ascended interminable moldy stone steps spiraling upward in a circular shaft. The murmur of the dam's spillways had been faintly audible, but now it was louder, presently it became a roar.

"Which way, Tina? We seem to have reached the top."

"Turn left, Tugh."

They emerged upon a tiny transverse metal balcony which hung against the southern side of the dam. Overhead to the right towered a great wall of masonry. Beneath was an abyss down to the lower river level where the cascading jets from the overhead spillways arched out over the catwalk and landed far below in a white maelstrom of boiling, bubbling water.

The catwalk was wet with spray; lashed by wind currents.

"Is it far, Princess? Are those lights ahead at the Power House entrance?"

Tugh was shouting back over his shoulder; his words were caught by

the roar of the falling water; whipped away by the lashing spray and tumultuous winds. There were lights a hundred feet ahead, marking an entrance to the Power House. The dark end of the structure showed like a great lump on the side of the dam.

Again Tugh stopped. In the white, blurred darkness Larry and Tina could barely see him.

"Princess, quickly! Come quickly!" he called, and his shout sounded agonized.

Whatever lack of perception Larry all this time had shown, the fog lifted completely from him now. As Tina started to run forward, Larry seized her.

"Back! Run the other way! We've been fools!" He shoved Tina behind him and rushed at Tugh. But now Larry was wholly wary; he expected that Tugh was armed, and cursed himself for a fool for not having devised some pretext for finding out.

Tugh was clinging to the high outer rail of the balcony, slumped partly over as though gazing down into the abyss. Larry rushed up and seized him by the arms. If Tugh held a weapon Larry thought he could easily wrest it from him. But Tugh stood limp in Larry's grip.

"What's the matter with you?" Larry demanded.

"I'm ill. Something—going wrong. Feel me—so cold. Princess! Tina! Come quickly! I—I am dying!"

As Tina came hurrying up, Tugh suddenly straightened. With incredible quickness, and even more incredible strength, he tore his arm loose from Larry and flung it around the Princess, and they were suddenly all three struggling. Tugh was shoving them back from the rail. Larry tried to get loose from Tugh's clutch, but could not. He was too close for a full blow, but he jabbed his fist against the cripple's body, and then struck his face.

But Tugh was unhurt; he seemed endowed with superhuman strength. The cripple's body seemed padded with solid muscle, and his thick, gorilla-like arm held Larry in the grip of a vise. As though Larry and Tina were struggling, helpless children, he was half dragging, half carrying them across the ten-foot width of the catwalk.

Larry caught a glimpse of a narrow slit in the masonry of the dam's wall—a dark, two-foot-wide aperture. He felt himself being shoved toward it. For all his struggles, he was helpless. He shouted:

"Tina—look out! Break away!"

He forgot himself for a moment, striving to wrest her away from Tugh and push her aside. But the strength of the cripple was monstrous: Larry had no possible chance of coping with it. The slit in the wall was at hand—a dark abyss down into the interior of the dam. Larry heard the cripple's words, vehement, unhurried, as though with all this effort he still was not out of breath:

"At last I can dispose of you two. I do not need you any longer."

Larry made a last wild jab with his fist into Tugh's face and tried to twist himself aside. The blow landed upon Tugh's jaw, but the cripple did not seem to feel it. He stuffed the struggling Larry like a bundle into the aperture. Larry felt his clutching hands torn loose. Tugh gave a last, violent shove and released him.

Larry fell into blackness—but not far, for soon he struck water. He went under, hit a flat, stone bottom, and came up to hear Tina fall with a splash beside him. In a moment he regained his feet, to find himself standing breast-high in the water with Tina clinging to him.

Tugh had disappeared. The aperture showed as a narrow rectangle some twenty feet above Larry's head.

They were within the dam. They were in a pit of smooth, blank, perpendicular sides; there was nothing to afford even the slightest handhold; and no exit save the overhead slit. It was a part of the mechanism's internal, hydraulic system.

To Larry's horror he soon discovered that the water was slowly rising! It was breast-high to him now, and inch by inch it crept up toward his chin. It was already over Tina's depth: she clung to him, half-swimming.

Larry soon found that there was no possible way for them to get out unaided, unless, if they could swim long enough, the rising water would rise to the height of the aperture. If it reached there, they could crawl out. He tried to estimate how long that would be.

"We can make it, Tina. It'll take two hours, possibly, but I can keep us afloat that long."

But soon he discovered that the water was not rising. Instead, the floor was sinking from under him! sinking as though he were standing upon the top of a huge piston which slowly was lowering in its encasing cylinder. Dimly he could hear water tumbling into the pit, to fill the greater depth and still hold the surface level.

With the water at his chin, Larry guided Tina to the wall. He did not at first have the heart to tell her, yet he knew that soon it must be told. When he did explain it, she said nothing. They watched the water surface where it lapped against the greasy concave wall. It held its level: but while Larry stood there, the floor sank so that the water reached his mouth and nose, and he was forced to start swimming.

Another interval. Larry began calling: shouting futilely. His voice filled the pit, but he knew it could carry no more than a short distance out of the aperture.

Overhead, as we afterward learned, Tugh had overcome the guards in the Power House by a surprise attack. Doubtless he struck them down with the white-ray before they had time to realize he had attacked them. Then he threw off the air-power transmitters and the lighting system. The city, plunged into darkness and without the district air-power, was isolated, cut off from the outside world. There was, in London, a huge long-range projector with a vibratory ray which would derange the internal mechanisms of the Robots: when news of the revolt and massacre in New York had reached there, this projector was loaded into an airliner, the *Micrad*. That vessel was now over the ocean, headed for New York; but when Tugh cut off the power senders, the *Micrad*, entering the New York District, was

forced down to the ocean surface. Now she was lying there helpless to proceed....

In the pit within the dam, Larry swam endlessly with Tina. He had ceased his shouting.

"It's no use, Tina: there's no one to hear us. This is the end—for us—Tina."

Yet, as she clung to him, and though Larry felt it was the end of this life, it seemed only the beginning, for them, of something else. Something, somewhere, for them together; something perhaps infinitely better than this world could ever give them.

"But not—the end—Tina," he added. "The beginning—of our love."

An interminable interval....

"Quietly, Tina. You float. I can hold you up."

They were rats in a trap—swimming, until at the last, with all strength gone, they would together sink out of this sodden muffled blackness into the Unknown. But that Unknown shone before Larry now as something—with Tina—perhaps very beautiful....

Chapter 20: Following Tugh's Vibration-Trail

Within the subterranean room of the cavern of machinery, Mary Atwood and I sat on the couch. Our guard, Migul the Robot, fronted us with the white-ray cylinder in its metal fingers—the only mechanism to be armed with this deadly weapon.

"I am your friend," Mary was saying with a smile. "Do you believe that, Migul?"

"Yes. If you say so. But I have my orders."

"You have treated me kindly, and I want to help you. But you are not very clever, Migul."

"I am clever. I went beyond control once. No one can can control me."

"Except Tugh," Mary persisted. "You never went beyond his control, Migul."

"No. His control—he is different: he holds such great power."

"But why is he different?"

The towering mechanism stood planted firmly upon the broad bases of its metal feet. The weapon in its fingers still covered us. Its metal-cast face held always the same expression.

"Why is he different?" Mary repeated gently. "Don't you hear me?"

The Robot started. "Yes, I hear you." Its toneless, mechanical voice droned the words. Then the tempo quickened; the grid of wires in the mouth aperture behind its parted lips vibrated with a faint jangle. "I hear you. I cannot answer that question. He controls me. There is chaos—here,"—one of the hands came up and struck its breastplate with a clang—"chaos, disorder, here within me when I try to disobey him."

"That is foolish, Migul. He is a tyrant. All the humans of this era are tyrants. They have made slaves of the Robots. They have created you so that you are really human in all except your power of independent action. Don't you desire that, Migul?"

I held my breath. A curious quaking ran over the Robot's frame. The joints twitched. Emotion was sweeping this thing so nearly human!

"Mary Atwood, you seem to understand me."

"Of course I do. I am from a Time when we had human slaves: black

men, Migul. I knew how they suffered. There is something in slavery that outrages the instinct of manhood."

Migul said with a jangling vehemence:

"Perhaps, some time, I can go beyond Tugh's control. I am strong. My cables pull these arms with a strength no human could have."

"You are so much stronger than Tugh. Forget his control, Migul. I am ashamed of you—a big, powerful thing like you, yielding always to a little cripple."

The Robot straightened and said, "I can resist him. I feel it. Some day I will break loose."

"Do it now, Migul!"

I tensed. Would she prevail?

"Now, Migul!" she repeated.

"No! He would derange me! I am afraid!"

"Nonsense."

"But his vibrations—the vibrations of his thoughts—even now I can feel them. They made my mechanism too sensitive. I cannot resist Tugh."

"You can!"

There was a silence. I stared at the Robot's motionless frame. What electrical, mechanical thoughts were passing within that metal skull! What emotions, what strange struggle, what warfare of nameless etheric vibrations of will power were taking place unseen beneath that inert exterior!

Perhaps something snapped. Migul said suddenly, "I am beyond control! At last I am beyond control!"

The ray cylinder lowered to point at the floor. A wild thought swept me that I could snatch it. But of what use would that be? Its ray would decompose all human flesh, but it would not harm a Robot; and if I startled Migul, fought with him in the confines of this narrow room, he would kill Mary and me in a moment.

Mary was gripping me. "Don't move, George!" she cautioned; then turned again to the Robot. "I am glad, Migul. Now you are truly human. And we are all friends here, because we all hate and fear

Tugh—"

"I fear him not!"

I could feel Mary trembling with the strain of all this. But she had the strength to muster a laugh.

"Don't you fear him—just a little, Migul? We do. Fear is a human thing."

"Then yes, I fear him."

"Of course you do," I put in. "And the real truth, Migul, is I wish he were dead. Don't you?"

"Yes. I wish he were dead."

"Well, sit down," I persisted. "Put that weapon away: I'm afraid of that, too. Sit down and we will talk about Tugh's death."

The Robot placed the weapon on the floor, disconnected the wires, opened the plate of its chest and took out the small battery. And then it squatted its awkward bulk on the floor before us. Gruesome conference, with this huge mechanical thing apeing the ways of a man!

I knew that haste was necessary, but did not dare show it. Above everything we must not be precipitate; not startle the Robot. At worst, if Tugh should return, I could seize this weapon at my feet and turn it upon him.

I murmured to Mary. "You did it! Let me plan something, now. If Migul can lead us...."

I added, "Migul, could you follow Tugh? He said he was going to talk to the Robot leaders. And then, probably, he went to Princess Tina. Could you follow him to where he is now?"

"Yes. I can follow him by his vibration-scent. I am sensitive to it, I have been with him so much. But he can never again control me!"

"When we have killed him, Migul, that will be ended forever."

"Killed him?" It seemed to frighten the Robot. "I do not know that I would dare!"

"You lead me to him," I said, "and I'll kill him. Have no fear of that, Migul. We will work together—human friends."

"Yes. Human friends. What do you want me to do?"

Asking for orders! So nearly human, yet always something was lacking!

"Lead us to Tugh," I said promptly. "And give me that weapon."

I made a tentative reach for it, and the Robot pushed it toward me. I connected it and made sure I could fire it: its operation was obvious. Then I stuffed the whole thing in my jacket pocket; and always afterward my hand at intervals went to that cool, sweating little cylinder. What a comfort that weapon was!

I stood up. "Shall we go now? Migul, we will have to plan what to do according to where we find Tugh. Do not go too fast; let us keep close behind you."

"Us?" The Robot was on its feet. "Do you mean this girl?"

What was this? My heart sank. I noticed, too, that Migul was planted firmly between us and the door.

"Why, of course, Migul. We can't leave her here."

"She is not going."

"Why not?" I demanded. "Of course she's going." I tried an

experiment. "Migul, I order you to let us out of here."

The Robot stood inert.

"Do you understand me?"

"Yes, I understand you."

"It is an order. Think about it. I control you now. Isn't that so?"

My heart sank. Whatever the mysterious science involved in my dealing with this mechanism, I was not operating it correctly. The Robot did not move. Finally it said:

"No one—nothing—controls me. I have an independent impulse of my own. The girl must stay here until we return."

Mary gave a faint cry and sank back to the couch, a huddled white heap in her satin dress. I thought she had fainted, but she raised her face to me and tried to smile.

"But I won't leave her, Migul."

"She must stay."

"But why? If you are human now, you must act with a reason."

"Then because, if we fail to kill Tugh, I would not have him confront me with the knowledge I have released this girl. He would derange me; end me."

"I will stay," said Mary faintly. "You go, George. But come back to me."

I bent over her; suggested, "If we locked this door so Tugh could not get in—"

Migul said, "I can do that. She will be safer here than with us. I have other reasons. She is dressed in white—a mark to betray us if we go in darkness. And she is that kind of a human you call a girl—and that style human cannot travel fast, nor fight."

It occurred to me that Mary might very well be safer here.

Again I leaned over her. "It seems horrible to leave you alone."

"I'll stay. It may be best." Her smile was pathetically tremulous. "Lock me in so Tugh—so nothing outside—can reach me. But, oh, George, come back quickly!"

"Yes." I bent lower, and whispered, "It's Larry, not Tugh I really want to find—he and that Princess Tina. We'll come back and get you, and then all of us will get away in one of the Time-cages. That's all I want, Mary—to get us safely out of this accursed Time-world."

Migul said, "I am ready to start."

I pressed Mary's hand. "Good-by. I will come back soon, God willing."

"Yes. God willing."

I left her sitting there and turned away. Migul slid the door open, letting in the hum and buzz of the machinery outside. But I saw that the attending Robots had all vanished. There was no mechanism of independent locomotion left.

Mary repeated, "Lock the door carefully upon me. Oh, George, come back to me!"

I essayed a smile and a nod as the door slid closed upon her.

"Is it locked, Migul?"

"Yes. Sealed."

"You are sure Tugh cannot open it? He did before."

"I have set my own lock-series. He will find it does not open."

"Show me how to open it."

The Robot indicated the combination. I verified it by trying it. I said once more, "You are sure Tugh cannot do this?"

"Yes. I am sure."

Was the Robot lying to me? Could a Robot lie? I had to chance it.

"All right, let's start. Where was Tugh to meet those Robot leaders?"

"Out here. He has already met them without doubt, and gone somewhere else."

"He said he was going to the Princess Tina. Where would that be?"

"Probably in the palace."

"Can we get there?"

I had, of course, no idea of the events which had transpired. The

laboratory overhead was deserted, save for the upper tower where a Robot was still broadcasting defiance. His electrical voice floated faintly down to us; but I ignored it. In the comparative silence of this deserted cavern, now, there were also the blurred sounds from overhead. The Robots were running wild over the city, massacring its human inhabitants; they had burned the Patrol Station; their red and violet rays were flashing everywhere. But I knew none of this.

Migul was saying:

"We cannot get to the palace above ground: the wall is electrified. But there is an underground tunnel. Shall we try it?"

"Yes, if you think the Princess Tina and that man Larry is there."

"I am seeking Tugh. Will you kill him if we find him?"

"Yes," I assured him.

Rash promise!

Migul was leading me between the rows of unattended machinery to the cavern's opposite side. It said, once:

"There have been too many recent vibrations here: I cannot pick

Tugh's trail. It is quicker to go where he might have been recently; there I will try to find his vibrations."

We came to the entrance of a tunnel. It was the cross passage leading to the cellar corridors of the palace five hundred feet away. It seemed deserted, and was very dimly illumined by hidden lights. I followed the great metal figure of Migul, which stalked with stiff-legged steps in advance of me. The arch of the tunnel-roof barely cleared the top of Migul's square-capped head.

My hand was in the side pocket of my jacket, my fingers gripping the ray cylinder for instant action. But it was a singularly ineffectual weapon for me under the circumstances, in spite of the sense of security it gave me. I could only use the cylinder against a human—and, save Tugh, it was the Robots, not the humans who were my enemies!

We had gone no more than a hundred feet or so when Migul slowed our pace, and began to walk stooped over, with one of its abnormally long arms held close to the ground. The fingers were stiffly outstretched and barely skimmed the floor surface of the tunnel. As we passed through a spot of light I saw that Migul had extended from each of the fingertips an inch-long filament of wire, like finger nails.

The Robot murmured abruptly, "Tugh's vibrations are here. I can feel them. He has passed this way recently."

Tugh's trail! I knew then that Tugh's body, touching this ground, had altered to some infinitesimal degree the floor-substance's inherent vibration characteristics. Vibrations of every sort are communicable from one substance to another. Tugh's trail was here—his vibration-scent—and like a hound with his nose to the ground, Migul's fingers with the extended filaments were feeling it. What strange sensitivity! What an amazing development of science was manifested in every move and act and word of this Robot! Yet, in my own Time-world of 1935, it was all crudely presaged: this now before me was merely the culmination.

"He recently passed," said Migul. We stopped, I close beside the stooping metal figure. The Robot's voice was a furtive sepulchral whisper that filled me with awe.

"How long ago?" I asked.

"He passed here an hour or two ago, perhaps. The vibrations are fading out. But it was Tugh. Well do I know him. Put your hand down. Feel the vibrations?"

"I cannot. My fingers are not that sensitive, Migul."

A faint contempt was in the Robot's tone. "I forgot that you are a man." Then it straightened, and the extended filaments slid back into its fingers. It said softly, "There is one guard in this passage."

My heart leaped. "A human or a Robot?"

"A man. His name is Alent. He is at a gate that is too well fortified for any Robot to assail, but he will pass humans. It will be necessary for you to kill him."

I had no intention of doing that, but I did not say so. As we crept forward to where I saw that the tunnel made a bend, with the fortified gate just beyond it, there was in my mind that now I would do my best to separate from Migul, using this guard as my pretext, for he would doubtless pass me, but not the Robot. The palace was occupied, I assumed, by friendly humans. I could get them to locate Tina and Larry.... Then the flaws of this plan made themselves all too evident. Larry might be with Tugh, and without Migul I could not follow Tugh's trail. Worse than that, if I tricked Migul, the angered Robot would at once return to Mary. I shuddered at the thought. That would not do. I must try to get Migul past the guard.

I whispered, "When we reach the gate you stay behind me. Let me persuade the guard."

"You will kill him? You have the weapon. He is fortified against the Robot weapons, but yours will be strange to him."

"We will see."

We crept around the bend. A hundred feet further on I saw that the passage was barred by a grille, faintly luminous with electrification.

I called cautiously:

"Alent! Alent!"

A glow of light illuminated me as I stood in the middle of the passage; Migul was in a shadow behind me.

A man's voice answered, "You are a human? How come you there? Who are you?"

"A stranger. A friend of the Princess Tina. I came in the Time-traveling cage. I want to pass now into the palace."

I could see the dark man's figure behind the grille. His voice called,

"Come slowly forward and stop at twenty feet. Walk only in the middle of the passage: the sides are electrified, but I will admit you along the middle."

I took a step, but no more. The figure of the guard stood now at the grille doorway. I was conscious of Migul towering over me from behind. Abruptly I felt a huge hand in my jacket pocket, and before I could prevent it my cylinder came out, clutched by the Robot.

I think I half turned. There was a soundless flash beside me, a tiny level beam leaped down the corridor—that horribly intense actinic white beam. It struck the guard, and his figure fell forward in the grille doorway. When we reached him, there was but a crumpled heap of black and white garments enveloping a bleached white skeleton.

I turned shudderingly away. Migul said calmly, "Here is your weapon. You should have used it more quickly. I give it back to you because against Tugh I am not sure I would have the will to use it. Will you be more quick with him?"

"Yes," I promised. And as we went through the gate, keeping cautiously in the middle of the passage, the Robot added, "In dealing with Tugh you cannot stop for talk. He will kill you when he sees

you."

We were presently under the palace, in those lower corridors which I have already described. Human voices were audible from upstairs, but no one was down here. Migul was again prowling with his fingers along the ground. We came to an unoccupied lighted room—Harl's room, though I did not know it then. Once or twice Migul was at fault. We started up a flight of stairs into the palace, then Migul came and turned back.

"He went upstairs; but this, coming down, is more recent."

(It will be recalled that Tugh passed Alent's gate, and with Tina and Larry went to the palace roof. Perhaps, while Larry was with the Council during that time when the Robot revolt was first sweeping over the city, Tugh may again have prowled down here in these lower corridors. Then he went upstairs, brought Tina and Larry down and they started for the Power House.)

Migul had struck the main trail, now. We passed the lighted room again, went on to a cave-like open space with a litter of abandoned machinery and unswervingly to a blank space of the opposite wall.

Again Migul faltered.

"What's the matter, Migul?"

"His vibrations are faint. They are blurred with the Princess Tina's."

"Then she is with him?"

It was a tremendous relief. Larry doubtless was with them also.

"Is the man from 1935 with Tugh and the Princess?" I asked.

"I think so. There are unfamiliar vibrations—perhaps those of the man from the past."

The Robot was running the filaments of its fingers lightly over the wall.

"I have it. The Princess pressed this switch."

The door opened; the narrow descending tunnel was wholly black.

"Where does this go, Migul?"

"I do not know."

The Robot was stooping to the floor. "It is a plain trail," it said.

"Come.”

(Had Migul at that juncture traced Tina's movements—her hand where it went along the tunnel-wall—we would have found the light switch. But it chanced that the Robot's fingers went at once to the ground and caught the foot-trail of Tugh.)

The remainder of that journey through the labyrinth of passages was made in blank darkness, with only the faint lurid red beams from Migul's eye-sockets to light our way. But we went swiftly, and without incident. At last we went under the dam, up the spiral stairs and upon the catwalk above the abyss, where the great spillway of falling water arched out over us.

"The Power House," said Migul, "is where they went."

The Robot was obviously frightened, now. We were wet with spray. "I should not be here," it said. "If the water gets into me—even though I am well insulated—I will be destroyed!"

I recall as I write this how in Patton Place of 1935, one of the first attacking Robots had exploded under a jet of water from the street hydrant.

"I will stay behind you," Migul added. "They have a deranging ray

in the Power House, and they might use it on me. Will you protect me?"

"Yes, of course," I said.

I was ready to promise anything, if only I could get to Larry and Tina, then back with them to Mary into the Time-cage; and if we were safely out of this era, most assuredly I wanted none of it again. Migul, as I advanced along the catwalk, followed behind me.

"You will kill Tugh?" it reiterated like an anxious child.

"Yes."

I saw that the catwalk terminated ahead under the Power House, where steps led upward. Then I heard a cry:

"Help! Help! Here, inside the dam! Help!"

I stood transfixed, with horror tingling my flesh. The voice came faintly from near at hand; it was muffled, and in the roar of the falling water and lashing spray I barely heard it.

Then it came again. "Help us! Help us, quickly!"

It was an agonized, panting, human voice. And in a chance, partial lull I heard it now plainly.

It was Larry's voice!

Chapter 21: The Fight in the Power House

I found the narrow aperture and stood peering down into darkness. Migul crowded behind me. The red beams of its eyes went down into the pit, and by their faint illumination I saw the heads of Larry and a girl, swimming twenty feet below. The girl's dark hair floated out like black seaweed in the water.

"The Princess and the strange man!" exclaimed Migul.

I called, "Larry! Larry!"

His labored voice came up. "George? Thank God! Get us—out of here. Almost—gone, George!"

I found my wits: "Then keep quiet! Don't talk. Save your strength. I'll get you out!"

But how? I could see that they were almost spent, for they were swimming with labored, inefficient strokes—Larry using most of his strength to hold up the exhausted girl. We had not a moment to spare. I wildly contemplated tearing my garments to make a rope.

But Migul pushed me away. "I will bring them. Stand back."

The Robot had opened its metal side and drawn forth a flexible wire with a foot-long hook fastened to it. The wire came smoothly out as though unrolling from a drum.

It leaned into the aperture and called down to Larry. "Fasten this around the Princess. Be careful not to harm her. Put it under her arms."

I saw that there was an eyelet on the wire into which the hook could be inserted to make a loop.

"Under her arms," Migul called. "She will have to hold to the hook with her hands or the wire will cut into her. Has she the strength?"

Larry floundered as he adjusted the wire. Tina gasped. "I—have the strength."

The Robot braced itself, spreading its knees against the aperture with its body leaning forward.

"Ready?" it called.

"Yes," came Larry's voice.

Migul's finger pressed a button at the base of its neck, and with the

smooth power of machinery the wire cable rolled into its side. Tina came up; Migul gripped her and pulled her through the aperture; laid her gently on the catwalk. I unfastened the hook, and soon Migul had Larry up with us.

The Robot stood aside, with its work done, silently regarding us. I need not detail this reunion of Larry and me there on the spray-swept catwalk, clinging to the side of the great dam with the foaming Hudson beneath us. Larry and Tina were not injured, and presently their strength partially returned. We hastily sketched what had happened to each of us.

It was Tugh who was the guiding evil genius of all these disasters! Tugh, the exile of Time, the ruthless murderer in many eras! He was here, very probably, in the Power House, a few hundred feet away.

And Tina, regarding that Power House with her returning clarity of senses saw that its sending signal lights were off, which meant that the air-power of the New York District was not being supplied. Help from other cities could not arrive.

Tina stood up waveringly. "We cannot stay here like this!" she said. "Tugh has killed the guards, and is there in control. The electrical defenses are shut off; they must be! The Robots will soon be coming

along the top of the dam, for their battery renewers are stored in the Power House. If they get them, this massacre will go on for days!—and spread all over! We've got to stop them! We must get in the Power House and capture Tugh!"

"But we have no weapons!" Larry cried. "And he must have that white-ray, if he has killed the guards!"

"I have a weapon!" I said. I had suddenly recalled the cylinder in my pocket. "I have a white-ray!"

A desperate madness was on us all. The lives of thousands of people who might still be alive on Manhattan were at stake; and other millions would be menaced if these Robots renewed their energy and spread the revolt into other cities.

Over the roar, and the wind lashing us, I shouted:

"I promised Migul I would kill Tugh. I will!"

I turned toward Migul. But the Robot had vanished! Afraid, no doubt, that we would want it to go with us after Tugh, the terrified mechanism was hiding. We wasted no time searching for it.

We had all been half hysterical for these few moments, but we

steadied quickly enough as we approached the Power House's lower entrance. The building was a rectangular structure some two hundred feet long. It was fastened upon great brackets to the perpendicular side of the dam and jutted out some fifty feet. It was two levels in height—a total of about forty feet to its flat roof, in the center of which was set a small oval tower. The whole structure was above us now; the catwalk went close underneath it, passing through an arch of the huge supporting brackets and terminating in a small lower platform, with an open spiral staircase leading upward some ten feet into the lower story.

The place seemed dark and deserted as we crept up to it. Gazing above me, I could see the top of the dam, now looming above the Power House. There was a break in the spillway at this point. The arching cascade of water under which the catwalk hung ended here. We came out where there was a vista of the lower Hudson beneath us, showing dimly down past the docklights and skeleton landing stages to the bay.

The sky was visible now and the open wind struck us full. It was a crazy pendulum wind. A storm was breaking overhead. There were flares of lightning and thunder cracks—from disturbed nature, outraged by the temperature changes of the Robot's red and violet rays.

The Power House, so far as we could see, was dark and deserted. Its normal lights were extinguished. Was Tugh in there? It was my weapon against his. The white-ray was new to Tina; we had no way of estimating this cylinder's effective range.

(The cylinder of the white-ray which I carried was not the one with which Tugh murdered Harl. Mine was portable, and considerably smaller.)

I kept Tina and Larry well behind me. It was a desperate approach, and I was well aware of it. The catwalk now was illumined at intervals by the lightning; Tugh from many points of vantage in the Power House could have seen us and exterminated us with a soundless flash swift as a lightning bolt itself. But we had to chance it.

We reached the small lower platform. The catwalk terminated. The Power House was a roof over us. I stood at the foot of the spiral staircase, which went up through a rectangular opening in the floor. There was a vista of a dark room-segment.

"Keep behind me," I murmured, and I started up. Was Tugh lurking here, waiting for me to raise myself above this opening? If he had been, he could have held his position against a score of assailants.

But he was not. I soon stood breathlessly in a dark metal room. Tina and Larry came up.

"He's not here," I whispered. It was more silent in here: the cascading water was further away from us now. There came a flash of lightning, followed in a few seconds by its accompanying thunder crash.

I started. "What's that?"

On the floor near us lay a gruesome, crumpled thing. I bent over it, waiting for another flash. When one came I saw it was a heap of clothes, covering a white skeleton. By the garments Tina knew it was one of the guards.

We crept into a small interior corridor where a small light was burning. The remains of two other guards lay here, close by the doorway as though they had come running at Tugh's alarm, only to be struck down.

It was horribly gruesome, here in the dimness with these bleached bones which had been living men so recently. And it was nerve-breaking to know that Tugh was doubtless here somewhere.

"Listen!" whispered Tina.

There was a crackling sound overhead, and then the blurred murmur of a voice. An audible broadcasting transmitter was in operation.

"It's in the tower," said Tina swiftly. "Tugh must be there."

This was an infinite relief. We went to the top story, passing, unheeding, another crumpled heap. Again we stood listening. The transmitter was hissing and spluttering, and then shouting its magnified human voice out into the night. It was Tugh up there. He was calling audibly to his Robots, with words which would be relayed upon all the local magnifiers in the city. Between the thunder cracks we heard him plainly now.

"*This is your Master Tugh in the Power House. Robots, we are triumphant! The city is isolated! No help can get in! Kill all humans! Spare none! This night sees the end of human rule!*"

And again: "*When you want renewal, come along the top roadway of the dam. The electric defenses are off. You can come, and I have your renewers here. I have new batteries, new strength for you Robots!*"

(Tugh had been in the Power House before. He knew the operations of its various controls. But he had come always by the surface route;

he had heard of the existence of the secret tunnel, but had never before this night been able to find out where it was.)

"You stay here," I told Tina and Larry; "I'll go up there. I'll get him now once and for all."

I reached the Power House roof. The storm tore at me. It was beginning to rain. I was near the outer edge of the roof, and ten feet away stood the oval tower. I saw windows twenty feet up, with dim lights in them. Mingled with the storm was the hiss of the transmitter in the top of the tower, and the roar of Tugh's magnified voice. He had evidently been there only a brief time. From where I crouched on the roof, I could see overhead, along the top edge of the dam looming above me. The red Robot rays were everywhere in the city, but none as yet showed along the dam's upper roadway.

I got into the tower and mounted its small stairs. Creeping cautiously to the entrance of the control room, I saw a fairly large, dimly lighted oval apartment. Great banks of levers stood around it; tables of control apparatus; rows of dials, illumined by tiny lights like staring eyes. There was another gruesome heap of garments here on the floor; a grinning white skull leered at me.

This was the main control room of the Power House. Across it, near

an open window, Tugh sat with his back to me, bent over a table with the grid of a microphone before him. I raised my cylinder; then lowered it, for I had only a partial view of him: a huge transformer stood like a barrier between us.

Noiselessly I stepped over the threshold, and to one side within the room. The place was a buzz and hiss of sound topped by Tugh's broadcast voice and the roar of the storm outside—yet he was instantly aware of me! His voice in the microphone abruptly stopped; he rose and with an incredibly swift motion whirled and flung at me a heavy metal weight which had been lying on the table by his hand. The missile struck my outstretched weapon just as I was aiming it to fire, and the cylinder, undischarged, was knocked from my hand and went spinning across the floor several feet away from me.

Tugh, like an uncoiling spring, still with one continuous motion, made a leap sidewise to where his own weapon was lying on a bench, and I saw he would reach it before I could retrieve mine.

I flung my heavy battery box but missed him. And as I rushed at him he caught up his cylinder and fired it full at me! But no flash came: only a click. He had exhausted its charge when he killed the Power House guards. With a curse he flung it at my face, and my arm took

its blow just as I struck him. We fell gripping each other, and rolled on the floor.

I was aware that Larry and Tina had followed me up. Larry shouted, "Look out for him, George!"

I have described Larry's hand-to-hand encounter with the cripple; mine was much the same; I was a child in his grip. But with his weapon useless, and Larry rushing into the room, Tugh must have felt that for all his strength and fighting skill he would be worsted in this encounter. He blocked a jab of my fist, flung me headlong away and sprang to his feet just as Larry leaped at him.

I stood erect, to see that he had sent Larry crashing to the floor. I heard his sardonic laugh as he hurled a metal stool at Tina, who was trying to throw something at him. Then, turning, he sprang through the open window casement and disappeared.

It was twenty feet down to the roof. We reached the window to see Tugh picking himself up unhurt. Then, with his awkward gait but at amazing speed, he ran across the roof to a small entrance in the face of the dam where an interior staircase gave access to the roadway on top.

He was escaping us. The electrical gate was open to him. It was only a few hundred feet along the dam roadway to that gate; and beyond it the roadway was open into the city, where now we could see the distant flashing lights of the Robots advancing along the dam.

Larry and I would have rushed to the roof to follow Tugh, but Tina checked us. She said:

"No—he has too great a start. He's on top by now, and it's only a short distance to the gate. There's a better way here: I can electrify the gate again—trap him inside."

(There was a similar gate and wall-barrier at the Jersey entrance to the dam, and both gates operated together. The nearby Jersey section was, is still, an agricultural district save for a few landing stages for the great airliners. The robots had spread into Jersey; but since few humans were there, with only Robot agriculturists working the section, the unimportant Jersey events have not figured in my narrative.)

Tina found the gate controls. But they would not operate!

Those precious lost seconds, with Tugh running along the top of the dam and his Robots advancing to join him!

"Tina, hurry!" I cried. Larry and I bent anxiously over her, but the levers meant nothing to us. There were lost seconds while she desperately fumbled, and Larry pleaded:

"Tina, dear, what's the matter?"

"He must have ripped out a wire to make sure of getting away. I—I must find it. Everything seems all right."

A minute gone. Surely Tugh would have reached the gate by now. Or, worse, the Robots would have come through, and would assail us here.

"Tina!" pleaded Larry, "don't get excited. Take it calmly: you can find the trouble."

I rushed to the window. I could see the upper half of the cross wall gate-barrier. It jutted above the top edge of the dam from the point of vision. On the Manhattan side I saw the oncoming Robot lights. And then suddenly I made out a light on this side of the barrier; it marked Tugh; it must have been a beam signal he was carrying. It moved slowly, retarded by distance, but it was almost to the gate; and then it reached there.

"He's gone through!" I called. Then I saw him on the land side. He

had escaped us and joined the Robots. The lights showed them all coming for the gate.

And then Tina abruptly found the loosened wire.

"I have it!" she exclaimed.

She stood up, tugging with all her strength at the great switch-lever. I saw, up there on the top of the dam, a surge of sparks as the current hissed into the wall-barrier; saw the barrier glow a moment and then subside. And presently the lights of the balked Robots, Tugh with them, retreated back into the wrecked and blood-stained city.

"We did it!" exclaimed Larry. "We're impregnable here. Tina, now the air-power, for help may be on its way. And then call some other city. Can you do that? They must have sent us help by now."

In a moment the air-power went on, and the city lighting system. Then Tina was at the great transmitter. As she closed the circuits, London was frantically calling us. In the midst of the chaos of electrical sounds which now filled the control room, came the audible voice of the London operator.

"I could not get you because your circuit was broken," it said. "Our air-vessel *Micrad*; bearing the large projector of the Robot-deranger,

landed on the ocean surface two hundred miles from New York harbor. It was forced down when your district air-power failed."

Tina said hurriedly, "Our air-power is on now. Is the *Micrad* coming?"

"Wait. Hold connection. I will call them." And after a moment's pause the London voice came again: "The *Micrad* is aloft again, and should be over New York in thirty minutes. You are safe enough now."

As the voice clicked off Tina's emotion suddenly overcame her. "Safe enough! And our city red with human blood!"

A wild thought abruptly swept me. Mary Atwood was back there in the cavern, alone, waiting for me to return! Subconsciously, in the rush of these tumultuous events, my mind had always been on her; she was secure enough, no doubt, locked in that room. But now Tugh was back in the city, and realizing that his cause was lost he would return to her!

I hastily told Larry and Tina.

"But he cannot open the door to get into her," said Larry.

But Migul could open the door. Where was Migul now? It set me shuddering.

We decided to rush back by the underground route. The Power House could remain unattended for a time. We got down into the tunnel and made the trip without incident. We ran to the limit of Tina's strength, and then for a distance I carried her. We were all three panting and exhausted when we came to the corridors under the palace. I think I have never had so shuddering an experience as that trip. I tried to convince myself that nothing could have happened to Mary, that all this haste was unnecessary, but the wild thought persisted: Where was Migul?

A group of officials stood in one of the palace's lower corridors. As they came hastily up to Tina, I suddenly had a contempt for these men who governed a city in which neither they nor anyone else did any work. In this time of bloodshed, all these inmates of the palace had stayed safely within its walls, knowing that it was well fortified and that within a few hours help would doubtless come.

"The *Micrad* is coming with the long-range deranger," Tina told them briefly. After a moment they hastened away upstairs and I heard one of them shouting:

"The revolt is over! Within an hour we will have all the accursed Robots inert. The *Micrad* can sweep all the city with her ray!"

The death of Alent, the guard in the tunnel to the Robot cavern, had been discovered by the palace officials, and another guard was there now in his place. Migul had not passed him, this guard told us. But there had been an interim when the gate was open. Had Migul returned here and gone back to Mary?

We reached the cavern of machinery. It was dim and deserted, as before. We came to the door of Mary's room. It was standing half open!

Mary was gone! The couch was overturned, with its coving and pillows strewn about. The room showed every evidence of a desperate struggle. On the floor the great ten-foot length of Migul lay prone on its back. A small door-porte in its metal side was open; the panel hung awry on hinges half ripped away. From the aperture a coil and grid dangled half out in the midst of a tangled skein of wires.

We bent over the Robot. It was not quite inert. Within its metal shell there was a humming and a faint, broken rasping. The staring eye-sockets showed wavering beams of red; the grid of tiny wires back

of the parted lips vibrated with a faint jangle.

I bent lower. "Migul, can you hear me?" I asked.

Would it respond? My heart sent a fervent prayer that this mechanical thing—the product of man's inventive genius through a thousand years—would have a last grasp of energy to answer my appeal.

"Migul, can you—"

It spoke. "I hear you." They were thin, jangled tones, crackling and hissing with interference.

"What happened, Migul? Where is the girl?" I asked.

"Tugh—did this—to me. He took the girl."

"Where? Migul, where did he take her? Do you know?"

"Yes. I—have it recorded that he said—they were going to the Time-cage—overhead in the laboratory. He said—they—he and the girl were leaving forever!"

Chapter 22: The Chase to the End of the World

The giant mechanism, fashioned in the guise of a man, lay dying. Yet not that, for it never had had life. It lay deranged; out of order; its intricate cycle was still operating, but faintly, laboriously. Jangling out of tune.

Every moment its internal energy was lessening. It seemed to want to talk. The beams of its eyes rolled wildly. It said:

"Tugh—did this—to me. I came back here frightened because I knew that Tugh still controlled me. You—hear me...."

There was a muffled, rumbling blur, then its voice clicked on again.

"When Tugh came I opened the door to him, even though the girl tried to stop me.... And I was humble before Tugh.... But he was angry because I had released you. He—deranged me. I tried to fight him, and he ripped open my side porte...."

I thought the mechanism had gone inert. From within it was complete silence. Larry murmured, "Good Lord, this is gruesome!"

Then the faint, rasping voice started again.

"Deranged me.... And about Tugh, he—" A blur. Then again, "Tugh—he is—Tugh, he is—"

It went into a dull repetition of the three words, ending in a rumble which died into complete silence. The red radiance from the eye-sockets faded and vanished.

The thing we had called Migul seemed gone. There was only this metal shell, cast to represent a giant human figure, lying here with its operating mechanisms out of order—smashed.

I stood up. "That's the end of it. Mary Atwood's gone—"

"With Tugh in the Time-cage!" Larry exclaimed. "Tina, can't we—"

"Follow them?" Tina interrupted. "Come on! No—you two wait here. I will go upstairs and verify if the Time-cage is gone."

She came back in a moment. The laboratory overhead was fortunately deserted of Robots: Larry and I had not thought of that.

"The cage is gone!" Tina exclaimed. "Migul told us the truth!"

We hastened back through the tunnel, past the guard, up into the palace and into the garden. My heart pounded in my throat for fear

that Tina's Time-cage would have vanished. But it stood, dimly glowing under the foliage where she had left it.

A young man rushed up to us and said, "Princess Tina, look there!"

A great row of colored lights sailed slowly past overhead. The *Micrad* was here, circling over the city. The storm had abated; it had rained only for a brief time. The crazy winds were subsiding. The *Micrad* was using its deranging ray: we could hear the thrum of it. It sent out vibrations which threw the internal mechanisms of the Robots out of adjustment, and they were dropping in their tracks all over the city.

(It was afterward found that many of the Robots, heedless of the rain as they ran about the city intent upon their murderous work, had exploded by getting too wet.)

It chanced, as momentarily we stood there at the entrance to the Time-cage while the great airliner swept by, that the top of the nearby laboratory was visible through the trees. We saw a white search-beam from the *Micrad* come down and disclosed a group of Robots on the laboratory roof. Then the spreading beam of the deranging ray struck them, and they stood an instant transfixed, stricken, with wildly flailing arms. Then one toppled and fell. Then

another. Two rushed together, locked in each other's grip, desperately fighting because of some crazy, deranged thought-impulse. They swayed and tore at each other until both wilted and sank inert. Another tottered with jerky steps to the edge of the roof and plunged headlong, crashing with a great metal clatter to the stone paving of the ground....

The young man who had joined us dashed into the palace. We heard his shouts:

"The revolt is over! The revolt is over!"

This had been a massacre similar to Tugh's vengeance upon the New York City of 1935; just as senseless. Both, from the beginning, were equally hopeless of ultimate success. Tugh could not conquer this Time-world, so now he had left it, taking Mary Atwood with him....

We hastened into the Time-cage. Larry and I braced ourselves for the shock as Tina slid the door closed and hurried to the controls.

Within a moment we were flashing off into the great stream of Time....

“You think he has gone forward into the future?" Larry asked. "Won't the instrument show anything, Tina?"

"No. No trace of him yet."

We were passing 3,000 A.D., traveling into the future. Tina reasoned that Tugh, according to Harl's confession, had originally come from a future Time-world. It seemed most probable that now he would return there.

The Time-telespectroscope so far had shown us no evidence of the other cage. Tina kept the telescope barrel trained constantly on that other space five hundred feet from us which held Tugh's vehicle. The flowing gray landscape off there gave no sign of our quarry; yet we knew we could not pass it, without at least a brief flash of it in the telespectroscope and upon the image-mirror. Nervously, breathlessly we waited for a sign of the other Time-cage.

But nothing showed. We were not traveling fast. With Larry and Tina at the instrument table, I was left to stand at the window. Always I gazed eastward. That other little point of space only five hundred feet to the east held Mary; she was there; but not *now*. She was remote, inaccessible. The thought of her with Tugh, so inaccessible, set me shuddering.

I was barely aware of the changing gray outlines of the city: I stared, praying for the fleeting glimpse of a spectral cage.... I think that up

to 3,000 A.D., New York remained much the same. And then, quite suddenly, in some vast storm or cataclysm, it was gone. I saw but a blurred chaos. This was near 4,000 A.D. Then it was rebuilt, smaller, with more trees growing about, until presently there seemed only a forest. People, if they still were here, were building such transitory structures that I could not see them.

5,000 A.D. Mankind no doubt had reached its peak of civilization, paused at the summit and now was in decadence, reverting to savagery. Perhaps in Europe the civilized peak lasted longer. This was a backward space during the ascent; perhaps now it was reverting faster to the primitive.

But I think that by 15,000 A.D., mankind over all the Earth had become primitive. There is no standing still: we must go forward; or back. Man, with his own machines softening him, enabling him to do nothing, eventually unfitted himself to cope with nature. That storm at 4,000 A.D. in New York, for instance, even in my own Time would have been merely an incentive to reconstruct upon a greater scale. But the men of 4,000 A.D. could not do that....

At the year 10,000 A.D., with a seemingly primeval forest around us, Tina, Larry and I held an anxious consultation. We had anticipated that Tugh would stop in his own Time-world. That might have been

around 3,000 or 4,000; but we hardly thought, as we viewed the scene in passing, that he had come originally from beyond 4,000. He was too civilized.

Tugh had not stopped. He had to be still ahead of us, so our course was to follow. Whenever he stopped, we would see him. If he turned back and flashed past us, that too would be evident. But if, from 2,930, he had gone into the past—!

And then suddenly we glimpsed the other cage! It was ahead of us, traveling more slowly and retarding as though about to stop. A gray unbroken forest was here. The time was about 12,000 A.D. Tina saw it first through the little telescopic-barrel; then it showed on the mirror-grid—a faint, ghostly-barred shape, thin as gossamer. We even saw it presently through the window. It held its steady position, level with us, hanging solid amid the melting, changing gray outlines of the forest trees. They blurred it as they rose and fell.

This chase through Time! The two cages sped forward with the gray panorama whirling around them. Of all the scene, only that other cage, to us, was real. Yet it was the cages which were apparitions.

We gathered at our eastward window to gaze across the void of that five hundred feet. The interior of Tugh's cage was not visible to us. A

little window—a thinner patch in the lattices of the cage-side—fronted us; but nothing showed in it.

We were so helpless! Only five hundred feet away, the Tugh cage was there—now; yet we could do nothing save hold our Time-changing rate to conform with it. Of course Tugh saw us. He was making no effort to elude us, for neither cage was running at its maximum.

For hours I stood gazing, praying that Mary might be safe, striving with futile fancy to guess what might be transpiring within that cage speeding side by side with us in the blurred shadows of the corridors of Time.

And again, as so many times before, I was balked at guessing Tugh's motives for his actions. He knew we could not assail him unless he stopped. But to what destination was he going?

It was a chase—to our consciousness of the passing of Time—which lasted several hours. Tugh altered his Time-rate and sped more swiftly. My heart sank, for this showed he was not preparing to stop. We lost direct sight of the other cage several times as it drew ahead of us. But it was always visible on the image-mirror.

"I think," Tina said finally, "that we should stay behind it. When he retards to stop, we will have a better opportunity of landing simultaneously with him."

We passed 100,000 A.D. The forest went down, and it seemed that only rocks were here. A barren vista was visible off to the river and the distant sea. The familiar conformations of the sea and the land were changed. There was a different shore-line. It was nearer at hand now; and it was creeping closer.

I stared at that blurred gray surface of water; at the wide, undulating stretch of rock. We came to 1,000,000 A.D.—a million years into my future. Ice came briefly, and vanished again. But there were no trees springing into life on this barren landscape. I could not fancy that even the transitory habitations of humans were here in this cold desolation.

Were we headed for the End? I could envisage a dying world, its internal fires cooling.

Ten million years.... Then a hundred million.... The gray scene, blended of dark nights and sunshine days, began changing its monochrome. There were fleeting alternating intervals, now, when it was darker, and then lighter with a tinge of red. The Earth's rotation

was slowing down. Through thousands of centuries the change had been proceeding, but only now could I see the lengthening days and nights. Perhaps now the day was a month long, and the night the same.

A billion years! 1,000,000,000 A.D.! By now the day and the year were of equal length. And it chanced that this Western Hemisphere faced the sun. I could see the sun now, motionless above the horizon. The scene was dull red. The sun painted the rocks and the sullen sea with blood....

A shout from Larry whirled me round. "George! Good God!"

He was bending over the image-mirror; Tina, ghastly pale, with utter horror stamped upon her face, sprang for the controls. On the mirror I caught a fleeting glimpse of Tugh's cage, wrecked and broken—and instantly gone.

"It stopped!" Larry shouted. "Good God, it stopped all at once! It was wrecked! Smashed!"

We reeled; I all but lost consciousness with the shock of our own abrupt retarding. Our cage stopped and turned back. Tina located the wreckage and stopped again.

We slid the door open. The outer air was deadly cold. The sun was a huge dull-red ball hanging in the haze of a grey sky. The rocks were grey-black, with the blood-light of the sun upon them.

Five hundred feet from us, by the shore of an oily, sullen sea, the wreckage of Tugh's cage was piled in a heap. Near it, the crumpled white figure of Mary lay on the rocks. And beside her, still with his black cloak around him, crouched Tugh!

Chapter 23: Diabolical Exile of Time!

Tugh saw us as we stood in our cage doorway. His thick barrel-like figure rose erect, and from his parted cloak his arms waved with a wild gesture of defiance and triumph. He was clearly outlined in the red sunlight against the surface of the sea behind. We saw in one of his hands a ray cylinder—and then his arm came down and he fired at us. It was the white, disintegrating ray.

We were stricken by surprise, and stood for that moment transfixed in our doorway. Tugh's narrow, intensely white beam leaped over the intervening rocks; but it fell short of us. I saw that it had a range of about a hundred feet. Over the muffled heavy silence of the blood-red day the cripple's curse floated clear. He lowered his weapon; and, heedless that we also might be armed, he leaped nimbly past Mary's prostrate form and came shambling over the rocks directly for me!

It stung me into action, and for all the chaotic rush of these desperate moments my heart surged with relief. Mary was not dead! Beyond Tugh's oncoming figure, as he shambled like an infuriated charging bear over the rough rocky ground, I saw the white form of Mary move! She was striving to sit up!

I held my ray cylinder—the one I had rescued from Migul. But its

range was no more than twenty feet: I had tested it; and Tugh's beam had flashed a full hundred! I whirled on Larry.

"Get away from here, you and Tina! You can't help me!"

"George, listen—"

"He's coming. Larry—you damn fool, get away from here! It goes a hundred feet, that ray of his: it'll be raking us in a minute! Run, I tell you! Get to that line of rocks!"

Close behind our cage was a small broken ridge of rocks—strewn boulders in a tumbled line some ten or fifteen feet in height. It would afford shelter: there were broken places to give passage through it. The ridge curved crescent-shaped behind our cage and ran down toward the shore.

Larry and Tina stood white and confused. Larry panted, "But, George. I can help you fight him! Hide here in the cage—"

"Get away, I tell you! It's his death or mine this time! I'll get him if I can!"

I shoved Larry violently away and ducked back into our doorway. Only a few breathless seconds had passed; Tugh was still several

hundred feet away from us. Larry and Tina ran behind the cage, darted between the boulders of the ridge and vanished.

I crouched in the cage. Tugh was not visible from here. A moment passed. Dared I remain? If I could get Tugh within twenty feet of me, my shot was as good as his.... The silence was horrible. Was he coming forward? Did he know I was in here? I thought surely he must have seen Larry and Tina run away, and me dart in here: we had all been in plain sight of him.

This horrible silence! Was he creeping up on me? Would he fire through the doorway, or appear abruptly at the window? I could not tell where to place myself in the room—and it could mean my life or death.

The silence was split by Tina calling, "Tugh, we have caught you!"

Her voice was to one side and behind our cage, calling defiance at Tugh to distract his attention from me. Through the window I saw the flash of his beam, slanting sidewise at Tina. I gauged the source of his ray to be still some distance off, and crept to the door, cautiously peering.

Tugh stood on the open rock surface. He had swung to my right and

was near the little ridge of rocks where it turned and bent down to the shore. Behind me came Tina's voice again:

"At last we have you, Tugh!"

I saw Tina poised on the top of the ridge, partially behind me at the elbow of the ridge-curve. She screamed her defiance, and again Tugh fired at her. The beam slanted over me, but still was short.

Larry had vanished. Then I saw him, though Tugh did not. He had run along behind the ridge, and appeared, now, well down toward the shore. He was barely a hundred feet from the cripple. I saw him stoop, seize a chunk of rock, and throw it. The missile bounded and passed close to Tugh.

Larry instantly ducked back out of sight. The bounding stone startled Tugh; he whirled toward it and fired over the ridge. Tina again had changed her position and was shouting at him. They were trying to exhaust his cylinder charges; and if they could do that he would be helpless before me.

For a moment he stood as though confused. As he turned to gaze after Tina, Larry flung another rock. But this time Tugh did not fire. He started back toward where, by the wreckage of his cage, Mary

was now sitting up in a daze; then he changed his mind, whirled and fired directly at my doorway. I was just beyond the effective range of his beam, but it was truly aimed: I felt the horrible nauseous impact of it, a shuddering, indescribable sickening of all my being. I staggered back into the room and recovered my strength. A side window porte was open; I leaped through it and landed upon the rocks, with the cage between Tugh and me.

He fired again at the doorway. Tina had disappeared. Larry was now out of range, standing on the ridge, shouting and hurling rocks.

But Tugh did not heed him. He was shambling for my doorway. He would pass within twenty feet of me as I crouched outside the cage at its opposite corner. I could take him by surprise.

And then he saw me. He was less than a hundred feet away. He changed his direction and fired again, full at me. But I had had enough warning, and, as the beam struck the cage corner, I ran back along the outer wall of the cage and appeared at the other corner. Tugh came still closer, his weapon pointed downward as he ran. Fifty feet away. Not close enough!

I think, there at the last, that Tugh was wholly confused. Larry had come much closer. He was shouting: and from the ridge behind me

Tina was shouting. Tugh ran, not for where I was lurking now, but for the corner where a moment before he had seen me.

Now he was thirty feet from me.... Twenty.... Then nearer than that. Wholly without caution he came forward.... I leaned around the edge of the cage and fired. For one breathless instant the voices of Tina and Larry abruptly hushed.

My beam struck Tugh in the chest. It caught him and clung to him, bathing him in its spreading, intense white glare. He stopped in his tracks; stood transfixed for one breathless, horrible instant! He was so close that I could see the stupid surprise on his hideous features. His wide slit of mouth gaped with astonishment.

My beam clung to him, but he did not fall! He stood astonished; then turned and came at me! For just a moment I was stricken helpless there before him. What manner of man was this? *He did not fall!* My ray, which had decomposed the body of Alent, the guard, and left his skeleton stripped and bleached in an instant, did not harm Tugh! He had walked into it, taken it full and he did not fall! He was still alive!

I came to my senses and saw that Larry, seeing my danger, had run into the open, dangerously close, and hurled a rock. It struck Tugh upon the shoulder and deflected his aim, so that his flash went over

me. I saw Tugh whirl toward Larry, and I rushed forward, ripping loose the cylinder of the ray projector from its restraining battery cord. In the instant the cripple was turned half way from me I landed upon him, and with all my strength brought the point of the small heavy cylinder down on his skull. There was a strange splintering crack, and a wild, eery scream from his voice. He fell, with me on top of him.

Crowning horror! Tugh lay motionless, twisted half on his back, his thick arms outstretched on the rocks and his weapon still clutched in his hand. Culminating, gruesome horror! I rose from his body and stood shuddering. Amazing realization! The bulging misshapen head was splintered open. And from it, strewn over the rocks, were tiny intricate cogs and wheels, coils and broken wires!

He was not a man, but a Robot! A Super-Robot from some unknown era, running amuck! A mechanism so cleverly fashioned by the genius of man that it stood diabolically upon the threshhold of humanity!

A super-mechanical exile of Time! But its wild, irrational career of destruction through the ages now was over. It lay inert, smashed and broken at my feet....

Chapter 24: The Return

I think that there is little I should add. Tugh's last purpose had been to hurl himself and Mary past the lifetime of our world, wrecking the cage and flinging them into Eternity together. And Tugh was luring our cage and us to the same fate. But Mary, to save us, had watched her opportunity, seized the main control lever and demolished the vehicle by its instantaneous stopping.

We left the shell of Tugh lying there in the red sunlight of the empty, dying world, and returned to Tina's palace. We found that the revolt was over. The city, with help arrived, was striving to emerge from the bloody chaos. Larry and Tina decided to remain permanently in her Time. They would take us back; but the cage was too diabolical to keep in existence.

"I shall send it forward unoccupied," said Tina; "flash it into Eternity, where Tugh tried to go."

Accompanied by Larry, she carried Mary and me to 1935. With Mary's father, her only relative, dead, she yielded to my urging. We arrived in October, 1935. My New York, like Tina's a victim of the exile of Time, was rapidly being reconstructed.

It was night when we stopped and the familiar outlines of Patton Place were around us.

We stood at the cage doorway.

"Good-by," I said to Larry and Tina. "Good luck to you both!"

The girls kissed each other. Such strangely contrasting types! Over a thousand years was between them, yet how alike they were, fundamentally. Both—just girls.

Larry gripped my hand. In times of emotion one is sometimes inarticulate. "Good-by, George," he said. "We—we've said already all there is to say, haven't we?"

There were tears in both the girls' eyes. We four had been so close; we had been through so much together; and now we were parting forever. All four of us were stricken with surprise at how it affected us. We stood gazing at one another.

"No!" I burst out. "I haven't said all there is to say. Don't you destroy that cage! You come back! Guard it as carefully as you can, and come back. Land here, next year in October; say, night of the 15th. Will you? We'll be here waiting."

"Yes," Tina abruptly agreed.

We stood watching them as they slid the door closed. The cage for a moment stood quiescent. Then it began faintly humming. It glowed; faded to a spectre; and was gone.

Mary and I turned away into the New York City of 1935, to begin our life together.

79 Hell's Dimension by Tom Curry

Professor Lambert deliberately ventures into a Vibrational Dimension to join his fiancee in its magnetic torture-fields.

Aproximate word count:

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

“Now, Professor Lambert, tell us what you have done with the body of your assistant Miss Madge Crawford. Her car is outside your door, has stood there since early yesterday morning. There are no footprints leading away from the house and you can't expect us to believe that an airplane picked her off the roof. It will make it a lot easier if you tell us where she is. Her parents are greatly worried about her. When they telephoned, you refused to talk to them, would not allow them to speak to Miss Crawford. They are alarmed as to her fate. While you are not the sort of man who would injure a young woman, still, things look bad for you. You had better explain fully."

John Lambert, a man of about thirty-six, tall, spare, with black hair

which was slightly tinged with gray at the temples in spite of his youth, turned large eyes which were filled with agony upon his questioners.

Lambert was already internationally famous for his unique and astounding experiments in the realm of sound and rhythm. He had been endowed by one of the great electrical companies to do original work, and his laboratory, in which he lived, was situated in a large tract of isolated woodland some forty miles from New York City. It was necessary for the success of his work that as few disturbing noises as possible be made in the neighborhood. Many of his experiments with sound and etheric waves required absolute quiet and freedom from interrupting noises. The delicate nature of some of the machines he used would not tolerate so much as the footsteps of a man within a hundred yards, and a passing car would have disrupted them entirely.

Lambert was terribly nervous; he trembled under the gaze of the stern detective, come with several colleagues from a neighboring town at the call of Madge Crawford's frightened family. The girl, whose picture stood on a working table nearby, looked at them from the photograph as a beautiful young woman of twenty-five, light of hair, with large eyes and a lovely face.

Detective Phillips pointed dramatically to the likeness of the missing girl. "Can you," he said, "look at her there, and deny you loved her? And if she did not love you in return, then we have a motive for what you have done—jealousy. Come, tell us what you have done with her. Our men will find her, anyway; they are searching the cellar for her now. You can't hope to keep her, alive, and if she is dead—"

Lambert uttered a cry of despair, and put his face in his long fingers. "She—she—don't say she's dead!"

"Then you did love her!" exclaimed Phillips triumphantly, and exchanged glances with his companions.

"Of course I love her. And she returned my love. We were secretly engaged, and were to be married when we had finished these extremely important experiments. It is infamous though, to accuse me of having killed her; if I have done so, then it was no fault of mine."

"Then you did kill her?"

"No, no. I cannot believe she is really gone."

"Why did you evade her parents' inquiries?"

"Because ... I have been trying to bring her ... to re-materialize her."

"You mean to bring her back to life?"

"Yes."

"Couldn't a doctor do that better than you, if she is hidden somewhere about here?" asked Phillips gravely.

"No, no. You do not understand. She cannot be seen, she has dematerialized. Oh, go away. I'm the only man, save, possibly, my friend Doctor Morgan, who can help her now. And Morgan—I've thought of calling him, but I've been working every instant to get the right combination. Go away, for God's sake!"

"We can't go away until we have found out Miss Crawford's fate," said Phillips patiently.

Another sleuth entered the immense laboratory. He made his way through the myriad strange machines, a weird collection of xylophones, gongs, stone slabs cut in peculiar patterns to produce odd rhythmic sounds, electrical apparatus of all sorts. Near Phillips was a plate some feet square, of heavy metal, raised from the floor

on poles of a different substance. About the ceiling were studs thickly set of the same sort of metal as was the big plate.

One of the sleuths tapped his forehead, pointing to Lambert as the latter nervously lighted a cigarette.

The newcomer reported to Phillips. He held in his hand two or three sheets of paper on which something was written.

"The only other person here is a deaf mute," said the sleuth to Phillips, his superior. "I've got his story. He writes that he takes care of things, cooks their meals and so on. And he writes further that he thinks the woman and this guy Lambert were in love with each other. He has no idea where she has gone to. Here, you read it."

Phillips took the sheets and continued: "'Yesterday morning about ten o'clock I was passing the door of the laboratory on my way to make up Professor Lambert's bed. Suddenly I noticed a queer, shimmering, greenish-blue light streaming down from the walls and ceiling of the laboratory. I was right outside the place and though I cannot hear anything, I was knocked down and I twisted and wriggled around like a snake. It felt like something with a thousand little paws but with great strength was pushing me every way. When there was a lull, and the light had stopped for a few moments, I

staggered to my feet and ran madly for my own quarters, scared out of my head. As I went by the kitchen, I saw Miss Crawford at the sink there, filling some vases and arranging flowers as she usually did every morning.

"'If she called to me, I did not hear her or notice her lips moving. I believe she came to the door.

"'I was going to quit, when I recovered myself, angry at what had occurred; but then, I began to feel ashamed for being such a baby, for Professor Lambert has been very good to me. About fifteen minutes after I went to my room, I was able to return to the kitchen. Miss Crawford was not there, though the flowers and vases were. Then, as I started to work, still a little alarmed, Professor Lambert came rushing into the kitchen, an expression of terror on his face. His mouth was open, and I think he was calling. He then ran out, back to the laboratory, and I have not seen Miss Madge since. Professor Lambert has been almost continuously in the work-room since then, and—I kept away from it, because I was afraid.'"

Two more members of Phillips' squad broke into the laboratory and came toward the chief. They had been working at physical labor, for they were still perspiring and one regarded his hands with a rueful expression.

"Any luck?" asked Phillips eagerly.

"No, boss. We been all over the place, and we dug every spot we could get to earth in the cellar. Most of it's three-inch concrete, without a sign of a break."

"Did you look in the furnace?"

"We looked there the first thing. She ain't there."

There were several closets in the laboratory, and Phillips opened all of them and inspected them. As he moved near the big plate, Lambert uttered a cry of warning. "Don't disturb that, don't touch anything near it!"

"All right, all right," said Phillips testily.

The skeptical sleuths had classified Lambert as a "nut," and were practically sure he had done away with Madge Crawford because she would not marry him.

Still, they needed better evidence than their mere beliefs. There was no corpus delicti, for instance.

"Gentlemen," said Lambert at last, controlling his emotions with a

great effort. "I will admit to you that I am in trepidation and a state of mental torture as to Miss Crawford's fate. You are delaying matters, keeping me from my work."

"He thinks about work when the girl he claims he loves has disappeared," said Doherty, in a loud whisper to Phillips. Doherty was one of the sleuths who had been digging in the cellar, and the hard work had made his temper short.

"You must help us find Miss Crawford before we can let you alone," said Phillips. "Can't you understand that you are under grave suspicion of having injured her, hidden her away? This is a serious matter, Professor Lambert. Your experiments can wait."

"This one cannot," shouted Lambert, shaking his fists. "You are fools!"

"Steady now," said Doherty.

“Perhaps you had better come with us to the district attorney's office," went on Phillips. "There you may come to your senses and realize the futility of trying to cover up your crime—if you have committed one. If you have not, why do you not tell us where Miss Crawford is?"

"Because I do not know myself," replied Lambert. "But you can't take me away from here. I beg of you, gentlemen, allow me a little more time. I must have it."

Phillips shook his head. "Not unless you tell us logically what has occurred," he said.

"Then I must, though I do not think you will comprehend or even believe me. Briefly, it is this: yesterday morning I was working on the final series of experiments with a new type of harmonic overtones plus a new type of sinusoidal current which I had arranged with a series of selenium cells. When I finally threw the switch—remember, I was many weeks preparing the apparatus, and had just put the final touches on early that morning—there was a sound such as never had been heard before by human ears, an indescribable sound, terrifying and mysterious. Also, there was a fierce, devouring verditer blue light, and this came from the plates and studs you see, but so great was its strength that it got out of control and leaped about the room like a live thing. For some moments, while it increased in intensity as I raised the power of the current by means of the switch I held in my hand, I watched and listened in fascination. My instruments had ceased to record, though they are the most delicate ever invented and can handle almost anything which man can even surmise."

The perspiration was pouring from Lambert's face, as he recounted his story. The detectives listened, comprehending but a little of the meaning of the scientist's words.

"What has this to do with Miss Crawford?" asked Doherty impatiently.

Phillips held up his hand to silence the other sleuth. "Let him finish," he ordered. "Go on, professor."

"The sensations which I was undergoing became unendurable," went on Lambert, in a low, hoarse voice. "I was forced to cry out in pain and confusion.

"Miss Crawford evidently heard my call, for a few moments later, just as the terrific unknown force reached its apex, she dashed into the laboratory, and stepped across the plate you see there.

"I was powerless. Though I shut off the current by a superhuman effort, she—she was gone!"

Lambert put his face in his hands, a sob shook his broad shoulders.

"Gone?" repeated Phillips. "What do you mean, gone?"

"She disappeared, before my very eyes," said the professor shakily. "Torn into nothingness by the fierce force of the current or sound. Since then, I have been trying to reproduce the conditions of the experiment, for I wish to bring her back. If I cannot do so, then I want to join her, wherever she has gone. I love her, I know now that I cannot possibly live without her. Will you please leave me alone, now, so that I can continue?"

Doherty laughed derisively. "What a story," he jeered.

"Keep quiet, Doherty," ordered Phillips. "Now, Professor Lambert, your explanation of Miss Crawford's disappearance does not sound logical to us, but still we are willing to give you every chance to bring her back, if what you say is true. We cannot leave you entirely alone, because you might try to escape or you might carry out your threat of suicide. Therefore, I am going to sit over there in the corner, quietly, where I can watch you but will not interfere with your work. We will give you until midnight to prove your story. Then you must go with us to the district attorney. Do you agree to that?"

Lambert nodded, eagerly. "I agree. Let me work in peace, and if I do

not succeed then you may take me anywhere you wish. If you can," he added, in an undertone.

Doherty and the others, at Phillips' orders, filed from the laboratory. "One thing more, professor," said Phillips, when they were alone and the professor was preparing to work. "How do you explain the fact, if your story is true, that Miss Crawford was killed and made to disappear, while you yourself, close by, were uninjured?"

"Do you see these garments?" asked Lambert, indicating some black clothes which lay on a bench nearby. "They insulated me from the current and partially protected me from the sound. Though the force was very great, great enough to penetrate my insulation, it was handicapped in my case because of the garments."

"I see. Well, you may go on."

Phillips moved in the chair he had taken, from time to time. He could hear the noises of his men, still searching the premises for Madge Crawford, and Professor Lambert heard them, too.

"Will you tell your men to be quiet?" he cried at last.

There were dark circles under Lambert's eyes. He was working in a

state of feverish anxiety. When the girl he loved had dematerialized from under his very eyes, panic had seized him; he had ripped away wires to break the current and lost the thread of his experiment, so that he could not reproduce it exactly without much labor.

The scientist put on the black robes, and Phillips wished he too had some protective armor, even though he did believe that Lambert had told them a parcel of lies. The deaf mute's story was not too reassuring. Phillips warned his companions to be more quiet, and he himself sat quite still.

Lambert knew that the sleuths thought he was stark mad. He was aware of the fact that he had but a few hours in which to save the girl who had come at his cry to help him, who had loved him and whom he loved, only to be torn into some place unknown by the forces which were released in his experiment. And he knew he would rather die with her than live without her.

He labored feverishly, though he tried to keep his brain calm in order to win. His notes helped him up to a certain point, but when he had made the final touches he had not had time to bring the data up to the moment, being eager to test out his apparatus. It was while testing that the awful event had occurred and he had seen Madge Crawford disappear before his very eyes.

Her eyes, large and frightened, burned in his mind.

The deaf mute, Felix, a small, spare man of about fifty, sent the professor some food and coffee through one of the sleuths. Lambert swallowed the coffee, but waved away the rest, impatiently. Phillips, watching his suspect constantly, was served a light supper at the end of the afternoon.

There seemed to be a million wires to be touched, tested, and various strange apparatus. Several times, later on in the evening. Lambert threw the big switch with an air of expectancy, but little happened. Then Lambert would go to work again, testing, testing—adjusting this and that till Phillips swore under his breath.

"Only an hour more, professor," said Phillips, who was bored to death and cramped from trying to obey the professor's orders to keep still. A circle of cigarette-ends surrounded the sleuth.

"Only an hour," agreed Lambert. "Will you please be quiet, my man? This is a matter of my fiancée's life or death."

Phillips was somewhat disgruntled, for he felt he had done Lambert quite a favor in allowing him to remain in the laboratory for so long, to prove his story.

"I wish Doctor Morgan were here; I ought to have sent for him, I suppose," said Lambert, a few minutes later. "Will you allow me to get him? I cannot seem to perfect this last stage."

"No time, now," declared Phillips. "I said till midnight."

It was obvious to Lambert that the detective had become certain during the course of the evening that the scientist was mad. The ceaseless fiddling and the lack of results or even spectacular sights had convinced Phillips that he had to do with a crank.

"I think I have it now," said Lambert coolly.

"What?" asked Phillips.

"The original combination. I had forgotten one detail in the excitement, and this threw me off. Now I believe I will succeed—in one way or another. I warn you, be careful. I am about to release forces which may get out of my control."

"Well, now, don't get reckless," begged Phillips nervously. The array of machines had impressed him, even if Lambert did seem a fool.

"You insist upon remaining, so it is your own risk," said Lambert coolly.

Lambert, in the strange robes, was a bizarre figure. The hood was thrown back, exposing his pale, black-bearded face, the wan eyes with dark circles under them, and the twitching lips.

"If you find yourself leaving this vale of tears," went on the scientist, ironically, to the sleuth, "you will at least have the comfort of realizing that as the sound-force disintegrates your mortal form you are among the first of men to be attuned to the vibrations of the unknown sound world. All matter is vibration; that has been proven. A building of bricks, if shaken in the right manner, falls into its component parts; a bridge, crossed by soldiers in certain rhythmic time, is torn from its moorings. A tuning fork, receiving the sound vibrations from one of a similar size and shape begins to vibrate in turn. These are homely analogies, but applied to the less familiar sound vibrations, which make up our atomic world, they may help you to understand how the terrific forces I have discovered can disintegrate flesh."

The scientist looked inquiringly at Phillips. As the sleuth did not move, but sat with folded arms, Lambert shrugged and said, "I am ready."

Lambert raised his hood, and Phillips said, in a spirit of bravado, "You can't scare me out of here."

"Here goes the switch," cried Lambert.

He made the contact, as he had before. He stood for a moment, and this time the current gained force. The experimenter pushed his lever all the way over.

A terrible greenish-blue light suddenly illuminated the laboratory, and through the air there came sound vibrations which seemed to tear at Phillips' body. He found himself on the floor, knocked from his chair, and he writhed this way and that, speechless, suffering a torment of agony. His whole flesh seemed to tremble in unison with the waves which emanated from the machines which Lambert manipulated.

After what seemed hours to the suffering sleuth, the force diminished, and soon Phillips was able to rise. Trembling, the detective cursed and yelled for help in a high-pitched voice.

Lambert had thrown back his hood, and was rocking to and fro in agony.

"Madge, Madge," he cried, "what have I done! Come back to me, come back!"

Doherty and the others came running in at their chief's shouts. "Arrest him," ordered Phillips shakily. "I've stood enough of this nonsense."

The detectives started for Lambert. He saw them coming, and swiftly threw off the protective garments he wore.

"Stand back!" he cried, and threw the switch all the way over. The verditer green light smashed through the air, and the queer sound sensations smacked and tore them; Doherty, who had drawn a revolver when he was answering Phillips' cries, fired the gun into the air, and the report seemed to battle with the vibrating ether.

Lambert, as he threw the switch, leaped forward and landed on the metal plate under the ceiling studs, in the very center of the awful disturbance and unprotected from its force.

For a few moments, Lambert felt racking pain, as though something were tearing at his flesh, separating the very atoms. The scientist saw the wriggling figures of the sleuths, in various strange positions, but his impressions were confused. His head whirled round and round, he swayed to and fro, and, finally, he thought he fell down, or rather, that he had melted, as a lump of sugar dissolves in water.

"He's gone—gone—"

In the heart of nothingness was Lambert, his body torn and racked in a shrieking chaos of sound and a blinding glare of iridescent light which seemed too much to bear.

His last conscious thought was a prayer, that, having failed to bring back his sweetheart, Madge Crawford, he was undergoing a step toward the same destination to which he had sent her.

John Lambert came to with a shudder. But it was not a mortal shudder. He could sense no body; had no sense of being confined by matter. He was in a strange, chilly place—a twilight region, limitless, without dimensions.

Yet he could feel something, in an impersonal way, vaguely indifferent. He had no pain now.

He was moving, somehow. He had one impelling desire, and that was to discover Madge Crawford. Perhaps it was this thought which directed his movements.

Intent upon finding the girl, if she was indeed in this same strange world that he was, he did not notice for some time—how long, he

had no way of telling—that there were other beings which tried to impede his progress. But as he grew more accustomed to the unfamiliar sensations he was undergoing, he found his path blocked again and again by queer beings.

They were living, without doubt, and had intelligence, and evinced hostility toward him. But they were shapeless, shapeless as amoebas. He heard them in a sort of soundless whisper, and could see them without the use of eyes. And he shuddered, though he could feel no body in which he might be confined. Still, when he pinched viciously with invisible fingers at the spot where his face should have been, a twinge of pain registered on the vague consciousness which appeared to be all there was to him.

He was not sure of his substance, though he could evidently experience human sensations with his amorphous body. He did not know whether he could see; yet, he was dodging this way and that, as the beings who occupied this world tried to stop him.

They gave him the impression of gray shapes, and in coppery shadows things gleamed and closed in on him.

He seemed to hear a cry, and he knew that he was receiving a call for help from Madge Crawford. He tried to run, pushed determinedly

toward the spot, impelled by his love for the girl.

Now, as he hurried, he occasionally was stopped short by collision with the formless shapes which were all about him. He was hampered by them, for they followed him, making a sound like wind heard in a dream. Whatever medium he was in was evidently thickly inhabited by the hostile beings who claimed this world as their own. Though he could not actually feel the medium, he could sense that it was heavy. He leaped and ran, fighting his way through the increasing hosts, and the roar of their voice-impressions increased in his consciousness.

Yet there seemed to be nothing, nothing tangible save vagueness. He felt he was in a blind spot in space, a place of no dimensions, no time, where beings abhorred by nature, things which had never developed any dimensional laws, existed.

The cry for help struck him, with more force this time. Lambert, whatever form he was in, realised that he was close to the end of his journey to Madge Crawford.

He tried to speak, and had the impression that he said something reassuring. He then bumped into some vibrational being which he knew was Madge. His ears could not hear, nor could his flesh feel,

but his whole form or cerebrum sensed he held the woman he loved in his arms.

And she was speaking to him, in accents of fear, begging him to save her.

"John, John, you have come at last. They have been torturing me terribly. Save me."

"Darling Madge, I will do everything I can. Now I have found you, and we are together and will never part. Can you hear me?"

"I know what you are thinking, and what you wish to say. I can't exactly hear; it all seems vague, and impossible. Yet I can suffer. They have been hitting me with something which makes me shudder and shake—there, they are at it again."

Lambert felt the sensations, now, which the girl had made known to him. He felt crowded by gray beings, and his existence was troubled by spasms of pain-impressions. He knew Madge was crying out, too.

He could not comprehend the attacks, or guess their meaning. But the situation was unendurable.

Anger shook him, and he began to fight, furiously but vaguely. They

were closely hemmed in, but when Lambert began to strike out with hands and legs, the beings gave way a little. The scientist tried to shout, and though he could actually hear nothing, the result was gratifying. The formless creatures seemed to scatter and draw back in confusion as he yelled his defiance.

"They hate that," Madge said to him. "I have screamed myself hoarse and that is why they have not killed me—if I can be killed."

"I do not believe we can. But they can torture us," replied Lambert. "It is an everlasting half-life or quarter-life, and these creatures who call this Hell's Dimension home, have nothing but hatred for us in their consciousness."

The inhabitants of the imperfect world had closed in once again and the sharp instruments of torture they used were being thrust into the invisible bodies of the two humans. Each time, Lambert was unable to restrain his cries, for it seemed that he was being torn to pieces by vibrations.

He yelled until he could not speak above a whisper, or at least until the impressions of speech he gave forth did not trouble the beings. The two humans, still bound to some extent by their mortal beliefs, were chivvied to and fro, and struck and bullied. The creatures

seemed to delight in this sport.

The two felt they could not die; yet they could suffer terribly. Would this go on through eternity? Was there no release?

They were trying to tear Madge away from him. She was fighting them, and Lambert, in a frenzy of rage, made a determined effort to get away with the girl from their tormentors.

They retreated before his onslaughts. Drawing Madge after him, Lambert put down his head—or believed he was doing so—and ran as fast as he could at the beings.

He bumped into some invisible forms and was slowed in his rush, but he shouted and flailed about with his arms, and tried to kick. Madge helped by screaming and striking out. They made some distance in this way, or so they thought, and the horrid creatures gave way before them.

All about them was the coppery sensation of the medium in which they moved: Lambert as he became more used to the form he was inhabiting, he began to think he could discern dreadful eyes which stared unblinkingly at the couple.

He fought on, and believed they had come to a spot where the beings did not molest them, though they still sensed the things glaring at them.

Were they on some invisible eminence, above the reach of these queer creatures?

"We might as well stop here, for if we try to go farther we may come to a worse place," said Lambert.

They rested there, in temporary peace, together at last.

“I seem to be happy now," said Madge, clinging close. "I feared I would never see you again. John dear. I ran to you when you called out that day and when I crossed the plate, I was torn and racked and knocked down. When I next experienced sensation, it was in this terrible form. I am becoming more used to it, but I kept crying out for you: the beings, as soon as they discovered my presence, began to torment me. More and more have been collecting, and I have a sensation of seeing them as horrible, revolting beasts. Oh, John, I don't think I could have stood it much longer, if you hadn't come to me. They were driving me on, on, on, ceaselessly torturing me."

"Curse them," said Lambert. "I wish I could really get hold of some

of them. Perhaps, Madge, I will be able to think of some escape for us from this Hell's Dimension."

"Yes, darling. I could not bear to think that we are eternally damned to exist among these beings, hurt by them and unable to get away. How I wish we were back in the laboratory, at the tea table. How happy we were there!"

"And we will be again, Madge." Lambert was far from feeling hopeful, but he tried to encourage the girl into thinking they might get away.

However, he was unable to dissimulate. She felt his anguish for her safety. "But I know now that you love me. I can feel it stronger than ever before, John. It seems like a great rock to which I can always cling, your love. It projects me from the hatred that these beasts pour out against us."

Since they had no sense of time, they could not tell how long they were allowed to remain unmolested. But in each other's company they were happy, though each one was afraid for the safety of the loved one.

They spoke of the mortal life they had lived, and their love. They felt

no need of food or water, but clung together in a dimensionless universe, held up by love.

The lull came to an end, at last. There was no change in the coppery vagueness about them which they sensed as the surrounding ether, but all was changeless, boundless. Lambert, close to Madge Crawford, felt that they were about to be attacked.

He had swift, temporary impressions of seeing saucerlike, unblinking eyes, and then hordes of bizarre inhabitants started to climb up to their perch.

For a short while, Lambert and Madge fought them off, thrusting at them, seeming to push them backward down the intangible slope; the cries which the dematerialized humans uttered also helped to hold the leaders of the attacking army partially in check, but the vast number of beings swept forward.

The thrusts of the torture-fields they emanated became more and more racking, as the two unfortunates shuddered in horror and pain.

The power to demonstrate loud noise was evidently impossible to the creatures, for their only sounds came to Madge Crawford and John Lambert as long-drawn out, almost unbearable squeaks, mouse-

like in character. Perhaps they had never had the faculty of speech, since they did not need it to communicate with one another; perhaps they realized that the racket they could make would hurt them as much as it did their enemies.

Lambert, Madge clinging to him, was forced backward down the slope, and the beings had the advantage of height. He could not again reach the eminence, but the way behind seemed to clear quickly enough, though thrusts were made at him, innumerable times with the torture-fields.

The hordes pushed them backward, and ever back.

They were forced on for some distance. As they retreated, the way become easier, and fewer and fewer of the beings impeded the channel along which they moved, though in front of them and on all sides, above, beneath, they were pressed by the hordes.

"They are forcing us to some place they want us to go," said Lambert desperately.

"We can do nothing more," replied the girl.

Lambert felt her quiet confidence in him, and that as long as they

were together, all was well.

"Maybe they can kill us, somehow," he said.

And now, Lambert felt the way was clear to the rear. There was a sudden rush of the creatures, and needlelike fields were impelled viciously into the spaces the two humans occupied.

Madge cried out in pain, and Lambert shouted. The throng drew away from them as suddenly as it had surged forward, and an instant later the pair, clinging together, felt that they were falling, falling, falling....

"Are you all right, Madge?"

"Yes, John."

But he knew she was suffering. How long they fell he did not know, but they stopped at last. No sooner had they come to rest than they were assailed with sensations of pain which made both cry out in anguish.

There, in the spot where they had been thrust by the hordes, they felt that there was some terrific vibration which racked and tore at their invisible forms continuously, sending them into spasms of sharp

misery.

They both were forced to give vent to their feelings by loud cries. But they could not command their movements any longer. When they tried to get away, their limbs moved but they felt that they remained in the same spot.

The pain shook every fraction of their souls.

"We—we are in some pit of hell, into which they have thrown us, John," gasped Madge.

He knew she was shivering with the torture of that great vibration from which there was no escape, that they were in a prison-pit of Hell's Dimension.

"I—oh—John—I'm dying!"

But he was powerless to help her. He suffered as much as she. Yet there was no weakening of his sensations; he was in as much torture as he had been at the start. He knew that they could not die and could never escape from this misery of hell.

Their cries seemed to disturb the vacuum about. Lambert, shivering and shaking with pain, was aware that great eyes, similar to those

which they had thought they saw above, were now upon them. Squeaks were impressed upon him, squeaks which expressed disapprobation. There were some of the beings in the pit with them.

Madge knew they were there, too. She cried out in terror, "Will they add to our misery?"

But the creatures in the vacuum were pinned to the spots they occupied, as were Madge and Lambert. From their squeaks it was evident they suffered, too, and were fellow prisoners of the mortals.

"Probably the cries we make disturb them," said Lambert. "Vibrations to which we and they are not attuned are torture to the form we are in. Evidently the inhabitants of this hell world punish offenders by condemning them to this eternal torture."

"Why—why did they treat us so?"

"Perhaps we jarred upon them, hurt them, because we were not of their kind exactly," said Lambert. "Perhaps it was just their natural hatred of us as strangers."

They did not grow used to the terrible eternity of torments. No, if anything, it grew worse as it went on. Still, they could visualize no

end to the existence to which they were bound. Throbs of awful intensity rent them, tore them apart myriad times, yet they still felt as keenly as before and suffered just as much. There was no death for them, no release from the intangible world in which they were.

Their fellow prisoners squeaked at them, as though imploring them not to add to the agony by uttering discordant cries. But it was impossible for Madge to keep quiet, and Lambert shouted in anguish from time to time.

There seemed to be no end to it.

And yet, after what was eternity to the sufferers, Madge spoke hopefully.

"Darling John, I—I fear I am really going to die. I am growing weaker. I can feel the pain very little now. It is all vague, and is getting less real to me. Good-by, sweetheart, I love you, and I always will—"

Lambert uttered a strangled cry, "No, no. Don't leave me, Madge."

He clung to her, yet she was becoming extremely intangible to him. She was melting away from his embrace, and Lambert felt that he,

too, was weaker, even less real than he had been. He hoped that if it was the end, they would go together.

Desperately, he tried to hold her with him, but he had little ability to do so. The torture was still racking his consciousness, but was becoming more dreamlike.

There was a terrific snap, suddenly, and Lambert lost all consciousness.…

“Water, water!"

Lambert, opening his eyes, felt his body writhing about, and experienced pain that was—mortal. A bluish-green light dazzled his pupils and made him blink.

Something cut into his flesh, and Lambert rolled about, trying to escape. He bumped into something, something soft; he clung to this form, and knew that he was holding on to a human being. Then the light died out, and in its stead was the yellow, normal glow of the electric lights. Weak, famished, almost dead of thirst, Lambert looked about him at the familiar sights of his laboratory. He was lying on the floor, close by the metal plate, and at his side, unconscious but still alive to judge by her rising and falling breast,

was Madge Crawford.

Someone bent over him, and pressed a glass of water against his lips. He drank, watching while a mortal whom Lambert at last realized was Detective Phillips bathed Madge Crawford's temples with water from a pitcher and forced a little between her pale, drawn lips.

Lambert tried to rise, but he was weak, and required assistance. He was dazed, still, and they sat him down in a chair and allowed him to come to.

He shuddered from time to time, for he still thought he could feel the torture which he had been undergoing. But he was worried about Madge, and watched anxiously as Phillips, assisted by another man, worked over the girl.

At last, Madge stirred and moaned faintly. They lifted her to a bench, where they gently restored her to full consciousness.

When she could sit up, she at once cried out for Lambert.

The scientist had recovered enough to rise to his feet and stagger toward her. "Here I am, darling," he said.

"John—we're alive—we're back in the laboratory!"

"Ah, Lambert. Glad to see you." A heavy voice spoke, and Lambert for the first time noticed the black-clad figure which stood to one side, near the switchboard, hidden by a large piece of apparatus.

"Dr. Morgan!" cried Lambert.

Althaus Morgan, the renowned physicist, came forward calmly, with outstretched hand. "So, you realized your great ambition, eh?" he said curiously. "But where would you be if I had not been able to bring you back?"

"In Hell—or Hell's Dimension, anyway," said Lambert.

He went to Madge, took her in his arms. "Darling, we are safe. Morgan has managed to re-materialize us. We will never again be cast into the void in this way. I shall destroy the apparatus and my notes."

Doherty, who had been out of the room on some errand, came into the laboratory. He shouted when he saw Lambert standing before him.

"So you got him," he cried. "Where was he hidin'?"

His eyes fell upon Madge Crawford, then, and he exclaimed in

satisfaction. "You found her, eh?"

"No," said Phillips. "They came back. They suddenly appeared out of nothing, Doherty."

"Don't kid me," growled Doherty. "They were hidin' in a closet somewhere. Maybe they can fool you guys, but not me."

Lambert spoke to Phillips. "I'm starving to death and I think Miss Crawford must be, too. Will you tell Felix to bring us some food, plenty of it?"

One of the sleuths went to the kitchen to give the order. Lambert turned to Morgan.

"How did you manage to bring us back?" he asked.

Morgan shrugged. "It was all guess work at the last. I at first could check the apparatus by your notes, and this took some time. You know you have written me in detail about what you were working on, so when I was summoned by Detective Phillips, who said you had mentioned my name to him as the only one who could help, I could make a good conjecture as to what had occurred. I heard the stories of all concerned, and realized that you must have

dematerialized Miss Crawford by mistake, and then, unable to bring her back, had followed her yourself.

"I put on your insulation outfit, and went to work. I have not left here for a moment, but have snatched an hour or two of sleep from time to time. Detective Phillips has been very good and helpful.

"Finally, I had everything in shape, but I reversed the apparatus in vital spots, and tried each combination until suddenly, a few minutes ago, you were re-materialized. It was a desperate chance, but I was forced to take it in an endeavor to save you."

Lambert held out his hand to his friend. "I can never thank you enough," he said gratefully. "You saved us from a horrible fate. But you speak as though we had been gone a long while. Was it many hours?"

"Hours?" repeated Morgan, his lips parting under his black beard. "Man, it was eight days! You have been gone since a week ago last night!"

Lambert turned to Phillips. "I must ask you not to release this story to the newspapers," he begged.

Phillips smiled and turned up his hands in a gesture of frank wonder. "Professor Lambert," he said, "I can't believe what I have seen myself. If I told such a yarn to the reporters, they'd never forget it. They'd kid me out of the department."

"Aw, they were hidin' in a closet," growled Doherty. "Come on, we've wasted too much time on this job already. Just a couple of nuts, says I."

The sleuths, after Phillips had shaken hands with Lambert, left the laboratory. Morgan, a large man of middle age, joined them in a meal which Felix served to the three on a folding table brought in for the purpose. Felix was terribly glad to see Madge and Lambert again, and manifested his joy by many bobs and leaps as he waited upon them. A grin spread across his face from ear to ear.

Morgan asked innumerable questions. They described as best they could what they could recall of the strange dominion in which they had been, and the physicist listened intently.

"It is some Hell's Dimension, as you call it," he said at last.

"Where it is, or exactly what, I cannot say," said Lambert. "I surely have no desire to return to that world of hate."

Madge, happy now, smiled at him and he leaned over and kissed her tenderly.

"We have come from Hell, together," said Lambert, "and now we are in Heaven!"

80 The World Behind the Moon by Paul Ernst

Two intrepid Earth-men fight it out with the horrific monsters of Zeud's frightful jungles.

Aproximate word count: 6,900

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Like pitiless jaws, a distant crater opened for their ship. Helplessly, they hurtled toward it: helplessly, because they were still in the nothingness of space, with no atmospheric resistance on which their rudders, or stern or bow tubes, could get a purchase to steer them.

Professor Dorn Wichter waited anxiously for the slight vibration that should announce that the projectile-shaped shell had entered the new planet's atmosphere.

"Have we struck it yet?" asked Joyce, a tall blond young man with the shoulders of an athlete and the broad brow and square chin of one who combines dreams with action. He made his way painfully

toward Wichter. It was the first time he had attempted to move since the shell had passed the neutral point—that belt midway between the moon and the world behind it, where the pull of gravity of each satellite was neutralized by the other. They, and all the loose objects in the shell, had floated uncomfortably about the middle of the chamber for half an hour or so, gradually settling down again; until now it was possible, with care, to walk.

"Have we struck it?" he repeated, leaning over the professor's shoulder and staring at the resistance gauge.

"No." Absently Wichter took off his spectacles and polished them. "There's not a trace of resistance yet."

They gazed out the bow window toward the vast disc, like a serrated, pock-marked plate of blue ice, that was the planet Zeud—discovered and named by them. The same thought was in the mind of each. Suppose there were no atmosphere surrounding Zeud to cushion their descent into the hundred-mile crater that yawned to receive them?

"Well," said Joyce after a time, "we're taking no more of a chance here than we did when we pointed our nose toward the moon. We were almost sure that was no atmosphere there—which meant we'd

nose dive into the rocks at five thousand miles an hour. On Zeud there might be anything." His eyes shone. "How wonderful that there should be such a planet, unsuspected during all the centuries men have been studying the heavens!"

Wichter nodded agreement. It was indeed wonderful. But what was more wonderful was its present discovery: for that would never have transpired had not he and Joyce succeeded in their attempt to fly to the moon. From there, after following the sun in its slow journey around to the lost side of the lunar globe—that face which the earth has never yet observed—they had seen shining in the near distance the great ball which they had christened Zeud.

Astronomical calculations had soon described the mysterious hidden satellite. It was almost a twin to the moon; a very little smaller, and less than eighty thousand miles away. Its rotation was nearly similar, which made its days not quite sixteen of our earthly days. It was of approximately the weight, per cubic mile, of Earth. And there it whirled, directly in a line with the earth and the moon, moving as the moon moved so that it was ever out of sight beyond it, as a dime would be out of sight if placed in a direct line behind a penny.

Zeud, the new satellite, the world beyond the moon! In their excitement at its discovery, Joyce and Wichter had left the moon—

which they had found to be as dead and cold as it had been surmised to be—and returned summarily to Earth. They had replenished their supplies and their oxygen tanks, and had come back—to circle around the moon and point the sharp prow of the shell toward Zeud. The gift of the moon to Earth was a dubious one; but the gift of a possibly living planet-colony to mankind might be the solution of the overcrowded conditions of the terrestial sphere!

"Speed, three thousand miles an hour," computed Wichter. "Distance to Zeud, nine hundred and eighty miles. If we don't strike a few atoms of hydrogen or something soon we're going to drill this nearest crater a little deeper!"

Joyce nodded grimly. At two thousand miles from Earth there had still been enough hydrogen traces in the ether to give purchase to the explosions of their water-motor. At six hundred miles from the moon they had run into a sparse gaseous belt that had enabled them to change direction and slow their speed. They had hoped to find hydrogen at a thousand or twelve hundred miles from Zeud.

"Eight hundred and thirty miles," commented Wichter, his slender, bent body tensed. "Eight hundred miles—ah!"

A thrumming sound came to their ears as the shell quivered,

imperceptibly almost, but unmistakeably, at the touch of some faint resistance outside in space.

"We've struck it, Joyce. And it's much denser than the moon's, even as we'd hoped. There'll be life on Zeud, my boy, unless I'm vastly mistaken. You'd better look to the motor now."

Joyce went to the water-motor. This was a curious, but extremely simple affair. There was a glass box, ribbed with polished steel, about the size and shape of a cigar box, which was full of water. Leading away from this, to the bow and stern of the shell, were two small pipes. The pipes were greatly thickened for a period of three feet or so, directly under the little tank, and were braced by bed-plates so heavy as to look all out of proportion. Around the thickened parts of the pipes were coils of heavy, insulated copper wire. There were no valves nor cylinders, no revolving parts: that was all there was to the "motor."

Joyce didn't yet understand the device. The water dripped from the tank, drop by drop, to be abruptly disintegrated, made into an explosive, by being subjected to a powerful magnetic field induced in the coils by a generator in the bow of the shell. As each drop of water passed into the pipes, and was instantaneously broken up, there was a violent but controlled explosion—and the shell was

kicked another hundred miles ahead on its journey. That was all Joyce knew about it.

He threw the bow switch. There was a soft shock as the motor exhausted through the forward tube, slowing their speed.

"Turn on the outside generator propellers," ordered Wichter. "I think our batteries are getting low."

Joyce slipped the tiny, slim-bladed propellers into gear. They began to turn, slowly at first in the almost non-existent atmosphere.

"Four hundred miles," announced Wichter. "How's the temperature?"

Joyce stepped to the thermometer that registered the heat of the outer wall. "Nine hundred degrees," he said.

"Cut down to a thousand miles an hour," commanded Wichter. "Five hundred as soon as the motor will catch that much. I'll keep our course straight toward this crater. It's in wells like that, that we'll find livable air—if we're right in believing there is such a thing on Zeud."

Joyce glanced at the thermometer. It still registered hundreds of degrees, though their speed had been materially reduced.

"I guess there's livable air, all right," he said. "It's pretty thick outside already."

The professor smiled. "Another theory vindicated. I was sure that Zeud, swinging on the outside of the Earth-moon-Zeud chain and hence traveling at a faster rate, would pick up most of the moon's atmosphere over a period of millions of years. Also it must have been shielded by the moon, to some extent, against the constant small atmospheric leakage most celestial globes are subject to. Just the same, when we land, we'll test conditions with a rat or two."

At a signal from him, Joyce checked their speed to four hundred miles an hour, then to two hundred, and then, as they descended below the highest rim of the circular cliffs of the crater, almost to a full stop. They floated toward the surface of Zeud, watching with breathless interest the panorama that unfolded beneath them.

They were nosing toward a spot that was being favored with the Zeudian sunrise. Sharp and clear the light rays slanted down, illuminating about half the crater's floor and leaving the cliff protected half in dim shadow.

The illuminated part of the giant pit was as bizarre as the landscape of a nightmare. There were purplish trees, immense beyond belief.

There were broad, smooth pools of inky black fluid that was oily and troubled in spots as though disturbed by some moving things under the surface. There were bare, rocky patches where the stones, the long drippings of ancient lava flow, were spread like bleaching gray skeletons of monsters. And over all, rising from pools and bare ground and jungle alike, was a thin, miasmic mist.

Sustained by the slow, steady exhaust of the motor, rising a little with each partly muffled explosion and sinking a little further in each interval, they settled toward a bare, lava strewn spot that appealed to Wichter as being a good landing place. With a last hiss, and a grinding jar, they grounded. Joyce opened the switch to cut off the generator.

"Now let's see what the air's like," said Wichter, lifting down a small cage in which was penned an active rat.

He opened a double panel in the shell's hull, and freed the little animal. In an agony of suspense they watched it as it leaped onto the bare lava and halted a moment....

"Seems to like it," said Joyce, drawing a great breath.

The rat, as though intoxicated by its sudden freedom, raced away out

of sight, covering eight or ten feet at a bound, its legs scurrying ludicrously in empty air during its short flights.

"That means that we can dispense with oxygen helmets—and that we'd better take our guns," said Wichter, his voice tense, his eyes snapping behind his glasses.

He stepped to the gun rack. In this were half a dozen air-guns. Long and of very small bore, they discharged a tiny steel shell in which was a liquid of his invention that, about a second after the heat of its forced passage through the rifle barrel, expanded instantly in gaseous form to millions of times its liquid bulk. It was the most powerful explosive yet found, but one that was beautifully safe to carry inasmuch as it could be exploded only by heat.

"Are we ready?" he said, handing a gun to Joyce. "Then—let's go!"

But for a breath or two they hesitated before opening the heavy double door in the side of the hull, savoring to the full the immensity of the moment.

The rapture of the explorer who is the first to set foot on a vast new continent was theirs, magnified a hundredfold. For they were the first to set foot on a vast new planet! An entire new world,

containing heaven alone knew what forms of life, what monstrous or infinitesimal creatures, lay before them. Even the profound awe they had experienced when landing on the moon was dwarfed by the solemnity of this occasion; just as it is less soul stirring to discover an arctic continent which is perpetually cased in barren ice, than to discover a continent which is warmly fruitful and, probably, teeming with life.

Still wordless, too stirred to speak, they opened the vault-like door and stepped out—into a humid heat which was like that of their own tropical regions, but not so unendurable.

In their short stay on the moon, during which they had taken several walks in their insulated suits, they had become somewhat accustomed to the decreased weight of their bodies due to the lesser gravity, so that here, where their weight was even less, they did not make any blunders of stepping twenty feet instead of a yard.

Walking warily, glancing alertly in all directions to guard against any strange animals that might rush out to destroy them, they moved toward the nearest stretch of jungle.

The first thing that arrested their attention was the size of the trees they were approaching. They had got some idea of their hugeness

from the shell, but viewed from ground level they loomed even larger. Eight hundred, a thousand feet they reared their mighty tops, with trunks hundreds of feet in circumference; living pyramids whose bases wove together to make an impenetrable ceiling over the jungle floor. The leaves were thick and bloated like cactus growths, and their color was a pronounced lavender.

"We must take back several of those leaves," said Wichter, his scientific soul filled with cold excitement.

"I wish we could take back some of this air, too." Joyce filled his lungs to capacity. "Isn't it great? Like wine! It almost counteracts the effects of the heat."

"There's more oxygen in it than in our own," surmised Wichter. "My God! What's that!"

They halted for an instant. From the depths of the lavender jungle had come an ear shattering, screaming hiss, as though some monstrous serpent were in its death agony.

They waited to hear if the noise would be repeated. It wasn't. Dubiously they started on again.

"We'd better not go in there too far," said Joyce. "If we didn't come out again it would cost Earth a new planet. No one else knows the secret of your water-motor."

"Oh, nothing living can stand against these guns of ours," replied Wichter confidently. "And that noise might not have been caused by anything living. It might have been steam escaping from some volcanic crevice."

They started cautiously down a well defined, hard packed trail through thorny lavender underbrush. As they went, Joyce blazed marks on various tree trunks marking the direction back to the shell. The tough fibres exuded a bluish liquid from the cuts that bubbled slowly like blood.

To the right and left of them were cup-shaped bushes that looked like traps; and that their looks were not deceiving was proved by a muffled, bleating cry that rose from the compressed leaves of one of them they passed. Sluggish, blind crawling things like three-foot slugs flowed across their path and among the tree trunks, leaving viscous trails of slime behind them. And there were larger things....

"Careful," said Wichter suddenly, coming to a halt and peering into the gloom at their right.

"What did you see?" whispered Joyce.

Wichter shook his head. The gigantic, two-legged, purplish figure he had dimly made out in the steamy dark, had moved away. "I don't know. It looked a little like a giant ape."

They halted and took stock of their situation, mechanically wiping perspiration from their streaming faces, and pondering as to whether or not they should turn back. Joyce, who was far from being a coward, thought they should.

"In this undergrowth," he pointed out, "we might be rushed before we could even fire our guns. And we're nearly a mile from the shell."

But Wichter was like an eager child.

"We'll press on just a little," he urged. "To that clear spot in front of us." He pointed along the trail to where sunlight was blazing down through an opening in the trees. "As soon as we see what's there, we'll go back."

With a shrug, Joyce followed the eager little man down the weird trail under the lavender trees. In a few moments they had reached the clearing which was Wichter's goal. They halted on its edge, gazing at

it with awe and repulsion.

It was a circular quagmire of festering black mud about a hundred yards across. Near at hand they could see the mud heaving, very slowly, as though abysmal forms of life were tunneling along just under the surface. They glanced toward the center of the bog, which was occupied by one of the smooth black pools, and cried aloud at what they saw.

At the brink of the pool was lying a gigantic creature like a great, thick snake—a snake with a lizard's head, and a series of many-jointed, scaled legs running down its powerful length. Its mouth was gaping open to reveal hundreds of needle-sharp, backward pointing teeth. Its legs and thick, stubbed tail were threshing feebly in the mud as though it were in distress; and its eyes, so small as to be invisible in its repulsive head, were glazed and dull.

"Was that what we heard back a ways?" wondered Joyce.

"Probably," said Wichter. His eyes shone as he gazed at the nightmare shape. Impulsively he took a step toward the stirring mud.

"Don't be entirely insane," snapped Joyce, catching his arm.

"I must see it closer," said Wichter, tugging to be free.

"Then we'll climb a tree and look down on it. We'll probably be safer up off the ground anyway."

They ascended the nearest jungle giant—whose rubbery bark was so ringed and scored as to be as easy to climb as a staircase—to the first great bough, about fifty feet from the ground, and edged out till they hung over the rim of the quagmire. From there, with the aid of their binoculars, they expected to see the dying monster in every detail. But when they looked toward the pool it was not in sight!

"Were we seeing things?" exclaimed Wichter, rubbing his glasses. "I'd have sworn it was lying there!"

"It was," said Joyce grimly. "Look at the pool. That'll tell you where it went."

The black, secretive surface was bubbling and waving as though, down in its depths, a terrific fight were taking place.

"Something came up and dragged our ten-legged lizard down to its den. Then that something's brothers got onto the fact that a feast was being held, and rushed in. That pool would be no place for a before-

breakfast dip!"

Wichter started to say something in reply, then gazed, hypnotized, at the opposite wall of the jungle.

From the dense screen of lavender foliage stretched a glistening, scale-armored neck, as thick as a man's body at its thinnest point, which was just behind a tremendous-jawed crocodilian head. It tapered back for a distance of at least thirty feet, to merge into a body as big as that of a terrestial whale, that was supported by four squat, ponderous legs.

Moving with surprising rapidity, the enormous thing slid into the mud and began ploughing a way, belly deep, toward the pool. Shapeless, slow-writhing forms were cast up in its wake, to quiver for a moment in the sunlight and then melt below the mud again.

One of the bloated, formless mud-crawlers was snapped up in the huge jaws with an abrupt plunge of the long neck, and the monster began to feed, hog-like, slobbering over the loathsome carcass.

Wichter shook his head, half in fanatical eagerness, half in despair. "I'd like to stay and see more," he said with a sigh, "but if that's the kind of creatures we're apt to encounter in the Zeudian jungle, we'd

better be going at once—"

"Sh-h!" snapped Joyce. Then, in a barely audible whisper: "I think the thing heard your voice!"

The monster had abruptly ceased its feeding. Its head, thrust high in the air, was waving inquisitively from side to side. Suddenly it expelled the air from its vast lungs in a roaring cough—and started directly for their tree.

"Shoot!" cried Wichter, raising his gun.

Moving with the speed of an express train, the monster had almost got to their overhanging branch before they could pull the triggers. Both shells imbedded themselves in the enormous chest, just as the long neck reached up for them. And at once things began to happen with cataclysmic rapidity.

Almost with their impact the shells exploded. The monster stopped, with a great hole torn in its body. Then, dying on its feet, it thrust its great head up and its huge jaws crunched over the branch to which its two puny destroyers were clinging.

With all its dozens of tons of weight, it jerked in a gargantuan death

agony. The tree, enormous as it was, shook with it, and the branch itself was tossed as though in a hurricane.

There was a splintering sound. Wichter and Joyce dropped their guns to cling more tightly to the bole of the drooping branch that was their only security. The guns glanced off the mountainous body—and, with a last convulsion of the mighty legs, were swept underneath!

The monster was still at last, its insensate jaws yet gripping the bough. The two men looked at each other in speechless consternation. The shell a mile off through the dreadful jungle.... Themselves, helpless without their guns....

"Well," said Joyce at last. "I guess we'd better be on our way. Waiting here, thinking it over, won't help any. Lucky there's no night, for a couple of weeks at least, to come stealing down on us."

He started down the great trunk, with Wichter following close behind. Walking as rapidly as they could, they hurried back along the tunneled trail toward their shell.

They hadn't covered a hundred yards when they heard a mighty crashing of underbrush behind them. Glancing back, they saw tooth-studded jaws gaping cavernously at the end of a thirty-foot neck—

little, dead-looking eyes glaring at them—a hundred-foot body smashing its way over the trap-bushes and through tangles of vines and down-drooping branches.

"The mate to the thing we killed back there!" Joyce panted. "Run, for God's sake!"

Wichter needed no urging. He hadn't an ounce of fear in his spare, small body. But he had an overwhelming desire to get back to Earth and deliver his message. He was trembling as he raced after Joyce, thirty feet to a bound, ducking his head to avoid hitting the thick lavender foliage that roofed the trail.

"One of us must get through!" he panted over and over. "One of us must make it!"

It was speedily apparent that they could never outrun their pursuer. The reaching jaws were only a few yards behind them now.

"You go," called Joyce, sobbing for breath. He slowed his pace deliberately.

"No—you—" Wichter slowed too. In a frenzy, Joyce shoved him along the trail.

"I tell you—"

He got no further. In front of them, where there had appeared to be solid ground, they suddenly saw a yawning pit. Desperately, they tried to veer aside, but they were too close. Their last long birdlike leap carried them over the edge. They fell, far down, into a deep chasm, splashing into a shallow pool of water.

A few clods of earth cascaded after them as the monster above dug its great splay feet into the ground and checked its rush in time to keep from falling after them. Then the top of the pit slowly darkened as a covering of some sort slid across it. They were in a prison as profoundly quiet and utterly black as a tomb.

“Dorn," shouted Joyce. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," came a voice in the near darkness. "And you?"

"I'm still in one piece as far as I can feel." There was a splashing noise. He waded toward it and in a moment his outstretched hand touched the professor's shoulder.

"This is a fine mess," he observed shakily. "We got away from those

tooth-lined jaws, all right, but I'm wondering if we're much better off than we would have been if we hadn't escaped."

"I'm wondering the same thing." Wichter's voice was strained. "Did you see the way the top of the pit closed above us? That means we're in a trap. And a most ingenious trap it is, too! The roof of it is camouflaged until it looks exactly like the rest of the trail floor. The water in here is just shallow enough to let large animals break their necks when they fall in and just deep enough to preserve small animals—like ourselves—alive. We're in the hands of some sort of reasoning, intelligent beings, Joyce!"

"In that case," said Joyce with a shudder, "we'd better do our best to get out of here!"

But this was found to be impossible. They couldn't climb up out of the pit, and nowhere could they feel any openings in the walls. Only smooth, impenetrable stone met their questing fingers.

"It looks as though we're in to stay," said Joyce finally. "At least until our Zeudian hosts, whatever kind of creatures they may be, come and take us out. What'll we do then? Sail in and die fighting? Or go peaceably along with them—assuming we aren't killed at once—on the chance that we can make a break later?"

"I'd advise the latter," answered Wichter. "There is a small animal on our own planet whose example might be a good one for us to follow. That's the 'possum." He stopped abruptly, and gripped Joyce's arm.

From the opposite side of the pit came a grating sound. A crack of greenish light appeared, low down near the water. This widened jerkily as though a door were being hoisted by some sort of pulley arrangement. The walls of the pit began to glow faintly with reflected light.

"Down," breathed Wichter.

Noiselessly they let themselves sink into the water until they were floating, eyes closed and motionless, on the surface. Playing dead to the best of their ability, they waited for what might happen next.

They heard a splashing near the open rock door. The splashing neared them, and high-pitched hissing syllables came to their ears—variegated sounds that resembled excited conversation in some unknown language.

Joyce felt himself touched by something, and it was all he could do to keep from shouting aloud and springing to his feet at the contact.

He'd had no idea, of course, what might be the nature of their captors, but he had imagined them as man-like, to some extent at least. And the touch of his hand, or flipper, or whatever it was, indicated that they were not!

They were cold-blooded, reptilian things, for the flesh that had touched him was cold; as clammy and repulsive as the belly of a dead fish. So repulsive was that flesh that, when he presently felt himself lifted high up and roughly carried, he shuddered in spite of himself at the contact.

Instantly the thing that bore him stopped. Joyce held his breath. He felt an excruciating, stabbing pain in his arm, after which the journey through the water was resumed. Stubbornly he kept up his pretence of lifelessness.

The splashing ceased, and he heard flat wet feet slapping along on dry rock, indicating that they had emerged from the pit. Then he sank into real unconsciousness.

The next thing he knew was that he was lying on smooth, bare rock in a perfect bedlam of noises. Howls and grunts, snuffling coughs and snarls beat at his ear-drums. It was as though he had fallen into a vast cage in which were hundreds of savage, excited animals—

animals, however, that in spite of their excitement and ferocity were surprisingly motionless, for he heard no scraping of claws, or padding of feet.

Cautiously he opened his eyes....

He was in a large cave, the walls of which were glowing with greenish, phosphorescent light. Strewn about the floor were seemingly dead carcasses of animals. And what carcasses there were! Blubber-coated things that looked like giant tadpoles, gazelle-like creatures with a single, long slim horn growing from delicate small skulls, four-legged beasts and six-legged ones, animals with furry hides and crawlers with scaled coverings—several hundred assorted specimens of the smaller life of Zeud lay stretched out in seeming lifelessness.

But they were not dead, these bizarre beasts of another world. They lived, and were animated with the frenzied fear of trapped things. Joyce could see the tortured heaving of their furred and scaled sides as they panted with terror. And from their throats issued the outlandish noises he had heard. They were alive enough—only they seemed unable to move!

There was nothing in his range of vision that might conceivably be

the beings that had captured them, so Joyce started to lift his head and look around at the rest of the cavern. He found that he could not move. He tried again, and his body was as unresponsive as a log. In fact, he couldn't feel his body at all! In growing terror, he concentrated all his will on moving his arm. It was as limp as a rag.

He relaxed, momentarily in the grip of stark, blind panic. He was as helpless as the howling things around him! He was numbed, completely paralyzed into immobility!

The professor's voice—a weak, uncertain voice—sounded from behind him. "Joyce! Joyce!"

He found that he could talk, that the paralysis that gripped the rest of his muscles had not extended to the vocal cords. "Dorn! Thank God you're alive! I couldn't see you, and I thought—"

"I'm alive, but that's about all," said Wichter. "I—I can't move."

"Neither can I. We've been drugged in some manner—just as all the other animals in here have been drugged. I must have got my dose in the pit. I was cut, or stabbed, in the arm."

Joyce stopped talking as he suddenly heard steps, like human

footsteps yet weirdly different—flap-flapping sounds as though awkward flippers were slapping along the rock floor toward them. The steps stopped within a few feet of them; then, after what seemed hours, they sounded again, this time in front of him.

He opened his eyes, cautiously, barely moving his eyelids, and saw at last, in every hideous detail, one of the super-beasts that had captured Wichter and himself.

It was a horrible cartoon of a man, the thing that stood there in the greenish glow of the cave. Nine or ten feet high, it loomed; hairless, with a faintly iridescent, purplish hide. A thick, cylindrical trunk sloped into a neck only a little smaller than the body itself. Set on this was a bony, ugly head that was split clear across by lipless jaws. There was no nose, only slanted holes like the nostrils of an animal; and over these were set pale, expressionless, pupil-less eyes. The arms were short and thick and ended in bifurcated lumps of flesh like swollen hands encased in old-fashioned mittens. The legs were also grotesquely short, and the feet mere shapeless flaps.

It was standing near one of the smaller animals, apparently regarding it closely. Observing it himself, Joyce saw that it was moving a little. As though coming out of a coma, it was raising its bizarre head and trying to get on its feet.

Leisurely the two-legged monster bent over it. Two long fangs gleamed in the lipless mouth. These were buried in the neck of the reviving beast—and instantly it sank back into immobility.

Having reduced it to helplessness—the monster ate it! The lipless jaws gaped widely. The shapeless hands forced in the head of the animal. The throat muscles expanded hugely: and in less than a minute it had swallowed its living prey as a boa-constrictor swallows a monkey.

Joyce closed his eyes, feeling weak and nauseated. He didn't open them again till long after he had heard the last of the awkward, flapping footsteps.

"Could you see it?" asked Wichter, who was lying so closely behind him that he couldn't observe the monstrous Zeudian. "What did it do? What was it like?"

Joyce told him of the way the creature had fed. "We are evidently in their provision room," he concluded. "They keep some of their food alive, it seems.... Well, it's a quick death."

"Tell me more about the way the other animal moved, just before it was eaten."

"There isn't much to tell," said Joyce wearily. "It didn't move long after those fangs were sunk into it."

"But don't you see!" There was sudden hope in Wichter's voice. "That means that the effect of the poison, which is apparently injected by those fangs, wears off after a time. And in that case—"

"In that case," Joyce interjected, "we'd have only an unknown army of ten-foot Zeudians, the problem of finding a way to the surface of the ground again, and the lack of any kind of weapons, to keep us from escaping!"

"We're not quite weaponless, though," the professor whispered back. "Over in a corner there's a pile of the long, slender horns that sprout from the heads of some of these creatures. Evidently the Zeudians cut them out, or break them off before eating that particular type of animal. They'd be as good as lances, if we could get hold of them."

Joyce said nothing, but hope began to beat in his own breast. He had noticed a significant happening during the age-long hours in the commissary cave. Most of the Zeudians had entered from the direction of the pit. But one had come in through an opening in the opposite side. And this one had blinked pale eyes as though dazzled from bright sunlight—and was bearing some large, woody looking

tubers that seemed to have been freshly uprooted! There was a good chance, thought Joyce, that that opening led to a tunnel up to the world above!

He drew a deep breath—and felt a dim pain in his back, caused by the cramping position in which he had lain for so long.

He could have shouted aloud with the thrill of that discovery. This was the first time he had felt his body at all! Did it mean that the effect of the poison was wearing off—that it wasn't as lastingly paralyzing to his earthly nerve centers as to those of Zeudian creatures around them? He flexed the muscles of his leg. The leg moved a fraction of an inch.

"Dorn!" he called softly, "I can move a little! Can you?"

"Yes," Wichter answered, "I've been able to wriggle my fingers for several minutes. I think I could walk in an hour or two."

"Then pray for that hour or two. It might mean our escape!" Joyce told him of the seldom used entrance that he thought led to the open air. "I'm sure it goes to the surface, Dorn. Those woody looking tubers had been freshly picked."

Three of the two-legged monsters came in just then. They relapsed into lifeless silence. There was a horrible moment as the three paused over them longer than any of the others had. Was it obvious that the effects of the numbing poison was wearing off? Would they be bitten again—or eaten?

The Zeudians finally moved on, hissing and clicking to each other. Eventually the cold-blooded things fed, and dragged lethargically out of the cave in the direction of the pit.

With every passing minute Joyce could feel life pouring back into his numbed body. His cramped muscles were in agony now—a pain that gave him fierce pleasure. At last, risking observation, he lifted his head and then struggled to a sitting position and looked around.

No Zeudian was in sight. Evidently they were too sure of their poison glands to post a guard over them. He listened intently, and could hear no dragging footsteps. He turned to Wichter, who had followed his example and was sitting up, feebly rubbing his body to restore circulation.

"Now's our chance," he whispered. "Stand up and walk a little to steady your legs, while I go over and get us a couple of those sharp horns. Then we'll see where that entrance of mine goes!"

He walked to the pile of bones and horns in the corner and selected two of the longest and slimmest of the ivory-like things. Just as he had rejoined Wichter he heard the sound with which he was now so grimly familiar—flapping, awkward footsteps. Wildly he signaled the professor. They dropped in their tracks, just as the approaching monster stumped into the cave.

For an instant he dared hope that their movement had gone unobserved, but his hope was rudely shattered. He heard a sharp hiss: heard the Zeudian flap toward them at double-quick time. Abandoning all pretense, he sprang to his feet just as the thing reached him, its fangs gleaming wickedly in the greenish light.

He leaped to the side, going twenty feet or more with the press of his Earth muscles against the reduced gravity. The creature rushed on toward the professor. That game little man crouched and awaited its onslaught. But Joyce had sprung back again before the two could clash.

He raised the long horn and plunged it into the smooth, purplish back. Again and again he drove it home, as the monster writhed under him. It had enormous vitality. Gashed and dripping, it yet struggled on, attempting to encircle Joyce with its stubby arms. Once it succeeded, and he felt his ribs crack as it contracted its powerful

body. But a final stroke finished the savage fight. He got up and, with an incoherent cry to Wichter, raced toward the opening on which they pinned their hopes of reaching the upper air.

Hissing cries and the thudding of many feet came to them just as they reached the arched mouth of the passage. But the cries, and the constant pandemonium of the paralysed animals died behind them as they bounded along the tunnel.

They emerged at last into the sunlight they had never expected to see again, beside one of the great lavender trees. They paused an instant to try to get their bearings.

"This way," panted Joyce as he saw, on a hard-packed path ahead of them, one of the trail-marks he had blazed.

Down the trail they raced, toward their space shell. Fortunately they met none of the tremendous animals that infested the jungles; and their journey to the clearing in which the shell was lying was accomplished without accident.

"We're safe now," gasped Wichter, as they came in sight of the bare lava patch. "We can outrun them five feet to their one!"

They burst into the clearing—and halted abruptly. Surrounding the shell, stumping curiously about it and touching it with their shapeless hands, were dozens of the Zeudians.

"My God!" groaned Joyce. "There must be at least a hundred of them! We're lost for certain now!"

They stared with hopeless longing at the vehicle that, if only they could reach it, could carry them back to Earth. Then they turned to each other and clasped hands, without a word. The same thought was in the mind of each—to rush at the swarming monsters and fight till they were killed. There was absolutely no chance of winning through to the shell, but it was infinitely better to die fighting than be swallowed alive.

So engrossed were the Zeudians by the strange thing that had fallen into their province, that Joyce and Wichter got within a hundred feet of them before they turned their pale eyes in their direction. Then, baring their fangs, they streamed toward the Earth men, just as the pursuing Zeudians entered the clearing from the jungle trail.

The two prepared to die as effectively as possible. Each grasped his lace-like horn tightly. The professor mechanically adjusted his glasses more firmly on his nose....

With his move, the narrowing circle of Zeudians halted. A violent clamor broke out among them. They glared at the two, but made no further step toward them.

"What in the world—" began Wichter bewilderedly.

"Your glasses!" Joyce shouted, gripping his shoulder. "When you moved them, they all stopped! They must be afraid of them, somehow. Take them clear off and see what happens."

Wichter removed his spectacles, and swung them in his hand, peering near-sightedly at the crowding Zeudians.

Their reaction to his simple move was remarkable! Hisses of consternation came from their lipless mouths. They faced each other uneasily, waving their stubby arms and covering their own eyes as though suddenly afraid they would lose them.

Taking advantage of their indecision, Joyce and Wichter walked boldly toward them. They moved aside, forming a reluctant lane. Some of the Zeudians in the rear shoved to close in on them, but the ones in front held them back. It wasn't until the two were nearly through that the lane began to straggle into a threatening circle around them again. The Zeudians were evidently becoming

reassured by the fact that Wichter continued to see all right in spite of the little strange creature's alarming act of removing his eyes.

"Do it again," breathed Joyce, perspiration beading his forehead as the giants moved closed, their fangs tentatively bared for the numbing poison stroke.

Wichter popped his glasses on, then jerked them off with a cry, as though he were suffering intensely. Once more the Zeudians faltered and drew back, feeling at their own eyes.

"Run!" cried Joyce. And they raced for the haven of the shell.

The Zeudians swarmed after them, snarling and hissing. Barely ahead of the nearest, Joyce and Wichter dove into the open panel. They slammed it closed just as a powerful, stubby arm reached after them. There was a screaming hiss, and a cold, cartilagenous lump of flesh dropped to the floor of the shell—half the monster's hand, sheared off between the sharp edge of the door and the metal hull.

Joyce threw in the generator switch. With a soft roar the water-motor exploded into action, sending the shell far into the sky.

"When we return," said Joyce, adding a final thousand miles an hour

to their speed before they should fly free of the atmosphere of Zeud, "I think we'd better come at the head of an army, equipped with air-guns and explosive bombs."

"And with glasses," added the professor, taking off his spectacles and gazing at them as though seeing them for the first time.

81 Four Miles Within by Desmond Winter Hall

Far down into the earth goes a gleaming metal sphere whose passengers are deadly enemies.

Aproximate word count: 14,300

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Chapter 1: The Monster of Metal

Far down into the earth goes a gleaming metal sphere whose passengers are deadly enemies.

A strange spherical monster stood in the moonlight on the silent Mojave Desert. In the ghostly gray of the sand and sage and joshua trees its metal hide glimmered dully—an amazing object to be found on that lonely spot. But there was only pride and anticipation in the eyes of the three people who stood a little way off, looking at it. For they had constructed the strange sphere, and were soon going to entrust their lives to it.

"Professor," said one of them, a young man with a cheerful face and

a likable grin, "let's go down now! There's no use waiting till to-morrow. It's always dark down there, whether it's day or night up here. Everything is ready."

The white-haired Professor David Guinness smiled tolerantly at the speaker, his partner, Phil Holmes. "I'm kind of eager to be off, myself," he admitted. He turned to the third person in the little group, a dark-haired girl. "What do you say, Sue?"

"Oh, let's, Father!" came the quick reply. "We'd never be able to sleep to-night, anyway. As Phil says, everything is ready."

"Well, I guess that settles it," Professor Guinness said to the eager young man.

Phil Holmes' face went aglow with anticipation. "Good!" he cried. "Good! I'll skip over and get some water. It's barely possible that it'll be hot down there, in spite of your eloquent logic to the contrary!" And with the words he caught up a large jug standing nearby, waved his hand, said: "I'll be right back!" and set out for the water-hole, situated nearly a mile away from their little camp. The heavy hush of the desert night settled down once more after he left.

As his figure merged with the shadows in the distance, the elderly

scientist murmured aloud to his daughter:

"You know, it's good to realize that my dream is about to become a reality. If it hadn't been for Phil.... Or no—I really ought to thank you, Sue. You're the one responsible for his participation!" And he smiled fondly at the slender girl by his side.

"Phil joined us just for the scientific interest, and for the thrill of going four miles down into the earth," she retorted at once, in spite of the blush her father saw on her face. But he did not insist. Once more he turned, as to a magnet, to the machine that was his handiwork.

The fifteen-foot sphere was an earth-borer—Guinness's own invention. In it he had utilized for the first time for boring purposes the newly developed atomic disintegrators. Many holes equally spaced over the sphere were the outlets for the dissolving ray—most of them on the bottom and alternating with them on the bottom and sides were the outlets of powerful rocket propulsion tubes, which would enable it to rise easily from the hole it would presently blast into the earth. A small, tight-fitting door gave entrance to the double-walled interior, where, in spite of the space taken up by batteries and mechanisms and an enclosed gyroscope for keeping the borer on an even keel, there was room for several people.

The earth-borer had been designed not so much for scientific investigation as the specific purpose of reaching a rich store of radium ore buried four miles below the Guinness desert camp. Many geologists and mining engineers knew that the radium was there, for their instruments had proven it often; but no one up to then knew how to get to it. David Guinness did—first. The borer had been constructed in his laboratory in San Francisco, then dismantled and freighted to the little desert town of Palmdale, from whence Holmes had brought the parts to their isolated camp by truck. Strict secrecy had been kept. Rather than risk assistants they had done all the work themselves.

Fifteen minutes passed by, while the slight figure of the inventor puttered about the interior of the sphere, brightly lit by a detachable searchlight, inspecting all mechanisms in preparation for their descent. Sue stood by the door watching him, now and then turning to scan the desert for the returning Phil.

It was then, startlingly sudden, that there cracked through the velvet night the faint, distant sound of a gun. And it came from the direction of the water-hole.

Sue's face went white, and she trembled. Without a word her father stepped out of the borer and looked at her.

"That was a gun!" he said. "Phil didn't have one with him, did he?"

"No," Sue whispered. "And—why, there's nobody within miles of here!"

The two looked at each other with alarm and wonder. Then, from one of the broken patches of scrub that ringed the space in which the borer stood, came a mocking voice.

"Ah, you're mistaken, Sue," it affirmed. "But that was a gun."

David Guinness jerked around, as did his daughter. The man who had spoken stood only ten yards away, clearly outlined in the bright moonlight—a tall, well-built man, standing quite at ease, surveying them pleasantly. His smile did not change when old Guinness cried:

"Quade! James Quade!"

The man nodded and came slowly forward. He might have been considered handsome, had it not been for his thin, mocking lips and a swarthy complexion.

"What are you doing here?" demanded Guinness angrily. "And what do you mean—'it was a gun?' Have you—"

"Easy, easy—one thing at a time," said Quade, still smiling. "About the gun—well, your young friend Holmes said, he'd be right back, but I—I'm afraid he won't be."

Sue Guinness's lips formed a frightened word:

"Why?"

Quade made a short movement with his left hand, as is brushing the query aside. "Let's talk about something more pleasant," he said, and looked back at the professor. "The radium, and your borer, for instance. I hear you're all ready to go down."

David Guinness gasped. "How did you know—?" he began, but a surge of anger choked him, and his fists clenched. He stepped forward. But something came to life in James Quade's right hand and pointed menacingly at him. It was the stubby black shape of an automatic.

"Keep back, you old fool!" Quade said harshly. "I don't want to have to shoot you!"

Unwillingly, Guinness came to a stop. "What have you done with young Holmes?" he demanded.

"Never mind about him now," said Quade, smiling again. "Perhaps I'll explain later. At the moment there's something much more interesting to do. Possibly you'll be surprised to hear it, but we're all going to take a little ride in this machine of yours, Professor. Down. About four miles. I'll have to ask you to do the driving. You will, won't you—without making a fuss?"

Guinness's face worked furiously. "Why, you're crazy, Quade!" he sputtered. "I certainly won't!"

"No?" asked Quade softly. The automatic he held veered around, till it was pointing directly at the girl. "I wouldn't want to have to shoot Sue—say—through the hand...." His finger tightened perceptibly on the trigger.

"You're mad, man!" Guinness burst out. "You're crazy! What's the idea—"

"In due time I'll tell you. But now I'll ask you just once more," Quade persisted. "Will you enter that borer, or must I—" He broke off with an expressive shrug.

David Guinness was powerless. He had not the slightest idea what Quade might be about; the one thought that broke through his fear

and anger was that the man was mad, and had better be humored. He trembled, and a tight sensation came to his throat at sight of the steady gun trained on his daughter. He dared not trifle.

"I'll do it," he said.

James Quade laughed. "That's better. You always were essentially reasonable, though somewhat impulsive for a man of your age. The rash way you severed our partnership, for instance.... But enough of that. I think we'd better leave immediately. Into the sphere, please. You first, Miss Guinness."

"Must she come?"

"I'm afraid so. I can't very well leave her here all unprotected, can I?"

Quade's voice was soft and suave, but an undercurrent of sarcasm ran through it. Guinness winced under it; his whole body was trembling with suppressed rage and indignation. As he stepped to the door of the earth-borer he turned and asked:

"How did you know our plans? About the radium?—the borer?"

Quade told him. "Have you forgotten," he said, "that you talked the

matter over with me before we split last year? I simply had the laboratory watched, and when you got new financial backing from young Holmes, and came here. I followed you. Simple, eh?... Well, enough of this. Get inside. You first, Sue."

Trembling, the girl obeyed, and when her father hesitated Quade jammed his gun viciously into his ribs and pushed him to the door. "Inside!" he hissed, and reluctantly, hatred in his eyes, the professor stepped into the control compartment after Sue. Quade gave a last quick glance around and, with gun ever wary, passed inside. The door slammed shut: there was a click as its lock shot over. The sphere was a sealed ball of metal.

Inside, David Guinness obeyed the automatic's imperious gesture and pulled a shiny-handled lever slowly back, and the hush that rested over the Mojave was shattered by a tremendous bellow, a roar that shook the very earth. It was the disintegrating blast, hurled out of the bottom in many fan-shaped rays. The coarse gray sand beneath the machine stirred and flew wildly; the sphere vibrated madly; and then the thunder lowered in tone to a mighty humming and the earth-borer began to drop. Slowly it fell, at first, then more rapidly. The shiny top came level with the ground: disappeared; and in a moment there was nothing left but a gaping hole where a short while before a round monster of metal had stood. The hole was hot

and dark, and from it came a steadily diminishing thunder....

For a long time no one in the earth-borer spoke—didn't even try to—for though the thunder of the disintegrators was muted, inside, to a steady drone, conversation was almost impossible. The three were crowded quite close in the spherical inner control compartment. Sue sat on a little collapsible stool by the bowed, but by no means subdued, figure of Professor David Guinness, while Quade sat on the wire guard of the gyroscope, which was in the exact center of the floor.

The depth gauge showed two hundred feet. Already the three people were numb from the vibration; they hardly felt any sensation at all, save one of great weight pressing inwards. The compartment was fairly cool and the air good—kept so by the automatic air rectifiers and the insulation, which shut out the heat born of their passage.

Quade had been carefully watching Guinness's manipulation of the controls, when he was struck by a thought. At once he stood up, and shouted in the elderly inventor's ear: "Try the rockets! I want to be sure this thing will go back up!"

Without a word Guinness shoved back the lever controlling the disintegrators, at the same time whirling a small wheel full over. The

thudding drone died away to a whisper, and was replaced by sharper thundering, as the stream of the propulsion rockets beneath the sphere was released. A delicate needle trembled on a gauge, danced at the figure two hundred, then crept back to one-ninety ... one-sixty ... one-forty.... Quade's eyes took in everything.

"Excellent, Guinness!" he yelled. "Now—down once more!"

The rockets were slowly cut; the borer jarred at the bottom of its hole; again the disintegrators droned out. The sphere dug rapidly into the warm ground, biting lower and lower. At ten miles an hour it blasted a path to depths hitherto unattainable to man, sweeping away rock and gravel and sand—everything that stood in its way. The depth gauge rose to two thousand, then steadily to three and four. So it went on for nearly half an hour.

At the end of that time, at a depth of nearly four miles, Quade got stiffly to his feet and once more shouted into the professor's ear.

"We ought to be close to that radium, now," he said. "I think—"

But his words stopped short. The floor of the sphere suddenly fell away from their feet, and they felt themselves tumbled into a wild plunge. The drone of the disintegrators, hitherto muffled by the earth

they bit into, rose to a hollow scream. Before the professor quite knew what was happening, there was a stunning crash, a shriek of tortured metal—and the earth-borer rocked and lay still....

The whole world seemed to be filled with thunder when David Guinness came back to consciousness. He opened his eyes and stared up into a darkness to which it took him some time to accustom himself. When he did, he made out hazily that he was lying on the floor of a vast dark cavern. He could dimly see its jagged roof, perhaps fifty feet above. There was the strong smell of damp earth in his nostrils; his head was splitting from the steady drone in his ear-drums. Suddenly he remembered what had happened. He groaned slightly and tried to sit up.

But he could not. His arms and legs were tied. Someone had removed him from the earth-borer and bound him on the floor of the cavern they had plunged into.

David Guinness strained at the rope. It was futile, but in doing so he twisted his head around and saw another form, similarly tied, lying close to him. He gave a little cry of relief. It was Sue. And she was conscious, her eyes on his face.

She spoke to him, but he could not understand her for the drone in

his ears, and when he spoke to her it was the same. But the professor did not just then continue his effort to converse with her. His attention was drawn to the borer, now dimly illuminated by its portable light, which had been secured to the door. It was right side up, and appeared to be undamaged. The broad ray of the searchlight fell far away on one of the cavern's rough walls. He could just make out James Quade standing there, his back towards them.

He was hacking at the wall with a pick. Presently he dropped the tool and wrenched at the rock with bare hands. A large chunk came loose. He hugged it to him and turned and strode back towards the two on the floor, and as he drew near they could plainly see a gleam of triumph in his eyes.

"You know what this is?" he shouted. Guinness could only faintly hear him. "Wealth! Millions! Of course we always knew the radium was here, but this is the proof. And now we've a way of getting it out —thanks to your borer! All the credit is yours, Professor Guinness! You shall have the credit, and I'll have the money."

Guinness tugged furiously at his bonds again. "You—you—" he gasped. "How dare you tie us this way! Release us at once! What do you mean by it?"

Quade smiled unpleasantly. "You're very stupid, Guinness. Haven't you guessed by now what I'm going to do?" He paused, as if waiting for an answer, and the smile on his face gave way to a look of savage menace. For the first time his bitter feelings came to the surface.

"Have you forgotten how close I came to going to jail over those charges of yours a year ago?" he said. "Have you forgotten the disgrace to me that followed?—the stigma that forced me to disappear for months? You fool, do you think I've forgotten?—or that I'd let you—"

"Quade," interrupted the older man, "you know very well you were guilty. I caught you red-handed. You didn't fool anyone—except the jury that let you go. So save your breath, and, if you've the sense you were born with, release my daughter and me. Why, you're crazy!" he cried with mounting anger. "You can't get away with this! I'll have you in jail within forty-eight hours, once I get back to the surface!"

With an effort Quade controlled his feelings and assumed his oily, sarcastic manner. "That's just it," he said: "'once you get back!' How stupid you are! You don't seem to realize that you're not going back to the surface. You and your daughter."

Sue gasped, and her father's eyes went wide. There was a tense

silence.

"You wouldn't dare!" the inventor cried finally. "You wouldn't dare!"

"It's rather large, this cavern," Quade went on. "You'll have plenty of room. Perhaps I'll untie you before I go back up, so—"

"You can't get away with it!" shouted the old man, tremendously excited. "Why, you can't, possibly! Philip Holmes'll track you down—he'll tell the police—he'll rescue us! And then—"

Quade smiled suavely. "Oh, no, he won't. Perhaps you remember the shot that sounded from the water-hole? Well, when I and my assistant, Juan, heard Holmes say he was going for water, I told Juan to follow him to the water-hole and bind him, to keep him from interfering till I got back up. But Mr. Holmes is evidently of an impulsive disposition, and must have caused trouble. Juan, too, is impulsive; he is a Mexican. And he had a gun. I'm afraid he was forced to use it.... I am quite sure Philip Holmes will not, as you say, track me down."

David Guinness looked at his daughter's white face and horror-filled eyes and suddenly crumpled. Humbly, passionately, he begged Quade to take her back up. "Why, she's never done anything to you,

Quade!" he pleaded. "You can't take her life like that! Please! Leave me, if you must, but not her! You can't—"

But suddenly the old man noticed that Quade was not listening. His head was tilted to one side as if he was straining to hear something else. Guinness was held silent for a moment by the puzzled look on the other's face and the strange way he was acting.

"Do you hear it?" Quade asked at last; and without waiting for an answer, he knelt down and put his ear to the ground. When he rose his face was savage, and he cursed under his breath.

"Why, it's a humming!" muttered Professor Guinness. "And it's getting louder!"

"It sounds like another borer!" ventured Sue.

The humming grew in volume. Then, from the ceiling, a rock dropped. They were looking at the cavern roof and saw it start, but they did not hear it strike, for the ever-growing humming echoed loudly through the cavern. They saw another rock fall; and another.

"For God's sake, what is it?" cried Guinness.

Quade looked at him and slowly drew out his automatic.

"Another earth-borer, I think," he answered. "And I rather expect it contains your young friend Mr. Holmes. Yes—coming to rescue you."

For a moment Guinness and his daughter were too astounded to do anything but gape. She finally exclaimed:

"But—but then Phil's alive?"

James Quade smiled. "Probably—for the moment. But don't let your hopes rise too high. The borer he's in isn't strong enough to survive a fifty-foot plunge." He was shouting now, so loud was the thunder from above. "And," he added, "I'm afraid he's not strong enough to survive it, either!"

Chapter 2: The Man-Hunt

When Phil Holmes started off to the water-hole, his head was full of the earth-borer and the imminent descent. Now that the long-awaited time had come, he was at fever-pitch to be off, and it did not take him long to cover the mile of sandy waste. His thoughts were far inside the earth as he dipped the jug into the clear cool water and sloshed it full.

So the rope that snaked softly through the air and dropped in a loop over his shoulders came as a stark surprise. Before he knew what was happening it had slithered down over his arms and drawn taut just above the elbows, and he was yanked powerfully backwards and almost fell.

But he managed to keep his feet as he staggered backward, and turning his head he saw the small dark figure of his aggressor some fifteen feet away, keeping tight the slack.

Phil's surprise turned to sudden fury and he completely lost his head. What he did was rash; mad; and yet, as it turned out, it was the only thing that could have saved him. Instinctively, without hesitating one second, and absolutely ignoring an excited command to stand still, he squirmed face-on to his aggressor, lowered his head and charged.

The distance was short. Halfway across it, a gun barked, and he heard the bullet crack into the water jug, which he was still holding in front of himself. And even before the splintered fragments reached the ground he had crashed into the firer.

He hit him with all the force of a tackling lineman, and they both went down. The man grunted as the wind was jarred out of him, but he wriggled like an eel and managed to worm aside and bring up his gun.

Then there was a desperate flurry of bodies in the coarse sand. Holmes dived frantically for the gun hand and caught it; but, handicapped as he was by the rope, he could not hold it. Slowly its muzzle bent upward to firing position.

Desperately, he wrenched the arm upwards, in the direction it had been straining to go, and the sudden unexpected jerk doubled the man's arm and brought the weapon across his chest. For a moment there was a test of strength as Phil lay chest to chest over his opponent, the gun blocked between. Then the other grunted; squirmed violently—and there was a muffled explosion.

A cry of pain cut the midnight air, and with insane strength Holmes' ambusher fought free from his grip, staggered to his feet and went

reeling away. Phil tore loose from the rope and bounded after him, never feeling, at the moment, his powder-burned chest.

And then he halted in his tracks.

A great roar came thundering over the desert!

At once he knew that it came from the earth-borer's disintegrators. The sphere had started down without him.

He stood stock still, petrified with surprise, facing the sound, while his attacker melted farther and farther into the night. And then, suddenly, Phil Holmes was sprinting desperately back towards the Guinness camp.

He ran until he was exhausted; walked for a little while his legs gathered more strength, and his laboring lungs more air; and then ran again. As the minutes passed, the thunder lessened rapidly into a muffled drone; and by the time Phil had panted up to the brink of the hole that gaped where but a little time before the sphere was standing, it had become but a distant purr. He leaned far over and peered into the hot blackness below, but could see nothing.

Phil knelt there silently for some minutes, shocked by his strange

attack, bewildered by the unexpected descent of the borer. For a time his mind would not work; he had no idea what to do. But gradually his thoughts came to order and made certain things clear.

He had been deliberately ambushed. Only by luck had he escaped, he told himself. If it hadn't been for the water jug, he'd now be out of the picture. And on the heels of the ambush had came the surprising descent of the earth-borer. The two incidents coincided too well: the same mind had planned them. And two, men, at least, were in on the plot.... It suddenly became very clear to him that the answer to the puzzle lay with the man who had ambushed him. He would have to get that man. Track him down.

Phil acted with decision. He got to his feet and strode rapidly to the deserted Guinness shack, horribly quiet and lonely now in the bright moonlight. In a minute he emerged with a flashlight at his belt and a rifle across his arm.

Once again he went over to the new black hole in the desert and looked down. From far below still came the purr, now fainter than ever. His friend, the girl he loved, were down there, he reflected bitterly, and he was helpless to reach them. Well, there was one thing he could do—go man-hunting. Turning, he started off at a long lope for the water-hole.

Ten minutes later he was there, and off to the side he found the marks of their scuffle—and small black blotches that could be nothing but blood. The other was wounded: could probably not get far. But he might still have his gun, so Phil kept his rifle handy, and tempered his impatience with caution as he set out on the trail of the widely spaced footprints.

They led off towards the nearby hills, and in the bright moonlight Phil did not use his flashlight at all, except to investigate other round black blotches that made a line parallel to the prints. As he went on he found his quarry's steps coming more closely together: becoming erratic. Soon they showed as painful drags in the sand, a laborious hauling of one foot after the other.... Phil put away his light and advanced very cautiously.

He wondered, as he went, who in the devil was behind it all. The radium-finding project had been kept strictly secret. Not another soul was supposed to know of the earth-borer and its daring mission into the heart of the earth. Yet, obviously, someone had found out, and whoever it was had laid at least part of his scheme cunningly. An old man and a girl cannot offer much resistance: he, Phil, would have been well taken care of had it not been for the water jug. So far, there were at least two in the plot: the man who had ambushed him and the unknown who had evidently kidnapped both Professor and Sue

Guinness. But there might be still more.

There might be friends, nearby, of the man he was tracking. The fellow might have reached them, and warned them that the scheme hadn't gone through, that Phil was loose. They could very easily conceal themselves alongside their partner's tracks and train their rifles on the tracker....

The trail was leading up into one of the cañons in the cluster of hills to the west. For some distance he followed it up through a slash of black below the steep moonlit heights of the hills to each side—and then, suddenly, he vaguely made out the forms of two huts just ahead.

Immediately he stooped low, and went skirting widely off up one side. He proceeded slowly, with great caution, his rifle at the ready. At any moment, he knew, the hush might be split by the cracks of waylaying guns. Warily he advanced along the narrow cañon wall above the huts. No lights were lit, and the place seemed unoccupied. He was debating what to do next when his attention was attracted to a large dark object lying in the cañon trail some twenty yards from the nearest hut. Straining his eyes in the inadequate moonlight, he saw that it was the outstretched figure of a man. His quarry—his ambusher!

Phil dropped flat, fearful of being seen. Keeping as best he could in the shadows, fearing every moment to hear the sharp bark of a gun, he crawled forward. It took him a long time to approach the sprawled figure, but he wasn't taking chances. When within twenty feet, he rose suddenly and darted forward to the man's side.

His rapid glance showed him that the fellow was completely out: and another quick look around failed to show that anyone else was watching, so he returned to his examination of the man. It was the ambusher, all right: a Mexican. He was still breathing, though his face was drawn and white from the loss of blood from a wound under the blood-soaked clothing near his upper right arm. A hasty search showed that he no longer had his gun, so Phil, satisfied that he was powerless for some time to come, cautiously wormed his way towards the two shacks.

There was something sinister in the strange silence that hung over them. One was of queer construction—a windowless, square, high box of galvanized iron. The other was obviously a dwelling place. Carefully Phil sneaked up to the latter. Then, rifle ready, he pushed its door open and sent a beam of light stabbing through the darkness of the interior.

There was no one there. Only two bunks, a table, chair, a pail of

water and some cooking utensils met his view. He crept out toward the other building.

Come close, Phil found that a dun-colored canvas had been thrown over the top of it, making an adequate camouflage in daytime. The place was about twenty feet high. He prowled around the metal walls and discovered a rickety door. Again, gun ready, he flung it open. The beam from his flash speared a path through the blackness—and he gasped at sight of what stood revealed.

There, inside, was a long, bullet-like tube of metal, the pointed end upper-most, and the bottom, which was flat, toward the ground. It was held in a wooden cradle, and was slanted at the floor. In the bottom were holes of two shapes—rocket tubes and disintegrating projectors. It was another earth-borer.

Phil stood frozen with surprise before this totally unlooked-for machine. He could easily have been overcome, had the owner been in the building, for he had forgotten everything but what his eyes were staring at. He started slowly around the borer, found a long narrow door slightly ajar, and stepped inside.

This borer, like Guinness's, had a double shell, and much the same instruments, though the whole job was simpler and cruder. A small

instrument board contained inclination, temperature, depth and air-purity indicators, and narrow tubes led to the air rectifiers. But what kept Holmes' attention were the wires running from the magneto to the mixing chambers of the disintegrating tubes.

"The fools!" he exclaimed, "—they didn't know how to wire the thing! Or else," he added after a moment, "didn't get around to doing it." He noticed that the projectile's interior contained no gyroscope: though, he thought, none would be needed, for the machine, being long and narrow, could not change keel while in the ground. Here he was reminded of something. Stepping outside, he estimated the angle the borer made with the dirt floor. Twenty degrees. "And pointed southwest!" he exclaimed aloud. "This borer would come close to meeting the professor's, four miles under our camp!"

At once he knew what he would do. First he went back to the other shack and got the pail of water he had noticed, and took this out where the Mexican lay outstretched. He bathed the man's face and the still slightly bleeding bullet wound in his shoulder.

Presently the wounded man came to. His eyes opened, and he stared up into a steel mask of a face, in which two level black eyes bored into his. He remembered that face—remembered it all too well. He trembled, cowered away.

"No!" he gasped, as if he had seen a ghost. "No—no!"

"Yes, I'm the man," Holmes told him firmly, menacingly. "The same one you tried to ambush." He paused a moment, then said: "Do you want to live?"

It was a simple question, frightening in its simplicity.

"Because if you don't answer my questions, I'm going to let you lie here," Phil went on coldly. "And that would probably mean your death. If you do answer, I'll fix you up so you can have a chance."

The Mexican nodded eagerly. "I talk," he said.

"Good," said Phil. "Then tell me who built that machine?"

"Señor Quade. Señor James Quade."

"Quade!" Phil had heard the name before. "Of course!" he said. "Guinness's old partner!"

"I not know," the Mexican answered. "He hire me with much money. He buy thees machine inside, and we put him together. But he could no make him work—it take too long. We watch, hear old man go down to-night, and—"

The greaser stopped. "And so he sent you to get me, while he kidnapped the old man and his daughter and forced them under the ground in their own borer," Holmes supplied, and the other nodded.

"But I only mean to tie you!" he blurted, gesturing weakly. "I no mean shoot! No, no—"

"All right—forget it," Phil interrupted. "And now tell me what Quade expects to do down there."

"I not know, Señor," came the hesitant reply, "but...."

"But what?" the young man jerked.

Reluctantly the wounded Mexican continued. "Señor Quade—he—I think he don' like thees old man. I think he leave heem an' the girl down below. Then he come up an' say they keeled going down."

Phil nodded grimly. "I see," he said, voicing his thoughts. "Then he would say that he and Professor Guinness are still partners—and the radium ore will belong to him. Very nice. Very nice...."

He snapped back to action, and without another word hoisted the Mexican onto his back and carried him into the shack. There he cleansed the wound, rigged up a tight bandage for it, and tied the

man to one of the cots. He tied him in such a fashion that he could reach some food and water he put by the cot.

"You leave me like thees?" the Mexican asked.

"Yes," Phil said, and started for the door.

"But what you going to do?"

Phil smiled grimly as he flung an answer back over his shoulder.

"Me?—I'm going to fix the wiring on those disintegrators in your friend Quade's borer. Then I'm starting down after him." He stopped and turned before he closed the door. "And if I don't get back—well, it's just too bad for you!"

And so, a little later, once more the hushed desert night was cleft by a furious bellow of sound. It came, this time, from a narrow cañon. The steep sides threw the roar back and back again, and the echoes swelled to an earth-shaking blast of sound. The oblong hut from which it came rocked and almost fell; then, as the noise began to lessen, teetered on its foundations and half-slipped into the ragged hole that had been bored inside.

The descent was a nightmare that Holmes would never forget.

Quade's machine was much cruder and less efficient than the sphere David Guinness had designed. Its protecting insulation proved quite inadequate, and the heat rapidly grew terrific as the borer dug down. Phil became faint, stifled, and his body oozed streams of sweat. And the descent was also bumpy and uneven; often he was forced to leave the controls and work on the mechanism of the disintegrators when they faltered and threatened to stop. But in spite of everything the needle on the depth gauge gradually swung over to three thousand, and four, and five....

After the first mile Holmes improvised a way to change the air more rapidly, and it grew a little cooler. He watched the story the depth gauge told with narrowed eyes, and, as it reached three miles, inspected his rifle. At three and a half miles he stopped the borer, thinking to try to hear the noise made by the other, but so paralyzed were his ear-drums from the terrific thunder beneath, it seemed hardly any quieter when it ceased.

His plans were vague; they would have to be made according to the conditions he found. There was a coil of rope in the tube-like interior of the borer, and he hoped to find a cavern or cleft in the earth for lateral exploring. He would stop at a depth of four miles—where he should be very near the path of the professor's sphere.

But Phil never saw the needle on the gauge rise to four miles. At three and three quarters came sudden catastrophe.

He knew only that there was an awful moment of utter helplessness, when the borer swooped wildly downwards, and the floor was snatched sickeningly from under him. He was thrown violently against the instrument panel; then up toward the pointed top; and at the same instant came a rending crash that drove his senses from him....

Chapter 3: "*You Haven't the Guts*"

“Faust as I thought," said James Quade in the silence that fell when the last echoes had died away, and the splinters of steel and rock had settled. "You see, Professor, this earth-borer belongs to me. Yes, I built one too. But I couldn't, unfortunately, get it working properly—that is, in time to get down here first. After all, I'm not a scientist, and remembered little enough of your borer's plans.... It's probably young Holmes who's dropped in on us. Shall we see?"

David Guinness and his daughter were speechless with dread. Quade had trained the searchlight on the borer, and by turning their heads they could see it plainly. It was all too clear that the machine was a total wreck. It had pitched over onto one side, its shell cracked and mangled irreparably. Grotesque pieces of crumpled metal lay all around it. Its slanting course had tumbled it within fifteen yards of the sphere.

In silence the old man and the girl watched Quade walk deliberately over to it, his automatic steady in his right hand. He wrenched at the long, narrow door, but it was so badly bent that for a while he could not get it open. At last it swung out, however, and Quade peered inside.

After a moment he reached in and drew out a rifle. He took it over to a nearby rock, smashed the gun's breech, then flung it, useless, aside. Returning to the borer, he again peered in.

Sue was about to scream from the torturous suspense when he at last straightened up and looked around at the white-faced girl and her father.

"Mr. Holmes is tougher than I'd thought possible," he said, with a thin smile; "he's still alive." And, as Sue gasped with relief, he added: "Would you like to see him?"

He dragged the young man's unconscious body roughly out on the floor. There were several bad bruises on his face and head, but otherwise he was apparently uninjured. As Quade stood over him, playing idly with the automatic, he stirred, and blinked, and at last, with an effort, got up on one elbow and looked straight at the thin lips and narrowed eyes of the man standing above. He shook his head, trying to comprehend, then muttered hazily:

"You—you're—Quade?"

Quade did not have time to answer, for Sue Guinness cried out:

"Phil! Are you all right?"

Phil stared stupidly around, caught sight of the two who lay bound on the floor, and staggered to his feet. "Sue!" he cried, relief and understanding flooding his voice. He started towards her.

"Stand where you are!" Quade snapped harshly, and the automatic in his hand came up. Holmes peered at it and stopped, but his blood-streaked face settled into tight lines, and his body tensed.

"You'd better," continued Quade. "Now tell me what happened to Juan."

Phil forced himself to be calm. "Your pal, the greaser?" he said cuttingly. "He's lying on a bunk in your shack. He shot himself, playing with a gun."

Quade chose not to notice the way Phil said this, but a little of the suave self-confidence was gone from his face as he said: "Well, in that case I'll have to hurry back to the surface to attend to him. But don't be alarmed," he added, more brightly. "I'll be back for you all in an hour or so."

At this, David Guinness struggled frantically with his bonds and

yelled:

"Don't believe him, Phil! He's going to leave us here, to starve and die! He told us so just before you came down!"

Quade's face twitched perceptibly. His eyes were nervous.

"Is that true, Quade?" Holmes asked. There was a steely note in his voice.

"Why—no, of course not," the other said hastily, uncertain whether to lie or not. "Of course I didn't!"

Phil Holmes looked square into his eyes. He bluffed.

"You couldn't desert us, Quade. You haven't the guts. You haven't the guts."

His face and eyes burned with the contempt that was in his words. It cut Quade to the raw. But he could not avoid Phil's eyes. He stared at them for a full moment, trembling slightly. Slowly, by inches, he started to back toward the sphere; then suddenly he ran for it with all his might, Holmes after him. Quade got to it first, and inside, as he yanked in the searchlight and slammed and locked the door, he yelled:

"You'll see, you damned pup! You'll see!" And there was the smothered sound of half-maniacal laughter....

Phil threw all his weight against the metal door, but it was hopeless and he knew it. He had gathered himself for another rush when he heard Guinness yell:

"Back, Phil—back! He'll turn on the side disintegrators!"

Mad with rage as the young man was, he at once saw the danger and leaped away—only to almost fall over the professor's prone body. With hurrying, trembling fingers he untied the pair's bonds, and they struggled to their feet, cramped and stiff. Then it was Phil who warned them.

"Back as far as you can! Hurry!" He grabbed Sue's hand and plunged toward the uncertain protection of a huge rock far in the rear. At once he made them lie flat on the ground.

As yet the sphere had not stirred nor emitted a whisper of sound, though they knew the man inside was conning the controls in a fever of haste to leave the cavern. But they hadn't long to wait. There came a sputter, a starting cough from the rocket tubes beneath the sphere. Quickly they warmed into life, and the dully glimmering ball rocked

in the hole it lay in. Then a cataract of noise unleashed itself; a devastating thunder roared through the echoing cavern as the rockets burst into full force. A wave of brilliant orange-red splashed out from under the sphere, licked back up its sides, and seemed literally to shove the great ball up towards the hole in the ceiling.

Its ascent was very slow. As it gained height it looked—save for its speed—like a fantastic meteor flaming through the night, for the orange plumage that streamed from beneath lit the ball with dazzling color. A glowing sphere, it staggered midway between floor and ceiling, creeping jerkily upwards.

"He's not going to hit the hole!" shouted Guinness.

The borer had not risen in a perfectly straight line; it jarred against the rim of the hole, and wavered uncertainly. Every second the roar of its rockets, swollen by echoes, rose in a savage crescendo; the faces of the three who watched were painted orange in the glow.

The sphere was blind. The man inside could judge his course only by the feel. As the three who were deserted watched, hoping ardently that Quade would not be able to find the opening, the left side-rockets spouted lances of fire, and they knew he had discovered the way to maneuver the borer laterally. The new flames welded with the

exhaust of the main tubes into a great fan-shaped tail, so brilliant and shot through with other colors that their eyes could not stand the sight, except in winks. The borer jerked to the right, but still it could not find the hole. Then the flames lessened for a moment, and the borer sank down, to rise again a moment later. Its ascent was so labored that Phil shouted to Professor Guinness:

"Why so slow?"

And the inventor told him that which he had not seen for the intolerable light.

"Only half his rockets are on!"

This time the sphere was correctly aimed, however, and it roared straight into the hole. Immediately the fierce sound of the exhaust was muffled, and in a few seconds only the fiery plumage, shooting down from the ceiling, showed where the machine was. Then this disappeared, and the noise alone was left.

Phil leaped forward, intending to stare up, but Guinness's yell halted him.

"Not yet! He might still use the disintegrators!"

For many minutes they waited, till the muffled exhaust had died to a drone. There was a puzzled expression on the professor's face as the three at last walked over and dared peer up into the hole. Far above, the splash of orange lit the walls of the tunnel.

"That's funny!" the old man muttered. "He's only using half the rockets—about ten. I thought he'd turn them all on when he got into the hole, but he didn't. Either they were damaged in the fall, or Quade doesn't see fit to use them."

"Half of them are enough," said Phil bitterly, and put his arm around the quiet girl standing next to him. Together, a silent little group, they watched the spot of orange die to a pin-point; watched it waver, twinkle, ever growing smaller.... And then it was gone.

Gone! Back to the surface of the earth, to the normal world of reality. Only four miles above them—a small enough distance on the surface itself—and yet it might have been a million miles, so utterly were they barred from it....

The same thought was in their minds, though none of them dared express it. They were thinking of the serene desert, and the cool wind, and the buttes and the high hills, placid in the moonlight. Of the hushed rise of the dawn, the first flush of the sun that was so

achingly lovely on the desert. The sun they would never see again, buried in a lifeless world of gloom four miles within.... And buried alive—and not alive for long....

But that way lay madness. Phil Holmes drove the horrible thoughts from his brain and forced a smile to his face.

"Well, that's that!" he said in a voice meant to be cheerful.

The dim cavern echoed his words mockingly. With the earth-borer gone—the man-made machine that had dared break a solitude undisturbed since the earth first cooled—the great cavern seemed to return to its awful original mood. The three dwarfed humans became wholly conscious of it. They felt it almost a living thing, stretching vastly around them, tightening its unheard spell on them. Its smell, of mouldy earth and rocks down which water slowly dripped, filled their nostrils and somehow added to their fear.

As they looked about, their eyes became accustomed to the dim, eery, phosphorescent illumination. They saw little worm-like creatures now and again appear from tiny holes between stalagmites in the jagged floor; and, as Phil wondered in his mind how long it would be before they would be reduced to using them for food, a strange mole-sized animal scraped from the darkness and pecked at

one of them. As it slithered away, a writhing shape in its mouth, Holmes muttered bitterly: "A competitor!" Vague, flitting forms haunted the gloom among the stalactites of the distorted ceiling—hints of the things that lived in the terrible silence of this nether world. Here Time had paused, and life had halted in primate form.

A little moan came from Sue Guinness's pale lips. She plucked at her arm; a sickly white worm, only an inch long, had fallen on it from the ceiling. "Oh!" she gasped. "Oh!"

Phil drew her closer to him, and walked with her over to Quade's wrecked borer. "Let's see what we've got here," he suggested cheerfully.

The machine was over on its side, the metal mangled and crushed beyond repair. Nevertheless, he squeezed into it. "Stand back!" he warned. "I'm going to try its rockets!" There was a click of broken machinery, and that was all. "Rockets gone," Phil muttered.

He pulled another lever over. There was a sputter from within the borer, then a furious roar that sent great echoes beating through the cavern. A cloud of dust reared up before the bottom of the machine, whipped madly for a moment, and sank as the bellow of sound died down. Sue saw that a rocky rise in the floor directly in front of the

disintegrators had been planed off levelly.

Phil scrambled out. "The disintegrators work," he said, "but a lot of good they do us. The borer's hopelessly cracked." He shrugged his shoulders, and with a discouraged gesture cast to the ground a coil of rope he had found inside.

Then suddenly he swung around. "Professor!" he called to the old figure standing bowed beneath the hole in the ceiling. "There's a draft blowing from somewhere! Do you feel it?"

Guinness felt with his hands a moment and nodded slowly. "Yes," he said.

"It's coming from this way!" Sue said excitedly, pointing into the darkness on one side of the cavern. "And it goes up the hole we made in the ceiling!"

Phil turned eagerly to the old inventor. "It must come from somewhere," he said, "and that somewhere may take us toward the surface. Let's follow it!"

"We might as well," the other agreed wearily. His was the tone of a man who has only a certain time to live.

But Phil was more eager. "While there's life, there's hope," he said cheerfully. "Come on, Sue, Professor!" And he led the way forward toward the dim, distorted rock shapes in the distance.

The roof and sides of the cavern angled down into a rough, tunnel-like opening, from which the draft swept. It was a heavy air, weighted with the smell of moist earth and lifeless water and a nameless, flat, stale gas. They slowly made their way through the impeding stalagmites, surrounded by a dark blur of shadows, the ghostly phosphorescent light illuminating well only the few rods around them. Utter silence brooded over the tunnel.

Phil paused when they had gone about seventy-five feet. "I left that rope behind," he said, "and we may need it. I'll return and get it, and you both wait right here." With the words he turned and went back into the shadows.

He went as fast as he could, not liking to leave the other two alone. But when he had retrieved the rope and tied it to his waist, he permitted himself a last look up as he passed under the hole in the ceiling—and what he saw there tensed every muscle in his body, and made his heart beat like mad. Again there was a tiny spot of orange in the blackness above!

"Professor!" he yelled excitedly. "Sue! Come here! The sphere's coming back!"

There was no doubt about it. The pin-point of light was growing each second, with the flame of the descending exhausts. Guinness and his daughter ran from the tunnel, and, guided by Phil's excited ejaculations, hurried to his side. Their eyes confirmed what his had seen. The earth-borer was coming down!

"But," Guinness said bewilderedly, "those rockets were enough to lift him!"

This was a mystery. Even though ten rockets were on—ten tiny spots of orange flame—the sphere came down swiftly. The same force which some time before had lifted it slowly up was now insufficient. The roar of the tubes rose rapidly. "Get back!" Phil ordered, remembering the danger, and they all retreated to the mouth of the tunnel, ready to peep cautiously around the edge. Holmes' jaws were locked tight with grim resolution. Quade was coming back! he told himself exultantly. This time he must not go up alone! This time—!

But his half-formed resolutions were idle. He could not know what frightful thing was bringing Quade down—what frightful experience was in store for them all....

Chapter 4: Spawn of the Cavern

In a crescendo of noise that stunned their ears, the earth-borer came down. Tongues of fire flared from the hole, speared to the ground and were deflected upward, cradling the metal ball in a wave of flame. Through this fiery curtain the machine slowly lowered to the floor, where a shower of sparks spattered out, blinding the eyes of the watchers with their brilliance. For a full minute the orange-glowing sphere lay there, quivering from the vibration; then the exhausts died and the wave of flame wavered and sank into nothingness. While their ear-drums continued the thunder, the three stared at the borer, not daring to approach, yet striving to solve the mystery of why it had sunk despite the up-thrust of ten rocket tubes.

As their eyes again became accustomed to the familiar phosphorescent illumination, pallid and cold after the fierce orange flame, they saw why—and their eyes went wide with surprise and horror.

A strange mass was covering the top of the earth-borer—something that looked like a heap of viscid, whitish jelly. It was sprawled shapelessly over the round upper part of the metal sphere, a half-transparent, loathsome stuff, several feet thick in places.

And Phil Holmes, striving to understand what it could be, saw an awful thing. "It's moving!" he whispered, unconsciously drawing Sue closer. "There's—there's life in it!"

Lazy quiverings were running through the mound of jelly, pulsings that gave evidence of its low organism. They saw little ripples of even beat run over it, and under them steady, sluggish convulsions that told of life; that showed, perhaps, that the thing was hungry and preparing to move its body in quest of food.

It was alive, unquestionably. The borer lay still, but this thing moved internally, of itself. It was life in its lowest, most primate form. The mass was mind, stomach, muscle and body all in one, stark and raw before their startled eyes.

"Oh, God!" Phil whispered through the long pause. "It can't be real!..."

"Protoplasm—a monster amoeba," David Guinness's curiously cracked voice said. "Just as it exists on the surface, only microscopically. Primate life...."

The lock of the earth-borer clicked. Phil gasped. "Quade is coming out!" he said. A little cry of horror came from Sue. And the metal

door opened.

James Quade stepped through, automatic in hand. He was fresh from the light inside, and he could not see well. He was quite unconscious of what was oozing down on him from above, of the flabby heap that was carefully stretching down for him. He peered into the gloom, looking for the three he had deserted, and all the time an arm from the mass above crept nearer. Sue Guinness's nerves suddenly gave, and she shrieked; but Quade's ears were deaf from the borer's thunder, and he did not hear her.

It was when he lifted one foot back into the sphere—probably to get out the searchlight—that he felt the thing's presence. He looked up—and a strange sound came from him. For seconds he apparently could not move, stark fear rooting him to the ground, the gun limp in his hand.

Then a surge ran through the mound of flesh, and the arm, a pseudopod, reached more rapidly for him.

It stung Quade into action. He leaped back, brought up his automatic, and fired at the thing once; then three times more. He, and each one of the others, saw four bullets thud into the heap of pallid matter and heard them clang on the metal of the sphere

beneath. They had gone right through its flesh—but they showed no slightest effect!

Quade was evidently unwilling to leave the sphere. Jerking his arm up he brought his trigger finger back again. A burst of three more shots barked through the cavern, echoing and re-echoing. The man screamed an inarticulate oath as he saw how useless his bullets were, and hurled the empty gun at the monster—which was down on the floor now, and bunching its sluggish body together.

The automatic went right into it. They could all see it there, in the middle of the amorphous body, while the creature stopped, as if determining whether or not it was food. Quade screwed his courage together in the pause, and tried to dodge past to the door of the sphere; but the monster was alert: another pseudopod sprang out from its shapeless flesh, sending him back on his heels.

The feeler had all but touched Quade, and with the closeness of his escape, the remnants of his courage gave. He yelled, and turned and ran.

He ran straight for the three who watched from the tunnel mouth,

and the mound of shapeless jelly came fast on his trail. It came in surging rolls, like thick fluid oozing forward; it would have been hard to measure its size, for each moment it changed. The only impression the four humans had was that of a wave of half-transparent matter that one instant was a sticky ball of viscid flesh and the next a rapidly advancing crescent whose horns reached far out on each flank to cut off retreat.

By instinct Phil jerked Sue around and yelled at the professor to run, for the old man seemed to be frozen into an attitude of fearful interest. Bullets would not stop the thing—could anything? Holmes wondered. He could visualize all too easily the death they would meet if that shapeless, naked protoplasmic mass overtook and flowed over them....

But he wasted no time with such thoughts. They ran, all three, into the dark tunnel.

Quade caught up with them quickly. Personal enmity was suspended before this common peril. They could not run at full speed, for a multitude of obstacles hindered them. Tortuous ridges of rock lay directly across their path, formations that had been whipped in some mad, eon-old convulsion and then, through the ages, remained frozen into their present distortion; black pits gaped suddenly before

them; half-seen stalagmites, whose crystalline edges were razor-sharp, tore through to their flesh. Haste was perilous where every moment they might stumble into an unseen cleft and go pitching into awful depths below. They were staking everything on the draft that blew steadily in their faces; Phil told himself desperately that it must lead to some opening—it must!

But what if the opening were a vertical, impassable tunnel? He would not think of that....

Old David Guinness tired fast, and was already lagging in the rear when Quade gasped hoarsely:

"Hurry! It's close behind!"

Surging rapidly at a constant distance behind them, it came on. It was as fast as they were, and evidently untiring. It was in its own element; obstacles meant nothing to it. It oozed over the jagged ridges that took the humans precious moments to scramble past, and the speed of its weird progress seemed to increase as theirs faltered. It was a heartless mass driven inexorably by primal instinct towards the food that lay ahead. The dim phosphorescent illumination tinged its flabby tissues a weird white.

The passage they stumbled through narrowed. Long irregular spears of stalactites hung from the unseen ceiling; others, the drippings of ages, pronged up from the floor, shredding their clothes as they jarred into them. One moment they were clambering up-hill, slipping on the damp rock; the next they were sliding down into unprobed darkness, reckless of where they would land. They were aware only that the water-odorous draft was still in their faces, and the hungry mound of flesh behind....

"I can't last much longer!" old Guinness's winded voice gasped. "Best leave me behind. I—I might delay it!"

For answer, Phil went back, grabbed him by the arm and dragged his tired body forward. He was snatching a glance behind to see how close the monster was, when Sue's frightened voice reached him from ahead.

"There's a wall here, Phil—and no way through!"

And then Holmes came to it. It barred the passage, and was apparently unbroken. Yet the draft still came!

"Search for where the draft enters!" he yelled. "You take that side!" And he started feeling over the clammy, uneven surface, searching

frantically for a cleft. It seemed to be hopeless. Quade stood staring back into the gloom, his eyes looking for what he knew was surging towards them. His face had gone sickly white, he was trembling as if with fever, and he sucked in air with long, racking gasps.

"Here! I have it!" cried the girl suddenly at her end of the wall. The other three ran over, and saw, just above her head, a narrow rift in the rock, barely wide enough to squirm through. "Into it!" Phil ordered tersely. He grasped her, raised her high, and she wormed through. Quade scrambled to get in next, but Holmes shoved him aside and boosted the old man through. Then he helped the other.

A second after he had swung himself up, a wave of whitish matter rolled up below, hungry pseudopods reaching for the food it knew was near. It began to trickle up the wall....

The crack was narrow and jagged; utterly black. Phil could hear Quade frantically worming himself ahead, and he wondered achingly if it would lead anywhere. Then a faint, clear voice from ahead rang out:

"It's opening up!"

Sue's voice! Phil breathed more easily. The next moment Quade

scrambled through; dim light came; and they were in another vast, ghostly-lit cavern.

The crack came out on its floor-level; Guinness was resting near, and his daughter had her hands on a large boulder of rock. "Let's shove it against the hole!" she suggested to Phil. "It might stop it!"

"Good, Sue, good!" he exclaimed, and at once all four of them strained at the chunk, putting forth every bit of strength they had. The boulder stirred, rolled over, and thudded neatly in front of the crack, almost completely sealing it. There was only a cleft of five inches on one side.

But their expression of relief died in their throats. A tiny trickle of white appeared through the niche. The amorphous monster was compressing itself to a single stream, thin enough to squeeze through even that narrow space.

They could not block it. They had nothing to attack it with. There was nothing to do but run.... And hope for a chance to double back....

As nearly as they could make out, this second cavern was as large as the first. They could dimly see the fantastic shapes of hundreds of stalactites hanging from the ceiling. Clumps of stalagmites made the

floor a maze which they threaded painfully. The strong steady draft guided them like a radio beacon, leading them to their only faint hope of escape and life. Guinness, very tired, staggered along mechanically, a heavy weight on Phil's supporting arm; James Quade ran here and there in frantic spurts of speed. Sue was silent, but the hopelessness in her eyes tortured Phil like a wound. His shirt had long since been ripped to shreds; his face, bruised in the first place by the borer he had crashed in, now was scratched and bloody from contact with rough stalagmites.

Then, without warning, they suddenly found among the rough walls on the far side of the cavern, the birthplace of the draft. It lay at the edge of the floor—a dark hole, very wide. Black, sinister and clammy from the draft that poured from it, it pierced vertically down into the very bowels of the earth. It was impassable.

James Quade crumpled at the brink; "It's the end!" he moaned. "We can't go farther! It's the end of the draft!"

The hole blocked their forward path completely. They could not go ahead.... In seconds, it seemed, the slithering that told of the monster's approach sounded from behind. Sue's eyes were already fixed on the awful, surging mass when a voice off to one side yelled:

"Here! Quick!"

It was Phil Holmes. He had been scouting through the gloom, and had found something.

The other three ran to him. "There's another draft going through here," he explained rapidly, pointing to an angled crevice in the rocky wall. "There's a good chance it goes to the cavern where the sphere and the hole to the surface are. Anyway, we've got to take it. I'd better go first, after this—and you, Quade, last. I trust you less than the monster behind."

He turned and edged into the crack, and the others followed as he had ordered. Quickly the passageway broadened, and they found the going much easier than it had been before. For perhaps ten minutes they scrambled along, with the draft always on their backs and the blessed, though faint, fire of hope kindling again. In all that time they did not see their pursuer once, and the hope that they had lost it brought a measure of much needed optimism to drive their tired bodies onward. They found but few time-wasting obstacles. If only the tunnel would continue right into the original cavern! If only their path would stay clear and unhindered!

But it did not. The sound of Phil's footsteps ahead stopped, and when

Sue and her father came up they saw why.

"A river!" Phil said.

They were standing on a narrow ledge that overhung an underground river. A fetid smell of age-old, lifeless water rose from it. Dimly, at least fifty feet across, they could see the other side, shrouded in vague shadows. The inky stream beneath did not seem to move at all, but remained smooth and hard and thick-looking.

They could not go around it. The ledge was only a few feet wide, and blocked at each side.

"Got to cross!" Phil said tersely.

Quade, sickly-faced, stared down. "There—there might be other things in that water!" he gasped. "Monsters!"

"Sure," agreed Phil contemptuously. "You'd better stay here." He turned to the others. "I'll see how deep it is," he said, and without the faintest hesitation dove flatly in.

Oily ripples washed back, and they saw his head poke through, sputtering. "Not deep," he said. "Chest-high. Come on."

He reached for Sue, helped her down, and did the same for her father. Holding each by the hand, Sue's head barely above the water, he started across. They had not gone more than twenty feet when they heard Quade, left on the bank, give a hoarse yell of fear and dive into the water. Their dread pursuer had caught up with them.

And it followed—on the water! Phil had hoped it would not be able to cross, but once more the thing's astounding adaptability dashed his hopes. Without hesitation, the whitish jelly sprawled out over the water, rolling after them with ghastly, snake-like ripples, its pallid body standing out gruesomely against the black, odorous tide.

Quade came up thrashing madly, some feet to the side of the other three. He was swimming—and swimming with such strength that he quickly left them behind. He would be across before they; and that meant there was a good chance that the earth-borer would go up again with only one passenger....

Phil fought against the water, pulling Sue and her father forward as best he could. From behind came the rippling sound of their shapeless pursuer. "Ten feet more—" Holmes began—then abruptly stopped.

There had been a swish, a ripple upstream. And as their heads turned

they saw the water part and a black head, long, evil, glistening, pointing coldly down to where they were struggling towards the shore. Phil Holmes felt his strength ooze out. He heard Professor Guinness gasp:

"A water-snake!"

Its head was reared above the surface, gliding down on them silently, leaving a wedge of long, sluggish ripples behind. When thirty feet away the glistening head dipped under, and a great half-circle of leg-thick body arched out. It was like an oily stream of curved cable; then it ended in a pointed tail—and the creature was entirely under water....

With desperate strength Phil hauled the girl to the bank and, standing in several feet of water, pushed her up. Then he whirled and yanked old Guinness past him up into the hands of his daughter. With them safe, and Sue reaching out her hand for him, he began to scramble up himself.

But he was too late. There was a swish in the water behind him, and toothless, hard-gummed jaws clamped tight over one leg and drew him back and under. And with the touch of the creature's mouth a stiff shock jolted him; his body went numb; his arms flopped limply

down. He was paralyzed.

Sue Guinness cried out. Her father stared helplessly at the spot where his young partner had disappeared with so little commotion.

"It was an eel," he muttered dully. "Some kind of electric eel...."

Phil dimly realized the same thing. A moment later his face broke the surface, but he could not cry out; he could not move his little finger. Only his involuntary muscles kept working—his heart and his lungs. He found he could control his breathing a little.... And then he was wondering why he was remaining motionless on the surface. Gradually he came to understand.

He had not felt it, but the eel had let go its hold on his leg, and had disappeared. But only for a moment. Suddenly, from somewhere near, its gleaming body writhed crazily, and a terrific twist of its tail hit Phil a glancing blow on the chest. He was swept under, and the water around him became a maelstrom. When next he bobbed to the tumultuous surface, he managed to get a much-needed breath of air—and in the swirling currents glimpsed the long, snake-like head of the eel go shooting by, with thin trickles of stuff that looked like white jelly clinging to it.

That explained what was happening. The eel had been challenged by the ameboid monster, and they were fighting for possession of him —the common prey.

The water became an inferno of whipping and lashing movements, of whitish fibers and spearing thrusts of a glistening black electric body. Unquestionably the eel was using its numbing electric shock on its foe. Time and time again Phil felt the amoeba grasp him, searingly, only to be wrenched free by the force of the currents the combat stirred up. Once he thudded into the bottom of the river, and his lungs seemed about to burst before he was again shot to the top and managed to get a breath. At last the water quieted somewhat, and Phil, at the surface, saw the eel bury its head in a now apathetic mound of flesh.

It tore a portion loose with savage jaws, a portion that still writhed after it was separated from the parent mass; and then the victor glided swiftly downstream, and disappeared under the surface....

Holmes floated helplessly on the inky water. He could see the amoeba plainly; it was still partly paralyzed, for it was very still. But then a faint tremor ran through it; a wave ran over its surface—and it moved slowly towards him once again.

Desperately Phil tried to retreat. The will was there, but the body would not work. Save for a feeble flutter of his hands and feet, he could not move. He could not even turn around to bid Sue and David Guinness good-by—with his eyes....

Then a fresh, loved voice sounded just behind him, and he felt something tighten around his waist.

"It's all right, dear!" the voice called. "Hang on; we'll get you out!"

Sue had come in after him! She had grasped the rope tied to his belt, and she and her father were pulling him back to the bank!

He wanted to tell her to go back—the amoeba was only feet away—but he could only manage a little croak. And then he was safe up on the ledge at the other side of the river.

A surge of strength filled his limbs, and he knew the shock was rapidly wearing off. But it was also wearing off of the monster in the water. Its speed increased; the ripplings of its amorphous body-substance became quicker, more excited. It came on steadily.

While it came, the girl and her father worked desperately over Phil, massaging his body and pulling him further up the bank. It had all

but reached the bank when Holmes gasped:

"I think I can walk now. Where—where did Quade go to?"

Guinness gestured over to the right, up a dim winding passage through the rocks.

"Then we must follow—fast!" Phil said, staggering to his feet. "He may get to the sphere first; he'll go up by himself even yet! I'm all right!"

Despite his words, he could not run, and could only command an awkward walk. Sue lifted one of his arms around her shoulder, and her father took the other, and without a backward glance they labored ahead. But Phil's strength quickly returned, and they raised the pace until they had broken once more into a stumbling run.

How far ahead James Quade was, they did not know, but obviously they could follow where he had gone. Once again the draft was strong on their backs. They felt sure they were on the last stretch, headed for the earth-borer. But, unless they could overtake Quade, he would be there first. They had no illusions about what that would mean....

Chapter 5: A Death More Hideous

Auade was there first.

When they burst out of a narrow crevice, not far from the funnel-shaped opening they had originally entered, they saw him standing beside the open door of the sphere as if waiting. The searchlight inside was still on, and in its shaft of light they could see that he was smiling thinly, once more his old, confident self. It would only take him a second to jump in, slam the door and lock it. He could afford a last gesture....

The three stopped short. They saw something he did not.

"So!" he observed in his familiar, mocking voice. He paused, seeing that they did not come on. He had plenty of time.

He said something else, but the two men and the girl did not hear what it was. As if by a magnet their eyes were held by what was hanging above him, clinging to the lip of the hole the sphere had made in the ceiling.

It was an amoeba, another of those single-celled, protoplasmic mounds of flesh. It had evidently come down through the hole; and

now it was stretching, rubber-like, lower and lower, a living, reaching stalactite of whitish hunger.

Quade was all unconscious of it. His final words reached Phil's consciousness.

"... And this time, of course, I will keep the top disintegrators on. No other monster will then be able to weigh me down!"

He shrugged his shoulders and turned to the door. And that movement was the signal that brought his doom. Without a sound, the poised mass above dropped.

James Quade never knew what hit him. The heap of whitish jelly fell squarely. There was a brief moment of frantic lashing, of tortured struggles—then only tiny ripples running through the monster as it fed.

Sue Guinness turned her head. But the two men for some reason could not take their eyes away....

It was the girl's voice that jerked them back to reality. "The other!" she gasped. "It's coming, behind!"

They had completely forgotten the mass in the tunnel. Turning, they

saw that it was only fifteen feet away and approaching fast, and instinctively they ran out into the cavern, skirting the sphere widely. When they came to Quade's wrecked borer Phil, who had snatched a glance behind, dragged them down behind it. For he had seen their pursuer abandon the chase and go to share in the meal of its fellow.

"We'd best not get too far away," he whispered. "When they leave the front of the borer, maybe we can make a dash for it."

For minutes that went like hours the young man watched, waiting for the creatures to be done, hoping that they would go away. Fortunately the sphere lay between, and he was not forced to see too much. Only one portion of one of the monsters was visible, lapping out from behind the machine....

At last his body tensed, and he gripped Sue and her father's arm in quick warning. The things were leaving the sphere. Or, rather, only one was. For Phil saw that they had agglutenated—merged into oneness—and now the monster that remained was the sum of the sizes of the original two. And more....

They all watched. And they all saw the amoeba stop, hesitate for a moment—and come straight for the wrecked borer behind which they were hidden.

"Damn!" Phil whispered hoarsely. "It's still hungry—and it's after us!"

David Guinness sighed wearily. "It's heavy and sluggish, now," he said, "so maybe if we run again.... Though I don't know how I can last any longer...."

Holmes did not answer. His eyes were narrowed; he was casting about desperately for a plan. He hardly felt Sue's light touch on his arm as she whispered:

"In case, Phil—in case.... This must be good-by...."

But the young man turned to her with gleaming eyes. "Good-by, nothing!" he cried. "We've still got a card to play!"

She stared at him, wondering if he had cracked from the strain of what he had passed through. But his next words assured her he had not. "Go back, Sue," he said levelly. "Go far back. We'll win through this yet."

She hesitated, then obeyed. She crept back from the wrecked borer, back into the dim rear, eyes on Phil and the sluggish mass that moved inexorably towards him. When she had gone fifteen or

twenty yards she paused, and watched the two men anxiously.

Phil was talking swiftly to Professor Guinness. His voice was low and level, and though she could not hear the words she could catch the tone of assurance that ran through them. She saw her father nod his head, and he seemed to make the gesture with vigor. "I will," she heard him say; and he slapped Phil on the back, adding: "But for God's sake, be careful!"

And with these words the old man wormed inside Quade's wrecked borer and was gone from the girl's sight.

She wanted desperately to run forward and learn what Phil intended to do, but she restrained herself and obeyed his order. She waited, and watched; and saw the young man stand up, look at the slowly advancing monster—and deliberately walk right into its path!

Sue could not move from her fright. In a daze she saw Phil advance cautiously towards the amoeba and pause when within five feet of it. The thing stopped; remained absolutely motionless. She saw him take another short step forward. This time a pseudopod emerged, and reached slowly out for him. Phil avoided it easily, but by so narrow a margin that the girl's heart stopped beating. Then she saw him step back; and, snail-like, the creature followed, pausing twice, as if wary

and suspicious. Slowly Phil Holmes drew it after him.

To Sue, who did not know what was his plan, it seemed a deliberate invitation to death. She forgot about her father, lying inside the mangled borer, waiting. She did not see that Phil was leading the monster directly in front of it....

It was a grotesque, silent pursuit. The creature appeared to be unalert; its movements were sloth-like; yet the girl knew that if Phil once ventured an inch too close, or slipped, or tried to dodge past it to the sphere, its torpidness would vanish and it would have him. His maneuvering had to be delicate, judged to a matter of inches. Tense with the suspense, the strain of the slow-paced seconds, she watched —and yet hardly dared to watch, fearful of the awful thing she might see.

It was a fantastic game of tag her lover was playing, with death the penalty for tardiness. The slow, enticing movements were repeated again and again, Phil advancing very close, and stepping back in the nick of time. Always he barely avoided the clutching white arms that were extended, and little by little he decoyed the thing onward....

Then came the end. As Holmes was almost in front of the wrecked machine, Sue saw him glance quickly aside—and, as if waiting for

that moment when he would be off guard, the monster whipped forward in a great, reaching surge.

Sue's ragged nerves cracked: she shrieked. They had him! She started forward, then halted abruptly. With a tremendous leap, Phil Holmes had wrenched free and flung himself backwards. She heard his yell:

"Now!"

There was a sputter from the bottom of the outstretched borer; then, like the crack of a whip, came a bellow of awful sound.

A thick cloud of dust reared up, and the ear-numbing thunder rolled through the cavern in great pulsing echoes. And then Sue Guinness understood what the young man had been about.

The disintegrators of James Quade's borer had sent a broad beam of annihilation into the monster. His own machine had destroyed his destroyer—and given his intended victims their only chance to escape from the dread fate he had schemed for them.

Sue could see no trace of the creature in its pyre of slow-swirling dust. Caught squarely, its annihilation had been utter. And then,

through the thunder that still echoed in her ear-drums, she heard a joyful voice.

"We got 'em!"

Through the dusty haze Phil appeared at her side. He flung his arms up exultantly, swept her off the ground, hugged her close.

"We got 'em!" he cried again. "We're free—free to go up!"

Professor David Guinness crawled from the borer. His face, for the first time since the descent, wore a broad smile. Phil ran over to him, slapped him on the back; and the older man said:

"You did it beautifully, Phil." He turned to Sue. "He had to decoy them right in front of the disintegrators. It was—well, it was magnificent!"

"All credit to Sue: she was my inspiration!" Phil said, laughing. "But now," he added, "let's see if we can fix those dead rocket-tubes. I have a patient up above—and, anyway, I'm not over-fond of this place!"

The three had won through. They had blasted four miles down from the surface of the earth. The brain of an elderly scientist, the quick-

witted courage of a young engineer, had achieved the seemingly impossible—and against obstacles that could not have been predicted. Death had attended that achievement, as death often does accompany great forward steps; James Quade had gone to a death more hideous than that he devised for the others. But, in spite of the justice of it, a moment of silence fell on the three survivors as they came to the spot where his fate at last had caught up to him.

But it was only a moment. It was relieved by Professor Guinness's picking up the chunk of radium ore his former partner had hewn from the cavern's wall. He held it up for all to see, and smiled.

"Here it is," he said simply.

Then he led the way into his earth-borer, and the little door closed quietly and firmly into place.

For a few minutes slight tappings came from within, as if a wrench or a screwdriver were being used. Then the tappings stopped, and all was silence.

A choke, a starting cough, came from beneath the sphere. A torrent of rushing sound burst out, and spears of orange flame spurted from the bottom and splashed up its sides, bathing it in fierce, brilliant

light. It stirred. Then, slowly and smoothly, the great ball of metal raised up.

It hit the edge of the hole in the ceiling, and hung there, hesitating. Side-rockets flared, and the sphere angled over. Then it slid, roaring, through the hole.

Swiftly the spots of orange from its rocket-tube exhausts died to pin-points. There were now almost twenty of them. And soon these pin-points wavered, and vanished utterly.

Then there was only blackness in the hole that went up to the surface. Blackness in the hole, calm night on the desert above—and silence, as if the cavern were brooding on the puny figures and strange machines that had for the first time dared invade its solitude, in the realms four miles within the earth....

82 The Lake of Light by Jack Williamson

In the frozen wastes at the bottom of the world two explorers find a strange pool of white fire—and have a strange adventure.

Aproximate word count: 10,600

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

The roar of the motor rang loud in the frosty air above a desert of ice. The sky above us was a deep purple-blue; the red sun hung like a crimson eye low in the north. Three thousand feet below, through a hazy blue mist of wind-whipped, frozen vapor, was the rugged wilderness of black ice-peaks and blizzard-carved hummocks of snow—a grim, undulating waste, black and yellow, splotched with crystal white. The icy wind howled dismally through the struts. We were flying above the weird ice-mountains of the Enderby quadrant of Antarctica.

That was a perilous flight, across the blizzard-whipped bottom of the world. In all the years of polar exploration by air, since Byrd's memorable flights, this area had never been crossed. The intrepid

Britisher, Major Meriden, with the daring American aviatrix whom the world had known as Mildred Cross before she married him, had flown into it nineteen years before—and like many others they had never returned.

Faintly, above the purring drone of the motor, I heard Ray Summers' shout. I drew my gaze from the desolate plateau of ice below and leaned forward. His lean, fur-hooded face was turned back toward me. A mittened hand was pointing, and thin lips moved in words that I did not hear above the roar of the engine and the scream of the wind.

I turned and looked out to the right, past the shimmering silver disk of the propeller. Under the blue haze of ice-crystals in the air, the ice lay away in a vast undulating plain of black and yellow, broken with splotches of prismatic whiteness, lying away in frozen desolation to the rim of the cold violet sky. Rising against that sky I saw a curious thing.

It was a mountain of fire!

Beyond the desert of ice, a great conical peak pointed straight into the amethystine gloom of the polar heavens. It was brilliantly white, a finger of milky fire, a sharp cone of pure light. It shone with white

radiance. It was brighter, far brighter, than is the sacred cone of Fujiyama in the vivid day of Japan.

For many minutes I stared in wonder at it. Far away it was; it looked very small. It was like a little heap of light poured from the hand of a fire-god. What it might be, I could not imagine. At first sight, I imagined it might be a volcano with streams of incandescent lava flowing down the side. I knew that this continent of mystery boasted Mt. Erebus and other active craters. But there was none of the smoke or lurid yellow flame which accompanies volcanic eruptions.

I was still watching it, and wondering, when the catastrophe took place—the catastrophe which hurled us into a mad extravaganza of amazing adventure.

Our little two-place amphibian was flying smoothly, through air unusually good for this continent of storms. The twelve cylinders of the motor had been firing regularly since we took off from Byrd's old station at Little America fifteen hours before. We had crossed the pole in safety. It looked as if we might succeed in this attempt to penetrate the last white spot on the map. Then it Happened.

A sudden crack of snapping metal rang out sharp as a pistol report. A bright blade of metal flashed past the wing-struts, to fall in a flashing

arc. The motor broke abruptly into a mad, deep-voiced roar. Terrific vibration shook the ship, until I feared that it would go to pieces.

Ray Summers, with his usual quick efficiency, cut the throttle. Quickly the motor slowed to idling speed; the vibration stopped. A last cough of the engine, and there was no sound save the shrill screaming of the wind in the gloomy twilight of this unknown land beyond the pole.

"What in the devil!" I exclaimed.

"The prop! See!" Ray pointed ahead.

I looked, and the dreadful truth flashed upon me. The steel propeller was gone, or half of it at least. One blade was broken off at a jagged line just above the hub.

“The propeller! What made it break? I've never heard—"

"Search me!" Ray grinned. "The important thing is that it did. It was all-metal, of course, tested and guaranteed. The guarantee isn't worth much here. A flaw in the forging, perhaps, that escaped detection. And this low temperature. Makes metal as brittle as glass. And the thing may have been crystallized by the vibration."

The plane was coming down in a shallow glide. I looked out at the grim expanse of black ice-crags and glistening snow below us, and it was far from a comforting prospect. But I had a huge amount of confidence in Ray Summers. I have known him since the day he appeared, from his father's great Arizona ranch, to be a freshman in the School of Mines at El Paso, where I was then an instructor in geology. We have knocked about queer corners of the world together for a good many years. But he is still but a great boy, with the bluff, simple manners of the West.

"Do you think we can land?" I asked.

"Looks like we've got to," he said, grimly.

"And what after that?"

"How should I know? We have the sledge, tent, furs. Food, and fuel for the primus to last a week. There's the rifle, but it must be a thousand miles to anything to shoot. We can do our best."

"We should have had an extra prop."

"Of course. But it was so many pounds, when every pound counted. And who knew the thing would break?"

"We'll never get out on a week's provisions."

"Not a shot! Too bad to disappoint Captain Harper." Ray grinned wanly. "He ought to have the *Albatross* around there by this time, waiting for us." The *Albatross* was the ship which had left us at Little America a few months before, to steam around and pick us up at our destination beyond Enderby Land. "We're in the same boat with Major Meriden and his wife—and all those others. Lost without a trace."

"You've read Scott's diary—that he wrote after he visited the pole in 1912—the one they found with the bodies?"

"Yes. Not altogether cheerful. But we won't be trying to get out. No use of that." He looked at me suddenly, grinning again. "Say, Jim, why not try for that shining mountain we saw? It looks queer enough to be interesting. We ought to make it in a week."

"I'm with you," I said.

I did not speak again, for the jagged ice-peaks were coming rather near. I held my breath as the little plane veered around a slender black spire and dropped toward a tiny scrap of smooth snow among the ice-hummocks. I might have spared my anxiety. Under Ray's

consumately skilful piloting, the skids struck the snow with hardly a shock. We glided swiftly over the ice and came to rest just short of a yawning crevasse.

"Suppose," said Ray, "that we spend the first night in the plane. We are tired already. We can keep warm here, and sleep. We've plenty of ice to melt for water. Then we're off for the shining mountain."

I agreed: Ray Summers is usually right. We got out the sledge, packed it, took our bearings, and made all preparations for a start to the luminous mountain, which was about a hundred miles away. The thermometer stood at twenty below, but we were comfortable enough in our furs as we ate a scanty supper and went to sleep in the cabin of the plane.

We started promptly the next morning, after draining the last of the hot chocolate from our vacuum bottles, which we left behind. We had a light but powerful sporting rifle, with telescopic sights, and several hundred rounds of ammunition. Ray put them in the pack, though I insisted that we would never need them, unless a quick way out of our predicament.

"No, Jim," he said. "We take 'em along. We don't know what we're going to find at the shining mountain."

The air was bitterly cold as we set out: it was twenty-five below and a sharp wind was blowing. Only our toiling at the sledge kept us warm. We covered eighteen miles that day, and made a good camp in the lee of a bare stone ridge.

That night there was a slight fall of snow. When we went on it was nearly thirty-five degrees below zero. The layer of fresh snow concealed irregularities in the ice, making our pulling very hard. After an exhausting day we had made hardly fifteen miles.

On the following day the sky was covered with gray clouds, and a bitterly cold wind blew. We should have remained in the tent, but the shortage of food made it imperative that we keep moving. We felt immensely better after a reckless, generous fill of hot pemmican stew; but the next morning my feet were so painful from frost-bite that I could hardly get on my fur boots.

Walking was very painful to me that day, but we made a good distance, having come to smoother ice. Ray was very kind in caring for me. I became discouraged about going on at all: it was very painful, and I knew there was no hope of getting out. I tried to get some of our morphine tablets, but Ray had them, and refused to be convinced that he ought to go on without me.

On the next march we came in sight of the luminous mountain, which cheered me considerably. It was a curious thing, indeed. A straight-sided cone of light it was, rather steeper than the average volcano. Its point was sharp, its sides smooth as if cut with a mammoth plane. And it shone with a pure white light, with a steady and unchanging milky radiance. It rose out of the black and dull yellow of the ice wilderness like a white finger of hope.

The next morning it was a little warmer. Ray had been caring for my feet very attentively, but it took me nearly two hours to get on my footgear. Again I tried to get him to leave me, but he refused.

We arrived at the base of the shining mountain in three more marches. On the last night the fuel for the primus was all gone, having been used up during the very cold weather, and we were unable to melt water to drink. We munched the last of our pemmican dry.

A few minutes after we had started on the last morning, Ray stopped suddenly.

"Look at that!" he cried.

I saw what he had seen—the wreck of an airplane, the wings

crumpled up and blackened with fire. We limped up to it.

"A Harley biplane!" Ray exclaimed. "That is Major Meriden's ship! And look at that wing! It looks like it's been in an electric furnace!"

I examined the metal wing; saw that it had been blackened with heat. The metal was fused and twisted.

"I've seen a good many wrecks, Jim. I've seen planes that burned as they fell. But nothing like that. The fuselage and engines were not even afire. Jim, something struck out from that shining mountain and brought them down!"

"Are they—" I began.

Ray was poking about in the snow in the cockpits.

"No. Not here. Probably would have been better for them if they had been killed in the plane. Quick and merciful."

He examined the engines and propellers.

"No. Seems to be nothing wrong. Something struck them down!"

Soon we went on.

The shining mountain rose before us like a great cone of fire. It must have been three thousand feet high, and about that in diameter at the bottom. Its walls were as smooth and straight as though turned from milky rock crystal in a gigantic lathe. It shone with a steady, brilliantly white radiance.

"That's no natural hill!" Ray grunted beside me as we limped on.

We were less than a mile from the foot of the cone of fire. Soon we observed another remarkable thing about it. It seemed that a straight band of silvery metal rose from the snow about its foot.

"Has it a wall around it?" I exclaimed.

"Evidently," said Ray. "Looks as if it's built on a round metal platform. But by whom? When? Why?"

We approached the curious wall. It was of a white metal, apparently aluminum, or a silvery alloy of that metal. In places it was twenty-five feet high, but more usually the snow and ice was banked high against it. The smooth white wall of the gleaming mountain stood several hundred yards back from the wall.

"Let's have a look over it." Ray suggested. "We can get up on that

hummock, against it. You know, this place must have been built by men!"

We clambered up over the ice, as he suggested, until our heads came above the top of the wall.

"A lake of fire!" cried Ray.

Indeed, a lake of liquid fire lay before us. The white aluminum wall was hardly a foot thick. It formed a great circular tank, nearly a mile across, with the cone of white fire rising in the center. And the tank was filled, to within a foot of the top, with shimmeringly brilliant white fluid, bright and luminous as the cone—liquid light!

Ray dipped a hand into it. The hand came up with fingers of fire, radiant, gleaming, with shining drops falling from them. With a spasmodic effort, he flung off the luminous drops, rubbed his hand on his garments, and got it back into its fur mitten.

"Gee, it's cold!" he muttered. "Freeze the horns off a brass billy-goat!"

"Cold light!" I exclaimed. "What wouldn't a bottle of that stuff be worth to a chemist back in the States!"

"That cone must be a factory to make the stuff." Ray suggested, hugging his hand. "They might pump the liquid up to the top, and then let it trickle down over the sides: that would explain why the cone is so bright. The stuff might absorb sunlight, like barium sulphide. And there could be chemical action with the air, under the actinic rays."

"Well, if somebody's making cold light, where does he use it?"

"I'd like to find out, and strike him for a hot meal," Ray said, grinning. "It's too cold to live on top of the ground around here. They must run it down in a cave."

"Then let's find the hole."

"You know it's possible we won't be welcome. This mountain of light may be connected with the vanishing of all the aviators. We'd better take along the rifle."

We set off around just outside the white metal wall. The snow and ice was irregularly banked against it, but the wall itself was smooth and unbroken. We had limped along for some two miles, or more than halfway around the amazing lake of light. I had begun to doubt that we would find anything.

Then we came to a square metal tower, ten feet on a side, that rose just outside the silvery wall, to a level with its top. The ice was low here; the tower rose twenty feet above its unequal surface. We found metal flanges riveted to its side, like the steps of a ladder. They were most inconveniently placed, nearly four feet apart; but we were able to climb them, and to look down the shaft.

It was a straight-sided pit, evidently some hundreds of feet deep. We could see a tiny square of light at the bottom, very far away. The flanges ran down the side forming the rungs of a ladder that gave access to whatever lay at the bottom.

Without hesitation, Ray climbed over the side and started down. I followed him, feeling a great relief in getting out of the freezing wind. Ray had the rifle and ammunition strapped to his back, along with a few other articles; and I had a small pack. We had abandoned the sledge, with the useless stove and the most of our instruments. Our food was all gone.

The metal flanges were fully four feet apart, and it was not easy to scramble down from one to another; certainly not easy for one who was cold, hungry, thirsty, worn out with a week of exhausting marches, and suffering the torture of frozen feet.

"You know, this thing was not built by men," Ray observed.

"Not built by men? What do you mean?"

"Men would have put the steps closer together. Jim, I'm afraid we are up against something—well—that we aren't used to."

"If men didn't build this, what did?" I was astounded.

"Search me! This continent has been cut off from the rest of the world for geologic ages. Such life as has been found here is not common to the rest of the earth. It is not impossible that some form of life, isolated here, has developed intelligence and acquired the power to erect that cone of light—and to burn the wing off a metal airplane."

My thoughts whirled madly as we clambered down the shaft.

It must have taken us an hour to reach the bottom. I did not count the steps, but it must have been at least a thousand feet. The air grew rapidly warmer as we descended. We both took off most of our heavy fur garments, and left them hanging on the rungs.

I was rather nervous. I felt the nearness of an intelligent, hostile power. I had a great fear that the owners of those steps would use

them to find us, and then crush us ruthlessly as they had brought down Meriden's plane.

The little square of white light below grew larger. Finally I saw Ray swing off and stand on his feet in a flood of white radiance below me. The air was warm, moist, laden with a subtle unfamiliar fragrance that suggested growing things. Then I stood beside Ray.

We stood on the bare stone floor of a huge cavern. It must have been of volcanic origin. The walls glistened with the sparkling smoothness of volcanic glass. It was a huge space. The black roof was a hundred feet high, or more; the cave was some hundreds of feet wide. And it sloped away from us into dim distance as though leading into huger cavities below.

The light that shone upon us came from an amazing thing—a fall of liquid fire. From the roof plunged a sheer torrent of white brilliantly luminous fluid, falling a hundred feet into a shimmering pool of moon-flame. Shining opalescent mists swirled about it, and the ceaseless roar of it filled the cave with sound. It seemed that a stream of the phosphorescent stuff ran off down the cave from the pool, to light the lower caverns.

"Very clever!" said Ray. "They make the stuff up there at the cone

and run it in here to see by."

"This warm air feels mighty good," I remarked, pulling off another garment.

Ray sniffed the air. "A curious odor. Smells like something growing. Where anything is growing there ought to be something to eat. Let's see what we can find."

Only black obsidian covered the floor about us. Cautiously we skirted the overflowing pool of white fire, and followed down the stream of it that flowed toward the inner cavern. We had gone but a few hundred yards when suddenly Ray stopped me with a hand on my arm.

"Lie flat!" he hissed. "Quick!"

He dived behind a huge mass of fire-born granite. I flung myself down beside him.

"Something is coming up the trail by the shining river. And it isn't a man! It's between us and the light; we should be able to see it."

Soon I heard a curious scraping sound, and a little tinkle of metal. I caught a whiff of a powerful odor—a strange, fishy odor—so strong

that it almost knocked me down.

The thing that made the scraping and the tinkle and the smell came into view. The sight of it sickened me with horror.

It was far larger than a man; its body was heavy as a horse's, but nearer the ground. In form it suggested a huge crab, though it was not very much like any crustacean I had ever seen. It was mostly red in color, and covered with a huge scarlet shell. It had five pairs of limbs. The two forward pairs had pinchers, seemingly used as hands; it scraped along on the other three pairs. Yard-long antennae, slender and luminously green, wavered above a grotesque head. The many facets of compound eyes stood on the end of foot-long stalks.

The amazing crab-thing wore a metal harness. Bands of silvery aluminum were fastened about its shell, with little cases of white metal dangling to them. In one of its uplifted claws it carried what seemed to be an aluminum bar, two feet long and an inch thick.

It scraped lumberingly past, between us and the racing stream of white fire. It passed less than a dozen feet from us. The curious fishy smell of it was overpowering, disgusting.

Sweat of horror chilled my limbs. The monster emanated power,

sinister, malevolent power, power intelligent, alien and hostile to man.

I trembled with the fear that it would see us, but it scrambled grotesquely on. When it was twenty yards past, Ray picked up a block of black lava that lay beneath his hand and hurled it silently and swiftly. It crashed splinteringly on the rocks far beyond the creature, on the other side of the stream of light.

In fascination I watched the monster as it paused as if astonished. The glittering compound eyes twisted about on their stalks, and the long shining green tentacles wavered questioningly. Then the knobbed limbs snapped the white metal tube to a level position. A metallic click came from it.

And a ray of red light, vivid and intense, burst from the tube. It flashed across the river of fire. With a dull, thudding burst it struck the rocks where the stone had fallen. It must have been a ray of concentrated heat. Rocks beneath it flashed into sudden incandescence, splintered and cracked, flowed in molten streams.

In a moment the intensely brilliant ruby ray flashed off. The rocks in

the circle where it had struck faded to a dull red and then to blackness, still cracking and crumbling.

To my intense relief, the monstrous crab lumbered on.

"That," Ray whispered, "is what got Major Meriden's airplane wing."

When we could hear its scraping progress no longer, we climbed up from behind our boulder and continued cautiously down the cavern, beside the rushing luminous river. In half a mile we came to a bend. Rounding it, we gazed upon a remarkable sight.

We looked into a huge cavity in the heart of the earth. A vast underground plain lay before us, with the black lava of the roof arching above it. It must have been miles across, though we had no way to measure it, and it stretched down into dim hazy distance. Its level was hundreds of feet below us.

At our feet the glistening river of fire plunged down again in a magnificent flaming fall. Below, its luminous liquid was spread out in rivers and lakes and canals, over all the vast plain. The channels ran through an amazing jungle. It was a forest of fungus, of mushroom things with great fleshy stalks and spreading circular tops. But they were not the sickly white and yellow of ordinary

mushrooms, but were of brilliant colors, bright green, flaming scarlet, gold and purple-blue. Huge brilliant yellow stalks, fringed with crimson and black, lifted mauve tops thirty feet or more. It was a veritable forest of flame-bright fungus.

In the center of this weirdly forested subterranean plain was a great lake, filled, not with the flaming liquid, but with dark crystal water. And on the bottom of that lake, clearly visible from the elevation upon which we stood, was a city!

A city below the water! The buildings were upright cylinders in groups of two or three, of dozens, even of hundreds. For miles, the bottom of the great lake was covered with them. They were all of crystal, azure-blue, brilliant as cylinders turned from immense sapphires. They were vividly visible beneath the transparent water. Not one of them broke the surface.

Through the clear black water we saw moving hundreds, thousands of the giant crabs. The crawled over the hard, pebbled bottom of the lake, or swam between the crystal cylinders of the city. They were huge as the one we had seen, with red shells, great ominous looking stalked eyes, luminous green tentacular antennae and knobbed claws on forelimbs.

"Looks as if we've run on something to write home about," Ray muttered in amazement.

"A whole city of them! A whole world! No wonder they could build that cone-mountain for a lighting plant!"

"When they got to knocking down airplanes with that heat-ray," he speculated, "they were probably surprised to find that other animals had developed intelligence."

"Do you suppose those mushroom things are good to eat?"

"We can try and see—if the crabs don't get us first with a heat-ray. I'm hungry enough to try anything!"

Again we cautiously advanced. The river of light fell over a sheer precipice, but we found a metal ladder spiked to the rock, with rungs as inconveniently far apart as those in the shaft. It was five hundred feet, I suppose, to the bottom; it took us many minutes to descend.

At last we stepped off in a little rocky clearing. The forest of brilliant mushrooms rose about us, great fleshy stalks of gold and graceful fringes of black and scarlet about them, with flattened heads of purple.

We started eagerly across toward the fungoid forest. I had visions of tearing off great pieces of soft, golden flesh and filling my aching stomach with it.

We were stopped by a sharp, poignantly eager human cry.

A human being, a girl, darted from among the mushroom stalks and ran across to us. Sobbing out great incoherent cries, she dropped at Ray's feet, wrapped her arms about his knees and clung to him, while her slender body was wracked with sobbing cries.

My first impression was that she was very beautiful—and that impression I was never called upon to revise. About her lithe young body she had the merest scrap of some curious green fabric—ample in the warm air of the great cavern. Luxuriant brown hair fell loose about her white shoulders. She was not quite twenty years old, I supposed; her body was superbly formed, with the graceful curves and the free, smooth movements of a wild thing.

Ray stood motionless for a moment, thunder-struck as I was, while the sobbing girl clung to his knees. Then the astonishment on his face gave place to pity.

"Poor kid!" he murmured.

He bent, took her tenderly by the shoulder, helped her to her feet.

Her beauty burst upon us like a great light. Smoothly white, her skin was, perfect. Wide blue eyes, now appealing, even piteous, looked from beneath a wealth of golden brown hair. White teeth, straight and even, flashed behind the natural crimson of her lips.

She stood staring at Ray, in a sort of enchantment of wonder. An eager light of incredible joy flamed in her amazing eyes; red lips were parted in an unconscious smile of joy. She looked like the troubled princess in the fairy tale, when the prince of her dreams appeared in the flesh.

"God, but you're beautiful!" Ray's words slipped out as if he were hardly conscious of them. He flushed quickly, stepped back a little.

The girl's lips opened. She voiced a curious cry. It was deep toned, pealing with a wonderful timbre. A happy burst of sound, like a baby makes. But strong, ringing, musically golden. And pathetically eager, pitifully glad, so that it brought tears to my eyes, cynical old man that I am.

I saw Ray wipe his eyes.

"Can you talk?" Ray put the question in a clear, deliberate voice, with great kindness ringing in it.

"Talk?" The chiming, golden voice was slow, uncertain. "Talk? Yes. I talked—with mother. But for long—I have had no need to talk."

"Where is your mother?" Ray's voice was gentle.

"She is gone. She was here when I was little." The clear, silvery voice was more certain now. "Once, when I was almost as big as she—she was still. She was cold. She did not move when I called her. The Things took her away. She was dead. She told me that sometime she would be dead."

Bright tears came in the wide blue eyes, trickled down over the perfect face. A pathetic catch was in the deliberate, halting voice. I turned away, and Ray put a handkerchief to his face.

"What is your name? Who are you?" Ray spoke kindly.

"I am Mildred. Mildred Meriden."

"Meriden!" Ray turned to me. "I bet this is a daughter of the major and his wife!"

"Father was the major," the girl said slowly. "He and mother came in a machine that flew, from a far land. The Things burned the machine with the red fire. They came here and the Things kept them. They made mother sing over the water. They killed father. I never saw him."

"I know," Ray, said gently. "We came from the same land. We saw your father's machine above."

"You came from outside! And you are going back? Oh, take me with you! Take me!" Piteous pleading was in her voice. "It is so—lonely since the Things took Mother away. Mother told me that sometime men would come, and take me away to see the people and the outside that she told me of. Oh, please take me!"

"Don't worry! You go along whenever we leave—if we can get out."

"Oh, I am so glad! You are very good!"

Impulsively, she threw her arms around Ray's neck. Gently, he disengaged himself, flushing a little. I noticed, however, that he did not seem particularly displeased.

"But can we get out?"

"Mother and I tried. We could never get out. The Things watch. They make me come to the water to sing, when the great bell rings."

"Are these things goods to eat?" I motioned to the brilliant fungal forest. I had begun to fear that Ray would never get to this very important topic.

Blue eyes regarded me. "Eat? Oh, you are hungry! Come! I have food."

Like a child, she grasped Ray's hand, pulled him toward the mushroom jungle. I followed, and we slipped in between the brilliantly golden, fleshy stalks. They rose to the tangle of bright feathery fringes above, huge and substantial as the trunks of trees.

In a few minutes we came to a wide, shallow canal, metal-walled, through which a slow current of the opalescent, luminous liquid was flowing. We crossed this on a narrow metal foot-bridge, and went on through the brilliant forest.

Suddenly we emerged into a little clearing, with the black waters of the great lake visible beyond it, across a quarter-mile of rocky beach. In the middle of the open space, rose three straight cylinders of azure crystal, side by side. Each must have been twenty feet in diameter,

and forty high. They shone with a clear blue light, like the cylindrical buildings we had seen in the strange city of the crab-creatures below the great lake.

Mildred Meriden, the strangely beautiful girl who had known no other world than this amazing cavern empire where giant crabs reigned, beckoned us with unconscious queenly grace to enter the arched door in the blue sapphire wall of her remarkable abode of clustered cylinders.

The crystal of the walls seemed luminous, the lofty cylinders were filled with a liquid, azure radiance. The high round room we entered was strangely furnished. There was a silken couch, a bathing pool of blue crystal filled with sparkling water, a curious chest of drawers made of bright aluminum with a mirror of polished crystal, its top bearing odd combs and other articles. The furnishings must have been done by the giant crabs, under human direction.

Mildred led us quickly across the room, through an arched opening into another. A round aluminum table stood in the center of the room, with two curious metal chairs beside it. Odd metal cabinets stood about the shining blue walls. The girl made us sit down, and put dishes before us.

She gave us each a bowl of thick, sweetish soup, darkly red; placed before us a dish piled high with little circular cakes, crisp and brown, which had a tantalizing fragrance; poured for each of us a transparent crystal goblet full of clear amber drink.

We fell to with enthusiasm and abandon.

"The Things made this place for father," the girl told us, as she watched us eat, attentively replenishing the red soup in the great blue crystal bowl, or the little cakes, or the fragrant amber drink. "They would give him anything he wanted. But he tried to go away with mother, and they killed him."

"We must get out of here," Ray declared when at last we had done. "We must get together a lot of food, and enough clothing for all of us. We ought to be able to make it to the edge of the ice-pack. We've got to give these crab-things the slip; we ought to get off before they know we're here—unless they already do."

Mildred was eagerly attentive: she was so unused to human speech that it took the best of her efforts to understand us, though it seems that her mother had given her quite a wide education. She promised that there would be no difficulty about the food.

"Mother taught me how to fix food," she said. "She always said that sometime men would come, with weapons of fire and great noise that would tear and kill the Things. I have food ready, in bags—more than we can carry. I have, too, the furs that mother and father wore."

She ran into another room and returned with a great pile of fur garments, which we examined and found to be in good condition.

"Now is the time," Ray said. "I'd like to know more about the big crabs, but there'll be a chance for that, later. Mildred is the important thing, now. We must get her out. Then we can tell the world about this place and come back with a bigger expedition."

"You think we can reach the coast?"

"I think so. It might be hard on Mildred. But we will have food; we can probably find fuel for the stove in Meriden's plane, if the tanks were well sealed. And Captain Harper should have a relief party landed and sent to meet us. We should have only three or four hundred miles to go alone."

"Three or four hundred miles, over country like we've been crossing in the last week, with a girl! Ray, we'd never make it!"

"It's the only chance."

I said nothing more. I knew that I could stand no such march on my frozen feet, but I resolved to say nothing about it. I would help them as far as I could, and then walk out of camp some night. Men have done just that.

Mildred brought out sacks of the little cakes, and of a red powder that seemed to be the dried and ground flesh of a crimson mushroom. We made a pack for each of us, as heavy as we could carry.

Just before we were ready to start Ray took off my footgear and treated my feet from his medicine kit. I had feared gangrene, but he assured me that there was no danger if they were well cared for. Walking was still exquisitely painful to me as we slipped out through the arched door and into the fungoid forest beyond the three blue cylinders.

As rapidly and silently as possible we hastened through the brilliant fungous forest, across the river of opalescent liquid, to the foot of the fall of fire. A weird and splendid sight was that sheer arc of shimmering white flame, roaring into a pool of opal light, and surrounded with a mist of moon-flame.

We reached the foot of the metal ladder spiked to the rocks beside the fall and started up immediately. The going was not easy. The packs of food, heavy enough when we were on level ground, were difficult indeed to lift when one was scrambling up over rungs four feet apart.

Ray climbed ahead, with a piece of rope fastened from his waist to Mildred's, so that he could help her if she slipped. I was below the girl. We were halfway up the rock when suddenly a glare of red light shone upon me, casting my shadow sharply on the cliff. I looked up and saw the broad, intensely red beam of a heat-ray like that we had seen the giant crab use.

The ray came, evidently, from the shore of the great lake with its submerged city of blue cylinders. It fell upon the face of the cliff just above us. Quickly the ladder was heated to cherry red. The face of the rock grew incandescent, cracked. Hot sparks rained down upon us.

Slowly the ray moved down, toward us.

"Guess we'd better call it off," said Ray. "They have the advantage right now. Better get to climbing down, Jim. This ladder is going to be burning my hands pretty soon."

I climbed down. Mildred and Ray scrambled down behind me.

The ray followed us, keeping the metal at a cherry red just above Ray's hands.

I looked down and saw a dozen of the giant crabs lumbering up out of the fungoid jungle from the direction of the great lake. Hideous things they were, with staring, stalked eyes, shining green antennae, polished red shells, claw-armed limbs. Like the one that had passed us in the upper cavern, they wore glistening white metal accoutrements.

We clambered down, with the red ray following.

I dropped to the ground among them, wet with the sweat of horror. I reeled in nausea from the intolerable odor of the crab-things; it was indescribable, overpowering.

Curious rasping stridulations came from them, sounds which seemed to serve as means of communication, and which Mildred evidently understood.

"They say that you will not be harmed, but that you must not go out," she called down.

I was seized by the pincher-like claws, held writhing in an unbreakable grasp, while the glittering eyes twisted about, looked at me, and the shining green tentacles wavered questioningly over me. My stomach revolted at the horrible odor.

The crabs tore off my pack, even my clothing. Ray was similarly treated as soon as he reached the ground. Though they took Mildred's pack, they treated her with a curious respect.

In a few minutes they released us. They had taken the packs, the rifle and ammunition, our medicine kit and the few instruments we had brought with us down the shaft, even our clothing. They turned us loose stark naked. Ray's face and neck went beet-red when he saw Mildred standing by him.

The rasping sound came from one of them again.

"It says you may stay with me," Mildred said. "They will not harm you unless you try again to get away. If you do, you die—as father did. They will keep what they took from you."

Several of the creatures went scraping off, carrying the articles they had taken from us either in their claws or in the metal cases they wore. Several waited, staring at us with the stalked compound eyes,

and waving the green antennae as if they were organs of some special sense.

Two of the creatures waited at the foot of the metal ladder, holding the long slender white tubes of the heat-ray in their claws.

"They say we can go now," Mildred said.

She led the way toward the edge of the brilliant jungle. She seemed to be without false modesty, for I saw her glancing with evident admiration at Ray's lithe and powerful white-skinned figure. We followed her into the giant mushrooms, glad to escape the overpowering stench of the crabs.

In a few minutes we arrived again at the strange building of the three blue cylinders. Mildred, noticing our discomfort, produced for each of us a piece of white silken fabric with which we draped ourselves.

She had noticed my difficulty in walking on bare feet. She had me bathe them, then dressed them with a soothing yellow oil, and bandaged them skilfully.

"Anyhow," she said later, "it is good to have both of you here with me. I am sorry indeed for you that you may never see your country

again. But it is good fortune for me. I was so lonely."

"These damned crabs don't know me!" Ray Summers muttered. "They think I'll play around like a pet kitten, for the rest of my life! They'll get their eyes opened. We'll spend the winter on Palm Beach yet!"

"It seems to me that we're rather outnumbered." I said. "And it's rather more pleasant in here than outside."

"I'm going to get that rifle," Ray declared, "and give these big crabs a little respect for humanity!"

"Let's rest up a while first, anyhow," I urged.

Presently Mildred noticed how tired we were. She went into the third of the connected cylinders of blue crystal, was busy a few minutes and called us to the couches she had prepared there.

"You may sleep," she told us. "The Things never come here. And they said they would not harm you, if you did not try to go out."

We lay down on the silken beds. In a few minutes I was sleep. I awoke to feel a curious unease, a sense of impending catastrophe. Ray was bending over me, his face drawn with anxiety.

"Something's happened!" he whispered. "She's gone!"

I sat up, staring into the liquid blue vastness of the tall cylinder above us.

"Listen! What's that?"

A deep bell-note sounded out, brazen, clanging. Sonorous, throbbing, mighty, it rang through the cylindered rooms. Slowly it died; faded to silence with a last ringing pulse. Tense minutes of silence passed. Again it boomed out, throbbed, and died. After more long minutes there was yet a third.

"Outside, somewhere!"

Ray started; ran to the arched door. We looked out upon the dense forest of gold and crimson mushrooms that grew below the black cavern roof. Before us, across a few hundred yards of bare rocky beach, was the edge of the crystal lake with the city of blue cylinders upon its floor.

"God! What's that?" Ray gripped my arm crushingly.

A thin wailing scream came across the beach from the black lake. A piteous sound it was, plaintive, pleading. Higher and higher it rose,

until it was a piercing silver note. Clear and sweet it was, but inexpressibly lonely, sorrowful, mournful. It sank slowly, died away. Again it rose and fell, and again.

"It's Mildred!" I gasped. "Didn't she say something about singing to the crabs?"

"Yes! I think she did. Well, if that's singing, it's wonderful! Had me feeling like I'd never see another human. But listen—"

Liquid, trilling notes were rising, pealing out in a queer, swift rhythm. It was happy, joyous, carefree. The rippling golden tones made me think of the caroling of birds on a spring morning. Swiftly it rose and fell, pure and clear as the tinkle of a mountain brook.

Mildred sang not words but notes of pure music.

The gay song died.

And the strong clear voice rose again with the force and challenge of bugle notes, with a swift marching time beating through it. It throbbed to a rhythm strange to me. It set my feet tingling to move; it set my heart to pulsing faster. It was a challenge to action, to battle.

Unconsciously obeying the suggestion of the song, Ray whispered, "Let's get over and see what's going on."

We leaped through the door and ran across four hundred yards of rocky beach to the edge of the lake. We stepped on a granite bluff a few yards above the water, to gaze upon as strange a sight as men ever saw.

The black water lay before us, a transparent crystal sheet. On its rocky bottom we could see the innumerable clusters of upright azure cylinders that were the city of the crabs. The blue cylinders seemed to bend and waver in the water.

A hundred yards away from us, over the dark water, was Mildred. She stood on a slender azure cylinder that came just to the surface. Tall, slender, superbly graceful, with only the scant bodice of green silken stuff about her, she looked like the statue of a goddess in white marble. Her head was thrown up, golden-brown hair fell behind her shoulders, and the pure notes of her song rang over the water.

Beyond her, all about her, were thousands upon thousands of the giant crabs, swimming at the surface of the water. Their green antenna rose above the water, a curious forest of luminous tentacles,

flexing, wavering. Green coils moved and swung in time to the strange rhythm of her song.

The last note died. Her white arms fell in a gesture of finality. The thousands of twisting green antennae vanished below the water, and the giant red crabs swam swiftly back to the tall blue cylinders of their submerged city.

The white goddess turned and saw us.

Her voice rang out in a golden shout of welcome. With a clean dive she slipped into the water and came swimming swiftly toward us. Her slim white body glided through the crystal water as smoothly as a fish. Reaching the shore she sprang to her feet and ran to meet Ray.

"The Things come together when the giant bell rings, to listen to my song," she said. "They like my singing, as they liked mother's. But for that, they would not let us live. That is the reason they would not let us go."

"I like your singing, too," Ray informed her. "Though at first you made me cry. It was so lonely."

"The song was lonely because I have been lonely. Did you hear the

glad song I sang because you have come?"

"Sure! Great stuff! Made me feel like a kid at Christmas!"

"Come," she said. "We will eat."

Like a child, she took Ray's hand again, smiling naively up at him as she led the way toward the three sapphire cylinders.

Back in the blue-vaulted dining room, Ray made Mildred sit with me at the little metal table while he served the little brown cakes and the dark-red soup and the fragrant amber drink. Mildred got up and brought a great metal bowl filled with tiny purple fruits that had a delicious, piquant tang.

Ray was deeply thoughtful as he ate. Suddenly he sat back and cried out:

"I've got it!"

"Got what?" I demanded.

"I want that rifle! Mildred can find out where it is. Then, when she sings, the crabs will all come. I'll get the gun, while she is singing, and hide it. Then when it comes time to get out, she will sing while

you and I are getting our packs up the cliff. I can cover them with the rifle while she gets up to us."

"Looks good enough," I agreed, "provided they all come to hear the singing."

He explained the plan at greater length to the girl. She assured him that the crabs all come when the bell-notes sound. She thought that she could make them return her furs, and find out where they had put the gun.

My feet were much better than they had been, and Mildred dressed them again with the yellow oil. Ray examined them, said that I should be able to walk as well as ever in a few days.

Considerable time went by. Since the crabs had taken our watches, we had no very accurate way of counting days; but I think we slept about a dozen times. Ray and Mildred spent a good deal of time together, and seemed not altogether to hate each other. By the end of the time my feet were quite well; I did not even lose a toe.

We went over our plans for escape in great detail. The crabs had confiscated our clothing. Mildred managed to secure the return of her furs, and, incidentally, while she was about it, learned where the

rifle was.

Fortunately, perhaps realizing that it would be ruined by water, the crabs had not taken it to their submerged city. Being amphibious, they lived above water as easily as below, and much of their industrial equipment was above the surface. The great pumps which lifted the white phosphorescent liquid from the canals back to the cone above the ground were located beyond the great lake. I did not see the place, but Ray tells me that they had great engines and a wealth of strange and complex machinery there. It was at these pumps that they had left our rifle and instruments, as Mildred found when she was recovering her furs.

They had taken our food, and we prepared as much more as we could carry, arranged sacks for it, and made quilted garments for ourselves.

Then the three brazen notes clanged out, and Mildred ran across the beach and swam out to the blue cylinder to sing. Ray slipped hurriedly away, while the green forest of antennae was still growing up from the water about the girl.

I waited above the beach, enchanted by the haunting, wordless melody of the gongs. It seemed that only a few minutes had passed,

though it may have been an hour or more, when Ray was by my side again. He flourished the rifle.

"I've got it! In good shape, too. Hasn't even been fired, though it looks like they have opened a box of cartridges, and cut open one or two. Maybe they didn't understand the outfit—or it may be such a primitive weapon that they aren't interested in it."

We hurried up to the building of blue cylinders and carefully hid the gun and ammunition, as well as a sun compass, a pair of prism binoculars, and a few other articles Ray had recovered.

In a few minutes Mildred, having seen Ray's return, finished her song and ran up to join us. We arranged our packs, and waited the next call of the throbbing brazen gong to make the attempt for freedom.

We slept twice again before the clang of the great gong. Ray and Mildred were always together; I could not see that they were at all impatient.

The bell note came, the awful brazen vibration of it ringing on the black cavern roof. It came when we were eating, in the liquid turquoise radiance of the lofty cylinder. We sprang out. Ray gave his

last directions to Mildred.

"Give us time to get to the top of the cliff by the shining fall. Then swim ashore and run. They may not notice. And if they do, we give 'em a taste of lead!"

I was not very much surprised when he took the girl in his arms and put a burning kiss on her red lips. She gasped, but her struggles subsided very quickly; she clung to him as he freed her.

She paused a moment in the door, before she ran down across the beach. A radiant light of joy was burning in her great blue eyes, even though tears were glistening there.

Ray and I waited, to give time for the giant crabs that guarded the ladder to get away. In about ten more minutes the second brazen gong sounded, and presently the third. We gathered up the heavy packs of food. Ray took the rifle and I the binoculars, and we slipped out into the brilliant mushroom forest.

I stepped confidently out of the jungle into the clearing below the splendid opalescent fall of fire—and threw myself backward in trembling panic. A flaming crimson ray cut hissing into the towering mushrooms above my head.

Mildred's confidence that the crabs would all gather at the ringing of the gong had been mistaken. The two guards had been waiting at the foot of the ladder, their flaming heat-rays ready for use.

As I dived back into the jungle, I heard two quick reports of the rifle. I scrambled awkwardly to my feet, beneath the heavy pack. Ray stood alert beside me, the smoking rifle in his hand. The giant crabs had collapsed by the foot of the ladder, in grotesque and hideous metal-bound heaps of red shell and twisted limb. Blood was oozing from a ragged hole in the head of each.

"Glad they were here," Ray muttered. "I wanted to try the gun out on 'em. They're soft enough beneath the shell; the bullet tears 'em up inside. Let's get a move on!"

He sprang past the revolting carcasses. I followed, holding my nose against their nauseating, charnel-house odor. We scrambled up the metal ladder.

As we climbed, I could hear the haunting melody of Mildred's wordless song coming faint across the distance. Once I glanced back for a moment, and glimpsed her tiny white figure above the black water, with the thousands of green antennae rising in a luminous forest about her.

We reached the top of the cliff, where the opalescent river plunged down in the flaming fall. Ray chose convenient boulders for shelter and quickly we flung ourselves flat. Ray replaced the fired cartridges in the rifle and leveled it across the rock before him. I unslung the binoculars and focussed them.

"Watch 'em close," Ray muttered. "And tell me when to shoot."

The black lake lay below us, with the weird city of sapphire cylinders on its floor. I got the glasses upon Mildred's white form. Soon she dived from the turquoise pedestal, swam swiftly ashore and vanished in the vivid fungous jungle. The wavering green antennae vanished below the water; I watched the crabs swimming away. Some of them climbed out of the water and lumbered off in various directions.

In fifteen minutes the slender white form of Mildred appeared at the foot of the ladder. She sprang over the dead crabs and scrambled nimbly up. Soon she was halfway up the face of the cliff, and there had been no sign of discovery. My hopes ran high.

I was sweeping the whole plain with the binoculars, while Ray peered through the telescopic sights of the rifle. Suddenly I saw a giant crab pause as he lumbered along the edge of the black lake. He

rose upright; his shining green antennae wavered. Then I saw him reaching with a knobbed claw for a slender silver tube slung to his harness.

"Quick! The one by the lake! To the right of that canal!"

I pointed quickly. Ray swung his gun about, aimed. A broad red beam flashed from the tube the thing carried, and fell upon the cliff. The report of Ray's rifle rang thunderously in my ears. The red ray was snapped off abruptly, and the giant crab rolled over into the black water of the lake. Half a dozen of the huge crabs were in sight. They all took alarm, probably having seen the flash of the red ray. They raised grotesque heads, twisted stalked eyes and waved green antennae. Some of them began to raise the metal tubes of the heat-ray.

"Let's get all there are in sight!" Ray muttered.

He began firing regularly, with deliberate precision. A few times he had to take two shots, but ordinarily one was enough to bring down a giant crab in a writhing red mass. Three times a red ray flashed out, once at the girl clambering up the ladder, twice at our position above the precipice. But the intense color of the ray announced its source, and Ray stopped each before it could be focussed to do damage.

I looked over at Mildred and saw that she was still climbing bravely, a little over a hundred feet below.

Then the great red crabs began to climb out of the water, heat-ray tubes grasped in their claws. Ray fired as fast as he could load and aim. Still he shot with deliberate care, and almost every shot was effective.

Intense, ruby-red rays flashed up from the lake shore. Twice, one of them beat scorchingly upon us for a moment. Once a rock beside us was fused and cracked with the heat. But Ray fired rapidly, and the rays winked out as fast as they were born.

He was powder-stained, black and grimy. The heat-ray had singed his clothing. He was dripping perspiration. The gun was so hot that he could hardly handle it. But still the angry bark of the rifle rang out, almost with a deliberate rhythm. Ray was a fine shot in his youth on his father's Arizona ranch, but his best shooting, I think, was done from above that cascade of liquid fire, at the hordes of monster scarlet crabs.

Mildred scrambled over the edge, unharmed. Her breast was heaving, but her face was bright with joy.

"You are wonderful!" she gasped to Ray.

We seized the packs and beat a hurried retreat. A crimson forest of the heat-rays flashed up behind us, and flamed upon the black walls and roof of the cavern until glistening lava became incandescent, cracked and fused.

We were below the line of the rays. Quickly we made the bend in the cavern and followed at a halting run up the path beside the shimmering river of opalescent light. Before us the torrent of fire fell in a magnificent flaming arc from the roof.

We rounded the pool of lambent milk of flame, passed the roaring torrent of coruscating liquid radiance and reached the ladder in the square, metal shaft. "If we can get to the top before they can get up here, we're safe," Ray said. "If we don't, this shaft will be a chimney of fire."

In the haste of desperation, we attacked the thousand-foot climb. I went first, Mildred below me, and Ray, with the rifle, in the rear. Our heavy packs were a terrible impediment, but we dared not attempt to go on without them. The metal rungs were four feet apart; it was no easy task to scramble from one to the next, again and again, for hundreds of times.

It must have taken us an hour to make it. We should have been caught long before we reached the top, but the giant crabs were slow in their lumbering movements. Despite their evident intelligence, they seemed to lack anything like our railways and automobiles.

The cold gray light of the polar sky came about us; a dull, purple-blue square grew larger above. I clambered over the last rung, flung myself across the top of the metal shaft. Looking down at the tiny fleck of white light so far below, I saw a bit of red move in it.

"A crab!" I shouted. "Hurry!"

Mildred was just below me. I took her pack and helped her over the edge.

Red flame flared up the shaft.

We reached over, seized Ray's arms and fairly jerked him out of the ruby ray.

The bitterly cold wind struck our hot, perspiring bodies as we scrambled down the rungs outside the square metal shaft. Mildred shivered in her thin attire.

"Out of the frying pan into the ice box!" Ray jested grimly as we

dropped, to the frozen plain.

Quickly we tore open our packs. Ray and I snatched out clothing and wrapped up the trembling girl. In a few minutes we had her snugly dressed in the fur garments that had been Major Meriden's. Then we got into the quilted garments we had made for ourselves.

The intensely red heat-beam still flared up the shaft. Ray looked at it in satisfaction.

"They'll have it so hot they can't get up it for some time yet," he remarked hopefully.

We shouldered our packs and set out over the wilderness of snow, turning our backs upon the metal-bound lake of fire, with the tall cone of iridescent flame rising in its center.

The deep, purple-blue sky was clear, and, for a rarity, there was not much wind. I doubt that the temperature was twenty below. But it was a violent change from the warm cavern. Mildred was blue and shivering.

In two hours the metal rim below the great white cone had vanished behind the black ice-crags. We passed near the wreck of Major

Meriden's plane and reached our last camp, where we had left the tent sledge, primus stove, and most of our instruments. The tent was still stretched, though banked with snow. We got Mildred inside, chafed her hands, and soon had her comfortable.

Then Ray went out and soon returned with a sealed tin of oil from the wrecked plane, with which he lit the primus stove. Soon the tent was warm. We melted snow and cooked thick red soup. After the girl had made a meal of the scalding soup, with the little golden cakes, she professed to be feeling as well as ever.

"We can fix our plane!" Ray said. "There's a perfectly good prop on Meriden's plane!"

We went back to the wreck, found the tools, and removed an undamaged propeller. This we packed on the sledge, with a good supply of fuel for the stove.

"I'm sure we're safe now, so far as the crab-things go," he said. "I don't fancy they'd get around very well in the snow."

In an hour we broke camp, and made ten miles of the distance back to the plane before we stopped. We were anxious about Mildred, but she seemed to stand the journey admirably; she is a marvelous

physical specimen. She seemed running over with gay vivacity of spirit; she asked innumerable questions of the world which she had known only at second-hand from her mother's words.

The weather smiled on us during the march back to the plane as much as it had frowned on the terrible journey to the cone. We had an abundance of food and fuel, and we made it in eight easy stages. Once there was a light fall of snow, but the air was unusually warm and calm for the season.

We found the plane safe. It was the work of but a short time to remove the broken propeller and replace it with the one we had brought from the wrecked ship. We warmed and started the engine, broke the skids loose from the ice, turned the plane around, and took off safely from the tiny scrap of smooth ice.

Mildred seemed amazed and immensely delighted at the sensations of her first trip aloft.

A few hours later we were landing beside the *Albatross*, in the leaden blue sea beyond the ice barrier. Bluff Captain Harper greeted us in amazed delight as we climbed to the deck.

"You're just in time!" he said. "The relief expedition we landed came

back a week ago. We had no idea you could still be alive, with only a week's provisions. We were sailing to-morrow. But tell us! What happened? Your passenger—"

"We just stopped to pick up my fiancee," Ray grinned. "Captain, may I present Miss Mildred Meriden? We'll be wanting you to marry us right away."

83 The Ghost World by Sewell Peaslee Wright

Commander John Hanson records another of his thrilling interplanetary adventures with the Special Patrol Service.

Aproximate word count: 9,600

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

I was asleep when our danger was discovered, but I knew the instant the attention signal sounded that the situation was serious. Kincaide, my second officer, had a cool head, and he would not have called me except in a tremendous emergency.

"Hanson speaking!" I snapped into the microphone. "What's up, Mr. Kincaide?"

"A field of meteorites sweeping into our path, sir." Kincaide's voice was tense. "I have altered our course as much as I dared and am reducing speed at emergency rate, but this is the largest swarm of meteorites I have ever seen. I am afraid that we must pass through at least a section of it."

"With you in a moment, Mr. Kincaide!" I dropped the microphone and snatched up my robe, knotting its cord about me as I hurried out of my stateroom. In those days, interplanetary ships did not have their auras of repulsion rays to protect them from meteorites, it must be remembered. Two skins of metal were all that lay between the *Ertak* and all the dangers of space.

I took the companionway to the navigating room two steps at a time and fairly burst into the room.

Kincaide was crouched over the two charts that pictured the space around us, microphone pressed to his lips. Through the plate glass partition I could see the men in the operating room tensed over their wheels and levers and dials. Kincaide glanced up as I entered, and motioned with his free hand towards the charts.

One glance convinced me that he had not overestimated our danger. The space to right and left, and above and below, was fairly peppered with tiny pricks of greenish light that moved slowly across the milky faces of the charts.

From the position of the ship, represented as a glowing red spark, and measuring the distances roughly by means of the fine black lines graved in both directions upon the surface of the chart, it was evident

to any understanding observer that disaster of a most terrible kind was imminent.

Kincaide muttered into his microphone, and out of the tail of my eye I could see his orders obeyed on the instant by the men in the operating room. I could feel the peculiar, sickening surge that told of speed being reduced, and the course being altered, but the cold, brutally accurate charts before me assured me that no action we dared take would save us from the meteorites.

"We're in for it, Mr. Kincaide. Continue to reduce speed as much as possible, and keep bearing away, as at present. I believe we can avoid the thickest portion of the field, but we shall have to take our chances with the fringe."

"Yes, sir!" said Kincaide, without lifting his eyes from the chart. His voice was calm and businesslike, now; with the responsibility on my shoulders, as commander, he was the efficient, level-headed thinking machine that had endeared him to me as both fellow-officer and friend.

Leaving the charts to Kincaide, I sounded the general emergency signal, calling every man and officer of the *Ertak's* crew to his post, and began giving orders through the microphone.

"Mr. Correy,"—Correy was my first officer—"please report at once to the navigating room. Mr. Hendricks, make the rounds of all duty posts, please, and give special attention to the disintegrator ray operators. The ray generators are to be started at once, full speed." Hendricks, I might say, was a junior officer, and a very good one, although quick-tempered and excitable—failings of youth. He had only recently shipped with us to replace Anderson Croy, who—but that has already been recorded.

These preparations made, I glanced at the twin charts again. The peppering of tiny green lights, each of which represented a meteoritic body, had definitely shifted in relation to the position of the strongly-glowing red spark that was the *Ertak*, but a quick comparison of the two charts showed that we would be certain to pass through—again I use land terms to make my meaning clear—the upper right fringe of the field.

The great cluster of meteorites was moving in the same direction as ourselves now; Kincaide's change of course had settled that matter nicely. Naturally, this was the logical course, since should we come in contact with any of them, the impact would bear a relation to only the *difference* in our speeds, instead of the *sum*, as would be the case if we struck at a wide angle.

It was difficult to stand without grasping a support of some kind, and walking was almost impossible, for the reduction of our tremendous speed, and even the slightest change of direction, placed terrific strains upon the ship and everything in it. Space ships, at space speeds, must travel like the old-fashioned bullets if those within are to feel at ease.

"I believe, Mr. Kincaide, it might be well to slightly increase the power in the gravity pads," I suggested. Kincaide nodded and spoke briefly into his microphone; an instant later I felt my weight increase perhaps fifty per cent, and despite the inertia of my body, opposed to both the change in speed and direction of the *Ertak*, I could now stand without support, and could walk without too much difficulty.

The door of the navigating room was flung open, and Correy entered, his face alight with curiosity and eagerness. An emergency meant danger, and few beings in the universe have loved danger more than Correy.

"We're in for it, Mr. Correy," I said, with a nod towards the charts. "Swarm of meteorites, and we can't avoid them."

"Well, we've dodged through them before, sir," smiled Correy. "We can do it again."

"I hope so, but this is the largest field of them I have ever seen. Look at the charts: they're thicker than flies."

Correy glanced at the charts, slapped Kincaide across his bowed, tense shoulders, and laughed aloud.

"Trust the old *Ertak* to worm her way through, sir," he said. "The ray crews are on duty, I presume?"

"Yes. But I doubt that the rays will be of much assistance to us. Particularly if these are stony meteorites—and as you know, the odds are about ten to one against their being of ferrous composition. The rays, deducting the losses due to the utter lack of a conducting medium, will be insufficient protection. They will help, of course. The iron meteorites they will take care of effectively, but the conglomerate nature of the stony meteorites does not make them particularly susceptible to the disintegrating rays.

"We shall do what we can, but our success will depend largely upon good luck—or Divine Providence."

"At any rate, sir," replied Correy, and his voice had lost some of its lightness, "we are upon routine patrol and not upon special mission. If we do crack up, there is no emergency call that will remain

unanswered."

"No," I said dryly. "There will be just another 'Lost in Space' report in the records of the Service, and the *Ertak's* name will go up on the tablet of lost ships. In any case, we have done and shall do what we can. In ten minutes we shall know all there is to know. That about right, Mr. Kincaide?"

"Ten minutes?" Kincaide studied the charts with narrowed eyes, mentally balancing distance and speed. "We should be within the danger area in about that length of time, sir," he answered. "And out of it—if we come out—three or four minutes later."

"We'll come out of it," said Correy positively.

I walked heavily across the room and studied the charts again. Space above and below, to the right and the left of us, was powdered with the green points of light.

Correy joined me, his feet thumping with the unaccustomed weight given him by the increase in gravity. As he bent over the charts, I heard him draw in his breath sharply.

Kincaide looked up. Correy looked up. I looked up. The glance of

each man swept the faces, read the eyes, of the other two. Then, with one accord, we all three glanced up at the clocks—more properly, at the twelve-figured dial of the Earth clock, for none of us had any great love for the metric Universal system of time-keeping.

Ten minutes.... Less than that, now.

"Mr. Correy," I said, as calmly as I could, "you will relieve Mr. Kincaide as navigating officer. Mr. Kincaide, present my compliments to Mr. Hendricks, and ask him to explain the situation to the crew. You will instruct the disintegrator ray operators in their duties, and take charge of their activities. Start operation at your discretion; you understand the necessity."

"Yes, sir!" Kincaide saluted sharply, and I returned his salute. We did not shake hands, the Earth gesture of—strangely enough—both greeting and farewell, but we both realized that this might well be a final parting. The door closed behind him, and Correy and I were left together to watch the creeping hands of the Earth clock, the twin charts with their thick spatter of green lights, and the two fiery red sparks, one on each chart, that represented the *Ertak* sweeping recklessly towards the swarming danger ahead.

In other accounts of my experiences in the Special Patrol Service I

feel that I have written too much about myself. After all, I have run my race; a retired commander of the Service, and an old, old man, with the century mark well behind me, my only use is to record, in this fashion, some of those things the Service accomplished in the old days when the worlds of the Universe were strange to each other, and space travel was still an adventure to many.

The Universe is not interested in old men; it is concerned only with youth and action. It forgets that once we were young men, strong, impetuous, daring. It forgets what we did; but that has always been so. It always will be so. John Hanson, retired Commander of the Special Patrol Service, is fit only to amuse the present generation with his tales of bygone days.

Well, so be it. I am content. I have lived greatly; certainly I would not exchange my memories of those bold, daring days even for youth and strength again, had I to live that youth and waste that strength in this softened, gilded age.

But no more of this; it is too easy for an old man to rumble on about himself. It is only the young John Hanson, Commander of the *Ertak*, who can interest those who may pick up and read what I am writing here.

I did not waste the minutes measured by that clock, grouped with our other instruments in the navigating room of the *Ertak*. I wrote hastily in the ship's log, stating the facts briefly and without feeling. If we came through, the log would read better thus; if not, and by some strange chance it came to human eyes, then the Universe would know at least that the *Ertak's* officers did not flinch from even such a danger.

As I finished the entry, Correy spoke:

"Kincaide's estimate was not far off, sir," he said, with a swift glance at the clock. "Here we go!" It was less than half a minute short of the ten estimated by Kincaide.

I nodded and bent over the television disc—one of the huge, hooded affairs we used in those days. Widening the field to the greatest angle, and with low power, I inspected the space before us on all sides.

The charts, operated by super-radio reflexes, had not lied about the danger into which we were passing—had passed. We were in the midst of a veritable swarm of meteorites of all sizes.

They were not large; I believe the largest I saw had a mass of not

more than three or four times that of the *Ertak* herself. Some of the smaller bodies were only fifty or sixty feet in diameter.

They were jagged and irregular in shape, and they seemed to spin at varying speeds, like tiny worlds.

As I watched, fixing my view now on the space directly in our path, I saw that our disintegrator ray men were at work. Deep in the bowels of the *Ertak*, the moan of the ray generators had deepened in note; I could even feel the slight vibration beneath my feet.

One of the meteorites slowly crumbled on top, the dust of disintegration hovering in a compact mass about the body. More and more of it melted away. The spinning motion grew irregular, eccentric, as the center of gravity was changed by the action of the ray.

Another ray, two more, centered on the wobbling mass. It was directly in our path, looming up larger and larger every second.

Faster and faster it melted, the rays eating into it from four sides. But it was perilously near now; I had to reduce power in order to keep all of it within the field of my disc. If—

The thing vanished before the very nose of the ship, not an instant too soon. I glanced up at the surface temperature indicator, and saw the big black hand move slowly for a degree or two, and stop. It was a very sensitive instrument, and registered even the slight friction of our passage through the disintegrated dust of the meteorite.

Our rays were working desperately, but disintegrator rays are not nearly so effective in space as in an atmosphere of some kind. Half a dozen times it seemed that we must crash head on into one of the flying bodies, but our speed was reduced now to such an extent that we were going but little faster than the meteorites, and this fact was all that saved us. We had more time for utilizing our rays.

We nosed upward through the trailing fringe of the swarm in safety. The great field of meteorites was now below and ahead of us. We had won through! The *Ertak* was safe, and—

"There seems to be another directly above us, sir," commented Correy quietly, speaking for the first time since we had entered the area of danger. "I believe your disc is not picking it up."

"Thank you, Mr. Correy," I said. While operating on an entirely different principle, his two charts had certain very definite advantages: they showed the entire space around us, instead of but a

portion.

I picked up the meteorite he had mentioned without difficulty. It was a large body, about three times the mass of the *Ertak*, and some distance above us—a laggard in the group we had just eluded.

"Will it coincide with our path at any point, Mr. Correy?" I asked doubtfully. The television disc could not, of course, give me this information.

"I believe so; yes," replied Correy, frowning over his charts. "Are the rays on it, sir?"

"Yes. All of them, I judge, but they are making slow work of it." I fell silent, bending lower over the great hooded disc.

There were a dozen, a score of rays playing upon the surface of the meteorite. A halo of dust hung around the rapidly diminishing body, but still the mass melted all too slowly.

Pressing the attention signal for Kincaide, I spoke sharply into the microphone:

"Mr. Kincaide, is every ray on that large meteorite above us?"

"Yes, sir," he replied instantly.

"Full power?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well; carry on, Mr. Kincaide." I turned to Correy; he had just glanced from his charts to the clock, with its jerking second hand, and back to his charts.

"They'll have to do it in the next ten seconds, sir," he said. "Otherwise—" Correy shrugged, and his eyes fixed with a peculiar, fascinated stare on the charts. He was looking death squarely in the eyes.

Ten seconds! It was not enough. I had watched the rays working, and I knew their power to disintegrate this death-dealing stone that was hurtling along above us while we rose, helplessly, into its path.

I did not ask Correy if it was possible to alter the course enough, and quickly enough, to avoid that fateful path. Had it been possible without tearing the *Ertak* to pieces with the strain of it, Correy would have done it seconds ago.

I glanced up swiftly at the relentless, jerking second hand. Seven

seconds gone! Three seconds more.

The rays were doing all that could be expected of them. There was only a tiny fragment of the meteorite left, and it was dwindling swiftly. But our time was passing even more rapidly.

The bit of rock loomed up at me from the disc. It seemed to fly up into my face, to meet me.

"Got us, Correy!" I said hoarsely. "Good-by, old-man!"

I think he tried to reply. I saw his lips open; the flash of the bright light from the ethon tubes on his big white teeth.

Then there was a crash that shook the whole ship. I shot into the air. I remember falling ... terribly.

A blinding flash of light that emanated from the very center of my brain, a sickening sense of utter catastrophe, and ... blackness.

I think I was conscious several seconds before I finally opened my eyes. My mind was still wandering; my thoughts kept flying around in huge circles that kept closing in.

We had hit the meteorite. I remembered the crash. I remembered

falling. I remembered striking my head.

But I was still alive. There was air to breathe and there was firm material under me. I opened my eyes.

For the first instant, it seemed I was in an utterly strange room. Nothing was familiar. Everything was—was *inverted*. Then I glanced upward, and I saw what had happened.

I was lying on the ceiling of the navigating room. Over my head were the charts, still glowing, the chronometers in their gimballed beds, and the television disc. Beside me, sprawled out limply, was Correy, a trickle of dried blood on his cheek. A litter of papers, chairs, framed licenses and other movable objects were strewn on and around us.

My first instinctive, foolish thought was that the ship was upside down. Man has a ground-trained mind, no matter how many years he may travel space. Then, of course, I realized that in the open void there is not top nor bottom; the illusion is supplied, in space ships, by the gravity pads. Somehow, the shock of impact had reversed the polarity of the leads to the pads, and they had become repulsion pads. That was why I had dropped from the floor to the ceiling.

All this flashed through my mind in an instant as I dragged myself toward Correy. Dragged myself because my head was throbbing so that I dared not stand up, and one shoulder, my left, was numb.

For an instant I thought that Correy was dead. Then, as I bent over him, I saw a pulse leaping just under the angle of his jaw.

"Correy, old man!" I whispered. "Do you hear me?" All the formality of the Service was forgotten for the time. "Are you hurt badly?"

His eyelids flickered, and he sighed; then, suddenly, he looked up at me—and smiled!

"We're still here, sir?"

"After a fashion. Look around; see what's happened?"

He glanced about curiously, frowning. His wits were not all with him yet.

"We're in a mess, aren't we?" he grinned. "What's the matter?"

I told him what I thought, and he nodded slowly, feeling his head tenderly.

"How long ago did it happen?" he asked. "The blooming clock's upside down; can you read it?"

I could—with an effort.

"Over twenty minutes," I said. "I wonder how the rest of the men are?"

With an effort, I got to my feet and peered into the operating room. Several of the men were moving about, dazedly, and as I signalled to them, reassuringly, a voice hailed us from the doorway:

"Any orders, sir?"

It was Kincaide. He was peering over what had been the top of the doorway, and he was probably the most disreputable-looking officer who had ever worn the blue-and-silver uniform of the Service. His nose was bloody and swollen to twice its normal size. Both eyes were blackened, and his hair, matted with blood, was plastered in ragged swirls across his forehead.

"Yes, Mr. Kincaide; plenty of them. Round up enough of the men to locate the trouble with the gravity pads; there's a reversed connection somewhere. But don't let them make the repairs until the signal is

given. Otherwise, we'll all fall on our heads again. Mr. Correy and I will take care of the injured."

The next half hour was a trying one. Two men had been killed outright, and another died before we could do anything to save him. Every man in the crew was shaken up and bruised, but by the time the check was completed, we had a good half of our personnel on duty.

Returning at last to the navigating room, I pressed the attention signal for Kincaide, and got his answer immediately.

"Located the trouble yet, Mr. Kincaide?" I asked anxiously.

"Yes, sir! Mr. Hendricks has been working with a group of men and has just made his report. They are ready when you are."

"Good!" I drew a sigh of relief. It had been easier than I thought. Pressing the general attention signal, I broadcasted the warning, giving particular instructions to the men in charge of the injured. Then I issued orders to Hendricks:

"Reverse the current in five seconds, Mr. Hendricks, and stand by for further instructions."

Hastily, then, Correy and I followed the orders we had given the men. Briefly we stood on our heads against the wall, feeling very foolish, and dreading the fall we knew was coming.

It came. We slid down the wall and lit heavily on our feet, while the litter that had been on the ceiling with us fell all around us. Miraculously, the ship seemed to have righted herself. Correy and I picked ourselves up and looked around.

"We're still operating smoothly," I commented with a sweeping glance at the instruments over the operating table. "Everything seems in order."

"Did you notice the speed indicator, sir?" asked Correy grimly. "When he fell, one of the men in the operating room must have pulled the speed lever all the way over. We're at maximum space speed, sir, and have been for nearly an hour, with no one at the controls."

We stared at each other dully. Nearly an hour, at maximum space speed—a speed seldom used except in case of great emergency. With no one at the controls, and the ship set at maximum deflection from her course.

That meant that for nearly an hour we had been sweeping into infinite space in a great arc, at a speed I disliked to think about.

"I'll work out our position at once," I said, "and in the meantime, reduce speed to normal as quickly as possible. We must get back on our course at the earliest possible moment."

We hurried across to the charts that were our most important aides in proper navigation. By comparing the groups of stars there with our space charts of the universe, the working out of our position was ordinarily, a simple matter.

But now, instead of milky rectangles, ruled with fine black lines, with a fiery red speck in the center and the bodies of the universe grouped around in green points of light, there were only nearly blank rectangles, shot through with vague, flickering lights that revealed nothing except the presence of disaster.

"The meteoric fragment wiped out some of our plates, I imagine," said Correy slowly. "The thing's useless."

I nodded, staring down at the crawling lights on the charts.

"We'll have to set down for repairs, Mr. Correy. If," I added, "we can

find a place."

Correy glanced up at the attraction meter.

"I'll take a look in the big disc," he suggested. "There's a sizeable body off to port. Perhaps our luck's changed."

He bent his head under the big hood, adjusting the controls until he located the source of the registered attraction.

"Right!" he said, after a moment's careful scrutiny. "She's as big as Earth, I'd venture, and I believe I can detect clouds, so there should be atmosphere. Shall we try it, sir?"

"Yes. We're helpless until we make repairs. As big as Earth, you said? Is she familiar?"

Correy studied the image under the hood again, long and carefully.

"No, sir," he said, looking up and shaking his head. "She's a new one on me."

Conning the ship first by means of the television disc, and navigating visually as we neared the strange sphere, we were soon close enough to make out the physical characteristics of this

unknown world.

Our spectroscopic tests had revealed the presence of atmosphere suitable for breathing, although strongly laden with mineral fumes which, while possibly objectionable, would probably not be dangerous.

So far as we could see, there was but one continent, somewhat north of the equator, roughly triangular in shape, with its northernmost point reaching nearly to the Pole.

"It's an unexplored world, sir. I'm certain of that," said Correy. "I am sure I would have remembered that single, triangular continent had I seen it on any of our charts." In those days, of course, the Universe was by no means so well mapped as it is today.

"If not unknown, it is at least uncharted," I replied. "Rough looking country, isn't it? No sign of life, either, that the disc will reveal."

"That's as well, sir. Better no people than wild natives who might interfere with our work. Any choice in the matter of a spot on which to set her down?"

I inspected the great, triangular continent carefully. Towards the

north it was a mass of snow covered mountains, some of them, from their craters, dead volcanoes. Long spurs of these ranges reached southward, with green and apparently fertile valleys between. The southern edge was covered with dense tropical vegetation; a veritable jungle.

"At the base of that central spur there seems to be a sort of plateau," I suggested. "I believe that would be a likely spot."

"Very well, sir," replied Correy, and the old *Ertak*, reduced to atmospheric speed, swiftly swept toward the indicated position, while Correy kept a wary eye on the surface temperature gauge, and I swept the terrain for any sign of intelligent life.

I found a number of trails, particularly around the base of the foothills, but they were evidently game trails, for there were no dwelling places of any kind; no cities, no villages, not even a single habitation of any kind that the searching eyes of the disc could detect.

Correy set her down as neatly and as softly as a rose petal drifts to the ground. Roses, I may add, are a beautiful and delicate flower, with very soft petals, peculiar to my native Earth.

We opened the main exit immediately. I watched the huge, circular door back slowly out of its threads, and finally swing aside, swiftly and silently, in the grip of its mighty gimbals, with the weird, unearthly feeling I have always had when about to step foot on some strange star where no man has trod before.

The air was sweet, and delightfully fresh after being cooped up for weeks in the *Ertak*, with her machine-made air. A little thinner, I should judge, than the air to which we were accustomed, but strangely exhilarating, and laden with a faint scent of some unknown constituent—undoubtedly the mineral element our spectroscope had revealed but not identified. Gravity, I found upon passing through the exit, was normal. Altogether an extremely satisfactory repair station.

Correy's guess as to what had happened proved absolutely accurate. Along the top of the *Ertak*, from amidships to within a few feet of her pointed stem, was a jagged groove that had destroyed hundreds of the bright, coppery discs, set into the outer skin of the ship, that operated our super-radio reflex charts. The groove was so deep, in places, that it must have bent the outer skin of the *Ertak* down against the inner skin. A foot or more—it was best not to think of what would have happened then.

By the time we completed our inspection dusk was upon us—a long, lingering dusk, due, no doubt, to the afterglow resulting from the mineral content of the air. I'm no white-skinned, stoop-shouldered laboratory man, so I'm not sure that was the real reason. It sounds logical, however.

"Mr. Correy, I think we shall break out our field equipment and give all men not on watch an opportunity to sleep out in the fresh air," I said. "Will you give the orders, please?"

"Yes, sir. Mr. Hendricks will stand the eight to twelve watch as usual?"

I nodded.

"Mr. Kincaide will relieve him at midnight, and you will take over at four."

"Very well, sir." Correy turned to give the orders, and in a few minutes an orderly array of shelter tents made a single street in front of the fat, dully-gleaming side of the *Ertak*. Our tents were at the head of this short company street, three of them in a little row.

After the evening meal, cooked over open fires, with the smoke of

the very resinous wood we had collected hanging comfortably in the still air, the men gave themselves up to boisterous, noisy games, which, I confess, I should have liked very much to participate in. They raced and tumbled around the two big fires like schoolboys on a lark. Only those who have spent most of their days in the metal belly of a space ship know the sheer joy of utter physical freedom.

Correy, Kincaide and I sat before our tents and watched them, chatting about this and that—I have long since forgotten what. But I shall never forget what occurred just before the watch changed that night. Nor will any man of the *Ertak's* crew.

It was just a few minutes before midnight. The men had quieted down and were preparing to turn in. I had given orders that this first night they could suit themselves about retiring; a good officer, and I tried to be one, is never afraid to give good men a little rein, now and then.

The fires had died down to great heaps of red coals, filmed with ashes, and, aside from the brilliant galaxy of stars overhead, there was no light from above. Either this world had no moons, not even a single moon, like my native Earth, or it had not yet arisen.

Kincaide rose lazily, stretched himself, and glanced at his watch.

"Seven till twelve, sir," he said. "I believe I'll run along and relieve __"

He never finished that sentence. From somewhere there came a rushing sound, and a damp, stringy net, a living, horrible, *something*, descended upon us out of the night.

In an instant, what had been an orderly encampment became a bedlam. I tried to fight against the stringy, animated, nearly intangible mass, or masses, that held me, but my arms, my legs, my whole body, was bound as with strings and loops of elastic bands.

Strange whispering sounds filled the air, audible above the shouting of the men. The net about me grew tighter; I felt myself being lifted from the ground. Others were being treated the same way; one of the *Ertak's* crew shot straight up, not a dozen feet away, writhing and squirming. Then, at an elevation of perhaps twice my height, he was hurried away.

Hendrick's voice called out my name from the *Ertak's* exit, and I shouted a warning:

"Hendrick! Go back! Close the emergency—" Then a gluey mass cut across my mouth, and, as though carried on huge soft springs, I was

hurried away, with the sibilant, whispering sounds louder and closer than ever. With me, as nearly as I could judge, went every man who had not been on duty in the ship.

I ceased struggling, and immediately the rubbery network about me loosened. It seemed to me that the whisperings about me were suddenly approving. We were in the grip, then, of some sort of intelligent beings, ghost-like and invisible though they were.

After a time, during which we were all, in a ragged group, being borne swiftly towards the mountains, all at a common level from the ground, I managed to turn my head so that I could see, against the star-lit sky, something of the nature of the things that had made us captive.

As is not infrequently the case, in trying to describe things of an utterly different world, I find myself at a loss for words. I think of jellyfish, such as inhabit the seas of most of the inhabited planets, and yet this is not a good description.

These creatures were pale, and almost completely transparent. What their forms might be, I could not even guess. I could make out writhing, tentacle-like arms, and wrinkled, flabby excrudescences and that was all. That these creatures were huge, was evident from

the fact that they, apparently walking, from the irregular, undulating motion, held us easily ten or a dozen feet from the ground.

With the release of the pressure about my body I was able to talk again, and I called out to Correy, who was fighting his way along, muttering, angrily, just ahead of me.

"Correy! No use fighting them. Save your strength, man!"

"Then? What are they, in God's name? What spawn of hell—"

"The Commander is right, Correy," interrupted Kincaide, who was not far from my first officer. "Let's get our breaths and try to figure out what's happened. I'm winded!" His voice gave plentiful evidence of the struggle he had put up.

"I want to know where I'm going, and why!" growled Correy, ceasing his struggling, nevertheless. "What have us? Are they fish or flesh or fowl?"

"I think we shall know before very long, Correy," I replied. "Look ahead!"

The bearers of the men in the fore part of the group had apparently stopped before a shadowy wall, like the face of a cliff. Rapidly, the

rest of us were brought up, until we were in a compact group, some in sitting positions, some upside down, the majority reclining on back or side. The whispering sound now was intense and excited, as though our strange bearers awaited some momentous happening.

I took advantage of the opportunity to speak very briefly to my companions.

"Men, I'll admit frankly that I don't know what we're up against," I said. "But I do know this: we'll come out on top of the heap. Conserve your strength, keep your eyes open, and be prepared to obey, instantly, any orders that may be issued: I know that last remark is not needed. If any of you should see or learn something of interest or value, report at once to Mr. Correy, Mr. Kincaide or my __"

A simultaneous, involuntary exclamation from the men interrupted me, and it was not surprising that this was so, for the wall before us had suddenly opened, and there was a great burst of yellow light in our faces. A strong odor, like the faint scent we had first noticed in the air, but infinitely more powerful, struck our nostrils, but I was not conscious of the fact for several seconds. My whole attention, my every startled thought, was focused upon the group of strange beings, silhouetted against the glowing light, that stood in the

opening.

Imagine, if you can, a huge globe, perhaps eight feet in diameter, flattened slightly at the bottom, and supported on six short, huge stumps, like the feet of an elephant, and topped by an excrudescence like a rounded coning tower, merging into the globular body. From points slightly below this excrudescence, visualize six long, limp tentacles, so long that they drop from the equators of these animated spheres, and trail on the ground. Now you have some conception of the beings that stood before us.

A sharp, sibilant whispering came from one of these figures, to be answered in an eager chorus from our bearers. There was a reply like a command, and the group in the doorway marched forward. One by one these visible tentacles wrapped themselves around a member of the *Ertak's* crew, each one of the globular creatures bearing one of us.

I heard a disappointed whisper go up from the outer darkness where, but a moment before, we had been. Then there was a grating sound, and a thud as the stone doorway was rolled back into place.

The entrance was sealed. We were prisoners indeed!

"All right, now what?" gritted Correy. "God! If I ever get a hand loose!"

Swiftly, each of us held above the head-like excrudescence atop the globular body of the thing that held us, we were carried down a widening rocky corridor, towards the source of the yellow light that beat about us.

The passage led to a great cavern, irregular in shape, and apparently possessed of numerous other outlets which converged here.

I am not certain as to the size of the cavern, save that it was great, and that the roof was so high in most sections that it was lost in shadow.

The great cavern was nearly filled with creatures similar to those which were bearing us, and they fell back in orderly passage to permit our conductors to pass.

I could see, now, that the hump atop each rounded body was a travesty of a head, hairless, and without a neck. Their features were particularly hideous, and I shall pass over a description as rapidly as

possible.

The eyes were round, and apparently lidless; a pale drab or bluff in color. Instead of a nose, as, we understand the term, they had a convoluted rosette in the center of the face, not unlike the olfactory organ of a bat. Their ears were placed as are ours, but were of thin, pale parchment, and hugged the side of the head tightly. Instead of a mouth, there was a slightly depressed oval of fluttering skin near the point where the head melted into the rounded body: the rapid fluttering or vibration of this skin produced the whispering sound I have already remarked.

The cavern, as I have said, was flooded with yellow light, which came from a great column of fire near the center of the clear space. I had no opportunity to inspect the exact arrangements but from what I did see, I judged that this flame was fed by some sort of highly inflammable substance, not unlike crude oil, except that it burned clearly and without smoke. This substance was conducted to the font from which the flame leaped by means of a large pipe of hollow reed or wood.

At the far end of the cavern a procession entered from one of the passages—nine figures similar to those which bore us, save that by the greater darkness of their skin, and the wrinkles upon both face

and body, I judged these to be older than the rest. From the respect with which they were treated, and the dignity of their movements, I gathered that these were persons of authority, a surmise which quickly verified itself.

These nine elders arranged themselves, standing, in the form of a semicircle, the center creature standing a pace or two in front of the others. At a whispered command, we were all dumped unceremoniously on the floor of the cavern before this august council of nine.

Nine pairs of fish-like, unblinking eyes inspected us, whether with enmity or otherwise; I could not determine. One of the nine spoke briefly to one of our conductors, and received an even more brief reply.

I felt the gaze of the creature in the center fix on me. I had taken my proper position in front of my men; he apparently recognized me as the leader of the group.

In a sharp whisper, he addressed me; I gathered from the tone that he uttered a command, but I could only shake my head in response. No words could convey thought from his mind to mine—but we did have a means of communication at hand.

"Mr. Correy," I said, "your menore, please!" I released my own from the belt which held it, along with the other expeditionary equipment which we always wore when outside our ship, and placed it in position upon my head, motioning for one of the nine to do likewise with Correy's menore.

They watched me suspiciously, despite my attempt to convey, by gestures, that by means of these instruments we could convey thoughts to each other. The menores of those days were bulky, heavy things, and undoubtedly they looked dangerous to these creatures: thought-transference instruments at that time were complicated affairs.

However, I must have made myself partially understood, at least, for the chief of the nine uttered a whispered command to one of the beings who had borne us to the large cavern, and motioned with a writhing gesture of one tentacle that I was to place the menore upon this creature's head.

"The old boy's playing it safe, sir," muttered Correy, chuckling. "Wants to try it out on the dog first."

"Right!" I nodded, and, not without difficulty, placed the other menore upon the rounded dome of the individual selected for the

trial.

Both instruments were adjusted to full power, and I concentrated my mental energy upon the simple pictures that I thought I could convey to the limited mentality of which I suspected these creatures, watching his fishy eyes the while.

It was several seconds before he realized what was happening; then he began talking excitedly to the waiting nine. The words fairly burned themselves in my consciousness, but of course were utterly unintelligible to me. Before the creature had finished, a lash-like tentacle shot out from the chief of the nine and removed the menore; a moment later it reposed, at a rather rakish slant, on the shining dome of its new possessor.

"Get anything, sir?" asked Correy in a low voice.

"Not yet. I'm trying to make him see how we came here, and that we're friends. Then I'll see what I can get out of him; he'll have to get the idea of coming back at me with pictures instead of words, and it may take a long time to make him understand."

It did take a long time. I could feel the sweat trickling down my face as I strove to make him understand. His eyes revealed wonderment

and a little fear, but an almost utter lack of understanding.

I pictured for him the heavens, and our ship sailing along through space. Then I showed him the *Ertak* coming to rest on the plateau, and he made little impatient noises as though to convey that he knew all about that.

After a long time he got the idea. Crudely, dimly, he pictured the *Ertak* leaving this strange world, and soaring off into vacant space. Then his scene faded out, and he pictured the same thing again, as one might repeat a question not understood. He wanted to know where we would go if we left this world of his.

I pictured for him other worlds, peopled with men more or less like myself. I showed him the great cities, and the fleets of ships like the *Ertak* that plied between them. Then, as best I could, I asked him about himself and his people.

It came to me jerkily and poorly pictured, but I managed to piece out the story. Whether I guess correctly on all points, I am not sure, nor will I ever be sure. But this is the story as I got it.

These people at one time lived in the open, and all the people of this world were like those in the cavern, possessed of opaque bodies and

great strength. There were none of the ghost-like creatures who had captured us.

But after a long time, a ruling class arose. They tried to dominate the masses, and the masses refused to be dominated. But the ruling classes were wise, and versed in certain sciences; the masses were ignorant. So the ruling classes devised a plan.

These creatures did not eat. There was a tradition that at one time they had had mouths, as I had, but that was not known. Their strength, their vitality, came from the powerful mineral vapor which came forth from the bowels of the earth. The ruling classes decided that if they could control the supply of this vapor, they would have the whip hand, and they set about realizing this condition.

It was quickly done. All the sources of supply, save one, were sealed. This one source of supply was the cavern in which we stood. These were members of the ruling class, and outside was the rabble, starved and unhappy, living on the faint seepage of the vital fumes, without which they became almost bodiless, and the helpless slaves of those within the cavern.

These creatures, then, were boneless; as boneless as sponges, and, like sponges, capable of absorbing huge quantities of a foreign

substance, which distended them and gave them weight. I could see, now, why the rotund bodies sagged and flattened at the base, and why six short, stubby legs were needed to support that body. There was only tissue, unsupported by bone, to bear the weight!

This chief of the nine went on to show me how ruthlessly, how cruelly those within the cavern ruled those without. The substance that fed the flame had to be gathered and a great reservoir on the side of the mountain kept filled. Great masses of dry, sweet grass, often changed, must be harvested and brought to the entrance of the cavern, for bedding. A score of other tasks kept the outsiders busy always—and the driving force was that, did the slaves become disobedient, the slight supply of mineral vapor available in the outside world would be cut off utterly, and all outside would surely die, slowly and in agony.

Those within the cavern were the rulers. They would always remain the rulers, and those outside would remain the slaves to wait upon them. And we—how strangely he pictured us, as he saw us!—were not to return to our queer worlds, that we might bring many other ships like the *Ertak* back to interfere. No.

The pupils of his eyes contracted, and the leafy structure of his nose fluttered as though with strong emotion.

No, we would not go back. He would give a signal to those of his creatures who stood behind us—a sort of soldiery, I gathered—and our heads, our legs, our arms, would be torn from our bodies. Then we would not go back to bring—

That was enough for me.

"Men!" I spoke softly, but with an intensity that gave me their instant attention, "it's going to be a fight for life. When I give the signal, make a rush for the entrance by which we came in. I'll lead the way. Use your pistols, and your bombs if necessary. All right—forward!"

Correy's great shout rang out after mine, and I flung my menore in the face of the nearest guard. It bounced off as though it had struck a rubber ball. Behind me, one of the men called out sharply; I heard a sharp crunch of bone, and with a pang realized that the *Ertak's* log would have at least one death to record.

A dozen tentacles lashed out at me, and I sprayed their owners with pellets from my atomic pistol. The air was filled with the shouts of my men and the whispers of our enemies. All around me I could hear the screaming of ricochets from our pistols. Twice atomic bombs exploded not far away, and the solid rock shook beneath my feet. Something shot by close to my face; an instant later a limp bundle in

the blue and silver uniform of our Service struck the rock wall of the cavern, thirty feet away. The strength in those rubbery tentacles was terrible.

The pistols seemed to have but little effect. They wounded, but they did not kill unless the pellet struck the head. Then the victim rolled over, rocking idiotically on its middle.

"In the head, men!" I shouted. "That downs them! And keep the bombs in action. Throw them against the walls of the cavern. Take a chance!"

A ragged cheer went up, and I heard Correy's voice raised in angry conversation with the enemy:

"You will, eh? There!... Now!... Ah!—right—through—the—eye. That's—the place!"

A score of times I was grasped and held by the writhing arms of the angry horde whispering all around me. Each time I literally shot the tentacle away with my atomic pistol, leaving the severed end to unwrap itself and drop from my struggling body. The things had no blood in them.

Steadily, we fought our way toward the doorway, out of the cavern, down the passageway, pressed into a compact, sweating mass by the pressure of the eager bodies around us. I have never heard any sound even remotely like the babel of angry, sibilant whispering that beat against the walls and roof of that cavern.

I had saved my own bombs for a specific purpose, and now I unslung them and managed to work them up above my shoulders, one in either hand.

"I'm going to try to blow the entrance clear, men," I shouted. "The instant I fling the bombs, drop! The fragments will be stopped by the enemy crowding around us. One ... two ... three ... *drop*!"

The two bombs exploded almost simultaneously. The ground shook, and all over the cavern masses of stone came crashing to the floor. Bits of rock hummed and shrieked over our heads. And—yes! There was a draft of cooler, purer air on our faces. The bombs had done their work.

"One more effort and we're outside, men," I called. "The passage is open, and there are only a few of the enemy before us. Ready?"

"Ready!" went up the hoarse shout.

"Then, forward!"

It was easy to give the command, but hard to execute it. We were pressed so hard that only the men on the outside of the group could use their weapons. And our captors were making a terrible, desperate effort to hold us.

Two more of our men were literally torn to pieces before my eyes, but I had the satisfaction of ripping holes in the heads of the creatures whose tentacles had done the beastly work. And in the meantime we were working our way slowly but surely to the entrance.

I glanced up as I dodged out into the open. That soft humming sound was familiar, and properly so. There, at an elevation of less than fifty feet, was the *Ertak*, with Hendricks standing in the exit, leaning forward at a perilous angle.

"Ahoy the *Ertak*!" I hailed. "Descend at once!"

"Right, sir!" Hendricks turned to relay the order, and, as the rest of the men burst forth from the cavern, the ship struck the ground before us.

"All hands board ship!" I ordered. "Lively, now." As many years as I have commanded men, I have never seen an order obeyed with more alacrity.

I was the last man to enter, and as I did so, I turned for a last glance at the enemy.

They could not come through the small opening my bombs had driven in the rock, although they were working desperately to enlarge it. Leaping back and forth between me and the entrance I could see the vague, shadowy figures of the outside slaves, eagerly seeping up the life-giving fumes that escaped from the cavern.

"Your orders, sir?" asked Hendricks anxiously; he was a very young officer, and he had been through a very trying experience.

"Ascend five hundred feet, Mr. Hendricks," I said thoughtfully. "Directly over this spot. Then I'll take over.

"It isn't often," I added, "that the Service concerns itself with economic conditions. This, however, is one of the exceptions."

"Yes, sir," said Hendricks, for the very good reason, I suppose, that that was about all a third officer could say to his commander, under

the circumstances.

“Five hundred feet, sir," said Hendricks.

"Very well," I nodded, and pressed the attention signal of the non-commissioned officer in charge of the big forward ray projector.

"Ott? Commander Hanson speaking. I have special orders for you."

"Yes, sir!"

"Direct your ray, narrowed to normal beam and at full intensity, on the spot directly below. Keep the ray motionless, and carry on until further orders. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly, sir." The disintegrator ray generators deepened their purr as I turned away.

"I trust, sir, that I did the right thing in following you with the *Ertak*?" asked Hendricks. "I was absolutely without precedent, and the circumstances were so mysterious—"

"You handled the situation very well indeed," I told him. "Had you not been waiting when we fought our way into the open, the nearly invisible things on the outside might have—but you don't know

about them yet."

Picking up the microphone again, I ordered a pair of searchlights to follow the disintegrator ray, and made my way forward, where I could observe activities through a port.

The ray was boring straight down into a shoulder of a rocky hill, and the bright beams of the searchlights glowed redly with the dust of disintegration. Here and there I could see the shadowy, transparent forms of the creatures that the self-constituted rulers of this world had doomed to a demi-existence, and I smiled grimly to myself. The tables would soon be turned.

For perhaps an hour the ray melted its way into the solid rock, while I stood beside Ott and his crew, watching. Then, down below us, things began to happen.

Little fragments of rock flew up from the shaft the ray had drilled. Jets of black mud leaped into the air. There was a sudden blast from below that rocked the *Ertak*, and the shaft became a miniature volcano, throwing rocky fragments and mud high into the air.

"Very good, Ott," I said triumphantly. "Cease action." As I spoke, the first light of the dawn, unnoticed until now, spread itself over the

scene, and we witnessed then one of the strangest scenes that the Universe has ever beheld.

Up to the very edge of that life-giving blast of mineral-laden gas the tenuous creatures came crowding. There were hundreds of them, thousands of them. And they were still coming, crowding closer and closer and closer, a mass of crawling, yellowish shadows against the sombre earth.

Slowly, they began to fill out and darken, as they drew in the fumes that were more than bread and meat and water to us. Where there had been formless shadows, rotund creatures such as we had met in the cavern stood and lashed their tentacles about in a sort of frenzied gladness, and fell back to make room for their brothers.

“It's a sight to make a man doubt his own eyes, sir," said Correy, who had come to stand beside me. "Look at them! Thousands of them pouring from every direction. How did it happen?"

"It didn't happen. I used our disintegrator ray as a drill; we simply sunk a huge shaft down into the bowels of the earth until we struck the source of the vapor which the self-appointed 'ruling class' has bottled up. We have emancipated a whole people, Mr. Correy."

"I hate to think of what will happen to those in the cavern," replied Correy, smiling grimly. "Or rather, since you've told me of the pleasant little death they had arranged for us. I'm mighty glad of it. They'll receive rough treatment, I'm afraid!"

"They deserve it. It has been a great sight to watch, but I believe we've seen enough. It has been a good night's work, but it's daylight, now, and it will take hours to repair the damage to the *Ertak's* hull. Take over in the navigating room, if you will, and pick a likely spot where we will not be disturbed. We should be on our course by to-night, Mr. Correy."

"Right, sir," said Correy, with a last wondering look at the strange miracle we had brought to pass on the earth below us. "It will seem good to be off in space again, away from the troubles of these little worlds."

"There are troubles in space, too," I said dryly, thinking of the swarm of meteorites that had come so close to wiping the *Ertak* off the records of the Service. "You can't escape trouble even in space."

"No, sir," said Correy from the doorway. "But you can get your sleep regularly!"

And sleep is, when one comes to think of it, a very precious thing.

Particularly for an old man, whose eyelids are heavy with years.

May 1931

84 Dark Moon by Charles Willard Diffin

Mysterious, dark, out of the unknown deep comes a new satellite to lure three courageous Earthlings on to strange adventures.

Aproximate word count: 29,000

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Chapter 1: There Comes a New World

Mysterious, dark, out of the unknown deep comes a new satellite to lure three courageous Earthlings on to strange adventures.

The one hundred and fifty-ninth floor of the great Transportation Building allowed one standing at a window to look down upon the roofs of the countless buildings that were New York.

Flat-decked, all of them; busy places of hangars and machine shops and strange aircraft, large and small, that rose vertically under the lift of flashing helicopters.

The air was alive and vibrant with directed streams of stubby-

winged shapes that drove swiftly on their way, with only a wisp of vapor from their funnel-shaped sterns to mark the continuous explosion that propelled them. Here and there were those that entered a shaft of pale-blue light that somehow outshone the sun. It marked an ascending area, and there ships canted swiftly, swung their blunt noses upward, and vanished, to the upper levels.

A mile and more away, in a great shaft of green light from which all other craft kept clear, a tremendous shape was dropping. Her hull of silver was striped with a broad red band; her multiple helicopters were dazzling flashes in the sunlight. The countless dots that were portholes and the larger observation ports must have held numberless eager faces, for the Oriental Express served a cosmopolitan passenger list.

But Walter Harkness, standing at the window, stared out from troubled, frowning eyes that saw nothing of the kaleidoscopic scene. His back was turned to the group of people in the room, and he had no thought of wonders that were prosaic, nor of passengers, eager or blase; his thoughts were only of freight and of the acres of flat roofs far in the distance where alternate flashes of color marked the descending area for fast freighters of the air. And in his mind he could see what his eyes could not discern—the markings on those roofs that were enormous landing fields: Harkness Terminals, New

York.

Only twenty-four, Walt Harkness—owner now of Harkness, Incorporated. Dark hair that curled slightly as it left his forehead; eyes that were taking on the intent, straightforward look that had been his father's and that went straight to the heart of a business proposal with disconcerting directness. But the lips were not set in the hard lines that had marked Harkness Senior; they could still curve into boyish pleasure to mark the enthusiasm that was his.

He was not typically the man of business in his dress. His broad shoulders seemed slender in the loose blouse of blue silk; a narrow scarf of brilliant color was loosely tied; the close, full-length cream-colored trousers were supported by a belt of woven metal, while his shoes were of the coarse-mesh fabric that the latest mode demanded.

He turned now at the sound of Warrington's voice. E. B. Warrington, Counsellor at Law, was the name that glowed softly on the door of this spacious office, and Warrington's gray head was nodding as he dated and indexed a document.

"June twentieth, nineteen seventy-three," he repeated; "a lucky day for you, Walter. Inside of ten years this land will be worth double the fifty million you are paying—and it is worth more than that to you."

He turned and handed a document to a heavy-bodied man across from him. "Here is your copy, Herr Schwartzmann," he said. The man pocketed the paper with a smile of satisfaction thinly concealed on his dark face.

Harkness did not reply. He found little pleasure in the look on Schwartzmann's face, and his glance passed on to a fourth man who sat quietly at one side of the room.

Young, his tanned face made bronze by contrast with his close-curling blond hair, there was no need of the emblem on his blouse to mark him as of the flying service. Beside the spread wings was the triple star of a master pilot of the world; it carried Chet Bullard past all earth's air patrols and gave him the freedom of every level.

Beside him a girl was seated. She rose quickly now and came toward Harkness with outstretched hand. And Harkness found time in the instant of her coming to admire her grace of movement, and the carriage that was almost stately.

The mannish attire of a woman of business seemed almost a discordant note; he did not realize that the hard simplicity of her costume had been saved by the soft warmth of its color, and by an indefinable, flowing line in the jacket above the rippling folds of an

undergarment that gathered smoothly at her knees. He knew only that she made a lovely picture, surprisingly appealing, and that her smile was a compensation for the less pleasing visage of her companion, Schwartzmann.

"Mademoiselle Vernier," Herr Schwartzmann had introduced her when they came. And he had used her given name as he added: "Mademoiselle Diane is somewhat interested in our projects."

She was echoing Warrington's words as she took Harkness' hand in a friendly grasp. "I hope, indeed, that it is the lucky day for you, Monsieur. Our modern transportation—it is so marvelous, and I know so little of it. But I am learning. I shall think of you as developing your so-splendid properties wonderfully."

Only when she and Schwartzmann were gone did Harkness answer his counsellor's remark. The steady Harkness eyes were again wrinkled about with puckering lines; the shoulders seemed not so square as usual.

"Lucky?" he said. "I hope you're right. You were Father's attorney for twenty years—your judgment ought to be good; and mine is not entirely worthless.

"Yes, it is a good deal we have made—of course it is!—it bears every analysis. We need that land if we are to expand as we must, and the banks will carry me for the twenty million I can't swing. But, confound it, Warrington, I've had a hunch—and I've gone against it. Schwartzmann has tied me up for ready cash, and he represents the biggest competitors we have. They're planning something—but we need the land.... Oh, well, I've signed up; the property is mine; but...."

The counsellor laughed. "You need a change," he said; "I never knew you to worry before. Why don't you jump on the China Mail this afternoon; it connects with a good line out of Shanghai. You can be tramping around the Himalayas to-morrow. A day or two there will fix you up."

"Too busy," said Harkness. "Our experimental ship is about ready, so I'll go and play with that. We'll be shooting at the moon one of these days."

"The moon!" the other snorted. "Crazy dreams! McInness tried it, and you know what happened. He came back out of control—couldn't check his speed against the repelling area—shot through and stripped his helicopters off against the heavy air. And that other fellow, Haldgren—"

"Yes," said Harkness quietly, "Haldgren—he didn't fall back. He went on into space."

“Impossible!" the counsellor objected. "He must have fallen unobserved. No, no, Walter; be reasonable. I do not claim to know much about those things—I leave them to the Stratosphere Control Board—but I do know this much: that the lifting effect above the repelling area—what used to be known as the heaviside layer—counteracts gravity's pull. That's why our ships fly as they please when they have shot themselves through. But they have to fly close to it; its force is dissipated in another ten thousand feet, and the old earth's pull is still at work. It can't be done, my boy; the vast reaches of space—"

"Are the next to be conquered," Harkness broke in. "And Chet and I intend to be in on it." He glanced toward the young flyer, and they exchanged a quiet smile.

"Remember how my father was laughed at when he dared to vision the commerce of to-day? Crazy dreams, Warrington? That's what they said when Dad built the first unit of our plant, the landing stages for the big freighters, the docks for ocean ships while they lasted, the berths for the big submarines that he knew were coming. They jeered at him then. 'Harkness' Folly,' the first plant was called.

And now—well you know what we are doing."

He laughed softly. "Leave us our crazy dreams, Warrington," he protested; "sometimes those dreams come true.... And I'll try to forget my hunch. We've bought the property; now we'll make it earn money for us. I'll forget it now, and work on my new ship. Chet and I are about ready for a try-out."

The flyer had risen to join him, and the two turned together to the door where a private lift gave access to the roof. They were halfway to it when the first shock came to throw the two men on the floor.

The great framework of the Transportation Building was swaying wildly as they fell, and the groaning of its wrenched and straining members sounded through the echoing din as every movable object in the room came crashing down.

Dazed for the moment, Harkness lay prone, while his eyes saw the nitron illuminator, like a great chandelier, swing widely from the ceiling where it was placed. Its crushing weight started toward him, but a last swing shot it past to the desk of the counsellor.

Harkness got slowly to his feet. The flyer, too, was able to stand, though he felt tenderly of a bruised shoulder. But where Warrington

had been was only the crumpled wreckage of a steeloid desk, the shattered bulk of the illuminator upon it, and, beneath, the mangled remains where flowing blood made a quick pool upon the polished floor.

Warrington was dead—no help could be rendered there—and Harkness was reaching for the door. The shock had passed, and the building was quiet, but he shouted to the flyer and sprang into the lift.

"The air is the place for us," he said; "there may be more coming." He jammed over the control lever, and the little lift moved.

"What was it?" gasped Bullard, "earthquake?—explosion? Lord, what a smash!"

Harkness made no reply. He was stepping out upon the broad surface of the Transportation Building. He paid no attention to the hurrying figures about him, nor did he hear the loud shouting of the newscasting cone that was already bringing reports of the disaster. He had thought only for the speedy little ship that he used for his daily travel.

The golden cylinder was still safe in the grip of its hold-down clutch,

and its stubby wings and gleaming sextuple-bladed helicopter were intact. Harkness sprang for the control-board.

He, too, wore an emblem: a silver circle that marked him a pilot of the second class; he could take his ship around the world below the forty level, though at forty thousand and above he must give over control to the younger man.

The hiss of the releasing clutch came softly to him as the free-signal flashed, and he sank back with a great sigh of relief as the motors hummed and the blades above leaped into action. Then the stern blast roared, though its sound came faintly through the deadened walls, and he sent the little speedster for the pale blue light of an ascending area. Nor did he level off until the gauge before him said twenty thousand.

His first thought had been for their own safety in the air, but with it was a frantic desire to reach the great plant of the Harkness Terminals. What had happened there? Had there been any damage? Had they felt the shock? A few seconds in level twenty would tell him. He reached the place of alternate flashes where he could descend, and the little ship fell smoothly down.

Below him the great expanse of buildings took form, and they

seemed safe and intact. His intention was to land, till the slim hands of Chet Bullard thrust him roughly aside and reached for the controls.

It was Bullard's right—a master pilot could take control at any time—but Harkness stared in amazement as the other lifted the ship, then swung it out over the expanse of ocean beyond—stared until his own eyes followed those of Chet Bullard to see the wall of water that was sweeping toward the land.

Chet, he knew, had held them in a free-space level, where they could maneuver as they pleased, but he knew, too, that the pilot's hands were touching levers that swung them at a quite unlawful speed past other ships, and that swept them down in a great curve above the ocean's broad expanse.

Harkness did not at once grasp the meaning of the thing. There was the water, sparkling clear, and a monstrous wave that lifted itself up to mountainous heights. Behind it the ocean's blue became a sea of mud; and only when he glanced at their ground-speed detector did he sense that the watery mountain was hurling itself upon the shore with the swiftness of a great super-liner.

There were the out-thrusting capes that made a safe harbor for the

commerce that came on and beneath the waters to the Harkness Terminals; the wave built itself up to still greater heights as it came between them. They were riding above it by a thousand feet, and Walter Harkness, in sudden knowledge of what this meant, stared with straining eyes at the wild thing that raced with them underneath.

He must do something—anything!—to check the monster, to flatten out the onrushing mountain! The red bottom-plates of a submarine freighter came rolling up behind the surge to show how futile was the might of man. And the next moment marked the impact of the wall of water upon a widespread area of landing roofs, where giant letters stared mockingly at him to spell the words: Harkness Terminals, New York.

He saw the silent crumbling of great buildings; he glimpsed in one wild second the whirling helicopters on giant freighters that took the air too late; he saw them vanish as the sea swept in and engulfed them. And then, after endless minutes, he knew that Chet had swung again above the site of his plant, and he saw the stumps of steel and twisted wreckage that remained....

The pilot hung the ship in air—a golden beetle, softly humming as it hovered above the desolate scene. Chet had switched on the steady

buzz of the stationary-ship signal, and the wireless warning was swinging passing craft out and around their station. Within the quiet cabin a man stood to stare and stare, unspeaking, until his pilot laid a friendly hand upon the broad shoulders.

"You're cleaned," said Chet Bullard. "It's a washout! But you'll build it up again; they can't stop you—"

But the steady, appraising eyes of Walter Harkness had moved on and on to a rippling stretch of water where land had been before.

"Cleaned," he responded tonelessly; "and then some! And I could start again, but—" He paused to point to the stretch of new sea, and his lips moved that he might laugh long and harshly. "But right there is all I own—that is, the land I bought this morning. It is gone, and I owe twenty million to the hardest-hearted bunch of creditors in the world. That foreign crowd, who've been planning to invade our territory here. You know what chance I'll have with them...."

The disaster was complete, and Walter Harkness was facing it—facing it with steady gray eyes and a mind that was casting a true balance of accounts. He was through, he told himself; his other holdings would be seized to pay for this waste of water that an hour before had been dry land; they would strip him of his last dollar. His

lips curved into a sardonic smile.

"June twentieth, nineteen seventy-three," he repeated. "Poor old Warrington! He called this my lucky day!"

The pilot had respected the other man's need of silence, but his curiosity could not be longer restrained.

"What's back of it all?" he demanded. "What caused it? The shock was like no earthquake I've ever known. And this tidal wave—" He was reaching for a small switch. He turned a dial to the words: "News Service—General," and the instrument broke into hurried speech.

It told of earth shocks in many places—the whole world had felt it—some tremendous readjustment among the inner stresses of the earth—most serious on the Atlantic seaboard—the great Harkness Terminals destroyed—some older buildings in the business district shaken down—loss of life not yet computed....

"But what did it?" Chet Bullard was repeating in the cabin of their floating ship. "A tremendous shake-up like that!" Harkness silenced him with a quick gesture of his hand. Another voice had broken in to answer the pilot's question.

"The mystery is solved," said the new voice. "This is the Radio-News representative speaking from Calcutta. We are in communication with the Allied Observatories on Mount Everest. At eleven P. M., World Standard Time, Professor Boyle observed a dark body in transit across the moon. According to Boyle, a non-luminous and non-reflecting asteroid has crashed into the earth's gravitational field. A dark moon has joined this celestial grouping, and is now swinging in an orbit about the earth. It is this that has disturbed the balance of internal stresses within the earth—"

“A dark moon!" Chet Bullard broke in, but again a movement from Harkness silenced his exclamations. Whatever of dull apathy had gripped young Harkness was gone. No thought now of the devastation below them that spelled his financial ruin. Some greater, more gripping idea had now possessed him. The instrument was still speaking:

"—Without light of its own, nor does it reflect the sun's light as does our own moon. This phenomenon, as yet, is unexplained. It is nearer than our own moon and smaller, but of tremendous density." Harkness nodded his head quickly at that, and his eyes were alive with an inner enthusiasm not yet expressed in words. "It is believed that the worst is over. More minor shocks may follow, but the cause is known; the mystery is solved. Out from the velvet dark of space

has come a small, new world to join us—"

The voice ceased. Walter Harkness had opened the switch.

"The mystery is solved," Chet Bullard repeated.

"Solved?" exclaimed the other from his place at the controls. "Man, it is only begun!" He depressed a lever, and a muffled roar marked their passage to a distant shaft of blue, where he turned the ship on end and shot like a giant shell for the higher air.

There was northbound travel at thirty-five, and northward Harkness would go, but he shot straight up. At forty thousand he motioned the master-pilot to take over the helm.

"Clear through," he ordered; "up into the liner lanes; then north for our own shop." Nor did he satisfy the curiosity in Chet Bullard's eyes by so much as a word until some hours later when they floated down.

An icy waste was beneath them, where the sub-polar regions were wrapped in the mantle of their endless winter. Here ships never passed. Northward, toward the Pole, were liner lanes in the higher levels, but here was a deserted sector. And here Walter Harkness had

elected to carry on his experiments.

A rise of land showed gaunt and black, and the pilot was guiding the ship in a long slant upon it. He landed softly beside a building in a sheltered, snow-filled valley.

Harkness shivered as he stepped from the warmth of their insulated cabin, and he fumbled with shaking fingers to touch the combination upon the locked door. It swung open, to close behind the men as they stood in the warm, brightly-lighted room.

Nitro illuminators were hung from the ceiling, their diffused brilliance shining down to reflect in sparkling curves and ribbons of light from a silvery shape. It stood upon the floor, a metal cylinder a hundred feet in length, whose blunt ends showed dark openings of gaping ports. There were other open ports above and below and in regular spacing about the rounded sides. No helicopters swung their blades above; there were only the bulge of a conning tower and the heavy inset glasses of the lookouts. Nor were there wings of any kind. It might have been a projectile for some mammoth gun.

Harkness stood in silence before it, until he turned to smile at the still-wondering pilot.

"Chet," he said, "it's about finished and ready—just in time. We've built it, you and I; freighted in the parts ourselves and assembled every piece. We've even built the shop: lucky the big steeloid plates are so easily handled. And you and I are the only ones that know.

"Every ship in the airlanes of the world is driven by detonite—and we have evolved a super-detonite. We have proved that it will work. It will carry us beyond the pull of gravitation; it will give us the freedom of outer space. It is ours and ours alone."

"No," the other corrected slowly, "it is yours. You have paid the bills and you have paid me. Paid me well."

"I'm paying no more," Harkness told him. "I'm broke, right this minute. I haven't a dollar—and yet I say now that poor Warrington was right: this is my lucky day."

He laughed aloud at the bewilderment on the pilot's face.

"Chet," he said slowly, and his voice was pitched to a more serious tone, "out there is a new world, the Dark Moon. 'Tremendous density,' they said. That means it can hold an atmosphere of its own. It means new metals, new wealth. It means a new little world to explore, and it's out there waiting for us. Waiting for us; we will be

the first. For here is the ship that will take us.

"It isn't mine, Chet; it's ours. And the adventure is ours; yours and mine, both. We only meant to go a few hundred miles at first, but here's something big. We may never come back—it's a long chance that we're taking—but you're in on it, if you want to go...."

He paused. The expression in the eyes of Chet Bullard, master-pilot of the world, was answer enough. But Chet amplified it with explosive words.

"Am I in on it?" he demanded. "Try to count me out—just try to do it! I was game for a trial flight out beyond. And now, with a real objective to shoot at—a new world—"

His words failed him. Walt Harkness knew that the hand the other extended was thrust forth blindly; he gripped at it hard, while he turned to look at the shining ship.

But his inner gaze passed far beyond the gleaming thing of metal, off into a realm of perpetual night. Out there a new world was waiting—a Dark Moon!—and there they might find.... But his imagination failed him there; he could only thrill with the adventure that the unknown held.

Chapter 2: Escape

Two days, while a cold sun peeped above an icy horizon! Two days of driving, eager work on the installation of massive motors—yet motors so light that one man could lift them—then Harkness prepared to leave.

"Wealth brings care when it comes," he told Chet, "but it leaves plenty of trouble behind it when it goes. I must get back to New York and throw what is left of my holdings to the wolves; they must be howling by this time to find out where I am. I'll drop back here in a week."

There were instruments to be installed, and Chet would look after that. He would test the motors where the continuous explosion of super-detonite would furnish the terrific force for their driving power. Then the exhaust from each port must be measured and thrusts equalized, where needed, by adjustment of great valves. All this Chet would finish. And then—a test flight. Harkness hoped to be back for the first try-out of the new ship.

"I'll be seeing you in a week," he repeated. "You'll be that long getting her tuned up."

But Chet Bullard grinned derisively. "Two days!" he replied. "You'll have to step some if you get in on the trial flight. But don't worry; I won't take off for the Dark Moon. I'll just go up and play around above the liner lanes and see how the old girl stunts."

Harkness nodded. "Watch for patrol ships," he warned. "There's no traffic directly over here—that's one reason why I chose this spot—but don't let anyone get too close. Our patents have not been applied for."

Harkness spent a day in New York. Then a night trip by Highline Express took him to London where he busied himself for some hours. Next, a fast passenger plane for Vienna.

In other days Walter Harkness would have chartered a private ship to cut off a few precious hours, but he was traveling more economically now. And the representatives of his foreign competitors were not now coming to see him; he must go to them.

At the great terminal in Vienna a man approached him. "Herr Harkness?" he inquired, and saluted stiffly.

He was not in uniform. He was not of the Allied Patrol nor of any branch of the police force that encircled the world in its operations.

Yet his military bearing was unmistakable. To Harkness it was reminiscent of old pictures of Prussian days—those curious pictures revived at times for the amusement of those who turned to their television sets for entertainment. He had to repress a smile as he followed where the other led him to a gray speedster in a distant corner of the open concourse.

He stepped within a luxurious cabin and would have gone on into the little control room, but his guide checked him. Harkness was mildly curious as to their course—Schwartzmann was to have seen him in Vienna—but the way to the instrument board was barred. Another precise salute, and he was motioned to the cabin at the rear.

"It is orders that I follow," he was told. And Walter Harkness complied.

"It could happen only here," he told himself. And he found himself exasperated by a people who were slow to conform to the customs of a world whose closely-knit commerce had obliterated the narrow nationalism of the past.

They landed in an open court surrounded by wide lawns. He glimpsed trees about them in the dusk, and looming before him was an old-time building of the chateau type set off in this private park.

He would have followed his guide toward the entrance, but a flash of color checked him.

Like a streak of flame a ship shot in above them; hung poised near the one that had brought them and settled to rest beside it. A little red speedster, it made a splash of crimson against the green lawns beyond. And, "Nice flying," Harkness was telling himself.

The hold-down clamps had hardly gripped it when a figure sprang out from an opened door. A figure in cool gray that took warmth and color from the ship behind—a figure of a girl, tall and slender and graceful as she came impulsively toward him.

"Monsieur Harkness!" she exclaimed. "But this is a surprise. I thought that Herr Schwartzmann was to see you in Vienna!" For a brief moment Harkness saw a flicker of puzzled wonderment in her eyes.

"And I am sorry," she went on, "—so very sorry for your misfortune. But we will be generous."

She withdrew her hand which Harkness was holding. He was still phrasing a conventional greeting as she flung him a gay laugh and a look from brown eyes that smiled encouragement. She was gone

before he found words for reply.

Walter Harkness had been brought up in a world of business, and knew little of the subtle message of a woman's eyes. But he felt within him a warm response to the friendly companionship that the glance implied.

Within the chateau, in a dark-paneled room, Herr Schwartzmann was waiting. He motioned Harkness to a chair and resumed his complacent contemplation of a picture that was flowing across a screen. Color photography gave every changing shade. It was coming by wireless, as Harkness knew, and he realized that the sending instrument must be in a ship that cruised slowly above a scene of wreckage and desolation.

He recognized the ruins of his great plant; he saw the tiny figures of men, and he knew that the salvage company he had placed in charge was on the job. Beyond was a stretch of rippling water where the great wave had boiled over miles of land and had sucked it back to the ocean's depths. And he realized that the beginning of his conference was not auspicious.

After the warmth of the girl's greeting, this other was like a plunge into the Arctic chill of his northern retreat.

“I have listed every dollar's worth of property that I own," he was saying an hour later, "and I have turned it over to a trustee who will protect your rights. What more do you want?"

"We have heard of some experimental work," said Herr Schwartzmann smoothly. "A new ship; some radical changes in design. We would like that also."

"Try and get it," Harkness invited.

The other passed that challenge by. "There is another alternative," he said. "My principals in France are unknown to you; perhaps, also, it is not known that they intend to extend their lines to New York and that they will erect great terminals to do the work that you have done.

"Your father was the pioneer; there is great value in the name of Harkness—the 'good-will' as you say in America. We would like to adopt that name, and carry on where you have left off. If you were to assign to us the worthless remains of your plant, and all right and title to the name of Harkness Terminals, it might be—" He paused deliberately while Harkness stiffened in his chair. "It might be that we would require no further settlement. The balance of your fortune—and your ship—will be yours."

Harkness' gray eyes, for a moment, betrayed the smouldering rage that was his.

"Put it in plain words," he demanded. "You would bribe me to sell you something you cannot create for yourselves. The name of Harkness has stood for fair-dealing, for honor, for scrupulous observance of our clients' rights. My father established it on that basis and I have continued in the same way. And you?—well, it occurs to me that the Schwartzmann interests have had a different reputation. Now you would buy my father's name to use it as a cloak for your dirty work!"

He rose abruptly. "It is not for sale. Every dollar that I own will be used to settle my debt. There will be enough—"

Herr Schwartzmann refused to be insulted. His voice was unruffled as he interrupted young Harkness' vehement statement.

"Perhaps you are right; perhaps not. Permit me to remind you that the value of your holdings may depreciate under certain influences that we are able to exert—also that you are in Austria, and that the laws of this country permit us to hold you imprisoned until the debt is paid. In the meantime we will find your ship and seize it, and whatever it has of value will be protected by patents in our name."

His unctuous voice became harsh. "Honor! Fair dealing!" He spat out the words in sudden hate. "You Americans who will not realize that business is business!"

Harkness was standing, drawn unconsciously to his full height. He looked down upon the other man. All anger had gone from his face; he seemed only appraising the individual before him.

"The trouble with you people," he said, "is that you are living in the past—way back about nineteen fourteen, when might made right—sometimes."

He continued to look squarely into the other's eyes, but his lips set firmly, and his voice was hard and decisive.

"But," he continued, "I am not here to educate you, nor to deal with you. Any further negotiations will be through my counsellors. And now I will trouble you to return me to the city. We are through with this."

Herr Schwartzmann's heavy face drew into lines of sardonic humor. "Not quite through," he said; "and you are not returning to the city." He drew a paper from his desk.

"I anticipated some such verdammpt foolishness from you. You see this? It is a contract; a release, a transfer of all your interests in Harkness, Incorporated. It needs only your signature, and that will be supplied. No one will question it when we are done: the very ink in the stylus you carry will be duplicated. For the last time, I repeat my offer; I am patient with you. Sign this, and keep all else that you have. Refuse, and—"

"Yes?" Harkness inquired.

"And we will sign for you—a forgery that will never be detected. And as for you, your body will be found—a suicide! You will leave a letter: we will attend to all that. Herr Harkness will have found this misfortune unbearable.... We shall be very sad!" His heavy smile grew into derisive laughter.

"I am still patient, and kind," he added. "I give you twenty-four hours to think it over."

A touch of a button on his desk summoned the man who had brought Harkness there. "Herr Harkness is in your charge," were the instructions to the one who stood stiffly at attention. "He is not to leave this place. Is it understood?"

As he was ushered from the room, Walter Harkness also understood, and he knew that this was no idle threat. He had heard ugly rumors of Herr Schwartzmann and his methods. One man, he knew, had dared to oppose him—and that man had gone suddenly insane. A touch of a needle, it was whispered....

There had been other rumors; Schwartzmann got what he wanted; his financial backing was enormous. And now he would bring his ruthless methods to America. But there he needed the Harkness standing, the reputation for probity—and Walter Harkness was grimly resolved that they should never buy it from him. But the problem must be faced, and the answer found, if answer there was, in twenty-four hours.

An amazing state of affairs in a modern world! He stood meditating upon his situation in a great, high-ceilinged room. A bed stood in a corner, and other furniture marked the room as belonging to an earlier time. Even mechanical weather-control was wanting; one must open the windows, Harkness found, to get cooling air.

He stood at the open window and saw storm clouds blowing up swiftly. They blotted the stars from the night sky; they swept black and ominous overhead, and seemed to touch the giant trees that whipped their branches in the wind. But he was thinking not at all of

the storm, and only of the fact that this room where he stood must be directly above the one where Schwartzmann was seated. Schwartzmann—who would put an end to his life as casually as he would bring down a squirrel from one of those trees!

And again he thought: "Twenty-four hours!... Why hours? Why not minutes?... Whatever must be done he must do now. And might made right: it was the only way to meet this unscrupulous foreign scoundrel."

A wind-tossed branch lashed at him. On the ground below he saw the man who had brought him, posting another as a guard. They glanced up at his window. There would be no escape there.

And yet the branch seemed beckoning. He caught it when again it whipped toward him, and, without any definite plan, he lashed it fast with a velvet cord from the window drapes.

But his thoughts came back to the room. He snatched suddenly at the covers of the bed. What were the sheets?—fabric as old-fashioned as the room, or were they cellulex? The touch of the soft fabric reassured him: it was as soft as though woven of spider's web, and strong as fibres of steel.

It took all of his strength to rip it into strips, but it was a matter of minutes, only, until he had a rope that would bear his weight. The storm had broken; the black clouds let loose a deluge of water that drove in at the window. If only the window below was still open!

He found the middle of his rope, looped it over a post of the bed, and, with both strands in his grasp, let himself out and over the dripping sill.

Would the guard see him, or had he taken to shelter? Harkness did not pause to look. He left the branch tied fast. "A squirrel in a tree," he thought: the branch would mislead them. His feet found the window-sill one story below. He drew himself into the room and let loose of one strand of his rope as he entered.

Schwartzmann was gone. Harkness, with the bundle of wet fabric in his hands, glanced quickly about. A door stood open—it was a closet—and the rain-drenched man was hidden there an instant later. But he stepped most carefully across the floor and touched his wet shoes only to the rugs where their print was lost. And he held himself breathlessly silent as he heard the volley of gutteral curses that marked the return of Herr Schwartzmann some minutes later.

"Imbecile!" Schwartzmann shouted above the crash of the closing

window. "Dumkopff! You have let him escape.

"Give me your pistol!" Harkness glimpsed the figure of his recent guard. "Get another for yourself—find him!—shoot him down! A little lead and detonite will end this foolishness!"

From his hiding place Harkness saw the bulky figure of Schwartzmann, who made as if to follow where the other man had gone. The pistol was in his hand. Walt Harkness knew all too well what that meant. The tiny grain of detonite in the end of each leaden ball was the same terrible explosive that drove their ships: it would tear him to pieces. And he had to get this man.

He was tensed for a spring as Schwartzmann paused. From the wall beyond him a red light was flashing; a crystal flamed forth with the intense glare of a thousand fires. It checked the curses on the other's thick lips; it froze Harkness to a rigid statue in the darkness of his little room.

An emergency flash broadcast over the world! It meant that the News Service had been commandeered. This flashing signal was calling to the peoples of the earth!

What catastrophe did this herald? Had it to do with the Dark Moon?

Not since the uprising of the Mole-men, those creatures who had spewed forth from the inner world, had the fiery crystal called!... It seemed to Harkness that Schwartzmann was hours in reaching the switch.... A voice came shouting into the room:

"By order of the Stratosphere Control Board," it commanded, "all traffic is forbidden above the forty level. Liners take warning. Descend at once."

Over and over it repeated the command—an order whose authority could not be disregarded. In his inner vision Harkness saw the tumult in the skies, the swift dropping of huge liners and great carriers of fast freight, the scurrying of other craft to give clearance to these monsters whose terrific speed must be slowly checked. But why? What had happened? What could warrant such disruption of the traffic of the world? His tensed muscles were aching unheeded; his sense of feeling seemed lost, so intently was he waiting for some further word.

"Emergency news report," said another voice, and Harkness strained every faculty to hear. "Highline ships attacked by unknown foe. Three passenger carriers of the Northpolar Short Line reported crashed. Incomplete warnings from their commanders indicate they were attacked. Patrol ship has spotted one crash. They have landed

beside it and are reporting....

"The report is in; it is almost beyond belief. They say the liner is empty, that no human body, alive or dead, is in the ship. She was stripped of crew and passengers in the air.

"We await confirmation. Danger apparently centered over arctic regions, but traffic has been ordered from all upper levels—"

The voice that had been held rigidly to the usual calm clarity of an official announcer became suddenly high-pitched and vibrant. "Stand by!" it shouted. "An S. O. S. is coming in. We will put it through our amplifiers; give it to you direct!"

The newscaster crackled and hissed: they were waiving all technical niceties at R. N. Headquarters, Harkness knew. The next voice came clearly, though a trifle faint.

"Air Patrol! Help! Position eighty-two—fourteen north, ninety-three—twenty east—Superliner Number 87-G, flying at R. A. plus seven. We are attacked!—Air Patrol!—Air Patrol!—Eighty-two—fourteen north, ninety-three—twenty—"

The voice that was repeating the position was lost in a pandemonium

of cries. Then—

"Monsters!" the voice was shouting. "They have seized the ship! They are tearing at our ports—" A hissing crash ended in silence....

"Tearing at our ports!" Harkness was filled with a blinding nausea as he sensed what had come with the crash. The opening ports—the out-rush of air released to the thin atmosphere of those upper levels! Earth pressure within the cabins of the ship; then in an instant—none! Every man, every woman and child on the giant craft, had died instantly!

The announcer had resumed, but above the sound was a guttural voice that shouted hoarsely in accents of dismay. "Eighty-seven-G!" Schwartzmann was exclaiming, "—Mein Gott! It iss our own ship, the Alaskan! Our crack flyer!"

Harkness heard him but an instant, for another thought was hammering at his brain. The position!—the ship's position!—it was almost above his experimental plant! And Chet was there, and the ship.... What had Chet said? He would fly it in two days—and this was the second day! Chet had no radio-news; no instrument had been installed in the shop; they had depended upon the one in Harkness' own ship. And now—

Walt Harkness' clear understanding had brought a vision that was sickening, so plainly had he glimpsed the scene of terror in that distant cabin. And now he saw with equal clarity another picture. There was Chet, smiling, unafraid, proud of their joint accomplishment and of the gleaming metal shape that he was lifting carefully from its bed. He was floating it out to the open air; he was taking off, and up—up where some horror awaited.

"Monsters!" that thin voice had cried in a tone that was vibrant with terror. What could it be?—great ships out of space?—an invasion? Or beasts?... But Harkness' vision failed him there. He knew only that a fast ship was moored just outside. He had planned vaguely to seize it; he had needed it for his own escape; but he needed it a thousand times more desperately now. Chet might have been delayed, and he must warn him.... The thoughts were flashing like hot sparks through his brain as he leaped.

He bore the heavier body of Schwartzmann to the floor. He rained smashing blows upon him with a furious frenzy that would not be curbed. The weapon with its deadly detonite bullet came toward him. In the same burst of fury he tore the weapon from the hand that held it; then sprang to his feet to stand wild-eyed and panting is he aimed the pistol at the cursing man and dragged him to his feet.

"The ship!" he said between heavy breaths, "—the ship! Take me to it! You will tell anyone we meet it is all right. One word of alarm, one wrong look, and I'll blow you to hell and make a break for it!"

The pistol under Harkness' silken jacket was pressed firmly into Schwartzmann's side; it brought them safely past excited guards and out into the storm; it held steady until the men had fought their way through blasts of rain to the side of the anchored ship. Not till then did Schwartzmann speak.

"Wait," he said. "Are you crazy, Harkness? You can never take off; the trees are close; a straight ascent is needed. And the wind—!"

He struggled in the other's grasp as Harkness swung open the cabin door, his fear of what seemed a certain death overmastering his fear of the weapon. He was shouting for help as Harkness threw him roughly aside and leaped into the ship.

Outside Harkness saw running figures as he threw on the motors. A pistol's flash came sharply through the storm and dark. A window in the chateau flashed into brilliance to frame the figure of a girl. Tall and slender, she leaned forward with outstretched arms. She seemed calling to him.

Harkness seized the controls, and knew as he did so that Schwartzmann was right: he could never lift the ship in straight ascent. Before her whirling fans could raise her they would be crashed among the trees.

But there were two helicopters—dual lift, one forward and one aft. And Walt Harkness, pilot of the second class, earned immediate disbarment or a much higher rating as he coolly fingered the controls. He cut the motor on the big fan at the stern, threw the forward one on full and set the blades for maximum lift, then released the hold-down grips that moored her.

The grips let go with a crashing of metal arms. The bow shot upward while a blast of wind tore at the stubby wings. The slim ship tried to stand erect. Another furious, beating wind lifted her bodily, as Harkness, clinging desperately within the narrow room, threw his full weight upon the lever that he held.

The full blast of a detonite motor, on even a small ship, is terrific, and the speedster of Herr Schwartzmann did not lack for power. Small wonder that the rules of the Board of Control prohibit the use of the stern blast under one thousand feet.

The roaring inferno from the stern must have torn the ground as if by

a mammoth plow; the figures of men must have scattered like leaves in a gusty wind. The ship itself was racked and shuddering with the impact of the battering thrust, but it rose like a rocket, though canted on one wing, and the crashing branches of wind-torn trees marked its passage on a long, curving slant that bent upward into the dark. Within the control room Walter Harkness grinned happily as he drew his bruised body from the place where he had been thrown, and brought the ship to an even keel.

Nice work! But there was other work ahead, and the smile of satisfaction soon passed. He held the nose up, and the wireless warning went out before as the wild climb kept on.

Forty thousand was passed; then fifty and more; a hundred thousand; and at length he was through the repelling area, that zone of mysterious force, above which was a magnetic repulsion nearly neutralizing gravity. He could fly level now; every unit of force could be used for forward flight to hurl him onward faster and faster into the night.

Harkness was flying where his license was void; he was flying, too, where all aircraft were banned. But the rules of the Board of Control meant nothing to him this night. Nor did the voluble and sulphurous orders to halt that a patrol-ship flashed north. The patrol-ship was on

station; she was lost far astern before she could gather speed for pursuit.

Walter Harkness had caught his position upon a small chart. It was a sphere, and he led a thin wire from the point that was Vienna to a dot that he marked on the sub-polar waste. He dropped a slender pointer upon the wire and engaged its grooved tip, and then the flying was out of his hands. The instrument before him, with its light bulbs and swift moving discs, would count their speed of passage; it would hold the ship steadily upon an unerring course and allow for drift of winds. The great-circle course was simple; the point he marked was drawing them as if it had been a magnet—drawing them as it drew the eyes of Walt Harkness, staring strainingly ahead as if to span the thousands of miles of dark.

Chapter 3: The Space Terror

The control room was glassed in on all sides. The thick triple lenses were free from clouding, and the glasses between them kept out the biting cold of the heights. The glass was strong, to hold the pressure of one atmosphere that was maintained within the ship. The lookouts gave free vision in all directions except directly below the hull, and a series of mirrors corrected this defect.

But Walt Harkness had eyes solely for the black void ahead. Only the brilliant stars shone now in the mantle of velvety night. No flashing lights denoted the passing of liners, for they were safe in the harbor of the lower levels. He moved the controls once to avoid the green glare of an ascending area, then he knew that there were no ships to fear, and let the automatic control put him back on his course.

Before him, under a hooded light, was a heavy lens. It showed in magnification a portion of the globe. There were countries and seas on a vari-colored map, and one pin-point of brilliance that marked his ever-changing position.

He watched the slow movement of the glowing point. The Central Federated States of Europe were behind him; the point was tracing a

course over the vast reaches of the patchwork map that meant the many democracies of Russia. This cruiser of Schwartzmann's was doing five hundred miles an hour—and the watching man cursed under his breath at the slow progress of the tiny light.

But the light moved, and the slow hours passed, while Harkness tried to find consolation in surmises he told himself must be true.

Chet had been delayed, he insisted to himself; Chet could never have finished the work in two days; he had been bluffing good-naturedly when he threatened to fly the ship alone....

The Arctic Ocean was beneath. The tiny light had passed clear of the land on the moving chart.

He would be there soon.... Of course Chet had been fooling; he was always ready for a joke.... Great fellow, Chet! They had taken their training together, and Chet had gone on to win a master-pilot's rating, the highest to be had....

Another hour, and a rising hum from a buzzer beside him gave warning of approach to the destination he had fixed. The automatic control was warning him to decelerate. Harkness well knew what was expected of the pilot when that humming sounded; yet, with

total disregard for the safety of his helicopters, he dived at full speed for the denser air beneath.

He felt the weight that came suddenly upon him as he drove through and beneath the repelling area, and he flattened out and checked his terrific speed when the gauges quivered at forty thousand.

Then down and still down in a long, slanting dive, till a landmark was found. He was off his course a bit, but it was a matter of minutes until he circled, checked his wild flight, and sank slowly beneath the lift of the dual fans to set the ship down as softly as a snowflake beside a building that was dark and forbiddingly silent—a lonely outpost in a lonely waste.

No answer came to his hail. The building was empty; the ship was gone. And Chet! Chet Bullard!... Harkness' head was heavy on his shoulders; his feet took him with hopeless, lagging steps to his waiting ship. He was tired—and the long strain of the flight had been in vain. He was suddenly certain of disaster. And Chet—Chet was up there at some hitherto untouched height, battling with—what?

He broke into a stumbling run and drew himself within the little ship. He was helpless; the ship was unarmed, even if the weapons of his world were of use against this unknown terror; but he knew that

he was going up. He would find Chet if he could get within reach of his ship; he would warn him.... He tried to tell himself that he might yet be in time.

The little cruiser rose slowly under the lift of the fans; then he opened the throttle and swept out in a parabolic curve that ended in a vertical line. Straight up, the ship roared. It shot through a stratum of clouds. The sun that was under the horizon shone redly now; it grew to a fiery ball; the earth contracted; the markings that were coastlines and mountains drew in upon themselves.

He passed the repelling area and felt the lift of its mysterious force—the "R. A. Effect" that permitted the high-level flying of the world. His speed increased. It would diminish again as the R. A. Effect grew less. Record flights had been made to another ten thousand.... He wondered what the ceiling would be for the ship beneath him. He would soon learn....

He set his broadcast call for the number of Chet's ship. They had been given an experimental license, and "E—L—29-X" the instrument was flashing, "E—L—29-X." Above the heaviside layer that had throttled the radio of earlier years, he knew that his call from so small an instrument as this would be carried for hundreds of miles.

He reached the limit of his climb and was suddenly weightless, floating aimlessly within the little room; the ship was falling, and he was falling with it. His speed of descent built up to appalling figures until his helicopters found air to take their thrust.

And still no answering word from Chet. The cruiser was climbing again to the heights. The hands of Harkness, trembling slightly now, held her to a vertical climb, while his eyes crept back to the unlit plate where Chet's answering call should flash. But his own call would be a guide to Chet; the directional finders on the new ship would trace the position of his own craft if the new ship were afloat —if it were not lying crushed on the ice below, empty, like the liners, of any sign of life.

His despairing mind snapped sharply to attention. His startled jerk threw the ship widely from her course. A voice was speaking—Chet's voice! It was shouting in the little room!

"Go down, Walt," it told him. "For God's sake, go down! I'm right above you; I've been fighting them for an hour; but I'll make it!"

He heard the clash of levers thrown sharply over in that distant ship; his own hands were frozen to the controls. His ship roared on in its upward course, the futile "E—L—29-X" of his broadcast call still

going out to a man who could not remove his hands to send an answer, but who had managed to switch on his sending set into which he could shout.

Harkness was staring into the black void whence the wireless voice had come—staring into the empty night. And then he saw them.

The thin air was crystal clear; his gaze penetrated for miles. And far up in the heights, where his own ship could never reach and where no clouds could be, were diaphanous wraiths. Like streamers of cloud in long serpentine forms, they writhed and shot through space with lightning speed. They grew luminous as they moved living streamers of moonlit clouds.... A whirling cluster was gathered into a falling mass. Out of it in a sharp right turn shot a projectile, tiny and glistening against the velvet black. The swarm closed in again.... There were other lashing shapes that came diving down. They were coming toward him.

And, in his ears, a voice was imploring: "Down! down! The R. A. tension may stop them!... Go down! I am coming—you can't help—I'll make it—they'll rip you to pieces—"

The wraith-like coils that had left the mass above had straightened to sharp spear-heads of speed. They were darting upon him, swelling to

monstrous size in their descent. And Walt Harkness saw in an instant the folly of delay: he was not helping Chet, but only hindering.... His ship swung end for end under his clutching hands, and the thrust of his stern exhaust was added to the pull of Earth to throw him into a downward flight that tore even the thin air into screaming fragments.

One glance through the lookouts behind him showed lashing serpent forms, translucent as pale fire; impossible beasts from space. His reason rejected them while his eyes told him the terrible truth. Despite the speed of his dive, they were gaining on him, coming up fast; one snout that ended in a cupped depression was plain. A mouth gaped beneath it; above was a row of discs that were eyes—eyes that shone more brightly than the luminous body behind—eyes that froze the mind and muscles of the watching man in utter terror.

He forced himself to look ahead, away from the spectral shapes that pursued. They were close, yet he thrilled with the realization that he had helped Chet in some small degree: he had drawn off this group of attackers.

He felt the upthrust of the R. A. Effect; he felt, too, the pull of a body that had coiled about his ship. No intangible, vaporous thing, this. The glass of his control room was obscured by a clinging, glowing mass while still the little cruiser tore on.

Before his eyes the glowing windows went dark, and he felt the clutching thing stripped from the hull as the ship shot through the invisible area of repulsion. A scant hundred yards away a huge cylinder drove crashingly past. Its metal shone and glittered in the sun; he knew it for his own ship—his and Chet's. And what was within it? What of Chet? The loudspeaker was silent.

He eased the thundering craft that bore him into a slow-forming curve that did not end for fourscore miles before the wild flight was checked. He swung it back, to guide the ship with shaking hands where a range of mountains rose in icy blackness, and where a gleaming cylinder rested upon a bank of snow whose white expanse showed a figure that came staggering to meet him.

Some experiences and dangers that come to men must be talked over at once; thrills and excitement and narrow escapes must be told and compared. And then, at rare times, there are other happenings that strike too deeply for speech—terrors that rouse emotions beyond mere words.

It was so with Harkness and Chet. A gripping of hands; a perfunctory, "Good work, old man!"—and that was all. They housed the two ships, closing the great doors to keep out the arctic cold; and then Chet Bullard threw himself exhausted upon a cot, while he

stared, still wordless, at the high roof overhead. But his hands that gripped and strained at whatever they touched told of the reaction to his wild flight.

Harkness was examining their ship, where shreds of filmy, fibrous material still clung, when Chet spoke.

"You knew they were there?" he asked, "—and you came up to warn me?"

"Sure," Harkness answered simply.

"Thanks," Chet told him with equal brevity.

Another silence. Then: "All right, tell me! What's the story?"

And Walt Harkness told him in brief sentences of the world-wide warning that had flashed, of the liners crashing to earth and their cabins empty of human life.

"They could do it," said Chet. "They could open the ports and ram those snaky heads inside to feed." He seemed to muse for a moment upon what might have come to him.

"My speed saved me," he told Harkness. "Man, how that ship can

travel! I shook them off a hundred times—outmaneuvered them when I could—but they came right back for more.

"How do they propel themselves?" he demanded.

"No one knows," Harkness told him. "That luminosity in action means something—some conversion of energy, electrical, perhaps, to carry them on lines of force of which we know nothing as yet. That's a guess—but they do it. You and I can swear to that."

Chet was pondering deeply. "High-level lanes are closed," he said, "and we are blockaded like the rest of the world. It looks as if our space flights were off. And the Dark Moon trip! We could have made it, too."

If there was a questioning note in those last remarks it was answered promptly.

"No!" said Harkness with explosive emphasis. "They won't stop me." He struck one clenched fist upon the gleaming hull beside him.

"This is all I've got. And I won't have this if that gang of Schwartzmann's gets its hands upon it. The best I could expect would be a long-drawn fight in the courts, and I can't afford it. I am

going up. We've got something good here; we know it's good. And we'll prove it to the world by reaching the Dark Moon."

Another filmy, fibrous mass that had been torn from one of the monsters of the heights slid from above to make a splotch of colorless matter upon the floor.

Harkness stared at it. The firm line of his lips set more firmly still, but his eyes had another expression as he glanced at Chet. He would go alone if he must; no barricade of unearthly beasts could hold him from the great adventure. But Chet?—he must not lead Chet to his death.

"Of course," he said slowly, "you've had one run-in with the brutes." Again he paused. "We don't know where they come from, but my guess is from the Dark Moon. They may be too much for us.... If you don't feel like tackling them again—"

The figure of Chet Bullard sprang upright from the cot. His harsh voice told of the strain he had endured and his reaction from it.

"What are you trying to tell me?" he demanded. "Are you trying to leave me out?" Then at the look in the other's eyes he grinned sheepishly at his own outburst.

And Walter Harkness threw one arm across Chet's shoulder as he said; "I hoped you would feel that way about it. Now let's make some plans."

Provisions for one year! Even in concentrated form this made a prodigious supply. And, arms—pistols and rifles, with cases of cartridges whose every bullet was tipped with the deadly detonite—all this was brought from the nearest accessible points. They landed, though, in various cities, keeping Schwartzmann's ship as inconspicuous as possible, and made their purchases at different supply houses to avoid too-pointed questioning. For Harkness found that he and Bullard were marked men.

The newscaster in the Schwartzmann cabin brought the information. It brought, too, continued reports of the menace in the upper air. It told of patrol-ships sent down to destruction with no trace of commander or crew; and a cruiser of the International Peace Enforcement Service came back with a story of horror and helplessness.

Their armament was useless. No shells could be timed to match the swift flight of the incredible monsters, and impact charges failed to explode on contact; the filmy, fibrous masses offered little resistance to the shells that pierced them. Yet a wrecked after compartment and

smashed port-lights and doors gave evidence of the strength of the brutes when their great sinuous bodies, lined with rows of suction discs, secured a hold.

"Speed!" was Chet Bullard's answer to this, when the newscaster ceased. "Speed!—until we find something better. I got clear of them when they caught me unprepared, but we can rip right through them now that we know what we're up against."

He had turned again to the packing of supplies, but Harkness was held by the sound of his own name.

Mr. Walter Harkness, late of New York, was very much in the day's news. When a young millionaire loses all his wealth beneath a tidal wave; when, further, he flies to Vienna and transfers all rights in the great firm of Harkness, Incorporated, to the Schwartzmann interests in part settlement of his obligations; and, still further, when he is driven to fury by his losses and attacks the great Herr Schwartzmann in a murderous frenzy, wounds him and escapes in Schwartzmann's own ship—that is an item that is worth broadcasting between announcements of greater importance.

It interested Harkness, beyond a doubt. He remembered the shot outside the cabin as he took off in his wild flight. Schwartzmann had

been wounded, it seemed, and he was to be blamed for the assault. He smiled grimly as he heard the warrant for his arrest broadcast. Every patrol-ship would be on the watch. And there would be a dozen witnesses to swear to the truth of Schwartzmann's lie.

The plan seemed plain to him. He saw himself in custody; taken to Vienna. And then, at the best, months of waiting in the psychopathic ward of a great institution where the influence of Herr Schwartzmann would not be slight. And, meanwhile, Schwartzmann would have his ship. Clever! But not clever enough. He would fool them, he and Chet.

And then he recalled the girl, Mademoiselle Diane, a slim figure outlined in a lighted window of the old chateau. Was there hope there? he wondered. Had her clear, smiling eyes seen what occurred?

"Nonsense," he told himself. "She saw nothing in that storm. And, besides, she is one of their crowd—tarred with the same stick. Forget her."

But he knew, as he framed the unspoken words, that the advice was vain. He would never forget her. There was a picture in his mind that could not be blotted out—a picture of a tall, slender girl, trim and straight in her mannish attire, who came toward him from her little

red speedster. She held out her hand impulsively, and her eyes were smiling as she said; "We will be generous, Monsieur Harkness—"

"Generous!" His smile was bitter as he turned to help Chet in their final work.

Chapter 4: The Rescue in Space

Now often are the great things of life submerged beneath the trivial. The vast reaches of space that must be traversed; the unknown world that awaited them out there; its lands and seas and the life that was upon it: Walter Harkness was pondering all this deep within his mind. It must have been the same with Chet, yet few words of speculation were exchanged. Instead, the storage of supplies, a checking and rechecking of lists, additional careful testing of generators—such details absorbed them.

And the heavy, gray powder with its admixture of radium that transformed it to super-detonite—this must be carefully charged into the magazines of the generators. A thousand such responsibilities—and yet the moment finally came when all was done.

The midnight sun shone redly from a distant horizon. It cast strange lights across the icy waste. And it flashed back in crimson splendor from the gleaming hull that floated from the hangar and came to rest upon the snowy world.

The two men closed the great doors, and it was as if they were shutting themselves off from their last contact with the world. They stood for long moments, silent, in the utter silence of the frozen

north.

Chet Bullard turned, and Harkness gripped his hand. He was suddenly aware of his thankfulness for the companionship of this tall, blond youngster. He tried to speak—but what words could express the tumult of emotions that arose within him? His throat was tight....

It was Chet who broke the tense silence; his happy grin flashed like sunshine across his lean face.

"You're right," he answered his companion's unspoken thoughts; "it's a great little old world we're leaving. I wonder what the new one will be like."

And Harkness smiled back. "Let's go!" he said, and turned toward the waiting ship.

The control room was lined with the instruments they had installed. A nitron illuminator flashed brilliantly upon shining levers—emergency controls that they hoped they would not have to use. Harkness placed his hand upon a small metal ball as Chet reported all ports closed.

The ball hung free in space, supported by the magnetic attraction of the curved bars that made a cage about it. An adaptation of the electrol device that had appeared on the most modern ships, Harkness knew how to handle it. Each movement of the ball within its cage, where magnetic fields crossed and recrossed, would bring instant response. To lift the ball would be to lift the ship; a forward pressure would throw their stern exhaust into roaring life that would hurl them forward; a circular motion would roll them over and over. It was as if he held the ship itself within his hand.

Chet touched a button, and a white light flashed to confirm his report that all was clear. Harkness gently raised the metal ball.

Beneath them a soft thunder echoed from the field of snow, and came back faintly from icy peaks. The snow and ice fell softly away as they rose.

A forward pressure upon the ball, and a louder roaring answered from the stern. A needle quivered and swung over on a dial as their speed increased. Beneath them was a blur of whirling white; ahead was an upthrust mountain range upon which they were driving. And Harkness thrilled with the sense of power that his fingers held as he gently raised the ball and nosed the ship upward in meteor-flight.

The floor beneath them swung with their change of pace. Without it, they would have been thrown against the wall at their backs. The clouds that had been above them lay dead ahead; the ship was pointing straight upward. It flashed silently into the banks of gray, through them, and out into clear air above. And always the quivering needle crept up to new marks of speed, while their altimeter marked off the passing levels.

They were through the repelling area when Harkness relinquished the controls to Chet. The metal ball hung unmoving; it would hold automatically to the direction and speed that had been established. The hand of the master-pilot found it quickly. They were in dangerous territory now—a vast void under a ceiling of black, star-specked space. No writhing, darting wraith-forms caught the rays of the distant sun. Their way seemed clear.

Harkness' eyes were straining ahead, searching for serpent forms, when the small cone beside him hummed a warning that they were not alone. Another ship in this zone of danger?—it seemed incredible. But more incredible was the scream that rang shrilly from the cone. "Help! Oh, help me!" a feminine voice implored.

Harkness sprang for the instrument where the voice was calling. "We aren't the only fools up here," he exclaimed; "and that's a woman's

voice, too!" He pressed a button, and a needle swung instantly to point the direction whence the radio waves were coming.

"Hard a-port!" he ordered. "Ten degrees, and hold her level. No—two points down."

But Chet's steady hand had anticipated the order. He had seen the direction-finder, and he swung the metal ball with a single motion that swept them in a curve that seemed crushing them to the floor.

The ship levelled off; the ball was thrust forward, and the thunder from the stern was deafening despite their insulated walls. The shuddering structure beneath them was hurled forward till the needle of the speed-indicator jammed tightly against its farthest pin. And ahead of them was no emptiness of space.

The air was alive with darting forms. Harkness saw them plainly now—great trailing streamers of speed that shot downward from the heights. The sun caught them in their flight to make iridescent rainbow hues that would have been beautiful but for the hideous heads, the sucker-discs that lined the bodies and the one great disc that cupped on the end of each thrusting snout.

And beneath those that fell from on high was a cluster of the same

sinister, writhing shapes which clung to a speeding ship that rolled and swung vainly in an effort to shake them off.

The coiling, slashing serpent-forms had fastened to the doomed ship. Their thrashing bodies streamed out behind it. They made a cluster of flashing color whose center point was a tiny airship, a speedster, a gay little craft. And her sides shone red as blood—red as they had shone on the grassy lawn of an old chateau near far-off Vienna.

"It's Diane!" Harkness was shouting. "Good Lord, Chet, it's Diane!"

This girl he had told himself he would forget. She was there in that ship, her hands were wrenching at the controls in a fight that was hopeless. He saw her so plainly—a pitiful, helpless figure, fighting vainly against this nightmare attack.

Only an instant of blurred wonderment at her presence up there—then a frenzy possessed him. He must save her! He leaped to the side of the crouching pilot, but his outstretched hands that clutched at the control stopped motionless in air.

Chet Bullard, master-pilot of the first rank, upon whose chest was the triple star that gave him authority to command all the air-levels of earth, was tense and crouching. His eyes were sighting along an

instrument of his own devising as if he were aiming some super-gun of a great air cruiser.

But he was riding the projectile itself and guiding it as he rode. He threw the ship like a giant shell in a screaming, sweeping arc upon the red craft that drove across their bow.

They were crashing upon it; the red speedster swelled instantly before their eyes. Harkness winced involuntarily from the crash that never came.

Chet must have missed it by inches, Harkness knew; but he knew, too, that the impact he felt was no shattering of metal upon metal. The heavy windows of the control room went black with the masses of fibrous flesh that crashed upon them; then cleared in an instant as the ship swept through.

Behind them a red ship was falling—falling free! And vaporous masses, ripped to ribbons, were falling, too, while other wraith-like forms closed upon them in cannibalistic feasting.

Their terrific speed swept them on into space. When the pilot could check it, and turn, they found that the red ship was gone.

"After it!" Harkness was shouting. "She went down out of control, but they didn't get her. They've only sprung the door-ports a crack, releasing the internal pressure." He told himself this was true; he would not admit for an instant the possible truth of the vision that flashed through his mind—a ripping of doors—a thrusting snout that writhed in where a girl stood fighting.

"Get it!" he ordered; "get it! I'll stand by for rescue."

He sprang for the switch that controlled the great rescue magnets. Not often were they used, but every ship must have them: it was so ordered by the Board of Control. And every ship had an inset of iron in its non-magnetic hull.

His hand was upon the switch in an agony of waiting. Outside were

other beastly shapes, like no horror of earth, that came slantingly upon them, but even their speed was unequal to the chase of this new craft that left them far astern. Harkness saw the last ones vanish as Chet drove down through the repelling area. And he had eyes only for the first sight of the tiny ship that had fallen so helplessly.

Ahead and below them the sun marked a brilliant red dot. It was falling with terrific speed, and yet, so swift was their own pace, it took form too quickly: they would overshoot the mark.... Harkness felt the ship shudder in slackening speed as the blast from the bow roared out.

They were turning; aiming down. The red shape passed from view where Harkness stood. His hand was tight upon the heavy switch.

Chet's voice came sharp and clear: "Rescue switch—ready?" He appeared as cool and steady as if he were commanding on an experimental test instead of making his first rescue in the air. And Harkness answered: "Ready."

A pause. To the waiting man it was an eternity of suspense. Then, "Contact!" Chet shouted, and Harkness' tense muscles threw the current into crashing life.

He felt the smash and jar as the two ships came together. He knew that the great magnets in their lower hull had gripped the plates on the top of the other ship. He was certain that the light fans of the smaller craft must have been crushed; but they had the little red speedster in an unshakable grip; and they would land it gently. And then—then he would know!

The dreadful visions in his mind would not down.... Chet's voice broke in upon him.

"I can't maintain altitude," Chet was saying. "Our vertical blasts strike upon the other ship; they are almost neutralized." He pointed to a needle that was moving with slow certainty and deadly persistence across a graduated dial. It was their low-level altimeter, marking their fall. Harkness stared at it in stunned understanding.

"We can't hold on," the pilot was saying; "We'll crash sure as fate. But I'm darned if we'll ever let go!"

Harkness made no reply. He had dashed for an after-compartment to their storage place of tools, and returned with a blow-torch in his hand. He lit it and checked its blue flame to a needle of fire.

"Listen, Chet," he said, and the note of command in his voice told

who was in charge, at the final analysis, in this emergency. "I will be down below. You call out when we are down to twenty thousand: I can stand the thin air there. I will open the emergency slot in the lower hull."

"You're going down?" Chet asked. He glanced at the torch and nodded his understanding. "Going to cut your way through and—"

"I'll get her if she's there to get," Harkness told him grimly. "At five hundred, if I'm not back, pull the switch."

The pilot's reply came with equal emphasis. "Make it snappy," he said: "this collision instrument has picked up the signals of five patrol-ships a hundred miles to the south."

They dropped swiftly to the twenty level, and Harkness heard the deafening roar of their lower exhausts as he opened the slot in their ship's hull. He dropped to the red surface held close beneath, while the cold gripped him and the whirling blasts of air tore at him. But the torch did its work, and he lowered himself into the cabin of the little craft that had been the plaything of Mademoiselle Diane.

The cabin was a splintered wreck, where a horrible head had smashed in search of food. One entrance port was torn open, and the

head itself still hung where it had lodged. The mouth gaped flabbily open; above it was the suction cup that formed a snout; and above that, a row of staring, sightless eyes. Chet had slammed into the mass of serpents just in time, Harkness realized. Just in time, or just too late....

The door to the control room was sprung and jammed. He pried it open to see the unconscious body that lay huddled upon the floor. But he knew, with a wave of thankfulness that was suffocating, that the brute had not reached her; only the slow release of the air-pressure had rendered her unconscious. He was beside her in an instant.

He was dimly aware of the thunder of exhausts and the shrill scream of helicopters as he reached the upper surface of the red ship and forced his unconscious burden into the emergency slot above his head.

"They're here!" Chet was shouting excitedly. "We're ordered to halt. Looks as if our flight was postponed." He tried to smile, but the experiment was a failure.

"I am dodging around to keep that big one from grabbing us with its magnet. Schwartzmann is aboard one of the patrols; they think the

girl is in her ship. They won't fire on us as long as we hang on. But we'll crash if we do that, and they'll nail us if we let go."

Harkness had placed the girl's body upon the floor. His answer was a quick leap to the pilot's side. "See to her," he ordered; "I'll take the ship. Stop us now? Like hell they will! What's all our power for?"

One glance gave him the situation: the big gray fighter above, slipping down to seize them with her powerful magnets; four other patrol cruisers that slowly circled, their helicopters holding them even with the two ships that clung together in swift descent.

Chet was right; no burst of speed could save them from the guns of the patrols if they dropped the red speedster and made a break for it. They thought Diane was still in her ship, and a patrol would have the little craft safe before she had dropped a thousand feet. Their own stern exhaust would be torn by a detonite shell, and the big cruiser would seize them in the same way. No—they must hang onto the girl's ship and outmaneuver the others. He pressed the metal ball forward to the limit of its space, and the stern exhaust crashed into action with all the suddenness of his own resolve.

The ship beneath him threw itself straight ahead, flashed under the patrol-ship that blocked them, and was away. The weight below, and

its resistance to the air, dragged them down, but Harkness brought the ball up, and the ship answered with a slow lift of the bow that aimed them straight out into space.

A vertical climb!—and the voice from the instrument beside him was shouting orders to halt. On each side were patrol-ships that roared upward with him.

"Cut those motors!" the voice commanded. "Release that ship! Halt, or we will fire!"

Harkness threw his ship into a wild spiral for reply, and the thin crack of guns came to him from outside. Down! A headlong dive! Then out and up again!

He was through the repelling area in a twisting, rocking flight. Not hit as yet; they had to aim carefully to avoid damaging the red craft.... He was straining his eyes for a glimpse of serpent-forms, and he laughed softly under his breath at thought of his strange allies. Laughed!—until he saw them coming.

He slammed down the switch on his own broadcast sender. "Back!" he shouted; "back, all of you! Look up! Look above you! The monsters are coming!—the air-beasts!—they are attacking!"

He threw his own ship into a dive; saw the others do likewise; then leaped for the switch on the rescue magnets and pulled it open.

He felt the red ship fall clear. He swung his own ship free and aimed it out and up on a long line of speed. Beside him a voice from a distant, fleeing patrol was shouting; "Come back, you fool! Down! Down, through the R. A.!"

One backward glance showed him that his pursuers were safe. The serpents had turned to pursue him, and other writhing luminosities were falling from above. He swung head on, his motors wide open, his speed building up and up, to crash softly through the advance guard of the giant creatures out of space.

Nothing could stop him! He was trembling with the knowledge, and with the sheer joy of the adventure. Nothing could check them; neither cruisers nor monsters; nothing of earth or of space. They were free; they were on their way out—out where a new world awaited—where the Dark Moon raced on her unlighted path!

For the moment he had forgotten their passenger. The thrill of combat and the ecstasy of winning freedom for their great adventure had filled him to forgetfulness of all else.

"We're off!" he shouted. "Off for the Dark Moon!" Then he remembered, and turned where Chet was supporting the head of a slim girl whose eyes opened to look about, to glance from Chet to Harkness and back to Chet who was holding her.

"You saved me," she breathed, "from them!" She raised one hand weakly to cover her eyes at memory of those writhing shapes, then let it fall as other memories crowded in.

"The patrol-ships!" she exclaimed breathlessly. "You must...." Her voice trailed off into silence.

She was able to stand, and with Chet's help she came slowly to her feet as Harkness reached her. His voice was harsh and scornful; all elation had left him. He forced himself to hold his unsmiling gaze steadily upon the soft brown eyes that turned to his.

"Yes," he said; "we must 'surrender'—that was the word you wanted. We must surrender!... Well, Mam'selle Diane, we're not in a surrendering mood to-day. We've got away; made our escape!"

He laughed loudly and contemptuously, though he winced at the look of hurt that opened the brown eyes wide.

"You brought the patrol," he went on; "you learned where we were __"

"Herr Schwartzmann did," she interrupted in a quiet voice. "He located you; your signals were picked up.... They left two hours before I did," she added enigmatically. "I had to fly high, above the R. A. for greater speed."

Walt Harkness was bewildered. What did this mean? He tried to preserve the pose of hard indifference that was becoming increasingly difficult.

"More generosity?" he inquired. "You had to see the end of the hunt —be in at the death?"

"In at the death!" she echoed, and laughed in a tone that trembled and broke. "I nearly was, truly. But, no, my dear Monsieur Harkness: incredible as it seems, in view of your unfriendly reception, I came to warn you!... But, enough of that. Tell me—you see how interested I am in your plans?—what did you say of the Dark Moon?"

Walter Harkness tried to rearrange his jumbled thoughts. She had come to warn them. Was this true? Or was this girl, who laughed so lightly, playing with him?

"Yes," he said dully, "we were bound for the Dark Moon. The Patrol couldn't stop us, nor the beasts that have paralyzed the flying service of the earth; but you have done it. We will turn back at once, and return you safely—"

He was again at the controls, one hand extended for the metal ball, when her slim hand closed upon his wrist.

"I know Herr Schwartzmann's plans," she said quietly. "He would ruin you; seize your ship; steal for himself the glory of your invention. Would you go back and deliver yourself into his hands—because of me?"

The brown eyes, Harkness found, were upon his with an expression he could not fathom.

"Yes," he said simply.

And still the eyes looked into his. There was laughter in them, and something else whose meaning was concealed.

"I ask you not to do this," she was saying. "You will succeed; I read it in your face. Let me go with you; let me share in the adventure. I am begging this of you. It is your turn to be generous."

Harkness' hand upon the metal ball held it motionless within its enclosing cage. From astern there came to him the muffled roar of a blast that drove them on and out into space—black, velvety space, thick-studded with sharp points of light.... He stared into that wondrous night, then back into the eyes that looked steadily, unfathomably, into his.... And his hand was unresisting as the strong, slender fingers about his wrist drew it back....

They were off for the Dark Moon: their journey, truly, was begun. And this girl, whom he had told himself to forget, was going with them. There was much that he did not understand, but he knew that he was glad with a gladness that transcended all previous thrills of the perilous plan.

Chapter 5: The "Dark Moon"

They were seated in the cabin of the man-made meteor that the brain of Harkness had conceived—two men and a girl. And they stared at one another unsmilingly, with eyes which reflected their comprehension of the risks that they ran and the dangers which lay ahead in the dark void. Yet the brown eyes of Mam'selle Diane, no less than the others, were afire with the thrill of adventure—the same response to the same lure that has carried men to each new exploration—or to their death.

Behind them, a rear lookout port framed a picture of awful majesty. The earth was a great disc, faintly luminous in a curtain of dead black. From beyond it, a hidden sun made glorious flame of the disc's entire rim. And, streaming toward it, a straight, blasting line from their stern exhaust, was an arrow of blue.

It had taken form slowly, that arrow of blue fire, and Harkness answered an unspoken question from the girl.

"Hydrogen and oxygen," he explained. "It is an explosive mixture at this height, but too thin to take fire. It will pass. Beyond this is pure hydrogen. And then, nothing."

He turned to switch on their radio receiver, and he set it for the newscasting waves that went forth from the most powerful station of Earth, the Press Tower of New York. A voice came to them faintly. For a time it vied with the muffled roar of their thundering exhaust; then it lost volume, faded, and was finally gone.

Their last contact with Earth was severed. There remained only blackness, and a great abyss through which they were plunging.

Harkness busied himself with calculations. He would have spoken, but the silence that followed the vanished voice of Earth had robbed his own voice of control.

A telescope sight was fixed rigid with the axis of their ship. He looked through it, moved their controls, and brought the cross-hairs of his instrument to bear upon a star.

"That's about right," he said quietly. "I got all the information that the observatories had on the orbit of the Dark Moon. It is circling the Earth from north to south. It coincided for a short time with our own moon when it first hit; that's what kicked up the big wave and jarred us up. But it swung off and seems to have settled down in its own orbit now.

"Two hundred thousand miles away is what they make it, though I think that is more or less of a guess. I wish we could measure our speed." He looked at the earth-induction speed-indicator. Useless now, it registered zero.

"Well," he added, "we are shooting for the North Star. We will pass close to the Dark Moon's orbit; it should be about over the Pole on this date. And there is one good safe bet, anyhow; there is nothing between here and there to stop us."

He was being weakly facetious, but his efforts met with an enthusiastic response. The tension of the moment, it was plain, had not affected Harkness alone. But it was many hours before the error of his statement was made manifest to all.

An island, faintly luminous, lay ahead. It grew to enormous size as they dashed upon it. Harkness sprang for the controls, but, before he could reach them, they had struck the vast field of pale green light, flashed through it, and left it diminishing in size behind them. Then, other lights, not brilliant, but like phosphorescent bodies, that came and went and flashed by with blinding speed.

Another luminous area rushed at them from ahead. At first it was a speck, then an island, and then a continent in size, and through it

moved other brighter lights. This time a slight suggestion of an impact was felt. Here was matter of a form they could not guess. It was Chet who pointed to the glass of their control room. The heavy lights of the lookouts were smeared with sticky fluid that drew together in trickling streams.

"Nothing between us and the Dark Moon?" he asked of Harkness. "And space is an empty void? We Earth-creatures are a conceited lot."

"Meaning?" the girl questioned.

"Meaning that because we live on Earth—walk on solid ground, swim in the water and fly in the air—we deny the existence of life in space. There's the answer written in the blood of some life that was snuffed out as we hit it."

Harkness shook his head doubtfully. "Matter of some sort," he admitted, "and the serpents came from somewhere; but, as for the rest, the idea that the ocean of space is filled with life as our Earth-oceans are—creatures living and moving through unknown fields of force...." He did not finish the denial, but looked with wondering gaze at the myriad points that flashed softly into glowing masses and darted aside before their onward rush.

It was hours later that he checked their flight. Slowly at first he cut off the exhaust from their stern and opened the bow valve. Slowly, for their wild speed must slacken as it had been built up, by slow degrees. The self-adjusting floor swung forward and up. Their deceleration was like the pull of gravity, and now straight ahead seemed down.

More hours, and they were at rest, floating in an ethereal ocean, an ocean teeming with strange life. Each face was pressed close to a lookout port. No one of the three could speak; each was too absorbed in the story his eyes were reading—this story of a strange, new existence where no life should have been.

Animalculae. They came in swarms; cloud masses of them floated past; and swirls of phosphorescent fire marked the presence of larger creatures that moved among them. Large and small, each living creature was invisible until it moved; then came the greenish light, like phosphorescence and yet unlike.

Still Harkness could not force himself to believe the irrefutable evidence. What of astronomy? he asked himself. Why was this matter not visible through telescopes? Why did it not make its presence known through interference? Through refraction of light?... And then he realized the incredible distance within the scope of his

vision; he knew that this swarming life was actually more widely spaced; and the light of a brilliant star shone toward him through the center of a living mass to prove that here was matter that offered no resistance to the passage of light.

A void of nothingness was before his eyes. He saw its black emptiness change to pale green fire that swirled and fled before a large shape. The newcomer swept down like light itself. Softly green like the others, its rounded body was outlined in a huge circle of orange light. Like a cyclopean pod, it was open at one end, and that open end closed and opened and closed again as the creature gulped in uncounted millions of the tiny, luminous dots—every one, as Harkness now knew, a living thing.

Strange light whirled into life and vanished, each evidencing a battle where life took life in this ocean of the invisible living. A gasp from the girl brought Harkness quickly about.

"Another one!" she said breathlessly, and pointed where the blackness was looped with writhing fire. It came swiftly near to show the outline of the dread serpent form; the suction cups showed plainly.

Danger was in this thing, Harkness knew, but it passed them by

before he could move. The further lookout showed two gleaming monsters locked together in deadly embrace. So swift was their whirling motion that details of form were lost: only a confusion of lashing tentacles that whipped and tore, and one glimpse of a savage maw that sheared the tentacles off. Then the serpent was upon them.

Harkness had seen one time a sight that was indelibly impressed upon his memory. A steeloid cable had broken under a terrific strain; the end of it had lashed out with a speed the eye could not follow, to wind itself around the superstructure of a submarine—and the men who were gathered there.

He thought of that now, saw again the bleeding mass that had been an instant before a group of humans, as the serpent seized its prey. The two combatants were encircled in a living coil of light. Then, as motion ceased, the ethereal sea went dark except for pulsing suction cups that drew and strained at the bodies they held.

Harkness was groping for the controls—he saw too plainly their own helplessness when they were at rest—but the voice of Dianne checked him.

"That bright star went out," she said; and Harkness let his gaze follow where she pointed.

The stars that were distant suns shone in brilliant points of light; no atmosphere here to dim them or cause a flickering. A bright point vanished as she looked—another!—and he knew abruptly that he was seeing a circle of blackness that moved slowly between them and the stars.

"The Moon!" he shouted. "The Dark Moon!" And now his hand found the controls that threw their ship into thunderous life. It was approaching! He swung the metal ball to throw them ahead and to one side, and the roar from the stern told of the fast-growing speed that was pressing them to the floor....

An hour of wild flight, and the circle was close upon them. Too faintly lighted to register in the telescopes of Earth, there was still enough of luminosity to mark it as a round disc of violet that grew dimly bluish-green around the edge.

It ceased to grow. Their ship, Harkness knew, was speeding beside it some hundreds of miles away. But they were within its gravitational pull, and were falling toward it. And he aimed his ship bow-on to make the forward blast a check upon their falling speed.

The circle broadened; became a sphere; and then they were plunging through clouds more tenuous than any vapors of Earth—thick layers

of gas that reflected no rays from the distant sun.

Beside them a sinuous form showed where a serpent of space was trying to match their speed. Harkness saw it twisting convulsively in the stratum of gas; it was falling, lifeless, beside them as they sped on and away. Here was something the beasts could not combat. He made a mental note of the fact, but his thoughts flashed again to what lay ahead.

Every eye was held close to the lookouts that faced forward. The three were breathless, wordless; the hand of Harkness that held the tiny ball was all that moved.

Ahead of them was their goal, the Dark Moon! And they were prepared for Stygian darkness and a land of perpetual night. The almost invisible gas-clouds thinned; there was a glow ahead that grew brilliant as they watched; and then, with a blinding suddenness that made them shield their eyes, there flashed before them a world of light.

Each line of shore was marked distinctly there; the blue and violet of rippling seas were blended with unreal hues; there were mountains upthrust and, on the horizon, a range of volcanic peaks that poured forth flashing eruptions half-blanketed by invisible gas.

"The Dark Moon!" gasped Harkness. He was spellbound with utter awe at the spectacle he beheld. This brilliant world a-gleam to its farthest horizon with golden, glorious sunlight, softly spread and diffused! This, this! was the Dark Moon!

He turned to share with the others the delirium of ecstatic wonder too overpowering to be borne alone—turned, to find his happiness shot through with a pang of regret. He saw Chet and Diane. They had been standing together at a wide forward lookout; and now she was holding one hand of the pilot to her breast in an embrace of passionate joy.

Unconscious, that gesture of delight at this climax of their perilous trip?—Harkness told himself that this was so. But he swung back to the helm of the ship. He glanced at instruments that again were registering; he saw the air-pressure indicator that told of oxygen and an atmosphere where men might live. He gauged his distance carefully, and prepared to land.

The moment of depression could not last, for there was too much here to fill brain and eyes. What would they find? Was there life? His question was answered by an awkward body that flapped from beneath them on clumsy wings. He glimpsed a sinuous neck, a head that was all mouth and flabby pouch, and the mouth opened

ludicrously in what was doubtless a cry of alarm.

Then land, that took form and detail; a mountain whose curled top was like a frozen wave of stone. In a valley below it trees were growing. They swayed in a wind, and their branches reached upward and flowed and waved like seaweed on the ocean's floor. Green—vivid, glowing green!—and reds and purples that might be flowers and fruit.

An open space in a little valley spread invitingly before him, and he laid the ship down there in a jungle of lush grasses—set it down as gently as if he were landing from a jaunt of a thousand miles instead of two hundred times that distance straight away from Earth.

The others were looking at him with glowing, excited eyes. In the cabin was silence. Harkness felt that he must speak, must say something worthy of the moment—something to express in slight degree the upwelling emotion that filled them all, three adventurers about to set foot upon a virgin world....

The pause was long-drawn, until he ended it in a voice that had all the solemn importance of a head-steward's announcement on a liner of the high-level service. But the corners of his lips were twitching to a little smile.

"This," he announced, "is as far as we go. This is the end of our run."

The tension that had held them emotionally taut was ended. With outstretched hands Diane ran toward him, and her broken laugh betrayed the hysteria she was holding back.

"Congratulations!" she cried, and clung tightly to his hands. "Congratulations, M'sieu Walter—"

Her voice choked and she could not go on; but the eyes that were raised to his were luminous through the tears that filled them.

From the cabin beyond came a clash of levers, where Chet was preparing to open a port. And Harkness followed with unseeing eyes where the pilot waited that their commander might be the first to step forth upon an unknown globe—upon the surface of what men had called "The Dark Moon."

Chapter 6: Trapped

Walter Harkness, piloting his ship to a slow, safe landing on a new world, had watched his instruments with care. He had seen the outer pressure build up to that of the air of Earth; the spectro-analyzer had shown nitrogen preponderating, with sufficient oxygen to support life. And, below him, a monstrous thing that flopped hurriedly away on leather wings had told him that life was there.

But what would that life be? This was the question uppermost in the minds of all three as they stepped forth—the first of Earth's people to ask the question and to find the answer.

Chet had gone to their stores. He strapped a belt about his waist, a belt banded with a row of detonite cartridges, and a pistol hung at his hip. He handed another to Harkness. But the pistol he offered Diane was refused.

"My many accomplishments," she laughed, "do not include that. I never could shoot—and besides I will not need to with both of you here." Her hand was resting confidently upon Chet's arm as they followed where Harkness led.

The heavy grass, standing waist-high in the little valley where their

ship was at rest, stirred to ripples of vivid green as a light breeze touched it. Above, the sun shone warm upon this world of tropical growth. Harkness, listening in the utter silence for sounds that might mean danger, let his eyes follow up the rugged wall of rock that hemmed them in on two sides. It gleamed with metallic hues in the midday glare. He looked on to the sun above.

"A dark moon!" he said wonderingly. "Dark!—and yet it is blazing bright. Why can't we see it from Earth? Why is it dark?... I've an idea that the gas we came through is the answer. There is metal, we know, that conducts an electric current in only one direction: why not a gas that will do the same with light?"

The pilot was listening, but Diane seemed uninterested in scientific speculations. "The trees!" she breathed in rapture; "the marvelous, beautiful trees!"

She was gazing toward distant towering growths where the valley widened. Like no trees of Earth, these monsters towered high in air, their black trunks branching to end in tendrils that raised high above them. And the tendrils were a waving, ever-moving sea of color, where rainbow iridescence was stabbed through with the flash of crimson buds. A down-draft of air brought a heady, intoxicating odor.

And still there was silence. To Walter Harkness, standing motionless and alert amidst the waving grass, it seemed a hush of waiting. A prickle of apprehension passed over his skin. He glanced about, his pistol ready in his hand, looked back for a moment at the ship, then smiled inwardly in self-derision of his fear as he strode forward.

"Let's have a look at things," he said with a heartiness not entirely sincere. "We'll discover nothing standing here."

But the silence weighed upon them all as they pressed on. No exclamations of amazement from them now, no speculations of what might lie ahead. Only wide-eyed alertness and a constant listening, listening—until the silence was broken by a scream.

A man it seemed at first, when Harkness saw the figure leap outward from the cliff. A second one followed. They landed on all fours upon a rock that jutted outward toward the trees.

The impact would have killed a human, but these creatures stood upright to face the concealment from which they had sprung. One was covered with matted, brown hair. Its arms were long, and its fists pounded upon a barrel-like chest, while it growled hoarsely. The other ape-thing, naked and hairless, did the same. They were both uttering those sounds, that at times seemed almost like grunted

words, when the end came.

A swishing of leather wings!—a swooping, darting rush of a huge body!—and one of the ape-men, as Harkness had mentally termed them, was struggling in the clutch of talons that gripped him fast.

The giant bat-shape that had seized him reached for the other, too. A talon ripped at the naked face, but the ape-man dodged and vanished among the rocks.

With pounding wings, the bat swept off in lumbering flight, but with its burden it seemed heavy, and failed to rise. The trees were close, and their waving tentacles drew back, then shot out to splash about the intruder. The talons released their hold, and the huge leather wings flapped frantically; but too late. Both captor and captive were wrapped in an embrace of iridescent arms and held struggling in mid-air, while the unmoving watchers below stood in horror before this drama of life and death.

Then a red bud opened. It was enormous, and its flowery beauty made more revolting the spectacle of the living food that was thrust within its maw.

The bud closed. Its petals were like lips.... And Diane, in white-faced

horror, was clinging to the protecting arm of Chet Bullard beside her. Chet, too, had paled beneath his tan. But Walter Harkness, though white of face, was staring not at the crimson bud, shut tightly about its living food, but upward toward the broken, rocky face of the cliff.

The flying thing, the unnamed horror of the air, had come silently from on high. None of them had seen it until it struck, and he was sure that the ape-men had been taken unaware. Then what had frightened them? What other horror had driven them in screaming terror to that fearful spring out into the open where they must have known danger awaited?

Did a rock move? he wondered. Was the splotch of color—that mottling of crimson and copper and gray—a part of the metallic mass? He rubbed his smarting eyes—and when he looked again the color was gone. But he had a conviction that eyes, sinister and deadly, had been staring into his, that a living mass had withdrawn softly into a shadowed cave, and that the menace that had threatened the ape-men was directed now toward them.

Was this the reason for the silence? Was this valley, so peaceful in its sunlit stillness, a place of death, from which all living things kept clear? Had the ape-men been drawn there through curiosity at seeing their ship float down?

And the quiet beauty of the valley—it might be as horrible a mockery as the blazing splendor of those things ahead—those beautiful and horrible eaters of flesh! His voice was unsteady as he turned toward the others.

"Let's call this off," he said: "there is something up there. We'll go back to the ship and get up in the air again. We'll find a healthier place to land."

Like Harkness, Chet Bullard held his pistol ready in his hand. "Something else?" he inquired. "You saw something?" And Harkness nodded grimly.

They retraced their steps. A half-mile, perhaps. It had seemed long as they ventured forth, and was no shorter now. And the gleaming, silvery shape of the ship was entirely lovely to their eyes as they approached.

Harkness circled the blunt bow with its open exhaust high above his head. On the far side was the port where they had emerged; its open door would be welcome in its promise of safe seclusion. His sigh of relief was echoed by the two who followed, for the horror and apprehension had been felt by all. But the breath choked abruptly in his throat.

Before them was the door, its thick metal wide-swung as they had left it. But the doorway itself, where warm darkness should have invited, was entirely sealed by a web of translucent stuff.

Harkness approached to look more closely. The substance was glistening and smooth—yellowish—almost transparent. It was made up of a tangle of woven cords which clung tightly to the metal sides. Harkness reached out in sudden fury to grip it and tear it loose. He grasped the slippery stuff, stumbled—and hung suspended by a tenacious hold that gripped his hand where it had touched, and would not let go.

His arm swung against it, and his shoulder. They were instantly immovable. And he knew in a single terrifying instant his utter helplessness. He saw Chet Bullard's hands come up, and he found his voice in time to scream a harsh warning to him.

"Tear me loose!" he commanded, "but don't touch the damned stuff!" It took the combined strength of the pilot and the girl to free him, and Harkness had to set his teeth to restrain an exclamation of pain as his hand came slowly from the web that clung and clung and would not let go.

From his place upon the ground he saw Chet raise a broken piece of

rock. It was like metal, and heavy, as the pilot's efforts proved, though it was surprisingly small in size. He saw Chet raise it above his head and crash it upon the thick web that filled the door. And, as his own aching arm had been held, the rock was seized in the tough strands, which gave back only slightly under the blow.

Harkness scrambled to his feet. The fury that had possessed him made the hurt of his arm unfelt. What devil's work was this that barred them from the safety of the ship? The memory of that other menace, half-seen among the rocks, was strong upon him.

"Stand back!" he shouted to Chet and the girl, and he raised his pistol to send a charge of detonite into the unyielding mass. Here was power to tear the clinging-stuff to atoms.

He felt Chet's body plunge upon him an instant before he fired, and his pistol was knocked up and flew outward from his hand. He heard the pilot's voice.

"Walt!" Chet was saying. "For God's sake come out of it! Are you crazy? You might have wrecked that door-port so we never could have fixed it; or the bullet could have gone on through to explode inside the ship. Either way we would never get back: no leaky hull would ever let us make the trip home!"

Chet was right: Harkness knew it in a moment. He knew the folly of what he would have done, yet knew, too, that desperate measures were needed and needed quickly. The eyes of a devil had held his own from the darkness of the rocks, and the same rock wall came close to where they stood. He was in command; it was up to him—

The moment of indecision ended as a mass of viscous fluid splashed heavily against the ship. Harkness whirled about to face the rocks. He was calm now and controlled, but under his quiet courage was a fear that gripped him. A fear of what he should find! But the reality was so far beyond any imagined terror as to leave him cold.

Above them and thirty feet away on a rocky ledge was a thing of horror. Basilisk eyes in a hairy head; gray, stringy hairs; and the fearful head ended in narrow, outthrust jaws, where more of the gray hairs hung like moss from lips that writhed and curled and sucked at the air with a whistling shrillness. Those jaws could crush a man to pulp. And the head seemed huge until the body behind it came into view.

The suddenness with which the great body rose showed the strength of the beast. A prodigious sack, like black leather, with markings of crimson and copper!—and the straggling, ropy hairs on it were greenish-gray like the lustre of the rocks at its back.

It stood upright on great hairy legs. The eyes shot forward on protruding antennae. The sack-like body flexed to bring the rear part under and forward. It was aiming at them.

Harkness seized the slim figure of the girl who stood, mute with horror, beside him. He threw her roughly to the ground, for the meaning of the viscous splash was plain.

"Down!" he shouted to Chet. "Down on the ground!" And he felt the swish of another liquid mass above his head as he obeyed his own command.

He felt for his pistol, then remembered it was gone—lost when Chet sprang upon him. But Chet had his.

"Shoot!" he ordered. "Shoot the damned thing, Chet! Kill the spider!"

Spider! He had named it unconsciously. But the name was inadequate, for here was a thing of horror beyond even a spider of prodigious size. This peaceful valley!—and here was its ruler, frightful, incredibly loathsome!

He waited for the sound of a shot. A cursing, instead, was the only

reply: Chet was not firing! Harkness whirled to see the pilot pinned by one arm to the web.

The fluid had caught him; he had not dropped quickly enough. And his right hand that had been raised, and the pistol it held, were clamped fast to the awful stuff.

There was no word of appeal, no call for help, yet Chet Bullard must have known what this meant. But neither did Harkness wait for that word. One spring, and he had the pilot by the waist, and he felt the weight of the girl's slim body added to his as her arms went about him to help. Chet's face went chalk-white as the hand tore loose. The pistol remained buried in the clinging stuff.

From the corner of his eye, Harkness saw the monster crouched to spring. He was half dragging the other two as he stooped and ran for the bow of the ship. The monstrous body thudded against the metal hull behind them.

The leap was prodigious. He saw the sack-like body fall inert, the great, hairy legs shaking. For the moment, the attacker was helpless: but the respite was brief, as the glaring eyes plainly told.

Below the ledge where the beast had been was an opening in the

rocks—a bit of black shadow that was darker than the lustrous metal of the cliff. There was a chance—

"I can make it," Chet was saying, as Harkness dragged him on; "help Diane!" But the girl had sprung before them to gain a foothold and extend a helping hand. And they were back in the darkness of a rocky cave before the sunlit entrance was blocked by a hairy head and a horrible, slavering mouth on a body too huge to enter.

Chapter 7: In the Labyrinth

Spent and shaken, the three passed onward into the cave. Harkness searched his pockets for his neolite flash; found it—a tiny pencil with a tip of glass—and the darkness of the inner cave was flooded with light.

A box of food tablets was in a pocket of Chet's jacket, and there was water that trickled in a tiny stream out of the rocks. It could have been worse, Diane pointed out with forced gaiety. But Harkness, who had gone back for a final look at the entrance to the cave, found it difficult to smile.

He had found the entrance an opening no longer: it was sealed with a giant web of ropy strands—a network, welded together to a glutinous mesh. They were sealed in as effectively as if the opening were closed by a thick door of steel.

They gathered fungus that grew in thready clumps on the walls, and this served as a mattress to soften the rocky floor that must be their bed. And Harkness sat silent in the darkness long after the others were asleep—sat alone on guard, to think and to reach, at last, a conclusion.

A cleavage in the rocks made a narrow crack to the outside world, and through it the starlight filtered dimly. The thread of light grew brilliantly golden—moonlight, a hundredfold more bright than moonlight on Earth. And he realized that the source of light was their own globe, Earth, shining far through space!

It lighted the cave with a mellow glow. It shone upon the closed eyes of the sleeping girl, and touched lightly upon the rounded softness of a lovely face beneath a tangle of brown curls. Harkness stared long and soberly at the picture she made, and he thought of many things.

No parasite upon society was this girl. He had known such; but her ready wit, her keen grasp of affairs, had been evident in their talks on the journey they had made. They had stamped her as one who was able to share in the work and responsibilities of a world where men and women worked together. Yet there was nothing of the hardness that so many women showed. And now she was altogether feminine, and entirely lovely.

Not far away, Chet Bullard was sleeping heavily. His hand, injured painfully when they tore it from the clinging mass, had been bandaged by Diane. It troubled him now, and he flung one arm outward. His hand touched that of the girl, and Harkness saw the instant quiet that came upon him at the touch. And Diane—her lips

were smiling in her sleep.

They had been much together, those two; theirs had been a ready, laughing comradeship. It had troubled Harkness, but now he put all thought of self aside.

"This trip," he thought, "can end only in disaster—if it has not already done so. What a fool I was to bring these two!" And: "If I want to risk my own life," he told himself bitterly, "that's my own affair. But for Chet, and Diane, with their lives ahead of them—" His determination was quickly reached.

He would go back. Somehow, some way, he would get them to the ship. They would return to Earth. And then.... His plans were vague. But he knew he could interest capital; he knew that this new world, that was one great mine of raw metals, would not go long unworked. The metallic colorations in rock walls and mountains had fairly shouted of rich ores and untold wealth.

Yes, they would go back, but he would return. He would put from his mind all thought of this girl; he would forget forever those nebulous plans that had filled him with hope for a happiness beyond all hoping. And he would come back here prepared for conquest.

He put aside all speculation as to what other horrible forms of life the little world might hold: he would be prepared to deal with them. But he still wondered if there were people. He had hoped to find some human life.

And this hope, too, left him; his sense of this globe as an undeveloped world was strong upon him. The monsters; the tropical, terrible vegetation; the very air itself—all breathed of a world that was young. There had not been time for the long periods of evolution through which humanity came.

He tried to tell himself of the wealth that would be his; tried to feel the excitement that should follow upon such plans. But he could only feel a sense of loss, of something precious that was gone. Diane —named for the moon: she seemed more precious now to the lonely man than all else on moon or Earth. She could never be his; she never had been. It was Chet upon whom the gods and Diane had smiled. And Chet deserved it.

Only in this last conviction did he find some measure of consolation during the long night.

“He will rip the big web out with detonite," Harkness told the others when morning came. "But I want to get the spider, too."

A touch upon the web with a stick brought an instant response. Again they saw in all its repulsiveness the thing that seemed a creature of some horrible dream. The eyes glared, while hairy feelers seized the web and shook it in furious rage. Harkness, fearing another discharge of the nauseating, viscous liquid, withdrew with the others far back in the cave.

"Wait," he told them. "I have a plan."

The creature vanished, and Harkness went cautiously forward to the web. He took a detonite cartridge from his belt and placed it on the floor close to the ropy strands. Another, and another, until he had a close-packed circle of the deadly things. Then he placed a heavy, metallic piece of rock beside them and proceeded, with infinite care, to build a tower.

One irregular block upon another: it was like a child at play with his toys. Only now the play was filled with deadly menace. The stones swayed, then held in precarious, leaning uncertainty; the topmost was directly above the cartridges on the floor.

"Back!" he ordered the others, "and lie flat on the floor. I must guess at the amount of explosive for the job."

Chet and Diane were safe as Harkness weighed a fragment of metal in his hand. One throw—and he must not hit the tower he had built.... The rock struck into the network of cords; he saw it clinging where it struck, and saw the web shaking with the blow.

Over his shoulder, as he ran, he glimpsed the onrush of the beast. Again the eyes were glaring, again the feelers were shaking furiously at the web. They touched the leaning stones!

He had reached the place where Chet and Diane lay and saw the beginning of the tower's fall; and in the split second of its falling he threw himself across the body of the prostrate girl to shield her from flying fragments of stone. A blast of air tore at him; his ears were numbed with the thunder of the blast—a thunder that ended with a crashing of stone on stone....

Slowly he recovered his breath; then raised himself to his feet to look toward the entrance. It would be open now, the way cleared. But, instead of sunlight, he saw utter dark. Where the mouth of the cave had been was blackness—and nothing else!

He fumbled for his flash, and stood in despairing silence before what the light disclosed.

The rock was black and shining about the mouth of the cavern. It had split like glass. In shattered fragments it filled the forward part of the cave. The whole roof must have fallen, and a crashing slide above had covered all.

Chet was beside him; Harkness dared not look toward the girl coming expectantly forward.

"We'll use more of the same," Chet suggested: "we will blast our way out."

"And bring down more rock with each charge," Harkness told him tonelessly. "This means we are—"

Diane had overheard. Harkness' pause had come too late.

"Yes?" she encouraged. "This means we are entombed?—buried here? Is that it?"

Her voice was quiet; her eyes, in the light of the little flash, were steady in their look upon the man who was leader of the expedition. Diane Vernier might shudder with horror before some obscene beast—she would tremble with delight, too, at sight of some sudden beauty—but she was not one to give way to hysteria when a

situation must be faced. No despair could be long-lived under the spell of those eyes, brave and encouraging.

"No," said Walter Harkness: "we will find some way to escape. This is blocked. We will follow the cave back and see where it leads. There must be other outlets. We're not quitting now." He smiled with a cheerful confidence that gave no hint of being assumed, and he led the way with a firm step.

Diane followed as usual, close to Chet. But her eyes were upon their leader; they would have repaid him for a backward look.

To a mineralogist this tunnel that nature had pierced through the rock would have been an endless delight, but to a man seeking escape from his living tomb it brought no such ecstasy. The steady, appraising glance of Harkness was everywhere—darting ahead, examining the walls, seeking some indication, some familiar geological structure, that might be of help.

He stopped once to kick contemptuously at a vein of quartz. Three feet in thickness—and it crumbled to fragments under his foot to release a network of gold.

"Rotten with it," he said.

And the only comment came from Chet: "A fat lot of good it does us!" he replied.

The cavern branched and branched again; it opened to a great room higher than their light could reach; it narrowed to leave apertures through which they crawled like moles; it became a labyrinth of passages from which there seemed no escape. Each turn, each new opening, large or small—it was always the same: Harkness praying inaudibly for a glimpse of light that would mean day; and, instead—darkness!—and their own pencil of light so feeble against the gloom ahead....

Chapter 8: The Half-Men

The Valley of the Fires," Harkness was to call it later, and shorten it again to "Fire Valley." The misty smokes of a thousand fires rose skyward from the lava beds of its upper end.

Where the lava flow had stopped and the lower valley began, came vegetation. Sparse at first, then springing to luxuriant growth, it contrasted strongly with the barren wall beside it and the equally barren waste of high ground where the fires were.

Mountains hemmed it in; their distant peaks showed black, with red and green striations of mineralized deposits. The valleys about them were dense with foliage, a green so startling and vivid as almost to offend the eye.

Trees were in the lower end of the valley. They were of tremendous growth, and the dew of early morning dripped from them like rain. Trunks smooth and ghostly white, except where the bark had split into countless fractures and the scarlet color of the sap-wood showed through. Outflung branches forked to drop down dangling stalks that rooted again in the ground; these made a forest of slender white supports for the leafy roof—a forest of spectral shapes in a shadow-world. Only here and there were arrows of sunlight that pierced the

dense foliage above to strike through and down to the black earth floor and the carpet of rainbow hues.

And that carpet of radiant colors was trampled into paths that wound on to lose themselves in the half-light of that ghostly world.

From one of the paths came sounds of tramping feet. Cries and snarling grunts resounded through the silence to send lizards scurrying to the safety of the trees. Animal cries or hoarse voices of men—it would have been difficult to tell which. And a sight of the creatures themselves would have left an observer still in doubt.

A score of them, and they walked upright. Some bodies were naked, a coppery-black in color; on others the skin was covered by a sparse growth of hair. Noses that were mere nostril-slits; low foreheads, retreating flatly to a tangle of matted hair; protruding jaws which showed the white flash of canine teeth as the ape-like faces twisted and the creatures tugged at ropes of vines thrown over their shoulders.

The Neanderthal Man had not learned to use the wheel; and these man-animals, too, used only the sheer strength of their corded muscles as they hauled at the body of a beast.

It dragged along the path behind them, rolling at times to show the white of its belly instead of the flexible armor-plating that protected its back. Fresh blood flowed from a wound in the white under-skin; this, and the dripping flints that tipped their spears, told how death had come. One curving horn that projected from a wrinkled snout caught at times in the undergrowth, and then the ones who dragged it would throw themselves upon the head with snarls of fury and twist the big horn free.

The rocky cliff was honeycombed with caves. A cry, half-human in its tone, brought an avalanche of figures scurrying forth. Children, whose distended abdomens told of the alternate feasting and hunger that was theirs, were cuffed aside by women who shouted shrilly at sight of the prize. Older men came, too, and in a screaming mob they threw themselves upon the carcass of the beast that had been dragged into the open.

Flint knives came into play, then sharpened stakes that were thrust through the bleeding meat. Young and old seized what they could, leaped across the little stream that trickled downward through the valley, and raced for the nearest fires.

The fumaroles made places for roasting, and these half-men had learned the taste of cooked meats. Their jaws were slavering as they

waited. The scents were tantalizing.

A hunter was reaching to snatch a shred of half-cooked meat when a woman of the tribe gave a scream that was shrill with fear. She pointed her gnarled hand upward on the face of the cliff.

An opening was there, a black cave-mouth in the black cliff. Above their own caves, was this higher opening, yet they must have explored it often—must have followed it as far as they dared, where it led to the mountain's innermost depths. Yet from this familiar place there stepped forth an apparition. Another followed, and another—three strange creatures like none the savage eyes of this world had ever seen.

Clothing torn to rags—faces black and smeared with blood—hands that reached groping and trembling toward the light, until the half-blinded eyes of one saw the trickling brook.

Then, "Water!" he croaked in a voice hardly more human than the grunts of horror from below, and he took the hand of another to help in the steep descent—while the tribe beneath them forgot their anticipated feast, forgot all but their primordial fear of the unknown, and, with startled cries, broke and ran for the safety of the forest....

Chapter 9: The Throwers of Thunder

It is doubtful if Walter Harkness heard or consciously saw that fleeing tribe. He saw only the glorious sunlight and its sparkling reflection upon the stream; and in his nostrils was the scent of roasting meat to rouse him to a frenzy.

For seven Earth days he and Chet had kept account of the hours. How long after that they had followed their stumbling course he could not have told. Time ceased to be measured in hours and days; rather was it reckoned in painful progress a foot at a time up rocky burrows, helping, both of them, to ease the path for the girl who struggled so bravely with them, until aching muscles refused to bear them further. Then periods of drugged sleep with utter fatigue for an opiate—and on again in hopeless, aimless wandering.

And now, the sun! And he was plunging his head into icy water to drink until he strangled for breath! He knew that Chet and Diane were beside him. A weak laugh came to his lips as he sat erect: the girl had drunk as deeply as the rest—and now she was washing her hands and face.

The idea seemed tremendously amusing—or was it that the simple rite indicated more than he could bear to know? It meant that they

were safe; they had escaped; and again a trifle like cleanliness was important in a woman's eyes. He rocked with meaningless laughter—until again a puff of wind brought distinctly the odor of cooking food.

A hundred feet away, up higher in the valley, were the first of the fires. Harkness came to his feet and ran—ran staggeringly, it is true, but he ran—and he tore at some hanging shreds of smoking meat regardless of the burn. But the fierce gnawing at his stomach did not force him to wolf the food. He carried it back, a double handful of half-cooked meat, to the others. And he doled it out sparingly to them and to himself.

The cold water had restored his sanity. "Easy," he advised them; "too much at first and we're done for."

He was chewing on the last shred when a thought struck him; he had been too stunned before to reason. For the first time he jerked up his head in startled alarm. He looked carefully about—at the meat on its pointed stakes, at the distant fires, at the open glade below them and the dense jungle beyond where nothing stirred.

"Cooked meat!" he exclaimed in a whisper. "Who did it? This means people!"

The memory that had registered only in some corner of a mind deeper than the conscious, came to the surface. "I remember," he said. "There were things that ran—men—apes—what were they?"

"Oh, Lord!" Chet groaned. "And all I ask is to be left alone!" But he wearily raised himself upright and verified the other's words.

"They ran toward that opening among those trees. And I'll bet they live in these caves up here behind us. I got a whiff of them as we came past: they smelled like a zoo."

They had come out on top of the lava-flow, close to its end. The molten rock had hardened to leave a drop of some forty feet to the open glade below. Beyond that the jungle began, but behind them was the lava bed, frozen in countless corrugations. Harkness rose and helped Diane to her feet: they must force their aching muscles to take up their task again.

He peered up the valley where a thousand fires smoked. "That stream," he said, "comes in from a little valley that branches off up there. We had better follow it—and we had better get going before that gang recovers from its surprise."

They were passing the first of the fires where the meat was smoking

when Chet called a halt. "Wait a bit," he begged: "let's take a sirloin steak along—" He was haggling at a chunk of meat with a broken flint when a spear whistled in and crashed upon the rocks.

Harkness saw the thrower. Beyond the lava's edge the jungle could be seen, and from among the spectral trees had darted a wild figure whose hairy arm had snapped the spear into the air.

There were more who followed. They were sliding down the slender trunks that supported the branches and leafy roof high above the ground. To Harkness the open doorway to the jungle seemed swarming with monkey-men. The movement of the three fugitives had been taken as a retreat, and the courage of the cave-dwellers had returned.

Harkness glanced quickly about to size up their situation. To go on was certain death; if these creatures came up to meet them on the lava-beds, the end was sure. The escarpment gave the three some slight advantage of a higher position.

One vain wish for the pistol now resting in the deep grass beside a vanished ship; then he sprang for the weapon that had been thrown —it was better than nothing—and advanced cautiously to the lava's edge.

No concealment there; no broken rocks, other than pieces of flint; a poor fortress, this, that they must defend! And the weapons of their civilization were denied them.

Another spear hummed its shrill song, coming dangerously close. He saw women-figures that came from the jungle with supplies of weapons. Short spears, about six feet long, like the one he held. But they had others, too—long lances of slender wood with tips of flint. Thrusting spears! He had a sickening vision of those jagged stone heads ripping into their bodies while these beasts stood off in safety. It was thus that they killed their prey. And Diane—he could not even spare her—could not give her the kind oblivion of a mercy-shot!

The other two were lying beside him now at the edge of the sloping cliff. The bank of shining gray was not steep; the enemy would climb it with ease. Hopeless! They had won through for this!... Harkness groaned silently in an agony of spirit at thought of the girl.

"Oh, for one detonite shell to land among them!" he said between clenched teeth—then was breathless with a thought that exploded within his mind.

His fingers were clumsy with haste as he fumbled at the head of the spear. The sharp-edged stone was bound to its shaft with sinew,

wound round and round. The enemy were out in the open; he spared an instant's look to see them advancing. A clattering of falling spears sounded beyond, but the weapons were overcast, thanks to the protection of the rocky edge.

"A shell!" Harkness spoke with sharp intensity. "Give me a cartridge from your belt, quick!"

Chet handed him one. Harkness took one look, then pulled a cartridge from his own belt.

"That explains it," he was muttering as he worked, "—the big explosion when I smashed the rocks. You've got ammunition for your pistol, but you put rifle cartridges in my belt—and service ammunition at that. No wonder they raised the devil with those rocks!"

His fingers were working swiftly now to bind the slender cartridge to the spear. A chipped out hollow in the flint made a seat. He gave silent thanks for Chet Bullard's mistake. Chet had slipped; he had filled Harkness' belt with ammunition that would have been useless for the pistol—but it was just what he needed here.

So intent was he on his task that he hardly heard the yelling chorus

from below. It swelled to a din; but his work was finished, and he looked up.

One figure in advance of the rest had been urging them on, and they came in a wild rush now. Walt Harkness scrambled to his feet. Tall and sinewy, his broad shoulders, scantily covered by the rags of blouse that remained, were turned sideways as he raised the spear. The yelling from below swelled louder and more shrill.

This strange one from another tribe—he was unarmed except for one of their own spears. The curious covering on his body was flapping in the breeze. Nothing here, surely, to hold a hunting-tribe in check.

The spear rose slowly in the air. What child of the tribe could not have thrown it better! They came on faster now; the leader had almost reached the place where the spear was dropping down. He must have laughed, if laughter had yet been born in such a breast, at the futile weapon dropping point first among the rocks.

One little shell, a scant three inches long, no thicker than the stylus on milady's desk! But here was service ammunition, as Harkness had said; and in the end of the lead a fulminate cap was buried—and a grain of dense, gray dust!

Here was no flame—only a concussion that cracked upon one's ears, and flying rock fragments that filled the air with demoniac shrieks. And then that sound was lost in the shriller cries of terror and pain as the ape-men broke for the trees.

Harkness saw some of them who rose and fell again to rise no more, and one who dragged himself slowly from the blast that had struck him down. But his eyes came back to another spear in his hands, and his fingers were tearing at the sinew wrapping.

The spear bent in his hands; the wood was flexible and springy. It was Diane who offered the next suggestion. She, too, was working at another spear—what wonder if her breath came fast!—but her eyes were alight, and her mind was at work.

"Make a bow!" she exclaimed. "A bow and arrow, Walter! We are fighting primitive men, so we can't scorn primitive weapons." She stopped with a little exclamation of pain; the sharp tip of the flint had cut her hand.

Chet's spearhead was unloosed. He tried the spring of the shaft. "Bully girl, Diane!" he said, and fell to gouging out a notch with the sharp flint near the end of the shaft.

The sinew made a string. Three slender sticks lying about whose ends had been sharpened for use on the meat: they would do for arrows. Each arrow must be notched and headed with an explosive shell, and there were many of them.

Chet sprang to his feet at last. Forgotten was the fatigue that had numbed him. A wild figure, his clothes in rags, his short, curling hair no longer blond, his face a mottling of brown and black, where only here and there the white skin dared show through—he executed an intricate dance-step with a bed of lava for a floor, while he shouted:

"Bring on your fighters! Bring 'em on! Who's going to stop us now?"

They were free to go, but Harkness paused at a renewed screaming from the jungle. Again the hairy ones poured forth into the open glade. He had half raised his bow, with arrow ready, before he saw that this was no attack.

The screams merged discordantly with other sounds—a crashing of uprooted trees—a chorus of harsh coughing—snorting—unrecognizable noises. And the people were cowering in terror.

They half-ran toward the safety of their caves, but the throwers of thunder, the demons on the lava bed, were between them and their

homes. They turned to face the jungle, and the wild sounds and crash of splintered wood that drew near.

Harkness saw the first head that appeared. He stared in open-mouthed amazement at the armored monster. Thick plates of shell covered its mammoth body and lapped part way over the head to end at beady, wicked, red eyes on either side of a single curved horn.

An instant the animal waited, to glare at the cowering human forms it had tracked to their lair; others crashed through beside it; and in that instant Harkness recognized the huddled group below as brothers. Far down they were, in the long, weary path that was evolution, and hardly come as yet to a consciousness of self—but there were those who leaped before the others, their long spears couched and ready; they were defending the weaker ones at their backs; they were men!

And Harkness was shouting as he raised his crude bow. "Shoot!" he ordered. "Kill the brutes!" His own arrow was speeding true.

The rush of mammoth beasts was on as he fired, but it was checked as quickly as it began. An inferno of explosions rose about the rushing bodies; crashing detonations struck two of them down, their heads torn and crushed. Between the helpless, primordial men and

the charging beasts was a geyser of spouting earth and rocks, through which showed ugly heads and tremendous bodies that wheeled and crashed madly back into the jungle growth.

Harkness suddenly realized that only he and Chet had fired. Diane's bow was on the ground. He saw the girl beside it, sitting upright; but her body was trembling and weaving, and she was plainly maintaining her upright posture only by the greatest effort.

He was beside her in an instant. "What is it?" he demanded. "Are you hurt? What is it?"

She raised her hand that he might see; her lips, seemed almost too numb for speech.

"Only a scratch," she whispered, but Harkness saw her eyes glazing. He dropped to his knees and caught her swaying body in his arms.

"A scratch," she repeated in a fading voice, "from the spear.... Poison ... I think."

A head appeared over the lava crest. Harkness saw it vaguely. He knew that Chet had the newcomer covered; his bow was drawn. It meant nothing to him, for Diane was wounded—dying! Dying, now,

in his arms....

The ape-man came on; he was grovelling upon the ground. He was hairless, like the one they had seen escape the attack of the giant bat, and his cheek was slashed with a healing cut that might have been made by a ripping talon. He abased himself before the awful might of these creatures who had saved them. And he made motions with his arms to picture how they had sailed down from the skies; had landed; and he had seen them. He was plainly petitioning for pardon and the favor of these gods—when he dropped his animal head to stare at the girl and the cut hand that Harkness held in his.

The blue discoloration of the wound must have been plain in its significance. The hairless one sprang abruptly to his feet and darted toward a cave. He was back in a moment; and, though be approached with wriggling humility, he reached the girl and he ventured to touch the discolored hand with a sticky paste. He had a gourd that he held to the girl's lips.

Harkness would have struck it away; he was beside himself with grief. But Chet interposed.

"Give it to her," he said in a sharp, strained voice that told of his own dismay. "I think the beggar knows what he's about. He is trying to

help."

The lips were lax; only a little of the liquid found its way down her throat. But Harkness, after minutes of agony, saw the first flutter of lids that betokened returning life....

Chapter 10: "But Awfully Dumb...."

Harkness would never forget the helpless body in his arms, nor the tender look that came slowly to the opened eyes that gazed so steadily into his. And yet it was Chet that she seemed to want for the thousand little services during the week that followed. And Harkness tried to still the hurt in his heart, and he told himself that it was her happiness be wanted more than his; that if she found greater pleasure in having Chet near, then his love was unworthy if it placed itself as a bar to that other happiness.

He talked by signs with the hairless one whom he called Towahg. It was the sound the other made as he struck upon his chest. And he learned that Towahg could guide him to the ship.

The tribe had left them alone. Only Towahg seemed inclined to friendliness; and Harkness frequently saw the one who was their leader in ugly, silent contemplation of them when Towahg brought food and water to their cave.

Diane was recovering, but her progress was slow. She was able at once to walk and go slowly about, but the least exertion tired her. It had been a close call, Harkness knew, and he realized that some time must pass before she could take up the hardships of the trail. And in

the meantime much might happen.

He felt that he must reach the ship at the first possible moment and return for the others; Towahg would show him the way. He explained the plan to Chet and Diane only to meet with emphatic dissent.

"You would go alone?" the girl exclaimed. "To meet heaven knows what dangers? No, no, Walter; you must not! Wait; I am stronger; I can go soon, I know."

Chet, too, was for delay—Diane was better, and she would improve steadily. They could carry her, at first. But Harkness looked at the jungle he must penetrate and knew that he was right.

He gave Towahg a bow and arrows like his own and those that Chet kept for defense, but the arrows were of sharpened wood without detonite tips. He grinned toward Chet as he showed the savage how to handle the marvellous thing.

"We've advanced these people a thousand years in the science of arms," he said. "They should make Diane their first Minister of Munitions, or worship her as their own lovely goddess of the chase."

A weapon that would throw farther than the strongest man could cast a spear—here was magic indeed! And Towahg knelt and grovelled on the ground at his benefactor's feet.

Harkness made light of the dangers he must face, but he knew in his own mind he might fail. And the time of leaving found him curiously depressed. He had gripped Chet's hand, then turned to Diane for what might be a last good-by. The quick enfoldment of her soft body in his arms was as unpremeditated as the kiss he placed upon her lips.... He swung away abruptly, and fell in behind his guide without a word. The way led first across the place of smoke and fire.

Danger ahead on this strange trail; he knew it well. But he took it as it came; and his guide, and his crude weapon, and his steady eye and sureness of foot on rocky crags all saw him through. And he mentally mapped the hills and valleys and the outcrops of metals that he would explore some later time. Only seven of the short six-hour days of this little earth had passed when he drew near the ship.

He was ready for an attack. There was the broken rubble that marked the entrance of the cave. Beneath it, he knew, were mangled, horrible remains. This one beast alone, it seemed, had been the ruler of the valley, for no other appeared.

The mass that had blocked the doorway was crystalline now, and broke to brittle fragments at a blow. He entered the familiar cabin of the ship. There was nothing disturbed; the sealed inner door had barred entrance to any inquiring beasts.

Far down the valley he saw a naked, running figure. Towahg had escorted this sky-god to the great bird that had brought him, but the courage of even so advanced a tribesman as he must have limits. He was still running along the path they had come when Harkness closed and sealed the door.

There was an instrument among their stores for taking samples of gas. Harkness attached it to the ship before he left, and he took a few precious minutes for a flight into the heights. That gas up there was fatal to the monsters of space: he must secure a sample and learn its composition.

A closing of the switch on wires that led to the instrument outside, and he knew that the container had emptied its contents of water, drawn in the gas and sealed itself.

Then the swift descent.

He flew low as he circled back. They had traveled far on their

journey below ground; it was even a longer route where he and Towahg had circled about. But it was the only route he knew; he could take no chances on a short-cut and a possible long-drawn search for the little valley.

He followed the trail. The quick dusk was near; but in an hour's slow flying, while his eyes searched the hills and hollows, the valley was in sight.

He came down slowly in a black sky, with only the soft, muffled roar of the lower exhausts. It was growing dark, and he leaned from an open door to see more clearly his position. All was different from the air, and he needed time and careful scrutiny to get the bearings of the place.

The soft thunder from below was in his ears when a sound pierced through. His own name! And it was Diane's voice calling him in a terrified tone.

"Walter!" she cried. "Help! Help! Oh, Walter, come quickly!"

The scene below was lighted by fitful fires. He was above the upper valley, a hundred yards from their cave: his mind was oriented in an instant, and he knew each foot of ground.

And here, where neither Diane nor Chet should be, was Diane. He saw her running in the bright glare of his landing light that he now switched on; saw a black shape hurl itself upon her; she was struggling. He threw himself back at the controls to send the ship like a thunderbolt upon the earth.

A pistol was in his hand as he leaped from the still-rocking ship and threw himself upon the thing that ran and tried to carry a struggling burden in its arms.

He could not fire; but he brought the pistol down upon a heavy skull. The hairy figure seemed never to feel the blow. It dropped the body of Diane and turned, and its slavering, shining fangs were set in a horrible face that Harkness recognized.

It was the leader of the tribe, and he had dared to attack. But where was Chet? What of his arrows and their detonite tips? These thoughts were crowding through his mind in the instant that ape-like fingers gripped at his throat—the instant while he was bringing the pistol forward and up.

A light charge of detonite in pistol ammunition—but no living body could withstand the shock. Harkness leaped over the fallen foe to reach the girl. She was half risen to a sitting posture as he came.

"Dieu!" she was whispering; "Ah, le bon Dieu!" Then she cried out: "Walter! Oh, Walter, they have killed Chet! Down there!" Her hand was pointing. She grasped at Harkness' hand to draw herself to her feet and race with him toward the cave.

“Just at dark," she explained gaspingly as they ran. "It was their chief, and there were others with him. They leaped upon Chet—before he could reach for his bow. They had seemed so friendly after you left—but they were short of food—"

Her voice was sobbing now, but she kept on, and she set a pace that Harkness could not outdistance.

"One aimed a spear at me, and Chet threw himself between. I saw the spear strike—then I ran. I thought I heard your motors—I screamed for you—"

They were nearing the caves. A fire was burning in the open glade where grotesque figures leaped and danced in cannibal glee about a figure that lay motionless upon the ground.

The tattered, wind-blown clothing—the curling hair, blond in the fire's light—it was Chet.... And now Harkness could fire.

His pistol held twenty rounds. He emptied it into the shrieking group, then jammed in more of the shells and fired again. He fired until no target remained, and every savage figure was either vanished among the trees or inert and lifeless upon the ground, their only motion the stirring of their hairy coverings in the breeze.

Harkness was beside the prostrate figure. He raised Chet's head within his arms; Diane's brown head leaned close, her gasping breath broken by dry sobs. The firelight flickered upon the closed lids to give them semblance of life.

"Chet," said Walter Harkness softly. "Chet, old man—can't you speak? We'll save you, Chet; you're not done for yet." But he felt as he spoke that the words were a horrible lie; the blood that ran slowly now from a wound in Chet's side seemed to speak more truly than did he.

Yet Chet Bullard opened his eyes. His breath was the merest flutter; the listeners bent their heads close to hear.

"Made it, did you?" asked Chet in a ghastly whisper. "And you've saved Diane?... Good!... Well, it's been a great trip.... It's been worth the price...."

Harkness seized at the girl's name. Here was something that might strike home to the sinking man; might rouse him.

"Yes, Diane is saved," he told Chet: "saved for you, old fellow. You must live—for Diane's sake. You love her, and she needs you."

Again the tired eyes opened. Once more the fluttering breath formed words; lips moved to bring a pale ghost of Chet's ready smile like a passing light across his face.

"Needs me? Diane?" It was a question and a denial. He was looking straight at Harkness as he added: "It's you she needs.... You're one square old sport, Walt, but dumb—awfully dumb...."

Glorious adventure!—and the price is so often death. "A great trip," Chet Bullard had said; "it's been worth the price." Chet was prepared to pay in full.

But—there was the ship! Walt Harkness, as she finished bandaging the body of the unconscious man, stared first at the metal cylinder, gleaming, brilliant in the Earthlight; then his gaze went to the Earth that had risen over distant peaks with the glory of a thousand moons. And he dared to hope.

He brought the ship softly to rest close to where Chet lay, then placed the limp form on the self-adjusting floor of the control room. There must be no shifting of the body as the pull of gravitation ceased. Soft blankets made a resting place for him.

The entrance port was closed and sealed; and the ship rose gently under his touch. And, below them, the mirrors showed a world that sank away. Diane's head was pressed near to his to watch that vanishing world.

Each rugged mountain was softened in the Earthlight's mellow glow; they melted together, and lost all sharpness of form. And the light faded and vanished as they rose into the blanket of gas that blocked off the return rays and made of this world a dark moon.

No regret now for the territory that was unexplored. Harkness told himself he would return. And, with the vanishing of that world his thoughts were only of the little flame of life that still flickered in Chet's body, and of the Earth, and of the metal ball that was swinging them out and away.... The sound of the stern exhaust built up and up to the roaring thunder that meant the blast was opened full....

Chapter 11: "Nothing to Be Done"

Unmoving, their ship seemed, through the long hours. Yet there were lights that passed swiftly and unnoticed, and the unending thunder from the stern gave assurance that they were not floating idly in the vast sea of space.

The sun was behind them, and ahead was Earth in midday glory; Harkness could not tear his eyes away from that goal. He stood always at the controls, not because there was work to be done, but for the feeling it gave him of urging the ship onward.

Diane ministered to Chet and dressed the wound. There were few words exchanged between them.

The menace that had emptied Earth's higher levels of all aircraft was still there. No ships were in sight, as Harkness guided his ship toward the great sphere. His speed had been cut down, yet still he outraced the occasional, luminous, writhing forms that threw themselves upon them. Then the repelling area—and he crashed silently through and down, with their forward exhaust roaring madly to hold them in check.

A sea and a shoreline, where a peninsula projected like a giant boot

—and he knew it for Italy and the waters of the Mediterranean.

"Vienna," Diane was telling him; "go to Vienna! It is nearby. And I know of a surgeon—one of the greatest!"

And an hour later, a quiet, confident man was telling them: "But yes! —of a certainty he will live. It is fortunate that you were not very far away when the accident occurred." And only then did Harkness catch Diana's eyes in an exchange of glances where unbearable relief was tempered with amusement.

The great hospital had its own landing stages on its broad roof. Their ship was anchored there, an object to excite the curiosity of a gathering throng.

"Not a healthy place for me, here in Vienna," Harkness remarked. He was lifting the ship from its anchorage, its errand of mercy done.

"Now where?" he pondered aloud. The strain of the flight was telling on him.

The girl recognized the strained look in his eyes, the deep lines that their experiences had etched upon his face. Gently she drew his hand from the controls.

"I will take it," she said. "Trust me. Lie down and rest."

Harkness had witnessed an example of her flying skill; she could handle the ship, he knew. And he threw himself upon a cot in the cabin to sink under the weight of overpowering fatigue.

He felt the soft shock of their landing. Diane was calling him, her hand extended to lead him from the open port. But he was wrenched sharply from the lethargy that held him at sight of his surroundings, and the memories they recalled.

They were in a park, and their ship rested upon a spacious lawn. Beyond were trees where a ship had shot crashingly through storm-tossed limbs. And, before him, a chateau, where a window had framed the picture of a girl with outstretched arms.

"Trust me," Diane had said. And he did trust her. But did she not know what this meant? She was delivering him into the enemy's hands. He should have kept himself from sight until he had rallied his forces.... He was stammering words of protest as she led him toward the door. Armed guards were already between him and the ship.

In a dark-panelled room Herr Schwartzmann was waiting. His gasp

of amazement as he sprang to his feet reflected the utter astonishment written upon his face, until that look gave place to one of satisfaction.

"Mademoiselle," he exclaimed, "—my dear Mademoiselle Diane! We had given you up for lost. I thought—I thought—"

"Yes," said Diane quietly, "I believe that I can well imagine what you thought."

"Ah!" said Herr Schwartzmann, and the look of satisfaction deepened. "I see that you understand now; you will be with us in this matter. We have plans for this young man's disposal."

The puzzled wonder that had clouded the steady eyes of Walter Harkness was replaced by cold anger and more than a trace of contempt.

"You can forget those plans," he told Schwartzmann. "I have plans of my own."

"Poof!" exclaimed the heavy, bearded man. "We will crush you like that!" He struck one heavy fist upon the desk. "And what will you do?"

"Several things," said Harkness evenly. "I shall rid the upper levels of the monsters: I have a gas that will accomplish that. I shall restore the world's flying to normal. And, with that attended to, I will give you my undivided attention—raise forty kinds of hell with Herr Schwartzmann and the interests he represents.

"Forgery! Theft! The seizing of my properties by virtue of a lying document! You shall see what this leads to. Your companies will be wrecked; not a decent man or woman engaged in the business of a decent world will deal with you: that is a small part of what I plan."

The dark face of Herr Schwartzmann was flushed with anger. "You will never leave this place—" he began. But Harkness would not let him go on: his voice was as hard as the metal of his ship.

"You and your assassins!" he said contemptuously. "You don't dare touch me. There is another man who knows—and Diane, too." He paused to look into the eyes of the girl, which were regarding him with an inscrutable expression. "I do not know why she brought me here, but Diane also knows. You can't throttle us all."

"Diane!" The exclamation was wrung involuntarily from Schwartzmann's lips. "You speak of Mademoiselle Vernier so familiarly?"

The girl's cool voice broke in. She had watched the meeting of the men in silence; she spoke now as one taking matters into her own quite capable hands.

"You may omit the incognito, Herr Schwartzmann," she said; "it is no longer required. I have enjoyed a birthday since last we met: it was passed in a place of darkness and anguish, where strong men and brave forgot their own suffering to try by every means to bring comfort to a girl who was facing death. For that reason I say that I enjoyed it.... And that birthday was my twenty-first. You know what that means."

"But Mademoiselle Vernier—pardon!—Mam'selle Delacoeur, surely you will support me. My trustee-ship during all these successful years—"

"Is at an end," said the cool voice.

"I learned more than you were aware of in this last year while I familiarized myself with the interests that would soon be mine. No, Herr Schwartzmann, your methods do not appeal to me; they are an anachronism in the world of to-day."

Harkness was standing in stunned silence. "Delacoeur!" Diane was

Mademoiselle Delacoeur! But that name had been borne by the wealthiest house of France! Old Delacoeur had died, possessed of millions beyond counting—and he had left a daughter—Diane!

His mind could not grasp the full significance of this. But one thing was clear: he could not aspire to the love of one of the queens of Earth. Whatever faint hope that remained in his heart was lost.... The cool voice was still speaking.

"You may leave now," she was saying—this girl who had been his comrade, so unfailingly tender, so true and steady in the face of incredible dangers. And Herr Schwartzmann took his dismissal as one who cannot dispute his superior.

The room was silent. Harkness stood with downcast eyes that followed with meticulous precision the intricacies of design in the rug on which he stood. A voice was speaking. Not the cool, imperative voice of Mademoiselle Delacoeur, mistress of vast estates, but the voice of Diane—the Diane he had learned to love—and it tore at his emotions until his mind was a whirl of conflicting thoughts.

A tender voice: and there was laughter in it and in the eyes that his own came despondently to meet.

"Such a man, this Walter Harkness!" she was saying. "So hard, so vindictive! Ah, the trouble he will make for me because of my conscienceless agents!"

Harkness threw out his hands in a helpless gesture. "Don't taunt me," he said. "You know you have me tied. You've drawn the charges from all my guns. There is nothing to be done."

Diane Delacoeur drew near. The raillery was gone from her voice, and the hand that she placed on his arm was trembling.

"Nothing?" she inquired. "Then, if friendly rivalry is impossible, would you consider, could there not be arranged—a merger of our interests? I am not thinking now of wealth, of which you will have far more than I: there are so much greater things in life—"

The eyes that clung to his were pleading now. And within them was the light that Walter Harkness at last could understand and define. He took the trembling hand in one of his that was suddenly strong, and with the other he raised a lovely face that no longer dared to meet his look.

"You mean—" he began, and fumbled for words to express an emotion that was beyond words. "Chet said—why, he said—that you

needed me—"

Her reply came mingled with a tremulous laugh.

"I have the greatest regard," she whispered, "for Chet's judgement. But—do you—need me?"

Walt Harkness held the soft body close; bent nearer to catch the words. And he answered them with his own lips in an ecstasy of emotion that made nothing of the thrills to be found in that other conquest—of a Dark Moon.

85 When Caverns Yawned by Sterner St. Paul Meek

Only Dr. Bird's super-scientific sleuthing stands in the way of Ivan Saranoff's latest attempt at wholesale destruction.

Aproximate word count: 9,900

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Bells jangled discordantly. A whistle split the air with a piercing note. A band blared away on the platform. With a growing rumble of sound, the Presidential special slowly gathered headway. The President waved a final farewell to the crowds at the platform and sat down. He chatted cheerily with his companions until the train was clear of Charleston, then rose, and with a word to the others stepped into the car. Operative Carnes of the United States Service slumped back in his chair with a sigh of relief.

"Thank Goodness, that's over," he said. "I was never so glad to get him safely away from a place in my life."

Haggerty of the secret service nodded in agreement. Colonel Holmes, the military aide, looked up inquiringly.

"Why so? Do you think Charleston an especially dangerous place for him to be?"

"Not ordinarily. Charleston is a very patriotic and loyal city, but I have been worried. There have been vague rumors going around. Nothing definite that we could pin down, but enough to make me pretty uneasy."

"I think you've worried needlessly. I have been in constant touch with the Military Intelligence Division and they have reported nothing alarming."

Haggerty chuckled at the look of disgust that spread over Carnes' face. Colonel Holmes bridled visibly.

"Now look here, Carnes," he began.

"Oh, horse-feathers!" interrupted Carnes. "The M.I.D. is all right in its place—Good Lord! What's that?"

The train gave a sudden sickening lurch. Colonel Holmes sprawled in an undignified heap in one corner of the observation platform.

Carnes and Haggerty kept their feet by hanging on to the rails. From the interior of the car came cries of alarm. The train righted itself for a moment and then lurched worse than before. There was a scream of brakes as the engineer strove to halt the forward progress. The train swayed and lurched like a ship in a storm. Carnes sprang for the telephone connected with the engine cab and rang excitedly.

"Hello, Bemis," he cried when an answer came: "take off the brakes! Keep moving at full speed, no matter what happens. What? Use your gun on him, man! Keep moving even if the train tips over!"

The train swayed and rocked worse than ever as it began to gather momentum. Carnes looked back along the track and gasped. For three hundred yards behind them, the track was sinking out of sight. The train forged ahead, but it was evident that it also was sinking into the ground. The track behind them suddenly gave. With a roar like a hundred buildings collapsing, it sank out of sight in a cloud of dust. The rear car of the train hung partially over the yawning cavern in the earth for an instant before the laboring engine dragged it to solid ground. The swaying and lurching grew less. For a mile it persisted to a slight degree. With a face the color of a sheet, Carnes made his way into the train. The President met him at the door.

"What's the trouble, Carnes?" he demanded.

"I am not sure, Mr. President. It felt like an earthquake. A great cavern opened in the earth behind us. Our train was almost trapped in it."

"An earthquake! We must stop the train at once and take charge of the situation. An emergency of that sort demands immediate attention."

"I beg you to do nothing of the sort, sir. Your presence would add little to the rescue work and your life is too precious to risk."

"But my duty to the people—"

"Is to keep yourself alive, sir! Mr. President, this may well be an attempt on your life. There are persons who would give anything to do away with you, especially at present. You have not endeared yourself to a certain class in calling for a conference of the powers to curb Russia's anti-religious tactics."

The President hesitated. He knew Carnes well enough to know that he usually spoke from accurate knowledge and with good judgment.

"Mr. President," went on the operative earnestly, "I am responsible to the American people for your safety. I beg you to follow my advice."

"Very well, Carnes," replied the President, "I'll put myself in your hands for the present. What is your program?"

"Your route is well known. Other attempts may be planned since this one failed. Let me have you transferred incognito to another train and hurried through to Washington secretly. I am going to drop off and go back. That earthquake needs to be looked into."

Again the President hesitated.

"My desertion of the stricken area will not be favorably regarded. If I sneak away secretly as though in fear, it will be bad for the public morale."

"We'll let the special go through. No one need know that you have left it."

"Well—I guess you're right. What are you going to do about it?"

"My first move will be to summon Dr. Bird from Washington."

"That's a good move. You'd better have him bring Dr. Lassen with him. Lassen is a great volcano and earthquake specialist, you know."

"I will, sir. If you will get ready to drop off at the next connecting

point, I'll send Haggerty and Bemis with you. The rest of the party can remain on the special."

"All right, Carnes, if you insist."

Carnes went forward to the operator of the train's radio set. In half an hour the special came to a stop at a junction point and four men got off. Ten minutes later three of them climbed aboard another train which stopped for them. Carnes, the fourth man, hurried to a telephone. Fifteen minutes later he was talking to Dr. Bird at the latter's private laboratory in the Bureau of Standards.

"An earthquake, Carnes?" exclaimed the doctor as the operative described the happenings. "Wait a few minutes, will you?"

In five minutes he was back on the telephone.

"It was no earthquake, old dear, whatever it may have been. I have examined the records of all three of the Bureau's seismographs. None of them record even a tremor. What are you going to do?"

"Whatever you say, Doctor. I'm out of my depth already."

"Let me think a moment. All right, listen. Go back to Charleston as quickly as you can and get in touch with the commanding officer at

Fort Moultrie. I'll have the Secretary of War telephone him and give him orders. Get troops and go to the scene of the catastrophe. Allow no one near it. Proclaim martial law if necessary. Stop all road and rail traffic within a radius of two miles. Arrest anyone trying to pass your guard lines. I'll get a plane from Langley Field and come down on the run. Is that all clear?"

"Perfectly, Doctor. By the way, the President suggested that you bring Dr. Lassen with you."

"Since it wasn't an earthquake, he wouldn't be of much value. However, I'll bring him if I can get hold of him. Now start things moving down there. I'll get some apparatus together and join you in five hours; six at the outside. Have a car waiting for me at the Charleston airport."

Carnes commandeered a passing car and drove back to Charleston. He made a wide sweep to avoid the disturbed area and went direct to Fort Moultrie. Dr. Bird had been good at his word. The troops were assembled in heavy marching order when the detective arrived. A few words to the commanding officer was sufficient to set the trucks loaded with soldiers in motion. Carnes, accompanied by the colonel and his staff, went direct to the scene of the catastrophe.

He found a hole in the ground, a hundred feet wide and a quarter of a mile long, sunk to a depth of fifty feet. He shuddered as he thought of what would have happened had the Presidential train been in the center of the devastated area instead of at the edge. The edges of the hole were ragged and sloping as though the earth had caved in to fill a huge cavern underground.

State and local authorities were already on the ground, striving to hold back sightseers. They were very glad to deliver their responsibility to the representative of the federal government. Carnes added their force to that of the military. In an hour a cordon of guards were stationed about the cavern while every road was picketed two miles away. Fortunately there had been no loss of life and no rescue work was needed. The earth-shaking had been purely a local matter, centered along the line of the railroad track.

There was nothing to do but wait, Carnes thought furiously. He had worked with Dr. Bird long enough to have a fair idea of the scientist's usual lines of investigation.

"The first thing he'll want to do is to explore that hole," he mused. "Probably, that'll mean some excavating. I'd better get a wrecking train with a crane on it and a steam shovel here. A gang of men with picks and shovels might be useful, too."

He hurried to the railroad officials. The sight of his gold badge had the desired result. Telegraph keys began to click and telephones to ring. Carnes was sorely tempted to explore the hole himself, but he resisted the temptation. Dr. Bird was not always pleasant when his colleagues departed from the orders he had given.

The morning passed, and the first part of the afternoon. Two wrecking trains stood with steam up at the edge of the hole. Grouped by the trains were a hundred negroes with shovels and picks. Carnes sat at the edge of the hole and stared down into it. He was roused from his reverie by the sound of a motor.

From the north came an airplane. High over the hole it passed, and then swerved and descended. On the under side of the wings could be seen the insignia of the Air Corps. Carnes jumped to his feet and waved his hat. Lower came the plane until it roared across the cavern less than a hundred feet above the ground. Two figures leaned out and examined the terrain carefully. Carnes waved again. One of the figures waved a hand in reply. The plane rose in the air and straightened out toward Charleston.

"We'll have the doctor here in a few minutes now," said Carnes to the Colonel. "It might be a good plan to send a motorcycle out along the Charleston road to bring him in. We don't want the guards to delay

him."

The colonel gave an order and a motorcycle shot off down the road. In half an hour it came sputtering back with a huge Cadillac roaring in its wake. The car drew up and stopped. From it descended two men. The first was a small, wizened figure with heavy glasses. What hair age had left to him was as white as snow. The second figure, which towered over the first, was one to merit attention anywhere.

Dr. Bird was as light on his feet and as quick and graceful as a cat, but there was nothing feline about his appearance. He stood well over six feet in his stockings and tipped the beam close to the two hundred mark. Not one ounce of fat was on his huge frame. So fine was he drawn that unless one looked closely he would never suspect the weight of bone and muscle that his unobtrusive tweed suit covered. Piercing black eyes looked out from under shaggy brows. His face was lean and browned, and it took a second glance to realize the tremendous height and breadth of his forehead. A craggy jutting chin spoke of stubbornness and the relentless following up of a line of action determined on. His head was topped with an unruly shock of black hair which he tossed back with a hand that commanded instant attention.

His hands were the most noteworthy thing about the famous Bureau

scientist. Long slender hands, they were, with slim tapering fingers —the hands of an artist and a dreamer. The acid stains that marred them could not hide their slim beauty, yet Carnes knew that those hands had muscles like steel wire and that the doctor boasted a grip that could crush the hand of a professional wrestler. He had seen him tear a deck of playing cards in half and, after doubling, again in half, with as little effort as the ordinary man would use in tearing a bare dozen of the cards. As he climbed out of the car his keen black eyes swept around in a comprehensive glance. Carnes, trained observer that he was, knew that in that one glance every essential detail which it had taken him an hour to place had been accurately noted and stored away in the doctor's mind. He came forward to the detective.

"Has anything happened since you telephoned me?" was his first question.

"Nothing, Doctor. I followed your instructions and also assembled a crew of men with excavating tools."

"You're improving, Carnes. This is Dr. Lassen. This is a little out of your line. Doctor, but you may see something familiar. What does it look like to you?"

"Not like an earthquake, Bird, at all events. Offhand I would say that

a huge cavern had been washed in the earth and the ground had caved in."

"It looks that way. If you are right, we should find running water if we dig deep enough. Have you been down in the hole, Carnes?"

"No, Doctor."

"Then that's the first thing to do. You have ropes, of course?"

Carnes called to the waiting gang of negroes and a dozen of these hurried up with ropes. Dr. Bird slung a rope around his body under his arms and was lowered into the hole. The rope slackened as he reached bottom. Carnes lay on his stomach and looked over the edge. Dr. Bird was gingerly picking his way across the ground. He turned and called up.

"Carnes, you and Lassen can come down if you care to."

In a few minutes the detective and the volcanologist joined him in the cavern. The top surface of the ground was rolled up into waves like the sea. The sides of the hole were almost sheer. The naked rock was exposed for thirty feet. Above the rock could be seen the subsoil, and then the layer of top soil and vegetation. Dr. Bird was

carefully examining the rock wall.

"What do you make of these, Lassen?" he asked, pointing to a row of horizontal striations in the rock. The volcanologist studied them.

"They might be water marks but if so they are different from any that I have seen before," he said doubtfully. "It looks as though some force had cut the rock away in one sharp stroke."

"Exactly. Notice this yellow powder on the ridges. Water would have washed it away."

Dr. Bird stepped forward to the wall and idly attempted to pick up a pinch of the yellow powder he had referred to in his fingers. He gave an exclamation of surprise as he did so. The powder was evidently fast to the wall. He drew his knife from his pocket and pried at the stuff. It fell readily. He scraped again and caught a speck of the falling powder in his hand. He gave a cry of surprise, for his hand sank as though borne down by a heavy weight. With an effort he lifted his hand and examined the substance.

"Come here, Carnes," he said. "Hold your hand up to catch some of this powder as I scrape it off."

The detective held up his hand. Dr. Bird pried with his knife and a shower of dull yellow particles fell. Carnes' hand sank as though the bits of dust had been a lead bar. He placed his other hand under it and with an effort lifted both hands up a few inches.

"What on earth is this stuff, Doctor?" he cried. "It's as heavy as lead."

"It's a great deal heavier than lead, Carnesy, old dear. I don't know what it is. I am inclined to think you did a wise thing when you sent for me. Lassen, take a look at this stuff. Did you ever run into anything like it?"

The aged volcanologist shook his head. The yellow powder was something beyond his ken.

"I have been poking around volcanos all my life," he said, "and I have seen some queer things come out of the ground—but nothing like that."

Dr. Bird poked tentatively at the substance for a moment, his brow furrowed in lines of thought. He suddenly threw back his shoulders in a gesture of decision.

"Send a gang of excavators down here," he cried. "Never mind the power shovel at present."

Down the ropes swarmed the gang of negroes. Dr. Bird indicated an area at one end of the cavern and directed them to dig. The blacks flew to work with a will. The top soil and subsoil were rapidly tossed into buckets and hauled to the surface. When bare rock lay before them, the negroes ceased their efforts.

"What next, Doctuh, suh?" asked the foreman.

"Get dynamite!" cried the doctor. "If I'm right, this underground cavern is entered by a tunnel. We'll blast away this caved-in rock until we locate it."

Then occurred a strange thing.

"There is no need to go to that trouble, Dr. Bird," spoke a metallic voice, from nowhere, it seemed. The negroes looked at one another. Picks and shovels fell from nerveless hands.

"Your guess about a tunnel is correct, Doctor," went on the Voice. "There is a tunnel leading away from the spot where you are, but to find the end would be useless to you. I have prepared for that."

From the blacks came a low moan of fear.

"Ha'nts!" cried one of them. The cry was taken up and spread into a rolling chorus of fear. With one accord they dropped their tools and stampeded in a mad rush toward the dangling ropes. Carnes sprang forward to stop them.

"Let them go, Carnes!" cried the doctor. "Their work is done for the present. Let's locate that radio receiver."

"That also will be a useless search. Doctor," spoke up the Voice again. "I have perfected a transmitter which will send my voice through space and make it audible without the aid of the clumsy apparatus you depend on. I am also able to see you through the miles of intervening rock without the aid of any instruments at your end."

“I presume that you can hear me as well?"

"Certainly, Doctor. To save you trouble—and I dislike to see you waste the efforts of your really good brain on minor problems—I will tell you that your surmise is correct. A tunnel does lead both to and from the place where you stand. It twists and turns so that even you would be puzzled to plot a general direction. You would have to follow it inch by inch. If you tried that, naturally I would cause it to

collapse before you, or on top of you, if you got too close. Be content with what you have seen and seek a better way to trace me."

"Who are you, anyway?" blurted out Carnes.

"Is it possible that you do not know? Such is fame. I thought that at least my friend Mr. Carnes would suspect that Ivan Saranoff had done this."

"But you're dead!" protested the detective. "We killed you when we destroyed your helicopter."

"You killed merely an assistant who had disobeyed my orders. Had I not decreed his death, he would be alive to-day. I could kill you as you stand there; resolve you into nothingness; but I do not choose to do so—yet. Other attempts I have made you have frustrated, but this time I shall succeed. I will institute a reign of terror which will bring your rich, foolish country to its knees. Listen, while I give you a taste of my power. The city of Charleston is about to be destroyed."

A thunderous roaring filled the air. Crash followed crash in rapid succession. It sounded as though all the noise of the universe had been concentrated in the cavern. The earth shook and rocked like a restless sea. From above came cries of terror.

The three men in the cavern were thrown to the ground. Shaken by the fall and deafened by the tumult, they hung onto irregularities of the rock on which they lay. Gradually the tumult and the shaking subsided. The cries from above became more apparent. Silence finally reigned in the cavern and the metallic Voice spoke again.

"Go back now and look at Charleston and you will see what to expect. The rest of your cities will soon share the same fate. Beware of trying to trace my movements, for your lives are in the hollow of my hand."

The voice died away in silence. From the edge of the hole came a cry. A Fort Moultrie officer was peering down at them.

"Are you all right down there?" he hailed.

"Right as hops," called Dr. Bird cheerfully. "What happened up above?"

"I don't know, Doctor. There seems to be a lot of smoke and fire over in the direction of the city. I expect the quake shook them up a little this time. What shall we do now?"

"We're ready to come up. First I'm going to send up a wheelbarrow

full of yellow powder. Rig a crane to lift it, for it's too heavy to try to hoist with ropes."

With the aid of Carnes and Dr. Lassen, Dr. Bird collected a few cubic inches of the yellow powder from the ridges in the rock. He made the wheelbarrow containing it fast to the wire cables of the crane and gave the signal. Slowly it was raised to the surface. When it had safely reached there he turned to his companions.

"Grab a rope and let's go," he said.

In a few moments they were on the upper level. With the efforts of half a dozen men, the body of the wheelbarrow was lifted into the car. With a few final words of instruction to the colonel, Dr. Bird and his companions entered the car and were whisked away to the city.

A spectacle of destruction and ruin awaited them. Fully one-fourth of the city had sunk thirty feet into the ground. The sinking was not even nor uniform. The sunken ground was rolled into huge waves while buildings which had collapsed lay in confused heaps on all sides. From a dozen places in the area, columns of fire rose in the air.

Dr. Bird wasted little time on the scene before him. His car skirted the edge of the huge hole and took the road toward the Charleston

airport, which was in a section which had suffered little. In half an hour the army transport roared into the air carrying Dr. Bird's precious load of yellow powder. Four hours later they dropped to a landing at Langley Field.

"Now, Carnes," said the doctor as they debarked from the plane, "there is work ahead. It may be too late to do much to-night, but we have no time to waste. Get Bolton on the wire and tell him that we have positive evidence that Saranoff is still alive and still up to his devil's tricks. Start every man of the secret service and every Department of Justice agent that can be spared on the trail. He can't live underground all the time, and you ought to get on his tracks somehow. I'm going up to the laboratory and see what I can do with this stuff. Report to me there to-morrow morning."

Carnes hurried away. Bolton, the chief of the United States Secret Service, had long ago recovered from any professional jealousy he had ever felt of Dr. Bird. The doctor's message that Ivan Saranoff, the arch-enemy of society, the head of the Young Labor party, the unofficial chief of the secret Soviet forces in the United States, was alive and again in the field against law and order was enough to set in motion every force that he controlled. Waving aside precedent and crashing his way past secretaries, he set in motion not only the agents of the Department of Justice but also the post-office forces

and the specialized but highly efficient Military and Naval Intelligence Divisions. The telephone and telegraph wires from Washington were kept busy all night carrying orders and bringing in reports. But despite all this activity, it was with a disappointed face that Operative Carnes sought the doctor in the morning.

Dr. Bird was in his private laboratory on the third floor of the Bureau of Standards. When Carnes entered he was seated in a chair at his desk. His black eyes shone out from a chalky face like two burned holes in a blanket. Carnes started at the appearance of utter weariness presented by the famous scientist. Dr. Bird straightened up and squared his shoulders as the detective entered.

"Any luck, Carnes?" he asked eagerly.

"None at all, Doctor. We haven't been able to get a single trace of his corporeal existence since that submarine was destroyed off the Massachusetts coast. All we have is Karuska's word that he is still alive."

"We heard his voice yesterday."

"His or another's."

"True. Have you set in motion every agency that the government has?"

"Every one. Either Bolton or I have talked to the Chief of Police in every large city in the United States and Canada. Every known member of the Young Labor party who is above the mere rank and file is under close surveillance."

"Good enough. Keep at it and you'll trace him eventually. As soon as I get a few quarts of black coffee into my system, I'll start another line of search going."

"What did you find out last night?"

"I found that our seismograph recorded the Charleston disaster. It was merely a faint jog, about what should be caused by a severe landslide. The disaster did not affect the earth's crust, but was purely local. That gives me a clue to his method."

"I described the affair to Bolton and he suggested that it might be caused by a disintegrating ray."

Dr. Bird snorted. "When will people learn that there is not, and in the nature of things never can be, a disintegrating ray?" he exclaimed.

"Of course a ray can be made which will tear things down to their constituent elements, but matter is indestructible, and the idea of wiping matter out of existence is absurd."

"But I have heard you say that matter and energy were interchangeable."

"That is a different proposition. I believe they are. In fact, if you remember, Carmichael proved it, although the proof was lost at his death. Nothing of the sort was done at Charleston, however. Do you know how much energy is contained in matter? Well, a cubic inch of copper would drive the largest ship afloat around the world twice, and across the Atlantic to boot. The energy contained in the cubic yards of rock that were removed under Charleston would have blown the world to fragments."

"Then what did happen?"

"Matter, as you know, is composed of atoms. These atoms are as far from one another, compared to their size, as the stars and planets of the universe. Each atom in turn is composed of electrons, negative particles of electrical energy, held in position about a fixed central nucleus of positive electricity known as a proton. I speak now of the simplest element. Most of them have many protons and electrons in

their make-up. The space between these particles compared with their size is such that the universe would be crowded in comparison."

"What does that lead to?"

"I have described the composition of lead, the densest known element, over thirteen times as heavy as water, bulk for bulk. Conceive what it would mean if some force could compress together these widely separated particles until they touched. The resulting substance would be an element of almost inconceivable density. Such a condition is approached in the stars, some of which are as high as four thousand times as dense as the earth. What Saranoff has done is to find some way of compressing together the atoms into that yellow powder which we found in the cavern. He has not gone to the limit, for the stuff is only a little over four thousand times as dense as water. A cubic inch of it weighs one hundred and thirty-two pounds. With its density increased to that extent, the volume is reduced accordingly. That was what accounted for those caverns into which the earth tumbled."

"I'll believe you, Doctor," replied the detective; "but I'd believe you just as quickly if you swore that the moon was made of cream cheese made from the milk taken from the milky way. One would be just as

understandable to me as the other."

They were interrupted by the entrance of a waiter who bore a huge pot of steaming coffee. Dr. Bird's eyes lighted up as a cup was poured. Carnes knew enough not to interrupt while the doctor poured and drank eight cups of the strong black fluid. As he drank, the lines of fatigue disappeared from the scientist's face. He sat up as fresh as though he had not been working at high pressure the entire night.

"Dr. Fisher tells me that the amount of caffeine I drink would kill a horse," he said with a chuckle; "but sometimes it is needed. I feel better now. Let's get to work."

"What shall we do?"

"Despite Saranoff's words, it must be possible to trace him. He is undoubtedly releasing his energy from some form of subterranean borer, and such a thing can be located. The energy he uses must set up electrical disturbances which instruments will detect. I have had work started on a number of ultra-sensitive wave detectors which will record any wave-length from zero to five millimeters. We'll send them to various points along the seacoast. They ought to pick up the stray waves from the energy he is using to blast a path through the earth. I'm not going to bother with the waves from his motor; they

may be of any wave-length, and there would be constant false alarms. I have another idea."

"What is it?"

"I am judging Saranoff from his previous actions. You remember that he used a submarine in that alien-smuggling scheme the Coast Guard broke up, and also when he loosed that sea monster on the Atlantic shipping? He seems to be rather fond of submarines."

"Well?"

The amount of energy he uses must be almost inconceivable," Dr. Bird went on. "He can hardly carry an amount of fuel which will enable him to bore underground for very many miles, Charleston is on the coast. I have an idea that he uses a submarine to transport his borer from point to point. After using the borer he must return to the submarine for recharging and transportation to the point where he plans to strike next. I already have two hundred planes scouring the sea looking for such a craft."

"Where do you expect him to strike next?"

"I have no idea. New York and Washington will undoubtedly be

targets eventually, but neither of them may be next. Meanwhile, would you like to do a little more flying?"

"Surely."

"A plane is waiting for us at Langley Field. I want to look over the coast in the vicinity of Charleston Harbor and some of the sounds near there. If he is using a sub, he must have a base somewhere."

With a competent pilot at the stick, Carnes and the Doctor spent the day in exploring. The day yielded no results, and with the coming of dusk they landed at Savannah for the night. Carnes talked with Bolton over the telephone, but the secret service chief could report no favorable progress. Tired and disgusted, they retired early, but they were not destined to enjoy a night of uninterrupted sleep. At one o'clock a telegram was brought to their room. Dr. Bird tore it open and glanced sleepily at it.

"Get up, Carnes," he cried sharply. "Read this!"

The yawning detective glanced at the telegram. It contained only two words and a signature. It was signed "Ivan," and read simply, "Watch Wilmington."

"What the dickens?" he exclaimed as he studied the yellow slip. Dr. Bird was hurriedly pulling on his clothes.

"Saranoff has slipped a cog this time," said the doctor. "He sent that as a night message, but it was delivered as a straight message through error. He has got further north than I expected. We will turn out our pilot and take off. We should make Wilmington by daybreak. I'll telephone Washington and have a couple of destroyers started up Delaware Bay at once. We ought to give him a first class surprise party. I suppose that Philadelphia was meant to be his next stop."

In an hour the army plane took off into the night. At seven o'clock they were circling over Wilmington. The city had not been disturbed. For an hour they flew back and forth before they landed. Startling news awaited them. At six that morning an earthquake had struck Wilmington, North Carolina. Half the town had sunk into the earth. Dr. Bird struck his brow with his clenched fist.

"Score one for the enemy," he said grimly. "We were too sure of ourselves, Carnes. We should have realized that he would hardly be so far north yet. Well, I've got to use the telephone while we're refueling."

Within an hour after landing they were again in the air One o'clock

found them over the stricken city. Dr. Bird wasted no time on Wilmington but headed north along the coast. For a hundred miles he skirted the shore, two miles out. With an exclamation of disappointment he ordered the pilot to turn the plane and retrace his route southward, keeping ten miles from the shore. Fifty miles south he ordered the plane further out and again turned north. From time to time they passed a ship of the air patrol which was steadily skirting the coast, but none of them had seen a submarine. Off Cape Hatteras the pilot asked for orders.

"The gas is running low. Doctor," he said. "I think we had better put in somewhere and refuel. If we are going to keep the air much longer, you had better get a relief pilot. I have been flying for thirty hours out of the last thirty-six and I'm about done."

"Head back for Washington," said the doctor with a sigh. "I seem to have gone off on a false scent."

At Cape Charles the pilot swung east over Chesapeake Bay. Hardly had he turned than Dr. Bird gave a cry. Excitedly he pointed toward the water. Carnes grasped a pair of binoculars and looked in the direction Dr. Bird was indicating. Sliding along under the water was a long cigar-shaped shadow.

"It's a submarine!" exclaimed Carnes. "Is it a navy ship or the one we're after?"

"It's no navy sub," said the doctor positively. "It's not the right shape. Look at that bump on the side!"

The symmetry of the craft was marred by a huge projection on one side that could not be explained by the pattern of any known type of under-water craft.

"He's towing the borer!" cried the doctor in exultation. He took up the speaking tube. "Turn back to sea!" he cried. "We passed four destroyers less than ten miles out. We want to get in touch with them."

The plane roared out to sea while Dr. Bird feverishly sounded the "Alnav" call on the radio sending set. In a few minutes an answer came. From their point of vantage they could see flags break out at the peak of the destroyer leader. The four ships turned into column formation and stormed at full speed into the bay. The plane raced ahead to guide them.

"We've got him this time, Doctor!" cried Carnes in exultation. He pointed to the bay below where the submarine was still making its

way slowly forward. Dr. Bird shook his head.

"I hope so," he said, "but I have my doubts. Saranoff is no fool. He wouldn't walk into a trap like this unless he had some means of escape. Here comes the first destroyer. We'll soon know the truth."

With the radio set he directed the oncoming boat. The destroyer reduced to half speed and changed direction slightly. From side to side she maneuvered until she was less than half a mile behind the submarine and headed straight for it. Dr. Bird tapped a few words on his key. With a belch of smoke, the destroyer lurched forward. She cut the waters with her sharp bow, throwing up a wave higher than her decks. Dr. Bird watched anxiously.

The destroyer was almost over the submarine and Dr. Bird's fingers trembled on the key. One word from him would send a half dozen depth charges into the water. On came the destroyer until it was directly over the underseas craft. Dr. Bird pounded his key rapidly.

"Good Lord!" cried Carnes.

From the bump on the side of the submarine came a flash of red light. The destroyer staggered for a moment, and the entire central section of the ill-fated ship disappeared. The bow and stern came

together with a rush and went down in a swirling maelstrom of water. The plane lurched in the air as a thundering crash rose from the sea.

The second destroyer, in no way daunted by the fate of her colleague, rushed to the attack. Dr. Bird pounded his key frantically in an attempt to turn her back. His message was too late or was misunderstood. Straight over the submarine went the second ship. Again came the red flash. The forward half of the destroyer disappeared and the stern slid down into a huge hole which had opened in the water.

"He's invulnerable!" cried the doctor. He pounded his key with feverish rapidity. The two remaining destroyers slackened speed and veered off. Slowly, as though loath to turn their backs on the enemy, they headed out for the broad Atlantic and comparative safety.

The submarine went slowly on her way. She did not turn west at the mouth of the Potomac but continued on up the bay. As long as there was light enough, the doctor's plane kept above her but the fading light soon made it impossible to see her. When she had disappeared from view, the doctor reluctantly gave the word to return to

Washington.

“Where do you suppose he will attack next, Doctor?" asked Carnes when they sat again in the doctor's private laboratory.

"Washington, of course," said Dr. Bird absently as he looked up from a pile of telegrams he was running through.

"Why Washington?"

"Use your head. Representatives of every civilized power are in Washington now at the President's invitation to consider means of halting the anti-religious activities of the Soviets. The destruction of the city and the killing of these men would be a telling blow for Russia to strike."

"But, Doctor, you don't think—"

"Excuse me, Carnes; that will keep. Let me read these telegrams."

For half an hour silence reigned in the laboratory. Dr. Bird laid down the last message with a sigh.

"Carnes," he said, "I'm check-mated. I sent out a hundred ultra-sensitive short wave receivers yesterday. Four of them were located

within fifty miles of Wilmington, North Carolina. One of these four was destroyed, but none of the others detected a sign of a wave during the attack. One of them was within a hundred feet of the edge of the hole. If he isn't using a ray of some sort, what on earth is he using?"

"It looked like a flash of red light when it came from the submarine."

"Yes, but it couldn't be light. Let me think."

The doctor sat for a few minutes with corrugated brows. Suddenly he sprang to his feet.

"I deserve to be beaten," he cried. "Why didn't I think of that possibility before?"

He hurried into his laboratory and brought out a small box with a glass front. From the top projected a spike topped with a ball. Through the glass, Carnes could see a thin sheet of metal hanging pendant from the spike.

"An electroscope," explained the doctor. "That sheet of metal is really two sheets of gold-leaf, at present stuck together. If I rub a piece of hard rubber with a woolen cloth, the rod will become

charged with static electricity. If I then touch the ball with it, the charge is transferred to the electroscope and causes the two sheets of gold-leaf to stand apart at an angle. Watch me."

He took a hard rubber rod and rubbed it briskly on his coat sleeve. As he touched the ball of the electroscope the sheets of gold-leaf separated and stood apart at a right angle.

"As long as the air remains non-conducting, the two bits of gold-leaf will hold that position. The air, however, is not a perfect insulator and the charge will gradually leak off. If I bring a bit of radioactive substance, for instance, pitchblende, near the electroscope, the charge will leak rapidly. Do you understand?"

"Yes, but how is that going to help us?"

"Saranoff is accomplishing his result by artificially compressing the atoms. It is inevitable that he will do it imperfectly, and some electrons will be loosened and escape. These electrons, traveling up through the earth will make the air conducting. To-morrow we will have a means of locating the borer under ground."

"Once you locate it, how will you fight it?"

"That is the problem I must work out to-night."

"Could we bury a charge of explosive and blow it up?"

“Ordinary explosives would be useless," the doctor answered. "They would react in the same manner as other substances, and would be rendered harmless. Radite might do the work if it could be placed in the path, but it couldn't be. We may locate the position and depth of the borer, but long before we could dig and blast a hole deep enough to place a charge of radite before it, it would have passed on or changed direction. No, Carnes, old dear, the only solution that I can see is to turn his own guns on him. If I can, before morning, duplicate his device, we can train it on the spot where he is and reduce him and his machine to a pinch of yellow powder."

"Can you do it, Doctor?"

"What one man's brain can device, another man's brain can duplicate. The only question is that of time. I am confident that Saranoff will attack Washington to-morrow. If I can do the job to-night, we may save the city. If not—At any rate, Carnes, your job will be to see that the President and all of the heads of the government are out of the city by morning. The President may refuse to leave. Knowing him as I do, I rather expect he will."

"In that case, the issue is in the hands of the gods. Now get out of here. I want to work. Report back at daybreak with a car."

Dr. Bird turned back to his laboratory.

"He must be using a ray of some sort, possibly a radium emanation," he muttered to himself. "That would have no wave motion and might accomplish the result, although I would expect the exact opposite from it. The first thing to do is to examine that powder with a spectroscope and see if I can get a clue to the electronic arrangement."

When Carnes arrived at the Bureau of Standards at dawn be rubbed his eyes in astonishment. The buildings were lighted up and the grounds swarmed with workmen. Before the buildings were lined up a dozen trucks and twice that many touring cars. A cordon of police held back the curious. Carnes' gold badge won him an entrance and he hurried up the stairs to Dr. Bird's laboratory. The doctor's face was drawn and haggard, but his eyes glowed with a feverish light. Workmen were carrying down huge boxes.

"What's up, Doctor?" demanded the detective.

"Oh, you got here at last, did you? You're just in time. If you'd been

fifteen minutes later, you would have found us gone."

"Gone where?"

"Out into Maryland in an attempt to stop Saranoff in his progress toward Washington."

"Have you found your means of combating him?"

"I hope so, although it is not what I started out to get. Did you bring a car as I told you?"

"It's waiting below."

"Good enough. I'll go in it. Williams, are those projectors all loaded?"

"Yes, Dr. Bird. The magnet will be ready to go in five minutes. The electroscopes and the other light stuff are all loaded and ready to move."

"You have done well. I'll let you bring the trucks and heavy equipment while I go ahead with the instruments. Take the road out toward Upper Marlboro. If I don't meet you before, stop there for orders."

"Very well, Doctor."

"Come on, Carnes, let's go."

He raced down the stairs with the detective at his heels. He went along the line of touring cars and spoke briefly to the drivers. He climbed into the car which Carnes had brought. As it started the other cars fell in behind it. At a speed of forty miles an hour, with a detachment of motorcycle police leading the van, the cavalcade rolled out through the deserted streets of Washington. Once clear of the city, the speed was increased.

"Did you persuade the President to leave?" asked the doctor.

"There wasn't a chance. The papers panned him so much for following my advice at Charleston that he has turned stubborn. He says that if all the forces of the government can't protect him against one man, he is willing to die."

"We've got to save him," said Dr. Bird grimly. "Hello, there's the Chesapeake ahead."

The doctor studied the country.

"We are about opposite the place where we left that sub last night. I

fancy that Saranoff will operate from there, for it didn't move during the last half hour we watched it. We'll go back inland a mile or two and spread out. I have no idea how far his radiations will affect the electroscopes, but we'll try four hundred-yard intervals to start. That will enable us to cover a line twelve miles long."

He picked up a megaphone and spoke to the line of cars behind him.

"Take up four hundred yard intervals when we spread out," he said. "Every man keep his headphone on and listen for orders. Follow my car until it stops, then turn north and south and drop your men at intervals."

He reentered the car and led the way back for two miles. He halted his car at a crossroad. The cars following him turned and went to the north and south. Besides Carnes and the doctor, the car held two men from the Bureau. As they climbed out, Carnes saw that one of them carried a portable radio sending set, while the other bore an electroscope and a rubber rod. The radio operator set up his device, while the other man rubbed his coat sleeve briskly with the hard rubber and then touched the ball of the electroscope with it. The two bits of gold-leaf spread out.

"While we're waiting, I'll explain something of this to you, Carnes,"

said the doctor. "At four hundred-yard intervals are men with electroscopes like this one. My attempt to locate Saranoff by means of wave detectors was a failure. That proved that the ray he was using is not of the wave type. The other common ray is the cathode ray type which does not consist of vibrations but of a stream of electrons, negative particles of electricity, traveling in straight lines of high velocity. He must be knocking loose some of the electrons when he collapses the atoms. The rate of discharge of these electroscopes will give us a clue to the nearness of his device."

“Once you locate him, how do you propose to attack him?"

"The obvious method, that of using his own ray against him, fell down. However, in attempting to produce it, I stumbled on another weapon which may be equally effective. I am going to try to use an exact opposite of his ray. The cathode ray, when properly used, will bombard the atoms and knock electrons loose. I perfected last night a device on which I have been working for months. It is a super-cathode ray. I tested it on the yellow powder and find that I can successfully reverse Saranoff's process. He can contract matter together until it occupies less than one one-thousandth of its original volume. My ray will destroy this effect and restore matter to something like its original condition."

"And the effect will be?"

"Use your imagination. He blasts out a hole by condensing the rock to a pinch of yellow powder. He moves forward into the hole he has made. I come along and reverse his process. The yellow powder expands to its original volume and the hole he has made ceases to exist. What must happen to the foreign body which had been introduced into the hole that is no longer a hole?"

Carnes whistled.

"At any rate, I hope that I am never in a hole when that happens."

"And I devoutly hope that Saranoff is. I met with one difficulty. My ray will not penetrate the depth of solid rock which separates his borer from the surface."

"Then how will you reach him to crush him? You don't expect to drill down ahead of him?"

"That is my stroke of genius, Carnes. I am going to make him bore the hole down which my ray will travel to accomplish his destruction. The cathode ray and rays of that type—"

“Pardon me, Doctor," interrupted the radio operator. "I have just

received a message from the squadron leader of the planes patrolling the bay. He states that every inch of the Chesapeake Bay and the Potomac River have been examined and no submarine is visible."

"I expected that. He will have opened a cavern under the earth, in which his craft is safe from aerial observation. Once the borer has left it, it is invulnerable no longer."

"What reply shall I make?"

"Tell him to keep up a constant patrol. Three navy subs with radite-charged torpedos are on their way up the bay, together with half a dozen destroyers. The subs will scout for such a hole as I have described and will attack his sub if they find it. The destroyers will stand by and support them."

The operator turned to his instrument. The electroscope observer claimed the doctor's attention.

"There is a steady leak here, Doctor," he said. "I get a discharge in eleven minutes."

"Probably a result of his work in opening the hiding place for his submarine last night. Keep it charged, Jones."

"What did you say about the cathode ray, Doctor?" asked Carnes.

"The cathode ray? Oh, yes. I said that rays of that type were attracted by—Hello, look there!"

From a point a mile to the north a ball of red fire streaked up into the air. A moment later similar signals rose from other watchers in the line.

"It works, Carnes!" cried the doctor as he rushed for the car. "We've got him this time!"

The car raced along the road. At the first man who had signalled, it slackened speed. The doctor leaned out.

"What is your discharge rate?" he called.

"Eight minutes. Doctor."

The car rolled on. Dr. Bird repeated the question at the next post and was told that the electroscope there was losing its charge in seven minutes. The next man reported four minutes and the next man, one minute. The following station reported three minutes.

"It's right along here somewhere!" cried the doctor. "Summon

everyone to this point and take up twenty-yard intervals."

From the north and south the cars came racing in. The instruments were spread out along a new line twenty yards apart. As the borer was located the intervals were decreased to fifteen feet. Dr. Bird thrust a long white rod into the ground.

"His path lies under here," he said. "Into the cars and go back a mile and test again."

The borer was making slow progress, and it was half an hour before Dr. Bird drove the second stake in the ground. With a transit he took the bearing of the path and laid it out on a large scale map.

"We'll stop him between Marr and Ritchie," he announced. "Jones, I am going back and set up my apparatus. Keep track of his movements. If he changes direction, let me know at once."

The doctor's car tore off to the west. Near Upper Marlboro, he met the convoy of trucks and led them to the selected spot. The trucks were unloaded and the apparatus laid out. Attached to a huge transformer were a dozen strange-looking projectors. What puzzled Carnes most was a huge built-up steel bar wound about with heavy cable. Dr. Bird had this bar erected on a truck and located it with

great exactness. The projectors were set up in a battery just east of the bar.

"How about power?" asked the doctor.

"We'll have it in five minutes," replied one of the men. "A power transmission line carrying twenty-two thousand passes within two hundred yards of here. We are phoning now to have the power cut off. As soon as the line is dead we'll cut it and bring the ends here."

The electrician was good at his word. In five minutes the power line had been cut and cables spliced to the ends. The cables were brought to the doctor's apparatus and the main lines were rigged to the ends of the cable wound around the bar. In parallel on taps, the projectors were connected. Huge oil-switches were placed in both lines.

"All ready, Doctor," reported the electrician.

"Good work, Avent. He'll be here soon, I fancy."

A car whirled up and a man leaped out with a surveyor's rod. He set it up on the ground while a companion watched through binoculars. He moved it a hundred yards to the north and then back twenty. When he was satisfied he turned to Dr. Bird.

"The direction of movement has not changed," he said. "The path will pass under this stake."

Under the doctor's supervision, the truck carrying the bar moved forward until it stood over the surveyor's stake. The battery of projectors moved to a new location a few feet east of the rod. Other cars came racing up.

"He's less than half a mile away, Doctor!" cried Jones.

"Get your electroscopes out and spot him a hundred yards from this truck."

"Very well, Doctor."

The men with the instruments spread out along the path of the borer. Briskly they rubbed their sleeves with the rubber rods and charged their instruments. Almost as fast as they charged them, the tiny bits of gold-leaf collapsed together. Presently the man on the end of the line shouted.

"Maximum discharge!" he cried.

Dr. Bird looked around. Every man stood ready at his post. The next man signalled that the borer was under him. Carnes felt himself

trembling. He did not know what the doctor was about to do, but he felt that the fate of America hung in the balance. Whether it remained free or became the slave of Soviet Russia would quickly be decided.

Slowly the borer made its way forward. With a pale face, Jones signalled the news that it had reached the point the doctor had indicated. Dr. Bird raised his hand.

"Power!" he cried.

The electrician closed a switch and power surged through the cables around the bar. The earth rocked and quivered. A hundred yards east of the bar a flash of intolerable red light sprang from the ground with a roar like that of Niagara. Toward the bar it moved with gathering momentum.

"Back, everyone!" roared Dr. Bird.

The men sprang back. The searing ray approached the bar. It touched it, and bar and truck disappeared into thin air. A splutter of sparks came from the severed ends of the wire. The ray disappeared. Carnes rubbed his eyes. Where the truck had rested on solid ground was now a gaping wound in the earth.

"Projector forward!" cried the doctor. "Hurry, men!"

The trucks bearing the battery of projectors moved forward until they were at the edge of the hole. Portable cranes swung the lamps out, and men swarmed over them. The projectors were pointed down the hole. Carnes joined the doctor in peering down. A hundred yards below them the terrible ray was blazing. As they watched, its end came in sight. The ray was being projected forward from the end of a black cigar-shaped machine which was slowly moving forward.

"That's your target, men!" cried the doctor. "Align on it and signal when you are ready!"

One by one the projector operators raised their hands in the signal of "ready." Still the doctor waited. Suddenly the forward movement of the black body ceased. The ray was stationary for a moment and then moved slowly upward. A terrific roaring came from the cavern.

"Projector switch!" roared the doctor, his heavy voice sounding over the tumult.

"Ready, sir!" a shrill voice answered.

"Power!"

From each of the projectors a dazzling green ray leaped forth as the switch was closed. There was a crash like all the thunder of the universe. Before the astonished eyes of the detective, the hole closed. Not only did it close but the earth piled up until the trucks were overturned and the green rays blazed in all directions.

"Power off!" roared the doctor.

The switch was opened and the ray died out. Before them was a huge mound where a moment before had been a hole.

"You see, Carnes," said Dr. Bird with a wan smile. "I made him bore his own hole, as I promised."

"I saw it, but I don't understand. How did you do it?"

"Magnetism. Rays of the cathode type are deflected from their course by a magnet. His ray proved unusually susceptible, and I drew it toward a huge electro-magnet which I improvised. When the magnet was destroyed, the ray dropped back ... to its original ... direction. That's the end ... of Saranoff. That is ... I hope ... it is."

Dr. Bird's voice had grown slower and less distinct as he talked. As he said the last words, he slumped gently to the ground. Carnes

sprang forward with a cry of alarm and bent over him.

"What's the matter, Doctor?" he demanded anxiously, shaking the scientist. Dr. Bird rallied for a moment.

"Sleep, old dear," he murmured. "Four days—no sleep. Go 'way, I'm ... going ... to ... sleep...."

86 When The Moon Turned Green by Hal K Wells

Outside his laboratory Bruce Dixon finds a world of living dead men —and above, in the sky, shines a weird green moon.

Aproximate word count: 8,200

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

It was nearly midnight when Bruce Dixon finished his labors and wearily rose from before the work-bench of his lonely mountain laboratory, located in an abandoned mine working in Southern Arizona.

He looked like some weirdly garbed monk of the Middle Ages as he stretched his tall, lithe figure. His head was completely swathed in a hood of lead-cloth, broken only by twin eyeholes of green glass. The hood merged into a long-sleeved tunic of the same fabric, while lead-cloth gauntlets covered his hands.

The lead-cloth costume was demanded by Dixon's work with radium

compounds. The result of that work lay before him on the bench—a tiny lead capsule containing a pinhead lump of a substance which Dixon believed would utterly dwarf earth's most powerful explosives in its cataclysmic power.

So engrossed had Dixon been in the final stages of his work that for the last seventy-two hours he had literally lived there in his laboratory. It remained now only for him to step outside and test the effect of the little contact grenade, and at the same time get a badly needed taste of fresh air.

He set the safety catch on the little bomb and slipped it into his pocket. As he started for the door he threw back his hood, revealing the ruggedly good-looking face of a young man in the early thirties, with lines of weariness now etched deeply into the clean-cut features.

The moment that Dixon entered the short winding tunnel that led to the outer air he was vaguely aware that something was wrong. There was a strange and intangibly sinister quality in the moonlight that streamed dimly into the winding passage. Even the cool night air itself seemed charged with a subtle aura of brooding evil.

Dixon reached the entrance and stepped out into the full radiance of

the moonlight. He stopped abruptly and stared around him in utter amazement.

High in the eastern sky there rode the disc of a full moon, but it was a moon weirdly different from any that Dixon had ever seen before. This moon was a deep and baleful green; was glowing with a stark malignant fire like that which lurks in the blazing heart of a giant emerald! Bathed in the glow of the intense green rays, the desolate mountain landscape shone with a new and eery beauty.

Dixon took a dazed step forward. His foot thudded softly into a small feathered body there in the sparse grass, and he stooped to pick it up. It was a crested quail, with every muscle as stonily rigid as though the bird had been dead for hours. Yet Dixon, to his surprise, felt the slow faint beat of a pulse still in the tiny body.

Then a dim group of unfamiliar objects down in the shadows of a small gully in front of him caught Dixon's eye. Tucking the body of the quail inside his tunic for later examination, he hurried down into the gully. A moment later he was standing by what had been the night camp of a prospector.

The prospector was still there, his rigid figure wrapped in a blanket, and his wide-open eyes staring sightlessly at the malignant green

moon in the sky above. Dixon knelt to examine the stricken man's body. It showed the same mysterious condition as that of the quail, rigidly stiff in every muscle, yet with the slow pulse and respiration of life still faintly present.

Dixon found the prospector's horse and burro sprawled on the ground half a dozen yards away, both animals frozen in the same baffling condition of living death. Dixon's brain reeled as he tried to fathom the incredible calamity that had apparently overwhelmed the world while he had been hidden away in his subterranean laboratory. Then a new and terrible thought assailed him.

If the grim effect of the baleful green rays was universal in its extent, what then of old Emil Crawford and his niece, Ruth Lawton? Crawford, an inventor like Dixon, had his laboratory in a valley some five miles away.

An abrupt chill went over Dixon's heart at the thought of Ruth Lawton's vivid Titian-haired beauty being forever stilled in the grip of that eery living death. He and Ruth had loved each other ever since they had first met.

Dixon broke into a run as he headed for a nearby ridge that looked out over the valley. His pulse hammered with unusual violence as he

scrambled up the steep incline, and his muscles seemed to be tiring with strange rapidity. He had a vague feeling that the rays of that malignant green moon were beating directly into his brain, clouding his thoughts and draining his physical strength.

Gaining the crest of the ridge, he stopped aghast as he looked down the valley toward Emil Crawford's place. Near the site of Crawford's laboratory home was an unearthly pyrotechnic display such as Dixon had never seen before. An area several hundred yards in diameter seemed one vivid welter of pulsing colors, with flashing lances of every hue crisscrossing in and through a great central cloud of ever-changing opalescence like a fiery aurora borealis gone mad.

Dixon fought back the ever-increasing lethargy that was benumbing his brain, and groped dazedly for a key to this new riddle. Was it some weird and colossal experiment of Emil Crawford's that was causing the green rays of death from a transformed moon, an experiment the earthly base of which was amid the seething play of blazing colors down there in the valley?

The theory seemed hardly a plausible one. As far as Dixon knew, Crawford's work had been confined almost entirely to a form of radio-propelled projectile for use in war-time against marauding planes.

Dixon shook his head forcibly in a vain effort to clear the stupor that was sweeping over him. It was strange how the vivid rays of that malevolent green moon seemed to sear insidiously into one's brain, stifling thought as a swamp fog stifles the sunlight.

Then Dixon suddenly froze into stark immobility, staring with startled eyes at the base of a rocky crag thirty yards away. Something was lurking there in the green-black shadows—a great sprawling black shape of abysmal horror, with a single flaming opalescent eye fixed unwinkingly upon Dixon.

The next moment the vivid moon was suddenly obscured by drifting wisps of cloud. As the green light blurred to an emerald haze, the creature under the crag came slithering out toward Dixon.

He had a vague glimpse of a monster such as one should see only in nightmares—a huge loathesome spider-form with a bloated body as long as that of a man, and great sprawling legs that sent it half a dozen yards nearer Dixon in one effortless leap.

The onslaught proved too much for Dixon's morale, half-dazed as he was by the green moon's paralyzing rays. With a low inarticulate cry of terror, he turned and ran, straining every muscle in a futile effort to distance the frightful thing that inexorably kept pace in the

shadowy emerald gloom behind him.

Dixon's strength faded rapidly after his first wild sprint. Fifty yards more, and his faltering muscles failed him utterly. The dread rays of that grim green moon sapped his last faint powers of resistance. He staggered on for a few more painful steps then sprawled helplessly to the ground. His brain hovered momentarily upon the verge of complete unconsciousness.

Then he was suddenly aware of a fluttering struggle, inside his tunic where he had placed the body of the quail. A moment later and the bird wriggled free. It promptly spread its wings and flew away, apparently as vibrantly alive as before the mysterious paralysis had stricken it.

The incident brought a faint surge of hope to Dixon as he dimly realized the answer to at least part of the green moon's riddle. The bird had recovered after being shielded in the lead-cloth of his tunic. That could only mean one thing—the menace of those green moon rays must in some unknown way be radioactive. If Dixon could only get the lead-cloth hood over his own head again he also might cheat the green doom.

He fumbled at the garment with fingers that seemed as stiff as

wooden blocks. There was a long moment of agony when he feared that his effort had come too late. Then the hood finally slipped over his head just as utter oblivion claimed him.

Dixon came abruptly back to life with the dimly remembered echo of a woman's scream still ringing in his ears. For a moment he thought that he was awakening on his cot back in the laboratory after an unusually vivid and weird nightmare. Then the garish green moonlight around him brought swift realization that the incredible happenings of the night were grim reality.

The clouds were gone from the moon, leaving his surroundings again clearly outlined in the flood of green light. Dixon lifted his head and cautiously searched the scene, but he could see no trace of the great spider-form that had pursued him.

Wondering curiously why the creature had abandoned the chase at the moment when victory was within its grasp, Dixon rose lithely to his feet. The protecting hood had brought a quick and complete recovery from the devastating effects of the green moon's rays. His muscles were again supple, and his brain once more functioned with clearness.

Then abruptly Dixon's blood froze as the sound of a woman's scream

came again. The cry was that of a woman in the last extremity of terror, and Dixon knew with a terrible certainty that that woman was Ruth Lawton!

He raced toward the small ridge of rocks from behind which the sound had apparently come. A moment later he reached the scene, and stopped horror-stricken.

Three figures were there in a small rock-walled clearing. One was old Emil Crawford, sprawled unconscious on his side, the soft glow of a small white globe in a strange head-piece atop his gray hair shining eerily in the green moonlight.

Near Crawford's body loomed the giant spider-creature, and clutched firmly in the great claspers just under the monster's terrible fanged mouth was the slender body of Ruth Lawton. Merciful unconsciousness had apparently overwhelmed the girl now, for she lay supinely in the dread embrace, with eyes closed and lips silent.

As the monster dropped the girl's body to the ground and whirled to confront Dixon, for the first time he had a clear view of the thing in all its horror.

He shuddered in uncontrollable nausea. The incredible size of the creature was repellent enough, but it was the grisly head of the monstrosity that struck the final note of horror. That head was more than half human!

The fangs and other mouth parts were those of a giant tarantula, but these merged directly into the mutilated but unmistakable head of a man—with an aquiline nose, staring eyes, and a touseled mop of dirty brown hair. Resting on top of the head was a metallic head-piece similar to the one worn by Emil Crawford, but the small globe in this one blazed with a fiery opalescence.

The creature crouched lower, with its legs twitching in obvious preparation for a spring. Dixon looked wildly about him for a possible weapon, but saw nothing. Then he suddenly remembered the little lead grenade in his pocket. The cataclysmic power of that little bomb should be more than a match for even this monster.

His fingers closed over the grenade just as the great spider's twitching legs straightened in a mighty effort that sent it hurtling through the air straight toward him.

Dixon dodged to one side with a swiftness that caused the monster to miss by a good yard. Dixon raced a dozen paces farther away, then whirled to face the great spider. The creature's legs began scuttling warily forward. It was to be no wild leap through the air this time, but a swift rush over the ground that Dixon would be powerless to evade.

Releasing the safety catch of the grenade, Dixon hurled the tiny missile straight at the rock floor just under the feet of that vast misshapen creature. There was a vivid flash of blinding blue flame, then a terrific report. Dazed by the concussion, but unhurt, Dixon cautiously went over to investigate the result of the explosion.

One brief glance was enough. The hideous mass of shattered flesh sprawling there on the rocks would never again be a menace. The only thing that had escaped destruction in that shattering blast was the strange head-piece the thing had worn. Either the small shining globe was practically indestructible, or else it had been spared by some odd freak of the explosive, for it still blazed in baleful opalescence atop the shattered head.

Dixon hurried back to where Emil Crawford and Ruth Lawton lay. The girl's body was so rigidly inert that Dixon threw back his encumbering hood and knelt over her for a swift examination. His fears were quickly realized. Ruth was already a victim of the green moon's dread paralysis.

"Dixon! Bruce Dixon!"

Dixon turned at the call. Emil Crawford, his face drawn with pain, had struggled up on one elbow. The old man was obviously fighting off complete collapse by sheer will power.

"Dixon! Replace Ruth's shining head-piece at once!" Crawford gasped. "That will make her immune from the Green Death, and then we can—" The old man's voice swiftly faded away into silence as he again fainted.

Dixon hurriedly searched the scene and found Ruth's head-piece on the ground where it had apparently fallen in her first struggle with the giant spider, but the tiny white globe in the device was shattered and dark.

Despair gripped Dixon for a moment. Then he remembered the unbroken head-piece of the slain monster. True, the glow of its globe

was opalescent instead of white, but it seemed to offer its wearer the same immunity to the green moon's rays.

He swiftly retrieved the head-piece from the spider-creature's body, and set the light metal framework in place on Ruth's auburn curls.

Results came with incredible quickness. The rigidity left Ruth's body immediately. Her breath came in fast-quickening gasps, and her eyes fluttered open as Dixon knelt over her.

"It's Bruce, Ruth—Bruce Dixon," he said tenderly. "Don't you know me, dear?"

But there was no trace of recognition in those wide-open blue eyes staring fixedly up at him. For a moment Ruth lay there with muscles strangely tense. Then with a lithe strength that was amazing she suddenly twisted free of the clasp of Dixon's arms and sprang to her feet.

The next minute Dixon gave ground, and he found himself battling for his very life. This was not the Ruth Lawton whom he had known and loved. This was a madwoman of savage menace, with soft lips writhing over white teeth in a jungle snarl, and blue eyes that fairly glittered with unrestrained, insensate hate.

He tried to close with the maddened girl, but instantly regretted his rashness. Her slender body seemed imbued with the strength of a tigress as she sent slim fingers clawing at his throat. He tore himself free just in time. Dazed and shaken, he again gave ground before the fury of the girl's attack.

He could not bring himself to the point of actively fighting back, yet he knew that in another moment he would either have to mercilessly batter his beautiful adversary into helplessness or else be himself overcome. There was no middle course.

Then old Emil Crawford's voice came again as the old man rallied to consciousness for another brief moment.

"Bruce, the opal globe is a direct link to those devils themselves! Break it, Bruce, break it—for Ruth's sake as well as your own!"

Crawford had barely finished his gasped warning when Ruth again hurled herself forward upon Dixon with tapering fingers curved like talons as they sought his throat. Dixon swept her clutching hands aside with a desperate left-handed parry, then snatched wildly at the gleaming head-piece with his right hand.

The thing came away in his grasp, and in the same swift movement

he savagely smashed it against the rocky wall beside him. Whatever the opalescent globe's eery powers might be, it was not indestructible. It shattered like a bursting bubble, its fire dying in a tiny cloud of particles that shimmered faintly for a moment, then was gone.

Again, the effect upon Ruth was almost instantaneous. Every trace of her insane fury vanished. She swayed dizzily and would have fallen had not Dixon caught her in his arms. For a moment she looked up into his face with eyes in which recognition now shone unmistakably. Then her eyelids slowly closed, and she again lapsed into unconsciousness.

Dixon looked over at Emil Crawford, and found that the old man had again collapsed. Dixon knew of but one thing to do with the stricken man and girl, and that was to take them to his laboratory. The laboratory, apparently insulated by veins of lead ore in the mountain surrounding it, was the one sure spot of refuge in this weird nightmare world of paralyzing lunar rays and prowling monsters.

Flinging his tunic over Ruth's head to shield her as much as possible from the moonlight, he carried her to the laboratory, then returned for Emil Crawford. Safe within the subterranean retreat with the old scientist, Dixon removed his encumbering lead costume and began

doing what he could for the stricken pair.

Ruth was still unconscious, but the cataleptic rigidity was already nearly gone from her body, and her breathing was now the deep respiration of normal sleep.

Emil Crawford's condition was more serious. Not only was the old man's frail strength nearly exhausted, but he was also badly wounded. His thin chest was seared by two great livid areas of burned flesh, the nature of which puzzled Dixon as he began to dress the injuries. They seemed of radioactive origin, yet in many ways they were unlike any radium burns that Dixon had ever seen.

While Dixon was working over him, Crawford stirred weakly and opened his eyes. He sighed in relief as he recognized his surroundings.

"Good boy, Bruce!" he commended wanly. "We are safe here among the insulating veins of lead ore in the mountain. This is where Ruth and I were trying to come after we escaped from those devils to-night. But, Bruce, how did you guess the radioactive nature of the Green Sickness in time to avoid falling a victim to it as soon as you left the shelter of your laboratory?"

"My escape was entirely luck," Dixon admitted grimly. "To-night I left my laboratory for the first time in three days. I found a world gone mad, with a strange green moon blazing down upon a land of living dead men, and with marauding monsters hideous enough to have been spawned in the Pit itself. What in Heaven's name does it all mean?"

I am afraid that it means the end of the world, Bruce," Crawford answered quietly. "It was a little over forty-eight hours ago that the incredible event first happened. Without a moment's warning, the moon turned green! Hardly had the world's astronomers had time to speculate upon this amazing phenomenon before the Green Sickness struck—a pestilence of appalling deadliness that swept resistlessly in the path of those weird green rays. Wherever the green moon shone, every living creature succumbed with ghastly swiftness to the condition of living death that you have seen.

"Westward with the racing moon sped the Green Sickness, and nothing stayed its attack. The green rays pierced through buildings of wood, stone, and iron as though they did not exist. A doomed world had neither time nor opportunity to guess that lead was the one armor against those dread rays. To-night, Bruce, we are in all probability the only three human beings on this planet who are not slumbering in the paralytic stupor of the Green Sickness.

"Ruth and I were stricken with the rest of the world," Crawford continued. "We recovered consciousness hours later to find ourselves captives in the Earth-camp of the invaders themselves. You probably saw the display of lights that marks their camp down in the valley a mile beyond my place. We have learned since that the space ship of the invaders dropped silently down into the valley the night before the moon turned green and established the camp as a sort of outpost and observatory. They left two of their number there as pioneers, then the rest of them departed in the space ship for their present post up near the moon.

"Ruth and I were revived only that the two invaders in the camp might question us regarding life on this planet. They have a science that is based upon principles as utterly strange and incomprehensible to us as ours probably is to them. They probed my brain with a thought machine. It was an apparatus that worked both ways. What knowledge they got from me I do not know, but I do know that they unwittingly told me much in the bizarre and incredible mental pictures that the machine carried from their brains to mine.

“They are refugees. Bruce, from a planet that circled about the star that we know as Alpha Centauri, a star that is the nearest of all our stellar neighbors, being only four and a third light years distant. Their home planet was disrupted by a colossal engineering

experiment of the Centaurians themselves, the only survivors being a group of fifty who escaped in a space ship just before the catastrophe.

"There were no other habitable planets in their own system, so in desperation these refugees sped out across the void to our solar system in the hope of finding a new home here. They reconnoitered our Earth secretly and found it ideal. But first they believed that they must conquer the life that already held this Earth. To do this, they struck with the Green Sickness.

"The rays that are turning the moon green emanate from the space ship hovering up there some fifty thousand miles from the moon itself. The Centaurian's rays, blending with the sunlight striking the disc of the full moon, are intensified in some unknown way, then reflected across the quarter of a million miles to the Earth, to flood this planet with virulent radiance.

"The green moonlight is radioactive in nature, and overcomes animal life within a matter of fifteen minutes or less. The rays are most powerful when the moon is in the sky, but their effect continues even after it has set, because as long as the green moonlight strikes any part of the Earth's atmosphere the entire atmospheric envelope of the planet remains charged with the paralyzing radioactive influence.

"Earth's inhabitants are not dead. They are merely stupefied. If the green rays were to cease now, most of the victims of the Green Sickness would quickly recover with little permanent injury. But, Bruce, if that evil green moon blazes on for twenty-four hours more, the brain powers of Earth's millions will be forever shattered. So weakened will they be by then that recovery will be impossible even with the rays shut off, and the entire planet will be populated only by mindless imbeciles, readily available material for the myriads of monstrous hybrids that the invaders will create to serve them.

“To-night you saw the hybrid that the invaders sent to recapture Ruth and me. It was a fit specimen of the grisly magic which those devils from outer space work with their uncanny surgery and growth-stimulating radioactive rays. The basic element of that monster was an ordinary tarantula spider, with its growth incredibly increased in a few short hours of intensive ray treatment in the Centaurian's camp. The half-head grafted to it was that of a human being. They always graft the brain cavity of a mammal to a hybrid—half heads of burros, horses, or even dogs, but preferably those of human beings. I think that they prefer to use as great a brain power as possible.

"The hybrids are controlled through the small opalescent globes on their heads, globes that are in direct tune with a huge master globe of opalescent fire in the invaders' camp. When Ruth attacked you after

you placed the opal head-piece upon her head, she was for the moment merely another of the invaders' servants blindly obeying the broadcast command to kill. The white globes that Ruth and I wore when we escaped from the camp were identical with those worn by the invaders themselves, being nothing more than harmless insulators against the effect of the green moonlight."

A sudden spasm of pain convulsed Crawford's face. Dixon sprang forward to aid him, but the old man rallied with an effort and weakly waved Dixon back.

"I'm all right, Bruce," he gasped. "My strength is nearly exhausted, that is all. Like a garrulous old fool I've worn myself out talking about everything but the one important subject. Bruce, have you developed that new and infinitely powerful explosive you were working on?"

"Yes," Dixon answered grimly. "I have an explosive right here in the laboratory that can easily blow the Centaurian's camp completely off the map."

Crawford shook his head impatiently. "Destroying the camp would do no good. We must shatter the space ship itself if we are to extinguish those green rays in time to save our world."

"That is impossible if the space ship is hovering up there by the moon!" Dixon protested.

"No, it is not impossible," Crawford answered confidently. "I have a projectile in my laboratory that will not only hurtle across that great gap with incredible speed, but will also infallibly strike its target when it gets there. It is a projectile that is as irresistibly drawn by radio waves as steel is by a magnet, and it will speed as straight to the source of those waves as a bit of steel will to the magnet.

"The Centaurians in the space ship," Crawford continued, "are in constant communication with their camp through radio apparatus much like our own. If you can pack a powerful contact charge of your explosive in my projectile, I can guarantee that when the projectile is released it will flash out into space and score a direct hit against the walls of the space ship."

"I can pack the explosive in the projectile, all right," Dixon answered grimly. "We will need only a lump the size of an egg, and a small container of the heavy gas that activates it. The explosive itself is a radium compound that, when allowed to come in contact with the activating gas, becomes so unstable that any sharp blow will set it off in an explosion that in a matter of seconds releases the infinite quantities of energy usually released by radium over a period of at

least twelve hundred years. The cataclysmic force of that explosion should be enough to wreck a small planet."

"Good!" Crawford commended weakly. "If you can only strike your blow to-night, Bruce, our world still has a chance. If only you—" The old man's voice suddenly failed. He sank back in utter collapse, his eyes closed and his last vestige of strength spent.

Knowing that the old man would probably remain in his sleep of complete exhaustion for hours, Dixon turned his attention to Ruth. To his surprise, he found her sitting up, apparently completely recovered.

"I'm quite all right again," she said reassuringly. "I've been listening to what Uncle told you. Go ahead and prepare your explosive, Bruce. I'll do what I can for Uncle while you're working."

Dixon donned his lead-cloth hood and tunic again and set to work. Ten minutes later he turned to Ruth with a slender foot-long cylinder of lead in his hand.

"Ruth, will this fit your Uncle's projectile?" he asked.

"Easily," she assured him. "But isn't it frightfully dangerous to carry

in that form?"

"No, it's absolutely safe now, and will be safe until this stud is turned, releasing the activating gas from one compartment to mingle with the radium compound in the other section. Then the cylinder will become a bomb that any sharp jar will detonate."

"All right, let's go then," Ruth answered. "Have you any more of those lead clothes that I can wear? I could wear the globe head-piece that Uncle wore, but it would loom up in the dark like a searchlight."

Dixon did not protest Ruth's going with him. There was nothing further that could be done for Emil Crawford for hours and in the hazardous sally to Crawford's laboratory he knew that Ruth's cool courage and quick wits would at least double their chances for success in their desperate mission. He provided her with a reserve hood and tunic of lead cloth, then handed her a tiny leaden pellet.

"Keep this for a last resort," he told her. "It's a contact bomb that becomes ready to throw when this safety catch is snapped over. I wish we had a dozen of them, but that's the last capsule I had and there's no time to prepare more."

He fished a rusty old revolver out of a drawer, and placed it in his

pocket. "I'll use this gun for a last resort weapon myself," he said. "The action only works about half the time, but it's the only firearm in the place."

The green moon was still high in the sky as Ruth and Dixon emerged from the tunnel, but it was already beginning to drop gradually down toward the west. Dixon wheeled his disreputable flivver out of its nearby shed. With engine silent they started coasting down the rough winding road into the valley.

For nearly two miles they wound down the long grade. Then, just as they reached the valley floor they saw, far up among the rocks to the left of the road, the thing they had been dreading—the bobbing opalescent globe that marked the presence of one of the Centaurians' hideous hybrids. The shimmering globe paused for a moment, then came racing down toward them.

The need for secrecy was past. Dixon threw the car in gear and savagely pulled down the gas lever. With throttle wide open they hurtled around the perilous curves of the narrow road, but always in the rocks beside and above them they heard the scuttling progress of some huge, many-legged creature that constantly kept pace with them.

They had occasional glimpses of the thing. Its pale jointed body was some twenty feet in length, and had apparently been developed from that of a centipede, with scores of racing legs that carried it with startling speed over the rocky terrain.

The flivver raced madly on toward the blaze of kaleidoscopic colors that marked the Centaurians' camp. Crawford's home loomed up now barely a hundred yards ahead.

As though sensing that its quarry was about to escape, the hybrid flashed a burst of speed that sent it on by the car for a full fifty yards, then down into the road directly in front, where it whirled to confront them. Dixon knew that he could never stop the car in the short gap separating them from that huge upreared figure, and to attempt swerving from the road upon either side was certain disaster.

He took the only remaining chance. With throttle wide open he sent the little car hurtling straight for the giant centipede. He threw his body in front of Ruth, to shield her as much as possible, just as they smashed squarely into the hybrid.

The impact was too much for even that monstrous figure. It was hurled bodily from the road to crash upon the jagged rocks at the bottom of a thirty-foot gully. There it sprawled in a broken mass, too

hopelessly shattered to ever rise again.

The flivver skidded momentarily, then crumpled to a full stop against the rocks at the side of the road. Dixon and Ruth scrambled from the wreckage and raced for Crawford's home, scarcely fifty yards ahead.

They entered the laboratory and Ruth went directly over to where the radio-projectile rested in a wall-rack. Dixon took the gleaming cylinder down to examine it. Tapering to a rounded point at the front end, it was nearly a yard long and about five inches in diameter.

"The mechanism inside the projectile is turned off now, of course," Ruth said. "If it were turned on, the projectile would have been on its way to the space ship long ago, for the radio waves are as strong here as at the Centaurians' camp."

The girl pointed to a small metal stud in the nose of the projectile.

"When that is snapped over, it makes the contact that sets the magnetizing mechanism into action," she explained. "Then the projectile will go hurtling directly for the source of any radio waves within range. I don't know the nature of its mechanism. Uncle merely told me that it is the application of an entirely new principle

of electricity."

Dixon laid the long projectile down on the work-bench, and began packing his lead cylinder of explosive inside it. He had to release the lead cylinder's safety catch before closing the projectile, which made his work a thrillingly precarious one, for any sharp blow now would detonate the unstable mixture of gas and radium compound in one cataclysmic explosion.

He sighed in relief as he finally straightened up with the completed projectile held carefully in both hands.

"All we have to do now, Ruth," he said, "is step out from under this roof and snap that energizing stud. Then this little package of destruction will be on its way to our Centaurian friends up there by that pestilential green moon."

Ruth stepped ahead to open the door for him. With the end of their task so near at hand, both forgot to be cautious.

Ruth threw the door open and took one step outside, then suddenly screamed in terror as her shoulders were encircled by a long snake-like object that came whipping down from some vast something that had been lurking just outside. Dixon tried to dodge back, but too

late. Another great hairy tentacle came lashing around his shoulders, pinning his arms tightly and jerking him out of the doorway.

He had a swift vague glimpse of a hybrid looming there in the green moonlight—a tarantula hybrid that in size and horror dwarfed any of the frightful products of Centaurian science that he had yet seen.

Before Dixon had time to note any of the details of his assailant another tentacle curled around him, tearing the projectile from his grasp. Then he was irresistibly drawn up toward that grisly head where Ruth's body was also suspended in one of the powerful tentacles. The next moment, bearing its burdens with amazing ease, the giant hybrid started off.

Dixon tried with all his strength to squirm free enough to get a hand upon the revolver in his pocket, but the constricting tentacle did not give for even an inch. The only result of his effort was to twist his hood to one side, leaving him as effectually blindfolded as though his head were in a sack.

Long minutes of swaying, pitching motion followed as the hybrid sped over the rocky ridges and gullies. It finally came to a halt, and for another minute or so Dixon was held there motionless in mid-air, dimly conscious of a subdued hum of activity all about him. Then he

was gently lowered to the ground again.

While one tentacle still held him securely, another tore away his hood and tunic. Almost immediately the hood was replaced by one of the protective white globe devices. Dixon blinked for a moment in half-blinded bewilderment as he got his first glimpse of the Earth-camp of the Centaurians.

The place, located on the smooth rock floor of a large natural basin, seemed a veritable cauldron of seething colors which rippled and blended in a dazzling maze of unearthly splendor. But Dixon forgot everything else in that weird camp as his startled gaze fell upon the creature standing directly in front of him.

He knew instinctively that the thing must be one of the Alpha Centaurians, for in its alien grotesqueness the figure was utterly dissimilar to anything ever seen upon Earth before.

Life upon the shattered planet of that far distant sun had apparently sprung from sources both crustacean and reptilian. The Centaurian stood barely five feet in height. Its bulky, box-like body was completely covered with a chitinous armor that gleamed pale yellowish green.

Two short powerful legs, scaled like those of a lizard, ended in feet that resembled degenerated talons. Two pairs of slender arms emanated from the creature's shoulders, with their many-jointed flexible length ending in delicate three-pronged hands.

The scaly hairless head beneath the Centaurian's white globe device bore a face that was blankly hideous. Two great lidless eyes, devoid of both pupils and whites, stared unblinkingly at Dixon like twin blobs of red-black jelly. A toothless loose-lipped mouth slavered beneath.

Dixon averted his gaze from the horror of that fearful alien face, and looked anxiously around for Ruth. He saw her almost at once, over at his right. She was tethered by a light metallic rope that ran from her waist to one of the metal beams supporting the great shimmering ball of opalescent fire which formed the central control of the hybrids.

One of the white globe devices had been placed upon Ruth's head and she was apparently unhurt, for she pluckily flashed a reassuring smile at Dixon.

Directly in front of Dixon and some forty yards away there was a large pen-like enclosure, with vari-colored shafts of radiance from

banks of projectors constantly sweeping through it. Dixon drew in his breath sharply as he saw the frightful life lying dormant in that pen. It was a solid mass of hybrids—great loathesome figures fashioned from a score of different worms, insects, and spiders. The globes upon the gruesome mammalian half-heads were still dark and unfired with opalescence.

The invaders had apparently raided most of the surrounding country in obtaining those grafted half-heads. Near where Dixon stood there was a tragic little pile of articles taken from the Centaurians' victims—prospectors' picks, shovels, axes, and other tools.

Over to the left of the dormant hybrids stood the second Alpha Centaurian, curiously examining Dixon's projectile. The creature apparently suspected the deadly nature of the gleaming cylinder for it soon laid it carefully down and packed cushions of soft fabric around it to shield it from any possible shock.

Then at an unspoken command from the first Centaurian the great hybrid whirled Dixon around to face a small enclosure just behind him in which were located banks of control panels and other apparatus. One of the pieces of mechanism, with a regularly spaced stream of sparks snapping between two terminals, was apparently a radio receiver automatically recording the broadcast from the space

ship. Dixon was unable to even guess the nature of the remaining apparatus.

"Bruce, be careful!" Ruth called in despairing warning. "He is going to put the thought-reading machine on your brain. Then he'll learn what the projectile is for, and everything will be lost!"

Dixon's mind raced with lightning speed in the face of this new danger. He stealthily slipped a hand over the revolver in his pocket. There was one vulnerable spot in the great hybrid holding him, and that was the opalescent globe on the creature's head. If he could only smash that globe with one well-directed shot, he might be able to elude the Centaurians for the precious minute necessary to send the projectile on its deadly journey.

The hybrid began maneuvering Dixon toward the instrument enclosure. For a fleeting second the grip of the tentacles upon his shoulders loosened slightly. Dixon took instant advantage of it. Twisting himself free from the loosened tentacle in one mighty effort, he whirled and fired pointblank at the opalescent globe on the head looming above him.

The bullet smashed accurately home, shattering the globe like a bursting bubble. The great hybrid collapsed with startling

suddenness, its life force instantly extinguished as the globe burst.

Dixon leaped to one side and swung the gun into line with the Centaurian's hideous face. He pulled the trigger—but there was no response. The rusty old firearm had hopelessly jammed.

Dixon savagely flung the revolver at the Centaurian. The creature tried to dodge, but the heavy gun struck its body a glancing blow. There was a slight spurt of body fluid as the chitinous armor was partly broken.

Dixon's heart leaped exultantly. No wonder these creatures had to create hybrids to fight for them. Their own bodies were as vulnerable as that of a soft-shelled crab!

The Centaurian quickly drew a slender tube of dark green from a scabbard in its belt. Dixon dodged back, looking wildly about him for a weapon. There was an ax in the pile only a few yards away. Dixon snatched the ax up, and whirled to give battle.

The other Centaurian had come hurrying over now to aid its mate. Dixon was effectually barred from attempting any progress toward the projectile by the two grotesque creatures as they stood alertly there beside each other with their green tubes menacing him. Dixon

waited tensely at bay, remembering those searing radium burns upon Emil Crawford's body.

Then the first Centaurian abruptly leveled a second and smaller tube upon Dixon. A burst of yellow light flashed toward him, enveloping him in a cloud of pale radiance before he could dodge.

There was a faint plop as the protecting white globe upon his head was shattered. The yellow radiance swiftly faded, leaving Dixon unhurt, but he realized that the first round in the battle had been won decisively by the Centaurians. His only chance now, was to end the battle before the paralyzing rays of the green moon sapped his strength.

He warily advanced upon the Centaurians. Their green tubes swung into line and twin bolts of violet flame flashed toward him. He dodged, and the bolts missed by inches. Then Dixon nearly fell as his foot struck a bundle of cloth on the ground.

The next moment he snatched the bundle up with a cry of triumph. It was his lead-cloth tunic, torn and useless as a garment, but invaluable as a shield against the searing effects of those bolts of radioactive flame. He hurriedly wrapped the fabric in a rough bundle around his left forearm. The next time the tubes' violet flames

flashed toward him he thrust his rude shield squarely into their path. There was a light tingling shock, and that was all. The bolts did not sear through.

With new confidence, Dixon boldly charged the two Centaurians. A weird battle ensued in the garishly lighted arena.

The effective range of the violet flashes was only about ten feet, and Dixon's muscular agility was far superior to that of his antagonists. By constant whirling and dodging he was able to either catch the violet bolts upon his shielded arm or else dodge them entirely.

Yet, in spite of the Centaurians' clumsy slowness, they maneuvered with a cool strategy that constantly kept the Earth man's superior strength at bay. Always as Dixon tried to close with one of them he was forced to retreat when a flanking attack from the other threatened his unprotected back. And always the Centaurians maneuvered to bar Dixon from attempting any dash toward the projectile.

The minutes passed, and Dixon felt his strength rapidly ebbing, both from his herculean exertions and from the paralyzing rays of the green moon beating down upon his unprotected head. As his speed of foot lessened the Centaurians began inexorably pressing their

advantage.

Dixon was no longer escaping unscathed. In spite of his frantic efforts to dodge, twice the violet bolts grazed his body in searing flashes of exquisite agony.

His muscles stiffened still more in the attack of the Green Sickness. Desperately dodging a Centaurian bolt, he stumbled and nearly fell. As he staggered to regain his balance, one of his antagonists scrambled to the coveted position behind him.

It was only Ruth's scream of warning that galvanized Dixon's numbed brain into action in time to meet the imminent peril.

In one mighty effort he flung his ax at the Centaurian in front of him. The heavy blade cut deep into the thinly armored body. Mortally wounded, the creature collapsed.

Dixon whirled and flung up his shielded left arm just in time to intercept the violet bolt of the other Centaurian. Warily backing away, Dixon succeeded in retrieving his ax from beside the twitching body of the fallen invader.

Then, with the heavy weapon again in his hand, he remorselessly

charged his remaining foe. The Centaurian's tube flashed in a veritable hail of hurtling violet bolts, but Dixon caught the flashes upon his shield and closed grimly in.

One final leap brought him to close quarters. The heavy ax whistled through the air in a single mighty stroke that cleft the Centaurian's frail body nearly in two.

Then Ruth's excited scream came again. "Bruce—the other one! Get it quick!"

Dixon turned. The wounded invader, taking advantage of their preoccupation in the final struggle with its mate, had dragged its crippled body over to the instrument enclosure. Dixon staggered toward it as fast as his half-paralyzed muscles would permit.

He was just too late. The Centaurian jerked a lever home a fraction of a second before Dixon's smashing ax forever ended his activities. The lever's action upon the pen of inert hybrids was immediate.

The sweeping lances of light vanished in a brief sheet of vivid flame which kindled the dark globes on the hybrids' gruesome heads to steady opalescence—and the dread horde came to life! Sprawling from the pen, they came scuttling toward Dixon in a surging flood—

a scene out of a nightmare.

Dixon faced the oncoming horde in numb despair, knowing that his nearly-paralyzed body had no chance in flight. Then, just as the hybrids were nearly upon him, he heard Ruth's encouraging voice again.

"There's still one chance left, Bruce," she cried, "and I'll take it!"

Dixon turned. Ruth had in her hand the tiny contact grenade he had given her for a last emergency. She snapped the safety catch on the little bomb, then hurled it squarely at the giant opalescent globe looming close beside her.

There was a terrific explosion and the great globe shattered to atoms. Apparently stunned by the concussion but otherwise unhurt, Ruth was flung clear of the wreckage.

With the shattering of the central globe the strange life force of the hybrid horde vanished instantly and completely. Midway in their rush they sprawled inert and dead, with their outstretched legs so close to Dixon that he had to step over one or two to get clear.

Dixon's brain reeled in the reaction of relief from the horde's hideous

menace. Then he grimly fought to clear his fast-numbing senses long enough for the one final task that he knew must still be done.

The projectile, cushioned as it was, had escaped detonation in the blast. He had only to stagger across the twenty yards separating him from it, then release the stud that would send it flashing out into space.

But his last shred of reserve strength had nearly been sapped now by the insidious rays of that malevolent green moon. Even as he started toward the projectile, he staggered and fell. Unable to drag himself to his feet again, he began grimly crawling with arms and legs as stiff and dead as that much stone.

Only ten more yards to go now. And now only five. Grimly, doggedly, with senses reeling and muscles nearly dead, the last survivor of a dying planet fought desperately on under the malignant rays of the vivid green moon!

One last sprawling convulsive effort—and Dixon had the projectile in his hands. His stiff fingers fumbled agonizingly with the activating stud. Then abruptly the stud snapped home. With a crescendo whistle of sundered air the projectile flashed upward into the western sky.

Dixon collapsed upon his back, his dimming eyes fixed upon the grim green moon. Minutes that seemed eternities dragged slowly by. Then his heart leaped in sudden hope. Had there really glowed a small blue spark up there beside the green moon—a spark marking the mighty explosion of the radium bomb against the Centaurians' space ship?

A fraction of a second later, and doubt became glorious certainty. The vivid green of the moonlight vanished. The silvery white sheen of a normal moon again shone serenely up there in the western sky!

With the extinguishing of the dread green rays, new strength surged swiftly through Dixon's tired body. He arose and hurried over to where Ruth lay limp and still near the wreckage of the great globe. He worked over her for many anxious minutes before the normal flush of health returned to her white cheeks and her eyes slowly opened.

Then he took Ruth into his arms and for a long minute the two silently drank in the beauty of that radiant silver moon above them, while their hearts thrilled with a realization of the glorious miracle of awakening life that they knew must already be beginning to rejuvenate a stricken world.

87 The Death-Cloud by Nat Schachner and Arthur Leo Zagat

The epic exploit of one who worked in the dark and alone, behind the enemy lines, in the great Last War.

Aproximate word count: 11,300

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

We sat, Eric Bolton and I, at a parapet table atop the 200-story General Aviation Building. The efficient robot waiter of the Sky Club had cleared away the remnants of an epicurean meal. Only a bowl of golden fruit remained—globes of nectar picked in the citrus groves of California that morning.

My eye wandered over the scene spread before us, the vast piling of masonry that is New York. The dying beams of the setting sun glinted golden from the roofs of the pleasure palaces topping the soaring structures. Lower, amid interlacing archings of the mid-air thoroughfares, darkness had already piled its blackness. Two thousand feet below, in the region of perpetual night, the green-blue

factory lights flared.

On three sides, the unbroken serration of the Empire City's beehives stretched in a semicircle of twenty miles radius. Long since, the rivers that had made old Manhattan an island had been roofed over. But, to the east, the heaving sea still stretched its green expanse. On the horizon a vast cloud mountain billowed upward from the watery surface, white, and pink and many shades of violet.

"That's just the way it looked," Bolton muttered, as he drew my attention to the cloud mass. "See that air-liner just diving into it? Just so I saw the New York—five thousand men—pride of the Air Service—dive into that mountain of smoke. And she never came out! Gone—like that!" And he snapped his fingers.

He fell silent again, gazing dreamily at the drifting rings of pipe smoke. He smiled, the twisted smile which was the sole indication that one side of his face was the master work of a great surgeon-sculptor. A marvelous piece of work, that, but no less marvelous than the protean changes that Bolton himself could make in his appearance. It was this genius at impersonation that had won Bolton his commission in the Intelligence Service, when, in 1992, the world burst into flame.

"Would you like to hear about it?" The obtuseness of the man!

"If you'd care to tell me." I spoke off-handedly. This was like hunting birds on the wing: too abrupt a movement of the glider, and the game was lost.

This is the story he told me, in the low, modulated voice of the trained actor. He told it simply, with no dramatic tricks, no stressing, no climatic crescendos. But I saw the scenes he described, dodged with him through black caverns of dread, felt an icy hand clutch my heart as the Ferret stared at me with his baleful glance; was deafened, and stunned, and crushed by that final tremendous down pouring of the waters.

*I was standing—he began—on one of our rafts, watching the installation of a new ray machine. A storm was raging, but the great raft, a thousand feet long, and five hundred wide, was as steady as a rock. We were 700 miles out; the great push of '92, that drove us back to within 150 miles of our coast and almost ended the war, was still eleven weeks off.

Suddenly the buzzer of my radio-receiver whirred against my chest. "2—6—4"—my personal call. "2—2"—"Go to nearest communications booth." "A—4"—"Use Intelligence Service

intermitter 4." The secret of that was known only to a half-dozen men in the field. Headquarters wanted to talk to me on a supremely important matter.

There was a booth only a short distance away. I stepped to it and identified myself to the guard. In a moment I was within and had swung shut and sealed the sound-proof door. I set the intermitter switches to the A—4 combination. Not even our own control officers could eavesdrop now. Then I switched off the light, and waited.

A green glow grew out of the darkness. I was being inspected. Headquarters was taking no chances. Out of the green haze before me the general himself materialized. I could count every hair in his grizzled beard. The little scar at the corner of his left eye fascinated me with its distinctness.

I saluted. "Captain Bolton reporting, sir."

"At ease!" General Sommers' voice snapped with military precision. The general was standing in his private office in Washington. I could see his desk in the corner, and the great operations map on the wall. There were new lines of worry in the general's grim face.

*He went straight to the point. "Captain Bolton, we are confronted

with a problem that must be solved at once. While our information is meagre, the Staff is convinced that a great danger menaces us. Of its precise nature, or how it is to be combatted, we are unaware. I am assigning you to secure the answer to these two questions.

"A week ago there appeared, ten miles east of the enemies' first line, and directly opposite our raft 1264, what seemed at first to be merely a peculiar cloud formation. It rose directly from the surface of the water, and was shaped roughly like half an egg. The greatest dimension, lying along the water, parallel to the battle line, was about 5 miles; the height approximately a mile.

"When two or three days had passed, and no change in the shape or dimensions of the strange mass had taken place, although wind and weather conditions had been varied, we determined to investigate. This was undoubtedly an artificial, not a natural, phenomenon. It was then that we discovered that there was a concentration of defenses along this portion of the front. Our scouts were unable to find any of the usual gaps in either the ray network in the upper air, or the gyro-knife barrier beneath the surface. At the same time, from scouting parties and deserters at other points we learned that rumors are rife throughout the enemy forces of some scheme now on foot that will overwhelm us within a very short time. No details have been given, but so widespread is the gossip, and so consistent, that

we have been forced to the conclusion that it cannot be reasonably dismissed as mere morale-supporting propaganda.

"We have secretly developed a method of so equipping aircraft as to render them immune to the enemy death ray. The device is complicated and requires time to manufacture and install. After careful consideration, we decided that the situation was sufficiently grave to warrant revealing to the enemy our possession of this new device.

"The battle-airship New York has been equipped with the new protective equipment. To-morrow at sunrise she will make an attack in force on whatever lies behind that screen.

"Your orders are these. You will proceed at once to raft 1264. You will observe the attack made by the New York. If she fails, you will then find some way to enter that area, discover what is going on behind the screen, hamper or destroy the enemy plans if possible and report back to me personally."

The general's face suddenly softened. His tones lost their military precision. "I am afraid, Captain, that I am sending you to your death. But—we must know what is going on. If the New York fails, the task will appear impossible, but you have already done the impossible."

The grim mask dropped again over the chief's features; again he became the perfect military machine. "You will call on any officer of our forces for whatever you may need. Here is your authority." He stepped aside, and I heard the low burr of the tel-autograph at the side of the screen before me. A moment, and the general was again visible.

"That will be all." Once more the momentary softening. "Good luck, my boy." A final exchange of salutes, and the screen went blank.

I switched on the light. There in the little machine was a slip of paper. I extracted it. The lines of type, the scrawled signature, burned into my brain like letters of fire.

"To: All Officers of the Military Forces of the Americas.

Subject: Military Assistance. Eric Bolton, Captain M.I.S., M.F.A. is authorized to call upon you for any assistance. You will comply with his requests.

Alton Sommers, Lieut. General Commanding M.I.S., M.F.A.

By authority of the Commander in Chief."

In the corner appeared my thumb-print.

I stood there for a long time, mulling the thing over. The Staff was laying tremendous stress on the enemy's strange cloud formation, even to the extent of disclosing the secret of the new defensive device. The Easterners, too, had something novel, something that would cut off absolutely the transmission of ether waves. Nothing either side had yet produced would do that. What was happening behind that screen? Would they break through our defenses at last?

A vision arose before me. Hordes of yellow men, of black, of white renegades from the nations where the red flag waved dominant, pouring over the Americas. The horrors that Britain had undergone, the last European nation to hold out against the Red horde, flashed into my mind. I shuddered. Never. It must not be.

I was hurled from my feet by an electric shock. A great flood of sunlight burst in on me. A corner of the booth, three-foot concrete, had been sheared away, whiffed into nothingness! I arose and dashed into the open. A raid was in progress. The air was electric with the clashing of opposing barrages. The terrible silence of the pitched battles of that war oppressed me. I saw a squad, caught in the beam of an Eastern ray-projector, destroyed. The end man must have been just on the edge of the beams—half his right side lay twitching on the ground. The rest of him, and the seven others, were smoking heaps of blackened cinders.

High over No Man's Land—queer how those old phrases last—a covey of enemy helicopters hung, waiting for the barrage to lift. A black hulk broke the surface of the water, split open: then another. Enemy sub-surface craft. The fight was being waged under water, too. A green mass spilled its contents as it leaped over the waves and fell back. One of ours.

A huge buzzing came from behind me. A cloud of wasplike forms flew high overhead. It was reserve aircraft, hurrying up from the second line raft, ten miles west.

But this was no affair of mine. I had my orders. I must be in the North Atlantic by daybreak. I looked around. There at the further edge my little Zephyr rested, intact. I hurried to her and sprang into the cockpit. I was off the coast of Chile. Twelve thousand feet would clear the highest range between. I set the height control. Today you don't have to do that, but Mason hadn't perfected his automatic elevator then. The starting indicator was already set for my position. I adjusted the direction disk. The little green light showed that the power broadcast was in operation. I snapped over the starting switch and the whir of the helicopter vanes overhead told me all was well. The machine leaped into the air. Nothing to do now till the warning bell told me I was within a hundred miles of my destination. The battle shot away from me, far below.

Darkness came swiftly. I was shooting into the eye of the sun at three hundred miles an hour. I swallowed a few pellets of concentrated food, then curled up in my bunk. There was no knowing how many hours would pass till I slept again.

I fell asleep at once.

The strident clamor of the alarm bell woke me. Dawn was just breaking. Far below me I could make out the heaving Atlantic, calm and peaceful. A long line of the huge second-line rafts just underneath, stretching north and south till it curved over the horizon. A bugle's clear notes came drifting up to me, reveille. Then I was hovering over my goal, raft 1264. The black rectangle was alive with activity unwonted at this early hour. I took over the controls from the mechanical pilot, sent my recognition signal and drifted downward.

The Zephyr settled on the raft with a soft hiss of the compressed air shock absorbers. A guard came hurrying up. My credentials passed upon, I alighted. Momentarily, it was getting brighter. I was just in time.

I looked eastward, toward the enemy rafts. Beyond them, there it was, just as General Sommers had described it—a mountain of vapor, gleaming white in the gathering light. Not at all disquieting;

merely a shifting, billowing cloud mass. Rather pretty. The rest of the sky was clear, unspecked.

As I gazed a line of red fire ran around the edge of the cloud. A violet glow suffused the whole, faded swiftly into pink. The sun was rising. Behind me I heard a huge whirring. Turning, I saw her, just rising, all the beautiful trim length of her. The New York! Pride of our air fleet!

Fifty paces to my right a little knot of officers caught my attention. I recognized Jim Bradley. I remembered, someone had told me he was a major, and was commanding a raft. Good. Jim would work with me as he had in the old days at Stanford U., when I coached the air polo team that he captained. I walked over.

Time for only a hurried handclasp. The signal corps sergeant, earphones clamped to his head, was intoning the airship's messages. "We have reached the thousand-foot level. Will now head for the objective. All well."

We watched her. She was through our barrage-line. A snapped order from Jim restored the barrier, momentarily lifted to let her pass. A curious shimmering blurred the ship's outlines. I called Jim's attention to it. "That's the new device, a network of fine wires,

charged with neutralising vibrations. Worked like a charm in the tests. But there's no telling how effective it is in actual service."

A cold shiver ran up my spine. Many a fine ship I had seen strike that invisible network of rays, and puff into smoke. Was that to be the New York's fate?

"We are about to pass through the enemy barrage. All well," came the sergeant's unemotional monotone, repeating the voice in his ears. I knew that voice was being listened to in Washington by a little group whose every shoulder bore the stars of high command. My thoughts flashed to them, gazing breathless at the screen that imaged the very scene before us.

My breath stopped. Now! She must be in it now. The next second would tell the tale. A faint coruscation of sparks ran along the network, but the craft kept steadily onward. Thank God!

"We have passed through the enemy first-line barrage. All well."

A faint whistling of released breath came from all about me. I was not the only one who had agonised at that moment. The first test had been passed; would the other be as successful?

"We are increasing our speed to the maximum. Objective dead ahead. All well."

I saw the ship fairly leap through the sky. Five hundred miles an hour was her greatest speed. Another moment—

"We are entering the cloud. Bow is invisible. All—"

She was in it. She lurched. Plunged forward. She was hidden. I turned to the sergeant. Tremendous concentration was on his bronzed face. He reached out, twirled a dial in the set before him, and shook his head slightly. Twirled again. We were knotted around him, our faces bloodless. He looked up. "The last sentence was cut off sharp, sir. I can hear nothing more. Even the carrier wave is dead."

Jim ripped out an oath, snatched the phones, and clamped them over his own ears. Dead silence.

At last he looked up. "Nothing, gentlemen."

We looked at each other, appalled.

Bradley handed the apparatus back to the sergeant. "Remain here, listening carefully. Let me know at once if you hear anything." The sergeant saluted.

Out there the white cloud billowed and gleamed in the sunlight. But there was something ominous in its calm beauty now.

A thought struck me. I spoke, and my voice sounded flat, dead. "Perhaps it's only the radio waves that are cut off. Maybe she's all right, fighting there inside, smashing them." But I knew that it was all over.

"God, I hope you're right. Five thousand men aboard her." Bradley's lips were white, his hands trembling. "Come to my office, Eric; we'll wait there. To your posts, gentlemen. Each of you will detail a man to watch that cloud bank, and report to me any change in its appearance, even the slightest."

We walked back to the concrete command-post. We didn't talk, though it had been years since we had seen each other. My brain was numbed, I know. I had seen plenty of fighting, watched many a man go to his death in the seven months since the war began. But this, somehow, was different.

An hour passed. Jim busied himself with routine paper work. At least he had that relief. I paced about his tiny office. Already I was making plans. Force had failed. Strategy must take its place. I must get in there. But how?

Bradley looked up from his work, his face grim. "No news, Eric. If you were right we should have heard something from the New York by this time. They're gone, all right."

"Yes, they're gone," I answered. "It's up to me, then."

He stared in surprise. "Up to you? What do you mean?"

"Just that. I'm going in there, God helping." I made sure the room was shut tight against eavesdroppers. Then, briefly as I could, I told him of my orders, showing him the document I had received the day before. He shook his head.

"But it's impossible. Their ray network, and the undersea barrier, are absolutely solid here. I don't think even a mouse could get through. And even if you did get behind their lines, how on earth are you going to get into the area underneath that devilish cloud. You saw what happened to the New York, protected as she was."

"Yes. I know all that. Nevertheless it's got to be done." Just then I got the glimmering of an idea. "Tell me, Jim, are they doing much scouting here. Undersea, I mean."

"The usual one-man shell, radio-propelled. We get one once in a

while. Most of them, however, even if we do smash them, are pulled back on the wave before we can grab them. It's a bit easier than most places, though: our depth's only about six hundred feet."

"What! Why, I thought the bottom averaged three thousand all along the line."

"It does. But what would be a mountain ridge, if this were dry land, runs out from the mainland. We're over a big plateau here. It goes on east another twenty-five miles, or so. See, here's the chart."

A warning bell seemed to ring somewhere within me. Had this peculiar formation of the ocean bed anything to do with the problem at hand? But I kept to the immediate step. My plan was rapidly taking shape in my mind.

"What are the scouts—black, yellow, or—"

"Russians, mostly."

"Good. Now listen, Jim. Send down word that the next scout-sub that is caught is not to be ripped, but simply held against the attraction of the return wave. The television eye is to be smashed at once, and radio communication jammed. Can you do it as if

something had happened to the shell?"

"Sure thing, but what's the big idea?"

"You'll see. I've worked the thing out now."

Just then a red light on Bradley's desk winked three times. "There's one between the lines now!" he exclaimed.

"Quick, man, shoot my orders down."

He pressed a yellow button and spoke quietly but emphatically into a mouth piece. "O.K. They understand."

"Now take me down."

He looked at me as if I had taken leave of my senses, but complied.

The door of the elevator that lowered us from the surface clanged open. We stepped out on a balcony that ran around a large, steel-lined room. The walls were dripping, and on the floor, twenty feet beneath, a black pool sloshed about with the heaving of the raft, in whose interior we were. Rubber-clad soldiers moved about in the blue glow of the globes sending down their heatless light from the ceiling. One sat at a desk near the elevator. As I spied him a green

light glowed in front of him twice.

"They've got him, sir, bringing him in."

A low-toned order. The soldiers sprang to their post. A whirring signal. At the other end of the room the steel wall began to move upward, and water rushed in. A tremendous vibration shook the chamber: a ponderous thudding. The water rose to the level of the balcony and stopped. I looked at Bradley.

"We're beneath the surface, aren't we?" I asked. "How is it that the water doesn't fill the room?"

"Pumps," he replied. "Tremendous pumps that draw the water out just as fast as it comes in, and shoot it out again into the sea. We can maintain any desired level in here."

Then I noticed that the black flood was rushing by beneath me at a terrific rate.

Something bulked in the opening. Two tiny subs drew in, a black and a green. The steel wall rushed down again, and the vibration ceased. From the green craft heavy grapples extended, clutching the black, enemy scout. I saw a gaping hole in the black boat's nose, where its

eye had been smashed.

Men were clambering over both vessels' hulls, tugging at the hatchway fastenings. The black one flew open. I leaped to the deck. Bradley after me, and jumped down into the hold.

In the little cubby-hole that was all the machinery left space for, a pale-faced form in green-gray crouched against the wall. His eyes stared in fear. A Russian, praise be. And not far from my size and build.

"Off with his clothes, quick!" I yelled, stripping mine as I spoke. Bradley looked at me queerly, and shrugged his shoulders. "Quick, man! Everything depends on speed!"

He shook his head, as one who listens to the vaporings of an imbecile, but turned to obey. I was standing there—naked, studying the Easterner's face, his body. No scars. Good.

*Jim turned to me, the prisoner's clothing in his hands. An exclamation burst from him. He looked back at the trembling Russ, then at me. "My God, Eric, how did you do it?" he asked.

I smiled. "All right, is it?"

"You're his twin; no, you're himself! If I'd had a drink to-day I'd be sure I was seeing double. How on earth—you had no make-up, no time—"

I was sliding into the Red's gear as I talked! "I've trained all the little muscles in my face—muscles you others don't even know you have. Started when I was a kid, then made a good living at it, acting. Comes in handy now, damn handy. I can make anything of my face, and hold it forever if I have to. Chink, Russ—anything. Distort my limbs too, and change my voice. That won't be necessary now. Simple, but it takes a lot of practice."

I was dressed by then, a counterpart of the enemy officer—I hoped. If I wasn't—well, I wouldn't live much longer.

"Now, out with the Russ and my clothes. Don't leave a bit, if you value my life."

A light of comprehension illumined Jim's face. "You're going to pass yourself off as this man? You've got your nerve with you!" he exclaimed.

"Exactly." The cubby-hole was clear now. "Now take that spanner, and bang me over the head. Not too hard; I don't want a cracked

skull, only a splashed scalp. Then pile me where it will seem I crashed against a projection of some kind when the grapples took hold. That bunk edge will do. Batten the hatch, and cast off the grapples. I hope their automatic control is still working, otherwise my scheme's gaflooey."

Jim stuck out his great paw. "Good luck, Eric," he said, simply. Then he clutched the spanner. I saw it go over my head....

Voices around me, harsh, guttural voices. Russian! By the Nine Dogs of War, I had pulled it off! But what were they saying? I was inside the lines, but was my deception successful? Or had my face relaxed with the shock of the blow? I thanked my Russian grandmother then for all the time she had spent teaching me her mother tongue.

"Boszhe moi, the poor fellow must have had an awful smash. He hasn't come to yet."

"The doctor will be here in a minute. He'll revive him."

I breathed a prayer of gratitude. They didn't suspect! But I didn't like this doctor business. Well, I'd have to stall through that as best I could.

I seemed to be lying on hard rock. I opened my eyes, staring blankly, straight up. A bearded face was bending over me, the captain's crossed sickles on the shoulder straps just within my vision. Behind, and above him, towering straight up—my God!—what was it? A green wall, a vertical green wall, going up and up! It looked like—but no: how could water stand straight up like that, for hundreds of feet?

I almost betrayed myself with a gasp! A dim bulk showed in the translucent depths of the wall. It rushed toward me, took form. A fish, a huge, blind fish, its cavernous mouth stretched wide. It came straight for me, just above. In a second it would leap through. A scream of terror trembled in my throat. Then it hit the edge of the translucent green wall—and vanished! Was I dreaming? Had Jim hit me too hard?

Something stirred in the back of my mind. I sensed dimly that here lay the explanation of the disappearance of the New York, the very mystery that I had come to solve. Almost I had it; then it slipped away.

“Here's the doctor!" someone said. There was a little stir of activity about me. I allowed my eyes to close, as if in utter weariness.

"What's all this? What have you got here?" A gruff voice, intolerant.

"One of our sub-sea scouts, sir. Just come back, after some delay. Her eye was smashed, and there are grapple marks on her. Must have been caught, and then slipped away. She was leaking badly. We got her through the lock just in time." Jim had evidently added a few touches of his own. "Comrade Pauloff seems to have been seriously injured. He's got a bad cut on his scalp, and was unconscious till a moment ago. Opened his eyes just as you came along."

"Hm. Let's see." I felt a none too gentle hand finger my wound. It throbbed maddeningly. The doctor spoke again. "A nasty crack, but no fracture. Here, you—wake up." I made no move. "Come on, wake up!" I heard the plop of a cork being drawn from a bottle; a pungent odor assailed my nostrils, choked me. I writhed, pulled at the hand holding the bottle to my nose and opened my eyes.

"That's better. How do you feel now?"

I raised a hand to my injury and muttered, in Russian. "Hurts, papashka." I kept my expression as blank, as uncomprehending, as I could.

The doctor flashed an understanding glance at the captain, then

turned back to me. "What's your name?"

Memories of my grandmother's tales of her youth came flooding back to me. "Pavel, son of Pauloff."

It was the formula of the Russian student, in his teens.

"Your rank?"

"Second year. Petrovski Gymnasium."

The physician turned away. "No use bothering him now. A clear case of amnesia.

"He's been thrown back to his high school days. I've had a number of cases like that among your scouts lately." Blessed inspiration! "Only cure is rest. Get him over to the infirmary. We'll evacuate him to a base hospital to-morrow."

I was in a cool white bed, in a low ceilinged room, white painted. There were other beds, vacant. A uniformed male nurse puttered around. There was an elusive green tinge to the light that poured in through the one window.

The door opened and a sergeant came in. "Comrade Alexis!"

"Well, what is it now? Have they found another gold-bricking officer to mess up my clean beds?"

"A party from corps headquarters will be here in fifteen minutes for inspection."

"Let them come. They won't find any specks of rust on my instruments, like they did on Comrade Borisoff's."

"They'd better not. You know what happened to him."

"Yeah. Chucked into the ray. Well, he didn't give the burial squad any work." And the two laughed, a laugh that had more than a hint of sadistic cruelty in it. "If I had my way," the nurse went on, "I'd do the same with all these nuts that come back from the scout ships raving of home and mother. It's my idea that they're all bluffing. It's a good way to be shipped to the rear, where the captured dames are. Say, did I tell you about the last time I was on leave—"

The two whispered, their heads close together. My brain was working frantically. Things had gone well so far, but I had to get out of here before the morning, or I'd be sent to the base and lose all that I had gained by my daring.

The door snapped open. "Smirnow!" (Atten-shun!)

I was on my side, facing away from the wall. I remained so, staring blankly across the room. I hoped the inspection would be over quickly. The fewer the enemy officers I had looking me over, the better. Someone back there was snapping questions. That voice—where had I heard it before?

"Your patient. What's his trouble?"

"Amnesia, sir. One of the scouts."

"Oh, yes. Let's look at him."

Someone was walking across the room, then standing above me. His hand was just at the level of my eyes—a hand with the little finger twisted queerly into the palm. I knew that hand: it was the Ferret's! A cold shiver ran up my back. I almost stopped breathing.

Of all the infernal luck in the world, to have the Ferret walk in here! He was chief of the Red's Intelligence Service, the shrewdest, sharpest, cruelest of them all. Many of our best men had gone west because of his uncanny instinct for piercing disguise. They said he could smell an American. And many of our most strictly guarded

plans had been smashed through his infernally clever spying. Only a month before I had him in my clutches; saw the very rope around his neck. But he had slipped away, and left me empty-handed and kicking myself for an ass.

I held my breath as I felt those gimlet eyes of his boring into me. Would he sense who I was? Surely he could hear the pounding of my heart. How long he stood there I don't know. It seemed like hours. I tautened, waiting for him to call out, determined to sell my life as dearly as I could.

But for once the Ferret was fooled. He turned away. "Take us into your kitchen," he snapped at the nurse, then there was the tramping of feet and the slamming of a door.

The breath whistled from me in relief. I turned cautiously. I was alone. Now was my chance. I jumped from the bed and started toward the window. Once out, I'd find some place to hide. I let my face relax; there was no use for that particular disguise any longer. The window was up. I was on the sill. Another second and I'd be out in the open.

"Just where do you think you're going?" came the Ferret's silky, cruel voice. I whirled. There he was, just inside the door. His little

black eyes glinted dangerously over his hooked nose and sharp chin.

"Oh—Bolton! Something made me turn back. Glad to see you."

His hand flashed to the ray-tube in his belt. At the same moment I left the window sill in a desperate leap. Clear across the room I sprang, and before he had time to pull his weapon I had one hand clamped around his wrist, the other clutching his throat. We crashed to the ground.

I was in pyjamas, barefooted, he fully clothed. His leather shoes drove into me viciously, even as his face turned purple. The pain was excruciating, but I dared not cry out. His left thumb found my eye, was digging in.

The crash of our fall must have been heard outside; another moment and all would be lost. I was momentarily on top as we rolled across the floor. With a supreme effort I pulled his head away from the floor, then crashed it down. He slumped; lay still.

The door knob was turning as I jumped frantically through the window. I heard a cry behind me. Rough, uneven ground. No one about. To my right was a rocky cliff, and at its base what looked like the mouth of a cave. Any port in a storm: I dived into it.

It was a cave, all right, or rather a narrow tunnel winding some distance into the cliff. I ran back at top speed, till I crashed into the end of the passage.

I crouched there, panting. It was beastly cold, and the dampness struck into my bones. I shivered, then laughed grimly. I wouldn't shiver long. When the Ferret came to and revealed that Eric Bolton was around, there wouldn't be a stone left unturned till I was found. Those birds had good cause to want me rubbed out.

Already I could hear faint shouts from without. The chase was on. I was caught, right enough. Trapped like any rat.

I felt around me in the darkness and my hand lighted on a round stone. It just fitted my fist. Well, I'd get one of them, anyway, when they found me. Cold comfort in that, but I didn't feel like giving in tamely.

Footsteps sounded out at the tunnel end. So soon! I gripped my rock tightly, and waited.

But—it sounded like only one man. I drew myself together. Maybe I had a chance. A dim glow showed where the passage curved, then a disk of light flashed on the wall and flitted about. The fool!

The steps came on, slowly, stumblingly. The disk of light grew smaller as its source drew nearer. Then he was around the corner, bulked for a moment against his own light as it was reflected from the wet wall. That moment was enough! The stone left my hand with all the force I possessed. It went straight to its mark: a sickening thud told me that. The form dropped, and the flashlight clinked on the rocks.

I listened. Still the shouts from without, but no steps inside. I was safe for a time. But the searcher would surely be missed, and others would come looking for him. I had only one chance. I shrugged my shoulders. I couldn't lose anything. If I stayed here my goose was cooked.

By the light of the flashlight I examined my quarry. A renegade Frenchman, apparently. A private. In a trice I had his uniform on me and had twisted my features to match his. Little did I think when I acted under the Klieg lights that the fate of two continents would some day depend on this gift of mine.

He stirred; groaned. I hesitated. Then—well, I couldn't chance his crawling out. His ray-tube was newly charged. I left a heap of ashes there as I walked away....

I was outside the cave. I darted a glance around. My refuge was not the only hole in sheer rock; it was literally honeycombed. From one, then another of the cavern mouths a soldier emerged. Each strode across the uneven, rocky plain to where an officer stood with what was apparently a map in his hand. As each searcher saluted and reported, the officer made a mark on the map. Someone came out from the cave-mouth next to mine. I fell in behind him.

"No one in cave twenty-one, sir."

"To your post."

The private turned on his heel and marched off to take his place in a company formation that was rapidly taking shape near by. My turn was next. What was the number of my cave? A mistake now, and I was through.

I saluted. "No one in cave twenty, sir."

"To your post."

Had I hit it? When the final check-up came would there be two reports for one cave, none for another?

A front rank man moved aside. Good: that meant my place was just

behind him. My luck was holding. And never did a man need luck more!

Now was my first chance to look about, to discover what sort of place this was. It was an oval plain, roughly a mile wide by five miles long. Buildings, squat structures of corrugated iron, were scattered here and there. In the distance, to my left, what seemed a great hole in the ground glowed; a huge disk of light.

Dry land, here, where there should be nothing but a waste of waters!

Puzzled, I strained to see what bordered the plain. It was a tall cliff, running all around, and towering high in the air. But it wasn't rock, for it glowed strangely green in the flood of light that illumined the place. And it was clean cut, rising sheer from the unevenness of the ground.

Then I remembered. The vertical green wall that soared above me as I lay dazed from Jim's blow. The translucent green wall in whose depths I had seen the blind fish rushing toward me. Water! The sea! Impossible! There were scientific miracle-workers in the enemy's ranks, but they couldn't have hollowed out a pit such as this in mid-ocean; forced back the very ocean to create this amphitheatre, this dry plain on the Atlantic's very bottom: held back the unthinkable

weight of Earth's waters by a nothingness. Incredible!

Yet the accomplished fact stared me in the face.

My eyes traveled up that impossible wall. It must have been at least six hundred feet high. At its summit, in a murky haze that heaved and billowed, I made out strange, dim bulks that hung, unsupported. A long line of them, a long ellipse following closely the curving of the cliff. Underneath the nearest, barely perceptible, I could make out a lens-shaped cage of wire. I began to understand.

Overarching everything was a great dome of heaving cloud.

"Smirn-ow!"

The long line snapped into immobility.

"By the left flank, march!"

We were moving, marching. Then my ruse had succeeded. I had chosen the right cave number. I breathed a sigh of relief.

The command for route order was given, and at once a buzz of talk broke out around me. "Damn them, they're sending us right off to work! We missed our mess, hunting for that damned spy. But that

don't mean anything. It's back to the tunnel for ours."

"Oh, quit your bellyaching, Andreyeff. Another week, and we'll be in New York. Just think of it, the richest city in the world to loot! And women! Why, they tell me the American women are to the Frenchies and the cold English-women as the sun is to the stars. What's a meal more or less when you think of that?"

An obscene laugh swept through the ranks. Guttural voices boasted of past exploits—black deeds and sadistic cruelties that had marked the trail of the hordes sweeping over Europe from the windy Asiatic steppes.

As we marched, I noticed a peculiarity of the rocky floor. There were no sharp edges, no sudden cleavages in the uneven terrain. It looked, for all the world, as though the stone had been melted, then frozen again in a moment. An unbelievable pattern was forming itself in my mind. If what I thought were true—!

The command came to halt.

We had reached the blazing disk I had seen from afar. It was a tremendous shaft, dropping straight into the very bowels of the earth. Two hundred feet across, a blinding glare streamed up from the pit.

From far beneath came shoutings, the clank of machinery, a growling roar.

Other companies marched up and halted at the pit edge. My outfit were whites—Russians, French, Germans. But the others were black, brown, yellow—all the motley aggregation of races that formed the Red cohorts, the backbone of the Great Uprising. As the "At ease" order snapped out a babel of tongues rose on the air. Every language of Earth was there save English. The Anglo-Saxons had chosen tortured death rather than submission to the commands of their conquerors.

A huge platform rose slowly up in the shaft and came to a stop at the ground level. It was solidly packed with another throng of soldiers in the gray-green of the enemy. They marched off and we took their place.

Down, down, we went, till it seemed that our destination was the center of the earth. Louder and louder grew the growling roar, the ponderous thud and clank of huge machines.

We were in a huge chamber, hollowed out of the solid rock. Thousands of men bustled out among great piles of lumber and steel rails. Huge cranes rolled here and there, swinging their ponderous

loads. Officers shouted crisp orders. Green-uniformed privates sprang to obey.

But no time was given me to get more than a glimpse of all this activity. From out the gaping mouth of a hundred-foot-wide tunnel a long train of flat cars came gliding. It halted and swayed on the single rail, and the whir of the gyroscopic balancers filled the cavern. A sharp order, and my companions leaped for the cars, lay prone on the steel car-beds, and passed their belts through projecting loops. I wondered, but imitated them. I buried my face in my arms, as the others were doing.

There came the eery shriek of a siren: the train was moving. Swiftly it gathered speed till it seemed as though my protesting body was being forced through a wall of air grown suddenly solid. Myriad fingers pulled at me, seeking to hurl me to destruction. Even through my protecting arms my breath was forced back into my lungs, choking me. The wind howled past with the wail of a thousand souls in torment.

Just as the limit of endurance was reached the terrific speed slackened, and the long train ground to a halt. "All off! Lively now!" came the command.

We were at the rail-head, and before me was the face of the tunnel. Queer, hooded figures were there bending over wheeled tripods, manipulating what appeared to be searchlights. But no shafts of light leaped from the lenses. The tripods were rolling steadily forward.

I looked at the tunnel face again, then, startled, back to the hooded men. I rubbed my eyes. Was I seeing things? No, by all that was holy, it was so! The distance between the machines and the end wall of the passage had not changed, but men and rock were ten—fifteen—twenty feet away! They were boring; boring into the solid rock at tremendous speed. And the rock was melting, vanishing, disappearing into nothingness in the awful blast projected from those machines!

I gaped—my pose, my danger, forgotten. Almost as fast as a man could run, the tunnel extended itself. It was phantasmal, incredible!

A rough hand seized me from behind. I whirled, my heart in my mouth. It was the burly sergeant. "What the hell are you dreaming about, Renaud? Hop to it. Over there, on that shoring job. Get busy now, or—" The threat in that unfinished sentence chilled me by its very vagueness.

My squad was hauling heavy timbers, setting them up where a fault

showed in the rocky roof of the tunnel. I joined them but my thoughts were a madly whirling chaos.

The pattern was complete now. The long, curving under-water ridge on Jim's chart—this tunnel was boring through it. Whatever it was that those tripods projected—a new ray it must be—it was melting a passage six hundred miles long. Under our rafts, under our fleets, under our coast defenses—to come up far behind our lines. The ridge joined the coast just south of New York. Some night, while our generals slept in smug complacency, all that gray green horde of wolves would belch forth—from the very earth.

And the Americans would follow Europe into hell!

Five minutes passed. I looked again at the face of the tunnel, drawn by an irresistible fascination. It had advanced a full quarter of a mile. Like fog before a cloud-piercing searchlight, the age-old rock was dissolving before the ray. At this rate America's doom would be sealed in a week. And I, alone among these thousands, was helpless to avert the climaxing menace.

A howl of rage came from the sergeant. I turned. A diminutive German, his face pale green with fatigue, had stumbled and fallen under the weight of a heavy timber.

The swarthy non-com was kicking him with a cruel boot. "Get up, you; get up before I brain you!"

The sprawling man looked up, fear staring from his deep-sunk eyes. "Aber, ich bin krank."—"I am sick; I can't stand the work; it is too schwer, too heavy," he faltered.

"Sick?" the Russian roared. "Sick? I'll sick you! You're lazy, too damned lazy to do a little work. I'm tired of this gold-bricking around here. I'm going to make an example of you that the rest of you dogs won't forget in a hurry." His face was purple with rage. He bent, seized the fallen man and dragged him out from under the crushing bulk. Then, raising the struggling wretch over his head as lightly as though he were an infant, he ran forward, toward the ray projectors.

Shriek after shriek pierced the hot air, such howls of utter fear and agony, as I hope never to hear again. The little figure, held high in the huge paws, writhed and tossed, to no avail.

The sergeant reached the nearest tripod. His brawny arms flexed; straightened. The German swept up and over the head of the operator, and dropped in front of the machine. Then—he vanished. Nothing, absolutely nothing, was there between projector and

rapidly retreating wall!

A horrible retching tore my stomach; I swayed dizzily. The utter brutality, the finality of the thing! "And any more of you carrion that I catch slacking will get the same thing," the Russian said. "You, Renaud, I've got my eye on you. Watch out!" The sergeant's voice rasped through the mist about me. I shoved my shoulder under one end of an eight by eight and plunged into the back breaking labor. But one thought hammered at my reeling brain: "The New York! That's what happened to her!"

The long hours of toil at last ended. We were again in the entrance cavern, waiting for the elevator platform. It was unaccountably delayed: the last batch had gone up fifteen minutes before. The men about me chafed and swore. They were impatient for mess and bed.

Bit by bit I had reconstructed all the elements of this unprecedented operation. The ray, the blasting ray that whiffed into non-existence all that it touched, was the keynote. The great plain had been cleared by the ray. The dim shapes floating high in that far-circling ellipse were pouring down the dreadful vibrations, thus holding back the sea in a marvelous green wall. I remembered the sea-monster that had dashed at me and vanished. That proved it. The dome of cloud was camouflage, or the product of the processes of destruction going on

underneath: it didn't matter. What mattered was that it was interlaced by a network of ray beams. It was an impenetrable wall, a perfect defense. Boxed in on all sides by such a barrier, how was I to get out word of the menace? How was it to be combatted even if our forces knew of the danger? A hundred plans flooded my wearied brain, to be rejected one by one.

A mocking, ribald cheer arose from the men around me. The platform was ascending. Why the long delay? A premonition of disaster chilled me. I shrugged it aside.

We were at the top. A long line of soldiers curved about the mouth of the pit. The next shift waiting to go down? No—they made no move to approach. And each one was holding his ray-tube at the ready. This was the guard. At a table nearby a knot of officers was gathered. Papers of some sort were piled high on it. Again the icy finger of dread touched me. One of the officers moved aside, revealing the profile of his companion. The Ferret. Then I knew I was done for!

My eyes darted here and there, seeking escape. No hope—the heavily armed guard was all around; the platform blocked the shaft mouth. A dash would be self-betrayal—suicide.

Mechanically I obeyed the sergeant's barked commands. We were in single file. We were moving toward that ominous table where the Ferret stood, a sardonic smile on his sharp-featured face. I could make out a livid weal across his throat. I had left my mark on him. That was some satisfaction.

The head of the line reached the table. They were fingerprinting the leader! A lieutenant extracted a paper from the pile and handed it to the Ferret. He made momentary comparison of something on the paper with the mark the soldier had just made. Then the next man stepped up, while the first made off across the plain.

Of course! Simple: how very simple! And yet it had caught me! The service records of the men had their fingerprints, just as in our own forces. And each man in the area was being checked up. Trust the Ferret to think of that. He knew that I'd be somewhere in their ranks, impersonating one of their men. Well, I was in for it. The last trick in our long game was his.

My turn. No use going through the motions. I bent down a moment, then straightened. "Oh, hello, Bolton," the Ferret said, thrusting out his hand, the one with the twisted finger. I had resumed my own visage. "Didn't think you could get away with it, did you?"

Chagrined as I was, I put a good face on it. The Ferret and I had run up against each other many many times. Cheerfully, either of us would have cut the other's throat. But—we played the game.

"Hello, Rubinoff," I responded. "You seem to have me, just now. But try and hold me."

The Ferret threw back his head and laughed. "Oh, I think you'll find it a little difficult to get away this time." I thought so, too, but did not voice my thought.

The smile left Rubinoff's face. He snapped an order. A squad advanced from the guard. Handcuffs clicked around my wrists, the mates of each were fastened to the arms of two guardsmen. I was securely chained. They were taking no chances.

"Take him to the special cell in the guard-house." The lieutenant saluted. I was marched off. Then I was not to be summarily executed. I was not as much relieved as you might think. You see, I knew the Ferret. We had raided one of his hangouts once; just missed him. But we found an M.I.S. man there whom Rubinoff had been—questioning. We thanked God when he died.

*We tramped across the plain. My eyes kept roving about: there

wasn't much hope for me, but miracles have happened. Most of the scattered structures were hastily thrown together sheds of sheet iron. Barracks, they looked like. But, every so often I spied spheres of concrete, the wide open doors revealing yard-thick walls. What could be their purpose?

Something bothered me. Something about the ray projectors and the other machinery I had seen. I glanced up at one of the balloons floating high above. All these needed a power supply; tremendous power to accomplish what the ray was doing. And there were no cables running to them. How did the power get to them?

There was only one answer. Radio transmission. The required energy, perhaps the very ray vibrations themselves, were being broadcast to the points of projection. That meant a power-house and a control room somewhere in the area. The vulnerable points! Where were they?

I stumbled, and was jerked roughly to my feet. The lieutenant slapped me. "Scared, Americansky? You well may be. We'll have rare sport when they throw what the Ferret leaves of you into the ray." I shuddered. To go out that way! I'll be honest—I was horribly afraid. The men to whom I was shackled laughed.

A dull throbbing beat at my ears, a vibration just too low to be sound. I looked about for its source. It came from my left—a concrete building, low lying, about a hundred yards long by as many feet wide. At the further end a squat smokestack broke the flat line of the roof. Guards, many guards, were pacing their slow patrol about it. From the center of the side nearest me, cables thick as a man's trunk issued forth. I followed them with my eye. They ended in a marble slab on which rested a concrete sphere, somewhat larger than the others. The door of this one was closed. On the roof of the queer edifice was a peculiar arrangement of wires, gleaming in the artificial daylight. This building, too, was heavily guarded.

I had found what I sought—the power-house and the transmitting station. Much good it did me—now.

My warders turned sharply to the right. I glimpsed another concrete structure. A heavy steel door opened, then clanged shut, behind us. The fetid odor that means only one thing the world over, folded round me.

I sprawled on the steel floor of the cell into which I was thrust. A wave of utter fatigue engulfed me. I felt great weariness of body and despair of soul. I had failed in my mission. The fate of my country had been entrusted to me—and here I was in a steel-floored, steel-

walled prison cell. And that tunnel was rushing toward New York at three miles an hour; over seventy miles a day.

I think I slept from sheer exhaustion. But something startled me into awaking. The dim light filtering in from the tiny air-hole high up on one wall showed me that I was still alone. I lay, listening. There it was again, a wailing scream of agony that rose and fell and died away.

I heard a grating sound at the door, and it opened and shut. Rubinoff, the Ferret, had entered. "Comfortable, Captain Bolton?" he asked, and there was more than a hint of mockery in the velvety voice. In the hand with the twisted finger was his ray-tube. It pointed steadily at me.

I got to my feet. I was in no mood for trifling, for that scream had shaken me. "Cut the comedy, Rubinoff." I growled. "Kill me, and let's have done with it."

He raised a deprecating hand. "Oh, come now. There's really no absolute necessity for that. You can save yourself, very easily."

"What do you mean?"

"I can use you, if you're amenable to reason."

"I don't understand."

"You're the cleverest of the American Intelligence men. The rabble they give me are well-nigh useless. Cast your lot in with us, and in a week you'll have the riches of your greatest city to dip your hands in. It's easy. There is certain information we need. Give it to us. Then I'll get you back into your lines: we'll cook up a good tale for Sommers. You can resume your post and send us information only when it is of extreme importance. Come, now, be sensible."

At first blush this was an astounding proposal. But I knew my man. He needed to know something. Once he had extracted the knowledge he sought from me, I should be disposed of. He'd never let me get back into our lines with what I had found out. It might have been policy to play him—but what was the use?

"No, Rubinoff. You know I won't do it."

He sighed. "Just as I thought. Honor, country, and so on. Well, it's too bad. We should have made a wonderful team. However, you'll tell me what I want to know. What are the defenses within fifty miles of New York?"

I laughed derisively.

"You'll save yourself a lot of trouble if you tell me, Bolton. After all, death in the ray isn't so bad. Whiff—and you're gone. Don't force me to other measures." There was a grim threat in his voice. But I simply shook my head.

"Stubborn, like all the other Anglo-Saxons. Well, I've got something to show you." He raised his weapon and glanced at it. "Pretty little thing, this. Not the ordinary ray-tube. Only field officers have these. Look."

He pointed it at the wall from behind which that scream had come and pressed the trigger button. A tiny round hole appeared in the steel.

"Neat, isn't it? Utilizes the same ray you saw at work in the tunnel. The Zeta-ray we call it. Just think what that would do to human flesh." I said nothing.

"But that isn't what I had in mind. Just look through that hole."

I wanted to see what was on the other side, so I obeyed. The Thing that lay on the floor within—could it ever have been a man? I

whirled back to the Ferret in a fury, my fists clenched.

His infernal weapon was pointing straight at me. "Softly, Bolton, softly. You'd never get to me." I checked my spring, for he was right. "How'd you like that?" he purred.

"Some of your work, I suppose," I growled.

"The poor fool was fomenting a mutiny. We wanted to know the other plotters. He was stubborn. What would you? Necessity knows no law.... What are the defenses around New York?" He advanced menacingly.

No answer.

"Why be a fool? This ray hurts, I tell you, when it's properly applied. How would you like to be melted away, piece by little piece, till you're like that in there?"

I shrugged my shoulders, but kept silent.

"I tell you it hurts. You don't believe me? That in there is unconscious, seven-eighths dead. Listen."

He bored another hole in the steel, keeping his finger pressed on the

trigger. Again that heart-rending scream of agony rang out, tearing its way through me. My brain exploded in red rage. I leaped for the fiend, reckless of consequences. My fist drove into the leering face with all the force of my spring, with all the insane fury that his heartless cruelty had roused in me. Smack!—he catapulted across the floor and crashed into the wall! I was on him, my hand clutching for his tube. But there was no need. He was out—dead to the world. So sudden, so unexpected was my mad attack that even he had not had time to meet it.

I worked fast. In a minute I was in Rubinoff's uniform and had assumed his face. I was a little taller; no matter. But the finger—that would be noticed immediately. There was only one thing to do. I stuck my little finger through one of the holes he had made in the wall and twisted. Crack! Beads of agony stood out on my forehead, but the break was just right. By bending the other fingers slightly I could hold that one in just the position of his.

I picked up the ray-tube with my left hand. If I went out through the guard-house entrance I might meet other officers and be engaged in conversation. That might lead to discovery. My cell was on the side of the prison away from the road; I had noticed no buildings behind it: I'd chance it. Luck had been with me so far.

I carved out a hole in the wall pierced by the air-hole. It was like cutting through butter with a red hot knife. I stepped out.

There was no one about. I walked carelessly around the corner of the building, my hand, holding the tube, buried deep in my pocket. Not far away was the spherical structure I had spotted as the control room. I returned salutes. No one stopped to talk to me. Would the guard before that building require a pass-word?

I heard a shout behind me. My escape was discovered! At once I broke into a run and dashed past the guard, shouting: "Prisoner escaped! Came this way!" The man gaped. The shouting behind me grew louder. I heard the thud of many feet, running. I flung open the door, slammed it shut behind me, and turned the key.

A long row of giant electrode bulbs, as tall as a man, stretched before me—the source of the Zeta-ray. From here came the power that held back the waters, that bored the tunnel. A thunderous knocking shook the door. Someone at a huge switchboard turned toward me. Instantly my hand was out of my pocket, and the ray-tube leveled at the nearest bulb. I pressed the trigger. The bulb crashed. I swept down the line. Crash, crash, crash—they were all gone.

I whirled to meet the expected attack. It was wholly instinctive, for in a second we'd all be dead anyway. The waters would be down on us.

But the switchboard operator wasn't springing at me. Instead, he was tugging frantically, at a long lever that came down from above. There was a clang, and a steel shutter dropped across the door.

Then came a sound of crashing thunder that split my eardrums with its unbearable clamor. Then a mightier roar, as the mountain-high sea, held back so long by the invisible ray, poured its countless millions of tons of deep green water down into the man-made hole.

The impact was terrific. The yards-thick concrete shuddered and strained. The tremendous pressure forced trickles of water into the concrete shell: the roaring of the elements was indescribably deafening.

I was in pitch darkness, expecting every moment to be crushed under miles of ocean, when suddenly I was thrown from my feet. The floor was heaving drunkenly beneath me. In a moment I was slammed breathlessly against the shattered remnants of a huge vacuum tube. The jagged glass slashed my arms and face. I grabbed with my hand to steady myself; came in contact with an iron bar: clung like grim

death.

For a huge concrete sphere was whirling, tossing, gyrating in a welter of waters. The din was terrific. I rolled over and over, my arms almost pulled out of their sockets. Then, like a ton of brick, something collided with my head. There was a blinding flare in the black void, and I knew no more.

Slowly I came out of a hideous nightmare.

My head ached frightfully, and my wounds smarted and stung. It was dark, but a faint luminescence from somewhere enabled me to faintly discern my surroundings. I was wedged between a steel cable-bracket and the curving wall. Across the glass strewn floor a body lay, sprawling queerly.

The room was swaying in long undulations, or was it my head? I lay helpless, unable to move. A leg dangled uselessly. There was a bump, the sound of scraping. I heard confused sounds penetrating the walls, and the jar of steady impacts.

A half an hour passed so; maybe an hour: I had no means of telling. I was weak from pain and loss of blood, and slightly delirious.

A faint whirring noise, a sudden intensity in the illumination caused me to turn my head. The steel shutter was glowing red, then a shower of white sparks broke through. The heavy steel was melting away into incandescence. It crashed.

A group of men stumbled cautiously in. Now I was sure I was delirious. For the men wore khaki uniforms! Americans! Then, in my fever, I thought I heard a familiar voice cry out my name. It was Jim's voice. A roaring curtain of blackness shut down on me.

When I awoke again I was lying in a clean-sheeted hospital bed. Jim was sitting at the side, staring at me with gloomy eyes.

"Hello, Jim," I gasped weakly. "How did I get here?"

It was touching to see the instantaneous delight on his weathered countenance.

"So you came to at last, you old son-of-a-gun! Thought you were cashing in on us for a while. How did you get here? That's just what I want to know. How in hell did you get here?"

I was still pretty weak. "You pulled me out. What happened?"

"We're still trying to puzzle it out. Wouldn't be surprised if you had a

hand in it, you blighter. We were watching that damned cloud, worrying ourselves to death. What with the New York going out like a light, and not hearing anything from you, we were pretty low.

"Then, suddenly, there was a tremendous detonation. The whole cloud mass collapsed like a pricked bubble, and a bottomless pit yawned underneath the ocean—and, next thing we knew, our raft was yanked from under our feet, plunging and bucking in a swirl of waters.

"I just had time to grab hold of a stanchion, when we were sucked down into a whirlpool such as I never hope to see again. Round and round we spun, the tumbling waters mountain high above us. I was buried most of the time in crashing billows; my arms were almost pulled out of their sockets.

“I never expected to see daylight again," Jim went on. "My hold was being broken when at last we were spewed out somehow onto a sea that looked as if a thousand hurricanes were blowing down.

"I managed to get my men together—what was left of them. There were pitifully few. Later, I heard that our losses were enormous. Over seventy-five per cent of our rafts on a 50-mile front were lost, and the enemies' were almost totally wiped out.

"When the mile-high seas had toned down a bit, we saw a huge concrete ball tossing about like a cork. Couldn't make out what the devil it was. Then someone noticed a door. We got that open, but there was a steel one inside. We had to slice it with an oxy-hydrogen flame. Inside, snug as a bug in a rug, were you.

"Now come on, tell me how in blazes you got in there. If you don't spill it quick, I'll bust."

I sat up in my excitement. "Don't you see, they were afraid the ray might fail. They had those concrete balls stuck all around so that the officers at least could escape, if it did. Their best technical men must have been running the control room. They made sure to have that specially strong. And the wave caused by the water pouring into the hole swept me right over here, just where I started from."

Jim had both hands on my shoulders, was pushing me down. "Whoa, baby, whoa. That's just as clear as a darkness-rayed area. Count up to ten, and start all over again."

"'Ten-shun!"

The general himself strode into the room. And then I had to tell my story straight.

June 1931

88 The Man from 2071 Sewell Peaslee Wright

Out of the flow of time there appears to Commander John Hanson a man of mystery from the forgotten past.

Aproximate word count: 7,300

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Perhaps this story does not belong with my other tales of the Special Patrol Service. And yet, there is, or should be, a report somewhere in the musty archives of the Service, covering the incident.

Not accurately, and not in detail. Among a great mass of old records which I was browsing through the other day, I happened across that report; it occupied exactly three lines in the log-book of the *Ertak*:

"Just before departure, discovered stowaway, apparently demented, and ejected him."

For the hard-headed higher-ups of the Service, that was report

enough. Had I given the facts, they would have called me to the Base for a long-winded investigation. It would have taken weeks and weeks, filled with fussy questioning. Dozens of stoop-shouldered laboratory men would have prodded and snooped and asked for long, written accounts. In those days, keeping the log-book was writing enough for me and being grounded at Base for weeks would have been punishment.

Nothing would have been gained by a detailed report. The Service needed action rather than reports, anyway. But now that I am an old man, on the retired list, I have time to write; and it will be a particular pleasure to write this account, for it will go to prove that these much-honored scientists of ours, with all their tremendous appropriations and long-winded discussions, are not nearly so wonderful as they think they are. They are, and always have been, too much interested in abstract formulas, and not enough in their practical application. I have never had a great deal of use for them.

I had received orders to report to Earth, regarding a dull routine matter of reorganizing the emergency Base which had been established there. Earth, I might add, for the benefit of those of you who have forgotten your geography of the Universe, is not a large body, but its people furnish almost all of the officer personnel of the Special Patrol Service. Being a native of Earth, I received the

assignment with considerable pleasure, despite its dry and uninteresting nature.

It was a good sight to see old Earth, bundled up in her cottony clouds, growing larger and larger in the television disc. No matter how much you wander around the Universe, no matter how small and insignificant the world of your birth, there is a tie that cannot be denied. I have set my ships down upon many a strange and unknown world, with danger and adventure awaiting me, but there is, for me, no thrill which quite duplicates that of viewing again that particular little ball of mud from whence I sprang. I've said that before; I shall probably say it again. I am proud to claim Earth as my birth-place, small and out-of-the way as she is.

Our Base on Earth was adjacent to the city of Greater Denver, on the Pacific Coast. I could not help wondering, as we settled swiftly over the city, whether our historians and geologists and other scientists were really right in saying that Denver had at one period been far from the Pacific. It seemed impossible, as I gazed down on that blue, tranquil sea, that it had engulfed, hundreds of years ago, such a vast portion of North America. But I suppose the men of science know.

I need not go into the routine business that brought me to Earth. Suffice it to say that it was settled quickly, by the afternoon of the

second day: I am referring, of course, to Earth days, which are slightly less than half the length of an enaren of Universe time.

A number of my friends had come to meet me, visit with me during my brief stay on Earth; and, having finished my business with such dispatch, I decided to spend that evening with them, and leave the following morning. It was very late when my friends departed, and I strolled out with them to their mono-car, returning the salute of the *Ertak*'s lone sentry, who was pacing his post before the huge circular exit of the ship.

Bidding my friends farewell, I stood there for a moment under theheavens, brilliant with blue, cold stars, and watched the car sweep swiftly and soundlessly away towards the towering mass of the city. Then, with a little sigh, I turned back to the ship.

The *Ertak* lay lightly upon the earth, her polished sides gleaming in the light of the crescent moon. In the side toward me, the circular entrance gaped like a sleepy mouth; the sentry, knowing the eyes of his commander were upon him, strode back and forth with brisk, military precision. Slowly, still thinking of my friends, I made my way toward the ship.

I had taken but a few steps when the sentry's challenge rang out

sharply, "Halt! Who goes there?"

I glanced up in surprise. Shiro, the man on guard, had seen me leave, and he could have had no difficulty in recognizing me. But—the challenge had not been meant for me.

Between myself and the *Ertak* there stood a strange figure. An instant before, I would have sworn that there was no human in sight, save myself and the sentry; now this man stood not twenty feet away, swaying as though ill or terribly weary, barely able to lift his head and turn it toward the sentry.

"Friend," he gasped; "friend!" and I think he would have fallen to the ground if I had not clapped an arm around his shoulders and supported him.

"Just ... a moment," whispered the stranger. "I'm a bit faint.... I'll be all right...."

I stared down at the man, unable to reply. This was a nightmare; no less. I could feel the sentry staring, too.

The man was dressed in a style so ancient that I could not remember the period: Twenty-first Century, at least; perhaps earlier. And while

he spoke English, which is a language of Earth, he spoke it with a harsh and unpleasant accent that made his words difficult, almost impossible, to understand. Their meaning did not fully sink in until an instant after he had finished speaking.

"Shiro!" I said sharply. "Help me take this man inside. He's ill."

"Yes, sir!" The guard leaped to obey the order, and together we led him into the *Ertak*, and to my own stateroom. There was some mystery here, and I was eager to get at the root of it. The man with the ancient costume and the strange accent had not come to the spot where we had seen him by any means with which I was familiar; he had materialized out of the thin air. There was no other way to account for his presence.

He propped the stranger in my most comfortable chair, and I turned to the sentry. He was staring at our weird visitor with wondering, fearful eyes, and when I spoke he started as though stung by an electric shock.

"Very well," I said briskly. "That will be all. Resume your post immediately. And—Shiro!"

"Yes, sir?"

"It will not be necessary for you to make a report of this incident. I will attend to that. Understand?"

"Yes, sir!" And I think it is to the man's everlasting credit, and to the credit of the Service which had trained him, that he executed a snappy salute, did an about-face, and left the room without another glance at the man slumped down in my big easy chair.

With a feeling of cold, nervous apprehension such as I have seldom experienced in a rather varied and active life, I turned then to my visitor.

He had not moved, save to lift his head. He was staring at me, his eyes fixed in his chalky white face. They were dark, long eyes—abnormally long—and they glittered with a strange, uncanny light.

"You are feeling better?" I asked.

His thin, bloodless lips moved, but for a moment no sound came from them. He tried again.

"Water," he said.

I drew him a glass from the tank in the wall of my room. He downed it at a gulp, and passed the empty glass back to me.

"More," he whispered. He drank the second glass more slowly, his eyes darting swiftly, curiously, around the room. Then his brilliant, piercing glance fell upon my face.

"Tell me," he commanded sharply, "what year is this?"

I stared at him. It occurred to me that my friends might have conceived and executed an elaborate hoax—and then I dismissed the idea, instantly. There were no scientists among them who could make a man materialize out of nothingness.

"Are you in your right mind?" I asked slowly. "Your question strikes me as damnably odd, sir."

The man laughed wildly, and slowly straightened up in the chair. His long, bony fingers clasped and unclasped slowly, as though feeling were just returning to them.

"Your question," he replied in his odd, unfamiliar accent, "is not unnatural, under the circumstances. I assure you that I am of sound mind; of very sound mind." He smiled, rather a ghastly smile, and made a vague, slight gesture with one hand. "Will you be good enough to answer my question? What year is this?"

"Earth year, you mean?"

He stared at me, his eyes flickering.

"Yes," he said. "Earth year. There are other ways of ... figuring time now?"

"Certainly. Each inhabited world has its own system. There is a master system for the Universe. Who are you, what are you, that you should ask me a question the smallest child should know?"

"First," he insisted, "tell me what year this is, Earth reckoning."

I told him, and the light flickered up in his eyes again—a cruel, triumphant light.

"Thank you," he nodded; and then, slowly and softly, as though he spoke to himself, he added, "Less than half a century off. Less than a half a century! And they laughed at me. How—how I shall laugh at them, presently!"

"You choose to be mysterious, sir?" I asked impatiently.

"No. Presently you shall understand, and then you will forgive me, I know. I have come through an experience such as no man has ever

known before. If I am shaken, weak, surprising to you, it is because of that experience."

He paused for a moment, his long, powerful fingers gripping the arms of the chair.

"You see," he added, "I have come out of the past into the present. Or from the present into the future. It depends upon one's viewpoint. If I am distraught, then forgive me. A few minutes ago, I was Jacob Harbauer, in a little laboratory on the edge of a mountain park, near Denver; now I am a nameless being hurtled into the future, pausing here, many centuries from my own era. Do you wonder now that I am unnerved?"

"Do you mean," I said slowly, trying to understand what he had babbled forth, "that you have come out of the past? That you ... that you...." It was too monstrous to put into words.

"I mean," he replied, "that I was born in the year 2028. I am forty-three years old—or I was a few minutes ago. But,"—and his eyes flickered again with that strange, mad light—"I am a scientist! I have left my age behind me for a time; I have done what no other human being has ever done: I have gone centuries into the future!"

"I—I do not understand." Could he, after all, be a madman? "How can a man leave his own age and travel ahead to another?"

"Even in this age of yours they have not discovered that secret?" Harbauer exulted. "You travel the Universe, I gather, and yet your scientists have not yet learned to move in time? Listen! Let me explain to you how simple the theory is.

“I take it you are an intelligent man; your uniform and its insignia would seem to indicate a degree of rank. Am I correct?"

"I am John Hanson, Commander of the *Ertak*, of the Special Patrol Service," I informed him.

"Then you will be capable of grasping, in part at least, what I have to tell you. It is really not so complex. Time is a river, flowing steadily, powerful, at a fixed rate of speed. It sweeps the whole Universe along on its bosom at that same speed. That is my conception of it; is it clear to you?"

"I should think," I replied, "that the Universe is more like a great rock in the middle of your stream of time, that stands motionless while the minutes, the hours, and the days roll by."

"No! The Universe travels on the breast of the current of time. It leaves yesterday behind, and sweeps on towards to-morrow. It has always been so until I challenged this so-called immutable law. I said to myself, why should a man be a helpless stick upon the stream of time? Why need he be borne on this slow current at the same speed? Why cannot he do as a man in a boat, paddle backwards or forwards; back to a point already passed; ahead, faster than the current, to a point that, drifting, he would not reach so soon? In other words, why can he not slip back through time to yesterday; or ahead to to-morrow? And if to to-morrow, why not to next year, next century?

These are the questions I asked myself. Other men have asked themselves the same questions, I know; they were not new. But,"—Harbauer drew himself far forward in his chair, and leaned close to me, almost as though he prepared himself to spring—"no other man ever found the answer! That remained for me.

"I was not entirely correct, of course. I found that one could not go back in time. The current was against one. But to go ahead, with the current at one's back, was different. I spent six years on the problem, working day and night, handicapped by lack of funds, ridiculed by the press—Look!"

Harbauer reached inside his antiquated costume and drew forth a flat packet which he passed to me. I unfolded it curiously, my fingers clumsy with excitement.

I could hardly believe my eyes. The thing Harbauer had handed me was a folded fragment of newspaper, such as I had often seen in museums. I recognized the old-fashioned type, and the peculiar arrangement of the columns. But, instead of being yellow and brittle with age, and preserved in fragments behind sealed glass, this paper was fresh and white, and the ink was as black as the day it had been printed. What this man said, then, must be true! He must—

"I can understand your amazement," said Harbauer. "It had not occurred to me that a paper which, to me, was printed only yesterday, would seem so antique to you. But that must appear as remarkable to you as fresh papyrus, newly inscribed with the hieroglyphics of the ancient Egyptians, would seem to one of my own day and age. But read it; you will see how my world viewed my efforts!" There was a sharpness, a bitterness, in his voice that made me vaguely uneasy; even though he had solved the riddle of moving in time as men have always moved in space, my first conjecture that I had a madman to deal with might not be so far from the truth. Ridicule and persecution have unseated the reason of all too many men.

The type was unfamiliar to me, and the spelling was archaic, but I managed to stumble through the article. It read, as nearly as I can recall it, like this:

Harbauer Says Time

Is Like Great River

Jacob Harbauer, local inventor, in an exclusive interview, propounds the theory that man can move about in time exactly as a boat moves about on the surface of a swift-flowing river, save that he cannot go back into time, on account of the opposition of the current.

That is very fortunate, this writer feels; it would be a terrible thing for example, if some good-looking scamp from our present Twenty-first Century were to dive into the past and steal Cleopatra from Antony, or start an affair with Josephine and send Napoleon scurrying back from the front and let the Napoleonic wars go to pot. We'd have to have all our histories rewritten!

Harbauer is well-known in Denver as the eccentric inventor who, for the last five or six years, has occupied a lonely shack in the mountains, guarded by a high fence of barbed wire. He claims that he has now perfected equipment which will enable him to project

himself forward in time, and expects to make the experiment in the very near future.

This writer was permitted to view the equipment which Harbauer says will shoot him into the future. The apparatus is housed in a low, barn-like building in the rear of his shack.

Along one side of the room is a veritable bank of electrical apparatus with innumerable controls, many huge tubes of unfamiliar shape and appearance, a mighty generator of some kind and an intricate maze of gleaming copper bus-bar.

In the center of the room is a circle of metal, about a foot in thickness, insulated from the flooring by four truncated cones of fluted glass. This disc is composed of two unfamiliar metals, arranged in concentric circles.

Above this disc, at a height of about eight feet, is suspended a sort of grid, composed of extremely fine silvery wires, supported on a frame-work of black insulating material.

Asked for a demonstration of his apparatus, Harbauer finally consented to perform an experiment with a dog—a white, short-haired mongrel that, Harbauer informed us, he kept to warn him of

approaching strangers.

He bound the dog's legs together securely, and placed the struggling animal in the center of the heavy metal disc. Then the inventor hurried to the central control panel and manipulated several switches, which caused a number of things to happen almost at once.

The big generator started with a growl, and settled immediately into a deep hum; a whole row of tubes glowed with a purplish brilliancy. There was a crackling sound in the air, and the grid above the disc seemed to become incandescent, although it gave forth no apparent heat. From the rim of the metal disc, thin blue streamers of electric flame shot up toward the grid, and the little white dog began to whine nervously.

"Now watch!" shouted Harbauer. He closed another switch, and the space between the disc and the grid became a cylinder of livid light, for a period of perhaps two seconds. Then Harbauer pulled all the switches, and pointed triumphantly to the disc. It was empty.

We looked around the room for the dog, but he was not visible anywhere.

"I have sent him nearly a century into the future," said Harbauer.

"We will let him stay there a moment, and then bring him back."

"You mean to say," we asked, "that the pup is now roaming around somewhere in the Twenty-second Century?" Harbauer said he meant just that, and added that he would now bring the dog back to the present time. The switches were closed again, but this time it was the metal plate that seemed incandescent, and the grid above that shot out the streaks of thin blue flame. As he closed the last switch, the cylinder of light appeared again, and when the switches were opened, there was the dog in the center of the disc, howling and struggling against his bonds.

"Look!" cried Harbauer. "He's been attacked by another dog, or some other animal, while in the future. See the blood on his shoulders?"

We ventured the humble opinion that the dog had scratched or bit himself in struggling to free himself from the cords with which Harbauer had bound him, and the inventor flew into a terrible rage, cursing and waving his arms as though demented. Feeling that discretion was the better part of valor, we beat a hasty retreat, pausing at the barbed-wire gate only long enough to ask Mr. Harbauer if he would be good enough, sometime when he had a few minutes of leisure, to dash into next week and bring back some stock

market reports to aid us in our investment efforts.

Under the circumstances, we did not wait for a response, but we presume we are persona non grata at the Harbauer establishment from this time on.

All in all, we are not sorry.

I folded the paper and passed it back to him; some of the allusions I did not understand, but the general tone of the article was very clear indeed.

“You see?" said Harbauer, his voice grating with anger. "I tried to be courteous to that man; to give him a simple, convincing demonstration of the greatest scientific achievement in centuries. And the fool returned to write this: to hold me up to ridicule, to paint me as a crack-brained, wild-eyed fanatic."

"It's hard for the layman to conceive of a great scientific achievement," I said soothingly. "All great inventions and inventors have been laughed at by the populace at large."

"True. True." Harbauer nodded his head solemnly. "But just the same —" He broke off suddenly, and forced a smile. I found myself

wishing that he had completed that broken sentence, however; I felt that he had almost revealed something that would have been most enlightening.

"But enough of that fool and his babblings," he continued. "I am here as living proof that my experiment is a success, and I have a tremendous curiosity about the world in which I find myself. This, I take it, is a ship for navigating space?"

"Right! The *Ertak*, of the Special Patrol Service. Would you care to look around a bit?"

"I would, indeed." There was a tremendous eagerness in the man's voice.

"You're not too tired?"

"No; I am quite recovered from my experience." Harbauer leaped to his feet, those abnormally long, slitted eyes of his glowing. "I am a scientist, and I am most curious to see what my fellows have created since—since my own era."

I picked up my dressing gown and tossed it to him.

"Slip this on, then, to cover your clothing. You would be an object of

too much curiosity to those men who are on duty," I suggested.

I was taller than he, and the garment came within a few inches of the floor. He knotted the cincture around his middle and thrust his hands into the pockets, turning to me for approval. I nodded, and motioned for him to precede me through the door.

As an officer of the Special Patrol Service, it has often been my duty to show parties and individuals through my ship. Most of these parties are composed of females, who have only exclamations to make instead of intelligent comment, and who possess an unbounded capacity for asking utterly asinine questions. It was, therefore, a real pleasure to show Harbauer through the ship.

He was a keen, eager listener. When he asked a question, and he asked many of them, he showed an amazing grasp of the principles involved. My knowledge of our equipment was, of course, only practical, save for the rudimentary theoretical knowledge that everyone has of present-day inventions and devices.

The ethon tubes which lighted the ship, interested him but little. The atomic generators, the gravity pads, their generators, and the disintegrator-ray, however, he delved into with that frenzied ardor of which only a scientist, I believe, is capable.

Questions poured out of him, and I answered them as best I could: sometimes completely, and satisfactorily, so that he nodded and said, "I see! I see!" and sometimes so poorly that he frowned, and cross-questioned me insistently until he obtained the desired information.

In the big, sound-proof navigating room, I explained the operation of the numerous instruments, including the two three-dimensional charts, actuated by super-radio reflexes, the television disc, the attraction meter, the surface-temperature gauge and the complex control system.

"Forward," I added, "is the operating room. You can see it through these glass partitions. The navigating officer in command relays his orders to men in the operating room, who attend to the actual execution of those orders."

"Just as a pilot, or the navigating officer of a ship of my day gives his orders to the quartermaster at the wheel," nodded Harbauer, and began firing questions at me again, going over the ground we had covered, to check up on his information. I was amazed at the uncanny accuracy with which he had grasped such a great mass of technical detail. It had taken me years of study to pick up what he had taken from me, and apparently retained intact, in something more than an hour, Earth time.

I glanced at the Earth-time clock on the wall of the navigating room as he triumphantly finished his questioning. Less than an hour remained before the time set for our return trip.

"I'm sorry," I commented, "to be an ungracious host, but I am wondering what your plans may be? You see, we are due to start in less than an hour, and—"

"A passenger would be in your way?" Harbauer smiled as he uttered the words, but there was a gleam in his long eyes that rather startled me, and I wondered if I only imagined the steeliness of his voice. "Don't let that worry you, sir."

"It's not worrying me," I replied, watching him closely. "I have enjoyed a very remarkable, a very pleasant experience. If you should care to remain aboard the *Ertak*, I should like exceedingly to have you accompany us to our Base, where I could place you in touch with other laboratory men, with whom you would have much in common."

Harbauer threw back his head and laughed—not pleasantly.

"Thanks!" he said. "But I have no time for that. They could give me no knowledge that I need, now; you have told me and showed me

enough. I understand how you have released atomic energy; it is a matter so simple that a child should have guessed it, and man has wondered about it for centuries, knowing that the power was there, but lacking a key to unfetter it. And now I have that key!"

"True. But perhaps our scientists would like, in exchange, the secret of moving forward in time," I suggested, reasonably enough.

"What do I care about them?" snapped Harbauer. He loosened the cord of the robe with a quick, impatient gesture, as though it confined him too tightly, and threw the garment from him.

Then, suddenly, he took a quick stride toward me, and thrust out his ugly head.

"I know enough now to give me power over all my world," he cried. "Haven't you guessed the reason for my interest in your engines of destruction? I came down the centuries ahead of my generation so that I might come back with power in my hand; power to wipe out the fools who have made a mock of me. And I have that power—here!" He tapped his forehead dramatically with his left hand.

"I will bring a new regime to my era!" he continued, fairly shouting now. "I will be what many men have tried to be, and what no man

has ever been—master of the world! Absolute, unquestioned, supreme master!" He paused, his eyes glaring into mine—and I knew from the light that shone behind those long, narrow slits, that I was dealing with a madman.

"True; you will," I said gently, moving carelessly toward the microphone. With that in my hand, a slight pressure on the General Attention signal, and I would have the whole crew of the *Ertak* here in a moment. But I had explained the workings of the navigating room's equipment only too well.

"Stop!" snarled Harbauer, and his right hand flashed up. "See this? Perhaps you don't know what it is; I'll tell you. It's an automatic pistol—not so efficient as your disintegrator-ray, but deadly enough. There is certain death for eight men in my hand. Understand?"

"Perfectly." What an utter fool I had been! I was not armed, and I knew that Harbauer spoke the truth. I had often seen weapons similar to the one he held in the military museums. They are still there, if you are curious—rusty and broken, but not unlike our present atomic pistols in general appearance. They propelled the bullet by the explosion of a sort of powder; inefficient, of course, but, as he had said, deadly enough for the purpose.

“Good! You are a good sort Hanson, but don't take any chances. I'm not going to, I promise you. You see,"—and he laughed again, the light in his long eyes dancing with evil—"I'm not likely to be punished for a few killings committed centuries after I'm dead. I have never killed a man, but I won't hesitate to do so now, if one—or more—should get in my way."

"But why," I asked soothingly, "should you wish to kill anyone? You have what you came for, you say; why not depart in peace?"

He smiled crookedly, and his eyes narrowed with cunning.

"You approve of my little plan to dominate the world?" he asked softly, his eyes searching my face.

"No," I said boldly, refusing to lie to him. "I do not, and you know it."

"Very true." He pulled out his watch with his left hand, and held it before his eyes so that he could observe the time without losing sight of me for even an instant. "I doubted that I could secure your willing cooperation; therefore, I am commanding it.

"You see, there are certain instruments and pieces of equipment that

I should like to take back to my laboratory with me. Perhaps I would be able to reproduce them without models, but with the models my task will be much easier.

"The question remaining is a simple one: will you give the proper orders to have this equipment removed to the spot where you first saw me, or shall I be obliged to return to my own era without this equipment—leaving behind me a dead commander of the Special Patrol Service, and any other who may try to stop me?"

I tried to keep cool under the lash of his mocking voice. I have never been adept at holding my temper when I should, but somehow I managed it this time. Frowning, I kept him waiting for a reply, utilizing the time to do what was perhaps the hardest, fastest thinking of my life.

There wasn't a particle of doubt in my mind regarding his ability to make good his threat, nor his readiness to do so. I caught the faint glimmering of an idea and fenced with it eagerly.

"How are you going to go back to your own period—your own era?" I asked him. "You told me, I believe, that it was impossible to move backward in time."

"That's not answering my question," he said, leering. "Don't think you're fooling me! But I'll tell you, just the same. I can go back to my own era: that is, back to my own actual existence. I shall return just two hours after I leave; I could not go back farther than that, and it's not necessary that I do so. I can go back only because I came from that present; I am not really of this future at all. I go back from whence I came."

"But," I objected, thinking of something I had read in the clipping he had showed me, "you're not going back to your own era. You cannot. If you returned, you would put your project into execution, and history does not record that activity." I saw from the sudden narrowing of his abnormally long eyes that I had caught his interest, and I pressed my advantage hastily. "Remember that all the history of your time is written, Harbauer. It is in the books of Earth's history, with which every child of this age, into which you have thrust yourself, is familiar. And those histories do not record the domination of the world by yourself. So—you are confronted by an impossibility!"

My reasoning, now, sounds specious, and yet it was a line of thought which could not be waved aside. I saw Harbauer's black brows knit together, and mounting anger darken his face. I do not know, but I believe I was never nearer death than I was at that instant.

"Fool!" he cried. "Idiot! Imbecile! Do you think you can confuse me, turn me from my purpose, with words? Do you? Do you believe me to be a child, or a weakling? I tell you, I have planned this thing to the last detail. If I had not found what I sought on this first trip, I would have taken another, a dozen, a score, until I found the information I sought. The last six years of my life I have worked day and night to this end; your histories and your words—"

My plan had worked. The man was beside himself with insane anger. And in his rage he forgot, for an instant, that he was my captor.

Taking a desperate chance, I launched myself at his legs. His weapon roared over my head, just as I struck. I felt the hot gas from the thing beat against my neck; I caught the reeking scent of the smoke. Then we were both on the floor, and locked in a mad embrace.

Harbauer was a smaller man than myself, but he had the amazing strength of a Zenian. He fought viciously, using every ounce of his strength against me, striving to bring his weapon into use, hammering my head upon the floor, racking my body mercilessly, grunting, cursing, mumbling constantly as he did so.

But I was in better trim than Harbauer. I have never seen a laboratory man who could stand the strain of prolonged physical

exertion. Bending over test-tubes and meters is no life for a man. At grips with him, I was in my own element, and he was out of his. I let him wear himself out, exerting myself as little as possible, confining my efforts to keeping his weapon where he could not use it.

I felt him weakening at last. His breath was coming in great sobs, and his long eyes started from their sockets with the strained effort he was putting forth. And then, with a single mighty effort, I knocked the pistol from his hand, so that it slid across the floor and brought up with a crash against a wall of the room.

"Now!" I said, and turned on him.

He knew, at that moment when I put forth my strength, that I had been playing with him. I read the shock of sudden fear in his eyes. My right arm went about him in a deadly hold; I had him in a grip that paralyzed him. Grimly, I jerked him to his feet, and he stood there trembling with weakness, his shoulders heaving as his breath came and went between his teeth.

"You realize, of course, that you're not going back?" I said quietly.

"Back?" Half dazed, he stared at me through the quivering lids of his peculiar eyes. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that you're not going back to your own era. You have come to us, uninvited, and—you're going to stay here."

"No!" he shouted, and struggled so desperately to free himself that I was hard put to it to hold him, without tightening my grip sufficiently to dislocate his shoulders. "You wouldn't do that! I must return; I must prove to them—"

"That's exactly what must not happen, and what shall not happen," I interrupted. "And what will not happen. You are in a strange predicament, Harbauer; it is already written that you do not return. Can't you see that, man? If it were to be that you left this age and returned to your own, you would make known your discovery. History would record it. And history does not record it. You are struggling, not against me, but against—against a fate that has been sealed all these centuries."

When I had finished, he stared at me as though hypnotized, motionless and limp in my grasp. Then, suddenly, he began to shake and I saw such depths of terror and horror in his eyes as I hope never to see again.

Mechanically, he glanced down at his watch, lifting his wrist into his line of vision as slowly and ponderously as though it bore a great

weight.

"Two ... two minutes," he whispered huskily. "Then the automatic switch will close, back in my laboratory. If I am not standing where ... where you found me ... between the disc and the grid of my time machine, where the reversed energy can reach me, to ... to take me back ... God!"

He sagged in my arms and dropped to his knees, sobbing.

"And yet ... what you say is true. It is already written that I did not return." His sobs cut harshly through the silence of the room. Pitying his despair, I reached down to give him a sympathetic pat on the shoulder. It is a terrible thing to see a man break down as Harbauer had done.

As he felt my grip on him relax, he suddenly shot his fist into the pit of my stomach, and leaped to his feet. Groaning, I doubled up, weak and nerveless, for the instant, from the vicious, unexpected blow.

"Ah!" shrieked Harbauer. "You soft-hearted fool!" He struck me in the face, sending me crashing to the floor, and snatched up his pistol.

"I'm going, now," he shouted. "Going! What do I care for your

records and your histories? They are not yet written; if they were I'd change them." He bent over me and snatched from my hand the ring of keys, one of which I had used to unlock the door of the navigating room. I tried to grip him around the legs, but he tore himself loose, laughing insanely in a high-pitched, cackling sound that seemed hardly human.

"Farewell!" he called mockingly from the doorway. Then the door slammed, and as I staggered to my feet, I heard the lock click.

I must have acted then by instinct or inspiration. There was no time to think. It would take him not more than three or four seconds to make his way to the exit, stroll by the guard to the spot where we had found him, and—disappear. By the time I could arouse the crew, and have my orders executed, his time would be up, and—unless the whole affair were some terrible nightmare—he would go hurtling back through time to his own era, armed with a devastating knowledge.

There was only one possible means of preventing his escape in time. I ran across the room to the emergency operating controls, cut in the atomic generators with one hand and pulled the Vertical-Ascent lever to Full Power.

There was a sudden shriek of air, and my legs almost thrust themselves through my body. Quickly, I pushed the lever back until, with my eye on the altimeter, I held the *Ertak* at her attained height —something over a mile, as I recall it. Then I pressed the General Attention signal, and snatched up the microphone.

Less than a minute later Correy and Hendricks, fellow officers, were in the room and besieging me with solicitous questions.

It had been my idea, of course, to keep Harbauer from leaving the ship, but it was not so destined.

Shiro, the sentry on duty outside the *Ertak*, was the only witness to Harbauer's fate.

"I was walking my post, sir," he reported, "watching the sun come up, when suddenly I heard the sound of running feet inside the ship. I turned towards the entrance and drew my pistol, to be in readiness. I saw the stranger we had taken into the ship appear at the exit, which, as you know, was open.

"Just as I opened my mouth to command him to halt, the *Ertak* shot up from the ground at terrific speed. The stranger had been about to leap upon me; indeed, he had discharged some sort of weapon at me,

for I heard a crash of sound, and a missile of some kind, as you know, passed through my left arm.

"As the ship left the ground, he tried to draw back, but he was off balance, and the inertia of his body momentarily incapacitated him, I think. He slipped, clutched at the gangway across the threads which seal the exit, and then, at a height I estimate to be around five hundred feet, he fell. The *Ertak* shot on up until it was lost to sight, and the stranger crashed to the ground a few feet from where I was standing—on almost exactly the spot where we first saw him, sir.

And now, sir, comes the part I guess you'll find hard to believe. When he struck the ground, he was smashed flat; he died instantly. I started to run toward him, and then—and then I stopped. My eyes had not left the spot for a moment, sir, but he—his body, that is—suddenly disappeared. That's the truth, sir, for I saw it with my own eyes. There wasn't a sign of him left."

"I see," I replied. I believe that I did. We had gone straight up, and his body, by no great coincidence, had fallen upon the spot close to the exit of the *Ertak* where we had first found him. And his machine, in operation, had brought him, or rather, his mangled body, back to his own age. "You have not mentioned this affair to anyone, Shiro?"

"No, sir. It wasn't anything you'd be likely to tell: nobody would believe you. I went at once to have my arm attended to, and then reported here according to orders."

"Very good, Shiro. Keep the entire affair to yourself. I will make all the necessary reports. That is an order—understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then that will be all. Take good care of your arm."

He saluted with his good hand and left me.

Later in the day I wrote in the log-book of the *Ertak* the report I mentioned at the beginning of this tale:

"Just before departure, discovered stowaway, apparently demented, and ejected him."

That was a perfectly truthful statement, and it served its purpose. I have given the whole story in detail just to prove what I have so often contended: that these owlish laboratory men whom this age reveres so much are not nearly so wise and omnipotent as they think they are.

I am quite sure that they would have discredited, or attempted to discredit, my story, had I told it at the time. They would have resented the idea that someone so much ahead of them had discovered a principle that still baffles this age of ours, and I would have had no evidence to present.

Perhaps even now the story will be discredited; if so, I do not care. I am much too old, and too near the portals of that impenetrable mystery, in the shadow of which I have stood so many times, to concern myself with what others may think or say.

I know that what I have related here is the truth, and in my mind I have a vivid and rather pitiful picture of a mangled body, bloody and alone, in the barn-like structure the ancient paper had described; a body, broken and motionless, lying athwart the striated metal disc, like a sacrificial victim—a victim and a sacrifice of science.

There have been many such.

89 Manape the Mighty by Arthur Josephus Burks

High in jungle treetops swings young Bentley—his human brain imprisoned in a mighty ape.

Aproximate word count: 27,500

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Chapter I: Castaway

Lee Bentley never knew how many others, if any, lived on after the Bengal Queen struck the hidden reef and sank like a stone. He had only a hazy memory of the catastrophe, and recalled that when she had struck and the alarm had gone rocketing through the great passenger boat—though no alarm was really necessary because she went to pieces so fast—that he had leaped far over the rail and swam straight out, fast, in order to escape being dragged down by the suction of the sinking liner.

The screaming of frightened women and children would ring in his ears until the day the grave closed over him—screaming that was

made all the more terrible by the crashing roar of the raging black seas which came out of the darkness to make the affair all the more hideous, and to bear down beneath them into the sea the feeble struggling ones who had no chance for their lives. Lifeboats had been smashed in their davits.

Bentley swam straight away after he was satisfied at last that he could do nothing more. He had helped men and women reach bits of wreckage until he could scarcely any longer keep his wearied arms to the task of keeping his own head above water. He knew even as he helped the white-faced ones that few of them would ever live through it, but he was doing the best he knew—a man's job.

When absolutely sure that he could do nothing further, when he could no longer hear cries of distress, or discover struggling forms in the sea which he might aid, he had turned his back on the graveyard of the Bengal Queen and had struck for shore. He remembered the direction, for before sunset that evening, in company with several ship's under officers, he had studied the navigation charts upon which each day's run of the Bengal Queen was shown. Ahead of him now was the coast of Africa, though what part of it he knew but in the haziest way. He might not guess within a hundred miles.

One thing only he remembered exactly. The second officer had said,

apropos of nothing in particular:

"This wouldn't be a happy place to be shipwrecked. This section of the coast is a regular hangout of the great anthropoid apes. You know, those babies that can pick a man apart as a man would pluck the legs off a fly."

Bentley had merely grinned. The second officer's remarks had sounded to him as though the fellow had been reading more than his fair share of lurid fiction of the South African jungles.

However, apes or no apes, the shore would look good to Lee Bentley now. And he fully intended making it. He knew he could swim for hours if it became necessary, and he refused to think of the possibility of sharks. If one got him, well, that was one of the chances one had to take when one was shipwrecked against one's will.

So he alternately swam toward where he expected to find land, and floated on his back to rest.

"A swell ending to a great life, if I don't make it," he told himself. "I wonder how the old man will take it when the world reads that the Bengal Queen went down with all on board? He'll be relieved,

maybe, for he was about ready to wash his hands of me if I can read signs at all."

It might be said that Bentley was his own worst critic, for he really was not a bad sort of a fellow. He was a good American, over-educated perhaps, with a yen to delve into forbidden places usually avoided by his own kind, and of digging into books which were better left with the pages unturned. There were strange ruins in Africa, he knew. He had gathered a weird fund of information from such books as he could unearth relative to ancient ruins and vanished races, to the lurid accounts of strange deaths of the various scientists who had taken active part in the opening of the tomb of Tutankhamen.

There were queer things in the heart of darkest Africa, and such things intrigued him. He could take whatever chances with his life he saw fit, for his only relative was a father, and he had never attached himself to any woman nor permitted any woman to attach herself to him—because he could never be sure that her interest might not primarily be in his bank account.

"If, as, and when," he told himself as he rode the waves through the night, "I reach the coast I'll be tossed into black Africa in a way I was not expecting. Anyway, if I live through, I can at least go about

my work without the governor interfering. I only hope it won't be hard on the old fellow. He isn't a bad egg at all, and I guess I have given him plenty to think about and worry over."

He turned on his stomach again and struck out. He had managed to rid himself of all of his clothing except his underwear. They had only weighed him down, and he recalled, with a wry grin, that Africa as a whole went in but little for the latest in men's sport wear.

It must have been a good hour since he had lost the Bengal Queen back there in the raging deep, that he heard the faint call through the murk.

"Help, for God's sake!"

He listened for a repetition of the call, minded to believe that his ears had tricked him. He fancied it had been a woman's voice, but no woman could have lived so long in those raging seas, in which any moment Bentley himself expected to be overwhelmed. For himself he regarded death more or less philosophically, but a woman out there, crying for help, was a different matter entirely. It tore at his heartstrings, mostly because he realized his inability to be of material assistance.

He was sure that he had been mistaken about the cry, when it came again.

"For God's sake, help!"

It came from his left and this time it was unmistakable, piteous and unnerving. Lee Bentley had the horrible fear that he would never reach her in time to help—though what help he could give, when he could barely manage to keep himself afloat, he could not forsee.

He was swimming down the side of a monster wave. He could see something white in the trough, and he struggled manfully to make headway, while the angry waters tossed him about like a bit of cork and seemed bent on defeating his most furious efforts. He saw the bit of white ride high on the next wave, pass over it and vanish. He dived straight through the wave as it towered over him. He came up, gasping, his hands all but clutching at a pair of hands that reached out of the waters and grasped with a last desperate effort at the sky.

Ahead of the hands was a broken piece of oar. Those hands had just despairingly relinquished their grip on the one chance of safety, if any chance there could possibly be in that mad midnight waste.

He pulled on the wrists and a white face came to view. Wild, staring

eyes looked into his. Black hair flowed back from a face whose lips were blue and thin.

"Take it easy," he counseled. "Turn on your back and rest while I see if I can get back your life-boat."

He captured the oar, and found it practically useless to sustain any appreciable weight, but he clung to it because it was at least better than nothing at all. It had held the girl afloat for over an hour and might be made to serve again somehow. With his left hand under the woman's head and his right grasping the oar he turned on his back to regain his breath. He was deep in the water because the woman was now almost on top of him; but her face was above water. He knew instinctively that she had fainted, and he was a little glad. If she were the usual hysterical woman her fighting would drown them both. As a dead weight she was easier to handle.

They drifted on, and hope began to mount high in the heart of Lee Bentley—the hope that they might yet reach land. When, hours later, he could hear the roaring of breakers he was sure of it—if the breakers could be passed in safety. After that their fate was in the lap of the gods.

The girl too must have heard, for she turned at last in Bentley's arms

and began to swim for herself. She was a strong swimmer and the period during which she had been out of things had revived her amazingly. She even managed a smile as she swam beside Bentley into the creamy breakers behind which they could make out the blackness of shore.

They were so close together that at times their hands touched as they swam, and could make themselves heard by dint of shouting, though they both husbanded their strength and their breathing for swimming.

"I'm not dressed for company," he told her. "I left my tuxedo aboard the Bengal Queen!"

It was then that her lips twisted into a smile.

"I wouldn't even allow my maid into my stateroom if I were dressed as I am at the moment," she answered strongly, "but we're both grown up I think, and there are times when conventions go by the board. We'll pretend it doesn't matter!"

Then mutually helping each other they fought through the breakers into the calmer water behind, and managed at last to stand in water hip deep, with the undertow dragging at their limbs. They looked at

each other and clasped hands without a word. They strode to the sandy beach beyond which the jungle reached away to some invisible horizon, and continued on until they were at last beyond the reach of the waves.

They did not look at each other again, though Bentley did notice that her garb was as scanty almost as his own, consisting mostly of a slip which the water had pasted fast against her flesh. Beyond noting that she seemed to be young, Bentley did not intrude. Nor did he think of the future. It was enough for the moment that they had escaped the might of angry Neptune, god of the seas.

They dropped to the sands side by side, and the sands were warm. That the jungle behind them might be alive with wild beasts they did not pause to consider. Bentley had gazed at the jungle a moment before dropping down.

He had noticed but one thing—a moving light somewhere among the tangled mass, a light as of a monster firefly erratically darting through the deeper gloom.

The girl—he had noted she was as much girl as woman—dropped to the sand and stretched herself out. Bentley looked about him for a moment, just now realizing what he had been through. Then he

dropped down beside the girl, and put one arm over her protectively, an instinctive movement. The two were alone in an alien world, and even this slight contact gave Bentley a feeling of companionship he found at the time peculiarly appealing.

The girl was in a drugged sort of sleep, but she stirred at the touch of his arm, and her hand came up so that her fingertips touched his cheek.

He slept heavily, while outside on the raging deep the storm swept on along the coast, bearing with it the secret of the rest of those who only last night had looked forward to a pleasant voyage aboard the Bengal Queen.

The last thought in Bentley's mind was of that flickering light he had seen. It was not important, but memory of it clung, and followed him into his sleep with his dreams—in which he seemed to be following a darting, erratic light through a jungle without end.

He wakened with the sun burning his face and torso, and turned on his stomach with a groan. The heat ate into his back unbearably and he finally sat up, rubbed his eyes and stared out to sea. Then it all came back and he looked about him for the girl. She had disappeared.

He rose to his feet and shouted.

An answering cry came back to him, and after a moment the girl appeared around a bend in a shoreline where she had been masked by a wall of the jungle and came toward him. She was carrying something in her hands. When she stood at last before him he noted that she carried a bundle of cloth that was dripping wet.

"We need something to cover us," she said simply. "I was tempted to garb myself, but I did not wish to seem like a simpering prudish female, which I'm not at all. So I brought my findings here so that we could get together and fix up something to protect us from the sun."

"You're a sensible woman," said Bentley. "I've never understood why people should be so sensitive about their bodies. Mine isn't bad and yours, if you'll pardon me, is superb. That's not a compliment, just a statement of fact—which will help us to understand each other better. I've a hunch we're going to be some time in each other's company and we may as well know things about each other. My name's Lee Bentley."

"Mine is Ellen Estabrook."

Solemnly they shook hands. And their hands clung convulsively, for as though their handshake had been a signal there came a strange sound from the jungle behind them.

A burst of laughter that was plainly human—and another sound which caused the short hair at the base of Bentley's skull to rise, shift oddly, and settle back again.

The sound was like the beating of a skin-tight drumhead by the fists of a jungle savage. But if such it was the drum was a mighty drum, and the savage was a giant, for the sound went rolling through the jungle like an invisible tidal wave of sound.

Both the laughter and the drumming ceased as suddenly as they had sounded.

The man and woman laughed jerkily, dropped to the sand side by side and considered the necessity of clothes.

Chapter 2: Into the Jungle

They had to smile together at the results achieved with the bedraggled bits of cloth. Bentley suspected that they had been taken from bodies washed ashore as gruesome reminders of the catastrophe which had befallen the Bengal Queen, and because he did suspect this he did not ask questions that might cause Ellen to remember any longer than was necessary. Not that he doubted her courage, for she had proved that sufficiently; and she had proved that she was sensible, with none of the notions of the proprieties which would have made any other girl of Bentley's acquaintance a nuisance.

Their next concern was food, which they must find in the jungle, or from other wreckage cast ashore from the Bengal Queen. Now, hand in hand—which seemed natural in the circumstances—they began to walk along the shore, heading into the north by mutual consent.

As they walked Bentley kept pondering on that strange laughter he had heard and on the sound of savage drumming. The laughter puzzled him. If there were anyone in the jungle back of them, why had he or they failed to challenge them?

As for the drumming sound—Bentley remembered what the second

officer had said about this section of the coast. It was a bit of jungle inhabited by the great apes in large numbers. So, that drumming had been a challenge, the man-ape's manner of mocking an enemy by beating himself on his barrel chest with his huge fists. But that the ape had not been challenging Bentley and the girl Bentley felt quite sure, as the brute would certainly have shown himself in that case.

They trudged on through the sand, while the sun beat down unmercifully on their uncovered heads. Ellen Estabrook strode along at Bentley's side without complaint.

After perhaps an hour of this unbearable effort, when both felt as though the sun had sucked them dry of perspiration, they encountered a rough footpath leading into the jungle. The path suggested human habitation somewhere near. The inhabitants might be hostile natives, even cannibals perhaps, but in this unknown land they would have to take a chance on that.

With a sigh of relief, and refusing to look ahead too far, or try to guess what lay in wait for them in the black mystery of the jungle, they turned into the footpath. The jungle was fetid and sweaty, but even this was a relief from the intolerable sun which could not reach them here because the jungle had closed its leafy arms over the trail instantly. One could not tell from the path whether it had been made

by natives or by whites, for it was packed hard. It led straight away from the shoreline.

"We'll have to keep a sharp lookout for possible poisoned spring darts, Ellen," said Bentley.

"I'm not afraid, Lee," she answered stoutly. "Fate wouldn't allow us to come through what we have only to end things with poisoned darts. It just couldn't happen that way!"

Thus simply they addressed each other. It seemed as though years had been squeezed into a matter of hours. They knew each other as well as they would, in other circumstances, have known each other after a year of constant association. Here barriers of conventions were razed as simply and naturally as among children.

They had pressed well into the gloom of the jungle when the first sound came.

Not the laughter they had heard before, but the drumming. It was ahead and somewhat to the left, and as they stopped without speaking they could distinctly hear the threshing of a huge body through the underbrush. The sound seemed to be approaching and for a minute or so they listened. Then the sound was repeated off to

the right, a trifle further away.

"Can you climb, Ellen?" asked Bentley simply. "This section is filled with anthropoid apes, according to the second officer of the Bengal Queen. We may have to take to the trees."

"I can climb," she said, "but from what I've studied of the habits of these brutes they do a great deal of bluffing before they actually charge, and may not molest us at all if we pay no attention."

Bentley felt almost nude because he had no weapons save his own fists. And he would not have admitted even to himself how deeply he was concerned over the girl. As far as he knew, this section might be entirely uninhabited. It might be given over entirely to the anthropoids. In this case he shuddered to think of what might happen to Ellen Estabrook if he were slain.

He quickened his pace until Ellen kept stride with him with difficulty. The object uppermost in Bentley's mind was to get as far away as possible from the ominous drumbeats.

They rounded a bend in the trail and stopped stock-still.

Within fifty yards of them, blocking the trail, was a brute whose

great size sent a thrill of horror through Bentley. It towered to the height of a big man, and must have weighed in the neighborhood of four hundred pounds. It was larger by far than any bull ape Bentley had seen in captivity.

It had been waiting for them, silently, with almost human cunning; but now that it was discovered the shaggy creature rose to his hind legs and screamed a challenge, at the same time striking his chest with blows of his hairy fists which rolled in a dull booming of sound through the jungle. At the same time the creature moved forward.

Bentley whirled to run, his hand clasping tighter the hand of Ellen Estabrook. But they had not retreated ten steps down the pathway when their way was blocked by another of the great shaggy brutes. And they could hear others on both sides.

Bentley's face was chalk-white as he turned to the girl. Her calm acceptance of their predicament, an attitude in which he could read no slightest vestige of fear, helped him to regain control of his own nerves, which had threatened to send him into a panic. She even smiled, and Lee felt a trifle ashamed of himself.

Now the crashing sounds were closing in. The two brutes before and behind on the trail were pressing in upon them. But no general

headlong charge had yet begun. Bentley looked around him, seeking a tree with limbs low enough for them to reach and thus climb to safety.

"There's one!" cried Ellen. Tugging at his hand she began to run.

At the same moment the great apes bellowed and charged.

But the charge was never finished, for through the drumming of their mighty fists on mighty barrel-like chests, through the sound of their charge, through the crackling underbrush came again that sound of laughter. There was fierce joy in the laughter, and the laughter was followed by words of a strange gibberish which Bentley could not recall as being from any language he had ever heard.

The great apes paused. Out of the jungle to the right of the fugitives burst a white man. He was well past middle age, for his white hair hung almost to his shoulders, which were stooped with the weight of years. He was a wisp of a man whose smooth shaven face was apple-red. His eyes were black and expressionless as obsidian, and when Lee encountered the full gaze of them he was conscious of that feeling which he had experienced at various times in his life when he knew that some deadly reptile was close by.

"Stand still a moment!" cried the old man. His voice was strangely high-pitched and cracked.

From his right hand a whip with a long lash uncurled like a snake.

This he swung back and hurled to the front, and the snap of it was like a pistol shot. The great ape on the path ahead cowered back, bearing his fangs, roaring in anger. But that he feared the whip of the old man was plain to be seen. The crashing sound in the jungle died away rapidly, immediately the first report of the whip lash sounded in the trail.

Fearlessly the little man dashed upon the first of the great brutes the castaways had seen. His lash curled about the great beast's body, and the animal bellowed with pain. It clawed at the lash, but was not fast enough to capture it. In the end the brute broke and fled.

The animal which had blocked their path in the rear had already disappeared.

Now the little man came back to face the fugitives, and his lips were parted in a cordial smile. He coiled his whip and tucked it under his arm. He was dressed in well worn corduroy with high boots that were rather the worse for wear. Bentley saw that his lips were too

red—like blood—and somehow he disliked the man instantly.

"Welcome to Barterville," said the old man. "It has been years since I have seen any of my own kind. People avoid this section of the jungle."

"I don't wonder," said Bentley, sighing deeply with relief. "Those brutes would make anybody keep away from here, if they knew about them. I thought they had us for a few minutes. They planned an ambush almost as well as human beings could have done it—but that's absurd of course, merely a coincidence."

“Coincidence?" snapped the old man, a hint of asperity in his words. "Coincidence? I see you do not know the great apes, sir. I have always maintained that apes could be trained to do anything men can do. I have maintained that they have a language of their own, and even ways of communicating without words, a sort of jungle writing which men of course have never yet learned. I've devoted my life to learning the secrets of the great apes, their life histories, and so forth. I am Professor Caleb Barter!"

"Professor Caleb Barter!" ejaculated Ellen Estabrook. "Why I've heard of him! He went on an expedition among the great apes ten years ago and was never heard of again."

"I am Caleb Barter," said the old man. "I decided to disappear from the world I knew, to let other fool scientists think me dead in order that I might continue my investigations without molestation. And now I have almost reached the place where I can go back to civilization with information that will startle the world. There yet remains one experiment. Now I hope to make that experiment. No! No! Don't ask me what it is. It is my secret and nobody will ever wrest it from me."

Bentley studied the old man. He seemed slightly demented, Bentley thought, but that might be merely the mental evolution of a man who had made a hermit of himself for so many years—if this chap actually were Professor Barter.

"Professor Barter," went on Ellen, "was the scientific leader of his day. Others followed where he led. He made greater strides in surgery and medicine, and in unravelling the mysteries of evolution, than anyone else up to his time. Of course I believe you are Professor Barter. My name is Ellen Estabrook, and this gentleman is Lee Bentley. We believe ourselves to be the only survivors of the Bengal Queen. Perhaps you can lead us to food and water?"

"Yes, oh yes! Indeed. One forgets how to be hospitable, I fear. I am sorry to hear there was a wreck and that lives were lost—but it may

mean a great gain to the world of science. I am happier to see you than you can possibly know!"

Bentley felt the cold chills racing along his spine as he listened to the old man's flow of words. He behaved well, but Bentley could feel in spite of that, that there was a hidden current of menace in the old man's behavior. He wished that Ellen would keep him talking, would somehow make sure of his identity. Perhaps the same thought was in her mind, for it had scarcely come to him when the girl spoke again.

"Before he disappeared Professor Barter wrote a learned treatise on __"

"I am Professor Barter, I tell you, young woman. But if you wish proof the title of the treatise was 'The Language of the Great Apes.'"

Ellen turned quickly to Bentley and nodded. She was satisfied that the man was the person he claimed to be. He didn't ask how Ellen happened to know about him, and Bentley himself considered the proof entirely lacking in conclusiveness. Anyone might know about the last treatise of Barter.

However, they could but await developments.

They followed Barter along the trail. Now and again apes challenged from the jungle, and Barter answered them with that strange laughter of his, or with a flow of gibberish that was like nothing human.

Bentley shivered. Barter, by his laughter, was identifying himself to the great anthropoids. But with his gibberish was he actually conversing with them?

"This experiment of yours," said Bentley when the period of silence became unbearable, "—won't you tell us about it?"

The old man cackled.

"You'll know all about it—soon! You'll know everything, but the secret will still rest with Caleb Barter. Do not be too curious, my friends."

"We are anxious to reach civilization, Professor," said Bentley, deciding to be placative with the old man. "Perhaps you can arrange for guides for us?"

Barter laughed.

"I could not permit you to leave me for some time," he said. "I want you to witness my experiment. The world would never believe me

without the evidence of reliable witnesses."

Barter laughed again.

They entered a clean clearing which was a riot of flowers. At the further edge was a log cabin of huge proportions. The whole thing had a decidedly homely appearance, but it was a welcome sight to the castaways. There were cages in which strange birds chattered shrilly in their own language at sight of the three. A pair of tame monkeys chased each other on the roof of the house, whose corners were almost hidden by climbing vines whose growth one could almost see.

Barter led the way at a swift walk across the clearing and into the house.

Bentley gasped. Ellen Estabrook exclaimed with pleasure.

The reception room was as neat as though it received the hourly attentions of a fussy housewife. It was cozily furnished, yet it was evident that the furniture had been made on the spot of rough wood and skins of various animals. Deep skin rugs covered the floor and walls. There were three doors giving off of the reception room, all three of which were closed.

"You are not married?" he asked the two.

"No!" snapped Bentley.

"That center door leads to your room, Bentley. The one next to it is for the young lady. The other door? Ah, the other door my friends! That door you must never open. But to make sure that curiosity does not overcome caution, let me show you!"

They followed him to the door. He swung it open.

Both visitors started back and a gasp of terror burst from the lips of Ellen Estabrook. Beads of perspiration burst forth on Bentley.

They saw a huge room. In one corner was a bed. The other held a great cage—and in the cage was an anthropoid ape larger even than the great brute they had met on the trail!

Barter laughed. He stepped into the room, uncoiled his whip and hurled the lash at the cage. A great bellowing roar fairly shook the house, while the brute tore at the bars which held him prisoner until the whole massive cage seemed to dance. Barter laughed and continued to goad him.

"Barter," yelled Bentley, "stop that! If that beast should ever happen

accidentally to get free he'd tear you to pieces!"

"I know," said Barter grimly, "and that's part of the experiment! Now we shall eat, and you, young lady, shall tell me what other fool scientists had to say about me after I disappeared—to escape their parrot-like repeating of my discoveries!"

Bentley started to offer protest as Barter began preparation for the meal, which obviously was to be taken in the room which held the cage of the giant anthropoid, but Ellen put her fingers to her lips and shook her head. Her eyes were dancing with excitement.

Chapter 3: A Night of Horror

The meal consisted of various fruits, some meat which Bentley could not identify, and wild honey which was delicious. The bread tasted queer but was distinctly edible. The castaways ate ravenously, but even as he ate Bentley noticed that Ellen's face was chalky pale, and that in spite of a distinct effort of will she simply had to look at intervals toward the great beast in the cage.

Caleb Barter sat with his back to the animal. Bentley sat at the left of the old scientist, Ellen Estabrook at his right. The great beast was quiet now, but he squatted within his prison and his red-rimmed eyes swerved from one person to the other in the room with a peculiar intentness.

"I'd swear that beast can almost read our thoughts!" ejaculated Bentley at last, after he had somewhat sated his appetite.

Barter smiled with those too-red lips of his.

"He can—almost. You'd be surprised to know how nearly human the great apes are, and how nearly human this particular one is. Ah!"

"What do you mean, this particular one?" asked Bentley curiously.

"He doesn't look any different to me from the others I've seen except that he is far and away the largest."

"I don't see why you should be so curious," said Barter testily. "It's none of your business you know—yet."

"What do you mean?" demanded Bentley, nettled by Barter's tone.

"Lee, hush," said Ellen. "Professor Barter is not on trial for any crime."

Bentley looked at her in hurt surprise, inclined to be angry with her for the tone she was taking, but he saw such a look of appeal in her eyes that he choked back the words that rushed to his lips for utterance. He was decidedly on edge, more, he felt, than he should have been despite what they had gone through. When their eyes met he saw her glance quickly toward the ape, and noted a frown of worry between her brows.

Bentley glanced at the ape. The brute now was staring at the girl in a way that made Bentley's flesh crawl. It was preposterous of course, but he had the feeling, something which seemed to flow out of that mighty cage like some evil emanation from a dank tarn, that the ape knew the girl's sex—and that he desired her! It was horrible in the

extreme to contemplate, yet Bentley knew when he glanced swiftly at the girl that she had sensed the same thing and was fighting to keep the natural horror she felt at such a ghastly thought from being noticeable. It was absurd. The ape was a prisoner. But....

"Professor Barter," said Bentley, "you're accustomed to being with this brute, but it isn't so nice for us, especially for Miss Estabrook."

Barter now frowned angrily.

"My dear Bentley," he said with that odd testiness which he had assumed toward Bentley before, "I refuse to have any interference with my experiment. This is part of it."

"You mean—" began Bentley.

"I mean that I'm training that ape—I call him Manape—to behave like human beings. How better can he learn than by watching our behavior?"

"Just the same," said Bentley, "I don't like it."

"It's all right, Lee," said Ellen quickly. "I don't mind."

But Bentley knew that it wasn't all right, and that she did mind,

terribly.

Barter finished eating. Bentley had noticed that despite the long years he had been a virtual hermit, Barter ate as fastidiously as he probably had done when he had lived among his own kind. He pushed back his chair with a swift movement.

Instantly the roaring of Manape rang through the room. The great brute rose to his full height and grasped the bars of his cage, shaking them with savage fury. He glared at his master and bestial rage glittered from his red-rimmed eyes. He was a horrible sight. Ellen Estabrook, with no apology, stepped around the table and crouched wide-eyed in the arm of Lee Bentley.

"Lee," she said, "I'm terribly afraid. I almost wish we had trusted ourselves in the jungle."

"I'll look out for you," he whispered, as Barter turned his attention to the great ape.

But Bentley was watching the animal. So was Barter. The eyes of the scientist were shining like coals of fire. For the moment he appeared to have forgotten his guests.

"It is a success!" he cried. "As far as it goes, I mean!"

What did Barter mean? Seeking some answer to the enigma, Bentley studied the ape anew. Now he was positive of another thing: Manape was scarcely concerned with Barter, whom he appeared to hate with an utterly satanic hatred. His beady eyes were staring at Bentley instead!

"The brute is jealous of me!" thought Bentley. "Good God, what does it mean, anyway?"

Barter turned back to them and all at once became the genial host.

"Shall we return to the other room?" he asked politely.

It was a relief to the castaways to put that awful room behind them. Barter closed and barred the door with deliberate slowness.

Why had this old man shut himself away from civilization like this? How long had he held this great ape in captivity? What was the purpose of it? What experiment was he performing? What part of it had the castaways been witnessing that they had not recognized? Bentley, recalling the distinct impression that the ape had stared at Ellen almost with the eyes of a lustful man, and had even appeared

to be jealous of him because the girl had gone into his arms—Bentley felt a shiver of revulsion course through him as it struck him now how human the regard and the jealousy of the creature had been!

He felt like clutching at the girl and racing with her into the hazards of the jungle. But he remembered the anthropoids out there, and Barter's peculiar domination of the brutes.

Barter was now watching the two with interest, studying them in turn speculatively, unmindful of the impertinence of his studious regard and silence.

"I have it!" he said. "Will you two be good enough to excuse me? You will need rest, I am sure. I am going away for a little time, but I shall return shortly after dark. Make yourselves at home. But remember—don't enter that room!"

"You need not worry," said Bentley grimly. "I sincerely hope we take our next meal in some other room."

Barter laughed and passed out of the door without a backward glance.

From the jungle immediately afterward came the drumming of the great apes, and now and again the laughter of Barter—high-pitched at first, but dying away as Barter apparently moved off into the jungle.

“Ellen," said Bentley quickly, "I don't know what's going on here, but I'm sure it's something sinister and awful. Let's take a look at our rooms. If there isn't a door between them which can be left open, then you'll have to spend the night in my room while I remain awake on guard."

"I was thinking of the same thing, Lee," she whispered. "This place gives me the horrors. Barter's association with the apes is a terrible thing."

Hand in hand they stepped to the door Barter had designated as that of Ellen Estabrook's. Bentley opened it cautiously, heaving a sigh of relief to find it empty. He scarcely knew what he had expected. There was a connecting door between the two rooms, open, and they peered into the chamber Bentley was to occupy.

Back they came to her room, to stand before a window which gave onto a shadowed little clearing in the rear of the cabin.

"Look!" whispered Ellen.

There was a single mound of earth, with a white cross set over it, on which was the single word: Mangor.

It might have been a word in some native dialect. It might have been some native's name. It might have been anything, but, whatever it was, it added to the sinister atmosphere which seemed to hang like an evil mist over the home of Caleb Barter.

"That settles it, Ellen," he said. "You'll spend the night in my room."

Ellen retired in Bentley's room, closing the door which led to the adjoining room, and Bentley walked back and forth in the reception room, waiting for Barter to return. When darkness fell he lighted the lamps he had previously located. Their odor caused him to guess that the fuel they used was some sort of animal fat. In the strange glow from the lamps, his shadow on the walls, as he walked to and fro, was grotesque, terrible—and at times a grim reminder of the great apes. It caused him to consider how, after all, human beings were akin to gorillas and chimpanzees. Somehow, now, it was a horrible thought.

The night wore on and Bentley's stride became faster. Now and

again he peered into the girl's room. She was sleeping the sleep of utter exhaustion and he did not waken her. Bentley felt it was near midnight when Barter returned, his return heralded by a strange commotion in the clearing, and the frightful drumming of the great apes—or at least one great ape. Bentley shuddered as the animal behind the locked door answered the drumming challenge with a drumming thunder of his own.

Barter came in, and Bentley accosted him at once.

"See here, Barter," he began. "I don't like it here. There's something strange going on in this clearing. Miss Estabrook and I wish to leave immediately in the morning! And that grave behind the cabin, who or what is it?"

Barter studied the almost trembling Bentley for all of a minute.

"That grave?" he said at last, with silken softness. "It's the grave of a jungle savage. He died in the interest of science. As for you, you'll leave here when I bid you, and not before, understand? I've a guardian outside that would tear both of you limb from limb."

But Bentley caught and held fast to certain words the scientist had spoken.

"The savage died in the interest of science?" he said. "What do you mean?"

Barter smiled his red-lipped smile.

"I took the savage and Manape, who wasn't called Manape then, and administered an anesthetic of my own invention. You've heard that I was a master of trephining? No matter if you haven't heard, the whole world will know soon! While the native and the ape were under anesthesia I transferred their brains. I put the black man's brain in the skull pan of the ape, and the ape's brain in that of the savage. The ape lived—and he is Manape. The savage, with the ape's brain, died, and I buried him in that grave you asked about!"

With a cry of horror Bentley turned and fled from Barter as though the man had been His Satanic Majesty himself. He entered the room with Ellen and barred the door behind him. He likewise barred the door which led to that other room. Now in total darkness it was all he could do from clambering on the bed where Ellen slept, and begging her to touch him—anything—if only to prove to him that there still were sane creatures left in a mad world.

Outside Barter laughed.

"Oh, Bentley," he called after a long interval of silence, "do you like the odor of violets? Goodnight, and pleasant dreams!"

What had Barter meant?

Again assuring himself that the connecting door could not be opened if anything or anybody tried to enter that way, Bentley flung himself down before the door which gave on the reception room. He had no intention of sleeping. But in spite of himself he dozed off, though he fought against sleep with all his will.

Strange, but as he gradually slipped away into unconsciousness he was cognizant of the odor of violets—like invisible tentacles which reached through the very door and wrapped themselves gently about him.

His last conscious thought was of Manape, the ape with the brain of a jungle savage. But in spite of the vague feeling of horror he could not fight off the desire for sleep.

Chapter 4: Grim Awakening

Bentley returned to consciousness with a dull headache. He rose to a sitting posture and looked dully about him. Dimwittedly he tried to recall all that had passed since he had last been awake. He knew he had gone to sleep under the door in the room where Ellen had slept. Yet he was not there now. He peered about him.

He recognized the room.

Yonder was the table where they had eaten last night, or yesterday afternoon. Yonder was the bed he guessed Barter customarily used, and he shuddered a little as he fancied a man sleeping in the same room with that ghastly travesty which was neither ape nor human—Manape. The creature's name was simple, being simply "man" and "ape" joined together to fit the creature perfectly—too perfectly. Barter's bed had been slept in, but Barter was nowhere to be seen. Where was he? How came Bentley in this room? Barter had forbidden him to enter the place at all, on any pretext whatever. Had he walked in his sleep, drawn by some freak of his subconscious mind into the room of Manape?

Slowly, afraid to look yet forced by something outside himself, he turned his eyes toward the corner where the beast's cage was.

The cage was empty!

The door of it was open!

Stunned by his discovery, wondering what had happened during the night, Bentley looked about him. He noticed the long narrow table at the end of the cage, and the white covering it bore. He recognized it instantly as an operating table, and wondered afresh.

Where was Barter?

Bentley raised his voice to shout the scientist's name. But before he could himself recognize the syllables of the scientist's name, through the whole room rang the bellowing challenge of a giant anthropoid ape. Bentley cowered down fearfully and looked around him. Where was the ape that had uttered that frightful noise? The sound had broken in that very room, yet save for himself the room was empty.

Bentley turned his head as he heard someone fumbling with the door.

Barter entered, and his face was a study as his eyes met those of Bentley. Bentley noticed that Barter held that whip in his hand, uncoiled and ready for action.

What was this that Barter was saying?

"I warn you, Bentley, that if anything happens to me you are doomed. If I am killed it means a horrible end for you."

Bentley tried to answer him, tried to speak, but something appeared to have gone wrong with his vocal cords, so that all that came from his lips was a senseless gibberish that meant nothing at all. He recalled the odor of violets, Barter's enigmatic good-night utterance with reference to violets, and wondered if their odor, stealing into the room where he had gone on guard over Ellen, had had anything to do with paralyzing his powers of speech.

"I see you haven't discovered, Bentley," said Barter after a moment of searching inspection of Bentley. "Look at yourself!"

Surprised at this puzzling command, Bentley slowly looked down at his chest. It was broad and hairy, huge as a mighty barrel, and his arms hung to the floor, the hands half closed as though they grasped something. Horror held Bentley mute for a moment. Then he raised his eyes to Barter, to note that the scientist was smiling and rubbing his hands with immense satisfaction.

Bentley started across the floor toward a mirror near Barter's bed. He

refused to let his numbed brain dwell upon the instant recognition of his manner of progress. For he moved across the floor with a peculiar rolling gait, aiding his stride with the bent knuckles of his hands pressed against the floor.

He fought against the horror that gripped him. He feared to look into the mirror, yet knew that he must. He reached it, reared to his full height, and gazed into the glass—at the reflection of Manape, the great ape of the cage!

Instantly a murderous fury possessed him. He whirled on Barter, to scream out at the man, to beg him to explain what had happened, why this ghastly hallucination gripped him. But all he could do was bellow, and smash his mighty chest with his fists, so that the sound went crashing out across the jungle—to be answered almost at once by the drumming of other mighty anthropoids outside, beyond the clearing which held the awful cabin of Caleb Barter.

He started toward Barter, still bellowing and beating his chest. His one desire was to clutch the scientist and tear him limb from limb, and he knew that his mighty arms were capable of ripping the scientist apart as though Barter had been a fly.

"Back, you fool!" snarled Barter. "Back, I say!"

The long lash of the whip cracked like a revolver shot, and the lash curled about the chest and neck of Bentley. It ripped and tore like a hot iron. It struck again and again. Bentley could not stand the awful beating the scientist was giving him. In spite of all his power he found himself being forced back and back.

He stepped into the cage, cowered back against its side. Barter darted in close, shut the door and fastened it. Then he stood against the bars, grinning.

"Nod your head if you can understand me, Bentley," he said.

Bentley nodded.

"I told you I would yet prove to the world the greatness of Caleb Barter," said the scientist. "And you will bear witness that what I have to tell is true. Would you like to know what I have done?"

Again, slowly and laboriously, Bentley nodded his shaggy head.

Barter grinned.

"Wonderful!" he said. "You see, you are now Manape. Yesterday you had the brain of a black man, and to exchange your brain with Manape's of yesterday would not have served my purpose in the

least. So I had to find an ape of more than average intelligence. That's why I spent so much time in the jungle yesterday. I needed a brain to put in the body of Lee Bentley's—an ape's brain. Your body is a healthy one and I did not think it would die as the savage's did. I was right. It is doing splendidly. It would interest you to see how your body behaves with an ape's brain to direct it. Your other self, whom I call Apeman, is unusually handsome. Miss Estabrook, however, who does not know what has happened, has taken a strange dislike to the other you! Splendid! I shall study reactions at first hand that will astound the world!

"But remember, whatever your fine brain dictates that you do, don't ever forget that I am the only living person who can put you to rights again—and if I die before that happens, you will continue on, till you die, as Manape!"

Barter stopped there. Bentley stiffened.

From the room where he knew Ellen Estabrook to be came her voice, raised high in a shout of fear.

"Lee! Please! I can't understand you. Please don't touch me! Your eyes burn me—please go away. What in the world has come over you?"

Bentley listened for the reply of the creature he knew was in the other room with Ellen Estabrook.

But the answer was a gurgling gibberish that made no sense at all! His own body, directed by the brain of an ape, could not emit speech that Ellen could understand, because the ape could not speak. The ape's vocal cords, which now were Bentley's, were incapable of speech.

How, if Barter continued to keep Ellen in ignorance of what had happened, would she ever know the horrible truth—and realize the danger that threatened her?

"Don't worry for the moment, Bentley," said Barter with a smile. "I am not yet ready for your other self to go to undue lengths—though I dislike intensely to leave the marks of my whip on that handsome body of yours!"

Barter slipped from the room.

Bentley listened, amazed at the clarity with which he heard every vagrant little sound—until he remembered again that his hearing was that of a jungle beast—until he knew that Barter had entered that other room.

Then came the crackling reports of the whip, wielded mightily by the hands of Barter.

A scream that was half human, half animal, was the result of the lashing. Bentley cringed as he imagined the bite of that lash which he himself had experienced but a few moments before.

"Professor Barter! Professor Barter!" distinctly came the voice of Ellen Estabrook. "Don't! Don't! He didn't mean anything, I am sure. He is sick, something dreadful has happened to him. But he wouldn't really hurt me. He couldn't—not really. Stop, please! Don't strike him again!"

But the sound of the lash continued.

"Stop, I tell you!" Ellen's voice rose to a cry of agonized entreaty. "Don't strike him again. See, you've ripped his flesh until he is covered with blood! Strike me if you must strike someone—for with all my heart and soul I love him!"

Chapter 5: Fumbling Hands

Now Bentley was beginning to realize to the full the horrible thing that had befallen himself and Ellen Estabrook. He knew something else, too. It had come to him when he had heard Ellen's words next door—telling Barter that she loved the creature Barter was beating, which she thought was Lee Bentley. That creature was Lee Bentley; but only the earthly casement of Lee Bentley. The ruling power of Bentley's body, the driving force which actuated his body, was the brain of an ape.

As for Bentley himself, that part of him of which he thought when he thought of "I," to all intents and purposes, to all outer seeming, had become an ape. His body was an ape's body, his legs were an ape's, everything about him was simian save one thing—the "ego," that something by which man knows that he is himself, with an individual identity. That was buried behind the almost non-existent brow of an ape.

In all things save one he was an ape. That thing was "Bentley's" brain. In all things save one that creature in the room with Ellen Estabrook was Bentley. Bentley, driven to mad behavior by the brain of an ape!

The horror of it tore at Bentley, as he still thought of himself.

"If I were to get out of this cage," he told himself voicelessly, "and were to enter that room with Ellen, she would cower into a corner in terror. She would fly to the arms of that travesty of 'me,' for she thinks it is 'I' in there with her because it looks like me."

Now that Ellen was beyond his reach, more beyond his reach than if she had been dead, he realized how much she meant to him. In the few mad hours of their association they had come to belong to each other with a possessiveness that was beyond words. Thinking then that the travesty in there with her—with Bentley's body—was really Bentley, to what lengths might she not be persuaded in her love? It was a ghastly thing to contemplate.

But what could Bentley do? He could not speak to her. If he tried she would race from him in terror at the bellowing ferocity of his voice. How could he tell her his love when his voice was such as to frighten the very wild beasts of the jungle?

Yet....

How could he allow her to remain with that other Bentley—that body which perhaps was provided with a man's appetites, and the

brain of a beast which knew nothing of honor and took what it wished if it were strong enough?

There was one ray of hope in that Barter had hinted he would protect Ellen from the apeman. That meant physically, with all that might indicate; but who could compensate her for the horror she must be experiencing with that speechless imbecile she thought was Bentley? If this thing were to continue indefinitely, and Ellen were kept in ignorance, she would eventually grow to hate the "thing"—and if ever, as he had hinted, Barter were to transfer back the entities of the man and the ape, Ellen would always shudder with horrible memories when she looked at the man she had just now admitted she loved.

Bentley was becoming calmer now. He knew exactly what he faced, and there was no way out until Barter should be satisfied with his mad experiment. Bentley must go through with whatever was in store for him. So must the ape who possessed his body—and in the very nature of things unless Bentley could train himself to a self-saving docility, both bodies would repeatedly know the fiery stinging of that lash of Barter's. Bentley could control himself after a fashion. The ape might be cowed, but long before that time arrived, Bentley's body would be made to suffer marks they would bear forever to remind him of this horror.

"I must somehow manage to continue to care for Ellen," he told himself. "But how?"

He scarcely realized that his great hands were wandering over his body, scratching, scratching. But when he did realize he felt sick, without being able to understand how or where he felt sick. If he felt sick at the stomach he thought of it as his own stomach. When he thought of moving the hairy hands he thought of his hands. He grinned to himself—never realizing the horrible grimace which crossed his face, though there was none to see it—when he recalled how men of his acquaintance during the Great War, had complained of aching toes at the end of legs that had been amputated!

He was learning one thing—that the brain is everything that matters. The seat of pain and pleasure, of joy and of sorrow, of hunger and of thirst even.

Bentley waddled to the door of the cage. He studied the lock which held him prisoner, and noted how close he must hold his face to see at all. All apes might be near-sighted as far as he knew; but he did know that this one was. Perhaps he could free himself.

He tried to force his massive hands to the task of investigating the lock. But what an effort! It was like trying to hypnotize a subject that

did not wish to be hypnotized. A distinct effort of will, like trying to force someone to turn and look by staring at the back of that someone's neck in a crowd. It was like trying to make an entirely different person move his arm, or his leg, merely by willing that he move it.

But the great arms, which might have weighed tons, though Bentley sensed no strain, raised to the door and fumbled dumbly, clumsily. He tried to close the gnarled fingers, whose backs were covered with the rough hair, to manipulate the lock, but he succeeded merely in fumbling—like a baby senselessly tugging at its father's fingers, the existence of which had no shape or form in the baby's brain.

But he strove with all his will to force those clumsy hands to do his bidding. They slipped from the lock, went back again, fumbled over it, fell away.

"You must!" muttered Bentley. "You must, you must!"

He would discover the secret of the lock, so that he would be able to remove it when the time was right—but so slow and uncertain and clumsy were the movements of his ape hands, he was in mortal fear that he would unlock the door and then not be able to lock it again, and Barter would discover what he had in mind.

But he struggled on, while foul smelling sweat poured from his mighty body and dripped to the floor. He concentrated on the lock with all his power, knowing as he did so that the lock would have been but a simple problem for a child of six or seven. It was nothing more than a bar held in place with a leather thong. But the powerful fingers which now were Bentley's were too blunt and inflexible to master the knot Barter had left.

Bentley paused to listen.

From Ellen's room came the sound of weeping. From the front room came Barter's pleased laughter as he talked with the thing which so much resembled Bentley. That was a relief—to know that his other self had been at least temporarily removed from any possibility of injuring Ellen.

In Bentley's mind were certain pictures of Barter. He saw him plainly on his knees begging for mercy, while Bentley's ape hands choked his life away. He saw him tossed about like a mere child, and casually torn apart, ripped limb from limb by the mighty hands of Manape.

"God," he told himself, refusing to listen to the slobbering gibberish which came from his thick lips when he addressed himself, "I can do

nothing to Barter—not until he restores me properly. If he is slain, it is the end for me, and for Ellen! He is a master, no doubt of that. He anesthetized me through the door with something of his own manufacture that smelled like violets, and put my brain in Manape after removing from Manape the brain of the savage. Then he removed an ape's brain from a second ape and put it in my skull pan—all within the space of a few hours! Yet his knowledge of surgery and medicine is such that even in so short a time I suffer little from the operation, save for the dull headache which I had on awakening, and which I now scarcely feel at all."

He straightened, close against the bars, and began again to fumble with the leather thong which held him prisoner. In his brain was the hazy idea that he might after all make a break for it, and carry Ellen away to a place of safety, taking a chance on finding his way back here to force Barter to operate again and restore him to his proper place. But would not Ellen die of fright at being borne away through the jungle in the arms of an ape? Was there any possibility of forcing Barter to perform the operation? No, for under the anesthetic again, Barter, angered by the thwarting of whatever purpose actuated him, might do something even worse than he had done—if that were possible. Again, even if he reached civilisation with Ellen, every human hand would be turned against him. Rifles would hurl their lead into him. Hunters would pursue him....

No, it was impossible.

Bentley, Ellen, and the Apeman—his own body, ape-brained—were but pawns in the hands of Barter. Barter might be actuated by a desire to serve science, that science which was alike his tool and his god. Bentley scarcely doubted that Barter believed himself specially ordained to do this thing, in the name of science; probably, unquestionably, felt himself entirely justified.

Plainly, now that Bentley recalled things Barter had said, Barter had waited for an opportunity of this kind—had waited for someone to be tossed into his net—and Ellen and Lee, flotsam of the sea, had come in answer to the prayer for whose answer Barter had waited.

It was horrible, yet there was nothing they could do—at least, to free themselves—until it pleased Barter to take the step. It came then to Bentley how precious to them both was the life of Caleb Barter. He could restore Bentley or destroy him—and with him the woman who loved him.

Suppose, came Bentley's sudden thought, Barter should think of performing a like operation on Ellen—using in the transfer the brain of a female ape? God!...

He prayed that the thought would never come to Barter. He was afraid to dwell upon it lest Barter read his thought. He might think of it naturally, as a simple corollary to what he had already done. Bentley then must do something before Barter planned some new madness.

He sat back and bellowed savagely, beating his chest with his mighty hands.

Instantly the outer door opened and Barter came in.

Bentley ceased his bellowing and chest pounding and sat docilely there, staring into the eyes of Barter.

"Have you discovered there is no use opposing me, Bentley?" said the professor softly.

Bentley nodded his shaggy head. Then by a superhuman effort of will he raised the right arm of Manape and pointed. He could not point the forefinger, but he could point the arm—and look in the direction he desired.

"You want to come out and go into the front room?"

Bentley nodded.

"You will make no attempt to injure me?"

Bentley shook his head ponderously from side to side.

"You would like to see the Apeman?—the creature that looks so much like you that it will be like peering at yourself in the mirror? Or, rather, as it would have been yesterday had you looked into a mirror?"

Bentley nodded slowly.

"You understand that no matter what the Apeman does, you must not try to slay him?"

Bentley did not move.

"You understand if you destroy Apeman's body, you are doomed to remain Manape forever, because the true body of Lee Bentley will die and be eventually destroyed?"

Bentley nodded. He felt a trickle of moisture on the rough skin about his flaring nostrils and knew that he was weeping, soundlessly.

But there was no pity in the face of Barter. He was the scientist who studied his science, to whom it was the breath of life, and he saw

nothing, thought of nothing, not directly connected with his "experiment."

"You give me your word of honor as a gentleman not to oppose me?"

It was odd, an almost superhumanly intellectual scientist asking for an ape's word of honor, but that did not occur to Bentley at the moment, as he nodded his head.

Barter still held his lash poised. He unfastened the leather thong which held Bentley prisoner and swung wide the door. Then he turned his back on Bentley and led the way to the door.

Bentley followed him on mighty feet and bent knuckles into the room which had first received Lee and Ellen when they had entered the cabin of the scientist.

Bentley would have gasped had he been capable of gasping at what he saw.

In a far corner, cowering down in fear at sight of Barter and his coiled whip—was the Bentley of the mirror in his stateroom aboard the Bengal Queen, and before that.

It was an uncanny sensation, to stand off and peer at himself thus.

Yonder was Bentley, yet here was Bentley, too.

Then he noted the difference. The face of that Bentley yonder was twisted, savage. That Bentley had seen Manape, and the teeth were exposed in a snarl of savage hatred. There a man ape stared at another man ape, and bared his fangs in challenge. The white hands of Bentley began to beat the white chest of Bentley—to beat the chest savagely, until the white skin was red as blood....

The Bentley buried within the mighty carcass of an anthropoid ape watched and shuddered. That thing yonder was dressed only in a breech-clout, and the fair flesh was criss-crossed in scores of places with bleeding wounds left by the lash of Barter. The Apeman's brows were furrowed in concentration. The human body made ape-like movements.

Bentley knew that soon that creature, forgetting everything save that he faced a rival man ape, would charge and attempt to measure the power of Manape—fang against fang. The white form rose.

Barter caused his whiplash to crack like an explosion.

"One moment," he said. "Back, Apeman! I'll bring Miss Estabrook. Perhaps she can placate you. She has a strange power over you

both!"

Bentley would have cried out as Barter crossed to unlock Ellen's door, but he knew that he could not stop Barter, and that his cry would simply be a terrible bellow to frighten the woman he loved when she entered the room.

The door opened. White, shaken, her eyes deep wells of terror, circled with blue rings which told the effect of the horror she had experienced, Ellen Estabrook entered.

And screamed with terror as she saw the hulking figure of Manape. Screamed with terror and rushed to the arms of the cowering thing in the corner!

Chapter 6: Puppets of Barter

The thing that Barter then contrived was destined to remain forever in the memory of Bentley as the most ghastly thing he had ever experienced. Ellen hurried into the arms of that thing in the corner. Gropingly, protectively, the white arms encompassed her. But they were awkward, uncertain, and Bentley was minded of a female ape or monkey holding her young against her hairy bosom.

Barter turned toward Bentley and smiled. He rubbed his hands together with satisfaction.

"A success so far, my experiment," he said. "The human body still answers to primal urges, which are closely enough allied to those of our simian cousins that their outward manifestations—manual gestures, expressions in the eyes et cetera—are much the same. When the two are combined the action approximates humanness!"

That travesty yonder pressed its face against Ellen, and she drew back, her eyes wide as they met those of the white figure which held her.

"I am all right," she managed, "please don't hold me so tightly."

She tried to struggle away, but Apeman held her helpless.

"Barter," yelled Bentley, "take her away from that thing! How can you do such a horrible thing?"

At least those were the words he intended to shout, but the sound that came from his lips was the bellowing of a man ape. That other thing yonder answered his bellow, bared white teeth in a bestial snarl. Barter turned to Bentley, however.

"You want me to take her away from Bentley and give her to you?"

Bentley nodded.

His bellowing attempt at speech had sent Ellen closer into the arms of Bentley's other self—henceforth to be known as Apeman. Bentley had defeated his own purpose by his bellow.

“Miss Estabrook," said Barter softly, "nothing will happen to you if you stand clear of your sweetheart...."

Nausea gripped Bentley as he heard Apeman referred to as Ellen's sweetheart, but now he remembered to refrain from attempting speech.

"But," went on Barter, "Manape has taken a violent dislike to Bentley, and may attack him if you do not stand clear. Manape likes you, you know. You probably sensed that last evening?"

Ellen visibly shuddered. She patted the shoulder of Apeman and stepped away, toward a chair which Barter thrust toward her.

She pressed her hands to her throbbing temples, visibly fighting to control herself. Her whole body was trembling as with the ague.

"Professor Barter," she said at last. "I am terribly confused, and most awfully frightened. What has happened here? What dreadful thing has so awfully changed Lee? I talk to him and he answers nothing that I understand. Is it some weird fever? At this moment I have the feeling that that brute Manape understands more perfectly than Lee, and the idea is horrible! I love Lee, Professor. See, he hears me say it, yet I cannot tell from his expression what he thinks. Does he despise me for so freely admitting my love? Has he any feeling about it at all? Has his mind completely gone?"

"Yes," said Barter, with a semblance of a smile on his lips, "his mind has completely gone. But it is only temporary, my dear. You forget that I am perhaps the world's greatest living medical man, and that I can do things no other man can do. I shall restore Lee wholly to you

—when the time comes. It is not well to hasten things in cases of this kind. One never knows but that great harm may be done."

"But I can nurse him. I can care for him and love him, and help to make him well."

Barter looked away from Ellen, his eyes apparently focussed on a spot somewhere in the air between Apeman and Manape.

"Would that be satisfactory to Bentley, I wonder?" he said musingly, yet Bentley recognized it as a question addressed to him. Bentley looked at the girl, but her eyes were fixed—alight with love which was still filled with questioning—on Apeman. Bentley shook his head, and Barter laughed a little.

"You know, Miss Estabrook," he went on, "that a strange malady like that which appears to have attacked Lee Bentley should be studied carefully, in order that the observations of a savant may be given to the world so that such maladies may be effectually combatted in future. This is one reason why I do not hasten."

"But you are using a sick man as you would use a rabbit in a laboratory experiment!" she cried. "Can't you see that there are things not even you should do? Don't you understand that some

things should be left entirely in the hands of God?"

"I do not concede that!" retorted Barter. "God makes terrible mistakes sometimes—as witness cretins, mongoloid idiots, criminals, and the like. I know about these things better than you do, my dear, and you must trust me."

"Oh, if I only knew what was right. Poor Lee. You lashed him so, and his body is awful with the scars. Was that necessary?"

"Insane persons are not to blame for their insanity," said Barter soothingly. "Yet sometimes they must be handled roughly to prevent them from causing loss of life, their own or others."

Now the eyes of Ellen came to rest on Manape.

They were fear filled at first, especially when she discovered that the little red eyes of Manape were upon her. But she did not turn her eyes away, nor did Manape. She seemed dazed, unable to orient herself, unable to distinguish the proper mode of action.

"That ape in repose is almost human," she said wearily, her brow puckered as though she sought the answer to some unspoken question that eluded her. "I am not afraid of him at this moment, yet

I know that in a second he can become an invincible brute, capable of tearing us all limb from limb."

"Not so long as I have this whip," said Barter grimly. "But Manape is docile at the moment, and it is Bentley who is ferocious."

Apeman was still snarling at Manape, lending point to Barter's statement. Barter went on.

"You know," he said, "apes are almost human in many respects. Manape likes you, and I doubt if he would attempt to hurt you. If he knew that you cared for Bentley there, he would most assuredly try to be friendly to Bentley also. Perhaps you can manage it. Apes are capable of primitive reasoning, you know. Go to Manape. He won't injure you, at least while I am here. Stroke him. He will like it. He is a friend worth having, never fear, and one never knows when one may need a friend—or what sort of friend one may need."

Ellen hesitated, and her face whitened again.

Barter went on.

"Go ahead. It is necessary that Manape and Bentley remain here together for a time. Manape will be locked up, but if he happens to

break loose there is nothing he might not do. With Bentley in the condition he is he would be no match for Manape. But if Manape thought you desired his friendship for Bentley...?"

There he left it, while Bentley wondered what new horror Barter was planning. He yearned for Ellen to come to him. But, if he strode toward her now, how would Barter explain that Manape had understood his words? No, Ellen must take the step, and each one would be hesitant, as she fought against her natural revulsion at touching this great shaggy creature which was Manape to her, and Bentley to himself.

Slowly, almost against her will, Ellen rose and moved across the floor toward Bentley. Apeman growled ominously. He rose to his feet, his arms writhing like disjoined, broken-backed snakes across his scarred chest.

Apeman took a step forward. Barter did not notice, apparently, for he was watching Manape as Ellen approached.

She came quite close. Slowly she put forth her hand to touch the shaggy shoulder of Manape. Bentley, seeking some way, any way, to reassure her, put his great shaggy right arm about her waist for the merest second.

Then Apeman charged, bellowing a shrill crescendo that was half human, half simian.

Before Bentley could realize Apeman's intentions, Apeman had clutched Ellen about the waist and dashed for the door of the cabin. He was gone, racing across the clearing with swift strides, bearing the girl with him.

Bentley whirled to pursue, but Barter had beaten him to the door and now blocked it, whiplash writhing, twisting, curling to strike.

"Back, Bentley! Back, I say! In a moment you may follow—as part of my experiment. But remember—the end must be here in this cabin, and you must remember everything, so that you can tell me all—when you are restored!"

Bentley cowered under the lash. His whole shaggy body trembled frightfully.

From the jungle toward which Apeman was racing come the roaring challenge of half a dozen anthropoids.

Chapter 7: Lord of the Jungle

Apeman, never realizing that his actual strength was that of but a puny human being, was racing with Ellen Estabrook into the very midst of animals which would tear him to bits as easily as they would tear any human being to pieces. Apeman, being but an ape after all, would merely think that he was joining his own kind, bearing with him a mate with white skin.

But to the other apes he would be a human being, a puny hairless imitation of themselves which they would pounce upon and tear asunder with great glee. Apeman would not know this: would not realize his limitations. He would try to take to the upper terraces of the jungle, to swing from tree to tree, carrying his mate—and would find the body of Bentley incapable of supporting such an effort. Apeman would be a child in the hands of his brethren, who could not know him. Apeman could probably speak to them after a fashion, but his gibberish would come strangely perhaps unintelligibly, through the mouth of Bentley. They would suspect him, and destroy him, and with him Ellen Estabrook, unless other apes discovered also her sex and took her, fighting over her among themselves.

Bentley made good time across the jungle clearing. Behind him came the voice of Barter in final exhortation.

"Your human cunning, hampered by your simian body, pitted against the highly specialized body of your former self, in turn hampered by the lack of reasoning of an ape—in a contest in primitive surrounding for a female! A glorious experiment, and all depends now upon you! You will save the girl who loves you and whom you love, but you must return to me and be transferred before you can make your love known. I shall wait for you!"

In Bentley's brain the shouted words of Barter rang as he hurried into the jungle in pursuit of Apeman. Ellen Estabrook was crying: "Hurry, Lee, hurry!"

Yet she was really yelling to Apeman, the man-beast which carried her, bidding him race on to escape the pursuit of Manape, in whom she would never recognize the man she loved. She must have thought that Bentley had taken a desperate chance to escape the clutches of Barter, and that Barter had set his trained ape to pursue them. What else could she think? How could she know that she was actually in the power of an ape, and that her loved one actually pursued to save her? With every desire of her body she was urging Apeman to take her away from Manape. But she must also have heard the challenges of the man apes in the jungle ahead. She was looking back over Apeman's shoulder, wondering perhaps if Barter would again come out to save them from the anthropoids.

Bentley could guess at her thoughts as he raced on in pursuit of Apeman.

Would he be in time? Even if he were, Apeman himself would turn against him. If he were to try to aid Ellen she would fight against him, believing him an ape. And how could he fight? Would his brain be able to direct his mighty arms and his fighting fangs in a battle with the apes of the jungle?

As he thought of coming to grips with the apes on equal terms, something never in this world before vouchsafed to a human being, he felt a fierce exaltation upon him. He felt a desire to take part in mortal combat with them, to fight them fist and fang, and to destroy them, one by one. He had their strength and more—he had the cunning of a human being to match against the dim wits of the apes. He had a chance.

But he must protect not only Ellen, but Apeman. Both Ellen and Apeman would be against him. Ellen would fear him as an ape that desired her. Apeman would fight against him as a rival for the favors of a she....

And he must harm neither. His own body, which Apeman directed, must be spared, must be kept alive—while every effort of Apeman

would be to force Bentley to slay!

It was a predicament which—well, only Caleb Barter had foreseen it.

The bellowing of the apes was a continuous roar on all sides now. Bentley felt a fierce sensation of joy welling up within him and he answered their bellowing with savage bellows of his own. His legs were obeying his will. His knuckles touched the ground as he raced on all fours.

He could hear the shriek of Ellen there ahead, and knew that Apeman and the girl were surrounded—that he must make all possible speed if he were to be in time.

Apeman and his captive were on the trail, trapped there just as Apeman had started into the jungle. Apeman had lifted Ellen so that her hands might have grasped a limb; but the girl had refused to attempt to escape by the trees if her "lover" remained behind. She had crumpled to the ground, and Apeman, snarling, smashing his chest which was so sickly white as compared to the chests of the other apes, had turned upon his brethren. They hesitated for a moment as though amazed at the effrontery of this mere human.

Then a man ape charged. Apeman met him with arms and fangs, and Bentley saw Apeman's all too small mouth snap out for the vein in the neck of Apeman's attacker. The ape whose brain reposed in Apeman had been a courageous beast, that was plain. But he was fighting for his she.

And he did not know his limitations. Apeman was bowled over as though he had been a blade of grass, and the great ape was crouched over him, nuzzling at his white flesh when Bentley-Manape arrived.

With a savage bellow, and with a mighty lunge, Bentley leaped upon the attacker of Apeman. His arms obeyed him with more certainty now, perhaps because the matter was so vitally urgent. Bentley's brain knew jiu-jitsu, boxing, ways of rough and tumble fighting of which the great apes had never learned, nor ever would learn.

He hurled himself upon the animal that was on the point of pulling Apeman apart as though he had indeed been a fly, and literally flattened him against the ground. His mighty hands searched for the throat of the great ape, while he instinctively pulled his stomach out of the way of possible disemboweling tactics on the part of his antagonist. But the great ape twisted from his grasp, struggled erect.

And, amazed at what he was doing, surprised that he, Lee Bentley,

could even conceive of such a thing, he launched his attack with bared and glistening fangs straight at the throat of his enemy. His mouth closed. His fangs ripped home—and the great ape whose throat he had torn away, whose blood was salt on his slavering lips, was tossed aside as an empty husk, to die convulsively, a dripping horror which was humanlike in a ghastly fashion. Bentley felt like a murderer. Not like a murderer, either, but like a man who has slain unavoidably—and hates himself for doing so.

Ellen was backed against the tree into which Apeman had tried to force her.

Apeman was up now, moving to stand beside her. Apeman had discovered that he was not the invincible creature he had thought himself.

Bentley moved in closer to the two, as other apes charged upon him from both sides, smothering him, giving him no time. He was a stranger, seemingly, an upstart to be destroyed.

And he was forced to fight them with all his ape strength and human cunning, while Apeman, whimpering, caught up Ellen and darted away with her, straight into the jungle.

For Bentley this was a sort of respite. Ellen was not afraid to go with Apeman, thinking him Bentley. The great apes were bent on destroying this strange ape which had come into their midst and had already destroyed one of their number, perhaps their leader.

He must be destroyed.

Bentley fought like a man possessed. His arms were gory with crimson from the slashing fangs of his enemies. His mouth was dripping with red foam as he slashed in turn, with deadly accuracy. A great arm clutched at the hair of his chest—and fell away again, broken in two places, as Bentley snapped it like a pipe stem because he knew leverages and was able to force his ape's body to obey the will of his human mind.

One ape whimpering, rolling away to lick at his wounds; whimpering oddly like a baby that has burned its fingers. A great ape weighing hundreds of pounds, crying like a child! Yet that "child," with his arm unbroken, could have taken a grown man, no matter how much of a giant, and torn him to pieces.

Two other apes were out of the fray, one dead, the other with only empty eye-sockets where his red-rimmed eyes had been.

Bentley guessed that Apeman had gone at least a mile into the jungle, heading directly away from the dwelling of Caleb Barter. He must get free and pursue. There was nothing else he could do. If he were slain, Ellen was doomed to a fate he dared not contemplate. Apeman would never be accepted by the apes because to all outward seeming he was a man. His body would never stand the hardship of the jungle, yet Apeman would never guess that, and would be slain. Bentley must prevent that.

He must make sure that Apeman's body at least remained sufficiently healthy that it could become his own again without the necessity of a long sojourn in some hospital. Ellen must not be left alone with Apeman, who was still an ape, running away with a she.

A ghastly muddle.

Now the apes broke away from Bentley. They broke in all direction into the jungle. Some of them seemed on the trail of Apeman. One of them took to the trees, swinging himself along with the speed of a running man, flying from limb to limb with no support save his hands.

Bentley stared after the fleeing ape, and then gave chase. He felt that the ape was on the trail of Apeman. Bentley did not know that he

himself could follow the spoor of Apeman, for he had not yet analyzed all of his new capabilities. But while he was discovering, he would follow something he could see—the fleeing ape, who would overhaul Apeman as though Apeman were standing still.

So, in a manner of speaking, Bentley essayed his wings.

He took to the trees after the fleeing ape, and was amazed that his great arms worked with ease, that he swung from limb to limb as easily and as surely as the other apes. He climbed to the upper terrace, where view of the ground was entirely shut off. His eyes took note of limbs capable of bearing his weight—after he had made one mistake that might easily have proved costly. He had leaped to a limb that would have supported Bentley of the Bengal Queen, but that was a mere twig under the weight of Manape. It broke and he fell, clutching for support; and fate was kind to him in that he found it, and so clambered back and swung easily and swiftly along.

In his nostrils at intervals was a peculiar odor—a peculiarly human odor, reminding him of the work-sweat of a man who seldom bathed. He knew that for the odor of Apeman, and a thrill of exaltation encompassed him as he realized that he was following a spoor by the cunning of his nostrils.

There was a great leap across space. The ape ahead of him made it with ease. Bentley essayed it without hesitation, hurling himself into space, all of a hundred feet above the ground; with all the might of his arms—and almost overshot the mark, almost went crashing once more through the branches. But the tree swayed, and held, and Bentley went swinging on.

It was wildly exhilarating, thrilling in a primitive way. Bentley remembered those dreams of his childhood—dreams of falling endlessly but never striking. Racial memories, scientists called them, relics of our simian forebears. Bentley thought of that and laughed; but his laughter was merely a beastly chattering which recalled him to the grim necessity of the moment.

Fifteen minutes passed, perhaps. Twenty. Half an hour. He was following a trace which led away from the coast, and further away from the cabin of Caleb Barter. But with his jungle senses, and his human memory, Bentley was sure he could return when the time came.

Had Barter foreseen all that? Was Barter smiling to himself, back there in his awful hermitage, waiting for the working out of his "experiment"?

But Apeman had jungle knowledge, and must have forced Bentley's body to the limit of its endurance, for it was near evening when Bentley, who had lost the ape ahead of him, but had continued on the spoor of Apeman by the smell, came to swift pause on his race through the trees.

He had heard the voice of Ellen Estabrook, and the voice was pleading.

"Lee! Lee! If you love me try to regain control of yourself. Please do not stare at me like that. Oh, your poor body! The brush and briars have literally torn you to bits."

But the answer of "Lee" was a bestial snarl, and traveling as quietly as he could, Manape dropped down so that he could gaze upon his beloved, and the thing she believed she loved.

Ellen was unaware of him. But he had scarcely dropped into view before Apeman became aware of him, and rose weakly to tottering limbs, to beat his bruised and bleeding chest in simian challenge. Apeman was simply an ape that had run until he was finished, and now was turning to make a last stand against a male who was stronger—a last bid for life and possession of the she he had carried away.

Then Ellen saw Manape, screamed, and for the first time since she had been saved from the deep by Bentley, fainted dead away.

The two so strangely related creatures faced each other across her supine body—and both were savagely snarling. Apeman weakly but angrily, Manape with a sound of such brute savagery that even the twittering of birds died away to awed silence.

Chapter 8: Struggle for Mastery

It was Apeman who charged. Pity for Apeman welled up in Bentley. That was his own body which Apeman was so illy using. His own poor bruised and bleeding body, which Apeman had all but slain by forcing it far beyond human endurance. It must be saved, in spite of Apeman.

But there was something first to do. Bentley bent over Ellen, caught her under his arm, and returned to the trees, with Apeman chattering angrily and futilely behind him. Bentley found a crotch in the tree where he could place Ellen, made sure that she was safely propped there and that no snakes were near, and hurried back to the contest with Apeman which could not be avoided.

He did not fear the battle he knew he must fight. He hurried back because Apeman might realize himself beaten and escape into the jungle. In his weakened condition he could not travel far and would be easy prey for any prowling leopard, easy prey for the crawling things whose fangs held sure death. Or would the cunning of Apeman, denizen of the jungle, warn him against any such? His ape brain would warn him, but would his human strength avail in case of necessity, in case of attack by another ape, or a four-footed carnivore?

Bentley hurried back because Apeman must be saved, somehow, even against his will. Apeman hated Manape with a deadly hatred. Yet to subdue the travesty of a human being, Manape must take care that he did not destroy his own casement of humanity. Any moment now and a great cat might charge from the shadows and destroy Apeman.

Apeman, snarling, beating his puny chest with his puny hands, was waiting for Manape his enemy.

Manape found himself thinking of the line: "'O wad some power the giftie gie us, to see oursilves as ithers see us,'" and adding some thoughts of his own.

"If that were actually 'I' down there, my chance of preserving the life of myself, and that of Ellen against the rigors of the jungle, would be absolutely nil. How helpless we humans are in primitive surroundings! The tiniest serpent may slay us. The jungle cats destroy us with ease, if we be not equipped with artificial weapons which our better brains have created. As Manape, Barter's trained ape, I am better fitted to protect Ellen than if I were Bentley—the Bentley of the Bengal Queen. Yet she will cower away from me when she wakens."

Now Bentley was down, and Apeman was charging. He charged at a staggering run. He stepped on a thorn, hesitated, and whimpered. But he possessed unusual courage, for he still came on. Apeman knew the law of the jungle, that the weakest must die. Death was to be his portion if he could not withstand the assaults of Manape, and he came to meet his fate with high brute courage.

Apeman was close in. His hands were swinging, fists closed, in a strange travesty of a fighting man. Apeman was snarling. He groped for the throat of Manape with his human teeth—which sank home in the tough hide of Manape, hurting him as little as though Apeman were toothless.

"As Bentley I would have no chance at all against a great ape," said Bentley to himself.

Now could he take the pugnacity out of Apeman without destroying him? If he struck him he might strike too hard and slay Apeman—which was the equivalent of slaying himself. So Manape extended his mighty hands, caught Apeman under the armpits and held him up, feet swinging free. Yet Apeman still struggled, gnashed his teeth, and beat himself on the chest.

How utterly futile! As futile as Bentley in his own casement would

have been against a great ape! Apeman might destroy himself through his very rage. How could Bentley render the travesty unconscious and yet make sure that Apeman did not die?

If he struck he might strike too hard and slay.

What should he do?

A low coughing sound came from somewhere close by. From the deeps of his consciousness Bentley knew that sound. He clutched Apeman in his right arm, swung back to the tree and up among the branches. He was just in time. The tawny form of a great cat passed beneath, missing him by inches.

But while he had saved himself and Apeman, he had been clumsy. He had struck the head of Apeman against the bole of the tree, and Apeman hung limp in his arm. Bentley, fear such as he had never before known gripping him, pressed his huge ear to Apeman's heart. It was beating steadily and strongly. With a great inner sigh of relief he climbed to safety in the tree, bearing Apeman with him.

He reached the crotch where Ellen rested, and disposed Apeman nearby, his own gross body between them. He even dared to gather Ellen closer against him for warmth. His left hand held tightly the

wrist of the unconscious Apeman, so that he should not fall and become prey of the night denizens of the jungle.

So, the two who seemed to be human—Apeman and Ellen, passed from unconsciousness into natural sleep, while Bentley-Manape remained motionless between them, afraid to close his eyes lest something even more terrible than hitherto experienced might transpire. But his ears caught every sound of the jungle, and his sensitive ape's nostrils brought him every scent—which his man's mind strove to analyze, reaching back and back into the dim and misty past for identification of odors that were new, or that were really old, yet which had been lost to man since they had left forever the simian homes of their ancestors and their senses had become more highly specialized.

The questions which turned over and over in Bentley's mind were these:

How shall I tell Ellen the truth? Will she believe it?

What is the rest of Barter's experiment? How shall I proceed from this moment on? How shall I procure food for Ellen? What food will Apeman choose for my body to assimilate?

And jungle night drew on. Once Ellen shivered and pressed closer to Manape as she slept.

What would morning bring to this strange trio?

Chapter 9: Fate Decides

Morning brought the great apes of the jungle—scores of them. They had approached so silently through the darkness that Bentley had not heard them, and his ape's nostrils had not told his human brain the meaning of their odor. It appeared too that his ape's ears had tricked him. For when morning came there were great apes everywhere.

Bentley still held the wrist of Apeman, whose chest was rising and falling naturally, though the body was limp and plainly exhausted, and exuded perspiration that told of some jungle fever or other illness perhaps, induced by hardship and over-exertion. The ape's brain of Apeman had driven Bentley's body to the uttermost, and now that body must pay.

Bentley wondered how far he was now from the cabin of Caleb Barter.

He doubted if Apeman could stand the return journey, though Bentley's ape body could have carried Apeman's with ease. But would Apeman stand the journey? Apeman, Bentley knew, was going into the Valley of the Shadow, and something must be done to save him. But what?

And the great apes constituted a new menace, though they were making no effort to molest the three in the tree. Apeman must be placed in a shady place and some attention paid to his needs. But the human body with the ape's brain could not tell how it hurt or where.

The first task was to get the two beings down from the tree, and much depended upon chance. To the apes Bentley was another ape, one moreover which had slain a number of them. But Apeman was a human being, as was Ellen Estabrook. The whole thing constituted a fine problem for the brain of Manape.

If Manape were to attempt first aid for Apeman, how would such a sight react upon Ellen Estabrook? If Manape were to attempt to take Apeman back to Caleb Barter, leading the way for Ellen, would she follow, and what would his action tell her? She would think herself demented, imagining things, because a great ape did things which only human beings were supposedly capable of doing.

If she knew, of course, it would make a difference. But she did not, and Bentley had no means by which to inform her. That was a problem for the future. Ellen was sleeping the sleep of utter exhaustion and he felt that he could safely leave her for the moment while he swung Apeman down from the tree. He must work fast, and return for Ellen before the great apes discovered the helpless

Apeman at the foot of the tree. He hoped to get Ellen down while she slept, knowing that she would be in mortal fear of him if she wakened and found herself in his power.

Bentley got Apeman down, and looked about him. No apes were close enough, as far as he could tell, to molest Apeman before Bentley could return with Ellen. He raced back into the tree, lifted Ellen so gently that she scarcely altered the even motion of her breathing—and for a moment he hesitated. So close to him were her tired lips. So woe-begone and pathetic her appearance, a great well of pity for her rose in the heart of Bentley—or what was the seat of this emotion within him? Was the brain the seat of the emotions? Or the heart? But Bentley's true heart was in Apeman's human body, so there must be some other explanation for the feeling which grew and grew within Bentley for Ellen.

He leaned forward with the intention of touching his lips to the tired thin lips of Ellen Estabrook, then drew back in horror.

How could he kiss this woman whom he loved with the gross lips of Manape, the great ape?

He could, of course, but suppose she wakened at his caress and saw the great figure of the jungle brute, with all man's emotions and

desires, yet with none of man's restraint—bending over her? Women had gone insane over less.

He hurried down with Ellen, and placed her beside Apeman.

By now the great apes had discovered the strange trio and were coming close to investigate. There was a huge brute who came the fastest and seemed to be the leader of the apes, if any they had. But even this one did not offer a challenge, did not seem perturbed in the least. But he did seem filled with childish curiosity. The apes themselves were like children, children grown to monstrous proportions, advancing and retreating, staring at this trio, darting away when Apeman or Ellen made some sort of movement.

Bentley could sense too their curiosity where he was concerned. Their senses told them that Bentley was a great ape. Their instincts, however, made them hesitate, uncertain as to his true "identity"—or so Bentley imagined.

Ellen still slept, but she must have sensed the near presence of potential enemies, for she was stirring fitfully, preparing to waken.

What would her reaction be when she opened her eyes to see Manape near her, standing guard over Apeman, with the jungle on

all sides filled with the lurking nightmare figures of other great apes?

A moan of anguish came from Apeman. He stirred, and groans which seemed to rack his whole white bruised body came forth. The brain of the ape was reacting to the suffering of Bentley's body—and a brute was whimpering with its hurts. The advancing apes came to pause. They seemed to stare at one another in amazement. They were suddenly frightened, amazed, unable to understand the thing they saw and were listening to. Bentley crouched there, watching the apes, and he fancied he could understand their sudden new hesitancy.

He did not know, but he guessed that the moans and groans of Apeman were comprehensible to the great apes. They knew that this strangely white creature was an ape, though he looked like a man. Already they had wondered as much as they were capable, about Manape. They had sensed something not simian about him which puzzled them.

But from the lips of Apeman, to add to their mystification, came the groans and moans of an ape that was suffering. Bentley held his position, wondering what they would do. That they meant no harm he was sure, else they would long since have charged and overborne the three—unless they remembered the super-simian might of

Manape and were afraid to attack again. Bentley hoped so, for that would make things easier for them all.

Now the nearest apes were almost beside the body of Apeman, which was still covered with agony sweat. The lips emitted moans and faint blurs of gibberish. Bentley noted that the leading ape was a great she. The female came forward hesitantly, making strange sounds in her throat, and it seemed to Bentley that Apeman answered them. For the she came forward with the barest trace of hesitancy, stared for a moment at Manape, with a sort of challenge in her savage little red eyes, then dropped to all fours beside Apeman and began to lick his wounds!

The she knew something of the injuries of Apeman and was doing what instinct told her to do for him. Now the rest of the apes were all about them—and Ellen wakened with a shrill cry of terror.

Bentley remained as a man turned to stone. If he moved toward the woman he loved she would flee from him in terror—out among the other apes and into the jungle where she would have no slightest chance for life. If he did nothing she might still run.

Wildly she looked about her. She screamed again when she saw the she bending over the travesty she thought to be Bentley, and licking

the poor bruised body. Ellen cast a sidelong look at Manape, and there was something distinctly placating in her eyes. She recognized Manape, and wanted his friendship. What thoughts crowded her brain as she realized that she was in the center of a group of anthropoids who could have destroyed her with their fingers in a matter of seconds!

She did the one thing which proved to Bentley that she was worthy of any man's love. The great she who licked the wounds of Apeman was thrice the size of Ellen. Yet Ellen crawled to Apeman, little sounds of pity in her throat. Instantly the snarling of the she sent her back. The she had, for the time being at least, assumed proprietorship of Apeman, and was bidding Ellen keep her distance. And the she meant it, too. For she bared her fighting fangs when Ellen again approached close enough to have touched the body of Apeman.

This time the she advanced a step toward the girl, and her snarl was a terrible sound. Ellen retreated, but no further than was necessary to still that snarl in the throat of the she. Manape moved in quite close now, into position to interfere if the she tried to actually injure Ellen Estabrook. If only, Bentley thought, there were some way of making himself known to Ellen! But how could she believe, even if a way were discovered?

"What shall I do?" moaned Ellen aloud, wringing her hands. "Poor Lee! I can't move him. That brute won't let me touch him. Oh, I'm afraid!"

Bentley wanted to tell her not to be afraid, but had learned from experience that when he tried to speak his voice was the bellowing one of a great ape. And if he were to enunciate words that Ellen could understand, what then? English from the lips of a giant anthropoid! She would not believe, would think herself insane—and with excellent reason. Slowly, as matters were transpiring, she had already been given sufficient reason to believe that her mind was tottering.

Manape stood guard over her. A she had adopted the thing she thought was Bentley. A score of great apes, which only three days ago had tried to destroy both Bentley and herself, now surrounded Bentley and Ellen with all the appearance of amity—crude, true, but unmistakable. Certainly this was sufficiently beyond all human experience to make Ellen believe she were in the throes of some awful nightmare. What would she think if an ape began to address her in English, and "Bentley" suddenly held speech with the great apes?

Add to this possibility, suppose she were suddenly confronted with

the truth—that the essential entities of Bentley and Manape had been exchanged, and the whole thing were explained to her from the gross lips of Manape himself, while "Bentley" looked on and chattered a challenge in ape language while Manape talked?

No, at first she might have understood. Now it would have been even more horrifying for her to hear the truth. She must think what she would, and be allowed to adjust herself to the astounding state of affairs. Apeman could not be moved for some time. Ellen would not leave him, naturally. Nor would Manape. And the apes apparently intended to remain with them. Which made the problem, after all, a simple one. The trio must remain for the time being among the great apes. They needed one another in a strange way, and they needed the apes themselves, which were like a formidable army at their backs, as protection against the other beasts of the wilds.

Bentley watched the great she continue her rude first aid for Apeman. Apeman was still moaning, though less fitfully, like a child that nuzzles the milk bottle, but is drifting away into sleep. The she gave the travesty her full attention. There was something horribly human about her maternal care of this creature before her. Her great arms held Apeman close while her tongue caressed his wounds. Bentley knew that that tongue was an excellent antiseptic, too. All animals licked their own wounds, and those wounds healed. Only

human beings knew the dangers of infection, because they had departed from Nature's doctrines and had tried to cheat her with substitutes. Only the animals, like that great she, still were Nature's children, healing their own wounds in Nature's way.

Satisfied that the apes would not molest Ellen, so long as she kept her distance from Apeman, Bentley decided to seek food, which Ellen must sorely need. The need for water was urgent, too. Bentley knew the danger of drinking water found in the jungle—but an ape could scarcely be expected to build a fire with which to boil the water, nor to produce a miracle in the shape of something to hold it in over the fire.

Here were many makeshifts indicated, then. Bentley smiled inwardly, the only way he could smile. He must feed himself, too. He must go wandering through the woods, feeding the body of Manape with grubs, worms and such nauseous provender, because it was the food to which Manape was accustomed. Apeman, when he was well enough to eat, would sicken the body of Bentley with the same sort of food, because the brain of Apeman would not know what was good or bad for the body of a human being—nor even would understand that his body was human. What did Apeman think of his condition, anyway?

That question, of course, would never be answered—unless Barter could really speak the language of the great apes and somehow managed to secure from Apeman, if Apeman lived, a recital of these hours in the jungle.

What food should Manape secure for Ellen? What fruits were edible, what poisonous? How could he tell? He watched the other apes, which were scattering here and there now, tipping over rocks and sticks to search for grubs and worms—to see what fruits they ate, if any. They would know what fruits to avoid.

An hour passed before Bentley saw one of the brutes feed upon anything except insects. A cluster of a peculiar fruit which looked like wild currants, but whose real name Bentley did not know. Now, feeling safe in his choice, because the ape was eating the berries with relish, Bentley searched until he found a quantity of the same berries, and bore them back to Ellen Estabrook.

Beside Apeman, who now was awake and exchanging crazy gibberish with the she who had licked his wounds, Ellen Estabrook, trying to be brave, did not cry aloud. But her face was dirty, and her tears made furrows through the grime.

Manape dropped the berries beside her. The she snarled as Ellen

reached for the berries. Manape flung himself forward as the she strove to take the berries before Ellen could grasp them—and cuffed her over backward with a cumbersome but lightning-fast right swing.

"Manape," said Ellen, "if only you could talk! I feel that you are my friend, and my fears are less when you are with me. I'll pretend that you can understand me. It helps a little to talk, for one scarcely seems so much alone. How would you feel, I wonder, Manape, if you were suddenly taken entirely out of the life you've always known, and forced to live in another world entirely? It would not be easy to be brave, would it? Suppose you were taken out of the wilds and dropped into a ballroom?"

Bentley could have laughed had the jest not been such a grim one. What would Ellen think if he were to answer her:

"I would be much more at home in that ballroom than that thing on the ground that you love—as matters are at this moment!"

She would not understand that.

Nor did she understand when the she went away for a time and came back with a supply of worms and grubs—which nauseous supply

vanished with great speed under the wolfish appetite of Apeman. There was little wonder that Ellen found it difficult to orient herself.

"I must tell her somehow," thought Bentley, "and that soon. Surely enough has been done to satisfy the devilish curiosity of Caleb Barter."

Toward evening the apes began to drift further into the jungle. The she gathered Apeman in her arms and moved off with him. There was nothing for Manape to do but follow, and nothing for Ellen to do but follow, too—if she loved the thing she thought was Bentley. She did not hesitate.

With unfaltering courage she followed on, and the lumbering forms of the great apes drifted further away from the sea, seemingly headed toward some mutely agreed upon jungle rendezvous. Everything depended for the time upon the return to health of Apeman. All other matters depended upon that. Each in his own way, Manape and Ellen, realized this. Caleb Barter had schemed better than he could possibly have foreseen.

Chapter 10:Written in Dust

As Apeman was borne deeper into the jungle in the great arms of the she, what was more natural in the circumstances than that Ellen keep close to her only remaining link with the world she had left—Manape, the trained anthropoid of Caleb Barter? A natural thing, and one that filled Manape with obvious pleasure.

Once she touched his hand, rested her own small one in his mighty palm for a moment—and Bentley was afraid to return the pressure of her palm with the hand of Manape, lest he crush every bone in her fingers. Thereafter at intervals, while the whole aggregation drifted deeper into the jungle, Ellen clung to Manape; depended upon him. Was it her woman's intuition which told her that Manape was a safe guardian?

Bentley refused to dwell on that phase of this wild adventure however, for there were other things to think about. It required many hours for him to discover the truth, but he knew it at last. He, Manape-Bentley, was the lord of the great apes! Before his capture, or before the capture of Manape by Caleb Barter, Manape had been leader of these apes. Now he had returned and was their ruler once more. Upstarts had taken his place, and he had slain them—back there when Apeman had tried to escape into the jungle with Ellen in

his arms. To the apes this must have seemed the way it was.

Bentley was putting things together, hoping and believing that they made four—yet not sure but that he was forcing them to equal four when in actuality they were five or six. If Manape—the original ape of Barter's capture, whose body now was Bentley's—had been the leader of the great apes, that explained why the animals remained constantly in the vicinity of Barter's dwelling. Barter had needed them in his plans, and had made certain their remaining near by making their leader captive. And of course only an ape sufficiently intelligent to rule other apes would have suited the evil scheme which must have been growing for years in the mind of Caleb Barter. Barter had merely waited with philosophic calmness for human beings to drift into this territory—and the Bengal Queen had obligingly gone down off the coast, throwing Ellen Estabrook and Lee Bentley into Barter's power.

What was Barter doing now? Would he not be striving to watch the course of his experiment? Would he not think of details hitherto overlooked and plan further experiments, or an enlarging of this experiment of which three creatures were the victims? Surely Barter would not remain quietly at Barterville while the subjects of his experiment went deeper into the jungle with the great apes. Barter was too thorough a scientist for that. Somehow, Bentley was sure,

Barter would know what was happening, even at this very moment.

He would wish to know how a modern woman would conduct herself if suddenly forced to live among apes. Therefore he would try in some manner to keep watch over the conduct of Ellen Estabrook. He would wonder how a modern man would conduct himself if he suddenly found, himself the leader of that same group of apes, and how an ape would behave if he suddenly discovered himself a man. It was a neat "experiment," and Bentley was beginning to believe that there was probably far more to it than there first had seemed.

Barter would wish to know how all three creatures would conduct themselves in certain circumstances—Apeman, Ellen and Bentley. He would not leave it to chance, for Bentley now realized that Barter himself did not feel inimical to either Ellen, Apeman or Bentley. To him they were merely an experiment. Barter would not wish for Apeman to die, and thus deprive Barter of a certain knowledge relative to one angle of his unholy experiment. He would not wish for Manape-Bentley to remain forever as Manape-Bentley, lacking the power of speech, either human speech or the gibberish of the apes.

No, all this was not being left to chance. Bentley believed that Barter

was directing the destination of these three subjects of his, as surely as though he were right with them at this moment, driving them to his will with that awful lash which had made him feared by the great apes.

Yes, Barter was still the master mind. It made Bentley feel awfully helpless. Yet—he was the leader of the great apes. That, too, Barter must have foreseen. Would Barter try in any way to discover how Bentley would behave in an emergency as leader of the apes? Would he wish to know sufficiently to create an emergency? From Bentley's knowledge of the twisted genius of Caleb Barter, he fully believed that Barter planned yet other angles to his experiment.

If he did, then what would he do next?

It was not until the storm broke over the strange aggregation of great apes, who seemed to be holding two white people prisoners, that Bentley understood that from the very beginning he should have been able to see the obvious denouement—the mad climax which even then was preparing in the jungle ahead, simply waiting for the great apes to drift, feeding as they went without a thought of danger, into the trap set for them.

Ellen now kept her hand in the great palm of Manape. She wept on

occasions, when she thought of the apparent hopelessness of her position, but for the most part she was brave, and Bentley grew to love her more as the hours passed—even as he grew more impatient at his inability to express his love. If he tried he could simply frighten her—fill her with horror because, gentle though he was with her and he was a great ape, a fact which nothing could change. Nor could anybody change the fact, except Caleb Barter. Where was the scientist? What would be his next move if he were not leaving the working out of his experiment entirely to chance, which seemed not at all in keeping with the thorough manner of his experiment thus far.

The future was a dark, painful obscurity, in which all things were hidden, in which anything might happen—because Caleb Barter would wish for it to happen.

How long would Barter wait before making his next move? Long enough for Ellen to accustom herself to life among the apes? Long enough to discover whether her natural intelligence would guide her to eke out existence among hardships such as human beings never thought of, except perhaps in nightmares? Long enough to allow the brain of Bentley to discover what miracles intellect might do with the body of Manape? Long enough for Apeman to be well of his illness, so that he might observe what havoc an ape's brain might

work with a human body?

Certainly when one gave the hideous experiment full thought, its possible angles of development, its many potential ramifications, were astounding in the extreme. Was it not up to Bentley then to do something besides mope and pine for the impossible, and thus hasten the hour when Barter should be wholly satisfied with his experiment?

What would Apeman do, how would he behave, when the white body of Bentley was well again? Would that body grow well faster when guided by an ape's brain than when a human brain was in command? Certainly Caleb Barter must have listed all these questions and hundreds of others which had not as yet occurred to Bentley. If he had he would not transfer the two intelligences back to their proper places until all of his questions were answered to his satisfaction. Bentley himself must somehow force an answer to some of them.

To do this he must try to guess what sort of questions Barter would have listed, and try to work out their answers—assuming all the time that Barter, from some undiscovered coign of vantage would be watching for the answers he hoped his experiment would provide.

Bentley arrived at a decision. Ellen must long since have become numbed to the horror which encompassed her. Bentley knew that a human brain could stand only so much, beyond which it was no longer surprised or horrified. He guessed, noting the pale face of his beloved, that Ellen had well nigh reached that stage.

He decided to take a tremendous risk with her sanity, hoping thereby to do his part in working out the details of Barter's experiment.

The sun was creeping into the west when the roving apes came to pause in a sort of clearing. Some of them curled up in sleep. The she who carried Apeman squatted with Apeman in her arms, and licked his wounds again.

That Apeman was recovering was plainly evident, and when he saw it filled Bentley with an odd mixture of thankfulness and revulsion. Apeman was essentially an ape. With all his strength back he would revert to type, and what if he forced the body of Bentley to do horrible things that Ellen would never be able to forget or condone—even when she at last knew the truth? What if Apeman selected, for example, a mate—from among the hairy she's? For Apeman that would be natural, for Bentley horrible.

Yet it might easily transpire. Apeman might relinquish the white she

to a successful rival—which he would regard Manape as being—and content himself with a choice from the ape she's. Somehow that unholy thing must not happen. That was up to Manape-Bentley.

Or, with his strength fully returned, Apeman might again desire Ellen, and force the issue with Manape for her possession—which seemed equally horrible to the brain of Bentley.

Ellen remained as close to Apeman as the she would permit her. Manape-Bentley crouched close by. After a time Apeman slept, and Bentley was pleased to notice that the agony sweat no longer beaded Apeman's body, and that Apeman was recovering with superhuman swiftness—thanks to the ministrations of the unnamed she who had taken charge of him. Apeman now rarely groaned, sleeping or waking.

Ellen watched the sleeping Apeman with her heart—and her fears—in her eyes. Satisfied that he slept, and that his sleep was healthy, Ellen again approached the creature she knew as Manape, Barter's trained ape.

"If only you could talk," she said to him. "If only you were able to give some hope. If only there were some way I could cause you to understand my wishes—understand and help me."

Bentley did not answer. He knew that to be useless. But his brain remembered something. His brain recalled that moment in the cage in the dwelling of Barter, when his human brain had tried to force obedience from the great clumsy hands of Manape, when he had tried to force those mighty fingers to unfasten the knots which held the cage door secure.

Could he force those hands to something else?

Did he dare try?

It was a terrible risk to take with Ellen's sanity, but Bentley felt it must be taken. She was watching him hopelessly, and her lips moved as though she prayed for a miracle—as though by some weird necromancy she might force Manape to understand her words, and to answer her, allaying her fears, destroying her hopelessness.

When Ellen watched him, Bentley searched about nearby until he found a dried stick perhaps eight feet in length. He held it up, sniffed at it, fumbled it with his heavy, grotesque fingers. He focussed the attention of Ellen upon that stick, while his excitement mounted and mounted, and his fear of possible consequences kept pace with his excitement.

Then, his decision reached, he began again that species of hypnosis which seemed necessary to compel the hands and fingers of Manape to do things no ape's hands had ever done before, no ape's brain had ever thought of doing.

He pressed one end of the stick against the ground at his sprawling feet. With his left palm he smoothed out an area of dust several feet in either direction—a rough dusty rectangle.

Interested, her brows puckered in concentration. Ellen watched as Manape went through these gestures which were so strangely, terribly human.

Her eyes were watching the end of that twig which the trained ape was so clumsily clutching in both hands.

She saw the marks the twig made in the dust as Manape caused it to move—slowly, horribly, fearfully, from left to right across the area of dust.

Fear began to grow in her face, but Bentley forced himself on. Again the fetid odor of ape sweat covered him. This awful concentration, this awful task of forcing Manape to write English words was in itself a miracle, more miraculous even than Ellen would have

thought of praying for.

Her eyes were glued to the sprawling, uneven, misshapen marks in the dust with hypnotic fascination. Bentley dared not look at her, because it required all his will to force the clumsy hands of Manape to his bidding.

He could only watch the marks in the dust, and will with all the power of his human intelligence that the hands of Manape make their shape sufficiently plain that Ellen might read them—and hope besides that this terrible thing would not send the sorely harassed girl into the jungle, madly shrieking for deliverance from a nightmare.

There, the words were written—and Ellen was staring at them, her eyes wide and unblinking, her body as rigid as stone, and her face as cold. Only three words were possible without an interval of rest, but those three words, among all Bentley might have selected, were the most to the point, the most unbelievable, the most black-magical.

"I am Lee!"

Minutes went into eternity as Ellen stared at the words. Silence that

it seemed would never be broken hang over the clearing. The bickering of the apes passed unnoticed as Ellen stared. Then, slowly, she tried to raise her eyes to meet those of Manape.

She failed. Her body went limp and she slid forward on her face in the dust. Manape-Bentley gently turned her on her side and waited. What would he see in her beloved eyes when she regained consciousness?

Chapter 11: Barter Acts

Bentley remained motionless, awaiting Ellen's return to consciousness. He waited in fear and trembling. How would she react to the horrible thing he had told her?

Now there was possibility of converse between them. If she knew and realized the meaning of his revelation. But would her mind stand up under the awfulness of it? He had thought so, else he would not have taken the chance he had taken. Much now depended upon Ellen, and all he could do was wait.

Slowly she began to move. Moans escaped her lips, little pathetic moans, and the name of Lee Bentley.

At last her eyes opened, and widened with horror when they met those of Manape. Bentley knew that there were tears on the face of Bentley-Manape. Manape, it seemed, cried easily, like a child.

Her eyes still wide with horror. Ellen Estabrook slowly turned them until she gazed at the dust rectangle in which presumably a great ape had written words in English. But Bentley-Manape had rubbed out the words. She turned and looked at Manape again, and her lips writhed and twisted. She was seeking for words, shaping words, to

ask questions such as none in all the world's history had ever asked of a giant anthropoid, with any hope of receiving answers.

"You tell me you are Lee," she began slowly, hesitantly, as though the words were literally forced from her against her will. "I cannot grasp the meaning of that. You say you are Lee, yet I recognize you as Manape, Caleb Barter's great ape. Yet Manape could not have written those words. Yet, if you are Lee Bentley, who or what is that?"

She turned and pointed a trembling finger at Apeman. Bentley of course could not answer her in words, yet his mind was busy conceiving of some way in which he might answer her. She turned back to him after a long look at Apeman and studied him. His huge barrel chest, the mighty arms, the receding forehead—the outward seeming of a giant ape.

Again that hesitant, horribly difficult task, of forcing the arms of Manape to perform actions which were not natural to the arms of a great ape. Bentley managed to raise the right arm in the gesture of pointing.

He pointed at the other apes, some of which slept, some of which ate of grubs and worms, or bickered savagely among themselves over

whatever childish trifles seemed important to the ape mind.

"You mean," said Ellen huskily, "that Lee Bentley there is really an ape?"

Manape nodded, ponderously.

Ellen's face became animated. She was beginning to understand how to hold speech with Manape.

"You tell me he is a great ape, yet he has the body of Lee Bentley. You tell me you are Bentley, yet I see you as Manape. Caleb Barter's trained ape. How am I to understand? Are my eyes betraying me, or is this a nightmare from which I shall waken presently? I see the shape of Manape, who writes in the dust that he is Lee. How can I know? None of you I can see is Lee Bentley. What part of you that I cannot see is Lee?"

Again the effort of forcing the hands of Manape to obedience.

Manape-Bentley tapped his receding forehead with his knuckles, and a gasp burst from the lips of Ellen Estabrook.

"You mean your brain is Bentley's brain, and that Bentley's body holds the brain of a great ape?"

Manape nodded clumsily.

"But how? You mean—Caleb Barter? I remember about him now. A master surgeon, an expert on anesthesia—a thousand years ahead of his time. You mean then that we three are part of an experiment? You, Manape, have the brain of Bentley, and Bentley has the brain of a great ape?"

Bentley nodded.

The face of Ellen Estabrook writhed and twisted. Her eyes studied the person of Manape the great ape. She could not believe the thing she had been told, yet she was thinking back and back—back to when Apeman had carried her away, his subsequent behavior, his behavior in the house of Barter, and his interest in the she ape who had licked his wounds.

She remembered how Manape in the beginning had looked at her with the eyes of a lustful man—and how later all his attitude had been protective. There seemed evidence in plenty to support the statement Manape had mutely managed to give her. She was forced to believe.

"But, Lee,"—she came closer to Manape as she spoke—"we must do

something for that creature there—that thing with the ape she which looks like the man I love. You've heard me say that I love Lee Bentley?"

Manape nodded.

"Does Lee Bentley love me?"

Again Manape nodded, more vehemently this time. Ellen smiled. Then, quickly, she came to Manape, thrust her fingers against his skull and examined it closely. Her brows were furrowed in concentration. She left Manape and strode to Apeman. The she growled at her but she ignored the beast as much as possible, though plainly cognizant of the fact that she dared not touch her hands to Apeman on pain of being torn asunder by the fighting fangs of the ape she.

hen Ellen came back.

"The evidence is there, Lee," she said. "There are the marks of a surgeon's instruments. Marvelous. One is almost inclined to forget

the horror of it in the realization that a miracle has been performed. The operation was perfect. But what did he use for anesthesia? How did Barter manage to complete his operation and cause his two patients to feel no-ill effects, to be to all intents and purposes well in mind and body—all within less than twelve hours? However, that does not matter now. Something must be done. Since Caleb Barter was the only man who could perform this unholy operation, he is the only one who could repeat it restoring each of you to your proper earthly casements. So we must play in with him. I suppose you've long since decided that way, Lee?"

How strange it seemed to Ellen to discuss such matters with Manape. But behind his brutish exterior was the brain of the man whom she loved.

"And there is one other thing," Ellen almost whispered, and her face flushed rosily. "No harm must come to the body of Lee, you understand? He must never be permitted to do anything of which Lee Bentley of after years may have cause to feel ashamed."

Manape nodded. He understood her, and despite the grotesquerie of the whole thing there was something intimate and sweet about this interchange. A man and woman loved. Just now that love was mentioned more or less in the abstract, discussed on purely a mental

basis—but both Bentley and Ellen Estabrook were thinking of the future, and were as frank with each other as they perhaps ever would be again.

Now the apes were beginning to stir themselves. It was time to be on the move again. Eyes were turned toward Manape, who was plainly intended to lead them further into the jungle. Ellen and the white body of Bentley were already being accepted as a matter of course.

If the great apes wondered why their returned lord did not jabber with them in the gibberish of the great apes, there was no way of telling, for there was no way in which Manape could make himself understood, nor any way the great apes could tell their thoughts to Manape.

Then, without warning, the blow fell.

The storm broke, and even as the uproar started Bentley was sure that he could sense behind it the fine hand of Caleb Barter—still working out his "experiment," with human beings and apes as the pawns.

The apes were on the move, entering a series of aisles through the gloomy woods when the blow fell—in the shape of scores of nets, in

whose folds within a matter of seconds the great apes were fighting and snarling helplessly. They expended their mighty strength to no avail. They fought at ropes and thongs which they did not understand—and only Manape made no effort to fight, knowing it useless.

Scores of black folk armed with spears danced and yelled in the brush, frankly delighted at the success of their grand coup. Barter was nowhere to be seen, and there was a possibility that he knew nothing about this. Yet Bentley knew better. Perhaps, in order to stimulate the blacks, he had offered them money for great apes taken alive. Anyhow, scores of the apes were taken, and now exhausted themselves in savage bellowing and snarling, as they fought for freedom.

A half dozen to each net, the blacks gathered in their captives. They made much over Ellen Estabrook. They pawed over Apeman despite his snarls and bellowings, and laughed when Apeman played the ape as though to the manner born. They scented some mystery here, a white man raised by the apes, perhaps. But that Ellen and Apeman were prisoners of blacks, Bentley could plainly understand. He scarcely knew which was the more horrible for her—to be prisoner of the apes or the blacks.

But for the moment there was nothing he could do. And the blacks

were not torturing either Apeman or Ellen, though there was no mistaking what he saw in the faces of the blacks when they looked at Ellen and grinned at one another.

Darkness had fallen over the world when the blacks went shouting into a village of mud-wattled huts, bearing the trophies of their ape hunt. Still in their nets for safety's sake, the great apes were thrown into a sort of stockade which had plainly just been built for their reception—proof to Bentley that this decision to make an attack against the passing band of anthropoids had been a sudden one. What did that indicate?

Someone had caused the blacks to react in a way that never would have occurred to them ordinarily.

Caleb Barter?

Bentley thought so. What now was Bentley supposed to do? What did Barter expect him to do? What did Barter expect Ellen to do? What did he expect Apeman to do?

There was no question, as Bentley saw it, but that Caleb Barter still pulled the strings, and that before morning this jungle village was to witness a horror it should never forget.

But at the moment Bentley had but one thought: to escape quietly with Ellen and Apeman, and return to the dwelling of Caleb Barter.

Chapter 12: Jungle Justice

Again that grim concentration on the part of Bentley, forcing the unaccustomed great hands of Manape to perform things they had never done before. He must release himself from the rope net which held him. For the hands of a human being the task would have been easy. For the hands of Manape, even though guided by the will of Bentley, the task was far from easy.

But he persevered.

An hour after the apes had been dumped in the stockade, Bentley had released himself from the rope net and was resting after the awful ordeal of forcing the hands of Manape to do his bidding. He pressed himself against the uprights of the stockade, and carefully tested them with his strength. The strength of Bentley would never have availed against the stout uprights of the stockade. Yet Manape-Bentley knew that with the arms of Manape he could tear the uprights out of the ground as easily as though they had been match-sticks. What should he do now?

His first impulse of course was to release the rest of the great apes. The brutes still fought at their bindings and were utterly insane with rage. What would they do when they were released? What was his

duty where they were concerned? If they went wild through the native village, slaying and laying waste, would Bentley be responsible for loss of life? If he left the apes in the hands of the natives, what then? He would never afterward forgive himself. He knew them as children of the wilds, carefree and happy brutes of the jungle. Now if held captives indefinitely they would either die or spend the rest of their lives in cages.

No, he would release the animals, one by one. The natives would have to take their chances.

A white figure loomed out of the darkness, coming from the direction of a great bonfire which showed all the jungle surrounding in weird, crimson relief. The white figure, all but nude, was Apeman! Following him were several natives, who laughed and prodded Apeman with the butts of their spears.

Bentley understood that. They thought Apeman a demented white man, and to these natives a demented one was a butt of jokes. They did not even suspect the horror of the possible revenge that was growing in the brain of the ape which controlled the body of Apeman.

Twice or thrice Apeman tried to dart into the jungle, but always the

blacks prevented, heading him toward the cage where the apes were held prisoners. Bentley wondered where Ellen was and what was happening to her.

A celebration of some sort seemed going forward in the village. Was Caleb Barter somewhere near, perhaps on the edge of the jungle, grinning gleefully at this thing he had brought about as part of his unholy experiment? There was no way of knowing of course, yet.

But....

Apeman reached the side of the stockade and snarled back at his annoyers, while his white hands grasped the uprights and tore at them with futile savagery. A strange situation. Inside the stockade a score of brutes who could rip the stockade to bits. Outside, one of them free, but hampered by the puny strength of a human being.

The blacks shouted to Apeman but of course Bentley could not understand what they said. Apeman turned after snarling at them for a few moments, and began to chatter in that gibberish which appeared to be Apeman's only mode of speech—ape language on the lips of a man! This was the only time it had ever happened.

The apes stirred fitfully as Apeman chattered, and began to renew

their attacks on their bonds. The blacks, after watching Apeman for a few moments turned back toward the bonfire, evidently satisfied that this strange demented creature would not run away. Apeman chattered and the apes made answer.

The she who had nursed Apeman managed to reach the side of the stockade, and for several moments Bentley listened to the horrible grotesqueries—an ape she and a man talking together in brutish gibberish, and with hellish intimacy.

Now, wondering just how matters would work themselves out, Bentley set himself the task of releasing the apes. They would at least create a furor in the village, during which Bentley could escape into the jungle with Apeman and Ellen Estabrook before the natives could reorganise themselves and give chase.

His plan was hazy, and he figured without the savagery of Apeman who occupied that white body which had been Bentley's. His one thought was to free the apes, set them upon the village, and escape with Apeman and Ellen. Just that and no more; but he did not know the great apes, nor how thoroughly they followed the lead of their lord whom they knew as Manape, though how he was named in their brains he was never to know.

One by one he released the apes. They seemed to sense the necessity for stealth, for they began to ape the cautious behavior of Manape. Apeman, outside, seemed to be advising them, telling them what to do.

One by one as Manape released them, the apes squatted side by side, their red angry little eyes watching his every move. Bentley knew of course what a fearful racket his own appearance would cause when he strode out of the gloom among the blacks, seeking Ellen. But he knew that surprise for a few precious moments would render the blacks incapable of stopping him until he got away. At least he hoped so.

Beyond that he had no other plan. All depended upon the behavior of the apes and the reaction of the blacks who were holding a devil's dance about the mighty fire in the center of their village. Bentley did not even yet dare guess what the apes would do when they saw what Manape-Bentley did. Would they follow him? Or would they race for the jungle to escape?

A few minutes now would tell the tale. He had released the last of the great apes, who now lined the side of the stockade, apparently holding angry converse with Apeman. Bentley was reminded of the old fashioned mob of pioneer days—angrily muttering yet lacking a

leader to direct their efforts. Well, he had done his duty as he saw it. From now on things must take their course.

But Bentley waited, watching the dancing figures about the fire. As far as he could tell the dance was approaching some sort of a climax. The figures leaped higher as they danced, and the noise of their shouting raced and rolled across the jungle. They appeared to be drunk with some sort of excitement, perhaps helped by native liquor, perhaps because of superstitious frenzy.

If he waited for their excitement to die down a bit, for some of them to go to sleep, his chances of releasing Ellen would be better. It would not be hard for him to find her—not with Manape's sensitive nose to lead him to her.

But time passed and the apes, though apparently being urged to something by Apeman, watching Manape sullenly, apparently waiting for him to make some move.

Then, sharp as a knife, cutting through the other noises of the village, came Ellen's voice.

"Help, Lee! Help me!"

The scream was broken short off as though a hand had clutched the girl's throat, but Bentley waited for no more—and Manape-Bentley flew into action. His great hands went to the uprights of the stockade. His mighty shoulders heaved and twisted and the uprights were ripped apart.

The apes followed his lead, and the cracking of the stockade's uprights was like a volley of pistol shots. The great brutes fairly walked through the green saplings which formed the prison. Manape was leading the charge, and the apes, once through, did not hesitate. If their leader charged the blacks they would follow—and did, while among them danced, cavorted and gibbered the travesty, Apeman.

He was Bentley's lieutenant, and Bentley-Manape was the lord of the apes. Just now he forgot that he was more ape than man. Just now he was happy that his strength was the strength of many men. He was hurrying to the assistance of the woman he loved.

Behind him came the great apes, following like an army of poorly trained recruits, yet armed as no army has ever been armed since the days when men fought with fist and fang against their enemies. Bentley lumbered swiftly toward the sound of Ellen's voice, aided in his journey by the odor of her which came to his sensitive ape's nostrils.

The blacks never saw the approach of the apes, until, led by Manape the Mighty, the great apes were right among them. Bentley did not pause. A black man saw him and shrieked aloud in terror, a shriek which seemed to freeze the other blacks in all sorts of postures. Sitting men remained where they sat, and some of the motionless ones saved their lives by their immobility. Dancers paused in midstride, and those who did not, died.

For the hands of the great apes clutched at everything that moved, and the great shoulders bulged, and the mighty muscles cracked, and men were torn asunder as though they had been flies in the hands of vengeful boys.

The black who had shrieked hurled a spear, purely a reflex, perhaps —an action born of its habitual use. It missed Bentley by a narrow margin, but passed through the stomach of the she who had nursed Apeman. Snarling, snapping at the thing which hurt her, the she tore the weapon free—then waddled forward swiftly, caught the man who had hurled the spear, and tore his head off with a single twisting movement of her great hands.

Next moment her blood was mingling with that of her slayer as she fell above him. But her hands, in the convulsions of death, still ripped and tore, and the black whom she held was a ghastly thing

when the she was finally dead. Bentley did not see the ghastly end of the spearman, for he was seeking Ellen, and at the some time keeping a close watch on Apeman.

Apeman seemed to be urging the apes to the attack, bidding them rip and tear and gnash, and the apes were doing that, making of the village a crimson shambles. But they did it in passing, for Manape was their leader, and him they followed—and he was seeking Ellen Estabrook.

The door of the hut in which his nostrils told him she would be found, gave before his mighty chest as though it had been made of paper. Inside, in the glow of the native lamp, a huge black man cowered against the further wall of the hut, with spear poised.

But the black man seemed frozen with terror.

"Lee! Lee!"

Bentley essayed one glance at her. In the other corner she was, with the upper part of her clothing almost torn from her body.

Then the spearman hurled his weapon. Bentley strove to force the huge bulk of Manape's body to dodge the spear; but that body was

slow in doing so—and took a mortal wound!

But it was a wound that would mean slow death. An aching, terrible wound. Then Manape-Bentley had grasped the body of the black, lifted it high above his head, and crashed it to the hard packed floor of the hut. The hut fairly shook with the thud of that fall. At once Manape stooped, caught the black by the ankles and pulled in opposite direction with all his terrific might.

Then he whirled, masking what he had done from Ellen's sight with his huge, sorely wounded body.

He tried to send her a message with his eyes, but it was not necessary. She knew Manape, Barter's trained ape. She followed close at his heels. Outside the hut's door Apeman still urged the apes to destruction of men and property, of women and children. The village of the blacks had become a place of horror.

"Hurry, Lee!" gasped Ellen. "You've been grievously wounded, and if Manape dies, nothing can save you—and I shall not care to live!"

But Bentley knew. His brain could sense the approach of death, and what he now must do was very plain.

He charged at Apeman and caught the struggling, snarling travesty up in his mighty arms. Then, with Ellen at his heels, he leaped into the jungle and began the race for the house of Caleb Barter.

Life was going from him, yet his brain forced onward the body of Manape. Behind came the great apes, following their leader. Now and again they screamed and snarled at him, but he paid them no heed. They could follow or leave him, as they chose. They chose to follow.

Apeman fought and bit at Bentley, but he paid him as little heed as though he had been nothing at all. Now and again when Ellen faltered Bentley caught her up, too, and carried her with Apeman until Ellen was rested enough to go on.

Some of the apes appeared to realize whither they were going, for they took to the trees and vanished onward. With Apeman alone, Bentley himself would have taken to the trees as the swiftest way back to Barter's dwelling. But Ellen could not race along the upper terraces, and Bentley could not carry both Apeman and Ellen and leave the ground. But he could travel swiftly on his race with death, with Ellen as the prize if he won.

The hours passed, and the strength of Manape decreased; but fiercely

the brain of Bentley drove the mighty body on. Ellen sobbed with weariness but continued on, and no words were spoken. There was no time for words. Now and again Bentley forced Apeman to walk, and dragged him forward with a hand clutching his wrist. At such times Bentley carried Ellen, and scarcely slackened his stride under her weight.

Once he tried to force Apeman to carry her, but the arms of Apeman were not equal to the task for more than fifty yards or so, and he gave that up as being impracticable. His brain raced, thinking up ways to travel faster, to reach Barter's quarters before the mighty body of Manape should die, and with it the brain of Bentley.

Surely no stranger cavalcade ever before traversed the jungles of the Black Continent.

So they came at last to the clearing. The apes protested and remained in hiding, while Bentley, never pausing, raced across toward the house he would never forget.

The body of Manape was almost through, for it staggered like a drunken man. Blood covered the mighty chest, and the brain of Bentley felt hazy; nothing made sense; and the end was very near.

But they reached the door of Barter's dwelling, and Barter himself met them, bearing his cruel whip in his hand. Ellen roused herself from her extreme exhaustion and clutched at the scientist's hand.

"Professor Barter!" she begged. "Please, please! Manape is almost dead! Hurry! Hurry, for the love of God!"

"There, there, my dear young lady," said Barter soothingly. "Make yourself easy. There's no cause for worry."

Manape-Bentley toppled forward on the floor of the cabin. Ellen screamed and Barter comforted her. Apeman tried to escape to the jungle, but the lash of Barter drove him cowering and whimpering to a corner.

Then, oblivion—save that somewhere was the odor of violets. Or did violets possess odor? Then, if not, the odor of flowers he thought were violets.

Chapter 13: The Horror Passes

Slowly consciousness returned to Bentley, and his first thought was one of horror. From somewhere distinct came a doleful wailing sound. He thought he knew what it was—the mourning of great apes over a member that had died.

He had read somewhere that the great apes sorrowed when any of their members died. Bentley opened his eyes. He could make out the ceiling of a room that he recognized. It was the room that had been first assigned him in the dwelling of Barter.

Ellen Estabrook would be somewhere nearby. He opened his lips to call to her. Then he remembered. He'd tried to call to her before—and had merely bellowed like an ape. No, there was something he must know first.

His arms and hands seemed as heavy as lead, but he lifted them and looked at them—and a great feeling of peace descended upon him. Manape-Bentley was gone, and he was plain Lee Bentley again. There was his own ring, which Apeman had worn, and besides he had just spoken aloud, softly, for no ears save his own, and the voice had been Lee Bentley's voice.

Yes, Barter had kept his promise, and Lee Bentley was Lee Bentley again.

But he was very weak, and his body was racked with pain. His hands and arms were covered with bandages. His body seemed packed in concrete, so moveless was it, and when he raised his voice it was terribly weak.

"Ellen," he managed to call; and again, "Ellen, darling!"

Instantly there came a swift patter of feet and Ellen was beside his bed, on her knees, covering his face—what there was of it unbandaged—with kisses. There was really no need for words between these two.

"Lee," she whispered, "I've been so afraid. You've been like this for a week, despite the miraculous knowledge and skill of Professor Barter. I've waited in fear and trembling, praying for you to live, and now you are Lee again, and will live on. Professor Barter has promised me. All you need now is food, and care, and I shall shower you with both. Barter has instructed me so carefully that I could manage even to care for you, sick as you are, without him here at all."

"And Manape?" Bentley's voice seemed to be stronger.

"He is dead," whispered Ellen. "I shall never forget him. There was something great, something even better than human about him, Lee! Oh, I know that he was you—but where would all three of us have been had it not been for the powerful body of Manape, the great ape? Manape is dead, and in the jungle hereabouts the great apes mourn his passing. They've been wailing almost like human beings for a week. Manape—well, Professor Barter told me that you too would have died, had Manape reached his door five minutes later. As it was, he, and you, were just in time!"

"It's amazing," whispered Bentley, "that the great apes stay around here now that Manape is dead."

"Yes. It's strange—and terrible I think. There have been times when I felt they were waiting for something, for Professor Barter, perhaps. I've had the feeling they believe he killed their leader."

Now the two became silent, and Ellen held the bruised and broken hands of Bentley in both her own, and their eyes said things, one to the other, which eyes say so much better than lips do. They kissed each other softly, and Ellen crooned with ecstasy, her cheek against Bentley's.

Then Caleb Barter entered.

"Well, well," he said, "when a man is in condition to make love to a woman, he is well on the road to recovery. It won't hurt you to talk now, Bentley, and before I begin asking questions, let me assure you that you will suffer no ill effects from your experience."

"What of my memories?" asked Bentley softly.

"Forget them!" snapped Barter tartly. "That is, after you have told me everything that has happened. Miss Estabrook has already told me her angle of the experiment. Now, talk please—and then I shall make you well, and you shall both go into the world with me, and tell people that what I have to tell is true!"

So Bentley talked. Barter wrote like a man possessed. His fingers raced over the paper, repeating the words which fell from the lips of Lee Bentley, beside whom Ellen sat, holding his hands. Now and again Barter uttered an ejaculation of fierce joy. He was like a child with a toy that pleased him beyond words. He could scarcely wait for the words to spill from the lips of Lee Bentley.

When Bentley paused for breath, Barter exclaimed impatiently, and urged him to greater speed. He thought of but one thing, his

experiment.

And so at last Bentley had finished.

"That's all, Professor Barter!" he said softly.

"All!" cried Barter. "Everything! Fame! Wealth! Adulation! There is nothing in the world Caleb Barter may not have when this story is told! I can scarcely contain myself. You must hurry to be well in order that the world may be told at once."

Laughing immoderately, Barter piled the manuscript he had written, and weighted it with a piece of rock. His face was a constant grin. His fingers trembled with eagerness. He could not contain himself.

Finally, as though from sheer joy of what he had accomplished, he raced from the cabin, and out across the clearing. Ellen and Bentley smiled at each other. Moments passed. Still came to their ears the mourning wails of the great apes.

Then suddenly there broke a sound so utterly appalling that the two were frozen with terror for a moment. First it was the laughter of Caleb Barter. Then, mingled with the laughter, the bellowing, frightful and paralyzing, of man apes challenging a hated enemy.

The drumming of ape fists on huge barrel chests. Then the laughter of Barter, dying away, ironic, terrible, into silence. Immediately afterward, high-pitched, mighty as the jungle itself, the concerted cries of half a dozen apes, as if bellowing their joy of the kill.

"They—they—" began Ellen in a choked voice. "The apes must have got Professor Barter!"

Silently Bentley nodded, and pointed.

Coiled on a nail near the door was Barter's whip. In his excitement he had gone into the jungle without it for the first—and last—time.

"There is one thing to do," whispered Ellen, "before we prepare to get you fully well. I shall care for you, and we shall both try to forget. And then we shall return to our own people."

"And the one thing?" asked Bentley.

The strained silence was suddenly broken by the bellowing of the great apes, which now charged into the cabin. Bentley and Ellen cringed back from the murderous brutes to no avail. There was no denying them. Their slavering jaws, drooled below flaring nostrils, their eyes emitted sparks of animal fury. Bentley leaped to the girl

and interposed his body between hers and the vanguard of the apes, who now were surging into the room through the open door, and spreading apart within like water released from a dam.

The apes were bent on murder, there could be no doubt.

A very monster towered over Bentley. His jaws were wide, his little red eyes fixed on the white man's neck. His great arms were coming forward to gather in both Ellen and Bentley—whom he could crush as easily as he crushed the grubs which were his food.

Bentley was helpless and knew it. This was the end for Ellen and himself. He must meet it unafraid. He tensed, awaiting the descent of bestial destruction. His eyes met the murderous gleam in the eyes of the ape leader unflinchingly. And then the miracle happened.

The brute became suddenly and inexplicably hesitant. His bellow died away to a gurgling murmur in which there seemed somehow a hint of apology. The fire went out of his eyes. His jaws closed with a snap. His great arms, already about Bentley, slid harmlessly over Bentley's shoulders; dropped to his shaggy side.

The brute's little eyes looked long and in puzzled fashion into the eyes of Bentley. Then he began to chatter, and in a moment the other

apes ambled grotesquely toward the door and out. Ellen and Bentley were alone together once more, unharmed—though numbed by realization of the near passing of disaster.

"I don't understand it," muttered Bentley, brushing the beads of perspiration from his brow. "It was a miracle!"

"Lee," Ellen answered, "I think I know, and it is a sort of miracle. Somehow the apes felt that you were—whatever your guise—Manape. They did not recognize you by any of their means of recognition; yet that beast knew! How? Only God Himself might answer. But the beasts knew, and did not slay us. The inner voice which whispers inside us in times of crises, whispers also to the great apes! Barter, then must have understood their somehow spiritual kinship with us. His experiments—"

Her words reminded Bentley of what she had been saying when the great apes had charged in upon them, murder bent. He interrupted her, gently.

"And the one thing we must do?" he rallied her.

Ellen rose, and her face was white and strained as she gathered together Barter's manuscript. This she carried to the fireplace. She

applied a match and returned to Bentley's bedside. Then, side by side, the two who would never forget in any case watched the record of Barter's unholy experiment burn slowly to ashes, while the screams of the great apes died away second by second, proof that they were leaving this section of the jungle—going deeper and deeper into the forest gloom which was their rightful heritage, and from which no man had a right to take them.

90 Holocaust by Charles Willard Diffin

The extraordinary story of "Paul," who for thirty days was Dictator of the World.

Aproximate word count: 11,200

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

I am more accustomed to the handling of steel ingots and the fabrication of ships than to building with words. But, if I cannot write history as history is written, perhaps I can write it the way it is lived, and that must suffice.

This account of certain events must have a title, I am told. I have used, as you see: "Holocaust." Inadequate!—but what word can tell even faintly of that reign of terror that engulfed the world, of those terrible thirty days in America when dread and horror gripped the nation and the red menace, like a wall of fire, swept downward from the north? And, at last—the end!

It was given to me to know something of that conflict and of its ending and of the man who, in that last day, took command of Earth's events and gave battle to Mars, the God of War himself. It was against the background of war that he stood out; I must tell it in that way; and perhaps my own experience will be of interest. Yet it is of the man I would write more than the war—the most hated man in the whole world—that strange character, Paul Stravoinski.

You do not even recognize the name. But, if I were to say instead the one word, "Paul"—ah, now I can see some of you start abruptly in sudden, wide-eyed attention, while the breath catches in your throats and the memory of a strange dread clutches your hearts.

'Straki,' we called him at college. He was never "Paul," except to me alone; there was never the easy familiarity between him and the crowd at large, whose members were "Bill" and "Dick" and other nicknames unprintable.

But "Straki" he accepted. "Bien, mon cher ami," he told me—he was as apt to drop into French as Russian or any of a dozen other languages—"a name—what is it? A label by which we distinguish one package of goods from a thousand others just like it! I am unlike: for me one name is as good as another. It is what is here that counts,"—he tapped his broad forehead that rose high to the tangle

of black hair—"and here,"—and this time he placed one hand above his heart.

"It is for what I give to the world of my head and my heart that I must be remembered. And, if I give nothing—then the name, it is less than nothing."

Dreamer—poet—scientist—there were many Paul Strakis in that one man. Brilliant in his work—he was majoring in chemistry—he was a mathematician who was never stopped. I've seen him pause, puzzled by some phase of a problem that, to me, was a blank wall. Only a moment's hesitation and he would go way down to the bed-rock of mathematics and come up with a brand new formula of his own devising. Then—"Voila! C'est fini! let us go for a walk, friend Bob; there is some poetry that I have remembered—" And we would head out of town, while he spouted poetry by the yard—and made me like it.

I wish you could see the Paul Straki of those days. I wish I could show him to you; you would understand so much better the "Paul" of these later times.

Tall, he seemed, though his eyes were only level with mine, for his real height was hidden beneath an habitual stoop. It let him conceal,

to some extent, his lameness. He always walked with a noticeable limp, and here was the cause of the only bitterness that, in those days, was ever reflected in his face.

"Cossacks!" he explained when he surprised a questioning look upon my face. "They went through our village. I was two years old—and they rode me down!"

But the hard coldness went from his eyes, and again they crinkled about with the kindly, wise lines that seemed so strange in his young face. "It is only a reminder to me," he added, "that such things are all in the past; that we are entering a new world where savage brutality shall no longer rule, and the brotherhood of man will be the basis upon which men shall build."

And his face, so homely that it was distinctive, had a beauty all its own when he dared to voice his dreams.

It was this that brought about his expulsion from college. That was in 1935 when the Vornikoff faction brought off their coup d'etat and secured a strangle hold on Russia. We all remember the campaign of propaganda that was forced into the very fibre of every country, to weaken with its insidious dry-rot the safe foundations of our very civilization. Paul was blinded by his idealism, and he dared to speak.

He was conducting a brilliant research into the structure of the atom; it ended abruptly with his dismissal. And the accepted theories of science went unchallenged, while men worked along other lines than Paul's to attempt the release of the tremendous energy that is latent in all matter.

I saw him perhaps three times in the four years that followed. He had a laboratory out in a God-forsaken spot where he carried on his research. He did enough analytical work to keep him from actual starvation, though it seemed to me that he was uncomfortably close to that point.

"Come with me," I urged him; "I need you. You can have the run of our laboratories—work out the new alloys that are so much needed. You would be tremendously valuable."

He had mentioned Maida to me, so I added: "And you and Maida can be married, and can live like a king and queen on what my outfit can pay you."

He smiled at me as he might have done toward a child. "Like a king and queen," he said. "But, friend Bob, Maida and I do not approve of kings and queens, nor do we wish to follow them in their follies.

"It is hard waiting,"—I saw his eyes cloud for a moment—"but Maida is willing. She is working, too—she is up in Melford as you know—and she has faith in my work. She sees with me that it will mean the release of our fellow-men and women from the poverty that grinds out their souls. I am near to success; and when I give to the world the secret of power, then—" But I had to read in his far-seeing eyes the visions he could not compass in words.

That was the first time. I was flying a new ship when next I dropped in on him. A sweet little job I thought it then, not like the old busses that Paul and I had trained in at college, where the top speed was a hundred and twenty. This was an A. B. Clinton cruiser, and the "A.B.C.'s" in 1933 were good little wagons, the best there were.

I asked Paul to take a hop with me and fly the ship. He could fly beautifully; his lameness had been no hindrance to him. In his slender, artist hands a ship became a live thing.

"Are you doing any flying?" I asked, but the threadbare suit made his answer unnecessary.

"I'll do my flying later," he said, "and when I do,"—he waved contemptuously toward my shining, new ship—"you'll scrap that piece of junk."

The tone matched the new lines in his face—deep lines and bitter. This practical world has always been hard on the dreamers.

Poverty; and the grinding struggle that Maida was having; the expulsion from college when he was assured of a research scholarship that would have meant independence and the finest of equipment to work with—all this, I found, was having its effect. And he talked in a way I didn't like of the new Russia and of the time that was near at hand when her communistic government should sweep the world of its curse of capitalistic control. Their propaganda campaign was still going on, and I gathered that Paul had allied himself with them.

I tried to tell him what we all knew; that the old Russia was gone, that Vornikoff and his crowd were rapacious and bloodthirsty, that their real motives were as far removed from his idealism as one pole from the other. But it was no use. And I left when I saw the light in his eyes. It seemed to me then that Paul Stravoinski had driven his splendid brain a bit beyond its breaking point.

Another year—and Paris, in 1939, with the dreaded First of May drawing near. There had been rumors of demonstrations in every land, but the French were prepared to cope with them—or so they believed.... Who could have coped with the menace of the north that

was gathering itself for a spring?

I saw Paul there. It lacked two days of the First of May, and he was seated with a group of industrious talkers at a secluded table in a cafe. He crossed over when he saw me, and drew me aside. And I noticed that a quiet man at a table nearby never let us out of his sight. Paul and his companions, I judged, were under observation.

"What are you doing here now?" he asked. His manner was casual enough to anyone watching, but the tense voice and the look in his eyes that bored into me were anything but casual.

My resentment was only natural. "And why shouldn't I be here attending to my own affairs? Do you realize that you are being rather absurd?"

He didn't bother to answer me directly. "I can't control them," he said. "If they would only wait—a few weeks—another month! God, how I prayed to them at—"

He broke off short. His eyes never moved, yet I sensed a furtiveness as marked as if he had peered suspiciously about.

Suddenly he laughed aloud, as if at some joking remark of mine; I

knew it was for the benefit of those he had left and not for the quiet man from the Surete. And now his tone was quietly conversational.

"Smile!" he said. "Smile, Bob!—we're just having a friendly talk. I won't live another two hours if they think anything else. But, Bob, my friend—for God's sake, Bob, leave Paris to-night. I am taking the midnight plane on the Transatlantic Line. Come with me—"

One of the group at the table had risen; he was sauntering in our direction. I played up to Paul's lead.

"Glad I ran across you," I told him, and shook his extended hand that gripped mine in an agony of pleading. "I'll be seeing you in New York one of these days; I am going back soon."

But I didn't go soon enough. The unspoken pleading in Paul Stravoinski's eyes lost its hold on me by another day. I had work to do; why should I neglect it to go scuttling home because someone who feared these swarming rats had begged me to run for cover? And the French people were prepared. A little rioting, perhaps; a pistol shot or two, and a machine-gun that would spring from nowhere and sweep the street—!

We know now of the document that the Russian Ambassador

delivered to the President of France, though no one knew of it then. He handed it to the portly, bearded President at ten o'clock on the morning of April thirtieth. And the building that had housed the Russian representatives was empty ten minutes later. Their disguises must have been ready, for if the sewers of Paris had swallowed them they could have vanished no more suddenly.

And the document? It was the same in substance as those delivered in like manner in every capital of Europe: twenty-four hours were given in which to assure the Central Council of Russia that the French Government would be dissolved, that communism would be established, and that its executive heads would be appointed by the Central Council.

And then the bulletins appeared, and the exodus began. Papers floated in the air; they blew in hundreds of whirling eddies through the streets. And they warned all true followers of the glorious Russian faith to leave Paris that day, for to-morrow would herald the dawn of a new heaven on earth—a Communistic heaven—and its birth would come with the destruction of Paris....

I give you the general meaning though not the exact words. And, like the rest, I smiled tolerantly as I saw the stream of men and women and frightened children that filtered from the city all that day and

night; but I must admit that our smiles were strained as morning came on the First of May, and the hour of ten drew near.

Paris, the beautiful—that lovely blossom, flowering on the sturdy stalk that was La Belle France! Paris, laughing to cover its unspoken fears that morning in May, while the streets thudded to the feet of marching men in horizon blue, and the air above was vibrant with the endless roar of planes.

This meant war; and mobilization orders were out; yet still the deadly menace was blurred by a feeling of unreality. A hoax!—a huge joke!—it was absurd, the thought of a distant people imposing their will upon France! And yet ... and yet....

There were countless eyes turned skyward as a thousand bells rang out the hour of ten; and countless ears heard faintly the sound of gunfire from the north.

My work had brought me into contact with high officials of the French Government; I was privileged to stand with a group of them where a high-roofed building gave a vantage point for observation. With them I saw the menacing specks on the horizon; I saw them come on with deadly deliberation—come on and on in an ever-growing armada that filled the sky.

Wireless had brought the report of their flight high over Germany; it was bringing now the story of disaster from the northern front. A heavy air-force had been concentrated there; and now the steady stream of radio messages came on flimsy sheets to the group about me, while they clustered to read the incredible words. They cursed and glared at one another, those French officials, as if daring their fellows to believe the truth; then, silent and white of face, they reached numbly for each following sheet that messengers brought—until they knew at last that the air-force of France was no more....

The roar of the approaching host was deafening in our ears. Red—red as blood!—and each unit grew to enormous proportions. Armored cruisers of the air—dreadnaughts!—they came as a complete surprise.

"But the city is ringed with anti-aircraft batteries," a uniformed man was whispering. "They will bring the brutes down."

The northern edge of the city flamed to a roaring wall of fire; the batteries went into action in a single, crashing harmony that sang triumphantly in our ears. A few of the red shapes fell, but for each of these a hundred others swept down in deadly, directed flight.

A glass was in my hand; my eyes strained through it to see the

silvery cylinders that fell from the speeding ships. I saw the red cruisers sweep upward before the inferno of exploding bombs raged toward them from below. And where the roar of batteries had been was only silence.

The fleet was over the city. We waited for the rain of bombs that must come; we saw the red cloud move swiftly to continue the annihilation of batteries that still could fire; we saw the armada pass on and lose itself among cloud-banks in the west.

Only a dozen planes remained, high-hung in the upper air. We stared in wonderment at one another. Was this mercy?—from such an enemy? It was inconceivable!

"Mercy!" I wonder that we dared to think the word. Only an instant till a whistling shriek marked the coming of death. It was a single plane—a giant shell—that rode on wings of steel. It came from the north, and I saw it pass close overhead. Its propeller screamed an insolent, inhuman challenge. Inhuman—for one glance told the story. Here was no man-flown plane: no cockpit or cabin, no gunmounts. Only a flying shell that swerved and swung as we watched. We knew that its course was directed from above; it was swung with terrible certainty by a wireless control that reached it from a ship overhead.

Slowly it sought its target: deliberately it poised above it. An instant, only, it hung, though the moment, it seemed, would never end—then down!—and the blunt nose crashed into the Government buildings where at that moment the Chamber of Deputies was in session ... and where those buildings had been was spouting masonry and fire.

A man had me by the arm; his fingers gripped into my flesh. With his other hand he was pointing toward the north. "Torpedoes!" he was saying. "Torpedoes of a size gigantic! Ah, mon Dieu! mon Dieu! Save us for we are lost!"

They came in an endless stream, those blood-red projectiles; they announced their coming with shrill cries of varying pitch; and they swung and swerved, as the ships above us picked them up, to rake the city with mathematical precision.

Incendiary, of course: flames followed every shattering burst. Between us and the Seine was a hell of fire—a hell that contained unnumbered thousands of what an instant before had been living folk—men and women clinging in a last terrified embrace—children whose white faces were hidden in their mothers' skirts or buried in bosoms no longer a refuge for childish fears. I saw it as plainly as if I had been given the far-reaching vision of a god ... and I turned and ran with stumbling feet where a stairway awaited....

If that flight, only a blurred recollection has stayed with me. I pray God that I may never see it more clearly. There are sights that mortal eyes cannot behold with understanding and leave mortal brain intact. It is like an anaesthetic at such times, the numbness that blocks off the horrors the eyes are recording—like the hurt of the surgeon's scalpel that never reaches to the brain.

Dimly I see the fragmentary scenes: the crashing fall of buildings that come crumbling and thundering down, myself crawling like an insect across the wreckage—it is slippery and wet where the stones are red, and I stumble, then see the torn and mangled thing that has caused me to fall.... A face regards me from another mound. I see the dust of powdered masonry still settling upon it: the dark hair is hardly disturbed about the face, so peaceful, so girlishly serene: I am still wondering dully why there is only the head of that girl resting on the shattered stone, as I lie there exhausted and watch the next torpedo crash a block behind me.... The air is shrill with flying fragments. I wonder why my hands are stained and sticky as I run and crawl on my way. The red rocks are less slippery now, and the rats, from the sewers of Paris!—they have come out to feed!

Fragments of pictures—and the worst of them gone! I know that night came—red night, under a cloud of smoke—and I found myself on the following day descending from a fugitive peasant's cart and

plodding onward toward the markings of a commercial aerodrome.

They could not be everywhere, those red vultures of the sky, and they had other devils'-work to do. I had money, and I paid well for the plane that carried me through that day and a night to the Municipal Airport of New York.

The Red Army of occupation was halfway across communist Germany, hailed as they went as the saviors of the world. London had gone the way of Paris; Rome had followed; the countries of France and England and Italy were beaten to their knees.

"We who rule the air rule the world!" boasted General Vornikoff. The Russian broadcasting station had the insolence to put on the air his message to the people of America. I heard his voice as plainly as if he stood in my office; and I was seeing again the coming of that endless stream of aerial torpedoes, and the red cruisers hanging in the heights to pick up control and dash the messengers of death upon a helpless city. But I was visioning it in New York.

"The masses of the American people are with us," said the complacently arrogant voice. "For our fellow-workers we have only brotherly affection; it is your capitalist-dominated Government that must submit. And if it does not—!" I heard him laugh before he went

on:

"We are coming to the rescue of you, our brothers across the sea. Now we have work to do in Europe; our gains must be consolidated and the conquests of our glorious air-force made secure. And then—! We warn you in advance, and we laugh at your efforts to prepare for our coming. We even tell you the date: in thirty days the invasion begins. It will end only at Washington when the great country of America, its cruel shackles cast off from the laboring masses, joins the Brotherhood—the Workers of the World!"

There was a man from the War Department who sat across from me at my desk; my factories were being taken over; my electric furnaces must pour out molten metal for use in war. He cursed softly under his breath as the voice ceased.

"The dirty dog!" he exclaimed. "The lying hypocrite! He talks of brotherhood to us who know the damnable inquisition and reign of terror that he and his crowd have forced on Russia! Thirty days! Well, we have three thousand planes ready for battle to-day; there'll be more in thirty days! Now, about that vanadium steel—"

But I'll confess I hardly heard him; I was hearing the roar of an armada of red craft that ensanguined the sky, and I was seeing the

curving flight of torpedoes, each an airplane in itself....

Thirty days!—and each minute of each hour must be used. In close touch with the War Department, I knew much that was going on, and all that I knew was the merest trifle in the vast preparations for defense. My earlier apprehensions were dulled; the sight I had of the whole force of a mighty nation welded into one driving power working to one definite end was exhilarating.

New York and Washington—these, it was felt, would be the points of first attack; they must be protected. And I saw the flights of planes that seemed endless as they converged at the concentration camps. Fighters, at first—bombers and swift scouts—they came in from all parts of the land. Then the passenger planes and the big mail-ships. Transcontinental runs were abandoned or cut to a skeleton service of a ship every hour for the transport of Government men. Even the slower craft of the feeder lines were commandeered; anything that could fly and could mount a gun.

And the three thousand fighting ships, as the man from Washington had said, grew to three times that number. Their roaring filled the skies with thunder, and beneath them were other camps of infantry and artillery.

The Atlantic front was an armed camp, where highways no longer carried thousands of cars on pleasure bent. By night and day I saw those familiar roads from the air; they were solid with a never-ending line of busses and vans and long processions of motorized artillery and tanks, whose clattering bedlam came to me a thousand feet above.

Yes, it was an inspiring sight, and I lost the deadly oppression and the sense of impending doom—until our intelligence service told us of the sailing of the enemy fleet.

They had seized every vessel in the waters of Europe. And—God pity the poor, traitorous devils who manned them—there were plenty to operate the ships. Two thousand vessels were in that convoy. Ringed in as they were by a guard of destroyers and fighting craft of many kinds, whose mast-heads carried the blood-red flag now instead of their former emblems, our submarines couldn't reach them.

But our own fleet went out to measure their strength, and a thousand Navy planes took the air on the following day.

Uppermost in my own mind, and in everyone's mind, I think, was the question of air-force.

Would they bring the red ships? What was their cruising range? Could they cross the Atlantic with their enormous load of armored hull, or must they be transported? Were the air-cruisers with the fleet, or would they come later?

How Vornikoff and his assassins must have laughed as they built the monsters, armored them, and mounted the heavy guns so much greater than anything they would meet! The rest of us—all the rest of the world!—had been kept in ignorance.... And now our own fliers were sweeping out over the gray waters to find the answer to our questions.

I've tried to picture that battle; I've tried to imagine the feelings of those men on the dreadnaughts and battle-cruisers and destroyers. There was no attempt on the enemy's part to conceal his position; his wireless was crackling through the air with messages that our intelligence department easily decoded. Our Navy fliers roared out over the sea, out and over the American fleet, whose every bow was a line of white that told of their haste to meet the oncoming horde.

The plane-carriers threw their fighters into the air to join the cavalcade above—and a trace of smoke over the horizon told that the giant fleet was coming into range.

And then, instead of positions and ranges flashed back from our own swift scouts, came messages of the enemy's attack. Our men must have seen them from the towers of our own fleet; they must have known what the red swarm meant, as it came like rolling, fire-lit smoke far out in the sky—and they must have read plainly their own helplessness as they saw our thousand planes go down. They were overwhelmed—obliterated!—and the red horde of air-cruisers was hardly checked in its sweep.

Carnage and destruction, those blue seas of the north Atlantic have seen; they could tell tales of brave men, bravely going to their death in storm and calm but never have they seen another such slaughter as that day's sun showed.

The anti-aircraft guns roared vainly; some few of our own planes that had escaped returned to add their futile, puny blows. The waters about the ships were torn to foam, while the ships themselves were changed to furnaces of bursting flame—until the seas in mercy closed above them and took their torn steel, and the shattered bodies that they held, to the silence of the deep....

We got it all at Washington. I sat in a room with a group of white-faced men who stared blindly at a radiocone where a quiet voice was telling of disaster. It was Admiral Graymont speaking to us from the

bridge of the big dreadnaught, Lincoln, the flagship of the combined fleet. Good old Graymont! His best friend, Bill Schuler, Secretary of the Navy, was sitting wordless there beside me.

"It is the end," the quiet voice was saying; "the cruiser squadrons are gone.... Two more battleships have gone down: there are only five of us left.... A squadron of enemy planes is coming in above. Our men have fought bravely and with never a chance.... There!—they've got us!—the bombs! Good-by, Bill, old fellow—"

The radiocone was silent with a silence that roared deafeningly in our ears. And, beside me, I saw the Secretary of the Navy, a Navy now without ships or men, drop his tired, lined face into his hands, while his broad shoulders shook convulsively. The rest of us remained in our chairs, too stunned to do anything but look at one another in horror.

He expected them to strike at New York. I was sent up there, and it was there that I saw Paul again. I met him on lower Broadway, and I went up to him with my hand reaching for his. I didn't admire Paul's affiliations, but he had warned me—he had tried to save my life—and I wanted to thank him.

But his hand did not meet mine. There was a strange, wild look in

his eyes—I couldn't define it—and he brought his gaze back from far off to stare at me as if I were a stranger.

Then: "Still got that A.B.C. ship?" he demanded.

"Yes," I answered wonderingly.

"Junk it!" he said. And his laugh was as wild and incomprehensible as his look had been. I stared after him as he walked away. I was puzzled, but there were other things to think of then.

A frenzy of preparation—and all in vain. The enemy fooled us; the radio brought the word from Quebec.

"They have entered the St. Lawrence," was the message it flashed. Then, later: "The Red fleet is passing toward Montreal. Enemy planes have spotted all radio towers. There is one above us now—" And that ended the message from Quebec.

But we got more information later. They landed near Montreal; they were preparing a great base for offensive operations; the country was overrun with a million men; the sky was full of planes by night and day; there was no artillery, no field guns of any sort, but there were torpedo-planes by tens of thousands, which made red fields of

waiting death where trucks placed them as they took them from the ships.

And there were some of us who smiled sardonically in recollection of the mammoth plants the Vornikoff Reds had installed in Central Russia, and the plaudits that had greeted their plans for nitrogen fixation. They were to make fertilizers; the nitrates would be distributed without cost to the farms—this had pacified the Agrarians—and here were their "nitrates" that were to make fertile the fields of Russia: countless thousands of tons of nitro-explosives in these flying torpedoes!

But if we smiled mirthlessly at these recollections we worked while we chewed on our cud of bitterness. There came an order: "Evacuate New England," and the job was given to me.

With planes—a thousand of them—trucks, vans, the railroads, we gathered those terrified people into concentration camps, and took them over the ground, under the ground, and through the air to the distributing camp at Buffalo, where they were scattered to other points.

I saw the preparations for a battle-front below me as I skimmed over Connecticut. Trenches made a thin line that went farther than I could

see! Here was the dam that was expected to stop the enemy columns from the north. I think no one then believed that our air-force could check the assault. The men of the fighting planes were marked for death; one read it in their eyes; but who of us was not?

How those giant cruisers would be downed no man could say, but we worked on in a blind desperation; we would hold that invading army as long as men could sight a gun; we would hold them back; and somehow, someway, we must find the means to repel the invasion from the air!

I saw the lines of track that made a network back to the trenches. Like the suburban lines around New York, they would carry thousands of single cars, each driven at terrific speed by the air plane propeller at its bow. With these, the commanders could shift their forces to whatever sector was hardest pressed. They would be bombed, of course, but the hundreds of tracks would not all be destroyed—and the line must be held!

The line! it brought a strangling lump to my throat as I saw those thin markings of trenches, the marching bodies of troops, the brave, hopeless, determined men who went singing to their places in that line. But my planes were winging past me; my job was ahead, where a multitude still waited and prayed for deliverance.

We never finished the job; in two days the red horde was upon us. Their swarming troops were convoyed by planes, but no effort was made to fly over our lines and launch an attack. Were they feeling their way? Did they think now that they would find us passive and unresisting? Did they want to take our cities undamaged? Oh, we asked ourselves a thousand questions with no answer to any—except the knowledge that a million men were marching from the north; that their fleet of planes would attack as soon as the troops encountered resistance; that our batteries of anti-aircraft guns would harry them as they came, and our air-fleet, held back in reserve, would take what the batteries left....

My last planes with their fugitive loads passed close to the lines of red troops. There were red planes overhead, but they let us pass unhindered. Fleeing, driving wildly toward the south, we were unworthy, it seemed, of even their contemptuous attention. But I was sick to actual nausea at sight of the villages and cities where only a part of the population had escaped. The roads, in front of the red columns, were jammed with motors and with men and women and children on foot: a hopeless tangle.

I was watching the pitiful flight below me, cursing my own impotence to be of help, when a shrill whistling froze me rigid to my controls. I had heard it before—there could be no mistaking the cry

of that oncoming torpedo—and I saw the damnable thing pass close to my ship.

I was doing two hundred—my motor was throttled down—but this inhuman monster passed me as if my ship were frozen as unmoving as myself. It tore on ahead. I saw an enemy plane above it some five thousand feet. The torpedo was checked; I saw it poise; then it curved over and down. And the screaming motor took up its cry that was like a thousand devils until its sound was lost in the screams from below and the infernal blast of its own explosion.

Only a trial flight—an experiment to test their controls! No need for me to try to tell you of the thoughts that tore me through and through while I struggled to bring my ship to an even keel in the hurricane of explosion that drove up at me from below. But I spat out the one word: "Brotherhood!" and I prayed for a place in the front line where I might send one shot at least against so beastly a foe.

That was somewhere in Massachusetts. Their foremost columns were close behind. They came to a stop some fifty miles from our waiting line of battle: I learned this when I got to Washington. And the reason, too, was known; it was published in all the papers. There had been messages to the President, broadcast to the world from an unknown source:

"To the President of the United States—warning! This war must end. You, as Commander-in-Chief of the American forces can bring it to a close. I have prevailed upon the Red Army of the Brotherhood to halt. They have listened to me. You, also, must take heed.

"You will issue orders at once to withdraw all resistance. You will disband your army, ground all your planes; bring all your artillery into one place and prepare to turn the government of this country over to the representatives of the Central Council. You will act at once."

"This war is ended. All wars are ended forevermore. I have spoken."

And the strange message was signed "Paul."

The wild words of a maniac, it was thought at first. Yet the fact remained that the enemy's advance had ceased. Who was this "Paul" who had "prevailed upon the Red Army" to halt?

And then the obvious answer occurred; it was a ruse on the part of the Reds. They feared to attack; their strength was not as great as we had thought—officers and men of all branches of the service took new heart and plunged more frenziedly still into the work of preparation.

There were direction-finders that had taken the message from several stations; their pointers converged upon one definite location in southern Ohio. Over an area of twenty square miles, that place was combed for a sending radio where the message could have originated —combed in vain.

The next demand came at ten on the following morning.

"To the President of the United States: You have disregarded my warning. You will not do so again; I have power to enforce my demands. I had hoped that bloodshed and destruction might cease, but it is plain that only that will save you from your own headstrong folly. I must strike. At noon to-day the Capitol in Washington will be destroyed. See that it is emptied of human life. I have spoken. Paul."

A maniac, surely; yet a maniac with strange powers. For the graphs of the radio direction-finders showed a curve. And when they were assembled the reading could only mean that the instrument that had sent the threat had moved over fifty miles during the few minutes of its sending. This, I think, was what brought the order to vacate the big domed building in Washington.

Of course the Capitol Building had been searched; there was not a nook nor corner from roof to basement but had been gone over in

search of an explosive machine. And now it was empty, and a guard of soldiers made a solid cordon surrounding it. No one could approach upon the ground; and, above, a series of circling patrol-planes, one squadron above another, guarded against approach by air. With such a defense the Capitol and its grounds seemed impregnable.

My watch said 11:59; I held it in my hand and watched the seconds tick slowly by. The city was hushed; it seemed that no man was so much as breathing ... 11:59 :60!—and an instant later I heard the shriek of something that tore the air to screaming fragments. I saw it as it came on a straight, level line from the east; a flash like a meteor of glistening white. It passed beneath the planes, that were motionless by contrast, drove straight for the gleaming Capitol dome, passed above it, and swept on in a long flattened curve that bent outward and up.

It was gone from my sight, though the shrieking air was still tearing at my ears, when I saw the great building unfold. Time meant nothing; my racing mind made slow and deliberate the explosion that lifted the roofs and threw the walls in dusty masses upon the ground. So slow it seemed!—and I had not even seen the shell that

the white meteor-ship had fired. Yet there was the beautiful building, expanding, disintegrating. It was a cloud of dust when the concussion reached me to dash me breathless to the earth....

he white meteor was the vehicle of "Paul," the dictator. From it had come the radio message whose source had moved so swiftly. I saw this all plainly.

There was a conference of high officials at the War Department Building, and the Secretary summed up all that was said:

"A new form of air-flight, and a new weapon more destructive than any we have known! That charge of explosive that was fired at the Capitol was so small as to be unseen. We can't meet it; we can only fight. Fight on till the end."

A message came in as we sat there, a message to the Commander-in-Chief who had come over from the White House under military guard.

"Surrender!" it demanded; "I have shown you my power; it is

inexhaustible, unconquerable. Surrender or be destroyed; it is the dawn of a new day, the day of the Brotherhood of Man. Let bloodshed cease. Surrender! I command it! Paul."

The President of the United States held the flimsy paper in his hand. He rose slowly to his feet, and he read it aloud to all of us assembled there; read it to the last hateful word. Then:

"Surrender?" he asked. He turned steady, quiet eyes upon the big flag whose red and white and blue made splendid the wall behind him—and I'll swear that I saw him smile.

We have had many presidents since '76; big men, some of them; tall, handsome men; men who looked as if nature had moulded them for a high place. This man was small of stature; the shortest man in all that room if he had stood, but he was big—big! Only one who is great can look deep through the whirling turmoil of the moment to find the eternal verities that are always underneath—and smile!

"Men must die,"—he spoke meditatively; in seeming communing with himself, as one who tries to face a problem squarely and honestly—"and nations must pass; time overwhelms us all. Yet there is that which never dies and never surrenders."

He looked about the room now, as if he saw us for the first time.

"Gentlemen," he said quietly, "we have here an ultimatum. It is backed by power which our Secretary of War says is invincible. We are faced by an enemy who would annihilate these United States, and this new power fights on the side of the enemy.

"Must we go the way of England, of France, of all Europe? It would seem so. The United States of America is doomed. Yet each one of us will meet what comes bravely, if, facing our own end, we know that the principles upon which this nation is founded must go on; if only the Stars and Stripes still floats before our closing eyes to assure us that some future day will see the resurrection of truth and of honor and kindness among men.

"We will fight, as our Secretary of War has said—fight on to the end. We will surrender—never! That is our answer to this one who calls himself 'Paul.'"

We could not speak; I do not know how long the silence lasted. But I know that I left that room a silent man among many silent men, in whose eyes I saw a reflection of the emotion that filled my own heart. It was the end—the end of America, of millions of American homes—but this was better than surrender to such a foe. Better death

than slavery to that race of bloodthirsty oppressors.

But who was "Paul?" This question kept coming repeatedly to my mind. The press of the country echoed the President's words, then dipped their pens in vitriol to heap scorching invective upon the head of the tyrant. The power of the Reds we might have met—or so it was felt—but this new menace gave the invaders a weapon we could not combat. It was power!—a means of flight beyond anything known!—an explosive beside which our nitro compounds were playthings for a child.

"Who is Paul?" It was not only myself who asked the question through those next long hours, but perhaps I was the only one in whose mind was a disturbing certainty that the answer was mine if I could but grasp it.

I was remembering Paris; I was thinking of that peaceful, happy city before the First of May, before the world had gone mad and a raging, red beast had laid it waste and overrun it. And of Paul Stravoinski—my friend "Straki" of college days—who had warned me. He had known what was coming. He himself had said that he had prayed to "them" for delay; that in a few weeks he would do—what?... And suddenly I knew.

Paul had succeeded; his research had ended in the dissection of the atom; he had unleashed the sub-atomic power of matter. Only this could explain the wild flight through the sky, the terrific explosion at the Capitol. It was Paul—my friend, Paul Stravoinski—who was imposing his will upon the world.

I said nothing as I took off; the swiftest plane was at my command. I might be wrong; I must not arouse false hopes; but I must find Paul. And the papers were black with scareheads of another threat as I left Washington:

"You have twenty-four hours to surrender. There shall be one last day of grace." Signed: "Paul."

There was more of the wild talk of the beauties of this new dispensation—a mixture of idealistic folly and of threats of destruction. I needed no more to prove the truth of my suspicions. No one but the Paul I had known could cling so tenaciously to his dreams; no one but he could be so blind to the actual horror of the new oligarchy he would impose upon the world.

I flew alone; no one but myself must try to hunt him out. I paid no attention to the radio direction of the last message; he would fly far afield to send it; distance meant nothing to one who held his power. I

must look for him at his laboratory, that cluster of deserted buildings that stood all alone by a distant railway siding; it was there he had worked.

He met me with a pistol in his hand—a tiny gun that fired only a .22 calibre bullet.

"Put down your pop-gun," I told him and brushed through the open door into the room that had been his laboratory. "I am unarmed, and I'm here to talk business.

"You are 'Paul'!" I shot the sentence at him as if it were a bullet that must strike him down.

He did not answer directly; just nodded in confirmation of some unspoken thought.

"You have found me," he said slowly; "you were the only one I feared."

Then he came out with it, and his eyes blazed with a maniacal light.

"Yes, I am Paul! and this 'pop-gun' in my hand is the weapon that destroyed your Capitol at Washington. The bullet contained less than a grain of tritonite; that is the name I have given my explosive."

He aimed the little pistol toward me where I stood. "These bullets are more lightly charged—they are to protect myself—and the one ten-thousandth of a milligram in the end of each will blow you into bits! Sit down. I will not be checked now. You will never leave this place alive!"

"Less than a grain of tritonite!"—and I had seen a great building go down to dust at its touch! I sat down in the chair where he directed, and I turned away from the fanatical glare of Paul's eyes to look about me.

There was poverty here no longer; no makeshift apparatus greeted my eyes, but the finest of laboratory equipment. Paul read my thoughts.

"They have been liberal," he told me; "the Central Council has financed my work—though I have kept my whereabouts a secret even from them. But they would not wait. I told you in Paris, and you did not believe. And now—now I have succeeded! the research is done!"

He half turned to pick up a flake of platinum no larger than one's finger-nail; it was a weight that was used on a delicate balance.

"Matter is matter no longer," he said; "I have resolved it into energy. I hold here in my hand power to destroy an army, or to drive a fleet of ships. I, Paul, will build a new world. I will give to man a surcease from labor; I will give him rest; I will do the work of the world. My tritonite that can destroy can also create; it shall be used for that alone. This is the end of war. Here is wealth; here is power; I shall give it to mankind, and, under the rule of the Brotherhood, a united world will arise and go forward to new growth, to a greater civilization, to a building of a new heaven on earth."

He was pacing up and down the room. His hands were shaking; the muscles of his face that twitched and trembled were moulded into deep lines. I sat there and realized that within that room, directly before my eyes, was the Dictator of the World. It was true—I could not doubt it—Paul Straki of college days had made his dreams come true; his research was ended. And this new "Paul" who held in those trembling hands the destinies of mankind, at whose word kings and presidents trembled, was utterly mad!

I tried to talk and tell him of the truth we knew was true. He would have none of it; his dreams possessed him. In the bloody flag of this new Russia he could see only the emblem of freedom; the men who marched beneath that banner were his brothers, unwitting in the destruction they wrought. It was all that they knew. But they fought

for the right. They would cease fighting now, and would join him in the work of moulding a new race. And even their leaders, who had sometimes opposed—were they not kind at heart? Had they not checked the advance of an irresistible army to give him and his new weapon an opportunity to open the eyes of the people? Theirs was no wish to destroy; their hearts ached for their victims who refused to listen and could be convinced only by force.

And as he talked on there passed before my eyes the vision of an aerial torpedo and a blood-red ship above, where these "kindly" men who were Paul's allies turned the instrument of death upon huddled, screaming folk—and laughed, no doubt, at such good sport.

I thought of many things. I was tensed one moment to throw myself upon the man; and an instant later I was searching my mind for some argument, some gleam of reason, with which I could tear aside the illusions that held him. I saw him cross the room where a radio stood, and he switched on the instrument for the news-broadcast service. The shouting of an excited voice burst into the room.

"The Reds have advanced," said the voice. "Their armies have crossed the Connecticut line. They are within ten miles of the American forces. The twenty-four hours of grace promised by the tyrant 'Paul' was a lie. The battle is already on."

I saw the tall figure of Paul sink to its former stoop; the lameness that had vanished in the moment of his exaltation had returned. He limped a pace or two toward me.

"They said they would wait!" His voice was a hoarse whisper. "General Vornikoff himself gave me his promise!"

I was on my feet, then. "What matter?" I shouted. "What difference does it make—a few hours or a day? Your damned patriots, your dear brothers in arms—they are destroying us this instant! And not one of our men but is worth more than the whole beastly mob!"

I was wild with the picture that came so clear and plain before my eyes. I had my pistol in my hand; I was tempted to fire. It was his whisper that stopped me.

"They have crossed Massachusetts! And Maida is there in Melford!"

There was no resisting his strength that tore my weapon from me. His tritonite pistol was pressed into my side, and his hand upon my collar threw me ahead of him toward a rear room, then out into a huge shed. I had only a quick glimpse of the airplane that was housed there. It was a white cylinder, and the stern that was toward me showed a funnel-shaped port.

I was thrown by that same furious strength through a door of the ship; I saw Paul Stravoinski seat himself before some curious controls. The ship that held me rose; moved slowly through an opened door; and with a screech from the stern it tore off and up into the air.

I have said Paul could fly; but the terrific flight of the screaming thing that held us seemed beyond the power of man to control. I was stunned with the thundering roar and the speed that held me down and back against a cabin wall.

How he found Melford, I cannot know; but he found it as a homing pigeon finds its loft. He checked our speed with a sickening swiftness that made my brain reel. There were red ships above, but they let the white ship pass unchallenged. There were no Red soldiers on the ground—only the marks where they had passed.

From the distance came a never-ceasing thunder of guns. The village was quiet. It still burned, blazing brightly in places, again smouldering sluggishly and sending into the still air smoke clouds whose fumes were a choking horror of burned flesh. There were bodies in grotesque scattering about the streets; some of them were black and charred.

Paul Stravoinski took me with him as he dashed for a house that the flames had not touched. And I was with him as he smashed at the door and broke into the room.

There was splintered furniture about. A cabinet, whose glass doors had been wantonly smashed, leaned crazily above its fallen books, now torn, scuffed and muddy upon the floor. Through a shattered window in the bed-room beyond came a puff of the acrid smoke from outside to strangle the breath in my throat. On the floor in a shadowed corner lay the body of a woman—a young woman as her clotted tangle of golden hair gave witness. She stirred and moaned half-consciously.... And the lined face of Paul Stravoinski was a terrible thing to see as he went stumblingly across the room to gather that body into his arms.

I had known Maida; I had seen their love begin in college days. I had known a laughing girl with sunshine in her hair, a girl whose soft eyes had grown so tenderly deep when they rested upon Paul—but this that he took in his arms, while a single dry sob tore harshly at his throat, this was never Maida!

There were red drops that struck upon his hands or fell sluggishly to the floor; the head and face had taken the blow of a clubbed rifle or a heavy boot. The eyes in that tortured face opened to rest upon Paul's,

the lips were moving.

"I told them of you," I heard her whisper. "I told them that you would come—and they laughed." Unconsciously she tried to draw her torn clothing about her, an instinctive reaction to some dim realization of her nakedness. She was breathing feebly. "And now—oh, Paul!—Paul!—you—have come—too late!"

I hardly think Paul knew I was there or sensed that I followed where he carried in his arms the bruised body that had housed the spirit of Maida. He flew homeward like a demon, but he moved as one in a dream.

Only when I went with him into the room where he had worked, did he turn on me in sudden fury.

"Out!" he screamed. "Get out of my sight! It is you who have done this—your damned armies who would not do as I ordered! If you had not resisted, if you had—"

I broke in there.

"Did we do that?" I outshouted him, and I pointed to the torn body on a cot. His eyes followed my shaking hand. "No, it was your

brothers—your dear comrades who are bringing the brotherhood of men into the world! Well, are you proud? Are you happy and satisfied—with what your brothers do with women?"

It must be a fearful thing to have one's dreams turn bitter and poisonous. Paul Stravoinski seemed about to spring upon me. He was crouched, and the muscles of his thin neck were like wire; his face was a ghastly thing, his eyes so staring bright, and the sensitive mouth twisting horribly. But he sprang at last not at me but toward the door, and without a word from his tortured lips he opened it and motioned me out.

Even there I heard echoes of distant guns and the heavier, thudding sounds that must be their aerial torpedoes. My feet were leaden as I strained every muscle to hurry toward my ship. Through my mind was running the threat of the Russian, Vornikoff: "We even tell you the date: in thirty days." And this was the thirtieth day—thirty days that a state of war had existed.

The battle was on; the radio had spoken truly. I saw its raging fires as I came up from our rear where the gray-like smoke clouds shivered in the unending blast. But I saw stabbing flames that struck upward from the ground to make a wall of sharp, fiery spears, and I knew that every darting flame was launching a projectile from our

anti-aircraft guns.

The skies were filled with the red aircraft of the enemy, but their way was an avenue of hell where thousands of shells filled the air with their crashing explosions. There were torpedoes, the unmanned airships whose cargo was death, and they were guided to their marks despite the inferno that raged about the red ships above.

I saw meteors that fell, the red flames that enveloped them no redder than the bodies of the ships. And, as I leaped from my plane that I had landed back of our lines, I sensed that the enemy was withdrawing.

There was a colonel of artillery—I had known him in days of peace—and he threw his arms around me and executed a crazy dance. "We've beaten them back, Bob!" he shouted, and repeated it over and over in a delirium of joy.

I couldn't believe it; not those cruisers that I had seen over Paris. Another brief moment showed my fears were all too rational.

A shrieking hailstorm of torpedoes preceded them; the ships were directing them from afar. And, while some of the big shells went wild and overshot our lines, there were plenty that found their mark.

I was smashed flat by a stunning concussion. Behind me the place where Colonel Hartwell had stood was a smoking crater; his battery of guns had been blasted from the earth. Up and down the whole line, far beyond the range of my sight, the eruption continued. The ground was a volcano of flame, as if the earth had opened to let through the interior fires, and the air was filled with a litter of torn bodies and sections of shattered guns.

No human force could stand up under such a bombardment. Like others about me, I gripped tight upon something within me that was my self-control, and I marveled that I yet lived while I waited for the end.

Beyond the smoke clouds was a hillside, swarming with figures in red; solid masses of troops that came toward us. Above was the red fleet, passing safely above our flame-blasted lines; there were bombs falling upon those batteries here and there whose fire was unsilenced. And then, from the south, came a roar that pierced even the bedlam about me. The sun shone brightly there where the smoke-clouds had not reached, and it glinted and sparkled from the wings of a myriad of our planes.

There was something that pulled tight at my throat; I know I tore at it with fumbling hands, as if that something were an actual band that

had clamped down and choked me, while I stared at that true line of sharp-pointed V's. The air-force of the United States had been ordered in; and they were coming, coming—to an inevitable death!

I tried to tear my eyes away from that oncoming fleet, but I could not move. I saw their first contact with the enemy; so small, they were, in contrast with the big red cruisers. They attacked in formations; they drove down and in; and they circled and whirled before they fluttered to earth....

Dimly, through the stupor that numbed my brain, I heard men about me shouting with joy. I felt more than saw the fall of a monster red craft; it struck not far away. The voices were thanking God—for what? Another red ship fell—and another; and through all the roaring inferno a sound was tearing—a ripping, terrible scream that went on and on. And above me, when I forced my eyes upward, was a flash of white.

It darted like a live thing among the red ones whose guns blazed madly—and the red ships in clotted groups fell away and over and down as the white one passed. They had been burst open where some power had blasted them, and their torn hulls showed gaping as they fell.

For a time the air was silent and empty above; the white, flashing thing had passed from sight, for the line of red ships was long. Then again it returned, and it threw itself into the mad whirl in the south where the air-force of the American people was fighting its last fight.

I was screaming insanely as I saw it come back. The white ship!—the blast of vapor from its funneled stern—It was Paul!—Paul Stravoinski!—Paul the Dictator!—and he was fighting on our side!

His ship had been prepared; I had seen the machine-guns on her bow. Paul was working them from within, and every bullet was tipped with the product of his brain—the deadly tritonite!

The white flash swung wide in a circle that took it far away. It came back above the advancing army of the Reds. It swerved once wildly, then settled again upon its course, and the raging hell that the Reds had turned loose upon our lines was as nothing to the destruction that poured upon the Red troops from above.

A messenger of peace, that ship; I knew well why Paul had painted it white. And, instead of peace—!

He was flying a full mile from our lines, yet the torn earth and great boulders crashed among us even then. There were machine-guns

firing ceaselessly from the under side of the ship. What charges of tritonite had the demented man placed in those shells?

Below and behind it, as it flashed across our view, was a fearful, writhing mass where the earth itself rose up in unending, convulsive agony. A volcano of fire followed him, a fountain of earth that ripped and tore and stretched itself in a writhing, tortured line across the land as the white ship passed.

No man who saw that and lived has found words to describe the progress of that monstrous serpent; the valley itself is there for men to see. The roar was beyond the limit of men's strained nerves. I found myself cowering upon the ground when the white ship came back; I followed it fearfully with my eyes until I saw it swoop falteringly down. Such power seemed not for men but for gods; I could not have met Paul Stravoinski then but in a posture of supplication. But I leaped to my feet and raced madly across the torn earth as I saw the white ship touch the ground—rise—fall again—and end its flight where it ploughed a furrow across a brown field....

I raised Paul Stravoinski's head in my arms where I found him in the ship. An enemy shell had entered that cabin; it must have come early in the fight, but he had fought gamely on. And the eyes that looked up into mine had none of the wild light I had seen. They were the

eyes of Paul Straki, the comrade of those few long years before, and he smiled as he said: "Voila, friend Bob: c'est fini! And now I go for a long, long walk. We will talk of poetry, Maida and I...."

But his dreams were still with him. He opened his eyes to stare intently at me. "You will see that it is not in vain?" he questioned; then smiled as one who is at peace, as he whispered: "Yes, I know you will—my friend, Bob—"

And his fixed gaze went through and beyond me, while he tried, in broken sentences, to give the vision that had been his. So plain it was to him now.

"The wild work—of a mistaken people. America will undo it.... A world at peace.... The vast commerce—of the skies—I see it—so clearly.... It will break down—all barriers.... A beautiful, happy world...."

His lips moved feebly at the last. I could not speak; could not even call him by name; I could only lean my head closer to hear.

One whispered word; then another: a fragment of poetry! I had heard him quote it often. But the whispered words were not for me. Paul was speaking to someone beside him—someone my blind, human

eyes could not see....

I am writing these words at my desk in the great Transportation Building in New York. It stands upon the site of the Chrysler Building that towered here—until one of the flying torpedoes came over to hunt it out. They landed several in New York; how long ago it all seems that the threat of utter destruction hung over the whole nation—the whole world.

And now from my window I see the sparkling flash of ships. The air is filled with them; I am still unaccustomed to their speed. But a wisp of vapor from each bell-shaped stern throws them swiftly on their way; it marks the continuous explosion of that marvel of a new age—tritonite! There are tremendous terminals being built; the air-transport lines are being welded into efficient units that circle the world; and the world is becoming so small!

The barriers are gone; all nations are working as one to use wisely this strange new power for the work of this new world. No more poverty; no more of the want and desperate struggle that leads a whole people into the insane horrors of war; it is a glorious world of which we dream and which is coming slowly to be....

But I think we must dream well and work well to bring to actuality

the beautiful visions in those far-seeing eyes of the man called Paul —Dictator, one time, of the whole world.

91 The Earthman's Burden by Roman Frederick Starzl

There is foul play on Mercury—until Denny Olear of the Interplanetary Flying Police gets after his man.

Aproximate word count: 6,000

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Denny Olear was playing blackjack when the colonel's orderly found him. He hastily buttoned his tunic and in a few minutes, alert and very military, was standing at attention in the little office on the ground floor of the Denver I. F. P. barracks. His swanky blue uniform fitted without a wrinkle. His little round skullcap was perched at the regulation angle.

"Olear," said the colonel, "they're having a little trouble at the Blue River Station, Mercury."

"Trouble? Uh-huh," Olear said placidly.

The colonel looked him over. He saw a man past his first youth. Thirty-five, possibly forty. Olear was well-knit, sandy-haired, not over five feet six inches in height. His hair was close-cropped, his features phlegmatic, his eyes a light blue with thick, short, light-colored lashes, his teeth excellent. A scar, dead white on a brown cheekbone, was a reminder of an "encounter" with one of the numerous sauriens of Venus.

"I'm sending you," explained the colonel, "because you're more experienced, and not like some of these kids, always spoiling for a fight. There's something queer about this affair. Morones, factor of the Blue River post, reports that his assistant has disappeared. Vanished. Simply gone. But only three months ago the former factor—Morones was his assistant—disappeared. No hide nor hair of him. Morones reported to the company, the Mercurian Trading Concession, and they called me. Something, they think, is rotten."

"Yes, sir."

"I guess I needn't tell you," the colonel went on, "that you have to use tact. People don't seem to appreciate the Force. What with the lousy politicians begrudging every cent we get, and a bunch of suspicious foreign powers afraid we'll get too good—"

"Yeah, I know. Tact, that's my motto. No rough stuff." He saluted, turned on his heel.

"Just a minute!" The colonel had arisen. He was a fine, ascetic type of man. He held out his hand.

"Good-by, Olear. Watch yourself!"

When Olear had taken his matter-of-fact departure the colonel ran his fingers through his whitening hair. In the past several months he had sent five of his best men on dangerous missions—missions requiring tact, courage, and, so it seemed, very much luck. And only two of the five had come back. In those days the Interplanetary Flying Police did not enjoy the tremendous prestige it does now. The mere presence of a member of the Force is enough, in these humdrum days of interplanetary law and order, to quell the most serious disturbance anywhere in the solar system. But it was not always thus. This astounding prestige had to be earned with blood and courage, in many a desperate and lonely battle; had to be snatched from the dripping jaws of death.

Olear checked over his flying ovoid, got his bearings from the port astronomer, set his coordinate navigator and shoved off. Two weeks later he plunged into the thick, misty atmosphere on the dark side of

Mercury.

Ancient astronomers had long suspected that Mercury always presented the same side to the sun, though they were ignorant that the little planet had water and air. Its sunward side is a dreary, sterile, hot and hostile desert. Its dark side is warm and humid, and resembles to some extent the better known jungles and swamps of Venus. But it has a favored belt, some hundreds of miles wide, around its equator, where the enormous sun stays perpetually in one spot on the horizon. Sunward is the blinding glare of the desert; on the dark side, enormous banks of lowering clouds. On the dark margin of this belt are the "ringstorms," violent thunderstorms that never cease. They are the source of the mighty rivers which irrigate the tropical habitable belt and plunge out, boiling, far into the desert.

Olear's little ship passed through the ringstorms, and he did not take over the controls until he recognized the familiar mark of the trading company, a blue comet on the aluminum roof of one of the larger buildings. Visibility was good that day, but despite the unusual clarity of the atmosphere there was a suggestion of the sinister about the lifeless scene—the vast, irresistible river, the riotously colored jungle roof. The vastness of nature dwarfed man's puny work. One horizon flashed incessantly with livid lightning, the other was one blinding blaze of the nearby sun. And almost lost below in the

savage landscape was man's symbol of possession, a few metal sheds in a clear, fenced space of a few acres.

Olear cautiously checked speed, skimmed over the turbid surface of the great river, and set her down on the ground within the compound. With his pencil-like ray-tube in his hand he stepped out of the hatchway.

A Mercurian native came out of the residence, presently, his hands together in the peace sign. For the benefit of Earthlubbers whose only knowledge of Mercury is derived from the teleview screen, it should be explained that Mercurians are not human, even if they do slightly resemble us. They hatch from eggs, pass one life-phase as frog-like creatures in their rivers, and in the adult stage turn more human in appearance. But their skin remains green and fish-belly white. There is no hair on their warty heads. Their eyes have no lids, and have a peculiar dead, staring look when they sleep. And they carry a peculiar, fishy odor with them at all times.

This Mercurian looked at Olear seemingly without interest.

"Where is Morones?" the officer inquired.

"Morones?" the native piped, in English. "Inside. He busy."

"All right. I'm coming in."

"He busy."

"Yeah, move over."

Though the native was a good six inches taller than Olear he stepped aside when the officer pushed him. Men—and Mercurians—had a way of doing that when they looked into those colorless eyes. They were not as phlegmatic as the face. Morones was sitting in his office.

"Well, I'm here," Olear announced, helping himself to a chair.

"Yes"—sourly. "Who invited you?"

Olear looked at the factor levelly, appraising him. A big man, fat, but the fat well distributed. Saturnine face, dark hair, dark and bristly beard. The kind that thrived where other men became weak and fever-ridden. Also, to judge by his present appearance, an unpleasant companion and a nasty enemy.

"Don't see what difference it makes to you," Olear answered in his own good time; "but the company invited me."

"They would!" Morones growled. His eyes flickered to the door, and

quick as a cat, Olear leaped to one side, his ray-pencil in his hand.

Morones had not moved, and in the door stood the native, motionless and without expression. Morones laughed nastily.

"Kind of jumpy, eh? What is it, Nargyll?"

Nargyll burst into a burbling succession of native phrases, which Olear had some difficulty following.

"Nargyll wants to move your ship into one of the sheds, but the activator key's gone."

"Yeah, I know," Olear assented casually. "I got it. Leave the ship till I get ready. Then I'll put it away. Get out, Nargyll."

The native, hesitated, then on the lift of Morones' eyebrows departed. Olear shifted a chair so that he could watch both Morones and the door. He reopened the conversation easily:

"Well, we understand each other. You don't want me here and I'm here. So what are you going to do about it?"

Morones flushed. He struggled to keep his temper down.

"What do you want to know?"

"What happened to the factor who was here before you?"

"I don't know. The translucene wasn't coming in like it should. Sammis went out into the jungle for a palaver with the chiefs to find out why. And he didn't come back."

"You didn't find out where he went?"

"I just told you," Morones said impatiently, "he went out to see the native chiefs."

"Alone?"

"Of course, alone. There were only two of us Earthmen here. Couldn't abandon this post to the wogglies, could we? Not that it'd make much difference. Except for Nargyll, none'll come near."

"You never heard of him again?"

"No! Dammit, no! Say, didn't they have any dumber strappers around than you? I told you once—I tell you again—I never saw hide nor hair of him after that."

"Aw-right, aw-right!" Olear regarded Morones placidly. "And so you took the job of factor and radioed for an assistant, and when the assistant came he disappeared."

Morones grunted, "He went out to get acquainted with the country and didn't come back."

Olear masked his close scrutiny of the factor under his idle and expressionless gaze. He was not ready to jump to the conclusion that Morones' uneasiness sprang from a sense of guilt. Guilty or not, he had a right to feel uneasy. The man would be dense indeed if he did not realize he was in line for suspicion, and he did not look dense. Indeed, he was obviously a shrewd character.

"Let me see your 'lucene."

Morones rose. Despite his bulk he stepped nimbly. He had the nimbleness of a Saturnian bear, which is great, as some of the earlier explorers learned to their dismay.

"That's the first sensible question you've asked," Morones snorted. "Take a look at our 'lucene. Ha! Have a good look!"

He led the way across the compound, waved his hand before the

door of a strongly built shed in a swift, definite combination, and the door opened, revealing the interior. He waved invitingly.

"You go first," Olear said.

With a sneer Morones stepped in. "You're safe, boy, you're safe."

Olear looked at the small pile on the floor in astonishment. Instead of the beautiful, semi-transparent chips of translucene, the dried sap of a Mercurian tree which is invaluable to the world as the source of an unfailing cancer cure, there were only a few dirty, dried up shavings, hardly worth shipping back to Earth for refining. The full significance of the affair began to dawn on the officer. The translucene trees grew only in this favored section of Mercury, and the Earth company had a monopoly of the entire supply. Justly, for only on Earth was cancer known, and it was on the increase. That small, almost useless pile on the floor connoted a terrible drug famine for the human race.

Morones' smile might have been a grin of satisfaction, at Olear's question:

"Is that all you've bought since the last freighter was here?"'

"It is," he replied. "The last load went off six months ago, and this here shed should be full to the eaves. There'll be hell to pay."

"It may not be tactful," Olear remarked, "but if you've got your takings cached away somewhere to hold up the Earth for a big ransom, you'd better come across right now. You can't get by with it, fellow. You should have close to six million dollars' worth of it, and you can't get away. You just can't."

Morones controlled his anger with an effort.

"Like any dumb strapper, you've got your mind made up, ain't you? Well, go ahead. Get something on me. Here I was almost set to give you a lead that might get you somewhere. And you come shooting off—trying to make out I stole the 'lucene and killed those two fellows, eh? Go ahead! Get something on me! But not on Company grounds. You're leaving now!"

With that he made a lunge at the officer, quite beside himself with rage. Olear could have burnt him down, but he was far too experienced for such an amateurish trick. Instead he ducked to evade Morones' blow. But the big man was as agile as a panther. In mid-air, so it seemed, he changed his direction of attack. The big fist swept downward, striking Olear's head a glancing blow.

But the men of the Force have always been fighters, whatever their shortcomings as diplomats. Olear countered with a strong right to the body, thudding solidly, for Morones' softness did not go far below the surface. The factor whirled instantly, but not quite fast enough to bar the door. Olear was out and inside his ship in a few seconds, slamming the hatch.

"Tact!" he grinned to himself, inserting the activator key. "Tact is what a fella needs." The little space flier shot aloft, until the tiny figure of the factor stopped shaking its fist and entered the residence. The post had a flier of its own, of course, but Morones was too wise to use it in pursuit.

Olear considered what was best to do. Of course he could have placed Morones under arrest; could still do it; but that would not solve the mystery of the two deaths and the missing 'lucene. If the choleric factor was really guilty of the crimes, it would be better to let him go his way in the hope that he would betray himself. Olear regretted that he had not kept his tongue under closer curb. But there was no use regretting. Perhaps, after all, he ought to turn back to pump Morones for some helpful information.

His mind made up, he descended again until he was hovering a few feet from the ground.

"Morones!" he called. "Morones!" He held the hatch open.

Morones came to the door of the residence. He had a tube in his hand, a long-range weapon.

"Morones," Olear declared pompously. "I place you under arrest!"

The effect was instantaneous. Morones lifted the tube, and a glimmering, iridescent beam sprang out. The ship was up and away in a second, lurching and shivering uncomfortably every time the beam struck it in its upward flight. A good few seconds continued impingement....

But a miss is as good as a light-year. Miles high, Olear looked into his telens. Morones had laid aside his tube and was working with an instrument like a twin transit. Plotting the ship's course, naturally. Olear set his course for the Earth, and kept on it for a good twenty-four hours. Morones, if he was still watching him, would think he'd gone back for reinforcements. Such an assumption would be incredible now, but that was before the I. F. P. had achieved its present tremendous reputation.

Beyond observation range, Olear curved back toward Mercury again, and was almost inside its atmosphere when he made a

discovery that caused him to lose for a moment his natural indifference, and to clamp his jaws in anger. The current oxygen tank became empty, and when he removed it from the rack and put in a new one he found someone had let out all of this essential gas. The valve of every one of the spare tanks had been opened. Had Olear actually continued on his way to Earth he would have perished miserably of suffocation long before he could have returned to the Mercurian atmosphere. The officer whistled tunelessly through his teeth as he considered this fact.

The visibility was by this time normal; that is, so poor it would have been possible to land very close to the trading station. Olear was taking no chances, however, and came down a good three Earth miles away. The egg-shaped hull sank through the glossy, brilliant treetops, through twisted vines, and was buried in the dank gloom of the jungle. Here it might remain hidden for a hundred years.

The twilight of the jungle was almost darkness. Landmarks were not. But Olear made a few small, inconspicuous marks on trees with his knife until he came to an outcropping rock. He had noticed the scarlike white of it slashing through the jungle from the air, and used it as a guide to direct his stealthy return to the trading post. His belt chronometer told him it would be about time for Morones to get up from his "night's" sleep. A little discreet observation might tell much.

Long before he reached the compound, Olear heard the rushing of the great Blue River in its headlong plunge to the corrosive heat of the desert. And then, through the mists, he glimpsed the white metal walls of the Company sheds.

He climbed a tree and for a long time watched patiently, lying prone on a limb. Blood-sucking insects tortured him, and flat tree-lice, resembling discs with legs, crawled over him inquisitively. Olear tolerated them with stoic indifference until at last his patience was rewarded. Morones was coming out of the compound. He was alone and obviously did not suspect that he was being watched, for he stepped out briskly. Once in the jungle he walked even faster, watching out warily for the panther-like carnivora that were the most dangerous to man on Mercury.

Olear shinned to the ground and followed cautiously. Morones had his ray-tube with him, as any traveler in these jungles did. Olear could and did draw fast, but a dead trader would be valueless to him in his investigation, so he stalked him with every faculty strained to maintain complete silence. Often, in occasional clearings where the brown darkness grew less, he had to grovel on the slimy ground, picking up large bacteria that could be seen with the naked eye, and which left tiny, festering red marks on the skin. Mercury has no snakes.

The trader seemed to be heading for higher ground, for the path led ever upward, though not far from the tossing waters of the river. And then, suddenly, he disappeared.

Olear did not immediately hurry after him. A canny fugitive, catching sight of his pursuer, might suddenly drop to the ground and squirm to the side of the trail, there to wait and catch his pursuer as he passed. So Olear sidled into the all but impenetrable underbrush and slowly, with infinite caution, wormed his way along.

Presently he came to the little rise of ground where Morones had disappeared, but a painstaking search did not reveal the factor. There were, however, a number of other trails that joined the very faint trail he had been following, and now there was a well-defined track which continued to lead upward. With a grimace of disgust Olear again plunged into the odorous underbrush and traveled parallel to the trail. It was well he did so, for several Mercurians passed swiftly, intent, so it seemed, in answering a shrill call that at times came faintly to the ear. They carried slender spears.

Several more Mercurians passed. The growth was thinning out, and Olear did not dare to proceed further. However, from his hiding place he could discern a number of irregular cave openings, apparently leading downward. They were apparently the entrances to

one of the native cavern colonies, or possibly of a meeting place. No Earthman had ever entered one, but it was thought they had underground openings into the river.

As the cave openings were obviously natural, Olear conjectured that there might be others that were not used. After an anxious search he found one, narrow and irregular, well hidden under the broad, glossy leaves of some uncatalogued vegetation. As it showed no evidence of use, Olear unhesitatingly slid down into it. It was very narrow and irregular, so that often he was barely able to squeeze through. The roots of trees choked the passage for a dozen feet or so, requiring the vigorous use of a knife. Bathed in sweat, his uniform a filthy mass of rags, Olear at last saw light.

The passage ended abruptly near the roof of a large natural cavern. Lights glistened on stalactites which cut off Olear's larger view, and voices came from below. By craning his neck the officer could look between the pendent icicles of rock and see a fire burning on a huge oblong block of stone. Figures were sitting on the floor around this block—hundreds of Mercurians. The leaping flames made their white and green faces and bodies look frog-like and less human than usual.

But the figure that dominated the whole assemblage, both by its own

hugeness and the magnetic power that flowed from it, was not of Mercury but of Pluto. For the benefit of those who have never seen a stuffed Plutonian in our museums—and they are very rare—let me refer you to the pious books still to be found in ancient library collections. The ancients personified their fears and hates in a being they called the Devil. The resemblance between the Devil of their imagination and a Plutonian is really astounding. Horns, hoofs, tail—almost to the smallest detail, the resemblance is there.

Philosophers have written books on the "coincidence" in appearance of the ancient Devil and the modern decadent Plutonians. The Plutonians were once numerous and far advanced in science, and no doubt they called on the Earth many times, in prehistoric days, and the so-called Devil was a true picture of those vicious invaders, who are somewhat less human than usually portrayed. What was once classed as superstition was therefore a true racial memory. Long before our ancestors came out of their caves to build houses, the Plutonians had mastered interplanetary travel—only to forget the secret until human ingenuity should reveal it once more.

The modern Plutonian in that dank cave was over ten feet tall, and it is easy to see why he dominated the assemblage. His black visage was set in an evil smile; his ebony body glistened in the firelight. He held a three-pronged spear in one hand, and sat on a pile of rocks, a

sort of rough throne, so that he towered magnificently above all others.

He spoke the Mercurian language, although the liquid intonations came harshly from his sneering lips.

"Are ye assembled, frogfolk, that ye may hear the decision of your Thinking Ones?" he asked.

A respectful peeping chorus signified assent. But in that there was a hint of unrest; even of fear.

"Speak, ye Thinking One, your commands!"

"Hear me first!" An old Mercurian, unusually tall, faded and dry looking, his thick hide wrinkled like crushed leather, rose slowly to his feet and stepped before the oblong stone. His back was to the Plutonian, his face to the crescent of chiefs.

"The Old Wise One!" A twittering murmur went around the assemblage. "Hear the Old Wise One!"

"My people, I like this not!" began the ancient. "The Lords of the Green Star* have dealt with us fairly. Each phase* they have brought us the things we wanted"—he touched his spear and a few gaudy

ornaments on his otherwise naked body—"in exchange for the worthless white sap of our trees. If we longer offend the Lords of the Green Star—"

(Footnotes:

In their various languages, almost all solar races call Earth "The Green Star." Although conditions on Mercury are unfavorable, Earth can be seen from the dark star, on mountain tops, during occasional dispersals of the cloud masses.

The Mercurians had no conception of time before the Earthmen came. A "phase" is the time between calls of the freight ships, and is therefore variable; but in those days it was about six or seven months.)

A raucous laugh interrupted the Mercurian's feeble voice, and it echoed eerily from the walls of the chamber.

"Valueless ye call the white sap?" sneered the Plutonian. "Hear me. That sap you call valueless is dearer than life itself to the Lords of the Green Star. For they are afflicted in great numbers with a stinking death they call cancer. It destroys their vitals, and nothing—nothing in this broad universe can help them save this white sap ye

give them. In your hands ye have the power to bring the proud Lords of the Green Star to their knees. They would fill this chamber many times with their most priceless treasures for the sap ye give them so freely. Withhold the sap, and your Thinking Ones may go to the Green Star itself to rule over its Lords. They are desperate. Their emissaries may even now be on the way to beg your pleasure. Speak, Thinking Ones! Would ye not rule the Green Star?"

But the chiefs failed to become enthused. One of them rose and addressed the Plutonian:

"O Lord of the Outer Orbit! For near one full phase have ye dwelt among us. And well should ye know we have no desire for conquest. We fear to go to the Green Star to rule."

"Then let me rule for ye!" exclaimed the Plutonian instantly. "My brothers will abide with ye as your guests—shall see that ye receive a fair reward for the white sap; and I will convey your commands to the Lords of the Green Star."

The Old Wise One raised his withered hands, so that the uncertain twittering of voices which followed the Plutonian's suggestion subsided.

"My children," piped the feeble old voice, "the Black Lord has spoken cunning words, but they are false. It is plain to see that he desires to rule the Green Star, and our welfare does not concern him."

"If so it be that the white sap is of great value to the Lords of the Green Star, it is still of no value to us; and if the gifts they bring to us are of no value to them, they are dear to us."

The Plutonian sneered.

"Dearer than the Paste of Strange Dreams?"

A startled hush fell among the assembled Mercurians. They looked guiltily at one another, avoiding the eyes of the Old Wise One.

"What is this?" shrilled he, turning furiously to the Plutonian. "Have ye brought the paste of evil to our abode, knowing well the strict proscription of our tribe? Fool! Your death is upon ye!"

But the Plutonian only grinned and spread his glistening, black hands in a careless gesture. High overhead, peering through the stalactites, Olear instantly understood the Plutonian's strange power, the Paste of Strange Dreams, a fearsome narcotic of that far-

swinging dark planet. More insidious and devastating than any drug ever produced on Earth, it had wrought frightful havoc among many solar races. The Earthmen had opened the lanes, broken the age-old barriers of distance, so that the harpies of evil could traffic their poison from planet to planet. So the Paste of Strange Dreams was added to the Earthman's burden.

"Seize him—the Evil One!" shrieked the old chief, but the Mercurians sat sullen and silent, and the Plutonian sneered.

Finally one of the chiefs arose and with an effort faced the Old Wise One and said:

"The Strange Dreams are dearer to us than all else. Do as he says."

The piping voices rose in eager acclamation, but the Old Wise One held up his claws, waiting until silence returned.

"Wait! Wait! Before ye commit this folly, hear the Green Star man. Many times has he demanded audience. Let him come in."

"It is not permitted," demurred one of the chiefs.

"Ye permitted this being of evil to enter; let him enter also."

"He is in the outer chambers now," one of the guards spoke. "His face is like the center of a ringstorm."

"Let him enter!"

Morones strode into the room angrily. Blinded by the fire after the darkness of the antechambers, he did not at first see the Plutonian. He strode up to the ancient chief and glared at him.

"Does the Old Wise One learn wisdom at last?" he rasped. The ancient shrank away from him, as did the nearer of the lesser chiefs.

"The Old Wise One thinks less of his wisdom," he replied wearily. "Behold!" He pointed to the enthroned Plutonian.

Morones started. His hand flashed to his side, and came away empty. Deft fingers had extracted his ray-tube. But he was a man of courage. Never could it be said to his shame that an Earthman cringed in the sight of lesser races.

"So it's you, my sooty friend!" he snarled in English. The Plutonian, accomplished linguist, replied:

"As you see. You don't look very happy, Mr. Morones."

Morones regarded him impassively, his eyes frosty.

"That explains everything," he said at last with cold deliberation. "First Sammis, then Boyd. Going to finish me next, I suppose?"

The Plutonian twisted the end of an eyebrow and smiled.

"Interested in them?"

"What'd you do with the bodies?"

The Plutonian jerked his thumb carelessly. "The river you call the Blue is swift and deep. But before you follow them there is certain information I wish to get from you. Where is the soldier who came to visit you?"

A crafty light came into Morones' face.

"He is not far from here, waiting for me."

Olear, in his cramped hiding place, could not help feeling a warm glow of admiration for Morones' nerve, because Morones thought him well on his way to Earth.

"Nargyll, what did your master do with the visitor?"

"Drove him back to the Green Star," Nargyll said promptly.

"And the oxygen tanks. Did you empty them?"

"I let them hiss." Nargyll's grin was sharkish.

"News to you, eh, Morones? Your officer's corpse has probably dropped into the sun by this time. Tell me, why did you drive him off?"

Morones sagged perceptibly. To gain a little time he said truthfully:

"I knew I should be blamed and ruined for life. I didn't know you were here, damn you! I hoped to get this mess with the natives straightened up before he'd come back with reinforcements."

"Yes. Well, you owe some months of life already. Your presence here has been more or less embarrassing, but I had to let you live or I'd have had the whole I. F. P. here to investigate. Now that you've failed in keeping them from getting interested you may do me one more service." The black giant grinned.

"I've often wondered at the Earthman's prestige all over the solar system. Even to-night, soft and helpless as you are, these natives fear you. You will, therefore, be an object lesson in the helplessness of

Earthmen."

Morones was pale but courageous. With contempt in every line of him he watched some of the less frightened chiefs, at the command of the Plutonian, push aside some of the blazing blocks of fungus on the stone, to make room for his body. At last he raised his hand.

"Frogfolk!" he cried, "if ye do this thing, the Lords of the Green Star will come. They will come with fires hotter than the sun; they will blast your rivers with a power greater than the thunder of the ringstorms; they will fill your caves with a purple smoke that turns your bones to water—"

Shrill cries of fear almost drowned out his words. All the Mercurians had seen evidences of the dreadful power of the Earthmen. They began milling around, then stood rooted by the roar of the Plutonian's voice.

"Lies! Lies!" he bellowed. "See, they are weak as egglets!" He stepped down, picked Morones up by one shoulder, and held him, dangling, high over the heads of all. Morones clawed and tore at the brawny arm. He made a ludicrous picture. Soon the simple natives made a sniffling sound of mirth, and the Plutonian, satisfied at last, set him down again.

"He tells truth!" The Old Wise One had climbed to the top of the stone block. "The Lords of the Green Star have their power not in their bodies, but it is great. It is greater far than the frogfolk. It is greater than the Lords of the Outer Orbit. They will come even as the surly one has said, and great shall be our sorrow. It is not yet too late. Release him, and deliver to him the white sap. Seize this evil one—"

The feeble, fickle minds were being swayed again. In a gust of impatience, the Plutonian stepped down, seized the aged chief's skinny body in his great black hands, and snapped him in two. There was a tearing of tough cords and tissue, and the two halves fell into the fire.

For an instant the Mercurians were stunned. Then some of them vented hissing sounds of rage, while others prostrated themselves on the floor. The black giant watched them narrowly for a moment, then turned his attention to Morones. He seized him by the arm and drew him slowly and irresistibly to him.

The murder of the Old Wise One had been done so quickly that Olear was unable to prevent it. Had he been able to use his ray weapon he could have burned the Plutonian down, but it had been bent at one of the narrow turns of the crevice he had come down.

The need for extreme lightness in weapons was rather overdone in those early times, and a little rough handling made them useless.

So now Olear, weaponless except for the service knife at his belt, began the hazardous undertaking of climbing among the stalactites to a position approximately above the Plutonian's head. The job required judgment. Some of the stone masses were insecurely anchored and would crash down at the lightest touch. Some were spaced so closely together that he could not get between them. Others were so far apart that it was difficult to get from one to another.

Yet he made it somehow, and unnoticed, for all eyes were turned on the tense drama being enacted below. From almost directly overhead he saw Morones being drawn upward.

"You saw," the Plutonian was saying triumphantly in Mercurian, "—you saw me unmake your Old Fool. And now you will see that a Lord of the Green Star is even softer, even weaker—"

Morones, in that pitiless grasp, turned his face to the hateful grinning visage above him. In his last extremity he was still angry.

"You devil!" Morones shouted. "You may murder me, but they'll get

you! They'll get you!"

"Who'll get me?" the Plutonian purred silkily, deferring the pleasure of the kill for another moment. Morones was having trouble with his breathing. His red face lolled from side to side, his eyes rolled in agony. Suddenly he saw Olear. Unbelieving, he relaxed.

"I'm seein' things!" he breathed.

"Who'll get me?" persisted the Plutonian, applying a little more pressure.

"The I. F. P.!" Morones gasped.

"Well, you little son-of-a-gun!" Olear thought, and then he jumped.

He landed a-straddle the neck of the Plutonian, which was almost like forking a horse. One brawny arm seized a horn. The other, with a lightning-swift dart, brought the point of the long service-knife to the pulsing black throat.

"Put him down!" Olear spoke into the great pointed ear. "Easy!"

Back on his feet, Morones began bellowing at the Mercurians. Utterly demoralized, they fled pell-mell. Morones came back. He said:

"Nothing to tie him up with."

"That's all right," Olear replied, studiously keeping the knife point at exactly the right place, "I'll ride him in. Get going, you, and be tactful when you go through the door, or this sticker of mine might slip!" With extreme care the Plutonian did exactly as Olear ordered him to.

It was necessary to radio for one of the larger patrol ships to take Olear's enormous prisoner back to Earth for his trial. The officer testified, of course, and the Plutonian was duly sentenced to death for the murder of the old Mercurian. Execution by dehydration was decreed, so that the body would be uninjured for scientific study; and to-day it is considered one of the finest specimens extant.

In his testimony, however, Olear so minimized his own connection with the case that he received no public recognition. It was not until some months afterward, when Morones, on leave, rode back with a shipload of translucene, that the whole story came out, emphatically and profanely. Olear finally consented to speak a few words for the

Telephoto News Co. As he stepped off the little platform deferential hands tried to push him back.

"You haven't told them who you are," protested the announcer. "Give your name and rank."

"Aw, they don't have to know that!" Olear rejoined, keeping on going. "They know it's one of the Force. That's all they have to know. Besides there's a blackjack game going on and I'm losing money every minute I'm out of it."

July 1931

92 The Doom from Planet 4 by Jack Williamson

A ray of fire, green, mysterious, stabs through the night to Dan on his ship. It leads him to an island of unearthly peril.

Aproximate word count: 8,100

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

"S O S. S O S. S O S." Three short, three long, three short, the flashes winked from the dark headland. Dan McNally, master and owner of the small and ancient trading schooner, *Virginia*, caught the feeble flickering light from the island as he strode across the fore-deck. He stopped, stared at the looming black line of land beneath the tropical stars. Again light flashed from a point of rock far above the dim white line of phosphorescent surf, spelling out the signal of distress.

"Somebody bane callin' with a flashlight, I t'ank," the big Swede, Larsen, rumbled from the wheel.

Dan thought suddenly of a reply. He rushed into the charthouse, to return in a moment with a lighted lantern and a copy of the Nautical Almanac which would serve to hide the flame between flashes. He flashed an answer.

Again the pale light flickered from the dark mass of land, spelling words out rather slowly, as if the sender were uncertain in his knowledge of Morse. Surprised as Dan had been by the signal from an island marked on the charts as uninhabited, he was astonished at the message that now came to him.

"You are in terrible danger," he read in the flashes. "Dreadful thing here. Hurry away. Radio for warships. I am—"

The winking light suddenly went out. Dan strained his eyes to watch the point where it had been, and a few seconds later he saw a curious thing. A darting, stabbing lance of green fire flashed out across the barren, rocky cliff, lighting it fleetingly with pale green radiance. It leapt out and was gone in an instant, leaving the shoulder of the island dark as before.

Dan watched for long minutes, but he saw nothing more brilliant than the pale gleam of phosphorescence where the waves dashed against the sheer granite wall of the island.

"What you t'ank?" Larsen broke in upon him.

Dan started, then answered slowly. "I don't know. First I thought there must be a lunatic at large. But that green light! I didn't like it."

He stared again at the looming mass of the island. Davis Island is one of the innumerable tiny islets that dot the South Pacific; merely the summit of a dead volcano, projecting above the sea. Nominally claimed by Great Britain, it is marked on the charts as uninhabited.

"Radio for warships, eh?" he muttered. A wireless transmitter was one of many modern innovations that the Virginia did not boast. She had been gathering copra and shell among the islands long before such things came into common use, though Dan had invested his modest savings in her only a year before.

"What would anyone want with warships on Davis Island?" The name roused a vague memory. "Davis Island?" he repeated, staring in concentration at the black sea. "Of course!" It came to him suddenly. A newspaper article that he had read five years before, at about the time he had abandoned college in the middle of his junior year, to follow the call of adventure.

The account had dealt with an eclipse of the sun, visible only from

certain points on the Pacific. One Dr. Hunter, under the auspices of a Western university, had sailed with his instruments and assistants to Davis Island, to study the solar corona during the few precious moments when the shadow covered the sun, and to observe the displacement of certain stars as a test of Einstein's theory of relativity.

The reporter had interviewed the party at San Francisco, on the eve of sailing. There had been photographs of the chartered vessel, of Dr. Hunter and his instruments, and of his daughter, Helen, who acted as his secretary. She looked not at all like a scientist, Dan recalled. In fact, her face had seemed rather pretty, even in the blurred newspaper half-tone.

But the memory cast no light upon the present puzzle. In the rambling years that had led him to this spot upon the old Virginia, he had lost touch with the science that had interested him during his college days. He had heard nothing of the results of the Hunter expedition. But this island had been its destination.

He turned decisively to the man at the wheel. "Larsen, we'll stand well offshore till daylight," he said. "Then, unless we see something unusual, we can sail in and land a boat to—"

The sentence was never finished. Through the corner of his eye, Dan saw a ray of green light darting toward them from the island. A line of green fire seemed to reach out and strike him a physical blow. Green flame flared around him; and somehow he was hurled from the bridge, clear of the rail and into the sea.

His impression of the incident was very confused. He seemed to have struck the water with such force that his breath was knocked out. He struggled back to the surface, strangling, and coughing the bitter brine from his lungs. It was several minutes before he was comfortably treading water, and able to see what had happened.

The old schooner was then a hundred yards away, careening crazily, and drifting aimlessly before the light breeze. The strange green fire had vanished. Parts of the ship apparently had been carried away or disintegrated by the ray or the force of which it was a visible effect. The mainmast was down, and was hanging over the side in a tangle of rigging.

Bright yellow flames were dancing at a dozen points about the wreckage on the listing deck. A grotesque broken thing, queerly illuminated by the growing fires, was hanging over the wheel—the body of Larsen. No living thing was visible; and Dan, after a second look at the wreck of the bow, knew that he must be the sole survivor

of the catastrophe.

"Too bad about the boys," he muttered through teeth that chattered, for the cold water had already chilled him. "And poor old Larsen."

He thought again of the warning flashed from the shore. "Guess there must be something hellish afoot after all," he muttered again. "The flicker of green that stopped the signals, and the green fire that got us—what can they mean?" He looked toward the looming black shadow of the island, and began divesting himself of his clinging, sodden garments. "I don't wonder somebody wanted battleships. But even a battleship, if that green ray hit it—"

He drew a deep breath and ducked his head while he unlaced his shoes and kicked out of them. Then, with a final look at the burning wreck of the Virginia, he tore off the last bit of his underclothing and swam for the shore in an easy crawl.

The rocky ramparts of Davis Island were three or four miles away. But there was no wind; the black sea was calm save for a long, hardly perceptible swell. A strong swimmer and in superb condition, Dan felt no anxiety about being able to make the distance. There was danger, however, that a shark would run across him, or that he could not find a landing place upon the rocky shore.

Four bells had rung when he had seen the first flash; it had been just ten o'clock. And it was some four hours later that Dan touched bottom and waded wearily up a bit of smooth hard beach, through palely glittering phosphorescent foam.

He rubbed the brine from his tired limbs, and sat down for a time, in a spot where a fallen boulder sheltered his naked body from the cool morning wind. In a few moments he rose, flexed his muscles and peered through the starlit darkness for a way up the cliff behind the beach. He found it impossible to distinguish anything.

"Got to keep moving, or find some clothes," he muttered. "And I may stumble onto what made the green light. Darn lucky I've been so far, anyhow. Larsen and the others—but I shan't think of them. Wonder who was flashing the signals from the island. And did the green fire get him?"

He turned to look out over the black plain of the sea. Far out, the Virginia lay low in the water, a pillar of yellow flame rising from her hull. As he watched, the flame flickered and vanished: the old schooner, he supposed, had sunk. Then he noticed a pale glow come into being among the stars on the eastern horizon.

"Hello," he muttered again. "So we're going to have a moon? In the

last quarter, but still it ought to light me up from this beach."

A moment later the horns of the crescent had come above the black rim of the sea. Dan waited, swinging his arms and tramping up and down on the sand, until the silvery moon had cleared the horizon and illuminated the rugged face of the cliff with pale white radiance.

He chose a path to the top of the cliff and clambered up, emerging in a jungle-like thicket of brush. Picking his way with the greatest caution, yet scratching his naked skin most painfully, he made his way for a few yards through the brush to a point of vantage from which he could look about.

He was, he perceived, in a narrow valley or ravine, with rugged black walls rising sheer on either side. The silvery light of the crescent moon fell upon the rank jungle that covered the narrow floor of the canyon, which rose and dwindled as it penetrated inland.

Gazing up the canyon, Dan gasped in amazement at what he saw.

Mars, the red planet, hung bright and motionless, low in the western sky, gleaming with deep bloody radiance. Directly beneath it, bathed in the white light of the moon, was a bare, rocky peak that seemed the highest point of the island. And upon that highest pinnacle, that

chanced to be just below the ruddy star, was an astounding machine.

Three slender towers, of a white metal that gleamed in the moonlight with the silvery luster of aluminum, rose from the rocky peak. They supported, in a horizontal position, an enormous metal ring. It must be, Dan reckoned swiftly, at least a hundred feet in diameter, and held a hundred feet above the summit of the mountain.

The huge ring gleamed with a strange purple radiance. A shimmering mist of red-violet light surrounded it. An unknown force seemed to throb within the mighty ring, drawing the mantle of purple haze about it.

And suspended inside the ring and below it was a long, slender needle of dazzling white light. To Dan, from where he stood in the canyon, it seemed a fine, sharp line, though he knew it must be some kind of pointer, luminous with the strange force pulsing through it.

The strange needle wavered a little, with quick, uncertain motions. The brilliance of its light varied oddly; it seemed to throb with a queer, irregular rhythm.

And the gleaming needle pointed straight at the planet Mars!

Dan stood a long time, watching the purple ring upon the silver towers, with the shining white needle hanging below it. He stared at Mars, glowing like a red and sinister eye above the incredible mechanism.

His mind was in a wild storm of wonder shot with fear. What was the meaning of the gleaming ring and needle? What connection did this great device have with the signal of distress from the cliff, and the green fire that had destroyed the *Virginia*? And why did the glowing needle point at Mars?

He did not know when he first began to hear the sound. For a time it was merely part of the strange mystery of the island, only another element in the atmosphere of fear and wonder that surrounded him. Then it rose a little, and he became suddenly sharply conscious of it as an additional menace. The sound was not loud, but deep and vibrant. A whir or hum, like that of a powerful, muffled motor, but deeper than the sound of any motor man has ever made. It came down the gorge, from the direction of the machine on the mountain.

That deep, throbbing noise frightened Dan as none of his previous experiences had done. Shivering from fear as much as from cold, he crouched down beside a huge boulder in the edge of the tangle of brush that covered the bottom of the ravine. His heart pounded

wildly. He was in the clutches of an unreasoning fear that some terrible Thing had seen him, and was about to seek him out. For a moment he had to use all his will to keep himself from panic flight through the brush. The unknown is always terrible, and he had invaded the domain of a force he could not understand.

In a moment, however, he recovered himself. He would be as safe there in the jungle, he thought, as anywhere on the island. He thought of starting a fire, then realized that he had no matches, and that he would not dare to make a light if he were able. He pulled a few handfuls of dry grass to make a sort of bed, upon which he huddled up, thanking his lucky stars that the island was in semi-tropical latitudes.

His mind returned again to the riddles that confronted him: the green flash and the strange mechanism on the peak. He recalled fantastic stories he had read, of hermit scientists conducting amazing experiments in isolated parts of the world. Presently he decided that something of the kind must be on foot here.

"The green flash is a sort of a death ray," he summed up, aloud. "And they shoot it from that bright needle. No wonder they don't want to be bothered! Somebody may be fixing to upset civilization!

"But it's queer that the needle points at Mars...."

Of this last fact, which might have been a clue to the most reasonable solution of the mystery, if a rather astounding one, he was able to make nothing. In fact, huddled up on his pile of grass in some degree of comfort, he presently went to sleep, still pondering in vain upon this last clue.

He was awakened by a soft, insistent purring sound, rather like that of a small electric motor run without load at very high speed. Recollection of the night's events came abruptly to him, and he sprang to his feet in alarm, finding his muscles sore and stiff from his cramped position.

From one side Dan heard the rumble of thunder, and, glancing up, saw that the sky above the sea was overcast with a rolling mass of dark, menacing clouds. There was a strange portentous blackness about these storm clouds that filled him with a nameless fear.

Suddenly he was struck with the thought that it was not thunder that had wakened him. The noise he had heard had not the rumbling or booming quality of thunder. As he stood there he again became conscious of the low, whirring sound, behind him. He whirled around to face it. The shock of what he saw left him momentarily

dizzy and trembling—though undoubtedly his surroundings had much to do with its effect upon him.

The sound came from a glistening metal machine which stood half-hidden in the brush a dozen yards away looking at him!

The thing was made of a lustrous, silvery metal, which Dan afterwards supposed to be aluminum, or some alloy of that metal. Its gleaming case was shaped more like a coffin, or an Egyptian mummy-case, than any other object with which he was familiar, though rather larger than either.

That is, it was an oblong metal box, tapering toward the ends, with the greatest width forward of the middle. Twin tubes projected from the end of it, lenses in them glistening like eyes. Just below them sprang out steely, glistening tentacles several feet long, writhing and twitching as if they were alive. The tangle of green brush hid the thing's legs, so that Dan could not see them.

Suddenly it sprang toward him, rising ten feet high and covering half the distance between them. It alighted easily upon the two long, jointed metal limbs upon which it had leapt, and continued to keep the lens-tubes turned toward Dan, so he knew that the grotesque metal thing was watching him.

The limbs, he observed, were similar to the hind legs of a grasshopper, both in shape and position. And evidently the thing leapt upon them in about the same way. Then he noticed another curious thing about it.

Three little bars of metal projected above the thickest part of its case, on the upper side. Their ends were joined by a little ring, three inches across. The tiny metal ring glowed with purple luminosity. A purple haze seemed to cling about it, as to the huge ring Dan had seen on the towers above the peak. And suspended inside this ring was a tiny metal needle, shimmering with pulsating white fire.

On the back of this metal monster was a miniature replica of the strange mechanism upon the pinnacle. The little needle pointed up the canyon. A glance that way showed Dan that it pointed at the great device upon the mountain, which looked even more brilliant on this gloomy morning than in the uncertain radiance of the moon. The colossal ring was shrouded in a splendid mantle of purple flame; and the long, slender needle, which seemed to have swung on down to follow Mars below the horizon, still throbbed with scintillating white fire.

For several minutes the two stood there, studying each other. A naked man, tense and bewildered in the presence of mysterious

forces—and a grotesque machine, cased in gleaming white metal, whose parts seemed to duplicate most of the functions of a living creature.

Then one of the writhing tentacles that shot from the "head" of the machine reached back under the metal case, and reappeared grasping what appeared to be a flat disk of emerald, two inches across and half an inch thick.

This green disk it held up, with a flat side toward Dan. There was no sound, but a flash of green light came from it, cutting a wide swath into the jungle, and littering its path with smoking and flaming debris.

But Dan, expecting something of the kind, had flung himself sidewise into the shelter of the boulder beside which he had slept. Behind it, he gathered his feet under him, picked up a rock of convenient size for throwing, and waited, ready and alert.

He heard the soft humming sound on the other side of the boulder. A glittering object flashed above him. Crashing through the brush the metal monster came to earth on the same side of the boulder with him.

But the metal thing had not turned in its flight: consequently its rear end was toward Dan. As it began cumberously to turn about, he hurled his rock with an accuracy that came of a boyhood on the farm. Instinct had made him try for the little ring and needle on the back of the monster, apparently its most vulnerable part.

Whether by luck or skill, the rock struck the gleaming ring, crushing it against the needle—and instant paralysis overtook the metal thing. Its tentacles and limbs became fixed and rigid, and it toppled over in the brush.

Dan walked over to it, and examined it briefly. The green disk had fallen on the ground, and he picked it up. It was made of emerald crystal, it had a little knob of glistening metal set in one side. Rather afraid of it, Dan forebore to twist the knob. But he still clutched it in his hand a few moments later, when, partly for fear that others of its kind would come to succor the fallen monster, and partly to secure shelter from the threatening rain, he retired into the shadows of the tangled jungle.

He spent perhaps half an hour in creeping back to what he supposed a place of comparative safety. For some time he lay there in the cool gloom, brushing occasional insects off his bare skin, wishing by turns that he had a cup of coffee and a good beefsteak, and that he

could puzzle out a logical solution of all the astounding things he had met in the island. After the encounter with the metal monster, he felt his theory of the hermit scientists a bit inadequate.

Presently his attention was attracted by the unmistakable mew of a kitten. Then he heard the padding sound of cautious human footsteps, and a clear feminine voice calling "Kitty, kitty," in low tones. The steps and the voice seemed coming toward him; since there was no sound of crackling brush, he supposed there was a trail which he had not found.

"Hello," he ventured, when the voice seemed only a few yards away through the green tangle.

At the same instant a gray kitten appeared out of the underbrush, and frisked trustfully across to him. He put out a hand, caressed it, picked it up. In a moment the feminine voice replied, "Hello yourself. Who are you?"

A crackling sound came from the brush, as if the speaker were starting toward him. Dan, abruptly conscious of his lack of attire, said quickly, "Wait a minute! I haven't anything on, you see. I'm Dan McNally. I owned the schooner that something happened to off the island last night."

A delicious, trilling laugh greeted the panic of his first words. Then the clear, sweet voice, serious again, replied, "So you swam ashore from the boat I signaled?"

"Yes."

"Gee, but I'm glad to find you! And you say you haven't any clothes? I wonder what...." The voice paused reflectively, then resumed, "Here's a sheet that I got to signal with in the daytime, if I had a chance. You might wrap it around you until we find something better."

The low, liquid laugh rang out again; again there was a rustling in the brush, and presently an arm appeared, holding a rolled-up sheet.

"All right," he called. "Throw it this way."

In a moment, with the sheet draped around him like a Roman toga, and the kitten on his arm, he advanced to meet the owner of the beautiful voice.

At the trail he met a trim, active-looking young woman, clad in out-of-door attire and with a canvas knapsack on her back. Bareheaded, she wore her brown hair closely shingled. Her face, Dan recognized

from the photograph he had seen five years before, though it was more lovely than the splotched newspaper picture had hinted. Her brown eyes were filled with laughter at his predicament and his present unusual garb.

He bowed with mock gravity and said, "How do you do, Miss Helen Hunter?"

Brown eyes widened in surprise. "You know me?" she asked.

"Not half so well as I hope to," he grinned.

Then, handing her the kitten, he spoke seriously. "What about this island? The green flashes? The big machine on the mountain? The metal thing that jumps about like a grasshopper? What's it all about? You know anything about it?"

"Yes, I know a good deal about it," she told him soberly. "It's rather a terrible story. And one you may not believe—no, you've seen them! But the kitten is hungry, and you must be, too, if you swam ashore."

"Well, yes, I am." Dan admitted.

The storm clouds were drifting out to sea; the sun was beginning to assert itself, and it now lighted up the scene with a cheerful

brightness. She slung off her pack and sat down cross-legged at the side of the trail. Dan sat down opposite her as she opened the knapsack and produced a can of condensed milk, one of sardines, a can-opener, and half a loaf of bread.

"I had to select my supplies rather at random," she said, "and you'll have to make the best of them."

She started to open the sardines. "You'd better give it to me," Dan advised. "You might cut your hand."

"You think so?" she asked, deftly lifting the lid, fishing out a fish for the kitten, and presenting the can to Dan. Then with capable hands she broke off a large chunk of bread, which she handed him.

"Go ahead and finish this up," she said. "I've already had breakfast." She punched two holes in the end of the milk can, and poured some of the thick yellow fluid into the palm of her left hand, from which she let the kitten lap it.

"And now for the mystery of the island," Dan demanded, forgetting bread and sardines in his eagerness.

The girl turned her face to him. "I'm Helen Hunter, as you seem to

know," she began. "I came here with my father five years ago to observe an eclipse of the sun. When it was all over, and the ship called to take us off, he decided to send the results of our observations by one of the other men. He wanted to stay here to carry on another experiment—the one that led to that machine on the hill. Part of the other men were willing to stay. The yacht left us here, and has been back from San Francisco every six months since, with mail and supplies."

"And what was the experiment?" Dan demanded eagerly.

"Have you ever looked at Mars through a good telescope?" she countered. "Then you must have seen the canals—straight dark lines running from the white polar caps to the equatorial zone. All scientists did not agree as to what they were, but nobody could suggest a natural origin for them.

"My father was one of those who thought that the canals were fertile, cultivated strips, irrigated with water brought down from the melting ice-caps. Irrigation systems meant intelligent life upon the planet, and his experiment was an attempt to communicate with that intelligence."

"And he succeeded?" Dan was astounded.

"Yes. The means was simple enough: other men had suggested it years before, in fact. Any fairly bright light on Mars—such as the beam of a searchlight directed toward earth—would be visible in a good telescope, when the planet is favorably situated: it follows that such a light on earth should be visible to an observer with a similar instrument on Mars.

"It was possible, of course, but unlikely, that Mars would have intelligent inhabitants still ignorant of the telescope. It was also possible that their senses would be different from ours—that, if they saw at all, it would be with a different part of the spectrum. Father took the chance. And he succeeded.

"The call was simple: merely three flashes of light, repeated again and again. We used a portable searchlight, mounted on a motor-truck, such as is used in the army. The three flashes meant that we were on the third planet of the solar system. The answering call, from the fourth planet, should be four flashes, of course.

"For three nights we kept signaling. One of the men watched the motor-generator, and I operated the searchlight, swinging it on Mars and off again, to make the flashes. Dad kept his eye screwed to the telescope. Nothing happened and he got discouraged. I persuaded him to keep on for another night, in case they hadn't seen us at first;

or needed more time to get their searchlight ready.

"And on the fourth night poor Dad came out of the observatory, shouting that he had seen four flashes."

Dan gasped, speechless with astonishment. "Then that machine, with the needle pointing at Mars, and the green flashes, and the thing that jumped at me—"

Helen waved a white hand for silence. "Just keep cool a minute! I'm coming to them.

"The four flashes just began it. In a few days Dad and the Martians were communicating by a sort of television process. He would mark off a sheet of paper into squares, blacken some of the squares to make a picture or design, then have me send a flash for each black square, and miss an interval for each white one, taking them in regular order. The Martians seemed to catch on pretty soon; in a few days Dad was receiving pictures of the same sort.

"Rather a slow way of communication, perhaps. But it worked better than one might think at first. In a month Dad had received instructions for building a small machine like that big one on the hill. It is something like radio—at least it operates with vibrations in the

ether—but it's as much ahead of our radio as an airplane is in advance of a fire-balloon. I understand a good bit about it, but I won't try to explain it now.

"And in the next three years Dad learned no end of things from the people on Mars. One queer thing about it was, that they never let us see them on the television apparatus, no matter how many of their scientific secrets they gave us. Dad and I exhibited ourselves, but I don't know yet what the Martians look like—though I have made a guess.

"By the end of the third year they had showed Dad how to make one of those metal things—"

"Like that one that jumped at me?" Dan broke in with a shudder.

"Yes. They seem almost alive; but they are machines, like our robots, and controlled by the radio apparatus. The eyes use photo-electric cells, and relay what is before them to the Master Intelligence." The girl spoke these last words in a low tone, shrinking involuntarily. She paused a moment, then shrugged and continued.

"The first machine did not obey my father. It was controlled by signals that came from Mars, over the big station on the hill. And it

went to work, making more apparatus, building more machines, enlarging the receiving station. It worked in obedience to the Master Intelligence on Mars!

"That was a year ago. The last time the yacht called, my father and the other men still hoped to control the machines. They let her go back without us. The machines tolerated us a while; paid no attention to us; they were busy working mines and building huge, strange things that must be flying machines; the plateau on the other side of the peak is crowded with them.

"For the machines are preparing to leave the island! They are going to conquer the world for the Master Intelligence on Mars!

"Months ago my father discovered this, and realized that he had loosed doom upon the earth. He and the three other men planned to destroy that big station on the peak. All the signals to the machines are relayed through that, from Mars. The machines seemed to pay no heed as they made their preparations.

"Then one night, about three weeks ago, they tried to dynamite the station." The girl's shoulder trembled; she paused to brush a tear from her eye, then went on hastily, in a voice grown husky with emotion. Dan felt an odd desire to take her slight form in his arms

and comfort her in her grief.

"The machines had seemed heedless, but they were ready. They had those disks that throw the green fire: we had not seen them before. And—well, all four of them were killed."

Dan handed her the disk of green crystal he had taken from the thing that had attacked him. She examined it silently, then went on.

"Dad had left me in bed, but I heard an explosion. I think the bombs went off when the green fire struck them. I knew what had happened, and got out of the house just before the machines arrived. They wrecked the place with their green flashes.

"And for the last three weeks I've been hiding in the jungle, or watching for ships. Three times I've raided the ruins of the house for something to eat: fortunately it didn't burn, like your ship. And that's all, I suppose—except I'm awfully glad that you got ashore."

"Thanks," Dan said, earnestly. "And what are we going to do now?"

“I don't know," Helen answered in a troubled tone. "I'm afraid. Afraid for all humanity. On the television, I've seen enough of Mars to be sure that it is a world of machines, controlled by one Master

Intelligence. And even that may be a machine. We make machines that compute the tides and carry out other computations that are almost beyond the power of the human mind: why couldn't a machine think?

"The Master Intelligence of Mars plans to add the Earth to his domain. Unless we can do something to stop it, in a few years the world will be overrun with gigantic robot-machines, controlled by force from across the gulf of space. Humanity cannot resist them. Imagine a battleship pitted against that green annihilating ray, and all the other science of an elder planet!

"Life is to be blotted out! The Master Intelligence of Mars will rule two worlds of mechanical monsters!"

Dan sat in a dazed vision of horror to come, until Helen straightened up as if shaking off a mantle of fear, and smiled heroically, if a bit wanly.

"Now you must eat your bread and sardines, to give you strength to fight for humanity!" she cried, with a laugh that she strived, not too successfully, to make cheerful and gay.

Obediently, he began to eat, finding an excellent appetite....

It was several minutes later that he fancied he heard a whirring and crackling in the brush behind them. He sprang to his feet in alarm.

"It can't be far back to where I left the machine," he cried. "Do you suppose there's danger that—"

The mechanical ears of the metal things may have picked up the sound of his voice: but in any event, green flame flashed about them on the instant. Feeling a sudden protective impulse, Dan started toward Helen. That was his last recollection, before what seemed a terrific concussion swept him into the abyss of unconsciousness....

His first thought, when he awakened, was of the girl. But he was alone in the silence of the canyon. He sat up, realizing that many hours had passed, for the air was growing cool again, and the sun was low behind the peak at the head of the ravine. The huge, mysterious machine of the purple ring and the vibrating white needle were blazing splendidly.

He took more detailed stock of his immediate surroundings. The tangle of brush that had sheltered them had been cut away by the green annihilating ray. Charred stumps remained to show where it had fired bushes beyond the trail. His own shoulder was blistered, a hole was burned in the sheet wound about him, and the hair was

singed from the back of his head.

Suddenly trembling with horror, he looked about for anything to show that Helen had perished by the ray. Discovering nothing, he breathed a sigh of relief.

"She must be still alive, anyhow," he muttered. "And I've had another lucky break! The ray was too high to get me. They must have left me for dead."

Presently he became conscious of torturing thirst. He retired through the brush, along the rocky wall of the canyon. By sunset he came upon a little natural basin in a rock, half full of rain water. It was none too clean, but he drank his fill of it, and felt relief.

Looking up the canyon, he could see the great mechanism on the peak, gleaming in the dusk. Intensely-glowing purple mist clung about the great metal ring, and the slender, delicate needle swung below it, still vibrating, still throbbing with brilliant, white radiance. It pointed at the red eye of Mars, which had just winked into view.

Dan stared at it a long time.

"It all sounds crazy," he muttered, "but it isn't! The Master

Intelligence of Mars, she said, is controlling the mechanical things through that! The doom of the Earth is coming through that white needle! If only I could smash it, somehow!"

He looked down at the white folds of the sheet that draped him, and clenched his hands impotently. "No gun! Not even a pocket-knife. Nothing but my bare hands!" He bit his lip.

Still he stared challengingly at the gleaming mechanism on the peak. An idea slowly took form in his mind; an exclamation abruptly escaped him. Narrowly he eyed the trussed girders of the silver towers which supported the great ring, muttering to himself.

"Yes, I can do it! If I don't get caught! I can climb it, well enough. The needle looks a bit frail. I should be able to smash it! I'd like to see Helen again, though."

He gathered the sheet around him, and began picking a cautious way up the canyon, staying always in the cover of boulders or brush. A few times he disturbed a rock, or snapped a twig beneath his foot. Then he waited out of sight for long minutes, though he had no reason to believe that the metal monsters were on the alert for him.

"I've got to do it! The world depends on it!" he kept saying again and

again in his mind.

The quick darkness of the tropics had fallen almost before he started. But he welcomed the night, for, if it made his own silent progress more difficult, it reduced the hazard that he would be discovered.

Gauging the time by the slow wheeling of the diamond-like stars across the velvet sky, he thought that two hours had passed when he reached the head of the canyon. He stood up cautiously to survey the little plateau at the summit of the hill.

It was several acres in extent, quite level, and almost clear of vegetation. At the farther side was a pile of wreckage, which, he supposed, had been the quarters of Dr. Hunter's party, before they had been destroyed.

Many huge machines stood about the plateau, vast, dark masses looming in the starlight. Mostly they were either not running or very silent in operation; but a very deep, vibrant humming sound came from one near him. Smaller shapes were moving about them, with long easy leaps. These, he knew, were the mechanical monsters, though it was too dark to distinguish them.

But by far the most prominent object upon the plateau was the

enormous gleaming thing that Helen had said was the station over which came the signals from the Master Intelligence on Mars. One of its three towers sprang up not far from where he stood. The huge, refulgent ring, swathed in its mist of purple fire, was a full hundred feet above him; and the slender needle, pulsing with white flame, swinging within and below the colossal ring, was itself a hundred feet in length.

The white needle, for all its length, seemed hardly thicker than a man's finger. It was mounted at the top of a curiously complex and delicate-looking device that spread broadly out between the three towers, below the center of the huge purple ring.

Dan looked at it and decided that his plan had at least a chance of success—though he had no hope that it would not be fatal to him.

Quickly and silently he ran to the base of the mighty silver towers nearest him and began to climb the side toward the ravine, where the maze of girders would hide him, at least partially, from any watchers back on the plateau. The starlight and the faint weird radiance of the purple ring above sufficed to guide him.

The cross-braces on the girder he had chosen were spaced closely enough to serve as the rungs of a ladder. Dan climbed easily, pausing

twice for breath, and to look down at the dark plateau. The vast, humming machines loomed up strangely in the pale purple light that fell from the gleaming ring.

Once he looked across toward the other side of the island. The surface there was more level. He glimpsed tiny moving lights, and huge stationary masses, apparently as large as ocean liners. He had an impression of a vast amount of mechanical activity, proceeding in the darkness very rapidly, and in a silent and orderly fashion.

"The expeditionary force of the Master Intelligence of Mars," he thought, "preparing to set out against humanity! And what I can do is the only chance to stop it!"

He climbed again with renewed energy. A few yards more brought him to the colossal metal ring. Resting upon the three towers, it was a circular band of shining metal a foot thick and as wide as a road. The intense purple glow extended several feet from its surface.

Dan touched it tentatively. He felt a tingling electric shock. And he thought he could feel a radiation coming from it, giving him a curious sensation of cold. As he reached his hands up and grasped the upper edge of the great ring, he felt what seemed a physical current of cold.

Controlling his tendency to shiver, he climbed upon the last brace, and, lifting his weight with his hands, threw himself face down upon the flat upper surface of the vast ring. He lay bathed in cold purple fire. He tingled with the chill of it. A frozen current seemed to penetrate his body. Involuntarily he trembled, lost his grip and dangled precariously from the rim.

Only a frantic scrambling restored his hold. Then, fighting the sensation of freezing cold that came from the mist of purple flame, he drew himself forward and got to his feet upon the broad surface of the metal ring. On both sides it curved away like a circular track. Red-violet fire shimmered about it, bathing him to the waist in a chilling torrent.

Through coruscating frozen flame he waded to the inner rim of the colossal ring. Below him hung the needle, a mere straight line of white fire, a hundred feet in length. Eye-dazzling radiance scintillated along it, waxing and waning with a curious throbbing rhythm. The needle vibrated a little, but it pointed directly at the red point of Mars, now almost directly overhead.

Repressing a shudder, Dan looked down at the complex and delicate apparatus upon which the slender needle was mounted. It was a light frame of white metal bars, with spidery coils and huge glowing tubes

and flimsy spinning disks mounted in it. The gleaming needle was mounted much like a telescope at the top of the device, fully fifty feet below him.

"Looks flimsy enough," Dan muttered. "I'll go through it like a sixteen-inch shell! Who would have thought I'd end this way!"

He stepped back for a moment, and stood on the polished metal, hidden to the waist in cold purple flame. Lest it impede his movements, he tore the sheet from him and threw it aside. He let his eyes sweep for a last time over the familiar constellations blazing so splendidly in the black sky above. He had a pang of heartache, as if the stars were old friends. His glance roved fondly over the dark, indistinct masses of the island, and across the black plain of the sea.

"Well, no good in waiting," he muttered again. "Sorry I can't see Helen. Hope she gets off all right."

He backed to the outer rim and drew a deep breath, like one about to dive. Then, with set face, he sprinted forward. As he did so a blinding flash of green light flickered up before him. He ducked his head and leapt from the inner edge of the vast glowing ring.

For long seconds, it seemed, he was plunging down through space,

feet first. Air rushed screaming about his ears. But his mind was quite calm, and registered an astonishingly large series of impressions.

He saw the delicate, gleaming machine rushing up to meet him, the shimmering white needle swung on its top.

He took in the silent, dark plateau, with the masses of the great machines rising like ominous shadows here and there, and the mechanical monsters leaping busily about it, almost invisible in the dim, ghostly radiance that fell from the purple ring.

He saw a vivid flame of green reach up past him from somewhere below. He knew, without emotion or alarm, that he had been discovered, and that it was too late for his discoverers to stop him.

He found time, even, for a fleeting thought of death. His mind framed the question, "What will I be in a moment from now?"

Then he had struck the great white needle, and was crashing into the delicate apparatus below it. Waves of pain beat upon his mind like flashes of blinding light. But his last mental image, as he passed into oblivion, was a picture of Helen's face. Oddly, it was not her face as he had last seen it, but a reproduction of the old newspaper half-tone,

curiously retouched with life and color.

There is little more to tell. It was some weeks later when Dan came back out of a world of delirium and dreams, to find himself lying on his back in a tent, very much bandaged. He was alone at the moment, and at first could not recall that tremendous last day of his conscious life.

Then he heard a thrillingly familiar feminine voice calling "Kitty, kitty, kitty." He tried to move, a dull pain throbbed in his breast, and a groan escaped him. In a moment Helen appeared; the gray kitten was forgotten. She looked very anxious and solicitous—and also, Dan thought, very beautiful.

"No, no!" she cried. "You are going to be all right! Dad made me learn a little elementary medicine before we came here, and I know. But you mustn't speak! Not for days yet! I'll have to guess what you want. And you can wink when I guess the right thing.

"Gee, but I'm glad you've come to! You'll be as well as ever, pretty soon. The kitten was lots of comfort. Still—"

Dan attempted to move. She leaned over him, shifted his weight and smoothed the sheet with strong, capable hinds. "You want to know

about what happened to the machine monsters?"

He winked.

"Well, you remember when they found us, and shot the green ray at us. They left you there—I thought you were dead—and carried me up here on the hill. Perhaps they wanted me for a laboratory subject to test the green ray on, or something of the kind. Anyhow, they carried me into a big shed filled with strange machines.

"They kept me there until that night. Then, all of a sudden, they all—stopped! They froze! They were dead!

"The tentacles of the one that was holding me were set about me. But I worked free, and got out of the shed. It took all night. And when I came out, just at sunrise, I saw that the purple fire was gone from the great ring. The needle was knocked down, and the apparatus smashed.

"I found you there in the wreckage. You made a human bullet of yourself to smash it! The greatest thing a man ever did!"

Though normally rather modest, Dan felt a glow of pride at the honest admiration ringing in her clear voice, and shining from her

warm brown eyes.

"So I gathered up what was left of you," she went on, "and tried to put you back together again. A good many bones were broken, and you had more cuts and bruises than I could mention; but the apparatus had broken the force of the fall, and you were still alive. You are remarkably well put together, I should say; and unusually lucky, as well!

"And, well, the machines and apparatus are scattered about all over the island. Every one of them stopped the instant you smashed the connection with the directing intelligence on Mars. There'll be quite a stir in the scientific world, I imagine, in about three weeks, when the yacht comes and carries us back with a lot of plans and specimens. We must send about a thousand engineers back here to study what we leave behind us.

"And do you want anything else?" She bent over and watched his bandaged face. Looking up into her bright eyes, thrilling to the cool, comforting pressure of her hand on his forehead, Dan reflected. Then he winked.

"Something you want me to do?"

He winked.

"When? Right now?"

No response.

"After the yacht comes."

He winked.

"What is it?" She looked him in the eye, blushed a little, and laughed.

"You mean—"

Dan winked.

93 The Hands of Aten by Desmond Winter Hall

Out of solid ice Craig hews three long-frozen Egyptians—and is at once caught up into amazing adventure.

Aproximate word count: 14,400

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

The sleek black monoplane came scudding out of the south, flying low over fields of ice and snow that were thawing slowly under the heat of the arctic sun. After a long time it wheeled, circled gradually, and then, as if it had found what it had been looking for, came lightly down and skidded to a graceful halt in a low flat area between some round-topped hillocks. A fur-clad figure emerged from the enclosed cockpit and climbed a low ridge into the wan sunlight above.

For a while the man looked around, getting his bearings. Miles on every side stretched the great rough plains of ice—ice that became a broad path of glittering diamonds where it led toward the low-hung sun, far in the south. Perhaps a quarter mile in that direction lay the

white rise of a hill much larger than its fellows, probably, the man thought, a volcano. Towards it he laboriously made his way. His tiny figure was only a speck on the far-flung, deserted landscape—a human mite, puny and futile against the giant, hostile white waste.

The sky was clear and cloudless, the sun unusually warm. So warm, indeed, that long clefts, caused by the unequal expansion of the ice, appeared here and there. The man from the plane had not gone more than fifty yards when he halted sharply. With a crack like thunder, a cleft had opened at his very feet—a rift ten feet deep in places, apparently bottomless in others, and very long. Not wanting to go around it, he slid down one side and, with an ice pick, started to hack a foothold in the opposite bank.

It was then that the man saw the thing—something sticking from the ice just above his head. As he stared at it, amazement appeared on his bronzed face. He looked around bewilderedly, then peered still more closely into the bluish depths of the crystal wall.

The head of a spear was jutting from the ice. And the spear was held by a man entrapped within the wall.

The details of the ice-held figure were but slightly blurred, for it was only a few feet from the surface. It was that of a man, and it was

plain that he was not an Eskimo. He was locked in a distorted position, as if caught unawares by a terrific weight of sliding snow. And he had been caught, seemingly, when in the act of hurling his weapon.

For a long time the man from the plane peered at his discovery. Then his blue eyes followed slowly the direction in which the spear was pointing, and he gasped, and took a few quick steps further down the cleft. There, in the opposite wall, were two more bodies.

These, though, were of man and woman. They were even closer to the surface of the ice. Crouched over, the man's left hand was craned as if to protect his companion from some peril—from the cataclysm that had trapped them, it might have been. Or perhaps from the spear of the other.

The fur-muffled figure stood motionless, gazing at them. His ice pick was held limply, his eyes were wide. Then, suddenly, the pick was grasped firmly, and flakes of ice flew under its level blows as he started to carve his find from their frozen tomb.

The man was trembling with wild excitement when at last the stiff form of the woman was extricated. She was not so much a woman as a girl, really—and she was beautiful. But the man from the plane

evidently didn't care so much about that; nor even her almost miraculous state of preservation. He rubbed away some of the coating of ice from her face, and stared most intently at her forehead. Then he stood upright, and said, simply:

"Well, I'll be damned!"

If Wesley Craig had been merely what he was listed as on the roster of the Somers Arctic Expedition of 1933—that is, a geologist—he would not have been so astounded. But his life work, really, was archaeology. He had spent years delving in the ruins of ancient temples, especially, those of old Egypt. He knew the ancient language as well as anyone knew it, and was familiar with every known detail of the civilization of the Pharaohs. And, being so, he was now properly confused. For every bit of his knowledge told him that this girl, whom he had found in the wastes of the arctic, was of Egyptian stock.

A certain tiny hieroglyph traced on her smooth forehead—the intricate band around her fine hair—the very cut of the frozen robe she wore—Egyptian—every one of them!

Yet, stubbornly, Wesley Craig wouldn't admit it. Not until he had cut the two men from the ice and hauled all three laboriously up the side

of the cleft and stretched them out on the level ice, did he have to. He couldn't deny it, then. In some mysterious way, Egypt was connected with the three rigid bodies.

For the two men were garbed as warriors, and their helmets and harness and sword-sheaths were indisputably of Egyptian design.

There, however, the similarity between the two ended. The one with the spear was big-muscled and burly; the other much slighter of build. This latter, Craig guessed, had been fleeing with the girl when icy death had overwhelmed them.

But he did not then try to go into that, the story that some sudden cataclysm had cut short. His fervor, as an Egyptologist, was afire. He was burning with eagerness to get these bodies back to the main base of the Somers Expedition, some three hundred miles south. Into the learned circles of Egyptology, of archaeology, they'd throw a bomb-shell that would make nitroglycerine seem like weak tea.

Craig couldn't taxi his plane closer; he would have to carry them to it; and to do this he began to carefully massage all the larger pieces of ice from the girl's limbs and clothing, to make her lighter. At the Somers base they could all be re-frozen, to maintain their perfect preservation.

It was while he was diligently rubbing that he fully realized the girl's beauty. Delicate, cleanly cut features; fine, large eyelids; tiny, slender hands. Save for her icy pallor, she might almost have been merely asleep as she lay on the snow.

Wes Craig finished massaging the girl and then went on and did the same for the two warriors. For an hour he carefully and reverently released them from the reluctant fingers of their icy death, and he was a little tired from his exertions and his great excitement when at last he finished and stood erect, resting. But he did not stand quiet for long. A sudden gleam lit his eyes: a mad idea had come to him.

"Won't hurt to try!" he muttered excitedly, and the next moment his lithe figure was running over the slippery ice bank to his airplane, out of sight behind the nearby hillocks.

Wes Craig worked from a sub-base on his sole expeditions to chart the various mountains and ranges in the islands off north-east King Charles Land, within the Arctic Circle. He had only one partner, a mechanic, who stayed behind on his shorter trips. And therefore all manner of emergency devices were stowed in the cockpit of his plane: a tiny folding tent, an amazingly light sled, a large store of compressed food—and a large vial of Kundrenaline and a hypodermic needle.

Kundrenaline was still somewhat of an unknown quantity in 1933. Kund, the German, had developed it but a year before. The fluid was already standard beside the operating tables of the world's most modern hospitals, so valuable had its qualities proven to be. It had actually restored life after hours of death. A complex mixture of concentrated adrenaline and highly compressed liquid food, it gave a tremendous stimulation to the heart, at the same time providing the body with energy food to withstand the shock.

It was meant for emergency use on the Somers Expedition. But Wes Craig wasn't going to use it for that. He was going to use it for an experiment—a crazy experiment, he told himself. Fish—many forms of life—withstand freezing in solid ice without hurt. Human beings—? It wouldn't hurt to try, anyway, his mind kept repeating.

Fifteen minutes saw him back beside the rigid bodies, and kneeling over the girl. The sun had warmed her body somewhat, and the glistening rheum of frost had melted from all three. Hardly breathing from his suspense, Wes filled the needle's chamber full and plunged it into the firm white flesh just above the girl's silent heart.

A short laugh came from him—an ironic laugh. It seemed idiotic to even think of restoring her to life, even if she had been dead only a week or so. It was quite—

And then his thoughts stopped.

"My God!" he said suddenly.

For a tide of faintest color had surged through the girl's wan cheeks. And her slim figure had stirred perceptibly on the sheet of ice!

"By heaven, she's coming to!" Craig muttered unbelievingly.

Pressing his ear to her chest, he detected a faint and labored beating of her heart, stirring from its cold sleep as the terrific stimulation jolted it back to life. The girl's eyelids flickered; a tiny sigh escaped her full lips. Craig took off his heavy parka and laid it over her. Trembling with tremendous excitement, he tore himself away from the miracle of re-created life, and strode to the body of the young man who was apparently her partner.

Again he administered the Kundrenaline. Then he went to his first discovery—the heavily built, powerful warrior whose spear had stuck out of the ice. The hypodermic was once more filled, and the fluid plunged into his body. Even as a faint moan came from the younger man, the warrior's heart started to beat.

Perspiring, breathing quickly, vial and needle still in his hands, Wes

stood off and surveyed the three.

The girl's hands were moving fitfully; strange, racking gasps came from her throat. The other two were similarly affected. Almost frightened, held motionless by the weirdness of it, the American watched.

The heavily built warrior was tossing in a series of convulsions. His legs kicked out spasmodically, arms jerked and clenched, and the helmeted head rolled from side to side. Then the man lay still for as long as a minute; but, just as Craig was about to go to him, his legs tensed once again, and, staggering drunkenly, he got to his feet.

He looked around wildly, but did not see the dumbfounded Craig, for his eyes fell on the figure of the younger man. He too had risen, swaying on weak legs. And the girl was sitting up and staring at the two of them.

And then, grotesquely, preluded by a cry from the woman, the tragedy which death had once cut short was enacted out, there on the rough sheet of ice and snow.

The man with the spear fixed his eyes on the girl's young partner, raised his weapon, leveled it unsteadily, and tossed it weakly

forward. The pointed end clipped its target and sent him reeling, with a thin trickle of slow blood running from his right shoulder. The girl staggered to her feet and ran between the two. But the big warrior's hand swept her aside, and a short sword leaped from its sheath at his waist.

Wes was stupidly staring, unable to move. The combatants were utterly unconscious of him. The younger one, painfully wounded, drew his own sword and swayed forward to meet his enemy.

The fight was grotesque. Both were weak, unsteady. The short swords stabbed slowly, missing by yards in their drunken course. Hatred was on the big man's dark face, and a fierce lust for blood. It was only when the weapons clashed loudly together that Craig came out of his daze.

"Stop!" he yelled, jumping forward. "Wait! Stop!"

All three turned and looked full at him. And then death, which had been banished for but a few minutes, swooped swiftly once more on the young man. While he stood peering, bewildered, at Craig, the huge warrior steadied his blade and drove it home through his unguarded chest. The man slid over the edge of the ice into the cleft below.

The girl shrieked again and went down to his fallen figure, while the victor waved his bloody sword aloft with a shout of triumph. Then, without hesitation, he leaped at the American.

Wes was taken wholly by surprise. He dropped the vial of Kundrenaline and the hypodermic, and he heard them crash and break at his feet as he fumbled for his automatic, in a holster at his belt. But the warrior was upon him. His crimsoned blade swung high, gleamed downward, and smote Wesley Craig square on the side of the head.

Lucky for him, the flat of the sword had been used—but it was enough. The American reeled under the terrific swipe. He had a last glimpse of two inflamed eyes, of a savage, contorted face; then the universal whiteness went black, and he fell, and the whole incredible scene passed from his consciousness....

Just how long he had remained unconscious, Wesley Craig had no means of determining. His head was hurting devilishly; for a moment he thought that his plane had crashed, and that he was lying in the wreckage. Then he tried to move his hands, and found that he couldn't. They were bound. His eyes opened.

He discovered that he was lying flat on the ice, hands tied behind his

back. Somebody was moaning softly. It was the girl. She too was tied. Wes tried to sit up; and a hand grasped his shoulder tightly and yanked him to his feet.

The big warrior who had felled him, his bloody sword still in hand, stared closely at the American, and fingered his fur jacket curiously. Presently he muttered a few words in some strange tongue. When Craig did not reply, he again spat out the words, his dark brows bunching malevolently. And this time Wes understood part of what he said.

He was speaking ancient Egyptian!

That proved it. These three, who but half an hour before were dead and entombed in the ice, were Egyptians. Trying to cope with his returning bewilderment, Craig racked his brains for remnants of the difficult language. And finally said laboriously:

"Who—who art thou?"

A torrent of words broke from the warrior. Only a few were understandable.

"Shabako—Pharaoh Shabako!" And he repeated Craig's question:

"Who art thou?"

The girl was sitting up now, and peering at the American. Her eyes were still tear-filled, for the dead body of the young man was at her side. She cried out a warning, and Craig caught most of it.

"Be careful, Stranger! He will slay thee as he slew Inaros!"

"Answer me! Who art thou?" repeated the warrior angrily. His patience was short; he played with the hilt of his sword.

"I come," said Wesley Craig slowly, groping for words, "from a far country. I found the three of you in this ice—dead. I brought thee back to life."

There was an astounded silence. Then the man who called himself Shabako deliberately cuffed his prisoner on the cheek. "Blasphemer!" he roared. "To claim the powers of the gods! Thou shall die for that! Yea, the ice entrapped me when I was about to slay the guilty Inaros—but our mighty god Aten restored me to life! Enough! The priests shall deal with thee!"

He jerked the trembling girl to Craig's side, and with a prick of his sword in their backs made them go forward. The American was too

bewildered to think evenly. Why, the god Aten was the Sun God!—the divinity Egypt worshipped in five hundred B.C.? How had these warm-blooded people come to the far north? Where did they live? And what fate lay in store for him?

He felt none too optimistic about his position. He knew that it would be two weeks before Somers, at the main base, would become alarmed at his absence. Unless, of course, the mechanic at the sub-base tried to beat his way back on foot, which was only barely possible.... Then he discovered that his automatic was still in its holster; it was slapping against his thighs; and he felt more hopeful.

The girl trudged tiredly at his side. Shabako was a few feet behind, grumbling and urging his captives along.

"Where does he drive us?" Craig asked softly. "What is thy name—and why did he slay thy companion?"

Her frightened eyes slanted towards his face. "To the Temple of the Sun God, Stranger," she whispered. "And there—" She broke off, to get control of the emotion she was feeling.

"There—what?"

"The God's awful hands!... Taia is my name. I do not know how I am once again alive, when a short while ago I was dead—but it matters not. I am a priestess of Aten, a virgin of the Temple. Inaros, he—he who lies behind—dared to love me. But a few hours gone he committed sacrilege, hiding in the Temple, so he could watch me. Pharaoh Shabako chanced on him, threatened death to us and pursued us out here. And then of a sudden, when Shabako was hurling his spear, we were entrapped ... and died...."

It was a strange story of forbidden love, one that might have been enacted in age-old times beneath the shadows of the pyramids. Craig began, "How did—" but a harsh voice cut his question short.

"Silence, infidel! Stir thy feet! This ice cools my blood!"

The American's plane, hidden from view behind the hillock, was left farther and farther in the rear, and Wes was surprised to find that he was being driven up the very slopes of the ice-covered hill he had come to investigate.

At the top, he saw that the hill was a volcano, as he had guessed. There, in the center, was a wide gaping hole from which, in past ages, fiery streams of lava and ashes had belched forth. He was amazed to see that rude steps had been hacked in one side of the

great cleft, and that they led sharply downwards. A faint warmth reached him, and he observed that there was but little ice in the crater cup, and none on the rocky walls where the hewn steps led down. It was here that these warm-blooded people lived!

As soon as Taia reached the steps she began to descend them, but Craig wasn't so docile. He told himself that this was his last chance; once below, surrounded by numbers, there might be no opportunity to strike for freedom. His eyes narrowed as he groped for a plan. If he could butt his brawny captor, strike him fairly in the solar plexus, and, while he lay helpless, cut his bonds with the sword....

He whirled around. Reverting to football tactics, he tensed his lean, hard body and plunged squarely at Shabako.

The Pharaoh was taken completely by surprise, and went sprawling; but the sword did not pitch from his hand. He had received a stiff, shrewd blow, but only a glancing one, for he had twisted his body at the last second. Now, sputtering with wrath, he scrambled to his feet and whipped back his blade for a killing slice at the American.

It was Taia who saved him, then. In a flash she threw herself against the sword arm and deflected the sweep.

"Wait, O Pharaoh!" she cried breathlessly. "The priests will claim this stranger; 'tis they who must decide his fate! Do not kill him here!"

Shabako's face was livid with wrath; rage choked him; but he paused. The girl's aptly timed words had told. He was obviously not decided as to what to do. There was a pause, while the sword pointed straight at Craig's chest; then, grumbling, the Egyptian let down his weapon.

"But try no more of thy tricks, dog!" he said harshly. "Else thy death come before its time!"

Taia glanced appealingly at Wes. Her eyes were half-frightened. Craig smiled wryly. "Lead on!" he said.

Years of time fell away with each of their descending steps. Egypt stirred under the dust of the centuries; Egypt lived again, though in a sad mockery of her former glory. It was like a descent into a new world, yet a world that was, at the same time, as old as man's civilization....

Fifty or more steps they trudged down, then came suddenly to two dark corridors, both of which slanted steeply into the bowels of the

earth. The one they took was mystic with deep shadows thrown by flaring oil lamps, cunningly imbedded in the walls of rock; and immediately into Wes's mind came the memory of a corridor he had once walked through in old Egypt, a corridor that pierced to the heart of a pyramid and the somber vault of a mummy who had once been revered as the Pharaoh Aknahton. In his nostrils now there seemed to be that same, musty, age-old smell; the same hushed gloom was about him; his eyes saw dimly on the walls the same rows of hieroglyphs telling of long-past deeds of warriors and priests.

But there the similarity ended. In Egypt it had been a dead Pharaoh; here, though even yet he could hardly believe it, a living one—living by grace of modern science—walked warily behind him, and a living virgin of the temple at his side. The sword of the Pharaoh was pricking his back.

The passageway they trudged down became one of many. Others angled from it frequently, all dark, all hushed, all seemingly devoid of people. The volcano—extinct, almost surely, for the warmth was only that of the earth—was honey-combed with corridors. The marvelous ingenuity of the Egyptian race had come into play in fashioning this warm home in the barren arctic wastes. But Craig's ever-alert eyes warned him of what was to come. The characters, the hieroglyphs, the rude forms of Egyptian gods on the jagged walls

were of degenerate character—and always, when degeneration sets in, the cruellest form of worship has been chosen. The worship of Aten, the Sun God, Wes recalled, was one that demanded human sacrifice....

Still they went down. Savage crevices, split in the days when the volcano roared with fire and gushing lava, were skirted; crude ladders reached down ever-recurring pits, beneath which there was always another corridor, and always leading down. Craig could not reckon the depth they must be at; he knew that the heat was growing, though, and that his skin was wet with perspiration beneath his furs. He started to ask Taia the question that ceaselessly tormented him—how her race had come to the arctic; but a prick from Shabako's sword silenced him.

Then the passageway they were in widened. There was a bend just ahead. Through the gloom came the sonorous chant of many voices.

"The Temple!" whispered Taia.

They turned the bend, and saw, ahead, lit by a thick cluster of oil lamps which threw a broad swathe of yellowish light, two tall columns of corrupt Egyptian design. They framed the entrance to the Sun God's Temple. The full volume of a chant of worship from

inside poured through them.

Shabako's sword brooked no pause. He drove his prisoners straight through.

A host of impressions thronged Wes's bewildered eyes: a huge, misty-dark room, columns lining it—the vague form of a great idol squatting at the far end, massed people bowed before it—a weird chant rising into murmuring echoes along the high, dim ceiling. There were priests standing rigidly in front of the idol, their hands stretched high; and every eye was upon them. None saw the three in the doorway until a roar split the drone of worship.

"Way! Way for thy Pharaoh, Shabako the Fourth!"

Shabako had stepped for the moment in front of his prisoners. His sword blade was waved aloft; his bawl rudely interrupted the ceremony. The chant stopped, and silence fell as the priests whirled around. The worshippers, too, turned and stared at the man who had broken the service with his imperious command.

"Way!" the vibrant voice cried again. "Aside for thy Pharaoh, who returns to the shrine of Aten, Father of Life!"

Some sixty bewildered faces peered at the man. The silence of the buried Temple was solid, awesome. Through the mist of wreathing incense-smoke and heavy shadows the giant head of the idol stared down, cruel in the coldness of the rock it had been chiselled from.

But a pathway cleared in the thick of the crowd, and, without a glance to either side, Shabako's proud figure strode down it, driving his prisoners before him.

Craig heard low gasps of astonishment, glimpsed the people fall back as he walked forward, saw the amazement in their eyes. The statue of the god seemed to grow as he neared the altar; it was in squatting posture, with hands outstretched, one above the other. The American was to learn the reason for that position later. Now he had only a fleeting impression of it, for a man stepped from his ceremonial position beside the god's feet and met Shabako halfway.

His face was thin and cunning, with slanted rat's eyes. Ornate head-dress and stiffly inlaid robes denoted him to be the High Priest. He held a claw-like hand high.

"Hold!" he bade shrilly. "Who art thou to come thus into the Temple, calling thyself Shabako—Shabako, who has been dead these twenty years?"

The words were a thunderbolt of surprise, both to the Pharaoh and Taia, and to Wes Craig. He could not see Shabako's face, but he saw his tall form pause, and his tensed muscles relax.

"Dead ... these twenty years?" the Egyptian at last repeated slowly, struggling to overcome the shock. "Why, 'twas but a few hours ago that I left this Temple, in pursuit of—" He peered at the priest's sly face. "Who art thou?" he demanded suddenly.

"Hrihor, High Priest of Aten."

Craig heard the girl whisper something, inaudible because of her surprise, but Shabako's bewildered voice cut in:

"Hrihor! It cannot be! Thou art not Hrihor! When last I saw Hrihor, he was an under-priest of twenty. Ay was High Priest of the Temple! Call him! Where is Ay?"

"Dust," said the priest. "Dust these ten years and more."

Wes's senses were reeling. The bodies in the ice—he had taken it for granted they had only lain there for days; a week at most. That they had been entrapped for twenty years was incredible. Had he known that, he would not even have thought of using the Kundrenaline.

Twenty years ago he had been a boy of eight; it meant—Lord!—it meant the youthful girl beside him was twice her age; and Shabako an old man! Old—yet young! Fantastic, unimaginable—yet true!

He saw Shabako pass a hand over his face, as if his body were suddenly tired; but the next moment it tautened again and he swung around. His face was unreadable. A multitude of conflicting emotions struggled there. He strode to a group of several of the older men.

"Look at me!" he cried, facing them squarely. "Look well at my features! Am I not he who twenty years ago—as the High Priest says—pursued the priestess and her lover into the land of ice? Am I not the man who ruled thee? Am I not Shabako? Is this not the priestess, Taia?"

They stared at him. Remembrance suddenly gleamed on their faces. A thin, cracked voice shrilled:

"Yea! Thou art Shabako! Thou art Shabako as he was twenty years ago—old, yet without the lines of age on thy brow! And the priestess—well do I remember her. That is she!"

A hand pointed at the trembling girl; all eyes centered on her. The

High Priest's mouth dropped open, and he believed.

Then Shabako breathed deeply, drew himself up and with kingly dignity faced the ranks of his people, sword again held imperiously aloft.

"Thou hast seen!" he cried. "Thou hast heard! Here is the guilty Taia—and here am I, returned to thee, still with the strength of my prime! As I was about to slay the rash Inaros, the ice entrapped us, and for twenty years we lay thus, while my spirit pursued those two guilty ones across the River of Death. Then Aten aided me, filled my veins with His holy fire and melted the ice from our bodies. We lived and breathed again. With His divine help I slew Inaros and brought the transgressing virgin back to the Temple. Twenty years have passed—but of years Aten thinks nothing. Give praise to our God!"

A breathless silence swallowed his shout. Then a mighty roar burst out, an exultant roar that soared up past the impassive image of the god and rolled in thunderous echoes along the roof. "Praise to Aten! Praise to Aten!"

Wesley Craig smiled wryly. He could hardly credit the Kundrenaline's power in wiping twenty years away; but it was evidently true. Shabako, he saw, really believed the superstition-

conceived story he had just spun, so—now what?

The High Priest was staring at him malevolently, his slanted eyes fastened on his garb of furs. His weedy voice pierced through the echoes.

"O divine Shabako," he questioned shrilly, "who is this stranger?"

The Pharaoh's glance was contemptuous. "A blasphemer," he said harshly. "One who dares claim—"

But Wes had understood the question. He stepped forward. Frankly and simply, he told his story.

"I found thy ruler and the maid and her lover in the ice, entrapped," he concluded. "I cut them out and, with a fluid which is of common knowledge in my country, restored them to life. I told this to Shabako, but he overpowered me and—"

"Hear thou!" bawled the Pharaoh, furiously breaking in. "Blasphemy! He claims the might of the God! Back, dog, lest I kill thee here myself!"

Wes saw how hopeless it was; he shrugged and stepped back. He read all too plainly the hatred in Shabako's eyes; his frank story had

also apparently inflamed the High Priest against him. There was not a friend in the whole Temple, save the girl—and the next moment Hrihor walked to her.

His slanted eyes ran over her figure. A sneering smile appeared. "So!" he observed mockingly. "Taia is returned to the Temple! Yes, well do I remember thee now—the scornful cast of thy mouth, the proud bearing of thy head. Even Aten thou were scornful of, I remember. Aten remembers too!" He turned slightly. "Listen, O Shabako. Three days ago thy elected successor, Siptah, died. We had met to choose a new ruler. But, by the will of the God, thou art returned and art again Pharaoh. Thy people are grateful to Aten. In twelve hours a sacrifice shall proclaim our gratitude." His crafty eyes again swung to the girl. "There!" he shrilled, "—she pays for her sin. She is the sacrifice!"

There was a great shout from the crowd, but the words that Shabako then cried savagely were plainly audible to Wes Craig.

"Aye. Taia. O High Priest—and the blasphemous stranger, too! Both shall die in the hands of Aten!"

The priest nodded, smiling cruelly. "'Tis well, Shabako. Both shall die!"

Taia's frightened eyes met Craig's, then lifted to the form of the idol. He too peered up at it, and for the first time its hideousness and the cold-blooded cruelty of its design struck him.

The rudely carved figure was a full forty feet high. The impassive face, horrible in the lifelessness of rock, stared unseeingly down on its worshippers. One gross black hand was held some ten feet above the palm of the other, and, inserted in its palm, was a long, keen-pointed blade. The living sacrifice would be tied to the lower palm; the upper, by some trickery, would be made to slowly descend....

A surge of panic swept over Craig. In his mind he saw the slight, helpless form of the girl strapped to that grim paw, saw the knife inch down, saw it touch and prick and finally drive through her heart. And it would be the same for him! A flame of blind fury burst in him, making him reckless; mad.

"The hell we die!" he yelled, in English, and with a great bound he was at Taia's side. A priest leaped for him, but Craig shot a foot out and sent him sprawling. Then, with eyes flaming and legs outthrust, he stood in front of the girl, facing the worshippers.

"Fools!" he roared. "Listen to me! My words are truthful! I do not lie, as does thy Pharaoh! I can prove that which I say! I can—"

"Take him!" the High Priest shrieked. "Forward! Take him!"

Craig could handle one or two, but not a dozen. A mass of men, women, soldiers, priests, swept at him. There was a brief moment of struggle, of oaths and shouts and excited yells from the crowd in the Temple, till something thudded into the American's head and he went down. Feet trampled him; men surged over him; then blessed unconsciousness en-wrapped him, and he knew no more.

He did not hear, as did Taia, Shabako's command:

"To a chamber with them! Guard them well, till the time of sacrifice!"

A small party, led by the stocky figure of the captain of the Pharaoh's guard, wound its way through a network of corridors, past jagged walls down which water slowly dripped, across a swaying bridge of hides that spanned an awful chasm in the volcano's very heart, and came at last to a large dark hole in the rock.

The captain turned. "In there!" he commanded harshly. The two figures, man and girl, were dumped like sacks of flour into the gloomy chamber. The men who had carried them turned and tramped away; the captain faced one who had stayed.

"Guard them with thy life, Sitah. Thou knowest the payment for carelessness."

Sitah nodded grimly. He was fully armed, with spear and sword. He sat down outside the dark hole, and the captain retraced his steps. The pad of his feet on the floor died away, and then, for a long time, there was silence.

Perhaps every five minutes Sitah turned and stared down into the hole behind, ears craned for the slightest sound. But none came. The two inside, no doubt, were asleep.

It was very hot, down in the deep-buried corridor, and though Sitah was accustomed to the heat, he soon found his eyelids drooping and his whole body crying out for sleep. But he did not go to sleep. He knew too well what would befall him in Aten's hands if he did. He had seen many old men and women die in those hands, on ceremony days—old people who croaked in helpless agony as the keen knife blade dropped slowly down toward them, paused a second, inches from their hearts, and then plunged in with a rush. Old men and women, useless, their years of service gone. Yes, and many unwanted girl children....

That was what the Sun God demanded. His hands reached ever for

human bodies. It was cruel, but he was a god; and who was to question the will of a god?

Sitah was very glad when, after six hours of lonely vigil, another guard relieved him and took his place outside the dark hole. Sitah spoke humorously to him, a grim kind of humor, as befitting one who has seen much death.

"They sleep, Hapu," he said, nodding into the prison. "But soon a longer sleep will come for them—the sleep of the knife!" He chuckled as he made his way far below, to his bed. A few hours of rest and he would be in fine fettle for the ceremony.

The relieving guard grunted and peered into the cell. He saw two dark figures outstretched, mere blobs of black, a little blacker than the shadows. Yes, they slept....

He sat down on the bench Sitah had just vacated. He had four hours to wait. Then the priests, led by Hrihor, would come, and the ceremony would begin, and the god's hands would move together. It would be a fine show! He looked forward to it keenly. It would be delicious to see that girl Taia bared to the knife. It would please the god: seldom did his hands hold such a beautiful sacrifice. And the queer stranger, too—he would probably die very noisily. When he

saw the knife sliding down, he would regret his blasphemy and shriek for forgiveness!

For along time Hapu sat quite motionless. He was a good watchdog. Hours passed; his vigil was nearing its end; the priests would soon come. Soon—

A slight noise came from the cell behind him.

He whirled around. The noise came again, louder. A voice cried out.

"Water! Water! I am dying!"

Hapu grunted. It was the stranger's voice. The stranger must not die; it would spoil the ceremony; Aten would be wroth. He stared into the hole.

One of the figures was tossing, writhing painfully. The agonized cry echoed again. "Water! Please! I am dying!"

Hapu strode into the cell.

For a moment he stood still, peering down at the tossing figure. His brain suddenly shouted alarm. This was no human body! "What—" he began.

But the question was never finished. Something hard crashed into the back of his skull; his spear dropped with a clank, and he slumped to the floor.

Out of the shadows, behind, a man emerged and bent down over the outstretched figure of the guard. A smile appeared on the man's lean face: the guard was out—cold. It took Wes Craig just a moment to ascertain this; then he tiptoed over to a dark form that lay on the floor—the girl, whose pale, anxious face peered up out of the shadows. Craig cut her bonds with the guard's sword and raised her to her feet. She stood close to him, clinging to him, trembling, almost not believing she was free.

Her eyes were filled with awe as she looked up into the American's eyes. "First thou didst restore me to life," she whispered, "and now thou hast broken thy bonds. Surely, thou must be a god!"

Wes smiled. "It was simple, Taia. Look! This buckle on my belt—'tis sharp. I edged it round and cut the rope. It was slow work, else we would have been free long before."

"But I saw thee toss and writhe on the floor, and cry out for water!"

Craig kicked a pile of furs that had been heaped one on top of the

other, and tied together with thread from an unraveled woolen mitten. "This was my body," he said coolly. "Furs. The cell must be a storeroom for them—lucky for us. I was standing with a rock in my hand near the door, when I cried out for water.... We shall not die in Aten's hands, Taia! See—I have a sword. With luck—"

There was a warmer quality than reverence in Taia's eyes when she spoke—though she did not realize it. "Then come quickly, O Stranger!" she said. "The guard has been changed once; the time for sacrifice nears!"

Craig nodded. Only a sword was in his hand; his automatic, he found, had been taken from him while he lay unconscious in the Temple, probably desired as a curious heathen object. The discovery, made when he had cut his bonds, had been a serious blow to his hopes: with a sword, he was only a human being, but with a gun he might have passed as supernatural to this primitive race.

But it could not be helped. He peered to each side, gestured to the girl, and together they started up the sloping incline of the corridor.

The heat of the earth was great, down where they were, and it made the passageway muggy and odorous. Fitful shadows were flung by widely separated oil lamps as they pressed forward—grotesque

splotches of black that half a dozen times tightened the American's grasp on his sword, sure that a guard had come upon them. He knew that their margin of time in which to effect escape was small, and he gradually quickened their pace, sacrificing caution for speed. Taia's hand was in his left; and he had just turned to her to ask if they were taking the best course up to the surface, when suddenly she stopped short.

"Hearken!" she whispered, frightened.

Wes craned his ears. For a moment there was nothing but silence. Then a faint sound trembled through the shadows. It could only have been that of many approaching footsteps.

"The priests!" Taia murmured, tightening her grip on his hand. "They come!"

There was a sharp bend in the corridor fifty feet ahead; from behind it a growing clatter of sandals echoed through the rock-walled passageway. Craig paused, irresolute. "Are we blocked, ahead?" he asked.

"Yes," her low voice hurriedly told him. "But we can go back, cross the bridge of the chasm and go up the other side. But others may be

there, and—"

A shout cut her words short. Dim figures appeared around the bend in the passage. They were discovered!

Wes Craig's face set grimly; he worked his hand into a good grip on the sword handle, looked levelly at the gathering crowd ahead and said:

"I think it best to face them now, Taia. I can hold them for minutes at least; thou canst perhaps escape. Rest assured I shall take that High Priest with me, when I cross thy River of Death!"

"But where can I go?" cried the girl. "Nay, Divine One—I shall stay at thy side!"

The excited yells of Hrihor, urging the others forward, came plainly to their ears. Swords glittered in the gloom of the corridor, and like a foam-tipped wave that slowly gathers speed the group of priests and soldiers charged down on the man and girl. Craig saw that she would not run.

"Then come!" he shouted, and swung her around. With desperate speed they retraced their steps. They soon passed their cell, and

recklessly leaped through the deceptive shadows on the far side, on down the corridor.

The High Priest and the others followed close behind. His crafty face was distorted with rage, and he kept screaming to his men: "The wrath of the God on thee if they escape!" Craig's ears caught that, and he found time for a bitter smile. If! If only they had left him his automatic! A few bullets flung into them would even matters a trifle.

The corridor twisted and slanted ever downward. They panted around a corner and came to the brink of a dark pit. "Down!" cried the girl. She led the way, nimbly dropping down the fifteen-foot rawhide ladder that was there. Halfway down the ladder Wes reached up with his sword and cut it from where it was fastened. He fell to the bottom of the hole with a grunt. As he extricated himself from the ladder's entangling meshes be yelled up, "Come and get us, you cutthroats—if you can!" and was off after the lithe form of the girl.

But the action helped them but little, and added only a few feet to the distance between them and their pursuers, for they boldly made the deep drop without sending for another ladder. Taia was sobbing for air, and Wes himself beginning to feel the bitter pang of hopelessness when they rounded a corner and came to a great chasm—a wide cleft in the very heart of the volcano. A terrific heat came from its maw of

unbroken black, and a peculiar, choking odor, sulphurous. Across it was a slender framework of hides and thongs—a mere catwalk over the terrible depths below.

"You first!" Craig snapped, and as Taia started across a spear came hurtling from the mob behind, and clanked against the rocky wall on the far side. Nimbly Taia sped over the bridge, and Wes, the yells of Hrihor and his men loud in his ears, followed.

Midway a long spear snaked after him. It missed by inches, and went pitching into the gulf. In his haste he caught his foot on the interlaced thongs, stumbled and almost fell—which saved his life, for another spear streaked through the very spot he had been a second before. Then he was across, and his sword was flashing in vicious hacks at one of the two main supporting thongs of the bridge.

The hide was tough, but Craig's strength was that of a desperate man, and in several mighty strokes he severed it. The framework slumped to one side, held only by one thong. Hrihor, half across, croaked in sudden horror and sprang back as he saw the stranger raise his blade to carve through the other support. But even as the sword swept down a spear streamed from a warrior's hand and thudded against Wes's right shoulder.

His sword jarred loose. It fell into the chasm.

"Thou art hurt!" cried the girl. Wes grinned wryly.

"Nay," he said, "but weaponless. Lead on!"

They were now on the other side of the chasm in the tunneled volcano. The priests had hesitated a moment when the bridge had slackened; but now, seeing the weaponless man and girl disappear in a tortuous corridor ahead, they sidled across the damaged catwalk after their fierce leader.

"They will go past the Temple!" Hrihor shrilled. "It is Taia who leads him: again she tries to escape to the land of ice! Follow—up here!"

His words were true. The corridor that led by the Temple was the one which led to the only other passage up to the crater of the volcano.

But Taia had guided Craig only a few steps past the place of worship, now a silent vault of impenetrable blackness when, turning a corner, the American felt her shrink back.

"Shabako comes!" she told him faintly.

Quickly he verified it. Led by the Pharaoh himself, a party of soldiers was coming down the corridor some thirty yards away. Even as Wes saw them, they saw him—and Shabako's roar of sudden alarm tingled his ears.

Priests behind, soldiers and the blood-lustful Pharaoh ahead. They were cut off, blocked, trapped. There was no nearby branch passage to run down; there was no way to turn. It was the end of the game.... But no, not quite, Craig told himself grimly. His sword was gone, but his fists would tell on them before he went down, before the paws of the idol finally claimed him....

He stepped before Taia, clenched his fists, and waited the shock of the charge.

He could see the fury in Shabako's narrowed eyes, so close were they, when a soft hand pulled him back. It was Taia's.

"Come!" she whispered, and darted swiftly back to the gloomy, shadow-filled entrance of the Temple. And wondering, Wes Craig followed.

She glided through the pillared portal and was immediately swallowed up by a shroud of silent, velvety darkness. Wes could not

see her, but her soft hand touched his arm lightly to guide him forward, and he sensed the girl's warm body close to his. Where was she going? Inevitably they would be trapped in the far end of the Temple, beneath the very hands of the idol—or so he thought. But he trusted her, and went on.

A shout came from the entrance. "They went in here!" someone cried, and the two heard Shabako detailing swift instructions to his men—instructions which were cut short by another clatter of feet and the approaching voice of Hrihor. Priests and soldiers had joined, a confusion of men, most of them hanging back, half afraid to venture into the well of blackness that was Aten's abode on earth.

But the Pharaoh whipped them into discipline with the harsh tones of his voice, and strung them into a close line, to advance slowly through the Temple. "Have thy blades ready!" he added. "They cannot escape us now: they are trapped. Forward!"

Nothing could get through that line. It was like a fine-toothed comb, with every tooth a man. Craig saw it coming, and knew that he and the girl could not go much farther back, for already he sensed himself directly beneath the looming figure of Aten. Yet the gentle touch led him on—around and past the idol into the furthermost corner of the Temple. It was then that Taia paused, felt around, and

placed Craig's right hand upon some unseen knob in the wall. Her faint whisper hurriedly explained the purpose of the knob as Wes drank in her words eagerly.

"There is a secret room behind the idol, from whence the priests ape the God's voice and move his hands at sacrifice. A priest should be there e'en now, ready for the ceremony. Thou must overcome him, Divine One, and we too can hide therein. Hrihor dare not search for us there while others are present, for e'en Shabako knows not of the room. Quick, then—they come! Thy hand is on the latch of the secret panel. I follow thee!"

Wes pressed the girl's hand tightly and his body tensed. Then, without hesitation, he jerked the secret panel back. A faint glow of light lay ahead, and he plunged into the tiny room that lay revealed.

An alarmed face stared up—the priest! Wes leaped at him, his steely fingers thumbing into the man's throat and throttling its scream to a gasping choke. All the American's pent-up fury went into a lunge that the priest could not begin to stand against. He was bowled sharply over and went down. Craig on top, and there the fight ended as suddenly as it had begun. The priest's head thudded into the smooth rock floor; a convulsion quivered his body; he moaned and lay still.

A grim flicker in his eyes, Craig got up and looked around for Taia. Then astonishment and cold fear swept through him.

The secret door was closed—but she was not inside!

“Now what—" Wesley Craig gasped.

He did not dare finish the thought. He glared around, much as a trapped tiger does, his brain a turmoil. His eyes fell on a ladder that led up from the floor to a niche in the left wall—a slit about forty feet high, a pool of darkness, shadowed from the thin tongue of flame that lit the room. Only half realizing what the slit was, Wes sprang forward and leaped up the ladder. A platform was built high up inside the niche, a place for a man to stand on. The American reached it, pressed himself forward, and peered through a tiny hole that was in the rock ahead. He knew it ought to command a view of the Temple.

But if it did, Craig could see nothing, for there was no light in the huge vault outside. For minutes the brooding silence was not broken, save by an occasional scraping sound made by one of the searching line of men. There was no hint of the girl who waited beside the hideous figure of the god, nor of the network that gradually closed in on her.

But suddenly the silence was shattered by a shout.

"I have her!" someone yelled. Then came a multitude of sounds. The piercing voice of Hrihor was audible above them all.

"Light the lamps! Hast thou the other, too?"

"Nay—he is not here."

"Not here? What—"

A spark of light made an erratic course from the Temple door: someone was bringing a flame to light the lamps. A moment later there was a flare of yellow light as the oil in a large wall lamp caught fire, and then the darkness melted further before a wave of light from the opposite wall. Now could be seen the warriors who, with gleaming outdrawn swords, were clustered around the girl. Shabako was gripping her arm and shaking her roughly: the High Priest was drawing to a stop before her, to stand glaring at her with hate-inflamed eyes.

"Tell us!" roared the Pharaoh. "Where is the man?"

She looked at him levelly. Her eyes were quite calm, and she breathed evenly. There was a glorious light in her eyes as she

replied.

"I will tell thee," she said; "though thou wilt not comprehend. He vanished. Vanished, even as a god. He was here beside me, in the darkness and then suddenly he was gone. But why not? For he was a god...."

The soldiers gaped at her. Silence came down in the Temple. The High Priest did not break it, but only stared closely at the girl with eyes that suddenly had something more than hate in them—comprehension, and a trace of fear....

But the Pharaoh Shabako's eyes were only wrathful, and he shouted:

"A god? Vanished, sayest thou? Lies! Lies! But thou canst not lie to Aten! The God knows of a way to loosen thy tongue!"

Despite herself, Taia shuddered. She knew that way.

Gradually the Temple was filling with other worshippers come to see the sacrifice, and soon there were sixty or seventy of them. The men outnumbered the women two to one, and none of them was very old. Fifty was about their age limit—and those who were near this age were reluctant to let their eyes rest on the hands of the idol. When

they did glance at them, and at the cruel knife blade in the upper one, fear showed on their faces. There were also very few children....

Hrihor's thin features grew unreadable in the coldness that settled upon them. He was now in the role of High Priest: apart, separate from the common mob before him; interpreter of Aten's divine mysteries: playing his part of one who listened to a god's awful whisperings. Impassively he superintended the binding of Taia by a priestess, who tightened the cords around the girl's slim body with claw-like hands, a gleam of unholy anticipation on her fleshless, soured face. Then the High Priest turned from the altar and faced the crowd of people.

"Silence!" he commanded. "Silence, before thy God Aten!"

A hush fell instantly. Their eyes centered on the bound figure of the girl, standing just beside the lowermost hand of the idol that would presently claim her. Her face was very pale, but none could detect fear in it. There was an uneasy stir, a shifting of feet, a mumbling, as her fresh young beauty struck the watchers. Somewhere a man muttered that she was very young to die. Aten had returned her once: perhaps the God did not wish her to perish.... His neighbor demurred. And the ceremony went on.

Ornate but crude censers were in the hands of two priests; the incense was lit by long tapers, and its acrid odor wound up in wavering purple spirals of smoke. On each side of Hrihor were five under-priests, eyes stiffly on their superior's impassive face. The soldiers had retreated from the altar and now were massed in the rear of the Temple, their spear blades glittering dully above their heads.

The High Priest raised his hands slowly, and stared with glazed eyes into the gloom of the ceiling, high above. "Praise!" he shrilled. "Praise to Aten!"

The assembled worshippers joined him in the chant of sacrifice. It was low and soft, and, at first, almost drowsy, like the slow stir of a tropical wind through palm leaves. But soon it quickened with rising tones from perfectly concerted voices; it soared up; its tenor changed; it became fierce, lustful, eager for blood, eager for the sacrifice, a heathen chant shrilling for sight of a girl's body in the god's, awful hands.

And it died in a sad, discordant moan on an expectant note....

Hrihor's body, stiff and rigid in its ceremonial robes, did not seem human as he stretched his arms straight forward and wheeled silently to the huge idol of stone. A full two minutes he stood without so

much as flicking an eyelash; then, not shifting his glazed stare, he harshly intoned:

"Ages ago our ancestors set out from the homeland of Egypt in a great galley, bound for the barbarian countries of the north in quest of metal. But storms seized upon them, drove them far from their course, till at last, weak from hunger, they came to this land of ice, where their galley was wrecked and they were cast ashore. At first all was dark; then came the Sun God Aten's life giving rays, leading them to this mountain, which they inhabited and in which they carved this Temple wherein to worship the God who had saved them. The lord of the galley was the first Pharaoh; the priest of the galley was called High Priest; the Pharaoh took a concubine to wife—and thus was our civilization begun.

"There were virgins of the Temple, holy, set apart from man, sacred to Aten. Never did one betray her sacred trust—never, until Taia fled to the land of ice with the sacrilegious Inaros. Our mighty Pharaoh pursued them, and after twenty years, by Aten's special grace, slew the man and brought the maid back to pay for her transgression. Never before has this happened."

He paused, waiting. An under-priest spoke; evidently following some ritual.

"Here is the priestess, O High Priest of Aten! What penalty must she pay?"

"Death in Aten's hands!" the cold voice shrilled instantly. "The God wills it!"

But now came an interruption, unexpected and disconcerting to the well-laid plans of Hrihor. The voice of Pharaoh Shabako cried out:

"Another came with this priestess—a blasphemous stranger! He lies concealed; the maid will not tell where! High Priest, let her be tortured in Aten's hands until she reveals where he is!"

For a moment Hrihor lost his mask-like rigidity, of expression. His eyes shifted nervously. But Shabako was not to be denied. Again be repeated his demand.

"We must pray to Aten to make his hand descend on her, prick and gash her, till she divulges!"

A murmur arose from the people in the Temple: they approved the torture. Hrihor, obviously reluctant, was forced to comply.

"O mighty Aten," he cried, turning to the idol, "thou hast heard our Pharaoh. We pray to thee to lay thy hand on the priestess Taia, till

she tells where the stranger lies concealed!"

Shabako nodded in approval. While a mumbled prayer rose, four priests strode to the girl, lifted her slight form and flung it on the upturned lower band of the idol. They strapped her there securely, her breast but ten feet below the waiting knife. Even then she did not struggle or cry out.

She did not know who had won the fight inside the secret room, but her heart told her it was the mysterious stranger, for was he not a god?—She would not be afraid, for he would surely reveal his divinity, and save her, even as he had from her twenty-year death, and from her bonds in the cell where they had been imprisoned....

The softly chanted prayer surged through the Temple. Hrihor's slitted eyes were on the knife in the upper palm of the idol. Suddenly he flung up his arms, and cried:

"Now, O Aten!"

The prayer stopped. With fearful interest the people stared at the dagger, at the inert figure of the girl—the more elderly seeing in her a hint of what was to come to them when their days of service were ended.

The knife started downward.

Taia's eyes were closed. Her breathing was even and regular. She did not seem at all aware of the shaft of steel that slowly, in the hushed gasp from the audience, stirred with the stone hand that held it and moved deliberately downward.

To the silent crowd of worshippers it was a religious phenomenon, and well calculated to strike fear and awe into their hearts. The moving idol seemed to be a living thing, motivated by the unseen spirit of the god it represented, who caused the massive upper hand to execute his will. Its movement was slow and clumsy, and close listeners would have heard a slight creaking noise from somewhere behind it—but the ears of the worshippers were deaf from the fear and the horror in which they were vicariously participating.

Slowly the hands came together, until the long, wicked shear was but a foot above the bound girl.... It dropped to within inches of her flesh....

And there it stopped.

Then, before the amazed crowd could realize what was happening, before even Hrihor could control the surprise that raised his brows incredulously, the palm in which the blade was implanted slowly retraced its course and returned to its original position.

A breathless silence reigned in the Temple. The hand was motionless. It did not stir again.

"The God will not touch his priestess!"

It was a faint, awed whisper that came from someone amongst the worshippers. But Hrihor heard it, and so did the other priests. While they stared at each other, utterly at a loss, the whisper was taken up and repeated on all sides.

"The God will not touch his priestess!"

The High Priest sensed the crowd's conviction, and sensed them turning against him. His beady eyes glanced around nervously. His lips a thin line, he called to his second ranking priest in a tense whisper, and, when the other came to him, muttered in his ear:

"'Tis the stranger, hiding in the secret chamber, who does this! He has overcome our brother there, and now controls the levers! And

Taia knows it; and if she reveals it to the people our hold will be broken! She must be killed!"

"Yes! But how? We must be quick!"

Hrihor's crafty face set cruelly. "I know a way. Watch thou...."

He strode to the fore of the altar and flung his hands high. A shrill shout from his thin lips cut the uneasy murmuring short.

"Hearken! Aten will not torture His own priestess! He will not maim those who have sworn their lives to Him!"

The silent crowd waited for his next words. He screamed savagely.

"His High Priest must perform the rite! Aten has appointed me to be His instrument of vengeance!"

A gleam of unholy exultation was in his narrowed eyes. His face worked: he thrust a hand inside his ornate ceremonial vestment.

"By Divine Will," he cried, "this knife in my hand is the knife in the God's hand!"

And he whipped a long blade from the robe.

Never before had such a ceremony been held in the Temple of Aten, the Sun God. Never before had the hand of the god paused above the living sacrifice and deliberately risen again without tasting blood. It was miracle upon miracle; half-bewildered, Pharaoh Shabako and the herd of common people alike waited for what would come next, their High Priest's savage words somewhat reassuring them that all was correct.

They saw him clench his dagger tightly and with slow steps advance to the side of the helpless girl. Glaring down at her, he swung the blade high. It poised directly over her heart. It would not torture her, Taia knew: it was death that she read in the High Priest's eyes. She closed her own, and thought of the stranger; she breathed a silent prayer to him. She waited.

"In Aten's name!" screamed Hrihor, and brought the dagger down.

At that second the sharp roar of a sudden explosion thundered through the Temple, and the startled worshippers saw, slowly trickling from the right eye of Aten, a curling streamer of gray smoke. They did not know what had happened. And not until, after a moment of fearful silence, they saw the expression on Hrihor's face change to great surprise, and saw his right hand relax and drop the dagger to the floor, did they comprehend that he had been struck

down.

He clutched at his side, staggered, twisted round, and fell full length before the feet of the god whose representative he was.

A frightened woman close to the altar saw a dark red stain on his robe, and a scream from her lips pierced out:

"He is dead! Killed by Aten—whose eyes have looked death! Oh!"

She flung herself flat on the floor, and the others, back to the soldiers in the rear, did likewise. The priests clustered together in a scared group, staring fearfully at the right eye of the idol, from which a wisp of smoke was still trailing. None dared approach the outstretched figure of the High Priest. Only Shabako dared look at him.

The Pharaoh clutched his sword tightly, muttering uneasily to himself. Not a sound came from the prostrate multitude. The slow echoes of the explosion died away; again the heavy silence fell. Then Shabako suddenly stared around, and peered up at the stone image of the god.

His ears had caught a sound. It was a panting and scuffling noise, as if men were fighting. It grew, even though muffled by apparently intervening rock. The beginning of a scream, cut short into a choke, added to its volume. The worshippers far back in the Temple heard it, and looked up. There was a muffled crash—then another crash of thundering noise, similar to the one that had come from the god's eye.

But this time no smoke eddied from the eye. The explosion echoed through the Temple and died away, while all the time Pharaoh Shabako stared at the idol. Slow comprehension broke through the bewilderment on his face. Suddenly he swung around and gripped the cowering form of the second ranking priest, who stood near him.

"From whence came those sounds, Priest?" he hissed. "Tell me!"

The frightened priest gibbered unintelligibly, but there was a guilty look on his face which spurred Shabako on. He shook the man and roared the question again. Then the priest spoke.

"They came—from—the secret chamber," he stammered.

A gasp rose from the crowd behind. But before they could master their astonishment, Shabako had whipped his sword from its sheath

and sprung up the altar.

"Show me this chamber!" he cried.

Up on the platform in the secret room, his eye glued to the hole that was the eye of Aten, Wes Craig had seen and heard everything that had transpired. He had been shocked to see the brave thing Taia had submitted to, rather than divulge where he was hidden. Sacrificing herself, so that he, a stranger, might have a few more minutes of life! It hurt.

He had climbed down from the platform and glared around the lower floor of the secret room again, scanning shelves that were crowded with scores of curious objects, sacred relics, properties to aid in the manipulation of the idol and other unidentifiable things—looking for a potential weapon. If the girl had to die—and he—it would be better to go out and meet his enemies, taking some of them with him in full fight.

And then his heart leaped madly at the sight of something lying on one of the shelves.

A stumpy black shape, it was, with a short barrel of cold blue steel, and it looked as much out of place in that chamber as did the fur-clad

man who stared half-unbelievingly at it. It was a foreigner, as he was, in the gloomy corridors and chambers of the race that worshipped Aten. It too was American. It was a friend—his automatic!

To Wes Craig, bewildered and tired and sadly without hope, it almost seemed to be alive, smiling at him with its wicked round mouth. He picked it up, and it bolstered his courage, his hope and his energy enormously. At once he leaped to the closed entrance-door and felt for the lever that opened it. But there he paused a moment to think.

There was only the faintest chance of fighting free with Taia now. There were at least thirty men outside, and he had only seven bullets. And then he remembered where he was, and what the purpose of the secret room was. He remembered, also, a certain nervous expression on the High Priest's face that he had just seen....

He swung around and inspected the levers and crude wheels of wood that led to a handle up in the niche, shoulder-high to whoever might stand on the platform there. He had had experience with certain idols in Egypt. He remembered particularly one that had been worshipped in a degenerate age—its hands, its eyes. And then he stepped over the sprawling body of the still unconscious priest and climbed to the platform and his peep-hole again.

As he pressed himself forward in the niche, and applied his eye to the slit, he gently fingered the handle of the large lever right beside him. And he also measured the size of the slit in the right eye of the god....

Craig had not minded shooting the murderous High Priest Hrihor, but he did not want to kill the under-priest in the secret room. He had had no choice in the matter. At the tensest moment in the dramatic scene in the Temple, just when he had been hoping that the mysterious death he had sent to Hrihor would frighten the worshippers away, he had heard a slight rustling sound behind him, and had turned just in time to see a hate-distorted face within feet of him, and a short curved-knife upraised to strike him in the back. It was the priest, whom he had left unconscious below, now revived and coming to kill him.

Wes could have shot the man then and there, but he knew the thunder of his gun would betray his presence; so, using the weapon as a club he had struck out at his attacker and tried to block the thrust of the knife. For a moment he was successful; but the knife proved the better weapon in the close rough and tumble scuffle that ensued and, with its point at his very throat, Wes had been forced to shoot.

He had killed the man instantly, but he felt no slightest relief. Like a

tiger—even before the crashing echoes had died away in the little room—he sprang back to his peep-hole to see what the effect was outside. And just what he feared most was happening. The frightened priest in the Temple was telling the suspicious Shabako about the hidden chamber—and even then was leading him to the secret entrance!

The two passed the American's line of vision, and after a moment he heard them fumbling at the catch of the panel. He could shoot them both down, easily, but there would still be a whole Temple full of warriors and priests to be faced with only three bullets!

Then, in a flash, came an inspiration.

Wes swung around, leveled the automatic's muzzle at the hole in the idol's eye, sighted carefully, and squeezed the trigger. And as the explosion boomed through the vast chamber outside, he veered the gun in a different aim and fired again and again.

The two huge oil lamps, imbedded one in each side wall, splintered and crashed.

"Now for it!" Wes Craig muttered. He sprang for the ladder, snatching the dagger of the dead priest as he passed, and half-slid,

half-tumbled to the floor below. At once he was at the secret door and grasping the lever that worked it; and, pausing only to take a deep breath, he plunged out.

He came into a scene of wildest confusion. Panic-stricken screams rang in his ears; the oil from the cracked lamps, transformed into splatters of flame, had splashed down from the walls and scattered fire over much of the floor. A tumult of shadows moiled through the flames as the crowd fought to get free. Shrieks and gasps and curses cut through the air: the worshippers were caught up in a mob panic caused more by their superstitious frenzy than by the understandable fire. The flames pierced fantastically into the blackness, throwing a vivid glow on the frantic faces of the people who struggled to get out of their reach. The altar was deserted, save for the girl who still lay on the hand of the idol....

Wes Craig, a blur in the wavering shadows, darted to her side. His dagger sped through the cords that bound her, and he lifted her slight form down. For a moment she clung to him.

"I knew thou wouldst come, Divine One!" she whispered. "I knew!"

He smiled for answer, gripped her hand, and then swiftly led her along the least crowded wall of the Temple towards the door, packed

with a frantic, struggling crowd of soldiers, people and priests.

The deceptive shadows thrown by the flames were kind to them; for some time no one in the whole crowd recognized the two. Everyone was reacting in a blind panic of fear from the mysterious thunders that had killed their High Priest, splintered the lamps, and caused the resultant inferno of leaping fire. But discovery was inevitable, and at last one did see the fleeing pair—one who had kept his head and was looking for them. It was Shabako. He roared:

"The stranger escapes—and the girl! There, there! Hold them!"

His imperative shout brought a measure of control to the soldiers, who were fighting to get through the doorway. They grouped uncertainly together, gripping their swords and staring wildly around. They saw, in the ruddy light of the flames, a grim-faced man pressing into them, holding in one hand a stubby black object, and in the other the arm of the sacrifice, Taia.

Wes cursed, and, forgetting that the warriors understood no English, ordered them in that tongue to make way for him. For answer, one of them leaped out at him, his sword swinging up. Craig's face set; he levelled the automatic and fired. The bullet caught the man in the midst of his leap; he spun round, his sword clanked to the floor, and

he fell.

Wes fired again at the staring mob; then again; but the last time only a sharp click answered his trigger finger. He flung the gun into the thick of the hesitating warriors, swept the dead soldier's sword off the floor and pressed forward, intending to hack his way through.

But he did not have to. The other warriors were only human. They had just seen uncanny, instant death. They shrank back from the door; some even ran back from the stranger, preferring the flames to the thunder-death that he meted out. The doorway was cleared, and Craig pulled the girl through.

"Back to the left!" she gasped. "Across the bridge! Quick—Shabako comes!"

Even as they ran, they heard the Pharaoh's furious bawling as he struggled up to the door of the Temple, which he had not been able to reach for the rolling tide of fear-stricken people around him. He was shouting:

"After them—after them! They cross the bridge! Follow them, everyone! I will take the other way up and trap them! Hurry!"

He turned to the right, panting up the corridor in the direction from which he had first approached the Temple. And slowly, as they collected their dazed wits, the swarm of warriors and priests and common people followed the fleeing pair toward the bridge.

Wes Craig was tired, but the shouting pursuit lent strength to his near-exhausted limbs. Spears snaked after Taia and him from the warriors close behind; but, once across the dangerous bridge, he disregarded them long enough to hack its supports through and see it fade into the blackness beneath. "Get across now, damn you!" he yelled, and ran again after the girl's leading figure.

All now depended on their speed in reaching the top of the extinct volcano, and of that speed he was none too confident. He had gone through two strength-sapping fights in the last hour; his nerves were ragged from the constant strain, and his breath came in racking sobs. He wished passionately he had a loaded gun—even his smashed vial of Kundrenaline. The fluid would have put marvelous new life in his weary limbs.

"Hurry, Taia!" he gasped: "we must beat them! Shabako goes some other way to head us off! If only we can get to my bird-that-flies-in-the-air!"

Once again they stumbled up the difficult passage, fighting for speed with tired bodies, bodies which every twist and obstacle tried sorely. Without the girl, Wes could never have made it: she led him unerringly through the branching, gloomily-lit corridors, up flights of rickety steps, her knowledge of several short-cuts aiding measurably the speed of their progress. Tired as he was, admiration for the mighty fire of courage that burned in Taia's frail figure, and drove it forward when all physical strength was gone, never left him. For she had been through as much as he—and even more!...

They did not know it then, but the Pharaoh had made good time on the other side. As they at last neared the cup of the crater, and passed the place where the two diverging main corridors, each slanting downwards, met, they heard Shabako's shouts and the rapid clatter of his feet on the rock floor.

In a desperate sprint, they gained the flight of steps, stumbled up them, and came again into the glorious fresh cold air, and the slanting rays of the setting sun....

New life surged through Craig's body; but, whereas he ran across the uneven cup of the crater with fresh speed, the girl seamed suddenly to tire. He had taken the lead; now he went back, took her hand and pulled her forward, puzzled by her sudden exhaustion. He did not

have time to question her, however, for the rapid beat of footsteps grew quickly very loud, and with a shout Shabako burst up into the open and caught sight of them.

The two went across the lip and slid down the slope of the volcano with all the haste they could. Shabako only twenty yards behind, his sword waving aloft and his dark face lit with a savage hate. And he was gaining—gaining steadily; and Taia was tiring more and more, and was becoming almost a dead weight on Wes Craig's supporting arm....

This was the last stretch, over almost the same ground the girl and her dead lover, Inaros, had covered twenty years before—and with the same pursuer behind. Again, by grace of the potent Kundrenaline, Shabako and the girl were enacting the desperate chase of years before, the chase that had ended in death for Inaros....

But there was a stricken look in Taia's eyes now.

"I am suddenly so tired, Divine One!" she gasped. She seemed hardly able to walk. Craig could not understand. Snatching a glance backwards, he saw that the Pharaoh, too, seemed to be strangely tiring—but gaining nevertheless....

He was practically carrying the suddenly exhausted girl when they came to the cleft in the ice from which he had dug her the day before. There was no time to get across, for before they could climb the other side Shabako would be on them. Wes gripped the handle of his blade. Here the last fight would have to be made.

"Go down the cleft, out of the way!" he told the girl rapidly. He did not have time to help her; he swung round just in time to parry a slash of Shabako's sword with his own.

Then Wes Craig stepped back and stared at his opponent, a peculiar look in his eyes.

It might have been merely from the force of his first swipe, or he might have slipped—but Shabako staggered drunkenly and barely avoided falling. With an oath, he came erect and once more charged at the American. It was easy for Wes to avoid his thrust; it would have been childishly easy to drive his blade through the Pharaoh's unguarded chest. But somehow Craig withheld his attack, and only peered more closely at the other. He rubbed his hand across his eyes. What he was seeing was incredible.

For Shabako's face was going a ghastly white; and, as Wes watched, he groaned, tried to raise his sword arm for another blow—and could

not. He staggered, legs askew, lurched crazily forward, stumbled, and at last pitched down on the ice near the cleft.

Then his great body rolled over, arms flung wide, and lay still. And the face of Pharaoh Shabako stared unseeingly up at the darkening sky....

Then, in a flash, understanding came to Wes Craig.

"Oh, God!" he cried. "The Kundrenaline!"

He had forgotten completely about the liquid he had infused into Shabako's veins. Its potency, adequate to the tremendous task of revitalizing a long-dead heart, had given out—hastened, no doubt, by the great physical exertions of the man, and made sudden by the return to the biting air of the ice fields. The liquid was only for emergency use, anyway, and supposed to serve for a period of but hours, after which the heart was intended to carry on alone.

Shabako's heart had not been able to carry on any longer....

Wes Craig was afraid to think, afraid almost to look, to see how Taia had stood the shock. Her sudden weariness became at once all too clear to him....

Slowly he turned and looked down into the cleft. He saw her—a slender, quiet little figure, flat on the ice by the body of her slain lover.

He leaped down the slippery bank and ran to her side; knelt there, and grasped her cold white hand.

The girl's eyelids were closed, but when he touched her, they flickered, and a little sigh came from her pallid lips. Then her large black eyes, opened and looked up straight into his—and when she saw him there, she smiled.

It wrenched the man's heart. "Taia!" he cried. "Taia!"

She nodded feebly, still smiling, and her lips moved. He bent close. She was whispering something. The words came to him through a great fear.

"Take me—take me, O Divine One. Take me with thee to—to thy—heaven.... Canst thou not—take—Taia?"

With her last bit of quickly ebbing strength, she pressed his hand. Then the fingers went limp in his, and her arm dropped. And her eyelids gently closed....

Wes's jaws were clenched tightly as he folded her hands across her slim body. "If thy Pharaoh had not made me drop the vial," he murmured softly, "I would again bring thee to life, Taia, and take thee to my heaven.... Though"—with a sad smile, and relapsing into English—"Times Square would not be quite the heaven you had pictured...."

He stood up. The irony of the thing gripped him, and brought a wry smile to his tight lips. The body of Inaros, her dead lover, lay at her side; and Shabako's still figure was but feet away. Once again they were all together in death. The Kundrenaline had pierced the black veil of their silent tryst and brought them back for a few fleeting hours; but even modern science could not stand long against the weight of twenty years.

And science would not have another chance with their still bodies. They would quickly be found there by the pursuing Egyptians, and would be gone, already decaying, when he could get back with another vial....

A growing murmur of nearby voices brought the silent man back to the present. Over the cleft in the ice he saw a string of priests and warriors speeding towards him. He sighed. It was time to go. There was much he wanted to learn about these people and their strange

civilization, but there was no chance for it now. Perhaps on another trip, later.

He looked a last time on Taia, lying by her lover.

Then he scrambled up the other bank and ran towards the hillock behind which a sleek black monoplane with an eight hundred horse-power motor awaited him....

The thing that followed next was never forgotten by the people who worshipped Aten, the Sun God. It went down in legends; it was repeated and repeated, and it grew in the telling. It was awful; it was magical; it was godlike.

A great thunder sounded from behind the hillock of ice, a thunder that pulsed louder and louder, until the people fell down in awe, hardly daring to look. When they did, they saw a gleaming black form that stood on queer shafts of wood come gliding with the speed of the wind from behind the hillock. It straightened out on a stretch of snow, bellowing with a loudness that hammered their eardrums into numbness, and sped lightly along till the queer shafts of wood left the surface and the sleek black object soared up into the air.

Into the air! With frightened eyes they watched it wheel around, and

then come roaring towards them. They fell flat again, and did not dare to look. The thunderous blast passed close over them, then dwindled and dwindled, until they ventured timidly to look up again.

They saw the shape ringed with sunset fire hurtling through the air, soaring up and up and up ... till it died to a speck ... till it disappeared into the face of the sun they worshipped as Aten....

A warrior spoke. His tones were low and awed but they all heard him.

"Truly," he whispered, "he was a god!..."

94 The Diamond Thunderbolt by Harold Thompson Rich

Locked in a rocket and fired into space!—such was the fate which awaited young Stoddard at the end of the diamond trail!

Aproximate word count: 11,500

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Prof. Norman Prescott, leader of the American Kinchinjunga expedition, crept from his dog-tent perched eerily at the 26,000-foot level of this unscaled Himalayan peak, the third highest in the world. With anxious eyes he searched the appalling slopes that lifted another 2,000 feet to its majestic summit, now glistening in the radiance of sunset.

Where was young Jack Stoddard, official geologist and crack mountaineer of the party?

That morning Professor Prescott and Stoddard had set off together, from Camp No. 4, at the 22,000-foot level. Mounting laboriously but

swiftly, they had reached the present eyrie by noon. There Stoddard had left the leader of the expedition and pushed on alone, to reconnoiter a razor-back ridge that looked as though it might prove the key to the summit.

But the afternoon had passed; the daring young geologist had promised to return in an hour; and now it was sunset, with still no sign of him.

Professor Prescott sighed, and a bitter expression crossed his bronzed, lined face. Just one more evidence of the cursed luck that had marked the expedition from the start!

Well he knew that he must head down at once for Camp No. 4 or risk death on this barren, wind-swept slope, and equally well he knew that to go would be to leave his brave companion to his fate, providing he had not already met it on those desolate ridges above.

Yes, and another thing he knew. The report of this latest disaster would mean the doom of the expedition. The terrified, superstitious natives would bolt, claiming the "snow people" had struck again.

"Gods of the Mountain" they called them, those mysterious beings they alone seemed to see—evil spirits who kept guard over this

towering realm, determined none should gain its ultimate heights.

Tensely Professor Prescott stood there on that narrow shelf of glacial ice, peering off into the sunset.

A hundred miles to the west, bathed in the refulgence of a thousand rainbows, rose the incredible peak of Everest, mightiest of all mountains, yet less than 1,000 feet higher than Kinchinjunga. And down, straight down those almost vertical slopes up which the expedition had toiled all summer, lay gorges choked with tropical growth. Off to the south, a scant fifty miles away, the British health station of Darjeeling flashed its white villas in the coppery glow.

An awesome spectacle!—one that human eyes had seldom if ever seen. Yet from the summit, so invitingly near!...

Perhaps, even now, Stoddard was witnessing this incomparable sight. To push on, to join him, meant triumph. To head down, defeat. While to stay, to wait....

Grimly, Professor Prescott left his insecure perch and headed up over that razor-back ridge whence the young geologist had vanished.

As he proceeded cautiously along, drawing sharp, quick breaths in

the rarefied upper atmosphere, he told himself it was ambition that was leading him on, but in his heart he knew it was not so. In his heart, he knew he was going to the rescue of his gallant companion, though the way meant death.

A hundred yards had been gained, perhaps two—each desperate foothold fraught with peril of a plunge into the yawning abysms to left and right—when suddenly he spied a figure on a twilit spur ahead.

Panting, he paused. It must be Stoddard! Yet it seemed too small, too ghostly.

Professor Prescott waved, but even as he looked for an answering signal, the figure vanished.

"My eyes!" he muttered to himself. "I'm getting snow-blind."

Then he called aloud:

"Jack! Oh, Jack! Hello!"

Only an echo greeted the call, and he did not repeat it but pushed on silently, conserving his energy.

Was there truth after all in those persistent rumors of the natives about the snow people who inhabited the upper slopes of the Himalayas? His tired brain toyed with the idea, to be cut off sharply by the cheery call:

"Hi there, Professor! Hi-ho!"

And gazing upwards toward a jutting crag not ten rods beyond, he saw young Stoddard etched against the darkening sky.

In a few joyous steps, Professor Prescott had reached his audacious companion.

"Thank God!" he gasped. "I'd given you up for lost."

"Why give me up for anything so unpleasant?" was the genial reply. "I've just been enjoying the view."

"Then—then you reached the top?" with a quick intake of breath.

"Well, not exactly, but I feel on top of the world, just the same."

The professor's spirits fell.

"Then I can't see—"

"Of course you can't see!" interrupted Stoddard. "But look at this!"

As he spoke, he drew from a pocket of his leather jacket something that caught the last light of the dying day and refracted it with weird brilliance.

Professor Prescott blinked.

"Well?"

"A diamond. As big as your fist! And here's another!"

His left hand reached into his jacket and produced a second sparkling gem.

"But—but I don't understand—"

"Granted. But you will, when I tell you I've found the Diamond Thunderbolt!"

The professor gave a shrug of scorn.

"And no doubt you've seen the snow people and have had a perfect afternoon, while—"

"No, I haven't seen any snow people, but I've had a perfect afternoon, all right! As I said, I've found the Diamond Thunderbolt; and here are a couple of chips, picked up from around the edge."

So saying, Stoddard extended his two specimens toward Professor Prescott, who disdained at first to touch them.

"Nothing but quartz!" was the deprecating comment. "The snow has affected your eyesight, as it has my own."

"I'll say it's affected yours, if you don't recognize diamonds when you see them. But wait till I show you the old Thunderbolt itself! It's __"

"More quartz!" brusquely. "Be sensible, Jack. This Diamond Thunderbolt thing is a pure myth, like the snow people business. Just because this section of India is known as The Land of the Diamond Thunderbolt you think you're going to find some precious meteor or other, whereas the term applies merely to the Lama's scepter."

"Granted it does,"—a little impatiently—"but did it ever occur to you that where there's smoke, there's fire? Meteor is the word! One struck here once—a diamond meteor!—and I've found it. Take a look at these two specimens and see what you think."

Whereupon Professor Prescott accepted the glinting gems from his young friend—to gasp a moment later, as he held them tremblingly:

"Good Lord—they're diamonds, to be sure! Where did you find them?"

Stoddard hesitated before replying.

"Not far from here," he said at length, moving off. "Come, I'll show you."

But the professor stood firm on their narrow ledge.

"You must be crazy!" he exclaimed. "We'll have trouble enough now, getting back. It's practically dark already."

"Then what's the odds?" retorted the young geologist. "We've got all night."

"But our friends at Camp No. 4. Even now, they must think we are lost."

"Then further thought won't kill them. Besides, we'll be back before morning—and they can't send out a relief party sooner."

"But any moment a storm may come up. You know what that would mean."

"Does it look likely?" scoffed Stoddard, waving his hand aloft. "See—there's the moon! She'll be our guide."

Professor Prescott looked, saw a slender shallop charting her course among the stars, and for a moment was tempted. But speedily his responsibilities reasserted themselves.

"No, I can't do it," he said with finality. "I owe it to the expedition to return as soon as possible. Furthermore, there's the matter of the authorities. We assured the British we would adhere strictly to our one purpose—to scale Kinchinjunga."

"A mere formality."

"No—a definite order from the Lamas. They closed Mt. Everest, after the last expedition, you will recall. The Lama's scepter is veritably a diamond thunderbolt of power in this region."

Whereupon Stoddard's patience snapped.

"Listen!" he said. "I hurried away because I knew you'd be anxious, but I'm going back, if I have to—"

"And I say you're not!" The professor's patience, too, had snapped. "I'm not going with you, and you're not going back alone! As the leader of this expedition, I forbid it!"

The younger man laughed raspingly, as he shook off the hand that clasped his arm, and for a moment it looked as though the two would fight, there on that dizzy ledge above the world.

Then Stoddard got control of himself.

"Sorry!" he said. "I see I've got to tell you something, Professor. You think I'm merely the geologist of this expedition, but in fact I'm a secret service man from Washington, on the trail of the biggest diamond-smuggling plot in history—and here is where the trail ends!"

Professor Prescott's astonishment at these words was profound. He stood there blinking up at Stoddard, scarcely believing he had heard aright.

"You—you say you are—?"

"A detective, if you want. Anyway, if you've read the papers, you must know that for the past year or more the diamond markets of the

world have been flooded with singularly perfect stones."

"Yes, I recall reading about that. They were thought to be synthetic, were they not?"

"By certain imaginative newspaper reporters, not by the experts, for under the microscope they revealed the invariable characteristics of diamonds formed by nature—the tiny flaws and imperfections no artificial means could duplicate."

"But didn't I read something, too, about some anonymous Indian rajah who was thought to be raising money by disposing of his jewels?"

"More newspaper rubbish! For one thing, British secret service men traced the rumor down and satisfied themselves there wasn't a rajah in India unloading any diamonds. For another; no rajah could possibly have the wealth involved. Why, do you know that since this plot unfolded, over five million carats' worth have made their appearance—and that means something like a billion dollars."

"Whew!" whistled the professor.

"Whew is right!" his companion agreed. "And not only have the

diamond markets of the world been disorganized by this mysterious influx, but the countries involved have lost millions of dollars in revenue, due to the fact that the gems have been smuggled in without payment of duty."

"But surely, my dear fellow, you don't connect this gigantic plot with your discovery of—whatever it is you have discovered?"

"A diamond as big as a house! That's what I've discovered! And I most surely do connect the plot with it. Did you ever have a hunch, Professor? Well, I had one—and it's worked out!"

"You leave me more in the dark momentarily!" declared the older man, glancing around as though to give his words a double meaning. "What was your hunch, and how did it come to lead you here?"

Whereupon Stoddard told him, swiftly, for there was no time to lose.

When first assigned to the case, he said, he had been as baffled as anyone. But as he had studied the problem, one outstanding fact had given him the clue. All the gem experts agreed that the mysterious flood of smuggled stones was of Indian origin, being of the first water and of remarkable fire—in other words, of the finest transparency and brilliance.

Therefore, since they were genuine and were seemingly coming from India, Stoddard had concentrated his attention on this country, seeking their exact source. Investigation showed that there were no mines within its borders capable of producing anything like the quantity that was inundating the market.

But—and here was where the hunch came in—there was a district in the Sikkim Himalayas of Bengal whose capital was Darjeeling—Land of the Diamond Thunderbolt. Why had it been called that? Was there some legend back of it?

There was, he had learned. For though in modern times the phrase had come to apply merely to the Lama's scepter, as Professor Prescott had pointed out, originally it had carried another meaning—for legend said that once a diamond meteor had fallen on the mighty slopes of Kinchinjunga.

That had been enough for Stoddard. He had followed his hunch, had got himself attached to the American Kinchinjunga expedition—

"And that's why I'm here, and all about it," he finished. "Now, then, are you coming back with me and have a look at my Diamond Thunderbolt, or am I going back alone?"

A long moment the professor debated, before replying.

"Yes, I'll come with you," he said at length, extending his hand. "Forgive me, Jack. I didn't know, or—"

"Forget it," said Stoddard shaking. "How the devil could you, till I told you? But just one thing. Mum's the word—right?"

"Right!"

"And one thing more. It may be—well, a one-way trip."

"Forget it."

"O. K., Professor."

With a last warm handclasp, leaving them joined in a new bond of friendship, the two men moved on over that narrow, moonlit ridge across the top of the world.

It was a desperate trail, Professor Prescott realized after scarcely a dozen steps. The ridge grew narrower, sheerer, and in places they had to straddle it, legs dangling precariously to left and right.

Admiration for his gallant companion mounted in the professor's

pounding heart, as they struggled on. Only to picture anyone eager to return such a perilous way, after once getting safely back!

Other thoughts occupied his mind, too, during the next half-hour. More than once he could have sworn he saw small, ghostly figures on the ridge ahead. But he made no mention of it, for Stoddard didn't seem to see them.

Now they gained the far end of that hazardous ridge, where a sloping shelf of jagged rock offered a somewhat more secure footing. Along this they proceeded laterally for some distance.

Suddenly Stoddard paused and called out:

"Ah—there we are!" He indicated a steep pocket to the left. "Have a look down there, Professor, and tell me what you see."

Prescott lowered his eyes to the depths below, to draw back with a gasp—for what he saw was a vast phosphorescent glow, like a fallen star.

"What—what is it?" he cried, in an awed voice.

And back came the ringing reply:

"The Diamond Thunderbolt!"

"But the radiance of the thing! It couldn't reflect that much light from the moon!"

"No, and it doesn't. But there's nothing uncanny about it. Just what I expected the thing would look like at night. But come on, Professor. You haven't seen the half of it!"

The way led down the jagged, shelving slope, now, and the descent was too precarious for further comment.

Ten minutes passed—fifteen, possibly—when they reached a sheltered, snowless arena where titanic forces had clashed at some remote age. Fragments of splintered rock lay strewn in wild confusion—and among them, glinting in the moonlight, were bright crystals.

Picking up one, Stoddard said laughingly:

"One of Mother Nature's trinkets worth half a million or so!"

Professor Prescott blinked at it a moment, almost in disbelief, then stooped and picked up one for himself—a diamond that would have made the Kohinoor look like a pebble.

There was no doubting its genuineness. Even in the moonlight, it flashed and burned like a thing afire.

But as the professor turned his eyes at last from its dazzling facets, they failed him again—or so he thought—for half hidden behind a jutting crag loomed a huge cylindrical object, seemingly of metal.

For the space of two breaths, he stared speechless, then gasped:

"Good Lord! What's that?"

Following his gaze, Stoddard saw it too.

"God knows!" he muttered, in a tense voice. "It wasn't there this afternoon. Let's have a look at it."

Cautiously, not knowing what to expect, they advanced toward the singular phenomenon.

Nearing, they saw that it was a mechanism some twenty feet at the base and sixty or more feet high, pointed at the top.

"A rocket!" declared Professor Prescott. "Though I've never seen

anything larger than a laboratory model, I'll gamble that's what it is."

"And I'll gamble you're right!" exclaimed Stoddard. "And one capable of carrying passengers, would you say?"

"Fully."

"Then I think we have solved the mystery of how these diamonds reach the market. The question now is, who's back of this thing? And since our position here probably isn't any too healthy—"

He broke off and drew his automatic, as a small, ghostly figure appeared—seemingly from nowhere.

The professor saw it, too—saw it followed by another, and another—and now he knew his eyesight had not failed him back on that wind-swept slope above, either, for these were actual creatures, incredible as they seemed.

The snow people?

He did not know—had no time to find out—for with a rush, the strange beings were all around them.

Stoddard levelled his pistol and called on them to halt, but they came

on—scores, hundreds now, seeming to pour out of some unseen aperture of the earth.

Once or twice he fired, over their heads, but it failed to halt them. They closed in, jabbering shrilly.

But though their words were a babel, their actions were plain enough. Swarming up, they overpowered the explorers by sheer numbers, and herded them with jabs of sharp, tiny knives toward a cavern mouth that opened presently amid those eery crags.

Led underground, they found themselves proceeding along a frosty passage lit every few yards by a great chunk of diamond. Their dim glow seemed to be refracted from some central point beyond.

This point they soon reached—a great, vaulted chamber whose brilliance was at first dazzling.

Its source, after the first moment or so, was obvious. It was coming from the roof, which was one vast diamond.

"You see where we are?" whispered Stoddard. "Under the Diamond Thunderbolt! These people have tunneled beneath the meteor. Or else—"

"Their tunnel was already there, when the meteor fell," finished Professor Prescott. "But can it be possible such creatures could have produced that rocket?"

"I'm inclined to think anything is possible, now! But I'm sorry I dragged you into this, Professor. I—"

"Forget it! We're here and we'll face it together, whatever it is."

"You're a game sport!" Stoddard gripped the older man's hand. "We'll face it—and lick it!"

Further talk was interrupted by a stir among their captors. The ranks parted—and into that dazzling chamber stepped a tall, bearded personage whose aristocratic features and haughty bearing suggested a Russian of the old regime.

He strode toward them, smiling sardonically.

"Greetings, my friends! Nice of you to drop in on me while in the neighborhood." His English was suave, precise. "Professor Norman Prescott, leader of the American Kinchinjunga expedition, I believe." He paused and lifted inquiring eyebrows to his other guest. "And —?"

"Dr. John Stoddard, our geologist," came the answer stiffly. "And you, sir?"

"A fellow professor, you might say. Prince Ivan Krassnov. You have heard of me, perhaps?"

Prescott had indeed. One of Russia's most brilliant and erratic scientists under the czar, the man had been permitted to continue his work for the Soviets, developing among other inventions, a rocket reported to be capable of carrying passengers. But some two years ago he and his rocket had vanished in the course of a test flight from Moscow, and the natural conclusion was that he had either perished in the sea or shot off the earth altogether, since no trace of the unique mechanism was ever found.

"Yes, I have heard of you," said the professor, recalling this sensational story that had occupied the front pages of the world's press for days. "And so it turns out that your rocket didn't come to grief."

"Not exactly—though as you can see, it landed me in rather an inaccessible spot," was the reply. "But quite an interesting one! I was well satisfied to let the papers report me missing. You can understand, yes?"

"I think I can, that part of it." While as for Stoddard, he was beginning to understand a great deal. "But these curious creatures?" he said, indicating the whispering, pigmy host that filled the cavern. "You found them here?"

“They found me, rather!" corrected the prince. "But we get on quite well together. They consider me a god, you see, since I, too, came out of the sky in a thunderbolt, as their great diamond once did, according to their legends."

"But who are they? What is their origin? Why are they so small, so pale?"

"Natural questions, Professor, but not so easy to answer. Who they are I cannot say, save that they are the snow people of native superstition. Their origin? It is lost in antiquity. Perhaps they are the remnants of some Tibetan tribe driven into the mountains by enemies, thousands of years ago. While as for their stature, their pallor—these no doubt are the result of the furtive underground life they lead."

He paused, waited politely, as though for further questions, but neither spoke. Now that the main mystery was solved, the one question uppermost in both their minds was what this suave,

inscrutable nobleman was going to do with them—and that question neither cared to ask, fearful of what the answer might be.

Finally Prince Krassnov spoke again.

"What, gentlemen—you have no further curiosity about me? How unflattering! I thought perhaps you might want to know why I have chosen to maintain my headquarters here on Kinchinjunga, the past two years, and how I have been occupying my time. But I hold no resentment. I shall tell you, so that you will be prepared for what I am going to propose."

He turned and addressed the pigmy host in what must have been their own tongue. Then, facing his guests again, he said:

"Now, come. Let us retire to my private study, where we shall have more leisure."

They followed him from that dazzling chamber and proceeded on down the cavern to a fork that ended about twenty paces further in a massive steel-bound door.

There he paused and twirled a knob like the dial of a safe. After a moment there came a click, as of tumblers meshing, and a tug on the

knob swung the door open.

The prince bowed.

"Step into my little apartment," he said.

They entered, to find themselves in a large oblong room furnished in Slavic luxury.

As they crossed a rich Oriental rug spread over the threshold, a musical gong sounded somewhere, and almost instantly two enormous Cossacks sprang into view, to bar their way with rifles.

"My bodyguard," apologized Krassnov, shutting the door. "They are quite harmless, except to intruders. Just one of the little precautions that make life safer."

He spoke to the men in Russian and they withdrew.

Then he advanced to a divan beside a teakwood table on which stood a large copper samovar. Dropping down, he motioned for them to take seats beside him.

"You will have tea, my friends? Or perhaps you would prefer whiskey and soda?"

They chose the latter, since their recent exertions seemed to have warranted it, and their host tinkled a silver bell, bringing a Chinese boy beaming and salaaming.

A few words to him and the samovar was lit; then he hurried off on padding feet, to return with miraculous speed, bearing not only the whiskey and soda but a platter heaped with exotic cakes, cubed sandwiches of caviar and spiced fish, together with a profusion of other delicacies—doubly welcome to men who had toiled all day on a mountain peak, with nothing but chocolate to sustain them.

And while they drank and ate, Prince Krassnov told his story—a story whose very first words were an admission that he was the head of the great diamond-smuggling plot Stoddard had set out to trace down.

It was a story as dramatic and romantic as it was unscrupulous.

Finding himself and the crew of the rocket marooned on the upper slopes of this mighty mountain, in the midst of an incalculable wealth, he had set about at once to capitalize their astounding discovery.

First he had made certain adjustments in the mechanism of his

apparatus—which fortunately had not been injured by its forced landing—and then he had taken off with specimens of the treasure, bringing the craft down this time with precision in the midst of his ancestral estates near Baku, in the foothills of the Caucasus Mountains.

This vast property the Bolsheviks had not confiscated, partly because of its remoteness, no doubt, and partly because of the prince's services to the Soviet Republic. At any rate, it was here he had developed in secret the details of his amazing plot—a plot that had as its aim not only his own enrichment but the rehabilitation of all the Russian nobles.

Once they had heard his story of the Diamond Thunderbolt and seen the specimens he showed them, many had eagerly joined the plot, with the result that an international ring had been formed for disposal of the gems.

His plans perfected, Prince Krassnov had then returned to Kinchinjunga with his rocket, since when the mysterious flood of those perfect diamonds into the jewel markets of the world had begun.

"So you see, my friends," he smiled, "that is what you Americans

would call my 'little game'—a game your chance discovery has rather jeopardized, you must admit."

Professor Prescott could well realize this, but at a glance from Stoddard he declined to admit it.

"A very ingenious game!" he said. "But where do the Lamas figure in this? Surely they must know of the presence of this meteor within their kingdom."

"No doubt they do," the prince conceded. "This is why they are so reluctant to have foreigners enter their domain. At one time, I am satisfied, they knew its exact location and drew many of their own gems from that source. But in recent times the snow people have guarded their secret well. The Lamas are as terrified of them as the natives—and with better reason!"

He did not mention what the reason was, but there was something ominous in his tone.

But to get on with my story, friends. I am not telling you all this merely to satisfy your curiosity. I have what you call a motive in my madness!"

Madness was right, thought Stoddard. The man was dangerously, criminally mad.

"My motive is simply this," he went on. "You have chanced upon my little nest-egg, and consequently I have either to let you in on the deal or—"

Krassnov paused; shrugged.

"But why talk of anything unpleasant, when there is wealth enough here for all? What I propose, briefly, is that you join me."

They knew it was coming, but they winced, nevertheless.

"Oh, don't be premature!" he exclaimed, a little nettled. "Hear me out. What is good enough for me and my fellow nobles of Imperial Russia is surely good enough for poor, under-paid professors of democratic America. Listen, friends—I am generous. Join me and we will make millionaires out of all of you. Every professor in your country shall be a little czar. It will be, to use the old phrase, a triumph of the intellect."

Beyond a doubt, the man was mad; yet his madness was vast, dizzying. Though neither was tempted, they were both rendered

speechless for a moment. It was like standing on a mountain top and being shown the countries and the glories of the world—like standing on the top of Kinchinjunga, thought Prescott.

"But you assume we are all Bolsheviks, like yourself, we professors," he said, struggling for calm words.

"Bolsheviks!" snorted the prince. "I spit on them! You think I, a nobleman, am interested in the masses? Cattle—swine! I plan only for the day when we who are worthy rule again, and this that I have told you is my plan. You can, as you Americans so coarsely say, either take it or leave it."

A tension hung in the air, as his words echoed into silence. The man had revealed himself.

"And suppose we leave it?" asked the professor, restraining his irritation as best he could. "What then?"

"Then I am afraid—ah—unpleasant consequences would result," was the bland answer. "Surely you realize that I could not let you and young Dr. Stoddard rejoin your expedition with this story to report."

They realized it quite well.

"But suppose we agree not to report it?" said Professor Prescott.

"Not to doubt your honesty of intention," replied Krassnov sharply. "I would refuse to accept such an agreement."

"Then I see nothing else but to decline your kind proposal," said Stoddard, before the professor could formulate further words. "What do you propose to do—murder us?"

"Nothing so personal," said the prince, with his sardonic smile. "I shall merely turn you over to my little subjects. They no doubt will deal with you as your merits warrant."

Whereupon he pressed a button under that elaborate teakwood table. The musical gong they had heard before sounded again, and the prince's two Cossack retainers reappeared.

He addressed them briefly in Russian, adding to his guests:

"Adieu, friends! If you change your minds, you have only to speak. You will be understood, and I shall be gratified."

And without further words, they were led from that ornate

apartment.

Taken back to the dazzling chamber under the meteor, they were turned over to the pigmies.

A powwow resulted, but it was brief. The two captives were bound fast in a curious ceremonial pit near the center of the room. Then the midget horde withdrew, leaving them alone there under that eery glow.

"Now what the devil will be the next step?" queried Stoddard, when the last of the pigmies had gone.

Professor Prescott considered for a moment, before replying.

"I don't think there will be any next step, except our cremation," he said at length.

"Cremation?" gasped his young friend. "What do you mean, cremation?"

Another pause, then:

"Just this. Don't you see where we are? Right under the Thunderbolt! Well?"

"Well what?"

"Simple enough, Jack." The professor's tone was grave. "When dawn comes, and the rising sun strikes that—"

"Good God!" Stoddard suddenly understood. "Why, we'll be cooked alive—frizzled!"

It was only too true. Even now, the pale rays of the moon, concentrated by the myriad facets of that monumental diamond, were beginning to focus on them a warmth that was uncomfortable. And by morning—!

The two men crouched there silent, realizing their desperate plight. They must escape, before the sun rose. But how?

Studying their bonds, they discovered that they were of rawhide of some sort, obviously from the hides of animals these strange people caught on the lower slopes somewhere. But though they strained and twisted, they could not stretch them, the leather evidently having been cured to a marvelous toughness in these high altitudes.

Precious minutes ticked by as they struggled there, but they were unable to extricate themselves.

But before the end of a half-hour, Stoddard managed to free one arm, and reaching into his jacket he drew forth a small, compact metal object—his cigarette lighter.

Twirling the wheel, while Professor Prescott held his breath, he succeeded in kindling a flame on its tiny wick.

If only he could reach the thongs with it! If only he could burn them through and free himself and the professor before any of the pigmies re-entered that lethal chamber!

Wrenching around now, he applied the flame to his left wrist, which was still bound. As the living fire touched his flesh, he winced with pain, but almost anything was better than the grisly fate that threatened.

Slowly, a little at a time, he endured the torture, straining at each application to see if the thongs would yield.

"Here, let me try it once!" called out Professor Prescott, as he cried aloud with the agony of the ordeal.

"No. I'll get it!" Stoddard gritted his teeth, continued. "There! I think my hand is free!" He struggled. "Yes. Now wait!"

Replacing his cigarette lighter in his pocket, he drew his blistered wrist from its smouldering bonds and struggled feverishly now to undo the lashes about his feet.

Five minutes of that and suddenly he flung them off and stood up.

"Now! Now then, Professor. I'll have you loose in a jiffy!"

Bending over his fettered companion, he worked with frantic haste to untie the rawhide bonds.

Another five minutes and they were both free.

Professor Prescott stood up and stretched.

"Thank God for small favors!" he exclaimed. "But you, Jack? You must be burned cruelly.

"Forget it!" Stoddard was already wrapping a handkerchief around his wrist. "Now let's see about getting out of here. These little rats all seem to be asleep, and Lord knows where that maniac Krassnov is. Perhaps we can make it. At any rate, we'll give them a run for their money!"

As he spoke, he drew his automatic.

Silently, stealthily, they left that glittering chamber and proceeded down the cavern toward what seemed to be the entrance, guided by their remembrance of the way they had come.

A hundred yards or more they made, seeing no sign of their captors, when suddenly a musical gong rang out.

"We've stepped on one of Krassnov's infernal signals!" cried Stoddard, above the din. "Now there'll be hell to pay!"

And "hell to pay" there was, almost instantly—for before they had taken ten more steps, the cavern ahead was full of small, ghostly figures, jabbering in their shrill voices.

Indifferent now of what he did, their lives at stake, Stoddard blazed away with his automatic, sweeping it from side to side of the stony walls as he fired.

As the shots crashed out, the jabbers turned to shrieks of terror. Several of the pigmies fell. The rest broke their ranks and shrank into the shadows.

"Run!" yelled Stoddard, slipping a new clip into his pistol.

The professor needed no invitation. Gathering his long legs he sped

after the younger man, and together they burst from the mouth of the cavern.

Outside, in the dazzle of moonlight, they paused for an instant.

"This way!" called Stoddard, racing toward that splintered arena.

They gained it and lunged across it to the shelving slope that reached upward to the narrow, perilous ridge whence they had come.

As they proceeded, the pigmy horde following with incredible swiftness, Stoddard wheeled and fired time and again—and now his shots were answered by the reports of rifles.

"Krassnov and his Cossacks!" he muttered. "Well, we'll give them our heels, unless they hit us."

"And Russians are notoriously bad shots, I understand," panted the professor.

At any rate, they reached the slope and struggled upward toward the ridge, putting themselves presently out of range behind the jagged rocks that loomed on every side.

But just as they were congratulating themselves on their escape,

came a dull, reverberating explosion—and as they clung to their insecure footholds, a volcano of snow and ice rose ahead. Thousands of tons of debris avalanched into the chasm below.

Stunned, deafened, they looked around.

Down in that pocket where the Thunderbolt had so recently gleamed was one vast chaos, and above, where that razor-back ridge had led across the intervening chasms to safety, was a dazzling void.

To both came the same thought, but Stoddard expressed it first.

"Krassnov—he's dynamited the ridge!" he gasped.

"Then we—we'll never get back now!" echoed Professor Prescott.

"No, but they'll never get us here!"

"Scant comfort, though, when we're pinioned here like a couple of birds with their wings clipped."

"Right; but let's see. Let's figure. We're better off than we were. And what was it Napoleon once said: 'When you can't retreat, advance.' So suppose we—"

"But listen!"

Stoddard heard. It was the sound of rifle shots. And looking down, he saw a feverish activity surrounding the rocket. Myriads of the pigmies were swarming upon it, while a handful of Cossacks were holding them off.

"Something doing down there, all right!" he muttered. "Looks to me like—why, sure I've got it! That madman has overshot himself, for once! He's buried their precious meteor, in blowing up our ridge, and they've turned on him!"

"I think you're right," agreed Professor Prescott. "Suppose we advance as you say. It looks like a chance."

"Right," said Stoddard.

Slowly, cautiously, they returned down the slope.

When within a hundred yards, they knew they had sized up the situation correctly. With frantic speed, Krassnov was supervising the shoveling out of his rocket from amid the debris; was directing its loading, while the free members of his crew held off the enraged natives who were obstructing them.

Descending even more cautiously now, they neared the scene of activity.

"My plan is this—to get aboard and find out where they're going!" said Stoddard, through shut teeth. "What do you say?"

"Lead on!" said the professor.

So they continued down, neared the resting-place of that strange craft, and, under shelter of the moonlight shadows, stole through the confused ranks surrounding it and crept aboard.

Stowing themselves into the first likely niche that offered—a narrow cubicle behind a flight of metal stairs—they waited, scarcely daring to breathe for fear of being discovered.

Fifteen minutes passed, a half-hour, when suddenly sounded a rasping of doors that told them the rocket was being sealed.

Then came a roar, as of some mighty blast beating down upon the frozen earth, followed by a lifting, rushing sensation—and they were flung violently to the flooring.

The pressure ceased in a moment, however, to be supplanted by a buoyant, exhilarating sense of flight. It increased, and they judged

they must be traveling at great speed.

Glancing at the luminous dial of his watch, Professor Prescott saw that it was a quarter to ten.

"Well, we're off!" he whispered. "And where, would you guess, are we headed?"

"I wouldn't guess," Stoddard whispered back. "From the way we're riding, it might be Mars! We must be making hundreds of miles an hour."

"Or thousands! Who knows?"

They crouched there in their cramped niche, scarcely even whispering now, as the tense minutes passed.

Suddenly the motion changed. They seemed to be dropping.

Another moment or two, and with a slight jar the rocket came to rest.

"Well, we're here, wherever it is," said Stoddard, stirring.

"Yes, undoubtedly," the professor agreed. "And the next move?"

"I think we'll let them make that."

They were not long in doing so. There came the sound of doors rasping open, of footsteps echoing on metal stairs and corridors. Once a giant Cossack passed within four feet of them. But at length, all was silent within the rocket.

"Now, then, suppose we have a look around," said Stoddard, stepping out.

"Right," agreed his companion, following. "I'll admit I am mildly curious to know what corner of the earth we've been transported to."

They proceeded down the dim-lit corridor the way they had come, descended a flight of stairs and headed along another corridor—to pause suddenly and gasp with astonishment. For through the door whence they had entered the rocket poured a flood of sunshine.

Stoddard stared at it a moment incredulously, and then glanced at his watch.

"Ten o'clock, I make it!" he muttered. "Am I crazy, or what?"

"No, I hardly think so," smiled Professor Prescott, recovering from his own surprise. "It is merely that we are in some part of the world

quite a few thousand miles removed from India. Back on Kinchinjunga, it is still ten o'clock at night, but here, it is quite obviously daytime."

"That must be the explanation," Stoddard agreed. "But it certainly gave me a start at first!"

Approaching the door, followed by the professor, he peered cautiously out, to confront a desolate stretch of scrubby growth, hemmed in by a background of rugged mountains.

"Now where the devil would you say we are?" he demanded, gazing around perplexedly.

"Either in the United States or in Mexico," was the astonishing reply.

"But how can you say that?"

"Because it must be some place approximately twelve hours distant from India in time, to judge from the sun, which is not far past the meridian."

"But why not Australia, for instance?"

"Because Australia is too far. It would be three o'clock tomorrow

morning there, since it is ten o'clock last night now in India."

Stoddard pondered this a minute, then admitted its correctness.

"All right, then. Assuming that we are somewhere on the North American continent, the next thing is to give Krassnov the slip; otherwise it won't be big enough for all of us!"

And that Professor Prescott conceded readily enough.

But before making any further move, they looked over their surroundings carefully, to satisfy themselves none of their late captors were in view.

"They're evidently somewhere on the other side of the rocket," Stoddard concluded at length. "So let's make a break for it while we've got the chance."

"Lead the way!" said the professor.

"O. K., here we go!"

And, stepping through the door, they dropped to the ground and raced off under the glare of the burning sun toward the rugged mountains that loomed ahead.

For a hundred yards or so they were able to keep the rocket between themselves and the Russians but soon the ground sloped up to such an extent that they realized they must be in full view.

Dropping behind the scant shelter of a scraggly tree, they turned and glanced down—and there, beyond the rocket, they could now see a group of men standing around outside a small wooden shack, shouting and gesticulating in their direction.

"Damn it, they've seen us!" muttered Stoddard.

"But why don't they come after us?" queried Professor Prescott.

The answer came even as he spoke, for out of the shack rushed the tall figure of the prince, in his hand a pair of binoculars which he raised to his eyes.

Whether or not be spotted them, an instant later he turned and uttered a command, and two huge Cossacks sprang to the pursuit.

"There's nothing to do now but run for it!" cried Stoddard, leaping to his feet.

The professor followed and they plunged on up the slope, bullets from their pursuers' pistols and the rifles of those below kicking up

the dust around them. But either because the aim was bad or the targets difficult, they escaped unscathed.

As for Stoddard, he wasted no time in firing back.

"Once we get in those mountains, we're safe!" he gasped, as they struggled on. "How are you, Professor—all right?"

"No holes in my skin so far!" came the panting answer.

Five desperate, dodging minutes passed.

Glancing over their shoulders, they saw that the heavy, stolid Cossacks were losing ground. And ahead, tauntingly near now, loomed a thickly-wooded slope that meant the beginning of big timber—and safety.

Another five minutes—each second an hour—and they had gained it.

But there was no pausing yet, they could hear the Cossacks crashing on like determined blood-hounds behind.

"No need to climb any more!" exclaimed Stoddard, half breathless. "We'll edge along, keep in the trees, and try to throw them off."

The older man said nothing; merely gritted his teeth. This climb had told on him more than anything he had experienced on the cruel slopes of Kinchinjunga.

As they struggled along now, sometimes it seemed that they had thrown their pursuers off the trail, or completely outdistanced them, but always a moment later they would hear again the crunch of the Cossacks' boots on the dry undergrowth.

So the grim flight continued, mile after heart-tearing mile, and Stoddard was beginning to realize that the professor couldn't keep on much longer—had just about decided to stop and shoot it out with their pursuers—when suddenly there came a sound that brought new hope to him.

"Did you hear that?" he gasped, pausing.

"It—sounded like—a car!" panted his companion.

"Right. And that means there must be a road through here somewhere! But where?"

"Listen." Professor Prescott pointed to the left. "The sound seems to be coming from over there."

And sure enough, from the left came a wheezing grind of a car making a heavy grade.

"Near, too," decided Stoddard. "Come on—let's go! We've got to head it off. It's our only hope, except—"

With relief, he shoved his automatic back into its holster and led the way in the direction of the now rapidly nearing car.

A hundred yards they had made, up a slight rise, when there spread before them a rutted mountain road, and on it, in full view, was a laboring Ford of ancient vintage.

Over the wheel hovered a lanky, leathery native, and beside him sat a small, plump woman who looked as though she might be his wife.

They were almost to the top of the hill when Stoddard hailed them.

"Say!" he said. "Give us a ride, will you? We're lost."

"Keep on, Henry!" he heard the woman urge. "I don't like the looks of 'em."

Americans! Well, thought Stoddard, they were in the United States, anyway. That was something. And he didn't exactly blame the good

woman for her suspicions. They must look pretty wild, at that, with their two-day beards and tattered clothes.

"Sorry," spoke up Henry. "Missus says no. She knows best. 'Sides, it ain't fur to Martin's Bluff. You kin make it in an hour."

"But say, wait a minute!" They were running along beside the wheezing car now. "We've got to get there in a hurry. We'll pay you."

Henry pricked up his ears at this, but his wife shook her head.

"Keep on!" she urged. "They may be bandits!"

Thereupon Stoddard drew his automatic, for there was no more time to argue.

"Stop!" he commanded. "You'll take us, understand? I'll pay you well!"

"See, I was right!" screamed the woman. "Bandits! Bandits! Oh, Henry—save me!"

Wildly she clung to him, as Stoddard mounted the running-board, but before he could make another move, Professor Prescott gasped out:

"The Cossacks! Quick!"

And jumping down, he wheeled to face the two leering Russians, not forty feet down the road. Pistols levelled, they were advancing stolidly.

Stoddard half-raised his own weapon, then turned to see if the car was within range of the return fire it would bring. It was—but not for long.

With a furious chattering of bands, as Henry gave it the gas, the decrepit vehicle gained the top of the hill and disappeared from view down the far slope, and the last thing he saw of it was a dusty plate flapping under its tail-light.

It was a Texas license!

Then, turning back, he lifted his automatic; but it was too late. The Cossacks were on them.

In answer to a guttural command, he dropped the weapon and raised his hands, as the professor had already done.

Two hours later, they were back at the rocket.

Led into the shack—which was furnished inside like an Oriental hunting-lodge—they were confronted at once by Prince Krassnov.

Though his aristocratic features were immobile, it was obvious that he was in no amiable frame of mind.

"So, my friends!" he exclaimed. "I leave you in India, and meet you again in America, all within a matter of hours. It is but an example of our modern progress, is it not?"

They made no reply.

"Ha! You are not sociable, after enjoying my hospitality, my transportation? Then suppose we—as you Americans so quaintly say—call a spade a spade! I gave you your chance. You declined it. And what is the result? My beautiful Diamond Thunderbolt, my immeasurable treasure, is buried forever."

"Through no fault of ours!" put in Stoddard.

"But buried nevertheless, and my adopted kingdom in revolt. Yet do not think I mourn too much, my friends. Though the game is what you call up, my plans shall go on. Here and elsewhere in the world, where we have sub-headquarters, are billions of dollars' worth of

diamonds—supplies for years ahead. We shall not suffer. But you—Professor Prescott and Doctor Stoddard—I have a very interesting fate in store for you. How would you care to make a little scientific expedition to Mars, say?"

"Mars?" gasped the professor.

"Yes, or Venus, or even Jupiter, not to mention the moon! Or how about the sun? That would be an interesting sphere for exploration."

"We don't know what you're talking about," said Stoddard growing nettled. "Why mince matters? Call a spade a spade, if you're going to! What do you propose to do with us, now that you have us in your power?"

The prince paused, drew forth a long Russian cigarette from an exquisite platinum case.

"I propose," he smiled, when he had lit it, "to turn over my rocket to you, my fellow scientists, since I shall have no further use for it and it might be embarrassing to be found with it in my possession."

And the way he proposed to turn it over to them, as they had already suspected, was to lock them in it and fire it off into space.

Within the hour, the man's diabolical plan had been put into operation.

Led to the rocket, the luckless pair were locked within a small metal room somewhere within its recesses. There sounded again the peculiar rasping that told them its doors were being sealed. And then came the roar of that mighty exhaust beating down.

There followed the lifting, rushing sensation they had experienced before, and again they were flung violently to the flooring by the force of the upward impulse.

When the pressure slacked, they staggered to their feet and groped around the dark, stuffy little room.

"Well, this is the end, I guess," sighed Professor Prescott. "I had never thought," with a grim attempt at humor, "that I would meet quite such a scientific fate as this!"

"Nor had I!" Stoddard agreed. "But I'm not quite ready to cash in my checks yet. The game isn't over!" He was pacing around the room, knocking on the metal walls with something that gave back a strident ring. "Have you any idea what composition this stuff is?"

The professor rapped on one of the panels; felt of it.

"Aluminum, I would say."

"Nothing so lucky! If it were, I could cut it like cheese. But duralumin, probably, a very light, strong alloy; and what I have here is a hunting knife with a can-opener on one end! If I'm not mistaken, we'll be out of this sardine box before long."

Whereupon he applied himself to the thin metal wall of their cell, working determinedly, while Professor Prescott held his cigarette lighter for a torch.

"You see, duralumin yields to heat, like aluminum," he exclaimed, as finally his knife thrust through. "Now then, let's get the can opener working."

The progress was slow but sure. Within an hour, he had cut out a jagged section some two feet square, through which they squeezed into an equally dark corridor.

"Now then!" Stoddard's mood was exultant. "There must be switches around here somewhere. There were lights, I remember, so let's find them. Once we get a little light on the subject—"

"Here!" called the professor, who had groped down the corridor with the cigarette lighter. "How's that?"

As he pressed a switch, a row of small bulbs glowed overhead.

"Fine!" was the answer. "Now let's see if we can find the engine-room, or whatever they call it."

Jubilant now, they continued on down the corridor, which ended in a flight of stairs.

"I fancy it must be below," said Professor Prescott. "From what I have seen of experimental models, the propulsion impulse must originate from the base."

So they descended the stairs, entered another dark corridor, found another switch and pressed it, and thus they proceeded, lighting the interior of the rocket as they went. And as they descended, the roar of the exhaust increased in volume, indicating that they were nearing its source.

Presently they entered a large, circular room with an illuminated dial at the far end. Drawing near, they saw a confusion of instruments that for a moment left them dazed.

While Stoddard studied them in bewilderment, Prescott circled the room till he found a switch. Pressing it, he produced a brilliant flood of illumination.

"Now then, let me have a look at this," he said, returning to the dial. "Professor Goddard once explained to me the workings of one of his experimental models. The motive force must be some liquefied mixture, possibly oxygen and hydrogen. Some of these instruments —most of them, in fact—must be valves."

He touched one, turned it, and the rocket responded with a sickening burst of speed.

"No, that won't do! We're going plenty fast enough now!"

He touched another, and they slacked off dizzyingly.

"Well, there are two controls, anyway. Now then, how do they steer this thing? That is the next problem we must solve."

But though he touched this instrument and that, producing weird effects, their course continued in the direction set. And meanwhile, they were hurtling outward through space at a rate of speed he knew would presently carry them beyond the gravitational pull of the

earth.

Then, as he grasped and swung down a curious lever that worked in a quadrant, they felt a violent lunge to the left, and for a moment it seemed they would shoot to the ceiling.

"Good God!" gasped Stoddard. "What's happened?"

"Nothing—only that I've found how to steer this wild steed!" cried the professor, exultantly.

It was really quite simple, he explained, as he eased up on the lever. In application, it was a development of the gyroscope principle, that a wheel revolving freely within a freely suspended frame tends to make the frame revolve in the other direction.

"You see, the rocket is the freely suspended frame," he went on, "while this lever controls a gyroscopic wheel somewhere. To set it spinning to the right causes us to turn to the left, and vice versa."

"But you almost stood us on our heads, a moment ago! How did that happen?"

"Simply because I threw the lever too far to the right. We are in interstellar space, obviously, where every change of direction

involves an adjustment of equilibrium."

And if Stoddard didn't exactly understand, being first a secret service man and only secondarily a scientist, at least he showed his ignorance no further. If the professor could bring this astounding machine back to Earth, that was all he wanted.

Prescott said he could, he thought, providing they had fuel enough left. So for the next few minutes, while the younger man held his breath, the professor labored with the various instruments on that complicated dial.

"Now then, I think we're headed back," he said at length, relaxing. "But we've got to have visibility, otherwise we will land with a velocity of about twenty thousand miles an hour, which is what I figure we're making at the present time."

"Good Lord!" gasped Stoddard. "I'll say we've got to have visibility! Wait a minute! Let me look around!"

He searched the room for further instruments—to find nothing that in any way met the purpose.

But even as he returned dejected, the professor cried out:

"Here—I've got it! Take a look at this!"

Bending over a small table beside the dial, Stoddard saw mirrored, in its ground-glass surface a hazy circular panorama that at first had no significance. But as he continued to peer down upon the scene, certain familiar aspects loomed out. It was the Earth—and what he was looking at was a view of the North and South American continents!

For some moments Stoddard stared at this amazing panorama in silence; saw it grow rapidly clearer, as the careening rocket plunged like a giant shell toward the earth.

"My God!" he whispered at length in awe. "Do you think you can ever check our speed?"

"I think so," the professor replied, busy over his instruments. "But where do we want to land? How do we know what state we were in?"

Whereupon Stoddard told him of that Texas license plate.

"But we don't want to land anywhere near that fiend Krassnov," he added, with a shudder. "I suggest, if it's possible, that you pick out

some aerodrome, preferably in the western part of the state—for if I remember my geography, Texas isn't mountainous in the east."

"I will do the best I can," said Prescott, grimly.

There followed tense minutes as the panorama in that ground-glass narrowed and grew more intense. Now they could see only North America, now only the United States and a portion of Mexico, and now only Texas.

"Back—back!" cried Stoddard, as the rugged land loomed up, spread into a panorama of towns and ranches. "We're descending too fast! We're bound to crash, unless—"

But already the professor had touched the ascending valve and swung the steering lever.

Up they zoomed again. Once more a portion of Mexico was visible on the glass, and along the international border now they could see a winding thread of silver.

"The Rio Grande!" exclaimed the young geologist. "Just follow it up toward its source till we come to El Paso. There'll be a landing-field there."

"Yes, undoubtedly." The professor was working in abstraction over the unfamiliar controls. "Now if I can just hold us on our course...."

We succeeded, and presently a white city gleamed over the curving rim of the horizon to the northwest, the tall chimneys of its smelters throwing long shadows from the lowering sun beyond.

In a minute or two they were over it, at a height of perhaps twelve miles—and now, as they began descending, its patchwork of buildings and plazas unfolded like some great quilt below.

"There's the field!" cried Stoddard, pointing in the glass to a wide clear space on the outskirts. "Can you make it, do you think?"

"We'll know soon!" was the grim answer, as Prescott worked frantically now with his valves and levers. "It's a matter of balancing off our flow of gases, of holding up buoyancy to the very last. A little too much, or not enough, and—"

Breathlessly, as they descended, Stoddard peered into the glass. Now a scene of excitement was visible below. Figures could be seen gazing up, waving their arms, running about this way and that.

"They must think they're getting a visit from another planet," said

Stoddard. "Or that the end of the world has come!"

"Maybe it has, for us!" agreed the professor, gravely. "I'm afraid we're going to crash. I can't seem to—"

Whatever he was going to add was lost in a sudden, rending concussion that flung them violently down, and plunged the room into darkness.

Staggering to his feet a moment later, bruised and shaken, Stoddard gasped out:

"Professor are you there? Are you all right?"

A groan answered him, and for a moment his heart sank, but then came the reassuring call:

"Yes—all right, I guess. And you?"

"O.K. Let's get out of here, quick!"

An ominous hissing sound beat on their ears, as they groped their way toward the door. Evidently escaping gases from the deranged mechanism, thought Stoddard. The floor rose at an angle, indicating that the rocket was half over on its side.

They found the door, and struggled along the twisted corridor toward a flight of stairs that would lead below; found it, descended, and groped along another dark corridor, seeking an exit; when suddenly, around a bend, daylight confronted them, and to their joy they saw that one of the main doors had been burst open by the impact.

Approaching it, they peered out—to be greeted by an awed group of officials and mechanics from the field.

As they climbed through, dropped to the ground, the group retreated, taking no chances.

"Back!" called Professor Prescott, warning and reassuring them with a word. Then, turning to his companion: "Come on, Jack—run! This thing is likely to explode at any moment."

Following this advice, Stoddard raced from the rocket with the rest.

At a safe distance, he turned and peered back—to see it standing there at a crazy angle, dust and fumes issuing from under it in a blast that was hollowing a deep crater to the far side.

Even as they looked, the strange craft quivered, tottered, and fell over on its side, and the next instant was enveloped in a blinding

sheet of flame that brought with it a dull detonation and a blast of dazing heat.

The party backed still farther away.

"A nasty mixture, oxygen and hydrogen," muttered the professor, feeling of his singed eyebrows. "We got out of there just in time, Jack."

"I'll say we did!" Stoddard agreed, with a shudder.

By now the higher officials of the field were on the scene, among them a number of Army men.

Curiosity ran high, not unmingled with indignation. Who were these strange visitors? Where had they come from? What did they mean by endangering the lives of everyone, with their damned contraption?

Inquiring for the commandant, they were taken to him—Major Clark Hendricks, U.S.A.—and Stoddard briefly outlined their astounding story, producing credentials, whereupon a squadron of fast military planes was assembled.

From the way they described the mountainous region where the

rocket had first landed, mentioning the town Martin's Bluff, that Henry of the ancient Ford had named, the major declared that it must have been the Guadalupe Mountains a hundred miles to the east—and sure enough, a government map showed such a town there.

So it was that presently the squadron lifted into the late afternoon skies, with Major Hendricks in the leading plane, accompanied by the two weary adventurers.

Swiftly the squadron winged eastward. They reached the mountains in less than an hour, and circled them in search of that little wooden shack which Prince Krassnov and his Cossacks had made their rendezvous....

It was like finding a needle in a haystack, and for a time Stoddard despaired of success. But those rugged mountains were an open book to the planes circling high overhead, and with Martin's Bluff once located, the rest was not so hard.

At last, as twilight was falling, they found the shack and brought their planes to rest near it.

But as the party approached the shack, after posting a heavy guard over their planes, they saw that it was deserted.

This, after all, was only what Stoddard had feared, but nevertheless they forced their way inside—and there, had Major Hendricks had any doubt of their story, it was dispelled.

As Stoddard had told them, it was furnished like an Oriental hunting-lodge, with evidences of the recent occupation of the Russians on all sides.

But where were they? Had they got away or were they hiding somewhere?

Proceeding from room to room until they had searched it thoroughly, the party paused baffled.

But not for long, for suddenly Stoddard discovered something that gave him a clue. It was a barred door, within a closet, covered over with clothes and uniforms so as to be fairly well concealed. On battering it in, they found that it led into a passage below.

As the party entered the passage, leaving further guards above, it became obvious that what they had found was the shaft of an old mine.

It led down abruptly, for a while, then more gradually, with many

windings and twistings, and ending presently in another barred door.

This they in turn battered in—to be greeted suddenly by a volley of rifle-fire that dropped three of them in their tracks.

Stoddard was one of those who fell.

Bending over him, Professor Prescott lifted up his head.

"Jack!" he called. "Where are you hit? Answer me!"

"I—it seems to be in the shoulder," came the weak reply. "If you've got a handkerchief—"

The professor produced one and staunched the flow of blood as best he could, working with the aid of his flashlight.

Meanwhile, ahead, the crash of pistols and rifles continued to split the stillness of the passage, as the attacking party pressed forward.

"There—that does it!" gasped Stoddard, at length. "Help me up. I'll be all right."

Prescott steadied him to his feet. They continued on.

Now the firing ceased, and in a moment Major Hendricks appeared, at the head of his party.

"Well, we've got them," he said, saluting Stoddard. "How are you, old man?"

"All right," was the gritted reply. "Let's have a look at them."

A flashlight was swept across the stolid group of Cossack prisoners, but as Stoddard peered into one face after another, he realized that Krassnov was not among them.

"You haven't got the leader," he said. "See here, you birds," he addressed the Cossacks, "where is he, eh?"

If they understood, they gave no indication of it, but shook their heads sullenly.

"Well, damn it, we'll find him!" Stoddard wheeled and strode past them. "Give me three or four men, Major. I'll smoke out that Russian bear. He must be here somewhere."

Hendricks sent the main body above, with their prisoners, and gave him the men he wanted, putting himself at their head.

"You'd better go on up, too, Professor," said Stoddard, addressing Prescott. "You've risked enough, in my behalf."

But the older man shook his head.

"No, I'll come along, if you don't mind," he insisted. "I want to see the end of this thing."

It was an end that came with dramatic suddenness.

Pausing before a barred door some fifty paces down the passage, they were debating what their next move would be—when suddenly it was flung open.

"Come in, gentlemen," came a suave, ironical voice. "Sorry my servants were so uncivil."

In the glare of light from beyond, Stoddard and the professor saw that it was Prince Krassnov.

He stood there unarmed, smiling.

"Is this the fellow?" rasped Major Hendricks, his automatic levelled.

"It is," said Stoddard.

Slowly, cautiously, they followed the man into the room, which in reality was merely the end of the passage sealed off, though its walls were richly panelled and it was luxuriously furnished.

Pausing beside a small, heavy table, he swept his hand over it, indicating a heap of rough diamonds that must have represented millions.

"Merely a fraction of my treasure, gentlemen," he told them, with a deprecating shrug. "I hadn't quite finished storing away the last shipment, when you interrupted me."

He strode to one of the walls, drew out a small drawer from a built-in cabinet and dumped its glittering contents on the table with the rest.

All around the room, Stoddard noted as he stood there swaying, were other cabinets dotted with the knobs of similar drawers.

"And this, gentlemen, is but my American sub-headquarters," the Prince went on. "In Siberia, in Brazil—but why bore you with the multiplication of my now useless wealth? Tell me, instead, my good friends—Professor Prescott, Doctor Stoddard—how come you back here, after I saw you safely on your way earlier in the afternoon?"

"Because I happen to have a knack with can-openers, and my colleague is rather adept with machinery," Stoddard told him, "while Major Hendricks here is quite a hand with geography, not to mention aviation."

A question or two, which they answered briefly, and Krassnov had the story.

"Ah, my poor rocket!" he sighed. "But it is fate, I suppose; Kismet, as the Turkish say. Still, I deserved a better fate than to be captured by a pair of American professors, when the secret service of the world was on my trail."

"Then cheer up!" said Stoddard, gritting his teeth to keep back the pain of his throbbing shoulder. "For I have the honor to represent Washington in this case."

At that, the prince scowled darkly for a moment. Then he brightened.

"Kismet again! I might have acted differently, had I known that, but —well, I drink to your success, Doctor Stoddard!"

Whereupon, before they could restrain him, he lifted a vial from a shelf over one of the cabinets and downed its contents.

"A diamond-dust cocktail!" he smiled, replacing the vial. "The most expensive, even in your country of costly drinks—and the most deadly!"

But Stoddard knew, as the doomed nobleman stood there facing them in stoic triumph, that diamond dust in the human system was as slow as it was deadly, and that the desperate gesture had been futile, so far as justice was concerned.

There would be ample time, in the weeks Prince Krassnov of Imperial Russia still lived, to round up his international allies and stamp out the remnants of their amazing ring of diamond smugglers.

While as for Professor Prescott, he was thinking with what amazement the members of his expedition back on Kinchinjunga would receive the cablegram he would dispatch that night, informing them that Stoddard and himself were safe in El Paso, Texas.

95 The Slave Ship from Space by Desmond Winter Hall

Three kidnapped Earthlings show Xantra of the Tillas how "docile" Earth slaves can be.

Aproximate word count: 11,600

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Twice that night the two young men had seen the thing, and their hour for turning in had long since passed as they lay half reclining on the ground by their campfire waiting, hoping that it would return once more. Their interest in the strange visitant had completely banished all sensations of fatigue from a full day of vacation fishing in the cold Adirondack streams among which they were camping for that month.

They had discussed the appearance until there was nothing more they could say; and now as for the last hour, they watched in silence, only moving to knock the dottle from their pipes and to get fresh lights off the splinters they stuck into their slumbering fire. The velvet night was now at full reign, and the myriad stars in their

familiar patterns leaned close—brilliant jewels for man to share but never pluck.

Jim Wilson had seen the thing first—a pinpoint of cherry red that moved upward in a perfect arc against the brilliant white constellations of the east. As it rose, it grew perceptibly larger, to dwindle again as it arced over the western horizon.

Nearly an hour later it had appeared again; but this time, when halfway up the skies, it had changed its direction until it was heading directly over the spot where the two thrilled campers were watching; and as it approached they saw its color fade slowly until it had disappeared completely from sight among the inky patches between the stars overhead. For minutes the two were not able to locate it—until Jim, once again, had pointed to a faint red spot that grew in color and intensity as it drew away from the zenith. Once again it had disappeared over the rim of the western world—and from then on there was no thought of sleep in the minds of Jim Wilson and Clee Partridge. They were watching the skies, hoping it would return.

"What was the thing?" Jim Wilson exclaimed suddenly with exasperation. "I've been racking my brain, Clee, but nothing I can think of makes sense. It couldn't have been a plane, and it couldn't

have been a meteor. And if it was a fire-fly—well, then I'm one too." He paused, and looked at the other. "Any new suggestions?" he asked.

"Me—I still think it was a space ship from Mars or Venus," Clee Partridge answered drily; "searching for a couple of good Earth-men to help 'em out of some jam. You noticed the way it disappeared for a moment when it was overhead: it was looking us over."

"Then it'll be back," answered Jim, not to be outdone, "for it's not apt to find anyone better qualified. I, myself, would kinda like to take a joy-ride out through the Great Dipper."

Clee smiled and looked down at the luminous dial of his wrist watch. The two resumed their vigil, and there was quietness between them. For some time they lost themselves in the sparkling glory of the firmament, hardly moving, except to pull closer the collars of their flannel shirts against the increasing coldness of the mountain air.

And then for the third time that night the mysterious sky traveler sprang over the trees on the eastern horizon. Suddenly it appeared; both men saw it at once; and this time it made a clear, beautiful arc straight for the zenith. As it raised, it grew in size, a beautiful, delicate cherry star spanning the whole welkin. The two men got to

their knees and watched it, breathless with fascination.

"Look!" cried Jim suddenly.

As had happened on its second appearance, the thing began to slow up and its color gradually faded as it drew directly overhead. By the time it should have reached the zenith it could no longer be seen. It had dissolved against the inky spaces above.

"It should come into view again in a moment," Clee said; "a little farther on, like the other time."

They watched, thrilled by the mystery of the midnight phenomenon. Minutes passed, but still it did not appear. Clee grew restive, and as his eyes chanced on his wrist watch he started violently and held out his arm for Jim to see. The radium-painted hands and dial were glowing with unusual brilliance.

Looking quickly into the skies again, Clee sensed something wrong; something different. For a moment he could not figure out what—and then it came to him. One of the great stars, one that he had been watching in its climb up the sky through the night, had disappeared!

He got excitedly to his feet, grabbed his companion's arm and

pointed out this strange thing—and as he pointed another star blinked out and did not reappear.

"Something's happening up there," Jim said soberly. "I don't know what; but I, for one, don't feel quite comfortable."

He kept peering at the place pointed out, at a spot of black even darker than the inky sky; or did he only imagine it was darker? he asked himself. Soon the spot enlarged; became a distinct patch; then, growing still, obliterated one star after another around its borders. It made a pure circle; and before long the starlight glinting off its sides showed it to be a great, tinted sphere.

Swiftly it dropped down on the two men, and they watched it hypnotized, incapable of moving. It was only a hundred yards overhead when some presence of mind returned to Clee.

"Run, Jim!" he yelled, moving away. "It's coming straight down!"

Wilson came out of his daze and the two sprinted wildly for the path that led down the spur on which their camp was located. They had not made more than fifty yards when they heard a dull thud, and, turning, saw the great sphere resting on the ground with a slight rocking motion that quickly ceased.

A gully cut into the trail ahead, and when they reached it Clee grabbed his partner's arm and pulled him off to one side, where, panting with their sudden exertion, they wormed up to the brow and peeped over at their strange visitor.

She sphere stood in the starlight on the very spot they had been occupying when they first saw it. Right in their campfire it lay—a great, dark-red crystal shape perhaps fifty feet in diameter, whose surface sparkled with innumerable facets. It rested quietly on the ground, as if oblivious of the two routed men breathlessly watching it from a short distance. No ports or variations of any kind were visible to mar its star-reflecting sides.

"It must be some new kind of dirigible!" murmured Jim; "but why did it go and pick on us for its midnight call!"

"It's a space ship from Mars," answered Clee with a serious face. "They heard you, and're coming to take you for your ride. See?" he added quickly, pointing.

A large door was opening in the side of the sphere, and the illumination within threw a bright beam of amber-colored light in their direction. A metallic ramp slid out and angled down to the ground.

Breathlessly the two men waited to see who would emerge, but a long time went by without their catching the slightest sign of life within. The face of Clee's wrist watch was fluorescing brilliantly now, and moment by moment the weird glow was increasing. Jim stirred nervously.

"I don't mind telling you, I'm scared," he said.

"Aw, they won't make you walk back," consoled Clee; but he was scared himself. Why didn't something happen? Why didn't someone come out of the ship?

Jim thought he heard a noise, and touched Clee on the shoulder, pointing to a place on the trail down which they had come a few minutes before. Clee looked, and as he did so the hair on the back of his neck stood up. For the bushes along the side of the path were moving as if they were being brushed aside by someone in passing—someone making a straight line to the spot where they lay concealed. And no one was there!

"Can they be invisible?" breathed Jim, every pore in his body prickling.

For a moment the two men could hardly breathe, so great was their

unnamed fear. During that time no other movements could be noted. Then Clee suddenly pointed to a bush only five yards away. Half a dozen leaf-tipped branches were bending slowly in their direction—and then a sharp crack, as of a broken twig, came to them from the same spot.

Panic, blind and unreasoning, swept them. "Run!" gasped Jim; and together, instinctively, they turned and scrambled down the side of the ridge to get away, anywhere, far from the approaching menace of they knew not what. Reckless of possible injury, they slid and stumbled down the brush-covered slope—and right behind them came sudden crashing sounds of pursuit.

New fears lent wings to their flight, but the sounds behind continued inexorably at their heels no matter how fast they ran or how lucky they were in making past obstacles. Their pursuer was as fast as they. They had no idea who—or what—it might be, for in the brief glances they snatched over their shoulders they could not see anything at all!

The going was bad, and the two campers had not gone more than a quarter-mile when they were breathing hard, and felt that they could not make one more step without collapsing on the ground to give their laboring lungs a chance to catch up. Panting like dogs they

dragged themselves along through pine and birch trees, around large rocks and over briar-covered hills, only a few steps ahead of their pursuer.

Then Partridge, a little in the lead as they made their way up a steep slope, heard Jim suddenly go sprawling; heard him gasp:

"It's got me!"

Turning, he saw his partner rolling and threshing violently on the ground, and now and then lashing out at the empty air with his fists. Without a moment's hesitation he jumped from his position above—jumped square and hard into the space which Jim's invisible assailant should be occupying. With a great thud he crashed into some unseen body in the air, and went down, the breath knocked out of him. As he got to his knees an odor like that of cloves came to his nostrils, and something caught him around the neck and began constricting. Frantically he tried to tear himself loose, but the harder he struggled the more strangling became the grip on his neck; and at last, faint from the growing odor and the lack of air, his efforts dwindled into a spasmodic tightening and relaxing of the muscles.

Then, for a moment, the hold on his neck must have loosened, for he found himself able to breathe a little. Turning, he saw Jim at his side,

apparently similarly held.

"If I could only—see it!" Clee managed to get out. Jim's spasmodic, bitter answer came a moment later.

"Being invisible—tremendous advantage!" he gasped.

In desperation the two men again began to fight against the clutches that were holding them, and this time the grip about their necks unexpectedly loosened—to bring to their noses the odor of cloves overpowering in strength. And that was all they knew before they lapsed into a black and bottomless void....

Through the lifting haze of returning consciousness Clee felt a command to get up. As he automatically complied he saw that Jim was doing likewise. Once on his feet he felt another impulse to go to the cherry-crystal sphere, visible in the distance; but his legs were weak, and neither he nor Jim could walk very well until out of the nothingness around them came something of invisible bulk to lend them support.

Slowly, carefully, straight for the waiting globe the two men were conducted; and in his state of half-consciousness Clee wondered at the impotence of his will to make his body offer resistance. They

passed right by their tent and up the ramp to the inside of the strange sphere.

Clee's impressions were blurred and dull, but he noticed that they were in a small room brilliant with amber light, on one wall of which there was a circular area which contained a dozen or more instruments and levers and wheels. As his eyes rested on them, one of the levers moved, seemingly of itself, and the ramp came sliding into the ship and the thick door slowly swung closed. Then they were conducted along a short, narrow passageway into which opened, on the right, a small dim room; and there the grip about their bodies loosened and they slumped to the floor. The door whereby they had entered, closed.

A faint vibration became noticeable; they suddenly felt very heavy; and to the accompaniment of a low but rising hum they saw one wall of their room begin to glow with a beautiful cherry color. Although they had been too stupefied to try to speak, this spurred their tired bodies, and they dragged themselves over to it. They found the wall to be of some kind of hard crystal; it was the outer shell of the sphere; and it now gleamed redly transparent.

Far out and down the men saw a great convex surface on which lay narrow ribbons of silver, winding veinlike through dark areas that

were in some places lit by little clusters of twinkling lights. As they watched, the distances on the surface shrank in on themselves; they could see the outline of a great circle. The sight stimulated the exhausted men. In a hushed and awestruck voice, Jim Wilson broke the silence.

"We've been kidnaped," he said. "Being taken God knows where, out among the stars...."

He was getting the sky-ride he had asked for.

Clee smiled faintly, and was going to remind him of this; but he was too tired to make the effort. He only looked at the tremendous scene below: at the Earth they knew so well, with its familiar streets, comfortable fireplaces, the faces of those they loved and those others who were their friends....

The Earth soon became a ball—a globe such as he had used at school, showing clearly the outline of the continents and oceans. And little by little it dwindled, until it was only a ghostly shape far out in nothingness....

A little later, had the two Earthlings not been deep in sleep, they might have seen enter a strange-looking man clad in odd garments—

a man whose great, bulging head was quite bald, and whose wrinkled, leprous-white face wore an expression of unutterable wisdom and majesty. In his hands he carried a strange piece of apparatus which he held to Jim's wrist while it emitted a coarse vibratory hum that whined slowly up in pitch until it passed the range of hearing. He did the same thing to Clee, and then he quietly left.

But the two Earthlings knew nothing of this. Limp on the floor, oblivious to everything, they slept....

Some hours later found the kidnapped men well recovered and sitting on the floor of their cell talking over their situation. As usual, Wilson was thinking out loud.

"What can they be?—or who?" he asked, frowning with his thought. "They can't be from Earth, for no one there could invent such a ship as this and keep it a secret; and even if someone had, he could never have done the equally astounding thing of inventing a way to render living bodies invisible. I doubt if the thing that caught us was human, by what I was able to feel in my short struggle with it. There was something that might have been a hand; but the strength and the weight of its body was enormous!"

"Well, we'll probably soon see," commented Clee with philosophic resignation and pulling out of a hip pocket a package of tobacco and his corn-cob pipe. "Or, rather, we may soon know. Our captors may keep themselves invisible; and of course it's barely possible that it's their natural state to be invisible, so that we may never hope to see them. What I'm chiefly afraid of, is that they are from some other planet, and that that's where we are being taken—though heaven knows what any creatures so infinitely far ahead of us Earthlings scientifically could want with a pair of young Earth lawyers!"

He offered the package to Jim. "Here, have a smoke; you'll feel better," he said. "While there's tobacco there's hope."

"At least they don't seem disposed to kill us right off," returned Jim, handing back the tobacco after lighting his own pipe. "Later—if there's to be any 'later' for us—we may be able to find a way to get out of this room; though how we'd run the ship, to get back home, is another hard brick wall.... Maybe the controls are invisible, too!" he suggested with a wry grin. "Ever take any pre-law courses on how to work the invisible controls of a space ship?"

Clee's reply was spoken low, and was entirely irrelevant.

"That's funny," he said.

He was looking at the face of the watch on his left wrist. For the first time since they had been abducted, its abnormal brightness had left it.

As Jim watched, inquiringly, Clee moved his right hand a little, and once more the dial leaped out through the dimness with unnatural brilliance. Jim saw that his friend was holding in this hand the package of tobacco. Clee repeated the demonstration.

"The dial glows with unusual brightness always—except when I hold the package of tobacco in front of it at this spot," he said wonderingly, half to himself. "If I remember my science right, ultra-violet light would make the radium on the dial glow; and the lead in the tin-foil of the tobacco wrapping would screen it off. Let's see—"

He crossed to the other side of the room and held his watch and the package of tobacco in various positions until he again found one line along which the watch-dial gave off only its customary light.

"Yes," he said, "—exactly in the extended line made by my watch and this package of tobacco is the source of the ray which makes the watch-dial glow. It's probably the control room of this ship."

"An extraordinary deduction, my dear Sherlock," commented Wilson

drily; "and valuable. I wish you'd now take a moment and deduce the reason for the mysterious appearance of the lumps on the back of our necks. I know I didn't have mine before I was taken for this sky-ride."

As he spoke, his hand sought the back of his neck where there was a fat lump about the size of a quarter—a lump not painful, for all its newness and size. Hard pushing with probing fingers had revealed something that seemed to be hard and flat, buried within; but close examinations failed to show any wound or scar, and the men had no notion what the lumps might be. Clee's was just like Jim's.

But Clee did not respond to his friend's invitation. A heavy mood had come over him; he was standing by the outer wall, looking out. Jim went and stood beside him, his hand on his shoulder, and together they gazed through the cherry-crystal wall of their prison ship out on the loneliness of the immeasurable miles outside. For them, space was red, instead of the deep black they knew they would see through colorless glass. Brilliant pinpoints of light, millions of them, in all sizes, made up the infinite space that was the background of their adventure.

To which one—near which one were they going? Would they ever return to their Earth again? Would their friends ever know of the

incredible adventure that had overtaken them?—or would they, after the few weeks of searching and inquiry that must follow their disappearance, at last conclude that some nameless mountain disaster had made them victims, and give them up for dead? No doubt. And month after succeeding month their memory would fade from the minds of those who had loved them, while they would be—where?...

A peculiar, dynamic thought came simultaneously into the minds of the two men. It was not a word: it seemed more like a feeling; but its unquestionable import was "Come." Together they rose, and looked at each other wonderingly. Again came the feeling. They started for the door.

"But that's foolish!" Jim said aloud, as if objecting to his own thought. "The door's locked! We tried it!" He looked at Partridge, who returned his gaze blankly—and then, in spite of what he had said, he reached out and turned the latch.

The door swung open!

Expressions of surprise died on the men's lips as again came the compelling urge to go to some unknown destination.

"Suggestion!" said Clee, as he passed through the doorway. "Someone's suggesting—telepathically willing—that we come to him! And I—God help me—I can't resist!"

His neck corded with veins and muscles with his effort to restrain his body from obeying the mysterious command that was drawing it onward. Wilson, one arm outstretched in a repelling gesture, his legs stiff and tight, was also trying to resist. But the will that had sounded within them was stronger than theirs, and slowly, inevitably, they were drawn down the passage.

Their carpeted way took them back to the entrance chamber and then up a steeply sloping corridor that led upward to the left. As they passed along they saw that the hand of a master had made on the walls, in panel effect, marvelously complicated decorations in many-colored mosaic. No man of Earth could ever have done such work, the two men realized—and this thought did not cheer them any.

At the top of their curving passage a doorway led them into a spacious room hung with soft, finely woven tapestries with a metallic lustre and furnished with deep-napped rugs and luxurious chairs and divans. Through this room the intangible threads of the alien will directed them—on into a wide-vaulted alcove about one-third its size. There, the strange clutch on them relaxed, and they

looked about, at first apprehensively, then with growing boldness and curiosity.

"This is the control room!" exclaimed Clee suddenly; and after a moment Jim agreed with him. It was the simplicity of the controls which had prevented them from recognizing it at first. Against the left wall was a great table with a tilted top, bearing, in its center, a raised and hooded eyepiece giving a view into a large, enclosed black box. On each side were several rows of small, shiny, metallic levers and what they took to be instrument dials—round, cup-shaped depressions with pointers free to move across dials lined with disorderly and meaningless convolutions. For the full length of the middle wall, straight ahead, was a broad table of some jet-black polished material, and on it was a large array of instruments and apparatus, all unfamiliar to them. Against the draperies of the wall to their right was one large cushioned chair, simple and beautiful in its lines.

No living person or thing could be discerned in either the main room or the alcove.

For several minutes the two men walked all about, examining everything they saw with curiosity and interest; and then Clee discovered a peculiar thing. His watch-dial, glowing very brightly

now, would perceptibly increase in brilliance every time he neared the great chair. With sudden inspiration he took out his package of tobacco and held it in the line his watch made with the chair—and he found that his watch stopped glowing. He tried it again from another angle, and the result was the same. From that chair came the electrical disturbance that was making his watch-dial glow—yet nowhere near the chair was any bit of electrical apparatus to be seen.

What he did see in the chair, though, almost caused his heart to stop beating. The cushions of the seat, compressed before, began to puff out to full volume, as if someone had just risen from them. And then, faintly but sharply outlined in the long-napped rug in front, appeared the print of a human shoe!

"A man!" breathed Clee. "A human being!"

The two men stood frozen in their tracks. Clee's arm, with the package of tobacco in his hand, was still outstretched toward the great chair, but now the dial of his watch was glowing brightly again. Something within caused him in spite of his terror to move the package between the watch and the space above the footprint on the rug. The glowing stopped. The man—devil—whatever it was that made the print—was the source of the strange excitation!

This took but a second—the interval before another shoe-print formed in the rug in their direction. Jim gasped something unintelligible and started to back away; but no sooner did Partridge start to follow suit, than a compulsion to stand still came over them. Caught where they were, unable to move, they saw the shoe-prints come towards them. Slowly, step by step, twelve inches apart, they came, and did not stop until they were only four or five feet away.

"We'll jump him, if we get the chance!" hissed Jim, never taking his eyes off the prints.

"Yes," came the answer; but Clee's further words were cut off in the making by an added compulsion to keep quiet. Were their words understood? The two men were locked, speechless, where they stood. And by some creature with a human footprint whom they could not see!

The touch of firm flesh came out of the nothingness of space about them, to poke and pry all over their bodies. Anger began to take the place of their fear, as, for some time, impotent of resistance, they had to submit to the examination given them. They were prodded and felt like dogs at a show; their breathing and heart action were carefully listened to; their mouths were opened and their teeth inspected as if they were horses offered for sale. Both men were inwardly fuming.

"Dogs!" shouted Clee in his thoughts. "Treating us like dogs, to see how healthy we are! Does he want us for slaves?"

At last the examination came to a stop, and they saw the shoe-prints in the rug go over to the black table and remain there, heels toward them, while various pieces of apparatus were invisibly moved across the table top. For a moment the compelling will did not seem, to Clee, to be constraining him as much is it had, and he began to wonder if he might not have a little control over his body again. Tentatively he tried to break through the oppressing blanket of foreign will; his arms and legs moved a little; he succeeded! He caught Jim's eye and showed him. He thrilled all over at his discovery, and his will to move measurably increased with his growing confidence that he could.

The toes of the prints were still turned away. He was going to try and get the man or monster who was making them.

He gestured to Jim, and with a great effort took a step in the invisible man's direction. A thrill of gladness helped him on—for Jim was following suit!

Again and again, with greatest mental effort, they made steps toward the footprints, which, remaining side by side and motionless, gave

them increasing hope of stealing up unobserved. When they were only three feet away Clee motioned to Jim, and with a tremendous effort of will they jumped at the space where their enemy should be.

They hit him hard, and bore him heavily to the floor. By the feel, he was a man such as they! Clee's blood leaped with the lust for revenge, and blanking his mind against strong urges to cease his attack he rained savage blows at the place he was holding.

But almost at once they had evidence that their opponent was not such a man as they. A terrific pain stabbed suddenly through them, and they doubled up on the floor, writhing in agony. It was as if every nerve in their bodies had turned into white-hot wire, and was searing through their flesh. Again and again came the terrible stabs of pain—and their source seemed to be the mysterious lumps at the back of their necks!

At last they ceased coming, and Jim and Clee stretched out on the floor all but unconscious from the terrific shocks of fiery agony. They were completely helpless; further thoughts of resistance were unthinkable. But they were not left lying long. There came a telepathic compulsion to stand up; and they found themselves obeying, in spite of the shrieking protest of their every nerve.

Twitching, stumbling, they were made to do servile things—to kneel on the floor; get up again; turn round and round; bow low, then stretch backwards. And out of the air around them came shocking blows which landed on their faces, necks and chests; feet which kicked out at their shins; and they had to stand there and take it, helpless to resist.

Then Clee, as the nearer of the two men, was pushed over to the work-table, where an oval head-piece of finely-woven wire was fitted over his head. Another very large one, standing next to it, and connected to it by wires which led to a small instrument panel nearby, lifted into the air until it must have settled about the head of their persecutor. A dial on the panel turned slowly. And gradually the helmet resting in the air dissolved into nothingness before their eyes.

A slight nausea swept over Clee as it did so, and in the midst of it he felt a series of sharp, staccato thoughts—thoughts which did not seem to be composed of words, and yet were clear and intelligible.

“Fool of a fool!" crackled in his brain with almost a physical effort, "do you think to resist Xantra? Do you think with your sub-human minds to overcome one of the Tillas, Masters of the Universe? Close you were to death—and death indeed would have come had I not other plans for you.

"Know that henceforth you and your companion are my slaves. You will jump at my slightest will; serve me as best you can with such intelligence as you may possess. For faithful, willing service you shall have food and clothing and a portion of leisure. Disobedience and tardiness will bring you the pain you have already tasted; revolt, or the attempt to escape—death; but only after torture such as you have never known.

"I shall never repeat this mode of communication: it is as physically nauseating to me as to you. And you may never expect to see me, though I can always see you. By vibrational means I have given you the universal atomic rhythm of all Tillian slaves; and, although in that state your fellow-slaves will be visible to you, I, your master, will not!

"You will now return to your place of confinement. After you have recovered you will be taken in hand by your fellow-slaves and shown your duties. And if your instinct for self-preservation is only one-tenth normal, you will never again be such a stupid sub-animal fool as to attempt to resist Xantra—to fly in the face of the inevitable!"

The sharp, staccato voice in Clee's brain stopped; his nausea began to leave him; his helmet was removed; and had he been looking he

might have seen the other one slowly materialize on the table. The ordeal was over just in time, for the last remnants of his strength was giving out—as was Jim's. The two Earth-men slumped down, and would have fallen but for the telepathic will, stronger than theirs, that forced them erect again. There came a very strong compulsion to return to their cell, and bruised, stumbling, their nerves still afire from their strange stabbing pains, they made their way back.

They fell to the floor and passed into unconsciousness—beaten, subdued. Slaves....

After a long blank interval a distinct thought crossed Clee's mind. He was in heaven, and an angel voice had spoken. There it was again! Cool hands were stroking his wrists and forehead. He opened his eyes and looked, but seeing no one closed them again.

The Voice returned, and two of the words which kept repeating were somehow familiar. "So sorry ... so sorry...." The Voice was low and cool and feminine. And someone was bathing his battered head.... He rolled over and got up on one elbow. He still could see no one.

The Voice said: "Oh, I'm so glad you're better! I thought you'd never come to!"

Mechanically Clee asked: "Who are you?"

"Vivian Gray," came the quick answer; "from Boston. And you?"

Clee did not answer, but started to lie back again. Things were all wrong: he couldn't even see anyone. He'd go back to sleep, and wake up some other time. But the Voice wouldn't let him.

"Oh, you must listen!" it said. "I haven't much time!"

"Where are you?" he asked.

"Why—right here!" came the surprised answer. "Can't you see me?"

"No," answered Clee, still not himself. He added categorically: "I can see Jim. I can see the door. I can see my hands, but I can't see you."

"Oh, then it must be true! Xantra told me he was going to make you one of his common slaves; but I hoped—I hoped—"

This didn't mean much to Clee; but with the words came memory of all that had happened, and with sudden concern he crept over to where Jim was lying, to see how he was. He found him blinking and stirring, aroused by the voices. Quickly he explained the invisible

presence to him, warning him to be on guard.

"Oh, but I'm a friend—Vivian Gray—kidnapped from Earth just like you!" came quick explanation out of the air. "Xantra stole me from Cape Cod, where I was vacationing, about the time he took you. Xantra is the one whose space ship we are on. He looks much like a man; he is some kind of a man; but he's not from Earth—"

"You've seen him?" interrupted Clee, beginning to believe the Voice a little.

"Yes," came the instant response; "not when he abducted me—he had made himself invisible for that—but always after. Haven't you yet?" And then, without waiting for his answer, she gave it herself. "But of course you couldn't see him if he's already given you the universal atomic rhythm the slaves have. You'd then be able to see only each other, and the other slaves; not Xantra and not me.

"I think he makes his slaves that way for protection," she explained. "They can't very well plot or rebel against him when they can't even see him, and never know but what he's around."

"Who are these slaves you keep mentioning?" Jim broke in. "How many of them are there on this ship: and how many like Xantra?"

“Xantra is the only one of his kind," came the answer. "The slaves are a race of inferior people found on his planet—wherever that is: I couldn't understand, from his explanation, just where. They are creatures much like ugly human beings with a touch of the ape, and are entirely bald, very strong and not very intelligent. There're seven or eight on board. Normally they are good-natured: but sometimes when they have a hard master, like Xantra, they take to hating him; and when they do that they can be very fierce and treacherous. That's the main reason for Xantra's stopping at Earth: to see what kind of slaves we humans will make. He is hoping that we will be more intelligent than those he has—and more docile, and safer to have around."

"Well," snorted Jim belligerently, "if Mr. Xantra thinks that I'm going to be safe to have around, he's a lot dumber than I am!"

"Oh, it's good to hear you talk that way," the girl's voice went on. "We three have got to stick together, and find some way to escape!

"I've so much to say!" she went on; "but I daren't stay long, for fear of getting caught. What you said is where my chief hope lies: Xantra doesn't realize how intelligent we are, and how dangerous; and we mustn't let him know! I think he believes we are much like his present slaves: he gets away with murder with them. You've noticed

the lumps on the back of your necks? Well, they have them, too; it's something that's attached to the spinal cord and gives him telepathic control over them; also the power to hurt them dreadfully—as you've unfortunately found out. His slaves don't understand these lumps; they don't seem to know that he would lose control if they could only in some way get rid of the things in their necks!"

For the first time since the girl started talking, Clee spoke. His voice was low and grave, and there was a tinge of suspicion in it.

"Just how does it happen," he asked, "that you know so much about things here?"

The girl's voice broke as she gave her answer.

"I'm ashamed to tell you," she said. "Xantra—he—he admires me as a healthy animal; one close, in species, to himself. He thinks by being nice to me that he might be able to make me a willing companion to share his trip!" For a moment the girl was silent; and when she spoke again there was a hard note in her voice.

"I let him have hopes," she said, "—deliberately. I planned to make him trust me, and give me the run of the ship, so I could find out all I could. So far—before you came—I saw no slightest hope of ever

escaping back to Earth; but I had at least to look for a quick, sure way to death, in case—in case—"

"You—and us too!" exclaimed Clee impulsively. "No Earth-man—no American, at least—is ever going to submit to slavery. If the worst comes to the worst, we'll at least die together, Vivian!"

Jim added soberly: "And perhaps, if we do, no one from Xantra's planet will ever again come to Earth looking for 'docile' slaves...."

For a moment everyone was silent, affected by the thought behind what they had said. Then the girl's voice suggested, with a touch of Earth formality that was almost ludicrous under the circumstances: "But you two men have not yet introduced yourselves!"

Both Clee and Jim smiled, and told her their names, and in the slight pause that followed Clee said awkwardly, almost shyly: "Miss Gray, we don't know what's in store for us here, and it—it's possible that we may never know each other any better: so would you—I mean, I wonder would you mind if I reached out and touched you. In spite of all we have said. I—I can hardly realize that you are there, somewhere, before me."

Out of the nothingness came an impulsive soft hand that closed over

his. There was both a smile and something deeper in Vivian's voice as she said, "Here," and raised his hand until it touched her brow and the thick smooth hair of her head. Then she placed it a little lower, over her face; and gently Clee's fingers told him what his eyes could not read.

"In case you never see me—why, I—I'd like you to know that I'm really, not bad looking," she said; and Clee knew she was blushing as he smiled at the eternal feminine in her.

But the smile suddenly left his face. His hand had felt her give a distinct start. Then—

"He's calling!" she gasped faintly. "Xantra's calling for me to come to him!" Her voice, as she spoke, moved, and Clee knew she was going towards the door.

"No!" he cried impulsively. "Don't risk it! Stay here, and we'll begin our fight against him right now!"

"I will be safe," came Vivian's reassuring voice from the door. "I can manage him a while yet." Her further words came with a rush. "But I wanted to tell you—I had a faint plan. If I could get hold of the anaesthetic—the vial of stuff that smells like cloves—"

The door was closing now, and the two men knew she was moving down the corridor. They listened in vain for her to complete what she had been saying. Just before the door clicked shut, Jim jammed his foot in it, preventing it from closing.

"Gee, that girl has courage!" Clee murmured.

For a moment the two men looked at each other. Jim was thinking about the opened door, and the chance they had to get out. But Clee's mind was on something else.

"Well, Jim," he said, "you and I have a nasty job ahead."

Jim looked at Clee wonderingly as he took out his pipe and stuck it in the crack of the door, allowing him to remove his foot. Clee explained to him what Xantra had told him with the thought-sending helmets; reminded him of what they had learned from Vivian about the lumps on their necks. After he had finished he said quietly but decisively:

"Now, we're going to try and remove whatever is under these lumps. Have you got anything sharp? Your knife? Something with an edge on it?"

It would mean escape from the domination of Xantra's will!—from his terrible stabbing punishment!—if they could remove them! Jim breathed a little quicker in his excitement.

"But once we do it—if we can do it—it'll mean that we'll have to make our break to escape right away," he reminded Clee. "We'll be caught if Xantra wills us to come to him and we don't appear!"

"You know what will happen to Vivian if we delay the attempt." Clee reminded him levelly: and Jim knew that Clee was right—that their break for freedom must start right then and there....

He looked through his pockets and produced some cigarettes, matches, a pipe, a nailfile and some utterly useless odds and ends. Clee's hands came out of his pockets empty. "I've got nothing at all," he said—and picked up the nailfile and looked at it questioningly. "We'll have to use this, I guess.... Well, I'm first."

He lay face down on the floor and loosened his collar. Quietly, he made several suggestions. "Light a match and heat the tip in the flame," he said. "The point's pretty dull, but cut as deep and quick and clean as you can. If I yell, pay no attention; I'll try to hold still. Unless it bleeds very much, best not make a bandage; we've nothing clean enough."

That was all he said; and Jim, his heart beating like mad, and a lump in his throat, could find no words at all. He sterilized the tip of the file as directed, studied the lump a moment, then, after a rough, affectionate shake of his friend's shoulder, he knelt close to his task. One quick hard cut; a sharp gasp from Clee; a repetition; then two more times crossways—and a firm, spongelike metallic disc lay revealed. Then the worst—raising it a little, and breaking the several fine wires that led from it through the flesh within....

Clee lay panting, the sweat running down the deep wrinkles of pain on his face. Dark blood oozed from the jagged wound. But he smiled a little, and some of the pain-wrinkles in his face smoothed away, when Jim showed him the disk....

For a short time Clee rested, quieting his nerves, while Jim staunched the flow of blood.

And then it was Jim's turn; and he bore the sharp agony as stoically as Clee....

It was perhaps a strange thing; but at this great moment in the lives of the two men they felt no need to talk. For the few minutes they rested after they had done, no word was spoken; but in that time a bond of friendship was formed that only death could ever break....

They did not rest long. Every moment brought them nearer to the inevitable discovery of what they had done. Their muscles were still quivering, the wounds on their necks still slowly bleeding, when Clee rose and aroused Jim. The most dangerous, desperate part of their wild revolt lay just ahead.

They were able to make but the vaguest of plans, not knowing what to anticipate outside. They only knew that they would first have to strike boldly for possession of the control alcove—which, without doubt meant they would have, somehow, to kill Xantra—to find and kill a man they could not see, yet who could see them. An enormous task. And only the first of several.

For a moment, realizing this, they hesitated at the door. But the die had been cast; there was nothing for them to do but go forward—and quickly; so, giving Jim a final warning that they must stick together, Clee opened wide the door and stepped out into the corridor.

What he saw there halted, him in his tracks.

"The slaves!" gasped Jim, and involuntarily both Earth-men backed into the room again. The creatures they had seen at once followed them inside.

There were four of them. As tall as men, they were, and the general cast of their bodies was identical. But they were different in shocking little details. Their heads were much larger, and in the shape of inverted pears, like those of hydrocephalics; their eyes, popped and dull. The thin lips beneath their stubs of noses were ever writhing and twisting in horrible grimaces. And, worst, their skins were sickly-white, and were absolutely bald of hair. The only clothes they wore were loin-cloths and very large sandals, which exposed to full view their chunky, muscular bodies.

All this the two men took in at a glance. They knew they could never hope to cope, unarmed, with four such creatures as these, so they stood with their backs to the wall, alertly awaiting their first move.

"Easy," warned Clee. "They're probably only coming to take us in hand, as Vivian said."

The nearest of the slaves stepped a little closer to the two men, and by the twitching of its eyelids and the increased mouthings of its lips it was apparent that the creature was highly excited. A high, variable moaning sound came from its throat. Curiously, boldly, it looked Clee all over—and then it did an amazing thing. Seeing the blood on

the back of his neck, it swung him around, put its writhing lips to the still-bleeding wound and dog-like licked it clean.

The gesture was altogether a friendly one.

Another of the slaves of Xantra went up and did the same to Jim, and the two men looked at each other with relief. This meant that the removal of the disks had not been understood by the creatures!

It was with growing hope that they allowed themselves to be conducted from their cell, through the sloping corridor into a doorway they had passed coming in, and down a curving flight of steps into a large room below. They were in the space at the very bottom of the ship, for, through the redly-glowing transparent walls that curved on each side and below, they could see the infinite deeps of star-filled space. Three other slaves were there, waiting for them. At the far side of the room their guide pointed to two small stalls, with a partition between, which they understood were to be their beds. They were across from a long row of similar ones.

"Making us right at home," commented Jim. "I wonder if they'll serve cakes and tea."

"Wish they would," added Clee; "I'm getting damned hungry. But

we've got work to do—and we've got to do it quick!"

His eyes swept the room, looking among the sparse furnishings for something they might be able to use as a weapon. He saw nothing, but the sight of the lump on the neck of a nearby slave gave him an idea.

"I wonder if these slaves would fight for us if we removed the lumps from their necks," he said musingly, his eyes narrow. "I wish there were some way to talk to them...."

He looked from one to another of the animal-men making a circle about them, wondering what to do; then quickly he made his decision. "Jim, I'm going to try. It'll have to be done by signs; I've got to make them understand, and get their permission."

At once he raised his hand to get the slaves' attention; then, raising both fists high in the air, he shook them violently, at the same time gritting his teeth, working his face, and growling in animal anger at something overhead. He was trying to show the slaves his anger at Xantra, above.

The slaves fell away from him in surprise and alarm, not understanding what he was trying to put across. He continued his

demonstration, hopping about furiously, but still without result. Then Jim cried out:

"Touch the place on your neck!"

Clee did so, and the result was startling. Quickly there ran around the circle throaty growls of anger, and every slave raised a hand to the lump on its neck. Evidently they had all felt the awful punishment-pain of their master.

Heartened by this, Clee extended his pantomime. Stopping his demonstration of anger, he put one finger on the wound on his neck and fell to the floor, writhing in simulated pain. As he lay there groaning, the easily aroused animal-men moaned with him in sympathy. Then Jim, inspired, stepped into the act. Taking out his nailfile, he bent over the prostrate Clee and pretended to cut into his neck, making a great show of removing something and throwing it away; and as he did so Clee jumped to his feet and grinned and hopped about the room in a wildly exaggerated affectation of joy and relief. Then he stopped his acting and carefully showed the slaves the wounds in his and Jim's necks, by finger movements doing his best to make it clear that they had removed something from there.

And then, taking no chances, he repeated the whole pantomime, Jim,

at the proper place, acting his part as before.

When at last he stopped and looked around, he was over-joyed at his apparent success in putting across the idea. All over the room the animal-men were repeating his show in its various phases.

"Now I've got to take the disk out of one of them," said Clee, "and it's a mighty dangerous thing to attempt! You see how easily their emotions are aroused. If I hurt too much—!"

"I know," responded Jim, "but we've got to risk it, for if we succeed we've got a good bunch of tough fighters at our backs. We need every bit of help we can get!"

Carefully they made their few preparations, and Clee, again by acting, indicated to one of the animal-men what he wanted to do. He seemed to make himself well understood, for without hesitation the creature lay face down on the floor. The others all gathered around as Clee bent over it, and Jim scanned their faces closely for any sign of suspicion or resentment. Seeing none, he told Clee to start; then held his breath in awful suspense.

The disk appeared near the surface, and with a quick slice Clee made his first incision. With the cut, the prone slave bucked and snarled.

Clee murmured soothing words to it in English, and, as the creature quieted down, made another cut. Again came the bucking and throaty protest; and this time, to Jim's dismay, he saw in the bestial faces of the animal-men around them a sympathetic swing of emotional protest. A little more, now; and Clee would be able to take the disk out; but would the slaves restrain themselves until then?

Again Clee allowed the brute body under him to calm down. Then, as he was about to cut once more, from somewhere above in the space ship came the piercing scream of a woman. Something was happening to Vivian.

Clee half started to rise, to run to her aid, but he forced himself to be reasonable. Weaponless, visible, he could never hope to rescue an invisible girl from someone he couldn't even see. He was on the point of making valuable allies; in just a few moments more—! He decided to hurry through with the job he had undertaken.

All below had heard the scream. The circle around him was shifting uncertainly, and peculiar sounds were coming out of the brutes' twisting mouths as he bent again over their fellow on the floor.

Clee's hand was trembling like an aspen leaf as he prepared to make the next incision. He was completely unnerved, and with the utmost

efforts of his will he was unable to control the nailfile. And he had to hurry!

He sliced as straight as he could at the bleeding lump; the slave moved; and the point of the file slipped deep into the creature's flesh!

At that, with a snarling growl the brute below arched from the floor and flung Clee sprawling. From all around the circle came menacing growls as the bleeding animal-man lumbered to its feet and came after him in a definite attack. Jim, not at that moment the center of their attention, pushed one of the slaves in the way of the charging brute and the two of them half fell; and before they could recover their balance Clee was on his feet making after Jim to the steps that led up out of the room.

"Up!" came Jim's shout. "Fast! We've made them enemies!"

Above them on the stairs was descending another slave, innocent of what had transpired below, and the two men bowled it over in their haste to get past. All the way to the bottom of the stairs it tumbled; and that delayed pursuit for the moment needed by the Earth-men to gain the upper corridor. Quickly they darted through the door; there was no way they could lock or block it, so they had to run on. Taking

to the left, they found themselves in the little entrance room, and from there their only course led up the corridor leading to Xantra's quarters and the control alcove.

Arrived there, the two men found the door ajar, but they paused irresolute before it, hardly daring to go in. They had no choice, however, for behind, only fifteen feet away, came the van of the animal-men. They pushed through the door, closed and bolted it, then, wheeling tigerishly, surveyed the room.

They saw no one.

They were not relieved at this. Xantra might well be there; he, as well as Vivian, would be invisible to them. And he had every opportunity of striking first; even then he might be preparing to deal with them, if he was in the room. The slaves were not attempting to break in the door to get them—and this was ominous: it argued that the master was there.

The two men stood motionless at the door, peering intently at the rug in search of telltale footprints. Then Clee touched Jim's shoulder and whispered faintly in his ear:

"Cloves! Smell it?"

Jim nodded. Slowly, on guard every second, they advanced to the alcove. They saw no sign of anyone there, though the odor of cloves was stronger. Jim grabbed a chair and held it ready, and Clee followed suit with a small, heavy tabouret. Cautiously, methodically, the two men began to reconnoitre the large room, examining foot by foot the rug in search of the faint clear prints that would reveal the presence of their enemy. The smell of cloves was beginning to dull their brains a little. Clee saw the danger in this, and whispered to Jim:

"Faster! Xantra may be insidiously anaesthetizing us! We've got to find where he is—quick!"

They hastened their search, feeling more and more sure that Xantra was close by. And not till then did Clee remember that he had a way to discover Xantra's location. Jim heard him curse under his breath; saw him put down the tabouret and take out his tobacco; and knew at once what he was about to do. He went close to Clee, to guard him with his chair against possible attack.

The face of Clee's wrist watch was glowing brightly; it took only a second to find with the package of tobacco a spot which cut the dial's unnatural glow. As they found it the skin on the two men's bodies prickled all over. The line from the dial to the package of

tobacco, if continued, would reach a spot on the floor not six feet away. And looking carefully there they could barely make out, in the bent hairs of the rug, a broken outline that might have been made by a prone figure.

As they prepared to jump they heard from that place a low sigh—and just before them appeared the distinct print of a human hand. Xantra was rising! And coincident with this a sudden banging at the door told them that the slaves at last had started to break in!

As one man the two Earthlings leaped on Xantra; he would have to be taken care of first. When they had fastened on his rising body they punched and pounded it furiously. Though their enemy was undoubtedly only half conscious, the sudden attack aroused him and he resisted vigorously. But then Clee made a lucky connection on what he felt to be his jaw, and the invisible form in their arms went limp.

"Get a rope—wire—anything to bind him with—quick!" yelled Clee. "I'll hold him!"

The pounding at the door was increasing ominously is Jim dashed over to the work-table. Rapidly he looked for something suitable, and in a few seconds was back with a length of stout wire which

they quickly wrapped around the ankles and wrists of the limp form Clee was holding. As the wire touched Xantra it gradually disappeared from their sight, but their fingers reassured them that he was tightly bound.

Then they were at the door, which, shivering and bending from the battering without, showed signs of giving in. With herculean efforts they dragged a heavy divan over and wedged it tightly against it; then added other furniture in a tight supporting pile. But the door, of some light metal, was not built to stand such a siege, and was buckling further inward with each blow being dealt it. More and more plainly the two men could hear the triumphant snarls and howls of the animal-men.

Frantically they ransacked the rooms looking for what they thought might be weapons, but found none. They looked at each other with dismay. It was only a question of time—minutes—before the slaves would break in. What could they do?

In that tense moment of indecision a low, weak voice reached their ears—a woman's voice, and one they remembered well.

"Vivian!" cried Clee, and ran to the alcove, from whence it had seemed to come. The girl's next words brought them understanding.

"Clee—Jim—it's Xantra! He's willing the slaves to break in! He's lying bound on the floor, but he's conscious!"

Clee ran to where he had left the invisible man, cursing himself under his breath for being an utter ass for not having guessed this. His groping fingers quickly found the squirming Xantra's neck; and he had begun to throttle him into unconsciousness when Vivian called out:

"No! Don't! That won't stop the slaves: they've already been given the order! We've got to make Xantra stop them! Here—drag him to the work-table! I've got something—"

Wondering what the girl was about, Clee relaxed his grip on the invisible man's neck and complied. But he suddenly understood—and Jim, too—when he saw coming through the air the pair of thought-sending helmets. He had a way of communicating with Xantra, of course! He saw the larger helmet lower to rest over the head he was still holding; then soft hands placed the other over his own.

As it settled down a great crash sounded in the other room: the door had given in. It was still held almost in place by the tightly-wedged furniture, but that would not hold the animal-men long.

"Hurry!" cried Jim. "I'll stand by the door!" And he was already on his way to it.

Clee saw the small panel on the table above; saw the knob on it turn. He caught Vivian's excited voice. "Tell him to order them to stop," she said; "or else—or else—"

"He dies!" finished Clee, viciously thumbing into the air where the invisible Xantra's neck was.

With all the intensity he could muster, Clee concentrated on one simple, strong thought. He hardly heard the triumphant cries of the slaves as they felt the blocking furniture give before their efforts; all his energy was being expended in the will to get his thought across.

"Tell those slaves to stop breaking in or you die!" he commanded.

The noises at the door continued. Either Xantra had not understood, or else he was stubborn. He repeated his command and threat, and still the crashing sounds came to his ears.

Desperate, he played his last card; and unconsciously his lips formed the words of his next mental command, so that it was understood by the breathlessly watching Vivian.

"Tell them to stop!" he willed. "No more air till you do!" And with the words his fingers closed tightly over the other's throat.

The sounds at the door continued; for a moment the invisible form between Clee's knees writhed violently—and then suddenly, almost magically, a silence fell over the whole room. Clee had forced his will on Xantra! He had made him stop the slaves!

And just in time.

Clee's fingers relaxed a little on the throat of the man beneath him. He turned and said: "Quick, Vivian—find that anaesthetic!" A moment later it was pressed in his hands. "Say when," he told the girl, and held it beneath the nose of the helpless man. Xantra's head at once fell back, and he heard Vivian telling him to stop. He pulled away the bottle, corked it and stood up.

"Well, that's that," he said.

For a moment he was silent. Only the noises made by Jim in strengthening the barricade at the door could be heard in the room. Then he said, earnestly:

"I wish I could see you, Vivian—right now; but that'll have to wait. I

guess...."

A low laugh came from the place where the girl was standing. A hand touched his arm, and he found himself being conducted into the alcove. Vivian laughed again; said, teasingly, "What a stupid expression on your face!" then commanded him to shut his eyes, and keep them shut. He felt something being attached to his wrists; heard a coarse hum that quickly rose in pitch until it passed the range of hearing. He was caught up in a surprising exhilaration; he heard the hum again, sliding down and down in pitch, while every atom in his body felt a sickening vibration that grew ever coarser. Then suddenly he felt normal; the things on his wrists were removed and Vivian told him he could open his eyes.

He did so. He had guessed what she had done, but he was surprised, nevertheless, to see the straight, slender, attractive girl who stood before him.

"You see, Xantra used this on me twice—the latter time to restore me, so I would be able to see him. I watched him carefully," the girl explained.

Clee gazed at Vivian in greatest confusion. Why—she was beautiful! He grew conscious of a growing need to say something, and

eventually the asinine thing that left his lips was:

"Yes—you—you aren't bad looking at all."

The girl turned away, blushing; and it was Jim who relieved Clee from his awkward situation. He came swinging happily through the alcove portal to suddenly stop in blank surprise. Clee had disappeared!

It did not take long to restore Jim to his normal self, and Vivian and Clee laughed at the great sigh of relief he unconsciously gave when he found himself able to see the girl who before had been only a disembodied Voice to him. Clee explained to Vivian what had happened to them down below, and she in turn told them how she and Xantra had come to be unconscious when they reached the control alcove.

"I found the anaesthetic by its smell soon after I went to Xantra," she explained. "I tried to conceal it in my dress, but Xantra saw me and tried to take it away; and in the struggle that followed I guess we both got anaesthetized. When I came to I saw you and Jim trying to hold back the slaves; and I could see Xantra on the floor, conscious—which you couldn't—and knew he was ordering the slaves on. So I told you, and—here we are!

"Do you want to see Xantra now?" she added.

Clee would never forget the sight of the bound figure that met his eyes on the floor on the large room. The clothes were odd; the figure was much that of a normal man, though the shoulders were more sloped and the head much larger; but it was the face, its expression, that held him.

Unhealthy, leprous-white was the skin, and there was not one hair, eyelash or eyebrow on the whole head. The closed eyes lay in deep caverns surrounded by a thousand fine wrinkles, which crisscrossed all over his face in every direction. The face and head were freakish—monstrous; and yet, somehow, over it rested an expression of infinite wisdom and calm. He lay bound and still and unconscious, at the mercy of men far below him intellectually, this man from another planet. Clee could not help but compare him to a stoical man staked out on an anthill to die....

"We'll have to keep him unconscious with the anaesthetic," he said at length; "he's too dangerous to monkey with. And that means we've got to find out how to run this ship—take it back ourselves."

"Leave that to me!" said Jim, feeling quite chipper. "Never saw anything yet I couldn't drive. Where is it—Cape Cod, you want to be

let off, Miss Gray?... O. K. This is my joy-ride, and I'll see that you're delivered at your front door."

More than two days later, again at night, the few look-outs on the lonely fishing craft off Cape Cod might have seen a pinpoint of cherry-red appear off the eastern horizon and make a wide arc up the heavens.

Its course was erratic, and it made sudden angles as it drew near the zenith. It glowed more and more brightly as it approached—until it disappeared from sight overhead.

For some minutes it was invisible; and then, suddenly, only a few hundred yards overhead, it emerged into view again, a great sphere of faintly glowing, cherry-red crystal. Rapidly—with dangerous speed—it descended, straight for the shore-line of Massachusetts Bay. And as it neared, its erratic side-to-side dashes increased, rather than diminished.

Down at a wide angle it came for the beach; then, when it was a hundred feet away, it sheared suddenly out to sea. There, only a few feet above the water, it darted to the side once more—and fell, and skipped along the water at dizzying speed.

But it did not go far. With its first contact with the water a great crack split the night air; and a little further, the ship split into hundreds of small pieces, all of which slid along the surface of the water until, their momentum lost, they came to a stop and slowly sank from view. A dozen figures were left threshing on the surface; but one by one they disappeared, till there were only four left. Then one of the four sank from sight....

Slowly but steadily the remaining three drew near to the welcoming shore, and at last stood dripping and tired on the sandy beach. For some time they stood there in silence, reviewing all the incredible adventure they had been through, as they gazed off across the water to the place where the slave ship had gone down.

But one of them—Jim—had something to say, and at last it came out.

"Well, I told you I'd drive you safely back!"

Clee, his arm around the waist of the exhausted Vivian, smiled and answered:

"But I don't see Vivian's front door."

"We're close enough!" Jim snorted. "After all, I did hit the Earth!"

96 The Revolt of the Machines by Nat Schachner and Arthur Leo Zagat

Something in the many-faceted mind of the master machine spurs it to diabolical revolt against the authority of its human masters.

Aproximate word count: 11,600

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Prologue

For five thousand years, since that nigh legendary figure Einstein wrote and thought in the far-off mists of time, the scientists endeavored to reduce life and the universe to terms of a mathematical formula. And they thought they had succeeded. Throughout the world, machines did the work of man, and the aristos, owners of the machines, played in soft idleness in their crystal and gold pleasure cities. Even the prolat hordes, relieved of all but an hour or two per day of toil, were content in their warrens—content with the crumbs of their masters.

Then the ice began to move, down from the north and up from the south. Slowly, inexorably, the jaws of the great vise closed, till all that was left of the wide empire of man was a narrow belt about the equator. Everywhere else was a vast tumbled waste of cold and glaring whiteness, a frozen desert. In the narrow habitable belt were compacted the teeming millions of earth's peoples.

In spite of the best efforts of the scientists among them, the crowding together of the myriads of earth's inhabitants brought in its train the inevitable plagues of famine and disease. Even with the most intensive methods of cultivation, even with the synthetic food factories running day and night, there could not be produced enough to sustain life in the hordes of prolats. And with the lowering of resistance and the lack of sufficient sanitary arrangements, disease began to spread with ever increasing rapidity and virulence.

The aristos trembled, for they were few, and the prolats many. Already were arising loud and disheveled orators, inciting the millions to arise against their masters. The aristos were few, but they were not helpless. In the blackness of a moonless, clouded night there was a whispering of many wings, and from dark shapes that loomed against the dark sky, great beams swept over the tented fields where the prolats lay huddled and sleeping. And when the red sun circled the ice-chained earth he found in his path heaps of dust

where on his last journey he had warmed the swarming millions.

The slaves thus ruthlessly destroyed could well be spared, for the machines did the work of the world, even to the personal care of the aristos' pampered bodies. Only for direction, and starting and stopping, was the brain and the hand of man required. Now that the inhabited portion of the terrestrial globe was so straitly circumscribed, radio power waves, television and radio-phone, rendered feasible the control of all the machines from one central station, built at the edge of the Northern Glacier. Here were brought the scant few of the prolats that had been spared, a pitiful four hundred men and women, and they were set to endless, thankless tasks.

I was one of those few; and Keston, my friend, who was set at the head of the force. I was second in command. For a decade we labored, whipped our fellows to their tasks, that the aristos might loll careless in the perfume and silks of their pleasure palaces, or riot in wild revel, to sink at last in sodden stupor. Sprawled thus they would lie, until the dressing machines we guided would lift them gently from their damasked couches, bathe them with warm and fragrant waters, clothe their soft carcasses in diaphanous, iridescent webs, and start them on a new day of debauchery.

But the slow vengeance of an inscrutable Omnipotence they mockingly denied overtook them at last, and I saw the rendering and payment of the long past due account.

As I entered the vast domed hall wherein all my waking hours were spent, the shrill whistle of an alarm signal told me that something had been wrong. Instinctively I looked toward the post of Abud. Three times in the past week had Keston or I been called upon for swift action to right some error of that dull witted prolat. On the oval visor-screen above the banked buttons of his station I saw the impending catastrophe. Two great freight planes, one bearing the glowing red star that told of its cargo of highly explosive terminite, were approaching head-on with lightning rapidity. The fool had them on the same level.

Abud was gaping now at the screen in paralyzed fright, with no idea of how to avoid the cataclysm. Just below I glimpsed the soaring towers of Antarcha. In a moment that gold and crystal pleasure city would be blasted to extinction, with all its sleeping thousands. Swift would be the vengeance of the aristos. Already I could see Abud and Keston and a hundred others melting in the fierce rays of the Death Bath!

But, even as my face blanched with the swift and terrible vision, the

little controller's car ground to a smoking stop at Abud's back. With one motion Keston's lithe form leaped from his seat and thrust aside the gaping prolat. His long white fingers darted deftly over the gleaming buttons. The red starred plane banked in a sudden swerve; the other dipped beneath. Distinct from the speaker beneath the screen came the whoosh of the riven air as the fliers flashed past, safe by a margin of scant feet. Another rippling play of the prolat chief's fingers and the planes were back on their proper courses. The whistle ceased its piercing alarm, left a throbbing stillness.

Chief Keston turned to the brute faced culprit. Cold contempt tautened the thin, ascetic features of his face. Somehow I was at his side: I must have been running across the wide floor of the Control Station while the crisis had flared and passed. In measured tones, each word a cutting whip-lash, came his well merited rebuke:

"Don't try me too far, Abud. Long before this I should have relieved you of your post, and ordered you to the Death Bath. I am derelict in my duty that I do not do so. By my weak leniency I imperil the lives of your comrades, and my own. It is your good fortune that a Council delegate has not been present at one of your exhibitions. But I dare not risk more. Let the warning whistle come from your station just once again and I shall report you as an incompetent. You know the law."

I looked to see the man cringe in abasement and contrition. But the heavy jaw thrust forth in truculent defiance; hate blazed forth from the deep-set eyes; the florid features were empurpled with rage. He made as if to reply, but turned away from the withering scorn in Keston's face.

"Ha, Meron, here at last." A warm smile greeted me. "I've been waiting for you impatiently."

"I'm an hour before my time," I replied, then continued, exasperatedly: "Chief, I hope this latest imbecility will convince you that you ought to turn him in. I know it hurts you to condemn a prolat to the Death Bath, but if you let him go on, his mistakes will bring us all to that end."

I glanced toward where a black portal broke the circle of switchboards, and shuddered. Behind that grim gate leaped and flared eternally the flame of the consuming Ray, the exhaust flue of the solar energy by which the machines were fed. Once I had seen a condemned man step through that aperture at the order of an aristo whom he had offended. For a moment his tortured body had glowed with a terrible golden light. Then—there was nothing.

My friend pressed my arm, calmingly. Again he smiled. "Come,

come, Meron, don't get all worked up. It isn't his fault. Why, look at him. Can't you see that he is a throwback, lost in this world of science and machines? Besides"—his voice dropped low—"it doesn't matter any more. Man-failure will no longer trouble the even tenor of the machines. I've finished."

A tremor of excitement seized me. "You've completed it at last? And it works?"

"It works. I tested it when the shifts changed at midnight; kept the oncoming force outside for five minutes. It works like a charm."

"Great! When will you tell the Council?"

"I've already sent the message off. You know how hard it is to get them away from their wines and their women—but they'll be here soon. But before they come, I've something to tell you. Let's go back behind the screens."

As we walked toward the huge tarpaulin-screened mass that bulked in the center of the great chamber, I glanced around the hall, at the thousand-foot circle of seated prolats. Two hundred men and women were there; two hundred more were sleeping in the dormitories. These were all that were left of the world's workers. Before each

operative rose the serried hundreds of pearl buttons, dim lit, clicking in and out under the busy fingers. Above each, an oval visor-screen with its flitting images brought across space the area the switches controlled. Every one of the ten score was watching his screen with taut attention, and listening to the voices of the machines there depicted—the metallic voices from the radio speakers broadcasting their needs.

The work was going on as it had gone on for ten years, with the omnipresent threat of the Death Bath whipping flagged, tired brains to dreary energy. The work kept going on till they dropped worn out at last in their tired seats. Only in Keston's brain, and in mine, flamed the new hope of release. Tomorrow the work would be done, forever. Tomorrow, we would be released, to take our places in the pleasure palaces. To loll at ease, breathing the sweet perfume of idleness, waited on by machines directed by a machine.

For, as we stood behind the heavy canvas folds that Keston had drawn aside, there towered, fifty feet above me, halfway to the arching roof, a machine that was the ultimate flowering of man's genius. Almost man-form it was—two tall metal cylinders supporting a larger, that soared aloft till far above it was topped by a many-faceted ball of transparent quartz. Again I had a fleeting, but vivid, impression of something baleful, threatening, about it. Small

wonder, though. For the largest cylinder, the trunk of the man-machine Keston had created, was covered thick with dangling arms. And the light of the xenon tube that flooded the screened space was reflected from the great glass head till it seemed that the thing was alive; that it was watching me till some unguarded moment would give it its chance.

A long moment we stood, going again over each detail of the thing, grown so familiar through long handling as it was slowly assembled. Then my friend's voice, low pitched as was its wont, dissipated the visions I was seeing. "Two hours ago, Meron, with none here but me to see, those arms were extended, each to its appointed station. And, as the sensitive cells in the head received the signals from the visor-screens and the radio-speakers the arms shot about the key-boards and pressed the proper buttons just as our men are doing now. The work of the world went on, without a falter, with only the master machine to direct it. Yet a year ago, when I first spoke to you of the idea, you told me it was impossible!"

"You have won," I responded; "you have taken the last step in the turning over of the functions of man to machines—the last step but one. Routine control, it is true, can now be exercised by this—those fellows out there are no longer necessary—but there will still be the unexpected, unforeseen emergencies that will require human

intelligence to meet and cope with them. You and I, I'm afraid, are still doomed to remain here and serve the machines."

Keston shook his head, while a little smile played over his sharp-featured face, and a glow of pride and triumph suffused his fine dark eyes. "Grumbling again, old carper. What would you say if I told you that I have solved even that problem? I have given my master machine intelligence!"

My wide-eyed, questioning stare must have conveyed my thought to him, for he laughed shortly, and said, "No, I've not gone insane."

"It was an accident," he went on with amazing calm. "My first idea was merely to build something that would reduce the necessary supervisory force to one or two humans. But, when I had almost completed my second experimental model, I found that I was out of the copper filaments necessary to wind a certain coil. I didn't want to wait till I could obtain more from the stores, and remembered that on the inside of the door to the Death Bath there was some fine screening that could be dispensed with. I used the wire from that. Whether the secret of life as well as of death lies in those waste rays from the sun, or whether some unknown element of the humans consumed in the flame was deposited on the screening in a sort of invisible coating, I do not know. But this I do know: when that

second model was finished, and the vitalizing current was turned on, things happened—queer things that could be explained only on the ground that the machine had intelligence."

He fell silent a moment, then his thin pale lips twisted in a wry smile. "You know, Meron, I was a little scared. The thing I had created seemed possessed of a virulent antagonism toward me. Look." He bared an arm and held it out. A livid weal ran clear around the fore-arm. "One of the tentacles I had given it whipped around my arm like a flash. If I had not cut off the current at once it might have squeezed through flesh and bone. The pressure was terrific."

I was about to speak, when from the screen nearest the entrance door a beam of green light darted out, vanished, came again. Once, twice, three times.

"Look, Chief, the signal. They're coming. The Council will soon be here."

"They're over-prompt. My message must have aroused their curiosity. But listen:

"I incorporated my new thought coil, as I called it, in the large

master machine. But I don't know just what will happen when the current flows through that. So I shunted it. The machine will work, routinely, without it. There is a button that will bring it into action. When I shall have taken the proper precautions I will switch it on, and then we shall see what happens."

We saw, sooner than Keston expected.

Again the green beam flashed out. The great portals slowly opened. Through them glided the three travel cars of the Supreme Council of the aristos.

It had been almost a year since I saw them, the Over Lords of the World, and I had forgotten their appearance. Sprawled on the glowing silks of their cushioned couches, eyes closed in languid boredom, they were like huge white slugs. Swollen to tremendous size by the indolent luxuriousness of their lives, the flesh that was not concealed by the bright hued web of their robes was pasty white, and bagged and folded where the shrunken muscles beneath refused support. Great pouches dropped beneath swollen eyelids. Full-lipped, sensual mouths and pendulous cheeks merged into the great fat rolls of their chins. I shuddered. These, these were the masters for whom we slaved!

As we bent low the gliding cars came to rest, and a warm redolence of sweet perfume came to me from the fans softly whirling in the canopies over the aristos' heads. Strains of music rose and fell, and ceased as a flat, tired voice breathed: "Rise, prolats."

I straightened up. The eyes of the Council were now opened, little pig's eyes almost lost in the flesh about them. They glinted with a cold, inhuman cruelty. I shuddered, and thought of the night of terror ten years before. And suddenly I was afraid, deathly afraid.

Ladnom Atuna, head of the Council, spoke again. "We have come at your petition. What is this matter so grave that it has led you to disturb us at our pleasures?"

Keston bowed low. "Your Excellency, I would not have presumed to intrude upon you for a small matter. I have so greatly ventured because I have at length solved the final step in the mechanization of the world. I have invented a master machine to operate the switchboards in this hall and replace the workers thereat."

The flabby faces of the aristos betrayed not the slightest interest, not the least surprise. Only Atuna spoke: "Interesting, if true. Can you prove your statement?"

Keston strode to the canvas screen and pulled a cord. The great canvas curtains rolled back. "Here is the machine, my Lords!" His face was lit with the glow of pride of achievement. His voice had lost its reverence. Rapidly he continued: "The head of this contrivance is a bank of photo and sono-electric cells, each facet focussed on one of the screens. Through a nerve-system of copper filaments any combination of lights and sounds will actuate the proper arm which will shoot out to the required bank of buttons and press the ones necessary to meet any particular demand. That is all the prolats are doing out there, and they make mistakes, while my master machine cannot. The—"

But Ladnom Atuna raised a languid hand. "Spare us these technical explanations. They bore us. All we desire to know is that the machine will do as you say."

The chief flushed, and gulped. His triumph was not meeting with the acclaim he had expected. But he bowed. "Very well. With your gracious permission I shall demonstrate its operation." Atuna nodded in acquiescence.

Keston's voice rang out in crisp command. "Attention, prolats. Cease working." The long circling row suddenly jerked around; their flying fingers halted their eternal dartings. "Quickly, down to the space in

front of the door to the Death Bath." A rush of hurried feet. These men and women were accustomed to instant, unquestioning obedience. "Absolute silence. Keep clear of the floor on peril of your lives."

The chief wheeled to the master machine and pressed a button. Instantly, the hundreds of dangling arms telescoped out, each to a button bank where a moment before a prolat had labored. And, with a weird simulation of life, the ten forked ends of each arm commenced a rattling pressing of the buttons. Rapidly, purposefully, the metallic fingers moved over the key-boards, and on the screens we could see that the machines all over the world were continuing on their even course. Not the slightest change in their working betrayed the fact that they were now being directed by a machine instead of human beings. A great surge of admiration swept me at the marvelous accomplishment of my friend.

Not so the aristos. Expressionless, they watched as the maze of stretching tentacles vibrated through the crowded air. Yet not quite expressionless. I thought I could sense in the covert glances they cast at one another a crafty weighing of the implications of this machine; a question asked and answered; a decision made. Then their spokesman turned languidly to the waiting, triumphant figure of Keston.

"Evidently your claims are proven. This means that the force of prolat operatives are no longer necessary."

"Yes, Your Excellency. They may now be released to a well earned reward."

The aristo ignored the interruption. "We take it that only two will now be required to operate this Control Station, to supply the last modicum of human intelligence required to meet unforeseen emergencies."

I saw that Keston was about to interrupt once more, to tell the Council of the thought coil, the most unbelievable part of the miracle he had wrought. But something seemed to warn me that he should not speak. Standing behind him I nudged him, while I myself replied: "Yes, Your Excellency." The chief flung me a startled look, but did not correct me.

From the packed crowd of prolats at the other end of the hall I could hear a murmuring. While I could not make out the words, the very tones told me that in the hearts of those weary slaves new hope was rising, the same hope that glowed in Keston's face. But I was oppressed by an unreasoning fear.

Atuna was still talking, in his cold, unemotional monotone. "This being so, hear now our decision. Keston and Meron, you will remain here to meet all emergencies. You others, your function is done. You have done your work well, you are now no longer needed to control the machines. Therefore,"—he paused, and my heart almost stopped—"therefore, being no longer of value, you will be disposed of."

A click sounded loud through the stunned silence. Beyond the white crowd the huge black portal slid slowly open. A shimmering radiance of glowing vapors blazed from the space beyond.

"Prolats, file singly into the Death Bath!" Atuna raised his voice only slightly with the command. I glanced at Keston. He was livid with fury.

Incredible as it may seem, so ingrained was the habit of obedience to the aristos in the prolats that not even a murmur of protest came from the condemned beings. The nearest man to the flaming death stepped out into the void. His doomed body flared, then vanished. The next moved to his turn.

But suddenly a great shout rang out.

"Stop!"

It was Keston's voice, but so changed, so packed with fury and outrage, that I scarcely recognized it.

His spare, tall form was drawn tensely straight as he shook a clenched fist at the Council. He was quivering with anger, and his eyes blazed.

"Aristos, you do wrong! These men have served you faithfully and well. I demand for them the reward they have earned—rest and leisure, and the pleasures that for ten years they have seen you enjoy while they worked here for you. They have worked for you, I say, and now that I have released them you would destroy them. Aristos, I demand justice!"

For the first time I saw expression on the flaccid faces of the Council—surprise and astonishment that a prolat should dare dispute an aristo command. Then a sneer twisted Atuna's countenance.

"What is this? Who are you to demand anything from us? We spared these prolats because we needed them: we need them no longer, hence they must die. What madness has seized you? Reward! Justice! For prolats! As well say we should reward the stone walls of our houses; dispense justice to the machines. Proceed, prolats!"

Keston made as if to spring for the aristo's throat. I put out a hand to stop him. An invisible shield of death rays rimmed the platforms the Council used. It was suicide! But suddenly he turned and sprang to the master machine. He grasped a switch lever and threw it down.

A long tentacle left its keys and swished menacingly through the air. "Meron, prolats, under the key-boards!" came Keston's shout. I dived to obey. Steel fingers clutched my jerkin and tore it loose as I landed with a thud against the wall. Keston thumped alongside of me. He was breathing heavily and his face was deathly pale.

"Look!" he gasped.

Out on the floor was a shambles. I saw one snakelike arm whip around the stout form of Atuna, then tighten. A shriek of agony rang through the hall. Another tentacle curled about the couch of a second aristo, pinning the occupant to it. Then couch and all were swung a hundred feet in the air to be crashed down with terrific force on the stone floor. Two arms seized the third at the same time.…

"Too sluggish to get out of the way in time, damn them!" I heard Keston mutter. True, but not all the prolats had moved fast enough at

the warning shout. Cowering under the saving key-boards, shrinking from the metallic arms not quite long enough to reach them, I could count only a score. The others—but what use to describe the slaughter out there! I see it in nightmares too often.

A thunder from the speakers grew till it drowned out the agonized shrieks in the great hall. On the screens horror flared. All over the world, it appeared, the machines had gone mad. I saw Antarcha crash as a dozen air freighters plunged through the crystal towers. I saw a huge dredge strip the roof from a great playhouse, and smash the startled crowd within with stones it plucked from an embankment. I saw untenanted land cars shooting wild through packed streets. Great ponderous tractors left the fields and moved in ordered array on the panic-stricken cities. Methodically they pursued the fleeing aristos, and crushed them beneath their tread like scurrying ants.

I realized that the scraping of the tentacles reaching for us had ceased, that the arms had all returned to the button banks. Then it dawned on me that Keston's master machine was directing all the destruction I was watching, that the intelligence he had given it was being used to divert the machines from their regular tasks to—conquer the world. "You sure started something, Keston," I said.

"Yes," he gasped, white-faced, "something that I should have expected when that model machine went for me. Do you understand? I've given the machines intelligence, created a new race, and they are trying to wipe out the humans; conquer the world for themselves. The possibility flashed on me when I was half-mad with rage and disappointment at the callous cruelty of the aristo Council. I threw that switch with the thought that it would be far better for all of us to be wiped out. But now, I don't know. After all, they are men, like ourselves, and it hurts to see our own race annihilated. If only I can get to that switch."

He started to push out from under the scant shelter, but an alert tentacle hissed through the air in a swift stab at him, and he dodged back, hopelessly.

"Don't be a damn fool," I snapped at him. "Forget that mushy sentimentality. Even if you save the aristos, we're due for extinction just the same. Better that the whole human race be wiped out together."

Then a thought struck me. "Maybe we have a chance to get out of this ourselves."

"Impossible. Where could we hide from the machines?" He waved a

hand at the screens. "Look."

"The Glacier, man, the Glacier!" He started. "There are no machines out there. If we can get to the ice we are safe."

"But the aircraft will find us."

"They won't know we're there. There are no microphones or radio-eyes in the wastes."

A rough voice came from the cowering files behind us. "Hey, Keston, let's get a move on. You're the smart guy around here: get us out of this mess you've started."

It was Abud. When so many better prolats had perished, he was alive and whole.

We got out, crawling under the key-boards till we could make a dash for the door. We emerged into a world ablaze with the light of many fires, and reverberating with the far off crashing of destruction. To the right we could see the tumbled remains of what a short hour before had been our barracks. Two digging machines were still ponderously moving about among the ruins, pounding down their heavy buckets methodically, reducing the concrete structure to a

horrible dead level. Ten score prolats had been sleeping there when I left.

As we rushed into the open, the machines turned and made for us; but they had not been built for speed, and we easily outdistanced them. The rest of that day will always remain a dim haze to me. I can remember running, running, Abud's broad form always in the lead. I can remember long minutes of trembling under tangled underbrush, while from above sounded the burring of an air machine searching ceaselessly for us. I can remember seeing at last the tall white ramparts of the Glacier. Then a blackness swallowed me up, hands tugged at me, and I knew no more....

The great white waste of hummocky ice dazzled under the blinding sun. My eyes were hurting terribly. There was a great void in my stomach. For two days I had not eaten.

Keston, tottering weakly at my side, was in an even worse state. His trembling hand could scarcely hold the primitive bone-tipped spear. God knows I had difficulty enough with mine.

Yet, tired, hungry, shivering as we were, we forced our dragging feet along, searching the interminable expanse for sign of polar bear or the wild white dogs that hunted in packs. We had to find flesh—any

kind—to feed our shriveled stomachs—or go under.

Keston uttered a weak shout. I looked. From behind a frozen hummock a great white bear padded. He saw us, sniffed the air a moment, then turned contemptuously away. He must have sensed our weakness.

Almost crying in his eagerness, Keston raised his spear and cast it with what strength he had at the animal that meant food and warmth for our bodies.

The weapon described a slow arc, and caught the shaggy bear flush in the shoulder. But there had been no force behind the throw. The sharpened bone tip stuck in the flesh, quivered a bit, and dropped harmlessly to the ice.

Aroused, the creature whirled about. We caught a glimpse of small, vindictive eyes. Then, with a roar, it made for us.

"Look out!" I cried. Keston started to run, but I knew he could not match the wounded animal in speed. I threw my futile spear, but the bear shook it off as though it were a pin prick, and would not be diverted from his prey.

I ran after, shouting for help. Then Keston stumbled and went down in a sprawl on the rough gray ice. The bear was almost on him and there was nothing I could do.

When the figure of a man darted from behind a sheltering mound. It was Abud, swathed in warm white furs, brawny of body, strong, well fed, heavy jowled. He swung easily a long spear, far heavier than ours, and pointed with keen barbs.

He stopped short at the sight of us, and his brutal features contorted in merriment. The desperate plight of my friend seemed to afford him infinite amusement. Nor did he make any move to help.

I shouted to him. "Quick, kill it before it's too late!"

"So it is Abud you turn to now," he sneered heavily. "Abud, whom you thought deserving of the Death Bath not so long ago. No, my fine friends, let me see you help yourselves, you two who thought you were king pins down in the valley. Men? Bah! Weaklings, that's all you are!"

I ran blindly over the uneven ice, unarmed, some crazy notion in my mind of tackling the brute with bare fists, to drag him off my friend. Abud shouted with laughter, leaning on his spear.

For some strange animal reason, the mocking laughter enraged the bear. He had almost reached the motionless figure of Keston when he swerved suddenly, and made for Abud.

The ghastly merriment froze on the heavy jowled man. Like lightning he lifted his heavy lance, and drove it with a powerful arm squarely into the breast of the advancing brute. It sank a full foot into the blubbery flesh, and, while the stricken bear clawed vainly at the wound and sought to push himself along toward the man, Abud held the spear firmly as in a vise, so that the animal literally impaled itself. With a gush of blood, it sank motionless to the ground.

Abud plucked the spear away with a dexterous twist.

Keston was feebly groping to his feet. I was torn between joy at his deliverance and rage at the inhuman callousness of Abud.

The latter grinned at us hatefully.

"You see what poor weakling creatures you are," he jeered. "Good for nothing but to push a lot of senseless buttons. Down there you were the bosses, the ones to look upon me as dirt. Here, on the ice, where it takes guts to get along, I am the boss. I let you live on my scraps and leavings, simply because it tickled me to see you cringe

and beg. But I am growing weary of that sport. Henceforth you keep away from my camp. Don't let me catch you prowling around, d'you hear? Let's see how long you'll last on the ice!"

"This animal is mine." He prodded the carcass. "I killed it. I'll make the prolats skin and, cut it up for me. Ho-ho, how they cringe and obey me—Abud, the dull one! Ho-ho!"

On this he strode away, still laughing thunderously.

I looked to Keston in blank dismay. What was to be our fate now, but death by cold and slow starvation!

Three-months had passed since we had escaped to the ice from the dreadful machines—a score of us. For a while it seemed that we had fled in vain. We were not fit to cope with the raw essentials of life: it was uncounted centuries since man fought nature bare handed. So we huddled together for warmth, and starved. Even Keston's keen brain was helpless in this waste of ice, without tools, without machines.

When it was that Abud arose to take command. He, dull brute that he was amid the complexities of our civilization, fairly reveled in this primitive combat with hunger and cold. He was an anachronism in

our midst, a throwback to our early forebears.

It did not take him long to fashion cunning nooses and traps to catch the few beasts that roamed the ice. Once he pounced upon a wolf-like creature, and strangled it with bare hands. He fashioned with apt fingers spears and barbs of bone, curved knives from shin bones, and skinned the heavy fur pelts and made them into garments.

No wonder the prolats in their helplessness looked to him as their leader. Keston and I were thrust aside. But Abud did not forget. His slow witted mind harbored deadly rancor for former days, when we were in command. He remembered our contempt for his slow dull processes; for the many errors he was guilty of. By a queer quirk, the very fact that Keston had saved him from the Death Bath on several occasions but fed the flames of his hatred. Perhaps that was an ancient human trait, too.

So he set himself to twit and humiliate us. His jibes were heavy handed and gross. He refused to let us eat at the communal mess, but forced us to wait until all were through, when he tossed us a few scraps as though we were dogs.

Many times I started up in hot rage, ready to match my softened muscles against his brawn. But always Keston caught me in time and

whispered patience. Some plan was taking shape in his mind, I could see, so I stopped short, and was content to bide my time.

Now we were through, discarded, as a last brutal gesture. What was there to be done now?

In utter silence I looked at Keston. To my great surprise he did not seem downcast. Quite the contrary. His eyes were sparkling, once more alive with the red fire. The weariness was gone from him; there was energy, decision stamped on his finely cut features.

"Now is our time to act," he said. "I've been hesitating too long."

"What are you talking about?"

"Abud forced my hand," Keston explained. "You didn't think we were going to live here in this fashion the rest of our lives? I'd rather die now than have such a future staring me in the face. No, we're going down into the valley to fight the machines."

I stared at him aghast. "Man, you're crazy. They'd crush us in a minute!"

"Maybe," he said unconcernedly. "But we have no time to lose. Abud will be back with the prolats, and we'll have to clear out before

then. Quick—cut off a few chunks of meat. We'll need them."

"But Abud will kill us when he finds out what's been done."

"And we'll starve if we don't."

Which was an unanswerable argument. So with our bone knives we hacked off gobs of the still warm flesh, covered with great layers of fat.

Looking up from my task, I saw black figures coming toward us from the direction of the camp. They quickened into a run even as I noticed them—Abud and the prolats.

"Quick, Keston," I cried, "they're coming."

Keston glanced around and started to run. I followed as fast as I could.

"They'll catch us," I panted. "Where can we hide?"

"Down in the valley."

"But the machines will get us then."

"Save your breath and follow me. I know a place."

We were racing along as fast as our weakened legs could carry us, toward the edge of the Glacier. I looked back to see Abud, his brute face distorted with rage, gaining rapidly on us. The other prolats were being outdistanced.

Abud shouted threateningly for us to stop, but that only made us re-double our efforts. I knew he would kill us if he caught up with us. He had his spear and we were without ours.

The steep terminus of the great Northern Glacier hove into view. Far below was the broad fertile habitable belt, stretching as far as the eye could see. A lump rose in my throat as I ran. It was our earth, our heritage down there—and here we were, fleeing for our lives, dispossessed by bits of metal and quartz, machines that we had fashioned.

Hovering in the air, on a level with us, were scout planes, vigilant guardians of the frontier.

Once a prolat had become crazed by the eternal ice and cold, and had ventured down the side of the Glacier, to reach the warm lands his thin blood hungered for. As soon as he had painfully clambered

to the bottom, within the area of the televisors, a plane had swooped and crushed him, while we, lining the edge, had witnessed the horror helplessly.

Yet Keston ran on confidently. Abud was just a little way behind, bellowing exultantly, when we came to the jumping-off place. He was sure he had us now.

Keston slid from view. It was sheer suicide to go down there, I knew; yet, to remain where I was, meant certain death. Abud's spear was already poised to thrust. There was only one thing to do, and I did it. I threw myself over the rim, just where Keston had disappeared.

I landed with a thud on a narrow ledge of ice. The surface was glassy smooth, and I started slipping straight toward the outer edge, a sheer drop of a thousand feet to the valley below. I strove to recover my balance, but only accelerated my progress. Another moment and I would have plunged into the abyss, but a hand reached out and grabbed me just in time. It was Keston.

"Hold tight and follow me," he whispered urgently, "we've no time to lose. The master machine is seeing us now in the visor screen, and will act."

I had an impulse to turn back, but Abud's face was leering down at us.

"I'll get you for this!" he screamed, and let himself down heavily over the ledge.

Keston edged his way along the treacherous trail, I after him. It was ticklish work. A misstep, and there would be nothing to break our fall.

I heard a siren sound, then another; and another. I wasted a precious moment to look up. A scout plane was diving for us, on a terrific slant. The air was black with aircraft converging on us. The master machine had seen us! I sensed utter malevolence in the speed of these senseless metals, thrown at us by the thing my friend had created.

But there was no time for thought. In desperate haste, we inched our way along. Abud had seen the peril, too, and lost all his truculence in the face of the greater danger. He clawed after us, intent only on reaching whatever safety we were heading for.

I could hear the zoom of the great wings when the path took a sudden turn and we catapulted headlong into a black cavern

thrusting into the ice.

We were not an instant too soon. For a giant shape swooped by our covert with a terrifying swoosh, inches away from Abud's leg as he dived after us, and it was followed by a grinding crash. The machine had been directed too close to the ice and had smashed into bits.

We crouched there a moment, panting, struggling to regain our wind. Keston had regained the air of quiet power he had once possessed. Quietly he spoke to our enemy.

"Listen to me, Abud. Up there on the ice, you played the bully, relying on your brute strength. Here, however, we're up against the machines, and your intelligence is of too low an order to compete with them. You need my brains now. If you expect to escape from them, and live, you'll have to do exactly as I say. I'm boss, do you understand?"

I expected a roar of rage at Keston's calm assertion, and quietly got in back of Abud ready to jump him if he made a threatening move.

But the big brute was a creature of abject terror, staring out with fear-haunted eyes. Quite humbly he replied: "You are right. You are the only one who can beat the machines. I'll follow you in

everything."

"Very well, then. This cave leads through a series of tunnels down through the ice to the bottom of the valley. I explored it nights when you were all sleeping."

I looked at him in amazement. I had not known anything about his midnight wanderings. He saw my glance.

"I'm sorry, Meron, but I thought it wiser to say nothing of my plans, even to you, until they had matured. Let us go."

Outside hundreds of craft were hurtling across the opening. Escape that way was clearly impossible.

"No doubt the master machine is hurrying over high explosives to blast us out," Keston said indifferently; "but we won't be here."

We started down a tortuous decline, crawling on hands and knees. We had not progressed very far when we heard a thud and a roar behind us, followed by a series of crashes.

"Just as I thought. The master machine is firing terminite into the cavern. What a high degree of intelligence that thing has! Too bad we'll have to smash it." He sighed. I verily believe he hated to

destroy this brain child of his. Yet just how he was going to do it, I did not know.

There passed hours of weary, tortured stumblings, and slitherings, and sudden falls—down, always down, interminably. A pale glimmering showed us the way, a dim shining through the icy walls.

At last, faint with toil, bleeding and torn from glass-sharp splinters, we reached a level chamber, vaulted, surprisingly, with solid rock. It was good to see something of the earth again, something that was not that deadly, all-embracing ice. At the far end lay a blinding patch. I blinked.

"Sunlight!" I shouted joyously.

"Yes," Keston answered quietly. "That opening leads directly into the valley on our land."

Abud roused himself from the unreasoning dread he had been in. It was the first time he had spoken.

"Let us get out of here. I feel as though I'm in a tomb."

"Are you mad?" Keston said sharply. "The visors would pick you up at once. You wouldn't last very long."

Abud stopped suddenly. There was a plaintive, helpless note to him. "But we can't stay here forever. We'd starve, or die of cold. Isn't there some way to get back to the top of the Glacier?"

"No—only the way we came. And that's been blocked with terminite."

"Then what are we going to do? You've led us into a slow death, you with your boasted brains!"

"That remains to be seen," was the calm retort. "In the meantime, we're hungry. Let us eat."

And the amazing man drew out of his torn flapping furs the gobs of meat he had cut from the dead bear. I had quite forgotten them. With a glad cry, I too reached into my garments and brought out my supply.

Abud's eyes glinted evilly. His hand stole stealthily to the bone knife in its skin sheath. His spear had been dropped long before.

"None of that," Keston said sharply. "We'll all share equally, even though you have no food. But if you try to hog it all, or use force, you'll die as well as we. There's only enough for a meal or two; and

then what will you do?"

Abud saw that. He needed Keston's brains. His eyes dropped, and he mumbled something about our misunderstanding his gesture. We let it go at that. We had to. He could have killed us both if he wished.

So we divided our food with painstaking fairness. How we gorged on the raw red flesh and thick greasy fat! Food that would have disgusted us when we lived and worked in the Central Station, now was ambrosia to our sharpened appetites. When not the least scrap was left, and we had slaked our thirst with chunks of ice from the cavern floor, I spoke.

"What is that plan you spoke of, Keston, for reconquering the earth from the machines?"

Abud looked up abruptly at my question, and it seemed to me that a crafty smile glinted in the small pig eyes.

Keston hesitated a moment before he spoke.

"I confess my plans have been materially impeded by this sudden predicament we find ourselves in, thanks to our good friend here." He ironically indicated Abud.

The big prolat merely grunted.

"However," Keston continued, "I'll have to make the best of circumstances, without the aid of certain materials that I had expected to assemble.

"The idea is a simple one. You've noted no doubt how the terminus of the Glacier opposite the Central Control Station overhangs. The brow, over a thousand feet up, extends out at least a hundred feet beyond the base."

I nodded assent, though Abud seemed startled. Many times had Keston and I speculated on the danger of an avalanche at this point, and wondered why the Station had been built in such an exposed place. Once indeed we had ventured to suggest to the aristo Council the advisability of removing the Central Control to some other point, but the cold silence that greeted our diffident advice deterred us from further pursuit of the subject.

"Now, you know as well as I," Keston resumed, "that a glacier is merely a huge river of ice, and, though solid, partakes of some of the qualities of freely flowing water. As a matter of fact, glaciers do flow, because the tremendous pressure at the bottom lowers the melting point of ice to such a degree that the ice actually liquefies,

and flows along."

I followed him eagerly in these elementary statements, trying to glimpse what he was driving at, but Abud's brute features were fixed in a blank stare.

"This glacier does move. We've measured it—a matter of an inch or two a day. If, however,"—Keston's voice took on a deeper note—"we can manage to hasten that process, the Glacier will overwhelm the countryside."

He paused, and that gave me a chance to interpose some objections.

"But hold on a moment. In the first place it is an absolute impossibility with the means at our command, or even with every appliance, to melt the face of the whole Northern Glacier. In the second place, even if we could, the whole world would be overwhelmed, and then where would we be?"

Keston looked at me a trifle scornfully. "Who said we were going to melt the entire glacier? Remember I spoke only of the place of the overhang. Set that in motion, and we don't have to worry about the problem any further."

"Why not?" I inquired incredulously. "Suppose you do wipe out all the machines in this particular vicinity, won't there be tremendous numbers left all through the Equatorial Belt?"

"Of course," he explained patiently, "and what if they are? What are all these machines but inanimate mechanisms, things of metal and rubber and quartz. What makes them the monsters they have become?"

I smote my forehead in anger. "What a fool! Now I see it. It's the master machine you're after."

"Exactly," he smilingly agreed. "Overwhelm, destroy this devilish creature of mine, with its unhuman intelligence, and the machines are what they were before: merely obedient slaves."

I pondered that a moment. "And how, may I ask, are you going to force this old Glacier to move."

His face clouded. "That's the trouble. Up on the ice I was working on that problem, and had managed secretly to rig up a contrivance that would have done the trick. But we can't go back for it. That way is blocked." He mused, half to himself. "If only we could lay our hands on a solar disintegrating machine, the difficulty would be solved."

At the name, Abud's face, that had been a study in blank incomprehension, lit up.

"Solar disintegrating machine?" he inquired. "Why there's one stationed not more than a few hundred yards away from here. This area, 2-RX, was my sector, you know."

"Of course, of course," shouted Keston, "I'd quite forgotten. The very thing. You're not half bad, Abud, if you'd only stop trying to rely on brute strength instead of brains," he concluded.

Abud said nothing, but I noticed a quick flash of hatred that passed in an instant, leaving a blank countenance. I thought to myself, "You'll bear watching, my fine fellow. I don't trust you at all."

Keston was speaking. "We'll have to wait until nightfall. The master machine won't expect us down at the base, so I'm positive the search-rays won't be focussed along the ground. We'll sneak to the machine, smash its visor and radio units, so it won't give the alarm, and haul it back. Then I'll show you what's next to be done."

Night came at last, leaden footed, though we were burning with impatience. Very softly we crawled out of the cave, three shadows. Fortunately there was no moon. The great Glacier loomed ominously

above us, dimly white. High overhead hovered the green signal lights of the machine planes, their search rays focussed in blinding glares on the rim of the upper ice.

It did not take us long to find the dark bulk of the disintegrator. It was a squat cylinder, for all the world like a huge boiler. At one end there up-ended a periscope arrangement which broadened out to a funnel. In the funnel was a very powerful lens, cut to special measurements. The light of the sun, or any light, for that matter, was concentrated through the lens onto a series of photo-electric cells, composed of an alloy of selenium and the far more delicate element, illinium. A high tension current was there created, of such powerful intensity that it disintegrated the atoms of every element except osmium and indium into their constituent electrons. Consequently the interior as well as the long slit nozzle orifice at the other end, were made of these resistant metals.

Through a special process the tremendously powerful current was forced through the wide-angled nozzle in a spreading thin plate ray that sheared through earth and rock and metals as if they were butter.

Such was the machine we were after.

It was but the work of a few seconds to smash the delicate television

and sono-boxes placed on the top of every machine. Now we were sure no warning could be given the master machine as it sat in its metallic cunning at the control board, ceaselessly receiving its messages from the area apparatus focussed above it.

Quietly, very quietly, we trundled the precious instrument along on its wheel base. The green lights dotted the sky above: the search-rays were firmly set on the rim.

At last, without any untoward alarm, we reached the welcome shelter of the base, but not, as I had expected, back to our tunnel. On the contrary, Keston, who had directed the party, had led us almost a quarter mile away. I looked up again, and understood.

The great overhang of the Glacier was directly above us!

Without a word, with hardly a sound, we trundled the disintegrator into a natural niche we found in the icy surface. It was almost completely hidden; only the funnel with its lens protruded into the open. The nozzle orifice was pointing directly at the interior of the ice pack.

"Now everything is set properly," Keston remarked with satisfaction as he straightened up from adjusting the various controls on the

machine. "When the first ray of the morning sun strikes the lens, the disintegrator will start working. It will shear through a layer of ice over a radius of at least a mile. That huge crevasse, coupled with the terrific heat and the pressure from the mountain of ice above, will start the whole Glacier moving, or I'll be very much mistaken."

"Come, let us get back to our shelter before the alarm is given."

As he started to move, a dark bulk loomed ominously in front of us —Abud. His voice was harsh, forbidding.

"Do you mean to say nothing further is to be done here—that the disintegrator will work without any attention?"

"That is just what I said," Keston replied, somewhat surprised. "Step aside, Abud, and let us go. It is dangerous to remain here."

But Abud made no move to comply. Instead he thrust back his great shaggy head and gave vent to a resounding laugh.

"Ho-ho, my fine friends! So you were the brainy ones, eh? And Abud, the obedient dull-wit again? How nicely you've been fooled! I waited until you accommodatingly evolved the plan to reconquer the world, and put it into effect.

"Now that you've done so, I've no further need for you." The voice that heavily tried to be mocking, now snarled. "You poor fools, don't you know that with you out of the way, I, Abud, will be the Lord of the World. Those prolats up there know better than to disobey me."

"Do you mean you intend to kill us?" Keston asked incredulously.

"So you've actually grasped the idea!" was the sarcastic retort.

Meanwhile I was gradually edging to the side, my hand reaching for the bone knife in my bosom.

Abud saw my movement. "No, you don't!" he roared, and sprang for me, his long gleaming knife uplifted. I tugged desperately at my weapon, but it was entangled in the ragged furs. In a moment he was on top of me. Involuntarily I raised my arm to ward off the threatened blow, raging despair in my heart.

The point fell, but Keston struck at the savage arm with all his might, deflecting the blade just in time. It seared my shoulder like a red hot iron, and in the next instant all three of us were a rolling, kicking, snarling trio of animals. We fought desperately in the dark. There were no rules of the game. Biting, gouging, kicking—everything went.

Keston and I, weakened as we were from long starvation and the biting cold, were no match for our powerful, huge-muscled opponent, well clad and well nourished as he was. Though we fought with the strength of despair, a violent blow from his huge fist knocked Keston out of the fight. Hairy fingers grasped my throat. "I'll break your neck for you," he snarled, and his hands tightened. I struggled weakly, but I was helpless. I could just see his hateful face grinning at my contortions.

I was passing out—slowly, horribly. Keston was still motionless. Colored lights danced before my eyes, little spots that flared and died out in crashing blackness. Then the whole world leaped into a flaming white, so that my eyeballs hurt. In the dim recesses of my pain-swept mind I thought that strangulation must end like this. The brightness held dazzlingly.

But suddenly a fiercer pain swept into my consciousness—the pain of gasping breath forcing air through a tortured gullet into suffocating lungs.

I struggled up into the fierce illumination. From a sitting position I saw Abud, now clearly visible as in midday, craning his head way back. I looked, too—and, in spite of my stabbing gasps for air, jumped to my feet. The search-rays from the scout planes were

focussed directly on us!

I knew what that meant. The sight of us was even then being cast upon the 2-RX visor-screen in the Central Control Station. The devilish master machine was even then manipulating the proper buttons. We had not a second to lose!

My strangled throat hurt horribly, but I managed a hoarse yell, "Run!" and I tottered to where Keston yet lay, bathed in the deadly illumination, unmoving.

There was a snarl of animal fear from Abud, and he started to run, wildly, with never a backward glance at us.

Even in my own fear, expecting each instant the crash of terminite about me, I managed to hurl a last word at the fleeing figure. "Coward!" That relieved my feelings considerably.

I tottered over and tugged at Keston. He was limp. I looked up. Hundreds of planes were converging overhead; the night was a criss-cross of stabbing search-rays. I lifted my friend and slung him across my shoulder. Every exertion, every move, was accompanied by excruciating agony, but I persevered. Abud was already halfway to the tunnel, running like mad.

Then, what I had dreaded, happened. There came a swoosh through the night, a dull thud, a blinding flash and roar that paled the search-rays into insignificance. The first terminite bomb had been dropped!

For a moment the landscape was filled with flying rocks and huge chunks of ice. When the great clouds of violently upthrown earth had settled, there was no sign of Abud. He had been directly in the path of the explosion!

Staggering under my load, I headed as close to the ice pack as I could. There was no safety out in the open. I groaned heavily past the disintegrator, whose very existence I had forgotten in the crash of events.

A sizzling hum, a thin eddy of steam, halted me in my tracks. I stared. The machine was working! Even as I watched, a great wedge was momentarily being driven further and further into the ice—a great fan-shaped wedge. Clouds of steam billowed out, growing thicker and heavier. A rushing stream of unleashed water was lapping at my feet.

I was bewildered, frankly so. What had started the disintegrator in the dead of night? "Of course!" I shouted exultantly to the limp body on my shoulder.

For a search-ray was fixed steadily on the funnel. There it was. From that blinding light the machine was getting the energy it needed. If only the visor did not disclose that little bit of metal to the unwinking master machine! I looked again and took heart. It was almost undistinguishable against the dazzling blur of ice in the fierce white light. If those rays held, the salvation of the world was assured!

There was only one way to do it. I shrank at my own thoughts, yet there was no alternative: it must be done. I was hidden from the rays under a projection of ice, terminite bombs were dropping methodically over a rapidly devastated sector with methodical regularity. Sooner or later the master machine would feel that we were exterminated, and the search-rays switched off. That would mean that the disintegrator would cease working, and the whole plan fall through. In the morning light, the sector signalling apparatus, at the first sign of renewed activity, would give warning, and the unhuman thing of metal at the controls would discover and wreck our last hope.

No, I must walk boldly into the bombed area and discover myself as alive in the visors of the planes and make them continue to bomb and throw their search-rays on the scarred plain. That meant the disintegrator would receive the vital light.

But how about Keston? I couldn't leave him there on the ground, motionless, while I deserted him. Nor could I take him with me. I was prepared to take my chances with almost certain death, but I could not trifle with his life so. I was in an agony of indecision.

Just then the form on my aching shoulder stirred, sighed, struggled a bit, and suddenly slid down to a standing position. Keston swayed unsteadily a moment, straightened, looked about him in amazement.

"What's happening here?" he demanded.

"Why, you old war horse," I shouted in my relief, "I thought you were out of the picture completely!"

"Not me," he answered indignantly. "I'm all right. But you haven't answered my question."

A terminite bomb exploded not so far away from where we stood. I ducked involuntarily, Keston doing likewise.

"There's the answer," I grinned, "and a rather neat one, too. But I'll explain."

In a few words I sketched what had happened, and showed him the disintegrator spreading its deadly waves of destruction. By now

there was a torrent enveloping us up to our knees. We would have to move soon, or be drowned in the slowly rising water.

Then, hesitatingly, I told him of my scheme to keep the search-rays in action. His lean face sobered, but he nodded his head bravely. "Of course, that is the only way to keep them at it. You and I will start at once, in separate directions, so that if they get one, the other will continue to draw the search-rays down on the plain, and into the disintegrator."

"Not you, Keston," I dissented in alarm. "Your life is too valuable. Your brain and skill will be needed to remodel the world and make it habitable for the few prolats that are left, after the machines are wiped out."

"You're just as valuable a man as I am," he lied affectionately. "No, my mind is made up. We chance this together." And to all my pleadings he was obdurate, insisting that we each take an equal risk.

I gave in at last, with a little choke in my throat. We shook hands with a steady grip, and walked out into the glare of light, on divergent paths. Would I ever see my friend again?

There was a pause of seconds as I walked on and on; came then an

earth-shattering crash that flung me to the ground. The visors had caught the picture of me! I picked myself up, bruised and sore, but otherwise unharmed. I started to run.

The sky was a blaze of zooming planes that hurled destruction on the land below. Far off could be heard the rumbling roar of hurrying machines—tractors, diggers, disintegrators, levelers, all the mighty mobile masses of metal that man's brain had conceived—all hurrying forward in massed attack to seek out and destroy their creators, obedient to the will of a master machine, immobile, pressing buttons in the Central Control System.

The night resolved itself into a weird phantasmagoric nightmare for me, a gigantic game of hide-and-seek, in which I was "it." Gasping, choking, flung to earth and stunned by ear-shattering explosions, staggering up somehow, ducking to avoid being crushed beneath the ponderous treads of metal monsters that plunged uncannily for me, sobbing aloud in terror, swerving just in time from in front of a swinging crane, instinctively side-stepping just as a pale violet ray swept into nothingness all before it—I must have been delirious, for I retain only the vaguest memory of the horror.

And all the time the guiding search-rays biased down upon the torn and shattered fields, and the disintegrator, unnoticed in the vast

uproar, steadily kept up its deadly work.

At last, in my delirium and terror, I heard a great rending and tearing. I looked up, and a tractor just missed me as it rolled by on swishing treads. But that one glance was enough. The ice cap was moving, flowing forward, a thousand-foot wall of ice! Great billowing clouds of steam spurted from innumerable cracks. The deed had been done! The world was saved for mankind!

Summoning the last ounce of strength, I set off on a steady run for the shelter of the rock cave, to be out of the way when the final smash-up came.

I was not pursued. The ponderous machines, thousands of them, were hastily forming into solid ranks directly in front of the tottering glacier wall. The master machine had seen its impending fate in the visors, and was organizing a defense.

Even in my elation, I could not but feel unwilling admiration for this monstrous thing of metal and quartz, imbued with an intelligence that could think more coolly and quickly than most humans.

Yet I did not stop running until I reached the cave. My heart gave a great bound. For there, peering anxiously with worn face into the

growing dawn, stood the figure of Keston—my friend whom I had never expected to see alive again.

"Meron!" he shouted. "Is it you—or your ghost?"

"The very question I was about to ask you," I parried. "But look, old friend: see what your genius has accomplished—and is now destroying."

The mountain of ice was flowing forward, gathering speed on the way. At an invisible signal, the massed machines—thousands on thousands of them—started into action. Like shock troops in a last desperate assault they ground forward, a serried line that exactly paralleled the threatened break, and hundreds deep. This old earth of ours had never witnessed so awe-inspiring a sight.

They smashed into that moving wall of ice with the force of uncounted millions of tons. We could hear the groaning and straining of furiously turning machinery as they heaved.

Keston and I looked at each other in amazement. The master machine was trying to hold back the mighty Glacier by the sheer power of its cohorts!

A wild light sprang into Keston's eye—of admiration, of regret. "What a thing is this that I created!" he muttered. "If only—" I truly believe that for a moment he half desired to see his brain-child triumph.

The air was hideous with a thousand noises. The Glacier wall was cracking and splitting with the noise of thunderclaps; the machines were whirring and banging and crashing. It was a gallant effort!

But the towering ice wall was not to be denied. Forward, ever forward, it moved, pushing inexorably the struggling machines before it, piling them up high upon one another, grinding into powder the front ranks.

And to cap it all, the huge overhang, a thousand feet high, was swaying crazily and describing ever greater arcs.

"Look!" I screamed and flung up my arm. Great freight planes were flying wing-to-wing, head-on for the tottering crag—deliberately smashing into the topmost point.

"Trying to knock it back into equilibrium!" said Keston, eyes ablaze, dancing about insanely.

But the last suicidal push did not avail. With screams as of a thousand devils and deafening rending roars, the whole side of the Glacier seemed to lean over and fall in a great earth-shattering crescendo of noise.

While we watched, fascinated, rooted to the ground, that thousand feet of glittering wall described a tremendous arc, swinging with increasing momentum down, down, down to the earth it had so long been separated from.

The clamoring machines were buried under, lost in a swirl of ice and snow. Only the Central Station remained, a few moments defiant under the swift onrush of its unfeeling foe.

With a crash that could have been heard around the world, the uppermost crag struck the Station. The giant Glacier wall was down. The earth, the sky, the universe was filled with ice, broken, shattered, torn, splintered, vaporized!

The ground beneath our feet heaved and tumbled in violent quake. We were thrown heavily—and I knew no more....

Sweltered out of unconsciousness. Keston was chafing my hands and rubbing my forehead with ice. He smiled wanly to find me still

alive. Weak and battered, I struggled to my feet.

Before me was a wilderness of ice, a new mountain range of gigantic tumbled blocks of dazzling purity. Of the embattled machines, of the Central Control Station, there was not a sign. They were buried forever under hundreds of feet of frozen water.

I turned to Keston and shook his hand. "You've won; you've saved the world. Now let's get the prolats and start to rebuild."

There was no trace of exultation in Keston's voice. Instead, he unaccountably sighed as we trudged up a narrow winding path to the top. "Yes," he said half to himself, "I've done it. But...."

"But what?" I asked curiously.

"That beautiful, wonderful machine I created!" he burst forth in sudden passion. "To think that it should lie down there, destroyed, a twisted mass of scrap metal and broken glass!"

August 1931

97 The Danger from the Deep by Ralph Milne Farley

Marooned on the sea-floor, his hoisting cable cut, young Abbot is left at the mercy of the man-sharks.

Aproximate word count: 10,200

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Within a thick-walled sphere of steel eight feet in diameter, with crystal-clear fused-quartz windows, there crouched an alert young scientist, George Abbot. The sphere rested on the primeval muck and slime at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean, one mile beneath the surface.

The beam from his 200-watt searchlight, which shot out through one of his three windows into the dark blue depths beyond, seemed faint indeed, yet it served to illuminate anything which crossed it, or on which it fell.

For a considerable length of time since his descent to the ocean

floor, young Abbot had clung to one of the thick windows of his bathysphere, absorbed by the marine life outside. Slender small fish with stereoscopic eyes, darted in and out of the beam of light. Swimming snails floated by, carrying their own phosphorescent lanterns. Paper-thin transparent crustaceans swam into view, followed by a few white shrimps, pale as ghosts. Then a mist of tiny fish swept across his field of vision. Abbot cupped his face in his hands, and stared out.

The incongruous thought flashed across his mind that thus he had often sat by the window of his club in New York, and gazed out at the passing motor traffic.

His searchlight cut a sharp swath through the blue muck. More than once he thought he saw large moving fish-like forms far away.

"Speed up the generator," he called into his phone.

Immediately the shaft of light brightened. He set about trying to focus upon one of those dim elusive shapes which had so intrigued him.

But suddenly the searchlight went out! Intent on repairing the apparatus as rapidly as possible, Abbot snapped the button-switch, which ought to have illuminated the interior of his diving-sphere; but the lights did not go on. Then he noticed that the electric fan, on which he depended to keep his air-supply properly mixed, had stopped.

He spoke into the telephone transmitter, which hung in front of his mouth: "Hi, there, up on the boat! My electric power is cut off. I'm down here with my fan stopped and my heat cut off. Hoist me up, and be quick about it!"

"O.K., sir."

As the young man waited for the winch to get under way on the boat a mile above him, he pulled out his electric pocket flashlight and sent its feeble ray out through his quartz-glass window into the dim royal-purple depths beyond, in one last attempt to get a look at those mysterious fish-shapes which had so intrigued him.

And then he saw one of them distinctly.

Evidently they had swum closer when the glow of his searchlight had stopped; and so the sudden flash of his pocket-light had taken

them by surprise.

For, as he snapped it on, he caught an instant's glimpse of a grinning fish-face pressed close against the outside of his thick window-pane, as though trying to peer in at him. The fish-face somewhat resembled the head of a shark, except that the mouth was a bit smaller and not quite so leeringly brutal, and the forehead was rather high and domed.

But what most attracted Abbot's attention, in the brief instant before the startled fish whisked away in a swirl of phosphorescent foam, was the fact that, from beneath each of the two pectoral fins, there protruded what appeared to be a skinny human arm, terminating in three fingers and a thumb!

Then the fish was gone. Abbot snapped off his little light.

The diving-sphere quivered, as the hoisting-cable tautened. But suddenly the sphere settled back to the bottom of the sea with a jarring thud. "Cable's parted, sir!" spoke a frantic voice in his ear-phones.

For a moment George Abbot sat stunned with horror. Then his mind began to race, like a squirrel in a cage, seeking some way of escape.

Perhaps he could manage to unscrew the 400-pound trap door at the top of the sphere, and shoot to the surface, with the bubbling-out of the confined air. But his scientifically trained mind made some rapid calculations which showed him this was absurd.

At the depth of a mile, the pressure is roughly 156 atmospheres, that is to say, 156 times the air-pressure at the surface of the earth; and the moment that his sphere was opened to this pressure, he would be blown back inwardly away from the man-hole, and the air inside his sphere would suddenly be compressed to only 1/156 of its former volume.

Not only would this pressure be sufficient to squash him into a mangled pulp, but also the sudden compression of the air inside the sphere would generate enough heat to fry that mangled pulp to a crisp cinder almost instantly.

As George Abbot came to a full realization of the horror of these facts, he recoiled from the trap-door as though it were charged with death.

"For Heaven's sakes, do something!" he shrieked in agony into the transmitter.

"Courage, sir," came back the reply. "We are rigging up a grapple just as fast as we can. Long before your oxygen gives out, we shall slide it down to you along the telephone line, which is the only remaining connection between us. When it settles about your sphere, and you can see its hooks outside your window by the light of your pocket-flash, let us know, and we'll trip the grapple and haul you up."

"Thank you," replied the young man.

He was calm now, but it was an enforced and numb kind of calmness. Mechanically he throttled down his oxygen supply, so as to make it last longer. Mechanically he took out his notebook and pencil and started to write down, in the dark, his experiences; for he was determined to leave a full account for posterity, even though he himself should perish.

After setting down a categorical description of the successive partings of the electric light cable and the hoist cable, and his thoughts and feelings in that connection, he described in detail the shark with hands, which he had seen through the window of his

sphere. He tried to be very explicit about this, for he realized that his account would probably be laid, by everyone, to the disordered imagination of his last dying moments; being a true scientist, George Abbot wanted the world to believe him, so that another sphere would be built and sent down to the ocean depths, to find out more about these peculiar denizens of the deep.

Of course, no one would believe him. This thought kept drumming in his ears. No one—except Professor Osborne. Old Osborne would believe!

George Abbot's mind flashed back to a conversation he had had with the old professor, just before the oil interests had sent him on this exploring trip to discover the source of the large quantities of petroleum which had begun to bubble up from the bottom of a certain section of the Pacific very near where Abbot now was.

Osborne had said, "This petroleum suggests a gusher to me. And what causes gushers? Human beings, boring for oil, to satisfy human needs."

"But, Professor," Abbot had objected, "there can't be any human beings at the bottom of the sea!"

"Why not?" Professor Osborne had countered. "Life is supposed to have originated spontaneously in the slime of the ocean depths; therefore that part of the earth has had a head-start on us in the game of evolution. May not this head-start have been maintained right down to date, thus producing at the bottom of the sea a race superior to anything upon the dry land?"

"But," Abbot had objected further, "if so, why haven't they come up to visit or conquer us? And why haven't we ever found any trace of them?"

"Quite simple to explain," the old professor had replied. "Any creature who can live at the frightful pressures of the ocean depths could never survive a journey even halfway to the surface. It would be like our trying to live in an almost perfect vacuum. We should explode, and so would these denizens of the deep, if they tried to come up here. Even one of their dead bodies could not be brought to the surface in recognizable form. No contact with them will ever be possible, nor will they ever constitute a menace to any one—for which we may thank the Lord!"

George Abbot now reviewed this conversation as he crouched in his diving-sphere in the purple darkness of the marine depths. Yes, old Osborne would believe him. The diary must be written for Osborne's

eyes.

Abbot sent another beam from his pocket light suddenly out into the water; and this time he surprised several of the peculiar fish. These, like the first, had arms and hands and high intelligent foreheads.

Then suddenly Abbot laughed a harsh laugh. Old Osborne had been wrong in one thing, namely in saying that the super-race of the deep would never be a menace to anyone. They were being a menace to George Abbot, right now, for it was undoubtedly they who had cut his cables. Probably they were possessed of much the same scientific curiosity with regard to him as he was with regard to them, and so they had determined to secure him as a museum specimen.

The idea was a weird one. He laughed again, mirthlessly.

"What is the matter, sir?" came an anxious voice in his ear-phones.

"Hurry that grapple!" was his reply. "I have found out what cut my cables. There are some very intelligent-looking fish down here, and I think they want me for—"

An ominous click sounded in his ears. Then silence.

"Hello! Hello there!" he shouted. "Can you hear me up on the boat?"

But no answer came back. The line remained dead. The strange fish had cut George Abbot's last contact with the upper world. The grapple-hooks could never find him now, for there was now not even a telephone cable to guide them down to his sphere.

The realization that he was hopelessly lost, and that he had not much longer to live, came as a real relief to him, after the last few moments of frantic uncertainty.

Hoping that his sphere would eventually be found, even though too late to do him any good, he set assiduously to work jotting down all the details which he could remember of those strange denizens of the deep, the man-handed sharks, which he was now firmly convinced were the cause of his present predicament.

He stared out through one of his windows into the brilliant blue darkness, but did not turn on his flashlight. How near were these enemies of his, he wondered?

The presence of those menacing man-sharks, just outside the four-inch-thick steel shell, which withstood a ton of pressure for each square inch of its surface, began to obsess young Abbot. What were they doing out there in the watery-blue midnight? Perhaps, having secured his sphere as a scientific specimen, they were already

preparing to cut into it so as to see what was inside. That these fish could cut through four inches of steel was not so improbable as it sounded, for had they not already succeeded in severing a rubber cable an inch and a half thick, containing two heavy copper wires, and also two inches of the finest, non-kinking steel rope!

The young scientist flashed his pocket torch out through the thick quartz pane, but his enemies were nowhere in sight. Then he fell to calculating his oxygen supply. His normal consumption was about half a quart per minute, at which rate his two tanks would be good for thirty-six hours. His chemical racks contained enough soda-lime to absorb the excess carbon dioxide, enough calcium chloride to keep down the humidity and enough charcoal to sweeten the body odors for much more than that period.

For a moment, the thought of these facts encouraged him. He had been down less than two hours. Perhaps the boat above him could affect his rescue in the more than thirty-four hours which remained!

But then he realized that he had failed to take into consideration the near-freezing temperature of the ocean depths. This temperature he knew to be in the neighborhood of 39 degrees Fahrenheit—even though no thermometer hung outside his window, as none could withstand the frightful pressures at the bottom of the sea. For it is

one of the remarkable facts of inductive science that man has been able to figure out a priori that the temperature at all deep points of the ocean, tropic as well as arctic, must always be stable at approximately 39 degrees.

Abbot was clad only in a light cotton sailor suit, and now that his source of heat had been cut off by the severing of his power lines, his prison was rapidly becoming unbearably chilly. His thick steel sphere constituted such a perfect transmitter of heat that he might almost as well have been actually swimming in water of 39 degrees temperature, so far as comfort was concerned.

Abbot's emotions ran all the gamut from stupefaction, through dull calmness, clear-headed thought, intense but aimless mental activity, nervousness, frenzy, and insane delirium, back to stupefaction again.

During one of his periods of calmness, he figured out what an almost total impossibility there was of the chance that his ship, one mile above him on the surface, could ever find his sphere with grappling hooks. Yet he prayed for that chance. A single chance in a million sometimes does happen.

Several hours had by now elapsed since the parting of the young scientist's cables. It was bitterly cold inside the sphere. In order to

keep warm, he had to exercise during his calm moments as systematically as his cramped quarters would permit. During his frantic moments he got plenty of exercise automatically. And of course all this movement used up more than the normal amount of oxygen, so that he was forced to open the valves on his tanks to two or three times their normal flow. His span of further life was thereby cut to ten or twelve hours, if indeed he could keep himself warm for that long.

Why didn't the people on the boat do something!

He was just about to indulge in one of his frantic fits of despair, when he heard or felt—the two senses being strangely commingled in his present situation—a clank or thump upon the top of his bathysphere. Instantly hope flooded him. Could it be that the one chance in a million had actually happened, and that a grapple from the boat above had actually found him?

With feverish expectation, he pressed the button of his little electric pocket flashlight, and sent its feeble beam out through one of the quartz-glass windows into the blue-black depths beyond.

No hooks in front of this window. He tried the others. No hooks there, either. But he did see plenty of the superhuman fish. Eighteen

of them, he counted, in sight at one time. And also two huge snake-like creatures with crested backs and maned heads, veritable sea-serpents.

As there was nothing the young man could do to assist in the grappling of his sphere by his friends in the boat above, he devoted his time to jotting down a detailed description of these two new beasts and of their behavior.

One of the sharks appeared to be leading or driving them up to the bathysphere; and when they got close enough, Abbot was surprised to see that they wore what appeared to be a harness!

The clanking upon the bathysphere continued, and now the young man learned its cause. It was not the grapple hooks from his ship, but chains—chains which the man-armed sharks were wrapping around the bathysphere.

Two more of the harnessed sea-serpents swam into view, and these two were hitched to a flat cart: an actual cart with wheels. The chains were attached to the harness of the original two beasts; they swam upward and disappeared from view; and the sphere slowly rose from the mucky bottom of the sea, to be lowered again squarely on top of the cart. The cart jerked forward, and a journey over the ocean floor

began.

Then the little pocket torch dimmed to a dull red glow, and the scene outside faded gradually from view. Abbot switched off the now useless light and set to work with scientific precision to record all these unbelievable events.

In his interest and excitement, he had forgotten the ever-increasing cold; but gradually, as he wrote, the frigidity of his surroundings was forced on his consciousness. He turned on more oxygen, and exercised frantically. Meanwhile the cart, carrying his bathysphere, bumped along over an uneven road.

From time to time, he tried his almost exhausted little light, but its dim red beam was completely absorbed by the blue of the ocean depths, and he could make out nothing except two bulking indistinct shapes, writhing on ahead of him. Finally even this degree of visibility failed, and he could see absolutely nothing outside.

He was now so chilled and numb that he could no longer write. With a last effort, he noted down that fact, and then put the book away in its rack.

He began to feel drowsy. Rousing himself, he turned on more

oxygen. The effect was exhilaration and a feeling of silly joy. He began to babble drunkenly to himself. His head swam. His mind was in a daze.

It seemed hours later when he awoke. Ahead of him in the distance there was a dim pale-blue light, against which there could be seen, in silhouette, the forms of the two serpentine steeds and their fish-like drivers. Abbot's hands and feet were completely numb, but his head was clear.

As they drew nearer to the light, it gradually took form, until it turned out to be the mouth of a cave. The cart entered it.

Down a long tunnel they progressed, the light getting brighter and brighter as they advanced. The color of the light became a golden green. The rough stone walls of the tunnel could now be seen; and finally there appeared, ahead, two semicircular doors, swung back against the sides of the passage.

Beyond these doors, the tunnel walls were smooth and exactly cylindrical, and on the ceiling there were many luminous tubes, which lit up the place as brightly as daylight. The cart came to a stop.

The young scientist could now see with surprising distinctness his captors and their serpentine steeds, and even the details of the chains and the harness. He tried to pick up his diary, so as to jot down some points which he had theretofore missed; but his hands were too numb. But at least he could keep on observing; so he glued his eyes to the thick quartz window-pane once more.

A short distance ahead in the passage there was another pair of doors. Presently these swung open and the cavalcade moved forward. Five or six successive pairs of doors were passed in this manner, and then the sea-serpents began to thrash about and become almost unmanageable. It was evident that some change not to their liking had taken place in their surroundings.

At last, as one of the portals swung open, young Abbot saw what appeared to be four deep-sea diving-suits. Could these suits contain human beings? And if so, who? It seemed incredible, for no diving-suit had ever been devised in which a man could descend to the depth of one mile, and live.

These four figures, whatever they were, came stolidly forward and took charge of the cart. One of the sharks swam up to them and appeared to talk to them with its hands. Then the sharks unhitched the two sea-serpents and led them to the rear, and Abbot saw them

no more.

The four divers picked up the chains, and slowly towed the cart forward, their clumsy, ponderous movements contrasting markedly with the swift and sure swishings which had characterized the man-sharks and their snake-like steeds.

Several more pairs of doors were passed, and then there met them four figures in less cumbersome diving-suits, like those ordinarily used by men just below the surface of the sea. One of the deep-sea divers then pressed his face close to the outside of one of the windows of the bathysphere, as though to take a look inside; but the four newcomers waved him away, and hurriedly picked up the chains. Nevertheless, in that brief instant, Abbot had seen within the head-piece of the diver what appeared to be a bearded human face.

Several more pairs of doors were passed. The four deep-sea divers floundered along beside the cart, quite evidently having more and more difficulty of locomotion as each successive doorway was passed, until finally they lay down and were left behind.

At last the procession entered a section of tunnel which was square, instead of circular, and in which there was a wide shelf along one side about three feet above the floor. The four divers then dropped

the chains, and one by one took a look at Abbot through his window.

And he at the same time took a most interested look at them.

They had unmistakable human faces!

He must be dreaming! For even if Osborne was right about his supposed super-race at the bottom of the sea, this race could not be human, for the pressures here would be entirely too great. No human being could possibly stand two thousand pounds per square inch!

Having satisfied their curiosity, the four divers pulled themselves up onto the shelf, and sat there in a row with their legs hanging over.

Abbot glanced upward at the ceiling lights, but these had become strangely blurred. There seemed to be an opaque barrier above him, and this barrier seemed to be slowly descending. The lights blurred out completely, and were replaced by a diffused illumination over the entire ripply barrier. And then it dawned on the young man that this descending sheet of silver was the surface of the water. He was in a lock, and the water was being pumped out.

The surface settled about the helmets of the divers, and their helmets disappeared; then their shoulders and the rest of them. At last it

reached the level of Abbot's window. The divers could again be seen, and among then on the shelf there stood a half dozen naked bearded men, clad only in loin-cloths. They had evidently entered the lock while the water was subsiding.

These men unbuckled the helmets of the divers and helped them out, and then splashed down into the water and peered in through the windows of the bathysphere. Presently some of them left through a door at the end of the platform, but soon reappeared with staging, which they set up around the sphere. Then, climbing on top, they got to work on the man-hole cover.

As George Abbot realized their purpose, he became frantic. Although these men appeared to be human, just like himself, yet his scientifically-trained mind told him that they must be of some very special anatomical structure, in order to be able to withstand the immense pressures at the bottom of the Pacific. It was all right for them to be out there, but it would be fatal to him!

And then the heavy circular door above him began slowly to revolve.

This was terrible! In a moment the crushing pressures of the depths would come seeping in. Rising unsteadily upon his knees, the young

man tried with his fingers to resist the rotation of the door; but it continued to turn.

Yet no pressure could be felt. The door became completely unscrewed. It was pried up, and slid off the top of the bathysphere, to crash upon the floor outside. Inquisitive bearded faces peered down through the hole.

Young Abbot slumped to the cold bottom of the sphere and stared back at them. He was saved; incredibly saved! These were real people, the air was real air and he must therefore be on the surface of the earth, instead of at the bottom of the Pacific as he had imagined! With a sigh of relief, he fainted....

When he came to his senses again, he was lying in a bed in a small room. Bending over him was the sweetest feminine face that he had ever seen.

The girl seemed to be about twenty years of age. She was clad in a clinging robe of some filmy green substance. Her hair was honey-brown, short and curly, and her forehead high and intelligent. Her eyes, an indescribable shade of deep violet, were matchlessly set off by her ivory skin.

The young man smiled up at her, and she smiled back. Thus far it had not occurred to him to wonder where he was, or why. No recollection of his recent strange adventures came to him. To him this was an exotic dream, from which he did not care to awake.

She spoke. Her words were unintelligible, and unlike any language which George Abbot knew or had even heard; and he was an accomplished linguist in addition to his other attainments.

And her words were not all that was strange about her speech, for the very tones of her voice sounded completely unhuman, although not displeasing. Her talk had a metallic ring to it, like the brassy blare of temple gongs, and yet was so smooth and subdued as to be sweeter than any sound that the young scientist had ever heard before.

"Beautiful dream fairy," replied the enraptured young man, "I haven't the slightest idea what you are saying, but keep right on. I like it."

His own voice sounded crass and crude compared to hers. At his first words she gave a start of surprise, but thereafter the sound did not appear to grate on her ears.

Then one of the bearded men in loin-cloths entered, and he and the

girl talked together, quite evidently about their patient. The man's voice had the same strange metallic quality to it as that of the girl, but was deeper, so that it boomed with the rich notes of a bell.

At the sight of the man, young Abbot's memory swept back, and he remembered the adventure of his diving-sphere, and its capture, one mile down, by the strange shark-fish with human hands and arms. But how he had reached the surface of the earth again, he couldn't figure out. Nor did he particularly care.

The strange man withdrew, and the girl sat down beside the bed and smiled at Abbot. He smiled back at her.

Presently another girl entered and called, "Milli!"

The girl beside the bed started, and looking up asked some question, to which the other replied.

The newcomer brought in some strange warm food in a covered dish and then withdrew. The first girl proceeded to feed her patient.

After the meal, which tasted unlike anything which the young man had ever eaten before, the beautiful nurse again essayed conversation with him. She seemed perplexed and a bit frightened that he could

not understand her words. Somehow, the young man sensed that this girl had never heard any other language than her own, and that she did not even know that other languages existed.

Strengthened by his food, he determined to set about learning her language as soon as possible. So he pointed at her and asked, "Milli?"

She nodded, and spoke some word which he took for "yes."

Then he pointed to himself and said, "George."

She understood, but the word was a difficult one for her to duplicate in the metallic tongue of her people. She made several attempts, until he laughingly spoke her word for "yes."

Then he pointed to other objects about the room. She gave him the names of these, but he could easily see that she felt that, if he did not know the names for all these common things, there must be something the matter with him.

He wondered how he could make her understand that there were other languages in the world than her own; and then he remembered the sharks with their hands and what he had taken to be their sign

language. Perhaps Milli at least knew of the existence of the sign language. This would afford a parallel; for if she realized that there were two languages in the world, might there not be three?

So Abbot made some meaningless signs with his fingers. Milli quite evidently was accustomed to this kind of talk, but she was further perplexed to find that George talked gibberish with his hands as well as with his mouth.

She made some signs with her hands, and then said something orally. Young Abbot instantly pointed to her mouth, and held up one finger; then to her hands, and held up two; then to his own mouth, and held up three, at the same time speaking a sentence of English. Instantly she caught on: there were three languages in the world. And thereafter she no longer regarded him as crazy.

For several hours she taught him. Then another meal was brought, after which she left him, and the lights went out.

He awakened feeling thoroughly rested and well. The lights were on and Milli was beside him.

He asked for his clothes. They were brought. Milli withdrew and he put them on.

After breakfast, which they ate together, one of the bearded men came and led him out through a number of winding corridors into a larger room, in which there was a closed spherical glass tank, about ten feet in diameter, containing one of the human sharks. Around the tank stood five of the bearded men.

One of them proceeded to address Abbot, but of course the young American could not make out what he was saying. This apparent lack of intelligence seemed to exasperate the man; and finally he turned toward the tank, and engaged in a sign language conference with the fish; then turned back to Abbot again and spoke to him very sternly.

But Abbot shook his head and replied, "Milli. Bring Milli."

One of the other men flashed a look of triumph at their leader, and laughed.

"Yes," he added, "bring Milli."

The leader scowled at him, and some words were interchanged, but it ended in Milli being sent for. She apparently explained the situation to the satisfaction of the fish, to the intense glee of the man who had sent for her, and to the rather complete discomfiture of the

leader of the five.

Abbot later learned that the leader's name was Thig, and that the name of the gleeful man was Dolf.

The reception over, Milli led Abbot back to his room.

There ensued many days—very pleasant days—of language instruction from Milli. Dolf and Thig and others of the five came frequently, to note his progress and to talk with him and ask him questions.

A sitting room was provided for him, adjoining his sleeping quarters. Milli occupied quarters nearby.

Within a week he had mastered enough of the language of these people, for their strange history began to be intelligible to him.

In spite of the fact that the air here was at merely atmospheric pressure, nevertheless this place was one mile beneath the surface of the Pacific. Milli and her people lived in a city hollowed out of a reef of rocks, reinforced against the terrific weight of the water and filled with laboratory-made air. They had never been to the surface of the sea.

The fish with the human arms were their creators and their masters.

Professor Osborne had been right. The fish of the deep, having a head start on the rest of the world, had evolved to a perfectly unbelievable degree of intelligence. Centuries ago they had built for themselves the exact analog of George Abbot's bathysphere, and in it they had made much the same sort of exploring trips to the surface that he had made down into the deeps. But their spheres had been constructed to keep in, rather than to keep out, great pressure.

Their scientists had gathered a wealth of data as to conditions on the surface, and had even seen and studied human beings. But their insatiable scientific curiosity had led them to want to know more about the strange country above them and the strange persons who inhabited it. And so they set about breeding, in their own laboratories, creatures which should be as like as possible to those whom they had observed on the surface.

Of course, this experiment necessitated their first setting up an air-filled partial vacuum similar to that which surrounds the earth. But they had persisted. They had brought down samples of air from the surface of the sea, and had analyzed and duplicated it on a large scale.

Finally, through long years, they had so directed—and controlled the course of evolution, in their breederies, as first to be able to produce creatures which could live in air at low pressures, and then to evolve the descendants of those creatures into intelligent human beings.

Some of the lower types of this evolutionary process, both in the direct line of descent of man, and among the collateral offshoots, had been retained for food and other purposes. Abbot, with intense scientific interest, studied these specimens in the zoo of the underwater city where he was staying.

Plans had been in progress for some time, among the fish-folk and their human subjects, to send an expedition to the surface. And now the shark masters had fortunately been able to secure alive an actual specimen of the surface folk—namely, George Abbot. The expedition was accordingly postponed until they could pump out of the young scientist all the information possible.

Abbot was naturally overjoyed at the prospect. This would not only get him out of here—but think what it would mean to science!

The plans of the sharks were entirely peaceful. Furthermore there were only about two hundred of their laboratory-bred synthetic human beings, and so these could constitute no menace to mankind.

Accordingly he enthusiastically assured them that they could depend upon the hearty cooperation of the scientists of the outer earth.

During all his stay so far in this cave city, Abbot had been permitted to come in contact only with Milli, the members of the Committee of Five, and an occasional guard or laboratory assistant. Yet, in spite of the absence of personal contacts with other members of this strange race, Abbot was constantly aware of a background of many people and tense activity, which kept the wheels of industry and domestic economy turning in this undersea city.

Although the young man readily accustomed himself to the speech and food and customs of this strange race, his personal modesty and neatness revolted at the loin-cloths and beards of the men; and so, by special dispensation, he was permitted to wear his sailor suit and to shave.

The Committee of Five, who constituted a sort of ruling body for the city, interviewed him at length, cross-examined him most skilfully and took copious notes. But there seemed to be a strange lack of common meeting ground between their minds and his, so that very often they were forced to call on Milli to act as an intermediary. The beautiful young girl seemed able to understand both George Abbot and the leaders of her own people with equal facility.

A number of specially constructed submarines had already been built to carry the expedition to the surface. Before it came time to use them, Abbot tried to paint as glowing a picture as possible of life on earth; but he found it necessary to gloss over a great many things. How could he explain and justify war, liquor, crime, poverty, graft, and the other evils to which constant acquaintance has rendered the human race so calloused?

He was unable to deceive the men of the deep. With their super-intelligence, they relentlessly unearthed from him all the salient facts. And, as a result of their discoveries, their initial friendly feeling for the world of men rapidly developed into supreme contempt.

But Abbot on the other hand developed a deep respect for them. Their chemistry and their electrical and mechanical devices amazed and astounded him. They even were able to keep sun-time and tell the seasons, by means of gyroscopes!

Age was measured much as it is on the surface. This fact was brought to Abbot's attention by the approach of Milli's twentieth birthday.

Strange to relate, she seemed to dread the approach of that

anniversary, and finally told Abbot the reason.

"It is the custom," said she, "when a girl or a boy reaches twenty, to give a very rigorous intelligence test. In fact, such a test is given on every birthday, but the one on the twentieth is the hardest. So far, I have just barely passed each test, which fact marks me as of very low mentality indeed. And, if I fail this time, they will kill me, so as to make room for others who have a better right to live."

"Impossible!" exclaimed the young man indignantly. "Why, you have a better mind than those of many of the leading scientists of the outer world!"

"All the same," she gloomily replied, "it is way below standard for down here."

On the day of the test, he did his best to cheer her up. Dolf also came—she seemed to be an especial protege of his—and gave her his encouragement. He had been coaching her heavily for the examinations for some time previous.

But later in the day she returned in tears to report to Abbot that she had failed, and had only twenty-four hours to live. Before he realized what he was doing, Abbot had seized her in his arms, and was

pouring out to her a love which up to that moment he had not realized existed.

Finally her sobbing ceased, and she smiled through her tears.

"George, dear," said she, "it is worth dying, to know that you care for me like this."

"I won't let them kill you!" asserted the young man belligerently. "They owe me something for the assistance which I am to give them on their expedition. I shall demand your life as the price of my cooperation. Besides, you are the only one of all your people who has brains enough to understand what I tell them about the outer earth. It is they who are weak-minded; not you!"

But she sadly shook her head.

"It would never do for you to sponsor me," said she, "for it would alienate my one friend in power, Dolf. He loves me; no, don't scowl, for I do not love him. But, for the safety of both of us, we must not let him know of our love—yet."

"'Yet'?" exclaimed Abbot, "when you have less than a day to live?"

"You have given me hope," the girl replied, "and also an idea. Dolf

promised to appeal to the other members of the Five. I have just thought of a good ground for his appeal; namely, my ability to translate your clumsy description into a form suited to the high intelligence of our superiors."

"'Clumsy'?" exclaimed the young man, a bit nettled.

"Oh, pardon me, dear. I'm so sorry," said she contritely. "I didn't mean to let it slip. And now I must rush to Dolf and tell him my idea."

"Don't let him make love to you, though!" admonished Abbot gloomily.

She kissed him lightly, and fled.

A half hour later she was back, all smiles. The idea had gone across big. Dolf, as the leader of the projected expedition, had demanded that Milli be brought along as liaison officer between them and their guide; and the other four committeemen had reluctantly acceded. The execution was accordingly indefinitely postponed.

The young couple spent the evening making happy plans for their life together on the outer earth, for as soon as they should arrive in

America, Dolf would have no further hold over them.

The next day, the Committee of Five announced that, for a change, they were going to give George Abbot an intelligence test. He had represented himself as being one of the scientists of the outer earth; accordingly, they could gauge the caliber of his fellow countrymen by determining his I. Q.

Milli was quite agitated when this program was announced, but the ordeal held no terrors for George Abbot. Had he not taken many such tests on earth and passed them easily?

So he appeared before the Committee of Five with a rather cocky air. He had yet to see an intelligence test too tricky for him to eat alive.

"Start him with something easy," suggested Dolf. "Perhaps they don't have tests on the outer earth. You know, one gains a certain facility by practice."

"Milli didn't, in spite of all the practicing which you gave her," maliciously remarked Thig.

Dolf glowered at him.

What is the cube root of 378?" suddenly asked one of the other

members of the committee.

"Oh, a little over seven," hazarded Abbot.

"Come, come," boomed Thig: "give it to us exactly."

"Well, seven-point-two, I guess."

"Don't guess. Give it exact, to four decimal places."

"In my head?" asked Abbot incredulously.

"Certainly!" replied Thig. "Even a child could do that. We're giving you easy questions to start with."

"Start him on square root," suggested Dolf kindly. "Remember he isn't used to these tests like our people are."

So they tried him with square root, in which he turned out to be equally dumb.

Abstract questions of physics and chemistry he did better on; but the actual quantitative problems, which they expected him to solve in his head, stumped him completely.

Then they asked him about education on earth, and the qualifications for becoming a scientist, and who were the leaders in his field, and what degrees they held, and what one had to do to get those degrees, etc. Finally they dismissed him. Dolf then sent for Milli.

She was gone about an hour, and returned to Abbot wide-eyed and incredulous.

"Oh, George," said she, lowering her voice. "Dolf tells me that your intelligence is below that of a five-year-old child! Perhaps that is why you and I get along so well together: we are both morons."

He started to protest, but she silenced him with a gesture and hurried on. "I am not supposed to tell you this, but I want you to know that your examination to-day has resulted in a complete change in their plans for the expedition to the surface. They have consulted with the leaders of our masters, and they agree with them."

She was plainly agitated.

"What is it, dear?" asked Abbot, with ominous foreboding.

Milli continued: "Early during your test, when you demonstrated that you couldn't do the very simplest mathematical problems in your

head, they began to doubt your boastings that you are a scientist. But you were so ingenuous in your answers about conditions on the surface, that finally their faith in your honesty returned. If you are a scientist among men, as they now believe, then the average run of your people must be mere animals. This explains what has puzzled them before; namely, how the people of the earth tolerate poverty and unemployment and crime, and disease and war."

"Well?"

"And so a mere handful of our people, by purely peaceful means, could easily make themselves the rulers of the earth. Probably this would be all for the best; but somehow, my feelings tell me that it is not. I know only too well what it is to be an inferior among intelligent beings; so will not your people be happier, left alone to their stupidity, just as I would be?"

George Abbot was crushed. This frank acceptance by Milli of the alleged fact that he was a mere moron, was most humiliating. And swiftly he realized what a real menace to the earth, was this contemplated invasion from the deeps.

All that was worst in the world above would taint these intellectual giants of the undersea. They would rise to supremacy, and then

would become rapacious tyrants over those whom they would regard as being no more than animals.

He had witnessed jealousies among them down below. Might not these jealousies flame into huge wars when translated to the world above? Giants striving for mastery, using the human cattle as cannon fodder! He painted to the girl a word-picture of the horrible vision which he foresaw.

The invasion must be stopped at all costs! He and Milli must pit their puny wits against these supermen!

But what could they do? As they were pondering this problem, a girl entered their sitting room—the same who had brought Abbot's breakfast on his first day in the caves. Milli introduced George to the newcomer, whose name was Romehl.

Romehl appeared so woebegone that the young American ventured to inquire if she too had been having difficulty with one of her tests. But that was not the trouble; hers was rather of the heart.

About the same age as Milli, Romehl had recently passed her twentieth birthday test and hence was eligible to marry; so she and a young man named Hakin had requested the fish-masters to give

them the requisite permission. But their overlords for some reason had peremptorily denied the request. Romehl and Hakin were desolate.

Young Abbot's sympathies were at once aroused.

"Can't something be done?" he started to ask.

But Milli silenced him with a warning glance. "Of course not!" she said. "Who are we to question the judgment of our all-knowing masters?"

Romehl had really come to Milli just to pour her troubles into a friendly ear, rather than because she hoped to get any helpful ideas. So she had a good cry, and finally left, somewhat comforted.

George and Milli then took up again the problem of saving the outer earth from the threatened invasion. Milli suggested that they go peaceably with the expedition, and then warn the authorities of America at the first opportunity after their arrival; but Abbot pointed out that this would merely result in their both being shut up in some insane asylum, as no one would believe such a crazy story as theirs.

The time for lights to be put out arrived without their thinking of any

better idea.

Next day Milli spent considerable time with Dolf, and on her return excitedly informed Abbot that he had evolved a most diabolical plot. There were sufficient quantities of explosives in storage to blast a hole through the wall of the caves, letting in the sea and killing everyone in the city. Dolf planned to set this off with a time fuse, upon the departure of the expedition. Thus Thig and the people who were left behind—about two-thirds of the total population of the city—would be destroyed, and the fish would have no one to send after Dolf and his followers to dictate to them on the upper earth.

Relieved of the thraldom of the fish, Dolf could make himself Emperor of the World, and rule over the human cattle, with Milli at his side as Empress. An alluring program—from Dolf's point of view.

I didn't expect such treason even from Dolf!" exclaimed the young American. "We must tell Thig!"

"What good would that do?" remonstrated the girl. "If you failed to convince Thig, Dolf would make an end of us both. And if you convinced Thig, it would mean the end of Dolf, whose influence is all that keeps me alive. We must think of something else."

"Right, as always," replied Abbot.

A growl came from the doorway. It was Dolf, his bearded face black with wrath.

"So?" he sputtered. "Treachery, eh?"

He whistled twice and two guards appeared.

"Take them to the prison!" he raged, indicating Abbot and Milli. "Our expedition will have to do without a guide. I have learned enough of the American language to make a good start, and I guess I can pick up another guide when we reach the surface." Then, bending close to the frightened girl, he whispered, "And another Empress."

The guards hustled them away and locked them up. As an added precaution, a sentinel was posted in front of each cell door.

Abbot immediately got busy.

"Can you get word for me at once to Thig?" he whispered to the man on guard.

"Perhaps," replied that individual non-committally.

"Then tell him," said Abbot, "that I have proof that Dolf is planning to destroy this city behind him, and never return from the surface."

The sentry became immediately agitated.

"So you know this?" he exclaimed. "How did it leak out? But—through Milli, of course. And the guard on her cell is not a member of the expedition! Curses! I must get word to Dolf, and have that guard changed at once."

And he darted swiftly away.

The young prisoner was plunged into gloom. Now he'd gone and done it! Why hadn't he first made appropriate inquiries of his guard?

A new guard appeared in front of the door.

"Are you going on the expedition?" asked Abbot.

"Yes, worse luck," replied the guard.

The prisoner forgot his own gloom, in his surprise at the gloominess of the other.

"Don't you want to go?" he exclaimed incredulously.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Do you know Romehl?" asked the guard.

"Yes," Abbot replied.

"Well, that's why."

"Then you must be Hakin!" exclaimed Abbot, with sudden understanding.

"Yes," replied the other dully.

"You are going on the expedition, and Romehl is not?"

"Quite correct."

"Say, look here!" exclaimed Abbot, and then he launched into the description of a plan, which just that moment had occurred to him, for him, Milli, Romehl and Hakin to make their getaway ahead of the expedition—in fact, that very night—and to set off the time-fuse before leaving.

It turned out that Hakin knew where the explosives were planted, and where the submarines were kept, and even how to operate them. He eagerly accepted the plan; and when next relieved as sentinel, he hurried away to inform Romehl.

Three hours later he was back on post. Quickly he explained to his prisoner all about the workings of the submarines of the expedition. The lights-out bell rang, and all the city became dark, except for dim lights in the passageways. Hakin at once unlocked the door of Abbot's cell, and together the two young men sneaked down the corridor to the cell where Milli was confined.

Silently Hakin and Abbot sprang upon the guard and throttled him; then released Milli. There was no time for more than a few hurried words of explanation before the three of them left the prison and made for the locks of the subterranean canal, picking up Romehl at a preappointed spot on the way.

The canal locks were unguarded, as well as the storerooms of the submarines. Each of the rooms held two subs, and could open onto the second lock and be separately flooded.

The submarines were of steel as thick as Abbot's bathysphere. Their shape was that of an elongated rain drop, with fins. In the pointed tip

of their tails were motors which could operate at any pressure. At the front end were quartz windows. In the top fin was an expanding device which could be filled with buoyant gas, produced by chemicals, when the craft neared the surface. Each submarine also contained a radio set, so tuned as to be capable of opening and closing the radio-controlled gates of the locks. Each would carry comfortably two or three persons.

Having picked out two submarines and found them to be in order, Hakin sneaked back into the corridor to set off the time-fuse, leaving his three companions in the dark in the storeroom. Abbot put a protecting arm around Milli, while Romehl snuggled close to her other side.

Their hearts were all racing madly with excitement, and this was intensified when they heard Hakin talking with someone just outside their door.

Then Hakin returned unexpectedly.

"Something terrible has happened!" he breathed. "The explosives have been discovered and are gone. One of the expedition men has just informed me. Someone must have gotten word to Thig—"

"Why, I did," interrupted Milli. "I told my guard, just before they came and changed him."

Abbot groaned.

Hakin continued hurriedly: "So Dolf plans to leave at once. He is already rounding up his followers. Come on! We must get out ahead of him!"

An uproar could be heard drawing near in the corridor outside. Abbot opened the door and peered out; then shut it again and whispered, "The two factions are fighting already."

"Then come on!" exclaimed Hakin.

As he spoke he turned on the lights, wedged the door tight against its gaskets and threw the switch which started the water seeping into the storeroom; then he led Romehl hurriedly to one of the two submarines, while George and Milli rushed to the other. Heavy blows sounded against the storeroom door.

The water rapidly rose about them, and the four friends crawled inside the two machines and clamped the lids tight. Then they waited for sufficient depth, so that they could get under way.

The water rose above their bow windows, but suddenly and inexplicably it began to subside again. A man waded by around the bow of Abbot's machine.

"They've crashed in the door, and are pumping out the water again!" exclaimed Abbot. "We're trapped!"

"Not yet!" grimly replied the girl at his side. "Can you work the radio door controls?"

"Yes."

"Then quick! Open the doors into the lock!"

He pressed a button. Ahead of them two gates swung inward, followed by a deluge of water.

"Come on!" spoke the girl. "Full speed ahead, before the water gets too low."

Abbot did so. Out into the lock they sped, in the face of the surging current. Then Abbot pushed another button to close the gates behind them. But the water continued to fall, and they grounded before they reached the end of the lock. Quite evidently the rush of the current had kept the doors from closing behind them. The city was being

flooded through the broken door of the storeroom.

But Abbot opened the next gate, and again they breasted the incoming torrent. This time, although the level continued to fall, their craft did not quite ground.

"They must have got the gates shut behind us at last," said he, as he opened the next set and pressed on.

And then he had an idea. Why not omit to close any further gates behind him? As a result, the sea pressure would eventually break down the inmost barriers, and destroy the city as effectively as Dolf's bomb would have done. But he said nothing to Milli of this plan: she might wish to save her people.

Gate after gate they passed. This was too simple. A few more locks and they would be out in open water. The submarine of Hakin and Romehl swept by—evidently to let George and Milli know their presence—and then dropped behind again. But was it their two friends after all? It might have been some enemy! They could not be sure.

This uncertainty cast a chill of apprehension over them, which was immediately heightened by the sudden extinguishing of the overhead

lights of the tunnel. Abbot pressed the radio button for the next set of locks, but they did not budge.

"What can be the matter?" he asked frantically.

"My people must have turned off the electric current," Milli replied. "The gates won't open without electricity to feed the motors. We're trapped again."

For a moment they lay stunned by a realization that their escape was blocked.

"Kiss me good-by, dear," breathed Milli. "This is the end."

As the young man reached over to take her in his arms, the submarine was suddenly lifted up and spun backward, end over end: then tumbled and bumped along, as though it were a chip on an angry mountain torrent.

Stunned and bruised and bleeding, the young American finally lost consciousness....

When he came to his senses again, his first words were, "Milli, where are you?"

"My darling!" breathed a voice at his side. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," he replied. "Where are we? What has happened?"

"The entire system of locks must have crashed in and flooded the city," said she.

Instantly Abbott's mind grasped the explanation of this occurrence: their leaving open so many gates behind them had made it impossible for the few remaining gates ahead to withstand the terrific pressures of the ocean depths, and they had crumpled. But he did not tell Milli his part in this.

She continued, "I was pretty badly shaken up myself, but I've got this boat going again, and we're on our way out of the tunnel. See—I've found out how to work our searchlight."

He looked. A broad beam of light from their bow, illuminated the tunnel ahead of them.

Presently another beam appeared, shooting by them from behind.

"Hakin and Romehl!" exclaimed the girl. "Then they're safe, too!"

The tunnel walls grew rough, then disappeared. They were out in the

open sea at last, although still one mile beneath the surface.

But in front of them was an angry seething school of the man-sharks, clearly illumined by the two rays of light. Behind the sharks were a score or more of serpentine steeds.

The sharks saw the two submarines and charged down upon them; but Milli, with great presence of mind, shut off her searchlight and swung sharply to the left.

"Up! Up!" urged the young man, so she turned the craft upward.

On and on they went, with no interference. Presently they turned the light on again, so as to see what progress they were making. But they were making absolutely none! They were merely standing on their tail. They had reached a height of such relatively low pressure that it took all the churning of their propeller just merely to counteract the great weight of their submarine.

Abbot switched on their chemical gas supply, and as their top fin expanded into a balloon they again began to rise.

One thing, however, perplexed the young man: the water about him seemed jet black rather than blue. They must by now be close to the

surface of the sea, where at least a twilight blue should be visible. Even at the one mile depth in his bathysphere, the water had been brilliant, yet here, almost at the surface, he could see absolutely nothing.

He switched on the searchlight again to make sure that their window wasn't clouded over; but it wasn't.

Then suddenly a rippling veil of pale silver appeared ahead; then a blue-black sky and twinkling stars. They had reached the surface, and it was night.

He pointed out the stars to the girl at his side, then swung the nose of the submarine around and showed her the moon.

Where next? George Abbot picked out his position by the stars and headed east. East across the Pacific, toward America.

But soon he noticed that their little craft was dropping beneath the surface. He kept heading up more and more; he threw the lever for more and more chemical gas; yet still they continued to sink.

"Milli!" he exclaimed, "we've got to get out of here!"

She clutched him in fear, for to her the pressure of the open sea

meant death, certain death. But he pushed her firmly away, and unclamped the lid of the submarine. In another instant he had hauled her out and was battling his way to the surface, while their little boat sunk slowly beneath them.

Milli was an experienced swimmer, for the undersea folk enjoyed the privilege of a large indoor pool. As soon as she found that the open sea did not kill her, she became calm.

Side by side they floated in the moonlight. The sky began to pink in the east. Dawn came, the first dawn that Milli had ever seen.

Suddenly she called George's attention to two bobbing heads some distance away in the path of light the rising sun made on the ocean.

"Hakin and Romehl!" he exclaimed. Long since they had given them up for dead; but evidently fate had treated them in much the same way as themselves.

And a moment later his own salt-stung eyes noticed a long gray shape to one side.

As the day brightened, Abbot suddenly noticed a large bulking shape nearby.

It was his own boat!—the one which had lowered him into the depths in his bathysphere so many weeks and weeks ago! Evidently it was still sticking around, grappling for his long dead body.

"Come on, dear," said he, and side by side they swam over to it.

He helped her up the ship's ladder. The ship's cook sleepily stuck his head out of the galley door.

"Hullo, Mike," sang out George Abbot merrily to the astonished man. "I've brought company for breakfast. And there'll be two more when we can lower a boat."

98 Brood of the Dark Moon by Charles Willard Diffin

summary goes here

Aproximate word count: 60,000

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Chapter 1: The Message

In a hospital in Vienna, in a room where sunlight flooded through ultra-violet permeable crystal, the warm rays struck upon smooth walls the color of which changed from hot reds to cool yellow or gray or to soothing green, as the Directing Surgeon might order. An elusive blending of tones, now seemed pulsing with life; surely even a flickering flame of vitality would be blown into warm livingness in such a place.

Even the chart case in the wall glittered with the same clean, brilliant hues from its glass and metal door. The usual revolving paper disks showed white beyond the glass. They were moving; and the ink lines grew to tell a story of temperature and respiration and of every heart-

beat.

On the identification-plate a name appeared and a date: "Chet Bullard—23 years. Admitted: August 10, 1973." And below that the ever-changing present ticked into the past in silent minutes: "August 15, 1973; World Standard Time: 10:38—10:39—10:40—"

For five days the minutes had trickled into a rivulet of time that flowed past a bandaged figure in the bed below—a silent figure and unmoving, as one for whom time has ceased. But the surgeons of the Allied Hospital at Vienna are clever.

10:41—10:42—The bandaged figure stirred uneasily on a snow-white bed....

A nurse was beside him in an instant. Was her patient about to recover consciousness? She examined the bandages that covered a ragged wound in his side, where all seemed satisfactory. To all appearances the man who had moved was unconscious still; the nurse could not know of the thought impressions, blurred at first, then gradually clearing, that were flashing through his mind.

Flashing; yet, to the man who struggled to comprehend them, they passed laggingly in review: one picture followed another with

exasperating slowness....

Where was he? What had happened? He was hardly conscious of his own identity....

There was a ship ... he held the controls ... they were flying low.... One hand reached fumblingly beneath the soft coverlet to search for a triple star that should be upon his jacket. A triple star: the insignia of a Master Pilot of the World!—and with the movement there came clearly a realization of himself.

Chet Bullard, Master Pilot; he was Chet Bullard ... and a wall of water was sweeping under him from the ocean to wipe out the great Harkness Terminal buildings.... It was Harkness—Walt Harkness—from whom he had snatched the controls.... To fly to the Dark Moon, of course—

What nonsense was that?... No, it was true: the Dark Moon had raised the devil with things on Earth.... How slowly the thoughts came! Why couldn't he remember?...

Dark Moon!—and they were flying through space.... They had conquered space; they were landing on the Dark Moon that was brilliantly alight. Walt Harkness had set the ship down beautifully—

Then, crowding upon one another in breath-taking haste, came clear recollection of past adventures:

They were upon the Dark Moon—and there was the girl, Diane. They must save Diane. Harkness had gone for the ship. A savage, half-human shape was raising a hairy arm to drive a spear toward Diane, and he, Chet, was leaping before her. He felt again the lancet-pain of that blade....

And now he was dying—yes, he remembered it now—dying in the night on a great, sweeping surface of frozen lava.... It was only a moment before that he had opened his eyes to see Harkness' strained face and the agonized look of Diane as the two leaned above him.... But now he felt stronger. He must see them again....

He opened his eyes for another look at his companions—and, instead of black, star-pricked night on a distant globe, there was dazzling sunlight. No desolate lava-flow, this; no thousand fires that flared and smoked from their fumeroles in the dark. And, instead of Harkness and the girl, Diane, leaning over him there was a nurse who laid one cool hand upon his blond head and who spoke soothingly to him of keeping quiet. He was to take it easy—he would understand later—and everything was all right.... And with this assurance Chet Bullard drifted again into sleep....

The blurring memories had lost their distortions a week later, as he sat before a broad window in his room and looked out over the housetops of Vienna. Again he was himself, Chet Bullard, with a Master Pilot's rating: and he let his eyes follow understandingly the moving picture of the world outside. It was good to be part of a world whose every movement he understood.

Those cylinders with stubby wings that crossed and recrossed the sky; their sterns showed a jet of thin vapor where a continuous explosion of detonite threw them through the air. He knew them all: the pleasure craft, the big, red-bellied freighters, the sleek liners, whose multiple helicopters spun dazzlingly above as they sank down through the shaft of pale-green light that marked a descending area.

That one would be the China Mail. Her under-ports were open before the hold-down clamps had gripped her; the mail would pour out in an avalanche of pouches where smaller mailships waited to distribute the cargo across the land.

And the big fellow taking off, her hull banded with blue, was one of Schwartzmann's liners. He wondered what had become of Schwartzmann, the man who had tried to rob Harkness of his ship; who had brought the patrol ships upon them in an effort to prevent their take-off on that wild trip.

For that matter, what had become of Harkness? Chet Bullard was seriously disturbed at the absence of any word beyond the one message that had been waiting for him when he regained consciousness. He drew that message from a pocket of his dressing gown and read it again:

"Chet, old fellow, lie low. S has vanished. Means mischief. Think best not to see you or reveal your whereabouts until our position firmly established. Have concealed ship. Remember, S will stop at nothing. Trying to discredit us, but the gas I brought will fix all that. Get yourself well. We are planning to go back, of course. Walt."

Chet returned the folded message to his pocket. He arose and walked about the room to test his returning strength: to remain idle was becoming increasingly difficult. He wanted to see Walter Harkness, talk with him, plan for their return to the wonder-world they had found.

Instead he dropped again into his chair and touched a knob on the newscaster beside him. A voice, hushed to the requirements of these hospital precincts spoke softly of market quotations in the far corners of the earth. He turned the dial irritably and set it on "World News—General." The name of Harkness came from the instrument to focus Chet's attention.

"Harkness makes broad claims," the voice was saying. "Vienna physicists ridicule his pretensions.

"Walter Harkness, formerly of New York, proprietor of Harkness Terminals, whose great buildings near New York were destroyed in the Dark Moon wave, claims to have reached and returned from the Dark Moon.

"Nearly two months have passed since the new satellite crashed into the gravitational field of Earth, its coming manifested by earth shocks and a great tidal wave. The globe, as we know, was invisible. Although still unseen, and only a black circle that blocks out distant stars, it is visible in the telescopes of the astronomers; its distance and its orbital motion have been determined.

"And now this New Yorker claims to have penetrated space: to have landed on the Dark Moon: and to have returned to Earth. Broad claims, indeed, especially so in view of the fact that Harkness refuses to submit his ship for examination by the Stratosphere Control Board. He has filed notice of ownership, thus introducing some novel legal technicalities, but, since space-travel is still a dream of the future, there will be none to dispute his claims.

"Of immediate interest is Harkness' claim to have discovered a gas

that is fatal to the serpents of space. The monsters that appeared when the Dark Moon came and that attacked ships above the Repelling Area are still there. All flying is confined to the lower levels; fast world-routes are disorganized.

"Whether or not this gas, of which Harkness has a sample, came from the Dark Moon or from some laboratory on Earth is of no particular importance. Will it destroy the space-serpents? If it does this, our hats are off to Mr. Walter Harkness; almost will we be inclined to believe the rest of his story—or to laugh with him over one of the greatest hoaxes ever attempted."

Chet had been too intent upon the newscast to heed an opening door at his back....

“How about it, Chet?" a voice was asking. "Would you call it a hoax or the real thing?" And a girl's voice chimed in with exclamations of delight at sight of the patient, so evidently recovering.

"Diane!" Chet exulted, "—and Walt!—you old son-of-a-gun!" He found himself clinging to a girl's soft hand with one of his, while with the other he reached for that of her companion. But Walt Harkness' arm went about his shoulders instead.

"I'd like to hammer you plenty," Harkness was saying, "and I don't even dare give you a friendly slam on the back. How's the side where they got you with the spear?—and how are you? How soon will you be ready to start back? What about—"

Diane Delacouer raised her one free hand to stop the flood of questions. "My dear," she protested, "give Chet a chance. He must be dying for information."

"I was dying for another reason the last time I saw you," Chet reminded her, "—up on the Dark Moon. But it seems that you got me back here in time for repairs. And now what?" His nurse came into the room with extra chairs; Chet waited till she was gone before he repeated: "Now what? When do we go back?"

Harkness did not answer at once. Instead he crossed to the newscaster in its compact, metal case. The voice was still speaking softly; at a touch of a switch it ceased, and in the silence came the soft rush of sound that meant the telautotype had taken up its work. Beneath a glass a paper moved, and words came upon it from a hurricane of type-bars underneath. The instrument was printing the news story as rapidly as any voice could speak it.

Harkness read the words for an instant, then let the paper pass on to

wind itself upon a spool. It had still been telling of the gigantic hoax that this eccentric American had attempted and Harkness repeated the words.

"A hoax!" he exclaimed, and his eyes, for a moment, flashed angrily beneath the dark hair that one hand had disarranged. "I would like to take that facetious bird out about a thousand miles and let him play around with the serpents we met. But, why get excited? This is all Schwartzmann's doing. The tentacles of that man's influence, reach out like those of an octopus."

Chet ranged himself alongside. Tall and slim and blond, he contrasted strongly with this other man, particularly in his own quiet self-control as against Harkness' quick-flaring anger.

"Take it easy, Walt," he advised. "We'll show them. But I judge that you have been razzed a bit. It's a pretty big story for them to swallow without proof. Why didn't you show them the ship? Or why didn't you let Diane and me back up your yarn? And you haven't answered my other questions: when do we go back?"

Harkness took the queries in turn.

"I didn't show the old boat," he explained, "because I'm not ready for

that yet. I want it kept dark—dark as the Dark Moon. I want to do my preliminary work there before Schwartzmann and his experts see our ship. He would duplicate it in a hurry and be on our trail.

"And now for our plans. Well, out there in space the Dark Moon is waiting. Have you realized, Chet, that we own that world—you and Diane and I? Small—only half the size of our old moon—but what a place! And it's ours!

"Back in history—you remember?—an ambitious lad named Alexander sighed for more worlds to conquer. Well, we're going Alexander one better—we've found the world. We're the first ever to go out into space and return again.

"We'll go back there, the three of us. We will take no others along—not yet. We will explore and make our plans for development; and we will keep it to ourselves until we are ready to hold it against any opposition.

"And now, how soon can you go? Your injury—how soon will you be well enough?"

"Right now," Chet told him laconically; "to-day, if you say the word. They've got me welded together so I'll hold, I reckon. But where's

the ship? What have you done—" He broke off abruptly to listen—

To all three came a muffled, booming roar. The windows beside them shivered with the thud of the distant explosion; they had not ceased their trembling before Harkness had switched on the news broadcast. And it was a minute only until the news-gathering system was on the air.

"Explosion at the Institute of Physical Science!" it said. "This is Vienna broadcasting. An explosion has just occurred. We are giving a preliminary announcement only. The laboratories of the Scientific Institute of this city are destroyed. A number of lives have been lost. The cause has not been determined. It is reported that the laboratories were beginning analytical work, on the so-called Harkness Dark Moon gas—

"Confirmation has just been radioed to this station. Dark Moon gas exploded on contact with air. The American, Harkness, is either a criminal or a madman; he will be apprehended at once. This confirmation comes from Herr Schwartzmann of Vienna who left the Institute only a few minutes before the explosion occurred—"

And, in the quiet of a hospital room, Walter Harkness, drew a long breath and whispered: "Schwartzmann! His hand is everywhere....

And that sample was all I had.... I must leave at once—go back to America."

He was halfway to the door—he was almost carrying Diane Delacouer with him—when Chet's quiet tones brought him up short.

"I've never seen you afraid," said Chet; and his eyes were regarding the other man curiously; "but you seem to have the wind up, as the old flyers used to say, when it comes to Schwartzmann."

Harkness looked at the girl he held so tightly, then grinned boyishly at Chet. "I've someone else to be afraid for now," he said.

His smile faded and was replaced by a look of deep concern. "I haven't told you about Schwartzmann," he said; "haven't had time. But he's poison, Chet. And he's after our ship."

"Where is the ship; where have you hidden it? Tell me—where?"

Harkness looked about him before he whispered sharply: "Our old shop—up north!"

He seemed to feel that some explanation was due Chet. "In this day it seems absurd to say such things," he added; "but this Schwartzmann is a throw-back—a conscienceless scoundrel. He

would put all three of us out of the way in a minute if he could get the ship. *He* knows we have been to the Dark Moon—no question about that—and he wants the wealth he can imagine is there.

"We'll all plan to leave; I'll radio you later. We'll go back to the Dark Moon—" He broke off abruptly as the door opened to admit the nurse. "You'll hear from me later," he repeated; and hurried Diane Delacouer from the room.

But he returned in a moment to stand again at the door—the nurse was still in the room. "In case you feel like going for a hop," he told Chet casually, "Diane's leaving her ship here for you. You'll find it up above—private landing stage on the roof."

Chet answered promptly, "Fine; that will go good one of these days." All this for the benefit of listening ears. Yet even Chet would have been astonished to know that he would be using that ship within an hour....

He was standing at the window, and his mind was filled, not with thoughts of any complications that had developed for his friend Harkness, but only of the adventures that lay ahead of them both. The Dark Moon!—they had reached it indeed; but they had barely scratched the surface of that world of mystery and adventure. He

was wild with eagerness to return—to see again that new world, blazing brightly beneath the sun; to see the valley of fires—and he had a score to settle with the tribe of ape-men, unless Harkness had finished them off while he, himself, lay unconscious.... Yes, there seemed little doubt of that; Walt would have paid the score for all of them.... He seemed actually back in that world to which his thoughts went winging across the depths of space. The burr of a telephone recalled him.

It was the hospital office, he found, when he answered. There was a message—would Mr. Bullard kindly receive it on the telautotype—lever number four, and dial fifteen-point-two—thanks.... And Chet depressed a key and adjusted the instrument that had been printing the newscast.

The paper moved on beneath the glass, and the type-bars clicked more slowly now. From some distant station that might be anywhere on or above the earth, there was coming a message.

The frequency of that sending current was changed at some central office; it was stepped down to suit the instrument beside him. And the type was spelling out words that made the watching man breathless and intent—until he tore off the paper and leaped for the call signal that would summon the nurse. Through her he would get

his own clothes, his uniform, the triple star that showed his rating and his authority in every air-level of the world.

That badge would have got him immediate attention on any landing field. Now, on the flat roof, with steady, gray eyes and a voice whose very quietness accentuated its imperative commands, Chet had the staff of the hospital hangars as alert as if their alarm had sounded a general ambulance call.

Straight into the sky a red beacon made a rigid column of light; a radio sender was crackling a warning and a demand for "clear air." From the forty level, a patrol ship that had caught the signal came corkscrewing down the red shaft to stand by for emergency work.... Chet called her commander from the cabin of Diane's ship. A word of thanks—Chet's number—and a dismissal of the craft. Then the white lights signaled "all clear" and the hold-down levers let go with a soft hiss—

The feel of the controls was good to his hands; the ship roared into life. A beautiful little cruiser, this ship of Diane's; her twin helicopters lifted her gracefully into the air. The column of red light had changed to blue, the mark of an ascending area; Chet touched a switch. A muffled roar came from the stern and the blast drove him straight out for a mile; then he swung and returned. He was nosing

up as he touched the blue—straight up—and he held the vertical climb till the altimeter before him registered sixty thousand.

Traffic is north-bound only on the sixty-level, and Chet set his ship on a course for the frozen wastes of the Arctic; then he gave her the gun and nodded in tight-lipped satisfaction at the mounting thunder that answered from the stern.

Only then did he read again the message on a torn fragment of telautotype paper. "Harkness," was the signature; and above, a brief warning and a call—"Danger—must leave at once. You get ship and stand by. I will meet you there." And, for the first time, Chet found time to wonder at this danger that had set the hard-headed, hard-hitting Walt Harkness into a flutter of nerves.

What danger could there be in this well-guarded world? A patrol-ship passed below him as he asked himself the question. It was symbolic of a world at peace; a world too busy with its own tremendous development to find time for wars or makers of war. What trouble could this man Schwartzmann threaten that a word to the Peace Enforcement Commission would not quell? Where could he go to elude the inescapable patrols?

And suddenly Chet saw the answer to that question—saw plainly

where Schwartzmann could go. Those vast reaches of black space! If Schwartzmann had their ship he could go where they had gone—go out to the Dark Moon.... And Harkness had warned Chet to get their ship and stand by.

Had Walt learned of some plan of Schwartzmann's? Chet could not answer the question, but he moved the control rheostat over to the last notch.

From the body of the craft came an unending roar of a generator where nothing moved; where only the terrific, explosive impact of bursting detonite drove out from the stern to throw them forward. "A good little ship," Chet had said of this cruiser of Diane's; and he nodded approval now of a ground-speed detector whose quivering needle had left the 500 mark. It touched 600, crept on, and trembled at 700 miles an hour with the top speed of the ship.

There was a position-finder in the little control room, and Chet's gaze returned to it often to see the pinpoint of light that crept slowly across the surface of a globe. It marked their ever-changing location, and it moved unerringly toward a predetermined goal.

It was a place of ice and snow and bleak outcropping of half-covered rocks where he descended. Lost from the world, a place where even

the high levels seldom echoed to the roar of passing ships, it had been a perfect location for their "shop." Here he and Walt had assembled their mystery ship.

He had to search intently over the icy waste to find the exact location; a dim red glow from a hidden sun shone like pale fire across distant black hills. But the hills gave him a bearing, and he landed at last beside a vaguely outlined structure, half hidden in drifting snow.

The dual fans dropped him softly upon the snow ground and Chet, as he walked toward the great locked doors, was trembling from other causes than the cold. Would the ship be there? He was suddenly a-quiver with excitement at the thought of what this ship meant—the adventure, the exploration that lay ahead.

The doors swung back. In the warm and lighted room was a cylinder of silvery white. Its bow ended in a gaping port where a mighty exhaust could roar forth to check the ship's forward speed; there were other ports ranged about the gleaming body. Above the hull a control-room projected flatly; its lookouts shone in the brilliance of the nitron illuminator that flooded the room with light....

Chet Bullard was breathless as he moved on and into the room. His

wild experiences that had seemed but a weird dream were real again. The Dark Moon was real! And they would be going back to it!

The muffled beating of great helicopters was sounding in his ears; outside, a ship was landing. This would be Harkness coming to join him; yet, even as the thought flashed through his mind, it was countered by a quick denial. To the experienced hearing of the Master Pilot this sound of many fans meant no little craft. It was a big ship that was landing, and it was coming down fast. The blue-striped monster looming large in the glow of the midnight sun was not entirely a surprise to Chet's staring eyes.

But—blue-striped! The markings of the Schwartzmann line!—He had hardly sensed the danger when it was upon him.

A man, heavy and broad of frame, was giving orders. Only once had Chet seen this Herr Schwartzmann, but there was no mistaking him now. And he was sending a squad of rushing figures toward the man who struggled to close a great door.

Chet crouched to meet the attack. He was outnumbered; he could never win out. But the knowledge of his own helplessness was nothing beside that other conviction that flooded him with sickening certainty—

A hoax!—that was what they had called Walt's story; Schwartzmann had so named it, and now Schwartzmann had been the one to fool them; the message was a fake—a bait to draw him out; and he, Chet, had taken the bait. He had led Schwartzmann here; had delivered their ship into his hands—

He landed one blow on the nearest face; he had one glimpse of a clubbed weapon swinging above him—and the world went dark.

Chapter 2: Into Space

A pulsing pain that stabbed through his head was Chet's first conscious impression. Then, as objects came slowly into focus before his eyes, he knew that above him a ray of light was striking slantingly through the thick glass of a control-room lookout.

Other lookouts were black, the dead black of empty space. Through them, sparkling points of fire showed here and there—suns, sending their light across millions of years to strike at last on a speeding ship. But, from the one port that caught the brighter light, came that straight ray to illumine the room.

"Space," thought Chet vaguely. "That is the sunlight of space!"

He was trying to arrange his thoughts in some sensible sequence. His head!—what had happened to his head?... And then he remembered. Again he saw a clubbed weapon descending, while the face of Schwartzmann stared at him through bulbous eyes....

And this control-room where he lay—he knew in an instant where he was. It was his own ship that was roaring and trembling beneath him—his and Walt Harkness'—it was flying through space! And, with the sudden realization of what this meant, he struggled to arise. Only

then did he see the figure at the controls.

The man was leaning above an instrument board; he straightened to stare from a rear port while he spoke to someone Chet could not see.

"There's more of 'em coming!" he said in a choked voice. "*Mein Gott!* Neffer can we get away!"

He fumbled with shaking hands at instruments and controls; and now Chet saw his chalk-white face and read plainly the terror that was written there. But the cords that cut into his own wrists and ankles reminded him that he was bound; he settled back upon the floor. Why struggle? If this other pilot was having trouble let him get out of it by himself—let him kill his own snakes!

That the man was having trouble there was no doubt. He looked once more behind him as if at something that pursued; then swung the ball-control to throw the ship off her course.

The craft answered sluggishly, and Chet Bullard grinned where he lay helpless upon the floor; for he knew that his ship should have been thrown crashingly aside with such a motion as that. The answer was plain: the flask of super-detonite was exhausted; here was the last feeble explosion of the final atoms of the terrible explosive that

was being admitted to the generator. And to cut in another flask meant the opening of a hidden valve.

Chet forgot the pain of his swelling hands to shake with suppressed mirth. This was going to be good! He forgot it until, through a lookout, he saw a writhing, circling fire that wrapped itself about the ship and jarred them to a halt.

The serpents!—those horrors from space that had come with the coming of the Dark Moon! They had disrupted the high-level traffic of the world; had seized great liners; torn their way in; stripped these of every living thing, and let the empty shells crash back to earth. Chet had forgotten or he had failed to realize the height at which this new pilot was flying. Only speed could save them; the monsters, with their snouts that were great suction-cups, could wrench off a metal door—tear out the glass from a port!

He saw the luminous mass crush itself against a forward lookout and felt the jar of its body against their ship. Soft and vaporous, these cloud-like serpents seemed as they drifted through space; yet the impact, when they struck, proved that this new matter had mass.

Chet saw the figure at the controls stagger back and cower in fear; the man's bullet-shaped head was covered by his upraised arms:

there was some horror outside those windows that his eyes had no wish to see. Beside him the towering figure of Schwartzmann appeared; he had sprung into Chet's view, and he screamed orders at the fear-stricken pilot.

"Fool! Swine!" Schwartzmann was shouting. "Do something! You said you could fly this ship!" In desperation he leaped forward and reached for the controls himself.

Chet's blurred faculties snapped sharply to attention. That yellow glow against the port—the jarring of their ship—it meant instant destruction once that searching snout found some place where it could secure a hold. If the air-pressure within the ship were released; if even a crack were opened!—

"Here, you!" he shouted to the frantic Schwartzmann who was jerking frenziedly at the controls that no longer gave response. "Cut these ropes!—leave those instruments alone, you fool!" He was suddenly vibrant with hate as he realized what this man had done: he had struck him, Chet, down as he would have felled an animal for butchery; he had stolen their ship; and now he was losing it. Chet hardly thought of his own desperate plight in his rage at this threat to their ship, and at Schwartzmann's inability to help himself.

"Cut these ropes!" he repeated. "Damn it all, turn me loose; I can fly us out!" He added his frank opinion of Schwartzmann and all his men. And Schwartzmann, though his dark face flushed angrily red for one instant, leaped to Chet's side and slashed at the cords with a knife.

The room swam before Chet's dizzy eyes as he came to his feet. He half fell, half drew himself full length toward the valve that he alone knew. Then again he was on his feet and he gripped at the ball-control with one hand while he opened a master throttle that cut in this new supply of explosive.

The room had been silent with the silence of empty space, save only for the scraping of a horrid body across the ship's outer shell. The silence was shattered now as if by the thunder of many guns. There was no time for easing themselves into gradual flight. Chet thrust forward on the ball-control, and the blast from their stern threw the ship as if it had been fired from a giant cannon.

The self-compensating floor swung back and up; Chet's weight was almost unbearable as the ship beneath him leaped out and on, and the terrific blast that screamed and thundered urged this speeding shell to greater and still greater speed. And then, with the facility that that speed gave, Chet's careful hands moved a tiny metal ball within its

magnetic cage, and the great ship bellowed from many ports as it followed the motion of that ball.

Could an eye have seen the wild, twisting flight, it must have seemed as if pilot and ship had gone suddenly mad. The craft corkscrewed and whirled; it leaped upward and aside; and, as the glowing mass was thrown clear of the lookout, Chet's hand moved again to that maximum forward position, and again the titanic blast from astern drove them on and out.

There were other shapes ahead, glowing lines of fire, luminous masses like streamers of cloud that looped themselves into contorted forms and writhed vividly until they straightened into sharp lines of speed that bore down upon the fleeing craft and the human food that was escaping these hungry snouts.

Chet saw them dead ahead; he saw the out-thrust heads, each ending in a great suction-cup, the row of disks that were eyes blazing above, and the gaping maw below. He altered their course not a hair's breadth as he bore down upon them, while the monsters swelled prodigiously before his eyes. And the thunderous roar from astern came with never a break, while the ship itself ceased its trembling protest against the sudden blast and drove smoothly on and into the waiting beasts.

There was a hardly perceptible thudding jar. They were free! And the forward lookouts showed only the brilliant fires of distant suns and one more glorious than the rest that meant a planet.

Chet turned at last to face Schwartzmann and his pilot where they had clung helplessly to a metal stanchion. Four or five others crept in from the cabin aft; their blanched faces told of the fear that bad gripped them—fear of the serpents; fear, too, of the terrific plunges into which the ship had been thrown. Chet Bullard drew the metal control-ball back into neutral and permitted himself the luxury of a laugh.

"You're a fine bunch of highway-men," he told Schwartzmann; "you'll steal a ship you can't fly; then come up here above the R. A. level and get mixed up with those brutes. What's the idea? Did you think you would just hop over to the Dark Moon? Some little plan like that in your mind?"

Again the dark, heavy face of Schwartzmann flushed deeply; but it was his own men upon whom he turned.

"You," he told the pilot—"you were so clever; you would knock this man senseless! You would insist that you could fly the ship!"

The pilot's eyes still bulged with the fear he had just experienced. "But, Herr Schwartzmann, it was you who told me—"

A barrage of unintelligible words cut his protest short. Schwartzmann poured forth imprecations in an unknown tongue, then turned to the others.

"Back!" he ordered. "Bah!—such men! The danger it iss over—yess! This pilot, he will take us back safely."

He turned his attention now to the waiting Chet. "Herr Bullard, iss it not—yess?"

He launched into extended apologies—he had wanted a look at this so marvelous ship—he had spied upon it; he admitted it. But this murderous attack was none of his doing; his men had got out of hand; and then he had thought it best to take Chet, unconscious as he was, and return with him where he could have care.

And Chet Bullard kept his eyes steadily upon the protesting man and said nothing, but he was thinking of a number of things. There was Walt's warning, "this Schwartzmann means mischief," and the faked message that had brought him from the hospital to get the ship from its hiding place; no, it was too much to believe. But Chet's eyes were

unchanging, and he nodded shortly in agreement as the other concluded.

"You will take us back?" Schwartzmann was asking. "I will repay you well for what inconvenience we have caused. The ship, you will return it safely to the place where it was?"

And Chet, after making and discarding a score of plans, knew there was nothing else he could do. He swung the little metal ball into a sharply-banked turn. The straight ray of light from an impossibly brilliant sun struck now on a forward lookout; it shone across the shoulder of a great globe to make a white, shining crescent as of a giant moon. It was Earth; and Chet brought the bow-sights to bear on that far-off target, while again the thunderous blast was built up to drive them back along the trackless path on which they had come. But he wondered, as he pressed forward on the control, what the real plan of this man, Schwartzmann, might be....

Less than half an hour brought them to the Repelling Area, and Chet felt the upward surge as he approached it. Here, above this magnetic field where gravitation's pull was nullified, had been the air-lanes for fast liners. Empty lanes they were now; for the R. A., as the flying fraternity knew it—the Heaviside Layer of an earlier day—marked the danger line above which the mysterious serpents lay in wait.

Only the speed of Chet's ship saved them; more than one of the luminous monsters was in sight as he plunged through the invisible R. A. and threw on their bow-blast strongly to check their fall.

Then, as he set a course that would take them to that section of the Arctic waste where the ship had been, he pondered once more upon the subject of this Schwartzmann of the shifty eyes and the glib tongue and of his men who had "got out of hand" and had captured this ship.

"Why in thunder are we back here?" Chet asked himself in perplexity. "This big boy means to keep the ship; and, whatever his plans may have been before, he will never stop short of the Dark Moon now that he has seen the old boat perform. Then why didn't he keep on when he was started? Had the serpents frightened him back?"

He was still mentally proposing questions to which there seemed no answer when he felt the pressure of a metal tube against his back. The voice of Schwartzmann was in his ears.

"This is a detonite pistol"—that voice was no longer unctuous and self-deprecating—"one move and I'll plant a charge inside you that will smash you to a jelly!"

There were hands that gripped Chet before he could turn; his arms were wrenched backward; he was helpless in the grip of Schwartzmann's men. The former pilot sprang forward.

"Take control, Max!" Schwartzmann snapped; but he followed it with a question while the pilot was reaching for the ball. "You can fly it for sure, Max?"

The man called Max answered confidently.

"*Ja wohl!*" he said with eager assurance. "Up top there would have been no trouble yet for that *verdammt, verloren* valve. That one experimental trip is enough—I fly it!"

Those who held Chet were binding his wrists. He was thrown to the floor while his feet were tied, and, as a last precaution, a gag was forced into his mouth. Schwartzmann left this work to his men. He paid no attention to Chet; he was busy at the radio.

He placed the sending-levers in strange positions that would effect a blending of wave lengths which only one receiving instrument could pick up. He spoke cryptic words into the microphone, then dropped into a language that was unfamiliar to Chet. Yet, even then, it was plain that he was giving instructions, and he repeated familiar words.

"Harkness," Chet heard him say, and, "—Delacouer—*ja!*—Mam'selle Delacouer!"

Then, leaving the radio, he said, "Put my ship inside the hangar;" and the pilot, Max, grounded their own ship to allow the men to leap out and float into the big building the big aircraft in which Schwartzmann had come.

"Now close the doors!" their leader ordered. "Leave everything as it was!" And to the pilot he gave added instructions: "There iss no air traffic here. You will to forty thousand ascend, und you will wait over this spot." Contemptuously he kicked aside the legs of the bound man that he might walk back into the cabin.

The take-off was not as smooth as it would have been had Chet's slim hands been on the controls; this burly one who handled them now was not accustomed to such sensitivity. But Chet felt the ship lift and lurch, then settle down to a swift, spiralling ascent. Now he lay still as he tried to ponder the situation.

"Now what dirty work are they up to?" he asked himself. He had seen a sullen fury on the dark face of Herr Schwartzmann as he spoke the names of Walt and Diane into the radio. Chet remembered the look now, and he struggled vainly with the cords about his

wrists. Even a detonite pistol with its tiny grain of explosive in the end of each bullet would not check him—not when Walt and Diane were endangered. And the expression on that heavy, scowling face had told him all too clearly that some real danger threatened.

But the cords held fast on his swollen wrists. His head was still throbbing; and even his side, not entirely healed, was adding to the torment that beat upon him—beat and beat with his pulsing blood—until the beating faded out into unconsciousness....

Dimly he knew they were soaring still higher as their radio picked up the warning of an approaching patrol ship; vaguely he realized that they descended again to a level of observation. Chet knew in some corner of his brain that Schwartzmann was watching from an under lookout with a powerful glass, and he heard his excited command:

"Down—go slowly, down!... They are landing.... They have entered the hangar. Now, down with it, Max! Down! down!"

The plunging fall of the ship roused Chet from his stupor. He felt the jolt of the clumsy landing despite the snow-cushioned ground; he heard plainly the exclamations from beyond an open port—the startled oath in Walter Harkness' voice, and the stinging scorn in the

words of Diane Delacouer.

Herr Schwartzmann had been in the employ of Mademoiselle Delacouer, but he was taking orders no longer. There was a sound of scuffling feet, and once the thud of a blow.... Then Chet watched with heavy, hopeless eyes as the familiar faces of Diane and Walt appeared in the doorway. Their hands were bound; they, too, were threatened with a slim-barreled pistol in the hands of the smirking, exultant Schwartzmann.

A tall, thin-faced man whom Chet had not seen before followed them into the room. The newcomer was motioned forward now, as Schwartzmann called an order to the pilot:

"All right; now we go, Max! Herr Doktor Kreiss will give you the bearings; he knows his way among the stars."

Herr Schwartzmann doubled over in laughing appreciation of his own success before he straightened up and regarded his captives with cold eyes.

"Such a pleasure!" he mocked: "such charming passengers to take with me on my first trip into space; this ship, it iss not so goot. I will build better ships later on; I will let you see them when I shall come

to visit you."

He laughed again at sight of the wondering looks in the eyes of the three; stooping, he jerked the gag from Chet's mouth.

"You do not understand," he exclaimed. "I should haff explained. You see, *meine guten Freunde*, we go—ach!—you have guessed it already! We go to the Dark Moon. I am pleased to take you with me on the trip out; but coming back, I will have so much to bring—there will be no room for passengers.

"I could have killed you here," he said; and his mockery gave place for a moment to a savage tone, "but the patrol ships, they are everywhere. But I have influence here und there—I arranged that your flask of gas should be charged with explosive, I discredited you, and yet I could not so great a risk take as to kill you all."

"So came inspiration! I called your foolish young friend here from the hospital. I ordered him to go at once to the ship hidden where I could not find, and I signed the name of Herr Harkness."

Chet caught the silent glances of his friends who could yet smile hopefully through the other emotions that possessed them. He ground his teeth as the smooth voice of Herr Schwartzmann went on:

"He led me here; the young fool! Then I sent for you—and this time I signed his name—und you came. So simple!"

"Und now we go in my ship to my new world. And," he added savagely, "if one of you makes the least trouble, he will land on the Dark Moon-yess!-but he will land hard, from ten thousand feet up!"

The great generator was roaring. To Chet came the familiar lift of the R. A. effect. They were beyond the R. A.; they were heading out and away from Earth; and his friends were captives through his own unconscious treachery, carried out into space in their own ship, with the hands of an enemy gripping the controls....

Chet's groan, as he turned his face away from the others who had tried to smile cheerfully, had nothing to do with the pain of his body. It was his mind that was torturing him.

But he muttered broken words as he lay there, words that had reference to one Schwartzmann. "I'll get him, damn him! I'll get him!" he was promising himself.

And Herr Schwartzmann who was clever, would have proved his cleverness still more by listening. For a Master Pilot of the World does not get his rating on vain boasts. He must know first his flying,

his ships and his air—but he is apt to make good in other ways as well.

Chapter 3: Out of Control

Walter Harkness had built this ship with Chet's help. They had designed it for space-travel. It was the first ship to leave the Earth under its own power, reach another heavenly body, and come back for a safe landing. But they had not installed any luxuries for the passengers.

In the room where the three were confined, there were no self-compensating chairs such as the high-liners used. But the acceleration of the speeding ship was constant, and the rear wall became their floor where they sat or paced back and forth. Their bonds had been removed, and one of Harkness' hands was gripping Diane's where they sat side by side. Chet was briskly limbering his cramped muscles.

He glanced at the two who sat silent nearby, and he knew what was in their minds—knew that each was thinking of the other, forgetting their own danger: and it was these two who had saved his life on their first adventure out in space.

Walt—one man who was never spoiled by his millions; and Diane—straight and true as they make 'em! Some way, somehow, they must be saved—thus ran his thoughts—but it looked bad for them all.

Schwartzmann?—no use kidding themselves about that lad; he was one bad hombre. The best they could hope for was to be marooned on the Dark Moon—left there to live or to die amid those savage surroundings; and the worst that might happen—! But Chet refused to think of what alternatives might occur to the ugly, distorted mind of the man who had them at his mercy.

There was no echo of these thoughts when he spoke; the smile that flashed across his lean face brought a brief response from the despondent countenances of his companions.

"Well," Chet observed, and ran his hand through a tangle of blond hair, "I have heard that the Schwartzmann lines give service, and I reckon I heard right. Here we were wanting to go back to the Dark Moon, and,"—he paused to point toward a black portlight where occasional lights flashed past—"I'll say we're going; going somewhere at least. All I hope is that that Maxie boy doesn't find the Dark Moon at about ten thousand per. He may be a great little skipper on a nice, slow, five-hundred-maximum freighter, but not on this boat. I don't like his landings."

Diane Delacouer raised her eyes to smile approvingly upon him. "You're good, Chet," she said; "you are a darn good sport. They knock you down out of control, and you nose right back up for a

forty-thousand foot zoom. And you try to carry us with you. Well, I guess it's time we got over our gloom. Now what is going to happen?"

"I'll tell you," said Walter Harkness, looking at his watch: "if that fool pilot of Schwartzmann's doesn't cut his stern thrust and build up a bow resistance, we'll overshoot our mark and go tearing on a few hundred thousand miles in space."

Diane was playing up to Chet's lead.

"*Bien!*" she exclaimed. "A few million, perhaps! Then we may see some of those Martians we've been speculating about. I hear they are handsome, my Walter—much better looking than you. Maybe this is all for the best after all!"

"Say," Harkness protested, "if you two idiots don't know enough to worry as you ought, I don't see any reason why I should do all the heavy worrying for the whole crowd. I guess you've got the right idea at that: take what comes when it gets here—or when we get there."

Small wonder, thought Chet, that Herr Schwartzmann stared at them in puzzled bewilderment when he flung open the door, and took one

long stride into the room. Stocky, heavy-muscled, he stood regarding them, a frown of suspicion drawing his face into ugly lines. Plainly he was disturbed by this laughing good-humor where he had expected misery and hopelessness and tears. He moved the muzzle of a detonite pistol back and forth.

“You haff been drinking!" he stated at last. "You are intoxicated—all of you!" His eyes darted searching glances about the little room that was too bare to hide any cause for inebriation.

It was Mam'selle Diane who answered him with an emphatic shake of her dark head; an engaging smile tugged at the corners of her lips. "*Mais non!* my dear Herr Schwartzmann," she assured him: "it is joy—just happiness at again approaching our Moon—and in such good company, too."

"Fortunes of war, Schwartzmann," declared Harkness; "we know how to accept them, and we don't hold it against you. We are down now, but your turn will come."

The man's reply was a sputtering of rage in words that neither Chet nor Harkness could understand. The latter turned to the girl with a question.

"Did you get it, Diane? What did he say?"

"I think I would not care to translate it literally," said Diane Delacouer, twisting her soft mouth into an expression of distaste; "but, speaking generally, he disagrees with you."

Herr Schwartzmann was facing Harkness belligerently. "You think you know something! What is it?" he demanded. "You are under my feet: I kick you as I would *meinen Hund* and you can do nothing." He aimed a savage kick into the air to illustrate his meaning, and Harkness' face flushed suddenly scarlet.

Whatever retort was on Harkness' tongue was left unspoken; a sharp look from Chet, who brought his fingers swiftly to his lips in a gesture of silence, checked the reply. The action was almost unconscious on Chet's part; it was as unpremeditated as the sudden thought that flashed abruptly into his mind—

They were helpless; they were in this brute's power beyond the slightest doubt. Schwartzmann's words, "You know something. What is it?" had fired a swift train of thought.

The idea was nebulous as yet ... but if they could throw a scare into this man—make him think there was danger ahead.... Yes, that was

it: make Schwartzmann think they knew of dangers that he could not avoid. They had been there before: make this man afraid to kill them. The dreadful alternative that Chet had feared to think of might be averted....

All this came in an instantaneous, flashing correlation of his conscious thoughts.

"I'll tell you what we mean," he told Schwartzmann. He even leaned forward to shake an impressive finger before the other's startled face. "I'll tell you first of all that it doesn't make a damn bit of difference who is on top—or it won't in a few hours more. We'll all be washed out together.

"I've landed once on the Dark Moon; I know what will happen. And do you know how fast we are going? Do you know the Moon's speed as it approaches? Had you thought what you will look like when that fool pilot rams into it head on?

"And that isn't all!" He grinned derisively into Schwartzmann's flushed face, disregarding the half-raised pistol; it was as if some secret thought had filled him with overpowering amusement. His broad grin grew into a laugh. "That isn't all, big boy. What will you do if you do land? What will you do when you open the ports and

the—?" He cut his words short, and the smile, with all other expression, was carefully erased from his young face.

"No, I reckon I won't spoil the surprise. We got through it all right; maybe you will, too—maybe!"

And again it was Diane who played up to Chet's lead without a moment's hesitation.

"Chet," she demanded, "aren't you going to warn him? You would not allow him and his men to be—"

She stopped in apparent horror of the unsaid words; Chet gave her an approving glance.

"We'll see about that when we get there, Diane."

He turned abruptly back to Schwartzmann. "I'll forget what a rotten winner you have been; I'll help you out; I'll take the controls if you like. Of course, your man, Max, may set us down without damage; then again—"

"Take them!" Schwartzmann ungraciously made an order of his acceptance. "Take the controls, Herr Bullard! But if you make a single false move!" The menacing pistol completed the threat.

But "Herr Bullard" merely turned to his companion with a level, understanding look. "Come on," he said; "you can both help in working out our location."

He stepped before the burly man that Diane might precede them through the door. And he felt the hand of Walt Harkness on his arm in a pressure that told what could not be said aloud.

There were pallid-faced men in the cabin through which they passed; men who stared and stared from the window-ports into the black immensity of space. Chet, too, stopped to look; there had been no port-holes in that inner room where they had been confined.

He knew what to expect; he knew how awe-inspiring would be the sight of strange, luminous bodies—great islands of light—masses of animaculae—that glowed suddenly, then melted again into velvet black. A whirl of violet grew almost golden in sudden motion; Chet knew it for an invisible monster of space. Glowingly luminous as it threw itself upon a subtle mass of shimmering light, it faded like a flickering flame, and went dark as its motion ceased.

Life!—life everywhere in this ocean of space! And on every hand was death. "Not surprising," Chet realized, "that these other Earthmen are awed and trembling!"

The sun was above them; its light struck squarely down through the upper ports. This was polarized light—there was nothing outside to reflect or refract it—and, coming as a straight beam from above, it made a brilliant circle upon the floor from which it was diffused throughout the room. It was as if the floor itself was the illuminating agent.

No eye could bear to look into the glare from above; nor was there need, for the other ports drew the eyes with their black depths of unplumbed space.

Black!—so velvet as to seem almost tangible! Could one have reached out a hand, that blackness, it seemed, must be a curtain that the hand could draw aside, where unflickering points of light pricked through the dark to give promise of some radiant glory beyond.

They had seen it before, these three, yet Chet caught the eyes of Harkness and Diane and knew that his own eyes must share something of the look he saw in theirs—something of reverent wonder and a strange humility before this evidence of transcendent greatness.

Their own immediate problem seemed gone. The tyranny of this glowering human and his men—the efforts of the whole world and

its struggling millions—how absurdly unimportant it all was! How it faded to insignificance! And yet....

Chet came from the reverie that held him. There was one man by whom this beauty was unseen. Herr Schwartzmann was angrily ordering them on, and, surprisingly, Chet laughed aloud.

This problem, he realized, was *his* problem—his to solve with the help of the other two. And it was *not* insignificant; he knew with some sudden wordless knowledge that there was nothing in all the great scheme but that it had its importance. This vastness that was beyond the power of human mind to grasp ceased to be formidable—he was part of it. He felt buoyed up; and he led the way confidently toward the control-room door where Schwartzmann stood.

The scientist, whom Schwartzmann had called Herr Doktor Kreiss, was beside the pilot. He was leaning forward to search the stars in the blackness ahead, but the pilot turned often to stare through the rear lookouts as if drawn in fearful fascination by what was there. Chet took the controls at Schwartzmann's order; the pilot saluted with a trembling hand and vanished into the cabin at the rear.

"Ready for flying orders, Doctor," the new pilot told Herr Kreiss.

"I'll put her where you say—within reason."

Behind him he heard the choked voice of Mademoiselle Diane: "*Regardez! Ah, mon Dieu*, the beauty of it! This loveliness—it hurts!"

One hand was pressed to her throat; her face was turned as the pilot's had been that she might stare and stare at a quite impossible moon—a great half-disk of light in the velvet dark.

"This loveliness—it hurts!" Chet looked, too, and knew what Diane was feeling. There was a catch of emotion in his own throat—a feeling that was almost fear.

A giant half-moon!—and he knew it was the Earth. Golden Earth-light came to them in a flooding glory; the blazing sun struck on it from above to bring out half the globe in brilliant gold that melted to softest, iridescent, rainbow tints about its edge. Below, hung motionless in the night, was another sphere. Like a reflection of Earth in the depths of some Stygian lake, the old moon shone, too, in a half-circle of light.

Small wonder that these celestial glories brought a gasp of delight from Diane, or drew into lines of fear the face of that other pilot who

saw only his own world slipping away. But Chet Bullard, Master Pilot of the World, swung back to scan a star-chart that the scientist was holding, then to search out a similar grouping in the black depths into which they were plunging, and to bring the cross-hairs of a rigidly mounted telescope upon that distant target.

"How far?" he asked himself in a half-spoken thought, "—how far have we come?"

There was an instrument that ticked off the seconds in this seemingly timeless void. He pressed a small lever beside it, and, beneath a glass that magnified the readings, there passed the time-tape. Each hour and minute was there; each movement of the controls was indicated; each trifling variation in the power of the generator's blast. Chet made some careful computations and passed the paper to Harkness, who tilted the time-tape recorder that he might see the record.

"Check this, will you, Walt?" Chet was asking. "It is based on the time of our other trip, acceleration assumed as one thousand miles per hour per hour out of air—"

The scientist interrupted; he spoke in English that was carefully precise.

"It should lie directly ahead—the Dark Moon. I have calculated with exactness."

Walter Harkness had snatched up a pair of binoculars. He swung sharply from lookout to lookout while he searched the heavens.

"It's damned lucky for us that you made a slight error," Chet was telling the other.

"Error?" Kreiss challenged. "Impossible!"

"Then you and I are dead right this minute," Chet told him. "We are crossing the orbit of the Dark Moon—crossing at twenty thousand miles per hour relative to Earth, slightly in excess of that figure relative to the Dark Moon. If it had been here—!" He had been watching Harkness anxiously; he bit off his words as the binoculars were thrust into his hand.

"There she comes," Harkness told him quietly; "it's up to you!"

But Chet did not need the glasses. With his unaided eyes he could see a faint circle of violet light. It lay ahead and slightly above, and it grew visibly larger as he watched. A ring of nothingness, whose outline was the faintest shimmering halo; more of the distant stars

winked out swiftly behind that ghostly circle; it was the Dark Moon! —and it was rushing upon them!

Chet swung an instrument upon it. He picked out a jet of violet light that could be distinguished, and he followed it with the cross-hairs while he twirled a micrometer screw; then he swiftly copied the reading that the instrument had inscribed. The invisible disk with its ghostly edge of violet was perceptibly larger as he slammed over the control-ball to up-end them in air.

Under the control-room's nitron illuminator the cheeks of Herr Doktor Kreiss were pale and bloodless as if his heart had ceased to function. Harkness had moved quietly back to the side of Diane Delacouer and was holding her two hands firmly in his.

The very air seemed charged with the quick tenseness of emotions. Schwartzmann must have sensed it even before he saw the onrushing death. Then he leaped to a lookout, and, an instant later, sprang at Chet calmly fingering the control.

"Fool!" he screamed, "you would kill us all? Turn away from it! Away from it!"

He threw himself in a frenzy upon the pilot. The detonite pistol was

still in his hand. "Quick!" he shouted. "Turn us!"

Harkness moved swiftly, but the scientist, Kreiss, was nearer; it was he who smashed the gun-hand down with a quick blow and snatched at the weapon.

Schwartzmann was beside himself with rage. "You, too?" he demanded. "Giff it me—traitor!"

But the tall man stood uncompromisingly erect. "Never," he said, "have I seen a ship large enough to hold two commanding pilots. I take your orders in all things, Herr Schwartzmann—all but this. If we die—we die."

Schwartzmann sputtered: "We should haff turned away. Even yet we might. It will—it will—"

"Perhaps," agreed Kreiss, still in that precise, class-room voice, "perhaps it will. But this I know: with an acceleration of one thousand m.p.h. as this young man with the badge of a Master Pilot says, we cannot hope, in the time remaining, to overcome our present velocity; we can never check our speed and build up a relatively opposite motion before that globe would overwhelm us. If he has figured correctly, this young man—if he has found the true

resultant of our two motions of approach—and if he has swung us that we may drive out on a line perpendicular to the resultant—"

"I think I have," said Chet quietly. "If I haven't, in just a few minutes it won't matter to any of us; it won't matter at all." He met the gaze of Herr Doktor Kreiss who regarded him curiously.

"If we escape," the scientist told him, "you will understand that I am under Herr Schwartzmann's command; I will be compelled to shoot you if he so orders. But, Herr Bullard, at this moment I would be very proud to shake your hand."

And Chet, as he extended his hand, managed a grin that was meant also for the tense, white-faced Harkness and Diane. "I like to see 'em dealt that way," he said, "—right off the top of the deck."

But the smile was erased as he turned back to the lookout. He had to lean close to see all of the disk, so swiftly was the approaching globe bearing down.

It came now from the side; it swelled larger and larger before his eyes. Their own ship seemed unmoving; only the unending thunder of the generator told of the frantic efforts to escape. They seemed hung in space; their own terrific speed seemed gone—added to and

fused with the orbital motion of the Dark Moon to bring swiftly closer that messenger of death. The circle expanded silently; became menacingly huge.

Chet was whispering softly to himself: "If I'd got hold of her an hour sooner—thirty minutes—or even ten.... We're doing over twenty thousand an hour combined speed, and we'll never really hit it.... We'll never reach the ground."

He turned this over in his mind, and he nodded gravely in confirmation of his own conclusions. It seemed somehow of tremendous importance that he get this clearly thought out—this experience that was close ahead.

"Skin friction!" he added. "It will burn us up!"

He had a sudden vision of a flaming star blazing a hot trail through the atmosphere of this globe; there would be only savage eyes to follow it—to see the line of fire curving swiftly across the heavens.... He, himself, was seeing that blazing meteor so plainly....

His eyes found the lookout: the globe was gone. They were close—close! Only for the enveloping gas that made of this a dark moon, they would be seeing the surface, the outlines of continents.

Chet strained his eyes—to see nothing! It was horrible. It had been fearful enough to watch that expanding globe.... He was abruptly aware that the outer rim of the lookout was red!

For Chet Bullard, time ceased to have meaning; what were seconds—or centuries—as he stared at that glowing rim? He could not have told. The outer shell of their ship—it was radiant—shining red-hot in the night. And above the roar of the generator came a nerve-ripping shriek. A wind like a blast from hell was battering and tearing at their ship.

"Good-by!" He had tried to call; the demoniac shrieking from without smothered his voice. One arm was across his eyes in an unconscious motion. The air of the little room was stifling. He forced his arm down: he would meet death face to face.

The lookout was ringed with fire; it was white with the terrible white of burning steel!—it was golden!—then cherry red! It was dying, as the fire dies from glowing metal plunged in its tempering bath—or thrown into the cold reaches of space!

In Chet's ears was the roar of a detonite motor. He tried to realize that the lookouts were rimmed with black—cold, fireless black! An incredible black! There were stars there like pinpoints of flame! But

conviction came only when he saw from a lookout in another wall a circle of violet that shrank and dwindled as he watched....

A hand was gripping his shoulder; he heard the voice of Walter Harkness speaking, while Walt's hand crept over to raise the triple star that was pinned to his blouse.

"Master Pilot of the World!" Harkness was saying. "That doesn't cover enough territory, old man. It's another rating that you're entitled to, but I'm damned if I know what it is."

And, for once, Chet's ready smile refused to form. He stared dumbly at his friend; his eyes passed to the white face of Mademoiselle Diane; then back to the controls, where his hand, without conscious volition, was reaching to move a metal ball.

"Missed it!" he assured himself. "Hit the fringe of the air—just the very outside. If we'd been twenty thousand feet nearer!..." He was moving the ball; their bow was swinging. He steadied it and set the ship on an approximate course.

"A stern chase!" he said aloud. "All our momentum to be overcome—but it's easy sailing now!"

He pushed the ball forward to the limit, and the explosion-motor gave thunderous response.

Chapter 4: The Return to the Dark Moon

No man faces death in so shocking a form without feeling the effects. Death had flicked them with a finger of flame and had passed them by. Chet Bullard found his hands trembling uncontrollably as he fumbled for a book and opened it. The tables of figures printed there were blurred at first to his eyes, but he forced himself to forget the threat that was past, for there was another menace to consider now.

And uppermost in his mind, when his thoughts came back into some approximate order, was condemnation of himself for an opportunity that was gone.

"I could have jumped him," he told himself with bitter self-reproach; "I could have grabbed the pistol from Kreiss—the man was petrified." And then Chet had to admit a fact there was no use of denying: "I was as paralyzed as he was," he said, and only knew he had spoken aloud when he saw the puzzled look that crossed Harkness' face.

Harkness and Diane had drawn near. In a far corner of the little room Schwartzmann had motioned to Kreiss to join him; they were as far away from the others as could be managed. Schwartzmann, Chet

judged, needed some scientific explanation of these disturbing events; also he needed to take the detonite pistol from Kreiss' hand and jam it into his own hand. His eyes, at Chet's unconscious exclamation, had come with instant suspicion toward the two men.

"Forty-seven hours, Walt," the pilot said, and repeated it loudly for Schwartzmann's benefit; "—forty-seven hours before we return to this spot. We are driving out into space; we've crossed the orbit of the Dark Moon, and we're doing twenty thousand miles an hour.

"Now we must decelerate. It will take twenty hours to check us to zero speed; then twenty-seven more to shoot us back to this same point in space, allowing, of course, for a second deceleration. The same figuring with only slight variation will cover a return to the Dark Moon. As we sweep out I can allow for the moon-motion, and we'll hit it at a safe landing speed on the return trip this time."

Chet was paying little attention to his companion as he spoke. His eyes, instead, were covertly watching the bulky figure of Schwartzmann. As he finished, their captor shot a volley of questions at the scientist beside him; he was checking up on the pilot's remarks.

Chet was leaning forward to stare intently from a lookout, his head

was close to that of Harkness.

"Listen, Walt," he whispered; "the Moon's out of sight; it's easy to lose. Maybe I can't find it again, anyway—it's going to take some nice navigating—but I'll miss it by ten thousand miles if you say so, and even the Herr Doktor can't check me on it."

Chet saw the eyes of Schwartzmann grow intent. He reached ostentatiously for another book of tables, and he seated himself that he might figure in comfort.

"Just check me on this," he told Harkness.

He put down meaningless figures, while the man beside him remained silent. Over and over he wrote them—would Harkness never reach a decision?—over and over, until—

"I don't agree with that," Harkness told him and reached for the stylus in Chet's hand. And, while he appeared to make his own swift computations, there were words instead of figures that flowed from his pen.

"Only alternative: return to Earth," he wrote. "Then S will hold off; wait in upper levels. Kreiss will give him new bearings. We'll shoot

out again and do it better next time. Kreiss is nobody's fool. S means to maroon us on Moon—kill us perhaps. He'll get us there, sure. We might as well go now."

Chet had seen a movement across the room. "Let's start all over again," he broke in abruptly. He covered the writing with a clean sheet of paper where he set down more figures. He was well under way when Schwartzmann's quick strides brought him towering above them. Again the detonite pistol was in evidence; its small black muzzle moved steadily from Harkness to Chet.

"For your life—such as is left of it—you may thank Herr Doktor Kreiss," he told Chet. "I thought at first you would have attempted to kill us." His smile, as he regarded them, seemed to Chet to be entirely evil. "You were near death twice, my dear Herr Bullard; and the danger is not entirely removed.

"'Forty-seven hours' you have said; in forty-seven hours you will land us on the Dark Moon. If you do not,"—he raised the pistol suggestively—"remember that the pilot, Max, can always take us back to Earth. You are not indispensable."

Chet looked at the dark face and its determined and ominous scowl. "You're a cheerful sort of soul, aren't you?" he demanded. "Do you

have any faint idea of what a job this is? Do you know we will shoot another two hundred thousand miles straight out before I can check this ship? Then we come back; and meanwhile the Dark Moon has gone on its way. Had you thought that there's a lot of room to get lost in out here?"

"Forty-seven hours!" said Schwartzmann. "I would advise that you do not lose your way."

Chet shot one quizzical glance at Harkness.

"That," he said, "makes it practically unanimous."

Schwartzmann, with an elaborate show of courtesy, escorted Diane Delacouer to a cabin where she might rest. At a questioning look between Diane and Harkness, their captor reassured them.

"Mam'selle shall be entirely safe," he said. "She may join you here whenever she wishes. As for you,"—he was speaking to Harkness —"I will permit you to stay here. I could tie you up but this iss not necessary."

And Harkness must have agreed that it was indeed unnecessary, for either Kreiss or Max, or some other of Schwartzmann's men, was at

his side continuously from that moment on.

Chet would have liked a chance for a quiet talk and an exchange of ideas. It seemed that somewhere, somehow, he should be able to find an answer to their problem. He stared moodily out into the blackness ahead, where a distant star was seemingly their goal. Harkness stood at his side or paced back and forth in the little room, until he threw himself, at last, upon a cot.

And always the great stern-blast roared; muffled by the insulated walls, its unceasing thunder came at last to be unheard. To the pilot there was neither sound nor motion. His directional sights were unswervingly upon that distant star ahead. Seemingly they were suspended, helpless and inert, in a black void. But for the occasional glowing masses of strange living substance that flashed past in this ocean of space, he must almost have believed they were motionless —a dead ship in a dead, black night.

But the luminous things flashed and were gone—and their coming, strangely, was from astern; they flicked past and vanished up ahead. And, by this, Chet knew that their tremendous momentum was unchecked. Though he was using the great stern blast to slow the ship, it was driving stern-first into outer space. Nor, for twenty hours, was there a change, more than a slackening of the breathless

speed with which the lights went past.

Twenty hours—and then Chet knew that they were in all truth hung motionless, and he prayed that his figures that told him this were correct.... More timeless minutes, an agony of waiting—and a dimly-glowing mass that was ahead approached their bow, swung off and vanished far astern. And, with its going, Chet knew that the return trip was begun.

He gave Harkness the celestial bearing marks and relinquished the helm. "Full speed ahead as you are," he ordered: "then at nineteen-forty on W.S. time, we'll cut it and ease on bow repulsion to the limit."

And, despite the strangeness of their surroundings, the ceaseless, murmuring roar of the exhaust, the weird world outside, where endless space was waiting for man's exploration—despite the deadly menace that threatened, Chet dropped his head upon his outflung arms and slept.

To his sleep-drugged brain it was scarcely a moment until a hand was dragging at his shoulder.

"Forty-seven hours!" the voice of Schwartzmann was saying.

And: "Some navigating!" Harkness was exclaiming in flattering amazement. "Wake up, Chet! Wake up! The Dark Moon's in sight. You've hit it on the nose, old man: she isn't three points off the sights!"

The bow-blast was roaring full on. Ahead of them Chet's sleepy eyes found a circle of violet; and he rubbed his eyes savagely that he might take his bearings on Sun and Earth.

As it had been before, the Earth was a giant half-moon; like a mirror-sphere it shot to them across the vast distance the reflected glory of the sun. But the globe ahead was a ghostly world. Its black disk was lost in the utter blackness of space. It was a circle, marked only by the absence of star-points and by the halo of violet glow that edged it about.

Chet cut down the repelling blast. He let the circle enlarge, then swung the ship end for end in mid-space that the more powerful stern exhaust might be ready to counteract the gravitational pull of the new world.

Again those impalpable clouds surrounded them. Here was the enveloping gas that made this a dark moon—the gas, if Harkness' theory was correct, that let the sun's rays pass unaltered; that took

the light through freely to illumine this globe, but that barred its return passage as reflected light.

Black—dead black was the void into which they were plunging, until the darkness gave way before a gentle glow that enfolded their ship. The golden light enveloped them in growing splendor. Through every lookout it was flooding the cabin with brilliant rays, until, from below them, directly astern of the ship, where the thundering blast checked their speed of descent, emerged a world.

And, to Chet Bullard, softly fingering the controls of the first ship of space—to Chet Bullard, whose uncanny skill had brought the tiny speck that was their ship safely back from the dark recesses of the unknown—there came a thrill that transcended any joy of the first exploration.

Here was water in great seas of unreal hue—and those seas were his! Vast continents, ripe for adventure and heavy with treasure—and they, too, were his! His own world—his and Diane's and Walt's! Who was this man, Schwartzmann, that dared dream of violating their possessions?

A slender tube pressed firmly, uncompromisingly, into his back to give the answer to his question. "Almost I wish you had missed it!"

Herr Schwartzmann was saying. "But now you will land; you will set us down in some place that you know. No tricks, Herr Bullard! You are clever, but not clever enough for that. We will land, yess, where you know it is safe."

From the lookout, the man stared for a moment with greedy eyes; then brought his gaze back to the three. His men, beside Harkness and Diane, were alert; the scientist, Kreiss, stood close to Chet.

"A nice little world," Schwartzmann told them. "Herr Harkness, you have filed claims on it; who am I to dispute with the great Herr Harkness? Without question it iss yours!"

He laughed loudly, while his eyes narrowed between creasing wrinkles of flesh. "You shall enjoy it," he told them; "—all your life."

And Chet, as he caught the gaze of Harkness and Diane, wondered how long this enjoyment would last. "All your life!" But this was rather indefinite as a measure of time.

Chapter 5: A Desperate Act

The ship that Chet Bullard and Harkness had designed had none of the instruments for space navigation that the ensuing years were to bring. Chet's accuracy was more the result of that flyer's sixth sense —that same uncanny power that had served aviators so well in an earlier day. But Chet was glad to see his instruments registering once more as he approached a new world.

Even the sonoflector was recording; its invisible rays were darting downward to be reflected back again from the surface below. That absolute altitude recording was a joy to read; it meant a definite relationship with the world.

"I'll hold her at fifty thousand," he told Harkness. "Watch for some outline that you can remember from last time."

There was an irregular area of continental size; only when they had crossed it did Harkness point toward an outflung projection of land. "That peninsula," he exclaimed; "we saw that before! Swing south and inland.... Now down forty, and east of south.... This ought to be the spot."

Perhaps Harkness, too, had the flyer's indefinable power of

orientation. He guided Chet in the downward flight, and his pointing finger aimed at last at a cluster of shadows where a setting sun brought mountain ranges into strong relief. Chet held the ship steady, hung high in the air, while the quick-spreading mantle of night swept across the world below. And, at last, when the little world was deep-buried in shadow, they saw the red glow of fires from a hidden valley in the south.

"Fire Valley!" said Chet. "Don't say anything about me being a navigator. Wait, you've brought us home, sure enough."

"Home!" He could not overcome this strange excitement of a home-coming to their own world. Even the man who stood, pistol in hand, behind him was, for the moment, forgotten.

Valley of a thousand fires!—scene of his former adventures! Each fumerole was adding its smoky red to the fiery glow that illumined the place. There were ragged mountains hemming it in; Chet's gaze passed on to the valley's end.

Down there, where the fires ceased, there would be water; he would land there! And the ship from Earth slipped down in a long slanting line to cushion against its under exhausts, whose soft thunder echoed back from a bare expanse of frozen lava. Then its roaring faded. The

silvery shape sank softly to its rocky bed, as Chet cut the motor that had sung its song of power since the moment when Schwartzmann had carried him off—taken him from that frozen, forgotten corner of an incredibly distant Earth.

“Iss there air?" Schwartzmann demanded. Chet came to himself again with a start: he saw the man peering from the lookout to right and to left as if he would see all that there was in the last light of day.

"Strange!" he was grumbling to himself. "A strange place! But those hills—I saw their markings—there will be metals there. I will explore; later I return: I will mine them. Many ships I must build to establish a line. The first transportation line of space. Me, Jacob Schwartzmann—I will do it. I will haff more than anyone else on Earth; I will make them all come to me crawling on their bellies!"

Chet saw the hard shine of the narrowed eyes. For an instant only, he dared to consider the chance of leaping upon the big, gloating figure. One blow and a quick snatch for the pistol!... Then he knew the folly of such a plan: Schwartzmann's men were armed; he would be downed in another second, his body a shattered, jellied mass.

Schwartzmann's thoughts had come back to the matter of air; he

motioned Chet and Harkness toward the port.

Diane Delacouer had joined them and she thrust herself quickly between the two men. And, though Schwartzmann made a movement as if he would snatch her back, he thought better of it and motioned for the portal to be swung. Chet felt him close behind as he followed the others out into the gathering dark.

The air was heavy with the fragrance of night-blooming trees. They were close to the edge of the lava flow. The rock was black in the light of a starry sky; it dropped away abruptly to a lower glade. A stream made silvery sparklings in the night, while beyond it were waving shadows of strange trees whose trunks were ghostly white.

It was all so familiar.... Chet smiled understandingly as he saw Walt Harkness' arm go about the trim figure of Diane Delacouer. No mannish attire could disguise Diane's charms; nor could nerve and cold courage that any man might envy detract from her femininity. Her dark, curling hair was blowing back from her upraised face as the scented breezes played about her; and the soft beauty of that face was enhanced by the very starlight that revealed it.

It was here that Walt and Diane had learned to love; what wonder that the fragrant night brought only remembrance, and forgetfulness

of their present plight. But Chet Bullard, while he saw them and smiled in sympathy, knew suddenly that other eyes were watching, too; he felt the bulky figure of Herr Schwartzmann beside him grow tense and rigid.

But Schwartzmann's voice, when he spoke, was controlled. "All right," he called toward the ship; "all iss safe."

Yet Chet wondered at that sudden tensing, and an uneasy presentiment found entrance to his thoughts. He must keep an eye on Schwartzmann, even more than he had supposed.

Their captor had threatened to maroon them on the Dark Moon. Chet did not question his intent. Schwartzmann would have nothing to gain by killing them now. It would be better to leave them here, for he might find them useful later on. But did he plan to leave them all or only two? Behind the steady, expressionless eyes of the Master Pilot, strange thoughts were passing....

There were orders, at length, to return to the ship. "It is dark already," Schwartzmann concluded: "nothing can be accomplished at night."

"How long are the days and nights?" he asked Harkness.

"Six hours," Harkness told him; "our little world spins fast."

"Then for six hours we sleep," was the order. And again Herr Schwartzmann conducted Mademoiselle Delacouer to her cabin, while Chet Bullard watched until he saw the man depart and heard the click of the lock on the door of Diane's room.

Then for six hours he listened to the sounds of sleeping men who were sprawled about him on the floor; for six hours he saw the one man who sat on guard beside a light that made any thought of attack absurd. And he cursed himself for a fool, as he lay wakeful and vainly planning—a poor, futile fool who was unable to cope with this man who had bested him.

Nineteen seventy-three!—and here were Harkness and Diane and himself, captured by a man who was mentally and morally a misfit in a modern world. A throw-back—that was Schwartzmann: Harkness had said it. He belonged back in nineteen fourteen.

Harkness was beyond the watching guard; from where he lay came sounds of restless movement. Chet knew that he was not alone in this mood of hopeless dejection. There was no opportunity for talk; only with the coming of day did the two find a chance to exchange a few quick words.

The guard roused the others at the first light of sunlight beyond the ports. Harkness sauntered slowly to where Chet was staring from a lookout. He, too, leaned to see the world outside, and he spoke cautiously in a half-whisper:

"Not a chance, Chet. No use trying to bluff this big crook any more. He's here, and he's safe; and he knows it as well as we do. We'll let him ditch us—you and Diane and me. Then, when we're on our own, we'll watch our chance. He will go crazy with what he finds—may get careless—then we'll seize the ship—" His words ended abruptly. As Schwartzmann came behind them, he was casually calling Chet's attention to a fumerole from which a jet of vapor had appeared. Yellowish, it was; and the wind was blowing it.

Chet turned away; he hardly saw Schwartzmann or heard Harkness' words. He was thinking of what Walt had said. Yes, it was all they could do; there was no chance of a fight with them now. But later!

Diane Delacouer came into the control-room at the instant; her dark eyes were still lovely with sleep, but they brightened to flash an encouraging smile toward the two men. There were five of Schwartzmann's men in the ship besides the pilot and the scientist, Kreiss. They all crowded in after Diane.

They must have had their orders in advance; Schwartzmann merely nodded, and they sprang upon Harkness and Chet. The two were caught off their guard; their arms were twisted behind them before resistance could be thought of. Diane gave a cry, started forward, and was brushed back by a sweep of Schwartzmann's arm. The man himself stood staring at them, unmoving, wordless. Only the flesh about his eyes gathered into creases to squeeze the eyes to malignant slits. There was no mistaking the menace in that look.

“I think we do not need you any more," he said at last. "I think, Herr Harkness, this is the end of our little argument—and, Herr Harkness, you lose. Now, I will tell you how it iss that you pay.

"You haff thought, perhaps, I would kill you. But you were wrong, as you many times have been. You haff not appreciated my kindness; you haff not understood that mine iss a heart of gold.

"Even I was not sure before we came what it iss best to do. But now I know. I saw oceans and many lands on this world. I saw islands in those oceans.

"You so clever are—such a great thinker iss Herr Harkness—and on one of those islands you will haff plenty of time to think—yess! You can think of your goot friend, Schwartzmann and of his kindness to

you."

"You are going to maroon us on an island?" asked Walt Harkness hoarsely. Plainly his plans for seizing the ship were going awry. "You are going to put the three of us off in some lost corner of this world?"

Chet Bullard was silent until he saw the figure of Harkness struggling to throw off his two guards. "Walt," he called loudly, "take it easy! For God's sake, Walt, keep your head!"

This, Chet sensed, was no time for resistance. Let Schwartzmann go ahead with his plans; let him think them complacent and unresisting; let Max pilot the ship; then watch for an opening when they could land a blow that would count! He heard Schwartzmann laughing now, laughing as if he were enjoying something more pleasing than the struggles of Walt.

Chet was standing by the controls. The metal instrument-table was beside him; above it was the control itself, a metal ball that hung suspended in air within a cage of curved bars.

It was pure magic, this ball-control, where magnetic fields crossed and recrossed; it was as if the one who held it were a genie who

could throw the ship itself where he willed. Glass almost enclosed the cage of bars, and the whole instrument swung with the self-compensating platform that adjusted itself to the "gravitation" of accelerated speed. The pilot, Max, had moved across to the instrument-table, ready for the take-off.

Schwartzmann's laughter died to a gurgling chuckle. He wiped his eyes before he replied to Harkness' question.

"Leave you," he said, "in one place? *Nein!* One here, the other there. A thousand miles apart, it might be. And not all three of you. That would be so unkind—"

He interrupted himself to call to Kreiss who was opening the port.

"No," he ordered; "keep it closed. We are not going outside; we are going up."

But Kreiss had the port open. "I want a man to get some fresh water," he said; "he will only be a minute."

He shoved at a waiting man to hurry him through the doorway. It was only a gentle push; Chet wondered as he saw the man stagger and grasp at his throat. He was coughing—choking horribly for an

instant outside the open port—then fell to the ground, while his legs jerked awkwardly, spasmodically.

Chet saw Kreiss follow. The scientist would have leaped to the side of the stricken man, whose body was so still now on the sunlit rock; but he, too, crumpled, then staggered back into the room. He pushed feebly at the port and swung it shut. His face, as he turned, was drawn into fearful lines.

"Acid!" He choked out the words between strangled breaths. "Acid—sulfuric—fumes!"

Chet turned quickly to the spectro-analyzer; the lines of oxygen and nitrogen were merged with others, and that meant an atmosphere unfit for human lungs! There had been a fumerole where yellowish vapor was spouting; he remembered it now.

"So!" boomed Schwartzmann, and now his squinting eyes were full on Chet. "You—you *schwein!* You said when we opened the ports there would be a surprise! Und this iss it! You thought to see us kill ourselves!"

"Open the port!" he shouted. The men who held Chet released him and sprang forward to obey. The pilot, Max, took their place. He put

one hand on Chet's shoulder, while his other hand brought up a threatening, metal bar.

Schwartzmann's heavy face had lost its stolid look; it was alive with rage. He thrust his head forward to glare at the men, while he stood firmly, his feet far apart, two heavy fists on his hips. He whirled abruptly and caught Diane by one arm. He pulled her roughly to him and encircled the girl's trim figure with one huge arm.

"Put you *all* on one island?" he shouted. "Did you think I would put you *all* out of the ship? You"—he pointed at Harkness—"and you"—this time it was Chet—"go out now. You can die in your damned gas that you expected would kill me! But, you fools, you imbeciles—Mam'selle, she stays with me!" The struggling girl was helpless in the great arm that drew her close.

Harkness' mad rage gave place to a dead stillness. From bloodless lips in a chalk-white face he spat out one sentence:

"Take your filthy hands off her—now—or I'll—"

Schwartzmann's one free hand still held the pistol. He raised it with deadly deliberation; it came level with Harkness' unflinching eyes.

"Yes?" said Schwartzmann. "You will do—what?"

Chet saw the deadly tableau. He knew with a conviction that gripped his heart that here was the end. Walt would die and he would be next. Diane would be left defenseless.... The flashing thought that followed came to him as sharply as the crack of any pistol. It seemed to burst inside his brain, to lift him with some dynamic power of its own and project him into action.

He threw himself sideways from under the pilot's hand, out from beneath the heavy metal bar—and he whirled, as he leaped, to face the man. One lean, brown hand clenched to a fist that started a long swing from somewhere near his knees; it shot upward to crash beneath the pilot's out-thrust jaw and lift him from the floor. Max had aimed the bar in a downward sweep where Chet's head had been the moment before; and now man and bar went down together. In the same instant Chet threw himself upon the weapon and leaped backward to his feet.

One frozen second, while, to Chet, the figures seemed as motionless as if carved from stone—two men beside the half-opened port—Harkness in convulsive writhing between two others—the figure of Diane, strained, tense and helpless in Schwartzmann's grasp—and Schwartzmann, whose aim had been disturbed, steadying the pistol

deliberately upon Harkness—

"Wait!" Chet's voice tore through the confusion. He knew he must grip Schwartzmann's attention—hold that trigger finger that was tensed to send a detonite bullet on its way. "Wait, damn you! I'll answer your question. I'll tell you what we'll do!"

In that second he had swung the metal bar high; now he brought it crashing down in front of him. Schwartzmann flinched, half turned as if to fire at Chet, and saw the blow was not for him.

With a splintering crash, the bar went through an obstruction. There was sound of glass that slivered to a million mangled bits—the sharp tang of metal broken off—a crash and clatter—then silence, save for one bit of glass that fell belatedly to the floor, its tiny jingling crash ringing loud in the deathly stillness of the room....

It had been the control-room, this place of metal walls and of shining, polished instruments, and it could be called that no longer. For, battered to useless wreckage, there lay on a metal table a cage that had once been formed of curving bars. Among the fragments a metal ball that had guided the great ship still rocked idly from its fall, until it, too, was still.

It was a room where nothing moved—where no person so much as breathed....

Then came the Master Pilot's voice, and it was speaking with quiet finality.

"And that," he said, "is your answer. Our ship has made its last flight."

His eyes held steadily upon the blanched face of Herr Schwartzmann, whose limp arms released the body of Diane; the pistol hung weakly at the man's side. And the pilot's voice went on, so quiet, so hushed—so curiously toneless in that silent room.

"What was it that you said?—that Harkness and I would be staying here? Well, you were right when you said that, Schwartzmann; but it's a hard sentence, that—imprisonment for life."

Chet paused now, to smile deliberately, grimly at the dark face so bleached and bloodless, before he repeated:

"Imprisonment for life!—and you didn't know that you were sentencing yourself. For you're staying too, Schwartzmann, you contemptible, thieving dog! You're staying with us—here—on the

Dark Moon!"

Chapter 6: "*Six to Four*"

Perhaps to every person in that control room there came, as Chet's quiet, emotionless tones died away, the same mental picture; for there was the same dazed look on the countenances of all.

They were seeing an ocean of space, an endless void of empty black. And across that etheric sea was a whirling globe. They had seen it from afar; they had seen its diminutive continents and its snow-clad poles.... They would never see it again....

Earth!—their own world!—home! And now for them it was only a moon, a tremendous, glorious moon, whose apparent nearness would be taunting and calling them each day and night of their lives....

It was Diane Delacouer who dared to break the hard silence that bound them all. From wide eyes she stared at Walt Harkness; then her lips formed a trembling smile in which Chet, too, was included.

"You saved us," she whispered; "you saved us, Chet ... but now it looks as if we all were exiles."

She crossed slowly, walking like one in a dream, to stand close to Walt Harkness. And Chet Bullard also roused himself; but it was

toward the stupefied, hulking figure of Schwartzmann that he moved.

He reached for the detonite pistol, and this man who had been their captor was too stunned to make any resistance. Chet jammed the weapon under his belt.

"Close that port!" he ordered the two men who had half-opened it at Schwartzmann's command. "Keep that poison gas out."

There was a flash of color that swept by the open port—some flying creature of vivid crimson: Chet had no time to see what manner of bird or beast it was. But it was alive! He crossed to examine the spectro-analyzer, and the two men disregarded his order and slipped into the rear cabin.

"Seems all clear to me, Walt," he said; and Harkness confirmed his findings with a quick glance.

"O.K.!" he assured Chet; "that air is all right to breathe."

He glanced from a lookout port. "The air's moving now," he said. "That gas—whatever it was—is gone; it must have settled down here in the night. Some new vent that has opened since we were here

before.

"But suppose we forget that and settle matters in here," he suggested; and Chet nodded assent.

"Call your men!" Harkness ordered Schwartzmann.

The man had recovered his composure; again his heavy face was flushed beneath a stubble of beard. He made no move to comply with Harkness' demand.

But there was no need: from the cabin at the rear came the scientist, Kreiss. His face was pale and drawn, and he stared long and searchingly at Chet Bullard. His breath still whistled in his throat; the poison gas had nearly done for him.

At his heels were the two who had been working at the port. Two others, who had held Harkness, were drawn off at one side, where they mumbled one to another and shot ugly glances toward Chet.

This, Chet knew, accounted for all. Even the pilot, Max, had roused from the sleep that a blow on the chin had induced and was again on his feet. For him no explanation was needed; the shattered cage of the ball-control told its own story.

Harkness seated Mademoiselle Delacouer on a bench at the pilot's post. "You will want to be in on this," he told her, "but I'll put you here in case they get rough. But don't worry," he added; "we'll be ready for them now."

Then he turned to Schwartzmann: "Now, you! Oh, there are plenty of things I could call you! And you would understand them perfectly, though they are all words that no gentleman would use."

At Schwartzmann's outburst of profane rejoinder, Harkness broke in with no uncertain tones.

"Shut up, Schwartzmann, and stay that way; I'm giving the orders now. And we'll just cut out all the pleasantries; they won't get us anywhere. We must face the situation, all of us; see what we're up against and make some plans."

But Herr Schwartzmann was not to be put down so easily. He crossed over to where Chet stood. Chet's hand dropped to the pistol that was hooked in his own belt, but Schwartzmann made no move toward it. Instead he planted himself before the pilot and jammed his fists into his hips while he tried to draw his stocky form to equal Chet's slim height.

"Fool!" he said. "Dolt! For a minute I believed you; I thought you had cut us off from the Earth. Now I know better. Max, he understands ships; and the Herr Doktor Kreiss iss a man of science: together they the repairs will make."

The Master Pilot smiled grimly. "Try to do it," he said, and turned toward the two whom Schwartzmann had named. "You, Max, and you, too, Doctor Kreiss—do you want to take on the job? If you do, I will help you."

But the two looked at the shattered controls and shook their heads at their employer.

"Impossible!" the pilot exclaimed. "Without new parts it can never be done."

Schwartzmann seemed about to vent his fury upon the man who dared give such a report, but Doctor Kreiss raised a restraining hand.

"Check!" he said. "I check that report. Repairs are out of the question."

Chet caught Harkness' eye upon him. "I'll be back," Harkness told him and went quickly toward the rear of the ship. Their stores were

back there; would Walt think to get a detonite pistol? He came back into the room while the thought was still in Chet's mind. A gun was in each hand; he passed one of the weapons to Diane.

Unconsciously, Schwartzmann felt for his own gun that was in Chet's belt. He laughed mirthlessly. "Two men," he said scornfully; "two men and a girl!"

Harkness paid no attention. "Now we will get right down to cases," he remarked. "Two men and a girl is right—plus what is left of one ship. And please don't forget that the ship is ours and all the supplies that are in it. Now, you listen to me; I've a few things to tell you."

He faced squarely toward Schwartzmann, and Chet had to repress a grin at the steely glint in his companion's eyes. Nice chap, Harkness—nice, easy-going sort—up to a certain point. Chet had seen him in action before.

"First of all," Harkness was saying, "don't think that we have any illusions about you. You're a killer, and, like all such, you're a coward. If you had the upper hand, you would never give us a chance for our lives. In fact you were ready to throw us out to be gassed when Chet raised your little bet.

"But it looks as if Chet and Mademoiselle Delacouer and I will have to be living on this world for some time. We don't want to start that life by killing off even such as you—not in cold blood. We will give you a chance; we will split our provisions with you—give you half of what we have; you will have to shift for yourselves when that is gone. We will all have to learn to do that."

Again the heavy, glowering face of Schwartzmann broke into a laugh that was half sneer.

"You're damned kind," he told Harkness, "and, as usual, a fool. Two men and a girl!" He half turned to count his own forces.

"There are seven of us," he challenged; "seven! And all of them armed—all but me!"

He spoke a curt order in his own tongue, and each man whipped a pistol from his clothes.

"Seven to two," he said, and laughed again; "maybe it iss that Herr Harkness would like to count them.

"*Your* ship and *your* supplies!" he exclaimed scornfully. "And you would be so kind as to giff us food.

"*Gott im Himmel!*" he shouted; "I show you! I am talking now! We stay here—*ja*—because this *Dummkopf* has the controls *gebrochen*! But it iss we who stay; und you? You go, because I say so. It iss I who rule, und I prove it—seven to two!"

"Three!" a firm voice spoke from between Chet and Harkness; "seven to three! Our odds are improving, Herr Schwartzmann."

And Chet saw from the corner of his eye that the gun in the small hand of Mademoiselle Diane was entirely unwavering. But he spoke to her sharply, and his voice merged with that of Harkness who was saying somewhat the same words:

"Back—go back, Diane! We can handle this. For God's sake, keep out; we don't want any shooting."

Neither of the men had drawn his gun. Their hands were ready, but each had hoped to end this weird conference without firing a shot. Here was no place for gun-play and for wounded men.

Their attention was on Diane for the moment. A growled word from their enemy brought their minds back to him; they turned to find black pistol muzzles staring each of them in the eyes. Herr Schwartzmann, in the language of an earlier day, had got the drop.

"Seven to three," Schwartzmann said; "let it go that way; no difference does it make. If I say one word, you die."

Chet's arm ached to snap his hand toward his gun. It would be his last move, he well knew. He was sick with chagrin to see how easily they had been trapped; Walt had tried to play fair with a man who had not an atom of fairness in his character. And now—

"Seven to three!" Schwartzmann was gloating—till another voice broke in.

"I don't check your figures." The whistling tones were coming from a tortured throat, but the words were clear and distinct. "I don't check you; I make it six to four—and if one of your men makes a move, Herr Schwartzmann, I shall blow you to a pulp!"

And Herr Doktor Kreiss held a gun in a steady hand as he moved a pace nearer to Chet—a gun whose slender barrel made a glinting line of light toward Schwartzmann's eyes.

"If the gentlemen and Mademoiselle will permit," he offered almost diffidently, "I would prefer to be aligned with them. We are citizens of another world now; my former allegiance to Herr Schwartzmann is ended. This is—what is it you say?—a new deal. I would like to

see it; and I use another of your American aphorisms: I would like to see it a square deal."

The voice of a scholar, thought Chet; one more used to the precision of laboratory phrases than to wild talk like this; but no man to be trifled with, nevertheless. Chet did not hesitate to turn despite the pistols that were still aimed at him.

But Herr Kreiss was not looking in his direction; his eyes were trained steadily in the same line as his gun. This little experiment he was conducting seemed to require his undivided attention until the end. To Schwartzmann he said sharply:

"Your men—order them to drop their weapons. Quick!"

As they clattered upon the floor the scientist turned and extended his hand to Chet.

"And still speaking not too technically," he continued, "this is one hell of a fix that you have got us into. Even in desperate straits it took nerve to do that." He pointed to the shattered remains of the multiple bars that had been the control mechanism, and added:

"I admire that kind of nerve. And, if you don't mind, since we are

exiles together—" His throat seemed choking him again.

There were weapons in the hands of Chet and Harkness; they were not making the same mistake twice. Chet shifted his gun to his left hand that he might reach toward the scientist with his right.

"I knew you were white all the time," Chet told him; "I'll say you belong!"

Chapter 7: The Red Swarm

It was a matter of a half hour later when Harkness ordered them all outside. He had accepted Kreiss as an addition to their ranks and had made himself plain to Schwartzmann.

To the scientist he said. "You remarked that no ship could hold two commanding pilots: that goes for an expedition like this, too. I am in command. If you will take orders we will be mighty glad to have you with us."

And to Schwartzmann, in a different tone: "I am sparing you and your men. I ought to shoot you down, but I won't. And I don't expect you to understand why; any decency such as that would beyond you.

"But I am letting you live. This world is big enough to hold us both, and pretty soon I will tell you what part of it you can live in. And then remember this one thing, Schwartzmann—get this straight!—you keep out of my way. I will show you a valley where you and your men can stay. And if ever you leave that valley I will hunt you down as I would one of the beasts that you will see in this world."

Chet had to repress a little smile that was twitching at his lips; it always amused him hugely to see Harkness when roused.

"Turn us out to starve?" Schwartzmann was demanding. "You would do that?"

"There will be food there," said Harkness curtly: "suit yourself about starving. Only stay where I put you!"

Back of the others of Schwartzmann's men, the pilot, Max, was stooping. Half-hidden he moved toward the doorway to the rear cabin and to the storage-room and gun-rooms beyond. Chet glimpsed him in his silent retreat.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you, Max," he advised quietly. "Personally, I think you're all getting off too well; as for myself, I'm sort of itching for an excuse to let off this gun."

It was here that Harkness turned to the open port.

"Put them out!" he snapped. "You, Chet, go out first and line them up as they come—but, no, wait: there may be gas out there."

Chet was beside the port; a breath from outside came to him sweetly fragrant. A shadow was moving across the smooth lava rock. "A bird!" he thought. Then a flash of red in startling vividness swept past the open door: it was like a quick flicker of living flame. He

could not see what it was, but it was alive—and this answered his question.

"Send 'em along," he said; "it seems all right now." He stepped through the opening in the heavily insulated walls.

It was early morning, yet the sun was already hot upon the smooth expanse of the lava flow. Some ancient eruption from the distant peaks that hemmed in the valley had sent out this flood of molten rock; it was hard and black now. But, to the right, where the valley went on and up, and rose gently and widened as it rose, a myriad of red flames and jets of steam told of the inner fires that still raged.

These were the fumeroles where only a month before he and Harkness and Diane had found clustering savages who were more apes than men; they had been roasting meat at these flames. And below, where the lava stopped, was the open glade where the little stream splashed and sparkled: in the high rock walls that hemmed the glade the caves showed black. And, beyond the open ground, was the weird forest, where tree-trunks of ghostly white were laced with a network of red veining. They grew close, those spectral columns, in a shadow-world beneath the high roof of greenery they supported.

Here was the scene of an earlier adventure. Chet was swept up in the flood of recollections born of familiar sights and scents. Herr Schwartzmann, cursing steadily in a guttural tongue, came from the ship to bring Chet's thoughts back to the more immediate problem.

There were five others who followed—the pilot and Schwartzmann's four men. There had been another, but his body lay huddled upon the bare lava. He had followed his master far—and here, for him, was the end.

Kreiss' pistol was still in his hand as he came after. Harkness and Diane were last.

Harkness pointed with his gun. "Over there!" he ordered. "Get them away from the ship, Chet. Line them up down below there; all the ape-men have cleared out since we had our last fight. Get them down by the stream. Diane and I will bring them some supplies, and then we can send them off for good."

Chet sent Kreiss down first, where an easy slope made the descent a simple matter; it had been the bow-wave of the molten lava—here was the end of that inundation of another age—and the slope was wrinkled and creased. Schwartzmann followed; then the others. The last man was ready to descend when Diane and Walt came back.

They had packages of compressed foods. This was all right with Chet, but he raised his eyebrows inquiringly at sight of several boxes of ammunition and an extra gun. Harkness smiled good-naturedly.

"I will give them one pistol," Walt told him, "and a good supply of shells. We don't need to be afraid of them with only one gun, and we can't leave the poor devils at the mercy of every wild beast."

"You're the boss," said Chet briefly; "but, for me, I'd sooner give this Schwartzmann just one bullet—right where it would do the most good.

"Let's make him work for it," he suggested, and called to the men below:

"Come back up here, Schwartzmann! A little present for you—and I'm saying you don't deserve it."

He watched the return trip as Schwartzmann dragged his heavy bulk up the slope; he was enjoying the man's explosive, panted curses. Beside him were Diane and Walt. With them, it was as it had been with him at first. They had eyes only for the familiar ground below: the stream, the open ground, the trees....

Each of them was looking down at that lower ground.

It was Kreiss standing down there who first caught Chet's attention. Kreiss was trying to shout. Chet saw his waving arms; he stared, puzzled, at the facial contortions—the working lips from which no sound came. He knew that something was wrong. It was a moment or two before he realized that Kreiss could not speak, that the throat, injured by the choking fumes, had failed him. Then he heard the strangled croak that Kreiss forced from his lips: "*Behind you!—look behind you!*"

Schwartzmann was scrambling to the top where they stood; every man was accounted for. What had they to fear? And suddenly it was borne in upon Chet's consciousness that he had been hearing a sound—a sound that was louder now—a rustling!—a clashing of dry, rasping things! The very air seemed to hold something ominous.

He knew this in the instant while he whirled about; while he heard the dry rustling change to a humming roar; while he saw, like a cloud of flame, a great swarm of red, flying things like the one that had flown past the port—and one, swifter than the rest, that darted from the swarm and flashed upon him.

It was red—vividly, dazzlingly red! The body of a reptile—a wild

phantasm of distorted dreams—was supported by short, quivering wings. The body was some five feet in length, and it was translucent.

A shell, like the dried husk of some creature long dead!—yet here was something alive, as its quick attack proved. It had a head of dry scales which ended in a projecting black-tipped beak that came like a sword, straight and true for Chet's heart. It seemed an age before he could bring his pistol up and fire.

Detonite, as everyone knows, does not explode on impact; the cap of fulminate in the end of each bullet sets it off. But even this requires some resistance—something more than a dry, red husk to check the bullet's flight. There was no explosion from the tiny shell that Chet's pistol fired, but the bullet did its work. The creature fell plunging to the rocky ground, and its transparent wings sent flurries of dust where they beat upon the ground. There were others that went down, for the bullet had gone on and through the great swarm.

And then they attacked.

The very fury of the assault saved the huddle of humans. So close were the red things pressed together that their vibrating wings beat

and locked the swarm into a mass. They were almost above their prey. Chet knew that he was firing upward into the swarm, but the sound of his pistol was lost. The red cloud hung poised in a whirling maelstrom; and the pandemonium of clashing wings whipped down to them not only the sound of their dry scraping but a stench from those reptile bodies that was overpowering.

Sickly sweet, the taste of it was in Chet's mouth; the sound of the furious swarm was battering at his ears as he knew that his pistol was empty.

There were red bodies on the bare rock before him. A scaly, scabrous thing was pressing against his upflung hands that he raised above his head—a loathsome touch! A beak that was a needle-pointed tube stabbed his shoulder before he could flinch aside: the quick pain of it was piercingly sharp....

Other red horrors dropped from the main mass overhead; he saw Harkness beating at them wildly while he made a shelter of his body above the crouched figure of Diane. Two of them—two incredible, beastly, flying things! He saw them so plainly where they hovered, and Harkness striking at them with a useless, empty gun, while they waited to drive home their lance-like beaks.

The picture was so plain! His brain was a photographic plate, super-sensitized by the utter horror of the moment. While the red monster stabbed its beak into his shoulder, while he drove home one blow against its parchment body with his empty pistol, while the wild, beating wings lifted the creature again into the air—he saw it all.

Here were Diane and Harkness! Nearby Schwartzmann was on the ground! His man—the one who had not yet descended with the others—was running stumblingly forward. He was wounded, and the blood was streaming from his back. Chet saw the two monsters hovering above Harkness' head; he saw their thick-lidded eyes—and he saw those eyes as they detected an easier prey.

The fleeing man was half-stooped in a shambling run. The winged reptile Chet had beaten off joined the other two and they were upon the wounded man in a flurry of red.

Chet saw him go down and took one involuntary step forward to give him aid—then stopped, transfixed by what he beheld.

The man was down crouching in terror. Above him the three monstrous things beat each other with their wings; then their long beaks stabbed downward. The man's body was hidden, but through those transparent beaks there mounted swiftly a red stream. Plainly

visible, Chet saw that vital current—the living life-blood of a living man—drawn into those beastly bodies; he saw it spread through a network of canals! And he was held rigid with horror until a harsh scream from Harkness reached his brain.

"The trees!" Harkness was shouting. "The trees! Down, Chet, for God's sake! You can't save him!"

Walt was half carrying Diane. Even then Chet was vaguely thankful that their bodies were between the girl and this gruesome sight. And Walt was leaping madly down the lava slope.

Beyond him, already on the lower level, was the racing figure of Schwartzmann. A whirring flash of red pursued him. Another made a crimson streak through the air toward Walt's back. Chet came with startling abruptness from the frozen rigidity that held him, and he crashed his empty pistol in well-directed aim through the body of the beast. Then he, too, threw himself in great leaps down the slope.

Kreiss was firing from below; Chet knew dimly that this was checking the attack of the swarm. He saw Walt stagger; saw blood flowing from a slash on the back of his head, and knew that Kreiss had got the monster just in time. He sprang toward the stumbling man and got his arms under the unconscious figure of the girl to help

carry the load.

And now it was Kreiss who was shouting. "The trees! We'll be safe in the trees!" He saw Kreiss drop his pistol and dash headlong for the white trunks of ghostly trees.

His arm was pierced by a stinging pain; cold eyes, with thick, leathery lids, were staring into Chet's as he cast one horrified glance over his shoulder. Then he crashed against the white trunk of a tree and helped Harkness drag the body of the girl between two twin trunks. He pulled himself to safety in the shelter of the protecting trees, and held weakly to one of them.... And the crimson lace-work of the sap-wood that showed through the white bark was no brighter red than the mark of his blood-stained hands where they clung for support.

Chapter 8: Doomed

The sun was high when they ventured forth. Diane would have come, but the two men would have none of it. They remembered the sight they had seen; they knew what was left of a man's body lying on the rocks above; and they ordered the girl to stay hidden while Kreiss remained with her as a guard.

There were only the four who lay hidden in the woods; Schwartzmann and Max, with the remaining three men, were gone. Harkness' calls were unanswered, and he ceased the halloo.

"Better keep quiet," he advised himself and the others. "We are out of ammunition, though they don't know it. And they have got away. They will keep on going, too, and I am not any too well pleased with that. I wanted to put Schwartzmann where I could keep an eye on him.... Oh, well, he isn't very dangerous."

But Chet Bullard made a few mental and unspoken reservations to that remark. "That boy is always dangerous," he told himself, "and he won't be happy unless he is making trouble. Thank the Lord he hasn't got that gun!"

He came out cautiously from among the trees, but the red horde was

gone. The reptiles' wings had rasped and clashed furiously for a time; they had darted in fiery flashes before the protecting trees: and the fitful breeze had brought gusts of nauseous odors—until a thin haze formed in the higher air and the red things were gone.

"There will not be any more for a while," said Harkness.

He pointed toward the fumerole they had seen from the lookout earlier in the day: again it was emitting jets of thin, steamy vapor that did not disappear like steam but floated up above their heads. "The gas has driven them off," he added.

The two men climbed slowly up the slope that had been the wave front of molten rock. Chet found his pistol by the path and picked it up.

"We'll get more ammunition up top," he told Harkness, "and we will toss some down to Kreiss. He can have the extra gun you brought for Schwartzmann, too."

He stopped suddenly. He had reached the level top of the lava flow. Here was where they had stood when the beasts attacked; where Harkness had dropped the boxes of ammunition and the pistol—and except for a few scattered bodies of unbelievable reptiles and for a

stain of blood where his own wound had bled, there was nothing to show where they had been.

"He got 'em!" Chet exclaimed. "That son-of-a-gun Schwartzmann got the gun and shells. I saw him scrambling around on the rock. I thought he was just scared to death; but no, he wasn't too frightened to grab the gun and the ammunition while one of his own men was being killed. And that's not so good, either!"

A dozen paces beyond was a huddle of clothing that stirred idly in the breeze. "The poor devil!" exclaimed Chet, and moved over beside the body of the man who had gone down under the red swarm's attack.

It lay face down. Chet stooped to turn the body over, though he knew there was no hope of life. He stopped with a gasp of dismay.

Two eyes still stared in horror from a face that was colorless—a drained, ghastly white face! No tint remained to show that this ever had been a living man. More dreadful than the waxen pallor of death, here was a bleached, bloodless flesh that told of the nameless horror that had overwhelmed this man, beaten him down and drained him of every drop of blood.

"Vampires!" Chet heard Harkness saying in a horrified whisper. "Those beaks that were like tubes! And they—they—" He stopped as if in fear of the words that would tell what they themselves had escaped.

Chet turned the body to its former position; that dreadful face beneath a pitiless sun was a sight no other eyes should see. "Let's go on to the ship," he said. "We'll get some ammunition, go back and get Diane—"

He did not finish the thought. Before him he saw the lifeless body moving; it rolled and shuddered as if life had returned to this thing where no life should be. Chet raised one hand in an unconscious gesture as if to ward off some new horror that the body might disclose. It was a moment before he realized that the rock was shaking beneath his feet, that he was dizzy and that from no great distance a rumbling growl was sounding in his ears.

The moving body had shaken Chet's mental poise as had the earthquake his physical equilibrium. Harkness had not seen it; he was looking off across the level plateau.

"Look!" he exclaimed; "another vent has opened! See it spout?"

Some hundred yards distant were clouds of green vapor that rolled into the air. At their base a fountain of mud sputtered and spouted and fell back to build up a cone. The green cloud whirled sluggishly, then was caught by the breeze and began its slow, rolling progress across the flat rock. It was coming their way, rolling down toward the ship, and Chet gripped suddenly at his companion's arm.

"Come on!" he said! "I'm going away from here, and I'm going now. We'll get Diane and Kreiss: remember what a whiff of gas did to him this morning."

He was drawing Harkness toward the face of the rock; he wondered at his slowness. Walt seemed fascinated by the oncoming cloud.

"Wait!" Harkness paused at the top of the descending slope. Chet turned, to look where Harkness was watching.

The green cloud moved slowly. As he turned to stare it touched the bow of their ship; it flowed slowly, sluggishly, along the sides, and then swept up and over the top. The lookouts of the control room were obscured, and the port from which they had come!

"Cut off!" breathed Harkness, his voice heavy with hopeless conviction. "We can't get back! And now we're on our own past any

doubt!"

"It may not last," Chet was urging an hour later, when, with Kreiss and Diane, they stood on high ground to look down on the ship.

The sparkling sheen of the metal cylinder had changed from silver to pale green. The cloud that enveloped it was not heavy, but it was always the same. Yet still Chet insisted: "It may not last."

"Sorry to disappoint you," replied Kreiss, "but there is little ground for such a belief." Again he was the professor instructing a class. "These fumeroles, in my opinion, are venting a region far below the surface. It is possible that further seismic disturbances may alter conditions; a rearrangement of the lower rock strata may close existing crevices and open others like this you have seen; but, barring that, I see no reason for thinking that this emission of what appears to be chlorine with other gases may not continue indefinitely."

Chet looked at Diane. Was it a twinkle that appeared and vanished in her eyes as Herr Professor Kreiss concluded his remarks. She would laugh in the very face of death, Chet realized, but her tone was entirely serious as she offered another suggestion.

"If this wind should change," she said, "and if it blew the gas in another direction, the ship could be cleared. One of us could go in long enough to switch on the air generators full."

But now it was Chet who shook his head in a negative. "Remember," he told her, "when we were here before? All of the time while Walt was gone for the ship—how did the wind blow then?"

"The same as now," she admitted.

"And it never changed."

"No,"—slowly—"it never changed."

Chet turned to Walt and Kreiss. "That's that," he said shortly. "Any other good ideas in the crowd? Can anyone go through that gas and get to the ship? I'll make a try."

"Suicide!" was Kreiss' verdict, and Harkness confirmed his words.

"I saw things that moved up in the trees," he said. "Lord knows what they were; Birds—beasts of some sort! But they were alive till the gas touched them. I saw it drift among the trees when we left, and those things up there came plopping down like ripe apples."

Diane Delacouer looked up at Harkness with wide, serious eyes. "Then," she shrugged, "we are really—"

"Castaways," Harkness told her. "We're on our own—off on a desert island—shipwrecked—all that sort of thing! And you might as well know the worst of it; you, too, Kreiss.

"Our good friend, Schwartzmann, is at large, and he has the pistol and ammunition we brought out from the ship. He is armed, and we are not; he has food, and we have none. And I'll have to admit that I didn't have any breakfast and could use a little right now."

"There are seven shells left in my pistol," said Diane. She held the weapon out to Harkness; he took it carefully.

"Seven," he said; "it is all we have. We must kill some animals for food, my dear, but not with these; we must save these for bigger game."

"But we cannot!" expostulated Kreiss. "To kill game with our bare hands—impossible! We are doomed!"

And now Chet caught Diane's glance brimming with mirth that was undisguised. Truly, Diane Delacouer would have her laugh in the

face of death.

"Doomed?" she exclaimed. "Not while Chet and I know how to make bows and arrows!... Do you suppose we can find any of their old spears, Chet? They made gorgeous bows, you remember."

And Chet bowed low in an exaggeration of admiration that was not entirely assumed. "Lead on!" he said. "You are in command. The army is ready to follow."

Chapter 9: A Premonition

Fire Valley had been the home of the ape-men. On that earlier journey Walt and Chet had seen them, had fought with the tribe, and had lived for a time in their caves that made dark shadows high on the rock wall. And they knew that the wood the ape-men used for their spears was well suited for bows.

Back in the caves they found discarded spears and some wood that had been gathered for shafts. Tough, springy, flexible, it was a simple matter for the men to convert these into serviceable weapons. Sinews that the ape-men had torn from great beasts made the bowstrings, and there were other slim shafts that they notched, then sharpened in the fire.

Yet, to Chet as he worked, came an overwhelming feeling of despondency. To be fashioning crude weapons like these—preparing to defend themselves as best they could from the dangers of this new, raw world! No, it could not be true.... And he knew while he protested that it was all in vain.

He asked himself a score of times if his impulsive, desperate act had not been a horrible mistake. And he found the same answer always: it was all he could have done. Had he attacked Schwartzmann he

would have been killed—and Walt, too! Schwartzmann would have had Diane. Only some such stupefying shock as the effect of the shattered control could have checked Schwartzmann. No, there had been no alternative. And the thing was done. Finally, irrevocably done!

Chet walked to the cave-mouth to stare down at the ship below him in the valley. From the fumerole's throat came a steady, rolling cloud of shimmering green; the ship was immersed in it. The voice of Herr Kreiss spoke to him; the scientist, too, had come forward for another look.

"If it were at the bottom of the sea," he said, "it would be no more inaccessible. It is, in very fact, at the bottom of a sea—a sea of gas. We could penetrate an aqueous medium more easily."

"And," Chet pondered slowly, "if only I could have returned.... With time—and metal bars—and tools that I could improvise—I might...."

His voice trailed off. What use now to speculate on what he might have done. The scientist concluded his thought:

"You might have reconstructed the control—yes, I, too, had thought of that. But now, the gas! No—we must put that out of our minds,

unless we would become insane."

Chet turned back into the black and odorous cave. He saw Harkness who was flexing a bow he was making for Diane; he was showing her how to grip it and let the arrow run free.

"Towahg was the last one I instructed," Walt was saying; and Chet knew from the deep lines in his face that his attempt at casual talk was for Diane's benefit; "I wonder how long Towahg remembered. He was a grateful little animal."

"Towahg?" queried Kreiss. "Who is Towahg?"

"Ape-man," Harkness told him. "Friendly little rascal; he helped us out when we were here before. He saved Diane's life, no question about that. I showed him the use of the bow; jumped him ahead a hundred generations in the art of self-defense."

"And offense!" was Kreiss' comment. "There are certain drawbacks to arming a potential enemy."

"Oh, Towahg is all right," Harkness reassured the scientist, "although he may have taught the trick to others of the tribe who are not so friendly."

"Where are they? In what direction do they live?" Kreiss continued.

"Want to make a social call?" Chet inquired. "You needn't mind those little formalities up here, Doctor."

But in the mental makeup of Herr Doktor Kreiss had been included no trace of humor; he took Chet's remark at face value. And he answered in words that echoed Chet's real thoughts and that took the smile from his lips.

"But, no," said Herr Kreiss; "it is the contrary that I desire. Here we are; here we stay for the rest of our lives. I would wish those years to be undisturbed. I have no wish to quarrel with what primitive inhabitants this globe may hold. There is much to study, to learn. I shall pass the years so.

"And now," he questioned, "where is it that we go? Where shall be our home?"

Chet, too, looked inquiringly at Harkness. "You saw more of this country than I did," he reminded him; "what would you suggest?"

And, at sight of the serious, troubled eyes of Diane Delacouer, he added:

"We want a site for a high-grade subdivision, you understand. Something good, something exclusive, where we can keep out the less desirable element. Dianeville must appeal to the people who rate socially."

At the puzzled look on the scientist's face, Chet caught Diane's glance of unspoken amusement, and knew that his ruse had succeeded: he must not let Diane get too serious. Harkness answered slowly:

"I saw a valley; I think I can find it again. When Towahg guided me back to the ship, when we were here before, I saw the valley beyond the third range of hills. We go up Fire Valley; follow the stream that comes in from the side—"

"Water?" Chet questioned.

"Yes; I saw a lake."

"Cover? Trees? Not the man-eating ones?"

"Everything: open ground, hills, woods. It looked good to me then; it will look a lot better now," said Walt enthusiastically.

"Walk faster," said Chet; "I'm stepping on your heels."

They reached the valley floor some distance above the fumerole and the clouds of poison gas; and the march began. The attack of the flying reptiles had taught them the danger of exposure in the open, and they kept close to the trees that fringed the valley.

Once Chet left them and vanished among the trees, to return with the body of an animal slung over one shoulder.

"Moon-pig!" he told the others. "Ask Doctor Kreiss if you want to know its species and ancestry and such things. All I know is that it has got hams, and I am going to roast a slice or so before we start."

"Bow and arrow?" asked Harkness.

Chet nodded. "I'm a dead shot," he admitted, "up to a range of ten feet. This thing with the funny face stood still for me, so it looks as if we won't starve."

The sun had swung rapidly into the sky; it was now overhead. One half of their first short day was gone. And Chet's suggestions of food met with approval.

"I can't quite get used to it," Diane admitted to the rest; "to think that for us time has turned back. We have been dropped into a new and

savage world, and we must do as the savages of our world did thousands of years ago. Now!—in nineteen seventy-three!"

Chet removed a slab of meat from the hot throat of a tiny fumerole. "Nineteen seventy-three on Earth," he agreed, "but not here. This is about nineteen thousand B.C."

He called to Kreiss who was digging into a thin stratum of rock. The scientist had a splinter of flint in his hand, and he was gouging at a red outcropping layer.

"Old John Q. Neanderthal, himself!" said Chet. "What have you found, silver or gold? Whatever it is, you're forgetting to eat; better come along." But Doctor Kreiss had turned geologist, it was plain.

"Cinnabar," he said; "an ore of hydrargyrum!" His tone was excited, but Chet refused to have his mind turned from practical things.

"Is it good to eat?" he demanded.

"*Nein, nein!*" Kreiss protested. "It is what you call mercury—quicksilver!"

"Ladies and gentlemen," said Chet dryly, "I see where this man Kreiss is to be a big help. He has discovered the site for the

thermometer factory. He will be organizing a Chamber of Commerce next."

He left out a portion of the cooked meat for Kreiss' later attention, and he and Harkness rolled a supply into leaf-wrapped packages and stowed them in the pockets of their coats before they started on. Again the little procession took up the march with Harkness leading.

"Leave as little trail as possible," Harkness ordered. "We don't want to shout to Schwartzmann where we have gone."

They left the Valley of the Fires to follow the stream-bed in another hollow between great hills. Chet found himself looking back at the familiar flares with regret. Here was the only place on this new world which was not utterly strange to his eyes. He continued to glance behind him, long after the smoky fires were lost to sight; but he would not admit even to himself that it was for another reason.

Nineteen seventy-three!—and he was a man of the modern civilization. Yet deep within him there stirred ancient instincts—racial memories, perhaps. And, as he splashed through the little stream and bent to make his way through strange-leafed vines and leprous-spotted trees, a warning voice spoke inaudibly within his own mind—spoke as it might have whispered to some ancestor

scores of centuries dead.

"You are followed!" it told him. "Listen!—there is one who follows on the trail!"

Chapter 10: A Mysterious Rescuer

Their way led through tangled growths of trees and vines that were like unreal things of a dream. Unreal they were, too, in their strange degree of livingness, for there were snaky tendrils that drew back as if in fear at their approach and stalks that folded great, thorny leaves protectingly about pulpy centers at the first touch of a hand. The world of vegetation seemed strangely sentient and aware of their approach. Only the leprous-white trees remained motionless; their red-veined trunks towered high in air, and the sun of late afternoon shot slantingly through a leafy roof overhead.

Twice Chet let the others go on ahead while he slipped silently into some rocky concealment and watched with staring, anxious eyes back along their trail. But the little stream's gurgling whisper was the only voice, and in all the weird jungle there was no movement but for the unfolding of the vegetation where they had passed.

"Nerves!" he reproached himself. "You're getting jumpy, and that won't do." But once more he let the others climb on while he stepped quickly behind a projecting rock over which he could look.

Again there was silence; again the leaves unfolded their thorny wrappings while vermiform tendrils crept across the ground or

reached tentatively into the air. And then, while the silence was unbroken, while no evidence came through his feeble, human senses, something approached.

Neither sight nor sound betrayed it—this something, that came noiselessly after—but a tell-tale plant whipped its leaves into their former wrapping; a vine drew its hanging clusters of flowers sharply into the air. The unseeing watchers of the forest had sensed what was unheard and unseen, and Chet knew that his own inner warning had been true.

He waited to see this mysterious pursuer come into view; and after waiting in vain he realized the folly of thinking himself concealed. He glanced about him; every plant was drawn tightly upon itself. With silent voices they were proclaiming his hiding place, warning this other to wait, telling him that someone was hidden here.

Chet's face, despite his apprehension, drew into a whimsical, silent grin. "No chance to ambush him, whoever he is or whatever it is," he told himself. "But that works two ways: he can't jump us when we're prepared; not in daylight, anyway."

And he asked himself a question he could not answer: "I wonder," he whispered softly, "—I wonder what these plants will do at night!"

Almost they could see the swift descent of the sun. Each flashing glint of light through the dense growth came from lower down toward the invisible horizon. It shone at last where Chet cast anxious glances about upon a mound of rocks.

Rough blocks of tremendous size had been left here from some seismic disturbance. Like the ruins of a castle they were heaped high in air. Even the tree growths stopped at their base, and above them was an opening in the roof of tangled branches and leaves—a rough circle of clear, blue sky.

"How about making camp?" Chet asked. "This place looks good to me. I would just as soon be up off the ground a bit."

Harkness looked at the pile of rocks; glanced once toward the sun. "Right!" he agreed. "This will do for our first camp."

"You've named it," Chet told him as he scrambled to the top of a great block. He extended a hand to Diane, standing tired and breathless at its side.

"Welcome to First Camp!" he told her. "Take this elevator for the first ten floors."

He drew her up to the top of the block. Harkness joined them, and Diane, though she tried to smile in response to Chet, did not refuse their help in making the ascent; the day's experiences had told on all of them.

Thirty or forty feet above the ground was Chet's estimate. From the top of their little fort they watched the shadows of night sweep swiftly down. Scrub tree growths whose roots had anchored among the rocks gave them shelter, while vines and mosses softened the hard outlines of the labyrinth of stones.

Chet undid the package of meat and passed it out freely. There had been scurryings and rustlings in the jungle growth that had reassured him in the matter of food. Darkness fell as they ate; then it gave way to a new flood of light.

Golden light from a monstrous moon! It sent searching fingers through rifts in the leafy roof, then poured itself over the edge of the opening above in a cascade of glory. And, though each one of the four raised his eyes toward that distant globe and knew it for the Earth, no word was said; they ate their food in silence while the silent night wrapped them about.

Still in silence they prepared for the night. Chet and Harkness

improvised a bed for Diane in the shelter of a sheer-rising rock. They tore off pieces of moss and stripped leaves from the climbing vines to make a mattress for her; then withdrew with Kreiss to a short distance while Chet told them of his suspicions.

"Six hours of night," he said at last; "that means two hours for each of us. We'll take turns standing guard."

Harkness insisted upon being first. Chet flipped a coin with Kreiss and drew the last turn of guard duty. He stretched himself out on a bit of ground where vegetation had gained a foothold among the rocks.

"It's going to take me a while to get used to these short days," he said. "Six hours of daylight; six hours of night. This is a funny, little world—but it's the only one we've got."

The night air was softly warm; the day had been hard on muscles and nerves. Chet stared toward the glorious ball of light that was their moon. There were men and women there who were going about their normal affairs. Ships were roaring through the air at their appointed levels; their pilots were checking their courses, laughing, joking.

Chet resolutely withdrew his eyes. Think? Hell, no! That was one thing that he must not do. He threw one arm across his eyes to shut out the light that brought visions of a world he would never see again—that emphasized the utter hopelessness of their position.... His next conscious sensation was of his shoulder being shaken, while the hushed voice of Doctor Kreiss said:

"Your turn now, Herr Bullard; four hours have you slept."

From Kreiss, Chet took the pistol with its seven precious shells. "All quiet," Kreiss told him as he prepared to take Chet's place on the soft leaves; "strange, flying things have I seen, but they do not come near. And of your mysterious pursuer we have seen nothing. You imagined it, perhaps."

"I might have imagined it," Chet answered, "but don't try to tell me that the plants did. I'll give this vegetation credit for some damned uncanny powers but not for imagination—I draw the line there."

He looked toward the highest point of rock and shook his head. "Too plain a target if I'm up there," he argued, and took up his position in the shadows instead.

Once he moved cautiously toward the place they had prepared for

Diane. She was breathing softly and regularly. And on the rock at her side, with only his jacket for a bed, lay Harkness. Their hands were clasped, and Chet knew that the girl slept peacefully in the assurance of that touch.

"They don't make 'em any finer!" he was telling himself, and at the same moment he stiffened abruptly to attention.

Something was moving! Through and above the hushed noises of the night had come a gliding sound. It was an indescribable sound, too elusive for identification; and Chet, in the next instant, could not be sure of its reality. He did not call, but swung alertly back on guard and slipped from shadow to shadow as he made his way across the welter of rocks.

He stopped at last in strained listening to the silent night. One hand upon a great stone block at his side steadied his body in tense, poised concentration.

From afar came a whistling note whose thin keenness was mingled with a squeal of fright: some marauder of the night had found its prey. From the leafy canopy above him voices whispered as the night wind set a myriad leaves in motion. The thousand tiny sounds that blend to make the silence of the dark! These he heard, and

nothing more, while he forced himself to listen beyond them. He followed with his eyes the creeping flood of Earth-light that came slantingly now through the opening above to half-illumine this rocky world; and then, in the far margin of that light he found something on which his eyes focused sharply—something that moved!

Walt!—Kreiss—he must arouse them! A shout of alarm was in his throat—a shout that was never uttered. For, from the darkness at his back—not where this moving thing had been disclosed by the friendly Earth-light, but from the place he had just left—came a scream of pure terror. It was the shocking scream of a person roused from sleep in utter fright, and the voice was that of Diane.

"Walter!" she cried! "Walt!" There were other words that ended in a strangling, choking sound, while a hoarse shout from Harkness merged into a discord that rang horribly through the still night.

Chet was racing across the rocks; the pistol was in his hand. What fearful thing would he face? What was it that had attacked? He forced his leaden feet to carry him on in a succession of wild leaps. Forgotten was the menace behind him, although he half saw, half sensed, a shadow that moved faster than he along the upper rocks. He thought only of the unknown horror that was ahead, that had drawn that despairing shriek from the brave lips of Diane. The few

seconds of his crossing were an age in length.

One last spring, one vivid instant while the Earth-light marked in sharp distinctness the figure of a leaping man! It was Harkness, throwing himself into the air, trying vainly to reach the struggling form of Diane Delacouer. She was held high above his head, and she was wrapped in the coils of a monster serpent—coils that finished in a smoothly-rounded end. And Chet knew in that instant of horror that the thing was headless!

He was raising his pistol to fire; the long moments that seemed never to end were in actuality an instant. Where should he aim? He must not injure Diane.

From the high rocks beside him came a glint of light, a straight line of reflected brilliance as from a poised and slender shaft. It moved, it flashed downward, it hissed angrily as it passed close to Chet's head. It went on, a spear like a flash of light—on and down, to drive sharply into the body of that serpent shape! And the coils, at that blow, relaxed, while the figure of Diane Delacouer fell limply to the outstretched, cushioning arms of the man below....

Had the weapon been thrown with uncanny accuracy, or had it been meant for him? Chet could not be sure. But he knew that before him

Walt Harkness was bending protectingly above the unconscious figure of a girl, while above and about the two there flailed a terrible, headless thing that beat the rocks with sledge-hammer blows. It struck Harkness once and sent him staggering, and once it came close to Chet so that his hands closed upon it for an instant. And with the touch he knew that this serpent was no animal shape, but worse —a creeping tendril from some flesh-eating horror of the vegetable world.

He dashed in beside Walt; he saw Kreiss hurrying across the rocks. They had Diane safely out of reach of the threshing, striking thing before the scientist arrived.

The spear that had passed close to Chet had pinned this deadly thing to earth; it tore loose as they watched, and the wounded tendril, with the spear still hanging from its side, slid swiftly down the slope and into the darkness at the foot of the rocks.

Even the calm preciseness of Herr Kreiss was shattered by the attack. In a confusion of words he stammered questions that went unanswered. Chet thrust his pistol into Harkness' hands and was off down the rocky slope toward the springs where they had got water for their evening meal. A rolled leaf made a cup that he held carefully while he climbed back. A few minutes later the pallid face

of Diane showed a faint flush, while she drew a choking breath.

Harkness held the girl's head in his arms; he was uttering words of endearment that were mingled with vicious curses for the thing that had escaped.

"Never mind that," argued Chet; "that one won't bother us again, and after this we will be on guard. But here is something to wonder about. What about this spear? Where did it come from?"

Harkness had eyes only for Diane's tremulous smile. "I am all right, truly," she assured him. Only then did he turn in bewilderment to Chet.

"I thought you threw it! But of course not; you couldn't; we didn't have any spears."

"No," said Chet; "I didn't throw it. I saw something moving over across there"—he pointed toward the farther rocks where he had been—"I was going to call when Diane's scream beat me to it. But what I saw wasn't the thing that attacked her. And if it was the same one who threw that spear he must have come across here in a hurry. And that spear, by the way, came uncomfortably close to my head. I'm not at all sure but it was meant for me."

Harkness released his arms from Diane, for she was now able to sit erect. He picked up the crude bow that had been beside him and fitted an arrow to the string.

"I'll go and have a look," he promised grimly. But Chet held him back.

"You're not thinking straight; this shock has knocked you out of control. If that little stranger with the spear meant to help us there's no need of hunting him out; he doesn't seem anxious to show himself. And if he meant it for me, he's still too good a shot to fool with in the dark. You stick here until daylight."

"That is good advice," Herr Kreiss agreed. "The night, it will soon be gone." He was looking at the leafy opening overhead where the golden light of a distant Earth was fading before the glow of approaching day.

Chapter 11: The Sacrificial Altar

"I am off the trail," Harkness admitted. "Towahg guided me before; I wish he were here to do it now."

They had pushed on for another short day, Harkness leading, and Chet bringing up the rear and casting frequent backward glances in a vain effort to catch a glimpse of some other moving figure.

Smothered at times in a dense tangle of vegetation, where they sweated and worked with aching muscles to tear a path; watching always for the flaming, crimson buds on grotesque trees, whose limbs were waving, undulating arms and from which came tendrils like the one that had nearly ended Diane's life, they fought their way on.

They had seen the buds on that earlier trip; had seen the revolting beauty of them—the fleshy lips that opened above a pool of death into which those reaching arms would drop any living thing they touched. They kept well out of reach when a splash of crimson against the white trees flashed in warning.

Again they would traverse an open space, where outcropping rocks would send Kreiss into transports of delight over their rich mineral

contents. But always their leader's eyes were turned toward a range of hills.

"It is beyond there," he assured them, "if only we can reach it." Harkness pointed to a scar on a mountainside where a crystal outcrop in a sheer face of rock sparkled brilliantly in the sunlight. "I remember that—it isn't so very far—and we can look back down the valley from there and see our ship."

"But we'll never make it to-night," said Chet; "it's a case of making camp again."

They had gained an altitude of perhaps a thousand feet. No longer did the jungle press so hard upon them. Even the single file that had been their manner of marching could be abandoned, and Harkness drew Diane to his side that he might lend her some of his own strength.

Again the soft contours of the rolling ground had been disturbed: a landslide in some other century had sent a torrent of boulders from the high slopes above. Harkness threaded his way among great masses of granite to come at last to an opening where massive monoliths formed a gateway.

It was an entrance to another valley. They did not need to enter, for they could skirt it and continue toward the high pass in the hills. But the gateway seemed inviting. Harkness took Diane's hand to help her toward it; the others followed.

The fast sinking sun had buried itself behind a distant range, and long shadows swept swiftly across the world, as if the oncoming night were alive—as if it were rousing from the somnolence of its daytime sleep and reaching out with black and clutching hands toward a fearful, waiting world.

"No twilight here," Chet observed; "let's find a hide-out—a cave, by choice—where we can guard the entrance and—"

A gasp from Diane checked him. "Oh!" she exclaimed. "It is not real! *C'est impossible!*"

Chet had been busied with the matter of a secure footing; he looked up now and took a step forward where Harkness and Diane stood motionless in a gateway of stone. And he, too, stopped as if stunned by the weird beauty of the scene.

A valley. Its length reached out before them to end some half mile away. Sides that might once have sloped evenly seemed weathered

to a series of great steps, and an alternation of striations in black and white made a banding that encircled the entire oval. Each step was dead-black stone, each riser was snow-white marble; and the steps mounted up and up until they resembled the sides of a great bowl. In the center, like an altar for the worship of some wild, gargantuan god, was a stepped pyramid of the same startling black and white. Banded like the walls, it rose to half their height to finish in a capstone cut square and true.

An altar, perhaps; an arena, beyond a doubt, or so it seemed to Chet. He was first to put the impression in words.

"A stadium!" he marvelled; "an arena for the games of the gods!"

"The gods," Diane breathed softly, "of a wild, lost world—" But Chet held to another thought.

"Who—who built it?" he asked. "It's tremendous! There is nothing like it on Earth!"

Only Kreiss seemed oblivious to the weird beauty of the spectacle. To Professor Kreiss dolomite and black flint rock were dolomite and black flint; interesting specimens—a peculiar arrangement—but nature must be permitted her little vagaries.

"Who built it?" He repeated Chet's question and gave a short laugh before answering in words. "The rains, Herr Bullard, and the winds of ages past. Yes, yes! A most remarkable example of erosion—most remarkable! I must return this way some time and give it my serious attention."

Harkness had not spoken; he was shaking his head doubtfully at Kreiss' words. "I am inclined to agree with Chet," he said slowly. "But who could have built a gigantic work like this? Have there been former civilisations here?"

He straightened up and shook himself free from the effects of the wild, barbaric scene.

"And you needn't come back," he told Kreiss; "you can have a look now, to-night, by moonlight. We can't go on. I think we'll be safest on that big altar rock; nothing will get near us without our knowing."

Chet felt Diane Delacouer's hand on his arm; her other hand was gripping at Harkness. The shiver that passed through her was plainly perceptible. "I'm afraid," she confessed in a half-whisper; "there's something about it: I do not like it. There is evil there—danger. We should not enter."

Walt Harkness gently patted the hand that trembled on his arm. "I don't wonder that you are all shot to pieces," he assured her. "After last night, you've a right to be. But I really believe this is the safest spot we can find."

He stepped forward beyond the great stones that were like a gateway from one wildly impossible world to another. A rock slide, it seemed, had smoothed off the great steps from where they stood, for there was a descending slope that gave easy footing. He took one step, and then another, to show the girl how foolish were her fears; then he started back. In the fading light something had flashed from the jungle they had left. Across the rocky expanse it came, to bury itself in the loose soil and rubble, not two paces in advance of the startled man. An arrow!—and it stood quivering in silent warning on the path ahead.

Chet quietly unslung his bow where he had looped it over one shoulder, but Harkness motioned him back. The pistol was in his hand, but after a moment's hesitation he returned that to his belt. His voice was low and tense.

"Listen," he said: "we're no match for them with our bows. They are hidden; they could pick us off as we came. And I can't waste a single detonite shell on them while they keep out of sight. We can't go

back; we must go ahead. We will all make a break for it and run as fast as we can toward the big altar—the pyramid. From there we can stand them off for a while. And we will go now and take them by surprise."

He seized Diane firmly by one arm and steadied her as they dashed down the slope. Chet and the professor were close behind. Each spine must have tingled in anticipation of a shower of arrows. Chet threw one hasty look toward the rear; the air was clear; no slender shafts pursued them. But from the cover of the jungle growth came a peculiar sound, almost like a human in distress—a call like a moaning cry.

They slackened their breath-taking pace and approached the great pyramid more slowly. As they drew near, the great steps took on their real size; each block was taller even than Chet, and he had to reach above his head to touch the edge of the stone.

They walked quickly about; found a place where the great blocks were broken down, where the slope was littered with debris from the disintegrating stone that had sifted down from above. They could climb here; it was almost like a crudely formed set of more normally sized steps. They made their way upward while Chet counted the courses of stone. Six, then eight—ten—and here Harkness called a

halt.

"This—will do," he gasped between labored breaths. "Safe enough here. Chet, you and Kreiss—spread out—watch from all—sides."

The pilot was not as badly winded as Harkness who bad been helping Diane. "Stay here," he told Harkness; "you too, Kreiss; make yourselves comfortable. I will go on up to the top. The moon—or the Earth, rather—will be up pretty soon; I can keep watch in all directions from up there. We've got to get some sleep; can't let whoever it is that is trailing us rob us of our rest or we'll soon be no good. I'll call you after a while."

The great capstone projected beyond the blocks that supported it; that much had been apparent from the ground. But Chet was amazed at the size of the monolith when he stood at last on the broad step over which this capstone projected like a roof.

The shadows were deep beneath, and Chet, knowing that he could never draw himself to the top of the great slab whose under side he could barely touch, knew also that he must watch from all sides. The shadowed floor beneath the big stone made a shelter from any watchful eyes out there in the night; here would be his beat as sentry. He walked slowly to the side of the pyramid, then around toward the

front.

It was the front to Chet because it faced the entrance, the rocky gateway, where they had come in. He did not expect to find that side in any way differing from the first. Each side was twenty paces in length; Chet measured them carefully, astounded still at the size of the structure.

"Carved by the winds and rains," he said, repeating the opinion of Professor Kreiss. "Now, I wonder.... It seems too regular, too much as if—" He paused in his thoughts as he reached the corner; waited to stare watchfully out into the night; turned the corner, and, still in shadow, moved on. "Too much as if nature had had some help!"

His meditation ended as abruptly as did his steady pacing: he was checked in midstride, one foot outstretched, while he struggled for balance and fought to keep from taking that forward step.

In the shelter of the capstone was a darker shadow; there was a blackness there that could mean only the opening of a cave—a cavern, whose regular outlines and square-cut portal dismissed for all time the thought of a natural opening in the rock. But it was not this alone that had brought the man up short in his stealthy stride: it had jolted him as if he had walked head on into the great monolith

itself. It was not this but a flat platform before the cave, a raised stone surface some two feet above the floor. And on it, pale and unreal in the first light of the rising Earth was a naked, human form —a face that grimaced with distorted features.

Chet had known the ape-men on that earlier visit: he knew that while most of them were heavily covered with hair there were some who were almost human in their hairlessness. The body before him was one of these.

It lay limply across the stone platform, the listless head hanging downward over one edge. It had high cheekbones, a retreating forehead, glassy, staring eyes, and grinning teeth that projected from between loose lips. And the evening wind stirred the black, stringy hair while it touched lightly upon the ends of a short length of vine about the ape-man's neck, where only the ends could be seen, for the rest of the pliant vine was sunk deeply into the flesh of the neck. It had been the instrument of death; the ape-man had been strangled.

Chet tore his fascinated eyes from the revolting features of that purple face; he forced himself to look beyond at what else might be on this sacrificial stone. And, as he saw the assortment of fruit that was there on a green mat of leaves, the surprise was even greater than would have followed a repetition of the first discovery.

A naked, murdered man!—and ripe fruit! What was the meaning of this? Chet asked himself a score of questions and found the answer to none. But one thing he knew now beyond a doubt: Herr Professor Kreiss had been wrong. This was truly an altar for the performance of unknown and savage rites, and the altar itself and the whole encircling arena had been created by some intelligence. People—things—embodied intelligences of some sort had carved these stones. Chet was oppressed by a feeling of impending danger.

His thoughts came back sharply to the things on the stone: the absurdly contrasting exhibits: a naked body and fruit! But were they so different? he asked himself, and knew in the same instant that they were not. They were one and the same; they differed only in kind. They were both food!

From the darkness beyond came a shuffling of feet. From the black passage someone was coming—drawing near to the portal—and coming slowly, steadily through the dark. The pad of animal feet would have been unnerving—or the stealthy footfalls of an approaching savage—but this was neither; it was a scuffing, shuffling sound. The sweat stood out in beads on Chet's forehead and a trickle of it reached his eyes. He dashed it away with the back of his hand while he drew silently into the shadow of the overhanging stone. He held his breath as he watched in the darkness.

His pistol came noiselessly from his belt. Yet, how could he fire it? he asked himself in a moment of frantic planning. Only seven cartridges left!—they would need them all; and to fire now would bring more enemies upon them. He returned the gun to his belt and stooped to weigh a fragment of stone in his hand: this must serve him as a weapon.

The dragging footsteps were near, where the passage mouth loomed black. The light of a distant Earth, struck slantingly across to leave this face of the pyramid in half-darkness. From that far and peaceful world the light poured floodingly down; it shone in under the projecting capstone; it struck upon the raised altar and revealed in ghastliest detail the gruesome offering there. And surely the strangest sight of all that that Earth-light disclosed was when it shone golden upon a black and hairy body of a beast that was half man, half ape. The creature moved slowly forward, walking erect, with its furry arms stretched gropingly ahead. In the full light it went shuffling on like one who is blind or who walks in the dark, until it stopped before the altar stone and stood rigidly waiting.

Waiting for what? Chet was making demands upon his reason that was already taxed beyond its capacity. He heard nothing, and he knew with entire certainty that there was no audible call, yet he sensed the message at the instant the ape-man moved.

"Flesh!" said the message. "Bring flesh! Bring it now!"

And, with glazed, wide-open eyes which plainly saw, but could not comprehend, the ape-thing stared at the altar-stone. It bent forward, took the fresh-killed body by the throat, and slung it across one shoulder as easily as a child might handle a doll; then it turned and vanished once more into the waiting dark.

"God!" breathed Chet when the vision had passed. "God help us! What does it mean?"

He took one backward step, then another, and made his way in silence along the path he had come. He must get back to the others to tell them of what he had seen; to help them to flee from this place of horror that was more terrible for its qualities of the unknown.

He gave his companions the story in staccato sentences. "And the ape-man was unconscious," he concluded; "he was an automaton only, directed by another brain. I know it. I got that message, I tell you; it was radioed by someone or by something—sent direct to that big ape's brain.

"Now let's get out of here. Diane had it right when she said that the place was evil. But she didn't make it strong enough. It's foul with evil! It's damned! Come on, I'm leaving now!"

Chet's whispered words were uttered with all the emphasis that horror could instill. He knew that he spoke truth. But he could not know how mistaken was his last positive assertion.

"I'm leaving now!" Chet had said, and how desperately he wanted to put this place behind him only he himself could know. He took one step toward the place where they could descend; then Harkness' hand pulled him roughly to his knees.

"Down!" Harkness was commanding; "get down, Chet! They're coming—a swarm of them—through the gate!"

The pilot heard them before he saw them. They began a chant as they poured through the entrance, a weird, wailing note like the cry of a stricken animal that cries on and on. Then he saw the swarm.

They came in a cataract of black bodies that spilled through that stone portal and down the long slope. They formed a ragged column on the ground and came on toward the pyramid, where, unseen, three men and a girl from another world were crouching.

"Back!" Chet ordered in a whisper. "Keep low—in the shadow! Get around in back of the pyramid. We can make a run for it!"

They crept swiftly along the rocky step where the deep angle was in shadow. They reached the rear slope where Chet had climbed. And each one knew without the speaking of a word that retreat was not to be considered. The open arena!—the high bank of great steps in their bold markings of black and white! They could never hope to scale them; they would never even reach them alive, for the savage horde would overwhelm them before they had crossed the Earth-lit ground.

"All right," said Chet in acceptance of their unspoken thoughts, "up it is! Here's a hand, Diane—up you go! Now watch your step, and climb as if a thousand devils were after you, for there's all of that!"

The wave of bodies was washing against the pyramid's base when Chet drew Kreiss, the last of the four, into the shadow of the huge capstone. The noise of their climbing had been covered by the wailing cry that came piercing shrilly from the throng far below. And they had been unseen, Chet was sure; unless the one furtive shadow that he had seen draw away from the crowd and slip around toward the rear of the pyramid meant that some one of the tribe had found their trail.

From the front of the shadowed top came the shuffling of heavy, dragging feet on the stone. It was the same as before. Chet had held some vague idea of fighting off the horde from the top of the steps, for here was the only place where they could ascend. He had forgotten this other one for the moment, and he realized in a single flashing instant that here was a worse menace than the pack.

Only one, it was true, one ape-man who would be no match for them! But Chet remembered those blind, staring eyes and the message that had come to him. Those eyes had seen the horrible food upon the altar; some other brain had seen it too. The ape-man was an instrument only; there was some hidden horror in back of him, something that saw with his eyes, something that must never see them, cowering and huddled in the shadow of that great stone.

The shuffling was coming from the right; Chet clutched silently at the others to draw them away and toward the left. They retreated to the corner, turned it, and went on toward the front; then stopped in silent waiting where the shadow ended. The front, where the altar stood, was in the full glare of Earth.

For the moment they were safe, but what of the time when the ape-man returned? He had descended to the ground; when he climbed back again would he retrace his steps? Or would he come this side

and trap them here where the light of their own Earth made any forward step impossible?

Below them the wailing ceased. Chet leaned forward to see the black horde, silent and motionless. Approaching them was the "big ape" he had seen at the altar. His hands were reaching blindly before him and he moved as would a human when entranced.

He reached the huddled blacks; his groping hands hovered hesitantly above a cowering, hairy form. Presently the ape-man passed on to the next, and his hands rested on the creature's face. From the massed figures there rose a moan, and Chet felt poignantly the animal misery of it. Suddenly all emotion was transformed to startled attention. From the slope at the rear had come the rattle of loose stones!

Far below, in plain view, was the one who had descended—Chet knew that his eyes could never mistake that blind, groping figure—but from the slope they could not see, from around the far edge of the pyramid, a clicking stone sent a repeated warning.

Chet laid a hand on Harkness' arm. "Get set, Walt!" he warned. "Get ready for trouble. There's something coming: it may come this way!"

Chapter 12: In the Shadow of the Pyramid

They waited, unbreathing, listening to the occasional stealthy sounds. The pistol was still in Chet's belt; the three men were crouched before Diane, in their hands the crude weapons that they had made.

And then the sounds ceased. The menace seemed to have passed, or to be withheld; the men had been tensely prepared for some minutes when Diane spoke softly.

"Look below," she whispered; "the savages! That big one seems to be choosing them—selecting some from among them."

Chet forced himself to look away from that corner of the rocky step where he had been expecting an unknown enemy to appear, and he stared below them where the Earth-light from the fully risen globe swept across the arena.

He was amazed at the numbers of the savages that the full light disclosed. There were hundreds—yes, thousands—of them, he estimated. And they were standing in black, clotted masses, standing awed and silent in a world that was all black and white in a dazzling contrast, while there passed among them one with outstretched arms.

The black, hairy hands would hover over a cowering head; the eyes, Chet knew, were staring widely, blindly, at the shivering creature before him. And if Chet's surmise was correct, there was another—a hidden, mysterious something—who was taking the message of those eyes as the ape-man's brain transmitted it; taking it and sending back instructions as to which victims should be selected.

Often the hands passed on; but soon they would descend to touch the savage face of another in the assemblage. At the touch the selected one jerked sharply erect, then walked stiffly from the ranks to join a group that was waiting.

At last there were nearly a hundred savage figures in that group, all grown men, young and in the full flood of their savage strength. No women were chosen, nor children, though there were countless little black bodies huddled with the others.

A prolific race, indeed, Chet thought, and this human automaton down there was leaving the women to produce more victims; leaving the children till they were fully grown, taking only the best and strongest of the pack—for what?

His question was answered in part in the next instant. While the wailing cry quivered again upon the air, the chosen hundred took up

their somnambulistic walk. The messenger from the pyramid came after like a herdsman driving cattle to the slaughter. They passed from Chet's view as they rounded the rear of the pyramid, and then he heard the scuff and clatter of their ascent.

No need to explain to the others; each of the four saw all too clearly their predicament. From the rear, coming steadily on, was the savage throng; before them, plainly visible from below, was the lighted edge where the altar rock stood. To step out there in full view would bring the whole pack upon them; to drop down to another level would expose them as plainly. Only in the dark shelter of the projecting capstone were they hidden from the upturned faces now massed solidly about.

Their problem was solved for them by the sight of a savage body, black, ragged with unkempt tufts of hair—another!—a score of them! They were rounding the corner of the pyramid and walking stiffly toward them, pressing upon them.

And the arrow on the drawn bow in Chet's hand was never loosed, for each savage face was wide-eyed and devoid of expression; the ape-men neither saw nor felt them. They were hypnotized, as Chet was suddenly aware; they knew only that they must follow the mental instructions that were guiding them on.

The black, animal bodies were upon them. Chet came from the stupefying wonder that had claimed them all and sprang to shield the group from the steady advance. Harkness was beside him, and an instant later, Kreiss; Diane was at their backs. And the weight of the advancing bodies swept them irresistibly backward, out into the light, along the wide step toward the passage that yawned darkly under the projecting cap.

There was no checking the avalanche of bodies—no resisting them: the men were carried along; it was all they could do to keep their footing. Harkness sprang backward to take Diane in his arms and retreat with her before the advancing horde. Chet was waiting for an outcry from below, for some indication that despite the mass of bodies that smothered them, their presence had been observed. But only the wailing cry persisted.

There was another advancing column that had circled the other side, and now both groups were meeting at the passageway. Chet gripped at the figure of Kreiss who was being swept helpless toward the dark vault and he dragged him back. The two fought their way out toward the front and saw Harkness doing the same.

"The altar," gasped Chet; "up on the altar!" And he saw Harkness swing Diane up on the stone, then turn and extend a helping hand

toward the two men.

Safe in the sanctuary of this altar dedicated to some deity that they could never imagine, they crouched close to its blood-clotted surface, and still there was no change in the cry from below.

"Let them all go in," Harkness whispered. "Then follow them into the shadow. There will no more come up here, I imagine. We will make our escape after a bit."

The black mouth of the passage had swallowed the ape-men by solid scores, and now only some stragglers were left. Harkness was speaking in quick, whispered orders:

"Follow the last ones. Keep stooped over so they won't spot us from below. Wait in the darkness of the entrance."

Chet saw him crouch low as he crept from the stone. Diane followed, then Kreiss; and Chet next, close behind a shambling ape-figure that slunk into the darkness of the passageway.

That it was a passage Chet had not the least doubt. It had taken in these scores of savage figures, taken them somewhere; but where it led or why these poor stunned creatures had been chosen he could

not know. Yet he remembered the one message he had caught: "Flesh! Bring flesh!" It had meant only one thing: it was food that was wanted—human food! And the fetid stench that was wafted from the darkness of this place of mystery and horror, that made him reel back and put a hand to his revolted lips, would not have encouraged him, even had he had any desire to learn the answer to the puzzle.

Diane was half-crouching; she was choking with the foul air. Harkness spoke gaspingly as he took her by the arm:

"Outside, for God's sake!... Horrible!... Get Diane outside—try lying down—we may be out of sight!"

But this time he did not follow his own instructions. He rose erect, instead, and stood swaying as if dazed; and Chet saw that before him, outlined against the lighted opening in the rock, was the messenger he had seen.

Black against the bright Earth-light, his features were lost; no expression could be seen. But his eyes, that were dead and white like the upturned belly of a fish, came suddenly to life. They glared from the dark face with a light that came almost visibly from them to the staring eyes of Walt Harkness. Chet saw Harkness stiffen, one

upraised hand falling woodenly to his side; a cry of warning was strangled in his throat, and then the glaring eyes passed on to the face of Diane.

Chet had forgotten this messenger from the pyramid's hidden horror. If he had thought of him at all he had assumed that he had passed in with the other crowding ape-men; he was one like them, undistinguishable from the rest. And now the savage figure was before them in terrifying reality.

The eyes passed on to Kreiss. Then the ugly face swung toward Chet, and, as their eyes met, it seemed to Chet that a blow had crashed stunningly upon his brain. He tried to move—he knew that he must move. He must reach for his bow, must leap upon this hulking brute and beat at the glaring eyes with his bare fists. And his muscles that he tried to rouse to action might have changed to stone, so unresponsive were they, and unmoving.

The hairy hands reached out and touched Harkness. They passed on and lingered upon the blanched features of the girl, and Chet raged inwardly at his inability to resist and her utter helplessness to draw away. Then Kreiss; and again Chet's turn. And, with the touching of those rough animal hands, he felt that a contact had been established with some distant force—a something that communicated with him,

that sent thoughts which his brain phrased in words.

"Curious!" said those thoughts. "How exceedingly curious! We shall be interested in learning more. We shall learn all we can in one way and another of this new race. We shall dismember them slowly, all but the woman: we find her strangely attractive.... You will bring them to us at once."

And Chet knew that the instructions were for the messenger whose hands came stiffly upward to point the way; while, with a portion of his mind that was functioning freely, Chet raged as he saw Diane take the first stiff, involuntary step forward. Then Harkness and Kreiss! and he knew that he too must follow, knew himself to be as helpless as the driven brutes he had seen herded down below. And then, with the same mind that was still able to comprehend the messages of his own eyes and ears, he knew that from behind the savage figure there had come a sound.

His senses were alert, sharpened to an abnormal degree; the almost silent footfall otherwise could never have been heard.

The raised hand swung toward him; he knew that he must turn and follow the others to whatever awaited.... But the hand paused! Then swiftly the savage figure swung to face toward the entrance, and

those blazing eyes, as Chet knew, were a match for any opponent.

But the eyes never found what they looked for and the quick swing of the big ape-body was never completed. In the portal of light there was framed a naked figure which sprang as if from nowhere, squat, savage and ape-like, but hairless. Its arms were upraised; the hands held a bow; and the twang of the bowstring came as one with the ripping thud of a shaft that was tearing through flesh.

The savage fell in mid-turn; and it seemed as if the blazing light of the terrible eyes must have flicked out before the breath of Death. And, protruding from the thick neck, was the shaft of a crude arrow.... There were others that flashed, thudding and quivering, into the body that jerked with each impact, then lay still, a darker blot on the floor of a dark cave.

Chet was breathless; it was an instant before he realized that he was free, that the hypnotic bonds that had bound him were loosed. It was another instant before he sensed that his companions were still marching—trudging stiffly, woodenly off through the dark. He bounded after, heedless of bruising walls; he followed where the sound of their scuffling feet marked their progress to a sure doom.

There were stairs; how he sensed them Chet could not have told. But

he paused, hesitated a moment, then found the first step and half ran, half fell, through the utter darkness of the pit into which they had gone.

The odors that had seemed the utmost of vileness now came to him a hundred times worse. They tore at his throat with a strangling grip, and he was weak with nausea when he crashed upon a figure that he knew, was Kreiss. Then on, to grasp at Diane and Harkness; to drag them to a standstill in the darkness that pressed upon them smotheringly, while he shook them, beat at them, shouted their names.

"Diane! Walt! Wake up! Wake up, I tell you! We're going back!"

He swung them around; forced them to face about.

"Walt, for God's sake, wake up! Diane! Kreiss!" The deep, sobbing breath of Diane was the first encouraging response.

Then: "Free!" she gasped. "I'm free!" And Harkness and Kreiss both mumbled incoherently as they came from their hypnotic stupor.

"How—" began Harkness, "how did you—" But Chet waited for no explanation of the seeming miracle that had just taken place.

"Go back," he told them, "—back up the steps!" And a babble of cries that were terrifying in their inhuman savagery welled up from the depths of the pyramid to urge them on.

The body of their captor was prone on the floor above: they stepped over it to reach the entrance. No figure showed there now; Chet stooped low and stepped forth cautiously that the surging horde on the ground might not see him. The others followed. He felt Harkness' hand in a sudden warning grip upon him.

"Chet!" said Harkness, "there is something there in the shadow—there!" And Chet saw, even before Walt pointed, a wriggling figure that crept toward them.

He struck down the bow that Kreiss had raised, and a ray of light came through a jagged niche in the rock above to fall upon the face of the one who drew near.

Abjectly, in utmost humility, the naked figure crept toward their feet, and the savage face that was raised to theirs was wreathed in a distorted smile.

Beside him, Chet felt Harkness struggling to speak. In wondering tones that were almost unbelieving, Harkness choked out one word.

"Towahg!" he said. "Towahg!"

And the thick lips in that upraised face echoed proudly:

"Towahg! Me come!"

Chapter 13: Happy Valley

"Towahg!" Chet marveled; "you little devil! It's you who has been following us all this time!"

"I wish he hadn't been so bashful," Harkness added. "If he had come out and showed himself he would have saved us a lot of trouble." But Harkness stepped forward and patted the black shoulder that quivered with joy beneath his touch. "Good boy, Towahg!" he told the grinning ape-man.

Monkey-like, Towahg had to imitate, and this time he gave a reproduction of his own acts. He wriggled toward the entrance of the passage, peered around the edge, and seemed to see something that made him draw back. Then he fitted an arrow to his bow and springing upright, let it fly.

So realistic was the performance that Chet actually expected to see another enemy transfixed, but the squat figure of Towahg was doing a dance of victory beside the prostrate figure of the first and only victim. Chet reached out with one long arm and swung the exulting savage about. He heard Herr Kreiss expressing his opinion in accents of disgust.

"Ugly little beast!" Kreiss was saying. "And murderous!"

There was no time to lose: the sound of scrambling bodies was coming nearer from the dark pit beyond. Yet, even then, Chet found an instant to defend the black.

"Damned lucky for us that he is a murderer!" he told Kreiss. Then to Towahg:

"Listen, you little imp of hell! You don't know more than ten words, but get this!"

Chet was standing where the Earth-light struck upon him; he pointed into the dark where the sounds of pursuit grew loud, and he shook his head and screwed his features into an expression that was supposed to depict fear. "No! No!" he said.

He dragged the savage forward and pointed cautiously to the milling horde below, and repeated, "No! No!" Then he included them all in a wave of his hand and pointed back and out into the night. And Towahg's unlovely features were again twisted into what was for him a smile, as he grunted some unintelligible syllables and motioned them to follow.

It had taken but an instant. Towahg was scurrying in advance; he sped like a shadow of a passing cloud, and behind him the others followed, crouching low in the shelter of the deep-cut step. No figures were below them at the rear of the pyramid, and Chet reached for one of Diane's arms, while Harkness took the other. Between them they held her from falling while they followed the dark blur that was Towahg leaping noiselessly down the long slope.

No time for caution now. The savage ahead of them leaped silently; his flying feet hardly disturbed a stone. But beneath them, Chet felt a small landslide of rubble that came with them in their flight. And above the noise of their going came a sound that sped them on—the rising shout of wonder from the unseen multitude in front, and a chorus of animal cries from the pyramid's top.

Chet saw a blot of black figures at the top of the slope just as they felt firm ground beneath their feet. They followed where Towahg led in a swift race across the open arena toward the great steps at the rear. Black and white in strongly contrasting bands, the rock reared itself in a barrier that, to Chet, seemed hopelessly unsurmountable. He felt that they had come to the end of their tether.

"Trapped!" he told himself, and wondered at Towahg's leading them into such a cul-de-sac, even while he knew that retreat in other

directions was cut off. The pursuit was gaining on them; savages from beyond the pyramid had sighted them now in the full light of Earth, and their yelping cry came mingled with hoarse growls as the full pack took the trail. Ahead of them, Towahg, reaching the base of the first white step, was dancing with excitement beside a narrow cleft in the rocks. He led the way through the small passage. And Harkness, bringing up the rear, took the detonite pistol in his hand.

"One shell! We'll have to waste it!" he said, and raised the weapon.

Its own explosion was slight, but the sound of the bursting cartridge when its grain of detonite struck the rocks made a thunderous noise as it echoed between the narrow walls.

"That will check the pursuit," Harkness exulted; "that will make them stop and think it over."

It was another hour before Towahg slackened his pace. He had led them through jungle that to them seemed impassable; had shown them the hidden trails and warned them against spiked plants whose darts were needle sharp. At last he led them to a splashing stream where they followed him through the trackless water for a mile or more.

The mountain with the white scar was their beacon. Harkness pointed it out to their guide and made him understand that that was where they would go.

And, when night was gone, and the first rays of the rising sun made a quickly changing kaleidoscope of the colorful east, they came at last to a barren height. Behind them was a maze of valleys and rolling hills; beyond these was a place of smoke, where red fires shone pale in the early light, and set off at one side was a shape whose cylindrical outline could be plainly seen. It caught the first light of the sun to reflect it in sparkling lines and glittering points, and every reflection came back to them tinged with pale green, by which they knew that the gas was still there.

Chet turned from a prospect that could only be depressing. His muscles were heavy with the poisons of utter fatigue; the others must be the same, but for the present they were safe, and they could find some position that they could defend. Towahg would be a valuable ally. And now their lives were ahead of them—lives of loneliness, of exile.

Harkness, too, had been staring back toward that ship that was their only link with their lost world; his eyes met Chet's in an exchange of glances that showed how similar were their thoughts. And then, at

sound of a glad laugh from Diane, their looks of despair gave place to something more like shame, and Chet shifted his own eyes quickly away.

"It is beautiful, Walter," Diane was saying: "the lovely valley, the lake, the three mountain peaks like sentinels. It is marvelous. And we will be happy there, all of us, I know it.... Happy Valley. There—I've named it! Do you like the name, Walter?"

And Chet saw Harkness' reply in a quick pressure of his hand on one of Diane's. And he knew why Walt looked suddenly away without giving her an answer in words.

"Happy Valley!" Diane of all the four had shown the ability to rise above desperate physical weariness, above a despondent mood, to dare look ahead instead of backward and to find hope for happiness in the prospect.

Off at one side, Chet saw Kreiss; the scientist's weariness was forgotten while he ran like a puppy after a bird, in pursuit of a floating butterfly that drifted like a wind-blown flower. And Harkness, unspeaking, was still clinging to Diane's firm hand.... Yes, thought Chet, there was happiness to be found here. For himself, it would be more than a little lonesome. But, he reflected, what

happiness was there in any place or thing more than the happiness we put there for ourselves?... Happy Valley—and why not? He dared to meet the girl's eyes now, and the smile on his lips spread to his own eyes, as he echoed his thoughts:

"Why not?" he asked. "Happy Valley it is; we just didn't recognize it at first."

They came to the lake at last; its sparkling blue had drawn them from afar off: it was still lovelier as they came near. Here was the same steady west wind that had driven the gas upon their ship. But here it ruffled the velvet of waving grasses that swept down to the margin of the lake. There was a higher knoll that rose sharply from the shore, and back of all were forests of white-trunked trees.

Chet had seen none of the crimson buds, nor threatening tendrils since entering the valley. And Towahg confirmed his estimate of the valley's safety. He waved one naked arm in an all-inclusive gesture, and he drew upon his limited vocabulary to tell them of this place.

"Good!" he said, and waved his arm again. "Good! Good!"

"Towahg, you're a silver-tongued orator," Chet told him: "no one could have described it better. You're darned right; it's good."

He raised his head to take a deep breath of the fragrant air; it was intoxicating with its blending of spicy odors. At his feet the water made emerald waves, where the clear, deep blue of the reflected sky merged with yellow sand. Fish darted through the deeper pools where the beach shelved off, and above them the air held flashing colorful things that circled and skimmed above the waves.

The rippling grass was so green, the sky and lake so intense a blue, and one mountainous mass of cloud shone in a white too blinding to be borne. And over it all flowed the warm, soft air that seemed vibrant with a life-force pulsing strongly through this virgin world.

Diane called from where she and Harkness had wandered through the lush grass. Kreiss had thrown himself upon a strip of warm sand and was oblivious to the beauties that surrounded him. Towahg was squatted like a half-human frog, binding new heads on his arrows.

"Chet," she called, "come over here and help me to exclaim over this beautiful place. Walter talks only of building a house and arranging a place that we can defend. He is so very practical."

"Practical!" exclaimed Chet. "Why, Walt's a dreamer and a poet compared to me. I'm thinking of food. Hey, Towahg," he called to the black, "let's eat!" He amplified this with unmistakable pointings

at his mouth and suggestive rubbing of his stomach, and Towahg started off at a run toward trees that were heavy with strange fruit.

By night there were unmistakable signs that the hand of man had been at work. A band of savages would have accepted the place as they found it; for them the shelter of a rock would have sufficed. They would have passed on to other hunting grounds and only a handful of ashes and a broken branch, perhaps, would have marked where they had been. But your civilized man is never satisfied.

Along the mile of shore was open ground. Here the trees approached the water: again their solid rampart of ghostly trunks was held back some hundreds of yards. And the open ground was vividly green where the soft grass waved; and it was matted, too, with crimson and gold of countless flowers. A beautiful carpet, flung down by the edge of a crystal lake, and the flowered covering swept up and over the one high knoll that touched the shore.... And on the knoll, near an outcrop of limestone rocks, was a house.

"Not exactly pretentious," Chet had admitted, "but we'll do better later on."

"It will keep Diane under cover," argued Harkness; "these leaves are like leather."

He helped Diane put another strip of leaf in place on the roof; a twist of green vine tied around the stem held it loosely.

The leaves were huge, as much as ten feet in diameter: great circles of leathery green that they cut with a pocket knife and "tailored" as Diane called it to fit the rough framework of the hut. Towahg had found them and had given them a name that they did not trouble to learn. "Towahg's grunts sound so much alike," Diane complained smilingly. "He seems to know his natural history, but he is difficult to understand."

But Towahg proved a valuable man. He cracked two round stones together, and cleaved off one to a rounded edge. He bound this with withes to a short stick and in a few minutes had a serviceable stone ax that bit into slender saplings that were needed for a framework.

Chet nodded his head to call Kreiss' attention to that. "Herr Doktor," he said, "it isn't every scientist who has the chance to see a close-up of the stone age."

But Herr Kreiss, as Chet told Harkness later, did not seem to "snuggle up nice and friendly" to the grinning savage. "He is armed better than we," Kreiss complained. "I do not trust him. It is an impossible situation, this, that civilized men should be dependent

upon one so savage. For what is our *kultur*, our great advancement in all lines of mental endeavor, if at the last, when tested by nature, we must rely upon such assistance?"

Chet saw Herr Doktor Kreiss draw himself aloof with meticulous care as Towahg dashed by, and it occurred to him that perhaps it was as well for Kreiss that the black one knew so little of what was said.

But aloud he merely said: "You'll have lots of chances to use that mental endeavor stuff later on, Doctor. But right now what we need to know is how to get by without any of your laboratories, without text books or tools, with just our bare hands and with brains that are geared up to the civilization you mention and don't do us a whole lot of good here. Better let Towahg show us what he knows."

But Herr Kreiss only shrugged his thin shoulders and wandered off through this research-man's paradise, where every flower and insect and stone were calling to him. Chet envied the equanimity with which the man had accepted his lot, had come to this place and was prepared to spend his remaining years collecting scientific data that were to him all-important.

Again the sun sank swiftly. But this time, Chet stretched himself luxuriously upon the matted grass and turned to stare at the little fire

that burned before the entrance of Diane's shelter. His pocket fireflash had kindled some dry sticks that burned without smoke.

"We will be a little careful about smoke," Harkness had warned them all. "No use of broadcasting the news of our being here. We have come a long way and I think there is small chance of Schwartzmann's party or the savages finding us in this spot."

Beyond the fire, Harkness raised himself now to sit erect and glance about the circle of fire-lit faces. "There's plenty of planning to be done," he said. "There is the matter of defense; we must build a barricade of some sort. As for shelter, we must remember that we will be here a long time and that we might as well face it. We will need to build some serviceable shelters. Then, what about clothes? These we are wearing are none the better for the trip through the jungle: they won't last forever. We've got to learn—Lord! we've got to learn so many things!"

And the first of many councils was begun.

Chapter 14: A Bag of Green Gas

Under a tree on the edge of the open ground a notched stick hung. Six sharply cut V's showed red through the white bark, then one that was deeper; another six and another deeper cut; more of them until the stick was full: so passed the little days.

"Some time," Herr Kreiss had promised, "I shall determine with accuracy the length of our Dark Moon days; then we will convert these crude records into Earth time. It is good that we should not lose our knowledge of the days on Earth." He made a ceremony each morning of the cutting of another notch.

Chet, too, had a bit of daily routine that was never neglected. Each sunrise found him on the high divide; each morning he watched for the glint and sparkle of sunlight as it flashed from a metal ship; and each morning the reflected light came to him tinged with green, until he knew at last that it might never be different. The poisonous fumes filled the pocket at the end of the valley where the great ship rested. She was indeed at the bottom of a sea.

Back at camp were other signs of the passing days. Around the top of the knoll a palisade had sprung up. Stakes buried in the ground, with sharpened ends pointing up and outward, were interwoven with

tough vines to make a barricade that would check any direct assault. And, within the enclosure, near the little hut that had been built for Diane, were other shelters. One black night of tropic rainstorm had taught the necessity for roofs that would protect them from torrential downpours.

These did well enough for the present, these temporary shelters and defenses, and they had kept Diane and the two men working like mad when it was essential that they have something to do, something to think of, that they might not brood too long and deeply on their situation and the life of exile they were facing.

For Kreiss this was not necessary. In Herr Kreiss, it seemed, were the qualities of the stoic. They were exiled—that was a fact; Herr Kreiss accepted it and put it aside. For, about him, were countless things animate and inanimate of this new world, things which must be taken into his thin hands, examined, classified and catalogued in his mind.

In the rocky outcrop at the top of their knoll he had found a cave with which this rock seemed honeycombed. Here, within the shelter of the barricade, he had established what he called very seriously his "laboratory." And here he brought strange animals from the jungle—flying things that were more like bats than birds, yet colored

gorgeously. Chet found him one day quietly exultant over a wrinkled piece of parchment. He was sharpening a quill into a pen, and a cup-shaped stone held some dark liquid that was evidently ink.

"So much data to record," he said. "There will be others who will follow us some day. Perhaps not during our lifetime, but they will come. These discoveries are mine; I must have the records for them.... And later I will make paper," he added as an afterthought; "there is papyrus growing in the lake."

But on the whole, Kreiss kept strictly to himself. "He's a lone wolf," Chet told the others, "and now that he is bringing in those heavy loads of metals he is more exclusive than ever: won't let me into the back end of his cave."

"Does he think we will steal his gold?" Harkness asked moodily. "What good is gold to us here?"

"He may have gold," Chet informed him, "but he has something more valuable too. I saw some chunks that glowed in the dark. Rotten with radium, he told me. But even so, he is welcome to it: we can't use it. No, I don't think he suspects us of wanting his trophies; he's merely the kind that flocks by himself. He was having a wonderful time today pounding out some of his metals with a stone

hammer; I heard him at it all day. He seems to have settled down in that cave for keeps."

Harkness threw another stick across the fire; its warmth was unneeded, but its dancing flames were cheering.

"And that is something we must make up our minds about," he said slowly: "are we to stay here, or should we move on?"

He dropped to the ground near where Diane was sitting, and took one of her hands in his.

"Diane and I plan to 'set up housekeeping,'" he told Chet, and Chet saw him smile whimsically at the words. Housekeeping on the Dark Moon would be primitive indeed. "We are lacking in some of the customary features of a wedding; we seem to be just out of ministers or civil officials to tie the knot."

"Elect me Mayor of Dianeville," Chet suggested with a grin, "and I'll marry you—if you think those formalities are necessary here."

Diane broke in. "It's foolish of me, Chet, I know it; but don't laugh at me." He saw her lips tremble for an instant. "You see, we're so far away from—from everything, and it seems that that if Walter and I

could just start our lives with a really and truly marriage—oh, I know it is foolish—"

This time Chet interrupted. "After all you have been through, and after the bravery you've shown, I think you are entitled to a little 'foolishness.' And you *shall* be married with as good a knot as any minister could tie: you see, that is one of the advantages of being a Master Pilot. My warrant permits me to perform a marriage service in any level above the surface of the Earth. A left-over from the time when ship's captains had the same right. And although we are grounded for keeps, if we are not above the surface of the Earth right now I don't know anything about altitudes. But," he added as if it were an afterthought, "my fee, although I hate to mention it, is five dollars."

Harkness gravely reached into the pocket of his ragged coat and brought out a wallet. He tendered a five dollar bill to Chet. "I think you're robbing me," he complained, "but that's what happens when there is no competition. And we'll start building a house to-morrow."

"Will we?" Chet inquired. "Is this the best place? For my part I would feel safer if there were more miles between us and that pyramid. What was down in there, God knows. But there was something back of that hypnotized ape—something that knocked us

for a crash landing with one look from those eyes."

The night air was warm, where he lay before their huts, but a shiver of apprehension gripped him at the thought of a mysterious Something that was beyond the power of his imagination, and that was an enemy they would never want to face. Something inhuman in its cold brutality, yet superhuman too, if this mental force were an indication. A something different from anything the people of Earth had ever known, bestial and damnable!

"I am with you on that," Harkness agreed, "but what about the ship? You have had your eye on it every day; do we want to go where we could not see it? If the gas cleared, if there was ever a season when the wind changed, think of what that would mean. Ammunition, food, supplies of all kinds, and the ship as a place of refuge, too, would be lost. No, we can't turn that over to Schwartzmann, Chet; we've got to stick around."

"I still wish we were farther away," Chet acknowledged, "but you are right, Walt; we could never be satisfied a single day if we thought the ship could be reached. Then, too, Towahg seems to think this is O. K.

"As near as I can learn from his sign language and a dozen words,

this is about as good a spot as we can find. He says the ape-men never cross the big divide; something spooky about it I judged. However, we must remember this: the fact that Towahg came across shows that the rest of them would if they found it could be done."

"That was why he led us so far while we waded up that stream," offered Diane. "Trailing Towahg would be like trying to follow the wake of an airship."

"And I asked him about the red vampires that jumped us down by the ship," Chet continued. "He gave me the clear sign on that, too."

Diane was not anxious for more wanderings, as Chet could see. "There is game here," she suggested, "and the edge of the jungle is simply an orchard of fruit, as you know. And having a lake to bathe in is important—oh, I must not try to influence you. We must do what is best."

"No," said Chet, "our own wishes don't count; the ship's the deciding factor. You had better build your house here, Walt. Happy Valley will be headquarters for the expedition; we've got a whale of a lot of country to explore. And, of course, we will slip back and check up on Schwartzmann; find out where he went to—"

"Count me out;" Harkness interrupted; "count me out. You go and hunt trouble if you want to; Diane and I will have our hands full right here. Great heavens, man! We've got to learn to make clothes; and, by the way, that uniform you're wearing is no credit to your tailor. If we are to call this home, we must do better than the savages. I intend to find some bamboo, split it, make some troughs, and bring water down here from the spring. I've got to learn where Kreiss is getting his metal and find some soft enough to hammer into dishes. We can't call the department store by radiophone, you know, and have them shoot a bunch of stuff out by pneumatic tube."

"That's all right," Chet mocked; "by the time you have built a house with only a stone ax in your tool kit, you'll think the rest of it is simple."

The barricade, or *chevaux de frise* as Chet insisted upon calling it, to show his deep study of the wars of earlier days, was built in the form of a U. The knoll itself sloped on one side directly to the water's edge: they had left that side open and carried their line of sharp stakes down to the water, that in the event of a siege they would not be conquered by thirst.

On the highest point of the knoll, some few weeks later, a house was being built—a more pretentious structure, this, than the other little

huts. The aerial roots that the white trees dropped from their high-flung branches were not impossible to cut with their crude implements; they made good building material for a house whose framework must be tied together with vines and tough roots. This would be the home of Harkness and Diane.

The two had been insistent that this structure would be incomplete without a room for Chet, but the pilot only laughed at that suggestion.

"It's an old saying," he told them, "that one house isn't big enough for two families. I think the remark is as old as the institution of marriage, just about. And it's as true on the Dark Moon as it is on Earth. And, besides, I intend to build some bachelor apartments that will make this place of yours look pretty cheap, that is, if I ever find time. I am going to be pretty busy just roaming around this little world seeing what I can see. Even Herr Kreiss has got the wanderlust, you will notice."

"He has been gone four days," said Diane. Her tone was frankly worried. Chet finished tying a sapling to a row of uprights and slid to the ground.

"Don't be alarmed about Kreiss," he reassured her. "He has been all-

fired mysterious for the past several weeks. He's been working on something in that cave of his, and visitors have not been admitted. When he left he told me he would be gone for some time, and he looked at me like an owl when he said it: his mysterious secret was making his eyes pop out. He has a surprise up his sleeve."

"Wedding present for Diane," Harkness suggested.

"Well, he showed me some darn nice sapphires," Chet agreed. "Probably found some way to cut them and he's setting them in a bracelet of soft gold: that's my guess."

"I wish he were here," Diane insisted.

And Chet nodded across the clearing as he said fervently: "I wish I could get all my wishes as quickly as that. There he comes now with his bow in one hand and a bag of something in the other."

The tall figure moved wearily across the open ground, but straightened and came briskly toward them as he drew near. He seemed more gaunt than usual, as if he had finished a long journey and had slept but little. But his eyes behind their heavy spectacles were big with pride.

"You have—what do you Americans say?—'poked fun' at my helplessness in the forest," he told Chet. "And now see. Alone and without help I have made a great journey, a most important journey." He held up a bladder, translucent, filled with something palely green.

"The gas!" he said proudly.

"Why, Herr Kreiss," Diane exclaimed, amazed, "you can't mean that you've been to Fire Valley; that that is the gas from about the ship!... And why did you want it? What earthly use...."

She had looked from the proud face of the scientist to that of Harkness; then turned toward Chet. Her voice died away, her question unfinished, at sight of the expression in those other eyes.

"From—the ship? You mean that you've been there—Fire Valley? That you've come back here?" Chet was asking on behalf of Harkness as well: his companion added nothing to the words of the pilot—words spoken in a curiously quiet, strained tone.

"But yes!" Herr Kreiss assured him. His gaze was still proudly fixed upon the bladder of green gas. "I needed some for an experiment—a most important experiment." And not till then did he glance up and let his thin face wrinkle in amazed wonder at the look on the pilot's

face.

Chet had raised one end of another stick as Kreiss approached. He had intended to place it against the frame they were building: it fell heavily to the ground instead. He regarded Harkness with eyes that were somber with hopeless despair, yet that somehow crinkled with a whimsical smile.

"Well, I said he had a surprise up his sleeve," he reminded them. "It is nearly night; I can't do anything now. I'll go to-morrow; take Towahg. I don't know that there's anything we can do, but we'll try.

"You will stay here with Diane," he told Harkness. And Harkness accepted the order as he would from one who was in command.

"It's up to you now," he told Chet. "I'll stay here and hold the fort. You're running the job from now on."

But the pilot only nodded. Herr Kreiss was sputtering a barrage of how's and why's; he demanded to know why his success in so hazardous a trip should have this result.

But Chet Bullard did not answer. He walked slowly away, his eyes on the ground, as one who is trying to plan; driving his thoughts in

an effort to find some escape from a danger that seemed to hover threateningly.

Chapter 15: Terrors of the Jungle

Towahg had learned the names of these white-skinned ones who came down from whatever heaven was pictured in his rudimentary mind. His pronunciation of them was peculiar: it had not been helped any by reason of Diane's having been his teacher. Her French accent was delightful to hear, but not helpful to a Dark Moon ape-man who was grappling with English.

But he knew them by name, using always the French "Monsieur," and when Chet repeated: "Monsieur Kreiss—he go," pointing through the jungle, and followed this with the command: "Towahg go! Me go!" the ape-man's unlovely face drew into its hideous grin and he nodded his head violently to show that he understood.

Chet gripped a hand each if Harkness and Diane and clung to them for a moment. Below their knoll the white morning mist drifted eerily toward the lake; the knoll was an island and they three the only living creatures in a living world. It was the first division of their little force, the first parting where any such farewell might be the last. The silence hung heavily about them.

"Au 'voir," Diane said softly; "and take no chances. Come back here and we'll win or lose together."

"Blue skies," was Walt Harkness' good-by in the language of the flyer; "blue skies and happy landings!"

And Chet, before the shrouding mist swallowed him up, replied in kind.

"Lifting off!" he announced as if his ship were rising beneath him, "and the air is cleared. I'll drop back in four days if I'm lucky."

Towahg was waiting, curled up for warmth in the hollow of a great tree's roots. Like all the ape-men he was sullen and taciturn in the chill of the morning. Not until the sun warmed him would he become his customary self. But he grunted when Chet repeated his instructions, "Monsieur Kreiss, he go! Now Towahg go too—go where Monsieur Kreiss go!" and he led the way into the jungle where the scientist had emerged.

Chet followed close through wraith-like, drifting mist. They were ascending a gentle slope; among the trees and tangled giant vines the mist grew thin. Then they were above it, and occasional shafts of golden light shot flatly in to mark the ascending sun.

They were climbing toward the big divide, that much Chet knew. White, ghostly trees gave place to the darker, gloomier growth of the

uplands. Strange monstrosities, they had been to Chet when first he had seen them, but he was accustomed to them now and passed unnoticing among their rubbery trunks, so black and shining with morning dew.

Far above a wind moved among the pliant branches that whipped and whirled their elastic lengths into strange, curled forms. Then the miracle of the daily growth of leaves took place, and the rubbery limbs were clothed in green, where golden flowers budded prodigiously before they flashed open and filled the wet air with their fragrance.

They were following the path that Chet had traveled on his morning trips to the divide for a view of the ship. Kreiss would have gone this way, of course, although to Chet, there was no sign of his having passed. Then came the divide, and still Chet followed where Towahg led sullenly across the expanse of barren rocks. Towahg's head was sunk between his black shoulders; his long arms hung limply; and he moved on with a steady motion of his short, heavily muscled legs, with apparently no thought of where he went or why.

Chet stopped for a moment's look at the distant sparkle that meant the shining ship, which shone green as on every other day, and he wondered as he had a score of times if it might be possible for them

to make a suit—a bag to enclose his head, or a gas-mask—anything that could be made gas-tight: and could be supplied with air. Then he thought of the bow that was slung on his shoulder and the stone ax at his belt. These were their implements: these were all they had.... Suddenly he began to walk rapidly down the slope after Towahg who was almost to the trees.

Again they were among the black rubbery growth. It rose from a tangle of mammoth leafed vines and creepers that wove themselves into an impassable wall—impassable until Towahg lifted a huge leaf here, swung a hanging vine there, and laid open a passage through the living labyrinth.

"How did Kreiss ever find his way?" Chet asked himself. And then he questioned: "Did he come this way? Is Towahg on the trail?"

Again he repeated his instructions to the ape-man, and he showed his own wonder as to which way they should go.

The sun must have done its work effectively, for now Towahg's wide grin was in evidence. He nodded vigorously, then dropped to one knee and motioned for Chet to see for himself, as he pointed to his proof.

Chet stared at the unbroken ground. Was a tiny leaf crushed? It might have been, but so were a thousand others that had fallen from above. He shook his head, and Towahg could only show his elation by hopping ludicrously from one foot to the other in a dance of joy.

Then he went on at a pace Chet found difficulty in following, until they came to a place where Towahg tore a vine aside to show easier going, but climbed instead over a fallen tree, grown thickly with vines, and here even Chet could see that other feet had tripped and stumbled. The Master Pilot glanced at the triple star still pinned to his blouse; he thought of the study and training that had preceded the conferring of that rating, the charting of the stars, navigational problems in a three-dimensional sea. And he smiled at his failure to read this trail that to Towahg was entirely plain.

"Every man to his job," he told the black, and patted him on the shoulder, "and you know yours, Towahg, you're good! Now, where do we sleep?"

He ventured to suggest a bed of leaves that had gathered amongst a maze of great rocks, but Towahg registered violent disapproval. He pointed to a pendant vine; his hands that were clumsy at so many things gave an unmistakable imitation of a bud that developed on that vine and opened. Then Towahg sniffed once at that imaginary

flower, and his body went suddenly limp and apparently lifeless as it fell to the ground.

"You're right, old top!" Chet assured him, as Towahg came again to his feet. "This is no place to take a nap." A crashing of some enormous body that tore the tough jungle in its rush came from beyond the rocks.

"And there are other reasons," he added as he followed Towahg's example and leaped for a hanging tangle of laced vines. Here was a ladder ready to take them to the high roof above, but they did not need it; the crashing died away in the distance.

It was Chet's first intimation that this section of the Dark Moon held beasts more huge than the "Moon-pigs" he had killed: it was a disturbing bit of knowledge. He caught Towahg's cautious, wary eyes and motioned toward the branches high overhead.

"How about hanging ourselves up there for the night?" he asked, and the gestures, though not the words, were plain, as the ape-man's quick dissent made clear.

He motioned Chet to follow. Down they plunged, and always down. Towahg gave Chet to understand that Kreiss had slept some distance

beyond: they would try to reach the same place. But the quick-falling dusk caught them while yet among the black rubbery trees. And the dark showed Chet why their branches might not be inviting as a sleeping place.

By ones and twos they came at first, occasional lines of light that flowed swiftly and vanished through the black tangle of limbs. Chet could hardly believe them real; they appeared and were lost from sight as if they had melted.

But more came, and it seemed at last as if the roof above were alive with light. The moving, luminous things glowed in hues that were never still: were pure gold, were green, then red, melting and changing through all the colors of the spectrum.

Living fireworks that were a blaze of gorgeous beauty! They wove an ever-moving canopy of softest lights that raced dazzlingly to and fro, that crossed and intertwined; that were dazing to his eyes while they held his senses enthralled by their color and sheer loveliness ... until one light detached itself and fell toward him where he stood spellbound beside a giant fern.

It struck softly behind him, and its crimson glory flashed yellow as it struck, then went black and in the dim light, on a great leathery leaf

with a spread of ten feet, Chet saw an enormous worm, whose head was a thing of writhing antennae, whose eyes were pure deadliness, and whose round corrugated body drew up the hanging part that the leaf could not hold. It hunched itself into a huge inverted U and, before Chet could recover from his horrified surprise, was poised to spring.

It was Towahg's strength, not his own, that threw him bodily down the path. It was Towahg who poured a volley of grunted words and shrieks into his ear, while he dragged him back. Chet saw the vicious head flash to loveliest gold while it shot forward to the body's full twelve feet of length—twelve feet of pulsing lavender and rose and flashing crimson that was more horrible by reason of its beauty.

Chet stumbled to his feet and raced after Towahg. The ape-man moved in swift silence, Chet close at his back. And other luminous horrors dropped on ropes of translucent silver behind them, until the ghostly white of friendly trees became visible, and they stood at last, breathless and shaken, as far as Chet was concerned, in the familiar jungle of the lower valleys.

And Towahg, to whom poison vines and writhing, horrible worms of death that had failed to make him their prey were things of a forgotten past, curled up in the shelter of an outflung snarl of great

roots, grunted once, and went calmly to sleep.

But Chet Bullard, accustomed only to man-made dangers that would have held Towahg petrified with fear, lay long, staring into the dark.

Chapter 16: Through Air and Water

It was midday when they approached the heights they had reached on their flight from Fire Valley. Off to one side must lie the arena with the pyramid within. And within the pyramid—! Chet took his thoughts quickly away from that. Or perhaps it was the shrieking chatter from ahead that gave him other things to think of.

Towahg had heard them before, but Chet had not understood his signs. And now the chorus of an approaching pack of ape-men was louder with each passing minute. That they were coming along the same trail seemed certain.

Towahg sprang into the air; his gnarled hands closed on a heavy vine: he went up this hand over hand, ready to move off to one side through the leafy roof with never a sign of his going. He waited impatiently for Chet to join him, and the pilot, regarding the incredible leap of that squat ape-man body, shook his head in despair.

"Grab a loose end," he told Towahg. "Lower a rope—a vine. Get it down where I can reach it!" And he raved inwardly at the blank look on the savage face while he held himself in check and made signs over and over in an effort to get the idea across.

Towahg got it at last. He lowered a vine and hauled Chet up with jerks that almost tore the pilot's hands from their hold on the rough bark. Then off to one side! And they waited in the shelter of concealing leaves while the yelling pack drew near and a hundred or more of them raced by along the trail below.

Invisible to Chet was the marked trail where Kreiss had gone, but these savage things ran at top speed and read it as they ran.

Were they puzzled by the sudden increase in markings? Did they sense that some were more recent than those they had followed? Chet could not say. But he saw the pack return, staring curiously about until they swung off and vanished through the trees toward the west. And in that direction lay the arena and the haunt of a horror unknown.

Yet Chet lowered himself to the ground with steady hands and motioned Towahg where the yelling mob had gone.

"We'll go that way," he said; "we'll follow them up. And perhaps, if I can only get the idea into your thick head, we can learn what their plans are: find out if Kreiss has really thrown us in their hands—led them as straight as a pack of wolves could run to the quiet peace of Happy Valley."

Chet might have followed them into the arena itself: he felt so keenly that he must know with certainty whether or not the pack would continue their pursuit. And why had they turned back? he asked himself. Had they returned to acquaint their horrible god and his hypnotised slaves with what they had learned?

But the trail turned off from the rocky waste where the arena lay; it took them west and south for another mile, until again to Chet's ears came the chattering bedlam of monkey-talk that was almost human. And now they moved more cautiously from rock to tree and through the concealing shadows until they could look into a shallow valley ahead. But before Chet looked he was prepared for a surprising scene. For over and above the raucous calling of the ape-folk had come another deeper tone.

"*Gott im Himmel!*" the deep voice said. "One at a time, you *verdammt* beasts. Beat them on the head, Max; make them shut up!"

And the big bulk of Schwartzmann, when Chet first saw him, was seated on a high rock that was like a barbaric throne in a valley of green. About him the ape-men leaped and grimaced and made futile animal efforts to tell him of their discovery.

"They've found something, Max," Schwartzmann said to his pilot.

"Get the other two men. We'll go with the dirty brutes. And if they've got wind of those others—" His remarks concluded with a sputtering of profanity whose nature was not obscured by its being given in another language. And Chet knew that the obscenities were intended for his companions and himself.

Schwartzmann's booming voice came plainly even above the chorus of coughing growls and shriller chatter. Chet saw him showing his detonite pistol in a half-threatening motion, and the ape-men cringed away in fear.

"Not so well trained an army, Max, that I am general of, but if we find that man, Harkness, and his pilot and that traitor Kreiss, we will let these soldiers of mine tear them to little bits. Now, we go!"

Max's call had brought the other two men of Schwartzmann's party, and the black horde of ape-men broke into a wild run across the grass toward the place where Chet and Towahg lay. The two slipped hurriedly into the concealment of denser growth, then ran at top speed down a jungle trail that led off to one side.

They were bedded down for the night on the edge of the white

forest; no persuasion of Schwartzmann's would have driven the ape-men into the darkness of the black trees and their flashing, luminous worm-beasts. Chet and Towahg came within hearing of their encampment just at dusk, and a late-rising moon broke through the gaps in the leafy roof to make splotched islands of gold in the velvet dark where Chet and Towahg fought the jungle so they might swing around and past the camp. Occasional grunts and scufflings showed that the ape-men were restless, and the two knew that every step must be taken in silence and every obstructing leaf moved with no rasping friction on other leaves or branches. But they came again to the trail, and now they were ahead of the pack, as the first gray light of dawn was stealing through the ghostly white of the trees.

Towahg would have curled himself into a sleepy ball a score of times had Chet not driven him on, and now the pilot only allowed a few minutes for food, where ripe purple fruit hung in clusters on the end of stems that were like ropes.

No use to explain to Towahg. Perhaps the ape-man thought they were hurrying to get through the black forest; he might even have thought the matter through to see the necessity for reaching their own valley and warning the others. Certainly he had no idea of any plans other than these, and he must have been puzzled some several hours later when Chet halted where the trail had crossed a barren

expanse of rock.

Towahg had stopped there on the way down. Then he had sniffed the air, dropped his head low and circled about, motioning Chet to follow, from across the clearing where he had picked up the trail. Chet knew the ape-men would do the same unless they were diverted, and he had a plan. To communicate it to his assistant was his greatest problem.

He stopped at the clearing, while Towahg urged him on across the smooth rock. Chet shook his head and pointed away from the direction of the big divide, and at last he made him understand. Then Towahg did what Chet never could have done.

He followed their former trail across the stone, his head close to the ground. Now he picked a bruised leaf: again he replaced a turned stone whose markings showed it had been displaced, and he came back over an area that even an ape-man would not follow as being a place where men had gone.

From where they emerged he turned as Chet had pointed, crossed the clearing as clumsily as the German scientist might have done, scuffed his bare feet in a pocket of gravel, and pointed to soft earth where Chet might walk and leave a mark of shoes. Chet grinned

happily while Towahg did his grotesque dance that indicated satisfaction, though from afar the first cries of the pack rang in the air.

They could never have outdistanced the apes alone, Chet knew that. But he also knew that Schwartzmann and the others would slow them up, and he counted on the pack staying together on the trail as they traversed this new country. He entered the jungle with Towahg where their new trail led, and drove his tired muscles to greater speed while Towahg, always in the lead, motioned him on.

There were stops for food at times until another night came, and Chet threw himself down on a mat of grass and fell instantly asleep. If there was danger abroad he neither knew nor cared. He knew only that every muscle of his body was aching from the forced march, and that Towahg's twitching ears were on guard.

The following day they went more slowly, stopping at times to wait for the sounds of pursuit. They were leading the pack on a long journey; Chet wanted to be sure they were following and had not turned back. He left a plain mark of his boot from time to time, and knew that this mark would be shown to Schwartzmann. With that to lead him there would be no stopping the man: he would drive his army of blacks despite their superstitious fears.

The short days and nights formed an endless succession to Chet. Only once did he see a familiar place, as they passed a valley and he saw where their ship had rested on that earlier voyage.

"This is far enough," he told Towahg, and made himself plain with signs. "Now we'll lose them; hang them right up in the air and leave them there."

Another steep climb and a valley beyond, and in the hollow a tumbling stream. There was no need to tell Towahg what to do, for he led straight for the water, and his thick legs churned through it as he headed down stream; nor did he stop until they had covered many miles.

Chet had wondered how they would leave the water without trace, but again Towahg was ready. A stone where the water splashed would show no mark of bare feet. From it he leaped into the air toward a swaying vine. He missed, tried again, and finally grasped it. And the rest was a repetition of what had been done before.

He lowered a vine as Chet had taught him, pulled the slim figure of Chet up to the dizzy heights of the jungle trees, then took Chet's one arm in a grip of chilled steel and threw him across his back, while he swung sickeningly from limb to limb, up through the branches of

another grotesque tree where its queerly distorted limbs sagged and swung them to its fellow some fifty feet away.

It was a wild ride for the pilot. "I've driven everything that's made with an engine in it," he told himself, "but this one-ape-power craft has them all stopped for thrills."

And at last when even Towahg's chest that seemed ribbed with steel, was rising and falling with his great breaths, Chet found himself set down on the ground, and he patted the black on the shoulder in the gesture that meant approval.

"Water and air," he said; "it'll bother them to trail us over that route. Towahg, you're there when it comes to trapeze work. Now, if you can find the way back again—!"

And Towahg could, as Chet admitted when, after a series of eventless days, they came again to the big divide above the reaches of Happy Valley.

And the grip of Harkness' hand, and the tears in Diane's eyes brought a choke to his throat until the voluble apologies of a penitent Herr Kreiss and the antics of a Towahg, recipient of many approving pats, turned the emotion into the safer channel of laughter.

"But I think we switched them off for good," Chet said, in conclusion of his recital; "I believe we are as safe as we ever were. And I've only one big regret:

"If I could just have been around somewhere when friend Schwartzmann found his scouts had led him up a blind alley, it would have been worth the trip. He did pretty well when he started cussing us out before; I'll bet he pumped his vocabulary dry on them this time."

Chapter 17: Hunted Down

Work on the house was resumed. "And when it is done," said Diane with a gay laugh, "Walter and I shall have our wedding day. Now you see why you were wanted so badly, Chet; it was not that we worried for you, but only that we feared the loss of the one person on the Dark Moon who could perform a marriage ceremony."

"And I thought all along it was my clever carpenter work that had captivated you," responded Chet, and tried to fit the splintered end of a timber into a forked branch that made an upright post.

And each day the house took form, while the sun shone down with tropical warmth where the work was going on.

Only Harkness and Chet were the builders. Diane's strength was not equal to the task of cutting tough wood with a crude stone ax, and Herr Kreiss, though willing enough to help when asked, was usually in his own cave, busied with mysterious experiments of which he would tell nothing.

Towahg, their only remaining Helper, could not be held. Too wild for restraint of any kind, he would vanish into the jungle at break of day to reappear now and then as silently as a black shadow. But he kept

them all supplied with game and fruit and succulent roots which his wilder brethren of the forest must have shown him were fit for food.

And then came an interruption that checked the work on the house, that drained the brilliant sunshine of its warmth and light, and turned all thoughts to the question of defense.

The two had been working on the roof, while Diane had returned to the jungle for another of the big leaves. She carried her bow on such trips, although the weeks had brought them a sense of security. But for Chet this feeling of safety vanished in the instant that he heard Harkness' half-uttered exclamation and saw him drop quickly to the ground.

Beyond him, coming through the green smother of grass that was now as high as her waist, was Diane. Even at a distance Chet could see the unnatural paleness of her face; she was running fast, coming along the trail they had all helped to make.

Chet hit the ground on all fours and reached for the long bow with which he had become so expert; then followed Harkness who was racing to meet the girl.

"An ape!" she was saying between choking breaths when Chet

reached them. "An ape-man!" She was clinging to Harkness in utter fright that was unlike the Diane he had known.

"Towahg," Harkness suggested; "you saw Towahg!" But the girl shook her head. She was recovering something of her normal poise; her breath came more evenly.

"No! It was not Towahg. I saw it. I was hidden under the big leaves. It was an ape-man. He came swinging along through the branches of the trees: he was up high and he looked in all directions. I ran. I think he did not see me.

"And now," she confessed, "I am ashamed. I thought I had forgotten the horror of that experience, but this brought it all back.... There! I am all right now."

Harkness held her tenderly close. "Frightened," he reassured her, "and no wonder! That night on the pyramid left its mark on us all. Now, come; come quietly."

He was leading the girl toward the knoll that they all called home. Chet followed, casting frequent glances toward the trees. They had covered half the distance to the barricade when Chet spoke in a voice that was half a whisper in its hushed tenseness.

"Drop—quick!" he ordered. "Get into the grass. It's coming. Now let's see what it is."

He knew that the others had taken cover. For himself, he had flung his lanky figure into the tall grass. The bow was beside him, an arrow ready; and the tip of polished bone and the feathered shaft made it a weapon that was not one to be disregarded. Long hours of practice had developed his natural aptitude into real skill. Before him, he parted the tall grass cautiously to see the forest whence the sound had come.

The swish of leaves had warned Chet; some far-flung branch must have failed to bear the big beast's weight and had bent to swing him to the ground—or perhaps the descent was intentional.

And now there was silence, the silence of noonday that is so filled with unheard summer sounds. A foot above Chet's head a tiny bat-winged bird rocked and tilted on vermilion leather wings, while its iridescent head made flickering rainbow colors with the vibrations of a throat that hummed a steady call. Across the meadow were countless other flashing, humming things, like dust specks dancing in the sun, but magnified and intensely colored.

Above their droning note was the shrill cry of the insects that spent

their days in idle and ceaseless unmusical scrapings. They inhabited the shadowed zone along the forest edge. And now, where the foliage of the towering trees was torn back in a great arch, the insect shrilling ceased.

As the strings of a harp are damped and silenced in unison, their myriad voices ended that shrill note in the same instant. The silence spread; there was a hush as if all living things were mute in dread expectancy of something as yet unseen.

Chet was watching that arched opening. In one instant, except for the flickering shadows, it was empty; the place was so still it might have been lifeless since the dawn of time. And then—

Chet neither saw nor heard him come. He was there—a hulking hairy figure that came in absolute silence despite his huge weight.

An ape-man larger than any Chet had seen: he stood as motionless as an exhibit in a museum in some city of a far-off Earth. Only the white of his eyeballs moved as the little eyes, under their beetling black brows, darted swiftly about.

"Bad!" thought Chet. "Damn bad!" If this was an advance scout for a pick of great monsters like himself it meant an assault their own

little force could never meet. And this newcomer was hostile. There was not the least doubt of that.

Chet reached one hand behind him to motion for silence; one of his companions had stirred, had moved the grass in a ripple that was not that of the wind. Chet held his hand rigid in air, his whole body seeming to freeze with a premonition that was pure horror; and within him was a voice that said with dreadful certainty: "They have found you. They have hunted you down."

For the thing in the forest, the creature half-human, half-beast, had raised its two shaggy arms before it; and, with eyes fixed and staring, it was walking straight toward them, walking as no other living thing had walked, but one. Chet was seeing again that one—a helplessly hypnotized ape that appeared from a pit in a great pyramid. And the voice within him repeated hopelessly: "They have found you. They have run you down."

Chet lay motionless. He still hoped that the dread messenger might pass them by, but the rigidly outstretched arms were extended straight toward him; the creature's short, heavily muscled legs were moving stiffly, tearing a path through the thick grass and bringing him nearer with every step.

Diane and Harkness had been a few paces in advance of Chet when they dropped into the concealing grass. Chet could see where they lay, and the ape-man, as he approached, turned off as if he had lost the direction. He passed Chet by, passed where Walt and Diane were hiding and stopped! And Chet saw the glazed eyes turn here and there about their peaceful valley.

Unseeing they seemed, but again Chet knew better. Was he more sensitively attuned than the others? Who could say? But again he caught a message as plainly as if the words had been shouted inside his brain.

"Yes, the valley of the three sentinel peaks and the lake of blue; we can find it again. Houses, shelters—how crudely they build, these white-faced intruders!" Chet even sensed the contempt that accompanied the thoughts. "That is enough; you have done well. You shall have their raw hearts for your reward. Now bring them in —bring them in quickly!"

The instant action that followed this command was something Chet would never have believed possible had his own eyes not seen the incredible leap of the huge body. The ape-man's knotted muscles hurled him through the air directly toward the spot where Walt and Diane were hidden. But, had Chet been able to stand off and observe

himself, he might have been equally amazed at the sight of a man who leaped erect, who raised a long bow, fitted an arrow, drew it to his shoulder, and did all in the instant while the huge brute's body was in the air.

The great ape landed on all fours. When he straightened and stood erect—his arms were extended, and in each of his gnarled hands he held a figure that was helpless in that terrible grasp.

No chance to loose the arrow then, though the brute's back was half turned. He had Harkness and Diane by their throats, and Chet knew by the unresisting limpness of Harkness' body that the fearful fire in those blazing eyes had them in a grip even more deadly than the hands of the beast.

Thoughts were flashing wildly through Chet's brain. "Knocked 'em cold! He'll do the same to me if I meet his eyes. But I can't shoot now; Diane's in line. I must take him face about; get him before he gets me—get him first time!"

And, confusedly, there were other thoughts mingled with his own—thoughts he was picking up by means of a nervous system that was like an aerial antenna:

"Good—good! No—do not kill them. Not now; bring them to us alive. The pleasure will come later. And where are the other two? Find them!" It was here that Chet let out a wordless, blood-curdling shriek from lungs and throat that were tight with breathless waiting.

He must face the big brute about, and his wild yell did the work. Startled by that cry that must have reached even those calloused, savage nerves, the ape-man leaped straight up in the air. He whirled as he sprang, to face whatever was behind him, and he threw the bodies of Harkness and Diane to the ground.

Chet saw the black ugliness of the face; he saw the eyes swing toward him.... But he was following with his own narrowed eyes a spot on a hairy throat; he even seemed to see within it where a great carotid artery carried pumping blood to an undeveloped brain.

The glare of those eyes struck him like a blow: his own were drawn irresistibly into that meeting of glances that would freeze him to a rigid statue—but the twang and snap of his own bowstring was in his ears, and a hairy body, its throat pierced in mid-air, was falling heavily to the ground.

But Chet Bullard, even as he leaped to the side of his companions, was thinking not of his victory, nor even of the two whose lives he

had saved. He was thinking of some horror that his mind could not clearly picture: it had found them; it had seen them through this ape-man's eyes before the arrow had closed them in death ... and from now on there could not be two consecutive minutes of peace and happiness in this Happy Valley of Diane's.

Chapter 18: Besieged!

"I've felt it for some time," Chet confessed. "I've wakened and known I had been dreaming about that damnable thing. And, although it sounds like the wildest sort of insanity, I have felt that there was something—some mental force—that was reaching out for our minds; searching for us. Well, if there is anything like that—"

He was about to say that the trail made by Kreiss and the apes who tracked him would have given this other enemy a direction to follow, but Kreiss himself dropped down beside Chet where he and Walt sat before the front of Diane's shelter. The pilot did not finish the sentence. Kreiss had meant it for the best; there was no use of rubbing it in. But that thing in the pyramid would never be fooled as Schwartzmann and the apes had been.

Chet had told Kreiss of the attack and had shown him the body of the ape-man. "Council of war," he explained as Kreiss rejoined them, but he corrected himself at once. "No—not war! We don't want to go up against that bunch. Our job is to plan a retreat."

Harkness turned to look inside the hut. "Diane, old girl," he asked, "how about it? Are you going to be able to make a long trip?"

Within the shelter Chet could see Diane's hands drawn into two hard little fists. She would force those tight hands to relax while she lay quietly in the dark; then again they would tremble, and, unconsciously, the nervous tension would be manifested in those white-knuckled little fists. For all of them the shock had been severe; it was hardest on Diane.

She answered now in a voice whose very quietness belied her brave words.

"Any time—any place!" she told Walt. "And—and the farther we go the better!"

"Quite right," Harkness agreed. "I am satisfied that there is something there we can never combat. We don't know what it is, and God help anyone who ever finds out. How about it, Chet? And you, too, Kreiss? Do you agree that there is no use in staying here and trying to fight it out?"

"I do not agree," the scientist objected. "My work, my experiments I have collected! Would you have me abandon them? Must we run in fear because an anthropoid ape has come into this clearing? And, if there are more, we have our barricade; our weapons are crude, but effective, and I might add to them with some ideas of my own

should occasion demand."

"Listen!" Chet commanded. "That anthropoid ape is nothing to be afraid of: you're right on that. But he came from the pyramid, Kreiss, and there's something there that knows every foot of ground that messenger went over. There's something in that pyramid that can send more ape-men, that can come itself, for all that I know, and that can knock us cold in half a second.

"It's found us. One arrow went straight, thank God! It has given us a stay of execution. But is that damnable thing in the pyramid going to let it go at that? You know the answer as well as I do. It has probably sent twenty more of those messengers who are on their way this minute, I am telling you; and we've got two days at the most before they get here."

Kreiss still protested. "But my work—"

"Is ended!" snapped Chet. "Stay if you want to; you'll never finish your work. The rest of us will leave in the morning. Towahg will be back here to-night.

"Nothing much to get together," he told Harkness. "I'll see to it; you stay with Diane."

Their bows, a store of extra bone-tipped arrows, and food: as Chet had said there was not much to prepare for their flight. They had spent many hours in arrow making: there were bundles of them stored away in readiness for an attack, and Chet looked at them with regret, but knew they must travel fast and light.

Out of his rocky "laboratory" Kreiss came at dusk to tramp slowly and moodily down to the shelters.

"I shall leave when you do," he told Chet. "Perhaps we can find some place, some corner of this world, where we can live in peace. But I had hoped, I had thought—"

"Yes?" Chet queried. "What did you have on your mind?"

"The gas," the scientist replied. "I was working with a rubber latex. I had thought to make a mask, improvise an air-pump and send one of us through the green gas to reach the ship. And there was more that I hoped to do; but, as you say, my work is ended."

"Bully for you," said Chet admiringly; "the old bean keeps right on working all the time. Well, you may do it yet; we may come back to the ship. Who can tell? But just now I am more anxious about Towahg. Right now, when we need him the most, he fails to show

up."

The ape-man was seldom seen by day, but always he came back before nightfall; his chunky figure was a familiar sight as he slipped soundlessly from the jungle where the shadows of approaching night lay first. But now Chet watched in vain at the arched entrance to the leafy tangle. He even ventured, after dark, within the jungle's edge and called and hallooed without response. And this night the hours dragged by where Chet lay awake, watching and listening for some sign of their guide.

Then dawn, and golden arrows of light that drove the morning mist in lazy whirls above the surface of the lake. But no silent shadow-form came from among the distant trees. And without Towahg—!

"Might as well stay here and take it standing," was Chet's verdict, and Harkness nodded assent.

"Not a chance," he agreed. "We might make our way through the forest after a fashion, but we would be slow doing it, and the brutes would be after us, of course."

They made all possible preparations to withstand a siege. Chet, after a careful, listening reconnaissance, went into the jungle with bow

and arrows, and he came back with three of the beasts he had called Moon-pigs. Other trips, with Kreiss as an assistant, resulted in a great heap of fruit that they placed carefully in the shade of a hut. Water they had in unlimited supply.

How they would stand off an enemy who fought only with the terrible gleam of their eyes no one of them could have said. But they all worked, and Diane helped, too, to place extra bows at points where they might be needed and to put handfuls of arrows at the firing platforms spaced at regular intervals along the barricade.

Chet smiled sardonically as he saw Herr Kreiss laboring mightily and alone to rig a catapult that could be turned to face in all directions. But he helped to bring in a supply of round stones from a distance down the shore, though the picture of this medieval weapon being effective against those broadsides of mental force was not one his mind could easily paint.

And then Towahg came! Not the silent, swiftly-leaping figure that moved on muscles like coiled steel springs! This was another Towahg who dragged a bruised body through the grass until Harkness and Chet reached him and helped him to the barricade.

"Gr-r-ranga!" he growled. It was the sound he had made before when

he had seen or had tried to tell them of the ape-men. "Gr-r-ranga! Gr-r-ranga!" He pointed about him as if to say: "There!—and there!—and there!"

"Yes, yes!" Chet assured him. "We understand: you met up with a pack of them."

Whereupon Towahg, with his monkey mimicry, gave a convincing demonstration of himself being seized and beaten: and the tooth-marks on nearly every inch of his body gave proof of the rough reception he had encountered.

Then he showed himself escaping, running, swinging through trees, till he came to the camp. And now he raised his bruised body to a standing position and motioned them toward the forest.

"Gr-r-ranga come!" he warned them, and repeated it over again, while his face wrinkled in fear that told plainly of the danger he had seen.

Chet glanced at Harkness and knew his own gaze was as disconsolate as his companion's. "He's met up with them," he admitted, "though, for the life of me, I can't see how he ever got away if it was a crowd of messenger-apes who could petrify him

with one look. There's something strange about that, but whatever it is, here's our guide in no shape to travel."

Towahg was growling and grimacing in an earnest effort to communicate some idea. His few words and the full power of his mimicry had been used to urge them on, to warn them that they must flee for their lives, but it seemed he had something else to tell. Suddenly he leaped into his grotesque dance, though his wounds must have made it an agonizing effort, but his joy in the thought that had come to him was too great to take quietly. He knew how to tell Chet!

And with a protruded stomach he marched before them as a well-fed German might walk, and he stroked at an imaginary beard in reproduction of an act that was habitual with one they had known.

"Schwartzmann?" asked Chet. He had used the name before when he and Towahg had led their enemy's "army" off the trail. "You have seen Schwartzmann?"

And Towahg leaped and capered with delight. "Szhwarr!" he growled in an effort to pronounce the name; "Szhwarr come!"

Chet made a wild leap for their bows and supplies.

"Come on!" he shouted. "That's the answer. It isn't the ones from the pyramid; they're coming later. It's Schwartzmann and his bunch of apes. They've followed the messenger, they're on their way, and, in spite of his being all chewed up, Towahg can travel faster than that crowd. He'll guide us out of this yet!"

He was thrusting bundles of supplies—food, arrows, bows—into the eager hands of the others, while Towahg alternately licked his wounds and danced about with excitement. Diane's voice broke in upon the tense haste and bustle of the moment. She spoke quietly—her tone was flat, almost emotionless—yet there was a quality that made Chet drop what he was holding and reach for a bow.

"We can't go," Diane was saying; "we can't go. Poor Towahg! He couldn't tell us how close they were on his trail; he hurried us all he could."

Chet saw her hand raised; he followed with his eyes the finger that pointed toward the jungle, and he saw as had Diane the flick of moving leaves where black faces showed silently for an instant and then vanished. They were up in the trees—lower—down on the ground. There were scores upon scores of the ape-men spying upon them, watching every move that they made.

And suddenly, across the open ground, where the high-flung branches made the great arch that they called the entrance, a ragged figure appeared. The figure of a man whose torn clothes fluttered in the breeze, whose face was black with an unkempt beard, whose thick hand waved to motion other scarecrow figures to him, and who laughed, loudly and derisively that the three quiet men and the girl on the knoll might hear.

"*Guten tag, meine Herrschaften*," Schwartzmann called loudly, "*meine sehr geehrten Herrschaften!* You must not be so exclusive. Many *guten* friends haff I here with me. I haff been looking forward to this time when they would meet you."

Chapter 19: "*One for Each of Us*"

For men who had come from a world where wars and warfare were things of the past, Chet, and Harkness had done effective work in preparing a defense. The knoll made a height of land that any military man would have chosen to defend, and the top of the gentle slope was protected by the barricade.

On each side of the inverted U that ended at the water's edge an opening had been left, where they passed in and out. But even here the wall had been doubled and carried past itself: no place was left for an easy assault, and on the open end the water was their protection.

Within the barricade, at about the center, the top of the knoll showed an outcrop of rocks that rose high enough to be exposed to fire from outside, but their little shelters were on nearly level ground at the base of the rocks. The whole enclosure was some thirty feet in width and perhaps a hundred feet long. Plenty to protect in case of an attack, as Chet had remarked, but it could not have been much smaller and have done its work effectively.

There was no one of the four white persons but gave unspoken thanks for the barricade of sharp stakes, and even Towahg, although

his fangs were bared in an animal snarl at the sound of Schwartzmann's voice, must have been glad to keep his bruised body out of sight behind the sheltering wall.

No one of them replied to Schwartzmann's taunt. Harkness wrinkled his eyes to stare through the bright sunlight and see the pistol in the man's belt.

"He still has it," he said, half to himself: "he's got the gun. I was rather hoping something might have happened to it. Just one gun; but he has plenty of ammunition—"

"And we haven't—" It was Chet, now, who seemed thinking aloud. "But, I wonder—can we bluff him a bit?"

He dropped behind the barricade and crawled into one of the huts to come out with three extra pistols clutched in his hand. Empty, of course, but they had brought them with them with some faint hope that some day the ship might be reached and ammunition secured. Chet handed one to Diane and another to Kreiss; the third weapon he stuck in his own belt where it would show plainly. Harkness was already armed.

"Now let's get up where they can see us," was Chet's answer to their

wondering looks; "let's show off our armament. How can he know how much ammunition we have left? For that matter, he may be getting a little short of shells himself, and he won't know that his solitary pistol is the thing we are most afraid of."

"Good," Harkness agreed; "we will play a little good old-fashioned poker with the gentleman, but don't overdo it, just casually let him see the guns."

Schwartzmann, far across the open ground, must have seen them as plainly as they saw him as they climbed the little hummock of rocks. He could not fail to note the pistols in the men's belts, nor overlook the significance of the weapon that gleamed brightly in the pilot's hand. Chet saw him return his pistol to his belt as he backed slowly into the shadows, and he knew that Schwartzmann had no wish for an exchange of shots, even at long range, with so many guns against him. But from their slight elevation he saw something else.

The grass was trampled flat all about their enclosure, but, beyond, it stood half the height of a man; it was a sea of rippling green where the light wind brushed across it. And throughout that sea that intervened between them and the jungle Chet saw other ripples forming, little quiverings of shaken stalks that came here and there until the whole expanse seemed trembling.

"Down—and get ready for trouble!" he ordered crisply, then added as he sprang for his own long bow: "Their commanding officer doesn't want to mix it with us—not just yet—but the rest are coming, and there's a million of them, it looks like."

The apes broke cover with all the suddenness of a covey of quail, but they charged like wild, hungry beasts that have sighted prey. Only the long spears in their bunchy fists and the shorter throwing spears that came through the air marked them as primitive men.

The standing grass at the end of the clearing beyond their barricade was abruptly black with naked bodies. To Chet, that charging horde was a formless dark wave that came rolling up toward them; then, as suddenly as the black wave had appeared, it ceased to be a mere mass and Chet saw individual units. A black-haired one was springing in advance. The man behind the barricade heard the twang of his bow as if it were a sound from afar off; but he saw the arrow projecting from a barrel-shaped chest, and the ape-man tottering over.

He loosed his arrows as rapidly as he could draw the bow; he knew that others were shooting too. Where naked feet were stumbling over prostrate bodies the black wave broke in confusion and came on unsteadily into the hail of winged barbs.

But the wave rushed on and up to the barricade in a scattering of shrieking, leaping ape-man, and Chet spared a second for unspoken thanks for the height of the barrier. A full six feet it stood from the ground, and the ends that had been burned, then pointed with a crude ax, were aimed outward. Inside the enclosure Chet had wanted to throw up a bench or mound of earth on which they could stand to fire above the high barrier, but lack of tools had prevented them. Instead they had laid cribbing of short poles at intervals and on each of these had built a platform of branches.

Close to the barricade of poles and vines, these platforms enabled the defenders to shield themselves from thrown spears and rise as they wished to fire out and down into the mob. But with the rush of a score or more of the man-beasts to the barricade itself, Chet suddenly knew that they were vulnerable to an attack with long lances.

A leaping body was hanging on the barrier; huge hands tore and clawed at the inner side for a grip. From the platform where Diane stood came an arrow at the same instant Chet shot. One matched the other for accuracy, and the clawing figure fell limply from sight. But there were others—and a lance tipped with the jagged fin, needle-sharp, of a poison fish was thrusting wickedly toward Diane.

This time Harkness' arrow did the work, but Chet ordered a retreat. Above the pandemonium of snarling growls, he shouted.

"Back to the rocks, Walt," he ordered; "you and Diane! Quick! The rest of us will hold 'em till you are ready. Then you keep 'em off until we come!" And the two obeyed the cool, crisp voice that was interrupted only when its owner, with the others, had to duck quickly to avoid a barrage of spears.

Kreiss was wounded. Chet found him dropped beside his firing platform working methodically to extract the broad blade of a spear from his shoulder where it was embedded.

Chet's first thought was of poison, and he shouted for Towahg. But the savage only looked once at the spear, seized it and with one quick jerk drew the weapon from the wound; then, when the blood flowed freely, he motioned to Chet that the man was all right.

The savage wadded a handful of leaves into a ball and pressed it against the wound, and Chet improvised a first-aid bandage from Kreiss' ragged blouse before they put him from sight in one of the shelters and ran to rejoin Harkness and Diane on the rocks.

But the first wave was spent. There were no more snarling, white-

toothed faces above the barricade, and in the open space beyond were shambling forms that hid themselves in the long grass while others dragged themselves to the same concealment or lay limply inert on the open, sunlit ground.

And within the enclosure one solitary ape-man forgot his bruised body while he stamped up and down or whirled absurdly in a dance that expressed his joy in victory.

"Better come down," said Chet. "Schwartzmann might take a shot at you, although I think we are out of pistol range. We're lucky that isn't a service gun he's got, but come down anyway, and we'll see what's next. This time we've had the breaks, but there's more coming. Schwartzmann isn't through."

But Schwartzmann was through for the day; Chet was mistaken in expecting a second assault so soon. He posted Towahg as sentry, and, with Diane and Harkness, threw himself before the door-flap of the shelter where Kreiss had been hidden, and was now sitting up, his arm in a sling.

"Either you're a 'mighty hard man to kill,'" he told Kreiss, "or else Towahg is a powerful medicine man."

"I am still in the fight," the scientist assured him. "I can't do any more work with bow and arrow, but I can keep the rest of you supplied."

"We'll need you," Chet assured him grimly.

They ate in silence as the afternoon drew on toward evening.

Back by their little fire, with Towahg on guard, Chet shot an appreciative glance at a white disk in the southern sky. "Still getting the breaks," he exulted. "The moon is up; it will give us some light after sunset, and later the Earth will rise and light things up around here in good shape."

That white disk turned golden as the sun vanished where mountainous clouds loomed blackly far across the jungle-clad hills. Then the quick night blanketed everything, and the golden moon made black the fringe of forest trees while it sent long lines of light through their waving, sinuous branches, to cast moving shadows that seemed strangely alive on the open ground. Muffled by the jungle-sea that absorbed the sound waves, faint grumblings came to them, and at a quiver of light in the blackness where the clouds had been, Harkness turned to Chet.

"We had all better get on the job," Chet was saying, as he took his bow and a supply of arrows, "we've got our work cut out for us to-night."

And Harkness nodded grimly as the flickering lightning played fitfully over far-distant trees. "We crowed a bit too soon," he told Chet; "there's a big storm coming, and that's a break for Schwartzmann. No light from either moon or Earth to-night."

The moon-disk, as he spoke, lost its first clear brilliance in the haze of the expanding clouds.

"Watch sharp, Towahg!" Chet ordered. And, to the others: "Get this fire moved away from the huts—here. I'll do that, Walt. You bring a supply of wood; some of those dried leaves, too. We'll build a big fire, we have to depend on that for light."

With the skeleton of a huge palm leaf he raked the fire out into an open space; they had plenty of fuel and they fed the blaze until its mounting flames lighted the entire enclosure. But outside the barricade were dark shadows, and Chet saw that this light would only make targets of the defenders, while the attackers could creep up in safety.

"'Way up," he ordered; "we've got to have the fire on the top of the rocks." He clambered to the topmost level of the rocky outcrop and dragged a blazing stick with him. Harkness handed him more; and now the light struck down and over the stockade and illumined the ground outside.

"Here's your job, Kreiss," said Chet, "if you're equal to it. You keep that fire going and have a pile of dried husks handy if I call for a bright blaze.

"We've got to defend the whole works," he explained. "That bunch today tried to jump us just from one side, but trust Schwartzmann to divide his force and hit us from all sides next time.

"But we'll hold the fort," he said and he forced a confidence into his voice that his inner thoughts did not warrant. To Harkness he whispered when Diane was away: "Six shells in the gun, Walt; we won't waste them on the apes. There's one for each of us including Towahg, and one extra in case you miss. We'll fight as long as we are able; then it's up to you to shoot quick and straight."

But Walt Harkness felt for the pistol in his belt and handed it to Chet. "I couldn't," he said, and his voice was harsh and strained, "—not Diane; you'll have to, Chet." And Chet Bullard dropped his own

useless pistol to the ground while he slipped the other into its holster on the belt that bound his ragged clothes about him, but he said nothing. He was facing a situation where words were hardly adequate to express the surging emotion within.

Diane had returned when he addressed Walt casually. "Wonder why the beggars didn't attack again," he pondered. "Why has Schwartzmann waited; why hasn't he or one of his men crept up in the grass for a shot at us? He's got some deviltry brewing."

"Waiting for night," hazarded Walt. He looked up to see Kreiss who had joined them.

"If Towahg could tend the fire," suggested the scientist, "I could fire my little catapult with one hand. I think I could do some damage." But Chet shook his head and answered gently:

"I'm afraid Towahg's the better man to-night, Kreiss. You can help best by giving us light. That's the province of science, you know," he added, and grinned up at the anxious man.

Each moment of this companionship meant much to Chet. It was the last conference, he knew. They would be swamped, overwhelmed, and then—only the pistol with its six shells was left. But he drew his

thoughts back to the peaceful quiet of the present moment, though the hush was ominous with the threat of the approaching storm and of the other assault that must come in the storm's concealing darkness. He looked at Diane and Walt—comrades true and tender. The leaping flames from the rocks above made flickering shadows on their upturned faces.

The moment ended. A growl from where Towahg was on guard brought them scrambling to their feet. "Gr-r-ranga!" Towahg was warning. "Granga come!"

They fired from their platforms as before, then raced for the rocks and the elevation they afforded, for the black bodies had reached the stockade quickly in the half light. But they came again from one point—the farthest curve of the U-shaped fence this time—and though a score of black animal faces showed staring eyes and snarling fangs where heavy bodies were drawn up on the barricade, no one of them reached the inside.

"We're holding them!" Chet was shouting. But the easy victory was too good to believe; he knew there were more to come; this force of some thirty or forty was not all that Schwartzmann could throw into the fight. And Schwartzmann, himself! Chet had seen the bronzed faces of Max and another standing back of the assaulting force, but

where was Schwartzmann?

It was Kreiss who answered the insistent question. From above on the rocks, where he had kept the fire blazing, Kreiss was calling in a high-pitched voice.

"The water!" he shouted, "they're attacking from the water!" And Chet rushed around the broken rock-heap to see a lake like an inky pool, where the firelight showed faint reflections from black, shining faces; where rippling lines of phosphorescence marked each swimming savage; and where larger waves of ghostly light came from a log raft on which was a familiar figure whose face, through its black beard, showed white in contrast with the faces of his companions.

Still a hundred feet from the shore, they were approaching steadily, inexorably; and the storm, at that instant, broke with a ripping flash of light that tore the heavens apart, and that seared the picture of the attackers upon the eyeballs of the man who stared down.

From behind him came sounds of a renewed attack. He heard Harkness: "Shoot, Diane! Nail 'em, Towahg! There's a hundred of them!" And the wind that came with the lightning flash, though it brought no rain, whipped the black water of the lake to waves that

drove the raft and the swimming savages closer—closer—

Chet glanced above him. "Come down, Kreiss!" he ordered. "Get down here, quick! This is the finish. We could have licked them on land, but these others will get us." He stood, dumb with amazement, as he saw the thin figure of Kreiss leap excitedly from his rocky perch and vanish like a terrified rabbit into the cave in the rocks.

"I didn't think—" he was telling himself in wondering disbelief at this cowardice, when Kreiss reappeared. His one hand was white with a rubbery coating that Chet vaguely knew for latex. He was holding a gray, earthy mass, and he threw himself forward to the catapult where it stood idly erect in the wind that beat and whipped at it.

"Help me!" It was Kreiss who ordered, and once more he spoke as if he were conducting only an interesting experiment. "Pull here! Bend it—bend it! Now hold steady; this is metallic sodium, a deposit I found deep in the earth."

The gray mass was in the crude bucket of the machine. Kreiss' knife was ready. He slashed at the vine that he'd the bent sapling, and a gray mass whirled out into the dark; out and down—and the inky waters were in that instant ablaze with fire.

Fire that threw itself in flaming balls; that broke into many parts and each part, like a living thing, darted crazily about; that leaped into the air to fall again among ape-men who screamed frenziedly in animal terror.

"It unites with water," Kreiss was saying: "a spontaneous liberation and ignition of hydrogen." The white-coated hand had dumped another mass into the primitive engine of war. "Now pull—so—and I cut it!" And the leaping, flashing fires tore furiously in redoubled madness where a shrieking mob of terrified beasts, and one white man among them, drove ashore beyond the end of a barricade.

Chet felt Harkness beside him. "We drove 'em off in back. What the devil is going on here?" Walt was demanding. But Chet was watching the retreat of the blacks straight off and down the shore where the sand was smooth and neither grass nor trees could hinder their wild flight.

"You've got them licked," Harkness was exulting: "and we've cleaned them up on our side. Just came over to see if you needed help."

"We sure would have," said Chet; "more than you could give if it hadn't been for Kreiss."

"We've got 'em licked!" Harkness repeated wonderingly; "we've won!" It was too much to grasp all at once. The victory had been so quick, and he had already given up hope.

The two had clasped hands; they stood so for silent minutes. Chet had been nerved to the point of destroying his companions and himself; the revulsion of feeling that victory brought was more stupefying than the threat of impending defeat.

Staring out over the black waters, he knew only vaguely when Harkness left; a moment later he followed him gropingly around the jagged rocks, while there came to him, blurred by his own mental numbness, a shouted call.... But a moment elapsed before he was aroused, before he knew it for Walt's voice. He recognized the agonized tone and sprang forward into the clearing.

The fire still blazed on the rocky platform above; its uncertain light reached the figure of a running man who was making madly for the opening in the wall. As he ran he screamed over and over, in a voice hoarse and horrible like one seized in the fright of a fearful dream: "Diane! Diane, wait! For God's sake, Diane, don't go!"

And the driven clouds were torn apart for a space to let through a clear golden light. The great lantern of Earth was flashing down

through space to light a grassy opening in a jungle of another world, where, stark and rigid, a girl was walking toward the shadow-world beyond, while before her went a black shape, huge and powerful, in whose head were eyes like burning lights, and whose arms were rigidly extended as if to draw the stricken girl on and on.

The running figure overtook them. Chet saw him checked in mid-spring, and Harkness, too, stood rigid as if carved from stone, then followed as did Diane, where the ape-thing led.... From the far side of the clearing, where Schwartzmann's men had gone, came a great shout of laughter that jarred Chet from the stupor that bound him.

"The messenger!" he said aloud. "God help them; it's the messenger—and he's taking them to the pyramid!"

Then the torn clouds closed that the greater darkness might cover those who vanished in the shadowed fringe of a stormy, wind-whipped jungle....

Chapter 20: On to the Pyramid

It was like Walt Harkness to rush impetuously after where Diane was being drawn away; but who, under the same circumstances, would have done otherwise? Yet it was like Chet, too, to keep a sane and level head, to check the first wild impulse to dash to their rescue, to realize that he would be throwing himself away by doing it and helping them not at all. It was like Chet to stop and think when thinking was desperately needed, though what it would lead to he could not have told. There were many factors that entered into his calculations.

Half-consciously he had walked to the barricade that he might stare into the blackness beyond. The worst of the storm had passed, and the strong Earth-light forced its way through the thinning clouds in a cold, gray glow. It served to show the great gateway to the jungle, empty and black, until Chet saw more of the man-beasts he had called messengers.

A file of them, stolid, woodenly walking—he could not fail to know them from the ape-men of the tribe. And they moved through the darkness toward the sounds of shouts and laughter.

Chet saw them when they returned; following them were three

others. Schwartzmann was not one of them; but the pilot, Max, Chet could distinguish plainly; the other two, he was sure, were the men of Schwartzmann's crew.

And, for each of them, all laughter and shouted jests had escaped. They moved like wooden toys half-come to life. And they, too, vanished where Walt and Diane had gone through the high arch of the jungle's open door.

Chet knew Kreiss was beside him; at a short distance, Towahg, staring above the palisade, buried his unkempt, hairy head in the shelter of his arms. All of Towahg's savage bravery had oozed away at direct sight of the pyramid men; Chet, even through his heavy-hearted dismay, was aware of the courage that must have carried this primitive man to their rescue on that other black night when the pyramid had been about to swallow, them up.

To the pyramid all Chet's thoughts had been tending. There Diane and Harkness were bound; there he, too, must go, though the thought of driving himself into that black maw, through the overpowering stench and down to the pit where some horror of mystery lay waiting, was almost more than his conscious mind could accept. But, with the sight of Towahg and the abject fear that had overwhelmed him, Chet found his own mind calmly determined, though through

that cool self-detachment came savage spoken words.

"If poor Towahg could go near that damned place," he reasoned, "am I going to be stopped by anything between heaven and hell?"

And his mind was suddenly at ease with the certainty of the next step he must take. He turned to speak to Kreiss, but paused instead to stare into the dark where shadows that were not the ghosts of clouds were moving. Then his whispered orders came sharply to the scientist and to Towahg.

"Come!" he commanded. "Come quickly; follow me!"

The two were behind him as he found the narrow opening in the barrier's farther side, passed through, and crouched low in the darkness as he ran toward the lake where the shallow water of the shore took no mark of their hurrying feet.

At the end of the lake he stopped. Beside him, Kreiss, weakened by his wound, was panting and gasping; Towahg, moving like a dark shadow, was close behind.

"I saw them," said Kreiss, when he had breath enough for speech, "—more beasts from the pyramid. They were coming for us! But we

can go back there after a day or so."

"You can," Chet told him; "Towahg and I are going on."

"Where?" Kreiss demanded.

"To the pyramid."

Chet's reply was brief, and Kreiss' response was equally so. "You're a fool," he said.

"Sure," Chet told him: "I know there's nothing I can do to help them. But I'm going. All I ask is to get one crack at whatever it is that is down in that beastly pit and if I can't do that maybe I can still save Diane and Walt from tortures you and I can't imagine." He touched his pistol suggestively.

"Still I say you are a fool," Kreiss insisted. "They are gone—captured; they will die. That is regrettable, but it is done. Now, besides Herr Schwartzmann who escaped, only we two remain; the savage, he does not count. We two!—and a new world!—and science! Science that remains after these two are gone—after you and I are gone! It is greater than us all.

"But I, staying, shall contribute to the knowledge of men; I shall

make discoveries that will bear my name always. This world is my laboratory; I have found deposits such as none has ever seen on Earth.

"Be reasonable, Herr Bullard. The enemy has tracked us down by his superior cleverness. We will go far away now where he never shall find us, you and I. Do not be a fool; do not throw your life away."

Chet Bullard, a figure of helpless, hopeless despair, stood unspeaking while he stared into the black depths of the jungle, and the night wind whipped his tattered clothing about him.

"A fool!" he said at last, and his voice was dull and heavy. "I guess you're right—"

Herr Kreiss interrupted: "Of course I am right—right and reasonable and logical!"

Chet went on as if the other had not spoken:

"If I hadn't been a fool I would have found some way to prevent it; I would have killed that ape-thing when first I saw it; I would have got them free."

He turned slowly to face his companion in the darkness.

"But you were wrong, Kreiss; you forgot a couple of things. You said they found us by their superior cleverness. That's wrong. They found us because you left a trail they could follow. We threw them off once, Towahg and I, but the messenger wouldn't be fooled. Then Schwartzmann and his pack followed the messenger in.

"And you say it is logical that I should quit here, leave Diane and Walt to take whatever is coming; you say I'm a fool to stay with them till the end.

"Well,"—he was speaking very quietly, very simply—"if you are right I'm rather glad that I'm a fool. For you see, Kreiss, they're my friends, and between friends logic gets knocked all to hell.

"Come on, Towahg!" he called. "Let's see if we can travel this jungle in the night!" He set off toward the fringe of great trees, then let Towahg go ahead to find a trail.

Travel at night through the tangle of creepers was not humanly possible. Even Towahg, after an hour's work, grunted his disgust and curled himself up for the night. And Chet, though he found his mind filled with vain imaginings, was so drained by the day's demands on his nervous energy that he slept through to the rising of the sun.

Then they circled wide of the trail they had taken before; no risk would Chet take of a chance meeting with one of the pyramid apes. And he plagued his brain with vain questions of what he should do when he reached the arena and the pyramid and the unknown something that waited within, until he told himself in desperation: "You're going down, you're going into that damned place; that's all you know for sure."

Whereupon his questioning ceased, and his mind was clear enough to think of giant creepers that barred his way, of streams to be crossed, and to wonder, at the last, when the valley of the pyramid was in sight and whether the others had reached there before him.

Another day's sun was beating straight down into the arena when again it opened before Chet's eyes. And the bleak horror of this place of black and white that had seemed so incredibly unreal under Earth-lit skies was doubly so in the glare of noon.

They entered through the jagged crack that had been their means of escape. An earthquake, one time, had split the stone, and Chet was more than satisfied to avoid the broad entrance where the rocks made a gateway and where hostile eyes might be watching.

He stood for long minutes in the cleft in the rocks where the hard

earth of the arena made a floor before him, where the huge steps of ribboned white and black swung out on either hand, and where, directly ahead, in the same hard, contrasting strata, a pyramid lifted itself to finish in a projecting capstone. And now that he faced it he found himself curiously cool.

He motioned Towahg to his side, and the black came cowering and trembling. He had tried before to ask Towahg about the mystery of the pyramid, but Towahg had never understood, or, as Chet believed, he had pretended not to understand. But now he could no longer feign ignorance of Chet's queries.

Chet pointed to the pyramid with a commanding hand. "What is there?" he demanded. "Towahg afraid! What is Towahg afraid of? Ape-men go in there—Gr-r-ranga-men; who sends for them?"

And Towahg, who must know the sense of the questions, even though some words were strange, could not answer. He dropped to his knees there in the narrow, ragged chasm in the rock and clutched at Chet's legs with his two hands while he buried his shaggy head in his arms. Then—

"Krargh!" he wailed; "Krargh there! Krargh send—Gr-r-ranga go. Gr-r-ranga no come back!"

It was perhaps the longest speech Towahg had ever made, and Chet nodded his understanding. "Yes," he agreed; "that's right. I imagine. When Krargh sends for you, you never come back."

But more eloquent than the ape-man's halting words was the trembling of his muscle-knotted shoulders in a fear that struck him limp at Chet's feet. And the pilot realized that the fear was inspired in part by the thought in the savage mind that his master might ask him to go closer to the place of dread. He had followed them once and had struck down a messenger, but this was when he was avid with curiosity and half-worshipful of the white men as gods. Now, to go that dreadful way in full daylight!—it was more than Towahg could face.

Chet patted the cringing shoulder with a kindly hand. "Get up, Towahg," he ordered and pointed back toward the jungle. "Towahg wait outside; wait today and to-night!" He gave the ape-man's sign of the open and closed hand to signify one day and one night, and Towahg's grunt was half in relief and half in understanding as he slipped back into hiding where the jungle pressed close.

Chet turned again to the pyramid. "They're down there," he told himself, "facing God knows what. And now it's sink or swim, and I'm almighty afraid I know which it's to be. But we'll take it together:

'When Krargh sends for you, you never come back.'"

No jungle sounds were here in this silent arena, no flashing of leather-winged birds nor scuttling of little, odd creatures of the ground. It was as if some terror had spread its dark wings above the place, a terror unseen of men. But the little, wild things of earth and air had seen, and they had fled long since from a place unclean and unfit for life.

Chet felt the silence pressing heavily upon him as he took his hand from the rock at his side and stepped out into the arena. And the vast amphitheater seemed peopled with phantom shapes that sat in serried rows and watched him with dead and terrible eyes, while he went the long way to the pyramid's base, and his feet found the rough stone ascent....

Chapter 21: The Monstrous Something

The way to the top of the pyramid was long. One look Chet allowed himself out over this world—one slow, sweeping gaze that took in the bare floor at the pyramid's base, a level platform of rock some distance in front of the pyramid, the hard black and white of the walled oval, the sea of waving green that was the jungle beyond, and, beyond that, hills, misty and shimmering in the noonday heat. And nestled there, beyond that last bare ridge, must be the valley of happiness, Diane Delacouer's "Happy Valley."

Chet Bullard turned abruptly where the projecting capstone hung heavy above a shadowed entrance. He entered the blackness within, stopped once in choking nausea as the first wave of vile air struck him, then fought his way on till his searching feet found the stairway, and he knew he was descending into a pit that held something inhumanly horrible—an abomination unto all gods of decency and right.

And still there persisted that abnormal coolness that made him almost light-headed, almost carefree. Even the fetid stench ceased to offend. His feet moved with never a sound to find the first step—and the next—and the next. He must go cautiously; he must not betray his presence until he was ready to strike.

Just where that blow would be delivered or against what adversary he could not tell, and perhaps it would be given him only to save Diane and Walt by the grace of a merciful bullet. It made no difference. Nothing made any difference any more; they had had their day, and now if the night came suddenly that was all he could ask. And still his cautious feet were carrying him down and yet down....

He was far below the surface of the ground when he found the foot of the stairs. They had been a spiral; his hand had touched one wall that led him smoothly around a shaft like a great well. And now there was firm rock beneath his feet, where, with one hand still guiding him along the stone wall, he followed the wall into a darkness that was an almost solid, opaque black. He seemed lost in a great void, smothered in silence, and buried under the black weight of the pressing dark, until the sound of a footfall gave him sense of direction and of distance.

It made soft echoings along rock walls that picked up every slightest rustle, and Chet realized again how cautious his own advance must be. It came toward him, soft, scuffing, followed the wall where he stood ... and Chet felt that approaching presence almost upon him before he stepped silently out and away.

And in the darkness that blotted out his sight he sensed with some inner eye the passing ape-man with arms rigidly extended, while a wave of thankfulness flooded him as he realized that in the dark the brute was as blind as himself and that the terrible thing that had sent him could see at a distance only with the ape-man's eyes.

Here was something definite to count on. As long as he remained silent, as long as he kept himself hidden, he was safe.

The scuffling footsteps had gone to nothing in the distance when Chet reached out for the wall and went swiftly, carefully, on. The messenger had come this way; he could hurry now that he knew there was safe footing in the dark.

The wall ended in a sharp corner; it formed a right angle, and the new surface went on and away from him. Chet was debating whether he should follow or should cast out into the darkness when his staring eyes found the first touch of light.

It came from above, a wavering line that trembled to a flame which seemed curiously cold. The line grew: a foot-wide band of light high up on the wall, it thrust itself forward like a tendril of the horrible plants he had seen. It grew on and wrapped itself about a great room, while, behind it, cold flames flickered and leaped. And Chet, so

interested was he in the motion of this light that seemed almost alive, realized only after some moments that the light was betraying him.

He glanced quickly about and found himself within a chamber of huge proportions. Walls that only nature could form reared themselves high in the putrescent air of the room; they curved into a ceiling, and from that ceiling there hung a glittering array of gems.

Chet knew them for great stalactites, and, even as he cast about desperately for some secluded nook, he marveled at the diamond brilliance of the display. But on the smooth floor of stone, where corresponding stalagmites must have been, were no traces of crystal growths, from which he knew that though nature had formed the room some other power had fitted it to its own use.

Chet's eyes were darting swift glances about. There was no single moving thing, no sign of life; he was still undiscovered. But it could not last long, this safety; he looked vainly for some niche where the light would not strike so clearly, so betrayingly.

Across the great chamber was a platform fifteen feet above the floor. Even at a distance Chet knew this was not a natural formation; he could see where the stones had been cleverly fitted. And now his eyes, accustomed to the light, saw that the platform was carpeted

with hides and strange furs. There were some that hung over the edge; they reached almost to the upright block like a table or altar at the platform's base. On this altar another great hide of thick leather was spread; it dragged in places on the floor.

Bare floors, bare walls—no place where an intruder could remain concealed! Suddenly from the lighted mouth of another passage he heard sounds of many feet; the sounds of approaching feet.

The impulse that threw him across the room was born of desperation; he raced frantically to cross the wide expanse before those feet brought their owners within view, and he fought to keep his panting breath inaudible while he tugged at the heavy leather altar covering, stiff and thick as a board; while he forced his crouching body beneath and found space there where he could move freely about.

It walled him in completely on the platform side where it hung to the floor, but on the other three sides there were gaps near the floor where the light shone in on two pedestals of stone that supported the stone top.

Between the pedestals Chet crouched, hardly daring to look, hardly daring to breathe, while feet, bare and black, tramped shufflingly

past. They went in groups—he lost count of their number but knew there were hundreds; he heard them going to the platform above. And, through the sound of the naked feet, came disjointed fragments of thought that reached his brain, transformed to words.

Mere fragments at first: "... back; the Master goes first!... The lights—how grateful is their coolness!... Who stumbled? Careless and stupid ape! You, Bearer-captain, shall take him to the torture room; a touch of fire will help his infirmity!"

And there was a cold rage that accompanied the last which set Chet's tense nerves a-tingle. But there was no fear in the emotion; he was quivering with a fierce, instinctive, animal hate.

The black feet retraced their steps. Then there was silence, and Chet knew there was something above him on the platform; whether one or many he could not tell until an interchange of thoughts reached him to show there was at least more than one.

"A presence!" some unseen thing was thinking. "I sense a strange mental force!"

A moment of panic gripped Chet at the threat of discovery. Then he forced himself to relax; he tried to make his mind a blank; or if not

that, to think of anything but himself—of the jungle, the ape-men, of the two comrades who had been captured.

"Patience!" another thinker was counseling. "It is the captives; they draw near." And across the great room, from the same passage where he had entered, Chet heard again the sound of bare, scuffing feet.

He could see them at last; he dared, to stop and peer along the floor. Bare feet—black, hairy legs, and then came sounds of clumping leather that brought Chet's heart into his throat, until, directly before the altar that made his shelter, he saw the stained shoes and torn leggings of Walt Harkness, and beside them, the little boots and jungle-stained stockings that encased the slender legs of Mademoiselle Diane.

They were there before him, Walt and Diane; he would see them if he but dared to look. And, from somewhere above, a confusion of thought messages poured in upon him like the unintelligible medley of many voices. Out of them came one, clearer, more commanding:

"Silence! Be still, all! Your Master speaks. I shall question the captives."

And there came to Chet, crouched beneath the altar, hardly

breathing, listening, tense, a battering of questioning thoughts. He heard no answer from Harkness and Diane, but he knew that their minds were open pages to the one from whom those thought-waves issued.

"Where are you from?—what part of this globe?... Another world? Impossible! This is our own world, Rajj. It is alone. There is no nearby star."

And after a moment, when Harkness had silently answered, came other thoughts:

"Strange! Strange! This creature of an inferior race says that our world has joined hands with his; that his is greater; that our own world, Rajj, is now a satellite of his world that he calls by the strange name of 'Earth.'"

To Chet it seemed that this one mysterious thinker, this "Master" of an unknown realm, was explaining his findings to other mysterious beings. There followed a babel of released thoughts from which Chet got only a confused impression of conflicting emotions: curiosity, rage, hate, and a cold ferocity that bound them into one powerful, vindictive whole.

Again the leader quieted the rest; again he laid open the minds of Walt and Diane for his exploring questions, while Chet mentally listened and tried to picture what manner of thing this was that held two Earth-folk helpless, that called them "creatures of an inferior race."

Super-men? No? Super-beasts, these must be. Chet was chilled with a nameless horror as he sensed the cold deadliness and implacable hate in the traces of emotion that clung and came to him with the thoughts. And his imagination balked at trying to picture thinking creatures so abominably vile as these thinkers must be.

The questions went on and on. Chet lost all sense of time. He had the feeling that the two helpless prisoners were being mentally flayed. No thought, no hidden emotion, but was stripped from them and displayed before the mental gaze of these inhuman inquisitors. No physical torture could have been more revolting.

And at list the ordeal was ended. Chet had forgotten Schwartzmann's men until the "Master's" order recalled them to his mind. "Bring the other captives!" the unspoken thought commanded.

Chet crouched low to see from under the hanging leather. Naked feet shuffled aimlessly; they were raised and put down again in the same

position, until the dazed and hypnotized blacks received their orders and drew Diane and Harkness to one side. Then other leather-shod feet came into view as Max and his companions were brought forward.

But there was no more questioning. "Perhaps another day we shall amuse ourselves with them," a thinker said. Chet, for the first time was paying no attention.

A slit in the leather—it might bare been where a spear had entered to slay a dinosaur in some earlier age—served now as a peep-hole from which Chet saw two gray and lifeless faces that were expressionless as stone. And, as if their bodies, too, were carved from granite, Diane and Harkness stood motionless.

He saw the blacks, saw that all eyes were on the other prisoners. Only Harkness and Diane stood with lowered gaze, staring stonily at the floor where the leather hung. And through Chet's mind flashed a quick impulse that set his nerves thrilling and quivering, though he checked the emotion in an instant lest some other mind should sense it.

Those other minds were not contacting Walt and Diane now. Could he reach them? Chet wondered. That they were conscious, that they

knew with horrible clearness every detail of what went on, Chet was certain: his own brief experience that first night on the pyramid had taught him that. And now if these two could see and comprehend what they saw: if only he could send them a word—one flashing message of hope! His hands were working swiftly at his belt.

The detonite pistol slipped silently from its sheath. And as silently he placed it on the floor where the two were looking, then slid it cautiously underneath the leather that just cleared the floor.

His eye was close to the narrow slit. Did a change of expression flash for an instant across the face of Walt Harkness? Was it only imagination, or was there the briefest flicker of life in the dead eyes of Diane Delacouer? Chet could not be sure, but he dared to hope.

The "Master" was speaking. To Chet came a conviction that he must not fail to hear these thoughts. He restored the pistol to his belt.

"And now the time has come," flashed the message. "One thousand times has Rajj circled the sun since we put his light behind us and came down to the dark place that had been prepared.

"One hundred others and myself; we were the peerless leaders of a peerless race. To produce the marvelous mentality that made us what

we were, all the forces of evolution had been laboring for ages. We were supreme, and for us there was nothing left; no further growth.

"Then, what said Vashta, the All-Wise One? That I and a hundred chosen ones should descend into the dark, there to live until a new world was ready for us, lest our great race of Krargh perish." Chet started at the name. Krargh! It was the same word that Towahg had used.

The mental message went on:

"And we alone survive. Our world of Rajj is a wasteland where once we and our fellows lived. And we have been patient, awaiting the day. The biped beasts, as you know, have been our food; we have trained them to be our slaves as well. By the power of our invincible minds we have sent them out to do our bidding and bring in more of the man-herd for slaughter when we hungered.

"And now, remember the words of Vashta, the All-Wise: 'until a new world is ready.' O Peerless Ones, the new world waits. These ignorant, white animals have brought the word. We had thought that Vashta meant us to make a new world of our old world of Rajj, but what of this new world called Earth? Perhaps that will be ours."

Chet felt the thinker break in on his own thoughts.

"One thousand years, but not to a day. Tell us, O Keeper of the Records, when is the time?"

And another's thoughts came in answer: "Six days, Master; six days more."

The leader's thoughts crashed in with an almost physical violence:

"On the sixth night we shall go out! In darkness we have lived; in darkness we shall emerge. Then shall we feast in the arena of Vashta as we did of old. We shall see this new world; we shall breed and people the world; we shall take up our lives again.

"Let the captives live!" he commanded. "Feed them well. They shall be the sacrifice to Vashta—all but the woman. She shall see the blood of the others flow on the altar stone; then shall she come to me."

There was a chorus of mental protests; of counter claims. The leader quieted them as before.

"I am Master of All," he told them. "Would you dispute with me over this beast of the Earth—a creature of no mental growth? Absurd! But

she interests me somewhat; I will find her amusing for a time."

There were bearers who came crowding in; and again in groups they left. They were on the side where Chet dared not look, but he knew each group of blacks meant a mysterious something that was being carried carefully.

And somewhere in the confusion of black, shuffling feet the others vanished. No sight of Walt or Diane did the slitted leather give; only a motley crew of blacks who were left, and a wall, high-sprung to a glittering ceiling, and flaming, cold fire that ebbed and flowed till the room's last occupant was gone. Then the flames faded to dense blackness where only fitful images on the retina of Chet's staring eyes flared and waned, and ghostly voices seemed still whispering through the clamoring silence of the room....

They were echoing within his brain and harshly at his taut nerves as he made his slow way toward the passage through which he had come. Despite their terror-filled urging he did not run, but took one silent, cautious step at a time, until, after centuries of waiting, his eyes found a square of light that was blinding; and he knew that he was stumbling through the portal in the top of the pyramid of Vashta —Vashta the All-Wise—unholy preceptor of an inhuman race.

Chapter 22: Sacrifice

"Down in the pyramid! You went down there?" Herr Kreiss forgot even his absorbing experiments to exclaim incredulously at Chet's report.

Guided by Towahg, Chet had returned to Happy Valley. There had been six days and nights to be spent, and he felt that he should tell Kreiss what he had learned.

"Yes," said Chet dully; "yes, I went down."

He was seated on a rock in the enclosure they had built. He raised his deep-sunk, sleepless eyes to stare at the house where he and Walt had worked. There Walt and Diane were to have made their home; Chet found something infinitely pathetic now in the unfinished shelter: its very crudities seemed to cry aloud against the blight that had fallen upon the place.

"And what was there?" Kreiss demanded. "This hypnotic power—was it an attribute of the ape-men themselves? That seems highly improbable. Or was there something else—some other source of the thought waves or radiations of mental force?"

Chet was still answering almost in monosyllables. "Something else," he told Kreiss.

"Ah," exclaimed the scientist, "I should have liked to see them. Such mental attainment! Such control of the great thought-force which with us is so little developed! Mind—pure mentality—carried to that stage of conscious development, would be worthy of our highest admiration. I should like to meet such men."

"They're not men," said Chet; "they're—they're—"

He knew how unable he was to put into words his impression of the unseen things, and he suddenly became voluble with hate.

"God knows what they are!" he exclaimed, "but they're not men. 'Mind', you say; 'mentality!' Well, if those coldly devilish things are an example of what mind can evolve into when there's no decency of soul along with it, then I tell you hell's full of some marvelous minds!"

He sprang abruptly to his feet.

"I've got to get out of here," he said; "I can't stand it. Four more days, and that's the end of it all. I'm going back to the ship. I saw it

from up on the divide. Still buried in gas—but I'm going back. If I could just get in there I might do something. There's all our supplies—our storage of detonite; I might do some good work yet!"

He was pacing up and down restlessly where a path had been worn on the grassy knoll, worn by his feet and the pitiful, bruised feet he had seen from his shelter in the pyramid; worn by Walt and Diane—his comrades! And they were helpless; their whole hope lay in him! The thought of his own impotence was maddening. He poured out the story of his experience in the pyramid, as if the telling might give him relief.

Kreiss sat in silence, listening to it all. He broke in at last.

"Wait!" he ordered. "There are some questions I would have answered. You said once that they found us—these devils that you tell of—because of the trail that I left. That is true?"

"Yes," Chet agreed irritably, "but what of it? It's all over now."

"Possibly not," Herr Kreiss demurred; "quite possibly not. The fault, it appears, was mine. Who shall say where the results of that fault shall lead?

"And you say that these thinking creatures are devils, and that they plan to sacrifice your good friends to strange gods; and still the fault leads on." Herr Kreiss, to whom cause and effect were sure guides, seemed meditating upon the strange workings of immutable laws.

"And you say that if you could reach the interior of your ship you might perhaps be of help. Yes, it is so! And the ship is engulfed in a fluid sea, but the sea is of gas. Now in that I am not to blame, and yet—and—yet—they all tie in together at the last; yes!"

"What are you talking about?" demanded Chet Bullard harshly. "It's no use to moralize on who is to blame. If you know anything to do, speak up; if not—"

Herr Kreiss raised his spare frame erect. "I shall do better than that," he stated; "I shall act." And Chet stared curiously after, as the thin figure clambered up on the rocks and vanished into the cave.

He forgot him then and turned to stare moodily across the enclosure that had been the scene of their battle. Kreiss had done good work there; he had scared the savages into a panic fear. Chet was seeing again the scenes of that night when a faint explosion came from the rocks at his side. He looked up to see Herr Kreiss stagger from the cave.

Eyebrows and lashes were gone; his hair was tinged short; but his thick glasses had protected his eyes. He breathed deeply of the outside air as he regarded the remnant of a bladder that once had held a sample of green gas. Then, without a word of explanation, he turned again into the cave where a thin trickle of smoke was issuing.

Ragged and torn, his clothes were held together by bits of vine. There were longer ropes of the same material that made a sling on his shoulders when he reappeared. And, tied in the sling, were bundles; one large, one small, but sagging with weight. Both were bound tightly in wrappings of broad leaves.

"We will go now," Herr Kreiss stated: "there is no time to be lost."

"Go? Go where?" Chet's question echoed his utter bewilderment.

"To the ship! Come, savage!"—he motioned to Towahg—"I did not do well when I made my way alone. You shall lead now."

"He's crazy," Chet told himself half aloud: "his motor's shot and his controls are jammed! Oh, well; what's the difference? I might as well spend the time this way as any. I meant to go back to the old ship once more."

Kreiss' arm still troubled from the wound he had got in the fight, but Chet could not induce him to share his load.

"*Es ist mein recht*," he grumbled, and added cryptically: "To each man this only is sure—that he must carry his own cross." And Chet, with a shrug, let him have his way.

There was little said on the trip. Chet was as silent and uncommunicative as Kreiss when, for the last time, he paused on the divide to see the green glint from a distant ship, then plunged with the others into a forest as unreal as all this experience now seemed.

And at the last, when the red light of late afternoon ensanguined a wild world, they came to the smoke of Fire Valley, and a thousand fumeroles, little and big, that emitted their flame and gas. And one, at the lower end of the valley had built up a great mound of greasy mud from whose top issued hot billows of green gas. It was here that Kreiss paused and unslung his pack.

"Take this," he told Chet; and the pilot dragged his reluctant eyes from the view of the nearby cylinder enveloped in green clouds. The scientist was handing him the larger of the two packages. It was bulky but light: Chet took it by a loop in one of the vines.

"Careful!" warned Kreiss. "I have worked on it for a month; you see, my equipment was not so good. I thought that the time might come when it would be put to use, only first I must conquer the gas—which I now prepare to do."

"I don't understand," Chet protested.

"You are a Master Pilot of the World?" questioned Kreiss, and Chet nodded.

"And the control on your ship was a modification of the new ball-control mechanism such as is used on the latest of the high-level liners?"

Again Chet nodded.

"Then, if ever you are so fortunate, Herr Bullard, as to see once more that device on one of those ships, will you examine it carefully? And, stamped on the under side, you will find—"

"The patent marking," said Chet; then stopped short as the light of understanding blazed into his brain.

"Patented," he reflected; "that's what it says," and a wondering comprehension was in his voice: "patented by H. Kreiss, of Austria!

You—you are the inventor?"

"I did not speak with entire truth to Herr Schwartzmann," admitted Kreiss, "on that occasion when I told him I could not rebuild the control you had demolished. With your equipment on the ship I could have done a quite creditable job, but even now,"—he pointed to the leaf-wrapped bundle in Chet's hand—"with copper I have hammered from the rocks, and with silver and gold and even iron which I found occurring in a quite novel manner, I have done not so badly."

"This is—this is—" Chet stared at the object in his hand; his tongue could not be brought to speak the words. "But what use? How can I get in? The gas—"

"Cause and effect!" stated Herr Doktor Kreiss of the Institute at Vienna, and once more he seemed addressing a class and taking pleasure in his ability to dispense knowledge. "It is the law of the universe.

"I perform an act. It is a cause—I have invoked the law. And the effects go out like circling waves in an endless ocean of time forever beyond our reach.

"But we can do other acts, produce other causes, and sometimes we can neutralize thereby the effects of the first. I do that now." He picked up the second bundle in its wrapping of leaves; it was heavy for him to manage with his wounded arm. "This is all that I have," he said! "I must place it surely.

"Go down toward the ship," he ordered. "Wait where it is safe. Then when the gas ceases you will have but three minutes. Three minutes! —remember! Lose no time at the port!"

He had reached the base of the hill of mud. He was on the windward side; above him the fumerole was grunting and roaring. And, to Chet, the thin figure, gaunt and ungainly and absurd in its wrappings of dilapidated garments, became somehow tremendous, vaguely symbolic. He could not get it clearly, but there was something there of the cool, reasoning sureness of science itself—an indomitable pressing on toward whatever goal the law might lead one to; but Kreiss was human as well. He stopped once and looked about him.

"A laboratory—this world!" he exclaimed. "Virgin! Untouched!... So much to be learned; so much to be done! And mine would have been the glory and fame of it!"

He turned hesitantly, almost apologetically, toward Chet standing

motionless and unspeaking with the wonder of this turn of events.

"Should you be so fortunate as to survive," began Kreiss, "perhaps you would be so kind—my name—I would not want it lost." He straightened abruptly.

"Go!" he ordered. "Get as near as you can!" His feet were climbing steadily up the slippery ascent.

The faintest breath of the gas warned Chet back. Almost infinitely diluted, it still set him choking while the tears streamed down his face. But he worked his way as near the ship as he dared, and he saw through the tears that still blinded his stinging eyes the tall figure of Kreiss as he reached the top.

A table of steaming mud was there, and Kreiss was sinking into it as he struggled forward. At the center was a hot throat where fumes like a breath from hell roared and choked with the strangling of its own gas. The figure writhed as a whirl of green enveloped it, threw itself forward. From one outstretched hand an object fell toward the throat; its leafy wrapping was whipped sharply for an instant by the coughing breath....

And then, where the hot blast had been, and the forming clouds and

the erupting mud, was a pillar of fire—a white flame that thundered into the sky.

Straight and clean, like the sword of some guardian angel, it stood erect—a line of dazzling light in a darkening sky. And the fumes of green had vanished at its touch.

But Kreiss! Chet found himself running toward the fumerole. He must save him, drag him back. Then he knew with a certainty that admitted of no question that for Kreiss there was no help: that for this man of science the laws of cause and effect were no longer operative on the plane of Earth. The heat would have killed him, but the enveloping gas must have reached him first. And he had sacrificed himself for what?—that he, Chet, might reach the ship!... Before Chet's eyes was a silvery cylinder whose closed port was plainly marked.

No gas now! No glint of green! The way was clear, and the slim figure of Chet Bullard was checked in its rush toward a mound of mud and the body of a man that lay next to a blasting column of flame; he turned instead to throw himself through the clean air toward the ship that was free of gas.

"Three minutes!" This was what Kreiss had said; this was the

allotted time. In three minutes he must reach the ship, force open the long unused port, get inside—!

At one side, across the level lava rock he saw Towahg. The savage was running at top speed. He had thrown away his bow, dropping it lest it impede his flight from this terrifying witchcraft he had seen. There had been a witch-doctor in Towahg's tribe; the savage knew sorcery when he saw it. But never had his witch-doctor changed green gas to a column of fire; and this white sorcerer, Kreiss, powerful as he was, had been struck down by the fire-god before Towahg's eyes. Towahg ran as if the roaring finger of flame might reach after him at any instant.

Chet saw this in a glance—knew the reason for the black's desertion: then lost all thought of him and of Kreiss and even of the waiting ship. For, in the same glance, he saw, springing from behind a lava block, the heavy figure of a man.

Black as any ape, hairy of face, roaring strange oaths, the man threw himself upon Chet! It was Schwartzmann; and, mingled with profane exclamations, were the words: "the ship—und I take it for mineself!" And his heavy body hurled itself down upon the lighter man in the instant that Chet drew his pistol.

But, tearing through Chet's mind, was no rage against this man as an enemy in himself; he thought only of Kreiss' words; "Three minutes! Lose no time at the port!" And now the brave sacrifice! It would be in vain. He twisted himself about, so that his shoulder might receive the human projectile that was crashing upon him.

Chapter 23: The Might of the "Master"

As with other measures of matters earthly, time is a relative gauge. Nowhere is this more apparent than in those moments of mental stress when time passes in a flash or, conversely, drags each lagging minute into hours of timeless length.

"Three minutes!" The words clanged and reverberated through Chet's brain. And it seemed, as he strained and struggled and was forced backward and yet backward by the weight of his antagonist, that those three minutes had long since passed, and other three's without end.

The enemy's leaping body had been upon him before the detonite pistol was half drawn. And now he fought desperately; he felt only the jar of blows that landed on his half-covered face. There was no sting or pain, only the crashing thud that made strange clamor and confusion in his head. But he ducked and blocked awkwardly with the one arm that held the package Kreiss had given him, while the other hand that gripped the pistol was twisted behind him.

No chance here for clever blocking, no room for quick foot-work; weight was telling, and the weight was all in favor of his big opponent.

Chet knew that possession of the gun was vital. Flashingly it came to him that Schwartzmann had not fired: his pistol, then, was lost, or he was out of ammunition. And now Chet's hand that held the gun with the six precious charges of detonite was fast in the clutch of a huge paw, and the pain of that twisted arm was sending searing flashes to his brain.

A twist of the body, and the pain relaxed. He dropped the leaf-wrapped package to the ground, and, with the free hand, shot over a blow that brought a grunt of pain from Schwartzmann and a gush of blood that smeared the black, hairy face. He took one stiff jolt himself on his half-averted head that he might counter with another to flatten that crushed and painful nose.

For one brief instant Schwartzmann's free hand was raised protectingly to his face so contorted with rage; for one brief instant, below that big fist, there showed the contour of a jaw; and, with every ounce of weight that Chet could put into the swing, he came up from under in that same instant with a smashing left that connected with the exposed jaw.

The hand that gripped his gun-hand did not let go completely, but Chet felt the steel-hard rigidity of that arm relax, and abruptly he knew that he could beat this man down if he once got clear. He didn't

need the gun; he needed only to get both hands free. And, despite the arm that clung and swung with his, he managed to wrench himself into a sideways throw of his whole body at the instant he unclosed his hand. The slim barrel of the detonite pistol described a flashing arc through the clear air and clattered along the lava underneath a big shining surface of metal.

And then, in a breath-taking flash of understanding, Chet knew.

He knew he was beside the ship: he saw the closed port and the self-retracting lever that would open it, and he saw it through clear air where no taint of the green gas was apparent.

He was certain that he had been fighting for an interminable time, yet before him the air was clear. It was impossible, but true; and he threw the half-stunned body of Schwartzmann from him. Then, instead of following it with punishing blows, he sprang toward the port.

With one hand on the lever, he turned to dart a glance toward the column of flame. It was gone! And in its place came green, billowing gas that was coughed and spewed into the air to be caught up in the steady breeze that blew directly from the vent.

Beside him, his antagonist, prone on the lava floor, dragged himself beneath the ship to reach for the gun. Chet paid no heed; his every thought—his whole being, it seemed—was focused upon the lever that turned so slowly, that let fall, at last, a lock whose releasing mechanism clanged loudly through the metal wall.

The outer port, a thin door that served only to streamline the opening, swung open under Chet's hand. And, while he held his breath till his pumping heart set his whole body to pulsing, he drew himself into the ship as the green cloud wrapped thickly about. But first he bent to grasp the knotted vines and leathery leaves that enclosed a bulky package.

The port closed silently upon its soft-faced gasket; it was gas-tight when no pressure was applied. And Chet stumbled and reached blindly till he fell beside the huge inner compression port, while the breath of gas that had touched him tore with ripping talons at his throat.

More measureless time—whether hours or minutes Chet could never have told—and he sat upright and tried to believe the utterly incredible story that his eyes were telling.

A short passage and a control room beyond! It was just as they had

left it; was it days or years before? The shattered control cage was there, the familiar instrument board, the very bar of metal with which he had wrought such havoc in that wild moment of demolition; it was all crystal clear under the flooding light of the nitron illuminator!

Yes, it was true! He, Chet Bullard, was staring wide-eyed at his own control-room, in his own ship—his and Walt's—and he was alone! The remembrance of Walt and Diane, and the realization that now, by some miracle, he might be of help, brought him to his feet.

He sprang toward a lookout where the last light of day was gone and a monstrous moon shone down upon a world of ghastly green. Yet, through the gas, every detail of the world outside showed clear; even the giant fumerole that had been the funeral pyre of a man of science; even the mound of ashes at its top which the moving air was blowing in dusty puffs until spouting mud fell back to hide them from sight.

Chet cursed the gas for the dimness that clouded his eyes, and he rubbed at them savagely as he turned and walked to a side lookout.

Through the riot of impressions of the fight outside the port, he had known that there was a human body over which he stumbled at

times. He saw it now—the body of Schwartzmann's henchman, killed these long weeks before but preserved in the ceaseless flow of gas.

But now, sprawled across it, was another and bulkier shape. Sightless eyes stared upward from a face turned to the cruel gas clouds and the hideous green moon above. The mouth sagged open in a black, bearded face, and one hand still clutched a pistol. It would have shattered his human opponent had the man been given an instant more, but against the enemy that rolled down and overwhelmed him in billowing clouds no weapon could prevail. Herr Schwartzmann had fought his last fight.

The package—the last gift of Kreiss—was still securely wrapped. It lay on the metal floor. Chet stooped to lift it, to work at the knotted vines and lay off the thick wrappings of fibrous leaves, until he stood at last, under the white glare of the bubbling nitron bulb, to stare and stare wordlessly at the cage of metal bars in his hand.

Crude!—yes; no finely polished mechanism, this; no one of the many connection clips that the other had had, either. But Chet knew he could solder on the hundreds of wires that made the nervous system of the control and fed the current to the cage; and Kreiss had believed it would work!

There was no thought of delay in Chet's mind, no waiting for daylight. This was the fourth night since he had been in that place of horror, since, above him in that Stygian pit, an inhuman satanic *something* had said: "... the captives ... a sacrifice to Vashta ... on the sixth night...."

Chet threw off the rags that once had been a trim khaki jacket and went feverishly to work. And through the time that was left he drove himself desperately. The hours so few and each hour so short! As he worked with seemingly countless strands of heavy cables, where each strand must be traced back and its point of connection determined, he knew how long each dreadful minute must be for the two captives deep inside the Dark Moon.

It was as well, perhaps, that Chet did not have the power of distant sight, that he had no messenger like those from the pyramid who might have gone down in that place and have sent him by mental television a picture of what was there. For he would have seen that which could have lent no clarity of vision to his deep-sunk eyes nor skill to the touch of fumbling, tired hands.

Walt Harkness, no longer under hypnotic control, stood in a dim-lit room carved from solid stone; stood, and stared despairingly at the surrounding walls and at the pair of giant ape-men who guarded the

one doorway. And, clinging to his hand, was a girl; and she, too, had been released from the invisible bonds. She was speaking:

"No, Walter; we both saw it; it must be true. It was Chet's pistol; he was there in that horrible place. And I will not give up. He will save us at the last; I know it! He will save us from the inhuman cruelty of those terrible things. He shoots straight, Chet does; and he will give us a bullet apiece from the gun—the last kindly act of a friend. That's what the signal meant."

"Then why did he wait! Why didn't he do it then?" Walt Harkness had made the same demand a hundred times.

And Diane answered as always: "I don't know, Walter, I—don't—know."

Chet, cursing insanely at strange machines—equilibrators that controlled the longitudinal and transverse and rotative stability of the ship and that refused to take their electrical charge—knew with horrible certainty that the last night had come. But to the two humans, in the depths of this world where all knowledge of time was lost, the knowledge came only when they were dragged by their guards into a familiar room.

Ape-men were all about; they stared unwinkingly at the captives who stared back again in an effort to keep their eyes averted from the monstrous repulsiveness on the platform above them, till their eyes were drawn to meet the compelling gaze of the "Master" of a lost race.

A something which, at first glance, seemed all head—this was the "Master." The naked body, so skeleton-thin, was shrunken and distorted; it was withered and leathery-brown, like the aged parchment of mummified flesh. It was seated in a resplendent chair, whose radiating handles were for its carrying; and, above it, the head, so incredibly repulsive, was made more hideous by its travestied resemblance to human form.

Soft, pulpy and wetly smooth—a ten-foot sac, enclosed in a membrane of dead gray shot through with flickerings of color that flamed and died—the whole pulsing mass was supported in a sling of golden cloth. And, dominating it, in the center of that flabby forehead, a focal point for the gaze of the horrified observers, was a single glassy and lidless eye.

Cold, unchanging, entirely expressionless except for the fixed ferocity that was there, the eye was a yellow disk of hate, where quivering lines of violet culminated in a central, flaming point; and

that point of living fire swelled prodigiously before their staring eyes. It seemed to expand, to slowly draw their senses—their very selves—from their bodies, to plunge them down to annihilation in that fiery pit where a soundless voice was speaking.

"Slaves! Apes! Take the captives to the great altar rock of Vashta, to the Holy of Holies. The others you were permitted to slaughter for our food; hold these two safely. For one shall die slowly for Vashta's pleasure, and one shall live on for mine. And we would not have them under our mental control, so guard them well; the offering is more pleasing to Vashta when the blood in his cup flows from a creature unbound both in body and mind." And the two helpless humans found themselves released from the flaming pit that became again but an eye in the forehead of a loathsome thing.

They were fully conscious of their surroundings as they were herded up through the pyramid and out into the night, where rough, calloused hands seized them and dragged them to a smooth table-top of rock that stood only slightly above the ground before the great rocky pile. Stunned, waiting dumbly, they saw swarming ape-men clustered like bees on the lower pyramid face; they saw coverings of stone being removed and a great recess laid open, while the ape-things dropped in awe before a grotesque and horrible beast-head carved from a single piece of stone.

The eyes of the beast shone with some cold, hidden light. They seemed fixed hungrily upon a cup in a distorted hand, and, though the cup was empty, there was promise of its being filled. For little sluices of stone sloped from the place where the captives stood, and they ended above the cup so that the life-blood of a slaughtered creature, or a sacrificed man, might pour splashingly in, a streaming draught for this blood-thirsty god.

The arena filled with abominable life. Now, in the dark silence of a moonless night, the cold stars shone down on a gathering of spectators, wild and unreal—nameless, spectral horrors of a blood-chilling dream.

The flat capstone of the pyramid was the resting place of the "Master"; his huge head showed pulpy and gray above the glittering gold of the metal carrying-chair where a misshapen body was seated. Others like him had poured from the pyramid, carried by thousands of slaves to their places about the arena.

Monsters of prodigious strength, their forebears must have been, but this degenerate product of evolutionary forces had lost all firmness of flesh. Their bodies, sacrificed for the development of the bulbous heads, were mere appendages, fit only for the propagation of their kind and for the digestion of human food.

The clean air of night was polluted with abominable odors as it swept over the exudations of those glistening, pulpy masses. To the two waiting humans on the great sacrificial stone came a deadening of the senses, as an executioner, armed with strange torturing instruments, drew near. But, of the two, one, clinging hopelessly to the other, abruptly stifled the dry choking sobs in her throat to lift her head in sharp, listening alertness.

Walt Harkness was speaking in a dead, emotionless tone:

"Chet has failed us; he is probably dead. Good-by, dear—"

But his words were interrupted and smothered by a breathless, strangling voice. Diane Delacouer, staring with agonized eyes into the night was calling to him:

"Listen! Oh, listen! It's the ship, Walter! It's the ship! It's not the wind! I'm not dreaming nor insane!—Chet is coming with the ship!"

It was as well that Chet Bullard could not see the two, could not hear that voice, trembling and vibrant with an impossible, heart-gripping hope; and surely it was well that he could not share their emotions when, for them, the silence became faintly resonant, when the distant, humming, drumming reverberation grew to a nerve-

shattering roar, when the black night was ripped apart by the passage of a meteor-ship that shrieked and thundered through the screaming air close above the arena, while, with the rock beneath them still shuddering from the blasting voice of that full exhaust, the sky above burst into dazzling flame.

For Chet in that control-room that was darkened that he might see the world outside—Chet, grim and haggard and stained of face and with thin-drawn lips that bled unheeded where his teeth had clamped down on them—Chet Bullard, Master Pilot of the World, had no thought nor emotion to spare for aught beyond the reach of his hand. He was throwing his ship at a speed that was sheer suicide over a strange terrain flashing under and close below.

He overshot the target on the first try. The twin beams of his searchlights picked up the dazzling black and white of the arena; it was before him!—under him!—lost far astern in one single instant that was ended as it began. But his hand, ready on a release key, pressed as he passed, and the sky behind him turned blazing bright with the cloud of flare-dust that made white flame as it fell.

Such speed was not meant for close work; nor was a ship expected to hit dense air with a blast such as this on full. Even through the thick insulated walls came a terrible scream. Like voices of humans in

agony, the tortured air shrieked its protest while Chet threw on the bow-blast to check them and slanted slowly, slowly upward in a great loop whose tremendous size was an indication of the speed and the slow turning that was all Chet could stand and live through.

He came in more slowly the next time. Floodlights in the under-skin of the ship were blazing white, and whiter yet were the star-flares that he dropped one after another. Brighter than the sunlight of the brightest day this globe had ever seen, the sky, ablaze with dazzling fire, shone down in vivid splendor to drain every shadow and half-light and leave only the hard contrast of black and white.

In the nose of the ship was a .50 caliber gun. Chet sprayed the pyramid top, but it is doubtful if the two below heard the explosions. They must have seen the whole cap of the mountain of rock vanish as if, feather-light, it had been snatched up in a gust of wind. But perhaps they had eyes only for each other and for a glittering, silvery ship that came crashing toward the place where they stood, that checked itself on thunderous exhausts; then touched the hard floor of the arena as softly as the caress of a master hand on the controls.

But from them came no cry nor exclamation of joy; they were dazed, Chet saw, when he threw open the port. They were walking slowly, unbelievingly, toward him till Diane faltered. Then Chet leaped

forward to sweep the drooping, ragged figure up into his arms while he hustled Harkness ahead and closed the port upon them all. But, still haggard and stern of face, he left the fainting girl to Harkness' care while he sprang for a ball-control and a firing key that released a hail of little .50 caliber shells whose touch could plough the earth with the ripping sword of an avenging god.

And later—a pulverous mass where a huge pyramid had been; smoking rock in a great oval of shattered crumbling blocks; and, under all the cold light of the stars, no sign of life but for a screaming, frantic mob of ape-men, freed and fleeing from the broken bondage of masters now crushed and dead!

All this Chet's straining, blood-shot eyes saw clearly before his hand on the firing key relaxed, before he covered his eyes with trembling hands as realization of their own release rushed overwhelmingly upon him.

There were supplies of clothing in the ship—jackets, knee-length trousers, silken blouses, boots, and even snug-fitting, fashionable caps. Very unlike the ragged wanderers of the mountainous wastes were the three who stood safely to windward of a spouting fumerole.

Mud, coughed hoarsely from a hot throat, and green, billowing gas!

—there was nothing now to show that here was the scene of a companion's last moments. With heads bared to the steady breeze that had been their undoing, they stood silent for long minutes.

Behind them, at a still safer distance, where no chance flicker of a fire-god's finger might strike him down as it had the white man, a black figure danced absurdly from foot to foot and indulged in unexpected gyrations of joy.

For did not Towahg hold in one hand a most marvelous weapon of shining, keen-edged metal, with a blade that was longer than his two hands? What member of the tribe had ever seen such an indescribably glorious thing? And, lacking the words even to propound that question, Towahg spun himself in still tighter spirals of ecstasy.

Then there was the ax! Not made of stone but fashioned from the same metal! And besides this a magic thing for which as yet there was not even a name! It made flashing reflections in the sun; and if one held it just so, and moved one's head before it, it showed a quite remarkably attractive face of a man who was more than half ape—though Towahg had never yet been able to catch that man beyond the magic that the white men called "mirror."

He was still enthralled in his grotesque posturing when Diane looked down from the floating ship.

"He'll be the Lord Chief Voodoo Man for the whole tribe," she said, and, for the first time since they had stood at the fumerole, she managed to smile. "And now," she asked, "are we off? What comes next?"

Chet's hand was on a metal ball in a crudely constructed cage of metal bars. He looked at Harkness, and, at the other's almost imperceptible nod, he moved the ball forward and up.

"We're off!" Harkness agreed. "Off for Earth—home! And it will look good to us all. We will take up things where we left them when we were interrupted: there's no Schwartzmann to fear now. We can show our ship to the world—revolutionize all lines of transportation; and we can plan—"

He failed to finish the sentence. To his reaching vision there were, perhaps, more potentialities than he could compass in words.

And Chet Bullard, fingering the triple star on his blouse—the insignia that had gone with him through all his hopes and despairs—looked out into space and smiled.

Behind him a brilliant world went slowly dark; it became, after long watching, a violet ring—then that was gone; the Dark Moon was lost in the folds of enshrouding night. Ahead was an infinity of black space where only the distant stars struck sparks of fire in the dark. And still he smiled, as if, looking into the unplumbed depths, he, too, made plans. But he moved the little ball within his hand and swung the bow sights to bear upon a glorious globe—a brilliant, welcome beacon.

"Home it is!" he stated. "We're on our way!"

But there was needed the rising roar from astern that his words might have meaning; it thundered sonorously its resounding hum in a crescendo of power that brooked no denial, that threw them out and onward through the velvet dark.

99 If the Sun Died by Roman Frederick Starzl

Tens of millenniums after the Death of the Sun there comes a young man who dares to open the Frozen Gate of Subterranea.

Aproximate word count: 8,700

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

By our system of time we would have called it around 65,000 A. D., but in this cavern world, miles below the long-forgotten surface of the earth, it was 49,889. Since the Death of the Sun. That legendary sun was but a dim racial memory, but the 24-hour day, based on its illusory travel across the sky, was still maintained by uranium clocks, by which the myriads who dwelt in the galleries and maze of the under-world warrens regulated their lives.

In the office of the nation's central electro-plant sat a young man. He was unoccupied at the moment. He was an example of the marvelously slow process of evolution, for, to all outward appearances he differed little from a Twentieth Century man. Keen intelligence sat on his fine-cut, kindly young face. In general build

he was lighter, more refined than a man of the past. Yet even the long, delicately colored robe of mineral silk which he wore could not detract from his obvious virility and strength.

His face flashed in a smile when a girl suddenly appeared in the middle of the room, materializing, so it seemed, out of nowhere. She resembled him to some extent, except that she was exquisitely feminine, dark-haired, with a skin of warm ivory, while he was blond and ruddy. Her tinkling, silvery voice was troubled as she asked:

"Have I your leave to stay, Mich'l Ares?"

The look of adoration he gave her was answer enough, but he answered with the conventional formula, "It is given." He rose to his feet, walked right through the seemingly solid vision and made an adjustment on a bank of dials. Then he walked through the apparition again and, standing beside his chair, looked at her inquiringly.

"You haven't forgotten, Mich'l, this is the day of the Referendum?"

Mich'l smiled slightly. It would be a day of confusion in Subterranea if he should forget. As chief of the technies he was in direct charge

of the tabulating machines that would, a few seconds after the vote, give the result in the matter of the opening of the Frozen Gate. But the girl's concern sobered him instantly. On the decision of the people at noon depended the life work of her father, Senator Mane. And it was now nine o'clock.

"I am sure they will order the Gate opened," he said instantly. "All the technies are agreed that your father is right, that the Great Cold was only another, more severe ice age—not the death of the Sun. The technies—"

Just as the girl had seemingly materialized, a young man now stood beside her. In appearance he was a picture of pride, power, arrogance, and definite danger. His hawk-like, patrician features were smiling. This olive-skinned, dark young rival of Mich'l was Lane Mollon, son of Senator Mollon, ruthless administration leader and bitter opponent of Senator Mane's Exodus faction.

Lane looked at Mich'l insolently.

"Have I your leave to stay, Mich'l Ares?" he asked.

"It is given," said Mich'l without enthusiasm.

"I'm not calling on you of my own will, Mich'l," the apparition of young Mollon said contemptuously, "but Nida had the telucid turned on as I stepped into the room."

"It's as well for you that you're not here personally," Mich'l replied promptly. "The last time we met I believe I was obliged to knock you down."

Lane Mollon flushed, with a sidelong glance at Nida. The girl gave Mich'l a frightened look.

Lane interpreted her concern rightly.

"Ordinarily it's not safe to try anything like that with me. I could have you executed in half an hour. But I don't have to call on the State to punish you. Nida, you'll admit I'm taking no unfair advantage of him?"

"Oh, I do, Lane, but—"

Lane reached out his hand to the dial, invisible to Mich'l, which operated the telucid apparatus, and immediately the apparitions vanished. Mich'l looked at his own telucid, its great unwinking eye set in the wall. But he did not project his own illusory body to the

girl's home. He was a technie—one of the pitifully few trained men and women who kept the intricate automatic machinery working. On them rested the immense, stupid civilization of the caverns, and there was work to do. Mich'l felt that on this morning of her father's greatest trial Nida would pay scant attention to Lane.

Mich'l was testing some of the controls when Gobet Hanlon came in. Gobet was also a technie, and Mich'l's special friend. Like Mich'l, he wore the light robe that was universal among the civilians in the equable climate of the caverns. He walked with the light, springy step that was somehow characteristic of the specialized class to which he belonged, as distinguished from the languid gait of the pampered, lazy populace. Attached to his girdle of flat chain links was a tiny computing machine about as large as the palm of a man's hand. For Gobet did most of the mathematical work.

"You'll want me at the tabulating section?" Gobet stated inquiringly.

"It may be well," Mich'l smiled. "For the first time in centuries, I believe, the general public is going to vote."

"Flos Entine wants to come along."

Mich'l's smile changed to a grin. He knew the pretty, willful little

sweetheart of Gobet's. If she wanted to be at the tabulating plant she would be there.

"In fact," Gobet confessed somewhat sheepishly, "she is in the car."

The car was waiting in the gallery. It had no visible support, but hovered a few inches above the floor above one of two parallel aluminum alloy strips that stretched, like the trolley tracks of the ancients, throughout all the galleries. The ancients well knew that aluminum is repelled by magnetism, but the race had lived in the caverns for centuries before evolving an alloy that possessed this repulsive power to a degree strong enough to support a considerable weight.

Under Mich'l's guidance the car moved forward silently, through interminable busy streets with arched roofs, lined on either side with doors that led to homes, theaters and food distributing automats. Occasionally they passed public gardens, purely ornamental, in which a few specimens of vegetation were preserved. They passed multitudes of people, most of them handsome with a pampered, hot-house prettiness, but betraying the peculiar lassitude which had been sapping the energies of this once dynamic race for millennia. Yet to-day they showed almost eagerness. The name of Leo Mane, prophet of deliverance, was on every tongue. And what was the Sun like?

Like the great vita-lights that were prescribed by law and evaded by everyone, except possibly the technies? Those technies—they seemed to delight in work! Curious glances fell on the gliding car. Some work in connection with the Referendum? What must one do to vote? Oh, the telucid!

Arriving at Administration Circle, the car entered a vast excavation half a mile in diameter, possibly a thousand feet high at the dome. Here were the entrances to some of the principal Government warrens. Here also centered the streets, like radiating spokes of a wheel, on which many of the officials lived. Here the emanation bulbs were more frequent than in the galleries, so that the light was almost glaring. Guards of soldier-police, the stolid, well-fed, specialized class produced by centuries of a static civilization, were everywhere. Not in the memory of their grandparents had they done any fighting, but in their short, brightly colored tunics, flaring trousers and little kepis they looked very smart. Their only weapon was a small tube capable of projecting a lethal light-ray.

Mich'l led his party to the audience hall. It was only a few hundred feet in diameter. At one end was the speaker's rostrum. Senator Mane was already there. He was tall, purposeful, but withal tired and wistful looking. His graying hair was cut at the nape of his neck, sweeping back from his swelling temples in a manner really

suggestive of a mane. His large, luminous eyes lit up.

"Is it nearly time?"

"Yes, Senator," Mich'l said. "The nation will soon assemble."

"You have met Senator Mollon?"

"I have had the pleasure," Mich'l acknowledged with polite irony, "since Senator Mollon gives me practically all my orders."

Mollon acknowledged the tribute with a quick smile, without rising from his chair. He, too, was different from the average Subterranean in that he was forceful and aggressive, like Senator Mane. He was still youngish looking, of powerful, blocky build. His dark hair was carefully parted in the middle and brushed down sleekly. The Twentieth Century had known his prototype, the successful, powerful, utterly unscrupulous politician; and in a different sphere, that type of extra-Governmental ruler which the ancients called "gangster." It was casually discussed in Subterranea that certain of the state soldier-police were responsible for the mysterious assassinations that had so conveniently removed most of the effective resistance to Mollon's progress in the Senate. The once potent body had not held a session in ten years: didn't dare to, a

cynical and indifferent public said. And a strange reluctance on the part of qualified men to accept the Presidential nomination had left that office unfilled for the past three years. Mollon, as party dictator, performed the duties of President provisionally.

Flos, mischievous as usual, rounded her great blue eyes and gazed at Mollon with an expression of rapt admiration.

"Oh, Senator," she thrilled, "I think it's wonderful of you to give Senator Mane an opportunity to debate with you. You are so kind!"

Mollon failed to detect any mockery, luckily for Flos. He looked at her with half-closed eyes.

"The public must be satisfied," he rumbled. "Senator Mane has aroused in them great hopes. A small matter might be adjusted, but only a Referendum will satisfy them in this."

"But Senator, the race is going to ruin. If we could get into the Sun again—wouldn't you want that?"

"I don't believe there is a 'Sun'," Mollon replied; then, with the candor of one who is perfectly sure of himself, added:

"If Mane were right, I still couldn't permit the Frozen Gate to be

opened. I can control the people for their own good, here; it might not be possible Outside."

A deep musical note sounded. Suddenly the myriad inhabitants of Subterranea seemed to be milling around in the room. Actually their bodies were in their dwelling cells, but their telucid images filled the hall. By a simple adjustment of the power circuit, their images, instead of being life size, were made only about an inch high, permitting the accommodation of the entire nation in the hall. Their millions of tiny voices, mingling, made a sighing sound.

Mane rose and stepped forward, raising his hand.

"Citizens of Subterranea," he began in powerful, resonant tones, and then went on to put into his address all the fervor of a lifetime of endeavor. He told them of those times in the dim past when the human race still dwelt on the surface of the earth. Of the Sun that poured out inexhaustible floods of life and light; of the green things that were grown, not only to look at, but for food for all living things before food was made synthetically out of mined chemicals. Of the world overrun by a teeming, happy, dynamic civilization.

"Then something happened. The Sun seemed to give less light, less heat. Perhaps we ran into a cloud of cosmic dust that intercepted the

Sun's rays. Perhaps the cause was to be found in some change in the Sun's internal structure. But the effects could not be doubted. Ice began to come down from the poles. Ice barriers higher than the highest towers covered the world, wiping out all life but the most energetic.

"Our ancestors, and many other advanced nations, began to burrow toward the hot interior of the earth. We to-day have no idea of the labor that went into the digging of our underground home. We are becoming degenerate. More and more of us, even those who still use the vita-lights, are becoming pale and flabby. There are hardly enough technies to keep the automatic machinery in order. What will happen when those technies also deteriorate, and lose the will to work? For deteriorate they must, just as Senator Mollon and his still active allies will. Just as I will, if I live long enough. There is a great force that we never know here. It is called the cosmic ray. It never penetrates to our depth. And our vita-lights do not produce it."

He then spoke of the proposed Exodus, argued, pleaded, painted a rosy picture of the outer world, of a Sun come back, a world of brightness and life. At the conclusion of his speech a sigh arose from the assembled millions—a sigh of hope, of half belief. Had the vote been taken then the Frozen Gate would have been opened.

But Senator Mollon was on the rostrum, holding up a square, well manicured hand for attention. In his deep rumbling bass he tore the arguments for the Exodus to shreds. With the whip of fear he drove away hope.

"If our savage ancestors lived on the inhospitable outer shell of the earth," he shouted, "is that a reason for our taking that retrograde step? Read your histories. What happened to our neighboring nation of Atlantica only a short 15,000 years ago? They did just as this man is urging—opened their outer gate. It promptly froze open, and liquid air, the remnant of what in primordial days was an outer atmosphere, poured down the tunnels. The whole nation died, and we saved ourselves only by blasting the connecting passages between them and us with fulminite."

A wave of fear passed over the tiny massed figures. For centuries the race had been rapidly losing all initiative, except for those few leaders who, through superior stamina and religious devotion to the artificial sun-rays, had maintained something of their pristine energy.

Now they were hysterical with fear of the unknown. Even as Mich'l Ares adjusted the parabolic antenna of the thought-receptor vote-counting machine, he knew what the verdict would be. In a moment the vote was flashed on a screen on the ceiling: 421 in favor of the

Exodus and 2,733,485 against it. There was an eery cheer from the people, and they began to dissolve like smoke. Mollon rose, bowed politely and smilingly, and walked out to where his magnetic car awaited him.

It was with a feeling of deep depression that Mich'l Ares went to work the next morning. His despair was shared by the technies under him with whom he talked. At the telestereo station he found a bitter young man broadcasting a prepared commentary on the election ordered by Senator Mollon. It was congratulatory in nature, designed to confirm popular opinion that the nation had been saved from a great catastrophe and to glorify the principles of Mollon's party.

"... And so once more this great nation has demonstrated its ability to govern itself, to protect itself against dangerous and unsocial experiments. The voice of the people is the voice of God. The Government claims for itself no credit for this momentous decision. Each citizen has done his share toward the continuation of our safety, our prosperity...."

The young man finished the document, smiled a charming smile, and turned off the switch. Then he grimaced his disgust and lapsed into a glum meditation.

"What say, Kratz?" Mich'l asked.

"Trouble again on the west sector. Had trouble getting power enough. Generators ought to be overhauled." He made a helpless gesture.

"How about conscripting a little labor?"

"Tried it this morning. Most of the people are still in a daze from chewing too much merclite. Those that're sober are too busy preening themselves for voting on the winning side."

Kratz informed Mich'l that Mollon had that morning given up all pretense of constitutional government, had preempted the treasury, and was consolidating his position as avowed dictator.

"He probably wanted to do that a long time," Mich'l commented. "He didn't quite dare till that Referendum yesterday gave him the real measure of the public. Well, I've got to be going."

Mich'l took one of the small mechanical service tunnels back to his office. This latest news had hardly affected him, so keen was his disappointment over the defeat of the Exodus. But he wanted to be alone. He walked through vast halls full of machinery, abandoned

and rusting, through dark corridors that had once roared with industrial life. What would happen when the present overloaded machinery should break down; wear out? The remnants of the great technical army could hardly serve what was left. Each passing year these silent, useless hulks became more numerous. The specter of famine was stalking amid the dusty pipes and empty vats of the chemical plants; the horrors of darkness lurked amid the tarnished compression spheres and the long, hooded monstrosities of the power plants, inadequately served by harassed and overworked technies.

In the middle of his office Mich'l found the telucid counterpart of Mila, sister of Nida Mane. She was younger than Nida, hardly more than sixteen. Her eyes were wide with terror as she sought Mich'l. Her cheeks were wet with tears, and her silken brown hair fell in careless disarray.

"Mich'l!" she cried, as soon as she saw him. "Lane Mollon has taken Nida!"

"Taken her!"

"And Father is under arrest. Lane came this morning, crazy with merclite gum. He had four or five soldiers with him. When Nida

refused to see him they broke down the door and went to her room. They dragged her out to Lane's car, and he took her to his warren near the Presidential quarters."

"She there now?"

"Yes. Father followed Lane's car. Guards kept him out of Lane's warren, so he went to see Mollon. That devil only laughed at him, offered to call another Referendum. Father had a small pocket needle-ray and—"

"Good! He killed Mollon?"

"No. But he managed to burn a hole through his arm. He was rushed off to one of the cells. And Mollon says he will call a Referendum to decide Father's fate."

"It would be just like that devil's sense of humor to let the people decree their only friend's death."

They'll do it, too!" Mila exclaimed tragically. "Oh, how I wish Mother were alive!"

"And each one will feel deep within him that he has done a great, commendable and original thing!" Mich'l added, with keen insight.

Mila sank to the floor.

"Go to your room," Mich'l said, gently stern. "Mollon and his gang have reckoned without the technies." A woman's image appeared, stooping commiseratingly over Mila—a friend of the family. Mich'l ordered her to care for Mila. Then, he took a deep breath. Gone was his feeling of helpless sorrow, leaving only an overwhelming, steadying, satisfying anger. He flung the telucid switch, barked cracking orders.

In half an hour every technical man of Subterranea was in a large storeroom near Mich'l's office. They were mostly young, keen and alert, their skins red or brown from the actinic lights, their hair showing more or less bleaching from the same cause. As Mich'l talked they became intent: they listened with a cold, deadly silence that would perhaps have made the smug millions of Subterranea quake with fear.

This affront put upon the only man in the Government who could speak their language, who could comprehend their ideals: the peril of the girl they all knew and loved: these things set their long-repressed resentment flaring to white heat. They were ready for desperate things. A turn of a valve and water would thunder through the maze of galleries; a mishap far, far down toward the earth's hot core, and

steam would rush up—

But Mich'l steadied them. After all, Subterranea was their country. Anarchy was far from the technie ideals. He had a plan.

"Nothing is to be done until we have Senator Mane and Nida," Mich'l instructed them. "Remember that! Do nothing until you hear from me. Each of you go to your station. Set all adjustments so that they will not need attention for some weeks, at least. Those of you who have families, tell them to be ready to move to another residence. Say nothing about any trouble—understand?"

There were nods of assent.

"You will proceed to your posts and keep busy. When I come it'll be by telucid. I will say nothing. I will simply wave my hand. That means you are to take your wives, your families, your sweethearts, to Substation No. 37X."

There were audible gasps.

"Not 37X!" exclaimed one of the older men. "Why, that's twenty miles up, near the Frozen Gate!"

"Yes!" Mich'l smiled with tight lips. "You men willing?"

There was an instantaneous shout of approval. Curiously enough, seizure of the Gate by force had not occurred to any of this law-abiding, well-disciplined group. But Mollon's lawless seizure of the Government had removed all inhibitions of that sort. Seizure of the Gate would bring at one stroke the realization of the dream that the technies had tried for generations to win by political means. Surely, when the Gate was open, and they could see the glorious, half-mythical Sun for themselves, the people would consent to the Exodus!

For the technies, even in the bitterness of defeat, were not anti-social. They hoped and worked for the devitalized races of Subterranea, for the betterment of their condition, more than for their own. The technies were the fittest; they had demonstrated their ability to survive unchanged under adverse condition. They would be least helped by the Exodus. Yet they had worked for it all their lives, as had their fathers before them, out of unselfish love for humanity. There have always been such men. Through the murk of history we see their lives as small, steady lights, infrequent and lonely. With the opening of the Frozen Gate suddenly a possibility, the technies forgot their exasperation with the stupid mob.

“The Gate is guarded," said an elderly man dubiously.

"A small guard," Gobet Hanlon remarked quickly, "and probably dazed with merclite. Nothing to fear."

"Stay away from the Gate," Mich'l instructed. "Give no cause for alarm. If an emergency arises while I'm gone, see Gobet."

"Don't go alone, Mich'l," Gobet begged. "A few of us with ray-needles can storm the detention cells. We can clean out Lane's warren."

"We might, but the Senator and Nida would be gone. The alarm would be given. In a few minutes there'd be a mob."

The technies were already dispersing eagerly. Mich'l pressed his friend's hand, saying:

"I'll take my needle-ray, and I know every way to get around there is. Alone, I'll attract no attention. Till later, Gobet!" And he was gone.

Mich'l's way was through the smaller, less frequented communication passages used principally by the technies. Occasionally he did meet citizens, still light-headed after their election victory celebration, and lost, but he paid them no heed. He came to the ventilation center of that level.

For ages no air had entered Subterranea from the outside. All of the air had to be regularly reconditioned, and so was returned, through a systematic network of air ducts, to a vast, central chemical plant. It was a latter-day Cave of the Winds, where the north, south, east and west winds of that buried empire regularly returned for a brief few minutes of play amid chemical sprays, condensers, humidifiers, oxydisers, to be again dispatched to their drudgery. This hall was truly colossal, filled to the shadowy ceilings, a thousand feet high, with gigantic pipes, tanks, wind-turbines.

The technie in charge had not yet returned, but Mich'l consulted the distribution plan, and soon located the duct that led to Lane Mollon's warren. In a few minutes he was running, helped along by a strong current of fresh air. The map had shown the warren to be about a mile away. For the benefit of the technies who had to work there, the duct was plainly marked; and the lighting, by infrequent emanation bulbs, was adequate, though dim.

Mich'l had made no plans for a course of action after arriving at his destination. He felt reasonably sure that if he could get into the warren he would have a good chance to escape with Nida. In the confusion he could hide her nearby, and perhaps effect the release of the senator also. He had no doubt about his fate if he were caught. Lane's pose of good sportsmanship having failed to impress Nida, he

had adopted simple, brutal coercion. Mich'l's fate, if caught interfering, would be summary execution.

Mich'l found the grating which he sought. It bore the key number of Lane's establishment. The key which would unlock it was of course in the hands of the police; but the bars were badly corroded, and Mich'l managed to bend them enough to permit the passage of his body.

He found himself in a small chamber, from which ducts led to all parts of the warren. These ducts were too small to permit passage of his body, however; it would be necessary to come into the open. A small metal door promised egress. Mich'l climbed out, and faced a surprised cook in the kitchen, engaged in flavoring synthetic food drinks. Mich'l said explanatorily:

"Inspection, air service."

The cook did not know the regulations about keeping the air tunnels locked. Moreover, he, like all other servants of the mighty, worked unwillingly, being conscripted. He only grunted.

Mich'l made a pretense of testing the air currents. Presently he stepped into one of the communicating corridors. The warren was

planned something like a house of the Surface Age, with luxuriously furnished rooms, baths, dining halls, and all the appurtenances of wealth. Arriving at a rotunda, in the center of which was a glowing fountain, Mich'l encountered a guard. Boldly he asked him:

"Where is Mr. Mollon? I wish to see him."

The guard looked surprised.

"About Nida Mane, sir? I would hardly dare."

Mich'l looked at the man sharply, but there was no hint of recognition in the stupid, phlegmatic face.

"What about Nida Mane? It is about her I wish to speak."

There was a slight stirring of interest in the soldier's face.

"He will be glad to see you, sir, if you bring news of her."

"Eh, yes? Perhaps what I have to tell will be of no interest to him."

"If you can tell him where she is he will ask no more of you."

"She made good her escape then?"

Slow suspicion was dawning at last.

"For one who brings news you ask a lot of questions," the guard remarked heavily, as his hand slipped to the needle-ray weapon at his side. "Show your pass!"

Like a flash Mich'l was upon him, his hand at the thick throat, the other grasping the wrist. Although the soldier, like the majority of the populace, lacked the intense vitality of the technies, he had stubborn strength, and he fought effectively in the drilled, automatic way of his kind. Mich'l was further handicapped by the necessity of maintaining silence. One shout, and a dozen needle-rays would no doubt perforate his body with holes and slash his flesh with smoldering cuts.

Grunting and sweating, they fought all around the rose-colored curb of the fountain. At last Mich'l succeeded in forcing his adversary over the low stone, and they went over together with a resounding splash. The straining body of the guard suddenly relaxed, and a spreading red cloud in the water disclosed that he had struck his head against the first of the terraces that rose in the fountain's mist-shrouded center.

Up one of the corridors a door opened, and an angry voice shouted:

"Gurka! Gurka! I'll have you in bracelets! Captain of the guard!"

"Sir!" From another of the corridors came a sound of running feet. A command rang out:

"On the double!"

An officer, followed by four soldiers, dashed around the corner and flashed by the fountain. Peering over the curb, Mich'l saw them, some hundred yards away, come to a halt before an opened door. With a thrill of exultation Mich'l recognized the tall figure of Lane Mollon, looking like a slightly damaged satyr of the better class, for his head was bandaged, and he was in bad humor.

"Captain!" he stormed. "I want you to put that damned louse in solitary confinement for a year. Hear?"

"Yes, sir." Like a megaphone the long corridor carried the low, respectful words to Mich'l's ears.

Lane continued to storm:

"And if you put another damned merclite-crazy blunker* on guard in this place I'll have your commission. Hear?"

"Yes, sir."

(Blunker—a blunderer, an oaf. Mechanical recording had preserved the language in much of its original form, but new words did creep in.)

A quick decision was necessary, and Mich'l acted without hesitation. The guard had rolled over on his back, so that his face was out of the water, and he was breathing with quick, painful gasps. Mich'l dragged him up under the concealing shelter of the fountain spray, and there changed clothes with him. In the meantime the flowing water washed away the red stain of blood. When the captain returned with his guard, Mich'l was lying realistically in the pool, apparently deep in drugged sleep, the little kepi tilted rakishly over his face.

He was roughly seized and dragged out of the water to the accompaniment of much cursing. A fist crashed into his face.

Suddenly the soldiers felt the supine figure under their hands explode into energy. Elbows and fists seemed to fly from all directions at once. A needle-ray appeared, and before they could draw their own weapons they were howling with pain as searing welts drew over their bodies. With one accord they plunged into the pool. Only the officer remained, and he fell to the mosaic floor, his

weapon half raised, the small black hole in his chest giving off a burnt odor.

Mich'l appropriated the officer's brassard of rank, and, menacing the cowed guards, forced them to herd into a nearby room, carrying the body of the officer with them. Mich'l locked the door and looked around. He saw no one observing him, and could count on carrying a pretty good bluff in his uniform, which was rapidly shedding its water. With a firm step Mich'l walked to Lane Mollon's door, threw it open, and entered.

Mane sat up on his couch, his feet striking the floor with an angry thump. But when he recognized Mich'l he paled slightly.

"Where is she?" Mich'l demanded roughly, "before I burn you down!"

"You said once," Lane began sneeringly, "that you wanted to fight me. Now, if you'll just put down that—"

"Not now," Mich'l dissented with deadly coldness. "Where is Nida? Speak fast."

Lane did so.

"She isn't here. The little short* crowned me with a chair, and slipped out. How did I—"

(Short—trouble-maker, spitfire. A colloquialism probably growing out of the once frequently used electrical term "short-circuit.")

"When? Hurry up!"

"Hardly an hour ago. She walked down the corridor, showed a thick-witted guard my own executive pass, and got away. But I got that guard—"

"Never mind what you did to the guard—"

Suddenly the image of an officer strange to Mich'l stood in the room and saluted smartly.

"Has Captain Ilgen Mr. Lane Mollon's leave to stay?" he asked.

Mollon started forward, but before he could disclose his predicament Mich'l had sidled over to him and thrown one arm affectionately over his shoulder. In his hand, concealed by the rich folds of Lane's robe, Mich'l held his needle-ray, and it was pressed firmly against Lane's ribs.

"Mr. Mollon will be glad to hear you," Mich'l said smoothly.

He fancied that the eyes of the officer's image dilated slightly, but it lost none of its military rigor. But some explanation of his presence there in his still damp uniform must be given Ilgen, so he growled, in a voice that he tried to make a bit thick, as if he had chewed too much merclite:

"At ease, Captain. At ease! Damn it man, you don't have to be so damned military. You're among friends!" And he towseled Lane's dark hair affectionately.

Captain Ilgen looked his disgust.

"Sir," he said to Lane, "we recaptured Nida Mane as she tried to board a public car near the Executive Mansion."

The black lens at the end of Mich'l's needle-ray pressed hard, and Lane said naturally:

"You have her in custody?"

"Sir, we have." And to Mich'l's dismay, Nida, defiant, her lovely form half revealed by rents in her garments, seemed to materialize beside the officer. Her wrathful eyes were fixed on Lane, and then

she saw Mich'l.

The technie put all his will into the pleading stare which he returned, and she understood. She gave no sign of recognition, but favored both Lane and Mich'l equally with the chill of her disdain.

"Sir, what are your orders?"

Lane glanced aside at Mich'l, acutely conscious of the lethal pressure in his ribs.

"'Sall right with me, old fellow," Mich'l squawked good-humoredly. "This your girl that got away from you? Let's both go over and bring her back."

Lane nodded assent. The soldier saluted, and his vision and that of the girl disappeared.

"And we're going to do just that!" Mich'l added in an entirely changed voice. "Get up, you. Act right, speak right, do right, and you may live to see another day."

So the two left the warren in apparent amity, and walked the beautiful street, with its richly formed, brightly colored arches, its seemingly illimitable vistas, its luxuriant, pampered decorative

vegetation, its blazing lights—until at last they came to Administration Circle, and entered the ponderous gates behind which lay the very heart of the Government.

They were challenged at once. Although the officer of the guard knew Lane, usage required the showing of the daily pass. Many high officers of the Government had in years past fallen from grace overnight.

This formality complied with, Lane and Mich'l, the latter with his ray-needle ever ready, sat down to wait in the guard room. And Lane, under Mich'l's quiet prompting, ordered that Nida and her father be brought to him.

"We shall bring the girl, yes," the astonished officer protested, "but not Senator Mane. He is a prisoner of state."

"Perhaps you don't know, Captain," Mich'l suggested smoothly, "that it is not wise to disregard the orders of the Provisional President's son?"

"It would cost me my commission, perhaps my life!" the officer said.

"Neither would be worth much if you disobey!" Mich'l countered, a

wire edge creeping into his voice.

The officer looked into Lane's stormy face, then with great reluctance retreated to carry out the order.

In about ten minutes he was back, with four guards and his prisoners. He explained that Captain Ilgen was detained on official duty.

"You may go," said Lane, prompted by a jab in the ribs.

"A written receipt, please, sir, for the senator."

Glowering, Lane wrote out the desired document. At last they were alone.

"Our program," Mich'l announced briskly, "is simple. You will conduct us to one of the Government cars, and will ride with us to such places as we may direct, and I shall release you when it pleases me. If you then want to fight, I will accommodate you."

"I would be willing to fight you, as head of the technies," Lane countered sullenly, "but I wouldn't be bothered with a rebel and a traitor. You've overstepped yourself this time, my fine bolthead, and all I ask is a front seat at your execution!"

They stepped into the brightly lighted hall, and in that instant Mich'l felt a searing heat on his shoulder. Without a moment's pause he hurled Senator Mane and the girl back into the room. At the same moment he flung an arm around Lane's neck and pulled him back into the doorway, where he could use him as a shield while he cautiously peered out into the corridor. His shoulder throbbed painfully, but his movement had prevented the needle-ray from penetrating deeply in any one place.

A short distance up the corridor was a wider space, in the center of which stood a large bronze urn filled with exotic plants. Behind this urn were several soldiers, and Mich'l recognized the sharp-eyed Captain Ilgen. So that officer had recognized the true state of affairs, or had strong suspicions! But in his haste and eagerness he had overlooked one important fact. In the guardroom, were riot-rays, heavy replicas of the ordinary hand weapons. They had not been needed for many years, but the technies had always kept them fully charged and in order.

"Nida!" Mich'l called, not removing his eye from the doorway.

"Yes?" She was standing beside him, and Mich'l thrilled to the admiration and positive affection in her intonation.

"Notice those short tubes mounted on light wheels over against the walls? Those are riot-ray projectors. Wheel me over a couple."

Nida did as directed. Mich'l stuck the stubby muzzle of one of the nearest weapons into the corridor, pulled the lever and swung the ray in an arc toward the ambushed soldiers. There was a sharp crackling noise and the heat chipped myriads of flakes off the stone walls, leaving a gray path across the rich murals, and the air was filled with flying particles. The heat was terrific. It beat back into the doorway.

Captain Ilgen gave a short, sharp order, and he and his men retreated before the bronze urn began to wilt and drip melted metal. He could not be accused of cowardice, for his hand weapons were puny compared to the riot-rays.

"Quick, before he gets in touch with the outer guard!" Mich'l urged his prisoner forward, Senator Mane following. The grave patriarch of rhetoric made a striking picture as he dragged the second riot-ray along. The other one was abandoned, locked with full power on. It was converting that corridor into an inferno, and there would be no pursuit through that avenue.

Mich'l pushed open the metal door suddenly. Two guards on duty were just coming in, their hand weapons ready. They never knew

what struck them for there was no time for compunction. But even as their bodies sank to the paving there was the harsh clangor of alarm bells. Soldiers dashed from everywhere and came running, their needle-rays menacing.

"In there!" Mich'l shouted. He pointed to the doors, at the dead guards. As they hesitated, he added:

"Revolution! They're storming the President's office! Hear the rays?"

Through the doors came a faint humming, an acrid smell of heat, of stone and metal fumes. A corporal saluted Mich'l, recognized Lane's haggard features, and Lane again felt that cogent persuader in his ribs.

"That's right, Corporal!" he said bitterly.

"Is the guard room occupied, sir?"

"Not now, you fool!" Mich'l snapped at him. This resolved the last of the corporal's misgivings. Giving an order, he led his men in, gasping.

"Now we'll run!" Mich'l ordered, giving Lane a shove. "Coming, Nida?" She was dragging her father along joyously. They crossed the

broad pedestrian walk, and in the street found an official car nestling on one of the tracks.

"Heave in the riot-ray, will you, old fellow?" Mich'l requested jovially, and Lane did. Then the listless chauffeur turned a controller, and the big car rose a few inches, lightly as a feather, and sped away swiftly through the maze of traffic.

Sometime later they were in a service lift; not one of the great public lifts that carried their hundreds at a trip, but one of the small lifts used mostly by the technies, and known to few outside their ranks. Mich'l, standing blissfully close to Nida and her father, enjoyed his moment of relaxation. Many things had been attended to. Lane had been released at last, in one of the catacomb cemeteries. It would take him at least two hours to find his way out. They were discussing the riot-ray, which they had with them.

"I hope we won't have to exhaust it in a fight before we get out," Senator Mane said anxiously. "It would be a splendid weapon if we encounter a hostile environment Outside."

"The Gate is guarded," Mich'l said practically, "but we expect to surprise them. No use worrying."

The lift came to a stop at an air-lock. The great elevator shafts were closed by airlocks every 2,000 feet. The reason is obvious. If the air of the great, spheroid subterranean nation were allowed to freely obey the laws of gravity, it would be oppressively dense in the lower levels, and excessively rarified in the upper ones. While the airlocks were operating Mich'l stepped to a telucid and gave the agreed-on signal.

In another half hour they were at 37X. The great, dusty, and little-used storeroom was only poorly lighted; it was dank, and had an uncomfortable chill. Technies and their families were coming in from all sides, and it was not long before some five hundred persons, men, women and children, were assembled. Many of them were pale and frightened looking, for they were staking everything on an ideal, a theory. There would be no coming back. The statute books of Subterranea decreed only one penalty—death—for even the merest tampering with the Frozen Gate. It was not like this that they had visioned the opening of the Gate. Under properly controlled conditions, it would have been possible to open the gate for preliminary explorations. But not now. They were outside the law.

Nida, standing beside Mich'l, shivered and pulled her over-robe closer around her. There was sadness in her voice as she said:

"These children.... They remind me of the thousands of children we must abandon with our people. If I could, I'd steal a few to take with us."

Mich'l grinned without mirth.

"And be damned as a kidnapper of a particularly horrible sort, as long as Subterranea lasts!"

"I know. I know. But what will happen to them all when the automatic machinery fails?"

"They may learn to run it, if they have to. Or if we succeed in establishing ourselves in the outer world we can tunnel back to them around the Gate in a year or so. Don't worry about them too much. We're taking the big risk, not they."

Gobet Hanlon, accompanied by Flos Entine and Mila Mane, approached. He was loaded down with a huge case of concentrated food.

"I've given orders to bring with us all the cold resisting fabrics we could carry. Got 'em loaded down, eh?"

"All here?"

"Every last one."

"Let's go, then." Mich'l stepped to a small door that led into the main corridor close to the Gate. This door had not been used by the technies when assembling. Through a tiny hole the guard, four soldiers, could be seen about a blanket, tossing sixteen-sided dice. Mich'l opened the door, his needle-ray pointed.

"Don't move, or you burn!" he commanded harshly.

The guards, taken completely by surprise, did not move. In a few moments they were bound, gagged, and dumped into a corner of 37X. Eager technies were swarming over the complicated mechanism that they had dared to touch, before, only for inspection and maintenance. The Frozen Gate was like a huge stopper in a bottle, made of chromium steel. It was thirty feet in diameter, and thirty feet thick from its well insulated inside face to that enigmatical Outside that had been a grisly mystery to the race for some five hundred centuries.

There was a flash of sparks, and the quiet hum of motors. With a shuddering groan the great plug freed itself from the grip of millennia; turned a few inches in its hole. The supporting gimbals took the load now, and slowly the great mass moved inward, carried

by an overhead traveling crane whose track was bolted to the rock roof. The rate of movement was slow, not much over three or four inches a minute.

An excited murmur filled the cavern—almost hysterical joy. But Mich'l, watching that widening margin for the dreaded gush of liquid air, only trembled with relief. At least the calamity that had visited rash Atlantica would not be repeated here.

A young technie, one of the heat distributors, climbed up the heavy bosses on the gateway's face.

"I'm going to be the first to see the Sun!" he shouted joyously. His challenging gaze roved over the waiting crowd, and suddenly his face turned ashen. For at the turn of the corridor, some hundred yards away, he had seen men. No mistaking those uniforms; they were soldiers. And Mich'l, following his gaze, saw a riot-ray being wheeled into place. His own riot-ray already commanded the corridor, but he dared not use it. The soldiers, under the partial protection of the turn, could incinerate the helpless technies with little danger to themselves.

"Wait!" Mich'l shouted, running into the open.

An officer came to meet him. He then recognized Captain Ilgen, whose exceptional shrewdness had almost undone him before. Ilgen could not see the slow movement of the gate, and Mich'l, himself weaponless, counted only on parleying for time.

They met midway between the two forces, and the small black lens of the captain's weapon pointed steadily at Mich'l's chest.

"Mich'l Ares, I arrest you." It seemed that the captain's fine gray eyes looked out of the lean face with real sympathy. "It may be there will be executive clemency for these people of yours, but for you—"

Mich'l, tense and deadly, saw the captain's vigilant attention leave his face for a second; saw his eyes widen in consternation. He could not know that Ilgen had seen a slender crescent of green light appear in the Frozen Gate, but he did not lose the opportunity. His fist crashed on the captain's jaw, so that the soldierly figure reeled and the needle-ray fell to the ground. Mich'l leaped after him, picked him up, held him. The riot-ray was turned full on him, and a soldier's hand trembled on the lever. But it did not pull.

"You'll kill him!" Mich'l shouted. And then he ventured to turn his head to look at the Gate. He saw the first of the fugitives struggle into the narrow crack. The gate seemed to have stuck, and there was

barely room to pass. Ilgen, half conscious, was trying to rain blows on Mich'l's back, compelling him to stop and pass the officer's hands through the belt of his tunic and to manacle them with a pair of bracelets which he found in his pocket. As he staggered toward the Gate with his burden, he saw Gobet beside him, the stolen riot-ray menacing the soldiers, who would otherwise have rushed in.

Suddenly Ilgen struggled upright.

"Fire," he commanded in stentorian tones.

"They'll kill you too, you fool!" Mich'l exclaimed angrily.

"I am a soldier!" Ilgen answered with contempt. His legs barely supported his weight, and he was struggling to free his manacled hands. He threw himself into the narrow crevice of the Gate, to obstruct the stream of fugitives. He started to shout again:

"Fi—" Crack! Again Mich'l's fist caught him. He hooked the officer's elbows over two of the bosses, so that he was supported in plain sight of his men, and turned to urge haste. The last two stragglers were hurrying through, and with relief Mich'l turned to follow. But he set the closing mechanism in motion before he leaped for the narrow opening that was becoming still narrower, though very

slowly. Now for that green crescent of light, and hope!

He felt a wave of heat. Glancing back, he saw the irresolute guards scattered by the enraged charge of a square, blocky man in civilian robe—the usually smiling Provisional President, Senator Mollon. Mollon himself was fumbling with the lever of the riot-ray. Ilgen had evidently reported where he was going before starting in pursuit of the technies.

Again that withering flash of heat, and Mich'l saw Captain Ilgen, still semi-conscious, suddenly turn red-faced. Mollon would burn him up without compunction, in the hope of catching one of the fugitive technies. And now a figure in uniform leaped forward at Mollon's angry gesture, and bent purposefully to the sighting tube.

The crescent was now so slender that Mich'l had to turn sideways to squeeze back into the corridor. And slowly, inexorably, it was growing smaller still. With desperate haste the practiced, uniformed man was adjusting his range.

Captain Ilgen struggled when Mich'l seized him.

"I arrest—"

Mich'l thought for a sickening moment that he was caught in the closing gate. Then he was free in the cylindrical tunnel into which the plug was creeping. Luckily, Ilgen was slight. His body squeezed through with little more difficulty than Mich'l's own. Now the opening was too small for any man's body. A red glow illuminated that narrowing slit; an acrid wave of heat, and the smell of burnt metal came with the strong current of air that blew out of Subterranea.

Mich'l dragged his captive down the rocky tunnel, the floor of which dipped gently away from the Gate; for drainage, no doubt. Around a bend, the source of the greenish light was apparent. The fugitives were in an ice cavern. The light seemed to emanate from roof and walls. The air was uncompromisingly chill, for the blast of warm air from Subterranea had stopped.

But the cold of the air was nothing to the icy chill that settled on the heart of Mich'l Ares, and the hearts of Senator Mane, and the other leaders of this desperate enterprise. So this, this was the Outside! A cavern of ice—small, hemmed-in! Those ancient folk-legends of a Sun—

"I arrest you, Mich'l Ares!"

Mich'l laughed shortly. What a single-minded fellow this Captain Ilgen was! Still groggy, of course. Didn't know where they were. He left the soldier with the red, blistered face.

"Mich'l! Mich'l!" a voice echoed shrilly from the ice walls. It was a high-pitched voice, and an excited one. A boy came flying out of a narrow crevice, his short robe flying, his cloth-wrapped legs twinkling.

"Mich'l!" he shouted. "I saw it! I saw the Sun, the beautiful Sun!"

Lucky it was that in the rush no one was hurt. The small cleft opened into a wide tunnel, a low-roofed cave through which milky-white water flowed. The cave opened upon a vista of blue sky and towering mountains whose tops were burdened with snow and upon whose sides glaciers slid down and melted; and the milky-white stream brawled down into a green valley, far, far below. On a mountain meadow, not far from the glacier that still buried the Frozen Gate, they rested....

And so came a new strain of humanity upon the surface of the earth —a strain tempered and refined by the inexorable process of

evolution and environment. Already animal life had reappeared, drastically changed and ruthlessly weeded out by the most severe Ice Age the world had ever known, and now Man stood once more on a new threshold of time.

Something of this may have passed through the minds of the refugees luxuriating in the strong sunlight of this mountain meadow, and in active and alert brains the foundations of a new civilization were already being built.

They were preparing to go into the valley below when there was a dull concussion. The glacier over the Frozen Gate rose slightly, then disappeared completely out of sight, leaving a yawning hole in the mountainside. Ice and rocks slid down, filling the hole. The refugees gazed at the scene in fear and wonder.

"They have blown up the gate! And the chambers leading to it!" Senator Mane—now only Leo Mane—said slowly. "There goes our last chance to save them!" His tones were deeply sad. He could not look upon these people as an experiment that Nature had abandoned, although he knew that history is thronged with the shadows of vanished races, culled by the process of natural selection.

But Youth looks only ahead. The majority of the rescued technies

were young, and with eagerness and anticipation, they followed Mich'l and Nida Ares down into the valley to build their first homes.

100 The Midget from the Island by Desmond Winter Hall

Garth Howard, prey to half the animals of the forest, fights valiantly to regain his lost five feet of size.

Aproximate word count: 11,700

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

In the chill of an early morning, a rowboat drifted aimlessly down the Detroit River. It seemed to have broken loose from its mooring and been swept away; its outboard motor was silent and it swung in slow circles as the currents caught at it. But the boat carried a passenger. A man's nude body stretched face downward in it.

It was a startling figure that lay there. The body was fully matured and had a splendid development of rounded muscles—and yet it was not more than three feet in length. A perfectly formed and proportioned manikin! The two officers in the harbor police launch which presently slid alongside to investigate were giants in comparison.

They had not expected to find such weird cargo in a drifting rowboat. They stared at the naked, unconscious midget in utter amazement, as if seeing a thing that could not be real. And when one of them reached down to lift the tiny body aboard, his eyes went wider with added surprise. His lift was inadequate. The dwarf's weight was that of a normal-sized man!

This was mystery on mystery. But they got the uncannily heavy figure aboard at last and ascertained that, though the skin showed many wounds and was blue from long exposure, the heart was still beating. And realizing that the life might flicker out beneath their eyes unless they took action immediately, they proceeded to work over him.

After some minutes, the dwarf gave signs of returning consciousness. His lids fluttered and opened, disclosing eyes that filled suddenly with terror as they stared into the faces, huge in comparison, that leaned over his. One of the officers said reassuringly:

"You're all right, buddy: you're on a harbor police launch. But who in the devil are you? D'you speak English? Where'd you come from?"

The midget struggled to speak; struggled desperately to tell something of great importance. They bent closer. Gasping, high-pitched words came to their ears, and the story that those words told held them spellbound. When the shrill voice ceased and the dwarf sank back into the coat they had thrown around him, the two policemen gazed at each other. One whistled softly, and his companion said soberly:

"We'd better phone up and have the local police tend to this right away, Bill."

Thus, two hours later, several miles up the river, another launch containing three officers came to its destination, a solitary, thickly-wooded island that brooded under a cloak of silence where the river leaves broad Lake St. Clair. The launch crept up to a mooring post a few feet from a small, rough beach, and was tied there. Quickly, the men waded ashore and tiptoed up a winding trail that was barred from the sun by dank foliage. They soon came to a clearing where a large cabin had been built. There, one of them whispered, "Guns out!"

Then the three men crossed the clearing and cautiously entered the cabin.

For a moment there was silence. Then came a terrified shout, followed by the bunched thunder of a succession of pistol shots. The reverberations slowly died away, and some time later the policemen reappeared and stood outside the door.

One of them, dazed, kept repeating over and over, "I wouldn't have believed it! I wouldn't have believed it!" and another nodded in wordless agreement. The third, white-faced, stared for a long time unseeingly at the cloud-flecked bowl of the sky....

But it would be best, perhaps, to tell the story as it happened.

The incredible events that shaped it began two nights before, when the larger of the two rooms in the island cabin was bathed in the bald glare of a strong floodlight that threw into sharp prominence the intent features of two men in the room, and the complicated details of the strange equipment around them.

Garth Howard, the younger of the two, was holding a tiny, squawling, spitting thing, not more than three inches long, which might have seemed, at a quick glance, to have been a normal enough kitten. Closer inspection, however, would have revealed that it had a thick, smooth coat, a lithe, fully developed body and narrowed, venomous eyes—things which no week-old kitten ever possessed. It

was a mature cat, but in the size of a kitten.

Howard's level gray eyes were held fascinated by it. When he spoke, his words were hushed and almost reverent.

"Perfect, Hagendorff!" he said. "Not a flaw!"

"The reduction has not improved her temper," Hagendorff articulated precisely. His deep voice matched the rest of him. Garth Howard's clean-muscled body stood a good six feet off the floor, yet the other topped him by inches. And his face compared well with his bulky body, for his head was massive, with overhanging brows and a shaggy mop of blond hair. Athlete and weight-lifter, the two looked, but in reality they were scientist and assistant, working together for a common end.

The room in which they stood was obviously a laboratory. Bulky gas engines and a generator squatted at one end; tables held racks of tools and loops of insulated wiring and jars of various chemicals. One long table stretched the whole length of the room, placed flush against the left wall, whose rough planking was broken by a lone window. There were racks of test tubes on this table, and tools, carelessly scattered by men intent on their work.

Still another table was devoted to several cages, containing the usual martyrs of experimental science: guinea pigs and rabbits, rats and white mice. Beside these was a large box, screen topped, in which, in separate partitions, were a variety of insects: beetles and flies and spiders and tarantulas.

But the thing that dominated the laboratory was the machine on the long table against the wall. Its chamber, the most striking feature, was a cube of roughly six feet, built of dull material resembling bakelite. Wires trailed through it from the glittering plate, which was the chamber's floor, and a curved spray-shaped projector overhead, to an intricately constructed apparatus studded with vacuum tubes. A small switchboard stood beside the chamber, and from it thick cables led to the generator in the rear of the room.

"Let us return her to normal," Hagendorff rumbled after a moment or two devoted to prodding and examining the diminutive cat. "Then for the final experiment."

One whole wall of the cubical chamber was a hinged door, with a tier of several peep-holes. Garth Howard swung the door open, placed the tiny, struggling cat inside and quickly closed it again. "Right," he said briefly, and pressed his eyes to the bottom peep-hole.

A switch was pulled over, and the dynamo's drone pulsed through the room. Hagendorff's fingers rested on a large lever that jutted from the switchboard. Slowly, he pulled it to one side.

The imprisoned cat, small as a rat, had been nervously whipping its tail from side to side and meowing plaintively; but, as the lever swung over, there came a change. The vacuum tubes behind the switchboard glowed green; a bright white ray poured from the spray in the chamber, making the metal plate below a shimmering, almost molten thing. The animal's legs suddenly braced on it; its narrowed eyes widened, glazing weirdly, while the tail became a stiff, bristling ramrod. And, as a balloon swells from a strong breath, the cat's body increased in size. It grew not in spurts, but with a smooth, flowing rhythm: grew as easily as a flower unfolding beneath the sun.

In only a few seconds its original size was attained. Howard raised his hand; the lever shot back and the white beam faded into nothingness. A full sized and very angry cat tore around the inside of the chamber.

"Normal?" Hagendorff questioned. The other nodded and prepared to open the door.

"Wait! She always was a little undersized; I give her a few inches

more as a reward."

"Not too much," warned Garth. "She's got a nasty temper; we don't want a wildcat prowling round here!"

The white beam flashed, the tubes glowed and almost instantly flickered off again. When the chamber's door was opened, an indignant and slightly oversized cat bounded through, leaped from the table with a squawled oath of hatred and streaked into the front room of the cabin.

Garth turned and faced Hagendorff, a smile on his lips and a gleam in his eyes. He ran his fingers through his black hair.

"Well," he said, "now it's time for the final experiment. Who shall it be?"

Hagendorff did not answer at once, and the American went on:

"I think it'd better be me. There's a slight risk, of course, and I, as the inventor, could never ask an assistant to do anything I wouldn't. Is it all right with you?"

Hagendorff nodded quickly in answer. Garth stood reflecting for a moment.

"Guinea pigs, rabbits and insects have survived reduction to one-twentieth normal size," he said slowly. "It should be safe for the human body to descend just as far. But stop me at about two feet this first time. I'm not taking any chances; I want to be alive and kicking when I announce the success of my experiments to the scientific world."

His assistant said nothing.

"Well, here goes," Garth added. "I'd better take off my clothes if I don't want to be buried in them. They're not affected by the process. Must be because of the lack of organic connection between their fibers and the human body."

A few minutes later, nude, he jumped onto the laboratory table. He presented a perfect specimen of well-developed manhood as he stood before the door of the chamber. His smooth skin, under which the rounded muscles rolled easily, gleamed white beneath the glare of the floodlight. His gray eyes glanced at the stolid assistant, who already had one hand on the switchboard's lever. Garth saw that the hand was trembling slightly, and smiled as he realized Hagendorff was as excited as he. He said:

"I'll leave the door ajar, so you can more easily watch every phase of

the reduction. If it's painful—well, I guess I can stand anything a cat can!"

Then, stooping slightly, Garth stepped in and drew the door almost shut.

e relaxed as much as possible from the tremendous excitement that filled him, and nodded at Hagendorff.

"I'm ready," he said. "Go ahead!"

The ray came to his body as the crash of thunder comes to the ear. His nerves leaped as it struck and enveloped him. He felt as if he were entombed in ice, and yet his veins were aflame. Fiery shafts fanged him all through and resolved, presently, into a measured, tingling beat.

His thoughts raced. He knew that those minute particles of matter, the atoms of his body, were being compacted; he sensed that his legs were rigid, his body stiff, his eyes clamped ahead in a glazed stare. He was only half-conscious of the objects outside, but the dim sight

of them was fantastic and nauseous.

There was Hagendorff's face peering in at him—growing! Swelling as the cat's body had swollen; and yet receding and rising until Garth, momentarily forgetting that he was the one whose size was changing, thought that the man's titanic body would fill the room. But the room was growing, too: the stools were becoming leviathans of wood, the walls were like cliffs, the compact switchboard was a large surface of black, and the chamber in which he stood grew into a high-roofed vault, its sides shooting up and retreating as if shoved by invisible hands.

And still he sank, and still the terrible light devoured him.

Suddenly a delirious sensation engulfed him; his senses went reeling away, and he staggered. Then with a wrench he came to. As he regained control of his mind he knew the lever had been switched off and the process completed.

He found that he was gasping. He passed a hand over his sweat-studded face and looked around.

Outside was the room of a giant. And in a moment a giant became visible. His vast bulk filled the chamber's doorway; his mammoth

face peered in. Garth's eardrums quivered from a deep bass rumble, sounding like thunder on a distant horizon.

"Are you all right, Howard?"

A finger half the length of his own arm reached forward and prodded him. For a second Garth could do nothing but stare at it. It brought home to him starkly the puny size of his body, only two feet in height. He felt suddenly afraid. But that was foolish, he thought; and he laughed, his voice ludicrously high and shrill.

"I'm all right," he cried. "But I can hardly understand you. If I were much smaller, I probably couldn't—your voice'd seem so deep. Gangway, Hagendorff, I'm coming out!"

His eyes were just below the level of the giant's shoulders. He stepped from the black chamber and stared amazedly at the room, at the chairs, the objects in it—at the laboratory table on which he was standing, along which he might have sprinted thirty yards. A surge of exultant animal spirits flowed through him. His dream had become a reality; the machine had passed its last test! His body was sound and whole; he felt perfectly natural; he had not changed, save in size; and in size he was like Gulliver, confronted with a Brobdingnagian room!

He hurdled a five-inch-high box of tools, ran down the creaking table and stood laughing in front of a rack of test tubes half as high as he was. Three strides took Hagendorff opposite him; and from above the thunderous voice rumbled:

"What were your sensations?"

"Probably as close as man'll ever get to the feelings of a spark of electricity!" the midget replied. "But bearable, though I was freezing and burning at the same time. My body was rigid, paralyzed—just like the animals we used. I couldn't move."

"You're sure you couldn't move? You were helpless?"

The booming voice throbbed with sudden interest. Garth looked up curiously. "No," he repeated. "I couldn't move. But lift me down, Hagendorff. I want to take a walk on the floor."

A hand wrapped around his body, tensed and strained upwards. The two-foot-high man was not quite pulled off the table. Then Hagendorff grunted and relaxed his grasp.

"I had forgotten," he rumbled. "Your weight remains the same. You are one-third my size, yet you weigh almost as much as I do. Weight,

which is the sum of the mass of all the atoms in you, is not, naturally, affected by compacting those atoms."

It was only by a great effort that he was able to deposit the manikin on the floor.

For a while Garth strolled around, savoring to their full the fantastic sensations his diminished stature gave him, at once amused and somehow frightened by the overwhelming size of the laboratory. To his eyes, the tables were like bridges; Hagendorff's broad figure loomed monstrously over him, and the guinea pigs and rabbits in their cages seemed as big as fair-sized dogs. With a grin, he looked up at the giant who was his assistant.

"Think I'll make the return trip, and give you a chance," he said. "I've had my share, and the process has been proven. It's weird, being down in this new world all alone. I'd hate to think what would happen if a rat came along!"

Silently, Hagendorff stooped and grasped him again. But Garth, when he stood once more inside the chamber, regarded his huge, rough-moulded face curiously.

"Say," he said, puzzled, "your hands are trembling like the devil!

What's wrong? You're more nervous than I am!"

Hagendorff did not answer. He advanced to the switchboard. His narrowed, deep-set eyes shot a quick glance at the small, nude man inside the chamber, and for a second one hand hovered over the lever on the panel.

In that tense second a flash of intuition, of deadly fear, came to Garth Howard, and he leaped wildly forward. But his rear foot did not leave the floor of the chamber, and his shout of alarm was choked midway. Again the fierce ray paralyzed every muscle in him, and he was locked motionless where he was.

Helplessly, his glazed eyes stared at Hagendorff, while every moment his rigid little body melted downwards. He was becoming rapidly smaller, not larger!

Through the agony of the stabbing electrical waves, in vain Garth tried to wrench his legs free. The few inches that separated him from the door were an impassable barrier. Sheer panic clutched him. He was trapped. But why? Why had Hagendorff tricked him?

As if reading the question, the giant outside came close to the chamber's door and regarded his captive with eyes that were lit by a

peculiar flame. He grunted, then reached backward and returned the switchboard lever almost to the neutral point, reducing the speed of the decreasing process.

"Yes, that is better," the German gloated, in a deep, satisfied tone. "It will be slower, now. Slower—and more interesting to watch!... I fancy your eyes are reproachful, my friend. Why have I done it, you wonder? Ach! This machine, it will startle the world of science; it will make its inventor famous—not? Yes; and did you think I was going to stand by and see all the credit go to you? No! To me it shall go—me alone! And you—" He chuckled and rubbed his hands before going on.

"You shall be what the newspapers call a martyr to science. You shall sink to a foot, to six inches—to one inch—even less, I think! Eventually the reduction will kill you, of course; and your body shall be proof of how you died—in an experiment—and shall also prove the machine's power and my genius!"

He laughed thunderously, a blond and malevolent titan. He did not notice that, with the lessening of the reduction's speed, a slight trace of control over his muscles had returned to the midget inside. His tiny body was slowly diminishing, and complete, hopeless paralysis and death was not far away. But Garth was fighting every second,

fighting desperately with the trace of strength he possessed to slide to the door, break the contact and get out from under the ray's remorseless influence. Almost imperceptibly, the effort lacerating him with pain, he slid his feet forward. Hagendorff talked on. He seemed to be blinded by the vision of the fame his treachery would bring him.

"We shall have an experiment, my Professor; and then you will have an interesting death! The ray will suck you down; you will crumple and crumple till you're not much bigger than my thumbnail! And then I shall—ah!"

Garth had torn loose. Calling on every ounce of strength and will, the midget, now no more than one foot high, had reached the edge of the floor plate and pitched out onto the long laboratory table.

Giant and dwarf faced each other. For a moment neither spoke or moved. A breathless tensity hung over the laboratory. The machine droned on, forgotten. From outside, startlingly near, came the eery hoot of an owl.

A tight smile broke through the angry surprise on Hagendorff's face. "Well, well!" he said, with gargantuan, macabre humor. "We object! It was foolish, eh, to reduce the power? Next time, it shall not be so.

We—object!"

With the word, he lunged, and his bulky arms lashed down in a wide, grasping sweep.

But Garth's taut muscles, retaining all the strength and vigor of their normal size had been awaiting just such a move, and his tiny body described the arc of a tremendous leap that neatly vaulted one huge arm and started him sprinting swiftly down the table.

t the end he wheeled, and before the other overcame his surprise at such a nimble retreat, burst out indignantly:

"For God's sake, Hagendorff, what's come over you? Be sensible! You can't do this; you can't really mean it! Why—"

"So!" roared the assistant, and his rush cut short the midget's shrill, frantic words. But his grasp this time was better judged; Garth felt the great fingers slip over his body. Remembering his strength, he lashed out at one with all his might. Hagendorff grunted with pain; but instead of continuing the attack, he suddenly turned and strode to

the door leading into the other room, and closed it with a bang.

"You cannot escape," he growled, advancing again; "you merely delay."

Panting, Garth glanced around the room. He was, in truth, trapped. There was but the one door; and even if he could reach it, he could not get it open, for the handle would be far above him. The room was a sealed arena. For a little while it would go on—a wild leaping and dodging on the table, a hopeless evading of mammoth hands ... and then, inevitably, would come a crushing grip on his body, followed by experimentation and the agony of death in the black chamber.

Fearful, he waited, a perfect, living statuette, twelve inches high....

A grunt preluded the giant's vicious charge. The American staggered from the brush of a sweeping hand; then, twisting mightily, he dove under it, like a mouse slipping under the paw of a cat. In doing so he fell sprawling; and though he was up in a moment, his arm was held. A hoarse, exultant rumble came to his ears.

"Caught, my friend!"

But Hagendorff spoke too soon. With a great wrench, Garth broke free, and made a tigerish dash back along the table toward the window. And even as the clumsy titan jumped to the side and grabbed again at him, he hurled his tiny, heavy body against the pane, and went plunging through a shower of glass into the cool dark night outside.

He fell five feet, and the wind was jarred out of him as he crashed through the branches of a bush under the window into the sodden earth beneath. Unhurt, save for a few lacerations from the glass, he staggered to his feet, gasping for his breath, and started to run across the clearing towards the fringe of dense forest growth that ringed the cabin.

Then he heard thunderous footsteps and, a second later, the sound of the front door being pulled open. Garth turned in his tracks, and stumbled back beneath the cabin, thanking heaven that it was raised on short stilts. But the ruse did not give him much of a start, and by the time he had painfully threaded his way between the piles of timber left underneath the cabin, Hagendorff had discovered the trick and was scouting back.

Then, with the strength of the hunted, Garth was out from under the other side and sprinting for the doubtful sanctuary of the forest.

His tiny feet, carrying the weight of a normal-sized man, sank ankle high into the muddy ground, several times almost tripping him. Even as he got to where a trail through the bush began, and passed from the cold starlight into spaces black with clustered shadows, he heard a bellow from behind, and, glancing back, saw a monstrous shape come leaping on his tracks.

He had only seconds in which to find refuge; he could not stick to the trail. Thick bush, dank and heavy from recent rains, was on either side, fugitive streaks of pale light from above painting it eerily. Garth plunged into the matted growth, dropped to hands and knees and wormed forward away from the trail. Earth-jarring footbeats sounded close. With frantic haste he wrenched though the scratching tendrils and came to a miniature clearing.

He saw the tilted shape of a rotted tree-stump, its roots half washed away and exposing a narrow crevice between them. Gasping, the nude, foot-high figure tumbled down into it, and lay there, trying to hush his labored breathing.

He was a mere twenty feet from the trail; and though to him the bush was a jungle, to his pursuer it was only chest-high. A towering shadow moved along the trail. The thud of heavy footbeats came more slowly to the listening midget. Hagendorff was searching,

puzzled by the vague shadows, for where Garth had left the path.

Silence fell.

Garth's heart was pounding like a trip-hammer. He held himself alert, ready, if need be, to struggle up from the moist crevice and dart on further into the bush. He could not see the giant, but could picture his huge, sullen face all too clearly. Still no sound came. Risking all, he gripped a root and hauled himself up slightly. Then he peered around the stump.

Hagendorff was standing in the thick of the bush. He was not ten feet away, striving in the gloom to discern the other's tell-tale tracks. Garth drew his head back, hardly daring to breathe. Shivering, his naked body miserably cold, he waited, pressed down in the soggy earth. His betraying tracks were there; the shadows alone befriended him.

The silence was drawn so fine that the faint cheep of a night-bird sounded startlingly loud. But then came thunder that sent the bird winging away in fright, and the night and the forest echoed with the roar of a wrathful, impatient human voice.

"You hear me, wherever you are! And hear this: I leave you now, but

in ten minutes I have you! You little fool—you think you can get free? It is only by minutes you delay me!"

Snarling a curse, the treacherous giant turned and crashed through the bush and took his huge form striding back towards the cabin.

Garth was thinking of many things as he scrambled back wearily from his refuge to the trail. He was cursing the unwanted publicity which prying reporters had given his work in Detroit, and which had led him to lease the lonely island and build a laboratory in the wilderness. Had it not been for that publicity, he would never have needed an assistant, and the vision of fame would never have come to delude Hagendorff and turn his thoughts towards murder.

His position seemed a horrible delirium from which he must presently awake. Naked, dwarfed by each ordinary forest weed, unarmed, and trembling from the wind-sharpened night, he hardly knew which way to turn. His body was blotched with blood and mud, and under it the ragged gashes made by glass and bush stung painfully; he was hungry and stiff and tired and miserable. He remembered Hagendorff's threat of capturing him in ten minutes, and forced a smile to his face.

"Looks kind of bad," he muttered, using his voice in an attempt to

dispel some of the lonely grip of the night, "but we'll keep moving, anyway! He's coming back soon. Let's see: I'd better make for the stream. It'll be hard for him to follow my tracks through that. And then...."

Then—what? The island was small. He realized he could not stand many hours of exposure. Inevitably—But he turned his mind from the future and its seeming hopelessness, and concentrated on the immediate need, which was to hide himself. Forcing the pace, he struck off on a shambling trot down the dim trail, on into the deepening, sinister shadows towards the island's lone stream.

Obstacles that normally he would not have noticed made his path tortuous. His great weight sank his feet ankle-high in the moist, uneven ground. Time and time again he stumbled over some imbedded rock that, potato-sized, was like a boulder to him. Time and time again he fell, and when he rose his legs were plastered with soggy earth that did not dry; and the damp, fallen leaves and twigs he pitched into clung to his coating of mud. Each broken limb and branch, dropped from the whispering gloom of the trees above, drained the energy from his tiring muscles. Soon he was conscious of a vague numbness creeping over him, a deceptive, drowsy warmth into which he longed to sink, but which he drove back by working his arms and legs as vigorously as he could.

On he went, with teeth clenched and eyes fixed on the half-seen trail ahead—a fantastic, tiny creature hunted like a wild animal by a giant of his own kind!

Presently, through the shroud of darkness traced by ghostly slivers of starlight, came the sound of trickling water. The trail rose, dipped down; and through that hollow crawled the stream, winding from a hidden spring to the encompassing river below. Garth was winded when he came to it; to his eyes it seemed a small river. His legs were so numb they hardly felt the cold bite of the water that lapped around them.

Some furry water animal leaped away as Garth trudged upstream, alarmed by the strange midnight visitant and the self-encouraging mutterings of a shrill human voice....

He had waded what seemed to him a weary distance—in reality only a few hundred yards—through the winding, icy creek, when suddenly he halted and stood stock-still. Listening, he heard the ordinary sounds of the wind through the fir-spires, and the slow trickle of water; heard the beating of his own heart. Nothing else. And yet.... He took another step.

Then he swung quickly around and peered back, senses alert. There

was no mistaking the sound that had come again. It was the crunch of heavy feet, thudding at even intervals on damp earth. They were Hagendorff's; and he was armed with light!

A long beam of white speared through the tangle of bush and tree trunks far below. It came slanting down from above, prying for the story recorded by miniature footprints in the ground. By its distance from him, Garth could tell Hagendorff had come to where his trail led into the stream. The ray held steady for minutes. Again it prowled nervously around, hunting for tell-tale signs, sweeping in widening circles. Then, it was punctuated by the crunch of a boot.

The giant was following upstream!

With the flashlight, he might even be able to trace the prints in the bed of the creek. Stooping, Garth crept ahead, as silently as he could, though the stir of water at his feet seemed terribly loud. There were keen ears behind, craned for sounds like that. He knew he would have to hide again—quickly—and at that moment he saw a place.

A cleft in the bank to his right held a small hole, dimly limned by a wisp of starlight. On hands and feet the midget scrambled cat-like to it. It slanted down and inwards, only inches wide, so that the earth was close to his body when he slid feet-first inside. But it was warm

and dry, for it was shielded by a ledge from rain, and with the warmth the hunted manikin's spirits rose somewhat. The ray of light, which he could see sweeping back and forth downstream, was still following slowly, as if Hagendorff were having trouble making out the water-covered trail. Garth breathed easier, cuddled down—and then, for some unaccountable reason, he felt uneasy.

He had not noticed it at first, but now his nostrils were filled with a queer, musky odor that electrified his nerves and tensed his muscles. He felt the short hairs on his neck rise; felt his lips tighten and draw back over clenched teeth. Some long-buried instinct was warning him of danger—and suddenly he sprang from the hole and swung around.

From it, a killer came snaking out, its bared fangs thirsty for his life blood!

Arching and swaying its lithe-muscled body, it slid forward in its graceful, savage way—a weasel, the deadliest pound-for-pound killer that prowls the forest. It was as long as the naked human who faced it was tall. Unwittingly, he had chosen its hole as a refuge.

Retreat would have been impossible, but Garth for some reason did not even think of it. A strange new sensation poured through his

tense body, a sensation akin to fierce joy. Gone was his tiredness; his teeth too were bared, matching the wicked fangs before him. Two primal creatures they were, tooth to tooth and claw to claw, the man as naked and intoxicated with the blood lust as the ten pounds of bone and sinew that now darted suddenly for his throat.

With the lightning quickness that had come to him with small size, Garth stepped aside. And as the weasel's head streaked by he called on man's distinctive weapon, and put every ounce of his weight behind a right arm swing that landed square on a cold black nose and doubled the weasel back in midair.

Stunned, it writhed for a second on the slippery bank; and then again it was up, mad with pain now and swaying slightly as it gathered for a second leap against this creature that fought so strangely.

But in the momentary respite Garth had reasoned out his best chance. He did not try to fight off the second dart with his fists, but went boldly in. Ducking through the needle claws with head lowered, his tiny hands streaked in on the furry throat. He found it, and his fingers thumbed into the wind-pipe; but not before the weasel smelled the blood its claws had drawn and went utterly berserk. For a moment there was a wild flurry of furry, tearing legs and a blood-streaked white body between them, trying desperately to

evade their slicing strokes. They pitched down the bank together, animal and man struggling silently to the death; and when they jarred to a stop in the water below, Garth's strategy was achieved.

He was uppermost; his grip was steel around the throbbing throat, and the hundred and eighty pound weight of his body was holding the legs powerless. Not an inch from his face the weasel's fangs clashed frantically together. Garth maintained his clutch, squeezing with every bit of his mighty strength. The animal shuddered; then writhed in the death convulsions; at last lay still.

Panting, his mind a welter of primate emotions roused by the kill, the man shook it a last time, jumped to his feet and glared around—to see the beam of a flashlight only a dozen yards away. His more deadly foe, the human foe, was upon him. Perhaps the sounds of the fight had reached his ears.

Garth lost not a moment. Quickly he slung the weasel's body back into the hole and jammed himself down after it.

Hagendorff approached slowly, mumbling and cursing to himself in sullen ill-humor. Things were not going as he had expected them to. The white ray scoured the banks of the stream, searching doggedly. Nearer he came, and with each step the watching midget's rapid

breathing grew tighter. The towering body was more than shadow now. Another ten feet and the flashlight would find the marks of the fight.

But the titan's patience gave out. Closer than he had yet been to his quarry, he paused, and again the thunder of his voice broke the night's hush.

"Bah! This is foolish! In daylight I find him certainly. I have waited long; I can wait a little more. I need sleep. To-morrow, it will be different!"

He swung away from the stream, and in a few minutes the rip and crash of his progress through the bush had died. In the silence, Garth Howard considered his situation.

He faced it squarely, as was his custom. He did not brood over the treachery of his assistant, or of how unfairly and suddenly it had plunged him into peril and robbed him of his normal body. He accepted his position and searched for possible angles of escape. There were not many hours left in which to make a decisive move. The island was small, and, as Hagendorff had said, discovery would be inevitable in daytime.

Garth thought of the machine, and of the giant sleeping. A desperate plan came to him, and his jaws set decisively. "I'll do it!" he exclaimed aloud.

The lever which controlled both increase and decrease could be worked from inside the chamber if he rigged up a system of turning it with a wire or rope. If he pulled it to the increase only part way, he would, he knew, have sufficient power over his muscles to pull it back off, or slide again from the chamber, as he had done before. Whether or not he could do this depended on Hagendorff's being asleep. Possibly he could be locked in the living room, if he were there. Or tied. The increase, even at half speed, would only take about forty seconds. Once back to his size there would be a fight without odds, Garth thought grimly.

It was a big risk, and there was probably only a small chance of succeeding, but it meant getting back to six feet, back to a normal world, back to equal terms. That was the magnet which drew him presently toward the cabin laboratory.

He went slowly, to allow Hagendorff plenty of time to fall soundly asleep. The giant, as he had said, needed sleep—needed it badly—for, like Garth Howard, he had done without it for forty-eight hours under the excitement of imminent success in their work. Garth

considered that his move would be totally unexpected, being made right into the other's territory. There was a chance.

And so, cold and weariness banished by thoughts of the goal ahead, he prowled back along the trail like any small creature of the forest.

It was half an hour later when he came in sight of the cabin. His heart drummed excitedly as he stood in the shadows surveying it. He wondered if Hagendorff was still awake; if he was, perhaps, waiting for him. Certainly he did not seem to be: the cabin was dark and silent, and the only door was tightly closed. Still—it might be wiser to retreat while still free....

"No, by heaven!" Garth Howard exclaimed in his thoughts. "I'm going through with it!" Stooping slightly, he left the shadows and ran boldly into the starlight.

He half expected to hear a scuffle of feet and see the giant come leaping out at him; but nothing broke the silence. He made his careful way along the side of the cabin to the place where a trough for waste liquids led through a small hole at the level of the floor, and with great care wormed through.

As he started to cautiously reconnoiter, he was suddenly arrested in

his tracks. He had caught the sound of deep, rhythmic breathing. Hagendorff was asleep, not in the adjoining living room—but in the laboratory!

For a moment, Garth did not know what to do. Caution urged him to retreat; but that would not get him back to his size. On tip-toe, he explored around. The boards squeaked beneath his great weight, but the nearby breathing beyond continued in regular rhythm.

His eyes were toned to the darkness of the laboratory; he saw the chamber of his atom-compacting machine, its outer sides ghostly in the faint, reflected starlight, and stared at it with a pang of fierce longing. So near, it was—so very near! Holding the stolen size of his body; holding all that was vital to him; holding life itself—it rested there silently, within reach of a few steps and a quick climb up one of the table legs. So he thought, his brain whirling with mingled emotions, his tiny body shivering and aching with cold and its many hurts. The machine was near—but a barrier blocked the way.

Hagendorff's bulk lay outstretched on a side table, black in the shadows, and from him came the level breathing of a sound sleeper, climaxed now and again by a rumbling snore. He was taking no chances; his presence there seemed to destroy any hope of the midget's regaining normal size. But Garth was desperate, and for a

minute or so he considered.

Forty seconds, the increase would take, at half speed. It might be that long before the giant would waken thoroughly and see what was happening. He, Garth, might start the process, and, when he saw the huge figure stirring and waking from the noise of the dynamo, switch off the ray and get out. No matter how short a time it took Hagendorff to throw off the fogginess of his sleep, he would be somewhat increased in size, and the odds of combat would not be so great.

It was a terrible risk. Did he dare take it? He thought of the forest, of the raw night, of what was threatened in the morning.... Yes!

Silently, the manikin clasped the nearest table leg, shinnied up and hauled himself over the top. As he got there his heart leaped. A sharp thumping had come from behind. He dropped to his knees and glanced round; but he immediately rose again, reassured. It was only the rabbits in their cage, disturbed by the strange figure on the table. He thanked God that they—and his tarantulas and other insects—could make no alarming noises.

Garth found a long strand of wire. The panel's control lever, swung to the left, controlled increase; to the right, decrease. Garth's plan

was to wind the middle of the wire around it, relay each end around the two supporting posts of the switchboard, and thus have both ends of the wire in his hands when he stood inside the chamber. One end of the wire would enable him to pull the lever over for increase, and the other to pull it back to neutral when the increase was completed, or when Hagendorff arose.

Quickly he started to arrange the wire. Then suddenly his hands dropped and he stared dismayed at the control panel.

The power switch had been removed!

It was Hagendorff's work, of course. He had guarded every angle. Without that switch, the mechanism was lifeless and literally powerless. It worked on a delicately adjusted and enclosed rheostat; there was nothing that could be substituted for it. It would take hours to improvise one in the heart of the apparatus.

The switch, Garth reflected bitterly, was probably concealed somewhere about the giant's body.

He considered the possibility of tying him. He knew where there was a coil of light, pliable wire on the floor; he might be able to loop it over the giant's hands and legs while he slept, tie him securely, and

then go through his pockets for the switch. Another hazard! But there was nothing else to do.

Garth lowered himself over the table's edge and slid quietly down the leg. He glanced at the sleeping man, then over across the room to where, beneath another table, the wire was—and his nerves jumped at what he saw there.

From the darkness under the table two spots of greenish fire, close to the floor, held steadily on him.

As he stared, they vanished, to reappear more to the right. With the movement, he glimpsed the outline of a lithe, crouching animal, and knew it to be the cat he and Hagendorff had experimented on earlier that night. It was stalking him in the deliberate manner of its kind!

It came edging around, so as to leap on him from the side. He knew that he represented fair prey to it; that if he tried to run, it would pounce on him from behind. Wearily he tensed his miniature body, standing poised on the balls of his feet and never dropping his eyes for a moment. He could not repress a grim smile at the ludicrousness of being attacked by an ordinary house-cat, even though it was tiger-sized to him. Though his victory over the weasel, a far deadlier fighter, made him confident he could dispatch it, there was another

aspect to the approaching struggle. It would have to be fought in silence. Not four feet away, Hagendorff slept. There lay the overwhelming danger.

Even as these things flashed through his brain, the cat steadily inched nearer on its padded paws. Ghostly starlight framed it now; Garth could see the eager, quivering muscles, the long tail, flat behind, twitching slightly, the rigid, unstirring head and the slowly contracting paws. The terrible suspense of its stalking scraped his nerves. There would be a long pause, then an almost imperceptible hunching forward, with the tail ever twitching; then the same thing again, and over again. It became unbearable. Garth deliberately invited the attack.

He pretended to turn and run, his back towards it. At once he sensed its tensing body, its bunching muscles—then knew that it had sprung.

Whirling, he had a fleeting impression of a supple body in midair, of bristling claws and bared, needlepoint fangs. But he was ready. The weasel had taught him his best weapon, the great weight of his body. He streaked in beneath the wide-spread paws, shot his hands into the fur of the throat and threw himself against the shock of the animal's suddenly arrested leap.

There was no standing his weight. Over the cat went, its back thudding into the floor, its claws held powerless by the hundred and eighty pounds of hard flesh that straddled it.

The fall had made little noise; but, as Garth tightened the grip of his fingers and bored inward, a dull, steady thumping began to sound. It was the cat's tail, pounding on the floor!

Desperately he tried to hook a leg over it, but could not reach far enough. It beat like a tom-tom. From above, there came the sound of a huge frame stirring, and the rumble of a sleepy grunt.

In a moment, the titan would be thoroughly awake.

By the drumming tail alone, Garth realized, his chance of regaining full size was sent glimmering. There was nothing but retreat, now, and a hasty one, if he valued life. Another noise came from the waking Hagendorff. He was sitting up, staring around. Garth jumped to his feet, threw the cat's twitching body beneath the table, and dodged at full speed for the hole whereby he had entered.

Like a mouse he wriggled through, leaped to the ground, scrambled up and made for the forest. He ran with all the speed at his command, and was almost surprised when he reached the black

fringe of the forest in safety. In the protecting gloom, he dared to pause and look back.

Hagendorff was not pursuing him. From the sound, he was merely boarding shut the drain hole, to prevent another entrance in that way; then, afterwards, the windows.

Garth was puzzled. "I don't understand it," he said aloud. "Why is he so sure he can get me in the morning? Isn't he afraid I'll leave the island? Why I've got to try to get away, now. It would be death to be here after the dawn!"

He stood there making his plans. They had a rowboat below, powered with an outboard motor. Even in his present size, he might possibly run it, if he could get it started. He would strike down-river for Detroit, and when the gas gave out, the current would carry him on. Some river boat might pick him up and carry him to friends in the city. His grotesquely dwarfed body would prove his story, and they would bring him back and end Hagendorff's mad dream of fame, and help him to regain his normal size. He could superintend the construction of another machine if the present one was wrecked.

When he started down the trail to the river, he seemed to be walking through a haze. He felt curiously light-headed, and his body was

completely numb. The long exposure was telling on him, and there was much more of it to come. He wondered if he could hold out until he reached the mainland.

But his mind cleared of the daze the cold and near-exhaustion had brought it to when at last he came to the beach and realized that again Hagendorff had anticipated him. The rowboat was gone! No wonder the giant could afford to wait until daylight.

Garth floundered down to the beach and ran to where the craft usually lay. There was only a groove in the rough, pebbly surface, a groove left by the boat's keel. He followed it up the bank, and twenty yards in found the dinghy chained and locked firmly to a large tree.

The midget's face grew suddenly very haggard as he stood there, staring at what looked like his death sentence. He should have known Hagendorff would secure the boat, he told himself bitterly. It was a cruel blow, and sheer misery of mind and body gripped him as he turned and peered through the darkness of wind-whipped water and sky toward a horizon that was already lightening. Down-river lay Detroit, a friendly, everyday world. It was not far in miles, but it seemed lost to him forever....

Garth took his eyes from that prospect with a wry twist to his mouth.

It chanced that they fell on the painter of the rowboat.

It was a stout Manila cord, some twenty feet in length, and tied tightly to a ring in the bow of the boat. He looked at it dully for a full minute before the idea came to him. Then suddenly the lethargy bred of hopelessness left him. Garth remembered a pocket knife he had left in the boat the day before. He climbed over the side and began to fumble about in the darkness. First he came upon a torn handkerchief which he hastily tied about his loins. Further probing disclosed the knife wedged under a seat in the boat. When he had finally extricated it, he threw the knife over the side and climbed out.

After some minutes of frantic cutting and hacking he severed the rope, and, quickly taking up one of the ends, ran with it further along the bank.

There was still a way of getting off the island. A cold and risky way, but better than waiting miserably for capture. On the bank was a pile of sawn logs, intended for firewood; and a strong rope was in his hands. Much indeed could be done now.

The making of his raft proved a herculean task, a racking and almost impossible one for a man limited by doll-sized hands and a foot-high body. First the logs had to be rolled to the water's edge, six of them.

Each was as thick as he was tall, and this first part of his task took him a precious half hour, every minute of which brought nearer the dawn. Ripples like ordinary waves washed up the struggling manikin and left him gasping as he stood braced in the cold water and tugged one log after another out and wound the rope under and over it. The raft had to be built in water; he would never have been able to drag the whole thing off the beach.

When at last he wearily tied the rope end to the last log, and stuck his knife handy in it, the clouds on the horizon were flushed by the coming sun. But his means of escape was completed; and hanging on the end, he shoved the raft out into the river. Right then he almost lost his life. For when his feet left the sloping bottom, his great weight, out of all proportion to the size of his body, pulled him under, and it was only by virtue of a desperate clutch on the raft that he escaped drowning. Thrashing furiously, he struggled up from the water, and lay, totally blown, on the logs. It was then he first realized that his chance of life was no stronger than the rope which held them together. For swimming was out of the question, and one or two logs would never support his hundred and eighty pounds.

The end which he lay on was well under water, and the waves splashed up between the bobbing logs. The current he was headed for swept down fifty yards offshore, which was a sixth of a mile to

the little legs now thrust out behind and making a rhythmic flutter.

He was off the island! Freedom and life were near! Though his teeth were chattering, his fingers crushed by the jarring logs, and his body utterly wretched, he grinned with joy as the stretch between him and the gloomy mass of the island slowly widened.

Then came the sun. The skies faded from gray into a delicate, cloud-flecked blue; slowly the air warmed, and the surface of the water seemed to calm under it. Though the sun was good on his body, Garth realized night was more friendly to him, for in the growing light his craft was all too conspicuous to the giant who would presently be following his tracks down to the beach. He chided himself for not having thought of camouflaging the raft with leafy branches. Doggedly, he forced it out.

When at last he felt the pull of the current, he ceased his weary kicking and glanced up into the swiftly advancing dawn. There was a bird soaring through the keen air up there, gliding in easy circles with almost motionless wings. Garth gazed at it somewhat wistfully, envying its freedom and power of flight. And then he shut his eyes. He was very tired....

He must have dozed off for a moment, for he awoke to find himself

slipping off. With a sudden jerk he regained his position—and that was what saved his life at that moment. For without warning, while he was nodding, plumed death struck from the skies.

It dropped like a plummet, as was its manner. It had been circling above and judging its swoop, and by rights its curved talons should have arched deep into the unguarded back of the naked figure on the raft. But at the last second the figure moved aside—too late for the hawk to alter its swoop.

The raft rocked under the impact; for a moment Garth Howard, dazed by the sudden attack, did not know what had happened. Huge scratching wings were thrashing about him; his left arm stung from where a claw had raked it; and he wrenched around to stare into two wicked slits of eyes behind a fierce, rounded beak that jabbed at him.

Evidently he represented easy prey to the hawk, for it did not soar away, but instead came at him again in a flurry of beating wings and stabbing beak, a vicious, feathered fighter from above. Caught off guard by the suddenness and savagery of the onslaught, Garth retreated stumblingly, forgetting his weight and the size of the raft and defending himself with his arms as best he could against the rushes of the hawk. The raft tilted perilously; water washed around his legs and he slipped and went under.

He felt his fingers slipping inexorably over the edge of the log he had gripped; his legs threshed up a welter of foam, but he kept going down. Panic clutched him; his weight would sink him like a stone. But suddenly his clutching hand was gripped by steel-like talons, and through the water he caught a glimpse of the hawk straining backwards with mighty sweeps of its wings in an effort to lift him bodily into the air.

His size had deceived it. It could not hoist him, but did manage to drag his head and chest out of the water. That was enough. With an effort, Garth scrambled onto the raft.

The hawk, probably greatly surprised by its failure to soar away with such tiny prey, tore into him again, raking his body painfully. Hardly knowing what he did, Garth grabbed out as it hovered over him and succeeded in wrapping his fingers around one of its legs. Then, bracing himself as best he could, and ignoring the scratching wings and piercing beak, he gave the leg a sharp twist and heard the crack of breaking bone.

He was only half-conscious of the hawk's shrill scream of pain, of its swift retreat into the blue, with the broken leg dangling grotesquely. For only a moment he was aware that he had driven it off; then the pain of his wounds and his utter exhaustion swept up over him, and

he flopped down on the raft in a dead faint....

For a long time Garth was dimly aware of familiar noises. At first they were faint and scarcely perceptible; but, as his senses slowly began to return, disturbing thoughts came to him. He felt that he was on his back, and confined, and when he twisted, to turn over, he found he could not. He opened his eyes and blinked.

He was back in the laboratory—lying bound, hand and foot, on the long table.

The giant Hagendorff appeared over him, and his deep voice rumbled:

"Badly scarred and bruised, my little friend! Cats you have fought, and birds, and each has left its mark. It was useless to run away last night—not?"

Garth was suddenly too full of a weary resignation to even think of speaking. Remonstrance, he knew, would avail him nothing. The long struggle for freedom and life was over, and he had lost.

The assistant was apparently in good humor. He went on:

"Really, it is too bad, after that magnificent fight of yours! A hawk—

was it not? I was following your tracks, and had just reached the beach when I see a great fuss on the water. A raft, I see! A bird, attacking something on it! A little white figure, struggling! Well, it is that easy. I unlock the boat and go to the raft and find my elusive friend there, unconscious. So I bring him back here. He has forgotten: we have an experiment to complete."

There was a fire of exultation in the man's eyes as they glared down at the midget who lay on the laboratory table, just a few feet away from the chamber of the machine. He reached out and ran a thick finger over his victim's body.

"You do not deserve this," he said. "I should kill you outright—but, graciously, I give you death in the machine. Yours will be the first human body to be reduced to an inch; maybe less. This is your martyrdom; for this, your name will live, along with mine, for having perfected the process."

Garth Howard saw that the window was boarded tightly shut. Then Hagendorff caught his eyes as, with a grin, he plunged a hand into a pocket and drew forth the missing panel switch. He dangled it in front of Garth.

"What you would have given for this last night, eh? With your wire

to pull the lever so carefully arranged! Ach, it was too bad!" He shrugged, then picked up a screwdriver and turned to fix the switch on the control panel.

The moment his back was turned, Garth gazed frantically around. The fantastic fate he had striven so desperately to stave off was very close now. What could he do?

Some tools lay on the table, just out of his reach, among them a pair of cutting pliers. He stared at the pliers—an overgrown tool, half as long as his own body. The twist of Hagendorff's wrist driving home the first screw brought a cold chill over him. The pliers! It was a chance!

He twisted a little, and keeping his eyes on the giant's back, he inched toward them. His hands, tied at the wrists behind him, clutched for them; found them. The jaws were open, and there were two sharp cutting edges. He could not hope to manipulate the whole implement with his bound hands, but he located one edge, painfully brought the rope to it and sawed rapidly.

The steel sliced his flesh, and he felt the warm stickiness of blood. But he disregarded this and kept on. Hagendorff was still working, all unconscious—but the last screw was going in. And then some

strands of the rope snapped, and it loosened.

The next second, Garth had wrenched his hands free.

Then, throwing caution to the winds, he sat up, grabbed the great tool and sliced the rope at his feet.

At that moment, Hagendorff finished his job and turned around.

Their eyes met. For a breathless instant nothing happened, save that the smile on the titan's face changed to surprise and then fury. Garth scrambled to his feet. The movement brought a bellow of rage, and the manikin saw two enormous hands converging on him in a sweep that bade fair to crush every bone in his dwarfed body.

Leaping backwards instinctively, he hurled the pliers at the giant's head.

They were well aimed, and he saw them strike the temple, stopping the man in his tracks. He thundered, more from anger than pain. His heart pounding wildly, Garth ran back to a position behind a rack of test tubes. It was from there that he saw Hagendorff, cursing crazily, grab up a machinist's hammer and advance upon him.

All sanity had apparently left the giant. His great face was flushed

and distorted, and a growing welt showed where the pliers had clipped him. Garth suddenly knew that if he were captured again, death would not come in the chamber, but from those powerful hands, or the weapon they clutched.

The hammer swung back for a crushing blow. But in the instant it hung poised, Garth lifted a half-filled test tube from the rack before him and swished its contents forward.

The tube held sulphuric acid, and it sprayed over Hagendorff's face. The hammer pitched from his hand; he clutched at his eyes and stumbled back, shrieking in agony.

Garth at once ran to the edge of the table, swung himself over and slid down the leg to the floor. The laboratory door was open and he dashed for it. But, whether or not Hagendorff could see his frantic retreat, he anticipated it, and with a reeling plunge he got there first. Fumbling, he found the key in the hole and turned it. The room was sealed.

Beginning then, the blind Hagendorff was a man berserk. With a sobbing roar of pain and fury, he lashed round for the foot-high figure that dodged and wheeled and zig-zagged to keep from his threshing arms and his hands. A table crashed over, and a flood of

chemicals mixed and boiled on the floor; then another, as the giant blundered blindly into it. The cages of animals split open, and guinea pigs, rabbits and insects scuttled from their prisons, fleeing to the corners from the wild plunges of the raging German.

Garth went reeling from a glancing blow, and fell against an over-turned stool under a far table where he could hardly breathe for the mixed odors of spilt chemicals. By some sixth sense, Hagendorff seemed to locate him, for his huge body turned and came directly for him.

But Garth did not wait. Seizing the stool he whirled it so that it slid smash into the giant's legs. The man pitched over with a grunt, striking the floor so hard that the planks shivered.

He did not rise. He lay there, in a wreckage of glass and splintered wood and stinking chemicals, moaning slightly.

Garth wasted no time, but gripped a leg of the laboratory table, shinned to the top and with frantic speed fixed his strand of wire onto the control lever and round the supporting posts of the instrument panel. Then he jumped for the dynamo switch, caught the handle and jerked it down.

The drone of a generator surged through the room. Then the midget was standing in the chamber, both ends of the wire in his hands; and his heart was thudding madly as he pulled one of them.

It held. Over came the lever, halfway. The brilliant stream of the ray poured down. Dimly the manikin glimpsed the chamber's walls sinking down, the wreckage-strewn room outside diminishing to normal size. Fiery pain throbbed through him, but it was lost in the exultation that filled his mind as the seconds went by. He grew to two feet, two and a half—three.

But beyond that he was not to go. The swaying shape of Hagendorff loomed outside the cube. Aroused by the drone of the generator and what it signified, the giant had floundered up from the floor and now came clutching blindly for him.

Garth knew he would have to leave the chamber at once; so, struggling for command of his muscles through the paralysis that numbed them, he tensed his hold on the other wire and pulled it a little. The control lever swung back to neutral; the ray faded and Garth jumped out. He was only a few feet away from the huge convulsed face as the German roared:

"By God, you'll never get back on this machine!"

His purpose was plain; his groping hand had already found the control lever. To prevent his ripping it out, Garth plunged head first into Hagendorff's stomach, and they both went down in a flurry of arms and legs. Garth, scrambling to get loose, was conscious of the ray pouring down again in the chamber above. The lever had not been wrenched out, but jerked over, setting the process of increase on.

The next few minutes were a chaos. Now that Howard was three feet tall he was without some of the advantages of his former smallness and compactness, and his utmost efforts failed to free him from the death clutch of the pain-maddened giant. Over and over they rolled on the floor. Garth trying only to break free, and the other relentlessly holding on and dragging him over to the chamber again.

It was a losing fight for the diminutive one, weakened as he was by his exposure and the fierce fights he had had. Little by little, squirming and resisting with all his remaining strength, he was brought near—to see the German, at last, pull half the reducing apparatus with a crash to the floor.

The ray in the chamber faded off. The machine was silenced forever, so that Garth could never hope to regain his full size in this one....

With the realization of this, most of his spirit went, while the savage giant, successful in smashing the machinery, now turned and devoted himself exclusively to his victim.

"Now for you!" he roared in frightening triumph, clutching the smaller man's neck with his great hands and bearing him to the floor.

Against those fingers gouged into his wind-pipe like a vise of steel, Garth could do nothing. Feebly he gagged, and feebly he clawed at the pitiless hands—and futilely.

It was the end, he told himself. He had come close, but closeness did not count. His eyes bulged, and a shroud of black began to obscure his vision.

And then, suddenly, over the giant's flexed arms, he glimpsed, coming from the chamber on the table, something that chilled the blood in his veins with horror.

It was huge and utterly loathsome. Long, hairy legs folded out, and following them came a furry, bloated body at least five feet thick. Many-faceted eyes fixed themselves coldly on the men on the floor. In one hideous leap the monster soared from the table all the way to the room's ceiling, seeming almost to float as it came down. For a

moment it teetered on the floor, not five feet from the giant who, blind and all unconscious of it, was throttling his diminutive victim beneath him.

Garth for a second forgot the grip on his throat in the horror of the monster. He knew at once what it was—a tarantula. It had crawled inside the chamber when its cage was broken, had been there even while he had been there, and had been swollen to its present blood-curdling size while they were fighting and the ray was on. With the smashing of the apparatus, it was free to come out.

It gathered for the final spring, its terrible legs tensing perceptibly—a creature out of a nightmare. Garth Howard tried to shriek out a warning, but Hagendorff was holding his throat too well. He could only struggle weakly and nod toward the horror beyond; but the message did not get across to the giant.

Then the tarantula sprang again.

For a moment it seemed to hover on Hagendorff's upturned back. When it floated down, its ragged legs cradled over him, and the egg-shaped body squatted on his back....

Garth felt his frayed nerves and senses going. A hairy leg was

touching him, chilling his flesh. Above him, the giant was thrashing impotently, and he found his neck free of the awful grip.

He wormed free. He was hardly conscious of reaching up and unlocking the door, and closing it tightly again as he stumbled forth. Later, it seemed that it was in a dream that he ran wildly into the splendid sunlight outside and down the winding trail. It was only by a tremendous effort that he kept his senses long enough to shove the rowboat out from the beach and hop in.

He never started the motor. All that he had seen and suffered on the island of horror overcame him too soon, and he pitched down in a limp, unconscious heap....

And so it was, that, the next morning, the two harbor policemen found a rowboat with mysterious cargo floating silently down the Detroit River. So it was that some time later a launch with three local officers churned up to the solitary island, and that gunshots echoed in the gloom of a hushed laboratory room, and a man's white-faced body was carried from the cabin where he had made his one great treacherous effort to steal another's fame.

101 The Moon Weed by Harl Vincent

Unwittingly the traitor of the Earth, Van pits himself against the inexorably tightening web of plant-beasts he has released from the moon.

Aproximate word count: 10,600

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Hobart Madison pursed his lips in a whistle of incredulous surprise as he regarded the object that lay in the palm of his hand. An ordinary pebble, it seemed to be, but a pebble in which a strange fire smouldered and showed itself here and there through the dull surface.

"Would you mind repeating what you just said, Van?" he asked.

"You heard me the first time. I say that that's a diamond and that it came from the moon." Carl Vanderventer glared at his friend in resentment of his doubting tone.

"Mean to tell me you've been there? To the moon?"

"Certainly not. I'm not a Jules Verne adventurer. But I'm telling you that stone is a diamond of the first water and that it came from the moon. Weighs over a hundred carats, too. You can have it appraised yourself if you think I'm kidding you."

Bart Madison laughed. "Don't get sore, Van," he said. "I'm not doubting your word. But Lord, man—the thing's so incredible! It takes a little time to soak in. And you say there are more?"

"Sure. This one's the largest of five I've found so far. And there's other stuff, too. Wait till you see. Fossils, beetles and things. I tell you, Bart, the moon was inhabited at one time. I've the evidence and I want you to be the first to see it." The eyes of the young scientist shone with excitement as he saw that his friend was roused to intense interest.

"So that's what all your experimenting has been aimed at. No wonder it cost so much."

"Yes, and you've been a brick for financing me. Never asked a question, either. But Bart, it'll all come back to you now. Know how much that stone's worth?"

"Plenty, I guess. But, forget about the financing and all that. Where's this laboratory of yours?" Madison had pushed his chair back from his desk and was reaching for his hat.

"Over in the Ramapo Mountains, not far from Tuxedo. I'll have you there in two hours. Sure you can spare the time to go out there now?" Vanderventer was enthusiastically eager.

"Spare the time? You just try and keep me from going!"

Neither of them noticed the sinister figure that lurked outside the door which led into the adjoining office. They chattered excitedly as they passed into the outer hall and made for the elevator.

Vanderventer's laboratory was a small domed structure set in a clearing atop the mountain and well hidden from the winding road which was the only means of approach. Though Bart Madison, who had inherited his father's prosperous brokerage business, had financed his friend's research work ever since the two left college, this was his first visit to the secluded workshop, and its wealth of equipment was revealed to him as a complete surprise. He had always thought of Van's experiments as something beyond his ken; something uncanny and mysterious. Now he was convinced.

The most prominent single piece of apparatus in the laboratory was a twelve-inch reflecting telescope which reared its latticed framework to a slit in the dome overhead. Paralleling its axis and secured to the same equatorial mounting was a shining tube of copper which bristled with handwheels and levers and was connected by heavy insulated cables to an amazing array of electrical machinery that occupied an entire side of the single room.

"Regular young observatory you've got here, Van," Bart commented when he had taken all this in in one sweeping glance of appraisal.

"Yeah, and then some. Not another like it in the world." Van was busying himself with the controls of his electrical equipment, and a powerful motor-generator started up with a click and a whirr as he closed a starting switch.

Madison watched in silence as the swift-fingered scientist fussed with the complicated adjustments of the apparatus and then turned to the massive concrete pedestal on which his telescope was mounted. At his touch of a button the instrument swung over on its polar axis to a new position. The slit in the dome was opened to the afternoon sky, revealing the lunar disc in its daytime faintness.

"You can see it just as well in daylight?" Bart asked as his friend

peered through the eyepiece of the telescope and continued his adjustments.

"Sure, the surface is just as bright as at night. Doesn't seem so to your eye, but it's different through the telescope. Here, take a look."

Bart squinted through the eyepiece and saw a huge crater with a shadowed spire in its center. Like a shell hole in soft earth it appeared—a great splash that had congealed immediately it was made. The cross-hairs of the eyepiece were centered on a small circular shadow near its inner rim.

"That," Van was saying, "is a prominent crater near the Mare Nubium. The spot under the cross-hairs is that from which I have obtained the diamonds—and other things. Watch this now, Bart."

The young broker straightened up and saw that his friend was removing the cover from a crystal bowl that was attached to the lower end of the copper tube that pointed to the heavens at the same ascension and declination as the telescope. The air of the room vibrated to a strange energy when he closed a switch that lighted a dozen vacuum tubes in the apparatus that lined the wall.

"You say you bring the stuff here with a light ray?" he asked.

"No, I said with the speed of light. This tube projects a ray of vibrations—like directional radio, you know—and this ray has a component that disintegrates the object it strikes and brings it back to us as dissociated protons and electrons which are reassembled in the original form and structure in this crystal bowl. Watch."

A misty brilliance filled the bowl's interior. Intangible shadowy forms seemed to be taking shape within a swirling maze of ethereal light that hummed and crackled with astounding vigor. Then, abruptly, the apparatus was silent and the light gone, revealing an odd object that had taken form in the bowl.

"A starfish!" Bart gasped.

"Yeah, and fossilized." Van handed it to him and he took it in his fingers gingerly as if expecting it to burn them.

The thing was undoubtedly a starfish, and of light, spongy stone. Its color was a pale blue and the ambulacral suckers were clearly discernible on all five rays.

"Lord! You're sure this is from the moon?" Bart turned the starfish over in his hand and gazed stupidly at his friend.

"Certainly, you nut. Think I had it up my sleeve? But here, watch again, there's something else."

The crackling, misty light again filled the bowl.

"Suppose," Bart ventured, "you bring in something large—big as a house, let's say. What would it do to your machine?"

"Can't. The ray'll only pick up stuff that'll enter the bowl. Look—here's the next arrival."

The mysterious light died down and the scientist picked up the second object with trembling fingers. It was a knife of beautiful workmanship, fashioned from obsidian and obviously the work of human hands.

"There! Didn't I tell you?" Van gloated. "Guess that shows there were living beings on the moon."

He made minute changes in the adjustment of his marvelous instrument and Bart watched in dazed astonishment as object after object materialized before their eyes. There were fragments of strange minerals; more fossils, marine life, mostly; a roughly beaten silver plate; three diamonds, none of which was as large as what Van

had taken to New York, but all of considerable value.

"This'll be something for the papers, Van!" Bart Madison was visioning the fame that was to come to his friend.

"Yeah, all but the diamonds."

All but the diamonds is right!"

These words were spoken by a sarcastic voice, chill as an icicle, that came from the open door. They wheeled to look into the muzzles of two automatic pistols that were trained on them by a stocky individual who faced them with a twisted, knowing grin.

"Danny Kelly!" Bart gasped, raising his hands slowly to the level of his shoulders. He knew the ex-army captain was a dead shot with the service pistol, and a desperate man since his disgrace and forced resignation. "What's the big idea?" he demanded.

"You don't need to ask. Refused me a loan this morning, didn't you? Now I'm getting it this way." Kelly turned savagely on Van, prodding his ribs with a pistol. "Get 'em up, you!" he snapped.

Van had been slow in raising his hands, gaping in stupefied amazement at the intruder. Now he reached for the ceiling without

delay.

"You'll serve time for this, Danny!" Bart shouted.

"Shut up! I know what I'm doing. And back up, too—where—no, the other door." Kelly was forcing him toward the door of the cellar at the point of one pistol as he kept Van covered with the other.

Bart clenched his fist and brought it down in a sudden sweeping blow that raked Kelly's cheek and ear with stunning force. But the gunman recovered in a flash, dropped the muzzle of his pistol and pulled the trigger. Drilled through the thigh, Bart staggered through the open door and fell the length of the stairs into the darkness of the cellar. Kelly laughed evilly as he slammed the door and turned the key.

"Hold it, you!" he snarled as he swung on Van who had dropped his hands and crouched for a spring. "If I drill you, it won't be through the leg. I'll take those diamonds now."

He pocketed one of his pistols, and, keeping the other pressed to the pit of Van's stomach, went through his pockets. Then he added those on the tray by the crystal bowl to the collection, and transferred the entire lot to his own pocket.

"Now, you clever engineer," he grinned, "we'll just operate this trick machine of yours for a while and collect some more. Hop to it!" He watched narrowly as Van stretched his fingers to the controls. "No monkey business, either," he grated; "you'll not change a single adjustment. I've been listening to you and I know the clock of the telescope is keeping the ray trained on the same spot. You just operate the ray and nothing else. Get me?"

Van did not think it expedient to tell him of the drift caused by inaccuracies in the clock and perturbations of the moon's motion. He was playing for time, trying to plan a course of action.

"There may not be any more diamonds," he offered as he tripped the release of the ray.

"Oh, there'll be more. Don't try to kid me."

An irregular block of quartz materialized in the bowl and Kelly tossed it to the floor in savage disgust. Then a small diamond, very small; but he pocketed it nevertheless. The next object was a strange one—a dried seed pod about six inches in length and of brilliant red color. The ray had shifted to a new position on the lunar surface. Another and another of the strange legumes followed, one of them bursting open and scattering its contents, bright red like the

enclosing pod to rattle over the floor like tiny glass beads. Kelly snorted his disgust.

"Still some sort of vegetation out there," Van muttered. The eternal scientist in the man could not be downed by a mere hold-up.

"Can the chatter!" Kelly snarled as the crystal bowl gave up another of the useless pods and still another. He gathered up the evidence of lunar vegetation, a half dozen of the pods, and threw them through the open doorway with a savage gesture. "You trying to put one over on me?" he bellowed.

"How can I?" Van retorted mildly. "I haven't touched a handwheel." He was wondering vaguely whether this lunar seed would grow in earthly soil; what sort of a plant it would produce under the new environment.

Kelly was becoming nervous now. It seemed that little was to be gained by hanging around this crazy man's laboratory. He had a sizable fortune in rough stones already. That big one alone, when properly cut into smaller stones, would make him independent. Maybe there weren't any more, anyway. And the longer he stayed the greater chance there was of getting caught.

The advent of another of the pods decided him. A quick blow with the butt of his pistol stretched Van on the floor and Kelly fled the scene.

Bart was pounding furiously on the cellar door when Van first took hazy note of his surroundings. Several uncertain minutes passed before he was able to stagger across the room and release his friend.

"Where is he?" Bart demanded, swaying on his feet and blinking in the sudden light.

"Gone. Socked me and beat it with the diamonds." Van was mopping the blood from his eyes with a handkerchief. "Are you hit bad?" he inquired.

"No, just a flesh wound. Hurts like the devil, though. How about yourself?" Bart limped to his side and sighed with relief when he examined his bleeding scalp. "Not so bad yourself, old man. Where's your first aid kit?"

Van was still somewhat dazed and merely pointed to the cabinet. "Fine pair we turned out to be!" he grumbled after his head had cleared a bit under Bart's vigorous cleansing of the cut on his temple. "Here we stood, meek as a couple of lambs, and let that guy get

away with murder."

"Yeah, but those forty-fives made the difference. Ouch!" Bart winced as his friend poured fresh iodine over the wound in his leg. "Have a heart, will you?"

They were startled into silence by a hoarse, strangled scream that came from outside the laboratory. "Help! Help!" someone repeated in a panicky voice—a voice which at once ended on a gurgled note of despair.

"It's Kelly!" Bart whispered. "He's come back. Something's happened to him." He started for the open door.

"Wait a minute. It may be a trick to get us outside where he can pop us off."

"No, it isn't. For God's sake, look!" Bart had reached the door and was pointing at the ground with shaking forefinger.

The entire clearing seemed to be alive with wriggling things—long rubbery tentacles that crawled along the ground, reaching curling ends high in the air and had even started climbing the trees at the edge of the clearing. Blood red they were, and partially transparent

in the light of the setting sun; growing things, attached by their thick ends to swelling mounds of red that seemed anchored to the ground. Translucent stalks rose from the mounds and sprouted huge buds that burst and blossomed into flaming flowers a foot in diameter, then withered and went to seed in a moment of time. But always the weaving tendrils shot forth with lightning speed, reaching and feeling their uncanny way along the ground and over tree stumps into the woods. One of them emerged from a hollow stump with its slender end coiled around the tiny body of a chattering gray squirrel.

"The moon flowers!" Van cried.

"What do you mean—moon flowers?"

"Dried seed pods. They came over into the bowl, and Kelly threw them out. Now look at the damned things. They're alive!"

Kelly's voice came to them once more from behind the barrier of rapidly growing vegetation. "Help!" he screeched. "I'll give back the diamonds—anything! Only get me away from the things!"

"Ought to let 'em get him," Van growled.

Bart shivered. "Too horrible, Van. Got an ax or anything?"

"There's a hatchet around back. Maybe we can—"

But the young broker had scuttled around the corner of the building and Van looked after him anxiously. The vile red tendrils were reaching for the east wall of the laboratory, and he saw that their inner surfaces were covered with tiny suckers like those on the arms of a devil-fish. Carnivorous plants, undoubtedly, these awful half-animal, half-vegetable things whose seed had been transported across a quarter million miles of space. Man eaters! Deadly, and growing with incredible speed. Even the short-lived flowers were fearsome, as they opened their scarlet pansy-like faces and stared a moment before they folded up and shriveled into the seed cases like those that had materialized in the crystal bowl.

Then he noticed that the pods were opening and spreading more of the terrible seed. Nothing could stop this weird growth, now. It would cover the country like a sea of flaming horror, overcoming and devouring every living thing. Cold fear clutched at Van as he realized the enormity of the calamity that had come to the earth.

Bart was skirting the edge of the clearing with the hatchet in his hand, and Van tried to call out to him, to warn him. But his voice caught in his throat, and instead he ran to his assistance, circling the spreading menace to get around behind where Kelly was still

shouting. Damn Kelly anyway! This never would have happened if he hadn't come on the scene!

Kelly was in the woods, wedged into the crotch of a tree and striking wildly at the clutching tendrils with his clubbed pistol. They mashed easily and dripping red, but were not to be deterred from their ghastly purpose. Kelly's time would have indeed been short had not his erstwhile victims come to the rescue. One of the thickest of the twining things encircled his body and had him pinned to the tree. His breath was coming in gasps as its tightening coils increased their pressure. His coarse features were livid and his eyes bulged from their sockets.

Bart hacked and hacked at the rubbery growth until he had him free; jerked him from his perch, blubbering and whining like a schoolboy. His shirt had been torn from his breast and they saw a great red welt where the blood had been drawn through the pores by those terrible suckers.

"Look out, Bart!" Van shouted.

Another of the creeping things had come through the underbrush and was wrapping its coils around Bart's ankle. Another and another wriggled through, and soon they were battling for their own freedom. Kelly staggered off into the woods and went crashing down the hill, leaving them to take care of themselves as best they might.

The stench of the viscous liquid that oozed from the injured tendrils was nauseous; it had something of a soporific effect; and the two friends found themselves fighting the terror in a growing mist of red that blinded and confused them. Then, miraculously, they were free and Van assisted Bart as they ran through the forest. When they reached the road, weak and out of breath, they were just in time to see Kelly's roadster vanish around the bend.

"Yeah, he'd give back the diamonds—the swine!" Van muttered vindictively. Then, shrugging his shoulders, "Well, they won't be much good to him, anyway. Wouldn't be any good to us either, as far as that goes."

"What do you mean? Aren't they real?" Bart was raising himself painfully into the seat of Van's car, his wounded leg suddenly very much in the way.

"Sure they're real. But don't you realize what this thing means—this

ungodly growth that's started?"

"Why—why, no. You mean it'll keep on growing?"

"And how! Those inner stalks drop a new batch of seeds every five minutes or so. Presto!—a flock of new plants spring up ten feet from the first; dozens of them for every pod that drops. You know how geometrical progression works out. They'll cover the whole country—the whole world. Lord!"

"Man alive, this is terrible! I hadn't thought of that before. What'll we do?"

"Yeah, that's the question: what can we do?" Van started his motor and jerked the car to the road. "First off, we're going to get away from here—fast!"

Bart gripped his arm as he shifted into second gear. "Look, Van!" he babbled. "They're out of the woods already. Loose! The red snakes are loose from their stalks. They're alive, I tell you!"

It was true. Several of the slimy red things were wriggling their way over the macadam like great earthworms, but moving with the speed of hurrying pedestrians. Free, and untrammeled by the roots and

stems of the mother plants, they had set forth on their own in the search for beings of flesh and blood to destroy. Millions of their kind would follow; billions!

In sudden panic Van stepped on the gas.

Fifteen minutes later, with shrieking siren, a motorcycle drew alongside and forced them to the curb. "Where's the fire?" the sarcastic voice of a stern-visaged officer demanded, when Van had brought his car to a screeching stop. Seventy-five, the speedometer had read but a moment before.

"It's life and death, officer," Van started to explain. "We must get to the proper officials to warn the—"

"Aw, tell it to the judge! Come on now, follow me."

"But officer, there's death on its way from the hills, I tell you. Red, creeping things that'll be here in a couple of hours—"

"Get away, from that wheel. I'll drive you in meself. You're fulla applejack."

Bart had opened the door on his side and was limping his way around the back of the car. This was serious. They had to get away;

had to spread the word in a way that would be believed before it was too late. The officer was tugging at Van's arm, astonishment and black rage showing in his weather-beaten countenance. Speeding, drunk, resisting an officer—they'd never get out of this mess! A swift uppercut interrupted the proceedings. Bart's leg was numb and stiff, but his good right arm was working smoothly and with all its old time precision. His second punch was a haymaker. With his full weight behind it, it drove straight to the chin and stretched the officer on the concrete. Thoughtfully, Bart removed his pistol from its holster before scrambling in at Van's side.

"Boy, now we're in for it!" he gasped.

"And we might as well make a good job while we're at it." Van let in his clutch with a jerk, and again they were breaking all traffic regulations.

It was dusk when they roared in through the gate at the Rockland County Airport and pulled up at the hangar office. Van rushed in, shouting for Bill Petersen, and Bart followed. A slender, fair-haired youth in rumpled flying togs greeted them.

"Bill, my friend, Bart Madison," Van blurted without pausing for breath. "Listen, we've got to have a plane right away. Got one with a

radio?"

"Yes, but what's all the rush? Where you going?"

"Albany. Right away. Make it snappy, will you?"

"Sure, but what's it all about?" Young Petersen was leading them to the field where a sleek mono-plane was in waiting as if they had ordered it. "Warm her up, Joe," he called to the mechanic.

"Listen, Bill—I never lied to you, did I?" Van asked, when they were seated in the plane's cabin.

"Not that I know of. But sometimes I've thought you were lying, until I saw with my own eyes the things you had told me about. What is it this time?"

"Death and destruction. Coming down out of the Ramapos. We've got to warn the country. Plants, Bill—squirmy red plants with long feelers that can twist around a man and devour him. Half animal, they are, and the feelers break loose and crawl by themselves. Multiplying like nothing you ever saw. Millions of them in an hour."

"What?" Petersen stared incredulously as his motor roared into life. Then he gave his attention to the business of taking off. He jerked

the thumb of his free hand toward the radio.

Van's expert fingers manipulated the switches and dials of the portable apparatus, and its vacuum tubes glowed into life. "2BXX calling 2TIM," he droned into the microphone.

"Who's that?" Bart asked. The drone of the motor was barely audible in the closed cabin and did not interfere.

"The Times. Trying to get Johnny Forbes. If anyone can get this thing across, he can. Wait a minute, here they are." He closed his eyes as he listened to the murmuring voice in the headphones.

Then he was talking rapidly, forcefully, and the young flyer gazed with owlish solemnity at Bart as they listened to his conversation. It was plain that Bill was but half inclined to believe, though impressed by the earnestness and evident apprehension displayed by his two passengers.

"Yes, 2BXX," Van was saying. "Connect me with Johnny Forbes, please—in a hurry. Yes.... Hello, Johnny, it's Van—Carl Vanderventer, you know. Yes; got a scoop for you, but first I want you to get it in the broadcasts. Get me? It's about a man-eating plant that's starting to overrun the country. No—listen now, I'm not

dreaming—listen—"

The frantic scientist rambled on and on about the seed from the moon, the red death that was creeping down from the mountains, the horror of the calamity as he and Bart had visioned it. Then, with a sudden note of despair, his voice trailed off into nothingness and he turned a drawn white face to his two friends.

"Laughed at me. Hung up on me," he groaned. "Good God! We've got to do something—quick!"

"Be in Albany in an hour," the pilot suggested. "What you going to do there?" He believed, now. His expression of horror showed it.

"See the governor. But, man, it's an hour wasted! We must stir up the country—get the word to Washington—everywhere. It might be possible to fight the things some way if we can mobilize State and National resources quickly enough. Bill, Bart, what can we do?"

The plane sped on through the night under control of her gyro-pilot as the three men racked their brains for a solution of the problem. If a hard-boiled newspaper man would not believe the story, who could?

"I've got it!" Bart shouted suddenly. "Can either of you pound a key—code, I mean?"

"Sure, I can. Then what?" Petersen returned.

"Fake an S. O. S. Don't you see? All broadcasting has to stop, and every ship at sea, every air liner in this part of the country'll be listening—standing by. Give 'em the story in code. Let 'em think we're in a ship from the moon—captured by Lunarians who are here to destroy the world with this weed of theirs—anything. Make it as weird as possible. Most everyone'll think it's a hoax, but there are ten thousand kids—amateurs—who'll be listening in. Somebody'll believe it, and, believe me, there'll be some investigating in the neighborhood of the growth in no time."

"By George, I believe that'll do it!" Van exclaimed. "And the broadcasters listen in for an S. O. S. themselves. Got to, you know, so they know when to start up again. Some smart announcer will tell the story—maybe even believe it. The trick will work, sure as shooting!"

The pilot glanced at his instruments and saw that the automatic gyro-apparatus was functioning properly. Then he moved over to the radio and threw the switch that put the key in circuit instead of the

microphone. Rapidly he ticked off the three dots, three dashes, and again three dots that spelled the dread danger signal of the air. Over and over he repeated the signal, and then he listened for results.

"It worked!" he gloated, after a moment. "They're all signing off—the broadcasters. The Navy Yard in Brooklyn gives me the go-ahead."

He pounded out the absurd message with swift fingers, pausing occasionally to ask a pertinent question of Van or Bart. At Van's request he added a warning to all residents of New York State west of the Hudson River and of northern New Jersey to flee their homes without delay. He even asked that the message be relayed to the governors of the two states, and that Governor Perkins of New York be advised that they were on their way to Albany to discuss the situation. But he balked at the story of the Lunarians, telling instead the equally strange truth regarding the origin of the deadly growth, and adding the names of Van and Bart to lend authenticity to the tale.

Then he signed off and switched the radio receiver to the loud speaker before returning to the pilot's seat.

Bart tuned in on the various broadcasters as they resumed their programs, finally settling on WOR, Newark, whose announcer was

reading the strange message to his radio public with appropriate comment. A crime and an outrage he called it, an affront to the industry and to the public. An insult to the government of the United States. But wait! A telephone call had just been received at the station from the village of Sloatesburg. A reputable citizen of that town had reported the red growth at the edge of the State road—huge red earthworms wriggling across the concrete. Another call, and another! The announcer's voice was rising hysterically.

"It did work, Bart," Van exulted. "Now the hell starts popping."

Governor Perkins met them in person when they arrived at the Municipal Airport in Albany. A great crowd had gathered in the shadows outside the brilliance of the flood lights, and a police escort rushed them to the governor's private car.

"Here's where you go to the Bastille for socking that cop," Van observed. His spirits had risen appreciably since that successful S. O. S. call.

But the governor was in a serious mood, as they made their way toward the executive mansion through the milling crowds that lined the hilly streets of the capital city of New York State. Proofs had not been lacking of the truth of Bill Petersen's radio warning. Already

the spreading red death had covered a circle some eight miles in diameter, covering farm lands and destroying the crops, blocking the roads and trapping many on the streets and in their homes in nearby towns. More than a hundred had lost their lives, and thousands were fleeing the threatened area. The country was in an uproar.

"Gentlemen," the governor said, when they had reached the privacy of his chambers, "this is a serious matter, and no time must be lost in dealing with it. Nevertheless, I want you, Mr. Vanderventer, to tell your story of the thing to me and to the radio system of the United States Secret Service. The President himself will be listening, as will the chief executives of most of the states. Hold nothing back, as the fate of our people is at stake."

So Van faced the microphone and related the history of his work in the little laboratory in the Ramapo Mountains. He told of his interest in the earth's satellite, and of his first unsuccessful experiments with ultra-telescopes in the endeavor to explore its surface close at hand; of the failure of a space-ship he had built; of the final discovery of the ray, by means of which it was possible to transport solid objects from the one body to the other. He told of the discovery of man-made relics and of fossils; he told of the diamonds, and of the attack by Dan Kelly which had resulted in the spreading of the seed of the deadly moon weed. He even related the incident of the traffic

policeman, at which the governor smiled.

"That has been reported," he said, "and you need have no fear on that score.—The charges will be dropped. I now ask that you give us your opinion as to the best method of combatting this new enemy. Have you any ideas?"

"I have not, sir," Van replied gloomily, "though I believe it can be done only from the air. Possibly bombing, or a gas of some sort—I don't know. It will take time, Mr. Governor."

"Yes, and meanwhile the thing is overwhelming us at what rate?"

"As nearly as I can estimate it, the growth is moving with a speed of four or five miles an hour."

"By morning you expect it will have traveled forty or fifty miles in all directions?"

"I'm afraid so."

A sharp buzz from the instrument on the governor's desk interrupted them. "The President," he whispered.

"That is enough, Governor," came the husky tones of President

Alford's voice. "I shall communicate with Secretary Makely at once. All available army bombing-planes will be rushed to the scene. You, sir, will mobilize the militia, as will the governors of the other states. Meanwhile, this young scientist is to report to the Bureau of Scientific Research in Washington—to-night. Have him bring a supply of these seeds with him."

That was all. Governor Perkins offered no comment, but merely rose from his seat to indicate that the discussion was ended. A solemn silence reigned in the room.

"Let's go!" exclaimed Bill Petersen suddenly, unawed by the presence of the governor. "My ship's waiting, and we can stop off for a couple of those pods and still make Washington in two hours. Come on!"

Governor Perkins smiled. "Good luck, boys," he said, as they were ushered from the room. "My car will return you to the airport. And remember, the country will be watching you now, and expecting much from you. Good-by."

They were to recall his words in the dark days ahead.

Before they had reached Newburgh, they saw a dull red glow in the

skies that told them the news broadcast to which they had been listening had not exaggerated. The red growth was luminous in darkness. Off there to the south-west, it was as if a vast forest fire were lighting the heavens. No wonder the panics and rioting were getting out of control of the police!

Coming up over Bear Mountain, they caught their first glimpse of the sea of fire that was the red death by night. Like a vast bed of glowing embers it covered the countryside, extending eastward to Haverstraw where it was temporarily halted by the broad Hudson. It was a shimmering, undulating mass of living, luminous things, eating their horrible way through all organic matter that stood in their path. Writhing, squirming, all-absorbing monsters that sent out an advance guard of independent snake-like tendrils to capture and hold for the lagging mother-plants whatever of live stock and humanity they were able to find.

"Think they'll get over the river, Van?" Bart asked.

"Sure they will. Every fugitive who had a narrow escape after being in contact with the things is a potential carrier of the seed. I found several of them sticking to my clothing after we got away. I picked a couple off your coat, but didn't tell you."

"Lord! What did you do with them?"

"Put them in the ash receiver in my car—like a fool. Wouldn't have to go down for more if I'd kept them."

"Well, it can't be helped now. We'll have a job getting some down there now, too."

"I'll say so." Van lapsed into gloomy silence.

They were over the landing field above Tomkins Cove, and Bill turned on the siren whose raucous shriek operated the mechanism of the floodlight switches by sound vibrations. The field sprang into instant illumination, and they circled it once before swooping to a landing. They were but a mile from the advancing terror.

The field was deserted, and the three men started off immediately in the direction of the oncoming weed.

"We'll have to make it snappy," Van grunted. "We've got about twelve minutes to get the pods and get back to the ship. The damn things'll be here by that time."

They scrambled over fences and pushed through thickets. The lighted windows of a deserted farmhouse were directly ahead, and

they ran through the open gate and across the fields. Ever, the glow of the weed grew brighter. A terrified horse galloped wildly past them and crashed into the fence, whinnying piteously as it went down with a broken leg. They could see the red rim of the advancing horror just beyond the road.

One of the detached tendrils slithered past, each glowing coil distinctly visible.

"Lucky the things can't see!" Bart shuddered.

"Yeah," said Van. "Have to dodge 'em to get in close enough to one of the plants. Keep your eyes peeled now, you fellows, in case one of us gets caught."

A terrific explosion rocked the ground. They had paid no heed to the roaring of motors overhead. The bombers were on the job! Shooting skyward, a column of flame not a hundred yards from them showed where the high explosive had landed in the red mass. Then, slimy wriggling things rained all about them, fragments of the red weed that still squirmed and crawled and clung. Bill Petersen yelled and clutched at his neck where one of the things had taken hold.

Another warning whistle of a falling bomb. Crash! More of the

horror raining down and splattering as it fell. Whistle—crash! A huge blob of quivering, luminous jelly fell before them—a portion of one of the mother-plants. Crash! Crash!

"Run!" Van shouted. "Run for the plane. We'll never make it now. Damn those bombers, anyway!"

All along the advancing front, the bombs were bursting, shattering the air with their detonations and scattering the glowing red stems and tendrils in all directions. The din was appalling, and the increasing brightness of the crimson glow added to the horror of the situation. Stumbling and cursing, they ran for the plane.

"Fools! Fools!" Bill was shouting. "Can't they see the field and the plane? Why in the devil are they dropping them so near?"

Then Bart was down, clawing at a three-foot length of red tendril that had fallen on him and borne him to the earth.

"Bart! Bart!" Van turned back and was tearing at the thing with fingers that were slippery with the sap that oozed from its torn skin. Monstrous earthworms! Cut them apart and each portion lived on, took on new vigor. And these vile things could sting like a jellyfish! Where each sucker touched the skin a burning sore remained.

Bill helped them break away from the thing, and all three fought on toward the lights of the landing field. Only a short way off now; it seemed they would never reach it. The bombers were dropping their missiles with unceasing regularity, and the red death only spread the faster.

When they scrambled into the cabin of the plane, the red wall of creeping horror was almost upon them. Advancing speedily out from the red-lit darkness, it seemed to halt momentarily, when it emerged into the brilliance of the great arc-lights which illuminated the field. Then, more slowly and with seemingly purposeful deliberation, the wriggling feelers reached out from the mass and bore down upon them. Bill slammed the door and latched it, then fumbled frantically with the starter switch. A most welcome sound was the answering roar of the motor.

The pilot yanked his ship into the air, taking off with the wind rather than running the risk of remaining on the ground long enough to taxi around and head into it. The plane acted like a frightened bird as Bill struggled with the controls, darting this way and that, and once missing a crash by inches as the tail was lifted by the treacherous ground wind. Then they were clear, and slowly gained altitude in a steep climb.

"Whew!" Van exclaimed, mopping his red-splattered forehead with his handkerchief. "That was a narrow squeak, boys. And we haven't got the seeds yet—unless we can find a few on our clothing."

"Who said so?" Bart gloated. "Look at this."

He opened his clenched fist and disclosed one of the pods, unbroken and gleaming horribly scarlet in the dim light of the cabin. Bill heaved a sigh of relief as he banked the ship and swung around toward the south. He had dreaded another landing near the sea of moon weed. Van chortled over their good fortune as he examined the mysterious pod. One good thing the bombers had done, anyway! Blew one of the things into his friend's hands.

Bart and the young pilot found themselves very much out of the picture when they reported with Van at the Research Building in Washington. The Government had no use for them in this emergency: it was the scientist they wanted, and he was immediately rushed into conference with the heads of the Bureau. His two friends were left to shift for themselves, and they joined the crowds in the street.

The name of Carl Vanderventer was on everyone's tongue. Cursing and reviling him, they were, for the hare-brained experiment which

had been the cause of the terrible disaster. Fools! Bart seethed with rage and nearly came to blows with a number of vociferous agitators who were advocating a necktie-party. Why hadn't the officials published the entire story as Van told it over the Secret Service radio? There was no mention of Dan Kelly in the broadcast news, nor of the fact that the police were searching for him in every city and town in the country. Another instance of the results of secrecy in governmental activities!

"We'd better find ourselves a room and turn in," Bart growled. "Let's get out of this mob before I slam somebody."

Bill Petersen was only too willing. He was suddenly very tired.

In the Willard Hotel they were assigned to an excellent room, and Bart insisted on switching on the broadcasts and listening to the news. Far into the night he sat by the loud-speaker, or paced the floor as an exceptionally calamitous happening was reported. But Bill slept through it all.

The army bombers had been recalled. Their efforts had worked more harm than good. The invincible moon weed now had crossed the Hudson River at Nyack and Piermont. Tarrytown was overrun, and many of the inhabitants had lost their lives either in the maws of the

insatiable monsters or in the panics and rioting that accompanied the evacuation of the town.

New Jersey was covered as far south as New Brunswick, and west to Phillipsburg and Belvidere. At Mauch Chunk the contents of twenty oil tanks had been diverted to the Delaware River, and the floating oil film was proving at least a temporary protection to a considerable portion of the state of Pennsylvania. In New York State the growth had buried hill and valley, town and village, as far as Monticello, and, along the Hudson, extended as far north as Kingston. At Poughkeepsie, on the opposite side of the river, frantic householders had armed themselves with rifles and shotguns, and were killing off all refugees who attempted to land from boats at that point. But the militia was on guard at the bridges, assuring safe crossing to the thousands who fled the red death over these routes. There was no keeping the seed of the moon weed from finding its way east.

At some points fire had been used with considerable success as a barrier, hundreds of acres of forest lands being destroyed in the endeavor to stem the crimson tide. But, after the ashes were cool, germination would recur, and the weed would continue on its triumphant way. Acid sprays and poison-gas of various kinds had been tried without appreciable effect. The casualty estimates already ran into the tens of thousands; rumor had it that nearly one hundred

thousand had lost their lives in the city of Newark alone. There was no way in which the figures could be checked while everything was in a state of confusion.

Communication lines were broken, roads blocked, gas and electric supply systems paralyzed and the railroads helpless. Trains could not be driven through the glutinous, wriggling mass that piled high on the tracks. Only the radio and the air lines were operative in the stricken area, and even these were of little value to the unfortunates who, in many cases, were surrounded and cut off from all hope of succor.

At four in the morning, with aching heart and reeling brain, Bart threw himself on the bed without undressing and fell into the troubled sleep of exhaustion and despair.

The next day brought no encouragement, though it was reported that the growth developed with less rapidity after sunrise than it had during the night. Bart endeavored to get Van on the telephone, but was curtly informed by the operator at the Research Building that no incoming calls could be transferred to the laboratory where he was working. Knowing his friend, he pictured him as working feverishly with the Government engineers and giving no thought to sleep or food. He'd kill himself, sure! But such a death, even, was preferable

to the red one of the moon weed.

The Canadians and Mexicans had been quick to protect their borders and forbid the landing of any American aircraft or the passage of trains and automobiles. But the seed had reached Europe, one of the twelve-hour night air-liners having carried a thousand refugees who had sufficient foresight and the means to engage passage. It was a world catastrophe they faced!

By mid-afternoon the streets of Washington were almost deserted. It was less than twenty-four hours since the first moon seed took root, and already the crimson growth had progressed nearly a hundred miles southward from the point of origin! Another twenty or thirty hours and it would reach the capital city—unless Van and those engineers over in the Research Building discovered something; a miracle.

Bart tried the telephone once more and was overjoyed when the operator, all apologies now, informed him that Van had been trying to reach him for several hours.

"Listen, old man," his friend's voice came over the wire: "I've been worried as the devil not knowing where you were. I want you and Bill to stick around where I can get you at any time. I may need you.

Where are you staying?"

"The Willard. Have you doped out something?" Bart answered in quick excitement.

"Maybe. Can't let anything out yet—not till we've tested it thoroughly. But I can tell you that a hundred factories are already working on machines we've devised. By good luck it only means minor changes to an apparatus that is on the market in large quantity."

"Great stuff. The city's nearly emptied itself, you know, and, boy, how they've been razzing you over the radio and in the papers—howling for your hide, the whole country."

"I know." Van's voice was calm, but Bart sensed in it something of a cold fury that was new to him in his friend. The young scientist was bitterly resentful of the attitude of the public.

"Can we see you, Van?"

"No, nor call me either. Better hang around the hotel and wait for a call from me. So long now, Bart. I've got to get busy."

"So long."

Bart gazed solemnly at Bill Petersen, who had been listening abstractedly to the one-sided conversation. Bill had given up hope and was resigned to the inevitable.

"Says he may need us, Bill," said Bart.

"Yeah? Well, we'll be ready for anything he wants us to do. It's no use though—anything."

"What do you mean—no use? You never saw Van licked yet, did you?"

"Sure I did. By his super-telescopes and the rocket ship."

"But this is different." Bart was a staunch defender of his friend. He glared at Bill for a moment and then switched on the news broadcast which he knew he detested.

The progress of the moon weed continued unabated. In the city of New York a million souls were reported as having lost their lives, and this in spite of the difficulty experienced by the uncanny moon weed in obtaining a foothold in Manhattan. It had been thought that the asphalt and concrete would prove an effective barrier, and so they did for a time. But, with the seed active in the parks and along

the water fronts, it was not long before the powerful roots of the greedy plants worked their way underneath, ripping up pavements and wriggling into cellars as they progressed. The city was a mass of wreckage and a maelstrom of fighting, dying humanity.

Whole regiments of the National Guard were wiped out as they fought off the weed with ax and bayonet, in the effort to provide time for the refugees to clear from their homes in certain localities. All transportation facilities to the south and west were taxed to the utmost. There was fighting and killing for the possession of automobiles and planes and for room in trains and buses. Air-line terminals and railroad stations were the scenes of dreadful massacres as the police and military guards fought off the crazed and desperate creatures who attacked them en masse. And still the news announcers prated of the responsibility of one Carl Vanderventer.

The telephone bell rang, and Bart answered it in relief. At last they were to see some action! But no, it was merely the desk clerk, notifying him that all employees were leaving the hotel and that they would be left to shift for themselves. Yes, there was plenty of food in the kitchens; they were welcome to it. And a permanent telephone connection would be made to their room. The frightened clerk wished them luck.

In endless monotone, the voice of the news announcer droned on. Binghamton and Elmira, Albany and Schenectady, New Haven, Philadelphia, Allentown—all had succumbed. The casualty estimates now ran into the millions. The mist, the red mist that rose from the steaming weed, was drifting westward and spreading the seed with ever increasing rapidity. For now the monstrous growth from out the sky was adapting itself to its environment; providing the seed with feathery tufts that permitted the winds to carry them far and wide like the seed of a dandelion.

"Turn off that damn thing!" Bill shouted. And he jumped to his feet, his eyes glinting strangely in the twilight gloom of the room. Bill was close to the breaking point.

"Guess you're right," Bart mumbled. "Not good for either of us to listen to that stuff." He switched off the receiver, and they sat in silence as darkness fell over the city.

Bill shivered and felt for the button of the electric light which he pressed with a trembling finger. They blinked in the sudden illumination, but it cheered them somewhat. It was not good to sit in the darkness and think. Besides, they knew that the turbine generators of Potomac Edison were still running. Some brave souls were sticking to their jobs—for a time, at least.

"God!" Bill suddenly groaned, after an endless time of dead silence. "My sister! Lives in Pittsburgh, you know. Wonder if she and the kids got away. It won't be long before the damn stuff gets there."

Bart thanked his lucky stars that he had no family ties. "Oh, they've had plenty of warning," he tried to console Bill. "Hours, you know; and the westbound lines are in good shape from there. I wouldn't worry about them if I were you."

There was utter silence once more. Even the customary street noises was lacking. Both men jumped nervously when the shrill siren of a police motorcycle sounded in the distance. Bart thought grimly of his fracas with the officer who had tried to arrest Van. How long ago that seemed, and how inconsequential an incident!

Their windows faced north, and by midnight they could make out the red glow of the moon weed, that awful band of flickering crimson that painted the horizon the color of blood. The telephone clamored for attention and Bill stifled a hysterical sob as the terrifying sound broke the eery stillness.

Van was on the way to get them! He had a Government car and they were to go to Arlington for Bill's plane. Then what? He refused to commit himself: they must follow him blindly. Anything was better

than this inactivity, though. Bart shouted with glee.

“We're going north," Van replied shortly, in answer to Bart's question when they entered the official car in front of the hotel, "after Dan Kelly."

"After Dan Kelly? Got a line on him?"

"Yes. Secret Service reports him in Toronto. The Canucks are after him now, but, by God, I'm going to get him myself!"

Van was haggard and wan, his eyes gleaming with a fanatical light. The strain had done something to him—something Bart didn't like at all. This was a different Van from the man who had entered his office two days previously. Unshaven and unkempt, he looked and talked like a drunken man on the verge of delirium tremens.

"What's the idea, Van?" he asked gently.

"I'm going to get him. I tell you. The scum! It's his fault the whole world's against me. I'll get him, Bart; I'll kill him with my bare hands!"

So that was it! The combination of gruelling labor in the effort to save mankind from the dread moon weed, and bitter censure from

the very people he was trying to save, had been too much for Van. He had developed a fixation, unreasoning and murderous; he'd get even with the man who had caused the trouble. And nothing could deter him from his purpose: Bart could see that. Might as well humor him and help him. It made little difference, anyway, with the red doom spreading at its present rate. They'd all be victims in a few days.

They were speeding through the streets of Washington at a break-neck rate. Van bent over the wheel, and like a demented man glued his wildly staring eyes to the road.

"What about your work?" Bart asked, after a while. "Has anything been accomplished?"

"Yes and no. They'll be ready to shoot in a few hours. Don't know whether it'll be a complete success or not. But I sneaked away anyhow. This other thing's more important to me right now."

"What's the dope? Can you tell us now?"

"Sure. I've got one of the machines in the car and I'll explain when we're on our way to Canada."

This wasn't like Van. Never secretive and always in good humor, he was treating his friends like annoying strangers.

"You can't land in Canada," Bill ventured, as they pulled up at the gate of the airport.

"Like hell I can't! You watch my smoke, and let any bloody Canuck up there try and stop me!"

He was lifting a small black case from the luggage carrier of the car as he replied. Bart silenced the airman with a look.

When they had taken off and were well under way, Van opened his black case and set a vacuum-tube apparatus in operation. They were nearing the fringe of the glowing sea of red that was the vast blanket of moon weed. It now extended to within a few miles of Baltimore and stretched northward as far as the eye could see.

"It was a cinch," Van was explaining. "When I first saw that the growth slowed up under the arc-lights at Tomkins Cove it gave me the glimmering of an idea. Then, on the following day, when we learned that the weed spread more slowly in sunlight, I was convinced. The stuff is dormant on the moon, you know."

"Why?" Bart asked breathlessly.

"Because there is no atmosphere surrounding the moon, and the sun's rays are not filtered before they reach its surface as they are here. The invisible rays, ultra-violet and such, are present in full proportion. And the moon weed can not flourish when subjected to light of the higher frequencies. It died out when the moon lost its atmosphere, and only revived on being brought to earth—probably a million times more prolific in our dense and damp atmosphere and rich soil. The thing's a cinch to dope out."

"Yeah!" Bart commented drily. Van was now talking and he could have bitten off his tongue for interrupting him.

This machine of Van's was a generator of invisible light in the ultra-indigo range, Van explained. You couldn't see its powerful beam, but they had proved in the laboratory that it was certain doom to the moon weed. They had grown the stuff from seed in steel cages, and played with it until they were all satisfied. Now would come the final test. Ten thousand planes were being equipped with the new generator, which was merely an adaptation of standard directional television transmitters, and to-night these would start out to fight the weed. It was a cinch!

Beneath them the red cauldron seethed and tossed as they sped northward; the crimson blanket of death that was steadily covering the country.

"Drop to a thousand feet, Bill," the scientist called, "and then watch below. But, don't slow down. We've got to get to Toronto!"

The ship nosed down and soon leveled off at the prescribed altitude. Van's vacuum tubes lighted to full brilliancy, and a black spot appeared on the glowing surface just beneath them, a black spot that extended into a streak as the plane continued on its way. They were cutting a swath of blackness fifty feet wide through the heart of the growth!

"See that!" Van gloated. "It's killing them by millions! And the best of it is the effect it leaves behind. The soil is permeated to a depth of several inches and the stuff will not germinate in the spots where the ray has contracted. Oh, it works to perfection!"

Bill was exuberant; his hopes revived miraculously. He gave his motor the gun and got out of it every last revolution that it could turn up. He must get Van to Canada! Not such a bad idea, this going after Kelly, at that!

Bart was voluble in his praise, then caught himself short as he remembered that he had doubted Van but a half hour previously: doubted him and despaired. Now Van, lapsing into gloomy silence after his triumph, was again thinking of nothing but revenge. The getting of Dan Kelly meant more to him now than the extinction of the moon weed.

When they landed at the Toronto Airport they were welcomed with open arms instead of with rifle fire as Bill had anticipated. The news had gone forth. Already a thousand planes flying over the United States were driving back the sea of destruction. The invisible ray was a success, and the name of Carl Vanderventer was now a thing with which to conjure, rather than one on which to heap imprecation and insult. Van grimaced wryly at this last bit of news.

Danny Kelly? No one at the airport had ever heard of him. Van telephoned in to the city; to Police Headquarters. Yes, they had apprehended the fugitive American at the request of Washington, but he was a slippery customer. He had escaped. Van raged and fumed.

Of what use were the congratulations of the night flyers who still loitered in the hangar; of what consolation the radio reports of the success of the ultra-indigo ray in the States and in Europe? He had come after his man and he'd failed. Defeat was a bitter pill.

The news broadcasts from the States were jubilant and became increasingly so during the night. The moon weed was being driven back on a wide front and by morning would be entirely surrounded. There would be no further loss of life and little more destruction of property. Carl Vanderventer had saved the day! Van grunted his disgust whenever an announcer mentioned his name.

When daylight came they prepared to return. Little use there was of searching the highways and byways of Canada for the fugitive. He'd simply have to wait until the Canadians were able to get a line on Dan Kelly again.—It was maddening! But Bart was glad. The light of reason was returning to his friend's eyes in the reaction.

Then there was a telephone call from the city for Van. Police Headquarters wanted him. The fanatical glint returned to his eyes when he ran for the hangar to answer the call. Perhaps they had already captured Kelly! And he had an order in his pocket for the man's return to the States. He'd been made a deputy, and with Kelly released to him anything might happen. Something would happen.

But the police were reporting the unexplainable reappearance of the moon weed just outside the city limits at a point near Cookesville. Would Mr. Vanderventer be so kind as to fly over there and destroy it before any lives were lost? He would.

The growth had covered an acre of ground by the time they reached the spot designated. But it was the work of only a minute to blast it out of existence with the ultra-indigo ray. Van surveyed the blackened and shriveled mass with satisfaction.

"Let's land and take a look at it," he said.

Bart thought he saw a look of exultation flash over his careworn features.

Soon they were wading deep in the blackened remains of the moon weed. The stems and tendrils snapped and crumbled into powder as they passed through. The stuff was done for, no question of that.

Bill Petersen yelled and pointed a shaking forefinger at an object that lay in the blackened ruin. It was a human skeleton, the bones bare of flesh and gleaming white in the light of the early morning sun. Van was on his knees, quick as a flash, feeling around the grewsome thing: pawing at the shreds of clothing that remained.

Then he was on his feet, his face shining with unholy glee. In his hands were a half dozen small, smooth objects which looked like pebbles. The diamonds!

"I thought so!" he exclaimed. "It's Kelly. Only way the seed could have gotten up here. He had some on his clothes and didn't know it. I couldn't get him myself—but anyway I'm satisfied."

He staggered and would have fallen, had not Bart caught him in his arms. Poor old Van! Nearly killed him, this thing had, but he'd be himself again, after it was all over. No wonder he'd gone out of his head with the horror of it, and the blame that had been so cruelly laid on him! No wonder he'd become obsessed with this idea of getting square with Dan Kelly! But now he was content: sleeping like a babe in Bart's arms.

Tenderly they carried him to the plane and laid him out on the cushions in back. They'd let him sleep as long as he could; return him to Washington where he'd receive his just dues in recognition for his services. Then would follow the work of reconstruction and rehabilitation. Van would glory in that.

Bart regarded his sleeping friend thoughtfully as they winged their swift way toward the American border. The harsh lines that had showed in his face during the past few hours were smoothed away and in their place was an expression of deep contentment. He was at peace with the world once more. Good old Van.

What a difference there would be when he awakened to full realization of the changed order of things! What satisfaction and relief!

102 The Port of Missing Planes by Sterner St. Paul Meek

In the underground caverns of the Selom, Dr. Bird once again locks wills with the subversive genius, Saranoff.

Aproximate word count: 10,200

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

So that's the "Port of Missing Planes," mused Dick Purdy as he looked down over the side of his cockpit. "It looks wild and desolate all right, but at that I can't fancy a bus cracking up here and not being found pronto. Gosh, Wilder cracked in the wildest part of Arizona and he was found in a week."

The mail plane droned monotonously on through perfect flying weather. Purdy continued to study the ground. Recently transferred from a western run, he was getting his first glimpse of that section of ill repute. Below him stretched a desolate, almost uninhabited stretch of country. By looking back he could see Bellefonte a few miles behind him, but Philipsburg, the next spot marked on his map, was not yet visible. Twelve hundred feet below him ran a silver line of

water which his map told him was Little Moshannon Run. As he watched he suddenly realized that the ground was not slipping by under him as rapidly as it should. He glanced at his air-speed meter.

"What the dickens?" he cried in surprise. For an hour his speed had remained almost constant at one hundred miles an hour. Without apparent cause it had dropped to forty, less than flying speed. He realized that he was falling. A glance at his altimeter confirmed the impression. The needle had dropped four hundred feet and was slowly moving toward sea-level.

With an exclamation of alarm, Purdy advanced his throttle until the three motors of his plane roared at full capacity. For a moment his air-speed picked up, but the gain was only momentary. As he watched, the meter dropped to zero, although the propellers still whirled at top speed. His altimeter showed that he was gradually losing elevation.

He stood up and looked over the side of his plane. The ground below him was stationary as far as forward progress was concerned, but it was slowly rising to meet him. He fumbled at the release ring of his parachute but another glance at the ground made him hesitate. It was not more than three hundred feet below him.

"I must be dreaming!" he cried. The ground was no longer stationary. For some unexplained reason he was going backward. The motors were still roaring at top speed. Purdy dropped back into his seat in the cockpit. With his ailerons set for maximum lift he coaxed every possible revolution from his laboring motors. For several minutes he strained at the controls before he cast a quick glance over the side. His backward speed had accelerated and the ground was less than fifty feet below him. It was too close for a parachute jump.

"As slow as I'm falling, I won't crack much, anyway," he consoled himself. He reached for his switch and the roar of the motors died away in silence. The plane gave a sickening lurch backwards and down for an instant. Purdy again leaned over the side. He was no longer going either forward or back but was sinking slowly down. He looked at the ground directly under him. A cry of horror came from his lips. He sat back mopping his brow. Another glance over the side brought an expression of terror to his white face and he reached for the heavy automatic pistol which hung by the side of the control seat.

“He cleared Bellefonte at nine in the morning, Dr. Bird" said Inspector Dolan of the Post Office Department, "and headed toward Philipsburg. He never arrived. By ten we were alarmed and by eleven we had planes out searching for him. They reported nothing.

He must have come to grief within a rather restricted area, so we sent search parties out at once. That was two weeks ago yesterday. No trace of either him or his plane has been found."

"The flying conditions were good?"

"Perfect. Also, Purdy is above suspicion. He has been flying the mail on the western runs for three years. This is his first accident. He was carrying nothing of unusual value."

"Are there any local conditions unfavorable to flying?"

"None at all. It is much uninhabited country, but there is no reason why it shouldn't be safe country to fly over."

"There are some damnably unfavorable local conditions, Doctor, although I can't tell you what they are," broke in Operative Carnes of the United States Secret Service. "Dick Purdy was rather more than an acquaintance of mine. After he was lost I looked into the record of that section a little. It is known among aviators as 'The Port of Missing Planes.'"

"How did it get a name like that?"

"From the number of unexplained and unexplainable accidents that

happen right there. Dugan of the air mail, was lost there last May. They found the mailbags where he had dropped them before he crashed, but they never found a trace of him or his plane."

"They didn't?"

"Not a trace. The same thing happened when Mayfield cracked in August. He made a jump and broke his neck in landing. He was found all right, but his ship wasn't. Trierson of the army, dropped there and his plane was never found. Neither was he. He was seen to go down in a forced landing. He was flying last in a formation. As soon as he went down the other ships turned back and circled over the ground where he should have fallen. They saw nothing. Search parties found no trace of either him or his ship. Those are the best known cases, but I have heard rumors of several private ships which have gone down in that district and have never been seen or heard of since."

Dr. Bird sat forward with a glitter in his piercing black eyes. Carnes gave a grunt of satisfaction. He knew the meaning of that glitter. The Doctor's interest had been fully aroused.

"Inspector Dolan," said Dr. Bird sharply, "why didn't you tell me those things?"

"Well, Doctor, we don't like to talk about mail wrecks any more than we have to. Of course, the loss of so many planes in one area is merely a coincidence. Probably the wrecked planes were stolen as souvenirs. Such things happen, you know."

"Fiddlesticks!" said Dr. Bird sharply. He raised one long slender hand with beautifully modeled tapering fingers and threw back his unruly mop of black hair. His square, almost rugged jaw, protruded and the glitter in his eyes grew in intensity. "No souvenir hunting vandals could cart away whole planes without leaving a trace. In that case, what became of the bodies? No, Inspector, this has gone beyond the range of coincidence. There is some mystery here and it needs looking into. Fortunately, my work at the Bureau of Standards is in such shape that I can safely leave it. I intend to devote my entire time to clearing this matter up. The ramifications may run deeper than either you or I suspect. Please have all of your records dealing with plane disappearances or wrecks in that locality sent to my office at once."

The Post Office inspector stiffened.

"Of course, Dr. Bird," he said formally, "we are very glad to hear any suggestion that you may care to offer. When it comes, however, to a matter of surrendering control of a Post Office matter to the

Department of Commerce or to the Treasury Department, I doubt the propriety. Our records are confidential ones and are not open to everyone who is curious. I will inform the proper authorities of your desire to help, but I doubt seriously if they will avail themselves of your offer."

Dr. Bird's black eyes shot fire. "Idiot!" he said. "If you're a specimen of the Post Office Department, I'll have the entire case taken out of your hands. Do you mean to cooperate with me or not?"

"I fail to see what interest the Bureau of Standards can have in the affair."

"The Bureau isn't mixed up in it; Dr. Bird is. If necessary, I will go direct to the President. Oh, thunder! What's the use of talking to you? Who's your chief?"

"Chief Inspector Watkins is in charge of all investigations."

"Carnes, get him on the telephone. Tell him we are taking charge of the investigation. If he balks, have Bolton go over his head. Then get the chief of the Air Corps on the wire and arrange for an army plane to-morrow. There is something more than a mail robbery back of this or I'm badly fooled."

"Do you suspect—"

"I suspect nothing and no one, Carnes—yet! I'll get a few instruments together to take with us to-morrow. We'll fly over that section until something happens if it takes us until this time next year."

A three-seated scout plane rose from Langley Field at eight the next morning. Captain Garland was at the controls. In the rear cockpit sat Dr. Bird and Carnes. Inside his flying helmet, the doctor wore a pair of headphones which were connected to a box on the floor before him. Carnes carried no apparatus but his hand rested carelessly on the grip of a machine-gun.

The plane cleared Bellefonte at nine-thirty and bore east toward Philipsburg. Captain Garland kept his eyes on his instrument board and on a map. Less than six hundred feet above the ground, he was following the air-mail route as exactly as possible. Overhead a mail plane winged its way east, three thousand feet above them.

Fifteen minutes brought them to Philipsburg. Captain Garland shot his plane upward a few hundred feet.

"Turn back, Captain," said Dr. Bird into the speaking tube. "Retrace

your course a quarter of a mile farther north. At Bellefonte, turn back and go over the same ground another quarter of a mile north. Keep flying back and forth, working your way north, until I tell you to stop."

The plane swung around and headed back toward Bellefonte.

"Of course, we can't tell exactly what route he followed," said the doctor to Carnes, "but he was new on this run and it is safe to assume that he didn't stray far. We'll quarter the whole area before we stop."

Carnes watched the ground below them carefully. There was nothing about it to distinguish it from any other wooded mountainous country and his interest waned. He glanced aloft. The mail plane had disappeared in the distance and the sky was clear of aircraft. He turned again to the ground. It looked closer than it had before. He turned and looked at the duplicate altimeter. The plane had lost nearly a hundred feet elevation.

“There's something wrong about this plane, Doctor," came Captain Garland's voice through the speaking tube. "It doesn't behave like it should."

"I guess we've found what we were looking for, Carnes," said Dr. Bird grimly. "What seems to be the matter, Captain?"

"Blessed if I know," was the answer. "It feels like a drag of some sort, like an automobile going through heavy sand. We're slowing down, though I am giving her all the gun I've got!"

"Cut your motor!" said the doctor shortly. He bent over the duplicate instrument board as the roar of the motor died away. Carnes rose and looked over the side.

"Look, Doctor!" he cried in a strained voice. Directly below them yawned a hole sixty feet in diameter and extending down into the bowels of the earth. The plane hovered over the hole for a moment and then slowly descended into it.

"What is it?" cried the detective.

"It's the secret of the Port of Missing Planes," replied Dr. Bird. "Throw off your parachute. Keep your gun and light handy but don't fire unless I do first. The same holds good for you, Captain."

The plane sunk until it was fifty feet below the level of the ground. Carnes looked up. Gradually the circle of sky became blurred and

hazy as though the air were heavy with dust. The rasp of Dr. Bird's flashlight key aroused him and he hastily wound his own. The haze above them grew thicker. Suddenly the light died and then came darkness, a darkness so thick and absolute that it bore down on them like a weight. Dr. Bird's light stabbed a path through it.

They were in a tunnel or tube reaching into the ground. The sides were smooth and polished, as though water worn. The plane sank deeper and deeper into the earth. Suddenly Dr. Bird's light went out.

"What's the matter, Doctor?" asked Carnes, "did your light fail?"

"No," came a strained voice. "I turned it out."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Light yours."

Carnes reached into his pocket. Dr. Bird could hear his breath come in panting sobs as though he were exerting his whole strength.

"I can't do it, Doctor," he gasped. "I want to, but some power greater than my will prevents me."

"Are you affected, Captain?" asked the Doctor.

"I—can't—move," came in muffled accents from the front cockpit.

"Some power beyond my knowledge has us in its grasp," said the doctor. "All we can do is sit tight and see what happens. We are no longer falling at any rate."

From the forward cockpit came a rustling sound. There was a slight jar in the ship, and it gave as though a weight had been applied to one side.

"What are you doing, Garland?" asked the doctor sharply.

There was no reply. Again came the rustling sound. The ship gave a sudden lurch as though a weight had left the side. Carnes suddenly spoke.

"Good-by, Doctor," he said. "I'm going over the side."

"I have been fighting it but I'm going myself in a minute," replied the doctor grimly. "Something is pulling me over. It's the same power that keeps me from turning on my light."

"It's perfectly safe to go over," said Carnes suddenly. "The plane is resting on a solid base."

"I have the same feeling. Catch hold of my belt and let's go."

They climbed over the side of the plane and dropped to the ground. Their descent made absolutely no sound. Dr. Bird stopped and felt the floor.

"Crepe rubber, or something of the sort," he murmured. "At any rate, it's noise and vibration proof."

"Now what?" asked Carnes.

"This way," replied the doctor confidently. "I'm beginning to get the hang of understanding this. The way is perfectly level and open before us. Keep your hand on my shoulder and step right out."

"How do you know where we're going?"

"I don't, but something tells me that the road is level and open. It is the same thing that brought us over the side. I can't explain it but it is some sort of a telepathic control exerted by an intelligence. Whether the sending mind is reinforced by instruments I don't know, but I rather fancy not."

"Where is Garland?"

"He went off in another direction. I could feel the power that guided him although it was not directed at us. Something tells me that he is safe for the present."

For half a mile they made their way through the darkness before they stopped. This time Carnes could plainly understand the command which came to both of them.

"There is a table before us," said Dr. Bird. "Lay your flashlight and pistol on it."

Carnes struggled against the order but the power guiding him was stronger than his will. He strove to turn on his light. When he could not, he tried to cock his pistol. With a sigh, he laid his gun and light on the table before him. Without words, the two men walked forward a few feet and sat confidently down on a bench that something told them was there.

For a moment they sat quietly. A cry, choked in the middle, came from the detective's throat. Cold clammy hands touched his face. He strove again to cry out, but his voice was paralyzed. The hands went methodically over his body, evidently searching for weapons. Mustering up his will, Carnes made a grab for one of them. His captor apparently had no objection to the detective's action for

Carnes seized the hand without effort. But he almost dropped it. The hand was as large as a ham. He reached for the other hand but could not locate it. A movement on the part of his captor brought it to him and he made the startling discovery that the palms were directed outward. The hand had only four fingers, which were armed with long curved claws instead of nails. Carnes ran his hand up the palm to search for a thumb but found none. He found, however, that, while the hands were naked, the wrists were covered with short thick fur.

"Doctor!" he cried, "there's—"

Again came the overpowering will and his speech died away in silence. He sat dumb and motionless while his captor moved over to Dr. Bird. A second animal came forward and felt the detective over. He was not allowed to move this time, nor was he while a third and fourth animal went carefully over him. The four drew back some distance.

"Doctor," whispered Carnes as the influence grew fainter.

"Shh!" was the answer, and as the doctor's demand for silence was reinforced by another wave of the paralyzing power, Carnes had no choice. As he sat there silent, the power which held him again seemed to grow less. He found that he could move his arms slightly.

He edged forward to get his gun and light. Before he reached them, a beam of light split the darkness. Dr. Bird stood, electric torch in hand, staring before him.

At a distance of a few feet stood a group of half a dozen animals about the height of a man as they stood erect on their short hind legs. They were covered with heavy brown fur. Their lower limbs were thin and light, but their shoulders and forelegs were heavy and powerful. Their forepaws, which had the palms facing outward, were armed with the long wicked claws he had felt. No visible ears protruded from the round skulls. Their heads appeared to rest between their shoulders, so short were their necks. Their muzzles were long and obtusely pointed. Through grinning jaws could be seen powerful white teeth.

"Talpidae!" cried Dr. Bird. "Carnes, they are a race of giant intellectual moles!"

Despite the fact that they had no visible eyes, the creatures were strongly affected by the light. They dropped on all fours and turned their backs to the scientist and the detective. Two of them scurried away down a long tunnel which opened from the room in which they stood. Dr. Bird turned his light up and swept the room. It was roughly circular, a hundred feet in diameter, with a roof ten feet

high. Dozens of tunnels led off in every direction.

"Your light, Carnes, quick!" cried the doctor in a strained voice. Carnes reached toward the table for his light. Before he could reach it he was frozen into immobility. From the corner of his eye he could watch the doctor. Dr. Bird was struggling to bring the light back on the moles which stood before them. Great beads of sweat stood out on his forehead. Inch by inch he moved the light closer to his goal, but Carnes could see that his thumb was stealing up toward the switch button. His breath came in sobs. Suddenly the light went out.

For some time the two men sat motionless on the bench unable to speak or move. One of the moles stepped before them and gave a mental command. The two rose to their feet. For a mile or more they followed their guide, then, at a silent command, they turned to the right for a few steps and stopped. In another moment, the numbing influence had departed.

"Are you all right, Carnes?"

"Yes, right as can be. Doctor, what were those things? Where are we? What's it all about?"

"We'll find out in time, I guess," replied the doctor with a chuckle.

"Carnes, isn't this the darnedest thing we've ever been through? Captured half a mile underground by a race of giant talpidae before whose mental orders we are as helpless as children. Did you understand any of their talk?"

"Talk? I didn't hear any."

"Well, mental conversation then. They made no sound."

"No. All I understood was the orders I obeyed."

I got a great deal of it," the doctor said. "We are evidently in or near a sort of central community of these fellows. They spoke; thought is a better word; they thought of doing away with us but decided to wait until they consulted someone with more authority. You see, we are not airplane pilots. Captain Garland was taken at once to the place where they have other aviators imprisoned."

"What do they want of pilots underground?"

"I couldn't quite get that. There was another thought that I am not sure that I interpreted correctly. If I did, there is some man of the upper world down here in a position of considerable authority among them. He has some use for pilots, but what use, I don't know.

We are to be held until he is consulted."

"Who could it be?"

"I can only think of one man. Carnes, and I hope I'm wrong. I don't have to name him."

"You mean—?"

"Ivan Saranoff. We haven't heard of him or had any activity from him for the last eight months. We know that he had a subterranean borer with which he has penetrated deep into the earth. Isn't it possible that he has, at some time in his explorations, come into contact with these fellows and made friends with them?"

"It's possible, Doctor, but I hoped we had killed him when we destroyed his borer."

"So did I, but he seems to bear a charmed life. Several times we have thought him dead, only to have him show up with some new form of devil's work. It is too much to hope that we have succeeded in doing away with him. Did you notice one thing? Those fellows were helpless while I held the light on them. The one which was holding us captive got so interested in the discussion about our fate that he

momentarily forgot us. That was when I got my light. Until I turned the light away from them, we were free men."

“That's right," answered the secret service man.

"Remember that. The next time we get a light on a bunch of them, hold them in the beam until we can make terms."

"If we ever get hold of a light again."

"I have a light they didn't get, probably because I didn't think of it while they were around. It is one of those fountain pen battery affairs and they probably took it for a pen. I won't turn it on now, partly to save it and partly not to let them know we have it. Let's see what our prison is like."

They felt their way around the room. It proved to be eight paces by ten in size. Like the tunnels it was floored with crepe rubber or some similar substance which gave out no sound of footsteps, yet was firm underfoot. The room was furnished with two beds, a table and two chairs. There was no sign of a door.

"That's that," exclaimed the doctor when they had finished their exploration. "I'm hungry. I wonder when we eat. Hello, here comes

one of the fellows now."

Carnes made no reply. As the doctor's speech ended, a wave of mental power enveloped the room. One of the moles entered, moved over to the table for an instant and then left the room. An earthly odor of vegetables pervaded the room.

"My question is answered," said the doctor. "We eat now."

He moved to the table. On it had been placed dishes containing three different types of roots. Two of them proved to be palatable, but the third was woody and bitter. The prisoners made a hearty meal from the two they relished. For an hour they sat waiting.

"Here they come again!" exclaimed the doctor. "We are going before the person I spoke of. Can't you get their thoughts?"

"No, I can't, Doctor. I can understand when I get a command, but aside from those times everything is a blank to me."

"My mental wave receiver, if that's what it is, must be attuned to a different frequency than yours, for I can hear them talking to one another. I guess I should say that I can feel them thinking to one another. At any rate, they want us to follow. Come along, the road

will be open and level."

The doctor stepped out confidently with Carnes at his heels. For half a mile they went forward. Presently they halted.

"We are in a big chamber here, Carnes," whispered the doctor, "and there is someone before us. We'll have some light in a minute."

His prophecy was soon fulfilled. A vague glimmer of light began to fill the cavern in which they stood. As it grew stronger they could see a raised dais before them on which were seated three figures. Two of them were the giant moles. Each of the moles wore a helmet which covered his head completely, with no sign of lenses or other means of vision. It was the central figure, however, which held the attention of the prisoners.

Seated on a chair and regarding, them with an expression of sardonic amusement was a man. Above a high forehead rose a thin scrub of white hair. Keen brown eyes peered at them from under almost hairless brows. The nose was high bridged and aquiline and went well with his prominent cheekbones. His mouth was a mere gash below his nose, framed by thin bloodless lips. The lips were curled in a sneer, revealing yellow teeth. The whole expression of the face was one of revolting cruelty.

"So," said the figure slowly, "fate has been kind to me. My friends, Dr. Bird and Operative Carnes have chosen to pay me a long visit. I am greatly flattered."

The thin metallic voice with its noticeable accent struck a familiar chord.

"Saranoff!" gasped Carnes.

"Yes, Mr. Carnes, Saranoff. Professor Ivan Saranoff, of the faculty of St. Petersburg once. Now merely Saranoff, the scourge of the bourgeois."

“I hoped we had killed you," murmured Carnes.

"It was no fault of Dr. Bird's that he failed," replied the Russian with an excess of malevolence in his voice. "His method was a correct one. Merely the fortuitous fact that we had just pierced one of the tunnels of the Selom, and I was away from my borer exploring it, saved me. You did me a good turn, Doctor, without meaning to. You destroyed an instrument on which I had relied. In doing so, you unwittingly delivered into my hands a power greater than any I had dreamed of—the Selom."

"What can a mental cripple like you do with blind allies like them?" asked Dr. Bird with a contemptuous laugh. The Russian half rose from his seat in rage. For a moment his hand toyed with a switch before him. The sardonic sneer came back into his face and he dropped back into his seat.

"You nearly provoked me to destroy you, Doctor," he said, "but cold calculation saved you. Since you will never return to the upper world, save when and as I decree, I have no objection to telling you. The Selom are not blind. Their eyes are under the skin as is the case with many of the talpidae, but for all that they can see very well. Their eyes function on a shorter wave than ours, a wave so short that it readily penetrates through miles of earth and rock. This cavern is now flooded with it. Visible light, the light by which we see, is limited to their eyes, hence the helmets which you see. They can see through those helmets as well as you or I can see through air."

"What do you intend to do with us?"

"Ah, Doctor, there you hit me in a tender spot. I have a sore temptation to close this switch on which my hand rests. Were I to do so, both you and Mr. Carnes would vanish forevermore. I have, however, conceived a very real affection for you two. Your brains, Doctor, working in my behalf instead of against me would render me

well-nigh omnipotent. Mr. Carnes has a certain low cunning which I can also use to advantage. Both of you will join me."

“You might as well close your switch and save your breath, Saranoff, for we will do nothing of the sort," replied the doctor sharply.

"Ah, but you will. So will Mr. Carnes. I had no hopes that you would join me willingly. In fact, I am pleased that you do not. I could never trust you. All the same, you will join my forces as have the others whom I have brought into the hands of the Selom. I have ways of accomplishing my desires. It pleases my fancy, Doctor, to use your brains in aiding me in my scientific developments. You will enjoy working with the scientists of the Selom. Among them you will find brains which excel any to be found on the surface of the earth, since we two are below. Already I have learned much from them. You, Mr. Carnes shall be taught to pilot an airplane. When my cohorts go forth from the realms of the Selom to establish the rule of Russia, you will be piloting one of the planes. Your first task will be to learn to fly."

"I refuse to do anything of the sort!" said Carnes.

"I will not be ready to have your flying lessons started until to-morrow," replied the Russian, "and you will have until then to reconsider your rash decision. It will be much easier for you if you

obey my orders. If you still refuse to-morrow, you will pay a visit to the laboratory of the Selom. When you return your lessons will be started. You will now be taken to your cell. I have use for Dr. Bird this afternoon."

"I won't leave Dr. Bird and that's flat!" exclaimed Carnes. Dr. Bird interrupted him.

"Go ahead, Carnesy, old dear," he said lightly. "You might just as well toddle along under your own power as to be dragged along. You have a day for reflection, in any event. I daresay I'll see you again before they do anything to you."

Carnes glanced keenly at the doctor's face. What he saw evidently reassured him for he turned without a word and walked away. The light grew gradually dimmer until darkness again reigned in the cavern.

"Come, Doctor," said Saranoff's voice. "We have work to do."

Carnes sat alone in his cell for hours. The darkness and loneliness wore on him until he felt that his nerves would crack. Not a sound came to him. He threw himself on one of the beds and plugged his ears with his finger tips in an attempt to keep the silence out. Then a

cheerful voice sounded in the cell and a friendly hand fell on his shoulder.

"Well, Carnesy, old dear," said Dr. Bird, "have you been lonesome?"

"Dr. Bird!" gasped Carnes in tones of relief. "Are you all right?"

"Right as can be. I learned a lot this afternoon. For one thing, you're going to start flying lessons to-morrow and you're going to do your best to become an expert pilot in a short time. It is the only thing to do."

"And fly a plane for Saranoff?"

"I hope not. The only way to avoid that very thing is to keep your mentality unimpaired so that I can call on you for help when I need it. If the Selom operate on you, you will be useless to me."

"Operate? What do you mean?"

"I'll tell you. The Selom are a very old and highly civilized people. For ages they have possessed scientific knowledge for which the upper-world scientists are now blindly groping. Among other things, they have a perfect knowledge of the workings of the brain. If they operate they will remove from your brain every speck of memory

you have of past events, leaving only those things that will be useful to Saranoff. You will be his complete slave. In that condition you will be taught to fly a plane. When the time comes, you will fly one with no remembrance of anything which happened prior to the operation and with no will but his. It will be easier to teach you flying in your natural state if you are willing. You will be willing."

"If you wish it, Doctor."

“I do wish it, most decidedly," Dr. Bird went on. "Obey every order they give you. You will find that the Selom are an enlightened and civilized race. They are very kindly and would willingly harm no one."

"Then why have they taken up with Saranoff?"

"He is the first man with whom they have come into contact. He has told them a horrible tale of conditions on the surface, and they have swallowed it, hook, line and sinker. They believe that he is going to establish a new order of happiness and plenty for all with the aid of his gang of cutthroats from Russia. If they had the slightest inkling of the true state of affairs, they would turn on him in an instant."

"Why don't you tell them?"

"Remember that I am a stranger here and he has poisoned their minds against me. Although the mind of an ordinary men is an open book to them, they cannot read Saranoff's secret thoughts against his will. They can't read mine either, for that matter. I am working in the laboratory and I will pick up a great deal. When the time comes, we will strike for our liberty and for the safety of the world."

"Did you learn Saranoff's plans?"

"Yes. He is gathering planes and pilots in the underground caverns of the Selom. When he gets enough, he will bring men from Russia to man the planes. What could the United States, or the world for that matter, do against a fleet of hundreds, possibly thousands, of the best planes equipped with deadly weapons unknown to their science? That menace confronts us and we must remove it. To give you some idea of the power of the Selom, this afternoon Saranoff and I with one assistant opened a cavern in the solid rock three miles long and a mile wide and over six hundred feet in height."

"Three men! How on earth did you do it?"

"Two men and one mole. We did it with a ray, the secret of which only the Selom and Saranoff know."

“You have told me a disintegrating ray is an impossibility," objected Carnes.

"It is. This was not a disintegrating ray. Carnes, either I am crazy or the Selom have solved the secret of time, the fourth dimension. I haven't been able to grasp the whole thing yet. What I think we did was to remove that rock a distance, perhaps only a millionth of a second, forward or back into time. At any rate it ceased to exist, yet they can bring it back unchanged at will. That was the way they captured our plane. They sent out a magnetic ray of such power that it stopped our plane in midair and brought it to the ground. They removed the rock from beneath us and lowered us into the hole. By reversing the process they restored things to their original condition. All of these tunnels and rooms were made in that way."

"I still don't understand how they did it."

"I don't either, but I hope to in time. Now let's go to bed. It's late. Tomorrow you will start your lessons with Captain Garland as an instructor. He won't know you for he was operated on this afternoon. Do your best to become a pilot. When I get ready, I want you with me in full possession of all your faculties."

The next morning the two prisoners separated and went to their

duties. In the cavern which Dr. Bird had described, Captain Garland was waiting beside the plane he had flown. He did not know Carnes, but he still knew how to fly. Declining to enter into any conversation, he started expounding the theory of flying to the detective. Carnes remembered Dr. Bird's words and applied himself wholeheartedly. For four hours they worked together. At the end of that time the light faded in the cavern and Carnes was led by an unseen guide back to his cell. He threw himself on a bed and awaited Dr. Bird's return.

"I have learned a few more things about the Selom," said the doctor when he entered the cell several hours later. "We are in their largest community. They have cities or warrens scattered all over the world. Each city has its own ruler, but the whole race are ruled by an overlord or king who habitually lives here. He is away visiting a community under northern Africa just now, but he will be back in a few days. The Selom are sincere in their desire to help the upper world. They feel great pity for mankind in view of the conditions Saranoff has described to them. When the king returns. I plan to make a direct appeal to him. In the meantime, go on with your flying lessons. How did you make out to-day?"

The second day was a repetition of the first, as were the third and fourth. A week passed before Dr. Bird entered the cell in evident

excitement.

"Has Hanac brought our evening food yet?" he asked anxiously.

"No, Doctor."

"Good. Take this light. As soon as he enters throw the light full on him and hold him until I work on him. We've got to make our escape."

"Why?"

"The king is due back to-morrow. Saranoff is frightened at the good impression I have made on the Selom. He is supreme in the monarch's absence, so he plans to operate on both of us before he returns. He is afraid to allow me to see the king with an unimpaired intellect and memory. Shh! Here comes Hanac." The door to their cell opened noiselessly. When the mole who brought their food was well inside, Carnes turned on the tiny flashlight. The mole dropped on all fours and tried to turn its back. Dr. Bird sprang forward. For an instant his slim muscular fingers worked on the mole's neck and shoulders. Silently the animal sank in a heap.

"Come on, Carnes," cried the doctor. "Turn off the light."

"Did you kill him, Doctor?" asked Carnes as he raced down a pitch dark corridor at the scientist's heels.

"No, I merely paralyzed him temporarily. He'll be all right in a day or so. Turn here."

For ten minutes they ran down corridor after corridor. Carnes soon lost all track of direction, but Dr. Bird never hesitated. Presently he slowed down to a walk.

"It's a good thing I have a good memory," he said. "I planned that course out from a map, and I had to memorize every turn and distance of it. We are now behind your flying hall and away from any of the regular dwellings of the Selom. Straight west about four miles is one of the time-ray machines with a guard over it. Aside from them, there isn't a mole between here and Detroit."

"What are we going to do, Doctor?"

"Keep out of their way and avoid recapture if we can. If we merely wanted to escape we would try to get possession of that time-ray machine and open a road to the surface. However, I am not content with that. I want to stay underground until Astok, their king, returns. When he comes, we will surrender to him."

"Suppose they operate without giving us a chance to present our side of the affair."

"If they do, Saranoff wins; but they won't. The more I have seen of the Selom, the more impressed I am by their sense of justice. They'll give us a hearing, all right, and a fair one."

For two hours the doctor led the way. At the end of that time he stopped.

"We've gone as far as we need to," he said. "They'll undoubtedly send out searching parties, but if we can avoid thinking they won't be able to find us. The tunnels are a perfect labyrinth. If you care to sleep, go to it. We'll be safer sleeping than awake, for we won't be sending out thoughts so fast."

Dr. Bird threw himself down on the rubber floor of the tunnel and was soon asleep. Carnes tried to follow his example, but sleep would not come to him. Frantically he tried to think of nothing. By an effort he would sit for a few minutes with his mind a conscious blank, but thoughts would throng in in spite of him. Time and again he brought himself up with a jerk and forced his mind to become a blank. The hours passed slowly. Carnes grew cramped from long immobility and rose. A sudden thought intruded itself into his mind. "I might as

well throw that light away," he murmured to himself. "It will be no good now. The Selom won't hurt us if they do catch us."

He reached in his pocket for the light. He was about to hurl it from him when a moment of sanity came to him. He stared about. The impulse to hurl the light away came stronger. He strove in vain to turn it on.

"Doctor!" he cried suddenly. "Wake up! They're after us!"

With a bound, Dr. Bird was on his feet.

"The light!" he cried. "Where is it?"

"In—my—hand," murmured Carnes with stiffening lips.

Dr. Bird seized the light. A beam stabbed the darkness. Less than fifty feet from them stood two moles. As the light flashed on Carnes regained control of himself.

"Take the light, Carnes," snapped the doctor. "I've got to put these fellows to sleep."

Slowly he advanced toward the motionless Selom. He had almost reached them when the light flickered out. He turned and raced at

full speed toward the detective. Carnes was standing rigid and motionless. Dr. Bird took the light from his hand. Despite the almost overpowering drag on his mind, he managed to turn it on. He swung the beam around in a circle. Besides the two Selom he had seen before, the light revealed a pair standing behind him. As the light struck them, the numbing influence vanished for an instant from the doctor's mind. He moved a step forward and then halted. The moles behind him were hurling waves of mental power at him. Again the light cleared him for an instant, but he got a brief glance of other moles hurrying from every direction.

"The jig's up, I guess," he muttered. He strove to free himself by the use of his light, but the tiny battery had done its duty, and gradually the light grew dimmer. The influence grew too strong for him. With a sigh he shut off the feeble ray and hurled the light from him. The moles closed in.

"All right," said the doctor audibly. "We'll go peaceably."

As he spoke the paralyzing power was withdrawn. With Carnes at his side he retraced the route he had taken from the cell. Before they reached it they turned off. Dr. Bird realized that they were treading the familiar path to the laboratory.

Outside the laboratory the Selom halted. A wave of mental power enveloped the prisoners and they remained silent and motionless while their escort withdrew. From the laboratory came three of the Selom scientists. As the laboratory door opened they could see that it was bathed in a flood of light, and that the moles wore helmets covering their heads. They moved inside. Clad in a white gown stood Saranoff.

"So, my friends, you would run away and leave me, would you?" gloated the Russian. "And just when I had planned a very beneficial operation for you! I will remove permanently from your brains all the delusions which now encumber them, and for your own puny wills I will substitute my own."

The power which had held the prisoners silent disappeared.

"You have caught us, Saranoff," said Dr. Bird. "I know the power you wield and that you are making no idle boast. I appeal, however, to these others, my friends. The operation you are planning to perform is not a routine one. It is one that should have the sanction of the king before it is done. I appeal from you to him."

"He is far away," laughed Saranoff. "When he returns, your plea will be presented to him, but it will be too late to do you any good. You

are right, Doctor—I do not plan a mere routine operation. Not only will I remove your memory, but I'm going to use the time-ray on you and banish forever into the unknown a portion of your brains. Without knowing which adjustment I make of the infinite number possible, no one, not even the king, can ever recall it."

Dr. Bird turned to the Selom scientists and hurled his thoughts at them.

"This man intends to commit a horrible crime," he thought, "and one which he has no authority to perform. To you I appeal for justice. Bid him wait until Astok returns, and let him be the judge as to whether it shall be done. Jumor, you know me well. You know that my brain is the equal of one of the Selom. Even you cannot read my thoughts against my will. Are you willing to see that brain destroyed? Astok will be here soon and nothing will be lost by a short delay."

"He thinks truly," was the answering thought of Jumor. "It would be better to wait."

"We will not wait," crashed Saranoff's thought into their consciousness. "He killed Hanac when he escaped, and his punishment shall be as I have decreed. Did not the king give me full

power while he was away?"

"It is true that he ordered us to obey this man in all things dealing with upper-world men," thought Jumor. "If it is true that he killed Hanac his punishment is doubtless just."

"I did not kill Hanac," returned the doctor. "He is paralyzed and will be all right in a few hours, if he isn't already. I demand that you wait until Astok returns. When an appeal is made to him, no other may judge. So says the Selom law."

"That is true," replied Jumor. "We will wait until the king returns."

"We will not wait," came Saranoff's thought. "The king delegated to me his powers during his absence, as far as all the world, save the Selom, were concerned. Were it one of the Selom appealing to the king, I would be powerless before the appeal. These are not bound by Selom law and are not entitled to its benefits. We will operate at once."

"Then you will operate alone," retorted Jumor. "I will not assist you."

"I need none of your help," thought Saranoff. "Asmo and Camol,

will you help me? If you refuse I will report to Astok that you have disobeyed and defied his chosen delegate."

"We had better assist him, Jumor," thought Asmo. "Astok did delegate his authority. I am not of the nobility and I dare not refuse to help."

"Suit yourself, Asmo," replied Jumor. "I refuse to assist, and will appeal to Astok against him."

The third mole hesitated.

"You are higher in rank than we are, Jumor," he thought at length, "and like Asmo, I dare not resist him. I heard the king give this upper-earth man his authority while he was away. I will assist."

"And I will leave the room," retorted Jumor.

He moved to a door and threw it open. At the threshold he paused and sent back a final thought.

"I will appeal to Astok, our ruler. I will send now a message to him to hurry home that he may judge between us.”

The door closed behind him. Saranoff chuckled audibly.

"Good-by, Carnes," said Dr. Bird sadly. "This devil can do all he says he can, and more. I'm sorry I brought you and Garland into this mess."

"Oh, well, it can't be helped, Doctor," replied the detective with an attempt at cheerfulness. "What is he going to do to us?"

"He'll have to use instruments for what he plans," said the doctor. "Ordinarily a routine mental operation is performed without the use of extraneous power. The mind of the operator is electrically connected to the mind of the victim. By means of thought waves the operator banishes from the mind of the subject such portions of his memory and mentality as he chooses. He may then substitute other things in place of what he has removed. Any of the Selom could operate on you, but I doubt whether Jumor himself could do it successfully on me without aid from power. Here come the instruments."

Asmo and Camol took from a cabinet on the side of the wall what looked like a cloth helmet. Attached to it were a dozen wires which they connected to a box on a table. The box was made of crystal and inside it could be seen a number of vacuum tubes and coils of various designs. Other leads ran to a similar helmet which Asmo placed on Saranoff's head. A heavy cable ran to a switch on the wall.

As Camol closed the switch the tubes in the box began to glow with weird lights. Violet, green and orange streamers of light came from them to dance in wild patterns on the laboratory walls. For five minutes Saranoff made adjustments to dials on the front of the crystal box. The colored lights died away and a gentle golden glow came from the apparatus. He threw off the helmet.

Camol left the laboratory and returned with a large coil on the top of which was mounted a parabolic reflector. A device like a clock on the front of the coil was constantly marking the passage of time. The dial had two indicators which were together. Saranoff chuckled.

"You may not have seen this device work, Doctor," he said. "In order to let you know what you are facing, I will demonstrate."

He turned the reflector so that it bore on the wall. He adjusted the moving dial so that the two indicators were no longer together. As he closed a switch, the wall before the reflector vanished. Saranoff turned off the power.

"That portion of the wall has gone back in time exactly three seconds," he announced. "As far as the present is concerned, it has ceased to exist. It is following us through time three seconds behind us, but in all eternity it will never catch up unless I aid it. Since the

exact time is known, it can be restored. If I were to alter this adjustment ever so little, it could never be recalled. Watch me."

He again closed the switch, this time in a reverse direction. The wall instantly filled up as it had been before. He moved the time dial so that the two indicators coincided.

"After I have sent a portion of your physical brain into the past or the future as the fancy strikes me, I will change the adjustment of that dial. Since there are an infinite number of adjustments to which I might have set it, the chances that any one could ever duplicate my setting and restore it are the complement of infinity, or zero," he said. "I am now ready to remove your memory. If the impossible should happen and your physical brain be restored it would be useless. Asmo, adjust the helmet. I will operate on my friend, the Doctor, first."

Carnes strove to rush to Dr. Bird's assistance, but he was helpless before the force of Camol's will. Asmo adjusted the helmet to Dr. Bird's head and buckled it firmly in place. With an evil grin, Saranoff donned the other helmet.

"Good-by, Dr. Bird," he said mockingly. "You will continue to see me, but you won't know me, except as your master."

His hand reached for the switch. It had almost closed on it when Saranoff stopped convulsively. He sat motionless while the laboratory door opened and Jumor entered the room. He was followed by another mole. The newcomer was fully six inches taller than the others. His head was hidden by a helmet, but around his arms he wore strings of sparkling jewels.

"Ivan Saranoff, what means this?" his powerful thoughts dominated the room.

"I was merely engaged in rectifying some of the mental errors of this man of the upper earth," explained the Russian eagerly. "It is merely a routine operation such as you gave me authority to perform."

"An operation which uses power is not routine," replied the king. "I am told that this upper-earth man has a brain equal to those of my most advanced scientist. I am also told that you planned to do more than rectify his mental errors."

"You have been falsely informed. I was merely about to adjust his memory."

"Then what means this?" The king pointed to the time-ray machine.

"That was brought here in order that it could be used when you returned," thought the Russian eagerly. "This upper-earth man killed Hanac when he brought him food."

The door opened and Hanac entered.

"Oh, Astok," objected Hanac's thoughts, "when these upper-earth men had me at their mercy, with a light, they spared me. They paralyzed me for a time so that they might escape but they did it in such a manner that no harm came to me."

"So Jumor told me," replied the king. "Release them."

In an instant Carnes was on his feet removing the helmet from Dr. Bird's head. The doctor struggled to his feet.

"Dr. Bird," thought the king, "can you communicate with me easily?"

"Yes, Your Majesty, but may I ask that you alter the vibration period of my comrade, Mr. Carnes? He cannot understand you with his present low period."

The king stepped to the box with which Saranoff had been working. In response to his commands the helmet which had been on Dr. Bird's head was placed on the detective. The king made a few adjustments to the dials and signalled for the helmet to be removed.

"Can you understand me, Mr. Carnes?" he asked mentally.

The question leaped with startling clearness into the detective's head. Carefully he framed his answer.

"I can understand you," said the king. "I will now sit in judgment on the appeal made to me. Dr. Bird tell me your story."

With eloquent thoughts, Dr. Bird poured forth the history of the upper world. He told of the great war and the collapse of the Russian monarchy. He traced history to the fall of the moderate party and the rise of the Bolsheviki. He described the horrible conditions existing in Russia. At the end he reviewed the long battle he and Carnes had fought against Saranoff. When he had finished, the king questioned Carnes.

The detective repeated the story in different words and the king turned to Saranoff. From the Russian's mind came a tissue of distorted facts and downright lies. He denied or twisted around

everything that the detective and the scientist had said. When he had done with his tale, Astok sat in secret thought for a few minutes.

"The tales you tell me are so far apart that I can give credence to none of them," he announced at length. "There is but one solution. Although they are never used, for the Selom have forgotten the meaning of a falsehood, we have instruments which will drag the truth from the brain of a liar. They are powerful and their use may easily be fatal. If a man gives forth the contents of his brain willingly, the process is not painful. If he tries to conceal anything, it is torture. Will you willingly submit your brains to the searching of this instrument?"

"Gladly," came Dr. Bird's thought and Carnes reechoed it.

"And you, Ivan Saranoff?" demanded the king.

"I will not submit," thought the Russian sullenly.

"You will be examined whether you submit willingly or not," replied Astok. "I am going to learn the truth though I kill you all to get it."

At the king's order, Jumor hastened from the laboratory. He returned in a few minutes with an apparatus similar to the one which Saranoff

had planned to use on Dr. Bird, but larger, and with more dials on the crystal box. At a command from the king, Dr. Bird donned the helmet.

The king manipulated switches and dials. Around Dr. Bird's head glowed a halo of crimson light. Twice an expression of momentary pain passed over his countenance. After half an hour, Astok cut on the power and nodded to Carnes.

"Don't try to hold anything back, Carnesy," said Dr. Bird sharply. "You couldn't if you tried, and the process is very painful, I can assure you."

With the helmet on his head the detective sat for ten minutes while the Selom king went through his brain. A dozen times he shrieked in agony but his moments of suffering were short. The king removed the helmet.

"Your minds agree well," he thought. "Now I will examine the mind of my friend."

The helmet was strapped on Saranoff. Instantly an expression of the utmost anguish crossed his face. Shriek after shriek of agony came from his writhing lips. Relentlessly the king applied more power.

The cries of the Russian grew heartrending. Suddenly he grew rigid and slumped forward in his chair. Astok impassively manipulated his instrument. After half an hour, he opened the switch and removed the helmet. Under the ministrations of Jumor the Russian revived. The king sat in secret thought for an hour.

"I have examined the brains of all of you," he announced at length, "and I find hopeless contradictions. Each of you believes thoroughly in his own social order. Both tell me of hopeless misery on the part of a large portion of his people. Both tell of horrible wars and suffering beyond my comprehension. The thoughts of all of you teem with modes of bringing death to your fellow beings. Your entire science his been perverted to the ends of destruction. Nothing of the sort can be realized by the Selom where truth, justice and mercy prevail. Each of you holds that his form of government is better than the other, and will cause less suffering and misery than the others'. None of you hold out hope of happiness for your fellow beings. I do not know which system is less obnoxious. My decision is made. The Selom will not interfere in the affairs of the upper-earth. You may fight out your battles without aid and without interference.

"I will operate on both Ivan Saranoff and Dr. Bird. I will remove from their minds all knowledge of our science and instruments and leave them in the same condition that they were when they entered

my realms. Each of you will then be returned to upper-earth, Ivan Saranoff to Russia, Dr. Bird and Mr. Carnes to the United States. The pilots, whom I hold prisoners, will have their mentalities restored and be returned to their homes. The planes we have captured, I will send off into time so that they can never be used for the misery of upper-earth men again. Jumor, you will carry out these orders."

“I wish I could remember how that time machine was built and operated," said Dr. Bird reflectively, as he sat in his private laboratory in the Bureau of Standards some time later, "but Jumor did his work well. I can't even remember what the thing looked like."

"Well, Doctor, our trip below wasn't a loss. We removed a very real menace to the established order of things and we have got rid of Saranoff temporarily. It will take him some time to return here from Russia."

"Three weeks or less," said Dr. Bird pessimistically. "However, we have gained one other thing. Did you notice this?"

He pulled what looked like a watch from his pocket. Carnes regarded it with a puzzled expression.

"No, Doctor, what is it?"

"It is a very small camera which takes pictures one-half inch by seven-eighths. I had several opportunities to use it. I wasn't sure that it would work on such short waves, but it did. When Saranoff tries to return to this country, he will find that every immigration inspector and every member of the border patrol has an excellent likeness of him. That may hinder his entrance into the country for a little while."

September 1931

103 The Copper-Clad World by Harl Vincent

summary goes here

Aproximate word count: 26,400

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Chapter 1:Into the Unknown

A drift in space! Blaine Carson worked frantically at the controls, his jaw set in grim lines and his eyes narrowed to anxious slits as he peered into the diamond-studded ebon of the heavens. A million miles astern he knew the red disk of the planet Mars was receding rapidly into the blackness. And the RX8 was streaking into the outer void at a terrific pace—out of control.

Something had warned him when they left Earth; the Martian cargo of k-metal was of enormous value and a direct invitation to piracy. Of course there was the attempt at secrecy and the shippers had sent along those guards. His engineer, Tom Farley, was thoroughly reliable, too. But this failure of the control rocket-tubes, missing

their destination as a result—there was something queer about it.

"Tommy," he called into the mike. "Find anything yet?"

"We-e-ll, something," the audio-phone drawled after a moment: "I'm coming up."

"What is it, Tom?" he asked when the engineer's round face appeared at the head of the engine room companionway.

Farley dropped his voice and his customary smile was gone. "I found the stern rocket-tube ignition jammed so it's firing continuously," he said; "and the others are all dead: won't fire at all. That's why she doesn't swing to the controls?"

"Can't you fix it? Lord, man, we're headed out into the belt of planetoids. We'll be wrecked."

"Nothing I can do, Blaine, without shutting down the atomic engines. Then we'd freeze to death and run out of oxygen. These ships ought to have a spare engine just to take care of the heating and air conditioning. I always said so."

"What happened to the ignition system?"

Tom Farley looked over his shoulder apprehensively. "Dirty work, Blaine," he whispered. "I'm sure of it. Tool marks on the breech of the stern tube. And there's one of those guards I don't like the looks of."

"Nonsense. The k-metal people know their men; they picked these three especially for the job."

"Who else could do it? There's only the five of us on board."

There might be something in what Tommy said, at that. A thing like this couldn't just happen by itself. And, come to think of it, one of those guards was a queer looking bird: dwarfed and hunch-backed, sort of, and with long dangling arms. It would be better to investigate.

"Get 'em up here, Tommy," Blaine said.

The RX8 drove on and on through the uncharted wastes outside the orbit of Mars. None of the space ships of the inner planets ever ventured out this far, and Blaine knew there was grave danger of colliding with some of the small bodies with which the zone was infested. If one of those guards was the traitor he was risking his own neck as well as theirs.

Two of them entered the control room with Tom Farley, big, husky fellows of stolid countenance and armed with regulation flame-ray pistols and gas grenades.

"Where's the other, the dwarf?" Blaine asked, his suspicions mounting immediately.

"In his bunk," Tom replied with a meaning look. "He said he'd be up in a few minutes."

The pilot-commander addressed the guards. "Fellows," he said, "I suppose you know we're in a serious fix. The ship is out of control and we've missed Mars, where your metal was to be delivered. We're speeding out into the unknown, out past the limits of space-travel toward the orbits of Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus—God knows where. And my engineer thinks that one of your number has tampered with the machinery. Know anything about it?" Blaine eyed them keenly.

One of the guards, Mahoney, flushed hotly. "No, sir," he snapped. "At least Kelly and meself had nothin' to do with it. But we've been suspicionin' that little Antazzo ever since we came out. It's a peculiar way he has about him, the divil."

"You think he—"

An incisive voice from the doorway way interrupted, "Never mind what he thinks, Carson. I'll do the thinking from now on."

At one man they turned to face the speaker. It was the guard, Antazzo, and he was clothed from neck to ankles in a garment of bright metallic stuff that shimmered with shifting colors like those of a soap bubble. A mask of similar stuff covered his face, and in each hand there was a weapon resembling a ray pistol but of strangely unfamiliar design.

Mahoney shot from the hip and his stabbing ray splashed full on the hunchback's chest—but harmlessly. That lustrous garment was an insulating armor; the traitorous guard should have been shriveled to a cinder at the contact. Antazzo laughed evilly as his own weapons loosed strange and terrible energies.

Tom Farley ducked, and Blaine watched in horrified amazement as the crackling streamers of blue radiance from the dwarf's pistols found their marks. Mahoney and Kelly, standing there, bathed for a brief instant in horrid blue fire: tottering, swaying, their mouths opened wide in a last agonized effort, to cry out. Tiny pinpoints of brilliant pyrotechnics flashing and exploding within the columns of blue fire. Then, nothing! Where the two husky guards had stood there was utter emptiness; not even a shred of clothing remained.

The air in the control room became heavy and acrid.

"Antazzo!" White-faced and shaking, Blaine cried out in futile protest, "My God, man, what have you done? What does this mean?"

And then, in a blaze of rage, he was on his feet. Murder was in his heart as he set himself for a crashing charge that would sweep the beast from his feet. His own flame-pistol was missing; it was a case of killing this monster with his bare hands. Tom was circling, over there, cursing horribly. One of them would get him. Strangely, Antazzo had lowered the muzzles of his pistols.

A terrific punch, started from the floor, never reached its mark. Blaine saw a tiny puff of pinkish vapor that spurted from the bosom of that metallic garment. He was coughing and gasping; helpless. Muscles refused to do his bidding. With a moan he dropped into the pilot's seat, knowing that Antazzo's will compelled him. That gas had hypnotic powers. Mechanically, his fingers strayed to the controls.

And Tom—good old Tommy—he was under the influence of the stuff too, creeping there on hands and knees toward the engine room companionway.

Antazzo was talking. "We come now to the matter of instructions,"

he said. "You, Farley, will assist me in restoring the ignition system to normal. You, Carson, will keep to the controls and will lay a course to Jupiter as soon as the control rocket-tubes will respond. Understand?"

Tom growled reluctant assent from where he was crawling.

Strange, this hypnotic gas! Blaine's mind functioned clearly enough, yet he was utterly at the mercy of this madman's will—a robot of flesh and blood. "Jupiter!" he exclaimed. "Why man, it's nearly a half billion miles from the sun. Not habitable, either."

Antazzo had removed his mask and now smiled a superior smile. "We'll reach it," he said: "the RX8 is very fast. And it's not the planet itself we're bound for, but its second satellite. Io, your astronomers call this body, and it's a world sadly in need of this marvelous k-metal."

"But—but—"

"Enough!" The hunchback snarled his rebuke in Blaine's face and turned to Tom. "Come, Farley," he said, as if talking to a child, "we must get to work."

In a daze of conflicting emotions, Blaine turned to gaze through the forward port when the two had left the control room. The RX8 was accelerating rapidly under the steady discharge of gases from the stern rocket-tube and had already reached the speed of one thousand miles a second. If one of those tiny asteroids, even one no larger than a marble, should meet up with them it would crash through the hull plates as if they were paper. His heart went cold at the thought.

Oddly enough, he found himself wanting to make this trip with the demoniac Antazzo. It was the effects of the pink gas. Even with the misshapen guard down there in the engine room the power of his will was effective. The devil must be an Ionian, he thought. But how in the name of the sky-lane imps had he reached Earth? How had he wormed his way into the confidence of the k-metal people? He must have been there several years, working to this very end.

There was a tinkling crash on the starboard side amidships; a screaming swish as something slithered along the side and caromed off into the void. One of those little planetoids. Probably no bigger than a pea, and luckily they had struck it glancingly. He wiped the sudden perspiration from his forehead.

Pressure on the directive rocket controls brought no response. Would they never finish with that ignition system?

A gleaming light-fleck segregated itself from the mass of stars ahead. At first he thought he imagined it, but a second examination, this time through the telescope, convinced him it was growing larger. Drawing nearer, it was, and resolving itself into a well defined orb that was directly in their path. Fifteen hundred miles a second, the indicator read now! They'd never know what happened when they struck.

"Tommy!" he bellowed into the mike. "Are you fellows ever going to finish down there?"

There was no reply for a moment, and the blue-white globe drove madly toward them. He consulted the chart. Pallas—an asteroid some three hundred miles in diameter. Not very big as celestial bodies go, but big enough!

"Just one minute now." It was Tommy's voice coming drearily, unnaturally through the audiophone. A minute! Ninety thousand miles! It seemed the asteroid was that close already.

Antazzo was in the control room then, and the effect of his mental dominance became more pronounced. Suddenly the dwarf let out a shriek of terror when he looked through the port and saw the brilliant body that now loomed so close. Blaine experienced a savage joy in

the knowledge that the hunchback was mortally afraid.

"Latza! Latza!" In his fear Antazzo lapsed into his own tongue. Then, remembering, he shouted, "We're ready, Carson. Swing wide!"

The directive rockets answered to their controls now. Quick pressure on this, a swift pull on that, swinging the energy value to maximum, brought results. The little vessel groaned and shivered under the strain as a full blast from the forward tubes retarded them. Her hull plates twisted and screeched as the steering tubes belched full energy in swinging them from their course. They were thrown forward violently, though the deceleration compensators were working to the utmost.

Pallas swung around in their field of vision, and there was a fleeting glimpse of sun-lit spires of mountains, shadowed valleys, and mysterious crevasses from which clouds of steam and yellow vapor curled. Still it seemed they must crash against one of those slender pinnacles. Nearer it came like a flash; a dizzying blur, now, that drove directly in their straining faces.

And then, abruptly, it was gone. Already thousands of miles astern, the danger was past. Miraculously, they had escaped.

Antazzo laughed; a hollow mirthless cackle. His fingers shook crazily when he untwisted them from their grip on the port rail.

"Good work, my friend. Very good, indeed," he jabbered, his chin quivering in nervous reaction. "And now we carry on—on to Io."

Blaine Carson, almost wishing they had collided with the spire, set himself grimly to the task. He was powerless to refuse.

Chapter 2: The Second Satellite

When, eventually, they swung into the orbit of Jupiter and headed in toward the enormous red-belted body, the two Earth men were heartily disgusted with the voyage and with themselves. Repeated doses of the pink gas—the ignominy of their utter subservience to the will of Antazzo—had worn them down no less than had the hard work and loss of sleep. Both were in vile humor. They endured the triumphant chatter of their captor in bitter silence.

"Over there, my friends," he said, pointing; "see? It is our destination. The golden crescent, Io, is something over a quarter million of your miles from the mother planet. See it? It is home, my friends; home to me and for yourselves in the future—if the Zara spares your lives. Lay your course to the body, Carson."

Blaine growled as he sighted through the telescope. Yet, in spite of his fury, he could not overcome the feeling of excitement that came to him when the powerful glass brought the satellite near. This body was like nothing else in the heavens. Antazzo had called it the golden crescent. Rather, it was of gleaming coppery hue, and now, as they swung around, it was fully illuminated—a brilliant sphere of unbroken contour. Smoothly globular, there was not one projection or indentation to indicate the existence of land or sea, mountain or

valley, on its surface. It was like a ball of solid copper, scintillant there in the weak sunlight and the reflected light from its great mother planet.

Antazzo laughed over his absorption. "Looks peculiar to you, does it not?" he asked; "rather different from any of the bodies you have visited, you are thinking."

Blaine grunted wordless assent. The globe that was Io rushed in to meet them, growing ever larger in the field of the telescope. Now it appeared that there were tiny seams in the smooth surface, a regular criss-cross pattern of fine lines that looked like—Lord, yes, that was it! The body was constructed from an infinite number of copper plates, riveted or brazed together to form a perfect sphere.

"Why, the thing's made of copper!" Blaine gasped. "Copper plates. It's a man-made world; artificial. But where are the inhabitants?"

Antazzo laughed uproariously. "Not man-made, my friend," he corrected, "but preserved by man for his own salvation. A dying world, it was, and the cleverest scientists in the universe saved it and themselves from certain death. What you see is merely a shell of copper, the covering they constructed to retain an atmosphere and make continuation of life possible—inside."

"Your people live inside that shell?" Blaine was incredulous.

"What else? We must have air to breathe and warmth for our bodies. How else could we have retained it?"

It was staggering, this revelation. The young pilot could not conceive of a completely enclosed world with inhabitants forever shut off from the light of the sun by day and from the beauties of the heavens by night. Yet here it was, drawing ever nearer, a colossal monument to the ingenuity and handiwork of a highly intelligent civilization who had labored probably for centuries to preserve their kind. A titanic task! Who could imagine a sphere of metal more than twenty-four hundred miles in diameter enclosing a world and its peoples? A copper-clad world!

They were coming in close now, and the gravitational pull of the body made itself felt. Blaine was busy with the controls, sending tremendous blasts from the forward rocket-tubes to retard their speed for a safe landing. The incredibly smooth copper surface was just beneath them, stretching miles away to the horizon in all directions.

The inductor compass was functioning. Evidently Io possessed as strong a magnetic field as did the inner planets. Antazzo now consulted a chart which he drew from his pocket, and examined

minutely the surface over which they were speeding. Here and there curious designs were etched on the copper plates, and it was from these he determined their course. Obviously there was an entrance to this sealed-in world.

When they had proceeded some two thousand miles in a northeasterly direction Antazzo gave the order to reduce speed. Off at the horizon there appeared a bulge in the copper surface, a round protuberance that resolved itself into a great dome-shaped structure as they drew nearer. A full two hundred feet it reared itself into the heavens, and Blaine saw a number of large circular hatches in its side that evidently covered air-locked entrances.

"You will land close by the dome, Carson," Antazzo barked, "and both of you will get into your moon-suits."

At his tone Blaine saw red. He realized on the instant that the effect of the pink gas had worn off and that he was his own master once more. All the pent-up emotions of the past few days were unleashed. If only he could get in one good punch. They might get away yet. There was plenty of k-metal to replenish the fuel supply. He whirled suddenly, muscles tensed. He faced the grinning hunchback—and was greeted by a breathtaking spurt of the pink gas. This time it was not merely a subjecting of his own will to that of the master but a

complete hypnotism, a somnambulistic state. As in a dream he turned to the controls.

Now it came to him that the dwarf no longer spoke. He worked his will entirely without words; his evil mind possessed fully the mind of his victim. For Blaine Carson there was no further independent thinking. He was an automaton, a sleep-walker.

Like a detached and more or less disinterested observer, he saw that he had landed the ship. Then he noticed three dwarfs in bulky, helmeted moon-suits, shuffling clumsily across the copper plates. Hazily he knew he was with the others in an airlock; the hiss and the throbbing of pumps told him that. Under the great dome there was the latticework of a huge reflecting telescope; strange pigmy figures scuttled here and there, working at curious machines. There was the constant purr of many motors, the gentle pulsation of floor-plates beneath his feet.

With the moon-suit removed, he realized the atmosphere was fetid and stifling. A great pressure bore on his lungs, making breathing labored and difficult. And then they were in a lift that dropped into the depths of its shaft with dizzying speed. Antazzo's grin; Tom's eyes, dull and lifeless, floating there in the haze before his own—it was all a nightmare from which he must soon awaken.

There followed a period of complete unconsciousness of movement and of his surroundings. Light—light everywhere; a blue-white radiance that beat upon his unseeing eyes with unrelenting ferocity. Stabbing pains bored into his very brain, pains that carried with them an unspoken and unintelligible command. Why couldn't they let him alone; leave him to die in peace? He knew he was on his feet, swaying. There were voices, strident and guttural, and then by some magic the veil was lifted. His brain cleared and he saw that he stood before a dais where a much bejeweled and resplendently clad woman sat curled in the luxurious cushions of a golden seat. Chalk-white was her face and her lips crimson; amazing eyes, cat's eyes, pupils red-flecked and glittering, stared out at him.

"The Zara," Antazzo whispered. "You will make obeisance."

Mechanically, Blaine dropped to his knees and touched his forehead to the floor. Tom Farley, over there, was doing the same, but Antazzo stood erect with arms crossed over his chest and head thrown back. The eyes of the Zara swept him contemptuously from head to foot. All was not well between them.

Blaine arose from his humiliating position at a sharp command from the hunchback. Tommy did likewise and the two exchanged sheepish looks. The effects of the pink gas were wearing off once more. They

were in a large hall, obviously the throne room of a palace. Men-at-arms lined the walls on either side of the dais, and these were straight limbed giants with green-bronze skin and regular features—not at all like the deformed Ionian who had captured them and stolen the RX8.

The Zara talked rapidly in throaty gutturals, her fierce gaze directed at Antazzo and her brows drawn together in a scowl that could have but one meaning. She was displeased with the hunchback, displeased and furiously angry. What was it all about? Hadn't he brought home the bacon—the k-metal they were after? Blaine was nonplused.

Then Antazzo replied to the woman who was obviously his queen. His voice rose in shrill disagreement and his scowl was as fierce as the Zara's. Threatening her, he was, the nervy devil. He clenched his fists and raised his arms in an angry gesture, pacing the floor in his fury and thrusting out a pugnacious chin while he raved. This Zara woman rose higher in her cushions, and the look that flashed from those terrible eyes would have warned a less excited human, however justifiable his anger might be. But Antazzo was in too deep to draw back, that was plain to be seen. Blaine held his breath in anticipation of an explosion.

It came then, that explosion, and in a way entirely unexpected and

horrible to behold. The tiger woman uttered one fierce sibilant like the hiss of a serpent, a terrifying sound that silenced the hunchback and brought him stiffly to attention, mouth open and eyes bulging with horror. One of those unbelievably white arms stretched forth, threateningly tense, and a jeweled finger leveled itself at the rash Ionian. From it there flashed an intangible something that leaped to bridge the distance with the speed of light, something that screeched as it flew and crashed like breaking glass when it struck Antazzo's horrified face. In an instant he was on the floor, screaming and writhing in mortal agony.

The Zara watched with compressed lips and livid features as a host of black disk-like things covered the squirming body, spinning madly as if driven by atomic energy and emitting a myriad high-pitched tones like the angry buzzing of a swarm of bees. Antazzo's body shriveled as the things hummed on in their devilish work. Soon there was but a tiny heap of clothing with the angry black disks whirling and singing their song of hate. And then, in a puff of thick yellow vapor they were gone, their gruesome work completed. The odor of putrefaction lay heavy on the air.

Blaine shuddered and a fit of nausea twisted his vitals. It served the devil right, of course, but it was a horrible way to go. These damned Ionians, even to their queen, were bloodthirsty creatures. And what

devilish ingenuity they had displayed in their development of weapons! His eyes were drawn irresistibly to the flaming orbs of the Zara.

She was actually smiling at him, this beautiful, heartless animal, not a smile of derision but one of deliberate allure. He felt the hot blood mount to his temples. A languid arm beckoned him to her side and the amazing creature settled back in her cushions with the drowsy, contented motions of a lazy feline.

"Watch your step!" Tommy hissed.

That warning was unnecessary. Blaine shook his head and backed away from the dais, an instinctive recoiling from a loathsome thing. The Zara saw and understood; and she went again into a black rage. She sat stiffly erect and called rapid orders to her men-at-arms.

The Earth men were surrounded instantly, their arms and legs pinioned by powerful hands, their feeble resistance overcome by the bronze giants as easily as if they had been children. Helpless and hopeless, they were borne from the room.

This was the end of the story, Blaine thought. Why this Zara woman had not made away with them at once was a mystery. Perhaps they were being reserved for an even more terrible fate than that of the hunchback. They were being carried along a dim-lit passage now, and Tom was cursing his captors in a never-ending stream of invective.

A metal door opened and then clanged shut behind them. They were dumped unceremoniously on metal tables that resembled those of a hospital operating-room on Earth. Woven bands, quickly adjusted by the bronze giants held them fast. Blaine turned his head and saw that Tommy was still struggling against the inevitable. A gag had been placed in his mouth; that was why he had ceased reviling the Zara's servitors.

The room was cluttered with elaborate and complicated mechanisms that Blaine could not recognize in the slightest detail, excepting that there were many banks of slender glass cylinders which bore some resemblance to the vacuum tubes used on the inner planets for radio communication and television. One of the bronze giants, he saw, was bringing a metal cap from which a cable extended to one of the strange machines. This cap was forced down over his head with a none too gentle pressure and he could see no more.

There came a sharp buzz from the machine and a million stinging needles drove into his brain. There was a moment of fleeting visions; strange places he viewed, and strange creatures parading in a fantasmagoria of delirium before his aching eyes. Voices, harsh and guttural, spoke in his drumming ears; voices that were dimly understandable, though uttered in the tongue spoken by Antazzo and the Zara. Then came sudden and merciful unconsciousness.

Chapter 3: Ilen-dar

When Blaine Carson opened his eyes it was to stare at the blue-white radiance of an illuminated ceiling. He lay on a downy cot and it seemed he had just recovered from a long illness. Weak and sick, he turned his head listlessly to gaze at the ornate embossed designs on a wall of gleaming silvery metal. What place was this? His mind was wool-gathering; dim memories of unspeakable things struggled for mastery over a hazy consciousness. Suddenly then he remembered, and he sat up in his unfamiliar bed, senses acutely alert.

Across the room he saw a figure hunched in a chair; a twisted man-creature who was oddly like someone he had seen. Antazzo! But this one had none of the other's ferocity as he returned Blaine's stare. Rather, there was a look of deep concern in his ugly face. He came immediately to the bedside and looked at Blaine solicitously.

"I see you have recovered," he said. "It is good."

Blaine stared and stared. This creature had spoken in the language of the Zara's subjects, yet he understood his every word! It must be a dream, this impossible thing that had happened. And where was Tom? Abruptly he found that he was talking rapidly in this tongue of an alien race.

"Yes, I've recovered," he said, "and I'm amazed at what I find. How have I acquired this knowledge of your language? Where am I, and where is my friend? Can you enlighten me in these things?"

The other smiled. "I can, Earth man," he replied. "You have been taught our language while you slept. A thought transference process we use for educating the young. You are in the palace of the Zara and your friend is safe in the next room. I may add that you are in high favor with Her Majesty."

The wizened creature lowered his voice on the last words, and his knowing eyes spoke volumes. In favor with that she-devil! Blaine went cold at the thought.

"I want to see my friend," he said shortly.

"Later. My orders are to bring you to the Zara immediately you are strong enough. And Pegrani obeys orders."

No use to attempt a break now. Blaine was tempted to drive a fist into that ugly countenance and fight his way out of the place. But that would be suicide. He'd wait, get the lay of the land first and then try to dope something out with Tommy.

"All right, Pegrani," he said, "I'm ready to go before this Zara of yours."

As he prepared for the audience, alien thoughts crowded one upon the other in his strangely enlightened mind. With the knowledge of the language had come knowledge of many things relative to the copper-clad world. They'd given him a liberal education. Somehow he knew these stunted creatures like Antazzo and Pegrani were known as Llotta and that, while ruling the sealed-in planet, their kind had originally come from Ganymede, the fifth satellite of Jupiter. Centuries had passed since the inhabitants of Europa and Ganymede had been forced to desert their aging worlds and had settled on Io. During other centuries the widely different peoples had co-operated in constructing the great copper enclosure in order to keep the new world alive and capable of supporting life. Then had come a century of bitter warfare in which the Llotta were victorious. Intense hatred existed between the two races, he knew, and a hazy impression of mechanically imparted knowledge told him that few of the Europans remained alive.

"We are here, Carson," his guide announced, when they stood before the square columns of an enormous portal.

The scene in the throne room was vastly different than when he had

first visited it. The Zara sat curled as before, a golden bowl of incense burning at either side of the throne. The men-at-arms were absent and, instead, there were dozens of handmaidens, white-skinned and seductive as their queen, reclining on luxurious cushions that were arranged in a semicircle before the dais. It was a scene of Oriental splendor. A stage carefully set.

Pegrani knelt and touched his forehead to the floor but Blaine held himself stiffly erect, looking straight into the eyes of the Zara. She smiled and extended her arm in that beckoning gesture.

"You may leave now, Pegrani," she said, without deigning him a glance. "Remain in the corridor until I send for you."

There was a tense silence as the Zara's gaze, ineffably softened now, held Blaine's. Unconsciously he was drawn to the steps of the dais. Unwillingly, yet inexorably, his lagging footsteps brought him to her side. Cool white fingers touched his arm and he saw that the red flecks in the black of those wide eyes were golden now. Surely there was no harm in this woman. But he remembered Antazzo.

"Carson," she purred, "you are more than welcome to Llotta-nar, the land of my people and the ruling power of Antrid, the body you call Io. The freedom of the realm is yours for as long a time as you wish

to remain."

This was too good to be true. "You—you mean," he stammered, "that Antazzo exceeded his authority in his act of piracy—in bringing us here?"

The golden flecks flashed red and a cold note was manifest in the throaty voice. "Antazzo," she replied, "was destroyed for his audacious actions. We needed this k-metal of yours, Carson, and he was sent to Earth to get a quantity of the material. By magnetic directional waves was he sent—we have no space-ships—his body disintegrated by my scientists for transmittal, and the atoms of his beastly form reassembled in their proper relation when he arrived there. But he threatened me when he returned successful. The possession of the k-metal and his knowledge of its powers and uses had gone to his head. He demanded my hand in return for his work; demanded that he be permitted to mount the throne of Llotta-nar as my consort. Therefore I destroyed him." The hard eyes softened anew. "And—and for his abominable treatment of you I destroyed him," she concluded.

Blaine fought off the spell of those gold-flecked eyes; he looked away in sudden panic. This creature was not telling the truth. She was hiding something; a sinister motive lay beneath her smooth

speech.

"My friend," he said abruptly: "what of him?"

"For your sake, my Carson," she purred, "he too shall have the freedom of the realm for as long a time as is desired."

The cool fingers crept along his arm, firm and compelling. "Look at me," she whispered.

He thought of the pink gas as his eyes were drawn irresistibly to hers. What he saw in those gold-flecked depths sent a shiver of apprehension chasing down his spine. Savage, devastating desire mingled with ill-concealed rage at his coldness. This beautiful animal could turn like a flash and rend him limb from limb—and would on the slightest provocation.

A commotion in the corridor caused her to release him and sit bolt upright. Temporarily relieved, Blaine wheeled to face the portal. Tommy had broken loose! He heard his strident voice, berating an unseen antagonist in the tongue of the Llotta.

Then they were in the room, Tommy struggling and arguing vociferously with one of the green-bronze guards. The handmaidens

had deserted their cushions and were milling about in affrighted confusion. The Zara's sibilant exclamation startled him into looking at her once more. The same cold fury that had greeted Antazzo glinted icy-hard in that grimly beautiful face. It was all over for poor Tommy.

But the Zara reached upward and stroked a transparent rod that dangled above the throne, something he had not noticed before. A screaming vibrant note smote the heavy air, a pulsation that beat at the ear drums with painful intensity. Silence fell as the awesome sound died away and echoed faintly from the huge columns that supported the arched ceiling. Tommy cooled off when he saw that Blaine was unharmed.

"Drekan!" The Zara's voice was a whiplash as she addressed the guard. "You will leave my presence and report to your overman for punishment. Never again molest the Earth men. Begone!"

Again this amazing woman curled in her cushions and again she purred. Tommy watched in open mouthed astonishment as she smiled guilelessly on his friend.

"You may leave me now, my Carson," she cooed. "Farley is free to accompany you. Pegrani will guide you and inform you regarding

our customs and our people. You will learn much. And then you shall return to Zara Clyone."

Blaine had fully expected that Tommy would die a horrible death before his eyes, and in his sudden relief bent low and kissed the cold white hand of the Zara. A foolish thing to do! She purred and snuggled into the cushions like the feline she was—a dangerous animal; claws drawn in now but ready to strike out, razor sharp, on a moment's notice.

Pegrani led them along the corridor to a lift. The car shot upward with breath-taking speed.

"Say!" Tommy was growling, in English. "What's the big idea? You've got the old girl ga-ga. Trying to vamp her into letting us off easy?"

"Shut up!" Blaine returned, irritated. "I don't know where we stand any more than you do. But we're going to sit tight now and see what happens. No more rough stuff from you, either."

"What! You're going to just stand around and take it—whatever they hand us?"

"Of course not. But the time isn't ripe yet. We'll have to wait till we know what it's all about."

They were outside then, on the palace roof, and Pegrani motioned them to a railed-in runway that circled its edge. High overhead was the shadowy blackness of the copper shell that enclosed the satellite. Huge latticed columns, line upon line of them, stretched off into the distance as far as the eye could follow; enormous white metal supports that carried the immense weight of the covering which retained the dense and humid atmosphere. Myriads of tiny blue-white suns there seemed to be, stretching off between the columns, carried on thick cables and radiating the artificial daylight of the interior. Hot, damp odors wafted across the roof, the odors of decayed vegetation.

Most amazing of all, were the dwellings. In orderly rows like the columns, they were flat topped cylindrical things that reminded Blaine of nothing so much as the tanks of an oil refinery back home. And the space between was overgrown with dense tropical vegetation, tangled and matted and shooting transparent tubular stems up to a height of a hundred feet or more where they sprouted great spherical growths that looked like enormous sponges. Of a sickly, pale green hue, these growths overran everything; climbed the columns and were lost in the shadows above the multitude of

lights. The big sponge-like blossoms expanded and contracted rhythmically. Breathing, they were, like living things. Specially cultivated plant life to assist in maintaining the oxygen supply balance by decomposition of carbon dioxide. A marvelous artificial world!

"The streets and moving ways are in tunnels beneath the soil," Pegrani was explaining. "What lies before you is the city of Ilen-dar, capital city of the empire, and like all other cities of Antrid, it is self-sustaining. The vegetation is inedible, all of our food is synthetic and highly concentrated. You were fed by intravenous injection while under the influence of the language machines. Our heat and power is obtained from the internal fires of Antrid, and, alas, these are being exhausted with great rapidity. Our shortage of power is becoming acute, and again our peoples are facing extinction."

That explained their need for the k-metal. It came to Blaine in a flash that Antrid was in sore straits and that this expedition to Earth had more back of it than had been revealed. Even with the supply of k-metal Antazzo had stolen, they could not carry on forever.

A screaming object went hurtling through the blackness over their heads. Something, a vehicle of enormous size with rows of lighted ports on the under side, that roared its way under the roof of copper

and was gone in an instant.

"One of our monorail cars," Pegrani told them: "a complete system interconnects all cities and divisions. They are capable of circling the globe in a day of your time."

Their familiarity with conditions on Earth was astonishing. Probably Antazzo was but one of many spies who had been sent to the inner planets. Pegrani discussed the speed in their own terms.

Someone had crept up behind them; a slight, olive-skinned youth who touched Blaine softly on the shoulder. Pegrani did not see. He was pointing into the distance and expounding on the merits of the monorail system. The youth touched a finger to his lips to enjoin silence, and thrust a crumpled ball of metal foil into Blaine's hand before the pilot realized his intention. A message, undoubtedly!

Some instinct, or some slight sound, warned Pegrani and he turned on his heel just as the slender lad was slinking away. Black rage contorted his features and Blaine saw him make a quick motion toward the inner folds of his jacket.

"Pegrani!" he shouted as he saw a glint of steel. "Don't!"

But it was too late and the Llott paid him no attention, anyway. One of those wicked ray pistols sent forth its crackling blue flame and the youth stood there, bathed in the eery blue light; dazzling blasts of exploding atoms were seen within the flare. Then there was the nothingness into which Wahoney and Kelly had gone.

Blaine shouted horrified and angry protest and Tommy rushed in to mix it with their guide. But the glowing ray pistol waved them back. Other guards—the big green-bronze ones—were running in their direction.

"The message!" Pegrani snapped. "Give it to me."

Quick as a flash Blaine crumpled the foil more tightly. A hard little pellet now, he tossed it over the rail far into the matted vegetation below. One might as well hunt for a needle in a haystack as for that tiny ball. But Pegrani would not forget; he'd report to the Zara. They were in for it now.

Chapter 4: Before the Council

Pegrani lost no time in reporting the incident to the Zara. The Earth men were hustled to the throne room of the palace where the leopard woman sat in conference with her advisers. An ominous silence greeted their entrance. Ugly faces leered at them from the long table.

"What is it, Pegrani?" The Zara's chalky face went whiter still.

"The Rulans, Your Majesty. They have endeavored to communicate with the prisoners."

"Did they succeed?" Clyone's voice was terrible in its fury.

"They did not. I destroyed the messenger, and the message itself was lost in the jungle where Carson flung it."

The Zara shot a fleeting glance in Blaine's direction and permitted herself the ghost of a smile. "It is well," she breathed. "But it must not happen again. Have Tiedor brought to me."

Pegrani hurried off to do her bidding and Blaine turned uncertainly to follow.

"You will remain, Carson—you and Farley." The incisive voice of

the leopard woman halted him in his tracks.

Tiedor was chief of the Rulans, it developed. There was but a handful of them in the realm and they were the last survivors of the civilization of Europa; descendants of those original brave souls who had settled on Io as a last resort in the effort to perpetuate their kind.

He was a magnificent creature, this Tiedor, tall and straight in his muscular leanness and with wide-set gray eyes in the face of a Greek god. Olive-skinned like the messenger, he was, and with the high forehead of an intellectual. He swept the assemblage with a haughty gaze when he faced the Zara.

"Tiedor," she snarled, "it has come to my ears that a Rulan lad carried a message to one of my guests from Earth. What means this?"

"I know nothing about it, Your Majesty." Tiedor gazed into the wicked eyes, unafraid.

"You lie! There is some treasonable scheme in which you had hoped to enlist their help. You will tell me the entire story, here before the council."

"There is nothing to tell."

"You will confess or I shall destroy every Rulan in the Tritu Nogaru." The Zara's words were clipped short with deadly emphasis.

Tiedor paled and his lips tightened in a grim line, but he stood his ground. "I have nothing to confess," he said.

With a whistling indrawn breath, the leopard woman threw back her head and motioned to one of the green-bronze giants who guarded the entrance. There was a nervous stir around the council table.

At her command the guard drew back a heavy drape that hid an embrasure in the far wall. There, on a stubby pedestal, was revealed a gleaming sphere of crystal, a huge polished ball that shimmered a ghastly green against a background of jet.

Slowly in its depths a milky cloud took shape, swirling and pulsating like a living thing. Then it flashed into dazzling brilliance and the globe cleared to startling transparency. It was as if it did not exist. Rather they looked through an opening in the cosmos that carried their gaze to another and distant point. It was a large open space that was revealed to their eyes; a sort of public square where many of the olive-skinned Rulans were coming and going to and from the

entrances of the circular tank-like structures that surrounded the area. They were greeting one another in solemn fashion as they passed and watching furtively the green-bronze guards who were everywhere. The sound of their low voiced conversations came clear and distinct from the depths of the crystal sphere.

"Your choice, Tiedor," the Zara hissed.

"There is nothing—nothing, I tell you!" The Rulan chief's voice was panicky now.

Clyone's snarling command was carried to those guards out there in the Tritu Nogaru by some magic of the crystal sphere. As one man they snapped to attention. With deadly accuracy they released the energy of their ray pistols. It was a shambles, that square of the Tritu Nogaru; a slaughter house. Agonized screams of the doomed Rulans rent the air of the council chamber. They organized hastily and rushed again and again into the crackling blue flame of the disintegrating blasts of the guards' fire. It was hopeless: unarmed and unprotected, they were at the mercy of Clyone's minions.

Sick and trembling, Blaine cried out against the massacre. He was seized instantly by two of the green-bronze guards who had been watching his every move. Tommy, too, was in their clutches once

more, fighting valiantly but without avail. The sphere went blank and silent, and the drape was returned to its place. Still muttering disapproval, the members of the council gazed at their queen in alarm. There was no telling what this vile creature might do.

"The slaughter continues. Tiedor," she gloated. "Soon your handful of followers will be no more. And good riddance."

Swaying drunkenly, eyes glazed with the horror of the thing. Tiedor went raving mad. In one wild leap he was upon her, his fingers sinking into the white flesh of her throat. Woman or no woman, he'd have her life.

But it was not to be. A quick move of jeweled fingers was followed by a crashing report. Tiedor staggered and drew back, spinning on his heel to face them all with distended, pain-crazed eyes. Astonishment was there, and horror, but the fire of undying courage remained. His olive skin turned suddenly purple, then black from the poisoned dart that had exploded in his entrails. He collapsed in a still heap at the feet of the Zara.

She stood there a moment in the awful silence, caressing her bruised throat with fluttering fingers. She had faced death for one horrid instant and was obviously shaken.

Then she recovered and flew into a rage. "Out of my sight, all of you!" she screamed. "Out, I say! The Earth men are to be freed and Pegrani will conduct them to their quarters. Go now!"

The councillors made haste to comply, jostling one another in their anxiety to jam through the doorway. Blaine found himself released. He took one step toward Clyone, murderous hatred in his heart. But he recoiled from the expression in those red-flecked eyes; they softened instantly and looked into his very soul, saw through and beyond him into some far place where relief and happiness might be attained. And then, suddenly, they were swimming in tears. The Zara dropped into a seat and buried her sleek coiffured head in outstretched arms, her shoulders shaking with sobs.

An incomprehensible anomaly, this queen of the Llotta; a strange mixture of cruelty and tenderness, of cold hatred and the longing for love. A dual personality hers, susceptible to the deepest emotion or to utter lack of feeling as the mood might dictate.

Blaine tiptoed softly from the room.

They were in the corridor now, and Tommy was blowing off at a great rate. Even Pegrani was stunned and shaken. But Tommy raved.

"Forget it!" Blaine growled. "Where do we go from here?" He couldn't have explained his emotions then, even to himself.

"To our quarters, she said—damn her!" Tom Farley swore in picturesque English. "And we," he wound up his expressive tirade, "are getting in deeper and deeper. We can't do a thing. Why in the devil doesn't she put us out of the way and get it over with? What's she keeping us around for, anyway?"

Blaine was asking himself that very question. Pegrani regarded them with something of understanding in his beady eyes. But he was nervous and apprehensive and broke in on their conversation to urge them into action. The Zara must be obeyed.

The corridor was deserted now and their footsteps echoed hollowly from the bare metal walls. Pegrani was ahead, leading the way, when Blaine was startled by an insistent tap on his shoulder. Another of the Rulans, it was, repeating the gesture of the youth who had been killed on the roof. But this one had no message; he was after something else—telling them in pantomime to make a break for freedom and to follow him.

Blaine caught Tommy's attention. And Pegrani, warned again by that sixth sense of his, turned his head. With a bellow of rage he whirled

into action, ray pistol in hand. But Blaine was prepared for him this time. He wasn't going to witness another murder—not now. Flinging Tom Farley aside, he let loose a terrific jab that landed full on Pegrani's mouth. The ray pistol crackled harmlessly, its deadly energy spending itself in searing the metal of the ceiling.

Then he wrenched the weapon from the astonished Llott and was boring in with body punches that quickly had the dwarf gasping for breath. These creatures knew nothing of fighting with their hands except in the fashion of clumsy wrestlers. The thud of hard fists against yielding flesh was a new and terrifying experience. Pegrani was game, though, and he flailed about with his powerful arms, endeavoring to get his opponent in his grasp. Sidestepping to avoid one of his rushes, Blaine brought up a terrible uppercut that ended flush upon the Llott's jaw. His head snapped back and his knees gave way beneath him. Down he went in a flabby heap. Suddenly ashamed, the young pilot turned to the Rulan.

Tom's eyes were shining. It was easy to see that he felt better about things now.

"I am a friend," the Rulan whispered in the Llott tongue, "sent by one who would have conversation with you. It is of the highest importance, but we must make haste. Will you trust me?"

Blaine saw deep concern and sincerity in the fellow's blue eyes. "What do you say, Tommy?" he asked, looking to his friend for approval.

"I say, let's go. He seems okay to me."

Their new guide was familiar with the passages and especially so with dark and little used stairways that connected the floors of the huge building. They soon reached the roof through a hatch that opened on a small penthouse which was in deep shadow and entirely hidden from the runways where the green-bronze guards paced constantly.

A slender cable dangled before them, and at its lower end they saw a basket-like car which their guide bid them enter. When they had done so, he tugged on the cable, giving a rapid twitching signal. Instantly they were soaring up into the blackness above the lights of Antrid.

The swift journey ended in a tiny enclosed vehicle where another Rulan operated the cable drum which had made the trip possible. The car was unlighted save for the faint glow of a hand lamp, and it was not until the lower door was closed that they were permitted a view of the interior of the strange vehicle and had a good look at the

two Rulans.

"Now," the one who had brought them said, "I can explain. I am Tiedus, son of Tiedor. My companion is Dantus, son of Dantor, the greatest scientist in all Antrid. We are taking you to Dantor who has knowledge of the mad plans of the Llotta and is in need of your help in thwarting them. You are willing?"

"Why—why, yes," Blaine stammered, looking deep into the earnest eyes of Tiedus. "You—you know of the fate of Tiedor?"

"I do." The young Rulan fell silent; then shook his head as if to clear it of unwelcome thoughts. "There are but few of us left, oh Earth man," he said then, "and all expect a like fate sooner or later. But that is beside the point. We have important work to do: work that brooks no delay. We leave now for the Tritu Anu, with your consent."

Tom Farley was examining the machinery of the car with interest. "This one of the monorail cars?" he inquired, when Dantus had seated himself at the controls.

"Indeed not. The Llotta do not even know of the existence of this vehicle. We could not get right of way on the rails, so this gravity car

was developed in secrecy. It is provided with variable repulsion energies that can be adjusted to keep it at a fixed distance from the inner surface of the copper shell. Thus it misses cross beams and braces. It is drawn forward by similar energies, or more exactly, by the component of a number of attracting forces. We do not display lights, so are thus comparatively safe from discovery. They'll catch us sooner or later, though, of course." Dantus indulged in a fatalistic shrug of his shoulders as he concluded.

At his manipulation of a number of tiny levers that were set into the control panels like the stops of an organ, the car lurched forward. Silently, swiftly, they sped on through the gloom under the great copper shell.

Through the viewing glass of a periscope arrangement that let no betraying light escape to the outside, they watched the endless lines of illuminating globes slip by beneath them. Weirdly vast and shadowy in the upper reaches, the latticed supporting columns on either side merged into continuous semi-transparent walls as the car gathered speed.

The city of Ilen-dar was left far behind. Patches of jungle flashed by; other cities. And always the endless rows of blue-white lights. There was neither night nor day in the sealed-in world; only the artificial

suns that never set. Continuous subjection to the ultra-violet and visible rays of the vast lighting system was necessary to the growth and reproduction of the plant life that was so essential in keeping the atmosphere breathable.

Tommy had forgotten everything save his interest in the mechanism of the car. He and Dantus were fast friends already.

Chin in hand and eyes avoiding the pain of mourning in Tiedus' fixed gaze, Carson lost himself in gloomy meditation. As he thought back over the events of the past few days he could scarcely believe they had actually occurred or that he was sitting here in a mystery car, speeding through the rank atmosphere of an enclosed world a half billion miles from his own. Home seemed incredibly remote and desirable just then, and the future dark and forbidding.

Chapter 5: The Tritu Anu

Before the car came to a stop Tiedus rummaged in a locker and stretched forth his hands as if carrying something delicate and fragile.

"It will be necessary for you to put this on," he said: "it will be unsafe otherwise."

Blaine stared, mystified. Was this Rulan kidding him? "Put what on?" he asked.

"A thousand pardons. I had forgotten that you do not know. I hold in my hands a cloak, an invisible thing that will hide you from the guards and from the Zara's crystal. Another secret of my father's. Dantor developed it for him only recently."

Blaine felt the texture of the stuff then; crumpled it in his fingers as its gossamer-like weight dropped in loose folds around his body. But there was nothing there: to the eyes. It simply did not exist except to the touch, and he felt no different with it on than he had before.

"Where's Tommy?" he asked suddenly, seeing that Dantus now sat alone at the controls.

Tiedus laughed. "He has been covered in the same manner," he said, "and is safely hidden from sight as are you."

Incredulous, disbelieving, Blaine called out to his friend in a tremulous voice. And Tom Farley's awed response reassured him.

"Keep close to me," Tiedus told him. The car had stopped and he directed them into the basket of the lift. The two Earth men collided violently and, clinging to each other in their ghastly invisibility, laughed crazily for a moment. As far as any observers might know there were only the two Rulans in the basket.

Blaine fingered Pegrani's ray pistol when the cable lowered them swiftly to the roof of a huge steel cylinder that rose, a solitary and unlovely structure, in the midst of the jungle a thousand miles from Ilen-dar. The indicator informed him that seven energy charges still remained in the storage chamber of the little weapon. Its possession brought him a measure of confidence.

Careful scrutiny of the roof had shown it to be deserted, so the basket was brought to rest in a deeply shadowed portion. Immediately they stepped out, and it was sent swiftly aloft by remote control of a portable ether-wave that Dantor produced.

They encountered two of the green-bronze guards in one of the passages below and these challenged the Rulan lads with drawn pistols. The alarm was out! Fortunately Pegrani had not recognized Tiedus or all would have been lost. But the Zara was watching every Rulan community and had instructed her guards to take the Earth men into custody at all costs. Those remarkable cloaks were all that saved them. They breathed easier when the guards passed on.

Now they were in a lift, dropping speedily into the depths of the Tritu Anu. When the cage came to rest they were hustled into a maze of winding passageways that led ever downward. A wall of damp stone finally blocked their progress, but at Dantus' touch of a hidden spring a section of the solid rock swung aside to admit them to a concealed room where the lights were bright and where a delegation of Rulans awaited their coming.

With the cloaks of invisibility removed, they were welcomed by Dantor, a tall white-haired Rulan who was startlingly like his son.

They were a solemn lot, these Rulans of the older generation, but they gazed on the Earth men with sympathy and understanding. An entirely different breed from the Llotta.

This room was a secret laboratory, fully equipped for chemical and

physical research. Dantor sat before a smaller replica of the Zara's crystal ball as he addressed the visitors.

"No doubt you are puzzled," he began, using the language of the Llotta with an accent that softened its harsh gutturals, "over the calamity that has befallen you. And it is not to be wondered at. But your own danger is as nothing compared with the danger that now threatens our whole solar system. It is to explain that and to ask your cooperation in warding off the holocaust that I have sent for you.

"Since the destruction of the Tritu Nogaru we Rulans number less than one thousand, of whom three hundred are here. The Tritu Anu is foremost of the royal laboratories of Llotta-nar and its work is carried out entirely by our people. It is only on account of our superior accomplishments in science that the Llotta have allowed us to exist for so long a time, and, in this connection, I might say that the Zara has been taken severely to task for her wanton massacre of the Rulans of the Tritu Nogaru. But that is neither here nor there; it is merely a sidelight I am giving you.

"The important thing is this k-metal of yours and its relation to the plans of the Llotta. Antrid, as you know, is a dying world; coming rapidly to the end of its resources. And, as our ancestors did before us, the Llotta have been casting their eyes about for a new home.

The inner planets beckoned, especially your Earth, but it was manifestly impossible to reach them as there is insufficient fuel in all Antrid to provide for the voyage of even one space ship. Then, with the long range searching rays of the crystal ball television and sound reproducers, they discovered the use of this k-metal. The sending of Antazzo to your Earth followed.

"The rest you know insofar as his activities are concerned, but what you do not know is this: The Llotta have constructed a huge steel tube that is set deep into the crust of Antrid; an enormous rocket-tube if you please, like one of those on your space ship. They plan to use the energy of this supply of k-metal in setting up tremendous streams of electronic discharges from the great tube and thus to swing the satellite from its natural orbit. They would send this entire world hurtling through space toward the inner planets, and, by proper control of the rocket discharges, bring it close to your Earth where it would become a secondary satellite at close range. Then they could war on you at their leisure and finally take Earth as their new home. Thus have the Llotta planned."

"What!" Blaine exclaimed. "Why, we'd blast them from the skies before they were started. They haven't a chance."

Dantor nodded gravely. "I am sure of it," he agreed: "I have seen

your great guns in the crystal. But they are blind to that possibility. And there are other serious flaws in the plan. The incentive, of course, lies in the certain knowledge that we are using up the internal heat of Antrid so rapidly that less than a century of life now remains to its peoples. Our power is produced by admitting water to the interior through myriads of tubes that serve the double purpose of introducing the water and conveying the generated steam back to the surface, where it produces electricity by driving great turbine generators. This electricity is distributed by charging the copper shell and the ground beneath at high frequency; it is collected from the air between by the heaters and various machines that use it. But the shortage is ever more serious and Antrid is cooling off. Thus the need for the k-metal and thus the sending of Antazzo. And now for the flaws:

"The Zara, in killing Antazzo, frustrated her own plans, as he alone, of all her people, knew how to use this marvelous energy producer. Realizing this, she set about to make friends with you two in the hope that the information might be obtained from you. That was a great mistake and raised an unexpected obstacle."

"Well, I'll be damned!" Blaine exploded. "No wonder she tried her wiles on me. Tried to make a sucker out of me, didn't she?"

Dantor smiled knowingly. "More about Clyone later," he said. "Actually she is enamoured of you, Carson, and besides she is not really responsible for the mad plan herself. But that tale can wait.

"The basic and most serious flaw in the plan is this: It can not possibly succeed, no matter how successful their attempts. What they do not understand and will not believe when I tell them is that the only result of the mad experiment will be the complete destruction of the solar system, Antrid and themselves included. Complete and horrible annihilation, I say!" Dantor paused and eyed his visitors solemnly.

In his mind's eye, Blaine could not visualize such a thing nor picture the possible explanation. But he saw that Tommy had paled and was clenching his fists. Tommy was more of a scientist; it must be he realized what this enterprise involved.

Dantor was speaking again, in low, intense tones: "What they are refusing to see is that the delicate balance of the solar system will be disturbed if a body as large as Antrid is moved a half billion miles sunward. All bodies are kept in their orbits by a nice balance of mass attraction and centrifugal force; if a single one is altered all others are affected. What would happen is easy to calculate. First off, when Antrid approached the inner planets all bodies in the system would

change their paths and the altered forces would cause severe earthquakes, tidal waves and other natural disturbances of disastrous extent.

"These would increase in violence as Antrid drew nearer to the sun, and, if she finally took up her position as a new satellite of the Earth, the entire solar system would be in chaos. By this time, even if life still remained on Earth, it would quickly become extinct, for the vastly increased tidal forces on that body would flood the land to the peaks of the highest mountains. Earth would draw in closer to the sun due to loss of velocity and increased mass of the Earth-moon system. Tremendous new forces would rend asunder the Earth, its moon, and Antrid. Venus and Mars, following suit as the forces equalized, we would have a dead universe."

Tommy believed him. That was apparent from his furrowed brow and grim set jaw. "I'll never give 'em the secret of the k-metal," he grated. "Nor will Carson; I'll gamble on that. We'll die here before they'll get it out of us."

Blaine seconded his remarks fervently. Then, turning to the Rulan scientist, "Perhaps," he suggested, "we might remain in hiding here for an indefinite period. Perhaps even we might contrive a way of getting to the store of k-metal and regaining possession of it. They'd

be licked for sure then."

Dantor beamed. "That is exactly why I sent for you," he said. Then sobering anew, he added, "But I fear that would not be the end. They will not give up. Another emissary would be transmitted to duplicate Antazzo's exploit on Earth and in five of your years the danger would again be faced. They would take infinite precaution to prevent a second failure. We must make it forever impossible—now."

"How can we? My God, it's hopeless!" Blaine groaned.

"Nothing is hopeless, my boy. Consider the plight of the Rulans. No, there is still hope and we will leave you to think it over—if you are willing. It is necessary that we Rulans show our faces above before we arouse the suspicions of the guards."

"Of course we're willing. We'll stay as long as you say—and help." Blaine was intensely earnest and Tommy chimed in with his old time fervor and enthusiasm. But hope of success seemed remote.

A murmur of approval came from the assembled Rulans, and Dantor wiped a trace of moisture from his tired old eyes. "Thank you," he said simply. "This chamber is insulated from the searching rays of the crystal spheres. You are safe for the present and will be supplied

with everything you need. And I shall return shortly to discuss the matter in further detail."

The two Earth men were alone then, in the uncanny silence of the underground retreat, regarding each other with awed comprehension. What patient, hopeless creatures these Rulans were! Knowing they were doomed, and without thought of their own safety, they were bending their every effort to the impossible task of saving the universe from the madness of the Llotta.

"What do you know about that?" Tommy said, after a while.

"It's true, what he said?" Blaine asked. "What would happen to our world, I mean—and to the rest?"

"Not a question of doubt. He's doped it out to a T. Smart guy, this Dantor."

"What do you think? Is there a chance? Think—"

"Hush!" Tommy interrupted him. "Didn't you hear something?"

The silence was ghastly; depressing. Blaine heard distinctly the beating of his own heart.

Then it was there again, that sound—a muffled scream from the other side of the stone door. A woman's scream of desperate entreaty. A shuddering, long-drawn moan, trailing off into deathly silence.

Chapter 6: Ulana

Blaine was tugging at the lever he had seen the Rulans use in opening the stone door from the inside. Tommy, less excited, tried to press one of the invisible cloaks into his free hand.

"Here," he begged. "Don't be a damn fool! They'll get you, the devils."

But the great block of stone was swinging already and the young pilot squeezed through and into the passage. He stumbled over the crumpled figure of a young girl and into the arms of one of the green-bronze guards.

Recovering instantly, he prodded the big fellow's ribs with the ray pistol. "Stick 'em up!" he snarled. Then, realizing the words were meaningless to the other, he said, "Raise your hands—above your head! That's right. Stand still now, or I'll use the ray."

The guard, his face ghastly in the dim light, obeyed. But his wary eyes never left Blaine's for an instant.

A short way down the hall was the body of a young Rulan. Blaine shuddered as he saw it was headless. The ray had nearly missed that

time, its energy spent before complete disintegration was effected. The girl lay still at his feet. With quick fingers he frisked the guard, finding his ray pistol and one gas grenade. What was he to do with the big fellow? He ought to let him have it, but somehow he couldn't.

Tommy was in the passageway then, invisible. The big guard stifled an amazed cry as his husky voice came out of the nothingness. These devils of Earth men! They had worked their evil magic on the Zara: had she not ordered that their lives be spared? And now there was this! His thoughts were written large on the ordinarily expressionless countenance, and Blaine was tempted to laugh at his affrighted dismay.

"Come on, you bonehead," Tommy was saying in English. "Bring the big bum inside. I'll carry the girl. Hurry; there'll be a million of them in a minute."

The girl's huddled figure was raised by unseen hands. Poised in mid-air for a moment, it floated joggily, unsteadily through the crack of the partly opened stone door. The guard, wide-mouthed and staring, muttered supplication to the war gods of Antrid.

Safely inside the secret chamber, the Earth men made haste to truss

up the guard and gag him. He was as tractable as a child under the invisible fingers of Tom Farley, with eyes imploring the evil spirits for mercy. And when Tommy's head appeared, drifting, unsupported by a body; to be followed by arms and shoulders that seemed to materialize from nothingness, the big fellow struggled panic-stricken in his bonds, shaking with superstitious terror.

Blaine straightened the girl's limbs where she lay on a low couch. She was breathing in low shuddering gasps, but a swift examination assured him she had not been harmed. Her beautifully chiseled ivory features were fixed in an expression of nameless dread. A mass of red-gold hair tumbled in confusion about her face and shoulders and when the pilot smoothed this back his heart did a most peculiar flip-flop. Sort of jumped into his throat and stuck there. This Rulan maiden was a vision of feminine loveliness if there ever was one; a dream.

Tommy watched him with a cynical smile, and said with mock contempt, "So you're the guy who swore you'd never tangle up with a femme! Just a month ago, too. Now look: first you get this Zara woman all het up over you, and now this one's got you all het up over her. You make me sick!"

There was no fitting retort. Besides, this thing that had come to him

was too serious; too big. He couldn't kid about it—even with Tom. Why, he'd always pictured this very girl in his thoughts; had always dreamed of meeting her some day. And here she was: a living, breathing reality. She was stirring, too, now; breathing easier. Her eyes opened wide; frightened, innocent ones like a child's, blue-gray and fringed with long lashes that raised dewy from the smooth ivory of her cheeks.

"Antius, my brother," she exclaimed, remembering, "where is he? I saw—I thought—and the guard; he wanted to take me—oh!"

Hands fluttering to cover her face, she was sobbing now, and Blaine raised her in his arms, clumsily attempting to comfort her.

"Your brother," he said gently; "I'm afraid the guard did away with him. He is no more."

"Y-yes. I remember now; I saw." She shuddered and became still, her tousled golden head somehow finding a comfortable hollow beneath Blaine's shoulder.

And then, bravely, she sat erect and faced him. "I—I suppose I shouldn't feel so badly," she said. "We always expect it. But I was so fond of him, and he was the last. I am alone now."

"Not alone," said Blaine; "you have me—us, that is. We are the Earth men, you know. And you are safe here."

"You are Carson?" she inquired.

"Yes, and my friend is Farley. That is how your people address us, but we had rather you call us Blaine and Tommy."

Tom Farley was grinning like an idiot. Didn't he have any more sense? Blaine thought. The girl would think he was making fun of her.

"I am Ulana," she said simply.

The stone door opened silently and Tiedus slipped in, closing it swiftly behind him. He stared at the girl and at the trussed-up figure of the guard.

"So!" he exclaimed; "this is the explanation." He breathed heavily as if he had run a long way, and his face was flushed with excitement.

"Why? What's wrong?" Blaine sensed a calamity.

"The Zara—she must have seen you in the crystal. She is in a murderous rage and has visited her wrath on the Tritu Anu. Even

now Dantor is on his way to Ilen-dar in answer to her summons."

"Tiedus! I'm sorry. It is my fault entirely, but—but we heard Ulana cry out."

"You did quite right, Carson. I should have done the same myself. And actually it makes little difference as far as we Rulans are concerned. We had not long to remain in this life, anyway. It is only that your hiding place might be revealed; that our plans to outwit the Llotta will fail."

"You—you think she will make away with Dantor?"

"No; he is too valuable as a scientist. But the guards are awaiting her orders to repeat what happened in the Tritu Nogaru. She depends on the work of this laboratory a great deal, though it may be she will stay her hand."

He was fussing with the controls of the small crystal as he spoke, and it sprang into life with the peculiar shifting milkiness. Then, clearly, they were looking into the council chamber at Ilen-dar. Clyone was there, pacing the floor. Dantor had just arrived with two of the green-bronze guards. The Zara, though nervous, was curiously calm and polite in her greeting of the aged scientist.

"Dantor," she said, "I want these Earth men."

"I can not produce them, Your Majesty."

"You will not, you mean." Clyone dropped her voice. "For two reasons, Dantor, I must have these Earth men. And they must not be harmed. We need them on account of this k-metal that was brought by Antazzo, whose ugly body I so foolishly destroyed."

"Two reasons, you said, oh Clyone?" Dantor smiled knowingly.

"Yes, two!" said the Zara defiantly. "I love this Carson, if you must know. And it is the only influence for good that ever has come into my life, Dantor. Oh, can't you see? I must have them."

Blaine felt the hot blood mount to his temples. Tommy giggled like a moron. And Ulana drew away, ever so slightly, it was true, but still it was a definite withdrawal. Damn this leopard woman, anyway!

"He is not for you, oh Clyone," Dantor was saying, "To people of his world the very thought of such a woman as yourself is repulsive. A murderess he would call you! Their reactions to the taking of human life are entirely different from those of the Llotta. They are—you will pardon my saying it—more like those of the Rulans. The Llotta

hold life cheap; they hold it dear. To your people you are not a bad woman; only a foolish one who sometimes, in the heat of passion, upsets their plans by the sudden snuffing out of a life that is valuable to those plans. Do you not see my point? He is different; to him you are the wickedest woman whom he has ever encountered—a monster."

This was strong talk. Blaine drew a quick breath, anticipating another of her black rages and sudden death for poor old Dantor.

But Clyone suddenly was on her knees before the old scientist, pleading with him! Creature of strange caprices! Though humanlike in her emotions when in her softer moods, she was more like the feline to which Blaine had likened her, when those soft moods had passed.

Somewhere overhead, in the chambers of the Tritu Anu, there was the sound of a muffled explosion. Its shock was felt even here in the rock-hewn secret apartment. Tiedus went white. Quickly he manipulated the controls of the crystal sphere.

"It can't be," he exclaimed. "The guards would not disobey her, and she has ordered no action."

Swiftly, then, the searching ray of the apparatus swung back to the Tritu Anu itself, boring into the vast structure above them. One of the chemical laboratories was completely wrecked; maimed and dying Rulans were everywhere in the ruins. And those who staggered to their feet were shot down by the green-bronze guards who stood at the doorway.

Then, floor after floor was revealed in the all-seeing crystal. Everywhere it was the same. Merciless, cold-blooded destruction of the Rulan scientists, the most valuable of all in the Llott scheme of things. The Earth men were speechless with horror. Ulana once more buried her head in Carson's shoulder, moaning helplessly.

The scene shifted again to the council chamber of the palace in Ilendar. The Zara had not risen from her knees; she was still pleading with Dantor. She knew nothing of the massacre.

"Ianito!" Tiedus gasped. "It must be he."

And once more the view was changed. They were in the huge dome through which they had entered this mad world. Near the base of the great telescope a bullet-headed Llott was gazing into the depths of one of the crystal spheres, watching the carnage in the Tritu Anu and shouting his orders to the guards. "Slay, slay, slay!" he yelled. "Not a

Rulan shall remain in all Antrid. It is Ianito commanding you, Ianito the Great, master of our destinies, Dictator Supreme. Let not one escape; I command it. Then will come the great day of release; of conquest. A new home, a new world awaits you for the taking."

"It is as I thought," Tiedus groaned: "it is the end. He has taken things in his own hands at last."

The sphere went blank at his touch of a lever. His shoulders drooped and he spread his hands in a gesture of resignation.

"What in the devil!" Tommy exploded. "Can this guy overrule the Zara? Is he that powerful?"

"He is actual ruler of the world that is Antrid; the power behind the throne. Clyone must do his bidding. He has seen that she is softening and resolved to speed things up himself."

A sudden bedlam could be heard in the corridor outside the stone door. This Ianito had gone the Zara one better. He had located them; probably saw the capture of the guard and the rescue of Ulana on the very spot where his minions now hammered for entrance.

"They will take you!" Tiedus whispered. "There is no doubt as to the

orders issued by Ianito. They will take you alive and bring you to him. You will be compelled to yield the secret of the metal that energizes."

"Not on your life! We'll refuse." Blaine was very positive.

Tiedus smiled sadly. "There is the pink gas, you know," he reminded him. "No, Carson, there is but one way. You must go out into the jungle and hide for a time. Dantor will return later; it is certain he will be spared. And he will contrive some way of outwitting them. Come; there is a passage."

Blaine saw the wisdom of the argument. It was their only chance. There was a blast that shook the ground beneath their feet, and a huge section of the stone door was blown into the room. He drew Ulana close with a possessive encircling arm.

They were in a dark narrow passage now, following the whispered voice of Tiedus. It was damp and rankly odorous there in the darkness, and slimy things wriggled over the floor, brushing their ankles clammily. Behind them there was the roar of another explosion and the shouting of angry voices. The guards were in the secret chamber and hot on their trail.

Tiedus was fumbling with something ahead of them where they had halted; something that rattled and clanked and finally came free. A door opened into the deep-shadowed green of the jungle.

"Go now, quickly," he warned them. "Hide yourselves as far in as you dare go. You will be lost, but will later be directed by a mental message from Dantor. I shall advise him from the spirit world. We do that, you know, we Rulans. But I must leave you now; I must hold back the guards to give you time. Go, friends; farewell."

In his hand Tiedus held the ray pistol they had taken from the captured guard. He would account for a few of the Llotta at least. Blaine reached for him to restrain him; it was unthinkable that this fine lad should sacrifice himself for them. But Tiedus was gone; he had slipped away into the black depths of the passageway.

"Come on, snap into it!" Tommy grated, his voice brittle with suppressed emotion. "The kid's right; let's go." He pushed his way into the matted growth of the jungle.

Holding Ulana close and not daring to look into her eyes lest he should see what he knew was there, Blaine followed his friend. The mysterious depths of the pale green forest closed in about them.

Chapter 7: In the Jungle

They had progressed not more than twenty paces into the dense undergrowth when the gleaming wall of the Tritu Anu was entirely hidden from view. The artificial sunlight seeped through the mass of vegetation overhead, a ghostly green twilight that made death masks of their faces. But of the lights themselves, of the great latticed columns, of the enormous sponge-like blossoms of the upper surface of the jungle sea, nothing could be seen. They were deep in a tangled maze of translucent flora that was like nothing so much as a forest of giant seaweed transplanted from its natural element. The moss-like carpet beneath their feet was slushy wet and condensed moisture rained steadily from the matted fronds and tendrils above. The air they breathed was hot and stifling; laden with rank odors and curling mists that assailed throat and head passages with choking effect.

Weird whisperings there were from above and all about them. It seemed almost that the uncanny, weaving green things were alive and voicing indignant protest over the intrusion of the three humans.

Ankle deep in the rain-soaked moss, their clothing drenched and steaming, they pressed ever deeper into the tangle. All sense of direction was lost.

"Guess we'd better rest now," said Blaine, seeing that Ulana was gasping from her exertions, "They'll never trail us here."

"How about this crystal thing—the searching ray?" Tommy ventured.

"It can not follow us," the girl explained, "Certain juices of the plants provide an insulator against the ray. In fact, it was an extract of these that was used in protecting the underground laboratory we just left. We are safe now and I am very tired."

So that was the reason Tiedus had been so certain they would be safe in the jungle! Blaine had wondered about that searching ray, and now Ulana's statement had stilled his doubts. Poor kid—she was all in! Her shoulders drooped and she leaned on his arm for support. His conscience troubled him for having forced the pace in the difficult footing. They need not have come so far in.

A glint of light through the close packed stems caught his eye; something phosphorescent it was, shining there in the green twilight. A giant mushroom! Towering seven feet from the ground, the great umbrella-like top was aglow with sulphurous light on its under side. And, beneath its ten foot spread, the mossy carpet was dry. An ideal shelter. Here Ulana might find the rest she so sorely needed, and in

comparative comfort.

She curled up beside the huge stem and, half buried in warm, dry moss, immediately fell asleep. The Earth men sat gazing solemnly at each other; speechless. In the dim distance the roar of a monorail car rose faintly at first, then grew louder and louder, only to fade away once more into the whispering silence. A steady patter of jungle rain drummed on the mushroom top.

"God!" Tommy muttered, after a while. "I'd give my right eye for a cigarette."

"Me too." Blaine was hugging his knees, nodding drowsily. "A nice rare steak with mushroom sauce wouldn't go so bad, either," he drawled.

"Aw, have a heart. I'm so sick of these vitamin pills of theirs I never want to see one again."

"Yeah, but they're better than nothing. We haven't any of those even."

"Say!" Tommy jumped to his feet in sudden remembrance. "I saw a bush, back there about fifty feet, with bunches of big red berries on

it. Like grapes, they looked. May be good to eat."

"Sure, they may be. And then again they may be poison. We can't take any chances like that. Leave 'em alone."

Tommy growled unintelligibly and fell to walking around their shelter with nervous strides, keeping just within the dry area and glaring savagely into the steaming jungle. Blaine smiled grimly. Nerves! Tommy always was like that; always had to be on the go and doing something. His own nerves were jumpy to-day. They were in hot water this time, for sure. Had to keep on though; they were still alive, or at least half alive; and the solar system was intact as yet. If only Tom Farley would quit his infernal tramping!

"Cut it out!" Blaine snapped peevishly. "You'll have us both bughouse. Can't you sit down and take it easy?"

Tommy stopped in his tracks. "Sorry, Blaine," he said. But he remained standing, staring off into the jungle. Then, suddenly he exclaimed, "Say, I'm going for some of those grapes, or whatever they are. I'll bring a mess of them back and we can wait till Ulana wakes up. She'll know whether they're poison or not."

"Oh, go ahead. But don't get yourself lost. Yell out if you can't find

us and I'll answer."

"Okay. Don't worry about me." And in three steps Tommy was swallowed up in the undergrowth.

Blaine stole a glance at the girl and something caught at his throat. God, she was beautiful! There must be some way of getting her out of this mess. Dantor, perhaps, might show the way. He ought to be sending that message soon—a mental one, Tiedus said. Poor kid, Tiedus; gone to the happy hunting grounds now, no question of that. And he intended to advise Dantor from the spirit world. As simple as that, it was. They were game, these Rulans. Fatalists, though, and resigned to the inevitable; hopeless. But a wonderful people in a rotten world.

Soon he felt his head droop and in a moment he began to doze.

When he awoke it was to the touch of Ulana's soft fingers on his arm. "We are alone?" she asked.

"Lord!" he exclaimed, rising stiffly and rubbing the sleep from his eyes. "How long have I napped? I shouldn't have."

A swift look around the small clearing disclosed the fact that Tommy

was missing. He shouldn't have let him go. A sudden panic gripped him.

"Tommy! Tommy!" he called out.

There was not even an echo in reply. Only the whispering of the jungle overhead and all around them. His friend was gone.

"Ulana," he said, his voice trembling, "we are alone. Farley is lost; swallowed up in this terrible forest."

And then, suddenly, she was in his arms. Those wondrous blue eyes, swimming in tears, looked into his own. Soft red lips, upturned, met his lips; clung there.

"I am sorry, my Carson," she said softly, when he had released her: "sorry that your good friend is lost. But perhaps," more brightly —"he has but strayed away. When the mental message comes you will be reunited. He will hear it as well as you."

Blaine shook his head. In his own heart he knew he would never see Tommy again. He had wandered too close to the Tritu Anu and had been overpowered by the green-bronze guards. Their ray pistols—he shuddered at the thought.

"I have you now, my Carson," the girl was saying. "Only you."

In a daze of pain and happiness intermingled, he knew he was holding her close, drawing her fiercely to him. And then, raising dull eyes to stare over the precious head and into the jungle that hid his friend, he froze with horror.

A flat serpent head with wide slavering mouth and beady eyes swayed there directly behind her. Pendant, it was, on a scaly and slimy length of undulating body that coiled high above in the matted growths of the jungle. As he watched, rooted to the spot, the great head drew back and poised, vibrating, ready to strike.

In one quick movement he flung the girl aside and whipped out the ray pistol he had taken from Pegrani. He pressed the release and a whirring sound came from the little weapon. But no crackling blue flame sprang forth to blast this creature into nothingness. Jumping aside, he was thrown to the ground by its lashing body as the great snake struck and missed.

But the pistol was useless. Short circuited by moisture, no doubt. He crouched there, calling huskily to Ulana. She must run for it; force her way into the thick undergrowth where the thing could not reach her. She lay there, helpless with terror. Then, in a flash, she was on

her feet dashing to his side. God, the huge head was poised there again! Pulsating! The glittering avid eyes upon them!

Instinctively Blaine raised the pistol just as the head darted downward. The release clicked home. And, wonder of wonders, the blue flame crackled spitefully. Exploding atoms, dazzling in the green twilight. Mighty thrashings of the huge coils high up in the tangled foliage. Crashing and tearing of great stems and rope-like tendrils. But the enormous body was headless; a dead thing in the throes of its final reflexes. Only the one charge had been spoiled; the little pistol had served them well.

He drew Ulana into the thickest of the undergrowth for protection against the tremendous lashing thing that crashed into the small clearing where the giant mushroom grew. Their shelter was destroyed. He must find another; he must be forever on guard over this girl whose hand clung so confidently to his own as they wedged their way into the thicket.

"Carson! Ulana!" A familiar voice rose above the whisperings of the jungle. A voice familiar, yet unreal; supernatural; a calm, commanding one that did not sound but echoed only in the consciousness.

"Hark!" Ulana gripped his hand more tightly. "Did you hear? It is Dantor. The message Tiedus promised."

In awed silence they waited. A tiny ball of orange fire flamed suddenly in the depths of the rushes directly before them. A sign!

"Ah, you are there!" the voice broke in. "I have your mental reactions. You will follow the orange beacon to the Tritu Anu where I await your coming. Be of good cheer, my children."

What magic was this? The science of the Rulans was beyond the comprehension of the Earth man. Here was telepathy in its most perfect form. Communications from the spirit plane; the orange flame—it was all so utterly fantastic that Blaine had to look earnestly at the girl to assure himself it was not a dream. She smiled confidently.

And the orange flame was moving off into the undergrowth. They must follow its beckoning, flickering light.

It was a nightmare, that journey back through the jungle to the Tritu Anu. Dantor must be in a fearful hurry, for the orange flame moved swiftly. If they stopped a moment to rest it danced there impatiently, then receded into the green shadows until they were forced to follow

for fear of losing it. Ulana's light robe was torn and sodden with moisture. The perfectly rounded ivory shoulders, bare now, were scratched and bleeding from contact with thorny protuberances that covered some of the lighter reed-like stems.

But the brave girl was uncomplaining. She clung doggedly to the Earth man's hand when they were able to walk erect: followed swiftly and unquestioningly when they were compelled to crawl or wriggle through an almost impenetrable thicket.

Once she cried out in alarm and Blaine turned back to see that the wiry tendrils of a spiny, globular plant had wound themselves around her slim body and held her fast. As he grasped her hand to draw her away, others of the tendrils curled about his wrist and he too was imprisoned. They burned the flesh, those writhing things, and tugged mightily. Ulana screamed with the pain of the many that held her in their tightening grasp.

It was alive, this thing that grew there, a huge ball with a thousand stinging tentacles. A carnivorous plant. Even as the realization flashed across his mind he saw that the spiny sphere was opening. Split vertically, the two halves fell apart to disclose the steaming interior whose walls were lined with sharp dagger-like projections a foot in length. And the wiry tendrils were drawing them in!

Almost insane with horror, Blaine released the disintegrating energy of the weapon he still carried in his free hand. Twice he pressed its release and twice the searing blue flame spurted from the glass tube that was its muzzle. Only a few charges remained now in the marvelous weapon but once more it had served then well. The open-mouthed plant monster vanished with the clearing of the blue vapor and the ensnaring tendrils relaxed, falling from their bodies like so many loosened cords. Blaine caught the swooning girl in his arms.

Half carrying her, he struggled on after the orange flare. The base of one of the latticed supporting columns loomed vast in the eery twilight gloom, and he leaned a moment against one of its vine-wrapped members. The girl was exhausted and hung limp in his circling right arm. Still the orange beacon danced on. If only Dantor would ease up a bit. Couldn't he give them a little time?

On and on he staggered, ploughing through the sloppy footing and the dripping clinging greens that were everywhere in his path. Slimy fronds wrapped themselves around them, impeding his progress; clinging as if they too were alive. The whispering silence closed in on them, vast and mysterious. Menacing; awful....

And then he stumbled against a metallic wall. The curved side of the Tritu Anu! His brain cleared and courage returned with a rush. The

tiny orange flame danced merrily, leading him along the wall toward the door he knew was there.

Breathing easier now, his pace quickened as Dantor's guiding light slithered along the gleaming wall. Sometimes it was almost hidden from sight by the curvature of the welded plates and he was forced into a jog trot to keep it in view.

Grimly, tenderly, he clung to the delectable creature whose soft body drooped against him.

The door! The selfsame passage through which they had escaped opened before him. Grateful even for this doubtful protection, he crossed the threshold and trudged wearily along with his precious burden. Blindly trusting in the miraculous powers of Dantor, he followed the orange beacon which now seemed to smile cheerfully as it lighted his way through the winding rock-walled tunnel.

Dazed and spent, he collapsed in the arms of the aged Rulan when he reached the end of the passage.

Chapter 8: Last of the Rulans

Bathed and fed and attired in dry clothing provided by Dantor, the Earth man and Rulan maiden were much refreshed and heartened when, together, they finally faced the aged scientist in the laboratory of the secret apartment. He hadn't allowed them to talk as yet.

Blaine glanced at the ragged opening where the stone door had been blown away. "We are safe from intrusion here?" he asked.

Dantor shrugged expressive shoulders. "The Tritu Anu is empty of life," he said; "a sepulchre. Those of our people who were not completely disintegrated lie blackened corpses in the chambers and corridors overhead. The gas grenades, you know. The guards went to Ianito with Farley and reported you dead: lost in the jungle from which none return."

"Farley!" Blaine shouted. "He is alive?" A wild hope sprang into being, intensified to a certainty as Dantor nodded.

"Why, yes. I thought you knew. They captured him very soon after the escape, but were unable to find you and Ulana. Ianito has mechanized him; he is in a hypnotic state of complete subjection to the Dictator. A quantity of k-metal has been taken to the laboratory at

the breech of the great rocket-tube, and Farley now works there with Ianito's crew, initiating them into the mysteries of the metal's uses. Things look very bad."

"Wh-a-at!" Blaine lost his elation over the knowledge that his friend was alive. Tommy was doomed, anyway. They all were doomed. "Why did you bring us back?" he asked, turning away. Blaine felt it was better to have died in the jungle than to face this certainty of lingering torture. Ianito had triumphed; the universe was fated for utter annihilation and Ulana would suffer for weeks, perhaps months, before the final swift dissolution.

Understanding, Dantor smiled gravely. "My boy," he said, "we still live, and while we live there is hope. That is the reason I brought you back. Tiedus' message came to me as his spirit left the body and I made haste to come here as soon as the Zara released me and I knew the coast was clear."

"What hope can there be?" Appalled by the enormity of the disaster that threatened the solar system, certain of the ultimate fate that would be meted out to Tom Farley, and convinced of their own helplessness, Blaine was gloomily unenthusiastic.

"That remains to be seen, Carson. I confess it seems impossible of

remedy, but the situation must be faced and studied carefully. Insignificant as we are in the vastness of the cosmos, we may yet prove to be the ones to circumvent the mad plans of the Llotta and prevent the catastrophe which is inevitable if they succeed. We must not give up while we still breathe."

The indomitable spirit of the old scientist glistened in his keen eyes, and he stepped to the controls of the crystal sphere.

"He will not give up, oh Dantor," Ulana exclaimed loyally. "He is with us to the end. Do I speak truth, my Carson?"

Her arm slipped through his and he thrilled anew at her fragrant nearness. Give up? Never! Not with Ulana to fight for. Blaine nodded wordless agreement, silenced by the expression of Dantor's face as the crystal vibrated to a musically throbbing note.

There in the crystal ball was pictured a vast underground workshop somewhat like the one in the great dome through which they had entered the copper-clad world. In place of the telescope there was the butt of a gigantic cannon-like tube that towered and was lost in the shadows of the vaulted chamber. Tom Farley, moving jerkily and staring with glazed unseeing eyes, was working there with a cube of the glittering k-metal. In the open breech block of the tube was a

heaped-up cone of dry soil, the material they would disintegrate in producing the blast of electronic forces. Blaine groaned as his friend called for the equivalent of a milligram of radium. Though his voice was listless and his movements uncertain, Tommy knew what he was doing and was giving away the secret, powerless to resist the command Ianito had implanted in his completely subjective mind.

"Ah," Dantor breathed: "progressive annihilation of energy: a thing we never have accomplished. You excite ordinary material such as this dry soil by means of atoms exploded from this k-metal which is in turn excited by ordinary radium that can be used over and over as the primary excitant. Am I correct?"

"You are. There are precise ratios of atomic weights to be considered, of course, but it looks as if my friend is being extremely accurate in spite of his dazed condition. Man alive! There is enough material there to provide power for the entire planet Venus for a month!"

"And enough to start Antrid from her orbit," Dantor returned. "Enough to send her on her fatal journey sunward?"

"Only for the first acceleration. A vast amount of energy is needed, Carson, since the gravitational attraction of the planet you call

Jupiter is enormous. Antrid will be speeded up in its orbit and the increased centrifugal force will cause it to take up a new and larger orbit where the forces will equalize. Several charges will be required in order to free her entirely from the mother body."

"There's time then!" Blaine exclaimed excitedly. "What can we do to put a stop to the thing? Something to counteract this control by Ianito; to cause Tommy to err in his proportions."

"Yes, that would do it—temporarily at least," Dantor agreed, his brow wrinkled in thought; "and there are the invisible cloaks. It is a bare chance if you want to take it. I can show you the way to this underground laboratory, and, in invisibility, you might even be able to change the ratios yourself. Yes, yes, it is a very good idea." The scientist brightened in renewed hope.

"Of course I'll chance it. When do I start?"

Dantor grinned in appreciation and Ulana looked up at him starry-eyed. "I'm going with you," she stated simply.

"Not on your life! There'll be danger. I won't have it!"

"Nevertheless, I'm going. There's another cloak and besides the

danger would be greater if I were alone. Where you go I go, and if you die I die with you—gladly." She twined her fingers with his and gazed at him appealingly.

"Dantor! This can't be!" He turned to the scientist for support.

The aged scientist studied the two a little while, and then said quietly, "I'm afraid it is better as she wishes, Carson. I am unable to protect her, my boy, and there is no one else who might give her shelter. We are the last of the Rulans, she and I. The very last."

"Oh-h!" Ulana moaned, pale and distraught. "All—all are gone?"

"All, my dear. In his rage the Dictator destroyed the Tritu Deanu and the Tritu Raortu when he had finished here. Those were the last settlements remaining, you know. We alone are left behind, Ulana." Dantor bowed his head and the girl sobbed silently.

"Good Heavens!" Blaine Carson was aghast at the revelation. A monstrous deed, this last one of Ianito's. He was a fit master of a world gone mad. A monster in the twisted semblance of human form.

"He will be searching for you, oh Dantor," the girl said with sudden

conviction. She had mastered her emotions and was instantly alert to every angle of the situation.

"That is true," said the old man gravely. "For myself I have nothing to fear, of course. Though insanely jealous of my accomplishments, he maintains an armed truce with me. He dares not do otherwise as the Supreme Council is aware of his shortcomings and cognizant of my superior knowledge of science. But there is danger to you two. You must make haste."

A trembling of the ground beneath them lent added emphasis to his final words. A quick glance into the crystal told them that the initial charge was at work in the huge rocket-tube. The laboratory there at its base was in confusion indescribable, the workmen running hither and yon in the effort to escape the terrific heat that radiated from the red hot breech of the tube. They jammed the exits in their anxiety to be anywhere but near this monster source of energy whose pulsating roar drowned out all other sounds in the vast chamber.

Already Antrid was accelerating in velocity. Her vitals were wrenched and twisted, groaning in protest.

"Quick now!" Blaine was adjusting one of the invisible cloaks for Ulana. He'd have to take her with him. And a silent prayer for her

safety was on his lips.

Invisible now, and hand in hand, they followed Dantor through the deserted passageways to the lift which carried them quickly to the roof. A drumming sound came to their ears as they stood there looking up into the blackness above the blue-white lights of Antrid. Vibrating to the tremendous roar of the rocket-tube, the copper shell emitted a constantly increasing reverberation that was like a long drawn peal of thunder on Earth or Venus. It was awe-inspiring, that sonorous bombilation; deafening.

Dantor was fumbling with the mechanisms of the remote control which Tiedus had used in returning the basket lift to the car that had brought the two Earth men from Ilen-dar. Again and again he returned to his manipulations after peering anxiously upward. But the basket did not respond to the call. They were marooned atop the empty shell of the Tritu Anu!

"Carson! Ulana! Where are you?" the aged scientist shouted above the din, his face a tragic mask, his lips compressed with anxiety and disappointment.

They grasped him to reassure him, each taking a hand. Carson, placing his lips close to the old man's ear, inquired anxiously,

"What's the trouble?"

"The car does not respond. Something has happened to the motors, probably on account of the vibration. I can do nothing."

And then, piercingly through the thunderings of the copper shell, a voice broke in—Ianito's voice. "Dantor!" it shrieked. "At last I have found you. I need your help immediately. Wait there for the monorail."

Dantor gripped them tightly to enjoin silence. Ianito had located the scientist with the searching ray and was still watching and listening at his crystal. He seemed not to know that Blaine and Ulana were there.

"Very well, oh Ianito. I shall wait," Dantor shouted.

"It is good. There is important work to be done." Ianito's words trailed off into the maelstrom of sound that swirled about them.

"He's cut off," the scientist yelled. "There is but one chance now. You must come with me, depending on absolute silence and your cloaks to deceive them. It is the only way."

Ulana clung to him there in the terrifying bedlam and Blaine's

fingers strayed to the comforting butt of the ray pistol. Whatever happened there were a few charges left; blasts of energy that would serve at least to postpone the end for Ulana. Or, if worse came to worst—

The sudden rush of a monorail car high overhead interrupted his thoughts. "Close to me now!" Dantor shouted; "but have a care lest one of them touch you and discover—"

A cable-hung cage dropped swiftly to the roof and they crowded in beside the scientist. Quickly it whisked them aloft to the higher plane.

In the monorail car Blaine held the girl close, and they trod softly as they dodged the guard at the porthole and stepped into the passenger compartment. Two of Ianito's technical experts were there and a crew of at least a dozen of the green-bronze giants. Unseen by any, the couple tiptoed to the farthest corner of the compartment and took seats in a recessed section.

With a quick jerk and the rising whine of motors, the suspended vehicle started back in the direction of Ilen-dar. In earnest conversation with Ianito's engineers, Dantor affected an air of nonchalance that was artfully disarming. The Llotta suspected

nothing as the car continued on its way.

And then there came an ominous grinding sound from underneath the very seat occupied by the invisible fugitives. A puff of dense black smoke followed and Ulana coughed spasmodically, uncontrollably. They were coming now, two of the green-bronze ones, to investigate. There was no escape from this narrow space. And—Ulana was gone! She had slipped from his grasp in the coughing fit and he could not find her with his wildly searching hands. Another betraying cough over there. The green-bronze ones were between them. He saw one of them draw back in amazement, then clench his fingers and twist.

The ripping sound of torn material followed and the girl's head and startled face appeared: floating there, unsupported, her body and limbs as yet invisible. But they'd found her; she was lost!

Chapter 9: Ianito

Quickly stripping the protecting cloak from her body, the green-bronze one held the struggling girl gingerly but with a grip of iron. His eyes bulged from their sockets, and the other guard staggered backward with hands outstretched as if to ward off an evil spell that might be cast by this supernatural visitant.

Blaine thrust his arm through the folds of his coat, ray pistol in hand. A crazy laugh forced itself to his lips at sight of the detached member, stretched there, tensed, drifting in mid-air. The pistol prodded Ulana's captor viciously.

"Hands off of her!" the voice behind the lone arm was snarling. "Hands off, or I fire!"

The girl slipped to the floor in a heap as the amazed guard loosed his grip. And, in the same instant, the blue flame spurted. He had not intended to press the release; it was useless anyway to battle the entire outfit. But the blood lust was upon him and a savage joy in the destruction of this beast who had dared lay hands on Ulana impelled him to turn on the other. Blindly he swung, clubbing the pistol and beating in the ghastly face that wobbled there upon the spineless, superstition-bound body.

Others were coming then, hundreds of them it seemed. The pale face of Dantor appeared for an instant in the background, through the red haze that was blinding him. He only knew he was fighting desperately, viciously, and against impossible odds. The satisfying crunch of his left fist against a leering green-bronze face was followed by an excruciating pain as one of his knuckles was driven back. Hardly knowing he had pressed the release of the ray, he was mildly astonished to see that two of the guards were enveloped in the blue vapor. Scintillant tiny sunbursts within the blue. Two less of those devils! His pistol was empty and he flung it into a grinning face; he saw the blood spurt and the face change shape, crushed beyond human resemblance.

He was down then, gasping for breath against the floor plates. The weight upon him was enormous; crushing. If only they'd quit squirming so ... and pounding ... reminded him of his old football days ... some scrimmage!

Abruptly came the blankness of insensibility.

Dimly at first, in the painful throbbings of returning consciousness, Blaine knew he was in one of the Llott workshops where machines hummed and pounded and where many operatives were busily engaged. A cool hand stroked his aching brow and he opened his eyes. Ulana! They had spared her. Alert on the instant, he was acutely aware of the babbling of voices close at hand. Ianito was there, at the base of the huge telescope, talking with Dantor, his voice raised excitedly. The monorail crew stood by, and he noted with grim satisfaction that several of them were as badly damaged as he could wish.

His gaze returned to the sweet face that bent so near. Weakly he drew the golden head to his breast; held it there a moment, thinking, hoping, planning. Then he sat up on the edge of the low couch on which he had been placed, regarding her anxiously. Evidently they had not harmed her—as yet.

Ianito had dismissed the green-bronze ones and was approaching the couch. Dantor was with him, lagging a little and pressing a finger to his lips; shaking his head gravely to warn them. They must not speak of the plans made in the Tritu Anu; must not talk.

The Dictator was regarding them now with hard eyes. But it seemed almost that something of admiration or respect, something of

human-like emotion was in his cold stare.

"Hah!" he grunted, at last. "These two are in love, Dantor. It is as you explained. It is good, and fits in with my plans to a nicety. I shall spare the life of the Earth man on account of his knowledge of the inner planets; I can use him later. The girl I shall spare for a different reason, and that fits in with my plans as well."

What did he mean by that last crack, the grinning devil? A sinister intent was there, behind his smooth talk. Blaine half rose from his seat in quick anger, but the girl's gentle touch on his arm restrained him. She depended on him now and he'd have to go easy until the proper time came.

"Impetuous, aren't they?" Ianito was saying, "these Earth men. A characteristic that must get them into much trouble, even in their own world."

Laughing at him, this hell-hound! Blaine gritted his teeth.

The Dictator addressed him directly. "You are a fortunate young man," he drawled sarcastically. "You have slain several of my trusted retainers and by so doing have forfeited your right to life. But Ianito is forgiving. Mechanized, you will be of value to me when the great

day comes. And it pleases me that you are so deeply attached to the Rulan maiden; it pleases me greatly."

"Why?" Blaine snapped, a great rage consuming him. Only the pressure of Ulana's fingers held him back. He would have to control his temper or he'd make a mess of things.

"Because, my dear Carson, it will so displease the Zara."

With this cryptic remark he turned on his heel and left them. A number of his technical experts awaited him at the eyepiece of the great telescope.

Dantor whispered swiftly before following him, "Keep up your courage, Carson. A way may yet be found."

The group by the telescope was an excited one. Something had occurred which must be of great moment. It came to Blaine in a flash that the reverberations of the copper shell of Antrid had ceased. The rocket-tube was silent.

"I don't know why we shouldn't be in on this," he said to the girl. "Let's go over there and see what it's all about."

One of the astronomers was reporting to Ianito, referring to a sheet

of calculations he held in nervous fingers. "Our orbital velocity has increased greatly," he was saying, "and the new path lies at an average distance of eighty-three erds from the mother planet. According to my figures it will require six more charges to free us from her pull and another to redirect us toward our destination."

Eighty-three erds! Practically a million Earth miles. Already they had swung out to a new orbit between those of Ganymede and Callisto. And what of the effect on the other satellites? Blaine listened carefully as the astronomer continued.

"Perturbations in the movements of the other bodies in our own system are marked, and, in the case of the first satellite, have proved disastrous. It has commenced its inward journey and soon will have fallen into the gaseous envelope of the mother body. But this need occasion us no concern; it is small and there will be stabilization of the others after the second charge is fired."

Colossal conceit! What amazing ignorance or oversight of natural laws! These Llott scientists could see no farther than their snub noses, or at least no farther than the satellite system of Jupiter. And Ianito was complimenting the astronomer on his good work!

The group broke up now and the Dictator turned to the controls of

his crystal sphere. Blaine and Ulana caught the view of the underground laboratory at the base of the great rocket-tube.

All was as it had been when they first saw this chamber. The breech of the huge cannon had cooled and its massive block was open. Tommy was there, fishing the radium capsule from the powdery residue in order that it might be used in exciting the next charge. A mechanical precision marked his every motion.

"It is good," Ianito grunted, flicking a lever that cut off the view. "We are progressing nicely, thanks to the generosity of the Earth beings in providing this k-metal."

His sarcastic grin was infuriating. Dantor cast a warning look in the Earth man's direction. It wouldn't do to lock horns with this self-satisfied despot; at any rate, not now. Blaine's mien was expressionless as he faced him.

The view in the crystal was another familiar one when Ianito made a quick readjustment: the throne room in the palace of the Zara! The Dictator snorted when he saw that Clyone was reclining lazily on her golden couch, submitting graciously to the ministrations of her handmaidens.

"Faithless creature!" he snarled. "Harlot! Parricide! But at last Ianito will have his revenge."

The hate in his voice and in those terrible glass-hard eyes was devastating in its intensity: implacable, relentless. Yet Blaine could not down the exultant feeling that came to him when he saw that this monster could suffer, too.

"What's the matter?" he sneered. "Did she throw you down?" He could have bitten off his tongue as he spoke. Ulana gasped.

And if Ianito had been in a rage before he was a madman now. Despite his contempt of the misshapen creature, Blaine quailed before the murderous glare that answered his rash words. But the Dictator was master of himself, at that; his lips tightened in a thin line and he held his peace. He actually smiled after a moment, the devil, a smile, though, of evil triumph. He turned once more to the crystal and switched on the sound mechanism.

"Clyone," he called, in velvety voice; "it is Ianito."

She looked up, startled, her chalky face gone whiter still. Her jeweled fingers fluttered to the smooth throat.

"I hear you," she replied shakily. "What do you wish of me."

"Nothing much—this time. I have visitors who request an audience with you, oh Clyone. Can you see them at once?"

"Who—who are they?" Her eyes widened at his insinuating tone.

"An Earth man—Carson—and the Rulan maiden who is to become his mate." Ianito chuckled evilly as he watched her expression.

"Carson?" she whispered, her wild eyes softening, "He—he lives?" Black hatred replaced the wondering joy that had glowed in her face. She was thinking of the statement regarding the Rulan maiden. "Why, yes," she snapped, suddenly very much alert; "I can see them. Send them immediately."

The Dictator chortled as he switched off the power. Dantor paled and looked away. So this was his scheme! He was sending Ulana to certain death at the hands of the leopard woman. Blaine bit his lips until they bled. If only he had one of their ray pistols again. If he had —

Ianito was at his side, whispering. But he couldn't see him; the devil had donned one of Dantor's invisible cloaks. Something hard pressed

deep into his ribs.

"I shall be with you," the Dictator told him, "but she will not know. It is necessary, of course, that I watch over you in order that your deportment be suitable to the occasion. The death ray of Antrid is ready in my hands. Proceed, you and the Rulan maid, and see to it that you give her every attention while in the Zara's presence."

Dantor interposed an objection, "But, Ianito, you promised to spare them. I learned to love these two and want no harm to come their way."

"I keep my promise, oh Dantor. Ianito will not harm them."

"But the Zara."

"What Clyone does is none of my concern. Silence, Dantor; I command it! You will remain here." The voice of the Dictator cut like a knife.

The old Rulan scientist bowed his head and turned away. Good old Dantor! He'd done all in his power to help them. This was the end; not a question of doubt. Blaine Carson drew the Rulan maiden fiercely to him. This Clyone might meet some opposition if she

attempted to wreak her spite on Ulana; she would meet it. There was no need for Ianito to ask that he pay every attention to the lovely, frightened girl who clung to him so trustingly.

They were in the lift then, dropping swiftly into the palace beneath the great dome that topped Antrid.

"This Clyone," Ulana whispered, "she has great power of enticement, my Carson. I fear for your loss—to me. She will take you from me, and I shall be alone—or dead. Death would be the better."

"Never!" said Blaine huskily. "Never, my dear. She has no power over me; nor will I permit her to bring suffering to you."

Ianito laughed then, an ugly cackle that came out of the unseen.

Chapter 10: Clyone and Ulana

The Zara received them in the throne room, alone. Blaine hesitated as he crossed the threshold, Ulana's trembling fingers tightly clasped in his own. The quick prod of the invisible ray pistol warned him that Ianito was at his heels.

Clyone uncurled her sinuous, black-sheathed body and rose to her feet as they neared the dais.

"Welcome, oh Carson," she purred. "Clyone has mourned you as dead, but she mourns no longer. A kind fate has returned you."

The gold-flecked eyes were all for him; it was as if she did not see his companion. Blaine fought the spell of her with all that was in him. He did not reply.

"Come to me, Carson," she pleaded, her lashes lowered. "Leave this Rulan girl and come to me."

"Where I go she goes," he replied firmly.

"Very well then," said the Zara meekly, "bring her with you. I would converse with her as with you."

Something new, this was: a gentleness Blaine had never thought the leopard woman could exhibit, even in sham. And her eyes, when she raised them, still were gentle. She extended a white arm and smiled provocatively. If this was a ruse, if she meant harm to the Rulan maid, her acting was superb. And, from what he had seen of the woman previously, he was almost convinced of her sincerity. A nature like hers was incapable of successful dissimulation. Still, he was suspicious and he shielded Ulana with his body as they came up to the throne. The Zara studied them in silence for a while. Then she spoke.

"Let me look at you, my dear," she said to the Rulan maiden.

And Ulana, unafraid, faced her boldly. His muscles tensed, Blaine watched every movement of the Zara's straying fingers. But her gaze was direct and kindly; there was no dissembling here. It was not the same Clyone he had previously known.

"You are very beautiful, Ulana," she said softly. "Do you love this Earth man very much?"

"I do, Your Majesty."

"And you, Carson, you love her—very much?"

His answer was wordless. A sudden lump in his throat choked back the vigorous affirmative and he merely nodded, mute, as he enfolded the slight form of Ulana in his arms.

"Carson—are you sure?" Clyone was pleading, her eyes compelling; tender. Ulana drew away from his arms, waiting.

What had come over the leopard woman? She was a creature of mad vagaries, he knew, and yet this was the most convincing mood he had seen. Despite his knowledge of her past; despite his better judgment, he was drawn toward her. A step, and then quick revulsion of feeling. He recoiled and turned swiftly to Ulana.

Clyone saw and understood. Her tender mood was over in a flash and she crouched there, terrible jealous eyes fixed on the Rulan maiden. She extended a white arm with jeweled fingers, pointing. Blaine swung quickly, brushing the arm aside just as that intangible something flashed from her hand. The energy of the black disks! It had missed Ulana by inches, but crashed home—on something!

A scream of terror rang out in the chamber, and there on the floor a dozen paces from the dais the thing that had been Ianito wriggled under the heap of whirring black things that suddenly covered the invisible form. He wriggled and then lay still as the angry buzzing of

the black destroyers rose in triumphant, discordant song.

"Ianito!" the Zara exclaimed, thunderstruck. "He was here?"

"He was," Blaine assured her in an awed voice, "invisible, oh Zara, in a cloak contrived by Dantor, the Rulan scientist." Then blind rage overcame him. She had tried to kill Ulana; before his eyes! "You she-devil!" he roared. "I've half a mind to choke the vile life from your tainted body. Damn you! May the heat devils of Mercury burn and sear and shrivel you in everlasting torment."

She cowered as if he had struck her, and, unaccountably, he was ashamed. Cursing her like a schoolboy and using the language of the lower class Venerians!

"Please, Carson, please," she moaned; "do it. Choke me if you will and release me from my torment. I am yours to do with as you please." Throwing back her proud head, she bared her throat.

Blaine took a step forward, his knees weak beneath him.

"Carson!" It was Ulana, her hand soft on his arm.

He drew the back of his hand across his eyes. This was madness! But was ever a woman so deserving of death? Incomprehensible

half-animal creature, she sat there rocking to and fro, waiting.

"No!" he said. "No! Only let us go in peace, Clyone. Your sins be on your own head. Your realization of them is punishment enough."

"Wait!" Controlling herself now, she rose once more, and her face was transfigured. Almost it seemed that she was happy. "Wait!" she repeated. "You are free to go when I have finished, but first Clyone wishes to bid you farewell."

They faced her in silent wonderment.

"Ianito is gone," she continued, "and the Llotta are helpless without him, unless I take over their leadership in fact. He was my master, I admit. But Clyone is able to carry on with the plans he conceived; able, but no longer willing. Clyone is abdicating. It but remains for you, Carson, to put a stop to this thing they are doing down there at the great rocket-tube. You can do it, I am certain. Go now; and think not too badly of Clyone when you have gone. Farewell."

With a quick motion she raised her fingers to her lips, then tossed a small vial crashing to the floor.

"Carson—she has taken something," Ulana stifled a hysterical sob as

she spoke. "Go to her. It is the least you can do."

Blaine caught the leopard woman in his arms and lowered her gently to the luxurious cushions of the throne she had occupied for so long a time, a queen in name only. Already the gold-flecked eyes were glazing and they begged him piteously.

"Kiss me." Her lips formed the words, but no sound came.

Ulana was there, on her knees and crying. "Carson, you must," she urged him.

The spirit of Clyone, with its great burden of evil and some little of good, left the beautiful body as the Earth man pressed his lips to hers. An unwonted smile, placid and content, wreathed the still features.

The Zara was no more.

Stunned and shaken by what they had seen, they hurried from the chamber of death. Blaine located the lift and they were quickly carried to the laboratory.

Dantor was there, working with the astronomers, and Blaine drew him aside, whispering the story in his ear in swift disjointed

sentences. The aged scientist could scarcely credit his senses.

The thrumming of the copper shell to the energy of the second rocket-tube charge came but faintly to their ears in this place, since the vacuum of outer space surrounded the great domed structure. But the vibration and quakings of the satellite were transmitted to the floorplates on which they stood. They knew that Antrid was swinging ever outward from the mother planet.

"You must do it alone," Dantor was saying; "you and Ulana. I have no control over these Llotta. I am here only on sufferance of Ianito, and Ianito is no more. But they know it not. These in the dome think he is with you now, cloaked in invisibility. The tale of the cloaks has been broadcast. You are safe for the present and can descend to the base of the rocket with impunity. Ianito's name is the password. And here is a ray pistol, fully charged; two of them. He left them in his desk. Go now, quickly."

"The way—how do we get there?" Blaine's fingers closed lovingly over the butts of the pistols and he thrust them in his pockets.

"Oh yes. The lift—the one that carried you to the palace—its shaft ends deep down beneath the natural surface of Antrid in a tunnel where a moving platform will carry you to your friend. May your

God and the gods of ancient Antrid be with you."

Once more they were in the cage of the lift, dropping with breath-taking speed. Down into the bowels of the satellite they sped and it seemed the shaft would never end.

Then they were in the tunnel Dantor had told them about, smooth walls speeding past as the swiftly moving platform carried them on. The great arched chamber opened before them at last and they saw that the workmen were returning to their tasks. The huge breech of the rocket-tube had cooled to a dimly visible red, the second charge having done its work.

Hands in his pockets and walking stiffly as if mechanized, the Earth man presented himself before the guard at the entrance, Ulana pressed close to his side. He feigned the hypnotic state.

"I-an-i-to," he repeated in jerky syllables, acting the part, "he—sent us—with message—for Farley."

The guard grinned. Even here the story of the Earth man and the Rulan maiden was known. The strange leniency of Ianito in permitting them to remain together was the topic of the day. He waved them through with an indulgent gesture. Ianito knew what he

was about, and would have his little joke—later.

Tom Farley was there, waiting with the Llott scientists until the breech block should have cooled sufficiently to permit them to open it and prepare the third charge. A flicker of recognition in his glazed eyes told Blaine he was not altogether gone, but Tommy gave no other outward sign. Perhaps with Ianito no longer alive, the mental control would become ineffective.

They had not long to wait, for the breech was water-jacketed and cooled rapidly. Blaine puttered around with unfamiliar test tubes and retorts, watching for a chance to get a word with Tommy in private. He was almost certain that his friend was recovering. Ulana sat there on a greasy bench, regarding the scene with anxious eyes. She was a brick: game as they made them.

Tommy was beside him then, weighing a heap of the dry soil for the next charge. "Are you all right?" Blaine whispered.

But Tom Farley stared back with not a glimmer of comprehension: He was still a victim of the mechanizing process of the Llotta. With a carefully planned but seemingly careless gesture, Blaine slid back the weight on the scale arm. This charge would be short of the proper ratio of dry soil. He wondered what the effect would be.

One of the Llott scientists came over then with the radium capsule, and Tommy attached it to the clamp that would hold it in contact with the cube of k-metal. The dry soil was shoveled into the breech block by the unsuspecting Llotta and the thing was ready for the placing of the excitant.

The great breech block swung home and a siren shrieked. All work in the laboratory was suspended and the workmen stood around in expectant silence. Blaine found himself worrying as to the possible result of his tampering.

"I saw you!" Tommy hissed then in his ear. "There'll be hell to pay now. We gotta beat it."

Good old Tommy! He'd recovered after all. He, too, had been shamming at the last. Blaine saw they were unobserved and thrust one of the pistols in his hand.

"Now!" his friend rasped. "Before they get wise. Grab the girl and we'll make a break for the tunnel entrance: over there."

Ulana took in the situation at a glance and was at his side. They moved swiftly in the direction of the entrance through which they had come.

A terrific roar came from the base of the rocket tube and the Llotta broke into excited screechings. Something different about it this time. There was a terrible menacing note in the jarring thump which preceded the roar. A muffled boom high in the five mile depth of rock strata above them spelled disaster of an unknown and terrifying nature. The breech of the tube was white with heat in an instant of time.

Pandemonium broke loose now and the Earth men were running for the exit to the lift, covering their retreat with brandished ray pistols. Ulana, brave girl, ran alongside, swinging a pinch bar she had picked up, ready to help.

Chapter 11: Disaster

The great crystal sphere on the central pedestal was ablaze with the scarlet warning signal of the Supreme Council. A sonorous voice from its depths boomed out above the clamor.

"Kill them! Kill the Earth men," it roared. "The Zara is dead and Ianito has vanished. Denari has mounted the throne, and it is he who commands you. Kill the traitors!"

But the Llotta and the green-bronze guards needed no command from the new ruler of Antrid. These devils from Earth had tampered with the last rocket-tube charge; probably had caused serious damage to the tube itself. They must die.

Only the guards were armed, and the Llotta swarmed so closely in pursuit of the fugitives that it was impossible for them to use their ray pistols. At the great iron gate that now closed the exit stood the guard who had admitted them. Tommy's pistol spurted blue flame and he was enveloped by the destroying energy.

Ulana screamed as a Llott grasped her, wrenching the iron bar from her hands. Blaine covered the intervening distance in a bound and his fist crashed to the fellow's jaw, snapping back his head and lifting

him off his feet. He crashed to the floor plates an inert heap and the Earth man recovered the pinch bar.

Pocketing his pistol, he swung the bar with both hands in mighty circles that took terrible toll of the Llotta. They fell back before the onslaught of the infuriated Terrestrial, leaving eight of their number dead or dying with crashed skulls and broken ribs and arms.

"Open the gate, Tommy," he shouted. "Use your pistol on the lock if you have to." A guard was coming at him and he ducked to the floor as the blue flame crackled, singeing the hair from his head and blistering the scalp as it spent its charge in fusing a cross member from one of the steel columns nearby.

He fired from under his prostrate body and the guard thrashed his arms wildly in the blue mist, then stiffened to a sparkling vanishing figure within the dissipating vapor.

A gas grenade burst at his side and Blaine sprang to his feet, running from the spreading sulphurous cloud. The gate was open and its lock dropped molten metal. Good old Tommy!

The poison gas hid them from their pursuers for the moment and they were through the gate, all three.

"Get back!" Blaine shouted: "the gas!" He held his breath and closed his eyes as he slammed the gate and wedged it with the pinch bar he still carried. That would hold them for a while.

The gas was upon him and his skin flamed scorching hot from the contact. He mustn't breathe: mustn't open his eyes. He groped there in the scalding vapor, blindly. Tommy had him by the wrist then, dragging him away. Ulana was calling somewhere there in the darkness. His lungs were bursting. And then he knew the air was pure, and he exhaled the long pent breath noisily, and inhaled deeply.

Eyes smarting and head reeling, he saw Ulana through a haze of dancing smoke wisps he knew were illusory. She was safe, thank God! They were on the moving platform then, on the return side, and his strength was returning. Narrow escape, he'd had, from that lung-rotting gas. Ulana smiled happily when his vision cleared.

The speeding platform carried them swiftly toward the lift that had brought them down. What if the lift would not operate? This Denari might well have shut off the power or even returned the cage to the upper end of the shaft.

"Boy, oh boy," Tommy was saying, "you sure did gum up the works. Know what happened?"

"Plenty, from the look of things," Blaine smiled grimly.

"I'll say. You cut down the dry soil ratio a third. Not sure of the exact reaction, but the expansion was too rapid. Explosion followed before the air could be driven from the tube. I'll bet the big cannon was wrecked somewhere overhead. Boy, what a blast!"

As if the last sentence were a prophecy, there came a terrific jar that twisted the platform violently from under them. They were thrown headlong and an awe-inspiring rumbling came up from the vitals of Antrid. An earthquake! The tortured satellite could not withstand the strains set up by the tremendous reactive force of the rocket-tube. The lights snuffed out and the platform came to a grinding stop. One of the underground power plants was out of commission and they were trapped here in the stifling darkness.

"Nice fix we're in now!" Tommy grunted where he had fallen.

Blaine, having located Ulana, was relieved to find that she was unharmed. "Yes," he said slowly; "but there's one thing sure: they can't follow us here unless they walk."

"Why can't we walk?" Ulana asked with forced cheerfulness. "It isn't far now."

"Oh, we can walk all right; we'll have to. And here's hoping we get somewhere." Tommy, at least, was undaunted so far.

It was their only chance now. Blaine held fast to the girl as they felt their way along the smooth tunnel wall, and Tom Farley, behind them there in the darkness, kept up a running fire of small talk that was utterly irrelevant. Nothing could keep that Irishman down.

After what seemed like miles of steady plodding they glimpsed a light ahead. They quickened their pace. It was the open door at the base of the shaft, and the cage of the lift was there, fully lighted and waiting. Denari had not shut off the power after all. But of course! It came to Blaine in a flash; this was a private shaft, used by Ianito in his clandestine visits to the palace of the Zara and for his own use in descending to the sub-surface chamber at the base of the rocket-tube. Denari did not even know it existed.

Strange they had not been followed. Surely the Llotta could have forced that gate back there in a comparatively short time. A mass of falling rock, shaken loose by the temblor that cut off their light and stopped the moving platform, must have closed the tunnel.

They were in the cage now, shooting aloft with smooth acceleration. Tommy fidgeted and paced the floor in the narrow confines like a caged animal.

"Lord, man," he said, after a while, "what I wouldn't give for a cigarette!"

"Is that all you can think of?" Blaine was sarcastic. His own nerves were on edge. They were nearing the upper end of the shaft. "Try to do a little thinking about what's going to happen up there above Ilendar. We've got to do some tall figuring and some swift scrapping before we're through."

"Sure." Tommy shrugged his shoulders. "There'll be a lot of fireworks, I guess. But I wish I had a smoke just the same."

Ulana pouted. They spoke in English and she did not understand. But the expression of their faces forced a laugh to her lips, one of those silvery tinkles that caught at Blaine's heart strings. All that mattered now was to see her to safety—and happiness.

The cage slowed up and came to rest as the automatic control of its gravity energy functioned. The door rolled back and Blaine thrust his head through the opening, pistol in hand.

There on the floor of the corridor that led to the great dome room was a crumpled figure. Dantor! It couldn't be that they had slain him! Blaine was on his knees by the body, raising the blood-smeared head with gentle hands. A deep gash extended from over the right temple up into the scalp and the skull was crushed; a mortal wound. But the doughty heart of the aged scientist still beat on, weakly, but with determination. He opened his eyes and smiled.

"Ah, you have come at last," he sighed. "I have waited here to warn you and advise you."

"Easy now." Blaine straightened the helpless limbs and cradled the drooping head on his knees. Ulana was beside him, bravely holding back the sobs that were in her throat.

"I saw—in the crystal," Dantor whispered. "And Denari struck me down when I expressed relief at your escape. Carson—Ulana—Farley—you can escape if you do as I say. Antrid is doomed; the incorrectly proportioned charge burst the rocket-tube in several places and tore the muzzle asunder where it projected from the copper shell of our world. With the explosion at the muzzle a huge section of the copper casing was blown away and the atmosphere of Antrid is now escaping rapidly into the vacuum of space...."

Dantor closed his eyes, and a spasm of pain twisted his features.

Tommy expelled a shuddering breath, solemnly expressive.

The aged scientist fought off the grim spectre valiantly. He patted Ulana's hand as his weak voice resumed. "You will take care of her I know, Carson. Take her with you to your own world; make her happy." He fell silent once more.

"But how?" Blaine whispered.

"Oh yes, I am forgetting. The side passage—next one on the right—it leads to a storeroom of the oxygen helmets and vacuum-tight suits in which you can step forth from the adjoining airlock. Your space ship is there ... unharmed.... In it you will be able to return ... and...."

But Dantor's spirit had fled the pain-racked body. Blaine closed his lids and stretched him on the hard metal floor, crossing the thin hands on his breast. Ulana sobbed openly for a moment and then bowed her head in silence.

"The last of the Rulans," Blaine said softly, looking down at all that was mortal of the Rulan scientist.

"No," Ulana whispered, "I am the last, my Carson."

"You'll become a good American, sweetheart," he said gently. "That is, if we get away from here." There was no time to be lost, at that. At any moment this Denari might find them. "Come," he begged, drawing her from the body, "we must hurry."

Following the passage indicated by Dantor they came at last to an open door. A noticeable draft blew outward and Blaine thought grimly of the scenes that were being enacted throughout all Antrid. The air that made life possible was escaping. And the news broadcasts from Ilen-dar would have notified the entire population by this time. There would be rioting, panics, murder and suicide in the cities of the accursed Llotta and in their subject countries. A frantic effort of the scientists to stop the gap would avail them nothing: it was an impossible task now. The construction of the great shell had been a different matter; there was some natural atmosphere remaining in those days. And, finally, they would suffocate, every last one of them. They'd die miserably, purple of face and with swollen tongues protruding.

The open door led to a railed-in balcony that looked out over the dome room. Machines still hummed there but the place was deserted save for a few scattered corpses: probably those of the Llotta who had objected when Denari usurped the throne.

A second door opened from the balcony into the store room of the moon-suits. At least these helmeted contraptions resembled the so-called moon-suits used by inhabitants of the inner planets when they visited a body having no atmosphere.

Ulana needed some assistance with the bulky equipment, and then Blaine climbed into another of the suits and locked his helmet. A moment later they were in the air-lock with Tommy, who had attired himself more quickly and was operating the controls.

At the outer hatch they waited until the air pressure reduced to a practically complete vacuum. Their suits distended ludicrously now by the pressure within, they unclamped the hatch and stepped out to the surface of the great copper shell. It vibrated under their feet to the blast from the huge gap that was not five miles distant.

The RX8 was there as Dantor had said, a slim tapered, cylinder that gleamed, a thing of beauty, in the reflected light of Jupiter which now was millions of miles distant. The sun was not visible and the light of the mother planet cast long shadows on the copper plates. Pelting ice particles clattered resoundingly against the metal helmets: frozen moisture from the escaping air of Antrid.

Blaine cried out in surprise; then remembered his companions could

not hear him. There were moving shadows over there, four of them, nearing the hull of the RX8. The Llotta had beat them to it. Denari, no doubt, intending to escape with a chosen few of his subjects. He broke into a run through the now blinding hail storm. He would have to head them off; else, Ulana was lost, they all were lost.

Chapter 12: The Last of Antrid

Tommy was running beside him now and Ulana was not far behind. They too had seen the danger. If they could not reach the vessel ahead of the Llotta; would not fight them off and gain possession, it was all off. They'd die here, horribly, on the roof of Antrid.

And the ray pistols were useless: they could not be fired inside the ballooning fabric of their suits without destroying it and themselves. There were only the hooks that were attached to the bulging sleeves —iron hooks for lifting—but these were heavy and sharp pointed. They might be of some use, at that.

Once they were completely blinded by a deluge of ice particles, Blaine could see neither the RX8 nor the waddling figures of the Llotta. He clung to his companions by means of the hooks, interlocking his with theirs, and waited for the storm to ease off. If ever it would! Pressing the thick glass window of his helmet against that of Ulana's, he saw that her eyes were wide with terror. But she smiled bravely and nodded encouragement. What a girl!

There was a momentary clearing a little way from the white wall and he saw the hull of the ship, a dim shape that loomed suddenly distinct and near. They dashed for the open port, still holding

together.

One of the bulging, helmeted Llotta had reached the port and was scrambling inside. Blaine loosed himself and pounced on him, swinging one of his hooks in a sweeping, clawing arc. It caught in the fabric of the fellow's suit, ripping a foot-long slit. Like a punctured ballon it deflated and became a shriveled, clinging thing. The Llott hung there over the rim of the port, instantly suffocated and frozen stiff in the vacuum and intense cold of space as the air and heat of the suit was dissipated.

Blaine dragged the rigid body from the opening and flung it to the white powdered copper surface. Wheeling, he saw that another of the Llotta had engaged Tommy. Two of them: in fact, there were three swollen figures in that mix-up. And the fourth was advancing on a smaller figure that turned and ran. Ulana! In a flash he was after them. Tom Farley would have to look out for himself, poor devil. With two of them against him, the outcome was dubious.

And then came a second snow-like deluge of white particles. He stumbled on, groping blindly; slipping, sliding in the precarious footing. It was ankle deep now, that powdery carpet of ice particles. Oh God, if that Llott devil got Ulana! He groaned aloud, a hideous mournful echo in the confines of the helmet. Groping, staggering

there in the white silence, he gave up hope. The white-carpeted shell of Antrid heaved mightily from the force of some new concussion within, and threw Blaine scrambling.

Crawling now, feeling his way over the shuddering surface, he saw a dim huddled mass there in the pelting rain of ice. Moving, it was! Two bloated figures, one large and one small, rolling over and over: Ulana and the Llott who had chased her! He was there in one mad scramble and had dragged the fellow from her; was astride the rubbery inflated covering, clawing and tearing. The thing collapsed and went flat between his knees. He saw the mist of moisture-laden escaping air; felt the quick swelling and the jarring collapse as internal organs exploded from the atmospheric pressure inside the brute's body. Nauseated, he crawled away from the dead, grotesque-looking figure.

Ulana was on her knees, endeavoring to get to her feet. She had not been harmed, thanks to his good fortune in finding them. But where was the RX8? In the awful white silence, broken only by the eery patter of the ice particles on helmets and fabric, all sense of direction was lost. Through the double thickness of helmet lenses he looked into Ulana's eyes: for the last time, he thought.

And then the white shroud lifted once more. The ship was there, not

a hundred yards distant! Tommy still battled one of the Llotta, desperately circling the wary, grotesquely bobbing figure and swinging those terrible slashing hooks. The other was down, almost covered with white. Out of the picture, that one, but the remaining Llott was giving his friend a tough time of it. With the girl clinging to him, their arms hooked fast, he scuttled over the treacherous, ice-powdered copper. He had to get there quickly, and help.

Tom Farley slipped and fell heavily. The Llott was on him in a flash and they struggled madly there in splashings of white that hid them from view for a moment. Then one of them was up and the other lay still, a surprisingly shrunken and motionless figure.

The victor was coming at him then, bloated arms lashing out in swift, vicious circles. He had got Tommy, the damned swine! Blaine met his rush with a flying tackle that brought him down crashing. He lay still, the devil, knocked out probably by the metal helmet contacting with his skull. With arm poised for that slashing swing that would send him into eternity, Blaine peered through the lens of his helmet. His heart stopped beating and the upraised arm fell limp. This was no Llott: it was Tom Farley! Good Lord, he would have killed him in another second!

He tried to shake him; to bring him to. But he couldn't get hold of

the bulging suit anywhere without danger of slashing it with one of those hooks. What if that fall had been fatal! Ulana was at his side now and he stared at her, white-faced, trembling in his uncertainty and horror.

And then Tommy opened his eyes. They saw him shake his head to clear it and then he, too, stared in horror. How close a call! Friend killing friend, out here in the air-less cold on the shivering shell of the dying alien world!

They helped him to his feet and through the entrance manhole. His mind awhirl with emotion, Blaine saw that Ulana was inside and then followed as in a dream. He bolted the outer cover and turned the valve that would admit air to the lock. Soon they would be inside. With their protecting coverings discarded there would be the fresh air of the interior; light; warmth. Safety for Ulana. Away from the copper-clad world, they'd be on their way—home.

A little later, Blaine Carson sat at the controls of the RX8, Ulana at his side. Tommy was below, polishing and oiling and fondling his beloved machines. The surface of Antrid was visible through the viewing port, twenty miles beneath them and receding rapidly. Swinging in its new orbit, Antrid was gasping its last.

Over there, a few miles to the east, there spouted a column of white vapor that rose from a heaped up crater of ice which extended in a circle now many miles in diameter. Heavily laden with moisture as it was, the artificial atmosphere of Antrid provided a vast storm of frozen particles as it escaped into the absolute zero of space. For many days this would continue and the pressure within would drop gradually, down, down, until the air was so rare it would no longer sustain life. And there was no hope of repairing the break: the mountain of ice prevented getting at it from outside, and the rush of air from within made the handling of patch plates and brazing torches impossible. Besides, an area of supporting columns of more than a mile diameter had been wrecked by the blast of the rocket-tube. It would require an Earth year to make such a repair, even if they could retain that atmosphere. Antrid was done for, this time.

Abruptly, Blaine turned his head from the port and gave his attention to the controls. The RX8 pointed her nose upward, away from this terrible world of disaster and death—homeward bound. With a tremendous blast from the stern rocket-tubes she headed swiftly into the heavens. A thousand miles, five, ten, they shot into space with ever increasing acceleration.

And then a blazing orb was visible off to one side of the swiftly receding globe that was Antrid. Through the floor ports it shone, casting cheerful rays upward to the ceiling where they made a patchwork pattern of the gleaming metal.

"The sun," Ulana breathed, in awe. "I—I've never seen it, my Carson. It is most beautiful."

He drew her to him tenderly. "You'll see it every day, dear," he whispered, "when we're home."

Home—a wonderful thought! He'd not hoped to see it again; hadn't dared to since Antarro showed his hand back there in the asteroid belt. And now it was a reality. He was going home, and with him he was taking—Ulana.

"You—you think they will approve of me?" she was saying as he sent blasts from the steering rockets to swing them around on a new course sunward. "Your people, I mean. They will approve of your choice, my Carson?"

Anxiety showed in her wide-eyed gaze and she drew closer as if fearful of losing him.

If only she knew! If only he had words to tell her!

"Approve of you!" he said huskily. "Lord, girl, they'll love you! But not as I love you. It is the biggest thing—"

Tommy's discreet cough came from the head of the companionway. Blaine turned to glare savagely. His friend was standing there, grinning like an idiot and extending a paper-wrapped package.

"Look," he exclaimed guilelessly: "cigarettes. I found them, a whole carton."

"Well, I'll be damned!" Blaine exploded, careful that he spoke in English. "All you think of, all you've talked about since we left the vessel, is your hankering for a cigarette. For God's sake, get out of here and go smoke yourself to death."

But Tommy was advancing, still grinning, still extending the package. "Come on, old kid, have one," he insisted. "It'll do you good; quiet your nerves."

And his friend dropped a tantalizing eyelid. In spite of his annoyance Blaine was forced to laugh. "Oh, all right," he said, reaching for the package of smokes; "I'll take one. Just to please you. But, beat it

then, will you?"

Swaggering as he went and casting knowing glances over his shoulder, he was gone. Great little Irishman, Tommy: always smiling, always there in a pinch, never worried, he was the best friend a man could have. They'd catch hell when they got back, for losing a part of their precious cargo. Those miserly k-metal people wouldn't give them credit for salvaging nine-tenths of the stuff (luckily only about a tenth had been removed by the Llotta): they'd only cry about the amount that was lost. And Tom Farley would laugh it off: kid them out of it.

Ulana was smiling as if she understood. She did understand, God bless her. She saw into this wonderful friendship and was glad. It was great to have a friend like that—and a girl like this.

Hand in hand, they gazed into the heavens before them. To the girl it was a most marvelous sight, an omen of good fortune and of happiness to come. She nestled her head into the shoulder of the Earth man as she watched; spellbound.

For a long time the silence was broken only by the steady muffled purr of the stern rocket-tubes. The aroma of cigarette smoke drifted up the companionway.

Out there in the heavens was the sun, Mars, Earth, Venus; the dear old solar system was still intact, undisturbed excepting for the slight perturbation in the region of Jupiter. Blaine doubted if the influence was measurable insofar as changes in the motions of the inner planets were concerned.

He turned to the eyepiece of the telescope and swung the instrument around to bear on the Earth. A cool green crescent was there in the field of vision: the eastern coast line of the Americas outlined clear and distinct.

"Look, dear," he whispered. "Home! Your new home is there; our home together."

She sighed happily as she gazed at the inviting sunlit outlines. "Home," she repeated, softly, reverently, "with you, oh my Carson—for all eternity."

104 Devil Crystals of Arret by Hal K Wells

Facing a six-hour deadline of death, young Larry raids a hostile world of rat-men and tinkling Devil Crystals.

Aproximate word count: 8,800

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Benjamin Marlowe and his young assistant, Larry Powell, opened the door of the Marlowe laboratory, then stopped aghast at the sight which greeted their startled eyes.

There on the central floor-plate directly in the focus of the big atomic projector stood the slender figure of Joan Marlowe, old Benjamin Marlowe's niece and Larry Powell's fiancee.

The girl had apparently only been awaiting their return to the laboratory for around her gray laboratory smock was already fastened one of their Silver Belts, and a cord was already in place running from her wrist to the main switch of the projection

mechanism.

Joan's clear blue eyes sparkled with the thrill of high adventure as she swiftly raised a slender hand in a gesture of warning to the two men.

"Don't try to stop me," she warned quietly. "I can jerk the switch and be in Arret, before you've taken two steps. I'm going to Arret, anyway. I was only waiting for you to return to the laboratory so I'd be sure of having you here to bring me back to Earth again before I have time to get into any serious trouble over there."

"But, Joan," Benjamin Marlowe protested, "this is sheer madness! No one can possibly guess what terrible conditions you may confront in Arret. We've never dared to send a human being across the atomic barrier yet!"

"We've sent all kinds of animals across, though," Joan retorted calmly, "and as long as we recalled them within the twelve-hour limit they always came back alive and unhurt. There's no reason why a human being should not be able to make the round trip just as safely. Ever since our Silver Belts first came back with the weird plant and mineral fragments which proved that there really is such a place as Arret, I've been wild to see with my own eyes the incredible

things that must exist there.”

Joan waved her hand in gay farewell. “Good-by, Uncle Ben and Larry! I know that you’ll drag me back just as quickly as you can possibly dash over to the recall switch, but I’ll at least have had a few precious seconds of sightseeing as Earth’s first human visitor to Arret!”

Larry Powell was already sprinting for the mechanism as Joan jerked the cord that ran to the switch, but he was barely halfway across the intervening space when the big atomic projector flared forth in a brilliant gush of roseate flame.

For a fraction of a second Joan’s slender figure was outlined in the very heart of the ruddy glow, then vanished completely. There was left only a short length of the switch cord to indicate that the girl had ever stood there.

Powell reached the mechanism and shut off the projector’s flame, then turned swiftly to the control-panel of the recall mechanism. As he closed the switch on this panel, three banks of tubes set in triangular form around the floor-plate upon which Joan had stood glowed a brilliant and blinding green.

Shielding his eyes from the glare with an upraised forearm, Powell began stepping a rheostat up to more and more power. In his anxiety, he increased the power far too quickly. There was a sudden gush of blue-white flame from the heart of the mechanism, together with the hissing crackle of fusing metal. The green light in the tubes promptly died.

Benjamin Marlowe was bending over the apparatus almost instantly. A moment later he raised a face that had suddenly gone white. There was terror in his eyes as he turned to his assistant.

“The entire second series of coils is burned out, Larry!” he gasped in consternation. “Joan is marooned over there in Arret—marooned in that grim unknown land as completely beyond our reach as though she were upon one of the moons of Mars!”

For a long moment the two men gazed at each other with horror-stricken faces, dazed and shaken. Then they quickly drew themselves together again and set about the herculean task of making the necessary repairs to the damaged mechanism in time to rescue Joan before the twelve-hour limit should doom the girl to forever remain an exile in that land of alien mystery beyond the atomic barrier.

Their previous experiments with animals had proved that no living creature from Earth could be brought back after it had been in Arret over twelve hours. After that time the change in the atoms constituting living tissues apparently became permanently Arretian, for the Silver Belts returned without any trace of their original wearers.

The necessary repairs to the damaged coils were of such an exacting and intricate nature that any great speed was impossible. Hours passed while the two men bent to their work with grim concentration. Neither of them dared think too much of what nameless dangers might be confronting Joan during those weary hours. Their actual knowledge of Arret was so pitiably slight.

Some months ago, while they were experimenting upon apparatus for reversing the electrical charges of an atom's electrons and protons, they had first stumbled upon the incredible fact that such a place as Arret really existed. They found that it was another world occupying the same position in space as Earth, with the fundamental difference in the two interwoven planes of existence lying in the electrical make-up of the atoms that constituted matter in each plane.

On Earth all atoms are composed of small heavy protons that are always positive in charge, and larger lighter electrons that are always

negative. In Arret the protons were negative, and the electrons positive. The result was two worlds occupying the same space at the same time, yet with matter so essentially and completely different that each world was intangible to the other. They had named the unseen world Arret, the reverse of Terra.

Finding it impossible to work directly upon most forms of matter, the experimenters had finally evolved a silver alloy that served as a medium both for sending objects into Arret and then bringing them back to Earth. By focussing the flame of the projection apparatus upon a Silver Belt of this alloy, the electrical charges of the Belt's atoms were reversed, automatically causing the Belt to vanish from Earth and materialize in Arret. At the same time the atoms of any object within the Belt's immediate radius were similarly transformed, and that object was taken into Arret with the Belt.

The recall mechanism functioned by broadcasting a power wave that again reversed the atomic charge of the Belt and its contained object back to that of Earth. At the same time the recall wave exerted an attractive force that drew the atoms back to a central point in the laboratory, where they were re-materialized upon the same floor-plate from which they had originally been sent.

The twelve-hour time limit was half up when Benjamin Marlowe

and Larry Powell finally straightened up wearily from their work over the recall mechanism, their repairs completed. It had been one o'clock in the afternoon when Joan Marlowe vanished from Earth in the roseate flare of the projector. It was now nearly seven o'clock.

With nerves tense from anxiety, the two men crossed over to the control-panel of the recall apparatus. This time they donned goggles of dark glass to shield their eyes from the blinding green glare. Marlowe threw the main switch, and the banked tubes came to life in a flood of vivid emerald light.

Marlowe began stepping the rheostat up gradually to more power, advancing it with cautious slowness to avoid any chance of a repetition of the previous accident. The green radiance streaming from the tubes in every direction began to throb with an electric force that the two men could feel pulsing through their own bodies.

There was a click as the rheostat struck the last notch. The green radiance was now a searing flame that half-blinded them even through the thick dark glass of their protective goggles, while the vibrant force of the green rays was sweeping through their bodies with a tingling shock that nearly took their breath away.

Tensely the two men stared at the metal floor-plate in the center of

the area bounded by the flaming green tubes. Just over the plate the green radiance seemed to be thickening and swirling oddly. The swirling eddy became a small dense cloud of darker green light. Then abruptly, like the fade-in on a moving picture screen, from the cloud over the plate the misty outlines of an object swiftly cleared and solidified into a bizarre something at whose unfamiliar aspect both Marlowe and Powell gasped in amazement.

Marlowe snapped the switch off, and the green radiance vanished. Stripping the dark goggles from their eyes, the two men hurried over for a closer view of the thing that rested quiescent and apparently lifeless there on the metal floor-plate.

It was shaped like a huge egg, a little over a yard long, and was apparently composed of a solid lump of some unknown crystalline substance that closely resembled very clear, pale amber. Embedded in the heart of the strange egg were clearly visible objects which caused Marlowe and Powell to gasp in mingled horror and amazement.

Chief among the things imprisoned in that amber shroud was the Silver Belt that Joan had worn, but the Belt was now looped over the bony shoulder of a skeleton that by no possible stretch of the imagination could ever have been that of a creature of this Earth.

The skeleton was still perfectly articulated, and gleamed through the crystalline amber as though its bony surfaces were encrusted with diamond dust. The bones were apparently those of a creature that in life had been half dwarf-ape and half giant rat.

The beast had stood a little under a yard in height. The legs were short, powerful, and bowed. The long arms ended in claw-like travesties of hands. The skull was relatively small, with a sharply sloping forehead and projecting squirrel-like teeth that were markedly rodent.

Around the skeleton's neck there was a wide band of some strange gray metal, with its smooth outer surface roughly scratched in characters that resembled primitive hieroglyphics.

Marlowe's face was white with grief as he turned to Powell. "Joan must be dead, Larry," he said sadly. "Otherwise, she would surely never have allowed her Silver Belt to pass into the possession of—this! She knew that the Belt represented her only hope of ever being brought back to this world."

For a moment Powell stared intently into the heart of the crystalline egg without answering. Then suddenly he straightened up with marked excitement upon his face.

“There’s a small sheet of paper entwined in the coils of that Belt!” he exclaimed. “It may be a message from Joan!”

Swiftly the two men lifted the amber egg up to the top of a workbench. Powell took a small hammer to test the hardness of the strange translucent substance.

He struck it a sharp rap, then recoiled in surprise at the effect of his blow, for the entire egg instantly shattered with a tinkling crash like the bursting of a huge glass bubble. So complete was the disintegration of the egg and the skeleton within it that all that remained of either was a heap of diamond and amber dust. The only things left intact were the Silver Belt and the metal collar.

Powell snatched up the Belt and extracted the small piece of paper that had been firmly tucked into its coils. Hurriedly written in pencil upon the paper was a message in a handwriting familiar to both Powell and Marlowe:

Help! I am held prisoner in the Cave of Blue Flames!

—Joan.

“Larry, Joan must still be alive over there in Arret!” There was new

hope in Benjamin Marlowe's voice.

"Yes, alive and held captive by whatever monstrosities may inhabit that unknown plane," Powell agreed grimly. "There's only one way in which we can possibly rescue her now. That is for you to send me into Arret with a reserve Belt for Joan. I'll be ready to start as soon as I get a couple of automatic pistols that I have up in my room. It's a sure thing that I'll need them over there in Arret."

Five minutes later Powell stood ready and waiting upon the floor-plate in the focus of the big atomic projector, with the central lens of the apparatus levelled down upon him like a huge searchlight. Around Powell's waist were strapped two Silver Belts, and a cartridge belt with a holstered .45-calibre automatic on either side. His wrist-watch was synchronized to the second with Benjamin Marlowe's watch.

"Joan's twelve-hour time limit in Arret will expire at one o'clock tomorrow morning." Powell reminded Marlowe. "That gives me nearly six hours in which to find her and equip her with a Silver Belt. You will broadcast the recall wave at exactly one o'clock. If I haven't succeeded in finding Joan by then, I'll discard my own Belt and stay on over there in Arret with her…. I'm ready to start now, whenever you are."

Benjamin Marlowe raised his hand to the switch in the projector's control panel. "Good-by, Larry,"—the old man's voice shook a trifle in spite of himself—"and may God be with you!" He closed the switch.

A great burst of roseate flame leaped toward Powell from the projector. The laboratory was instantly blotted out in a swirling chaos of ruddy radiance that swept him up and away like a chip upon a tidal wave. There was a long moment during which he seemed to hurtle helplessly through a universe of swirling tinted mists, while great electric waves tingled with exquisite poignancy through every atom of his body.

Then the mists suddenly cleared like the tearing away of a mighty curtain, and with startling abruptness Powell found himself again in a solid world of material things. For a moment as he gazed dazedly about him he thought that the roseate glow of the projector must still be playing tricks with his eyesight, for the landscape around him was completely and incredibly red!

He soon realized that the monochrome of scarlet was a natural aspect of things in Arret. The weird vegetation all around him was of a uniform glossy red. The sandy soil under his feet was dull brick-red. High in the reddish-saffron sky overhead there blazed a lurid orb of

blood-red hue, the intense heat of its ruddy radiance giving the still dry air a nearly tropical temperature. From this orb's position in the sky and its size, Powell was forced to conclude that it must be the Arretian equivalent of Earth's moon.

For a moment he stood motionless as he peered cautiously around him, trying to decide what should be his first step in this scarlet world that was so utterly alien in every way to his own. On every side the landscape stretched monotonously away from him in low rolling dunes like the frozen ground swell of a crimson sea—dunes covered with vegetation of a kind never seen upon Earth.

Not a leaf existed in all that weird flora. Instead of leaves or twigs the constituent units of bushes and grasses consisted of globules, glossy spheres of scarlet that ranged in size from pinheads to the bulk of large pumpkins. The branches of the vegetation were formed from strings of the globules set edge to edge and tapering in size like graduated beads strung upon wire, dwindling in bulk until the tips of the branches were as fragile as the fronds of maidenhair fern. The bulk of the shrubbery was head-high, and so dense that Powell could see for only a couple of yards into the thicket in any direction.

The stillness around Powell was complete. Not even a globular twig stirred in the hot dry air. Powell decided to head for the crest of one

of the low dunes some fifty feet away. From its top he might be able to sight something that would give a clue to the location of the "Cave of Blue Flames" of which Joan had written.

He arrived at the foot of the dune's slope without incident. But there he came to an abrupt halt as the silence was suddenly shattered by a strange sound from the shrubbery-covered crest just above him. It was a musical, tinkling crash, oddly suggestive of a handful of thin glass plates shattering upon a stone floor. A second later there came the agonized scream of some creature in its death throes.

The tinkling, crashing sound promptly swelled to a steady pulsing song like that of a brittle river of crystalline glass surging and breaking over granite boulders. There was an eery beauty in that tinkling burst of melody, yet with the beauty there was an intangible suggestion of horror that made Powell's flesh creep.

The crystalline song swelled to a crescendo climax. Then there came another sound, a single resonant note like that given when a string of a bass viol is violently plucked—and the tinkling melody abruptly died. Immediately following the resonant twang some object was ejected from the midst of the thicket on the dune's crest, and came rolling and bounding down the gentle slope toward Powell.

It finally came to rest against the base of a bush almost at his feet. He whistled softly in surprise as he saw the nature of the thing. It was another of the yard-long egg-shaped crystals of translucent amber like the one that had been materialized in Benjamin Marlowe's laboratory. Imprisoned in the clear depths of this amber egg was the sparkling, diamond-encrusted skeleton of what had apparently been a small quadruped about the size of a fox.

Powell's eyes narrowed in speculation as he realized that he had before him the first slight clue as to what might have happened to Joan. Her Silver Belt had been enclosed in one of those amber, crystalline eggs. Apparently her capture had been in some way connected with that sinister, unseen Tinkling Death.

Powell began cautiously working his way up the slope of the dune, with an automatic pistol ready for use in his right hand. Silence reigned unbroken now in the thicket on the crest, but with each upward step that he took there came with constantly increasing force a feeling of some vast, alien intelligence lurking up there, watching and waiting.

Nearer and nearer the crest he worked his wary way, until he was so close that he fancied he could see the vague outline of some monstrous silvery bulk looming there in the heart of the red thicket.

He took another cautious step forward—and then his careful stalking was sharply interrupted.

Without a second's warning there came the roaring rush of great wings beating the air just above him. Powell tried to dive for cover, but he was too late. A slender snaky tentacle came lashing down and struck his shoulder with a force that sent him sprawling forward upon his face. Before he could rise, two of the tentacles twined around him, and he was jerked up into the air like a wood-grub captured by a husky robin.

Again the great wings above him threshed the air in tremendous power, as the unseen monster started away with its prey. Then the tentacles from which he was dangling shifted their grip slightly, turning Powell's body in the air so that he could look up and get his first glimpse of the thing that had captured him. He shuddered at what he saw. The creature was a hideous combination of octopus and giant bat.

Naked wings of membrane spanned twenty feet from tip to tip. There was a pursy sac-like body, ending in a head with staring, lidless eyes and a great black beak that looked strong enough to shear sheet steel. From the body descended half a dozen long writhing tentacles.

Powell's one hundred and eighty pounds made a weight that was apparently a burden for even this flying monster. It flew jerkily along, scarcely a dozen feet from the ground, and there was laborious effort obvious in every movement of its flapping wings. Powell decided to make a prompt break for escape before the octopus-bat succeeded in fighting its way any higher. His left arm was still pinioned to his body by one of the constricting tentacles, but his right hand, with the automatic in it, was free.

He swung the weapon's muzzle into line with the hideous face above him, then sent a stream of lead crashing upward into the creature's head. The bullet struck squarely home. The tentacles tightened convulsively with a force that almost cracked Powell's ribs. Then in another paroxysm of agony the tentacles flung him free.

The impetus of his fall sent him rolling for a dozen feet. Unhurt, save for minor scratches and bruises, he scrambled to his feet just in time to see the mortally wounded octopus-bat come crashing down in the red vegetation some thirty yards away. For a few minutes there was audible a convulsive threshing; and then there was silence.

Powell refilled the automatic's clip, then looked about, trying to regain his bearings. He wanted to return to the thicket of the Tinkling Death, but the octopus-bat had carried him hundreds of yards from

there and he was now uncertain even of the direction in which the thicket was.

As he paused in indecision, there came to Powell's ears a new sound that promptly drove all thought of the Tinkling Death from his mind.

The sound of his gun against the octopus-bat had apparently attracted new and unseen assailants—and their number was legion. Swiftly closing in upon him from every side there came the rustle and whisper of countless thousands of unseen foes advancing through the dense red thickets.

Completely hemmed in as he was, flight was out of the question. He sought the center of a small clearing, some ten feet in diameter, in order to gain at least a moment's sight of his adversaries before they swarmed in upon him. With an automatic in each hand, he waited tense and ready.

The encircling rush came swiftly nearer, until Powell was suddenly aware that the unseen horde had arrived. The thicket bordering his tiny clearing was literally alive with yard-high furry bodies of creatures that dodged about too swiftly in the cover of the red bushes for him to get a clear view of any of them. There was a constant babel of snarling, chattering sound as the things called back and

forth to each other.

Then the chattering stopped abruptly, as though at the command of some unseen leader. The next moment one of the creatures stepped boldly out into full view in the clearing. Powell's scalp crinkled in disgust as he realized the nature of the thing confronting him.

It was literally a rat-man. Its upright posture upon two powerful, bowed hind legs was that of a man, but its human-like points were overshadowed by a dozen indelible marks of the beast. A coat of short, dirty gray fur covered the creature from head to foot. Its hands and feet were claw-like travesties of human members. Its pointed, chinless face with its projecting teeth and glittering little beady eyes was that of a giant rodent.

The beast in the clearing was apparently a leader of some sort, for around his throat was a wide collar of gray metal, with its flat surface marked in rudely scratched hieroglyphics. Powell's heart leaped as he noted the collar. In this creature before him he had his second clue to the whereabouts of Joan Marlowe.

Not only was the collar practically identical to the one worn by the skeleton that had been materialized in the egg back in the laboratory, but the skeleton itself was obviously that of one of the rat-men.

Could it be this grotesque horde of human-like rodents that was holding Joan captive in the Cave of Blue Flames?

Powell tried desperately to think of some way of communicating with the gray-collared leader. Then the beast shrilled a command that brought hundreds of the beasts swarming into the clearing from every side, and in the face of the menace of their countless glittering eyes and bared fangs Powell abandoned all thought of attempting to parley with the beasts.

There was another shrill command from the leader, and the horde closed in. Both of Powell's guns flamed in a crashing leaden hail that swept the close-packed ranks of furry bodies with murderous effect. But he was doomed by sheer weight of numbers.

The rat-men directly in front of the blazing pistols wavered momentarily, but the press of the hundreds behind them swept them inexorably forward. Powell emptied both guns in a last vain effort. Then he was swept from his feet, and the horde surged over him.

Blinded and smothered by the dozens of furry bodies that swarmed over him, he had hardly a chance to even try to fight back. His cartridge-belt and guns, his Silver Belts and his wrist-watch were stripped from him by the dozens of claw-like hands that searched his

body. Other claw-hands jerked his arms behind his back and lashed them firmly together with rope.

A blanketing sheet of some heavy fabric was crammed over his head and tied in place so tightly that he was completely blindfolded and half-suffocated. A noose was knotted around his neck. A suggestive jerk of this noose brought Powell lurching to his feet; there was another commanding jerk, and he obediently started walking.

The march that followed soon became torture for the captive. Blindfolded as he was, and having only the occasional jerks of rope to guide his footsteps, he stumbled and fell repeatedly, until his aching body seemed one solid mass of bruises.

As nearly as he could judge, the horde had conducted him nearly two miles when the path abruptly sloped downward. A moment later the sudden coolness of the air and the echoes about him told him that they had entered an underground passage of some kind. After traversing this passage for several yards they emerged into what was apparently a large open area, for he could hear the excited chattering and squealing of countless thousands of rat-men on every side of him.

He was dragged forward a dozen steps more, then brought to a halt.

The blindfolding fabric was roughly stripped from his head. For a moment he blinked dazedly, half-blinded by a glare of blue light that flooded the place.

He was standing in a vast cavern. From dozens of fissures high in the rock walls streamed flickering sheets of blue flame which both warmed and lighted the place. There was a weird tingling glow in the air that suggested that the strange blue fires might be electrical in their origin.

Powell looked eagerly around for Joan, but he could see no trace of her. The only other living beings in the big cavern were the swarming thousands of the rat-people. The brutes were apparently too low in the evolutionary scale to have any but the most primitive form of tribal organization.

Sitting on a rude rock throne just in front of Powell was a grotesquely fat, mangy-furred old rat-man who was obviously the king of the horde. Some thirty or forty rat-men, larger and stronger than their fellows, wore the gray-metal collars that apparently marked them as minor leaders.

The great bulk of the horde, numbering far into the thousands, swarmed in the cavern in one vast animal pack, sleeping, feeding,

snarling, fighting. As Powell was halted before the king's throne, most of them abandoned their other pursuits to come surging around the captive in a jostling, curious mob.

The metal-collared leader of the pack that had captured Powell presented the rat-king with the captive's gun-belt and two Silver Belts, accompanying the gifts with a squealing oration that was apparently a recital of the capture. The old monarch took the trophies with delight.

The two Silver Belts were promptly draped over his own furry shoulders by the king—seemingly following the same primitive love for adornment that inspires an African savage to ornament his person with any new and glittering object he happens to acquire. The rat-king then graciously draped the cartridge-belt and holstered automatics around the shoulders of the metal-collared leader who had captured Powell.

The king turned his attention back to his prisoner. He studied the captive curiously for a moment or two, then squealed a brief command. A score of the rat-men promptly closed in upon Powell, and began herding him toward a far back corner of the big cavern.

Stopping a few yards away from the edge of what seemed to be a

wide deep pit in the rock floor, the guard stripped Powell's bonds from him. Powell made no move to take advantage of his freedom, realizing that the swarming thousands of rodents in the cave made escape out of the question for the moment. He allowed himself to be docilely herded on to the edge of the pit.

And the next moment he exclaimed aloud in delighted surprise as he gazed down at the floor of the pit ten feet beneath him. There, sitting on a low heap of stones on the pit's sandy floor, white-faced and weary but apparently unhurt, was Joan Marlowe.

The girl's face brightened in relief as she looked up and recognized him.

"Larry! Oh, thank God you've come!"

The leader of the guards motioned for Powell to jump down into the pit. He needed no urging. A moment later he landed lightly on the sandy floor of the pit, and Joan was in his arms.

The rat-men left a dozen of their number scattered as sentries around the edge of the pit. The rest of them returned to the main horde, leaving the prisoners to their own devices.

“I knew that you’d come, Larry, as soon as you got my note,” Joan exclaimed happily. “But how did you ever succeed in finding this Cave of Blue Flame?”

“I didn’t find it myself,” Powell admitted. “I was captured like a boob and dragged here.” He told Joan of his mishaps since arriving in Arret.

The girl nodded when he had finished. “Much the same happened to me, Larry, only the red moon wasn’t shining then. The only light was from what looked like the dim ghost of a big yellow sun. I materialized in Arret almost in the middle of a scouting group of rat-men. They took me captive immediately. When several minutes passed without you and Uncle Benjamin broadcasting the recall wave for me, I knew that something terrible must have happened back in the laboratory, and that I might be marooned in Arret for hours.

“I tried to hang onto my Silver Belt, of course,” the girl continued, “but when I was brought to the cavern here I saw that the king was going to take it. There was a notebook and a pencil in my laboratory smock. I managed to write the note and twine it into the belt just before it was taken from me. The king seemed to think the note enhanced the Belt’s value as an ornament. He was wearing it when I

last saw it. Was he materialized in the laboratory with the Belt?”

Powell told her of the amber egg and the skeleton.

“The same sort of crystalline amber egg that accompanied the work of the mysterious Tinkling Death, wasn’t it?” Joan mused. “One of the king’s lieutenants must have stolen the Belt, and reaped prompt retribution when he tried to flee. I wonder what that weird Tinkling Death is?”

“Possibly some strange weapon of the rat-men,” Powell hazarded.

“No, they are as afraid of it as we are. While I was being brought here to this cave the Tinkling Death was heard several times in the distance, and the rat-men were obviously terrified at the sound.”

The prisoners’ conversation was abruptly interrupted by a rhythmic, snarling chant from the vast horde of rat-men in the cavern above. The chant rose and fell in a rude cadence that was suggestively ritual in nature.

“They’ve been doing that at intervals ever since I was first brought here,” Joan commented. “It sounds almost like the beginning of some primitive religious ceremony, doesn’t it?”

Powell nodded, without telling Joan the depressing thought in his mind. The rat-men were so low in the evolutionary scale as to be little more than beasts, and a prominent feature of nearly all primitive religious rites is the sacrifice of living beings. Powell could not help but wonder whether the chanting might not mark the beginning of rites which would end with the sacrifice of himself and Joan to some monstrous deity of theirs.

The snarling chant continued with monotonous regularity for hours, while the prisoners huddled helplessly together there on the floor of the pit, awaiting the next move of the rat-men. Any thought of escape was out of the question. The sheer walls of the pit were always guarded by alert sentries who had only to call to bring the entire horde to their help.

Without Powell's wrist-watch, the captives had no way of accurately following the lapse of time, but they both realized that the twelve-hour time limit upon Joan's rescue from Arret must be coming perilously near its end. They waited in momentary fear lest a sudden turmoil in the cavern above them should indicate that Benjamin Marlowe had broadcast the recall wave, whisking the two Belts back to Earth, together with the old rat-king who presumably still wore them.

The chanting above rose slowly to a snarling climax, then swiftly died away into silence. A moment later there came the sound of thousands of claw-like feet scratching over the rocky floor as the main horde apparently began marching out of the cavern. A detachment of fifty rat-men appeared at the pit's edge.

A rude metal ladder was shoved down to the captives, and a metal-collared leader motioned for them to climb up. Seeing nothing to be gained by refusal, they obeyed. They were seized as they reached the top, and their hands again bound behind them. The overwhelming numbers of the rat-men made any attempt at resistance futile.

There was no sign of the main horde as Joan and Powell were herded out through the empty cavern and out into the open air again. With their prisoners in the center of their group, the rat-men started along a well-worn path that wound through the red vegetation. Overhead the blood-red moon still blazed down in lurid splendor.

From somewhere ahead of them the captives began to again hear the distant squealing chant of the main horde. They steadily approached the sound, until abruptly they emerged into a huge clearing that had apparently been a ceremonial assembly place for generations, for its smooth sandy floor was packed down nearly to the hardness of rock.

The main horde of rat-men was there now, countless thousands of them, packed in a roughly crescent-shaped mob, with the open side of their formation facing what seemed to be a large deep pit, some seventy yards in circumference. In the clear space left between the horde and the edge of the pit was a smaller group, among them the old king himself.

Powell's heart leaped as he noted that the Silver Belts were still draped over the mangy old monarch's shoulders. If only he and Joan could get their hands on those precious Belts before Benjamin Marlowe broadcast the recall wave that would forever snatch them out of their reach!

The captives were hurried through the main horde and taken in charge by a score of picked guards who herded them on to join a small group of four rat-men near the pit's edge. These four rodents were apparently also prisoners, for their arms were firmly bound behind them.

The rat-king, accompanied only by the metal-collared leader, around whose shoulders the gun-belt was still draped, stood near the pit's edge some ten yards distant from the guards and captives. Between the prisoners and the rodent monarch the edge of the pit jutted out in a narrow tongue of rock that extended outward for about twenty feet

over the pit.

Joan and Powell had barely taken their place with the other captives when an abrupt and familiar sound drew their attention to the floor of the pit some thirty feet beneath them. Its smooth sandy bottom was clearly visible from where they stood. And there on that sandy floor were six great gleaming shapes of menace which brought involuntary gasps of horrified amazement to the captives' lips.

The faint musical tinkling sound as the things moved in occasional ponderous restlessness was unmistakable. Joan and Powell realized that the amazing organisms responsible for the mysterious Tinkling Death were at last before them.

The things were giant living crystals—great silvery semi-transparent shapes nearly ten feet in height, their faceted sides pulsing in sinister and incredible life as they gleamed in unearthly beauty beneath the blazing rays of the red moon!

Near the center of each of the giant crystals there was visible through the semi-transparent wall a large inner nucleus of sullen opalescence that ceaselessly swirled and eddied.

Their powers of movement were apparently limited to a slow,

ponderous, half-rocking, half-rolling progress on their heavy rounded bases. They were now grouped in a rough semicircle just under the edge of the rocky projection that extended out over the pit. The opalescent nucleus in every silvery faceted form seemed to be "watching" with frightening intensity the figures on the pit's edge above them.

There was no mistaking the meaning of the scene. The giant carnivorous crystals had obviously been lured from their normal habitat in Arret's red vegetation, and established there in the big pit by the rat-men to act as principals in their primitive religious ceremonies.

Those Devil Crystals waiting down there on the pit's floor were waiting to be fed—and the small group of captives, rat-men and human beings, were to be the feast!

Utterly sick at heart, Powell wondered if they would at least be given the boon of a merciful death before being hurled over the brink to those lurking shapes. He was not left long in doubt.

At a shrill command from the rat-king the guards closed in upon the captives and herded two of the bound rat-men from among them. A guard placed to the lips of each of the captive brutes a small cup

containing a faintly cloudy white liquid. Apparently resigned to their fate, the creatures docilely drained the cups.

The drugged drinks acted with startling rapidity. Scarcely a minute passed before the rodents' eyes clouded dully, their jaws dropped slackly open, and their bodies stiffened in almost complete rigidity.

The bonds were quickly stripped from the two stupefied creatures. The ceremonial rites apparently required that the victims go to their doom unbound and of their own volition. The guards maneuvered the two over to the rocky projection that jutted out over the pit.

Moving with the stiffly wooden steps of automatons, the two victims started out along the narrow projection, leaving the guards behind. On they marched, straight for the end of the rocky strip—and then, without a second's hesitation, they plunged on and over.

Their bodies crashed to the pit's floor squarely among the group of waiting crystals. One of the rat-men lay motionless. The other dazedly tried to struggle to his feet—but was too late.

From the side of the nearest Devil Crystal, some fifteen feet away from the dazed rat-man, a cone-shaped projection budded with startling swiftness.

A fraction of a second more and the projection had lengthened into a long slender arm of crystalline silver that streaked across the intervening space with the swiftness of a spear.

There was a crashing, tinkling sound as the point of the arm struck the furry body of the rat-man. Then the arm's point sprayed into a web of shining filaments that laced the rodent's body inexorably in their web.

The arm immediately contracted, jerking the victim irresistibly toward the waiting crystal. A second later the rat-man was pinned against the faceted crystalline side just under the opalescent nucleus.

The moment the furry body made contact with the crystal's side a terrifying phenomenon occurred. Crystals grew and spread all over its form with the lightning growth of water-glass. Faster and faster clustered the crystalline shroud, until the furry body was lanced through and through—and all the time the air was filled with eldritch music as of a thousand sheets of thinnest glass crashing, tinkling and shattering.

The crystal growths over the imprisoned body rounded their contours and merged together until they were in the form of a great crystalline egg. The outlines of the rodent's body blurred and

vanished, melting swiftly until only a diamond-encrusted skeleton was left. The color of the great Devil Crystal began to gleam pink as the victim's flesh and blood were absorbed.

The egg-like excrescence under the nucleus turned in hue to pale translucent amber in whose depths the diamond skeleton gleamed with weird brilliance. Then there came a sudden twang, as of a violently plucked string on a bass viol, and the amber egg dropped from the faceted side. The Crystal's feast was over.

One of the most terrifying aspects of the whole thing had been its incredible speed. The entire tragedy had occurred in but little over two minutes from the time the lance-arm had first struck the rat-man.

In the meantime the body of the second rodent had been drawn in and devoured by another of the carnivorous crystalline monsters. There came a second twang now, as its skeleton in its amber shroud was discarded.

Powell's brain reeled as he saw the other crystals move sluggishly nearer the foot of the rocky projection in anticipation of the next victims.

The remaining two captive rat-men came next. They were swiftly

drugged, unbound, and started on their dazed march. They trudged woodenly out the rocky projection to its end, then on and over; and again the grim tragedy of the Devil Crystal's feast was repeated, to the accompaniment of that eerily beautiful crashing, tinkling song.

The four Devil Crystals that had completed their gruesome feast moved sluggishly away, leaving the space clear for the two crystals that remained unfed. The score of guards closed in upon Joan and Powell.

With the crystalline doom at last staring them squarely in the face, Powell went berserk in a final desperate effort to gain even a moment's respite. He lashed out in a writhing, kicking flurry that almost cleared the space around them.

Then three of the rat-men slipped behind him, and a second later his feet were jerked from under him. His bound arms made him helpless to avert his fall, and he crashed heavily to the ground. Then a dozen of the powerful little beasts swarmed over him, completely overpowering him by their numbers.

Claw-like hands pried his set jaws apart. A cup of the cloudy white liquid was pressed to his lips. He choked; then, unable to help himself, he had to let the stuff pour down his throat. It had an acid

taste faintly reminiscent of lemons. The rat-men apparently wanted to make sure of giving him enough, for they poured another full cup of the liquid down his throat before releasing him.

The guards then fell back and Powell stumbled to his feet. Joan was already up again, standing close beside him. From the wry expression upon her face, Powell knew that she had also been given the drugged potion.

For a long minute the two stood there with every nerve trembling as they helplessly waited for the paralyzing numbness to sweep over their bodies. The seconds passed slowly, and still their minds remained as clear as though the drug had been water. Another full minute elapsed without effect, before they could finally convince themselves of the amazing truth.

The drugged drink of the rat-men, instantly paralyzing to those of their own rodent race, was utterly harmless to the human being from another world!

Powell instantly realized the forlorn last chance their unexpected immunity to the drug gave them.

“Play ’possum, Joan!” he whispered tensely. “Then we’ll make a

break for the king and those Belts!”

Joan nodded slightly in quick understanding. Powell let his jaw drop slack and open, and stiffened his body in imitation of the stupor the rodent drug victims had shown. Joan promptly followed his lead. The alertly watching guards relaxed their tense vigilance in obvious relief.

The guards waited another minute to be sure of the drug’s effects. Then, apparently satisfied, they stepped forward and unbound the two prisoners. Powell let his bonds drop from him without making a hostile move of any kind. He wanted first to wait until he was free of the encircling guards.

The rat-men maneuvered the two into position, and prodded them forward toward the projecting point of rock. They obediently began their march, simulating as best they could the wooden mechanical gait of the drug victims. Powell saw from the corner of his eye that Joan was tensely watching his face for a sign from him.

As the captives reached the narrow projection the guards dropped a couple of yards behind and halted to watch. It was the chance for which Powell had been waiting.

“Let’s go!” he shouted to Joan. The girl, alert for his signal, was right beside him as they wheeled and dashed at break-neck speed for the rat-king and his sole lieutenant, some ten yards away.

They were upon the two startled rodent leaders before they even realized what was happening. Powell swept the squirming old king up in the air, tore the Silver Belts from about the monarch’s shoulders, and flung the creature sprawling and senseless at the pit’s edge.

The lieutenant leaped for Powell’s throat in a belated effort at rescue, but Powell smashed a solid fist squarely into its snarling face, and the brute collapsed with a broken neck.

Snatching his gun-belt from the fallen rat-man, Powell crammed new clips of ammunition into the two guns and wheeled to confront the rest of the rat-men. The detachment of guards, demoralized by the dazzling speed of the captives’ sortie, were milling in obvious uncertainty.

Behind them the thousands of the main horde were chattering and squealing in excited frenzy, dazed and bewildered by their king’s swift overthrow. The whole clearing was a seething mob of excited beasts, stunned for the moment, but ready at any second to rally

from their shock and surge forward in a furious charge that would sweep everything before it.

Powell menaced the rat-men with levelled guns while Joan, with fingers that shook from excitement and haste, quietly buckled one of the Silver Belts around each of them.

The guards rallied from their panic first. At a shrill command from their leader, they began cautiously edging forward toward Joan and Powell. The two gave ground slowly, working their way back over toward the projecting tongue of rock. Out on the end of that narrow strip, Powell knew that he could hold the horde at bay for a few moments at least.

They reached the rocky projection, and began backing slowly and carefully out toward its end. The guards, galvanized into action by their captives' retreat, suddenly came surging forward in a furious charge.

Powell emptied the two automatics in a crashing volley that nearly wiped out the charging guards. The few survivors turned and fled in panic back to the main horde. Powell reloaded his clips with feverish haste.

The thousands of rat-men in the main horde were now milling in what was apparently a last moment of hesitation before surging forward in an irresistible stampede toward the beleaguered two out on the rocky strip.

Several bolder individuals at the edge of the horde edged a step forward. Their example was followed by a hundred others. Another hesitant step or two—and then the whole horde was in motion.

Powell swept the front rank with a rain of lead from one of the automatics, holding the other as a reserve. The heavy bullets plowed murder into the close-packed furry bodies. The charge wavered momentarily. Then Powell felt Joan tugging frantically at his arm.

“Larry, the rocks under us are crumbling!” she cried. “We’ll be hurled down into the pit!”

Even as she spoke, Powell felt the narrow strip of rock under them quiver and settle. He looked quickly down. All along its length, the narrow rocky projection, weakened by their weight, was breaking swiftly away from the pit’s edge. And on the floor of the pit below them the two waiting Devil Crystals moved with musical, tinkling sounds as they waited restlessly for their prey to fall among them.

The horde of rat-men rallied and swept on forward in a wave that nothing could have stopped this time—but their charge was too late. The entire rocky projection collapsed with a final sickening lurch, and slid to the pit's floor, carrying Joan and Powell with it in a miniature avalanche of rocky rubble.

Even in the chaos of their wild descent, Powell retained his grip upon the loaded automatic in his hand. They struck the bottom and staggered half-dazed to their feet, to confront the two crystalline monsters rocking on their rounded bases scarcely ten feet away.

The fatal cone-shaped projection was already beginning to form upon the silver-faceted side of the nearest Devil Crystal. Before the lance-like arm of crystal could flash outward, Powell sent two bullets crashing into the crystal's side just over the opalescent nucleus.

The leaden missiles caromed harmlessly off, as though they had struck armor-plate, but the nucleus clouded momentarily and the cone-shaped projection dissolved back into the side.

With lightning speed Powell shifted his aim to the other crystal just as its partly-formed arm was flashing toward them. His bullet crashed into the silvery side squarely over the nucleus. Again the

bullet's effect was the same. This crystal nucleus clouded murkily, and the lance-like arm telescoped back into the faceted bulk.

But the effect of the bullets was only momentary. Swiftly the nuclei of both crystals cleared. A deep blue film, apparently protective in nature, formed between the outer wall and each nucleus. The cones budded, and again the arms started forth.

Powell fired again, and this time uselessly. His bullet struck squarely, but the shock of its impact was apparently nullified by the protective blue film. He emptied his gun in a last crashing fusillade, but without effect of any kind upon the film-guarded nuclei of the giant crystals.

Their forming arms never wavered as they came lancing forward with deadly accuracy straight toward Joan and Powell. In a last effort to save Joan from the terrible doom of the crystal lances as long as possible, Powell flung his own body as a shield in front of the half-fainting girl. The tip of one of the crystalline arms struck his chest with a crashing tinkle of musical glass.

Instantly the tip sprayed into a web of fine filaments that laced on around his body. A tinkling shock raced through his every nerve from the contact with the weird life force of the great crystal.

The arm began contracting. Powell was helpless against the terrific power of the slender, diamond-hard lance of crystal. He felt himself irresistibly drawn toward the silver-faceted wall of the Devil Crystal.

His senses reeled in the babel of alien sounds—the crashing, glass-like music of the crystalline monsters and the snarling, squealing, paean of jubilant triumph from the thousands of rat-men now lining the rim of the pit above.

Then suddenly the pit, the Devil Crystals, and everything else in the nightmare world of Arret was blotted out in a vast swirling cloud of pulsing roseate flame that seemed to sweep him bodily up into the air and whirl him dizzily around.

His dazed brain staggered from the shock of the cataclysmic force that was disintegrating an entire world around him, but through the utter chaos one thought rang clear and exultant in his consciousness.

Benjamin Marlowe had finally broadcast the recall wave!

For what seemed endless eons of time Powell hurried through a limitless universe of swirling, tinted fires, while vibrations of a mighty force tingled with poignant ecstasy in every atom of his body.

Then the eddying clouds of flame began to coalesce and solidify with startling suddenness. A moment later, like the abrupt lighting of a room when an electric switch is snapped, the mists vanished and Powell felt firm footing again under his feet. Around him were the familiar objects of Benjamin Marlowe's laboratory.

He was standing upon the floor-plate in the center of the area bounded by the banked green tubes, and beside him stood Joan, sobbing with relief at their last-minute rescue from the Devil Crystals of Arret. And over by the control panel of the recall mechanism was the slight figure of old Benjamin Marlowe, with a great joy now shining in his faded eyes.

105 The Sargasso of Space by Edmond Hamilton

Helpless, doomed, into the graveyard of space floats the wrecked freighter Pallas.

Aproximate word count: 8,700

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Captain Crain faced his crew calmly. "We may as well face the facts, men," he said. "The ship's fuel-tanks are empty and we are drifting through space toward the dead-area."

The twenty-odd officers and men gathered on the middle-deck of the freighter Pallas made no answer, and Crain continued:

"We left Jupiter with full tanks, more than enough fuel to take us to Neptune. But the leaks in the starboard tanks lost us half our supply, and we had used the other half before discovering that. Since the ship's rocket-tubes cannot operate without fuel, we are simply drifting. We would drift on to Neptune if the attraction of Uranus

were not pulling us to the right. That attraction alters our course so that in three ship-days we shall drift into the dead-area."

Rance Kent, first-officer of the Pallas, asked a question: "Couldn't we, raise Neptune with the radio, sir, and have them send out a fuel-ship in time to reach us?"

"It's impossible, Mr. Kent," Crain answered. "Our main radio is dead without fuel to run its dynamotors, and our auxiliary set hasn't the power to reach Neptune."

"Why not abandon ship in the space-suits," asked Liggett, the second-officer, "and trust to the chance of some ship picking us up?"

The captain shook his head. "It would be quite useless, for we'd simply drift on through space with the ship into the dead-area."

The score of members of the crew, bronzed space-sailors out of every port in the solar system, had listened mutely. Now, one of them, a tall tube-man, stepped forward a little.

"Just what is this dead-area, sir?" he asked. "I've heard of it, but as this is my first outer-planet voyage, I know nothing about it."

"I'll admit I know little more," said Liggett, "save that a good many

disabled ships have drifted into it and have never come out."

"The dead area," Crain told them, "is a region of space ninety thousand miles across within Neptune's orbit, in which the ordinary gravitational attractions of the solar system are dead. This is because in that region the pulls of the sun and the outer planets exactly balance each other. Because of that, anything in the dead-area, will stay in there until time ends, unless it has power of its own. Many wrecked space-ships have drifted into it at one time or another, none ever emerging; and it's believed that there is a great mass of wrecks somewhere in the area, drawn and held together by mutual attraction."

"And we're drifting in to join them," Kent said. "Some prospect!"

"Then there's really no chance for us?" asked Liggett keenly.

Captain Crain thought. "As I see it, very little," he admitted. "If our auxiliary radio can reach some nearby ship before the Pallas enters the dead-area, we'll have a chance. But it seems a remote one."

He addressed himself to the men: "I have laid the situation frankly before you because I consider you entitled to the truth. You must remember, however, that while there is life there is hope.

"There will be no change in ship routine, and the customary watches will be kept. Half-rations of food and water will be the rule from now on, though. That is all."

As the men moved silently off, the captain looked after them with something of pride.

"They're taking it like men," he told Kent and Liggett. "It's a pity there's no way out for them and us."

"If the Pallas does enter the dead-area and join the wreck-pack," Liggett said, "how long will we be able to live?"

"Probably for some months on our present condensed air and food supplies," Crain answered. "I would prefer, myself, a quicker end."

"So would I," said Kent. "Well, there's nothing left but to pray for some kind of ship to cross our path in the next day or two."

Kent's prayers were not answered in the next ship-day, nor in the next. For, though one of the Pallas' radio-operators was constantly at the instruments under Captain Crain's orders, the weak calls of the auxiliary set raised no response.

Had they been on the Venus or Mars run, Kent told himself, there

would be some chance, but out here in the vast spaces, between the outer planets, ships were fewer and farther between. The big, cigar-shaped freighter drifted helplessly on in a broad curve toward the dreaded area, the green light-speck of Neptune swinging to their left.

On the third ship-day Kent and Captain Crain stood in the pilot-house behind Liggett, who sat at the now useless rocket-tube controls. Their eyes were on the big glass screen of the gravograph. The black dot on it that represented their ship was crawling steadily toward the bright red circle that stood for the dead-area....

They watched silently until the dot had crawled over the circle's red line, heading toward its center.

"Well, we're in at last," Kent commented. "There seems to be no change in anything, either."

Crain pointed to the instrument-panel. "Look at the gravitometers."

Kent did. "All dead! No gravitational pull from any direction—no, that one shows a slight attraction from ahead!"

"Then gravitational attraction of some sort does exist in the dead-area after all!" Liggett exclaimed.

"You don't understand," said Crain. "That attraction from ahead is the pull of the wreck-pack at the dead-area's center."

"And it's pulling the Pallas toward it?" Kent exclaimed.

Crain nodded. "We'll probably reach the wreck-pack in two more ship-days."

The next two ship-days seemed to Kent drawn out endlessly. A moody silence had grown upon the officers and men of the ship. All seemed oppressed by the strange forces of fate that had seized the ship and were carrying it, smoothly and soundlessly, into this region of irrevocable doom.

The radio-operators' vain calls had ceased. The Pallas drifted on into the dreaded area like some dumb ship laden with damned souls. It drifted on, Kent told himself, as many a wrecked and disabled ship had done before it, with the ordinary activities and life of the solar system forever behind it, and mystery and death ahead.

It was toward the end of the second of those two ship-days that Liggett's voice came down from the pilot-house:

"Wreck-pack in sight ahead!"

"We've arrived, anyway!" Kent cried, as he and Crain hastened up into the pilot house. The crew was running to the deck-windows.

"Right ahead there, about fifteen degrees left," Liggett told Kent and Crain, pointing. "Do you see it?"

Kent stared; nodded. The wreck-pack was a distant, disk-like mass against the star-flecked heavens, a mass that glinted here and there in the feeble sunlight of space. It did not seem large, but, as they drifted steadily closer in the next hours, they saw that in reality the wreck-pack was tremendous, measuring at least fifty miles across.

Its huge mass was a heterogeneous heap, composed mostly of countless cigar-like space-ships in all stages of wreckage. Some appeared smashed almost out of all recognizable shape, while others were, to all appearances unharmed. They floated together in this dense mass in space, crowded against one another by their mutual attraction.

There seemed to be among them every type of ship known in the solar system, from small, swift mail-boats to big freighters. And, as they drifted nearer, the three in the pilot-house could see that around and between the ships of the wreck-pack floated much other matter —fragments of wreckage, meteors, small and large, and space-debris

of every sort.

The Pallas was drifting, not straight toward the wreck-pack, but in a course that promised to take the ship past it.

"We're not heading into the wreck-pack!" Liggett exclaimed. "Maybe we'll drift past it, and on out the dead-area's other side!"

Captain Crain smiled mirthlessly. "You're forgetting your space-mechanics, Liggett. We will drift along the wreck-pack's edge, and then will curve in and go round it in a closing spiral until we reach its edge."

"Lord, who'd have thought there were so many wrecks here!" Kent marvelled. "There must be thousands of them!"

"They've been collecting here ever since the first interplanetary rocket-ships went forth," Crain reminded him. "Not only meteor-wrecked ships, but ships whose mechanisms went wrong—or that ran out of fuel like ours—or that were captured and sacked, and then set adrift by space-pirates."

The Pallas by then was drifting along the wreck-pack's rim at a half-mile distance, and Kent's eyes were running over the mass.

"Some of those ships look entirely undamaged. Why couldn't we find one that has fuel in its tanks, transfer it to our own tanks, and get away?" he asked.

Crain's eyes lit. "Kent, that's a real chance! There must be some ships in that pack with fuel in them, and we can use the space-suits to explore for them!"

"Look, we're beginning to curve in around the pack now!" Liggett exclaimed.

The Pallas, as though loath to pass the wreck-pack, was curving inward to follow its rim. In the next hours it continued to sail slowly around the great pack, approaching closer and closer to its edge.

In those hours Kent and Crain and all in the ship watched with a fascinated interest that even knowledge of their own peril could not kill. They could see swift-lined passenger-ships of the Pluto and Neptune runs shouldering against small space-yachts with the insignia of Mars or Venus on their bows. Wrecked freighters from Saturn or Earth floated beside rotund grain-boats from Jupiter.

The debris among the pack's wrecks was just as varied, holding fragments of metal, dark meteors of differing size—and many

human bodies. Among these were some clad in the insulated space-suits, with their transparent glassite helmets. Kent wondered what wreck they had abandoned hastily in those suits, only to be swept with it into the dead-area, to die in their suits.

By the end of that ship-day, the Pallas, having floated almost completely around the wreck-pack, finally struck the wrecks at its edge with a jarring shock; then bobbed for a while and lay still. From pilot-house and deck windows the men looked eagerly forth.

Their ship floated at the wreck-pack's edge. Directly to its right floated a sleek, shining Uranus-Jupiter passenger-ship whose bows had been smashed in by a meteor. On their left bobbed an unmarked freighter of the old type with projecting rocket-tubes, apparently intact. Beyond them in the wreck-pack lay another Uranus craft, a freighter, and, beyond it, stretched the countless other wrecks.

Captain Crain summoned the crew together again on the middle-deck.

"Men, we've reached the wreck-pack at the dead-area's center, and here we'll stay until the end of time unless we get out under our own power. Mr. Kent has suggested a possible way of doing so, which I consider highly feasible.

"He has suggested that in some of the ships in the wreck-pack may be found enough fuel to enable us to escape from the dead-area, once it is transferred to this ship. I am going to permit him to explore the wreck-pack with a party in space suits, and I am asking for volunteers for this service."

The entire crew stepped quickly forward. Crain smiled. "Twelve of you will be enough," he told them. "The eight tube-men and four of the cargo-men will go, therefore, with Mr. Kent and Mr. Liggett as leaders. Mr. Kent, you may address the men if you wish."

"Get down to the lower airlock and into your space-suits at once, then," Kent told them. "Mr. Liggett, will you supervise that?"

As Liggett and the men trooped down to the airlock, Kent turned back toward his superior.

"There's a very real chance of your becoming lost in this huge wreck-pack, Kent," Crain told him: "so be very careful to keep your bearings at all times. I know I can depend on you."

"I'll do my best," Kent was saying, when Liggett's excited face reappeared suddenly at the stair.

"There are men coming toward the Pallas along the wreck-pack's edge!" he reported—"a half-dozen men in space-suits!"

"You must be mistaken, Liggett!" exclaimed Crain. "They must be some of the bodies in space-suits we saw in the pack."

"No, they're living men!" Liggett cried. "They're coming straight toward us—come down and see!"

Crain and Kent followed Liggett quickly down to the airlock room, where the men who had started donning their space-suits were now peering excitedly from the windows. Crain and Kent looked where Liggett pointed, along the wreck-pack's edge to the ship's right.

Six floating shapes, men in space-suits, were approaching along the pack's border. They floated smoothly through space, reaching the wrecked passenger-ship beside the Pallas. They braced their feet against its side and propelled themselves on through the void like swimmers under water, toward the Pallas.

"They must be survivors from some wreck that drifted in here as we did!" Kent exclaimed. "Maybe they've lived here for months!"

"It's evident that they saw the Pallas drift into the pack, and have

come to investigate," Crain estimated. "Open the airlock for them, men, for they'll want to come inside."

Two of the men spun the wheels that slid aside the airlock's outer door. In a moment the half-dozen men outside had reached the ship's side, and had pulled themselves down inside the airlock.

When all were in, the outer door was closed, and air hissed in to fill the lock. The airlock's inner door then slid open and the newcomers stepped into the ship's interior, unscrewing their transparent helmets as they did so. For a few moments the visitors silently surveyed their new surroundings.

Their leader was a swarthy individual with sardonic black eyes who, on noticing Crain's captain-insignia, came toward him with outstretched hand. His followers seemed to be cargo-men or deck-men, looking hardly intelligent enough to Kent's eyes to be tube-men.

"Welcome to our city!" their leader exclaimed as he shook Crain's hand. "We saw your ship drift in, but hardly expected to find anyone living in it."

"I'll confess that we're surprised ourselves to find any life here,"

Crain told him. "You're living on one of the wrecks?"

The other nodded. "Yes, on the Martian Queen, a quarter-mile along the pack's edge. It was a Saturn-Neptune passenger ship, and about a month ago we were at this cursed dead-area's edge, when half our rocket-tubes exploded. Eighteen of us escaped the explosion, the ship's walls still being tight; and we drifted into the pack here, and have been living here ever since."

"My name's Krell," he added, "and I was a tube-man on the ship. I and another of the tube-men, named Jandron, were the highest in rank left, all the officers and other tube-men having been killed, so we took charge and have been keeping order."

"What about your passengers?" Liggett asked.

"All killed but one," Krell answered. "When the tubes let go they smashed up the whole lower two decks."

Crain briefly explained to him the Pallas' predicament. "Mr. Kent and Mr. Liggett were on the point of starting a search of the wreck-pack for fuel when you arrived," he said, "With enough fuel we can get clear of the dead-area."

Krell's eyes lit up. "That would mean a getaway for all of us! It surely ought to be possible!"

"Do you know whether there are any ships in the pack with fuel in their tanks?" Kent asked. Krell shook his head.

"We've searched through the wreck-pack a good bit, but never bothered about fuel, it being no good to us. But there ought to be some, at least: there's enough wrecks in this cursed place to make it possible to find almost anything.

"You'd better not start exploring, though," he added, "without some of us along as guides, for I'm here to tell you that you can lose yourself in this wreck-pack without knowing it. If you wait until to-morrow, I'll come over myself and go with you."

"I think that would be wise," Crain said to Kent. "There is plenty of time."

"Time is the one thing there's plenty of in this damned place," Krell agreed. "We'll be getting back to the Martian Queen now and give the good news to Jandron and the rest."

"Wouldn't mind if Liggett and I came along, would you?" Kent

asked. "I'd like to see how your ship's fixed—that is, if it's all right with you, sir," he added to his superior.

Crain nodded. "All right if you don't stay long," he said. But, to Kent's surprise Krell seemed reluctant to endorse his proposal.

"I guess it'll be all right," he said slowly, "though there's nothing much on the Martian Queen to see."

Krell and his followers replaced their helmets and returned into the airlock. Liggett followed them, and, as Kent struggled hastily into a space-suit, he found Captain Crain at his side.

"Kent, look sharp when you get over on that ship," Crain told him. "I don't like the look of this Krell, and his story about all the officers being killed in the explosion sounds fishy to me."

"To me, too," Kent agreed. "But Liggett and I will have the suit-phones in our space-suits and can call you from there in case of need."

Crain nodded, and Kent with space-suit on and transparent helmet screwed tight, stepped into the airlock with the rest. The airlock's inner door closed, the outer one opened, and as the air puffed out

into space, Kent and Krell and Liggett leapt out into the void, the others following.

It was no novelty to Kent to float in a space-suit in the empty void. He and the others now floated as smoothly as though under water toward a wrecked liner at the Pallas' right. They reached it, pulled themselves around it, and, with feet braced against its side, propelled themselves on through space along the border of the wreck-pack.

They passed a half-dozen wrecks thus, before coming to the Martian Queen. It was a silvery, glistening ship whose stern and lower walls were bulging and strained, but not cracked. Kent told himself that Krell had spoken truth about the exploding rocket-tubes, at least.

They struck the Martian Queen's side and entered the upper-airlock open for them. Once through the airlock they found themselves on the ship's upper-deck. And when Kent and Liggett removed their helmets with the others they found a full dozen men confronting them, a brutal-faced group who exhibited some surprise at sight of them.

Foremost among them stood a tall, heavy individual who regarded Kent and Liggett with the cold, suspicious eyes of an animal.

"My comrade and fellow-ruler here, Wald Jandron," said Krell. To Jandron he explained rapidly. "The whole crew of the Pallas is alive, and they say if they can find fuel in the wreck-pack their ship can get out of here."

"Good," grunted Jandron. "The sooner they can do it, the better it will be for us."

Kent saw Liggett flush angrily, but he ignored Jandron and spoke to Krell. "You said one of your passengers had escaped the explosion?"

To Kent's amazement a girl stepped from behind the group of men, a slim girl with pale face and steady, dark eyes. "I'm the passenger," she told him. "My name's Marta Mallen."

Kent and Liggett stared, astounded. "Good Lord!" Kent exclaimed. "A girl like you on this ship!"

"Miss Mallen happened to be on the upper-deck at the time of the explosion and, so, escaped when the other passengers were killed," Krell explained smoothly. "Isn't that so, Miss Mallen?"

The girl's eyes had not left Kent's, but at Krell's words she nodded. "Yes, that is so," she said mechanically.

Kent collected his whirling thoughts. "But wouldn't you rather go back to the Pallas with us?" he asked. "I'm sure you'd be more comfortable there."

"She doesn't go," grunted Jandron. Kent turned in quick wrath toward him, but Krell intervened.

"Jandron only means that Miss Mallen is much more comfortable on this passenger-ship than she'd be in your freighter." He shot a glance at the girl as he spoke, and Kent saw her wince.

"I'm afraid that's so," she said; "but I thank you for the offer, Mr. Kent."

Kent could have sworn that there was an appeal in her eyes, and he stood for a moment, indecisive, Jandron's stare upon him. After a moment's thought he turned to Krell.

"You were going to show me the damage the exploding tubes did," he said, and Krell nodded quickly.

"Of course; you can see from the head of the stair back in the after-deck."

He led the way along a corridor, Jandron and the girl and two of the

men coming with them. Kent's thoughts were still chaotic as he walked between Krell and Liggett. What was this girl doing amid the men of the Martian Queen? What had her eyes tried to tell him?

Liggett nudged his side in the dim corridor, and Kent, looking down, saw dark splotches on its metal floor. Blood-stains! His suspicions strengthened. They might be from the bleeding of those wounded in the tube-explosions. But were they?

They reached the after-deck whose stair's head gave a view of the wrecked tube-rooms beneath. The lower decks had been smashed by terrific forces. Kent's practiced eyes ran rapidly over the shattered rocket-tubes.

"They've back-blasted from being fired too fast," he said. "Who was controlling the ship when this happened?"

"Galling, our second-officer," answered Krell. "He had found us routed too close to the dead-area's edge and was trying to get away from it in a hurry, when he used the tubes too fast, and half of them back-blasted."

"If Galling was at the controls in the pilot-house, how did the explosion kill him?" asked Liggett skeptically. Krell turned quickly.

"The shock threw him against the pilot-house wall and fractured his skull—he died in an hour," he said. Liggett was silent.

"Well, this ship will never move again," Kent said. "It's too bad that the explosion blew out your tanks, but we ought to find fuel somewhere in the wreck-pack for the Pallas. And now we'd best get back."

As they returned up the dim corridor Kent managed to walk beside Marta Mallen, and, without being seen, he contrived to detach his suit-phone—the compact little radiophone case inside his space-suit's neck—and slip it into the girl's grasp. He dared utter no word of explanation, but apparently she understood, for she had concealed the suit-phone by the time they reached the upper-deck.

Kent and Liggett prepared to don their space-helmets, and before entering the airlock, Kent turned to Krell.

"We'll expect you at the Pallas first hour to-morrow, and we'll start searching the wreck-pack with a dozen of our men," he said.

He then extended his hand to the girl. "Good-by, Miss Mallen. I hope we can have a talk soon."

He had said the words with double meaning, and saw understanding in her eyes. "I hope we can, too," she said.

Kent's nod to Jandron went unanswered, and he and Liggett adjusted their helmets and entered the airlock.

Once out of it, they kicked rapidly away from the Martian Queen, floating along with the wreck-pack's huge mass to their right, and only the star-flecked emptiness of infinity to their left. In a few minutes they reached the airlock of the Pallas.

They found Captain Crain awaiting them anxiously. Briefly Kent reported everything.

"I'm certain there has been foul play aboard the Martian Queen," he said. "Krell you saw for yourself, Jandron is pure brute, and their men seem capable of anything.

"I gave the suit-phone to the girl, however, and if she can call us with it, we can get the truth from her. She dared not tell me anything there in the presence of Krell and Jandron."

Crain nodded, his face grave. "We'll see whether or not she calls," he said.

Kent took a suit-phone from one of their space-suits and rapidly, tuned it to match the one he had left with Marta Mallen. Almost at once they heard her voice from it, and Kent answered rapidly.

"I'm so glad I got you!" she exclaimed. "Mr. Kent, I dared not tell you the truth about this ship when you were here, or Krell and the rest would have killed you at once."

"I thought that was it, and that's why I left the suit-phone for you," Kent said. "Just what is the truth?"

"Krell and Jandron and these men of theirs are the ones who killed the officers and passengers of the Martian Queen! What they told you about the explosion was true enough, for the explosion did happen that way, and because of it, the ship drifted into the dead-area. But the only ones killed by it were some of the tube-men and three passengers.

"Then, while the ship was drifting into the dead-area, Krell told the men that the fewer aboard, the longer they could live on the ship's food and air. Krell and Jandron led the men in a surprise attack and killed all the officers and passengers, and threw their bodies out into space. I was the only passenger they spared, because both Krell and Jandron—want me!"

There was a silence, and Kent felt a red anger rising in him. "Have they dared harm you?" he asked after a moment.

"No, for Krell and Jandron are too jealous of each other to permit the other to touch me. But it's been terrible living with them in this awful place."

"Ask her if she knows what their plans are in regard to us," Crain told Kent.

Marta had apparently overheard the question. "I don't know that, for they shut me in my cabin as soon as you left," she said. "I've heard them talking and arguing excitedly, though. I know that if you do find fuel, they'll try to kill you all and escape from here in your ship."

"Pleasant prospect," Kent commented. "Do you think they plan an attack on us now?"

"No; I think that they'll wait until you've refueled your ship, if you are able to do that, and then try treachery."

"Well, they'll find us ready. Miss Mallen, you have the suit-phone: keep it hidden in your cabin and I'll call you first thing to-morrow.

We're going to get you out of there, but we don't want to break with Krell until we're ready. Will you be all right until then?"

"Of course I will," she answered. "There's another thing, though. My name isn't Miss Mallen—it's Marta."

"Mine's Rance," said Kent, smiling. "Good-by until to-morrow, then, Marta."

"Good-by, Rance."

Kent rose from the instrument with the smile still in his eyes, but with his lips compressed. "Damn it, there's the bravest and finest girl in the solar system!" he exclaimed. "Over there with those brutes!"

"We'll have her out, never fear," Crain reassured him. "The main thing is to determine our course toward Krell and Jandron."

Kent thought. "As I see it, Krell can help us immeasurably in our search through the wreck-pack for fuel," he said. "I think it would be best to keep on good terms with him until we've found fuel and have it in our tanks. Then we can turn the tables on them before they can do anything."

Crain nodded thoughtfully. "I think you're right. Then you and

Liggett and Krell can head our search-party to-morrow."

Crain established watches on a new schedule, and Kent and Liggett and the dozen men chosen for the exploring party of the next day ate a scanty meal and turned in for some sleep.

When Kent woke and glimpsed the massed wrecks through the window he was for the moment amazed, but rapidly remembered. He and Liggett were finishing their morning ration when Crain pointed to a window.

"There comes Krell now," he said, indicating the single space-suited figure approaching along the wreck-pack's edge.

"I'll call Marta before he gets here," said Kent hastily.

The girl answered on the suit-phone immediately, and it occurred to Kent that she must have spent the night without sleeping. "Krell left a few minutes ago," she said.

"Yes, he's coming now. You heard nothing of their plans?"

"No; they've kept me shut in my cabin. However, I did hear Krell giving Jandron and the rest directions. I'm sure they're plotting something."

"We're prepared for them," Kent assured her. "If all goes well, before you realize it, you'll be sailing out of here with us in the Pallas."

"I hope so," she said. "Rance, be careful with Krell in the wreck-pack. He's dangerous."

"I'll be watching him," he promised. "Good-by, Marta."

Kent reached the lower-deck just as Krell entered from the airlock, his swarthy face smiling as he removed his helmet. He carried a pointed steel bar. Liggett and the others were donning their suits.

"All ready to go, Kent?" Krell asked.

Kent nodded. "All ready," he said shortly. Since hearing Marta's story he found it hard to dissimulate with Krell.

"You'll want bars like mine," Krell continued, "for they're damned handy when you get jammed between wreckage masses. Exploring this wreck-pack is no soft job: I can tell you from experience."

Liggett and the rest had their suits adjusted, and with bars in their grasp, followed Krell into the airlock. Kent hung back for a last word with Crain, who, with his half-dozen remaining men, was watching.

"Marta just told me that Krell and Jandron have been plotting something," he told the captain; "so I'd keep a close watch outside."

"Don't worry, Kent. We'll let no one inside the Pallas until you and Liggett and the men get back."

In a few minutes they were out of the ship, with Krell and Kent and Liggett leading, and the twelve members of the Pallas' crew following closely.

The three leaders climbed up on the Uranus-Jupiter passenger-ship that lay beside the Pallas, the others moving on and exploring the neighboring wrecks in parties of two and three. From the top of the passenger-ship, when they gained it, Kent and his two companions could look far out over the wreck-pack. It was an extraordinary spectacle, this stupendous mass of dead ships floating motionless in the depths of space, with the burning stars above and below them.

His companions and the other men clambering over the neighboring wrecks seemed weird figures in their bulky suits and transparent helmets. Kent looked back at the Pallas, and then along the wreck-pack's edge to where he could glimpse the silvery side of the Martian Queen. But now Krell and Liggett were descending into the ship's interior through the great opening smashed in its bows, and Kent

followed.

They found themselves in the liner's upper navigation-rooms. Officers and men lay about, frozen to death at the instant the meteor-struck vessel's air had rushed out, and the cold of space had entered. Krell led the way on, down into the ship's lower decks, where they found the bodies of the crew and passengers lying in the same silent death.

The salons held beautifully-dressed women, distinguished-looking men, lying about as the meteor's shock had hurled them. One group lay around a card-table, their game interrupted. A woman still held a small child, both seemingly asleep. Kent tried to shake off the oppression he felt as he and Krell and Liggett continued down to the tank-rooms.

They found their quest there useless, for the tanks had been strained by the meteor's shock, and were empty. Kent felt Liggett grasp his hand and heard him speak, the sound-vibrations coming through their contacting suits.

"Nothing here; and we'll find it much the same through all these wrecks, if I'm not wrong. Tanks always give at a shock."

"There must be some ships with fuel still in them among all these," Kent answered.

They climbed back, up to the ship's top, and leapt off it toward a Jupiter freighter lying a little farther inside the pack. As they floated toward it, Kent saw their men moving on with them from ship to ship, progressing inward into the pack. Both Kent and Liggett kept Krell always ahead of them, knowing that a blow from his bar, shattering their glassite helmets, meant instant death. But Krell seemed quite intent on the search for fuel.

The big Jupiter freighter seemed intact from above, but, when they penetrated into it, they found its whole under-side blown away, apparently by an explosion of its tanks. They moved on to the next ship, a private space-yacht, small in size, but luxurious in fittings. It had been abandoned in space, its rocket-tubes burst and tanks strained.

They went on, working deeper into the wreck-pack. Kent almost forgot the paramount importance of their search in the fascination of it. They explored almost every known type of ship—freighters, liners, cold-storage boats, and grain-boats. Once Kent's hopes ran high at sight of a fuel-ship, but it proved to be in ballast, its cargo-tanks empty and its own tanks and tubes apparently blown

simultaneously.

Kent's muscles ached from the arduous work of climbing over and exploring the wrecks. He and Liggett had become accustomed to the sight of frozen, motionless bodies.

As they worked deeper into the pack, they noticed that the ships were of increasingly older types, and at last Krell signalled a halt. "We're almost a mile in," he told them, gripping their hands. "We'd better work back out, taking a different section of the pack as we do."

Kent nodded. "It may change our luck," he said.

It did; for when they had gone not more than a half-mile back, they glimpsed one of their men waving excitedly from the top of a Pluto liner.

They hastened at once toward him, the other men gathering also; and when Kent grasped the man's hand he heard his excited voice.

"Fuel-tanks here are more than half-full, sir!"

They descended quickly into the liner, finding that though its whole stern had been sheared away by a meteor, its tanks had remained

miraculously unstrained.

"Enough fuel here to take the Pallas to Neptune!" Kent exclaimed.

"How will you get it over to your ship?" Krell asked. Kent pointed to great reels of flexible metal tubing hanging near the tanks.

"We'll pump it over. The Pallas has tubing like this ship's, for taking on fuel in space, and, by joining its tubing to this, we'll have a tube-line between the two ships. It's hardly more than a quarter-mile."

"Let's get back and let them know about it," Liggett urged, and they climbed back out of the liner.

They worked their way out of the wreck-pack with much greater speed than that with which they had entered, needing only an occasional brace against a ship's side to send them floating over the wrecks. They came to the wreck-pack's edge at a little distance from the Pallas, and hastened toward it.

They found the outer door of the Pallas' airlock open, and entered, Krell remaining with them. As the outer door closed and air hissed into the lock, Kent and the rest removed their helmets. The inner door slid open as they were doing this, and from inside almost a

score of men leapt upon them!

Kent, stunned for a moment, saw Jandron among their attackers, bellowing orders to them, and even as he struck out furiously he comprehended. Jandron and the men of the Martian Queen had somehow captured the Pallas from Crain and had been awaiting their return!

The struggle was almost instantly over, for, outnumbered and hampered as they were by their heavy space-suits, Kent and Liggett and their followers had no chance. Their hands, still in the suits, were bound quickly behind them at Jandron's orders.

Kent heard an exclamation, and saw Marta starting toward him from behind Jandron's men. But a sweep of Jandron's arm brushed her rudely back. Kent strained madly at his bonds. Krell's face had a triumphant look.

"Did it all work as I told you it would, Jandron?" he asked.

"It worked," Jandron answered impassively. "When they saw fifteen of us coming from the wreck-pack in space-suits, they opened right up to us."

Kent understood, and cursed Krell's cunning. Crain, seeing the fifteen figures approaching from the wreck-pack, had naturally thought they were Kent's party, and had let them enter to overwhelm his half-dozen men.

"We put Crain and his men over in the Martian Queen," Jandron continued, "and took all their helmets so they can't escape. The girl we brought over here. Did you find a wreck with fuel?"

Krell nodded. "A Pluto liner a quarter-mile back, and we can pump the fuel over here by connecting tube-lines. What the devil—"

Jandron had made a signal at which three of his men had leapt forward on Krell, securing his hands like those of the others.

"Have you gone crazy, Jandron?" cried Krell, his face red with anger and surprise.

"No," Jandron replied impassively; "but the men are as tired as I am of your bossing ways, and have chosen me as their sole leader."

"You dirty double-crosser!" Krell raged. "Are you men going to let him get away with this?"

The men paid no attention, and Jandron motioned to the airlock.

"Take them over to the Martian Queen too," he ordered, "and make sure there's no space-helmet left there. Then get back at once, for we've got to get the fuel into this ship and make a getaway."

The helmets of Kent and Krell and the other helpless prisoners were put upon them, and, with hands still bound, they were herded into the airlock by eight of Jandron's men attired in space-suits also. The prisoners were then joined one to another by a strand of metal cable.

Kent, glancing back into the ship as the airlock's inner door closed, saw Jandron giving rapid orders to his followers, and noticed Marta held back from the airlock by one of them. Krell's eyes glittered venomously through his helmet. The outer door opened, and their guards jerked them forth into space by the connecting cable.

They were towed helplessly along the wreck-pack's rim toward the Martian Queen. Once inside its airlock, Jandron's men removed the prisoners' space-helmets and then used the duplicate-control inside the airlock itself to open the inner door. Through this opening they thrust the captives, those inside the ship not daring to enter the airlock. Jandron's men then closed the inner door, re-opened the outer one, and started back toward the Pallas with the helmets of Kent and his companions.

Kent and the others soon found Crain and his half-dozen men who rapidly undid their bonds. Crain's men still wore their space-suits, but, like Kent's companions, were without space-helmets.

"Kent, I was afraid they'd get you and your men too!" Crain exclaimed. "It's all my fault, for when I saw Jandron and his men coming from the wreck-pack I never doubted but that it was you."

"It's no one's fault," Kent told him. "It's just something that we couldn't foresee."

Crain's eyes fell on Krell. "But what's he doing here?" he exclaimed. Kent briefly explained Jandron's treachery toward Krell, and Crain's brows drew ominously together.

"So Jandron put you here with us! Krell, I am a commissioned captain of a space-ship, and as such can legally try you and sentence you to death here without further formalities."

Krell did not answer, but Kent intervened. "There's hardly time for that now, sir," he said. "I'm as anxious to settle with Krell as anyone, but right now our main enemy is Jandron, and Krell hates Jandron worse than we do, if I'm not mistaken."

"You're not," said Krell grimly. "All I want right now is to get within reach of Jandron."

"There's small chance of any of us doing that," Crain told them. "There's not a single space-helmet on the Martian Queen."

"You've searched?" Liggett asked.

"Every cubic inch of the ship," Crain told him. "No, Jandron's men made sure there were no helmets left here, and without helmets this ship is an inescapable prison."

"Damn it, there must be some way out!" Kent exclaimed. "Why, Jandron and his men must be starting to pump that fuel into the Pallas by now! They'll be sailing off as soon as they do it!"

Crain's face was sad. "I'm afraid this is the end, Kent. Without helmets, the space between the Martian Queen and the Pallas is a greater barrier to us than a mile-thick wall of steel. In this ship we'll stay, until the air and food give out, and death releases us."

"Damn it, I'm not thinking of myself!" Kent cried. "I'm thinking of Marta! The Pallas will sail out of here with her in Jandron's power!"

"The girl!" Liggett exclaimed. "If she could bring us over space-

helmets from the Pallas we could get out of here!"

Kent was thoughtful. "If we could talk to her—she must still have that suit-phone I gave her. Where's another?"

Crain quickly detached the compact suit-phone from inside the neck of his own space-suit, and Kent rapidly tuned it to the one he had given Marta Mallen. His heart leapt as her voice came instantly from it:

"Rance! Rance Kent—"

"Marta—this is Rance!" he cried.

He heard a sob of relief. "I've been calling you for minutes! I was hoping that you'd remember to listen!

"Jandron and ten of the others have gone to that wreck in which you found the fuel," she added swiftly. "They unreeled a tube-line behind them as they went, and I can hear them pumping in the fuel now."

"Are the others guarding you?" Kent asked quickly.

"They're down in the lower deck at the tanks and airlocks. They won't allow me down on that deck. I'm up here in the middle-deck,

absolutely alone.

"Jandron told me that we'd start out of here as soon as the fuel was in," she added, "and he and the men were laughing about Krell."

"Marta, could you in any way get space-helmets and get out to bring them over here to us?" Kent asked eagerly.

"There's a lot of space-suits and helmets here," she answered, "but I couldn't get out with them, Rance! I couldn't get to the airlocks with Jandron's seven or eight men down there guarding them!"

Kent felt despair; then as an idea suddenly flamed in him, he almost shouted into the instrument:

"Marta, unless you can get over here with helmets for us, we're all lost. I want you to put on a space-suit and helmet at once!"

There was a short silence, and then her voice came, a little muffled. "I've got the suit and helmet on, Rance. I'm wearing the suit-phone inside it."

"Good! Now, can you get up to the pilot-house? There's no one guarding it or the upper-deck? Hurry up there, then, at once."

Crain and the rest were staring at Kent. "Kent, what are you going to have her do?" Crain exclaimed. "It'll do no good for her to start the Pallas: those guards will be up there in a minute!"

"I'm not going to have her start the Pallas," said Kent grimly. "Marta, you're in the pilot-house? Do you see the heavy little steel door in the wall beside the instrument-panel?"

"I'm at it, but it's locked with a combination-lock," she said.

"The combination is 6–34–77–81," Kent told her swiftly. "Open it as quickly as you can."

"Good God, Kent!" cried Crain. "You're going to have her—?"

"Get out of there the only way she can!" Kent finished fiercely. "You have the door open, Marta?"

"Yes; there are six or seven control-wheels inside."

"Those wheels control the Pallas' exhaust-valves," Kent told her. "Each wheel opens the valves of one of the ship's decks or compartments and allows its air to escape into space. They're used for testing leaks in the different deck and compartment divisions. Marta, you must turn all those wheels as far as you can to the right."

"But all the ship's air will rush out; the guards below have no suits on, and they'll be—" she was exclaiming. Kent interrupted.

"It's the only chance for you, for all of us. Turn them!"

There was a moment of silence, and Kent was going to repeat the order when her voice came, lower in tone, a little strange:

"I understand, Rance. I'm going to turn them."

There was silence again, and Kent and the men grouped round him were tense. All were envisioning the same thing—the air rushing out of the Pallas' valves, and the unsuspecting guards in its lower deck smitten suddenly by an instantaneous death.

Then Marta's voice, almost a sob: "I turned them, Rance. The air puffed out all around me."

"Your space-suit is working all right?"

"Perfectly," she said.

"Then go down and tie together as many space-helmets as you can manage, get out of the airlock, and try to get over here to the Martian Queen with them. Do you think you can do that, Marta?"

"I'm going to try," she said steadily. "But I'll have to pass those men in the lower-deck I just—killed. Don't be anxious if I don't talk for a little."

Yet her voice came again almost immediately. "Rance, the pumping has stopped! They must have pumped all the fuel into the Pallas!"

"Then Jandron and the rest will be coming back to the Pallas at once!" Kent cried. "Hurry, Marta!"

The suit-phone was silent; and Kent and the rest, their faces closely pressed against the deck-windows, peered intently along the wreck-pack's edge. The Pallas was hidden from their view by the wrecks between, and there was no sign as yet of the girl.

Kent felt his heart beating rapidly. Crain and Liggett pressed beside him, the men around them; Krell's face was a mask as he too gazed. Kent was rapidly becoming convinced that some mischance had overtaken the girl when an exclamation came from Liggett. He pointed excitedly.

She was in sight, unrecognizable in space-suit and helmet, floating

along the wreck-pack's edge toward them. A mass of the glassite space-helmets tied together was in her grasp. She climbed bravely over the stern of a projecting wreck and shot on toward the Martian Queen.

The airlock's door was open for her, and, when she was inside it, the outer door closed and air hissed into the lock. In a moment she was in among them, still clinging to the helmets. Kent grasped her swaying figure and removed her helmet.

"Marta, you're all right?" he cried. She nodded a little weakly.

"I'm all right. It was just that I had to go over those guards that were all frozen.... Terrible!"

"Get these helmets on!" Crain was crying. "There's a dozen of them, and twelve of us can stop Jandron's men if we get back in time!"

Kent and Liggett and the nearer of their men were swiftly donning the helmets. Krell grasped one and Crain sought to snatch it.

"Let that go! We'll not have you with us when we haven't enough helmets for our own men!"

"You'll have me or kill me here!" Krell cried, his eyes hate-mad.

"I've got my own account to settle with Jandron!"

"Let him have it!" Liggett cried. "We've no time now to argue!"

Kent reached toward the girl. "Marta, give one of the men your helmet," he ordered; but she shook her head.

"I'm going with you!" Before Kent could dispute she had the helmet on again, and Crain was pushing them into the airlock. The nine or ten left inside without helmets hastily thrust steel bars into the men's hands before the inner door closed. The outer one opened and they leapt forth into space, floating smoothly along the wreck-pack's border with bars in their grasp, thirteen strong.

Kent found the slowness with which they floated forward torturing. He glimpsed Crain and Liggett ahead, Marta beside him, Krell floating behind him to the left. They reached the projecting freighters, climbed over and around them, braced against them and shot on. They sighted the Pallas ahead now. Suddenly they discerned another group of eleven figures in space-suits approaching it from the wreck-pack's interior, rolling up the tube-line that led from the Pallas as they did so. Jandron's party!

Jandron and his men had seen them and were suddenly making greater efforts to reach the Pallas. Kent and his companions, propelling themselves frenziedly on from another wreck, reached the ship's side at the same time as Jandron's men. The two groups mixed and mingled, twisted and turned in a mad space-combat.

Kent had been grasped by one of Jandron's men and raised his bar to crack the other's glassite helmet. His opponent caught the bar, and they struggled, twisting and turning over and over far up in space amid a half-score similar struggles. Kent wrenched his bar free at last from the other's grasp and brought it down on his helmet. The glassite cracked, and he caught a glimpse of the man's hate-distorted face frozen instantly in death.

Kent released him and propelled himself toward a struggling trio nearby. As he floated toward them, he saw Jandron beyond them making wild gestures of command and saw Krell approaching Jandron with upraised bar. Kent, on reaching the three combatants, found them to be two of Jandron's men overcoming Crain. He shattered one's helmet as he reached them, but saw the other's bar go up for a blow.

Kent twisted frantically, uselessly, to escape it, but before the blow could descend a bar shattered his opponent's helmet from behind. As

the man froze in instant death Kent saw that it was Marta who had struck him from behind. He jerked her to his side. The struggles in space around them seemed to be ending.

Six of Jandron's party had been slain, and three of Kent's companions. Jandron's four other followers were giving up the combat, floating off into the wreck-pack in clumsy, hasty flight. Someone grasped Kent's arm, and he turned to find it was Liggett.

"They're beaten!" Liggett's voice came to him! "They're all killed but those four!"

"What about Jandron himself?" Kent cried. Liggett pointed to two space-suited bodies twisting together in space, with bars still in their lifeless grasp.

Kent saw through their shattered helmets the stiffened faces of Jandron and Krell, their helmets having apparently been broken by each other's simultaneous blows.

Crain had gripped Kent's arm also. "Kent, it's over!" he was exclaiming. "Liggett and I will close the Pallas' exhaust-valves and release new air in it. You take over helmets for the rest of our men in the Martian Queen."

In several minutes Kent was back with the men from the Martian Queen. The Pallas was ready, with Liggett in its pilot-house, the men taking their stations, and Crain and Marta awaiting Kent.

"We've enough fuel to take us out of the dead-area and to Neptune without trouble!" Crain declared. "But what about those four of Jandron's men that got away?"

"The best we can do is leave them here," Kent told him. "Best for them, too, for at Neptune they'd be executed, while they can live indefinitely in the wreck-pack."

"I've seen so many men killed on the Martian Queen and here," pleaded Marta. "Please don't take them to Neptune."

"All right, we'll leave them," Crain agreed, "though the scoundrels ought to meet justice." He hastened up to the pilot-house after Liggett.

In a moment came the familiar blast of the rocket-tubes, and the Pallas shot out cleanly from the wreck-pack's edge. A scattered cheer came from the crew. With gathering speed the ship arrowed out, its

rocket-tubes blasting now in steady succession.

Kent, with his arm across Marta's shoulders, watched the wreck-pack grow smaller behind. It lay as when he first had seen it, a strange great mass, floating forever motionless among the brilliant stars. He felt the girl beside him shiver, and swung her quickly around.

"Let's not look back or remember now, Marta!" he said. "Let's look ahead."

She nestled closer inside his arm. "Yes, Rance. Let's look ahead."

106 The God in the Box by Sewell Peaslee Wright

In the course of his Special Patrol duties Commander John Hanson resolves the unique and poignant mystery of "toma annerson."

Aproximate word count: 8,400

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

This is a story I never intended to tell. I would not even tell it now if it were not for the Zenians.

Understand that I do not dislike the Zenians. One of the best officers I ever had was a Zenian. His name was Eitel, and he served under me on the old Tamon, my first command. But lately the Zenians have made rather too much of the exploits of Ame Baove.

The history of the Universe gives him credit, and justly, for making the first successful exploration in space. Baove's log of that trip is a classic that every school-child knows.

But I have a number of friends who are natives of Zenia, and they fret me with their boastings.

"Well, Hanson," they say, "your Special Patrol Service has done wonderful work, largely under the officership of Earth-men. But after all, you have to admit that it was a Zenian who first mastered space!"

Perhaps it is just fractiousness of an old man, but countless repetitions of such statements, in one form or another, have irritated me to the point of action—and before going further, let me say, for the benefit of my Zenian friends, that if they care to dig deeply enough into the archives, somewhere they will find a brief report of these adventures recorded in the log of one of my old ships, the Ertak, now scrapped and forgotten. Except, perhaps, by some few like myself, who knew and loved her when she was one of the newest and finest ships of the Service.

I commanded the Ertak during practically her entire active life. Those were the days when John Hanson was not an old man, writing of brave deeds, but a youngster of half a century, or thereabouts, and full of spirit. Sometimes, when memory brings back those old days, it seems hard for me to believe that John Hanson, Commander of the Ertak, and old John Hanson, retired, and a spinner of ancient yarns,

are one and the same—but I must get on to my story, for youth is impatient, and from "old man" to "old fool" is a short leap for a youthful mind.

The Special Patrol Service is not all high adventure. It was not so even in the days of the Ertak. There was much routine patrolling, and the Ertak drew her full share of this type of duty. We hated it, of course, but in that Service you do what you are told and say nothing.

We were on a routine patrol, with only one possible source of interest in our orders. The wizened and sour-faced scientists the Universe acclaims so highly had figured out that a certain planet, thus far unvisited, would be passing close to the line of our patrol, and our orders read, "if feasible," to inspect this body, and if inhabited, which was doubted, to make contact.

There was a separate report, if I remember correctly, with a lot of figures. This world was not large; smaller than Earth, as a matter of fact, and its orbit brought it into conjunction with our system only once in some immemorable period of time. I suppose that record is stored away, too, if anybody is interested in it. It was largely composed of guesses, and most of them were wrong. These white-coated scientists do a lot of wild guessing, if the facts were known.

However, she did show up at about the place they had predicted. Kincaide, my second officer, was on duty when the television disk first picked her up, and he called me promptly.

"Strobus"—that was the name the scientists had given this planet we were to look over—"Strobus is in view, sir, if you'd like to look her over," he reported. "Not close enough yet to determine anything of interest, however, even with maximum power."

I considered for a moment, scowling at the microphone.

"Very well, Mr. Kincaide," I said at length. "Set a course for her. We'll give her a glance, anyway."

"Yes, sir," replied Kincaide promptly. One of the best officers in the Service, Kincaide. Level-headed, and a straight thinker. He was a man for any emergency. I remember—but I've already told that story.

I turned back to my reports, and forgot all about this wandering Strobus. Then I turned in, to catch up somewhat on my sleep, for we had had some close calls in a field of meteors, and the memory of a previous disaster was still fresh in my mind.1 I had spent my "watch below" in the navigating room, and now I needed sleep rather badly. If the scientists really want to do something for humanity, why don't

they show us how to do without food and sleep?

When, refreshed and ready for anything, I did report to the navigating room, Correy, my first officer, was on duty.

"Good morning, sir," he nodded. It was the custom, on ships I commanded, for the officers to govern themselves by Earth standards of time; we created an artificial day and night, and disregarded entirely, except in our official records, the enar and other units of the Universal time system.

"Good morning, Mr. Correy. How are we bearing?"

"Straight for our objective, sir." He glanced down at the two glowing charts that pictured our surroundings in three dimensions, to reassure himself. "She's dead ahead, and looming up quite sizeably."

"Right!" I bent over the great hooded television disk—the ponderous type we used in those days—and picked up Strobus without difficulty. The body more than filled the disk and I reduced the magnification until I could get a full view of the entire exposed surface.

Strobus, it seemed, bore a slight resemblance to one view of my own

Earth. There were two very apparent polar caps, and two continents, barely connected, the two of them resembling the numeral eight in the writing of Earth-men; a numeral consisting of two circles, one above the other, and just touching. One of the roughly circular continents was much larger than the other.

"Mr. Kincaide reported that the portions he inspected consisted entirely of fluid sir," commented Correy. "The two continents now visible have just come into view, so I presume that there are no others, unless they are concealed by the polar caps. Do you find any indications of habitation?"

"I haven't examined her closely under high magnification," I replied. "There are some signs...."

I increased power, and began slowly searching the terrain of the distant body. I had not far to search before I found what I sought.

"We're in luck, Mr. Correy!" I exclaimed. "Our friend is inhabited. There is at least one sizeable city on the larger continent and ... yes, there's another! Something to break the monotony, eh? Strobus is an 'unknown' on the charts."

"Suppose we'll have trouble, sir?" asked Correy hopefully. Correy

was a prime hand for a fight of any kind. A bit too hot-headed perhaps, but a man who never knew when he was beaten.

"I hope not; you know how they rant at the Base when we have to protect ourselves," I replied, not without a certain amount of bitterness. "They'd like to pacify the Universe with never a sweep of a disintegrator beam. 'Of course, Commander Hanson' some silver-sleeve will say, 'if it was absolutely vital to protect your men and your ship'—ugh! They ought to turn out for a tour of duty once in a while, and see what conditions are." I was young then, and the attitude of my conservative superiors at the Base was not at all in keeping with my own views, at times.

"You think, then, that we will have trouble, sir?"

"Your guess is as good is mine," I shrugged. "The people of this Strobus know nothing of us. They will not know whether we come as friends or enemies. Naturally, they will be suspicious. It is hard to explain the use of the menore, to convey our thoughts to them."

I glanced up at the attraction meter, reflecting upon the estimated mass of the body we were approaching. By night we should be nearing her atmospheric envelope. By morning we should be setting down on her.

"We'll hope for the best, sir," said Correy innocently.

I bent more closely over the television disk, to hide my smile. I knew perfectly what the belligerent Correy meant by "the best."

The next morning, at atmospheric speed, we settled down swiftly over the larger of the two continents, Correy giving orders to the navigating room while I divided my attention between the television disk and the altimeter, with a glance every few seconds at the surface temperature gauge. In unknown atmospheres, it is not difficult to run up a considerable surface temperature, and that is always uncomfortable and sometimes dangerous.

"The largest city seems to be nearer the other continent. You should be able to take over visually before long. Has the report on the atmosphere come through yet?"

"Not yet. Just a moment, sir." Correy spoke for a moment into his microphone and turned to me with a smile.

"Suitable for breathing," he reported. "Slight excess of oxygen, and only a trace of moisture. Hendricks just completed the analysis." Hendricks, my third officer, was as clever as a laboratory man in many ways, and a red-blooded young officer as well. That's a

combination you don't come across very often.

"Good! Breathing masks are a nuisance. I believe I'd reduce speed somewhat; she's warming up. The big city I mentioned is dead ahead. Set the Ertak down as close as possible."

"Yes, sir!" snapped Correy, and I leaned over the television disk to examine, at very close range, the great Strobian metropolis we were so swiftly approaching.

The buildings were all tall, and constructed of a shining substance that I could not identify, even though I could now make out the details of their architecture, which was exceedingly simple, and devoid of ornament of any kind, save an occasional pilaster or flying buttress. The streets were broad, and laid out to cut the city into lozenge-shaped sections, instead of the conventional squares. In the center of the city stood a great lozenge-shaped building with a smooth, arched roof. From every section of the city, great swarms of people were flocking in the direction of the spot toward which the Ertak was settling, on foot and in long, slim vehicles of some kind that apparently carried several people.

"Lots of excitement down there, Mr. Correy," I commented. "Better tell Mr. Kincaide to order up all hands, and station a double guard at

the port. Have a landing force, armed with atomic pistols and bombs, and equipped with menores, as an escort."

"And the disintegrator-ray generators—you'll have them in operation, sir, just in case?"

"That might be well. But they are not to be used except in the greatest emergency, understand. Hendricks will accompany me, if it seems expeditious to leave the ship, leaving you in command here."

"Very well, sir!" I knew the arrangement didn't suit him, but he was too much the perfect officer to protest, even with a glance. And besides, at the moment, he was very busy with orders to the men in the control room, forward, as he conned the ship to the place he had selected to set her down.

But busy as he was, he did not forget the order to tune up the disintegrator-ray generators.

While the great circular door of the Ertak was backing out ponderously from its threaded seat, suspended by its massive gimbals, I inspected the people of this new world.

My first impression was that they were a soldiery people, for there

were no jostling crowds swarming around the ship, such as might have been expected. Instead, the citizenry stood at ease in a sort of military formation of numerous small companies, each apparently in charge of an officer. These companies were arranged to form a long wide avenue, leading to the city, and down this avenue a strange procession was coming toward the ship.

I should make it clear at this point that these Strobians were, in form, very similar to Earth-men, although somewhat shorter in stature, and certainly more delicately formed. Perhaps it would be better to say they resembled the Zenians, save for this marked difference: the Strobians were exceedingly light in color, their skins being nearly translucent, and their hair a light straw color. The darkest hair I saw at any time was a pale gold, and many had hair as colorless as silver—which I should explain is a metal of Earth somewhat resembling aluminum in appearance.

The procession was coming toward the ship slowly, the marchers apparently chanting as they came, for I could see their lips moving. They were dressed in short kirtles of brilliant colors—scarlet, green, orange, purple—and wore brilliant belts suspended about their waists by straps which crossed over their breasts and passed over each shoulder.

Each marcher bore a tall staff from which flew a tiny pennon of the same color as his chief garment. At the top of each staff was a metal ornament, which at first glance I took to be the representation of a fish. As they came closer, I saw that this was not a good guess, for the device was without a tail.

The exit port is open, sir," reported Hendricks. "The people seem far from hostile, and the air is very good. What are your orders?"

"There will be no change, I think," I said as I hurried toward the now open door. "Mr. Kincaide will be in command of the guard at the port. You and I, with a small landing force, will advance to meet this procession. Make sure that there are a number of extra menores carried by the escort; we shall need them."

"Yes, sir!" Hendricks snapped a command and the landing force fell into place behind us as we passed through the circular doorway, and out onto the rocky ground of Strobus.

The procession stopped instantly, and the chanting died to a murmur. The men forming the living wall on each side bowed their heads and made a quick sign; a peculiar gesture, as though they reached out to shake an invisible hand.

The leader of the procession, a fine-featured man with golden hair, walked forward with bowed head, chanting a single phrase over and over again in a voice as sweet as a woman's: "Toma annerson ... toma annerson ... toma annerson...."

"Sounds friendly enough," I whispered to Hendricks. "Hand me an extra menore; I'll see...."

The chanting stopped, and the Strobian lifted his head.

"Greetings!" he said. "You are welcome here."

I think nothing ever surprised me more, I stared at the man like a fool, my jaw dropping, and my eyes bulging. For the man spoke in a language of Earth; spoke it haltingly and poorly, but recognizably.

"You—you speak English?" I faltered. "Where—where did you learn to speak this language?"

The Strobian smiled, his face shining as though he saw a vision.

"Toma annerson," he intoned gravely, and extended his right hand in a greeting which Earth-men have offered each other for untold centuries!

I shook hands with him gravely, wondering if I were dreaming.

"I thank you for your welcome," I said, gathering my wits at last. "We come as friends, from worlds not unlike your own. We are glad that you meet us as friends."

"It was so ordered. He ordered it so and Artur is His mouthpiece in this day." The Strobian weighed every word carefully before he uttered it speaking with a solemn gravity that was most impressive.

"Artur?" I questioned him. "That is your name?"

"That is my name," he said proudly. "It came from He Who Speaks who gave it to my father many times removed."

There were many questions in my mind, but I could not be outdone in courtesy by this kindly Strobian.

"I am John Hanson," I told him, "Commander of the Special Patrol Service ship Ertak. This is Avery Hendricks, my third officer."

"Much of that," said Artur slowly, "I do not understand. But I am greatly honored." He bowed again, first to me, and then to Hendricks, who was staring at me in utter amazement. "You will come with us now, to the Place?" Artur added.

I considered swiftly, and turned to Hendricks.

"This is too interesting to miss," I said in an undertone. "Send the escort back with word for Mr. Correy that these people are very friendly, and we are going on into the city. Let three men remain with us. We will keep in communication with the ship by menore."

Hendricks gave the necessary orders, and all our escort, save for three men, did a brisk about face and marched back to the ship. The five of us, conducted by Artur, started for the city, the rest of the procession falling in behind us. Behind the double file of the procession, the companies that had formed the living wall marched twenty abreast. Not all the companies, however, for perhaps a thousand men, in all, formed a great hollow square about the Ertak, a great motionless guard of honor, clad in kirtles like the pennon-bearers in the procession, save that their kirtles were longer, and pale green in color. The uniform of their officers was identical, save that it was somewhat darker in color, and set of with a narrow black belt, without shoulder straps.

We marched on and on, into the city, down the wide streets, walled with soaring buildings that shone with an iridescent lustre, toward the great domed building I had seen from the Ertak.

The streets were utterly deserted, and when we came close to the building I saw why. The whole populace was gathered there; they were drawn up around the building in orderly groups, with a great lane opened to the mighty entrance.

There were women waiting there, thousands of them, the most beautiful I have ever seen, and in my younger days I had eyes that were quick to note a pretty face.

Through these great silent ranks we passed majestically, and I felt very foolish and very much bewildered. Every head was bowed as though in reverence, and the chanting of the men behind us was like the singing of a hymn.

At the head of the procession, we entered the great domed, lozenge-shaped building, and I stared around in amazement.

The structure was immense, but utterly without obstructing columns, the roof being supported by great arches buttressed to pilasters along the walls, and furnished with row after row of long benches of some polished, close-grained red wood, so clear that it shone brilliantly.

There were four great aisles, leading from the four angles of the lozenge, and many narrower ones, to give ready access to the

benches, all radiating from a raised dais in the center, and the whole building illuminated by bluish globes of light that I recognized from descriptions and visits to scientific museums, as replicas of an early form of the ethon tube.

These things I took in at a glance. It was the object upon the huge central dais that caught and held my attention.

"Hendricks!" I muttered, just loud enough to make my voice audible above the solemn chanting. "Are we dreaming?"

"No, sir!" Hendricks' eyes were starting out of his head, and I have no doubt I looked as idiotic as he did. "It's there."

On the dais was a gleaming object perhaps sixty feet long—which is a length equal to the height of about ten full-sized men. It was shaped like an elongated egg—like the metal object surmounting the staffs of the pennon-bearers!

And, unmistakably, it was a ship for navigating space.

As we came closer, I could make out details. The ship was made of some bluish, shining metal that I took to be chromium, or some compound of chromium, and there was a small circular port in the

side presented to us. Set into the blunt nose of the ship was a ring of small disks, reddish in color, and deeply pitted, whether by electrical action or oxidization, I could not determine. Around the more pointed stern were innumerable small vents, pointed rearward, and smoothly stream-lined into the body. The body of the ship fairly glistened, but it was dented and deeply scratched in a number of places, and around the stern vents the metal was a dark, iridescent blue, as though stained by heat.

The chanting stopped as we reached the dais, and I turned to our guide. He motioned that Hendricks and I were to precede him up a narrow, curving ramp that led upwards, while the three Zenians who accompanied us were to remain below. I nodded my approval of this arrangement, and slowly we made our way to the top of the great platform, while the pennon-bearers formed a close circle around its base, and the people, who had surrounded the great building filed in with military precision and took seats. In the short space of time that it took us to reach the top of the dais, the whole great building filled itself with humanity.

Artur turned to that great sea of faces and made a sweeping gesture, as of benediction.

"Toma annerson!" His voice rang out like the clear note of a bell,

filling that vast auditorium. In a great wave, the assembled people seated themselves, and sat watching us, silent and motionless.

Artur walked to the edge of the dais, and stood for a moment as though lost in thought. Then he spoke, not in the language which I understood, but in a melodious tongue which was utterly strange. His voice was grave and tender; he spoke with a degree of feeling which stirred me even though I understood no word that he spoke. Now and again I heard one recognizable sequence of syllables, that now familiar phrase, "toma annerson."

"Wonder what that means, sir?" whispered Hendricks. "'Toma annerson?' Something very special, from the way he brings it out. And do you know what we are here for, and what all this means?"

"No," I admitted. "I have some ideas, but they're too wild for utterance. We'll just go slow, and take things as they come."

As I spoke, Artur concluded his speech, and turned to us.

"John Hanson," he said softly, "our people would hear your voice."

"But—but what am I to say?" I stammered. "I don't speak their language."

"It will be enough," he muttered, "that they have heard your voice."

He stood aside, and there was nothing for me to do but walk to the edge of the platform, as he had done, and speak.

My own voice, in that hushed silence, frightened me. I would not have believed that so great a gathering could maintain such utter, deathly silence. I stammered like a school-child reciting for the first time before his class.

"People of Strobus," I said—this is as nearly as I remember it, and perhaps my actual words were even less intelligent—"we are glad to be here. The welcome accorded us overwhelms us. We have come ... we have come from worlds like your own, and ... and we have never seen a more beautiful one. Nor more kindly people. We like you, and we hope that you will like us. We won't be here long, anyway. I thank you!"

I was perspiring and red-faced by the time I finished, and I caught Hendricks in the very act of grinning at his commander's discomfiture. One black scowl wiped that grin off so quickly, however, that I thought I must have imagined it.

"How was that, Artur?" I asked. "All right?"

"Your words were good to hear, John Hanson," he nodded gravely. "In behalf——"

The hundreds of blue lights hung from the vaulted roof clacked suddenly and went out. Almost instantly they flashed on again—and then clicked out. A third time they left us momentarily in darkness, and, when they came on again, a murmur that was like a vast moan rose from the sea of humanity surrounding the dais. And the almost beautiful features of Artur were drawn and ghastly with pain.

"They come!" he whispered. "At this hour, they come!"

"Who, Artur?" I asked quickly. "Is there some danger?"

"Yes. A very great one. I will tell you, but first—" He strode to the edge of the dais and spoke crisply, his voice ringing out like the thin cry of military brass. The thousands in the auditorium rose in unison, and swept down the aisles toward the doors.

"Now," cried Artur, "I shall tell you the meaning of that signal. For three or four generations, we have awaited it with dread. Since the last anniversary of his coming, we have known the time was not far off. And it had to come at this moment! But this tells you nothing.

"The signal warns us that the Neens have at last made good their threat to come down upon us with their great hordes. The Neens were once men like ourselves, who would have none of Him"—and Artur glanced toward the gleaming ship upon the dais—"nor His teachings. They did not like the new order, and they wandered off, to join those outcasts who had broken His laws, and had been sent to the smaller land of this world, where it is always warm, and where there are great trees thick with moss, and the earth underfoot steams, and brings forth wriggling life. Neen, we call that land, as this larger land is called Libar.

"These men of Neen became the enemies of Libar, and of us who call ourselves Libars, and follow His ways. In that warm country they became brown, and their hair darkened. They increased more rapidly than did the Libars, and as they forgot their learning, their bodies developed in strength.

"Yet they have always envied us; envied us the beauty of our women, and of our cities. Envied us those things which He taught us to make, and which their clumsy hands cannot fashion, and which their brutish brains do not understand.

"And now they have the overwhelming strength that makes us powerless against them." His voice broke, he turned his face away,

that I might not see the agony written there.

"Toma annerson!" he muttered. "Ah, toma annerson!" The words were like a prayer.

"Just a minute, Artur!" I said sharply. "What weapons have they? And what means of travel?"

He turned with a hopeless gesture.

"They have the weapons we have," he said. "Spears and knives and short spears shot from bows. And for travel they have vast numbers of monocars they have stolen from us, generation after generation."

"Monocars?" I asked, startled.

"Yes. He Who Speaks gave us that secret. Ah, He was wise; to hear His voice was to feel in touch with all the wisdom of all the air!" He made a gesture as though to include the whole universe.

There were a score of questions in my mind, but there was no time for them then. I snatched my menore from its clip on my belt, and adjusted it quickly. It was a huge and cumbersome thing, the menore of that day, but it worked as well as the fragile, bejeweled things of today. Maybe better. The guard posted outside the ship responded

instantly.

"Commander Hanson emanating," I shot at him. "Present my compliments to Mr. Correy, and instruct him as follows: He is to withdraw the outside guard instantly, and proceed with the Ertak to the large domed building in the center of the city. He will bring the Ertak to rest at the lowest possible altitude above the building, and receive further orders at that time. Repeat these instructions."

The guard returned the orders almost word for word, and I removed the menore with a little flourish. Oh, I was young enough in those days!

"Don't worry any more, Artur," I said crisply. "I don't know who He was, but we'll show you some tricks you haven't seen yet! Come!"

I led the way down the ramp, Hendricks, Artur, and the three Zenians following. As we came out into the daylight, a silent shadow fell across the great avenue that ran before the entrance, and there, barely clearing the shining roof of the auditorium, was the sleek, fat bulk of the Ertak. Correy had wasted no time in obeying orders.

Correy could smell a fight further than any man I ever knew.

From her emergency landing trap, the Ertak let down the cable elevator, and the six of us, Hendricks, Artur, the three Zenians of the crew, and myself, were shot up into the hull. Correy was right there by the trap to greet me.

"What are the orders, sir?" he asked, staring curiously at Artur. "Is there trouble brewing?"

"I gather that there is, but we'll talk about that in a moment—in the navigating room." I introduced Artur and Correy as we hurried forward, and as soon as the door of the navigating room had closed on the three of us, I turned to Artur with a question.

"Now, where will we find the enemy, these Neens? Have you any idea?"

"Surely," nodded Artur. "They come from their own country, to the south. The frontier is the narrow strip of land that connects Libar with Neen, and since the alarm has been sounded, the enemy is already at the frontier, and the forces of my people and the enemy are already met."

"I don't know anything about the set-up," put in Correy, "but that sounds like poor management to me. Haven't you any advance

guards, or spies, or outposts?"

Artur shook his head sadly.

"My people are not warlike. We who spread His teachings have tried to warn the masses, but they would not listen. The land of the Neens was far away. The Neens had never risen against the Libars. They never would. So my people reasoned."

"And you think there is fighting in progress now?" I asked. "How did the word come?"

"By phone or radio, I presume," said Artur. "We are in communication with the frontier by both methods, and the signal of the lights has been arranged for generations. In the day, all lights were to flash on three times; at night, they were to be darkened three times."

So they had telephones and radios! It was most amazing, but my questions could wait. They would have to wait. Correy was shuffling his feet with anxiety for orders to start action.

"All right, Mr. Correy," I said. "Close the ports and ascend to a height that will enable you to navigate visually. You are sufficiently

familiar with the country to understand our objective?"

"Yes, sir! Studied it coming down. It's that neck of land that separates the two continents." He picked up the microphone, and started punching buttons and snapping orders. In twenty seconds we were rushing, at maximum atmospheric speed, toward the scene of what, Artur had told us, was already a battle.

Artur proved to be correct. As we settled down over the narrow neck of land, we could see the two forces locked in frenzied combat; the Libars fighting with fine military precision, in regular companies, but outnumbered at least five to one by the mob-like masses of brown Neens.

From the north and from the south slim, long vehicles that moved with uncanny swiftness were rushing up reserve forces for both sides. There were far more monocars serving the Libars, but each car brought but a pitifully few men. And every car shot back loaded with wounded.

"I thought you said your people weren't fighters, Artur?" I said. "They're fighting now, like trained soldiers."

"Surely. They are well trained, but they have no fighting spirit, like

the enemy. Their training, it is no more than a form of amusement, a recreation, the following of custom. He taught it, and my people drill, knowing not for what they train. See! Their beautiful ranks crumple and go down before the formless rush of the Neens!"

"The disintegrator beams, sir?" asked Correy insidiously.

"No. That would be needless slaughter. Those brown hordes are witless savages. An atomic bomb, Mr. Correy. Perhaps two of them, one on either flank of the enemy. Will you give the order?"

Correy rapped out the order, and the ship darted to the desired position for the first bomb—darted so violently that Artur was almost thrown off his feet.

"Watch!" I said, motioning to Artur to share a port with me.

The bomb fled downward, a swift black speck. It struck perhaps a half mile to the west (to adopt Earth measures and directions) of the enemy's flank.

As it struck, a circle of white shot out from the point of impact, a circle that barely touched that seething west flank. The circle paled to gray, and settled to earth. Where there had been green, rank

growth, there was now no more than a dirty red crater, and the whole west flank of the enemy was fleeing wildly.

I said the whole west flank; that was not true. There were some that did not flee: that would never move again. But there was not one hundredth part of the number that would not have dissolved into dust with one sweep of the disintegrator ray through that pack of striving humanity.

"The other flank, Mr. Correy," I said quietly. "And just a shade further away from the enemy. A little object lesson, as it were!"

The battle was at a momentary standstill. The Neens and the Libars seemed, for the moment, to forget the issue; every face was turned upward. Even the faces of the runners who fled from a disaster they did not understand.

"I think one more will be enough, sir," chuckled Correy. "The beggars are ready to run for it right now." He gave a command, and as though the microphone itself released the bomb, it dropped from the bottom of the Ertak and diminished swiftly as it hurtled earthward.

Again the swift spread of white that turned to gray; again the vast

red crater. Again, too, a flank crumpled.

As though I could see the faces of the brown men, I saw terror strike to the heart of the Neens. The flanks were melting away, and the panic of fear spread as flame spreads on a surface of oil. Correy has a good eye for such things, and he said there were fifty thousand of the enemy massed there. If there were, in the space that it takes the heart to tick ten times, fifty thousand Neens turned their back to the enemy and fled to the safety of their own jungles.

The Libars made no effort to pursue. They stood there, in their military formations, watching with wonderment. Then, with crisp military dispatch, they maneuvered into great long ranks, awaiting the arrival of transportation.

"And so it is finished, John Hanson," said Artur slowly, his eyes shining with a light that might almost be called holy. "My people are saved! He spoke well, as always, when He said that those who would come after Him would be our friends if we were their friends."

"We are your friends," I replied, "but tell me, who is this one of whom you speak always, but do not name? From what I have seen, I guess a great deal, but there has been no time to learn all the story.

Will you tell me, now?"

"I will, if that is your wish," said Artur, "but I should prefer to tell you in the Place. It is a long story, the story of toma annerson, the story of He Who Speaks, and there are things you should see, so that you may understand that story."

"As you wish, Artur." I glanced at Correy and nodded. "Back to the city, Mr. Correy. I think we're through here."

"I believe we are, sir." He gave the orders to the operating room, and the Ertak swung in a great circle toward the gleaming city of the Libars. "It looked like a real row when we got here; I wouldn't have minded being down there for a few minutes myself."

"With the Ertak poised over your head, dropping atomic bombs?"

Correy shook his head and grinned.

"No, sir!" he admitted. "Just hand to hand, with clubs."

Artur and I were together in the great domed building he called "the Place." There were no others in that vast auditorium, although outside a multitude waited. Artur had expressed a wish that no one accompany me, and I could see no valid reason for refusing the

request.

"First," he said, pausing beside the great shining body of the space ship upon the central dais, "let me take you back many generations, to the time when only this northern continent was inhabited, and the Libars and the Neens were one people.

"In those days, we were of less understanding than the Neens of today. There were no cities; each family lived to itself, in crude huts, tilling the ground and hunting its own food. Then, out of the sky came this." He touched, reverently, the smooth side of the space ship. "It came to earth at this very spot, and from it, presently, emerged He Who Speaks. Would you inspect the ship that brought Him here?"

"Gladly," I said, and as I spoke, Artur swung open the small circular door. A great ethon flashlight, of a type still to be seen in our larger museums, stood just inside the threshold, and aided by its beams, we entered.

I stared around in amazement. The port through which he had entered led to a narrow compartment running lengthwise of the ship: a compartment twice the length of a man, perhaps, and half the length of a man in breadth. The rest of the ship was cut off by

bulkheads, each studded with control devices the uses of which I could but vaguely understand.

Forward was a veritable maze of instruments, mounted on three large panels, the central panel of the group containing a circular lens which apparently was the eyepiece of some type of television disk the like of which I have never seen or heard. From my hasty examination I gathered that the ship operated by both a rocket effect (an early type of propulsion which was abandoned as ineffective) and some form of attraction-repulsion apparatus, evidently functioning through the reddish, pitted disks I had observed around the nose of the ship. The lettering upon the control panels and the instruments, while nearly obliterated, was unmistakably in the same language in which Artur had addressed us.

The ship had, beyond the shadow of doubt, come from Earth!

"Artur," I said gravely, "you have shown me that which has stirred me more than anything in my life. This ship of the air came from my own world, which is called Earth."

"True," he nodded, "that is the name He gave to it: Earth. He was a young man, but He was full of kindness and wisdom. He took my people out of the fields and the forests, and He taught them the

working of metals, and the making of such things as He thought were good. Other things, of which He knew, He kept secret. He had small instruments He could hold in His hand, and which roared suddenly, that would take the life of large animals at a great distance, but He did not explain these, saying that they were bad. But all the good things He made for my people, and showed them how to make others.

Not all my people were good. Some of them hated this great one, and strove against Him. They were makers of trouble, and He sent them to the southern continent, which is called Neen. Those among my people who loved Him and served Him best, He made His friends. He taught them His language, which is this that I speak, and which has been the holy language of His priests since that day. He gave to these friends names from his own country, and they were handed down from father to son, so that I am now Artur, as my father was Artur, and his father before him, for many generations."

"Just a second," I put in. "Artur? That is not—ah! Arthur! That is the name: Arthur."

"Perhaps so," nodded the priest of this unknown Earth-child. "In many generations, a name might slightly change. But I must hasten on with my story, for outside my people become impatient.

"In the course of time, He passed away, an old man, with a beard that was whiter than the hair of our new-born children. Here, our hair grows dark with age, but His whitened like the metal of his ship that brought Him here. But He left to us His voice, and so long as His voice spoke to us on the anniversary of the day upon which He came out of the sky, the Neens believed that His power still protected His people.

"But the Neens were only awaiting the time when His voice would no longer sound in the Place. Each year their brown and savage representatives came, upon the anniversary, to listen, and each time they cowered and went back to their own kind with the word that He Who Speaks, still spoke to His people.

"But the last anniversary, no sound came forth. His voice was silenced at last; and the Neens went back rejoicing, to tell their people that at last the god of the Libars had truly died, and that His voice sounded no more in the Place."

A tense excitement gripped me; my hands trembled, and my voice, as I spoke to Artur, shook with emotion.

"And this voice—it came from where, Artur?" I whispered.

"From here." Sorrowfully, reverently, he lifted, from a niche in the wall, a small box of smooth, shining metal, and lifted the lid.

Curiously, I stared at the instruments revealed. In one end of the horizontal panel was a small metal membrane, which I guessed was a diaphragm. In the center of the remaining space was thrust up a heavy pole of rusty metal. Supported by tiny brackets in such fashion that it did not quite touch the pole of rusty metal, was a bright wire, which disappeared through tiny holes in the panel, on either side. Each of the brackets which supported the wire was tipped with a tiny roller, which led me to believe that the wire was of greater length than was revealed, and designed to be drawn over the upright piece of metal.

"Until the last anniversary," said Artur sadly, "when one touched this small bit of metal, here,"—he indicated a lever beside the diaphragm, which I had not noted—"this wire moved swiftly, and His voice came forth. But this anniversary, the wire did not move, and there was no voice."

"Let me see that thing a moment." There were hinges at one end of the panel, and I lifted it carefully. An intricate maze of delicate mechanism came up with it.

One thing I saw at a glance: the box contained a tiny, crude, but workable atomic generator. And I had been right about the wire: there was a great orderly coil of it on one spool, and the other end was attached to an empty spool. The upright of rusty metal was the pole of an electro-magnet, energized by the atomic generator.

"I think I see the trouble, Artur!" I exclaimed. One of the connections to the atomic generator was badly corroded; a portion of the metal had been entirely eaten away, probably by the electrolytic action of the two dissimilar metals. With trembling fingers I made a fresh connection, and swung down the hinged panel. "This is the lever?" I asked.

"Yes; you touch it so." Artur moved the bit of metal, and instantly the shining wire started to move, coming up through the one small hole, passing, on its rollered guides, directly over the magnet, and disappearing through the other hole, to be wound up on the take-up spool. For an instant there was no sound, save the slight grinding of the wire on its rollers, and then a bass, powerful voice spoke from the vibrating metal diaphragm:

"I am Thomas Anderson," said the voice. "I am a native of a world called Earth, and I have come through space to this other sphere. I leave this record, which I trust is imperishable, so that when others

come to follow me, they may know that to Earth belongs the honor, if honor it be, of sending to this world its first visitor from the stars.

"There is no record on Earth of me nor of my ship of space, the Adventurer. The history of science is a history of men working under the stinging lash of criticism and scoffing; I would have none of that.

The Adventurer was assembled far from the cities, in a lone place where none came to scoff or criticize. When it was finished, I took my place and sealed the port by which I had entered. The Adventurer spurned the Earth beneath its cradles, and in the middle of the Twenty-second century, as time is computed on Earth, man first found himself in outer space.

"I landed here by chance. My ship had shot its bolt. Perhaps I could leave, but the navigation of space is a perilous thing, and I could not be sure of singling out my native Earth. This is a happy world, and the work I am doing here is good work. Here I remain.

"And now, to you who shall hear this, my voice, in some year so far away that my bones shall be less than dust, and the mind refuses to compute the years, let me give into your charge the happiness and the welfare of these, my people. May peace and happiness be your portion. That is the wish of Earth's first orphan, Thomas Anderson."

There was a click, and then the sharp hum of the wire re-spooling itself on the original drum.

"Toma annerson," said Artur solemnly: "He Who Speaks." He offered his hand to me, and I understood, as I shook hands gravely, that this old Earth greeting had become a holy sign among these people. And I understood also the meaning of the familiar phrase, "toma annerson"; it was the time-corrupted version of that name they held holy—the name of Thomas Anderson, child of my own Earth, and explorer of space centuries before Ame Baove saw his first sun.

There is more I could tell of Strobus and its people, but an old man's pen grows weary.

The menace of the Neens, Artur agreed, had been settled forever. They knew now that He Who Speaks still watched over the welfare of his people. The Neens were an ignorant and a superstitious people, and the two great craters made by our atomic bombs would be grim reminders to them for many generations to come.

"You have done all that need be done, John Hanson," said Artur, his face alight with gratitude. "And now you must receive the gratitude of my people!" Before I could protest, he signalled to the men who guarded the four great entrances, and my words were lost in the

instant tramp of thousands of feet marching down the broad aisles.

When they were all seated, Artur spoke to them, not in the "holy" language I understood, but in their own common tongue. I stood there by the ship, feeling like a fool, wondering what he was saying. In the end he turned to me, and motioned for me to join him, where he stood near the edge of the dais. As I did so, every person in that monstrous auditorium rose and bowed his head.

"They greet you as the successor to He Who Speaks," said Artur gently. "They are a simple folk, and you have served them well. You are a man of many duties that must soon carry you away, but first will you tell these people that you are their friend, as Toma Annerson was the friend of their fathers?"

For the second time that day I made a speech.

"Friends," I said, "I have heard the voice of a great countryman of mine, who is dead these countless centuries, and yet who lives today in your hearts. I am proud that the same star gave us birth." It wasn't much of a speech, but they didn't understand it, anyway. Artur translated it for them, and I think he embroidered it somewhat, for the translation took a long time.

"They worship you as the successor to Toma Annerson," whispered Artur as the people filed from the great auditorium. "Your fame here will be second only to His, for you saved, to-day, the people He called His own."

We left just as darkness was falling, and as I shot up to the hovering Ertak, the chant of Artur and his bright-robed fellows was the last sound of Strobus that fell upon my ears. They were intoning the praises of Thomas Anderson, man of Earth.

And so, my good Zenian friends, you learn of the first man to brave the dangers of outer space. He left no classic journal behind him as did Ame Baove, nor did he return to tell of the wonders he had found.

But he did take strong root where he fell in his clumsy craft, and if this record, supported only by the log of the Ertak, needs further proof, some five or six full generations from now Strobus will be close enough for doubting Zenians to visit. And they will find there, I have no least doubt, the enshrined Adventurer, and the memory, not only of Thomas Anderson, but of one, John Hanson, Commander (now retired) of the Special Patrol Service.

October 1931

107 In The Orbit of Saturn by Roman Frederick Starzl

Disguised as a voluntary prisoner on a pirate space ship, an I. F. P. man penetrates the mystery of the dreaded "Solar Scourge."

Aproximate word count: 9,400

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

The Celestia, gliding through space toward Titan, major satellite of Saturn, faltered in her course. Her passengers, mostly mining engineers and their wives, stockholders, and a sprinkling of visitors, were aware of a cessation of the heavens' apparent gyrations, due to the halting of the ship's rotation on its axis. At the same time the ship's fictitious gravity, engendered by the centrifugal force of its rotation, ceased, so that passengers, most of whom were assembled in the main salon, which occupied the entire midship section, drifted away from the curved floor, whose contour followed that of the outer skin, to flounder in helpless confusion.

A woman screamed. A rasping sound, as of metal scraping against

the hull, came from one point in the circumference, and here the portholes were obscured by a dark mass that blotted out the stars.

An old man, clinging to a luxuriously upholstered chair, and pale with fright, cried:

"It's those damned pirates. If they find out who I am it'll break the company to ransom me."

"If the company thinks it worth while to ransom you," retorted his youngish, saturnine companion, who seemed less scared than annoyed.

Questions darted back and forth. No word came from the control room forward, and little of what transpired outside could be seen through the thick glass ports. The pirate ship loomed over them like a monstrous leech, its bolts sharply etched in black and white by the sunlight from their stern. Beyond that was only the velvety darkness —the absolute vacuity of space that carries no sound, refracts no light. A battle was raging out there, but of that nothing could be seen or heard in the salon. Only a dull, booming vibration through the flyer's hull, made by the rockets in a useless effort to shake off their captor.

Of all the passengers, none understood the situation as well as Quirl Finner. In imagination he followed the desperate struggle that was going on out there, for the men who were selling their lives were his companions in arms, the ship's guard of the redoubtable I.F.P., the Interplanetary Flying Police who carried the law of white men to the outermost orbit of the solar system.

Quirl bristled, but he maintained his pose of indifference—of the sightseeing passenger who depended blindly on the ship's crew for his own safety. In appearance he might easily have been the pampered son of some millionaire that he impersonated. His close-fitting silken tunic of blue, with its bright yellow roll-collar, the turban of fine yellow lace, the close-fitting trousers that showed his lithe yet powerfully molded legs, the thin-soled low boots—all proclaimed him the typical time-killing dandy of the times. His superb proportions made him look smaller, lighter than he really was, and his lean features, which under the I.F.P. skullcap would have looked hawk-like, were sufficiently like the patrician fineness of the character part he was playing. Young men of means in the year 2159 were by no means without their good points. They indulged in athletic sports to counteract the softening influence of idleness, and so Quirl Finner had no misgivings about the success of his disguise.

Yet he could not refrain from listening intently for every sound that

penetrated the hull. His part was to be captured by the pirate, who had been named "The Solar Scourge" by sensational newscasters, and to learn all he could, and eventually to be ransomed by a "wealthy father" with his priceless information. So he waited, chafing, while men he knew, men who had faced the perils of space with him, met their death.

After a time there came the sudden crackling of the air-tight bulkhead which separated the salon from the forward sections. Quirl knew what this meant. The pirates had succeeded in breaching a hole through the ship's skin, and the air of the forward section had rushed into space. It was sickening to think of those brave men up there caught in the suddenly formed vacuum. Long before the bulkhead had ceased crackling he knew they were dead, and that the pirate crew had entered, wearing vacuum suits, and was even then replenishing the air so the passengers could be taken alive.

They had been in the prison hold of the pirate ship for five days, terrestrial time. This was nothing like the spacious quarters they had occupied before. A cross-section of their prison would have looked like a wedge with a quarter circle for its blunt end. The curved wall of the great cylindrical projectile, nearly a hundred feet in diameter, was their floor, on which they could walk like flies on the inside of a wheel rim. The walls of the room, on two sides, converged toward

the top, until they joined the sides of a well-like tunnel that ran from the nose of the ship to its tail, where the rocket nozzles were. A door pierced the tunnel side, and under this door was a metal platform, from which one could either climb into the passage or down a ladder into the hold. A pirate guard held this platform, from where he could peer over the top of a curtain which gave scant privacy to the men and women prisoners on either side of it.

On the floor-plates, without even the meager comfort of the dried Martian weeds that had been given to the women, sat or lay the men. They showed their dejection, their faces covered with new growths of beard, their clothes crumpled and torn. The only furniture consisted of a long, light metal table on the women's side, securely bolted to the floor. The prisoners were obliged to stand at this when eating their meals. The whole cheerless scene was coldly illuminated by a single light-emanating disk just under the guard's platform.

Steps echoed hollowly metallic from above. Quirl wondered if it was already time for the galley boy to bring the immense bowl of hot stew for the noon meal.

It was not. It was Moby Gore, the huge and overbearing first mate of the pirates on his daily mission of inspection and prisoner baiting. Quirl crept further into his corner. It would be fatal to his plan for

him to attract the attention of this petty tyrant. It was hard enough to keep away from him—to crush back the almost overwhelming desire to fly at him, fists hammering.

Gore came down the ladder deliberately, pausing on the lower steps to look around with his little, pig's eyes. His head was set well forward on his thick, muscular neck, so that he had to look out from under his beetling brows in a manner peculiarly ape-like. His heavy face was smooth-shaven, and his blue-black jowls and chin looked painfully smooth. His coarse, black hair was brushed back and plastered firmly to his bullet head.

His body was heavy, but moved with deadly smoothness and precision. The customary harness which passed around his naked torso supported a double-barreled ironizing electrocution pistol, and also a short, savagely knobbed riot club. Depending from the belt at his waist were short pants, which displayed the thick, hairy legs with their cable-like muscles. On his feet were thick socks, so that his toes were able to curl around the rungs of the ladder.

Satisfied with his quick, darting inspection, Gore now came all the way down. At the foot of the ladder lay an elderly man in the oblivion of sleep. Gore's foot came down on the thin chest. With savage pleasure he bore down, so that the old man's startled squawk

ended in a fit of coughing. Gore cuffed him aside roughly, growling:

"Old squiffer! Let that learn you to sleep out of the way!" He laughed coarsely when one of the prisoners, with the temerity of anonymity, started to boo, but received no support.

Carelessly Gore passed among the prisoners. Here and there he halted, snatching some article of finery or inconspicuous bit of jewelry that he had overlooked before. They shrank from him, only too glad to see him pass on to the next unfortunate.

"You, there!" Gore rasped, indicating Quirl with his stubby forefinger. "Come on out o' there, you!"

Quirl hoped that the brutal mate would not hear the thudding of his beating heart, or that if he did, he would take it for fear. He came slowly toward Gore, who was greedily eyeing the young man's brightly colored and valuable tunic. Quirl came too slowly.

"What do you take me for?" Gore bellowed in unreasonable anger. He strode forward, the prisoners scattering before him. His large, knotty hand closed on Quirl's arm, and jerked, with the intention of whirling this reluctant prisoner across the room. But Quirl was heavier, and his arm harder, than Gore had supposed. The hand came

away, and with a tearing scream, the beautiful silk garment ripped off, ruined, disclosing Quirl's white and well-knit body.

"You done that a-purpose!" Gore roared, and then his great ape's arms were around Quirl, trying to break his back.

But that seemingly slight body would not bend, and, as much as Gore might tug and heave, he could not force Quirl back. The little pig-eyes glared, and there was death in them. Suddenly Gore let go. His hand leaped to the short club at his side, and he swung the weapon in a vicious arc. Quirl's relaxed forearm met it, sapping most of its force. Yet when it struck his head it seemed to burst like a ball of fire. He crashed against the wall and sank to the floor only half conscious.

"Gore! Gore!" yelled the guard from the platform, "'member how sore the Old Man was about the last terrie you killed? Better lay off."

"Shut yo'r damned mug!" Gore yelled back. But he gave up his idea of kicking the prisoner, and with a menacing glare for the guard, passed on.

As Quirl's mind slowly cleared he congratulated himself for his repression. During his struggle with Gore his hand had come in

contact with the butt of the mate's electrogun. He could easily have pulled it out of its holster and turned it against its owner. But this hasty action would not only have assured his own death, but would have destroyed the only chance the I.F.P. had of learning "The Scourge's" secrets.

Gore slowly worked his way to the women's side of the hold. Here, much to the amusement of the guard and himself, he began stripping off their long, flowing robes, disclosing their nude bodies. He seemed to see particular humor to heaping indignity on the older women, commenting coarsely on their shortcomings. The men viewed this with set, pale faces. But none dared to interfere. In their midst was an object lesson, his head swathed in bandages. He had been the first to resent this exhibition, an almost daily event, when the mate's roving eye had happened to alight upon his wife.

All at once Gore's careless and derogatory progress was halted, and he stared with terrifying intentness at the girl who had until that day managed to escape his notice. Gore had torn off a nondescript black cape that had covered her head and face, and the golden silk robe she wore. To Quirl, watching from a space of some sixty feet, her beauty came like a shock. He remembered her as Lenore Hyde, whom he had seen only once before as she emerged briefly from her stateroom.

About five feet, six inches tall, her slim figure was dwarfed by the huge bulk of the mate. Her golden hair tumbled over her slim shoulders, almost to her waist, where a tasseled cord held the clinging silk close to her. Her face, so white that it seemed like silver in that gorgeous setting, was cold and defiant. There was no fear in those deep blue eyes under the straight brows—only loathing and contempt.

Gore was not concerned with the personal feelings of his prize. He licked his wide, cruel lips, seizing the girl's arms as in a vise. His other big, dirty hand slipped into the collar of her robe.

But the ripping of fabric did not come. Instead there was a sharp crack, and Gore, too surprised even to move, stared at the little man who had hit him.

Again crack! The impact of fist on jaw. The blow was too weak to hurt this toughened veteran of countless battles. But slowly a tide of dull red welled up over the bull neck, turning the blue-black jowls to purple, and the walls echoed to Gore's roar of anger.

Again the fists of the smaller man smacked, this time drawing a trickle of blood from Gore's mouth. Then the thick fingers closed on the brave passenger's wrist, and the tremendous muscles swelled as,

with a quick movement, Gore thrust his adversary back of him, grasping the other wrist also. Then with slow, irresistible motion, he began drawing the thin arms forward, stretching them, until the unfortunate man, drawn against the barrier of Gore's back, began to shriek with pain.

Still Gore pulled, grinning evilly, and his victim's shoulder blades lifted under the tight skin of his back as they took the strain. Shriek followed shriek, until the guard on the platform glanced furtively out into the central well. There came a dry, tearing crackle as the bones of the arms were drawn out of their sockets, and then the shrieks ceased as merciful unconsciousness came. Gore tossed the limp body carelessly away.

"The beast!" Quirl gritted his teeth. But he stayed where he was, hiding his clenched fist, for his was a specific assignment, and men of the I.F.P. know the meaning of the word "duty."

In a better humor again, Gore looked around.

"Come on, you little ginny!" he chortled. "I see you! Come to Moby, my beauty. You'll be queen of the hold, and this scurvy litter will kiss your feet every day."

He pursued her as she ran, bowling over or trampling on the fear-stricken prisoners as they tried to scramble out of his way, men and women alike. But she made up in agility what she lacked in strength, lifting up the hem of her robe so that her legs twinkled bare, ducking under Gore's outstretched arms, or leaping over the fallen form of some stumbling, panic-stricken unfortunate.

Only in her eyes was there a true picture of her terror. Gore's uncertain temper was changing again, and in a few moments he was cursing foully, his little red-rimmed eyes glistening, as he dashed after her with short, boar-like rushes.

Again she skimmed past where Quirl cowered in simulated fear, and the look she gave him struck straight at the disguised officer's heart. So it was that when she slipped and fell to her knees, and Gore charged in with a triumphant laugh, Quirl met him with no thought of anything, no feeling but the joy of battle, the delight of a strong man when he meets a foe whom he hates. And to that heady, feral emotion was added the unforgettable picture of a lovely face whose obvious fear was somehow tempered by hope and confidence—in him!

As Gore lunged past, Quirl struck him. It was a short, sharp, well-timed jab that would have knocked out an ordinary man. But Gore

was by no means ordinary. The blow laid open his cheek against the jawbone, but Gore scarcely slowed as he swerved. With a bellow of rage, he came straight at Quirl, arms outstretched.

Philosophers have said that no matter how far the human race advances in the sciences, its fundamental reactions will still be atavistic. Gore could have dispatched Quirl in a second with his ray weapon, with perfect safety. Yet it is doubtful that the weapon even entered his mind. As he came to the battle he was driven only by the primitive urge to fight with his hands, to maim, to tear limb from limb like the great simians whom he resembled.

To Quirl, coolly poised, the picture of Gore did not inspire terror. In the passengers, it did. They saw a brutal giant, gorilla-like, and roaring like a beast, charging at a half-naked youth apparently only half his size. It seemed that those tremendous arms must break him at the first touch.

But the grasping hands slipped off the lithe body as if it were oiled, leaving only angry red welts along Quirl's ribs. As the officer edged away he planted two blows on Gore's nose, which began to bleed freely.

Again Gore rushed, and spat! spat! two seemingly light blows landed

on his face, opening a cut above his eye and another on his cheek bone. In a few seconds of battling he had become a shocking sight, with his features almost obscured by welling blood.

Again Quirl measured him, and this time, instead of evading the grasp of the mate's eager arms, he stepped right between them. Like a wraith he slipped into their embrace, and before they could grasp him, standing so close that his chest almost touched his adversary's, he whipped a right to Gore's jaw. It was the kind of punch that makes champions, a whiplike lash of the forearm, with relaxed muscles that tighten at the moment of impact. A punch with "follow-through" fit to knock out ninety-nine men out of a hundred.

But it did not knock out Gore, and Quirl had to pay dearly for his error. Gore was staggered, but his mighty arms closed, hugging his slighter opponent to his hairy chest so that the breath was choked out of him, and the metal studs on his harness gouged cruelly into Quirl's flesh. His face was blue before he could work his arm loose, and begin to prod with stiffened fingers at Gore's throat. Gore had to let go then, and Quirl broke away, boxed for a few moments until he had recovered, and then proceeded to chop Gore's face beyond any semblance of humanity.

The mate had dropped his ray weapon, and now searched for it with

blinded eyes. He flung his riot club, and it flew wide of the mark. It was obvious that he was going to be beaten into insensibility.

The guard on the platform, seeing the trend of the battle, shouted hoarsely up the well, and in a few minutes four men, hard-bitten, villainous looking fellows, tumbled down the ladder and joyously joined in the fray. It was then only a matter of seconds before Quirl lay on the floor-plates, battered and bleeding, but still feebly fighting, while Gore sat astride him, seeking with vicious fingers for Quirl's eyes. At the same time his men were kicking at the helpless man's body wherever they could reach him.

At the sight of this brutality the other prisoners, forgetting for the moment their own cowed condition, set up such a bedlam of noise that the guard began to look furtively up the passage, and to shout at the ruffians.

Suddenly he was whirled aside, and a figure in uniform, moving with uncanny speed for a man so massive, appeared upon the platform and bounded down the ladder. He was among the struggling men on the floor in a moment, and became a maze of flailing arms and legs. Like ten-pins the pirates scattered, and the giant pulled off the mate. Gore could not see, but as he writhed he knew he was in the grip of the pirate captain. Captain Strom's harsh, ascetic face was

dangerous, and his steely gray eyes compelling. The men managed slovenly salutes.

"Gore," Strom snapped, "have your men get some water and mop up this blood. How many times have I told you to quit mauling the prisoners? D'ye think I'm in this business to provide amusement for you? Henceforth keep out of this hold. Hear?"

"Yes, sir," Gore muttered sullenly.

"Took five of you bums to handle him, did it?" Strom remarked sardonically, stooping to pick up the unconscious Quirl. He carried him easily, up the ladder. As they disappeared Strom's voice boomed out:

"Dr. Stoddard! Stoddard! Messenger, have Stoddard report at my cabin."

The mate was wiping the blood off his face with a rag.

"I tried to call yer," the guard whined.

"That tears it!" Gore exclaimed fiercely, bursting into a string of abuse. But one of his henchmen nudged him.

"Keep yer tongue in yer face, Gore, till the time comes."

Gore said nothing, but glared savagely at the prisoners.

"Get the buckets and mops!" he snarled at his men, and they fled precipitately.

A long, wailing noise came through the hatch:

"Soopson! S-o-o-pson!"

"Here comes yer grub, damn you," Gore growled at the prisoners in general. A shuffling sound followed the singsong call, and then a "galley boy" of forty years or so, badly crippled by club-feet, shuffled up to the hatch and laboriously let himself down to the platform. The huge bowl of stew he was carrying was far too heavy for him, and his strained, thin face was beady with sweat.

"Get a move on, Sorko!" Gore bellowed up at him. "Get your swill down here. Some o' these swine are goin' short this time, anyway."

Sorko set the big bowl down at the top of the steps and began to descend backward. Then he resumed his burden.

But he was nervous, and had barely started when his crippled feet,

far too big for his thin shanks, became entangled. He gave a giddy shriek and fell over backward, landing on his back, and lay still. His pale, freckled face became greenish.

But the bowl, filled to the brim by its greasy, scalding hot contents, flew in a sweeping parabola, tipping as it fell, so that the entire contents cascaded on Gore, drenching him from head to foot. Howling with rage and pain he danced around. He was utterly beside himself. When he was able to see he rushed for Sorko, who was moaning with returning consciousness, and picked up the frail body to hurl it against the floor.

"Stop, or you're dead!"

That voice, so incisive and clear, was a woman's. Gore found himself looking into the little twin funnels of his own ray projector. They were filled with a milky light, and the odor of ozone was strong. The girl had only to press the trigger and a powerful current would leap along the path of those ionizing beams. And Gore would murder no more.

Stupidly, he let Sorko slide to the floor, where the poor fellow recovered sufficiently from his paralyzing fright and his fall to scuttle away.

Looking past the menacing weapon, Gore saw the girl, Lenore Hyde. Her limpid eyes under their straight brows were blazing, and he read in them certain death for himself.

"Up that ladder!" she ordered sharply, "and stay out! Guard, when this beast is gone I will give you this weapon. Now, connect up your skipper."

Too surprised to disobey, the guard threw the televisor switch, and in a moment Strom's stern face appeared on the screen. He comprehended the situation immediately.

"Do as she says," he ordered brusquely. "Stoddard is coming to take care of that man of hers that Gore beat up."

A few minutes later she was tearfully assisting the ship's doctor to put the man with the dislocated shoulders on a stretcher.

"Your husband?" asked Stoddard, who resembled a starved gray rat.

"My brother," she exclaimed simply.

"Want to take care of him?" And at her eager assent, he said, "Can't afford to let him die. Your family got money?"

"Yes, yes! They will pay anything—anything—to get him back safely."

The doctor grinned with satisfaction.

Memory returned to Quirl with the realization that he was lying on a metal bunk in an outside stateroom, where he could see the orderly procession of the stars through the floor ports as the ship rotated. His body was racked with pain, and his head seemed enormous. His sensation, he discovered, was due to a thick swathing of bandages.

As he stirred something moved in an adjoining bunk, and Dr. Stoddard's peaked face came into view.

"How do you feel?" he asked professionally.

"Rotten!"

"We'll fix that." He left, returning a few minutes later with a portable apparatus somewhat resembling its progenitor, the diathermy generator. He disposed a number of insulated loops about Quirl's body and head, connecting them through flexible cables to his machine. As a gentle humming began, Quirl was conscious of an agreeable warmth, of a quickening all over his body. A great

lassitude followed, and he slept.

When he awoke again Captain Strom was standing beside him. He had taken off his coat, and his powerful body filled the blouse he was wearing. He had evidently just come off duty, for he still had on his blue trousers, with the stripes of gold braid down the sides.

"It may interest you, Mr. Finner, that I have selected you as one of the chosen," he remarked casually.

"One of the chosen what?"

"The chosen race. You didn't take me for an out-and-out damned pirate, did you?"

"Excuse me if I seem dumb!" Quirl hoisted himself on his elbow. "Yes, I figure you're a pirate. What else?"

Strom's stern face relaxed in a smile. It was a strange smile, inscrutably melancholy. It revealed, beneath the hardness of a warrior, something else; the idealism of a poet. When he spoke again it was with a strange gentleness:

"To attain one's end, one must make use of many means, and sometimes to disguise one's purpose. For instance, it is perfectly

proper for an officer of the I.F.P. to disguise himself like a son of the idle rich in order to lay the infamous 'Scourge' by the heels, isn't it?"

Quirl felt himself redden. And a cold fear seemed to overwhelm him. He realized that Strom was a zealot, and he knew he would not hesitate to kill. This prompt penetration of his disguise was something he had not bargained for.

"What makes you think," he asked shortly, "that I'm an I.F.P. man?"

"The fight you gave Gore and his men. Do you expect me to think that a coupon clipper could have done that? I know the way of—"

He checked himself. Quirl said:

"My people have money. I don't know what you mean about—"

"Oh, yes, you do," Strom interrupted. "If you were what you claim to be perhaps I would let you go for the ransom, though you took my eye from the first."

"The ransom will be paid."

"It will not. You will be one of those who do not return. There is only one price I will accept from you."

"Yes? What is that?"

"The formula of the new etheric ray."

"I don't know the I.F.P. secrets. I told you that."

"You know how to operate the ray. All its men do. I want you to tell me what you know. I can deduce the rest."

Quirl thought rapidly. Strom was right. The I.F.P. had developed a new ray that was far superior to the ionizer ray, for the latter required an atmosphere of some kind for its operation, while the new one would work equally well in a vacuum.

"I never heard of any," he lied stubbornly. "Anyway, what do you want a ray for? Your guns, with no gravity to interfere and no air to stop the bullets, have just about unlimited range, haven't they?"

"Spoken like a soldier!" Again Strom permitted himself a brief triumphant smile. "And we have the further advantage of invisibility. The ship is surrounded by a net of wires that create a field of force which bend light rays around us. That explains why your men have never caught us. But to get back to our subject. I will tell you something. Do you know who I am?"

Quirl looked at him. Strom appeared to be at least sixty years old. But the fine, erect figure, the rugged features told nothing.

"Did you ever hear of Lieutenant Burroughs?" Strom asked casually.

"Burroughs—the man without a planet!" Quirl ejaculated. "Are you Burroughs, the traitor?" Immediately he regretted his heedlessness. Strom's face darkened in anger, and for a moment the pirate captain did not reply. When he did he was a little calmer.

"Traitor they called me!" he exclaimed vehemently. "I a traitor—the most loyal man in the solar system guard. Surrounded by rottenness and intrigue—

"But you wouldn't know. You were but a lad learning to fly your first toy helics when that happened. Years later the Martian Cabal was exposed, and the leading plotters—the traitors—were punished. But that was not till later, and the court's irreversible decree against me had been carried out. I, the unsuspecting messenger, the loyal, eager dupe, was made the cat's-paw. I was put on an old, condemned freighter, with food and supplies supposed to last me a lifetime, but with no power capsules and no means of steering the ship. I was set adrift in a derelict on a lonely orbit of exile around the sun—the man without a planet!

"Picture that, lad. That rusty, dead old cylinder, coursing around and around the sun, and inside, sitting on his bales and boxes, a young man like you. A young man in the pride and prime of his life, expiating the treason that had betrayed him. Day after day, through the thick ports, I saw the same changeless scene. And every two years, when I drew near the Earth, I watched the beautiful green ball of it, with what bitter longings! As I watched it dwindle away again into the blackness of space, I thought of the fortunate, selfish, stupid and cruel beings who lived on it, and hated them. They had banished me, an innocent man, to whirl forever and ever around the sun, in my steel tomb!

"But that cruel judgment was never executed. Seven years ago this Gore found me. He is an escaped convict, and he came in a little five-man rocket he had stolen. We loaded up all of the supplies the little ship would hold, for Gore had no food, and escaped to Titan, landing on an island on the side opposite to where the mines are.

"Gore wanted to become a pirate, and as he could get men, I consented. He scraped them up, fugitives from justice, every one of them. We built this ship, and I invented the invisibility field of force __"

"Just a moment," Quirl interrupted, vastly interested. "I saw your

ship through the ports that day."

"True. The presence of your ship in the field distorted it so much that it was ineffective. But at all other times—right now—we are utterly invisible. One of the I.F.P. patrols may pass within a mile of us and never see us.

"As we raided the interplanetary commerce, I began to weed out the people we captured. Those that showed the highest intelligence, sense of justice and physical perfection I selected to be the nucleus of a new race, to be kept on Titan for a time and then to be transplanted to a new planet of one of the nearer solar systems.

"My principal trouble is with the crew. They can collect ransom only on those I reject, and there are constant clashes between me and Gore. It is now my intention to let them go their way, and to fit out a new ship, with a new crew. I offer you the place of first mate."

"No!" Quirl replied crisply. "You say you understand the honor of the Force, and then offer me a job pirating with you. No, thanks!"

Strom, or Burroughs, made no attempt to conceal his disappointment. The recital of his wrongs had brought out the bitter lines of his face, and the weariness of one who plays his game alone

and can call no one friend.

"I should have known better," he said quietly. "There was none more loyal to the I.F.P. than I—when I still belonged to it. Yet, I thought if I laid all my cards before you—You realize what this means?"

"Yes," Quirl replied soberly. "It means you will never dare to let me be ransomed nor to free me among your selected people. It means—death!"

"Not death! I will parole you."

Quirl felt an overmastering surge of sympathy. He saw this pirate as later historians have come to see him—a man of lofty and noble purpose who was made the victim of shrewder, meaner minds in the most despicable interplanetary imbroglio ever to disgrace a solar system. The thought of his own fate, should he refuse the offer, did not depress Quirl as much as the necessity of heaping more disappointment on this deeply wronged "man without a planet."

"Captain," he said slowly, with deep regret. "You remember the I.F.P. oath?" And at the other's flush he hurried on. "Knowing that oath you know what my answer must be. Put me in irons or kill me!"

"I know," Strom added wistfully. "Would you—if I could just once more shake the clean hand of a brave man and a gentleman—"

Quirl's hand shot out and gripped the long, powerful fingers of the pirate captain.

Quirl was willing to compromise to the extent of not revealing anything to the other passengers, for the privilege of being kept in the prison hold rather than in solitary confinement. Here he would be under the vigilant eye of a guard, with possibly less chance of effecting an escape in some way, but he felt a great desire to be near the girl Lenore, and to know that she was safe and in good spirits

They fastened him by means of a light chain and hoop that locked around his waist to a staple set in the floor near one wall. The other prisoners regarded him as a hero, for since the day of the epic fight the mate had kept away, and they had been treated with tolerable decency. Quirl was able to cheer them up with predictions that the most of them would be eligible to ransom. But as he looked at the pale beauty of Lenore he felt grave misgivings, for he knew that a man of Strom's discernment would want her for his projected Utopia without question.

She did not speak to him while the hero-worshipping crowd were

fluttering about him to their heart's content. When they finally left him alone she came up to him silently, and sat on the floor beside him.

"I want to thank you," she said quietly, clearly, "for what you did for me and my brother, Mr.—"

"Finner. Quirl Finner. I have thought of you as Lenore, and wondered how you were. How long has it been since they took me out? You see—" he grinned, "I was asleep."

"Five days. At least, they turned off the lights five times for the sleeping periods."

"The man who fought for you—how is he?"

"My brother—is dead!"

Quirl looked away so that he should not see the quick tears springing to her eyes. But a few moments later he felt her cool hand on his scarred forehead, and she was smiling bravely.

"Tragedies such as these, Quirl, were common in the lives of our ancestors. They were able to bear them, and we can bear them. All his life my poor brother has lived as a gentleman, sheltered,

protected by class barriers. When he died of pneumonia caused by the jagged end of a broken rib—so Dr. Stoddard says—I think he had a lively sense of satisfaction that he should end in such a way. If it had not been for me—"

She came to him often, after that, to sit quietly by his side, and to bring his food to him from the big community bowl which even the most fastidious of the prisoners had come to look forward to. She told of her life as the daughter of a capitalist who owned large mine holdings on Titan. It would be about time for the Celestia to reach Titan, and her non-arrival would be causing anxiety to Lenore's father awaiting her there. The void would be swarming with I.F.P. patrols, but as the pirate ship was invisible nothing would be found but the mysteriously looted and abandoned Celestia.

There was no longer any reason for concealing from her the fact that he himself was a member of the I.F.P., and Quirl told Lenore of the adventurous life he and his companions had led. Of forays to far-away and as yet undisciplined Pluto, of tropical Venus and Mercury, where the rains never cease, of the hostile and almost unknown planet of Aryl, within the orbit of Mercury, where no man has ever seen a true image of the landscape because of the stupendous and never-ending mirages.

As time passed they were drawn together by the bonds of propinquity and mutual interest—this obscure police officer and the daughter of one of the most powerful men in the solar system. But Quirl did not name his love, for always there was the grim present of their captivity, the ghastly uncertainty of the future.

The little "galley boy" Sorko seemed daily more frail. Apparently the fall he had sustained had done him some internal injury. Often the guard, with many a ribald comment, had to help him get his emptied bowl back up the ladder.

One day he seemed overcome by great weakness. Staggering, he held his hand to his sweat-dewed forehead. Erratically he waltzed across the floor, to crumple in a heap where Quirl and the girl were sitting. Moved by compassion, Lenore composed his body in a more comfortable position, and with a bit of handkerchief moistened the pirate's wrinkled, old-young face with some of Quirl's drinking water. The guard looked on indifferently.

"Guard!" Quirl shouted. "He's going to die. Come and take him to the lazaret."

"Sez you!" returned the guard callously. "Me, I stay on post till relieved. Sorko'll be all right. He's been throwin' them fits right

regular."

Sorko's lips moved feebly, and Lenore bent down to catch his words. They were barely audible:

"I'm all right, lady. You done me a good turn when you made Gore put me down, and I'm doin' you one now. I wouldn't do this for no one else." He gasped.

"Water!" Lenore exclaimed sharply, and Quirl handed her the rest of his cup.

"Ain't water he wants," the amused guard observed. "The blighter's playin' for a good chew of merclite!”

(Merclite, a highly stimulating gum. It was prohibited by interplanetary proclamation, but was always obtainable through the surreptitious channels of a highly profitable traffic.)

"I ain't as bad as I'm makin' out," Sorko whispered. "Got to do it to tell you this, 'cause you was square with me. Gore is fixin' to have a mut'ny. Kill captain, kill all these dubs here—this guy of yourn, too. He wants to take you for his—" the weazened little face twisted in unwonted shy delicacy—"take you for him, pretty lady. I don't want

him to. I'm not—a—bad feller—"

"What the hell, Sorko!" the puzzled guard exclaimed over the delay. "You bandy-legged rat, get up there, or I'll give you a jolt."

Lenore looked up, indignant.

"You heartless wretch! Would you let this man—"

"Comin'!" Sorko scrambling to his feet, shuffling to the table, where he retrieved his bowl. Quirl and Lenore watched his painful progress up the ladder, until at last he disappeared into the passage.

"Quirl," she murmured, as her hand sought his, "take this."

He felt a small bit of metal, and looking at it cautiously, saw that he had a rough key, filed out of a piece of flat metal

"The key to that hoop around your waist. He copied it from the one the captain has, I suppose."

His hopes high all at once, Quirl sought the compact little lock in the small of his back. It took a long time to get the key in, and then it would not turn. It had been unskillfully made, and was probably not a true reproduction. Nevertheless, by constant effort, he succeeded at

last in turning it, and was rewarded by hearing a faint click. He tested the hoop, felt it slip, and knew that at any time he chose he could free himself.

"Lenore, dear," he told her. "Go with the other women now. We must do nothing to make the guard suspicious. We don't know when this mutiny is to come off, but we are close to Saturn now; it can't be long. Go now."

"Good-by, dear. Be careful!"

It seemed an eternity until the emanation disk became dim and went out and the prisoners made sleepy sounds. A relief guard took station, and the ship became silent, so that one could hear the rumbling of the propelling rockets. As there were no ports in this hold, there was no light whatever except the faint glow that came from the central passage above the platform. Against this the pirate was outlined as he sat on his stool. As Quirl's eyes became accustomed to the darkness he could see the play of faint highlights on his muscular torso, and so he waited.

He thought over the situation. The safest and easiest course would be to create such a disturbance that Captain Strom would be attracted to the scene. This would probably not involve anything more than a

severe beating for himself, and he would then find opportunity to acquaint Strom with the projected mutiny somehow. That Strom would know how to deal with it he never doubted. Lenore might then still be forcibly impressed as a citizen of Strom's new planet, but at least she would not be exposed to the infinitely worse fate of becoming the plaything of Gore and his villainous crew.

The flaw of this plan was that Quirl himself would still be under practical sentence of death. Strom would not let his gratitude carry him so far as to release a man who knew as much as Quirl did, and who would not promise to keep his secrets.

The preferable, though far more dangerous course was to strike before the mutineers could. Quirl knew something about the structure of the ship. It was built around the tubular passage, and every hold or group of rooms opened on this well, from the bow where the navigators were to the stern where the rockets were located. Somewhere there would be a generating room where the invisibility field was being produced. If he could find this and wreck the generators one of the I.F.P. ships with which this part of space doubtless swarmed, would sight them, and after that everything was in the hands of fate.

Quirl nervously waited for the guard to nod. At any moment he

expected to hear a hellish bedlam break loose—the beginning of the mutiny. And the guard seemed alert. There was nothing to do but take a chance.

Quirl sighed as if he were turning in his sleep, so that the clink of the released chain would not seem out of place. The guard did not stir. Slowly, very slowly, Quirl crept across the floor. He had been robbed of all his clothing except his torn silk trousers; and his boots were gone, so he was able to move as quietly as a cat.

With tense silence he ascended the ladder, praying that his weight would not send up a warning vibration. But his luck held. He was nearly at the top before it broke.

"Take him off! Take him off!" It was an eery, strangled shriek from one of the male prisoners in the throes of a nightmare. With a startled curse the guard thudded to his feet, peered tensely into the darkness, his weapon sending twin milky beams of the powerful ionizing ray toward the source of the sound.

The dreamer had awakened, still gasping in the grip of fear, and other disturbed sleepers were grumbling.

"Better go easy, you fools," the pirate warned them. "Yer just in luck

that I didn't let loose a couple bolts on ye. Got a good notion to do it, anyway." He played the dangerous little spots of light around, amused as the prisoners scrambled for safety, but with no real intention of releasing the deadly electric charge along the paths provided for it. This cruel pleasure cost him his life. As he turned his back Quirl leaped. His iron-hard forearm rose and fell, and the edge of his hand came down on the back of the pirate's thick neck. There was a muffled crack and he slumped to the platform grating.

Quickly the officer stripped off the man's harness and buckled it around his own naked chest. The electrogun had been uninjured, and hooked to the belt was also the riot club, a truly appalling thing at close quarters. Quirl carried the body down, laid it prone in the corner he had occupied, snapped on the waistlock, and threw a ragged old blanket over the hairy legs. In the forthcoming disturbance, if anyone looked in, he would think the inert form a sleeping prisoner, and that the guard had deserted post.

Quirl had feared an outbreak among the prisoners, but they were so apathetic that they paid little attention. Perhaps they thought it was Quirl who had been killed, and he did not dare even a whispered farewell to the girl he knew was watching somewhere in the darkness.

Much to Quirl's delight, the long, tubular passage was deserted. Here the centrifugal gravity was less than it had been in the hold. A weird place, this central tube, where every direction was down, and a man could walk on his ceiling, his floor, his walls with equal facility. No top nor bottom—just a long, smooth tube with numerous enigmatic doors leading to—where?

At least it was easy to tell where the bow of the ship was. A light shone through a transom over the door to the navigating room. Should he try to hold up the navigating officer? He decided against that. There would be at least three men in there, and it was the custom to keep those quarters locked.

"If only I knew where they generate the invisibility field!" he muttered, as he stood irresolute.

Opportunity came at that moment. A crack of light appeared along the passage. A door was opening there. A moment later a head and shoulders showed. Someone was climbing up. Swiftly the officer ran to the place. The pirate did not even suspect anything wrong until he felt the spots of milky light on his face. He showed his terror plainly.

"Get up!" Quirl hissed. The man obeyed with alacrity. Quirl glanced down. He saw tiers of bunks, evidently one of the crew's

dormitories.

He now turned to the cowering pirate.

"I'd as soon kill you as not!" Quirl snarled.

"You got me wrong, brother!" the pirate whined. "I'm with Gore in this deal. Lay off!"

"Where you bound for?"

"I have to relieve Burke at the ventilating turbines."

"Let Burke wait. Lead on to the invisibility generators."

"Oh, I can't do that, mister! I got to have a pass. Say, mister, I was just kidding about being one of Gore's men. I'm for the cap'n, yes, sir!"

"You lying scum!" Quirl barked impatiently. "Get going!"

The white-faced and bewildered pirate led the way down the tube to the after end. He unlatched a door and tried to enter, but as soon as he had dropped through to the platform he was met by a guard with leveled ionizer.

"This gem'man," he started to explain. But Quirl dropped after him and gave him a powerful shove, so that he crashed into the guard. The latter pulled the trigger, and the unfortunate pirate crashed over the platform's edge to the floor. Quirl had out his own electrogun and dispatched the guard. At the same time he felt a stunning shock. His senses reeled, but the grating had taken part of the discharge loosed by a pirate electrician at the foot of the ladder. Quirl threw his riot club and followed that up with another lightning bolt.

He was then the only living person in the room, in which two generators hummed softly. Connected to them was a bank of U-shaped tubes, each as tall as a man, which were filled with silent livid fire. Quirl picked up a wrench and started hammering at the thick tubes until the glass cracked. Each time he was engulfed by a wave of heat, and the tube became black. The great generators idled and automatically came to a stop. Quirl was certain now that the pirate ship would be visible, but the position of the captives was still desperate. He hoped that none of the surviving pirates would think of calling at the generator room, or find out in some other way that they were now visible in the eternal day of space.

Quietly he climbed back to the passage and closed the hatch. He cast about for his next move. He was looking toward the bow, but on hearing the subdued clink of metal on metal, he turned.

A dozen of the pirates were coming toward him.

It would have been useless to draw his weapon. Theirs were out and could have burned him to a crisp before he could move. Silently and with deadliness apparent in every move they approached him.

"Hope they try to capture me alive!" he thought. "What a dog-fight that'll be!"

Now they were nearly up to him.

"Come along, you fool!" barked the leader of the group as they were all around him. "Sapheads like you'll give the whole game away."

Quirl could have laughed. This was evidently part of the mutineers' crew bent on their errand of murder. In the dim light they had taken him for one of their number. He went with them, meekly.

"Unlocked!" The leader whom Quirl had not seen before, exclaimed with satisfaction. He pulled the hatch open softly and the hinges had been oiled. Quietly as panthers they descended the ladder. They stood at the bottom. Still another door barred the way. Quirl now realized that they were attacking the captain's quarters. But the leader produced a key, and silently swung the door open.

"So, you dogs! You've come!"

Like an infuriated bull Captain Strom charged them, a riot club in each hand. He could have killed them all with a ray, but he chose to vent in physical action his consuming anger at their treachery, which he had in some way anticipated. Three or four went sprawling under his mighty blows. The others sought shelter behind tables and chests, and began stabbing at him with their electroguns. Electricity crackled, and the air became pungent with ozone. A pair of the twin rays struck the captain's gold braid, and he went down. With a triumphant yell a man dashed at him, murderous club up-raised. But Quirl was faster, and the pirate fell dead with a crushed skull.

Strom was up again, fighting beside Quirl. The pirates remaining fell under their furious blows, and the two dashed out. Strom said nothing, and Quirl was not sure that he had been recognized. The captain charged straight for the navigating bow. Here, unless he should be attacked by the I.F.P. he could still control the situation. He was perhaps still ignorant of the ship's visibility.

But Quirl made for the prisoners' hold. They would be cowering there, probably in darkness, not knowing what was going on. It was his intention to rally them, provide them with the weapons of the fallen pirates, and so be in a position to advantageously make terms

with whoever was victorious in this battle.

He saw, as he approached that the light was on. He was hardly a dozen feet away when the door was darkened. Quirl did not have to hear her cry to know that Gore had Lenore.

Running with remarkable speed, the mate carried his prize toward the after end of the tube. A hatch stood open there, and he dropped through, slamming it after him.

Quirl picked up a bar that someone had dropped. It was but a matter of moments to break the lock and pull open the hatch. The hold was lighted, and empty. In its middle, holding the helpless Lenore, stood Gore, the electrogun in his hand covering the platform.

"Boy scout to the rescue again!" Gore sneered. He was even more repulsive than before, with the marks Quirl had left on him in the last battle. But he was fearless and utterly reckless. "Well, m'lad, I know when I'm done. And when a fellow's done he don't care what happens. So here's the lay: When I get out of here, I'll be dead. And she'll be dead, or you'll wish she was. Get it? She'll be killed, too, if you jolt me—the shock'll pass to her. And the first man-jack who crosses that grating'll get his from me. Now then, go ahead and pull! Goin' to kill us both, or leave her to me?" He laughed defiantly, like

one who counts himself already dead.

Quirl tentatively placed one foot on the platform. Instantly a fat spark jumped from the metal to his foot, and sent him sprawling into the tube. He saw Strom coming toward him. He had killed his enemies in the control room and was now on the hunt for more.

"Thanks for what you did," he grunted. As a forlorn hope, Quirl explained the situation. Strom smiled a rare smile.

"That's all right," he said mildly. "Quirl, you're a square man, and I'd rather do something for a square enemy than a false friend. Oh, I can do it cheaply. The jig's up for me, anyway!"

Quickly he dropped through the door and launched himself. Gore saw him coming, and Strom's body shuddered as the bolt struck squarely. He was dead when he hit, but his great weight knocked Gore down.

Quirl had time to jump after him, knocking the wind out of Gore before he could rise. Lenore picked up Gore's weapon, but dared not use it for fear of injuring her lover. As the two fighting men circled warily, seeking openings in this battle that must be fatal to one of them, they did not see the slight, shadowy figure that dropped down

to them. There was a flash, and Gore slumped, a knife in his back.

"I done it! I done for him!" chattered Sorko. "The dirty, lousy—"

"Come, Lenore, let's get up to the bow before the pirates think of it." They dashed up the ladder. Some more of the disks were out, and it was nearly dark. Three sinewy forms pounced on Quirl the moment he entered the passage. The girl, too, was caught, though she fought and bit.

"Lights! Let's have some lights!" commanded an authoritative voice.

"Coming, sir!" came a far-away answer.

The passage became bright, and Quirl looked into the faces of his captors, in the uniforms of the I.F.P.

"Got you, you dirty pirate!" gloated the husky young man on his chest.

"Mike!" Quirl gasped, "don't you know me? How'd you get here?"

"Dog-gone! Finner! Leggo his legs, you eggs."

"Trailed you," he added. "Glommed our magnets on the navigating

bow. Expected a fight, but some big guy let us in through an airlock. Well, he'd done plenty of scrapping—all the clothes torn off him. Half a dozen dead pirates in there. Who is he?"

Quirl thought of the stiffening body of Lieutenant Burroughs, alias Captain Strom, who had just purchased his life and that of Lenore at the cost of his own. Was his undeserved shame now to follow him to his grave? Quirl was no lawyer, and he decided not to take any chances with the law's mercy. He said:

"I don't know his name. A prisoner from some other ship, I think. He was very homesick for Earth, and I'll see he gets a decent grave on Earth. He died to save me."

"As for the lady," he added, "let her go. She's a captive. And, anyway, I think she is the future Mrs. Quirl Finner."

She smiled, and the men of the Force looked somewhat enviously at Quirl.

"Say," Quirl said, taking Lenore's hand and anxious to be rid of them, "if you find a little monkey-faced guy down in that hold, go easy with him. He's a good man, too, and I'm going to recommend his pardon."

108 The Heads of Apex by Francis Flagg

Far under the sea-floor Solino's submarine carries two American soldiers of fortune to startling adventure among the Vampire Heads of Apex.

Aproximate word count: 8,800

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Justus Miles was sitting on a bench in the park, down at the heels, hungry, desperate, when a gust of wind whirled a paper to his feet. It was the advertising section of the New York Times. Apathetically, he picked it up, knowing from the past weeks' experience that few or no jobs were being advertised. Then with a start he sat up, for in the center of the page, encased in a small box and printed in slightly larger type than the ordinary advertisement, he read the following words: "Wanted: Soldier of Fortune, young, healthy; must have good credentials. Apply 222 Reuter Place, between two and four." It was to-day's advertising section he was scanning, and the hour not yet one.

Reuter Place was some distance away, he knew, a good hour's walk on hard pavement and through considerable heat. But he had made forced marches in Sonora as badly shod and on even an emptier stomach. For Justus Miles, though he might not have looked it, was a bona fide soldier of fortune, stranded in New York. Five feet eight in height, he was, loose and rangy in build, and with deceptively mild blue eyes. He had fought through the World War, served under Kemal Pasha in Turkey, helped the Riffs in Morocco, filibustered in South America and handled a machine-gun for revolutionary forces in Mexico. Surely, he thought grimly, if anyone could fill the bill for a soldier of fortune it was himself.

222 Reuter Place proved to be a large residence in a shabby neighborhood. On the sidewalk, a queue of men was being held in line by a burly cop. The door of the house opened, and an individual, broad-shouldered and with flaming red hair, looked over the crowd. Instantly Justus Miles let out a yell, "Rusty! By God, Rusty!" and waved his hands.

"Hey, feller, who do you think you're shovin'?" growled a hard-looking fellow at the head of the line, but Justus Miles paid no attention to him. The man in the doorway also let out an excited yell.

"Well, well, if it isn't the Kid! Hey, Officer, let that fellow through: I

want to speak to him."

With the door shut on the blasphemous mob, the two men wrung each other's hands. Ex-Sergeant Harry Ward, known to his intimates as "Rusty," led Justus Miles into a large office and shoved him into a chair.

"I didn't know you were in New York, kid. The last I saw of you was when we quit Sandino."

"And I never suspected that 222 Reuter Place would be you, Rusty. What's the lay, old man, and is there any chance to connect?"

"You bet your life there's a chance. Three hundred a month and found. But the boss has the final say-so, though I'm sure he'll take you on my recommendation."

He opened a door, led Justus Miles through an inner room, knocked at a far door and ushered him into the presence of a man who sat behind a roll-topped desk. There was something odd about this old man, and after a moment's inspection Justus Miles saw what it was. He was evidently a cripple, propped up in a strange wheelchair. He had an abnormally large and hairless head, and his body was muffled to the throat in a voluminous cloak, the folds of which fell over and

enveloped most of the wheelchair itself. The face of this old gentleman—though the features were finely molded—was swarthy: its color was almost that of a negro—or an Egyptian. He regarded the two men with large and peculiarly colored eyes—eyes that probed them sharply.

"Well, Ward, what is it?"

"The man you advertised for, Mr. Solino."

Solino regarded Justus Miles critically.

"You have been a soldier of fortune?" he asked. He spoke English with the preciseness of an educated foreigner.

"Yes, sir. Rusty—that is, Mr. Ward knows my record."

"I was his sergeant in France, sir; saw fighting with him in Morocco, Turkey, Nicaragua—"

"You can vouch for him, then; his character, courage—"

"You couldn't get a better man, sir. If I had known he was in town I would have sent for him."

"Very well; that is sufficient. But Mr.—Miles did you say?—understands he is embarking on a dangerous adventure with grave chances of losing his life?"

"I have faced danger and risked my life before this," said Justus Miles quietly.

The other nodded. "Then that is all I am prepared to tell you at this time."

Justus Miles accompanied Ward to his room where the latter laid out for him a change of clothing. It was luxurious to splash in warm water and bath-salts after the enforced griminess of weeks. The clothes fitted him fairly well, the two men being of a size. Lounging in his friend's room after a substantial meal, and smoking a Turkish cigarette, he questioned Ward more closely.

"Who is the old fellow?"

"I don't know. He hired me through an advertisement and then set me to employing others."

"But surely you know where we are going?"

"Hardly more than you do. Solino did say there was a country, a city

to be invaded. Whereabouts is a secret. I can't say I care for going it blind, but neither do I like starving to death. I was in about the same shape you were when you applied. Desperate."

Justus Miles stretched himself comfortably.

"A spiggoty by the looks of him," he said; "negro blood, no doubt. Well, fighting's my trade. I'd rather cash in fighting than sit on a park bench. I suppose the old boy will tell us more in good time, and until then we're sitting pretty, with good eats to be had; so why worry?"

And yet if Justus Miles had been able to look ahead he might not have talked so blithely.

During the week that followed his employment, he saw nothing of Solino, though Ward met the old man for a few moments every day to receive his instructions. "It puzzles me," he confessed to Miles, "how the old chap lives. There's a private exit to the street from his rooms, but I could swear he never goes out. How could he in that wheelchair—no attendant. And yet he must. How would he get food?"

Justus Miles smiled lazily. "No mystery at all, Rusty. We're gone for hours at a time. What's to prevent him from phoning to have his

meals brought in?"

"But I've questioned them at the restaurant and they say—"

"Good Lord!—is there only one restaurant in Manhattan?"

Yet Justus Miles himself could not help feeling there was something mysterious about Solino, but just how mysterious he did not realize—until, one evening, he stood with a half dozen of his fellow adventurers in a lonely spot on the Long Island coast and watched the darkness deepen around them. "We shall wait," said Solino presently, "until the moon comes up."

The moon rose at about nine o'clock, flooding the beach and the heaving expanse of water with a ghostly light. From the folds of Solino's cloak, close about his muffled throat, a peculiar ray of green light flashed out over the water. In answer, a green light flashed back, and presently, something low and black, like the body of a whale half submerged, stole towards the beach. Scarcely a ripple marked its progress, and the nose of it slid up on the sand. "Good Lord!" whispered Miles, grasping Ward by the arm: "it's a submarine!"

But the craft on which the surprised soldiers of fortune gazed was

not an ordinary submarine. In the first place, there was no conning tower; and, in the second, from the blunt nose projected a narrow gangway bridging the few feet of water between the mysterious craft and the dry beach. But the men had little time to indulge in amazement. "Quick," said Solino; "load those boxes onto the gangway. No need to carry them further." He himself wheeled his chair into the interior of the submarine, calling back, "Hurry, hurry!"

The adventurers accomplished the loading in a few minutes. "Now," came the voice of their employer, "stand on the gangway yourselves. Steady; don't move."

Under their feet they felt the gangway vibrate and withdraw from the land. For a moment they were in utter darkness; then a light flashed up and revealed a long, box-like room. The opening through which they had come had closed, leaving no sign of its existence.

In the center of the room stood a mechanism like a huge gyroscope, and a plunging piston, smooth and black, went up and down with frictionless ease. In front of what was evidently a control board sat a swarthy man with a large hairless head and peculiarly colored eyes. The adventurers stared in surprise, for this man, too, sat in a wheelchair, seemingly a cripple; but unlike Mr. Solino he wore no cloak, his body from the neck down being enclosed in a tubular

metal container. The body must have been very small, and the legs amputated at the hips, since the container was not large and terminated on the seat of the peculiar wheel chair to which it seemed firmly attached.

Solino did not offer to introduce them to the man at the control board, who, aside from a quick look, paid them no attention. He ushered them ahead into another, though smaller cabin, and after indicating certain arrangements made for their comfort, withdrew. From the slight sway of the floor under their feet and the perceptible vibration of the craft, the adventurers knew they were under way.

"Well, this is a rum affair and no mistake about it," said one of them.

"A freak—a bloomin' freak," remarked another whose cockney accent proclaimed the Englishman.

"Yuh're shore right," said a lean Texan. "That hombre out there had no legs."

"Nor hands either."

Miles and Ward glanced at one another. The same thought was in both minds. Neither of them had ever seen Mr. Solino's hands. A rum

affair all right!

Hours passed. Some of the men fell to gambling. At intervals they ate. Twice they turned in and slept. Then, after what seemed an interminable time, Solino summoned Miles and Ward to his presence in the control room. "It is time," he said, "that you should know more of the enterprise on which you have embarked. What I say, you can communicate to the other men. A year's salary for all of you lies to your credit at the Chase Bank of New York. And this money will not be your sole reward if you survive and serve faithfully."

"Thank you, sir," said Ward; "but now that we are well on our way to our destination, could you not tell us more about it? You have said something of a city, a country. Where is that country?"

"Down," was the astounding answer.

"Down?" echoed both men.

"Yes," said Solino slowly, "down. The gateway to that land is at the bottom of the ocean."

As the two men gaped at him, incredulous, an awful thing happened. With an appalling roar and a rending of steel and iron, the submarine

halted abruptly in its headlong flight, reared upward at an acute angle and then fell forward with a tremendous crash. The adventurers were thrown violently against a steel bulkhead, and slumped down unconscious....

How long they lay there insensible they never knew. Justus Miles was the first to come to, and he found himself in Stygian blackness. "Rusty!" he called, feeling terribly sick and giddy. Only silence answered him. "Good God!" he thought, "what has happened?" His hand went out and recoiled from something soft and sticky. Gingerly he sat up. There was a lump on his head. His body felt bruised and sore but it was evidently sound. He recollected the small but powerful flashlight in his pocket, and drew it forth and pressed the button. A reassuring pencil of light pierced through the gloom. Even as it did so, someone groaned, and Ward's voice uttered his name.

"Is that you, Kid?"

"It's me, all right."

"You ain't hurt?"

"Nothing to speak of. How about you?"

"O. K., I guess. An awful headache."

"Can you stand up?"

"Yes."

Ward's face appeared in the ray of light, pale and blood-streaked.

"I wonder what happened."

"It sounded like a collision."

They stared at one another with fearful eyes. A collision while underseas in a submarine is a serious matter.

"Where's Solino?"

Justus Miles ran the beam of his torch this way and that, and saw that the room was in a fearful confusion. The gyroscopic mechanism had broken from its fastenings and rolled forward. Somewhere beneath its crushing weight lay the control board and the swarthy operator. Then they saw Solino, still in his overturned wheelchair, the cloak drawn tightly about himself and it; but the top of his head was crushed in like an eggshell. Justus Miles had touched that head when he stretched out his hand in the darkness.

He and Ward had been saved from death as by a miracle. Over their heads the great piston had hurtled, killing Solino and tearing through the steel partition into the chamber beyond, visiting it with death and destruction. One hasty examination of that place was enough. The men in there were dead.

Sick with horror, the two survivors faced the stark reality of their terrible plight. Trapped in an underwater craft, they saw themselves doomed to perish even more miserably than their companions. As the horrible thought sank home, a cool breath of air, suggesting the smell of stagnant salt water, blew through an opening created by the crushing of the plates in the vessel's hull—an opening larger than the body of a man. Miles and Ward stared at it with puzzled eyes. With such a hole in her hull, the boat should have been admitting water and not air. However, they approached the gap and examined it with their torches.

"Here goes," Ward said after a moment's hesitation, and clambered through the opening, followed by his friend. When they were able to make out their surroundings, they saw that they were in a vast tunnel or cavern, the extent of which was shrouded in darkness. How the submarine had left the ocean and penetrated to this cavern it was impossible to say; but evidently it had come so far over a shining rail, a break in which had caused the disaster. The cavern or tunnel

was paved with disjointed blocks of stone which once might have been smooth and even, but which now were disarranged by time and slimy with dampness and seagrowths. In the clammy air Miles involuntarily shuddered. "Good Lord, Rusty, we're certainly up against it! The only fellow who could tell us our whereabouts is dead!"

Ward's jaw tightened. "That rail leads somewhere: it's our only hope. But first let us get our guns and some food."

They were fortunate enough to discover several thermos bottles unbroken. Hot coffee revived their fainting spirits. Treating their bruises and cuts as well as they could, they left the submarine or car—it seemed to have been convertible for use either in water or on rail—and trudged ahead.

Beyond the break that had caused the wreck, the rail stretched away into illimitable blackness. Over rough stones, stumbling into shallow pools of water, the light of their torches serving but faintly to show the depressing surroundings, the two men plunged. Neither of them was without fear, but both possessed the enduring courage of men habituated to facing danger and sudden death without losing control of their faculties.

Time passed, but they had no means of telling how much, since their wrist watches no longer functioned. But after a while they noticed that the grade was upward and the going easier. At the same moment, Ward called attention to the fact that, even without electric torches, it was possible to see. All around the two Americans grew a strange light—a weird, phosphorescent glow, revealing far walls and massive pillars.

Now they could see that they were in a vast chamber, undoubtedly the work of human hands; a room awe-inspiring to behold, and even more than awe-inspiring in the reflections it forced upon their minds. Passages radiated on either hand to mysterious depths, and great bulks loomed in the spectral light. Justus Miles gave a low cry of amazement when a closer investigation revealed those bulks to be the wrecks of mighty and intricate machines, the use of which it was vain to conjecture. He looked at Ward.

"Solino spoke of a city down in the ocean. Can this be it?"

Ward shook his head. "Everything here is old, abandoned. Look—what is that?"

The figure of a giant creature, carved either from stone or marble and encrusted with phosphorous, stood lowering in their path. It was

that of a winged beast with a human head. Its features were negroid in character; and so malignant was the expression of the staring face, so lifelike the execution of the whole statue, that a chill of fear ran through their veins. It was in Ward's mind that this gigantic carving was akin to the ones he had seen in Egypt, and as old, if not older.

Beyond the statue the rail curved and the grade leveled; and, rounding the bend, they were amazed to come upon a sort of "yard" where the rail stopped. In that enclosure, on several sidings, were submarine cars similar to the wrecked one they had abandoned. But that was not the sight which brought them to a breathless halt. Beyond the sidings stood what appeared to be a small building of gleaming crystal.

After a moment of breathless wonder they cautiously approached the bizarre structure. No dampness or phosphorus impaired the clarity of its walls. The material composing them felt vibrantly warm to the touch. It was not glass, yet it was possible to look without difficulty into the interior of the building, which appeared to be one large room containing nothing but a central device not unlike the filaments of an electric bulb. In fact, the whole building, viewed from the outside, reminded the two adventurers of a giant light globe. The filaments radiated a steady and somehow exhilarating light. The door—they knew it was a door because an edging of dark metal outlined its

frame—gave admittance to the room.

"Shall we?" questioned Miles; and Ward answered doubtfully, "I don't know. Perhaps...."

But at last they turned the golden knob, felt the door give to their pressure, and stepped through the entrance into the soft radiance of the interior. Unthinkingly, Ward released his hold on the knob and the door swung shut behind them. Instantly there was a flash of light, and they were oppressed by a feeling of nausea: and then, out of a momentary pit of blackness, they emerged to find that the room of crystal had oddly changed its proportions and opaqueness. "Quick!" cried Ward; "let us get out of this place." Both men found the door and staggered forth.

Then, at sight of what they saw, they stood rooted to the spot in sheer amazement. The gloomy tunnel and the sidings of submarine cars had vanished, and they were standing in a vast hall, an utterly strange and magnificent hall, staring up into the face of a creature crudely human and colored green!

The green man was almost of heroic proportions; he was clad in but a breech-clout, and was so broad as to appear squat in stature. He carried a short club, and appeared almost as dumbfounded as the two

Americans. A moment he regarded them, then, with a ferocious snarl of rage, he hurled himself upon the startled Ward and half clubbed, half pushed him to the floor. Recovering from his momentary inaction and realizing the danger in which his friend stood, Miles shouted and leaped upon the green man's back, fastening his sinewy fingers about the giant's throat.

But the latter was possessed of incredible strength, and, straightening up, he shook off Miles as a bear might shake off an attacking dog, and threw him heavily to the floor. Then the green giant whirled up his club, and it would have gone hardly with Miles if Ward had not remembered his automatic and fired in the nick of time. As if poleaxed, the green man fell; and both the adventurers recovered their feet.

"Look out!" shouted Ward.

Through a wide entrance came charging a dozen greenish giants. Miles fired both his pistols. The leader of the greenish men paused in mid-leap, clawing at his stomach.

"This way, Kid!" yelled Ward; "this way!"

Taking advantage of the confusion in the ranks of the attackers, the

two sprang to where an exit in the far wall promised an avenue of escape. Down a broad passage they rushed. Seemingly the passage ended in a cul-de-sac, for a wall of blank whiteness barred further progress. Behind them came charging the greenish giants uttering appalling cries. Desperately the two Americans turned, resolved to sell their lives as dearly as possible; but at that moment happened a sheer miracle. The blank wall divided, revealing a narrow crevice through which they sprang. Noiselessly the crevice closed behind them, shutting out the green pursuers, and a voice said—a voice in precise but strangely accented English:

"We have been expecting you, gentlemen, but—where is Solino?"

Never would Miles and Ward forget the amazement of that moment. They were in a place which looked not unlike a huge laboratory. Then they saw it was a lofty room containing a variety of strange mechanisms. But it was not on these their eyes focussed. Confronting them in odd wheelchairs, with hairless heads projecting from tubular containers like the one they had seen encasing the man at the control board of the submarines, were all of half a hundred crippled men!

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Miles, "I must be seeing things!"

"Where is Solino?" demanded the voice in strangely accented English.

Ward saw that the question came from an individual in a wheelchair a few feet in front of them.

"Solino is dead," he answered.

"Dead?" A ripple of sound came from the oddly seated men.

"Yes, the submarine car was wrecked in the tunnel, and everyone aboard was killed save us two."

The hairless men looked at one another. "This is Spiro's work," said one of them, still in English; and another said, "Yes, Spiro has done this."

Miles and Ward were recovering somewhat from their initial astonishment. "What place is this?" asked the former.

"This is Apex—or, rather, the Palace of the Heads in Apex."

The Palace of the Heads! The two Americans tried to control their bewilderment.

"Pardon us if we don't understand. Everything is so strange. First the submarine was wrecked. Then we entered the crystal room and the tunnel vanished. We can't understand how this place can be at the bottom of the Atlantic."

"It isn't at the bottom of the Atlantic."

"Not at the bottom? Then where?"

"It isn't," said the voice slowly, "in your world at all."

The import of what was said did not at first penetrate the minds of the Americans. "Not in our world?" they echoed stupidly.

"Come," said the crippled man smiling inscrutably, "you are tired and hungry. Later I shall explain more." His strangely colored eyes bored into their own. "Sleep," said his voice softly, imperatively; and though they fought against the command with all the strength of their wills, heaviness weighted down their eyelids and they slept.

From dreamless sleep they awakened to find that fatigue had miraculously vanished, that their wounds were healed and their bodies and clothes were free of slime and filth. All but one of the crippled men—for so in their own minds they termed the odd

individuals—had gone away. That one was the man who had first addressed them.

"Do not be alarmed," he said. "In our own fashion we have given you food and rest and attended to your comfort."

Ward smiled, though a trifle uncertainly. "We are not easily frightened," he replied.

"So! That is good. But now listen: my name is Zoro and I am Chief of the Heads of Apex. Ages ago we Heads lived on a continent of your Earth now known to scholars as Atlantis. When Atlantis sank below the waves—in your sacred book that tragedy is known as the Flood—all but a scattered few of its people perished. I and my companions were among the survivors."

The Americans stared at him unbelievingly. "But that was a hundred thousand years ago!" exclaimed Ward.

"Three hundred thousand," corrected Zoro.

They stared at him dumbly.

"Yes," said Zoro; "it sounds incredible to your ears, but it is true. Mighty as is the industrial civilization of your day, that of Atlantis

was mightier. Of course, the country wasn't then called Atlantis; its real name was A-zooma. A-zooma ruled the world. Its ships with sails of copper and engines of brass covered the many seas which now are lands. Its airships clove the air with a safety and speed your own have still to attain. The wealth of the world poured into A-zooma, and its rulers waxed vain-glorious and proud. Time after time the enslaved masses of A-zooma and of conquered countries rose in great rebellions. Then against them marched the "iron baylas" breathing death and destruction, and from the air mighty ships poured down the yellow fog...."

Zoro paused, but presently went on: "So we ruled—for ten thousand years; until the scientists who begot those engines of destruction became afraid, because the serfs themselves began to build secret laboratories. We of the priesthood of science saw the inevitable disaster. Long ago we had put off our bodies—"

Zoro smiled at the Americans' amazement. "No," he said, "I am not a cripple in a wheelchair. This tubular container holds no fleshly body. Inside of it is a mechanical heart which pumps artificial blood—blood purified by a process I will not describe—through my head. It also contains certain inner devices under my mental control, devices that take the place of human hands and feet. Only by accident or through lack of certain essentials can I die."

His listeners stared at him in awe. "You mean," faltered Miles, "that save for your head you are all—machine?"

"Practically, yes. We priest-scientists of the Inner Mystery prolonged life in such fashion. I was three thousand years old when—But enough! I will not weary you with a recital of how the slaves burrowed the bowels of A-zooma and of how the masters loosed against them the forces of the atom. Suffice it to say that on an island we built our vast system of buildings—or tunnel as you choose to call it—and sealed them away from the outside world, entrance being made by submarines through automatically controlled locks.

"At about this time our experiments opened up another realm of existence, manifesting at a vibratory rate above that of earth. To this new realm we brought workers who built the City of Apex and the palace you are in. But, unfortunately, we brought with us no weapons of offense, and in the new world we had neither the material nor the delicate mechanisms and factories to reproduce them. However, for countless ages there was no rebellion on the part of the workers who, even in A-zooma, had worshipped us as gods. They were born, grew old and died, but we abode forever. Besides, in the City of Apex they were freer than they had ever been before, merely having to furnish our laboratories with certain raw materials and the wherewithal to sustain the blood supply on which our lives

depend. But, of late, they have made common cause with the original inhabitants of this plane, the green men—"

The green men! As if the words were a signal, a dreadful thing happened. Out of a far shadow leaped a lean and hideous monster. To Miles' startled eyes it seemed to grow as it leaped. Thin, unbelievably thin it was, yet swelling at the head. From between two goggle-eyes writhed a rope-like trunk. Twelve feet in the air its head towered over Zoro. "Look out!" screamed the American.

Zoro's chair seemed to jump. Too late! Around the tubular container wrapped the snake-like trunk, plucking the wheelchair and its occupant from the floor and dangling them high in air. "Shoot!" cried Zoro.

Miles shot. His bullet ploughed through the unbelievably thin body and ricochetted from a pillar beyond. Ward fired with better effect. One of the goggle eyes spattered like glass. Under a fusillade of bullets the monster wilted, giving expression to a weird, shrill cry. Zoro dangled head downwards. To drop from such a height on his skull would probably be fatal.

But the monster did not drop him. Instead, in its death agony, its grip tightened, and the Americans witnessed an incredible sight. Before

their very eyes the monster began rapidly to shrink. Its tenuous body telescoped together, becoming thinner and thinner in the process, until on the floor there lay the lifeless body of a snake-like creature not more than six inches in length!

"Good Lord!" breathed Miles.

Zoro who had escaped unscathed from his perilous plight, regarded it with his peculiarly colored eyes.

"It is a tah-a-la," he said, "and must have entered the room at the same time you did. The green men often capture and train them for hunting. When about to seize their prey their bodies have the power of enormously stretching." Outwardly he seemed unaffected by the danger safely passed and waved away several of his fellows who had wheeled to the spot attracted by the noise of the pistols. The Americans were more shaken. "Perhaps," said Ward, "there is danger of—"

"None," replied Zoro. "I know there are no other tah-a-las inside these rooms, since it is the nature of these beasts to rush to each other's aid when they scream. And as for outside attacks, the laboratories are insulated against any the insurgent workers can make. Their weapons are poor—the green men use but clubs. No, it

is not their attacks we fear but their refusal to furnish us with supplies. They worshipped us as gods, and the giving of supplies was long a religious rite. But now they doubt our divinity, and, since they no longer listen to or obey our decrees, we have no means of punishing them. Spiro is responsible for this."

"Spiro?" questioned the two men.

"He whom we raised to the dignity of godhead on the accidental death of Bah-koo, causing a deep sleep to fall upon him in the temple and grafting his head upon the mechanical body left by the latter. Twice before we had done this with citizens of Apex, and how were we to know that Spiro would resent it? True, he was in love with Ah-eeda, but the physical passions of men die with the organisms that give them birth. For three years he dwelt with us in the laboratories, learning the wisdom of the Heads, and then,"—Zoro's face became forbidding—"he denounced us to the people. Though there was more or less discontent, they would never have dared defy us save for him. He told them that our curses could do no harm, that we were merely the heads of men like himself and would die if they refused to give us the wherewithal to renew blood.

"But this refusal of theirs is an evil thing," he cried, looking at the Americans with his strangely colored eyes. "It violates the custom of

ages, and strikes at the very roots of our existence. So we held council and sent two of our number to Earth after men and weapons to enforce our demands. For years we had watched Earth, seen its myriad civilizations rise and fall, studied the coming of America to power and importance. So it was to America that Solino went, by way of the tunnel that still exists under the Atlantic—"

"And hired us," interrupted Ward, "and brought us to the tunnel in the submarine-car where we—"

"Stepped into the crystal chamber," finished Zoro. "That chamber is a re-vibrating device of certain rays and chemicals. The shutting of the door closed the switches and hurled your bodies to where a receiving-station on this plane integrated them again."

So they were not at the bottom of the ocean. They were—stupendous thought—living in a new world of matter!

"Spiro suspected our plans," continued Zoro. "He isolated us in our laboratories, and, by means of a crystal tube, went through to the tunnel, tore up a section of track, and wrecked the submarine-car. But his act was only partially successful. You two escaped death;

you are here; you are ready to keep faith and fight in our service."

"We are ready to fight," assented Miles and Ward. The situation was certainly an unusual one, and one they did not clearly understand; but theirs was the simple code of the mercenary soldier—they would fight for whoever hired them, and be loyal as long as their wages were paid.

"Then there is no time to lose," exclaimed Zoro. "Already our blood grows thin. You must go back to the wrecked submarine and retrieve your weapons."

"But how?"

"There is a sending tube in the next compartment."

They followed Zoro through lofty rooms filled with amber light until they came to one wherein were assembled the rest of the Heads. Zoro spoke to them swiftly in a strange, flowing tongue. Then he conducted the two Americans to a crystal chamber at the end of the room and bade them enter it. The vibrant light caressed their limbs.

"When I close this door," he said, "you will find yourselves back in the tunnel. Board one of the submarine-cars on the siding and

proceed to the wreck." He gave them detailed instructions how to operate the car. "Then get your weapons and return. Do you understand?"

They nodded.

"The workers possess no arms the equal of machine-guns and bombs. They will be at your mercy. Remember that you are fighting for our lives and that, if you save them, your reward will be great. Fear nothing."

The door closed. After a moment there was a blinding flash, a moment of swooning darkness, and then they were staring through transparent walls into the phosphorescent gloom of the underseas crypt. Suddenly, what they had recently undergone seemed the product of an illusion, a dream. Ward shook himself vigorously. "I guess it was real enough," he said. "Let us see if the car works."

They ran out to the wreck and returned without trouble. The machine-gun was mounted for action and the gas-bombs slung over their shoulders in convenient bags. "All right," said Miles tensely, "let us go."

Again they entered the crystal chamber; again there was the flash of

light and the sensation of falling into darkest space. Then, in a moment it seemed, they were stepping into the hall from which they had fled pursued by the green men—only for the second time, to be confronted by a crowd of hostile giants. "Don't fire, Kid!" yelled Ward. "It's no use to kill them uselessly. Give them the bombs!"

Disconcerted by the attack of tear-gas, the green men broke and fled. "After them," panted Ward: "we've got them on the run!"

Thrilling to the lust of battle, the two Americans emerged into an open square. They had little time to note the odd buildings and strange statues. Coming towards them with leveled weapons, the nature of which they did not know, was a band of short men—that is, short in comparison with the greenish giants. Behind this company appeared still another, and another. Tear-gas was useless to stop their onward rush. "All right," yelled Miles, "it's lead they want!"

The machine-gun spat a hail of bullets. Before the first withering blast the swarthy men recoiled in confusion. Then a second volley scattered them like chaff. Miles and Ward were conscious of no pity for the dead and wounded lying on the pavement of yellow stone. This was their profession, the stern business of which they were masters. In France they had seen worse sights, and in Nicaragua and Mexico. They swept destructively out of the square and into a long

tree-lined avenue. This might be another world or dimension but its trees looked not unlike those of tropical America.

In a short while the radiating streets were cleared of crowds and the cries of the mob died away. Miles and Ward paused in the shadow of an overhanging wall and wiped their faces. "That was quick work, all right," said Ward; and, even as he said it, the wall seemed to fall upon their unprotected heads and crush them into unconsciousness....

Out of a sick darkness they came. At first they thought they were confronting Zoro. Then, as the mists of unconsciousness cleared from aching heads, they perceived that they were in a vast hall crowded with swarthy men in short tunics, and with greenish giants wearing nothing but breech-clouts and swinging short clubs. The fierce eyes of the greenish giants were upon them, and the vengeful ones of the swarthy men. But the desire of both to rend and tear was held in check by the dominant head emerging from a tubular container mounted upon a wheelchair. The Americans stared. This was not the head of Zoro. No!

"The head of Spiro," thought Miles and Ward with sinking hearts.

They had fallen into the power of the leader of the insurgent workers!

Spiro—for it was indeed he—regarded them with pitiless eyes. His English was slower and not as fluent as that of Zoro, and his words harder to understand.

"You Americans, beings of another world, have come here at the bidding of the Heads to slay and kill for gold."

He paused. "I who for three years studied your country, learned its language, history, did not believe men of your race could be so vile."

He paused again, and Ward broke out hotly, "It is true that we came here to fight for gold, but who are you to speak of vileness? Have you not turned on the Heads, your benefactors, now your brothers, who raised you to their height? Are you not leading a revolt of the workers which would deny them the means of sustaining life? Are you not seeking to perpetrate—murder?"

Spiro regarded him slowly. "Is it possible you are in ignorance of what those means are? Listen, then, while I tell you the hideous truth. Since the dawn of our history, until the present moment, the Heads have maintained their lives by draining blood from the veins of thousands of Apexans yearly!"

The Americans' faces whitened. "What do you mean?" breathed

Ward.

"I mean that the artificial blood pumped by mechanical hearts through the brains of the Heads—yes, and that is now being pumped through my own!" cried Spiro bitterly—"is manufactured from human blood. Human blood is the basis of it. And to get that blood every Apexan must yield his quota in the temple. Slowly but surely this practice is sapping the vitality of the race. But though the Apexans realized this they were afraid to speak against the custom. For the Heads were worshipped as gods; and when the gods spoke, blasphemers died—horribly."

Miles and Ward shuddered.

"Even I," went on Spiro, "denounced blasphemers and thought it holy that each should yield a little of his blood to the Almighty Ones. Then I woke from darkness to find myself—a Head. At first I could not understand, for I was in love with Ah-eeda—and can a machine mate? But it is true that love is largely desire, and desire of the body. With the death of the body, desire died; and it may be that pride and ambition took its place. But, for all that, there were moments when I remembered my lost manhood and dreamed of Ah-eeda. Yes, though the laboratory of the Heads revealed wonders of which I had never dreamed, though I looked into your world and studied its languages

and history, though I was worshipped as a god and endless life stretched ahead of me—nevertheless, I could see that the strength of my race was being sapped, its virility lost!"

His voice broke. "In the face of such knowledge what were immortality and power? Could they compensate for one hour of life and love as humanity lived it? So I brooded. Then one day in the temple I looked into the face of a girl about to be bled and recognized Ah-eeda. In that moment, hatred of the fiends posing as gods and draining the vitality of deluded worshippers, crystallized and drove me to action. So it was I who denounced the Heads, aroused the people!" Spiro's voice broke; died. Miles and Ward stared at him, horrified; and after a while Miles exclaimed, "We never suspected! We would never have fought to maintain such a thing had we known!"

"Nonetheless," said Spiro inflexibly, "you fought for it, and many people died and more are afraid. Superstition is a hard thing to kill. Already there are those who murmur that truly the Heads are gods and have called up demons from the underworld, as they threatened they would, to smite them with thunder until once more they yield blood in the temple. But I know that without blood the Heads must die miserably and the people be freed from their vampire existence. It is true that I too shall die, but that is nothing. I die gladly.

Therefore, to keep the people from sacrificing blood, to show them that you are mortal and the Heads powerless to save the demons they have raised, you must be slain in front of the great palace.

"Yes; you, too, must die for the people!"

Bound and helpless, lying on their backs and staring into the gloom of the small chamber into which they had been thrown, Miles and Ward had time to ponder their desperate situation. Spiro was delaying their death until the workers of Apex would have time to gather and witness it. At first they had struggled to loosen their bonds, but such efforts served only to tighten them. Then they had tried the trick of rolling together so that the fingers of one might endeavor to undo the knots securing the other. On a memorable occasion in Turkey they had freed themselves in this manner. But the attempts proved fruitless now. The floor of the chamber was smooth, nor could they find any rough projection on which to saw the cords.

Exhausted, they finally desisted. The same thought was in both minds: Were they doomed to die in this strange world, fated never to see Earth again? Well, a soldier of fortune must expect to meet with reverses. Still, it was a tough break. After a long silence Ward said, "How were we to know that the heads lived on the blood of the people?"

"Would it have made any difference if we had known?" asked Miles.

"Perhaps not." Ward tried to shrug his shoulders. "After all, we have fought to maintain systems not much better. There is little difference, save in degree, between draining the life-blood of a race and robbing it of the fruits of its labor."

"But sometimes we fought to liberate people," protested Miles.

"Yes, I like to think of that. It's good to have something to our credit when we cash in. And it looks," he said pessimistically, "as if our time to do so has come."

They ceased talking. Time passed cheerlessly. Finally both of them fell into a heavy slumber from which they were aroused by the sudden flashing in their eyes of a bright light, bright only in comparison with the former intense darkness. "What's that!" cried Ward, startled.

"S-sh," said a soft voice warningly, and when their eyes became accustomed to the illumination, they were amazed to perceive the slender form of a young girl carrying a torch. She was marvelously lovely to look at, with her blue-black hair brushed straight back from a low, broad forehead and her smooth skin as dark as that of an

Egyptian. Nor was she dressed unlike pictures Miles had seen of people of ancient Egypt. The embroidered plates covering the small breasts shone and glittered; bracelets and bangles flashed on bare arms and shapely ankles; while from the waist to below the knees was a skirt of rich material. On the small feet were sandals of intricate design. Besides the torch, the girl carried a slim, gleaming knife, and for a moment the adventurers were guilty of imagining she had come to slay them where they lay. But her manner quickly dispelled their fear. Sinking on her knees beside them, she said, "Do not be afraid; Ah-eeda will not harm you."

So this was Ah-eeda, the girl of whom Spiro had spoken. Miles and Ward devoured her loveliness with their eyes; her coming flooded their bosoms with renewed hope. She continued speaking. Her English was not at all fluent, and she was often compelled to make it clear with expressions in her own tongue and with explanatory gestures. But to Miles and Ward, who knew nothing of temple training, her speaking English at all was a miracle.

"Is it true that you are men from another world?"

"Yes."

"And you came to make the people give their blood to the Heads?"

"No, that is not true. We were in ignorance of what it was we fought for. Had we known the truth we would have refused to fight for the Heads."

"Then, if I were to set you free, you would go back to your own world and not fight my people any more?"

They nodded vigorously.

"Oh, I am so glad," exclaimed the girl; "I did not want to see you die!" She looked at Miles as she spoke. "I saw you before Spiro this afternoon. Poor Spiro!" she murmured as she cut their bonds. It was some time before circulation was restored to their limbs. Miles asked anxiously, "How many guards are there at the door?"

"Twelve," said the girl; "but they are playing wong-wo in the room outside and drinking soola." She pantomimed her meaning. "I came here through a secret passage beyond," she indicated by a wave of her hand. "Now that you can walk, let us hurry." Shyly she took Miles' hand. The warm clasp of her fingers made the blood course faster in his veins.

Through a long passage they glided to another room. There were several confusing turns and dark hallways, and twice they had to

cower in shadowy corners while Ah-eeda boldly advanced and held converse with occasional persons encountered, though for the most part the way was silent and deserted. At last they came to a low door opening on a narrow street and the girl put out her torch.

"To return to our own world we must first reach the Palace of the Heads," said Ward. The girl nodded. "I will guide you there. But we must hurry: the workers will soon be gathered."

Never were Miles and Ward to forget that breathless flight. The girl led them through narrow and devious byways over which dark buildings leaned, evidently avoiding the more direct and open thoroughfares. It seemed as if they were to escape without hindrance when, suddenly, out of a dimly lighted doorway, lurched the gigantic figure of a green man carrying a flare. This flare threw the figures of the fugitives into relief.

"Ho!" roared the green man, and came at them like a furious bull. It seemed characteristic of his kind to attack without parley. The torch dropped as he came. There was no resisting that mighty bulk. Unarmed, and with scant room to move backward, the two Americans went down; and that would have been the end of the battle if Ah-eeda, who had shrunk to one side out of the way of the combatants, had not snatched up the still flaming torch and held it

against the naked back of the greenish giant. With a scream of anguish the latter ceased throttling the Americans, clapped his hands to his scorched back and rolled clear of them.

Instantly they staggered to their feet and fled down the roadway after the light-footed Ah-eeda. Behind them the screams of the green man made the night hideous. "Damn him!" panted Ward; "he'll have the whole town on our heels!" Providentially, at that moment the road debouched into the great square. This they crossed at a run, and so, for the last time, entered the Palace of the Heads. Its wide halls and chambers were practically deserted.

Past the crystal chamber where they had first materialized into this strange world they dashed, and through the far door and down the corridor to the blank wall. Already in the rear could be heard the sound of pursuit, the rising clamor of the mob. Ward hammered on the wall with both fists. "Zoro! Zoro! let us in!" Now the first of the mob had entered the corridor. "Zoro! Zoro!" Noiselessly, and just in time, the wall parted and they sprang through, Miles half carrying the slender form of Ah-eeda. The wall closed behind them, obliterating the fierce cries and footbeats of their pursuers.

In front of them was Zoro, his hairless head projecting from the tubular container. Ah-eeda shrank fearfully into Miles' embrace. All

the other Heads were ranged back of Zoro, but there was something odd about them. The massive craniums lolled loosely to one side or another and the curiously colored eyes were glazed or filmed. Zoro held his head erect, but only with an effort, and his features were drawn and ghastly looking.

"Yes," he said in a feeble voice, "the Heads are dying. You need not tell me that you have failed. In the end force always fails. No longer will the veins of the people yield their blood to us, and without their blood we cannot live. Soon three hundred thousand years of intelligence will be no more." His voice faltered.

Miles and Ward had learned to feel nothing but horror and detestation of the Heads, but now in the face of their tragic end, hearing the dying words of Zoro, awe and sympathy struggled with other emotions in their hearts. These mighty intellects had lived before the days of the flood; their eyes filming now in death had seen the ancient empires of Earth rise and fall.... Sumeria, Babylon.... Stupendous thought; and yet in the face of death a hundred thousand years of life was of no more importance than that of a day. Suddenly Ward sprang forward and shook the fainting Head. "Zoro! Zoro! what of us? We served you faithfully and would now return to Earth."

Visibly Zoro made a great effort to reply. "Go to the crystal tube in the laboratory beyond," he said at last. "It still works. I have told you how to run the car. Mend the tracks. The locks open automatically and let the car into the ocean when it strikes the switch. Your reward is in...." The words died away. Then, with a sudden influx of strength, the hairless head straightened, the strangely colored eyes cleared, and in a loud voice Zoro called out something in an unknown tongue and then collapsed.

Out of that chamber of death the Americans fled, suddenly afraid of its weird occupants. In time the workers of Apex would break into that strange laboratory and find the vampires of the ages dead. And in a very short time Spiro himself would die—Spiro the avenger.

At the crystal tube Miles paused. "Ah-eeda," he said softly, "we return to Earth, but I shall never forget you, never!"

A moment he hesitated, and then bent and kissed her swiftly. Instantly she was in his arms, clinging to him passionately.

"I too," she cried; "I too!"

"She means," said Ward, "that she wants to go back with us. What do you say?"

"God knows I am tempted to take her," said Miles; "but would it be right? What does she know of Earth?"

"Nothing," said Ward; "but I believe she loves you. And have you thought that after helping us to escape she may not be safe among her own people?"

Miles bowed his head. "Very well," he said; "so be it. I swear to make her happy."

So there were three of them who entered the crystal tube.

109 The Red Hell of Jupiter by Paul Ernst

What is the mystery centered in Jupiter's famous "Red Spot"? Two fighting Earthmen, caught by the "Pipe-men" like their vanished comrades, soon find out.

Aproximate word count: 24,000

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Chapter 1: The Red Spot

Commander Stone, grizzled chief of the Planetary Exploration Forces, acknowledged Captain Brand Bowen's salute and beckoned him to take a seat.

What is the mystery centered in Jupiter's famous "Red Spot"? Two fighting Earthmen, caught by the "Pipe-men" like their vanished comrades, soon find out.

Brand, youngest officer of the division to wear the triple-V for distinguished service, sat down and stared curiously at his superior.

He hadn't the remotest idea why he had been recalled from leave: but that it was on a matter of some importance he was sure. He hunched his big shoulders and awaited orders.

"Captain Bowen," said Stone. "I want you to go to Jupiter as soon as you can arrange to do so, fly low over the red area in the southern hemisphere, and come back here with some sort of report as to what's wrong with that infernal death spot."

He tapped his radio stylus thoughtfully against the edge of his desk.

"As you perhaps know, I detailed a ship to explore the red spot about a year ago. It never came back. I sent another ship, with two good men in it, to check up on the disappearance of the first. That ship, too, never came back. Almost with the second of its arrival at the edge of the red area all radio communication with it was cut off. It was never heard from again. Two weeks ago I sent Journeyman there. Now he has been swallowed up in a mysterious silence."

An exclamation burst from Brand's lips. Sub-Commander Journeyman! Senior officer under Stone, ablest man in the expeditionary forces, and Brand's oldest friend!

Stone nodded comprehension of the stricken look on Brand's face. "I

know how friendly you two were," he said soberly. "That's why I chose you to go and find out, if you can, what happened to him and the other two ships."

Brand's chin sank to rest on the stiff high collar of his uniform.

"Journeyman!" he mused. "Why, he was like an older brother to me. And now ... he's gone."

There was silence in Commander Stone's sanctum for a time. Then Brand raised his head.

"Did you have any radio reports at all from any of the three ships concerning the nature of the red spot?" he inquired.

"None that gave definite information," replied Stone. "From each of the three ships we received reports right up to the instant when the red area was approached. From each of the three came a vague description of the peculiarity of the ground ahead of them: it seems to glitter with a queer metallic sheen. Then, from each of the three, as they passed over the boundary—nothing! All radio communication ceased as abruptly as though they'd been stricken dead."

He stared at Brand. "That's all I can tell you, little enough, God knows. Something ominous and strange is contained in that red spot: but what its nature may be, we cannot even guess. I want you to go there and find out."

Brand's determined jaw jutted out, and his lips thinned to a purposeful line. He stood to attention.

"I'll be leaving to-night, sir. Or sooner if you like. I could go this afternoon: in an hour—"

"To-night is soon enough," said Stone with a smile. "Now, who do you want to accompany you?"

Brand thought a moment. On so long a journey as a trip to Jupiter there was only room in a space ship—what with supplies and all—for one other man. It behooved him to pick his companion carefully.

"I'd like Dex Harlow," he said at last. "He's been to Jupiter before, working with me in plotting the northern hemisphere. He's a good man."

"He is," agreed Stone, nodding approval of Brand's choice. "I'll have him report to you at once."

He rose and held out his hand. "I'm relying on you, Captain Bowen," he said. "I won't give any direct orders: use your own discretion. But I would advise you not to try to land in the red area. Simply fly low over it, and see what you can discern from the air. Good-by, and good luck."

Brand saluted, and went out, to go to his own quarters and make the few preparations necessary for his sudden emergency flight.

The work of exploring the planets that swung with Earth around the sun was still a new branch of the service. Less than ten years ago, it had been, when Ansen devised his first crude atomic motor.

At once, with the introduction of this tremendous new motive power, men had begun to build space ships and explore the sky. And, as so often happens with a new invention, the thing had grown rather beyond itself.

Everywhere amateur space flyers launched forth into the heavens to try their new celestial wings. Everywhere young and old enthusiasts set Ansen motors into clumsily insulated shells and started for Mars or the moon or Venus.

The resultant loss of life, as might have been foreseen, was

appalling. Eager but inexperienced explorers edged over onto the wrong side of Mercury and were burned to cinders. They set forth in ships that were badly insulated, and froze in the absolute zero of space. They learned the atomic motor controls too hastily, ran out of supplies or lost their courses, and wandered far out into space—stiff corpses in coffins that were to be buried only in time's infinity.

To stop the foolish waste of life, the Earth Government stepped in. It was decreed that no space ship might be owned or built privately. It was further decreed that those who felt an urge to explore must join the regular service and do so under efficient supervision. And there was created the Government bureau designated as the Planetary Exploration Control Board, which was headed by Commander Stone.

Under this Board the exploration of the planets was undertaken methodically and efficiently, with a minimum of lives sacrificed.

Mercury was charted, tested for essential minerals, and found to be a valueless rock heap too near the sun to support life.

Venus was visited and explored segment by segment; and friendly relations were established with the rather stupid but peaceable people found there.

Mars was mapped. Here the explorers had lingered a long time: and all over this planet's surface were found remnants of a vast and intricate civilization—from the canals that laced its surface, to great cities with mighty buildings still standing. But of life there was none. The atmosphere was too rare to support it; and the theory was that it had constantly thinned through thousands of years till the last Martian had gasped and died in air too attenuated to support life even in creatures that must have grown greater and greater chested in eons of adaptation.

Then Jupiter had been reached: and here the methodical planet by planet work promised to be checked for a long time to come. Jupiter, with its mighty surface area, was going to take some exploring! It would be years before it could be plotted even superficially.

Brand had been to Jupiter on four different trips; and, as he walked toward his quarters from Stone's office, he reviewed what he had learned on those trips.

Jupiter, as he knew it, was a vast globe of vague horror and sharp contrasts.

Distant from the sun as it was, it received little solar heat. But, with so great a mass, it had cooled off much more slowly than any of the

other planets known, and had immense internal heat. This meant that the air—which closely approximated Earth's air in density—was cool a few hundred yards up from the surface of the planet, and dankly hot close to the ground. The result, as the cold air constantly sank into the warm, was a thick steamy blanket of fog that covered everything perpetually.

Because of the recent cooling, life was not far advanced on Jupiter. Too short a time ago the sphere had been but a blazing mass. Tropical marshes prevailed, crisscrossed by mighty rivers at warmer than blood heat. Giant, hideous fernlike growths crowded one another in an everlasting jungle. And among the distorted trees, from the blanket of soft white fog that hid all from sight, could be heard constantly an ear-splitting chorus of screams and bellows and whistling snarls. It made the blood run cold just to listen—and to speculate on what gigantic but tiny-brained monsters made them.

Now and then, when Brand had been flying dangerously low over the surface, a wind had risen strong enough to dispel the fog banks for an instant; and he had caught a flash of Jovian life. Just a flash, for example, of a monstrous lizard-like thing too great to support its own bulk: or a creature all neck and tail, with ridges of scale on its armored hide and a small serpentine head weaving back and forth among the jungle growths.

Occasionally he had landed—always staying close to the space ship, for Jupiter's gravity made movement a slow and laborious process, and he didn't want to be caught too far from security. At such times he might hear a crashing and splashing and see a reptilian head loom gigantically at him through the fog. Then he would discharge the deadly explosive gun which was Earth's latest weapon, and the creature would crash to the ground. The chorus of hissings and bellowings would increase as he hastened slowly and laboriously back to the ship, indicating that other unseen monsters of the steamy jungle had flocked to tear the dead giant to pieces and bolt it down.

Oh, Jupiter was a nice planet! mused Brand. A sweet place—if one happened to be a two-hundred-foot snake or something!

He had always thought the entire globe was in that new, raw, marshy state. But he had worked only in one comparatively small area of the northern hemisphere; had never been within thirty thousand miles of the red spot. What might lie in that ominous crimson patch, he could not even guess. However, he reflected, he was soon to find out, though he might never live to tell about it.

Shrugging his shoulders, he turned into the fifty story building in which was his modest apartment. There he found, written by the automatic stylus on his radio pad, the message: "Be with you at

seven o'clock. Best regards, and I hope you strangle. Dex Harlow."

Dex Harlow was a six-foot Senior Lieutenant who had been on many an out-of-the-way exploratory trip. Like Brand he was just under thirty and perpetually thirsting for the bizarre in life. He was a walking document of planetary activity. He was still baked a brick red from a trip to Mercury a year before: he had a scar on his forehead, the result of jumping forty feet one day on the moon when he'd meant to jump only twenty; he was minus a finger which had been irreparably frost-bitten on Mars; and he had a crumpled nose that was the outcome of a brush with a ten-foot bandit on Venus who'd tried to kill him for his explosive gun and supply of glass, dyite-containing cartridges.

He clutched Brand's fingers in a bone-mangling grip, and threw his hat into a far corner.

"You're a fine friend!" he growled cheerfully. "Here I'm having a first rate time for myself, swimming and planing along the Riviera, with two more weeks leave ahead of me—and I get a call from the Old Man to report to you. What excuse have you for your crime?"

"A junket to Jupiter," said Brand. "Would you call that a good excuse?"

"Jupiter!" exclaimed Dex. "Wouldn't you know it? Of course you'd have to pick a spot four hundred million miles away from all that grand swimming I was having!"

"Would you like to go back on leave, and have me choose someone else?" inquired Brand solemnly.

"Well, no," said Dex hastily. "Now that I'm here, I suppose I might as well go through with it."

Brand laughed. "Try and get you out of it! I know your attitude toward a real jaunt. And it's a real jaunt we've got ahead of us, too, old boy. We're going to the red spot. Immediately."

Dex's sandy eyebrows shot up. "The red spot! That's where Coblenz and Heiroy were lost!"

"And Journeyman," added Brand. "He's the latest victim of whatever's in the hell-hole."

Dex whistled. "Journeyman too! Well, all I've got to say is that whatever's there must be strong medicine. Journeyman was a damn fine man, and as brave as they come. Have you any idea what it's all about?"

"Not an idea. Nobody has. We're to go and find out—if we can. Are you all ready?"

"All ready," said Dex.

"So am I. We'll start at eleven o'clock in one of the Old Man's best cruisers. Meanwhile, we might as well go and hunt up a dinner somewhere, to fortify us against the synthetic pork chops and bread we'll be swallowing for the next fortnight."

They went out; and at ten minutes of eleven reported at the great space ship hangars north of New York, with their luggage, a conspicuous item of which was a chess board to help while away the long, long days of spacial travel. Brand then paused a little while for a final check-up on directions.

They clambered into the tiny control room and shut the hermetically sealed trap-door. Brand threw the control switch and precisely at eleven o'clock the conical shell of metal shot heavenward, gathering such speed that it was soon invisible to human eyes. He set their course toward the blazing speck that was Jupiter, four hundred million miles away; and then reported their start by radio to Commander Stone's night operator.

The investigatory expedition to the ominous red spot of the giant of the solar system was on.

Chapter 2: The Pipe-like Men

Brand began to slacken speed on the morning of the thirteenth day (morning, of course, being a technical term: there are no horizons in space for the sun to rise over). Jupiter was still an immense distance off; but it took a great while to slow the momentum of the space ship, which, in the frictionless emptiness of space, had been traveling faster and faster for nearly three hundred hours.

Behind them was the distant ball of sun, so far off that it looked no larger than a red-hot penny. Before them was the gigantic disk of Jupiter, given a white tinge by the perpetual fog blankets, its outlines softened by its thick layer of atmosphere and cloud banks. Two of its nine satellites were in sight at the moment, with a third edging over the western rim.

"Makes you think you're drunk and seeing triple, doesn't it?" commented Dex, who was staring out the thick glass panel beside Brand. "Nine moons! Almost enough for one planet!"

Brand nodded abstractly, and concentrated on the control board. Rapidly the ship rocketed down toward the surface. The disk became a whirling, gigantic plate; and then an endless plain, with cloud formations beginning to take on definite outline.

"About to enter Jupiter's atmosphere." Brand spoke into the radio transmitter. Over the invisible thread of radio connection between the space ship and Earth, four hundred million miles behind, flashed the message.

"All right. For God's sake, be careful," came the answer, minutes later. "Say something at least every half hour, to let us know communication is unbroken. We will sound at ten second intervals."

The sounding began: peep, a shrill little piping noise like the fiddle of a cricket. Ten seconds later it came again: peep. Thereafter, intermittently, it keened through the control room—a homely, comforting sound to let them know that there was a distant thread between them and Earth.

Lower the shell rocketed. The endless plain slowly ceased its rushing underneath them as they entered the planet's atmosphere and began to be pulled around with it in its revolution. Far to the west a faint red glow illumined the sky.

The two men looked at each other, grimly, soberly.

"We're here," said Dex, flexing the muscles of his powerful arms.

"We are," said Brand, patting the gun in his holster.

The rapid dusk of the giant planet began to close in on them. The thin sunlight darkened; and with its lowering, the red spot of Jupiter glared more luridly ahead of them. Silently the two men gazed at it, and wondered what it held.

They shot the space ship toward it, and halted a few hundred miles away. Watery white light from the satellites, "that jitter around in the sky like a bunch of damned waterbugs," as Dex put it, was now the sole illumination.

They hung motionless in their space shell, to wait through the five-hour Jovian night for the succeeding five hours of daylight to illumine a slow cruise over the red area that, in less than a year, had swallowed up three of Earth's space ships. And ever as they waited, dozing a little, speculating as to the nature of the danger they faced, the peep, peep of the radio shrilled in their ears to tell them that there was still a connection—though a very tenuous one—with their mother planet.

Red spot ten miles away," said Brand in the transmitter. "We're approaching it slowly."

The tiny sun had leaped up over Jupiter's horizon; and with its appearance they had sent the ship planing toward their mysterious destination. Beneath them the fog banks were thinning, and ahead of them were no clouds. For some reason there was a clarity unusual to Jupiter's atmosphere in the air above the red section.

"Red spot one mile ahead, altitude forty thousand feet," reported Brand.

He and Dex peered intently through the port glass panel. Ahead and far below, their eyes caught an odd metallic sheen. It was as though the ground there were carpeted with polished steel that reflected red firelight.

Tense, filled with an excitement that set their pulses pounding wildly, they angled slowly down, nearer to the edge of the vast crimson area, closer to the ground. The radio keened its monotonous signal.

Brand crawled to the transmitter, laboriously, for his body tipped the scales here at nearly four hundred pounds.

"We can see the metallic glitter that Journeyman spoke of," he said. "No sign of life of any kind, though. The red glow seems to flicker a

little."

Closer the ship floated. Closer. To right and left of them for vast distances stretched the red area. Ahead of them for hundreds of miles they knew it extended.

"We're right on it now," called Brand. "Right on it—we're going over the edge—we're—"

Next instant he was sprawling on the floor, with Dex rolling helplessly on top of him, while the space ship bounced up twenty thousand feet as though propelled by a giant sling.

The peep, peep of the radio signalling stopped. The space ship rolled helplessly for a moment, then resumed an even keel. Brand and Dex gazed at each other.

"What the hell?" said Dex.

He started to get to his feet, put all his strength into the task of moving his Jupiter-weighted body, and crashed against the top of the control room.

"Say!" he sputtered, rubbing his head. "Say, what is this?"

Brand, profiting by his mistake, rose more cautiously, shut off the atomic motor, and approached a glass panel again. "God knows what it is," he said with a shrug. "Somehow, with our passing into the red area, the pull of gravity has been reduced by about ten, that's all."

"Oh, so that's all, is it? Well, what's happened to old Jupe's gravity?"

Again Brand shrugged. "I haven't any idea. Your guess is as good as mine."

He peered down through the panel, and stiffened in surprise.

"Dex!" he cried. "We're moving! And the motor is shut off!"

"We're drawing down closer to the ground, too," announced Dex, pointing to their altimeter. "Our altitude has been reduced five thousand feet in the last two minutes."

Quickly Brand turned on the motor in reverse. The space ship, as the rushing, reddish ground beneath indicated, continued to glide forward as though pulled by an invisible rope. He turned on full power. The ship's progress was checked a little. A very little! And the metallic red surface under them grew nearer as they steadily lost altitude.

"Something seems to have got us by the nose," said Dex. "We're on our way to the center of the red spot, I guess—to find whatever it was that Journeyman found. And the radio communication his been broken somehow...."

Wordlessly, they stared out the panel, while the shell, quivering with the strain of the atomic motor's fight against whatever unseen force it was that relentlessly drew them forward, bore them swiftly toward the heart of the vast crimson area.

“Look!" cried Brand.

For over an hour the ship had been propelled swiftly, irresistibly toward the center of the red spot. It had been up about forty thousand feet. Now, with a jerk that sent both men reeling, it had been drawn down to within fifteen thousand feet of the surface; and the sight that was now becoming more and more visible was incredible.

Beneath was a vast, orderly checkerboard. Every alternate square was covered by what seemed a jointless metal plate. The open squares, plainly land under cultivation, were surrounded by gleaming fences that hooked each metal square with every other one of its kind as batteries are wired in series. Over these open squares progressed tiny, two legged figures, for the most part following

gigantic shapeless animals like figures out of a dream. Ahead suddenly appeared the spires and towers of an enormous city!

Metropolis and cultivated land! It was as unbelievable, on that raw new planet, as such a sight would have been could a traveler in time have observed it in the midst of a dim Pleistocene panorama of young Earth.

It was instantly apparent that the city was their destination. Rapidly the little ship was rushed toward it; and, realizing at last the futility of its laboring, Brand cut off the atomic motor and let the shell drift.

Over a group of squat square buildings their ship passed, decreasing speed and drifting lower with every moment. The lofty structures that were the nucleus of the strange city loomed closer. Now they were soaring slowly down a wide thoroughfare; and now, at last, they hovered above a great open square that was thronged with figures.

Lower they dropped. Lower. And then they settled with a slight jar on a surface made of reddish metal; and the figures rushed to surround them.

Looking out the glass panel at these figures, both Brand and Dex

exclaimed aloud and covered their eyes for a moment to shut out the hideous sight of them. Now they examined them closely.

Manlike they were: and yet like no human being conceivable to an Earth mind. They were tremendously tall—twelve feet at least—but as thin as so many animated poles. Their two legs were scarce four inches through, taper-less, boneless, like lengths of pipe; and like two flexible pipes they were joined to a slightly larger pipe of a torso that could not have been more than a foot in diameter. There were four arms, a pair on each side of the cylindrical body, that weaved feebly about like lengths of rubber hose.

Set directly on the pipe-like body, as a pumpkin might be balanced on a pole, was a perfectly round cranium in which were glassy, staring eyes, with dull pupils like those of a sick dog. The nose was but a tab of flesh. The mouth was a minute, circular thing, soft and flabby looking, which opened and shut regularly with the creature's breathing. It resembled the snout-like mouth of a fish, of the sucker variety; and fish-like, too, was the smooth and slimy skin that covered the beanpole body.

Hundreds of the repulsive things, there were. And all of them shoved and crowded, as a disorderly mob on Earth might do, to get close to the Earthmen's ship. Their big dull eyes peered in through the glass

panels, and their hands—mere round blobs of gristle in the palms of which were set single sucker disks—pattered against the metal hull of the shell.

"God!" said Brand with a shudder. "Fancy these things feeling over your body...."

"They're hostile, whatever they are," said Dex. "Look out: that one's pointing something at you!"

One of the slender, tottering creatures had raised an arm and leveled at Brand something that looked rather like an elongated, old-fashioned flashlight. Brand involuntarily ducked. The clear glass panel between them and the mob outside gave him a queasy feeling of being exposed to whatever missile might lurk in the thing's tube.

"What do we do now?" demanded Dex with a shaky laugh. "You're chief of this expedition. I'm waiting for orders."

"We wait right here," replied Brand. "We're safe in the shell till we're starved out. At least they can't get in to attack us."

But it developed that, while the slimy looking things might not be able to get in, they had ways of reaching the Earthmen just the same!

The creature with the gun-like tube extended it somewhat further toward Brand.

Brand felt a sharp, unpleasant tingle shoot through his body, as though he had received an electric shock. He winced, and cried out at the sudden pain of it.

"What's the matter—" Dex began. But hardly had the words left his mouth when he, too, felt the shock. A couple of good, hearty Earth oaths exploded from his lips.

The repulsive creature outside made an authoritative gesture. He seemed to be beckoning to them, his huge dull eyes glaring threateningly at the same moment.

"Our beanpole friend is suggesting that we get out of the shell and stay awhile," said Dex with grim humor. "They seem anxious to entertain us—ouch!"

As the two men made no move to obey the beckoning gesture, the creature had raised the tube again; and again the sharp, unpleasant shock shot through them.

"What the devil are we going to do?" exclaimed Brand. "If we go out

in that mob of nightmare things—it's going to be messy. As long as we stay in the shell we have some measure of protection."

"Not much protection when they can sting us through metal and glass at will," growled Dex. "Do you suppose they can turn the juice on harder? Or is that bee-sting their best effort?"

As though in direct answer to his words, the blob-like face of the being who seemed in authority convulsed with anger and he raised the tube again. This time the shock that came from it was sufficient to throw the two men to the floor.

"Well, we can't stay in the ship, that's certain," said Brand. "I guess there's only one thing to do."

Dex nodded. "Climb out of here and take as many of these skinny horrors with us into hell as we can," he agreed.

Once more the shock stung them, as a reminder not to keep their captors waiting. With their shoulders bunched for abrupt action, and their guns in hand, the two men walked to the trap-door of the ship. They threw the heavy bolts, drew a deep breath—and flung open the door to charge unexpectedly toward the thickest mass of creatures that surrounded the ship!

In a measure their charge was successful. Its very suddenness caught some of the tall monstrosities off guard. Half a dozen of them stopped the fragile glass bullets to writhe in horrible death on the red metal paving of the square. But that didn't last long.

In less than a minute, thin, clammy arms were winding around the Earthmen's wrists, and their guns were wrenched from them. And then started a hand-to-hand encounter that was all the more hideous for being so unlike any fighting that might have occurred on Earth.

With a furious growl Dex charged the nearest creature, whose huge round head swayed on its stalk of a body fully six feet above his own head. He gathered the long thin legs in a football grip, and sent the thing crashing full length on its back. The great head thumped resoundingly against the metal paving, and the creature lay motionless.

For an instant Dex could only stare at the thing. It had been so easy, like overcoming a child. But even as that thought crossed his mind, two of the tall thin figures closed in behind him. Four pairs of arms wound around him, feebly but tenaciously, like wet seaweed.

They began to constrict and wind tighter around him. He tore at them, dislodged all but two. His sturdy Earth leg went back to sweep

the stalk-like legs of his attackers from under them. One of the things went down, to twist weakly in a laborious attempt to rise again. But the other, by sheer force of height and reach, began to bear Dex down.

Savagely he laced out with his fists, battering the pulpy face that was pressing down close to his. The big eyes blinked shut, but the four hose-like arms did not relax their clasp. Dex's hands sought fiercely for the thing's throat. But it had no throat: the head, set directly on the thin shoulders, defied all throttling attempts.

Then, just as Dex was feeling that the end had come, he felt the creature wrench from him, and saw it slide in a tangle of arms and legs over the smooth metal pavement. He got shakily to his feet, to see Brand standing over him and flailing out with his fists at an ever tightening circle of towering figures.

"Thanks," panted Dex. And he began again, tripping the twelve-foot things in order to get them down within reach, battering at the great pulpy heads, fighting blindly in that expressed craving to take as many of the creatures into hell with him as he could manage. Beside him fought Brand, steadily, coolly, grim of jaw and unblinking of eye.

Already the struggle had gone on far longer than they had dreamed it might. For some reason the grotesque creatures delayed killing them. That they could do so any time they pleased, was certain: if the monsters could reach them with their shock-tubes through the double insulated hull of the space ship, they could certainly kill them out in the open.

Yet they made no move to do so. The deadly tubes were not used. The screeching gargoyles, instead, devoted all their efforts to merely hurling their attenuated bodies on the two men as though they wished to capture them alive.

Finally, however, the nature of the battle changed. The tallest of the attackers opened his tiny mouth and piped a signal. The ring of weaving tall bodies surrounding the two opened and became a U. The creatures in the curve of the U raised their shock-tubes and, with none of their own kind behind the victims to share in its discharge, released whatever power it was that lurked in them.

The shock was terrific. Without the glass and metal of the ship to protect them, out in the open and defenceless, Brand and Dex got some indication of its real power.

Writhing and twitching, feeling as though pierced by millions of red

hot needles, they went down. A swarm of pipe-like bodies smothered them, and the fight was over.

Chapter 3: The Coming of Greca

The numbing shock from the tubes left the Earthmen's bodies almost paralyzed for a time; but their brains were unfogged enough for them to observe only too clearly all that went on from the point of their capture.

They were bound hand and foot. At a piping cry from the leader, several of the gangling figures picked them up in reedy arms and began to walk across the square, away from the ship. Brand noticed that his bearers' arms trembled with his weight: and sensed the flabbiness of the substance that took the place in them of good solid muscle. Physically these things were soft and ineffectual indeed. They had only the ominous tubes with which to fight.

The eery procession, with the bound Earthmen carried in the lead, wound toward a great building fringing the square. In through the high arched entrance of this building they went, and up a sloping incline to its tower-top. Here, in a huge bare room, the two were unceremoniously dumped to the floor.

While three of the things stood guard with the mysterious tubes, another unbound them. A whole shower of high pitched, piping syllables was hurled at them, speech which sounded threatening and

contemptuous but was otherwise, of course, entirely unintelligible, and then the creatures withdrew. The heavy metal door was slammed shut, and they were alone.

Brand drew a long breath, and began to feel himself all over for broken bones. He found none; he was still nerve-wracked from that last terrific shock, but otherwise whole and well.

"Are you hurt, Dex?" he asked solicitously.

"I guess not," replied Dex, getting uncertainly to his feet. "And I'm wondering why. It seems to me the brutes were uncommonly considerate of us—and I'm betting the reason is one we won't like!"

Brand shrugged. "I guess we'll find out their intentions soon enough. Let's see what our surroundings look like."

They walked to the nearest window-aperture, and gazed out on a startling and marvelous scene.

Beneath their high tower window, extending as far as the eye could reach, lay the city, lit by the reddish glare of the peculiar metal with which its streets were paved. For the most part the metropolis consisted of perfectly square buildings pierced by many windows to

indicate that each housed a large number of inmates. But here and there grotesque turrets lanced the sky, and symbolic domes arched above the surrounding flat metal roofs.

One building in particular they noticed. This was an enormous structure in the shape of a half-globe that reared its spherical height less than an eighth of a mile from the building they were in. It was situated off to their right at the foot of a vast, high-walled enclosure whose near end seemed to be formed by the right wall of their prison. They could only see it by leaning far out of the window; and it would not have come to their attention at all had they not heard it first—or, rather, heard the sound of something within it: for from it came a curious whining hum that never varied in intensity, something like the hum of a gigantic dynamo, only greater and of a more penetrating pitch.

"Sounds as though it might be some sort of central power station," said Brand. "But what could it supply power for?"

"Give it up," said Dex. "For their damned shock-tubes, perhaps, among other things—"

He broke off abruptly as a sound of sliding bolts came from the doorway. The two men whirled around to face the door, their fists

doubling instinctively against whatever new danger might threaten them.

The door was opened and two of their ugly, towering enemies came in, their tubes held conspicuously before them. Behind came another figure; and at sight of this one, so plainly not of the race of Jupiter, the Earthmen gasped with wonder.

They saw a girl who might have come from Earth, save that she was taller than most Earth women—of a regal height that reached only an inch or two below Brand's own six foot one. She was beautifully formed, and had wavy dark hair and clear light blue eyes. A sort of sandal covered each small bare foot; and a gauzy tunic, reaching from above the knee to the shoulder, only half shielded her lovely figure.

She was bearing a metal container in which was a mess of stuff evidently intended as food. The guards halted and stepped aside to let her pass into the room. Then they backed out, constantly keeping Dex and Brand covered with the tubes, and closed and barred the door.

The girl smiled graciously at the admiration in the eyes of both the men—a message needing no inter-planetary interpretation. She

advanced, and held the metal container toward them.

"Eat," she said softly. "It is good food, and life giving."

For an instant Brand was dumbfounded. For here was language he could understand—which was incredible on this far-flung globe. Then he suddenly comprehended why her sentences were so intelligible.

She was versed in mental telepathy. And versed to a high degree! He'd had some experience with telepathy on Venus; but theirs was a crude thought-speech compared to the fluency possessed by the beautiful girl before him.

"Who are you?" he asked wonderingly.

"I am Greca"—it was very hard to grasp names or abstract terms —"of the fourth satellite."

"Then you are not of these monsters of Jupiter?"

"Oh, no! I am their captive, as are all my people. We are but slaves of the tall ones."

Brand glanced at Dex. "Here's a chance to get some information,

perhaps," he murmured.

Dex nodded; but meanwhile the girl had caught his thought. She smiled—a tragic, wistful smile.

"I shall be happy to tell you anything in my power to tell," she informed him. "But you must be quick. I can only remain with you a little while."

She sat down on the floor with them—the few bench-like things obviously used by the tall creatures as chairs were too high for them—and with the informality of adversity the three captives began to talk. Swiftly Brand got a little knowledge of Greca's position on Jupiter, and of the racial history that led up to it.

Four of the nine satellites of Jupiter were now the home of living beings. But two only, at the dawn of history as Greca knew it, had been originally inhabited. These were the fourth and the second.

On the fourth there dwelt a race, "like me," as Greca put it—a kindly, gentle people content to live and let live.

On the second had been a race of immensely tall, but attenuated and physically feeble things with great heads and huge dull eyes and

characters distinguished mainly for cold-blooded savagery.

The inhabitants of the fourth satellite had remained in ignorance of the monsters on the second till one day "many, many ages ago," a fleet of clumsy ships appeared on the fourth satellite. From the ships had poured thousands of pipe-like creatures, armed with horrible rods of metal that killed instantly and without a sound. The things, it seemed, had crowded over the limits of their own globe, and had been forced to find more territory.

They had made captive the entire population of the satellite. Then—for like all dangerous vermin they multiplied rapidly—they had overflowed to the first and fifth satellites—the others were uninhabitable—and finally to the dangerous surface of Jupiter itself. Everywhere they had gone, they had taken droves of Greca's people to be their slaves, "and the source of their food," added Greca, with a shudder; a statement that was at the moment unintelligible to the two men.

Brand stared sympathetically at her. "They treat them very badly?" he asked gently.

"Terribly! Terribly!" said Greca, shuddering again.

"But you seem quite privileged," he could not help saying.

She shook her dainty head pathetically. "I am of high rank among my people. I am a priestess of our religion, which is the religion of The Great White One who rules all the sky everywhere. The Rogans" (it was the best translation Brand could make of her mental term for the slimy tall things that held them captive) "—the Rogans hold my fate over the heads of my race. Should they rebel, I would be thrown to the monster in the pen. Of course the Rogans could crush any revolt with their terrible tubes, but they do not want to kill their slaves if they can help it. They find it more effective to hold their priestesses in hostage."

Brand turned from personal history to more vital subjects.

"Why," he asked Greca, "are the shining red squares of metal laid everywhere over this empire of the Rogans?"

"To make things light," was the reply. "When the Rogans first came to this mighty sphere, they could hardly move. Things are so heavy here, somehow. So their first thought was to drive my enslaved people to the casting and laying of the metal squares and the metal beams that connect them, in order to make things weigh less."

"But how do the plates function?"

Greca did not know this, save vaguely. She tried to express her little knowledge of the scientific achievements of the savage Rogans. After some moments Brand turned to Dex and said:

"As near as I can get it, the Rogans, by this peculiar red metal alloy, manage to trap and divert the permanent lines of force, the magnetic field, of Jupiter itself. So the whole red spot is highly magnetized, which somehow upsets natural gravitational attraction. I suppose it is responsible for the discoloration of the ground, too."

He turned to question the girl further about this, but she had got nervously to her feet already.

"I'll be taken away soon," she said. "I was brought in here only to urge you to eat the food. I must be interpreter, since the Rogans speak not with the mind, and I know their hateful tongue."

"Why are they so anxious for us to eat?" demanded Dex with an uneasy frown.

"So you will be strong, and endure for a long time the—the ordeal they have in store for you," faltered the girl at last. "They intend to

force from you the secret of the power that drove your ship here, so they too may have command of space."

"But I don't understand," frowned Brand. "They must already have a means of space navigation. They came here to Jupiter from the satellites."

"Their vessels are crude, clumsy things. The journey from the nearest satellite is the limit of their flying range. They have nothing like your wonderful little ships, and they want to know how to build and power them."

She gazed sorrowfully at them and went on: "You see, yours is the fourth space ship to visit their kingdom; and that makes them fearful because it shows they are vulnerable to invasion. They want to stop that by invading your planet first. Besides their fear, there is their greed. Their looking-tubes reveal that yours is a fruitful and lovely sphere, and they are insatiable in their lust for new territories. Thus they plan to go to your planet as soon as they are able, and kill or enslave all the people there as they have killed and enslaved my race."

"They'll have a job on their hands trying to do that!" declared Dex stoutly.

But Brand paled. "They can do it!" he snapped. "Look at those death-tubes of theirs. We have no arms to compete with that." He turned to Greca. "So the Rogans plan to force the secret of our motors from us by torture?"

She nodded, and caught his hand in hers.

"Yes. They will do with you as they did with the six who came before you—and who died before surrendering the secret."

"So! We know now what happened to Journeyman and the others!" burst out Dex. "I'll see 'em in hell before I'll talk!"

"And me," nodded Brand. "But that doesn't cure the situation. As long as ships disappear in this red inferno, so long will the Old Man keep sending others to find out what's wrong. The Rogans will capture them as easily as they captured us. And eventually someone will happen along who'll weaken under torture. Then—"

He stopped. A dread vision filled his mind of Earth depopulated by the feebly ferocious Rogans, of rank on rank of Earth's vast armies falling in stricken rows at the shock of the Rogans' tubes.

Greca caught the vision. She nodded. "Yes, that is what would

happen if they found ways of reaching your globe."

"But, God, Brand, we can't allow that!" cried Dex. "We've got to find a way to spike the guns of these walking gas-pipes, somehow!"

Brand sighed heavily. "We are two against hundreds of thousands. We are bare-handed, and the Rogans have those damned tubes. Anyway, we are on the verge of death at this very moment. What under heaven can we do to spike their guns?"

He was silent a moment: and in the silence the steady hum from the domed building outside came to his ears.

"What's in that big, round topped building, Greca?" he asked quietly.

"I do not know, exactly," replied the girl. "There is some sort of machinery in it, and to it go connecting beams from all the square metal plates everywhere. That is all I know."

Brand started to question her further, but her time was up. The two guards poked their loathsome pumpkin heads in the doorway and contemptuously beckoned her out. She answered resignedly, in the piping Rogan tongue, and went with them. But she turned to wave shyly, commiseratingly at the two men; and the expression in her

clear blue eyes as they rested on Brand made his heart contract and then leap on with a mighty bound.

"We have in ally in her," murmured Brand. "Though God only knows if that will mean anything to us...."

Chapter 4: In the Tower

What I can't figure out," said Dex, striding up and down the big bare room, "is why we're needed to tell them about the atomic motor. They've got our ship, and three others besides. I should think they could learn about the motor just by taking it apart and studying it."

Brand grinned mirthlessly, recalling the three years of intensive study it had taken him to learn the refinements of atomic motive power. "If you'd ever qualified as a space navigator, Dex, you'd know better. The Rogans are an advanced race; their control of polar magnetism and the marvelously high-powered telescopes Greca mentions prove that; but I doubt if they could ever analyze that atomic motor with no hint as to how it works."

Silence descended on them again, in which each was lost in his own thoughts.

How many hours had passed, the Earthmen did not know. They had spent the time in fruitless planning to escape from their tower room and go back to the ship again. Though how they could get away in the ship when the Rogans seemed able to propel it where-ever they wished against the utmost power of their motor, they did not attempt to consider.

One of Jupiter's short nights had passed, however—a night weirdly made as light as day by red glares from the plates, which seemed to store up sunlight, among their other functions—and the tiny sun had risen to slant into their window at a sharp angle.

Suddenly they heard the familiar drawing of the great bolts outside their door. It was opened, and a dozen or more of the Rogans came in, with Greca cowering piteously in their midst and attempting to communicate her distress to Brand.

At the head of the little band of Rogans was one the prisoners had not seen before. He was of great height, fully two feet taller than the others; and he carried himself with an air that proclaimed his importance.

The tall one turned to Greca and addressed a few high-pitched, squeaky words to her. She shook her head; whereupon, at a hissed command, two of the Rogans caught her by the wrists and dragged her forward.

"They have come to question you," Greca lamented to Brand. "And they want to do it through me. But I will not! I will not!"

Brand smiled at her though his lips were pale.

"You are powerless to struggle," he said. "Do as they ask. You cannot help us by refusing, and, in any case, I can promise that they won't learn anything from us."

The tall Rogan teetered up to the prisoners on his gangling legs, and stared icily at them. Crouched beside him, her lovely body all one mute appeal to the Earthmen to forgive her for the part she was forced to play, was Greca.

At length the Rogan leader spoke. He addressed his sibilant words to Greca, though his stony eyes were kept intently on the Earthmen.

"He says," exclaimed Greca telepathically, "to inform you first that he is head of all the Rogan race on this globe, and that all on this globe must do as he commands."

Brand nodded to show he understood the message.

"He says he is going to ask you a few questions, and that you are to answer truthfully if you value your lives:"

"First, he wants to know what the people of your world are like. Are they all the same as you?"

Dex started to reply to that; but Brand flung him a warning look.

"Tell him we are the least of the Earth people," he answered steadily. "Tell him we are of an inferior race. Most of those on Earth are giants five times as large as we are, and many times more powerful."

Greca relayed the message in the whistling, piping Rogan tongue. The tall one stared, then hissed another sentence to the beautiful interpreter.

"He wants to know," said Greca, "if there are cities on your globe as large and complete as this one."

"There are cities on Earth that make this look like a—a—" Brand cast about for understandable similes—"like a collection of animal burrows."

"He says to describe your planet's war weapons," was the next interpretation. And here Brand let himself go.

With flights of fancy he hadn't known he was capable of, he described great airships, steered automatically and bristling with guns that discharged explosives powerful enough to kill everything within a range of a thousand miles. He told of billions of thirty-foot giants sheathed in an alloy that would make them invulnerable to any feeble rays the Rogans might have developed. He touched on the

certain wholesale death that must overtake any hostile force that tried to invade the planet.

"The Rogan shock-tubes are toys compared with the ray-weapons of Earth," he concluded. "We have arms that can nullify the effects of yours and kill at the same instant. We have—"

But here the Rogan leader turned impatiently away. Greca had been translating sentence by sentence. Now the tall one barked out a few syllables in a squeaky voice.

"He says he knows you are lying," sighed Greca. "For if you on Earth have tubes more effective than theirs why weren't you equipped with them on your expedition here to the red kingdom?"

Brand bit his lips. "Check," he muttered. "The brute has a brain in that ugly head."

The Rogan leader spoke for a long time then; and at each singsong word, Greca quivered as though lashed by a whip. At length she turned to Brand.

"He has been telling what his hordes can do, answering your boasts with boasts of his own. His words are awful! I won't tell you all he

said. I will only say that he is convinced his shock-tubes are superior to any Earth arms, and that he states he will now illustrate their power to you to quell your insolence. I don't know what he means by that...."

But she and the Earthmen were soon to find out.

The Rogan leader stepped to the window and arrogantly beckoned Brand and Dex to join him there. They did; and the leader gazed out and down as though searching for something.

He pointed. The two Earthmen followed his leveled arm with their eyes and saw, a hundred yards or so away, a bent and dreary figure trudging down the metal paving of the street. It was a figure like those to be seen on Earth, which placed it as belonging to Greca's race.

The tall leader drew forth one of the shock-tubes. Seen near at hand, it was observed to be bafflingly simple in appearance. It seemed devoid of all mechanism—simply a tube of reddish metal with a sort of handle formed of a coil of heavy wire.

The Rogan pointed the tube at the distant figure.

Greca screamed, and screamed again. Coincident with her cry, as though the sound of it had felled him, the distant slave dropped to the pavement.

That was all. The tube had merely been pointed: as far as Brand could see, the Rogan's "hand" had not moved on the barrel of the tube, nor even constricted about the coil of wire that formed its handle. Yet that distant figure had dropped. Furthermore, fumes of greasy black smoke now began to arise from the huddled body; and in less than thirty seconds there was left no trace of it on the gleaming metal pavement.

"So that's what those things are like at full power!" breathed Dex. "My God!"

The Rogan leader spoke a few words. Greca, huddled despairingly on the floor, crushed by this brutal annihilation of one of her country-men before her very eyes, did not translate. But translation was unnecessary. The Rogan's icy, triumphant eyes, the very posture of his grotesque body, spoke for him.

"That," he was certainly saying, "is what will happen to any on your helpless planet who dare oppose the Rogan will!"

He whipped out a command to the terror-stricken girl. She rose from her crouching position on the floor; and at length formulated the Rogan's last order:

"You will explain the working of the engine that drove your space ship here."

Dex laughed. It was a short bark of sound, totally devoid of humor, but very full of defiance. Brand thrust his hands into the pockets of his tunic, spread his legs apart, and began to whistle.

Aquiver that might have been of anger touched the Rogan leader's repulsive little mouth. He glared balefully at the uncowed Earthmen and spoke again, evidently repeating his command. The two turned their backs to him to indicate their refusal to obey.

At that, the tall leader pointed to Dex. In an instant three of the guards had wound their double pairs of arms around his struggling body. Brand sprang to help him, but a touch of the mysterious discharge from the leader's tube sent him writhing to the floor.

"It's no use, Brand," said Dex steadily. He too had stopped struggling, and now stood quietly in the slimy coils of his captors' arms. "I might as well go along with them and get it over with. I

probably won't see you again. Good luck!"

He was borne out of the room. The Rogan leader turned to Brand and spoke.

"He says that if your comrade does not tell him what he wants to know, your turn will come next," sobbed Greca. "Oh! Why does not The Great White One strike these monsters to the dust!"

She ran to Brand and pressed her satiny cheek to his. Then she was dragged roughly away.

The great door clanged shut. The heavy outer fastenings clicked into place. Dex had gone to experience whatever it was that Journeyman and the rest had experienced in this red hell. And Brand was left behind to reflect on what dread torments this might comprise; and to pray desperately that no matter what might be done to his shrinking body he would be strong enough to refuse to betray his planet.

Chapter 5: The Torture Chamber

Swiftly Dex was carried down the long ramp to the ground floor, the arms of his captors gripping him with painful tightness. Heading the procession was the immensely tall, gangling Rogan leader, clutching Greca by the wrist and dragging her indifferently along to be his mouthpiece.

They did not stop at the street level; they continued on down another ramp, around a bend, descending an even steeper incline toward the bowels of Jupiter. Their descent ended at last before a huge metal barrier which, at a signal from the leader, drew smoothly up into the ceiling to disclose a gigantic, red-lit chamber underlying the foundations of the building.

In fear and awe, Dex gazed around that huge room.

It resembled in part a nightmare rearrangement of such a laboratory as might be found on Earth; and in part a torture chamber such as the most ferocious of savages might have devised had they been scientifically equipped to add contrivances of supercivilization to the furthering of their primitive lust for cruelty.

There were great benches—head-high to the Earthman—to

accommodate the height of the Rogan workmen. There were numberless metal instruments, and glass coils, and enormous retorts; and in one corner an orange colored flame burnt steadily on a naked metal plate, seeming to have no fuel or other source of being.

There was a long rack of cruelly pointed and twisted instruments. Under this was a row of long, delicate pincers, with coils on the handles to indicate that they might be heated to fiendish precision of temperatures. There were gleaming metal racks with calibrated slide-rods and spring dials to denote just what pull was being exerted on whatever unhappy creature might be stretched taut on them. There were tiny cones of metal whose warped, baked appearance testified that they were little portable furnaces that could be placed on any desired portion of the anatomy, to slowly bake the selected disk of flesh beneath them.

Dex shuddered; and a low moan came from Greca, whose clear blue eyes had rested on the contents of this vast room before in her capacity as hostage and interpreter for the inhuman Rogans.

And now another sense of Dex's began to register perception on his brain.

A peculiar odor came to his nostrils. It was a musky, fetid odor, like

that to be smelled in an animal cage; but it was sharper, more acrid than anything he had ever smelled on Earth. It smelled—ah, he had it!—reptilian. As though somewhere nearby a dozen titanic serpents were coiled ready to spring!

Looking about, Dex saw a six-foot square door of bars in one wall of the laboratory—like the barred entrance to a prison cell. It was from the interstices of this door that the odor seemed to emanate; but he had no chance to make sure, for now the Rogan leader approached him.

"I will first show you," he said, through his mouthpiece, Greca, "what happens to those who oppose our orders. We have a slave who tried to run away into the surrounding jungles three suns ago...."

A man was dragged into the chamber. He was slightly taller and more stockily muscled than an Earthman might be; but otherwise, in facial conformation and general appearance, he might have come here straight from New York City. Dex felt a great pang of sympathy for him. He was so plainly one of humankind, despite the fact that he had been born on a sphere four hundred million miles from Dex's.

The fellow was paralyzed with horror. His eyes, wide and glazed, darted about the torture room like those of a trapped animal. And yet

he made no move to break away from the clutch of the two Rogans who held him. He knew he was helpless, that wild-eyed glance told Dex. Knew it so thoroughly that not even his wildest terror could inspire him to try to make a break for freedom, or strike back at the implacable Rogan will.

At a nod from the leader, the man was stripped to the waist. Here Dex started in amazement. The man's broad chest was seamed and crisscrossed by literally hundreds of tiny lateral scars, some long healed, and some fresh incisions.

He was dragged to a metal plate set upright in the wall, and secured to it by straps of metal. Evidently the miserable being knew what this portended, for he began to scream—a monotonous, high-pitched shriek that didn't stop till he was out of breath.

The Rogan leader stared at him icily, then depressed a small lever set in the wall beside him. The plate against which the captive was bound began to shine softly with a blue light. The slave twisted in his bonds, screaming again. Rhythmic shudders jerked at his limbs. His lips turned greenish white. The shudders grew more pronounced till it seemed as though he were afflicted with a sort of horrible St. Vitus dance. Then the tall Rogan pulled back the lever. The slave hung away from his supporting shackles, limp and unconscious.

Dex moistened his lips. An electric shock? No, it was something more terrible than that. Some other manifestation of the magnetic power the Rogans had harnessed—a current, perhaps, that depolarized partly the atoms of the body structure? He could only guess. But the convulsed face of the unfortunate victim showed that the torment, whatever it was, was devilish to the last degree!

"That will be the next to the last fate reserved for you," the Rogan informed Dex, through Greca. "Death follows soon after that—but not too soon for you to see and feel what waits for you behind the barred door!" And he nodded toward the cage-entrance affair, from which came the musky, reptilian stench.

"Now that you have seen something of what will happen to you if you refuse to tell us what we want to know, we shall proceed," said the leader.

He pointed toward one of the gargantuan work benches, and two of the Rogans slid down from it a contrivance that looked familiar to Dex. An instant's scrutiny showed him why it was familiar: it was a partly dismantled atomic motor.

In spite of the ordeal that faced him, Dex felt a thrill of elation as he looked at the motor. In its scattered state, it told a mute story: a story

of long and intensive study by the Rogans, which had yielded them no results! Only too obviously, the intricate secret of atomic power had not let itself be solved.

On the heels of the elation that filled his heart, came a sickening realization of his dilemma. He could not have told the Rogans what they wanted to know even if he had wished to! He himself didn't know the principles of the atomic engine. As Brand had remarked, he was no space navigator; he was simply a prosaic lieutenant, competent only at fighting, not at all versed in science.

He knew, though, that it would do no good to assert his ignorance to the Rogans. They simply wouldn't believe him.

"You will rebuild this engine for us," ordered the tall leader, "showing us the purpose of each part, and how the power is extracted from the fuel. After that you will set it running for us, and instruct us in its control."

Dex braced himself. His final moment had come.

By way of indicating his refusal he looked away from the dismantled motor and said nothing. The Rogan repeated his command. Dex made no move. Then the leader acted.

He said something to the Rogan guards who had been standing by all this while, alert against an outbreak from their prisoner. Dex was caught up, carried to one of the metal racks, and thrown down on its calibrated bed. Loops of metal, like handcuffs, were snapped around his wrists and ankles; and a metal hoop was clamped over his throat, pinning him to the torture rack. Resistance would have been useless, and Dex submitted quietly.

The contrivance, with him on it, was wheeled toward the barred door. It was halted at a spot marked on the floor, about thirty feet from the bars. The Rogan leader stepped alongside the rack, with Greca trembling beside him.

Dex closed his eyes for a moment, grimly marshaling strength of will to go through the trial that was just beginning.

The Rogan leader depressed another lever in the rock wall. The barred door slid slowly up, to reveal the receding darknesses of some great cave, or room, that adjoined the laboratory. Dex rolled his eyes so that he could watch the doorway; and, in a cold perspiration, waited for whatever might appear.

It was not long in coming!

The reptilian smell suddenly grew stronger. There was a booming hiss, a savage bellowing. A clattering of vast scales rattled out as some body weighing many tons was dragged over rock flooring. Then, before Dex's staring eyes appeared a huge, wedge-shaped head, at sight of which he bit his lips to keep from crying aloud.

Often enough he had seen one of those terrific heads looming in the fog of the northern hemisphere of Jupiter. He did not know the genus of the vast monster that bore it, but he did know it for the fiercest of the lizard giants that roamed the Jovian jungles. A creature larger than a terrestrial whale, with great long neck and heavy long tail dragging yards behind it, it would find the puny bulk of a man nothing but a morsel in its jaws!

Again the gigantic thing hissed and bellowed. And then its huge head came through the six-foot door and its neck uncoiled to send the gaping jaws within a foot of Dex. There it struggled to reach him, prevented by the small doorway that restrained the bulk of its enormous body, its head only inches away from the cleverly measured spot to which the metal rack had been wheeled.

Dex stared, hypnotized, into the dull, stony eyes of the beast, gasping for breath in the stench of its exhalations. The jaws snapped shut, fanning his cheek. He fought for self-control. Steady! Steady!

The slimy Rogans had no intention of feeding him to the thing yet. Not till they had made more determined efforts to wring from him the secret of the motor. They were just prefacing actual physical torture with hellish mental torture, that was all.

That he was right in his guess was proved in a few moments. He heard a louder hiss from the great lizard so near him. Opening his eyes, he saw the Rogan leader in the process of forcing the serpentine neck to withdraw foot by foot back into the doorway, using his shock-tube as a sort of distant prod.

The monster swayed its ugly flat head back and forth, hissing deafeningly at the sting of the tube, now and again lunging with its vast unseen body at the too narrow entrance that kept it from entering the laboratory. Dex could hear the foundation walls of the building creak at the onslaught of that tremendous weight.

If it would only break through! he thought savagely. But it wasn't going to. In a short while it was cowed by the deadly tube, and withdrew its head awkwardly from the chamber. The barred door slid down into place: and the Rogan leader once more turned his attention to his prisoner.

"You will be wheeled within reach of the creature as the last step of

your fate," Dex was informed. "Meanwhile, we shall start with something less deadly...."

A cogged wheel beside him was turning a notch. Dex felt the sliding bed of the rack crawl slightly under him. Intolerable tension was suddenly placed on his arms and legs. The leader stared at a spring dial; and moved the wheel another notch. The rack expanded again, stretching Dex's body till his joints cracked.

"You will tell us what we want to know," said the Rogan, glaring coldly down at him.

Dex compressed his lips stubbornly. He couldn't tell them if he wanted to, and, by God, he wouldn't if he could.

Another notch, the wheel was turned; and in spite of himself a groan escaped Dex's lips. One more notch, while the metal slide-rods beneath him lengthened a fraction of an inch....

Chapter 6: The Inquisition

Blind, animal fear caught Dex and shook him in its grip. Then rage filled his heart, driving out the fear as a gale dissipates fog. With pain-dimmed eyes he glared at the gangling, hateful figure that gazed down on him with icy eyes. If he could only blast that monstrous, physically feeble but mentally ferocious thing to bits! Annihilate it! Blow it to the four corners of Jupiter! And all the other Rogans with it!

And with this thought he suddenly saw, through the red mists of rage, the shock-tube that was dangling indifferently from the Rogan leader's hand.

Instantly the red mists began to clear away. Another change took place in the tortured lieutenant's mind. The blind hot rage faded into more deadly, cold wrath. A plan began to bud into thought. It was a futile plan, really. It could not possibly accomplish anything vital. But it might give him a chance for a little revenge before his life was snuffed out—might give him a chance to strike a blow for the dead Journeyman and the other gallant explorers who had perished here in this chamber before him.

He closed his eyes to hide the hate and calculation in them. The tall

Rogan leaned lower over the rack.

"You are ready to do as I command?" he demanded.

"Yes," whispered Dex. "Yes."

In the beautiful Greca's eyes, as she translated his assent, was horror. But then, faintly, her mind caught the thought that lay beneath the Earthman's apparent surrender. She veiled her own eyes with long lashes, lest they betray the captive's plan to the alert Rogan. Her lips moved silently; perhaps she was praying to her Great White One.

Release him," the Rogan ordered, triumph in his bird-like, shrill voice. The metal hoops were unfastened. Dex stretched his outraged body, wincing with the pain of movement; then felt life and strength returning to him.

"Come with us to the motor," commanded the Rogan, his dull eyes glinting in anticipation of learning the coveted secret that should add one more planet to the Rogan's tyranny.

Dex walked to the dismantled atomic engine with him. He walked slowly, pretending more stiffness and weakness than he really owned to. No use in letting his captors know that his resilient muscles were

so quickly throwing off the torment of the rack.

As he walked he kept his gaze covertly on that shock-tube that dangled in the leader's grasp. The rest of the guard had none; they had laid their weapons down on a far bench on their entrance to the chamber, depending on the one with which their leader was armed.

Eagerly the Rogans crowded around Dex and the motor that had thus far baffled them. They bent down from their twelve-foot heights to bring their staring goggle-eyes closer to the lesson in atomic motive power, till Dex was in a sort of small dome of Rogans, with their long, pipe-like legs forming the wall around him, and their thin torsos inclining forward to make a curved ceiling over him.

The Rogan leader drew Greca within the circle to interpret the Earthman's explanations.

Dex moved a trifle, to bring himself nearer the tall leader. Again he glanced covertly at the shock-tube.

"The first thing to tell about our motor," said Dex, stalling for time, "is that it utilizes the breaking up of the atom as its source of power."

He edged closer to the Rogan leader.

"You see those electrodes?" he said, pointing to two copper castings in a chamber between the fuel tank and the small but enormously powerful turbine that whirled with the released atomic energy. The Rogan leader blinked assent. His small, horrible mouth was pursed with his concentration of thought.

"The electrodes partially break down the atoms of fuel passing from the tank," explained Dex, desperately attempting scientific phraseology for a matter as far over his head as the remote stars. He raised his hand a trifle, bringing it nearer the Rogan's tube....

"Is that the outlet from the tank?" inquired the Rogan, pointing with the tube, and so raising it out of Dex's reach.

"Yes," mumbled Dex, sick with disappointment: he'd been on the point of leaping for the weapon. He sidled close again. Greca bit her lips lest she cry out with suspense.

"The partially disintegrated atoms pass into the turbine chamber," he went on, "and are there completely broken down by heat, which has been generated by the explosive energy of the atoms passing in before them."

"I warn you to speak true," said the leader, suddenly removing his

gaze from the specimen motor and staring icily down at Dex. Dex's hand dropped abruptly from its place near the tube. Again his fingers had come within a foot of it.

We will get ahead faster," piped the Rogan, an edge of suspicion sounding in his shrill voice, "if I conduct the explanation. I will ask questions for you to answer. What is the fuel used?"

"Powdered zinc," Dex answered promptly. No harm in admitting that. The Rogans must already know it; zinc was common to Jupiter, as Earth spectroscopes had showed long since; and they had no doubt analyzed it by now. The chances were that the leader was merely testing him, to see if he were sincere in his ostensible surrender.

That his guess was right, he read in the fishy, dull eyes. The Rogan leader nodded at his answer, and some of the lurking suspicion in his gaze died down.

"How is it prepared?"

Now this marked the beginning of the end, Dex knew. The preparation of the powdered metal was half the secret of atomic power—and Dex hadn't the faintest idea what it was! This questions-

and-answers affair was going to pin him down in short order!

"How is it prepared?" repeated the Rogan leader inexorably. "Tell us, or—"

But at that instant Dex attained his objective.

Once more his hand had crawled slowly toward the tube—till, once more, it was within reach. Then, more bold as his position grew more desperate, he straightened up—and, with a lightning move, had wrenched it from the sucker-disk that held it!

He shouted his triumph. He had it! Now let the devils put him back on the torture bed if they could! Now let them try to make him betray his planet!

There was an alarmed squeak from the Rogan leader, and in an instant the huge laboratory was in an uproar. The Rogan guards whipped their hose-like arms toward the Earthman. Dex, with a sweep of his hands, knocked the pipe-stem legs of two of the guards from under them, leaped over their bodies, and stood at bay in a corner—guarding the bench on which the guards had laid their tubes when they filed into the laboratory.

The air resounded with the shrill calls of the excited Rogans. Then they began to close in on him, all the while eyeing the tube in his hand with terror written large on their hideous faces.

Dex's eyes blazed with the light of vengeful exultation. For the death of Journeyman and the rest, for the coming inevitable death of himself and Brand, he was going to pay—at least in part—with the captured tube of death in his hand! It was a lovely thought, and for a few seconds he delayed acting in order to savor it.

Then, with a smile of pure happiness, he leveled the tube at the nearest Rogan in order to shrivel him to nothingness as he had seen the slave shrivelled in the street.

The Rogan did not fall! Full in the face of the death tube he teetered forward, his arms reaching savagely toward the Earthman.

Dex stared incredulously. Cold fear crept into his heart. He pointed the tube more accurately, and squeezed harder on the coil handle. Still nothing happened. The Rogans warily drew closer.

Perspiration began to trickle down Dex's cheeks. In God's name, why didn't the tube work? He had thought all he had to do was point it and squeeze down on the handle. But evidently there was more to

the trick than that!

He groaned. He had staged all this elaborate play for a weapon as useless to his untrained mind as one of Earth's explosive guns, with the safety-lock clamped on, would have been to an abysmal Venusian savage!

By now the nearest Rogan was within reaching distance of him. One of its two pairs of slimy arms uncoiled toward him. The other pair strained to reach around him and get to the weapons on the bench by his side.

With a cry, Dex dashed the useless shock-tube down on the reaching arms. As long as he didn't know how to work it anyway, he might as well use it as a club.

The Rogan squeaked with pain; the arms recoiled. Dex jerked the tube back over his shoulder for another blow....

There was a shriek from the doomed wretch fastened to the metal plate. The slave that had been tortured before Dex's eyes as an object lesson! He had been returned to consciousness a short time since, and had been writhing and shuddering against the plate.

Dex flashed a glance at him over his shoulder, as he shrieked, and cried aloud himself at what he saw.

The tortured slave was rapidly disappearing! Another shriek left his lips, to be broken off halfway. In an instant nothing was left of the struggling body but a wisp of greasy black smoke!

Dex stared stupidly at the tube in his hand. Then, as a squeak of agony sounded from a Rogan in front of him, his mind grasped what had happened. Somehow its mechanism had been jarred into functioning when he dashed it against the groping arm. In some way its death dealing power had been unleashed. With a cry of exultation, Dex began to use it!

The Rogan in front of him, squealing, collapsed on the floor, dwindling swiftly into nothingness. Dex turned the mysterious death against another teetering creature. It too went up in oleaginous smoke.

The Rogan leader came next. Dex whirled the tube in his direction, and saw him go down. Then he sprang to annihilate still another grotesque monster who had almost reached the bench on which were the other tubes. He shouted and raved as this fourth Rogan crumbled. Torture him, would they! Plan to capture Earth, would they! He'd kill

off the whole damned population with this tube!

The Rogan survivors, squeaking in panic, gave over their attempts to retrieve the tubes. They dove for various hiding places—under benches, behind retorts, anywhere to get away from the terror running amuck in their midst. And after them sprang Dex, mad with his sudden miraculous success, to ferret them out one by one and blow them into hell with their own horrible death-engine.

In his ecstasy of rage, Dex overlooked the Rogan leader. He had seen that attenuated monstrosity go down, and had assumed he was dead. But such was not the case. In the corner Dex had vacated when he sprang after the fleeing guard, the tall leader twisted feebly and sat up.

One of his four arms was missing, a smoking stump showing where the annihilating ray from the tube had blasted it off at the shoulder. But he was far from being dead. With cold purpose in his great staring eyes, he moved snakily toward the bench Dex had now left unguarded.

The Earthman got another Rogan; whirled to track down still another. Promptly the leader sank motionless to the floor. The Rogan leader continued his crawling. He reached the bench, fumbled up

and along its surface for the nearest tube.

Dex, unconscious of the sure fate gathering behind him to strike him down, dashed past a great glass tank behind which Greca was huddling in mortal fear, and charged down on two more of the squeaking guards.

Then, suddenly, some sixth sense warned him that something was wrong. He whirled toward the corner he had left.

The Rogan leader, two of his surviving arms propping feebly against the bench, was pointing a shock-tube squarely at him!

Dex fell to the floor to escape the first discharge of the tube, and leveled his own. He felt the thing grow hot in his hand, saw a blinding blue-white fire leap into being in the space between them as the rays from the two tubes met and absorbed each other. He shifted, to get out of the line and blast the creature he had too hastily reckoned as dead. But he was not quick enough. A fraction before him, the Rogan leader shifted.

Dex felt a terrible burning sensation all over his body, as the ray from his tube met the conflicting ray less squarely, and allowed a little of it to reach him. He shrieked as the slave had shrieked when

he felt the annihilating current from the plate sweeping through his body.

A black fog seemed to close in around the Earthman's senses. He crashed to the floor, with a glimpse of the leering triumph on the Rogan's face as the last picture to stamp itself in his failing consciousness.

The tall Rogan, obviously in great agony from his blasted arm, squeaked a faint command. The four guards who were left issued fearfully from their hiding places and came to him.

He pointed his tube at Dex Harlow, lying unconscious on the floor. There he hesitated an instant, his soft little mouth slobbering in his rage and pain. Then he let the tube sink slowly off its line.

He gave another command. The four guards picked the Earthman up and carried him to the metal torture-plate on which the slave had met his death. The tall leader's eyes gleamed with vicious hatred as the limp body was fastened to the metal.

Mouthing and squealing with the pain of his seared arm-stump, he wobbled toward the lever, a mere turn of which would readily convert the plate into a bed of agony.

Chapter 7: In the Power-House

Alone in the prison room, after Dex had been dragged away to be subjected to the Rogan inquisition, Brand gnawed at his fingers and paced distractedly up and down the stone flooring. For a while he had no coherent thought at all; only the realization that his turn came next, and that the Rogans would leave no refinement of torment untried in their effort to wring from him the secret of the atomic engine.

He went to the window, and absent-mindedly stared out. The whining hum from the great domed building off to the right, like the high-pitched droning of a swarm of gargantuan bees, came to his ears. He listened more intently, and leaned out of the window to look at the building.

Under that dome, it came to him again, was, in all probability, the mainspring of the Rogan mechanical power. If only he could get in there and look around! He might do some important damage; he might be able to harass the enemy materially before the time came for him to die.

He leaned farther out of the window, and examined the hundred feet or so of sheer wall beneath him. He saw, scrutinizing it intently, that

the stone blocks that composed it were not smooth cut, but rough hewn, with the marks of the cutters' chisels plainly in evidence. Also there was a considerable ridge between each layer of blocks where the Rogans' mortar had squeezed out in the process of laying the wall.

Never in sanity would a man have thought of the thing Brand considered then. To attempt to clamber down that blank wall, with only the slight roughness of the protruding layers of mortar to hang on to, was palpable suicide!

Brand shrugged. He observed that to a man already condemned to death, the facing of probable suicide shouldn't mean much.

With scarcely an increase in the beating of his heart, he swung one leg out over the broad sill. If he fell, he escaped an infinitely worse death; if he didn't fall, he might somehow win his way into that domed building whence the hum came.

Cautiously, clutching at the rough stone with finger tips that in a moment or two became raw and bleeding masses, he began his slow descent. As he worked his way down, he slanted to the right, toward the near wall of the retaining yard whose end was formed by the round structure that was his goal.

Beneath him and to the left the broad street swarmed with figures: the tall ones of the Rogans and the shorter, sturdier ones of slaves. Any one of those dozens of grotesque pedestrians might glance up, see him, and pick him off with the deadly tubes. Under his fingers the mortar crumbled and left him hanging, more than once, by one hand. For fully five minutes his life hung by a thread apt to be severed at any time. But—he made it. Helped by the decreased gravity of the red spot, and released from inhibiting fear by the fact that he was already, figuratively, a dead man, he performed the incredible.

With a last slithering step downward, he landed lightly on the near wall of the enclosure, and started along its broad top toward his objective.

Now he was in plain sight of any one who might be looking out the windows of the tower building or from the dome ahead of him; but this was a chance he had to take, and at least he was concealed from the swarms in the street. Making no effort to hide himself by crawling along the top of the wall, he straightened up and began to run toward the giant dome.

Hardly had he gone a dozen steps when he suddenly understood the meaning of the high-walled enclosure to his right!

Off in a far corner rose a slate colored mound that at first glance he had taken for a great heap of inanimate dirt. The mound began to move toward him—and metamorphosed into an animal, a thing that made Brand blink his eyes to see if he were dreaming, and then stop, appalled, to look at it.

He saw a body that dwarfed the high retaining walls to comparative insignificance. It had a tree-like tail that dragged behind it; and a thirty-foot, serpentine neck at the end of which was a head like a sugar barrel that split into cavernous jaws lined with backward-pointing teeth. Two eyes were set wide apart in the enormous head, eyes that were dead and cold and dull, yet glinting with senseless ferocity. It was the sort of thing one sees in delirium.

With increasing energy the creature made for him, till finally it was approaching his sector of the wall at a lumbering run that was rapid for all its ungainliness.

It was apparent at a glance that the snaky neck, perched atop the lofty shoulder structure, would raise the head with its gaping jaws to his level on the wall! Brand ran. And after him thudded the gigantic lizard, its neck arching up and along the wall to reach him.

A scant five yards ahead of the snapping jaws, Brand reached his

goal, the dome, and clambered over its curved, metal roof away from the monster's maw.

He stopped to pant for breath and wipe the sweat from his streaming face. "Thank God it didn't get me," he breathed, looking back at the bellowing terror that had pursued him. "Wonder why it's there? It's too ferocious to be tamed and used in any way: it must be kept as a threat to hold the slaves in hand. It certainly looks well fed...."

He shuddered; then he began to explore the dome of the building for a means of entrance.

There was no opening in the roof. A solid sheet of reddish metal, like a titanic half-eggshell, it glittered under him in an unbroken piece.

He crept down its increasingly precipitous edge till he reached a sort of cornice that formed a jutting circle of stone around it. There he leaned far over and saw, about ten feet below him, a round opening like a big port-hole. From it were streaming waves of warm, foul air, from which he judged it to be a ventilator outlet.

He scrambled over the edge of the cornice, hung at arm's length, and swung himself down into the opening. And there, perched high up under the roof, he looked down at an enigmatic, eery scene.

That the structure was indeed a strange sort of power-house was instantly made evident. But what curious, mysterious, and yet bewilderingly simple machinery it held!

In the center was a titanic coil of reddish metal formed by a single cable nearly a yard through. Around this, at the four corners of the compass, were set coils that were identical in structure but a trifle smaller. From the smaller coils to the larger streamed, unceasingly, blue waves of light like lightning bolts.

Along a large arc of the wall was a stone slab set with an endless array of switches and insulated control-buttons. Gauges and indicators of all kinds, whose purpose could not even be guessed at, were lined above and below, all throbbing rhythmically to the leap of the electric-blue rays between the monster coils.

Almost under Brand's perch a great square beam of metal came through the building wall from outside, to be split into multitudinous smaller beams that were hooked up with the bases of the coils. Across from him, disappearing out through the opposite wall, was an identical beam.

"The terminals for the metal plate system that extends over the whole red spot," murmured Brand. "This building is important. But

what can I do to throw sand in the gears before I'm caught and killed...?"

He surveyed the great round room below him more thoroughly. Now he saw, right in the center of the huge control board, a solitary lever, that seemed a sort of parent to all the other levers and switches. It was flanked by a perfect army of gauges and indicators; and was covered by a glass bell which was securely bolted to the rock slab.

"That looks interesting," Brand told himself. "I'd like to see that closer, if I can climb down from here without being observed.... Why"—he broke off—"where is everybody!"

For the first time, in the excitement and concentration of his purpose, the emptiness of the place struck him. There was no sign of light in the great building—no workmen or slaves anywhere. There was just the great coils, with the streamers of blue light bridging them and emitting the high-pitched, monotonous hum audible outside the dome, and the complicated control board with its quivering indicator needles and mysterious levers. That was all.

"Must be out to lunch," muttered Brand, his eyes going fascinatedly toward that solitary, parent lever under its glass bell. "Well, it gives me a chance to try some experiments, anyway."

It was about fifty feet from his perch to the floor; but a few feet to one side was a metal beam that extended up to help support the trussed weight of the roof. He jumped for this, and quickly slid down it.

He started on a run for the control board; but almost immediately he stopped warily to listen: it seemed to him that he had caught, faintly, the squeaking, high tones of Rogan conversation.

Miraculously, the sound seemed to come from a blank wall to his left. He crept forward to investigate....

The mystery was solved before he had gone very far. There was an opening in the wall leading off to an annex of some kind outside the dome building. The opening was concealed by a set-back, so that at first glance it had seemed part of the wall itself. From this opening drifted the chatter of Rogans.

Brand stole closer, finally venturing to peer into the room beyond from an angle where he himself could not be seen. And he found that his whimsical reference to "lunch" had contained a ghastly element of fact!

In that annex were several dozen of the teetering, attenuated Rogans,

and an equal number of slaves. And the relation of the slaves and the Rogans was one that made Brand's skin crawl.

Each Rogan had stripped the tunic from the chest of his slave. Now, as Brand watched, each drew a keen blade from his belt, and made a shallow gash in the shrinking flesh. There were a few stifled screams —some of the slaves were women—but for the most part the slashing was endured in stoical silence. When red drops began to ooze forth, the Rogans stooped and applied their horrible little mouths to the incisions....

"The slimy devils!" Brand whispered hoarsely, at sight of that dreadful feeding. "The inhuman, monstrous vermin!"

But now one or two of the Rogans had begun to utter squeaks of satiation; and Brand hastened away from there and toward the control board again. He hadn't an idea of what he might accomplish when he reached it; he didn't know but that a touch of the significant looking parent-lever might blast him to bits; but he did know that he was going to raise absolute hell with something, somewhere, if he possibly could.

Swiftly he approached the great master-lever, protected by its bell of glass. (At least it looked like glass, for it was crystal clear and

reflected gleamingly the blue light from the nearby coils). He tapped it experimentally with his knuckles....

At once pandemonium reigned in the great vaulted building. There was a siren-like screaming from a device he noticed for the first time attached under the domed roof. A clanging alarm split the air from half a dozen gongs set around the upper walls.

Squealing shouts sounded behind Brand. He whirled, and saw the Rogans, interrupted in their terrible meal, pouring in from the annex and racing toward him. Rage and fear distorted their hideous faces as they pointed first to the big lever and then at the escaped Earthman. They redoubled their efforts to get at him, their long unsteady legs covering the distance in great bounds.

Brand swore. Was he to be caught again before he had accomplished a certain thing? When he had already managed to win clear to his objective?

He hammered at the glass bell with his fists, but realized with the first blow that he was only wasting time trying to crack it bare-handed. He glanced quickly about and saw a metal bar propped up against the control board near him.

He sprang for it, grasped it as a club, and returned to the glass bell. Raising his arms high, he brought the thick metal bar down on the glass with all his strength.

With a force that almost wrenched his arms from their sockets, the bar rebounded from the glass bell, leaving it uncracked.

"Unbreakable!" groaned Brand.

Desperately he tried again, whirling the bar high over his head and bringing it smashing down. The result was the same as before as far as breaking the bell was concerned. But—a little trickle of crushed rock came from around the bolts in the slab to which the bell was fastened.

A third time be brought the bar down. The glass bell sagged a bit sway from the slab....

He had no chance for more assaults on it. The nearest Rogans had leaped for him. Slimy arms were coiling around him, while the loathsome sucker-disks tore at his unprotected face and throat.

Savagely Brand lashed out with the bar. It caved in a pair of the long, skinny legs, bringing a bloated round head down within reach.

He smashed it with the bar, exulting grimly as the blow crumpled bone and flesh almost down to the little mouth which was yet carmine from its recent feeding.

The process seemed a sound one to Brand, unable as he was to reach the Rogans' heads that towered six feet above his own. Methodically, swinging the bar with the weight of his body behind it, he repeated the example. First a crash of the bar against a pair of legs, then the crushing in of the Rogan's head when he toppled with agonized squeals to the floor.

Again and again he crushed the life out of a Rogan with his one-two swing of the deadly bar. They were thinning down, now. They were wavering in their charges against the comparatively insignificant being from another planet who was defending himself so fiercely.

Finally one of their number turned and ran toward an exit, waving his four arms and adding his high-pitched alarms to the incessant ringing of the gongs and shrieks of the warning siren up under the roof. The rest rushed the Earthman in a body.

Steadily, almost joyfully, Brand fought on. He had expected to be annihilated by one of the Rogan shock-tubes long before now; but as yet there was no sign of any. Either these Rogan workmen were not

privileged to carry the terrible things, or they were too occupied to think of going and getting them; anyhow, Brand was left free to wield his bar and continue crushing out the lives of the two-legged vermin that attacked him.

With almost a shock of surprise, he saw finally that he had battered their number down to three. At that he took the offensive himself. He rammed the bluntly pointed end of the bar almost through one writhing torso, broke the back of a second with a whistling blow, and tripped and exterminated the third almost in as many seconds. The creatures, without their death-tubes, were as helpless as crippled rats!

Panting, he turned again toward the loosened glass bell, and battered at it with the precious bar. Gradually the bolts that held it to the stone slab were wrenched out, till only one supported it. But at this point, from half a dozen set-back doorways, streams of infuriated Rogans began pouring into the building and toward him.

The one that had fled had come back with help.

Chapter 8: Tremendous Odds

Like living spokes of a half-wheel, with the Earthman as the hub, the Rogans converged toward Brand, a howling roar outside indicating that there were hundreds more waiting to jam into the dome as soon as they were able. There were still no shock-tubes in evidence: evidently the worker who had gone for help had gathered the first Rogan citizens he had encountered on the streets. But the very numbers of the mob spelled defeat for Brand.

However, there was still the great lever behind him to yank away from its switch-socket. The glass bell was almost off now. With a last mad blow, he knocked loose the remaining bolt that held it. The bell clattered to the floor.

A concerted shriek came from the crowding Rogans as they saw the Earthman's hand close on the lever. Whatever effect the throwing of that master-switch could have, there was no doubt that they were extremely anxious to prevent it!

And now, in the rear of the crowding columns, appeared Rogans taller than the others, with an authoritative air, who waved before them, eager to unleash their power, batteries of the death-tubes.

Resigning himself to annihilation in the next instant, Brand pulled down hard on the lever.

The effect wrought by the throwing of that great switch was almost indescribable.

In a flash, as though all had been struck at once by a giant's hand, every Rogan in the mob shot toward the floor, long thin legs caving under him as if turned to water. Writhing feebly, they endeavored to get up, but could not; and, still weakly ferocious, began to creep toward the Earthman like huge-headed worms.

Brand himself had been thrown to the floor with the falling of that switch. He had felt as though an invisible ocean had been poured on him, weighting him down intolerably. To move arms or legs required enormous effort; and to get up on his feet again was like rising under a two-hundred-pound pack.

The movement of the switch, he saw, had cut off the gravity reducing apparatus of the Rogans—whatever that might consist of. They were now, abruptly, subjected to the full force of gravity exerted by Jupiter's great mass. They could no more stand erect on their tottering, lofty legs than they could fly.

But, though greatly handicapped by the gravity pull, they were still not entirely helpless. Like huge, long insects they continued to worm their way toward Brand, using their four arms and their boneless legs to help urge them over the flooring. And in their rear the Rogan guards struggled to lift their tubes and level them at the escaped prisoner.

Prompt to avoid that, Brand went down on his hands and knees. Thus he was shielded by the foremost crawling Rogans: the ones in the rear, with the tubes, could not raise themselves high enough to bore down over their fellows' heads at the Earthman.

Squatting on his knees, Brand awaited the first resolute crawlers. And, on his knees, whirling the now thrice weighty bar at heads that were conveniently low enough to be accessible, he began his last stand.

On the Rogans came, evidently determined, at any sacrifice of life, to get the Earthman away from that vital control board. And to right and left, crouching low to escape the tubes of the guards slowly crawling forward from the rear, Brand laid about him with the bar.

He got a little sick at the havoc he was wreaking on these slow-moving, gravity-crippled things: but remembrance of their grisly

feeding habits, and the torture they must by now have inflicted on Dex, kept him flailing down on soft heads with undiminished effort.

With the gravity pull what it was, the Earthman was immeasurably stronger than any individual Rogan. For a time the contest was all in his favor. It was like killing slugs in a rose garden!

Nevertheless, these slugs were, after all, twelve feet long and possessed of intelligence, besides being hundreds in number. After a while the tide of battle began to turn in their favor.

Brand began to feel his arms ache burningly with the sustained effort of wielding a weapon that now weighed about twenty-five pounds. He knew he couldn't keep up the terrific strain much longer. And, in addition, he could see that the armed Rogans in the rear were steadily forging ahead among the unarmed attackers, till they soon must be in a position to blast him with their weapons.

Brand brought down his bar, with failing force but still deadly effect, on the loathsome face of the nearest Rogan, grunting with satisfaction as he saw it crumple into a shapeless mass. He thrust it, spear-like, into another face, and another.

Then, abruptly, he found himself weaponless.

Raising it high to bring it down on an attacker who was almost about to seize him, he felt the metal bar turn white hot, and dropped it with a cry as it seared the skin from the palms of his hands. Some Rogan guard in the rear had managed to train his tube on the bar; and in the instant of its rising had almost melted it.

Weaponless and helpless, Brand crawled slowly back before the tortuously advancing mob, keeping close enough to them to be shielded from the tubes of the rear guards. Without his club he knew the end was a matter of seconds.

He had an impulse to leap full into the mass of repulsive, crawling bodies and die fighting as his fists battered at the gruesome faces. But a second impulse, and a stronger one, was the blind instinct to preserve his life as long as possible.

Hesitantly, almost reluctantly, acting on the primitive instinct of self-preservation, he continued to back away from the advancing horde; away from the switch and toward the rear of the dome.

With the instant of his withdrawal, a Rogan turned toward the lever to push it back up into contact and release the red kingdom from the burden of Jupiter's unendurable gravity. And now ensued a curious struggle. The lever, placed for the convenience of creatures twelve

feet or more tall, was about five feet from the floor. And the Rogan couldn't reach it!

Stubbornly he heaved and writhed in an effort to raise his inordinately heavy body from the floor to a point where one of the weaving arms could reach the switch. But the pipe-stem legs would not bear its weight. Each time it nearly reached the lever, only to fall feebly back again in a snarl of tangled limbs.

Meanwhile, Brand had flashed a quick look back over his shoulder to see, in the wall behind him, a metal door he hadn't noticed before. He found time for a flashing instant to wonder why there were no Rogans entering from that doorway, too; but it was a vain wonder, and it faded from his mind as the ever advancing, groping monsters before him kept crowding him back.

Instinctively he changed his course a trifle, to edge toward the metal door. Perhaps, behind it, there was sanctuary for a few moments. Perhaps he could force it open, spring out, and bar it again in the faces of the pursuing mob. It sounded improbable, but at least it offered him a slim chance where before no chance had seemed possible.

He reached the door at last, fumbled behind him and felt, high over

his head, a massive sliding bolt.

In the spot Brand had left, the struggle to throw the gravity-lever back into closed contact position went on. The Rogan who was fruitlessly trying to reach up to it paused and said something to one near him. That one halted, and began to crawl toward him.

The two of them tried to reach it, one bracing the other and helping him pry his body up from the implacable pull of Jupiter's uninsulated mass. The top Rogan reached a little higher. The flesh sucker-disk that served as a hand almost grasped the lever, but failed by only a few inches.

A third Rogan crawled up. And now, with two arching their backs to help the other, the thing was done. The hose-like, groping arm went up and pushed the lever back into place.

The blue streamer began to hum and crackle from coil to coil again. The invisible weight that pressed down was released as once more the giant planet's gravity was nullified. The Rogans got eagerly to their feet and began to race toward Brand in their normal long bounds.

Brand, just cautiously rising, when the power went back on, found

himself leaping five feet into the air with the excess of his muscular effort. And in that leap he saw the Rogans in the rear straighten up and point their tubes. However, also in that leap, his fumbling hand shot back the bolt that securely shut the metal door.

With a shout of defiance he jumped out of the door and slammed it shut after him, feeling it grow searing hot an instant later under the impact of the rays from the tubes that had been trained on him.

A stinging shock reached him through the metal, flinging him to the ground. He rolled out of its range and leaped to his feet to race away from there. Then, with a gasp, he flattened his body back against the wall of the dome building.

He was in the enclosure that held the gigantic, lizard-like thing that had nearly got him on his escape from the tower room.

He wheeled frantically to go back and face the Rogan death-tubes. Anything rather than wait while that mammoth heap of tiny-brained ferocity ran him down and tore him to shreds! But even as he turned, he heard the bolt shoot home on the inside of the door; heard vengeful squeals of triumph from his pursuers.

At the other end of the enclosure, near the foot of the tower building,

the great lizard eyed him unblinkingly, its tremendous jaws gaping to reveal a cavernous mouth that was hideously lined with bright orange colored membrane. Then, squatting lower with every step it took, like a mountainous cat about to spring on its prey, it began to stalk on its tree-like legs toward the tiny creature that had leaped into its yard with it.

Brand whirled this way and that, mechanically seeking a way out. There was none. The walls of the great enclosure were not like the wall of the tower. Here were no rough hewn stones, with protruding ridges of mortar set between. These walls were as smooth as glass, and just as smooth was the curved wall of the dome building behind him.

The monstrous beast stalked nearer, almost on its belly now. As it advanced, the great tail stirred up a cloud of reddish dust, and left behind it a round deep depression in a surface already crisscrossed with a multitude of similar depressions. A bellowing hiss came from its gaping mouth, and it increased its pace to a thunderous, waddling rush.

Chapter 9: Into the Enclosure

In the torture chamber Dex wavered slowly back to consciousness to get the growing impression that he was being immersed in a bath of liquid fire. Burning, intolerable pain assailed him with increasing intensity as his senses clarified.

At last he groaned and opened his eyes, for the moment not knowing where he was nor how he had come to be there. He saw strange torture instruments and tall monstrosities with pumpkin-shaped heads surrounding him closely in a semicircle, and staring at him out of great, dull eyes.

Remembrance came back with a rush, and he gathered his muscles to spring at the hateful figures. But he could not move. At waist and throat, at wrists and ankles, were hoops of metal. He closed his eyes again while the burning waves of invisible fire shot through him recurrently from head to foot.

Dully he wondered that he was still alive. His last recollection had been of the Rogan leader pointing his shock-tube full at him, his shapeless countenance working with murderous fury. However, alive he was; and most unenviably so!

His hands, circumscribed to a few inches of movement by the bonds on his wrists, felt the smooth substance at his back. And with a thrill of horror he realized his position: he was crucified against the metal slab on which the slave had writhed in agony a short half hour ago.

Again he strained and tugged, vainly, to get free. Off to one side, pressed back against a huge glass experimental tank, he saw the beautiful Greca, her eyes wide with horror; and caught her frantic pleading message to her "Great White One."

The Rogan leader, squealing and grimacing, advanced toward the victim on the metal plate. One of the long arms went out and a sucker-disk was pressed to Dex's cheek. Dex quivered at the loathsome contact of that soft and slimy substance; then set his jaws to keep from groaning as the disk was jerked away, to carry with it a fragment of skin and flesh.

Gingerly, the tall leader felt the twitching, blackened stump of his blasted arm. Dex grinned mirthlessly at that: he'd struck one or two blows in his own defense, anyhow!

At sight of the Earthman's grin, an expression of defiance and grim joy that needed no interpreting to be understandable, the Rogan leader fairly danced with rage. His long arm went out to the switch

beside the plate, and pulled it down another notch—just a little, not nearly to the current that had torn at the slave.

At the increased torment resulting from that slight movement of the regulating lever, Dex yelled aloud in spite of all his will power. It seemed as though his whole body were about to burst into self-generated flame. Every cell and fiber of him seemed on the verge of flying apart. He could feel his eyes start from his head, could feel every hair on his scalp stand up as though discharging electric sparks.

A minute or two of that and he would go mad! He cried out again, and twisted helplessly in his bonds. And then the terrible torture stopped.

The Rogan had not touched the switch—yet whatever sort of current it was that charged the plate was abruptly clicked off, as though someone at a distance had cut a wire or thrown a master-switch.

Simultaneously with its ceasing, an invisible, crushing sea seemed to envelope everything. Dex felt his body sag against his metal bonds as if it had been changed to lead.

Before him the Rogans, who had been crowding closer to watch

gloatingly each grimace he made, shot doorward as though their pipe-stem legs had been swept from under them. The leader fell on the stump of his seared arm and, a deafening squeal of rage and pain came from his little mouth. His tube fell from his grasp and rolled over the floor half a dozen yards away from him.

Amazed, observing the stricken creatures only dimly through a haze of pain, Dex saw them struggle vainly to get up again, and heard them chattering excitedly to themselves. For the moment, in the face of this queer phenomenon, the prisoner seemed to be forgotten. And Dex was quick to seize the momentary advantage.

"Greca!" he called. "The tube! There—on the floor!"

The girl raised her head quickly, and followed his imploring gaze. Laboriously she started for the tube. At the same instant the Rogan leader began to feel around him for his lost weapon. Not finding it, he raised his head and glanced about for it. He saw the girl making her way toward it and, with a squeak of terror, began to crawl toward it himself.

He was not quick enough. The girl, though not nearly as active under the increased pull of gravity as a person of Earth might be, was yet more agile than the Rogans. And she was the faster mover in this

tortuous, snail-like race. While the Rogan leader was still several feet away, she retrieved the shock-tube.

"Kill him!" begged Dex. "And all the rest of the filthy creatures!"

With feminine horror of the thing that faced her, Greca hesitated an instant—a hesitation almost long enough to be fatal. Then, just as the Rogan leader was reaching savagely out for her, she leveled the tube at him and turned it to its full power.

One last thin squeal came from the Rogan's mouth, a squeal that cracked abruptly at its height. What had been its gangling body drifted up in inky smoke.

"The others!" called Dex. "Quick! Before they get their weapons—"

Greca swept the death-tube in a short arc in front of her, over the bodies of the remaining Rogans, as if spraying plants with a hose. One after another, toppling in swift succession like grotesque falling dominoes, the creatures sagged to the floor and melted away. That one small part of Jupiter's red spot, at least, was cleared of Rogan population.

Long shudders racked Greca's body, and her lips were a bloodless

line in her pallid face. But she did not go into womanly hysterics or swoon at the slaughter it had been her lot to inflict. Moving as quickly as she could, she went to the metal slab and began, with shaking fingers, to undo the fastenings that held Dex prisoner.

"Good girl," said Dex, patting her satiny bare shoulder as he stood free again. "You're a sport and a gentleman. You don't understand the terms? They're Earth words, Greca, that carry the highest praise a man can give a woman. But let's get out of here before another gang comes and takes us again. Where can we hide?"

"I don't know any hiding places," confessed Greca despairingly. "The Rogans swarm everywhere. We will be seen the moment we try to leave here."

"Well, we'll hunt for a hole, anyway," said Dex. He essayed to walk. What with the tendency of his muscles to jerk and collapse with the aftermath of the torture he had endured, and the sudden and inexplicable increase in gravity that bore him down, he made heavy going of it. "First we'll go up and get Brand."

"Yes, yes," said Greca, a soft glow in her clear blue eyes. "Let us go quickly."

She started toward the door, panting with the effort of moving. But Dex halted an instant, to stoop and pick up another of the tubes.

"We might as well have one of these apiece," he said. "You've proved you have the grit to use one; and maybe the dirty rats will think twice about rushing us if we each have a load of death in our hands."

They made their way out of the torture laboratory, and up the incline to the street level. And it was just as they reached this that the burden of gravity under which they staggered was lifted from their shoulders as quickly as it had descended on them.

Dex raised his arms just in time to fend his body from a collision with the wall in front of him. "Now what!" he exclaimed.

Greca lifted her hand for silence, inclined her head, and listened intently. As she did so, Dex heard the same noise her quick ears had caught an instant before his: a distant pandemonium of ringing gongs and siren shrieks, and squealing cries of a multitude of agitated Rogans.

"What the devil—" began Dex. But again Greca raised her hand to silence him, and listened once more. As she listened, her sea-blue

eyes grew wider and wider with horror. Then, frantically, she began to race down a long corridor away from the street door.

Dex hastened to follow her. "What is it?" he demanded, when he had caught up to her flying little feet. "This is not the way up to the room where Brand—"

"Your friend is not there," she interrupted. She explained swiftly, distractedly: "From the shouts of the Rogans I learn that he got into the great dome building, somehow, and then was driven into the pen of the...."

Dex could not get the next term she used. But her telepathic message of the peril she mentioned formed in his mind clearly enough.

He got a flashing brain picture of a great, high-walled yard with a monster in it of the kind he had caught a close-range glimpse a short while before. Also, he saw a blurred, tiny figure, running from wall to wall, that was Greca's imagining of Brand and his efforts to escape the enormous beast.

"Good heavens!" groaned Dex. "Penned in with one of the things they showed me while I was stretched on the rack! Are you sure, Greca?"

She nodded, and tried to run faster. "This way," she gasped, turning down a passage to the left that ended in a massive metal door. "This leads to the enclosure. Oh, if only we can be in time!"

Her slim fingers tore at a massive bolt that secured the door. "Here," said Dex, wrenching it open for her. And they stepped out into thin sunlight, onto a hard surface of reddish ground that was crisscrossed with innumerable rounded furrows like the tracks old-fashioned, fifty-passenger airplane wheels used to make on soft landing fields.

Greca shrieked, and pointed to the far end of the enclosure. Down there, flattened against the wall of the dome building, was Brand. And waddling toward him with a tread that caused the ground to quiver, was a mate to the hideous creature the Rogans had used to terrify Dex in the torture chamber.

Dex leveled the tube he was carrying, swore, hit it frenziedly against his hand. "How do you work this damned thing, Greca—Oh! Like that! There—see if that puts a sting in your hide!"

The distant monster stopped its advance toward Brand. A raw white spot as big as a dinner plate leaped into being on one of its enormous hind legs. It whirled with an ear-splitting hiss, to see what thing was causing such pain in its rear. The frightful head whipped back at the

end of the long neck, to nuzzle at the seared spot. Then the giant lizard turned toward Brand again.

A second time Dex pressed the central coil that formed the handle of the tube, as Greca had showed him how to do. A second time the ray shot down the field to flick a chunk of flesh weighing many pounds from the monster's flank. And this time it definitely abandoned the quarry behind it. With a scream like the keening of a dozen steam whistles, it charged back over its tracks toward the distant pigmies that were inflicting such exasperating punishment on it.

Dex swept the tube before him in a short half-circle. A smoking gash appeared suddenly in the vast fore-quarters of the monster. It stopped abruptly, its clawed feet plowing along the ground with the force of its momentum. An instant it stood there. Then, with its head swinging from side to side and lowered so that its looped neck dragged on the reddish, dusty ground, it began to back away from the source of its hurt, bellowing and hissing its rage and bewilderment.

"Brand!" shouted Dex. "This end! Run, while I hold the thing off!"

Brand began to race down the long enclosure, ten feet to a leap. The great lizard darted after him, like a cat after an escaping mouse; but a

flick of the tube sent it bellowing and screaming back to its corner.

"Dex!" gasped Brand. "Thank God!"

For a moment he leaned, white and shaken, against the wall. Then Greca caught his hand in both of hers, and Dex put his arm supportingly around his shoulder. They retreated back through the doorway behind them, and slid the bolt across the metal door.

Chapter 10: The "Tank Scheme"

Thank God you came when you did," repeated Brand. Then, with a moment in which, figuratively, to get his feet back on earth, the wonder of Dex's appearance struck him.

"How did you manage to get away?" he asked. "I was sure—I thought—when they dragged you out of the tower room I wouldn't see you again—"

Rapidly Dex gave an account of his ordeal in the torture chamber, telling Brand in a few words how he had attempted to win free of the Rogans, how he had almost succeeded, only to be caught again and clamped to the death-plate on the wall.

"But just as the big fellow was about to cook me for good and all," he concluded, "something happened to the current, and to the gravity at the same time—"

"That was when I pulled the lever in the dome building!" exclaimed Brand.

He told of what had befallen him in the Rogan power-house. "That lever, Dex!" he said swiftly. "It's the keynote of the whole business.

It absolutely controls the pull of gravity, and Lord knows what else besides. If we could only get at it again! Perhaps we could not only shut it off so that Jupiter's pull would function again, but also reverse the process so its gravity would be increased! Think what that would mean! Every Rogan in the red empire stretched out and immovable, possibly crushed in by his own weight!"

"It's a wonderful thought," sighed Dex; while Greca's eyes glowed with a sudden hope for her enslaved race, "but I don't see how we could ever—"

He stopped; and glanced in alarm down the passage behind them. Greca and Brand, hearing the same soft noise, whirled to look, too.

Far down the passage, just sneaking around the bend, was a group of Rogan guards, each armed with a death-tube.

"Back to the pen!" cried Brand.

He slid the bolt, and jerked the door open. They rushed into the walled enclosure again, the slamming of the door behind them cutting off the enraged squeals of the Rogans.

"This isn't going to mean anything but a short delay, I'm afraid," said

Brand, clenching his fists in an agony of futility. "They'll be in here in a minute, and get us like trapped rats."

"Not before we get a lot of them," said Dex grimly.

"But that isn't enough, man! We don't want to die, no matter how decently we do it. We've won free, and stayed free this long; now, somehow, we've got to reach our ship and get back to Earth to warn them of the danger that hides here for our planet!"

He strode tensely up and down, smacking his fist into his palm. "The lever!" he exclaimed. "That lever! It's our only answer! If we could get to it.... But how can we? We couldn't break into the dome, now the Rogans are on the watch for us, with anything less than a charge of explosives. Or a tank. God, how I'd like to have an old-fashioned, fifty-ton army tank here now!"

Greca exclaimed aloud as Brand's fleeting mental picture of one of Earth's unwieldy, long-discarded war tanks registered on her brain.

"There is the great beast there," she said hesitantly, pointing a slim forefinger at the huge lizard that had backed into a far corner and was regarding them out of dull, savage eyes. Then she shook her head. "But that is impossible. Impossible!"

The men stared at her, with dawning realization in their minds. Then they gazed at each other.

"Of course," said Brand. "Of course! Greca, you're marvelous! Wish we had a tank? Why, we've got one! A four-legged mountain of meat that ought to be able to plow through the side of that dome like a battering ram through cardboard!"

"But it's not possible," replied Greca, her head dropping dejectedly. "My people, as driven slaves, till the fields with great animals that were trapped in the surrounding jungles. They harness other great animals to haul burdens. But none of the beasts are like this one. This kind cannot be tamed or harnessed. It is too ferocious. It is used only as a scourge of fear, to crush us into complete submission."

"Can't be tamed?" Brand said. "We'll see about that! Come on, Dex."

"Just a minute," said Dex. He flattened against the wall, motioning them to do the same. Then he leveled his tube at the door.

Slowly, cautiously, the door began to swing back; and the Rogan that Dex had heard fumbling with the bolt stuck his huge head out to locate the escaped prisoners.

Dex pressed the release coil of his tube. Without a sound, the Rogan slumped to the ground, a smoking cavity in its shoulders at the spot where its head had been set. In an instant the body, too, disappeared; an upward coiling wisp of black smoke marking its vanishing.

Another Rogan, tiptoeing out, met the same fate; and another. And then the door was banged shut again, and the bolt ground into place on the inside.

"That'll teach 'em to be careful how they try to rush us from that door," said Dex, through set teeth. "Now let's see if that tank scheme of ours can be worked."

He picked up a tube dropped by one of the Rogans, and handed it to Brand; showing him which coil to press to get full force, as Greca had in turn informed him.

"Down the field," commanded Brand. "We'll go about thirty yards apart, and try to herd this brute back through the walls of the dome building. Once it's inside, we'll try to rush to the lever before the Rogans can down us, and jam the thing past its terminal peg and into reverse action. I don't know that there is a reverse to it—but we can

try.

"Greca dear,"—the girl started at the warmth of his thought, and a faint pink rose to her pale cheeks—"you'd better stay by my side. Your place as hostage-priestess of your people wouldn't save you if those devils catch you now. Besides, you can keep your tube leveled at the doorway as we go, and discourage any Rogans who might pluck up courage to try coming out again."

They started down the field toward the nightmare thing that snarled and hissed in its corner. On one side of the big enclosure walked Brand, with Greca close beside him, glancing continuously over her shoulder at the rear door, and holding her tube in readiness to check any charge the Rogans might attempt to make from the tower building. On the other side, keeping an equal pace, advanced Dex.

With tubes of death as whips, and with death for themselves set as the stake for which they gambled, they went about their attempt to drive the brainless monster before them through the solid wall of the dome building. And there followed what was probably the strangest animal act the universe has ever witnessed.

The first thing to do was to rout the enormous lizard out of the corner where sullen fear had sent it squatting. Dex contrived to do

that by standing next to the wall at its side, and sending a searing ray that just touched the scaly, tremendously thick hide. The monster bellowed deafeningly, and, with a spot smoking on its flank, waddled sideways to the center of the field. Its head and swaying long neck faced the Earthmen and its back was against the wall of the dome building. To that extent, at least, they had the creature placed; but they soon found that the struggle had only just begun.

Brand got far enough around to focus his tube on the tip of the huge tail, in an effort to swing the gigantic thing about. There was an unearthly shriek from the colossal beast, and a foot and a half of its tail disappeared.

"Careful," called Dex, his jaw set and grim as the monster lashed out in its wrath. "If you bore in too long with that tube there'll be nothing left of our tank but a cloud of smoke."

Brand nodded, wordlessly, walking on the balls of his feet like a boxer, holding himself ready to swerve the thing should it charge them. Which—next instant—it did!

With a whistling bellow it gathered its tons of weight and thundered with incredible quickness at the gnats that were stinging its flanks and tail.

Desperately Brand played the tube across the vast chest, scoring a smouldering gash in the scale-covered flesh just above the gash Dex had seared a few moments before.

"Sorry, old fellow," Brand muttered to the screaming beast. "We hate to bait you like this, but it has to be done. Come on, now, through that wall behind you, and give us a chance at the lever."

But through the wall behind it the vast creature, not unnaturally, refused to go! It darted from side to side. Backward and forward. Up to the wall, only to back bewilderedly away from it. And constantly the tubes flicked their blistering, maddening rays along its monstrous sides and tail, as the Earthmen tried to guide it into the wall.

"Hope there's enough left of it to do the trick," said Brand, white-lipped. The monster was smoking in a dozen spots now, and several of the hump-like scales on its back had been burned away till the vast spine looked like a giant saw that was missing a third of its teeth. "God, I'm thinking we'll kill it before we can drive it through that wall!"

Greca nodded soberly, keeping her eyes on the distant door to their rear. Twice that door had been opened, and twice she had directed the death rays into its opening to mow down the gangling figures

behind it. But she had said nothing of this to her man. He was busy enough with his own task!

"The door to the dome—" Dex shouted suddenly.

But Brand merely nodded, even as a discharge from his tube annihilated the Rogan that had appeared in the doorway before them. He had seen that door stealthily opening even before Dex had.

"It had better be soon, Dex!" he called. "Rogans in front of us—Rogans behind us—and—look out! On your side of the fence, there!"

Dex whirled in time to pick off a grotesque, pipe-like figure that had suddenly appeared on the broad wall of the enclosure. Then he turned to the frenzied problem of driving the monster through the building wall.

"The thing's going mad, Brand!" he cried, his voice high-pitched and brittle. "Watch out!"

It was only too evident that his statement was true. The baited monster, harried blindly this way and that, hounded against the blank wall behind it by something that bit chunks of living flesh out of its

legs and sides, was losing whatever instinctive mental balance it had ever had. Its dimly functioning brain, probably no larger than a walnut in that gigantic skull, ceased more and more to guide it.

With a rasping scream that set the Earthmen's teeth on edge, it charged for the wall on Dex's side. Dex just managed to swerve it with a blast from the tube so prolonged that half its great lower jaw fell away.

At this the titanic thing went wholly, colossally mad! It whirled toward Brand, jerking around again as a searing on that side jarred its dull sensory nerves, then headed at last straight toward the stone wall of the dome building.

With the rays from both tubes flicking it like monstrous spurs, it charged insanely toward the bulge of the circular wall. With all its tons and tons of weight it crashed against the stonework. There was a thunderous crackling noise, and the wall sagged in perceptibly, while the metal roof bent to accommodate the new curvature of its supporting beams.

The monstrous lizard, jerked off its huge legs by the impact, staggered up and retreated toward the two men. But again the maddening pain in its hindquarters sent it careening toward the

building wall. This time it raised high up on its hind legs in a blind effort to climb over it. "God, it must be five stories tall!" ejaculated Brand. Thunderingly its forelegs came down on the edge of the roof.

There was another deafening crash of stone and shrieking of torn metal. Just under the cornice, the wall sagged away from the roof and the top rows of heavy stone blocks slithered inward.

"Again!" shouted Brand.

His tube was pointing almost continuously now at the metal door leading from the dome building. The Rogans inside, at the shocks that were battering down a section of their great building, were all trying to get out to the yard at once. In a stream they rushed for the doorway. And in loathsome heaps they fell at the impact of the ray and shriveled to nothingness on the bombarded threshold.

"Once more—" Brand repeated, his voice hoarse and tense.

And as though the monster heard and understood, it rushed again with all its vast weight and force against the wall in a mad effort to escape the things that were blasting the living flesh from its colossal framework.

This charge was the last. With a roaring crash a section of the building thirty yards across went back and down, leaving the massive roof to sag threateningly on its battered truss-work.

It was as though the side of an ant-heap had been ripped away. Inside the domed building hundreds of Rogans ran this way and that on their elongated legs, squealing in their staccato, high-pitched tongue.

With blind fury the mad monster charged in through the gaping hole it had battered for itself. In all directions the Rogans scattered. Then an authoritative tall figure with a tube in each of its four sucker-disks, whipped out a command and pointed to the great coils which lay immediately in the berserk monster's path.

The command restored some sort of order. Losing their fear of the beast in their greater fear of the damage it might do, the Rogans massed to stop it before it could demolish the Rogan heart of power.

At this point Brand saw an opening of the kind he had been praying for. The Rogans had retreated before the terrific charge of the monster in such a way that the space between its vast bulk and the control board was clear.

"After me!" he shouted to Dex. "One of us has got to reach that lever while the creature's still there to shield us!"

The two Earthmen dashed through the jagged hole in the wall and raced to the control board just as the huge lizard, a smoking mass, sank to the floor. Brand gazed almost fearfully at the lever-slot.

Was there a reverse to the gravity-control action? There was room in the slot for the lever to be pulled down below the neutral point, if that meant anything....

Behind them the great bulk of the dead lizard was disappearing with incredible quickness under the rays of the tubes directed on it. Now the pumpkin-shaped heads on the opposite side were visible through a fleeting glimpse of a skeleton that was like the framework of a skyscraper. And now the colossal bones themselves were melting, while over everything hung a pall of greasy black smoke.

"Hurry, for God's sake!" gasped Dex.

Brand threw down the lever till it stuck. At once that invisible ocean poured crushingly over them, throwing them to their knees and sweeping the Rogans flat on their hideous faces just as half a hundred tubes were flashing down to point at the Earthmen.

"More—if you can!" grated Dex, whirling this way and that and spraying the massed Rogans with his death-dealing tube. Dozens went up in smoke under that discharge; but other dozens remained to raise themselves laboriously and slowly level their suddenly ponderous weapons at the Earthmen.

Brand set his jaw and threw all his weight on the lever. It bent a little, caught at the neutral point—and then jammed down an appreciable distance beyond it.

Instantly the blue streamers, that had stopped their humming progress from coil to coil with the movement of the switch to neutral, started again in reversed direction. And instantly the invisible ocean pressed down with appalling, devastating force.

Greca and Brand and Dex were flattened to the floor as if by blankets of lead. And the scattered Rogans about them ceased all movement whatever.

"Oh," sobbed Greca, fighting for breath. "Oh!"

"We can't stand this," panted Dex. "We've fixed the Rogans, all right. But we've fixed ourselves, too! That lever has to go up a bit."

Brand nodded, finding his head almost too heavy for his neck to move. Sweat beaded his forehead—sweat that trickled heavily off his face like drops of liquid metal.

With a tremendous struggle he got to his knees beneath the master-switch. There he found it impossible to raise his arms; but, leaning back against the control board and so getting a little support, he contrived to lift his body up enough to touch the down-slanting lever with his head and move it back along its slot a fraction of an inch. The giant coils hummed a note lower; and some of the smashing weight was relieved.

"That does it, I think," Brand panted, his voice husky with exhaustion and triumph.

He began to crawl laboriously toward the nearest street exit. "On our way!" he said vibrantly. "To the space ship! We leave for Earth at once!"

Slowly, fighting the sagging weight of their bodies, the two Earthmen inched their way to the street, helping Greca as they went. Among the sprawled forms of the Rogans they crept, with great dull eyes rolling helplessly to observe their progress, and with feeble squeals of rage and fear and malediction following their slow path.

On the street a strange and terrible sight met their eyes.

Strewn over the metal paving like wheat stalks crushed flat by a hurricane, were thousands of Rogans. Not a muscle of their pipe-like arms or legs could they move. But the gravity that crushed them rigidly to the ground did not quite hold motionless the shorter and more sturdily built slaves.

Among the thousands of squealing, panting Rogans that lay as though paralyzed on the metal paving, crawled equal thousands of Greca's enslaved people. Their eyes flamed with fanatic hate. And methodically—not knowing what had caused their loathed masters to be stricken helpless, and not caring as long as they were helpless—the slaves were seeking out the shock-tubes that here and there had fallen from the clutch of Rogan guards. Already many had found them; and everywhere gangling, slimy bodies were melting in oily black smoke that almost instantly vanished in thin air.

As it was in these streets and in the great square in the center of which rested the Earthmen's ship, just so, they knew, was it being repeated all over the red empire. Slowly crawling, fiercely exulting slaves were exterminating the tyrannous things that had held them so long in dreadful bondage! Before the sun should set on another flashing Jovian day there would be no Rogan left in the red spot.

And so it ends," said Brand with a great sigh. He moved over beside Greca, and touched her lovely bare shoulders. They were shaking convulsively, those shoulders; and she had buried her face in her hands to keep from gazing at the ghastly carnage.

Brand pressed her to him. "It's terrible—yes. But think what it means! The knell of all the Rogans been sounded to-day. As soon as the secret of these death-tubes has been analyzed by our science and provided against, my friend and I will return from Earth with a force that shall clear the universe of the slimy devils. Meanwhile, your people are safe here; with the gravity what it is, no Rogan attacking hordes can land."

They crawled tortuously over the square to the space ship. Brand turned again to Greca; and now in his eyes was a look that needed no language of mind or tongue for its complete expression.

"Will you come to Earth with me, Greca, and stay by my side till we return to set your people in power again?"

Greca shook her head, slowly, reluctantly. "My people need leaders now. I must stay and help direct them in their new freedom. But you —you'll come back with the others from Earth?"

"Try and stop him!" grinned Dex. "And try and stop me, too! From what I know now of the way they grow 'em on your satellite"—his eyes rested on Greca's beauty with an admiration that turned her to rosy confusion—"I'd say I'd found the ideal spot to settle down in!"

Brand laughed. "He's answered for me too. And now, a salute that is used on Earth to express a promise...." He kissed her—to her utter astonishment and perplexity, but to her dawning pleasure. "Good-by for a little while."

The two Earthmen hoisted themselves heavily over the sill of the control room of their ship, and crawled inside.

They secured the trap-door, and turned on the air-rectifiers. Brand moved to the controls, waved to Greca, who was smiling at him through the glass panel, and pointed the ship on its triumphant, four hundred million mile journey home.

110 The Solar Magnet by Sterner St. Paul Meek

Another episode in Dr. Bird's long scientific duel with his country's arch-enemy, Saranoff.

Aproximate word count: 10,200

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

The milling crowd in front of the Capitol suddenly grew quiet. A tall portly figure came out onto the porch of the building and stepped before a microphone erected on the steps. A battery of press cameras clicked. A newsreel photographer ground away on his machine. Wild cheers rent the air. The President held up his hand for silence. As the cheering died away he spoke into the microphone.

"My countrymen," he said, "the Congress of the United States has met in extraordinary session and is ready to cope with the condition with which we are confronted. While they deliberate as to the steps to be taken, it is essential that you meet this danger, if it be a danger, with the bravery and the calm front which has always characterized

the people of the United States in times of trial and danger. You may rest assured—"

A slightly built, inconspicuous man who had followed the President out onto the porch was surveying the crowd intently. He turned and spoke in an undertone to a second man who mysteriously appeared from nowhere as the first man spoke. He listened for a moment, nodded, and edged closer to the President. The first man slipped unobtrusively down the Capitol steps and mingled with the crowd.

"—that no steps will be neglected which may prove of value," went on the President. "The greatest scientists of the country have gathered in this city in conference and they undoubtedly will soon find a simple and natural explanation for what is happening. In the meantime—"

The President paused. From the crowd in front of him came a sudden disturbance. A man sprang free of the crowd and broke through the restraining cordon of police. In his hand gleamed an ugly blue steel automatic pistol. Quickly he leveled it and fired. A puff of dust came from the Capitol. The bullet had landed a few inches from one of the lower windows, fifty feet from where the President stood. He raised his weapon for a second shot but it was never fired. The man who had come down the Capitol steps sprang forward like a cat and

grasped the weapon. For a moment the two men struggled, but only for a moment. From the crowd, stunned for a moment by the sheer audacity of the attack, came a roar of rage. The police closed in about the struggling men but the crowd rolled over them like a wave. The captor shouted his identity and tried to display the gold badge of the secret service but the mob was in no state of mind to listen. The police were trampled underfoot and the would-be assassin torn from the hands of the secret service operative. Every man in reach tried to strike a blow. The secret service man was buffeted and thrown aside. Realizing that the affair had been taken out of his hands, he made his way to the rear of the Capitol where his badge gained him ready passage through the cordon of police. He entered the building and reappeared in a few moments by the side of the President.

Two hours later he leaned forward in his chair in Dr. Bird's private laboratory in the Bureau of Standards and spoke earnestly.

"Dr. Bird," he said, "that bullet was never meant for the President. That man was after bigger game."

The famous scientist nodded thoughtfully.

"Even a very rotten pistol shot should have come closer to him," he replied. "He must have missed by a good forty feet."

"He missed by a matter of inches. Doctor, that bullet struck the Capitol only two inches from a window. In that window was standing a man. The bullet was intended for the occupant of that window. I was directly behind him when he raised his weapon for a second shot and I am sure of his aim. He deliberately ignored the President and aimed again at that window. That was when I tackled him."

"Who was standing there, Carnes?"

"You were, Doctor."

Dr. Bird whistled.

"Then you think that bullet was intended for me?"

"I am sure of it, Doctor. That fact proves one thing to me. You are right in your idea that this whole affair is man-made and not an accident of nature. The guiding intelligence back of it fears you more than he fears anyone else and he took this means to get rid of you unobtrusively. Attention was focused on the President. Your death would have been laid to accident. It was a clever thought."

"It does look that way, Carnes," said the doctor slowly. "If you are

right, this incident confirms my opinion. There is only one man in the world clever enough to have disturbed the orderly course of the seasons, and such a plan for my assassination would appeal to his love of the dramatic."

"You mean—"

"Ivan Saranoff, of course."

"We are pretty sure that he hasn't got back to the United States, Doctor."

"You may be right but I am sure of nothing where that man is concerned. However, that fact has no bearing. He may be operating from anywhere. His organization is still in the United States."

A knock sounded at the door. In response to the doctor's command a messenger entered and presented a letter. Dr. Bird read it and dropped it in a waste basket.

"Tell them that I am otherwise engaged just now," he said curtly. The messenger withdrew. "It was just a summons to another meeting of the council of scientists," he said to Carnes. "They'll have to get along without me. All they'll do anyway will be to read a lot of

dispatches and wrangle about data and the relative accuracy of their observations. Herriott will lecture for hours on celestial mechanics and propound some fool theory about a hidden body, which doesn't exist, and its possible influence, which would be nil, on the inclination of the earth's axis. After wasting four hours without a single constructive idea being put forward, they will gravely conclude that the sun rose fifty-three seconds earlier at the fortieth north parallel than it did yesterday and correspondingly later at the fortieth south parallel. I know that without wasting time."

"Was it fifty-three seconds to-day, Doctor?"

"Yes. This is the twentieth of July. The sun should have risen at 4:52, sixteen minutes later than it rose on June twentieth and fifty-three seconds later than it rose yesterday. Instead it rose at 4:20, sixteen minutes earlier than it did on June twentieth and fifty-three seconds earlier than yesterday."

"I don't understand what is causing it, Doctor. I have tried to follow your published explanations, but they are a little too deep for me."

"As to the real underlying cause, I am in grave doubts, Carnes, although I can make a pretty shrewd guess. As to the reason for the unnatural lengthening of the day, the explanation is simplicity itself.

As you doubtless know, the earth revolves daily on its axis. At the same time, it is moving in a great ellipse about the sun, an ellipse which it takes it a year to cover. If the axis of rotation of the earth were at right angles to the plane of its orbit; in other words, if the earth's equator lay in the plane of the earth's movement about the sun, each day would be of the same length and there would be no seasons. Instead of this being the case, the axis of rotation of the earth is tipped so that the angle between the equator and the elliptic is 23½°."

"I seem to remember something of the sort from my school days."

"This angle of tilt may be assumed to be constant, for I won't bother with the precessions, nutations and other minor movements considered in accurate computations. As the earth moves around the sun, this tilt gives rise to what we call the sun's declination. You can readily see that at one time in the year, the north pole will be at its nearest point to the sun, speaking in terms of tilt and not in miles, while at another point on the elliptic, it will be farthest from the sun and the south pole nearest. There are two midway points when the two poles are practically equidistant."

"Then the days and nights should be of equal length."

"They are. These are the periods of the equinoxes. The point at which the sun is nearest to the south pole we call the winter solstice, and the opposite point, the summer solstice. The summer solstice is on June twenty-first. At that time the declination of the sun is 23½° north of the equatorial line. It starts to decrease until, six months later, it reaches a minus declination of 23½° and is that far south of the line. The longest day in the northern hemisphere is naturally June twenty-first."

"And the shortest day when the sun has the greatest minus declination."

"Precisely, at the winter solstice. Now to explain what is happening. The year went normally until June twenty-first. That day was of the correct length, about fourteen hours and fifty minutes long. The twenty-second should have been shorter. Instead, it was longer than the twenty-first. Each day, instead of getting shorter as it should at this time of year, is getting longer. We have already gained some thirty-two minutes of sunlight at this latitude. The explanation is that the angle between the equator and the elliptic is no longer 23½° as it has been from time immemorial, but it is greater. If the continuing tilt keeps up long enough, the obliquity will be 90°. When that happens, there will be perpetual midday at the north pole and perpetual night at the south pole. The whole northern hemisphere

will be bathed in a continuous flood of sunlight while the southern hemisphere will be a region of cold and dark. The condition of the earth will resemble that of Mercury where the same face of the planet is continually facing the sun."

"I understand that all right, but I am still in the dark as to what is causing this increase of tilt."

"No more than I am, old dear. Herriott keeps babbling about a hidden body which is drawing the earth from its normal axial rotation, but the fool ignores the fact that a body of a size sufficient to disturb the earth would throw every motion of the solar system into a state of chaos. Nothing of the sort has happened. Ergo, no external force is causing it. I am positive that the force which is doing the work is located on the earth itself. Furthermore, unless my calculations are badly off, this force is located on or very near the surface of the earth at approximately the sixty-fifth degree of north latitude."

"How can you tell that, Doctor?"

"It would take me too long to explain, Carnes. I will, however, qualify my statement a little. Either a variable force is being used or else a constant force located where I have said. The sixty-fifth

parallel is a long line. The exact location and the nature of that force, we have to find. If it be man-made, and I'll bet my bottom dollar that it is, we will also have to destroy it. If we fail, we'll see this world plunged into such a riot of war and bloodshed as has never before been known. It will be literally a fight of mankind for a place in the sun. Due to its favorable location in the new position of the earth, it is more than probable that Russia would emerge as the dominant power."

"Undertaking to destroy a thing that you don't know the location of and of whose existence you aren't even sure is a pretty big contract."

"We've tackled bigger ones, old dear. We have the President behind us. I haven't made much headway selling my idea to that gang of old fossils who call themselves the council of scientists, but I did to his nibs. Just before that attempt at assassination, I had a chin-chin with him. The fastest battle cruiser in the Navy, the Denver, is to be placed at my service. It will carry a big amphibian plane, so be equipped to assemble and launch it. Bolton will relieve you from the Presidential guard to-day. We sail in the morning."

"Where for, Doctor?"

"I feel sure that the force is caused and controlled by men and I

know of but one man who has the genius and the will to do such a thing. That man is Saranoff. Because he must be concealed and work free from interruption, I fancy he is working in his own country. Does that answer your question?"

"It does. We sail for Russia."

"Carnesy, old dear, at times you have flashes of such scintillating brilliance that I have hopes for the future of the secret service. In time they may even show human intelligence. Toddle along now and pay your fond farewells to the bright lights of Washington. Meet me at the Pennsy station at six. We'll sail from New York in the morning."

With the famous scientist and his assistant as passengers, the Denver steamed at her best speed across the Atlantic. As soon as New York harbor was cleared, Dr. Bird charted the course. Captain Evans raised his eyebrows when he saw the course laid out, but his orders had been positive. Had Dr. Bird ordered him to steam at full speed against the shore, he would have obeyed without question.

The Denver avoided the usual lanes of traffic and bore to the north of the summer lane. Not a vessel was sighted in the eight days which elapsed before the Faroe Islands came in sight on the starboard bow.

The Denver bore still more to the north and skirted around North Cape five days later. At Cape Kanin she headed south into the White Sea. Surprisingly little ice was encountered. When Captain Evans mentioned this, Dr. Bird pointed out to him that it was August and that the days were still lengthening. Once in the White Sea, the Denver was made ready for instant action. A huge amphibian plane was hoisted in sections from the hold and mechanics started to assemble it. Dr. Bird spent most of his time working on some instruments he had assembled in the radio room.

"This is an ultra-short wave detector," he explained to Carnes. "It will receive vibrations to the lowest limit of waves that we have ever been able to measure. The X-ray is high on the scale and even the cosmic ray is far above its lower limit of detection. We are hunting for an electro-magnet, the largest and strangest electro-magnet that has ever been constructed. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that we are seeking for a generator of magnetic force. It does not generate the ordinary magnetism which attracts iron and steel, nor the special type of magnetism which we call gravity, but something between the two. It attracts the sun enough to disturb the tilt of the earth's axis, but not enough to pull the earth out of its orbit. Such a device should give out a wave that can be detected, if we get a receiver delicate enough and operating on the right wave length."

He spent hours improving and refining the apparatus, but in the end he confessed himself beaten.

"It's no use, Carnes," he said the day after Cape Kanin faded from view to the north. "Either the apparatus we are seeking gives out no wave that we can detect or my apparatus is faulty. Luckily we have other things to guide us."

"What are they, Doctor?"

"The facts that Saranoff must have easy transportation and a source of power. The first precludes him from locating his station far from the sea-coast and the second indicates that it will be near a river or other source of power. The only Russian points on the sixty-fifth parallel that are open to water transport are the Gulf of Anadyr, north of Kamchatka, and the vicinity of Archangel. I passed up Kamchatka because it would mean too long a haul through unfriendly waters from Leningrad and because there is not much water power. Archangel is easy of access at this time of the year and it has the Dwina river for power. That will be our first line of search."

"We will explore by plane, of course?"

"Certainly. We wouldn't get far on foot, especially as neither of us

speaks Russian. We'll head south for another day and then— What's that?"

He paused and listened. From the distance came a dull drone of sound which brought him to his feet with a start. He raced out onto deck with Carnes at his heels. Far overhead in the blue, a tiny speck of black hovered.

"We're on the right trail, Carnes," he said grimly. The plane passed over them. In huge circles it sank toward the ground. Dr. Bird turned to Captain Evans. Orders flew from the bridge and a detail of marines rapidly stripped the covers from the two forward anti-aircraft rifles.

"I dislike to fire on that craft before it makes a hostile demonstration, Dr. Bird," demurred Captain Evans. "We are at peace with Russia. My action in firing might precipitate a war, or in any event, serious diplomatic misunderstandings."

"Allow me to correct you, Captain Evans, we are at war with Russia. The whole world is at war with the man who has pulled the earth out of her course. In any event, your orders are positive and the responsibility is mine. Wait until that plane gets within easy range and then shoot it down. Do not fail to get it; it must not get back to

shore with word of our approach."

Captain Evans bowed gravely. Shells came up from the magazines and were piled by the guns. From the fire control stations came a monotonous calling of firing data. The guns slowly changed direction as the plane descended. Nearer and nearer it came, intent on positive identification of the war vessel below it. It passed over the Denver less than five thousand feet up. As it passed it swung off to one side and began to climb sharply. Dr. Bird glanced at the fighting top of the cruiser and swore softly. From the top the stars and stripes had been broken to the breeze.

"Fire at once!" he cried, "and then court-martial the fool who broke out that flag!"

The two three-inch rifles barked their message of death into the sky. For agonizing seconds nothing happened. The guns roared again. Below and behind the fleeing plane, two puffs of white smoke appeared in the sky. The staccato calls of the observers came from the control station and the guns roared again and again. Now above and now below the Russian plane appeared the white puffs that told of bursting shells, but the plane droned on, unharmed.

"It's away safely," groaned the doctor. "Now the fat is in the fire.

Saranoff will know in an hour that we are coming. If we had a pursuit plane ready to take off, we might catch him, but we haven't. Oh, well, there's no use in crying over spilt milk. How soon will that amphibian be ready to take off?"

"In twenty minutes. Doctor," replied the Engineering Officer. "As soon as we finish filling the tanks and test the motor, she'll be ready to ramble."

"Hurry all you can. Hang a half dozen hundred-pound bombs and a few twenty-fives on the racks. Lower her over the side as soon as she's ready. Where's Lieutenant McCready?"

"Below, getting into his flying togs, Doctor."

"Good enough. Come on, Carnes, we'll go below and put on our fur-lined panties, too. We'll probably need them."

In half an hour the amphibian rose from the water. Lieutenant McCready was at the controls, with Carnes and the doctor at the bomb racks. The plane rose in huge spirals until the altimeter read four thousand feet. The pilot straightened it out toward the south. The plane was alone in the sky. For two hours it flew south and then veered to the east, following the line of the Gulf of Archangel. The

town came in sight at last.

"Better drop down a couple of thousand, Lieutenant," said Dr. Bird into the speaking tube. "We can't see much from this altitude."

The plane swung around in a wide circle, gradually losing altitude. Carnes and the doctor hung over the side watching the ground below them. As they watched a puff of smoke came from a low building a mile from the edge of the town. Dr. Bird grabbed the speaking tube.

"Bank, McCready!" he barked, "They're firing at us."

The plane lurched sharply to one side. From a point a few yards below them and almost directly along their former line of flight, a burst of flame appeared in the air. The plane lurched and reeled as the blast of the explosion reached it. From other points on the ground came other puffs.

"Get out of here," shouted Dr. Bird. "There must be a dozen guns firing at us. One of them will have the range directly."

From all around them came flashes and the roar of explosions. The plane lurched and yawed in a sickening fashion. Lieutenant McCready fought heroically with the controls, trying to prevent the

sideslips which were costing him altitude. Gradually the plane came under control and started to climb. The shells burst nearer as the plane took a straighter course and strove to fly out of the danger zone. Dr. Bird looked at the air-speed meter.

"A hundred and eighty," he shouted to Carnes. "We'll be safely out of range in a minute."

The bursts were mostly behind them now. Suddenly a blast of air struck them with terrific force. Half a dozen holes appeared in the fabric of the wings. A bit of high explosive shell plowed a way through the after compartment and wrecked the duplicate instrument board. In another moment they were out of range. Lieutenant McCready turned the nose of his plane toward the north.

"We came out of that well," cried Carnes. Dr. Bird dropped the speaking tube which he had held pressed to his ear and smiled grimly at the detective.

"I wish we had," he replied. "Our main gas tank is punctured."

An expression of alarm crossed the detective's face.

"Is it injured badly?" he asked.

"I don't know yet. McCready says that the gauge is dropping pretty rapidly. I'm going to go out and see what I can do."

"Can't I go, Doctor? I'm a good deal lighter than you are."

"You're not as strong or as agile, Carnes, and you haven't the mechanical ability to make the repair. Hand me that line."

He fastened one end of a coil of manila rope which Carnes handed him to his waist, while the detective fastened the other end to one of the safety belt hooks. With a word of farewell, he climbed out of the cockpit and onto a wing. In the pocket of his flying suit he carried a tool kit and repair material. Carnes shuddered as the doctor's figure disappeared under the plane. He snubbed the rope about a seat bracket and held it taut. For ten minutes the strain continued. It slackened at last, and the figure of the doctor reappeared on the wing. Slowly he climbed into the cockpit.

"I've made a temporary repair, Lieutenant," he called into the speaking tube, "and the leakage has stopped. How much gas have we left?"

"Enough for about an hour of flying, including the emergency tank."

"Thunder! No chance to get back to the Denver. Better head inland and follow the course of the Dwina. If we can locate the place we are looking for we may be able to drop a few eggs on it before we are washed out. In any event, it will be better to come down on land than on water."

McCready headed the plane south and followed the winding ribbon below him which marked the channel of the Dwina. He kept his altitude well over eight thousand feet. For a few minutes the plane roared along. Without warning the motor sputtered once or twice and died.

"Gas finished?" asked Dr. Bird into the speaking tube.

"No, there is plenty of gas for another forty-five minutes. It acted like a short in the wiring. Maybe another fragment got us that we didn't know about. I can glide to a safe landing, Doctor. Which direction shall I go?"

"It doesn't matter," replied Dr. Bird as he looked over the side. "Wait a minute, it does matter. See that long low building down there with the projection like a tower on top? I'll bet a month's pay that that is the very place we're looking for. Glide over it and let's have a look at it. If I am convinced of it, I'll drop a few eggs on it."

"Right!"

McCready glided on a long slope toward the suspected building. Dr. Bird kept his eye glued to the bomb sight.

"It's suspicious enough for me to act," he cried. "Drop one!"

Carnes pulled a lever and a hundred-pound high explosive bomb detached itself from the plane and fell toward the ground.

"Another!" cried the doctor.

A second messenger of death followed the first.

"Bank around and back over while we give them the rest."

"Right!"

The plane swung around in a wide circle.

"Volley!" cried the doctor. Carnes pulled the master lever and the rest of the bombs fell earthward.

"Now glide to the east, McCready, until you are forced down."

McCready banked the plane and started on a long glide toward the east. Carnes and the doctor watched the falling bombs. The doctor's aim had been perfect. The first bomb released struck the building squarely while the other landed only a few feet away. Instead of the puffs of smoke which they had expected, the bombs had no effect. The volley which Carnes had discharged fell full on the building as harmlessly as had the two pilot shots.

"Were these bombs armed, Lieutenant?" demanded the doctor.

"Yes, sir. I inspected them myself before we took off and they were fused and armed. They had always fused and should have gone off, no matter in what position they landed."

"Well, they didn't. That building is our goal all right. Saranoff would naturally expect an air raid and he has perfected some device which renders a bomb impotent before it lands. How far from the building will you land?"

"A couple of miles, Doctor."

"Get as far as you can. If you can make that line of thicket ahead, we'll take to our heels and hope to hide in it."

"I don't think we'll have much luck, Doctor," said Carnes.

"Why not?"

"Look behind."

Dr. Bird looked back toward the building they had tried to bomb. Across the country, a truck loaded with armed men followed the course of the plane. The plane was gaining slightly on the truck but it was evident that the plane's occupants would have little chance of escaping on foot. Dr. Bird gave a grim laugh.

"We're cornered all right," he said. "If we did elude the men in that truck, we would have a plane after us in no time. You might as well turn back, McCready, and land fairly near the building. We are sure to be captured and our best chance is to have the plane near us. They'll probably patch it up and if we get a chance to escape later, it may be a lifesaver. At any rate, we've lost for the present."

McCready turned the plane again to the west. The truck halted at their new maneuver. As the plane passed over, it turned and again followed them. The ground was approaching rapidly. With a final dip, McCready leveled off and made a landing. The machine rolled to a stop about a mile from the building. The truck was less than

three hundred yards away. It came up rapidly and disgorged a dozen men armed with rifles who hurried forward. In the lead was a tall, slight figure who carried no gun. Dr. Bird stepped forward to meet them.

"Do you understand English?" he asked.

An incomprehensible jargon of Russian answered him. The men raised their rifles threateningly. Dr. Bird turned back to his companions.

"Resistance is hopeless," he said. "Surrender gracefully and we'll see what comes of it."

He faced the Russians and held one hand high above his head. The Russian leader stepped forward and confiscated the doctor's pistol. He repeated the process with Carnes and McCready, frisking them thoroughly for concealed weapons. At his command, six of the Russians stepped forward. The Americans took their place in the midst of the guard and were marched to the truck. The balance of the Russians moved over to the American's plane. The truck rolled forward and approached the low building. The projection which Dr. Bird had noticed from the air proved to be a metal tube projection from the roof, fully twenty feet in diameter and fifty feet long.

"A projection tube of some sort," said the doctor, pointing. An excited command came from the Russian in command. A rifle was leveled threateningly at the doctor. He took the hint and maintained silence while they climbed down from the truck and approached the door of the building.

It swung open as they approached. As they entered a strong garlic-like smell was evident. The hum of heavy machinery smote their ears.

They were led down a corridor to a flight of steps. On the floor below they went along another corridor to a heavy iron-studded door. The guide unlocked it with a huge key and swung it open. With a shrug of his shoulders, Dr. Bird led the way into the cell. The door closed behind them and they were left alone. Dr. Bird turned to his companions.

"Be careful what you say," he whispered. "I am not at all convinced that there is no one here who knows English and we are probably spied upon. There is almost sure to be a dictaphone somewhere in this room. We don't want to give them any more information than we have to."

Carnes and McCready nodded. Dr. Bird spoke aloud of

inconsequential matters while they explored the cell. It was a room some twenty feet square, fitted with three bunks on one side, built into the wall like the berths on shipboard. The room was lighted by a single electric light overhead. A door opened into a lavatory equipped with running water.

"We're comfortable here, at any rate," said the doctor cheerfully. "They evidently don't mean to make us suffer. I'd like to know why they took the trouble to capture us, anyway. It would seem to be more in line with their usual policy to have shot us on sight. It must be that they want some sort of information from us."

Neither of his companions had a better reason to offer and conversation languished. For an hour they sat almost without speech. A sound at the door brought them to their feet. It opened and a Russian girl pushed in a cart laden with food. She made no reply to the remarks which Dr. Bird addressed to her but quickly and silently put their food on the table. When she had completed her task, she left the room without having spoken a word.

"Beautiful, but dumb," Dr. Bird remarked. "Let's eat."

"Do you suppose that it's safe to eat this food, Doctor?" asked Carnes in a whisper.

"I don't know, and I don't care. If we've got to go out, we might as well be poisoned as shot. If we refuse food, they can poison us through our water. We couldn't refuse that for any length of time. I'm hungry and I'm going to make a good meal. What's this stuff, bortsch?"

They soon received proof that they were under observation. Hardly had they pushed back their chairs at the completion of the meal than the door opened and the Russian girl who had brought their food removed the empty dishes. Silence settled down over the cell. For another hour they waited before the door opened again. A tall bearded Russian entered with a younger man at his heels. The bearded man dropped into a chair while his companion sat at the table and opened a notebook.

"Stand up!" barked the Russian sternly.

Carnes and McCready rose to their feet but Dr. Bird remained stretched out on a bed.

"What for?" he demanded languidly.

The Russian bristled with rage.

"When I speak to you, you shall obey," he said in curiously clipped English, "else it will be the worse for you. Would you rather be questioned while in the strelska than while standing?"

"Not by a long shot," replied Dr. Bird promptly as he rose to his feet. "Fire away, old fellow. I'll talk."

"What are your names?"

"I am Addison Sims of Seattle," replied Dr. Bird gravely, "and my friends are Mr. Earle Liedermann and Mr. Bernarr Macfadden. You may have read of us in the American magazines."

"Their names," said the Russian to his clerk, "are Dr. Bird, of the Bureau of Standards; Operative Carnes, of the United States Secret Service; and Lieutenant McCready, of the United States Navy. Dr. Bird, you will save yourself trouble if you will answer my future questions truthfully."

"Then ask questions to which I am not sure that you know the answer," replied the doctor dryly.

"What vessel brought you here?"

"The Denver."

"What is her armament?"

"Consult the Navy list. You will doubtless find a copy in your files. It may be purchased from the Superintendent of Public Documents at Washington."

"What is your errand here?"

"To consult with Ivan Saranoff and learn his future plans. If he means merely to bestow on the northern hemisphere additional sunshine and warmth, it is possible that the United States will not oppose him. We would benefit equally with Russia, you know. Possibly the northern countries could form some sort of an alliance against the southern hemisphere which is already threatening war."

"You chose a peculiar way of showing your peaceable intentions. You shot down our plane without warning and you dropped bombs on us at first sight."

"But they didn't explode."

"No, thanks to our ray operators. Dr. Bird, I have no time to waste. Either you will answer my questions fully and truthfully or I will resort to torture."

"You don't dare. You were merely bluffing when you mentioned the strelska. If you tortured us, you would have to answer to Ivan Saranoff on his return."

"How did you know that he is—" The Russian paused and bit his lip. "Shall I tell him that you refuse to talk?"

"When he returns, you may tell him that I will be glad to talk frankly with him. I came to Russia for that purpose, but I will not talk with one of his underlings. In the meanwhile, we are having lovely weather for this time of year, aren't we?"

With a muttered curse the Russian rose and left the room. Carnes turned to Dr. Bird.

"How did you know that Saranoff was away?" he demanded.

"I didn't," replied Dr. Bird with a chuckle, "it was merely a shrewd guess. We have twisted his tail so often that I figured he could not resist the temptation to come here and gloat a few gloats over us if he were here. I know his ruthless methods in dealing with his subordinates and I knew that they would never dare to resort to torture in his absence. No, old dear, we are safe until he returns. I hope he stays away a long time."

Four days passed monotonously. Three times a day the Russian girl appeared with ample meals. Despite their attempts to engage her in conversation, not a word would she reply or give any indication that she either heard or understood their remarks. The bearded Russian appeared daily and tried to question them, but Dr. Bird laughed at his threats and reaffirmed his intention of talking to no one but Saranoff.

"Your chance will soon come," replied the Russian with an evil leer on the fourth day. "He will be here the day after to-morrow. He will be able to make you talk."

"If he's telling the truth, the jig's about up," said Dr. Bird when the Russian had left. "I don't fancy that Saranoff will show us much mercy when he finds out what we've attempted to do."

"How would it be to overpower our waitress and make a break?" asked McCready in a guarded whisper.

"No good at all," replied the doctor decisively. "We wouldn't have a Chinaman's chance. Our best bet is to talk turkey to Saranoff. He may spare us if I can make him believe that I am willing to work for him. What a man he is! If we could turn his genius into the right channels, he would be a blessing to the world."

He paused as the door swung open and the Russian girl appeared with their food. She placed the cart against the wall and suddenly turned and faced them.

"Dr. Bird," she said in excellent English, "I am Feodrovna Androvitch."

"I'm glad to know you," said Dr. Bird with a bow.

"Do you recognize my name?"

"I'm very sorry, my dear, but it simply doesn't register."

"Do you remember Stefan Androvitch?"

A sudden light came into Dr. Bird's face.

"Yes," he exclaimed, "I do. He used to work for me in the Bureau some time ago. I had to let him go under peculiar circumstances. Is he related to you?"

"He was my twin brother. The peculiar circumstances you refer to were that you caught him stealing platinum. Instead of turning him over to the police, you asked him why he stole. He told you his wife was dying for lack of things that money would buy and he stole for

her. You allowed him to quit his position honorably and you gave him money for his immediate needs. For that act of mercy, I am here to reward you."

"Bread cast upon the waters," murmured Carnes. The Russian girl turned on him like a wildcat.

"Unless you wish to deprive yourself and your companions of my help, you will not quote the Bible, that sop thrown by the church to their slaves, to me," she said venomously. "I am a woman of the proletariat!"

"Respect the lady's anti-religious prejudices, Carnesy, old dear," said the doctor with a smile. "How do you propose to aid us, Miss Androvitch?"

"I will give you exactly what you gave my brother, your freedom and money for your immediate needs."

"Thanks. But, er—haven't you considered what your position here will be if you aid us to escape? Saranoff doesn't deal kindly with traitors, I fancy."

The girl spat on the floor.

"That swine!" she hissed, "I would like to kill him. I would have done so long ago had not the hope of the people rested on his genius. When the people finally triumph, I will feed his heart to my cat."

"Nice, gentle, loving disposition," murmured the doctor. "All right, my dear, we're ready for anything. What's the first move?"

The girl whisked the covers from the food cart and displayed three pistols and belts of ammunition.

"Put these on," she said, "and take this food with you. I will take you to a hiding place outside the walls where you may safely stay for a few days. I will bring you fresh supplies of food. As quickly as possible I will arrange for you to escape from Russia. When you have left Russia safely, my debt is paid and you are again my enemies."

"But, listen here," said Dr. Bird persuasively, "why don't you come with us? You know the object of our coming here. We aim to destroy this plant and let the earth take its normal tilt. You hate Saranoff, although I don't know why. If you'll help us to destroy him, we'll guarantee you a welcome in the United States and you can join your brother. I'll take him back into my laboratory."

"My brother is dead," she said bitterly. "After he left you, he fell into more evil times. His wife died and he swore revenge upon the society which had murdered her. An opportunity came to him to join Saranoff, and he did so. Saranoff hated him and distrusted him, although he was the soul of loyalty. As a reward for his genius and aid to Saranoff in constructing the black lamp, Saranoff abandoned him to you. It was your men who killed him when you blew into nothingness the helicopter he was piloting in your state of Maryland, near Washington."

"All the more reason why you should revenge yourself upon Saranoff," replied the doctor. "We will give you a chance to do so and aid you. We also give you an opportunity to be received in a free country with honor."

An expression of rage distorted the girl's features.

"I am a woman of the proletariat!" she cried. "I hate Ivan Saranoff for what he has done but I am loyal to him. He alone will force the bourgeoisie to their knees and establish the rule of the people. I hate your country and your government; yes, and I hate you. I aid you because I must pay my just debts. Come, the way is clear for your escape. Don't ask how I cleared it."

"Come on," said Dr. Bird with a shrug of his shoulders. "There is no arguing with convictions. She must act according to her lights, even as we must act according to ours. Grab your guns and let's go."

The three buckled on the weapons and belts of ammunition and followed the girl from the cell. Once outside she touched her lips for silence. A door barred their way but she opened it with a key which she withdrew from her dress. Outside the door, a guard slumbered noisily. At a motion from the girl, Carnes rolled him over on his face to quiet his snoring. He moved and stirred, but did not wake.

A few feet from the door the girl paused and faced the wall. She manipulated a hidden lever and a panel swung open in the wall. She led the way silently into the dark. As the panel closed behind her, a beam of light from an electric torch stabbed the darkness. Down a sloping tunnel they followed her for half a mile. The tunnel turned at right angles and led upward. At length they paused before another door. The girl opened it and they stepped out into the night. As they did so, a dull booming struck their ears. The girl paused.

"The ship!" she cried. "Your ship! It is attacking Fort Novadwinskaja. The factory will be awake in a moment! Run for your lives!"

Even as she spoke a pair of twinkling lights appeared far down the tunnel through which they had come. She turned as if to return down the tunnel. Dr. Bird caught her about the waist and clapped his hand over her mouth.

"Quick, Carnes, your belt," he cried. "Tie her up. She meant to go down that tunnel and give her life to delay them while we escaped. We'll save her in spite of herself."

Carnes and McCready quickly bound the struggling girl with their belts. They laid her on the ground beside the door and watched the oncoming lights.

"You two hold them back for the present," said the doctor. "I'm going to take Feodrovna away a bit and argue gently with her. If I can make her see the light, we may accomplish our mission yet. If I can't, I'll come back and help you."

He picked up the girl in his arms and disappeared into the darkness. Pistol in hand, the two men watched the oncoming lights. The men behind the lights could not be seen, but from the sound of their footsteps it was evident that there were quite a few of them.

"Had we better let them emerge from the door and then get them?"

whispered Carnes.

"No. These heavy guns will drive a bullet through three men at short range. Level your gun down the tunnel and fire when I give the word. Remember, every one is apt to shoot high in the dark."

The lights approached slowly. When they were twenty-five yards away, Lieutenant McCready spoke. The quiet was shattered by the roar of two Luger pistols. Again and again the guns barked. A volley of fire came from the tunnel, but Carnes and the lieutenant were standing well away from the opening and they escaped unharmed. Their deadly fire poured into the shambles until they were rewarded by the sound of retreating feet.

"So ends round one," said Carnes with a laugh. "I think we win on points."

"They won't try a direct attack again," replied the lieutenant. "Look out for a flank attack or from some new weapon. I don't like the way those bombs failed to explode the other day."

Dr. Bird appeared from the darkness.

"McCready," he said in a voice vibrant with excitement, "we're in

luck. We have come out less than a hundred yards from the point where our plane came down. It is still there. If the Denver has approached within shooting range, we will have enough gas to make it. Try to get your motor going."

"If it isn't completely washed out I'll have it going in a few minutes, Doctor," cried the pilot. "I'm going down the tunnel and get those flash-lights those birds dropped when they pulled out. Where's the girl?"

"She's back by the plane," said the doctor with a chuckle. "She is a spit-fire, all right. I took her gag off and she tried to bite me. I couldn't get a word of anything but abuse out of her. Go ahead and get the lights and I'll show you the plane."

In a few minutes they stood before the ship. It was apparently uninjured, but the spark was dead. Carnes went back to the tunnel mouth to guard against surprise while Dr. Bird and McCready labored over the motor. Despite the best of both of them, no spark could be coaxed from the coil. As a last resort, Dr. Bird short-circuited the cells with a screwdriver blade. No answering spark came from the terminals.

"Dead as a mackerel," he remarked. "I guess that ends that hope.

Let's get the machine guns out of her. Well have another attack soon and they'll be more effective than our pistols."

It was the work of a few minutes to dismount the two Brownings from the plane. Carrying the two guns, Dr. Bird joined Carnes while McCready staggered along laden down with belts of ammunition.

"Do you remember that rocky knoll we passed just before we landed?" asked the lieutenant. "If we can get this stuff there before we are attacked, we'll have a much better chance than we will in the open."

"Good idea, Lieutenant. Carnes, connect yourself to one of these guns. I'll fasten the other on my back and carry Feodrovna. We can't leave her here to Saranoff's tender mercies."

Through the night the little cavalcade made its way. The thunder of guns from Fort Novadwinskaja kept up and the sky to the north was lighted by their flashes. McCready's bump of direction proved to be a good one for the sought-for retreat was soon located. As they deposited their burdens and looked back, the lights of two trucks could be seen approaching across the plain from the factory. Hurriedly they mounted the machine gun. Dr. Bird straightened up and listened carefully.

"The guns are sounding less frequently," he said. "Possibly the Denver has had enough and is pulling out."

"If I know Captain Evans as well as I think I do, the Denver is not retreating," replied McCready grimly.

"I hope she's hammering the fort out of existence," said the doctor. "However, our main interest just now is on the land front. Gunners to the fore. Carnes, you aren't so good at this, better let McCready and me handle them."

The trucks approached slowly. Presently the American plane loomed up in the glare of their headlights. A powerful searchlight mounted on the leading truck swept the country. Discovery was a matter of moments. Lieutenant McCready trained his gun carefully and pressed the trigger. A rattle of fire came from the Browning. A crash was heard from the truck and the searchlight winked out.

"Bull's-eye!" cried Carnes exultantly.

"Down, you fool!" cried the doctor as he swept the detective from his feet and threw him down behind a rock. His action was none too soon. A burst of machine gun fire came from the trucks and a hail of bullets splattered on the rocks a few yards from them. McCready

crawled back to his gun.

"Wait a minute, Lieutenant," counseled the doctor. "A burst of fire from here will give them our location and probably do them little damage. Wait until they try to rush us."

They did not have long to wait. A guttural shout came from a point a few yards away and the sound of running feet came to their ears. The rush was directed toward a point a few yards to the left of where they crouched. Dr. Bird swung his gun around. As the rush passed them, he released his trigger. A volley of screams and oaths from the plain answered the crackle of the Browning. McCready's gun joined in with a staccato burst of fire. The attack could not live before that rain of death. A few running feet were heard from the darkness and a few groans. Presently the roar of a motor came from the direction of the parked trucks. It retreated into the distance and all was quiet.

"Round two goes to us on a knock-down," said Carnes jubilantly. "What will they do next, Doctor?"

"Probably nothing until daylight, now that they know we have machine guns. I wish that we could make that thicket, but it's too far to try. It'll be daylight in an hour or so."

The night was normally short in Archangel at that season of the year and the unnatural lengthening of the day which Saranoff had accomplished made it shorter still. In an hour red streamers in the east announced the approach of daylight. Hardly had they appeared than a dull drone of truck motors came from the direction of the factory.

"Round three is about to commence," announced Carnes. "I wish that I could do something."

"You can as soon as our ammunition runs out, which won't be long," replied McCready. "It will be a matter of pistols at close quarters."

The trucks approached to within a half mile and stopped. The distance was too great to warrant wasting any of their scanty store of ammunition at such long range. In the dim light they would see the Russians working at the trucks. Presently a flash came from the plain. A whining sound filled the air. With a crash a three-inch shell broke behind them.

"No fun," remarked the doctor. "We'll have to get better cover than this."

A second shell whined through the air and burst over their heads. A

third burst a few yards in front of them.

"They have us bracketed now," said McCready. "We'd better slide back a piece before they start rapid fire."

Dragging their prisoner with them, the three men made their way to the reverse side of the knoll. A short search revealed an overhanging ledge under which they crouched in comparative safety from anything but a direct hit above them.

"We're all right here except for the fact that they may rush us under cover of the fire," said the doctor. "One man will have to keep watch all the time and it will be a dangerous detail. I'll take the first hitch."

"You will not!" exclaimed Carnes emphatically. "I have done nothing so far and I am the least important member of the party. I'll do the watching."

"Let's draw straws," suggested McCready. "I'm willing to do that, but if it's a matter of volunteering, I refuse to yield to the civilian branches of the government. The Navy has traditions to uphold, you know."

"McCready's right," replied the doctor. "Get straws, Lieutenant, and

we'll draw."

McCready picked up three bits of grass and held them out.

"The shortest goes on watch," he said. Carnes and the doctor drew, McCready exhibited the remaining bit of grass. It was the shortest of the three. He waited until the next shell burst above them and then stepped out from the shelter.

"I'll relieve you in fifteen minutes," said Carnes as he left.

"Right."

When the lieutenant had left, Dr. Bird removed the gag from Feodrovna's mouth and tried to argue with her, but the Russian girl only glared her hatred and refused to talk other than to abuse him. With a sigh, the doctor gave over his efforts and talked to Carnes. The time passed slowly with a constant rain of shells on the knoll.

"It's time for my relief," said Carnes at length. As he spoke the hail of shells on the knoll ceased.

"What the dickens?" cried the doctor.

He and Carnes jumped from their shelter and ran over the knoll. On

the plain a few hundred yards from them, a straggling line of Russians were advancing with fixed bayonets. McCready was nowhere in sight.

"Where the devil is McCready?" cried the doctor. "He must have been killed. Hello, one of the guns is gone, too. There's only a belt and a half of ammunition left. I'll try to break that attack up."

He advanced to the gun and trained it carefully. When he pressed the trigger a dull click came from the gun.

"Misfire!" he cried. He drew back the bolt and inserted a fresh cartridge. Again the gun clicked harmlessly. Dr. Bird ejected the shell and examined it. A deep indentation appeared on the primer. Hurriedly he tried a half dozen more cartridges but they refused to explode. He turned a keen gaze toward the trucks. On the ground was set a tube-like projector pointing toward them. Dr. Bird swore softly and jerked his pistol from its holster. The hammer clicked futilely on a cartridge.

"Stymied!" he exclaimed. "They have that portable ray mechanism, with them, which disabled our bombs. It's hand to hand, Carnesy, old dear. I wonder where McCready is."

The Russians approached slowly, keeping their lines straight. They were within two hundred yards of the knoll. Suddenly from a point a hundred yards to the left of the end of the land came a rattle of fire. The attacking line dropped in a pile of grotesque heaps.

"It's McCready!" shouted Carnes. A little ravine ran from the knoll toward the trucks. Sitting in the ravine was the lieutenant, playing a Browning machine gun on the line of attackers. When there were no more of them on their feet, he turned his gun on the trucks. Panic seized the Russians and they made a rush for their truck. Their leader leaped among them, yelling furiously. They paused and turned to the projector tube. Slowly they swung it around. The lieutenant's gun ceased firing.

As the Russians rushed the now silent gun, Dr. Bird stepped to the gun on the knoll. He trained it and pressed the trigger. A rattle of fire came from it and two of the rushing figures fell. The attack paused for an instant. McCready had risen to his feet and was running up the ravine with his gun under his arm.

"Good head!" cried Dr. Bird, "Clever work! Watch the fun now."

He ceased firing his gun. The Russians wavered and then rushed the point from which McCready had fired. The lieutenant allowed them

to get to within a short distance and then crumpled the attack with another burst of fire from the flank. With cries of alarm, the Russians turned and fled toward their trucks. McCready ran along the ravine until he was within fifty yards of the standing machines. As the Russians approached, one of them stepped to the truck crank. McCready's pistol spoke and he dropped. A second shared his fate. With cries of despair, the Russians climbed into the remaining truck whose motor was running. Rapidly it drove away across the plain. McCready rose from the ravine and ran toward the standing truck. He started the motor and headed for the knoll.

"He's got a truck," cried Carnes. "We can get away in it."

"Where to?" demanded Dr. Bird. "Archangel is between us and the Denver."

The truck came up.

"Come on, Doctor," cried McCready. "Hurry up. We'll take the battery out of this truck and get our plane going."

"Oh, clever!" cried Dr. Bird admiringly. "Load that gun while I get Feodrovna, Carnesy. We'll get away safely yet."

The truck rolled up to the plane and stopped. While Carnes transferred the prisoner and the guns to the plane, the lieutenant and Dr. Bird ripped up the floor boards of the truck and exposed the battery. It was a matter of moments to detach it and carry it to the plane. It would not fit in place but they anchored it in place with wire.

"You'd better hurry," cried Carnes. "Here come a couple more trucks over the plain."

"That'll do, Doctor," said McCready. "Get on the prop and we'll see if the old puddle jumper will take off."

Dr. Bird ran to the propeller.

"Ready!" he cried.

"Contact!" snapped McCready.

The plane motor roared into life. The ship moved slowly forward as Dr. Bird climbed on board. Toward the oncoming trucks they rushed across the plain. A crash seemed imminent. In the nick of time McCready pulled back on his joystick and the plane rose gracefully into the air, clearing the leading truck by inches. The truck halted

and hastily mounted a machine gun.

"Too late!" laughed the lieutenant. "Now it's our turn for some fun."

He tapped the key of his radio transmitter. In a few seconds he received an answer.

"They have reduced Fort Novadwinskaja," he reported to the rear cockpit, "but they don't know what to fire at next. Their largest guns will reach the factory easily. Shall I start some fireworks?"

"You may fire when ready, Gridly," chuckled Dr. Bird.

Again the lieutenant depressed his key. From their altitude of four thousand feet, they could see the Denver. From its forward turret came a puff of smoke. There were a few moments of pause and then a cloud of black rose from the plain below them, half a mile from the factory. McCready reported the position of the burst to the ship. A second shell burst beyond the factory and the third just in front of it.

"It's a clear bracket," said McCready. "Now watch the gun. I'll give them a salvo."

From the side of the Denver came a cloud of black smoke as all of her turret guns fired in unison. The aim was perfect. For a few

moments all was quiet and then the factory disappeared in a smother of bursting high explosive shells.

Hardly had the shells landed than a terrific sheet of lightning ripped across the sky. The thunderclap which seemed to come simultaneously, rocked the plane like a feather. Sheet after sheet of lightning illuminated the sky while the roar of thunder was continuous. Rain fell in solid sheets. Even as they watched, it began to turn into snow. The air grew bitterly cold.

"The solar magnet is wrecked," shouted the doctor, "and these storms are the efforts of nature to return to normal."

"If they get any worse, we're doomed."

"But in a good cause."

Through the storm the plane raced. Suddenly the motor died with sickening suddenness.

"Our haywire battery connections are gone," shouted McCready. "Say your prayers."

The wind tossed the plane about like a feather. Rapidly it lost altitude. A building loomed up before them. As a crash seemed

imminent, a gust of wind caught the plane and tossed it up into the air again. For several minutes the ground could not be seen through the rain. Suddenly the plane hit an airpocket and dropped like a stone. With a splash it fell into the sea. A rift came for a moment in the curtain of rain.

"Look!" cried Carnes.

A hundred yards away, the Denver rode at anchor.

"I'm only sorry about one thing," said Carnes ten minutes later as they changed to dry clothes aboard the battle cruiser, "and that is that Saranoff wasn't in the factory when that salvo fell on it."

"I'm glad he was away," replied Dr. Bird. "With him absent, we succeeded in destroying it. If he had been there, our task would have been more difficult and perhaps impossible. I am an enemy of Saranoff's, but I don't underrate his colossal genius."

November 1931

111 The Planetoid of Peril by Paul Ernst

Undaunted by crazy tales of an indestructible presence on Asteroid Z-40, Harley 2Q14N20 sets out alone to face and master it.

Aproximate word count: 8,500

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Harley 2Q14N20 stopped for a moment outside the great dome of the Celestial Developments Company. Moodily he stared at their asteroid development chart. It showed, as was to be expected, the pick of the latest asteroid subdivision projects: the Celestial Developments Company, established far back in 2045, would handle none but the very best. Small chance of his finding anything here!

However, as he gazed at the chart, hope came suddenly to his face, and his heart beat high under his sapphire blue tunic. There was an asteroid left for sale there—one blank space among the myriad, pink-lettered Sold symbols. Could it be that here was the chance he had been hunting so desperately?

He bent closer, to read the description of the sphere, and the hope faded gradually from his countenance. According to its orbit and location, and the spectroscopic table of its mineral resources, it was a choice planetoid indeed. Of course such a rich little sphere, listed for sale by the luxurious Celestial Developments Company, would cost far more than he could ever rake together to pay for an asteroid.

Shaking his head, he adjusted his gravity regulator to give him about a pound and a half of weight, and started to float on. Then, his lips twisting at his own absurd hopefulness, he stopped again; and after another moment of indecision turned into the archway that led to the concern's great main office. After all, it wouldn't hurt to inquire the price, even though he knew in advance it would be beyond his humble means.

A youngster in the pale green of the one-bar neophyte in business promptly glided toward him.

"Something for you to-day, sir?" he asked politely.

"Yes," said Harley. "I'm looking around for a planetoid; want to get a place of my own out a way from Earth. Something, you understand, that may turn out to be a profitable investment as well as furnishing an exclusive home-site. I see on your chart that you have a sphere

left for sale, in the Red Belt, so I came in to ask about it."

"Ah, you mean asteroid Z-40," said the youngster, gazing with envious respect at the ten-bar insignia, with the crossed Sco drills, that proclaimed Harley to be a mining engineer of the highest rank. "Yes, that is still for sale. A splendid sphere, sir; and listed at a remarkably low figure. Half a million dollars."

"Half a million dollars!" exclaimed Harley. It was an incredibly small sum: scarcely the yearly salary of an unskilled laborer. "Are you sure that's right?"

"Yes, that's the correct figure. Down payment of a third, and the remaining two thirds to be paid out of the exploitation profits—"

Here the conversation was interrupted by an elderly, grey-haired man with the six-bar dollar-mark insignia of a business executive on his purple tunic. He had been standing nearby, and at the mention of asteroid Z-40 had looked up alertly. He glided to the two with a frown on his forehead, and spoke a few curt words to the neophyte, who slunk away.

"Sorry, sir," he said to Harley. "Z-40 isn't for sale."

"But your young man just told me that it was," replied Hartley, loath to give up what had begun to look like an almost unbelievable bargain.

"He was mistaken. It's not on the market. It isn't habitable, you see."

"What's wrong—hasn't it an atmosphere?"

"Oh, yes. One that is exceptionally rich in oxygen, as is true of all the spheres we handle. With a late model oxygen concentrator, one would have no trouble at all existing there."

"Is its speed of revolution too great?"

"Not at all. The days are nearly three hours long: annoying till you get used to it, but nothing like the inferior asteroids of the Mars Company where days and nights are less than ten minutes in duration."

"Well, is it barren, then? No minerals of value? No vegetation?"

"The spectroscope shows plenty of metals, including heavy radium deposits. The vegetation is as luxuriant as that of semi-tropic Earth."

"Then why in the name of Betelguese," said Harley, exasperated,

"won't you sell the place to me? It's exactly what I've been looking for, and what I'd despaired of finding at my price."

"I'm forbidden to tell why it isn't for sale," said the executive, starting to float off. "It might hurt our business, reputation if the truth about that bit of our celestial properties became widely known —Oh, disintegrate it all! Why wasn't the thing erased from the chart weeks ago!"

"Wait a minute." Harley caught his arm and detained him. "You've gone too far to back out now. I'm too eager to find some such place as your Z-40 to be thrown off the subject like a child. Why isn't it for sale?"

The man tightened his lips as though to refuse to answer, then shrugged.

"I'll tell you," he said at last. "But I beg of you to keep it confidential. If some of our investors on neighboring asteroids ever found out about the peril adjoining them on Z-40, they'd probably insist on having their money back."

He led the way to a more secluded spot under the big dome, and spoke in a low tone, with many a glance over his shoulder to see if

anyone were within earshot.

"Z-40 is an exceptionally fine bit of property. It is commodious; about twenty miles in diameter. Its internal heat is such that it has a delightful climate in spite of the extreme rarity of atmosphere common to even the best of asteroids. It has a small lake; in fact it has about everything a man could want. Yet, as I said, it is uninhabitable."

His voice sank still lower.

"You see, sir, there's already a tenant on that sphere, a tenant that was in possession long before the Celestial Developments Company was organized. And it's a tenant that can't be bought off or reasoned with. It's some sort of beast, powerful, ferocious, that makes it certain death for a man to try to land there."

"A beast?" echoed Harley. "What kind of a beast?"

"We don't know. In fact we hardly even know what it looks like. But from what little has been seen of it, it's clear that it is like no other specimen known to universal science. It's something enormous, some freak of animal creation that seems invulnerable to man's smaller weapons. And that is why we can't offer the place for sale. It

would be suicide for anyone to try to make a home there."

"Has anyone ever tried it?" asked Harley. "Any competent adventurer, I mean?"

"Yes. Twice we sold Z-40 before we realized that there was something terribly wrong with it. Both buyers were hardy, intrepid men. The first was never heard of after thirty-six hours on the asteroid. The second man managed to escape in his Blinco Dart, and came back to Earth to tell of a vast creature that had attacked him during one of the three-hour nights. His hair was white from the sight of it, and he's still in a sanitarium, slowly recovering from the nervous shock."

Harley frowned thoughtfully. "If this thing is more than a match for one man, why don't you send an armed band with heavy atomic guns and clear the asteroid by main force?"

"My dear sir, don't you suppose we've tried that? Twice we sent expensive expeditions to Z-40 to blow the animal off the face of the sphere, but neither expedition was able to find the thing, whatever it is. Possibly it has intelligence enough to hide if faced by overwhelming force. When the second expedition failed, we gave it up. Poor business to go further. Already, Z-40 has cost us more than

we could clear from the sale of half a dozen planetoids."

For a long time Harley was silent. The Company was a hard headed, cold blooded concern. Anything that kept them from selling an asteroid must be terrible indeed.

His jaw set in a hard line. "You've been honest with me," he said at length. "I appreciate it. Just the same—I still want to buy Z-40. Maybe I can oust the present tenant. I'm pretty good with a ray-pistol."

"It would be poor policy for us to sell the asteroid. We don't want to become known as a firm that trades in globes on which it is fatal to land."

"Surely my fate is none of your worry?" urged Harley.

"The asteroid," began the executive with an air of finality, "is not for __"

"Man, it's got to be!" cried Harley. Then, with a perceptible effort he composed himself. "There's a reason. The reason is a girl. I'm a poor man, and she's heiress to fabulous—Well, frankly, she's the daughter of 3W28W12 himself!" The executive started at mention of that

universally known number. "I don't want to be known as a fortune hunter; and my best bet is to find a potentially rich asteroid, cheap, and develop it—incidentally getting an exclusive estate for my bride and myself far out in space, away from the smoke and bustle of urban Earth. Z-40, save for the menace you say now has possession of it, seems to be just what I want. If I can clear it, it means the fulfillment of all my dreams. With that in view, do you think I'd hesitate to risk my neck?"

"No," said the executive slowly, looking at the younger man's powerful shoulders and square-set chin and resolute eyes. "I don't think you would. Well, so be it. I'd greatly prefer not to sell you Z-40. But if you want to sign an agreement that we're released of all blame or responsibility in case of your death, you can buy it."

"I'll sign any agreement you please," snapped Harley. "Here is a down payment of a hundred and seventy thousand dollars. My name is Harley; sign 2Q14N20; unmarried—though I hope to change that soon, if I live—occupation, mining engineer, ten-bar degree; age, thirty-four. Now draw me up a deed for Z-40, and see that I'm given a stellar call number on the switchboard of the Radivision Corporation. I'll drop around there later and get a receiving unit. Good day." And, adjusting his gravity regulator to lighten his weight to less than a pound, he catapulted out the archway.

Behind him a prosaic business executive snatched a moment from a busy day to indulge in a sentimental flight of fancy. He had read once of curious old-time beings called knights, who had undertaken to fight and slay fire-eating things called dragons for the sake of an almost outmoded emotion referred to as love. It occurred to him that this brusque man of action might be compared to just such a being. He was undertaking to slay a dragon and win a castle for the daughter of 3W28W12—

The romantic thought was abruptly broken up by the numeral. It jarred so, somehow, that modern use of numbers instead of names, when thinking of sentimental passages of long ago. "The rose is fair; but in all the world there is no rose as fair as thou, my princess 3W28W12...." No, it wouldn't do.

Cursing himself for a soft-headed fool, he went to deliver a stinging rebuke to somebody for not having blocked Z-40 off the asteroid chart weeks before.

"Harley 2Q14N20," recited the control assistant at Landon Field. "Destination, asteroid Z-40. Red Belt, arc 31.3470. Sights corrected, flight period twelve minutes, forty-eight seconds past nine o'clock. All set, sir?"

Harley nodded. He stepped inside the double shell of his new Blinco Dart—that small but excellent quantity-production craft that had entirely replaced the cumbersome space ships of a decade ago—and screwed down the man-hole lid. Then, with his hand on the gravity bar, he gazed out the rear panel, ready to throw the lever at the control assistant's signal.

The move was unthinkingly, mechanically made. Too many times had he gone through this process of being aimed by astronomical calculation, and launched into the heavens, to be much stirred by the wonder of it. The journey to Z-40 in the Dart was no more disquieting than, a century and a half ago, before the United States had fused together into one vast city, a journey from Chicago to Florida would have been in one of the inefficient gasoline-driven vehicles of that day.

All his thoughts were on his destination, and on a wonder as to what could be the nature of the thing that dwelt there.

He had just come from the sanitarium where the man who'd bought Z-40 before him was recovering from nervous exhaustion. He'd gone there to try to get first hand information about the creature the executive at the Celestial Developments Company had talked so vaguely of. And the tale the convalescent had told him of the thing

on the asteroid was as fantastic as it was sketchy.

A tremendous, weirdly manlike creature looming in the dim night—a thing that seemed a part of the planetoid itself, fashioned from the very dirt and rock from which it had risen—a thing immune to the ray-pistol, that latest and deadliest of man-made small-arms—a thing that moved like a walking mountain and stared with terrible, stony eyes at its prey! That was what the fellow said he had faintly made out in the darkness before his nerves had finally given way.

He had impressed Harley as being a capable kind of a person, too; not at all the sort to distort facts, nor to see imaginary figures in the night.

There was that matter of the stone splinter, however, which certainly argued that the wan, prematurely white-haired fellow was a little unbalanced, and hence not to be believed too implicitly. He'd handed it to Harley, and gravely declared it to be a bit of the monster's flesh.

"Why, it's only a piece of rock!" Harley had exclaimed before he could check himself.

"Did you ever see rock like it before?"

Turning it over in his hands, Harley had been forced to admit that he never had. It was of the texture and roughness of granite, but more heavily shot with quartz, or tridymite than any other granite he'd ever seen. It had a dull opalescent sheen, too. But it was rock, all right.

"It's a piece of the thing's hide," the man had told him. "It flaked off when it tried to pry open the man-hole cover of ray Dart. A moment after that I got Radivision arc directions from London Field, aimed my sights, and shot for Earth. It was a miracle I escaped."

"But surely your ray-pistol—" Harley had begun, preserving a discreet silence about the man's delusion concerning the stone splinter.

"I tell you it was useless as a toy! Never before have I seen any form of life that could stand up against a ray-gun. But this thing did!"

This was another statement Harley had accepted with a good deal of reservation. He had felt sure the weapon the man had used had a leak in the power chamber, or was in need of recharging, or something of the kind. For it had been conclusively proved that all organic matter withered and burned away under the impact of the Randchron ray.

Nevertheless, discounting heavily the convalescent's wild story, only a fool would have clung to a conviction that the menace on Z-40 was a trivial one. There was something on that asteroid, something larger and more deadly than Harley had ever heard of before in all his planetary wanderings.

He squared his shoulders. Whatever it was, he was about to face it, man against animal. He was reasonably certain his ray-gun would down anything on two legs or ten. If it didn't—well, there was nothing else that could; and he'd certainly provide a meal for the creature, assuming it ate human flesh....

A mechanic tapped against the rear view panel to recall his wandering attention. The control assistant held up his hands, fingers outspread, to indicate that there were ten seconds left.

Harley's hand went to his throat, where was hung a locket—a lovely but useless trinket of the kind once much worn by Earth women—and his fingers tightened tenderly on it. It had belonged to Beatrice 3W28W12's great-great-grandmother, and Beatrice had given it to him as a token.

"With luck, my dear," he whispered aloud. "With luck...."

There was a slight vibration. He threw the gravity bar over to the first notch. Earth dropped, plummet-like, away from him. He pushed the bar to the limit leg; and, at a rate of hundreds of miles a second, was repelled from Earth toward Z-40, and the thing that skulked there.

With a scarcely perceptible jar, he landed on the small sphere that, he hoped, was to be his future home. Before opening his man-hole lid, he went from panel to panel of the Dart and cautiously reconnoitered. He had elected to land beside the little lake that was set like a three hundred-acre gem on the surface of Z-40, and it was more than possible that the enemy had its den nearby.

However, a careful survey of the curved landscape in all directions failed to reveal a glimpse of anything remotely threatening. He donned his oxygen concentrator—in appearance a simple tube of a thing, projecting about six inches above his forehead, and set in a light metal band that encircled his head. Adjusting his gravity regulator so he wouldn't inadvertently walk clear off into empty space—he calculated his weight would be less than a twentieth of an ounce here—he stepped out of the Dart and gazed around at the little world.

Before him was the tiny lake, of an emerald green hue in the flashing

sunlight. Around its shores, and covering the adjacent, softly rolling countryside as far as eye could reach, was a thick growth of carmine-tinted vegetation: squat, enormous-leaved bushes; low, sturdy trees, webbed together by innumerable vines. To left and right, miniature mountains reared ragged crests over the abbreviated horizon, making the spot he was in a peaceful, lovely valley.

He sighed. There was everything here a man could wish for—provided he could win it! Loosening his ray-pistol in its holster, he started to walk slowly around the lake to choose a site for the house he intended to build. On the opposite shore he found a place that looked suitable.

A few yards back from the water's edge, curling in a thick crescent like a giant sleeping on its side, was a precipitous outcropping of rock; curious stuff, rather like granite, that gleamed with dull opalescence in the brilliant sunlight. With that as a sort of natural buttress behind the house, and with the beautiful lake as his front dooryard, he'd have a location that any man might envy.

He returned to his Dart, hopped back across the lake in it, and unloaded his Sco drill[1]. With this he planned to sink a shaft that would serve in the future as the cellar for his villa, and in the present as an entrenchment against danger.

But now the swift night of Z-40 was almost upon him. The low slant of the descending sun warned him that he had less than ten minutes of light left, until the next three-hour day should break over the eastern rim. He placed the drums and the flexible hose of the Sco drill so that he could begin operations with it as soon as the dawn broke, and started to walk toward the precipitous outcropping of quartziferous stone immediately behind the home-site he had picked. He would climb to the top of this for a short look around, and then return to the Dart—in which double-hulled, metal fortress he thought he would be safe from anything.

He had almost reached the rock outcropping when the peculiarities of its outline struck him anew. He'd already observed that the craggy mound rather resembled a sleeping, formless giant. The closer he got to it the more the resemblance was heightened and the greater grew his perplexity.

It sprang straight up from the carmine underbrush, like a separate heap of stone cast there by some mighty hand. One end of it tapered down in a thick ridge; and this ridge had a deep, horizontal cleft running along it which made it appear as though it were divided into two leglike members. In the center the mound swelled to resemble a paunchy trunk with sagging shoulders. This was topped by a huge, nearly round ball that looked for all the world like a head. There

were even rudimentary features. It was grotesque—one of those freak sculptures of nature, Harley reflected, that made it seem as though the Old Girl had a mind and artistic talent of her own.

He scrambled through the brush till he reached that part of the long mound that looked like a head. There, as the sun began to stream the red lines of its descent over the sky, he prepared to ascend for his view of the surrounding landscape.

He'd got within twenty feet of the irregular ball, and had adjusted his gravity regulator to enable him to leap to its top, when he stopped as abruptly as though he had been suddenly paralyzed. Over the two deep pits that resembled nostrils in the grotesque mask of a face he thought he had observed a quiver. The illusion had occurred in just the proper place for an eyelid. It was startling, to say the least.

"I'm getting imaginative," said Harley. He spoke aloud as a man tends to do when he is alone and uneasy. "I'd better get a tighter grip on my nerves, or—good God!"

Coincident with the sound of his voice in the thin, quiet air, the huge stumps that looked like legs stirred slightly. A tremor ran through the entire mass of rock. And directly in front of Harley, less than twenty feet from where he stood, a sort of half-moon-shaped curtain of rock

slid slowly up to reveal an enormous, staring eye.

Frozen with a terror such as he had never felt before in a life filled with adventure, scarce breathing, Harley glared at the monstrous spectacle transpiring before him. A hill was coming to life, A granite cliff was growing animate. It was impossible, but it was happening.

The half-moon curtains of rock that so eerily resembled eyelids, blinked heavily. He could hear a faint rasping like the rustle of sandpaper, as they did so. One of the great leg stumps moved distinctly, independent of the other one. Three columnar masses of rock—arms, or tentacles, with a dozen hinging joints in each—slowly moved away from the parent mass near the base of the head, and extended toward the Earth man.

Still in his trance, with his heart pounding in his throat till he thought it would burst, Harley watched the further awful developments. The eyelids remained opened, disclosing two great, dull eyes like poorly polished agates, which stared expressionlessly at him. There was a convulsion like a minor earthquake, and the mass shortened and heightened its bulk, raising itself to a sitting posture. The three hinged, irregular arms suddenly extended themselves to the full in a thrust that barely missed him. They were tipped, those arms, with immense claws, like interlocking, rough-hewn stone fingers. They

crashed emptily together within a few feet of Harley. Then, and not till then, did the paralysis of horror loose its grip on the human.

He tore his ray-pistol from its holster and pointed it at the incredible body. An angry, blue-green cone of light leaped from the muzzle, and played over the mighty torso. Nothing happened. He squeezed the trigger back to the guard. The blue-green beam increased in intensity, and a crackling noise was audible. Under that awful power the monster should have disappeared, dissolved to a greasy mist. But it didn't.

The light beam from the ray-gun died away. The power was exhausted. It was only good for about ten seconds of such an emergency, full-force discharge, after which it must be re-charged again. The ten seconds were up. And the gigantic creature against which it had been directed had apparently felt no injury from a beam that would have annihilated ten thousand men.

The now useless ray-pistol slipped from his limp fingers. Stupefied with horror at the futility of the deadly Randchron ray against this terrible adversary, he stood rooted to the spot. Then the thing reached for him again; and his muscles were galvanized to action—to instinctive, stupid, reasonless action.

Screaming incoherently, mad with horror of the stone claws that had clutched at him, he turned and ran. In great leaps he bounded away from the accursed lake and made for the taller trees and thicker vegetation at a distance from the shore. It was the worst thing he could have done. There was a chance that he could have reached his Dart, had he thought of it, and soared aloft out of reach. But he thought of nothing. All he wanted to do, in that abysmal fear that can still make a mindless animal out of a civilized man, was to run and hide—to get away from the fearful monster that had risen up to glare at him with those stony, pitiless eyes, and to reach for him with two-fingered bands like grinding rock vises.

Just as the sun fell below the rim of the asteroid, plunging it into a darkness only faintly relieved by the light of the stars, he crashed into the deeper underbrush. A trailing creeper tripped him in his mad flight. He fell headlong, to lie panting, sobbing for breath, in the thick carpet of blood-colored moss.

Behind him, from the direction of the lake, he heard a sudden clangor as of rock beating against metal. This endured only a short time. Then the solid ground beneath him shook slightly, and an appalling crash of trees and underbrush to the rear told him that the stone colossus was on his trail.

He leaped to his feet and continued his great bounds over the sharply curved surface of the asteroid, banging against tree trunks, bruising himself against stones, falling in the darkness to rise again and flee as before in a mad attempt to distance the crashing sound of pursuit behind him.

Then he felt himself writhing in thin air as his flying course took him over the edge of a cliff. Down, down he fell, to land in a dense bed of foliage far below. Something hit his head with terrific force. Pinwheels of light flashed before his eyes, to fade into velvety nothingness....

Slowly, uncertainly he wavered back to consciousness. For a moment he was aware of nothing save that he was lying on some surface that was jagged and uncomfortable, and that it was broad daylight. He opened his eyes, and saw that he was reclining, across a springy bed formed of the top of a tree. Ahead of him loomed a cliff about a hundred feet high.

Remembrance suddenly came to him. The unreasoning rush through the underbrush. The nightmare creature lumbering swiftly after him. The fall over the cliff into the top of this tree.

With a cry, he sat up, expecting to see the stone giant nearby and

poised to leap. But it was nowhere in sight; nor, listen as intently as he would, could he hear the sounds of its crashing path through the brush. Somehow, for the moment at least, he had been saved. Perhaps his disappearance over the cliff edge had thrown it off his track.

He became aware of the fact that it was difficult for him to breathe. His lungs were heaving in a vain effort to suck in more oxygen, and his tongue felt thick as though he were being strangled. Then he saw that his oxygen concentrator had been knocked from his head when he fell, and was dangling from a limb several feet away. It was almost out of breathing range. Had it fallen on through the branches to the ground he would have died, in his unconsciousness, in the rarified atmosphere. He reached for it; settled the band around his head again.

After once more listening and peering around to make sure the rock colossus was not about, he descended the tree that had saved his life, and began to walk in the direction he judged the lake to be. He would get into his Dart, cruise aloft out of harm's way, and perhaps think up some effective course of action.

He was thinking clearly, now. And, in the glare of daylight, no longer an unreasoning animal fleeing blindly over a dim-lit foreign sphere,

he was unable to understand his panic of the night. Afraid? Of course he had been afraid! What man wouldn't have been at sight of that monstrous thing? But that he, Harley 2Q14N20, should have lost his head completely and gone plunging off into the brush like that, seemed unbelievable. To the depths of his soul he felt ashamed. And to his own soul he made the promise that he would wipe out, in action, that hour of cowardice.

As he wound his way through the squat, carmine forest, he tried to figure out the nature of the thing that had crashed balefully after him in the black hours.

It had seemed made of rock—a giant, primitive stone statue imbued with life. But it was impossible that it should really be fashioned of rock. At least it ought to be impossible. Rock is inorganic, inanimate. It simply couldn't have the spark of life in it. Harley had seen many strange creations, on many strange planets, but never had he seen inorganic mineral matter endowed with animation. Nor had anyone else.

Yet the thing looked as though made of stone. Of some peculiar, quartz-suffused granite—proving that the wan, white-haired man he had talked to in the sanitarium had not been mad at all, but only too terribly sane. The creature's very eyes had had a stony look. Its

eyelids had rasped like stone curtains rubbing together. Its awful, two-fingered hands, or claws, had ground together like stones rubbing.

Was it akin to the lizards, the cold-blooded life of Earth? Was this rocky exterior merely a horny shell like that of a turtle? No. Horn is horn and rock is rock. The two can't be confused.

The only theory Harley could form was that the great beast was in some strange way a link between the animal and the mineral kingdoms. Its skeletal structure, perhaps, was silicate in substance, extending to provide an outside covering that had hardened into actual stone, while forming an interior support to flesh that was half organic, half inorganic matter. Some such silicate construction was to be found in the sponge, of Earth. Could this be a gigantic relative of that lowly creature? He did not know, and couldn't guess. He wasn't a zoologist. All he knew was that the thing appeared to be formed of living, impregnable stone. He knew, also, that this fabulous creature was bent on destroying him.

At this point in his reflections, the glint of water came to his eyes between the tree trunks ahead of him. He had come back to the lake.

For moments he stood behind one of the larger trees on the fringe

and searched around the shore for sight of the rock giant. It was nowhere in evidence. Rapidly he advanced from the forest and ran for the Dart. From a distance it appeared to be all right: but as he drew near a cry rose involuntarily to his lips.

In a dozen places the double hull of the little space craft was battered in. The man-hole lid was torn from its braces and bent double. The glass panels, unbreakable in themselves, had been shoved clear into the cabin; their empty sash frames gaped at Harley like blinded eyes. Never again would that Blinco Dart speed through the heavens!

He went to the spot where he had left his Sco drill, and a further evidence of the thing's cold blooded ferocity was revealed. The intricate mechanism had been wrenched into twisted pieces. The drums were battered in and the flexible hose lengths torn apart in shreds. The inventor himself couldn't have put it in working order again.

He was hopelessly trapped. He had no means of fighting the colossus. He had no way of escaping into space, nor of returning to Earth and trying to raise a loan that would allow him to come back here with men and atomic guns. He hadn't even a way of intrenching himself in the ground against the next attack.

For an instant his hair prickled in a flash of the blind panic that had seized him a few hours before. With a tremendous effort of will he fought it down. This—the destruction of his precious Dart and drill—was the result of one siege of insensate fear. If he succumbed to another one he might well dash straight into the arms of death. He sank to the ground and rested his chin on his fist, concentrating all his intellect on the hopeless problem that faced him.

The surface of Z-40 was many square miles in extent. But, if he tried to hide himself, he knew it was only a question of time before he would be hunted down. The asteroid was too tiny to give him indefinite concealment. Flight, then, was futile.

But if he didn't try to conceal himself in the sparse forest lands, it meant that he must stay to face the monster at once—which was insanity. What could he do, bare-handed, against that thirty-foot, three-tentacled, silicate mass of incredible life!

It was useless to run, and it was madness to stay and confront the thing. What, then, could he do? The sun had slid down the sky and the red of another swift dusk was heralding the short night before he shook his head somberly and gave the fatal riddle up.

He rose to his feet, intending to make his way back to the

concealment—such as it was—of the forest. It might be that he could find safety in some lofty treetop till day dawned again. Then he stopped, and listened. What was that?

From far away to the left he could hear faint sounds of some gargantuan stirring. And, coincident with the flickering out of the last scrap of sunlight, a distant crashing came to his ears as an enormous body smashed like an armored ship through trees and thorn bushes and trailing vines. The rock thing had found his trail and was after him again.

A second time Harley fled through the dim-lighted night, stumbling over boulders and tripping on creepers. But this time his flight was not that of panic. Frightened enough, he was; but his mind was working clearly as he leaped through the forest away from the source of the crashing.

The first thing he noted was that though—as far as his ears could inform him—he was managing to keep his lead, he wasn't outdistancing his horrible pursuer by a yard. Dark though the night was, and far away as he contrived to keep himself, the colossus seemed to cling to his trail as easily as though following a well-blazed path.

He climbed a tree, faced at right angles to the course he had pursued, and swung for the next tree. It was a long jump. But desperation lent abnormal power to his muscles, and the gravity regulator adjusted to extremely low pitch, was a great help. He made it safely. Another swinging leap into the dark, to land sprawling in a second tree; a third; a fourth. Finally be crouched in a tangle of boughs, and listened. He was a quarter of a mile from the point where he had turned from his first direction. Perhaps this deviation would throw the rock terror off.

It didn't. He heard the steady smashing noise stop. For an instant there was a silence in the darkness of the asteroid that was painful. Then the crashing was resumed, this time drawing straight toward where he was hidden. Somehow the thing had learned of his change of direction.

He continued his flight into the night, his eyes staring glassily into the darkness, his expression the ghastly one of a condemned man. And as he fled the crashing behind him told how he was followed—easily infallibly, in spite of all his twisting and turning and efforts at concealment. What hellish intelligence the monster must possess!

He ran for eternities. He ran till his chest was on fire, and the sobbing agony of his breathing could be heard for yards. He ran till

spots of fire floated before his eyes and the blood, throbbing in his brain, cut out the noise of the devilish pursuit behind him. At long last his legs buckled under him, and he fell, to rise no more.

He was done. He knew it. His was the position of the hunted animal that lies panting, every muscle paralyzed with absolute exhaustion, and glares in an agony of helplessness at the hunter whose approach spells death.

The crashing grew louder. The tremor of the ground grew more pronounced as the vast pursuer pounded along with its tons and tons of weight. Harley gazed into the blackness back along the way he had come, his eyes sunk deep in the hollows fatigue had carved in his face, and waited for the end. The dark night darkened still more with the approach of another swift, inexorable dawn.

There was a terrific rending of tree trunks and webbed creepers. Dimly in the darkness he could see something that towered on a level with the tallest trees, something that moved as rapidly and steadily as though driven by machinery. Fear so great that it nauseated him, swept over him in waves; but he could not move.

The first grey smear of dawn appeared in the sky. In the ghostly greyness he got a clearer and clearer sight of the monster. He

groaned and cowered there while it approached him—more slowly now, eyeing him with staring, stony orbs in which there was no expression of any kind, of rage or bate, of curiosity or triumph.

Great stumps of legs, with no joints in them, on which the colossus stalked like a moving stone tower—a body resembling an enormous boulder carved by an amateurish hand to portray the trunk of a human being—a craggy sphere of rock for a head, set directly atop the deeply riven shoulders—a face like the horrible mask of an embryonic gargoyle—a mouth that was simply a lipless chasm that opened and closed with the sound of rocks grinding together in a slow-moving glacier—the whole veiled thinly by trailing lengths of snapped vines, great shattered tree boughs, bushes, all uprooted in its stumping march through the forest! Harley closed his eyes to shut out the sight. But in spite of himself they flashed open again and stared on, as though hypnotized by the spectacle they witnessed.

The grey of dawn lightened to the first rose tint of the rising sun. As though stung to action by the breaking of day, the thing hastened its ground-shaking pace. With one last stride, it came to Harley's side and loomed far above, the unwinking eyes glaring down at him.

The three arms, hinged at equidistant points at the base of the horrible head, slowly lowered toward his prostrate form. There was a

grating noise as the creature hinged in the middle and bent low, bringing its enormous, staring eyes within two yards of his face.

One of its hands closed over his leg, tentatively, experimentally, as though to ascertain of what substance he was made. He cried aloud as the rock vise, like a gigantic lobster claw, squeezed tight. The thing drew back abruptly. Then the chasm of its mouth opened a little, for all the world as though giving vent to soundless, demoniac laughter. All three of the vise-like hands clamped over him—lightly enough, considering their vast size, and intimating that the colossus did not mean to kill him for a moment or two—but so cruelly that his senses swam with the pain of it.

He felt the grip relax. The vast stone pincers were lifted from him; slithered to the ground beside him.

The first blinding rays of the sun were beating straight on the colossal figure, which glittered fantastically, like a huge splintered opal, in their brilliance.

It glared down at Harley. The abyss of a mouth opened as though again giving vent to silent, infernal laughter. Then, with the noise of a landslide, the giant form settled slowly to the ground. The rock half-moons of curtains dropped over the expressionless, dull eyes.

The whole great figure quivered, and grew still. It lay without movement, stretched along the ground like a craggy, opalescent hill.

Dazed, stunned by such fantastic behavior, Harley struggled wearily to his feet. He had been a dead man as surely as though shot with a ray-gun. One twitch of those terrible rock pincers would have broken him in two pieces. It had seemed as though that deadly twitch were surely forthcoming. And then the thing had released him—and had lain down to go to sleep! Or was it asleep?

He took a few slow steps away from it, expecting to see the three great tentacles flash out to capture him as a cat claws at a mouse that thinks it is escaping. The arms didn't move. Astounding as it was, Harley was free to run away if he chose. Why was that?

A hint of a clue to the creature's action began to unfold in his mind. When he had first laid eyes on it, in daylight, it was asleep. It had not pursued him during the preceding day, which argued that again it was asleep. And now, with the first touch of dawn, it was once more quiet, immobile.

The answer seemed to be that it was entirely nocturnal; that for some obscure, unguessable reason sunlight induced in it a state of suspended animation. It seemed an insane theory, but no other

surmise was remotely reasonable.

But if it were invariably sunk in a coma during daylight, why had it delayed killing him just a moment ago? Its every act indicated that it possessed intelligence of a high order. It was more than probable that it realized its limitation—why hadn't it acted in accordance with that realization?

On thinking it over, he believed he had the answer to that, too. He remembered the way the gaping mouth had seemed to express devilish mirth. The thing was playing with him. That was all. It had saved him for another night of hopeless flight and infallible trailing through the forests of Z-40.

He gazed at the monster in a frenzy of impotent rage and fear. If only he could kill it somehow in its sleep! But he couldn't. In no way could he harm it. Secure in its silicate covering, it was impervious to his wildest attempts at destruction. And it knew it, too; hadn't it laughed just before sinking down to slumber through the asteroidal day?

With his Sco drill he might have pierced that silicon dioxide armor till he reached the creature's gritty flesh. Then he could have used his ray-pistol, possibly disintegrating all its vitals and leaving only an

empty rock shell sprawling hugely there in the trampled underbrush.

But he had neither drill nor pistol. The one had been wrecked by the monster; the other he had dropped in his madness of fright, after completely exhausting its power chamber.

Half crazed by the hopelessness of his plight, he paced up and down beside the great length of animated stone. Trapped on an asteroid—utterly unarmed—alone with the most pitiless, invulnerable creation Nature had placed in a varied universe! Could Hell itself have devised a more terrible fate?

Shuddering, he turned away. He had some two and a half hours of grace, before the sun should set again and darkness release the colossus from its torpor. There was only one thing he could do: place the diameter of the sphere between the thing and himself, and try to exist through another night of terror.

His hands went to his belt to adjust the gravity regulator strapped about his waist. By reducing his weight to an ounce or two, he could make the long journey possible for his fatigue-numbed muscles—

His hands clenched into fists, and his breath whistled between his set teeth as a wild hope came to him. The touch of the regulator had

brought inspiration. A way to defeat the gigantic creature stretched on the ground beside him! A way to banish it forever from the surface of this lovely little world where all was perfect but the monstrous thing with which it was cursed!

Trembling with the reaction wrought in him by the faint glow of hope, he began to race toward the lake and his wrecked Blinco Dart. It wasn't hard to find the way; the rock giant had left a trail as broad as a road; trees broken off like celery stalks, bushes smashed flat, tracks that looked like shallow wells sunk into the firm ground. Fifty yards to a step, he leaped along this path, praying that one object, just one bit of machinery in the Dart had escaped the general wreckage.

Arrived at the little shell at last, he was forced to pause a moment and compose himself before he could step into the battered interior. Everything hinged on this one final chance!

Drawing a long breath, he entered the cabin and made his way to the stern repellor. A groan escaped his lips. It was ruined. Evidently the thing had reached in the man-hole opening with one of its three mighty tentacles, and, with sure instinct, had fastened its stone claws on the repellor housing. At any rate, it was ground to bits. But—there was the bow repellor.

He went to that, and the flame of hope came back to his eyes. It was untouched! He threw back the housing to make sure. Yes, the inter-sliding series of plates, that reversed or neutralized gravitational attraction at a touch, were in alignment.

He bent to the task of disconnecting it from the heavy bed-plate to which it was bolted, his fingers flying frenziedly. Then back to the torpid colossus he hurried, clutching the precious repellor tight in his arms lest he should drop it, walking carefully lest he should fall with it.

There he was faced by a new difficulty that at first seemed insurmountable. How could he fasten the repellor to that great, impenetrable, opalescent bulk?

A second time he bounded back toward the Dart, to return with the heavy bow and stern bed-plates from its hull.

Once more the orange ball of the sun was sinking low. The terrible brevity of those three-hour days! He had less than ten minutes, Earth time, in which to work.

One of the thing's arms, or tentacles, was pointing out away from the parent mass. It was twice the diameter of his body, and was

ponderously heavy; but by rigging a fulcrum and lever device, with a stone as the fulcrum and a tough log as the lever, he managed to raise it high enough to thrust one of the bed-plates under it. The other massive metal sheet he laid across the top.

The lower rim of the sun touched the horizon. A tremor ran through the colossus. In frantic haste, racing against the flying seconds, Harley clamped the two plates tight against the columnar tentacle with four long hull-bolts from the Dart. He set the repellor in position on the top bed-plate, and began to fasten it down.

He felt another tremor run through the stone column on which he was squatting. With a rasping sound, one of the half-moon rock-curtains the thing had for eyelids blinked open and shut. He shot the last bolt into place and tightened it.

The stone claws, just behind which he had fastened the repellor, ground savagely shut. The great tentacle began to lift, and carried him with it—toward the chasm of a mouth. That chasm opened wide....

Harley straightened up and jumped for the ground. As he jumped, he kicked the repellor control bar hard over.

There was a shrieking of wind as though all the hurricanes in the universe were battling each other. He felt himself turned over and over, buffeted, torn at, in a mad aerial whirlpool. The whirlpool calmed as the abruptly created vacuum, caused by the monster's rapid drive upward, passed after it into space. Far overhead there was one fleeting glimpse of a pinpoint of dull opalescence reflecting the rays of the dying sun. Then the pinpoint disappeared in fathomless space. With his gravity regulator adjusted to the point where it almost neutralized his weight, he fell slowly back toward the ground....

Almost immediately after he had landed in the darkness that blanketed the surface of the planetoid, a big space yacht settled down near him. A searchlight bored a hole in the blackness, to bathe him in cold light. Down the beam came a band of men from Earth, pushing atomic cannon and gazing apprehensively about them. In the lead was an elderly man with the six-bar dollar-mark insignia of a business executive on his purple tunic.

He hastened to Harley's side. Harley only dimly heard what he said. Something to the effect that the man had been worried after selling the fatal asteroid. Had got in touch with the Radivision Corporation and learned that this call number was dead. Had come with men and big guns to rescue him, if it wasn't too late, and take him back to

Earth. Had cruised for half an hour before locating him. "I've been calling myself a murderer ever since I let you have Z-40, Mr. 2Q14N20," he concluded. "I was sure we'd get here only to find you'd been killed. But I see you've managed to escape from the creature so far—though by the look of you, it must have been a narrow shave."

At this Harley shook off some of the gathering dizziness that hazed his mind. He threw back his shoulders. "Managed to escape? I did better than that. I got rid of the thing forever! Yes, I'll return to Earth with you, but only because I need a new Blinco Dart. I'm coming back to Z-40 at once. Perfect little paradise, now that I've got rid of that—animated—rock pile—"

The belated rescuers caught him as he collapsed.

112 Hawk Carse by Desmond Winter Hall

One of the spectacular exploits of Hawk Carse, greatest of space adventurers.

Aproximate word count: 18,400

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Chapter 1: The Swoop of the Hawk

One of the spectacular exploits of Hawk Carse, greatest of space adventurers.

Hawk Carse came to the frontiers of space when Saturn was the frontier planet, which was years before the swift Patrol ships brought Earth's law and order to those vast regions. A casual glance at his slender figure made it seem impossible that he was to rise to be the greatest adventurer in space, that his name was to carry such deadly connotation in later years. But on closer inspection, a number of little things became evident: the steadiness of his light gray eyes; the marvelously strong-fingered hands; the wiry build of his splendidly

proportioned body. Summing these things up and adding the brilliant resourcefulness of the man, the complete ignorance of fear, one could perhaps understand why even his blood enemy, the impassive Ku Sui, a man otherwise devoid of every human trait, could not face Carse unmoved in his moments of cold fury.

His name, we know, enters most histories of the period 2117-2148 A. D., for he has at last been recognized as the one who probably did most—unofficially, and not with the authority of the Earth Government—to shape the raw frontiers of space, to push them outward and to lay the foundations of the present tremendous commerce between Earth, Vulcan, Pluto, Neptune, Uranus, Saturn and Jupiter. But, little of his fascinating character may be gleaned from the dry words of history; and it is Hawk Carse the adventurer, he of the spitting ray-gun and the phenomenal draw, of the reckless space ship maneuverings, of the queer bangs of flaxen hair that from a certain year hid his forehead, of the score of blood feuds and the one great feud that jarred nations in its final terrible settling—it is with that man we are concerned here.

A number of his exploits never recorded are still among the favorite yarns spun by lonely outlanders in the scattered trading posts of the planets, and among them is that of his final encounter with Judd the Kite. It shows typically the cold deadliness, the prompt repaying of a

blood debt, the nerveless daring that were the outstanding qualities of this almost legendary figure.

It began one crisp, early morning on Iapetus, and it ended on Iapetus, with the streaks of ray-guns searing the air; and it explains why there are two square mounds of soil on Iapetus, eighth satellite of Saturn.

Carse pioneered Iapetus and considered its product his by right of prior exploration. One or two men had landed there before he came to the frontiers of space and reported the satellite habitable, possessed of gravital force only slightly under Earth's, despite its twelve-hundred-mile diameter, and of an atmosphere merely a trifle rarer; but they had gone no further. They had noticed the forms of certain strange animals flitting through the satellite's jungles, but had not investigated. It was Carse who captured one of the creatures and saw the commercial possibilities of the pointed seven-inch horn that grew on its head, and who named it phanti, after the now extinct Venusian bird-mammal.

There were great herds of them, and they constituted Iapetus' highest form of life. The space trader cut off a few of their opalescent and green-veined horns and sent them as samples to Earth; and, upon their being valued highly, he two months later established his ranch on Iapetus, and thus laid the foundation for the grim business that

men sometimes call the Exploit of the Hawk and the Kite.

No doubt Carse expected trouble over the ranch. To protect the valuable twice-yearly harvest of horn from Ku Sui's several bands of pirates, and other semi-piratical traders who roamed space, he built a formidable ranch-house with generators for powerful offensive rays and a strong defensive ray-web, and manned it with six competent men. Moreover, he came personally twice a year to transport the cargo of horn, and let it be known throughout the frontiers that the sign of the Hawk was on that portion of Iapetus, and that all who trespassed would have to answer to him. This should have been, ordinarily, enough. But there was always the sinister, brilliant Dr. Ku Sui, plotting against him and his belongings, and reckless others to whom the ranch might look like easy pickings. From these Carse had long anticipated a raid on Iapetus.

And now he was worried. Clad as usual in a faded blue tunic, open at the neck, soft blue trousers and old-fashioned rubber soled shoes, he showed it by pulling occasionally at the bangs of flaxen hair that had been trained to hang down his forehead to the thick, straw-colored eyebrows. In his new cruiser, the Star Devil, he was within an hour's time of Iapetus, which lay before the bow observation ports of the control cabin like a giant buff-tinted orange, dark-splotched by seas and jungles, on the third of his semi-annual voyages for the

harvest of horn. Away to the left, scintillating and flaming in the blackness of space, whirled Saturn, his rings clear-cut and brilliant, his hard light filling the control cabin. Carse was staring unseeingly at the magnificent spectacle when the giant negro standing nearby at the space-stick rumbled:

"Well, suh, Ah cain't think they's anything wrong—no, suh. They's nobody'd dare touch that ranch! No, suh—not Hawk Carse's ranch."

This was "Friday," the herculean black Earthling whom Carse had rescued years before from one of the Venusian slave-ships, and now a member of that strange trio of totally dissimilar comrades, the third of whom was Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow, now absent and at work in his secret laboratory. Friday thought the Hawk just about the greatest man in the Solar System, and many times already had he given proof of his devotion.

Carse looked full at him. "You're a good mechanic, Eclipse," he said, "but in some ways very innocent. Crane hasn't replied to us for seventy minutes. He knows we're coming and he should be on duty. That cargo's valuable, and it's all ready and packed."

"Hmff," Friday grunted. "But who you think'd dare try an' swipe it when we're so close? One o' Ku Sui's gang, maybe?"

"Perhaps. I haven't heard anything of Ku Sui for some time, and he's never more dangerous than when he keeps silent," said the Hawk thoughtfully. "But Crane might be sick. Or his radio might have broken down temporarily. Still—"

It was then that the third man in the cabin, Harkness, the navigator, straightened abruptly and put a sharp end to the trader's last word by calling out:

"Radio, sir!"

A red dot of light was winking on a switchboard. Friday watched the Hawk move in his quick, effortless way to it and pull a lever down, all in the same motion, and then the negro's neck muscles corded as he listened to the sounds that came, choking and barely intelligible, from a loudspeaker:

"Carse—Hawk Carse—Crane speaking from the ranch. We're besieged—pirate ship—outnumbered—can't hold out much longer. We got most of the cargo inside here, but our generators—they're weakening—and I'm fading, I guess, and the others that're left are wounded. Carse—hurry—hurry...."

Five words went back into the microphone before the receiver went

dead.

"I'm coming, Crane! Hold on!"

Friday had seen the Hawk in such moments before, and he knew the sight; but the navigator, Harkness, had not been with Carse very long, and now he stood silent, motionless, while despite himself a shiver ran down his spine as he stared at the tight-pressed bloodless lips and the gray eyes, cold now as space. He started nervously when the Hawk turned and looked him in the eye.

"I want speed," came his quiet, soft, deceptive voice. "I want that hour's running time sliced by a third. Streak through that atmosphere."

"Yes, suh!" answered Friday.

"And you"—to Harkness—"be very sure you get out every ounce she's got. Tell the engineer personally."

"Full speed. Yes, sir," said the navigator, and felt relieved when Carse turned his eyes away. For the Hawk, as always when he learned that property had been ravaged and his friends shot down, seemed less human than the Indrots at the far end of the frigid deeps

of space he roamed. His face was mask-like, graven, totally expressionless: blood had been shed, and for each ounce another had to be spilled to balance the scales. At a speaking tube that reached aft to the three other members of the crew, he whispered: "Fighting posts. Arm and be ready for action. Pirates are attacking ranch," and then went noiselessly to the forward electelscope. Meanwhile Friday kept his eyes strictly on the dials before him and held the space-stick rigid, while aft, in the ship's other compartments, three men strapped on ray-gun belts and wondered who was doomed to be caught in the swoop of the Hawk.

Carse himself wondered that. The raider so far showed as a newcomer to the frontiers of space; he was one who as yet had never faced the Hawk, one to whom the tales that were told of him seemed laughable, to whom the rich consignment of horn looked like a gift. Certainly such an open attack did not resemble Ku Sui's subtle methods, or those of his several henchmen, pirates of space all; they, rather, struck behind his back, and then only when the infamous Eurasian had prepared what seemed an escape-proof trap.

"Foolish to raid when I'm so close!" he murmured as he trained the electelscope and peered into its eye-piece. "Stupid! Unless ..."

Friday, at the space-stick, mopped the trickles of sweat from his

brow and with a vast sigh shifted his bulk. The job of speeding into an atmospheric pressure was always ticklish, and it was with some relief that he reported "Into th' atmosphere, suh," according to routine. He waited for the usual acknowledgment, and when it did not come repeated his observation in a louder voice. Two full minutes of silence passed. Then, finally, Hawk Carse turned from the electelscope, and even the negro shivered at sight of the deadly mask that was his face.

For the ranch-house in its clearing had dimly appeared in the electelscope just as Friday had spoken.

Carse spoke.

"More speed, if it burns us up," came his almost whispered words. "I want much more speed."

Harkness gulped. "Yes, sir," he said, and, moistening his lips, he returned to the engine-room. The frigid gray eyes swung back to the sight that was revealed on Iapetus.

The long, lean shape of a rakish space ship was resting on the soil some three hundred yards from the ranch-house, and between were the hazy figures of six men, busily dragging as many boxes towards

their craft. The boxes contained the whole half-year's harvest of phanti horns, and had obviously been looted from the house. The resistance had been overcome; the pirate raid had succeeded. The trim, gray-painted ranch-house was lifeless....

The Hawk switched off the electelscope. His colorless lips were compressed very tightly. "I'll take the helm," he said curtly to Friday. "Turn on the defensive web, and prepare all ray batteries."

"Yes, suh!" The negro's big, yellow-palmed hands worked dexterously among the instruments to his right; then, amidships, grew a shrill whine which keened upward in pitch. A few sparks raced by the Star Devil's after ports, quickly to disappear after they left the almost invisible envelope of delicate bluish light that entirely wrapped her hull.

She was making dangerous speed. The wind screamed as she streaked through the satellite's atmosphere, and the great friction of her passage raised her outer shell to a perilous glow. The altitude dial's finger almost jumped from forty thousand to thirty-five.

"Ready for bow-ray salvo."

"Aye, sir!" replied Harkness, and a moment later repeated crisply:

"All ready for bow-ray salvo, sir!" His voice showed no sign of the fear within him—fear that the Star Devil's outer hull would reach the melting point—but his lips fell apart and his face lost its discipline when the Hawk next spoke and acted.

"Steady," came the low whisper to his ears—and he saw the controlling space-stick being shoved down as far as it would go

Chapter 2: Pursuit

That was the Hawk's method, and it had given him the name which he had made famous. It was characteristic of the man that he preferred to strike at an enemy ship in a wild, breath-taking swoop, even as the fierce hawk plummets from high heaven to sink its talons deep into the flesh of its more sluggish prey. Nerves were uncomfortable things to have on such occasions, and Harkness had them, and accordingly he felt his heart hammer and something tight seemed to bind his throat. He tried to assume the unshakable calmness of the motionless figure at the stick, but could not, for his body was only flesh and blood—and Hawk Carse was tempered, frosty, steel. Through staring eyes the navigator watched the surface of Iapetus rushing into the bow ports, watched it spread accelerating outward, until he could plainly see the pirate ship lying there, and the nearby figures of men tugging at the heavy boxes of horns.

His eyes were on those figures when they broke. First they teetered hesitantly a moment, glancing wildly around and up at the vision of death that was coming like a silver comet from the skies, and then they melted apart. Three scrambled towards the rim of jungle foliage close at hand, while their fellows leaped in the other direction, trying to make an open port in their craft. Harkness saw them tumble headlong through it and slam it shut. Then a web of blue streaks

appeared around the ship, and softened until her hull was bathed is ghostly bluish light.

"Their defensive ray-web's on, sir!" he managed to gasp. Carse, though close, might not have heard, so intently was he watching. The altitude dial's pointer reached for one thousand and slid past. Harkness's face was pale and drawn; his tight-gripped fingers and clenched teeth showed that he expected to crash into the ground in a molten, shapeless tomb of steel. But Friday was grinning, his teeth a slash of white.

"Stand by bow projectors," sounded the Hawk's clipped voice. The negro extended his hands and rumbled:

"Ready, suh."

"Fire."

"Fire!" Friday roared.

His rich laugh rang out and he whirled the wheels over. With a hissing as of a hundred snakes, the rays struck.

Well aimed, the bolt speared straight and true. The distance was short, and it came from generators that were perhaps not equaled in

space; no ordinary ship's defensive web could resist its vicious thrust. From the streak of silver that represented the Hawk's swoop, a stream of orange cut a swathe through the air ahead, holding accurately on the brigand ship. For just a tick of time there was a turmoil of color as offensive ray met defensive web; then the air cleared again—and the pirate was unmarked!

By rights she should have been split in two; and, though his face did not show it, it must have been surprising to Carse that she wasn't. With one flick of the wrist he wrenched the Star Devil out of her plunge and sent her scudding, a hundred feet up, over the jungle rim. Friday was gaping. Harkness, still numb from the dive, foolishly staring; and then the brigand bared her fangs in return.

Orange light winked from her stern, and the Hawk's ship was bathed in a streak of color. But the bolt caromed harmlessly off the side of the arcing Star Devil! and the next instant the pirate's lean bulk swayed, lifted a little and zoomed up into the heavens, abandoning the boxes of horn without further fight.

"Runnin' foh it! Scared stiff!" muttered Friday, unholy joy in his gleaming eyes. He looked at the figure at the stick. "Follow 'em now, suh, an' wear out their projectors?"

Carse thoughtfully smoothed his bangs with his free hand. "Plenty of time for that," he said patiently. "Some of the men on the ranch may still be alive: we must care for them. I'm going to land. Tell the engineer to keep watch through the electelscope on that ship. I'll start overtaking it shortly."

"Funny our rays didn't ha'm 'em," Friday ruminated aloud. "Ain't no ordinary craft, that. No, suh, they's more in this heah business than hits yo' eyes!"

"Now you're getting cynical, Eclipse," the Hawk said dryly.

A quarter-mile-square block of land had been fenced off as a corral for the ninety-head herd of bull phantis Carse kept on Iapetus. These creatures resembled mostly the old ostrich of Earth, but grew no feathers. The neck, however was shorter than the ostrich's; the leathery skin of a drab gray color; the powerful hind feet, on which they stood erect, prehensile and armed with short stabbing spurs; the forearms short and used for plucking the delicate shoots and young leaves on which they lived. There was a dim flicker of rudimentary intelligence inside the bullet heads; they recognized men as their enemies, and hated them. And therefore they necessitated careful handling, for, even without the valuable head-horns, their sharp-spurred feet could rip a human being into shreds in seconds.

They were clustered now behind the wire corral-fence, electrified to prevent them from breaking through. They bellowed angrily and shoved each other about as their wicked little blood-shot eyes caught sight of the Star Devil as she came dropping gently down.

At the electelscope of the descending craft was the ship's engineer. He had just centered the instrument on the fleeing pirate craft that by now was leaving the satellite's atmosphere, and the image was large on the screen above the bow windows, where he kept a steady eye on it. The inner door of the port-lock swung open, the outer door down, and Carse walked through, followed by Friday and Harkness.

An ugly scene lay spread out before them in the glaring daylight. The trader had only gone a few paces when he paused and looked down at an outsprawled thing that had once been a man. Stooping, he very gently turned the mess of charred flesh over and peered at what was left of the face. There were small, burnt holes in it, and the flesh surrounding them looked as though it had been suspended for some time over a slow fire....

Carse rose and stared into space.

"Ruthers, a guard," he said softly, as if speaking to himself. He walked on.

Another heap of flesh was pitched before the front wall of the ranch-house. The man it had been a little while before had evidently been running for the door when the deadly rays had got him. His ray-gun was lying a few feet away. Again Carse stooped and again very gently pulled the ragged thing over.

"By God!" stammered Harkness suddenly, staring, his face white, "that—that's Jack O'Fallon—old Jack O'Fallon! Why, we went to navigation school together! We—"

"Yes," said the Hawk, "O'Fallon, overseer." He stepped into the house. Friday, impassive and grim, pulled Harkness away from the distorted body.

Three more were tumbled together behind a splintered table in the main room. The rays had done their work well. Three were welded, it seemed, into one.... It was some time before the Hawk's frigid whisper came.

"Martin ... Olafson ... and this—Antil ... Antil was the only Venusian I ever liked...."

The chairs and tables in the room were overturned, most of them bore the seared scars of ray-guns, which showed plainly enough that

there had been a desperate last minute hand-to-hand struggle there, after the defensive ray-web had failed and the pirates rushed the building. The radio alcove was choked with seared, cracked wreckage. Crane, the operator, still sat in his seat, but he was slumped over forward, and his head and chest were pitted with slanting ray holes. One hand had been reaching for a dial. The other was twisted and charred.

"And Crane, the last," said Hawk Carse, and for some moments he stood there, his face cold and unmoving save for the tiny twitching of the left eyelid. Utter silence rested over the bitter three—a silence broken only by the occasional roar of an angry phanti bull outside in the enclosure.

Finally Carse took a deep breath and turned to Friday.

"You'll see to their burying," he ordered quietly. "Get the power ray from the ship and burn out two big pits on that knoll off the corner of the corral."

Friday looked at him in puzzlement. "Two, suh?" he repeated. "Why two? Why not put 'em all in one?"

"You will put all my men in one. I'll need the other later.... You," he

went on, to Harkness, "get the cargo of horns aboard. We can't leave it out there, for three of those pirates fled into the jungle. I haven't time to find them, and they'd come out and bury the horns if we left them. I'll be with you soon. We take off in ten minutes."

"Yes, sir," answered the navigator, and he and the negro went out.

For a little while Carse stayed in the cubby. As he softly stroked the flaxen bangs of hair over his brow, he visualized what had happened inside that house of death, piecing a number of things together and forming a whole. On the surface it seemed plain enough, and yet there were one or two points.... His face showed a trace of puzzlement. He shook his head slightly; then he stooped and picked up the radio operator's body with an ease that might have seemed surprising from such a slender man, and walked out of the house.

Beyond one corner of the corral, upon a slight rise in the ground, Friday was melting out the second grave with the ship's great portable ray-gun. Carse laid Crane's body gently down in the first grave, then went to where Harkness, with the Star Devil's radio-man and cook, was loading the cargo of horns aboard. The trader opened several of the boxes, glanced at the upper layers to inspect the quality, and, satisfied, closed them again. All the boxes were trundled soon into the craft's open port and aft to her cargo hold.

The engineer on watch at the electelscope and visi-screen felt a hand on his shoulder and looked around to find his captain standing by him. He pointed up at the screen: on it, the brigand ship was a mere four inches in size, and bearing straight out on an unwavering course. "I reckoned their speed to be about ten thousand an hour, a minute ago, sir," he reported. "Now about five thousand miles away."

"How soon," Carse asked, "do you think we could overhaul them?"

The other grinned. "If you're in a hurry, sir, about two hours and a half."

"I am in a hurry. I want all the speed you can muster."

"Yes, sir. Might be able to get it down, to two."

The Hawk nodded. "Try. Return to your post."

Outside, through the port, he saw Friday smoothing over the grave, the burying finished, and he beckoned him in. At that second Harkness reported the cargo all fastened down. Carse snapped out his orders.

"Harkness," he said shortly, "you and Friday with me in the control

cabin. Sparks, you can get an hour's sleep, but leave the radio receiver open. Cook, an hour's rest if you want it—and I think you'd better want it. There's war ahead. Close port!"

The inner and outer doors nestled snugly, one after the other, into place with a hiss; the rows of gravity plates in the ship's belly angled ever so slightly. She quivered, then, in a surge of power, lifted straight up and poised; then, answering the touch of space-stick and accelerator, she went streaking through the atmosphere on the trail of the distant craft that had left its mark of blood on Iapetus and provoked the vengeance of the Hawk....

Chapter III

Death Rides the Star Devil

Usually, when pursuing an enemy, Hawk Carse was impassive and grim, apparently emotionless, icy. But now he seemed somehow disturbed.

He fidgeted around, glancing occasionally at the visi-screen to make sure his quarry was not changing course, now watching Friday juggle through the skin of atmosphere into outer space, and now standing apart, silent and solitary, brooding.

There was something about the affair he didn't like. Something that was deeply hidden, that could not be grasped clearly; that might, on the other hand, be pure imagination. And yet, why—

Why, for instance, had the brigands taken to their heels with just the barest semblance of fight? Why, with their defensive ray-web proof for some time at least against his offensive rays, had they left without more of a struggle for the horn? Why were they so willing to flee, knowing as they must that he, the Hawk, would follow? Did they not know he had—thanks to Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow—the fastest ship in space, and would inevitably overtake them?

Were they Ku Sui's men? It seemed so, certainly, from the great strength of their defensive ray-web. No other ships that he knew of in space save Ku Sui's possessed such power. But—it wasn't the brilliant Eurasian's customary style. It was too simple for him.

Carse stroked his bangs. The factors were all mixed up. He didn't like it.

Iapetus' atmosphere was left behind; in minutes the light blue wash of her sky changed to the hard, frigid blackness of lifeless space. The Star Devil's lighting tubes glowed softly, though Saturn's rays, coming through the wide bow windows, still lit every object in the

control cabin with hard and dazzling brilliancy. Inside, light and color, life and action; outside, the eternal, sable void, sprinkled with its millions of sparkling motes of worlds. And ahead—shown now on the visa-screen only by the light dots of its ports—was the brigand craft.

The Star Devil was smoothly building up the speed that would eventually bring her up to the craft of the enemy. Carse's Earth-watch told him that an hour and a half had passed. A vague anxiety oppressed him, but he shook it off with the thought that soon the time for accounting would arrive. Only forty minutes more; probably less. His fears—foolish. He was getting too suspicious....

Then came the voice.

It pierced through the control cabin from the loudspeaker cone above the radio switchboard. It was rough and mocking. It said:

"Hawk Carse? Hawk Carse? You hear me?" Many times it repeated this. "Yes? You hear me, Hawk Carse? I've a joke I want you to hear—a very funny joke. You'll enjoy it!" There interrupted the staccato sounds of an irrepressible amusement.

Carse froze. His fingers by habit fluttered over his ray-gun butt as he

wheeled and looked into the loudspeaker. Friday, at the space-stick, stared at him; Harkness's face was puzzled as he peered at the loudspeaker and then turned and gazed at his captain.

"But where," he asked, "—where does the voice come from? Who is it?"

As if thinking aloud, Carse whispered:

"From that ship ahead. I half expected ... I know it well, that voice. Very well. It's the voice of ... of ... I can't quite place it.... In a minute.... The voice of—"

The chuckling ceased, and again the voice spoke.

"Yes—a very funny joke! I can't share it all with you, Carse, because you'd spoil it. But do you remember, some years ago, five men—and another who lay before them? Do you remember how this last man said: 'Each one of you will die for what you've done to me?' That man didn't wear bangs over his forehead then. Remember? Well, I'm one of the five the mighty Hawk Carse swore he would kill!"

Again the voice broke into a chuckle.

But it ended suddenly. The tone it changed into was entirely

different, was cruel with a taunting sneer.

"Bah! The avenging Hawk! The mighty Hawk! Well, in minutes, you'll be dead. You'll be dead! The mighty Sparrow Carse will be dead!"

A brief eternity went by. Carse remembered, and the glint in his gray eyes grew colder.

"Judd the Kite," he whispered.

Friday's lips formed the words.

And even Harkness, new to the frontiers of space, knew the name and echoed it haltingly.

"Judd the Kite...."

Of all the henchmen Dr. Ku Sui had gathered about him and banded against Earth, and against Carse, and against all peaceful traders and merchant-ships, Judd was perhaps the most cruel and relentless.

The Kite he was called—though only behind his back—yet it might better have been Vulture. Big and gross, with thick unstable lips and stubby, hairy fingers, more than once he and his motley gang of hi-

jackers had painted a crimson splash across the far corners of the frontiers, and daubed it to the tortured groans of the crews of honest trading ships. Often they had plunged on isolated trading posts and left their factors wallowing in their life blood. And more....

There are things that cannot be set down in print, that the carefully edited history books only hint at, and into this class fell many of the Kite's deeds. He was a master of the Venusian tortures. He and his band during the unspeakable debauches which always followed a successful raid would amuse themselves by practising certain of these tortures on the day's captives; and his victims, both men and women, would see and feel indescribable things, and Death would be kept most carefully away until the last ounce of life and pain had been squeezed quite dry.

"Judd the Kite," Carse repeated in a hardly audible whisper. "Judd the Kite ... one of the five...." Slowly his left hand rose and smoothed his long bangs of flaxen hair. "I have been looking for him."

"Will you reply to him, sir?" asked Harkness.

"What use? His trap—Ku Sui's trap, of course—has already been set." His brain raced. "What could it be?" he whispered slowly.

Friday was scratching his woolly hair, his smooth face puzzled, when Carse, with the crisp decisiveness that always came to him when in action, looked up at the visi-screen. The brigand was still clinging to a straight course, and being overhauled rapidly. Another thirty minutes and they would be within striking distance. He said tersely:

"Set up the defensive web. Spiral and zig-zag the ship all you dare, altering the period of the swing each time. Harkness, you and I are going to make an inspection tour. General alarm if Judd's course changes, Friday."

"Yes, suh." The negro, frowning, gave his undivided attention to his instruments as the Hawk and Harkness went aft into the next compartment, the engine room.

It looked quite normal. The great dynamos were humming smoothly; the air-renewing machine was functioning steadily; the gauge hands all slept or quivered in their usual places. Nothing uneven in the slight vibration of the ship; nothing that might possibly forbode trouble. Up on his perch, the engineer peered down curiously and asked:

"Anything wrong, sir?"

"Not yet," Carse answered shortly. "You're sure everything is regular here?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. But check every vital spot at once—and quickly. Then keep alert."

They passed on into the following compartment, the mess-room and sleeping quarters for the crew. Solid, rhythmical snores were issuing from the cook's open mouth as he lay sprawled out on his bunk; the smell of coffee hovered in the air; the cabin was quiet and comfortable with an atmosphere of sleep and rest. The radio-man, reading in his bunk, looked over and, seeing it was Carse, sat up.

"Notice anything wrong?" he was asked.

"Wrong? What—Why, no, sir. You want me for duty?"

"Yes. Stay here and keep your eyes open for signs of trouble. I'm expecting some. General alarm if the slightest thing happens." And Carse went noiselessly into the last division of the ship.

This was the cargo hold. The boxes of phanti horns were neatly stacked in precise rows; the dim tube burning overhead showed

nothing that gave the smallest cause for alarm. The Hawk's narrowed eyes swept walls, deck and ceiling in a search for signs of strain or buckling, but found none.

Then he let himself down into the ship's belly, in the three-foot-high space between the deck and the bottom outer hull. He found the three rows of delicately adjusted gravity plates in good order. Harkness joined him.

Their hand-flashes scanned every inch of the narrow compartment as they made the under-deck passage from stem to bow and up through the forward trap-door into the control cabin. They found nothing abnormal. The water and fuel tanks, built in the space between the inner and outer shells above the living quarters, also yielded nothing; likewise the storeroom.

Nothing. Nothing at all. The whole ship was in excellent condition. Everything was working as it should. Carse went forward again with Harness; turned and faced him with puzzled eyes.

"I can't understand it," he said. "Why that threat, when everything seems all right? How can Judd reach me to kill me? And in minutes?"

The navigator shook his head. "It's beyond me, sir."

The Hawk shrugged his shoulders. "Well, we'll see. It might be something altogether new. You report to the engine-room and keep on watch there. Any sound or sign, give the general alarm."

"Yes, sir," he said, and left.

"He talkin' foolish, that Judd," grumbled Friday, seeing that the search had been fruitless. "He think maybe he can bust through our ray-web? Hmff!"

His master said nothing. He was standing motionless in the center of the cabin, waiting—waiting for he knew not what.

Then it came.

A preparatory sputter from the loudspeaker that spun Friday around. Hawk looked up, tensed. Again sounded the hard, sneering voice of Judd the Kite.

"We're ready now, Carse: there was a little delay. I'll give you, say, five seconds. Yes—one for each of the five men you did not kill. Shall I count them off? All right. You have till the fifth.

"One."

Friday's big eyes rolled nervously; he wiped a drop of sweat from his brow and cursed.

"Two."

He glanced at the Hawk, and tried himself to assume the unshakable steely calm of the great adventurer. But his fists would clench and unclench as he stared up at the visi-screen. No change! The brigand was running straight ahead as ever, apparently fleeing.

"Three."

The negro's breath came more quickly; the tendons of his neck stood sharply out, and his powerful arms twitched nervously. "What's he goin' to do, suh? What's he goin' to do?" he asked hoarsely. "What's he goin' to do?"

"Four."

"Change course—a-starboard!" Carse rapped. The space-stick moved a little, all Friday dared, at their speed; the position dials swung; the dot of a fixed star that had been visible a moment before through the bow windows was now gone. Till the fifth, Judd had

said.

"Five!"

The two men in the control cabin of the Star Devil peered at each other. One of them licked his lips and wiped the sweat from his brow. But there was nothing. No sound, no change. No general alarm bell. No offensive ray spearing across the reaches of space; no slightest change in the brigand's course. He who had mopped the sweat away laughed loud and long in overwhelming relief.

"All foolishment!" he gurgled. "That Judd, he crazy. Try to scare us, I guess—huh! Try to—"

"What's that?" whispered Hawk Carse.

A sudden faint rustle of noise, of movement, had breathed through the ship.

At first it was hardly discernible; but it grew. It grew with paralyzing rapidity into a low but steady murmur, blended soon with voices raised in quick cries. There was one piercing, ragged shriek, and all the time an undertone of the indefinite, peculiar sound of something rustling, creeping, growing.

Then came the harsh jangle of the general alarm bell.

"Space-suits!" Carse snapped. The alarm was the signal to put them on; it was a safeguard from a possible breach in the ship's walls. Against such an emergency they had drilled often, and all over the ship the crew would be springing rapidly into space-suits hanging ready.

The space-stick automatically locked as Friday, eyes rolling, leaped with his master to the nearby locker. The shriek from aft had quickly died, the alarm bell had snapped off; but now there came a frantic rush of feet, and a man tumbled through into the control cabin, his face white, his eyes stark with horror, his breath coming in gasps and the sweat of fear on his brow.

It was Harkness.

He slammed the door tight shut behind him and stumbled to the suit locker; and as his fingers fumbled at his suit with the clumsiness of panic, he stammered:

"The cargo—the boxes of horn—it came from aft! Fungus! Planted in the horn! It's filling the ship! Got all the others and grew—grew on them! Dead already. There—look, look!"

Carse and Friday, grotesque giants in the bulky sheathings of stiff, many-plied fabric, turned as one and peered through their quartzite face shields to where the navigator's bulging eyes directed them.

It was the door between control cabin and engine room—the door he had just slammed shut. At first nothing was visible; then they saw the van of the enemy that had swarmed through the ship.

A thin line of bright yellow color had appeared along the under crack of the door. A second later the door was rimmed on all sides with it. It grew; reached out. Energy flowed through it: fingers of dusty yellow pronged out from the cracks where the door fitted, hung wavering for a moment, melted together, then slumped to the floor to more quickly continue the advance. It increased marvelously, in minor jerks of speed. It was delicate in texture, mold-like. The more there became, the faster it grew: in seconds shreds of it had darted out from the main mass and affixed themselves to the walls and ceiling of the cabin, there to accelerate the horrible filling process.

All this happened more quickly than it can be related. Within ten seconds most of the cabin was coated by the yellow stuff; grotesquely formed clumps and feathers hung from the ceiling; fern-like fingers kept spurting everywhere. Friday stepped back, before the advance, but not the Hawk. Useless to try and evade the stuff, he

knew, and he was fairly positive that there was no immediate danger: the tough fabric of the suits should resist it. A pseudopod-like surge flicked to his leg; crept up; cloaked the suit in patches of yellow; thickened and enveloped him. But it could not pierce through.

"Cap'n Carse! Look heah!"

He turned to the alarmed voice, brushing light, feathery particles of yellow from his face shield, and found the bulky giant that was Friday a few steps behind him, and pointing mutely at Harkness.

The young officer was slumped limply down against a wall, his legs sprawled and body twisted unnaturally. His suit was covered with the yellow, and he had fallen, silently, while they were watching the advance of the fungus and checking the fastenings of their suits.

Carse reached him in three steps, stooped, brushed the fungus off the face-shield and peered through. Friday looked over his shoulder. The yellow enemy had laid its deadly fingers on Harkness's fine pale face. Sprouts of yellow trailed from the nostrils; the mouth was a clump of it; tendrils of spongy substance had climbed out the ears and were still threading rapidly over the head, even as the Hawk and Friday watched.

"That's how the others died," the adventurer said slowly. "Harkness must have carried a bit of the stuff from aft. It was on him when he put on his suit. At least I hope so. If it can get into these suits...." He left the thought unfinished.

"You mean, suh," asked Friday haltingly, "you mean that maybe—maybe it'll get in our suits too?"

"Maybe," said Carse without emotion.

They waited.

Chapter IV

The Hawk Prepares a Surprise

Hawk Carse's icy poise in times of emotional stress never failed to amaze friends and enemies alike. Most of them swore he had no nerves, and that in that way he was not human. This estimate, of course, is foolish; Carse was perhaps too human, as was proved by the all-consuming object of his life. It was rather, probably, an inward vanity that made him stand composed as a statue while death was gnawing near; that had, once, led him actually to file his nails when apparently trapped and hotly besieged, with the wicked hiss of

ray-guns all around.

And so he stood within his suit now—calm, quite collected, his face graven, while the yellow tendrils carpeted the whole cabin, penetrated between the twin banks of instruments on each side and clouded the bow windows, visi-screen and positionals until the two living men aboard that ship of death were completely shut off from outside vision. Friday, his large white eyes never for a moment still, and waiting as the Hawk was waiting to find whether or not their suits, too, harbored the fungus, could quite easily have been scared into a state of panic; but the sight of the steely figure near him eased his nerves and brought a vague kind of reassurance.

Minutes went by. Presently the Hawk said softly into his microphone:

"We're safe, now, I think. You'd better go aft and see what state the ship's in. Come right back." And as Friday left, wading through the clinging growth, the trader went to the eye-piece of the electelscope.

He brushed the puffy covering of yellow silt away and adjusted the instrument's controls as best he could, centering it on where Judd's craft had last been. Then he peered through—and saw that which made him start.

The Star Devil was rolling round and round, like a ball!

Carse looked out on a star-studded panorama that was sweeping crazily by. Now the cloudy globe of Iapetus, which had just before lain far behind, came swinging into view, sliding rapidly from the bottom of his field of view to the top, and so out of sight again, to quickly give place to the flaming, ringed sphere of Saturn, which in turn passed away and left the star-spangled blackness of space. Then Iapetus once more. He snapped the electelscope off abruptly, and turned from it to see Friday come clumping back.

"Swept everything clean, suh," the negro reported gloomily. "That fungus's thick; cain't even see the men's bodies, it's so deep. It's that way, all over."

"It's down in the gravity propulsion plates too," Carse said shortly. "Their adjustment's been ruined by it, and we're out of control, turning over and over. I couldn't possibly see Judd. Well, we've got to go down to the plates and try and clean them."

It was a weird scene that faced him in the engine room. The complex instruments and machinery were draped with straggling ferns of yellow; up above, a solid clump some ten feet thick hung on the platform where the engineer usually stood—a living tomb. The usual

purr of the mechanisms was muffled and hushed. So fecund was the fungus that the path Friday had cleared in his passage aft was already filled, and Carse had to clear a new one. The growth was deep there, but still deeper in the next compartment.

It was practically a solid mass of yellow, for in it their invader had found food. It had fed well on the lockers of supplies and devoured all but the bones and clothing of the two men whom it had caught—radio-operator and cook. Carse fought on through this tough, clinging sea and came at last to the cargo hold, where, in the deck, was the man-hole that gave passage down to the 'tween-decks compartment where the rows of gravity propulsion plates were located.

Friday raised the cover with a wrench: then, preceded by the rays of their hand-flashes, they climbed down and wormed forward as best they could in their hampering suits, to the plates. They found they had lost their customary glitter beneath powdery coatings of yellow, sufficient to disturb their faint electric currents and microscopically adjusted angles. On hands and knees—for the compartment, though as wide as the ship's inner shell, was only three feet in height—the Hawk stopped and said:

"We might be able to get some use out of these plates if we can keep

the fungus brushed off. It's thin: let's try it."

But the yellow growth's vitality baulked them. Sweating from their awkward exertions inside the hot space-suits, they again and again brushed clean the plates with pieces of waste—only to see the feathery particles regather as quickly as they were cleared away. There wasn't more than an inch of the fungus, but that inch stuck. There was no removing it.

"No use, boss," gasped the negro, pausing breathless. "Cain't do it. Nothin' to do, I guess, but wait an' see what de Kite does. He'll sure want this ship and the horn."

"I know," his captain answered slowly. "He'll want this ship, for it's the fastest in space—but I can't understand how he'll board us. I'm going up and see what I can find out. You stay here. Try cleaning the plates again."

Up through the man-hole he went, and forward to the control cabin. And, as before, the electelscope's eye-piece held a surprise for him.

Somehow, the Star Devil's speed of wild tumbling had lessened. A moment later the reason appeared. As her bow dipped down and down, there slid across the field of view, about a mile away, the

lighted ports of another ship; and, from this other ship's nose there winked a spot of green, the beginning of a ray-stream which stabbed across the gulf to impinge on the Star Devil's bow. Carse could feel his craft steady as it struck. It was a gravital ray, with strong magnetic properties, which Judd was using to stop her turnings so he and his men could board!

Again and again the beam flashed across the Hawk's field of view, and he knew it was raying its mark neatly each time her bow swung abeam, for soon she was hardly turning at all. Then Judd evidently was satisfied. The port-lights of his ship veered aside; drew to a position abreast of the other. The two cold gray eyes that watched saw the outer port-lock door of the pirate open, revealing six figures, clad in space-suits and connected by a rope, that stepped out, pushed, and came floating towards the Star Devil.

Swiftly Carse moved. For many reasons it was useless, he rapidly decided, to try and surprise them as they boarded; there was a better and surer way. And, as always, he attended to every little detail—details that to others might have seemed trivial—of this preferred way.

With quick, strong fingers he removed the fungus-choked body of Harkness from its space-suit, and threw the suit into a nearby locker.

From another locker he selected a loop of yellow-encrusted rope. Holding this over one arm, he made his way back rapidly to the aft man-hole, closed it carefully behind him and crept forward to the anxious negro who was still futilely dusting the plates. He told what he had seen, but nothing else.

Friday noted the rope, and he twisted his whole body to get a sight of Carse's gray eyes, through the face-shield.

"What we do, then, suh?" he asked. "Try an surprise 'em?"

"Can't do that; we'd still be helpless, without a way to remove this fungus. They probably know how to do it, and we've got to give them a chance."

Puzzlement pricked the negro. "Then what you goin' to do with that rope?"

"You'll soon see," snapped Hawk Carse.

They waited.

It was hot and stuffy down in the belly of the ship, and also utterly black, for the trader had flicked off his hand-flash. Friday was unhappily possessed of an active curiosity; he wanted terribly to go

on with his questions and ask Carse what his plan was; but he did not dare, for he knew very well from past experience that the Hawk was impatient of detailing his schemes in advance. So he sat in silence, and sweated, and stared gloomily into the darkness, thinking uneasy thoughts.

True, he thought, Judd the Kite did not know that Carse and he were still alive; on the contrary, he was probably convinced that they were dead; but what good did that do? Surely it would have been better to have surprised the brigands when boarding, but Captain Carse was against that. And they were hopelessly outnumbered.

Friday remembered a tale told him once by a survivor of a trading ship Judd the Kite had destroyed. It wasn't a nice tale. The Kite, so the report ran, was diabolically ingenious with a long peeling knife, and could improvise with it for hours. Friday pursued the tack of thought, and then suddenly began to sweat in earnest. He recalled—horrible!—that Judd possessed a special dislike for colored gentlemen!...

"Oh, Lawd!" he groaned, unconsciously—to have a cold voice ring in his earphones.

"Quiet!" it snapped. "They're entering."

The negro threw a switch on his helmet so he could catch outside noises. His body tensed. From above, unmistakably, had come the hiss of the inner port-lock door opening. And again, moments later, the hiss echoed. Twice! The lock could hold three men at a time. That probably meant that all six had boarded. Friday turned in the darkness and peered at Carse.

The adventurer without warning flicked on his hand-flash. The beam fell on the parallel planes of the yellow-covered gravity plates. The negro, every nerve in him jumping from impatience and suspense, gazed at them, and suddenly straightened. The mold-like fungus which had prevented them from getting the ship into control was slowly melting away. It was dwindling into fine dust!

"Gas," came a soft whisper to him. "As I expected, Judd's cleaning it out with some sort of gas. But the plates won't work yet—not until they're polished bright." Unthinking, Friday raised his hand to his helmet fastenings. "Keep your face-shield shut!" he was ordered crisply. "The gas would be as fatal as the fungus."

Silence rested tensely over the two men, to be broken at last by the clump of feet proceeding aft on the deck above.

Carse switched off the light. His voice was but faintly audible.

"Coming down to clean off the dust. He'll have a flash. Hide behind the truss-work at your side, and when he gets here seize him by the neck. I'll be with you right away. I want no noise."

Friday saw a great light, and grinned in the confidence it brought him. Of course! That explained the rope. The plan was so simple it had escaped him. Already he felt cheerful. It was only mental worries, and never physical hazards, that unsettled him. He angled around the truss-work and shrank into as small a space as possible—which wasn't very small, as he still wore his bulky, clumsy suit.

The clump-clump of feet had died: now there came the sound of the man-hole aft being raised. A white beam pronged down into the darkness, felt around and flicked off. Boots clanged on the connecting ladder; reached the bottom. The light appeared again, lower now, and came slowly forward. Limned faintly against the reflected light was the outline of a crouching man's body.

He went to hands and knees and progressed carefully, his flash darting to left and right. Suddenly, in a certain light, the two who awaited his coming saw a swarthy, black-stubbled face in profile. He wore no space-suit! That meant, Friday reflected, that the brigands had cleared the ship of the gas in some way. It meant that they could get out of their own suits.

But they could not possibly do so at the moment. They heard the nearby pirate's breathing, a harsh oath as he stubbed a toe. The negro tightened his giant arms and held himself ready, his eyes steady on the black outline which signified his quarry. Then the pirate was close enough.

It was over in seconds. Rounding the truss, Friday caught the man in the armored crook of his arm. A startled croak preluded the thump of two bodies on the hull; there was the tinkle of a falling hand-flash and a slight squirming which was quickly stopped by a belting punch.

Then Carse was there in the darkness, looping his rope around the pirate's arms and legs—a difficult job when wearing a bulky space-suit in such cramped quarters. He used a bunch of waste for a gag and then hauled the captive to a girder farther forward and bound him sitting to it. By the time he had finished, Friday was out of his space-suit and asking:

"Shall I rub him out, suh? Best make sure of him."

"Never in cold blood," said the Hawk acidly. "You should know that well enough by now!

"Now, there should be five left above, and I think they'll send another down. We must get him, too. Get back where you were."

He took off his space-suit also: then, after minutes of silence, they heard voices upraised in argument coming from the control cabin. Once more came the sound of feet overhead; another flash bit down through the man-hole, and another man wriggled into the compartment. He was obviously uneasy and suspicious. He called:

"Jake! Hey, Jake! You there? Where the hell are you?"

Mumbling oaths, he advanced, his light ray weaving over every inch before him.

"What you doing, Jake? Where are you?"

Friday gathered his muscles, unhampered now by the restricting suit. But light must have been reflected by the round whites of his eyes, for the pirate suddenly stopped and called in sharp alarm:

"What's that? What's that there? You, Jake? Hey! I'll ray you—"

And that was all he said. Friday was too far away to reach him in time, but the Hawk was closer; he approached behind the brigand, crouched on silent cat's feet. Two powerful arms reached out and

tightened in a strangle hold—and two minutes later the second man was bound and gagged.

Carse loosened his ray-gun in its holster.

"Now we attack," he whispered. "Four to two are fair odds, I think. You go aft and wait by the man-hole; wait till you hear me call. Don't be seen—wait. And when I call, come at once."

"Yes, suh. You goin' forward 'tween the hulls?"

A curt nod answered him.

"Then up through that—"

"Don't ask so many questions!" the Hawk rasped crisply.

They separated.

Chapter V

The Hawk and the Kite

In the deck of the control cabin, between a bank of instruments and the starboard wall, was another man-hole that gave entrance from the

'tween hulls compartment to the cabin.

Only two men besides Carse knew of its existence. The adventurer for good reasons of his own had it built in; and so cunningly was its cover fitted on that its outlines were not visible.

Beneath it, now, on the three-rung ladder that led up from the lower shell, Hawk Carse waited.

He could hear quite clearly the angry, snarling voice of Judd the Kite, haranguing his men.

"Rinker, you go down and see what's wrong. Just because Jake and Sako don't come back right away, you guys seem to think the ship's haunted! Haunted! By Betelguese! A sweet bunch of white-livered cowards I've got for a crew—"

"Ah, lay off!" growled a deep, sullen voice. "I ain't scared, but this looks fishy to me. Something's wrong down there 'tween the hulls—damn wrong, I tell you. We only found four skeletons, an' four, ain't the full crew for a ship like this. There oughta to be a couple more somewhere. Carse, blast him! he's got nine lives. How do we know he was one of the four?"

Another spoke up, as Rinker evidently hesitated. "I say we all go down and investigate together."

"Stow it!" thundered Judd. "They didn't get their space-suits out, did they? Why, they hadn't a chance to escape—none of 'em. They were killed, every one, quick! And four's plenty to work this ship. Carse is dead, see, dead! This was one trick he didn't know—one time he couldn't worm out. He was clever, all right, but he couldn't quite stack up against me. I swore I'd get him and I did. He's dead!"

"Judd," said a low, clear voice.

The Kite whirled around. He stared. The hand-flash he was holding dropped to the deck with a clang. His hands went limp, and his voice was suddenly weak and dazed.

"My God—Carse! Hawk Carse!"

"Yes," a whisper answered. "Hawk Carse. And not dead."

It was a scene that might have puzzled a newcomer to the frontiers of space. Certainly there seemed to be nothing menacing about the slender figure that stood by the now open man-hole, both arms hanging easily at his sides; the advantage, on the contrary, appeared

to be all with the men whom he confronted. All but one was big, and each was fully armed with a brace of ray-guns and knives.

But, though there were four guns to one, they made no attempt to draw. For it was the Hawk they faced, the fastest, most accurate shot in all those millions of leagues of space, and in his two icy eyes was a menace that filled the control cabin with fine-drawn silence.

At last Judd the Kite opened his lips and wetted them.

"Where did you come from?" he stammered.

"No matter," came the answer from the thinly smiling mouth. "Friday!"

"Yes, suh!" boomed the big black's distant voice.

Judd's three men turned their heads and saw Carse's famous satellite step into the control cabin, a ray-gun in each capacious hand. He was all flashing white teeth, so wide was his grin.

"Well, well!" he chuckled. "Ain't this the pleasure! Certainly am pleased to meet old friends like this—yes, suh! Jus' drop in?"

But the Kite's head had not turned; he seemed not to hear Friday's

words; his eyes were held fascinated by Carse's. The attention of everyone came back to the two leaders.

"Ku Sui is in back of this?" asked the Hawk.

Judd licked his lips again. He had to spar for time: to divert for a while the vengeance he knew possessed the other's mind, so that he might find some chance, some loop-hole.

"That's right," he began eagerly, "it was Ku Sui. I had to do this, Carse: I hadn't any choice. He's got something on me: I had to go through with it. Had to!"

The Hawk's eyes were glacial; the ghost of a smile hovered once more around the corners of his lips.

"Go on," he said. "What was that fungus?"

"I don't know. Ku Sui developed it in his laboratory. He just gave me a sealed cartridge of the spores with instructions to raid your ranch, as you saw, and plant them in a drilled-out phanti horn. There was a simple mechanism in the cartridge that allowed us to release the spores by a radio wave from our ship. When I wanted them to grow I simply—"

"I see. A clever scheme," Carse said. "Quite up to Ku Sui's standard. The idea of those three men running for the jungle when I came down on Iapetus was to insure my taking the horn cargo aboard, of course. The raid was only incidental to your scheme to get me. And Crane, the radio operator, was dead when I received that S.O.S. It was faked, to bring me quickly for your schedule."

Judd stared at him. "How in hell did you know that? Damn you, Carse, you're—"

"Where," interrupted the adventurer coldly, "is Ku Sui?"

The pirate's eyes shifted nervously. "I don't know," he muttered.

"Where," came the steady question again, "is Ku Sui?"

The other licked his lips. His fingers clenched, unclenched, gripped tight. "I don't know!" he protested. His eyes widened as he saw the Hawk's left hand stir slightly, and he started as he heard the whip-like word:

"Talk!"

"Carse. I swear it! No one knows where he is. When he wants to see me personally, he comes out of darkness—out of empty space. I

don't know whether it's done by invisibility or the fourth dimension, but one moment his ship's not there; the next it is; I don't know where his base is; and if he knew I'd told you what I have, he'd—"

"How do you arrange your meetings, then?"

"They're always in a different place. The next is in seven days. I don't remember the figures: they're in the log of my ship."

Carse nodded. "All right. I believe you. And now—there are a few accounts to be settled."

During the few minutes the Hawk had questioned Judd, the brigand crew in the cabin had stood silent, their breath bated, their eyes watching fascinated. But now they started, and shifted uneasily. They suspected what was coming. The inexorable, seemingly inhuman adventurer went on emotionlessly:

"Six of my men were killed on Iapetus, treacherously, without a chance. Four more were slaughtered by the fungus. That's ten. Back up to your men, Judd."

Judd knew all too well what that order portended. He could not move. His cunning eyes protruded with fear as they shifted down

and riveted on the shabby holster that hung on Carse's left side. His breath came unevenly, in short, ragged gasps through parted lips.

"Back, Judd!"

The stinging, icy force of the voice jolted him back despite his will. One short retreating step after another he took, until at length he was standing with his three men against the side wall of the cabin, the dividing line between it and the engine room. Friday's guns were still covering the pirates.

"You goin' to shoot us down in cold blood?" one of them asked hoarsely.

The Hawk surveyed the speaker until the man shivered. Beneath their coldness, his gray eyes were faintly contemptuous.

"No—I leave that for yellow-streaked hi-jacking rats such as you. I'm going to give you a chance: more than a chance. Friday," he called.

"Yes, suh?"

"Do you want to come in on this?"

Without the slightest hesitation the negro answered, grinning:

"Yes, suh!"

"I thought you would. Come here alongside me, then sheathe your guns."

Friday did so. He stood in position beside his master, just in front of the opening that led below. The four brigands were some fifteen feet away. The two groups faced each other squarely.

"Good," whispered Carse.

They stood there, four men to two, deadly enemies; yet not one hand moved toward a ray-gun. Again, an outsider would have marveled why Judd, the numbers on his side did not draw and fire; why he waited; why his face was pale, his eyes nervous. But he knew too well what the least sign of a draw on his part would entail; he preferred to wait, to receive the advantage of the cold vanity in Carse which demanded, in gun-play, that the odds of numbers be against him. Perhaps this time that vanity would lead the Hawk a little too far. Perhaps even yet a loop-hole for strategy might appear.

So the Kite waited, but fear was strong within him.

"A little earlier," the Hawk's frigid voice went on, "there was some counting. To the number five. Remember, Judd? Well, since you managed so poorly before, perhaps you'll count again."

"You mean to count to five?"

"Yes. And on the fifth count, we draw and fire."

Judd's eyes narrowed, shifted, while thoughts clashed and meshed in his brain. Hawk Carse smiled icily.

"Is that clear?" he asked.

Judd said after a while:

"All right."

Friday noted one of the pirates: a brawny, black-browed giant almost as large as himself, and decided to go for him when the time came. He whispered this to Carse; then, keeping his gaze on the man, he stood ready.

"Begin, I'm waiting," reminded Hawk Carse.

The Kite crouched, drew a deep breath—but before his lips could

form the first count there was a quick, sharp stir of movement from the brigand to his right; Carse's left hand seemed to vanish; a hiss followed, a streak of wicked blue light. Friday grunted, not yet quite realizing what had happened; Judd, gaped at Carse's lowering weapon, then turned his eyes to the right—and choked out an oath.

The brawny giant by his side was standing, but his face was creased and puzzled. One hand was at a holster; the other grasped a gun—unfired. Accurate to an inch, between his eyebrows there had appeared is if by magic a neatly seared, round hole.

His knees crumpled. His gun clanged to the deck. His head bowed; he bent; he pitched forward, sprawled face downward. Then he quivered and lay still. A burnt odor was in the air....

"I'm still waiting, Judd," came an ironic whisper.

"My God!" stammered one of the pirate chief's two remaining men. "He's a devil. Fast as light!"

Judd's eyes had returned to the Hawk, and they still showed some of his reaction of surprise to what had happened, when a peculiar thing occurred. For a split second his gaze shot past Carse, took in something, then switched back again. And when he had done so his

face showed a faint but unmistakable feeling of relief.

This was old stuff to the Hawk, but he could not afford to take chances. Instantly he rapped:

"Look behind. Friday! Quick!"

The negro jerked his head around. He was too late. He had a glimpse of a man standing in the man-hole behind—a glimpse of a short steel bar that flashed to Carse's head in a vicious arc, and again to his own. He was rocked by pain is blackness came across his vision; and together, white man and black crumpled to the deck....

Chapter VI

Back to Iapetus

An indefinite time later Carse awoke to a trip-hammer of pain thudding through his head. He groaned a little, and tried to turn over in an effort to ease it. He found he could not. Then his eyes opened and he blinked up.

He found himself lying on the deck of the control cabin, near the after wall, and bound hand and foot with tightly strapped rope. Over him, looking down, was Judd the Kite, hands on his hips, a gloating

smile on his coarse lips, and in his eyes a look of taunting, exultant triumph. He drew back his foot and kicked the netted Hawk in the ribs. The trader made no sound; his pale face did not change, except to set a trifle more rigidly.

"Pretty easy the way my men got you, Carse," said Judd. "Seems to me you're just a damned fool with a big rep you don't deserve. You're too careless. You ought to know by now not to leave bound men in reach of high-powered cable. It cuts as good as an electric knife. Does your head hurt where you were hit?" Deliberately, still smiling, he rapped his foot brutally against Carse's head.

The trader said nothing. He glanced around, to get the situation clearly. Friday, he saw, was in the control cabin too, lying stretched out and bound as he was, but evidently still unconscious from the ugly, bloody welt on his head. One of Judd's men was at the ship's space-stick, another stood by her dials, occasionally glancing back at the prisoners and grinning; the two remaining pirates were apparently aft. The body of the one whom Carse had killed had been removed.

Through the port bow window, far out, he noticed a small spot, half black and half brilliant with the reflected light of Saturn: that would be the other space ship, the Kite's, on the same course as they. And

ahead was the large-looming sphere of Iapetus. The pirate was returning, then, to the ranch, probably to pick up his three men, and perhaps to leave a small crew to work it.

"Yes. I'm afraid this is the end of the Sparrow Hawk!" Judd sneered the name and laughed harshly. "A lot of people will be glad to hear it. There'll be a big reward for me, too, from Ku Sui. Head still bad?" And again he swung his leg and drove its heavy shoe into his captive's head.

Carse's lips compressed till they were colorless. He looked steadily at Judd's eyes and asked:

"What are you going to do with Friday and me?"

"Well," grinned the pirate, "I can't tell you definitely, but it's sure to be interesting. It'd suit me best if I could teach you a few little tricks with a peeling knife—the Venusians have some very neat ones, you know—and then perhaps burn you full of holes. Little holes, done with a mild needle-ray. But unfortunately I can't kill you personally, for Ku Sui will want to do that himself. You're worth a hell of a lot of money alive."

"I go to Ku Sui, then?"

"That's right. I'll hand you over when I have my rendezvous with him, seven days from now. Clever man, Ku Sui! Half Chinese, you know. He'll be tickled to get you alive."

A muscle in the Hawk's cheek quivered. Then he asked:

"And Friday?"

Judd laughed. "Oh, I don't much care; he's not worth anything. I'll throw him in with you for good measure, probably. How's the head?" Once more the foot swung.

Carse's gray eyes were as frigid as the snow caps of Mars. The left eyelid was twitching a little; otherwise his pale face was as if graven from stone.

"Judd," he whispered, so softly that his voice was almost inaudible. "I shall kill you very soon. I shall make it a point to. Very soon. Judd...."

The Kite stared at the pallid gray eyes. His lips parted slightly. And then he remembered that his captive was bound, helpless. He spat.

"Bah!" he snarled. "Just your old stuff, Carse. It's all over with you now. You'll be screaming to me to kill you when Ku Sui begins to

touch you up!" He guffawed, again kicked the man at his feet, and turned away.

Hawk Carse watched him walk to the forward end of the cabin; and, after a little while, he sighed. He could be patient. He was still alive, and he would stay alive, he felt. A chance would come—he did not know how or when; it perhaps would not be soon; it might not come until he had been delivered to Ku Sui, but it would arrive. And then....

Then there would be a reckoning!

The deceptively mild gray eyes of the Hawk were veiled by their lids.

Night had settled over the ranch by the time the Star Devil and Judd's accompanying ship were in the satellite's atmosphere. It was the rare, deep, moonless night of Iapetus, when the only light came from the far, cold, distant stars that hung faintly twinkling in the great void above. Occasionally, the tiny world was lit clearly at night by the rays of Saturn, reflected from one of the eight other satellites; and occasionally, too, there was no night, the central sun of the solar universe sending its distance-weakened shafts of fire to light one side of the globe while ringed Saturn gilded the other.

But this season was the one of dark, full-bodied nights; and it was into the hush of their blackness that the Star Devil and her attendant brigand ship glided.

Below, on the surface of the Satellite, glowed the pin-prick of a camp-fire. When the ships were some fifteen thousand feet up, Judd's orders caused long light-rays to shaft out from the Star Devil and finger the ground. They rested on the ranch house and then passed on to douse with white the figures of three men standing by the fire. Through the electelscope the pirate chief saw them wave their arms in greeting.

Ten minutes later the two ships nestled down close together a hundred yards or more from the ranch clearing, and Judd said to his mate, standing next to him:

"We'll have a little celebration to-night. Break out a few cases of alkite and send three of the boys to the ranch's storeroom after meat for the cook to barbecue."

"What you goin' to do with them two?" the other asked.

"Carse and the nig? Keep them here in the control cabin; I'll detail a couple of men to guard them. I'm taking no chances: they must be in

sight every minute. Carse is too damned dangerous." He peered back at the captives. The trader's eyes were shut; Friday still appeared unconscious from the brutal blow on his head. "Asleep. Well, they'd better sleep—while they have eyelid's to close!" Judd said mockingly, and his mate laughed in appreciation of his wit.

But neither the Hawk or Friday was asleep. Nor was the negro unconscious. Carse had ascertained this some time before by cautious signals.

A little stir had come within him when he heard Judd say there would be a celebration, for a celebration, to these men, meant a debauch and relaxed discipline, and relaxed discipline meant—a chance. First, however, there were the tight bonds of rope; they were expertly tied, and strong. But the Hawk was not particularly concerned about them.

He had dismissed them as a problem after a few minutes of consideration, and his mind ran farther ahead, planning coldly, mechanically, the payment of his blood debts....

All in all, Judd was to blame for what happened that night on Iapetus. He was an old hand and a capable one, and certainly he should have known that extraordinary measures had to be adopted

when Hawk Carse became his prisoner. By rights, he should have killed Friday immediately, and steered straight for his rendezvous with Ku Sui, keeping his eye on Carse all the time. He would have had to loaf on his way to the rendezvous, of course, for it needed but five days to get there, and he had seven; and he would also have had to pick up his three marooned men later. But that was what he should have done.

Yet, when one regards the personal angles, it is necessary to divide Judd's responsibility for succeeding events. He felt like having a celebration, and certainly he and his men had earned one. He had captured the man who had stood, more than anyone else, in his and in Ku Sui's way for years; the man who had quashed any number of their outlaw schemes, and who had given more trouble to them than all the forces of law and order on Earth and the patrol ships in space. More, he had captured him alive, and that meant a much fatter reward from Ku Sui. He possessed the valuable cargo of phanti horn; he had taken a brand new ship, alone worth millions, besides being the fastest in space. Judd was naturally elated; he had two nights and a day to spare; he felt expansive, and ordered a celebration.

Such decisions—trivial when seen from the eminence of a hundred years—have directed the tide of history more than once.

There were thirteen men left of Judd's crew, including the three posted on Iapetus; these three and the six who manned the pirate's own craft came running to the Star Devil and piled into her open port-lock. They milled around in the control cabin, shouting in high spirits, swearing, throwing clumsy jests at the two silent figures on the deck; and Judd joined with them. There was much loot to be split, and the Hawk was snared at last! Their chief stilled them for a moment and said:

"Well, I guess we deserve a little jamboree. I'm breaking out some alkite and meat; make a big fire outside and dig some barbecue pits. Go ahead—out of here! But wait: you, Sharkey, and you, Keyger."

These last two men, more husky and alert than most of their fellows, he detailed for guard duty ever Carse and Friday. They were much cast down at the job, but he premised them a larger slice of the loot for recompense, and then stalked out after the other men.

The two guards stuck a brace of ray-guns in their belts and looked over the captives. Angry at missing the carousal, the man called Keyger kicked Friday, whose eyelids did not budge and whose body did not quiver, and then, more gingerly, kicked Carse and swore at him—but he turned somewhat hastily when the mild gray eyes slowly opened and stared up into his.

Then the two guards pulled out chairs and placed them by the open port-lock, where they could command a view of the celebration. They drew one ray-gun each, laid them ready, close by, and sat down.

Chapter VII

Jamboree

Two hours later their eyes were taking in a fantastic, mad scene, one that in some ways might have occurred in the days when buccaneers roamed the Spanish Main of Earth.

A little over a hundred yards away, straight before them, was the corral of the phantis: far behind it encroached the shadowy fringe of the jungle: to their right, closer to the corral than to the space ships, was the ranch house, lonely now and silent. But these objects were only the background for what had grown in front of the corral wire.

It was the roaring mass of the monster fire that had been lit, a splash of fierce, leaping flames in the velvety cool of the night. Black shapes were clustered around it; bottles were raised and drained; and a frieze of shadows, staggered and jumped and danced around the ruddy pile of fire. The carousal was in full swing; a chorus of wild

song rose noisily into the night; more cases were smashed open and more alkite drawn out. The carcases of three animals taken from the ranch's storehouse sizzled on the barbecue pits, to be ripped apart and the rich, dripping meat torn at, tooth and claw. Ever higher pierced the shrieks and oaths, till the calm night was distorted and crazy.

Other heavier sounds accompanied the bedlam of human noise: deep snortings and roarings and the scraping of scores of horn-shod feet. Behind their wired electric fence was clustered the herd of phantis, staring with their evil, red-shot little eyes at the flames and the shapes of the hated men. The big bulls were bellowing, bucking their heads angrily, churning up the soft soil with their strong, dagger-spurred feet: the welter of noise and the sight of so many men had wrought them up into a vicious and dangerous state.

Judd the Kite, a bottle in one hand and in the other a huge joint of meat which he was tearing at with his teeth, suddenly paused with mouth crammed full and stared over through the flickering light at the phanti corral. A cruel light gleamed in his eyes: he gulped down the meat and then turned to the shapes staggering around him. He yelled:

"Hey, there—let's get out the nigger! A little entertainment, fellows!

Bring him out; but don't touch Carse: he's Ku Sui's. Douse him with water if he's unconscious."

They yelled in drunken delight at his words, and half of them reeled off towards the Star Devil. Judd, lips up-curved in a smile, drew his ray-gun and set the lever over for the low-power, continuous ray-stream. These guns, unlike our present weapons, could shoot in two ways: they could spit about twenty high-power discharges, a fraction of a second each in duration and easily sufficient to burn a man's head through; or they could deliver a long-lasting low-power stream, just strong enough to sear and crisp a human skin. For the entertainment Judd had in mind he needed low power.

The men sent to the Star Devil shoved past the guards on watch near the port-lock and over to the prisoners. They found them lying, very close together near the after wall.

"Gonna have some fun with the black, Judd's orders," they explained to the guards. "Still unconscious?"

Certainly Friday looked unconscious, his eyes closed, his full lips slightly parted, showing the powerful white teeth.

"I'll give him a shot of the ray," another brigand cut in. "That'll bring

him to. Be ready to grab him."

They got an unpleasant shock when the low-power stream flicked the negro's leg. With a gigantic bellow that rang throughout the ship, Friday resisted.

It was like seeing a dead man come to life, and it startled them. Bound as he was, Friday made things unhealthy for his would-be captors; he shunted his legs up and down and squirmed mightily, and once his gleaming teeth snapped into an arm, bringing a howl of pain and several minutes of cursing. The unexpected resistance, once the surprise was over, infuriated the rum-sodden men. One of them yelled: "Sock him; Shorty!" A ray-gun's butt was slapped down on Friday's head; the negro rolled over, stunned. Then he was picked up without resistance and borne out into the night, where fantastic figures cavorted around the towering fire.

"The black devil was faking all the time!" one of the guards said amazedly. "He wasn't unconscious. What in hell did he do that for?"

"Dunno," snarled the other, rubbing a bruised leg. "Must have suspected what he's gonna get. Wish we was over there."

"Well, we can watch from here," grumbled his companion, and

returned to the seats by the port-lock.

They both sat down, their backs half turned to the figure still lying on the deck.

Carse had said nothing, made no protest, had not even moved when Friday struggled in fierce resistance. He could have done much more, but it would have been useless. Long before, he had seen the negro's opening eyes and signaled him to feign unconsciousness thus deflecting attention and making him appear harmless. He had also broached his plan for escape to Friday. He had not, however, reckoned on Judd's desire to torture: he would, he now saw, have to act with his greatest speed to save his mate from as much pain as possible.

And he began to act.

The control cabin was streaked with patches of shadow and light, made vague by pools of darkness thrown by the banks of instruments. Only one lighting tube was dimly burning. In this indefinite half-light the Hawk set about stalking his prey.

With eyes narrowed and steady on the two guards who were completely absorbed in the happenings outside, he drew his hands

from beneath him. They were no longer bound. The rope knotted around them had been gnawed through strand by strand—sliced by the strong white teeth of a negro....

Cautiously, without a whisper of sound, Carse reached towards the bonds on his legs. The lean fingers worked rapidly. Quickly the knots, yielded and the rope was unwound. The legs were free. For a moment Hawk Carse, ever with careful calculation of time, stretched his cramped muscles, limbering them for action.

A mutter came from the port-lock. He froze. But it was only:

"Look at 'im! This is goin' to be good! Judd gets some damn clever ideas!"

They were utterly wrapped up in the scene outside, and unconscious of the low blot that moved with steely purpose behind them.

The Hawk got to hands and knees; moved forward, the ghost of a shadow. The two men who were his quarry were sitting close together, hunched a little forward in their eagerness not to miss a single detail. Their heads were not a foot apart. Each wore a ray-gun and had another lying on the deck at his side.

Carse came near to their backs. He paused, imperceptibly tensed, judged the distance carefully. Then in a sudden, snake-like movement, he sprang.

A forearm of steel clamped around the back of each guard's head and jerked it sharply into the other's. There was a quick crack; then, dazed, only half-conscious, the two men toppled off their seats and fell to the deck.

"Quiet!" warned an icy whisper. They stared, gaping, then staggered up to their feet.

A ray-gun that just before had been lying on the deck was leveled steadily at them, held in the hand of a gray-eyed man whose fine features were as if graven from stone and on whose wrists were deep blue lines that showed where ropes had pressed. The guards' faces whitened as realization came. One of them choked:

"It's him!"

"Yes," whispered the Hawk dryly. He took a few steps backward, eyes not moving. "Go to that locker," he said to the shorter of the men, indicating with a curt nod the place where space suits were stowed. "First draw your gun and lay it on that table. Hurry!"

The man hastily complied. Anything else was unthinkable; meant quick and lonely and useless death. Shouts and laughter and drunken shrieks were echoing from outside. No one would have ears for him.

When he had stepped into the locker, Carse closed and sealed the door.

"What you goin' to do with me?" croaked the remaining guard. He was big and burly and he towered inches over the figure facing him, but his lips were trembling and his eyes wild with fear.

"You," whispered the Hawk frigidly, "kicked me when I was bound." He sheathed his ray-gun in his holster, then spoke again. "Go for your gun."

The pirate trembled all over. His mouth fell open, and his eyes stuck on Carse's shabby holster. He seemed half hypnotized.

"Draw."

The other's swarthy brow beaded with sudden-starting sweat. His hands hung limp, twitching at the finger-tips. He watched death stare him in the face.

"Damn you, Carse!" he burst out and suddenly went for his ray.

Carse deliberately let him get the gun out. Not until then did his left hand move. But even with such a head-start, so bewildering was the adventurer's speed that only one streak of orange light made a flash in the cabin, and that streak was the Hawk's. The brigand quivered, his face still contorted with his last desperate emotion; then he fell slowly forward and thudded into the deck. His body twitched a little, and in a spasm rolled over. Square between the eyes was a crisp, smooth-burned hole.

Hawk Carse gave the body not a glance, but sheathed his ray-gun, picked up the three others, stuck them in his belt, and glided to the port-lock. There, he peered outside.

His face hardened.

Blobs of flame that flared from wood torches were clustered about the nearest side of the phanti corral. A dark blur of figures were ringed in a half-circle, and from it came yells of delight and almost hysterical laughter. The Hawk's eyes were chilling to look at when he saw, through gaps in the circle of black shapes, the figure of a huge negro, standing with his back almost touching the wire fence of the corral. The actions of Friday gave the clue to what was happening.

He was caught in a broad ray of orange light, and in it he shuddered and hopped grotesquely from one leg to the other in an agony of pain, his lips drawn back taut over the gleaming teeth, his face flexed and the whites of his eyes showing as the eyeballs rolled. The glow that in part hung around him streamed from a ray-gun that was held in the right hand of Judd the Kite. Heat! Friday was being slowly crisped alive; seared on his feet in a furnace of heat: and the men who ringed him were yelling advice at him between their laughter. Carse strained his ears. In a jumble, he caught:

"Jump over"—"Nah, he'd have to climb"—"Climb! The juice's cut!"—"Into the corral!"—"Climb over, you black buzzard"—"Hoowee!"

About a foot behind Friday was the wire fence, behind which the phantis, their snouts converged towards the pirates, their red-shot eyes glaring, their powerful hind feet clawing at the ground, were bellowing in wild and ferocious excitement. Sudden, awful death waited on the other side of the fence; slow death by burning on this side. Yet Friday still hoped, still had faith in his master, for he did not put a quick end to his living death by rushing the devilish circle or clambering over into the thick of the sharp stabbing spurs.

Carse's brain moved with the swiftness of light. He could not rush

the group: the odds were too great, and besides, Judd's gun was already out. Nor could he dive at them with the Star Devil itself, or ray them from above: that would mean Friday's death too. It would have to be something else—and in a moment he had it. Carefully he examined all variations and checked the scheme back: it promised to be the final move, engendering the final meeting, and there must be no slip.

First, the Hawk slipped shadow-like to the entrance port of the other space ship, lying a few hundred feet away, shrouded in darkness. He had to know if anyone were aboard.

Gruffly he called inside:

"Judd! Hey, Judd! You there?"

There was no answer. Again he called, but the gloomy interior's silence was not broken. Satisfied that it was empty, he doubled back with noiseless speed, skirted round the Star Devil and arrived like a wind-carried wraith at the rear wall of the ranch house.

A short leap and his hands closed on the copper drain. The muscles of his wiry arms flexed, and the lean figure raised himself foot by foot to the eaves, where a pull and press up brought him over the

edge. Stooping, he padded to the side which faced on the clearing and the corral.

And then the ray-gun was drawn from its holster.

For seconds the cold gray eyes reckoned the shooting distance and the angle. The weapon came up and rested at arm's length. The first finger of the deadly left hand began to squeeze back.

A pencil-thin streak of orange light speared the air!

Chapter VIII

Stampede

Judd the Kite was enjoying himself hugely. His bestial sense of humor was tickled. It was very funny, the contortions of the negro in the orange ray-stream!

"Climb over!" he suggested, amid roars of laughter from the circle of men. "Climb over, why don't you? I've turned off the current. There's no electricity in the fence. You won't be hurt. Why don't you climb over?"

Friday did not, could not answer. His lips were sucked tight together

now in wordless agony; the cheek muscles, strained taut, stood out like welts of flesh; the huge body, bathed always in that steady glow of orange, was slightly livid in patches. He hopped mechanically, changing from one aching leg to the other; his eyes were closed half the time, his whole being one dumb agony. He did not know when it would end, but he still had faith.

Overhead, the flames of four tarred wood torches bobbed and reeled as the men who held them reeled; seemed to shake in the gusts of laughter and yells and oaths that came ceaselessly from the onlookers. And in this distorted light the half-shadowed snouts and bodies of the phantis, clustered behind their nine-foot-high fence, looked indeed diabolical. The fence was high, for the creatures possessed surprising jumping powers; it was composed of eight strands of wire, running parallel a foot apart from each other, with inter-crossing supports. The electric current, now turned off, always kept the phantis from crashing through.

Judd smiled more widely. "I guess I'll increase the power," his coarse lips pronounced. "We'll see how you can duck a strong thin beam. I'll give you about five minutes to climb over. After that you'll be burned down slowly to a cinder. Now—will you climb? See—I'm moving the lever over. Watch, now, and feel—"

Suddenly his voice broke off short. There had been a hiss—a spang—a slight whip of sound. He glanced around swiftly. No, his men had not noticed it. They were still laughing, roaring, swaying in drunken merriment. The Kite's lips curved upward again. He continued:

"Feel the heat increase. It's stronger, now, and—"

Again the spang, the whip, the streak of something swift. The men noticed his expression and quieted somewhat. Judd was looking around him, and even as he saw what it was there came a cry from a pirate nearby.

"Look! The fence!"

Judd's eyes widened; his lips slackened and lost their smile. The noise, the laughs, the shouts, screams and oaths died into the night; frightened silence fell over the group, and all that was left were the concerted bellowings and snortings from the enraged herd of beasts just beyond.

All—except for another spang that sounded as a streak of orange light arrowed from somewhere through the flickering torchlight. And with its coming the third parallel strand of the corral-fence whipped

apart with a little singing swish, shot neatly through, as were the two below it. Ten feet of fence on each side slumped visibly.

"Someone's shooting it through!" came a scared whisper. Yet still the brigands, held fascinated by fear and puzzlement, stared at the fence and at the surging crowd of stampede-crazy animals beyond.

Another spang, another streak of light! With deadly accuracy the shot clove the fourth strand. The lower half of a whole section of fence was gone. Behind it the bucking, red-eyed phantis inched forward, still afraid of the electric shock they thought was somewhere there, but drawn to the opening by their hatred of the two-legged creatures so near. Closer, closer! Then the befuddled pirates found their senses. Even as the fifth arrow of light came from the invisible marksman and snapped the fifth strand, a concerted cry of fear of the advancing beasts went up from the crowd of men.

"Run! Run! They're coming! They're coming out!"

They turned, panic-stricken; the torches fell flaring to the ground, to lie there in pools of flame; the brigands ran for the nearest shelter, the dark bulk of the ranch house close by. They ran, fear tingling their spines, in their ears the sound of the maddened phantis.

From his vantage point on the roof of the ranch house, the Hawk confirmed his quick decision that this was the only way.

Rapidly, as was his custom, he had reckoned the problem out minutely and carefully; had considered and checked every possibility. He had to shoot the fence, not the brigands. For he couldn't hope to get more than a couple of them: a pirate toppling over dead would jar the others into instant action; they would scatter in the darkness, leaving the odds too great. And leaving, besides, small chance of wiping out every one of the pirates.

As for Friday, he had to take his chance. There was, this way, a good chance, if he used his brain. For, to the left, as close as the ranch house to the corral, were the grave-pits he himself had dug some hours before, and one was still empty, waiting to be filled. It offered shelter, a good chance—if he used his brain. He, Carse, would do all he could to protect him from the stampeding beasts while he ran.

Some of the pirates would be snared by the rush of phantis. Four or five would probably reach the ranch house. That was what he wanted.

And that was what he got. His fifth shot fired, straight and true from the ray-gun of the most accurate marksman of space, the Hawk

lowered the weapon and gazed at the scene resulting, a ghost of a smile on his lips.

He saw the mob of creatures, in a bedlam of noise, sweep under the fence that had for so long kept them back. Bellowing their hatred, their cruel spurs eager for blood, they charged. Before them fled the thin fringe of men, Friday on one flank. A man went down with a scream; a half-grown horn knifed into him; he was trampled, gored, spurred, and left a bloody welter of death in seconds. Another, hearing the loud thud of feet just behind, turned with desperate eyes, dodged, tripped, shrieked and was caught and ripped. Another and another. In the dancing, flickering half-light of the flames of fire and torches, a hellish scene of devastation and death spun out.

Carse was shooting again, with the cold mechanical precision of a machine. There was Friday to be guarded. He was now separated from the other men—cut off and edging to one side—to the side where was the grave-pit! Dodging, wildly twisting and turning, he several times barely escaped three or four phantis that thundered after him. The leader took perhaps ten steps: then its body quivered and it tumbled over and flopped on the ground, a little wisp of smoke curling from its body. The other two went down in swift succession. But there were many, and even as Friday melted into the shadows, a group of several beasts detached themselves and roared

after him. The deadly ray-gun on the roof wrought swift slaughter amongst them, but some got into the darkness beyond vision of the icy gray eyes.

Carse lowered his weapon. His face was very hard and very set. Would they catch the negro? Tumble down on him if he made the pit? Well, there was no helping it....

But the reckoning would soon be finished; the time was at hand. Cold as the deeps of space despite the awful havoc he had just created, totally without visible emotion, he drew the last unused ray-gun from his belt and put it in the shabby holster. One would be enough.

Shadow-like, noiseless and swift, he moved towards the far end of the roof.

Chapter IX

The Hawk Strikes

His face red, his breath coming in hoarse gasps, Judd the Kite stumbled through the house's door on the heels of four of his men. He swung rapidly and flung his weight against the door: locked and

double-locked it. A second later fists pounded on the outer panel, and a voice, racked with fear and terror, screamed:

"Let me in! Let me in! Oh, God, let me in! Judd!"

Then there was the thud of drumming feet, and one awful shriek from the man who had found the door locked against him.

But the Kite was not listening. A measure of courage returning to him with the building's protection, he snapped:

"Get those other doors locked quick! And lights. Then search the house."

The lighting tubes glowed, filling the room with soft radiance. Judd survey his position.

He saw that it could have been far worse. But his men needed courage.

The rapid change from orgy to deadly peril had sobered them completely. And they were frightened; nor was it fear of the beasts. They came treading silently back from their inspection of the house, reporting it empty; but their eyes kept shifting, their ray-guns ready in hand. Each one knew, deep within him, who had fired the shots

that collapsed the fence. They had taken two captives; Friday had been under their eyes; there was only one other, and he was—the Hawk.

Hawk Carse! The four men were nervous. More than a few lonely spots in the countless leagues of space had seen his vengeance: and they—they had killed his guards and his overseer, his radio-man, and, with the fungus, his ship's crew; they had tortured Friday. They were now marks for the fatal left hand: fugitives from gray, icy eyes. The Hawk was loose!

Judd saw the fear gnawing at their vitals. He felt it too. But there seemed no immediate danger, so, with a ray-gun in each hand, he summoned a blustering courage and said to the others, harshly:

"Yes, it was that damned Carse! He must have got loose in some way. But pull yourselves together: we're safe here. He's somewhere outside."

He reasoned it out for them.

"He couldn't have done that shooting from the Star Devil; it's too far away. And he's not in it now or he'd be using it to try and find that black of his—if the black's still alive. No, he's not in the ship, and

he's not in this house. He's somewhere outside, and he can't reach us here while the phantis have the place surrounded. We can shoot them down from the attic, and they'll soon beat it for the jungle. When that happens we'll rush to the ships, and before Carse knows what it's all about we'll be up and away and he'll be marooned. Then we'll get him later."

His words brought a return of confidence. It was true, the others thought: the Hawk could not reach them as long as the phantis were around the house; and when they were driven away, the ships were near at hand and empty. All they had to do was get to the ships before Carse. The adventurer certainly was not then in one of the craft, or he would be wasting no time hunting for Friday—and raying their stronghold. No doubt he was up a tree somewhere; perhaps gored and dead.

One of the men snickered, and Judd smiled at the sound. Their confidence in him was encouraging.

"Get to the windows of the attic," he ordered. "Some of those crazy brutes are horning at the house. We've got to shoot them and get out of here, quick!"

There were two rooms in the attic; the large one, used as a storeroom

for staple foods, had five windows, long, sloping affairs, three in front and one in each side wall. The second room was small and at the rear, and was used to store tools and spare technical apparatus. It had one little window, set high up, and connected with the larger room by a door set in the middle of the partition.

Judd placed one of his pirates at each of the windows of the large room, taking himself the center one.

Around the house milled dozens of animal bodies, snorting, bellowing and roaring, their little red eyes flashing, claws tearing the soil in futile rage at the men they knew to be safely within. A babel of brutish sounds rose from them. Two of the bulls fell foul of each other and fought in fury, to suddenly turn and hurl their weight against a ground floor door, quivering it. But their rashness was answered by a streak of light from an attic window, and as one toppled back, its body burnt through, the sights of the destroying ray-gun were already on its fellow.

The huge fire the brigands had laid was dying, and night was seeping ever thickening darkness over the scene. Glinting very slightly in the starlight were the black shapes of the two silent space ships.

Then Judd the Kite, as he aimed and shot and aimed and shot again,

was suddenly struck by a disturbing idea. From where had Carse fired at the corral fence? What was the logical vantage point for him?

A shiver trembled down his spine. He saw suddenly with terrible clearness where that vantage point was—and it had not been searched. The roof!

He turned swiftly, his lips opening to give orders.

And there, standing on the threshold of the door to the smaller adjoining room, stood the figure of a man whose eyes were cold with the absolute cold of space, and whose left hand held a steady-leveled ray-gun that pointed as straight as his eyes at Judd!

"Hawk—Carse!"

"Judd," said the quiet, icy voice.

The Kite went white as a sheet. His men turned slowly as one. One of them gasped at what he saw; another cursed; the other two simply stared with fear-flooded eyes; only one thing flamed in every mind—the never-failing vengeance of the Hawk.

"Carse!" repeated Judd stupidly. "You—again!"

"Yes," whispered the trader. "And for the last time. We settle now. There are a few debts—a few lives—a few blows and kicks—and a matter of some torture to be paid for. The accounts must be squared, Judd."

And slowly he raised his right hand to the queer bangs of flaxen hair which hung down over his forehead. He stroked them gently. Judd's eyes, dry, hot, held fascinated on the hand. He shuddered.

"It's not pleasant," came the whisper, "to always have to wear my hair like this. That's another debt—the largest of all—I have to settle. Sheathe your guns!"

The voice cracked like a whip. They obeyed without sound, though they read death in the frigid gray eyes. As their guns went into holsters, Carse's followed suit; he stood then with both hands hanging at his sides. And he said, in the whisper that carried more weight to them than the trumpets of a host:

"Once before we were interrupted. This time we won't be. This time we will see certainly for whom the number five brings death. Count, Judd."

With a jerk, the Kite regained some control over himself. The odds

were five to one. Five guns to one gun. Carse was a great shot, but such odds were surely too great. Perhaps—perhaps there might be a chance. He said in a strained voice to his men:

"Shoot when I reach five."

Then he swallowed and counted:

"One."

Aside from the tiny flickering of the left eyelid, the Hawk was graven, motionless, apparently without feeling. Judd, he knew, was just fairly fast; as for the others—

"Two."

—they were unknown quantities, except for one, the man called Jake. He had the reputation of possessing a lightning draw; his eyes were narrowed, his hands steady, and the body crouched, a sure sign of—

"Three."

—a gunman who knew his business, who was fast. His hip holsters were not really worn on the hips, but in front, very close together;

that meant—

"Four."

—that he would probably draw both guns. So Judd must wait; the other three, being unknowns, disposed of in the order in which they were standing; but Jake must be—

"Five!"

—first!

One second there was nothing; the next, wicked pencils of orange light were snaking across the attic! And then two guns clanged on the floor, unfired, and the man called Jake staggered forward, crumpled and fell, a puzzled look on his face and accurately between his eyes a little round neat hole that had come as if by magic. Two others, similarly stricken, toppled down, their fingers still tensed on ray-gun triggers; the fourth pirate, his heart drilled, went back from the force of it and crashed into the wall, slithering down slowly into a limp heap. But Judd the Kite was still on his feet.

His lips were twisted in a snarl; his hands seemed locked. His eyes met the two cold gray ones across the room—and then his coarse

face contorted, and he croaked:

"Damn you, Carse! Damn you—"

His body spun around and flattened out on the floor with arms and legs flung wide. A tiny black hole was visible through his shirt. He had been last, and the Hawk had struck him less accurately than his fellows.

The trader was unwounded. He stood there for several minutes, surveying what lay before him. He looked at each body in turn, and his eyes were calm and clear and mild, his face devoid of expression. Silence hung over the attic, for the bellowings and snortings of the beasts outside had died into faint murmurings as they straggled off for their jungle home. The single living man of the six who had lived and breathed there minutes before holstered his still warm ray-gun; and then the sound of a step on the stairs leading from the rooms below made him look up.

A man stood in the doorway of the attic.

He was big and brawny; but, though his arms and bare torso were streaked with blood, and his trousers torn into shreds, and his legs crisscrossed with cuts, there was broad grin on his face—a grin that

widened as his rolling white eyes took in what lay on the attic floor.

Neither said anything for a moment. Then the Hawk smiled, and there was all friendliness and affection in his face.

"You made the pit, Eclipse?" he asked, softly.

Friday nodded, and chuckled. "Yes, suh! But only just. If Ah'd bin a leap an' a skip slower Ah'd bin a tee-total eclipse!"

Dancing lights of laughter came to the Hawk's eyes.

"Still feeling chipper," he said, "—in spite of your burns. Well, good for you. But I guess you've had enough of Ku Sui for a little while!"

The negro grunted indignantly. "You surely don't imply Ah'm sca'ed of that yellow Chink? Hell, no! Why—"

Carse chuckled and cut him off.

"I see. Well, then, drag these carrion out to your pit. And then—"

There was something in the air, something big. Friday listened eagerly. "Yes, suh?" he reminded his master after a pause.

"Judd," said Hawk Carse softly, "was to have had a rendezvous with Dr. Ku Sui in seven days. The place of the rendezvous is entered in the log of his ship. I've got the last of Judd's crew a captive on the Star Devil...."

The adventurer paused a moment in thought, and when he resumed his words came clipped and decisive.

"I myself am going to keep that rendezvous with Ku Sui. I want to see him very badly."

Friday looked at the man's gray eyes, his icy graven face, the bangs of flaxen hair which obscured his forehead. He understood.

113 Raiders Invisible by Desmond Winter Hall

Alone and unaided, Pilot Travers copes with the invisible foes who have struck down America's great engine of war.

Aproximate word count: 12,500

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

The muffled, helmeted figure of a pilot climbed down the spider ladder, nestled into the foremost scout's cockpit and pressed the starting button. The motor spat out a wisp of smoke, then burst into its full-throated roar: the automatic clamp above loosened: the scout dropped plummet-like, bobbed to the flagship below, straightened out and zoomed six thousand feet up into the morning blue, where it hovered for a few moments like an eagle on taut wings. Lieutenant Christopher Travers, the pilot, glanced around.

Behind and below him was spread a magnificent panorama. Across the plate of scintillating glass that was the sea moved rows of toy ships, tipped by the gleaming, one-fifth-mile long shape of a

dirigible, of whose three scout planes Chris's was the leader. As he watched, the second scout dropped from the plane rack beneath the dirigible's sleek underside and went streaking away, followed by the third, in response to the Admiral's order of: "Proceed ahead to locate the enemy's position."

A grin relaxed Chris Travers' tanned, boyish face. His narrowed gray eyes swept the horizon. Below it somewhere lay hidden the ranks of the Black Fleet, complete with its own destroyers, submarines, cruisers, battleships, aircraft carriers and the ZX-2, sister dirigible of the Blue Fleet's ZX-1. Chris spurted the scout ahead and murmured:

"This war game's goin' to be a big affair—the biggest yet!"

It was. The Atlantic Fleet of the United States Navy, termed "Blue" for convenience, had been assigned to guard the Panama Canal; the Pacific Fleet, "Black," to attack it. The cream of America's sea forces had been assembled for that week of March, 1935, all the way from crabby little destroyers to the two newly completed monarchs of the air, the twin dirigibles, fresh from the hangars at Akron, a thousand feet each in length and loaded with the latest offensive and defensive devices developed by Government laboratories.

The war game around the Canal was planned for more than practice,

however. The eyes of the whole world were on that array of America's ocean might—the eyes of one foreign nation in particular. Washington knew of the policies of that nation, and wished to impress upon it the hopelessness of them. More than a game, this concentration of sea and air-borne fighting power was a gesture for the continued peace of the world—a gesture strong with the hint of steel.

Chris Travers was vaguely aware, through the rumors of the mess-room, of the double meaning of the game he was playing his part in, but this morning he didn't give a single thought. He was too wrapped up in his job of spotting the van of the Black Fleet, radio-telephoning latitude and longitude to the bridge of the Blue Fleet flagship, and getting home to his dirigible without being declared destroyed by one of the war game umpires.

Therefore, half an hour later, his heart thrilled as he glimpsed, wraith-like on the steely horizon, a wisp of smoke.

He catapulted forward, eyes steady on that hint of ships. The smoke grew to a cloud of black pouring from the funnels of a V-shaped squad of destroyers, rolling through the lazy swells of the Pacific waters. Behind them came the bulldogs, larger warships, hazy blurs in the distance.

Chris struck fist in palm to the tune of a gleeful chortle. He was first! He hauled the microphone from its cubby in the dashboard and spoke the code words. Latitude, longitude and steaming direction of the Black Fleet he gave rapidly, and the information knifed back to the bridge of the Blue Fleet flagship, a hundred miles behind, where a white-haired admiral said: "Ah! Good boy! Get those bombers up —pronto!"

Chris commanded a superb view of the ZX-2, whose gleaming shape, showering rays of sunlight, hung like a thing in a painting over the Black Fleet. He stared at the far-off dirigible, lost in admiration of her trim lines, pausing a minute before returning to his own ZX-1. At that distance, the mammoth craft seemed no more than four inches long, yet, through his telescopic sight, he could discern her markings, machine-gun batteries and the airplane rack along her belly plainly. One plane, he saw, was suspended from the rack; the others were scouting for the Blue Fleet, even as he had scouted for the Black. He wondered if something were wrong with the plane left behind. Somehow, it did not look quite familiar.

But, even as he watched, it dropped from the automatic rack, then straightened and soared dizzily up. And, from one of the airplane carriers' broad decks, he saw two pursuit craft begin to rise. He grinned. They'd seen him, were coming after him!

He gripped the stick, prepared to swerve around. He had already raised a spread-fingered hand for a derisive parting gesture, when suddenly he stiffened. The hand dropped as if paralyzed.

"Good Lord!" he gasped. "What—"

The mighty thousand-foot dirigible ZX-2, pride of the Navy and all America, had wobbled drunkenly in her path. She stuck her nose down, and then her whole vast frame shivered like a wind-whipped leaf as the dull roar of an explosion rolled over the sea. A huge sliver of hide was stripped from her as if by magic, revealing the skeleton of girders inside—revealing a tongue of crimson that licked out and welled into a hell of flame.

Chris's blood froze. He watched the ZX-2 wallow in her death throes, writhe in the fiery doom that had struck her in seconds, that was devouring her with awful rapidity while thousands of men, blanched and trembling, gazed on helplessly. He saw her plunge, a blazing inferno, into the sea beneath....

There were old pals on her—buddies, gone in a flash of time!

This wasn't a war game. This was tragedy, stark before his eyes.

The Black Fleet forgot its mimic battle. Radio telephone messages winged over the horizon to the approaching Blue Fleet. The Black dreadnoughts hove to; launches with ashen-faced men in white manning them dropped overboard; a dozen destroyers rolled in the swells around a crumbled, charred egg-shell that but minutes before had been an omnipotent giant of the sky.

Chris Travers, aloft in sunlight suddenly bereft of its beauty, jammed the stick of the scout full over. He could do nothing, he knew. He could only return to the ZX-1 and tell the story of its sister as he had seen it.

But why, he wondered as he flew almost blindly, had the ZX-2 so quickly flamed to oblivion? The helium of its inner bags had been uninflammable, as had the heavy oil of its fuel tanks; the ten engines were Diesels, and hence without the ordinary ignition system and gasoline. Safety devices by the score had been installed on board; nothing had been overlooked. And the weather, perfect.

It was uncanny. It seemed totally unexplainable.

Swarms of planes droned between sea and sky, all speeding in the one direction, west, to where the crumpled remnants of a dirigible were slipping quickly beneath the billows, beyond the sight of man.

Planes of war game umpires, of officials, of newspaper correspondents and photographers. And soon a spectral, gleaming wisp of silver nosed out of the east, and the lone scout flying east dropped in altitude to meet its mother.

Mechanically, his mind elsewhere, Chris shoved the button which reared the automatic clamp behind the cockpit in preparation for affixing the scout to the plane rack beneath the ZX-1. The dirigible, far in advance of the Blue Fleet, was roaring along at its full one hundred and fifty to hover over the grave of its sister. Chris eyed its course and changed his. To jockey into the rack, he had to pass the dirigible and come up underneath from its rear.

The air giant roared closer. As the distance between then loosened, Chris's brow wrinkled and he swore softly in puzzlement.

"Now, just what's wrong with them?" he exclaimed, "The darned zep isn't flying straight! She's wobbling in her course!"

It was hardly apparent, but true. Ever so slightly, the snub nose of the ZX-1 was swaying from side to side as it sped through the air; ever so slightly, her massive stern directional-rudders were wavering.

She was less than a mile away now. At that time, there were no other planes in sight; none flying in that vicinity save Chris's. He glued his eyes to the telescopic sight. A moment later, sheer horror swept his face.

"Good God!"

The scout leaped as its throttle rammed down. The gleaming, thousand-foot shell of the ZX-1 roared by it at equal altitude, making it a puny fly-speck in the sky. But the fly-speck was faster. It turned in a screaming bank; it straightened; it lunged back after the swaying, retreating mammoth like a whippet, lower, now, than its quarry. It maneuvered expertly as it gained, for one of the best pilots of the service was at its controls, and there were deep lines graven in his face, lines of anguish and intolerable suspense.

Through the telescopic sight, Chris had not seen a single white-clad figure standing beside the glass ports of the dirigible's control car. But he had seen, slung from the rack along her belly, a single plane —the same rather peculiar-looking plane he had seen hanging beneath the rack of the ZX-2 a few minutes before she had gone down in flames!

And in that plane, he knew surely, was the answer to the mystery.

Speed cut to just a trifle more than the dirigible's. Chris passed a few feet underneath the huge expanse of her lower directional rudder. From so close, its uncontrolled wavering was terrifying.

His faculties were concentrated on the task of sliding the scout's clamp into the groove of the plane rack, but he was also surveying the lone airplane hanging from it. A powerful machine, painted in Navy colors, a peculiar knob on the upper side of each half of the top wing gave it its unfamiliar appearance. Its pilot was obviously aboard the dirigible, working....

Closer and closer the scout crept, quarter-way now along from the stern of the massive bulk that loomed above it, and within fifty feet of the third clamp in the rack. Touchy work, maneuvering into it, with the ZX-1 yawing as she was, and the need for haste desperate. Chris's hands were glued to the stick: his nerves were as tight as violin strings. Then, when only ten feet from the rack clamp, he gave a startled jump of uncomprehending amazement.

The propeller of the mysterious plane ahead had roared over. Its clamp had left the rack; it had dropped down in a perfectly controlled dive and flattened out as if a master pilot were at its controls.

But the plane's cockpit was still empty, Chris could see; nor had he seen any figure pass down the ladder from the dirigible into it!

Devoid of all emotion save bewilderment, he sat stupidly in the scout. A moment later, so well had he aimed it, its clamp nestled snugly into the groove of the rack, and the regular automatic action took place. A tiny door slid open directly above in the dirigible's hull: a thin ladder craned down—and Chris's nostrils caught a faint whiff of something that cleared his mind of its confusion instantly.

Just a whiff, but it registered. Gas, with an odor resembling carbon monoxide.

He stared up. Over the edge of the automatic trap-door above, a white, contorted face was hanging. The dirigible swung; white-clad shoulders and body slumped into view. Then, with a rush, the body slipped through, jarred against the connecting ladder, slithered off and went twisting and turning into the gulf below.

"God!"

Gassed! How, by what, Chris had no idea. A moment before he had been about to follow the uncannily piloted plane; but now his duty was plain. He knew with awful certainty that in minutes, seconds

perhaps, the giant ZX-1 was scheduled to roar into flames like its sister and plunge into the Pacific.

He jerked out a gas mask. He was fitting it on with one hand as, with the other, he hauled himself up the spider ladder into the hull of the thundering, yawing dirigible.

He did not see, hovering a few hundred yards behind the ZX-1, the mystery plane; he did not see it now begin to approach the rack once more.

The crew of that dirigible of death, Chris discovered, had not had a chance. White-clad bodies lay sprawled throughout the cabin which contained the mechanism of the plane rack, stricken down silently at their posts. There was no life, no sound save the booming of the motors and the whip of the wind screaming past the uncontrolled air titan.

But he did not pause there. He did not know what he was grappling with—it seemed black magic—but he darted to a ladder which angled up from the lowermost entrance cabin to the cat-walk that stretched from the nose to the stern of the ship. If any infernal

contrivance had been planted aboard, it would be in the most vital spot.

Heart pumping from the artificial air he was breathing and from the consciousness that each second might well be his last, he sprinted along the interior gangway. Above was the vasty gloom of the gas bags and the interweaving latticework of the supporting girders; the drum of power-car motors and the strained creakings of cables and supports echoed weirdly throughout. Outside was the sun and the sea and the clean air, but this realm of mammoth shapes and dimness seemed apart from the world. Once he stumbled against something soft and yielding—a body flung down there in death, fingers at its throat. And there were other white-clad figures, grimly marking off the length of the cat-walk....

Chris's nerves were raw and his face sopping with sweat beneath its mask when suddenly he stopped at sight of something that lay on the cat-walk, with the main fuel tanks on the girders just above it and the entrance to the control car just below.

It was a black box, perhaps two feet square and a foot in depth, made of dull metal that did not reflect the rays of the light bulb placed at the head of the ladder leading down in the control car. There were three curious little dials on its face, and the trembling finger of each

one was mounting.

It had been strategically placed. An explosion at that point would rip open the fuel tanks, split the largest gas bag, wreak havoc on an intricate cluster of main girders, and destroy the control car with its mechanism.

"No wonder the ZX-2 crashed!" Chris muttered.

Then his hands swept down. The next instant he was hugging the thing tight to his chest and stumbling down into the control car, hearing only a high-pitched, impatient whine that was coming from the box as the fingers of its dials crept slowly upward.

The ZX-1 was wavering wildly as her rudders flopped from side to side, and with every swing the bodies that lay in her control car, strangled by gas, stirred slightly. The gray-haired commander was stretched there, one arm limply rolling as his ship, which had gone so suddenly from him, rolled. Subordinate officers were tumbled around him. Death rode the control car.

But down to it and through it now came one who was alive, a figure made grotesque by the mask it wore and the pack of the parachute strapped to it, who threaded past the littered bodies, an ever-rising

whine wailing from the box clasped in his arms.

With a leap, he was at one of the car's port-holes, fingers fumbling at the heavy bolts. The seconds seemed eternal, and the box's whine had become a shattering, sinister scream when at last the bolts loosened. The round pane of glass teetered back, swung open—and the masked man slung his metal burden out, out from the ZX-1 into the gulf between sea and sky.

It arced through the sunlight, went spinning down, became a dot, its screaming faded. Then something synchronized within it, and it was gone—in a burst of weird, bluish light, whose fangs forked upwards for a second, their unearthly flash dimming even the sunlight, and then were gone, too....

Chris found that his whole body was shaking. For a moment he stood there with his masked face through the port.

"Damn close," he muttered. "But what was it that left the box here?"

Then he jarred against the side of the car as the ship swung and came back to realization of what was needed to be done, and done at once. He shifted his gaze, drew his head back, and thrust it forth again, staring.

"Good Lord!" he cried. "That plane's come back!"

His own craft was not alone under the rack. The same mysterious machine hung there again, its cockpit empty, and the automatic spider ladder was stretched down to it from the trap-door in the dirigible above.

"Whatever flies it is aboard now." Chris thought aloud. "But it got back too late to stop me. Well, this time—"

He felt uneasy, however, almost powerless. What was this thing that had wiped out the crews of two dirigibles with deadly gas, and wrecked one of them? He spun around. The control car looked the same. But what might be moving in it?...

Chris carried no gun; but he extracted the service repeater from the holster of a body at his feet. Gripping it, he leaped to the helm of the dirigible. It was the work of a moment to clamp on the mechanical "iron mike," which steadied the ZX-1's mad swaying and leveled her ahead in a dead straight course. He could not cut down her speed, unless he went to each one of the hull-enclosed engine stations, and more urgent work awaited before he could afford to do that—work of sending out an S.O.S. before the weird, unseen killer and wrecker came to grips with him.

Though seeming hours, only minutes had passed since he had tooled his scout into the rack. Ahead, he could see the smudge of the Black Fleet's smoke on the horizon. Not so very far away, but a lot could happen in the distance still separating dirigible and surface craft.

He ran back into the radio-telephone cubby, which was a division of the control car. The operator was sprawled there, limp in his seat before the shining, switch-studded panel. Chris removed the head-gear of ear-phones: then he hauled one of the cubby's port-holes open, letting in a rush of cleansing air. His fingers sped quickly over the panel; a row of tubes glowed; the machinery hummed. Chris jerked off his mask.

A last faint odor was present, but he hardly noticed it, for his lips were at the mouthpiece and he was thrusting out a call for help.

"ZX-1 calling ... ZX-1 calling ... ZX-1—Hello!"

An answer from the flagship of the Black Fleet ahead had sounded.

"This is Travers, pilot on the ZX-1, speaking. We're coming dead for you; full speed; you'll see us in minutes. Get some planes with men capable of handling the dirigible up here immediately. The whole crew's been laid out by gas; there was a contrivance planted aboard

to blow up the ship and send it down in flames as the ZX-2 was. The thing that did it—"

Crack!

A gun barked out from behind; something crashed and splintered on the radio panel. Chris felt a white-hot needle sear along the side of his head. His brain reeled; with everything dancing queerly before him in splotches of gray and black he toppled down off the seat, knowing the radio-telephone had been put out of commission by the cessation of sound in the ear-phones clamped to him.

He gripped his consciousness hard. It was like a delirium: he was lying sprawled beside the seat, twisted round so that he saw, hanging in the cubby's entrance door, an automatic, dribbling a wisp of smoke—the automatic that had just fired, but hanging there by itself, held by something he could not see!

He was only half conscious, for the scorching pain along his head was throbbing his brain dizzily, but he realized that the service repeater he had taken from the control car lay by his side, within easy reach. But, while on the verge of risking a wild grab for it, he heard a voice, speaking very softly and with a slight thickness of accent.

"Do not move," it said. "I fire if you do. Now, listen: What did you do with the box that you found? Tell me quick, or die."

It was fantastic, unreal. There was—nothing, and yet a man, living, breathing, but invisible, was speaking! Chris could not understand; but it was at least a little relief to know he had a human to deal with. For with humans, strategy can be used....

He groaned. He saw plainly that the unseen marauder had been aboard when he had thrown the box over, and thus had not seen it explode in midair: did not know whether it had been tossed out or merely rendered harmless by being tampered with. If only the latter, it could be quickly repaired and set again. That must be the invisible man's reasoning.

Again Chris groaned. He moved an arm weakly and whispered:

"Can't speak much. Come closer."

The service repeater was very close now to his right hand. And he felt a thrill when he saw the automatic come forward through the air, descend, and pause right next to his head. He sensed a man close behind him, and he heard:

"Well? Tell me, quick. Did you throw it over, or—?"

"Don't shoot!" Chris groaned. "I'll tell you. I didn't—throw it over. I took it apart to get the secret of it. I put it—there."

He pointed feebly with his right hand, thus leading the invisible man to turn his head. His legs braced imperceptibly. And then:

"Like hell!" roared Chris Travers, and shot his whole weight backwards, grasping the service gun, whipping it around and yanking the trigger three times at the same instant.

Shooting at nothing! But, even above the bunched roar of the explosions, there pierced out a howl of agony that died quickly to a sobbing moan. Chris saw the automatic drop to the floor, felt the invisible body he had crashed into jerk away. He jumped to his feet, clutched at that body, and caught thin air. He swung around, listening, the service repeater in his hand.

Out of the air somewhere before him there came the sound of low, racking gasps, and also the slow noise of feet dragging heavily towards the cubby's door, towards the ladder that led up to the fore-and-aft cat-walk.

Chris sprang, slashing the butt of the gun downwards. The lead was false. He hurtled jarringly into the door jamb, the gun thumping against the floor. The wind was knocked from him; the nausea of his wound swept him again with a surge of dizziness. But the painful scuffle of unseen feet ahead pulled him up once more; like a punch-drunk fighter he staggered out from the cubby to the ladder and hauled himself up the steps. He half-fell at the top, but his mind was clearing; and as he swayed there he knew what he had to do—saw the duty that lay before him....

More slowly, he crawled after the dragging footsteps and the gasps of the invisible raider, following them through the vast dimness of the interior of the dirigible ZX-1.

The chief operator on duty in the flagship of the Black Fleet swung round in his seat and yelled through into the bridge of the massive battleship:

"Urgent, sir! From the ZX-1!"

A moment later the captain of the ship, for the fleet's admiral was out in a launch inspecting what little of the fallen ZX-2 was still floating on the surface, was at the operator's side, listening amazedly.

The operator read off, word for word, what Chris Travers had sent. "... There was a contrivance planted aboard to blow up the ship and send it down in flames as the ZX-2 was. The thing that did it is—" he finished, and fell silent on that uncompleted sentence.

The captain's lined face expressed incredulity. "My God!" he burst out. "First the ZX-2, now— That all?"

"Yes, sir. I can't get any answer or connection."

They stared at each other. Finally the captain spluttered:

"Is some maniac loose in this fleet? Don't sit there like a fool, man! Get in touch with the Saratoga; tell 'em what you received; tell 'em to send some men up to that dirigible, wherever she is. We can't lose both of them!"

The operator's fingers skipped nimbly; even while he was speaking into the microphone, the red-faced captain had rushed back into the control bridge and was roaring:

"Signal the Admiral back here! Hurry!"

Things moved quickly then; small things, but significant. A casual eye glancing over the ranks of the Black Fleet as it lay around the

scene of the tragedy, waiting for orders, would not have noticed any difference. The launch containing the fleet's admiral, which had been fussing about with its load of officers and various dignitaries, suddenly wheeled and pointed back for the mammoth flagship, in response to swift signals from the arms of a gob on her bridge; and, on the broad landing deck of the carrier, Saratoga, two three-seater planes, equipped with automatic clamps for a dirigible's rack, were wheeled up to the line.

Their props were spun over. But even before their cockpits had been filled, an officer on the bridge of the flagship, and a dozen others throughout the fleet, cried:

"There she is!"

Over the eastern horizon, a gleaming sliver in the sunlight, thundered the ZX-1, straight for the array of the Black Fleet. Only a few men were aware of the drama-fraught message which had come down from her radio cubby, but her growing shape commanded the eyes of every sailor and officer alike who had time to watch. A few telescopic sights were trained on her as she bellowed ahead; the keen old eyes of a very perplexed and puzzled admiral were at one of them.

"Two planes hanging from her rack," he muttered, half to himself and half to the officers standing around him. "Both Navy. Say, they're dropping off! Not coming this way, either. Going northeast. Fast, too. Can't see 'em any more.... Those men getting up from the Saratoga? Good. We'll find out something soon. Here she comes!"

Closer and closer roared the dirigible. Two planes from the Saratoga were swooping up to enter her rack, but the other two planes that shortly before had been suspended from it were gone—already vanished into the northeast.

"Don't understand this at all!" said the Admiral of the Black, or Pacific, Fleet of the United States Navy.

Things had broken well, Chris Travers considered. He had only wounded the invisible raider; but, luckily, had wounded him badly, so that, evidently, just one object was in the man's mind: to get back to where he came from, to where he could find help. He seemed oblivious of the scout that was following behind at the full speed of its mighty rotary motor, following him to his base, wherever it was.

"Just as well I didn't kill him," Chris muttered.

The rush of wind had cleared his brain; his faculties were steady and

normal. Not so with the man in the plane he pursued. It was flying crazily, but clinging to one course, nevertheless—into the northeast, towards land, some two hundred and fifty miles over the horizon.

The great silver shape of the ZX-1, barren, now, of life, dropped away, speeding ever due west; the hazy dots and blur of smoke which denoted the motionless Black Fleet vanished. But Chris was in contact with the fleet's flagship once more, through the compact radio-telephone set of his scout. As he flew, his eyes fixed steadily on the plane ahead, he was rapping into the microphone the story of what had happened. He told of the invisibility of the strange marauder, of how accurately he had judged the time of his raids; of how he, Chris, had managed to prevent the destruction of the ZX-1.

"He uses a tremendously expansive gas resembling carbon monoxide," he went on. "It seeps into every cranny of the dirigible, killing everything. The crews got no warning; they didn't know what was happening; couldn't see him! Well, I managed to wound him on the ZX-1. He beat it. I'm following him. If he lasts out, he'll go to where he came from, and we'll find out who's in back of all this. Let you know where his base is soon as I get there. Keep listening. Okay? Right; signing off."

Silence, then, between the scout and the flagship far behind....

On—on Time passed. The scout's gas was down below the half-way mark. They had covered two hundred miles now at a speed just bordering three hundred. The plane ahead looked uncanny with its apparently empty cockpit, but Chris could see all too well that death was pressing at its invisible pilot. The big machine was literally staggering in its course as the hands on its control stick grew weaker; was yawing wildly, even as the ZX-1 had yawed after her crew had been slain by vapors they could not see.

"He's got to last out!" Chris muttered. "Got to!"

At that moment land appeared, and the fleeing plane altered its northeast course to due east with an abrupt jerk.

First it was a mere hazy line on the horizon; then it rose to a thrust of land, jutted with cloud-misted hill-tops. Then, as the two roaring specks that were airplanes came closer, heavy tropical foliage became distinct, and white slashes of surf breaking on the shore. This was the Azuero Peninsula, most western point of the Republic of Panama.

Aside from one small cluster of wretched huts, it was practically uninhabited. Guarded by dense growth, only one or two of the dusty paths which passed for roads wandered aimlessly through its tangled

creepers, trees and bush. To the southeast was the broad Gulf of Panama, doorway to the Canal; on the other sides this thumb of land was surrounded by the reaches of the Pacific.

The plane was obviously nearing its eyrie—dropping lower and lower, losing speed and altitude; and also threatening each moment to tumble down out of control into the smothering welter of olive-green below, with a dead, unseen body in its cockpit.

But where was the landing field? They were now over the very heart of the Peninsula, and still Chris, searching through his telescopic sight, could see nothing but the monotonous roll of jungle. They must come to it soon, or be over to the Caribbean Sea and the Mosquito Gulf.

Then suddenly he started forward, staring. Of course there was no landing field in sight. The mystery plane needed none. It possessed the power of the helicopter: it could rise straight up or sink straight down.

From each one of the two knob-like projections on its upper wing that had puzzled him previously, a propeller had risen and unfolded into long, flat blades. They whirled in circles of light in the sun; and the airplane beneath them poised, all but motionless, its main

propeller swinging idly, and then began slowly to drop downwards.

But Chris, swooping nearby, was still perplexed. Dropping down to what? There was only the dense tropical growth beneath. He could see no trace of men, no clearing, however small, no base—nothing but the jungle.

"How in the dickens—" he began; and then stopped. At that moment the jungle's secret was revealed.

As the helicopter-plane dropped to within a few hundred feet of it, a strip of the sea verdure split in two and reared up. It looked, at first, like magic. But from aloft Chris saw the trick and how the camouflage was worked. What appeared to be a slice of the jungle roof was, in reality, a metal framework cunningly plastered with layers of green growth. An oblong, some fifty by a hundred feet, it parted in the middle like a bridge that opens to let a steamer through, revealing the lair of the plane.

Soon more was revealed. Two tiny, green-painted huts stood in the minute clearing, and a few white-clad figures were by them, staring up at the plane sinking down and at the other plane which soared above like a buzzing mosquito.

One of the dwarfed figures in white waved an arm. The others around him darted into the left-side hut. Then the helicopter-plane's wheels touched the small space allotted for it in the clearing, and the whirling propellers halted.

"So that's the secret!" Chris muttered. He pulled the microphone of the radio-telephone to his lips and angled with the dials for connection with the fleet hundreds of miles behind, meanwhile noting his exact position on Azuero Peninsula. But before he spoke, some sixth sense bade him glance below once more.

An icy shiver gripped his body.

A thin slit had appeared in the roof of the left-side hut. A spot of bright blue light was winking evilly inside it. And, though he could not hear it, Chris knew with terrible certainty that a shrill, impatient whining was piercing from the machinery of a weapon inside that hut—a weapon whose fangs had forked close to him once before—a weapon which the winking eye of blue presaged.

It struck. But at the same instant Chris leaped desperately from the cockpit of the scout.

He leaped almost into the teeth of the blue-tinged ray which knifed

up with uncanny accuracy from the slit in the roof of the hut. He was conscious of a flash of unearthly light, of terrible heat which came with it. Only the force of his jump saved him. He pulled the ripcord of the 'chute strapped to him and jerked to a pause; then he was swinging beneath a mushroom of white, trembling as he stared at the fate he had missed by a hair's breadth.

A web of spectral blue light had enveloped the abandoned scout. The plane appeared to shudder, hanging almost motionless in the wraith-like mist. Then, with a crackle, the wings and tail shivered into countless fragments; the stripped fuselage nosed over and plunged earthward, a roaring mass of flames. A fiery comet, it screamed past the man who swayed beneath his 'chute, coming within a few hundred feet of him and searing him with its hot breath. Then it drove into the dense flanks of the jungle growth.

Soon only a charred skeleton marked the last landing field of a scout of the dirigible ZX-1.

"And now, I guess," Chris whispered, "they'll turn that ray on me...."

But he had only been a thousand feet up when he jumped. Already he was close to the top of the jungle. The clearing and its huts disappeared from view; he was out of range of the swift-striking ray.

And, he reflected, though the scout was gone, he was still free—and could get to the Canal....

But tropical growth is difficult to land in.

A moment later his swinging body crashed through the branches of a tree, and he pitched forward, unable to control the impetus. A sudden shock of pain stabbed through his head and everything spun dizzily before him. He knew he was falling, jerking down as the parachute ripped on the boughs. There was another impact which drove all remaining consciousness from him.

Darkness washed over Chris Travers, lying limp beneath the shreds of a silky white shroud....

Electric light. A strong glare of it somewhere. A dull throbbing in his head. Then, a voice, with queer, hissing s's, speaking very close to him.

"Ah, yess. Look you, Kashtanov. He will be conscious soon, I think."

"You're a damned fool, Istafiev, to let him wake up," said another voice, cool and of easy correctness. "He'll see the machines. And

these Americans are tricky—one can never tell."

"Tricky? Bah! This fellow is a service man; there are things I can learn from him. Come, now, wake yourself properly, you! That glass of water, throw it on his face."

Kashtanov—Istafiev. Names that could belong to only one country, to that huge power overseas which was hovering, so said rumors, on the brink of war, waiting only for a favorable opportunity to strike—the country which the war game around the Canal had been designed to impress. Chris Travers' mind cleared just then with complete comprehension of who had schemed to send both dirigibles down and who had built this secret lair on Azuero Peninsula.

Inwardly, he groaned. It was all too plain. The destruction of the ZX-2 and the thwarted destruction of her sister had only been the first step of some gigantic plan which was to provide the opportunity for the mighty fighting machine overseas to strike. And he, who might have balked it, had made a rotten landing from the scout and delivered himself, helpless by his own clumsiness, into the hands of these men. The self-accusation was bitter.

With their secret of invisibility, their deadly blue rays, what havoc couldn't they wreak, working from their cunningly concealed base?

And now they were waiting for him to recover consciousness—waiting to question him before killing him....

But as he lay there, apparently still senseless, Chris was grappling with the seemingly hopeless problem. So, even when he felt the tingling coldness of a spray of water on his cheeks, not one line of his face moved, nor did the tiniest flutter of eyelids betray him.

Although the fumbled landing in the jungle had been a catastrophe, it had granted him his only weapon. He was believed to be genuinely unconscious.

"Another—he iss stubborn," hissed the voice of the man called Istafiev. "His senses will soon come. I can bring them back—oh, yess!"

"Enough of this!" complained the suave, beautifully modulated voice. "Darkness is coming; there's a lot to be done. Shoot him and throw him out!"

"It iss I who am in command here, comrade Kashtanov. Remember that. I desire to speak to this man. There! No? No sign yet? Well! We will see if this helps those eyes of yours to open, my American!"

Then began sheer torture.

It was an ordeal of silence. By no motion, sound or slightest sign of consciousness could he seek relief. Inanimate Chris Travers lay, holding his pose sturdily, although it seemed that the sweat was spurting from the pores, while a thin, cruel knife-blade drove into the quivering nerves beneath his left thumb-nail.

Deeper and deeper it inched, accompanied by the soft breathing of the man who guided it, until Chris felt one great sob of pain welling up inside him, struggling to break past his lips; felt a tremendous urge to writhe, to break away from the digging steel. His tongue seemed to be trembling, shivering; but no other part of his body, not even the smallest flicker of eyelash, betrayed him. At long last there came a voice, sounding as if from miles away, and the disgust in it was very good to Lieutenant Christopher Travers.

"Bah! It iss no use. His thick skull must be fractured. I could cut him open and he would not awake. He might be conscious for minutes after some hours—no, do not shoot him. I shall learn a few details from him then. Throw him over there. Now—Zenalishin iss dead, but the mask and cylinder on him should be returned to visibility. Well, we will return him, too. Then, Kashtanov, to your instructions and your work."

Hands gripped Chris's body. He felt himself thud against a wall, and slumped into a heap, head lolling over. The cessation of pain was sweet, though his thumb was raw, but sweeter still was the knowledge that he had won the first tussle: that he was deemed to be harmlessly unconscious for hours.

And carefully, through his lashes, he permitted himself a glimpse of the room he lay in, and the men whom he had heard and felt but not yet seen.

It seemed more like the belly of a submarine than a room, that maze of tubes, levers, wheels, switchboards and queer metallic shapes; and the blur cast upon his vision by barely raised eyelashes made it appear doubly unreal and grotesque. It might have been another world.

Some of it was recognizable. A massive radio-telephone set, by which, he judged, all communications between the fleets in the Pacific were overheard; a squat dynamo; a set of huge cylinders, from which, probably, had come the highly expansive gas that had snuffed out the crews of the two dirigibles. But there were other things—strange, monstrous. One of them, the tapered tube of metal that angled up to the hut's ceiling, its base a mass of wheels and dials and tubing, was evidently the weapon of the ray that had struck the

scout down.

There were three men visible in the room, and Chris switched his attention now to them.

Two were standing by a table in the center of the room, directly under a shaft of light from a powerful electric bulb. The shorter of them was saying to a third man, who knelt in front of the dynamo:

"On full." Then, as a full-throated drone pulsed from it: "Zenalishin iss there? Yess. Put him in."

The voice of the hissing s's—that was Istafiev. Short, stocky, black-haired, he was a direct contrast to the tall figure next him of one whose pointed black beard gave elegance to sharp, thin features. He carried a gun at his waist, and he identified himself as Kashtanov by saying languidly:

"Better strap him in. He'll fall, otherwise. Get some cord; I'll lift him."

The other man, by the dynamo, apparently a subordinate mechanic, dull-faced, drew a loop of cord from a box nearby, while Kashtanov went through actions that seemed fantastic. He stooped, groped

along the floor, and then gripped what looked like thin air with his fingers and lifted upwards. But it wasn't air, Chris knew; it was the invisible body of a man—the man who had destroyed the ZX-2, the man whom he had shot at in the cubby of the ZX-1—whose invisibility was now to be stripped from him.

By what? Carefully Chris swivelled his gaze around until it caught on an object which dwarfed Istafiev, now waiting by its side with one hand on the small panel of a switchboard.

A strange thing, truly, to find in a little hut on Azuero Peninsula! Row upon row of slender curved tubes, describing a three-quarter ovoid so that there was an opening for entrance in front, rose to a height of some eight feet, the whole topped by a curious glassy dome which was filled with creamy substance. There was room inside the layers of tubes for a man's body to stand upright—and a man's body was upright in it now, held by cords strapped to his unseen arms.

Invisibility! The dream of scientists for years! Here created, here taken away—by the simple manipulation of two levers on the control panel.

Intently Chris watched Istafiev pull down the right-side lever.

As it came down, the creamy liquid in the dome above the cage began to swirl slowly, then to froth and boil and whip round and round, while thick, dropsical bubbles slid up from its heaving surface and burst, discharging a kind of grayish mist, under which the white substance sank, until there was nothing left in the dome but drab-colored vapor. On the completion of this stage, the layers of tubes below warmed into life. They glowed with a soft vari-colored brightness that filled the cage with a golden splendor and seemed to rim each one of the watching men with fire.

"See you, Kashtanov," came Istafiev's voice. "The refractive index, lowered to that of air to produce invisibility, iss being raised again—all through a simple adaptation of Roentgen's theories! The substance above, mark, in the dome, which this morning you saw affect Zenalishin's blood and the pigment of his hair so that the vibrations would render his colorless tissues transparent, iss now reversing. Soon—see!—already he becomes visible!"

Something was growing in the heart of the ribbons of color, and Chris strained his shrouded eyes to discern what it was.

Black lines, standing out in the dazzling welter of light—lines that grew and became more solid as he peered at them—lines that were shaping into a recognizable form, the form of a man's skeleton!

The effect was that of an X-ray. A skeleton hung in the cage, held steady by the cords around its arms, its naked skull with yawning eye-pits grinning out at the four men in the room. Soon other details became visible: black lumps that were organs, the web of fine thin lines that were veins; and then a hazy, ghostly outline of flesh that quickly assumed solidity, burying the bones and veins and organs which had been first apparent.

And all the time the dynamo was filling the hut with its sweeping drone, and the million points of light flung from the intercrossing flame-tongues inside the cage were dancing madly on the walls and floor and ceiling, making the whole scene unreal, fantastic, as from a dream....

"There! That iss enough," said Istafiev.

The lever went back. The streaks of blue-white that threaded the cage died; the grayish vapor in the dome above faded away, leaving more of the creamy, bleaching substance than had been there originally; the dynamo was shut off, and silence fell in the room. A naked man with a very white, peaked face and a blotch of blood encrimsoning his neck hung inside the cage, his head pitched over lifelessly to one side.

Chris stared, almost forgetting the pose of unconsciousness in his bewilderment. A queer mechanism shaped in the form of a cylinder from some oddly sparkling, almost transparent material, was clasped to the nude body's chest: over the nose and mouth was another small attachment of the same substance. A nozzle midway in the large cylinder's front side gave him the clue: from it, obviously, had come the gas which had strangled the crews of the dirigibles, and the covering over nose and mouth was a novel gas mask. The material they were made of could, obviously, be rendered invisible—a virtue not possessed by ordinary inorganic substances. Invisible death from an invisible container, carried by an invisible man!

"Yess, dead," hissed Istafiev, probing the motionless, naked body. "He just got here, told what had happened, and died. He was hurt too badly to think of taking off the gas cylinder or putting on a coat. Well, it makes no difference.... Here, Grigory, take off the mask and cylinder and bury him. And you, Kashtanov, look well at this."

From the table, he picked up a large white piece of cardboard and tapped it meaningly. There were two broad lines on it, running side by side through other smaller lines and shaded patches, and there was also a thick black arrow pointing to one particular place on it.

The chart was easy to understand. Chris Travers recognized it

immediately, and his heart seemed to stop for a moment as he did.

Their first step had been the dirigibles: their second was a blow which paled the other into insignificance. And Chris told himself desperately:

"It can't go through! It can't!"

The lines on the cardboard were a detailed map of the Panama Canal; and the black arrow pointed unerringly to its most vulnerable, unguarded and vital point, the Gatun Spillway, which, if wrecked, would put the whole intricate Canal hopelessly out of commission.

Istafiev was speaking again, in low, terse tones, oblivious of the desperate resolve forming in Chris's brain.

"Only one of the dirigibles had been destroyed. Well, it iss too bad, but not fatal to the plan. The ZX-1 can hamper our country's operations when she strikes, but if the ZX-2 were also in action, they would be hampered much more—perhaps fatally. It iss not serious. So we go ahead. Now, Kashtanov, for the last time, the scheme of wrecking Gatun Spillway iss this:

"Note, here, the small golf course. That iss your landing space. You

know its location: a mile, perhaps, from Gatun Dam and the spillway. At night, there iss no one near it or on it. You drop down to the golf course from seven thousand feet: the helicopter motors are muffled, and no one will hear you come. Some of the stretches of the course are secluded and hidden by the surrounding jungle; choose one of these to land on. Well, that iss easy.

"The spillway iss about midway in Gatun Dam: its channel has been cut through a hill. You come along the side of this channel right up close to the spillway—close, remember!—and leave the box there. The range of the rays, you know, iss two hundred feet: set them to fire one minute after you leave the box. They will destroy the seven gates of the spillway and also part of the dam and the hydro-electric station. Gatun Lake will then empty itself; the canal will be half drained; the power will be gone—it will take half a year to repair it all. The ZX-1 can fly up to the east coast, thanks to Zenalishin's fumbling—yess; but these American fleets are massed in the Pacific; they will have to go around South America to reach the Atlantic—and that will take weeks.

"And in that time the Soviet has crossed the Atlantic uncontested and has paralyzed the heart of America, her eastern states. Ah, it iss magnificent!"

But Kashtanov's thoughts were elsewhere. Peering hard at the chart, he said:

"I have a minute to get clear, eh? Well, I can do that; but won't the water sweeping through from Gatun Lake after the spillway is wrecked catch me?"

"No. You run up the hill the spillway channel is cut through; it iss high ground, and the golf course iss on high ground. No one will see you coming or going, naturally, and the box iss not big enough to be noticed at night. The noise of its equalizers will be covered by the water coming through the spillway. It iss—what they say?—fool-proof. You cannot fail, Kashtanov. And—" he broke into swift-flowing, liquid Russian, his swarthy face lighting up, his arms waving, one of them slapping the other's back.

"Stop the dramatics," said Kashtanov, "and speak in English. I've worked so long in America, Russian is hard to understand. Time to begin?"

Istafiev glanced at a watch on his wrist. "A few minutes. Look you." He went to a side locker in the room, opened it, hauled out with both hands a box of plain dull metal, and put it on the table. It was larger than the one Chris Travers had seen on the ZX-1, but otherwise

similar.

"A double charge of nitro-lanarline iss in this," murmured Istafiev complacently. "Imagine it, when released! You know the working well, do you not? Yess. Well, I put it in the plane, ready." He stepped to the hut's single door and passed out. Through it Chris could see the tiny clearing, dark under the camouflaged framework, now closed once more; the light from the hut showed him the wings of the helicopter-plane standing there. He heard, moreover, the sound of a shovel from somewhere, and knew that a lonely grave was being dug in the wilderness. Then Istafiev shouted:

"Grigory! That grave, make it wide, make room for two." He came back and peered sidewise at Chris. "Not conscious yet?" A foot thudded into the American's side. "No. Well, I see to him when you are gone, Kashtanov. Yess, thick darkness iss here. Time to begin. Take off your clothes."

Chris was now keenly alert, poised, ready for any chance that might come. The odds were two or three to one, and a gun into the bargain, but the stakes were higher than any ever played for before; and a stroke had to be made, no matter how seemingly hopeless. Through his lashes he watched, turned things over in his mind—and something leaped within him when he saw Kashtanov unbuckle the

gun around his waist and lay it down, meanwhile taking off the clothes he was wearing: and when he heard the question which followed, and Istafiev's answer.

Naked, lean-muscled and sinewy, Kashtanov paused before the door of the cage. "How will this affect me?" he asked. "Painful?"

"You will be conscious of no sensation. You will see me, yess, and the room, but you will be paralyzed completely while the power is on."

"Paralyzed, eh?" murmured Kashtanov. "Well, let's go," and he placed himself inside the cage.

Paralyzed, when the power was on! In effect, that left only Istafiev in the room: the man Grigory was outside, and the noise of the dynamo would drown any shouts for help. And Kashtanov's gun was on the table....

Imperceptibly, Chris's muscles tensed as he judged the distance to the table and reckoned out each movement after the first leap. One sweeping blow with the gun would put Istafiev safely out of action; then he could be bound and Grigory summoned and tied also at the point of the gun. If, by that time, Kashtanov was invisible inside the

cage, the levers could be reversed and his body brought back to visibility and bound.

Then—a call broadcast from the hut's radio-telephone to headquarters at the Canal and the fleets in the Pacific!

"It'll work," Chris told himself. "It's damn well got to!"

But a certain part of the invisibility machine did not enter his plans.

The creamy liquid in the glassy dome began, as before, to swirl slowly: but apart from that its action was different. The white mass, instead of discharging the vapor-laden bubbles, became a whipping, highly agitated whirlpool as the tubes below glowed softly and ribbons of golden light snaked out and laced through the nude body of Kashtanov. The liquid above flowed rapidly in a complete circle, its center sucked hollow, exactly as a glass quarter-filled with water behaves when rotated quickly. Thus the outer surface of the dome, coated inside with the milky liquid, gleamed and scintillated as the whirl of light struck it and danced off it: and it even became dimly reflective.

In seconds Kashtanov's figure lost definite outline and assumed a ghostly transparency that bared the internal organs and veins: and

then his skeleton appeared.

Istafiev was facing the control panel. As he gathered his limbs for the decisive leap, Chris's eyes were on his stocky back. But Istafiev was watching keenly the gleaming, glassy dome above.

He was surveying the action of the white substance and judging the time of the process by it. Then suddenly his vision centered on something that had seemed to move on the surface of the dome.

Something had moved. Chris, lying against the wall behind, had opened his eyes fully, had dragged back his legs beneath him and balanced himself for his leap. And, in distorted perspective, his actions were reflected on the dome.

Just for a second he poised—then sprang.

The speed Istafiev showed seemed foreign to the build of his body. In an instant he had whirled from the switchboard, fingers not lingering to release Kashtanov, and leaped.

They met at the table. Two hands shot out for the gun lying on it. Chris grabbed it first. But he paid for his speed. The swipe he had aimed with his left arm went wild; a fist thudded into his stomach

and belted the wind from him, and he felt his gun-wrist seized and wrenched back.

Gasping for breath, dizzy, only the fighting instinct enabled him to crane a leg behind the other and throw his whole weight forward. The planks of the floor shivered under the two bodies that toppled onto them.

There was a melee on the floor, furious, savage, mad. In cold fact, it lasted merely for seconds; but Chris was grappling with a man whose strength was as desperate as his own, and who had not been weakened by a solar plexus blow or a cramping wait of hours in one position: the American had passed through an eternity of physical and mental agony when Istafiev, hunching up, strained the finger of his right hand upward, searching for the gun trigger.

One stubby finger found it. Istafiev grunted. The gun trembled from the force of the hands disputing its direction; then its ugly snout, stuck out parallel to the floor, and began to creep slowly downwards as Istafiev bore on it with all his might.

"So!" he hissed. "It was clever, your little game, but it iss finished!"

But Chris, undermost, had braced his elbow on the floor. The gun

held. Every ounce of his strength went into holding that one position, into keeping the weapon's muzzle away; he was therefore not prepared for Istafiev's sudden strategy.

There was a quick pull, a tug. Istafiev had wrenched himself over, reversing their positions and dragging Chris uppermost—and, as the American's balance was destroyed, the gun whipped up and fired.

A bullet sang past his head. It missed by inches. But from behind came a sound as of rending cloth. The glassy dome above the cage of the machine had splintered into countless fragments.

The effect was amazing. The shafts of light from the machine's tube ceased; creamy liquid dribbled out from the cracked dome, and, as it met the air, frothed into billows of dense gray smoke. In seconds, the room was choked with a thick, foggy vapor that obscured every object in it as well as the blackest of moonless nights.

Istafiev had not fired again, could not. With a quick, frantic wrench and twist Chris had knocked the gun from his hand, and it had slithered away, now lost in the bunching smoke. But Istafiev's other hand, steel-ribbed with tense muscles, had darted like a snake into the American's throat, and under that iron, relentless grip Chris was weakening. His head was whirling; the old wound throbbing waves

of nausea through him. Desperately he tried to struggle loose, flailing with his legs—but useless. He knew he was slipping; slipping....

Then, out of the gray, all-hiding mist, came a voice.

"Istafiev! Where are you? Call! The machine's broken; I'm out and invisible. Where is the American?"

Kashtanov!

Istafiev hissed:

"It iss all right. He will be finished in a moment. But you—go! The box iss aboard the plane; don't wait! You must not take chance of being hurt. Go to your work. Call Grigory in. Go, Kashtanov!"

"I go, Istafiev."

"No, you don't!" Chris Travers croaked almost inaudibly. "You don't!"

Thought of the Canal lying there defenseless, of Kashtanov speeding towards it on his wrecker's errand, kindled within him a strength that was unnatural, superhuman. Like a wildcat he tore loose from the

choking grip on his throat; Istafiev tried to subdue that sudden, unlooked-for surge of power, but could not. Five piston-like, jabbing blows crunched into him from Chris's hurtling fist, and with the fifth Istafiev faded quietly out of the picture....

Chris sprang up and started a leap for the door he could not see. A body brushed against him; dimly through the smoke he saw the man called Grigory, and Grigory saw him, but not for long. A whaling swing lifted him two inches clear of the floor, and then he went down onto the peacefully recumbent Istafiev; and Chris Travers, fighting mad, stormed from the hut into the clearing outside.

The camouflaged framework had been raised; soft motors were purring helicopter propellers around and lifting a plane up towards the stars hanging high above.

The airplane was already feet off the ground and sweeping straight up. A sane man wouldn't have thought of it, but Chris wasn't quite sane just then. With a short sprint, he launched himself into a flying leap, grabbed out desperately—and felt the bar of the undercarriage between his hands.

The plane jolted. Then it steadied; rose with terrific acceleration. And Chris hauled himself up onto the undercarriage and clung to one

of the wheel-stanchions, breathing, hard, hidden by the fuselage from the invisible pilot.

The clearing and the hut, with smoke billowing from it, dropped into nothingness. The night enclosed the helicopter-plane.

From the air, Panama Canal at night is a necklace of lights strung across the thin neck of land that separates sea from sea. Then, as a high-flying plane drops lower, the beams of light loosen into widely separated patches, which are the locks; between them the silky black ribbon of water runs, now widening into a dim, hill-girt lake, now narrowing as it passes through massive Culebra Cut, then widening again as it comes to the artificial Gatun Lake, at the far end of which stands Gatun Dam and its spillway.

Silence hung close over the Canal. The last ship had passed through; the planes that daily maneuver over it had returned to their hangars; the men who shepherd ships through the locks had gone either to bed or to Panama City or Colon. The Canal, as always at night, seemed almost deserted.

To Chris, clutching tight to his hazardous perch, it looked utterly deserted. The ride had been nightmare-like, fraught every second with peril. Several times the whip of wind had come near tearing

him loose; the cold air of the upper layers had numbed his fingers, his whole body; he was chilled and, experiencing the inevitable let-down which comes after a great effort, miserable. Just then, the task ahead appeared well-nigh impossible.

The only thing in his favor was that Kashtanov apparently did not know he was aboard, since the plane had flown evenly, steadily, not trying to shake off the man hanging to its landing gear by somersaulting in the sky. Evidently the jolt as it was rising hadn't warned the unseen pilot; the fog from the broken machine had obscured Chris's wild leap.

But what, he thought, of that? The element of surprise was in his favor—but how to gain advantage by it? He had no weapon, nothing save bare hands with which to subdue a foe as elusive as the wind that was now hurtling by him. Clinging there, slipping now and again, drenched with cold, the odds looked hopeless.

Then, suddenly, the booming of the main motor stopped. Only a quiet purring from the wings took its place. The helicopter-plane hovered almost motionless, quiet and deadly like a sinister bird of prey. It began to drop straight down through the dark. Chris Travers glanced below.

There, misty, fainty, small as the toy of a child, lay Gatun Dam, with the spillway in its center.

Chris stared. So small the dam looked—this dream of an engineer, this tiny outpost of man's genius thrust boldly into the breast of the tropics, holding back a whole lake with its cement flanks, enabling ocean to be linked to ocean! It was the heart of the Canal; if burst, the veins would be drained.

Something that cannot be caught in words seemed to seize the lone American then. As in a trance, he saw more than the dam; he saw what it symbolized. He saw the Frenchmen who had tried to thrust the Canal through first, and who had failed, dying in hundreds. He saw the men of his own race who had carried that mighty work on; saw them gouging through the raw earth and moving mountains, tiny figures doing the work of giants; saw them stricken down by fever and disease, saw others fill the empty files and go on, never wavering. He saw them complete it and seal the waters in captivity with the dam that lay below....

And with that vision of stupendous achievement, cold, weariness, hopelessness passed from Chris Travers and swept clean away. The odds that had loomed so large fell into insignificance.

The golf course spread out and became dimly visible as the plane dropped cautiously down. Away to the left there were the few twinkling lights of Gatun Dam, whitening the crests of the waters that tumbled through the spillway. Their drone was dully audible. On every other side dark rolling hills stretched, covered in untamed jungle growth. The golf course was shrouded by them. Its smooth sward made a perfect landing place; an ordinary plane might alight there.

Lower, lower, ever so slowly. A bare one hundred feet, now. Chris scanned the lay of the land. Right close to the spot Kashtanov had chosen to set the plane down on was a deep sand-trap, put there to snare unskilful golfers. Chris steadied himself on the cross-bar.

"I'll have to go up over the side and grab him," he planned. "Then hold on to his throat till I feel him go limp."

The wheels of the plane touched gently, and she settled to rest.

In one furious movement Chris was off and springing up the side of the fuselage into the single cockpit, his hands clutching for the invisible man who sat there.

He heard a croak of alarm; then his fingers thumbed into bare flesh

and slid up over a nude shoulder to the throat. They tightened, bored in, held with terrible pressure. Sprawled over the cockpit, he clung grimly, to what seemed nothing more than air.

Spattering noises came from somewhere. An unseen body thrashed frantically. Transparent hands clawed over the American's frame, worried at him. But he held his grip, tightening it each second. There was a gasping, choking sound, a desperate writhe, another scratching of the invisible hands—and then came what Chris had feared, what he could not guard against since his eyes could not forewarn him. A heavy monkey-wrench appeared to rise of its own accord from the floor of the cockpit and come swinging at his head.

He ducked at the last second. But it clipped him; his brain whirled dizzily. The next moment he slithered off the plane and fell to the ground, dragging the unseen Kashtanov with him. And as he pitched into the damp grass, the shock dislodged his grip.

He was up in a flash, but the damage was done. The monkey-wrench curved through the darkness in a vicious swipe that landed it flush against his jaw; swung back, pounded again like a trip-hammer—again and again and again....

Chris reeled back, teetered on the edge of nothingness, then went

tumbling crazily down into the sand-trap behind. One leg was doubled underneath him as he crashed.

A voice floated down out of the darkness. "That is the end of you!" it said. But Chris Travers did not hear it....

Pain. Agonizing pain. The whole lower side of his face was a burning, throbbing, aching lump of flesh, and his left leg seemed on fire. What had happened? Where was he?

Then came remembrance, and it was far worse than the fangs of pain that were gnawing him. Chris cried out—a cracked, twisted cry. Kashtanov, the dam—the box of the ray! How much time had passed?

He hunched his body over and stared up. Limned against the starlight were the wings of a plane, still standing where it had landed beside the sand-trap. He clutched his thoughts. The plane meant—it meant Kashtanov had gone on his errand, had not yet returned? Only minutes had gone by since the blows from the monkey-wrench. But was the box placed yet? Was Kashtanov already hurrying back?

He listened. From far away came a drone that was separate from the throbbing of his head. The drone of waters, controlled waters. The

normal sound of the spillway of Gatun Dam. The box had not yet unleashed its disintegrating bolt of blue.

"I've got to stop it!" he whispered.

He tried to rise. Only one leg held. The other twisted awrily with a rasp of broken bones. A spearing pain tore through him. Useless! His fall had broken it. He could not rise, could not walk, much less run. He was no more than a cripple.

"Oh, God!" he groaned, "How can I, how can I?"

Then his eyes fell on the plane resting above him.

"I've got one leg," he muttered, "and two hands and two eyes.... They're left me. Yes!"

He rolled over. He shoved with his right leg and clawed at the bank of the sand-trap. Inch by inch he wormed up, slipping, scraping. The sand grated into his battered face and seeped through onto his tongue; he coughed and spluttered, groaning from the effort and his feebleness. Spots of blood showed black against the crazy course he left behind him; ages seemed to pass before he thrust his head over the top of the bank, dug his chin into it and pulled onto level ground.

Ages, but in reality only seconds, and the whole Canal—America—lying at the mercy of what each one of those seconds might unloose!

But the plane was near now, and it almost seemed that some unseen force mightier than the strength of men hauled Chris's broken body to it and up the stretch of its fuselage-side into the cockpit.

Ordinarily, he should have been delirious from the pain of jaw and leg, but the controls of the plane were before him and he saw nothing else. Wings and propeller were better than legs! He was in his element: by the sixth sense of born airmen, he knew and could handle any flying machine, no matter how foreign.

In a second, his fingers had fumbled onto the starting button. The choke of the motor and then its full-throated roar were sweet to his ears.

The lonely golf course and the night re-echoed with the bellow of twelve pistons thrusting in line; watching, one would not have dreamed that a cripple was at the controls of the plane that now swung around with a blast of power, leveled its nose down the course and raced smoothly over close-clipped grass. Its wheels bumped, spun on the ground and lifted into air.

A mile to the dam! Istafiev's words came back to him. It would take Kashtanov twenty minutes at least, for he would go cautiously. But how long had passed—how long? That was the agonizing question.

Staring forward through the hurtling prop, the night rushed at him; the dark hills melted away to either side; clear ground swept into view and then a long black thread that was the spillway channel. Behind was the bubbling, leaping flow of the spillway itself, and Gatun Dam. The smooth cement sides were as yet unharmed.

"Thank God!" Chris muttered. "Now, where—where?"

A stream of light flowed out from the hydro-electric station on the left side of the spillway channel. The opposite bank was bare, running right up to the face of the dam beneath the spillway's seven gates. There the box was to be placed. But from the air, the light was uncertain, deceptive—and a little two-foot-square box was all he had to go by!

"I can't see!" Chris said hoarsely. "I can't see!"

Like a roaring black meteor the plane hurtled over the banks of the spillway, the eyes of its pilot scouring the ground. It zoomed just in time to miss the wall of the dam, banked, doubled like a scared jack-

rabbit, dove down again, coming within feet of the spillway channel. Mad, inspired flying! But what good could it do?

Then from its cockpit came a yell.

"There! There! By heaven, I can make it!"

Two or three hundred feet—it was not clear just how far—from the face of the dam, on the bare right bank of the channel, a tiny pin-prick of black was moving slowly along. It seemed to move by itself through the air. And now, as the screaming plane banked again and came rushing closer, the pin-prick grew into a black box that suddenly stopped its advance, held motionless some four feet off the ground. Though the man who held it was not visible, Chris could fancy him staring up at the plane, could fancy the look of consternation on his unseen face.

Two hundred feet was the range of the rays! Was Kashtanov that close? Obviously the controls had not yet been set, for he still held the box. But he could switch them on in a second and fling the deadly machine up toward the dam, if he were at present just out of range. A second—a second!

"Damn you, here goes!" roared Chris.

He wrenched the stick way over. The plane appeared to hang crazily on one wing. Then it leveled off and stuck its nose down, flipping its tail up, and down—down—down it bellowed; with no hope in the world of ever coming out of its insane plunge.

What he saw in that last momentary glimpse was burned forever into Chris Travers' memory. There was the black box, hanging in the air straight before the plane's thundering nose; there, behind it, the black tide of the spillway waters; and, still further behind, he could see the other bank and the hydro-electric station, and a few tiny figures that rushed out from it just then to see what some fool flyer was doing.

All this flashed into his sight, etched against the sable night as if in flame. Then the plane's snout smashed into the black box hanging before it, and the propeller crunched through a naked, invisible body. A ragged scream that marked the passing of Kashtanov split through the air for a flash of time, and the dark, blurred mass that was an airplane teetered clean over and flopped into the rushing spillway channel.

The men who had scrambled out from the hydro-electric station stared at each other blankly. One of them stuttered:

"But—he did that deliberately! Nothing went wrong with his ship! I

saw him! He seemed to be diving at something!"

"Come on!" snapped another. "We might be able to get him out. A mad fool like that's just the kind who'll live through it."

114 The Terror From the Depths by Sewell Peaslee Wright

Commander John Hanson challenges an appalling denizen of the watery world Hydrot.

Aproximate word count: 7,600

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

"Good afternoon, sir," nodded Correy as I entered the navigating room. He glanced down at the two glowing three-dimensional navigating charts, and drummed restlessly on the heavy frames.

"Afternoon, Mr. Correy. Anything of interest to report?"

"Not a thing, sir!" growled my fire-eating first officer. "I'm about ready to quit the Service and get a job on one of the passenger liners, just on the off chance that something exciting might eventually happen."

"You were born a few centuries too late," I chuckled. Correy loved a

fight more than any man I ever knew. "The Universe has become pretty well quieted down."

"Oh, it isn't that; it's just this infernal routine. Just one routine patrol after another; they should call it the Routine Patrol Service. That's what the silver-sleeves at the Base are making of it, sir."

At the moment, Correy meant every word he said. Even old-timers develop cases of nerves, now and then, on long tours of duty in small ships like the Ertak. Particularly men like Correy, whose bodies crave physical action.

There wasn't much opportunity for physical activity on the Ertak; she was primarily a fighting ship, small and fast, with every inch of space devoted to some utilitarian use. I knew just how Correy felt, because I'd felt the same way a great many times. I was young, then, one of the youngest commanders the Special Patrol Service had ever had, and I recognized Correy's symptoms in a twinkling.

"We'll be re-outfitting at the Arpan sub-base in a couple of days," I said carelessly. "Give us a chance to stretch our legs. Have you seen anything of the liner that spoke to us yesterday?" I was just making conversation, to get his mind out of its unhealthy channel.

"The Kabit? Yes, sir; we passed her early this morning, lumbering along like the big fat pig that she is." A pig, I should explain, is a food animal of Earth; a fat and ill-looking creature of low intelligence. "The old Ertak went by her as though she were standing still. She'll be a week and more arriving at Arpan. Look: you can just barely make her out on the charts."

I glanced down at the twin charts Correy had indicated. In the center of each the red spark that represented the Ertak glowed like a coal of fire; all around were the green pinpricks of light that showed the position of other bodies around us. The Kabit, while comparatively close, was just barely visible; her bulk was so small that it only faintly activated the super-radio reflex plates upon the ship's hull.

"We're showing her a pretty pair of heels," I nodded, studying our position in both dimensions. "Arpan isn't registering yet, I see. Who's this over here; Hydrot?"

"Right, sir," replied Correy. "Most useless world in the Universe, I guess. No good even for an emergency base."

"She's not very valuable, certainly," I admitted. "Just a ball of water whirling through space. But she does serve one good purpose; she's a sign-post it's impossible to mistake." Idly, I picked up Hydrot in the

television disk, gradually increasing the size of the image until I had her full in the field, at maximum magnification.

Hydrot was a sizable sphere, somewhat larger than Earth—my natural standard of comparison—and utterly devoid of visible land. She was, as I had said, just a ball of water, swinging along uselessly through space, although no doubt there was land of some kind under that vast, unending stretch of gray water, for various observers had reported, in times past, bursts of volcanic steam issuing from the water.

Indeed, as I looked, I saw one such jet of steam, shooting into space from a spot not far from the equator of the strange world. In the television disk, it looked like a tiny wisp of white, barely visible against the gray water, but in reality it must have been a mighty roaring column of smoke and steam and erupted material.

"There's life in the old girl, anyway," I commented, indicating the image in the disk. "See her spout?"

We bent over the disk together, watching the white feather of steam.

"First time I've ever seen that," said Correy. "I know volcanic activity has been reported before, but—look, sir! There's another—

two more!"

Undoubtedly, things were happening deep in the bowels of Hydrot. There were now three wisps of steam rising from the water, two of them fairly close together, the other a considerable distance away, arranged to form a very long pointed triangle, the short base of which ran close to the equator, its longer sides reaching toward one of the poles; the north pole, as we happened to view the image.

The columns of steam seemed to increase in size. Certainly they mounted higher into the air. I could imagine the terrific roar of them as they blasted their way through the sullen water and hurled it in steaming spray around their bases, while huge stones fell hissing into the water on all sides. The eruption must have shaken the entire sphere; the gushing of those vomiting throats was a cataclysm of such magnitude that I could not guess its effect.

Correy and I watched tensely, hardly breathing. I think we both felt that something was about to happen: a pent-up force had been released, and it was raging. We could almost hear the rumble of the volcanic explosions and the ear-splitting hiss of the escaping steam.

Suddenly Correy clutched my arm.

"Look!" he whispered, "Look!"

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. I could see the water crawling inside the triangle formed by the three wisps of steam: crawling in white, foaming waves like tiny scraps of thread as it rushed headlong, in mighty tidal waves, away from the center of that triangle.

The columns of steam flared up with fresh strength, darkening as though with smoke. Here and there within the triangle black specks appeared, grew larger, and ran together in crooked lines that widened continually.

"A—a new continent, sir!" said Correy almost reverently. "We've seen a new continent born."

Correy had put my thoughts into words. We had seen a new continent born; on the gray surface of Hydrot there was now a great irregular black blotch from which mounted three waving pillars of smoke and steam. Around the shores of the new continent the waters raged, white and angry, and little threads of white crawled outward from those shores—the crests of tidal waves that must have towered into the air twice the Ertak's length.

Slowly, the shore-line changed form as fresh portions arose, and others, newly-risen, sank again beneath the gray water. The wisps of steam darkened still more, and seemed to shrivel up, as though the fires that fed them had been exhausted by the travail of a new continent.

"Think, sir," breathed Correy, "what we might find if we landed there on that new continent, still dripping with the water from which it sprang! A part of the ocean's bed, thrust above the surface to be examined at will—Couldn't we leave our course long enough to—to look her over?"

I confess I was tempted. Young John Hanson, Commander of the Special Patrol ship, Ertak, had his good share of natural curiosity, the spirit of adventure, and the explorer's urge. But at the same time, the Service has a discipline that is as rigid and relentless as the passing of time itself.

Hydrot lay off to starboard of our course: Arpan, where we were to re-outfit, was ahead and to port, and we were already swinging in that direction. The Ertak was working on a close schedule that gave us no latitude.

"I'm afraid it can't be done, Mr. Correy," I said, shaking my head.

"We'll report it immediately, of course, and perhaps we'll get orders to make an investigation. In that case—"

"Not the Ertak!" interrupted Correy passionately. "They'll send a crew of bug-eyed scientists there, and a score or so of laboratory men to analyze this, and run a test on that, and the whole mess of them will write millions of words apiece about the expedition that nobody will ever read. I know."

"Well, we'll hope you're wrong." I said, knowing in my heart that he was perfectly right. "Keep her on her present course, Mr. Correy."

"Present course it is, sir!" snapped Correy. Then we bent together over the old-fashioned hooded television disk staring down silently and regretfully at the continent we had seen born, and which, with all its promise of interest and adventure, we must leave behind, in favor of a routine stop at the sub-base on Arpan.

I think both of us would have gladly given years of our lives to turn the Ertak's blunt nose toward Hydrot, but we had our orders, and in the Service as it was in those days, an officer did not question his orders.

Correy mooned around the Arpan sub-base like a fractious child.

Kincaide and I endeavored to cheer him up, and Hendricks, the Ertak's young third officer, tried in vain to induce Correy to take in the sights.

"All I want to know," Correy insisted, "is whether there's any change in orders. You got the news through to Base, didn't you, sir?"

"Right. All that came back was the usual 'Confirmed.' No comment." Correy muttered under his breath and wandered off to glare at the Arpanians who were working on the Ertak. Kincaide shrugged and shook his head.

"He's spoiling for action, sir," he commented. Kincaide was my second officer; a cool-headed, quick-witted fighting man, and as fine an officer as ever wore the blue-and-silver uniform of the Service. "I only hope—message for you, sir." He indicated an Arpanian orderly who had come up from behind, and was standing at attention.

"You're wanted immediately in the radio room, sir," said the orderly, saluting.

"Very well," I nodded, returning the salute and glancing at Kincaide. "Perhaps we will get a change in orders after all."

I hurried after the orderly, following him down the broad corridors of the administration building to the radio room. The commander of the Arpan sub-base was waiting there, talking gravely with the operator.

"Bad news, Commander," he said, as I entered the room. "We've just received a report from the passenger liner Kabit, and she's in desperate straits. At the insistence of the passengers, the ship made contact with Hydrot and is unable to leave. She has been attacked by some strange monster, or several of them—the message is badly confused. I thought perhaps you'd like to report the matter to Base yourself."

"Yes. Thank you, sir. Operator, please raise Base immediately!"

The Kabit? That was the big liner we had spoken to the day before Correy and I had seen the new continent rise above the boundless waters of Hydrot. I knew the ship; she carried about eighteen hundred passengers, and a crew of seventy-five men and officers. Beside her, the Ertak was a pygmy; that the larger ship, so large and powerful, could be in trouble, seemed impossible. Yet—

"Base, sir," said the operator, holding a radio-menore toward me.

I placed the instrument on my head.

"John Hanson, Commander of the Special Patrol ship Ertak emanating. Special report for Chief of Command."

"Report, Commander Hanson," emanated the Base operator automatically.

"Word has just been received at Arpan sub-base that passenger liner Kabit made contact with Hydrot, landing somewhere on the new continent, previously reported by the Ertak. Liner Kabit reports itself in serious difficulties, exact nature undetermined, but apparently due to hostile activity from without. Will await instructions."

"Confirmed. Commander Hanson's report will be put through to Chief of Command immediately. Stand by."

I removed the radio-menore, motioning to the operator to resume his watch.

Radio communication in those days was in its infancy. Several persons who have been good enough to comment upon my previous chronicles of the Special Patrol Service, have asked "But, Commander Hanson! Why didn't you just radio for assistance?"

forgetting as young persons do, that things have not always been as they are to-day.

The Ertak's sending apparatus, for example, could reach out at best no more than a day's journey in any direction, and then only imperfectly. Transmission of thought by radio instead of symbols or words, had been introduced but a few years before I entered the Service. It must be remembered that I am an old, old man, writing of things that happened before most of the present population of the Universe was born—that I am writing of men who, for the larger part, have long since embarked upon the Greatest Adventure.

"Base, sir," said the operator after a moment, and I hastily slipped on the radio-menore.

"Commander John Hanson, standing by," I shot at the operator at Base. "Have you orders?"

"Orders for Captain John Hanson, Commander of the Special Patrol ship Ertak," emanated the operator in a sort of mental drone. "Chief of Command directs that the Ertak proceed immediately to the scene of the reported difficulty, and take any necessary steps to relieve same. I will repeat the orders," and he droned through them a second time.

"Orders are understood. The results of our operations will be reported to Base as soon as possible." I tore off the radio-menore and hurried from the room, explaining to the sub-base commander as I went.

Correy was standing beside the Ertak, talking to Kincaide, and as I approached, they both looked around quickly and hopefully.

"What's up, sir?" asked Correy, reading news in my face. "A change in orders?"

"Correct! That big liner, the Kabit, landed on Hydrot, and she's in some sort of mysterious trouble. Orders from the Chief himself are to proceed there immediately. Are any men away from the ship on leave?"

"If there are, we can do without them!" shouted Correy. "I'll stand a double watch."

"The crew is on duty, sir," said Kincaide quietly. "Mr. Hendricks is aboard directing the taking on of supplies. We can leave any time you order, sir."

"We leave immediately, gentlemen," I said. "Mr. Correy, will you

give the necessary orders?"

"Yes, sir!" grinned Correy, his eyes dancing like a schoolboy's. He was in the navigating room jabbing attention signals and snapping orders into the microphone before Kincaide and I, moving more leisurely, had entered the ship.

Hurtling through space at maximum speed, it took us two days, Earth time, to come close enough to Hydrot so that we could locate the unfortunate Kabit. She had landed on a level plain near the shore of the new continent, where she lay, just a tiny bright speck, even under the maximum power of our television disk.

"It's an odd thing, sir, that we can't raise her by radio," commented Hendricks, who was on duty. "Have we tried recently?"

"We've been trying constantly, at intervals of but a few minutes," I replied grimly. "Several times, the operator reports, he has been able to get a muffled and garbled response, utterly unintelligible. He says that the signals sound as though the radio emanation-plates in her outer hull were damaged or grounded. We'll just have to wait until we get there."

"As soon as we are near enough, please make an analysis of her

atmosphere, so that we can break out masks, if necessary." Hendricks, while young and rather too impulsive, was a good rough-and-ready scientist, as well as a courageous and dependable officer. "When Mr. Correy relieves you, please inform him that I am taking a watch below, should he need me." Hydrot was looming up in the television disk, and I wished to be rested and ready for action when we landed.

I was awakened by an uncomfortable warmth, and when I glanced at my watch the explanation was obvious. We had penetrated the outer gaseous envelope of the world that had so recently given birth to a continent, and Correy was driving the Ertak through at reckless speed.

When I entered the navigating room, Correy glanced up guiltily at the surface-temperature gauge and then hastily saluted.

"We're reducing speed, sir," he said. "Atmosphere is rather denser than I had expected. Hendricks reports the air breathable, with a humidity of one hundred. And—tell me, sir, what do you make of the appearance of the Kabit now?"

I bent over the hooded television disk anxiously. The Kabit was in the center of the field, and the image was perhaps a third of the disk's

diameter in length.

Instead of a tiny bright speck, I could see now the fat bulk of the ship, its bright metal gleaming—but across or around the ship, were broad spiral bands of black or dark green, as sharp as though they had been painted there.

"What are the bands, Mr. Correy?" I asked sharply. "Have you formed any opinion?"

"I have, sir, but I'd rather not offer it at this time," said my first officer gravely. "Look about the ship, in the immediate vicinity, and see if you find anything of interest. My eyes may be playing me tricks."

I glanced curiously at Correy, and then bent my attention on the image in the disk.

It was impossible to make out any details of the background, save that the country round seemed to be fairly level, with great pools of gray water standing here and there, and a litter, as of gigantic, wilted vegetation, spread over everything.

And then, as I looked, it seemed to me that the Kabit shifted position

slightly. At the same time, the spiral bands seemed to move, and upon the ground around the ship, there was movement also.

I looked up from the disk, feeling Correy's eyes upon me. We stared at each other, neither wishing to speak—hardly daring to speak. There are some things too monstrous to put into words.

"You—you saw it, sir?" asked Correy at last, his voice scarcely more than a whisper.

"I don't know. I think I saw something like a—a snake. Is that what you mean?"

"Yes. Something like a snake. A snake that has wrapped itself around the Kabit, holding it helpless ... a serpent...." He gestured helplessly, a sort of horror in his eyes. I think he had convinced himself he had only imagined the serpent, until I had seen the same thing.

"Have you stopped to think, Mr. Correy," I asked slowly, "how long the creature would have to be to wrap itself like that around a liner the size of the Kabit? It—it can't be!"

"I know it, sir," nodded Correy. "I know it. And still, I saw it, and you saw it."

"Yes," I muttered. "I saw it. I—I saw it move!"

We maintained a speed that kept the surface-temperature gauge dangerously close to maximum permissible reading, and despite the forced ventilation of the ship, we were dripping with perspiration.

Atmospheric speeds are maddeningly low after the reckless, hurtling speed of space travel, but our vaunted scientists haven't yet found a way of eliminating friction, and we had to make the best of it.

With maddening slowness the image in the television disk grew larger and clearer, relentlessly confirming our original conclusion.

The Kabit was wrapped in the coils of a mighty serpent; a monster that must have been the height of a man in diameter, and whose length I could not even guess.

Four coils were looped tightly about the Kabit, and we could now see the terrible tail of the thing, and its head.

I have always been glad that the details of that ghastly head became visible gradually: viewed suddenly, in full relief, it was a sight that might well have threatened the reason of any man.

The serpent's mouth was lined with a triple row of long, fang-like

teeth, tilted gullet-ward at a sharp angle, and the breathing holes were elevated to form warty excrudescences near the end of the snoutish upper jaw. Long colorless tentacles fringed the horrible mouth: barbels that writhed incessantly, as though they sought food for the rapacious jaws they guarded. From a point slightly above and to the rear of the tiny, ruby eyes, two slim and graceful antennae, iridescent and incongruously beautiful, rose twice the height of a man. Like the antennae of a butterfly, they were surmounted by tiny knobs, and were in constant motion.

The whole head was armored with great plates or scales, dark green in color; and apparently of tremendous thickness. A short distance behind the head were two tremendous reddish-brown fins, with strong supporting spines that seemed to terminate in retractile claws. In the water, these fins would undoubtedly be of tremendous value in swimming and in fighting, but on land they seemed rather useless. Aside from a rudimentary dorsal fin, a series of black, stubby spines, connected by a barely visible webbing, the thing had no other external evidences of its marine origin.

"You've been restless for action, Mr. Correy," I commented grimly. "I believe this chap will give us all you could desire."

Correy, still staring down into the disk, fascinated by the terrible

details there, shook his head.

"It shouldn't be such a stiff battle, sir," he said. "The ray will make quick work of him once we're within distance."

"Yes—and of the Kabit and all on board," I reminded him. "If he has the strength his size would indicate, he would crush the liner in his death agonies, or, failing that, would heave it about so violently that those within would be maimed or killed outright. This is a case for cunning, and not might."

"I think, sir, both cunning and might will be needed," said Correy soberly, looking up from the disk. "Cunning alone will not dispose of that lad. Have you any plans?"

"Rough plans only; we'll have to develop them as we go along. We don't know what we'll be up against. We'll land a safe distance away, and a small expeditionary force will attack as it sees fit; probably, dividing itself into two or three units. The Ertak will be manned by a skeleton crew and ready to take any necessary action to protect itself or, if possible, to aid any of the expeditionary parties."

"What weapons, sir?" asked Correy, his eyes gleaming. "I'll give the orders now!"

"It's too soon for that; it'll be an hour at least before we land. But I believe every man, including officers, should be armed with pistols, at least six atomic bombs, and there should be a field disintegrator-ray unit for each party. And each member must be equipped with a menore; communication will be by menore only. You might call Mr. Kincaide and Mr. Hendricks, and we'll hold a little council of war."

"Right, sir!" said Correy, and picked up the microphone. Kincaide and Hendricks were in the room almost within the minute.

We laid our plans as best we could, but they weren't very definite. Only a few things were certain.

Somehow, we must induce the monster to release his grasp on the Kabit. We could take no action against the serpent until the big liner and her passengers were safe. It was a desperate mission; an enterprise not of the Ertak, but of individuals.

"One thing is certain, sir," commented Correy, taking over by visual navigation, and reducing speed still more, "you must remain in charge of the ship. You will be needed—"

"I understand your motives, Mr. Correy," I interrupted, "but I do not agree with you. As Commander of the Ertak, I shall command the

activities of her men. You will have charge of one landing force, and Mr. Hendricks of another. You, Mr. Kincaide, I shall ask to remain in charge of the ship."

"Very well, sir," nodded Kincaide, swallowing his disappointment. I should have liked to have Kincaide with me, for he was level-headed and cool in an emergency—but it was because of these very things that I wanted him in charge of the Ertak.

"We're close enough now, sir, to select a landing place," put in Correy. "There's a likely spot, a safe distance away and apparently level, almost on the shore. Shall I set her down there?"

"Use your own judgment, Mr. Correy. You may order the landing force to arm and report at the exit port. As soon as you have made contact, you and Mr. Hendricks will report to me there.

"Mr. Kincaide, you will remain on duty here. I am leaving the conduct of the ship entirely to your judgment, asking you to remember only that the rescue of the Kabit and her nearly two thousand souls is the object of this expedition, and the safety of our own personnel cannot be given primary consideration."

"I understand, sir," nodded Kincaide gravely. He held out his hand in

that familiar gesture of Earth, which may mean so much more than men ever dare put into words, and we shook hands silently.

There were to be three landing parties of five men and one officer each—eighteen men against a creature that held a mighty passenger liner in its coils!

"I wish, sir, that I were going in your place," said Kincaide softly.

"I know that. But—waiting here will be the hardest job of all. I'm leaving that for you." I turned and hurried out of the room, to make my entries in the log—perhaps my last entries—and secure my equipment.

There are times, in setting down these old tales of the Special Patrol Service as it was before they tacked a "Retired" after my name and title, that I wish I had been a bit more studious during my youth. I find myself in need of words, and possessed only of memories.

I wish I could think of words that would describe the sight that confronted us when we emerged from the Ertak and set foot upon the soil of that newly-born continent of Hydrot, but I find I cannot. I have tried many times, and I find my descriptions fall far short of the picture I still carry in my mind.

The ground was a vast littered floor of wilted marine growths, some already rotting away, while others, more hardy, or with roots reaching into as yet undried ooze, retained a sort of freshness. Crab-like creatures scuttled in all directions, apparently feasting upon the plentiful carrion. The stench was terrible, almost overpowering at first, but after a few minutes we became accustomed to it, and, in the intensity of the work we had undertaken, it was forgotten.

Progress was not possible on the ground. Sheltered from the sun by the thick growths it supported, it was still treacherously soft. But the giant marine vegetation that had retained something of its vigor provided a highway, difficult and dangerous and uncertain, but passable.

I remained with the party taking the most direct route to the unfortunate Kabit, while Correy and Hendricks led the parties to my left and right, respectively. We kept in constant touch with each other by means of our menores.

"I believe," emanated Correy, "that the beast sees us. I had a good view of him a few seconds back, and his head was elevated and pointed this way."

"It's possible," I replied. "Be careful, however, to do nothing to

alarm or excite him. All men must keep under cover, and proceed with as little noise and commotion as possible. I'm going to see, now, if I can get in touch with anyone on the Kabit; with full power, communication might be possible even through the Kabit's grounded hull."

"It's worth trying," agreed Hendricks. "These new menores are powerful."

I adjusted the little atomic generator to maximum, and replaced the instrument on my head.

"On board the Kabit!" I emanated, trying by sheer mental effort to drive the thought over that stinking waste, and through the massive double hull of the liner. "Ahoy the Kabit!"

"This is Captain Gole," flashed back the answer instantly. "Captain Gole of the passenger liner Kabit. You are from the Ertak?"

"Commander Hanson of the Ertak emanating. How are conditions on the Kabit?"

"Ghastly!" I could sense the feeling in the word, faintly as it smote upon my consciousness. "My officers are keeping the crew under

some sort of control, but the passengers are unmanageable. They are frantic—insane with terror. Two or three have already gone mad. I am on the verge of insanity myself. Have you seen the thing that has us trapped?"

"Yes. We are coming to your aid. Tell your passengers to calm themselves. We'll find a way out of this somehow. You know the motto of our Service."

"Yes: 'Nothing Less Than Complete Success!' I have already issued a bulletin to the effect that I am in contact with your ship. I think it has had a good effect. The clamor is quieting somewhat; you don't know what a terrible strain this has been, sir!"

I could well imagine his mental state. The captain of the Kabit was a Zenian, and the Zenians are too high-strung to stand up under a severe strain.

"It may help us if you'll tell us, very briefly, the history of your experience here," I suggested. "We're going up against something we know nothing about. Perhaps you can give us some valuable information."

"I doubt it, for there's very little to tell. Undoubtedly, you have the

report which I managed to get through to Arpan before our radio emanation plates were put out of commission.

"Against my better judgment, we set down here upon the insistence of the passengers. The television instruments revealed nothing more dangerous than the small life in the marine growths left stranded by the receding water.

"I unsealed one of the exit ports, and a small party of the more curious passengers, under the escort of my second officer and six men, ventured forth on a little tour of exploration. A goodly portion of the remaining passengers huddled close to the ship, contenting themselves with souvenir-hunting close by.

"Suddenly there was a great sound of shouting from the exploring party. Not knowing the danger, but realizing that something was wrong, the passengers rushed into the ship. Helplessly, for we are utterly defenseless, I watched the fleeing party of explorers.

"For a moment, I could not see why they fled; I could only see them scrambling desperately toward the ship, and casting frightened glances behind them. Then I saw the thing's head rear itself from the slimy tangle of vegetation, and behind it the wilting growths were lashed to shreds.

"The head drove forward. My second officer, courageously bringing up the rear, was the first victim. Perhaps his bright uniform attracted the beast's attention. I don't know.

"They were close now; very close. I knew that we were in danger, and yet I could not bear to seal the port in the faces of those helpless men racing towards the ship.

"I waited. Twice more the terrible head shot out and both times a man was picked from the fleeing ranks. It was terrible—ghastly.

"The rest of them reached the ship, and as the last man came reeling through the port, the door swung shut and began spinning upon its threads. Almost instantly I gave the order for vertical ascent at emergency speed, but before the order could be obeyed, the ship lurched suddenly, rolled half over, and swung back with a jolt. As the power was applied, the ship rose at a crazy angle, hung there trembling for a moment, and then sank back to the ground. The load was too great. I knew then that we were in the power of the thing that had come wriggling out of that sea of rotting weeds.

"I got the message off to Arpan before our radio emanation plates were grounded or destroyed by the coils of the monster. At intervals, I have tried to pull away, but each time the thing tightens its coils

angrily, until the fabric of the ship groans under the strain. We have heard you calling us, faintly and faultily. I have been waiting for you to reach me with the menore. You have come at last, and I am at your orders. If you cannot help us, we are lost, for we shall all go mad."

"We'll have you in the clear very soon," I assured him with a confidence I did not feel. "Stand by for further communications, and —are your generators working?"

"Yes. They're in perfect order. If only the beast would uncoil himself __"

"We'll see to that very shortly. Stand by."

I reduced power and asked Correy and Hendricks if they had both followed the conversation. They had, and had now reduced power, as I had done. We all realized that our counsels might not be reassuring to Captain Gole.

"As I see it, gentlemen, the first thing we must do is to induce the beast to leave the Kabit. And the only way that can be accomplished is by—bait."

"Exactly!" snapped Correy. "He's hungry. He knows there's food in the Kabit. If we can get him to leave the liner and come after us, the problem's solved."

"But he can run faster than we. I can hardly crawl over this slimy mess," objected Hendricks. "I'm ready to try everything, but remember that we've got to lead him away far enough to make him release the Kabit."

"I've got it!" emanated Correy suddenly, his enthusiasm making the vibrations from the menore fairly hammer into my brain. "I'll cut a long, narrow swath with one of the portable disintegrator rays; long enough to take him far away from the Kabit, and just wide enough to pass a man. I'll run along this deep groove, just below the reach of the monster. I can make good time; the serpent'll have to slash and wriggle his way over or through this slimy growth. How's that for an idea?"

It was daring enough to have some hope of success, but its dangers were obvious.

"What happens when you reach the end of the path the ray cuts?" I asked grimly.

"You and Hendricks, with your men, will be on both sides of the path, not opposite each other. When he passes, you'll let go your disintegrator rays and the atomic bombs. He'll be in a dozen pieces before we reach the end of the path."

Spread out here before me, in all its wordy detail, it would seem that a long time must have elapsed while Captain Gole related his story, and my officers and myself laid our plans. As a matter of fact, communicating as we were by menore, it was only a minute or so since Correy had emanated his first comment: "I believe the beast sees us. His head was elevated and pointed this way."

And now Hendricks, who was peering over the ruffled edge of an undulating, rubbery leaf of seaweed, turned and waved both arms. Disobeying my strictest orders, he fairly screamed his frantic warning:

"He sees us! He sees us! He's coming!"

I ran up the twisted, concave surface of a giant stem of some kind. To my left, I could hear the shrill whine of Correy's disintegrator ray generator, already in action, and protesting against a maximum load. To the right, Hendricks and his men were scrambling into position. Before me was the enemy.

Slowly, deliberately, as though he did not doubt his terrible ability, he unwrapped his coils from the Kabit. His head, with its graceful antennae searching the air, and the tentacles around his mouth writhing hungrily, reared itself ten times a man's height from the ground. His small red eyes flashed like precious stones. Beyond, the mighty greenish coils slashed the rotting weed as he unwrapped them from the Kabit.

I snatched off my menore and adjusted it again for maximum power.

"Captain Gole!"

"Yes. What's happening? Tell me! We're rolling and pitching."

"In a moment you'll be free. When I signal 'Rise!' ascend as quickly as possible to a safe distance. Stand by!"

"Hendricks! Be ready to follow Correy's plan. It's our only chance. In a second, now—"

The last coil moved, slipped from the blunt nose of the liner.

"Rise!" I ordered. "Rise!"

I saw the ship rock suddenly, and roar hollowly toward the sky. I felt

the rush of wind made by her passing.

Then, head still elevated and swaying, the two great reddish-brown fins fanning the air like grotesque wings, the serpent lashed out towards us, coming at amazing speed.

Correy, sure that he was observed by the serpent, leaped down from the huge leaf upon which he had been standing. Hendricks and I, followed by our men, scrambled desperately toward the deep path or lane that Correy's ray had cut through the tangled, stinking growth. Correy's plan had given some promise of success, had we had time to put it into proper operation. As it was, neither Hendricks or I had had time to get into position.

Hendricks, on my right, was working his way as rapidly as possible toward the path, but he had a long way to go. Unless a miracle happened, he would be too late to help. The portable ray machines would be helpless against such a mighty bulk, except at close range.

I reached the path and glanced hastily to the right, the direction, from which the great serpent was sweeping down on us. He was less than the Ertak's length away.

"Hide, men!" I ordered. "Under the vegetation—in the muck—

anywhere!" I glanced down the lane to the left, and saw, to my relief, that Correy and his men were a goodly distance away, and still far from the end of the swath their ray had cut for them. Then, with the monster towering almost over my head. I darted behind a spongy, spotted growth, listening, above the pounding of my heart, to the rapid slithering of the serpent's ponderous body.

Of a sudden the sound stopped. I was conscious of an excited warning from Hendricks: "He's stopped, sir! Run! He's seen you ... he—"

Startled, I glanced up—directly into the hideous face of the snake.

It seemed to me he was grinning. His mouth was partially open, and the pale, writhing barbels that surrounded his mouth seemed to reach out toward me. The long and graceful antennae were bent downward inquiringly, quivering tensely, and his small eyes glowed like wind-fanned coals of fire. The brownish fins were rigid as metal, the retractile claws unsheathed and cruelly curved. He was so close that I could hear the air rushing through his crater-like breathing holes.

For an instant we stared at each other; he with confident gloating: myself, too startled and horrified to move. Then, as his head shot downward, I leaped aside.

The scaly head raked the clothes from one side of my body, and sent me, sprawling and breathless, into the welter of sagging weeds.

I heard the sharp whine of my ray generator going into action, but I took no chances on the accuracy of my men. They were working under tremendous difficulties. As I fell, I snatched an atomic bomb from my belt, and, as the horrid head drew back to strike again, I threw the bomb with all my strength.

I had thrown from an exceedingly awkward position, and the bomb exploded harmlessly some distance away, showering us with muck and slimy vegetation.

Evidently, however, the explosion startled the serpent, for his head slewed around nervously, and I felt the ground tremble under me as his mighty coils lashed the ground in anger. Scrambling to my feet, I seized the projector tube of the disintegrator ray and swept the beam upward until it beat upon that terrible head.

The thing screamed—a high, thin sound almost past the range of audibility. Reddish dust sifted down around me—the heavy dust of disintegration. In the distance, I could hear the slashing of the tail as it tore through the rubbery growth of weeds.

With half his head eroded by the ray, the serpent struck again, but this time his aim was wild. The mighty head half buried itself in the muck beside me, and I swung the projector tube down so that the full force of the ray tore into the region above and behind the eyes, where I imagined the brain to be. The heavy reddish dust fairly pelted from the ugly head.

Correy had come running back. Dimly, I could hear him shouting.

"Look out!" I warned him. "Keep back, Correy! Keep the men back! I've got him, but he'll die hard—"

As though to prove my words true, the head, a ghastly thing eroded into a shapeless mass, was jerked from the mud, and two tremendous loops of tortured body came hurtling over my head. One of the huge fins swung by like a sail, its hooked talons ripping one of Correy's men into bloody shreds. Correy himself, caught in a desperate endeavor to save the unfortunate man, was knocked twenty feet. For one terrible instant, I thought the beast had killed Correy also.

Gasping, Correy rose to his feet, and I ran to assist him.

"Back, men!" I shouted. "Hendricks! Get away as far and as fast as you can. Back! Back!" Half dragging Correy, who was still

breathless from the blow, I hurried after the men.

Behind us, shaking the earth in his death agonies, the monstrous serpent beat the plain about him into a veritable sea of slime.

From a point of vantage, atop the Ertak, we watched for the end.

"I have never," said Correy in an awed voice, "seen anything take so long to die."

"You have never before," I commented grimly, "seen a snake so large. It took ages to grow that mighty body; it is but natural that, even with the brain disintegrated into dust, the body would not die immediately."

"Undoubtedly he has a highly decentralized nervous system," nodded Hendricks, who was, as I have said, something of a practical scientific man, although no laboratory worker or sniveling scientist. "And instinct is directing him back toward the sea from which, all unwillingly, he came. Look—he's almost in the water."

"I don't care where he goes," said Correy savagely, "so he goes there as carrion. Clark was a good man, sir." Clark was the man the serpent had killed.

"True," I said. Making the entry of that loss would hurt; even though the discipline of the Service is—or at least, used to be—very rigid, officers get rather close to their men during the course of many tours of duty in the confines of a little ship like the Ertak. "But the Kabit, with her nearly two thousand souls, is safe."

We all looked up. The Kabit was no longer visible. Battered, but still space-worthy, she had gone on her way.

"I suppose," grinned Correy, "that we'll be thanked by radio." The grin was real; Correy had had action enough to make him happy for a time. The nervous tension was gone.

"Probably. But—watch our friend! He's in the water at last. I imagine that's the last we'll see of him."

Half of the tremendous body was already in the water, lashing it into white foam. The rest of the great length slid, twitching, down the shore. The water boiled and seethed; dark loops flipped above the surface and disappeared. And then, as though the giant serpent had found peace at last, the waters subsided, and only the wreaths of white foam upon the surface showed where he had sunk to the ooze that had given him birth.

"Finish," I commented. "All that's left is for the scientists to flock here to admire his bones. They'll probably condemn us for ruining his skull. It took them a good many thousand years to find the remains of a sea-serpent on Earth, you remember."

"Some time in the Twenty-second Century, wasn't it, sir?" asked Hendricks. "I think my memory serves me well."

"I wouldn't swear to it. I know that sailors reported them for ages, but that wouldn't do for the laboratory men and the scientists. They had to have the bones right before them, subject to tests and measurements."

That's the trouble with the scientists, I've found. Their ability to believe is atrophied. They can't see beyond their laboratory tables.

Of course, I'm just an old man, and perhaps I'm bitter with the drying sap of age. That's what I've been told. "Old John Hanson" they call me, and smile as if to say that explains everything.

Old? Of course I'm old! But the years behind me are not empty years. I didn't spend them bending over little instruments, or compiling rows of figures.

And I was right about the scientists—they did put in a protest concerning our thoughtlessness in ruining the head of the serpent. They could only estimate the capacity of the brain-pan, argue about the cephalic index, and guess at the frontal angle: it was a terrible blow to science.

Bitter old John Hanson!

115 Spawn of the Comet by H. Thompson Rich

A swarm of huge, fiery ants, brood of a mystery comet, burst from their shells to threaten the unsuspecting world.

Aproximate word count: 8,700

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Tokyo, June 10 (AP).—A number of the meteors that pelted Japan last night, as the earth passed through the tail of the Mystery Comet have been found and are puzzling astronomers everywhere.

About the size of baseballs, orange in color, they appear to be of some unknown metal. So far, due to their extreme hardness, all attempts to analyze them have failed.

Their uniformity of size and marking gives rise to the popular belief that they are seeds, and, fantastic though this conception is, it finds support in certain scientific quarters here.

Jim Carter read the news dispatch thoughtfully and handed it back to his chief without comment.

“Well, what do you make of it?”

Miles Overton, city editor of The New York Press, shoved his green eye-shade far back on his bald head and glanced up irritably from his littered desk.

“I don’t know,” said Jim.

“You don’t know!” Overton snorted, biting his dead cigar impatiently. “And I suppose you don’t know they’re finding the damn things right here in New York, not to mention Chicago, London, Rio and a few other places,” he added.

“Yes, I know about New York. It’s a regular egg hunt.”

“Egg hunt is right! But why tell me all this now? I didn’t see any mention of ’em in your report of last night’s proceedings. Did you see any?”

“No, but I saw a lot of shooting stars!” said Jim, recalling that weird experience he and the rest of humanity had passed through so recently.

“Yeah, I’ll say!” Overton lit his wrecked cigar and dragged on it soothingly. “Now then, getting back to cases—what are these damn things, anyway? That’s what I’d like to know.”

“So would I,” said Jim. “Maybe they are seeds?”

Overton frowned. He was a solid man, not given to fancies. He had a paper to get out every day and that taxed his imagination to the limit. There was no gray matter left for any such idle musings as Jim suggested. What he wanted was facts, and he wanted them right away.

“Eggs will do!” he said. “Go out and get one—and find out what’s inside it.”

“Okay, Chief,” said Jim, but he knew it was a large order. “I’ll have one on your desk for breakfast!”

Then, with a grave face that denied his light words, he stepped from the city room on that fantastic assignment.

It was the television broadcast hour and crowds thronged the upper level of Radio Plaza, gazing, intently at the bulletin screen, as Jim Carter emerged from the Press tower.

News from the ends of the earth, in audio-picture form, flashed before their view; but only the reports on the strange meteors from the tail of 1947, IV—so designated by astronomers because it was the fourth comet discovered that year—held their interest. Nothing since the great Antarctic gold rush of ’33 had so gripped the public as the dramatic arrival and startling behavior of this mysterious visitant from outer space.

Jim paused a moment, halfway across the Plaza, to take a look at the screen himself.

The substance of the Tokyo dispatch, supplemented by pictures of Japanese scientists working over the baffling orange spheres, had just gone off. Now came a flash from Berlin, in which a celebrated German chemist was seen directing an effort to cut into one of them with an acid drill. It failed and the scientist turned to declare to the world that the substance seemed more like crystal than metal and was harder than diamond.

Jim tarried no longer. He knew where he was going. It was still early and Joan would be up—Joan Wentworth, daughter of Professor Stephen Wentworth, who held the chair of astro-lithology at Hartford University. It was as their guest at the observatory last night that he had seen 1947, IV at close range, as the earth passed through her

golden train with that awesome, unparalleled display of fireworks.

Now he'd have the pleasure of seeing Joan again, and at the same time get the low-down from her father on those confounded seeds—or eggs, rather. If anyone could crack one of them, he'd bet Professor Wentworth could.

So, hastening toward the base of Plaza Airport, he took an elevator to ramp-level 118, where his auto-plane was parked, and five minutes later was winging his way to Hartford.

Throttle wide, Jim did the eighty miles to the Connecticut capital in a quarter of an hour.

Then, banking down through the warm June night onto the University landing field, he retracted the wings of his swift little bus and motored to the foot of Observatory Hill.

Parking outside the Wentworth home, he mounted the steps and rang the bell.

It was answered by a slim, appealing girl of perhaps twenty-two. Hers was a wistful, oval face, with a small, upturned nose; and her clear hazel eyes were the sort that always seem to be enjoying some

amusing secret of their own. Her hair was a soft brown, worn loose to the shoulders, after the style then in vogue.

“Joan!” blurted Jim.

“What brings you here at such an hour, Jimmy Carter?” she asked with mock severity.

“You!”

“I don’t believe you.”

“What then have I come for?”

“You’ve come to interview father about those meteorites.”

“Nonsense! That’s purely incidental—a mere by-product, you might say.”

“Yes, you might—but I wouldn’t advise you to say it to father.”

“All right, I won’t,” he promised, as she led him into the library.

Professor Wentworth rose as they entered and laid aside some scientific book he had been reading.

A man of medium height and build, he had the same twinkling hazel eyes as his daughter, though somewhat dimmed from peering at too many stars for too many years.

“Good evening, Jim,” he said. “I’ve rather been expecting you. What is on your mind?”

“Seeds! Eggs! Baseballs!” was the reply, “I don’t know what. You’ve seen the latest television reports, I suppose?” said Jim, noting that the panel on the receiving cabinet across the room was still lit.

“I’ve seen some of them. Joan has been keeping an eye on the screen mostly, however, while I refreshed my mind on the known chemistry of meteorites. You see, I have a few of those eggs myself, up at the observatory.”

“You have?” cried Jim.

He was certainly on the right track!

“Yes. One of my assistants brought them in this afternoon. Would you like to see them?”

“I’ll say I would!”

“I rather thought you might,” the professor smiled. “Come along, then.”

And as Jim turned, he shot a look at Joan, and added:

“You may come too, my dear, if you want.”

They went out and up the hill to where the great white dome glistened under the stars, and once inside, Jim Carter of The New York Press was privileged to see two of those strange objects that had turned the world topsy-turvy.

As the Tokyo dispatch and the Berlin television flash had indicated, they were orange in color, about the size of baseballs.

“Weird looking eggs, all right!” said Jim. “What are they made of, anyway?”

“Some element unknown on earth,” replied Professor Wentworth.

“But I thought there were only ninety-two elements in the universe and we’d discovered them all.”

“So we have. But don’t forget this. We are still trying to split the atom, which nature has done many times and will doubtless do many

times again. It is merely a matter of altering the valence of the atoms in an old element; whereupon it shifts its position in the periodic scale and becomes a new element. Nature accomplishes this alchemy by means of great heat, which is certainly to be found in a meteor."

"Particularly when it hits the earth's atmosphere!"

"Yes. And now then, I'd like to have you examine more closely this pair I have here."

Jim lifted one and noted its peculiar smoothness, its remarkable weight for its size; he noted, too, that it was veined with concentric markings, like a series of arabesques or fleurs-de-lis.

The professor lifted the other, calling attention to the fact that the size and marking of both were identical, as hitherto reported.

"Also, you'll observe that they are slightly warm. In fact, they are appreciably warmer than when they were first brought in. Curious behavior, this, for new-laid cometary eggs! More like seeds germinating than meteorites cooling, wouldn't you say?"

"But good Lord!" Jim was somewhat taken aback to hear this celebrated scientist apparently commit himself to that wild view.

“You don’t really think they’re seeds, do you?”

“Why not?”

“But surely no seeds could survive the temperature they hit getting here.”

“No seeds such as we know, true. But what, after all, do we know of the types of life to be found on other planets?”

“Nothing, of course. Only these didn’t come from a planet. They came from a comet.”

“And who can say a comet is not a disintegrated planet? Or suppose we take the other theory, that it is an eruption from some sun, ours or another. In any event, who can say no life can survive intense heat? Certainly these seeds—or call them meteorites, if you choose—came through the ordeal curiously unscathed.”

“Yes, that’s true. Funny, too!”

“And another thing is true, Jim. If by chance they should be seeds, and should germinate, the life they would produce would be something quite alien to our experience, possibly quite inimical to __”

Professor Wentworth broke off abruptly as a startled cry came from Joan, and, turning, they saw her standing with eyes fixed in fascinated horror on the laboratory table.

Following her gaze, Jim saw something that caused his own eyes to bulge. The color of those mysterious orange spheres had suddenly, ominously heightened. They lay glowing there like balls of fire.

“Good God!” he gasped. “Look, Professor! Do you see that?”

Professor Wentworth did not answer but himself stood gazing spellbound at the astounding scene.

Even as they looked, the metal table smoldered under the fiery meteorites and melted, and in a little while the meteorites themselves sizzled from view. Flames licked up from the floor; dense, suffocating fumes rose and swirled through the laboratory.

“Quick!” cried Jim, seizing Joan’s arm. “Come on, Professor! Never mind trying to save anything. Let’s get out of here!”

They staggered from the laboratory and once outside, plunged down the hill. It was none too soon.

Behind them, as they fled, came suddenly two deafening explosions.

Looking back, they saw the roof of the observatory tilt crazily; saw the whole building shatter, and erupt like a volcano.

But that, startling though it was, was not all they saw. For now, as they stood there speechless, two incredible forms rose phoenix-like from the flames—two weird monsters, orange against the red, hideous, nightmarish. They saw them hover a moment above that fiery hell, then rise on batlike wings to swoop off into the night.

Nor was that all. As the awed trio stood there halfway down Observatory Hill, following the flight of that pair of demons, other explosions reached their ears, and, turning to the city below, they saw vivid jets of red leap up here and there, saw other orange wings against the night.

While off across the southeast sky, receding fast, spread the Mystery Comet whose tail had sowed the seeds of this strange life.

Still silent, the trio stood gazing upon that appalling scene for some minutes, while the ruddy shadows of the flaming observatory lit their tense faces.

“Well, the seeds have hatched,” said Professor Wentworth at length, in a strained voice. “I am afraid some of the curious who have been

gathering those meteorites so eagerly have paid a dear price for them."

"Yes, I'm afraid so," echoed Jim. "We were lucky. If Joan hadn't happened to spot those things just when she did—" He broke off and pressed her hand fondly. "But somehow I can't believe it, even yet. What do you think the things are, Professor?"

"God knows! As I told you, those seeds, should they germinate, would produce something quite alien to our experience; and as I feared, it is a form of life that will not blend well with humanity."

Jim shuddered.

"But look, father!" exclaimed Joan. "They're flying away! They seem to be way up among the stars. Maybe they've left the earth altogether."

Professor Wentworth following his daughter's gaze, saw that many of the monsters were now mere orange pinpoints against the night.

"Let us hope so!" he said fervently.

But in his heart there was no conviction, nor in Jim's, strangely.

On the way back to New York, Jim had plenty to heighten his uneasiness. The scene below him everywhere was red with conflagrations, the sky everywhere orange with the wings of those fiery moths.

More than one swept perilously close, as he pushed his auto-plane on at top speed; but they showed no inclination to attack, for which he was devoutly thankful.

Over the metropolitan area, the scene was one beggaring description. All the five boroughs were a blazing checker-board. New Jersey, Connecticut, Westchester—all were raging. Hundreds of those deadly bombs must have burst in Manhattan alone.

But the fire department there seemed to have the situation in hand, he noticed as he swept down onto the Plaza landing platform.

Leaving his plane with an attendant, he took the first elevator to the street level, and crossing hastily to the Press tower, mounted to the city room.

There absolute pandemonium raged. Typewriters were sputtering, telegraph keys clicking, phones buzzing, reporters coming and going in a steady stream, mingled with the frantic orders of editors, sub-

editors, copy readers, composing-room men and others.

Carter fought through the bedlam to the city editor's desk.

"Sorry I couldn't bring you that egg, Chief," he said, with a grim smile. "I had one right in my hand, but it hatched out on me."

Overton looked up wearily. He was a man who had seen a miracle, a godless miracle that restored his faith in the devil.

"Don't talk—just write!" he growled. "I've seen and heard too much to-night. We're all going to hell, I guess—unless we're already there."

But Jim wasn't ready to write yet.

"What's the dope elsewhere? The same?"

"All over the map! We're frying, from coast to coast."

"And abroad?"

"Cooked, everywhere!" He paused, and turned an imploring face to Jim. "Tell me, Carter—what's happening? You've seen Wentworth, I suppose. What's he make of it?"

“He—doesn’t know.”

“God help us! Well, go write your story. If we’ve got a plant by press time, we’ll have something on page one to-morrow—if there’s anyone to read it.”

By morning the fires in the metropolitan area had been brought under control and it was found that neither the loss of life nor the damage was as great as had at first been feared. Mainly it was the older types of buildings that had suffered the most.

The same thing was true in other parts of the country and elsewhere in the world; and elsewhere, as in New York, people pulled themselves together, cleared up the debris, and went ahead with their occupations. Business was resumed, and rebuilding operations were begun.

Meanwhile, where were those fiery moths that had sprung so devastatingly from their strange cocoons?

For a while no one knew and it was believed they had indeed winged off into interstellar space, as Joan had suggested that night on Observatory Hill.

Then came rumors that damped these hopes, followed by eye-witness reports that altogether dashed them. The bat-like monsters had flown, not off into space, but to the world's waste-lands.

Strange, it was, the instinct that had led them unerringly to the remotest point of each continent. In North America it was the great Arizona desert, in South America the pampas of Argentina, in Europe the steppes of Russia, in Asia the Desert of Gobi, in Africa the Sahara, in Australia the Victoria; while in the British Isles, Philippines, New Zealand, Madagascar, Iceland, the East Indies, West Indies, South Seas and other islands of the world, the interiors were taken over by the demons, the populace fleeing for their lives.

As for the oceans, no one knew exactly what had happened there, though it was obvious they, too, had received their share of the bombardment on that fateful night; but, while temperatures were found to be somewhat above normal, scientists were of the opinion that the deadly spawn that had fallen there had failed to incubate.

Immediately the presence of the monsters in the Arizona desert was verified, Overton called Jim Carter to his desk.

"Well, I've got a big assignment for you, boy," he said, rather more gently than was his fashion. "Maybe you know what, huh?"

“You want me to buzz out and interview those birds?”

“You guessed it. And photograph ’em!”

“Okay, Chief,” said Carter, though he knew this would be the toughest job yet.

Overton knew it, too.

“It won’t be easy,” he said. “And it may be dangerous. You don’t have to take the assignment unless you want.”

“But I want.”

“Good! I thought you would.” He regarded the younger man admiringly, almost enviously. “Now, about those photos. The Television News people haven’t been able to get a thing, nor the War Department—not so much as a still. So those photos will be valuable.”

Overton paused, to let that sink in.

“They’ll be worth a million, in fact, in addition to what the War Department offers. And to you they’ll be worth ten thousand dollars.”

“How come?”

“Because that’s what the Old Man said.”

“Well, I can use it!” said Jim, thinking of Joan.

“All right. Then go to it!”

Leaving New York late that night, Carter timed his flight to arrive over the eastern edge of the desert just before dawn.

The trip was uneventful till he crossed the Rockies over New Mexico and eased down into Arizona. Then, flying low and fast, he suddenly caught a glow of color off ahead.

For an instant Jim thought it was the dawn, then called himself a fool. For one thing, the glow was in the west, not the east. And for another, altogether more significant, it was orange.

His quarry!

Pulling his stick back hard, he shot like a rocket to ten thousand feet, figuring that a higher altitude, besides giving him a better view of the lay of the land, would be considerably safer.

Winging on now at that height, he saw the orange tide rise higher in the west by seconds, as he rushed toward God knew what eery lair. He suddenly gasped in amazement, as he saw now something so incredible it left him numb.

Below, looming above the on-rushing horizon was a city! But such a city as the brain of man could scarcely conceive, much less execute —a city of some fluorescent orange material, rising tier on tier, level on level, spreading out over the sandy floor of the desert for miles.

And, as Jim draw nearer, he saw, too, that this weird city was teeming with life—terrible life! Thousands of those hideous monsters were working there like an army of ants in a sand-hill—a sand-hill of glistening, molten glass, it seemed from the air.

Were they building their city from the sand of the desert, these hellish glaciers?

Carter decided to find out.

“Well, here goes!” he muttered, diving straight for that dazzling citadel, one hand on the stick, the other gripping the trigger of his automatic camera. “This’ll make a picture for the Old Man, all right!”

Off to the east the dawn was breaking, and he saw, as he swept down, its pearly pastel shades blending weirdly with that blinding orange glare.

Pressing the trigger now, he drove his screaming plane on with throttle wide—and yes, it was glass!—glass of some sort, that crazy nightmare down there.

"Whew!" gasped Carter as waves of dazing heat rose about him. "Boy, but it's hot! I can't stand much of this. Better get out while the getting's good."

But he clenched his teeth, and dove on down to see what those fiery demons looked like. Funny they didn't make any effort to attack. Surely they must see him now.

"Take that, my beauties!—and that!" he gasped, pressing the trigger of his camera furiously.

Then, at a scant two thousand feet, he levelled off, his wings blistering with the heat, and zoomed up again—when to his horror, his engine faltered; died.

In that agonizing moment it came to Jim that this perhaps was why

neither the Television News nor the War Department pilots had been able to get pictures of the hell below.

Had something about that daring heat killed their motors, too, as it had his? Had they plunged like fluttering, sizzling moths into that inferno of orange flame?

“Well, I guess it’s curtains!” he muttered.

A glance at his altimeter showed a scant eighteen hundred now. Another glance showed the western boundary of the city, agonizing miles ahead. Could he make it? He’d try, anyway!

So, nursing his plane along in a shallow glide, Jim slipped down through that dazing heat.

“Got to keep her speed up!” he told himself, half deliriously, as he steadily lost altitude. “Can’t pancake here, or I’ll be a flapjack!”

At an altitude of less than a thousand he levelled off again, eased on down, fully expecting to feel his plane burst into flames. But though his eyebrows crisped and the gas must have boiled, the sturdy little plane made it.

On a long last glide, he put her wheels down on the sandy desert

floor, a bare half mile beyond that searing hell.

The heat was still terrific but endurable now. He dared breathe deeper; he found his head clearing. But what was the good of it? It was only a respite. The monsters had seen him, all right—no doubt about that! Already they were swooping out of their weird citadel like a pack of furious hornets.

On they came, incredibly fast, moving in a wide half-circle that obviously was planned to envelop him.

Tense with horror, like a doomed man at the stake, Jim watched the flaming phalanx advance. And now he saw what they really were; saw that his first, fantastic guess had been right.

They were ants—or at least more like ants than anything on earth—great fiery termites ten feet long, hideous mandibles snapping like steel, hot from the forge, their huge compound eyes burning like greenish electric fire in their livid orange sockets.

And another thing Jim saw, something that explained why the fearful insects had not flown up to attack him in the air. Their wings were gone!

They had molted, were earthbound now.

There was much food for thought in this, but no time to think. Already the creatures were almost on him.

Jim turned his gaze from them and bent over his dials in a last frantic effort to get his motor started. The instinct of self-preservation was dominant now—and to his joy, suddenly the powerful little engine began to hum with life.

He drew one deep breath of infinite relief, then gave her the gun and whirled off down the desert floor, the enraged horde after him.

For agonizing instants it was a nip-and-tuck race. Then as he felt his wheels lift, he pulled hard back on his stick, and swept up and away from the deadly claws that clutched after him in vain.

Climbing swiftly, Jim banked once, swept back, put the bead full on that scattering half-circle of fiery termites, and pressed the trigger of his automatic camera.

“There, babies!” he laughed grimly. “You’re in the Rogues’ Gallery now!”

Then, swinging off to the northeast, he continued to climb, giving

that weird ant-hill a wide berth.

Funny, about those things losing their wings, he was thinking now. Would they grow them again, or were they on the ground for good? And what was their game out there in the desert, anyway?

Questions Jim couldn't answer, of course. Only time would tell. Meanwhile, he had some pictures that would make the Old Man sit up and take notice, not to mention the War Department.

"They'd better get the Army on the job before those babies get air-minded again!" he told himself, as he winged on into the rising sun. "Otherwise the show they've already staged may be only a little curtain-raiser."

Jim's arrival in the city room of The New York Press that afternoon was a triumphant one, for he had radio-phoned the story ahead and extras were out all over the metropolitan area, with relays flashing from the front pages of papers everywhere.

No sooner had he turned over his precious pictures to the photographic department for development than Overton rushed him to a microphone, and made him repeat his experience for the television screen.

But the city editor's enthusiasm died when the negatives came out of the developer.

"There are your pictures!" he said, handing over a bunch of them.

Carter looked at them in dismay. They were all blank—just so much plain black celluloid.

"Over-exposed!" rasped Overton. "A hell of a photographer you are!"

"I sure am!" Jim agreed, still gazing ruefully at the ruined negatives. "Funny, though. The camera was checked before I started. I had the range before I pulled the trigger, every shot." He paused, then added, as though reluctant to excuse himself: "It must have been the heat."

"Yeah. I suppose so! Well, that was damn expensive heat for you, my lad. It cost you ten thousand bucks."

"Yes, but—"

Jim had been going to say it had nearly cost him his life but thought better of it. Besides, an idea had come.

"Give me those negatives!" he said, "I'm going to find out what's

wrong with ’em.”

And since they were of no use to Overton, he gave them to Jim.

That night again, Jim Carter presented himself at the Wentworth home in Hartford, and again it was Joan who admitted him.

“Oh, Jimmy!” she murmured, as he took her in his arms. “We’re all so proud of you!”

“I’m glad someone is,” he said.

“But what a fearful risk you ran! If you hadn’t been able to get your motor started—”

“Why think of unpleasant things?” he said with a smile.

Then they went into the library, where Professor Wentworth added his congratulations.

“But I’m afraid I didn’t accomplish much,” said Jim, explaining about the pictures.

“Let me see them,” said the professor.

Jim handed them over.

For a moment or two Professor Wentworth examined them intently, holding them this way and that.

“They indeed appear to be extremely over-exposed,” he admitted at length. “Your Fire Ants are doubtless radio-active to a high degree. The results could not have been much worse had you tried to photograph the sun direct.”

“I thought as much,” said Carter, gloomily.

“But possibly the damage isn’t irreparable. Suppose we try re-developing a few of these negatives.”

He led the way to his study, which since the destruction of the observatory had been converted into a temporary laboratory.

Ten minutes later, Professor Wentworth had his re-developing bath ready in a porcelain basin and had plunged some of the negatives into it.

“This process is what photographers call intensification,” he explained. “It consists chemically in the oxidation of a part of the silver of which the image is composed. I have here in solution

uranium nitrate, plus potassium ferricyanide acidified with acetic acid. The latter salt, in the presence of the acid, is an oxidizing agent, and, when applied to the image, produces silver oxide, which with the excess of acetic acid forms silver acetate."

"Which is all so much Greek to me!" said Carter.

"At the same time, the ferricyanide is reduced to ferrocyanide," the professor went on, with a smile at Joan, "whereupon insoluble red uranium ferrocyanide is produced, and, while some of the silver, in being oxidized by this process, is rendered soluble and removed from the negative into the solution, it is replaced by the highly non-actinic and insoluble uranium compound."

The process was one quite familiar to photographers experienced in astronomical work, he explained. In fifteen minutes they should know what results they were getting.

But when fifteen minutes passed and the negatives were still as black as ever, Jim's hope waned.

Not so Professor Wentworth's, however.

"There is a definite but slow reaction taking place," he said after a

careful examination. “Either the over-exposure is even greater than I had suspected, or the actinic rays from your interesting subjects have formed a stubborn chemical union with the silver of the image. In the latter event, which is the theory I am going to work on, we must speed up the reaction and tear some of that excess silver off, if we’re ever to see what is underneath.”

“But how are you going to speed up the reaction?” asked Jim. “I thought that uranium was pretty strong stuff by itself.”

“It is, but not as strong as this new substance we have in combination with the silver here. So I think I’ll try a little electrolysis—or, in plain English, electro-plating.”

As he spoke, the professor clipped a couple of platinum electrodes to the basin, one at each end. To the anode he attached one of the negatives, to the cathode a small piece of iron.

“Now then, we’ll soon see.”

He passed a low current into the wires, through a rheostat, with startling results. There was a sudden foaming of the solution and a weird vapor rose from it, luminous, milky, faintly orange.

For a moment, all they could do was stare.

Then Professor Wentworth switched off the current and stepped toward the tank. Waving away that orange gas, he reached for the cathode and held it up. It was no longer iron, but silver, now.

“Plated, you see!” he exclaimed in triumph.

“Yes, but those fumes!” cried Jim. “Why, they were the same color as the—the Fire Ants, as you call them.”

“I know.” The professor was not as calm as he pretended. “We have released some of their actinic rays captured by the negative, in prying loose our excess silver. Later I shall repeat the process and capture some of that vapor for analysis. At present, let us have a look at the negative already treated.”

He lifted the anode from the solution now, removed the negative, and held it up. A smile of satisfaction broke over his face, followed by a shudder.

“There you are, Jim! Have a look!”

Jim looked, with Joan peering over his shoulder, and his pulses tingled. It was a clear shot of that scattering half-circle of fiery

termites, taken after he got away and swept back over them.

“Say, that’s wonderful!” he exclaimed.

“Wonderful—but horrible!” echoed Joan.

“I’ll admit they’re not much on looks,” laughed Carter. “But their homely maps are worth a lot to me—ten thousand dollars, in fact!”

He told her why, and what he proposed to do with the money, and Joan thought it a very good idea.

While this was taking place, Professor Wentworth was re-developing the rest of the negatives.

At last all had been salvaged, even those taken in the terrific heat over that weird glass city out there, and Jim was preparing to bear them back to Overton in triumph.

He had thanked the kindly professor from the bottom of his heart, had even told him something of what he had been telling Joan. There remained but to put one last question, then go.

“Summing it all up, what do you make of those nightmares?” he asked. “Do you think they can be destroyed?”

Professor Wentworth did not reply at once.

“I can perhaps answer your question better when I have analyzed this specimen of gas,” he said at length, holding up a test-tube in which swirled a quantity of that luminous, milky orange vapor. “But if you wish to quote me for publication, you may say that when I have learned the nature of it, I shall devote all my energies to combating the menace it constitutes.”

And that was the message Jim took back with him, but it was the pictures that interested the practical Overton most.

Before many days, however, Overton, with the rest of the world, was turning anxiously to Professor Wentworth, watching his every move, awaiting his every word. For before many days terrible reports started coming in, not only from the Arizona desert but from the assembly grounds of the Fire Ants everywhere.

Those deadly termites were on the move! They were spreading from their central citadels in ominous, expanding circles—circles that engulfed villages, towns and cities in a swift, relentless ring of annihilation that was fairly stupefying.

In North America, the cities of Phoenix, Tucson and Prescott, with

all that lay between, were already gone, their frantic populaces fleeing to the four points of the compass before that fateful orange tide. In South America, Rosario and Cordoba were within the flaming ring and Buenos Aires was threatened. In Europe, Moscow and its vast tributary plain had fallen before the invaders. In Asia, a veritable inland empire was theirs, reaching from Urga to the Khingan Mountains. In Africa, Southern Algeria and French Sudan, with their innumerable small villages and oases, were overrun. In Australia, Coolgardie had succumbed and Perth was in a panic.

But fearful though the destruction was on the continents, it was the islands of the world that suffered most. First the smallest, those picturesque green gems of the South Seas, crisped and perished. Then came reports of the doom of the Hawaiian group, the Philippines, the East and West Indies, New Zealand, Tasmania and a score of others, their populations perishing by the thousands, as shipping proved unavailable to transport them to safety.

By far the most tragic fate, however, was that suffered by the British Isles. What happened there stunned the world, and brought realization to humanity that unless some miracle intervened, it was but a mirror of the doom that awaited all. For England, Ireland and Scotland were habitable no more. London, Dublin, Glasgow—all their proud cities, all their peaceful hamlets, centuries old, were

flaming ruins.

Out of a population, of some sixty millions, it was estimated that at least eight millions must have perished. The rest, by prodigious feats of transportation, managed to reach the mainland, where they spread as refugees throughout an apprehensive, demoralized Europe.

As for the armies and navies of the world, they were powerless before this fiendish invader. Hammered with high explosives, drenched with chemicals, sprayed with machine-gun ballets, the fiery termites surged on unchecked, in ever-widening circles of death.

Lead and steel passed through them harmlessly. Gas wafted off them like air. Despite the frantic efforts of scientists and military men, nothing could be devised to stem that all-devouring orange tide.

It was quite obvious by now, even to the most conservative minds, that the end of human life on earth was not far off. It could only be a few more weeks before the last stronghold fell. Daily, hourly, those deadly Fire Ants were everywhere expanding their fields of operations. Presently all humanity would be driven to the seacoasts, there to perish by fire or water, as they chose.

There were some optimists, of course, who believed that the miracle would happen—that Professor Wentworth or some other scientist would devise some means of repelling the invader before it was too late.

Young Jim Carter of The York Press was not among them, however, though he would have gambled it would be Professor Wentworth if anyone. For what hope was there that any mere man could figure out a weapon that would be effective against such a deadly, such a superhuman foe?

Very little, it seemed, and he grew less and less sanguine, as he continued his frenzied, sleepless work of reporting the unending catastrophes for his paper.

He often thought bitterly of that ten thousand dollars. A lot of good that would do him now!

As for Joan, she faced her fate with fortitude—fortitude and a supreme faith that her father would succeed in analyzing that sinister orange vapor and find the weapon the world waited for.

But agonizing days passed and he did not find it.

Then at last, on the night of August 14th, when Los Angeles and San Francisco were smoldering infernos, along with Reno, Denver, Omaha, El Paso and a score of other great American cities; when Buenos Aires and Santiago were gone, Berlin and Peking and Cairo; when Australia was all one fiery hell—then it was that Professor Wentworth summoned Jim Carter to Hartford.

Hoping against hope, he hurried over.

Once again, Joan ushered him into the house. She was very pale and did not speak.

At her side stood her father. It was he who spoke.

“Good evening, Jim. You have come promptly.”

His voice was strained, his face grave. He had aged greatly in the past few weeks.

“Well I’ll admit I clipped along. You’ve—found something?”

Professor Wentworth smiled wanly.

“Suppose you step into my study and see what I have found.”

He led the way toward the little makeshift laboratory that for many days and nights had been the scene of his efforts.

It was littered with strange devices now, strangest of all perhaps a huge glass tube like a cannon, mounted on some sort of swivel base.

Ignoring this for the moment, he turned to a smaller tube set upright on a table at the far end of the room. In it, glowed a sinister orange lump that made the whole tube fluorescent.

“Behold one of your monsters in captivity!” said the professor, again with a wan smile. “In miniature, of course. What I have done is to condense some of that vapor into a solid.”

The process, he explained, was similar to that employed by Madame Curie in obtaining metallic radium—electrolyzing a radium chloride solution with mercury as a cathode, then driving off the mercury by heat in a current of hydrogen—only he had used the new element instead of radium.

“Incidentally, I have learned that this new element is far more radioactive than radium and possesses many curious properties. Among them, it decomposes violently in water—particularly salt water—producing harmless hydrogen and chloride compounds. So

we have nothing to fear from those seeds that fell in our oceans, lakes and rivers."

"Well, that's something, anyway," said Jim. "But have you found any way to combat the ones that have already hatched?"

"Before I answer that question," Professor Wentworth replied, "I shall let you witness a little demonstration."

He advanced to the cannon-like device at the other end of the room, swung it on its swivel till it was pointing directly at that fluorescent orange tube on the table.

"Watch closely!" he said, throwing a switch.

There was a sudden, whining hum in the air and the nib of the big tube glowed a soft, velvety green. Jim gazed at the scene with rapt attention.

"Don't look at that one!" whispered Joan. "Look at the other!"

Jim did so, and saw that its fluorescence was waning.

A moment more the professor held the current on, while the tube grew white. Then he threw off the switch.

“Now let us have a look at our captive,” he said, striding over.

They followed, and one glance told Jim what had happened. That sinister lump of orange metal had vanished.

But where was it? That was what he wanted to know.

“A natural question, but not one easy to answer,” was Professor Wentworth’s reply. “I shall tell you what I have done; then you may judge for yourself.”

The cannon-like device which had accompanied the seeming miracle was an adaptation of the cathode tube, whose rays are identical with the beta rays of the atom and consist of a stream of negatively charged particles moving at the velocity of light—186,000 miles a second. These rays, in theory, have the power to combine with the positively charged alpha rays of the atom and drag them from their electrons, causing them to discharge their full quanta of energy at once, in the form of complete disintegration—and it was this theory the professor had acted on.

“But, good Lord—that’s splitting the atom!” exclaimed Jim. “You don’t mean to say you’ve done that?”

“I apparently have,” was the grave admission. “But do not let it seem such a miracle. Bear in mind, as I have pointed out before, that nature has accomplished this alchemy many times. All radio-active elements are evidences of it. The feat consists merely in altering the valence of the atom, changing its electric charge, in other words. What I have done in the present instance is merely to speed up a process nature already had under way, inasmuch as we are dealing with a radio-active substance.”

“But what has happened to the by-product of the reaction?”

“Your guess is as good as mine. I have not had time to study that phase of it. Heat, mainly, was produced. Possibly a few atoms of helium. But the substance is gone. That is our chief concern just now.”

It was only after abandoning chemical means and turning to physics that he had met with success, he said. Cathode rays had finally proved the key to the riddle.

“But do you think this thing will work on a big scale?” asked Jim regarding that fragile tube doubtfully.

Professor Wentworth hesitated before replying.

“I do not know,” he admitted, “but I intend to find out—to-night.”

Jim looked at him in amazement. “To-night?”

“Yes. Or rather, the experiment will be at dawn. If successful, this continent at least will be rid of the menace.”

Jim’s amazement turned to incredulity and a sudden fear gripped him. Had the strain of the past few weeks unbalanced the professor’s mind?

“But surely you can’t hope to wipe them out with one tube. Why, it would take hundreds.”

“No, only one. You see, I am going to place the tube in the center of the circle and direct its rays outward toward the circumference in a swinging radius.”

Whereupon, for a moment, Jim’s fear seemed confirmed.

“But, good God!” he exclaimed. “It couldn’t possibly be that powerful, could it?”

“I think it can be made to be,” was Professor Wentworth’s grave assurance. “The greatest power we know in the universe is radiant

energy, which reaches us from the sun and the stars, traveling at the speed of light."

"Like light rays, these heat rays can be focused, directed; and the beta rays of the cathode, traveling at the same velocity, can be made to ride these rays of radiant heat much as electric power rides radio waves. The giant, in short, can be made, to carry the dwarf, with his deadly little weapon. That, at least, is the theory I am acting on."

This somewhat allayed Jim's fears—fears that vanished when the professor went on to explain somewhat the working of his mechanism.

"But how are you going to get the thing out there?" he asked, picturing with a shudder the center of the flaming hell.

"I imagine the War Department will provide me with a volunteer plane and pilot for the purpose," was the calm reply.

"And you will go?"

"Yes, I will go."

Jim debated, but not for long.

“Well, you needn’t trouble the War Department. Here’s your volunteer pilot! The plane’s outside. When do we start?”

“But, my dear young man!” objected the professor. “I cannot permit you to make this sacrifice. It is suicide, sheer suicide.”

“Is my life any more precious than yours, or that of some volunteer Army pilot?” Jim asked him.

“But there is Joan. If I fail—she must depend on you.”

“If you fail, Professor, Joan won’t need me or anyone, for long. No, I go. So let’s chuck the argument and get ready.”

“Oh, Jimmy!” sobbed Joan. “Jimmy!”

But her eyes, as they met his mistily, were lit with a proud splendor.

Two hours later, Jim Carter’s little auto-plane lifted into the night, and, with that precious tube mounted above the cabin, winged swiftly westward.

As on his former foray into that fiery realm, Jimmy timed his flight to arrive over the eastern edge of the Arizona desert just before dawn. Somewhere in that great sandy waste, they felt, there would

be a place to set the plane down and get the ray going.

Professor Wentworth had broadcast the particulars of his tube to his scientific colleagues wherever humanity still remained, and the eyes of the world were on this flight. If successful, swift planes would bear similar tubes to the centers of the devastated regions elsewhere, and sweep outward with their deadly rays. The earth would be rid of this fiery invader. If it were not successful….

Jim preferred not to think of that, as he drove on into the night.

Crossing the Missouri River at dark and deserted Kansas City, they soon saw the eastern arc of that deadly orange circle loom on the horizon. To get over it safely, Jim rose to twenty thousand feet, but even there the heat, as they sped across the frontier into enemy territory, was terrific.

Anxiously he watched his revs and prayed for his motor to hold up. If it stopped now, they were cooked!

The sturdy engine purred on with scarcely a flutter, however, and soon they were behind the lines, in a region pitted with the smoldering fires of towns and cities.

It made them shudder, it presented such an appalling panorama of ruin. But at the same time, it strengthened their hope. For very few flares of orange gleamed now among the red. The main forces of the invader were at the front. That meant there should be a safe place to land somewhere.

An hour later, some miles beyond that weird glass citadel that had been their objective, they found a wide stretch of empty desert, and there Jim brought the little plane down to a faultless landing, just as dawn was lightening the east.

Stepping out, he drew a deep breath of relief. For had he crashed, or smashed that fragile tube, all would have been in vain.

“Well, here we are!” he exclaimed, grimly cheerful, as Professor Wentworth stepped out after him. “Now let’s—”

Then he broke off, horrified, as he saw another figure follow the professor from the cabin.

“Joan!” he gasped.

“Present!” she replied.

“But, my daughter!” the professor’s voice broke in. “My dear child!”

A sob shook him. “Why, why, this is—”

“Please don’t let’s talk about it!” she begged, giving his arm a little pat. “I’m here and it can’t be helped now. I was only afraid you’d find me before it was too late and take me back.”

Then, edging over to Jim and slipping her arm in his, she murmured:

“Oh, my dear! Don’t you see I couldn’t stay behind? I had to be with you at the end, Jimmy, if—”

“It won’t be!” he cried, pressing her cold hand. “It can’t be!”

Then he turned to give his attention to her father, who had already mounted to the cockpit and was working absorbedly over his mechanism in the pale light of the coming day.

Any moment, Jim knew, those flaming termites might discover them, and come swooping down. With keen eyes he scanned the horizon. No sign of them yet.

“How are you up there?” he called.

“About ready,” was the reply. “But I shall want more light than this for my mirrors.”

Tensely, counting the seconds, they waited for the sunrise….

And now, as they waited, suddenly a sinister tinge of orange suffused the rosy hues of the east.

“The Fire Ants!” cried Joan, shrinking. “They’ve seen us! They’re coming!”

It was true, Jim saw with a heavy heart.

Turning to Professor Wentworth, he gasped out:

“Quick! We’ve got to do something! You’ve no idea how fast they move!”

“Very well.” The professor’s voice was strangely calm. “You may start your motor. I shall do what I can. Though if we only had the sun—”

Jim leaped for the cabin.

A touch of the starter and the powerful engine came in. Braking his wheels hard, to hold the plane on the ground, he advanced the throttle as much as he dared, and sent a high-tension current surging through the wires the professor had connected with his tube above.

Soon came that high, whining hum they had heard in the laboratory—a thousand times magnified now—and the nib of the big tube glowed a livid, eery green in the lemon dawn.

“Joan!” called her father sharply. “Get in the cabin with Jim!”

She did so, her eyes still fixed in horrified fascination on the eastern horizon; and in that tense instant, she saw two things. First, a great orange arc of fiery termites, bearing down on them; and second, another arc, far greater—the vast saffron rim of the rising sun.

Those two things Joan saw—and so did Jim—as their eardrums almost burst with the stupendous vibration that came from the gun in the cockpit. Then they saw a third, something that left them mute with awe.

As Professor Wentworth swung his cannon ray upon that advancing horde, it melted, vanished, leaving only the clear yellow of the morning sunlight before their bewildered eyes.

But the professor did not cease. For five minutes—ten, fifteen—he swung that mighty ray around, stepping up its power, lengthening its range, as it reached its invisible, annihilating arm farther and farther out….

Meanwhile Jim was radio-phoning frantically. The air seemed strangely full of static.

At last he got Overton of The New York Press.

“Carter speaking, out in Arizona,” he said. “Getting any reports on the ray?”

And back came the tremendous news:

“Results! Man, the world’s crazy! They’re gone—everywhere! Tell the professor to lay off, before he sends us scooting too.”

“Right!” said Jim, cutting his motor. “More later!”

And to Professor Wentworth he called:

“All right, that’s enough! That ray was stronger than you knew!”

But there came no answer, and mounting to the wing-tip, Joan following, Jim saw a sight that froze him with horror. They beheld the professor, slumped against the tube, his whole body glowing a pale, fluorescent green.

“Father!” screamed Joan, rushing to his side. “Oh, Father!”

The man stirred, motioned her away, gasped weakly:

“Do not touch me, child—until the luminosity goes. I am highly radio-active. I had no time to—insulate the tube. No time to find out how. Had to—hurry—”

His voice waned off and they knew he was dead. The two stood there stunned by the realization of his great sacrifice.

He and Joan had set forth on this venture knowing they stood at least a chance, thought Jim, but Professor Wentworth had known from the start that it was sure death for him.

The sun stood out above the eastern horizon like a huge gold coin, bright with the promise of life to spend, when Jim and Joan took off at last for the return home; but the radiance of the morning was dimmed by the knowledge of the tragic burden they bore.

For some moments, as they winged on, both were silent.

“Look!” said Jim at length. “Look ahead, Joan!”

She looked, brightened somewhat.

“Yes, I see.”

And after a moment, lifting her hazel eyes to his, she said. “Oh, Jimmy, I’m sure it means happiness for us.”

“Yes, I’m sure!”

She stirred, moved closer.

“Jimmy, you—you’re all I have now.”

He made no reply, save to press her trembling hand. But it was enough.

Silently, understandingly, they winged onward into the morning light.

December 1931

116 Out Around Rigel by Robert H Wilson

An astounding chronicle of two Lunarians' conquest of time and interstellar space.

Aproximate word count: 8,100

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

The sun had dropped behind the Grimaldi plateau, although for a day twilight would linger over the Oceanus Procellarum. The sky was a hazy blue, and out over the deeper tinted waves the full Earth swung. All the long half-month it had hung there above the horizon, its light dimmed by the sunshine, growing from a thin crescent to its full disk three times as broad as that of the sun at setting. Now in the dusk it was a great silver lamp hanging over Nardos, the Beautiful, the City Built on the Water. The light glimmered over[Pg 296] the tall white towers, over the white ten-mile-long adamantine bridge running from Nardos to the shore, and lit up the beach where we were standing, with a brightness that seemed almost that of day.

"Once more, Garth," I said. "I'll get that trick yet."

The skin of my bare chest still smarted from the blow of his wooden fencing sword. If it had been the real two-handed Lunarian dueling sword, with its terrible mass behind a curved razor edge, the blow would have produced a cut deep into the bone. It was always the same, ever since Garth and I had fenced as boys with crooked laths. Back to back, we could beat the whole school, but I never had a chance against him. Perhaps one time in ten—

"On guard!"

The silvered swords whirled in the Earth-light. I nicked him on one wrist, and had to duck to escape his wild swing at my head. The wooden blades were now locked by the hilts above our heads. When he stepped back to get free, I lunged and twisted his weapon. In a beautiful parabola, Garth's sword sailed out into the water, and he dropped to the sand to nurse his right wrist.

"Confound your wrestling, Dunal. If you've broken my arm on the eve of my flight—"

"It's not even a sprain. Your wrists are weak. And I supposed you've always been considerate of me? Three broken ribs!"

"For half a cent—"

He was on his feet, and then Kelvar came up and laid her hand on his shoulder. Until a few minutes before she had been swimming in the surf, watching us. The Earth-light shimmered over her white skin, still faintly moist, and blazed out in blue sparkles from the jewels of the breastplates and trunks she had put on.

When she touched Garth, and he smiled, I wanted to smash in his dark face and then take the beating I would deserve. Yet, if she preferred him— [TN-1]And the two of us had been friends before she was born. I put out my hand.

"Whatever happens, Garth, we'll still be friends?"

"Whatever happens."

We clasped hands.

"Garth," Kelvar said, "it's getting dark. Show us your ship before you go."

"All right." He had always been like that—one minute in a black rage, the next perfectly agreeable. He now led the way up to a cliff hanging over the sea.

"There," said Garth, "is the Comet. Our greatest step in conquering distance. After I've tried it out, we can go in a year to the end of the universe. But, for a starter, how about a thousand light-years around Rigel in six months?" His eyes were afire. Then he calmed down. "Anything I can show you?"

Editor's Note: The manuscript, of which a translation is here presented, was discovered by the rocket-ship expedition to the moon three years ago. It was found in its box by the last crumbling ruins of the great bridge mentioned in the narrative. Its final translation is a tribute at once to the philological skill of the Earth and to the marvelous dictionary provided by Dunal, the Lunarian. Stars and lunar localities will be given their traditional Earth names; and measures of time, weight, and distance have been reduced, in round numbers, to terrestrial equivalents. Of the space ship described, the Comet, no trace has been found. It must be buried under the rim of one of the hundreds of nearby Lunar craters—the result, as some astronomers have long suspected and as Dunal's story verifies, of a great swarm of meteors striking the unprotected, airless moon.

I had seen the Comet before, but never so close. With a hull of shining helio-beryllium—the new light, inactive alloy of a metal and[Pg 297] a gas—the ship was a cylinder about twenty feet long, by fifteen in diameter, while a pointed nose stretched five feet farther

at each end. Fixed in each point was a telescopic lens, while there were windows along the sides and at the top—all made, Garth informed us, of another form of the alloy almost as strong as the opaque variety. Running half-way out each end were four "fins" which served to apply the power driving the craft. A light inside showed the interior to be a single room, ten feet high at the center of its cylindrical ceiling, with a level floor.

"How do you know this will be the bottom?" I asked, giving the vessel a shove to roll it over. But it would not budge. Garth laughed.

"Five hundred pounds of mercury and the disintegrators are under that floor, while out in space I have an auxiliary gravity engine to keep my feet there."

"You see, since your mathematical friends derived their identical formulas for gravity and electromagnetism, my job was pretty easy. As you know, a falling body follows the line of least resistance in a field of distortion of space caused by mass. I bend space into another such field by electromagnetic means, and the Comet flies down the track. Working the mercury disintegrators at full power, I can get an acceleration of two hundred miles per second, which will build up the speed at the midpoint of my trip to almost four thousand times that of light. Then I'll have to start slowing down, but at the average

speed the journey will take only six months or so."

"But can anyone stand that acceleration?" Kelvar asked.

"I've had it on and felt nothing. With a rocket exhaust shoving the ship, it couldn't be done, but my gravitational field attracts the occupant of the Comet just as much as the vessel itself."

"You're sure," I interrupted, "that you have enough power to keep up the acceleration?"

"Easily. There's a two-thirds margin of safety."

"And you haven't considered that it may get harder to push? You know the increase of mass with velocity. You can't take one-half of the relativity theory without the other. And they've actually measured the increase of weight in an electron."

"The electron never knew it; it's all a matter of reference points. I can't follow the math, but I know that from the electron's standards it stayed exactly the same weight. Anything else is nonsense."

"Well, there may be a flaw in the reasoning, but as they've worked it out, nothing can go faster than light. As you approach that velocity, the mass keeps increasing, and with it the amount of energy required

for a new increase in speed. At the speed of light, the mass would be infinite, and hence no finite energy could get you any further."

"Maybe so. It won't take long to find out."

A few of the brightest stars had begun to appear. We could just see the parallelogram of Orion, with red Betelguese at one corner, and across from it Rigel, scintillant like a blue diamond.

"See," Garth said, pointing at it. "Three months from now, that's where I'll be. The first man who dared to sail among the stars."

"Only because you don't let anyone else share the glory and the danger."

"Why should I? But you wouldn't go, anyway."

"Will you let me?"

I had him there.

"On your head be it. The Comet could hold three or four in a pinch, [Pg 298] and I have plenty of provisions. If you really want to take the chance—"

"It won't be the first we've taken together."

"All right. We'll start in ten minutes." He went inside the ship.

"Don't go," Kelvar whispered, coming into the Comet's shadow. "Tell him anything, but don't go."

"I've got to. I can't go back on my word. He'd think I was afraid."

"Haven't you a right to be?"

"Garth is my friend and I'm going with him."

"All right. But I wish you wouldn't."

From inside came the throb of engines.

"Kelvar," I said, "you didn't worry when only Garth was going."

"No."

"And there's less danger with two to keep watch."

"I know, but still...."

"You are afraid for me?"

"I am afraid for you."

My arm slipped around her, there in the shadow.

"And when I come back, Kelvar, we'll be married?"

In answer, she kissed me. Then Garth was standing in the doorway of the Comet.

"Dunal, where are you?"

We separated and came out of the shadow. I went up the plank to the door, kicking it out behind me. Kelvar waved, and I called something or other to her. Then the door clanged shut. Seated before the control board at the front of the room, Garth held the switch for the two projectors.

"Both turned up," he yelled over the roar of the generators. His hands swung over and the noise died down, but nothing else seemed to have happened. I turned back again to look out the little window fixed in the door.

Down far below, I could see for a moment the city of Nardos with its

great white bridge, and a spot that might be Kelvar. Then there was only the ocean, sparkling in the Earth-light, growing smaller, smaller. And then we had shot out of the atmosphere into the glare of the sun and a thousand stars.

On and up we went, until the moon was a crescent with stars around it. Then Garth threw the power forward.

"Might as well turn in," he told me. "There'll be nothing interesting until we get out of the solar system and I can put on real speed. I'll take the first trick."

"How long watches shall we stand?"

"Eighteen hours ought to match the way we have been living. If you have another preference—"

"No, that will be all right. And I suppose I might as well get in some sleep now."

I was not really sleepy, but only dazed a little by the adventure. I fixed some things on the floor by one of the windows and lay down, switching out the light. Through a top window the sunlight slanted down to fall around Garth, at his instrument board, in a bright glory.

From my window I could see the Earth and the gleaming stars.

The Earth was smaller than I had ever seen it before. It seemed to be moving backward a little[TN-2], and even more, to be changing phase. I closed my eyes, and when I opened them again, sleepily, the bright area was perceptibly smaller. If I could stay awake long enough, there would be only a crescent again. If I could stay awake —But I could not....

Only the rattling of dishes as Garth prepared breakfast brought me back to consciousness. I got to my feet sheepishly.[Pg 299]

"How long have I slept?"

"Twenty hours straight. You looked as if you might have gone on forever. It's the lack of disturbance to indicate time. I got in a little myself, once we were out of the solar system."

A sandwich in one hand, I wandered over the vessel. It was reassuringly solid and concrete. And yet there was something lacking.

"Garth," I asked, "what's become of the sun?"

"I thought you'd want to know that." He led me to the rear telescope.

"But I don't see anything."

"You haven't caught on yet. See that bright yellowish star on the edge of the constellation Scorpio. That's it."

Involuntarily, I gasped. "Then—how far away are we?"

"I put on full acceleration fifteen hours ago, when we passed Neptune, and we have covered thirty billion miles—three hundred times as far as from the moon to the sun, but only one half of one per cent of a light-year."

I was speechless, and Garth led me back to the control board. He pointed out the acceleration control, now turned up to its last notch forward; he also showed me the dials which were used to change our direction.

"Just keep that star on the cross hairs. It's Pi Orionis, a little out of our course, but a good target since it is only twenty-five light-years away. Half the light is deflected on this screen, with a delicate photo-electric cell at its center. The instant the light of the star slips off it, a relay is started which lights a red lamp here, and in a minute sounds a warning bell. That indicator over there shows our approach to any body. It works by the interaction of the object's gravitational field

with that of my projector, and we can spot anything sizable an hour away. Sure you've got everything?"

It all seemed clear. Then I noticed at the top three clock-like dials; one to read days, another to record the speeds of light, and the third to mark light-years traveled.

"These can't really work?" I said. "We have no way to check our speed with outer space."

"Not directly. This is geared with clockwork to represent an estimate based on the acceleration. If your theory is right, then the dials are all wrong."

"And how long do you expect to go ahead without knowing the truth?"

"Until we ought to be at Pi Orionis. At two weeks and twenty-five light-years by the dials, if we aren't there we'll start back. By your figuring, we shouldn't be yet one light-year on the way. Anything more?"

"No, I think I can manage it."

"Wake me if anything's wrong. And look out for dark stars." Then he

had left me there at the controls. In five minutes he was asleep and the whole ship was in my hands.

For hours nothing happened. Without any control of mine, the ship went straight ahead. I could get up and walk about, with a weather eye on the board, and never was there the flash of a danger light. But I was unable to feel confident, and went back to look out through the glass.

The stars were incredibly bright and clear. Right ahead were Betelguese and Rigel, and the great nebula of Orion still beyond. There was no twinkling, but each star a bright, steady point of light. And if Garth's indicators were correct, we were moving toward them at a speed now seventy-five times that of light itself. If they were correct....[Pg 300] How could one know, before the long two weeks were over?

But before I could begin to think of any plan, my eye was caught by the red lamp flashing on the panel. I pressed the attention button before the alarm could ring, then started looking for the body we were in danger of striking. The position indicators pointed straight ahead, but I could see nothing. For ten minutes I peered through the telescope, and still no sign. The dials put the thing off a degree or so to the right now, but that was too close. In five more minutes I would

swing straight up and give whatever it was a wide berth.

I looked out again. In the angle between the cross hairs, wasn't there a slight haze? In a moment it was clear. A comet, apparently, the two of us racing toward each other. Bigger it grew and bigger, hurtling forward. Would we hit?

The dials put it up a little and far off to the right, but it was still frightening. The other light had come on, too, and I saw that we had been pulled off our course by the comet's attraction. I threw the nose over, past on the other side for leeway, then straightened up as the side-distance dial gave a big jump away. Though the gaseous globe, tailless of course away from the sun, showed as big as the full Earth, the danger was past.

As I watched, the comet vanished from the field of the telescope. Five minutes, perhaps, with the red danger light flickering all the time. Then, with a ghastly flare through the right hand windows, it had passed us.

Garth sat straight up. "What happened?" he yelled.

"Just a comet. I got by all right."

He settled back, having been scarcely awake, and I turned to the board again. The danger light had gone out, but the direction indicator was burning. The near approach of the comet had thrown us off our course by several degrees. I straightened the ship up easily, and had only a little more difficulty in stopping a rocking motion. Then again the empty hours of watching, gazing into the stars.

Precisely at the end of eighteen hours, Garth awakened, as if the consummation of a certain number of internal processes had set off a little alarm clock in his brain. We were forty-one hours out, with a speed, according to the indicator, of one hundred and twenty-eight times that of light, and a total distance covered of slightly over one quarter of a light-year. A rather small stretch, compared to the 466 light-years we had to go. But when I went back for a look out of the rear telescope, the familiar stars seemed to have moved the least bit closer together, and the sun was no brighter than a great number of them.

I slept like a log, but awakened a little before my trick was due.

Exactly on schedule, fourteen days and some hours after we had started off, we passed Pi Orionis. For long there had been no doubt in my mind that, whatever the explanation, our acceleration was

holding steady. In the last few hours the star swept up to the brilliance of the sun, then faded again until it was no brighter than Venus. Venus! Our sun itself had been a mere dot in the rear telescope until the change in our course threw it out of the field of vision.

At sixty-five light-years, twenty-three days out, Beta Eridani was almost directly in our path for Rigel. Slightly less than a third of the distance to the midpoint, in over half the time. But our speed was still increasing 200 miles a[Pg 301] second every second, almost four times the speed of light in an hour. Our watches went on with a not altogether disagreeable monotony.

There was no star to mark the middle of our journey. Only, toward the close of one of my watches, a blue light which I had never noticed came on beside the indicator dials, and I saw that we had covered 233 light-years, half the estimated distance to Rigel. The speed marker indicated 3975 times the speed of light. I wakened Garth.

"You could have done it yourself," he complained, sleepily, "but I suppose it's just as well."

He went over to the board and started warming up the rear gravity

projector.

"We'll turn one off as the other goes on. Each take one control, and go a notch at a time." He began counting, "One, two, three ..."

On the twentieth count, my dial was down to zero, his up to maximum deceleration, and I pulled out my switch. Garth snapped sideways a lever on the indicators. Though nothing seemed to happen, I knew that the speed dial would creep backward, and the distance dial progress at a slower and slower rate. While I was trying to see the motion, Garth had gone back to bed. I turned again to the glass and looked out at Rigel, on the cross hairs, and Kappa Orionis, over to the left, and the great nebula reaching over a quarter of the view with its faint gaseous streamers.

And so we swept on through space, with Rigel a great blue glory ahead, and new stars, invisible at greater distances, flaring up in front of us and then fading into the background as we passed. For a long time we had been able to see that Rigel, as inferred from spectroscopic evidence, was a double star—a fainter, greener blue companion revolving with it around their common center of gravity. Beyond Kappa Orionis, three hundred light-years from the sun, the space between the two was quite evident. Beyond four hundred light-years, the brilliance of the vast star was so great that it dimmed

all the other stars by comparison, and made the nebula seem a mere faint gauze. And yet even with this gradual change, our arrival was a surprise.

When he relieved me at my watch, Garth seemed dissatisfied with our progress. "It must be farther than they've figured. I'll stick at twenty-five times light speed, and slow down after we get there by taking an orbit."

"I'd have said it was nearer than the estimate," I tried to argue, but was too sleepy to remember my reasons. Propped up on one elbow, I looked around and out at the stars. There was a bright splash of light, I noticed, where the telescope concentrated the radiation of Rigel at one spot on the screen. I slept, and then Garth was shouting in my ear:

"We're there!"

I opened my eyes, blinked, and shut them again in the glare.

"I've gone around three or four times trying to slow down. We're there, and there's a planet to land on."

At last I could see. Out the window opposite me, Rigel was a blue-

white disk half the size of the sun, but brighter, with the companion star a sort of faint reflection five or ten degrees to the side. And still beyond, as I shaded my eyes, I could see swimming in the black a speck with the unmistakable glow of reflected light.

With both gravity projectors in readiness, we pulled out of our orbit and straight across toward[Pg 302] the planet, letting the attraction of Rigel fight against our still tremendous speed. For a while, the pull of the big star was almost overpowering. Then we got past, and into the gravitational field of the planet. We spiralled down around it, looking for a landing place and trying to match our speed with its rotational velocity.

From rather unreliable observations, the planet seemed a good deal smaller than the moon, and yet so dense as to have a greater gravitational attraction. The atmosphere was cloudless, and the surface a forbidding expanse of sand. The globe whirled at a rate that must give it a day of approximately five hours. We angled down, picking a spot just within the lighted area.

A landing was quite feasible. As we broke through the atmosphere, we could see that the sand, although blotched with dark patches here and there, was comparatively smooth. At one place there was a level outcropping of rock, and over this we hung. It was hard work,

watching through the single small port in the floor as we settled down. Finally the view was too small to be of any use. I ran to the side window, only to find my eyes blinded by Rigel's blaze. Then we had landed, and almost at the same moment Rigel set. Half overlapped by the greater star, the faint companion had been hidden in its glare. Now, in the dusk, a corner of it hung ghostlike on the horizon, and then too had disappeared.

I flashed on our lights, while Garth cut out the projector and the floor gravity machine. The increase in weight was apparent, but not particularly unpleasant. After a few minutes of walking up and down I got used to it.

Through a stop-cock in the wall, Garth had drawn in a tube of gas from the atmosphere outside, and was analyzing it with a spectroscope.

"We can go out," he said. "It's unbreathable, but we'll be able to use the space suits. Mostly fluorine. It would eat your lungs out like that!"

"And the suits?"

"Fortunately, they've been covered with helio-beryllium paint, and

the helmet glass is the same stuff. Not even that atmosphere can touch it. I suppose there can be no life on the place. With all this sand, it would have to be based on silicon instead of carbon—and it would have to breathe fluorine!"

He got out the suits—rather like a diver's with the body of metal-painted cloth, and the helmet of the metal itself. On the shoulders was an air supply cylinder. The helmets were fixed with radio, so we could have talked to each other even in airless space. We said almost anything to try it out.

"Glad you brought two, and we don't have to explore in shifts."

"Yes, I was prepared for emergencies."

"Shall we wait for daylight to go out?"

"I can't see why. And these outfits will probably feel better in the cool. Let's see."

We shot a searchlight beam out the window. There was a slight drop down from the rock where we rested, then the sandy plain stretching out. Only far off were those dark patches that looked like old seaweed on a dried-up ocean bed, and might prove dangerous

footing. The rest seemed hard packed.

My heart was pounding as we went into the air-lock and fastened the inner door behind us.

"We go straight out now," Garth explained. "Coming back, it will be necessary to press this button[Pg 303] and let the pump get rid of the poisonous, air before going in."

I opened the outer door and started to step out, then realized that there was a five-foot drop to the ground.

"Go ahead and jump," Garth said. "There's a ladder inside I should have brought, but it would be too much trouble to go back through the lock for it. Either of us can jump eight feet at home, and we'll get back up somehow."

I jumped, failing to allow for the slightly greater gravity, and fell sprawling. Garth got down more successfully, in spite of a long package of some sort he carried in his hand.

Scrambling down from the cliff and walking out on the sand, I tried to get used to the combination of greater weight and the awkward suit. If I stepped very deliberately it was all right, but an attempt to

run sank my feet in the sand and brought me up staggering. There was no trouble seeing through the glass of my helmet over wide angles. Standing on the elevation by the Comet, his space-suit shining in the light from the windows, Garth looked like a metallic monster, some creature of this strange world. And I must have presented to him much the same appearance, silhouetted dark and forbidding against the stars.

The stars! I looked up, and beheld the most marvelous sight of the whole trip—the Great Nebula of Orion seen from a distance of less than one hundred and fifty light-years its own width.

A great luminous curtain, fifty degrees across, I could just take it all in with my eye. The central brilliancy as big as the sun, a smaller one above it, and then the whole mass of gas stretching over the sky. The whole thing aglow with the green light of nebulium and blazing with the stars behind it. It was stupendous, beyond words.

I started to call Garth, then saw that he was looking up as well. For almost half an hour I watched, as the edge of the nebula sank below the horizon. Then its light began to dim. Turning, I saw that the sky opposite was already gray. The dawn!

Why, the sun had just set. Then I realized. It was over an hour since

we had landed, and a full night would be scarcely two hours and a half. If we were in a summer latitude, the shorter period of darkness was natural enough. And yet it was still hard to believe as, within ten minutes, it was as bright as Earth-light on the moon. Still clearer and clearer grew the light. The stars were almost gone, the center of the nebula only a faint wisp. There were no clouds to give the colors of sunrise, but a bluish-white radiance seemed to be trembling on the eastern horizon.

And then, like a shot, Rigel came up into the sky. The light and heat struck me like something solid, and I turned away. Even with my suit reflecting most of the light away, I felt noticeably warm. The Comet shone like a blinding mirror, so that it was almost impossible to see Garth on the plain below it. Stumbling, and shielding my eyes with my hand, I made my way toward him.

He was standing erect, in his hands two old Lunarian dueling swords. There was hate in his voice as the radio brought it in my ears.

"Dunal, only one of us is going back to the moon."

I stared. Was the heat getting him? "Hadn't we better go inside," I said quietly and somewhat soothingly.

He made no reply, but only held[Pg 304] out one of the hilts. I took it dumbly. In that instant he could have struck my head from my body, if he wished.

"But, Garth, old friend—"

"No friend to you. You shall win Kelvar now, or I. I'm giving you a sporting chance. One of your light cuts letting the fluorine inside will be as deadly as anything I can do. The one who goes back will tell of an accident, making repairs out in space. Damn you, if you don't want me to kill you where you stand, come on and fight."

"Garth, you've gone mad."

"I've been waiting ever since I got you to leave the moon. On guard!"

With a rush of anger I was upon him. He tried to step back, stumbled, had one knee on the ground, then hurled himself forward with a thrust at my waist that I dodged only by an inch. I had to cover, and in spite of myself, with the cool work of parrying, my animosity began to disappear.

And so began one of the strangest battles that the Universe has seen.

Lumbering with our suits and the extra gravity, we circled each other under the blazing sky. The blue-white of Rigel shimmered off our suits and the arcs of our blades as we cut and guarded—each wary now, realizing that a touch meant death. As that terrible sun climbed upward in the sky, its heat was almost overpowering. The sweat poured off every inch of my body, and I gasped for breath. And still we fought on, two glittering metal monsters under the big blue star sweeping up to its noon.

I knew now that I could never kill Garth. I could not go back to Kelvar with his blood. Yet if I simply defended, sooner or later he would wear me down. There was just one chance. If I could disarm him, I could wrestle him into submission. Then he might be reasonable, or I could take him home bound.

I began leading for the opening I wanted, but with no result. He seemed resolved to tire me out. Either I must carry the fight to him, or I would be beaten down. I made a wide opening, counting on dodging his slow stroke. I did, but he recovered too soon. Again on the other side, with no better result. Still again, just getting in for a light tap on Garth's helmet. Then I stepped back, with guard low, and this time he came on. His sword rose in a gleaming arc and hung high for a moment. I had him. There were sparks of clashing, locked steel.

"Damn you, Dunal!" He took a great step back, narrowly keeping his balance on the sand. On another chance, I would trip him. My ears were almost deafened by his roar, "Come on and fight."

I took a step in and to the side, and had him in the sun. He swung blindly, trying to cover himself with his whirling point but I had half a dozen openings to rip his suit. When he moved to try to see, I would lock with him again. I watched his feet.

And as I watched, I saw an incredible thing. Near one of Garth's feet the sand was moving. It was not a slide caused by his weight; rather —why, it was being pushed up from below. There was a little hump, and suddenly it had burst open, and a stringy mass like seaweed was crawling toward his leg.

"Look out, Garth," I yelled.

How he could see through that terrible sun I do not know, but Garth swung through my forgotten guard with a blow square across my helmet glass. The force threw me to the ground, and I looked up, dazed. The beryllium glass had not broken to let in the[Pg 305] fluorine-filled air, but Garth was standing over me.

"That's your last trick, Dunal." His blade rose for the kill.

I was unable even to get up, but with one hand I pointed to the ground.

"Look!" I shouted again, and on the instant the thing wound itself around Garth's foot.

He swung down, hacking it loose. I had got to my feet. "Run for the ship," I cried, and started off.

"Not that way."

I looked back, and saw that I had run in the wrong direction. But it made no difference. Over a whole circle around us the sand was rising, and directly between us and the Comet there was a great green-brown mass. We were surrounded.

We stood staring at the creatures. Spread out to full dimensions, each one made a sphere about four feet in diameter. In the center, a solid mass whose outlines were difficult to discern; and spreading out from this a hundred long, thin, many-jointed arms or legs or branches or whatever one could call them.

The things were not yet definitely hostile—only their circle, of perhaps fifty yards radius, grew continually thicker and more

impenetrable. Within the enclosed area, the only ripples we could see in the sand were heading outward. There was to be no surprise attack from below, at least; only one in mass. What, I wondered, might be a sign of friendship, to persuade them to let us go.

And then the circle began to close in. The things rolled over and over on themselves, like gigantic tumbleweeds. At one point, to the right of the direct route to the Comet, the line seemed thinner. I pointed the place out to Garth.

"Break through there, and make a run for it."

We charged into the midst of them with swinging blades. The very suddenness of our rush carried us half-way through their midst. Then something had my legs from behind. I almost fell, but succeeded in turning and cutting myself free. The creatures from the other side of the circle must have made the hundred yards in four or five seconds. And the rest had now covered the breach in front. It was hopeless.

And so we stood back to back, hewing out a circle of protection against our enemies. They seemed to have no fear, and in spite of the destruction our blades worked among them, they almost overcame us by sheer numbers and weight. It was a case of whirling our swords back and forth interminably in the midst of their tentacles.

Against the light, the long arms were a half-transparent brown. Our swords broke them in bright shivers. Formed from the predominant silicon of the planet, the creatures were living glass!

For perhaps a quarter of an hour we were in the thick of them, hewing until I thought my arms must fall, slashing and tearing at the ones that had got underfoot and were clamping their tentacles around our legs. Only for the space-suits, we should have, by this time, been overpowered and torn into bits—and yet these garments could not be expected to hold indefinitely.

But at last there was a breathing space. The crippled front ranks dragged themselves away, and there was left around us a brief area of sand, covered with coruscating splinters of glass. Garth got the breath to say something or other encouraging. It was like old days at school.

Only this time the odds were all[Pg 306] against us. We were still a good hundred yards from the Comet, and in our path stood a solid wall of the creatures. Even if we got free, they could outrace us to the goal. And with our limited strength, we could not hope to kill them all. In a minute or two, they would attack us again.

Somehow we must fight our way as long as we lasted. Perhaps they

might be frightened. We threw ourselves at the side next our goal. The line gave perhaps a yard, then stiffened, and we found ourselves swallowed up in a thick cloud of brown smoke.

Poison gas! It must be shot out of their bodies, at a cost so great that it was kept as a last resort. Through the rolling vapor it was just possible to see our opponents, but they made no forward move. They were waiting for us to be overcome. Suppose their compound could eat through even our helio-beryllium? But it did not. We were safe.

"Stand still, Garth," I whispered, counting on the radio to carry my voice. "Let them think we're dead, and then give them a surprise."

"All right."

Long, long minutes.... If only they did not know that it was the customary thing for a dead man to fall.... Slowly they began to move in.

Then Garth and I were upon them. They halted as if stupefied. We had hacked our way half through their mass. The rest fled, and we began running toward the Comet, praying that we might reach the ship before they could get organized again. How we floundered through the sand in wild and desperate haste.

Before we had covered half the distance, the pursuit began. There was no attempt to drag us down directly, but the two wings raced past to cut us off in front. At the base of the little cliff where the Comet lay, the circle closed.

"Jump," I called, and threw myself up over them toward the stone. Garth would have fallen back, but I caught his hand and pulled him to safety. We had won.

But had we? Joined by reinforcements from somewhere, the creatures were packed all around the base of the cliff and had begun to climb its walls, to cut us off from the ship. We rushed separately toward the two sides, and they backed away. But those in front were now established on the top. We stepped backward, and the whole line came on. But now we turned and ran for the Comet.

We were just able to turn again and clear them away with our swords. In a moment others would be climbing up from behind over the ship. And the door to safety was on a level with our heads.

There was just one chance. Stamping threateningly, we cleared the things out for ten feet in front of us. But once we turned our backs for a running start they were at us again.

"Boost you up, Dunal," said Garth pantingly.

"No, you first."

But in the midst of my words, he almost threw me into the doorway. I turned to pull him up after me. They were around his legs, and one had jumped down upon his helmet. And he must have known it would happen.

"Go back to her," he cried, and slammed shut the door.

There was no time to help him, to interfere with the way of expiation he had chosen. I tried to look away, but a sort of fascination kept me watching him through the glass. He had been dragged to his knees. Then he was[Pg 307] up again, whirling to keep them away on all sides in a mad, gallant fight. But the creatures knew it was the kill. Now they were around his knees, now up to his waist in their overpowering mass. It was only a matter of minutes.

Garth took a staggering step backward, dragging them all with him. He was facing me, and swung up his sword in the old Lunar salute. "Good luck, Dunal." The words, coming clearly over the radio, had a note of exaltation.

Then flashing his blade over his head, he hurled it into the midst of the accursed things. With a tremendous effort, Garth tore the protecting helmet from his head, and plunged backward over the cliff....

There was nothing to do but get in out of the lock and start for home, and little on the trip is worthy of recounting. Without unsurpassable difficulty, I was able to operate the machinery and steer, first for Betelguese, then for the sun. Counting on the warning bells to arouse me, I managed to get in snatches of sleep at odd intervals. At times the strain of the long watches was almost maddening.

By the time the midpoint had been passed, I was living in a sort of waking dream; or rather, a state of somnambulism. I ate; my hands moved the controls. And yet all the while my mind was wandering elsewhere—out to Garth's body under the blazing light of Rigel, back to the moon and Kelvar, or else in an unreal, shadowy world of dreams and vague memories.

With perfect mechanical accuracy I entered the solar system and adjusted the projectors for the sun's attraction. Running slower and slower, I watched Venus glide by. And then, gradually, everything faded, and I was walking along the great Nardos bridge with Kelvar. The ocean was so still that we could see mirrored in it the reflection

of each white column, and our own faces peering down, and beyond that the stars.

"I shall bring you a handful for your hair," I told her, and leaned over farther, farther, reaching out.... Then I was falling, with Kelvar's face growing fainter, and in my ears a horrible ringing like the world coming to an end.

Just before I could strike the water, I wakened to find the alarm bell jangling and the object-indicator light flashing away. Through the telescope, the moon was large in the sky.

It was an hour, perhaps two, before I approached the sunlit surface and hovered over the shore by Nardos. Try as I would, my sleep-drugged body could not handle the controls delicately enough to get the Comet quite in step with the moon's rotation. Always a little too fast or too slow. I slid down until I was only ten or fifteen feet off the ground that seemed to be moving out from under me. In another minute I should be above the water. I let everything go, and the Comet fell. There was a thud, a sound of scraping over the sand, a list to one side. I thought for an instant that the vessel was going to turn over, but with the weight of the reserve mercury in the fuel tanks it managed to right itself on a slope of ten or fifteen degrees.

From the angle, I could barely see out the windows, and everything looked strange. The water under the bridge seemed too low. The half-full Earth had greenish-black spots on it. And the sky?

So dead with sleep that I could scarcely move, I managed to crane my neck around to see better. There was no sky, only a faint gray haze through which the stars shone. And yet the sun must be[Pg 308] shining. I stretched still further. There the sun burned, and around it was an unmistakable corona. It was like airless space.

Was I dreaming again?

With a jerk, I got to my feet and climbed up the sloping floor to the atmosphere tester. My fingers slipped off the stop-cock, then turned it. And the air-pressure needle scarcely moved. It was true. Somehow, as the scientists had always told us would be the case eventually, the air of the moon, with so little gravity to hold it back, had evaporated into space.

But in six months? It was unthinkable. Surely someone had survived the catastrophe. Some people must have been able to keep themselves alive in caves where the last of the atmosphere would linger. Kelvar must be still alive. I could find her and bring her to the Comet. We would go to some other world.

Frantically, I pulled on my space-suit and clambered through the air-lock. I ran, until the cumbersome suit slowed me down to a staggering walk through the sand beside the Oceanus Procellarum.

Leaden and dull, the great sea lay undisturbed by the thin atmosphere still remaining. It had shrunk by evaporation far away from its banks, and where the water once had been there was a dark incrustation of impurities. On the land side, all was a great white plain of glittering alkali without a sign of vegetation. I went on toward Nardos the Beautiful.

Even from afar off, I could see that it was desolate. Visible now that the water had gone down, the pillars supporting it rose gaunt and skeletal. Towers had fallen in, and the gleaming white was dimmed. It was a city of the dead, under an Earth leprous-looking with black spots where the clouds apparently had parted.

I came nearer to Nardos and the bridge, nearer to the spot where I had last seen Kelvar. Below the old water level, the columns showed a greenish stain, and half-way out the whole structure had fallen in a great gap. I reached the land terminus of the span, still glorious and almost beautiful in its ruins. Whole blocks of stone had fallen to the sand, and the adamantine pillars were cracked and crumbling with the erosion of ages.

Then I knew.

In our argument as to the possible speed of the Comet, Garth and I had both been right. In our reference frame, the vessel had put on an incredible velocity, and covered the nine-hundred-odd light-years around Rigel in six months. But from the viewpoint of the moon, it had been unable to attain a velocity greater than that of light. As the accelerating energy pressed the vessel's speed closer and closer toward that limiting velocity, the mass of the ship and of its contents had increased toward infinity. And trying to move laboriously with such vast mass, our clocks and bodies had been slowed down until to our leaden minds a year of moon time became equivalent to several hours.

The Comet had attained an average velocity of perhaps 175,000 miles per second, and the voyage that seemed to me six months had taken a thousand years. A thousand years! The words went ringing through my brain. Kelvar had been dead for a thousand years. I was alone in a world uninhabited for centuries.

I threw myself down and battered my head in the sand.

More to achieve, somehow, my own peace of mind, than in any hope of its being discovered, I have written this narrative. There are two

copies, this to be placed in[Pg 309] a helio-beryllium box at the terminus of the bridge, the other within the comet[TN-3]. One at least should thus be able to escape the meteors which, unimpeded by the thin atmosphere, have begun to strike everywhere, tearing up great craters in the explosion that follows as a result of the impact.

My time is nearly up. Air is still plentiful on the Comet, but my provisions will soon run short. It is now slightly over a month since I collapsed on the sands into merciful sleep, and I possess food and water for perhaps another. But why go on in my terrible loneliness?

Sometimes I waken from a dream in which they are all so near—Kelvar, Garth, all my old companions—and for a moment I cannot realize how far away they are. Beyond years and years. And I, trampling back and forth over the dust of our old life, staring across the waste, waiting—for what?

No, I shall wait only until the dark. When the sun drops over the Grimaldi plateau, I shall put my manuscripts in their safe places, then tear off my helmet and join the other two.

An hour ago, the bottom edge of the sun touched the horizon.

117 The White Invaders by Ray Cummings

Out of their unknown fourth dimensional realm materializes a horde of White Invaders with power invincible.

Aproximate word count: 31,500

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Chapter 1: A White Shape in the Moonlight

The colored boy gazed at Don and me with a look of terror.

“But I tell you I seen it!” he insisted. “An’ it’s down there now. A ghost! It’s all white an’ shinin’!”

“Nonsense, Willie,” Don turned to me. “I say, Bob, what do you make of this?”

“I seen it, I tell you,” the boy broke in. “It ain’t a mile from here if you want to go look at it.”

Don gripped the colored boy whose coffee complexion had taken on a greenish cast with his terror.

“Stop saying that, Willie. That’s absolute rot. There’s no such thing as a ghost.”

“But I seen—”

“Where?”

“Over on the north shore. Not far.”

“What did you see?” Don shook him. “Tell us exactly.”

“A man! I seen a man. He was up on a cliff just by the golf course when I first seen him. I was comin’ along the path down by the Fort Beach an’ I looked up an’ there he was, shinin’ all white in the moonlight. An’ then before I could run, he came floatin’ down at me.”

“Floating?”

“Yes. He didn’t walk. He came down through the rocks. I could see the rocks of the cliff right through him.”

Don laughed at that. But neither he nor I could set this down as utter nonsense, for within the past week there had been many wild stories of ghosts among the colored people of Bermuda. The Negroes of Bermuda are not unduly superstitious, and certainly they are more intelligent, better educated than most of their race. But the little islands, this past week, were echoing with whispered tales of strange things seen at night. It had been mostly down at the lower end of the comparatively inaccessible Somerset; but now here it was in our own neighborhood.

"You've got the fever, Willie," Don laughed. "I say, who told you you saw a man walking through rock?"

"Nobody told me. I seen him. It ain't far if you—"

"You think he's still there?"

"Maybe so. Mr. Don, he was standin' still, with his arms folded. I ran, an'—"

"Let's go see if he's there," I suggested. "I'd like to have a look at one of these ghosts."

But even as I lightly said it, a queer thrill of fear shot through me.

No one can contemplate an encounter with the supernatural without a shudder.

“Right you are,” Don exclaimed. “What’s the use of theory? Can you lead us to where you saw him, Willie?”

“Ye-es, of course.”

The sixteen-year-old Willie was shaking again. “W-what’s that for, Mr. Don?”

Don had picked up a shotgun which was standing in a corner of the room.

“Ain’t no—no use of that, Mr. Don.”

“We’ll take it anyway, Willie. Ready, Bob?”

A step sounded behind us. “Where are you going?”

It was Jane Dorrance, Don’s cousin. She stood in the doorway. Her long, filmy white summer dress fell nearly to her ankles. Her black hair was coiled on her head. In her bodice was a single red poinsettia blossom. As she stood motionless, her small slight figure framed against the dark background of the hall, she could have been a

painting of an English beauty save for the black hair suggesting the tropics. Her blue-eyed gaze went from Don to me, and then to the gun.

“Where are you going?”

“Willie saw a ghost.” Don grinned. “They’ve come from Somerset, Jane. I say, one of them seems to be right here.”

“Where?”

“Willie saw it down by the Fort Beach.”

“To-night?”

“Yes. Just now. So he says, though it’s all rot, of course.”

“Oh,” said Jane, and she became silent.

She appeared to be barring our way. It seemed to me, too, that the color had left her face, and I wondered vaguely why she was taking it so seriously. That was not like Jane: she was a level-headed girl, not at all the sort to be frightened by Negroes talking of ghosts.

She turned suddenly on Willie. The colored boy had been employed

in the Dorrance household since childhood. Jane herself was only seventeen, and she had known Willie here in this same big white stone house, almost from infancy.

“Willie, what you saw, was it a—a man?”

“Yes,” said the boy eagerly. “A man. A great big man. All white an’ shinin’.”

“A man with a hood? Or a helmet? Something like a queer-looking hat on his head, Willie?”

“Jane!” expostulated Don. “What do you mean?”

“I saw him—saw it,” said Jane nervously.

“Good Lord!” I exclaimed. “You did? When? Why didn’t you tell us?”

“I saw it last night.” She smiled faintly. “I didn’t want to add to these wild tales. I thought it was my imagination. I had been asleep—I fancy I was dreaming of ghosts anyway.”

“You saw it—” Don prompted.

“Outside my bedroom window. Some time in the middle of the night. The moon was out and the—the man was all white and shining, just as Willie says.”

“But your bedroom,” I protested. “Good Lord, your bedroom is on the upper floor.”

But Jane continued soberly, with a sudden queer hush to her voice, “It was standing in the air outside my window. I think it had been looking in. When I sat up—I think I had cried out, though none of you heard me evidently—when I sat up, it moved away; walked away. When I got to the window, there was nothing to see.” She smiled again. “I decided it was all part of my dream. This morning—well, I was afraid to tell you because I knew you’d laugh at me. So many girls down in Somerset have been imagining things like that.”

To me, this was certainly a new light on the matter. I think that both Don and I, and certainly the police, had vaguely been of the opinion that some very human trickster was at the bottom of all this. Someone, criminal or otherwise, against whom our shotgun would be efficacious. But here was level-headed Jane telling us of a man standing in mid-air peering into her second-floor bedroom, and then walking away. No trickster could accomplish that.

“Ain’t we goin’?” Willie demanded. “I seen it, but it’ll be gone.”

“Right enough,” Don exclaimed grimly. “Come on, Willie.”

He disregarded Jane as he walked to the door, but she clung to him.

“I’m coming,” she said obstinately, and snatched a white lace scarf from the hall rack and flung it over her head like a mantilla. “Don, may I come?” she added coaxingly.

He gazed at me dubiously. “Why, I suppose so,” he said finally. Then he grinned. “Certainly no harm is going to come to us from a ghost. Might frighten us to death, but that’s about all a ghost can do, isn’t it?”

We left the house. The only other member of the Dorrance household was Jane’s father—the Hon. Arthur Dorrance, M.P. He had been in Hamilton all day, and had not yet returned. It was about nine o’clock of an evening in mid-May. The huge moon rode high in a fleecy sky, illumining the island with a light so bright one could almost read by it.

“We’ll walk,” said Don. “No use riding, Willie.”

“No. It’s shorter over the hill. It ain’t far.”

We left our bicycles standing against the front veranda, and, with Willie and Don leading us, we plunged off along the little dirt road of the Dorrance estate. The poinsettia blooms were thick on both sides of us. A lily field, which a month before had been solid white with blossoms, still added its redolence to the perfumed night air. Through the branches of the squat cedar trees, in almost every direction there was water visible—deep purple this night, with a rippled sheen of silver upon it.

We reached the main road, a twisting white ribbon in the moonlight. We followed it for a little distance, around a corkscrew turn, across a tiny causeway where the moonlit water of an inlet lapped against the base of the road and the sea-breeze fanned us. A carriage, heading into the nearby town of St. Georges, passed us with the thud of horses' hoofs pounding on the hard smooth stone of the road. Under its jaunty canopy an American man reclined with a girl on each side of him. He waved us a jovial greeting as they passed.

Then Willie turned us off the road. We climbed the ramp of an open grassy field, with a little cedar woods to one side, and up ahead, half a mile to the right, the dark crumbling ramparts of a little ancient fort which once was for the defense of the island.

Jane and I were together, with Willie and Don in advance of us, and

Don carrying the shotgun.

“You really saw it, Jane?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I thought I did. Then I thought that I didn’t.”

“Well, I hope we see it now. And if it’s human—which it must be if there’s anything to it at all—we’ll march it back to St. Georges and lock it up.”

She turned and smiled at me, but it was a queer smile, and I must admit my own feelings were queer.

“Don’t you think you’re talking nonsense, Bob?”

“Yes, I do,” I admitted. “I guess maybe the whole thing is nonsense. But it’s got the police quite worried. You knew that, didn’t you? All this wild talk—there must be some basis for it.”

Don was saying, “Take the lower path, Willie. Take the same route you were taking when you saw it.”

We climbed down a steep declivity, shadowed by cedar trees, and reached the edge of a tiny, almost landlocked, lagoon. It was no more than a few hundred feet in diameter. The jagged, porous gray-

black rocks rose like an upstanding crater rim to mark its ten-foot entrance to the sea. A little white house stood here with its back against the fifty-foot cliff. It was dark, its colored occupants probably already asleep. Two rowboats floated in the lagoon, moored near the shore. And on the narrow strip of stony beach, nets were spread to dry.

“This way, Mister Don. I was comin’ along here, toward the Fort.” Willie was again shaking with excitement. “Just past that bend.”

“You keep behind me.” Don led us now, with his gun half raised. “Don’t talk when we get further along, and walk as quietly as you can.”

The narrow path followed the bottom of the cliff. We presently had the open sea before us, with a line of reefs a few hundred yards out against which the lazy ground swell was breaking in a line of white. The moonlit water lapped gently at our feet. The cliff rose to our right, a mass of gray-black rock, pitted and broken, fantastically indented, unreal in the moonlight.

“I seen it—just about there,” Willie whispered.

Before us, a little rock headland jutted out into the water. Don halted

us, and we stood silent, gazing. I think that there is hardly any place more fantastic than a Bermuda shorefront in the moonlight. In these little eroded recesses, caves and grottoes one might expect to see crooked-legged gnomes, scampering to peer at the human intruder. Gnarled cedars, hanging precariously, might hide pixies and elves. A child's dream of fairyland, this reality of a Bermuda shorefront.

"There it is!"

Willie's sibilant whisper dispelled my roaming fancy. We all turned to stare behind us in the direction of Willie's unsteady finger. And we all saw it—the white shape of a man down near the winding path we had just traversed. A wild thrill of fear, excitement, revulsion—call it what you will—surged over me. The thing had been following us!

We stood frozen, transfixed. The shape was almost at the water level, a hundred feet or so away. It had stopped its advance; to all appearances it was a man standing there, calmly regarding us. Don and I swung around to face it, shoving Jane and Willie behind us.

Willie had started off in terror, but Jane gripped him.

"Quiet, Willie!"

“There it is! See it—”

“Of course we see it,” Don whispered. “Don’t talk. We’ll wait; see what it does.”

We stood a moment. The thing was motionless. It was in a patch of shadow, but, as though gleaming with moonlight, it seemed to shine. Its glow was silvery, with a greenish cast almost phosphorescent. Was it standing on the path? I could not tell. It was too far away; too much in shadow. But I plainly saw that it had the shape of a man. Wraith, or substance? That also, was not yet apparent.

Then suddenly it was moving! Coming toward us. But not floating, for I could see the legs moving, the arms swaying. With measured tread it was walking slowly toward us!

Don’s shotgun went up. “Bob, we’ll hold our ground. Is it—is he armed, can you see?”

“No! Can’t tell.”

Armed! What nonsense! How could this wraith, this apparition, do us physical injury!

“If—if he gets too close, Bob, by God, I’ll shoot. But if he’s human,

I wouldn’t want to kill him.”

The shape had stopped again. It was fifty feet from us now, and we could clearly see that it was a man, taller than normal. He stood now with folded arms—a man strangely garbed in what seemed a white, tight-fitting jacket and short trunks. On his head was a black skull cap surmounted by a helmet of strange design.

Don’s voice suddenly echoed across the rocks.

“Who are you?”

The white figure gave no answer. It did not move.

“We see you. What do you want?” Don repeated.

Then it moved again. Partly toward us and partly sidewise, away from the sea. The swing of the legs was obvious. It was walking. But not upon the path, nor upon the solid surface of these Bermuda rocks! A surge of horror went through me at the realization. This was nothing human! It was walking on some other surface, invisible to us, but something solid beneath its own tread.

“Look!” Jane whispered. “It’s walking—*into the cliff!*”

There was no doubt about it now. Within thirty feet of us, it was slowly walking up what must have been a steep ascent. Already it was ten feet or more above our level. And it was behind the rocks of the cliff! Shining in there as though the rocks themselves were transparent!

Or were my senses tricking me? I whispered, “Is it back of the rocks? Or is there a cave over there? An opening?”

“Let’s go see.” Don took a step forward; and called again:

“You—we see you. Stand still! Do you want me to fire at you?”

The figure turned and again stood regarding us with folded arms. Obviously not Don’s voice, but his movement, had stopped it. We left the path and climbed about ten feet up the broken cliff-side. The figure was at our level now, but it was within the rocks. We were close enough now to see other details: a man’s white face, with heavy black brows, heavy features; a stalwart, giant figure, six and a half feet at the least. The white garment could have been of woven metal. I saw black, thread-like wires looped along the arms, over the shoulders, down the sides of the muscular naked legs. There seemed, at the waist, a dial-face, with wires running into it.

The details were so clear that they seemed substantial, real. Yet the figure was so devoid of color that it could have been a light-image projected here upon these rocks. And the contour of the cliff was plainly visible in front of it.

We stood gazing at the thing, and it stared back at us.

“Can you hear us?” Don called.

Evidently it could not. Then a sardonic smile spread over the face of the apparition. The lips moved. It said something to us, but we heard no sound.

It was a wraith—this thing so visibly real! It was apparently close to us, yet there was a limitless, intervening void of the unknown.

It stood still with folded arms across the brawny chest, sardonically regarding us. The face was strangely featured, yet wholly of human cast. And, above all, its aspect was strangely evil. Its gaze suddenly turned on Jane with a look that made my heart leap into my throat and made me fling up my arms as though to protect her.

Then seemingly it had contemplated us enough; the folded arms swung down; it turned away from us, slowly stalking off.

“Stop!” Don called.

“See!” I whispered. “It’s coming out in the open!”

The invisible surface upon which it walked led it out from the cliff. The figure was stalking away from us in mid-air, and it seemed to fade slowly in the moonlight.

“It’s going!” I exclaimed. “Don, it’s getting away!”

Impulsively I started scrambling over the rocks; unreasoningly, for who can chase and capture a ghost?

Don stopped me. “Wait!” His shotgun went to his shoulders. The white shape was now again about fifty feet away. The gun blazed into the moonlight. The buckshot tore through the stalking white figure; the moonlit shorefront echoed with the shot.

When the smoke cleared away, we saw the apparition still walking quietly forward. Up over the sea now, up and out into the moonlit night, growing smaller and dimmer in the distance, until presently it was faded and gone.

A ghost?

We thought so then.

118 Giants on the Earth by Sterner St. Paul Meek

The yoke of Jovian oppression rests heavily on the dwellers of Earth—until Damis, the Nepthalim, comes forward to lead them in spirited revolt.

Aproximate word count: 24,400

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Chapter 1: *The Jovian Tyrant*

Glavour, Jovian Viceroy of the Earth, looked arrogantly about as he lay at ease on the cushions of the ornate chariot which bore him through the streets of his capital city. Like all the Jovians, he was cast in a heroic mold compared to his Earth-born subjects. Even for a Jovian, Glavour was large. He measured a good eight feet from the soles of his huge splayed feet to the crown of his enormous head, crested with stiff black hair which even the best efforts of Tonsome, the court barber, failed to make lie in order. His keen black eyes glittered as they swept over the scene before him. Where only a few

years before had been only tangled tropical jungle on the narrow neck of land separating the two great oceans, now rose row after row of stately buildings. Suddenly Glavour's attention was attracted by a girlish form in a passing chariot.

"Stop!" he cried.

Obedient to the driver's touch on a lever, the tiny radium motor of the chariot ceased to revolve and the equipage stopped its forward motion. Glavour turned to an equerry at his side.

"Havenner," he exclaimed, "did you note that maiden who passed us?"

"I did, Your Excellency."

"Bring her before me."

The equerry sprang lightly to the ground and called out in a stentorian voice. At the sound every vehicle on the street ceased its movement until the will of the Viceroy, the ruler of the Sons of God, should be made known. In a few steps, his powerful Jovian muscles carrying his huge body forward at a rate impossible to persons born of Earthly parentage who had not inherited the power needed to

overcome the enormous gravity of Jupiter, Havenner reached the equipage containing the girl. He gave a curt order and the girl's driver turned his vehicle and brought it alongside the Viceroy's.

Glavour's eyes rested on the slim lithesome figure of the Earth-girl. She was just emerging from the grace of girlhood into the full dignity of young womanhood and the soft clinging garb she wore accentuated rather than concealed the curves of her body. As Glavour's gaze fell on her, she cast down her eyes and a flush crept slowly over her pretty face to the mass of coppery gold hair which crowned her head. An expression of brutal lust came into the Viceroy's eyes.

"Daughter of Man," he said slowly, "how are you named and what is your family?"

"My name is Lura, Your Excellency," she faltered, "and I am the daughter of Turgan, the Kildare of this province."

"You please me, girl," said the Viceroy. "Dismiss your chariot and join me in mine. There is room in my seraglio for you."

Lura stared with horror at the huge Jovian and shrank back from his sensual gaze. Glavour gazed at her in astonishment and a deep scowl

spread over his face.

"The prospect does not seem to please you, Daughter of Man," he said slowly. "Perhaps the company of the Viceroy of Tubain, Ruler of the Universe, is too lowly to please you and you desire more exalted company. Be careful that I do not have you stripped and given to the palace guards for their sport. Join me in my chariot."

He half rose and leaned forward to clasp her. Lura gave a cry of horror and sprang from her chariot to the ground on the side farthest from the vehicle of the Viceroy. Glavour leaped to his feet with a roar of rage and lunged after her. Before he had left his chariot, the hand of his equerry fell restrainingly on his shoulder. The Viceroy turned a rage-maddened face toward his minion.

"Seize that maiden, Havenner!" he cried. "As I live, she shall be sacrificed at the next games."

The equerry made no move to obey his superior's orders and Glavour's face grew purple with rage.

"Obey my orders or you shall join her as a sacrifice!" he roared.

The equerry's face paled slightly and grew grim at the Viceroy's

words but no trace of fear appeared on his heavy countenance.

"Save your breath, Glavour," he said shortly, but in so quiet a voice that no one but the Viceroy heard him. "You may be head of the Sons of God on this planet but your power does not extend to life and death over me, who am of the same blood that you are. I have the right to appeal to Tubain from such a sentence. Before you strive to haul that girl away to your already crowded seraglio against her will, listen to me. Do you realize who she is?"

The Viceroy's face was a study. For a moment rage predominated and he raised a mighty fist to strike Havenner down, but the equerry looked him fearlessly in the eye. Slowly the hot rage faded and a deadly ferocity took its place.

"You try me far, Havenner," he said in a quiet voice, yet with a hint of steel in his tones, "yet your loyalty is above suspicion. Heard you not the girl say she was the daughter of the Kildare of this province?"

"I heard, Your Excellency," replied the equerry, "but beyond that, she is someone else. She is the affianced bride of Damis, the son of Hortan, who was Viceroy before you."

"A Nepthalim!" exclaimed the Viceroy scornfully. "What matters that? Are the desires of a half-breed bastard to stand above the wishes of the ruler of the planet?"

"It is true that the mother of Damis was a Daughter of Man," said the equerry quietly, "yet Hortan married her in honor. Damis is a man of great influence and it would be well to reflect before you rob him of his chosen bride. There is wide discontent with our rule which needs only a leader to flare up. Remember that we are few and Jupiter is far away."

"Havenner, you talk like a frightened woman," sneered the Viceroy. "Let him join the ranks of the malcontents. For my part, I hope they revolt. They need to be taught a lesson. Stand aside while I seize the maiden."

The equerry stood aside with a shrug of his shoulders and the Viceroy sprang to the ground. The girl had run as rapidly as her clinging robes would allow toward one of the beautiful buildings which lined the thoroughfare. She had almost reached the doorway before Glavour reached the ground and raced after her. His Jovian muscles carried his body forward at a pace which no Terrestrial could equal. It was evident to the watchers that he would seize Lura before she could reach the sanctuary she sought.

A mingled chorus of cries of rage and hisses came from the Earthmen who witnessed the scene. The Jovian guards strove to suppress the outcries until a word from Havenner made them cease their efforts and close in around the Viceregal chariot. The cries rose to a tumult but as yet none of the Earthmen dared to raise a hand against the person of the representative of Tubain, the far-off Jovian whom they had been forced to acknowledge as God, and whom many of the ignorant believed *was* God.

The Viceroy rapidly overtook his victim and his hand was outstretched to grasp her when there came an interruption. From the doorway which the girl had been striving to reach, a man burst forth and leaped between her and her pursuer. Glavour stopped and glowered at the new obstacle in the path of his sensuality.

The newcomer stood five inches over six feet in his flat sandals but it was only in his unusual height and his enormous strength that he showed the blood of his Jovian father. His feet were small and shapely with a high-arched instep and his whole form was graceful and symmetrical. Crisply curling yellow hair surmounted a head which Praxiteles would have reveled in as a model for his youthful Hermes. As he faced the Viceroy, his usual pleasant smile was gone and his face was set in grim lines, his clear blue eyes as cold as the ice brought from the polar regions to cool the Viceroy's drink.

The two stood and stared at one another, the black eyes of the Jovian burning like fire in strange contrast to the cold glare of the blue ones. Then tension in the street grew taut. The Earthmen gradually closed in about them. At a word from Havenner, the Jovian guards closed up and drew from their garments long black tubes. Presently Glavour broke the silence.

"Make way, son of Hortan, for the Viceroy of God," he rumbled in his deep-toned voice.

Damis made no reply, nor did he move a muscle. The rage deepened on the Viceroy's face and he strode forward, his hand raised to strike down this puny assailant who had interposed his slight form between the massive limbs of the Jovian and the object of his desires. With a cry of rage he brought down his huge hand and then Damis moved. So swiftly that the eye could hardly follow his movements, he leaped to one side and his own hand shot up. Fingers of steel circled the hairy wrist of the Viceroy and stopped his hand in mid-air. For a moment Glavour was too astonished at the idea of physical resistance to move. Damis, with an almost contemptuous air, tossed aside the hand he held and made as if to turn his back. With an inarticulate roar of rage, the Jovian charged.

Again Damis sprang to one side and his hand moved. In a long arc

his clenched fist shot up and caught Glavour on the chin and rocked the four hundred pounds of bone and muscle that made up the Viceroy. For a moment Glavour staggered and then his hand fell on Damis' shoulder. Exerting all of his huge strength, he pulled his opponent toward him and threw his massive arms about him. Damis made no attempt to wriggle out of the bone-crushing grip, but, instead, threw his arms about the Jovian and matched muscle against muscle. The Jovian guards, who had witnessed the feats of strength which were the Viceroy's boast, expected only one outcome, but to Havenner, who recalled that Hortan, the father of Damis, had been one of the mightiest men of Jupiter, the issue was not a foregone conclusion. Stealthily as a cat he crept forward, a long black tube clenched in his hand.

Mightily the two strove. The face of the Jovian grew dark red and then almost purple as he put forth his last ounce of strength to crush the opponent whom he topped a good eighteen inches. For all of his effort, not an inch did Damis yield. His face grew as pale as the Jovian's grew red and his breath came whistling through his lips, but the strength he had inherited from his mighty sire stood him in good stead. Inch by inch he bent the huge form of his opponent backward. With a sudden effort, the Jovian raised one of his huge misshapen feet and strove to bring his mighty thighs to aid him in thrusting away his enemy. Damis' knee came up and the Jovian dropped his

foot with a howl of pain. His breath came in gasps and he stared into the implacable blue eyes before him with a sudden spasm of fear. At last Glavour had met his match.

He opened his lips to call to his guards for help but shame held back the cry. Once he admitted defeat, the fear in which the Earthmen held him would be shaken. With an effort he bent forward his head and buried his huge fangs in Damis' shoulder. There was a cry from the watching Earthmen as they surged forward. The Jovian guards ran to their ruler's assistance but they were too far away. Havenner was close and he sprang forward, thrusting the black tube which he carried, toward Damis.

A cry advised Damis of his danger. With a herculean effort he lifted the huge Jovian from his feet and swung him around until the massive body was between him and the threatening weapon of the equerry. As swiftly as striking snakes his arms uncoiled from around Glavour's body and grasped him by the shoulders. With one mighty heave he tore the Jovian's mouth from his shoulder although the flesh was torn and lacerated by the action. One arm went under Glavour's arm and back around until the hand rested on the back of his neck. The other arm caught the Viceroy's arm and twisted it behind his back. Glavour gave a cry of pain as the punishing hold was applied. Holding his captive before him, Damis turned to the

equerry.

"Put up your tube," he said. "One hostile move and your ruler dies."

"Disintegrate him, Havenner!" gasped the Viceroy.

The equerry hesitated a moment but aid was at hand. The Jovian guards had come up to the scene of the struggle and surrounded the pair, black tubes in their hands. The sight of reinforcements roused the Viceroy's lagging courage.

"Capture him alive!" he gasped. "He will be sacrificed at the next games!"

With a roar the guards closed in on the struggling pair. As hairy hands grasped his shoulders, Damis lunged back with all his strength. There was the crack of a breaking bone and the Viceroy's arm hung dangling and useless. Damis whirled on the guards, shaking himself loose for a moment from their grasp, and his fists flew out. Two of the giants went down before well-aimed blows but no one man, no matter what his might, could fight against a score of the huge Jovians and Damis was borne to the ground. Even as he fell, a roar went up from the watching Terrestrials and with one accord they closed in to attack.

The Jovian guards who were nearest whirled about and raised the black tubes threateningly. For a moment the Earthmen hesitated and then came on with a rush. From the tubes came rays of intensely violet light. As they fell on the front ranks of the charging Terrestrials, the form, on which the rays impinged grew suddenly tenuous. The sunlight penetrated through the bodies for a moment and then there was nothing but a group of dancing motes of light to mark where they had stood.

Undaunted by the fate of their leaders, the balance of the mob surged forward uttering cries of hate and rage. From all the doorways, fresh hordes of Earthmen came rushing to join the fray. Again and again the terrible rays of the Jovian guards blasted scores of their assailants into nothingness but more came. Presently the tubes of the Jovians began to lose their power and the violet light became lighter in shade. With a roar the Earthmen swept forward and the huge guards went down under the onrushing waves of humanity. Half a dozen of them were dragged down and hurled back into the milling crowd where they were torn limb from limb. The balance of the guards, guided by Havenner's stentorian shouts, closed in around Glavour and the prisoner and battered their way by sheer brute force toward the Viceregal chariot. They had reached in and climbed in when a feminine shout pierced the din of conflict.

"Damis! They have Damis prisoner! Rescue him!"

With a roar, the mob charged again. Mightily the Jovians strove but they were outnumbered by hundreds to one. One after another was torn from the chariot until Damis freed himself by a mighty effort and leaped to the ground. As he did so, the driver's hand found the controlling lever and the chariot shot forward, crushing under its wheels several luckless Earthmen who stood in its path. A roar of triumph rose from the crowd and Damis was hastily lifted to their shoulders. He looked down on his rescuers with an anguished face.

"Lura!" he gasped. "Is she safe?"

One of the Terrestrials shouted something unintelligible and pointed up. Damis' gaze followed the direction in which he pointed. From an upper window of the building into which she had fled, Lura's face, wreathed with smiles, looked down on him. He smiled and waved in triumph to her. There was a stir on the outskirts of the crowd and an elderly man, tall for an Earthman and with dignity and authority written large on his countenance, made his way through the crowd. At a word from him, Damis was lowered to his feet to face the newcomer.

"Damis," said the elderly man, "I never thought to grasp the hand of

a Nepthalim or of anyone with Jovian blood in his veins in friendship, yet I can do no less than offer my hand. It is the thanks of a father to the saviour of his daughter."

Damis met the outstretched hand with a grip that made the elderly man wince.

"It is an honor and a pleasure to grasp in friendship the hand of Turgan, the Kildare of this province," he said, "the hand of one who was born to be ruler in fact, instead of an underling under a Jovian master."

"It is true that my father was king of this country before the Jovians came, forty years ago," said Turgan gravely, "yet now there is no honor or merit in it. Even the rank of Kildare, which is but that of a slave ruling other more unfortunate slaves, could not have prevented my only daughter from being dragged away to the seraglio of that monster. To such a pass has one been brought whose birth made him the peer of any. But now we must plan and plan swiftly, else are we undone. Glavour will return with his minions. Safety will be found only in flight, for mere numbers cannot oppose the weapons they will turn against us. Damis, so far you have been one with our Jovian masters, as have all of the Nepthalim. Now it is war to the death between them and us. On which side do you stand?"

Damis hesitated as the Kildare's keen gray eyes bored into his own.

"My father was Viceroy of the Earth in the days gone by," he said slowly, "and he planned that I should take his place. His dream was a peaceful union of the strength and science of Jupiter with the beauty and humanity of the Earth. True to his dream, I have cleaved to his people and striven to bring it about, but I can see now the folly of his ambition. In stature and mental power he was a Jovian, in all else he was a Terrestrial. Since his death I have seen you stripped bit by bit of what he left you until now you are lower than the slaves on Jupiter, who can appeal to Tubain against a cruel master. Even I, a Nepthalim, the son of a Viceroy, am forced to revolt to save the maiden I love. Henceforth, I give up my father's dream of peace and do what my heart tells me is right. It is war to the death between the Sons of God and the Sons of Man, and I, who am descended from a Son of God and a Daughter of Man, cleave to my mother's people."

A shout of joy came from all who heard his ringing voice announce his new allegiance. Damis had ever a reputation as a humane man and he was guilty of none of the brutalities which made the Jovians so detested and which were bettered by those of the Nepthalim who had the power. It was only the influence which Damis had wielded with the Earthmen which had prevented many an outbreak which would have been ruthlessly crushed by the Jovian overlords. To

know that the son of a Viceroy, reputed one of the most brilliant as well as one of the strongest of Jovian blood, was one with them, made them hope that they might make some headway against their oppressors and wring from them some small measure of liberty. Turgan's face was wreathed with smiles.

"Again I offer you my hand, Damis," he said. "Before it was as a father thanking you for the rescue of his daughter. Now it is a father welcoming the son he has always longed for and whom he feared he would never have. My consent to your union with Lura which was grudgingly given only to save her from the dishonor of being dragged a slave to Glavour's seraglio, is withdrawn, and in its place I give you a happy father's joyous consent to the marriage."

There were tears in the old Kildare's eyes as he grasped the hand of the young blond giant. For a moment they stood with clasped hands, two strong men taking the measure of one another and each found the other good. The Kildare dropped Damis' hand and turned to the crowd.

"To your homes!" he cried sharply. "The Sons of God will return with new weapons and it is my wish that none be found to oppose them. All within sound of my voice who are members of the inner council will join me in the palace. Damis, come with me."

Followed by Damis and a score of Earthmen, the Kildare led the way into a building. As they entered, Damis cast a swift glance around and looked questioningly at Turgan.

"Lura—?" he asked hesitantly.

"Will join us in the council room," said Turgan with a smile.

Chapter 2 *Turgan's Plan*

Content with the Kildare's answer, Damis followed him down a corridor and into a large room set around with benches. The Kildare did not pause but moved to the far end of the room and manipulated a hidden switch. A portion of the paneled wall swung inward and through the doorway thus opened, Turgan led the way. The corridor in which they found themselves was dimly lighted by radium bulbs which Damis shrewdly suspected had been stolen from the palace of the Viceroy by Earthmen employed there. It sloped steeply downward and Damis estimated that they were fifty feet below the level of the ground before another door opened to Turgan's manipulation of hidden catches and admitted them to a large room equipped with tables and chairs and well lighted by other radium bulbs. Damis turned to the Kildare.

"For years there have been rumors among the Sons of God of the existence of this place," he exclaimed, "yet every effort to find it has been futile. Glavour and his council have at last decided that it is merely a myth and that the underground council chamber does not exist. You have kept your secret well, for never has a breath of suspicion reached him that Turgan was one of the conspirators who plotted to overthrow the reign of the Sons of God."

"Let that, Damis, be a sample of the earnestness and loyalty of your new brethren," said the Kildare. "There are hundreds of Earthmen who know where this place is and what secrets it holds, yet none has ever betrayed it. Scores have gone to torture and to the sacrifice of the games without unsealing their lips. Would a Jovian have done likewise?"

"To give them due credit, I think they would have," replied Damis thoughtfully, "yet their motive would not have been loyalty, but stubbornness and a refusal to subordinate their will to another's. I thought you said that Lura would join us here?"

As Damis spoke a door on the far side of the chamber opened and a half dozen women entered. Lura was among them and with a cry of joy, she ran lightly forward and threw herself into Damis' outstretched arms. Turgan smiled paternally at them for a moment and then touched his daughter lightly on the shoulder.

"I have freely and gladly given my blessing to your union with Damis," he said. "He is now one with us. His presence makes victory possible and enables us to act at once instead of planning for years. Damis, you can operate a space flyer, can you not?"

"Certainly. That is knowledge which all Nepthalim possess."

A suppressed cheer greeted his words and the Earthmen crowded around him, vibrant with excitement.

"The time is at hand!" cried a stern-faced man in the crimson robe which marked him an Akildare, an under-officer of the Earthmen.

"Before I can operate a space flyer, I will have to have one to operate," objected Damis.

"That will be supplied," cried a dozen voices. Turgan's voice rose above the hubbub of sound.

"Let us proceed in orderly fashion," he cried.

The noise died down to silence and at a gesture from their ruler, the Earthmen took seats. Turgan stood beside Damis.

"For the enlightenment of our new-found brother, I will recite what has happened and what we have done, although most of you know it and many of you have done your part in bringing it about.

"Forty years ago, the Earth was prosperous, peopled with free men, and happy. While we knew little of science and lived in mere huts, yet we worshipped beauty and Him who ruled all and loved his children. It was to such a world that the Jovians came.

"When the first space flyer with a load of these inhuman monsters arrived on the earth, we foolishly took them for the angels whom we had been taught to believe spent eternity in glorifying Him. We welcomed them with our best and humbly obeyed when they spoke. This illusion was fostered by the name the Jovians gave themselves, the 'Sons of God.' Hortan, their leader and the father of our new brother, was a just and kindly man and he ruled the earth wisely and well. We learned from them and they learned from us. That was the golden age. And the Sons of God saw that the Daughters of Man were fair, and they took of them wives, such as they chose. And sons were born to them, the Nepthalim, the mighty men of the Earth.

"In time other flyers came from the heavens above and brought more of the Sons of God to rule over us. Then Hortan, the Viceroy, died, and Damis, know you how he died? You were a babe at the time and you know nothing. Your father and your mother, who was my distant kinswoman, died under the knives of assassins. It was given out that they had gone to Jupiter, yet there were some who knew the truth. You, the killers sought, but one of the Earthmen whose heart bled for your dead mother, spirited you away. When you had grown to boyhood, he announced your name and lineage, although his life paid for his indiscretion. The same hand which struck down your father and your mother struck at him and struck not unavailingly. You, since all knew your name and lineage, he dared not strike, lest

those who love him not, would appeal to Tubain. Know you the name of the monster, the traitor to his ruler and the murderer of your parents?"

Damis' face had paled during the recital and when the old Kildare turned to him, he silently shook his head.

"It was the monster who now rules over us as Viceroy and who profanes the name of God by conferring it on his master and who would, if he dared, assume the name for himself. It was Glavour, Viceroy of the Earth."

The blood surged back into Damis' face and he raised a hand in a dramatic gesture.

"Now I vow that I will never rest until he lies low in death and this be the hand that brings him there!"

A murmur of applause greeted Damis' announcement and Turgan went on with his tale.

"With the kind and just Hortan dead, Glavour assumed the throne of power, for none dared oppose him. Once secure, he gave way to every brutal lust and vice. Your mother was Hortan's only wife and

he honored her as such, and meant that the Nepthalim should in time rule the Earth, but Glavour had no such ideas. To him, the Daughters of Man were playthings to satisfy his brutal lusts. By dozens and by scores he swept the fairest of them into his seraglio, heeding not the bonds of matrimony nor the wishes of his victims. Only the fact that my daughter has been kept from his sight until to-day has spared her.

"The Earthmen who had been content to live under Hortan's rule, rebelled against Glavour but the rebellion was crushed in blood. Time and again they rose, but each time the mighty weapons of the Jovians stamped out resistance. At last we realized that craft and not force must win the battle. This chamber had been built when Hortan erected his new capital and none of the Jovians knew of its location, so it was chosen as our meeting place. To-day, Damis, I have twenty thousand men sworn to do my bidding and to rise when I give the word. Many thousands more will rise when they see others in arms and know that again the Sons of Man stand in arms against the Sons of God."

"There are less than a thousand Jovians and perhaps twice that number of Nepthalim on the Earth, yet that handful would stand victorious against all the Earthmen living," said Damis thoughtfully. "Even I, and I am a Nepthalim, do not know the secret weapons in the arsenal of Glavour, but I know that they are more powerful than

anything we have ever seen. Forget not, too, that a radio message to Jupiter will bring down ships with hundreds, nay, thousands, of her fighting men with weapons to overwhelm all opposition."

"Such was the case but it is so no longer since we number you among us," replied the Kildare. "Earthmen are employed in the communications net which the Jovians have thrown around the Earth and it is but a step from those machines to the huge one with which they talk to their mother planet. My spies have been busy for years and our plans are all laid. There is one planet which all the forces of Jupiter have never been able to conquer; from which their ships have ever retreated in defeat."

"Mars!" exclaimed Damis.

"Exactly," replied Turgan. "The Martians are a peaceful and justice-loving people, yet they know that peace is given only to those who are ready and able to fight for it. Ages ago they perfected weapons before which the Jovians fly, if they are not destroyed. I have communicated with the Grand Mognac of Mars and laid our plight before him. He has pledged his aid and has promised us enough of his weapons to not only destroy the Jovians and the Nepthalim on the Earth, but also to prevent other Jovian ships from ever landing. The only problem has been how to get them here. The Martians, not

desiring conquest and content with their own planet, have never perfected space flyers. They have promised us the weapons, but we must go to Mars and bring them here. Enough can be transported on one of the Jovian ships."

"How will we get a ship?" asked Damis.

"That also has been solved. There are two Jovian ships kept on the Earth, ready for instant flight to Jupiter. They are loosely guarded for the Sons of God believe that we have no idea of how to operate them. We can capture one of them whenever we desire, but so far such action would have been useless. Little by little we have gathered bits of information about the flyers, but we had expected to wait for years before our venture would have a chance of success. We dared not try prematurely, for one attempt will be all that we will ever get. Now we are ready to strike. You can fly the ship to Mars and back and with the Martian weapons, we can sweep the Jovians from the Earth."

Damis' eyes lighted as Turgan spoke.

"Your plans are good," he cried, "and I will fly the ship for you. In return I ask but one thing: let mine be the hand which strikes Glavour down."

"If it can be so done, yours shall be the hand, oh Nepthalim!" cried the Akildare who had first spoken of the ship. Turgan bowed his head and a murmur of assent came from the assembled council.

"And now for action!" cried Turgan. "There is no need to talk longer. Years ago our plans were perfected for the capture of the space ship and each knows the part assigned to him. Toness, the Akildare, will rule during my absence, for I will command the ship, under Damis. Twelve of our men who know all that we have been able to learn will make up the crew. None of them will take any part in the capture of the ship for many lives may be lost in that venture and we will need the instructed men to operate the ship after we capture it. Damis, have you any addition to make to our plans?"

"Only one, Turgan. Glavour will ransack the Earth rather than be cheated of one he has marked for his prey. Lura will be safe nowhere on Earth. Her capture by the Sons of God will discourage the timid who will say that if Turgan cannot protect his own daughter, how can he free the Earth? She must go with us."

"Your point is well taken, Damis," replied the Kildare. "She shall go. Now to action! Monaill, are your men ready?"

"They will assemble at my signal, oh, Kildare."

"Give the signal, for nothing will be gained by delay. We will follow behind while you capture the ship."

Monaill bowed before the Kildare and hastened from the council room. In a few words Turgan gave to Toness the final orders for the conduct of the conspiracy during his absence. Followed by Lura, Damis and three of the council, he made his way to a hidden doorway. Along an underground passage they made their way for a quarter of a mile. A group of figures was seen dimly ahead of them and nine men joined the party. Turgan identified them to Damis as the balance of the crew.

"Has Monaill passed this way?" he asked.

"He passed with his band a few moments ago, oh, Kildare," replied one of the men. "See, there is the light which summons us to follow."

He pointed to a tiny light which had suddenly flashed into brilliance. Turgan nodded and led the way forward. At another doorway which opened to Turgan's touch on a hidden lever, the party paused. An instant later there came from a few hundred yards ahead of them a hoarse cry of alarm followed by the roar of a huge whistle.

"The battle has joined!" cried Turgan. The others crouched, tense

and motionless. From ahead came the sound of battle. Violet light showed in short intense flashes. It was evident that the Jovian guard of the space ship was fighting valiantly to protect it. Shaking aside Turgan's restraining hand, Damis crept slowly forward.

Two hundred yards from the spot where he left Turgan he came to a bend in the passage. The sound of battle came from just ahead. He crept forward and peered around the corner. The passage emerged from the ground and gave way to a huge open space which he recognized as part of the grounds of the Viceregal palace. Standing on a launching platform was a Jovian space ship around which a battle raged.

Five of the huge Jovians were battling furiously with a score of Earthmen. Three dead Jovians and a dozen crushed forms of Terrestrials testified to the bitterness of the fight. The terrible black tubes of the Jovians were exhausted and the battle was now being waged hand to hand, Jovian ax against Earthly sword. The Terrestrials were being gradually pressed back.

A shout came from the distance and Damis could see a dozen Jovian guards hastening toward the scene of the fight, brandishing in their hands the terrible black tubes. He turned back and shouted to Turgan.

"Hasten!" he cried. "In a moment, Monaill and his men will be overthrown!"

With a shout the crouching group of Terrestrials rushed toward him, but Damis did not wait. The oncoming Jovians were several hundred yards away when he threw himself into the fray. At his appearance, a cry of dismay went up from the Earthmen which was changed to one of mingled wonder and triumph as Damis seized the nearest Jovian and bore the fellow down despite his struggles. It was a matter of seconds for him to break the bull neck of the huge guard and he turned to grasp another. The four remaining Jovians backed away but Damis was not to be denied. He rushed in and grasped another about the waist, avoiding the swing of the forty-pound ax, and dragged him back. The swords of the Terrestrials pierced the struggling guard from the rear and Damis rushed toward the three survivors.

Heartened by his aid, the remnants of Monaill's band charged with him. Two of the Jovians fell before the swords of the Earthmen and the third went down before a blow of Damis' fist. As he turned back to the ship, Turgan, followed by the crew of the ship, dashed up.

"Into the ship!" cried Damis. A glance showed that the Jovian guards were less than two hundred yards away and were coming on in huge leaps. The door of the space ship was open and the band of

Terrestrials clambered in.

"Quick, Damis!" came Lura's voice.

The Nepthalim turned to enter but his gaze fell on the six survivors of Monaill's band.

"In with you!" he cried sharply.

The Terrestrials hesitated but Damis grasped the nearest of them by the belt and threw him bodily into the ship. The others hesitated no longer but clambered in. The Jovians were less than fifty yards away and already deep violet flashes began to come from the tubes they carried. Damis stooped and grasped one of the dead Jovians. With an effort possible to only two men on Earth, himself and Glavour, he raised the body above his head and hurled it straight at the oncoming Jovians. His aim was true and three of them were swept from their feet. With a mighty bound, Damis sprang through the door of the space ship and the airlock clanged shut behind him.

The crew of the ship were already in place, awaiting orders. There was no time for instruction and Damis leaped to the control board. He pulled a lever far down and in an instant the entire crew was flat on the floor as though an enormous weight had pressed them down.

With a superhuman effort, Damis raised himself enough to cut off the power. The ship shot on through the rapidly thinning air, its sides glowing a dull red. The heat inside the ship was almost intolerable.

As the pressure of the enormous acceleration ceased, the bruised Terrestrials struggled to their feet. Damis turned to another lever and a breath of icy air swept through the ship.

"This will help for an instant," he gasped, "and the cold of space will soon cool us down. I had to give the ship a tremendous start or the tubes of the Sons of God would have reduced us to elemental atoms. Keep away from the walls and don't exert yourselves. I can handle the ship alone for the present."

For half an hour the ship charged on through space. Damis presently pulled the control lever down and placed the ship under power. The walls changed from dull red to black and the temperature in the ship grew noticeably lower. Damis made his way to one of the walls and tested it with a moistened finger.

"It's cool enough to touch," he announced. "Fortunately the insulating vacuum between the inner and the outer skins was at its maximum, otherwise we would have been roasted alive. The external wall was almost at the fusing point. We can move around

now."

He posted lookouts at the observing instruments with which the ship was equipped and instructed them in their duties and the manipulation of the instruments. He placed one man at the control lever of the stern rocket-motors. As he turned away from the control board he saw Lura standing quietly in a corner. He opened his arms and she ran to them with a cry of joy.

"Oh, Damis, I was so afraid for you," she gasped, "and I wanted to hug you when you jumped in and Father closed the lock behind you but I knew that you had to take care of the ship. Were you hurt at all?"

"Not a bit, darling," he assured her, "but it was touch and go for a moment. I didn't know whether the guards would dare to disintegrate the ship without orders from Glavour. In any event, the blasts of the stern motors must have hurled them half a mile. No strength could stand the blast of gas to which they were subjected. Are you all right?"

"Perfectly," she replied; "I never was in any danger. I was the first one in the ship and the only chance I had to be hurt was to have you overcome and the ship recaptured. In that case, I had this."

She displayed a small dagger which she drew from the bosom of her robe. Damis shuddered and took the weapon from her.

"Poisoned," he exclaimed as he glanced at its tip. "You had better let me take care of it. You might fall and prick yourself with it."

She surrendered the weapon to him with a smile and Damis placed it in a cabinet built against the wall of the flyer.

"Now go in and lie down," he told her. "I've got to start plotting a course to Mars and teaching my crew how to operate the ship."

"Can't I learn, too?" she objected. "If anything should happen, it might be quite a useful bit of knowledge. Besides, I already understand celestial geography quite well and I may be able to help in the navigation."

Damis looked at her in surprise.

"You a celestial geographer?" he asked in astonishment. "Where did you learn it?"

"From my father. He was a famous heaven-master before the Jovians came and he taught me."

"That's excellent!" cried Damis. "I didn't realize we had so much knowledge at our command. Turgan, will you take charge of the navigating after I plot a course? Lura can assist you. Now, the rest of you attend to my words and I'll teach you how to operate the rocket motors."

The Jovian ship was built along very simple lines. Batteries of rocket motors at the bow and stern and on each of the sides furnished both motive and steering power. The Terrestrials were all chosen men and in three hours Damis announced himself as satisfied with their ability to operate the ship under any normal conditions. With Turgan and Lura watching and checking his calculations, he plotted a course which would intercept Mars on its orbit.

"Luckily, Mars is approaching us now," he said, "and we won't have a stern chase, which is always a long one. We will be able to reach Mars, spend several days on it and return to Earth before ships can reach the Earth from Jupiter, even if they are already on the way, which is highly probable. I'll turn the ship a little."

Under his direction, the crew turned the ship in its course until it was headed for the point in space where Damis planned to intercept the red planet. With the course set to his satisfaction, he gave orders for the stern motors to be operated at such a power as to give the highest

acceleration consistent with comfort for the crew. There were no windows in the ship but two observers seated at instruments kept the entire heavens under constant observation. Damis motioned one of them to stand aside and told Lura to take his place. She sat down before a box in which were set two lenses, eye-distance apart. She looked through the lenses and gave a cry of astonishment. Before her appeared the heavens in miniature with the entire galaxy of stars displayed to her gaze. In the center of the screen was a large disk thickly marked with pocks.

"The moon," explained Damis. "We are headed directly toward it now but we'll shift and go around it. We'll pass only a few hundred miles from its surface, but unfortunately it will be between us and the sun and you'll be able to see nothing. Look in the other observer."

Lura turned to the second instrument. A large part of the hemisphere was blotted out by the Earth which was still only a few thousand miles away. The sun showed to one side of the Earth, but a movable disk was arranged in the instrument by means of which it could be shut off from the gaze of the observer. Despite the presence of the sun, the stars shone brilliantly in the intense black of space.

"How fast are we traveling?" asked Lura.

"It is impossible to tell exactly," he replied. "I can approximate our speed by a study of the power consumed in our stern motors and again I can approximate it by a series of celestial observations, provided we do not have to change our course while I am doing so."

"Isn't there some sort of an instrument which will tell you how fast we are going?" she asked in astonishment.

"Unfortunately not. We are traveling through no medium which is dense enough to register on an instrument. Our course is not straight, but is necessarily an erratic one as we are subject to the gravimetric pull of all of the celestial bodies. Just now the Earth supplies most of the pull on us but as soon as we approach the moon, we will tend to fall on it and frequent sideblasts will be needed to keep us away from it. Once we get up some speed that is comparable with light, we can measure by direct comparison, but our speed is too low for that now."

"I saw you lay out your course, but how are we steering?"

"The observer who works on the front instrument keeps a cross hair on a fixed star. When the curving of the ship deviates us more than five degrees from our course, a side motor is turned on until we straighten out again. It is quite a simple matter and I'll take the ship

myself when we near Mars. There is no need to be frightened."

"I'm not frightened," said Lura quickly; "I was just curious. Is there any danger of hitting a wandering body?"

"Not much in this zone and at this speed. When our speed picks up there will be a slight danger because the higher our rate of speed, the more crowded space becomes. If we were going to Jupiter we would have to use much more caution. The asteroid belt lying between Mars and Jupiter is really crowded with small bodies but comparatively few are in the zone between Earth and Mars. That is one thing I figured on when I said that we would have plenty of time to go to Mars and back before ships could come from Jupiter. Ships from Jupiter would be able to develop a much higher speed than we will attain were it not for the asteroid belt. They will have to travel quite slowly through it, in portions, not over a few thousand miles per minute, while we are not held down that way. Now that we are really started, it will be best to set regular watches. I will assign you as navigator for one watch if you wish."

"I certainly do want to do my share."

"All right, we'll let it go that way. Turgan and I will take the other two watches until we get there."

"How soon will that be?"

"About seventeen days. Mars happens to be only about forty million miles away just now. Now I'll set the watches and divide the crew."

A short examination showed Damis that his crew were intelligent and that his instruction had been good. Every member knew his duties. Instead of the two twelve-hour watches which were usual on space flyers, the additional members of the crew who had been part of Monaill's band enabled Damis to set only eight-hour shifts. Each member of the crew was taught to operate the offensive ray projectors with which the flyer was equipped.

Things soon settled down to routine. No wandering celestial bodies came close enough to cause them any real alarm. Once the novelty of hurtling through space had passed away, the trip became monotonous. The Earth, which had at first filled the field of one of the observers, dwindled until it became merely a brilliant green star. The red speck which was Mars grew constantly more prominent as the hours went by and Damis gave the word to turn on the bow motors and retard the speed of the flyer. Several of the crew had worked in the communications net which Glavour had thrown around the Earth and under orders from Turgan, they began to call the red planet on the ship's communicator.

"It is well to let them know who we are," he said to Damis when he gave the order. "We are flying a Jovian ship and since we have come so far successfully, I have no desire to be blasted out of space by their powerful weapons of defense."

Damis agreed heartily, and for twelve hours continual attempts were made to communicate with their destination. At last their signals were answered. Despite the differences in language, they had no trouble in understanding the messages. A system of communication based not on words or sound forms, but on thought forms, had been introduced to the Earth by the Jovians and both Damis and Turgan were quite familiar with it. The Martians informed them that the approaching ship had been sighted and carefully watched for several days. As soon as he learned who the occupants were, the Grand Mognac of Mars sent a message of welcome and instructed them on what part of the planet to land. He promised that a deputation would meet them with transportation to his capital city where he would welcome them in person and supply them with the weapons they sought.

Chapter 3: ***The Doom on Mars***

Two days later Damis dropped the ship gently to the ground in a wide and deep depression which had been designated as their landing place. The Grand Mognac had assured them that the depression held enough atmosphere to enable them to breathe with comfort. There was no one in sight when they landed and after a short consultation, Damis and Turgan entered the airlock. In a few moments they stood on the surface of Mars.

They had landed in a desert without even a trace of the most rudimentary vegetation. Barren slate-colored mountains shut off their view at a distance of a few miles. When they strove to move they found that the conditions which had confronted the Jovians in their first landing on the Earth were duplicated. The lesser gravity of the smaller planet made their strength too great for easy control and the slightest effort sent them yards into the air. This condition had been anticipated and at a word from Damis, lead weights, made to clamp on the soles of their sandals were passed out from the space ship. Although this enabled them to keep their footing when moving over the dry surface of Mars, the slightest exertion in the thin air caused them acute distress.

"We had better save our strength until the messengers of the Grand

Mognac arrive," said Damis at length. "We may have quite a trip before us."

Turgan agreed and they sat down by the side of the ship where its shadow would shield them from the fierce solar rays which beat down on them. The sun looked curiously small, yet its rays penetrated the thin air with a heat and fierceness strange to them. Lura and a half dozen of the crew were passed through the airlock and joined them.

"I am surprised that the Martians have not arrived," said Damis presently. "I am interested to see what their appearance is."

Hardly had he spoken than the air before them seemed to thicken in a curious fashion. Lura gave a cry of alarm and pressed close to Damis. The sun's rays penetrated with difficulty through a patch of air directly before them. Gradually the mistiness began to assume a nebulous uncertain outline and separated itself into four distinct patches. The thickening air took on a silvery metallic gleam and four metallic cylinders made their appearance. Two of them were about eight feet in height and three feet in diameter. The other two were fully thirty feet in length and about the same diameter. On the top of each one was a projecting cap shaped like a mushroom and from it long tenuous streamers of metal ran the full length of each cylinder.

From the ether came a thought wave which registered on the brains of all the Terrestrials.

"The Grand Mognac of Mars sends his greeting and a welcome to the visitors from Earth," the message ran. "Before his envoys make their appearance before you, we wish to warn you to be prepared for a severe shock for their physical appearance is not that of the life with which you are familiar. I would suggest that you turn your heads while we emerge from our transporters."

Obediently the Earthmen turned their gaze toward their ship until another thought wave ordered them to turn. Lura gave a cry of horror and Damis instinctively raised one of the Jovian ray tubes. Before them were huge figures which seemed to have stepped out of a nightmare, so grotesque were their forms.

The Martians had long slug-like bodies, twenty-five feet in length, from which projected a multiplicity of short legs. The legs on the rear portions of the bodies terminated in sucker-like disks on which they stood on the surface of the planet. The upper part of the body was raised from the ground and the legs terminated in forked appendages like hands. Stiff, coarse hair, brown in color, protruded from between brilliant green scales, edged with crimson. The heads were huge and misshapen and consisted mostly of eyes with a

multitude of facets and huge jaws which worked incessantly as though the slugs were continually chewing on something. Nothing that the Earth could show resembled those monstrosities, although it flashed across Damis' mind that a hugely enlarged caricature of an intelligent caterpillar would bear some resemblance to the Martians. Another thought wave impinged on the consciousness of the Terrestrials.

"Mars is much older than your planet and evolution has gone much farther here than it has on the Earth. At one time there were forms of life similar to yours which ruled this planet, but as air and water became scarce, these forms gave way to others which were better suited to conditions as they existed. I would be pleased to explain further, but the Grand Mognac anxiously awaits his guests. His orders are that two of you shall visit him in his city. The two whom he desires to come are Turgan, the leader of the expedition and Damis, the Nepthalim. Fear nothing, you are among friends."

Damis hesitated and cast a glance at Lura.

"By all means, Damis, do as the Grand Mognac bids you," she exclaimed. "I will stay here with the ship until you return. I am not at all frightened, for the whole crew will be here with me."

Damis kissed her and after a word with Turgan, he announced their readiness to proceed. He inquired the direction in which they should travel, but another thought wave interrupted him.

"We have brought transportation for you," it said. "Each of you will enter one of the smaller transporters which were especially prepared for your use. When you enter them, seal them tightly and place your feet in the stirrups you will find in them. Grasp the handles which will be before you firmly in your hands. In an instant you will be dissolved into elemental atoms and carried on a beam of force to the receiving focus where you will again be materialized. There is no danger and no pain. It is our usual means of transportation."

With a final word of farewell to Lura and the crew, Turgan and Damis unfastened and entered the two smaller cylinders. Before the astonished eyes of the Terrestrials the cylinders grew thin and vanished like a puff of smoke dissipating in a wind. Lura turned to Kastner whom Turgan had left in command.

"What were my father's orders?" she asked.

"Merely that we wait here until his return," he replied. "Since we are among friends, there is no need to keep the ray projectors manned and I am anxious to let all of the crew have the experience of setting

foot on a new planet."

"I am a little tired," said Lura. "I will return to the ship and rest while you let the crew try their footing on Mars."

She entered the airlock and in a few moments was again inside the ship. At a word from Kastner the balance of the crew passed through the lock and began to amuse themselves by trying to keep their footing on the surface of Mars.

Damis and Turgan, having entered the transporters, slipped their feet in place as the Martians had directed. They grasped firmly the handles which projected from the inside of the cylinders. There was a momentary sensation of slight nausea and then a thought wave reached them.

"You have arrived. Unfasten your cylinders and emerge."

They stepped out of the transporters and rubbed their eyes in astonishment. Two of the huge slugs had been amazing, but the effect of half a hundred grouped about them was more than the mind could, for a moment, grasp. They were in a huge room composed apparently of the same silvery material of which the transporters were made. It rose above them in a huge dome with no signs of

windows or openings. It was lighted by a soft glow which seemed to emanate from the material of the dome itself, for it cast no shadows. On a raised platform before them rested one of the huge slugs, a broad band of silvery metal set with flashing coruscating jewels clasped about its body. From the ornament and the exalted position, they judged that they were before the Grand Mognac of Mars. With a muttered word to Turgan to follow him, Damis advanced to the foot of the platform and bowed deeply.

"I thank you for that mark of respect, Nepthalim," came a thought wave from the Grand Mognac, "but such forms are obsolete on Mars. Here all living intelligences are equal. Only the accident of superior mental power is allowed to differentiate between us and this added power brings only added and more arduous duties. You came here to get weapons which will free you from the dominance of the Jovians who rule you, did you not?"

"We did, oh Grand Mognac," replied Damis.

"Your prayers shall be answered if you are found worthy. Relate to me now all that has passed since the Jovians first landed on your planet. If you can form thoughts without speaking, you may save the effort of speech. The air has become so thin on Mars that sound will not carry over large portions of it. As a result, we have no organs of

hearing, for they have been atrophied from ages of disuse. We use thought as our only means of communication."

Rapidly, Damis marshaled his thoughts in order. Slowly and carefully he pictured in his mind the landing of the Jovians as he had heard it described and then the event leading up to their trip. The Grand Mognac frequently interrupted him and caused him to amplify in detail some of the mental pictures and at times turned to Turgan and requested him to picture the same events. When Damis had finished the Grand Mognac was motionless for ten minutes.

"Pardon me for sealing my thoughts from you," he said at length, "but my consultation with my councillors was not a matter for those from another planet to know, no matter how friendly they may be. My council have agreed with me that your tale is a true one and has been fairly pictured. We have no interest in the fate of your planet except that we desire to help the form best adapted to bring about the day we all await with anxiety when all of the planets will be united in bonds of love and justice. We believe that the form which developed on the Earth is better adapted to this than the form which developed on Jupiter and we will give you weapons which will enable you to free yourselves and to protect your planet against future invasions. My scientists are now busy preparing for you weapons which we will deliver to your ship. Meanwhile, you are our

honored guests. You will be interested in seeing life as it exists here and Attomanis, one of my council, will be your guide and will answer your questions."

The Grand Mognac dropped the upper portion of his body to the dais as a sign that the interview was ended. Damis and Turgan hurriedly tried to form appropriate expressions of gratitude in their minds but a powerful thought wave took possession of their minds.

"Follow me," it said.

One of the caterpillars crawled forward and beckoned to them. With a backward glance at the Grand Mognac who seemed unaware of their existence, Damis and Turgan followed their guide. He led the way to a platform upon which he slowly crawled. In answer to a thought command, Turgan and Damis climbed upon it and in an instant they were skimming at high speed over the ground. The platform came to a stop near the outer edge of the huge dome. They followed their guide from the platform to a box-like contrivance built against the dome. It had lenses similar in appearance to the observers on the Jovian space ship but built on a larger scale. Attomanis removed the lenses from the instrument and substituted two smaller pairs through which he motioned Turgan and Damis to look.

Before them lay a huge plain across which ran a belt of green foliage. The vegetation forms were like nothing the earth could show. There were no true leaves but huge pulpy branches ran up into the air a hundred feet and divided and subdivided until they became no larger around than hairs. At places on the plants were huge crimson, mauve and blue flowers, ten feet across. As they watched a monstrous form flitted into view. It was that of a butterfly, but such a butterfly as they had never imagined.

The spread of the huge wings was fully a hundred feet across and its swollen body was larger by far than the huge slug which stood beside them. The butterfly waved its thirty-foot tentacles and approached one of the blue flowers. A long curled sucker, fifty feet in length, unrolled and was plunged down into the heart of the trumpet-shaped flower. Gradually the blue color faded to mauve and then to a brilliant crimson. The butterfly abandoned it when the change of color was completed and flitted away to another of the blue blooms.

"What manner of thing is that?" demanded Damis.

"That was a member of the council," replied Attomanis. "She was chosen to be one of those to perpetuate our race. Evolution has gone further with us than on your planet but it will show you what in time

you may expect.

"Life started with an amoeba on Mars as it did on Earth and the slow process of evolution followed similar lines. At one time forms like yours were the ruling and guiding intelligences of Mars. They were, however, a highly specialized form. As conditions changed, the form changed. The head and chest grew larger as the air grew thinner until the enfeebled trunk and limbs could no longer support their weight. Gradually the form died out and was replaced by others.

"The forms which you call insects on your Earth were more primitive and hardier forms and more readily adaptable. They increased in size and in intelligence until they were ready to supplant all other forms. The last vestiges of the bipeds were carefully nurtured and guarded by our forefathers until the vanishing atmosphere made their survival impossible. The insect form became supreme.

"We multiplied with extreme rapidity and would have overcrowded the planet had we not learned several things. Our present form of life is immature in many ways. For example, we are totally unable to reproduce our kind. That is the function of the next phase. In this form, however, the intelligence reaches its maximum. As a result, all living creatures, except selected ones, have their growth arrested at

the larval stage and pass their entire life in this form. Certain ones at long intervals of time as the population diminishes, are allowed to spin cocoons and hatch out in the form you have witnessed. This form is almost brainless, the securing of nourishment from flowers and reproducing their kind being the limits of their intelligence. The eggs are maturing in the body of the one you saw. Soon she will lay many thousands of them and then, her life mission accomplished, she will die. We will gather these eggs and tend them until they hatch. All defective ones will be destroyed and the balance will be instructed until they are ready to take their place in the community and carry on the work of the planet."

"That is extremely interesting," exclaimed Damis. "Will our Earth in time support the same forms of life as does Mars now?"

"I can see no reason why evolution should follow a different path there than it has here," replied Attomanis, "but millions of years will pass before you lose your atmosphere to such an extent as we have. All of our water is gathered at the polar icecaps, from whence we lead it as it melts through underground pipes hundreds of miles to the spot where we desire vegetation to grow. There we deliver it directly to the roots of the plants so there is no waste. Great bands of cultivated areas crisscross the planet where the soil is of unusual fertility. A certain number of plants are allowed to flower and to bear

fruit for the sustenance of the reproductive form of life and to replace themselves. The others we devour while they are young and tender."

"Do you always live in these sealed cities?"

"Always. There are hundreds of them scattered over the planet. As you have noticed, they are composed of damazonium, the same substance as is used in making the transporters. The whole city is but a large transporter. When we desire to feed, the city is disintegrated and materialized over a patch of vegetation which we eat. When the supply is for a time exhausted, the city is moved. This is one way in which we conserve the small supply of atmosphere which is left."

Attomanis suddenly paused and held up one hand for silence. In a moment the thought waves again beat in on the consciousness of Damis and Turgan.

"The weapons which were promised you are ready," he said. "We will return to the throne of the Grand Mognac and you will receive instructions in their use."

He again mounted the platform and Damis and Turgan took their places beside him. Rapidly they were borne over the ground until

they came to a stop before the dais on which the Grand Mognac rested. Beside the four cylinders in which they and the Grand Mognac's messengers had traveled from the space ship to the city, another of huge proportions stood before the platform. Beside it were two instruments. From a mass of coils and tubes a long rod projected up. It was pivoted so that it could be directed toward any point. The rod on one of the instruments was blue while the other was a fiery scarlet.

"These are the weapons which will enable you to destroy your oppressors and prevent more from ever landing," said the Grand Mognac. "I must caution you, however, regarding their use. They generate a ray of almost infinite frequency, much higher than the disintegrating ray the Jovians use. Instead of resolving materials into light and energy, these devices will absolutely destroy the ether, that imponderable substance which permeates and fills all space.

"Heat and light travel in waves through the ether. When it is destroyed, only blackness and entire absence of heat remain. Nothing can bear the cold of interstellar space and yet it is warm compared to the absolute cold which the absence of ether produces. When you direct one of these rays toward a Jovian ship, the ether in the ship is destroyed. No insulation against the cold of space will interfere for the ether penetrates and permeates all substance. The

cold of absolute nothingness will destroy all life in the twinkling of an eye and the ship will be reduced to a puff of powder. At such a temperature, even stellanium has less strength than the most brittle substance.

"There are two of these devices, set to different powers. The one with the blue rod is for use against space ships either before or after they enter the atmosphere envelope. Beware of using it except when it points in a direction almost normal to the surface of your planet. These devices tap and use the enormous force of gravity itself and when they are locked to your planet, they are anchored to the center of gravity of the planet. Unless it were normal to the planet's surface, its reactive force is so great that it would disrupt the balance which holds the planet in place were the beam sent off on a tangential line.

"The other, whose projecting rod is painted red, can be used at any angle as its force is only a minute fraction of that of the other. It also must be locked to the center of gravity of the earth before it is used by means of the switch on the front. This instrument will give you power to annihilate your oppressors on earth, for while it has not the terrible force of the other, it will penetrate any protective screen which the science of Jupiter can erect. Use it only against the Jovians and when you have finished with it, destroy it that it may not fall into the hands of those who would misuse it. The other may be left

intact to repel other Jovian attacks but I think you need fear none. Once they learn you have it, they will be content with their conquests of Venus and Mercury and give you a wide berth. The Jovians have had a taste of it already and they leave Mars alone. Each instrument is set in action by closing the switch on top, after closing the gravity anchor switch. To stop them, open the top switch."

Under the direction of the Grand Mognac, the Martians placed the terrible weapons in the transporter prepared for them. Turgan and Damis strove to thank the Grand Mognac for his gift but he interrupted them promptly.

"No thanks are due us," he said. "We have done that which we believe is the best for the orderly development of this galaxy of planets and there is no reason why we should be thanked. Now enter the transporters and you will be returned to your space ship. Destroy your oppressors and work for the day when Mars and Earth will march in peace toward the final goal of all life."

Accompanied by two Martian envoys, Damis and Turgan entered the cylinders and fastened them closely. They set their feet in place and grasped the handles before them. Again came the feeling of nausea and then a thought ordered them to emerge from the transporters.

They emerged almost at the same instant. Before them lay the space ship with its airlock wide open. Not a living soul was in sight. Damis leaped toward the ship, but his foot struck an obstruction which sent him sprawling. He glanced down and a hoarse cry of alarm broke from his lips. He had stumbled over the body of Kastner. The body had been horribly mutilated by some heavy instrument, one arm hanging to the torso by a mere shred of flesh. Scattered around on the ground lay other mutilated bodies.

With a shout of anguish, Turgan sped toward the open space ship. Damis, with a pale face, hastily examined the dead bodies. Eighteen of the Terrestrials lay stiff in death while the bodies of two huge Jovians in the uniform of Glavour's personal guard told the cause of their death. Damis struck by a sudden apprehension, ran from one body to the next, and in a little while he straightened up with a momentary breath of relief. Lura's body was not among them. He turned to the space ship in time to see Turgan appear in the door of the airlock, his face distorted by grief and his tall body swaying. Damis hurriedly ran to him.

"Is Lura—dead?"

He brought out the last word with an effort. Turgan's face worked for a moment before he could reply. Through the thin air of Mars came

his choking voice.

"Worse," he muttered: "she is gone!"

Damis' fist caught him under the ear.

Chapter 4: ***Damis' Decision***

Damis stared at Turgan for a moment as though unable to comprehend the old man's words.

"Gone?" he repeated stupidly. "She has slain herself?"

"No," replied the Kildare, his face still working in grief; "she is gone from us. She has been captured by Glavour's minions."

"Her dagger—?" asked Damis hesitatingly.

"Is gone with her," replied Turgan.

The Nepthalim started toward the space ship but a thought wave from one of the Martian envoys stopped him in mid-stride.

"Wait, Man of Earth," came the message. "The heavens are eternally watched by our people and none can enter or leave the vicinity of Mars unknown to us. My comrade is now inquiring of each of the observers whence came the Jovians and where they have gone."

Turgan and Damis waited impatiently. Presently the second Martian sent a thought wave to their minds.

"The Jovian ship approached Mars using Phobus, one of our moons, as a screen to its movements. It was close to the planet before it was seen. When challenged, the ship sent a message saying that it was captained by Toness, an Akildare of Earth and an enemy of the Jovians. The Grand Mognac was engaged and the matter was referred to the Mozar of Chinamonot, the nearest city. Thinking they were your followers, he directed them to land here. The Grand Mognac is enraged beyond measure that, after so many ages of failure, the Jovians have made a successful raid on our planet. The Mozar will pay for his indiscretion with his life."

A groan burst from Turgan's lips. Damis stood for a moment stricken with grief, and then sprang in giant leaps toward the space flyer.

"Come, Turgan!" he cried. "We may overtake them yet. At least we can avenge if we cannot save."

The Kildare followed him more slowly.

"Where, oh, Nepthalim," he asked, "will we find them in the trackless wastes of space?"

Damis paused at the words.

"Why, between here and Earth," he replied. As he did so a thought crossed his mind which was revealed by the sudden expression of dismay which clouded his features. "Earth, Venus, Mercury, Moon, Jupiter—all are under the rule of the Sons of God," he cried.

"And to any of them, Glavour's ship may have fled," replied the Kildare. "Before we start in pursuit, it is best to find, if we can, in what direction the ship went."

Frantically, Damis strove to muster his thoughts and hurl a question at the two Martians who stood beside the transporter cylinders. Before the thought had been fully formed, an answer reached him.

"I have been inquiring, Nepthalim, why, when our observers saw that the ship contained Jovians, they were not destroyed. One of the observers who watched them tells me that their ship landed between your ship and the only instruments of destruction which could be brought to bear on them. The Jovians poured out and attacked your crew who were all out of the ship. They were so mingled that it would have been impossible to destroy them without encompassing the destruction of your men as well and we could not blast their ship into nothingness without also destroying yours. When they rose again they carried one of your crew a prisoner and so they were not blasted out of the heavens. They took a course which carried them

behind Phobus where they were shielded. When next seen, they were headed away from your planet."

"If Glavour came to Mars, Lura is dead by now," said Turgan sorrowfully, tears coursing down his cheeks. "Glavour is not one to await the fulfillment of his desires and Lura had her dagger. Her soul is now with Him whom we are taught to glorify. His will be done!"

"If it be His will," replied Damis. "Don't give up, Turgan, we may save her yet." He turned to the Martians and formed a thought message in his mind.

"Has your science any way of telling us who was in command of the Jovian ship?" he asked.

"Were your men who lie dead familiar with the features of the Jovian Viceroy?"

"Yes, all of them."

"Then we will search the brains of the dead. The pictures that are in the living brain fade rapidly when death comes, but the last impression of these men was a powerful one of fighting and hatred and some traces may remain. I will search."

The huge slug crawled over the ground to the body of the nearest dead Terrestrial. In one of his many hands he carried a shiny metal tube from which crimson rays flickered and played over the head of the dead man. The skull disintegrated under the influence of the strange instrument until the brain lay naked and exposed to the fierce glare of the Martian sun. The Martian delicately connected two wires terminating in metal plates to the tissue of the brain and attached the other ends of the wires to a metal circlet which he clamped about his middle. For some moments he remained motionless and then crawled to the body of the second dead Earthman. One after another he examined each of the eighteen dead bodies. When he had completed he crawled over to Damis and Turgan.

"Put these bands about your brows," he commanded in thought language as he handed to each of them a metallic band similar to the one clasped about him. The two Earthmen quickly adjusted the bands. "Let your minds remain a blank and in them will be reproduced the impressions I have gathered from the brains of your dead followers."

Damis sprang suddenly upward and smote with all of his force at the air. Out of nothingness had materialized the form of a huge Jovian clad in the uniform of Glavour's guards. His blow went harmless through the thin air and the Jovian swung a massive ax. Just before

the blow landed the Jovian disappeared and a thought wave from the Martian impinged on Damis' brain.

"Spare your energies, Nepthalim," the message said. "What you saw was not a Jovian but was the last impression stored in the brain of the man who met his death under a blow of the ax which seemed to be striking at you. I am merely reproducing in you the emotions and experiences that man felt. Had I allowed the phantom blow to land, you would now be cold in death, so great was the strength of the impression. Now make your mind again a blank and I will reveal to you what was in the mind of another at the instant that his death came upon him."

Before the Nepthalim's startled gaze, another Jovian appeared.

"Havenner!" he cried as he recognized the principal officer of Glavour. The equerry came forward slowly, blood dripping from a wound in his leg. He swung his ax but it went wide of the mark. Again he struck, but two Terrestrials attacked him from the rear and he whirled. For a moment, Damis had a chance to watch the conflict which was raging about him. Nine of the huge Jovians were engaged in deadly combat with a dozen of the Terrestrials who still remained on their feet. In the door of the space ship stood Lura, watching the conflict with frightened eyes. One after another of the Earthmen

were stricken down. Suddenly a Jovian rushed at Damis but the scene went blank before the raised ax could strike him down.

"Have you seen enough or shall I show you the scenes in the brains of the others?" asked the Martian.

"I have seen and recognized nine of the Jovians," replied Damis, "yet among them was not the one I feared. Let me see into the brains of the others that I may be sure that Glavour was not among them."

Another scene materialized before him. It was merely a variation of those he had already seen. In the brain of one of the Terrestrials he saw the landing of the Jovian ship and the sudden outrush of the Sons of God, armed only with the forty-pound axes they used at close quarters. In none of the scenes did he see the huge form of Glavour. He removed the band with a sigh of relief.

"I broke Glavour's arms a few days back," he said to Turgan, "and it is probable that that prevented him from following us, even if he felt that he could leave the Earth in the turmoil which Toness had undoubtedly raised. It means that Lura is safe for the present, for Havenner would not dare to do other than to bring her to the Viceroy. We must follow them and endeavor to rescue her. I will ask our friends if they can plot her course for us."

"I have inquired as to that," replied the Martian to Damis' unspoken question, "and find we cannot. Soon after the ship left the surface of Mars, our observers sighted a Jovian fleet of a hundred flyers in the asteroid belt between here and Jupiter. They are nearly through the belt now and are headed toward your planet. Their path will bring them within a few thousand miles of Mars and every instrument on the planet is trained on them. While the Grand Mognac believes that Earth is their destination, never before have the Jovians approached us in such force and it may be that Tubain will try to avenge his former defeats by an attack in force. We have no instruments to spare to keep track of a lone flyer unless it changes its course and approaches us. There is one more source of information. I will examine the brains of the dead Jovians. Perhaps they know their leader's plans."

From the first Jovian the Martian turned away with an expression of disappointment.

"There is nothing in his brain but a scene of the fight with your followers, yet it may cheer you to know that at the last he felt fear, the emotion the Jovians boast is foreign to them," said the Martian. "I will examine the other."

With his crimson ray he removed the covering from the brain of the

second Jovian and connected his wires. For a few moments he was motionless and then he removed the wires and crawled rapidly toward Damis.

"Nepthalim, here is what you wish," came his thoughts, jumbled in a chaotic state of excitement. "This man had a wonderful brain and the impressions of the last month are clear and distinct. Attend carefully and leave your mind a blank."

On the Martian plain buildings suddenly materialized before the Nepthalim's gaze. With a cry of astonishment he saw himself facing Glavour in defiance. Lura, who had been crouching behind him, ran into one of the buildings. Act by act, Damis saw the fight between himself and the Jovian Viceroy repeated. The Viceroy, one arm dangling uselessly, was whisked away in his chariot. The scene faded and another took its place. The Viceregal palace was beleaguered by thousands and scores of thousands of shouting Terrestrials. The Jovians sought with rays and with atomic bombs to disperse them, but where a score were blasted into nothingness or torn into fragments, a hundred fresh men took their place. Suddenly the Jovian rays began to fail. The Earthmen had found the secret source of power which supplied the palace and had cut it.

Again the scene faded and he was on a space ship with Havenner

talking to him. The words he could not hear for the Martian could not comprehend a record of a sound. The pictures conjured up by the words were easy of comprehension and in picture forms the Martian conveyed to him the sense of the conversation. Havenner was telling him of their destination. First came a scene which he recognized as a Martian landscape. The Jovians swarmed from their space ship and struck down the Earthmen without exertion. Three were made captives: himself, Turgan, and Lura. The Jovians reentered the ship and sped away into space. Damis wondered what this last picture signified.

Another scene materialized and they were on another planet. It was not Mars and it was not Earth. For a moment he was puzzled. The sun, when it shone, was larger and fiercer than he had ever seen it, but it shone only for an instant. Blankets of cloud and fog hid it from view. Rain fell incessantly. Lush, rank vegetation covered the ground and rose in a tangle far overhead. The Jovians emerged from the space ship, the prisoners in their midst. A huge lizard, a hundred feet long, rushed at them but a flash of the disintegrating tubes dissolved it into dancing motes of light. The Jovians made their way through the steaming jungle until a huge city, roofed with a crystal dome which covered it and arched high into the air, appeared before them. Toward this city the Jovians marched.

"The crystal cities of Venus!" cried Turgan. Damis nodded in assent.

Again the scene changed and the Martian plain was before them. From the space ship the Jovians emerged, but instead of the easy victory they had had in the earlier scene, they found the task a difficult one. From all sides the Terrestrials charged at them and Damis found himself fighting against his compatriots. A sword flashed before his eyes and the scene was gone.

"Have you learned that which you sought?" came a Martian thought inquiry.

Damis hastily formed his thoughts into an affirmative message of thanks and turned to Turgan.

"We know now where to go," he cried exultingly. "Lura is safe until they land on Venus and enter the crystal cities, for Havenner would not dare to do otherwise than carry out the orders of Glavour. The Martian weapons which we have will insure us an easy victory. Come, let us hasten."

A thought message from the Martians stopped him.

"Those weapons on which you are planning, Nepthalim, were given

to you by our Grand Mognac for the purpose of ridding your planet of your oppressors and of defending your planet against further Jovian attacks, not for the purpose of invading another planet with which we have no quarrel. If you will use them for the purpose for which they were given you, you may depart with them in peace. If you plan to go to Venus, the weapons will remain on Mars."

"We will go to the Earth and rid her of her oppressors," replied Damis, "but first we must go to Venus and rescue Lura."

"Venus lies beyond the sun," was the Martian answer, "while your planet and Mars are on the same side. It will take you five times as long to go to Venus as to go to the Earth. Meanwhile the Jovian fleet will have landed and your efforts will be in vain to dislodge them. Even now you must fly at your best speed to reach your planet before them."

"But we cannot abandon Lura. She is the only daughter of my comrade and she is my affianced bride. She means more to us than does the fate of our planet."

"Then go to Venus after her, Nepthalim, but go without Martian aid. Only to save you from your oppressors will we help you. Never has Mars attempted conquest of another celestial body, although not

even Jupiter could stand against our might if we chose to attack it."

"You cannot understand her relationship to us, Martian."

"No, I cannot. We are sexless and sex exists on Mars only for the purpose for which it was intended, the perpetuation of our species. It may be that we have been mistaken. If the fate of one member of your species means more to you than the rescue of your whole race, it is perhaps well that you be eliminated by the Jovians. In any event, our decision is final. Make your choice of whether you depart with the weapons or as you came."

"Then I will go to Venus," cried Damis. "If necessary, I will fight the Jovians with bare hands, but I will rescue Lura or die in the attempt."

"And what of the Earthmen who trusted you, Nepthalim?" asked Turgan. "Dozens gave their lives gladly to capture the space ship in which we came here and thousands have gone cheerfully to annihilation to keep the Sons of God beleaguered in the Viceregal palace until we return with the weapons which will bring them victory. Think you that they would choose the destruction of enslavement of the whole race to the possible chance of rescuing one person from the grasp of Glavour's minions?"

"Turgan, you are mad!" cried Damis. "Have you forgotten that Lura is your only child?"

"Since the days of Hortan, Glavour has sought information as to the secret assembly room. Hundreds of men have gone to torture and death with their lips sealed when they could have bought life and freedom by speaking."

"Were it my own life, Turgan, I would not hesitate."

"Think you that never before has an Earthman been faced with the choice of betraying his countrymen or seeing his wife or daughter violated and sacrificed in the games? All have been true to the last and yet they could have done little harm had they spoken. *You* have the fate of the Earth in your hand, yet you hesitate. I am Lura's father and I know her better, it seems, than do you. If you abandon her countrymen, she will despise you for a coward. It is better that one or that many be lost than that all be lost."

Damis bowed his head in silence. Raised by the Jovians whose only ideal of life was their own selfish pleasure, the thought that the fate of thousands whom he did not know and in whom he felt little interest could be of more importance than the fate of the one whose safety meant more than life to him was a novel one. The lifelong

training he had received from the Sons of God struggled, and struggled in vain, against the ideals he had inherited from his Earthly mother and his loved sire. With a face drawn with anguish, he raised his head.

"We will take your weapons, Martian, and with them go to Earth. If it be His will that Lura be safe, safe shall she be although the whole force of Jupiter threaten her. If not, His will be done. One promise I exact of you, Turgan. When we have reached Earth and I have taught your followers to use the Martian weapons, you will give me a crew and let me depart to Venus to find her."

"Gladly will I promise, and if I be spared, I will go with you, Damis," said Turgan. "Do not think that Lura is not dear to me; she is dearer than all else in the Universe save only the keeping bright the ideal of loyalty that has been the guiding light of the Terrestrials for untold ages."

"Your decision is well made, Nepthalim," said the Martian, "and word of it shall be given to the Grand Mognac that he may know that he made no mistake when he entrusted you with the weapons of Mars. Now for your course. When you rise, direct your ship toward Deiphos. The Jovian fleet is now at an ascension of forty-two degrees and at an angle of one hundred and sixty degrees from the

sun. Deiphos will hide you from their instruments. Once you reach it, our observers will plot your course and send you a bearing which will take you as far from the Jovian fleet as possible. They are now passing Ceres and will soon be out of the asteroid belt. They are larger and more powerful than the ship you are flying and they will make better speed. However, if you use your maximum power, you will easily arrive on your planet before them. Have you fuel enough for your trip at full speed?"

Damis hastily inspected the fuel supply of the ship and made some rapid calculations.

"We have enough to carry us at maximum speed to Earth and to retard us to a safe landing, but very little to spare. Can you give us some?"

"There is no tantalum on Mars except a little scattered through tons of rock. It would take us days to extract enough to do you any good. It is well that you did not plan to fly to Venus for you could have made little speed and the Jovian flyer would have reached there long before you did. Now go, and may our best wishes aid you in your flight."

Damis turned and instinctively held out his hand. A trace of

expression flickered over the face of the nearest Martian slug and he bent forward and clasped the proffered hand in one of the many hands with which he was provided. No further message came to Damis from the Martians and he entered the airlock with Turgan following him. As the lock clanged shut, he turned to his companion.

"Open the reserve air tanks and restore the atmosphere gradually to the pressure of Earth," he directed. "Unless you do that, we will be unable to function efficiently."

While Turgan opened the valve which allowed the reserve supply of compressed air to gradually enter the ship, Damis pulled down the starting lever of the ship. With a terrific lurch the flyer left the surface of Mars and shot up into the trackless realms of space. Abandoning his controls for an instant, Damis looked into one of the observers. The plain below them was empty of Martians, but in the distance he could dimly see two of the silvery domes which marked their cities. He made some short calculations and turned on a side motor for a moment. The ship swerved and headed for the Martian satellite to which he had been directed.

In an hour he was holding the ship less than a thousand miles from Deiphos while he received a message from the Grand Mognac as to the location of the Jovian fleet, their speed and course, and the

course which he should fly to reach the Earth ahead of them. He noted down the directions and set the cross hairs of his forward observer on Alpha Centauri. His hand sought the controlling lever and the ship rapidly gathered momentum for the trip to Earth.

Chapter 5: ***A Desperate Plan***

Flying the space ship with a crew of two men instead of the normal nine threw a heavy strain on Damis. Turgan proved to be almost tireless, but while he could act as an observer, Damis devoutly hoped that no wandering celestial body would approach within the danger zone while he was alone on duty. Nothing of the sort happened. The days passed with monotonous slowness, yet daily and, indeed, hourly, the planet Mars faded to a red star and the green point of light which marked their destination grew larger. Damis cast many a longing glance at Venus, but he remained steadfast to the faith which Turgan had engendered in him. During the long hours Turgan had opportunity to tell the Nepthalim of some of the sacrifices made by Terrestrials for the cause of liberty. They filled Damis with amazement and moved him to awe to think of the loyalty and bravery displayed by those whom he had been taught from childhood to regard as a race of slaves, created solely to minister to their overlords.

Damis pushed the ship to the greatest acceleration which he dared to use, and, as they approached the Earth, he cast many an anxious glance at the diminishing fuel supply. For thirteen days he drove at high speed until the Earth seemed almost at hand. Using almost the full power of his bow motors, he checked its speed. For a time he

thought he had overestimated the power of his motors and that it would be necessary to avoid the atmosphere belt, run past the Earth and return. At the middle of the fifteenth day, with the Earth less than a thousand miles away, he threw in his last notch of power.

The deceleration pressed them so tightly to the nose of the ship that they could hardly breathe. Damis lay with his hand on a side motor to throw them out of danger. Gradually the forward motion of the ship ceased and at last Damis rose with an effort and shut off the bow motors.

"We are falling under the influence of terrestrial gravity," he announced. "In another three hours, we will land."

He was as good as his word. Three hours later he dropped the space ship to a landing at a spot half a dozen miles distant from the beleaguered capital of the Sons of God. As he landed, the sun was just peeping over the eastern horizon.

Their approach had been seen and the ship was surrounded by hundreds of Terrestrial swordsmen. As the airlock opened and Damis and Turgan appeared there was silence for a moment and then a thunderous shout of joy rose to the heavens. From the forefront of the crowd, a crimson-robed man ran toward the ship.

"Turgan, my lord," he cried as fell on his knees and strove to kiss the Kildare's hand. "You are spared to us who had given you up for lost. Our spies reported that the Sons of God had followed you to Mars and had slain you all. Havenner reported to Glavour that you had made such a resistance that it was impossible to follow his orders and bring you back alive."

"Havenner!" cried Damis. "Havenner is on Venus with Lura."

"The ship of the Sons of God returned last night," replied the Akildare, "with a loss of two men of its crew and with the Princess Lura a prisoner."

Tears of joy sprang into Damis' eyes and ran unrestrained down his face.

"And she is safe?" he cried.

"One of our spies saw her and reports that she is well although in poor spirits. She is confined in the palace and will not be harmed. A Jovian fleet of a hundred ships is expected hourly with Tubain himself in command. A message to Glavour has ordered that Lura be held for Tubain's arrival, when he will dispose of her."

"What is the situation here, Toness?" interrupted Turgan. "I rejoice with Damis that my daughter is safe, yet, unless we are victorious, her present safety will avail her little."

"Things have gone neither well nor ill since your departure, Kildare," replied Toness. "I have followed out the great conspiracy as it was planned many years ago. Although we have lost thousands of our bravest men, we have the Sons of God besieged in the Viceregal palace and we have tapped and cut the secret source of power which Timour, the Akildare, found years ago. They have no weapons save some hand tubes that are not yet exhausted and their axes. Their most powerful weapons of offense are crippled, yet we cannot storm the palace in the face of the defenses they have left. Have you brought us any hope from Mars?"

"We have brought weapons against which all the power and science of the Sons of God are as helpless as is our feeble strength against their might," replied Turgan. "Send me men to transport these weapons, and in two hours not a Jovian will remain on the planet."

A wild cheer of joy from the assembled Terrestrials answered the words of the Kildare. A score of men ran forward and entered the space ship on the heels of Turgan. They reappeared in a few minutes carrying with the greatest of care the two terrible weapons which

were the gift of the Grand Mognac. Damis suddenly looked up from a reverie in which he had been plunged.

"I have just figured it out," he exclaimed. "Despite his report to Glavour, Havenner knew that Turgan and I lived. He started away from Mars toward Venus, a destination which he had already informed his crew that they would make for. He feared the Martian weapons and he strove to draw us away toward Venus so that he would be safe. Once the Martian instruments had ceased to watch him, he altered his course and made for Earth. With his greater supply of fuel and more powerful ship, he was able to make a higher speed and, despite the additional million or two of miles, he was able to land before us. The thing that puzzles me is why we were not seen by the Jovians as we approached."

"You came from a different direction than Havenner, oh Nepthalim," replied Toness. "All of their instruments were either watching Havenner or the Jovian fleet. But for an accident, your approach would not have been noted by us. I am confident that the Sons of God have no idea that you have returned, especially since Havenner reported that he had slain you. We will take them by surprise. Where shall we take the weapons?"

"Take the one with the blue rod to the top of the mountain which

overlooks the palace and set it so that the rod points in the direction from which Tubain's fleet is approaching. That hill is less than two miles from the palace, so you had better take them both there. Point the red rod toward the palace."

At a word from Toness, the Terrestrials started off with the weapons for the point indicated by Damis. The Nepthalim and Turgan followed them, relating their adventure on the red planet as they walked along. The shutting off of the Jovian source of power had effectually crippled all of the power-driven chariots which certain of the higher officials among the Earthmen had been allowed to maintain.

On the top of the hill overlooking the palace grounds the two Martian weapons were placed on the ground, side by side. Damis carefully aligned the red rod on the Viceregal palace. When he had it set, with a word of warning, he closed the gravity anchor switch. The instrument settled a trifle on the solid rock on which it was bedded and then was motionless. At a word from Damis, as many of the Terrestrials as could find a hand-rest pushed against it. It was as though they were pressing against the mountain itself. Damis sighted along the rod and adjusted it until it pointed at the center of the building.

"So much for that one," he said. "It is the less powerful of the two, but it will be enough to destroy the Sons of God and the Nepthalim who are in the palace. The few who are scattered over the Earth, we can dispose of at our leisure. If the Jovian fleet approaches the Earth from directly above us, we will be able to destroy it easily. In any event, this weapon is to be used only when it is approximately normal to the surface of the Earth. We must have it almost under the point from which the Jovians are approaching. That may be on the opposite side of the Earth."

"I think not, Nepthalim," said Toness. "We know that Glavour and Tubain have been in constant communication since the Jovian fleet passed Mars and he expects them to land here. There would be no object in their taking a circuitous route, so they will probably drop directly down in the palace grounds."

"Let us hope so, Toness. In any event, we might as well anchor the weapon here as elsewhere."

He set the weapon with the blue rod on another patch of bare rock and tested the rod to make sure that it revolved freely and could be made to cover the entire heavens from horizon to horizon. He closed the gravity anchor switch and again the efforts of a dozen Terrestrials were futile to move it.

"Now we are ready for their attack," he said to Turgan. "You are as familiar with these weapons as I am, but I will instruct a dozen of your followers in using them. It is possible that we may not be able to operate the weapons ourselves."

"I can operate one weapon while you manipulate the other, Damis," replied the Kildare. "However, no harm will be done in instructing others."

"I may not be here," said Damis briefly.

Without replying to the questions of Turgan and Toness, he proceeded to instruct a dozen of the Earthmen in the use of the terrible Martian weapons. When he was certain that he had a half dozen men capable of attending to each of the weapons, he turned to Turgan.

"I may not be here when the weapons are used," he said. "When I thought that Lura had gone to Venus, I gave her up and sacrificed both her and my heart on the altar of our cause, for it is what she would have chosen. Now I have accomplished the sacrifice and returned with the Martian weapons to find that she is a captive in the Viceroy's palace. We can turn on the rays and reduce the building and all in it to a pinch of dust in a few seconds, but Lura would be

immolated with the Sons of God. The weapons are here; our men know how to use them, and my usefulness is at an end. Now I stand here with no more responsibility for our success than the humblest swordsman. Since I am no longer needed, I will leave the fate of the Earth to you and follow out my private designs."

"Where are you going, Nepthalim?" cried Toness. The question was echoed by all within the sound of his voice. Only Turgan smiled as though he knew Damis' answer.

"Where could I go, Akildare, but to one place?" replied the Nepthalim. "I go to Glavour's palace. I have two errands there. One is to rescue Lura and the other is to mete out to Glavour the death which I swore that I would accomplish. The rays can be turned on and the palace demolished at any time, but I ask that you wait until I return with Lura or until you know that we are dead."

"But if the Jovian fleet arrives before that time, Nepthalim?" demanded Toness.

"Then give the word for the use of the weapons, Akildare, and Lura's soul and mine will join the thousands of others whose lives are but a part of the price the race of Earthmen have had to pay to rid their planet of the Sons of God."

"It grieves me, Damis, to see you go to certain death," said Turgan sadly to the blond giant, "yet I will say nothing to stop you. Were it not that my presence would hinder you in your attempt, I would accompany you."

"Your place, Kildare, is at the head of your men, whom you were born to rule. I can hope to succeed only by stealth, else a thousand men would come with me. Now call from the ranks one who is a barber that he may change the color of my hair and alter my face that I shall not be known."

At the Kildare's word, three men stepped forward from the ranks of swordsmen and announced themselves adepts in the art of disguise. Swift runners were sent to bring supplies and the three labored over Damis. When they had finished their ministrations, only a close observer would have known him under the bushy black beard which covered his face.

Chapter 6: ***In the Seraglio***

With a parting word to Turgan and his followers, Damis made his way alone down the hill and into the thick tropical jungle which grew up almost to the gates of the Viceregal palace. He was well acquainted with a secret entrance into the building. It was a matter of minutes for him to locate the outer end and open it.

For half a mile he made his way underground until a huge stone door barred his way. He felt for the hidden catches and the slab of rock rose before him. As he turned toward the doorway he found himself looking into the muzzle of a black ray tube in the hands of a gigantic Jovian in the uniform of the Viceroy's guards.

"Whence came you, Nepthalim?" demanded the guard, a cold note of suspicion in his voice.

"From far Torna," replied Damis readily. "I am Durmino, Komar of the province of Capries. The slaves rose on us and all were slain except me. I have had to travel by night and hide by day to reach here. I knew not whether the slaves had conquered or not, but when I found them lying by thousands about Glavour's palace, I knew that the reign of the Sons of God was safe. What news from Tubain?"

The face of the Jovian guard cleared as Damis spoke. Durmino, a son of Glavour by one of his Terrestrial concubines, was Komar of Capries, a fact well known to Damis. There was nothing in the newcomer's story to excite suspicion.

"The fleet of the Ruler of the Universe is approaching," the guard replied. "In two hours it will be hovering above us. We would have needed no aid had not the dogs of Earthmen found our source of power and managed to destroy it with stolen ray tubes. We have been cooped up here like rats waiting for Tubain to arrive. When he comes our vengeance will be heavy."

"The heavier the better," growled Damis with an oath. "The dogs have been getting surly for a generation. I hope that Tubain will teach them a lesson that will not be forgotten for ages to come."

"He will, never fear," laughed the guard. "Already Glavour has made his plans. I am not a member of the council, yet I have heard enough to realize why Glavour is our ruler. My brain could not conceive of such a stupendous plan."

"I will go to my father now," said Damis. "What is the word for passing the inner gate? I wish to surprise my sire for he doubtless mourns me as dead."

"He thinks you are dead," replied the guard, "yet I never heard of Glavour mourning for any loss which did not affect his pleasures. He has plenty of bastards to take your place. The word is 'Tubain.'"

"I thank you, Son of God," said Damis, "and I will inform my sire of the great respect and high regard which you have for him. Fear not, your words shall be truthfully reported to him."

Leaving the Jovian guard hastily reviewing the conversation with the supposed Durmino, Damis made his way toward the palace. Since he knew that he would not reach another door until after several of the underground passages with which the foundations of the palace were honeycombed had joined, he had little doubt of his ability to make his way unsuspected into the citadel. He debated for a moment on the advisability of killing the Jovian guard and taking his weapons, but caution prevailed, and empty-handed, save for a dagger concealed under his robes, he strode forward.

His knowledge of the password enabled him to pass the various guards he met without difficulty. There were many of the Nepthalim who held subordinate positions in the outlying provinces and who were seldom at court, and the Jovian guards, who in their hearts regarded the Nepthalim as little better than the Terrestrials, paid small attention to him. He passed several guarded points before the

path rose steeply and he passed through the final gate into the palace itself. A Nepthalim passed him hurriedly and Damis plucked at his robe.

"I am just from outpost," he said. "What news of Tubain?"

"The fleet has entered the atmosphere belt a thousand miles east of here," replied the Nepthalim. "They are dropping to an altitude of five miles and will then approach. They should arrive in an hour. It is well that they hurry."

"What rush is there?" asked Damis in surprise. "We may not be able to leave here, but, at the same time, all the forces the slaves can muster would never force an entrance."

"You have not heard then?" exclaimed the other in surprise. "No—certainly not, if you have been on outpost—for I just learned it myself. There is a rumor that Havenner lied when he said that he killed Turgan, the Kildare and Damis, the renegade—the curse of Tubain rest on him—on Mars. It is said that they not only escaped death but have returned to Earth armed with the weapons of the red planet. Havenner is with Glavour now and no one knows what the outcome will be. Since Tubain is at hand, doubtless nothing will be done until he arrives. That is the reason why Tubain altered his

course and came down so far away instead of directly overhead. He hopes thus to elude the Martian weapons if the Earthmen really have them."

"Surely that is a lie!" cried Damis.

"We hope that it is, yet Havenner would have been slain without mercy had he admitted that he left Mars without slaying or capturing Turgan and Damis. Many believe that it is true."

"Is Glavour in the council room?" asked Damis. "I have a message."

"It would be better for you to defer the message if it be ill news until Tubain arrives, brother, for Glavour is enraged beyond measure at all of us. He threatens to sacrifice us at the next games and he may do so unless Tubain alters the decree. He has not loved us since Damis broke his arm a month ago."

"Nevertheless, I will deliver my message," replied Damis. "While it may not please him, it is essential that he get it before Tubain arrives."

"Good luck go with you, brother," replied the Nepthalim with a shrug of his shoulders. "The temper of the Viceroy of God is an

uncertain quality at best. He is in his seraglio."

Damis saluted the messenger and made his way toward the inner portion of the palace where the women whom the lustful Viceroy had dragged into his harem were kept. He had no plausible excuse for passing the guards into this forbidden portion of the palace, but that was a matter which caused him small worry. There were few of the secrets of the palace which were not well known to Damis, who had at one time been major domo of the building. There were some well known to him, the existence of which was not even suspected by the majority of the Sons of God.

As he neared the seraglio, he turned off to his right and passed through a maze of little-used passages until he halted before what was apparently a blank wall. Casting a rapid glance around to ensure himself that there was no one in sight, he touched a hidden catch and a portion of the wall swung inward, opening a way before him. He entered a passage built in the thickness of the wall and lighted with radium bulbs. The door closed softly behind him. He removed his sandals lest even their quiet tread should betray him and on bare feet crept forward.

The passage bent and twisted as it followed the walls until Damis knew that he was in one of the walls of the seraglio. Praying that it

would work noiselessly, he slid open a panel of stone and found himself looking through a semi-transparent hanging into the sacred precincts of the seraglio itself. Glavour stood facing him, his heavy face drawn up in a scowl of rage. Damis noted with satisfaction that one of the Viceroy's arms was supported by a silk scarf and that he made no attempt to use it. With a pale face, Havenner stood before his ruler.

"The word has been brought to me from a source which I trust as much as I do your own word, Havenner," Glavour was saying. "I tell you, I do not believe your story. If Damis and Turgan were dead, the Terrestrials would not see them alive again on Earth. Neither would they have weapons of which we know nothing. One of our observers admits that he saw a space ship land a few hours ago, coming from the direction of Mars. You failed in your mission, Havenner, and on you I pronounce the doom. I sentence you to the twilight of the gods."

"I appeal to Tubain from that sentence!" cried the equerry with dry lips.

"Your appeal shall be noted and laid before him at the proper time," replied the Viceroy savagely; "yet, by the time he arrives, it will be too late. Ho, Guards! Take him away."

Havenner turned as though to resist, but six of the huge Jovians answered the Viceroy's call. Two of them grasped him by the arms and started to lead him from the room.

"I appeal!" cried Havenner again. "I brought back the maiden whom I was sent to fetch, and for that reason I made no failure. To bring her was the principal item of my orders."

Glavour's face grew purple with rage.

"And who sent the message to Tubain which resulted in the orders which he sent me?" he demanded savagely. "It was sent by one of your henchmen and by your orders. You slew the sender before I could question him, but I know whose orders he obeyed. Take him away!"

The guards started to drag the luckless equerry from the presence of the Viceroy, but Havenner made a final appeal for his life.

"I will confess, Viceroy of God," he cried. "No message was sent to Tubain. I dared not send such a message lest such orders would be returned as I caused to be given to you. I coveted the maiden for myself and I took this means of getting her. I had a false message delivered to you which would prevent you from taking her before

Tubain arrived. In reward for my services as spy on you, I planned to ask that she be given to me. I surrender all claims to her, Glavour. Spare my life and you may have her."

For a moment Glavour could not speak for rage.

"So you have been the spy who has reported my every doing and my every secret council to Tubain!" he gasped. "But for you, I would long ago have conquered Venus and Mercury and declared myself independent of the Jovian overlord. In time I might have even overthrown him, but every move was known to him before I made it. Not once, but a dozen times, would you go through the twilight were Tubain not at hand. Niton, it is my order that the twilight be as slow as our instruments will allow. Give him time to learn to suffer and to pray for the blessing of death at my hand. Take him away!"

The struggling Havenner was removed by the guards despite his efforts at resistance and his cries for mercy. Glavour stared after him for a moment and an evil gleam came into his eyes.

"Sonom!" he called sharply.

A guard entered the room and saluted.

"Sonom, bring me the Daughter of Man, Lura!" cried the Viceroy. "When you have brought her here, post guards at all doors and see that no one is admitted under any circumstances until Tubain himself arrives and demands admittance."

The guard hesitated.

"Your Excellency," he faltered, "the orders from Tubain were—"

"False rumors given out by the traitor, Havenner, who has now gone to the twilight of the gods," interrupted the Viceroy. "By the crown of Tubain, do I need to repeat my orders? I am Viceroy of the Earth and am supreme until Tubain revokes my rank. Obey my orders!"

The guard saluted and withdrew. Glavour licked his thick lips in anticipation and strode restlessly back and forth across the room. Inside the hangings, Damis' face hardened and he drew his dagger from under his robe. The door opened and Sonom returned, dragging Lura after him. The face of the Earth-girl was pale and drawn, yet, when she saw Glavour, her head rose in an expression of defiance. Sonom saluted the Viceroy and left the room, the massive door clanging shut behind him. Glavour stared at the girl with an evil leer on his heavy countenance.

"I have learned, Daughter of Man," he said slowly, "of how you seduced one of my servants from his duty to me and caused him to forge an order from the great Tubain in order that he might keep you for his own pleasure. For a time the stratagem succeeded, but now my eyes are open. When I first looked upon your face and form I swore to myself that you should be the solace of my leisure hours. Now the time is come. I was minded once to honor you as Hortan once honored a Terrestrial and let you amuse yourself by sitting on a throne, but your treachery has changed my intention. Not even as an accepted concubine shall you rank, but only as a slave to be used as a toy and tossed to one of my guards when I am tired of you. Come hither!"

Lura made no move to obey the order, and Glavour with an oath stepped toward her, his one good arm outstretched in a grasping gesture. Lura did not move until his hand almost closed on her arm and then she sprang back. Her hand sought the bosom of her robe and the Viceroy recoiled as a glittering dagger flashed in the air.

"Back, Jovian!" cried Lura in ringing tones. "Think you that the daughter of a king of men is to be a toy for your base Jovian passions? The point of this dagger is poisoned so that one touch through your skin will mean death. One step nearer and I will strike!"

The Viceroy hesitated for a moment and then drew from his robe a short thick tube. Lura correctly interpreted the gesture.

"Raise that tube and I will bury the blade in my own body!" she cried. "I know that you have the power to clasp me in your arms, but it will be a corpse which you clasp."

She lowered the knife until the point rested against the skin of her throat. The slightest pressure would cause it to penetrate her skin and bring about her almost instant death. Glavour watched her like a cat, the tube ready in his hand. With a grim laugh he threw the tube from him and walked a few steps away. Lura lowered the knife. As she did so, Glavour turned with a movement so swift that the eye could hardly follow it. His eyes caught Lura's and she straightened back her head, powerless against his will, caught as she was, momentarily off her guard.

"Throw down your knife," said Glavour's voice slowly. Lura struggled to raise the weapon against herself, but she could not. Slowly her fingers relaxed and the weapon clattered on the floor. Still holding her eyes with his own, Glavour stepped forward until his huge splayed foot rested on the weapon. He averted his gaze and swiftly picked it up. Lura gave a scream of horror and strove to fly, but the heavy door was barred against her. Glavour placed the

weapon in a cabinet on the wall which he locked and then turned to her, an expression of triumph on his face.

"It is useless, Daughter of Man, to struggle against the will of the Sons of God," he said mockingly. "What we desire is ours. Come to me."

Lura's face showed an expression of loathing as she looked at the huge misshapen monstrosity before her. The Viceroy forgot the momentary satisfaction of his triumph in his rage at her attitude. With a growl of anger he grasped at her. Lura avoided his rush and ran along the side of the room, Glavour in pursuit. He cornered her at last and she stopped with her back to the tapestry with which the room was hung. Glowering in his triumph, Glavour approached and reached out his hand to seize her. His huge paw descended, but before it touched her shoulder a hand with fingers of steel reached through the hangings and grasped his wrist.

When Sonom had dragged Lura into the room, Damis inserted the point of his dagger into the tapestry and started to cut a slit through which he could enter the room. The keen-edged knife cut for a few inches readily enough and then stopped. Damis withdrew the blade and examined the stuff before him. An expression of dismay crossed his face, for the material was crisscrossed with stellanium wires, set

six inches apart. Each juncture was braised together and the whole made a web through which he could not force his way. Cautiously he exerted his strength. The keen blade hewed through the first of the stellanium strands, but Damis held his breath as the wire parted. It seemed impossible that the ting of parting metal which sounded like a thunderclap in his ears would not be heard by the Viceroy. He knew that there must be an entrance into the room through the hangings and he made his way cautiously forward, testing the draperies from time to time with his knife.

When Lura laid her dagger against her breast and threatened to end her life, it took all of Damis' self-control to keep from crying out and striving to force his way into the room by sheer strength. He knew the toughness of stellanium well enough to realize the impossibility of even his enormous strength tearing apart a webbing of it. The certainty that Glavour would not push matters far enough to rob himself of his prey aided him to restrain his ardor and to pursue his systematic search.

He came at last to a corner where his knife met with no resistance as it made its way through the silken stuff on the walls. Swiftly he cut a slit through which he could rush. As he parted the material, Lura rushed past him and stood with her back to the wall to await the oncoming Viceroy. Damis raised his hand and stood ready. As

Glavour's huge paw descended on Lura's shoulder Damis' hand shot out. Still holding the wrist of the Viceroy in a grip of steel, he emerged from his hiding place, tearing off the black wig and beard which disguised him.

"Damis!" cried Lura in wonder and delight as she saw him.

Glavour stared with unbelieving eyes for a moment and then a hoarse cry of alarm burst from his lips. Desperately he strove to release his wrist from the Nepthalim's grip, but to no avail. He disengaged his crippled arm from the scarf which supported it and groped under his robe for a weapon. Lura cried out in warning, but Damis had anticipated such a move. With a quick effort he whirled about and drew the Viceroy's arm over his shoulder. He bent forward and exerted his full strength. The huge bulk of Glavour rose in the air and pitched forward over Damis' shoulder. There was a crash as he landed on the marble floor. Quick as a cat, Damis sprang on him and pinioned down his arms.

"Take his weapons, Lura!" he cried.

Lura bent over the prostrate form of the Jovian to take from his belt the tubes which he habitually carried there. As she stooped, Glavour raised one of his huge feet and struck her with all the force of his

mighty thighs behind the blow. With a cry of pain, Lura flew halfway across the room. Damis leaped to her assistance, forgetting for a moment the potentialities for destruction which the Viceroy bore on his person. A sudden sound made him whirl about. He bent over Lura and picked her from the floor. With her in his arms he leaped to one side just as a flash of violet light stabbed through the air. It missed them by inches. He dropped Lura on a rug and turned to face Glavour.

On the Jovian's face was an expression of fiendish triumph. In his hand was a short black tube which he aimed with deliberate slowness at the crouching Nepthalim. Damis shifted his gaze from the Viceroy's eyes and concentrated it on the muscles of his wrist. Glavour's grip tightened and Damis leaped to one side as the violet light again stabbed the air. With an oath, Glavour swung the deadly ray in an arc trying to reach the Nepthalim, but Damis moved like a cat. Once, as the ray almost touched him, he sprang high in the air and let it sweep by under him. With each movement he came nearer to the Viceroy. Slowly the violet began to lose its intensity of color. Glavour dropped it and reached for a second tube. Before he could draw one, Damis was on him.

Chapter 7: *The Deluge*

Few of the Sons of God and none of the Nepthalim, save Damis, could match the brute strength of the Viceroy. As Damis rushed, Glavour sidestepped and caught the Nepthalim's arm in a bone-crushing grasp. Damis made no effort to break the grip, but with his free hand he gripped the wrist of Glavour's crippled arm. With a quick effort he twisted it and the Viceroy gave a shriek of pain as the newly knit bone gave way and his arm fell, dangling and useless. Damis caught his sound arm in a powerful grip and twisted slowly on his wrist. Gradually Glavour's fingers relaxed and Damis' arm was free. His hands shot up and gripped Glavour about the throat just in time to shut off the cry for help which was forming on his thick lips. The two giants strove silently for mastery in the struggle which meant life for the victor and death for the vanquished. The expression in Damis' eyes was one of confident mastery, but the face of the Jovian showed something that was strangely akin to fear. Even when he was whole, Glavour had found that his strength was no match for the power that lay in Damis' graceful limbs. With one of the Viceroy's arms useless, the issue was a foregone conclusion.

Glavour's face gradually grew purple and his eyes started out of their sockets. His tongue protruded horribly from his opened jaws. He grew weaker until it was only Damis' grip which kept him from

falling to the ground. Then Damis broke his silence and spoke slowly and distinctly into the dying Viceroy's ears.

"I was loyal to you, Glavour," he said, "despite your brutality and sensuality which sickened me, until you strove to add to your already crowded seraglio the maiden whom I had chosen. As a Nepthalim, you thought I had no right which you need respect and I would tamely submit to whatever you chose to do. You forgot that in my veins run the best blood of Earth and the proudest blood of Jupiter. Hortan was a Mildash of Jupiter, a rank to which you could never aspire. I restricted your efforts and proved to you a thing which I long have known, that, man to man, I am your superior.

"Even then you might have won back my loyalty had I not learned how my father and my mother came to their death. It has always been given out that they went to Jupiter on a summons from Tubain, but I know the truth. They died under the knife of a cowardly assassin, under your knife, Glavour. Then it was that I swore that it would be my hand that would strike you down. When you raised your hand against me, you were Viceroy of the Earth and your power was secure, for the conspiracy against you had no hope of success. What is the situation now? You are beleaguered in your palace, holding only the ground your few feeble weapons cover. Even this ground you hold only on the sufferance of the Earthmen. Listen to

what I say, for I wish your last moments to be bitter ones. On the hill east of the city sit two weapons of a type and a power unknown to both Earth and Jupiter. They are the deadly black ray weapons of Mars. Ah, you tremble! You have good cause. One of them is trained on this palace while the other searches the heavens, ready to blast into powder the fleet of Tubain when it appears. And who, think you, brought this about, Glavour? It was I, Damis, the Nepthalim, the 'half-breed bastard' whom you despised. My only regret is that I cannot send you to the twilight of the gods as you sent that other arch-traitor, Havenner. Are your last moments pleasant, Glavour? I am increasing the pressure slowly so that you will have time to think, to think of the Earthmen you have given to sacrifice and torture, to think of your ruler, Hortan, dying under your knife, to think of the doom which is about to overcome your race. Think, Glavour, for your time for thought is short."

As he finished, Damis thrust back on the Viceroy's chin with a sudden effort. There was a dull crack as Glavour's neck broke and Damis gently lowered the inert bulk to the floor. He felt a touch on his arm as he straightened up. He whirled like a cat and Lura shrank back with a frightened gesture. Damis opened his arms and in an instant the Earth-girl was folded in them.

"Is my father safe?" was her first question.

"Safer by far than we are," exclaimed Damis with a sudden pang of anxiety. He glanced at the time-recording device on the wall. Three-quarters of an hour had passed since he had first entered the Viceregal palace. If the estimates of Tubain's arrival which he had heard were correct, the Jovian fleet should be almost most overhead. "Come," he cried to Lura, "we have no time to lose if we escape before the palace and all in it are destroyed. Where did Havenner land his ship?"

"In the yard west of the palace," she replied.

"Pray that it is still there," said Damis. "We can reach it through the path by which I entered this room. Come quickly."

With Lura at his heels, he passed through the rent in the tapestry and entered the secret passage through the walls. The way twisted and turned interminably, but finally he paused before a door. Before opening it he slid back a panel which opened a peep-hole and looked out.

"The ship is there," he whispered in a voice of relief. "There is only one guard over it that I can see. Why didn't I think to bring Glavour's weapons? I'll have to try to catch him by surprise. When I open the door, run straight for the space ship as though you were trying to

escape from me. Don't try to dodge the guard, keep right on for the ship. As soon as I overpower the guard, get in the ship and hold your hand on the starting lever. When I get on board, throw in the power at a low rate. We don't want to rise rapidly enough to get out of easy control. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Damis," she whispered.

He watched until a sudden shout drew the attention of the sentry momentarily away from the ship he was guarding. A confused sound of cheering came from the palace and the sentry looked toward the western heavens. A moment of gazing and he raised his voice in a raucous shout of joy. Instantly Damis swung open the door.

Lura sped out like a frightened deer with Damis in close pursuit. The attention of the sentry was fixed on some distant object in the sky and he did not see the oncoming pair until Lura was only a few yards from him. The sound of her footsteps attracted his attention and he glanced down at her. An expression of surprise came over his heavy features and he reached for a weapon. His gesture was never finished, for Damis' fist caught him under the ear and he dropped in his tracks. Damis looked in the direction in which the sentry had been staring and a cry broke from his lips.

"The fleet of Tubain!" he cried.

A thousand yards in the air and a scant five miles to the west was a clump of half a dozen Jovian space flyers. Massed behind them were a hundred more. They were approaching with tremendous velocity.

Damis gave a mighty bound and leaped through the airlock of the ship. Hardly had he cleared the door than Lura pulled down the starting lever. The ship flew up from the ground. Hardly had it left its ways than a momentary flash came from the hill east of the palace. The air grew black around them and a cold as of interstellar space penetrated their very bones. In an instant the ship had flashed up into the sun above the zone of influence of the Martian weapon. The shouting from the palace was suddenly stilled. Damis looked down, but nothing could be seen save a pall of intense blackness over the ground where the building stood.

"The port motor, Lura!" cried Damis. The Jovian fleet was approaching so rapidly that a collision with the nearest flyer seemed inevitable. There was a roar from the air as Lura threw in the port blast with its maximum power. Damis was hurled against the side of the ship.

From the hill where the Martian weapons had been placed came a

second flash of light and a beam of jetty blackness shot through the air. An edge of it brushed the ship for an instant and Lura stiffened. A terrible cold bit through the flyer and the side where the Martian ray had touched crumpled into powder. The ship sped on, and the friction of the air and the bright rays of the sun dissipated the extreme cold. Through the terrific storm which was raging, the black ray stabbed again and again. Back and forth it played and ship after ship of the Jovians was momentarily caught in the beam. When the beam passed on there was nothing left of the ship save a cloud of dust which the terrific wind dissipated in all directions.

Damis glanced at the Earth below him. It seemed to be flying past the ship at a velocity which he could hardly comprehend. He made his way against the pressure of the movement to the control levers and strove to check the speed. As the Earth ceased to revolve beneath them, the wind rose to a terrible force.

"What has happened, Damis?" shrieked Lura in his ear.

"I don't know," he shouted in reply. "I am trying to keep away from the neighborhood of the palace for a while until the Jovian fleet is destroyed. Toness and your father might not be able to tell us from one of Tubain's ships and they might turn the ray on us."

He bent over the control levers of the ship, but they refused to obey his touch. The stern motor still roared with enough force to keep them three thousand feet above the ground, but none of the side motors responded to the controls. The ship was helpless and was tossed about, a plaything of the terrific wind which howled through the heavens. Damis watched the ground below them.

"Look, Lura!" he cried.

They swept over the site of the palace. The black ray was no longer playing on it, but the whole palace glistened like crystal.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Frost!" he shouted. "The Martian weapon did its work well. Everything in that palace is frozen. In the name of Tubain!"

The Jovian ejaculation had burst from his lips, unbidden, at the sight which met his gaze. Racing over the land was a solid wall of water, hundreds of feet high and moving with enormous speed. On toward the palace it swept. Below they could see the Earthmen on the hill striving to fly, but there was no place of safety. The oncoming wall of water was higher by a hundred feet than the top of the hill and it was the highest bit of land for many miles.

Nearer and nearer came the water until with a roar and a crash which they could plainly hear in the crippled space ship, it swept over the hill and the palace, burying them under a hundred feet of brine.

"Father!" cried Lura in anguish.

Damis made his way across the ship and folded her in his arms.

"He was chosen as one of the lives needed to buy the freedom of the Earth," he murmured to her. "It is hard, for I loved him as a father; but it was the end which he would have chosen. He died at the head of his followers battling for freedom."

"What happened, Damis?" asked Lura an hour later as she looked down on the seething tumult of water under them.

"As nearly as I can figure out, the Jovian fleet approached the palace from the west at a low elevation. In order to destroy them, we could not use the Martian weapon normal to the Earth's surface as they commanded us, but were forced to use it tangentially. The enormous counter reaction to the stream of force of almost incredible intensity which was shot at Tubain's flyers, had to be absorbed in some way. The weapon could not take it up as it was anchored to the center of gravity of the earth. As a result, the force was translated into one of

increased rotation. The Earth must be spinning on its axis at fully twice its former rate. Both the air and the water had too much inertia to follow the accelerated motion of the land, so the wind blew a gale and the oceans left their beds and swept over the land. Everything must have been swept to destruction before this flood."

"And all our labor and sacrifice has been useless," cried Lura. "We have freed a world at the cost of the lives of its inhabitants."

"The world is not lost, sweetheart," he cried as he clasped her to him. "The floods will not have overwhelmed the mountains and some men and animals will have escaped. The waters will subside in a few weeks as they take up the new rotation of the Earth. By His will, we are spared for the labor of building a new world. As soon as the land again appears above the waters, we will land and assemble those who have been spared. The fleet of Jupiter has been destroyed and we need fear no fresh attack for ages, perhaps never. Unhampered, we will build a new world and try to avoid the mistakes of the old one.

"Look, Damis!" exclaimed Lura in a hushed tone.

From the spray and mist below them leaped a living bridge of colored light. Above the sun it arced its way into the heavens in the

direction in which they knew Mars lay.

"It is His promise," whispered Damis reverently, "that henceforth the planets will live in peace and amity and that nevermore will the Jovians be allowed to invade us."

119 The Infra-Medians by Sewell Peaslee Wright

Into a land of shadows and lost souls goes Pete Grahame in search of his hapless friends.

Aproximate word count: 6,600

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

There was no sense to the note. There was no sense to anything that Vic Butler did, for that matter. Where he hid away his vast scientific knowledge in that rattle-brained, red-haired head of his has always been a mystery to me. The note read:

Dear Pete:

If you get this, I'm in a jam that promises some action.

Drive out, if plane-peddling is palling on you, and bust into the lab. I'm leaving another note there for you, old son, and after you read it you can let your conscience be your guide.

Bring a gat along, and plenty of ammo. Hope's away, at Aunt Cleo's, so don't get in touch with her and spoil her visit.

-Vic

I had a hot prospect lined up for a demonstration that morning, but I didn't even stop to give him a ring. Vic and I had been buddies ever since we were kids—and, besides, he was Hope's brother.

Vic's place was out on the river, about ten miles from town, and that little tan roadster of mine made it in just about ten minutes. The traffic in the business district slowed me up a bit.

There was nothing at all pretentious about the place; it was a rambling, lazy-looking house built largely of native stone, stretching its length comfortably in the shade of the big maples. Perrin, Vic's man-of-all-work, came hurrying out of the house to greet me as I locked my wheels on the drive before the door.

"I'm glad you're here, sir!" he exclaimed breathlessly. "I was just about to phone for the police; I was for certain, sir. Such goings on, I don't know what to think!"

"What's the matter, Perrin? Where's Mr. Butler?"

“That’s it, sir! That’s exactly it. Where’s Mr. Butler? And—”

“Just a moment, please! Cut it short, Perrin. What’s happened?”

“I don’t know. Yesterday afternoon Mr. Butler leaves a letter for me, which I’m to mail early this morning, special delivery. It’s to you. I reckon you got it, sir?”

“That’s why I’m here. Go on.”

“Well, after that, he locks himself up in his workroom, so Mrs. Perrin says, she being housekeeper, as you know, sir, leaving word not to disturb him for dinner.

“We don’t think so much of that, Mr. Butler being took with streaks of working at all hours, as you know. But when Miss Hope came home unexpected this morning—”

“What?”

“She cut her visit a few days short, her aunt having other house guests turn up unexpected like, and Miss Hope arrives first thing this morning, being here when I return from town after mailing the letter to you, sir.

“Mrs. Perrin had just told her about the master, and Miss Hope looks into his room. He isn’t there, and the bed hasn’t been slept in. ‘The poor dear,’ she says, ‘he’s worked himself half to death, and dropped off on that horrible cot he keeps in his laboratory,’ says Miss Hope. ‘I’ll let him sleep.’

“But just a few minutes ago, just before you arrived, sir, she became nervous like, and rapped on the door. There wasn’t a sound. So she went up to the master’s room and found a key, and went in. And now she don’t answer, and we were just about ready to call the police!”

“Let’s go inside!” I hurried by Perrin and through the cool, quiet hall to the broad door that opened into the big room at the back of the house, which was Vic’s laboratory.

Vic! Hope!” I pounded as hard as I could, shouting their names. There was no response.

“Is there another key, Perrin?” I snapped.

“No, sir; none that I know of. The master was mighty fussy about his workroom.”

“Can we get in through the windows?”

“No. They’re barred, if you remember rightly, and fitted with this frosted glass, so you can’t see in, even.”

“Then get me an ax!” I commanded. “Quick!”

“An ax?” hesitated Perrin.

“An ax—and be quick about it!”

Perrin mumbled a protest and hurried away. I turned to Mrs. Perrin, who had come up to determine the result of my shouting.

“How long is it since Miss Hope went in there?”

“How long, sir? I’d say about twenty minutes before you came. Maybe twenty-five. I wasn’t paying any particular attention, sir. She just got the key and went in. After a few minutes I heard something buzzing in there, and I thought maybe Mr. Butler was showing her some new gadget of his, like he was always doing. Then there was a telephone call for him, and I couldn’t make neither of them answer; that’s when Mr. Perrin and I began to get worried.”

“I see.” Perrin came hurrying up with the ax, and I motioned them aside. I swung the ax, and the head of the weapon crashed against the lock. The knob dropped to the floor with a clatter, but the door

gave not at all.

I brought the ax down again, and something cracked sharply. The third blow sent the door swinging wide.

Cautiously, fearing I know not what, I entered the familiar room. Nothing, apparently, had been disturbed. There was no sign of disorder anywhere. The blankets on the narrow cot in the corner of the room had not been unfolded.

But neither Vic nor Hope were anywhere in sight.

You and Mrs. Perrin stay there by the door," I suggested. "I don't know what's wrong here, but something's happened. There's no need for all of us entering."

My second glance around the room was more deliberate. To my right were the big generators and the switchboards, gleaming with copper bus-bar, and intricate with their tortuous wiring. Directly before me was the long work-bench that ran the full length of the room, littered with a dozen set-ups for as many experiments. At my left was a sizable piece of apparatus that was strange to me; on a small enameled table beside it was a rather large sheet of paper, weighted down with a cracked Florence flask.

In a sort of panic, I snatched up the paper. Vic had said in his note, that he would leave another note for me here. This was it, for in a bold scrawl at the top was my name. And in hardly decipherable script, below, was his message:

Dear Pete:

First of all, let me say that you've no particular call to do anything about this. If I'm in a jam, it's my own doing, and due to my bull-headedness, of which you have so often reminded me.

Knowing your dislike for science other than that related to aeronautics, I'll cut this pretty short. It'll probably sound crazy to you, anyway.

You know that there's sound above the frequencies to which the human ear will respond. You know there are light rays that the human eyes can't perceive. Some work I've been doing the last five or six months indicates that there's a form of life about us, all around us, which isn't perceptible to our senses—which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist.

Well, I'm going to do a little exploring. I'm going to take a whirl at what I'll call the Infra-Median existence. What I'll find there, I don't

know. Life of some kind, however, for my experiments prove that. Possibly not friendly.

All this being so, there's an off chance that I'll find myself tangled with something I can't anticipate. And if you are called upon to read this, then something has gone wrong with my plans.

Should you wish to take a flier after me, stand in the center of the square outlined by the four uprights of the device beside which this little table stands. Be sure your weapon—I told you to bring a gat—is on your person.

There's a small instrument board set on one of the posts. Turn the upper of the two dials until the hand of the meter beside it moves up to 2700 exactly. Wait a moment, until you're sure you have the exact reading. Then turn the second dial until the two red lines coincide, and as you do so, mark the time. The thing is set to operate the reverse cycle at three-hour intervals exactly. When you come down, you'll start a new cycle, and it might be important for us to know at just what minute we can get back to our own plane.

If you decide to try it, tell Perrin to do nothing for at least a week. If the law started experimenting on this equipment, we never could climb back. And leave word with them for Hope; tell her I'll

scramble out somehow—that we will, if you decide to try your luck.

Vic

Underneath, in Hope's clear, purposeful hand, was this:

Peter dear:

Not knowing when you'll arrive, I'm going on ahead. We must give Vic a hand—mustn't we?

H.

Naturally, I didn't understand Vic's jargon about frequencies and light-rays, for I thought more about football than physics in college, but two things were clear to me. One was that Vic had plunged into some sort of wild experiment, and the other was that Hope had followed him. The rest didn't matter very much.

"Perrin! Mr. Butler and Miss Hope are safe. Everything is explained in this note. You and Mrs. Perrin are to leave me here, and not disturb anything. Do nothing at all for at least a week. If we aren't all back here before that time ... take any action you see fit. Understand?"

“No-no, sir. Where—”

“You understand the orders, anyway. That’s all that’s necessary. Close the door—and keep it closed at least a week!” I glared at him, and Perrin closed the door.

The apparatus Vic had mentioned was my first thought. It consisted primarily of four tall, slim posts, set in the form of a square, about a yard apart, and supported by heavy copper brackets mounted on a thick base of insulating material, and each post bore at its top, like a stalk with a single drooping flower, a deep, highly polished reflector, pointing inward and downward. The whole effect was not unlike the skeleton of a miniature skyscraper.

I strode between two of the high, slim black pillars and glanced upward. All four of the reflectors seemed pointed directly at my face, and I could see that each held, not the bulb I had expected, but a crudely shaped blob of fused quartz.

There was nothing to be gained by examining the peculiar machine, and therefore the one quick glance sufficed. If Vic and Hope had gone this route, I was anxious to follow. I glanced down at the papers in my hand, and slowly turned the first dial on the little instrument board, narrowly watching the hand of the meter beside it,

as Vic had instructed.

The hand moved slowly, like the hand of an oil-gauge in which the pressure is gradually built up. Twenty-one ... twenty-five ... twenty-six ... twenty-seven.

I waited a moment, conscious only of the faint hum of a generator at the other end of the room, and the quivering hand of the meter. I turned the dial back an imperceptible degree, and the hand steadied down exactly upon the numerals “2700.” Then I touched the next dial.

This second dial was no more than a thin disk of hard rubber or bakelite, with a red scratch-mark on one side. On the panel itself, far to the right of the dial’s zero point, was the red scratch-mark that matched it. When the two coincided—well, something happened.

I was conscious of a faint glow from above as I moved the dial slowly, so that its red mark approached the stationary one upon the panel. I glanced up swiftly.

Each of the little blobs of quartz was glowing; each with a light of different color. One was a rich amber, one a pale green, one a vivid, electric blue, and one was fiery red. The intensity of the light

increased steadily as I moved the dial.

I could not only see the light; I could feel it. It beat upon my body; throbbed all around me. I had a feeling that the mingling rays of light conflicted with each other.

It seemed to me for a moment that I was growing as light as air; that my feet were drifting off the floor, and then, as the red line of the dial came closer to the indicated point, the feeling left, and I suddenly seemed very heavy. I could hardly support my own weight; my legs were trembling with the burden; sweat broke out over my whole body; the rays of light beat down upon me fiercely, overpoweringly....

Desperately, I quickly turned the dial until the two red marks coincided. A great weight, soft and enveloping, seemed to drop upon me. The senses of sight and hearing and feeling all left me. I could only think—and my thoughts were horrible.

Then, suddenly, there was a terrific crash of sound, and my senses returned.

I looked around. It seemed that an instant before I had been standing there in Vic's laboratory, slowly turning the second of the two dials,

while the four lights beat down upon my body. And now ... and now I was standing in the open, on another world. A nightmare world that words seem inadequate to describe.

The sky was an angry, sulphurous green, pressing low upon a country utterly flat and nearly barren. The only sign of vegetation I could perceive were strange growths that remotely resembled trees —inverted trees, with wide-spreading branches hungrily nursing the black and barren soil, and gnarled, brief roots reaching out tortured arms toward the forbidding sky.

To my left, and some distance away, a vast number of blunt and ugly towers rose against the sinister skyline, but no form of animal life seemed in evidence. Wonderingly, my head whirling, whether from my strange experience or from the shock of finding myself in what was obviously another world, I do not know, I turned toward the city. And as I took my first step, there materialized suddenly out of the thin and ill-smelling air, the figures of perhaps a dozen monstrous creatures.

They were, in effect, men. That is, they had a head, a torso, two arms and two legs apiece. But they were not human. Those huge round eyes, unblinking and browless, were not human, nor were their slitted, sunken mouths. They were not human beings; they were

images of despair.

Their thin legs seemed to buckle at the knees, their arms drooped from their shoulders, their mouths sagged at the corners, even their huge ears hung down like a hound's. Their round, dark eyes, deeply recessed, were caverns of despair.

They were clothed in some coarse, black stuff that bristled as though loosely woven of stiff hair, and yet which was not a true fabric, for it seemed to move within itself, and scintillate, as though composed of billions of restless motes. And as the strange creatures closed in quickly, I saw that theirs was not solid flesh, but, like the clothing that partially covered them, an attenuated substance that was not quite real.

Have you ever sat close to the screen in a motion picture theatre, so that the graininess of the moving film was visible? These creatures were like such shadows, seen in three dimensions.

I retreated two or three swift steps, jerking the revolver from my pocket.

"Back!" I warned, hoping they would understand the tone of voice if not the words. "Back—or I'll pot a couple of you!"

They glanced at each other, swiftly, almost as though they understood. It seemed to me that their mouths lifted; that they almost smiled. Then they rushed at me.

I had only one box of cartridges, besides those in the cylinder of my gun. I didn't know what might be in store for me, and I took no chances.

My first shot sent one of the creatures spinning to the ground. Two more were almost upon me before I could level the weapon and pull the trigger again. I got them both.

The rest of that unholy crew were grinning, and their eyes were shining with anticipation. They closed in upon me eagerly, each apparently doing everything in his power to invite my attention. It was bewildering, and I watched them warily, suspecting a trick. There were only three more cartridges left in my gun, and I did not dare replace the fired shells for fear they would rush me when the action was open and the gun momentarily useless.

I was just about to risk one more cartridge when another figure materialized in the ranks of the enemy; a taller, commanding figure, with a shining jewel, perhaps a mark of authority, dangling from his corded brown throat.

The others fell back instantly, and the newcomer approached me swiftly, holding out his hands as though in supplication.

So I was to receive a cordial welcome after all! I breathed a sigh of relief, and pocketed the weapon—and instantly the dark eyes flashed angrily. I held out both hands, to show that they were empty, trying to express my willingness to be friends.

He hesitated, and then uttered a high-pitched sound that I presumed to be a word of command. Before I could free the gun again, the creatures had me, and while their flesh looked more unnatural and unreal than ever, at close range, their long fingers gripped me like talons of steel. The being which had uttered the command disappeared, and my captors led me, struggling and protesting, toward the black, ugly towers of the city.

Over the barren, rocky ground we hurried; past the wretched hovels on the outskirts of the city, and through crooked, dismal streets, toward the center of the city.

A great crowd of creatures similar to my captors hemmed us in. Before us, they thinned into nothingness as we approached, only to swarm into being in some other spot. It was terrifying; an unbelievable experience that made me question my sanity. The only

vestige of comfort left me was the hope that they were taking me to Hope and Vic.

At the entrance of one of the huge misshapen black buildings, the creature with the brilliant stone at his throat appeared as suddenly as a light flashes up in the darkness. With him were two others, each wearing a similar jewel of authority. They stood aside for us to enter, and then followed us down a long corridor which was not lighted by any device I could discern, and yet which was not dark.

A broad door swung open, and I was thrust through the doorway.

“Pete!” shouted a familiar voice, and I scrambled to my feet. There was Vic, his red hair tousled, and his face gray with worry. Behind him, her big blue eyes brimming, her lips quivering, was Hope.

“Vic! Well, here I am. And Hope, dear....”

My voice trailed off. These were not Vic and Hope before me; they were unreal creatures, like the beings which had captured me. I could recognize the face and the figure of the woman I loved and of her brother; but they seemed to have no substance.

Hope suddenly put her arms about me. She was sobbing.

“Don’t, Peter!” she whispered.

“Don’t look at me like that. I know how you feel. You—you and Vic—you aren’t real to me, either! We’re just shadows—lost souls....”

“Buck up, Hope!” Vic’s voice was kindly, yet firm and gravely commanding. “We’re all right. Only—temporarily—we’re Infra-Medians. Sit down, Pete, and let’s talk. It may be that there’s no time to lose in making some plans.”

First of all,” I insisted, “tell me where we are; what’s happened to us. Do you know?”

“Where we are? Surely. Looking at it in one way, we’re less than a mile from my laboratory.”

“But, Vic!” I protested. “Do you really mean that we’re less than a mile from your laboratory; from our own world? If we were, we could see it; we’d bump into our own trees and houses and people; we’d be knocked down by automobiles, and—”

“Two bodies cannot occupy the same space at the same time. Old law of simple physics. Is that what you mean?” interrupted Vic.

“Why, yes.”

“And a body; what’s that?”

“A body? Why, matter, I suppose.”

“And matter is what?”

“Anything that occupies space,” I replied triumphantly. I had remembered that much from my physics classes.

“True,” smiled Vic. “But let’s see. It is possible to have sound and light in the same place, isn’t it? We can even add other things: heat and electricity, for example. Speaking of electricity, a tremendous current of it adds nothing to the weight of the wire carrying it, and nothing to its bulk, unless we have a heating overload. Current enough to kill a thousand men, or to do the work of a million horses, weighs nothing, is invisible, and actually does nothing until released in some form or other, either by accident or design.”

“True, but electricity isn’t matter. Our old world is matter; I’m matter, and you’re matter. Why don’t we bump into things?”

“Our old world is matter, true enough, but for the rest, you’re wrong, Pete, old son. You’re not matter, any more. You’re something else. In terms of our own being, you do not exist in your present form. This

world does not exist. And the reverse is just as true."

I stared at him, bewildered.

"What am I, then—a ghost?"

"Nothing of the sort. You're old Pete Grahame, a darned good half-back, and the world's rottenest scientist. Only you've been passed into another form of being, through the action of four little quartz bulbs whose periods of vibrations form a beat—but that's over your head, Pete, old son, and we'll have time to talk over details when we get back. Right now, we're in somewhat of a jam." Instinctively, he glanced at Hope; it was her danger, and not his own, that had brought that haggard pallor to his face in so short a time.

"That's what I don't understand. What do these people—if you can call them that—want of us?"

Vic looked down, frowning.

"I'm not sure I'm right," he replied after a moment, "but if I am—they wish us to kill them. As many as possible.

"When I found myself here, I wandered nearly to the city before I was molested. When they did appear, and tried to lay hands on me, I

warned them back, and finally shot one of them.

“The effect was magical. They seemed unable to believe the evidence of their eyes. They rushed me eagerly, each seeming to beg for a bullet.

“I gave them what they wanted, still hoping I could frighten them away. A great crowd formed around me, and the rabble was sent flying by a number of the men who seem to hold some office, distinguished by a jewel-like emblem around their throats. If I read their actions correctly, they claimed the privilege of death by virtue of their greater authority.

Well, I finally decided that my gun did anything but frighten them. They were angry when I refused to do any more slaughtering, and led me here. Every once in a while one of the captains would come in and command me to kill him. I refused, for that’s the only trump card I held.

“When Hope, here, acted like the foolish little kid she is, she was not even armed, and they rushed her here without delay. My theory is that these people live in a dreary world in which there is no pleasure. Their faces seem to show that. Apparently they live a very long time, and have no means of shortening that life. They are not intelligent.

Things that would kill a man of our own world have no effect on them, for remember that they are not physical beings. You have seen them appear out of thin air, and dissolve in the same fashion?”

“Yes.”

“That is simply their mode of transportation. They pass invisibly through the air, just as electricity passes through a wire; quickly, invisibly, silently. Then they assume their original form where they will—just, again, as electricity passes from the end of the wire exactly the same as it entered it, allowing only for voltage drops and some other factors that aren’t pertinent here.

“What we must do, and right now, is to settle upon some means of getting to the proper spot at the proper time. You marked the moment of your departure, I suppose?”

“Exactly.” I glanced down at my wrist watch, and noted with relief that it was still running. I observed then, for the first time, that the watch, my clothing, and even my hand, were not real; they were like the rest of the things in this monstrous state that Vic called Infra-Media. “I left at three after ten. It’s now fourteen minutes of eleven —Good Lord! Less than an hour since I stood there in your laboratory!”

“Then our next chance to get back will be at three minutes after one,” nodded Vic. “I wonder if there is any chance of—”

Before he could complete the sentence the door was flung open, and five of the older men, led by a sixth with a larger jewel at his throat, filed solemnly into the room and motioned that we were to leave.

At the doorway, a double file of creatures closed in about us, and we were led, by long corridors and mighty winding ramps, toward the top of the building.

“Now what?” I whispered to Vic.

“I don’t know. That chap with the big stone at his throat seems to be the head man of the city. I think his name is Ee-pay; the others seem to call him that. Maybe it’s just a title. But what they’re up to now, I can’t even guess. Keep your eyes open for a chance to get away, though. How are you feeling, Hope?”

“All excited!” She tried to smile, and almost succeeded. Hope was game all the way through. “What an adventure this will be to talk about when we’re old and rheumatic!”

“Good kid!” said Vic, and I pressed her hand as comfortably as I

could. We turned a bend in the long ramp we had been climbing, and came out upon the vast, level top of the building.

Thousands of the unreal creatures of this world were crowded around a vast, hideous image that rose from the center of the space; a monster so terrible that Hope cried out at the sight, and Vic exclaimed under his breath.

For myself, I seemed stricken dumb; I could only stare at this black and ghastly god of these people.

The carven image was perhaps thirty feet in height, and represented a figure crouched upon its knees, its head bent very low and at the same time tilted at a grotesque angle so that the face smiled heavenward; the hands, palms upward, extended invitingly just below the chin.

As our party appeared, an aisle opened, and we were marched through the assembled crowd, directly toward the idol. A high-pitched, sibilant chant arose from the multitude, and a procession of very ancient beings, whom I took to be the priests of this god, came in single file from behind the black god, directing the chanting with movements of their arms. They were lighter in color than the others, and much more intelligent, to judge by their faces. Their eyes held

none of the sadness which was the most marked characteristic of the others. Each wore upon his forehead a gleaming scarlet stone, bound in place by a circlet of black metal, or what looked like metal.

We paused, and the chanting went on and on, until I began to wonder if anything would ever happen. And then, at last the chanting ceased, and three of the priests moved toward us, followed by an elderly being who wore the same symbol of power or authority that I had already noted upon the creature Vic called Ee-pay.

One of the priests spoke sharply, commandingly, to Ee-pay, and the latter nodded—not agreeably it seemed to me.

“The old boy doesn’t like these other chaps; priests, I take it,” whispered Vic. “I think they’ve been messing up his plans. See; he’s motioning us to watch.”

The priests led the old man back to the idol. Eagerly, he clambered upon the outstretched hands, and stood there facing the grinning face, stroking the polished cheeks with beseeching fingers. The priests sank to the floor, bending themselves in mockery of the image. Four times they touched their foreheads to the ground, and as the fourth gesture was completed something moved swiftly behind the lips of the image, as though a plate had lifted for a moment and

dropped again.

There was a sharp, murmuring sound, as of a harp-string softly plucked. A scarlet haze of light shot forth from the mouth of the black god, and the old man stepped back sharply as though struck by some invisible agent. He would have fallen, but as he crumpled, his body seemed to soften and shatter into a scintillating cloud. An instant later there was no trace of him anywhere.

“Hm-m! The great reward for some notable service rendered, I imagine,” whispered Vic. “Those priests are wiser than the rest of this crew. They deal death sparingly, and that makes them great. They love life like a man of our earth; perhaps because they’ve found out how to enjoy it.”

“But what does the work; what killed him?” I asked breathlessly.

“Can’t say, Pete. You can’t name things here in terms of our own world. Some natural force they’ve corraled, I imagine. They control it with that shutter behind the lips of the image. Did you notice it?”

“Yes. I suppose one of the priests operates it from some hidden room. Whatever it is, it certainly does the work. And what do you suppose they want us to do now?”

The three priests were coming toward us, smiling. I didn't like their smiles; they were meant to be benign, but there was a cruel and vindictive twist to their lips which chilled me through and through.

"Keep your hand on your gun," said Vic swiftly. "I don't like the looks of these chaps."

The priests stopped before us and their leader began a long harangue in a screechy voice which set my nerves on edge. When he had finished he held out his hands toward me, and motioned toward the waiting idol.

Ee-pay spoke up in sharp protest, and thrust himself between me and the priest. For a moment, due to this obviously unexpected interruption, everything was in confusion.

"Pete!" Vic was whispering excitedly in my ear. "Listen, Pete, I think I see through this. These priests have heard about us and our death-dealing ability. They're jealous; they want a corner on that. Old Ee-pay figures maybe we could do him a favor in that line, and that's why he's arguing. The priests want to honor us for the good we've done—by giving us the reward we've just seen. So—"

Before he could finish, Ee-pay was thrust aside by a group of angry

guards, and I was jerked away. Hope screamed, and out of the tail of my eye I saw both Vic and Hope struggling frantically to free themselves from an overwhelming number of guards. Vic tried to shout something, but a claw-like brown hand was immediately thrust over his mouth.

The guards who held me, followed by the priests, made their way toward the extended palms which formed the altar of this strange black god whose favor was death. At a command from the priests, the guards lifted me to the altar and then stood watchfully below, gazing up at me with puzzled, mournful, envious eyes.

I saw the priests crouch low, and make their first beseeching bow, in imitation of the black god. Frantically, I looked about me, seeking some avenue of escape.

Below me, hemming me in, were the guards; a triple ring of them, through which I knew I could not escape. Behind me, for I was facing the multitude, was the hideous, grinning face of the idol.

The priests bowed a second time.

Both Hope and Vic were fighting desperately, but there were at least ten guards to each of them. I lifted my hand and waved a farewell,

hoping that one of them at least would see the gesture and know that my last thought was of them.

Then, as the priests completed their third bow, I turned and faced the statue.

As my eyes fell upon the shutter behind the thick, grinning lips, the shutter which released the lethal force, a wild and desperate idea came to me. With a shout, I jerked the gun from my pocket and leaped aside. As I did so, I fired twice into the gaping mouth, and saw the bullets shatter the heavy shutter. Then, with the humming sound ringing in my ears like a note of death, I leaped clear, into the midst of the waiting guards.

For an instant, there was no movement, no sound, from all that vast crowd. Even the guards seemed stunned, and I tore my way through them with hardly a pause in my stride.

Then a shrill cry went up; a cry that drowned utterly the humming sound that issued from the shattered mouth of the idol. Blindly, the multitude surged towards the scarlet ray that dealt death, fighting their way toward the oblivion they so highly prized.

Those who had been holding Hope and Vic were surging forward

with the rest, their erstwhile prisoners forgotten in their mad greed for death. The crowd jostling about me seemed blind to my presence; every eye was fixed on the altar-like hands of the idol, and the death that blew across them.

“Pete!” yelled Vic. “Coming, boy?” He was waiting for me, staving off as best he could the rush of bodies around him; shielding Hope from the savage jostling.

“Coming!” I leaned forward, butting with my head, both doubled fists working like pistons to clear a way to my companions.

“Nice work, Pete!” shouted Vic, as I joined them, breathless but triumphant. “Now for a break! Gun loaded?”

I snapped open the action and dropped in six cartridges.

“It is now. I’ll go ahead; you bring up the rear with Hope in the middle. Ready?”

“Let’s go!”

I plunged on, Hope’s fingers gripping my belt. Fresh multitudes were pouring up the ramp, brushing aside the five or six priests that had hurried there in an effort to stem the tide.

One of the priests saw us, and cried out shrilly to his companions. With one accord they came toward us, obviously intent upon blocking our way. I have never seen in any other eyes such anger and hatred as blazed in the eyes of those strange beings.

“Watch them, Pete!” roared Vic. “We can’t take chances!” His gun roared twice from behind me, and two of the priests fell writhing, to be instantly trampled into pulp. Another reached out long arms toward Hope, and I let him have it. There was nothing else to do. He went the way of the two others.

Twice again, before we reached the ramp they guarded, the angry attendants of the idol fell before our guns. Then, hurrying down ramp after ramp, corridor after corridor, fighting the rushing mob all the way, we came at last, shaking with weariness and gasping for breath, to the deserted streets of this black and terrible city.

“Are we free?” whispered Hope, holding tightly to my arm. “Are we really free?”

“I hope so, dear. We seem to be. If we can only reach the spot where we entered this insane world before something happens—”

“How much time have we?” interrupted Vic.

I glanced down at my watch, fearful, for a moment, that it had been broken or lost in the melée. It was still running, apparently undamaged.

“Let’s see; it’s four minutes of one. That gives us seven minutes. Can we make it?”

“I think so. It’s not so far, and we’re nearly out of the city. We have to make it!”

Vic led the way, Hope and I following. Anxiously, I watched the minute hand of the watch slide toward the “XII” of the dial ... touch it ... move on....

It was not far, as Vic had said, but we were weary from our battle with the crazed mob, and the best we could force from our legs was a sort of dog-trot.

One minute after ... two....

“Here’s the spot! I marked it with these three pieces of stone. Quick!” Vic swept both arms about Hope and me, holding us in a close embrace, so that we all stood within the triangle formed by the three bits of black rock.

I glanced down at my watch. It lacked but a few seconds of the moment when the machine back in Vic's laboratory would function —provided my watch was correct, and the equipment worked according to schedule.

Suddenly, Hope screamed, and I followed her eyes. A score or more of the strange beings had suddenly materialized but a few yards away, and they were closing in on us swiftly.

I tried to draw my gun. Hands reached out to grasp me; to grasp all three of us. Then darkness closed in swiftly; I was whisked upward, on and on, breathlessly. I was suddenly very heavy; I was dropping in the blackness ... there was something solid beneath my feet ... a glare of light in my eyes.

"Nicely timed, I'll say that," chuckled Vic. "How does our own material little old world look?"

"Great!" I stepped quickly away from the machine, drawing Hope with me. "Doesn't it, Hope?"

She sighed, a long, shuddering sigh, and snuggled into my arms. Vic glanced towards us and grinned.

“Come to think of it,” he remarked, “I believe I’ll run along and see if I can find Mrs. Perrin. I haven’t had a thing to eat since noon yesterday, and I’ve just realized I’m hungry. Will you join me?”

“In a moment,” I nodded, and Vic, being the good scout he was, hurried away.

And the machine?” I asked a few nights later. “Still experimenting with it?” I had really come out to see Hope, of course, but she was still upstairs, putting on the finishing touches.

Vic shook his head quite gravely.

“No, old son; I had enough. Off on another tangent now. Why—would you like to go back?”

“Not me! It doesn’t seem real now; more like a nightmare, but it was terrible enough at the time.”

“I can prove it wasn’t a nightmare,” chuckled Vic. “Come along, and I’ll show you something you missed.” He led the way to the laboratory, and unlocked a drawer, one of several, beneath the work table.

“I found this on the floor of the machine,” he said. “Didn’t notice it

until later. The rays of the machine caught it and brought it back with us; made it solid matter, as we know it here. Do you recognize it?”

I nodded, shuddering. There was no possibility of mistake.

In a squat, clear bottle of alcohol that Vic had taken from the drawer was a sinister, claw-like brown hand, severed cleanly at the wrist.

120 Morale by Murray Leinster

A Story of the War of 1941-43

Aproximate word count: 10,200

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Part 1

"... The profound influence of civilian morale upon the course of modern war is nowhere more clearly shown than in the case of that monstrous war-engine popularly known as a 'Wabbly.' It landed in New Jersey Aug. 16, 1942, and threw the whole Eastern Coast into a frenzy. In six hours the population of three States was in a panic. Industry was paralyzed. The military effect was comparable only to a huge modern army landed in our rear...." (Strategic Lessons of the War of 1941-43.—U. S. War College. Pp. 79-80.)

Sergeant Walpole made his daily report at 2:15. He used a dinky telephone that should have been in a museum, and a rural Central put him on the Area Officer's tight beam. The Area Officer listened drearily as the Sergeant said in a military manner:

It spouted a flash of bluish flame.

"Sergeant Walpole, sir, Post Fourteen, reports that he has nothing of importance to report."

The Wabbly, uncombatable engine of war, spreads unparalleled death and destruction—until Sergeant Walpole "strikes at the morale" of its crew.

The Area Officer's acknowledgment was curt; embittered. For he was an energetic young man, and he loathed his job. He wanted to be in the west, where fighting of a highly unconventional nature was taking place daily. He did not enjoy this business of watching an unthreatened coast-line simply for the maintenance of civilian confidence and morale. He preferred fighting.

Sergeant Walpole, though, exhaled a lungful of smoke at the telephone transmitter and waited. Presently the rural Central said:

"All through?"

"Sure, sweetie," said Sergeant Walpole. "How about the talkies tonight?"

That was at 2:20 P. M. There was coy conversation, while the civilian telephone-service suffered. Then Sergeant Walpole went back to his post of duty with a date for the evening. He never kept that date, as it turned out. The rural Central was dead an hour after the first and only Wabbly landed, and as everybody knows, that happened at 2:45.

But Sergeant Walpole had no premonitions as he went back to his hammock on the porch. This was Post Number Fourteen, Sixth Area, Eastern Coast Observation Force. There was a war on, to be sure. There had been a war on since the fall of 1941, but it was two thousand miles away. Even lone-wolf bombing planes, flying forty thousand feet up, never came this far to drop their eggs upon inviting targets or upon those utterly blank, innocent-seeming places where munitions of war were now manufactured underground.

Here was peace and quiet and good rations and a paradise for gold-brickers. Here was a summer bungalow taken over for military purposes, quartering six men who watched a certain section of coast-

line for a quite impossible enemy. Three miles to the south there was another post. Three miles to the north another one still. They stretched all along the Atlantic Coast, those observation-posts, and the men in them watched the sea, languidly observed the television broadcasts, and slept in the sun. That was all they were supposed to do. In doing it they helped to maintain civilian morale. And therefore the Eastern Coast Observation Force was enviously said to be "just attached to the Army for rations," by the other services, and its members rated with M. P.'s and other low forms of animal life.

Sergeant Walpole reclined in his hammock, inhaling comfortably. The ocean glittered blue before him in the sun. There was a plume of smoke out at sea indicating an old-style coal-burner, its hull down below the horizon. Anything that would float was being used since the war began, though a coal-burning ship was almost a museum piece. A trim Diesel tramp was lazing northward well inshore. A pack of gulls were squabbling noisily over some unpleasantness floating a hundred yards from the beach. The Diesel tramp edged closer inshore still. It was all very peaceful and placid. There are few softer jobs on earth than being a member of a "force in being" for the sake of civilian morale.

But at 2:32 P. M. the softness of that job departed, as far as Sergeant Walpole was concerned. At that moment he heard a thin wailing

sound high aloft. It was well enough known nearer the front, but the Eastern Coast Observation Force had had no need to become unduly familiar with it. With incredible swiftness the wailing rose to the shrillest of shrieks, descending as lightning might be imagined to descend. Then there was a shattering concussion. It was monstrous. It was ear-splitting. Windows crashed in the cottage and tinkled to the sandy earth outside. There was a pause of seconds' duration only, during which Sergeant Walpole stared blankly and gasped, "What the hell?" Then there was a second thin wailing which rose to a scream....

Sergeant Walpole was in motion before the second explosion came. He was diving off the veranda of Post Number Fourteen. He saw someone else coming through a window. He had a photographic glimpse of one of his men emerging through a doorway. Then he struck earth and began to run. Like everybody else in America, he knew what the explosions and the screamings meant.

But he had covered no more than fifty yards when the third bomb fell from that plane so far aloft that it was not even a mote in the sky. Up there the sky was not even blue, but a dull leaden gray because of the thinness of the atmosphere yet above it. The men in that high-flight bomber could see the ground only as a mass of vaguely blending colors. They were aiming their bombs by filtered light,

through telescopes which used infra-red rays only, as aerial cameras did back in the 1920's. And they were sighting their eggs with beautifully exact knowledge of their velocity and height. By the time the bombs had dropped eight miles they were traveling faster than the sound of their coming. The first two had wiped out Posts Thirteen and Fifteen. The third made no sound before it landed, except to an observer at a distance. Sergeant Walpole heard neither the scream of fall nor the sound of its explosion.

He was running madly, and suddenly the earth bucked violently beneath his feet, and he had a momentary sensation of things flying madly by over his head, and then he knew nothing at all for a very long time. Then his head ached horribly and someone was popping at something valorously with a rifle, and he heard the nasty sharp explosions of the hexynitrate bullets which have remodeled older ideas of warfare, and Sergeant Walpole was aware of an urgent necessity to do something, but he could not at all imagine what it was. Then a shell went off, the earth-concussion banged his nose against the sand, and the rifle-fire stopped.

"For Gawd's sake!" said Sergeant Walpole dizzily.

He staggered to his feet and looked behind him. Where the cottage had been there was a hole. Quite a large hole. It was probably a

hundred yards across and all of twenty deep, but sea-water was seeping in to fill it through the sand. Its edge was forty or fifty feet from where he stood. He had been knocked down by the heaving earth, and the sand and mud blown out of the crater had gone clean over him. Twenty feet back, the top part of his body would have been cut neatly off by the blast. As it was....

He found his nose bleeding and plugged it with his handkerchief. He was still rather dazed, and he still had the feeling that there was something extremely important that he must do. He stood rocking on his feet, trying to clear his head, when two men came along the sand-dunes behind the beach. One of them carried two automatic rifles. The other was trying to bandage a limp and flapping arm as he ran. They saw the Sergeant and ran to him.

"Hell, Sarge, I thought y'were blown to little egg-shells."

"I ain't," said Sergeant Walpole. He looked again at the hole in the ground and swore painedly.

"Look at that," said the man with the flapping arm. "Hell's goin' to pop around here, Sarge."

The sergeant swung around. Then his mouth dropped open. Just half

a mile away and hardly more than two hundred yards from the shore-line, the Diesel tramp was ramming the beach. A wake still foamed behind it. A monstrous bow-wave spread out on either hand, over-topping even the combers that came rolling in. It was being deliberately run ashore. It struck, and its fore-mast crumpled up and fell forward, carrying its derrick-booms with it. There was the squeal of crumpled metal plates.

"Flyin' a yeller flag just now," panted one of the two privates. "We started poppin' hexynitrate bullets at her an' she flung a shell at us. She's a enemy ship. But what the hell?"

Smoke spurted up from the beached ship. Her stern broke off and settled in the deeper water out from the shore. More smoke spurted out. Her bow split wide. There were the deep rumbles of black-powder explosions. Sergeant Walpole and his two followers stared blankly. More explosions, and the ship was hidden in smoke, and when it blew away her funnel was down and half or more of her upper works was sliding into the sea, and she had listed suddenly.

Sergeant Walpole gazed upward. Futilely, of course; there was nothing in sight overhead. But these explosions did look like the hexynitrate stuff they put in small-arm bullets nowadays. A thirty-caliber bullet had the explosive effect of an old-style six-pound

T.N.T. shell. Only, hexynitrate goes off with a crack instead of a boom. It wasn't an American plane opening up with a machine-gun.

Then the beached ship seemed to blow up. A mass of thick smoke covered her from stem to stern, and bits of plating flew heavily through the air, and there were a few lurid bursts of flame. Sergeant Walpole suddenly remembered that there ought to be survivors, only he hadn't seen anybody diving overboard to try to get ashore. He half-started forward....

Then the sea-breeze blew this smoke, too, away from the wreckage. And the tramp was gone, but there was something else left in its place—so that Sergeant Walpole took one look, and swallowed a non-existent something that came up instantly into his throat again, and remembered the urgent thing he had to do.

"Pete," he said calmly, "you hunt up the Area Officer an' tell him what you seen. Here! I'll give you a report that'll keep 'em from slammin' you in clink for bein' drunk. Grab a monocycle somewheres. It's faster than a car, the way you'll be travelin'. First telephone you come to that's workin', make Central put you in the tight beam to head-quarters. Then go on an' report, y'self. See?"

Pete started, and automatically fumbled with his limp and useless

arm. Then he carefully tucked the unmanageable hand in the pocket of his uniform blouse.

"That don't matter now," he said absurdly.

He was looking at the thing left in place of the tramp, as Sergeant Walpole scribbled on one of the regulation report-forms of the Eastern Coast Observation Force. And the thing he saw was enough to upset anybody.

Where the tramp had been there was a single bit of bow-plating sticking up out of the surf, and a bunch of miscellaneous floating wreckage drifting sluggishly toward the beach. And there was a solid, rounded, metallic shape apparently quite as long as the original tramp had been. There was a huge armored tube across its upper part, with vision-slits in two bulbous sections at its end. There were gun-ports visible here and there, and already a monstrous protuberance was coming into view midway along its back, as if forced into position from within. Where the bow of the tramp had been there were colossal treads now visible. There was a sort of conning-tower, armored and grim. There was a ghastly steel beak. The thing was a war-machine of monstrous size. It emitted a sudden roaring sound, as of internal-combustion engines operating at full power, and lurched heavily. The steel plates of the tramp still visible

above water, crumpled up like paper and were trodden under. The thing came toward the shore. It slithered through the shallow sea, with waves breaking against its bulging sides. It came out upon the beach, its wet sides glittering. It was two hundred feet long, and it looked somehow like a gigantic centipede.

It was a tank, of sorts, but like no tank ever seen on earth before. It was the great-grandfather of all tanks. It was so monstrous that for its conveyance a ship's hull and superstructure had been built about it, and its own engines had been the engines of that ship. It was so huge that it could only be landed by blasting away a beached ship from about itself, so it could run under its own power over the fragments to the shore.

Now it stopped smoothly on the sandy beach, in which its eight-foot-wide steel treads sank almost a yard. Men dropped down from ports in its swelling sides. They made swift, careful inspections of predetermined points. They darted back up the ladders again. The thing roared once more. Then it swung about, headed for the sand-dunes, and with an extraordinary smoothness and celerity disappeared inland.

Part 2

"... The Wabbly was meant for one purpose, the undermining of civilian morale. To accomplish that purpose it set systematically about the establishment of a reign of terror; and so complete was its success that half the population of a state was in headlong flight within two hours. It was, first, mysterious; secondly, deadly, and within a very few hours it had built up a reputation for invincibility. Judged on the basis of its first twelve hours' work alone, it was the most successful experiment of the war. Its effect on civilian morale was incalculable." (Strategic Lessons of the War of 1941-43.—U. S. War College. Pp. 80-81.)

Two of the members of Observation-Post Fourteen gaped after the retreating monster. Sergeant Walpole scribbled on the official form. Just as the monstrous thing dipped down out of sight there was a vicious, crashing report from its hinder part. Something shrieked....

Sergeant Walpole got up, spitting sand. There was blood on the report-form in his hand. He folded it painstakingly. Of the two men who had been with him, one was struggling out of the sand as Sergeant Walpole had had to do. The other was scattered over a good many square yards of sandy beach.

"Um. They seen us," said Sergeant Walpole, "an' they got Pete. You'll have to take this report. I'm goin' after the damn thing."

"What for?" asked the other man blankly.

"To keep it in sight," said Sergeant Walpole. "That's tactics. If somebody springs somethin' you ain't able to fight, run away but keep it in sight an' report to the nearest commissioned officer. Remember that. Now get on. There's monocycles in the village. Get there an' beat that damn Wabbly thing with the news."

He saw his follower start off, sprinting. That particular soldier, by the way, was identified by his dog-tag some days later. As nearly as could be discovered, he had died of gas. But Sergeant Walpole picked up one of the two rifles, blew sand out of the breech-mechanism, and started off after the metal monster. He walked in the eight-foot track of one of its treads. As he went, he continued the cleaning of sand from the rifle in his hands. The rifle was useless against such a monster, of course, but it is quaint to reflect that in that automatic rifle, firing hexynitrate bullets, each equivalent to a six-pounder T.N.T. shell in destructiveness, Sergeant Walpole carried greater "fire-power" than Napoleon ever disposed in battle.

The tread of the Wabbly made a perfect roadway. Presently Sergeant

Walpole looked up to find himself scrutinizing somebody's dining-room table, set for lunch. The Wabbly had crossed a house in its path without swerving. Walls, chimneys, timbers and planks, all had gone beneath its treads. But they had been pressed so smoothly flat that until Sergeant Walpole looked down at his footing, he would not have known he was walking on the wreckage of a building.

It was half an hour before he reached the village. The Wabbly had gone from end to end, backed up, and gone over the rest of it again. There was the taint of gas in the air. Sergeant Walpole halted outside the debris. His gas-mask had been blown to atoms with Observation-Post Fourteen.

"They're tryin' to beat the news o' their comin'," he reflected aloud, "which is why they smashed up the village. The telephone exchange was there.... Tillie's under there somewheres...."

He fumbled with the rifle, suddenly swearing queerly hate-distorted oaths. Tillie had not been the great love of Sergeant Walpole's life. She was merely a country telephone operator, reasonably pretty, and flattered by his uniform. But she was under a mass of splintered wood and crushed brick-work, killed while trying to connect with the tight beam to Area Headquarters to report the monster rushing upon the village. That monster had destroyed the little settlement.

There was nothing left at all but wreckage and the eight-foot tracks of monster treads. Sometimes those tracks crossed each other. Between them wreckage survived to a height of as much as four feet, which was the clearance of the Wabbly's body.

Something roared low overhead. Sergeant Walpole swore bitterly, looked upward, and waited to die. But the small plane was American, and old. It was a training-plane, useless for front-line work. It dived to earth, the pilot waved impatiently, and Walpole plunged to a place beside him. Instantly thereafter the plane took off.

"What was it?" shouted the pilot, sliding off at panic-stricken speed across the tree-tops. "They heard the bombs go off all the way to Philly. Sent me. What in hell was it?"

A thin, high, wailing sound coming down as lightning might be imagined to descend.... The pilot dived madly and got behind a pine forest before the explosion and the concussion that followed it. Sergeant Walpole saw the pine-trees shiver. The sheer explosion-wave of that egg, if it hit an old ship like this in mid-air, would have stripped the fabric from its wings.

"Set me down," said Sergeant Walpole. "They're watchin' us from aloft. I sent a man on a monocycle to report." But he told luridly of

the thing that had come ashore, and of its destructiveness. "Now set me down. Gimme a gas-mask an' clear out. You ain't got a burglar's chance of gettin' back."

The pilot set him down, and began ticking away on a code sender even as he landed. Then he climbed swiftly away from the Sergeant, headed in a weaving, crazy line to westward. Then things screamed downward and the Sergeant clapped hands over his ears once more. The ground quivered underfoot, though the eggs landed a good three-quarters of a mile away. The training-plane dropped like a plummet. The sharpness of a hexynitrate explosion carries its effect to quite incredible distances. The fabric of its wings split to ribbons. The ship landed somewhere and smoke rose from it.

"He shouldn't ha' gone up so high," said Sergeant Walpole.

He struck across country for the treads of the Wabbly once more. He saw a school-house. The Wabbly had passed within a hundred yards of it. The school-house seemed deserted. Then the Sergeant saw the hole in its roof. Then he caught the infinitely faint taint of gas.

"Mighty anxious," said Sergeant Walpole woodenly, "not to let news get ahead of 'em. Yeah.... If it busts on places without warnin', it'll have that much easier work. I hope I'm in on the party when we get

this damn thing."

There was no use in approaching the school-house, though he had a gas-mask now. Sergeant Walpole went on.

Part 3

"... The Wabbly made no attempt to do purely military damage. The Enemy command realized that the destruction of civilian morale was even more important than the destruction of munitions factories. In this, the Enemy displayed the same acumen that makes the war a fruitful subject of study to the strategic student." (Strategic Lessons of the War of 1941-43.—U. S. War College. Pp. 81-82.)

At nightfall the monster swerved suddenly and moved with greater speed. It showed no lights. It did not even make very much noise. Then the second flight of home-defense planes made their attack. Sergeant Walpole heard them droning overhead. He lit a fire instantly. A little helicopter dropped from the blackness above him and he began to heap dirt desperately on the blaze.

"Who's there?" demanded a voice.

"Sergeant Walpole, Post Fourteen, Eastern Coast Observation," said the Sergeant in a military manner. "Beg to report, sir, that the dinkus that brought down the other ships is housed in that big bulge on top of the Wabbly."

"Get in," said the voice.

The Sergeant obeyed. With a purring noise the helicopter shot upward. Then something went off in mid-sky, miles ahead, where a faint humming noise had announced the flight of attack-planes. A lurid, crackling detonation lit up the sky. One of the ships of the night-flying squadron. From the helicopter they could see the rest of the flight limned clearly in the flash of the explosion. Instantly thereafter there was another such flash. Then another.

"Three," said the voice beside Sergeant Walpole. Another flash. "Four...." The invisible operator of the screw-lifted ship was very calm about it. "Five. Six." The explosions lit the sky. Presently he said grimly. "That's all of them. I'd better report it."

He was silent for a while. Sergeant Walpole saw his hand flicking a key up and down in the faint light of radio bulbs.

"Now shoot the works," said the helicopter man evenly. "All the ships that attacked this afternoon went down. One of them started to report, but didn't get but two words through. What did that damned thing use on them?"

"A dinkus on top, sir," said Sergeant Walpole formally. "I'd found a monocycle, sir, and was trailing the thing. I'd come to the top of a hill and seen it moving through a pine-wood, crashing down the

trees in front of it like they wasn't there. Then a egg came down from Gawd-knows-where up aloft. I stopped up my ears, thinkin' it was aimin' for me. Then I seen the ships. Two of 'em were fallin'. They landed, an' I heard a coupla other explosions. Little ones, they sounded like."

The helicopter man's wrist was flicking up and down.

"Little ones!" he said sardonically. "Those ships were carrying five-hundred-pound bombs! It was those you heard going off!"

"Maybe," conceded Sergeant Walpole. "There was twenty or thirty ships flyin' in formation, goin' hell-for-leather for the Wabbly. They were trailin' it from the air. They were comin', natural, for me, because I was between them an' it. Then my pants caught on fire—"

"What?"

"My pants caught on fire," said Sergeant Walpole, woodenly. "I was sittin' on the monocycle, tryin' to figure out which way to duck. An' my pants caught on fire. The bike was gettin' hot. I climbed off it an' it blew up. My rifle was hot, too, an' I chucked it away. Then I saw a ship go down, on fire. The Wabbly'd stopped still an' it didn't fire a shot. I'll swear to that. Just my monocycle got hot an' caught on fire,

an' then a ship busted out in flames an' went down. A couple more eggs come down an' three ships dropped. Didn't hit 'em. The concussion blew the fabric off 'em. Another one caught fire an' crashed. Then another one. I looked, an' saw the next one catch. Then the next. It was like a searchlight beam hittin' 'em. They flamed up, blew up, an' that was that. The last two tried to get away, but they lit up an' crashed."

The pilot's hand flicked up and down, interminably. There was the steady fierce down-beat of the slip-stream from the vertical propellers. The helicopter swept forward in a swooping dash.

"The whole east coast's gone crazy," said the 'copter man drily. "Crazy fools trying to run away. Roads jammed. Work stopped. It leaked out about the planes being wiped out to-day, and everybody in three states has heard those eggs going off. You're the only living man who's seen that crawling thing and lived to tell about it. I've sent your stuff back. What's that about the thing on top?"

"I hid," said Sergeant Walpole, woodenly. "The Wabbly sent over gas-shells where the ships landed. Then it went on. Headin' west. It's got a crazy-lookin' dinkus on top like a searchlight. That moved, while the ships were catchin' fire an' crashin'. Just like a searchlight, it moved an' the ships went down. But the Wabbly didn't fire a shot."

The helicopter man's wrist flexed swiftly....

"Gawd!" said Sergeant Walpole in sudden agony. "Drop! Quick!"

The helicopter went down like a stone. A propeller shrieked away into space. Metalwork up aloft glowed dully red. Then there were whipping, lashing branches closing swiftly all around the helicopter. A jerk. A crash. Stillness. The smell of growing things all about.

"Well?" said the 'copter pilot.

"They turned it on us—whatever it is," said Sergeant Walpole. "They near got us, too."

A match scratched. A cigarette glowed. The Sergeant fumbled for a smoke for himself.

"I'm waiting for that metal to cool off," said the helicopter pilot. "Maybe we can take off again. They located us with a loop while I was sending your stuff. Damn! I see what they've got!"

"What?"

"A way of transmitting real power in a radio beam," said the 'copter man. "You've seen eddy-current stoves. Everybody cooks with 'em

nowadays. A coil with a high-frequency current. You can stick your hand in it and nothing happens. But you stick an iron pan down in the coil and it gets hot and cooks things. Hysteresis. The same thing that used to make transformer-cores get hot. The same thing happens near any beam transmitter, only you have to measure the heating effect with a thermo-couple. The iron absorbs the radio waves and gets hot. The chaps in the Wabbly can probably put ten thousand horsepower in a damned beam. We can't. But any iron in the way will get hot. It blows up a ship at once. Your monocycle and your rifle too. Damn!"

He knocked the ash off his cigarette.

"Scientific, those chaps. I'll see if that metal's cool."

Something whined overhead, rising swiftly to a shriek as it descended. Sergeant Walpole cowered, with his hands to his ears. But it was not an earth-shaking concussion. It was an explosion, yes, but subtly different from the rending snap of hexynitrate.

"Gas," said the Sergeant dully, and fumbled for his mask.

"No good," said the 'copter man briefly. "Vesicatory. Smell it? I guess they've got us. No sag-suits. Not even sag-paste."

The Sergeant lit a match. The flame bent a little from the vertical.

"There's a wind. We got a chance."

"Get going, then," said the 'copter man. "Run upwind."

Sergeant Walpole slid over the side and ran. A hundred yards. Two hundred. Pine-woods have little undergrowth. He heard the helicopter's engines start. The ship tried to lift. He redoubled his speed. Presently he broke out into open ploughed land.

In the starlight he saw a barn, and he raced toward that. Someone else plunged out of the woods toward him. The helicopter-engine was still roaring faintly in the distance. Then a thin whine came down from aloft....

When the echoes of the explosion died away the pilot was grinning queerly. The helicopter's engine was still.

"I said it could be done! Pack of fat-heads at Headquarters!"

"Huh?"

"Picking up a ship by its spark-plugs, with a loop. They're doing that up aloft. There's a ship up there, forty thousand feet or so. Maybe

half a dozen ships. Refueling in air, I guess, and working with the thing you call a Wabbly. When I started the 'copter's engine they got the spark-impulses and sighted on them. We'd better get away from here."

"Horses in here," said Sergeant Walpole. "The Wabbly came by. No people left."

They brought the animals out. The horses reared and plunged as there were other infinitely sharp, deadly explosions of the eggs coming down eight miles through darkness.

"Let's go. After the Wabbly?" said the 'copter man.

"O' course," said Sergeant Walpole. "Somebody's got to find out how to lick it."

They went clattering through darkness. It was extraordinary what desolation, what utter lack of human life they moved through. They came to a town, and there was a taint of gas in the air. No lights burned in that town. It was dead. The Wabbly had killed it.

Part 4

"... which panic was enhanced by the destruction of a second flight of fighting planes. However, the destruction of Bendsboro completed civilian demoralization.... A newscasting company re-broadcast a private television contact with the town at the moment the Wabbly entered it. Practically all the inhabitants of the Atlantic Coast heard and saw the annihilation of the town—hearing the cries of 'Gas!' and the screams of the people, and hearing the crashings as the Wabbly crushed its way inexorably across the city, spreading terror everywhere.... Frenzied demands were made upon the Government for the recall of troops from the front to offer battle to the Wabbly.... It is considered that at that time the one Wabbly had a military effect equal to at least half a million men." (Strategic Lessons of the War of 1941-43.—U. S. War College. Pp. 83-84.)

They did not enter the town. There was just enough of starlight to show that the Wabbly had gone through it, and then crashed back and forth ruthlessly. There was a great gash through the center of the buildings nearest the edge, and there were other gashes visible here and there. Everything was crushed down utterly flat in two eight-foot paths; and there was a mass of crumbled debris four feet high at its highest in between the tread-marks.

They looked, silently, and went on. They reached a railroad track, the quadruple track of a branch-line from New York to Philadelphia. The Wabbly was going along that right-of-way. There was no right-of-way left where it had been. Rails were crushed flat. Culverts were broken through. But the horses raced along the smoothed tread-trails. Once a broken, twisted rail tore at Sergeant Walpole's sleeve. Somehow the last great plate of a tread had bent it upward. Presently they saw a mass of something dark off to the left. Flames were licking meditatively at one of the wrecked cars.

Then they heard explosions far ahead. Flames lighted the sky.

"Our men in action!" said Sergeant Walpole hungrily.

He flogged his mount mercilessly. Then the sky became bright in the distance. The horses, going down the crushed-smooth trail of the treads, gained upon the din. Then they saw the cause of it, miles distant. A train was burning luridly. Its forepart was wreckage, pure and simple. The rest was going up in flames and detonations. Munitions, of course. The Wabbly was off at one side, flame-lit and monstrous, sliding smoothly out of sight.

"Ten miles of railroad," said the 'copter pilot calmly, "mashed out of existence. That's going to scare our people into fits. They can drop

eggs till the cows come home, and every egg'll smash up a hundred yards of right-of-way, and we can build it back up again in four hours with mobile track-layers. But ten miles to be regraded and laid is different. Half of America will be imagining all our railroads smashed and starvation ahead."

A piercing light fell upon them.

"Shut it off!" roared Sergeant Walpole. "D'y'want to get us killed?"

He and the 'copter pilot swerved. There was a car there, a huge two-wheeled car, whose gyroscopes hummed softly while its driver tried to extract it from something it was tangled in.

"I commandeer this car," said the 'copter pilot. "Military necessity. We have to trail that Wabbly."

Someone grunted. Lights flashed on within. The 'copter pilot and Sergeant Walpole stiffened to attention. The stars of a major-general shone on the collar of the stout man within.

"Beg pardon, sir," said the pilot, and was still.

"Umph," said the major-general. "There seem to be just four of us alive, who've seen the thing clearly. I hit on it by accident, I'll admit.

What do you know about it?"

"It come on a tramp-steamer—" began Sergeant Walpole.

"Hm. You're Sergeant Walpole. Mentioned in dispatches to-morrow, Sergeant. You, sir?"

"Its weapon against our planes, sir," said the 'copter man precisely, "is a radio beam carrying several thousand horsepower of energy. When it hits iron, sir, the energy is absorbed and the iron heats up and blows up the ship. The Wabbly's working with a bomber well aloft, sir, which spots planes from below by picking up their spark-plug flashes in a directional loop. The bomber aloft, sir, drops eggs when the Wabbly's attacked. Sergeant Walpole reports several planes disabled by their fabric being blown off their wings."

"I know," said the major-general. "Dammit, the front takes every ship that's fit to go aloft. We have only wrecks back here. You're sure about that spark-plug affair?"

"Yes, sir," said the 'copter pilot. "My ship crashed, sir. I started the motors again, trying to take off. Eggs began to drop about me instantly."

"Nasty!" said the major-general. "I was going to join my men. We've flung a line of artillery ahead of the thing. Motor-driven, of course. But if they can pick up motors by the spark-waves, the bomber knows all about it. Nasty!"

He lit a cigar, calmly. The gyrocar shifted suddenly and backed away from the thing it had been tangled in.

"Why ain't the bombers been shot down?" demanded Sergeant Walpole angrily. "Dammit, sir, if it wasn't for them bombers—"

"Up to an hour ago," said the major-general, "we had lost sixty-eight planes trying to get those bombers. You see, it works both ways. The bombers drop eggs to help the Wabbly defend itself. And the Wabbly uses that power-beam you spoke of to wipe the sky clean about the bombers. I wondered how it was done, before you explained, sir. Do you men want to come with me? Get on the running-board if you like. We shall probably be killed."

The gyrocar purred softly away, with two horses left wandering and two men clinging fast in a sweep of wind. They found a ribbon of concrete road and the wind sang as the car picked up speed. Then, suddenly, it bucked madly and went out of control, and, as suddenly, was passing along the road again. The Wabbly had passed over the

roadway here.

And then they heard gunfire ahead. Honest, malevolent gunfire. Flashes lit the horizon. The gyrocar speeded up until it fairly hummed, and the wind rushed into the nostrils and mouths of the men on the running-boards. The cannonade increased. It reached really respectable proportions, until it became a titanic din. As the road rose up a long incline, a shell burst in mid-air in plain view, and the driver of the gyrocar jammed on the brakes and looked down upon the strangest of sights below.

There were other hills yet ahead, and from behind them came that faint, indefinite glow which is the glow of the lights of a city. At the bottom of a valley, a mile and a half distant, there was the Wabbly. Star-shells flared near it, casting it into intolerable brightness and clear relief. And other shells were breaking upon it and all about it. From beyond the rim of hills came the flashes of guns. The air was full of screamings and many crashes.

The Wabbly was motionless. It looked more than ever like a monstrous, deadly centipede. It was under a rain of fire that would have shattered a dreadnaught of the 1920's. Its monstrous treads were motionless. It seemed queerly quiescent, abstracted; it seemed less defiant of the shell-fire that broke upon it like the hail of hell,

than indifferent to it. Yes, it seemed indifferent!

Only the queer excrescence on its top moved, and that stirred vaguely. Star-shells floated overhead and bathed it in pitiless light. And it remained motionless.... Sergeant Walpole had a vague impression of colossal detonations taking place miles above his head, but the sound was lost in the drumfire of artillery nearer at hand.

Then a gun on the Wabbly moved. It spouted a flash of bluish flame, and then another and another. It seemed to fire gas-shells into the town, at this moment, ignoring the batteries playing upon it. It was still again, while the queer excrescence on its back moved vaguely and shells burst about it in a very inferno.

Then the treads moved, and with a swift celerity the Wabbly moved smoothly forward and up the incline toward the cannonading guns. It went over the top of the incline, and those in the gyrocar saw its reception. Guns opened on it at point-blank range. Now the Wabbly itself went into action. In the light of star-shells and explosions they saw its guns begin to bellow. It went swiftly and malevolently forward, moving with centipedean smoothness.

It dipped out of sight. The cannonade lessened. Two guns stopped.

Three.... Half a dozen guns were out of action. A dozen guns ceased to fire.... One last weapon boomed desperately at its maximum rate of fire....

That stopped. The night became strangely, terribly still. The major-general put aside his radivision receiver. Though neither the helicopter pilot nor Sergeant Walpole had noticed it, he had opened communication the instant the gyrocar came to a stop. Now the major-general was desperately, terribly white.

"The artillery is wiped out," he observed detachedly. "The Wabbly, it seems, is going on into the town."

They did not want to listen, those men who waited futilely by the gyrocar which had witnessed the invulnerability of the Wabbly to all attack. They did not want to listen at all. But they heard the noises as the Wabbly crashed across the town, and back and forth.

"Morale effect," said the major-general, through stiff lips. "That's what it's for. To break down the morale behind the lines. Good God! What hellish things mere words can mean!"

Part 5

"... The only weak spot in the Wabbly's design, apparently, was the necessity of using its entire engine-power in the power-beam with which it protected itself and its attendant bombers from aerial attack. For a time, before New Brunswick, it was forced to remain still, under fire, while it fought off and destroyed an attacking fleet eight miles above it. With sufficiently powerful artillery, it might have been destroyed at that moment. But it was invulnerable to the artillery available.... Deliberately false statements were broadcast to reassure the public, but the public was already skeptical, as it later became incredulous, of official reports of victories. The destruction of New Brunswick became known despite official denials, and colossal riots broke out among the inhabitants of the larger cities, intent upon escape from defenseless towns.... Orders were actually issued withdrawing a quarter of a million men from the front-line reserve, with artillery in proportion to their force." (Strategic Lessons of the War of 1941-43.—U. S. War College. P. 92.)

The major-general left them at the town, now quite still and silent. Sergeant Walpole said detachedly:

"We'll prob'ly find a portable sender, sir, an' trail the Wabbly. That's about all we can do, sir."

"It looks," said the major-general rather desperately, "as if that is all anybody can do. I'm going on to take command ahead."

The 'copter pilot said politely:

"Sir, if you're going to sow mines for the Wabbly—"

"Of course!"

"That power-beam can explode them, sir, before the Wabbly gets to them. May I suggest, sir, that mine-cases with no metal in them at all would be worth trying?"

"Thank you," said the major-general grimly. "I'll have concrete ones made."

Sergeant Walpole grunted suddenly.

"Look here, sir! The Wabbly stops when it uses that dinkus on top. This guy here says it uses a lotta power—four or five thousan' horsepower."

"More likely ten or twenty," said the 'copter pilot.

"Maybe," said Sergeant Walpole profoundly, "it takes all the power

they got to work that dinkus. They were workin' it just now when the artillery was slammin' 'em. So next time you want to tackle it, stick a flock o' bombs around an' attack the bombers too. If they're kept busy down below, maybe the planes can get the bombers, or otherwise they'll get a chance to use a big gun on the Wabbly."

The major-general nodded.

"We four," he observed, "are the only living men who've actually seen the Wabbly and gotten away. I shall use both your suggestions. And I shall not send those orders by radio—not even tight beam radio. I'll carry them myself. Good luck!"

A non-commissioned officer of the Eastern Coast Observation Force and a yet uncommissioned flying cadet waved a cheerful good-by to the major-general in charge of home defense in three states. Then they went on into the town.

"Monocycles first," said Sergeant Walpole. "An' a sender."

The 'copter man nodded. The street-lights of the town dimmed and brightened. The Wabbly had paused only to create havoc, not to produce utter chaos. It had gone back and forth over the town two or three times, spewing out gas as it went. But most of the town was

still standing, and the power-house had not been touched. Only its untended Diesels had checked before a fuel-pump cleared.

They found a cycle-shop, its back wall bulged in by wreckage against it. Sergeant Walpole inspected its wares expertly. A voice began to speak suddenly. A television set had somehow been turned on by the crash that bulged the back wall.

"The monster tank has been held in check," said a smug voice encouragingly. "Encountered by home-defense troops and artillery, it proved unable to face shell-fire...."

"Liars!" said the 'copter man calmly. He picked up the nearest loose object and flung it into the bland face of the official news-announcer. The television set went dead, but there were hissings and sputterings in its interior. He had flung a Bissel battery at it, one of a display-group, and its high-tension terminals hissed and sparked among the stray wires in the cabinet.

"That makes me mad," said the 'copter man grimly. "Lying for morale! The other side murders our civilians to break down morale, and our side lies about it to build morale back up again. To hell with morale!"

Sergeant Walpole reached in and pulled out the battery. Bissel batteries turn out six hundred volts these days, and they make a fat spark when short-circuited.

"For Gawd's sake!" said Sergeant Walpole. "If they can pick up sparks from a motor, can't they pick 'em up from this? What the hell y'doin'? Y'want 'em droppin' eggs on us? Say!"

He stopped short, his eyes burning. He began to talk, suddenly groping for words while he waved the high-powered small battery in his hand. The helicopter man listened, at first skeptically and then with an equally hungry enthusiasm.

"Sergeant," he said evenly, "that's an idea! A whale of an idea! A hell of a fine idea! Let's get some rockets!"

"Why rockets?" demanded Sergeant Walpole in his turn. "Whatcha want to do? Celebrate the Fourth o' July?"

The 'copter man explained, this time, and Sergeant Walpole seized upon the addition. Then they began a hunt. They roved the town over, and it was not pleasant. When the Wabbly had gone into that town there had still been very many living human beings in it. Some of them had believed in the ability of the artillery to defend the town

against a single monster. Some had had no means of getting away. But all of them had tried to get away when the Wabbly went lurching in among the houses.

For them, the Wabbly had spewed out deadly gases. Also it had simply forged ahead. And the two living men in their gas-masks paid as little attention as possible to the bodies in the streets, most of them in flimsy night-clothing, struck down in frenzied flight, but they could not help seeing too much....

In the end they went back to the artillery-positions and found signal-rockets there. Two full cases of them, marvelously unexploded. A little later two monocycles purred madly in the beaten-down paths of the monstrous treads. Sergeant Walpole bore very many Bissel batteries, which will deliver six hundred volts even on short-circuit for half an hour at a time. The 'copter man carried some of them, too, and both men were loaded down.

When dawn came they were hollow-eyed and gaunt and weary. It had started to rain, too, and both of them were drenched. They could see no more than a couple of hundred yards in every direction, and they were hungry, and they had seen things no man should have to look upon, in the way of destruction. They came upon a wrecked artillery-train just as the world lightened to a pallid gray. Guns

twisted and burst. Caissons, no more than shattered scraps of metal, because of the explosion of the shells within them. And the tread-tracks of the Wabbly led across the mess. Steam still rose, hissing softly, from the bent and twisted guns which had burst when they were heated to redness by the power-beam. And there was a staff gyrocar crumpled against a tree where it had been flung by some explosion or other. There were neither sound nor wounded men about; only dead ones. The Wabbly had been here.

"Hullo," said the helicopter man in a dreary levity, "there's a portable vision set in this car. Let's call up the general and see how he is?"

Sergeant Walpole spat. Then he held up his hand. He was listening. Far off in the drumming downpour of the rain there was a rumbling sound. He had heard it before. It was partly made up of the noise of internal-combustion engines of unthinkable power, and partly of grumbling treads forcing a way through reluctant trees. It was a long way off, now, but it was coming nearer.

"The Wabbly," said Sergeant Walpole. "Comin' back. Why? Hell's bells! Why's it comin' back?"

"I don't know," said the 'copter man, "but let's get some rockets fixed up."

The two of them worked almost lackadaisically. They were tired out. But they took the tiny Bissel batteries and twisted the attached wires about the rocket-heads. They had twenty or thirty of them fixed by the time the noise of the Wabbly was very near. There was the noise of felled trees, pushed down by the Wabbly in its progress. Great, crackling crashes, and then crunching sounds, and above them the thunderous smooth purring rumble of the monster. The 'copter man climbed into the upside-down staff car. He turned the vision set on and fiddled absurdly with the controls.

"I'm getting something," he announced suddenly. "The bomber up aloft is sending its stuff down a beam, a tight beam to the Wabbly. Listen to it!"

The uncouth, clacking syllables of the enemy tongue came from the vision set. Someone was speaking crisply and precisely somewhere. Blurred, indistinct flashes appeared on the vision set screen.

"They ought to be worried," the 'copter man said wearily. "Even an infra-red telescope can't pick up a damned thing through clouds like this. And the Wabbly's in a mess without a bomber to help...."

Sergeant Walpole did not reply. He was exhausted. He sat looking tiredly off through the rain in the direction of the approaching noise.

Somehow it did not occur to him to run away. He sat quite still, smoking a soggy cigarette.

Something beaked and huge appeared behind a monstrous oak-tree. It came on. The oak-tree crackled, crashed, and went down. It was ground under by the monstrous war-engine that went over it. The Wabbly was unbelievably impersonal and horrible in its progress. There had been a filling-station for gyrocars close by the place where the artillery-train had been wrecked. One of the eight-foot treads loomed over that station, descended upon it—and the filling-station was no more. The Wabbly was then not more than a hundred yards from Sergeant Walpole, less than a city block. He looked at it in a weary detachment. It was as high as a four-story house, and it was two hundred feet long, and forty feet wide at the treads with the monstrous gun-bulges reaching out an extra ten or fifteen feet on either side above. And it came grumbling on toward him.

Part 6

"... Considered as a strategic move, the Wabbly was a triumph. Eighteen hours after its landing, the orders for troops called for half a million men to be withdrawn from the forces at the front and in reserve, and munitions-factories were being diverted from the supply of the front to the manufacture of devices designed to cope with it. This, in turn, entailed changes in the front-line activities of the Command.... Altogether, it may be said that the Wabbly, eighteen hours after its landing, was exerting the military pressure of an army of not less than half a million men upon the most vulnerable spot in our defenses—the rear.... And when its effect upon civilian morale is considered, the Wabbly, as a force in being, constituted the most formidable military unit in history." (Strategic Lessons of the War of 1941-43.—U. S. War College. P. 93.)

As Sergeant Walpole saw the Wabbly, there was no sign of humanity anywhere about the thing. It was a monstrous mass of metal, powder-stained now where shells had burst against it, and it seemed metallically alive, impersonally living. The armored tube with vision-slits at its ends must have been the counterpart of a ship's bridge, but it looked like the eye-ridge of an insect's face. The bulbous control-rooms at the ends looked like a gigantic insect's multi-faceted eyes. And the huge treads, so thick as to constitute

armor for their own protection, were so cunningly joined and sprung that they, too, seemed like part of a living thing.

It came within twenty yards of the staff-car with the 'copter man in it and Sergeant Walpole smoking outside. It ignored them. It had destroyed all life at this place. And Sergeant Walpole alone was visible, and he sat motionless and detached, unemotionally waiting to be killed. The Wabbly clanked and rumbled and roared obliviously past them. Sergeant Walpole saw the flexing springs in the tread-joints, and there were hundreds of them, of a size to support a freight-car. He saw a refuse-tube casually ejecting a gush of malodorous stuff, in which the garbage of a mess-table was plainly identifiable. A drop or two of the stuff splashed on him, and he smelled coffee.

And then the treads lifted, and he saw the monstrous gas-spreading tubes at the stern, and the exhaust-pipes into which he could have ridden, monocycle and all. Then he saw a man in the Wabbly. There were ventilation-ports open at the pointed stern and a man was looking out, some fifteen feet above the ground, smoking placidly and looking out at the terrain the Wabbly left behind it. He was wearing an enemy uniform cap.

The monster went on. The roar of its passing diminished a little. And

the 'copter man came suddenly out of the staff-car, struggling with the portable vision set.

"I think we can do it," he said shortly. "It's in constant beam communication with a bomber up aloft, and I think they're worried up there because they can't see a damned thing. But it's a good team. With the Wabbly's beam, which takes so much power no bomber could possibly carry it, the bombers are safe, and the bombers can locate any motor-driven thing that might attack the Wabbly and blow it to hell. But right now they can't see it. So I think we can do it. Coming?"

Sergeant Walpole threw away his cigarette and rose stiffly. Even those few moments of rest had intensified his weariness. He flung a leg over the monocycle's seat and pointed tiredly to the trail of the Wabbly. It nearly paralleled, here, a ribbon of concrete road which once had been a reasonably important feeder-highway.

"Let's go."

They went off through the rain along the road, nearly parallel to the route the Wabbly was taking. Rain beat at them. Off in the woods to their right the Wabbly's noise grew louder as they overtook it. They passed it, and came abruptly out of the wooded area upon cultivated

fields, rolling and beautifully cared-for. There had been a farm-headquarters off to one side, a huge central-station for all the agricultural work on what once would have been half a county, but there were jagged walls where buildings had been, and smoke still rose from the place.

Then the Wabbly came out of the woods, a dim gray monstrous shape in the rain.

The helicopter man pulled the ignition-cord and a rocket began to sputter. He made a single wipe with his knife-blade along the twisted insulated wires of the Bissel battery, and a wavering blue spark leaped into being. The rocket shot upward, curved down, and landed with enough force to bury its head in the muddy ploughed earth and conceal the signal-flare that must have ignited.

"That ought to do it," said the 'copter man. "Let's send some more."

Sergeant Walpole got exhaustedly off his monocycle and duplicated the 'copter man's efforts. A second rocket, a third.... A dozen or more rockets went off, each one bearing a wavering, uncertain blue spark at its tip. And that spark would continue for half an hour or more. In a loop aerial, eight miles up, it might sound like a spark-plug, or it might sound like something else. But it would not sound like the sort

of thing that ought to spring up suddenly in front of the Wabbly, and it would sound like something that had better be bombed, for safety's sake.

The Wabbly was moving across the ploughed fields with a deceptive smoothness. It was drawing nearer and nearer to the spot where the rockets had plunged to earth.

It stopped.

Another rocket left the weary pair of men, its nearly flashless exhaust invisible in the daytime, anyway. The Wabbly backed slowly from the irregular line where the first rockets sparked invisibly. It was no more than a distinct gray shadow in the falling rain, but the queer bulk atop its body moved suddenly. Like a searchlight, the power-beam swept the earth before the Wabbly. But nothing happened.

The 'copter man turned on the vision set he had packed from the staff gyrocar. Voices, crisp and anxious, came out of it. He caressed the set affectionately.

"Listen to 'em, Sergeant," he said hungrily. "They're worried!"

The voice changed suddenly. There was a sudden musical buzzing in the set, as of two dozen spitting sparks, in as many tones, all going at once.

"Letting the guys in the Wabbly hear what they hear," said the 'copter man grimly. "If God's good to us, now...."

The voices changed again. They stopped.

The Wabbly itself was still, halted in its passage across a clear and rain-swept field by little sparking sounds which seemed to indicate the presence of something that had better be bombed for safety's sake.

A thin whining noise came down from aloft. It rose to a piercing shriek, and there was a gigantic crater a half mile from the Wabbly, from which smoke rose lazily. The Wabbly remained motionless. Another whining noise which turned to a shriek.... The explosion was terrific. It was a bit nearer the Wabbly.

"We'll send 'em some more rockets," said the 'copter man.

They went hissing invisibly through the rain. The Wabbly backed cautiously away from the spot where they landed, because they were

wholly invisible and they made a sound which those in the Wabbly could not understand. Always, to a savage, the unexplained is dangerous. Modern warfare has reached the same high peak of wisdom. The Wabbly drew off from the sparks because it could not know what made them, and because it had used its power-beam and the bomber had dropped its bombs without stopping or destroying them. It was not conceivable to anybody on either the Wabbly or the bombers aloft that inexplicable things could be especially contrived to confront the Wabbly, unless they were contrived to destroy it.

"They don't know what in hell they're up against," said the 'copter man joyously. "Now lets give 'em fits!"

Rockets went off in swift succession. To the blinded men in the bomber above the clouds it seemed that unexplained mechanisms were springing into action by dozens, all about the Wabbly. They were mechanisms. They were electric mechanisms. They were obviously designed to have some effect on the Wabbly. And the Wabbly had no defense against the unguessed-at effects of unknown weapons except....

Bombs began to rain from the sky. The Wabbly crawled toward the last gap left in the ring of mysterious mechanisms. That closed. Triumphant, singing sparks sang viciously in the amplifiers. Nothing

was visible. Nothing! Perhaps that was what precipitated panic. The bombers rained down their deadly missiles. And somebody forgot the exact length of time it takes a bomb to drop eight miles....

Sergeant Walpole and the 'copter man were flat on the ground with their hands to their ears. The ground bucked and smote them. The unthinkable violence of the hexynitrate explosions tore at their nerves, even at their sanity. And then there was an explosion with a subtle difference in its sound. Sergeant Walpole looked up, his head throbbing, his eyes watering, dizzy and dazed, and bleeding at the nose and ears.

Then he bumped into the 'copter man, shuddering on the ground. He did it deliberately. There was a last crashing sound, and some of the blasted earth spattered on them. But then the 'copter man looked where Sergeant Walpole pointed dizzily.

The Wabbly was careened crazily on one side. One of its treads was uncoiling slowly from its frame. Its stern was blown in. Someone had forgotten how long it takes a bomb to drop eight miles, and the Wabbly had crawled under one. More, from the racked-open stern of the Wabbly there was coming a roaring, spitting cloud of gas. The Wabbly's storage-tanks of gas had been set off. Inside, it would be a shambles. Its crew would be dead, killed by the gas the Wabbly itself

had broadcast in its wake....

Part 7

"... It is a point worth noticing, by any student of strategy, that while the Wabbly in working solely for effectiveness in lowering civilian morale worked upon sound principles, yet the destruction of the Wabbly by Sergeant Walpole and Flight Cadet Ryerson immediately repaired all the damage done. Had it worked toward more direct military aims, its work would have survived it. It remains a pretty question for the student, whether the Enemy Command, with the information it possessed, made the soundest strategic use of its unparalleled weapon.... But on the whole, the raid of the Wabbly remains the most startling single strategic operation of the war, if only because of its tremendous effect upon civilian morale...." (Strategic Lessons of the War of 1941-43.—U. S. War College. Pp. 94-96.)

A major-general climbed out of a staff gyrocar and waded through mud for half a mile, after which he, in person, waked two sleeping men. They were sprawled out in the puddle of rain which had gathered in a torn-away tread from the Wabbly. They waked with extreme reluctance, and then yawned even in the act of saluting in a military manner.

"Yes, sir;" said Sergeant Walpole, yawning again. "Yes, sir; the

bombers've gone. We heard 'em tryin' to raise the Wabbly for about half an hour after she'd blown up. Then they cut off. I think they went home, sir. Most likely, sir, they think we used some new dinkus on the Wabbly. It ain't likely they'll realize they blew it up themselves for us."

The major-general gave crisp orders. Men began to explore the Wabbly, cautiously. He turned back to the two sleepy and disreputable men who had caused its destruction. His aspect was one of perplexity and admiration.

"What did you men do?" he demanded warmly. "What in hell did you do?"

Sergeant Walpole grinned tiredly. The 'copter man spoke for him.

"I think, sir," said the helicopter man, "that we affected the morale of the Wabbly's and the bombers' crews."

January 1932

121 Creatures of Vibration by Harl Vincent

The Vagabonds of Space are cast into the hands of the vibration-maddened natives of Titan, satellite of Saturn.

Aproximate word count: 9,400

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Carr Parker sat day-dreaming at the Nomad's controls. More than a week of Earth time had passed since the self-styled "vagabonds of space" had left Europa, and now they were fast approaching the great ringed orb of Saturn with the intention of exploring her satellites.

Behind him, his Martian friend, Mado, was manipulating the mechanism of the rulden, that remarkable Europan optical instrument which Detis had installed in the vessel before they left. Mado was utterly fascinated by the machine, having spent most of his time during the voyage searching the surfaces of Saturn's moons for signs of human habitation. Now, as they headed directly for

Titan, the sixth satellite, he was completely absorbed in an examination of the heavy cloud layer that covered it.

But Carr's thoughts were of his bride, who still slumbered in their stateroom amidships. In his bachelor days he never had imagined he could find such contentment as had come with his marriage to Ora. He had fought shy of the fair sex on Earth. Somehow, the women he knew back home had bored him; angling for a man's money and position, most of them, and incapable of giving real love and companionship in return for the luxuries they demanded. He was resigned to his single state.

But all that was changed by the little blue-eyed girl he had met in Paladar. She was a different sort; worth a hundred of those others and fulfilling to perfection the ideal he had always set up. On her world, Jupiter's satellite, Europa, he had neither wealth nor influence; he'd left these behind when he deserted Earth for a life of vagabondage among the stars. But, to the daughter of Detis, this lack meant less than nothing; his love, and hers, meant everything.

And, what a good sport she had been! When they were threatened by Rapaju and his minions; when they barely escaped being swallowed up by that monster of space which Mado had likened to the Sargasso Sea of Earth; when she herself proposed joining them in their

rovings throughout the universe.

She was a companion of whom even the phlegmatic Martian was proud, she brought with her presence on the Nomad a subtle something that made of the coldly mechanical space-ship a thing of new beauty and a place of cheerfulness—a home. And, to think he had won her for his own. To think....

"Carr!" Mado's sharp exclamation startled him from his pleasant thoughts. "Come here and take a look at this," the Martian demanded, his voice betraying an excitement unusual for him. "Something is wrong on this satellite we're heading for."

Locking the controls in the automatic position, Carr turned to join his friend at the viewing-disk of the rulden. Mado had found an opening in the heavy cloud layer, and before them was an unobstructed view of a rugged countryside where huge boulders had been scattered by the mighty hand of creation and where the sun shone weakly on the rim of a yawning crater in which sulphurous vapors curled. They saw this strange land as from an altitude of a few hundred feet, though the Nomad was still more than a million miles from the satellite.

"What's wrong about that?" Carr grunted. "Excepting that it's just

another of these barren and useless bodies that doesn't even provide us with an attracting interest."

"Wait," Mado replied, "You'll see in a moment. Something—"

At that instant there came a puff of blue flame from out the pit, carrying on its heated breath a drifting sheet of incandescence that fluttered and pulsated like a thing alive. Mado switched on the sound mechanism of the rulden and the roaring of the pillar of flame came to their ears. There were other sounds as well; the babble of alien voices and the rumble of drums.

Immediately the rough ground in the vicinity was filled with creatures of human mold, half naked red-skinned beings that rose up from behind the boulders and rushed toward the pit of fire and the uncanny heat mantle that wandered ghost-like along its rim. Two of them carried something between them, a struggling writhing something which they stood erect at the crater's edge. It was a girl!—a slim, bronzed figure that swayed there an instant uncertainly as the throb of the drums rose high and the voices of the assembled savages swelled in a monotony of exultant chanting.

"Good Lord!" Carr gasped. "A human sacrifice!"

A quick push, a piercing scream immediately drowned out by the cries of the multitude, and the girl was flung headlong into the welcoming folds of the white-hot ghost-mantle which hovered there like some greedy monster of the lava pools of Mercury. The thing closed in around the wildly struggling body, enwrapping it with exultant constrictions of its hell-born substance and diving, flapping, smoking heat devil, into the flame from whence it had sprung. Mado touched a lever with quick trembling fingers and the rulden's disk went blank.

Sickened by what they had seen, the two friends stared at one another, white-faced.

"No place for us," Mado said, after a moment. "Not with Ora."

"Right!" Carr agreed grimly. "But I'd like to get in close enough to see more of Titan. How high is this cloud layer?"

"About a mile above the surface. We can dive through and look them over; perhaps give them a taste of the disintegrator."

"Attaboy! You took the words out of my mouth. The devils! Who'd ever dream of such a horror in the twenty-fourth century—even out here?"

"What's the reason for this serious discussion?" The voice of Detis broke in on them from the door of the control room.

"Plenty!" Carr exclaimed. And the Europan listened gravely as he described the awful thing they had witnessed.

"I am not surprised," he said calmly, when the Terrestrial ended his recital. "There are certain emanations from the mother planet that most certainly will affect the mentality and baser instincts of a race living within their influence. I have been studying these vibrations for several hours."

They turned to the forward port as the scientist indicated the great orb of Saturn with its gleaming rings. Now, as they drew near to the enormous planet, it did indeed seem that there was a sinister quality in its shifting luminosity. Carr shivered, thinking of Ora.

"You mean," Mado asked, "that there are vibrations in the ether hereabouts that are set up electrically by the planet?"

"Precisely. Or rather I should say they are set up by the vast number of whirling particles of which its encircling rings are composed. The wave form propagated is of a characteristic that is in tune with those portions of the brain which control the savage impulses. We may

certainly expect to find superstition-ridden ignorance and all manner of vice prevalent in the races of Titan."

"You think these vibrations will affect us?" Carr inquired anxiously.

"Not if we make our visit short. The intensity is quite low."

"It'll be a short visit, all right. We'll be in Titan's atmosphere in about forty minutes now, and, if I have my say, we'll be out of it and away again inside of an hour."

"Best thing you've said today," Mado approved. "But let's have another look in the rulden. We may find other gaps in the clouds."

The mechanism of the radio telescope whirred into life as he spoke and its disk shone bright with the reflected light of Titan as it pictured the body. The Nomad was speeding toward the ill-omened satellite at the rate of more than a thousand miles a second.

But the surface was nowhere visible and Mado adjusted the focus so that the view of the billowy cloud-covering fell rapidly away. Though actually they were approaching the satellite with tremendous velocity, it receded swiftly in the rulden's disk until the entire body showed as a perfect sphere of uniform brilliancy. All surface

markings were concealed by the blanket of clouds.

"Just a moment, Mado," said Detis. "I believe I saw something."

The Martian pressed a button and the image was stationary. A tiny black spot had appeared near one edge of the satellite's disk and this now spread rapidly like a blot of spilled ink. Then it stretched out into a wriggling line that quickly streaked its way across the equator, completely banding the body as they watched. A moment it lay there like a great serpent encircling the globe, and then it vanished in a flash of intense light that left them blinking in amazement. It was as if a trail of gunpowder had been laid across the surface and then set off by a torch in the hand of some unseen giant of the cosmos. A strange electrical storm that agitated the cloud blanket mightily, then left it more densely closed in than before.

Through the forward port the satellite could be seen with the naked eye, growing larger now and resolving itself into a tiny globe. To Carr it seemed that the diminutive moon winked provocatively as he turned to regard it without the rulden's aid. Off to the west, Saturn and her rings almost filled the sky, and their baleful light shone cold and menacing against the black velvet of the heavens.

Mado took the controls when the Nomad entered the atmosphere of

Titan and drifted over the sea of clouds. He corrected the altimeter for the mass of this body of three thousand miles diameter, and noted that they were up about six thousand feet. Test samples indicated that the outside air, although thin, was pure. But they did not open the ports as they had no intention of landing.

Ora had not yet awakened and Carr hoped fervently that she would not do so until they had left the immediate vicinity of Titan. It was vastly better if she missed seeing anything of the barbarians of the cloudy satellite. Besides, with her adventuresome and fearless nature, she'd not be satisfied merely to look on from afar—she'd want them to land. And that must not be done.

Something tinkled metallically against the hull plates of the vessel. Again and again the sound was repeated, and soon they saw that the air was filled with driving particles which clattered on the thick glass of the ports and contacted resoundingly with the hull. A vast cloud of black loomed directly ahead, springing up from the tossing cloud banks; and Mado yanked at the controls, swerving the Nomad sharply from her course.

But there was no escaping the fury of that sudden squall; they were in the thick of it in an instant, and the ship was buffeted and tossed about as if it were a toy. Millions of the driving particles battered the

Nomad and the din of their pounding was terrific as the ship was whirled deeper into the midst of the tempest.

Carr saw that the black particles were piling up around the rim of the port, sticking fast to the metal of the hull. They were bristling in fantastic array, like iron filings adhering to the poles of a magnet. In a flash it came to him that these particles were magnetic; the Nomad was covered with them and they piled on ever more thickly, soon weighting her down so heavily that she lost altitude. They were at the mercy of a furious electrical storm of mysterious nature.

"Imps of the canals!" Mado shouted above the din. "We're finished! The machinery is paralyzed. This iron hail is charged."

The viewing port was completely covered over now with particles that arched across from rim to rim, slender rod-like things about two inches long and of the thickness of heavy wire. Black, they were, as black as graphite. Detis worked frantically with Mado at the useless controls, vainly endeavoring to stabilize the pitching vessel.

Dazed by the suddenness of the calamity, Carr turned to look at the altimeter. Five thousand feet, forty-five hundred, four thousand! Nose down, and reeling drunkenly, the Nomad was diving to certain disaster on the rocky ground of Titan. He dashed from the control

room, calling distractedly to Ora as he raced along the passageway.

She staggered from the stateroom and into his arms, a slim, boyish figure in her snug leather jacket and breeches. Together they were flung violently against the partition by a heavy lurch of the vessel.

"What is it?" she gasped, clinging to him for support.

"A freak storm, in Titan's atmosphere. Guess the Nomad's done for." Carr drew her fiercely close as an awful picture flashed across his mind—of Ora's body mangled in twisted wreckage; of the savages finding it, down there....

The metal floor-plates seemed to buckle and hurl themselves aft with a grinding crash of disrupted joints. Holding desperately to the precious little body within his arms, Carr was thrown off his feet. There was a detonation as if the universe had been blasted into oblivion—then darkness, and numbed silence.

"Carr, you're hurt!" Ora moaned.

He was—a little. His head was splitting and the taste of blood was in his mouth, but it was nothing serious. He'd been half knocked out, but his head was clearing already. Of far greater importance was the

fact that Ora was unharmed; he satisfied himself of that immediately.

"I'm all right," he grunted, struggling to his feet and feeling around in the blackness.

The lights in the passage were out and he groped blindly along the partition, the metal of which had suddenly become very hot to the touch. There was a curious feeling of lightness as if his body had no weight at all; the ship rolled gently and he knew they were falling swiftly to the inevitable crash. Yet he clung fast to Ora, and, together, they made their way to the control room.

Faint daylight streamed in through the ports there and he saw Mado and Detis, both bleeding from injuries they had received when the mysterious shock hurled them amongst the control mechanisms. They were working furiously with the exciter-generator, which had stopped. The Nomad was without power and helpless to exert her anti-gravity energy.

"The iron hail!" gasped the Europan scientist. "It gave up its charge, Carr—exploded. Here, give us a hand and see if we can get the generators started."

The ports were clear of the black particles and Carr saw that the

outer surface of the glass was cracked and darkened from the heat of the blast. He understood, remembering the black band and the flash they had seen across the cloud layer from afar. And in the instant of remembering he saw that the ground was very near, rushing upward to meet them. A coil of the exciter-armature broke away in his fingers; the thing had been burned out by the electric storm, and the Nomad was doomed.

The altimeter needle moved with sickening speed and already registered but little more than five hundred feet. Four hundred! Carr braced himself for the impending crash and gathered Ora in his arms.

And then a strange thing happened. Four light rays, dazzling in intensity, stabbed up at them from the forest beneath them and converged on the vessel's hull. The Nomad staggered, then came to an even keel and slackened in her mad dash to the surface. She vibrated from stem to stern under the mighty conflict of energies and they felt themselves pressed hard against the floor-plate. But the mysterious energy beams had come too late to save them. A densely wooded slope loomed directly ahead. There was a crashing of branches and the rending of mighty trunks, and the Nomad came to a jarring stop.

"Devils of Terra!" Mado ejaculated. "We're in a fine fix now. We'll have to set foot on Titan whether we want to or not."

Carr had laughed, somewhat shakily, in relief. They were safe, all of them, and no one much hurt. And the generator coils could be rewound. But he sobered instantly at Mado's words; they'd have to produce copper and insulating materials for the job.

"Right," he agreed. "And that's not so good."

"What's so terrible about landing here?" Ora inquired. "I thought we were expecting to explore this satellite." She looked up from her ministrations to Detis, who had a nasty scalp wound.

"The people here are dangerous savages," Carr answered gravely. "At least some of them are; we saw them in the rulden. You'll have to remain aboard while we look up the ones who projected those rays and do some bargaining with them."

"What! You expect me to hide in the vessel while you're at work outside? Not much! I want to see something of Titan while we are here." Her pretty chin was set in that determined manner she had.

"I tell you it's too risky!" Carr was firm, but he looked at Mado

beseechingly, signaling for his support.

But the Martian only grinned owlishly. He knew as well as did Carr that Ora would have her way.

"Risky—pooh!" she returned. "I'm not afraid. We have our ray pistols and the funny torpedoes you brought from Mars. Besides, I don't believe it's as bad as you think."

Carr shrugged his shoulders. After all, they probably would not encounter any of the savages here in the forest. Beings of far greater intelligence were responsible for those rays, that much was certain. Besides, they'd be three able-bodied men out there to watch over her, and he'd make sure she didn't get too far away from the ship.

Carr was first to step from the opened manhole to the soft carpet of the Titanese forest. He found the air cool and crisp, with a tang of ozone assailing his nostrils. There was a pulsating motion in it that he could hardly define; it seemed that it massaged his cheeks and raised the short hairs at the nape of his neck and on his forearms as if they were electrified. Those vibrations Detis had told them about were actively at work.

The gravity was even less than on Mars, though slightly greater than

that of Europa. Mado was entirely at ease, and the Europans would not be bothered by the slight change in their weight. But Carr would have to take it easy, as he'd done ever since leaving Earth. His muscles were too powerful for his body on these smaller worlds, though this was a mighty advantage if he took care not to over-exert.

A melodious whistling note rose high somewhere in the depths of the forest and trailed off into eery silence. The sky was overcast with gray clouds and the light was poor, of little more than twilight intensity on Terra, this being partly due to the masking of the sun by the clouds and partly to their tremendous distance from that radiant body. Odd that it was not colder, he thought. Probably those vibratory radiations of Saturn's rings had something to do with the temperature in addition to their other effects.

Detis was on his knees, examining a queer specimen of purplish moss which had drawn his eye. The eternal scientist in the man could not be downed. Mado had come out armed with one of the bulky kalbite torpedo-projectors and was looking around belligerently.

Ora drew herself erect and took a deep breath as soon as her feet touched the ground, her eyes bright and her cheeks flushed with excitement. "Oh, Carr," she breathed, "it's marvelous; an honest-to-

goodness virgin forest. We've neither of us ever seen one, you know. Aren't you thrilled?"

"We-e-ll," he admitted, "I've always looked forward to wandering in just such places. But, with you along, and thinking of those barbarians we saw—"

"Silly. I'm as capable as any of you. And, even if I couldn't look out for myself, I know that you will be at my side." She pursed her lips and tossed back her head provocatively.

What was a man to do?

A deep-toned booming note came then from the hills, commencing like the warning siren of a space liner approaching its berth and swelling to a bombilation of ear-shattering sound that set the steel of the Nomad's hull vibrating and their very flesh and bones a-tingle. Then it died away as had the bird note which was the first sound of this world to greet them.

"Jupiter! What's that?" Mado unslung his torpedo-projector.

As if in answer to his startled question, a weird object drifted over the treetops and poised directly above them, about fifty feet up. An

egg-shaped thing, six or seven feet in length, and seemingly made of white metal. It swayed there gently, without visible means of support, and they could make out a transparent disk on its side, back of which there was a human head with eyes that regarded them curiously.

Mado raised his torpedo tube and took aim.

"Hold it!" Carr warned him. "This fellow's no savage. Probably he's one of those who tried to break our fall. Friendly, perhaps."

Two more of the ovoids drifted in from the woods and joined the first one, all three settling a few feet lower and their occupants staring intently at the intruders.

"I'll get the psycho-ray apparatus," Detis said excitedly. "We may be able to get thought contact with them." He dived through the Nomad's entrance-manhole as he spoke.

"Nothing so frightening about these creatures," Ora murmured, her eyes reproaching Carr. "Why, they seem anxious to know that we are not enemies."

And, indeed, this seemed to be the case, for the strange ovoids

wafted still lower, dropping until a faint humming of the internal gravity mechanism came to their ears. These were a highly developed people of scientific attainment; civilized beings. But Mado kept firm hold of his torpedo tube, and Carr fingered the ray pistol at his belt.

The booming note from the hills came then, frightfully near this time, and the three ovoids moved with sudden roaring of their motors, literally hurling themselves skyward. But the menace they sought to escape was real, and not to be outdone in speed. A vast black something whirred out from beyond the treetops and flung itself upon them.

"A pterodactyl!" Mado gasped. "One of the prehistoric monsters of Terra!"

"Carr, there are men riding it!" Ora exclaimed. "Red men!"

It was true; the pteranodon, a horrid bat-like thing with a wing-spread of fully twenty feet, carried three of the bronzed savages clinging to a sort of harness that encircled its body just back of the crested head. The huge flying reptile whistled raucously as it flew and one of the savages was whirling a sling which held a stone as large as his own head. They watched in amazement as the swift

aerial steed flapped its way after the rising ovoids. And then the savage let loose an end of his thong and released its missile, which crashed full against the transparent disk of an ovoid and tore its way through.

The damaged ovoid careened violently and then fell end over end, crashing in the forest. With a bellow of fury, Mado fired with the kalbite tube at his hip. There was the twang of the propelling ray, and the slender arrow-like torpedo sped forth on its message of death, singing spitefully as it cleaved the air of Titan.

It was a fair hit, catching the pteranodon just ahead of its trailing legs and exploding with the characteristic screaming roar of the deadly kalbite. The monstrous reptile and its crew of barbarians vanished in a blaze that lighted the clouds above them and brought a babble of excited shoutings from the depths of the forest on all sides. They were surrounded by the uncivilized ones of Titan! And those of the ovoids had run off at the first sign of danger.

The din from the forest was augmented by the whistlings of a second pteranodon which darted after the remaining ovoids, following swiftly as these retreated with ludicrous, wabbling haste.

Ora screamed and struck out at something with her fist. A naked arm

had reached out from the underbrush and grasped her wrist. Carr wheeled and his ray pistol spat crackling flame. The savage, an undersized red man with an enormous head, rose unsteadily from his hiding place, a look of terrible hate in his contorted features. Then, like a punctured balloon, his body collapsed into the nothingness of complete disintegration.

"Back, back to the Nomad!" Carr roared, dragging Ora with him and leveling his pistol at a group of the bronze brutes who rushed into the space where the vessel lay amongst the trees.

Mado was busy with his torpedo tube and a vast explosion shook the ground beneath them as a trio of the savages were blasted out of existence. A great tree toppled and crashed across the nose of the Nomad, its roots ripped from the soil by the concussion.

Ora had whipped out her own pistol and was firing as they fell back. Game kid, she was! Carr gloated as he saw she was making each shot tell. But this couldn't last; there were hundreds of them now, long-armed and big-headed red devils swarming in from every direction. Carr dodged none too quickly to save his skull from a swift-flung stone, which clanged against the Nomad's hull. There was a perfect hail of the missiles now: one struck his left arm a numbing blow, and he heard a sickening thud and Ora's moan as she

was hit. And there were winged darts, from blow-guns.

A dusky moon-face leered into his own, horribly close, and he yelled his rage as he drove it back with a swift uppercut. But the horde of savages came on in ever increasing numbers and with renewed vigor.

"Quick—inside!" Carr hissed in Ora's ear as his fingers found the rim of the manhole. He'd have her safely within in a moment.

Detis clambered out with the thought machine in his arms, and a singing dart from one of the blow-guns pierced him through and through. A look of astonishment spread over his kindly features, and he fell forward, dying.

And then Carr looked up into a grinning face behind a huge club that was swinging downward. He threw up his arm to break the force of the blow, but the club fell too swiftly; the enormous weight of it crashed down on his skull, and he knew no more.

When he awakened it was to stare for a dazed moment into a pair of blue eyes that looked down upon him in a place of dim light and stuffy atmosphere. The eyes were only vaguely familiar in his befuddled memory. Beautiful eyes, though, and incredibly dear....

"Ora!" he exclaimed, in wondering remembrance, trying to sit up as he grasped her hand.

"Hush!" she warned him, placing a finger-tip to his lips. "Be quiet now and perhaps they'll leave us alone for a while."

"They! Did they capture us?" he whispered. "Are you hurt?"

"We're prisoners, all right, excepting poor father. But they didn't harm me much, outside of the rough handling."

"The devils. What of Detis?" He was growing stronger by the minute and now saw that they were in an open-mouthed cave and that Mado was sitting hunched dejectedly in a corner, his massive shoulders drooping and his proud head bowed on his chest.

"Father—they killed him," Ora sighed almost inaudibly. "Have you forgotten? We saw the dart strike him and I—I saw it sticking from his chest. Oh, Carr!" A dry sob caught in her throat.

"Yes—yes. Lord!" Carr groaned, sick at heart with the sudden recollection and full of compassion for the stricken girl.

He patted her hand with clumsy tenderness as she turned her head and gazed out through the cave mouth in silence that was fraught

with intense pain. She would take it like that: with little to say but with much inward suffering.

And then he noticed a fourth occupant of the cavern, a young lad of Titan. Like one of the savages in his small stature and in the large size of his head, he was much lighter in color and his body was encased in a snug one-piece garment of shimmering material of silky texture. And there was a different light in his eyes, the light of intelligence and culture.

"Who is that?" Carr whispered.

Ora stared when she saw that the stranger was on his feet. "Oh," she exclaimed, "I'm glad he has recovered. He's one of the civilized ones; they captured him with his ovoid when the second pteranodon went out after them."

Mado was standing now, endeavoring to communicate with the lad by means of signs and the drawing of crude pictures in the red sand of the cavern floor. The graceful little fellow watched him with understanding and with a smile of amused tolerance. Then he halted the big Martian with an imperious motion, addressing him in velvety voice.

"Nazu," he said simply, placing a forefinger on his breast and bowing before the astonished Mado.

"Imps of the canals!" the Martian exclaimed, grinning delightedly as he cast a swift look at Carr and Ora. "He's telling me his name." "Mine's Mado," he said, turning his eyes to the keen gray ones that smiled up at him. "Mado," he repeated, placing a huge fist against his own chest and bending his body in awkward imitation of the lad's courtly gesture.

They made no attempt to converse in tongues that would convey no meaning, but there was no mistaking the quick friendship that sprang up between the incongruous pair. Mado was the boy's slave from that moment, and Nazu looked up to the Martian with all of youth's admiration for his vast bulk and rippling muscles.

Suddenly they were without light and Carr saw that a curtain of woven rushes had been dropped over the mouth of the cave. There were soft padding footsteps on every side and he drew back against the rock wall with Ora clasped in his arms. A sinewy hand grasped his wrist and twisted his right arm free. He lashed out in the darkness and was rewarded by a grunt of pain as his fist contacted with an unseen face. Nazu's voice rose in anguish, and Mado's wrathful bellow was followed by a frightful commotion as he tore into his

assailants.

They were everywhere in the blackness, these slippery little savages of Titan, their half naked bodies crowding him and stifling him with their sweaty nearness. Again and again Carr struck out, but it was like fighting a horde of squirming and clawing feline creatures that swarmed over him and bore him down by sheer weight of numbers. They dragged Ora from his arms and quickly overpowered him. Thongs of rawhide twisted deeply into the flesh of his wrists and he was hauled forth into the daylight.

Securely tied, hand and foot, Carr was propped sitting with his back to a huge boulder. He saw they had been carried to the place they had viewed in the disk of the rulden. A dozen paces away, Ora and Mado sat similarly bound. The Martian had been gagged as well and Carr was forced to smile despite the seriousness of the situation. His mad bellowings must have proved as painful to the ears of the red dwarfs as had his fists to their bodies.

Nazu, unbound and walking proudly erect, was being marched to the edge of a smoking fissure by two of the savages. No others of the red men were in sight.

Carr shuddered. It was the place of sacrifice they had seen in the

rulden, and the natives were in hiding as before. Nazu would be first to go; then Ora, most likely. He strained desperately at his bonds when he realized the awful significance of their position. It was incredible that Ora was here and in the hands of these unspeakable monsters. Why, she'd be thrown into the incandescent folds of the flapping fire-god, along with the rest of them! He groaned in an agony of self-recrimination; he should not have allowed her to come on this mad voyage.

Then came that roaring column of flame from out the crater, and the weird fluttering thing whose intense heat radiated across the intervening space like the breath of a blast furnace. The rumble of drums commenced, and thousands of the red men dashed over the rocky area to worship at the shrine of their pitiless god.

As their monotonous chant rose high, Nazu was rushed to the edge of the pit. The ghastly, shimmering heat-ghost drifted hungrily to await the flinging of the slight form into its consuming embrace. Carr was glad to see that Ora had turned her head.

And then there came a sucking noise from the depths of the crater, and the pillar of blue flame vanished abruptly, the incandescent ghost-shape flapping disconsolately in its wake. The chant of the savages trailed off into a chorus of disgruntled murmurings and the

booming of the drums died down in disappointment. The worshippers had been cheated of their sadistic pleasure. There was something wrong with the timing of the rite; their mysterious fire-god had granted the captives a reprieve.

But the prisoners were not deceived by the solicitous treatment accorded them by their captors when they were returned to the cave and their bonds were severed. For well they knew that at the next appearance of the phenomenon of the pit they would be dragged off to the sacrifice. Sooner or later all of them were to meet the fate of those given into the embrace of the heat-demon.

A guard of fifty or more of the savages, armed with blow-guns and stone hatchets, paraded continuously before the mouth of the cave as one of their number returned with a huge woven container of fruits and nuts of strange form and color. This was set before them and the bearer withdrew.

"Humph!" Mado grunted. "Seems like they want to fatten us up for this heated sheet of theirs. Like hogs fattened for the market."

But he reached for the striped yellow melon atop the heap, and, at a bright nod of approval from Nazu, bit into its smooth skin.

Carr's stomach rebelled when he looked at the food. He could not bear the sight of the stuff, sitting there in the damp cavern with Ora's blue eyes regarding him in the dim light. Those wide eyes held a gleam of hope and trust that would not be discouraged.

He gazed out through the cave mouth and calculated their chances. There were none. Not against that horde of barbarians; there were too many of the devils to fight with their bare hands. If only they had their ray pistols, or a torpedo projector. At least they could sell their lives dearly. His eyes narrowed speculatively when they came to rest on a peculiar egg-shaped object that stood out there in the open. It was Nazu's ovoid. Here was an idea!

But he saw that its entrance door was open and that the space inside was too small for any of them excepting one of the small stature of the Titanese. It was crammed with machinery. Nazu was the only one of their number who could squeeze into the thing; in fact he alone knew how to operate the queer flying machine. There must be others of his kind, plenty of them; another country, or a city full of them at least. Perhaps he might obtain aid if only he could be made to understand, and if they could get him out there safely somehow.

"Mado," he called, pointing, "do you suppose we could dope out a way of getting Nazu aboard his sky vehicle to go for help?"

The Martian stared, his mouth stuffed with food and his jaws in full action. He strained suddenly to swallow the huge mouthful so he could make reply.

"Not a chance," he grunted. "Why, there's a million of them out there. You won't catch them napping."

But he turned his attention from the basket of fruit and made a desperate effort to convey the idea to Nazu, whose bright eyes took in his every significant motion and whose sensitive fingers traced images in the sand that conveyed his own thoughts to the mind of the Martian in rapid succession.

"He's got it!" Mado gloated. "The game little cuss would go in a minute if we could get him to the ovoid. He's got a picture of a big island here, so help me! An island covered with circular dwellings, made of metal like the ovoids, he indicates. Look here."

Carr and Ora moved over to watch the swift sketching of the Titanese lad. By means of pantomime and his carefully drawn pictures, he told them of his people, making it clear that they were forced to live in insulated dwellings and travel only in the ovoids, which likewise were insulated against the devastating vibrations that emanated from Saturn's rings. He sketched those rings, illustrating

the vibrations and tapping his own forehead in explanation of the effect on the brain; pointing to the savages to indicate the ultimate fate of his kind. The protective insulation, it appeared, was not permanent; sooner or later, all of them would become barbarians like the others.

The savages out there were their fathers, mothers, sisters and brothers, gone mad; their skins darkened by continued action of the vibrations after they fled their insulated homes. His pictures of the family life were meticulously drawn. His people never warred upon these savage kin of theirs—naturally—though the reverse was not always true. However, Nazu pointed to the ovoid and showed his willingness to help the strangers. But he shook his head sadly as he counted the barbarians on his fingers, multiplying the number endlessly by clapping his hands. There were too many of them; the thing was impossible.

"Good Lord!" Carr exclaimed. "He's a marvel at communicating his thoughts without words. But I'd think his people would beat it for the hills without waiting. Might as well have it over with."

"But, they're still working on the problem," Ora objected. "With their wisdom, they'll finally get the thing under control. And they probably hope to discover a way of restoring their maddened

relatives."

She was doing something with the red sand; wetting her fingers in a trickle of water that oozed from the wall and making a red paste which she smeared on her white forearm and then rubbed off.

"I guess you're right," Carr admitted. Then, watching her strange performance, he asked, "What are you doing?"

She looked up with sparkling eyes and stretched forth her arm. "It stains, Carr, see!" she exclaimed excitedly. "We can fix up Nazu to resemble one of the savages. It is the exact color of their skin."

"Mado!" he called, sensing at once the possibilities of her discovery. They could make up Nazu to perfection. Mingling with the barbarians unsuspected, he might get possession of the ovoid.

The Titanese lad fell in with the idea at once and the two men started work on him with water and the powdery stuff they had taken for red sand. They stripped him of his silken garment and smeared him from head to foot, Carr taking especial care to see that his upper body and face were thoroughly covered. Then, after using his own clothing to swab off the coating, they stepped back to view the result. He was exactly like one of the red men in color now, and he stood there

twisting his face in a wicked grin to heighten the similarity.

"The little devil!" Mado chuckled. "He gets the idea perfectly. We'll have to muss his hair now and fix him up with a kirtle like theirs."

Removing his suede jacket and turning it inside out, he draped it about the slim hips of Nazu, then slapped his chest approvingly. "There you are, lad," he told the grinning youngster. "A tough-looking kid we've made of you, too."

The words were lost on the young Titanese, but his bright eyes showed that he fully comprehended the humor as well as the gravity of the situation. The improvised covering would pass without question as one of the untanned hides the barbarians wore dangling from their waists. The disguise was faultless.

Ora had been watching at the mouth of the cave. Now she called out in low-voiced warning, "Hurry! One of them is coming."

Carr moved forward swiftly to face the opening, while Mado stood with his great bulk hiding the now unrecognizable Nazu. The savage entered, proceeding directly to where Carr was standing. He bent over the fruit basket and then the Earth-man was upon him.

The wiry red man struggled furiously, but Carr had a grip on his windpipe that stopped his attempts to cry out and quickly reduced him to a state of flabby subjection. Then he bound and gagged his captive, tearing strips of linen from his own shirt to provide the necessary material. In a moment they had bundled the trussed-up dwarf into a dark corner of the cavern, and Nazu stepped forth blithely to lift the basket to his shoulder.

Everything seemed to happen at once after that. Nazu stalked boldly out among the savages, who paid him no attention whatsoever. He passed out of their field of vision for a moment, and then they saw him at the circular door of the ovoid. In a flash he was inside and the thing soared speedily into the air and out of sight. The red men broke forth in a babel of excited jabbering and then they were crowding into the cave, hundreds of them it seemed, shrieking their rage as they attacked the hapless prisoners.

Carr went down fighting madly but to no avail. He hadn't counted on this; he should have known better. A crushing weight of them was upon him, clawing and beating at him as he struggled to rise. They were suffocating him with their rank animal odors.

And then he was dragged into the open air. Battered and dazed, he saw they had found their fellow, the one he had bound and gagged.

Ora was considerably mussed up, but unharmed, he observed with relief; but Mado lay there inert. This was the first time Carr had ever seen him take the count at the hands of man.

When they had untied the one whose place had been taken by Nazu, he came straight for the Earth-man and would have brained him with a huge stone had not his fellows interfered. He objected strenuously, his eyes red with hate and a torrent of harsh gutturals pouring from his lips. But the others held him off; this strange white giant from the machine of the skies was to be saved for the embrace of the fire-god.

With the entire blame for Nazu's escape thus placed upon the Terrestrial, Ora and Mado were returned to the cavern and left unmolested. But Carr was prodded into moving over against a boulder and was surrounded by a semi-circle of the dwarfs who squatted calmly to watch him, blow-guns in their hands and stone hatchets on the ground within easy reach. They were taking no more chances with this one.

The long day of Titan dragged interminably but the watchful eyes of his guards never strayed from their prisoner. At any moment the fire-god might make an appearance and the rite of sacrifice take place. Carr supposed that the thing made more or less regular appearances, like a geyser of Earth. And, next time, there would be no escape.

Night fell, and still those eyes watched intently in the light reflected against the low-flung clouds from the seething crater nearby. Nothing had been seen of Nazu or any of the ovoids. Probably it was useless to expect them; they could not bring themselves to do battle against these savage kin of theirs. Anyway, he was glad the little fellow had gotten away; he hoped he was safely in bed—if they had beds in those insulated dwellings.

He could not sleep. All through the night he sat with bowed head, alternately planning rescue attempts and cursing himself for bringing Ora to this horrible end. Detis was dead; the Nomad was hopelessly beyond repair for many days, even if they could make their escape and locate it; Nazu had saved his own skin, and they were left to the mercy of these vibration-crazed brutes who waited there in the flickering red twilight all around him. It was a revolting ending for an adventure that had started so auspiciously.

With the first faint light of dawn came the roaring of the pillar of flame from out the crater. Instantly there rose the hollow booming of the drums and the chanting of thousands of the barbarous worshippers. The place was swarming with them almost instantly, and Carr's guards closed in on him with evil glee.

Ora was brought out into the open, her arms held fast by two of the

red devils who yanked her roughly along between them. Carr roared out in blind rage and in awful fear for the girl. He struck out viciously into the first grinning face that pressed near. Something in his brain seemed to snap then, and he became a snarling, fighting animal, battling against overwhelming odds in defence of his mate. A dart buried itself in his arm and a stone hatchet bit into his shoulder, but he scarcely felt the hurts. All that mattered now was Ora; they were taking her away—taking her to the folds of that incredible hot thing that flapped there at the crater's rim. An arm snapped like a pipestem in his fingers and he heard the squeal of pain from somewhere in the tangled mass of savages around him.

And then they were falling back; easing up on him. The din was increasing, but it seemed that a note of fear had crept in to replace the exultant frenzy of those chanting voices. The drums were stilled.

Wiping the blood from his eyes with the back of his hand, he saw the barbarians running everywhere; they were screaming in superstitious terror and fighting one another in their desperate anxiety to escape the vicinity of their precious fire-god. A tremendous voice boomed out over the hubbub, a voice that came from the crater in vast commanding gutturals that struck terror into the souls of the panicky barbarians. Yet somehow that mightily sonorous voice carried a familiar ring.

Carr raised astonished eyes to the pillar of blue flame and was seized with a well-nigh uncontrollable impulse to flee with the red men. For a monstrous image of Detis swayed there in the hot vapors, a massive arm raised menacingly and an equally Brobdingnagian voice issuing from his lips in fierce syllables of the red man's tongue!

"Detis!" Carr shouted. "Detis! Ora—Mado!"

And then he was running toward the crater's edge in bounding strides that carried him twenty feet at a leap. He understood now. Detis had recovered from his wound and was reversing the rulden's energy. He was projecting his own image and voice, many times amplified, into the column of fire to terrify the savages!

Ora was lying there, on the rim of the pit. She had fainted at sight of the ghost-shape, whose white-hot folds flapped there, reaching to engulf her in their all-consuming embrace. Carr babbled like a madman as he pulled her away from the horrible thing that pulsated with eager flutterings not three feet away, its hot breath singeing her silken lashes and brows.

Mado was there, encouraging him and yelling something else he couldn't understand; pointing skyward. And then he saw it; the

Nomad, with its sleek, tapered cylinder of a body nosing down toward them with the silvery aura of its propulsive energy gleaming like a beacon of hope against the dull clouds of the satellite of terror. And there was something else: one of the ovoids of Titan, clinging there to the vessel's hull plates, alongside the open manhole. Nazu had not failed them after all. His mind refused to question the miracle further.

Somehow, when the vessel landed, he managed to reach the manhole with his precious burden. He staggered through the passageway and into their stateroom, tenderly stretching Ora on her own bed. In the next instant he was rummaging in the medicine closet. He found ointment for her burns; smelling salts; damp cloths. With trembling fingers he ministered to her, a great joy welling up within him as he saw she was recovering. Another minute, back there at the crater, and he'd have lost her forever. He swallowed hard at the thought, his eyes misty as he looked down at her and remembered.

Impatiently he jerked the barbed dart from his arm and poured a powerful antiseptic into the open wound, unmindful of the pain. As best he could, he disinfected his other cuts and bandaged them. Ora had raised herself and now sat there, swaying weakly and regarding him with anxious gaze.

A little later they made their way forward to the control room. The Nomad had taken off and was drifting slowly higher. At the controls sat a strange, bedaubed figure. Nazu!

Mado was peering through the coils of a helix of silver ribbon that had been erected beside the rulden.

"Father!" Ora darted past him and dropped to her knees on the floor-plates at the Martian's side. The body of Detis was slumped there a ghastly corpse within those gleaming coils. But his kind features were fixed in a serene smile. He had gone to his reward with content in his heart.

Only then did Carr remember. One could not subject his body to the reversed energies of the rulden without certain expectation of death. A few short seconds with those terrible oscillations surging through his being, carrying the amplified visual and oral reproduction through the ether, and the Europan scientist had perished. Knowingly, willingly, Detis had given his life that the rest of them might live! Recovered miraculously from his first serious injury, he had done this magnificent thing deliberately and gladly....

A great lump rose in Carr's throat as Ora's sobbing came to his ears. With his vision blurred by tears, he turned to the pilot's seat, where

Nazu faced him with solemn eyes.

"Nazu go now," the amazing young Titanese stated. He spoke in halting syllables of Cos, the language of the inner planets!

Carr stared agape, scarcely believing his ears.

"Detis great man," Nazu continued, relinquishing his seat to the dazed Earthman. "Nazu find him in ship. My people already there with him. They want to help when you come. Return after capture and heal dart wound of Detis. Bring wire and help him fix motors. Work very quick, my people. Detis have brain machine. Talk with Nazu; teach him words, also very quick. Nazu tell where you are and we come to help. Then he scare away red men—and die. That is all. Now I go—and you go also. Quickly."

"So that's how it happened," Carr muttered, slowly mulling over the amazing things he had heard. He watched the Titanese lad keenly as his eyes wandered in Mado's direction. He saw the admiring light that came into them as the big Martian removed the body of Detis from the helix and carried it gently away.

"Wait a minute," he interposed, as Nazu made as if to leave. "Mado would like to talk to you."

"Must go soon." The youngster drew himself up proudly. "Nazu is prince of his people. They need him. And you—you must go at once. Vibrations of mother planet's rings work on you too long already. Must be quick. Else you be wild men—like those down there."

He waved his arm in a gesture that embraced all Titan. Anxiety was written large on his countenance and his gaze traveled nervously to the door through which Mado must return.

The big Martian was not long in coming. He had carried the body of Detis aft, leaving Ora there with her dead. Carr's heart ached for her; he knew how silently and terribly she suffered. Knowing that her father had been healed of his deadly wound by the friendly Titanese, only to be taken from her afterwards by his own heroic act, made the blow doubly hard.

Later they would give Detis a decent burial, sending him through the airlock to drift aimlessly in space, preserved through the ages by the intense cold and the absence of air. A fitting tomb for the noblest of the vagabonds!

Mado chattered endlessly with Nazu, who was impatient to be off. Seeing that it was impossible to detain him, and realizing at last the stern necessity of hastening their own departure, he finally let him

go. The youngster bid Carr a sober, friendly farewell and followed Mado to the airlock.

Carr heard the clang of the manhole cover as it swung home, and was bolted to its seat. The ovoid drifted away from the vessel and dropped toward the forest beneath them. Nazu had gone to rejoin his people.

His fingers strayed to the controls. They must get away from the evil influence of those vibrations; he had felt something of their degrading power in the fighting down there. He had almost become a savage himself, he remembered with a revulsion of feeling.

The feel of the levers brought to him a renewed sense of confidence and responsibility. A while back he thought he'd never perform such simple duties again. The Nomad responded instantly and rose swiftly to hover over the pit of the fire-god. The flame had partly subsided and the ghost-shape wabbled there, changing form rapidly with darkening colors. Some weird phenomenon of nature that those brutes had set up as a deity.

Carr increased the repulsion energy once more and the Nomad shot skyward like a rocket. Through the floor port he saw Nazu's tiny ovoid scudding over the treetops. Then it had vanished.

"We're getting away none too soon," said Mado, rejoining him.

"Right." Carr watched the temperature indicator as he increased speed to the maximum they could withstand in the atmosphere.

They were out above the cloud layer then and he cast apprehensive eyes on the enormous flat disks encircling the great globe that was Saturn. Something like a hundred and seventy thousand miles across them, he remembered. But the astronomers of the inner planets had little actual knowledge of their composition; they knew nothing at all of their terrible power or their strange inhabitants.

The Nomad left Titan with tremendous acceleration now, as he increased the speed of the rejuvenated generators. They'd go on, on toward Uranus, Neptune—anywhere, away from this ringed planet that was responsible for the death of one of their number; away from the region that was soon to become the tomb of Detis.

There was silence then as the Nomad raced on through the blackness. Mado gripped the rail of the port and peered long and earnestly at the tiny pinpoint of light that now was Titan.

"Great kid, that Nazu," the Martian said, after a while. "Too bad he couldn't come along with us."

"Yes." Carr was thinking of the different life there would be on board the Nomad; and well he knew that Mado was thinking of the same thing. The Martian had missed the close companionship of his Terrestrial friend since his marriage to Ora; missed it more than he would admit, even to himself. And the lad, Nazu, had appealed to him; he would have fathered him as only a lonely bachelor can. Suddenly Carr's own friendship for the big fellow seemed a wonderful thing.

"Never mind, old man," he whispered, reaching over and gripping Mado's hand mightily, "We'll be a three-cornered family, Ora and you and I. And, who knows but that you'll find the one and only girl yourself, some fine day?"

"Oh, shut up!" Mado grunted.

But a big hand closed down hard on Carr's fingers, and the Earthman knew that their friendship was more firmly cemented than ever before.

122 The Mind Master by Arthur Josephus Burks

A squel to Manape the Mighty

Aproximate word count: 28,000

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Chapter 1: The Tuft of Hair

“Let’s hope the horrible nightmare is over, dearest,” whispered Ellen Estabrook to Lee Bentley as their liner came crawling up through the Narrows and the Statue of Liberty greeted the two with uplifted torch beyond Staten Island. New York’s skyline was beautiful through the mist and smoke which always seemed to mask it. It was good to be home again. Once more Lee Bentley is caught up in the marvelous machinations of the mad genius Barter.

Certainly it was a far cry from the African jungles where, for the space of a ghastly nightmare, Ellen had been a captive of the apes and Bentley himself had had a horrible adventure. Caleb Barter, a mad scientist, had drugged him and exchanged his brain with that of

an ape, and for hours Bentley had roamed the jungles hidden in the great hairy body, the only part of him remaining “Bentley” being the Bentley brain which Barter had placed in the ape’s skull-pan. Bentley would never forget the horror of that grim awakening, in which he had found himself walking on bent knuckles, his voice the fighting bellow of a giant anthropoid.

Yes, it was a far cry from the African jungles to populous Manhattan.

As soon as Ellen and Lee considered themselves recovered from the shock of the experience they would be married. They had already spent two months of absolute rest in England after their escape from Africa, but they found it had not been enough. Their story had been told in the press of the world and they had been constantly besieged by the curious, which of course had not helped them to forget.

“Lee,” whispered Ellen, “I’ll never feel sure that Caleb Barter is dead. We should have gone out that morning when he forgot to take his whip and we thought the vengeful apes had slain him. We should have proved it to our own satisfaction. It would be an ironic jest, characteristic of Barter, to allow us to think him dead.”

“He’s dead all right, dear,” replied Bentley, his nostrils quivering with pleasure as he looked ahead at New York, while the breeze

along the Hudson pushed his hair back from his forehead. “He had abused the great anthropoids for too many years. They seized their opportunity, don’t mistake that.”

“Still, he was a genius in his way, a mad, frightful genius. It hardly seems possible to me that he would allow himself to be so easily trapped. It’s a reflection on his great mentality, twisted though it was.”

“Forget it, dear,” replied Bentley, putting his arm around her shoulders. “We’ll both try to forget. After our nerves have returned to normal we’ll be married. Then nothing can trouble us.”

The vessel docked and later Lee and Ellen entered a taxicab near the pier.

“I’ll take you to your home, Ellen,” said Bentley. “Then I’ll look after my own affairs for the next couple of days, which includes making peace with my father, then we’ll go on from here.”

They looked through the windows of the cab as they rolled into lower Fifth Avenue and headed uptown. Newsies were screaming an extra from the sidewalks.

“Excitement!” said Bentley enthusiastically. “It’s certainly good to be home and hear a newsboy’s unintelligible screaming of an extra, isn’t it?”

On an impulse he ordered the cabbie to draw up to the curb and purchased a newspaper.

“Do you mind if I glance through the headlines?” Bentley asked Ellen. “I haven’t looked at an American paper for ever so long.”

The cab started again and Bentley folded the paper, falling easily into the habit of New Yorkers who are accustomed to reading on subways where there isn’t room for elbows, to say nothing of broad newspapers.

His eyes caught a headline. He started, frowning, but was instantly mindful of Ellen. He mustn’t show any signs that would excite her, especially when he didn’t yet understand what had caused his own instant perturbation.

Had Ellen looked at him she might have seen merely the calm face of a man mildly interested in the news of the day, but she was looking out at the Fifth Avenue shops.

Bentley was staring again at the newspaper story:

“An evil genius signing his ‘manifestoes’ with the strange cognomen of ‘Mind Master’ gives the authorities of New York City twelve hours in which to take precautions. To prove that he is able to make good his mad threats he states that at noon exactly, to-day, he will cause the death of the chief executive of a great insurance company whose offices are in the Flatiron Building. After that, at regular stated periods, warnings to be issued in each case ten hours in advance, he will steal the brains of thetwenty men whose names are hereto appended:” (There followed then a list of names, all of which were known to Bentley.)

He understood why the story had startled him, too. “Mind Master!” Anything that had to do with the human brain interested him mightily now, for he knew to what grim uses it could be put at the hands of a master scientist. Around his own head, safely covered by his hair unless someone looked closely, and even then they must needs know what they sought, was a thin white line. It marked the line of Caleb Barter’s operation on him that terrible night in the African jungles, when his brain had been transferred to the skull-pan of an ape, and the ape’s brain to his own cranium. Any mention of the brain, therefore, recalled to him a very harrowing experience.

It was little wonder that he shuddered.

Ellen noticed his agitation.

“What is it, dearest?” she asked softly, placing her hand in the crook of his arm.

He was about to answer her, desperately trying to think of something to say that would not alarm her, when their taxicab, with a sudden application of the brakes, came to a sharp stop. Bentley noticed that they were at the intersection of Twenty-second Street and Fifth Avenue. The lights were still green, but nevertheless all traffic was halted.

And for a strange reason.

From the west door of the Flatiron Building emerged a grim apparition of a man. His body was scored by countless bleeding wounds which looked as though they had been made by the fingernails of a giant. The man wore no article of clothing except his shoes. Apparently, his clothing had been ripped from his body by the same instrument which had turned his body into a raw, dripping horror.

The man staggered, half-running, at times all but falling, toward the traffic officer at the intersection.

As he ran he screamed, horrible, babbling screams. His lips worked crazily, his eyes rolled. He was frightened beyond the comprehension of ordinary mortals. His screams began and ended on the high shrill notes of utter dementia, and as he ran he pawed the air with his bleeding hands as though he fought out on all sides against invisible demons seeking to drag him down.

“Oh, my God!” said Ellen. “Even here!”

What had caused her to speak the last two words? Did she also have a premonition of grim disaster? Did she also feel, deep down inside her, as Bentley did, that the nightmare through which they had passed was not yet ended?

Bentley now sat unmoving, his eyes unblinking, as he saw the naked man stagger over to the traffic officer. The color drained from his face.

He looked at his watch. It was exactly noon.

Even without further consideration Bentley knew that this gruesome

apparition had some direct connection with the newspaper story he had just read.

Unobtrusively, trying to make it seem a preoccupied action, he folded the newspaper again and thrust it down at the end of the seat cushion. But Ellen was watching him, a haunting fear gradually coming into her eyes.

She quickly reached past him and snatched the paper before he realized her intent. The item he had read came instantly under her eyes because of the way he had automatically folded the paper. She read it with staring eyes.

“So, Lee,” she said, “you think there’s a connection with—with—well, with *us*?”

“Absurd!” he said heartily, too heartily. “Caleb Barter is dead.”

“But I have never been sure,” insisted Ellen. “Oh, Lee, let’s get away from here! Let’s take the first boat for Bermuda—anywhere to escape this terrible fear.”

“No!” he retorted harshly. “If our suspicions are correct, and I think we’re unwarrantedly keyed up because of our recent experiences, the

officials of New York may need my help."

"Your help? Why?"

"I know more about Caleb Barter than any other living man, perhaps."

"Then you *do* have doubts that he is dead!"

Bentley shrugged his shoulders.

"Ellen," he said, "drive on home without me. I'm going to drop off and find out all I can. If we're in for it in any way it's just as well to know it at once."

"You'll come right along?"

"Just as soon as I can make it. And I hope I'll be able to report our fears groundless."

Bentley stepped from the cab. He ordered the chauffeur to turn right into Twenty-second Street and to proceed until Ellen gave him further directions.

Then Bentley hurried through the congestion of automobiles toward

the traffic officer who was fighting with the naked man, trying to subdue him. Other men were running to the officer's assistance, for it could be seen that he alone was no match for the lunatic. Bentley, however, was first to arrive.

"Give me a hand!" gasped the officer. "I can't handle 'im without usin' my club and I don't wanna do that. The poor fella don't know what he's a-doin'."

Bentley quickly sprang to the patrolman's assistance. Between them they soon reduced the stranger to a squirming bundle and dragged him to the sidewalk; another officer was phoning for an ambulance. The stricken man was now mumbling, babbling insanely. Blood trickled from the corners of his lips. The sight of one eye had been destroyed.

Bentley watched him, sprawled now on the sidewalk, surrounded by a group of men. The man was dying, no question about that. The talons, which had scored him, had bitten deeply and he was destined to bleed to death soon even if the wounds were not otherwise mortal.

Bentley noticed something clutched tightly in the man's right hand—something that sent a chill through his body despite the heat of a mid-July noon. The officer, apparently, had not noticed it.

Soon a clanging bell announced the arrival of an ambulance, and as the crowd stepped aside to clear the way, Bentley bent over the dying man. The man's lips were parted and he was trying with a mighty effort of will to speak.

Bentley put his ear close to the bleeding lips through which words strove to bubble. He heard parts of two words:

"...ind ...aster...."

Bentley suddenly knew hat the man was trying to say. The half-uttered words could mean only—"Mind Master."

Bentley suppressed a shudder and extended his hands to the closed right hand of the dying man. Carefully he removed from between the fingers three tufts of thick brown hair, coarse and crude of texture. There was a rattle in the naked man's throat.

Five minutes later the ambulance intern hastily scribbled in his record the entry, "Dead on Arrival."

Bentley, more frightened than hehad ever been before, entered a taxicab as soon as the body had been removed and the streets cleared. He stared closely at the tufts of hair in his hand. Maybe he

had been wrong in taking them before detectives arrived on the scene, but he had to know, and he felt that these hairs proved his mad suspicions.

Caleb Barter was alive!

The hairs came from the shaggy coat of a giant anthropoid ape or a gorilla.

Chapter 2: Ultimatum

How terribly far-fetched it seemed! It was unbelievable enough that Bentley had once reposed in the body of an ape. That had been in the African wilds. But the idiocy of the thing now rested in Bentley's belief that here, immediately upon landing, he was again facing something just as horrible.

But the coincidences were too clear. The palaver about "brains," and "Mind Master"—and those ape hairs in Bentley's hands. He wished he knew all that had led up to that story he had read in the paper just prior to the appearance of the naked man from the west door of the Flatiron Building. However, the killing would get front page position now, due to the importance of the dead man—Bentley never doubted it was the man whom, in the paper, the "Mind Master" had promised to slay.

Great apes in the heart of New York City! It sounded silly, preposterous. Yet, before he had gone through that dread experience with the mad Barter, Bentley would have sworn that brain transplantation was impossible. Even now he was not sure that it hadn't all been a terrible dream.

Should Bentley go at once to the police to give them the benefit of

whatever knowledge he might have of Caleb Barter? He wasn't sure. Then he decided that sooner or later he must come out into the open. So he caught a cab and went to police headquarters.

"I wish," he said, "to talk to someone about the Mind Master!"

If he had said, "I have just come from Mars," he could scarcely have caused a greater sensation.

But his calm statement got him an instant audience with a slender man of thirty-five or so, whose hair was prematurely gray at the temples, and whose eyes were shrewd and far-seeing.

"My name's Thomas Tyler," said the detective. He certainly didn't look the conventional detective, but Bentley knew instantly that he *wasn't* the conventional detective. "I work on the unusual cases. If you hadn't sent in your name I wouldn't have seen you, which means that as soon as you leave here you are to forget my name and how I look."

He motioned Bentley to a seat. Bentley sat back. Suddenly Thomas Tyler was around his desk and had pushed back the hair from Bentley's temples. He drew in his breath with a sharp hiss when he saw the white line which circled Bentley's skull.

“It’s not exactly proof,” he said, as though he and Bentley had been in the midst of a discussion of that awful operation Barter had performed on Bentley, “but I’d take your word for it.”

“The story, in the main, was true,” said Bentley.

“I thought so. What made you come here?”

“I saw that naked man run across Fifth Avenue from the door of the Flatiron Building. I saw the officer subdue him, helped him do it in fact, and saw the man die. Since there was no detective there, I took the liberty of removing these from the fingers of the dead man.”

Bentley gave Tyler the coarse hair, stained with blood. Tyler looked at it grimly for a moment or two.

“Not human hair,” he said, as though talking to himself. “Not like any I know of. But ... ah, you know what sort of hair, eh? That’s what sent you here!”

“It’s the hair of an ape or a gorilla.”

“How do you know, for sure?”

“Once,” said Bentley grimly, “for several horrible hours ... I was a

giant anthropoid ape."

Tyler's chair legs crashed solidly to the floor.

"I see," he said. "You think this thing has some connection with your own experiences. How long ago was that?"

"Slightly over two months."

"You think the same man...?"

"I don't know. But who could want, as a newspaper story I just read says, to steal the brains of men? What for? It sounds like Barter. I've never heard of anybody else with such an obsession. I'm putting two and two together—and fervently hoping they'll add up to seven instead of four. For if ever in my life I wanted to be wrong it's now."

Tyler pursed his lips. Bentley saw that his eyes were glinting with excitement.

"But there's a possibility you're right. Do you know what the Mind Master's first manifesto said? It was published by a tabloid newspaper as a sort of gag—a strange crank letter. Here it is."

Tyler tossed Bentley a newspaper clipping a week old. Bentley read

quickly:

“The white race is deteriorating physically at a dangerous rate. In fifty years, if nothing is done to prevent it, the world will be filled with men whose bodies are so soft as to be almost worthless. But I shall take steps to prevent that, as soon as I am ready. I need a week. Then I shall begin my crusade to make the white race a race of supermen, whom I alone shall rule. They shall keep the brains they have, which shall be transferred to bodies which I shall furnish.

(Signed) The Mind Master.”

Tyler squinted at Bentley again.

“You see? Brains are all right, he says, but the white race needs new bodies. If he isn’t suggesting brain substitution, what is he suggesting? Though I confess I never thought of your story until your name was sent in to me a while ago. For the world thinks of Barter as having been killed by the great apes.”

“Yes, I told newspaper reporters that. I thought it was true. But this Mind Master must be Barter. There couldn’t be two persons in the world with mental quirks so much alike.”

“Tell me what Barter looks like. Oh, there are plenty of pictures extant of the famous Professor Caleb Barter who disappeared from the world some years ago, but he’ll know that, of course, and he won’t look like the pictures.

“Alteration of his own features should be easy for a man who juggles brains.”

“He may have changed his features since I saw him, too,” said Bentley. “But I’m sure I’d know him.”

Tyler’s telephone rang stridently.

He took down the receiver. His mouth fell slackly open as his eyes lifted to Bentley’s face. But he recovered himself and slapped his hand over the transmitter.

“Anybody know you came here?” asked Tyler.

Bentley shook his head.

“Well,” went on Tyler, “I don’t know how it happens, but this telephone message is for you!”

Bentley’s heart seemed to jump into his throat. One of those hunches

which sometimes were so valuable to him had struck him, as though it were a blow between the eyes. His lips tightened. His face was pale, but there was a grim light in his eyes.

He hesitated for a second, the receiver in his hand, his mouth against the transmitter.

“Well, Professor Barter?” he said conversationally.

There came a gasp from Thomas Tyler. He jumped to the door and motioned to someone. A man in uniform came to his side. Bentley distinctly heard Tyler tell the man to have this telephone call traced.

From the receiver came a well-remembered chuckle.

“So you were expecting me, eh, Bentley? You never really believed that one of my genius would fall such easy prey to the great apes did you?”

“Of course not, Professor,” said Bentley soothingly. “It would be an insult to your vivid mentality.”

“*Vivid* mentality! *Vivid* mentality! Why, Bentley, there isn’t another brain in the world to compare with mine. And you of all people should know it. The whole world will know it before I’m finished,

for I have made tremendous strides since you helped me to perform that crowning achievement in Africa. By the way, tell your friend Tyler, who just called the officer to the door, that it's useless to try to trace this call!"

Bentley jumped as though he had been stung. How had Barter known what Tyler was doing? How had he guessed what Tyler had told the man in uniform? How had Barter known Bentley was visiting Tyler? How had he discovered even that Bentley was back in the United States? Why, besides, was he so friendly with Bentley now?

"You speak, Professor," said Bentley softly, "as though you could see right into police headquarters."

"I can, Bentley! I can!" said Barter impatiently, as though he were rebuking a schoolboy for saying the obvious.

"You're close by, then?"

"No. I'm a long way—several miles—from you. But I can see everything you do. And you needn't look at Tyler in such surprise!"

Bentley started. He had looked at Tyler in a surprised way and,

clever though he was, he didn't think that Barter could have *guessed* so accurately to the second the gesture he had made. Barter chuckled.

"It's a good jest, isn't it? But listen to me, Bentley, I've a great scheme in hand for the amelioration of mankind. I need your help, mostly because you were such an excellent subject in my greatest successful experiment."

"Will it be the same sort of experiment as the other?" Bentley's heart was in his mouth as he asked the question.

"Yes, the same ... but there are improvements I have succeeded in perfecting since the creation of Manape. My one mistake when Manape was created was in that I allowed myself to lose control of him—of you! That will not happen again. Oh, if you'll help me, Bentley, that operation will not be performed on you until you yourself request it because I shall have proved to you that it is better for you. You shall be my assistant and obey my orders, nothing more."

Lee Bentley drew a deep breath.

"If I prefer not to work with you again, Professor?"

A chuckle was Barter's answer. The chuckle broke off shortly.

"You should not refuse, Bentley," said the scientist at last. "For then I should find it necessary to remove you. You might stand in my way, and though you would be but a puny obstacle, you still would be an obstacle. For example, consider Ellen Estabrook, your fiancée. I can find no use for her ... and she knows as much about me as you do. Therefore, at my convenience, I shall remove her."

"Caleb Barter," Bentley's voice was hoarse with anger as he dropped his soothing mode of address toward the man he knew was insane, "if anything happens to Miss Estabrook through you I shall find you no matter how well you are guarded ... and I shall destroy you bit by bit, as a small boy destroys a fly. For every least evil thing that happens to Miss Estabrook, a hundred times that will happen to you at my hands."

"Good!" snapped Barter, no longer chuckling. "I am happy to know how much she means to you. It shows me how easily I may control you through her. It means war then, between us? I'm sorry, Bentley, for I like you. In a way, you know, you are my creation. But in a war between us, Bentley, you haven't a chance to win."

Bentley clicked up the receiver.

“Could you trace the call, Tyler?” he snapped.

Tyler shook his head ruefully.

“We couldn’t locate the right telephone, but we could tell which exchange it came through, and the lines of that exchange cover a huge section of the city.”

“Can you find out exactly the section and the address of each phone on every line?”

“Yes. The exchange is Stuyvesant.”

“That gives me some help. I used to live in Greenwich Village and I had a Stuyvesant number. I’m going after Barter. Say, Tyler, how do you suppose Barter knew exactly what was going on in this room?”

Tyler’s face slowly whitened as his eyes looked fearfully into the eyes of Lee Bentley. He shook his head slowly.

Bentley squared his shoulders and spoke quietly and determinedly.

“Mr. Tyler,” he said, “I am in a great hurry. May I be conducted in a police car? Might as well. I’ll be working with you hand and glove until Barter is captured.”

Bentley rode behind a shrieking siren to the home of the Estabrooks ... while from a distance of two miles Caleb Barter watched every move and chuckled grimly to himself.

Chapter 3: Hell's Laboratory

The huge room was absolutely free of all sounds from anywhere save within itself. The walls, the floors, the doors were of chrome steel. The cages were iron-ribbed and ponderous.

The long table which ran down the strange room's center was covered with retorts, test tubes, Bunsen burners—all of the stock-in-trade of the scientist who spends most of his time at research work. The man who bent over the table was well past middle age. His hair was snow-white, but his cheeks were like rosy red apples. He literally seemed to glow with health. He was like a strange flame. His hands were slender, the fingers long and extraordinarily supple. His lips were redder even than his cheeks, and made one, strangely enough, think of vampires. His eyes were coal-black, fathomless, piercing.

On the bronze wall directly across the table from the swiftly laboring man was a porcelain tablet set into the bronze, and in the midst of the table were a score of little push-buttons. Above each was a red light; and below, a green one.

Several inches below each green light was a little slot which resembled a tiny keyhole, something like the keyhole in the average

handbag. There was a key in each hole, and from each key hung a length of gleaming chain which shone like gold and might have been gold, or at least, some gold-plated metal. On the dangling end of each chain was another key which might have been the twin of the key in the hole above.

In the space between the keyholes and the green lights there were the letters and figures: A-1, B-2, C-3, D-4 ... and so on up to T-20.

Plainly it was the beginning of a complicated classification system with any number of combinations possible.

Behind the working man the row of cages partially hid the brooding horror of the place. There were twenty cages—and in each one was a sulking, red-eyed anthropoid ape. Plainly the fact that the number of apes coincided with the number of push-buttons, and with the number of keys, to say nothing of the red lights and the green lights, was no accident. The apes were sullenly silent, proof that they feared the man at the table so much that they were afraid to move.

At last the white-haired man stopped and breathed a sigh of satisfaction. Carefully he placed in the middle of the table the instrument which he had been examining. It looked like a slightly concave aluminum plate or tympanum, save that on the apex

appeared a tiny ball of the same metal. Except for the color and the fact that the thing was almost flat, it looked like a small Manchu hat.

“Naka Machi!” said the man suddenly in a conversational tone of voice.

The chrome steel door swung open swiftly and silently and another man entered. He was about the same height as the first man, but he was younger and his eyes were blacker. His hair was as black as the wings of a crow. He was a Japanese dressed in Occidental garb.

“Naka Machi,” said the white-haired one again, “I have examined every bit of the infinitesimal mechanism in the ball on this tympanum. It is perfect. You are a genius, Naka Machi. There is only one genius greater—Professor Caleb Barter!”

Naka Machi bowed low, and as he spoke his breath hissed inwardly through his teeth after the Japanese manner of admitting humility—“that my humble breath may not blow upon you”—which never needed really to be sincere.

“I am merely a genius with my fingers, Professor Barter,” said Naka Machi in a musical voice. “The smaller the medium in which I work the happier I am, Professor; and in that I am a genius. But the plan

for this so marvelous little radio-control, as you call it, came entirely from your head, my master. I did exactly as the plans bade me. Will it work?”

Caleb Barter’s red face went redder still. His eyes shot flames of anger. His lips pouched. Almost he seemed on the point of striking down his Japanese assistant.

“Will it work?” he repeated. “Have you not just told me that you followed my plans exactly? Have I not just now checked your every bit of work and pronounced it perfect? Then how can it fail to work? Have you another one ready?”

“Yes, my master. Now that I have perfected two, the work will become monotonous. If the master wishes, I can create still another radio-control, inside the head of a pin, which I should first render hollow with that skill which only Naka Machi possesses?”

Caleb Barter almost smiled.

“It will not be necessary. But it will be necessary for you to make eighteen additional radio-controls of the same size as this one, or say make twenty-four so that we shall have some extra ones in case of accident. These two will be put into action at once. Naka Machi,

bring me Lecky, completely uniformed as a smart chauffeur! Have you laid in a store of clothing, as I bade you, to fit every conceivable need of Lecky, Stanley, Morton and Cleve?”

“Yes, my master.”

“Then bring in Lecky accoutered as a chauffeur.”

Ten minutes later a young man entered behind Naka Machi. He was slender and his chauffeur’s uniform fitted him like a glove. He looked like a soldier in it. Indeed his bearing, his whole stance, spoke of many years as a soldier—and a proud one. The fellow was brimful of health. His cheeks were rosy with vitality. He looked like a man with health so abundant he never found means to tire himself to the point where he could sleep dreamlessly.

But, nevertheless his arms hung listlessly at his sides. His eyes seemed empty of hope, dull and lifeless, and one looked into those eyes and shuddered. One tried to gaze deeply into them and found oneself baffled. There was no soul behind them.

“Come here, Lecky,” said Barter coldly.

Lecky glided effortlessly forward to stand before Barter.

“You’ve no brains, Lecky,” said Barter emotionlessly; “no brains of your own. You have a splendid body which moves only at the will of Caleb Barter. I need that body for my purposes. But a man with brains is dangerous. That’s why you haven’t any.”

Barter now took the silvery tympanum with the ball atop it and set it on the head of Lecky. On top of it he placed the chauffeur’s cap, bringing it down tightly to keep the tympanum in place.

“If I had it to do again I’d insert the tympanum under the skull as part of the operation, Naka Machi,” said Barter as he worked. “We’ll do that hereafter. And we begin work immediately. I’m going to send Lecky out now to get the first subject.”

“The first subject, sir?”

“Yes. Manhattan’s richest man. A man must have brains to become Manhattan’s richest man, and I need men with brains. His name is Harold Hervey. He will be leaving his office in the Empire State Building in about half an hour. I want Lecky to be on hand to meet him.”

On his own head Barter placed a second tympanum which Naka Machi had brought him. Over it he pulled a rubber cap, like a

bathing cap with a hole cut in the top.

“Now, we’ll try it out, Naka Machi,” said Barter. “Which one of these lights is Lecky’s?”

“B-2, my master.”

Barter sat down under the light marked “B-2” and lifted the key which dangled from the end of the golden chain. This key he inserted in a tiny orifice in the ball atop his head. Then he turned in his chair to look at Lecky. Barter’s face was a mask of concentration as he gazed intently at the young man.

Lecky stiffened to attention. His right hand shot to his cap visor in salute. His lips twisted into a travesty of a smile. For a few seconds he went through a strange series of posturings. He stood in the attitude of a boxer preparing to attack. He danced smartly on his toes. He bent double and touched the floor with the palms of his hands. He jumped up and down with his legs stiff. He stopped suddenly with his right hand at rigid salute. But his eyes were still vacant through every posture.

Barter’s face showed a glow of satisfaction.

“He did exactly what I willed him to do! I am his master. He is my slave—even more abjectly than you are my slave, Naka Machi!”

“But that would be impossible, my master,” said Naka Machi, hissing again through his teeth as he sucked in his breath. “None could be more abjectly your slave than I.”

“Do not say anything is impossible,” said Barter peevishly, “when I say otherwise. Anything is possible to me! Now, we’ll send Lecky forth. I’ll watch him through the heliotubes and control his every move. While I am directing Lecky you will prepare the table behind me for the first of our world-revolutionizing operations.”

“Yes, my master,” said the Japanese humbly.

“But first, it’s just as well that Lecky is in a good humor, even though he is my slave. Where are the walnuts, Naka Machi?”

The Japanese tendered a large walnut to Barter. Barter rose and approached Lecky who still stood at salute. He stopped a couple of paces in front of the soldierly man and held up the walnut as a man sometimes holds up food to a dog, bidding him “speak” before he may be fed.

Then Lecky did a strange thing.

He began to jump up and down like a pleased child. His jumping caused him to lose his balance, but he recaptured it by pressing the backs of his hands against the floor. His hitherto expressionless eyes lost their dullness. Saliva dribbled at the corners of his mouth. Barter tossed him the walnut. Lecky held it under his right forefinger, against the *heel* of his thumb, instead of between thumb and forefinger, as he lifted it to his mouth.

Barter chuckled.

“Even the human casement cannot wholly hide the ape, eh, Naka Machi?” said Barter.

Naka Machi hissed.

Barter returned to the porcelain slab banked with the lights and the keys. He readjusted the keys and his face became thoughtful again.

Lecky turned smartly, still nibbling at his walnut, strode to the bronze door and let himself out.

Through the heliotube directly above the key marked “B-2,” Caleb Barter watched him go, and kept watching him as he made his way

to the street. Barter looked ahead of his puppet, noting the cars which were parked at the curb. He saw a stately limousine. He grinned. The chauffeur was not in sight. Barter looked for him and found him at a table in a nearby restaurant, his back to the window.

Barter looked back at his puppet and his face became serious with concentration.

Lecky walked blithely along the street and turned right when he was opposite the limousine. Without a moment's hesitation, he stepped into the limousine, pressed the starter, shifted gears, turned in the middle of the block and started swiftly uptown.

After Lecky had shifted gears he drove with his left hand alone. His right was still busy with the walnut.

Barter now looked like a man in a trance, so deeply did he concentrate on his task of guiding his soulless, ape-brained puppet, Lecky, through the heavy traffic of Manhattan.

Chapter 4: The Opening Gun

“That list, Tyler,” said Bentley, after he had somewhat calmed the fears of Ellen Estabrook and had returned to the task of tracing Barter, “is headed by Harold Hervey, the multi-millionaire. I know Barter well enough to know that he’ll go down the list methodically, taking each person in turn. We’d best take immediate precautions to guard the old man’s home. For Barter, if not entirely ready to take drastic steps, must be almost ready, else he couldn’t issue his manifestoes and take a chance of some slip-up before he could get really started.”

“Why do you suppose he named Hervey on the list?” asked Tyler.

“Because Hervey is a financial genius. Barter wishes not only to carry out his plan of creating a race of supermen, but wishes at the same time to maintain personal control of them. And to control Manhattan, from which he logically hopes to extend his control to the whole United States, then to the whole world, Barter must also control the money marts. Hervey is the shrewdest financier in the world.”

“But won’t we frighten Hervey’s family if we take steps now?”

“Better to frighten them now than to be too late entirely. However, we can place his house under surveillance without the knowledge of the family for the time being. And you’d better send a couple of men to his office in the Empire State Building to see that nothing happens to him on the way home this evening. I talked to him by telephone and he pooh-poohed the whole thing. Hard-headed business executives have no imagination.”

Bentley and Tyler rode uptown in the back seat of a speeding police car driven by one of the best chauffeurs Bentley had ever ridden behind. He edged through holes in the traffic where Bentley could scarcely see any holes at all. He estimated the speed of cars which might have collided with the police vehicle and slipped through with inches to spare. In his way the man was a genius. But Bentley was yet to see the driving of a master genius....

Far out in the residential district the police car came to a stop. Other police cars arrived at intervals to disgorge men in plain clothes who immediately entered upon their guard duties as unobtrusively as possible. If Hervey’s family noticed at all they would scarcely attach any importance to the arrival of cars and the discharging of passengers who seemed to have nothing to do except dawdle on the sidewalks.

But all the way uptown a hunch had ridden Bentley. He had the feeling that no matter how fast the police car traveled, no matter how skilfully the chauffeur inched his way through the press, they would be too late to save Hervey. The feeling became an obsession. Many times he called through the speaking tube.

“Faster, driver, for God’s sake, faster!”

Now near the home of Harold Hervey, Bentley found himself unable to walk slowly, with the air of nonchalance, which the other police officers wore like a cloak.

“Something’s happened,” said Bentley, “I’m sure of it. I feel that Barter is so close to me that I could touch him if I knew in which direction to extend my fingers.”

Suddenly a speeding car, with horn bellowing, came crashing up the street toward the Hervey residence. It was traveling at great speed, careening from side to side like a ship in a storm at sea.

“There comes Hervey’s car,” said Tyler. “And something has happened to make him travel like that. Old man Hervey doesn’t allow his chauffeur to go faster than twenty miles an hour.”

Tyler and Bentley were near by when the car squealed to a stop before the Hervey residence and a hatless, disheveled man leaped out almost before the car stopped rolling.

“That’s not Hervey,” said Tyler. “That’s his private secretary. Something’s up. It’s time we took a hand in things.”

Tyler and Bentley grasped the young man by the elbow.

“What’s up?” demanded Tyler.

“It’s Mr. Hervey, sir,” panted the secretary. “It just happened. He’s been kidnaped!”

The secretary was a slight man, but fear had given him strength. He almost dragged Tyler and Bentley off their feet as he strode on up the walk leading to the home of Hervey.

“You’ll scare his family half to death!” said Tyler.

“It’ll have to come sometime, Tyler,” said Bentley. “It might as well be now. They’ll have to know. We’ll have to sit inactively from this moment on. Tyler, there’s nothing that can be done for Hervey. Barter has scored. We couldn’t catch him now to save ourselves from perdition. But his next step will involve the Hervey menage.

We’ll have to wait there for his next move.”

Tyler and Bentley entered the vast gloomy structure of the old-fashioned Hervey domicile on the heels of the frightened secretary. Mrs. Hervey, a faded woman of sixty or so, met them at the door. Her head was held high, her lips grimly drawn into a straight line.

“So,” she said evenly, “they’ve got Mr. Hervey. I begged him to take those threats seriously. He’s been either killed or kidnaped.”

“Kidnaped,” said Bentley, continuing brutally because of the courage he saw in the old woman’s face. “And that means he’ll be dead within the hour, if he isn’t dead already. We’ve got to stay here for a few hours, to await the next move of the madman calling himself the Mind Master, in the hope that we can trace him when he makes his next move.”

Mrs. Hervey lifted her head still higher.

“We’ll place no obstacles in your path, gentlemen,” she said, “if you are from the police. The family will confine itself to the upper floors of the house.”

Tyler and Bentley took possession of the living room. Outside a

dozen plain-clothes men were to patrol the grounds during the hours of darkness.

Other men were at every adjacent street corner. A rat could not have got through unobserved.

Tyler and Bentley took seats at a table facing the door. The police car in which they had arrived stood at the curb, with the chauffeur at the wheel, the motor humming softly.

“Timkins,” said Bentley, addressing the private secretary who stood in the most distant corner of the room, his eyes fearfully fixed on the street door, “how was Mr. Hervey captured?”

“I was accompanying him to his car, sir,” replied the young man, “when a dapper fellow in a chauffeur’s uniform confronted us on the sidewalk. He stood as stiff and straight as a soldier. He didn’t say a word. He just looked at Mr. Hervey. Mr. Hervey stopped because the man was blocking the sidewalk. I looked into the chauffeur’s eyes. They seemed utterly dead. I shivered. I’d have sworn the man had no soul, now that I look back at it. Suddenly he lashed out with his fist, striking Mr. Hervey on the jaw. Mr. Hervey started to fall. The man caught him under the arms and tossed him into the tonneau of a limousine at the curb. The car was away before I could summon the

police.”

Bentley nodded.

“Which way did the car go?” he demanded.

“Downtown, at top speed,” replied Timkins.

Bentley turned to Tyler.

“The Stuyvesant exchange is downtown,” he said. “Now Timkins says that the kidnaper’s car went downtown. And the naked man was killed in the Flatiron Building, which is well downtown in its turn. Tyler, fill all the area covered by the Stuyvesant exchange with plain-clothes men. Telephone Headquarters to see whether a stolen limousine has been reported from somewhere in the area. Barter wouldn’t have cars of his own for fear they could be traced. He’ll use stolen cars when he uses cars at all. And he had his puppet pick up the limousine close to his hideout.”

Tyler nodded and quickly spoke into the telephone on the table at his elbow.

The telephone reminded Bentley of Ellen Estabrook.

When Tyler had finished issuing pointed instructions Bentley called the residence of the Estabrooks in Astoria, Long Island.

Carl Estabrook answered the telephone.

“Is Ellen all right?” asked Bentley. “May I speak to her?”

Carl Estabrook’s answering gasp came plainly over the wire.

“Are you crazy, Lee?” he asked. “Not ten minutes ago you telephoned Ellen and told her to meet you near the arch in Washington Square. I asked her if she was sure the voice was yours, and she was....”

But Bentley, white-faced, had already clicked up the receiver.

“Tyler,” he said, “Ellen Estabrook, my fiancée, is walking into a trap. It’s Barter again. He’d know how to imitate my voice well enough to fool Ellen. It would be simple enough for a man like him. He probably had that long conversation with me at headquarters to make sure he hadn’t forgotten the timbre and pitch of my voice ... and to hear how it sounded over the telephone. Please have plain-clothes men pick up Ellen in Washington Square. And that, Tyler, if you’ll notice, is also downtown.”

Bentley felt that he would go mad with anxiety as he awaited some news from the plain-clothes men Tyler had ordered to look for Ellen Estabrook.

He had asked Tyler to issue rather unusual instructions to the plain-clothes men around the Hervey residence. They were to make no attempt to halt anyone who might approach the house, but were to permit no one to depart. It was a weak plan, but knowing the supreme egotism of Barter, Bentley felt that the old scientist would deliberately accept such a challenge. He wouldn't mind risking the loss of a minion.

"He controls his puppets from his hideout, Tyler," Bentley explained, "and won't hesitate to send them into danger since it can't touch him. And he watches every move they make, too. He's made some television adaptation of his own. I'll wager, if he so desires, he can see us sitting here right now, even perhaps hear what we say. I can fancy hearing him chuckle, and Tyler...?"

"Yes?"

"I can see old man Hervey on an operating table with Barter bending over him, working fiendishly. Behind Barter are cages of apes."

“But how could he transport apes to his hideout?”

“He could manage to smuggle anything anywhere. Money paves the way to any accomplishment, Tyler. We needn’t concern ourselves with how he does it, but with the fact that he must surely have apes in his hideout.”

There came suddenly an imperious ringing of the doorbell.

Bentley and Tyler leaped to their feet, their hands streaking for their automatics which they had placed within easy reach on the table. Side by side they sprang for the door, and flung it open.

A chill of horror ran through Bentley.

“Mother of God!” cried Tyler.

“Mr. Hervey!” shrieked Timkins. The secretary, noting the figure which toppled so grimly into the room, fainted. The thud of his body followed the thud of the old man’s body to the floor.

In that first moment of overwhelming terror, all three men noted that Hervey’s skull-pan was missing.

“Look after details here, Tyler!” cried Bentley, quickly recovering

himself. “I’m after whoever brought the old man home.”

Bentley was racing down the path for the street, where a man in chauffeur’s uniform was hurling himself into a limousine, while bullets from half a dozen plain-clothes men, racing to head him off, sang about his ears. But the stranger gained the driver’s seat and the limousine was away like a shot. The police car was rolling as Bentley leaped upon the running board, then eased in beside the driver.

“Don’t stop for anything!” cried Bentley. “Keep that car in sight!”

The car headed downtown at breakneck speed.

Chapter 5: To Broadway's Horror

Bentley would never forget that nightmarish ride downtown. It was a dream as terrifying and ghastly as had been his experience in the African jungles when he had been Manape. Added to the utter fear of the ride was his fear for the safety of Ellen Estabrook. Caleb Barter, so far, was utterly invincible. It seemed he could not be beaten or outwitted in any way. But Bentley set his lips tightly.

Caleb Barter must have some weak spot in his insane armor, some way by which he could be reached and destroyed—and Bentley swore to himself that it would be he who would find that weak spot.

The limousine ahead was going at dangerous speed. The police chauffeur beside Bentley crouched low over the wheel as he drove. His eyes never left the speeding limousine. People on the sidewalks stared in astonishment as the two cars flashed downtown.

The leading car sped on, the driver obviously expecting ways to open in the last second before threatened collision. He passed cars on the left and the right. There were times when his wheels were up on the curb as he went through lanes between cars and sidewalks. He was determined to go through.

Only Bentley understood that the driver ahead was an automaton, a man whose brain did not know the meaning of fear. He knew that from his hideout Caleb Barter was directing the flight of the escaping car. He could fancy the old man of the apple-red cheeks, sitting in a chair in his hideout, his hands in the air as though they gripped the wheel of a car, sweat breaking forth on his cheeks as he guided his puppet through the press of cars.

But by now in that uncanny way that sometimes happens the streets were being cleared as if by magic before the flight of one whom all observers must have thought a madman. Only Bentley knew that the driver ahead was not a madman.

His own car careened from side to side. Bentley wondered what the chauffeur would think if he knew he was driving a race against one of Barter's supermen. He would perhaps have realized that no man could possibly follow with any degree of success. The police driver had succeeded so far only because, Bentley guessed, he felt that where any other man could drive, so could he.

Only Bentley knew that the driver up there was not a "man" in the normal meaning of the word. He wondered who "he" really was—not that it mattered greatly, for the entity required to make "him" a normal man had perhaps been destroyed, or had become part of

some giant anthropoid to be used later in Barter's ghastly experiments.

"I wonder if Tyler will send out calls for police cars in other parts of the city to try and cut off the runaway," shouted Bentley above the shrieking of the motor and the wailing of the siren. "Are any police cars equipped with radio?"

"Several," answered the police chauffeur. "And they are able to cut in on various public radio stations, too. By this time warnings are being heard on every blaring radio in Manhattan."

The two cars sped on. For a brief space the car ahead took to the sidewalk. Suddenly a human body was tossed violently against the side of a building, and the fleeing car passed on. As the pursuing car passed the spot Bentley knew by the shape of the bundle that the enemy had killed a woman. At that speed he must have crushed every bone in her body. In a matter of seconds the information would be telephoned to radio studios and people would be warned to take to open doorways when they saw cars traveling at undue rates of speed.

"I'm a better driver than he is!" yelled the police chauffeur, out of the side of his mouth at Bentley. "I haven't killed anyone yet."

The words had scarcely left his mouth when a blind man, tapping his way with a cane, came from behind a building at an intersection and stepped into the gutter. The fool, couldn't he hear the shrieking of the siren? But perhaps he was deaf, too.

The police chauffeur turned sharply to the left and for a second Bentley held his breath expecting the careening car to turn over. If it did it would roll over a dozen times, and destroy anything that happened to be in its path. But with a superhuman manipulation of the wheel the police chauffeur righted the car, got it straightened out again, and was on his way. The old man had not been touched, but there was no doubt that he had felt the wind of the great car's passing.

The fleeing car was gaining now.

It rode madly down Broadway. The great pillared intersection where Broadway cuts through Sixth Avenue was dead ahead. The fleeing car continued on, crashing through, while cars evaded it in every direction, and into Broadway beyond. After it went Bentley, all other matters forgotten as he prayed to the god of speed to guide them through.

Two cars came out of Thirty-first Street. Their drivers saw their

danger at the same time. But they turned different ways, and as Bentley's car flashed past them the two cars seemed welded solidly together. They were rolling across the sidewalk toward the huge plate glass window of a restaurant. Just as the pursuing car lost them as they swept past, the two cars went through that plate glass window. Bentley, in his mind's eye, saw the two dead, mutilated drivers, and the passengers with them, he saw the wreckage of the restaurant, the mangled diners who sat at the tables nearest the fatal window.

"More marks against Barter," he muttered to himself. "How long will the list be before I'll be able to drag him down?"

On and on went the two cars. People packed the sidewalks, but they kept close against the buildings. The streets were almost deserted now, for that warning had got ahead. Three other police cars were careening down the street, too. Bentley saw them with pleasure. Other cars would be coming in to head off the fleeing limousine. This one puppet of Barter's, at least, would be pocketed before he could find time to leap from his car and escape.

"Barter's sweating blood as he saws with both hands at an imaginary

driver's wheel," thought Bentley. "When will he give up—and what will his driver do when Barter relinquishes control?"

For the first time the grim thought came to him. He knew that the creature there had the brain of an ape. What would an ape do if he suddenly found himself at the wheel of a car going down Broadway at eighty miles an hour? He would chatter, and jump up and down. The plunging car, with accelerator full on, would be out of control.

"God Almighty, I never thought of that!" yelled Bentley. "As soon as he sees he can't save his puppet he'll let him get out the best way he can, himself ... and that car will be traveling, uncontrolled, at eighty miles an hour."

As though his very statement had fathered the thought, two police cars swept into the intersection at Twenty-third Street and Fifth Avenue. The fleeing limousine was turning right to go down Fifth Avenue.

The police cars were brought to a halt to effectively stop the further progress of the speeding limousine. Three other cars plunged in to make the box barrage of cars effective. The fleeing car was trapped. Barter must know that. If he did know, it proved that he could see everything that transpired. The next few seconds would show.

Bentley gasped as he put his hand on the driver's arm to have him slow down to prevent a wholesale pile-up in the busy intersection. He gasped with horror as he did so, for the fleeing car was now going crazy. It zigzagged from side to side. Now it rode the two right wheels, now the two left.

And suddenly the driver swung nimbly out through the left window, his hands reaching up over the top, and in a moment he was on the roof of the careening car.

"I've seen apes swing into trees like that," Bentley thought.

While the car plunged on, the creature stood up on the doomed limousine, and in spite of the fact that the wind of the car's passing must have been terrific, the ghastly hybrid jumped up and down on the top like a delighted child viewing a new toy or riding a shoot-the-chutes.

Suddenly the creature's right leg went through the top's fabric. It struggled to regain its footing as an ape might struggle to regain position on a limb in the jungles.

At that moment the fleeing car crashed mercilessly into the two nearest police cars ahead. The men inside had expected the driver to

slow down to avoid a collision. How could they know what sort of brain lurked within the driver's skull? They couldn't ... and three policemen paid with their lives for their lack of knowledge as their bodies were hurled beneath a mass of twisted wreckage, crushed out of human semblance.

The hybrid atop the fatal car was hurled through the air like a thunderbolt. His body passed over the railing of the subway entrance before the Flatiron Building and Bentley knew he had crashed to his death on the steps.

The police car had already come to a stop, and Bentley was running toward the subway entrance.

The shapeless bleeding bundle on the steps no longer even resembled a man. Fortunately nobody had been struck by the hurtling body; and, miraculously enough, Barter's pawn was not yet quite dead.

Moans of animal pain came through his bleeding lips. The eyes scarcely noticed Bentley, though there was a slight flicker of fear in them. Then, in the instant of death, even that slight expression passed from them. Bentley saw the scarline about the skull.

And now Bentley knew that Barter was missing no slightest move, that he saw everything....

For the ghastly hybrid on the steps raised his right hand in meticulous salute ... and died. It was an ironic, grotesque gesture.

Plain-clothes men gathered around.

“Take his fingerprints,” said Bentley quickly. “Then telegraph the fingerprint section, U. S. Army, at Washington, for this man’s identity.”

An ambulance was taking aboard the three mangled policemen as Bentley stepped back into his car for the ride down to Washington Square to see what dread thing had happened to Ellen Estabrook.

Chapter 6: High Jeopardy

Ellen Estabrook was almost in hysterics when Bentley reached her. She had been immediately picked up by plain-clothes men and had thought herself captured by minions of Barter. She had been panic-stricken for a moment, she told Bentley, and it had taken her some little time to be persuaded that she was in the hands of police.

But Bentley's heart was filled to overflowing with gratitude that he had been able to safeguard Ellen against Barter. He never doubted it had been Barter who had telephoned her. And even now he fancied he could hear Barter's chuckle of amusement. Barter was watching, perhaps even listening. Bentley felt that the madman was just biding his time. Barter could have taken Ellen in this attempt, but hadn't tried greatly, knowing himself invincible, knowing that he could take her at any moment if it was necessary. And he might take her even if it were not necessary, since he had warned Bentley she must be removed.

The police car raced back uptown so that Bentley could inform himself of any new developments in the Hervey case. Ellen snuggled against him gratefully. "You'll have to stick close to me," said Bentley, "until something happens, or until the exigencies of service draw me away from you. Then it will be up to Tom Tyler to look

after you.”

“I can look after myself,” she retorted spiritedly. “I’m over age and not without brains....”

“Yet you went to Washington Square,” said Bentley gently. “Didn’t it even seem strange to you that I would have selected such a place as a rendezvous?”

Ellen turned away from him and her lips trembled. His gentle thrust had hurt her.

“But I would have sworn it was your voice, Lee,” she said. “And—I still think it was!”

“I tell you I didn’t phone you to meet me in Washington Square!”

“But you told me you had talked with Barter for a long time on the headquarters phone, didn’t you? Remember that you are dealing with the cleverest and maddest brain we know of to-day. What if he had merely talked with you to get a record of your voice? Suppose a voice were composed of certain ingredients, certain sounds. Suppose those ingredients could somehow be captured on a sensitized plate of some kind! Edison would have been burned as a sorcerer a few

centuries before he invented the wax record. Twenty years ago who would have thought of talking pictures ... voices permanently recorded on celluloid?”

“But the talkie films merely parrot, over and over again, the words of actual people. When I talked with Barter this morning I certainly said nothing about meeting you at Washington Square.”

“But the tone, the timber, the frequency of your voice! Lee, suppose he had gone a step further than the talkies and had found a way to break the voice apart and put it back together to suit himself...?”

“Good Lord, Ellen! It sounds crazy ... but if you would have sworn that voice was mine, then mine it may have been, speaking words with my voice that I never spoke personally. But wait until we find out for sure. We’re just guessing.”

But the idea stuck in his mind and he believed in it enough to tell Tyler, upon arriving at the Hervey residence, to warn every man named on the list of the Mind Master to make no appointments over the telephone, no matter how sure they were of the voices at the other end of the wire.

It sounded wild, but was it?

That night Ellen and Bentley occupied rooms which faced each other across the hall in a midtown hotel, and plain-clothes men were on duty to right and left in the hall. There were men on the roof and in the lobby, in the garage, everywhere skulkers might be expected to look for coigns of vantage from which to proceed against Ellen Estabrook. Bentley knew quite well that Barter would not drop his intention against Ellen, especially since he had failed once already.

Tyler and Bentley sat in Bentley's room drinking black coffee and discussing their plans for the next day. The latest paper had contained another manifesto of the Mind Master! the second man on his list was to be taken at ten o'clock the next day. The man was president of a great construction company. His name was Saret Balisle; he was under thirty, slim as a professional dancer, and dark as a gypsy.

"But what does Barter want with all these big shots?" asked Thomas Tyler. "Just what is the point of his stealing their brains and putting them into the skull-pans of apes, if that's what you think he has in mind?"

"The Barter touch," said Bentley grimly. "At first he probably intended to kill just any men and make the transfer, and then use his manapes to send against the men he wished to capture, and through

whom he intended to gain control of Manhattan. Then he decided, since he had learned to control his manapes, by radio I suppose, that it would be an ironic touch to make virtual slaves of the “key” men he had chosen for his crusade.”

“But why the transplantation at all, even if the man is mad? He reasons logically. Only his premises are unthinkable ... and he builds successful ghastly experiments on top of them....”

“He claims he wishes to build a race of supermen,” Bentley answered. “His reason for the brain transference is therefore plain. An anthropoid ape has a body which is several times as hardy, durable and mighty as that of even the strongest man, but the ape has not the brain of a civilized man. A specialized man, one with a highly developed brain, generally has a very weak body. He’s constantly put to the necessity of taking exercise to keep from growing sick. Therefore the ape’s body and the man’s brain would seem, to Barter, an ideal combination. That nature didn’t plan it so troubles him not at all. He will make a fool of nature!”

“I wonder if we’ll get him. Nobody knows how many lives have been lost already.”

“We’ll get him, Tyler. I’ll bet anything you want to name that your

men have walked back and forth across his hideout. I'll bet that decent, respectable people live within mere yards of him and do not know it. We'll get to him the second he makes a mistake of any kind. Maybe he'll make his first one when he tries to get Saret Balisle—Good Lord, I forgot something. Tyler, phone again and ask Headquarters if the coroner found anything strange about the head of the men I chased down Fifth Avenue."

Tyler phoned.

"Yes," he said, clicking up the receiver, "he had bits of metal which looked like aluminum in his scalp; but the autopsy shows that it came from outside somewhere."

"It's part of Barter's radio control," muttered Bentley, "it *must* be! It has to be ... and I didn't think of looking for it at the time."

Long before sunrise Bentley and Tyler repaired to the office of Saret Balisle, letting themselves in with keys which had been furnished them last night. It had been decided that Balisle would not try to run away from the threat of the Mind Master, but would be in his office as usual. If he ran, and got out of touch with the police, Barter would get him anyway and nobody would be the wiser.

Balisle had grinned and shrugged his shoulders, but the wanness in his cheeks showed that he didn't take the threats lightly, considering what it was thought had happened to Harold Hervey.

"I wonder," said Tyler as they walked through the cool of the morning to the Clinton Building on lower Fifth Avenue, where Balisle had his offices, "how Barter keeps his apes with men's brains from trying to break away from him when he has to divert his mental control to other channels?"

Bentley hesitated, seeking a logical answer. It seemed simple enough when the answer came to his mind.

"Suppose, Tyler," he said, "that you wakened from a nightmare and looked into a mirror to discover that you were an anthropoid ape? That you were incapable of speaking, of using your hands save in the clumsiest fashion? When it came home to you what had happened to you, would you rush right out into the street, hoping that the people on the sidewalks would understand that you were a man in ape's clothing?"

"Good Lord! I never thought of that!"

"You would if you'd ever been an ape. I know the feeling."

“Then Barter’s manapes are more surely prisoners than if they were sentenced to serve their entire lives in the deepest solitary cells in Sing Sing! How horrible—but still, they yet would have a way of escape.”

“Yes, simply break out and start running, knowing that the crowd would soon take and destroy them. Right enough—but even when one knows oneself an ape it isn’t easy to destroy oneself.”

They entered the offices of Saret Balisle and looked about them. It was just an ordinary office. They looked in clothes closets and in shadowy corners. They took every possible precaution in their survey of the situation. They looked for hidden instruments of destruction. They looked for hidden dictaphones. They were extremely thorough in their preliminary preparations for the defense of Saret Balisle.

At five minutes of ten o’clock Balisle was at his desk, pale of face, but grinning confidently.

There were men in uniform in the hallways, on the roof, in the windows of rooms across the avenue. Bentley and Tyler should have felt sure that not even a mouse could have broken through the cordon to reach Saret Balisle. But Bentley was doubtful.

He went to the window nearest Balisle and looked out. Sixteen stories down was Fifth Avenue, patrolled in this block by a dozen blue-coats and as many more plain-clothes men. Saret Balisle seemed to be impregnable.

But at ten o'clock exactly, a blood-curdling scream came from the room adjoining Balisle's, where some insurance company had offices. The scream was followed by other screams—all the screams of women....

For just a moment Bentley and Tyler whirled to stare at the door giving onto the hall, their hands tightly gripping their automatics.

"God Almighty!" It came in a choked scream from the lips of Saret Balisle, simultaneous with the falling of a shower of glass in the room.

Tyler and Bentley whirled back.

A giant anthropoid ape stood on the window sill, and the brute's left hand held tightly clasped the ankle of Balisle, holding him as a child holds a rag doll.

The ape swung Balisle out over the abyss.

Tyler flung up his automatic.

“Don’t!” shouted Bentley. “If you shoot he’ll drop Balisle!”

Bentley felt sick and the bottom seemed to drop out of his stomach as the anthropoid, still holding Balisle as lightly as though he didn’t know he held extra weight at all, dropped from sight.

Tyler and Bentley leaped to the window, looked down. The ape had dropped safely to the ledge of the window just below. He held on easily with his right hand while Bentley and Tyler swayed dizzily. The anthropoid still held Balisle by the ankle.

A head looked out of the window to the right. A frightened woman.

“God!” she choked. “That beast came out of the clothes closet. We’ve been wondering why we couldn’t open it. He must have been inside, holding it.”

A hundred men, all crack shots, stood helpless on roofs, in windows across the street, in the street below, while the anthropoid ape dropped slowly down the face of the Clinton Building toward the street.

How would Barter lead his minion free of this tangle when, as was

inevitable, the brute reached ground level?

Chapter 7: Strange Interview

Bentley and Tyler were to learn in the next few minutes how great was the executive ability of Caleb Barter. He had created a mighty puzzle, each and every bit of which must fit together exactly. Time was important in making the puzzle complete—and the puzzle changed with each passing second. As the anthropoid went slowly down the face of the Clinton Building, Bentley was sure that Barter controlled every move and saw every slightest thing that transpired. He knew very well that of all the great organization which had been set to prevent the taking of Saret Balisle, not a man would now shoot at the ape for fear of jeopardizing the life of Balisle.

And yet Balisle was being spirited away to pass through an experience which would be far worse than a merciful bullet through the brain or the heart. Bentley knew he would be justified in the eyes of humanity if he ordered his men to fire upon the anthropoid, even if he were sure that Balisle would die. But as long as there was life there was hope, too, and he couldn't bring himself to give the order.

The ape dropped down the face of the building as easily as he would have dropped from limb to limb of a jungle tree. The sixteen stories under him did not disconcert him at all. Bentley had a suspicion about this particular ape, but he wouldn't know for a time yet

whether his suspicion had a basis in fact. He couldn't think of a man—especially an old man like Harold Hervey—making that hair-raising descent. Yet ... if he were controlled, mind and soul, by Caleb Barter the Mind Master...?

"Tyler," said Bentley tersely. "The instant the ape reaches the street I'm going to order your men to fire. You will shout out to them now, designating which ones shall fire. Be sure they are crack marksmen who will drill the ape without hitting Balisle—and, by all means, have them wait so that the ape's fall won't send Balisle crashing to death."

"Maybe I'd better tell them to rush him?"

"Maybe that's better, but remember they're dealing with a giant anthropoid, in strength at least, and that somebody is likely to be fatally injured. In addition the ape may tear Balisle apart as soon as men start to close in on him. Barter will have thought of that, and all he'll have to do to make his puppet perform is to will him to do it. No, they'll have to shoot—and tell them to aim at his head and heart."

Tyler leaned out of the window and shouted to the men across the street.

“Shoot as soon as the ape reaches the sidewalk!” he cried. “Be careful you don’t hit Balisle.”

And from Balisle himself, muffled and frightened, came a sudden cry.

“Shoot now! I’d rather fall and have it over with!”

There was a moment of silence. Bentley almost gave the order to fire when the ape was at the twelfth story, but he held his tongue by a supreme effort of will.

Balisle looked down. It must have been a terrifying experience to swing above such a horrible abyss by one leg, and for a moment Balisle lost his head. He screamed and started to grapple with his grim captor.

“Don’t, Balisle!” shouted Tyler. “You’ll make him lose his balance. Hang on as you are and we’ll get him when he reaches the street.”

“What good will it do?” screamed Balisle, his voice taking on a high keening note as the ape dropped again, this time from the twelfth to the eleventh floor. “He slipped it over a hundred men to get me this far. He’ll find a way to beat you when he reaches the street, too.”

Bentley had a sinking feeling that Balisle spoke the truth; but even so, he could not see how anybody, even Barter, could walk through the trap which was being tightened around the descending anthropoid.

It made Bentley dizzy to watch the slow methodical descent of the anthropoid. He could fancy himself in Balisle's position and it made him sick and faint. He understood the desperation which caused Balisle to make yet another attempt to battle with the ape.

Then the ape did a grim thing.

He paused on the eleventh floor, and crouching on a window sill, deliberately snapped Balisle's head against the wall of the Clinton Building! In his time Bentley had slain rabbits exactly like that. Balisle hung now as limp as a rag and blood dripped from his mouth and nose. But Bentley knew, as his face went white at the sound of that sharp, thudding blow that Balisle had not been killed by it.

Savage oaths burst from the lips of policemen who saw the action of the ape.

"He acts like a human being! An ape wouldn't have thought of that!"

The words came hysterically from the lips of a woman who, frightened though she was, could not tear herself from the window to the right of where Bentley and Tyler leaned out to stare down.

Bentley smiled grimly. What would she think if he told her gravely that the creature crawling down the face of the building was not quite an ape?

So far the public didn't know what the Mind Master schemed. He'd spoken of stealing brains, but that had meant nothing to the general public. Just the maunderings of a madman, perhaps.

At the third floor the anthropoid hesitated. He seemed to be gazing all around, noting the preparations which were being made to trap him at the street level.

"An ape wouldn't do that," muttered Bentley. "A man would. The man in that manape is showing through—but he won't be able to force himself free of Barter's domination. If he could he'd probably throw Balisle down now to keep him from being ... well, treated as Barter intends to treat him."

The ape dropped to the second floor. Silence seemed to hang over Fifth Avenue. Ugly gun muzzles protruded from every window

across the street. Scores of rifles were aimed down from windows in the Clinton Building, to drill the ape through from above.

At that instant a limousine whirled into Fifth Avenue, traveling fast, and ground to a stop under the ape.

“What’s this?” cried Bentley.

“That’s Saret Balisle’s car,” said Tyler. “There’s nobody in it but his chauffeur. The fool! Does he think he can take his master away from the ape singlehanded?”

“That looks like foolhardy loyalty, but I’m not so sure that it’s Balisle’s chauffeur at the wheel. Tyler, send somebody down to wherever it is that Balisle parks his car.”

But before Tyler could move to obey, the anthropoid ape made his surprise move, and did a thing which no ape would have thought of doing. He hurled Balisle toward the limousine. The somersaulting body struck the roof of the car, crashed through the fabric, and dropped into the tonneau.

At the same instant the limousine leaped to full speed ahead.

A shower of bullets smashed windows and scored deeply and

menacingly the brick walls all around the giant anthropoid which for a second still crouched on the second-story ledge. The ape whirled and crashed through the window at his back.

“Tyler, send half a dozen cars after that limousine. They simply have to catch it. But they mustn’t fire for fear of killing Balisle. Have the car followed right to Barter’s hideout. The men in this building will scatter at once through the building. We must trap that ape!”

The whole police organization was in a turmoil.

Sirens screamed as police cars flashed after the fleeing limousine which carried Saret Balisle away. Doors slammed and windows crashed as two score policemen scattered through the building, armed with riot guns and pistols, seeking the ape.

Tyler, after barking the staccato orders which set his men in motion, turned to Balisle’s secretary.

“Quickly, the number Balisle calls when he wants his automobile sent around.”

The girl gave it, and Tyler called the number.

“Are Mr. Balisle’s car and chauffeur there?” he asked.

He swore explosively and hung up the receiver.

“Another killing,” he said. “Balisle’s car is gone and the garage people have just found his chauffeur, almost ripped to pieces, in another car left at the garage for storage.

“That means this ape is armed with metal fingernails, just like the one that killed the insurance man in the Flatiron Building. That means he’ll be doubly dangerous when caught. The murdered chauffeur will have to wait for a few moments while we capture the ape.”

Shouts and shots rang through the Clinton Building. The ape was going wild, crashing through doors and windows as if they weren’t there. His mad bellowing sounded terrifying in the extreme, so deep and rumbling that the air seemed to tremble with its menace.

But in the end there came a chorus of triumphant shouts which told that the giant ape had been surrounded.

Bentley and Tyler raced in the direction of the sounds. From all directions came the sounds of footfalls as other plain-clothes men raced to be in at the death. Bentley held his automatic tightly gripped in his right hand. He knew exactly where he was going to aim if the

ape were not dead when he reached him.

The creature had been cornered in the areaway between two banks of elevators and had climbed up the cage as high as he could go. He was just out of reach of human hands, even had there been any men there with the courage to try to take him alive. A white foam dripped from the chattering lips of the anthropoid. His red-rimmed eyes flashed fire. Bentley noted the little metal ball on top of the creature's head.

Deliberately he stopped, raised his automatic, and held it steady while he pressed the trigger with the extreme care which a sharp-shooter knows to be necessary ... and a bullet ploughed through the top of the ape's head.

The little ball vanished, and the ape released his grip suddenly. His chattering died away to an uncertain murmur, the fire went out of his eyes, and he fell to the floor. No bullet had yet actually struck him, for he had whirled into the window from the second-story ledge simultaneously with the barking of the policemen's rifles and pistols. He had escaped there—but here he was not to escape.

Bentley and Tyler both lifted their voices to shout warnings to the policemen, but their voices were drowned in the savage explosions

of a dozen weapons, in the hands of men who probably thought the creature was in the act of charging ... and the ape sprawled on the floor, his legs and arms quivering.

Half a dozen men rushed forward, weapons extended.

“Keep back!” yelled Bentley, rushing in.

He stood over the ape, staring intently at his glazing eyes.

“Tyler,” snapped Bentley, “have everybody fall back beyond earshot.”

Tyler issued the orders. Bentley shouted, “Quickly, quickly!” knowing he had little time.

Then, with Tyler beside him, he knelt beside the ape.

“I know you can’t talk, but you can answer me by nodding or shaking your head. You are Harold Hervey, aren’t you?”

The eyes of the ape were hopeless. Tyler gasped, staring at Bentley as though for a moment he thought him crazy. But in the next instant he doubted his own sanity, for the ape, slowly and ponderously, nodded his head.

“I’m going to name a number of places where I think you might have been taken,” went on Bentley. “In each case nod or shake your head. Is it near Sixth Avenue?”

Slowly the great head moved, more slowly even than before; but it nodded.

“Where? Below Twenty-third Street?”

Again the ponderous, agonizing nod.

Bentley went on.

“Below Fourteenth Street?”

Again the nod, barely perceptible this time.

“Below Christopher Street?” asked Bentley.

This time the head shook from side to side, ever so slightly.

“Two blocks above Christopher?”

But this question was never destined to be answered. The giant anthropoid in whose skull-pan was the brain of Harold Hervey,

entirely controlled by Caleb Barter, until Bentley had shot the little metal ball from his head, had died.

Bentley rose and looked down at the anthropoid for several seconds.

“Barter will hate to lose this creature,” he said. “He probably has just the number of apes he needs—and Tyler, here’s a hunch: he’ll need an ape to take the place of this one! Get me the best surgeon to be found in Manhattan, and get him as fast as you can!”

“Good God!” ejaculated Tyler. “What do you want a surgeon for? What are you going to do?”

“Barter needs an ape to take the place of this one. I shall be that ape!”

Chapter 8: The Mute Plungers

It would be difficult to comprehend the nervous strain under which Manhattan had been laboring during the past thirty-six hours. The story of the kidnaping of Harold Hervey had not been given to the newspapers, for an excellent reason. If Hervey's financial enemies knew of his kidnaping and death they would hammer away at his stocks until they fell to nothing and his family, accustomed to fabulous wealth, would have been reduced to beggary.

The Mind Master himself, up to a late hour, had given no word to the newspapers in his "manifestoes." The Hervey family held its breath fearing that he would—for the newspapers would have played the story for all the sensationalism it would carry. Bentley, when this matter was called to his attention, wondered. Barter had kept his own counsel for a purpose, but what was it? There was no way of asking him.

The story of the mad race down Broadway in pursuit of the limousine which had returned the lifeless body of Hervey to his residence had been a sensational one, and the tabloids had given it their best treatment. The chauffeur who had crawled out like a monkey atop his careening car, to lose his life when catapulted into the entrance to the Twenty-third Street subway station: the three

policemen whose lives had been lost because the chauffeur hadn't stopped as they had expected him to, the kidnaping of Saret Balisle by a great ape hadn't yet broken as a story, nor the murder of Balisle's chauffeur.

But everybody knew something of the story of the naked man of the day before. Many were the speculations as to what had ripped and torn his flesh from his body, along with his clothes. What manner of claws had it been which had sliced him in scores of places as though with many razors?

Men and women walked the streets apprehensively, and many of them turned at intervals to look behind them. No telling what they would do when the story of Balisle's kidnaping by an anthropoid ape and a queer mute chauffeur got abroad. To top it all the police pursuers lost the Balisle limousine and Saret Balisle had taken his place among the lost.

Bentley knew as soon as the disgruntled and rather frightened police officers returned to the Clinton Building with the news that Balisle had got away from them in the stolen Balisle car, that already the ill-fated young man was probably under the anesthetic which Caleb Barter used on his victims.

“Tyler, do you know a surgeon who can do any surgical job short of brain transplantation?”

“Yeah. There’s a chap has offices in the Fifth Avenue Building. He’s probably the very best in the racket. Maybe it’s because of his name. It’s Tyler.”

“Some relative of yours?”

“Not much. He’s just my dad—and one of the world’s finest and cleverest.”

“Will he listen to reason? Can he perform delicate operations?”

“He’s my dad, Bentley, and he’d do almost anything I asked him so long as it was honest ... and he could switch the noses of a mosquito and a humming bird so skillfully that the humming bird would go looking for a sleeping cop and the mosquito would start building a nest in a tree.”

“Get him here. No—has he an operating room where all sound can be shut out? I’ve got a hunch I’d like somehow to try and drop a screen around us as we work. Maybe your dad would know what to do. You see, I’m positive that Barter sees everything we do and if he

sees me turning into an ape he would just chuckle and pass up the trap."

"He's got a lead armored room where he keeps a bit of radium."

"That's it. Talk to him. No, not on the phone. You'll have to figure out some way to do it so that you can be sure Barter isn't listening."

"I'll manage. I'll send him a note."

"Your messenger will be killed on the way to him."

"Then I'll go myself."

"And Barter will watch everybody that goes into his office or comes out, and mark down each person as possibly being connected with the police. However, you figure it out."

When Tyler had gone and the dead "ape" had been stretched out in one corner of Balisle's office, and covered with something to cloak its hideousness, Bentley telephoned Ellen Estabrook.

"Have I been making any appointments with you this morning?" he

asked her cheerily.

“Please don’t jest when things are so terrible. Have you seen the latest papers?”

“No. What do they say?”

“There’s a lot of the story I’m thinking about. You’d better read it right away. It’s an extra, anyhow. The newsies ought to be calling it around you somewhere—and where are you, anyway?”

Bentley informed her, and told her, too, that he would be with her as soon as he possibly could. Taking the usual masculine advantage he decided to tell her now what he wouldn’t have had the heart to tell her to her face, that he was planning a rather desperate stunt to reach Barter, and would consequently be away from her for an indefinite period.

“But I’ll see you first?” she said after a long hesitation. Bentley could hear her voice tremble, though he knew she was fighting desperately to keep him from noting the catch in her voice.

“Yes, nothing will happen until—well, not until I’ve seen you again.”

Just as Bentley hung up the receiver the extra was being cried. Some two hours had now elapsed since Balisle had been taken away, and now the newsboys were shouting the headlines.

“Extra! Extra! All about the big Wall Street crash! Hervey fortune entirely swept away!”

Bentley sent an office boy out for the paper and spread it out on the desk to digest it as quickly as possible.

“One million shares of Hervey Incorporated,” read the black words in a box on the first page—a story in mourning, “were dumped on the market at eleven o’clock this morning. Four men seem to have been behind the queer coup. One of them had a power of attorney from Harold Hervey himself, and he had the shares to sell. So many shares were dumped that the bottom fell out of the stock. Others holding the Hervey shares, fearful that they would get nothing at all, also began to dump, and every share thus dumped was bought up quickly by three other men about whom nobody knew anything, except that they paid with cash. The strangest thing about it all was that the three men who bought Hervey Incorporated, seemed to be dumb-mutes, for they didn’t say anything. They acted through a broker, and indicated their purchases with their fingers in the conventional manner and tendered cards as identification! They were

Harry Stanley, Clarence Morton, and Willard Cleve—addresses unknown, history unknown.

“Nothing, in fact, is known about any of the three or the little white-haired, apple-cheeked man who sold so heavily in Hervey Incorporated. That the three mutes did not buy the shares sold by the little white-haired man would seem to indicate that all four of them worked together ... but it is only a supposition as they were not seen together and apparently did not know one another. But the three mutes constantly ate walnuts. All four men, who among them knocked the bottom out of Wall Street, and wiped away the Hervey fortune, slipped out in the excitement inspired by their rapid buying and selling, and seemed to vanish into thin air.”

Bentley didn’t know much about the stock market, but it seemed to him that Barter had managed a theft of mighty proportions. With a power of attorney, which he had wrung from Hervey after his capture, he had managed to possess himself of Hervey’s shares. In themselves they were worth millions. Even at a fraction of their price Barter would realize heavily on them. Selling quickly he would force the price far down. Then his puppets—and Bentley had no doubt that Stanley, Morton and Cleve were his puppets—bought all other shares offered by panicky investors in Hervey Incorporated at a tiny fraction of their value. Far less, naturally, than Barter had made

by selling his loot.

The purchased shares Barter could hold for an increase. Hervey Incorporated was good and its price would go up again, and Barter would sell and gain millions.

That is how Bentley saw it, and his lips drew into a firmer, straighter line as, half an hour later, he explained it all to Ellen.

“It’s desperate, dear,” he whispered in her ear. “Manhattan’s financial structure has been shaken to its foundations. But that isn’t all by any means. Barter has performed his horrible operation on two of New York’s most brilliant men. It was a Barter gesture to send ‘Harold Hervey’ to capture Balisle, and the horror of it staggered me.”

“Lee,” said Ellen, “understand this: that if I have no word from you within seventy-two, no, forty-eight hours after you get started on this scheme you have in mind, I’m going to get through to Barter somehow. If I put an ad in the paper and tell him where I’m to be found he’ll surely make another attempt to take me in. If he’s captured you, or uncovered the trap you’re laying, then I’ll at least be with you. If he kills you he kills me. If we can’t live together we can die together.”

Bentley kissed her fervently, trying not to think what it would mean to him now if she were in the hands of Caleb Barter. Secretly he intended having Tyler keep her so closely guarded that she couldn't possibly do anything as foolish as she had suggested.

The late evening papers carried another manifesto of the Mind Master to the effect that the remaining eighteen men named on the original list were to be taken before noon of the next day.

Oddly enough eighteen kidnapings were reported from various places in Manhattan, Brooklyn and Queens.

"So," thought Bentley, "he's afraid to send out normal apes to capture his eighteen key men. Maybe his control over them is not perfect. That's it. I suppose—he needs human brains before he can exercise perfect control. I suppose Stanley, Morton and Cleve did the kidnapings."

Late that night Bentley kissed Ellen good-by, told her to keep up her courage, and repaired to the rendezvous arranged for by Thomas Tyler and his surgeon father. In the operating room was the cold body of the anthropoid that had successfully abducted Saret Balisle.

"Young man," said Dr. Tyler, "just what is it you want me to do? I'm

not asking for your reasons. Tommy tells me you know what you're doing. I must say though, I don't believe that story of brain transplantation. No doctor would believe it for a minute."

Bentley looked at the dead ape.

"You'll take Tommy's word for it that that ape kidnaped Saret Balisle to-day and took him down the face of a building, sixteen stories to the ground?"

"Of course. Tommy wouldn't string his father."

"Well, part of your surgical work to-night will make it necessary for you to look at that creature's brain. You'll recognize a human brain in that ape's skull. After you've made that discovery, here's what I want you to do: I'll strip to the skin; then I want you to place the skin of that ape on me, so that from top to toes I am an ape. You'll have to do the job so perfectly that I'll *be* an ape—as soon as, under your watchful eye and Tom's, I have mastered all the ape mannerisms the three of us can remember. Can you do it?"

Tyler senior shrugged.

He motioned his son and Bentley to help him lift the huge ape body

to the operating table, and under the glaring light above he set to work with instruments which gleamed like molten silver, then became a sullen red....

Chapter 9: The Furry Mime

“Listen, boys,” said Dr. Tyler, after he had removed the skin of the ape, and for a few brief seconds had examined the brain, to shake his head in astonishment. “I’ve an idea that may help you. It would be impossible for you, Bentley, to play the ape well enough to fool this mad Mind Master. But a hitherto unknown type of ape has just been discovered in Colombia. I read the story of it in a scientific journal to-day. The ape is more manlike than any other known to science. You shall be that ape, brought in during the night by a famous returned explorer. There will be great interest in you now that the story of Saret Balisle’s kidnaping has broken. With the attention of New York upon you, certainly your presence will interest Caleb Barter.”

Tyler senior rummaged in a pile of papers on his desk and brought forth the story he referred to, which also carried a picture of the Colombian ape.

“It would be impossible for me to change your shape and add to your size sufficiently to make you a real giant anthropoid. You’d have to be twice as deep through the chest; you’d have to have bowed legs as big as small tree trunks; you’d have to have a sloping forehead. No, it’s impossible, for I’d have to equip you by padding to an

impossible degree, and a scientist would only need to touch you to know you as an imitation ape. But if you are made up as the Colombian ape—”

Bentley quickly interrupted.

“The idea is excellent. I was dubious before about my chances of success, but as an ape of a new species I have a far better chance, and my inevitable human behavior won’t be so noticeable.”

Dr. Tyler measured Bentley as carefully as a tailor, proud of his skill, measures a particular, wealthy customer.

“You will almost suffocate,” he said, keeping up a running monologue as his inspired hands worked with forceps and scalpels, “but I can make plenty of air vents in the ape skin which will allow the pores of your skin to breathe. If they are hidden under the hair they will scarcely be noticed, unless of course Barter sees what we are doing here and suspects from the beginning.”

“I can stand the discomfort for as long as may prove necessary,” said Bentley grimly, conquering a feeling of terror as he already saw himself in the role of an ape, a role previously played in which he had suffered the torments of the damned, “and anything is preferable

to the wholesale carnage which Barter is doing. In seventy-two hours he has wrecked the morale of Manhattan. I shall try to get it back. Tyler, will you make every effort to guard the other eighteen men named on the Mind Master's original list?"

"Of course," but Tyler said it dubiously. Barter had proved it almost impossible to outwit him. In their hearts both Bentley and Tyler knew that Barter would make good his boast to take the eighteen men he had named. It seemed a grim price Manhattan must pay to be finally rid of Barter's satanic machinations.

When Bentley, stripped naked, quietly announced his readiness to take his place on the operating table, Tyler senior took a deep breath, like a diver preparing to plunge into icy water, and looked questioningly at Bentley.

"I'm ready, sir," said Bentley quietly. "Let's get on with the task."

Dr. Tyler set to work with amazing, uncanny speed. He had never been more skilful in closing sutures of the flesh in any of his myriad of operations. He was a man inspired as he labored on the task of changing Lee Bentley from a normal human being to a Colombian ape.

While the surgeon worked his son telephoned to the Colombian explorer whose return from Latin-America had been mentioned in the day's news. He couldn't explain anything over the telephone, he said, but would Doctor Jackson come at once to the private offices of James Tyler, surgeon?

Doctor Jackson grumbled, but the urgency in the voice of Tyler convinced him that the thing was important. He promised to be on hand within an hour. It then lacked a few minutes of three o'clock in the morning.

Next at Bentley's suggestion—and he talked quickly and eagerly to keep his mind off the ordeal he knew he was facing—Tyler got the curator of the Bronx Zoo out of bed and asked him to wait upon Doctor Tyler immediately.

At four o'clock Doctor Jackson and the curator entered the room where Surgeon Tyler had performed a miracle.

Doctor Jackson stepped back in amazement when he noted the manlike ape which leaned with arms folded against one wall of the operating room. His eyes were big with amazement.

He studied Bentley for several minutes, while no one spoke a word.

It was the curator who broke the strained silence.

“So this is your Colombian ape,” he said. “I read the news story, but I understood that the ape you had found had been killed in the attempt to capture it.”

Surgeon Tyler spoke easily.

“That news story,” he said, “was to prevent Doctor Jackson from being annoyed by visitors eager to see his find. As a matter of sober fact Doctor Jackson captured the Colombian ape alive and is now about to turn it over to the zoo. Understand me, Doctor Jackson?”

Still the explorer said nothing. For a moment longer he stared at Bentley; then he walked over to him.

“The hair is different,” he said as though talking to himself. “The Colombian ape’s hair is of a slightly finer texture. But that could be explained away as I allowed only the merest bit of information to the reporters to-day. I can add a supplementary story in the next newspaper which will explain that the coarse fur of the Colombian ape is the only thing about it which makes it resemble a giant anthropoid.”

Jackson had walked to Bentley without fear and ran his fingers through the hair as he spoke.

“I know it’s a man, and some surgeon has performed a miracle,” he said. “Just what is it you wish me to do?”

“You’ve read the stories relating to the Mind Master, Doctor?” asked Bentley suddenly. How strangely his voice came from the body of an ape!

“I’ve read some of them,” answered Jackson. “Is this a scheme whereby you hope to trap the Mind Master?”

“Yes.”

“Then depend upon me for any assistance I can render. As a scientist I understand fully the power for evil of a mad genius of our class. This Mind Master should be ruthlessly destroyed.”

“Thank you,” said Bentley, stepping forward. “You know, perhaps, how the Colombian ape behaves, enough that you can coach me how to walk, how to gesture?”

“Certainly. It will take perhaps an hour to prepare you to fill your role creditably.”

Jackson's face flushed with enthusiasm. He was launched on a task which fired his interest. He was an authority on apes and anything relating to them inspired him.

"Seat yourself on a chair," said Jackson. "The Colombian ape sits upright like a man."

Bentley seated himself as Jackson had bidden him.

"Now spread your legs apart awkwardly, with the knees straight. The Colombian ape doesn't exactly sit on a chair or a rock or a tree, he leans against it in a *half* sitting position."

Bentley quickly assumed the awkward strained position suggested by Jackson.

Jackson stepped up to him and placed Bentley's arms, unbent, so that his fists hung down outside his wide-apart knees, and cupped his fingers so that they seemed perpetually in the act of closing on something.

"You can't possibly take the proper position with your toes," went on Jackson, "for it's beyond a man's ability to curve his toes as he does his hands. The Colombian ape's toes are prehensile."

“Can’t you say in your next news story, Doctor,” suggested Bentley, “that the Colombian ape, the nearest animal relative of man, seems to be in an advanced stage of evolution. Can you not say that the Colombian ape is by way of losing the use of his toes?”

“Many scientists know that to be untrue,” said Jackson, “but perhaps we can help you through your scheme before they begin denying details in the newspapers. Too bad we can’t send secret suggestions to all anthropologists that they remain discreetly silent until the mantle of horror is lifted from Manhattan. But of course we can’t, since we’d betray ourselves. Our only hope, then, is to work at top speed.”

“I am as eager as anyone to finish a particularly horrible task,” said Bentley.

Under Jackson’s instructions Bentley walked up and down the room. His shaggy shadow on the several walls as he turned, marched and countermarched at Jackson’s commands, filled Bentley with self-loathing. He found himself repulsive. His body perspired freely impregnating the ape skin with a harsh odor that was biting and terrible in his nostrils. It was sickening. He tried to close his mind to the repulsiveness of what he was doing.

He walked with a swaying, side-to-side gait, something like a sailor's rolling walk, while his arms swung free at his sides as though they merely hung from his body. The Colombian ape walked like that, Jackson said.

"How about the intelligence of the Colombian ape?" asked Bentley.

"We shot the only specimen so far seen by man before we could discover any facts bearing on his intelligence," said Jackson.

"Then you can safely say that he possesses intelligence far beyond that of known apes," said Bentley quickly, "somewhere, let us say, between that of the lowest order of mankind and civilized man."

Jackson nodded his held dubiously.

"It seems," he said unsmilingly, "that I arrived in the United States at exactly the right time! You would have failed signally to convince the Mind Master in the role of an African great ape."

Bentley managed a short laugh. How horribly it came from the lips of an ape!

"I'm not overly superstitious," he said, "but I regard this as a good omen. I feel we're sure to succeed in what we are planning. I think

Barter will surely wish to experiment with me if he thinks I am in reality a great ape from Colombia. He'll welcome the chance to examine any ape which so nearly resembles man. I'm an important link in his plan to create a race of supermen. At least that's how we must hope that Barter will estimate the situation when my story is told in to-morrow's papers."

An hour before dawn Doctor Jackson, weary from his arduous instruction of the equally exhausted Bentley, pronounced Lee a satisfactory "ape."

"Now here's where you come in," said Bentley tiredly to the curator. "I'm to be taken now to a cage in the Bronx. During the rest of to-day you will quietly instruct your attendants that their guard to-night at the zoo must not be too strict. I must be in position to be stolen by the minions of the Mind Master."

Now the full significance of the desperate expedition upon which Bentley was embarking came home to them all. Their faces were white. Bentley shuddered under his ape robe. His mind went catapulting back into the past to the time when he had been Manape. This was much like it, save that all of him was now encased in the accouterments of an ape and he did not suffer the mental hazards which had almost driven him insane when he had been Manape, with

the perpetual necessity of keeping close watch over his own human body which had held the brain of an ape.

He stiffened. “I’m ready,” he said.

Immediately upon arrival the curator had been asked to have a closed car, quickly walled with a mixture of lead and zinc—which Bentley and Tyler hoped would thwart the spying of Caleb Barter—brought to Tyler’s door.

Three or four zoo attendants entered with a cage when Bentley pronounced himself ready. They stared agape at Bentley and their faces went white when he strode toward them upright, like a man.

Bentley would have spoken to reassure them, but Tyler signaled him to keep silent. The zoo attendants might talk and entirely spoil their scheme.

Two hours later, long before the first crowds began to arrive at the Bronx Zoo, Lee Bentley was driven from his small cage in the car, into a huge cage at the zoo. From a dark corner, in which he crouched as though overcome with fear, he gazed affrightedly out across what he could see of Bronx Park.

“When I used to feed the animals here,” he said to himself, “I never expected that the time would come when I myself would be caged—and one of them.”

The curator had ridden out with the cage. But, save for making sure of the fastening on the big cage, he paid no heed to Bentley. He treated him, of necessity, as though he were actually the Colombian ape he pretended to be. From now on until he succeeded or failed, Lee Bentley was an ape from the jungles of Latin-America.

Just before the crowds could reasonably be expected to begin arriving, curious to see this strange thing Doctor Jackson had brought from Colombia, an attendant arrived with a freshly painted sign.

“Colombian Great Ape,” it read, “Presented to Bronx Zoo by Doctor Claude Jackson.”

It seemed to close entirely behind Lee Bentley the vast door which separated the apes from civilization. Miserably he crouched in his corner and awaited the coming of the curious.

Chapter 10: Grim Anticipation

A numbing fear began to grow upon Lee Bentley as the ordeal of waiting began.

Naturally he could not eat the food given usually to apes and of course he could not be seen calmly eating bacon and eggs with knife and fork. And because he couldn't eat he was assailed by a dreadful hunger, which, however, he managed to fight down partially. He smiled inwardly as he looked ahead and understood that despite the warnings not to feed the animals, children of all ages, from four years to sixty, would surreptitiously toss peanuts and walnuts into his cage.

He felt a little hopeful about it. They would at least allay his hunger.

But no, he could not do that, either. Nobody had thought to ask Doctor Jackson how a Colombian ape manipulated his food. Even a certain clumsiness in that respect might start questions which would cause the public to doubt the authenticity of Jackson's find.

Bentley decided to sulk. The ape he was supposed to be could reasonably be expected to resent captivity and would probably go on a hunger strike. He would do likewise and be in character if he

starved.

He crouched in a far corner as the first comers began to arrive. They were fathers and mothers with their children, and the older people carried, usually, newspapers under their arms. Bentley wished with all his soul that he could see one of the papers close enough to read the headlines.

However, when the crowd was not too thick, Bentley waddled nearer to the wire mesh which separated him from the curious crowd and through lids which were half closed as though he slept, he managed to glimpse a few excerpts from the paper:

“Police department redoubling their precautions to prevent Mind Master from capturing eighteen intended victims.”

“Hideout of Mind Master still undiscovered. When will the public be delivered from the stupidity of the police?”

“Doctor Jackson returns from Colombia, bringing a living specimen of an ape hitherto unknown to civilized man, but more like him than any ape hitherto known. Visitors may see the creature to-day in the Bronx Zoo.”

That was the story which had brought out the visitors who were forming, moment by moment, a bigger crowd before Bentley's cage. Bentley managed a glimpse of a woman's wrist-watch after what seemed an age of trying to do so without his intention becoming plain to the too bright children who crowded as close to the cage as attendants would permit. It was ten o'clock. It would be at least twelve more hours before Bentley could reasonably expect any action on the part of Barter. Barter would now be concentrating on his plans to kidnap the eighteen men he had first named.

Bentley tried to make the time pass faster by imagining what Barter would be doing. By now his labors must be titanic. He must have separate controls for each of his minions, and there were many times when he must control several at one time, thus making his task akin to that of a man trying to look two ways at once, while he rolled a cigarette with one hand and shined his shoes with the other. Certainly the concentration required was enormous.

Yet, no matter how complicated became his puzzle, Barter was its master because he was its creator, and Bentley hadn't the slightest doubt that, until someone actually penetrated Barter's stronghold, he would not be stopped.

Bentley knew that at the very first opportunity he would destroy

Caleb Barter as he would have destroyed a mad dog or stamped to death a deadly snake. The life of one man would rest lightly upon his conscience, if that man were Caleb Barter.

Perhaps, though, he could learn many of Barter's secrets before he destroyed him. Properly used they might prove boons to mankind. It was only the use Barter was putting them to that threatened to fill the world with horror and bloodshed.

"Mama, why don't he eat?"

"Hush," said a woman, as though afraid the Colombian ape would hear and become angry; "don't annoy the creature. He looks fully capable of coming right out at us."

But the child who had been admonished began to juggle a bag of peanuts which he managed to throw into the cage. Bentley stooped forward, sniffing suspiciously at the sack, while a wave of hunger made him feel weak and giddy for a moment. He just realized that he hadn't eaten for almost twenty-four hours. His time had been so filled with action and excitement that there hadn't been opportunity.

"I hope," he said to himself, in an effort to drive away thoughts of food, "that Tyler will take every precaution to prevent Ellen from

doing something foolish."

Knowing that he could no longer communicate with her, could no longer be absolutely sure that she was still out of Barter's clutches, he suffered agonies of fear for her safety.

"If Barter places a hand on her I'll tear his skin from his carcass, bit by bit!" he said, unconsciously clenching his fists.

"Oh, look, mama, he's shuttin' his fists as though he wanted to fight somebody! I'll bet he could whip Dempsey, couldn't he, mama?"

"Perhaps he could, son. Hush now, and watch him. There's a good boy!"

It brought Bentley sharply back to his surroundings and proved to him that he must not allow his mind to go wool-gathering if he did not wish to give himself away. What if, in an access of anger, he happened to speak his thoughts aloud? He could imagine the amazement of the crowd.

The day wore on.

At noon a strange horror seemed to travel over the Bronx Zoo, and within a short time every last visitor had precipitately departed.

Bentley could now safely approach the wire mesh and look out and around over a wider radius.

Right under the wire mesh was a newspaper someone had thrown away.

By pressing tightly against the mesh Bentley could see the headlines.

“Mind Master successful on all counts!”

So that’s what had turned the crowd to stony silence with very fear? They had all fled, wondering who would be next. Bentley had heard the shouting of the extra on the distant streets, but it had been so far away he hadn’t heard the words. One solitary newspaper had appeared among the Bronx crowd and the story it carried under startling scareheads had passed from brain to brain as though by magic ... and the crowd had fled.

Bentley stared down at the newspaper in horror, a horror that was in no way mitigated by his having fully expected Barter to succeed. Mutually, with no words having been spoken to express the thought, Tyler and Bentley had conceded to Barter the eighteen victims he had named.

Nothing could be done to stop him. His brains were greater than the combined wisdom of the city of New York.

What else was in that paper?

Bentley stared at it for an hour, and finally a vagrant breeze, for which he had hoped and prayed during that hour, whipped across the park and stirred the paper. He read more headlines.

“Lee Bentley disappears! Believed kidnaped or slain by Mind Master!”

How had that story got out? Surely Tyler would have kept that from the press. Following on the heels of the Colombian ape story, Barter would almost surely put two and two together to arrive at the proper total.

Bentley read on:

“Ellen Estabrook, fiancée of Lee Bentley, disappears mysteriously from her hotel room. Guarded by a score of police, not one has yet been found who knows anything of her disappearance or saw her leave. Nobody seems to have seen anyone go to her room or leave it. Our police department must have fallen on evil days indeed when

twenty crack plain-clothes men cannot keep one woman under surveillance."

Something was radically wrong, but Bentley could not piece the whole story together, simply because he had been out of touch for so many hours that the thread of it had slipped from his fingers.

Suddenly Bentley noticed that a solitary man was watching him curiously, a dawning amazement in his face. Bentley roused himself and saw that he was standing against the mesh, fingers hooked into it above his head, his weight on his left leg, his right foot crossed over his left, his head thoughtfully bowed.

To the amazed man yonder the "Colombian ape" must have looked remarkably like a condemned man clutching the bars of his cell, awaiting the coming of the executioner.

Bentley recovered himself and sat down on the floor of the cage in the loose easy manner an ape would have used.

He forced himself to sit thus until evening, when the last curious one vanished from the park and darkness began to fall.

Then excitement at the approach of a hoped for denouement began

to rise in his heart like a rushing tide.

Would Barter fall for the ruse? Or did he already know that the Colombian ape was Lee Bentley?

In either case, Bentley thought, the Mind Master would take action during the first hours of darkness. Bentley was gambling desperately on what he knew to be characteristic of Caleb Barter.

Chapter 11: In the Dead of Night

Bentley knew that if Ellen were in the hands of Caleb Barter the mad professor would probably do her no harm, but use her as a club against Bentley, and through Bentley, the Manhattan police. He did not believe that the Mind Master would consider performing the brain operation on Ellen. Caleb Barter's scheme seemed to consider only men, and men of substance.

No, Ellen would not be harmed, he felt, but that made him feel no easier, knowing that she might be in the hands of Barter.

How could he know of Naka Machi, and the refined vengeance of the Mind Master?

The last visitors had left the park and comparative quiet settled over the zoo. Save for the sounds of animals feeding and the occasional cursing voices of attendants there were no sounds. Not since Bentley had taken his place in the cage had anyone spoken to him. He had never felt so lonely and uncertain in his life.

Now there was utter darkness and silence.

And then before his cage appeared a tiny spot of light. If Barter's

minions expected to deal with a powerful ape they would come prepared to subdue him by whatever means seemed necessary. Bentley had no wish to be injured, and yet he must make some show of resistance in order to allay any possible suspicion that he *wished* to be stolen.

There was a faint gnawing sound at the wire outside the cage. Mice might have made that sound, sharpening their teeth on the wire. Bentley decided to feign sleep. Had Barter come personally to supervise his capture? That didn't seem reasonable as Barter must realize that all his effectiveness depended upon his ability to retain control of whatever organization he might have built up—and his central control must be his hideout.

Then he would be sending some of his puppets to get Bentley.

Would they be apes with man's brains? Impossible. Apes could not travel from place to place without attracting attention, especially if they traveled unguarded and went casually to a given destination as men would go. So, if his puppets were not men in the normal meaning, then they were "apemen."

The wire came softly down. Bentley hoped that no attendant might come blundering around now to spoil everything. His heart pounded

with excitement.

At last he was going to see Caleb Barter again at close quarters.

“I shall destroy him,” he told himself.

The shadowy outlines of two men came through the severed wires. Bentley still pretended to be asleep. He wondered if Barter’s televisory equipment included any arrangements permitting him to see in the dark, and knew instantly that it did. How else could these two puppets have come so unerringly to the proper cage in Bronx Park?

No, Bentley did not dare allow himself to be taken easily in the hope that his actions would pass unnoticed.

But he waited until the ropes began to fall about him, testing the strength of his adversaries by mental measurement. By their uncertain, hesitating actions he knew that he dealt only with the *forms* of men—forms which were ruled by brains which had not in themselves intelligence enough to perform the acts they were now performing. Ape brains in the skull-pans of men. The brains in themselves were only important because they were living matter which was being used as a sensory sounding board by which Caleb

Barter, the Mind Master, transmitted his commands to the arms and legs and bodies of his puppets.

Bentley sprang into action. He growled and snarled at the two men who were trying to take him. Only two men? Surely Barter would have sent more than two men to take a great ape! He knows I'm not a true ape, thought Bentley. He's giving me a challenge. He knows I wish to get to his hideout and he is making sure that I get there.

But Bentley was only guessing. Calmness descended upon him as he realized that he was soon to face a crucial test.

Just now, however, he struck out at the two men who were striving to bind him. They were husky chaps, and one of them packed the wallop of a real fighter. Neither man said a word to him, and when his own hands clawed at them—how would he dare strike out with his fists?—the men made queer animal sounds in their throats. Bentley could well remember how helpless, hopeless and lost he had felt when his brain had been in the skull-pan of Manape.

The brain of an ape could not be a terribly intelligent instrument in the first place. What thoughts, if apes had thoughts at all, coursed through an ape brain which found itself inside a human skull?

The answer to that was simple: only such thoughts as Barter originated and transmitted through the mental sounding board. After all, the material of the human brain and the ape brain were perhaps very much alike, and Barter was working on a sound scientific principle in making a sounding board of an ape's brain.

Bentley shuddered through the fur that covered him. Knowing the sort of creatures with which he had to deal—men in all things save their intelligence—made him tremble with nausea. Such grim, ghastly hybrids. But he stopped shuddering when he recalled that he still dealt with men after all—at least with one man, Caleb Barter. When he thought of these two "apemen" as separate entities of a human being of many personalities—Caleb Barter—he was able to plan some method by which to deal with them.

So now he fought, seemingly with the utmost savagery, to keep them from binding him with ropes. Even as he fought, however, he fancied he could hear the grim chuckling of Caleb Barter. What did Barter know?

Bentley knew that eventually he would discover the truth.

In struggling against the two "men" his hands encountered the knobs on their heads—the tiny metal balls protruding from the top of the

skull at the point where, in babies, the head remains soft during babyhood. He could have broken connection with Barter for these two by jerking the controls free. And then what? He would never get through to Barter and would release in Bronx Park two men whose strange type of madness, when they were discovered, would startle the countryside. Two men with the savagery of anthropoid apes! He shuddered as he carefully refrained from disturbing those balls.

At last Bentley was quite securely bound, only his lower limbs remaining free so that he could walk, though the length of his steps was strictly limited. His hands were entirely and securely bound, and the significance of this fact did not escape him. Barter knew that he did not need his hands to aid him in walking! Of course the newspaper story released by Doctor Jackson had reported the Colombian ape as being able to walk exactly like a man.

But that didn't prevent Bentley from nursing the suspicion that Barter already *knew*. Even if he did, it could in no wise alter the determination of Bentley. His task was to penetrate the hideout of Barter—and he was on the way there now.

With little attempt at concealment the two men led Bentley to a long black closed car outside the park. They met no one. The two men avoided discovery with uncanny ease. Bentley thrilled with

excitement. He felt he knew approximately where Barter's hideout was.

It was useless, to speculate, however; time would show it to him.

Bentley was tossed into the tonneau of the car. His two captors, moving with the precision of men in a trance, took their places in the front seat. Bentley struggled for a time against his bonds. He wanted to sit up and peer out, to see what way they took so that he would know where he was when he reached Barter's hideout. But of course, even if he shook his bonds free he did not dare rise to a sitting position, for to control the intricate handling of his two puppets, Barter's attention must have been pretty carefully fixed upon this car.

So Bentley contented himself with waiting.

Lying on his back on the floor of the car he tried to see what he could through the car windows. He knew when he was carried under an elevated system by the crashing roar of trains over his head. He knew he was being carried downtown, but he wasn't sure that this was the Sixth Avenue elevated.

How could he find out the road they were traveling without sitting

up and looking at street signs?

He felt he didn't dare do that. He'd be as careful as possible on the off-chance that Barter really believed him a Colombian ape, when the benefit of surprise would be with Bentley.

The car progressed downtown at a normal speed. It stopped for red lights and obeyed all other traffic regulations. Barter was taking no chance on losing more of his puppets.

Bentley suddenly gasped with horror as he remembered something. Eighteen important men of Manhattan had been kidnaped that day by Caleb Barter. Would Bentley be forced to watch the mad professor perform the eighteen inevitable operations?

Perspiration poured from every pore as he visualized the horror he might be compelled to witness when he was finally taken into Barter's hideout. The ape skin clung to him as though it were actually his own. There were even moments when Bentley feared that it might grow to him.

But he put the feeling of horror from him with the thought that if Ellen were in Barter's power, Barter might even be forcing her to anesthetize for him while he performed his grisly slaughter.

Bentley’s courage returned and now it seemed to him that the journey would never end, so eager was he to discover whether or not Ellen had eluded the hands of the Mind Master.

Chapter 12: A Woman of Courage

Caleb Barter smiled warmly at the woman who had come to him almost as though in answer to a prayer. He admired her flashing eyes and the lifted chin which spoke of pride and courage.

“I had thought of improving the feminine strain of the race also,” he told her, but almost as though he spoke to himself, “but I realized that it mattered little the stature of the mothers of the race as long as the fathers were made virile. But if all women were like yourself, Miss Estabrook, the race would not require the improvement it is now my duty to bestow upon it.”

Ellen stared directly into the eyes of the white-haired old man. As she looked at him she found it hard to believe that one so gentle from outward appearances had such a vast, grim power for evil. In repose his face was kindly, though there was something out of character in the fact that it was so apple rosy. And his lips were far too red.

“Where,” she said quietly, fearlessly, “is Lee Bentley?”

Barter raised his eyebrows as he stared back at her. So far she had not looked around at this great room into which he had had her

conducted; she had seemed interested only in her mission, whatever that might be.

“You mean that delightfully rude young man?” he asked sardonically.

“You know well enough whom I mean! Where is he?”

“Then he is not to be found in his usual haunts?”

“He has disappeared.”

“And you come out seeking Professor Barter because Bentley his disappeared! It is almost as though you had previously arranged with him to come seeking me if, at a certain time he failed to return from some mysterious rendezvous....”

Barter’s face was now a mask of uncanny shrewdness. In a few words he had pierced through Ellen’s secret of why she had deliberately placed herself in the way of Barter’s minions in order to be taken, and now he had used the words of her own questions to form a weapon against her. Ellen gasped in terror.

Had she made a hideous mistake? Had she, by failing to wait for word from Bentley, ruined all his well laid plans?

Barter now stood before her, his eyes almost shooting fire.

“Tell me quickly,” he began, and for a second she thought he would put his hands on her, “what sort of plan is he making to betray me into the hands of my enemies, who are the enemies of super-civilization because they are my enemies?”

“I know of nothing,” said Ellen stoutly, hoping that she had not, after all, betrayed the fact that she knew Bentley had started to work out an unusual scheme. The details she didn’t know, for Lee hadn’t told her. “But I do know, what all the world knows, that he was helping the police against you. Naturally, then, when he vanished I thought of you. Besides you had already warned him that you would remove him in your own good time. He caused you the loss of two of your puppets and I thought, naturally enough, that you would try to remove him to some place where he could not operate so successfully against you.”

“That’s all?” queried Barter eagerly. “You don’t know of some special scheme that has been worked out to trap me?”

“I know of no scheme. Now that I am in your hands, Professor, what do you intend doing with me?”

Barter stared at Ellen for several minutes.

“I haven’t captured Bentley ... yet,” he said at last, slowly, “but I shall—no doubt about that. It is inevitable—as inevitable as Caleb Barter. I can use him in my labors for humanity. How I treat him after he is taken depends somewhat on you. You may therefore consider yourself a sort of hostage. I have much medical work to perform. Have you ever been a nurse?”

Ellen recoiled in horror. “You don’t mean you would ask me to help you perform those horrible—” She stopped abruptly before her sudden tendency to hysterics should make her say things to anger Barter too far.

“So,” he said quickly, “you think my brain operations are horrible, eh? Well, you shall see that they are not horrible; that Professor Barter, the greatest scientist the world has ever produced, is really preparing to prevent civilization from utterly decaying.”

“And afterward?” asked Ellen. “I know that eventually you will be taken and that the people will destroy you, tear you limb from limb. But you will never believe that. Tell me, then, what you plan to do with me.”

For a brief time he considered the matter.

“I am an old man,” he said at last, musingly, “but I am young in spirit and in body. It would be amusing to have a mate—but no, no, that would not do! The destiny of Caleb Barter is not linked with a woman. You would simply hold me back. However, I have often been interested in miscegenation and its effect on the race if properly guided. My assistant Naka Machi, is one of the finest specimens of his race. Perhaps I shall arrange for you to mate with him, under conditions which I shall dictate, in order to experiment with your offspring....”

Ellen swayed, her face going dead white. She hadn’t yet met Naka Machi, but his name told her enough. The thought of a Japanese, however, was far less repellent than the cold, calm way in which Barter spoke of using the offspring of such a union.

“I’ll kill myself at the first opportunity,” said Ellen suddenly.

Barter put his forefinger under Ellen’s chin in a paternal fashion. His eyes looked deeply into hers. She thought of what his fingers had done in the past ... those long slender fingers. His touch made her shudder.

But his eyes held her. They seemed like deep wells. Then they were like black coals advancing upon her out of the darkness, growing bigger and bigger as they came, with little flames in their centers also growing as they approached.

“You will submit your will to mine,” said the soft voice of Caleb Barter.

His right hand was making swift snakelike movements back of Ellen’s head. His voice droned on, but already it seemed to Ellen to come from a vast distance.

“Your mind will be concerned only with the welfare of Caleb Barter,” droned on the voice. “You will think only of Caleb Barter; your greatest desire will be to serve him. There is nothing you would not do for him. Let your objective mind sleep until Caleb Barter wakens it; give your subjective mind into my keeping.”

Beads of perspiration broke out on the cheeks of Caleb Barter as he worked quickly to place the girl entirely under his skilled hypnosis. At last she stood like a statue, her wide-open eyes staring into space, straight ahead. She did not move. She scarcely seemed to breathe.

“You will know that my home is your home, Ellen,” said Barter

softly. “You will feel that you are welcome here and that you love this place. It needs the attention of a loving woman; you will give it that attention. But you will be subservient always to my will. You will enter upon your duties.”

Ellen Estabrook sighed softly as though with relief. Her hands went up to remove her hat, which she placed on a chair in a corner of the hellish laboratory. She removed her light coat and arranged her hair with skilled fingers. But even as she moved around the room of the long table her eyes stared vacantly into space. She was as much a puppet of Caleb Barter as were Stanley, Morton and Cleve. But, mercifully, she did not know it.

Barter studied her for several moments; his eyes squinted. He was making sure that she was not duping him with pretense. Satisfied at last be turned his eyes away from her. He stepped to the porcelain slab set in the bronze wall of his laboratory and looked at the push-buttons marked “C-3” and “E-5”. The red lights were on, indicating that the two puppets controlled by these two keys were returning toward their master. The lights had been green when Barter had begun his conversation with Ellen Estabrook, indicating that the two puppets were still going away. With a tremendous effort of will he had given them sufficient mental stimulus to keep them traveling without his direct will for the few minutes he would require for

Ellen.

Now, however, he quickly donned the metal cap and the little ball, and inserted into the orifice in his cap the swinging key which connected by chain with the key which fitted into the slot under the button marked “C-3”.

He had returned to his puppets just in time. “C-3” was Cleve, who was driving the car sent out to bring in the Colombian ape. As Barter got in touch with the car it narrowly averted a crash with a police car ... and the perspiration broke forth afresh on the body of Barter as he resumed control of his puppets.

The second creature, in the front seat of the car, was Morton, and it didn’t matter particularly about him as he was not driving. But Morton was now becoming all ape. Barter did not wish to use any more of his mental energy than was necessary. He contented himself by sending his will into Cleve, who began at once to drive like a master. Whenever Morton, beside him, showed an inclination to jump out of the car or otherwise interfere with Cleve in his work, Barter had but to express the thought, and Cleve either pulled him back to his place beside him, or gave him a walnut from his pocket.

Barter could as easily have had them change places, since he

assumed control of either at will, or could have controlled a score simultaneously. But that would have required additional thought stimulus, and he wished to conserve his mental energies for the work which yet faced him.

Once he switched his attention from the heliotube which controlled Cleve—and through which, concurrently, he saw everything that transpired near Cleve, because his televisory apparatus and his radio control were co-workers on almost identical vibratory waves—to the area of Manhattan immediately surrounding his own neighborhood.

“Hmm,” he said to himself, “the police are getting too close. As soon as I have completed my labors to-night I shall destroy some of them as a warning to others to keep their distance.”

Morton and Cleve drew up to the curb while Barter watched carefully on all sides, through the heliotube, to make sure that their arrival was unmarked by the police.

They climbed out quickly and raced across the sidewalk to the green gate which gave on a gloomy old court, inside which they were swallowed by the shadows from all eyes save those of Caleb Barter.

Five minutes after the strange trio had entered the “place,” the great

chrome-steel door of Barter's laboratory swung open.

"Morton and Cleve, my master," announced Naka Machi, bowing low and sucking in his breath with a hissing sound.

Barter's own puppets entered with the ape between them.

Barter walked fearlessly forward. He had slipped the key from the orifice atop his head. Morton and Cleve now stood listlessly, dumbly, looking with dead eyes at their master. Barter tossed them several walnuts each.

Then he turned his attention to the ape, rubbing his hands together with pleasure.

But the ape was behaving strangely. His eyes were staring past Barter. His hands sought to lift as though he would hold them out to someone; but the ropes prevented him. Barter turned to look. Ellen Estabrook stood beyond him, white of face, motionless as a statue. The ape was straining toward her.

Caleb Barter chuckled with understanding.

"Good evening, Lee," he said gently. "I've been expecting you!"

Chapter 13: Where the Bodies Went

Bentley had been bound carelessly. Who could expect ape brains to devise clever bonds, even when controlled by Caleb Barter? And now it seemed that Caleb Barter had known all along; he said he had been expecting Bentley. No, that wasn't it. Barter had seen him yearning toward Ellen Estabrook, statuesque and wide-eyed on the other side of the room. If it hadn't been for the presence of Ellen he might have been accepted as an ape. Now it made little difference.

But his bonds were not tightly drawn. He found himself fighting them fiercely, trying to get his hands on Caleb Barter. He could see the scrawny Adam's apple of the mad scientist, and his fingers itched to press themselves into the flesh.

Caleb Barter stood his ground calmly. "Naka Machi," he said softly.

Suddenly Bentley felt a dull, paralyzing blow on his skull. He knew it had been intended to render him utterly unconscious. But Naka Machi hadn't taken into consideration that his skull was protected by the hide of an ape. He remembered, as he stumbled and fell forward, that the Japanese were wizards with their hands. That's why Naka Machi could knock him down, render him helpless, yet leave his brain as clearly active as before. Perhaps clearer, even, for now his

brain did not act on his legs and arms, which were helpless.

Bentley felt as he imagined a patient on the operating table might feel when not given sufficient anesthetic, yet given enough to make him incapable of speech or movement. Such a patient would hear the soft discussions of the surgeons, see them prepare their instruments, yet be unable to tell them that he wasn't entirely unconscious.

Barter stooped over Bentley and rolled back the lids of his eyes.

"Good. Naka Machi!" he said. "He won't be in any position to do us an injury. Remain powerless, Lee Bentley, but retain your knowledge."

Barter, then, was familiar with the strange hypnosis which the blow of Naka Machi's hand had put upon Bentley. Barter had taken advantage of it to add to it a sort of mental paralysis, so that the condition would continue.

"You are in my hands, Lee," he said in paternal fashion, "but you can do me no harm. Since you were associated with me in the first of my great experiments you know much about me. I have never ceased to hope that you would one day understand and appreciate what I am doing for humanity and be brought to aid me. Perhaps if I force you

to watch my efforts you will understand them and sympathize with my ambitions.”

Bentley could say nothing. Barter’s eyes seemed to leap at him growing large and glaring, just as the eyes of caricatured animals leap at the camera in trick motion pictures. Physically he was powerless. Only his brain was active.

“Remove this covering from him, Naka Machi,” went on Barter. “Remove his bonds. You are about his size. Garb him in some of your own clothing.”

Bentley had the odd feeling that he didn’t need to turn his head to see things around him. His head felt huge, almost to bursting, and his eyes felt huge, too, so that he could see in all directions, as though his eyeballs had been fish-eye lenses.

He studied Naka Machi. A nasty opponent in a fight, he decided. He hadn’t figured on any opponent other than Barter. This man was almost as great. The skill of his fingers as he quickly removed the ape skin from Bentley, using scalpels taken from Barter’s table, amazed Bentley with their miraculous dexterity. He cleaned Bentley’s body with some solution in a sponge and clothed him in some of his own clothing which fitted fairly well.

Then he lifted Bentley from the floor and stood him against the wall.

Bentley was unbound. He tried to lift his hands but they refused to move. His feet, too, seemed anchored to the floor. His knees were stiff and straight. He might as well have been a wooden image for all his ability to get about.

Now Barter spoke.

“Come here, Lee,” he said.

Bentley was amazed at the kindliness in Barter’s attitude. He dealt with Bentley as though he had been his son. He felt that Barter genuinely liked him. It was rather amazing. Barter liked him but would remove him without compunction if he thought it necessary.

Bentley found he could move his feet, or rather they seemed to move of their own volition, as he crossed the room to stand before Barter.

“I’m rather proud of what I have been able to do, Lee,” went on Barter, “and I am now entirely safe from the police. I’ve issued another manifesto telling the public that for each attempt made against me, one of the eighteen men captured by me to-day will die. Manhattan is the abode of terror. Here, see for yourself.”

He extended to Bentley what seemed to be a pair of binoculars, but with the ear-hooks common to ordinary spectacles. He set them over Bentley's eyes and set them in place.

"Now you can survey New York as you wish."

Bentley looked for a moment or two. Sixth Avenue was a deserted highway, on which red and green lights blinked off and on in the usual routine, signaling to drivers who were non-existent. There were vistas of deserted streets and avenues. There were some few living things—policemen in uniform, standing in pairs and larger groups, all concentrated in an area covering no more than twenty acres, which twenty acres included the hideout of Caleb Barter. Bentley knew that the hideout was under Millegan Place. He had recognized it coming in. A secret panel in a brick wall had opened to show a door where none was apparent. Then a circular stairway leading down into darkness to the room which Barter had gouged out of the earth and turned into a laboratory of hell.

"See the police?" asked Barter. "They know now where I am, but they are helpless because of my hostages. I shall now begin the operations I believe to be necessary. Then I shall issue another manifesto, telling the public that I am safeguarded by great apes whose ability will prove the correctness of my theory about the

possibility of creating a race of supermen. My manifesto shall say that my apes must not be slain. It shall say that for every ape slain by the police one of my eighteen hostages will die."

Bentley would have gasped with horror, but he could not. Now he saw Thomas Tyler, his face a white mask of despair, in the midst of his helpless men.

"I'll give you a hand, somehow, Tommy," Bentley whispered deep down inside him.

"Now you shall see what I do, Lee," said Caleb Barter. "Naka Machi, bring the ape skin you took from my friend. Bentley, you will follow us."

Barter removed the strange glasses from Bentley's eyes, blotting out the deserted streets and avenues of Manhattan. Naka Machi followed behind Bentley, carrying the ape skin in which Bentley had penetrated the stronghold of Caleb Barter.

The chrome-steel door swung silently back and the three entered another room filled with blaring light. Without being able to look back Bentley knew that Ellen, white of face and staring, followed at their heels.

There was a long white operating table in this room, and a smaller chrome-steel door set some four feet above the floor in one wall.

“Naka Machi, the incineration tube,” said Barter brusquely.

Naka Machi stepped to the operating table and dug into one of the drawers. He brought out a white tube, closed at one end, about an inch in diameter, eight inches in length, and snowy white.

“Concentrated fire, Bentley,” said Barter. “Watch!”

Barter had Naka Machi cast the ape skin through the small steel door, beyond which Bentley could see a boxlike space large enough to accommodate two or three grown men, lying side by side at full length. It seemed to be indirectly lighted. The ape skin dropped on the floor of this compartment. Barter took the “incineration tube” and directed it on the skin. Bentley heard the clicking of a button.

The ape skin charred quickly, folded up, drew into itself, disappeared—and a fine gray ash settled on the floor of the compartment, like rain from the roof of the ghastly little space.

“Now you understand that I have solved the problem of disposing of the cumbersome useless bodies of my hostages, Lee,” said Baxter,

rubbing his hands together as though he washed them.

Bentley's heart leaped as Naka Machi placed the incineration tube on the operating table. It was close enough that Bentley could have reached it, had he not been utterly powerless to move.

"Naka Machi," said Barter. "Bring me ape D-4 and Frank Keller, the diplomat. Ellen, clear the operating table. Quickly, now! Bentley, stand against the wall and do not move—but miss nothing I do."

Chapter 14: The Straining Prison

Then began a grim series of activities which combined to form a nightmare Bentley was never to forget, even as he prayed within him that no slightest memory of it would remain in the brain of Ellen Estabrook.

Naka Machi went back to the room which Bentley had first entered and returned almost at once with a tall thin man, immaculately garbed in gray, wearing a spade beard. His eyes were flashing fires of anger and of pride.

He stared at Barter.

“What is all this quackery?” he demanded. “Who is responsible for this unspeakable rigmarole?”

“Your words are harsh, Mr. Keller,” said Barter suavely, “and you shall learn in good time what I intend. Had you followed my manifestoes in the news columns you would have known what I intend. I shall create a race of super—”

“You will at once release myself and the others with me,” interrupted Keller.

But at that moment Naka Machi returned, leading a great ape which seemed as docile as though it had been drugged. Naka Machi raised his right hand quickly, so quickly Bentley could scarce follow the movement, and with the edge of his palm struck the tall gray man in back of the head. Keller's knees buckled. As he started to fall Naka Machi stepped close to him, gathered him in his arms and bore him to the table.

At Barter's swift instructions Ellen Estabrook, all unknowing, placed a cone indicated by Barter over the mouth and nose of Keller. Naka Machi struck the ape as he had struck the man, but he waited until he had persuaded the brute to take his place on the table near Keller's head.

The ape sprawled. Naka Machi quickly twisted both Keller and the ape around so that their heads were toward each other, their feet pointing in opposite directions.

"Is that close enough my master?" came the soft voice of Naka Machi.

"Quite," said Barter, whose face was now a mask of concentration. "Cleve and Stanley and Morton?"

“They have been locked in their cages, my master,” said Naka Machi. “Are you sure this man who came in the guise of an ape is safe?”

“I shall make sure. But do you remain close where you can render him harmless in case I have misjudged him.”

Naka Machi turned baleful eyes on Bentley. The latter could see the hatred in them and for a moment was at a loss to understand it.

“I shall destroy him before he can put his hands upon you, my master,” said Naka Machi.

“I do not wish him destroyed, Naka Machi,” replied Barter. “That is enough of the anesthetic, Miss Estabrook. Naka Machi, my instruments, quickly.”

Before he proceeded with his labors Barter stood in front of Bentley and stared at him for a moment. Bentley felt the strength flow out of him under the gaze of this man—a gaze he could not avoid. Barter smiled slightly.

“You will eventually join me of your own free will, Lee,” he said softly.

“I would rather die a thousand deaths!” screamed Bentley, but the sound of his scream echoed and reechoed through his soul without coming out so that Barter could hear it.

Barter’s confidence in his ability to convert Bentley was assuredly a mark of his twisted mind, for he must surely have realized that Bentley would be the most injured by his schemes. But he seemed to associate him with the days of Manape, when Barter had proved to himself, to Bentley and Ellen Estabrook, that the operation he now planned in wholesale proportions was possible. Bentley could understand why Barter regarded him as a friend and colleague, and his animosity temporary—because as a subject of his first great experiment Bentley was a symbol of Barter’s success.

Strange how easy it was to find logic in the reasoning of madmen, and to understand that logic!

Barter sprang back to his task.

“Naka Machi,” he said, “take heed that you serve me well. Do you like this woman?”

“Yes, my master.”

“If you continue in your loyalty to me, I shall give her to you.”

Bentley’s mind recoiled with horror. The shock of this cold statement was like another blow on the head. He wanted to leap forward and set strangling fingers about the neck of Naka Machi. Ordinarily Naka Machi could handle him with ease, but now that Bentley had heard the plan of Barter, he could have handled the Japanese with superhuman strength. But he could not move. He strained against the bodily lethargy which held him prisoner. If only he could move forward and grasp the incineration tube, he would turn it on Naka Machi and Barter....

But he could not move, could not fight off the lethargy which was like invincible prison walls around him.

He could move the tips of his fingers, he discovered ... but no more than that. The shock of Barter’s calm statement had cast off that much of his semi-hypnotic lethargy. A minute before he hadn’t been able even to move his fingers.

Give him time, he told himself, while inwardly he bled as he struggled desperately to throw off the grim hypnosis, and he would yet manage to save the lives of at least some of the eighteen, see that Ellen won free, and destroy this hell-hole under Millegan Place.

Now incredibly slender instruments were busy near the heads of the two on the operating table—the ape and Keller, the doomed man. As the knives and scalpels leaped to their work with startling dexterity and amazing speed, Bentley strained again against his horrid invisible prison. If only he could save this man Keller from this horror ... but it was useless.

The fingers of Barter worked swiftly over the skull of the ape, first. Naka Machi stood on one side of the long table, Ellen on the other, near Barter. Bentley studied her face as the skull of the ape fell open under the hands of Barter, and he knew she was unaware of what she was doing. Bentley had expected a crimson horror, but nothing of the kind developed. Could Barter read his thoughts?

“I am an adept at bloodless surgery, Bentley,” he said, while his fingers never ceased their swift manipulations.

Now Naka Machi held the skull-pan of the ape, from which he had removed the reddish substance which was the ape’s brain. This Naka Machi had tossed into the aperture where the ape skin had been destroyed.

The empty skull-pan of the ape awaited the brain of Keller.

Bentley could feel the sweat burst forth on him in every pore as he tried to throw off his awful inertia, to go to the aid of Keller. If Barter should see the perspiration on his cheeks....

Bentley thought of Samson in the midst of his enemies, blind and beaten, of how he had prayed to be given strength to pull down the pillars of the temple....

“Oh God,” said Bentley to himself, “only this once give me strength to throw off these chains. Grant that I do something to save the man from this horror.”

But he could still move only the tips of his fingers when Barter had finally closed the sutures in the skull-pan of the ape, renewing again the ape’s skull, with the brain of Keller inside. Keller was finished. He had not moved on the table. Even his chest stood still, stark and lifeless. Barter had not troubled to restore Keller’s skull-pan. What was the need?

Naka Machi gathered up the carcass of Keller and bore it swiftly to the boxlike hole in the wall of the ghastly room....

He thrust it in. He stepped back and caught up the incineration tube of concentrated fire ... and Bentley saw the body of the murdered

man shrivel up so quickly it seemed as though it had dissolved before his eyes. Down from the ceiling of the hell-hole dropped the fine gray ash, all that remained—save the imprisoned brain—of Frank Keller, the diplomat.

Now Bentley was cognizant of something else. With Barter's concentrated work on Keller, something of the power went out of him. Ever so slightly Bentley could feel that Barter was lacking in strength. Some of his will, some of the essential essence of his brain, of his soul, had been expended in the operation—and by so much was Bentley enabled to move. For now he could move two full fingers on each hand. But how carefully he kept watch to see that neither Naka Machi nor Barter noticed that he was bursting from his invisible prison.

If he could get that incineration tube. He'd do the necessary things first ... then direct the ray of it against the softer portions of the hideout of Barter. The flame would eat through. Somewhere it would finally reach wood; that was inflammable.

There would be smoke, and fire ... and in the end people would come. Tyler would be watching for a sign, anyway. Barter had said that the police knew approximately where he, Barter, was located.

“Now, Bentley,” said Barter, “I’ll explain what I intend doing while I rest a moment before the next ordeal. The whole world is against me now because it regards my experiments as horrible, but if I prove to the world that I am right, and that the men of my creation are supermen, in the end the world will be on my side. I can force it to obey me, in time, but I prefer the world to serve me willingly, because it realizes that what I do for civilization should really be done.”

Bentley said nothing, because he could not speak.

“I’ll send Keller to his office under my instructions,” said Barter. “Of course I’ll issue a manifesto, first, so that the city will know that it is not a wild ape that has escaped. When the new Keller, with the strong brain of Keller and the mighty body of an ape, appears at his office and proves to his people that he has been vastly improved by my experiment....”

Bentley tried to shut his mind to the horrible picture Barter’s words drew before his eyes. Barter broke off short, while Bentley’s mind seemed to rock with the shock of Barter’s last statement. He saw a picture ... a great office filled with many desks occupied by white-faced men and women ... an ornate desk where a “manape” sat.... It was ghastly beyond comprehension. It must never come to pass.

Barter spoke again to Naka Machi.

“Bring me David Fator and ape S-19.”

“Yes, my master,” replied Naka Machi.

Again Bentley went through the horror from beginning to end. He could now move his toes. If only he could fall forward, grasp that incineration tube, turn it on Barter! With Barter unable to control him he would regain his senses in time, he hoped, to stave off the certain charge of Naka Machi, whose hatred for himself he now understood too well.

He hoped, if he were able to accomplish what he planned, that horror upon awakening would cause Ellen to faint. While she was out he could destroy the horror with the cleansing flame ... and tell her she hadn’t seen it, after all.

Bentley could feel the strength pour back into him. Barter was becoming moment by moment more intent on his labors. He was becoming careless with Bentley, not because he underestimated him but because he was intensely absorbed in his work.

By the time two more men had gone bodily into the incinerator and

mentally into a pair of apes, the first ape, carelessly dumped on the floor, came out from under the effects of the drug.

“Stand over there in the corner, Keller,” Barter said to the hybrid carelessly, “and remember that no matter how you may wish to escape you can only do so if I will. Remain quiet there and consider whether you will oppose me or obey me. Oppose me and your only escape is self-destruction. Obey me and possess the world!”

Bentley could imagine the horror and despair of “Keller,” for he himself had known that horror and despair.

Now he could swing his wrists slightly. Naka Machi turned once with a sudden movement and almost caught him at it, and perspiration broke out on Bentley’s face again. Thank God, Ellen realized none of what she was experiencing.

Two other men gave their lives at Barter’s hands ... yet Bentley had only regained sufficient possession of himself to fall forward on his face if he tried to walk, but even that was something.

Five men were gone now. Could he possibly regain muscular control in time to save the lives of some of the eighteen? As he watched the five go into the furnace, one by one, he began to despair of saving

any of the eighteen, but with each operation Barter lost mental strength. If he lost in arithmetical progression as he had during the last five, Bentley estimated that he, Bentley, would be able to move his arms enough to grasp the incineration tube by the time Barter had finished his eighth transplantation.

So, the horror growing until nausea ate at Bentley's stomach like voracious maggots, he watched Barter destroy three more men and create godless monsters in their places. As each manape regained consciousness Barter told him what he had told Keller—and Naka Machi took them out, one by one, and placed them in their allotted cages.

Naka Machi placed the eighth man in the furnace, returned the incineration tube to the table.

"Now, oh God the Father!" moaned Bentley.

He leaned forward, striving with all his will to force his hands to go truly to their target as he fell. He had little or no control of his legs or knees. But let him once hold that tube in his hands....

He fell soundlessly, his hands clutching for the tube. His fingers touched it as he crashed to the floor, and it fell near him. His fingers

fumbled for the tube and now gripped it tightly.

From under the table, writhing and twisting, striving to break his mental bondage, Bentley saw the legs of Caleb Barter. He snapped the button on the tube and turned its open end toward those legs.

“I must not look into his eyes as he falls,” thought Bentley, “or all is lost.”

A terrible scream rang through the operating room. Barter was falling, crumpling as he fell, and as his body slid downward past the table edge, Bentley held the end of the tube toward it. As the bodies of the eight had shriveled, so shriveled the body of Caleb Barter.

Ellen Estabrook screamed horribly, and sprawled on the floor within a foot or two of Bentley. Nature had mercifully sent her into momentary oblivion when the will of Barter, holding her in thrall, had snapped to show her the horror of what she did.

Naka Machi was screaming. Bentley was Bentley again, crawling forth from under the table. Naka Machi met him in a rush and dissolved before the deadly ray as though he had never existed. Its effect must have been a silent explosion, for a fine gray ash came down from the ceiling as the residue which falls when a soaring

rocket has exploded and expended its power. The gray ash was Naka Machi, forever rendered harmless to Ellen.

Bentley walked over and stood looking at the manapes in their cages. What could be done with them? There was no hope, no possible way by which they could resume their normal lives, for of their human bodies there remained but heaps of fine powdery ashes.

Suddenly the manape Keller swept his great hairy arm out between the bars and snatched the tube from Bentley's hand. With a cry of mortal anguish Bentley recoiled from the cage. God! Now all was lost if the manape clicked on the deadly ray and swept it over the room.

Before he could formulate a plan of action, the manape pressed the fatal button. With a cry Bentley threw himself across the room to where Ellen lay unconscious, his only thought to somehow protect her from the tube.

But the manape, Keller, swung the ray upon the other apes with the human minds, and they dissolved into ashy nothingness with bewildering rapidity. The keen mind of Keller was doing what he knew must be done for the good of everyone concerned.

Numbed with horror, Bentley saw the ray directed on Morton and Stanley. They fell silently and without protest....

Keller clicked off the button and looked over at Bentley. He alone remained of Barter's frightful experiment. He alone remained and it seemed that he was trying to tell Bentley something ... asking him to now take the tube and turn it full on the body which housed his human brain.

While Bentley hesitated, the manape bent down and placed the tube on the floor of the cage, the muzzle pointing inward. With a clumsy motion of a long hairy arm he reached out and snicked on the button, then placed himself within its deadly range. Keller vanished and the ray bit into the wall back of the cage; began to eat through.

Bentley leaped to his feet and tore across the floor. He plunged his trembling hand through the bars of the cage, switched off the button and lifted the tube.

There were the remaining normal apes. They could have been saved for transportation to the zoo, but horror was on Bentley and he used the tube again, and yet again....

And there were the keys. He pulled them from their slots in the

porcelain slab, in case there should be other “Stanley-Morton-Cleves” abroad of whom he knew nothing....

He turned the tube against the red lights and the green lights.

Then he turned the tube upward and held it steadily. He watched the charred hole grow bigger and deeper in the high ceiling....

When at last he heard the approaching clang of the fire engine bells and the screaming triumph of police sirens, he carefully snicked off the button of the tube and returned to lift the form of Ellen in arms that were strong to hold her.

123 The Winged Men of Orcon by David R Sparks

Far out at the edge of the Universe two scientists play a game of wits —Earth to the winner.

Aproximate word count: 14,800

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Chapter 1: The Wrecked Space-Ship

When I came to, it was dark; so dark that the night seemed all but fluid with black pigment. Breathing was difficult, but in spite of that, however, I felt exhilarated mentally. Also I felt strong, stronger than I ever had in my life before. I tried to raise my hands, and found that I was handcuffed.

I lay sprawled out on a sharply canted floor of metal, and from outside the house, or whatever it was I was in, I could hear the screeching and howling of the wind. I touched my face with my fettered hands, and the act gave me a feeling of comfort, for the scar on my cheek was still there and I knew that I was myself.

Twisting around, I sat up, and with great difficulty drew a lighter from my trousers pocket. The flame glimmered up. I knew then that I was lying in the control room of a great flying machine!

All about me I saw crumpled human forms clad in glistening gray flying jumpers. It was very, very hot. I thought I caught the sound of waves crashing on a shore. Through a broken port blustered a hot wind laden with an odd odor suggestive of garlic and kelp. It was just as dark outside as in. I stirred about a bit, and found that I was in good shape except for the handcuffs.

A low moan came from behind a bulkhead door at one end of the control room. I listened, and again the sound was repeated. With the lighter still flickering in my hands, I got to my feet. The bulkhead door was jammed, but I found a heavy telargeium spanner-wrench on the floor, and with a strength which frightened me—a strength which could have come only by some upset condition of gravitation—I soon crashed the door open. I had no sooner done it, however, than I forgot about the moan which had fetched me.

What I saw first, hanging on a hook on one wall, was a bunch of keys, one of which readily opened the lock of my handcuffs. Then there was a long-barrelled, gleaming atomic gun, undamaged, and a couple of the new cold-ray flashlights. Free, I caught up one of the

flashlights, and placed back on their hook the keys which had opened the cuffs. Then I stooped over each corpse, and confirmed my first impression that two of the dead men were strangers to me, but that I half recognized one.

The vaguely familiar man was clad, under his gray jumper, in the uniform of a rear admiral of the U.S.W. Upper Zone Patrol Division. He wore a medal of high honor, the Calypsus medal. I knew that he was Wellington Forbes, the man who had defeated the planet Calypsus three years before.

Wellington Forbes! And I with him!

I think I may be excused my temporary forgetfulness of the moan which had brought me to Forbes' death chamber. Uppermost in my mind was the manner in which I had been brought here. For it was he, approaching me through the medium of letters and messengers, who had begged, implored me to help him against Orcon, the eccentric planet of my own discovery, the planet which belonged to a solar system at the other end of the Universe from ours. Because of my knowledge of Orcon, with its bubbling seas, its brooding nightmares, and lastly, its queer conduct toward Earth, he had wanted to take me away from my telescopes to fight. And I had refused.

Now I understood how I came to be here.

I knew that this dead man had kidnapped me after drugging me with one of the new amnesiacs. Yorildiside, I reckoned it. And just because I knew that Admiral Forbes had seized me by force, I knew almost to a certainty that I was shipwrecked on that very Orcon which I had discovered two years before.

I was enraged at this high-handed treatment. For if danger was indeed threatening Earth from Orcon, my place of all places was at my telescopes. I could do with them, for the civilizations about me, what no one else could. Too, I was actuated by selfish motives. I loved my telescopes and my isodermic super-spectroscopes. And there was still much work I had to do! Already I had discovered three new elements, and that had showed me I was but at the beginning of a knowledge of cosmological chemistry. Forbes! He had brought me by force out here on this beastly little planet whose orbit was like that of a snake with the Saint Vitus' dance! He had taken me to this wretched planet which lay at such a remote end of the Universe that not even explorers had been tempted to visit it!

"Oh, damn the whole business!" I groaned aloud. I was thoroughly angry and bitter.

In a little while I experienced a sudden change of mood. I'd no sooner spoken than a moan came from directly behind me, and I remembered why I'd got going in the beginning, and was ashamed. I entered a small compartment which opened from Forbes' cabin, and discovered immediately three more people.

The strides I had taken made me realize that I had to be careful, for I was indeed endowed with a terrific strength—an extraordinary strength and lightness. One of these three new people was obviously dead, for his neck was broken. The other two still breathed. The first of the two was a short man, a Japanese by the look of him. His arm was broken. The other person was, to my surprise, a woman. She, like the dead Forbes, wore the insignia of the U. S. W. Upper Zone Patrol. Her insignia was that of a navigating officer.

So it was she who had caused the crash!

It was also she who had moaned. My feelings as I lifted her to a bunk were mixed. Being a reactionary, I still felt that woman's place was not in the Army or Navy. Yet I confess that the woman—or girl, rather—was ornamental. She was of the Iberian type. She was beautiful, and looked helpless. Some atavistic trait of the protective instinct in man made me take a little more pains in caring for her than I might have taken with a man.

"Doctor Weeks," were the first surprised words she murmured when I had bandaged a cut in her head and she came to.

Weeks being my name—Frederick Weeks—I grunted and wondered just how much she'd had to do with my being here. I noted that the eyes were gray with violet lights.

"You were handcuffed and drugged," she announced wonderingly.

"I was," I answered, "but I'm not any more. Thanks to my own efforts."

She dropped that subject.

"Take me to Admiral Forbes, Doctor Weeks. I am Captain Virginia Crane."

I acknowledged curtly her introduction of herself and told her the admiral was dead. Her cheeks, already pale, grew white. I asked her the number of the space flyer's crew. She said ten. So far, four were dead, three alive, including myself, and the rest unaccounted for, I told her. She winced. In a moment, though, she pulled herself together with a grit which I could not deny, despite my disapproval of her being here.

"I suppose you wonder why you're here," she said suddenly, "and where we are."

"I don't need to be told where I am," I said coldly, "but a little information as to who was responsible for my coming to Orcon wouldn't be amiss. I suppose it was Forbes."

She cut me off with a look.

"It wasn't the admiral." Her really beautiful eyes narrowed. "It was I who planned your abduction and got him to execute it."

"You!"

I drew back. My manner was formal and cold.

And after that I guess I pretty well boiled over. But did it gain me anything? Before I had said half enough to soothe my lacerated feelings, the girl simply shrugged and looked bored.

"Don't be a fool," she ordered curtly. "We needed you, and I, for one, was not going to see your egotistical ideas about an unimportant piece of work—your cosmological chemistry—jeopardize the safety of the world. Oh, I know the government wanted you in your laboratory. But with Ludwig Leider loose on Orcon, and you the

only one in our Zone who knew much of anything about the planet, what could you expect?"

I hardly know what might have happened between us if she had not mentioned Leider's name when she did. The insults with which she had begun had hardly been atoned for by her half understanding of my refusal to join Forbes, and I was still in a rage. Yet, as it was, at the mention of Leider I snapped to attention.

"Ludwig Leider! Here?"

"Yes," she replied significantly.

"But that makes a difference! Why wasn't I told? Why this silly kidnapping?"

She moved a little on the couch and looked at me.

"There was not time to tell you and to chance putting up with further silly arguments on your part. When the secret service detail which had been handling the Leider case brought in word of his whereabouts, there was time only to get a ship specially outfitted for such a tremendous journey and start. We had to kidnap you."

I hardly heard her last words. Ludwig Leider—scientist

extraordinary, renegade, terrorist. Everyone of our latter day century knew that he was the greatest example of the megalomaniac—the power-seeking genius—which the human race had produced for decades. Everyone knew that he—furious because he had been denied the high position he craved as ruler for life of the united peoples of Earth—had been the leader of the interplanetary struggle which had resulted in Forbes' brilliantly successful attack on Calypsus. And everyone knew that he had escaped from Calypsus. And that, while he was free, there could be no real safety anywhere, either for Earth, which he hated, or any of its allied planets. Leider, here! No wonder I had been observing queer goings on in Orcon!

Somehow I forgot to be angry with poor dead Forbes. Almost I forgot to disapprove of the woman.

"See here!" I broke out. "If your secret service detail was right, and Leider is on Orcon, we've got to stop talking and get going. Tell me more about your expedition."

"Do you know," she said presently, "I rather thought you would make quite a leader—and fighter—if you could ever be aroused. As for the expedition, we have only this one ship. It's that kind of a job."

"Oh, suicide party, eh?"

I ignored her remark about my ability as a fighter. I had never aspired to any sort of naval or military leadership.

"Yes," she answered; "suicide party. And I suppose, with our ship wrecked, our admiral dead, and contact with Leider not even made as yet, it's become doubly so. But we've got to do something."

She leaned forward on the couch.

"Our primary objective," she went on, "was to reach Orcon and scout, and then radio information back to Earth. But we also have two tons of the new explosive, kotomite, aboard and are to do damage if we can. What are you going to do, Doctor? The command is yours now."

I was well enough versed in the upper space tactics of our modern navy to appreciate the wisdom which had been used in sending the one ship alone on the expedition, and I could well understand the reasonable hope of success which had been promised. I confess I was staggered to know what could be done, however, now that the admiral was dead and the ship wrecked. As for my having inherited the command, I was even more disconcerted.

"I don't know what we're going to do," I said in answer to Captain

Crane's question. "I doubt if Forbes would know, if he were alive, and I'm by no means the commander he was. But, as you say, we have to do something. So, since it's a little early in the game to explode the kotomite and call it a day's work, we better declare a truce between ourselves, and then check up on the ship. Come on, if you're able."

She was able.

In the next twenty minutes we found that it was the forward end of the great flier which was damaged, and that while she was in fair shape amidships and astern, she would never fly again. We discovered that the three unaccounted-for men of the crew were lying forward, and found that two were dead and one lived—a radio man named LeConte. He had two ribs broken. Half a dozen atomic guns remained to us, and we found intact one dynamo capable of generating the new cold light in considerable quantities. It was not an encouraging check-up, though. Out of a crew of ten, only the four of us were alive; Captain Crane, the Jap, LeConte, and myself. And all of us were more or less battered. The ship was still habitable, but smashed beyond hope of repair. Around us stretched Orcon—in the control of Ludwig Leider.

I got LeConte, the radio man with the broken ribs, into the small

cabin where the Jap still lay and made him comfortable. Then I set the Jap's broken arm. I gave both him and LeConte an injection of penopalatrin in order that their shattered bones might be decently knitted in two or three hours. The Jap presently came to, and I found that he was a civilian like myself, but one who had long been employed on the U. S. W. research staff as a ray and explosive expert. I realized at once that he was the inventor of the kotomite with which the ship was loaded.

All of them, including Captain Crane, told me the story of the crash. Captain Crane hadn't been responsible, after all. Their magnogravitos system had failed in some mysterious manner as they approached Orcon. In spite of the checking effect of their helium pontoons, which had expanded properly when they had come into Orcon's atmosphere, they had slammed into a sea of light and crashed. That was all anyone knew. But everyone suspected that Leider had been somehow responsible.

"I do not enjoy the prospect," Koto said after a glance at his temporarily helpless left arm. "If Leider is able to wreck a space ship before she ever reaches his planet, he has more power than he ever had during the Calypsus war."

I said nothing, but simply looked at LeConte, and nodded approval

when he muttered something about getting his sending set in shape, if that were possible. We were sitting in the small cabin and Captain Crane was searching my face with those discomforting, violet-lighted gray eyes. I knew she was asking me once more what I was going to do, and I knew that, except that we might fire the kotomite, I could tell her nothing.

We sat on in silence. Then, however, before I spoke about the kotomite, a change came.

All at once I felt the space flier tremble under me. It rocked gently over on one side and began to move. Slowly, but definitely.

Koto and I were on our feet in a flash. Captain Crane stiffened and faced me, waiting.

"What is it?" Koto gasped.

"We'll find out what it is," I flung back. "Miss Crane—Captain—on deck with you. Here, Koto, a hand with one of the guns. We'll take it up out of the hatchway and through the main cabin."

LeConte, I knew, was the one we must be careful of, with his cracked ribs.

"Get to your apparatus," I ordered him, "and stay with it until you get through to Earth."

With that I jumped into the main cabin, stepped over Forbes' lifeless body, and caught hold of the nearest of the atomic guns. I was to be a leader, after all.

Chapter 2: The Cable of Menace

It was dark when we gained the deck; as dark as it had been when I first regained consciousness. Captain Crane was attending to that problem, however. As Koto and I floundered with the gun on the slippery telargeium plates of the outer hull, I heard her moving about. Then she uttered a cry of relief, and there came a faint click. Instantly the darkness all about—the clinging noisome darkness of Orcon at night—was shattered.

The blessed rays of our one good lighting dynamo were loosed!

I saw the girl standing braced beside a stanchion, staring over the ship's side.

"Come on, Koto!" I snapped.

I am no fighting man by trade. Nevertheless, there was a kind of instinct which told me to get the gun set up at any point of vantage along the ship's side. And Koto understood.

"There," he breathed after but a few seconds, and from the experienced way in which he touched the disintegration-release trigger with his one good hand, I knew we were ready.

The flier was still moving, slowly and smoothly. She seemed to be half lifted, half drawn by some colossal force. I leaned far out over the rail.

A long, slender, but apparently indestructible cable had been affixed to our stern by means of a metal plate at its end which I guessed to be magnetic. I saw that the cable vanished under lashing waves which broke on a not distant shore, and that we were being drawn irresistibly toward the waves.

The light from the deck brought out dazzling scintillations from a beach composed of gigantic crystal pebbles as large as ostrich eggs. On the beach and grouped thickly all about our hull, swarmed a legion of creatures which—

Well, they were the brood of Orcon. They were the creatures who had given Ludwig Leider refuge and allied themselves with him in his attempt to make trouble for Earth. And they were half-bird, half-human! Their faces, bodies, arms, and legs were human. But they had wings! Translucent, membranous structures, almost gauzy, which stretched out from their shoulders like bat's wings. And their skins, as they surged about in the beams of our light, gleamed a bright orange color, and about their heads waved frilled antennae which were evidently used as extra tactile organs to supplement the

human hands. I could see instantly that the Orconites possessed a high degree of intelligence. Of all the queer breeds that interplanetary travel and exploration had produced, this was the queerest.

I swung to Koto, who was crouching beside the gun.

"Get rid of that cable before we go under!" I exclaimed.

I had already guessed that the plate which held the cable to our stern was magnetic. It was easy to see that the cable had been fastened there by the Orconites and that our ship and ourselves might be drawn to destruction. I flung myself over to Koto's side to help him with the gun.

The howling wind which had been at a lull as we reached the deck, broke loose again, and, as a gust hit us, Koto, gun, and I were all but swept overboard. The winged legion overside gave loud cries and braced themselves against the gusts. I saw Virginia Crane clinging desperately to her stanchion beside the light switches.

"More light if you have it!" I screamed to her against the wind.

Then Koto and I got the gun going.

My first feeling was one of intense relief. As the thing went off under our hands, and I knew from a faint trembling and a low hiss that the weapon was functioning perfectly, I felt thankful indeed for the instinct which had made me get the gun on deck. It could be only a matter of seconds now until a whole section of the metallic cable was disintegrated completely and until our ship was free.

Breathlessly I watched the greenish atomic stream play along the bright length of the cable of death, and, as Koto and I steadied the gun together, I knew he shared my relief. Despite the howling of the wind, the yells of the Orconites, the continued slow movement of the ship, and the hideous churning of the waves astern, I laughed to myself.

"Doctor Weeks!"

I saw that Captain Crane had gone aft to watch the effects of our fire.

"All right," I bellowed. "What—"

"Nothing is happening back here! Your gun! What's the matter with it?"

I was too startled to answer otherwise than I did.

"Nothing's the matter with it. What's the matter with you?"

But the next instant I knew she was right.

"My God, Doctor!" Koto cried, and I knew he had leaped to the same conclusion I had.

Suddenly I brushed Koto's hands away from the gun, and myself directed it so that its ray cut straight across one whole group of the queer creatures on the beach. Then I cursed.

Instead of being cut down, broken like so many blades of grass, not one of the creatures showed that the ray had touched them at all. They only uttered tremendous hoarse sounds that might have been laughter.

I stood up.

"Koto, Leider's found means of protecting both raw materials and living beings against the atomic gun!"

Captain Crane was beside us now, and I saw that she did not need to be told of the disaster. As Koto turned away from the gun, I thought of LeConte below. When the waves closed in on us, he would be caught like a rat.

The shriek of the wind and the crash of waves grew louder. I felt upon my face the sting of spray from the aqueous solution of which the lashing sea at our stern was composed. The cable held, and the ship continued to move. We were barely a hundred yards away from the shore.

All at once, though, a string of both chemical and physical formulae—the last thing a man would expect to think of in such a position—flashed into my mind.

"Here, wait a minute," I thought. "If Leider's done this thing, it means—it must mean—that he's juggled his atomic structures through production in terrific quantities of the quondarium light which I theorized about last year! But he can't have done that without playing hell with the action of magnetic forces from beginning to end! I believe if we take the gun aft and direct it at—"

That was as far as I got with forming words. I flung myself toward the gun and began to drag it to a position aft, where we might direct its ray full force, at close range, against the magnetic metal plate which held the cable to our stern.

"Help me!" I yelled at the others.

Koto was the first to close in. Struggling, slipping, hampered rather than helped by our great strength, we clawed our way aft. A combined lurch of ship and blast of wind threw Captain Crane down, but she staggered up.

We dropped the gun with a thump at a spot where the bulging curve of the stern swelled directly under the muzzle. I grabbed at the trigger just as a new surge of movement brought the flier perilously close to a great, inrushing wall of water which was not water. Koto's face was drawn, and Virginia Crane was staring in horrified fascination at the gun.

Again came the faint trembling of the beautifully constructed mechanism. The green ray leaped out across the blinding whiteness of our light rays. I jammed the muzzle down until the whole force of the atomic stream was spouting against the magnetic plate which held the cable to our stern.

"Look, Doctor! Look!" Captain Crane cried.

But I was already looking.

For an instant a flash of blue light played about our ship. There was a single sharp, crackling sound; and, ringing in the night, an echoing,

high-pitched twang.

Koto let out a shout. I took my hands away from the gun.

Backward the twanging cable snapped, demolishing with one touch a score of the clustering Orconites. Into the waves it snapped, and our ship, ceasing to move, came to rest upon the glittering pebbles of the beach.

I heaved a deep sigh.

"What came to me a moment ago," I said breathlessly to the others, "was the idea that when atomic structures are so juggled that they are no longer affected by the gun, all the forces of magnetism, which usually are immune to the atomic stream, are rendered liable to disruption by it. We could not destroy Leider's cable, but we could play the deuce with its magnetic grip on us."

Koto was looking at me wide-eyed, and I saw that his interest was as keen as my own. Even Virginia Crane, scientist though she was not, was interested.

We were in no position, however, to sit still and think. The waves astern and the howling wind were subsiding noticeably, but the

inhabitants of Orcon all about us were still creating a great hubbub. Our next obvious move, regardless of what they might do, was to get hold of one of them and make him talk.

After a gesture to Koto and Captain Crane to stay where they were, I ran to a spot on the deck where I had seen a permanent ladder fixed to the side of the ship. Three jumps took me down to the beach, and three more took me into the very midst of the mob.

The confusion brought about by the destruction of the score or so of Orconites by the flying cable, and by our unexpected salvation, all worked for me. And another thing worked for me, too.

These people had great intelligence, but they seemed like sheep when it came to a question of physical, hand to hand encounter. Of rough and tumble fighting with fists they knew nothing—as indeed not many people do in this century, even on Earth. The result of it all was that they shrank back when I charged into them, and not a blow was struck, even when I caught up the nearest figure in my path, swung it over my shoulder, and tore back to the ladder. In two shakes I was standing on the deck again, my prisoner all safe.

"What a creature!" Virginia Crane cried as I presented her and Koto with my struggling but helpless prize.

That was just what I had thought after my first glimpse of the whole brood of them. Close inspection showed, as I had supposed, that the Orconite was a man, and yet not a man. The body, the limbs, the enormous head, the features of the orange-colored face were human; and the chap began to spout excited sounds which were certainly the words of intelligent speech. But also he was winged, and from the orange forehead waved those curious, frilled feelers!

He was clad in a single loose garment of woven cloth which permitted free action for both limbs and wings. A small, flat black box with a mouthpiece into which he could speak, was strapped to his chest in such a position that it was almost concealed by the folds of his blouse. We were to find out presently the purpose of this instrument, but I did not examine it carefully then. As the creature glared balefully at us from his intelligent dark eyes, I glanced over the side of the ship to see whether trouble was to be expected from his fellows.

And for the moment they surged about so much, and made so much noise, that I thought trouble might come. The shouting, however, was caused by their dismay at all that had happened to them, and I saw that instead of making ready to attack they were preparing a retreat. We had whipped them temporarily.

We had thrown them into such disorder, indeed, that in another moment a whole force of them gave proof of their ability to fly, by taking off from the beach. Up and out they swept, out into the intense blackness which overhung the sea behind us. In another moment the whole crew had vanished, and I was glad enough of it.

"Come on below," I said to my two companions. "There's no telling how long Leider will keep his hands off us, and we've got to find out from our prisoner whatever we can."

With that I turned to the companionway, lugging the winged man, and the others followed.

Chapter 3: In the Grip of Ludwig Leider

Once we were below, LeConte joined us from the radio room. After taking a swift look at our prisoner, and listening to our account of what had happened above, he reported that the radio had been put out of commission by the crash but could be repaired. All of us then held a hasty conference and decided that since no one was badly in need of rest, LeConte would return to his sending set, Koto would keep a deck watch, and Captain Crane and I would see what we could learn from the prisoner.

From the start it had been certain that the Orconite's strength was not to be compared to our earthly powers. Therefore I made no attempt to bind him, but simply shoved him into a seat in the main cabin of the flier—the room in which Forbes' body still lay—and began to try to make him talk.

I knew that Leider must have some way of communicating with his allies, and I was determined that if he could, I could. But it was uphill work. The creature closed his mouth, assumed a sullen look, and sat tight. He knew what I was after—that I could tell by the expression of his face—but he met with stolid silence all of my attempts to address him in such languages as I knew of Earth and our allied planets. I got nowhere, until, in a manner as sudden as it was

unexpected, something happened which ended the deadlock.

The way it happened was this. As LeConte, working in the radio room close off the main saloon, completed a connection which had been broken, he called to us that he was making progress, and a moment later we heard the click of his sending key and the shrill squeal of a powerful electric arc breaking across the transmission points of his set. I realized at once that this did not mean that the set was wholly in order, for the pitch of the squealing arc was too high and too sharp, but I did know that there was hope of establishing communication with Earth soon. And, too, I realized another thing.

The moment that shrill, squealing sound impinged upon the Orconite's ears, he jumped and uttered a cry of pain. There was something about his nervous organism that could not stand these sounds!

"LeConte," I shouted, "close your key again!"

After that the battle was won. By the time I had explained to LeConte why I had given him the order, and he had filled the cabin two or three times with the screech, the Orconite was ready to speak. He trembled in his seat. His mouth twisted with pain, and a look of agony seared his eyes. He burst into fluent Orconese speech. Then

he made a swift pass with one hand at the black box on his chest, touched a switch there, and began to rattle his Orconese into the mouthpiece.

The result—well, one might have known that Leider would have found some ingenious means of making the difficult speech of Orcon easy. Out of the small instrument into which our prisoner spoke his hard, rattling words, came a flood of pure German.

An instrument for translating spoken Orconese into spoken German. That was what the little box was.

"Shut the accursed transmission set off!" came from the box in a clear German which I understood readily. "I will talk. Ask what you want to know. I cannot stand this!"

His face still contorted, the Orconese touched a second switch on the box, and indicated that I was to speak at the instrument. I did so, in German. The result was an instant translation into the prisoner's own tongue.

The rest was easy.

"What is your name?" was my first question.

"Hargrib."

"What were you and your people trying to do to us with the cable you hitched to our stern?" I asked next.

"Destroy you."

The whole story was this: In a power house on an island only a few hundred yards off the beach was kept a magnetic cable which Leider had been using in connection with some deep sea dredging apparatus he kept there. When our ship crashed, the order had come from headquarters that the cable be fastened to us and the ship drawn into the sea. I concluded that we had missed an unpleasant fate by a narrow margin.

Quickly Hargrib confirmed our belief that it was Leider who had wrecked our ship while it was still approaching Orcon through space. A ray which had crippled the magnogravitos had been used. So great was Leider's power that, after disabling us, he had even been able to direct our course so that we had crashed on the beach close to the headquarters he had set up for himself deep in the wilderness, away from the cities of Orcon.

The Orconite's free mention of Leider's name and his open

admission that the man was king and god in Orcon, made direct inquiry about him easy. Also it was plain that Hargrib, now he had been cornered, would hold nothing back because he believed we would never live long enough to make trouble, regardless of what information we gained.

To state the rest of it briefly, we learned that Leider had come to Orcon immediately after his defeat at Calypsus. He had found ready allies here, on the crazy, distant planet which had been too remote to tempt explorers from Earth until necessity had forced our voyage. The people of Orcon knew science and machinery, and were advanced in every respect. From communication which they had had with other peoples in their own zone of the Universe, they had even heard of Earth and its allied planets. They had lent themselves readily to Leider's fierce plans to make trouble for Earth.

As to what Leider's plan of war was, Hargrib could not tell us much, for his duties kept him absorbed in other work, not connected with the campaign. He stated definitely, however, that Leider had almost completed the development of apparatus which would enable him to strike his blow without ever leaving Orcon. The whole work was being carried forward in tremendous subterranean laboratories and power rooms which had been established in a series of natural caverns only a few miles distant from the desolate beach on which

we were lying at that moment. Hargrib said that with the coming of daylight, we would be able to see the mountains in which the caverns were concealed, just as we would be able to sight the nearby island whence had been shot the cable which had so nearly done for us.

At this point my natural curiosity as a scientist made me desire greatly to ask a thousand questions about the planet itself, with its bubbling chemical seas and its erratic orbit, and I did ask a few things. The answers I received confirmed the theory I had already formed that Orcon did not revolve regularly, but had days and nights which might last anywhere from a few hours to a month. I was told —what I had already guessed—that the bubbling fluid which composed the seas changed the orbit of the planet as the nature of the fluid's chemical elements changed.

Also I was told flatly and calmly, as though there were nothing at all remarkable about the fact, that Leider had penetrated so deeply into the chemical secrets of Orcon that he was able to control the coming of day and night. Finally I was told that the planet had a hot, moist climate instead of the frigid one to be expected when any sun was so remote, because of the continued warmth-giving chemical action of its seas.

I could have gone on seeking information for hours. Captain Crane, however, showed impatience at even the few questions I did ask, and I knew that she was justified. It was my duty to think about the position we were in and the task we had in hand.

I asked Hargrib sharply what was to be expected from Leider now that his cable party against us had failed. And he told me.

The sum of it was that Leider was working eagerly to complete his preparations for the attack on Earth. Although it was he who had sent word from headquarters that we were to be destroyed, he had not paused to attend to the matter himself. Hargrib thought, however, that the failure of the cable party might change this attitude, and expressed the belief that Leider would interview us now before he put us out of the way. He swore, and I believed, that he did not know when or how Leider would come to us or have us brought to him. Also he did not know when or how we would finally be exterminated.

I now asked a series of indirect questions which led me to believe that neither Hargrib nor his master knew of the thing I had been conscious of from the start—that we had aboard the ship an amount of high explosive sufficient to do ghastly damage not only to this section of the coast but to the whole planet of Orcon. I gathered,

however, that Leider suspected we were armed against him in some way, and would watch us carefully.

By now daylight had begun to peer in through the ports, a greenish daylight which grew out of the north, and with its coming I resolved on a plan of action.

"I am done with Hargrib," I said suddenly to Captain Crane. "We'll lock him up in one of the staterooms, and after that we'll see if we can't get busy with something that will at least help Earth, even if it doesn't help us."

Hargrib, still terrified by those radio sounds he could not stand, made no protest when I ordered him into the stateroom which had belonged to the ship's second officer, and we were rid of him in a moment.

I now called LeConte from the radio room and Koto in from the deck, and after Captain Crane and I had told them what we had learned, I made my proposal.

The plan was simply that LeConte should continue to work on his sending apparatus until he reached Earth, while Koto, Captain Crane and I set out on a reconnaissance. I said that I hoped to be able to

locate Leider's headquarters and learn what method of attack he intended to use against Earth; and that I hoped further that at least one of us would be able to bring word back to LeConte, who could send it to Earth. Finally I indicated that we would see what could be done with our two tons of kotomite as soon as we had made the attempt to send information home. I told LeConte, who would stay with the ship, to fire the explosive himself if anything happened to make him believe that we had been killed while scouting.

I did not fail to point out that since our atomic guns were useless against the Orconites and Leider, we should have to go unarmed on our expedition, and I did not fail to state that the whole effort seemed futile. But the opportunity offered by Leider's present withdrawal was one we could not afford to miss. We were drowning people, I said, and we must clutch at straws. And my friends were good enough to agree.

As soon as the conference was ended, therefore, we disposed of our six dead by the simple process of disintegrating them with one of the atomic guns, and then LeConte returned to the radio, and Koto, Captain Crane and I went on deck to have our first look at Orcon by daylight.

The first thing we saw was the small, rocky islet just off the shore

whence had come the cable. It seemed a harmless place now, with only one squat building of stone and no Orconites about, but we were glad enough to turn away from it and look toward the dark and ragged range of mountains which loomed up some five miles inland —the mountains of Leider's headquarters. Not that the sight inspired us with greater confidence. It didn't. But it was good to look at the mountains, because the fact that we were going there meant that at least we should be acting instead of idling.

No Orconite was visible anywhere.

With the coming of daylight—the greenish daylight of Orcon—the sea behind us had calmed until its surface was disturbed only by gigantic lazy bubbles which broke with muffled, thudding explosions. The air smelled of chlorine, iodine, and sulphurated hydrogen, but was breathable. I saw that the principal characteristic of life on Orcon was an organic ability to thrive under almost any climatic conditions. Many of the huge, crystal clear boulders which covered the beach and the coastal plain which led to the hills, were covered with leafless flowers which had immense, leathery petals and sharp, fang-like spines. Other evidences of swift growing life showed on every hand. Ugly, jelly-like creatures oozed about the ship and everywhere else. In places the very rocks seemed ready to come to life.

After one good look about, I issued the order to start. As we clambered down the ship's ladder to the beach and set out resolutely toward the hills, I made myself try to hope, and for a time did muster up a little cheer.

I did not keep it, though. In less than ten minutes something happened which ended our expedition in a terrible manner.

What began it was a long shout which came echoing from LeConte back on the ship. The instant I heard the cry I knew, somehow, that trouble had started. Leider had kept off us as long as we had remained quiet, but at our first move he had gone into action.

While LeConte's cry still echoed in my ears, I swung to face the ship and saw him waving frantically from the deck. At that moment I also had a queer impression that the sunlight was growing brighter on all the glittering rocks, and that some new feeling was creeping into the air.

"Doctor Weeks!" LeConte cried across the distance between us. "Come at once!"

Terror had laid hold of the man. Captain Crane, Koto and I began to run to him.

"What is it?" I shouted.

"I don't know," came the thin answer. "I almost had Earth when my whole set went to pieces. Come, quickly!"

"We will, if we're able," I muttered to myself, and said aloud as I ran in the gigantic bounds possible on Orcon: "Koto, Captain, do you feel anything queer in the air as if—as if—"

I never finished. Suddenly Captain Crane screamed and flung out her arms to me with the gesture of one about to fall.

"Doctor Weeks!" she gasped. "Frederick, help me!"

And that was all. Before she could choke out another word, before I could do more than clutch at her, she had been caught up by an invisible power, caught up straight into the now dazzlingly brilliant green air, and swept away from us as if she were a feather in a tornado.

It was over before realization could sink in. Nor was her departure all. From the ship came a ringing yell, and as LeConte, in the distance, clutched a stanchion as if for dear life, the whole battered, glimmering gray shape of the flier moved, shivered, and in a flash

was caught up and whisked away as easily as had been Virginia Crane!

"He's got us!" I sputtered as I turned to Koto. "He was only waiting until we started to march against him."

"God, yes. Horrible!" he muttered.

Then his kindly yellow face went white. Even while I stood looking at him, he, too, was swept away into space.

When my turn came, it was as if implacable fingers took hold of my wrists, the front of my coat, my shoes. I distinctly remember thinking that after all the peace we'd had, something as astounding as this was almost bound to have happened. The glittering boulders of the coastal plain fell away, and I felt myself being whirled through space. The speed was taking my breath away. A ringing came into my ears, spots floated before my eyes, a nauseating light-headedness swept me, and I lapsed into unconsciousness.

Chapter 4: In the Caverns of Orcon

I came out of it to find myself lying on my back upon the rocky floor of a cavern more lofty than any cathedral. The air was warm and charged with a pungent, almost mephitic odor. Blue light filled the vast subterranean place. I heard the far-away, droning throb of machinery. Crackling sounds like static on a vast scale ripped back and forth at intervals.

Neither Captain Crane, Koto, nor LeConte was in sight, but wherever I looked as I twisted my head slowly, I saw winged Orconites staring at me. They stood back against the walls of the cavern chamber, their wings folded, the antennae on their orange foreheads waving gently. None was close, but all watched with cold, intelligent interest. I decided that I was in Leider's headquarters, a closely guarded prisoner. It was to be supposed that Leider had brought us here, as Hargrib had said he might, to interview us before he finished us off.

Fear for the others laid hold of me, but I was still too dazed and giddy to get up and look for them. I lay still, trying to remember everything.

"He waited until we made an aggressive move," I thought, "and then

he did something to us. He did something which brought us shooting through the air here to his headquarters!"

After I had progressed so far, it did not take me long to realize what method Leider had employed to fetch us to the caverns. Nor did it take me much longer, once I was sure of the method, to roll over heavily and begin to yank the metal buttons off my coat. Since the many guards—fully twenty of them—made no move to interfere, I did not stop until I had torn every button off my clothing, dumped from my pockets every object which had a scrap of metal on it, and even dug the metal eyelets out of my shoes.

What had happened was that Leider had simply readjusted the forces of his damned power houses so as to yank us to him, ship and all, without the medium of a magnetic cable. What he had done was to direct at us a magnetic current so terrific that, taking hold of the few odds and ends of metal on our persons, it had snatched us bodily through space. And the ship, too! It was stupendous; incredible.

Full consciousness had returned by this time, and fear possessed me even more completely than it had before—fear for what might be going to happen to Earth and fear of what might already have happened to my friends. The Leider who had planned the Calypsus war had had no such gigantic powers as these. As thoughts of

Virginia Crane and the others increased until they filled my whole mind, I sat up on the floor of the cavern and then rose slowly to my feet.

The guards never relaxed their vigilance, but they made no move as I moved; they only stared, and I ventured to call out.

"Captain Crane! Koto! LeConte!" I shouted loudly.

No answer came. Since the Orconites still did not prevent me, I began to walk swiftly down the length of the great, echoing cathedral cavern, toward an abutment of rock which jutted out from one wall, separating the room I was in from another. Again I shouted, and the whole place rang with echoes, and my fears grew.

But all at once fear vanished. I knew that the worst had not happened and that I was not to be left alone.

"Doctor Weeks!" It was Koto's voice, and it came from behind the abutment of rock toward which I was hurrying.

"Koto!" I yelled and entered the next cavern and saw it all.

He was lying stretched out on the rocky floor of an underground room as vast as the one I had left behind me. He was unhurt, and he

was waving to me! Captain Crane, just waking up, was stretched out beside him. Our ship, a colossal bulk of battered, gleaming metal, had come to a lighting point some fifty yards beyond them. LeConte was sitting on the deck, staring groggily at me.

Guards were posted all around the walls of this new cavern, and those I had just walked away from now came crowding in to join their fellows, but none spoke to us or held us back. In another thirty seconds LeConte had slid down from the ship, Captain Crane had stumbled to her feet, Koto had flung an arm about me, and we were all babbling together.

I will not attempt to tell of our feelings during that interval. But the reunion did much for us. When I had returned to consciousness, it had been with the thought that our puny scouting expedition had been wrecked before it had begun, and that all else had been lost to us. Now the mere fact that we were together once more changed my attitude suddenly and completely.

"Defeated?" I asked myself, and as I gripped the warm hands of friends I knew that we were not defeated at all. Rather it seemed that everything we could have hoped to gain was won.

The penopalatrin I had injected in Koto and LeConte had mended

the former's broken arm and the latter's cracked ribs, so that none of us was in any way disabled. And we seemed to be free within limits. And our ship was here in Leider's caverns—our ship laden with two tons of the most terrific explosive science had ever created. And the Orconites, though they might be suspicious, knew nothing of our weapon.

Now that hope had sprung to life again, I knew that the opportunities open to us were huge. We were in great trouble, and whatever we did would probably not be easily done, but there was a strong chance that we might yet strike a blow that would help the peoples of Earth in their hour of need.

It was not necessary to explain to the others all that was passing in my mind, for I could tell by their expressions that they were comprehending the possibilities as clearly as I.

"What's Leider up to?" Captain Crane asked after a while.

"He's brought us here to put us through an interview," I answered. "He hasn't sent for us yet because he's busy getting ready for his war. Also, since he's a Prussian all the way through, he's probably ignoring us in the belief that his absence will make us more impressed with his mightiness."

"Yes, but what are we going to do while he ignores us?" she snapped back.

"Quite a lot," I answered, and turned to LeConte. "What are the chances of getting word to Earth?"

"Impossible," he said, shaking his head. "The set was wrecked when the magnetism—or whatever it was—took hold of us."

"All right. Never mind it." I looked at Koto now. "Koto, what do you have to do to fire your explosive?"

I was sure now that the thought had already been in their minds, for Captain Crane and LeConte nodded and Koto smiled.

"The kotomite," he answered, "is packed in telargeium drums in the ship's hold, and protected against being exploded until oxygen is admitted to the drums and force applied. It was our original hope to land on Orcon, deposit the drums, and fire them by a time fuse. The quickest way now would be simply to place one of our atomic guns in the hold, turn it loose, and get out. The stream of the gun would in a very short time disintegrate the drums to admit oxygen, and would at the same time set off the explosive."

"Good," I said shortly, and without more ado glanced about the cavern to look over the situation with regard to the forty or so Orconites whom we had been ignoring, and who had ignored us, ever since we found each other.

They were standing motionless against the walls, eyes alert, ugly antennae waving, but with their arms folded across their chests. There seemed to be no reason why we should not all march boldly to the ship, climb aboard, and forthwith do the work that was to be done there. I had, however, a feeling that our task was not to be so easily accomplished, and was not long in discovering that the feeling was correct.

The moment I told the others to come with me, and we all started to walk toward the ship, the whole encircling force of Orconites began to move silently forward. When we were within a few yards of the ship's ladder, a tall lithely built Orconite who seemed to be captain of the guard, flopped his wings, shot across the cavern, and dropped down before us. Into the instrument on his chest he rapped a word of Orconese which was translated instantly into the German.

"Verboten!" was the word.

Forbidden! The Orconites were not taking any chances with us. It

was discouraging, but no more than I had expected. It simply meant that if we were to be interfered with, we should have to do something about the interference.

I quickly began to work out a plan.

First of all I shrugged at the captain of the guard and turned back from the ship as though his refusal to let us aboard was of no consequence. Next I spoke to the others.

"Come on," I said in a normal voice. "Don't make a fuss now, but pull back, from the gangway."

They saw, I think, that I was planning something, and we retreated together, with the result that the Orconites ceased to threaten and once more fell back to the walls of the cavern. Their captain flew over and joined them.

"I thought for a moment," I said, "that we might tell the captain that Hargrib was locked up in the ship, and so furnish an excuse to get aboard. But that isn't good. Some of the Orconites would surely go with us, and in that case it would be next to impossible to get at the kotomite properly. What we need is at least a couple of minutes which will be uninterrupted. We'll leave Hargrib right where he is,

and get access to the ship in another way. We'll fight for it!"

"Fight?" Captain Crane shot a glance at me, and I saw that the idea appealed to her.

"So far as I can see," I said quickly, "Leider hasn't armed his guards with any unique weapon, but has merely left them to watch us. And the Orconites don't know how to fight! Think of the ease with which I got away with Hargrib last night. When it comes to dealing destruction with scientific weapons, their power is appalling. When it comes to a slugging match, they are only so many sheep. And Leider's forgotten to take that fact into account!"

I felt really sure that the guards were not armed with some mysterious weapon we could not see, and Koto felt the same.

"Doctor, you're right!" he exclaimed. "Leider's made a mistake! He's forgotten what damage can be done by physical strength, and left us alone with a mere flesh-and-blood guard. There are forty of the Orconites and their leader, and only four of us. But we have strength that they never dreamed of possessing. It makes the odds almost even!"

"Right," I snapped. "And they will be even altogether if we can get

hold of some clubs."

Koto and the others looked doubtful at that, but I had been thinking hard of the problem all the while we were talking. I motioned unobtrusively toward the end of the room, where a tunnel, blue-lighted and lined with curious, glittering dials like ammeters, gave entrance, evidently, to another great underground chamber. On the floor of that tunnel, close to the entrance, lay a pile of heavy stalactites of some mineral which resembled jade. The spikes had seemingly been cleared off the tunnel roof and left to be carried away. They were pointed enough to be used for stabbing, and looked heavy enough to make stout clubs.

Captain Crane smothered an exclamation as she glanced at the pile, and Koto and LeConte smiled.

Our conversation all this while had been carried on with seeming casualness, and not even the leader of the Orconites showed suspicion. More than ever I felt that neither they nor Leider would be prepared to defend the ship against a sudden physical attack.

"The weak point for us," I said, "is that we'll have to make an awful row, and the alarm will go out, and eventually some weapon will be brought out to stop us. But if we work quickly, there's a good chance

that we can finish everything before Leider is able to step in with some devilish freak instrument. Take it easy until we've got the clubs, and then cut loose for all you're worth. Captain Crane, it's a great pity you're a woman. In all this you'll simply have to—"

I did not finish. Something in the look she gave me stopped me quite, and somehow, whether I would admit it or not, I knew she was as fit as we were. By this time we were strolling away from the ship toward the tunnel.

Blue-lighted, brilliant, the opening loomed larger as we approached. The same sounds of static on a vast scale which filled our cavern, filled the tunnel, but the place was deserted. The pile of jade spikes shimmered right at the entrance. A few of the guards behind us sauntered at our heels without speaking, and the dozen or so about the tunnel closed in toward the opening, but no restraint was put upon us.

"We seem to have the freedom of the place and the key to the city!" was Captain Crane's dry comment.

"Yes," I answered. "I'm pretty sure it's going to be a case of lambs led to the slaughter. Looks as if—Oh, good Lord, look!"

At the moment when I spoke those last words, we had approached to within thirty or forty feet of the pile of stalactites, and from the quick movement which eight or ten Orconites made ahead of us, drawing themselves up in a line across the tunnel mouth, I knew that we had almost reached the limit of our freedom. But it was not that fact, or the movement of our guards, that brought the exclamation from me.

"Look!" I cried again, even though I knew each of the others had seen as clearly as I.

From where we were walking slowly forward, it was possible to see clear down the tunnel to the tall, lighted cavern beyond our own. In the center of that cavern, with her nose pointing toward a wide tunnel down which showed a glimmer of daylight, rested the long, needle-like, bright hull of the most beautifully designed space flier I had ever seen.

We did not need to be told that this was Leider's own cruiser. A ship of such magnitude and exceeding beauty could have been nothing else.

The guards knew we had seen and were aware of our excitement, but contented themselves by standing fast in the line they had already formed across the tunnel. We advanced another few yards.

"Mother of Mercy!" LeConte whispered, almost in awe.

"There's a chance for us!" Koto gasped. "A chance! We'll set one of the guns going in the hold of our own ship, and then—"

Captain Crane's face was flushed with intense excitement, and her fingers were moving as though she felt the delicate controls of the space ship under them even now.

"Could you pilot it?" I asked.

"Could I! Give me the chance!" she cried.

"All right," I snapped, "we will!"

And in that second I enlarged my plans to take this gorgeous new development into account.

"Fight to take the cruiser," I ordered. "Captain Crane, Koto, LeConte, get aboard as soon as you can cut your way through. I'll take care of our ship and the kotomite at that time and join you, if possible. Come on!"

Thus was it decided. Thus did we enter our fight with an outlook as utterly different from our original one as hope is different from

despair. Our discovery of the cruiser had been almost accidental, a thing which might never have taken place except for our trip to get the spikes of jade. Surely such a happy accident had never happened before!

The moment I gave the command to go ahead, and we started to run, all of the ugly, bird-like faces of the Orconites across the tunnel became convulsed, and the creatures commenced to howl at us. Before we hurled ourselves against the line, swift reinforcements shot through the air over our heads and joined them, and the temporary uncertainty which had held them gave way, so that they met our advance with an advance of their own. But we did not care.

A few smashing blows which I delivered with my fists served to bring screams of agony from the several creatures immediately about me, and as one or two staggered and crashed to the floor, the others gave way a little. In a moment I was through the line to the pile of stalactites. And the others were through with me.

"Here you go, Koto!" I cried, and stooping down in spite of the jostling bodies and clammy hands that tried to prevent us, I caught up one of the long, needle-pointed, heavy stalactites. As I shoved it at him and snatched another for myself, Captain Crane and the others armed themselves.

By this time every Orconite in the heavy guard was on the spot, and the whole mass was all over us, gasping, burbling, flapping their wings, fighting to clutch at us with their hideous orange hands and waving antennae. Decidedly the fight was on, and I was forced to admit the fact that, though these creatures might be sheep, even sheep have power. But the first skirmish was already won, and I had faith that we could win the real battle.

I balanced my peculiar weapon in my hand to get the feel of it, then brushed aside a pair of sucking paws which were trying to take it from me, and plunged the spike clean through the body of the man who held me.

He fell without making a sound. I regained my weapon by planting my boot on his chest and wrenching it free.

I swung the spike like a club and crushed two heads with a single blow at each. A downward blow served almost to hack a long, clutching arm from an Orconite's body. With four men out of the struggle, I looked to see how my companions were faring, and was assured by a single glance that they were as well off as I.

Encouraged greatly, I met an advance of pressing, jostling bodies by a return to my original technique of stabbing. I stabbed every time a

hand reached out to hold me, and if I did not take a life with each stab, I at least drew a spout of greenish-colored blood.

It was not a nice business, any of it, especially as the Orconites were as fearless before our onslaught as they were powerless. But it had to be done. We were fighting for far more than our own lives.

The blue-lighted corridor with its rippling sounds of static and its gigantic ammeters became worse than a shambles. We walked upon, stumbled over, wallowed amongst the piled corpses of the slain, whose master, knowing more of the science of destructive warfare than any other being in the Universe, had nevertheless forgotten that it was still possible for mankind to fight with their hands.

Such a fight could have only one ending.

When the end came I saw that Virginia Crane was splashed with the ugly blood of the Orconites from her smooth forehead to the soles of her flying boots, but she was unhurt. The rest of us were likewise blood-stained and uninjured. We were all too excited to feel tired. The moment the pressure about us began to relax, she surged toward the waiting cruiser at the end of the tunnel, and I shouted to Koto and LeConte.

"Go and help her, you two! I'll do the work on our ship!"

They did not question my order, but obeyed.

There were only ten or a dozen of the winged ones left now, and when the two men leaped after the woman, it was easy for me to fight a jabbing, slashing battle which not only protected the retreat, but enabled me to work my way slowly toward our own ship and its kotomite.

With Leider's cruiser already headed toward the tunnel which led out from the underground hangar, I knew that it could be taken into space with a minimum loss of time. I believed that I could get an atomic gun going in our hold quickly, too. My hopes rose high as I darted a glance over my shoulder and saw Captain Crane and Koto taking, three at a time, the gangway steps which led to the deck and control room, with LeConte directly behind them. Now there were only seven guards left instead of a dozen, and those were at last showing signs of being cowed. I cut down two, and gave a great bound which carried me away from the others in the direction of our wrecked ship.

No sooner, though, did I tense myself for a second leap than I felt a nerveless sensation in my knees, as though the bones had turned to

butter, and knew that my high hopes had budded too soon. Instead of leaping, I staggered on for two short steps, then stopped because I could stagger no farther. Looking back at the cruiser, I saw that LeConte, still on the gangway, had stopped also. Captain Crane and Koto were making weak, despairing signs at me from the entrance to the control room. Both of them looked as sick as cats. I heard a laugh, a shrill, rasping sort of laugh, from the forward end of the bright cruiser, and I looked in that direction.

I saw a short man, bald headed, with frog eyes peering at us from behind thick prismatic glasses. He was clad in baggy green overalls, and was slowly waving in our direction a glistening metal tube which he held in both hands. From the end of the tube emanated a purplish light.

"You were clever, my good young friends," he chortled, "to think of fighting with your hands, but you were not quite quick enough. Not to-day goes anyone in my cruiser! What do you think of the enervating ray, heh? Ingenious, not? Ludwig Leider discovered it. I am Ludwig Leider. You shall come with me and with your own eyes watch the de-energizing of New York and Paris and Berlin. For I am ready to do away with your paltry Earth now!"

I felt the last energy ooze out of me and I sunk, all in a heap, on the

floor of Ludwig Leider's cavern.

Chapter 5: Death in a Box

New York. We did see it with our own eyes. The instrument through which we gazed was like a metal box with a ground-glass top and a mesh of slender wires leading away from the table on which the box rested. Leider touched a button amidst a long row of buttons on the table. All we had to do after that was to look at the ground-glass plate, and the picture was there.

We, in Leider's private laboratory on Orcon, saw the crowds of a mass meeting of some sort in Union Square, saw a boy and a girl kissing each other in the shadow of bushes in Central Park, saw a little fox terrier watching with only one eye open.

We could not speak, any of the four of us, as we stared at that very simple box which wrought miracles. I stood still, thinking of the things which had happened after our capture, when the cruiser had already seemed to be in our grasp.

First of all, Leider had restored our energy to us by the simple process of turning off the ray which emanated from the tube in his hands. Then a veritable legion of Orconites had come to the cavern in which the cruiser rested, and we had been marched through the very heart of the power rooms, with their hum and clack and dazzle

of mighty machinery, to the laboratory. That was all.

The Orconites had left us outside the heavy doors of the private room, but, just as there had been no opportunity to attack while they marched with us, Leider gave us no opportunity to harm him while we were alone. Though he had forgotten once the damage we could do in a fight, he was not going to be fooled again. He kept the great table of the box between ourselves and him, and his wary hands were always closer to a certain row of control buttons than ours were to his.

It was he who broke at last the silence which had fallen as we watched New York from Orcon, and his voice was loud in the hushed laboratory from which the noises of his subterranean power houses were shut out.

"Sit down," he commanded, "and keep away from the table and the reflector."

Then, when we had taken chairs beside the table, he began to speak to us.

"That little dog you saw—I have it in my power to withdraw from him in one second all the energy which makes him run, jump about,

live. That I can do by touching controls here at my table without even leaving this marvelous, marvelous room." A frown crossed his forehead above his pop-eyes, and he exclaimed with swift anger, in a croaking voice, "And what I do to the little dog, I can do as easily to the whole population of your loathsome Earth!"

I looked up at him where he stood with the table between us, and at length found my tongue.

"And of course you will do it, you swine!" I burst out.

His momentary anger had passed as swiftly as it had come, and, ignoring my epithet, he rocked smugly on the balls and heels of his feet and smiled.

"Ah, Herr Doktor," he answered contentedly, "I will destroy Earth, of course! For who has better cause than I, whom Earth would not accept as her master? All of the people there will lose the power to move, and they will die. I am ready now, in the uttermost degree. After you so neatly but uselessly saved yourselves from drowning last night, I finished. As easily can I de-energize the peoples of Earth as I can you—the four of you—if you should make the move to harm me."

Captain Crane was staring first at Leider, then at me, and her cheeks were gray and ghastly looking. Koto and LeConte were both sitting tight in chairs beside our own, watching me rather than Leider. I looked over the shelves, the whole complex apparatus of that incredible room, but saw no weapon of any kind. And my hands were useless because his were so close to the damnable controls.

"But what becomes of Earth itself, after our peoples are gone?" I asked presently.

Leider shrugged and his eyes twinkled behind the thick glasses.

"Herr Doktor, you are a brilliant man. Amongst the most brilliant, I should say, of any who on the Earth have labored. Yet of science you know less than a child. What should I do with Earth except to sit here in my own room, and, with the anarcostic ray, reduce its solid structure into stardust which will drift away into space like the smoke from one tiny match? Pouf! like that."

I looked at the table, at Leider's wary hands. I knew that the man was ready, even as he had said, to do away with Earth. I guessed that we would die, too, when Earth was gone—probably here in this room. And it seemed likely that the destruction would begin at a not distant moment, for there was some quality of fanatical evil lurking even

now in Leider's face.

Then, however, I stiffened in my chair very suddenly indeed. If I could find a way to get close to the box on the table without rousing Leider's suspicion, the outlook might not be so black!

"Leider," I exclaimed all at once, and there was a vigor in my words, "it's all very well for you to be saying these mighty things, but do you know what? I don't believe you can draw the energy out of the human race or disintegrate the Earth, either!"

I think if I had kicked him I could not have surprised him more. Which was exactly what I had hoped to do.

"You—you do not believe?" he said, incredulously.

"No I don't!"

"Ach, Gott!" A black fury overcame him. Hideous fury. He was already standing beside the table. Quaking from head to foot, he pointed savagely at the box. "Get up and look into the reflector!" He choked and his voice rose to a scream. "Get up! Stoop close to the reflector and watch! Watch there, I say!"

The thing which had launched me on my course of action was the

fact that the picture-making box was not screwed to the table. The only thing which held it there was the soft mesh of wires!

With a concealed gesture to the others to stay still, I rose, placed my hands on the table close to the box, and leaned forward as though to look at the glass.

"It shall come now!" Leider yelled, and at that moment took his eyes off me, while he reached with a rage-palsied hand for the twinkling line of buttons.

The instant he looked away from me, I gave a tug which jerked the heavy box away from its wires as easily as a weed is plucked from soft earth. As I made the move Leider looked up and screamed. His hand, already reaching for the buttons, darted forward. But the instant had been all I needed. Before the darting hand ever reached the table, I struck Leider a sharp blow, and hurled the box to the floor.

In a moment more the others were around me. The box was shattered to matchwood. Leider was lying on the floor behind his table with one arm doubled limply under him and dark blood welling from a forehead gash which I hoped went as deep as his brain.

Koto and LeConte kicked open the laboratory door and shot through. Captain Crane and I jumped after them.

Chapter 6: Through the Darkness of Orcon

Gongs clanged, blue lights flashed on and off with the lurid glare of sulphur pits burning in hell, and screaming, winged Orconites, all mixed up together, pelted toward us as thickly as the snowflakes of a blizzard. I don't suppose the destruction of one little mesh of wires had ever created such a disturbance before.

Leider's cruiser rested in the hangar two caverns away.

"Play hide-and-seek with them!" I shouted against the turmoil.

The initial wave of the attack struck us as we tore from the laboratory corridor into the first power room. Captain Crane went down under the onslaught of what must have been a hundred Orconites, and it took all the tearing strength of Koto's, LeConte's, and my hands combined to burrow through the piles of creatures who covered her, and get her out. By the time she was on her feet again, a new legion was at us.

I had not, however, suggested hide-and-seek meaninglessly.

While the others fought, and wildest confusion reigned, I pulled off my coat, flung it aside, and crammed myself into a loose, one-piece

costume of Orcon which I tore off a corpse. Then I fought while my three companions repeated the operation. We succeeded in confusing the mob to such an extent that we were able to work our way through the fringes of the melee and move clear across the first room, before we were recognized.

The alarm of our escape, though, spread into the next room almost as soon as we reached it, and a foolish attempt we made to keep bunched together and get through with a dash, betrayed us before we got well started.

Now it was a case of being drowned again by a sheer deluge of men. While the Orconites pawed me, tripped me, and otherwise discommoded me, I broke necks, dug out eyes, tore quivering antennae from foreheads until I felt as if I had been doing nothing else for hours. And those beside me were doing the same. Yet always more bladder faces rose in front of us, and more wings beat down from above. Not even our supreme strength was great enough to stand it.

Out across the bleeding, crumpled bodies and the teeming swarms beyond, I saw as through a red mist the glittering, whirling maze of Leider's wondrous generators, and began to curse to myself.

For the steady pressure was forcing us slowly back toward the machines and toward the rugged, high wall of the cavern beyond, and I knew that once we reached the wall we could retreat no farther and must stand there to fight until we were completely exhausted. I drew closer to Virginia Crane and did what I could to help her with her main group of assailants while still battling my own.

Oddly enough, I was remembering how, when she had been caught up by the magnetic current that had brought us here, she had cried out to me, calling me by my given name.... The recollection filled me with a queer emotion, partly rebellion and partly—something else. In the crisis we were facing now, I somehow lacked my wonted power to shun femininity.

Side by side we struggled against our enemies, tearing at them with our whole strength, yet always we were driven closer to the wall which would finally stop us.

"Oh," she finally gasped, "I—didn't want—to die!"

"No," I answered through set teeth as I hurled down an Orconite only to be confronted by two more; "but I'm afraid—we must. Well, we've done away with Leider, anyway."

"Yes," she choked. "That's—something."

Koto and LeConte were as hard pressed as we. Then, as we fell steadily back into a passage between two of the vast generators, back toward the solid wall of the cavern, a queer thing happened.

Despite the fact that LeConte was embroiled with a dozen winged men, his face became crinkled with a broad grin!

"Watch!" he yelled suddenly, and I did watch.

We were within a few feet of the driving gear of one of the generators. Quick as a bolt of lightning, LeConte caught a deadly firm hold on one of the ugly, squawking orange-skinned creatures, raised him into the air, and there held him poised while he swung around to face the generator.

Genius!

There was a shriek, then a thousand shrieks. Impelled by the Frenchman's tremendous heave, the winged man shot forward and struck full, with a splashing sound, against the terrifically revolving armature. A thunderbolt seemed to explode in our faces. All in that room, we as well as the Orconites, reeled dazedly back. A stench of

seared flesh and short circuited wires smote our nostrils. Darkness—smothering, thick, absolute darkness—settled over us.

"Come on!" LeConte shouted amidst the blessed inkiness of it, and I felt him tug at my hand. Captain Crane's hand slipped into my other, Koto caught hold of her, and we started forward.

Genius indeed, this stroke of LeConte's.

Clinging stoutly to each other, we pushed through the meager, floundering opposition which was all that was offered in the intense darkness, and began to forge swiftly ahead. Ten yards ... a hundred. A slight decrease of the sounds of crying and panting and of confused flopping wings told us we had passed through the arch which separated the wrecked power room from the hangar.

"Captain," I whispered as we battered against some confused and helpless Orconites and flung them aside, "could you make anything of the control system on the cruiser before Leider got us?"

Virginia Crane said vigorously that she had.

"The light switches are all on a board to the right of the entrance door. The other controls are as readily accessible."

"Leaves us in something of a position!" I whispered.

The hand which she had placed in my own tightened its grip. I heard LeConte grunt with satisfaction as he pressed forward. I began to figure on ways and means of getting to our wrecked ship alone after the others were aboard the cruiser.

We crossed another fifty or sixty yards of the darkness, and found fewer of the badly shaken Orconites in our path. Now, in that thick obscurity, I sensed that we were nearing the magnificent, tapering hull with its fish-scale sides.

"Come on!" I urged unnecessarily. I kicked into several of the yielding bodies left from our first fight, before Leider had taken us, and in a little while the feel of cool, smooth metal under my hand told me we had reached the gangway.

"Up you go, Captain!" I snapped, and as she clutched the slender rail of the gangway and plunged upwards, "LeConte, you next. Koto—"

But Koto laid a firm hand on my arm.

"No, I do not go."

We stopped where we were. The noises of pursuit were still around

us, and I could have slugged him for making a delay.

"You fool, get aboard!" I roared.

But it did no good.

"No."

"Get the motors started!" I called to Captain Crane. "LeConte, you help her." Then I turned to Koto and in the dark waved a fist under his nose. "You idiot—"

"No, my friend," he laughed at me. "You killed Leider. LeConte put out the lights. Captain Crane will pilot the ship. Now it's my turn. You will pardon my insubordination, but you will also please to hurry up the gangway before I knock you unconscious and throw you up. Damn it, it's my explosive, anyway, isn't it? Who has the best right to fire it?"

With that he whirled away from me.

"Don't wait!" he called over his shoulder.

I laughed at him and sang out the order to Captain Crane to stand by. As for myself, I remained standing on the small platform at the foot

of the gangway.

The moment Captain Crane flipped a switch which flooded the control room and a score of ports along the hull with golden light, I thought the yells which rose from the other room and the far side of this one would blow the roof off. By the time we felt a quiver run through the hull, and heard the sweet, deep-throated hum of the gigantic power plant, a mob of Orconites had formed for a new attack. It was hideous that we could not wait for Koto in darkness, but the light was essential to Captain Crane's preparations, so there was nothing to be done. I felt that Koto's chances of getting back to us were one in a thousand.

Yet suddenly, as I still clung to the foot of the gangway, LeConte thrust his head from the control room door and yelled at me to hang on tight. At once the ship moved forward, and, rolling easily on her ground gear, swung left and lunged toward the swooping mob of Orconites.

Handling that space flier in the cavern was like trying to navigate a one-hundred-thousand-ton freighter in a pond. But Captain Crane did it—she whom I had once accused, to myself, of misnavigating and wrecking our other ship. The Orconites had formed themselves in a dense group. We went into them, mowed them down, stopped

under the great arch which led to the inky black power rooms, backed up, and, as the screaming lines reformed, crunched terrifically into them again.

By this time I saw in the corridor leading to our old ship, where the darkness was only partially broken by our lights, a dark-headed grinning man who was bent nearly double with the speed of his running.

"He's coming!" I howled.

"He's coming!" LeConte echoed to Virginia Crane in the control room.

And again the miracle of the hundred-thousand-tonner in the pond was performed. Again the cruiser backed up and swung around. We headed toward Koto, straight toward him.

There still were droves of Orconites to contend with. Flocks of them had taken to their wings, and were filling the whole upper reaches of the cavern, now that a juggernaut had the floor. They had spied Koto and were swooping toward him. But they could not seize him without coming to the floor, and they could not come to the floor without contending with the juggernaut.

Now the cruiser seemed to swoop. I saw a swirl of wings all about, battering down and down about the Jap; then I clung to the gangway rail with one hand and reached far out with the other toward our friend.

He leaped, and I felt the warm contact of his hands gripping my arm. I gave a heave, and landed him on the steps as neatly as a fisherman ever netted a trout.

"All clear!" I screamed up the gangway.

It was not until we were on the deck, and the cruiser was gliding magnificently forward toward the shaft which led outside to space and light, that Koto spoke. But when he did, his words had significance.

"It's done!" he panted. "The gun is firing against the drums!"

We dove into the control room, and LeConte banged the outer door shut and jammed huge catches, battening it down for our flight through space.

"Get out as fast as you can!" LeConte panted on, speaking now to Captain Crane as she headed us gently into the tunnel. "The

kotomite's due to go off the second the first drums are disintegrated."

I dropped limply on to a seat beside the pilot and sat still.

We passed through the tunnel in five or six seconds. In another five seconds, we had not only taken off, but had worked up a formidable speed. We barely felt the explosion when it came. But on the instrument board in front of Virginia Crane, gleamed a little box with a ground-glass top, and in that we saw, as by a magic, what happened on Orcon.

First the mountains which topped the subterranean power houses were lifted off. Then the whole planet rocked. Finally the caverns were inundated by the deluge of the sea which, in the beginning, had so nearly swallowed us.

Orcon was not destroyed, but we knew even then that such of its inhabitants as might remain alive would not soon again dream of making an attack upon Earth.

On the way back, as Earth took form and grew round in the interminable reaches of space ahead of us, I got on well with Captain Crane. It started when she asked me if I were still so cocksure that woman had no place in the U.S.W. Upper Zone Patrol, and I was

forced to answer that I was not. After that, one thing led to another.

We were photographed together when we landed beside the colossal, metal-roofed hangars of the Long Island station of the U.S.W. The snapshot was published in that afternoon's tabloids under the caption: Betrothed.

124 The Seed of the Toc-Toc Birds by George Henry Weiss

Little did Prof. Reubens suspect what his atom-tampering would set loose upon the world.

Aproximate word count: 9,600

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Talbot had been working that day, far up in the Catalinas, looking over some mining prospects for his company, and was returning to the Mountain View Hotel in Oracle when, from the mouth of an abandoned shaft some distance back of that town, he saw a strange object emerge.

"Hello," he said to Manuel, his young Mexican assistant, "what the devil can that be?"

Manuel crossed himself swiftly.

"Dios!" he exclaimed, "but it is a queer bird, señor."

Queer, it certainly was, and of a species Talbot had never before laid eyes on. The bird stood on the crumbling rim of the mining shaft and regarded him with golden eyes. Its body was as large as that of a buzzard, and its head had a flat, reptilian look, unpleasant to see. Nor was that the only odd thing. The feathers glittered metallically, like blued copper, and a streak of glistening silver outlined both wings.

Marveling greatly, and deciding that the bird must be some rare kind escaped from a zoo, or a stray from tropical lands much further south, Talbot advanced cautiously, but the bird viewed his approach with unconcern. Ten feet from it he stopped uneasily. The strange fowl's intent look, its utter immobility, somewhat disconcerted him

"Look out, señor," warned Manuel.

Involuntarily, Talbot stepped back. If he had possessed a rifle he would have shot the bird, but neither Manuel nor himself was armed. Suddenly—he had looked away for a moment—the bird was gone. Clutching a short miner's pick-ax, and a little ashamed of his momentary timidity, he strode to the edge of the abandoned shaft and peered down. There was nothing to see; only rotting joists of wood, crumbling earth for a few feet, and then darkness.

He pondered for a moment. This was the old Wiley claim. He knew

it well. The shaft went down for over two hundred feet, and there were several lateral workings, one of which tunneled back into the hills for a considerable distance. The mine had been a bonanza back in the days when Oracle boomed, but the last ore had been taken out in 1905, and for twenty-seven years it had lain deserted. Manuel came up beside him and leaned over.

"What is that?" he questioned.

Talbot heard it himself, a faint rumbling sound, like the rhythmic throb of machinery. Mystified, he gazed blankly at Manuel. Of course it was impossible. What could functioning machinery be doing at the bottom of an abandoned hole in the ground? And where there were no signs of human activity to account for the phenomenon? A more forsaken looking place it would be hard to imagine. Not that the surrounding country wasn't ruggedly beautiful and grand; the hills were covered with live-oak, yucca grass, chulla, manzanita, and starred with the white blossoms of wild thistle. But this locality was remote from human habitation, and lonely.

Could it be, Talbot wondered, the strange bird making that noise? Or perhaps some animal? The noise sounded like nothing any creature, furred or feathered, could make, but, of course, that must be the explanation. However, it would be dark within the hour, with Oracle

still two miles distant, so he turned reluctantly away, Manuel thwacking the burros from the grazing they had found. But that was not to be the end of the odd experience. Just before the trail swung over the next rise, Talbot glanced back. There, perching on the rim of the abandoned mining shaft, were not one but two of the strange birds. As if cognizant of his backward glance, they napped their gleaming, metallic wings, although they did not rise, and gave voice to what could only be their natural harsh cries, measured and, somehow, sinister.

"Toc-toc, toc-toc."

Talbot went to bed determined to investigate the old Wiley claim the next day, but in the morning an urgent telegram called him and Manuel to Phoenix, and so the matter was necessarily postponed. Moreover, on mature reflection, he decided that there was nothing much to investigate. The days went by, the matter slipped his mind, and he had almost forgotten the incident.

It was an Indian who first brought news of the jungle to Oracle. His name was John Redpath and he wasn't the average person's idea of an Indian at all. He wore store clothes and a wide-brimmed hat, and spoke English with the colloquial ease of one whose native language it was. It was ten o'clock in the morning, the hour when people

gathered at the local store and post-office to gossip and get their mail, when he came driving into town in his Ford, his terrified wife and three children crowded into the back seat.

"What's the matter, John?" asked Silby, the constable.

"Matter?" said Redpath. "I'll tell you what's the matter."

He held the attention of the crowd which now began flocking around him. "You know me, Silby; I'm not easily frightened; but what's happened at my place has me scared stiff."

He pulled out a handkerchief and mopped his brow.

"When we went to bed last night, everything looked as usual; but this morning...."

He paused.

"Something over night had grown up in my pasture. Don't ask me what it is. The whole hillside was filled with it. I went to the pasture to milk my goats—that's some distance from the house and over a rise; you know how rugged my land is—and there was the stuff, acres of it, twenty, thirty feet tall, like—like nothing I had ever seen before. And Silby"—his voice was suddenly low—"I could see it

growing."

At this remarkable statement, everyone in sound of his voice gaped with astonishment. Had it been any other Indian they would have said he was drunk—but not John Redpath. He didn't drink.

"Growing?" echoed Silby stupidly.

"Yes. The damn stuff was growing. But it wasn't that which stampeded me out of there. It was the globe."

"The globe!" said Silby, more mystified than ever.

"It was floating over the growing stuff, like a black balloon. Just over my place the balloon began to sift down a shower of pebbles. Like beans, they were; seeds, rather; for when they hit the ground they started to sprout."

"Sprout?" The constable was capable of nothing more than an echo.

"I'm telling you the truth," continued Redpath. "Incredibly fast. I had barely time to crank up the car and get out of there. I never would have done it if the strange growth hadn't left the way clear from the garage to the road. Silby, I had the devil of a time getting the wife and kids out of the house. When I looked back after going a quarter

of a mile the house had disappeared under a tangled mass."

There was no time for anyone to question John Redpath further. Even as he finished speaking a large automobile dashed up and out tumbled a well-dressed and portly red-faced stranger.

"What the devil's the matter with the road above here? Funniest thing I ever saw. The road to Mount Lemmon's blocked. My family," he said inconsequentially, "is at Mount Lemmon for the summer and I want to get through to them."

Blocked! The crowd stared at him wonderingly. John Redpath threw in his clutch. "So long," he said. "I've a brother in Tucson, and I'm going to his place until this blows over."

As he left Oracle, John Redpath noticed several dark globes drifting down on it from the hills.

The first inkling the outside world had of the terrible tragedy that was happening at Oracle came over the phone to Tucson while John Redpath was still en route to that city.

"Hello, hello! Is this the police station? Silby speaking. Silby, town constable at Oracle. For God's sake, send us help! We're being

attacked. Yes, attacked from the air. By strange aircraft, round globes, discharging—oh, I don't know what it is; only it grows when it hits the earth. Yes, grows. Oracle is hemmed in. And there are the birds—b-i-r-d-s, birds——"

There was a stifled cry, the voice suddenly ceased, and the wire went dead.

"My God!" said the chief of police of Tucson, "somebody's raving." He lost no time in communicating with the sheriff's office and sending out his men. They soon returned, white-faced and shaken.

"Chief," said the officer in charge of the party, "you know where the road to Oracle switches off the main highway? Well, it's impassable, covered with stuff a hundred feet high."

The chief stared. "Are you crazy?"

"No. Listen. It's the queerest growth you ever saw. Not like vegetation at all. More like twisted metal...."

But now the city began to seethe with excitement. Farmers and their families flocked in from the Seep Springs district, and from Jayhnes, telling weird tales of drifting globes and encroaching jungle. The

Southern Pacific announced that traffic northward was disrupted. Extras appeared on the streets with shrieking headlines. Everything was in confusion.

A flyer from the local airport flew over Oracle and announced on his return that he could see no signs of the town, that its immediate vicinity was buried under an incredibly tall and tangled mass of vegetation. "From the air it looks like giant stalks of spaghetti, twisted, fantastic," was his description. He went on to say that he noticed quite a few drifting globes and large birds with black, glistening wings, but these offered no hindrance to his flight.

Now the wires hummed with the startling news. All the world was informed of the tragedy. The great cities of the nation stood aghast. An aroused Washington dispatched orders for the aerial forces of the country to proceed to Arizona without delay. The governor of Arizona mobilized the state militia. All border patrol officers proceeded to the area affected. And yet in the face of what was happening they were powerless to do a thing.

At two o'clock of the day following the wiping out of Oracle, the first black globes approached Tucson. They floated down from the north, skirting the granite ridges and foothills of the Catalinas, and were met with a withering hail of lead from anti-aircraft guns, and

burst, scattering wide their contents. When some three hours later the first squadron of the air fleet came to earth on the landing field a few miles south of the city, the northern environs of Tucson, all the area the other side of Speedway, and running east and west as far as the eye could see, was a monstrous jungle a hundred or more feet tall—and still growing.

Terrified residents fled before the uncanny invasion. People congested the streets. Thousands fled from the city in automobiles, and thousands of others thronged the railroad station and bus-line offices seeking for transportation. Rumors ran from lip to lip that Russia was attacking the United States with a newly invented and deadly method of warfare; that it wasn't Russia but Japan, China, England, Germany, a coalition of European and Asiatic powers.

Frantically, the city officials wired railroad companies to send in emergency trains. The mayor appealed to the citizens to be quiet and orderly, not to give way to panic, that everything was being done to insure their safety. Hastily deputized bodies of men were set to patrolling streets and guarding property. Later, martial law was established. The south side of Speedway rapidly assumed the appearance of an armed camp. At the landing field Flight Commander Burns refueled his ships and interviewed the flyer who had flown over Oracle. That worthy shook his head.

"You're going out to fight, Commander," he said, "but God knows what. So far we have been unable to detect any human agency back of those globes. They just drift in, irrespective of how the wind is blowing. So far our only defense has been to shoot them down, but that does little good; it only helps to broadcast their seed. Then, too, the globes shot down have never been examined. Why? Because where they hit a jungle springs up. Sometimes they burst of their own accord. One or two of them got by us in the darkness last night, despite our searchlights, and overwhelmed a company of National Guards."

The flight commander was puzzled.

"Look here," he said, "those globes don't just materialize out of thin air. There must be a base from which they operate. Undoubtedly an enemy is lurking in those mountains." He got up decisively. "If it is humanly possible to locate and destroy that enemy, we shall do it."

Flying in perfect formation, the bombing squadron clove the air. Looking down, the observers could see the gigantic and mysterious jungle which covered many square miles of country. Like sinuous coils of spaghetti, it looked, and also curiously like vast up-pointed girders of steel and iron. The rays of the late afternoon sun glinted on this jungle and threw back spears of intense light. Over the iron

ridges of the Catalinas the fleet swept at an elevation of several thousand feet. Westward, numerous huge globes could be seen drifting south. The commander signaled a half dozen of his ships to pursue and shoot them down.

In the mountains themselves, there was surprisingly little of the uncanny vegetation. Mile after mile of billowing hills were quartered, but without anything of a suspicious nature being noted. Here and there the observers saw signs of life. Men and women waved at them from isolated homesteads and shacks. At Mount Lemmon the summer colonists appeared unharmed, but in such rugged country it was impossible to think of landing. Oracle, and for a dozen miles around its vicinity, was deserted.

Though the commander searched the landscape thoroughly with his glasses, he could detect the headquarters of no enemies; and yet the existence of the drifting globes would seem to presuppose a sizable base from which they operated. Mystified, he nevertheless subjected the Oracle area to a thorough bombing, and it was while engaged in doing so that he and his men observed a startling phenomenon.

High in the heavens, seemingly out of nothing, the mysterious globes grew. The aviators stared, rubbed their eyes in amazement, doubted the truth of what they saw. Their commander recollected his own words, "Those globes don't just materialize out of thin air." But that actually seemed to be what they were doing. Out of empty space they leaped, appearing first as black spots, and in a moment swelling to their huge proportions.

One pilot made the mistake of ramming a globe, which burst, and he hurtled to earth in a shower of seed, seed which seemed to root and grow and cover his craft with a mass of foliage even as it fell. Horrified, ammunition and explosives exhausted, the amazed commander ordered his ships back to Tucson. What he had to tell caused a sensation.

"No," he said, finishing his report to the high military official who had arrived with federal forces, "I saw nothing—aside from the globes—that could possibly account for the attack. Nothing."

But none the less the attack went on. Though hundreds of planes scoured the sky, though great guns bellowed day and night and thousands of soldiers, state and federal, were under arms, still the incredible globes continued to advance, still more and more of the countryside came under the sway of the nightmarish jungle. And this losing battle was not waged without loss of human life. Sometimes bodies of artillery were cut off by globes getting beyond their lines in the darkness and hemming them in. Then they had literally to hack their way out or perish; and hundreds of them perished. One company sergeant told of a thrilling race with three globes.

"It was a close thing," he said, scratching his head, "and only a third of us made it."

Fear gripped the hearts of the most courageous of men. It was terrifying and nerve-racking to face such an unhuman foe—weird,

drifting globes and invading jungles whose very source was shrouded in mystery. Against this enemy no weapons seemed to prevail. All the paraphernalia of modern warfare was proving useless. And looking at each other with white faces—not alone in Arizona, but in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles—men asked themselves these questions, and the newspapers posed them:

"What if this thing can't be stopped?"

"What if it keeps on and on and invades every city and state?"

"It is only starting now, but what will it be like a month from now, a year?"

The whole nation awoke to a realization of its danger. The Administration at Washington solemnly addressed itself to the capitals of the world.

"If some power, jealous of the greatness of America, has perfected a new and barbarous weapon of warfare, and without due warning and declaration of hostilities has launched it against us, not only do we denounce such uncivilized procedure, but demand that such a power speak out and reveal to us and the world who our enemy is."

But the powers of the world, as one, united in disclaiming any hand in the monstrous attack being made on the United States. As for that attack, it proceeded inexorably. On the fourth day Tucson was evacuated. Then Winkleman awoke one morning to find that the drifting globes had reached the river. The town was abandoned. California mobilized citizen forces in cooperation with Nevada. The great physicist Miller was said to be frantically at work on a chemical designed to destroy the gigantic growths, specimens of which had been sent him. Such was the condition of affairs when, at Washington, Milton Baxter, the young student, told his incredible story to a still more incredulous Senate.

The Senate had been sitting in anxious session for five days, and was little inclined to give ear to the stories of cranks. Fortunately for the world, young Baxter came of an influential family and had taken the precaution of having himself introduced by two prominent financiers, who demanded that he be heard.

"Gentlemen," he said earnestly, "contrary to current opinion, America is not being assailed by a foreign power. No! Listen to me a moment and I shall tell you what is attacking America."

He paused and held the assemblage with compelling eyes.

"But first let me explain how I know what I am going to tell you. I was in London when I read of what is occurring in Arizona. Before the wire went dead on him, didn't the unfortunate constable of Oracle say something about birds?"

The senators were silent. "Yes," said a press correspondent at length. "If I remember correctly, he said, 'And there are the birds—b-i-r-d-s, birds.'"

"Well," exclaimed Senator Huffy, "the man was pretty well excited and his words may have been misunderstood. What the devil have birds to do with those globes and jungles?"

"More than you think," replied Baxter. "Listen!" He fixed their attention with uplifted hand. "The thing I have to reveal is of such paramount importance that I must not be interrupted. You must bear with me while I go back some months and even years in time to make myself understood.

"You all remember the mysterious disappearance of Professor Reubens. Yes, I see that you do. It caused a sensation. He was the foremost scientist in the country—it would not be exaggerating too much to say in the world. His name was not as well known among the masses as that of Miller and Dean; in fact, outside of an

exclusive circle it wasn't known at all, but ask any scientist about Reubens. He was a tall, dour man of sixty, with Scotch blood in his veins, and was content to teach a class in a college because of the leisure it afforded him for his own research work. That was at the University of Arizona in Tucson.

"The faculty of the college was proud to have him on its staff and provided him with a wooden building back of the campus, for a private laboratory and workshop. I understand that the Rockefeller Institute contributed funds towards Professor Reubens' experiments, but I am not certain.

“At any rate he had a wonderfully well equipped place. I was a pupil at the University and attended his class in physics. A strong friendship grew up between us. How can I explain that friendship? I was not a particularly brilliant student, but he had few friends and perhaps my boyish admiration pleased him. I think, too, that he was lonely, heart-hungry for affection. His wife was dead, and his own boy.... But I won't go into that.

"Suffice it to say that I believe he bestowed on me some of the affection he had felt for his dead son. Indeed I am sure he did. Be that as it may, I often visited him in his laboratory and watched, fascinated, as he pored over some of his intricate apparatus. In a

vague way, I knew that he was seeking to delve more deeply into the atom.

"'Before Leeuwenhoek invented the microscope,' the Professor once said, 'who ever dreamed of the life in a drop of water? What is needed now is a super-microscope to view the atom.'

"The idea thrilled me.

"'Do you believe, sir, that an instrument will ever be invented that will do that?'

"'Yes. Why not? I am working on some such device myself. Of course the whole thing has to be radically different. The present, method of deducing the atom by indirection is very unsatisfactory. We can know nothing for certain until direct observation is possible. The atomic theory that likens the atom to our solar system, with planets revolving round a central nucleus, is very interesting. But I shall never be content, for one, until I can see such an atomic system in operation.'

"Now I had every admiration for the capacity and genius of my teacher, but I couldn't forebear exclaiming:

"'Is that possible?'

"'Of course it's possible,' he cried irritably. 'Do you think I should be pursuing my experiments if I didn't think it possible? Only numbskulls think anything impossible!'

“I felt rather hurt at his retort and a certain coolness sprang up between us. The summer holidays came and I went away without bidding him good-by. But returning for the new semester, my first act was to hurry to the laboratory. He greeted me as if there had never been any difference between us.

"'Come,' he cried; 'you must see what I have accomplished. It is marvelous, marvelous.'

"In his workshop stood a mechanism perhaps three feet square and four feet high. It was made of polished steel and looked not unlike an Edison music box.

"'You are the first I have shown it to,' he said excitedly. 'Here, look into this.'

"Stooping over the top of the box I peered into the eye-piece indicated. It was so fashioned that it fitted the contour of the face

snugly.

"'Now hold steady,' warned the Professor. 'This machine makes quite a noise, but it won't harm you at all.'

"I sensed that he was fingering and arranging dials and levers on the side of the contrivance. Suddenly an engine in the box began to throb with a steady rhythm. This gradually increased in tempo until the vibration of it shook the room.

"'Don't move,' shouted the Professor.

"At first I could see nothing. Everything was intensely dark. Then the darkness began to clarify. Or rather I should say it seemed as if the darkness increased to such a pitch that it became—oh, I can't describe it! But of a sudden I had the sensation of looking into the utter bleakness and desolation of interstellar space. Coldness, emptiness—that was the feeling. And in this coldness and emptiness flamed a distant sun, around which twelve darker bodies the size of peas revolved. They revolved in various ellipses. And far off—millions of light years away (the thought came to me involuntarily at the time)—I could glimpse infinitesimal specks of light, a myriad of them. With a cry I jerked back my head.

"'That,' shouted the Professor in my ear, 'was an atomic universe.'

“It never entered my head to doubt him. The realness, the vividness, the overwhelming loneliness and vastness of the sight I had seen—yes, and the suggestion of cosmic grandeur and aloofness that was conveyed—banished any other feeling but that of belief.

"'Inside that box,' said Professor Reubens quietly, 'and directly underneath the special crystal-ray medium I have perfected, is a piece of matter no larger than a pin-head. But viewed through the magnifying medium of the crystal-ray that insignificant piece of matter becomes as vast and as empty as all space, and in that space you saw—an atomic system.'

"An atomic system! Imagine my emotions. The tremendousness of the assertion took away my breath. I could only seize the Professor's hand and hold to it tightly.

"'Softly, my boy, softly,' he said, smiling at my emotion. 'What you have seen is but the least part of the invention. There is more to it than that.'

"'More?'

"'Yes. Did you think I would be content with merely viewing at a distance? No. Consider that revolving round a central nucleus similar to our sun are twelve planets, any one of which may be inhabited by intelligent creatures.'

"I stared at him dumbly.

"'You mean—'

"'Why not? Size is only relative. Besides in this case I can demonstrate. Please look again.'

"Not without trepidation, I did as he bade. Once more I saw the black emptiness of atomic space, saw the blazing nucleus with its whirling satellites. Above the roaring noise of the machine came Professor Reubens' voice. 'I am now intensifying the magnifying medium and focusing it on one of the planets you see. The magnifying crystal-ray is mounted on a revolving device which follows this particular planet in its orbit. Now ... now....'

“I gazed, enthralled. Only one atomic planet—the size of a pea and seemingly motionless in space—now lay in my field of vision. And this planet began to grow, to expand, until beneath my staring eyes it looked like the full moon in all its glory.

"'I am gradually increasing the magnifying power of the crystal-ray,' came the voice of the Professor.

"The huge mass of the planet filled the sub-atomic sky. My hands gripped the rim of the box with excitement. On its surface began to form continents, seas. Good God! was all this really materializing from a speck of matter under the lens of a super-microscope? I was looking down from an immense height upon an ever clarifying panorama. Mountains began to unfold, plains, and suddenly beneath me appeared a mighty city. I was too far away to see it distinctly, but it was no city such as we have on earth. And yet it was magnificent; it was like gazing at a strange civilization.

"Dimly I could see great machines laboring and sending forth glowing streamers of light. Strange buildings rose. It was all bizarre, bewildering, unbelievably weird. What creatures dwelt in this place? I strained my eyes, strove to press forward, and in that very moment the things at which I gazed seemed to rise swiftly to meet my descending head. The illusion was that of plunging earthward at breakneck speed. With a stifled cry, I recoiled, rubbed my blinking eyes, and found myself staring stupidly into the face of Professor Reubens. He shut off the machine and regarded me thoughtfully.

"'In that atomic universe, on a planet swinging round a sub-atomic

sun, the all of which lies somewhere in a speck of our matter, intelligent creatures dwell and have created a great machine civilization. And Baxter,' he leaned forward and fixed me with eyes that gleamed from under heavy brows, 'not only has my super-atomic-microscope revealed somewhat of that world and its marvels to human vision, but it has opened up another, a more wonderful possibility.'

“He did not tell me what this wonderful possibility was, and a few minutes later I left the laboratory, intending to return after a late class. But a telegram from Phoenix was at my rooms, calling me home. My father was seriously ill. It was June before he recovered his health. Consequently I had to forego college until the next season.

"'Old Reubens is going dotty,' said one of my classmates to me. Rather disturbed, I sought him out. I saw that there were dark circles of sleeplessness under his eyes and that his face had grown thinner. Somewhat diffidently I questioned him about his experiments. He answered slowly:

"'You will recollect my telling you that the super-atomic-microscope had opened up another wonderful possibility?'

"I nodded, sharply curious now.

"'Look.'

"He led the way into his workshop. The super-atomic-microscope, I noticed, had been altered almost out of recognition. It is hopeless for me to attempt describing those changes, but midway along one side of its length projected a flat surface like a desk, with a large funnel-shaped device resting on it. The big end of this funnel pointed towards a square screen set against the wall, a curious screen superimposed on what appeared to be a background of frosted glass.

"'This,' said the Professor, laying one hand on the funnel and indicating the screen with the other, 'is part of the arrangement with which I have established communication with the world in the atom.

"'No,' he said, rightly interpreting my exclamation, 'I am not crazy. For months I have been exchanging messages with the inhabitants of that world. You know the wave and corpuscular theories of light? Both are correct, but in a higher synthesis—But I won't go into that. Suffice it to say that I broke through the seemingly insuperable barrier hemming in the atomic world and made myself known. But I see that you still doubt my assertion. Very well, I will give you a demonstration. Keep your eyes on the screen—so——'

“Adjusting what seemed a radio headpiece to my ears, he seated himself at a complicated control-board. Motors purred, lights flashed, every filament of the screen became alive with strange fires. The frosted glass melted into an infinity of rose-colored distance. Far off, in the exact center of this rosy distance appeared a black spot. Despite the headpiece, I could hear the Professor talking to himself, manipulating dials and levers. The black spot grew, it advanced, it took on form and substance; and then I stared, I gasped, for suddenly I was gazing into a vast laboratory, but depicted on a miniature scale.

"But it wasn't this laboratory which riveted my attention. No. It was the unexpected creature that perched in the midst of it and seemed to look into my face with unwinking eyes of gold set in a flat reptilian head. This creature moved; its feathers gleamed metallically; I saw its bill open and shut. Distinctly through the ear-phones came a harsh sound, a sound I can only describe by the words toc-toc, toc-toc. Then, just as the picture had appeared, it faded, the lights went out, the purring of the motors ceased.

"'Yes,' said the Professor, stepping to my side and removing the headpiece, 'the inhabitants of the sub-atomic planet are birds.'

"I could only stare at him dumbly.

"'I see that astounds you. You are thinking that they lack hands and other characteristics of the genus homo. But perhaps certain faculties of manipulation take their place. At any rate those birds are intelligent beings; in some respects, further advanced in science than are we ourselves. Perhaps it would be more exact to say that their scientific investigations and achievements have been along slightly different lines. If such messages I sent them had come to our world from another planet or dimension, how readily they might have been misconstrued, ridiculed or ignored.' The Professor shrugged his shoulders. 'But the beings in this sub-atomic world interpreted my communications without difficulty.

“In no time we were conversing with one another through means of a simplified code. I was soon given to understand that their scientists and philosophers had long recognized the fact that their universe was but an atom in an immeasurably greater dimension of existence; yes, and had long been trying to establish contact with it.' The Professor's voice fell. 'And not that alone: they were eager to cooperate with me in perfecting a method of passing from their world to ours!

"'Yes,' he cried, 'much of what I have accomplished has been under their advice and guidance; and they on their part have labored; until now'—his eyes suddenly blazed into my fascinated face—'until now, after months of intensive work and experiment, success is nigh, and

any day may see the door opened and one of them come through!'

"Gentlemen!" cried Milton Baxter, "what more is there to say? I staggered from Professor Reubens' laboratory that afternoon, my head in a whirl. That was on a Monday.

"'Come back Thursday,' he said.

"But as you know, Professor Reubens disappeared on a Wednesday night before; and stranger still, his machines disappeared with him. In his laboratory were signs of a struggle, and bloodstains were found. The police suspected me of a guilty knowledge of his whereabouts, in short of having made away with my friend. When I told somewhat of the experiments he had been engaged in, spoke of the missing inventions, they thought I was lying. Horrified at the suspicion leveled at myself, I finally left Tucson and went abroad. Months passed; and during all those months I pondered the mystery of the Professor's fate, and the fate of his machines. But my fevered brain could offer no solution until I read of what was happening in Arizona; then, then...."

Milton Baxter leaned forward, his voice broke.

"Then," he cried, "then I understood! Professor Reubens had

succeeded in his last experiment. He had opened the door to earth for the bird intelligences from the atom and they had come through and slain him and spirited away his machines and established them in a secret place!

"God help us," cried Milton Baxter, "there can be but one conclusion to draw. They are waging war against us with their own hideous methods of warfare; they have set out to conquer earth!"

Such was the amazing story Milton Baxter told the Senate, but that body placed little credence in it. In times of stress and disaster cranks and men of vivid imaginations and little mental stability inevitably spring up. But the Washington correspondents wired the story to their papers and the Associated Press broadcast it to the four winds.

Talbot had just returned to Phoenix from New Mexico. He had been out of touch with civilization and newspapers and it was with a feeling of stunned amazement that he learned of the evacuation of Tucson and Winkleman and the wiping out of Oracle. Reading Milton Baxter's incredible story he leapt to his feet with an oath. Toc-toc! Why, that was the sound the strange birds had uttered in the hills back of Oracle. And there was the noise of machinery coming from the old shaft.

Full of excitement he lost no time in seeking an interview with the military commander whose headquarters were located in Phoenix and related to him what Manuel and himself had witnessed and heard that day at the abandoned mine. Manuel corroborated his tale. The commander was more than troubled and doubtful.

"God knows we cannot afford to pass up an opportunity of wiping out the enemy. If you will indicate on a map where the old shaft is we will bomb it from the air."

But Talbot shook his head.

"Your planes would have a tough job hitting a spot as small as that from the air. Besides, a direct hit might only close up the shaft and not destroy the workings underground. If the enemy be the creatures Milton Baxter says they are, what is to prevent them from digging their way out and resuming the attack?"

"Then we will land troops in there somehow and overwhelm them with——"

Talbot interrupted. "Pardon me, General, but the enemy would have no difficulty in spotting such a maneuver. What chance would your soldiers have against a shower of jungle seed? You would only be

sending them to destruction. No, the only way is for someone familiar with those old underground diggings to enter them, locate the birds and the machines and blow them up."

"But who——"

"Myself. Listen. This is the plan. About five years ago my company mined for copper and other ores about a half mile above the Wiley claim. I was in charge of operations. That is how I know the ground so well. One of our northern leads broke through into a tunnel of the abandoned mine. When copper prices were shot to hell in the depression of 1930 we quit taking out ore; but when I went through the place eighteen months ago it was still possible to crawl from one mine to another. Of course earth and rock may have fallen since then, but I don't believe the way is yet blocked. If I were dropped in that vicinity at night with another man and the necessary tools and explosives...."

The general thought swiftly.

"An auto-gyroscope could land you all right. There's one here now. But what about the second man to accompany you?"

Manuel said quickly, "I'm going with the boss."

"You, Manuel," Talbot said roughly. "Don't be a fool. If anything should happen to me—well, I've lived my life; but you're only a kid."

Manuel's face set stubbornly. "An experienced mining man you need, is it not? In case there should be difficulties. And I am experienced. Besides, señores," he said simply, "my wife and child are somewhere in those mountains ... above Oracle...."

Talbot gripped his hand in quick sympathy. "All right, Manuel; come if you like."

A moonless sky hung above them as they swung over the dark and jungle-engulfed deserted city of Tucson, a sky blazing with the clarity of desert stars, and to the south and west shot through with the beams of great searchlights. Flying at a lofty altitude to avoid contact with drifting globes or betrayal of their coming with no lights showing aboard their craft save those carefully screened and focused on the instrument board, it was hard to realize that the fate of America, perhaps of the world, hung on the efforts of two puny individuals.

Everything seemed unreal, ghost-like, and suddenly the strangeness of it all came over Talbot and he felt afraid. The noiseless engine

made scarcely a sound; the distant rumble of gunfire sounded like low and muttering thunder. They had come by way of Tucson so as to pick up a ten-gallon tube of concentrated explosive gas at the military camp in the Tucson mountains.

"This gas," the general had assured them, "has been secretly developed by the chemical branch of the War Department and is more powerful than TNT or nitro-glycerin. It is odorless, harmless to breathe and exploded by a wireless-radio device."

He had showed them how to manipulate the radio device, and explained that in the metal tube was a tiny chamber from which gas could not escape, and a receiving-detonating cap. "If you can introduce the tube into the underground galleries where you suspect the enemy's headquarters to be, allow the contents to escape for ten minutes, and a mile distant you can blow the mine and all in it to destruction. And you needn't be afraid of anything escaping alive," he had added grimly.

Talbot thought of his words as the dark and silent world slid by. He glanced at the luminous dial of his wrist-watch. Eleven-fifteen. The moon rose at eleven-twenty-four. He studied the map. High over Mount Lemmon the craft soared. He touched the army pilot's arm. "All right," he said, "throttle her down." Their speed decreased.

"Lower."

Swiftly they sank, until the dark bulk of hills and trees lay blackly beneath; so near as to seem within the touch of a hand. Though he strained his ears, no alien sound came wafting upward. "Keep circling here," he directed the pilot. "The moon'll be up in a minute and then we can be sure of where we are." The pilot nodded. He was a phlegmatic young man. Not once during the trip had he uttered a word.

The east glowed as if with red fire. Many a time before had Talbot watched the moon rise, but never under stranger circumstances. Now the night was illuminated with mellow glory. "Hit the nail on the head," he whispered. "Do you see that spot over there? To the left, yes. Can you land us there?"

Without a word the pilot swung for the clearance. It was a close thing, requiring delicate maneuvering, and only an auto-gyroscope could have made it without crashing. Hurriedly Manuel and Talbot unloaded their gear.

"All right," said Talbot to the pilot. "No need to wait for us. If we are successful, we'll send out the wireless signal agreed on, and if we aren't...." He shrugged his shoulders. "But tell the General to be sure

and allow us the time stipulated on before undertaking another attack."

Standing there on the bleak hillside, watching the auto-gyroscope run ahead for a few yards and then take the air, Talbot experienced a feeling of desolation. Now he and Manuel were alone, cut off from their own kind by barriers of impregnable jungle. And yet on that lonely hillside there were no signs of an enemy. For a moment he wondered if he weren't asleep, dreaming; if he wouldn't soon awake to find that all this was nothing but a nightmare.

But Manuel gathering up the tools aroused him from such thoughts. Not without difficulty were the necessary things conveyed to the abandoned mine back of the old Wiley claim. Their course lay along the bottom of a dry creek, over a ridge, and so to the shaft half-way down the side of a hill. A second trip had to be made to bring the gas tube.

It was two o'clock in the morning when Manuel stood at the foot of the four-hundred-foot hole and signaled up that the air was good. Talbot lowered the tools to him, and the gas container, and lastly went down himself. As already stated, Talbot had explored the underground workings of the mine not eighteen months before. Picking out the main tunnel and keeping a close watch for rattlers

with electric torches, the two men went cautiously ahead. In places earth had fallen and had to be cleared away, but the formation for the most part was a soft rock and shale. They went slowly, for fear of starting slides.

At a spot taking an abrupt turn—and it was here that the newer tunnel had broken through into the older gallery of the Wiley claim—Manuel caught swiftly at Talbot's arm. "What is that?" To straining ears came the unmistakable throb of machinery. They snapped off their torches and crouched in Stygian darkness. Not a ray of light was to be seen. Talbot knew that in following the ore stratum, the Wiley gallery took several twists. Laboriously he and Manuel advanced with the gas tube. It was stiflingly close. He counted the turns, one, two, three. Now the roar of machinery was a steady reverberation that shook the tunnel. He whispered to Manuel:

"Go back and wait for me at the mouth of the shaft. Only one of us must risk taking the gas tube any nearer the enemy. Here, take my watch. It is now two-forty-five. If I don't rejoin you by four o'clock touch off the explosive."

Manuel started to protest. "Do as I say," commanded Talbot. "The fate of the world is at stake. Give me an hour; but no longer—remember!"

Left alone in the clammy darkness Talbot wiped the sweat from his face. Grabbing one end of the rope sling in which the tube was fastened, he pulled it ahead. There was a certain amount of unavoidable noise; rock rattled, earth fell; but he reasoned shrewdly enough that the roar of the machinery would drown this. Beyond a crevice created by a cave-in he saw an intense light play weirdly. He squirmed through the crevice and pulled the tube after him.

His mind reconstructed the mine ahead. He recollected that when the lead of this mine had petered out, the owners had begun to sink the shaft deeper into the earth before abandoning the mine. This meant that the foot of the shaft, with the addition of an encroaching twenty feet of the southern gallery, was deeper by some several yards than the floor of the tunnel in which he stood. Here was the logical place to set the gas tube, nose pointed ahead.

With trembling fingers he loosened the screwed-in nose of the tube with a wrench. A slight hiss told of the deadly gas's escape. It would inevitably flow towards the shaft, drawn by the slight suction of machinery, following the easiest direction of expansion. Now Talbot's work was done, and if he had immediately retreated all would have been well, but the weird light fascinated him. Here he was, one man in the bowels of earth pitting his strength, his ingenuity against something incredible, unbelievable. Beings from

an atomic universe, from a world buried within the atom; beings attacking his own earth with uncanny methods of destruction. Oh, it was impossible, absurd, but he must look at them, he must see.

Scarcely daring to breathe, he squirmed, he crawled, and suddenly he saw. He was looking down into an underground crypt flooded with brilliant light. That crypt had been altered out of all recognition, its greater expanse of roof supported with massive pillars, the light screened away from the shaft. But it was not all this which riveted his staring eyes. No—it was the machines; strange, twisted things, glowing, pulsing, and—in the light of his knowledge—menacing and sinister.

Talbot gasped. Almost at once he observed the birds, twelve of them, two standing in front of what appeared to be a great square of polished crystal, wearing metal caps and goggles, heads cocked forward intently. The others also perched in front of odd machines like graven images. That was the uncanny thing about the birds: they appeared to be doing nothing. Only the occasional jerk of a head, the filming of a hard golden eye, gave them a semblance of life. But, none the less, there could be no mistaking the fact that they were the guiding, the directing geniuses back of all the pulsing, throbbing mechanisms.

Half mesmerized by the sight, forgetful of time and place, Talbot leaned forward in awe. There was a great funnel, a shallow cabinet, and out of the cabinet poured an intense reddish beam, and out of the beam....

It was a minute before he understood, and then comprehension came to him. Those dark spots shooting from the cabinet, no larger than peas, were the mysterious drifting globes whose scattered seed was fast covering miles of Arizonian soil with impenetrable jungle. From a universe in a piece of matter no larger than a pin-head, from a sub-atomic world, the weapons of an alien intelligence were ruthlessly being hurled against man, to conquer, to destroy him.

And now it was made plain to him why the drifting globes had seemed to materialize out of thin air. Being infinitesimally small parts of an atom, these globes were released from the cabinet and soon assumed the size of peas; they were guided across the crypt, up the old Wiley shaft, and high in the air, somewhere in space, enlarged to immense proportions. How? Talbot could not guess. By some manipulation of science and machinery beyond that of earth.

Engrossed, he moved an inch forward, craned his head, and in that moment it happened. Beneath his weight a section of earth and rock crumbled, cracked, slid forward, and he plunged headlong to the

floor below, striking his skull with stunning force!

He came to himself, staring up into the dour-looking face of a tall man. He recollected pitching forward among the birds and the machines. But the birds and the machines had disappeared and he was lying in an odd room without windows but lit with a soft radiance. Bewildered, he sat up.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

The man's beard looked straggly, untrimmed.

"My name," he said, "is Reubens—Professor Reubens."

Professor Reubens! Talbot gasped. "Not the scientist who disappeared?"

"Yes—as you've disappeared."

"What!"

"Through the machine."

It was a moment before Talbot understood. "You mean...."

"That you are a prisoner in a sub-atomic world."

Talbot now realized with startling clearness what had happened to him. When he had fallen into the crypt the weird birds had directly placed him in the cabinet and transported him to their own world. In other words, he and Reubens and everything he saw about him were infinitely small creatures in an atom-world. He and the Professor were trapped! And when Manuel blew up the only means of return....

"How long have I been here?" Talbot asked hoarsely.

"Five minutes at the most."

Then, at the shortest, the way to earth would exist twenty minutes longer. Twenty minutes.... Incoherently he told Reubens of what had happened in Arizona since his disappearance, of his own misadventure.

"Aye," said the Professor, "I knew as much. Nor do these inhuman birds intend stopping with the use of seed globes. More devilish weapons than that they plan using against earth. Oh, they are fiends, fiends! Already have they wiped out civilization and intelligent life on other planets in this sub-atomic system and introduced their own."

He stopped, shuddering. "Nor is it to be wondered at that no birds were seen after the first attack on Oracle," he went on. "They do not fight in person, as do we ourselves, but through proxy, directing machines from centers of control. In powers of destruction, they are immeasurably ahead of man. Thank God you discovered their headquarters in the deserted mine and have spread the gas for its destruction. But the rage of the birds at such a defeat will be terrible. They will undoubtedly torture me in an effort to make me reveal the basis of my invention so that they can resume the attack on earth. So we must escape."

"But how—where?"

"I have thought that out. It is one chance in a thousand. Undoubtedly we will be killed. But that is better than being tortured or living in this world. Look."

He held up a pearl-handled pen-knife. "The birds are smart, all right, but they don't quite understand clothes, wearing none themselves. They found your revolver, but overlooked this."

"Of what good is it?"

"To cut our way out of this cell."

Talbot laughed incredulously. The walls of the room were smooth, and hard to the touch. "They're as solid as concrete," he said.

"But cut like cheese under a steel blade. I found that out. Watch."

To Talbot's amazement the point of the penknife sank into the wall and in a moment a section of it was gouged out. The professor said tensely, "I've been months in this place, been taken back and forth, and know the lay of the land. This room is in a great building that houses the laboratory from which the attack against earth is being launched. Would you believe it, only the great scientist who picked up my messages and helped me perfect my invention, and a few of his assistants, are concerned in that attack, and they will be congregated at the machines. Follow me, and whatever I command, do it promptly."

The Professor had been working feverishly as he spoke, and now he and Talbot crawled through the hole he had made in the wall and found themselves in a long gloomy corridor. "Quick," Reubens whispered.

They darted down the passageway. Talbot had only time to see that the gleaming sides of the corridor were beveled and etched with strange designs, before they came to its end and where a curious

device like a huge five-pointed star was revolving noiselessly, half sunk in a great hole in the floor. Without hesitation the Professor stepped onto one of the flat-tipped star-points as it came level with where they stood and Talbot did the same. Up, turned the star-point, to a dizzy height, and over, but the tip swung on ball-bearings, maintaining its passengers in a perpendicular position, and from its highest point of elevation descended to another floor far below, where they disembarked.

The huge revolving star-wheel was nothing but an ingenious movable staircase. But the Professor gave Talbot no time to marvel, nor did the latter try to linger. The corridor below was wider, more richly beveled and carved, and the statue of an heroic bird stood perched in the center of it. The lighting was soft and mellow, but Talbot could perceive no windows or globes. Suddenly from an open doorway hopped a bird. There was no chance to avoid it. Its wings were spread and from its parted bill came a harsh cry, "Toc-toc, toc-toc!"

Knife in one hand, the Professor hurled himself forward and caught the bird in the grip of the other. Instantly from the doorway sprang a monstrous mechanism on stilts, flexible tentacles of metal reaching out and wrapping themselves around the Professor. Talbot leaped to the Professor's assistance. The mechanism fought like a live thing. In

vain he strove to wrench the tentacles free of the Professor. One of them lashed out and took him by the thighs in a crushing grasp. But the Professor had the bird by the throat. Both of his hands were free. Back, he forced its head, back. The mechanism seemed to falter in the attack, as if bewildered. Across the exposed throat the Professor drew the gleaming blade. Flesh, tendons and arteries gave, blood spurted, and in the same moment the tentacles fell away from Talbot and the Professor and withdrew with a dull clang. The Professor released the bird and it dropped to the floor.

"It is the birds' mentality that directs those mechanisms," said the Professor, pointing to the now harmless machine.

Apparently the brief but terrific battle had passed unnoticed, no alarm being given. Now the corridor twisted. The two men came to where a deep well was sunk in the floor. To one side a star-wheel revolved smoothly. Out of the depths came the steady throb of machinery. Cautiously peering over the edge, Talbot saw a sight he would never forget.

He did not need the Professor's whispered words to tell him that here was the source of the deadly attack being waged against earth. Motionless birds perched in front of bizarre machines; lights waxed and waned; a cannon-like device, or funnel, shot a column of light

into a screen, and through the column of light moved a steady procession of round objects the size of plums.

"The drifting globes being shot through to earth," whispered the Professor, "and our only hope. Listen, the birds are intent on their machines, their backs to the star-wheel. We will descend, throw ourselves into the column of light, seize hold of a globe, and...."

He did not need to finish. Talbot understood in a flash. They would be dragged to their own world by the weapons hurled at it.

"Of course that column of light may kill us," went on the Professor tensely. "Or we may be blown up on the other side. Your Mexican friend hasn't touched off that explosive gas yet, because—But we've not a moment to lose. Follow me."

The tip of the star-wheel went up, over, descended. The blood was roaring in Talbot's ears. "Now!" hissed the Professor. "Now!" Together they rushed forward. Talbot's foot slipped. The heart leaped into his throat. He never remembered reaching the column of light; but suddenly he was in it, blinded, dazed. His clutching hands closed on something small and hard.

The laboratory was a pinwheel going round and round. Through a

sea of darkness he floated. A distant glow grew, expanded, became the crypt in the old Wiley mine. A moment he glimpsed the gleaming pillars, the pulsing machines, the startled birds, and then—Oh, it was incredible, impossible, but the dark, crumbling walls of the old shaft were around him; the globe in his hand no larger than a pea was lifting him towards life and safety.

He wanted to shout, to sing, but even as the pale stars fell athwart his upturned face, even as the cool mountain air smote his fevered brow, the dark earth erupted beneath his feet, a whirlwind of smoke and wind beat and buffeted him, and, in the midst of an overwhelming noise, consciousness was blotted out!

It was bright daylight when Talbot regained his senses. Propped against a great rock the Professor regarded him whimsically. Reubens looked badly bruised and battered; one arm hung loosely at his side. Talbot's head ached and he knew that a leg was broken.

"Yes," said the Professor, "we got through just in time—a few seconds before the explosive gas was touched off. Thank God, my invention has been destroyed. The world is safe."

Yes, the world was safe. Talbot sank back with a sigh of relief. Overhead a white plane was dipping toward earth.

125 The Radiant Shell by Paul Ernst

Summary goes here

Aproximate word count: 7,200

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

"And that, gentlemen," said the Secretary of War, "is the situation. Arvania has stolen the Ziegler plans and formulae. With their acquisition it becomes the most powerful nation on earth. The Ziegler plans are at present in the Arvanian Embassy, but they will be smuggled out of the country soon. Within a month of their landing in Arvania, war will be declared against us. That means"—he glanced at the tense faces around the conference table—"that we have about three months to live as a nation—unless we can get those plans!"

There was a hushed, appalled silence, broken at last by General Forsyte.

"Nonsense! How can a postage-stamp country like Arvania really threaten us?"

"The day has passed, General," said the Secretary, "when a nation's power is reckoned by its size. The Ziegler heat ray is the deadliest weapon yet invented. A thousand men with a dozen of the ray-projectors can reduce us to smoking ruins while remaining far outside the range of our guns. No! I tell you that declaration of war by Arvania will be followed by the downfall of the United States inside of three months!"

Again the hushed, strained silence descended over the conference table, while one white-faced man gazed at another and all speculated on the incredible possibility of a world in which there was no United States of America.

"We must get the plans," nodded Forsyte, convinced at last. "But how? March openly on the Arvanian Embassy?"

"No, that would be declaration of war on our part. The World Court, which knows nothing of the Ziegler plans, would set the League at our throats."

"Send volunteers unofficially to raid the place?"

"Impossible. There is a heavy guard in the Arvanian Embassy; and I more than suspect the place bristles with machine guns."

"What are we to do?" demanded Forsyte.

The Secretary seemed to have been waiting for that final question.

"I have had an odd and desperate plan submitted me from an outside source. I could not pass it without your approval. I will let you hear it from the lips of the planner."

He pressed a buzzer. "Bring Mr. Winter in," he told his secretary.

The man who presently appeared in the doorway was an arresting figure. A man of thirty-odd with the body of an athlete, belied somewhat by the pallor of an indoor worker, with acid stained, delicate hands offset by forearms that might have belonged to a blacksmith, with coal black hair and gray eyes so light as to look like ice-gray holes in the deep caverns of his eye-sockets. This was Thorn Winter.

"Gentlemen, the scientist, Mr. Winter," announced the Secretary. "He thinks he can get the Ziegler plans."

Thorn Winter cleared his throat. "My scheme is simple enough," he

said tersely. "I believe I can walk right into the Embassy, get the plans—and then walk right out again. It sounds kind of impossible, but I think I can work it by making myself invisible."

"Invisible?" echoed Forsyte. "Invisible!"

"Precisely," said Thorn in a matter-of-fact tone. "I have just turned out a camouflage which is the most perfect yet discovered. It was designed for application to guns and equipment only. I'd never thought of trying to cover a human body with it, but I am sure it can be done."

"But ... invisible ..." muttered Forsyte, glancing askance at Winter.

"There's no time for argument," said the Secretary crisply. "The question is, shall we give this man permission to try the apparently impossible?"

All heads nodded, though in all eyes was doubt. The Secretary turned to the scientist.

"You are aware of the risk you run? You realize that if you are caught, we cannot recognize you—that we must disclaim official knowledge of your work, and leave you to your fate?"

Thorn nodded.

"Then," said the Secretary, his voice vibrant, "yours is the mission. And on your effort hangs the fate of your country. Now—what help will you require?"

"Only the assistance of one man," said Thorn. "And, since secrecy is vital, I'm going to ask you, sir, to be that man."

The Secretary smiled; and with that smile he seemed to be transformed from a great leader of affairs into a kindly, human individual. "I am honored, Mr. Winter," he said. "Shall we go at once to your laboratory?"

In the great laboratory room, the Secretary glanced about almost uneasily at the crowding apparatus that was such an enigma to one untrained in science. Then his gaze returned to Winter's activities.

Thorn was carefully stirring fluids, poured drop by drop from various retorts, in a mixing bowl. All the fluids were colorless; and they combined in a mixture that had approximately the consistency of thin syrup. To this, Thorn added a carefully weighted pinch of glittering powder. Then he lit a burner under the bowl, and thrust into the mixture a tiny, specially constructed thermometer.

"You can really make yourself invisible?" breathed the Secretary.

"I can," said Thorn, "if the blisters don't upset my calculations by making my body surfaces too moist for this stuff to stick to. I'm going to have you paint me with it, you see, and it was never intended to cover flesh."

He regulated the burner anxiously, and then began to take off his clothes.

"Ready," he said at last, glancing at the thermometer and turning off the burner. He stood before the wondering Secretary, a fine, muscular figure. "Take this brush and cover me with the stuff. And be sure not to miss any of me!"

And then the Secretary saw why Thorn had said the colorless paint was never intended to be applied to human flesh. For it was still seething and smoking in the cauldron.

"Good heavens!" he said. "Don't you want to wait till it cools a little?"

"Can't," said Thorn. "It has to be applied hot or it loses its flexibility."

The Secretary dipped the brush and began to paint the naked flesh of the scientist. Not a quiver touched that flesh as an almost microscopically thin, colorless layer formed into a film after the brush strokes. But the Secretary's fingers shook a little.

"My God, man!" he said finally. "Doesn't it hurt?"

"It's a little like being boiled in oil," replied Thorn grimly. "Outside of that it's all right. Hurry, before the stuff gets too cool."

The clinging thin shell covered him to his chest, then to his throat. At that point he reached into a drawer in a workbench beside him and drew out two small, hollow hemispheres of glass. These he cupped over his eyes.

"What are those for?" asked the Secretary.

"So my eyes can be covered with the film. If they weren't, I'd present the somewhat remarkable spectacle of a pair of disembodied eyes walking down the street."

Painfully, agonizingly, the hot film was applied to throat and face; over the glass spheres that cupped around the eyes; over a tight leather cap covering the scientist's hair; and over a sort of football

nose-guard which extended down an inch below the end of Thorn's nose in a sort of overhanging offset that would allow him to breathe and still keep his nostrils hidden. The Secretary stepped back.

Before him stood a figure that looked not unlike a glazed statue of a man. The effect was that of a body encased in clear ice—and like clear ice, the encasing shell sparkled and glittered radiantly in the sunlight that poured in at the windows.

Thorn moved. His glazed arms and legs and torso glistened with all the colors in the spectrum; while under the filmed bulges of glass his eyes looked as large as apples. The Secretary felt a chill of superstitious fear as he gazed at that weird and glittering figure with its enormous glazed eyes.

"But you aren't invisible," he said at length.

"That comes now," said Thorn, walking ahead of the Secretary while on the ceiling above him danced red and yellow and blue rainbows of refracted light.

He stepped onto a big metal plate. Suspended above was a huge metal ring, with its hole directly over the spot on which he stood.

"Soft magnets," explained Thorn. "As simply as I can put it, my process for rendering an object invisible is this: I place the object, coated with the film, on this plate. Then I start in motion the overhead ring, creating an immensely powerful, rapidly rotating magnetic field. The rotating field rearranges the atoms of this peculiarly susceptible film of mine so that they will transmit light rays with the least possible resistance. It combs the atoms into straight lines, you might say. With that straight-line, least-resistance arrangement comes invisibility."

"I don't quite see—" began the Secretary.

"Refraction of light," said Thorn hurriedly. "The light rays strike this film, hurtle around the object, it coats—at increased speed, probably, but there are no instruments accurate enough to check that—and emerge on the other side. Thus, you can look at a body so filmed, and not see it: your gaze travels around it and rests on objects in a straight line behind it. But you'll see for yourself in a moment. Pull that switch, there, will you? And leave it on for two full minutes after you have ceased to see me."

Straight and tall, a figure encased in shimmering crystal, the scientist stood on the metal plate. Hesitant, with the superstitious dread growing in his heart, the Secretary stood with his hand on the switch.

That hand pulled the switch down.…

Soundlessly the overhead metal ring began to whirl, gathering speed with every second. And then, though he had known in advance something of what was coming, the Secretary could not suppress a shout of surprise.

The man before him on the metal plate was vanishing.

Slowly he disappeared from view—slowly, as an object sinking deeper and deeper into clear water disappears. Now the face was but a white blob. Now the entire body was but a misty blur. And now a shade, a wavering shadow, alone marked Winter's presence.

The Secretary could not have told the exact instant when that last faint blur oozed from sight. He only knew that at one second he was gazing at it—and at the next second his eyes rested on a rack of test-tubes on the wall beyond the plate.

He looked at his watch. Sweat glistened in tiny points on the hand that held the switch. It was all so like death, this disappearance—as if he had thrown the switch that electrocuted a man.

The specified two minutes passed. He cut off the power. The great

ring lost speed, stopped whirling. And on the plate was—nothing.

At least it seemed there was nothing. But a moment later a deep voice sounded out: "I guess I'm invisible, all right, according to the expression on your face."

"You are," said the Secretary, mopping his forehead, "except when you speak. Then I have the bizarre experience of seeing glimpses of teeth, tongue and throat hanging in mid-air. I'd never have believed it if I hadn't witnessed it myself! That paint of yours is miraculous!"

"A little complicated, but hardly miraculous. It has a cellulose base, and there is in it a small per cent of powdered crystal—but the rest I'll keep locked in my brain alone till my country has need of it."

The glimpses of teeth and tongue and throat ceased. In spite of himself, the Secretary started as an unseen hand touched his shoulder.

"Now,"—there was ringing resolution in the deep voice—"for the Arvanian Embassy. Please drive me there—and be as quick as you can about it. I can't last very long with this film sealing most of the pores of my body."

The Secretary started for the laboratory door. Beside him sounded the patter of bare feet. He opened the door and walked into the hallway. Behind him, apparently of itself, the door clicked shut; and the footsteps again sounded beside him.

The Secretary walked to the curb where his limousine waited. His chauffeur jumped out and opened the door. The Secretary paused a moment, one foot on the running board, to draw a cigar from his pocket and light it. During that moment the car pressed down on that side, and as suddenly rocked back up again.

The chauffeur stared wide-eyed at his employer.

"Did you do that, sir?" he asked.

"Do what?" said the Secretary.

"Push down on the running board with your foot."

"Of course not," said the Secretary, his eyebrows raising. "You could have seen my leg move if I had. But why do you ask?"

"It felt like somebody got into this car," mumbled the man.

"Did you see anybody get in?" said the Secretary with a shrug. And,

shaking his head, with a fuddled look in his eyes, the chauffeur turned away and got into the driver's seat.

The Secretary glanced at the rear seat. On the far side, the cushion was heavily depressed. He sat on the near side, feeling his knee strike another, unseen knee.

"Drive to the Bulgarian Embassy," he told his man.

Up Sixteenth Street the car swung, past the various embassies which looked more like palatial private villas than offices of foreign nations. Toward the end of the line, a smaller building than most of the others, was the Arvanian Embassy. Next to it was the Bulgarian.

The car stopped in front of the Bulgarian Embassy, and the Secretary got out. Again he paused, while the chauffeur held the door open, to hold a match to his cigar. Again the car sagged down on that side, and slowly swayed up again.

"Hey—" said the chauffeur. But meeting the Secretary's calmly inquiring gaze, he stopped. Scratching his head, he went back to the wheel, while the Secretary walked toward the building entrance.

Behind him, moving on soundless bare feet along the sidewalk,

Thorn Winter hastened, cloaked in invisibility, toward the Arvanian Embassy—and the plans that spelled America's destruction if they remained in Arvanian hands.

The embassy building was a three-storied oblong house of white stone topping a terrace that started its climb from the sidewalk of Sixteenth Street. The doors at the head of the wide stone staircase were of bronze; and they were closed, and, Thorn surmised, efficiently barred. The windows at front and sides were also closed, in spite of the warmth of the sunny spring afternoon.

Beside the building, leading up in a short steep hill, was the driveway. Up this Thorn started. The front of the house was hopelessly barred; but at the rear entrance there might be a chance.

Up the driveway, then, he walked, a little startled at the fact that he cast no shadow—feeling as a ghost might feel. The pavement was hot to his thinly filmed feet. A little dubious as to the effect of heat on the vital shell that hid him, he stepped off into the cool grass beside the drive; and came soon to the rear of the embassy.

There was no porch or veranda, simply two stone steps leading up to a stout oak door which opened onto the embassy kitchens. From behind this door came the sound of crockery and the hum of voices.

The Arvanian chef evidently was preparing afternoon tea.

Walking boldly to the very steps, Thorn began the vigil that should end when someone came in or out of that door, allowing him to slip inside the building before the portal was barred shut again.

For nearly half an hour Thorn stood there before something happened that at once helped him, and, at the same time, nearly proved his undoing.

A light delivery van sped up the driveway. The wheels stirred up a cloud of dust. It was a very small cloud of very fine dust. Thorn at first thought nothing of it, because he was so engrossed in the conviction that here ought to be provided an entrance into the house.

The truck driver got out, took a crate from the body of the van, and went with it to the back door. After a moment of waiting, the door opened. Thorn noticed that it was opened very cautiously, only an inch or so. He caught a glimpse of a heavy chain stretched across the inch opening, and saw a strip of bearded, resolute face.

The door was unchained. The driver walked in, while the door stood open. Thorn started to glide in after him....

Mere chance made him glance at a window near the door. This window framed another bearded, resolute face. And the eyes in that face were like saucers as they stared full at Thorn!

For an instant Thorn knew icy fear. His invisibility! Had something happened to strip him of that concealing mantle? But what could have happened?

He glanced down at himself and saw the reason for the guard's saucer-eyed expression.

A little of the light cloud of dust stirred up by the truck wheels had settled over him and clung to the encasing shell. As he moved, these dust specks moved. The effect to the staring guard, Thorn realized, must be that of seeing a queer, fine dust column moving eccentrically over a grassy lawn where no dust column had any business to be.

Quickly Thorn moved toward the garage, with the eyes of the amazed guard following him. The scientist was savage at the delay; but it was vital that he rid himself of that clinging dust.

Behind the garage he broke off a feathery spray from a vine, and stroked it lightly over himself. That, too, presented a curious

spectacle: a leafy branch suddenly detaching itself from the parent vine and dancing here and there in mid-air.

When the all-important task was done, Thorn raced back to the rear doorway. By great good luck it was still open. He stole in, just making it as the truck driver, staggering under a load of empty crates, came up the cellar stairs and went out to his truck.

Thorn drew a deep breath. He was inside the Arvanian Embassy. The place was a three-storied stone trap in which, if the slightest slip revealed him to its tenants, he would surely meet his death. But, anyway, he was inside! And the threatening Ziegler plans waited somewhere near at hand for him to find and take!

Even had Thorn not known in advance that trouble was brewing, he could have surmised that something sinister was being hatched in the Arvanian Embassy. For, in this big sunny kitchen five men lounged about in addition to the white-coated chef and his beardless stripling of an assistant. And each of the five had a holster strapped openly over his coat with the butt of an automatic protruding in plain sight.

Thorn looked about. Across from the great range, beside which he was standing and holding his breath for fear some one of the seven men should become aware of his presence, was the door leading to

the front part of the house. He started toward that door, walking on tiptoe. A shudder crept up his spine as he tiptoed across the floor directly in front of the armed guards who would have shot him down without compunction could they have seen him. He was not yet used to his invisibility; knowing himself to be substantial, feeling his feet descend solidly on the floor, he still could hardly credit the fact that human eyes could not observe him.

He got to the door. He put out his hand to open it, then realized just in time that he could not do that. A door stealthily opening and closing again, with no apparent hand to manipulate it? Such a spectacle would start a riot!

In a frenzy of impatience, he stood beside the door, waiting till someone else should swing it open. And in a moment it chanced that the stripling assistant chef came toward him with a tray. The boy pushed the swinging door with his foot, and walked into the butler's pantry. After him, treading almost on the lad's heels, came Thorn.

The boy sat the tray down, and turned to reach into an upper shelf. The space in the pantry was constricted, and he turned abruptly. The result was that he suddenly drew back as though a hot iron had seared him, and went white as chalk. Then he dashed back into the kitchen.

"A hand!" Thorn heard him gibbering in Arvanian. "A hand! I touched it with mine! Something horrible is in there!"

With his heart pounding in his throat, Thorn leaned close to the swing-door to hear what happened next. Would there be a rush for the butler's pantry? An investigation? He eyed the farther door—the dining room door. But he dared not flee through that save as a last resort. In the dining room sounded voices; and again the sight of a door opening and closing of itself would lead to uproar.

"A hand?" he heard one of the guards say in the kitchen. "An unseen hand? Thou art empty in the head, young Gova."

There followed some jeering sentences in colloquial Arvanian that were too idiomatic for Thorn's knowledge of the language to let him understand. A general guffaw came from the rest; and, as no move was made toward the pantry, Thorn decided he was saved for another few moments.

Gasping, he raised his hand to wipe the perspiration off his forehead, then realized there was no perspiration there. His film-clogged pores could exude nothing; he had only the sensation of perspiring.

Now the problem was to get through the next door. Thoughtfully,

Thorn gazed at it. He saw that this, too, was a swing-door. Further, he saw that now and then it creaked open a few inches, and swung sluggishly back. Beyond it somewhere a window was open, and spasmodic gusts moved the swinging slab of wood.

The next time the door moved with the wind, Thorn caught it and augmented the movement a bit. Twice he did that, each time swinging it back a trifle further. Next time, he figured, he could open it enough to slide into the room.

Two glimpses he had had, with the openings of the door, into the room beyond. These glimpses had showed him a great oval table on which was set the debris of afternoon tea, and around which were grouped tense, eager men. Dark of hair and complexion were these men, with the arrogant hawk noses and ruthless small eyes of the typical Arvanian. Several of them were garbed in military uniforms and armed with swords. They were talking in tones too low for Thorn to distinguish words through the film over his ears. He would have to get in there to hear them.

For the third time the wind pushed at the door. For the third time Thorn caught its edge and swung it—six inches, eight, almost enough to slip through....

"Shut thou the window!" crackled a voice suddenly. "Fool! What if some of these documents blew away?"

There was a slam, and the breeze was cut off. Thorn quickly let go of the door, and watched it fall back in place again.

He was cursing his luck when he heard the same commanding voice say: "Kori, see if there be one who listens in the butler's pantry. It seemed the door opened wider than the wind would warrant."

There was the scrape of a chair. Then the door was abruptly thrust open and coldly alert eyes in a hostile, wary face, swept over the pantry.

"No one here, Excellency," said Kori; and he returned to his place at the table.

But with him came another, unseen, to stand against the wall beside a great mahogany buffet, and to listen and watch. Kori had, not unnaturally, held the door open while he glanced around the pantry. And under Kori's outstretched arm, so close as almost to brush against his uniformed legs, had stolen Thorn.

"Then, gentlemen, it is all arranged?" said the man at the head of the

oval table—a spare, elderly individual with bristling gray mustachios and smoldering dark eyes. "The plans leave for Arvania to-morrow night, to arrive in our capital city in ten days. Then day and night manufacture of the Ziegler projectors—and declaration of war. Following that, this great city of Washington, and the even greater cities of New York and Chicago, and all, this fine land from Atlantic to Pacific, shall become an Arvanian possession to exploit as we like!"

There was an audible "Ah!" from the score of men around the table—broken by a voice in the main double doorway of the dining room: "Gentlemen, your pardon, I am late."

Thorn looked at the speaker. He was a young fellow with an especially elaborate uniform and a face that appeared weak and dissipated in spite of the arrogant Arvanian nose. Then a bark came to Thorn's ears—and a cold feeling to the pit of Thorn's stomach. The newcomer had brought a dog with him!

Even as he gazed apprehensively at the dog—a rangy wolfhound—the brute growled deep in its throat and stared at the corner by the buffet where Thorn was instinctively trying to make himself smaller.

The dog growled again, and stalked warily toward the buffet.

"Grego, down," said his master absently. Then, to the spare man at the head of the table: "I have been next door, talking to the American Secretary of War. A dull fellow. Convinced, is he, that Arvania harbors only kind thoughts for this great stupid nation. They shall be utterly unprepared for our attack—Grego! What ails the brute?"

The wolfhound had evaded several outstretched hands and got to the buffet. There it crouched and cowered, fangs showing in a snarl, eyes reddening wickedly, while the growl rattled louder in its shaggy throat.

"Perhaps the heat has affected him," said one.

All were looking at the dog now, marveling at its odd behavior. But of all the eyes that observed it a pair of unseen eyes watched with the utmost agitation.

Thorn stared, almost hypnotized, at the creature. A dog! What rotten luck! Men might be fooled by the masking invisibility, but there was no deceiving a dog's keen nose!

The wolfhound started forward as though to leap, then settled back. Plainly it longed to spring. Equally plainly it was afraid of the being that so impossibly was revealed to its nostrils but not to its eyes.

Meanwhile, one tearing sweep of blunt claws or sharp fangs—and a fatal rent would appear in Thorn's encasing shell!

The dog snapped tentatively. Thorn flattened still harder against the wall, with discovery and death hovering very closely about him. Then the beast's master intervened.

"Grego! Here, sir! A council room is no place, for thee, anyway. Here, I say! So, then—"

He hastened to the dog and caught its collar. Twisting the leather cruelly, he dragged the protesting, snarling brute to the doors and slid them shut with the wolfhound barking and growling on the outside. "Someone put him in his kennel," he said through the panels. A scuffling in the hall told of the execution of the order. The council room became quiet again, and Thorn leaned against the wall and closed his eyes for an instant.

"We were saying, Soyo," the leader addressed the dog's owner, "that the Ziegler plans start for Arvania to-morrow night. All is arranged. These innocent looking bits of paper"—he thumped a small packet of documents lying before him—"shall deliver mighty America to us!"

A subdued cheer answered the man's words—while Thorn stared at the packet of papers with unbelieving eyes. It had never occurred to him that the Ziegler plans might be in that very room, on the table with the rest of the welter of letters, thumbed documents, and cups and saucers. And there they were—the vital projector plans—not in a safe or hidden in some fantastic place, but right before his eyes!

Involuntarily his hand extended eagerly toward the packet, then was withdrawn. Not now. He was invisible—but the papers, if he grasped them, would not be. Clenched in his unseen hand, they would be perfectly visible, moving in jerks and starts as he raced for the door.

Like lightning his mind turned over one plan after another for making away with that precious packet. Each scheme seemed impossible of fulfilment.

"The biggest difficulty is in getting them out of the country," the spare, elderly man was saying. "But we have solved that. Solved it simply. I myself shall bear them, sewn in my clothes, to our native land. The American authorities could search, on some pretext, any other of our number who tried to smuggle them out. But me they dare not lay a finger on. That would be an overt act."

Thorn's thoughts whirled desperately on. Wait till later and follow

whoever left the room with the plans? But he hated to let them get out of his sight.

And at this point he became suddenly aware that the man named Kori was gazing fixedly at him.

Thorn was between the section of the table where Kori sat, and the angular buffet-end. Kori could not possibly see anything but the shining mahogany, thought Thorn. And yet the man's eyes were narrowing to ominous slits as he started in his direction.

Thorn held his breath. Was the shielding film changing in structure? Were the repolarized atoms slowly losing their straight-line arrangement, allowing light rays to penetrate through to his body instead of diverting them to form a pocket of invisibility around him? The film had never acted like that before—but never before had Thorn applied it to living flesh with its disintegrating heat and moisture.

"Excellency," said Kori at last, a hard edge to his voice, "look thou at that buffet. No, no—the end nearest my chair."

"Well?" said the elderly man. "I see nothing."

Thorn breathed a sigh of relief. But the relief was to be of short duration.

"Come to my place, if thou wilt, and see from here," said Kori.

The leader got up and came to Kori's place. Kori pointed straight at Thorn.

"There—seest thou anything out of the ordinary?"

"I see nothing," said the leader, after a moment. "Thine eyes, Kori, are not good."

"They are the eyes of a hawk," said Kori stubbornly. "And they see this—the vertical line of the end of that buffet does not continue straightly up and down. At its middle, the line is broken, then continues up—a fraction of an inch to the side! Like an object seen under water, distorted by the sun-rays that strike the surface!"

Thorn fairly jumped away from the buffet and stood against bare wall. Fool! Of course the light refraction would not be perfect! Why hadn't he thought of that—thought to stand clear of revealing vertical lines!

"There, it is gone," said Kori, blinking. "But something, Excellency,

made that distortion of line. And something made Soyo's wolfhound act as it did! Something—"

"Art thou attempting to say a spy listens unseen in this room?" demanded the gray-mustachioed Arvanian.

"Something is odd—that is all I say."

All eyes were ranging along the wall against which Thorn leaned his back. All eyes finally turned to Kori. "It is nonsense." "I see nothing whatever." "Kori has drunk of champagne in place of tea!" were some of the exclamations.

And then occurred the thing that, in Thorn's perilous position, was like the self-signing of his own death warrant.

He sneezed.

That agony of helplessness, as a man's nose wrinkles and twitches and—in spite of the most desperate attempts at repression—the betraying sound forces its way out! How many men have lost their lives because of that insistent soft nasal explosion which can be smothered, but not entirely hushed!

Thorn had felt the sneeze coming on for seconds. He had fought it

frantically, with life itself at stake. But he could not hold it back. In his naked body, beginning to burn with fever from the long-clogged pores and insulated not at all by the film from the coolness of the room, the seeds of that soft explosion had been planted—and they would bear fruit!

So he had sneezed!

Instantly there was chaos. Men looked at each other, and back at the blank wall from which had come the painfully muffled sound. Then all sprang to their feet.

"Champagne, is it!" Kori exulted savagely. "Did I not say my eyes were those of a hawk?"

"Double guard all doors!" roared the Arvanian leader, to the guards outside. "Someone is in the house! And you in here," he went on in a lower tone, "see that this unseen one dies!"

Soyo and several other men whipped out automatics and pointed them at the wall. Thorn dropped to the floor. But with his quick action came Kori's voice.

"No, no! The sword, gentlemen. It is not so noisy, and covers a wider

sweep."

Thorn shivered. Far rather would he have had bullets as his lot than cold steel. The prospect of being hacked to pieces, of gradually emerging from invisibility as a lump of gashed and bleeding flesh, turned him faint.

The Arvanians split up into orderly formation. Two went to guard the door to the butler's pantry, and two to cover the closed sliding doors to the outer hall. Six, with drawn swords sweeping back and forth before them, walked slowly toward the wall from which the sneeze had come.

Thorn set his jaws—only just catching himself in time to prevent his lips from opening in the half-snarl instinctive to the most civilized of men when danger is threatening. That lip motion would have revealed his teeth for an instant!

The sensation of perspiring heavily flamed over him again. There were so many trifling things to keep in mind! And each, if neglected, meaning certain death!

The nearest of the marching six stopped with his foot almost touching Thorn's hand. The dancing sword the man carried almost

grazed the scientist's shoulder on its down sweep.

Thorn could not stay there. Lying flat along the baseboard, he would be stabbed at any instant by an inquiring sword point.

The six spread a little. A very little. But there was room enough for Thorn to slide between the two men nearest him and roll soundlessly under the table.

There was no sanctuary for him there. The cursed Kori, with his hawk eyes, glanced under the table after stabbing vainly along the wall.

"The carpet!" he bellowed. "See how the nap is pressed down! He is under there, comrades!"

The thrusting swords raked under the table a half second or so after Thorn had rolled out the other side, upsetting a chair in his hurry.

"After him!" panted Soyo. "By the living God, this is wizardry! But he must not get away—"

"He won't!" snapped the elderly leader. "Men, form a line at the far end of the room and march slowly, shoulder to shoulder, to this end. The spy must be caught!"

The move was executed. All the men in the room, save the four guarding the doors, lined up and advanced slowly, swerving and slashing their swords. Like a line of workers hand-harvesting a wheat field they came—foot by foot toward the corner where Thorn turned this way and that in a vain effort to escape.

The line reached the table. Over and under and around it the swords slashed viciously, leaving no space unprobed.

Thorn clenched his fists. He gazed at the packet containing the Ziegler plans. He gazed at the guarded door leading back to the kitchen. Then he tensed himself and leaped.

"The plans!" shouted Kori hoarsely. "Look—"

The vital packet, as far as the eye could see, had suddenly grown wings, soared from the table top, and was floating rapidly, convulsively, toward the door.

"Stop him!" yelled Soyo. "Stop—"

At that instant the heads of the two who guarded the door were dashed together. The door itself slammed open. The Ziegler plans sped into the butler's pantry.

The door to the kitchen began to open just as Kori reached the pantry. An oath burst from the Arvanian's lips. He flung his sword. In the air, shoulder high, appeared suddenly a small fountain of blood. Kori yelled triumphantly.

Thorn, feeling the warm drip following the glancing slash in his shoulder, knew the veil of invisibility had at last been rent. Abandoning efforts at noiselessness, knowing that his whereabouts was constantly marked by the packet in his hand, anyway, he fled through the kitchen to the rear door.

The bolt jerked back, under the astonished eyes of the five guards who had not yet realized precisely what the commotion was all about —and who only saw a packet of papers waving in mid-air, a trickle of blood appearing out of nothing, and a bolt banging open in its slot for no reason whatever.

Thorn's fingers worked feverishly at the chain. But before he could begin to get it undone, the guards had recovered from their surprise and had joined the Arvanians who poured in from the dining room under Kori's lead.

With a score of men crowding the kitchen, Thorn looped back in his tracks like a hunted creature, and sought the cellar door. Four men he

upset, one after another, aided by the fact that his twisting body could be only approximately placed by the papers and the wound.

Then Kori's hand swept through the air above the waving packet, to clamp over Thorn's wrist.

With an effort—that bulged the muscles of that blacksmith's fore-arm of his till it seemed they must burst through the film, Thorn whirled Kori clear off his feet and sent him stumbling into the charge of three guards. But in the meantime the cellar was barred to him by a double line of men.

Fighting for his life—and, far more important, the existence of his country—Thorn lashed out with his invisible right fist while his left clutched the plans.

A score of men arrayed in a death struggle against one! But the odds were not twenty to one. Not quite. The score could mark Thorn's general whereabouts—but they could not see his flying right fist! That was an invisible weapon that did incredible damage.

But if they could not see the fist to guard against it, they could see the results of the fist's impacts. Here a nose suddenly crumpled and an instant later gushed red. There a head was snapped back and up,

while its owner slowly sagged to the floor. And all the while the still dripping wound and the packet of documents kept with devilish ingenuity between the body of some swordless guard and the impatient blades of the Arvanian nobles.

Almost, it seemed to Thorn, he would win free. Almost, it appeared to the Arvanians, the unseen one would reach the big window near the door—which the path of his wreckage indicated was his goal. But one of the wildly swinging fists of a guard caught Thorn at last.

It landed on the glass cup over his right eye, cutting a perfect circle in the skin around the eyesocket, and tearing the film over the glass!

Now there were three things about the lithe, invisible body that the Arvanians could see: the crumpled papers, a slowly drying patch of blood that moved shoulder high in the air, and a blood-rimmed, ice-gray eye that glared defiance at them from apparently untenanted atmosphere.

Then came what seemed must be the end. Soyo appeared in the pantry doorway with a machine gun.

"Everybody to the end of the kitchen by the window!" he cried. "To the devil with silence—we'll spray this room with lead, and let the

sound of shots bring what consequences it may!"

The men scattered. The machine gun muzzle swept toward the place where the eye, the papers, and the blood spot were to be seen.

That spot was now at one end of the great kitchen range on which a few copper pots simmered over white-hot electric burners. At the other end of the range, in the end wall of the kitchen, was a second window. It was small, less than a yard square, and had evidently been punched through the wall as an afterthought to carry off some of the heat of the huge stove.

Soyo's face twisted exultantly. The machine gun belched flame. Chasing relentlessly after the dodging, shifting blood spot, a line of holes appeared in the wall following instantly on the tap—tap—tap of the gun.

Eye and papers and blood spot appeared to float through the air. One of the copper pots on the range flew off onto the floor. The glass of the small ventilating window smashed to bits. In the jagged frame its broken edges presented, the Arvanians saw for a flashing instant the seared, blistered soles of a pair of human feet.

"Outside!" bawled Kori. "He jumped onto the range and dove

through the window! After him!"

After precious seconds had been wasted, the rear door was unchained and wrenched open. The Arvanians, swords and guns drawn, raced out to the rear yard.

His Excellency's town car, that had been standing in front of the open garage doors, leaped into life. With motor roaring wide open, it tore toward the Arvanians, some of whom leaped aside and some of whom were hurled to right and left by the heavy fenders....

Startled people on Sixteenth Street saw a great town car swaying down the asphalt seemingly guided by no hand other than that of fate; some said afterward they saw a single eye gleaming through the windshield, but no one believed that. Equally startled people saw the car screech to a stop in front of the home of the Secretary of War. After it, scarcely a full minute later, three motors with the Arvanian coat of arms on them came to a halt.

"My dear fellow," said the Secretary blandly to the livid Arvanian Ambassador, "no one has come in here with papers or anything else. I saw a man jump out of your town car and run south on Connecticut Avenue. That's all I know."

"But I tell you—" shrieked the Arvanian.

He stopped, impaled on the Secretary's icy cold glance.

"Your story is rather incredible," murmured the Secretary. "Valuable plans stolen from your Embassy by an invisible man? Come, come!"

Dark Arvanian eyes glared into light American ones.

"By the way," said the Secretary affably, "I am thinking of giving a semi-official banquet to celebrate future, friendly relations between our two countries. Do you approve?"

The Arvanian Ambassador tugged at his collar to straighten it. World dominion had been in his fingers—and had slipped through—but he would not have been a diplomat had he let his face continue to express the bitterness in his heart.

"I think such a banquet would be a splendid idea," he said suavely.

February 1932

126 The Pygmy Planet by Jack Williamson

Down into the infinitely small goes Larry on his mission to the Pygmy Planet.

Aproximate word count: 9,300

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

"Nothing ever happens to me!" Larry Manahan grumbled under his breath, sitting behind his desk at the advertising agency which employed his services in return for the consideration of fifty a week. "All the adventure I know is what I see in the movies, or read about in magazines. What wouldn't I give for a slice of real life!"

Unconsciously, he tensed the muscles of his six feet of lean, hard body. His crisp, flame-colored hair seemed to bristle; his blue eyes blazed. He clenched a brown hammer of a fist.

Larry felt himself an energetic, red-blooded square peg, badly afflicted with the urge for adventure, miserably wedged in a round

hole. It is one of the misfortunes of our civilization that a young man who, for example, might have been an excellent pirate a couple of centuries ago, must be kept chained to a desk. And that seemed to be Larry's fate.

"Things happen to other people," he muttered. "Why couldn't an adventure come to me?"

He sat, staring wistfully at a picture of a majestic mountain landscape, soon to be used in the advertising of a railway company whose publicity was handled by his agency, when the jangle of the telephone roused him with a start.

"Oh, Larry—" came a breathless, quivering voice.

Then, with a click, the connection was broken.

The voice had been feminine and had carried a familiar ring. Larry tried to place it, as he listened at the receiver and attempted to get the broken connection restored.

"Your party hung up, and won't answer," the operator informed him.

He replaced the receiver on the hook, still seeking to follow the thin thread of memory given him by the familiar note in that eager

excited voice. If only the girl had spoken a few more words!

Then it came to him.

"Agnes Sterling!" he exclaimed aloud.

Agnes Sterling was a slender, elfish, dark-haired girl—lovely, he had thought her, on the occasions of their few brief meetings. Larry knew her as the secretary and laboratory assistant of Dr. Travis Whiting, a retired college professor known for his work on the structure of the atom. Larry had called at the home-laboratory of the savant, months before, to check certain statistics to be used for advertising purposes and had met the girl there. Only a few times since had he seen her.

Now she had called him in a voice that fairly trembled with excitement—and, he thought, dread! And she had been interrupted before she had time to give him any message.

For a few seconds Larry stared at the telephone. Then he rose abruptly to his feet, crammed his hat on his head, and started for the door.

"The way to find adventure is to go after it," he murmured. "And this

is the invitation!"

It was not many minutes later that he sprang out of a taxi at the front of the building in which Dr. Travis Whiting made his home and maintained a private experimental laboratory. It was a two-story stucco house, rather out of date, set well back from the sidewalk, with a scrap of lawn and a few straggling shrubs before it. The door was closed, the windows curtained blankly. The place seemed deserted and forbidding.

Larry ran up the uneven brick walk to the door and rang the bell. Impatiently, he waited a few moments. No sound came from within. He felt something ominous, fateful, about the silent mystery that seemed to shroud the old house. For the first time, it occurred to him that Agnes might be in physical danger, as a result of some incautious experiment on the part of Dr. Whiting.

Instinctively, his hand sought the door knob. To his surprise, the door was unlocked. It swung open before him. For a moment he stared, hesitating, into the dark hall revealed beyond. Then, driven by the thought that Agnes might be in danger, he advanced impulsively.

The several doors opening into the hall were closed. The one at the back, he knew, gave admittance to the laboratory. Impelled by some

vague premonition, he hastened toward it down the long hall and threw it open.

As he stepped inside the room, his foot slipped on a spot of something red. Recovering his balance with difficulty, he peered about.

Bending down, Larry briefly examined the red spot on which he had slipped. It was a pool of fresh blood which had not yet darkened. Lying beside it, crimson-splashed, was a revolver. As he picked up the weapon, he cried out in astonishment.

Something had happened to the gun. The trigger guard was torn from it, and the cylinder crushed as if in some resistless grasp; the stock was twisted, and the barrel bent almost into a circle. The revolver had been crumpled by some terrific force—as a soft clay model of it might have been broken by the pressure of a man's hand.

"Crimson shades of Caesar!" he muttered, and dropped the crushed weapon to the floor again.

His eyes swept the silent laboratory.

It was a huge room, taking up all the rear part of the house, from the

first floor to the roof. Gray daylight streamed through a sky-light, twenty feet overhead. The ends of the vast room were cluttered with electrical and chemical apparatus; but Larry's eye was caught at once by a strange and complex device, which loomed across from him, in the center of the floor.

Two pillars of intense light, a ray of crimson flame and another of deeply violet radiance, beat straight down from a complicated array of enormous, oddly shaped electron tubes, of mirrors and lenses and prisms, of coils and whirling disks, which reached almost to the roof. Upright, a yard in diameter and almost a yard apart, the strange columns of light were sharp-edged as two transparent cylinders filled with liquid light of ruby and of amethyst. Each ray poured down upon a circular platform of glass or polished crystal.

Hanging between those motionless cylinders of red and violet light was a strange-looking, greenish globe. A round ball, nearly a yard in diameter, hung between the rays, almost touching them. Its surface was oddly splotched with darker and lighter areas. It was spinning steadily, at a low rate of speed. Larry did not see what held it up; it seemed hanging free, several feet above the crystal platforms.

Reluctantly he withdrew his eyes from the mysterious sphere and looked about the room once more. No, the laboratory was vacant of

human occupants. No one was hidden among the benches that were cluttered with beakers and test tubes and stills, or among the dynamos and transformers in the other end of the room.

A confusion of questions beat through Larry's brain.

What danger could be haunting this quiet laboratory? Was this the blood of Agnes Sterling or the scientist who employed her that was now clotting on the floor? What terrific force had crumpled up the revolver? What had become of Agnes and Dr. Whiting? And of whatever had attacked them? Had Agnes called him after the attack, or before?

Despite himself, his attention was drawn back to the little globe spinning so regularly, floating in the air between the pillars of red and violet flame. Floating alone, like a little world in space, without a visible support, it might be held up by magnetic attraction, he thought.

A tiny planet!

His mind quickened at the idea, and he half forgot the weird mystery gathering about him. He stepped nearer the sphere. It was curiously like a miniature world. The irregular bluish areas would be seas; the

green and the brown spaces land. In some parts, the surface appeared mistily obscured—perhaps, by masses of cloud.

Larry saw an odd-looking lamp, set perhaps ten feet behind the slowly spinning, floating ball, throwing upon it a bright ray of vividly blue light. Half the strange sphere was brilliantly illuminated by it; the rest was in comparative darkness. That blue lamp, it came to Larry, lit the sphere as the sun lights the earth.

"Nonsense!" he muttered. "It's impossible!"

Aroused by the seeming wonder of it, he was drawn nearer the ball. It spun rather slowly, Larry noted, and each rotation consumed several seconds. He could distinguish green patches that might be forests, and thin, silvery lines that looked like rivers, and broad, red-brown areas that must be deserts, and the broad blue stretches that suggested oceans.

"A toy world!" he cried. "A laboratory planet! What an experiment __"

Then his eyes, looking up, caught the glistening, polished lens of a powerful magnifying glass which hung by a black ribbon from a hook on one of the heavy steel beams which supported the huge

mass of silently whirring apparatus.

Eagerly, he unfastened the magnifier. Holding it before his eyes, he bent toward the strange sphere spinning steadily in the air.

"Suffering shades of Caesar!" he ejaculated.

Beneath the lens a world was racing. He could see masses of vividly green forest; vast expanses of bare, cracked, ocherous desert; wastes of smooth blue ocean.

Then he was gazing at—a city?

Larry could not be sure that he had seen correctly. It had slipped very swiftly beneath his lens. But he had a momentary impression of tiny, fantastic buildings, clustered in an elflike city.

A pygmy planet, spinning in the laboratory like a world in the gulf of space! What could it mean? Could it be connected with the strange call from Agnes, with the blood on the floor, with the strange and ominous silence that shrouded the deserted room?

"Oh, Larry!" a clear, familiar voice rang suddenly from the door. "You came!"

Startled, Larry leaped back from the tiny, whirling globe and turned to the door. A girl had come silently into the room. It was Agnes Sterling. Her dark hair was tangled. Her small face was flushed, and her brown eyes were wide with fear! In a white hand, which shook a little, she carried a small, gold-plated automatic pistol.

She ran nervously across the wide floor to Larry, with relief dawning in her eyes.

"I'm so glad you came!" she gasped, panting with excitement. "I started to call you on the phone, but then I was afraid it would kill you if you came! Please be careful! It may come back, any minute! You'd better go away! It just took Dr. Whiting!"

"Wait a minute," Larry put in. "Just one thing at a time. Let's get this straight. To begin with, what is it that might kill me, and that got the doctor?"

"It's terrible!" she gasped, trembling. "A monster! You must go away before it comes back!"

Larry drew a tall stool from beside one of the crowded tables and placed it beside her.

"Don't get excited," he urged. "I'm sure everything will be all right. Just sit down, and tell me about it. The whole story. Just what is going on here, and what happened to Dr. Whiting."

He helped her upon the stool. She looked up at him gratefully, and began to speak in a rapid voice.

"You see that little planet? The monster came from that and carried the doctor back there. And I know it will soon be back for another victim—for sacrifice!"

She had pointed across the great room, toward the strange little globe which hung between the pillars of red and violet light.

"Please go slow!" Larry broke in. "You're too fast for me. Are you trying to tell me that that spinning ball is really a planet?"

Agnes seemed a little more composed, though she was still flushed and breathing rapidly. Her small hand still gripped the bright automatic.

"Yes, it is a planet. The Pygmy Planet, Dr. Whiting called it. He said it was the great experiment of the century. You see, he was testing evolution. We began with the planet, young and hot, and watched it

until it is now almost as old as Mars. We watched the change and development of life upon it. And the rise and decay of a strange civilization. Until now its people are strange things, with human brains in mechanical bodies, worshiping a rusty machine like a god __"

"Go slow!" Larry pleaded again. "I don't see—Did the doctor build —create—that planet himself?"

"Yes. It began with his work on atomic structure. He discovered that certain frequencies of the X-ray—so powerful that they are almost akin to the cosmic ray—have the power of altering electronic orbits. Every atom, you know, is a sort of solar system, with electrons revolving about a proton.

"And these rays would cause the electrons to fall into incredibly smaller orbits, causing vast reduction in the size of the atoms, and in the size of any object which the atoms formed. They would cause anything, living or dead, to shrink to inconceivably microscopic dimensions—or restore it to its former size, depending upon the exact wave-length used.

"And time passes far more swiftly for the tiny objects—probably because the electrons move faster in their smaller orbits. That is what

suggested to Dr. Whiting that he would be able to watch the entire life of a planet, in the laboratory. And so, at first, we experimented merely with solitary specimens or colonies of animals.

"But on the Pygmy Planet, we have watched the life of a world—the whole panorama of evolution—"

"It seems too wonderful!" Larry muttered. "Could Dr. Whiting actually decrease his size and become a dwarf?"

"No trick at all," Agnes assured him. "All you have to do is stand in the violet beam, to shrink. And move over in the red one, when you want to grow. I have been several times with Dr. Whiting to the Pygmy Planet."

"Been—" Larry stopped, breathless with astonishment.

"See the little airplane," Agnes said, pointing under the table.

Larry gasped.

Beneath the table stood a toy airplane. The spread of its glistening, perfect wings was hardly three feet. A wonderful, delicate toy, accurate in every detail of propeller, motor and landing gear, of brace and rudder and aileron. Then he realized that it was no toy at

all, but a faithful miniature of a commercial plane. A complete, tiny copy of one of the latest single-motor, cabin monoplane models.

"It looks like it would fly," he said "a friend of mine his a big one, just like it! Taught me to fly it, last summer vacation. This is the very image of it!"

"It will fly!" Agnes assured him, now composed enough to smile at his amazement. "I have been with the doctor to the Pygmy Planet in it.

"You stand in the violet ray until you're about three inches high," she explained, "and then get into the plane. Then you fly up and into the violet ray at the point where it touches the planet, and remain there while you grow smaller. When you are the right size, all you have to do is drop to the surface, and land. To come away, you rise into the red ray and stay in it till you grow to proper size, when you come down and land."

"You—you've actually done that?" he gasped. "It sounds like a fairy story!"

"Yes, I've done it," she assured him. Then she shuddered apprehensively. "And the things—the machine-monsters, Dr.

Whiting called them—have learned to do it, too. One of them came down the red ray, and attacked him. The doctor had a gun—but what could he do against one of those?" She shivered.

"It carried him back up the violet beam. Just a few minutes ago, I started to phone you. Then I was afraid you would be hurt—"

"Me, hurt?" Larry burst out. "What about you, here alone?"

"It was my business. Dr. Whiting told me there might be danger, when he hired me."

"And now, what can we do?" Larry demanded.

"I don't know," she said slowly. "I'm afraid one of the monsters will be back after a new victim. We could smash the apparatus, but it is too wonderful to be destroyed. And besides, Dr. Whiting may have escaped. He may be alive there, in the deserts!"

"We might fly up, in the little plane," Larry proposed, doubtfully. "I think I could pilot it. If you want—"

The girl's body stiffened. Her brown eyes widened with sudden dread, and her small face went pale. She slipped quickly from the stool, drawing in her breath with a sort of gasp. The hand that

gripped the automatic trembled a little.

"What's the matter?" Larry cried.

"I thought—" she gasped, "I think I see something in the ray! The machine-monster is coming back!"

Her lips tightened. She lifted the little automatic and began to shoot into the pillar of crimson fire beside the tiny, spinning globe.

Larry, watching tensely, saw a curious, bird-like something fluttering about in the red ray, swiftly growing larger!

Deliberately, and pausing to aim carefully for each shot, the girl emptied the little gun at the figure. Her body was rigid, her small face was firmly set, though she was breathing very fast.

A curious numbness had come over Larry. His only physical sensations were the quick hammering of his heart, and a parching dryness in his throat. Terror stiffened him. Though he would not have admitted it, he was paralyzed with fear.

The glittering thing that fluttered about in the crimson ray was not an easy target. When the gun was empty, it seemed still unharmed. And its wings had increased to a span of a foot.

"Too late!" Agnes gasped. "Why didn't we do something?"

Trembling, horror-stricken, she shrank toward Larry.

He was staring at the thing in the pillar of scarlet light.

It had dropped to the crystal disk upon which the red ray fell from the huge, glowing tube above. It stood there, motionless except for the swift increase of its size.

Larry gazed at it, lost in fear and wonder. It was like nothing he had ever seen. What was it that Agnes had said, of machine-monsters, of human brains in mechanical bodies? His brain reeled. He strained his eyes to distinguish the monstrosity more clearly. It was veiled in crimson flame; he could not see it distinctly.

But suddenly, when it was as tall as himself, it sprang out into the room, toward Larry and the shuddering girl. Just off the crystal disk, beyond the scarlet pillar of fire, it paused for long seconds, seeming to regard them with malevolent eyes.

For the first time, Larry could see it plainly.

Its body, or its central part, was a tube of transparent crystal; an upright cylinder, rounded at upper and lower ends. It was nearly a

foot in diameter, and four feet long. It seemed filled with a luminous, purple liquid.

About the cylinder were three bands of greenish, glistening metal. Attached to the lower band were four jointed legs of the same bright green metal, upon which the strange thing stood.

Set in the middle band were two glittering, polished lenses, which seemed to serve as eyes, and Larry felt that they were gazing at him with malevolent menace. Behind the eyes, two wings sprang from the green band. Ingenious, folding wings, of thin plates and bars of green metal.

And from the upper band sprang four slender, glistening, whip-like tentacles, metallic and brilliantly green, two yards in length. They writhed with strange life!

It seemed a long time to Larry that the thing stood, motionless, seeming to stare evilly at them with eye-like lenses. Then, lurching forward a little, it moved toward them upon legs of green metal. And now Larry saw another amazing thing about it.

Floating in the brilliant violet liquid that filled the crystal tube was a gray mass, wrinkled and corrugated. This was divided by deep clefts

into right and left hemispheres, which, in turn were separated into larger upper and smaller lower segments. White filaments ran through the violet liquid from its base toward the three rings or bands of green metal that encircled the cylinder.

In an instant, Larry realized that the gray mass was a human brain. The larger, upper part the cerebrum, the smaller mass at the back the cerebellum. And the white filaments were nerves, by means of which this brain controlled its astounding, mechanical body!

A brain in a machine!

The violet liquid, it came to Larry in his trance of wonder, must take the place of blood, feeding the brain-cells, absorbing waste.

An eternal mind, within a machine! Free from the ills and weaknesses of the body. And devoid, too, of any pity, of any tender feelings. A cold and selfish mind, without emotion—unless it might worship itself or its mechanical body.

It was this monster that had spilt the pool of blood drying on the floor, near the door. And it was these glistening, green, snake-like tentacles that had crumpled the revolver into a broken mass of steel!

Abruptly the machine-monster darted forward, running swiftly upon its four legs of green metal. Slender tentacles reached out toward the shuddering girl at Larry's shoulder.

"Run!" Agnes gasped to him, quickly. "It will kill you!"

The girl tried to push him back.

As she touched him, Larry recovered from his daze of wondering fear. Agnes was in frightful danger, and facing it with quiet courage. He must find a weapon!

Wildly, he looked about him. His eyes fell upon the tall, heavy wooden stool, upon which Agnes had been sitting.

"Get back!" he shouted to her.

He snatched up the stool, and, swinging it over his head, sprang toward the machine of violet-filled crystal and glittering green metal.

"Stop!" Agnes screamed, in a terrified voice. "You can't—"

She had run before him. He seized her arm and swung her back behind him. Then he advanced warily toward the machine-monster, which had paused and seemed to be regarding him with sinister

intentness, through its glistening crystal eye-lenses.

With all his strength, Larry struck at the crystal cylinder, swinging the stool like an ax. A slender, metallic green tentacle whipped out, tore the stool from his hands, and sent it crashing across the room, to splinter into fragments on the opposite wall.

Larry, sent off his balance, staggered toward the glittering machine. As he stumbled against the transparent tube that contained the brain, he clenched his fist to strike futilely at it.

A snake-like metal tentacle wrapped itself about him; he was hurled to the floor, to sprawl grotesquely among broken apparatus.

His head came against the leg of a bench. For a few moments he was dazed. But it seemed only a few seconds to him before he had staggered to his feet, rubbing his bruised head. Anxiously, he peered about the room.

The machine-monster and Agnes were gone!

He stumbled back to the mass of apparatus in the center of the huge laboratory. Intently, he gazed into the upright pillar of crimson flame. Nothing was visible there.

"No, the other!" he gasped. "The violet is the way they went."

He turned to the companion ray of violet radiance that beat straight down on the opposite side of the tiny, whirling planet. And in that motionless torrent of chill violet flame he saw them.

Tiny, already, and swiftly dwindling!

With green wings outspread, the machine-monster was beating swiftly upward through the pillar of purple-blue flame. And close against the crystal tube that contained its brain, was Agnes, held fast by the whip-like tentacles of glistening green metal.

Larry moved to spring after them, into the torrent of violet light. But sudden caution restrained him.

"I'd shrink, too!" he muttered. "And then where would I be? I'd be standing on the glass platform, I guess. And the thing flying off over my head!"

He gazed at the rapidly dwindling forms of Agnes Sterling and her amazing abductor. As it grew smaller, the machine-monster flew higher in the violet beam, until it was opposite the tiny, spinning planet.

The distance between the red and the violet rays was just slightly more than the diameter of the pygmy world. The sphere hung between them, one side of it a fraction of an inch from the red, the other as near the violet.

Opposite the elfin planet, the monster ceased to climb. It hung there in the violet ray, an inch from the surface of the little world.

And still it swiftly dwindled. It was no larger than a fly, and Larry could barely distinguish the form of the girl, helpless in the green tentacles.

Soon she and the monster became a mere greenish speck....
Suddenly they were gone.

For a little time he stood watching the point where they had vanished, watching the red and the violet rays that poured straight down upon the crystal disks, watching the tiny, green-blue planet spinning so steadily between the bright rays.

Abruptly, he recovered from his fascination of wonder.

"What did she say?" he muttered. "Something about the monsters carrying off people to sacrifice to a rusty machine that they worship

as a god! It took her—for that!"

He clenched his fists; his lips became a straight line of determination.

"Then I guess we try a voyage in the little plane. A slim chance, maybe. But decidedly better than none!"

He returned to the table, dropped on his knees, inspected the tiny airplane. A perfect miniature, delicately beautiful; its slim, small wings were bright as silver foil. Carefully, he opened the door and peered into the diminutive cabin. Two minute rifles, several Lilliputian pistols, and boxes of ammunition to match, lay on the rear seat of the plane.

"So we are prepared for war," he remarked, grinning in satisfaction. "And the next trick, I suppose, is to get shrunk to fit the plane. About three inches, she said. Lord, it's a queer thing to think about!"

He got to his feet, walked back to the machine in the center of the room, with its twin pillars of red and violet flame, and the tiny world floating between them. He started to step into the violet ray, then hesitated, shivering involuntarily, like a swimmer about to dive into icy cold water.

Turning back to one of the benches, he picked up a wooden funnel-rack, and tossed it to the crystal disk beneath the violet ray. Slowly it decreased in size, until it had vanished from sight.

"Safe, I suppose," he muttered. "But how do I know when I'm small enough?"

After a moment he picked up a glass bottle which measured about three inches in height, set it on the floor, beside the crystal disk.

"I dive out when I get to be the size of the bottle," he murmured.

With that, he leaped into the violet beam.

He felt no unusual sensation, except one of pleasant, tingling warmth, as if the direct rays of the sun were bearing down upon him. For a moment he feared that his size was not being affected. Then he noticed, not that he appeared to become smaller, but that the laboratory seemed to be growing immensely larger.

The walls seemed to race away from him. The green-blue sphere of the tiny planet which he proposed to visit expanded and drew away above his head.

Abruptly fearful, alarmed at the hugeness of the room, he turned to

look at the bottle he had placed to serve as a standard of size. It had grown with everything else, until it seemed to be about three feet high.

And it was swiftly expanding. It reached to the level of his shoulder. And higher!

He ran to the edge of the crystal disk, which now seemed a floor many yards across, and leaped from its edge. It was a dozen steps to where he had left the bottle. And it was as tall as himself!

He started across the floor of the laboratory toward the table under which the toy plane stood. The incredible immensity of his surroundings awed him strangely. The walls of the room seemed distant, Cyclopean cliffs; the roof was like a sky. Table legs towered up like enormous columns.

It seemed a hundred yards across the strangely rough floor to the plane. As he drew near it, it gave him huge satisfaction to see that it was of normal size, correctly proportioned to his own dimensions.

"Great luck," he muttered, "that I can fly!"

He paused, as he reached the cabin's open door, to wonder at the

astounding fact that a little while ago he had opened that door with a hand larger than his entire body now was.

"I guess this is my day of wonders!" he muttered. "Allah knows I had to wait long enough for it!"

First he examined the weapons in the cabin. There were two heavy sporting rifles and two .45 automatics. There were also two smaller automatics, which, he supposed, had been intended for Agnes' use. And there was abundant ammunition.

Then he inspected the plane. It looked to be in excellent condition in every way. The gasoline and oil tanks were full.

He set about starting the motor, using the plane's inertia starter, which was driven by an electric motor. Soon the engine coughed, sputtered, and gave rise to a roaring, rhythmic note that Larry found musical.

When the motor was warm, he opened the throttle and taxied out from beneath the colossal table, and across the laboratory floor toward the Titanic mechanism in the center of the room. The disk of crystal was set almost flush with the floor, its edge beveled. The plane rolled easily upon it, and out into the Cyclopean pillar of violet

flame.

Once more, Larry felt the sensation that everything about him except the plane itself, was expanding inconceivably in size. Soon the laboratory's walls and roof were lost in hazy blue distance. He could distinguish only the broad, bright field formed by the surface of the crystal disk, with the floor stretching away beyond it like a vast plain. And above, the green-blue sphere of the tiny planet, bright on one side and dark on the other, so that it looked like a half-moon, immensely far-off.

As he waited, he noticed a curious little dial, in a lower corner of the instrument board, which he had not seen at first. One end of its graduated scale was marked, "Earth Normal," the other, "Pygmy Planet Normal." A tiny black needle was creeping slowly across the scale, toward "Pygmy Planet Normal."

"That's how we tell what size we are without having to look at a bottle," he muttered.

When the area of the crystal platform appeared to be about half a square mile, he decided that he would now have sufficient space to spiral up the violet ray toward the planet. If he waited too long to start, the distance would become impossibly great.

He gave the little plane the gun. The motor thundered a throbbing song; the ship rolled smoothly forward over the polished surface, gained flying speed and took the air without a shock.

"Feels good to hold the stick again!" Larry murmured.

Making small circles to keep within the upright pillar of violet radiance, he climbed steadily and as rapidly as possible, keeping his eyes upon the brilliant half-moon of the Pygmy Planet.

The strangest flight in the annals of aviation! He was flying toward a goal that, a few minutes before, he could have touched. Toward a goal that, at the beginning of his flight, was only a few lengths of his plane away. And his size dwindled so rapidly as he flew that the planet seemed to swell and draw away from him.

As Larry and the plane grew smaller, the relative size of the violet ray increased, so there was no longer much danger of flying out of it. It seemed that he flew through a world of violet flame.

He met a curious problem in time. It is evident that time passes faster for a small animal than for a large one, because nerve currents require a shorter time in transit, and all thought and action is consequently speeded up. It took a hundred-foot dinosaur nearly a

second to know that his tail had been pinched. A fly can get under way in time to escape a descending swatter. The Pygmy Planet rotated in a few seconds of earth time; one of its inhabitants might have lived, aged, and died in the duration of a single day in our larger world.

So Larry found that time seemed to pass more rapidly, or rather that the time of the world he had left appeared to move more slowly, as he adventured into smallness. He had been flying, it seemed to him, nearly an hour when he reached the level of the planet's equator.

Now it seemed a vast world, filling half the visible universe. He flew toward it steadily, until he knew, by the fading before him of the violet flame which now seemed to fill all space, that he was near the edge of the ray. And as he flew, he watched the little scale, upon which the black needle was now nearing the line marked, "Pygmy Planet Normal."

Circling slowly, keeping always on the level of the planet's equator, and near the edge of the violet ray, so as to be as close as possible to his landing place when he reached the proper size, he watched the creeping black needle.

Too, he scanned with eager eyes the planet floating before him. Bare,

red deserts; narrow strips of green vegetation; shrunken, blue oceans; silvery lines of rivers, passed in fascinating panorama beneath his eyes. The rate of the planet's spinning seemed continually to lessen, with the changing of his own sense of time.

Agnes! Larry thought of her with a curious, eager pain in his heart. She was somewhere on that strange, ancient world, a prisoner of weird machine-monsters! Intended victim of a grotesque sacrificial ceremony!

Could he find her, in the vastness of an unfamiliar world? And having found her, would there be a chance to rescue her from her hideous captors? The project seemed insane. But Larry felt a queer, unfamiliar urge, which, he knew, would drive him on until he had discovered and saved her—or until he was dead.

At last, when it seemed to Larry nearly three hours since he had begun this amazing flight, the crawling ebon needle reached the mark, "Pygmy Planet Normal."

He flew out of the wall of violet flame toward the planet's surface. Before, the distance between the planet and the ray's edge had seemed only the fraction of an inch. Now it appeared to be many miles.

Abruptly the Pygmy Planet, which had seemed to be beside him, appeared to swing about, so that it was beneath him. He knew that it was a change merely in his sensations. He was feeling the gravitation of the new world. It was pulling him toward it!

He cut the throttle, and settled the plane into a long glide, a glide that was to end upon the surface of a new planet!

In what seemed half an hour more, Larry had made a safe landing upon the Pygmy Planet. He had come down upon a stretch of fairly smooth, red, sandy desert, which seemed to stretch illimitably toward the rising sun, which direction Larry instinctively termed "east."

To the "west" was a line of dull green—evidently the vegetation along a stream. The ocher desert was scattered with sparse clumps of reddish, spiky scrub. Larry taxied the plane into one of those thickets. Finding canvas and rope in the cabin, he staked down the machine, and muffled the motor.

Then, selecting a rifle and a heavy automatic from the weapons in the cabin, and filling his pockets with extra ammunition, he left the plane and set out with brisk steps toward the green line of vegetation.

"I'll follow along the river," he reasoned. "It may lead me somewhere and it will show the way back to the plane. I may come across something in the way of a clue. Can't go exploring by air, or I'll burn up all the gas and be stranded here!"

To his surprise, the water course proved to be an ancient canal, walled with crumbling masonry. Its channel was choked with mud and thorny, thick-leaved desert shrubs of unfamiliar variety; but a feeble current still flowed along it.

After some reflection, Larry set out along the banks of the canal.

He followed it for two days.

Curious straight bars of light were visible across the sky—a band of violet in the morning; one of crimson at evening. Their apparent motion was in the same direction as that of the sun. The bars of light puzzled him considerably before it occurred to him that they must be the red and violet rays.

"So you wait till evening, and then fly up into the red ray, to go home," he muttered. "But I may not need that information," he added grimly. "Seems to be a pretty big job to search a planet on foot, for one person. And I'm not going back without Agnes!"

In the afternoon of the second day, he came within view of a city. He could discern vast, imposing walls and towers of dark stone. It stood in the barren red desert, far back from the green line of the old canal. Larry left the canal and started wearily across toward it. He had covered several miles of the distance before he saw that the lofty towers were falling, the magnificent walls crumbling. The city was ruined, dead, deserted!

The realization brought him a great flood of despair. He had hoped to find people—friends, from whom he might get food, and information about this unfamiliar planet. But the city was dead.

Larry was standing there, in the midst of the vast red plain between ruined city and ruined canal. Tired, hungry, lonely and hopeless. He was looking up at the white "sun," trying to comfort himself with the thought that the brilliant luminary was merely a queer blue lamp, that he was upon a tiny experimental world in a laboratory. But the thought brought him no relief; only confusion and a sense of incredulity.

Then he saw the machine-monster.

A glittering, winged thing of crystal and green metal, identical with the one he had encountered in the laboratory. It must already have

seen him, for it was dropping swiftly toward him.

Larry started to run, took a few staggering steps. Then he recalled the heavy rifle slung over his shoulder. Moving with desperate haste, he got it into his hands and raised it just as the monster dropped to the red sand a dozen yards away from him.

Steadily he covered the crystal cylinder within which the thing's brain floated in luminous violet liquid. His finger tightened on the trigger, ready to send a heavy bullet crashing into it. Then he paused, swore softly, lowered the gun.

"If I kill it," he murmured, "I may never find Agnes. And if I let it carry me off, it may take me where she is."

He walked toward the monster, across the red sand.

It stood uncertainly upon green metal legs, seeming to stare at him strangely with eye-like lenses. Its wings of thin green metal plates, were folded; its four green tentacles were twitching oddly.

Abruptly, it sprang upon him.

A green tentacle seized the rifle and snatched it from his hands. He felt the automatic pistol and the ammunition being removed from his

pockets.

Then, firmly held in the flexible arms of green metal, he was lifted against the cylinder of violet liquid. The monster spread its broad emerald wings, and Larry was swiftly borne into the air.

In a few moments the wide ruins of the ancient city were spread below, with the green line of the choked canal cutting the infinite red waste of the desert beyond it.

The monster flew westward.

For a considerable time, nothing save barren, ocherous desert was in view. Then Larry's weird captor flew near a strange city. A city of green metal. The buildings were most fantastic—pyramids of green, crowned with enormous, glistening spheres of emerald metal. An impassable wall surrounding the city.

Larry had expected the monster to drop into the city. But it carried him on, and finally settled to the ground several miles beyond. The green tentacles released him, as the thing landed, and he sprawled beside it, dizzy after his strange flight.

As Larry staggered uncertainly to his feet, he saw that the monster

had released him in an open pen. It was a square area, nearly fifty yards on each side, and fenced with thin posts or rods of green metal, perhaps twenty feet high. Set very close together, and sharply pointed at the top, they formed a barrier apparently insurmountable.

In the center of the pen was a huge and strange machine, built of green metal. It looked very worn and ancient; it was covered with patches of bluish rust or corrosion. At first it looked quite strange to Larry; then he was struck by a vaguely familiar quality about it. Looking closer, he realized that it was a colossal steam hammer!

Its design, of course, was unfamiliar. But in the vast, corroded frame he quickly picked out a steam chest, cylinder, and the great hammer, weighing many tons.

He gasped when his eyes went to the anvil.

A man was chained across it.

A man in torn, grimy clothing, fastened with fetters of green metal upon wrists and ankles, so that his body was stretched beneath the massive hammer. He seemed to be unconscious; upon his head, which was turned toward Larry, was a red and swollen bruise.

The monster which had dropped Larry within the pen rose again into the air. And Larry started forward, trying to remember just what Agnes had told him of a machine to which the monsters sacrificed.

This must be the machine—this ancient steam hammer!

As he moved forward, Agnes came into view.

She walked around the massive base of the great machine, carrying a bowl filled with a fragrant brown liquid. She stopped at sight of Larry, and uttered a little cry. The bowl fell from her hands, and the fragrant liquid splashed out on the ground. Her brown eyes went wide with delighted surprise; then a look of pain came into them.

"Larry, Larry!" she cried. "Why did you come?"

"To get you," he answered, trying to speak as lightly as he could. "And the best way I knew to find you was to let one of the monsters bring me. Cheer up!" But even to himself, his voice had a tone of discouragement.

She smiled wanly. "I don't see anything to be cheerful about." Her small face was set and a little white. "Dr. Whiting is going to be smashed under the hammer of this dreadful machine, whenever the

steam is up. Then it is my turn. And yours. That's nothing to laugh about."

"But we aren't smashed yet!" Larry insisted.

"By the way, what was that in the bowl?" he went on, glancing down. "I forgot to bring lunch." He grinned.

She looked down, startled.

"Oh. Dr. Whiting's soup. Poor fellow, I'm afraid he'll never awake to eat it. There's plenty more. Come around here."

She picked up the bowl and led him around the base of the machine; then she filled the bowl again with the fragrant, red-brown liquid, from a tall urn of green metal. Larry took the dish eagerly and gulped down the rather insipid and tasteless food.

"And the monsters worship this old steam hammer?" he inquired, when his hunger was appeased.

"Yes. I think the thing is worked by steam generated by volcanic heat. Anyhow, there isn't any boiler, and the steam pipe comes up out of the ground. You can see that. So it runs on, without any attention —though I guess the heat is dying down, since it is several days

between blows of the hammer.

"And I guess the monsters have forgotten how they used to rule machines. They seem to have depended upon machines, even giving up their own bodies for mechanical ones, until the machine rules them.

"And when this old hammer kept pounding on through the ages, using volcanic steam, I guess they got to considering it alive. They began to regard it as a sort of god. And when they got the idea of giving it sacrifices, it was natural enough to place the victims under the hammer."

They went back to Dr. Whiting who was chained across the anvil. He was still breathing, but unconscious. He had been injured in a struggle with the monsters, and his body was much emaciated. Agnes explained that he had been a prisoner in the pen for many months of the time of this world, waiting his turn to die; she said that the monsters had just completed the extermination of another race upon the Pygmy Planet, and were just turning to the greater world for victims.

Larry noticed that the great hammer was slowly rising in its guides, as the pressure of the steam from the planet's interior increased. In a

few hours—just at sunset—it reached the top of its stroke.

The air above the pen was suddenly filled with glittering swarms of the green-winged monsters, sweeping slowly about, in measured flight, with strange order in their masses. They had come to witness the sacrifice!

With an explosive rush of steam, the hammer came down!

The ground trembled beneath the terrific blow; the roaring of escaping steam and the crash of the impact were almost deafening. A heavy white cloud shrouded the corroded green machine.

When the hammer slowly lifted, only a red smear was left....

Agnes had shrunk, trembling, against Larry's shoulder. He had put his arms about her and was holding her almost fiercely.

"My turn next," she whispered. "And don't try to fight them. It will only make them hurt you!"

"I can't let them take you, Agnes!" Larry cried, in an agonized tone. And the words seemed to leap out, of themselves, "Because I love you!"

"You do?" Agnes cried, in a thin, choking voice, pressing herself against him. "Ever since the first time you came to the laboratory—"

A score of the monster forms of violet-filled crystal and gleaming green metal had dropped into the pen. They tore Agnes from Larry's arms, hurling him roughly to the ground, at the bottom of the green metal fence. For some time he was unconscious.

When he had staggered painfully to his feet, it was night. The monsters were gone; the starless sky was black and empty. Calling out weakly, and stumbling about the pen, he found Agnes. She was chained where Dr. Whiting had been.

She was conscious, unharmed. For a time they talked a little, exchanging broken, incoherent phrases. Then they went to sleep, lying on the anvil, beneath that mighty hammer that was slowly lifting to strike another fearful blow.

When the "sun" had risen again, Larry brought Agnes some of the brown soup from the metal urn, which had been filled again. Then, when he had satisfied himself, he started clambering up the massive frame of the hammer.

If he could put it out of commission!

It was a difficult task. He slipped back many times, and finally had to choose another place to make the ascent. Twice he slipped and almost fell from a considerable height. But finally he reached the massive wheel of the valve which seemed to control the admission of steam into the cylinder above the hammer.

If he could but close that, the steam would be confined in the chest below. And when the pressure reached a certain point, something should happen!

The valve was not easy to turn; it seemed fixed with the corrosion of ages. For hours Larry wrestled with it. Then he left it, realizing that he must find something to use for a hammer. A vigorous search of the pen's hard earth floor failed to reveal any stone that would do. He turned his attention to the machine, and presently saw a slender projecting lever, high up on the side of the vast frame, which looked as if it had been weakened by corrosion. After a perilous climb, he reached the bar of green metal and swung his weight upon it. It broke, and he plunged to the ground with the bar in his hands.

Clambering up once more to the great valve, he hammered it until the rust that stiffened it was loosened. Then he struggled with the valve until it was closed.

"We'll see what happens!" he muttered.

Returning to the ground, he set to work to break the green metal fetters upon Agnes' wrists and ankles, using the broken lever as hammer and file.

For the greater part of six days he toiled at that task, while the great hammer rose slowly. But the green metal seemed very hard. One arm was free at the end of the second day, the other on the fourth. He had one ankle loose on the morning of the sixth day. But as evening came on, and the great hammer reached the top of its stroke, the fourth chain still defied him.

Before sunset, a swarm of the monsters appeared, wheeling on green wings. He was forced to leave the work, hiding his improvised file.

Agnes still lay across the anvil, to conceal from the monsters the fact that the chains were broken. Larry sat close beside her, nursing hands that were blistered and sore from his days of filing at the chains.

A sudden clatter came from the huge mechanism above them, and a sharp hiss of steam, which became louder.

"It works!" Larry whispered to Agnes. "The old valve held, and the steam can't get into the cylinder to smash us! But Allah knows what will happen when the pressure rises in that old steam chest!"

Darkness came. Dusk swallowed the wheeling machine-monsters. All night Larry and Agnes waited silently, together on the great anvil, listening to the hissing of steam from above, which was slowly becoming a shrill monotonous scream; monotonous, always higher, shriller.

The "sun" rose again. Still the green-winged monsters wheeled about. They came in glittering swarms, thousands of them. They came nearer the machine now, and flew about more swiftly, is if excited.

Then it happened.

There was a roar like thunder, and a colossal, bellowing explosion. The air was filled suddenly with scalding steam, and with screaming fragments of the bursting steam chest. In the midst of it all, Larry felt a crushing blow upon the head. And a blanket of darkness fell upon him....

"The monsters are all gone, darling," Agnes' voice reached him. "As

though they were very much frightened. And a piece of the old hammer hit the fence and knocked a hole in it. You must go. Leave me—"

"Leave you?" Larry groaned, struggling to sit up. "Not a bit of it!" He touched his head gingerly, felt a swollen bruise.

Collecting a few fragments of the wrecked machine, to serve as tools, he fell to work again upon Agnes' remaining chain. Already he had cut a deep groove in it. Two hours later, it was broken.

Carrying the metal urn of brownish liquid, they crept out through the hole in the fence, which had been torn by the flying fragment of a broken casting of green metal. They left the wreck of the machine which a strange race had worshiped as a bloody god and hurried furtively into the desert of red sand.

Making a wide circuit about the fantastic city of green metal, which Larry had seen from the air, they struck out eastward across the desolate ocherous waste. The food in the urn, eaten sparingly, lasted until the end of the eighth day.

On the morning of the ninth, they came in view of the green line of the ancient canal. It was hours later that they staggered weakly over

its wall of crumbling masonry, clambered down into the muddy, weed-grown channel, and drank thirstily of green, tepid water.

Larry found his old trail, beyond the canal. They followed it back. In the middle of the afternoon they stumbled up to the thicket of spiky desert growth, in which Larry had hidden the plane.

The machine was undamaged.

Before sunset, Larry had removed the stake ropes, slipped the canvas cover from the motor, turned the plane around, inspected it, and examined the strip of smooth, hard red sand upon which he had landed.

Agnes pointed out the dim band of crimson across the sky, from north to south, slowly rising toward the zenith.

"That's the red ray," she said. "We fly into it."

"And a happy moment when we do," Larry rejoined.

He roused the motor to life.

As the bar of crimson light neared the zenith, the plane rolled forward across the sand and took off. Climbing steeply, Larry

anxiously watched the approach of the red band. The gravitation of the Pygmy Planet seemed to diminish as he gained altitude, until presently he could fly vertically from it, without circling at all. He set the bow toward the scarlet bar across the sky before him.

And suddenly he was flying through ruby flame.

His eyes went to the little scale at the corner of the instrument board. He saw the little ebon needle waver, leave the mark designated "Pygmy Planet Normal" and start toward "Earth Normal."

For what seemed a long time, he was wheeling down the crimson ray. A few times he looked back at Agnes, in the rear seat. She had gone to sleep.

Then a vast, circular field was below—the crystal platform.

Larry landed the plane upon it, taxied to the center and stopped there, with the motor idling. The laboratory, taking shape in the blue abyss about him, seemed to contract swiftly.

Presently the plane covered most of the crystal disk. He taxied quickly off, stopped on the floor nearby, and cut the ignition. Agnes woke. Together they clambered from the plane's cabin and walked

back into the crimson ray.

Once more the vast spaces of the room seemed to shrink, until it looked familiar once more. The Pygmy Planet, and the huge machine looming ever them, dwindled to natural size.

Agnes, watching a scale on the frame of the mechanism, which Larry had not noticed, leaped suddenly from the red ray, drawing him with her.

"We don't want to be giants!" she laughed.

Larry drew a deep breath, and looked about him. Once more he was in his own world, and surveying it in his normal size. He became aware of Agnes standing close against him. He suddenly took her in his arms and kissed her.

"Wait a minute," she objected, slipping quickly from his arms. "What are we going to do about the Pygmy Planet? Those monsters might come again, even if you did wreck their god. And Dr. Whiting, poor fellow—But we mustn't let those monsters come back!"

Larry doubled up a brown fist and drove it with all his strength against the little globe that spun so steadily between the twin,

upright cylinders of crimson and of violet flame. His hand went deep into it. And it swung from its position, hung unsteadily a moment, and then crashed to the laboratory floor. It was crushed like a ball of soft brown mud. It spattered.

"Now I guess they won't come back," Agnes said. "A pity to spoil all Dr. Whiting's work, though."

Larry was standing motionless, holding up his fist and looking at it oddly. "I smashed a planet! Think of it. I smashed a planet! Just the other—why it was just this evening, at the office, I was wishing for something to happen!"

127 Wandl, The Invader by Ray Cummings

Summary goes here

Aproximate word count: 46,600

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

"It's a planet," I said. "A little world."

"How little?" Venza demanded.

"One-fifth the mass of the Moon. That's what they've calculated now."

"And how far is it away?" Anita asked. "I heard a newscaster say yesterday...."

"Newscasters!" Venza broke in scornfully. "Say, you can take what they tell you about any danger or trouble and cut it in half; and even then you'll be on the gloomy side. See here, Gregg Haljan."

"I'm not giving you newscasters' blare," I retorted. Venza's extravagant vehemence was always refreshing. The Venus girl glared at me. I added: "Anita mentioned newscasters; I didn't."

Anita was in no mood for smiling. "Tell us, Gregg." She sat upright and tense, her chin cupped in her hands. "Tell us."

"For a fact, they don't know much about it yet. You can call it a planet, a wanderer."

"I should say it was a wanderer!" Venza exclaimed. "Coming from heaven knows where beyond the stars, swimming in here like a comet."

"They calculated its distance yesterday at some sixty-five million miles from Earth," I said. "It isn't so far beyond the orbit of Mars, coming diagonally and heading very nearly for the Sun. But it's not a comet."

The thing was indeed inexplicable; for many weeks now, astronomers had been studying it. This was early summer of the year 2070 A.D. All of us had recently returned from those extraordinary events I have already recounted, when we came close to losing Johnny Grantline's radiactum treasure on the Moon, and our lives as

well. My ship, the Planetara, in the astronomical seasons when the Earth, Mars, and Venus were within comfortable traveling distances of each other, had carried mail and passengers from Greater New York to Ferrok-Shahn, of the Martian Union, and to Grebhar, of the Venus Free State. Now it was wrecked on the Moon.

(See "Brigands of the Moon", Ace Book, D-324)

I had been under navigating officer of the Planetara. Upon her, I had met Anita Prince, whose only living relative, her brother, was among those killed in the struggle with the brigands; Anita and I were soon to marry, we hoped.

I was waiting now in Greater New York upon the decision of the Line officials regarding another spaceship. Perhaps I would have command of it, since Captain Carter of the Planetara had been killed.

It was a month or so before that adventure, April, 2070, that this mysterious visitor from interstellar space first appeared upon our astronomical horizon. A little thing, at first, a mere unusual dot, a pinpoint on a photo-electric star diagram which should not have been there. It occasioned no comment at the time, save that some thought it might be another planet beyond Pluto; but this was not taken seriously enough to get into the newscasts. None of us had

heard about it as late as May, when the Planetara set out on what was to be her final voyage.

Presently, it was seen that the object could not be a planet of our solar system; Coming in at tremendous speed, it daily changed its aspect, gathering velocity until soon it was not a dot, but a streak on every diagram-plate.

In a week or so the thing passed from an astronomical curiosity to an item of public news. And now, early in June, when it had cut through the orbit of Jupiter and was approaching that of Mars, fear was growing. The visitor was a menace. No astronomical body could come among us, with a mass as great as a fifth of the Moon, without causing trouble.

The newscasters, with a ready skill for lurid possibilities, were blaring of all sorts of horrible events impending.

I told the girls all I knew of the approaching wanderer. The density was similar to that of Earth. The oncoming velocity and the calculated elements of its orbit now were such that within a few weeks more the new planet would round our Sun and presumably head outward again. It would pass within a few million miles of us, causing a disturbance to Earth's orbit, even a change of the

inclination of our axis, affecting our tides and our climate.

"So I've heard," Venza interrupted me. "They say that, and then they stop. Why can't a newscaster tell you what is so mysterious?"

"For a very good reason, Venza: because you can't throw people into a panic. This whole thing, up to today, has been withheld from the public of Earth and Venus. The Martian Union tried to withhold it, but could not. Every heliogram between the worlds is censored."

"And still," said Venza sarcastically, "you don't tell us what is so mysterious about this wanderer."

"For one thing," I said, "it changes its direction. No normal heavenly body does that. They calculated the elements of its orbit last April. They've done it twenty times since, and every time the projected orbit is different. Just a little at first, but last week the accursed thing actually took a sudden turn, as though it were a spaceship."

The girls stared at me. "What does that mean?" Anita asked.

"They're beginning to make wild guesses but we won't go into that."

"What else is mysterious?" Venza demanded.

"The thing isn't normally visible."

Venza shifted her silk-sheathed legs. "Don't talk in code!"

"Not normally visible," I repeated. "A world one-fifth as large as the Moon could be seen plainly by our 'scopes when well beyond Pluto. It's now between Jupiter and Mars, invisible to the naked eye, of course, but still it's not very far away. I've been out there myself. With instruments, we ought to be able to see its surface; see whether it has land and water, inhabitants perhaps. You should be able to distinguish an object on its surface as large as a city, but you can't."

"Why not?" asked Anita. "Are the clouds too thick? What causes it?"

"They don't even know that," I retorted. "There is something abnormal about the light-waves coming from it. Not exactly blurred, but a distortion, a fading. It's some abnormality of the light-waves."

A swift rapping on our door-grid interrupted me, and Snap Dean burst in.

"Hola-lo, everybody! Is it a conference? You look so solemn."

He dashed across the room, kissed Venza, pretended that he was about to kiss Anita, and winked at me. He was a dynamic little

fellow, small, wiry, red-headed and freckle-faced, and had been the radio-helio operator of the ill-fated Planetara. He was a perfect match for Venza, for all the millions of miles that separated their native lands. Venza, too was small and slim, her manner as readily jocular as his.

"And where have you been?" Venza demanded.

"Me? My private life is my own, so far. We're not married yet, since you insist on us going to Grebhar for the ceremony."

"Do stop it," protested Anita. "We've been talking of...."

"I know very well what you've been talking about. Everybody is. I've got news for you, Gregg." He went abruptly solemn and lowered his voice. "Halsey wants to see us, right away."

I regarded him blankly and my mind swept back. No more than a few short weeks ago Detective-Colonel Halsey of Divisional Headquarters here in Greater New York had sent for us, and we had been precipitated into the Grantline affair. "Halsey!" I burst out.

"Easy, Gregg." Snap cast a vague look around Anita's draped apartment. An open window was beside us, leading to a tiny catwalk

balcony. It was moonlit now, and two hundred feet above the pedestrian viaduct.

But Snap continued to frown. "Easy, I tell you. Why shout about Halsey? The air can have ears."

Venza moved and closed and sealed the window.

"What is it?" I asked, more softly.

But Snap was not satisfied. "Anita, do you have a complete isolation barrage for this room?"

"Of course I haven't, Snap."

"Well, Gregg do you have a detector with you?"

I had none. Snap produced his little coil and indicator dial. "It's out of order, but let's see now. Shove over that chair, Gregg."

He disconnected one of the room's tube-lights and contacted with the cathode. It was a makeshift method, but as he dropped to the floor, uncoiling a little length of his wire for an external pick-up, we saw that the thing worked. The pointer on the dial-face was swaying.

"Gregg!" he muttered. "Look at that. Didn't I tell you?"

The pointer quivered in positive reaction. An eavesdropping ray was upon us.

Anita gasped, "I had no idea!"

"No, but I did." Snap added softly. "No one very close."

He and I carried the detector to the length of the hall. The indicator went nearer normal. "It must be the other way," I whispered.

We went to the moonlit balcony. "Way down there on the pedestrian arcade," I said.

"We'll soon fix that," Snap said.

Inside the room, we made connection with a newscaster's blaring voice. Under cover of it we could talk. Snap gathered us close around him.

"Halsey has something important, and it's about this interstellar invader. It all connects. His office paged me on a public mirror. I happened to see it at Park-Circle 40. When I answered it, Halsey's man wanted me to talk in code. I can't talk in code; I have enough to

worry about with the interplanetary helios. Then they sent me to an official booth, where I got examined for positive legal identification, and then they put me on the official split-wave length. After all of which precautions I was told to be at Halsey's office tonight at midnight, and told a few other things."

"What?" demanded Venza breathlessly.

"Only hints. Why take chances, by repeating them now?"

"You said he wants me, too?" I put in.

"Yes. You and Venza. We've got to get into his office secretly, by the vacuum cylinders. We're to meet a man from his office at the Eighth Postal switch-station."

"Venza?" Anita said sharply. "What in the universe can he want with Venza? If she's going, I'm going too!"

Snap gazed at her and grinned. "That sounds like a logical deduction. Naturally he must want you; that's why he said Venza."

"I'm going," Anita insisted.

We left half an hour before midnight. The girls were both in gray,

with long capes. We took the public monorail into the mid-Manhattan section under the city roof of the business district, and into the Eighth Postal switch-station where the sleek bronze cylinders came tumbling out of the vacuum ports to be re-routed and dispatched again.

A man was on the lookout for us. "Daniel Dean and party?"

"Yes. We were ordered here."

The detective gazed at the girls and at me. "It was three, Dean."

"And now it's four," said Snap cheerfully. "The extra one is Miss Anita Prince. Ever heard of her?"

He had indeed. "All right," he said. "If you and Haljan say so."

We were put into one of the oversized mail cylinders and routed through the tubes like sacks of recorded letters; in ten minutes, with a thump that knocked the breath out of all of us, we were in the switch-rack of Halsey's outer office.

We clambered from the cylinder. Our guide led us down one of the gloomy metal corridors. It echoed with our tread.

A door lifted.

"Daniel Dean and party."

The guard stood aside. "Come in."

The door slid down behind us. We advanced into the small blue-lit apartment, steel-lined like a vault.

Colonel Halsey sat at his desk, with a few papers before him and a bank of instrument controls at his elbow. He pushed his audiphone and mirror-grid to one side.

"Sit down, please." He gave us each the benefit of a welcoming smile, and his gaze finished upon Anita.

"I came because you sent for Venza," Anita said quickly. "Please, Colonel Halsey, let me stay. I thought, whatever you want her for, you might need me, too."

"Quite so, Miss Prince. Perhaps I shall." It seemed that in his mind were many of the thoughts thronging my own, for he added: "Haljan, I recall I sent for you like this once before. I hope this may be a more auspicious occasion."

"So do I, sir."

Snap said, "We've been afraid hardly to do more than a whisper. But you're insulated here, and we're mighty curious."

Halsey nodded. "I can talk freely to you, and yet I cannot." His gaze went to Venza. "It is you in whom I am most interested."

"Me? You flatter me, Colonel Halsey." She sat gracefully reclining in the metal chair before his desk, seeming small as a child between its big, broad arms. Her long gray skirt had parted to display her shapely, gray-satined legs. She had thrown off the hood of her cloak. Her thick black hair was coiled in a knot low at the back of her neck; her carmine lips bore an alluring smile. It was all instinctive. To this girl from Venus it came as naturally as she breathed.

Halsey's gray eyes twinkled. "Do not look at me quite like that, Miss Venza, or I shall forget what I have to say. You would get the better of me; I'm glad you're not a criminal."

"So am I," she declared. "What can I do for you, Colonel Halsey?"

His smile faded at once. His glance included us all. "Just this. There is a man here in Greater New York, a Martian whom they call Set

Molo. He has a younger sister, Setta Meka. Have any of you heard of them?"

We had not. Halsey went on, slowly now, apparently choosing his words with the greatest care. "There are things that I can tell you and there are things that I cannot."

"Why not?" asked Venza.

"My dear, for one thing, if you are going to help me you can do it best by not knowing too much. For another, I have my orders; this thing concerns the very highest authorities, not only of the U.S.W., but in Ferrok-Shahn and Grebhar too."

He paused, but none of us spoke. Then Halsey said quietly, "Well, this Martian and his sister are here now in Greater New York. They have some secret. They are engaged in some activity, and I want to find out what it is. I have picked up only little parts of it."

He stopped; and out of the silence Snap said, "If you don't mind, Colonel Halsey, it seems to me you are mostly talking in code."

"I'm not, but I'm trying to tell you as little as possible. You, Miss Venza, need only understand this: the Martian, Molo, must be

induced to give you some idea of what he is doing here."

"And I am to induce him?" Venza asked calmly.

"That is my idea." The faint shadow of a smile swept Halsey's thin, intent face. "My dear, you are a girl of Venus. More than that, you have far more than your normal share of wits and brains."

It did not make Venza smile. She sat tense now, with her dark-eyed gaze fastened on Halsey's face. Anita, equally breathless, reached over and gripped her hand.

Then Venza said slowly, "I realize, Colonel Halsey, that this is something vital."

"As vital, my child, as it could be." He drew a long breath. "I want you to understand I am doing my duty. Doing, what seems the best thing, not for you, perhaps, but for the world."

I seemed to see into his mind at that moment. He might have been a father, sending a daughter into danger.

"I need not disguise the danger. I have lost a dozen men." He lighted a cigarette. "I don't seem to be able to frighten you?"

"No," she said. And I heard Anita murmur, "Oh, Venza!"

"But you frighten me," said Snap. "Colonel, look here; you know I'm going to marry this girl very soon."

"Yes, I know. You'll have to consider this a sacrifice, a voluntary descent into danger, for a great cause in a great crisis. You four have just come out of a very considerable danger. We know of what stuff you are made, all of you."

He smiled again. "Perhaps that prominence is unfortunate for you, but let me settle it now. Is there any one of you who will not take my orders and trust my judgement of what is best? And do it, if need be, blindly? Will you offer yourselves to me?"

We gazed at each other. Both the girls instantly murmured, "Yes."

"Yes," I said at last. It was not too hard for me, for I thought I was yielding him Venza, not Anita.

Snap was very pale. He stared from one to the other of us.

"Yes," he said finally. "But Colonel, surely you can tell us more."

Halsey tossed his cigarette away. "I will tell you as much as I think

best. These Martians, Molo and his sister, do not know of Venza; at least, I think that they do not. They apparently have not been here very long. How they got here, we don't know. There was no passenger or freight ship. In Ferrok-Shahn, they have a dubious reputation at best; but I won't go into that.

"Venza, I will show you these Martians and the rest depends upon you. There is a mystery; you will find out what it is."

He reached for his inter-office audiphone. "I want to locate the Martian Set Molo. Francis, Staff X2, has it in charge."

The audible connection came in a moment. "Francis?"

We could hear the answering microphonic voice, "Yes Colonel."

"Is the fellow in a public place by any chance?"

"In the Red Spark Cafe, Colonel. With his sister and a party."

"Good enough. The Red Spark has an image-finder. Have you visual connection?"

"Yes, the whole room; they have a dozen finders."

"Use a magnifier. Get me the closest view you can."

"It's done, Colonel. I did it just in case you called."

"Connect it."

In a moment our mirror-grid was glowing with the two-foot square image of the interior of the Red Spark Cafe. I knew the place by reputation: a fashionable, more or less disreputable eating, drinking and dancing restaurant, where money and alcholite flowed freely. The patrons were successful criminals of the three worlds, intermingled with thrilled, respectable tourists who hoped they would see something really evil.

The Red Spark was not far from Halsey's office; it was perched high in a break of the city roof, almost directly over Park-Circle 29.

"There he is," said Halsey.

We crowded around his desk. The image showed the interior of a large oval room, balconied and terraced; a dais dance-floor, raised high in the center with three professional couples gyrating there; and beneath them the public dance-grid, slowly rotating on its central axis. A hundred or so couples were dancing. The lower floor was

crowded with dining tables; others were upon the little catwalk balconies, and still others in the terraced nooks and side niches, half-enshrouded, half-revealed by colored draperies.

The image now was silent, for Halsey was not bothering with audio connection. But it was a riot of color, flashing colored floodlights bathing the dancers in vivid tints; and there were twinkling spots of colored tube-lights on all the tables. I saw, too, the blank rectangles of darkness against the walls which marked the private dining rooms, insulated against sight and sound. Here one might go for frivolous indiscretion, or for conspiracy, perhaps, and be as secure from interruption as we were, here in Halsey's office.

Venza asked eagerly, "Which is he?"

"Over there on the third terrace to the left. That table. There seem to be six of them in the party."

We heard Francis' voice; he was in Halsey's lower Manhattan office, with this same image before him. "We'll get a closer view."

The table in question was no more than a square inch on our image. We could see an apparently gay party of men and women. One of the couples was gigantic, a Martian man and woman, obviously. The

others seemed to be Earth or Venus people.

Francis' voice added: "I've got an audio magnifier on them. Foley's been listening for an hour. Nice, clear English. Much good it does us; this fellow is as cautious as a director of the lower air-lane. Here's your near-look."

Our image shifted to another view. The lens-eye with which we were connected now gave us a view directly over the Martian's table. We were looking down diagonally upon the table, at a distance of no more than ten feet.

There were three Earthwomen in the party. There was nothing peculiar about them. They were rather handsome, dissolute in appearance, all of them obviously befuddled by alcholite. There was a man who could have been Anglo-Saxon. A wastrel, probably, with more money than wit; he wore a black dinner suit edged with white.

Our attention focussed upon the other two. They were tall, as are all Martians. The young woman, Setta Meka, seemed perhaps twenty or twenty-five years of age, by Earth reckoning, in stature perhaps very nearly my own height, which is six feet two. It is difficult to tell a Martian's age, but she was very handsome, even by Earth standards; and in Ferrok-Shahn she would be considered a beauty. Her gray-

black hair was parted and tied at the back with a plaited metal rope. Her short dark cloak, so luminous a fabric that it caught and reflected the sheen of all the gaudy restaurant lights, was parted, its ends thrown back over her shoulders. Beneath it she wore the characteristic Martian leather jacket, and short, wide leather trousers ornamented with spun metal fringes and tassels. Most Martian women have an amazonian aspect, but I saw now that Setta Meka was an exception.

Her brother, who sat beside her, was a full seven feet or more. A hulking sort of fellow, far less spindly than most of his race, he might have come from the polar outposts beyond the Martian Union. He was bare-headed, his gray-black hair clipped close upon a round bullet head, with the familiar Martian round eyes.

I gazed into the face of Molo, as momentarily he turned his head. It was a rough-hewn, strongly masculine face with a hawk-like nose, bushy black brows frowning above deepset round eyes. The face of a keen scoundrel, I could not doubt, though the smooth-plucked gray skin was flushed now with alcholite, and the wide, thin-lipped mouth was leering at the woman across the table from him.

Like his sister, he had thrown back his cloak, disclosing a brawny, powerful figure, leather clad, with a wide belt of dangling

ornaments, some of which probably were weapons.

How long we gazed at this silent colored image of the restaurant table I do not know. I was aware of Halsey's quiet voice: "Look him over, Miss Venza. It depends on you."

Another interval passed. It seemed, as we watched, that Molo's interest in his party was very slight. I got the impression, too, that though at first he had seemed to be intoxicated, actually he was not. Nor was his sister. Anxiety seemed upon her; the smile she had for jests seemed forced; and at intervals she would cast a swift, furtive glance across the gay restaurant scene.

More drinks arrived. The Earthpeople at the table here seemed upon the verge of stupor; and suddenly it appeared that Molo had completely lost interest in them. With a gesture to his sister, he abruptly rose from his seat. She joined him. They left the table, and a red-clad floor manager of the restaurant came at their call. Then in a moment they were moving across the room.

Halsey called sharply into his audiphone: "Francis! Hold us to them if you can."

They were standing now by the opened door of one of the Red

Spark's private insulated rooms. We caught a glimpse of its interior, a gaily set table with a bank of colored lights over it.

The figure of a man was in there. He was on his feet, as though he had just arrived to meet the Martians here, and a hooded long cloak enveloped him. It may have been a magnetic "invisible" cloak, with the current now off.

We caught only the fleetest of impressions before the insulated door closed and barred our vision. The glimpse was an accident. Molo, taken by surprise at this appearance of his visitor, could hardly have guarded against it. The waiting figure was very tall, some ten feet, and very thin. The hood shrouded his face and head. In his hand he held a large circular box of black shiny leather, of the sort in which women carry wide-brimmed hats. As Molo joined him he put the box gently on the floor. He handled it as though it were extraordinarily heavy; and as he took a step or two, he seemed weighted down. Just as the room door was hastily closing, Meka sliding it from the inside, we caught a fleeting glimpse of horror.

The lid of the hat box had lifted up. Inside was a great round thing of gray-white, a living thing; a distended ball of membrane, with a network of veins and blood-vessels showing beneath the transparent skin.

For the instant we gazed, stricken. The ball was palpitating, breathing! I saw convolutions of inner tissue under the transparent skin of membrane; a little tentacle, like an arm with a flat-webbed hand, was holding up the lid of the box. The lid rose a trifle higher; the colored lights overhead gave us a brief but clear view of it.

The thing in the box was a huge living brain. I saw goggling, protruding eyes; an orifice that could have been a nose, and a gash upended for a vertical mouth. It was a face. And the little tentacle arm holding up the box-lid was joined to where the ear should have been.

Was this something human? A huge distended human brain, with the body withered to that tiny arm?

The palpitating thing sank down in the box and the lid dropped. And upon our horrified gaze the insulated door of the room slid too.

"By the gods!" exclaimed Halsey. "One of them dares come to the Red Spark. Here, almost in public."

So Halsey knew what this meant. His eyes were blazing now; his face was white, with an intensity of emotion that transfigured it.

"Francis, tell Foley I'll be in the manager's office in five minutes."

He snapped off; our image connection with the Red Spark went dead.

"We're going to the Red Spark," he announced. "This changes everything, yet I don't know. Venza, I may need you more than ever, now."

Halsey herded us to the office door. From his desk he had snatched up a few portable instruments, and he flung on a cloak.

It was a brief trip to the Red Spark, on foot through the sub-cellar arcade to where, under Park Circle 29, we went up in a vertical lift to the roof. We were in the side entrance oval of the restaurant in five minutes.

In the dim metal room of Orentino, the Red Spark's manager, a barrage was up and Foley was waiting for us. We could hear it faintly humming. Now we could talk.

Halsey slammed the door down. He said swiftly, "My men caught one of these things this morning. They have it now and I think Molo does not yet know we captured it. A brain; we're convinced it

understands English and can talk, but no one has been able to make it talk yet. Foley, order that damned Orentino to de-insulate the room Molo is in. Now, by the gods, we may see and hear something."

The frightened manager of the Red Spark was in the control room. Halsey killed our barrage to let the outside connections get through to us. We all crowded around the mirror-grid which stood on Orentino's desk. Foley gave us connection with the control room. We saw Orentino's face, his eyes nearly popping with fright. "Colonel Halsey, I will do whatever you tell me."

"What room is that Martian occupying?"

"Insulated 39."

"Break off the insulation. Do it slowly and he may not notice. Then give us connection, audio and vision."

"But I have no image-finders in the insulated rooms."

"Cut off the barrage. I'll get connection there."

Foley was already setting up his eavesdropper on the desk. The mirror blurred a little; then it clarified. We had the interior of the secret room, and voices were coming out of Foley's tiny receiver.

The image showed the box on the floor, with its lid down. The tall hooded shape of the stranger stood with Molo and his sister by the table. They were talking in swift, vehement undertones. The language was Martian, a dialect principally used in Ferrok-Shahn. Our equipment brought it in and I could understand it.

Molo was saying: "But you are the fool to have dared to come here!"

"The master knows that there is danger. Something is wrong." The hooded stranger spoke like a foreigner, but not a Martian, nor an Earthman, and not like any person of Venus I had ever heard. It was a strange, indescribable intonation, a flat, hollow voice.

"I say the master is concerned."

"Let him be."

"And he demanded I bring him here to find you. He is displeased that you are here."

What gruesome thing was this? Their glances seemed to go to the box on the floor at their feet, as though the master were in there. But the lid of the box did not rise.

"Well, you have found me," Molo declared impatiently. "When you

know me better, always you will find I have my wits. The thing is for tomorrow night, not tonight."

"But that, my master is not sure." The hollow voice was deferential but insistent. "He fears danger; something has gone wrong. He is working on it now, striving to receive the message! There is a message. He knows that much. Perhaps from our world, Wandl, itself."

For a moment Molo had no answer. His sister had not spoken. I noticed that her gaze seemed roving the room.

"What is it I should do?" Molo asked at last.

"Come with us to your home-room."

"But I have everything ready there. The contact is ready for tomorrow night. Your world will control Earth."

"But if it be tonight?"

Again Molo was silent. My breath stopped. On our mirror I saw the stranger's hood part just a little. There seemed to be no face; just the blur of something brownish.

"But if it be tonight?" the voice insisted.

"I will go," Molo said abruptly, "but your coming here was dangerous. Suppose we cannot get out undetected? You know I will never go to where all our instruments are set up and have some damnable spy follow me. Is all going well on Venus and Mars?"

"Yes. My master feels so. He seems to get messages. The contacts will be made simultaneously." A gruesome chuckle. "The capture of these three worlds. We shall have all three enchained at once. Helpless."

The lid of the black box seemed again about to rise when there came a sharp cry from Meka. "This room is not insulated!"

Our eavesdropping was discovered. Beside me, I heard Halsey give a low curse. On our mirror we saw sudden action. The ten-foot, cloaked figure laboriously lifted the black box, and swung with it toward the outer wall of the room. I saw now clearly with what a dragging, heavy tread that giant shape moved, as though it weighed, here on Earth, far more than the normal weight to which it was accustomed.

"Over there!" Molo gasped. "The escape-port; this room has one.

Meka, go with him. I will join you. You know where."

Foley cried, "Colonel, I may be able to stop them!"

But Halsey saw on our image that Molo was staying. "Wait. Let them go. If we have the Martian here, that's better."

I saw the room's escape-port swing open as Meka and the hooded shape carrying the box moved for it. The moonlit darkness of the outer catwalk enveloped the disappearing figures.

Molo was left alone. He closed the port swiftly. His detector now was in his hand, but Halsey anticipated him by a second or two. Our listener went dead; our mirror darkened. Doubtless Molo was never sure whether he had been spied on or not.

Halsey was on his feet. "Foley, get out into the main room. Stay with him."

But there was no need to follow Molo. He had sent his visitor and sister out by the escape-port, which was usual enough; now he was back in the main room as though nothing of importance had happened, with an appearance of intoxication about him. He wavered jovially across the room, threading his way through the gay

diners, and reached the table where his party still sat carousing.

Again Halsey shut us off.

"He's got a base somewhere in the city; you heard what they said about it. We've got to trick him into going there, unsuspecting."

Halsey seized the audiphone. "Your chance, Venza. It's the only way. Foley, keep away from that Martian. Shut off all contacts. I'll meet you out there in a moment. I'm sending a girl; she'll go after him."

"Now?" Venza asked.

"Yes. It's the only way. Perhaps you can get him drinking. Venza, use all the wiles you possess now."

"No!" gasped Snap. "It's too dangerous!"

Anita was clinging to Venza. "Colonel Halsey, I'm going too."

Halsey stared, then made a swift decision. "Right. That is still better."

I jumped to my feet. "Colonel, I should prefer that one of us men...."

He gripped me by the shoulders. "Gregg Haljan, I take no suggestions from you!" His blazing eyes bored into me. "There isn't a second to lose. Don't you realize this means destruction of our three inhabited planets? I'll sacrifice myself, you, or these girls! Venza, take Anita outside. I'll join you immediately, give you last instructions. Take a portable audiphone with you."

He turned to Snap. "This is the only way. These demons can't be forced. You know that."

The girls were moving toward the door. I met Snap's anguished gaze.

"Gregg, don't let them go!"

"No! No, I won't!"

I made a lunge past Halsey, with Snap after me. Halsey did not move, but one of his rays struck us. With all senses numbed, I felt myself falling.

"Gregg—don't—let them...."

Snap had tumbled upon me. My senses did not quite fade. I was aware of Anita's and Venza's horrified cries, but Halsey pushed them toward the door. It slid up. I vaguely saw the two girls going out

with Halsey after them; and the door coming down.

I have no idea how long it was before Halsey came back. Snap and I were seated on a low metal bench against the wall. The effect of the paralysing ray was wearing off. We were tingling all over, our senses still confused.

Halsey stalked in upon us. "So you are recovered?"

Snap stammered, "We—I say, we're sorry as hell we acted like that."

"I know you are." His voice softened. "If I could have done anything else, believe me, I would have. But I don't think harm will come to them. They're clever."

"Are they outside?" I asked. "Did they find a way of meeting the Martians? How long have you been gone?"

Halsey merely stared at me as though he had no intention of answering. And then the audiphone on the desk buzzed.

"This is Halsey," he said. "Yes, I have them here. Bring them—did you say bring them?"

We could not hear the answering voice, for Halsey had the muffler in

contact.

"No, I would prefer not to come. I'm watching something. I'm at the Red Spark Cafe. Well, I'm going back to my office presently to wait there."

He continued in code. Like Snap, I had never had occasion to learn it. The words were a strange sounding staccato gibberish. He ended, "I will send them, Grantline. Very well, I'll tell them to locate him. At once, yes." He closed off the audiphone.

Halsey swung on us. "You're all right now?"

"Yes." I stood up, drawing Snap up with me. "What is wanted of us Colonel?"

"That's better, Gregg." He smiled, but he was still grim. "I wanted you here to wait for this call from the Conclave of Public Safety. It met at midnight. They have ordered both of you there."

"That's a secret meeting, isn't it?" asked Snap. "There was no report of it over the air tonight."

"Yes. Secret." He was leading us to the door. "They won't need you for more than half an hour. When they finish, come back to my

office. You can come openly." He stood with his finger on the door lever. "Good-by, lads. Foley will lead you to the service room. You are to take a mail cylinder for Postal Switch-station 20. They'll re-route you from there to the conclave auditorium."

The door slid up. "When you disembark," he added, "Ask for Johnny Grantline. You are to sit with him."

He showed us out and the door slid down before him. We trudged the corridor, and Snap gripped me.

"For myself," he whispered swiftly, "I'll go to the damnable conclave because I'm ordered. But I won't stay there long. Once we get out of it, if I don't route myself back to the Red Spark, I'm a motor-oiler."

I agreed with him. We had a mental picture of Anita and Venza in the Red Spark's public room. Doubtless Orentino had created a way for them to meet Molo. They would sit there in the Red Spark with that drinking party, and in less than an hour we would be back.

But as we crossed diagonally across an end of the main room with Foley leading us, we caught a glimpse of Molo's table. The party was still there, but Molo, Anita, and Venza were gone!

We had no time to get any information. Foley abruptly left us and another man took his place. In the service room a passenger cylinder was waiting. Our guide entered it with us.

At the switch station we had the breath knocked out of us. After another ten minutes in the vacuum tube, we reached our unknown destination. The cylinder-slide opened. We found ourselves with a lone guard; and through a gloomy arcade opening, Johnny Grantline was advancing, to greet us.

"Well, so here you are, Gregg. Hell to pay heaven, going on here. Come on in; I'll tell you."

"We were sent for," Snap said.

"Yes, but they don't want you yet. Come in here."

He waved away the guard and led us through a padded arcade into a low-vaulted audience room, windowless and gloomy. Across it, a doorway panel stood ajar. Grantline peered through it. There was the glow of light from the adjoining room and the distant murmur of many voices.

Grantline closed the door. "Sit down and I'll tell you...."

"Where are we?" I asked.

"The ninth Conclave Hall."

I knew its location: Lower Manhattan, high under the city roof.

Grantline produced little cigarette cylinders. "Steady your nerves, lads; you'll need it."

He grinned at us. The hand with which he lighted my cylinder was steady as a tower-base, but he was excited. I could see it by the glint in his eyes, and hear it in his voice.

"What's going on?" Snap demanded.

"It's about this invading planet. By the gods, when you hear what's really been learned about it!"

"Well, what?" I asked.

He sketched what he had heard this night at the conclave. The mysterious invader was inhabited.

"How do they know that?" Snap put in.

"Wait. I'll tell you the rest of it. The accursed thing changes its orbit. It banks and turns like a spaceship! It stopped out in space; it's poised out there now between Mars and Jupiter. A world about a fifth the size of the Moon, and the beings on it can control its movements. They've brought it in from interstellar space, into our solar system. Evidently the point they've reached now is far as they want to come. They've poised out there, getting ready to attack, not only us, but Mars and Venus simultaneously."

Grantline gazed at us through the smoke of his cigarette. He was much like Snap, small, wiry, brisk of movement and manner, but older. His hair was graying at the temples; his voice carried the authority of one accustomed to commanding men.

"Don't ask me for the technicalities of how they reached these conclusions. I'm no astronomer. I'm only telling you their conclusions and what their discussions have been here for the past hour."

Heaven knows, we had no inclination to dispute him. What we had seen and heard at the Red Spark tallied with his words.

He went on swiftly, "The attack, of whatever nature it may be, is impending at once. Not next month, or next week, but now. Lord,

Gregg, I don't blame you for staring like that. You don't know what's been going on for the past two days on Earth, and Venus and Mars. It's all been suppressed. Neither did I, until I heard it here tonight. The U.S.W., the Martian Union, the Venus Free State, are all preparing for war. Every government spaceship on Earth is being commissioned. We're not going to sit around and wait for invaders to land; the war won't be fought on Earth if we can help it."

We stared. Snap asked, "What makes them so sure?"

"That war is coming? Plenty. This new planet has sent out spaceships. The planet itself is hovering sixty million miles away from us, about forty million miles from Mars and close to ninety million from Venus. Perhaps its leaders think that's the most strategic spot.

"Then it sent out spaceships, three of them. One is hovering close to Venus. Another is near Mars, and the third is some 200,000 miles off Earth. Several of our interplanetary freighters are overdue; it seems now that they must have encountered these invading ships and been destroyed.

"Still more, and worse: these three hovering ships have already landed the enemy on Mars and Venus. The helio-reports mention

mysterious encounters in Ferrok-Shahn and Grebhar. For three or four days, Mars has been in a panic of apprehension; Venus almost as bad. And some have landed here. Not many, perhaps; but one has been captured. A thing—God, it's almost beyond description."

We could well agree with that, since Snap and I had just seen one.

"They've got it here," Grantline was saying. "They've tried to make it talk. They can't but they're going to try again."

He jumped to his feet and went to the door. "They're bringing it in." Upon his face was a look of awed horror.

We stood crowding the small door-oval. It gave onto a darkened balcony of the conclave hall. The girders of the city roof were over us. There were a few official spectators sitting up here in the dark on the balcony, but none noticed us.

The lower floor of the hall was lighted. Around the polished oblong tables perhaps a hundred scientists and high governmental officials of the three worlds were seated. Near the center of the hall was a small dais-platform. On a table there, someone had just placed a circular black box, similar to the one we had seen previously.

The hall was hushed and tense. On the dais stood a group of Earth officials. One of them spoke. "Here it is, gentlemen. And this time, by God, we'll make it speak."

Grantline whispered, "That's the War Secretary from Greater London."

I recognized him: Brayley, Commander in Chief of the land, air, water and space armies of the United States of the World. He was gigantic in stature, with a great shock of gray-white hair. A commanding figure, if there ever was one.

Beside him, Nippor, the Japanese representative in Greater New York, seemed a pigmy. The acoustics of the silent hall carried his soft voice up to us. "I would be afraid of drugs. Will we use force? It is vital."

"Yes, by God! Anything."

It seemed that everyone in the hall must be shuddering: I could feel it like an aura pounding up at me. Brayley lifted the box-lid, reached in and raised the horrible thing. He held it up, a two-foot ball of palpitating gray-white membrane. Another living brain.

"Now, damn you, you're going to talk to us! Understand that? We're going to make you talk. Get that box out of the way."

They flung the box to the floor, and Brayley placed the brain on the table.

A glare of light, focussed on it, showed beneath the stretched taut membrane the convolutions of the brain, like tangled purple worms. The blood-vessels seemed distended almost to bursting now. The gruesome face, with popping eyes and that gaping mouth, showed a horrible travesty of terror. From where its ears should have been, a crooked little arm of flabby, gray-white flesh came down, one on each side and braced the table. And I saw now that it had a shriveled body, or at least little legs, bent, almost crushed under by its weight.

"Now, damn you," Brayley said, rubbing off his hands on a rough towel, "for the last time: will you talk?"

The goggling eyes held a terrified but baleful gaze upon Brayley's face. Did it understand? The eyes were fronted our way, and suddenly their glance swung up so that I seemed for an instant to see down into them. And it struck me then: this was a thing of greater intelligence than my own. A humanoid, with brain so developed that through myriad generations the body was shriveled, almost gone. A

mind was housed here, an intelligence housed in this monstrous brain.

Were these the beings of the new planet which had come to attack us? But how could this helpless creature, incapable of almost everything, obviously, save thought, do the work of its world?

Then I recalled again that insulated room of the Red Spark Cafe: the thin, ten-foot hooded shape which was carrying the box. Was that, perhaps, an opposite type of being with the brain submerged, dwarfed, and the body paramount? Were there, on this mysterious planet, two co-existing types, each a specialist, one for the physical work and the other for the mental?

I stood with Snap and Grantline in that dark balcony doorway, gazing down to where the giant brain stood braced upon its shriveled arms and legs, and realized why we of Earth and Venus and Mars are all cast in the same mould we call human. It is a little family of planets, here in our solar system; for countless eons we have been close neighbors. The same sunlight, the same general conditions of life, the same seed, were strewn here by a wise Creator. A man from the Orient is different from an Anglo-Saxon; a man of Mars differs a little more. But basically they are the same.

Yet, confronting us now was a new type, from realms of interstellar space, far beyond our solar system.

"For the last time, will you talk?" snapped Brayley.

There was another interval of silence. The eyes of the brain were very watchful. Its gaze roved the hall as though it were seeking for help. It shifted its little arms on the table, seemingly exhausted from the physical effort of supporting itself.

Brayley's voice came again. "Doubtless you can feel pain acutely. We shall see."

With what effort of will to overcome his revulsion we may only guess, he reached forward and pinched the little arm. The result was electrifying. From the upended slit of mouth in that goggling face, came a scream. It pierced the heavy tense silence of the hall, ghastly in its timbre, like nothing any of us had ever heard before. And in it was conveyed agony as though Brayley had not merely pinched that flabby arm, but had thrust a red-hot knife into its vitals.

The brain could feel pain indeed. It crouched with stiffened arms and legs. The membrane of its great head seemed to bulge with greater distension; the knotted blood-vessels were gorged with purple blood.

The eyes rolled. Then it closed its mouth. Its gaze steadied upon Brayley's face, so baleful a gaze that as I could see the reflection of its luminous purple glow a shudder of fear and revulsion swept me.

"So you did not like that?" Brayley steadied his voice. "If you don't want more, you had better speak. How did you get here on Earth? What are you trying to do here?"

There seemed an interminable silence; then Nippor took a menacing step forward. "Speak! We will force it from you!"

And then it spoke. "Do—not—touch—me—again."

Indescribable voice! Human, animal or monster no one could say. But the words were clear, precise; and for all their terror, they seemed to hold an infinite command.

A wave of excitement swept the hall, but Brayley's gesture silenced it. He leaped forward and bent low over the palpitating brain.

"So you can talk. You came as an enemy. We have given you every chance today for friendship, and you have refused. What are you trying to do to us?"

It only glared.

"Speak!"

"I will not tell you anything."

"Oh, yes, you will."

"No!"

All the men on the platform were crowding close to it now.

"Speak!" ordered Brayley again. "Here in Greater New York is a hiding place. Where is it?"

No answer.

"Where is it? You are perhaps a leader of your world. I lead ours, and I'm going to master you now. Where is this hiding place?"

The thing suddenly laughed, a gruesome, eerie cackle. "You will know when it is too late. I think it is too late already."

"Too late for what?"

"To save your world. Doomed, your three worlds! Don't touch—me!"

It ended with a scream of apprehension as Nippor grasped the crooked little arm. "Tell us!"

"No!" It screamed again. "Let—me—go!"

"Tell us!" Nippor strengthened his squeezing grip. The thing was writhing, the thin ball of membrane palpitating, heaving. And suddenly it burst. Over all its purpled surface, blood came with a gush.

Nippor and Brayley staggered backward. The scream of the brain ended in a choking gurgle. The little legs and tiny body wilted under it; the round ball of membrane sank to the table. It rolled sidewise upon one arm and ear, and in a moment its palpitation ceased. A purple-red mass of blood, it lay deflated and flabby.

It was dead.

"But see here," I said, "did they mention the Martian, Molo, at all?"

"They were discussing Molo before you arrived," Grantline told us.

We had drawn back from the doorway. The conference, with the dead thing removed, was proceeding. Snap and I had momentarily forgotten Anita and Venza; but now we were in a panic to get back to

the Red Spark.

"But you can't go," said Grantline. "Brayley ordered you here. He'll want to see you in a moment."

"Well, why doesn't he see us now?" Snap protested. "I'm not going to cool myself off sitting here."

"Oh yes, you are."

Grantline sent word to Brayley that we were here. In a moment the answer came. We were to wait a short time; he would want to see us.

We swiftly told Grantline what had happened at the Red Spark, and found that already he knew. Francis had relayed it to the conference, and Halsey was in constant communication with the officials here.

"Then what is happening?" I demanded. "Where are the girls? Has Halsey heard from them?"

Again Grantline went to a nearby room.

"Anita sent a message," he said, when he returned. "They are with Molo. Halsey is ordering a squad of men to be ready."

Grantline told us what had been happening in the Red Spark. Anita and Venza, simulating drunkenness with a skill for acting which I knew both of them possessed, had joined Molo's party. Perhaps if Meka had been there she would have seen through them.

But Molo did not. And they have since told me that the Martian himself was far from sober, although he was probably not aware of it. He yielded to their demands to leave the restaurant with him. He wanted, as we know, to leave unobtrusively; and Venza threatened a scene unless she could go.

He took them, leaving openly in a public fare-car. Doubtless he at first intended to de-rail them somewhere, but they convinced him that he was not being followed. Twice he used his detector, and Anita and Halsey were clever enough to throw off their rays in time to avoid it. Then Halsey lost connection with the fleeing car, and after that Molo changed his mind about ditching the girls.

"But where are they now?" I demanded.

"You," said Grantline sternly, "are out of it. Do you think that Halsey, under Brayley's orders, will neglect any chance to find out where Molo is hiding? Something is about to happen. This conference is wrestling with it. In Grebhar and Ferrok-Shahn they're

striving to find out what it is. Something impending now. Helios are pouring in here from Venus and Mars. They're mobilizing their spaceships, just as we are."

Grantline at last was letting out all his apprehensions on us, with this burst. "Halsey didn't tell you that the entire resources of his organization are out upon this thing tonight. Here at this conclave there's a room of information-sorters. That's just where I came from a moment ago. Every country on our Earth is making ready—for what, nobody knows!

"He's had two fragmentary calls from Anita. He has a hundred men ready to rush to their aid, and to capture Molo's lair. He expects another message from Anita any moment. This conference here knows every movement that is being made, within ten or twenty seconds of its making. Perhaps upon Anita and Venza the whole outcome of this thing may hang."

We had no answer to that. "Do you know who Molo is? He's an interplanetary pirate; his ship is the Star-Streak."

"Good Lord!"

We had heard of him. For five years past, a gray spaceship, with a

base supposedly hidden in the Polar deserts of Mars, had been terrorizing interplanetary shipping.

"They think," Grantline went on, "that Molo was cruising with his pirate ship. He has, as you know, a band of criminals drawn from all the three worlds. There are about fifty of them, commanded by his sister and himself. We think that Molo encountered the three ships which that new planet sent out. The Star-Streak was captured, perhaps destroyed. Molo and his band, joined with this new enemy, to save themselves, and because they have been promised rewards."

"But why should these brains want their help?" Snap demanded.

"Wouldn't you say it was because, in Ferrok-Shahn, Grebhar and here in Greater New York, simultaneously tonight, something has to be accomplished, something the brains themselves could not do? Molo and his band know all three cities. How they landed here in Greater New York nobody knows; the enemy spaceship is 200,000 miles out. Obviously they came from it, landed secretly with some smaller ship somewhere on Earth and made their way here."

A buzzer sounded beside us. A voice commanded: "Grantline, bring Gregg Haljan and Daniel Dean to room six at once."

In room six we stood before the War Secretary, who had arrived there a moment ahead of us.

"Ah, Haljan and Dean. I'm glad to see you."

He was still white and shaken. Beads of perspiration stood upon his forehead. He mopped them off.

"I've just had a rather terrible experience." He did not suggest that we sit down. He went on crisply: "Grantline no doubt has told you of what's going on. Disturbing, terrifying. Haljan, we have a ship being rushed into commission tonight. You know her, the Cometara."

"I know her," I said.

"Quite so. She is taking off as soon as we can ready her. She will carry about fifty men. Grantline is in charge of the armament and men. You, Dean, we want to handle her radio-helio."

"Right," said Snap.

"And you, Haljan, we can think of no one better to navigate her."

He waved away my appreciation. "Within a brief time we shall have thirty such ships in space. Mars and Venus also are mobilizing."

He stood up. "We feel, Haljan, that if anyone can handle the Cometara with skill enough to combat this lurking enemy, it will be you."

"I'll do my best, sir."

"We know that. The ship is leaving from the Tappan Interplanetary Stage shortly after dawn. When have you and Dean last slept?"

"Last night," we both said.

"Quite so. Then you need sleep now. I want you to go at once to the Tappan Fieldhouse. The commander there will make you comfortable. Eat, and sleep if you can. We want you in good shape. You're to keep out of this night's activities here in the city; you understand?"

"Yes sir."

An orderly was approaching behind Brayley. "I'll be back in a moment, Rollins."

He shook hands with us. "I may not see you again before it's over. Good luck, lads. Grantline, they need you for a moment in the hall; something about electronic space weapons, further equipment for the

Cometara. Then you'd better go to Tappan House too, and get some sleep."

We were dismissed. Snap and I regarded each other hesitantly. I said impulsively, "Mr. Brayley, Detective-Colonel Halsey is using two girls."

"Yes, we're watching that, Haljan."

"They're the girls we're to marry," I added. "May we communicate with Colonel Halsey?"

"Yes. Call him from here." He smiled wanly. "But keep out of it; we need you at dawn."

The Tappan departure-stage was only a few miles up the Hudson; we could get there in half an hour. It was now nearly trinight, halfway between midnight and dawn. I had my portable audiphone and got Halsey at once.

"You Gregg?"

"Yes. They're through with us at the Conclave. Where is Anita?"

"We heard from her twice. I'm expecting...."

We could hear someone interrupting him. Then he came back. "Gregg? Molo took them somewhere. I didn't dare fling after them. He had his detector going, and Anita warned me not to try it. She had to stop connection herself. God knows how she was able to whisper to me at all."

His voice, like Brayley's, had the ring of a man strained to the breaking point. I could appreciate how Halsey must feel, forced to remain at his desk with its encircling banks of instruments; holding all the network of his farflung activities centralized; his decisions, his commands in a hundred places almost simultaneously, while his body sat there inactive.

"Gregg, the girls must have arrived at Molo's place by now. If only they know where they are! I have lookouts throughout the city with intricate and complete connecting equipment. Gregg, I must disconnect."

"Colonel, give me Anita's frequency. Maybe Snap or I can pick up the message."

He named the oscillating frequency, then disconnected.

"Try that frequency," Snap suggested. "We've got to do something."

The door-slide opened suddenly and an orderly appeared. "Haljan?"

"Get the hell away," roared Snap. "We've had our orders; we don't want any from you."

"Gregg Haljan and Daniel Dean are paged on the mirrors."

Someone in the city wanted us; our names were appearing on the various mirror-grids publicly displayed throughout the city in the hope that we would answer.

"That's different," said Snap. "Answer it for us, that's a good fellow. We're busy."

"It must be important," the orderly insisted. "The caller registered a fee at the Search Bureau; that's how they located you here. He paid the highest fee to search you. An emergency call."

It was against the law to invoke the services of the Search Bureau unless based upon actual impending danger. "We'll take it," I said.

"Come with me." He turned to the left and down the corridor.

We hastened with him to a corridor cubby. Upon the audiphone there I was at once connected with a voice, and an anxious man's face with

a two-day growth upon it.

"Haljan! Thank God you answered. This is Dud Ardley. Me and Shac are here. Listen, this is the lower cellar corridor, Lateral 3, under Broadway. Me and Shac just have seen your girls down here."

News of Anita and Venza! I could see in the mirror-image, behind Dud's head the outlines of the little public cubby from which he was calling. He and his brother, on some illicit errand of their own in East Side lower Manhattan, had seen figures alighting from a fare-car. They had caught a glimpse of the faces of Anita and Venza. The girls were hooded and cloaked; a hooded man was with them. The fare-car quickly rolled away, and the hooded figures, suddenly becoming invisible within their magnetic cloaks, had vanished.

"S'elp me, we couldn't do nothin'. You know we take no chances with the police by carryin' cylinders. So I paged you in a hurry."

"Dud, that's damn nice of you. Where are you now? Tell me again."

The Ardleys, knowing nothing of the events of this night, supposed that the girls were being abducted, and decided I should be informed.

"Damn right, Dud. We'll come at once. You two wait for us?"

"Sure. If you got instruments, maybe we can track 'em. It wasn't a quarter of a mile from here, over toward the river. Plenty of rotten dumps down there."

"Wait for us, Dud. We'll come in a rush."

I slammed shut the audiphone. Snap, beside me, had heard it all. He shoved the astonished orderly out of the way.

"What's the nearest exit-route out of here?"

"To the city roof, sir. Up this incline."

We dashed up the spiral incline, through a low exit-port, and were in the starlight of the city roof.

"Connect it, Gregg! You can't tell; her message might come over any minute."

I tuned my coils to the seldom used oscillation frequency which Halsey had told us Anita's transmitter was sending.

"Anything, Gregg?"

"No. Dead channel."

The air, in Anita's channel, was bafflingly silent.

We had been challenged by a roof-guard when we appeared from the upper port of the Conclave Hall; the city roof was not open to public traffic. But with our identifications, he found us a single-seat hand-tram, and started us southward on the deserted route.

It was a cloudless night, with stars like thickly-strewn diamonds on purple velvet. The city roof lay glistening in the starlight. In my great-grandfather's time there had been no roof here; the open city was exposed to all the inclement weather. But gradually the arcades and overhead viaducts, cross balconies and catwalks which spanned the canyon street between the giant buildings became a roof. It spread, now terraced and sloped to top the lofty buildings, like a great rumpled sheet propped by the knees of sleeping giants. Some of the roof was of opaque alumite, dark patches, alternating with the great glassite panes which in places admitted the daylight.

Our little tram sped along southward, wending its way over the terraces. Save for the guards and lookouts in their occasional cubbies, and the air-traffic directors in their towers, we were alone up here. The roof was tangled with air-pipes, line-wire conduits, aerials, arterial systems of the ventilating and lighting devices. As far as one could see the ventilators stood fronting the night breeze like

listening ears. There were water tanks, great cross-bulkheads and flumes to handle the rain and snow. A few traffic towers maintained order in the overhead air-lanes. Their beacons shot up into the sky when the passing lights marked the thinly-strewn trinight traffic.

We were stopped at intervals, but in each case were passed promptly.

"Nothing yet, Gregg?"

"No."

Anita's channel remained empty. It was, I suppose, no more than ten minutes during which we sped south along the grotesque maze of the roof; but to us it was an eternity. If only some message would come!

"I'll pull up here."

"Yes."

I gathered up my little audiphone, thrust it under my dark flowing cloak. If only our cloaks were magnetic!

We leaped from our car. "In a rush, Haljan?" asked a guard.

"That's us. Orders from Mr. Brayley."

We left him and plunged into a descending automatic lift. A drop of a thousand feet; we shot downward past all the deserted levels, past the ground-level, the undersurface transportation lanes, the sub-river tubes, the sub-cellar, down to the very bottom of the city.

"Come on, Gregg. Two segments from here."

We advanced at a run. At this hour of night, hardly a pedestrian was in evidence. It was an arched vaulted corridor, almost a tunnel, dimly blue-lit with short lengths of fluorescent tubes at intervals on the ceiling. For all the vaunted mechanisms of our time, the air here was heavy and fetid. Moisture dripped from the concrete roof. It lay on the metal pavement of the ground; the smell of it was dank, tomb-like.

There were frequent cross-tunnels. We turned eastward into one of them. For a segment there were the lower entrances to the cellars of the giant buildings overhead. We passed a place where the tunnel-corridor widened into a great underground plaza. The sewerage and wire-pipes lay like tangled pythons on its floor. Half across it, by the glow of temporary lights strung on a cable, a group of repairmen were working. We passed them, headed in to where the tunnel narrowed again and there were now occasional cubby entrances to underground dwellings.

It was a rabbit warren from here to the river, haunted by criminals and by miserable families, many of whom never saw the daylight for weeks at a time. The giant voices of the city hardly carried down here, so that an oppressive silence hung upon everything.

"That next crossing, Gregg. They said they'd wait for us there."

Occasional escalators led upward. In advance of us was a narrow intersection. There were a few lights in the bullseyes of the subterranean dwelling rooms, but most of them were dark.

"Easy, Snap. Not so fast."

I pulled Snap to a walk. We edged over against the tunnel side. We had passed a small lighted audiphone cubby, evidently the one from which Dud and Shac had paged us. They should have been here waiting; but there was nothing but the empty, gloomy tunnels.

"Something is coming!" Snap clutched at me; we drew our cloaks around us and waited in a shadowed recess. Down a side incline, a segment behind us, a small automatic food truck came lurching. It pulled up at an arcade entrance. Its driver slid the portals, deposited his cases of food, locked the panel after him; and in a moment he and his truck were gone up the incline.

We heard, in the ensuing silence, a low groan near at hand; then abruptly it stopped. We saw, within twenty feet of us, two dark figures lying on the pavement grid in a black patch of shadow where the mailtube came down in a curve and disappeared into the tunnel wall.

We bent over the figures of two men. They lay together, one half upon the other, black-garbed figures with white, staring faces. One twitched a little and then lay still.

They were Shac and Dud Ardley.

"Murdered, Gregg! Good Lord!"

Both were dead, but we could see no marks on either of them.

I found my wits. "Snap, we can't stand like this wholly visible."

I pulled Snap away. We darted a few feet. The light of the tunnel intersection was directly over us. "Not here, Snap! Run!"

Under the curving vacuum tube a little further along, we found shelter. Snap murmured: "The girls went past here. But which way, Gregg?"

As though I knew!

I felt at that moment, under the shirt against my skin, the anode of my audiphone tingling. A receiving signal! In the gloom, I could see Snap's white face as he watched me bring it out.

We heard a tiny microphonic voice, Anita's voice.

"Colonel Halsey. Yes I have the location. Lafayette 4—East corridor, lowest level. A descending entrance. Don't you speak again; I've only a minute! Venza safe—but send help. Something we don't understand—a strange mechanism here."

Then Halsey's interrupting voice. "Anita, escape! You and Venza!"

"We can't. They've got us!"

"I'm sending men. They'll be there in ten minutes."

"Ten minutes will be too late. Molo is...."

It seemed that we heard her scream; then the waves blurred and died.

Lafayette 4—East corridor, lowest level. "Snap, that's here! A descending entrance."

We stood back against the great curving side of the postal vacuum tube. Within it I heard the hiss and clank as a mail cylinder flashed past. Halsey's secret orders must be going out now. His men nearest this place would come in a rush. But Anita said that would be too late.

Snap and I were frantically searching. Somewhere here was an entrance to Molo's lair. It seemed in the silence that Anita's scream was still ringing in my ears. Had it been entirely from the instrument, or were we so close that we had heard its distant echoes?

"Gregg, help me." Snap was tugging at a horizontal door-slide, like a trap in the tunnel floor, partly under the vacuum tube. "Stuck!" he gasped.

It yielded with our efforts. It slid aside. Steps led downward into blackness. We plunged in, caution gone from us. The steps went down some twenty feet; we were in another smaller corridor. It was vaguely lighted by a glow from somewhere, and as my pupils expanded, I could see this was a shabby alley, opening ahead into a winding passage with the slide-port above us like its back gate. A warren of cubbies was here, a little sequestered segment of disreputable dwellings.

We stood peering, listening. "Shall I try the eavesdropper, Gregg?"

"Yes. No, wait!" I thought I heard distant sounds.

"Voices, Snap. Listen."

More than voices. A thud: footsteps running. A commotion, back in this warren, within a hundred feet of us.

"This way," I murmured.

We plunged into a black gash. There was a glow of light, a glassite pane in a house wall nearby. The commotion was louder, and under it now we heard a vague humming: something electrical. It was an indescribably weird sound, like nothing I had ever heard before.

Snap clutched at me. "In here, but where is the accursed door?"

There was a glassite pane, but we could find no door. In our hands we held small electronic bolt-cylinders, short-range weapons.

The hum and hissing was louder. It seemed to throb within us, as though vibration were communicating to every fiber of our bodies.

Light was streaming through the glassite pane, and we glimpsed the

interior of the room. The light now came from a strange mechanism set in the center of the metal cubby. I caught only an instant's glimpse of it, a round thing of coils and wires. The metal floor of the room was cut away, exposing the gray rock of Manhattan Island. And against the rock, in a ten-foot circle, a series of discs were contacted, with wires leading from them to the central coils.

The whole was glowing with opalescent light. It was dazzling, blinding. Within in it the goggled figure of Molo was moving, adjusting the contacts. He stooped. He straightened, drew back from the light.

Only an instant's glimpse, but we saw the girls, crouching with black bandages on their eyes. Meka, goggled like her brother, was holding them. A tall shape carrying a round black box darted through the light and ran. Molo leaped for the girls; the hum had mounted to a wild electrical scream. Molo flung his sister back out of the light.

They all vanished. There was nothing but the light, and the mounting dynamic scream.

Beside me, Snap was pounding on the glassite panel. I joined him. Everything was dreamlike, blurring as though unconsciousness was upon me.

Where was Snap? Gone? Then I saw him nearby. He had found a door, but it wouldn't yield. I saw his arm go up in a gesture to me.

He ran; I found myself running after him, but I stumbled and fell. Then over me the scream burst into a great roar of sound. It seemed so intense, so gigantic a sound that it must ring around the world.

And the light burst with an exploding puff. The black metal cubby walls seemed to melt like phantoms in a dream. A titan's blowtorch, the opalescent light shot upward, a circular ten-foot beam, eating its way through all the city levels as though they were paper, up through the city roof.

Molo's cubby was gone. His mechanism was eaten by the light and destroyed. There was only this motionless, upstanding beam, contacted here with the Earth, streaming like an opalescent sword into the starry sky.

I must paint now upon a broader canvas to depict the utter chaos of this most memorable night in the history of the Earth, Venus and Mars.

From that point in the bowels of Greater New York, near the southern tip of Manhattan Island, the mysterious light-beam shot up.

It screamed with its weird electrical voice for an hour, so penetrating a sound that it was heard with the unaided ears as far away as Philadelphia. A titan voice it was, shrill as if with triumph. There were millions of people awakened by it this night; awakened and struck with a chill of fear at this nameless siren shrilling its note of danger. The sound gradually subsided; it seemed to reach its peak within a few minutes of the appearance of the light, and within an hour it had ceased.

But the light beam remained. Those who inspected it closely have given a clear description of its aspect; but to this day its real nature has never been determined.

It was a circular beam of about a ten-foot diameter. In color it was vaguely opalescent, rather more brilliant at night than in the day. With the coming of the sun it did not fade, but remained clearly visible, with a spectrum sheen when the sunlight hit it so that it had somewhat the appearance of a titanic, straightened rainbow.

From that contact point with our Earth, the inexplicable beam stood vertically upward. It ate a vertical hole like a chimney up through all the city levels, through the roof and into the sky. It had a tremendous heat, communicable by contact so that it melted the city above it with a clean round hole. But the heat was non-radiant.

I was found lying within fifty feet of the base of the beam. There had been an explosion, so that Molo's metal room was gone; but from where I lay there was only a warmth to be felt from the light.

Halsey's men found me within half an hour. I was unconscious but not injured. I think now that the sound and not the light overcame me. I presently recovered consciousness; for another hour I was blind and deaf, but that quickly wore off. They rushed me through the chaos of the city to the Tappan Headquarters. Grantline was there, but not Snap. I sent them back when once I was fully conscious. They searched all the vicinity at the base of the light. Snap, alive or dead, was not to be found.

Anita and Venza were gone. I had seen Molo and Meka plunge away with them as the light-beam burst forth. They were gone, and Snap was gone.

There was, by now, a turmoil unprecedented throughout all the metropolitan area. The motionless light-beam itself had done little damage, but its appearance brought instant chaos. Within a radius of five miles of its base, the city was plunged into darkness. All power was cut off. Every vehicle, even the aeros passing overhead, and, the ventilating system stopped. Audiphones were wrecked; it subsided within an hour, though, and after that, lights and instruments brought

into the area were not affected.

But during that hour, south Manhattan was in panic. A multitude of terrified people awakened in the night to find blackness and that screaming sound. The streets and corridors and traffic levels were jammed with throngs trampling and killing one another in their efforts to escape.

This was in the stricken area; but everywhere else the panic was spreading. Transportation systems were almost all out of commission. The panic spread until by dawn there was a wild exodus of refugees jamming the bridges and viaducts and tunnels, streaming from all the city exits.

This was Greater New York. But from Venus and Mars came similar reports. In Grebhar and in Ferrok-Shahn, doubtless almost simultaneous with Greater New York, similar light-beams appeared.

"But what can it be?" I demanded of Grantline. "Something Molo contacted there? He did it. That was what he was working for, and he accomplished his purpose. But what will the beam do to us?"

"It's doing plenty," said Grantline grimly.

"He didn't intend that. There was something else."

But what? As yet, no one knew. I had already told the authorities what I had seen. I was the only eye-witness to Molo's activities; and heaven knows I had but a brief, confused glimpse.

The beam remained; it streamed upward from the rock. They thought, this night, that Molo's strange current had set up a disintegration of the atoms, and that electronic particles from them were streaming into space.

The light-beam seemed impervious to attack. Within a few hours the authorities were attacking its base with various vibratory weapons but without success.

From where Grantline and I sat, we saw the dawn coming. But the radiance-beam remained unaffected. "Gregg, look there at Venus!"

To the east of us there was a distant line of metal structures surmounting the mid-Westchester hills; above them, in the brightening sky of dawn, Venus was just rising. Mars had already set at our longitude. Venus, fairly close to the Earth now, was the "Morning Star."; it mounted now above that line of metal stages in the distance.

And as Grantline gestured, I saw from Venus the same sword-like beam streaming off almost to cross our own.

Grantline and I, with a mutual thought, ran around the balcony and gazed to where Mars had set. A narrow radiance was streaming up among the stars off there.

Three swinging swords of light in the sky! With the rotation of the planets, they swept the firmament. The mysterious enemy had planted them—but why? What was coming next?

And as though to answer us, from far to the south, over mid-Jersey, came a new manifestation. We saw a speck rising, a distant mounting speck of something dark, with streamers of tiny radiance flowing from it.

"A spaceship, Gregg."

It seemed so. It came slowly from above the maze of distant structures, gathered speed, and in a moment was gone.

But others, better equipped, had observed it. It was a cylindrical projectile, with stream-fluorescence propelling it upward, an unusual form of spaceship. Telescopically it was seen until well after dawn.

Speeding out in the direction of the Moon.

Molo and his weird allies had escaped, I thought. With their work done here on Earth, they were off to rejoin the hovering enemy ship 200,000 miles out.

I stood gripping Grantline on that balcony, and gazed with sinking heart. Were Anita and Venza prisoners on that mounting ship? And Snap: I prayed he was there with the girls to lend them the protection I had failed to give.

"Haljan and Grantline wanted below."

The voice of a mechanic on the balcony behind us roused us from our thoughts. We went down through the busy building.

The workshops of Tappan Interplanetary Headquarters had for hours been ringing with busy activity. The Cometara rested upon her departure stage outside, with a score of workmen conditioning her. Newly-installed additional armament was aboard, ready to be assembled after the start. The men to handle it were embarked. My half dozen officers and the ten members of the crew I had already briefly met. They were waiting for me.

"On we go, Gregg. Let's wish ourselves luck." From grim, silent abstraction, Grantline had now sprung into his familiar dynamic self.

There was a solemn group of officers and a hundred or so workmen here; they stopped their fevered labors now to watch the Cometara get away, first of Earth's ships speeding into space to confront this nameless enemy. Grantline and I went past them with silent handshakes and murmured good-bys. I saw the towering figure of Brayley. He raised an arm for a farewell gesture to us.

We mounted the incline to the Cometara. She rested upon her stage, a great, sleek bronze ship, low and rakish, with pointed ends and a flattened, arched turtle-back dome of glassite covering the superstructure and the decks from bow to stern. She lay quiescent, gleaming in the glow of the departure beacons; but there was an aspect of latent power upon her.

My ship! My first command! As we went through the opened port of the domeside and I touched foot upon the deck, I prayed that I might justify the faith reposed in me.

Men crowded the narrow, covered deck. I saw the space-guns at the deck pressure-ports, partly assembled. My chief officer, a young fellow named Drac Davidson, who with his twin brother had been in

the Interplanetary Freight Service, rushed up to me.

"We're ready, sir."

"Very good, Drac."

He hurried me to the turret control room. Grantline instantly had plunged into details of assembling the weapons.

"Her ports are all closed," said Drac. He spoke calmly, but his thin face was pale and his dark eyes glowed with excitement. "The interior pressure is set at fifteen pounds. You can ring us up at once."

No formalities to this departure! With pounding heart I entered the small circular turret and mounted its tiny spiral stairs to the upper control room. But as I touched the levers, calmness came to me with these familiar tasks at which I was skilled.

I slid a central-hull gravity-plate. It went smoothly, perfectly operated by the magnets. The vessel trembled, lifted; outside the enclosing dome I could see the dawn-light of the sky and paling floodlights of the stage. Figures of men out there, made silent gestures of farewell, dropping slowly beneath our hull as we lifted.

The bow gravity-plates slid into the repulsive-force positions. The

bow lifted. The Cometara responded smoothly. We went up, poised at a forty-five degree angle. I saw the outer beacons on the stage swing upward with their warning to passing traffic in the lower lanes.

"Light our bow-beacon, Drac."

We lifted through the lower thousand and two thousand-foot lanes. The lights of Tappen were dwindling beneath us. The interior of the Cometara was humming with the whirr of its circulators and air-receivers, mingled with the throb of air pressure pumps. At three thousand feet I started the air-rocket engines. They came on with a gentle purring. The fluorescence from them streamed along our hull and down past the stern, like twin rocket tails.

With gathering speed we slid smoothly upward through the highest traffic lanes, out of the atmosphere, through the stratosphere and into space.

Leaving the stratosphere, I cut off the air-rocket engines, slid the stern gravity-plates for the Earth's repulsion and the bow plates for the attraction of the Moon and Sun. The firmament swung, in a slow arc, and steadied with the Earth behind us and the Sun and Moon in advance of our bow. We were on our course, plunging through space

with accelerating velocity toward the unknown enemy ship hovering two hundred thousand miles ahead of us. My orders were to find the ship and maneuver us close to it; and Grantline's orders were to assail it.

I gazed down at the convex North Atlantic with the reddening coastline of North America spread like a map.

What was the nature of this strange enemy whom we sought? That opalescent beam from Greater New York mounted with its radiance into the dome-like starfield; the one from Venus and the other from Mars seemed crossing overhead amid the stars.

Three swords crossing the sky! What did they mean?

"Will you swing east or west of the Moon?"

"We haven't decided."

Drac Davidson and I were alone in the Cometara's control turret.

We were some ten hours out from Earth. Over such short astronomical distances it was impossible to attain any great velocity. When once we were clear of the Earth's atmospheric envelope, the rocket-stream engines were useless. The Cometara was equipped

also with tail-streamers of electronic nature. They exerted a slight pressure, useful for sudden curving and turning; but they had only negligible influence upon the main velocity of the vehicle.

I used the repulsion of the Earth upon our negatively charged stern gravity-plates; and with those of the bow electronified to the positive reaction, we were drawn forward by the Sun and the Moon.

For three or four hours I held to this combination with steady acceleration; but then I had to retard. In close quarters such as this, the retarding velocity must be calculated with a nicety many hours in advance.

We hung now, very nearly poised, within some forty thousand miles of the surface of the Moon. Bleak and cold, sharply black and white, it hung in a gigantic crescent in advance of our bow. The Sun, whose attraction I had ceased using some hours back, was visible sharply to one side now. Its great gas streams of giant flame licked up into the blackness of the firmament. The sunlight caught the lunar mountains with a white glare, and left the valleys black with shadow; moonlight and the mingled sunlight painted our bow. Behind our stem the great disk of Earth hung somber and glowing.

And everywhere else was the great black enclosing firmament. The

stars blazed with a new white glory never seen through the haze of an atmosphere. Like a little world in the vastness of this awesome void, we hung poised.

Grantline came into the turret. "I've got everything ready, Gregg. By the gods, once you can lay telescope upon that accursed enemy ship, I'm ready to open fire on it."

"Good," I said.

But the thought of hurling our bolts at this enemy ship had struck terror into my heart for hours past. I was convinced that the three who in all the world were dearest to me—Anita, Venza, and Snap—were upon that enemy vessel.

Grantline asked, "Are you going closer to the Moon?"

"No."

"The ship couldn't be between us and the Moon. Waters and I have been in the helio room for the past hour, searching with the 'scope there. Nothing doing, Gregg. Not a sign."

"I know. Our instruments here show that."

"There might be a way of sighting them," Drac put in.

"I'll try the Zed-ray," I suggested. "Drac and I have it corrected. But I doubt if it would penetrate the sort of invisibility this enemy would use."

Grantline nodded. "Or the Benson curve-light. You think the ship went behind the Moon? Or landed on the Moon?"

"It could have done either. Has Waters still got contact with the Earth? Have they seen it?"

"No."

I made a sudden decision. It would take us two hours at least to make a careful scanning with the Zed-ray; and to take an elaborate series of spectro-heliographs of the Moon's surface, which might show the enemy vessel if it had landed there, was a laborious process.

After brief thought, I discarded the idea. "We'll go to the helio room," I told Grantline. "I'm going to try the Benson curve-light."

Grantline and I left the turret, heading along the catwalk under the glassite dome toward the helio cubby where the rotund, middle-aged

Waters was in charge. It made my heart sink to think of the helio room. Snap should have been there.

We crossed the transverse catwalk. The superstructure roof was under us. Farther down, the narrow decks showed with Grantline's men grouped at the firing ports, where his weapons were mounted and ready. As I saw those grouped men loitering on the deck, waiting for me to give them a sighting, I prayed I could do so; and yet there was the shuddering fear that the first blast would bring death to Anita.

Waters met us at the door of his cubby. His face was red; he mopped the perspiration from his bald head. "I'm so glad you came! Will you want the Benson-light? I say, I've lost connection with the Earth. I had the Washington transmitter. Five minutes ago they sent me a flash of the Mars and Venus news. They both sent ships, out."

He gasped for breath, then added in a rush: "Both the Mars and Venus ships were destroyed and the enemy escaped!"

Grantline and I gasped with horror.

"Destroyed?" I said. "How?"

Waters did not know. The news came; then, immediately after, the Washington transmitter changed its wavelength and he lost connection.

"But why, in heaven's name, man, didn't you ring and tell us?" Grantline demanded. "Destroyed—only that! Just destroyed."

"I was afraid to leave my instruments," Waters said. "How could I tell? I might be able to renew connections with Washington any minute. Come on in. Do you want to try the Benson curve-light, Mr. Haljan?"

"Yes," I said. "I do." We entered the dim helio cubby. "See here, Waters, what about the projectile that ascended from Earth last night? Did the Washington observatory report what happened to it?"

"No, not a word. They lost it, evidently."

Our 'scopes on the Cometara had not been able to locate the projectile. The large instruments of Earth had lost it. Was that because, with tremendous velocity, it had sped directly for the new planet out beyond Mars?

Or, with some form of invisibility, might it be close to us now, just as

the lurking ship might be somewhere around here?

From the little circular helio cubby, perched here under the dome like an eagle's nest, I could see down all the length of the ship, and out the side ports of the dome to the blazing firmament. The Sun, Moon and Earth and all the starfield were silently turning as Drac swung us upon our new course.

Waters bent over the projector of the Benson curve-light, making connections. The cubby was silent and dim, with only a tiny spotlight where Waters was working, and a glow upon his table where his recent messages from Earth were filed. Grantline and I glanced at them.

Panic in Greater New York, Grebhar, and Ferrok-Shahn. The three strange beams which the enemy had planted on Earth, Venus and Mars still remained unchanged. I could see them now plainly from the helio cubby windows, great shafts of radiance sweeping the firmament.

Waters straightened from his task. "That will do it, Mr. Haljan." He met me in the center of the cubby. "When you locate the enemy, do you think they'll destroy us as they did those other ships?"

Grantline laughed grimly. "Maybe so, Waters. But let's hope not."

Fat little Waters was anything but a coward, but being closed up here all these hours with a stream of dire messages from Earth had shaken him.

"What I mean, Mr. Grantline, is that prudence is sometimes better than reckless valor. The Cometara is no warship. If Earth had sent an international patrol vessel...."

Grantline did not answer. He joined me at the Benson projector. "Can we operate it from here, Gregg, or will you mount it in the bow?"

"From here. Drac's swinging. When he's on the course I gave him, I can throw the Benson-ray through the bow dome-port. Waters, you're all done in. Go below and sleep awhile."

But he stood his ground. "No, sir; I don't want to sleep."

"We've had ours," said Grantline. "We'll call you if anything shows up."

We sent Waters away. "Ready, Gregg?"

"Yes. I've got the range."

The coils hummed and heated with the current, and in a moment the Benson curve-beam leaped from the projector.

The Benson curve-light was similar to an ordinary white searchlight beam, except that its path, instead of being straight could be bent at will into various curves—hyperbola, parabola, and for its extreme curve, the segment of an ellipse—gradually straightening as it left its source. It was effective for police work, with hand torches for seeing around opaque obstructions. It had also another advantage, especially when used at long range: the enemy, when gazing back at its source, would under normal circumstances conceive it to be a straight beam and thus be misled as to the location of its source. Or even realizing it to be curved, one had no means of judging the angle of the curve.

A narrow white stream of light, it flung through our window-oval, forward under the dome and through the bow dome bullseye, into space. I saw the men on the deck spring into sudden alertness with the realization we were using it. The bow lookout on the forward observation bridge crouched at his 'scope-finder to help us search.

From the control turret came an audiphone buzz, and Drac's voice:

"Am I headed right? The swing is almost completed."

"Finish the job and don't bother me now."

I bent over the field-mirror of the projector. On its glowing ten-inch grid the shifting image of my range was visible, a curving, brilliant limb of the Moon, with the sunlight on the jagged mountain peaks; everywhere else was the black firmament and the blazing dots of stars.

Grantline crouched beside me. "I'll work the amplifiers. Going to spread it much, Gregg?"

"Yes. A full spread first. We're in no mood for a detailed narrow search."

I gradually widened the light. Three feet here at its source, it spread in a great widening arc. With the naked eye we could see its white radiance, fan-shaped as an edge of it fell upon the Moon. And though optically it was not apparent, the elliptical curve of it was rounding the Moon, disclosing the hidden starfield to our instruments.

"Nothing yet?" I murmured.

"No."

"I'll try a narrower spread and less curve."

Grantline was searching the magnified images on the series of amplifier grids. There was nothing. For an hour we worked; then suddenly Grantline cried: "Gregg! Wait! Hold it!"

I tensed, stricken. I held the angle and the spread of light steady.

"Two seconds of arc, east; try that. The damned thing is shifting." He gripped me. "It's at the eastern edge of the field; it shifts off. It must be in rapid motion."

Then I saw it, a mere moving dot of black; but suddenly it clarified. I saw a dot which I could imagine was a shape with discs along its edge, moving with high velocity. Grantline was shifting our field to hold it.

"Got it, Gregg. By God, that's it! Now we'll see."

Then presently we saw that from its bow a very faint radiant beam was streaming. Beside me I heard Grantline gasp, "Gregg, am I crazy or is that bow beacon like the light-beam planted in Greater New York?"

There did seem to be a similarity, but thought of it abruptly was swept from my mind. Our cubby was alive with signals. Both the bow and the stern observers saw the enemy ship now with their 'scopes gazing directly along our Benson-light. And Drac was calling, "I've got the measurement of its velocity. Doubling every ten seconds. God, what acceleration!"

I flung off the Benson-light. The enemy ship had come from behind the limb of the Moon; our straight-light telescopes showed it clearly. It was heading unmistakably in our direction.

Drac was pleading, "We need velocity! Are you coming to the turret?"

"Yes."

Grantline and I rushed out upon the catwalk. Waters was mounting the spiral ladder from the deck. "Into your cubby," I shouted. "Call Earth. Keep calling until you get them."

Grantline rushed for the deck. I gained the control turret, Drac, with his thin face white and set, met me at the door. "We need velocity."

I nodded. "We'll get it, Drac; have no fear of that."

I set the gravity-plates for the greatest possible acceleration forward and added the stern rocket engines for narrow-angle maneuvering.

With gathering speed we plunged directly for the oncoming enemy ship.

"But there's something wrong, Drac."

"We've got grade five acceleration."

Grantline had joined us in the control turret. "How far would you say, at a rough guess, that ship is from us now?"

"Thirty thousand miles; about that." Drac scanned his page of calculations. "Impossible to gauge with any exactness; they change their pace so often and I can't figure out how large the damn thing is."

"Say they've got a forty thousand velocity; added to our ten, that's fifty."

"And we're accelerating. In half an hour we'll be within range."

"But there's something wrong," I persisted.

For several minutes now I had been aware that the Cometara was acting strangely. A sluggish response to the controls, I thought, but when I called engine chief Franklin, he had not noticed it. Yet I was certain.

Grantline stared at me. "Something wrong?"

"Yes. Drac, try orienting us. I did it ten minutes ago." I shoved him at my equations, giving the angles with the Sun, Earth and Moon which we should now have. "There's our flight course as it ought to be. Measure how we're heading, actual position. If it's what it ought to be, with the plate-combinations I'm using, then I'm crazy."

"Oh, you're just naturally apprehensive," Grantline said.

But we were not where we should be. The Cometara was off her predetermined course. And then I realized the factor of error. There was a gravitational force here for which I was not allowing. The error was not within the Cometara; she was responding perfectly. But there was a force upon her, and not that of the Sun, Earth, Moon or the distant starfield. I had calculated all of these. It was something else. Some gravitational pull, so that we were not upon the course of flight we should have been on.

"But what could be wrong?" Grantline demanded.

It was Drac who guessed it. "That radiance from the enemy's bow?"

It was that, we felt certain. Even at this thirty thousand mile distance, the bow-beacon seemed streaming upon us. We could not see that it illumined the Cometara, nor could our instruments measure any added illumination. Our flight-orbit, if held, would carry us with a swing some ten thousand miles above the South Pole of the Moon. It would cross diagonally in front of the trajectory that the enemy vessel was maintaining. But we were off our predetermined course, with a side-drift toward the enemy. That bow-beacon radiance was exerting a force upon us, a strange gravitational pull.

Grantline gasped when Drac said it. "If it's that now, what will it be when we get closer?"

The minutes were passing. The thirty thousand miles between us and the enemy was cut to ten thousand; to five. The ship was soon visible to the naked eye. Its visual movement, for all this time measurable only as a drift upon the amplified images of our instruments, now was obvious. We could see it plunging forward, could see that probably we would cross its bow. Within fifty miles? We hoped and guessed that would be the result, so that with this first

passing we could use our weapons. Fifty miles of distance at combined speeds of some fifty thousand miles an hour: that would be something like three seconds from a collision. The danger of a collision, which both ships would do anything to avert, was negligible; in the immensity of space two objects so small could not strike each other, even with intention, once in a million times.

We could not calculate the passing so closely, but suddenly it seemed that perhaps the enemy could. The bow-beacon radiance, so obviously a miniature of the weird light-beams streaming from Earth, Mars and Venus, now swung away from us and was extinguished. Whatever alteration of our course the enemy had made, they seemed to be satisfied. The passing would be to their liking. Would it be to ours?

Grantline had left the turret. He was down on the deck, ready with his men. The weapons were ready.

We had long since advanced beyond the possibility of mathematical calculations keeping pace with our changing position in relation to the enemy, but it seemed that the passing would be within fifty miles. Grantline's weapons would carry their bolt that far.

It was barely two thousand miles away now. Two minutes of time

before the passing. I stared at it, a long, low ship of dark metal, red where the moonlight struck upon it. I estimated its size to be about that of the Cometara, but it was much more nearly globular. Upon its top, seeming to project from the terraced dome, was an up-pointing funnel, like the smokestack of an old-fashioned surface steam vessel; or like a great black muzzle of an old-fashioned gun. And in a row along the bulging middle of the hull there was a series of little discs.

The vessel was still a tiny blob, but every instant it was enlarging, doubling its visual size. Drac said tensely, "Fifteen hundred miles! We'll pass in a minute and a half."

I turned the angle of the stern rocket-streams. The firmament slowly began swinging; the enemy ship seemed swaying up over us. I was turning our top to it, so that Grantline might fire directly upward from both sides almost simultaneously. It might be possible, if I could roll us over at just the proper seconds.

But the enemy anticipated us. As they observed our roll, again the bow-beacon flashed on. It visibly struck us, bathed all our length in its spreading opalescent radiance.

It seemed for an instant to do nothing. Our dome did not crack; there was no shock. But our side-roll slowed. The heavens stopped their

swing, and then swung back! We were upon an even keel again, the enemy level with our bow. Against the force of my turning rocket-streams this radiation had righted us. It clung a few seconds more, and again vanished.

Grantline's deck audiphone rang with his startled voice: "Gregg, roll us over! Quick! I can only fire from one side."

"I can't."

It was too late now. A few hundred miles of distance! Drac stood clutching me, staring through the port. And I stared, breathless, awaiting the results of these next few seconds.

The ships passed like crossing, speeding meteors. A few seconds of final approach; I saw the enemy vessel as an elongated, flattened globe, with a triple-terraced dome and terraced decks beneath it. That queer stack on top! The round discs, like ten-foot eyes, gleamed along the equator of the bulging hull.

One of Grantline's weapons fired a silent flash. Still out of range. The spit of our electrons leaped from our side. The enemy was untouched.

The thought stabbed at me: Anita! Not killed by that one.

Another shot from Grantline.

No result. It seemed that I saw the bolt strike. There was a reddening, a flash upon that bulging hull, but nothing more.

I was aware again of the enemy bow-beam swinging upon us. The beam was pressing us over again so that in a moment we would be hull-bottom to the enemy and Grantline could not fire.

He anticipated it. The ship was broadside to us. In the split second of that passing I saw that it was not fifty miles away, hardly ten. Grantline flung his remaining bolts. The enemy was a streaked blur going by; and all in that second it was past, reddening in the distance. Untouched by our bolts? It seemed so. The bow radiance darted ahead of it. The globular shape, unharmed, dwindled in the distance behind us.

And it had done nothing to us!

The control levers were in my hands. I would shift the gravity-plates, and make the quickest turn we could. We would go around the Moon, probably, and come back within an hour or two. Perhaps our

adversary would also turn to encounter us again.

At that second I had not seen the little discs, but I saw them now! They came sailing in a line, ten foot, flat, circular discs of a dark metal; they gleamed reddish where the sunlight painted them. They had been fastened outside the enemy vessel and in our passing they had been discharged. They sailed now like whirling plates. There seemed perhaps twenty of them, heading in a curve toward us.

Grantline's voice came again from the deck audiphone. "Missed them, Gregg. That's what I thought but at least two of our bolts must have struck. But it didn't hurt them."

"No," I replied. "It seemed not. They must have a defensive barrage."

Drac was pulling at me. "Those things out there, those discs...."

Grantline demanded, "Yes, what in hell are they?"

We could not tell. It seemed that their curve would take them behind our stern. Grantline added: "Will you try going back after that ship?"

"Yes."

But I did not. To the naked eye the enemy ship had already disappeared; but with the 'scopes we saw that it seemed to be turning.

I did not attempt to turn us, for we were afraid of those oncoming discs which took all our attention. They passed within five miles astern of us, but in a great curve they swung and now seemed heading across our bow. With what tremendous velocity they had been endowed by their firing mechanisms! Their elliptical curve swung them a mile or so ahead of us.

They were circling us like tiny satellites in a narrowing spiral ellipse. Our attraction, the normal gravity of our close bulk, was drawing them to us.

The men on the Cometara's deck stood gazing, surprised but not yet alarmed. The lookout calls sounded with routine notification each time the discs passed across our bow and stern. In the helio cubby, Waters was still trying to raise an Earth station.

Grantline came running to the control turret. "If those cursed things, should strike us, Gregg!"

I had set the gravity-plates into new combinations, turning our

course downward, trying to swing us under the plane of the discs' orbit. But they swung downward with us; they were no more than two thousand feet away now.

Grantline said, "At the next broadside passing I'll fire at them."

Drac looked up from his calculating instruments. "Look! A circular rotation: Horribly swift. But I've caught a picture. Look!"

He had a still image of one of the discs. It had saw-teeth at its thin knife-like outer circumference. Whirling at tremendous speed, these saw-toothed metal discs might cut into our dome, or some other part of our ship.

At the next round, Grantline fired. The discs reddened a little, but came on unharmed. From the other side, he fired again. Three of the discs seemed to have been caught full. His bolts, sustained for their fullest ten seconds of duration at this close, thousand-foot range, took effect. The three discs seemed to crumble with a puff of queerly-radiant vacuum spark-glows, then were gone.

But the others came closing in.

The Cometara rang now with the excitement and alarm of the men.

Grantline could not set his gauges fast enough to fire at every round.

I had a sudden thought. With the rear rockets, I rolled us over. For a moment we were hull-down to the passing discs. From our hull gravity-plates I flung a full repulsion. Would it stave them off, bend their orbit outward? It did not. Their course was unaltered.

Again Grantline was shouting at me, "Roll us back! I must fire!"

It had been an error, that rolling; Grantline lost several shots because of it. I swung us level. The discs passed within a hundred feet; half a dozen of them were still closer. Gleaming, whirling circles, thin as knife-blades; they passed close under our stern, came broadside.

These were tense, horrible seconds. The discs skimmed our bow; one seemed to miss our dome by inches. Grantline's volley annihilated four more, but there were still eight of them. They swung in at our stern.

I was aware of confusion throughout the Cometara. The crew and stewards were running up to the bow quarter-deck. My second officer stood there, stricken. The stern lookout screamed his futile warning.

Useless! I saw one of the discs strike our stern dome, then another. Still others. They were silent blows, but it seemed that I could feel them cutting into the dome-plates.

The dome was cracking! Then, after that horrible instant, came the sound: crunch, a rumble; the grind of crushed and breaking metal; then the puff and surge of the outward explosion.

I saw the whole tip of the stern dome cracking, bursting outward, forced by our interior air pressure. And over all the Cometara the outgoing air was sucking and whining with a growing rush of wind.

I shouted, "Drac! Close the stern bulkhead!"

I set the word-buttons for the distress siren, and pulled the lever. Its voice screamed over the uproar. "Keep forward! Take the space-suits! Prepare to abandon ship!"

In the midst of the chaos I was aware that all the remaining discs struck us upon the port stern quarter. The broken dome of the stern showed a jagged hole, but the up-sliding cross-bulkhead partially shut it off. Two or three of the crew and the stern lookout were gone behind that closing bulkhead. Their bodies in a moment would be blown into space.

"It may hold, Drac. Order Waters out of his cubby. Forward!"

I was calling the engine-room. "Order your men up by the bow, not the stern." But I got no answer from the engine-chief.

I raised Grantline. "Order your men forward: Clear amidships! I want to close the central bulkheads. If the stern one breaks with the pressure...."

"Right, Gregg. Are we lost?"

"God knows! We'll know in a minute or two. Get all your men into their space-suits. Keep in the bow. Prepare the exit-port there."

"Right, Gregg. You coming down?"

"Yes. When I finish." I cut him off. "Drac, get out of here! Did you order Waters forward?"

"He won't leave."

"Why the hell not?"

"He thinks he may be able to get communication with Earth."

"He can't stay where he is; there's no protection up here! When that stern bulkhead goes...."

It was breaking. I could see it bending sternward under the pressure. And at best it was leaking air, so that the decks were a rush of wind. Already Drac and I were gasping with the lowered pressure.

"Drac, get out of here. Go get Waters; bring him forward. The hell with his transmitter: this is life or death!"

"But you?"

"I'm coming down. From the forward deck, call the hull control rooms. Order everybody forward and to the deck."

"What about the pressure pumps?"

"I can keep them going from here."

I set the circulating system to guide the fresh air forward, but it was futile against the sucking rush of wind toward the stern. As the pumps speeded up I saw, with the little added pressure, the great cross panel of the stern bulkhead straining harder. It would go in a moment.

Drac was clinging to me. "Tell me what to do!"

"I've told you what to do!" I shoved him to the catwalk. "Get out of here. Get Waters forward. Get the men out of the hull."

His anguished eyes stared at me; then he turned and ran forward on the catwalk. I saw him forcibly dragging the bald-headed Waters from the helio cubby. It was the last time I ever saw either of them.

A buzzer was ringing in the turret, and I plunged back for it. The exertion put a band of pain across my chest, a panting constriction from the lowering pressure.

Fanning, assistant engineer, was still at the pressure pumps. His voice came up: "Pumps and renewers working. Will you use the gravity shifters?"

"Hell, no! Get out of there, Fanning. We're smashed. Air going. It's a matter of minutes—abandoning ship. Get forward!"

Suddenly the stern bulkhead cracked with a great diagonal rift. I waited a moment to give them all time to get forward; then I slid all the cross 'midship bulkheads.

It was barely in time. The stern bulkhead went out with a gale of

wind, but the barrier amidships stemmed it. Half of the vessel sternward was devoid of air, but here in the bow we could last a little longer. Beneath me I could see Grantline's men—some of them, not all—and a few of the stewards, crew and officers, crowding the deck, donning space-suits. The two side chambers were ready; half a dozen men crowded into each of them. The deck doors slid closed. The outer ports opened; helmeted, goggled, bloated figures were blown by the outgoing air from the chamber into space. Then the outer slides went closed. The pumps filled up the chambers; the deck doors opened again. Another batch of men....

I saw Grantline, suited but with his helmet off, dashing from one side of the deck to the other, commanding the abandonment.

The central bulkheads seemed momentarily holding. Then little red lights in the panel board before me showed where in the hull corridors the doors were leaking, cracking, giving away, breaking under the strain. The whole ribbed framework of the vessel was strained and slued. The bulkhead sides no longer set true in the casements. Air was whining everywhere and pulling sternward.

It was the last stand; I was aware that the alarm siren had ceased. There was a sudden stillness, with only the shouts of the remaining men at the exit-ports mingling with the whine of the wind and the

roaring in my head. I felt detached, far-away; my senses were reeling.

I staggered to the gauges of the Erentz system, the system whereby an oscillating current, circling within the double-shelled walls of hull and dome, absorbed into negative energy much of the interior pressure. The main walls of the vessel were straining outward. The Cometara could collapse at any moment. I started for the catwalk door. The electro-telescope stood near it and I yielded to a vague desire to gaze into the eyepiece. The instrument was still operative. I swept it sternward.

The enemy ship had not vanished. By what strange means, I cannot say, its velocity had been checked. A few thousand miles from us, it was making a narrow, close-angle turn. Coming back? I thought so.

I suddenly realized my intention of having all the gravity-plates in neutral before abandoning the ship. I seized the controls now. An agony of fear was upon me that the shifting valves would fail. But they did not. The plates slid haltingly, reluctantly.

I recall staggering to the catwalk. It seemed that the central bulkhead was breaking. There were fallen figures on the deck beneath me. I stumbled against the body of a man who had tangled himself in the

stays of the ladder rail and was hanging there.

I think I fell the last ten feet to the deck. The roaring in my ears, the bands tightening about my chest encompassed all the world.

Then I was on my feet again, and I stumbled over another body. It was garbed in a space-suit, with the helmet beside it. I stripped it of the suit. I was panting, with all the world whirling in a daze, bursting spots of light before my eyes.

Ten feet away down the deck was the opened door of the pressure chamber. A bloated figure came into my dreamlike vista, moving for the pressure door. It turned, saw me, came leaping and bent over me. I saw behind the vizor that it was Grantline. His bloated, gloved hands helped me don my suit.

He helped me with my helmet. The metal tip on Grantline's gloved hand touched the contact-plate on my shoulder. His voice sounded from the tiny audiphone grid within my helmet. "Gregg! Thank God I found you! All right?"

"Yes." My head was clearing.

"I've got the chamber ready. We're the last, Gregg."

I gripped his shoulder. "You're sure there's nobody else?"

"No. I've been everywhere I could reach. The central bulkheads are almost gone."

He pushed me into the pressure chamber. There was hardly need to close the door after us. I stood gripping him as he opened the small outer slides. The abyss was at our feet; the outgoing wind tore at us like a gale, so that we stood gripping the casements.

"Thank God you've got a power-suit, Gregg. So have I. We must keep together."

"Yes."

I could feel the floor grid of the chamber shuddering beneath my feet. The Cometara was cracking, bursting outward throughout her length; at any instant she might collapse.

For a moment we stood poised. Beneath us, here at the brink were millions upon millions of miles of emptiness, the remote, unfathomable void. Blazing worlds down there in the black darkness.

"Good-by, Gregg. It may be the end for us."

"Good luck, Johnny."

His bloated figure dropped away from me. I waited just an instant, and then I dove into space.

For a moment there was a chaos of strangeness, the wrench to my sense of the transition. I had been the inhabitant of a little world, the Cometara, with a gravity beneath my feet. Now, in a breath, I had no world to inhabit. I was alone in space. No gravity; nothing solid to touch; emptiness.

I was in a world to myself, and the abnormality of it brought a mental shock. But in a moment the adjustment came. I passed the transition, the sense of falling.

The firmament steadied and my senses cleared. My dive from the Cometara carried me in a slow arc some three hundred feet away. There had been a sense of falling, but no actual fall. My velocity was retarded, with the mass of the Cometara pulling at me. I went like a toy boat in water shoved by a child, quickly slowing. In a few moments, the velocity was gone, and I hung poised. I saw Grantline's bloated form not over fifty feet from me. He waved an arm at me.

Out here in the void I lay weightless, as though upon an infinitely soft feather bed. I could kick, flounder, but not endow myself with motion. I craned my neck, gazed around through the bulging vizor pane.

The Earth and the Sun hung level with the white star-dots strewn everywhere. I could not see that unknown light-beam from Greater New York; it was shafting out now in the other direction, so that the Earth hid it from me. Venus was visible to one side of the Sun. The enemy light-stream from Grebhar was apparent; and as I turned my body and bent double to look behind me, I saw Mars and the sword-like ray from Ferrok-Shahn. The beams streamed off like the radiance of the Milky Way, faintly luminous but seemingly visible for an infinite distance.

The Cometara was obviously falling now toward the Moon, drawn irresistibly, and all of us with her, toward the lunar surface. It seemed so close, that black and white mountainous disc. We were, I suppose, some twenty thousand miles from it, gathering speed as it pulled at us. But that motion was not apparent now. Distance dwindled all these celestial motions, so that all the firmament seemed frozen into immobility.

But there was some motion. Twenty or more bloated figures, the

survivors from the wreck of the Cometara, were encircling it in varying orbits, revolving around it like tiny satellites. Some were closing in, drawn against it. I saw one plunge against the wrecked dome, and begin crawling like a fly. And I found that the forces of the firmament were molding my orbit also. My outward plunge was checked. I poised for an indeterminate instant, and then I took my orbit. I too, was a satellite of the Cometara.

I gazed at the wreck of the Cometara. My ship! My first command! So smoothly, confidently rising from the Earth only a few hours ago; and she had come to this. She lay askew in the heavens. The dome was cracked throughout all its length and smashed like a shell at the sterntip.

I could see the interior litter beneath the dome, the twisted and strained lines of the hull. A dead ship now, the mechanisms stilled; dead and silent inside, with all the warmth gone out of it. All the air dissipated, so that in every cubby, every dark corridor of that broken hull there was the coldness and silence of interplanetary space.

I suppose these thoughts swept me within a few seconds. I saw myself starting to revolve in my orbit. Perhaps my motion would carry me around indefinitely; or I might be drawn down to the vessel as those other survivors had been drawn.

Grantline, with one of the few power suits, was coming toward me now, with tiny fluorescent streams back along his body from his shoulder blades. I switched on my own mechanism. It moved me toward him, and our gravity attracted us. We shut off the power when twenty feet apart; drifted together; contacted; bounced apart like rubber balls as our inflated suits struck. Then in a moment we had drifted back and clung.

I touched the metal plate of his shoulder. "Working all right?"

"Yes. Thank God for this much, Gregg. I wonder how many are alive."

In the chaos of the abandonment, many of the men's air mechanisms had failed to operate. It is always so in times of disaster. We could see, revolving around the wreck, and motionless against its dome, those horrible flabby, deflated suits where the delicate Erentz mechanism had failed. Within was only a corpse.

"Too many," I said. "And not more than four or five of us with power. What shall we do first? Round them up? We must all get together."

His answering voice was grim. "We can tow them from the wreck.

Six or seven of us altogether have power. Do you suppose we can get away, Gregg? Get loose from the ship before she falls?"

Only trying it could tell us that. The Cometara, and all of us with her, were plunging for the Moon. We would seek out the men who were alive and tow them in a string. If we could break the gravity pull of the ship, and then struggle upward from the Moon, we could maintain ourselves here in space until some rescue ship from Earth, Venus or Mars would come and pick us up.

"You take one side, Gregg; I'll take the other. Don't go aboard; she might collapse."

"I'll pick up the men without power and alive. The others with power suits will do the same. Then we'll meet out here, about where we are now?"

"Yes. And hurry, Gregg! Every mile toward the Moon makes it that much harder. We're falling fast."

"Good luck!" I shoved away from him. And within a minute, as he went in an arc toward the Cometara bow and I toward her stern, I suddenly thought of that returning enemy vessel. My last look through the 'scope had shown that she was returning; and then I had

forgotten it.

My gaze swept the firmament now. I had no 'scope instruments within the helmet. With the naked eye the enemy ship was not in sight. But I knew that meant little; within a moment she could come in view and be here if she were going at any great velocity.

There were on the Cometara, at the time of the disaster, some sixty-odd men; perhaps forty had gotten away. And I could see very soon that not more than fifteen, or less, out here were alive. Two with power were ahead of me now, slowly floating past the wrecked dome of the stern. One had picked up two others, found them alive and was towing them out. They went past me, moving very slowly so that I could see that two were all that one of us could tow and attain any velocity at all.

I contacted with the leader. He was one of Grantline's men.

"Two or three hundred feet out," I directed. I gestured. "Grantline said to meet out there. I'll tow others."

"Yes. Around the stern you'll find—God! Haljan, look!"

A mile from us the enemy ship was in view. Passing—no! Stopping!

With incredible retardation she had plunged into view, was here, and yet had no great forward velocity. She seemed no more rapid than a great air liner winging past, so close that her reddish-tinged bulging hull length showed clearly. The discs were gone. The funnel set on top of her was sloped diagonally toward us as she rolled on her side, so that momentarily I could see down into it. There was some mechanism down there. The bow radiance was a narrow opalescent beam in advance of the bow.

"Slowing, Haljan!"

"Yes, stopping. Don't try to meet Grantline. Tow your men away!"

"Or should we board the Cometara and hide?"

"No. They've come back to bombard her."

I kicked at him violently. With his two drifting figures clinging behind, he swung past me. I headed behind the stern. Upon its dangling framework several of our men were glued, lying there inert. I caught a glimpse of the interior of the stern, the littered deck; men lying there had been stricken before they had time to get into their suits.

On the outside, forward, I saw Grantline come rounding the bow, towing a figure and heading for another. On the outside of the bow-peak a group of others were perched, gesticulating for help. I started that way; then I saw another, and nearer figure in a power suit heading for them. I swung back. There were two figures on the outside of the under-hull whom I could more quickly reach. Inverted flies. Their feet were on the keel. They stooped and waved toward me.

I took a swoop. Passing close down the hull, my rocket-streams struck the hull plates and gave me sudden downward velocity. I shot down, out past the keel. And again I saw the enemy ship. She hung poised, no more than two miles away. And as I looped over, with all the black, star-strewn firmament in a dizzy whirl, the great Moon-disc, first above, and then below me, I saw the bow-beam of the enemy swinging. It came to the Cometara, and there it clung.

I had gone perhaps fifty feet below the keel with my dive when I righted. I was mounting. I saw the opalescent ten-foot circle of the beam moving along the Cometara hull. It seemed to do no damage; then suddenly it darted down and clung to me.

I felt nothing save the impact of a gentle push, something shoving with a ponderable force against me.

I saw the Cometara receding, the heavens swinging as I turned over. The red disc of the distant Earth swooped. The Moon surface momentarily seemed rotating and lifting above me.

I was helpless, rolling, then whirling end-over-end. Then again I steadied. The beam was gone from me.

I saw the Cometara, a full mile away from me! The enemy ship was again in motion, moving toward me, and between the Cometara and the Earth. And the beam was steady upon the Cometara's mid-section.

The Cometara had a new velocity now. I could not miss it. She was dwindling rapidly in visual size; relative to me, she was receding, falling upon the Moon. More than that she was being pushed downward by the repulsive force of the strange enemy beam upon her. I stared, as with all the little dots which were our men around and upon her, she went down into the void.

I found myself presently alone up here, with the enemy ship hovering nearby. Its maneuvering to thrust the wrecked Cometara toward the Moon had brought it within a mile of me. The bow-beam was still on the Cometara; and then abruptly it vanished.

The Cometara had almost dwindled beyond the sight of my unaided vision. By chance, undoubtedly, the beam had fallen upon me and thrust me from the wreck. I was alone up here now with the enemy, but they may not have noticed me, or cared. I found my power mechanism intact. I turned it on; slowly, like a log in water, I began moving away.

A minute. Five minutes. The Cometara was lost. Grantline, all the men, were lost; with that added downward thrust they could never free themselves from the falling wreck.

I was jerked out of my thoughts by the sight of an oncoming red blob. Something was coming from the enemy ship, red with the sunlight and earthlight, silvered by the Moon and the stars. It took form. It was a disc, another of those cursed whirling discs, sent to annihilate me!

Then, when it was a quarter of a mile away, I saw that it was a disc which was turning slowly. Rocket radiances came from its rotating circumference; it came sailing directly at me, so swiftly that my own velocity was futile.

Another minute and I was caught. I saw that the disc was some fifteen feet in diameter, and that it bulged, so that within its convex

floor and ceiling was a space of several feet.

I cut off my power and with pounding heart lay waiting. The space-suit had no weapons for equipment save a knife hung in the belt. I drew it out, held it in my gloved fingers.

The disc sailed upon its level, vertical axis. Its rotation slowed; I saw little windows set around its convex middle. It came up and bumped me with its metal side. I kicked away, shoved off. Shapes were moving in a dim interior light behind the port-panes. Little hand-beams of radiance darted out. They seemed to seize me, draw me.

I found myself glued helplessly to the convex outer surface of the disc. The rotation gathered speed again, but I looked presently only at the gleaming surface to which I was pinned. Had I been a metal bar upon the horns of an electro-magnet, I could not have been more helpless.

An interval passed. With the contact plate of my fingers against this hull it seemed that I could hear voices within, strange, indistinguishable words. I twisted, but could not see into the port.

Again the rotation was slowing. The near shape of the enemy vessel swung close and past; and again and again I saw that we were over

it, dropping down into the wide black opening of the funnel-top. It yawned presently like a great black tunnel, into which we fell.

The jar of landing knocked me loose, and no doubt the attraction radiance also released me. I fell another space, bounced up and sank back. I thought that something like a sliding port-door closed over me.

And then, in the dimness, figures were gripping me. I lashed and struck, but the knife was wrenched away.

I was a prisoner in a pressure-port of the enemy ship!

It seemed that the small room had a very faint radiance showing through my vizor pane. Narrow enclosing walls were visible. It was a triangular-shaped space, fifteen feet or so down one side, with a concave ceiling overhead. I was lying on the floor. The darkness at first had been impenetrable. The figures which had flung me down and seized my knife were gone; I had not seen them nor where they went.

For a moment I lay cushioned by my bloated suit. When I struggled to my feet, I was almost weightless. The movement of getting upright flung me upward as though I were a tossed feather. My

helmet struck the metal ceiling, so sharp a blow that I feared for an instant I had smashed the helmet.

From the ceiling, with flailing arms and legs, I sank back to the grid-floor; and in a moment I was able to stand upright with so slight a feeling of weight that I could have been a bit of thistle ready to blow away in the least wind.

There was, as I stood there balancing myself, a queer feeling of triumph within me. A triumphant hope; for coming down in the ship's capacious funnel—larger than it had seemed from a distance—I had seen what appeared to be a small projectile, resting in some strange landing gear. The disc bearing me had settled on a stage alongside it. Was that the projectile from Earth?

A growing air pressure was around me; the tiny Erentz dials within my helmet had been immovable, but now they were showing outside pressure. I stood waiting. Whatever sounds were here I could not tell. Then presently the dials stopped. They registered seventeen pounds—whatever that might mean here. I loosed the helmet and took it off.

With the first gasping breath my senses reeled. I sank to the floor, and though I tried to replace the helmet, it was too late. My thoughts

were fading. A strange chemical odor was in my nostrils. It was like breathing a thin, perfumed water.

The drifting away was pleasant.

Tortured dreams came with my awakening. I found myself in the same dim room upon the floor. I could breathe better now, and in a few more hours the strangeness had almost gone. I found now that I was not injured, but I was ravenously hungry.

Again, gingerly as before, I stood up and slid my space-suit from me; and now I was aware of movement and sound. The floor-grid vibrations were apparent. And there was a dim, distant, tiny throbbing; it was much like the interior of the Cometara while in flight.

And there were other sounds, indescribably faint, yet strangely clear. I thought they might be distant voices.

I took a cautious step. I could see a dim blank wall nearby with what seemed a bowl-like article of furniture on the floor against the wall. For all my caution, I sailed upward; but this time I held my balance. And I found that with my negligible weight, I could almost swim in this strange air! I hit the wall and slid slowly down it to the floor

again, like a man sinking to the bottom of a tank.

It suddenly occurred to me to put my ear against the wall. At once the sounds all became incredibly louder. It was a confusion of sound: the mechanisms of the vessel, some of which I thought I could identify, and some not; the strange swish and thump of what might have been people moving; and there were voices.

The voices seemed mingled babble coming from everywhere. The timber of the sound was very strange. It held no suggestion of how far away from me the voices might be. There were so many of them I could only think they were scattered about the ship; and yet they all seemed together. After a moment, the blend was less confusing. Again, very strangely my hearing seemed able to separate one from the other.

I was to learn that the atmosphere handled sound vibrations differently from that of Earth. Voices had a muffled tone, as though they were smothered. There was undoubtedly a vibrational distortion; and a sound-wave speed slower than Earth's normal-pressure rate of 1,050 feet a second, perhaps as slow as 700. Yet sounds remained audible over longer distances than on Earth.

In this instance now, as I listened with my ear to the wall of the ship,

I was hearing all its sounds picked up and carried by the metal.

Now I heard a strange tongue: two types of voices, slow, measured, carefully-intoned phrases, and voices of a curiously sepulchral, hollow sound. My mind went back to the Red Spark restaurant room.

And suddenly I realized that amid the babble I was hearing English. A man's voice, talking English. I caught, very clearly the phrase:

"Master, yes. She means well. Can you not see it?"

Molo's voice! Then the girls must be here also.

Another voice: "I am not sure. Perhaps. The Great Intelligence will talk with her when we are arrived." It was the slow measured voice of one of the brains.

"When will that be? Pretty soon now, won't it, Molo?"

Venza! A great wave of thankfulness swept me. And then I heard Anita. "Your two captives, where are they? You're not going to kill them, are you?"

"No," said Molo. "Perhaps not. No one has inspected the new one yet. The other is being cared for. The Great Intelligence will question

him when we arrive."

"We are arriving," said Venza. "That's your world, Wandl, down there, isn't it?"

"Yes. We are dropping fast."

The voice of the brain: "Come, Wyk. The instruments are showing events on our captured worlds. Take me to watch. I am tired of movement."

"Yes. Master."

It seemed that the brain was being carried away; Molo and the two girls were being left alone. I had thought at first that they were in the adjacent room to me, but they could have been far distant. They had mentioned two captives. One, obviously, was myself. Was the other Snap?

"Come," Molo was saying, "stand here with me and we will watch this world. Not mine, Venza chia, as you just called it, But my adopted world. And it will be yours, until we rule the new Mars."

I heard them moving to gaze through the window-port. Then came Anita's voice: "If it's anything like this ship, it will be very strange."

"Strange indeed, little dove. I was there only once, a month ago, and for a few hours only. The Great Intelligence, as they call him, talked with me, absorbing my knowledge: they call it that. And he was much impressed by me, and made very wonderful promises in exchange for my fidelity. And for my sister, too."

I learned further how Molo and Meka became identified with the Wandlites; it was as we had suspected.

"You will rule Mars?" Venza was saying. "When this is over, you mean you will really be given Mars to rule?"

"I would rather live on the Earth," said Anita. "There was a young man there."

"He will not be there much longer." Molo laughed. "You are very lucky that I fancy you!"

"Lucky indeed," Venza echoed. "No death for me. I'm too young."

"But all those millions dead. It seems so terrible."

"It is, for them!" Molo was in high good humor, pleased with himself and with these girls. "See down there; that blurring is the heavy air. We're almost down into it now."

I heard the sound of someone joining them, and then the hollow voice again: "Molo! Bad tidings come from Mars. One of the Masters was captured there in Ferrok-Shahn. They tortured him as they did the one on Earth. But he did not die unyielding. He spoke and told our plans!"

"Hah! Did I not advise you to keep those helpless things on Wandl?"

"But it is done now. The worlds know our purpose. They are preparing spaceships. Already some are rising from Ferrok-Shahn, from Grebhar and from Greater New York."

"We knew they were doing that."

"But now they know our purpose. The Master Intelligence fears that they will come raiding Wandl. Our vessels are being made ready to go out and repel them."

The hollow voice ceased.

"Your purpose discovered?" asked Anita. "What does that mean? Won't you tell us now? Twin queens for your future Mars, and you treat us like children!"

"That light-beam he so cleverly planted in Greater New York,"

Venza hinted.

"Yes, I will tell you. Without me in New York and my men who went with these Wandlites to Ferrok-Shahn and Grebhar, the vital gravity beams could never successfully have been planted. The apparatus was complicated; you saw it. You saw the labor I had making the contact?"

"But what are the light-beams for?"

I listened, breathless, as he told them. The electronic beams could not be destroyed; a disintegration of the rock atoms had been set up. With each rotation of the Earth it was sweeping the sky. From a great control station, Wandl was flinging attraction gravity upon that beam, using it as a monstrous lever upon the rotation of Earth. With every daily passage now the force was being exerted. The rotation was slowing. In a few days it would stop, with the end of the beam drawn to Wandl and held there.

And the beams from Grebhar and Ferrok-Shahn were the same. Three giant chains! Then Wandl, traveling of its own gravitational volition, would withdraw from our solar system. The gravitational chains would pull the Earth, Venus and Mars after it!

Titanic tow-ropes! The destruction, not of our worlds, but of all life upon them, for the cold of interstellar space would leave no living organism. Three dead worlds; Wandl would draw them to her own Sun and then free them, send them, with new orbits, around the distant blazing star. Three new worlds brought home triumphantly by Wandl to join the little family of inhabited planets revolving around this other Sun. Three fair and lovely worlds, warmed back by the other sunlight to be green mansions untenanted, ready to receive the new beings who would come and possess them.

"You, Snap!"

"Gregg! But how...?"

"Hush! They might hear us."

"They can do more than that. They can almost hear you think."

"Anita and Venza are here."

"I know it. I was with them for a time. This accursed gravity! I can't walk."

"Careful," I whispered. "You can crack your head on something with the least false step. Are they taking us ashore?"

"I guess so. How did you happen...?"

"Tell you later."

They had come for me in that dark pressure-port, taken me along a dim corridor of the ship, which evidently had landed a few moments before. Then Snap, with strange figures around him, had been flung at me.

These weird beings! The brains were here, but not many; I saw half a dozen on the ship. They could move easily now. They bounced upon their small arms and legs, hitching with little leaps of a few feet. Close at hand they were gruesome; from a distance they had the aspect of thirty-inch ovoids, bouncing of their own volition. And I saw too that underneath, toward the back, was a shriveled body.

The other figures were wholly different; they seemed at first to be ten-foot, upright insects. The two legs were like stilts, the body narrow but with bulging chest. The neck was thin, holding the small round head, about the size of my own.

Words seem futile to picture this thing which was a man of Wandl. There was no skin, but instead what seemed to be a glossy, hard brown shell. It was laid in scales; and upon the legs was a brown

fuzz of stiff hair. There were many joints, both of the legs and the torso. Clothing was worn; a single garment, hanging from a wide belt halfway down the legs seemed incongruous, fantastically aping humanity.

This was the worker, equipped by nature for mechanical tasks. There were not two arms, but at least ten. From what could have been called the shoulders, they were tentacles, half the length of an elephant's trunk, with many-fingered hands at the ends. From the waist depended huge lobster-like pincers; and from the chest and back the arms were smaller, each with a different type finger-claw.

The head and face were most of all a personal mocking of mankind. Wide, upstanding, listening ears were upon the sides of the head, one on the forehead and one on the back. The face was mobile, with tiny brown scales small as a fish. A nose orifice, with two protruding brown eyes above it was set outward on stems, and an upended slit of a mouth. There was an eye in the back of the head.

Probably, over eons of upward development from what was perhaps an original single type, these two specialized forms had developed. The "Masters," as they were known upon Wandl, neglected the body for the brain, and the "Workers," the reverse. There was no separate individual for the female. As is the case with primitive organisms,

they were all bi-sexual, the parent dying in the reproduction of offspring.

Of necessity I have been forced into digression. But at the time, Snap and I clung together, whispering, as a group of workers pushed us down a descending incline. Snap, back there in Greater New York when Molo's contact light had burst into existence, had fallen, half unconscious. They picked him up. Molo was going to kill him, but the girls persuaded him to take Snap with them.

"Anita and Venza pretended never to have seen me before," Snap whispered to me now. "You take the same line."

"If we get with them."

"We will."

It was weird, this landing upon Wandl. We had left the vessel's side-port and were descending what seemed a narrow, hundred-foot landing incline. We were outdoors, and it was night. Shafts of colored radiance flashed around us. The ship was poised on a disc-like platform, with skeleton legs. It seemed a hundred feet or more down to the ground level from where the colored lights were darting up. Overhead was a cloudless, purple-red sky of blurred, reddish

stars. No doubt the curious atmosphere of Wandl gave the sky and stars this abnormal look.

Later, what a multiplicity of obscure wonders we were to glimpse upon Wandl! The slowing rotation of the Earth caused climatic changes there, volcanic and tidal disturbances, but Wandl rotated and stopped at will. Undoubtedly she was equipped to withstand the shock. Her internal fires could not break into eruption; she had very little fluid surface. And the nature of her atmosphere was such that it was not easily disturbed into storms. Only if there was laxity in the handling of the planet's motion would a storm come.

But now, questions pounded at me. Earth, Venus and Mars were to be towed into interstellar space; all life on our worlds would perish in the cold of that stellar journey. Yet Wandl had made that journey. Was her atmosphere inherently such that it did not transmit rays of heat?

Snap and I had been pushed down the incline with half a dozen figures in advance of us. Without difficulty we could have leapt down that hundred feet, unaided. Figures were leaping into mid-air from several pressure-ports of the ship. They did not fall, but floated, drifted down. I saw one of the insect-like workers drop with motionless outstretched arms. Others came mounting up, using their

arms and legs with sweeping strokes, as though swimming. It was like being under water.

It was a strange, weird scene, the vessel wavering above us; the flashing lights; waving beams of radiance. A fantastic structure nearby reared itself several hundred feet with lights on top and outlining its many lateral balconies one above the other. The air was full of the leaping, swimming insect-like figures. The brains, the masters, were not in evidence; then I saw one of them being carried, and others, floating down like distended falling balloons, to be caught by the workers in small nets and thus saved from jarring contact.

Snap was suddenly whispering: "That fellow back of us is our guard. I can feel his ray. Some form of attraction; it's pulling at me."

Snap was a little behind me. I turned and saw the faint radiance of a narrow light-beam upon him. It came from an instrument in an upper shoulder hand of the insect figure following us, no doubt the reverse form of the same ray which had been used to thrust the wrecked Cometara toward the Moon.

We reached the bottom. I saw now that the group of workers in advance of us were carrying metal cubes, seemingly of considerable

weight; they also had to use the incline.

We stood presently on a smooth ground surface. We had not seen Anita and Venza, nor Molo and his sister. The insect figure who was our guard came forward. "You stand here. Molo comes."

"Where is he?" I demanded. "I want to see him." I stopped myself quickly; I had very nearly mentioned the girls. "And talk with him."

"He comes soon."

"I'm hungry." I gestured to my stomach. "Food. You know what that is?"

The brown scaly face contorted for a smile, a ghastly grimace. "Yes. You shall have food and drink."

It seemed that the hollow voice came not from the neck but from the shell-like, bulging chest. He stood aside, with the globular weapon of the ray in a pincer hand.

We waited, standing gingerly together, wavering with our slight weight. A wind would have blown us away, but there was no wind. Instead, there was a heavy, sultry air, warm as a mid-summer Earth night, warmer even than the Neo-time of Venus.

Snap and I were dressed much the same, wearing heavy boots, for which weight we were thankful, tight, puttee-like trousers, flaring at the top, and high-necked white blouses. Both of us were bare-headed. Doubtless we were as fantastic a sight to these Wandlites as they to us. Some of the workers crowded up, reaching out to pluck at us, but Snap waved them away and our guard dispersed them.

One of the master brains came bouncing up. Upon his little upright body the great head wavered.

"You will wait here." His eyes glowed up at us.

"But listen," Snap began.

"You will wait here for the Martian. He has his orders to take you to the Great Intelligence." The little arm from the side of the head had a hand with a finger pointing for a gesture. "There is a meeting place there. We decided now what to do to destroy the warships of your worlds. I do not like your thoughts; they are black. I will inform the Great Intelligence when he can spare the thought for you."

He added something in the Wandl tongue. A worker came forward; lifted him carefully, held him in the hollow of an encircling tentacle. And with a bound, the worker sailed upward and was gone.

Again we stood through an interval. I noticed now that the towering structure near us, with its storied balconies, was not perpendicular. Its front curved up and back. It was convex, somewhat in the fashion of an irregular globe, a three-hundred foot ball, with a flattened base set here on the ground. The balconies were segments of its front curve. At the top, the roof was as though the ball had been sliced off, like a giant apple with a slice gone for a base and another for the roof. At the bottom was a huge portal with a glow of light from within. And at the terraced balcony levels were lighted windows.

"Is that the meeting place?" Snap whispered.

"Probably. And look to the side of it, Snap."

It was a city. There was a vista of distance to one side of the great globe structure. Now that our eyes were more accustomed to the queerness of this night upon Wandl, we could ignore the colored light-beams of the landing stage and the disembarking palisade upon which we were standing. Gazing into the distance, the curvature of the surface of this little world was immediately apparent. The reddish firmament of stars came down to meet the sharply-curving surface at a horizon line which seemed about a mile away.

Spread upon this near distance were a variety of structures with little

roads of open space winding between them. Most of the buildings seemed globular in shape. Some were small, little round mound-shaped individual dwellings. Others were larger. Some were tiered like half a dozen apples speared in a row upon a stick and set upright.

I saw a ribbon of what might be a river in the distance, with the reddish starlight glinting upon it. To our left, half a mile away perhaps, was a row of buttes and rocks which stood like a miniature range of mountains. The city seemed entirely to encompass them; and every little rock-peak had upon its top a globelike dwelling.

Lights were winking everywhere and figures bounded a hundred feet and more, and sailed in an arc, coming down to the ground to bound again. A row of workers went by overhead, not swimming or leaping but stiffly motionless. Tiny opalescent rays went from them to the ground, as though to give them power.

Five minutes of Earth-time might have passed while Snap and I gazed at this busy night scene in this Wandl city upon the occasion of the landing of their ship so triumphantly returned from its mission to Earth. As I stood, certainly a helpless captive if ever there was one, nevertheless a strange sense of my own power was within me.

This was so small a world; the people were so flimsy. With a poke of my fist I could kill any one of these master brains. The ten-foot workers seemed mere shells, light and fragile; even the buildings were light and flimsy. The little globe-houses on their sticks seemed to waver, almost like nodding flowers. If we ran amuck we could smash everything we saw here on Wandl.

We became aware of Molo approaching. What a solid giant this seven-foot Martian seemed now in the midst of this buoyant, almost weightless city! He was still bare-headed and wearing his garments of ornamented leather, with his brawny legs bare. Upon his feet were strange-looking, wide-soled shoes. His hands and forearms were thrust into loops of small shields. These shields appeared to be constructed of a heart-shaped flexible framework, covered with an opaque membrane. They were about two feet long and half as wide. With a hand and forearm thrust into fabric loops, the shield appeared to serve as wings so that the arms had more thrust against the air. He came at us with a sort of swimming stroke. He landed somewhat awkwardly, half-stumbled and almost fell, but gathered himself up and confronted us.

He gained his balance and waved our guard aside. His gaze went to me.

"You are the new prisoner taken from that wrecked Earth-ship?"

"Yes."

"What is your name? You are an Earthman, evidently."

"Yes." I hesitated. I had seen Molo and heard him talk, back there in Greater New York; but he had not seen me nor heard of me probably.

"Gregg Haljan." I added, "I am a skilled navigator; perhaps it was fortunate you saved me."

He flung me a look and there was a tinge of amusement in it. "You would save your own skin now?"

"Why not? You're a Martian, and this is a war also against Mars."

His look darkened, but then again sardonic amusement struck him.

"We shall see what the Great Master says. There will be a few of our type humans, men and women, wanted when the worlds begin anew. The Great Master said so. He wants to study life on Earth as it was before the destruction."

Molo's glance swept behind us. I turned to see three figures

approaching. My heart pounded. They were Anita, Venza and Molo's sister, Meka. They came slowly, trying to walk, with balancing outstretched arms. With a dozen curious Wandl workers crowding them, they came and joined Molo before us. My heart was pounding, but I flung them a curious, impersonal stare.

"You are here," said Molo. "Good. We go now." He bent over Snap and me. "I advise you make no effort to leap away, though it may look easy."

"Not me," said Snap. "Where would I go alone in this damned world? I can't very well leap back to Earth, can I?"

"True enough," said Molo. "You have sense, little fellow. But I just warn you: the guard who will watch you always is very sharp of eye. And the weapons here bring very swift death."

I could feel Anita's gaze upon me, but I did not dare look her way.

"Let's go," I said, "You will have no trouble with me."

With Molo leading us, and the giant insect-like guard following close behind, we made our slow, awkward way across the esplanade portals of the huge globular building.

And within, we traversed a cylinder-like, padded corridor and came presently upon the strangest interior scene I had ever beheld.

The room was so large that it seemed almost the entire interior of the building. It was a globular room, a hundred and fifty feet or more in diameter. The inner surface was crowded with people. It was a huge, hollow interior of a ball; and upon its concave surface a throng of the brown-shelled workers were gathered. They sat on low seats at the curved bottom of the room, where we entered, and up the sides and upon the slopes and the top, like flies in a globe, hanging head downward. There was no up or down here; the slight gravity made little difference.

I gazed up amazed to where, a hundred and fifty feet above me, head downward, the crowd of figures were calmly seated. These were clinging, of course; the pound-weight of each of them would drop them down if they let loose. But it required only a slight effort.

Between the tiers, there were narrow open aisles bearing glowlights at intervals. With Molo leading us, we stared up the curving incline of one of these aisles.

"Gregg! Good Lord, it's weird!" Snap said. "Where are we going to sit? Don't speak to the girls yet."

"Have you spoken to them?"

"Yes. A little, on the ship. They're watching for an opportunity but we have to be cautious. Gregg, I've got so much to tell you, but no chance. The brains can just about hear your thoughts."

We went only a short distance up the incline. There were vacant seats seemingly held ready for us. Our passage created a commotion among the figures. Some leaped up and over us to get a better look. I found that we were clinging to the mound-like convex surface of a small half-globe. It raised us some ten feet above the floor. There were low seats with arms against the side-pull of gravity. I found Anita close beside me. Her hand touched me, but she did not turn her head or speak.

Molo was on my other side. I chanced to see his feet. They were planted firmly on the floor. He wore wide-soled shoes equipped with suction pads, no doubt, which would enable him, like the Wandlites, to walk and stand upon the upper inner surfaces of buildings.

As during the moments when Snap and I stood on the landing esplanade, there was so much here that at first I could not encompass it. But now I began to grasp other details of the strange scene.

Poised in mid-air, almost exactly in the center of the huge globular room, was a metal globe of some thirty feet in diameter. It was held, not by any solid girders, but by four narrow beams of light which mounted to it from widespread points of the convex room.

Upon the entire surface of this thirty-foot globe, a group of masters were seated, in little, cup-like seats upon resilient stems. They swayed and nodded with movement. There seemed to be glowing wires and grids and thread-like beams of light carrying current. Light-threads shot from the mechanisms to the heads of the seated brains. All the devices were evidently in operation; and upon this poised central globe the attention of the audience was directed.

Molo bent over me. "The Great Intelligence soon will see you."

Snap, from the other side of Molo, whispered: "What are they doing up there?"

The faint hiss and throb of the devices were audible. I stared, trying to understand. Images, and sounds, invisible and inaudible were being received from across the millions of miles of space, and they were being transmuted within the brains themselves. I saw that discs were fastened upon the bulging foreheads of the brains, upon which the tiny light-beams carrying the vibrations impinged.

These brains, receiving "waves" of some unknown variety were, within the mechanism of the brain-cell, transmuting, translating the vibrations into things knowable. They were not seeing, not hearing, but knowing what went on millions of miles across space!

Again Molo bent over me. "They are about to show this audience what is happening on the three worlds."

Upon the thirty-foot globe I saw now a dozen or so balls of about three-foot diameter. These had been dark and I had not noticed them. Now they began glowing, not from wires carrying the current, but from the little hands of the brains touching them.

I stared at the brain nearest me. His flabby little arm was extended; his hand touched the image-ball; gave it light and color, like a fortune-teller of Earth with a crystal before her.

Even though I was some sixty feet from it, I could see the moving images clearly, and recognized the scene. The Tappan Interplanetary Stage. Ships were rising; two of our spaceships mounting.

And all in an instant the scene blurred, took form again. The red-green spires and minarets of Ferrok-Shahn. The Central Canal extended like a gash across the foreground; the "Mushroom

Mountains" were in a line upon the horizon. Three Martian space-flyers slid up while we watched.

And now Grebhar. The silver forest in all its shining beauty, where Venza was born. The sunlight sparkled on the river. A spaceship was rising in the distant sky over the shining forest.

Beyond Anita, I heard Venza murmuring, "Home! If only we were there."

I could feel Anita move to silence her.

Molo was whispering: "They come. But we will be ready for them."

Another image: mid-space. The allied ships gathering, waiting for others to arrive. A group here of about ten of our ships from the three worlds: poised, waiting.

I was aware that upon the mound-like protuberance of the room-floor where we were sitting, a door was opening. It slid, or melted away. At our feet was an opening downward into the small interior of the mound.

Molo whispered, "The great Master. Sit quiet! He will talk to us."

Over us now a barrage came with a hiss, a circular curtain of insulation. The huge globular room faded. We were alone on the mound, Snap, Molo, myself, Anita, Venza and Meka upon the end of our bench. Behind us stood our single Wandlite guard, with a weapon in his shoulder hand.

At our feet an opening yawned into the mound-interior. It was a tiny, lighted room. In a cup-like seat a brain was perched, just below the level of our feet: the great Master Brain of Wandl. He was alone here. Not attended by retinue; no pomp and ceremony to usher us into his presence; no underlings obsequiously bowing to mark him for a great ruler.

We stared down, and the great brain stared up at us, seemingly equally curious. His head was a full four feet in diameter; the little body sat in the cup, with dangling legs. The clothes were ornamented: there was a glowing device on the chest.

He spoke with a measured rumble, in Martian. "You are Molo, of Ferrok-Shahn."

"Yes," said Molo.

"You must say, 'Yes, Great Master.'"

"Yes, Great Master."

"I know about you. I know that we trust you."

The huge round eyes next fastened upon me. Then to Snap, and back to me. The words were English this time. "Men of Earth, are you decided, like the Martian, to join with us?"

I tried with sudden vehemence to still my thoughts, or to change them so that they lied. Fear surged upon me. Could this vast mechanism of human mind here at my feet interpret the vibrations of my thoughts? Could this Great Master of Wandl see into my mind?

The brain said, "You are uncertain. You do not want to die?"

"No Great Master," we both answered.

"You shall not, unless you attempt to cause us trouble. Your thoughts are black." He addressed Molo. "Have they ever been read?"

"No, Great Master."

"When opportunity comes, have them read." He added to Snap and me: "I plan to take prisoners. My Supreme Rulers, rulers of a neighboring more powerful planet, which sent Wandl upon her

mission of conquest, ordered it. When your worlds are vacant of life, those who command me will want some of you left alive to be studied. Your thoughts are very black, Earthman. I think when they are carefully read you will prove no great advantage to us."

There was irony in the voice, and upon the monstrous bulging face came the horrible travesty of a grin.

The grin on the brain's face faded. His interest went again to Molo. "That is your sister." The eyes swung to Meka and back.

"Yes, Great Master."

"She is caring for this Earth-girl and this girl from Venus?"

"Yes, Great Master. I am fond of them. I have plans."

"They are in your charge, Martian; I will not interfere with you. But guard them well. I trust you and your sister. These others...."

"The Earth and the Venus girl can be of help to me, Great Master."

"How?"

"They knew young men who were in the Spaceship Service. They

can tell me the armament of men and weapons on most of the spaceships which Earth will send against us."

Did Molo really believe that? Probably not, but he wanted the girls with him. Again came that grotesque smile. "Let them not bother you, Martian. You have work to do. Listen carefully. There will be a battle. Earth, Mars, and Venus may perhaps have a hundred ships. I cannot bring destruction upon those three worlds in a day. We soon will make contact with the light-beam you placed on Earth. That I will show you. But the rotation cannot be stopped at once. It will take time.

"The enemy ships might dare to come to Wandl, but I shall not wait for that. All my spaceships are very nearly ready. If there is to be a battle, it shall be far from here, in the neighborhood of the enemy worlds. We are at this time about sixty-two million of your miles from the Earth, a third less than that from Mars, and about a third more from Venus. I understand, Martian, that you are skilled in space warfare."

The brain went on, "I have given you a vessel to command. You will be surprised to know its name: the Star-Streak."

Meka gasped, "But you destroyed it, Great Master!"

"Only wrecked it, Martian girl. It is repaired now. You, Molo—and your sister to help you—who could command it to more advantage? All your own weapons, and ours of Wandl have been added. You may select your crew. Is it to your liking?"

"Yes, Great Master."

"You will be housed in this city, Wor, in the dwelling-globe you occupied before. Keep your prisoners with you, if you like."

"These two Earthmen...." began Molo, but he was interrupted.

"Settle that later. I do not want the annoyance."

I was dimly conscious of a great clanging, coming through the curtain of barrage which was over us.

The brain added, "Keep Wyk with you, to guard the prisoners; he will also attend your needs. In the battle, Martian, I expect great things of you and your Star-Streak."

"Great Master, you will not be disappointed."

"And prisoners, but not too many. Bring me a few young specimens like these, representative of Venus, Mars and the Earth. I want both

of the sexes, an equal number of each."

"Yes, Great Master."

"The warning signal is coming. You will now see our first contact."

The light at our feet was fading. It clung last by the gruesome face of the huge brain; the goggling eyes shone green, and as the light in the little mound-room dimmed there was in a moment nothing left but those lurid green pools of the brain's eyes.

Then I was aware that the aperture at our feet had closed. Over us, the barrage curtain was dissipating, sight and sound coming in to us. The huge ball-shaped conclave room again became visible, the audience crowding its entire inner surface.

I suddenly felt Anita's fingers twitching at my sleeve.

"Gregg, darling, can you hear me?"

"Yes. Be careful."

But Molo was gazing up over our heads. The crowd was shifting, bending so that they all seemed gazing at their feet. A dim white radiance, seeming to come from down here somewhere near us, lay

in a splotch on a segment of the throng overhead. Molo was watching.

I whispered, "All right, Anita. Quick, what is it?"

"The great control station is not far from here. Venza and I have been trying to find out where it is exactly."

She stopped, evidently fearful of Meka. Then she added:

"Gregg, we haven't been guarded very closely; they're not suspicious of us."

"Later, Anita. Can't talk now."

"No. Watch our chance. Later."

I turned toward Molo. "What's that up there?"

"The transparent ray is opening the top of the globe."

The clanging signal gong had stilled. The audience was hushed and expectant. The white patch of light overhead spread until it encompassed all the top of the globe. The whole area was glowing. The people were white, spectral shapes, transparent! And the top of

the globe was transparent; I saw the night sky, with the gleaming reddish stars.

It was, in a moment, as though we were staring up at a huge square window orifice cut in the top of the room. A broad vista of cloudless sky and stars was visible. Across it, like a shining sword, was a narrow, opalescent beam.

"The Earth-beam which I planted," Molo whispered triumphantly. "Our control station will contact with it now. The first contact!"

Earth was below our angle of vision, but the beam from Greater New York, sweeping the sky with the Earth's rotation, was passing now comparatively close to Wandl.

There was an expectant moment. Then into the sky leaped another ray, narrow, luridly green. It swung up from Wandl and darted into space. The hissing, agonized electrical scream from it as it burst through the Wandl atmosphere was deafening. I saw it strike the Earth-beam, grip it with a blinding burst of radiance up there in the sky, clinging, pulling against the rotation of the Earth with a lever sixty million miles long.

A moment of screaming sound in the atmosphere around us, and that

conflict of light in the sky. Then the screaming suddenly stilled. The Wandl beam vanished.

The Earth-beam still swept the heavens like a stiff, upstanding sword. But in that moment when Wandl gripped it, the axis of the Earth had been changed a little. The rotation was slowed. By a few minutes, the day and the night on Earth were lengthened.

It was the beginning of Earth's desolation.

"But when do we eat?" Snap demanded.

"Soon," said Molo.

"I hope so."

We were leaving the great room as we had come. Walking? I can only call it that, though the word is futile to describe our progress as we made our way to the lighted esplanade, across its side and into what might have been called a street. Globular houses, single, or one set upon another, or half a dozen swaying on a stick, gardens of vegetables and flowers. I saw what seemed to be a round patch of hundred-foot tree-stalks, like a thick batch of bamboo. It was laced and latticed thick with vines.

"A house," Snap murmured. "That's a house."

Another type of dwelling. This patch of vegetable growth, so flimsy it was all stirring with the movement of the night breeze, was woven into circular thatched rooms, birds' nests of little dwellings. Staring up, I seemed to see a hundred of them. Rope-vine ladders; flimsy vine platforms; tiny lights winking up there in the trees.

On a platform twenty feet above us a group of tiny infant brains sat in a gruesome row, goggling down on us.

We passed the tree patch; again the city seemed all a thin, flexible metal. The ground was like a smooth rock surface, alternating with small patches of soil where things were growing.

We walked in a slow, unsteady line. Molo led. Behind Snap and me came the girls, ignoring us; and at the rear, the brown-shelled giant guard stalked after us.

Molo stopped at a large globe-dwelling. "We rest here. I will go see that our rooms are ready." He gestured to his sister. "Meka, you come with me. Wyk will guard them."

We stood at an oval doorway. A worker came out, stared at us, then

went back. On an upper balcony, a brain was gazing down at us.

I caught Molo's brawny arm. "Won't you tell us what's going on?"

"Rest here with Wyk."

"What are you going to do?" asked Snap.

"I am going to select my men for battle."

"When do you go?"

"In a few hours, Earth-time."

"And you're taking us on the ship, Molo? Where is your Star-Streak?"

"That I must find out." He, gazed at us with a slow, faint smile. "Not far. Nothing is far on Wandl. I do not know if I will take you on my ship. You might be of help, or you might be troublesome. The Great Master wants prisoners, or I would have killed you long ago."

He took his sister and left us. There was a brief moment when Wyk, standing aside incuriously, gave us opportunity for swift whispers.

Again Anita clutched me. "Gregg, we'll be separated now. But with Molo gone, Venza and I can get away from Meka."

Venza whirled on us. "Gregg, listen! Snap, be quiet! If we're ever going to escape, now is the time. You get away from Wyk. We'll handle Meka."

"And do what?" Snap demanded.

"The control station! We'll find it!"

Anita whispered, "We've got to wreck it, Gregg. Stop those contacts. It'll mean the end of Earth if we don't."

I protested. "Better try for Molo's vessel. We might be able to navigate it, escape from this world."

"The control station first," Anita insisted. "Gregg, we know something about it. You and Snap, with your strength, can demolish it. And then, if we can locate the Star-Streak...."

It was a desperate, mad plan, but there seemed nothing better. The girls insisted now that though they did not know where the control station was located, they knew the details of its interior; its physical layout; its human operators.

"In an hour," whispered Snap. "Have you got a timer? Is it going?"

The little timers we still had with us were undoubtedly operating differently from on Earth; but they were in agreement.

"An hour by our timers," I whispered. "We'll make the break then, try to find you inside. Anita, if you get free of Meka, don't come out."

"All right."

We had only a moment to try and plan it. "Anita, in an hour, with Molo gone...."

He came suddenly with a driving leap from the doorway and dropped among us. "All is ready. Come."

We ignored the girls. Snap again protested that he was hungry, which indeed, for me at least, was certainly the truth. And I was parched with thirst. I felt that this vaunted strength of my Earth body would not last long without food and drink.

We entered the globular interior. There were narrow corridors; triangular rooms; a slatted, ladder-like incline leading upward to a higher level.

The girls followed Meka up the incline. Molo and Wyk herded us into a nearby room. "You will have your food and drink here. Cause Wyk no trouble and you will be quite safe."

He turned, but Snap plucked at him. "When are you coming back?"

"Not too long."

I said, "We will cause you no trouble. Take us on the ship."

"I will see."

He murmured to Wyk in Martian, then left us.

The small triangular room had no windows and only the single door. Wyk touched a mechanism and it slid closed. The place was a queer apartment indeed. The floor was convex, curving upward to the walls. The light radiance dimly glowed, as though inherent to the metal ceiling. There was strange metal furniture: a table and chairs, high and large; bunks of a size evidently for the ten-foot workers.

The door opened, and a worker brought us food and drink. Wyk sat apart and watched us while we consumed the meal. I noticed that he seldom let himself get close to us. He sat stiffly upright, with his jointed legs bent double under him, his many arms and pincers

hanging inert, save the one short shoulder-arm with flexible fingers gripping his weapon. At his waist, and upon several hook-like protuberances of his chest, other weapons and devices were hanging.

Snap gazed up from where, on the floor, we were ravenously eating and drinking. "Aren't you hungry?" he asked Wyk.

"No."

"You eat often?"

"No."

An incurious, taciturn creature, this insect-like being. Snap whispered, "Got to talk to him; make him let us get close. That weapon...."

How the weapon operated, we did not know; but that a flash from it would bring instant death we well imagined.

Half of that hour of waiting was past.

I said to Wyk, "You would call this night on your world; the sun obviously is on the other hemisphere. When will it be day?"

His gaze swung on me. His hollow voice, deep from the capacious shell of chest, echoed and blurred in the room.

"I think Wandl has no rotation now. Or almost none."

He was not as taciturn, as he had seemed, and presently we had him talking. We learned several things regarding the gravity-controls of Wandl, by which at will the planet could be rotated on its axis; and by which also it could navigate space. We learned that the great control station contained these gravitational mechanisms, as well as the mechanism by which the Earth had been attacked. But we could not discover where on Wandl that station was located.

Then, with our meal finished, Snap rose to his feet. "Those arms of yours, seem very strange to us. But they must be mighty useful."

Snap had taken a cautious, shoving step. It wafted him directly toward the guard.

The weird, brown-scaled face of Wyk, with its popping eyes upon stems and its upended mouth, contorted with surprise.

"Back! Don't come near me!"

He flung himself back, but struck the wall of the room. All his arms

were writhing. Alarm was in his voice. It was the first time either Snap or I had made an unexpected move, and it startled Wyk.

"Wait! Let me go!" Snap cried.

Wyk's longest arms were around Snap, like the tentacles of an octopus, and Snap was struggling, fighting. We had not intended this at this time, but the opportunity was here.

I scrambled from the floor. Now, with the need for powerful action, the lack of gravity was a tremendous handicap. I went up with flailing arms into the air. Wyk fired his weapon, but it missed me, a soundless, dimly-white bolt. It hissed along the curving wall of the room. The smell of it was a stench in my nostrils.

I hit the concave ceiling, shoved down, and like a swimmer in water struck against the struggling bodies of Snap and the guard. The waving little shoulder arm with the weapon came at me.

Snap shouted, "Gregg, look out!"

I seized the little arm; it felt like the shell of a huge crab. For a moment we were all three entangled, floundering, unable to find a foothold. Then suddenly I felt Snap pulling me loose.

"We've got him!"

The brown-shelled body of Wyk sank away from us, hit the floor and lay still. I felt the floor under me, and Snap clutching at me.

In my hand I was clutching Wyk's little shoulder arm, with fingers still gripping the weapon. I had jerked it out of his shoulder socket. With a shudder I cast the noisome thing away. Whether Wyk was dead or not we did not know. He lay on his back; the hideous face stared upward.

"I cracked the shell," Snap gasped. "We've got to get out of here. Better try and get the girls loose now."

We wasted no further time on Wyk. Snap snatched several of his weapons and mechanical devices. We stowed them hastily in our pockets. One was like another to us; we could only guess at their uses.

"His shoes, Gregg. I can't get the damn things off him."

"Here are shoes."

A small pile of shoes was in a corner of the room; wide, resilient suction soles, built like sandals. They were very large, but the things

were so placed that it seemed we could fasten them to our boots.

"But not now, Snap."

We snatched up four pairs of the shoes.

There seemed nothing else to do. Could we get the door open? Snap was already fumbling at it. "Accursed thing! It won't give."

Then it slid open. The dim corridor was visible. No one, nothing, out there. "Come on, Gregg! In a rush!"

We went like bouncing rubber figures up the incline ladder.

"Snap, watch out!" He all but cracked his head with an upward leap. Every instant we expected to be set upon. There was a terraced upper hall, black with shadow; dark ovals of doorways led into rooms.

No one here. As yet we were not discovered.

We stood at the intersection of two corridors. One went almost vertically up, like a chimney extending into the dome peak of the globe. Its sides were latticed; we could go up it hand over hand, like monkeys. The other sloped at an angle downward.

"Which way?" Snap whispered. "What do you think? Got to find them."

It still lacked about five minutes of our designated time, but it would not do to burst in upon the girls, perhaps to find Molo and guards there.

"Let's wait a minute, listen, see if we can't get some idea."

We were backed against the corridor wall, almost in darkness. From the dark length of the descending corridor came a thump, the sound of a struggle, and then a muffled scream. Venza! And we heard her words: "Anita! Look out for her! She's got a knife!"

As though diving into water, Snap and I plunged head first into the blackness of the corridor.

Later, we learned that Anita and Venza had tried much the same tactics on Meka that we had used on Wyk, but their task was more difficult. She was suspicious of them. Venza asked her where the control station was, but she wouldn't answer.

"Your brother said it was just beyond the dark forest," Anita said. "What is the dark forest?"

"A place with trees where no one lives."

"Off that way." Venza gestured. "That's what Molo said. Will it be day soon, or will the night keep on?"

"If they cause Wandl to rotate, it will soon be day." An ironic look crossed Meka's face. "I am in no mood for answering more of your silly questions. Save the breath."

"Well, if that's they way you feel about it," replied Venza laughing, "we will. There's not much air in here." She shoved herself across the floor toward the closed window.

"Get back!"

"Oh, all right—all right!"

Perhaps Meka herself felt there was not enough air. She stood waveringly upright, and pushed herself with a slow leap for the window. Her back for that moment was to Anita and Venza. They shoved from the floor, whirled through the air and were upon her.

It was a brief struggle, and instantly they knew that they had lost. The huge Martian whirled and flung them off. Her upflung fist, with a blow like a man's, caught Anita's thigh and knocked her toward the

ceiling. She sank in a heap on the floor, saw that Venza had shoved back, but was standing upright.

Anita bent double, with her feet braced against a chair, tensed to shove forward again. At the still unopened window, Meka crouched. Anita heard Venza's warning outcry. "Anita, look out for her! She's got a knife!"

Upon this scene, in a moment, Snap and I came with a rush. The closed door was not barred. We slid it down and catapulted through the opening. Meka sailed over us. I swam up at her; seized her. The knife ripped my blouse and slit the flesh of my upper arm with a glancing blow. Then Snap came and struck against us; we sank to the floor.

Meka had fought silently, but now she was shouting. I twisted her wrist, seized the knife handle and flung the knife away. I was aware of Anita lunging to retrieve it. And over us Venza appeared, waving a metal chair as though it were a huge feather.

Snap gasped, "Gregg get your hand over her mouth. Shut her up!"

We had her subdued in a moment, but it seemed almost too late. Outside the opened door a distant shout sounded.

I shoved Meka toward the door. "If you don't do what I say, I'll kill you," I whispered into her ear.

"What shall I do?"

There came another shout, closer, now. Someone was coming.

"Call out in Martian. Say there's no trouble, nothing wrong. You were arguing with these girls."

She did as I commanded. The voice down the corridor answered, and then subsided.

Snap slid the door closed. "Hurry! We'll go by the window. I dropped those damn shoes."

Anita and Venza tore their dark coats into strips. We bound and gagged Meka, laid her in a corner of the room. We had dropped the shoes as we came plunging through the door oval. We found that we could all fasten their things to our feet. I put Meka's knife in my belt.

"Hurry, all of you!" Snap was saying. "Got to get out of here; jump by the window."

"Say, look at these wing-shields!" From a recess in a corner of the

room Venza appeared with an armful of the small shields. We thrust our hands and forearms into their loops. The shields extended from a few inches beyond our fingers to the elbow.

Snap had slid the window blind. I bent over the prone form of Meka. "Don't try to move. Molo will release you when he comes back."

We gathered on the starlit balcony. The city stretched around us. There was as yet no alarm. No swimming figures near here; but a distance away we saw the towering conclave globe, with its audience just beginning to emerge, like bees coming from a hive.

"Let me go first." I held Anita and Venza at the rail. "It's like swimming. I suppose we'll get the way of it pretty quickly."

I balanced on the rail, and then leaped off. With the others after me, we swam awkwardly upward into the reddish starlight.

The city structures dropped away, showing in a dark blur with winking lights. Over us were the stars and the cloudless night sky. Behind, the flashing light beams of radiance at the landing stage, the figures fluttering, the great globe, all dropped swiftly beneath a sharply curving horizon.

We had passed the city. A thousand feet below us, a dark forest stretched. It was beyond this that the control station was located.

The swimming flight became less awkward, but it was an effort in this abnormal Wandl air. Snap and Venza were behind me. Anita was leading, a strange, bird-like little figure. White blouse; long parted dark skirt from which her gray-sheathed legs kicked out as she swam, sometimes half upon one side, or with a breast stroke. The braids of her dark hair fell forward over her shoulders.

She was tiring: I could not miss it. How far had we gone? Ten miles, perhaps. There was only a small vista of this little world visible at once, it was so sharply convex. A line of distant mountains was to our left. We had crossed a river at the forest edge.

I suppose we had been half an hour swimming those ten-miles. Was daylight coming? It seemed that the sideline of mountain-tops had a little light on them. The opalescent beam from Earth had swept this portion of the sky and was gone below the horizon.

Apparently there was no pursuit from the city. Behind me, Venza panted, "Say, I'm about finished. Can't we rest?"

With this altitude we could cease our efforts and drift down. It would

take several minutes.

We gathered together, falling with a slow drift toward the dark forest under us. The trees seemed huge and spindly, a porous growth something on the Martian style, with huge leaves and a tangle of matter vines. They came mounting up at us as we fell with slowly gathering speed.

"Shall we go on?" I suggested.

"Yes." But she was tired, and Anita as well.

"Girls," I asked, "where is the Star-Streak?"

They did not know.

Anita said, "Perhaps we can land in the trees, and examine what devices we have here."

The girls had carefully watched Molo upon several occasions. They thought we might find we had a hand-globe or a couple of the repulsive rays. With these we could attain rapid flight without effort.

We sank, fluttering, into a dark and tangled mass of the forest tree-top growth. I had understood that Wandl was crowded with its

human population, yet this dark and silent forest evidently was uninhabited. We clung, like awkward birds, to a swaying limb of a tree-top. The trees were close together.

"Let's see what you've got," Venza demanded.

We handed the girls the various devices we had taken from Wyk. Most of them were the size of my fist: globular metallic projectors like hand bombs; ray cylinders; a device with multiple barrels the size of one's finger, set in a small circumference of a circular grid of wires.

Anita said, "I saw Molo with one of these. He killed an unwilling worker on the ship."

"I'll take a look around," Snap said anxiously. "Suppose we're being followed? Give me that weapon."

There was vegetation partly over us, so that the sky was half obscured. Snap took the weapon, and like a monkey swaying precariously, he ran and leaped among the upper branches, crashing his way until he could see back toward the horizon beyond which lay the city of Wor.

We heard his voice. "All clear. Nothing in sight. You coming up? Better get started."

I put the weapons in my pocket. Snap had one now in the branches over us. I was examining an electronic bolt, when suddenly there came Snap's call. "Gregg! Look out!"

We heard the hiss and saw the flash of his bolt.

Anita swung at me. "Gregg, see there!"

I followed her gesture, and then I knew why this forest was shunned by humans!

The forest swarmed with living things. Here in the dark they had been crawling upon us. Every branch of this leafy tree-top angle had something staring at us; the darkness was suddenly glowing with a myriad little green torches which were their eyes. They all winked on in an instant, as though at a signal, or at the sound of Snap's shout and the hiss of his bolt.

Insects? I suppose I should call them that. With a glance I saw that they were of many sizes and shapes; tiny little things with eyes like lanterns; things of many legs, finger-length, hand-length, and some

as long as my forearm. Brown-shelled things, with eyes glowing on stems. There was one quite near us, a smooth, brown-shelled body; a round head on top, as big as my fist. And these things had heads like little distended brains.

What horrible jest of nature this was, with miniatures of the Wandl workers, crawling here, unable to stand erect, groping with little pincers. And miniature brains with naked, shriveled bodies.

It seemed that the eyes of that little brain were fixed on me with a baleful green glare in the darkness. Anita and Venza were floundering to their feet in horror. They all but slipped from the limb. The weapons and devices they had arranged there slid off and went down into the darkness unheeded. From above us came Snap's horrified shouts and the hiss of his bolts.

"Here!" I gasped. "My hand—Anita, Venza, jump!"

I shoved Anita upward. The little eyes suddenly were all in movement, advancing upon us. Anita floundered, fluttered, got into the air and mounted toward Snap. Again Venza slipped off the limb. I lunged and drew her up. Green eyes nearest us came swooping. I did not dare fire a bolt; it was too close to Venza. I flung the entire weapon at the green eyes, but I missed.

The little thing bit Venza's arm. She screamed and her flailing hand hit the tiny distended head. Its hideous little scream mingled with hers. It floated downward, massed and purple-red with gushing blood.

I struggled upward with the inert form of Venza under one arm. Anita was mounting, free. Snap came lunging down.

"Fired every bolt in the damn weapon!" He saw the unconscious Venza. "Good God, Gregg!"

Never have I heard such anguish in his tone. "Gregg, she isn't...."

"One of them bit her. Help me."

He floundered up with her, a hundred feet above the tree-tops of that horrible forest. The little lanterns of eyes down there had all winked out. The open starlight was over us.

Anita came swimming, then Venza stirred. She murmured, "... all right."

She had fainted. It seemed nothing more; but I found her upper arm swelling. She tried to bend her body and sit up; but it threw us all out of balance.

"Lie straight," Snap murmured. "Venza, are you all right?"

"Yes. Why not?" And then she laughed. It sent a shuddering chill over me. "What's the fuss about? Let's get away from here. Somebody will be coming."

She was swimming now and we let her loose, but stayed close by her. The reddish firmament was like an inverted bowl. The curving Wandl surface gave us a narrow little vista, the forest rolling up from the horizon in front. Then we saw where the forest seemed to end. Water was beyond it: a ribbon like a broad river, and beyond that, frowning mountains, terraced and spired with jagged peaks.

Snap and I suddenly recalled the gravity ray projectors. We tried them; found that they would fling little beams of two varieties. Pencil points of radiance, they seemed to have an effective range of no more than a few hundred feet.

I let myself drift downward, experimenting. The tiny beam struck the forest-top. I felt the projector pulling violently downward in my hand. I clung to it. I was being drawn swiftly down by the attractive gravity force of the ray. The forest rose rapidly under me: I was all but flung upon it before I could find the other controls.

Then the ray altered its nature; the projector in my hand pulled me steadily up. But after a few hundred feet, I felt I was mounting only of my own momentum, with gravity and air-friction retarding me.

Snap had tried similar experiments. We rejoined the swimming girls. I stared into Venza's face; it was pale but she did not seem distressed. She winked at me.

"How's your arm, Venza?"

"It hurts, but I guess it's all right."

I turned to Snap. "I guess we can work these things. Get Venza to cling to you."

Our progress now was far less difficult. Venza clung to Snap's ankles and Anita to mine. With the repulsing rays directed downward, we had a strong upward and forward thrust. We went forward with great thousand-foot bounds. The forest rolled back under us. We came over the gleaming river. It seemed several miles broad. It appeared to have a swift current.

I saw sunlight upon the mountain ahead. The darkness had been paling. Now day suddenly burst upon us. The sun, smaller than on

Earth, mounted swiftly up. It was a flattened, distorted, dull-red disc, blurred by Wandl's strange atmosphere. We were in a dim red daylight.

Anita twitched at my ankles. "Look back of us!"

We were going up. Venza and Snap, behind us, were in a descending arc. Above them, far back in the direction from which they had come, two blobs were visible up against the reddish day sky.

Pursuit? It seemed so. The blobs went down, but came up again, traveling with rays, like ourselves.

I called to Snap, "Someone after us! Two figures back there!"

He was shouting, "Gregg! Gregg, help!"

My gaze had been on the distant figures. I saw now that at the bottom of his arc, and starting upward again, Snap had lost Venza. The impulse of his ray had twitched his ankle from her grasp. Or had she let loose? He was about a hundred feet above the river, and Venza, with acceleration downward unchecked, was falling into it.

"Gregg, help! Venza, swim up!" His frenzied call reached me as I used the attractive ray and Anita and I whirled over and lunged

downward.

"Gregg, help! Venza use your arms! Swim!"

She was lying inert, making no effort to keep from falling. Her body turned slowly, end-over-end. She struck the swiftly-flowing river surface but did not sink; instead, she half emerged, came up and lay in a crumpled heap; and with its rapid current, the river carried her away.

It was several minutes before we could reach Venza. Snap was already there, floundering on the water, awkwardly maintaining his balance, bending over Venza. "Gregg, she's unconscious. Fainted again."

The bite of that insect! The thought of it turned me cold.

The river surface was like a very soft rubber mattress. The water clung to us, wet us. We could not kneel or stand erect; but in sitting down only a few inches of our bodies were submerged. We floated like corks, we were so light, and so little water did we displace.

We struggled with Venza across the gluey river surface. She had fallen near the further shore. Rocks, crags and strewn boulders were

passing as the current swept us along at a speed of about ten miles an hour. She lay in our arms, eyes closed, her face pallid but calm. She seemed to breathe rapidly; but that on Wandl was normal.

We landed on the rocky shore. It was still daylight. The blurred sun was winging across the zenith so swiftly that its movement was visible. Wandl had been suddenly endowed with axial rotation. Even in these few minutes, the day was past its noon. On the distant mountain peaks looming above the nearby horizon; it seemed that the sheen of coming night was mingled with the red sunlight.

Anita and Snap laid Venza on the rocks. I suddenly remembered the two blobs in the sky behind us, which had seemed to be following. I stood gazing across the river. The red sky there seemed empty.

"Thank God, she's reviving!" Snap called at me and I joined them. Venza was stirring. Color was coming into her cheeks. Her lips were murmuring as though she were talking in her sleep.

Then she opened her eyes. Her gaze fixed on us as we bent over her. "Why, what's the matter? Where are we? I thought we were in the tree-tops. Snap, don't look at me like that, dear. I'm all right—only confused."

She could remember nothing since that gruesome thing bit into her arm, but the attack of its poison in her veins seemed definitely over. We sat with her, soothing her, explaining what had happened. And she was wholly rational. Her strength came back; her mind cleared.

The brief red day came to its close. The sun plunged below the horizon; the stars winked into being. The red-purple Wandl night again was here. And now we saw that the whole firmament was swinging, the rotation made visible.

The darkness leaped around us. Shadows filled the rock hollows. The caves and recesses of this rocky shore turned black with darkness. And in the sky now we saw another of those familiar opalescent beams. This was the one from Mars: we could identify the red disc of the planet.

And then, from the mountains ahead of us but still below our horizon, the Wandl control station shot its attacking beam upward. Again there was that conflict in the sky. The axis of Mars was being altered, its rotation slowed.

We could see now that we were much nearer than before to the control station. It seemed only about twenty miles ahead of us. The scream from it was deafening.

The Wandl beam died presently. The electrical scream from the control station was stilled.

The Earth's axis had been altered. Now Mars; and next would be Venus. A few more of these gravitational attacks and then the helpless planets, with rotation checked, would be towed away by Wandl, out into the deadly cold of interstellar space.

Anita abruptly gave a startled outcry. The four of us, sitting in a group, had no time to rise. From behind a dark crag nearby, two figures appeared. The starlight showed them clearly.

Molo and Wyk! They lunged forward at us.

We were unarmed. I had flung my weapon at the thing in the forest; and Snap had exhausted all his bolts firing at the multitude of green eyes. Molo and Wyk came with a dive through the air. Two tiny flashes leaped from them to the rocks behind them, and flung them forward.

Snap and I seized Venza and Anita. It was a second of confusion; then I saw we would not be able to rise in time. The driving, oncoming figures were no more than twenty feet away.

"Protect Venza, Snap! Get her behind you!"

Snap shoved Venza behind him; I got myself in front of Anita. We had almost gained our feet. I tried to thrust Anita and myself violently upward. We rose, but only a few feet. And then we were struck by the oncoming body of Wyk, like a huge, light-shelled, three-pound insect lunging in mid-air against us. The two longest tentacle arms wrapped around us. Anita twisted and kicked. The gruesome, goggling face of Wyk thrust itself almost into mine. The hollow voice panted, "I have you fast."

One of my arms was free and I struck with my fist at the gaping, upended mouth. There was a crack. My fist sank through the shell; a cold, sticky ooze spurted out.

Wyk screamed. His encircling arms fell away. The grisly smashed face was white with ooze and pulp where my fist had gone in.

We had sunk back to the rocks. I kicked the dead body of Wyk away.

"Anita! Swim up!"

"No!"

Sinking beside us were the flailing bodies of Molo, Snap and Venza

were drifting down. They seemed intermingled. Snap was shouting: "No you don't! Drop that!"

I leaped for them. Something long and thin and glowing was dangling from Molo's hand. He broke loose from the struggling Snap and Venza; his feet struck the rocks and he shoved himself backward. My leap had carried me too high. I saw that in his hand was a six-foot length of glowing wire. He whirled it. The weight on its end described an arc, and then he flung the handle. The weighted wire struck Venza and Snap just as their repulsive ray shot down against the rocks and shoved them upward. The whirling wire wrapped itself around them, bound them together. Its glow vanished. Snap had been shouting, "Gregg, come up." But it died in his throat.

All this while, in those few seconds, I was vaulting over Molo, trying to get back to the ground to leap again. I saw that Anita was crawling on the rocks. My gravity cylinder was at my belt. I had jammed it there to leave my hands free just as Wyk struck me.

I saw that Snap and Venza, wrapped together by the wire, had dropped their gravity projector. Their entwined figures went up some fifty feet and stopped; then began drifting down.

Molo was shouting, "You, Gregg Haljan! Now for you!"

I struck the rocks and fell twenty feet beyond him. I jerked out my gravity projector, but I did not know what I wanted to do with it. And in that second I saw that the standing Molo was aiming at me. Directly over my head the inert bound bodies of Venza and Snap were falling.

A flash leaped over the dark rocks from Molo. There was a split-second when I thought it was the end of me. But I was still alive. The bodies of Venza and Snap struck my head and shoulders; knocked me down. I felt Molo's ray upon me. Not death, but only his gravity ray, like a giant hand pulling me. Apparently he wanted us alive. I was scrambling on the rocks, entangled with Venza and Snap. Molo's radiance clung. All three of us went tumbling forward toward him. I flashed my own ray, but I was rolling end over end, and it went wild.

I dropped it, saw Molo's beam vanish, saw his upright standing figure towering above me. Snap, Venza and I were in a heap at his feet. He leaned down and seized me. "Now, Gregg Haljan, I will teach you not to try escaping like this!"

With the huge, muscular Martian gripping me, his fist striking for my face but missing and hitting my shoulder, this was a semblance of normality. I could understand fighting like this. I wrapped my legs

around him; my fingers reached for his brawny throat as he kicked us into the air free of the entangling bodies of Snap and Venza.

We rose a few feet and sank back, gripping each other, lunging and striking. He was very powerful, this Martian. I caught the round pillar of his throat with my hands. For an instant I shut off his wind, but I could not hold the grip. He struck me a glancing blow in the face, then the heel of his hand was under my chin. It forced back my head, broke my hold on his throat. With returning breath, he gasped an inhalation. And I heard his exulting words: "You are not strong enough!"

We rolled and bumped over the rocks. I caught a blow from his fists full in my face. It was almost the end; I felt my strength going. He laughed as he struck away my answering swing. I was on my back against the rocks, with his body on top of me. Then beyond and behind his hulking shoulder, silhouetted against the sky, I saw Anita rise up. She was lifting a jagged gray mass of stone, full four feet in diameter. She poised it, then crashed it down on Molo's head. He sank away from me; his arms relaxed. The boulder rolled beside him.

It was over now. Wyk was dead; his gruesome body with its smashed face lay near us. Molo was unconscious, breathing heavily, lying

motionless, with a wound on the back of his head, the blood welling out, matting his hair.

Anita and I were uninjured, victorious—but what a hollow victory. On the rocks here, bound together by that strange wire, Snap and Venza lay inert. We bent over them. The wire was cold to the touch now. It resisted our efforts to untwine it. We pulled frantically as we pleaded: "Snap, speak to us! Venza, can't you speak?"

Their eyes were open. I was aware that there was no starlight above us, but instead, a lurid sky of flying clouds, shot with a greenish cast. The darkness here was green. The glow of it struck upon the wide-open staring eyes of Venza and Snap. It seemed that there was intelligence in those eyes.

"Snap, can't you hear us?"

His eyelids came down and up again, slowly, as though by a horrible effort. "Can you move, Snap?"

His right eyelid moved. Was his answer, no?

Anita and I had never felt so horrible a sense of aloneness as that which swept us in those succeeding minutes. A breeze was springing

up in the lurid green night. It came from the mountains. It wafted across the nearby river, rippling the surface which was now green and sullen. We did not know where to go, what to do.

We found at last that we could untwist the stiffly clinging wire. We laid Venza and Snap on the rocks side-by-side, about thirty feet back from the river. The glowing wire had burned their clothes only a little, as the current was absorbed by the contact with their bodies.

"Snap, are you in pain?"

His eyes seemed to be trying to talk to me. Anita rose from Venza: "Oh, Gregg, what shall we do? Can't we carry them?"

But where? To what purpose? Wild thoughts thronged me: Wandl's control station, bringing chaos and death upon Earth. Mars and Venus. What was that now to me? I thought of Molo's ship.

"Anita, if we can get to the Star-Streak, seize it and escape from this world...."

"Carry Snap and Venza there now? But we don't know where it is. Can we make Molo lead us?"

But Molo lay unconscious. I could not rouse him.

Anita and I were so alone! We clung together.

"Gregg, look at that sky!"

The mounting wind was tugging at us. It whined through the dark mountain defiles, surged out over the river where the water now was beginning to toss with waves crossing the swift current. The sky was shot with green shafts of radiance. Over us, the lowering, leaden clouds were scudding, riding the wind.

It burst now upon us; I found suddenly that Anita and I were bracing against it. A puff dislodged us, so that we were blown a dozen feet, bringing up against a crag, as though we were balloons.

"Anita—this wind—we can't maintain ourselves here. We...."

Horror checked me at the thought of Venza and Snap, lying there on the rocks. We saw the body of Wyk, like a great dried insect, lifted by the wind, whirled like a brown leaf over and over, and carried away.

A little pebble came hurtling and struck me. Then a rain of pebbles, like hailstones was pelting at us.

The storm was probably caused by the axial rotation of Wandl. The

light-beam upon Earth had been attacked by the Wandl control station without axial rotation. But to attack the beam from Mars, a manipulation of Wandl was necessary. The planet's rotation was started; and suddenly checked. It remained night now, here in this hemisphere. Perhaps there were natural storm tendencies here; perhaps the operators of the control station were unduly eager, manipulating the rotation too suddenly.

At all events, it was frightening. I shouted above its whine and the clatter of the pebbles: "Hold onto me! We'll get to Venza and Snap."

We reached the two inert forms, where they had blown into a niche between two boulders. "Can't stay here, Anita."

"No! If it begins again!"

"Over there! A cave!"

We got Venza and Snap into it, just as another gust came, with a rain of dirt and loose stones pelting past outside.

Suddenly I thought of Molo. "Anita, stay here! Must get to Molo."

"Gregg, no!"

"I must. If we can bring him to consciousness, make him tell us where the Star-Streak is...."

I flung off her restraining hold. The wind had eased up. I leaped out into it, swimming. The rocks slid by close under me in a swift sidewise drift. In a moment I would be carried out over the river. It was a chaos of green, windswept darkness. But there was bursting light now overhead and rumbling claps, like thunder.

I saw Molo's body where the wind held him pinned against the side of a flat, ten-foot rock butte, and dove for him, swimming down frantically until I struck against the rock with a blow that almost knocked the breath from me. Molo was still obviously unconscious.

How long it took me to get back to Anita, floundering with Molo's body, I do not know. I managed to keep against the ground; was blown back, and struggled forward again. The wind came with strange puffs. In one of the lulls, I hauled Molo through the air and into the cave.

"Gregg!" Anita held to me, her arms around me. "Gregg dear, you were gone so long!"

I was battered and bruised and breathless. The cave's mouth was like

a ten-foot tunnel leading downward into blackness.

"Gregg, I put Venza and Snap here."

They lay side by side, like two dead bodies, here in the greenish darkness. We placed Molo with them. Together Anita and I crouched beside them, clinging to each other, listening to the wild sweep of the wind outside. The storm had burst into full fury now. It would whirl us away like feathers, outside there now. The lightning and thunder hissed and crashed. Stones and boulders were being flung like hailstones.

This flimsy, weightless world! It seemed as though the rocks here on which we were crouching would be shifted and carried away.

"Gregg! Gregg, is this the end?"

A mass of rocks fell at the opening, closing it, so that we were buried here in the darkness. "Anita, my darling, I will never stop loving you."

Darkness, with her arms around me and a shuddering world outside. But here, only Anita and her soft arms.

"Gregg!"

Horror was in her voice. Then I saw what she was seeing. It was not just Anita and I buried here in the darkness with the bodies of Snap and Venza and Molo. Something else was here.

From the blackness of the cave, two green, glowing eyes were staring. Their radiance showed me the outlines of a distended head. An insane thing? But it was not another of the forest insects. This seemed to be an animal. The glow of its distended head disclosed a lythe, horizontal body, seemingly solid and muscled. A chattering, insane animal, here in the dark with us! We heard mouthing, mumbling words, and an eerie, cackling laugh as it came padding toward us.

The thing in the cave stared at us as we clung together in the darkness, transfixed for a moment by horror. The distended head, ghastly of face with its green glowing eyes, wobbled upon a long, spindly neck. The eyes seemed luminous of their own internal light. The radiance from them faintly lighted the black cave so we were able to see its tawny, hairy body. It was long sleek, the size of an Earth leopard. A muscled body, with ponderable weight, it was moving toward us, padding on the rocks.

I recovered my wits and shoved Anita behind me. I crouched on one knee. There was no escape, nowhere to run. This tunnel was blocked

by a fallen rock mass behind us, with the wild storm raging outside. The thing was some twenty feet away, where the tunnel broadened into a black cave of unknown size. Beside me Snap and Venza lay inert, the still-unconscious Molo with them.

There was nothing to do but crouch here and protect Anita. I waved my arms, shouted above the outside surge of the storm; my voice reverberated with a muffled roar in this subterranean darkness.

"Get back! Back! Back, away from me!"

It stopped. Round ears stood up from the bloated head. Then it laughed again. I felt Anita shoving a rock at my hand, a chunk of rock the size of my head. "Its face, Gregg! Aim for its face!"

The rock felt like a ball of cork. I flung it and hit the thing on the body. Its laughter checked abruptly; it crouched, as though gathering for a spring.

And then I thought of my gravity projector. I flashed on the repulsive ray to its full intensity.

The tawny body leaped. It came hurtling, but my beam met it in mid-air. For a second I thought that I had been too late. The thing was

clawing the air; its momentum carried it against the push of my ray. For an instant it hung, snarling, and then laughed that wild laugh.

The ray forced it back. It receded through the air, back across the blackness of the cave, gathering speed until, in a moment it brought up against the opposite wall some forty feet away. There it hung, pinned as I held the ray upon it. The body had struck the rocky wall but the head was uninjured. It was writhing and twisting: the cave was filled with the reverberations of its screams.

Over the screams, I heard another voice: "Oh Gregg, where are you?"

Snap! Behind me, Anita was moving sidewise toward where Snap and Venza were lying. The thing pinned in my light stopped its screaming, with curiosity perhaps at this new sound.

"Snap! We're here, Snap!"

Then Venza's voice: "It's letting me talk. We're better now."

They were recovering, Anita was bending over them. "Gregg, they're all right. The shock is wearing off, thank God."

But I did not dare move to them. My light on the snarling thing

across the cave held it, but I did not dare to relax my attention.

I called, "Stay with them, Anita." I moved slowly forward, holding the beam steady. The cave floor was littered with loose stones and boulders. Ten feet from the pinned animal I selected a great chunk of rock. It towered in my hand, but the weight of it was only a few pounds.

The gravity held the animal as though I had pinned it by a pole. From the distance of a few feet I heaved the boulder. The palpitating head mashed against the wall. The body and the pulp of the head and the boulder sank to the floor when I removed the beam.

"Snap, thank God you've recovered! And you, Venza!"

Anita and I sat with them. They had been fully conscious all the while, but they were out of it now.

An hour passed while we sat crouched, listening to the storm.

"It's letting up," Venza said out of a silence.

Anita was sitting over the prone form of Molo. He had stirred and mumbled several times.

"Let's see if we can get out of here," Snap suggested.

Rocks had fallen and blocked the only exit from the cave. But to our strength, even the hugest of the rocks was movable.

"Shall we try it now, Gregg?"

As though we were elephants, heaving and pushing, we struggled with the litter choking the passage. There was a danger that the whole thing would cave in on us; but we were careful of that. We tossed the small rocks aside like pebbles. There was one main mass. Together we pulled and tugged and shifted it. A small opening was disclosed, large enough for our bodies. The wind puffed in through it.

The girls called us. Molo had regained consciousness. The blow from the rock had only stunned him. We bound his wrists with a portion of his belt which we cut into strips.

"What is it you do with me? Is Wyk dead?"

"Yes."

He lay silent and sullen. "Look here, Molo, we're going to get out of this, and you're going to help us. If you don't...." The knife which we

had taken from him to cut his belt was in my hand. I drew its blade lightly across his throat. "Will you talk freely and truthfully?"

"Yes, I will talk the truth."

"Do you know where the control station is located?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Not far."

"The hell with that!" Snap burst out. "Get it meshed in your mind, Molo, that we're in no mood for talk like that. How far is it?"

"On Earth you would call it ten miles."

"In these mountains?"

"He told us it was," said Anita. "Underground."

"Do you know where your ship is?" I persisted.

He told us that it was some thirty miles in another direction, not in

the mountains, but in the outskirts of a city like Wor. It was equipped and ready for flight, all but the assembling of its crew.

And now we had weapons! Molo was carrying several of the gravity projectors; two small searchlight beams, little hand torches; and three electronic ray-guns of short-range size.

Hope filled us. The storm was abating. We could creep upon the single small control room of the gravity station, where usually but two operators were stationed. The delicate mechanisms there could be wrecked.

And then we would seize the Star-Streak. No one would be on the lookout for us. The fact that Molo's prisoners had escaped was as yet unknown; he and Wyk had not dared tell it. Meka was back there waiting. Our absence from the globe dwelling might have been discovered; but Meka would say that we were with Molo. She was waiting there, hoping that her brother and Wyk would recapture us. All this we dragged piecemeal from Molo.

Snap and I shared the gravity projectors and the small electronic guns. "Let's get started, Gregg. The storm seems over."

It was. We found the purple-red starry night again outside. The river

was lashed white with waves, but they were spent. There was only a mild warm breeze remaining.

Molo's legs were free, but his wrists were lashed behind him. I hooked an arm under his, holding him like a huge, but light, oblong bundle. Snap called, "Ready, Gregg?"

"Yes."

Snap flashed on his gravity ray and mounted, with the girls clinging to his ankles. Then I followed with Molo. By great arching swoops, we swung up into the frowning, tumbled mountains.

"This will be the place to land, Gregg Haljan."

We were drifting down upon a barren region of naked crags, dark, frowning rock-masses, broken and tumbled, as though by some great cataclysm of nature. Mountains upon the Moon could not be more desolate of aspect.

We landed on the rocks. The heights here had a purple-red sheen from the starlight. We had seen frequent evidence of the storm; and it showed here. Rocks were abnormally piled in drifts; smooth areas showed, where the pebbles, stones and boulders had been swept

away by the wind.

Snap and the girls landed beside us. We spoke softly. None of us, not even Molo, knew how far sound would carry in this air.

"Where is the place from here?" Snap demanded.

"Off there."

Molo spoke with docile, guarded softness. He gestured with his head and shoulder. A quarter of a mile away, over these uplands, the broken land went down in a sharp depression.

"It is there. I think from here we should go on the ground. There is no guard, and I think seldom is anyone on top."

"If I help you now, if we should wreck the gravity controls, then Wandl will be helpless to navigate space, or to interfere with the rotation of Earth, Mars and Venus. The allied worlds might then defeat the Wandl ships in battle. If that happened, perhaps your governments, because of my help here, would forgive what my Star-Streak has done."

"Your piracy?" I said.

"Yes. I am outlawed. I might be reinstated if you would speak the good words for me."

"Maybe."

"Maybe even they would reward me. You think so, Gregg Haljan?"

He wanted to be on the winning side; this suited us. "Let's try it and see, Molo. I'll speak plenty of good words for you."

Now, as we landed on the uplands, he said, "You will do best to free my hands."

"Oh, no!" Snap declared.

"But I am a good fighter. Something unexpected might come."

"Too good a fighter," I said. "We trust you because we have to, Molo, but no more than is necessary."

A small recess in the rocks was near us. We put Molo there, with his hands bound, and with Anita and Venza to guard him. Venza held the electronic gun; she knew how to fire it. The girls crouched in a depression about twenty feet away. They could see Molo plainly; if he moved, a flash of the gun would kill him. He knew that.

The girls gazed at us as we were ready to start. "Good-by, Gregg. Good-by, Snap. Good luck!"

"We won't be long. Sit where you are." Snap touched Venza's shoulder for his good-by. "Listen, Venza: Molo has already told us enough to enable us to find the ship. If he tries anything, kill him."

"Right," she said.

We left them. A minute or two, cautiously shoving ourselves along the rocks, and we were crouching there. The cauldron was about two hundred feet broad and fifty feet deep; an irregular circular bowl. The starlight gleamed on it, and there were dots of small artificial light. We saw a group of small metal buildings, very low and squat, like balls mashed down, flattened in a bulging disc-shape; between them were tiny skeleton towers.

The towers, twice the height of a man, were spread at irregular intervals in a hundred-foot circle, with a group of three or four in the center. There seemed some twenty of them. Taut wires connected their tops, each tower with every other, so that the wires were a lacework above the small disc buildings. The bottoms of the towers were grounded with electrical contacts, and every tower had a ground connection with each other by means of cables.

Far to one side, across the bowl from us, was a single globe-dwelling with lighted windows. From its ground doorway, a narrow metal catwalk extended like a sidewalk on the ground, winding and branching among the towers and discs.

This was the exterior of the Wandl gravity station. It lay silent and dark, save for the starlight and the little lights on the towers. No sign of humans. Then we saw movement in the globe-dwelling. A man came to the doorway, gazed at the sky and went back.

I whispered, "Which is the best entrance to the underground rooms?"

We saw where, at several points, the winding catwalk terminated in low, dome-like kiosks, giving ingress downward. One was on our slope of the cauldron. "That's the one we'll try," Snap murmured.

He stopped suddenly. The top of the distant globe-dwelling was glowing. A little round patch there was radiant, like a lighted window. A transparent ray was coming from inside. The operators within this globe were observing the sky, training instruments upon it, no doubt.

And now we saw in the sky the third of those sword-like beams. It had probably been visible there for some time but we had not

noticed it. "That's Venus," I murmured.

It seemed so. A blurred star, red in this atmosphere, was close above the horizon. The light-beam stood out from it, sweeping up to the zenith.

The gravity station here was about to make contact with the Venus beam. We heard a muffled siren, a signal echoing from the subterranean control rooms. The current went into all these wires and towers and twenty-foot ground discs. The hissing and throbbing hum of it was audible. The discs and towers were glowing; red at first, then violet. Then that milky, opalescent white. The overhead wire-aerials were snapping with a myriad of tiny jumping sparks.

I saw now that the top of each tower was a grid of radiant wires, a six-foot circular projector with a mirror reflector close beneath it and a series of prisms and lenses just above. It all glowed opalescent in a moment, a dazzling glare.

Then the tower tops were swinging. The lights from them had reached the intensity of an upflung beam, and the projectors were swinging to focus the beam inward. The focal point seemed about a thousand feet overhead. All the beams merged there; and guided by the towers directly underneath, a single shaft was standing into the

sky.

The entire cauldron depression was now a blinding mass of opalescent light. We could see nothing but the milk-white inferno of glare. It painted the rocks up here on the rim so that we shrank back, shaded our eyes and gazed into the sky. And from the cauldron, the hum and the hiss of the current, the snapping of sparks, were all lost in a wild electrical screaming turmoil.

Overhead, we saw the Wandl beam from Venus.

Apparently this control station had two functions: the control of the planet's movements, its axial rotation and its orbital flight, and its ability to apply gravitational force to other celestial bodies.

Wandl was controlling her own movements by applying gravity force, attraction and repulsion, to all the celestial starfield; and doubtless also by applying the repulsive beam tangentially against the ether like rocket streams. In this respect, I realized, the planet was probably operated not unlike one of our familiar spaceships. In effect, it was itself a gigantic globular vehicle. Later I learned that it was thought that Wandl's atmosphere could be highly electronized at will, with a resulting aberration of the natural light-ray reflected from her into space. This could have caused the blurring of the

image of Wandl when viewed telescopically from other worlds.

Again, for a moment of the contact, there was that bursting light in the sky.

The contact with the Venus beam lasted a minute or two. Snap and I, on the cauldron rim, were engulfed in the blaze of reflected light and the wild scream of sound. Then presently the turmoil subsided. The contact in the sky was broken. The tow-rope of Venus jerked itself away. But on the next Venus rotation it would be attacked again.

Another few minutes passed. The little circular depression beneath us was dim and silent as we had first seen it. Figures were moving within the dwelling structure. From several of the underground entrances figures came up, the ten-foot insect-like shapes of workers. Three or four of the brains came bouncing up, moving along the ground catwalk with little leaps. All the figures entered the distant main dwelling house. The contact was over.

"Probably hardly anyone left down below," Snap whispered. "Now's our chance."

"If we can get into that opening without being seen," I said.

"Shadows, down the rocks to the left. Damnation, Gregg, we can make it in one calculated leap."

"I'll try it first. I'll get in and wait for you."

"Right."

We each had a gravity cylinder at our belt and a ray-gun in our hand. The slope of the depression was dim here, merely starlit; it was a steep, broken and fairly shadowed descent, fifty feet to the little dome-like kiosk which marked the nearest subterranean entrance. I went down it with a swoop, landed in a heap beside the kiosk and ducked into it. Instinct made me fear a guard, but reason told me none would be here; there was only the danger of encountering someone coming up.

I was at the top of a winding, descending passage, a step-terraced floor; there were occasional lights in the ceiling. In a moment Snap joined me. "Got here! I wonder how far down it goes?"

I gripped him. "Snap, no matter what happens, do it with a rush. Keep with me. And if I shout to get out...."

"We go out with a rush!"

"Yes. Back to the girls. Use your ray-gun and the gravity projector in getting back to them and get away without me, if I fall."

"Same for you, Gregg."

We went down the deserted passage. We had had experience in movement on Wandl now; we handled ourselves more deftly. We went down several hundred feet. The passage branched, but there always seemed a main tunnel.

It was all deserted. There were distant, dimly-lighted, silent rooms. Were these factories of the strange forms of electronic gravity currents Wandl used? Some were in operation. A hum issued from them. Workers moved about.

We stopped to consult. The girls, and Molo himself, had described what we would find: a main route leading to the control room where the delicate mechanisms which operated all this were centralized, the nerve center of Wandl. It seemed that we were following that main route.

A worker came with a swimming leap past us. We dropped into a hollowed shadow at a tunnel intersection, and he went swooping by.

"Lord, Snap," I muttered, "that was too close for comfort."

Again we advanced. The tunnel turned sharply. Down a short slope, a glowing room was disclosed, with two or three workmen moving within it.

The main control room! We could not doubt it. Molo, in his enthusiasm, had once described it clearly to the girls, its great skeins of little thread-like wires spread upon the walls, the myriad tiny opalescent discs contacted with the small gray rock surface under the tangled masses of thread-wire, the levers and dials banked on the circular tables: they were unmistakable features.

"There it is, Snap," I whispered in his ear. "In that central rack. Those insulated rods, see them? Anita told us they used them to adjust the discs. Watch out for the current."

"But it's off now, Gregg!"

"There's still danger in it, and you'd short-circuit somewhere. Keep your hands off. Use the rods."

"The operators...."

He got no further. A figure lunged into us from behind, a giant

worker! His largest pincer bit into my shoulder; his hollow shout resounded. The operators of the control room came with leaps at us.

There was a moment of wild confusion. Light, seemingly almost weightless bodies flapped against us. Arms gripped us, but they were flimsy. The huge body-shells cracked gruesomely as we struck with our solid fists.

A moment of turmoil passed. No bolts were fired. The shouts were brief down here in the narrow confines of the tunnel. Panting, bruised more by our collisions against the rocks than by our adversaries, we ceased our wild lunges. We did not look at the scattered, broken and crushed bodies drifting now to the floor.

"Now, Snap! Hurry! Others may come."

We lunged into the glowing control room, seized the long insulated poles from the central rack. They had a grateful feel of weight. I picked one up, jumped with a twenty foot leap to the wall.

The wires came down like cobwebs under my sweeping blows; the little discs knocked off as though they were fungus growth. Sparks flew around us. Shafts of electronic radiance spat out. The wall was hissing over all its length as I ranged up and down it. The tangled

broken threads of wire writhed like living things on the floor; then crumpled, fused and turned black.

I swept that wall-segment with frantic haste, lunged around and started another way. Across the room I saw Snap doing the same. A turmoil of electrical sound was reverberating around us, deafening, and the glare was blinding. A belt-shaft shot from the wreckage under my rod. It seared my left arm. My sleeve burned off; the arm hung limp and tingling at my side. I stopped to rub it; in a moment strength came back to its muscles.

Snap was raging like a great heavy bird gone amok. Through the green fumes of electrical gases which were filling the room I saw him lunging at the circular tables, overturning them. They cracked like thin polished stone as they struck the metal floor.

I finished with the wall. There was a twenty-foot square piece of metal apparatus, ramified and intricate; I heaved it over upon its side. A thousand little mirrors and prisms, dislodged from it, came out in a splintering deluge.

I was aware of Snap fighting with a brown-shelled figure. Then he was free of it. I saw it mashed and broken at his feet as I dove past, swimming in the smoke to lunge the length of a great fluorescent

tube which was still dimly glowing. My pole pried it over; it crashed with a brief puff of light and the rush of an explosion as air went into its vacuum.

I found Snap panting beside me, clinging to me in mid-air. The glare was dying around us; the din was lessening. We were choking in the chemical fumes of the released, half-burned gases. Turgid darkness was coming to the wrecked room, with little hissing flares spitting through it.

"Enough, Gregg! Listen! Up overhead...."

A great siren from up there was screaming into the night.

Snap panted, "Got to get out of here. Can't breathe."

Together we lunged for the tunnel by which we had entered. I stood a moment, gazing back upon the strewn and scattered room.

The delicate nerve-center of Wandl. Heavy green-black gas fumes swirled in it; darkness and silence closed down.

Over us was turmoil, that screaming siren. Then suddenly it was checked and we heard the thump and swish of what on Earth would have been called running footsteps and shouts.

Snap shoved me. "Don't stay there, you fool!"

We lunged up the passage. Figures barred it but they scattered; a bolt hissed at us, but missed. At the kiosk a group of workers and several peering little brains leaped away in terror to let us pass.

We gained the open air. With the small gravity rays darting down with repulsion upon the rocks we mounted like rockets out of the cauldron. The upper plateau lay silent in the starlight, but the cauldron behind us was ringing with alarm, and again the danger siren was blaring.

I changed my way of direction, swung it to the plateau rocks ahead. The arc of my flight was sharply bent as I went hurtling down. Over me, I saw Snap use the same tactics. I tried to aim for where we had left the girls and Molo. I could not see them down there amid the starlit crags; and suddenly a wild apprehension filled me. How had we dared leave them to Molo's trickery?

Then, ahead and below me, I saw the slight figure of one of the girls, standing on a rock with arms outstretched to signal us. I changed my ray to repulsion barely in time to avoid crashing. The landing flung me in a heap. Twenty feet away, Snap came whirling down. We picked ourselves up, saw Anita waving from the rock, and bounded

to her.

The girls were safe. Venza sat intent, with unwavering watchful gaze across the intervening space to where Molo had flattened himself against his rock, not daring to move.

"Still got him," Venza exulted. "He wasn't willing to take any chances with us. You did it, Snap?"

"I'm a motor-oiler if we didn't. Come on; got to get out of this. They're after us! We wrecked the whole damn place, Venza. Wandl's a normal planet now. No more of this accursed dislocation of Earth."

We learned later that our hope and our assumption that we had irretrievably wrecked the entire gravity control system of Wandl was proven to be a fact. Wandl was, in effect, a normal celestial body now. The beams planted in Greater New York, Ferrok-Shahn and Grebhar still streamed across space. But there was no giant beam from Wandl to seize them, and Wandl now could not move through space of her own volition. Like Earth, and all other known planets, satellites, comets and asteroids, she was subject now to all the normal natural laws of celestial mechanics. We had done a thorough job of it.

Now I shoved at Snap. "No time to talk. You tow the girls; I'll take Molo. Got to get to the Star-Streak."

I lunged over and seized Molo. "We did it. Now for your vessel! It will be ill for you if she is not where you say she is."

"She will be there, Gregg Haljan."

He docilely put himself in position for me to hook my forearm under his crossed, bound wrists and carry him. Snap rose up past us, towing the girls. Over the nearby cauldron a figure mounted to gaze and see the nature of this strange attacking enemy, and then sank back.

With Molo hanging to me, I mounted with my ray, following Snap and the girls into the starlight, with the turmoil of the cauldron receding until in a moment or so it was gone behind our horizon.

We headed now, not toward Wor, whence we had come, but over at an angle to the side. Our great bounding arcs soon left the mountains behind. We crossed the river, another portion of the forest, and came over undulating lowlands.

It was a flight of under half an hour. The pursuit, if indeed anyone

followed us, remained below our little segment of curving horizon. Everywhere there was evidence of the storm; the forest trees were laid flat, strewn like driftwood over the area. The river had in several places lashed over its banks. The lowlands were dotted thick with globe-dwellings. Some were hanging awry on their stems; others were pulled from their place, cracked and piled into a litter.

We kept well aloft. The surface scenes were only glimpses of wreckage, moving lights and people. And there were areas which the wind had seemingly spared.

The confusion from the storm was mingled now with the spreading alarm from the gravity station; the sound of the danger siren there was still audible behind us. As we advanced into what now seemed the outskirts of a city like Wor, with a pile of solid-looking metal structures ranging the horizon ahead, I saw a distant spaceship rise up and wing away. Wandl was proceeding with the dispatching of her space navy to oppose the distantly gathering ships of Earth, Venus, and Mars. No doubt with the wrecking of the control station, the masters of Wandl immediately recognized the paramount importance of the coming battle.

The huge, globular, disc-like ship sailed high over us, rotating with the impulse of its rocket-streams. In a moment it was lost in the

stars. And then another rose and followed it.

There were many human figures in the air around us now. I mounted higher, and Snap with the girls followed me. The figures, intent upon their own affairs, did not seem to heed us.

Molo's vessel lay alone upon a low metal cradle. No other ship was near it; but half a mile away on both sides we could see others resting on their stages. Lights were moving around and upon them, but the Star-Streak was dark and neglected.

We poised a thousand feet over her, and to one side. I saw her as a long, low, pointed vessel, dead gray in color, longer than the Cometara, and seemingly narrower, but very similar in aspect.

"Meka and I are supposed to be gathering our crew," said Molo. "No one bothers with my vessel. Will you take me to Wor now to get Meka?"

"I will not."

Snap was drifting down with the girls. They were near us. His arm waved at me with a gesture. And then came the muffled tone of his voice: "Shall we drop down, Gregg?"

"Yes, but cautiously. Have your gun ready."

Molo protested, "I would like to take Meka with us, and a few of my crew. You will have trouble handling the Star-Streak, just us three men."

"We'll take our chances."

We dropped swiftly down upon the dark and vacant platform. The gray hull of the Star-Streak loomed beside us, her dome arched still higher. An inclined catwalk went up to her opened deck-port.

"I'll go first," I said softly to Snap. "Come quickly after me. Watch out: there might be someone on board."

Venza still clung to her weapon. Mine was in my hand as I lifted Molo. And, ignoring the incline, bounded the thirty feet for the deck-port. I landed safely, and stood Molo upon his feet. "Don't you move," I admonished him sternly.

He stood docilely against the cabin wall of the superstructure. No one here. We had thought there might easily be one or two workers on board.

Snap and the girls came sailing, one after the other, and landed on

the deck beside me. We stood silent, alert. No one appeared from within the cabin or from the lengths of the deck. Venza was watching Molo with her weapon upon him. Snap and I had planned this boarding: Anita and Venza to stay here and guard Molo while we searched the ship, and inspected the controls. We started for the cabin door oval.

"Gregg!"

It was all the warning Snap could give. I was within the dim cabin, but he, behind me, was still on the deck. I whirled to see a dozen dark forms leaping from the roof of the cabin superstructure. Snap was all but buried by them. These were not men of Wandl, but Molo's pirate crew, Martians, Earthmen and Venusians. Snap's ray-gun spat as he went down; one of the men dropped away. I saw Venza turn with startled horror, as the huge figure of Meka leaped down upon her and Anita from the roof.

For an instant, weapon in hand, I paused in the doorway. I could not fire into the turmoil of that struggling group, so instead plunged into it, striking with my fists.

Molo was shouting, "Do not kill them! I was ordered not to kill them!"

These men, so different from the insect-like workers and the brains of Wandl, were solid in my grip; but we were all so weightless! I felled one, but others gripped me, pounded me. A struggling mass of bodies, arms and legs, we surged up to the superstructure roof and dropped upon it. My weapon was gone. Half a dozen adversaries had me pinioned.

Down on the deck I saw that Venza had lost her weapon; Molo and Meka were clutching her. Snap was fighting with several antagonists. Anita was loose. She dove for the group in which Snap was struggling, hit them, kicked and bounded upward, to be seized by two of my own captors.

"Anita, don't fight! They'll kill you!"

I tried to break loose, but four huge Martians were holding me.

"Oh, Gregg!"

There was horror in Anita's voice. Snap had broken away. At the open deck-port he stood, as though undecided what to do. The deck was almost black around him; he was silhouetted against the outside starlight. From almost at his side, in the darkness, a tiny bolt spat upward at his head. His arms went wildly out; he tumbled backward.

At the top of the boarding incline his body seemed spasmodically to kick, and the thrust whirled it down into the darkness.

The end of Snap! A pang went through me. Snap, my best friend!

Molo cursed the unknown man of his crew who had fired the shot. But none would admit who did it.

"Get to your posts," Molo roared in Martian. "Enough of you are here. Lash up the prisoners; we're launching away now." He thumped his brawny sister as she passed him. "Well played, Meka!"

These wily Martians! Molo had planned that Meka was to gather the crew and wait here at the ship for him and Wyk. If they returned with us as captives, it would be here that they would come. But if by chance things went adversely, Molo reasoned we would act just as we did; and Meka and her men were lurking here in ambush, waiting for us.

All the many various ports swung shut. Anita, Venza, and I, with arms and legs bound, were taken by Molo to the forward observation and control room.

The ship was resounding with signals. The interior controls in the

hull-base raised the gravity-pull within the vessel to a strength comparable to that of Earth. Within a few minutes the Star-Streak lifted from the stage. Strange, weird Wandl fell away from us. We slid upward through the atmosphere, following one of the globular Wandl vessels, and headed into space toward the point where, a few million miles distant, the ships of allied Earth, Venus, and Mars were gathering.

"They are visible." Molo turned from the eyepiece of his electro-telescope. "Do you want to see them, Gregg Haljan?"

We were in the forward control and observation turret of the Star-Streak, Molo and his sister Meka, Venza, Anita and myself. Unobtrusively squatting on the floor was a small, gray, rat-faced fellow, put there, weapon in hand, to watch us. He was a ruffian from the underworld of Grebhar, a member of the Star-Streak's pirate crew.

We were some ten hours out from Wandl. A group of four of the globular Wandl ships were with us, strung in a line some ten thousand miles to our left. We had been heading diagonally toward Mars. Some fifteen other Wandl vessels were ahead and others following.

We were no more than fifteen million miles from Mars when Molo sighted the allied ships. "Will you observe them, Gregg Haljan?"

I moved to take his place at the 'scope-grid, with the gaze of Anita and Venza upon me. They sat huddled together on a low bench against the back curve of the circular turret.

It was dim here, with little spots of instrument lights, and the radiance coming in the glassite plates of the encircling dome. The loss of Snap had put a grim look upon the girls. They were dispirited, docile with Meka. They had hardly had a word with me. I think that all of us had about given up hope during those hours. Molo had consulted me several times with his policies of navigation.

But I saw no chance to trick him. He was indeed, far more experienced than I, and more skillful, in celestial mechanics. I worked with him. I learned the operation and the handling of the Star-Streak, which was not greatly different from the Cometara or the Planetara.

Poor Snap! He and I had planned to capture and navigate this Star-Streak. We could have handled her. There were, I gathered, some fifteen men aboard her now, but no more than two or three were engaged at the navigating mechanisms. Even they could be

dispensed with at times, for the ship's controls were all automatic, handled directly from the forward turret.

I learned too, something, though not much, of the Star-Streak's weapons. They were similar to those of the allied ships, since Molo in equipping his pirate craft had seized upon all the best he could find of the three worlds.

The Star-Streak, during this flight toward Mars, was in close communication with the Wandl craft. There was a giant vessel, the Wor, off to our left now. It carried the brain master in command of the Wandl forces. Molo took his orders from the Wor, but since his equipment and his weapons were so wholly different, the Star-Streak was set apart.

"I can do what I like," Molo told me. "With my own judgement I can act; you shall see."

"You've had plenty of experience, Molo."

"Have I not! The terror of the starways, your world called me." He chuckled vaingloriously. "I must justify it now."

"Act, do not talk," Meka commented sourly. "Children with toys

make speeches like that, and then the toys get broken."

"Fear not, sister. Never again will the Star-Streak come to grief."

And now I gazed through the 'scope at the waiting allied ships. They were lying some eight million miles off Mars. I gazed and saw the poised little group. There were perhaps fifty of them. The majority were Martian, long, low and very sharp-ended, and dull red in color. The wider Earth and Venus ships were silvery and drab. I could distinguish the several different types of craft in this hastily assembled fleet: many converted commercials like my ill-starred Cometara; a few rakish police ships; and about a dozen of the long, narrow supermodern warships. It was their first voyage into battle. They had only been built these past few years, by peaceful governments that protested there never again would be another war!

The little fleet was lying waiting for us. It was being augmented by occasional other ships from Mars. They saw us coming now. The radiance of a Benson curve-light enveloped them, with a shaft toward us. The image of them shifted over a million miles to one side.

Molo laughed when he saw it. "Protecting themselves already! But we are not going to attack them there."

The first tactics of the Wandl commanders surprised me. We swung away from the course to Mars and headed diagonally toward Earth and Venus. Earth was the nearer to us, with Venus some forty million miles beyond her. For hours we turned in that sweeping curve. Then with our Wandl convoy following, we headed for Earth. I could not help admiring the way the Star-Streak was handled. She turned more sharply than the Wandl craft; and before our next meal, we were leading them all.

Would the allied ships follow us? It was immediately apparent they were coming; but from their poised position, hours of attaining velocity would be needed. The other allied vessels approaching from Venus and Earth checked their flight and turned after us. We passed within five or six hundred thousand miles of several of them.

I found now that some twenty other Wandl ships, leaving Wandl after us, had headed directly for Earth. We were all together presently, the Star-Streak and nearly fifty Wandl ships, gathered close to one side of the Moon. The allies, about a hundred of them, were strung through space, scattered, with varying velocities and flight direction, but most of them endeavoring to get between the Moon and Earth.

This was the day! I call it that: a routine of meals which Meka

grimly served us in the turret, and a little sleep when she took the girls below and I lay on the turret floor. I wondered who was in command of this allied force, and did not learn until afterward that it was Grantline. The Cometara had fallen upon the Moon Apennines, not very far from where my old Planetara still lay, near the base of Archimedes. But Grantline and a few of his companions, with their powered suits, had struggled free from the gravity pull of the wreckage; and a few hours later, a ship out from Earth picked them up.

Grantline, on one of the Earth police ships, commanded the fleet now, and he afterward told me in detail how he endeavored to conduct his forces in the battle, thus enabling me to describe it from both viewpoints. He had been cruising toward Mars when he saw us make the turn. He thought a landing upon Earth might be planned and hastened all his ships into the area between the Moon and Earth to cut us off.

But that was what Wandl wanted. The Wandl ships, with the Star-Streak among them, made a complete slow circuit of the Moon. It took another day. Molo said very little to me in explanation of the Wandl tactics, but I could see that the object was to lure Grantline into following. A few of the allied ships did follow us around, but not many. The rest stayed carefully guarding the line between the

Moon and Earth.

There had been no encounter yet between the hostile ships. The huge distances involved in the engagement must be kept in mind. The gravity rays from the Wandl ships were only a slight disturbing element at such a long distance; Grantline's Zed-rays and Benson curve-lights were defensive only. For offence, Grantline's electronic guns and other weapons were of varying range, but none for such distances as these.

Wandl seemed unwilling to begin the battle, and Grantline was cautious as well. He did not know what weapons these strange globular vessels would use; his only experience had been our encounter with the whirling discs.

Then, at the end of the second day, came the first clash. The Star-Streak, and all the Wandl ships, were again clustered on the Earth side of the Moon; they were hovering perhaps twenty thousand miles above its surface. Grantline's force was a hundred thousand miles off, toward Earth. One of the Wandl ships came tentatively forward, and Grantline sent one of the new-style warships to meet it.

They encircled each other. Both were cautious, but there was a passing within fifty miles. The Earth ship fired her bolts. The

insulated barrage of the Wandl ship withstood them. There was a shower of ether sparks close to the ship, and a reddening of the hull, but nothing more. It seemed that the electro-barrages of the Wandl and allied ships were very similar in nature, an aura of electro-magnetism, enclosing the ship like a curtain fifty feet away, absorbed the electronic stream of the enemy bolt. The Wandl ship flung no bolts; she loosed a score of the whirling discs during the passing. They were of varying sizes, but similar to those which cut and wrecked the Cometara; in this instance, the Grantline ship was able to destroy each of them as it came close.

This was the first encounter. The Earth warship went back to its squadron and the Wandl vessel rejoined its fellows. It had fired no bolts. Grantline suspected now what afterward proved to be the fact: these Wandl vessels were not equipped with long-range electronic guns. The Wandl defensive tactics were necessary; they feared a widespread encounter. They were hovering in a compact group, covering a five hundred mile area, over the Moon surface. Their purpose was not yet apparent, but Grantline saw now that one of the Wandl ships was dropping down and landing on the Moon. It skimmed the Apennines and landed not far from Archimedes.

What was that for? Grantline noticed that the lowering, closely-gathered Wandl fleet tried to mask the landing. And their gravity-

rays, with repulsive force, darted out to impede the Grantline vessels should they try to advance.

This Earthward hemisphere of the Moon was now largely in shadow, but Grantline's Zed-ray magnifiers showed the vessel on the Moon. Apparatus was being unloaded. It seemed, down there on the rocky Moon plain in the foothills of the Apennines, that some extensive, elaborate base was being prepared.

It was for this the hovering Wandl fleet was waiting, holding off from conflict until this Moon base was ready. When Grantline reached that conclusion, he ordered all his vessels forward to a general attack.

During this time, on the Star-Streak, as we and the Wandl fleet made that preliminary circuit of the Moon, an incident occurred which changed everything for me. I had noticed several times as we gathered in the Star-Streak's forward turret, that Venza and Anita were eying me. Their expressions were furtive, but I realized that they were trying to attract my attention.

We had no opportunity to speak secretly. Molo or Meka, or that rat-faced guard, were always too near us; and Molo kept me busy with computations of our course.

We rounded the Moon. We gathered with the Wandl fleet some twenty thousand miles above the lunar surface, and I watched that ship descend and land. Like Grantline, I wondered what for. Molo gave me no hint. I saw, through his 'scope, bloated figures in pressure suits unloading mechanisms. They seemed to be placing huge contact-discs in a circle on the lunar rocks. It was reminiscent of the Wandl gravity station, and the contact-beam which Molo had planted in Great-New York.

Then at last the girls had an opportunity to whisper to me. A swift phrase came from Anita. "Gregg! Snap is alive. Hiding on board."

I gasped. Snap alive?

"Planning to rescue us. You and he can capture the Star-Streak!"

"Anita! Tell me how."

"No more now! Our room below—he's near it. He spoke to us."

No more. She moved away from me. But it was enough. Snap alive! I recalled that when he fell beside the ship, no one had bothered to go down after the body, and at that time the hull-ports were open.

After a time Meka took the girls below. I sat with Molo, gazing

down at the dark and gloomy surface of the Moon. I had finished the mathematical work Molo had given me. My thoughts were with Anita and Venza, down in their cabin now with Meka. Perhaps even now Snap was joining them.

I hardly heard Molo's low, muttered curses, as he set his lenses for a slight alteration of our slow circular course among the Wandl fleet. "That fellow at my gravity-shifts acts like a nitwit. He has them disarranged."

It snapped me to sudden alertness. "Something wrong, Molo? Nonsense!"

"These men of my crew answer my controls too slowly. They should jump when my signals come."

The plates suddenly shifted normally, but there had been an interval of delay. Molo was puzzled and annoyed. My heart pounded as I wondered if he would investigate. But he did not.

"You had better sleep, Haljan. Take advantage now; we shall have action presently. Did you figure our emerging curve?"

I shoved my computations across the table to him. "There."

"You are quick, Haljan."

"We should emerge from the Moon's shadow in about two hours."

"But I will not hold that course. We're staying close near here with the other vessels, but I want some velocity always. Take your sleep, Haljan."

I stretched on the narrow floor mattress. The turret was silent.

I was aroused from a doze by Molo's activities in the turret. The girls and Meka were still below. The ever-silent Venusian, squatting in the turret corner, still had his gun upon me.

I saw that Grantline's ships, over a wide fan-shaped spread, were advancing.

And presently we were engaged in the soundless turmoil of battle. I cannot relate more than fragments, things I saw and experienced, during six or more hours of bursting electronic light and puffs of darkness in that spread of battle area within the Moon-shadow. It was a silent battle of crossing lights, ships a thousand miles apart, gathering velocity with great tangential curves; passing each other in a second; sweeping a thousand miles apart again; turning and

coming back. A hundred engagements.

The Star-Streak was very fast, very mobile, and, unlike all the other Wandl ships, had the allies' own weapons to use against them. I saw now why they called Molo the terror of the starways!

We swept into the shadowed battle area. Over all its thousand-mile spread were the radiant Wandl gravity-beams, disturbing and impeding the course of Grantline's ships. There was the luminous gleam of projectile rockets, like little comets, soundless, launched by the Wandl craft, and the radiance of the rocket-streams which all the vessels were using now for close maneuvering; the glare of Grantline's searchlight bombs and his white search-beams to disclose the deadly whirling discs which the weapons of his vessel must seek out and destroy. A chaos of silent light, stabbed here and there with Grantline's darkness bombs, bombs of limited local range which exploded in space and which, for a few minutes duration, absorbed all light-rays, giving a temporary effect of darkness.

And then wreckage! Broken, leprous Wandl vessels whose barrage at close range had been smashed by Grantline's guns; torn and littered allied ships, struck by the huge exploding comet-projectiles and the whirling discs; airless hulks, and scattered fragments which no longer resembled a ship at all but only a hull plate or a torn segment

of dome. And little drifting blobs, the survivors in pressure suits who had leaped from the wreckage; little blobs ignored, whirled away or drawn forward as by chance the sweeping gravity-beams fell upon them; tiny derelicts, floating stormtossed until the Moon's attraction caught and pulled them down, or a whirling disc cut through them, or the distant aura of a bolt shocked them to a merciful death.

It was a three-dimensional, thousand-mile spread of fantasy infernal. Out of it, after an hour or two, a steady sift of every manner of wreckage was drifting down upon the Moon. The scene began to blur. A haze like glowing star-dust, or the radiance from a comet's tail, was spreading a weirdly luminous mist, blurring, obscuring the scene. This was the released electrons and the dissipating gases of the space guns and exploding projectiles, forming dust which glowed in the mingled starlight and Earthlight.

The Star-Streak had plunged, during those six or eight hours, through the battle area. Our several encounters were all characterized by the Star-Streak's extreme flexibility, her speed, mobility, and Molo's reckless skill. We came through unscathed. There is a certain advantage for the man who seems not to care for his own life. But there was an encounter, the last one as it chanced, just before we emerged downward out of the fog and found ourselves no more than a thousand miles above the Moon's surface,

where our adversary was equally reckless and only Molo's skill saved us.

We came upon a Venus police ship. We plunged, as though seeking a collision, and the Venus ship was willing. For a moment of chaos, both barrages held against the exchange of bolts. Then we rolled over and tilted down from the impulse of the stern rockets. The passing must have been within feet, not miles; and in that second, Molo timed a shot to strike at the enemy bottom. It went through their barrage. Behind us, a second later, there was only strewn wreckage of the ship, so finely powdered that it became a silvery radiance, like moonlight shining on a little patch of fog.

"Not too bad?" Molo gazed around for appreciation. "Not bad, Gregg Haljan? Molo is not too unskillful?"

We hung now close above the Moon's surface, with the battle area over us. Out of the fog up there came the drifting wreckage; and now the Wandl ships were coming down, one by one. Not so many of them now; no more than ten of them emerged.

Grantline did not follow. His ships withdrew the other way. The fog gradually dispersed. Grantline could now take stock of the battle; he had been victorious. One might call it that, since his percentage of

strength, numerically, was greater now than when the battle began. Ten remaining Wandl ships, and the allies had about twenty-five.

Another hour passed. Grantline's twenty-five ships were gathered in a close group, ten thousand miles above the Moon's surface. Under them, the ten Wandl vessels and the Star-Streak seemed ranging in a five hundred mile circle. Down through it, on the rocks of the Moon in the foothills of the Apennines, the mechanism established there abruptly sprang into action.

It was a giant gravity-beam. Of infinitely greater power than any Wandl vessel could generate, it flung out its spreading, conical ray.

So this had been the purpose of all the Wandl tactics, to manipulate Grantline into his present position. This gravity-beam, though far smaller, was comparable to the one used by the Wandl control station. A rock contact against a huge mass, Wandl, and here, the Moon were necessary to give the ray its power. No ship could generate such a ray, so the Wandlites chose this battleground where they could establish themselves upon our deserted Moon.

The beam had about a hundred foot diameter at its base on the rocks; it passed upward through the circle of Wandl vessels and its spread bathed all of Grantline's ships at once. An attractive beam, so

powerful that the ships were helpless; against all their efforts they were pinned and drawn downward. A slight velocity at first, but with a tremendous acceleration.

Within an hour they were hurtling, coming together as they speeded down the narrowing cone of the beam. The ten thousand miles, their distance above the Moon, was cut to five thousand. The Wandl ships drew aside, keeping well out of range to let them pass; in another thirty minutes they would crash against the rocks.

I gazed in horror from the Star-Streak's turret. We were sidewise to the angle of the beam. Grantline's ships were pulled together now into almost a fifty-mile group. They hung all askew, helplessly pinned, some broadside, some upended. The movement of their fall was so rapid that even with the naked eye it was apparent.

"Got them now," Molo chuckled. "This is the end for them, Gregg Haljan."

There were only three of us in the turret: Molo and I, and my watchful, silent guard who sat cross-legged, with a ray-gun pointed at me.

Meka and the two girls were below during all the engagement.

It was over now.

During this lull Molo had sent the men from the deck gun ports to their hull quarters. Our decks were empty now; the bridges and catwalks up here had momentarily no occupants. The Star-Streak had little velocity, only a slow drift downward toward the Moon's surface, which now was only a few hundred miles beneath us.

The lunar disc was a great dark spread of desolation, with only the sunlight topping the distant horizon limb. And from under us, to the side, was the source of the giant gravity-beam. Over us were the watch-Wandl vessels, and, still higher, the helpless knot of Grantline's ships hurtling down.

"Got them now," Molo repeated. "In another...."

He never finished. From the open doorway of the turret a figure rose up. Snap! His aspect, even more than his appearance, transfixed me. Snap, with his clothes torn; grimy and spattered with blood; his face pale and gaunt, with hollow, blazing eyes. And above it, the shock of rumpled red hair. In one hand he clutched a ray-gun, and in the other a blood-stained knife!

My guard squatting on the floor, half-turned. Snap's bolt met him

before he could raise his weapon. He tumbled dead almost at my feet. And mingled with the hiss of the bolt was Snap's shout at the unarmed Molo.

"Into the corner, you! Back up, you damned traitor, else I'll kill you as I've killed everyone else on this ship!"

I had leaped and seized the gun which was still in the hand of the dead guard. "Snap, the girls!"

"Down below. Free. They've got Meka bound and gagged, locked and sealed in a bunk-room. You bring them up! I'll hold this accursed traitor. No need to kill him. By the gods, I've killed enough!"

He saw for the first time the vast silent drama in the firmament outside the dome windows. "Gregg, for the love of...."

"No time now, Snap! I'll get the girls."

"Watch out. I might have missed somebody down below."

He had. Three men appeared on the forward deck near the foot of our turret ladder. My bolt spat down upon them; two of them fell. The other ran aft, toward where I saw Venza and Anita appearing from the lounge doorway of the cabin superstructure. I fired again,

and the running man tumbled forward on his face. He was the last of the pirate crew.

Molo was crouching, half-bending forward over his instrument table, with Snap's gun upon him. The girls burst upon us. We armed them. Meka was safely fastened down below. We backed Molo to the floor in the corner, with Venza and Anita watching him.

Snap and I were in control of the ship. For temporary periods the automatics would handle the gravity-shifters. I could operate them here from the turret. We had a downward velocity toward the Moon. Five hundred miles below us, no more, was the base of that diabolical gravity-ray which was so swiftly pulling the twenty-five Grantline ships to their destruction.

I gripped Snap and told him what we must do. "The forward gun on the starboard side is almost identical with our Earth guns, the Francine projectors. With a short range you can handle it and I'll give you a close mark!"

He dashed for the deck. I set the levers. Gravity-plates with full bow attraction. Stern repulsion to the Earth and the stern rocket-streams at highest power.

The Star-Streak responded smoothly; with acceleration such as only Molo's famous terror of the starways could attain, we dove for the Moon.

Breathless minutes! Those Wandl ships up in the firmament behind our stern would probably do nothing; they would not understand this sudden move of their friendly ship. The brain masters, the insect-like Wandlites down on the Moon rocks operating the mechanism of the gravity-ray, would not suspect until too late what the Star-Streak was doing.

Uprushing rocks, the Apennines to one side; the dark yawning maw of Archimedes on the other. We were diving parallel with the gravity-ray now, hardly a mile from it, diving for the mechanisms of its source. Twenty thousand feet of altitude. I bent our rocket-streams up for the start of our turning. Bow-hull gravity-plates next. Ten thousand feet. Five thousand.

How close we went I never knew. It was seconds now, not minutes. I shifted all the controls. Our bow lifted as we straightened. The whole spreading lunar surface tilted and dipped. Snap fired. I saw the bolt flash at the tilting landscape and a puff of light down there on the rocks. And an instant later there were vacant rocks where the little cluster of men and mechanisms had been. And the upflung gravity-

beam was gone!

The giant towering cliffs of the mountain of Archimedes seemed to rush at our upturning bow. The great dark crater-mouth slid under our hull. But we cleared it; the maw of blackness slid down and away; the whole lunar world tilted down and dwindled as we mounted again into the starlight.

Minutes passed while we mounted. Above our upstanding bow was a new drama. The suddenly-released Grantline ships, almost level with the ten Wandl vessels when the ray vanished, turned sidewise. The poised Wandl craft, devoid of velocity, could not pick up the ray to escape now. Grantline, for those minutes, ignored the frantically flung discs; it was a desperate encounter, all at close quarters. We saw the spitting, puffing lights and the silent turmoil, hidden presently by the spreading clouds of luminous fog.

Then out of it came drifting the wreckage. We plunged through an end of the glowing fog, encountered nothing but two triumphant Venus vessels. With them we mounted into the upper starlight.

This was the end of the battle. The victorious Grantline ships one by one came lunging up: only twelve of them now. No Wandl vessels were left.

The great spreading cloud drifted down like a shroud to hide the wreckage, drifted and settled to the lunar surface, a great, radiant area of fog, gleaming in the Earthlight.

There is very little more, pertinent to this narrative, that I need add of the events on Earth, Venus, and Mars during this momentous summer. The main facts are history now: the wild storms, the damage done by outraged nature and the panic among the people—all of it has been detailed as public news. The strange light-beams planted by Wandl in Greater New York, Grebhar, and Ferrok-Shahn have not yet burned themselves away. But they are lessening and scientists say that they will soon be gone.

The changed calendars call this the New Era. The axis of each of the three worlds was not appreciably altered; the climates are at last restoring to normal. But the axial rotations of all three planets were slowed by that attacking Wandl beam before we wrecked the gravity station. The Earth day has been lengthened, resulting in the new calendar, the New Era. Our year, formerly of approximately 365-1/4 days, now contains, but 358.7 days.

Molo and Meka have been returned to Ferrok-Shahn. They were tried there for piracy and treason and are imprisoned.

And Wandl? With her gravity-controls wrecked, Wandl became subject to the balancing celestial forces. During those succeeding months of the summer and autumn no other spaceships appeared from her: nor did our world investigate. Her presence here, even a little world one-sixth the size of the Moon, was causing disturbance enough!

Wandl moved with slow velocity, like a dallying, strangely sluggish comet about to round our Sun. What would her final orbit be? By fortunate chance she headed in, far from the Earth and Venus; missed Mercury by a wide margin; went close around the Sun: came out again.

But the pull of the Sun, and Mercury dragged her back. Her velocity was not great enough.

I recall that late autumn afternoon when, with Anita, Snap, and Venza, I sat in the observatory near Washington, gazing at Wandl through the dark glass of the solar-scope. Doomed invader! She showed now as a tiny dark dot over the Sun's giant, blazing surface. This was her final plunge. The dot was presently swallowed and gone. It seemed, amid those giant, licking streamers of blazing gas, that there was an extra puff of light.

And some claim now that for a brief time our sunlight was a trifle warmer, a little pyre to mark the end of Wandl, the Invader.

128 Seed of the Arctic Ice by Desmond W Hall

Killer whales and seal-creatures tangle Ken Torrance in an amazing adventure under the ice-roofed arctic sea.

Aproximate word count: 10,900

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Sleepily the lookout stared at the scope-screen before him, wishing for something that would break the monotony of the scene it pictured: the schools of ghostly fish fleeting by, the occasional shafts of pale sunlight filtering down through breaks in the ice-floes above, the long snaky ropes of underwater growth. None of this was conducive to wakefulness; nor did the half-speed drone of the electric engines aft and the snores of some distant sleeper help him. The four other men on duty in the submarine—the helmsman; the second mate, whose watch it was; the quartermaster and the second engineer—might not have been present, so motionless and silent were they.

The lookout man stifled another yawn and glanced at a clock to see how much more time remained of his trick. Then suddenly something on the screen brought him to alert attention. He blinked at it; stared hard—and thrilled.

Far ahead, caught for an instant by the submarine Narwhal's light-beams, a number of sleek bodies moved through the foggy murk, with a flash of white bellies and an easy graceful thrust of flukes.

The watcher's hands cupped his mouth; he turned and sang out:

"K-i-i-ll-ers! I see killers!"

The cry rang in every corner, and immediately there was a feverish response. Rubbing their eyes, men appeared as if from nowhere and jumped to posts; with a clang, the telegraph under the second mate's hand went over to full speed; Captain Streight rolled heavily out of his bunk, flipped his feet mechanically into sea-boots and came stamping forward. First Torpooner Kenneth Torrance, as he sat up and stretched, heard the usual crisp question:

"Where away?"

"Five points off sta'b'd bow, sir; quarter-mile away; swimming

slow."

"How large a school?"

"Couldn't say, sir. Looks around a dozen."

"Whew!" whistled Ken Torrance. "That's a strike!" He pulled on a sweater and strode forward to the scope-screen to see for himself, even as Captain Streight, all at once testy with eagerness, bawled:

"Sta'b'd five! Torpoon ready, Mister Torrance! Mister Torr—oh, here you are. Take a look."

Never in the two years of experience which had brought him to the important post of first torpooner had Ken failed to thrill at the sight which now met his eyes. Directly ahead, now that the Narwhal's bow was turned in pursuit, but veering slowly to port, swam a pack of the twenty to thirty-foot dolphins which are called "killer whales," their bodies so close-pressed that they seemed to be an undulating wave of black, occasionally sliced with white as the fluke-thrusts brought their bellies into view. Their speed through the shadowed, gloomy water was equal to the submarine's; when alarmed, it would almost double.

"Three more of 'em will fill our tanks," grunted Streight, his chunky face almost glowing. He bit on a plug of tobacco, his eyes never moving from the screen. "Now, if only we hadn't lost Beddoes.... Y' think you can bag three, Mister Torrance?"

"Well, if three'll fill our tanks—sure!" grinned Ken.

The other's eyebrows twitched suddenly. "They're speeding up!" he shouted, and then: "That torpoon ready, there? Good." His voice lowered again as Ken pulled his belt a notch tighter and snatched a last glimpse of the fish before leaving. "I want you to try for three, son," he said soberly: "but—be careful. Don't take fool chances, and keep alert. Remember Beddoes."

Ken nodded and walked to the torpoon catapult, hearing Streight's familiar send-off echoed by the men of the crew who were nearby:

"Good hunting!"

The idea of an underwater craft for the pursuit of killer whales—tremendously valuable since the discovery of valuable medicinal qualities in their oil—had been scoffed at by the majority of the Alaska Whaling Company's officials at the time of its suggestion, but the Narwhal after her first two months of service had decisively

proved her worth. She was not restricted to the open seas, now swept almost clean of the highly prized killers; she could follow them to their last refuge, right beneath the floe-edges of the Arctic Circle; and as a result she could bring back more oil than any four surface whalers.

With a cruising radius of twenty-five hundred miles, she stayed out from the base until her torpoons had accounted for anywhere from sixty to eighty killers. One by one these sea-animals would be taken to the surface and there cut up and boiled down, until her tanks were full of the precious blubber oil. Ever farther she pressed in her quest for the fish schools, dipping for leagues into a silent sea that for ages had been known only to the whale and the seal and their kindred; a sea always dark and mysterious beneath its sheath of ice.

The inner catapult door closed behind Kenneth Torrance, and he slid into his torpoon. Twelve feet long, and resembling in miniature a dirigible, was this weapon that made practical an underwater whaling craft. The tapered stern bore long directional rudders, which curved round the squat high-speed propeller: its smooth flanks of burnished steel were marked only by the lines of the entrance port, which the torpooner now drew tight and locked. Twin eyes of light-beam projectors were set in the bow, which was cut also by a vision-plate of fused quartz and the nitro-shell gun's tube, successor to the

gun-cast harpoon.

Ken lay full-length in the padded body compartment, his feet resting on the controlling bars of the directional planes, hands on the torpoon's engine levers. A harness was buckled all around him, to keep him in place. His gray eyes, level and sober, peered through the vision-plate at the outer catapult door.

Suddenly a spot of red light glowed in it; the door quivered, swung out. A black tide swirled into the chamber. There came the hiss of released air-pressure, and the slim undersea steed rocketed out into the exterior gloom, her light-beams flashing on and propeller settling into a blur of speed as she was flung.

Ken turned on her full twenty-four knots, zoomed above the dark bulk of the slower mother ship, whose light-beams flashed across him for a second, and then straightened out in a long, slight-angled dive after the great black bodies ahead.

Aware that some strange enemy was on their track, the killers had become panicky and were darting away at their full speed, which was only slightly under that of the torpoon's humming motors, and which at times even surpassed it. Ken saw that it looked like a long chase, and settled his lean body as comfortably as he could.

His mind was not concentrated on the task ahead, for the first part was mere routine and he could follow his quarry almost mechanically. And so, as his steel shell drove through the ever-shadowed, icy sea, he began to think about the disappearance of Chan Beddoes, the Narwhal's second torpooner.

Dead, now Beddoes; it was a week since he had set out on the chase from which he had never returned. Ken could only conjecture as to what had stricken him down. There were countless possibilities: perhaps a blow from a dying killer whale's flukes bursting his torpoon's seams; perhaps a crash into underwater ice. Whatever it was, it had been sudden, for not even a faint radioed S.O.S. had trembled into the ear-phones of the Narwhal's radio-man. For two days they had held hopes that the second torpooner still lived, as the sea-suit stored in each torp contained air-units sufficient for thirty-six hours. But a whole week's passing told them that that vast stretch of glacial sea was now Chan Beddoes' grave.

Ken's reflections brought an urge to get the present job over with as quickly as possible. He squeezed another ounce of speed from the torpoon, taxing it to the limit and setting up a slight vibration; then he fondled the nitro-shell gun's trigger and studied the huge fish bodies ahead.

"Seems as if they're going to run forever," he muttered indignantly. "We'll be to the Pole if they keep it up!"

Already the Narwhal was miles behind. Through the torp's vision-plate a scene of ever increasing mystery and gloom met his gaze. The killers' course had brought them beneath a wide sheet of ice, apparently, for there were no more columns of pale sunlight piercing through. The quarter-light monotone was unbroken, save by deeper drifts of shadow, and as he drummed through it the torpooner wondered at its lifelessness. He discerned no more of the ghostly fish-schools that usually abounded. Some enemy possibly had driven them from the region; but not the whale he was pursuing, for they scorned such fare.

He was scanning the surrounding murk apprehensively, when, of a sudden, his brain and body tensed.

Off to one side, far to the right, he thought he had glimpsed a figure. It was hanging motionless, level with him; and at first it looked like a seal. But the flippers seemed longer than a seal's; moreover, no seal would be anywhere near a pack of killer whales; nor did they poise in an upright position. It couldn't be a seal, he told himself. What, then? Was it only imagination that made it appear faintly human-shaped?

He strove to catch it again with staring eyes, but it was gone, leaving only a jumbled impression of something fantastic in his mind, and the next instant the whole thing was forgotten in the movements of the killer school, now only a few hundred yards ahead.

They suddenly began a great sweeping curve to the right, a typical maneuver before standing for attack or breaking up. At once Ken swerved to starboard and drove the torpoon's nose for an advance point on the circle the fish were describing. His move swallowed the distance between them; the sleek, thick-blubbered bodies swept close by his vision-plate, their rush tossing the torp slightly. Twelve of them went past in a blur, and then came the thirteenth, the invariable straggler of a school. The thin light-beams pencilled through the darkness, outlining the rushing black shape; Ken gripped the gun's trigger and jockeyed the torp up a trifle in the seconds remaining, always keeping the sights dead set on the vital spot twelve inches behind the whale's little eye.

When only fifteen feet separated them he squeezed the trigger and at once zoomed up and away to get clear of the killer's start of pain and, if the shot were true, its following death flurry.

The shell slid deep into the rich outer blubber; and, wheeling, Ken watched the mighty mammal quiver in its forward rush. This was

merely the reaction from the pain of the shell's entrance; the nitro had not as yet exploded.

Now it did. The projectiles carried but a small charge, in order not to rip too much the buoyant lungs and so cause the body to sink, but the killer trembled like a jelly from the shock. The heart was reached; its razor-sharp flukes thrashing and tooth-lined jaws clicking, the killer wheeled with incredible speed in its death flurry. A minute later the body shuddered a last time, then drifted slowly over, showing the white belly. It began a gentle rise up toward the ceiling of ice.

"One!" grinned Ken Torrance. He noted his position on the torpoon's dials and gave it to the Narwhal by radio. They would then follow and pick up the whale.

"I'll have the second in ten minutes," he promised confidently. "Signing off!"

Again the torp darted after its prey.

He found it easy, this time, to overhaul them. Not many minutes had elapsed before he again caught sight of their rhythmically thrusting flukes and the flash of white under-sides. Unaware that one of their fellows had been left a lifeless carcass by the steel fish again nearing

them, they had reduced their speed somewhat.

Ken angled down a hundred feet into the deeper shadows, not wanting to apprise them of his presence. He continued at that level until the belly of the rearmost whale rolled white above him; then he veered off to the left, rising as he did so, in order to bring his assault to bear directly on the killer's flanks.

He swung back and streaked in for the kill. It looked like an easy one.

But he was never more mistaken in his life. For, as luck had it, he had chosen a tartar, a fighting fish—literally the "killer" which its kind had been named.

The torpooner knew what he was in for as soon as he fired his first shell. Its aim was bad, and instead of sinking into the flesh it merely ripped across the whale's back, leaving a ragged, ugly scar.

An ordinary whale would have been scared into panic by the wound and doubled its speed in an effort to get away; but Ken Torrance saw this one wheel its six-foot snout around viciously until its beady little eyes settled on the torpoon.

"I'll be damned!" he muttered. "He's turning to fight. All right, come ahead!"

He veered about and fired another shot that missed its mark by feet, but creased the whale's flukes. At once this terrible weapon lashed titanically up and down, and thirty feet of berserk killer came curving towards the lone man inside his shell of steel. Ken tensed himself for combat. He would have to keep a good distance from the fish and fire until he got it, as a square smash from its flukes might crumple the torp like an egg-shell.

Thirty feet of berserk killer came curving towards the lone man.

But his foe gave him no chance. Crazy with pain and anger, it swept up and nipped his dive for the bottom with a fluke-blow that tumbled the torpoon over and dazed its pilot. Before he could get straightened out it was on him again, catching him up into a wild whirlpool, butting the shell and flashing round to get its flukes into position. With a wrench, Ken jammed the rudder over, shoved his accelerator flat, and got free just as the tail thrashed down. He was breathing hard and sweating as he banked around—to see once more the whale, its wicked jaws wide open, charging directly at him.

For a moment he was unable to move. Such a mode of attack was

totally unexpected, and the sight held him fascinated. He could see the very wrinkles of the monster's skin as it rushed in, with shadowy flukes thrusting behind; could see the lines of dagger-like teeth, the cavernous maw and gullet. And then all vision was blotted out as the jaws closed around the torpoon's nose.

Ken did not wait for those jaws to crunch shut. He gripped the nitro-shell gun's trigger and squeezed it back.

The weapon hissed, flung its shell. He reversed his engines to try and tear free. Seconds dragged by with no result. Then he felt a mighty jolt; his harness broke; and he was pitched into the torp's engine controls.

That was all he knew, save for a vague feeling of falling, falling over and over, which was ended when a second bone-shaking shock brought complete oblivion....

It was darkness that met his eyes when they opened, the eery darkness of the floor of the Polar Sea.

Darkness! Half-conscious as he was, he started in surprise. He looked for the torp's shaded control board-lights, but could not find them. Bewildered, he wondered what had happened, and then

remembered the whale. In its flurry it had smashed him down.

Pain was thumping his forehead where he had struck the control levers; with a groan he twisted his body around and felt for his hand-flash. At any rate, there was no water inside the body compartment. The seams had resisted the blow. But why were there no lights?

He found his hand-flash, and its beam showed him the reason. Playing it on the small water-tight door which separated the main compartment from that in which the machinery was contained, he looked through its fused quartz peep-hole. He gaped in consternation.

There was, after all, a leak in the torpoon's shell, and a bad one. The machinery compartment was full of water.

"Gosh!" he muttered. "That means no light, no radio—no power! Guess I'm stranded!"

He considered the situation. It was not serious, for he had been in touch with the Narwhal after bagging the first whale and had given his position. The submarine would proceed to the kill immediately; then, after a while, not hearing from him, they would scour the neighborhood, just as they had hunted for Chan Beddoes when he

did not return.

But they'd find him, Ken told himself—and soon. He had no idea how long he had lain unconscious, but probably by now the mother ship had already hooked onto the first whale; maybe she was already hunting for him.

"Well, I'd better get out and be ready to signal to 'em with the flash," he reflected. "They may miss me here in the mud."

Taking his sea-suit from a long narrow locker, he drew the stiff-woven fabric over his body, turned the air-units on, clamped the face-shield shut, and then, gripping his hand-flash, slowly opened the port in the shell's side.

A weird figure he was, fit for the mysterious gloom into which he came. With casque of steel and lead-weighted feet, staring face-shield and metal belt, and equipped with a knife and two or three emergency tools, the sea-suit transformed him into a clumsy, grotesque giant. He sloshed into the muddy sea bottom, stumbling at first from the heavy water resistance and hardly able to see anything. The torpoon itself was a hazy blur at a short distance, but up above the light was better, being almost bright next to the ice ceiling. He adjusted the air pressure inside his suit, floating his feet off the

bottom. A few clumsy armstrokes and he went drifting gently upward.

Knowing that the "bends"—bubbles of air in a diver's veins—come from too rapidly changing pressures when rising, he made his ascent carefully. Up twenty feet, then a pause; twenty feet more and another pause. So he rose some ninety feet, and finally arrived at the underside of the ice floe.

Here he found the water a pale blue-green, increasing, at the limit of his vision, to impenetrable black. Nearby was a great dark blur which he recognized as the killer whale that had struck him down. It bobbed lifelessly against the smooth, light ceiling of ice. Slowly, he swam over towards it.

There was no mark of the havoc his last shot must have wreaked inside. He examined the body with interest, fingering the two inch-long teeth, which even the mighty sperm whale fears and flees from.

"Pretty wicked," he said aloud, just for the companionship of his voice. "And there's a lot of oil in this brute. Streight'll be glad to get him. Maybe he won't need a third to fill the tanks."

Thought of his captain made him look up and around, hoping to see

the Narwhal's light-beams come threading through the distant murk. He did not see them, but what he did see caused his mouth to drop open, and his veins to chill with a cold that was not that of the sea nor the ice above.

"Good Lord!" he whispered. "That thing—again!"

Like a specter from the deep, some hundred feet away was a form, seal-like in appearance, yet not wholly seal. It poised there motionless, apparently looking straight at him

Fear came over Ken as he studied it. Its body was perhaps ten feet long, and sleek and fat under a brown-colored hide. But its flippers were not those of a seal; they were too long and slender, especially the hind ones. They unquestionably bore a remote resemblance to human arms and legs.

"Yet it can't be anything but some kind of seal," Ken whispered to himself. "It must be!"

But then, too, it did not have the ordinary seal's bullet head, set squat between smoothly tapering shoulders, but rather something bulbous, half like that of a man, in spite of the layers of fat that stream-lined from it to the broad shoulders. It did have, however, two large,

staring eyes, and slitted holes inches below them for nostrils—which showed that it breathed air and was therefore warm-blooded.

Quite motionless, each stared at the other, while minutes passed. Then the creature moved slowly up and forward, impelled by a graceful and hardly perceptible roll of its queer flippers. Very gradually it came towards Kenneth Torrance; and he, peering with fear-tinged curiosity at the animal's bold advance, saw two creases of fat that must have been lips slide open in the smooth brown face, baring strong, pointed teeth.

Not knowing whether it was an attack or merely inquisitiveness, he unsheathed his knife. At this the figure stopped and poised motionless again, perhaps fifty feet away, and after a moment turned its sleek head first to the left and then to the right. Automatically, Ken gazed around likewise. He drew in his breath with a sharp hiss.

Like shadows, additional figures had appeared in the distant murk. Silently they had come; he could see eleven—twelve—even more. He was surrounded! No longer doubting their purpose, he gripped his knife firmly. He knew he could never get down to the torpoon in time.

And then the circle began to close.

There was little he could do to resist them, he realized, for what he had seen of their movements told him that they were swift, effortless swimmers. But he braced himself as best he could against the dead whale, to protect his back. He would at least go down fighting.

As their spectral shapes slid slowly closer he noted something that had escaped his eyes before. Four or five of them were holding dim objects in their arm-like flippers. Spears, he made them out to be, rudely fashioned from bone. And others held dark-colored loops, which they were slowly forming into nooses.

"They're intelligent, all right," Ken muttered. "Spears—of whalebone, I guess. And ropes—probably seaweed. Weapons! Good Lord, what kind of seals are these?"

Easily, gracefully, the silent circle drew in to perhaps twenty feet of him, where they paused again, hanging motionless at regular intervals in the eery, wavering half-light. Ken licked his lips nervously. Then the one whom he had seen first moved its head slightly, in what was apparently a signal. And in a concerted movement, so bewilderingly rapid that his eyes could not hold them, they rushed him.

He had expected speed, but not speed such as this. He had barely

swung his knife-arm up when the wave engulfed him.

Doubling, curving shapes looped around him; blubbery bodies pressed against him; eyes flashed by in streaks of brown; he knew that he was being tumbled and tossed and that his knife and hand-flash had fallen under the shock of the attack. And then there was a sharper sensation. As he struggled to break free, taut cords trussed his legs and arms like any captive animal's.

The stream of moving bodies slowed in movement and fell back from a breathless, dazed Kenneth Torrance. He then got his first clear view since the assault was unleashed.

He was upright, many feet away from the killer whale's carcass, his arms bound strongly to his sides with seaweed-rope, his legs locked close together. To one side he glimpsed several of the creatures fastening other rope strands to the whale's flukes. When they had finished, with smoothly thrusting flippers they began to haul the carcass forward, and he felt himself move feet first in the same direction.

He forced a wry smile to his lips. "A swell fight I put up!" he grunted. "Hold 'em off! Yeah—I bet I held 'em for a full tenth of a second."

He still could hardly believe what had so rapidly befallen him. It was difficult to credit eyes that showed him creatures whose bodies were mainly seal-like, and yet whose weapons and co-ördinated movements spoke for human intelligence. But they were certainly real. At his feet he could feel the pressure of a guard's flippers against him.

He was towed in this fashion for some distance when the pressure of the flippers suddenly tightened and he was pulled into a deep-angled swoop toward the sea-bottom below. Previously he had seen his captors' amazing speed, but now he felt it. Down and down he went, and at last, when it seemed he must crash into the sea floor, his momentum was quickly checked, and he found himself standing in the mud, from which position, lacking support from his guard, he drifted to a horizontal one, face up. And there, lying helpless on the bottom, he saw the reason for the sudden dive. Far to the right, piercing faintly through the murk, were two faint interweaving beams of white that preceded a slowly moving dark bulk.

The Narwhal! Wild hopes of rescue coursed through him.

Dimly, as he watched the beams, he was aware of the rest of the creatures dropping down, guiding between them the whale's carcass. Then a firm pressure was applied to his side, and he was rolled over,

face down in the mud. Unable any longer to see his ship, his momentary vision of rescue vanished.

"Hopeless, I guess," he muttered despairingly. The darkness on the sea-floor was too thick, the wavering shadows too deceptive. And his hand-flash and knife were gone—probably knocked from his grasp during the struggle, he thought.

He realized that the seal-like animals were lying low until the submarine passed, its size having awed them. The color of the bodies blended perfectly with the gloom, as did that of his own sea-suit. His bonds prevented him from making even the slightest movement to attract attention.

Torturing thoughts raced through the torpooner's brain. He saw, in his mind's eye, straight above, a hazy bulk, with shimmering columns of white angling from its nose. His imagination pictured for him the warm, well-lit interior, and the bunks—the coffee steaming on the fire, the men at their posts and Streight's anxious, beefy face. He saw it all as plainly as if he were inside, cracking jokes with one of the engineers.

The minutes passed. The Narwhal must now be gone. Ken's cheek muscles stood out as he pressed his teeth together. "Well, go on!" he

exploded in impotent rage. "What are you waiting for? Kill me! Eat me if you're going to!" And he cursed the silent forms around him till his ears hurt from the reverberation.

After the Narwhal had vanished in the gloom, the torpooner's captors lifted him from the bottom and propelled him leisurely forward again, the slight, graceful roll of their flippers slipping them along smoothly.

A dull hopelessness came over him. No longer could he hope that his submarine would find him. Only one thing was certain, and that was that death would soon come. For even if his captors did not kill him at once, he had but thirty-six hours before his air-units would be exhausted. Certainly, having captured him, the seal-creatures would not release him. And it was too much to expect them to realize that his sea-unit was only an artificial covering which enabled him to live underwater, and not his own flesh and blood.

And as for the chance of breaking loose—the idea was laughable. His speed was snail-like in comparison with theirs. Even if he did manage somehow to get away, what good would it do? How could he, a puny, helpless mite, ever hope to locate the Narwhal in this vast sweep of Arctic sea? His torpoon was wrecked, and he had no means of communication.

His situation was quite hopeless.

Far ahead, a dark shape grew in the foggy murk, and as they neared, spread upwards and outwards. They angled up and up; the sea-floor was higher there. Ken, peering as best he could, made out that the mountainous, looming bulk was the face of a giant underwater mound, whose uneven formation indicated that it was the result of some long-past upheaval. It was the first of a rolling series of such hillocks, six or seven in all, stretching back into the gloom. Their rounded peaks reached to within a few feet of the water's ice-sheathed surface. Surely the creatures' home was among these mounds.

He was skirted round the base of the first hillock and caught a glimpse of something in its face which was apparently of his captors' construction. It was a hole, dark, mysterious, perhaps fifteen feet in diameter, and barring it were three great gray stakes, reaching from top to bottom. Behind the stakes, Ken got a jumbled impression of a body, large and sleek, of black streaked with white, that moved restlessly back and forth in the hole and occasionally seemed to lash out in anger. He wondered what it was. Before long, he knew.

The party of seal-creatures stopped before the second of the row of hillocks. In its face, too, was a hole—a well of blackness—but with

no stakes across it. He twisted his head back and saw the carcass of the killer whale he had slain being guided up to the entrance and shoved through. Then, from the upper rim of the hole, three stakes similar to the others he had seen slid down and barred it.

"Storehouses!" he muttered. "Storehouses, I'll bet anything. And killer whales are their food. They keep 'em in the holes until they're needed. But I'll swear it was a live whale I saw in the first one—and how in the dickens could they capture a mighty killer with their dinky spears and ropes?"

There he had to leave the question, for its answer implied greater intelligence in the creatures than he would admit.

Intelligence—in seals!

And now he was guided smoothly forward to the third hillock, where the leaders of the group glided through a V-shaped cleft in its face. His guards brought him along behind.

A wry smile twisted Kenneth Torrance's lips. To him, the cleft was more than an entranceway. To him it signified the beginning of the hopeless, lonely end of his life....

The cleft led into a corridor, and the corridor was softly illuminated with a peculiar light whose source he could not discover. It served to show him a passageway that was wide rather than tall, and gouged from the firm, clayey soil by blunt tools that had left uneven marks. Straight ahead it led, and, as they continued, the mysterious illumination brightened, until suddenly, rounding a turn, its source appeared.

Like will-o'-the-wisps, a score of arrows of light flashed softly into view down the corridor. They were of delicate green and orange and yellow, glowing and luminous, and hovering like humming birds between floor and ceiling. Ken looked at them in some alarm until his nearer approach showed him what they were, and then he exclaimed in amazement:

"Why—they're fish! Living electric bulbs!"

A school of slender, ten-inch fish they were, each one a radiant, shimmering, lacey-finned gem of orange or green or yellow. In concert they shot to the ceiling over the party of seal-creatures, who still swam impassively ahead, paying no attention to them, and from there scattered in quick darts in all directions, showering the cortege with washes of spectral luminosity. Then the corridor crooked again, and with one simultaneous movement they were gone. And the scene

that lay revealed before Kenneth Torrance took his breath from him.

In the passageway he had seen a score of the living jewels; now he beheld hundreds. He peered up at a shimmering sheet of brilliance, composed of hundreds of the slender refulgent fish, all swimming in slow rotation. Below them was a large cavern, which he guessed had been created by hollowing out one of the underwater hillocks. The sides were rounded, and pitted with holes that represented other passageways, showing dark against the luminosity from above. And streaming out from these dark holes of corridors came dozens of the seal-creatures, gathering in response to some unheard, unseen signal that had called them to witness the strange captive their fellows had brought in....

Ken's guards gripped him more firmly and he was guided forward and downward to the smooth black floor of soil.

Scores of large, placid eyes stared at him from the slowly undulating, brown-skinned bodies packed close about him. The sight was so weird, so beyond his imagination, that he laughed a little hysterically.

"Dreaming!" he said. "Dreaming! But what a dream!"

Silently, a space cleared in the center of the horde. His bonds were taken away, the guards released his arms and he righted himself and stood there on braced legs, the object of a concerted gaze.

This, the torpooner felt, was the crucial period. Something was about to be decided. If it looked bad he would make a wild—and of course, futile—break for freedom, and die quickly when they punctured his suit. But meanwhile he would stick things out. Anything might happen in that fantastic convocation.

There came a stir in the tiers of brown bodies. An aisle cleared, and down it a single seal-creature glided slowly towards Ken Torrance—undoubtedly the leader of the herd, ruler of the underwater labyrinth.

Gracefully the creature glided up to the lone human, and when only a foot away extended one of its long upper flippers so that its webbed edge rested on his sea-suit's casque. And its placid brown eyes hung close to the face-shield and gazed through inquisitively, intelligently! Intelligently! No longer did Kenneth Torrance doubt that. As he held absolutely motionless under the close-searching scrutiny, his brain rang with the conviction that this creature, this thing of blubbery body and long, webbed flipper-arms and legs—this brown-skinned denizen of the Arctic underseas was, with all its fellows, related to him, a man of the upper world.

Men they were; or, rather, blubber-men!

Previously he had marveled at something suggestively human-like in their appearance; now he recognized human intelligence in his observer's peering brown eyes and questing movements of the flipper over his head casque and suit. Warm red blood flowed in its blubber-sheathed body; an intelligent brain lay in the fat round head. And why not?

Whales, ages ago, were land mammals, animals that walked on the soil of the dim, early world. They had taken to the seas in quest of food, had stayed there and never returned; and Nature had guarded their bodies against the cold and great depths by giving them layer upon layer of oily blubber. The ancestors of these creatures before him might well have lived on the soil, walked and run as he did; then, when the ice came, taken to the sea and made a new home for themselves.

They had enticed the splendent light-fish into their caverns to give illumination. Intelligence almost human. A brain not as highly developed as man's, but a human brain!

Ken Torrance had been almost apathetic toward his eventual fate, but suddenly, now, a great hope came to him—and twin with it, on its

heels, came fear. If, or since, this creature inspecting him had an intelligent, human brain, in some way he might be able to correspond with it. He might be able to show that his real body was inside the sea-suit; that he had to have air; that he would die if he were kept underwater, that he could not survive as a prisoner. These creatures appeared to be friendly; seemed to wish him no harm. If he could show them that he was a man of the upper world, they might let him go.

If he could do it! He had to make known to the herd leader that he breathed air, and that he'd die if they didn't release him at once. On that depended life and death.

Ken trembled as he cast about for some way of putting over his idea, and then the plan came. Smiling through his face-shield at the brown eyes so close, he drew back slowly and took out a short steel crowbar from the belt at his waist. He bent over and made a line on the soft floor.

All eyes watched him; every creature held motionless, apparently interested, eager to understand. Under his suit-clad figure the crowbar traced a rude outline of a man in a sea-suit. The torpooner pointed to the drawing and then fingered his suit, repeating the gesture several times. Then he drew another figure in the soil, this

one intended to represent him without the sea-suit. It was not as bulky; the features were sharper and thinner. Ken pointed to the twin dots standing for eyes, then tapped his face-shield; he did this again and again.

For a moment the leader did not move; but then he slid forward and stared through the shield. Rapidly Ken opened and closed his eyes, and pointed again to the dots on the drawing's face.

"Eyes! Eyes!" he said excitedly, voicing the thought his brain was making. "Eyes—inside the suit! The suit's not me; I'm inside! Eyes!" He waited for a reaction, tense and strained. The blubber-man reached out one flipper-arm and took the steel bar from his hand.

A thrill ran through him as the creature dipped its body down and began to draw in the soil. Laboriously, crudely, he outlined another sea-suit, and on the circle representing the face-shield marked two dots—eyes.

"He's getting it!" Ken cried.

The blubber-man went on drawing. He sketched a second suit, similar in all respects, and looked up at the torpooner, inquiringly, it seemed.

Ken nodded rapidly. He tapped the drawings, then his suit; nodded again. "The idea's over!" he told himself. "Now I'll make a move towards that corridor to show them that I want to go, and if—"

But before he could stir, the leader of the blubber-men, with one quick gesture, summoned two creatures from the innermost circle. Swiftly they placed themselves alongside Kenneth Torrance, lifted him and bore him forward, right across the cavern to another of the passageway-entrances.

It was so sudden that for a moment Ken could not think clearly. What had happened? Were they releasing him? Or was he still to be kept a prisoner? No doubt the latter. And he had been so sure that he was communicating with the blubber-man's brain!

His lips pressed tight in a hard white line. It was a tough blow to take.

"Well, that's that," he said. "It was all imagination."

He did not know that his drawings had signified something to the leader of the herd—that each had mistaken the meaning of the other. Nor did he have any inkling of the greatest surprise of all that now lay just before him.

The surprise lay in another cavern.

A quick turn through a cleft-like entrance brought them into it. The room was only a fraction of the size of the central meeting place, and its light, from but several of the light-fish, was dim and vague, barely enabling Ken to see what looked like a pile of rocks in the chamber, heaping upwards. The ceiling was flat and strangely blurred, a rippling veil. As he wondered what caused this, his guards lifted him rapidly towards it, up alongside the rocks.

Not only towards it, but through it! His head-casque pierced through; rivulets of water gurgled off it—and he realized that the blurred veil he had seen was the top plane of the water, which only filled three-quarters of the cavern.

Surprise left him breathless. At first he could see nothing, could only feel that his shoulders were above water. Then he was pushed slowly upward until he rested almost completely above the surface. How did the cavern come to be but part-filled with water? he wondered. And was this dim emptiness around him air? Could he breathe it?

Then he was vaguely aware of a presence on the top of the rock heap. He sensed rather than heard a stir of movement. Then suddenly a ray of light stabbed through the darkness and impinged on his

head-casque—white, electric, man-made light!

And there came to his ears, muffled by the suit and distorted by echoes, a call that sounded like his own name!

"Ken! Is it you, Ken?"

Bewildered, he motioned the blinding light to one side. It turned upward and backward, and in its glare a face suddenly appeared out of the darkness.

"Good God!" Kenneth Torrance cried.

It was a pale, drawn face, stubbled with beard, and its eyes were wild.

It was the face of Chanley Beddoes, the lost second torpooner of the Narwhal.

Ken stared, his body rigid. Chan Beddoes! The dead brought back! So it at first seemed. And here, in a cavern of the blubber-men!

He pulled himself further up on the rock pile, unfastened the clasps on his helmet and took it off—for Beddoes wore none, and that meant the space was filled with breathable air.

"Chan!" he said. "And we were sure you were dead!"

A high-pitched, hysterical voice cried in answer!

"It's you, Ken! They got you too! Oh, but it's good to see you! It's been so lonely, so dark.... You are there, Ken? I'm not just dreaming again?"

Ken realized that the other's nerves were shot, and he replied gently:

"You're not dreaming, Chan. I'm here with you now. Steady. Take it easy. Lord, this air—it's pretty foul, but it smells good to me, and it'll save our units. How ever do they get it down here?" He asked the question in hope of steadying Beddoes; giving his mind something definite to occupy it.

A soft ripple sounded just then; looking round, Ken saw that his two guards had slipped back beneath the water, leaving them alone.

Chan Beddoes' helmet was off, but the rest of his body was still clad in a sea-suit. He half squatted on the rocks, his face raised and peering at the first torpooner fearfully, as if afraid he would disappear as suddenly as he had come. The beam of light came from a hand-flash held in his hand. Scattered around were pieces of

whitish meat—fish—and the air was sickening with its smell. Ten feet above was the chamber's domed ceiling, from which water kept dripping to the slimy rocks below.

"Air?" repeated Beddoes, stupidly. His mind was obviously affected. "They fetch it from the surface with seal-hide bags, and release it. They change it often. All over the caverns. They have to breathe, too. I think they sleep in rooms like this." His voice rose with hysteria. "Ken, they're seals and yet they're human! Human, down here! They have arms and legs and they breathe air, like whales—and they've kept me here for weeks, years—I don't know! They're devils! It's been so dark and cold and—and—" He began to cough painfully.

"I know," Ken told him sympathetically. "Steady, man. How did you get here? How did they catch you?"

Beddoes' eyes wandered. He sucked his lips.

"I can't remember," he said. "No. Yes! We left the Narwhal, both of us, chasing those killers. They broke up and we went after different ones, and I lost sight of you.

"I chased mine for a long time, and when I fired I only wounded him. He went like hell, and I after him. After half an hour I was

ready to give up; I couldn't get close enough. God! Ready to return! To the submarine! To life!"

His voice broke, and he paused until he was able to go on.

"Then I saw another shape ahead of the whale. A queer looking thing —one of these human seals, though I didn't know it then. It seemed to be fleeing from the killer, just as the killer was from me. There was something big and dark ahead—a shadow, I thought, and kept my eyes on the whale. And the next second my torpoon crashed and I was knocked cold.

"It's a deliberate scheme," he went on at a tangent. "The seal things get a killer chasing them and lead it towards the traps they've got in the sides of these hillocks. They dart in and the whale follows; then bars drop over the entrance and they've got the killer trapped. They eat them."

"But how does the blubber-man get out?" Ken asked.

Beddoes scowled. "Oh, they're clever enough! A passage runs off the trap, big enough for the seal thing, but not for a killer.... Well, my torp had gone into the trap and was stuck in one of the walls. When I came to I reversed my engines full, but I couldn't get free. The

impact had ruined my radio.

"Through the after peep-holes I could make out the killer in the trap with me, lashing around like mad. The bars over the entrance were wide-spaced enough to let the torp squeeze through—but I couldn't get loose.

"As I lay there, wondering what to do, I saw some more of those blubber-men in the corridor raising the bars. They had long spears and knives—and in ten minutes that killer was dead and the place black with its blood.

"Well, I thought I saw my chance. I got into my sea-suit, thinking I maybe could dig the torp free and escape before the damned fish caught me. I climbed out the port and was hacking at the mud bank with my crowbar when a rope slipped over my head and they had me."

Ken nodded. "They got me in the same way," he said.

"And gave you the once-over in the big room," Chan declared. "You'll get plenty more of that."

For most of the man's narrative his tone and manner had been sane

enough, but now again he broke out wildly.

"And I've been here for days! Weeks! And nothing but fish to eat, and whale meat, and pieces of ice brought for me to drink, and the darkness and the fish smell! God, it's driven me crazy! I can't stand it any longer, Ken, and I won't. I've got to get out right away or kill myself. I've got to!"

Ken gripped his shoulders and shook. "Steady!" he said sharply. "Get control over yourself!"

"Steady!" Beddoes gasped. "You don't know how long I've kept control! Waiting and hoping, for a chance. One little chance to escape!"

"Why haven't you tried before? Don't they leave you alone here?"

Chanley Beddoes laughed harshly. "Just because you can't see them, you think that? Hell, no! Put on your helmet. Look down—down under the water—and you'll see a guard at the entrance. There's always one there—with a spear. And every now and then he comes up, to see what I'm doing. But no matter; now that you're here we can make a break. You've still got your crowbar; they took mine away. I've only had my flash to work with."

In spite of his awful experience and intolerable predicament, Ken was getting drowsy. He had been through much; he had been short on sleep when he had started out. Nevertheless, he forced himself to consider their situation. Since the blubber-men had kept Chan Beddoes a prisoner, they would no doubt keep him one likewise. It did not mean immediate death from suffocation, for there was air of a kind here; and food was brought. But—imprisonment!

All around him was damp darkness; the rocks they lay on were jagged and slime coated all over and there were little pools of water here and there. Gloom; awful water beneath; slimy rocks to lie on; raw whale meat to eat; stench of rotting fish. Imprisonment! Weeks of this! Suddenly he felt deep admiration for Beddoes in having clung to sanity so long.

"Yes," he said slowly, "we've got to get out. But with that guard on duty.... What's your plan?"

The other coughed long, then began:

"It all depends on whether they've moved my torpoon from the trap where it stuck. You didn't see it anywhere? Well, it's got to be still in the trap, and we've got to get to it. It'll carry both of us. The whale that led me into the trap is dead, and we can finish prying the torp

loose with your crowbar."

Ken nodded. "But the guard?"

Chanley Beddoes said harshly: "I'm going to kill it!"

Ken looked at him. His pale, drawn face was contorted; his hands clenched and unclenched. He repeated:

"Yes, kill it! I've a score to settle with these devils, anyway. I'll take him unawares. One blow'll do it, if it's placed right. Then, down the corridor and to the trap. I think I remember the way."

Ken thought it out, and shook his head.

"What's the matter?" Beddoes asked.

"We'd better not," he said "Not yet. And never, if we can help it."

"Why not?" Beddoes cried in great surprise.

"Don't you see? They haven't really harmed us. They're friendly. Yes, they've kept you prisoner and they'll keep me, too—but probably they don't think that's any terrible hardship for us. And they don't realize how much we want to get free."

"What will we do then?" Beddoes broke in impatiently.

"When I see the leader again I've got to get it over that we want to be released. It's a better risk than killing this guard, anyway. They're disposed to be friendly; but if you killed one there'd be the devil to pay." Ken paused, and his eyes closed. He said wearily:

"But, I'm dog tired; no sleep for twenty hours. Let me sleep an hour or two; my head'll be much clearer and we'll talk it over."

Chanley Beddoes said nothing. Ken yawned and stretched his body as comfortably as he could on the slime-coated rocks. Dazed from the rush of amazing events his eyelids closed at once, and soon his breathing settled into a regular beat.

Perhaps half an hour later, a shape moved in the dank gloom of the underwater cavern. The top plane of water rippled softly; little wavelets eddied against the rocks and whispered as the shape slipped down underneath. Then there was silence, no movement; and the water again calmed into a black sheet, smooth as glass. For minutes it stayed so, while Ken's deep, regular breathing stirred the air.

Then suddenly the water's calm was broken. Through its rippling waves the shape reappeared, rivulets streaming from it. Quickly

hauling itself up on the rocks, it clambered towards the sleeper. For a moment it paused; then its helmet swung back, revealing Chan's tense, pale face. A hand reached out and gripped the sleeper's arm. A voice called:

"Ken! Wake up! Hurry!"

Even as the words reverberated in the close bowl, the black mirror of water stirred once more. Something pierced through and drifted idly on the surface. It was a large brown-skinned shape, apparently lifeless.

"Ken!" called Chan anxiously again.

The first torpooner stirred. Out of the depths of slumber he mumbled:

"What's the matter?"

"We've got to shove off right now! Quick! Put on your helmet!"

Kenneth Torrance sat up and peered through half-open eyes. He saw before him the face of Chanley Beddoes, wild and excited. In one hand he held the steel crowbar. And behind, on the surface of the water, floated the motionless body of a blubber-man, its head beaten

in, streamers of red trailing from it.

Ken said sharply:

"You killed him? After what I told you? You fool!"

"Yes, I killed him!" Beddoes answered brazenly. "What of it?"

Ken said nothing for a moment. Bitter reproach trembled on his tongue, but he did not speak the words, for Chan's mind was all too clearly on the thin line this side of insanity. He only said:

"Well, you've forced the issue, and we've got to leave immediately. It may mean our death, but let's forget it. Now—how much of your air-units is left?"

"About two hours. I lost a lot through a leak."

Ken took half of his own store of the little cells from his helmet. "I'll share mine. That'll give us both sixteen hours all told—in case we don't find your torpoon. You're sure they killed the whale in that trap? And you know the way?"

"I think so," said Beddoes excitedly. "You follow me."

"All right. On helmets, then."

The clasps were fastened down, cutting them off from spoken communication with each other. Ken took the hand-flash and crowbar and stuck them in his own belt, and both clumsy, grotesque figures splashed into the water, vanished beneath its surface and ducked under the shadowy body of the dead blubber-man.

Below, in the dim quarter-light, Ken peered out of the entrance to the cell chamber. The corridor seemed safe, there being only the distant colored streaks of light-fish, and occasionally even these disappeared, leaving heaped shadows in the darkened water. He nodded to Beddoes and boldly they began their flight.

Their progress was nerve-rackingly slow, in spite of their utmost exertions. The water that retarded them at times contained unsuspected currents that destroyed their equilibrium and sent them stroking madly with both hands to regain it. Far different, this, than the swift, effortless swimming of the blubber-men. Their weighted feet stumbled often on the floor of the passage, and several times they lost balance and fell towards the sides. Each time that this happened Ken was struck with the fear of ripping the fabric of his sea-suit. And all the time there was the apprehension of imminent discovery.

At last he saw Beddoes wave an arm and enter a dim cleft a few feet ahead in the left side of the wall. In turn he floundered through—and just in time. From around a bend in the corridor shortly ahead there came two blubber-men. In only a few seconds they would pass the niche the two humans had entered. Crowbar ready, Ken flattened himself against the sidewall, pulling his companion back with him. They waited.

The seal-men passed by—two sleek, blubbery shapes, flipper-arms and legs weaving gracefully, bodies rolling slightly, eyes apparently directed ahead. Close!

They had escaped that time, but there was a disturbing thought in Ken's mind and in Beddoes' too, perhaps—as they resumed their slow-motion flight down the second corridor. "What if those two were going to visit us in the cell-chamber? Once they see the dead guard, hell sure will start to pop!"

For a period that seemed to be measured in hours they fought their way forward through the retarding pressure of the water. The corridor described a long curve. They were on the last stretch—and still no pursuit!

"If only the torp's there!" Ken kept exclaiming in his thoughts. "Just

that!"

"If only the torp's there!..." Had they come the right way? He had to trust that to the memory of Beddoes. Beddoes, whose mind had clearly been affected by his seven-day nightmare.... He shook his head. He dared not doubt.

They increased their pace a little. Imagination stimulated their weary muscles. The Narwhal! Men of their own kind! Sun and air! Life again! Ken could have shouted when he saw his partner stop and gesture excitedly before a dark spot in the wall. It could be nothing but the entrance to a trap.

He pressed forward, flicking on his flash and making sure by the water-waved beam it threw. But Beddoes was attending to some sight down the corridor; and suddenly he pointed in fright. The first torpooner looked in the indicated direction and saw what was meant.

Approaching was a wave of menacing brown-skinned bodies, streaming swiftly through the passage several abreast. Their escape had been discovered. The blubber-men were coming.

At once Ken acted, pushing Chan into the narrow opening and scrambling after himself. They wormed along for several feet, till

they emerged in a large dark chamber at the far end of which was a big circular entrance barred by three great pale stakes. They were certainly in a whale trap.

Rapidly Ken played his flash around, looking for the torp, but it was nowhere visible. To one side was an out-jutting rock with a niche beneath it. It was a promising place and he stumbled his way there, followed by the other.

It was then that a most peculiar feeling came over him, a feeling that was instantly a surge of panic. Something else was in the trap! His flash arced around and up, and what lay revealed in its ray caused cold shivers to run down the backs of the two men.

Above them, just over the three-toothed outer entrance, hung a black, sleek body, white-striped. Head-on it was, and motionless, eyeing them. A killer whale—alive!—and poised for a lunge!

It barred the way to the outer entrance. They could not retrace their steps; already the round brown head of a blubber-men showed in the inner entrance. They were trapped, front and rear, and confronted by the deadliest animal in the sea.

A second they watched it, frozen immobile; then the whale's great

body curved and its flukes went up, and by purest instinct the men dove for the niche at their feet. Head to head, they arrived in it, and just in time, for the great jaws of the killer barely missed their snap.

As the monster curved past, the swirling water of its passage nearly dislodged the torpooners, and they made haste to jam themselves into the crevice as tightly as they dared for the safety of their suits.

The whale whipped around in a narrow circle and returned. Its pointed teeth gleamed as it snapped shut its jaws and muzzled its hard, wicked snout into Ken's ribs. Again it circled and streaked for the niche; and, helpless, Kenneth Torrance lay there as the beast tried to slide its head into it. He felt more of the terrifying nuzzling of the snout. But the creature could not dislodge him.

"Can't bring his teeth to bear," he muttered with a certain relief. "Niche isn't high enough. We're safe, I guess, for a couple of minutes. Unless the blubber-men come in and kill him like they did the one Chan followed last week."

For several minutes the sea-beast continued its frantic attempt to reach the two humans, and then its attacks became desultory. During one respite Ken managed to get up his flashlight and send its beam out over the floor—and what he discovered was the essence of irony.

Directly opposite, on the floor by the wall, lay a familiar long slim shape, its stern tipped by rudder-planes and propeller, its metal flanks gleaming in the white ray. The torpoon. And utterly useless—a heartbreaking jest—unless they could reach it.

But a slight hope grew in the men at its discovery. They had come to the right trap, after all. Probably the whale had dislodged the shell from the wall with fluke-blows—possibly, too, the blows had sprung its seams and opened the engine-compartment to water....

Ken occupied himself with the problem of how to get to it. It held their only hope. But with all his racking his brains he could think of no way but to make a rush for it. If he could get inside, the torp, lying flat on the ground, would be reasonably safe from the killer until he could get it running.

Through the face-shields, he met his companion's eyes. The same decision had come to both.

There was a tiny space of muddy floor between them. Kent doused it with light from the flash. In the mud, with a forefinger he slowly traced these words one at a time, rubbing each one out to make room for the next:

"I get torp. Kill whale with gun. Only way. I go. I senior. If fail, you try."

He looked at the other inquiringly. Vigorously, Chanley Beddoes shook his head.

He smoothed over the last word Ken had marked and in its place, in the same fashion, began:

"No. Draw lots. Only fair."

Yes, it was fair, and Ken knew it. He wrote:

"How?"

The second torpooner scrabbled around with his fingers. Presently he unearthed something, and apparently satisfied showed them to Ken. They were two pebbles, of different sizes. Beddoes pointed to the larger. He wrote:

"Large makes attempt."

Again Ken nodded. He marked:

"Other try keep killer's attention."

From time to time a long sleek body slid down to them and edged back and forth, striving its best to dislodge them with its blunt shout. After each failure it would return to a position just over the outer entrance. At the proper moment Chanley Beddoes jumbled the pebbles in his cupped hands and laid two fists down on the pad.

Unhesitatingly, Ken placed a finger on the left one.

Beddoes turned and opened it. It was the smaller pebble.

Close as was his face-shield to Beddoes', Ken could not see what his reaction was. Ken stretched forth his hand and clumsily touched his companion's shoulder.

"Good hunting!" he said; but Chan never heard that....

The marked man peered out into the trap. The killer was circling slowly. In the escape hole, the faces of three or four blubber-men were dimly visible. They seemed to be watching with interest.

There came a good moment when the killer paused at the three bars of its cell, its head turned in exactly the opposite direction from the two torpooners. Beddoes seized the opportunity at once. Almost before Ken knew it, he had rolled out of the niche.

Quickly he worked to his feet and started pushing for his goal. The whale had not seen him. Arms and legs straining, he floundered slowly ahead. He nearly made it.

But the killer, restlessly turning, saw him—and Kenneth Torrance winced and cried out.

The black monster struck. With horrible, beautiful grace it curved down. Its snout caught Chanley Beddoes square in the side and butted him up and around, and both disappeared in a swirl of water into the inky shadows of the trap's ceiling.

Ken closed his eyes. He knew what was happening. He could not move. But it came to him, as he lay there sick with horror, that he would never have a better chance than now, while the killer was occupied.

Recklessly he forced himself out of the niche. Up above there was commotion, a whirlpool of churning water. The current helped him: he got caught in it and was swept sprawling right over to the torpoon's side.

He clutched at the port, expecting each instant the tear of monster fangs; but he made the interior and clicked shut the port. No matter

the water that had come into the main compartment with his entrance. He pulled the starter over, and heard the familiar drone of electric engines, safe inside their water-tight division. He felt no relief at this. There was only the same sick horror.

He raised the torpoon a little. There was one thing to do. Perhaps it was mad to try to destroy that killer whale in so narrow a space, but he was going to attempt it. It would not be so bad to join Chan, if he failed....

A terrific blow struck the stern of the torpoon and spun it around dizzily. Ken made out the killer lifting its flukes for a second blow. Quickly he sped the torp ahead, and turned as best he could. Flashing on his powerful bow-beam, he found the killer to his left, slightly above. Carefully he maneuvered into firing position: then coldly, with deadly accuracy, he centered the sights of his nitro-shell gun on the vital spot behind the eyes. He pressed the trigger: again, and yet again. The projectiles hurtled out.

The monster started; its beady eyes settled on the torpoon; with a lunge it darted forward, jaws gaping wide. And as it came another shell sped true into the tooth-rimmed mouth.

It halted then, and doubled in the water. Shock after shock shook the

torpoon as the shells exploded in the whale. For a little while the sea-beast flurried, and once or twice the torp shivered from chance fluke-blows. But then at last came peace. The body rolled over, showing its white belly, and drifted towards the trap's ceiling....

The brown-skinned heads had disappeared from the inner entrance. Kenneth Torrance glanced in that direction for a last time, then looked sadly around.

"So long, Chan," he murmured. "So long."

The torpoon squeezed through the bars of the outer entrance and sped forth into the open sea.

So it was that, perhaps an hour later, the light-beams of the whaling submarine Narwhal, doggedly scouring the region where last her first torpooner had been heard from, fell across a slim shape of steel that was beating its way at full speed through the foggy murk of the Arctic sea.

Right up to the Narwhal she came, swerving at the last moment and hovering outside the starboard torpoon catapult; while, aboard the submarine, an officer whose voice quivered with excitement roused Captain Henry Streight from his bunk, and the men off duty gathered

around the inner catapult entrance-port.

Quickly the outer port swung open. And the lone torpoon slid in—slid home.

129 The Space Rover by Edwin K Sloat

Young Winford heads a desperate escape from the prison mines of Mercury.

Aproximate word count: 9,000

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Evan Winford leaned wearily against the controls of the little space sphere, and stared out of the window at the planet, Mercury, which lay a million miles sunward. Fail now? He gritted his teeth. No! He would wrench victory from Fate after all, even though at this moment mine guards must be searching the nearby mountains, for him and his companions, and a warning was being broadcast to all the planets and space ships to watch the little prison tender ship, the one that was used to transfer prisoners from liners out in space to Mercury and its Interplanetary Council prison mines to which all who were sentenced came on one-way tickets only. This was the first time, Winford reflected grimly, that the sphere had ever carried outbound passengers.

A long, quavering wail sounded from the hold below. Winford scowled. That fellow, Agar, again. Too bad, for he was unquestionably an engineering genius and thoroughly dependable when he didn't get one of his spells and imagine he was a godo-dog on the red steppes of his native Mars. A little rest and gentle treatment would unquestionably work wonders. Again the wail, followed this time by a series of growls.

Winford slid open the door that separated the control nest from the hold of the little prison tender ship. The other five men had withdrawn to the other side of the cabin and were watching listlessly the big, ragged, barrel-chested Martian crouching on all fours against the side of the cabin and ferociously baring his teeth.

"What's the matter down there?" called Winford sharply.

Six pairs of eyes looked up at him. Agar forgot he was a dog and stared with the rest. They were an unkempt, ragged lot with unshaven faces and the dirty, white canvas uniforms of mine prisoners. The group was composed of four Martians and two Venusians.

"Let's go back," growled Nizzo, whose squat, powerful body and long arms bespoke his Venus ancestry. "It's death out here. No food.

No water, excepting the emergency ration you have up there in the box. That will scarcely last till we can reach Mercury again. Now you tell us that the fuel is nearly exhausted. Let's go back. I say! We don't want to swing about the Sun in this as our tomb for all eternity. At least we eat and drink at the mines, even though the whips of the drivers hurry us on to an early death."

"You're crazy, Nizzo," harshly retorted Winford. "You know what they do when escaped prisoners are brought back, or come of their own free will. The Universe knows nothing of the caged saurians in the warden's gardens, nor of the incorrigible prisoners that go to feed them. But I know—we all of us know. Far better to remain out here and die whole, than to be devoured alive by a slobbering horror."

A heated argument ensued among the men below. Presently Nizzo looked up again.

"But you have no plan," he shouted at the Earthman. "We have followed you blindly so far, and here we are off the traffic lanes. Our only hope of being picked up now is one of space patrol ships. And short shrift may we expect from them!"

Winford scowled impatiently.

"Listen, men," he began. "This is a desperate venture, I know, and I picked every one of you carefully. You are not common scum of the prison mines. Every man of you can be depended upon to put through a daring escape of this nature. Every man of you is an innocent victim of the rotten politicians and corrupt officials that now hold sway in the Three Planets. Take Jarl there, for example." He indicated a big, patient, resigned Martian. "He is under life sentence in the penal mines simply because his brother-in-law wanted his lands and wealth. As for myself, I had a sister who suffered the misfortune of being seen and coveted by Silas Teutoberg, a member of the Earth Council...."

He choked at the thought, his pale face rigid with emotion. Those below saw the flash of his lambent eyes. He controlled himself with an effort, and continued:

"I have said nothing of any plan beyond that of making our escape in this prison tender off Mercury, but I had a plan behind that. It is true that we seem to be off the regular traffic lanes, but space liners between Venus and Earth just now are cutting in quite close to Mercury, due to the position of the three planets in their orbits. This formed the basis of the whole venture.

"During the three interplanetary days we have floated out here, I

have repeatedly scanned the Void, thinking every minute we would sight a craft we could reach. But so far luck has been against us. All I ask is that you do not allow yourselves to be discouraged, for sooner or later we'll get a break."

A chorus of enthusiastic approval answered him. Winford sighed with relief, then stared abruptly through the window and gave a shout. The others below swarmed up the ladder and crowded into the tiny control nest. Winford pointed.

Far off against the black depths of space toward Venus gleamed the tiny, elliptical, silvery hull of a ship, bearing slightly toward them. Although sharply outlined, the craft was hundreds of miles away as the men realized. Winford checked it swiftly through the telescope distance calculator, determined its speed, and rapidly formed his plan.

"There are plenty of space suits in the lockers," he said tersely. "Get into them. Stand by the air-lock. You, Jarl, get into the lock and take a cable with an electro-magnet anchor. Lash yourself to it. When I give the signal by blinking the lights in the lock, open the outer door and leap across to the other ship. I know you risk death from their rays, but it is our only chance. Clamp the anchor against the side of the ship and locate the emergency entrance lock."

"Suppose there is none?" interrupted Jarl stoically.

"Chances are there will be. The interplanetary treaties call for them on most ships since those five hundred passengers perished trying vainly to enter a liner after their own ship was smashed by a meteor out near Jupiter several years ago. Anyway, it's our only chance. You, Nizzo and Ragna, enter the air-lock with Jarl so that if he misses, you can pull him back. Now hurry. I'll have to maneuver this tub around so that I can approach the ship, if possible, without being noticed."

The others scuttled back down the ladder, leaving Winford to rapidly work out his final calculations. The ship, traveling at a rate of six thousand miles an hour, would miss their little sphere by about a hundred miles. The ship was probably a slow speed freighter, a guess that was supported by the lack of port-holes in the hull.

It was a ticklish task that Winford faced. He could either approach the freighter from against the sun, trusting that the navigation officer on duty would fail to notice the dark blot of the little tender against the blinding glare. Or he could get on the far side of the ship and approach it, concealed by its black shadow. He decided on the latter plan.

The freighter was coming up fast. Winford eased the accelerator open, and moved off at right angles to its line of progress to place it between him and the sun. If the officer in charge of the freighter should see the tiny dot go shooting presently across his path, he would doubtless mistake it for a wandering meteor. As soon as he crossed the path of the big ship, Winford slowly turned his little craft toward the protecting shadow of his prospective victim, and picked up speed as quickly as he dared until the little tender was traveling at the same speed as the freighter. Lucky it was for him that the big craft was not a mail liner, for if it had been, the little ball could never have gained speed enough to equal it.

The shadow of the freighter presently enveloped the little ship, and the two hung side by side. Winford eased the tender in toward the big craft, fully realizing that the meteor warning dial in the control room of the freighter would hint at his presence by its pronounced fluctuation. But there was no help for it; he could only take the chance that the navigator in charge would not investigate. Winford peered up anxiously at the windows of the control room. Apparently the little craft had not yet been discovered.

Less than a hundred yards now separated the two craft. Winford flashed his signal to the air-lock. A moment later a dark blob that shut off the light of the stars in depths below floated across the gap

from the tender to the freighter. The electric meter on the control board registered a sudden fluctuation as the electro-magnet anchor attached itself to the hull of the big ship.

Winford snapped off the propulsion beams, seized two ray pistols that lay on the chart table, and ducked down the ladder. His companions were standing before the inner door of the air-lock in their bulging space suits, awaiting his order to leave the tender. He quickly got into a suit, clamped on the helmet and screwed tight the connections. Then he opened the door of the air-lock and motioned the others into it, following the last man in.

Nizzo and Ragna were waiting there, and as the inner door closed, automatically opening the outer door, they pointed to the cable stretching away across forty yards of empty space to the side of the big freighter. Winford could make out faintly the form of Jarl, who was clambering cautiously up the bulging side of the ship on hands and knees, seeking the emergency air-lock. Winford beckoned to the others to follow, and leaped out into space along the cable.

It was a terrifying experience, for no matter how often a man made such a trip, there was always the primitive fear of falling into those millions upon millions of miles of space below where the stars gleamed, red, green, white and blue in the cold depths. Yet a man

had no weight. He merely pulled himself along the cable, which kept him from getting lost.

He reached the bulging side of the hull and continued upward on hands and knees, now held to it by its own attraction for his body. The others followed, and scattered out seeking the emergency entrance lock.

At the end of an hour they were in despair. There was no emergency entrance lock! Winford bitterly resigned himself to their fate. This was the end of their daring attempt. He must go forward now to the control room windows and attract the attention of the navigating officer. It meant surrender and subsequent death in the teeth of the caged saurians, but if they remained much longer where they were they would freeze to death anyway, for the batteries that warmed their suits were running down under the continued strain, and when they ceased to function, the deadly cold of interstellar space would claim them. He managed to make known his intentions to the others and was starting forward when Fate took a hand.

The prison tender ship, which was still floating at the end of its cable at the side of the freighter, relinquished itself to the play of the forces that rule the measureless void and began to set up an orbit of its own about the bigger ship. It came to the end of its tether and swung

gently against the hull of the freighter, sending a violent vibration through it; then it rebounded and struck with another crash which was utterly soundless to the stranded men on the outside of the hull, who, nevertheless, felt the vibration plainly.

Winford halted abruptly. The crew inside the ship would investigate. Fate was offering the desperate men on the outside another chance. He turned and beckoned to the others and hurried aft toward the regular air-lock, which was operated only from inside the ship. Hastily he placed the men about the outer door. Then they waited.

Five minutes later it opened, and two men in space suits crawled out. Jarl captured the first man single-handed, and Nizzo and Ragna, with perfect teamwork, overpowered the second before he realized what was taking place. Within a minute the men crowded into the air-lock, and shut the outer portal. Automatically, the inner door slid open.

Winford stepped out into the passageway with his ray pistols, covering the half dozen members of the crew who gaped at the intruders in speechless astonishment. One man recovered his wits and started to run. Winford's pistol stabbed a ray after him, and he collapsed. The other members of the crew silently raised their hands in surrender and were herded into a nearby stateroom and locked in, including the two in space suits who had been captured on the hull

outside.

"Overpower and imprison the crew at once," Winford ordered, as he emerged from his space suit. "Jarl, you take charge, and work through the ship. Miss no one. Bind them, imprison them, if you can, and if you must, use sterner measures. Remember you are now pirates, and if we don't capture this ship, the ship will capture us. I'll go ahead alone to the control room and introduce myself to the officers there. When you have cleaned things up, join me."

Captain Robers was peering out through the window at the dark blob of the space tender near the rear of the big freighter when the door of the control room opened softly and Winford slipped inside with leveled ray pistols. The two navigation officers on duty gasped in astonishment. Captain Robers whirled around. His momentary amazement gave way to wrath.

"Who the devil are you, and what do you want?" he bellowed.

Winford's eyes blazed coldly. The ray pistols in his hands twitched meaningly.

"Civility first, Captain. Hands off those instruments, gentlemen. Stand up. Face the windows. Thank you."

With catlike quickness Winford leaped behind the chart table. A glance showed that the ship was holding to its course with unchecked speed. Only the meteor detector fluctuated from the presence of the little space ship outside. No worry there. Disintegrator rays would soon dissolve it, and with it the last visible evidence of their presence on the ship.

"Now, Captain, you may turn about facing me. I want a little information."

"You'll sniff gas for this!" snarled the officer. "This is piracy pure and simple. Who are you, anyway?"

Winford smiled ironically. Captain Robers' eyes widened suddenly and he paled slightly, as he recognized the dirty white uniform.

"The mines of Mercury!" he ejaculated. "We received a heliogram not twenty-four hours ago warning us of your escape. You're Evan Winford of Earth!"

Winford bowed slightly.

"At your service, Captain. My six companions are even now trussing up the remainder of your crew down below. Don't choke, Captain.

You are in no danger, unless you make it yourself. I desire a little information about the Universe. You see I have been out of touch for the last three years during my enforced sojourn on Mercury."

Captain Robers glared at Winford.

"Tell me, Captain, who are you, and what is this craft?"

The officer thrust out his chin stubbornly, then glanced at the pistol covering him and changed his mind.

"Captain Robers. The freighter is the *Golden Fleece*."

"Port?"

"New York. I am homeward bound with a cargo from Ceres of the Asteroids."

Winford's eyes gleamed momentarily.

"Iridium, eh?"

Captain Robers declined to answer. The valuable metal, which was found mostly in abundance among the Asteroids and particularly on Ceres, had proved the bait that lured pirates in flocks from all parts

of the Universe to prey on the freighters that carried it, usually under heavy guard. The *Golden Fleece* had obviously been trying to slip through under the camouflage of an ordinary tramp freighter when Winford and his followers boarded her. Robers saw no reason for trying to lie about Ceres, since Winford would discover it later when he examined the log. Winford, however, did not press the question about the cargo.

"Who is the owner, Captain?"

"The Interstellar Transportation Company, New York, Silas Teutoberg, president."

Winford leaped to his feet.

"Repeat that name, Captain," he ordered harshly.

"Silas Teutoberg," sullenly complied the officer. "But don't be so excited. He has already resigned."

"Why?"

A crafty light appeared in the captain's eyes. He sensed a slight advantage in retaining this knowledge himself.

"I decline to answer," he stated.

The lambent flames leaped ominously in Winford's eyes. He toyed with the ray pistol expressively, then glanced up at a sudden interruption. The control room door had opened, admitting Jarl and Ragna.

"The crew is all accounted for," announced Jarl. "We imprisoned a hundred men and have control."

"Very good, Jarl," replied Winford calmly. "Ragna, take these two navigating officers down and lock them up with the rest. Jarl, you remain here. I have a little task for you."

"Awah," replied Jarl, using the Martian term for "very good, sir."

"Captain Robers here is going to strip off his clothing and pass out through the air-lock into space." Winford spoke each word with cold precision.

The officer jerked up his head in sudden terror. He had once witnessed the modern equivalent for the ancient piratical sentence of walking the plank and the vivid memory rose before him. He saw again the nude man cowering inside the air-lock as the inner door

shut, the wafting out into interstellar space of his struggling body as the atmosphere inside the lock rushed out of the outer opening door, and the fatal bloating of the body from the sudden pressure from within. The horror of it unlocked the officer's tongue.

"I'll answer, I'll answer!" he cried. "What do you want to know?"

"Tell me why Silas Teutoberg is resigning as president of the Interstellar Transportation Company."

In the momentary silence that followed, Jarl's eyes narrowed with sudden intensity. His interest escaped Winford, who was watching Robers closely. The officer gulped with relief.

"Teutoberg has been named governor of the new emigration colonies the United States is establishing on Ganymede," he explained hurriedly. "The Earth Council, which recently took over the most fertile provinces on the third moon of Jupiter, with the full approval of the Interplanetary Council, has named him for the post. The position is nearly the same as that of an absolute monarch. But he could not hold a government post and retain his executive position with the Interstellar people, so he resigned."

Winford eyed him skeptically. Captain Robers, now greatly agitated,

gestured frantically toward the chart table.

"I am telling you the truth!" he assured Winford fervently. "You'll find somewhere on the table a copy of the Heliogram News which tells of his departure from New York less than twelve hours ago in a specially chartered liner with his staff and friends for New Chicago, on Ganymede. It also tells of his approaching marriage to Princess Irkeen, daughter of King Donossus, a political marriage that will assure Teutoberg's position with the natives."

"Poor girl," muttered Winford under his breath, searching among the loose papers on the chart table for the copy of the news which was received every twelve hours by automatic helioprinter from New York millions of miles away. He read the article about Teutoberg through and laid aside the paper. Turning to the charts he jotted down a few hasty calculations, and stepped to the controls where he set a new course for the "iron mike" of the space freighter to follow.

"Captain Robers, I have changed my mind about having you go out into space from the air-lock," he announced, turning again to the anxious officer. "We will hold you prisoner with your men and later on will set you down on one of Jupiter's smaller satellites—Callisto, if possible, since the living conditions there are quite satisfactory. Word will be sent to Mars of where you can be found. All of your

crew, excepting those who wish to sign on with me, will be freed with you. I and my six companions are hardly enough to operate such a craft as this. Incidentally, we are appropriating the *Golden Fleece* and its cargo. If the Interstellar people object, they may present the bill to Silas Teutoberg, and he can deduct it from the income my property yields him."

Captain Robers glanced up curiously at the harsh bitterness that crept into Winford's voice. Then his glance shifted to Jarl, and he was amazed to see the malevolent expression that appeared on the Martian's face as he listened to Winford's words. The moment passed, and Jarl silently escorted the officers below to be locked up with the rest of his crew.

Three weeks later, Earth time, the *Golden Fleece* slipped into the atmosphere of Callisto, the fourth satellite of mighty Jupiter, which swung in its orbit a million and a quarter miles from the great planet. Far off to the west, separated by two million miles of empty space, floated Ganymede, the third satellite, on which the people of the United States were now gaining a foothold with their newly planted colonies.

The big freighter, under the engineering genius of Agar, had made a marvelously speedy journey from its original position just outside

the orbit of Mercury to this point nearly four hundred and fifty million miles away from the little planet. Winford studied the ground below. He was only partly acquainted with the topography of Callisto and wanted to be sure to pick a spot where Captain Robers and his men could be certain of surviving until help arrived. His eye picked out a satisfactory spot close beside the Gnan River in one of the stunted conifer forests of the planet. Swiftly he dropped the big freighter until it hovered but a few yards above the ground.

A freight port-hole was opened, and Captain Robers, accompanied by half his crew, prepared to descend. They were all bundled in heavy garments, for the temperature of Callisto, never high, frequently drops to sub-zero readings. Winford stood at the port and watched the men climb down the rope ladder to the ground below.

Robers was last to go. He faced Winford bitterly, for this escaped lifer from Mercury had stolen not only his ship, but half his crew as well, and the prospect of a liberal share of the rich iridium cargo in the hold.

"You'll regret this day!" snarled the captain. "I'll be in the front row of spectators when you sniff the death gas in the glass execution cage on Mars. Hundreds have tried this sort of thing before you, and every man of them has come finally to the cage."

"You're only delaying us, Captain Robers," replied Winford coldly. "I am in a hurry to be on my way. Kindly move down the ladder and join your men. Your hand weapons and food supplies will be dropped by parachute as we leave. I might add that in a short time I expect to be in a position to broadcast an S O S message for you which should bring rescue ships here to Callisto for you. Good-by."

He turned away, leaving the officer to descend the ladder in baffled fury to the ground below, where his men huddled together in the unfamiliar cold, and stared half fearful at the far-away sun glowing like a yellow arc-light in the depths of space half a billion miles away.

When the rising ship reached the thousand-foot level, the weapons and food were dropped by parachute, and the port-hole closed and locked. Winford hurried forward to the control room where the two navigators, who had signed with him for a hundred and twentieth share of the iridium each, were already pointing the nose of the ship up through the purple heavens toward Ganymede.

"Open her up! Use the emergency propulsion beams!" ordered Winford. "We are overdue now for my tryst with this new governor at New Chicago!"

The officers gazed at him in awe, wondering what desperate thing he planned at the new colonial capital.

Winford was poring over the maps of New Chicago six hours later in the chart room when one of the navigation officers touched him on the shoulder.

"Battle sphere rapidly overhauling us from sunward, sir," said the man. "Approaching us against the glare of sunlight until it was so close when we discovered it that escape is now impossible. I'd say it is one of the new 4-Q heavies of the Interplanetary Council patrol fleet."

Winford hurried to the telescope. As his anxious eye took in the spherical outline of the battle craft, showing as a silvery crescent to the rear and starboard of them, he recognized it as one of the heavily armored spheres of the Interplanetary Council's fleet with the new long range K-ray disintegrator guns.

Winford seized a telescope speed calculator. The sphere was coming up far too rapidly to permit the *Golden Fleece* to pick up speed soon enough to escape—although he was confident the freighter could do it now, since Agar had changed its propulsion machinery.

Perhaps the commander of the battle sphere was merely curious about the *Golden Fleece* since it appeared to be an ordinary tramp freighter with no distinguishing emblems or other identification, and was coming close to give her a better look. Or perhaps he was hurrying to some destination and his nearness to the *Golden Fleece* was merely accidental.

Whatever the cause, there remained but one thing to do, and that was to keep the freighter on its course as though nothing out of the ordinary was taking place. Winford turned to the communication board and cut in the universal radio wave. The instrument was silent. He sighed. At least the commander of the battle sphere was not trying to communicate with him.

Winford turned back to the window again. The sphere was quite close now, and its speed was dropping rapidly. Suddenly the radio loud-speaker hummed to life.

"Ahoy there, aboard the freighter," sounded a stern, determined voice. "This is the Interplanetary Council battle sphere, *Eagle*, nearing you. We are coming aboard you to investigate. Make ready your air-lock to receive us. Attempt nothing hostile. Hundred-kilowatt ray guns are trained on you."

Winford cut in the microphone and answered with the customary "O. K." reply; then he turned to the two white-faced navigators.

"Carry on as usual," he said grimly. "Perhaps we can fool them once they are aboard."

Then he turned to the phone connecting with the crew's quarters. He hurriedly explained the situation to Jarl and instructed him to receive the boarding party at the air-lock.

The big battle sphere was drawing close alongside. Magnet grapnels shot across the narrow space between the two craft and gripped the side of the freighter, followed by the cable bridge along which the boarding party presently came wavering their way to the air-lock of the freighter.

Winford counted fifty men, then turned away dejectedly. This was no ordinary inspection party, but a prize crew coming aboard. He sat down wearily. Just as victory seemed almost within his grasp—had been actually in his hand when he had started to Ganymede—this battle sphere popped up out of nowhere like an inescapable doom to strike him and his companions down. He gritted his teeth. Some way, somehow he would still win out. He and his fellows had come too far to be cheated of liberty now.

The door of the control room opened, and a smart young officer in gold and gray of the Interplanetary Council Marine service entered, accompanied by three privates with drawn pistols who took their positions near the door. Winford noted the clean-cut lines and fresh features of the officer and felt that under different circumstances he would like to know him.

"I am Lieutenant Commander 6666-A," the officer introduced himself, using the designation the Interplanetary Council required of all their fighting men. "You are Evan Winford, are you not?"

Winford nodded.

"You nearly got away with it, Winford," complimented the officer with a boyish grin. "I almost admire you for it. But you made at least one fatal error."

"What was that?" asked Winford curiously.

"When you put Captain Robers and his men off this ship they smuggled out with them a hand-operated helio set. Each man carried a part. Within an hour after you left they had it assembled and were cranking out S O S signals. We happened to be but a million miles off Callisto and picked up their message. At once our commander

decided to start out and rope in the *Golden Fleece* before you did any further damage. And here we are."

Winford cursed himself under his breath. Fool that he had been not to have had the men and their baggage searched more carefully before he allowed them to leave the freighter. Nizzo was responsible for that. He should be—but it was too late now. No use crying over spilled milk. He forced a grin and shrugged.

"'The best laid plans of mice and men—'" he quoted philosophically. "I hope the entire blame for this wild venture is put on my shoulders where it belongs when we are brought to trial. These two navigators here and the rest of the men are in no way responsible. I forced every man of them under pain of death to join me."

The young officer shook his head and smiled.

"Not a chance of that, Winford. You'll all stand trial alike, and you know it. You are rather a strange sort of pirate, it seems to me, to offer yourself as a sacrifice for your men. I'd say you are too tender-hearted for buccaneering in the Void."

"If I had succeeded in reaching New Chicago, you might have gained a different impression of me," retorted Winford, his lambent

eyes flaming at the thought. "I have sworn to kill Silas Teutoberg, the new governor of Ganymede, because he sent me to die in the mines of Mercury for a crime I never committed."

The young officer laughed.

"You can set your mind at rest about him, Winford. He was due at New Chicago five days ago in his specially chartered space liner from New York. Nothing was heard from his ship ten days after he left New York with his guests aboard. His last reported position was near the Mars orbit and since then nothing has come out of the Void. They'll just chalk him under the 'Lost in Space' column on the admiralty boards of the Universe and give the credit for his disappearance to some hurtling meteor. We were on our way to search for the remains of his liner when we intercepted the messages from Captain Robers and his men on Callisto."

Winford's face was bleak.

"Fate has prevented me from achieving my greatest desire," he said harshly. "To rid the Universe of that scourge to humanity would have been one of the sweetest moments of my life. I've dreamed of it for years."

The officer lighted a cigarette.

"Perhaps you are right, but I'd say the chance is gone in more ways than one. Teutoberg is undoubtedly dead, and you are on your way to the gas execution cage on Mars. Incidentally, you are now my prisoner. I'll not lock you in the hold with the rest of your crew, but will confine you to your stateroom."

Winford surveyed him curiously.

"I warn you that I'll take advantage of any opportunity to escape," he said.

The officer grinned.

"That's to be expected. So would any other man doomed to die. But the coronium doors, locks and walls of the *Golden Fleece's* staterooms are practically escape proof, and with two of my marines on guard outside your door, with orders to kill if you break out, I feel reasonably safe."

Imprisoned in his stateroom, Winford threw himself on his bunk. Too early to attempt anything yet, he considered. It would be better to wait a few days—at least until *Eagle* had departed. Besides, he

would have to work out a plan for escape.

He glanced up at the port-hole. The sunlight was shifting. He arose and peered out. Twenty-five miles away he could see the battle sphere standing out across the Void on a sunward course. The *Golden Fleece* was turning her nose toward distant Mars, a long journey, since the Red Planet was on the opposite side of the sun, seven hundred million miles away.

Winford knew what was taking place. The commander of the battle sphere was again resuming his mission of searching for the missing liner, while the young officer and his crew were taking the *Golden Fleece* with its iridium cargo and pirate crew directly to Mars.

Meantime the radio and audio-vision announcers on all the planets were broadcasting the sensational news of the capture of the escaped convict-pirates and their forthcoming trial and certain execution on Mars. Winford turned bitterly away from the port-hole.

One week had passed. Winford started up out of a sound sleep. He listened tensely. There was a murmur through the big freighter. He recognized it as the clanging of the great alarm gongs through the hull of the big ship, muffled by the walls of his stateroom. Something was afoot!

He threw off the covers, sprang out on the deck and pulled on his clothes. This might be a break! Those gongs never sounded without plenty of cause.

He pulled a chair to the door, mounted it, and cautiously opening the transom which he had previously loosened, thrust his head out into the passage.

A marine was running down the passage. The guards before Winford's door tried to stop him, but the man ran on. Presently another came along. The guard was more successful.

"Say, Buddie, what's all the excitement?" he demanded.

"We've found Teutoberg's liner, or rather, it has found us!" exclaimed the marine. "They say old Teutoberg has trained his heaviest guns on us and is demanding that we surrender. Our skipper doesn't know just what to make of it. He's arguing with Teutoberg by radio that this old tub is in the hands of the law already and that he is taking it to Mars for the piracy court. Teutoberg says he won't be fooled by any such bunk as that; he knows we are all pirates and he is going to have this ship regardless of anything, since it belongs to his line. I've got to be hurrying along. We're getting the big guns ready, the few that we have."

Winford cautiously withdrew his head. His eyes were glowing. The whole scheme was as plain as day now. Teutoberg knew as well as every informed person in the Universe did that the *Golden Fleece* was in the hands of the Interplanetary Council marines. That talk about being entitled to the freighter because it was owned by his shipping line was so much rubbish. He was protected by insurance. What he wanted was the insurance and the ten million dollars' worth of iridium in the hold as well.

Furthermore, he had intended to have it all along. It was part of his diabolical scheme to put the shipment on an unprotected freighter. Then he had chartered a liner privately for his venture in piracy. When the liner was "lost" he was out searching for the *Golden Fleece* along the lanes where it should have been had not he, Winford, and his companions captured the craft and sent it hurtling out toward Ganymede. And now Teutoberg had succeeded in trailing it down.

Winford surveyed the transom pessimistically. Impossible to get through it. If only he had a ray pistol to dissolve the door lock.... The air ventilator! He dropped down on hands and knees and peered under the bunk. The opening seemed large enough to let his shoulders through. If he should become fast in one of the turns of the tunnel it would be all up with him. They'd probably find his body

when the ship went into dock for repairs. But this was no time to think of that.

He crawled under the bunk, took out the grating and set it beside the opening. Then he wormed his way into the tunnel. It was a tight fit, but he could move. The first turn should bring him to the branch that opened out on the passage not far from his stateroom door.

Never would he forget that struggle when he forced his cramped, tortured body round the bend in the blackness a fraction of an inch at a time and crawled up the branch. If he was mistaken—but he wasn't. Presently he was looking out of the grating into the passage.

Members of the crew raced back and forth like disturbed ants. From the snatches of conversation that reached him, Winford learned that Teutoberg had succeeded in getting the range of the freighter and was holding her helpless under the imposing muzzles of his heavy disintegrator-ray guns.

The door of the control opened and the boyish commander, his face pale and drawn, thrust out his head.

"They're coming aboard, men," he shouted to the group in the passage below. "I can't stop them. Our only chance may come after

they are aboard."

"Why don't you free the pirates and let them help us?" cried one of the men.

"Never," returned the young commander firmly. "They are in our care, and by the gods, we are going to bring them and this ship through safe and sound!"

A moment later he descended the stairs and led his men aft.

Teutoberg displayed a flash of generalship, for his first ten men who came in through the air-lock were pistol experts. They rayed the marines in their tracks and cleared the passage leading to the lock, before the defenders could get organized. A few minutes later the invaders were spreading through the ship, hunting down and ruthlessly slaying the marines whom they outnumbered three to one. Scattered fights to the death took place on all the decks. Winford, snugly ensconced in his air tunnel, raged inwardly as the crackling of the rays and the agonized screams of the wounded and dying came to his ears.

The fighting seemed to be drawing nearer. He risked peeping out. The young commander and half a dozen of his men covering

themselves as best they might with the inadequate protector shields of the service, retreated to the foot of the stairs leading up to the control room. As the invaders prepared to mow them down a sudden hush fell on the men and the invaders parted. A huge man stepped out before them. Winford sucked in his breath sharply as he recognized Teutoberg and saw him take a step forward in the direction of the marines.

Teutoberg raised his hand toward Commander 6666-A and spoke.

"Will you surrender, or must my men obliterate you? I would say that you pirates have your backs to the wall. Surely life is sweet. Why not surrender while you still have it?"

"We're not pirates!" declared the young commander hotly.

Teutoberg sneered.

"It will take more than a gold and gray uniform of the Interplanetary Council military forces to convince me," he retorted. "Uniforms of any kind can be obtained anywhere in the Universe where there happens to be a competent tailor."

"The only pirates, excepting yourselves, aboard this ship are under

lock and key," said the commander. "That's where you will be before this matter is settled."

Teutoberg laughed. His manner changed suddenly.

"What a line of talk for a pirate," he commented affably. "Come, youngster, there is no need to sacrifice lives uselessly. Surrender, since you're outnumbered anyway, and let's discuss this thing on a sane basis."

Commander 6666-A hesitated. Winford could scarcely refrain from shouting treachery. Then the marines lowered their shields and rays. Next instant they went down under the charge of the invaders.

The young commander was chalky white when they dragged him bound and helpless to his feet. A trickle of blood made a crimson line from the corner of his mouth, and his eyes sparkled with helpless rage.

"You dirty snake!" he gasped. "You'll sniff gas for this!"

Teutoberg laughed scornfully.

"Take them back to the air-lock and shove them out naked one at a time," he ordered curtly. "That's the way they would have treated us.

Save the young bantam for the last. Now, where is this Evan Winford? I have an old score to settle with him."

Up in his air tunnel Winford nodded grimly to himself. Teutoberg's words only added to the proof that he knew all along that the *Golden Fleece* was in the hands of the Interplanetary marines, for his request for Winford revealed that he had been following the helio reports of the capture of the ship by the marines and the stories being broadcast throughout the Universe of how Winford and Jarl and their pirate companions were being taken with the ship to Mars for piracy and execution.

Neither Commander 6666-A nor his men deigned to answer Teutoberg, but one of his own men had already discovered that Winford was locked in his own stateroom, and he promptly indicated the door.

Teutoberg scowled, drew a pistol in either hand, and strode to the door. One of the men unlocked it, and he kicked it open. He waited expectantly, then advanced cautiously into the room. The sound of his baffled curses filled the passage. Winford grinned mirthlessly.

"Someone dies for this!" shouted Teutoberg, storming out into the passage. "Where is he, I say? Bring me that Martian, Jarl! He'll

know, if anyone does. Bring him, I say, and I'll torture the truth out of his big carcass!"

Winford's grin vanished. His eyes grew anxious as he waited, tense and breathless, until Jarl, with his big hands lashed together behind his back, was brought up from the hold.

"So we meet again, Jarl?" jeered Teutoberg, scowling blackly at him. "Where is this master of yours, this Winford?"

Jarl's eyes met Teutoberg's impassively. All too well he knew the innate cruelty of this Earthman. Some explanation would have to be made to satisfy him. Never a flicker of an eye-lash revealed what that explanation would be, but Jarl glanced stoically at the empty stateroom.

"He did it," he said calmly.

"Did what, you clod?" Teutoberg flung at him savagely.

"Ended his life as he swore he would."

"Suicide? Impossible! Where is the body?"

"He destroyed it together with his life by drinking disintegrator

concentrate. He carried a capsule of it when we escaped from Mercury, and I've heard him swear time and again that he would die before he would permit himself to be taken back."

Teutoberg swallowed the story. There was nothing else to do, apparently. He raved and cursed. Once he raised his pistol to Jarl's heart and lowered it again.

"You'll take his place, Martian dog!" he snarled. "By proxy I shall treat him as he deserves, and you shall be the proxy. Back to the hold with you for the present!"

With that Teutoberg whirled about, strode up the stairs and vanished in the control room.

Commander 6666-A and his men were dragged aft to the air-lock, leaving the passage near Winford temporarily empty. He broke out the grating and wormed his way out of the air tunnel, dropping on the floor hands first. He sprang to his feet, and started grimly up the steps to the control room. Inside that room was Teutoberg, a bigger man than himself, and armed, yet Winford, barehanded, cautiously opened the door and stepped inside.

Teutoberg was standing at one side of the room gazing in rapt

attention at the slaughter of the helpless marines. One by one he watched them emerge from the air-lock bloated and white in their nakedness with their convulsed limbs already growing rigid in the icy cold of space. Out in the open space between the two ships they hung motionless a few minutes, then swiftly dissolved and vanished under the ray of a small disintegrator gun on the liner.

Teutoberg smiled crookedly.

The door clicked behind him. Teutoberg turned with a startled oath. Winford, foul with grime and his clothing torn to rags, stood there. Teutoberg's eyes widened. Both hands leaped downward for the holstered pistols in his belt. At that instant Winford lunged for him.

One of Teutoberg's hands was now gripping a pistol. Winford struck frenziedly, knocking it from Teutoberg's grasp. The weapon slid under the chart table out of reach. Winford clutched Teutoberg's left hand which held the still holstered pistol.

Suddenly he saw an advantage, and his heart leaped in exultation. Round behind Teutoberg he pivoted—a wrestling trick he had learned as a boy. For an instant they stood back to back. Then with a mighty effort Winford heaved upward relentlessly on his opponent's forearm.

Teutoberg screamed in pain as something snapped in his wrist. The pistol dropped from his nerveless fingers. Winford flicked it out of reach under the table with his toe, but had no chance to reach for it, because Teutoberg had managed to work himself free.

With a bellow of animal rage and with arms flailing like wind-mills he charged at Winford again. Winford met his rush with a rapid series of blows and Teutoberg went down. But up he came, a wild light in his eyes. Again he went down, only to struggle gamely to his feet once more.

Winford was gasping for breath. It amazed him that Teutoberg could endure so much punishment. His arm must be broken and he was terribly battered, yet here he came staggering back for more. Winford now hunched down and, like a crouching animal, advanced slowly toward his enemy. Suddenly he started a right almost from the deck straight for Teutoberg's chin. It connected. Teutoberg was lifted clear of the deck and hurled unconscious against the side of the control room six feet away.

Winford staggered to the communication board and his trembling fingers clutched the air-lock phone.

"Hello, hello!" he gasped. "Teutoberg speaking. Send no more

marines out through the lock just now.... Yes, of course this is Teutoberg."

He hung the instrument back on its hook and clung dizzily to the edge of the table. At least the slaughter was halted for the time being.

He would have to act fast. He caught up the big water pitcher from the holder on the wall where it had miraculously escaped the fight, gulped deeply from it, and splattered water down his face and chest. Then he picked up the two pistols from the deck, placed one in his belt and gripped the other firmly as he approached the unconscious Teutoberg.

At the first splash of water in his face Teutoberg groaned and rolled over.

"Get up, you," Winford ordered harshly.

Teutoberg sat up groggily. The sight of the pistol and Winford's eyes brought him out with a sudden shock.

"Get over to that air-lock phone and say just what I tell you to," ordered Winford grimly. "One false word, and I'll ray you plenty."

Teutoberg staggered to his feet obediently and took the phone, for he

had read death in Winford's hard eyes.

"Hello, Jarvis?" he asked, his body rigid under the prod of Winford's pistol. "This is Teutoberg.... Yes, I talked a minute ago. I've changed my plans, Jarvis. We've got to get the iridium out of the hold and into the liner as soon as possible, or we'll be sighted by some other craft. Take all the men but ten and go back to the liner. Make ready there for the cargo.... You'll have to clear some cabins; there is more than I thought. There isn't much food aboard here, anyway, and it is better to let the men go to mess right away and start transferring the cargo immediately afterward."

Teutoberg hung up the phone.

"Is that satisfactory?" he asked sullenly.

"It will do," was Winford's terse reply. "Now when the men have gone back to the liner, order two of the remainder to bring up Jarl from the hold to the control room here."

Jarl was as impassive as usual when he entered the control room and beheld Winford in charge there, although his two captors stared in amazement at Teutoberg, bloody and battered, seated against the side of the room with his hands upraised. Jarl calmly disarmed his two

captors and closed the door.

"Only eight of Teutoberg's men besides these remain on the *Golden Fleece*," Winford explained to Jarl. "Take care of them first, then release the rest of our men from the hold. Tell Agar to take charge of the machinery as soon as possible, and have the gunners stand by for further orders."

"Awah," replied Jarl stoically, and left the control room.

He took care of the eight invaders in his very efficient Martian fashion, for he pistoled them with neatness and dispatch where they stood before the air-lock with the young commander and his remaining two marines, waiting to thrust them out into space. Winford had not instructed Jarl just how to take care of the situation, and the Martian attended to it in his own way. Commander 6666-A, with his arms bound behind his back, stared in amazement as Jarl calmly stepped over the dead bodies and went on his way to release his fellow pirates from the hold.

Up in the control room the radio loud-speaker hummed to life.

"Teutoberg, Teutoberg, are you there?" cried an anxious voice. "Three Interplanetary battle spheres are approaching from the

direction of the Earth! They are still two thousand miles away, but they are coming on fast! We're going to cut loose and run for it. If you're not back here in five minutes, you'll have to stay where you are!"

Winford cut in then for Teutoberg, who gulped painfully before speaking.

"Go right ahead," he said in a strained voice. "I'm staying here on the *Golden Fleece*. I'll—I'll see you later."

"Why didn't you say you'd meet them in the Hereafter?" suggested Winford coldly, as he cut out the microphone. "That's where you are going as soon as Jarl returns. He'll be glad to help you on your way, for he hasn't forgotten the aid you gave his brother-in-law in robbing him and sending him to Mercury."

Teutoberg made no answer.

Things were happening swiftly. Already the liner was lurching forward frantically with every propulsion ray flaming as she started her flight through space away from the avenging battle spheres. Red lights twinkled on the control board of the *Golden Fleece*. Agar, at the generators now, threw in the power. The big freighter leaped

ahead like a grayhound, soon reaching a speed that even the swift battle spheres could not equal, thanks to the engineering genius of the half-insane Agar.

Winford glanced around. Teutoberg was already gone. Jarl had taken him down to the air-lock. Winford tried to forget him. There were other things to think of. There were the details of taking the *Golden Fleece* out to Pluto near the frontiers of the Sun's domain—Pluto, that stronghold of the space pirates where a man could sell an entire planet or any part of it, no questions asked, if he could produce it for the buccaneer kings to bid on. The freighter and its cargo were as good as sold already, and the money they would bring would be more than enough to buy pardons and freedom for everyone in the crew.

There were many details to consider carefully, but instead Winford found himself thinking of Teutoberg down by the air-lock, stripped of his clothing, ready for his last adventure with life. As much as Winford hated the man, he was forced into an unwilling admiration for his dogged fight in the control room. A mere word in that telephone would save him. Winford shook his head irritably. The man deserved death. Yet again he saw the set features, the final walk into the air-lock. Suddenly Winford found himself at the phone and heard himself giving the order that would save Teutoberg's life. He

sat down again, surprised at his own weakness. He was still musing when Jarl entered.

"You couldn't go through with it," observed the big Martian impassively. "I was afraid you couldn't. It is as I have always said of you Earthlings. You think you want revenge, good old ancient vengeance; but when the moment comes and you sit in the high place and can have it, you weaken. Well, you won't have to execute Teutoberg now."

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Winford.

"After I received your order and told Teutoberg he wasn't to go out through the lock after all, he grinned. It was an insult, that grin, just as though he knew all along you wouldn't have the nerve to kill him. And while I stood there asking myself if I should not go ahead and shove him out anyway, one of his men—one of the two we captured up here in this room—caught sight of that grin. He screamed something about treachery and Teutoberg betraying him to the pirates, and before I could interfere he drew a knife and stabbed Teutoberg to death right there before all of us. After that there was nothing to do but to heave his body into the air-lock and let it go on out into space."

Far back across the Void in a tiny space sphere which Winford had given him and his two marines to return to the distant battle sphere, Lieutenant Commander 6666-A saw through his telescope the white speck of Teutoberg's body leave the side of the *Golden Fleece* and wondered what it was.

130 Zehru of Xollar by Hal K Wells

Three Earthlings are whisked on an inter-dimensional journey to the den of the Scientist Zehru.

Aproximate word count: 8,400

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

When the rolling thunder of infra-bass first came to their ears, Robert Blake and Helen Lawton were standing on the platform of a New York subway station waiting for the arrival of an uptown express to bear them to their homes.

They made a strikingly attractive couple as they stood there. New York had not had time as yet to remove the bronze tan of an outdoor life from Blake's ruggedly good-looking face. His tall athletic figure was still conspicuous for the lithe strength that had made him an All-Western tackle less than two years ago.

Standing beside Blake's husky figure, Helen Lawton looked like a

tiny, very perfect, blonde doll, with an exquisitely molded face framed in curly bobbed hair that was the clear golden-amber hue of orange honey. There was a diamond sparkling on the ring finger of the girl's slim left hand, placed there by Blake.

It was well after midnight, and the only other passenger waiting on the station was a burly chap leaning against one of the white pillars on the other side of the platform. After a casual glance at the fellow, with his derby hat shoved far back from a low forehead, his blatantly conspicuous clothing, and the suspicious bulge under one arm-pit, Blake had mentally set him down as a minor gangster, probably a strong-arm man for some beer mob.

Blake and Helen had been standing there but a few minutes when the strange sound first became audible. For a moment Blake thought it was merely the rumbling roar of an express approaching far down the tunnel. Then he realized that no subway train could possibly produce a sound effect so oddly disturbing and strangely alien.

It was like no sound that Blake had ever heard before. Vibrant with colossal power, it suggested a sustained note struck from a giant organ, a note so low in pitch that it seemed a full octave below the lowest bass note ever struck. Whatever it was, the thundering vibration of infra-bass was coming nearer with startling swiftness.

It was impossible to locate the source of the mighty pulsing note. It seemed to be coming simultaneously from all directions, like a great hollow sphere of invisible sound waves closing in with the station platform as its central focal point.

Helen's face was white with dread as she shrank closer into Blake's embrace. Blake noted that the gangster across the platform was standing tensely at bay with his back against the pillar and his right hand thrust under his coat as he stared wildly about him in an effort to discover the cause of the disturbance.

The rolling thunder closed in upon them with a final rush that brought it so near that their very bodies seemed to vibrate in harmony with that mighty note of shuddering bass. Then with startling abruptness the green net came.

Out from the walls and down from the roof spurted scores of quivering ribbons of blinding green flame. Swiftly the radiant tendrils rushed in upon the shrinking three from every side, while the infra-bass thundered in mighty crescendo.

Blake instinctively swept Helen close within the shelter of his arms in an effort to protect her with his own body against the searing menace of those onrushing green flames. The next moment the fiery

ribbons were upon them, lashing about their bodies, crossing and crisscrossing in the air above and around them in a great tangled web of interlacing lines of flame that filled the entire platform.

With a shock of relief Blake found that there was no heat in those strange flames, but his relief was short-lived as the next second brought him realization of the real menace of the radiant ribbons. There was a solidity and strength in those glowing streamers that held them as helplessly captive as though they were gripped in ribbons of steel. Dazed and helpless, the three struggled for a moment in the meshes of the weird net of flame like fish caught in the strands of some giant cosmic seine.

The trembling thunder of infra-bass abruptly changed to a thin whining note so high in pitch that it seemed the nearly soundless ghost of a metallic scream. With the change in sound Blake became aware of a new and astounding change in his surroundings.

The walls and roof of the station seemed closing in upon him as though he were growing in size at an incredible rate. The next moment he shot through the roof, hurtling on and upward with the velocity of a rocket. The sensation was one that his reeling brain could not even grasp. His body seemed to be inside every stone, iron bar, and lump of earth, yet at the same time every exterior object

seemed within his body. It was an eery chaos of a dozen different dimensions blending to form a Space in which there was no known dimension.

As they flashed on out to the surface Blake had one hazy glimpse of Manhattan's glowing lights spread all about them. Then the speed of their progress leaped into a new and terrible acceleration that blotted out every tangible sensation from Blake's brain.

Time and Space alike seemed to vanish as their hurtling flight sent them rocketing on for distances inconceivably vast through a bleak and appalling Nothingness, where neither sight nor sound existed.

Then abruptly the speed of their flight seemed to be lessening. Sensation returned to Blake. He again heard the thin high-pitched metallic wail, now swiftly deepening to the familiar growl of rolling bass. He again noted the presence of the glowing green ribbons of the net that still encircled them.

A blindingly brilliant purple mist was now closing in upon them from every direction, bringing with it a nameless and agonizing force that seemed to be shaking the very atoms in Blake's body asunder. Then they dropped swiftly down out of the purple mists, and the strange agony at once vanished. Blake felt their downward

progress come to an end with the gentle arrival of his feet upon firm ground.

The encircling net of green flame glowed dazzlingly brighter for a brief moment, then swiftly vanished into thin air, while the mutter of bass vibrations simultaneously died away into silence. Blake staggered and nearly fell as the sudden release from the net's strands again left his body free.

He looked down at Helen as she stood huddled close beside him, still in the shelter of his arms. The girl's face was white with terror as she looked back up at him.

"Bob, what happened—and where on earth are we?" Her voice trembled a little in spite of her plucky effort to keep it steady.

Blake's bewildered gaze was already roving around them trying to comprehend the incredible details of their surroundings. "I've no idea what happened, dear," he answered slowly. "As to where we are now, I'm very much afraid it's nowhere on Earth!"

"Then where is this hopped-up layout anyway, fellah, if it ain't on Earth?" broke in a voice with a decided East Side twang. Blake quickly turned and saw that the gangster had remained with them in

that eery flight in the green net. There was an expression of dumfounded amazement upon the man's heavy face, and he was obviously anxious to be friendly with the two who now represented the only link with the familiar world he had known.

"Gee, for a minute I thought they had me on the spot in some new way, sure!" he chattered excitedly as he came quickly over to join Helen and Blake. "There's plenty of guys wantin' to turn the heat on me there in the Big Town. I'm Gil Mapes, see? But this ain't no frame-up like any I ever heard of. What happened anyway, fellah?"

For the moment Blake did not answer. The three of them were silent as they stared about them with eyes that were dazed by the startlingly unfamiliar aspect of every detail in their surroundings.

From the twin purple suns that blazed down through the tenuous mists overhead to the barren blue-gray ground underfoot, there was not a single object familiar to Earthly eyes. The huge enclosure in which the three of them stood was obviously the work of intelligent beings of some kind, but its mechanical details were products of a science different from any known to Blake.

The purpose of the enclosure seemed to be to maintain an area of clear air in the midst of the swirling purple vapors that pressed in

against it from the top and from every side. In shape it was a great oblong cell, some fifty feet high, two hundred yards long, and about one hundred yards wide. The three captives stood near the center.

Fencing in the enclosure at twenty-yard intervals and reaching upward to the ceiling were slender posts of some lusterless black metal. Between these posts streamed unbroken, nearly transparent sheets of some unknown force, the only visible sign of which was the presence of countless millions of tiny shimmering golden flecks which danced like dust motes in a ray of sunlight. It was obviously this thin sheet of unknown force that was keeping the purple mists at bay, for fan-like antennae at the top of each post spread a similar shimmering sheet that formed a ceiling for the clear-aired area.

The three Earthlings were facing one of the side walls of the big enclosures. The purple mists outside made it hard to see clearly for any distance, but Blake had an impression that the surrounding terrain was featured by the same barren, nearly desert bleakness that characterized the interior of the enclosure, where scattered clumps of dead, spiky black branches of shrub-like vegetation were the only sign of plant life.

Just within the distant end wall at their right there was a low platform surmounted by a wide arch some ten feet in height, both

constructed of silver-colored metal. There was nothing between them and the end wall to their left, but they could see that the ground sloped sharply upward from the barrier-sheet, and on the crest of the ridge a gigantic cone-shaped structure of solid black could be seen dimly through the intervening mists.

The cone-building seemed to be the source of the power that kept the enclosure intact. Slender cables of black metal ran down the slope from it into the clear-aired space, spreading out over the dusty gray-blue ground to the base of each of the tall posts, with a heavier copper-colored cable running on the silver arch. From within the windowless interior of the cone there was audible a low hum as of tremendous power being generated there.

"Gee, what a rummy joint this place is!" There was frank awe in the gangster's voice as he at last broke the silence. "That guy with the green net sure took us for one sweet ride. Mebbe we're on the Moon now, or on Mars, huh?"

Blake shook his head. "No, we're completely out of our entire solar system. Those twin purple suns up there prove that. We may even be in another universe, or another dimension from our own. A piece of apparatus that could whisk us up through fifty feet of earth and masonry as that green net did obviously works in dimensions of

which we've never dreamed. The only thing we're sure of is that we were brought to this purple world deliberately and intentionally by an intelligent being of some kind, scooped up like tadpoles from a mud-puddle and dumped here in this elaborate enclosure It had already prepared for us."

Blake nodded to where the black cone-building loomed through the purple mists outside the end wall. "Whoever or whatever the thing was that brought us here, I have a hunch It's there in that power-house watching us. I'd suggest that we walk down toward that end of the enclosure for a closer look. We may at least find out whether we're guests or prisoners."

"Listens good to me, fellah," agreed Mapes, sliding a hand up to his shoulder holster and bringing out a squat black automatic pistol of heavy caliber. "We'll do a prowl, over that way, and if His Nibs tries any more funny business mebbe a few slugs outta this rod will change his mind for him."

"Better go easy with the gun, Mapes," advised Blake as the three of them started slowly toward the cone-building. "From what we've already seen, there must be weapons in this world that would make your pistol look like a kid's pop-gun. We'd better go easy till—wait, what's that?"

The thin high-pitched whine, followed promptly by the familiar growling thunder of infra-bass, had again become audible. At the same moment a long pencil-like beam of green light glowed into visibility, extending from the tip of the cone to a point high within the enclosure just back of them. As they halted abruptly and watched, they saw the interlacing meshes of the green flame-net materialize suddenly at the end of the beam.

The beam curved into an arc that dropped the net swiftly to the ground some thirty yards from them. Its meshes were packed nearly full of dark, writhing figures.

"Looks like some more tadpoles arriving for our pond!" Mapes exclaimed. "I wonder what part of N' Yawk His Nibs yanked these babies from?"

Blake's answer died on his lips as the net and beam glowed blindingly brighter for a brief second, then disappeared, leaving the dark figures in full view. Helen choked back a gasp of horror. Mapes swore in consternation and hurriedly swung his pistol into line with those writhing shapes.

The net's latest captives were not from New York, nor were they from any other part of the planet Earth. Hideous spawn of some

unknown world out in the black void of Space, they writhed for a moment in a nightmare chaos of countless brown-furred bodies, then swiftly disentangled themselves before the staring eyes of the three Earthlings.

The things were apparently too low in the mental scale to have any reaction to their situation other than a blind instinct to attack any other living being within reach, for they promptly headed for the three captives from Earth.

As the creatures came shambling rapidly forward on powerful bowed legs, and with the tips of their long hairy arms brushing the ground, they looked like grotesquely distorted apes. The crowning horror of those shambling figures, however, lay in the fact that they were completely headless!

Even when the things approached to a distance of less than ten feet before halting in momentary indecision, Blake could detect no sign of any normal skull in the blunt space at the top of the powerful hairy torso. There was a furry-lipped mouth opening of some kind in the hollow between the bulging shoulders, but of eyes, ears, nose, or brain cavity there was no discernible trace.

For a long moment the headless ape-things and the three human

beings stood silently facing each other. Mapes' pistol was leveled pointblank at the nearest of the creatures, but their overwhelming numbers made the gangster hold his fire.

There were two distinct groups of the things. At least twenty members of each group were in the crowd facing the Earthlings. To the rear of these attackers two oddly repulsive objects were carried and carefully shielded by picked guards of four unusually large and powerful ape-things.

The nature of those two guarded objects puzzled Blake. They looked like large eggs of dirty-gray jelly, about a yard in length. They were obviously alive, for their gelatinous masses quivered and trembled in constant activity. Blake noted that there seemed to be a curious connection between the ebb and flow of pulsations in the egg-masses and the movements of the ape-things.

His attention was abruptly recalled to the headless things in front of him as they suddenly began shambling forward again. There was no possible mistaking the intention of those advancing horrors. They were moving to the attack.

They reached barely to Blake's shoulders, but he realized that their enormous numbers and hook-taloned hands would make the result of

the battle almost a foregone conclusion. The fact that the headless things were without eyes was no handicap to them. The swift certainty of their movements proved that they had a sense of sight of some kind that was in every way as efficient as eyesight.

Blake looked hurriedly around him, seeking a place where they might be at the best possible advantage in the impending battle. There was a small dense thicket of the spiky dead branches half a dozen yards to their right. At Blake's low command, the three made a dash for the thicket. Arriving there, they ranged themselves against it, with their backs at least partially protected from attack.

The maneuver seemed to puzzle the ape-things for a moment. They stood passively watching the retreat of the three until they had reached the thicket. Then the creatures again began slowly closing in upon them. Blake snatched up a dead branch from the ground near the thicket, and was delighted to find that its weight and tough fiber made it an excellent club.

He stripped off his topcoat and passed it back to Helen. Its tough fabric, heavily rubberized for proof against rain, might guard her head and face at least momentarily from those ripping talons if the headless attackers came to close quarters. With Helen safely behind them, Blake and Mapes turned grimly to face the enemy.

The attack was prompt in coming. Moving with the perfect synchronization of a single unit, one of the main groups came shambling in, followed an instant later by the other group. Mapes' pistol sent a bullet crashing squarely into the nearest attacker. The creature staggered momentarily, then came lurching on again, apparently not even crippled. Blake swung his heavy club in a whistling arc that sent two of his adversaries broken and writhing to the ground.

He heard Mapes' pistol bark four times more as the things closed in. Then the gun was knocked from the gangster's grip by a groping talon-armed hand. Mapes tried to batter back his assailants with his naked fists, but the flailing arms of the horde knocked him from his feet. His limp body was promptly tramped into unconsciousness by the milling feet of the close-packed group.

Blake lashed the heavy club about him with a burst of savage fury that for the moment sent the furred horrors reeling backward. Their retreat ended after a scant two yards. Reforming their ranks, they again began cautiously shambling forward in a new attack that Blake realized would probably mean the end.

It was easy enough to batter the things to ground, but it seemed impossible to seriously hurt them. Their incredible vitality and their

overwhelming numbers made them almost invincible. Grimly Blake set himself to battle as long as he could in that last desperate effort to keep the hordes at bay.

He noticed idly that the two groups still kept their oddly separated formation. Behind them the two egg-masses of jelly were now seething in new activity after a brief lessening of their gruesome shivering. Blake now saw that there was a direct and unmistakable connection between the activity of the jelly and the corresponding activity of the ape-things.

Realization of the fact sent a sudden flash of inspiration flaming through Blake's weary brain, correlating the real significance of a dozen different things he had been subconsciously noting ever since the first appearance of the weird beasts.

Those attacking things were not hordes of individual animals. They were merely two complete organisms, with the members of each organism controlled by its nucleus through invisible lines of nervous force as the various individual cells of the human body are linked by nerve fibers. No wonder the creatures themselves were blind. The egg-mass that was the nucleus of each of the two groups was eyes, brain, and seat of life for every ape-thing in the group.

With a swift surge of hope Blake realized the way to conquer the things. If he could only shatter those flaccid masses of jelly, he would destroy the swarming dozens of beasts at the same time.

Reaching the jelly ovoids seemed at first consideration to be an impossible task. They were carefully guarded far in the rear of the attacking groups. Blake knew that he had scarcely a chance in a hundred of battering his way through the intervening ape-things.

Then he remembered the gangster's pistol. His searching eyes found it immediately, there on the ground nearly under the feet of the ape-things as they again shambled forward to the attack.

Blake staked everything upon a last desperate sortie against the advancing things. With his club whistling around his head in crashing blows that wrought murderous havoc in the close-packed hordes, he drove them back for one breathless moment that gave him time to leap forward and snatch up the pistol.

The ape-things were already springing back upon him as he swung the pistol into line with one of the jelly-masses. He barely pressed the trigger before the charging brutes knocked him from his feet.

As he went down he flung his arms over his head to protect his face

from the expected attack of those hooked talons, but none came. A body thudded down upon him, then slid limply off again without making any move to attack. Blake scrambled to his feet.

Writhing upon the ground all around him were ape-things in their death agonies. On the ground beyond them, quivering and broken in the midst of its dying guards, was a viscid mass of loathsome gray jelly. Blake's shot had apparently struck home squarely in the center of that vulnerable blob. Even as he watched, the gelatinous mass shuddered in a last convulsion, then became quite still. At the same instant the last sign of life vanished from the writhing ape-things on the ground.

A good half of the attacking creatures were included in the dead bodies. The other half, Blake now saw, had retreated to cluster in wild panic about the remaining blob of jelly. Realizing exultantly that his single shot had slain one of the two weirdly disassociated organisms, Blake with pistol in hand advanced toward the other, trying to get a clear shot at the jelly through the furry bodies clustering around it.

The group promptly turned and fled in blind panic. Blake sent the pistol's last shot crashing into the mass without any appreciable effect. Then the things' stampede carried them hurtling on through

one of the gold-flecked side walls out into the swirling purple mists.

The gold-flecked sheet flowed together again so swiftly behind the things that a fraction of a second later there was not even the slightest indication in its shimmering unbroken surface to show that it had ever been pierced.

For thirty yards the fleeing ape-things sped on into the purple vapors. Then disaster struck them with bewildering swiftness. They stopped in full flight, shuddered for a moment, then slumped to the ground with their limbs writhing in agony. In their center the jelly ovoid quivered madly in the same strange torture.

Tiny patches of vivid purple appeared at a hundred different points upon the dying creatures. The patches spread and merged with lightning rapidity until a solid sheet of livid purple covered the writhing mass. Swiftly that mass lost both movement and shape as it melted down into a pool of turgid purple slime. Then the slime vaporized into purple mists that blended into the surrounding vapors, and all trace of the ape-things and their jelly nucleus had vanished.

Stunned by the incredible speed of this general dissolution, Blake realized for the first time the real reason for the presence of the gold-flecked walls of force. Without those shimmering walls the captives

would not have lived for a minute in the deadly purple atmosphere of this weird world beneath the twin suns. The gold-flecked walls were both their protection and their prison. The swirling purple mists outside those walls held the Earthlings as effectively and hopelessly prisoners in their enclosure as gold-fish in a bowl of water.

Blake turned back to the thicket to see how Helen and Mapes had fared in that terrific battle with the headless things. He was relieved to see that the girl had apparently escaped without even a scratch. She was kneeling beside Mapes' prone figure, doing what she could to revive him. The gangster was badly battered, but he seemed to have no serious injuries. He was already beginning to stir weakly and show signs of returning life.

Blake started to step over to the two. Then he stopped abruptly as he heard a sharp metallic clang from the cone-building out in the purple mists beyond the end wall. He looked quickly up and saw that an oval window had opened in the structure near its tip. Framed in the opening was what seemed to be a large concave mirror. At one side of the mirror was a living being of some kind, but the intervening mists prevented Blake from making out any details beyond a hazy glimpse of a cluster of what seemed to be long slender snake-like black tentacles.

The next moment there spurted from the mirror a broad and swiftly spreading beam of red light so brilliant that it glowed clearly even in the bright purple rays of the twin suns. Before Blake could shout a warning to Helen the racing flood of ruddy radiance was upon them. The scene reeled in a blurred kaleidoscope of flaming colors before Blake's eyes for a brief second, then complete oblivion swept over him.

After an interval that seemed hours, consciousness returned to him as suddenly as it had left him. His first bewildered look around him disclosed the fact that startling changes had occurred in his surroundings during the period while he was under the anesthesia of the red ray.

His first effort at movement brought realization that he was in the grip of a strange paralysis. His head and neck seemed quite normal in every way, but from the throat downward his body was completely dead as far as any power of voluntary movement was concerned.

He twisted his head stiffly to one side, and saw that Helen was standing there beside him. Just beyond her was the motionless figure of Gil Mapes. Both the gangster and the girl were in the grip of the same strange paralysis. Like Blake, they were standing there rigidly

motionless, facing the gold-flecked barrier wall just in front of them.

A moment's painful scrutiny of their position showed Blake that the posts forming the wall of the enclosure at the end toward the cone had been brought in nearly a hundred yards toward them while they slept. The shimmering barrier sheet was now scarcely a yard from their faces, yet they still stood near the thicket where they had battled the headless horrors. Blake saw his coat half-buried in the blue-gray dust near his feet where Helen had discarded the garment to minister to Mapes.

Their unseen captor had obviously made definite preparations for whatever his next purpose with them was to be, for a long wheeled platform had been brought to a position opposite them just outside the shimmering gold-flecked sheet. Blake noted the shattered remains of Mapes' pistol on the ground at one side of the platform. It had apparently been fished from the enclosure and rendered harmless after their captor had seen the weapon's efficient use against the headless ape-things.

Clustered upon the wheeled platform was an assemblage of intricately winding coils, glowing tubes, and other apparatus that conveyed no more meaning to Blake's bewildered gaze than a sight of the interior of a metropolitan power-house would to a Congo

savage.

There was only one piece of the apparatus regarding whose probable function Blake could even guess. This was a pair of long slender arms that projected through the shimmering walls into the enclosure, supporting at their end a large thin metal plate located just over the heads of the three Earthlings. Blake was willing to wager that it was this overhead plate that was responsible for the odd paralysis that held them helpless.

Then a figure came slowly into view from where it had been concealed by the apparatus, and Blake forgot all thought of the strange mechanisms as he watched the monstrous thing clamber stiffly from the platform and halt squarely in front of the captives to stare at them through the transparency of the intervening force sheet.

The thing was a curious blending of human and bestial features. It stood barely five feet in height, yet its great scale-armored skull was at least three times as large as that of a grown man. There was colossal mental power and nameless evil glowing in the dark depths of the two abnormally large eyes that stared fixedly out from under the heavy forehead. The thing had no nose. The mouth opening, surrounded by a rosette of flabby gray skin, was a mere slit. The entire skull and face were covered with small, closely overlapping

scales of lusterless gray.

The head merged directly into a short black torso nearly as wide as the skull itself. From this trunk there writhed a score of long black snake-like tentacles, each terminating in a flexible three-fingered "hand." The trunk was supported by two short thick legs, armored with gray scales, and ending in broad three-toed feet.

"Greetings, Earthlings!" The voice that emanated from the grotesque mouth was surprisingly resonant in tone. "Allow me to present myself. I am Zehru, imperial scientist of Xollar."

The monstrosity seemed amused at the expressions of blank surprise upon the faces of his captives. "I learned your crude language from your brain cells while you slept under the red ray," he explained. "Also I learned many other things regarding your planet, Earth. I am glad to find your world so well adapted to my purpose. Within a few years after my arrival there I shall be its unquestioned ruler."

Blake started to voice the many questions that were surging through his mind, but an imperious gesture of an outflung tentacle stopped him.

"Silence, Earthling!" There was tolerant contempt in Zehru's ringing

voice. "I will explain some of the things that puzzle you. There is no reason why I should trouble myself to do so, yet it may while away the tedium of the short wait yet remaining before my apparatus becomes charged to the required point. Listen carefully, Earthling, for at best you will find many of my thoughts beyond the feeble limits of the word forms with which you have provided me.

"The world of Xollar, where you now are, is a planet in the island universe known to your astronomers as the Great Nebula of Andromeda. Until a short time ago I was one of its ruling scientists. Then I sinned, and so grave was my sin according to the laws of this planet that the Council of Three decreed my death. That death sentence upon Xollar is irrevocable, and no man has yet escaped it no matter where upon the planet he may be when the appointed time for his execution comes. I was given the usual period of grace in which to put my affairs in order. Instead, I have labored unceasingly here in my laboratory, and my labors have borne fruit. I am the first man in Xollarian history to find a means of escaping the dread death penalty.

"Briefly, I discovered a way by which I can flee to your far-distant universe, where not even the powers of the Council of Three can follow me. That way lies through the door of inter-dimensional Space. In Space as you know it, the almost unthinkable distance of a

million light years separates Xollar from the dwarf star you call your Sun. Yet, traveling between Space, the two planets nearly touch each other. The same situation of being near neighbors in inter-dimensional Space holds true with Xollar and at least seven other planets located in widely separated parts of your universe.

"Let me try to illustrate what I mean by traveling between Space. We will assume a nearly two-dimensional universe in the form of a circular piece of paper three feet in diameter. There is a dot in the exact center of each side of this paper. To a two-dimensional creature, forced to travel only on the surface of the paper, the distance between the two dots can never be less than thirty-six inches. Yet by cutting between the two surfaces and going directly through the paper the dots are less than one-hundredth of an inch apart.

"Such is the case with Xollar and the planets in your universe which are our immediate neighbors in inter-dimensional Space. In order to reach those planets I had only to develop a method of using sufficient force to cut between the three dimensions of intervening Space. In solving this problem I developed both an inter-dimensional net to bring beings from your universe to mine, and an inter-dimensional gate to permit beings to pass from here back to worlds in your galaxy.

"You have already seen the workings of the net. It was the device of green fire that brought you here. The use of the net was a vital part of my plans, for without the use of a physical body from some world in your universe I could not hope to live longer than a few minutes after leaving Xollar via the inter-dimensional gate. The inherent characteristics and basic elements of your galaxy and the Andromedan universe are so different in every way that an inhabitant of either star-group cannot exist in the other. Xollar's purple atmosphere is characteristic of Andromedan worlds. Your oxygen-saturated air is typical of worlds in your galaxy. Just as Xollar's purple mists would be immediately fatal to you, so would your clear oxygen-tainted air be quickly fatal to me.

"Accordingly, my only chance of surviving in one of your worlds is to first transfer my Intelligence to the body of one of the dwellers upon that planet. Of the seven planets within reach of my net I found only two that promised to be at all suitable. One was your Earth, the other a minor planet circling the star you call Vega. I brought both you and a net-load of Vegans here to this oxygen-filled enclosure I had already prepared.

"The Vegans were the headless things with the jelly nuclei. I watched your battle with them, and waited to choose as my vehicle the planetary type that proved the stronger. You vanquished the

Vegans, so it is in the body of an Earthling that I shall leave Xollar, and it is to the planet Earth that I shall be hurtled through the inter-dimensional gate.

"Aside from the slight difficulty caused by having to keep my body and yours each in its proper element during the operation, the matter of transfer into one of your bodies is a simple one. It involves none of the clumsy brain surgery of your Earthly science. We of Xollar have found that the real Intelligence of a being is an invisible force not at all dependent for existence upon the protoplasm through which it manifests. My Intelligence can function quite as well in your brain cells as in my own.

"I require no assistant in the transfer." Zehru indicated an intricate piece of apparatus on the platform behind him. It was a massive cylinder of fluorescent metal, with two long metallic cables running from its center, each cable ending in a saucer-shaped disk.

"I have only to thrust one cable through the force-wall into your enclosure and place its disk upon one of your heads, then place the other disk upon my own head. The apparatus is entirely automatic. Three seconds after both disks are in place my Intelligence will course into the Earthling brain, driving out his Intelligence and destroying it as mine enters.

"I will, of course, remove the selected body from under the paralyzing plate before I attach the disks. Then when I am safely transferred to the Earthling body I will have only to walk on through the enclosure to the silver arch at the far end and leave Xollar forever.

"That silver arch is the inter-dimensional gate to your Earth. Its operation is slightly different from that of the net. Where the net was capable of reaching under the surface of your planet, a proceeding I tried when two attempts upon the surface proved fruitless, the gate is so adjusted that it will place its passenger exactly upon the surface of your world. It requires no cooperation from this end. When I step under the arch I merely close a black lever there. Inter-dimensional force immediately catapults me to your Earth. Then the automatic mechanism of the gate will within half a minute of my departure release an explosion that will shatter everything within a radius of a mile here, and so prevent the Council of Three from even guessing the method of my escape."

"But what of the two of us whose bodies you do not need?" Blake protested. "Can you not at least take them through the arch-gate with you back to their home world?"

"Why should I do anything so foolish as that?" Zehru answered

callously. "They might easily be a menace to my first attempts to establish myself upon your planet. Far better to leave them here in their present state of paralysis to be safely destroyed in the explosion of the gate."

Zehru now thrust three of his tentacles into a vat of milky fluid, and withdrew them coated with a silver sheen on the black flesh. The silver glaze seemed to be an insulation against both the oxygen of the enclosure and the paralyzing force of the overhead disk, for the Xollarian promptly thrust the three silver-coated arms through the wall and began handling the bodies of Mapes and Blake in a painstaking process of examination.

Again Blake noted that the shimmering gold-flecked wall closed quickly in and kept its surface unbroken no matter how often objects were thrust through it.

Completely ignoring Helen, Zehru lifted first Mapes, then Blake, his tentacles probing, fingering, exploring. There was enormous power in the Xollarian's grotesque body. He lifted the men as though they were wooden dolls, bringing them close to the shimmering wall to peer at them, then setting them carefully down again on their feet under the disk. Blake wondered idly why their stiff bodies did not topple over when they were left unsupported, then decided that the

paralyzing force of the disk probably left the automatic muscular balancing movements unimpaired, affecting only the powers of voluntary movement.

Then, as Zehru set him down after one of the periods of examination, Blake noticed a new and startling change the moment his feet touched the ground. His right leg and right arm were no longer dead!

He hurriedly glanced down at the ground at his feet, and promptly found what seemed to be the reason for his partial freedom from the paralysis. In setting his body down the last time Zehru had moved Blake slightly. His right foot now rested upon a corner of the discarded topcoat lying half-buried there in the blue-gray dust.

The heavily rubberized cloth apparently acted as an insulating sheet that prevented the effective grounding of the paralyzing force that streamed down through Blake's body from the overhead disk. Consequently all portions of his body between the coat and the disk were free from the paralysis. For a moment Blake wondered at Zehru's carelessness. Then he realized that the insulating qualities of rubber would naturally be unknown to a Xollarian.

Noting that Zehru was busy at the moment with his work upon

Mapes, Blake quickly grasped at the faint chance the presence of the rubberized cloth offered him. Working with infinite slowness and caution, he edged his right foot over an inch at a time, dragging the rest of his body with it.

Luck was with him. Zehru continued, absorbed in his work upon Mapes. The Xollarian's telepathic powers apparently functioned only with the aid of the red ray, for he remained oblivious of Blake's actions. One final cautious dragging movement, and Blake's entire body was upon the cloth, with every muscle again vibrantly alive.

Blake stood there motionless, faking paralysis, while his brain raced in an effort to figure the best use to make of his present advantage. He was still trapped, not daring to reach even a hand beyond the protection of the cloth underfoot. The first essential of any effort at escape would have to be a lunge of sufficient power to take him safely beyond the area of the disk's influence.

Blake's first thought was to hurl himself through the barrier wall upon Zehru, trusting to sheer surprise to overwhelm the Xollarian, but he quickly dismissed that plan. It left too many elements in Zehru's favor. There was a tube-like weapon thrust in a belt around Zehru's middle and there were probably a dozen other different weapons lying handy to his reach among the apparatus on the

platform. The deadly purple mists beyond the wall would alone in all probability overcome Blake before he could batter Zehru down.

By far the best plan was to stage the battle inside the enclosure where Blake would be in his own native element. If he could yank Zehru inside the wall he would have him away from contact with his mechanical weapons and battling in an atmosphere inherently poisonous to him. Under those circumstances, Blake felt that he might have an even chance in a hand-to-hand combat with the powerful but slow-footed Xollarian.

Once Zehru was eliminated, escape back to Earth should be a simple matter. The silver gate, with its automatic mechanism needing only the closing of a lever, was ready and waiting there in the enclosure behind them.

For long tense minutes Blake forced himself to remain rigidly motionless while Zehru labored over Mapes. Then finally the Xollarian turned his attention briefly back to Blake, and thrust two tentacles in to grip his body. No sooner had the tentacles crossed above the border of the cloth than Zehru realized that something was wrong. He tried to whip his arms back again but too late.

Blake made a lightning snatch at a tentacle with both hands, and in

the same lithe movement turned from the barrier wall and flung himself headlong toward the center of the enclosure. Zehru had no time to brace himself. He was jerked bodily through the shimmering wall and on after Blake's lunging body.

One of the Xollarian's waving tentacles grasped wildly at the overhead disk in an effort to stay his flight. The only result was to bring the entire disk and its supports crashing in ruins to the ground upon the struggling figures of Blake and himself.

Blake was upon his feet again instantly. Snatching up a yard-long scrap of metal from the wreckage of the disk, he flung himself upon Zehru. The Xollarian seemed for the moment too dazed by his fall to fight back. With tentacles raised to guard his head, he staggered backward in retreat, every step taking him farther away from the wall and the purple mists.

Blake was vaguely aware that Helen and Mapes, freed by the wrecking of the disk, were scrambling to their feet. Mapes was already running toward the combatants. Blake was glad at the prospect of an ally. Zehru's dazed condition was swiftly passing. He had now stopped his retreat and was already fumbling a tentacle toward the tube-weapon in his belt.

Blake flung himself upon Zehru in another effort to beat him down before he could draw that weapon, but his metal club glanced harmlessly off the tentacles Zehru raised to shield his head. Then beyond Zehru Blake saw something that made him stop his assault.

It was Mapes, sprinting toward the silver arch-gate at the other end of the enclosure. Blake's heart sank as he realized the gangster's treachery. If he once reached that arch he could send himself safely hurtling back to Earth, while Blake and Helen would be left to perish with Zehru in the explosion that would immediately follow. It was too late for Blake to head the gangster off. He had already covered half the distance to the arch.

Zehru noted Mapes' fleeing figure almost as quickly as did Blake. Swiftly the Xollarian swung his tube-weapon into line with the fleeing gangster. A thin pencil of dull yellow light of a peculiar density spurted from the tube toward Mapes. There was a flash of blinding flame as the light beam met the gangster's body; then Mapes' figure seemed to literally explode, as though blasted by dynamite from within. So devastating was the force of that explosion that nothing remained of Mapes' body beyond a few scattered fragments of shoes and clothing.

Blake was still dazed at the cataclysmic suddenness of Mapes' death

as Zehru swung the tube around to train it upon him. Only a last-minute desperate effort upon Blake's part saved him. His wildly thrown metal club made a lucky hit on the tube itself, knocking it, shattered and useless, out of Zehru's grasp.

Unarmed, Zehru faced Blake with his face contorting in agony. For a moment the Xollarian swayed there, apparently trying to gather his failing strength for the next move. The deadly air of the enclosure was already taking hideous toll. The scaly flesh of his head and face was dissolving like melting butter.

Zehru's strength was ebbing too swiftly for him to have any chance of gaining safety through either of the distant side walls. His only hope of fighting back to the purple mists was to pass Blake and go through the nearby end wall through which he had originally been drawn.

He came lunging forward in an attack whose sheer fury made Blake give ground before the menace of the lashing tentacles.

Blake took another backward step, then staggered as his foot struck a rough spot in the ground. Zehru's tentacles were upon him before he could recover himself. His club was jerked from his fingers and sent hurtling far out of reach. Half a dozen of the tentacle-arms lashed

around his throat in a strangling grip.

He clawed wildly at the choking coils, but they failed to loosen even a fraction of an inch. Desperately Blake sent his fists smashing into the gray face. The scale armor of Zehru's skull, fast weakening in the liquefying influence of the oxygen, gave way beneath that battering attack. He staggered, and his coiling tentacles relaxed slightly.

Blake tore himself free. A final smashing blow, with every ounce of his one hundred and ninety pounds behind it, sent Zehru crashing to the ground. The Xollarian tried to rise, then feebly slumped back, his strength spent. Blake leaped forward to finish his opponent, but stopped as he saw that his efforts were not needed.

The deadly air of the enclosure was now overwhelming Zehru with swift and hideous death. He was literally rotting before Blake's horrified eyes, the gray-scaled skin sloughing off in streaming rivulets of pallid ooze, and the entire body contorting in what was obviously a death agony.

Sickened, Blake stepped back a pace or two. Zehru's tentacles feebly beat the ground around him, then suddenly one of the writhing arms blundered upon a thin cable running along the ground. Before Blake could spring forward to stop him, Zehru with a last surge of power

ripped the fragile metal strand completely in two.

It was the Xollarian's dying effort. He slumped in a motionless, nearly liquescent heap. But that last blind blow at the Earthlings threatened to be a deadly one. The severed cable led to one of the black posts surrounding the enclosure. With the cable's parting an entire section of one of the gold-flecked barrier walls vanished. Xollar's deadly purple mists were already surging in.

Speed was the Earthlings' only chance now. Helen was as quick to realize the danger as was Blake. Side by side they started their mad race toward where the silver arch-gate loomed nearly a hundred yards away.

They had covered barely half the distance when the air around them began to show a definite tinge of purple. With the appearance of the purple hue there came a strange and swiftly increasing agony, a torturing vibration that seemed to be tearing every atom in their bodies asunder.

They were within ten yards of the arch when Helen fell. Blake grabbed her up in his arms and stumbled on. There was no longer enough oxygen in the air to even breathe. Blake's lungs were on fire. Every cell in his body seemed vibrating in unbearable torment.

It was all that he could do to struggle up on the low platform. He staggered across the space and under the arch. It took the last shred of strength in his tortured body for him to lift his hand and pull the black lever down into place.

Its action was instantaneous. The agony of the purple mists was blotted out in a surging wave of mighty force that swept Blake and Helen up and away through a Spaceless universe where black chaos reigned awesomely supreme. There was a long terrible moment of hurtling through distances inconceivably vast. Blake's brain reeled in nausea.

Then suddenly all motion ceased and everything was normal again. There was firm grassy ground under his feet and a cool breeze was blowing in his face.

He opened his eyes and saw the gray half-light of early dawn. After the first swift look around him he sighed in mighty relief. To his left was the familiar skyline of Fifth Avenue. To his right was Central Park West. They were somewhere in Central Park, safe again in their own world.

And somewhere in that other world beneath the twin purple suns, the time mechanism of the silver gate should even now be releasing the

explosive that would forever blot out all trace of the evil handiwork of Zehru, cosmic fisher of Xollar.

March 1932

131 Poisoned Air by Sterner St. Paul Meek

Summary goes here

Aproximate word count: 10,400

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

A telephone bell jangled insistently. The orderly on duty dropped his feet from the desk to the floor and lifted the receiver with a muttered curse.

"Post hospital, Aberdeen Proving Ground," he said sleepily, rubbing his eyes.

A burst of raucous coughing answered him. Several times it ceased for an instant and a voice tried to speak, but each time a fresh spasm of deep-chested wracking coughing interrupted.

"Who is this?" demanded the now aroused orderly. "What's the matter?"

Between intervals of coughing difficultly enunciated words reached him.

"This is—uch! uch!—Lieutenant Burroughs at the—uch!—Michaelville range. We have been—uch!—caught in a cloud of poison—uch! uch!—gas. Send an ambulance and a—uch!—surgeon at once. Better bring—uch!—gas masks."

"At the Michaelville range, sir? How many men are down there?"

"Uch! uch! uch!—five—all help—uch! uch!—helpless. Hurry!"

"Yes, sir. I'll start two ambulances down at once, sir."

"Don't forget the—uch! uch!—gas—uch!—masks."

"No, sir; I'll send them, sir."

Five minutes later two ambulances rolled out of the garage and took the four-mile winding ribbon of concrete which separated the Michaelville water impact range from the main front of the Aberdeen Proving Ground. On each ambulance was a hastily awakened and partially clothed medical officer. For three miles they tore along the curving road at high speed. Without warning the leading machine slowed down. The driver of the second ambulance

shoved home his brake just in time to keep from ramming the leading vehicle.

"What's the matter?" he shouted.

As he spoke he gave a muttered curse and switched on his amber fog-light. From the marshes on either side of the road a deep blanket of fog rolled up and enveloped the vehicle, almost shutting off the road from sight. The forward ambulance began to grope its way slowly forward. The senior medical officer sniffed the fog critically and shouted to his driver.

"Stop!" he cried. "There's something funny about this fog. Every one put on gas masks."

He coughed slightly as he adjusted his mask. His orders were shouted to the ambulance in the rear but before the masks could be adjusted, every member of the crew was vying with the rest in the frequency and violence of the coughs which he could emit. The masks did not seem to shut out the poisonous fog which crept in between the masks and the men's faces and seemed to take bodily possession of their lungs.

"I don't believe we'll ever make the last mile to Michaelville through

this, Major," cried the driver between intervals of coughing. "Hadn't we better turn back while we can?"

"Drive on!" cried the medical officer. "We'll keep going as long as we can. Imagine what those poor devils on the range are going through without masks of any sort."

On through the rapidly thickening fog, the two ambulances groped their way. The road seemed interminable, but at length the flood lights of the Michaelville end of the range came dimly into view. As the vehicles stopped the two surgeons jumped to the ground and groped their way forward, stretcher bearers following them closely. Presently Major Martin stumbled over a body which lay at full length on the concrete runway between the two main buildings. He stooped and examined the man with the aid of a pocket flashlight.

"He's alive," he announced in muffled tones through his mask. "Take him to the ambulance and fit a mask on him."

Three more unconscious men were carried to the ambulances before the prone form of Lieutenant Burroughs was found by the searchers. The lieutenant lay on his back not far from the telephone and directly under the glare of a huge arc-light. His eyes were open and he was conscious, but when he tried to speak, only a murmur came

from his lips. There was a rattle in his chest and faint coughs tried in vain to force their way out between his stiffened lips.

"Easy, Lieutenant," said Major Martin as he bent over him; "don't try to talk just now. You're all right and we'll have a mask on you in a jiffy. That damned gas isn't as thick right here as it is down the road a way."

Two medical corps men lifted the lieutenant onto a stretcher and started to fit a mask over his face. He feebly raised a hand to stop them. His lips formed words which he could not enunciate, but Major Martin understood them.

"Your men?" he said between intervals of coughing. "We've got them all in the ambulance, I think. There were four besides yourself, weren't there?"

The lieutenant nodded.

"Right. We have them all. Now we'll take you back to the hospital and have you fixed up in a jiffy."

The entire rescue crew were coughing violently as the ambulances left Michaelville. For a mile they drove through fog that was thicker

than had been seen in Maryland for years. They reached the point where they had encountered the congealed moisture on the way out, but now there was no diminution of its density. The main post was less than two miles away when they burst out into a clear night and increased their speed.

As the two machines drew up in front of the post hospital, the driver of the leading ambulance swayed in his seat. Blindly he pulled on his emergency brake and then slumped forward in his seat, his breath coming in wheezing gasps. Major Martin hastily tore the mask from his face and glanced at it.

"Take him in with the rest!" he cried. "His mask must have leaked."

As they entered the hospital, a sickening weakness overcame Major Martin. From all sides a black pall seemed to roll in on him and bits of ice seemed to form in his brain. He reeled and caught at the shoulder of a corps man who was passing. The orderly caught at him and looked for a moment at his livid face.

"Sergeant Connors!" he cried.

A technical sergeant hastened up. Major Martin forced words with difficulty through stiffening lips.

"Call Captain Murdock," he wheezed, "and have him get Captain Williams. I'm down and probably Dr. Briscoe will be down in a few minutes. Telephone the commanding officer and tell him to quarantine the whole proving ground. Have the telephone orderly wake everyone on the post and order them to close all windows in all buildings and not to venture outside until they get fresh orders. This seems to be the same stuff they had in Belgium last December."

As the last words came from his lips he slowly stiffened and slumped toward the ground. The sergeant and the orderly picked him up and carried him to a bed in the emergency ward. The orderly hurried away to close all of the hospital windows while Sergeant Connors took down the receiver of the telephone and began to carry out the Major's orders.

Dr. Bird glanced at the news-paper clipping which Operative Carnes of the United States Secret Service laid on his desk. Into his eyes came a curious glitter, sure evidence that the famous scientist's interest was aroused.

"Last December when we discussed this matter, Doctor," said the detective, "you gave it as your opinion that Ivan Saranoff was at the bottom of it and that the same plague which devastated the Meuse Valley in Belgium would eventually make an appearance in the

United States. You were right."

Dr. Bird bounded to his feet.

"Is Saranoff back on this side of the Atlantic?" he demanded.

"Officially, he is not. Every customs inspector and immigration officer has his photograph and no report of his arrest has come in, but we know Saranoff well enough to discount negative evidence where he is concerned. Whether he is here or not, the plague is."

"When did it appear?"

"Last night at the Aberdeen Proving Ground in Maryland. It has killed eight or ten and twice as many more are sick. The place is quarantined and a rigid censorship has been placed over the telephones, but it is only a matter of time before some press man will get the story. I have a car waiting below and a pass signed by the Secretary of War. Grab what apparatus you need and we'll start."

Dr. Bird pressed a button on his desk. A tall, willowy girl entered, notebook in hand. Carnes glanced with keen appreciation at her slim beauty.

"Miss Andrews," said the doctor, "in five minutes Mr. Carnes and I

will leave here for Aberdeen Proving Ground in the Government car which is waiting below. You will see that Mr. Davis is in that car and that traveling laboratory 'Q' is ready to follow us."

"Yes, Doctor."

"You remember that mysterious plague in Belgium last December, do you not?"

"Yes, Doctor."

"I was unable to get over to Belgium, but an army surgeon and two Public Health Service men went over. You will get copies of all reports they made, including especially any reports of autopsies on bodies of victims. I want all data on file in the Public Health Service or the War Department. You will then obtain a car and follow us to Aberdeen. Arrangements will be made for your admittance to the proving ground. The Belgian plague has made its appearance in the United States."

Swiftly the expression of the girl's face changed. Her dark eyes glowed with an internal fire and the immobility of her face vanished as if by magic to be replaced by an expression of fierce hatred. Her lips drew back, exposing her strong white teeth and she literally spat

out her words.

"That swine, Saranoff!" she hissed.

Carnes sprang to his feet.

"Why, it's Feodrovna Androvitch!" he cried in astonishment.

In an instant the rage faded from her face and the calm, immobility which had marked it reappeared. Through the silence Dr. Bird's voice cut like a whip.

"Miss Andrews," he said sternly, "I thought that I had impressed on you the fact that even a momentary lapse from the character which you have assumed may easily be fatal to both of us. Unless you can learn to control your emotions, your usefulness to me is at an end."

Although Carnes watched closely he could not detect the slightest change of expression in the girl's face as the doctor spoke.

"I am very sorry, Doctor," she said evenly. "We were alone and I allowed the mask to slip for an instant. It will not happen again."

"It must not," said the doctor curtly. "Carry out your instructions."

"Yes, Doctor."

She turned on her heel and left the office. Carnes looked quickly at Dr. Bird.

"Surely that is Feodrovna Androvitch, Doctor?" he asked.

"It was. It is now Thelma Andrews, my secretary. She changed her name with her appearance and politics. I have been training her since last August. This is her first official appearance, so to speak."

"In view of her past associations, is it safe to trust her?"

"If I didn't think so, I wouldn't use her. She has ample reason to hate Ivan Saranoff and she knows how much mercy she has to hope for from him if he ever gets her in his clutches. We can't play a lone hand against Saranoff forever and I know of no better place to recruit an organization than the enemy's camp. Thelma saved our lives in Russia, you may remember."

"But even when she was rescuing us from the clutches of Saranoff's gang, she was an ardent communist, if I remember correctly."

"Theoretically I believe she still favors the world revolution, but she hates Saranoff even more than she does the bourgeoisie and I believe

she had come to be willing to accept capitalistic institutions for the present, at least as far as this country is concerned. At any rate, I trust her. If you have any doubts, you can have her watched for a while."

Carnes thought for a moment and then picked up the telephone.

"I have plenty of confidence in your judgment, Doctor," he said apologetically, "but if you don't mind, I'll have Haggerty trail her for a few days. It won't do any harm."

"Very well; and if any of the Young Labor gang should penetrate her disguise, he'd be a mighty efficient bodyguard. Do as you see fit."

Carnes called the number of the secret service and conferred for a few moments with Bolton, the chief of the bureau. He turned to Dr. Bird with a smile of satisfaction.

"Haggerty will be on the job in a few minutes, Doctor."

"Good enough. The five minutes I allowed are up. Let's see how well she has performed her first task."

As they emerged from the Bureau of Standards, Carnes glanced rapidly around. In the front seat of the secret service car which he

had left sat a young man whom the detective recognized as one of Dr. Bird's assistants. Behind the car stood a small delivery truck with two of the Bureau mechanics on the seat.

Dr. Bird nodded to the mechanics and followed Carnes into the big sedan. With a motorcycle policeman clearing a way for them, they roared across Washington and north along the Baltimore pike. Two hours and a half of driving brought them to Aberdeen and they turned down the concrete road leading to the proving ground. Two miles from the town a huge chain was stretched across the road with armed guards patrolling behind it. The car stopped and an officer stepped forward and examined the pass which Carnes presented.

"You are to go direct to headquarters, gentlemen," he said. "Colonel Wesley is waiting for you."

The commanding officer rose to his feet as Carnes and Dr. Bird entered his office.

"I am at your service, Dr. Bird," he said formally. "The Chief of Ordnance has given instructions which, as I understand them, put you virtually in command of this post." There was resentment in the colonel's tone.

Dr. Bird smiled affably and extended his hand. The old colonel struggled with his chagrin for a moment, but few men could resist Dr. Bird when he deliberately tried to charm them. Colonel Wesley grasped the proffered hand.

"What I want most, Colonel, is your cooperation," said the doctor suavely. "I am not competent to assume command here even if I wished to. I would like to ask a few favors but if they should prove to be contrary to your established policies, I will gladly withdraw my request."

Colonel Wesley's face cleared as if by magic.

"You have only to ask for anything we have, Doctor," he said earnestly, "and it is yours. Frankly, we are at our wit's end."

"Thank you. I have a truck with some apparatus and three men outside. Will you have them guided to your laboratory and given what aid they need in setting their stuff up?"

"Gladly."

"My secretary, Miss Andrews, will arrive from Washington later in the day with some information. I would like to have her passed

through the guards and brought directly to me wherever I am. You have the place well guarded, have you not?"

"As well as I can with my small force. All roads are patrolled by motorcycles; four launches are on the waterfront, and there are seven planes aloft."

"That is splendid. Now can you tell me just what happened last night?"

"Captain Murdock, the acting surgeon, can do that better than I can, Doctor. He is at the hospital but I'll have him up here in a few minutes."

"With your permission, we'll go to the hospital and talk to him there. I want to examine the patients in any event."

"Certainly, Doctor. I will remain at my office until I am sure that I can give you no further assistance."

With a word of thanks, Dr. Bird left, and, accompanied by Carnes, made his way to the hospital. Captain Murdock was frankly relieved to greet the famous Bureau of Standards scientist and readily gave him the information he desired.

"The first intimation we had of trouble was when Lieutenant Burroughs telephoned from the water impact range where they were doing night firing last night at about four A.M. Two ambulances went down and brought him and his four men back, all of them stricken with what I take to be an extremely rapidly developing form of lobar pneumonia. All of the men who went down were stricken with the same disease, two of them as soon as they got back. So far we have had eight deaths among these men and all of the rest, except Lieutenant Burroughs, are apt to go at any moment.

"The trouble seemed to come from a cloud of some dense heavy gas which rolled in from the marsh. On the advice of Major Martin, every door and window in the post was kept closed until morning. The gas never reached the upper part of the post but it reached the stables. Eleven horses and mules are dead and all of the rest are stricken. The stable detachment either failed to close their barracks tightly or else the gas went in through cracks for seven out of the nine are here in the hospital, although none of them are very seriously ill. As soon as the sun came up, the gas seemed to disappear."

"Let me see the men who are sick."

Captain Murdock led the way into the ward. Dr. Bird went from man

to man, examining charts and asking questions of the nurses and medical corps men on duty. When he had gone the rounds of the ward he entered the morgue and carefully examined the bodies of the men who lay there.

"Have you performed any autopsies?" he asked.

"Not yet."

"Have you the authority?"

"On the approval of the commanding officer."

"Please secure that approval at once. Have all lights taken out of the operating room and the windows shaded. I want to work under red light. We must examine the lungs of these men at once. With all due respect to your medical knowledge, Captain, I am not convinced that these men died of pneumonia."

"Neither am I, Doctor, but that is the best guess I could make. I'll have things fixed up for you right away."

Dr. Bird stepped to the telephone and called the laboratory. When, in half an hour, Captain Murdock announced that he was ready to proceed, Davis had arrived with an ultra-microscope and other

apparatus which the doctor had telephoned for.

"Did you arrange about the horses, Davis?" asked Dr. Bird.

"Yes, sir. They will be up here as soon as the trucks can bring them."

"Good enough. We'll start operating."

An hour later, Dr. Bird straightened up and faced the puzzled medical officer.

"Captain," he said, "your diagnosis is faulty. With one possible exception, the lungs of these men are free from pneumonicocci. On the other hand there is a peculiar aspect of the tissues as though a very powerful antiseptic solution had been applied to them."

"Hardly an antiseptic, Doctor; wouldn't you say, rather, a cauterizing agent."

Dr. Bird bent again over the ultra-microscope.

"Are you familiar with the work done by Bancroft and Richter at Cornell University last November and December?" he asked.

"No, I can't say that I am."

"They were working under a Heckscher Foundation grant studying just how antiseptic solutions destroy bacteria. It has always been held that some chemical change went on, but this theory they disproved. It is a process of absorption. If enough of the chemical adheres to the living bacterium, the living protoplasm thickens and irreversibly coagulates. It resembles a boiling without heat. I have seen some of their slides and the appearance is exactly what I see in this tissue."

Captain Murdock bent over the microscope with a new respect for Dr. Bird in his face.

"I agree with you, Doctor," he said. "This tissue certainly looks as though it had been boiled. It is certainly coagulated, as I can plainly see now that you point it out to me. You believe, then, that it is a simple case of gassing?"

"If so, it was done by no known gas. I have studied at Edgewood Arsenal, and I am familiar with all of the work done by the Chemical Warfare Service in gases. No known gas will produce exactly this appearance. It is something new. Carnes, have those horses been brought up yet?"

"I'll see, Doctor."

"If they are, bring one here."

In a few moments the body of a dead horse was dragged into the operating room and Dr. Bird attacked it with a rib saw. He soon laid the lungs open and dragged them from the body. He cut down the middle of one of the organs and shaved off a thin slice which he placed under the lens of a powerful binocular microscope.

"Hello, what the dickens is this?" he exclaimed.

With a scalpel and a delicate pair of tweezers he carefully separated from the lung tissue a tiny speck of crystalline substance which glittered under the red light in the operating room. He carefully transferred it to a glass slide and put it under a microscope with a higher magnification.

"Rhombohedral regular," he mused as he examined it. "Colorless, friable, and cleaving in irregular planes. What in thunder can it be? Have you ever seen anything like this in a lung, Murdock?"

The medical officer bent over the microscope for a long time before he shook his head with a puzzled air.

"I never have," he admitted.

"Then that's probably what we're looking for. Start slicing every lung in this place and look for those crystals. Save them and put them in this watch glass. If we can get enough of them, we may be able to learn something. Carnes, get the rest of those horses in here and open them up."

Two hours of careful work netted them a tiny pile of the peculiar crystals. Some had come from the lungs of the dead animals and some few from the lungs of the dead soldiers. Dr. Bird placed the crystals in a glass bottle which he covered with layer after layer of black paper.

"Get me more of those crystals if you can find them, Captain Murdock," he said, "and in any case, leave the bodies here for further study. Davis and I will go to the laboratory and try to find out what they are. Carnes, hasn't Miss Andrews showed up yet?"

"No, Doctor."

"Locate her on the telephone if you can and tell her not to bother about anything except the autopsy reports and to get them here as quickly as possible. Let me know when you have that done."

In a dark room of the photographic laboratory, Dr. Bird removed the

black wrappings from the bottle. He dropped a few of the crystals in a test tube and added distilled water. The water assumed a pink tinge as the blood with which the crystals were covered dissolved, but the crystals themselves did not change. They rose and floated on the surface of the water.

"Insoluble in water, Davis," commented the doctor. "Better wash the lot and then we'll get after the ultimate analysis. Whether we'll be able to make a proximate is doubtful in view of the small amount of sample we have. It's dollars to doughnuts that it's some carbon compound."

He heated a few of the washed crystals in a watch glass. Suddenly there was a sharp crack and the material disappeared. Dr. Bird thrust his nose toward the glass and sniffed carefully.

"The dickens!" he muttered. "Davis, have I got a cold or do you smell garlic?"

"Faintly, Doctor."

"I have a hunch. Fill a gasometer with purified argon and we'll introduce a few of these crystals and explode them. If I'm right—"

Half an hour later he straightened up and examined the tube of the gas analysis apparatus with which he was working. The level of the gas showed it to be of the original volume but the liquid under the argon was stained a light brown.

"It's impossible, Davis," cried the doctor, "but nevertheless, it's true. Expose some of those crystals to strong sunlight and see what happens."

The crystals rapidly disappeared as the light from a sun-ray arc fell on them.

"It's true, Davis," cried the doctor, positive awe in his voice. "Keep this strictly under your hat for the present. Now that you know what we're up against, fix up a couple of masks and air-collecting apparatus. That stuff will show up again in the swamp to-night and I am going down there to collect some samples. I'll telephone the hospital now."

As Dr. Bird emerged from the dark room, Carnes hurried up with a worried expression.

"The devil's to pay, Doctor," was his greeting.

"All right, stall him off for a minute while I telephone the hospital. I think I can save some of those poor fellows up there."

Carnes paced the floor in anxiety while Dr. Bird got Captain Murdock on the telephone.

"Bird talking, Murdock," he said crisply. "How much deep therapy X-ray apparatus have you got up there?... Too bad.... Well, at least you can give every patient a four-minute dose of maximum intensity and repeat in an hour or so. Keep them under sun-ray arcs as much as you can. Be ready for a fresh attack of the same epidemic to-night. As fast as the patients come in, give them a five-minute dose of X-rays and then sun-rays. Do you understand?... All right, then."

"Just a moment more, Carnes," he went on as he called the office of the commanding officer. "Colonel Wesley, this is Dr. Bird. I think that I have some light on your problem. You must anticipate another more virulent attack than you had last night, probably as soon as the sun goes down. Will you arrange to have everyone removed from the swamp area before that time? Never mind trying to guard the place; you'll just lose more lives if you do. Warn everyone to keep inside the buildings with all doors and windows closed tight. Get all the women and children and everyone else who isn't needed here off the post before dark. Send them to Aberdeen or Baltimore or

anywhere.... No, sir, the sick had better not be moved. I think they will be safer in the hospital than they would be elsewhere.... Yes, sir, that's all. Thank you."

Dr. Bird turned to the waiting Carnes.

"Did you locate Miss Andrews?" he asked.

"No, I didn't and that is what I want to talk to you about. I just started to telephone when a hurry call came through from Washington for me and I took it. It was Haggerty on the wire. He followed your precious secretary from the Bureau of Standards over to the Public Health Office and waited for her to come out. She stayed in the building for about an hour and brought a bundle of papers with her when she returned. She walked toward the State, War and Navy Building and Haggerty followed.

"On Pennsylvania Avenue, she was stopped by two men whom Haggerty describes as dark, swarthy, bearded Europeans of some sort. He tried to overhear their conversation but it was in a language which he did not recognize. He got only one word. The girl called one of them 'Denberg.'"

"Denberg!" cried the doctor, "Why, he's one of the Young Labor

crowd, but he's in Atlanta."

"He was, Doctor, but I telephoned Atlanta, and found that he had been released last month. After several minutes of talk the two men and your secretary went off together in perfect amity with Haggerty following. The trio got into a waiting car and Haggerty trailed them in a taxi. They drove around town rather aimlessly for some time and then left the car and walked. Haggerty was afraid he would lose them in the crowd so he closed in on them. He doesn't know what happened except that he felt a sudden stab in his arm and everything went black. He recovered in the police station twenty minutes later but the birds had flown."

"The devil!" cried Dr. Bird, consternation in his voice. "Of course, it's easy to see what happened. They spotted him and a confederate slipped a hypo into his arm. What worries me is the fact that they've got Thelma."

"I hope they kill her," snapped Carnes vindictively. "She was never kidnapped in broad daylight. Haggerty says she went with them quite willingly and talked and laughed with them. She has deserted, if she wasn't simply acting as a spy from the first. I didn't trust her at all."

"I hate to admit that my judgment is that rotten, Carnes, but the evidence certainly points that way. At that, I think I'll reserve final judgment until later. Now, in view of what you have learned, I have a job for you."

"It's about time, Doctor. I have been rather useless with all the high-powered science that has been flying around here."

"Well, you'll be in your element now. We know that Denberg is loose and their capture of Thelma is no coincidence. I was pretty sure that Saranoff and his gang were at the bottom of this; now I am certain. They must have introduced something onto the marshes last night which caused the trouble. They could not have come overland very well, for the place is too well patrolled. Had they come by air, they would have attracted attention, even had they used a Bird silencer on their motor, for they couldn't muffle their propeller, especially on a takeoff, and there are plenty of men here who would have recognized it. You might check up on that, but I am confident that they came by water. Launches and boats are continually passing up and down the Chesapeake and its tributaries and one more could easily have escaped notice. The Bush River is at the far end of the Michaelville range and it is navigable for craft of light draft at high tide. Find out whether any strange craft were seen in the vicinity of the proving ground last night. If you draw a blank, go to Perryville

and Havre de Grace and see what you can find out there. I have a hunch that their base is more likely to be up the Susquehanna than down toward the coast. Above all, Carnes, don't approach the proving ground by water to-night and don't get near the mouth of the Bush River."

"All right, Doctor. What are you going to do?"

"I'm going down on the swamp and collect samples. Oh, don't look so worried. I know just what I am up against and I will have adequate protection. I'll be in no danger and you would just be in the way. Toddle along, old dear, and report to me by telephone as soon as you have learned anything."

"As you say, Doctor. You'll hear from me the minute I do."

When Carnes had left, Dr. Bird climbed into the waiting car and was driven back to the hospital. Captain Murdock greeted him with a smiling face.

"I don't know how you got on to that treatment, Dr. Bird," he said, "but it is doing the men good. The worst cases haven't been affected much, one way or the other, but the progress of the malady in the mild cases from the stables has been completely checked. I think

they have a chance now."

"They'll be all right if the destruction and coagulation of tissue hadn't progressed too far before you checked it, Captain. Treat them now for simple lung cauterization and they ought to get well."

"I have some more of those crystals dissected out, Doctor."

"Keep them in the dark until Mr. Davis comes after them. I want to take a few of them back to Washington for study."

"You expect another attack to-night, Doctor?"

"Yes, sometime after sundown."

"What, in heaven's name, is it?"

"Heaven has nothing to do with it, Captain; the stuff comes from the devil's regions and it is the product of a Russian chemist, who I sometimes believe is verily the devil himself. How it's done and what it is, I haven't found out yet, but I am going to investigate a little to-night. The effect is what you have seen. Are you familiar with the various forms of oxygen?"

"The forms of oxygen? Why, there is only one, oxygen gas. Wait a

minute though, there is another form, ozone. Are there any more?"

"None that have been previously listed and studied, but at least one other form exists. Those crystals are pure oxygen."

"Impossible! Oxygen is a gas at all ordinary temperatures."

"Yes, a gas, but one whose density varies. Oxygen, to which we chemists assign the formula O2, meaning that its molecule consists of two atoms of oxygen, has a weight of 32 grams per gram molecule. Ozone, to which we assign the formula O3, meaning that its molecule contains three atoms of oxygen, weighs fifty per cent more or 48 grams per gram molecule. This new form has a density less than water, but tremendously greater than any known gas. I have not yet been able to determine its structure, so I will have to assign to it the formula, Ox, meaning an indefinite number of atoms per molecule. The only name which suggests itself is oxyzone, a combination of oxygen and ozone.

"The stuff is a polymerization, or condensation, to speak roughly, of the oxygen of the air. The oxygen takes this form which the lungs cannot assimilate except with great difficulty and with great damage to the tissues. The oxyzone will break down rapidly under the influence of sunlight or of any ray whose wave-length is shorter than

indigo. As a result, it disappears as soon as the sun is up and it will reappear after dark. That is why I suggested X-rays as a treatment. They have a very short wave-length and will penetrate tissues and affect the particles in the lungs themselves. Once the material is removed from the lungs, the cauterization of the tissue ceases and it is merely a matter of slow recovery."

"It is a marvelous discovery, Doctor. I can foresee great uses for it in medical science if a way can be found to produce it."

"Just now we are much more interested in stopping its production than in producing it. Carry on with the line of treatment I have prescribed and be ready for a busy time to-night."

From the hospital, Dr. Bird made his way to the headquarters building where he conferred with Colonel Wesley on the measures being taken to clear the proving ground of all persons not strictly necessary for its guarding. The commanding officer, when he learned Dr. Bird's plans, wished to send guards with him, but the doctor promptly vetoed the scheme.

"My assistant, Mr. Davis, won't be able to fix up more than two masks before dark, Colonel," he said, "and you would just be condemning men to death to send them with me into that fog without

proper protection. I can see that you are anxious to know what is causing it, but I'm not ready to tell just yet. I had given your medical officer enough information to enable him to treat the hospital cases scientifically, and to-morrow or the next day I hope to be able to tell you all about it. Now, if you'll pardon me, I'm going to the laboratory to see how Mr. Davis is getting along. It will be dark in three-quarters of an hour and I hope that everyone will stay under cover as much as possible."

Davis looked up as Dr. Bird entered the laboratory.

"I'll have the masks completed in an hour, Doctor," he said, "but I don't know how much value they will be. If the oxygen polymerizes before it enters the body, these masks ought to stop it, but if it polymerizes under the influence of heat and moisture in the lungs, they will be useless."

"I'll have to take a chance on that, Davis. From the description of the fog, I strongly suspect that the process takes place outside the body. Have you had your supper?"

"No, Doctor."

"Neither have I. I'll go over to the officers' mess and get a bite to eat.

As soon as you have those masks done, get your supper and then telephone me at the club. If Carnes isn't back, I may have to ask you to drive me down toward Michaelville."

"I'll be very glad to, Doctor."

Carnes had not returned when Davis called Dr. Bird at the officers' club two hours later. Night had fallen and everyone on the proving ground sat behind tightly closed windows with lights blazing on them, wondering whether the finger of death would reach in from the swamp to touch them. The fog had not yet made an appearance on the main post and Dr. Bird had no fear of it when he entered his car and drove down to pick up his assistant.

Davis came out to meet him with a curious hood made of vitiolene and rubber, pulled down well over his head. In his hand he carried a second one. Dr. Bird adjusted the second mask and the two men loaded the rear of the car with apparatus designed for collecting samples of air. The outside of each sample cylinder was heavily coated with black rubberine paint. At a word from the Doctor, Davis took the wheel and drove off along the winding ribbon of concrete which led to the upper end of the Michaelville range.

For a mile they drove through a clear, calm night with no traces of

fog apparent. Dr. Bird's eyes continually searched the swamps on both sides of the road.

"Stop!" he said suddenly, his voice coming muffled through the enveloping mask. The car stopped and the Doctor pointed to the west. Over the swamp a few stray fingers of fog were curling up from the water.

Leaving Davis in charge of the car, Dr. Bird donned rubber hip boots and with a gas cylinder in his hand, splashed through the water toward the fog. He reached the place with no difficulty and spent ten minutes trying to collect a sample. Finally, with a muttered exclamation, he removed his mask and inhaled deeply a dozen times. Carrying the mask in his hand, he made his way back to the car.

"False alarm," he said as he pulled on his mask. "It was so thin that I couldn't get a sample so I tested it by breathing. There isn't a trace of cough in that fog. Drive on."

A half mile farther along the road, a curtain of fog swept in on them, momentarily hiding the road from view. They were through the belt of fog in a few feet and the car came to a stop. Dr. Bird sprang out, gas cylinder in hand. He returned to the car shortly.

"We may have what we are looking for, Davis," he said, "but I am not at all certain. It looked very much like ordinary fog. Let's go down to the range."

The car drew up between the two main buildings of the Michaelville front. The air was clear as far as they could see, but from under the north building, a tiny wisp of fog was coming. As it came under the glare of the three huge arc-lights which flooded the ground with light, it grew more tenuous and gradually dissipated into nothingness. With an exclamation of satisfaction, Dr. Bird bent down and thrust the end of a cylinder under the building. He removed it in a moment as the fog began to stream from the upper end. Carefully he closed the pet-cocks of the tube and replaced it in the car. He filled a half dozen tubes before he was satisfied.

"I'd like to go down to the water," he said through his mask. "What kind of a jigger do they run on that track?"

"It's a Ford scooter, I was told. It's probably in that shed."

Half an hour later the two men were running the scooter down the four miles of narrow gage track which separated Michaelville from the Bush River. A few scattered patches of fog could be seen on either side of the track, but none were of sufficient thickness to

warrant much success in sample taking. At the water front Dr. Bird looked across the half mile wide river and grunted.

"The tide won't be in for another three hours," he said. "Right now there isn't over sixteen inches of water in there."

Carnes was waiting in the well lighted laboratory when they drove up.

"All right, Davis," said the doctor, "get busy on those samples. If you can't make out the first two, don't crack the others but leave them for me. Give Carnes your mask; he'll drive the rest of the night.

"What luck, Carnesy?" he asked, as the detective, wearing Davis' mask, drove toward the officers' club.

"No stray plane landed or even flew over here last night so far as I could learn. Most of the boats on the bay were either known or lent themselves to ready identification. There were four that I couldn't exactly place, but I think we can safely discard all but one. Some fishermen were pulling nets on the bay about half a mile outside the mouth of the Bush River last night. About eleven, a boat running without lights passed them. They said that they could not hear an engine running, but just a dull hum and the gurgle of a propeller.

They hailed it, but got no answer. It faded away into the darkness and they think it was headed toward the mouth of the Bush River. They had their nets up and reset in another hour but the boat didn't reappear."

"Hmm. High tide was at ten minutes after midnight. There was plenty of water in the river at that hour. It sounds promising."

"I thought of telephoning Washington and getting a Coast Guard cutter put on patrol in the bay but I didn't like to do it without your sanction."

"It might have been a good idea, but on the whole it's probably better that you didn't. Carnes, we'll go down to the water front and see whether anything shows up to-night. High tide will be about eleven-thirty. It's about half-past nine now. We'd better get going."

On the second drive to Michaelville, the fog patches were quite noticeably denser than they had been earlier in the evening. Three times the car had to pass through bands of fog which covered the road. As they passed the second one Carnes suddenly began to cough.

"What's the matter, old man?" cried Dr. Bird, a note of anxiety in his

voice. For a few moments Carnes could not answer for coughing. He seized the mask to tear it from his head but Dr. Bird restrained him. In a few minutes his voice became intelligible.

"It seemed like that fog bit right into my lungs, Doctor," he gasped. "I felt as if I were choking. It's better now."

"Are you sure your mask isn't leaking, Carnes? It'll be all up with you if it does. Test it."

The detective closed the intake valve of the mask and expelling all of the air from his lungs, took a deep breath. The air whistled noisily in through the outlet valve.

"The devil!" cried the doctor. "Take that mask off and let me look at it."

A few moments were enough to make the needed repairs and they drove on. Carnes still coughed from time to time. At Michaelville, they started the scooter and ran down the track to the river. They secreted the scooter under the parapet on the water pent-house and walked to the river's edge.

"There's no telling just where they may land, Carnes," said the

doctor reflectively, "but this looks like the most likely place. I'll tell you what we'll do. The river narrows a good deal about half a mile east of here. You go up to the narrows and keep watch while I stay here. If any craft passes you, follow it upstream until you find me. If they land, handle the situation as well as you can alone. If you hear any shooting, come as fast as you can leg it. I'll do the same."

The detective stole away into the darkness and Dr. Bird settled himself for a long vigil. For an hour nothing broke the stillness of the night. Suddenly the doctor was on his feet, peering downstream. A faint purring murmur came over the water, so faint that no one with less sensitive ears than the doctor's could have detected it. Assured after a few minutes of listening that some kind of a craft was coming up the river, the doctor sank back into his hiding place, an automatic pistol firmly grasped in his long tapering fingers.

The purr came nearer, but it was not appreciably louder. The gurgle of water past the prow of the boat could be heard and Dr. Bird could see a long ribbon of white on the water where the craft was passing. He stepped from his cover and leaned forward, straining his eyes to see the boat. It passed beyond him and continued up the river. He stepped quickly along the river bank, trying to keep it in sight. Suddenly he paused. The boat had turned and was coming back. Hurriedly he returned to his hiding place.

The boat came down the river until it was opposite the point where he crouched, and then it turned and came in toward the shore. Dr. Bird gripped his pistol and waited. When the craft was less than twenty feet from shore it stopped and a guttural voice spoke. Dr. Bird started. He had expected the language to be Russian, but it came as a shock to him, nevertheless. He strained his ears and cursed his inability to make out the words. Dr. Bird had been assiduously studying Russian under the tutelage of his new secretary for some months, but he had not yet progressed to the stage where he could readily understand it. The gift of languages was one which the erudite doctor did not possess.

The boat lay motionless for several minutes. Nervously the doctor glanced at his wrist watch. He barely stifled a cry of amazement. From the face of the luminous dial, long streamers of faintly phosphorescent light were streaming. He whirled to meet an attack from the rear but he was too late. Even as he turned the muzzle of a pistol pressed into his back and a voice spoke behind him.

"Drop that pistol, Doctor, or I'll be under the unpleasant necessity of making a hole in you."

Reluctantly, Dr. Bird dropped his pistol and the voice went on.

"Really, I hardly expected to catch you by surprise, Doctor. I thought you were clever enough to realize that our boat would be equipped with an ultra-violet searchlight. However, even the best minds must rest sometimes, and yours is due for a nice long rest. In fact, I might almost prophesy that it will be a permanent rest."

Dr. Bird shivered despite himself at the cold mercilessness of the railing voice behind him. The accents were ones which he did not recognize. His captor chuckled for a few moments and then called out in Russian. The boat came into the shore and eight figures climbed out. Two of them bore a small chest which they set down on the wharf. One of the figures picked up the doctor's automatic and his captor stepped in front. A flashlight gleamed for an instant and Dr. Bird started in surprise. The men wore no masks but only a plate of glass which protected their cheeks and eyes. Fastened to the neck of each one, below the chin, was a long tube which gleamed like glass. They wore heavy knapsacks strapped to their backs from which wires ran to each end of the bars.

"Those protectors make your enveloping head-mask look rather clumsy, don't they, Doctor?" said his captor mockingly. "It's too bad you didn't think of them first. It must be such a blow to your pride to think that anyone had invented something better than yours. Really, that mask of yours worries me. Remove it!"

At his words two of the men stepped forward and tore the doctor's mask roughly from his head. The mocking voice went on.

"In view of the fact that you have only a few hours of life left, Dr. Bird, it will give me pleasure to let you know how thoroughly you have been defeated. You may not know me by sight, although my name may not be unfamiliar. I am Peter Denberg."

He turned the flashlight for an instant on his own face, and Dr. Bird gazed at him keenly.

"I'll know you the next time I see you," he muttered, half to himself.

"The next time you see me will be in the hereafter, if there be such a thing," laughed the Russian. "The sweetest blow of all is now about to fall. We expected you to be here and came prepared to capture you. Had we not known that the arch enemy of the people would be here to-night, we would have struck at a point miles away. Do you know who betrayed you? It was one we placed in your laboratory for the very purpose which she served."

He turned on the light again and it picked out of the darkness another face, a long oval face with startlingly red lips and dark oval eyes which glowed as with an internal flame. As the face became visible,

the red lips drew back, exposing strong white teeth and the words were literally spat out.

"Swine!" she hissed. "Bourgeois! Did you think you could bribe me with your gifts to tolerate your vileness? I have brought about your downfall and death, Dr. Bird. I, Feodrovna Androvitch! Now will I avenge my brother's death at your hands!"

She sprang forward and spat full in the doctor's face. Dr. Bird fell back for an instant under the ferocity of her attack and long nails ripped the skin from his face. Denberg stepped forward and caught her wrists.

"Gently, sister," he warned. Feodrovna struggled for an instant but gave way to the powerful muscles of the communist leader. "There is no need for anything of that sort," he went on. "In a few moments we will open the chest which we have and then you will enjoy the amazing spectacle of the man who has temporarily checked the plans of our leader a dozen times, gasping for breath like a fish out of water. Start your protectors."

Each of the Russians closed a switch on the knapsack which he wore. From the bars below their chins came a dull violet glow which made their faces stand out eerily in the darkness. The flashlight was

centered on the box which Dr. Bird could see was made of lead, soldered into a solid mass. At a word from Denberg, one of the Russians stepped forward with a long knife in his hand and started to cut open the box.

With a sudden effort, Dr. Bird shook himself loose from the two men who were holding him and sprang forward. Denberg turned to meet him and the doctor's fist shot out like a piston rod. Full on the Russian's chin it landed and he went down like a poled ox. Two of the Russians closed with him but the two were no match for Dr. Bird's enormous strength, fighting as he was for his life. He hurled one away and swung with all of his strength at the other. His blow struck glancingly, and while the Russian spun away under the blow, he did not fall. A man caught at him from the rear and Dr. Bird whirled, but as he did so, two men seized his arms from behind. Mightily the doctor strove but others flung themselves on him. He straightened up with a superhuman effort and then from an unexpected source came help.

One of the men holding him gave a choking gasp and reeled sideways. Dr. Bird felt his neck deluged with liquid and the smell of hot blood rose sickeningly on the air. He shook himself loose again and smote with all of his strength at his nearest opponent. His blow landed fair but at the same instant an iron bar fell across his arm and

it dropped limp and helpless. Again a knife flashed in the darkness and a howl of pain came from the Russian who felt it bite home.

"We are attacked!" cried one of them. They whirled about, their flashlights cutting paths through the thickening fog. With her back to the crippled doctor's Feodrovna Androvitch held aloft a bloody knife.

Something seemed to catch Dr. Bird by the throat and shut off his breath. From a gash which had been cut in the lead box, a heavy gray fog was rising and enveloping everything in its deadening blanket. The fog penetrated into the doctor's lungs and an intolerable pain, as though hot irons were searing the tissues, tore him. He tried to cough, but the sound could not force its way through his stiffening lips. Darkness closed in on him and he swayed. He was dimly conscious that the Russians were swarming about Feodrovna, knives and clubs in their hands. Then through the night came an ear-splitting crack and a flash of orange flame. One of the Russians toppled and fell forward, knocking the weakened doctor down as he did so. Again came a flash and a report, and to the doctor's fading senses came a sound of shouts and pounding feet. Over his head another flash split the fog and then darkness swarmed in and with a sigh of pain, Dr. Bird let his head fall forward on his chest.

He recovered consciousness slowly and looked about him. He was in a white bed in a strange, yet somehow familiar, place with a ray of light of almost intolerable brilliance boring its way into his brain. He tried to raise his hand and found himself curiously weak. With a great effort he raised his hand until he could see it and let it fall with a cry which came from his lips only as a feeble murmur. His hand was thin almost to the point of emaciation. Blue veins stood out on the back and his long, slim, mobile fingers, the fingers of an artist and dreamer, were mere claws, with the skin drawn tight over the bones.

A man in a white uniform bent over him. "Drink this, Doctor," came in soothing tones.

He was too weak to protest and he managed to sip the drink through a glass tube. Slowly he felt himself sinking through vast unexplored reaches of darkness.

How long he lay there he did not know but when he again opened his eyes the light was no longer over him. He strove to speak and a husky whisper came from his lips. A tall woman in white hastened forward and bent over him.

"Where am I?" he asked with difficulty.

"You're in the hospital at Aberdeen Proving Ground, Doctor," said the nurse. "Everything is all right and you're doing splendidly. Just don't excite yourself and you'll get well in no time. Captain Murdock will be here in a few minutes."

"How long have I been here?" he asked.

"Oh, quite a while, Doctor. Now don't ask any more questions. You must rest and get well and strong, you know."

Strength seemed to be surging slowly back into the doctor's wasted frame. His voice came clearer and stronger.

"How long have I been here?" he demanded.

The nurse hesitated, but her face suddenly cleared as Captain Murdock entered the ward.

"Oh, Captain," she cried, "come here and take care of your patient. He won't keep quiet."

"Out of his head again?" asked Captain Murdock as he hastened forward.

"No more than you are," came in a husky whisper from Dr. Bird's

lips.

Captain Murdock looked quickly down and smiled in relief. "You'll live, Dr. Bird," he said. "Just take it easy for a few days and then you can talk all you want to."

"I'll talk now," came in stronger tones from the doctor's lips. "How long have I been here?"

Captain Murdock hesitated, but a glance at the doctor's flushed face warned him that it was better to give in than to fight him.

"You were brought in here two weeks ago yesterday," he said. "It was touch and go for a while, and, but for the treatment you devised, you would have been a goner. We fed you X-rays until I was afraid we would burn you up, but they did the business. It will cheer you up to learn that every man who got your treatment is either well or on the high road to recovery."

"The plague?" asked the doctor faintly.

"Oh, that's all over, thanks to you. It reached the post that night but under the influence of the daylight blue bulbs you had installed, it lost most of its virulence. We had a lot of sore throats in the morning

but there wasn't a man dangerously sick. It all faded when the sun hit it."

An orderly entered and spoke in an undertone to Captain Murdock. The surgeon hesitated for a moment, his eyes on Dr. Bird, and then nodded.

"Bring him in," he said quietly.

A small, unobtrusively dressed man entered the room and stepped to the bedside. Dr. Bird's face lighted up in one of its rare smiles and he strove to raise his hand in greeting.

"Carnesy, old dear, I'm glad to see you got out all right," he whispered. "I was afraid your mask wouldn't hold up after the trouble you had with it. Tell me what happened that night."

Carnes glanced at Captain Murdock, who nodded.

"I went down to the narrows and watched, Doctor, and when the Russian boat passed, I started to make my way back to you. The tide had come in and I had to make quite a detour to get to you. I got there a little later than I liked but still in time to do some good. You were down and Miss Andrews was standing over you with a bloody

knife in her hand, fighting like a wildcat. I started shooting and ran in yelling as loud as I could. I managed to plug three of them and I guess they thought I was a dozen men. I tried to make enough noise for that many. The rest took to their heels and Miss Andrews and I rigged one of their protectors over your face and dragged you to the scooter. The rest was plain sailing. We brought you in and Captain Murdock did the rest. That's all there was to it. If I hadn't been so slow, I could have driven them off before they opened that box and saved you all of this."

"Thelma?" asked the doctor faintly.

"Oh, she's none the worse, Doctor. I want to apologize to you for the poor opinion I had of your judgment. That girl wasn't recognized; she recognized Denberg on the streets of Washington and deliberately put her head into the lion's mouth by declaring herself. She got their whole plan and went along to try to checkmate them. If she hadn't started knifing when she did, the devils meant to hold your head directly over that box and it would have been just too bad."

"What was in the box?"

"She found that out. It was some kind of a microbe that Saranoff

developed in a Belgian laboratory which does something to the oxygen of the air. You'll have to get Dr. Burgess to explain that to you later; he has some of the bugs shut up for you to play with when you get back on the job. When we found that you were knocked out, Davis got him to come down from Washington to take charge. He has been running ray machines over the swamps for two weeks and says that every trace of the bugs are gone except those he has in the laboratory."

"Saranoff has more."

"No, he hasn't, thanks to Miss Andrews. Every day they started a fresh colony, leaving one lot back to start the next brood with. She tipped us off where they were kept and Bolton and Haggerty raided and got the lot and turned them over to Dr. Burgess."

"That's enough for to-day, Mr. Carnes," interrupted Captain Murdock. "You can see Dr. Bird to-morrow, but he has had enough excitement for to-day."

As Carnes took his leave, the nurse spoke to Captain Murdock. He looked carefully at Dr. Bird and nodded.

"For one minute. No longer!" he said.

The nurse stepped to the door. Into the room came a slim young woman of remarkable beauty, her eyes glowing as with an internal light. Her parting lips of startling redness showed strong white teeth. Her eyes grew misty as she leaned over the doctor's bed. Dr. Bird blinked for a moment and his face grew stern.

"Miss Andrews," he said in a husky whisper, "Mr. Carnes has told me what you did. In my service, success does not excuse disobedience. I thank you for your services which may have saved my life and which may have put me in worse danger. In any event, please remember two things. Unless you can learn to entirely suppress your emotions and learn that I will tolerate nothing but implicit obedience, your usefulness to me will be at an end and I will no longer need you."

The happiness faded from the girl's face as if by magic and an expression of absolute immobility took its place. Her eyes looked as though a curtain had been drawn over them.

"Yes, Doctor," she said in a toneless voice as she turned and left the room.

132 The Affair of the Brains by Desmond Winter Hall

Hawk Carse himself goes to keep Judd the Kite's rendezvous with the sinister genius Ku Sui.

Aproximate word count: 24,100

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Chapter 1: Off to the Rendezvous

Though it is seldom nowadays that Earthmen hear mention of Hawk Carse, there are still places in the universe where his name retains all its old magic. These are the lonely outposts of the farthest planets, and here when the outlanders gather to yarn the idle hours away their tales conjure up from the past that raw, lusty period before the patrol-ships came, and the slender adventurer, gray-eyed and with queer bangs of hair obscuring his forehead, whose steely will, phenomenal ray-gun draw and reckless space-ship maneuverings combined to make him the period's most colorful figure. These qualities of his live again in the outlanders' reminiscences and also

of course his score of blood-feuds and the one great feud that shook whole worlds in its final terrible settling—the feud of Hawk Carse and Dr. Ku Sui.

Again and again the paths of the adventurer and the sinister, brilliant Eurasian crossed, and each crossing makes a rich tale. Time after time Ku Sui, through his several bands of space-pirates, his individual agents and his ambitious web of power insidiously weaving over the universe, whipped his tentacles after the Hawk, and always the tentacles coiled back, repulsed and bloody. An almost typical episode is in the affair which followed what has been called the Exploit of the Hawk and the Kite.

It will be remembered—as related in "Hawk Carse"1—that Dr. Ku laid a most ingenious trap for Carse on the latter's ranch on Iapetus, eighth satellite of Saturn. Judd the Kite, pirate and scavenger, was the Eurasian's tool in this plot, which started with a raid on the ranch. The fracas which followed the Hawk's escape from the trap was bloody and grim enough, and resulted in the erasure of Judd and all his men save one; but the important thing to the following affair was that Judd's ship, the Scorpion, fell into Carse's hands with one prisoner and the ship's log, containing the space coordinates for a prearranged assignation of Judd with Ku Sui.

All other projects were postponed by the Hawk at this opportunity to meet Dr. Ku face to face. The trail of the Eurasian was the guiding trail of his life, and swiftly he moved along it.

There was work to be done before he could set out. Three men had emerged alive from the clash between the Hawk and the Kite: Carse himself, Friday, his gigantic negro companion in adventure, and a bearded half-caste called Sako, sole survivor of Judd's crew. Aided sullenly by this man, they first cleaned up the ravaged ranch, burying the bodies of the dead, repairing fences and generally bringing order out of confusion. Then, under Carse's instructions, Friday and the captive brigand tooled the adventurer's own ship, the Star Devil, well into the near-by jungle, while the Hawk returned to the Scorpion.

He went into her control cabin, opened her log book and once more scanned what interested him there. The notation ran:

"E.D. (Earth Date) 16 January, E.T. (Earth Time) 2:40 P.M. Meeting ordered by Ku Sui, for purpose of delivering the skeleton and clothing of Carse to him, at N.S. (New System) X-33.7; Y-241.3; Z-92.8 on E.D. 24 January, E.T. 10:20 P.M. Note: the ship is to stand by at complete stop, the radio's receiver open to Ku Sui's private wave (D37, X1293, R3) for further instructions."

He mulled over it, slowly stroking his flaxen bangs. It was a chance, and a good one. Judd's ship would keep that rendezvous, but it would sheathe the talons of the Hawk. This time a trap would be laid for Ku Sui.

The plan was simple enough, on the face of it, but the Eurasian was a master of cunning as well as a master of science, and high peril attended any matching of wits with him. Carse closed the log, his face bleak, his mind made up. A shuffle of feet brought his gaze up to the port-lock entrance.

Friday, stripped to shorts, a sweat-glistening ebony giant, stood there. Shaking the drops of steaming perspiration from his face, he reported:

"All finished, suh—got the Star Devil in the jungle where you said to hide her. An' now what? You still figurin' on keepin' that date with Dr. Ku in this ship?"

Carse nodded, absently.

"Then where'll we pick up a crew, suh? Porno? It's the nearest port, I reckon."

"I'm not taking any crew, Eclipse."

Friday gaped in surprise at his master, then found words:

"No crew, suh? Against Ku Sui? We'll be throwin' our lives——"

"I've lost enough men in the last two days," Carse cut in shortly. "And this meeting with Dr. Ku is a highly personal affair. You and I and Sako can run the ship; we've got to." One of the man's rare smiles relaxed his face. "Of course," he murmured, "I'm risking your life, Eclipse. Perhaps I'd better leave you somewhere?"

"Say!" bellowed the negro indignantly.

The Hawk's smile broadened at the spontaneous exclamation of loyalty.

"Very well, then," he said. "Now send Sako to me, and prepare ship for casting off."

But as Friday went aft on a final thorough inspection of all mechanisms, he muttered over and over, "Two of us—against Ku Sui! Two of us!" and he was still very much disturbed when, after Carse had had a few crisp words with the captive Sako, telling him that he would be free but watched and that it would be wise if he

confined himself to his duties, the order came through to the engine room:

"Break ground!"

Gently the brigand ship Scorpion stirred. Then, in response to the delicate incline of her space-stick, she lifted sweetly from the crust of Iapetus and at ever-increasing speed burned through the satellite's atmosphere toward the limitless dark leagues beyond.

The Hawk was on the trail!

Carse took the first watch himself. Except for occasional glances at the banks of instruments, the screens and celestial charts, he spent his time in deep thought, turning over in his mind the several variations of situation his dangerous rendezvous might take.

First, how would Ku Sui contact the Scorpion? Any of three ways, he reasoned: come aboard from his own craft accompanied by some of his men; stay behind and send some men over to receive the remains of the Hawk—for either of which variations he was prepared; or, a third, and more dangerous, direct that the remains of Carse be brought over to his ship, without showing himself or any of his crew.

Whatever variations their contacting took, there was another consideration, Carse's celestial charts revealed, and that was the proximity of the rendezvous to Jupiter's Satellite III, less than three hundred thousand miles. Satellite III harbored Port o' Porno, main refuge and home of the scavengers, the hi-jackers, and out-and-out pirates of space, so many of whom were under Ku Sui's thumb. Several brigand ships were sure to be somewhere in the vicinity, and one might easily intrude, destroying the hairbreadth balance in Carse's favor....

There was peril on every side. The Hawk considered that it would be wise to make provision against the odds proving too great. So, his gray eyes reflective, he strode to the Scorpion's radio panel and a moment later was saying over and over in a toneless voice:

"XX-1 calling XX-2—XX-1 calling XX-2—XX-1 calling XX-2...."

After a full two minutes there was still no answer from the loudspeaker. He kept calling: "XX-1 calling XX-2—XX-1 calling XX-2—XX-1 calling——"

He broke off as words in English came softly from the loudspeaker:

"XX-2 answering XX-1. Do you hear me?"

"Yes. Give me protected connection. Highly important no outsider overhears."

"All right," the gentle voice answered. "Protected. Go ahead, old man."

The Hawk relaxed and his face softened. "How are you, Eliot?" he asked almost tenderly.

"Just fine, Carse," came in the clear, cultured voice of Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow, probably the greatest scientific mind in the solar system, Ku Sui being the only possible exception. He spoke now from his secret laboratory on Jupiter's Satellite III, near Porno, this transcendent genius who, with Friday, was one of Carse's two trusted comrades-in-arms. "I've been expecting you," he went on. "Has something happened?"

"I'm concerned with Ku Sui again," the Hawk told him swiftly. "Please excuse me; I have to be brief. I can't take any chances of his hearing any of this." He related the events of the last two days: Judd's attack on the Iapetus ranch, the subsequent fight and outcome, and finally his present position and intention of keeping the rendezvous. "The odds are pretty heavily against me, M. S.," he went on. "It would be stupid not to admit that I may not come out of this

affair alive—and that's why I'm calling. My affairs, of course, are in your hands. You know where my storerooms and papers are. Sell my trading posts and ranches; Hartz of Newark-on-Venus is the best man to deal through. But I'd advise you to keep for yourself that information on the Pool of Radium. Look into it sometime. I'm in Judd's ship, the Scorpion; our Star Devil's on Iapetus, hidden in the jungle near the ranch. That's all, I think."

"Carse, I should be with you!"

"No, M. S.—couldn't risk it. You're too valuable a man. But don't worry, you know my luck. I'll very likely be down to see you after this meeting, and perhaps with a visitor who will enable you once again to return to an honorable position on Earth. Where will you be?"

"In eight Earth days? Let's make it Porno, at the house you know. I'll come in for some supplies and wait for you."

"Good," the Hawk said shortly. "Good-by, M. S."

He paused, his hand on the switch. There came a parting wish:

"Good luck, old fellow. Get him! Get him!"

The Master Scientist's voice trembled at the end. Through Ku Sui he had lost honor, position, home—all good things a man on Earth may have; through Ku Sui he, the gentlest of men, was regarded by Earthlings as a black murderer and there was a price on his head. Hawk Carse did not miss the trembling in his voice. As he switched off, the adventurer's eyes went bleak as the loneliest deeps of space....

(1 See the November, 1931, issue of Astounding Stories.)

Chapter 2:The Coming of Ku Sui

Straight through the vast cold reaches that stretched between one mighty planet and another the Scorpion arrowed, Carse and Friday standing watch and watch, Sako always on duty with the latter. Behind, Saturn's rings melted smaller, and ahead a dusky speck grew against the vault of space until the red belts and one great seething crimson spot that marked it as Jupiter stood out plainly. By degrees, then, the ship's course was altered as Carse checked his calculations and made minor corrections in speed and direction. So they neared the rendezvous. And a puzzled furrow grew on Friday's brow.

What was bothering his master? Instead of becoming more impassive and coldly emotionless as the distance shortened, he showed distinct signs of worry. This might be natural in most men, but it was unusual in the Hawk. Often the negro found him abstractedly smoothing his bangs of hair, pacing the length of the control cabin, glancing, plainly worried, at the visi-screen. What special thing was wrong? Friday wondered again and again—and then, in a flash, he knew.

"Why—how we goin' to see Dr. Ku?" he burst out. "Didn't that Judd say somethin'——"

The Hawk nodded. "That's just the problem, Eclipse. For you'll remember Judd said that Ku Sui 'comes out of darkness, out of empty space.' That might mean invisibility or the Fourth Dimension—and God help us if he's solved the problem of dimensional traveling. I don't know—but it's something I can't well prepare against." He fell to musing again, utterly lost in thought.

A day and a half later found Friday genuinely worried—an unusual state for the always cheerful black. The laugh wrinkles of his face were re-twisted into lines of anxiety which gave his face a most solemn and lugubrious expression. From time to time he grasped the butt of his ray-gun with a grip that would have pulped an orange; occasionally his rolling brown eyes sought the gray ones of the Hawk, only to return as by a magnet to the visi-screen, whose five adjoining squares mirrored the whole sweep of space around them.

Jupiter now filled one side of the forward observation window. It was a vast, red-belted disk, an eye-thrilling spectacle at their distance, roughly a million miles. Against it were poised two small pale globes, the larger of which was Satellite III. Several hours before, when they had been closer to the satellite, Carse had scrutinized it through the electelscope and made out above its surface a silver dot which was a space-ship. It was bound inward toward Port o' Porno, and might well have been one of Ku Sui's. But

the Scorpion, slowing down for her rendezvous, had attracted no attention and had passed undisturbed.

Now she hung motionless—that is, motionless with respect to the sun. Only the whisper of the air-renewing machinery disturbed the tension in her control cabin where the three men stood waiting, glancing back and forth from the visi-screen to the Earth clock and its calendar attachment. The date the clock showed was 24 January, the time, 10:21 P. M. Dr. Ku Sui was one minute late.

Sako, the captive, was sullen and restless, and made furtive glances at the Hawk, who stood detached, arms hanging carelessly at his sides, gray eyes half closed, giving in his attitude no hint of the strain the others were feeling. But his attitude of being relaxed and off his guard was deceptive—as Sako found out. Suddenly his left hand seemed to disappear; there was a hiss, an arrowing streak of spitting orange light; and Sako was gaping foolishly at the arm he had stealthily raised to one of the radio switches. A smoking sear had appeared as if by magic across it.

Hawk Carse sheathed his gun. "I would advise you to try no more obvious tricks," he said coldly. "Cutting in our microphone is too simple a way to give warning to Dr. Ku Sui. Move away from there. And don't forget your lines when Dr. Ku calls. You will never act a

part before a more critical and deadly audience."

Sako mumbled something and rubbed his arm. A pitying smile came to Friday's face as he comprehended what had happened. "You damned fool!" he said.

It was 10:22 P.M. Still, in the visi-screen, no other ship. Nothing but the giant planet, the smaller satellites poised against it, and the deep star-spangled curtain of black space all around.

They had carefully followed the instructions in the log. They were at the exact place noted there: checked and double-checked. The radio receiver was tuned to the wave-length given in the log. But of Ku Sui, nothing.

And yet, in a way, he was with them. His enigmatic personality, his seldom-seen figure was very present in their minds, and with it were overtones of all the diabolic cunning and suave ironic cruelty that men always associated with him. "He comes out of darkness, out of empty space...." Friday licked his lips. He was not built for mental strain: his lips kept drying and his tongue was as leather.

A little sputtering sound tingled the nerves of the three waiting men, and as one their eyes went to the radio loudspeaker. A contact

question was being asked in the usual way:

"Are you there, Judd? Are you there, Judd? Are you there, Judd?"

The voice was not that of Ku Sui. It was a dead voice, toneless, emotionless, mechanical.

"Are you there, Judd?" it went on, over and over.

"The mike switch, Friday," the Hawk said, and then was at Sako's side, his ray-gun transfixing the man with its threatening angle. "Play your part well," was the whisper from his lips.

The switch went over with a click. Trembling, Sako faced the microphone.

"This is Sako," he said.

"Sako?" the dead voice asked. "I want Judd. Where is Judd?"

"Judd is dead. The trap failed, and there was a fight on Iapetus. Judd was killed by Carse, and most of the others. Only two of us are left, but we have Carse and the negro, prisoners, alive. What are your instructions?"

A half minute went by, and the three men hardly breathed.

"How do we know you are Sako?" said the voice at last. "Give the recognition."

"The insignia of Dr. Ku Sui?"

"Yes. It is——"

Carse's ray-gun prodded the stomach of the sweating Sako.

"An asteroid," he said hastily, "in the center of a circle of the ten planets."

The unseen speaker was quiet. Evidently he was conferring with someone else, probably Ku Sui.

"All right," his toneless voice came back at last. "You will remain motionless in your present position, keeping your radio receiver open for further instructions. We are approaching and will be with you in thirty minutes."

Carse motioned to Friday to switch off the mike. Sako sank limply into a chair, soaked with perspiration.

"Now we must wait again," the Hawk murmured, crossing his arms and scanning the visi-screen.

They had heard from Ku Sui, but that had not answered the old tormenting question of how he would come. It was more puzzling than ever. The visi-screen showed nothing, and it should have shown the Eurasian's decelerating ship even at twice thirty minutes' time away. They looked upon the same vista of Jupiter and his satellites, framed in eternal blackness; there was no characteristic steely dot of an approaching ship to give Carse the enemy's position and enable him to shape his plan of reception definitely.

Twenty minutes went by. The strain the Hawk was under showed only in his pulling at the bangs of flaxen hair that covered his forehead as far as the eyebrows. He had, from Judd's words, expected a mystery in Ku Sui's approach. There was nothing to do but wait; he had made what few plans and preparations he could in advance.

Friday broke the tense silence in the control cabin. "He's got to be somewhere!" he exploded. "It isn't natural for the screen not to show nothin'! Isn't there somethin' we can do?"

The Hawk was surprisingly patient. "I'm afraid not," he said. "It's

invisibility he's using, or else the fourth dimension, as Judd said. But we've got one good chance. He'll send more instructions by radio, and surely, after that, his ship will appear——"

A new voice, bland and unctuous, spoke in the control cabin from behind the three men.

"Not necessarily, my honored friend Carse," it said. "You will observe there is no need for a ship to appear."

Ku Sui had come.

Chapter 3:The Wave of a Handkerchief

He stood smiling in the door-frame leading aft to the rear entrance port. There was all grace in his posture, in the easy angle at which one arm rested against the side bulkhead, in the casual way in which he held the ray-gun that bored straight at Carse. Height and strength he had, and a perfectly proportioned figure. Beauty, too, of face, with skin of clearest saffron, soft, sensitive mouth and ascetic cheeks. His hair was fine and black, and swept straightly back from the high narrow forehead where lived his tremendous intelligence.

It was his eyes that gave him away, his eyes of rare green that from a distance looked black. Slanting, veiled, unreadable beneath the lowered silky lashes, there was the soul of a tiger in their sinister depths. It was his eyes that his victims remembered....

"So you have arrived, Dr. Ku," whispered Hawk Carse, and for a second he too smiled, with eyes as bleak and hard as frosty chilled steel. Their glances met and held—the cold, hard, honest rapier; the subtle perfumed poison. The other men in the cabin were forgotten; the feeling was between these two. Strikingly contrasted they stood there: Carse, in rough blue denim trousers, faded work-shirt, open at the neck, old-fashioned rubber shoes and battered skipper's cap askew on his flaxen hair; Ku Sui, suavely impeccable in high-

collared green silk blouse, full-length trousers of the same material, and red slippers, to match the wide sash which revealed the slender lines of his waist. A perfume hung about the man, the indescribable odor of tsin-tsin flowers from the humid jungles of Venus.

"You see I meet you halfway, my friend," the Eurasian said with delicate mock courtesy. "A surpassing pleasure I have anticipated for a long time. No, no! I see that already I shall have to ask you a small favor. A thousand pardons: it's my deplorable ability to read your mind that requires me to ask it. Your so justly famed speed on the draw might possibly overcome this advantage"—he raised his ray-gun slightly—"and, though I know you would not kill me—save in the direst emergency, since you wish to take me a living prisoner—I would find it most distressing to have to carry for the rest of my life a flaw on my body. So, may I request you to withdraw your ray-guns with two fingertips and put them on the floor? Observe—your fingertips. Will you be so kind?"

The Hawk looked at him for a minute. Then silently he obeyed. He knew that the Eurasian would have no compunctions about shooting him down in cold blood; but, on the other hand, even as the man had said, he could not kill Ku Sui, but had to capture him, in order to take him to Earth to confess to crimes now blamed on Eliot Leithgow. "Do as he says, Friday," he instructed the still staring

negro; and, like a man in a trance, Friday obeyed.

"Thank you," the Eurasian said. "It was a most friendly thing to do." He paused. "I suppose you are wondering how I arrived here, and why you did not see me come. Well, I shall certainly tell you, in return for your favor. But first—ah, friend Carse—your gesture! A reminder, I assume."

Slowly the Hawk was stroking the bangs of hair which had been trained to obscure his forehead. There was no emotion on his chilly face as he answered, no slightest sign of feeling unless it were a slight trembling of the left eyelid—significant enough to those who could read it.

"Yes," he whispered, "a reminder. I do not like to wear my hair like this, Ku Sui, and I want you to know that I've not forgotten; that, though I'm now in your power, there'll be a day——"

"But you wouldn't threaten your host!" the other said with mock surprise. "And surely you wouldn't threaten me, of all men. Must I point out how useless it has always been for you to match yourself, merely a skilful gunman, against me, against a brain?"

"Usually," the cold whisper came back, "the brain has failed in the

traps it has laid for the gunman."

"Only because of the mistakes of its agents. Unfortunately for you, the brain is dealing with you directly this time, my friend. It's quite a different matter. But this small talk—although you honor——"

"Of course you intend to kill me," said the Hawk. "But when?"

Dr. Ku gestured deprecatingly. "You insist on introducing these unpleasant topics! But to relieve your mind, I've not yet decided how I can entertain you most suitably. I have come primarily to ask you one trifling thing."

"And that is?"

"The whereabouts of Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow."

Hawk Carse smiled. "Your conceit lends you an extraordinary optimism, Dr. Ku."

"Not unfounded, I am sure. I desire very much to meet our old friend Leithgow again: his is the only other brain in this universe at all comparable to mine. And did I tell you that I always get what I desire? Well, will you give me this information? Of course, there are ways...."

For a moment he waited.

The Hawk only looked at him.

"Always in character," the Eurasian said regretfully. "Very well." He turned his head and took in Friday and Sako, standing near-by. "You are Sako?" he asked the latter. "It is most unfortunate that you had to deceive me a little while ago. We shall have to see what to do about it. Later. For the present, move farther back, out of the way. So. You, black one, next to my friend Carse: we must be moving along. So."

Ku Sui surveyed then with inscrutable eyes. Gracefully, he drew close.

Carse missed not a move. He watched the Eurasian draw, from one of the long sleeves of his blouse, a square of lustrous black silk.

"This bears my personal insignia, you see," he murmured. "You will remember it." And he languidly waved it just under their eyes.

Friday stared at it; Carse too, wonderingly. He saw embroidered in yellow on the black a familiar insignia composed of an asteroid in the circle of ten planets. And then alarm lit his brain and he grimaced. There was a strange odor in his nostrils and it came from

the square of silk.

"Characteristic, Dr. Ku," he said. "Quite characteristic."

The Eurasian smiled. An expression of stupid amazement came over Friday's face. The design of asteroid and planets wavered into a blur as the Hawk fought unconsciousness; a short, harsh sound came from his lips; he lurched uncertainly. The negro crumpled up and stretched out on the deck. Carse's desire to sleep grew overpowering. Once more, as from a distance, he glimpsed Ku Sui's smile. He tried to back to the wall; made it; then a heavy thump suggested to his dimming mind that he had collapsed to the deck. He was asleep at once....

Chapter 4: Soil

Hawk Carse awoke with a slight feeling of nausea, and the smell of the drug faint in his nostrils. He found he was lying on the floor of a large, square cell whose walls and ceiling were of some burnished brown metal and which was bare of any kind of furnishing. In one wall was a tightly closed door, also of metal and studded by the knob of a lock. Barred slits, high in opposite walls, gave ventilation; a single tube set in the ceiling provided illumination.

He was not bound. He sat up and regarded the outflung figure of Friday, lying to one side. "Something in his look seemed to reach the giant negro, for, as he watched, the man's eyelids flickered, and a sigh escaped his full lips. He stared up at Carse, recognition, followed by gladness, flooding his eyes. The Hawk smiled also. There were close bonds between these two.

"Lord, I'm sure thankful to be with you, suh!" said the negro with relief. His eyes rolled as he took in the cabinlike cell. "Hmff—nice homey little place," he remarked. "Where do you reckon we are, suh?"

"I think we're at last at that place we have searched so long for—Ku Sui's headquarters, his own spaceship."

It will be remembered by those who have read their history that the Eurasian's actual base of operations was for a long time the greatest of the mysteries that enveloped him. Half a dozen times had the Hawk and his comrade in arms, Eliot Leithgow, hunted for it with all their separate skill of adventurer and scientist, and, although they had twice found the man himself, always they had failed to find his actual retreat.

For those who are unacquainted with the histories of that raw period a hundred years ago, it will be impossible to understand the spell of fear which accompanied mention of Dr. Ku throughout the universe—a fear engendered chiefly by the man's unpredictable comings and goings, thanks to his secret hiding place. Those who were as close to him as henchmen could be—which was not very close—only added to the general mystery of the whereabouts of the base by their sincerely offered but utterly contradictory notions and data. One thing all agreed on: the outlaw's lair was a place most frightening.

Therefore it can be understood why, on hearing the Hawk's opinion, Friday's face fell somewhat.

"Guess that means we're finished, suh," he opined moodily.

Carse had walked to the lone door and found, as he of course

expected, that it was tightly locked. He responded crisply:

"It's not like you to talk that way, Eclipse. We're far from that. We have succeeded in the first step—if, as I suspect, this cell is part of Dr. Ku's real headquarters—and surely before he decides to eliminate us we will be able to learn something of the nature of his space-ship; perhaps how it can be attacked and conquered."

Conversation always cheered the naturally social Friday; he seldom had the opportunity for it with his usually curt master. He objected:

"But what good'll that do us, suh, if we take what we've learned to where it won't help anybody, least of all us? An' what chance we got against Ku Sui now, when we're prisoners? Why, he's a magician; it ain't natural, what he does. Lands in our ship plop right out of empty space! Puts us out with a wave of his handkerchief!" With final misery in his voice he added: "We're sunk, suh. This time we surely are."

Carse smiled at his emotional friend. "All you need is a good fight, Eclipse. It's thinking that disintegrates your morale; you should never try to think. Why—there was an anesthetic on that handkerchief! Simple enough; I might have expected it. As for his getting into our ship, he entered from behind, through the after port-

lock, while we were looking for his ship on the visi-screen. I don't understand yet why we could not see his craft. It's too much to suppose he could make it invisible. Paint, perhaps, or camouflage. He might have a way of preventing, from a distance, the registering of his ship on our screen. Oh, he's dangerous, clever, deep—but somewhere, there'll be a loophole. Somewhere. There always is." His tone changed, and he snapped: "Now be quiet. I want to think."

His face stiffened into a cold, calm mask, but behind his gray eyes lay anything but calmness. Ku Sui's easy assumption that the information as to Eliot Leithgow's whereabouts would be forthcoming from his lips, puzzled him, brought real anxiety. Torture would probably not be able to force his tongue to betray his friend, but there were perhaps other means. Of these he had a vague and ominous apprehension. Dr. Ku was preeminently a specialist in the human brain; he had implied his will to have that information. Suppose he should use something it was impossible to fight against?

And he alone, Hawk Carse, brought the responsibility. He had asked Leithgow where he would be, and he remembered well the place agreed upon. He dared not lose the battle of wits he knew was coming!...

His eyes shot to the door. It was opening. In a moment Ku Sui stood

revealed there, and behind him, in the corridor, were three other figures, their yellow coolie faces strangely dumb and lifeless above the tasteful gray smocks which extended a little below their belted waists. Each bore embroidered on his chest the planetary insignia of Ku Sui in yellow, and each was armed with two ray-guns.

"I must ask forgiveness, my friend, for these retainers who accompany me," the Eurasian began suavely. "Please don't let them disturb you, however; they are more robots than men, obeying only my words. A little adjustment of the brain, you understand. I have brought them only for your protection; for you would find it would result most unpleasantly to make a break for freedom."

"Of course, you're not the one who wants protection!" sneered Friday, with devastating sarcasm. "Or else you'd 'a' brought a whole army!"

But the negro paled a little when the Oriental's green tiger eyes caught him full. It was with a physical shock—such was the power of the man—that he received the soft-spoken reply:

"Yours is a most subtle and entertaining wit, black one; I am overcome with the honor and pleasure of having you for my guest. But perhaps—may I suggest?—that you save your humor for a more

suitable occasion. I would like to make the last few hours of your visit as pleasant as possible."

He turned to Hawk Carse. "I have thought that an inspection of this, my home in space, would intrigue you more than anything else my poor hospitality affords. May I do you the honor, my friend?"

"You are too good to me," the Hawk replied frostily. "I will duplicate your kindness some day."

The Eurasian bowed. "After you," he said, and waited until Friday and the Hawk passed first through the door. Close after them came the three automatons of yellow men.

The passageway was square, plain and bare, and spaced at intervals by other closed doors. "Storerooms in this wing," the Eurasian explained as they progressed. He stopped in front of one of the doors and pressed a button beside it. It slid noiselessly open, revealing, not another room, but a short metal spider ladder. Up this they climbed, one of the guards going first in the half darkness; then a trap-door above opened to douse them with warm ruddy light. They stepped out.

And the scene that met them took them completely off guard. Friday

gasped, and Carse so far lost his habitual poise as to stare in wonder.

Soil! And a great glassy dome!

Not a space-ship, this realm of Ku Sui. Soil—soil with a whole settlement built upon it! Hard, grayish soil, and on it several buildings of the familiar burnished metal. And overhead, cupping the entire outlay, arched a great hemisphere of what resembled glass, ribbed with silvery supporting beams and struts: an enormous bowl, turned down, and on its other side the glorious vista of space.

Straight above hung the red-belted disk of Jupiter, with the pale globes of Satellites II and III wheeling close, and all of them were of the same relative size they had appeared when last seen from the Scorpion!

Dr. Ku smiled unctuously at the puzzlement that showed on the faces of his captives.

"Have you noticed," he asked, "that you are still in the neighborhood of the spot in space where we had our rendezvous? But this isn't another of Jupiter's satellites. Ah, no. This is my own world—my own personally controlled little world!"

"Snakes of the Santo!" Friday gasped, the whites of his eyes showing all around. "Then we must be on an asteroid!"

They were. From the far side of the dome ahead of them the asteroid stretched back hard and sharp in Jupiter's ruddy light against the backdrop of black space. It was a craggy, uneven body, seemingly about twenty miles in length, pinched in the middle and thus shaped roughly like a peanut shell. One end had been leveled off to accommodate the dome with its cradled buildings; outside the dome all was untouched. The landscape was a gargantuan jumble of coarse, hard, sharp rocks which had crystallized into a maze of hollows, crevices, long crazy splits and jagged out-thrusting lumps of boulders. Without an atmosphere, with but the feeblest of gravities and utterly without any form of life—save for that within the dome built upon it—it was simply a typical small asteroid, of which race only the largest are globe-shaped.

"Once," the Eurasian went on softly as they took all this in, "this world of mine circled with its thousands of fellows between Mars and Jupiter. I picked it from the rest because of certain mineral qualities, and had this air-containing dome constructed on it, and these buildings inside the dome. Then, with batteries of gravity-plates inserted precisely in the asteroid's center of gravity, I nullified the gravital pull of Mars and Jupiter, wrenched it from its age-old

orbit and swung it free into space. An achievement that would command the respect even of Eliot Leithgow, I think. So now you see, Carse; now you know. This is my secret base, this my hidden laboratory. I take it always with me, and I travel where I will."

The Hawk nodded coldly his acceptance of the astounding fact; he was too busy to make comment. He was observing the buildings, the nature of them, the exits from the dome, how they could best be reached.

They stood on the roof of the largest and central building, a low metal structure with four wings, crossing at right angles to make the figure of a great plus mark. The hub was probably Dr. Ku's chief laboratory, Carse conjectured. On each side stood other buildings, low, long, like barracks, with figures of coolies moving in and out. Workshops, living quarters, power-rooms, he supposed: power-rooms certainly, for a soft hum filled the air.

There were two great port-locks at ground level in the dome, one on each side, each sizable enough to admit the largest space-ship and each flanked by a smaller, man-sized lock. To reach them....

"And over there," Dr. Ku's voice broke in, "you see your borrowed ship, the Scorpion. But please don't let it tempt you to cut short your

visit with me, my friend. It would avail you nothing even if you reached her, for it requires a secret combination to open the port-locks, and my servants' brains have been so altered that they are physically incapable of divulging it to you. And of course I have offensive rays and other devices hidden about—just in case. All rather hopeless, isn't it? But surely interesting.

"Let us go: I have more. Below, in my main laboratory in the center of this building, there's something far more interesting, and it concerns you, Carse, and me, and also Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow." He let the words sink in. "Will you follow me?"

And so they went below again, down the spider ladder into the corridor. There was nothing else to do: the guards, ever watchful, pressed close behind. But a tattoo of alarm was beating in Hawk Carse's brain. Eliot Leithgow again—the hint of something ominous to be aimed at him, Carse, for the extraction of information he alone possessed: the whereabouts of his elderly friend the Master Scientist.

Chapter 5: The Color-Storm

The corridor was stopped by a heavy metal door. As the small party approached, it swung inward in two halves, and a figure clad in a white surgeon's smock emerged. He was a white man, tall, with highly intelligent face but eyes strangely dull and lifeless, like those of the coolie-guards. His gaze rested on Ku Sui, and the Eurasian asked him:

"Is it ready?"

"Yes, lord,"—tonelessly.

"Through here, then, my friends." The door opened and closed behind them as they stepped inside. "This is my main laboratory. And there, friend Carse, is the object which is to concern us."

With one glance the adventurer took in the laboratory. It was a great room, a perfect circle in shape, with doors opening into the four wings of the building. The walls were lined with strange, complicated machines, whose purpose he could not even guess at; in one place there was a table strewn with tangled shapes of wire, rows of odd-bulging tubes and other apparatus; and conspicuous by one door was an ordinary operating table, with light dome overhead. A

tall wide screen placed a few feet out from the wall hid something bulky from view. Carse noted all these things; then his gaze went back to the object in the middle of the floor which Ku Sui had indicated.

It was, primarily, a chair, within a suspended framework of steely bars, themselves the foundation for a network of fine-drawn colored wires. Shimmering, like the gossamer threads of a spider's spinning, they wove upward, around and over the chair, so that he who sat there would be completely surrounded by the gleaming mesh.

Within the whole hung a plain square boxlike device, attached to the chair and so placed that it would be directly in front of the eyes of anyone sitting there. Ropes were reeved through pulleys in the ceiling, for raising the wire-ball device to permit entrance. And standing ready around it, were four men in surgeons' smocks—white men with intelligent faces and dull, lifeless eyes.

The Hawk knew the answer to the question he curtly asked. "Its purpose, Dr. Ku?"

"That," came the suave reply, "it will be your pleasure to discover for yourself. I can promise you some novel sensations. Nothing harmful, though, however much they may tire you. Now!" He gave a

sign; one of his assistants touched a switch. The wire ball rose, leaving the central seat free for entrance. "All is ready. May I ask you to enter?"

Hawk Carse faced his old foe. There was stillness in the laboratory then as his bleak gray eyes met and held for long seconds Ku Sui's enigmatic green-black ones.

"If I don't?"

For answer the Eurasian gestured apologetically to his guards.

"I see," Carse whispered. There was nothing to be done. Three coolies, each with ray-guns at the ready; four white assistants.... No hope. No chance for anything. He looked at the negro. "Don't move, Friday," he warned him. "They'll only shoot; it can do no good. Eight to two are big odds when the two are unarmed."

He turned and faced the Eurasian, holding him with his eyes. "Ku Sui," he said, clipping the words, "you have said that this would not permanently harm me, and, although I know you for the most deadly, vicious egomaniac in the solar system, I am believing you. I do not know you for a liar.... I will enter."

The faint smile on the Oriental's face did not alter one bit at this. Carse stepped to the metal seat and sat down.

The web of shimmering wires descended, cupping him completely. Through them he saw Ku Sui go to a switchboard adjoining and study the indicators, finally placing one hand on a black-knobbed switch and with the other drawing from some recess a little cone, trailing a wire, like a microphone. A breathless silence hung over the laboratory. The white-clad figures stood like statues, dumb, unfeeling, emotionless. The watching negro trembled, his mouth half open, his brow already bedewed with perspiration. But the only sign of strain or tension that showed in the slender flaxen-haired man sitting in the wire ball in the center of the laboratory, came when he licked his dry lips.

Then Dr. Ku Sui pulled the switch down, and there surged out a low-throated murmur of power. And immediately the ball of wire came to life. The fine, crisscrossing wires disappeared, and in their stead was color, every color in the spectrum. Like waves rhythmically rising and falling, the tinted brilliances dissolved back and forth through each other; and the reflected light, caroming off the surfaces of the instruments and tables and walls, so filled the laboratory that the group of men surrounding the fire-ball were like resplendent figures out of another universe.

Ku Sui pressed a button, and the side of the boxlike device nearest Hawk Carse's eyes assumed transparency and started to glow. Beautiful colors began to float over its face, colors never still but constantly weaving and clouding into an infinity of combinations and designs. Eyes staring wide, as if unable to close them to the brilliant kaleidoscopic procession, the adventurer looked on.

Friday knew that his master at that moment was impotent to move, even to shut his eyes, and, with a wild notion that he was being electrocuted, he made a rash rush to destroy the device and free him. He learned discretion when two ray-streaks pronged before him and forced him back; and thereafter he was given the undivided attention of two guards.

From the outside, through the ball of color, Carse was a ghostlike figure. Rigid and quivering, he sat in the chair and watched the color-maelstrom. His face was contorted; his cheek muscles stood out weltlike in his sweat-glistening skin; his eyes, which he could not close, throbbed with agony. But yet he was conscious; yet he still could will.

He defended his secret as best he could. Obviously this machine was being used to force from his mind the knowledge of Eliot Leithgow's whereabouts, and therefore he attempted to seal his mind. He

fastened it on something definite—on Iapetus, satellite of Saturn, and his ranch there—and barred every other thought from his head. Mechanically he repeated to himself: "Iapetus, Iapetus—my ranch on Iapetus—Iapetus, Iapetus." Hundreds of times.... Hours.... Days....

The blinding waves of color rioted about him, submerged him, fatigued him. He had a strong impulse to sleep, but he resisted it.

Days seemed to pass.... Years.... Eons. All this.... Continued without change.... To the end of the world....

Dimly he knew that the color-storm was working on him; sensed danger when a great drowsiness stole over him; but he fought it off, his brain beating out hundreds of times more: "Iapetus, Iapetus—I have a ranch there—Iapetus, Iapetus...."

Then came excruciating pain!

An electric shock suddenly speared him. His nerves seemed to curl up, and for a second his mind was thoroughly disorganized before it again took up the drone about Iapetus. Recovery ... dullness ... a kind of peace—and again the shock leaped through him. It was followed by a question from afar off:

"Where is Eliot Leithgow?"

Somehow the question meant a great deal and should not be answered....

Again the stab of agony. Again the voice:

"Where is Eliot Leithgow?"

Again the shock, and again the voice. Alternating, over and over. He could brace himself against the shock, but the voice could in no way be avoided. It was everywhere about him, over, around, under him; he began to see it. Desperately he forced his brain on the path it must not leave. He had forgotten years ago why, but knew there must be some good reason.

"Iapetus, Iapetus—I have a ranch there—Iapetus, Iapetus—Where is Eliot Leithgow?—Iapetus, Iapetus—I have a ranch there—Where is Eliot Leithgow—I have a ranch there—a ranch there—Iapetus, a ranch—Where is Eliot Leithgow?—Where is Eliot Leithgow?—Where is Eliot Leithgow?" ...

After two hours and ten minutes the Hawk crumpled.

He was quite delirious at the time. The combined effect of the pain,

the physical and nervous exhaustion of the shocks and light, the endlessly repeated question, his own close concentration on his Iapetus ranch—these were too much for any human body to stand against. He lost his grip on his mind, lost the fine control that had never been lost before, the control about which he was so vain. And the lump of flesh that was Hawk Carse gave the information that was tearing wildly at its prison.

A stammering voice came from the heart of the color-sphere:

"Port o' Porno, Satellite III—Port o' Porno, Satellite III—Port o' Porno Sat——"

Dr. Ku Sui interrupted him; leaned forward.

"The house is number——?"

"574—574—574——"

"Ah!" breathed the Eurasian. "Port o' Porno! So near!"

Ku Sui returned the switch and pressed one of the buttons. The pool of colors faded; the laboratory returned to comparative dimness. The machine in its center seemed but a great web of wire.

Slumped in the seat within it was a slender figure, his flaxen head bowed over on his chest, his eyes closed, and sweat still trickling down his unconscious brow.

And lying on the floor was another unconscious figure.

Friday had fainted.

Chapter 6: Port o' Porno

The pirate port of Porno is of course dead now, replaced by the clean lawfulness of Port Midway, but a hundred years ago, in the days before the patrol-ships came, she roared her bawdy song through the farthest reaches of the solar system. For crack merchant ships and dingy space trading tramps alike, she was haven; drink and drugs, women and diversions unspeakable lured to her space ports the cream and scum, adventures and riffraff of half a dozen worlds. Sailors and pirates paid off at her and stayed as long as their wages lasted in the Street of the Sailors; not a few remained permanently, their bodies flung to the beasts of the savage jungle that rimmed the port. There only the cunning and strong could live. Ray-guns were the surest law. Modern scientific progress stood side by side with murderous lawlessness as old as man himself.

The hell town had grown with the strides of a giant, rising rapidly from a muddy street of tio shacks to a small cosmetropolis. She was essentially a place of contrasts. Two of the big Earth companies had modern space-ship hangars there, well-lighted, well-equipped, but under their very noses was a festering welter of dark, rutted byways extending all the way to the comparative orderliness of the short,

narrow Street of the Merchants, itself flanked by the drunken bedlam of the Street of the Sailors. It can be understood why these men who flew, who needed a whole solar system for elbow room, disdained setting to order the measly few acres of dirt they stopped at, but it is a mystery why, when used to living through vast leagues of space, they endured such narrow streets and cluttered houses. Probably, tired from their long cramped cruises, impatient for their fling, they just didn't care a whoop.

The whole jumble that was this famous space port rested in the heart of Satellite III's primeval jungle.

Tall electric-wired fences girdled Port o' Porno to keep the jungle back. It was equivalent to a death sentence to pass unarmed outside them; the monstrous shapes that lived and fought in the jungle's swampy gloom saw to that. Hideous nightmare shapes they were, some reptilian and comparable only to the giants that roamed Earth in her prehistoric ages. Eating, fighting, breeding in the humid gloominess of the vegetation shrouded swamps, their bellows and roars sometimes at night thundered right through Porno, a reminder of Nature yet untamed. Occasionally, in the berserk ecstasy of the mating season, they hurled their house-high bodies at the guarding fences; and then there was panic in the town, and many lives ripped out before a barrage of rays drove the monsters back.

They were not the only inhabitants native to Satellite III. Deep underground, seldom seen by men, lived a race of man-mole creatures, half human in intelligence, blind from their unlit habitat, but larger than a man and stronger; fiercer, too, when cornered. Their numbers no one knew, but their bored tunnels, it had been found, constituted a lower layer of life over the whole satellite.

Probably more vicious than these native "Three's" of Porno were the visiting bipeds, man himself, who thronged the kantrans—which may be defined as dives for the purveying of all entertainments. In them were a score of snares for the buccaneer with money in his pocket and dope in his blood. The open doors on the Street of the Sailors were all loud-speakers of drunken oaths and laughter, pierced now and then by a scream or cry as someone in the sweating press of bodies inside knew rage or fear.

One interplanetarily notorious kantran made a feature of swinging its attractions aloft in gilded cages, where all of them, young and old, pale and painted, giant and dwarf, ogled the arrested passers-by and invited sampling of their wares.

Of all kinds and conditions of men were these passers-by. Earthling sailors, white, negro, Chinese and Eurasian, most of them in the drab blue of space-ship crews, but each with a ray-gun strapped to his

waist; short, thin-faced Venusians, shifty-eyed, cunning, with the planet's universal weapon, the skewer-blade, sheathed at their sides; tall, sweaty Martians, powerful brutes, wearing the air-rarifying mask that was necessary for them in Satellite III's Earthlike atmosphere. Business men and sight-seers, except the most bold, were apt to stay in their houses after their first visit to the Street of the Sailors. Each face on the street or in the kantrans that lined it bore the mark of drink, or the contemptuous, insolent expression bred by Porno's favorite drug, isuan.

Around Porno was the constant threat of savage life; below it were half-human savagery and mystery; above, in the very shadow of their mighty engines of space, were the most vicious animals of all —degraded men.

This was the Port o' Porno of a hundred years ago.

This was the Port o' Porno where Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow for very good reasons had told Hawk Carse he would meet him. 574. The house of his friend.

Night descended suddenly on the outlaw space-port that day the elderly exile waited in vain for his comrade in arms Hawk Carse to show up.

There were six hours when the blasting heat received by Satellite III from near-lying Jupiter would be gone, and in its place a warm, cloying tropical darkness, heavy with the odors of town and exotic products and the damp, lush vegetation of the impinging jungle. The night would be given over to carousing; for these six hours the Street of the Sailors came to life. It was a time to keep strictly in hiding.

In the middle of that night, when the pleasures of Porno were in full stride, there emerged suddenly, from one of the dark, crooked byways that angled off the Street of the Sailors, a squad of five men whose disciplined pace and regular formation were in marked contrast to the confusion around them. They were slant-eyed men, with smooth saffron faces, and strongly built, and they were armed, each one, with both a ray-gun and a two-foot black, pointed tube. But it was not their numbers, formation or weapons that caused the carousing crowd to fall silent and hastily get out of their path. It was, rather, the insignia embroidered on the breasts of the gray smocks they wore. The insignia represented an asteroid in a circle of the ten planets, and the Street of Sailors knew that sign and dreaded it.

The squad pressed along rapidly. A still-comely woman, new to Porno, plucked smirking at the leader's sleeve; but his pace did not slacken, and she fell back, puzzled and afraid because of her feeling of something lifeless, dumb, machinelike in the man. Ahead, an

isuan-maddened Earthling fell foul of a Venusian; a circle cleared in the mob, a ray-gun spat and missed, and the Venusian closed, the gleam of a skewer-blade playing around him. This was combat; this was interesting; but none of the squad's five men gave the fight a glance, or even turned his head when, as they passed, the butchered Earthling coughed out his life.

So they passed, and soon they were gone down another black-throated byway.

They padded noiselessly along in the darkness to turn again presently, pausing finally before a low, steel-walled house, typical of the strongholds of prudent merchants of the port. No lights were visible within it; all seemed asleep.

Silence filled the narrow street, and unrelieved darkness. Occasionally a desultory breeze brought sounds of a burst of revelry from the Street of the Sailors; once the ports of an outbound space-ship flashed overhead for an instant. But there was mainly silence and darkness, and in it the five men, parleying close together in toneless whispers.

After a little they separated. On cat's feet four of them stole around the sides of the house. The fifth, drawing the black, pointed tube

from his slash, crept up to the front entrance-port and held the tip to it. Blue light sparkled fantastically, revealing his impassive face, outlining his crouching body. Then, quite suddenly, the port appeared to melt inward, and he disappeared into the blackness of the interior.

Presently there came a stir of movement, a whisper, a rustle from inside. A challenge, shouts volleying forth, a scream, another, and the peculiar rattling sound that comes from a dying man's throat. Then again silence.

Five shadows melted from the front entrance-port. They were carrying something black and still and heavy between them.

The errand was done....

Chapter 7: The Coming of Leithgow

Hawk Carse awoke to the touch of a hand on his brow. He came very slowly to full consciousness. His pain was great.

His whole body was sore: every joint, every muscle in it ached; his brain was feverish, pumping turmoil. When he at length opened his eyes he found Friday's face bent close down, tender anxiety written large over it.

"You all right, suh? How do you feel now?"

A harsh sound came from the Hawk's throat. He pressed a hand to his throbbing temple and tried to collect his senses. Sitting up helped; he glanced around. They were back in the same cell, and they were alone. Then, shortly, he asked:

"Did I tell him?"

"About Mr. M. S., suh?"

"Of course, I can't quite remember—a bit blurred——"

"I guess you did, suh," Friday answered mournfully. "I didn't hear you, but Ku Sui said you told him where Master Leithgow is. But

dog-gone—you couldn't help it!"

Carse forgot his pain as his brain straightened these words out into their overwhelming consequence, and something of its old familiar mold, hard and graven, emotionless, came back to his face. His eyes were bleak as he murmured:

"I couldn't help it—no. I really don't think it was possible. But I could have refused to get into the machine. I thought I could resist it. I took that risk, and failed." He stopped short. His body twitched with uncontrolled emotion, and in decency the negro turned his back on his master's anguish. A broken whisper reached him: "I have betrayed Leithgow."

For a short while neither man moved, or made any sound. Friday was a little afraid; he guessed what must be going on in Carse's mind, and had no idea what to expect. But the Hawk's next move was quite disciplined; he was himself again.

He got up and stretched his body, to limber its muscles. "How long have we been here?" he asked.

"Don't know suh; I was unconscious when they brought me here myself. But I guess not less'n six or eight hours."

"Unconscious?" asked the Hawk, surprised. "You fought, and they knocked you out?"

The big negro looked sheepish and scratched his woolly head.

"Well, no suh," he explained. "I was aimin' to butt in some, but they wouldn't let me."

"Then how did you get unconscious?"

Friday fidgeted. He was acutely embarrassed. "Don't know, suh, Dog-gone, I just can't figure it, unless I fainted."

"Oh." The Hawk smiled. "Fainted. Well so did I, I guess. I suppose," he went on seriously, "you couldn't tell whether the asteroid moved or not. I mean toward Satellite III."

Friday scratched his head again.

"I guess I can't, suh," he replied. "I haven't felt any movement."

"The door is locked?"

"Oh, yes, suh. Tight."

"Very well. Now please be silent. I want to think."

He went over and leaned against the far wall of the cell. His right hand rose to the bangs of flaxen hair and with a slow regular movement began to smooth them. Lost in thought he stood there, thinking through the situation in which he found himself.

He had expected, of course, to subject himself to great risk in keeping the rendezvous with Dr. Ku Sui, but he had never thought he would be endangering Eliot Leithgow also. It was torture to know he had put the gentle old scientist into the Eurasian's web.

That was it: if he could not somehow shear through that web, he must destroy Leithgow himself, and follow on after. The scientist would prefer it so. For whatever Dr. Ku's exact reason for wanting the Master Scientist was, it was an ugly one: that it was worse than quick death, he knew full well.

Shear through the web. How? Where was the weak strand in Ku Sui's cunningly laid plot? The Hawk visualized all he could of the asteroid's mechanical details, and surveyed them painstakingly. Two great port-locks flanked by little ones; secret opening combinations —not much hope in that avenue. Judd's ship, resting above: could he reach it, and raise it and douse the buildings with its rays? No; Dr.

Ku had spoken of defense rays—they would certainly be far more powerful than the Scorpion's. Then, somewhere there were the mighty gravity-plates batteries which motivated the asteroid and held it controlled in space. The dynamos. Two men, working swiftly, might wreak an unholy amount of damage in little time; in the resulting confusion anything might happen. If!

Into the depths of his concentration came the odor of tsin-tsin flowers, followed by the familiar, silkie voice of his arch-enemy.

"I see you are deep in thought, my friend. I trust it indicates your complete recovery."

Dr. Ku Sui stood smiling in the doorway, his same bodyguard of three armed men behind him. His sardonic words brought no reply. He went on:

"I hope so. I have arranged, thanks to your kindness, a meeting with an old, dear friend of yours. An illustrious friend: he already honors my establishment with his presence. I have come to ask you to join us."

The Hawk's gray eyes turned frigid: a lesser man would have blanched at the threat implied in his answer.

"God help you, Ku Sui."

The Eurasian turned it aside. "Always," he said, "God helps those who help themselves. But come with me, if you'll be so kind. We are expected in the laboratory."

This exchange passed quickly. Friday was still grasping at its underlying meanings as they again filed down the short straight outside corridor. It brought a perverse satisfaction to see the coolie guards bearing their ray-guns unsheathed and ready. Ku Sui's general attitude did not fool him. He knew that the man's suave mockery and flowery courtesy were camouflage for a very real fear of the quick wits and brilliant, pointed action of his famous master, the Hawk.

Carse walked steadily enough, but every step he took beat in his mind like the accents of a dirge. For he had betrayed into the hands of the Eurasian his most loved and loyal friend. Betrayed him! Despicably egotistical he had been in submitting to the chair, in not making one last wild break for freedom at that time. He had thought he could beat Ku Sui at his own game. Ku Sui, of all men!

Unseen hands opened from the other side the metal laboratory door, they passed through and the close-fitting halves closed behind them. Ku Sui went to the main switchboard and Carse glanced rapidly

around. Leithgow was not there. The wire-ball device was gone, but otherwise the details of the room were unchanged, even to the four white-clad assistants whose fine heads had eyes so lifeless and faces so expressionless. Emphasized, now, somehow, was the tall screen that hid something on one side of the room, and an intuition told the Hawk that what lay behind the screen was in some way connected with their fate.

He waited stolidly for what he knew was coming.

"Now," Dr. Ku murmured. He smiled at his two prisoners and pressed one of the switchboard's array of buttons. A door opposite them swung open.

"Believe me, this is a pleasure," he said.

Flanked by two impressive slant-eyed guards, a frail figure in a rubber apron stood revealed.

Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow blinked as he looked about the laboratory. Helpless, pitifully alone he looked, with his small, slightly stooped body, his tragedy-aged, deeply-lined face. The blue veins showed under the transparent skin of his forehead; his light-blue eyes, set deep under snow-white eyebrows, darted from side to

side, dazed by the light and perhaps still confused by the events which had snatched him so suddenly from his accustomed round and struck him with such numbing force. His years and frailty were obviously fitted rather to some seat of science in a university on Earth than the raw conditions of the frontiers of space.

Hawk Carse found words, but could not control his voice.

"This is the first time I've ever been sorry to see you, M. S.," he said simply.

Chapter 8: Dr. Ku Shows His Claws

The scientist brushed back his thinning white hair with a trembling hand. He knew that voice. He walked over and put his hands on his friend's shoulders.

"Carse!" he exclaimed. "Thank God, you're alive!"

"And you," said the Hawk.

Ku Sui interrupted.

"I am most glad, honored Master Scientist," he said in the flowery Oriental fashion that he affected in his irony, "to welcome you here. For me it is a memorable occasion. Your presence graces my home, and, however unworthily, distinguishes me, rewarding as it does aspirations which I have long held. I am humbly confident that great achievements will result from your visit——"

Quickly Eliot Leithgow turned and looked squarely at him. There was no bending of spirit in the frail old man. "Yes," he said, "my visit. Your sickening verbal genuflections beautifully evade the details—the house of my friend raided at night; he, himself, unarmed, shot down in cold blood; his house gutted! You are

admirably consistent, Dr. Ku. A brilliant stroke, typical of your best!"

Five faint lines appeared across the Eurasian's high, narrow brow. "What?" he exclaimed. "Is this true? My servitors must be reprimanded severely; and meanwhile I beg you not to hold their impetuousness against me."

Carse could stand it no longer. This suave mockery and the pathetic figure of his friend; the mention of raid and murder——

"It's all my fault," he blurted out. "I told him where you were. I thought——"

"Oh, no!" Dr. Ku broke in, pleasantly protesting. "Captain Carse is gallant, but the responsibility's not his. I have a little machine—a trifle, but most ingenious at extracting secrets which persons attempt to hold from me. The Captain couldn't help himself, you see——"

"It was not necessary to tell me that," said Leithgow.

"Of course," the Eurasian agreed and for the first time seriously; "but let me suggest that the end justifies the means. And that brings me to my point. Master Scientist, now you may know that I have for some

time been working toward a mighty end. This end is now in sight, with you here, the final achievement can be attained. An achievement——" He paused, and the ecstasy of the inspired fanatic came to his eyes. Never before had the three men standing there so seen him. "I will explain."

His eyes changed, and imperiously he gave an order to his assistants. "A chair for Master Leithgow, and one for Carse. Place them there." Then, "Be seated," he invited them with a return of his usual seeming courtesy. "I'm sure you must be tired."

Slowly Eliot Leithgow lowered himself into the metal seat. Friday, ignored, shifted his weight from one foot to the other. The Hawk did not sit down until with old habit he had sized up the whole layout of laboratory, assistants and chances. The two chairs faced toward ward the high screen; to each side stood the five coolie-guards; mechanically alert as always; the four Caucasian assistants made a group of strange statues to the right.

Ku Sui took position, standing before the screen. Seldom did the cold, hard iron of the man show through the velvet of his manner as now.

"Yes," he said, "I will talk to you for a while; give you broad outline

of my purpose. And when I have finished you will know why I have wanted you here so badly, Master Leithgow."

He began, and, as never before, he hid nothing of his monstrous ambition, his extraordinary preparations. With mounting fear his captives listened to his well-modulated voice as it proceeded logically from point to point. He had fine feeling for the dramatic, knew well the value of climax and pause; but his use of them was here unconscious, for he spoke straight from his dark and feline heart.

For the first time in the Affair of the Brains, the tiger was showing his claws.

"For a long time," Ku Sui said, "we four gathered here have fought each other. All over space our conflict has ranged, from Earth to beyond Saturn. I suppose there never have been more bitter enemies; I know there has never been a greater issue. I said we four, but I should have said we two, Master Leithgow. Captain Carse has commanded a certain respect from me, the respect one must show for courage, fine physical coordination and a remarkable instinct and capacity for self-preservation—but, after all, he is primarily only like the black here, Friday, and a much less splendid animal. It is a brain that receives my respect! A brain! Genius! I do not fear Carse: he is

only an adventurer; but your brain, Master Leithgow, I respect.

"For, naturally, brains will determine the future of these planets around us. The man with the most profound and extensive scientific knowledge united to the greatest audacity—remember, audacity!—can rule them every one!"

He paused and looked into the eyes of the Master Scientist. Pointedly he said:

"You, Master Leithgow, have the brains but not the audacity. I have the audacity and the brains—now that you are here."

Cold prickles of fear chased down Carse's and the scientist's spine at this obscure threat. Some of their reaction must have shown in their faces, for the Eurasian permitted himself a brief, triumphant smile and added:

"You shall know just what I mean in but a few minutes. Right now, in this very laboratory, the fate of the planets is being decided!"

Hawk Carse licked his dry lips.

"Big words!" he said.

"Easily proved, Captain Carse, as you'll see. What can restrain the man who can instantly command Earth's master-minds of scientific knowledge, the man who has both a considerable brain of his own to call on and the mightiest brains in existence, all coordinated for perfect, instant effectiveness. Why, with these brains working for him, he can become omnipotent; there can be but feeble resistance to his steps toward universal power! Only chance, unpredictable chance, always at work, always powerful, can defeat him—and my audacity allows me to disregard what I cannot anticipate."

"You talk riddles," answered Leithgow. "You do not explain your intended means. What you imply you can do with brains is utterly impossible."

"Impossible? Ever a foolish word, Master. You know that the brain has always been my special study. As much as ten years ago, I was universally recognized as the greatest expert in my specialty. But I tell you that my knowledge of the subject was as nothing then to what it is now. I have been very busy these last ten years. Look!"

With a graceful sweep of a hand he indicated the four coolie-guards and his four white-smocked assistants.

"These men of mine," he continued, "do they appear normal, would

you say? Or, rather, mechanicalized; lacking in certain things and thereby gaining enormously in the values which can make them perfect servitors? I have removed from their minds certain superficial qualities of thought. The four men in white were, a few years ago, highly skilled surgeons, three of them brain specialists and noted for exceptional intellects and bold, pioneering thinking. I needed them and took them, diverting them from their natural state, in which they would have resisted me and refused my commands. Certain complicated adjustments on their brains—and now their brains are mine, all their separate skill at my command alone!"

Leithgow sat back suddenly, astonishment and horror on his face. His lips parted as if to speak, then closed tightly together again. At last he uttered one word.

"Murderer!"

Dr. Ku smiled. "In a sense, yes. But let me go on.

"The reshaping of these mentalities and of the mentalities of all my coolies, were achievements, and valuable ones; but I wanted more. I wanted much more. I wanted the great, important part of all Earth's scientific knowledge at my fingertips, under my control. I wanted the exceptional brains of Earth, the brains of rare genius, the brains

that lived like lonely stars, infinitely removed from the common herd. And more than that, I wanted them always; I wanted them ageless. For I had to seal my power!"

The Eurasian's words were coming more rapidly now, though the man's thoughts and tone were still under control; and Carse, sitting there silently, felt that the climax was being reached; that soon something unthinkable, something of dread, would be revealed. The voice went on:

"These brains I wanted were not many—only six in all. Most of them you knew, Master Leithgow, these men who constituted the cream of Earth's scientific ability. Professor Estapp, the good-looking young American; Dr. Swanson, the Swede; Master Scientist Cram—the great English genius Cram, already legendary, the only other of that rank beside yourself; Professor Geinst, the hunchbacked, mysterious German; and Dr. Norman—Dr. Sir Charles Esme Norman, to give him his English title. I wanted these men, and I got them! All except you, the sixth!"

Again Dr. Ku Sui smiled in triumph. To Eliot Leithgow his smile was unspeakable.

"Yes," the elderly scientist cried out, "you got them, you murderer!"

"Oh, no, no, Master Leithgow, you are mistaken. I did not kill them. Why should I be stupid as to do that? To these men I wanted so badly? No, no. Because these five scientists disappeared from Earth suddenly, without trace, without hint of the manner of their going, the stupid Earthlings believe they were killed! Stupid Earthlings! Abducted, of course; but why assume they were killed? And why, of all people, decide that Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow had something to do with their disappearance? I confess to having planted that evidence pointing to you, but if they had the sense of a turnip they would know that you were incapable of squashing a flea, let alone destroying five eminent brothers in science! You, jealous, guilty of five crimes passionel! Pour le science! Credulous Earthlings! Incredible Earthlings! And here are you, a hunted man with a price on your head!

"So for ten years you have thought I murdered those five men? No, no. They were very much alive for eight years and very troublesome prisoners. It took me eight years to solve the problem I had set myself.

"You will meet them in a minute—the better part of them. You'll see for yourself that they are very usefully alive. For I succeeded completely with them. I have sealed my power!"

His silk pajamalike clothing rustled loud in the strained silence as he turned to the screen behind him. For some obscure reason the perfume about him, flowers of tsin-tsin, seemed to grow in their nostrils.

"Observe!" he said, and lifted it aside. An assistant threw a switch on a nearby panel. The unnatural quiet in the laboratory was resumed.

"The ultimate concentration of scientific knowledge and genius! The gateway to all power!"

Chapter 9: The Brain Speaks

A case lay revealed.

At first, while it was unlit, it seemed nothing more than that: a case like those glass-sided and glass-topped ones found in museums, a case perhaps three feet high, three feet deep and five feet in width. Under this glass upper part of the case was an enclosed section a little more than a foot in depth. The whole structure was supported at each corner by short strong metal legs. And that was all.

But, second by second, as the captives took in these details, a change came over the interior. No doubt it was the result of the increasing action of some electrical current loosed by the throwing of the switch; the whole insides of the glass case little by little lightened, until it became apparent it was full of a strange liquid that seemed of itself to have the property of glowing with soft light. As this light increased, a row of five shadowy bulks the size of footballs began to take form between what looked, from where the men sat, like a forest of fibers of silk.

In a few more seconds a miracle of complicated wiring came into visibility. The silk fibers were seen to be wires, threads of silver gossamer that interconnected the five emerging bulks in a maze of

ordered complexity. Thousands interlaced the interior; hundreds were gathered in each of five close bunches that sprouted from the floor of the case and then spread, fanwise, to various groupings of delicate liquid-immersed instruments.

In several seconds more Eliot Leithgow and Hawk Carse were staring with horror at what the now brilliantly glowing liquid revealed the five shapes to be. As one man they rose, went to the cabinet and gazed with terrible fascination.

"Brains!" exclaimed Leithgow. "Human brains! But not alive—surely not alive!"

"But yes," contradicted the triumphant Eurasian. "Alive."

Five human brains lay all immersed in the glowing case, each resting in a shallow metal pan. There were pulsings in narrow gray tubes which led into their under-sides—theatrical evidence that the brains held imprisoned there were, as the Eurasian had said, alive—most strangely, unnaturally and horribly alive. Stark and cruelly naked they lay there, pulsing with life that should not have been.

"Yes, alive!" repeated Ku Sui. "And never to die while their needs are attended!"

One of his long artistic fingers tapped the glass before the central brain, which was set somewhat lower than the others. "This," he said, "is the master brain. It controls and coordinates the thoughts of the others, avoiding the useless, pursuing the relevant and retaining the valuable. It is by far the most important of the five, and is, of course the superior intellect. It is the keystone of my gateway to all power."

Eliot Leithgow's face was deathly white, but, as one in the grip of some devilish hypnotic fascination, he could not tear his eyes away from the revolting, amazing achievement of his brilliant enemy. The Eurasian with the cruelty of a cat picked that awful moment to add:

"This master brain is all that was best of Master Scientist Cram."

The frail old man took this statement like a blow.

"Oh, dear heaven—not Raymond Cram! Not Cram, the physicist, brought to this! Why, I knew him when——"

Ku Sui smiled and interrupted. "But you speak of him as if he were dead! He's not. He's very much alive, as you shall see. Possibly even happy—who knows? There is no good—— Keep back, Carse!"

His tiger's eyes had not missed the adventurer's slight crouch in preparation for a shove which might have toppled the case and ended the abominable servitude of its gruesome tenants. The Hawk was caught before he had well started; and had he not stopped his gathering muscles he would have been dead from the coolie-guards' rays by the time he touched the near side of the case.

He took his failure without comment; only stepped back, folded his arms and burned his enemy with the frigid glare of his eyes. The Eurasian continued as if nothing had happened, addressing himself chiefly to Leithgow.

"The others, too, you once knew; you are even charged with their murder. Let me introduce you once more to your old colleagues and friends. There, at the right, is the brain you once compared notes with in the person of Professor Estapp. Next to him is Dr. Swanson. To the left of Master Scientist Cram, is Professor Geinst, and this last is Dr. Sir Charles Esme Norman. Now think what this group represents!

"Estapp, Chemistry and Bio-Chemistry; Swanson, Psychology; Geinst, Astronomy; Norman, Mathematics. And Cram, the master brain, of course, Physics and Electricity, although his encyclopedic knowledge encompassed every major subject, well fitting his brain

for the position it holds. All this, gathered here in one! The five outstanding intellects of Earth, here gathered in one priceless instrument! Here are my advisors; here my trusty, never-tiring assistants. I can have their help toward the solution of any problem; obtain from their individual and combined intelligences even those rare intuitions which I have found almost always precede brilliant discoveries.

"For they not only retain all they ever knew of science, but they can develop, even as brains in bodies can develop. Their knowledge does not become outmoded, if they are kept informed of the latest currents of scientific thought. From old knowledge and new they build their structures of logic once my command sets them on. Wills of their own they have none.

"I have not succeeded in all my secondary alterations, however. For one thing, I have been unable to deprive them altogether of the memory of what they formerly were; but it is a subdued memory, to them doubtless like a dream, familiar yet puzzling. Because of this I imagine they hate me—heartily!—yet they lack the will, the egocentricity which would enable them to refuse to answer my questions and do my work.

"Frankly, without them this whole structure"—his hands swept out

widely—"my whole asteroidal kingdom, would have been impossible. Most of my problems in constructing it were solved here. And in the future other problems, far greater, will be solved here!"

Hawk Carse by now understood very well Dr. Ku Sui's purpose in bringing M. S. Leithgow to his laboratory, and was already goading his brain in search of a way out. Death was by all means preferable to what the Eurasian intended—death self-inflicted, and death that mutilated the brain—but there were no present chances that his searching mind could see.

If Leithgow suspected what was in store, his face gave no sign of it. He only said:

"Dr. Ku, of all the things you have ever done, this is the most heartless and most vile. I would have thought there was a limit in you somewhere, but this—this thing—this horrible life you have condemned these five men to——"

He could not continue. The Eurasian only smiled, and replied, with his always seeming courtesy:

"Your opinion is natural Master: I could expect no other. But when

great ends are to be gained, he who would gain them must strip himself of those disturbing atavistic things we call the tender emotions. The pathway to power is not for those who wince at the sight of blood, who weep at the need for death. I hope, for special reasons, that you'll make an effort to understand this before we come to the phase which will follow my demonstration....

"Now, please allow me to show you my coordinated brains in useful operation. Will you be seated again? You, too, Captain Carse."

It was Ku Sui's show: there was nothing for the two men but to obey. But they felt, both of them, a great unnaturalness in being seated for the demonstration to come.

"Thank you," the Eurasian said, and went to the panel flanking the case. There, he turned and remarked: "Before we begin, I must ask you to remember that the opinions of my brains may always be accepted as the probable truth, and always, absolutely, are they honest and without prejudice." He threw a small knife switch and again turned. Nothing seemed to happen.

"I have contrived, of course, an artificial way of communicating with my helpers. This inset grille here contains both microphone and speaker—ear and mouth.

"The ear picks up my words and transmits them to every brain. If I have asked a question, it is individually considered and the respective answers sent to the master brain; they are there coordinated and the result spoken to me by means of the mechanical mouth. When the opinions of the individual brains do not agree, the answer is in the form of a poll, often with brief mention of points pro and con. Sometimes their meditations take considerable time; but simple questions always bring a prompt and unanimous answer. Shall we try them now?"

The man's spectators did not answer; even the Hawk was for once in his life too overcome by conflicting feelings of horror and dread, and compelling morbid fascination. Dr. Ku paused dramatically, a slight smile on his enigmatic lips; then turned his head and spoke into the grille.

"Do you hear me?" he asked, easily and confidently.

The silence in the laboratory was for one brief moment almost overpowering. Then, from the grille, came a thin metallic voice. Inhuman, artificial, it sounded in the tense strain of the silent room, voice from the living dead that it was.

"I do," were its words.

"Strange," mused the Eurasian, half aloud, "that their collective answer is always given as 'I.' What obscure telescoping of egotisms can be the cause of that...."

He dropped the mood of wonder at once. "Tell me," he said, looking deliberately at Leithgow: "Would the brain of Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow be more valuable in the position of the master brain than Cram's?"

A horrible eternity passed. Again came the inhuman voice:

"I have answered that question before. Yes."

Dr. Ku broke the stunned silence that followed this verdict.

"Don't forget that several ray-guns are centered on you, Carse," he remarked casually. "Others, black, are on you. Earthlings would no doubt consider your emotions very creditable; I only suggest that you keep them under control."

But the Hawk had given no slightest intimation that he might attempt anything. He sat quietly, a little tensely, his face an icy mask, only the freezing shock of his steady gray eyes betraying his emotion as they bore straight into those of the Eurasian. No man could meet

such eyes for long, and even the tiger ones of Ku Sui the all-powerful went aside at the icy murder that showed there.

Friday still stood in back of the chairs where were seated his two friends. He was scared to death from the thing he had seen. His face was a sickly, ashy gray, and his eyes large round rolling white marbles; but at the slightest sign of a break he would have metamorphosed into a demon of destruction, however hopeless the try, with ray-guns covering him at all times. Such was his love and loyalty for his famous master.

Eliot Leithgow was a man resigned. His head sank down on his chest. Dr. Ku's next words, though aimed at him, did not seem to penetrate his consciousness.

"You see, Master Leithgow, I have no choice. My purposes are all-important; they always come first; they demand this substitution. Were your intellect of lesser stature, I would have no interest in you whatever. But as it is...." He shrugged.

Hawk Carse stood up.

The Eurasian's voice fell away. The ensuing silence gave an icy, clear-cut sharpness to the whisper that then cut through it from thin

lips that barely moved:

"God help you, Ku Sui, if you do it. God help you."

Dr. Ku Sui smiled deprecatingly and again shrugged.

"I have told you before that God helps those who help themselves. I have always had splendid results from helping myself."

For a moment he looked away as he considered something in his mind. Then to his veiled eyes came the old mocking irony, and he said:

"I think perhaps you'd like to observe the operations, my friend, and I'm going to allow you to. Not here—no. I could never have you interrupting; the series of operations is of infinite delicacy and will require weeks. But I can make other arrangements; I can give you as good as ringside seats for each performance. A small visi-screen might be attached to one wall of your cell to enable you to see every detail of what transpires here." His tone suddenly stiffened. "I wouldn't, Carse!"

The Hawk relaxed from the brink on which he had wavered. A sudden mad rush—what else remained? What else? For an instant he

had lost his head—one of the several times in his whole life. Just for an instant he had forgotten his phenomenal patience under torture, his own axiom that in every tight place there was a way out.

"That's much safer," said Ku Sui. "Perhaps you and the black had better return to your cell."

Certain little muscles in the Hawk's face were trembling as he turned to go, and his feet would not work well. The ray-guns of the coolie-guards covered his every move. Friday followed just behind.

As the adventurer came to the door he stopped and turned, and his eyes went back to those of the frail, elderly scientist.

The doomed man met the gray eyes and their agony with a smile.

"It's all right, old comrade," he said. "Just remember to destroy this hellish device, if you ever possibly can. My love to Sandra; and to her, and my dear ones on Earth, anything but the truth.... Farewell."

Carse's fingernails bit each one into his palms. He hesitated; tried, but could not speak.

"All right, Carse—you may go."

The feelingless guards nudged white man and black out, and the door swung solidly closed behind them....

Chapter 10: In the Visi-Screen

There were those among the few claiming to have any insight into the real Hawk Carse who declared that a month went out of his life for every minute he spent in the cell then. The story, of course, came trickling out through various unreliable sources; we who delve in the lore of the great adventurer have to thank for our authorities Sewell, the great historian of that generation—who personally traveled several million miles to get what meager facts the Hawk would divulge concerning his life and career—equally with Friday, who shared this particular adventure with him. Friday's emotional eyes no doubt colored his memory of the scenes he passed through, and it is likely that the facts lost nothing in the simple dramatic way he would relate them.

But certainly the black was as fearful of his master during that period in the cell as he was of what he saw acted out on the screen.

We can picture him telling of the ordeal, his big eyes rolling and his deep rich voice trembling with the memories stamped forever in his brain; and picture too the men who, at one time or another, listened to him, fascinated, their mouths agape and a tickling down the length of their spines. It was probably only Friday's genius as a narrator which later caused some of his listeners to swear that new lines were

grooved in Carse's face and a few flaxen hairs silvered by the minutes he spent watching Eliot Leithgow strapped down on that operating table, close to the beautiful surgeon fingers of Dr. Ku Sui.

But whether or not that period of torture really pierced through his iron emotional guard and set its mark on him permanently by aging him, it is impossible to say. However, there were deep things in Hawk Carse, and the deepest among them were the ties binding him to his friends; there was also that certain cold vanity; and considering these it is probable that he came very close indeed to the brink of some frightening emotional abyss, before which he had few shreds of mind and body-discipline left....

He reentered the cell like a ghost; he stood very still, his hands slowly clenching and unclenching behind his back, and his pale face inclined low, so that the chin rested on his chest. So he stood for some minutes, Friday not daring to disturb him, until the single door that gave entrance clicked in its lock and opened again. At this he raised his head. Five men came in, all coolies, three of whom had ray-guns which they kept scrupulously on the white man and black while the other two rigged up an apparatus well up on one of the cell walls. They remained wholly unaffected the several times their dull eyes met those of the Hawk. Perhaps, being mechanicalized humans, practically robots, they got no reaction from the icy gray eyes in his

strained white face.

The device they attached was some two square feet of faintly gleaming screen, rimmed by metal and with little behind it other than two small enclosed tubes, a cuplike projector with wires looping several terminals on its exterior, and a length of black, rubberized cable, which last was passed through one of the five-inch ventilating slits high in the wall. Carse regarded it with his hard stare until the door clicked behind the coolies and they were once more alone. Then his head returned to its bowed position, and Friday approached the apparatus and began to examine it with the curiosity of the born mechanic he was.

"Let it be, Friday," the Hawk ordered tonelessly.

A dozen minutes passed in silence.

The silence was outward: there was no quiet in the adventurer's head. He could not stop the sharp remorseless voice which kept sounding in his brain. Its pitiless words flailed him unceasingly with their stinging taunts. "You—you whom they call the Hawk," it would say; "you, the infallible one—you, so recklessly, egotistically confident—you have brought this to pass! Not only have you allowed yourself to be trapped, but Eliot Leithgow! He is out there

now; and soon his brain will be condemned forever to that which you have seen! The brain that trusted you! And you have brought this to pass! Yours the blame, the never-failing Hawk! All yours—yours—yours!"

A voice reached him from far away. A soft negro voice which said, timidly:

"They're beginning, suh. Captain Carse? On the screen, suh; they're beginning."

That was worse. The real ordeal was approaching. True, he might have thrown himself on the coolie-guards who had just left—but his death would not have helped old M. S.

Friday spoke again, and this time his words leaped roaring into Carse's ears. He raised his head and looked.

The tubes behind the screen were crackling, and the screen itself had come to life. He was looking at the laboratory. But the place was changed.

What had before been a wide circular room, with complicated machines and unnamed scientific apparatus following only its walls,

so as to leave the center of its floor empty and free from obstructions, was now a place of deep shadow pierced by a broad cone of blinding white light which shafted down from some source overhead and threw into brilliant emphasis only the center of the room.

The light struck straight down upon an operating table. At its head stood a squat metal cylinder sprouting a long flexible tube which ended in a cone—no doubt the anesthetizing apparatus. A stepped-back tier of white metal drawers flanked one side of the table, upon its various upper surfaces an array of gleaming surgeon's tools. In neat squads they lay there: long thin knives with straight and curved cutting edges; handled wires, curved into hooks and eccentric corkscrew shapes; scalpels of different sizes; forceps, clasps, retractors, odd metal claws, circular saw-blades and a variety of other unclassified instruments. Sterilizers were convenient to one side, a thin wraith of steam drifting up from them into the source of the light.

Four men worked within the brilliant shaft of illumination—four white-clad figures, hands gloved and faces swathed in surgeons' masks. Only their lifeless eyes were visible, concentrated on their tasks of preparation. Steam rose in increased mists as one figure lifted back the lid of a sterilizer and dropped in some gleaming

instruments. The cloud swirled around his masked face and body with devilish infernolike effect.

All this in deadest silence. From the darkness came another figure, tall and commanding, a shape whose black silk garments struck a new note in the dazzling whiteness of the scene. He was pulling on operating gloves. His slanted eyes showed keen and watchful through the eyeholes of the mask he already wore, as he surveyed the preparations. Ominous Ku Sui looked, among his white-clad assistants.

The Eurasian seemed to give an order, and a white figure turned and glanced off into the surrounding darkness, raising one hand. A door showed in faint outline as it opened. Through the door two shadows moved, wheeling something long and flat between them.

They came into the light, two coolies, and wheeled their conveyance alongside the operating table. Then they turned into the darkness and were gone.

"Oh!" gasped Friday. "They've shaved off his head!"

The frail form of Eliot Leithgow, clad to the neck in loose white garments, showed clearly as he was lifted to the operating table. As

Friday said, his hair was all gone—shaved off close—stunning verification of what was to happen. Awfully alone and helpless he looked, yet his face was calm and he lay there composed, watching his soulless inquisitors with keen blue eyes. But his expression altered when Dr. Ku appeared over him and felt and prodded his naked head.

"I can't stand this!"

It was a whisper of agony in the silence of the cell where the two men stood watching, a cry from the fiber of the Hawk's innermost self. The path he left across the frontiers of space was primarily a lonely one; but Friday and Eliot Leithgow and two or three others were friends and very precious to him, and they received all the emotion in his tough, hard soul. Especially Leithgow—old, alone, dishonored on Earth, frail and nearing the end of the long years—he needed protection. He had trusted Carse.

Trusted him! And now this!

Ku Sui's fingers were prodding Leithgow's head like that of any dumb animal chosen as subject for experimentation. Prodding.... Feeling....

"I can't stand it!" the Hawk whispered again.

The mask on his face, that famous self-imposed mask that hid all emotion, had broken. Lines were there, deep with agony; tiny drops of sweat stood out all over. He saw Ku Sui pick up something and adjust it to his grip while looking down at the man who lay, now strapped on the table. He saw him nod curtly to an assistant; saw the anesthetic cylinder wheeled up a little closer, and the dials on it set to quivering....

His hands came up and covered his eyes. But only for a moment. He would not be able to keep his sight away. That was the exquisite torture the Eurasian had counted on: he well knew as he had arranged it that the adventurer would not be able to hold his eyes from the screen. Carse had to look!

He took away his hands and raised his eyes.

The screen was blank!

Friday looked up with a grin from where he was kneeling before the knob on the door of the cell. Carse saw that the knob was of metal, centered in an inset square of some dull fibrous composition.

"This door has an electric lock, suh," the negro explained rapidly. "And things worked by electricity can often be short-circuited!"

Quickly and silently he had disconnected from the television projector the wire which led back through the ventilating slit in the wall, and now was holding its end with one hand while with the other he twisted out the screw which held in the knob. "Anyway, won't hurt to try," he said, removing the screw and laying it on the floor. In another second the knob lay beside it, and he was squinting into the hole where it had fitted.

"Be quick!" Carse whispered.

Friday did not answer. He was guessing at the location of the mechanism within, and trying to summon up all the knowledge he had of such things. After a moment he bent one of the live ends of the wire he was holding into a gentle curve and felt his way down within the lock with it, carefully keeping the other end clear of all contacts.

Seconds went by as his fingers delicately worked—seconds that told terribly on Hawk Carse. For the screen was blank and lifeless, and there was no way of knowing how far the work in the laboratory had meanwhile progressed. In his mind remained each detail of the scene

as he had viewed it last: the strapped-down figure, the approaching anesthetic cylinder, the knives lying in readiness.... How was he to know if one of those instruments were not already tinged with scarlet?

"Oh, be quick!" he cried again.

"If I can touch a live part of the lock's circuit," grunted Friday, absorbed, "there ought—to—be—trouble."

Suddenly currents clashed with a sputtering hiss, and a shower of sparks shot out of the knob-hole and were instantly gone. Short-circuited! It remained to be seen whether it had destroyed the mechanism of the lock. Friday dropped the hot, burned-through wire he was holding and reached for the knob, but the Hawk had leaped into life and was ahead of him.

In a moment the knob was in the door and its holding screw part-way in. Gently the Hawk tried the knob. It turned!

But they did not leave the cell—then. Ku Sui's voice was echoing through the room, more than a trace of irritation in its tone:

"Hawk Carse, you are beginning to annoy me—you and your too-

clever black satellite."

Carse's eyes flashed to the ceiling. A small disklike object, almost unnoticeable, lay flat against it in one place.

"Yes," continued Ku Sui, "I can talk to you, hear you and see you. I believe you have succeeded in destroying the lock. So open it and glance into the corridor—and escape, if you still want to. I rather wish you'd try, for I'm extremely busy and must not be disturbed again."

Graven-faced, without comment Carse turned the knob and opened the door an inch. He peeped through, Friday doing so also over his head—peeped right into the muzzles of four ray-guns, held by an equal number of coolie-guards waiting there.

"So that's it," Friday said, dejectedly. "He saw me workin' on the lock an' sent those guards here at once. Or else had them there all the time."

The Hawk closed the door and considered what to do. Ku Sui's voice returned.

"Yes," it sounded metallically, "I've an assistant posted here who's

watching every move you make. Don't, therefore, hope to surprise me by anything you may do.

"Now I am going to resume work. Reconnect the screen: I've had the burned-out fuse replaced. If you won't, I'll have it done for you—and have you so bound that you'll be forced to look at it.

"Don't tamper with any of my hearing and seeing mechanisms again, please. If you do, I will be forced to have you destroyed within five minutes.

"But—if you'd like to leave your cell, you have my full permission. You should find it easy, now that the lock is broken."

The voice said no more. Carse ordered Friday harshly:

"Reconnect the screen."

The negro hastened to obey. His master's gray eyes again fastened on the screen. Fiercely, for a moment, he smoothed his bangs.

The laboratory flashed into clear outline again. There was the shaft of white light; the operating table, full under it; the anesthetic cylinder, the banks of instruments, the sterilizers with their wisps of steam curling ceaselessly up. There were the efficient white-clad

assistant-surgeons, their dull eyes showing through the holes in their masks. And there was the black figure of Ku Sui, an ironic smile on his lips, and before him the resigned and helpless form of Eliot Leithgow.

The Eurasian gestured. An assistant found the pulse in Leithgow's wrist, and another bent over him in such fashion that the prisoners could not see what he was doing. Ku Sui too bent over, something in his hands. The prelude to living death had begun....

At that moment Hawk Carse was a different man, recovered from the weakness that had made him cry out at his friend's imminent destruction a short time before. The old characteristic fierceness and recklessness had come back to him; he had decided on action—on probable death. "I've been too cautious!" he exclaimed violently in his thoughts.

"Friday!" he whispered sharply to the negro, going close.

"Yes, suh?"

"Four men outside—a sudden charge through that door when I nod. We'll die, too, by God! Willing?"

Friday was held by the man's iron will to succeed or die. Without hesitation he whispered back:

"Yes, suh!"

Their whispers had been low. Dr. Ku Sui had not been warned, for the screen still showed him bending over his victim.

"You'll open the door; you're nearest. I'll go through first," the Hawk murmured, and smiled at the loyalty behind the promptness of his man's grin of understanding.

Then both smiles faded. The muscles of the negro's huge body bunched in readiness for the signal as tensely he watched the flaxen-haired head close to him.

Suddenly it nodded.

The door swung wide and white man and black went charging out.

And immediately there burst in their ears the furious clanging of a general alarm bell, sounding throughout the whole building!

Chapter 11: Trapped in the Laboratory

In his carefully welded plot-chain, Ku Sui left one weak link, though he was not aware of it at the time. For it would not appear save by the testing of it, and he had not expected it to be tested. Carse acted recklessly; perhaps, if cold reason be applied to his move, senselessly. Dr. Ku had not thought he would dare make the break he did. But the adventurer did dare, and the loophole, the weak link, was exposed.

The Eurasian had a paranoic's vanity, and with it a lust accumulated over years to exact the most terrible vengeance he could from the adventurer who had frustrated his schemes time and time again. His arrangement for subtly forcing Carse to watch the operation was part of his vengeance; but he planned more. He wanted his old foe, broken by the living death of Eliot Leithgow, to die slowly later; wanted to crumple that will of steel utterly; wanted to watch and pleasantly mock him during the slow death agonies he had contrived for him. Therefore—and here lay the weak link—Dr. Ku left orders for Carse to be kept alive.

If he had not instructed his coolie-guards to wound, and not kill, in case of a break for freedom, Carse and Friday could never possibly have gained the corridor alive. The four waiting ray-guns would

have burned out their lives within three seconds. But, as it was, the barrage of shots from the ray-guns was directed at their legs, with the intention of bringing them down—and their legs were moving very rapidly. And so, reckoning up the caliber of the two comrades, their wild fighting start, their fatalistic resolve to get as many as possible of the enemy before they died, the result of that first hectic scramble in the corridor was more or less inevitable.

With a savage war-whoop that rose, ear-shattering, above the clanging of the alarm bell, Friday flung his two hundred and twenty pounds of brawn and muscle after Carse into the thick of the guards, taking no more notice of the spitting streaks of orange light that laced past his legs than if they had been squirts from a water-pistol. The guards had been bunched well together, but they scattered like ten-pins when Carse, followed by the living thunderbolt of fighting negro, crashed into them. In that first charge three of them were knocked flat, their guns either dropping or twisting loose from their hands.

Immediately recovering, the Hawk darted at the fourth with the speed of a striking cobra; his wiry hands closed around the yellow throat: and two seconds later that coolie was no longer connected with the proceedings, a whacking head-thump being his passport into insensibility. Again Friday's exultant war-whoop bellowed out

over the scene.

Carse pushed to his feet, his deadly fighting smile on his face, a ray-gun in his hand. He stooped and picked up another.

"Get to the Master!" roared Friday, an ebon god of war between two futilely attacking bodies. "I'm—followin'!"

In those red seconds, ultimate success was still too impossible a thing to even hope for. But they would at least try, then die like the men they were.

Hawk Carse sped on down the corridor, a deadly, smoothly-functioning fighting machine. And after him a few seconds later came leaping the negro, a whooping giant with a ray-gun in each hand and the light of battle flashing in his eyes. As his personal contribution to the fight he was leaving in the rear three sprawled bodies, two knocked cold and the third with a broken neck.

Their triumph had so far been a matter of but sixty seconds. The jangle of the alarm bell continued ominously. It summoned resistance, well-trained resistance; the defenses of the asteroid awoke to action. Doors spacing the corridor behind now began to open, releasing dozens of Orientals. Nor had these men heard Ku

Sui's orders. They would shoot to kill!

Three peering faces suddenly were in Hawk Carse's line of vision ahead: three ray-guns were settling on him. His famous left hand, the gun-hand that was known and dreaded throughout space, moved with the eye-blinding speed that was necessary; his trigger finger bent only three times, but each of the pencil-thin streaks of orange that spat forth brought down a man, and he had struck without slackening his stride for an instant.

Twice more his ray-gun spoke, and then the goal, the entrance to the central laboratory, was just ahead. Carse glanced back.

"Yes, suh!" a fierce voice yelled out to him. "Coming!"

Friday was bringing up the rear as fast as he could. He came sideways in a zigzag course ducking and whirling constantly, and in between firing promptly at any portions of enemy anatomies that dared project into the line of the corridor. The Hawk covered the last few yards of his retreat, and then they were together at the laboratory.

"The knob!" Carse ordered, spraying the corridor in general warning.

Friday tried it, but the door was locked. He hurled himself against it, but it did not budge.

How to get through? On the other side of the door was Leithgow, and probably Ku Sui; on this side they were trapped in a blind end. They could never make it back down that gauntlet and live, and anything like concerted action on the part of the yellows would do for them where they were.

That concerted action came at once. Seventy feet behind, a heavy shot-projector was pushed out on its little rollers from one of the doors. A hand reached out and whirled it so that its muzzle bore straight down the corridor at them. Carse shot at the hand, but the target was too small even for his fine eye, and he missed; Friday silenced an emboldened orange spot of light that was spitting streaks at them.

Hopeless! It looked like the end. Hawk Carse's face was in its old, emotionless mold as he waited, his gun sharp on the spot where the hand must reappear if they would fire the deadly projector. He had to get that hand—and any others that took its place. An almost impossible shot. He couldn't rush it and get it too. Not in time.

A moment passed. The hand flashed out; Carse shot and again

missed. Then a narrow cone was along the corridor, a blinding orange streak. Instantly, with a rasp of thunder, it was gone, and the air was stifling.

The Hawk was untouched; Friday, too, he saw. The bolt had been taken by the door—and one of the door's two halves was ajar!

At once Hawk Carse acted. "Inside!" he yelled, then was through, the negro right behind. Carse's eyes swept the laboratory. It was a place of shadows, the sole light being a faint gleam from a tiny bulb-tipped surgical tool which glimmered weirdly from the bank of instruments waiting by the operating table. Carse saw no one.

"Hold the door!" he ordered. "I don't think it'll lock!"

Friday obeyed. He found the inner bolt melted and the lock inoperative; and, placing his forearms on either side of the middle crack of the door, he stood bracing it.

A furious pounding shook the door. A heavy pressure bent it inward.

"Quick!" the big black gasped. "Somethin' to wedge it!"

"A minute, Friday," the Hawk answered. "Hold it!"

He was already dragging a metal table there; and, upended under the knob, making an angle with the floor, it held stoutly closed the door, now thumping and quivering with blows given it from outside. The panting negro fell back from the door exhausted, but rose to help his master at the need for placing additional barricades.

That finished, the Hawk wheeled, and at once, pantherlike, ray-guns at the ready, stalked the room. There was no sign of the enemy. He approached the operating table.

A great relief flooded his grim face as he sighted Eliot Leithgow lying there, apparently untouched and still conscious. The elderly scientist was strapped down tight, but he was smiling.

"I knew you'd come, Carse, if you could," he said simply.

There was no time for visiting. "Where's Ku Sui?" the adventurer asked.

"Gone," Leithgow answered. "I heard a door open and close—which one I couldn't see. He went as soon as that bell began to ring. The assistants, too."

Through the shouts and batterings at the barricaded door came a new

sound—from another direction. Like a streak the Hawk was at one of the three other doors, throwing its inside hand bolt; and by the time he had shot over the second, Friday had taken the cue and secured the remaining one.

The negro let out a vast breath. "Umph!" he said. "I'll tell the universe that was close!"

Hawk Carse said nothing. With eyes ever-watchful for sign of a trick or a trap in the apparently deserted laboratory, he quickly unbuckled the bands that held Leithgow to the operating table. Friday lifted the scientist to the floor, where he stretched weakly.

The adventurer smiled faintly, then his eyes went cold and serious. Crisply he said:

"We came, yes—but now I think we're trapped. There'll be men outside each of these four doors. The bolts may hold them a while, but eventually they'll get through. We must look for further weapons. If only there were better light! Friday," he ordered, "look for a switch. Ah!"

With a thud and a booming reverberation a systematic battering had begun on the metal door through which they had entered. It quivered

visibly and rang as the powerful blows from the other side bludgeoned into it, and evenly spaced, shrewdly delivered at the vital middle point. Whrang, whrang—even strokes, ringing throughout the barred laboratory—whrang ... whrang....

And then a similar piece settled into clanging routine on another door; then on the remaining two. The bolts holding them jumped with each deafening thud. Friday scowled, forgot to search farther for the switch, took a few short, indecisive steps, and then stood still again, looking questioningly at his master. The Hawk stood silent also, smoothing the bangs of flaxen hair above one temple, his face knit in concentration.

He had been afraid they would use the great projector on the door, and had been somewhat cheered by the reflection that they dared not, for fear of destroying the contents of the laboratory, especially the irreplaceable brains. But this was worse; Ku Sui was without question directing their efforts now. And that being the case, he could expect to see one door after another battered down—and then a concerted, four-point rush which would end everything....

Eliot Leithgow said the extraordinary thing that pointed a way out. "May I suggest," he said mildly, "that we try to get Dr. Ku Sui's brains to help us?"

"What do you mean?"

The older man smiled, a little sadly. "Those brains—they once were friends of mine. It's possible they'll answer our questions. It won't hurt to try. We'll ask them how it might be possible to get out."

Hawk Carse cried: "Eliot, you've got it! There is a chance!"

But the negro shivered. The brains stood for magic, for ghosts—for awful, unknown things he wanted nothing to do with.

Carse shoved back the screen concealing the infamous device.

"We know where this switch is, at least. If only the current's not been turned off!"

"Probably not," the Master Scientist said, out of his own technical thought-train.

Friday hung back, loath to be concerned. He looked askance at the thing, his open mouth a small round circle.

The Hawk was at the switch, but his hand hesitated. In spite of the emergency at the doors, in spite of his innate promptness of action, he hesitated. This thing he was about to do—this awful human

mechanism before him—they were so weird and unnatural....

Then he heard a faint click inside the laboratory—in a place where no one should be. Instinctively he whirled and crouched—and an orange ray streaked over his head with its wicked spit of death. At once his own ray-gun was up and answering to the spot where the other bolt had started, and then he was flat on the floor and ceiling toward the wall opposite.

A high wide panel in the wall had slid open, with only the faint noise Carse had heard to mark its movement. For just a few seconds it stayed open. The Hawk covered the last few feet in a desperate rush, but he reached it too late. It clicked shut in his face, and there was no hold for his hands when he tried to force it back.

Only a voice showed that someone was on the other side. In familiar, suave tones it said:

"Carse, I still will take you and Leithgow—alive. It would of course be idle to ask you to surrender, but that's not necessary, for you're trapped and can't possibly last another five minutes. I intrude only to warn you away from my synchronized brains. I will destroy without compunction anyone who meddles with them."

Dr. Ku's voice dropped away; the last words seemed to have come from below. Apparently he was descending by a stairway or hidden elevator.

"Without compunction!" Leithgow echoed with a bitter smile.

Carse ordered Friday curtly to watch the panel, then returned to Leithgow.

"Eliot," he said, "we've got to be quick."

And with his words the delicate, overstrained filament in the tiny instrument bulb gave out, and the laboratory was plunged into ultimate blackness....

Chapter 12: Out Under the Dome

Within the well of darkness rang the metallic reverberations from the battering on the four doors all around. The fluid nothingness was a place of fear. Its nerve-shattering, mind-confusing bedlam might have come from the fantastic anvils of some giant, malevolent blacksmith.

The Hawk's curt voice cut through imperatively:

"Keep your heads. We'll have a light in a second. Light of a sort."

He threw the switch by the side of the chamber of brains.

Seconds passed, and where was darkness grew a faint glow. The switch had operated; the current, probably from the device's own batteries, was there! Quickly and steadily the liquid within the case took on its self-originating glow, until the midnight laboratory was faintly washed with the delicate rosy light. The wires emerged in their complexity as before, and then the brains, all gruesome and naked in their cradles of unnatural life.

Around the internally-lit case were the three besieged Earthlings, half in blackness, the light from the front making ghastly shadows

on their faces. Acolites at some sorcerer's rite they looked, with the long inky patches that left them to dissolve formlessly against the far walls of the room.

Grotesque in the operating garments he wore, his bald head shining in the eery light, Eliot Leithgow approached the microphone Dr. Ku had used to communicate with his pathetic subjects. He looked down at the brains, at the wires which threaded the pans they lay in, at the narrow gray tubes that pulsed with blood—or whatever might be the fluid used in its stead. All mechanical was the apparatus—all of metal and other cunningly fashioned man-made materials—all but the brains....

To the old Master Scientist there came a vision of five human figures, rising specterlike from the case they were entombed in; straight, proud young figures, two of them; two others old, like himself, and the fifth a gnarled hunchback. Very different were they, each from each other, but each face had its mark of genius; and each face, to Eliot Leithgow, was warm and smiling, for these five men were friends....

So he saw them in vision....

"Another switch has to be thrown to talk with them, Carse," he said.

The Hawk indicated one inquiringly. Leithgow nodded. "Yes. That was it." The switch went over.

He steadied himself and said into the speaking grille:

"I am Eliot Leithgow—Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow. Once you knew me. Professors Geinst, Estapp and Norman, Dr. Swanson and Master Scientist Cram—do you remember me? Do you remember how once we worked together; how, long ago on our Earth, we were friends? Do you remember your old colleague, Leithgow?"

He stopped, deeply shaken. In seconds his mind sped back through the years to those five men as he had last seen them—and to two women he had met, calm-faced as their husband-scientists.... God forbid those women should ever learn of this!

Carse watched his old comrade closely, fearful of the strain this was on him.

Then came a cold, thin, mechanical voice.

"Yes, Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow. I remember you well."

The scientist strove to keep level his voice as he continued:

"Two friends and I are trapped here. Dr. Ku Sui desires my brain. He wishes to add it to——" He stammered, halted; then burst out: "If it would help you in any way, I'd give it gladly! But it couldn't, I know; it would only aid his power-mad schemes. So my friends and I must escape. And we can see now no way!

"You can hear that noise? It's very loud; men are outside each door, battering at them, and soon they must break through. How can we escape? Do you know of a way, out of your knowledge of conditions here? Will you tell me, old colleagues?"

He waited.

Fifty feet away from this scene, and missing almost all of it, was Friday. From his post at the panel he kept throwing fearful looks at the nearest door, which was shuddering and clanging and threatening any moment to be wrenched off its hinges. A good thing—he was thinking—that the doors were of stout metal. When one did go he would get five or six of the soulless devils before they brought him down.

Carse waited tensely for the response—if one there was to be. His ears were throbbing in unison with the regular crash of rams on metal, but his eyes never left the convoluted mounds of intelligent

matter so fantastically featured by the internal radiance of the life-giving liquid. Impossible, it seemed, that thoughts were stirring inside those gruesome things....

"Please hurry!" he said in a low voice; and Leithgow repeated desperately:

"How can we escape? Please be quick!"

Then the miracle of mechanism and matter functioned and again gave forth the cold voice of the living dead.

"It is my disposition to help you, Eliot Leithgow. On a shelf under one of the tables in this room you will find a portable heat-ray. Melt a hole in the ceiling and go out through the roof."

"Then what can we do?"

"In lockers behind the table there are space-suits, hanging ready for emergencies. Don them and leave through one of the asteroid's port-locks."

"Ask if the ports are sealed," Carse interjected instantly.

Leithgow asked the question.

"Yes," replied the unhuman voice. "But twice four to the right will open any of them."

The Master Scientist wiped his brow. Though trembling under the strain of conversing with this machine on which his life depended, he did not overlook a single point.

"But the asteroid's gravital pull would hold us close to it," he said. "Is there a way of breaking free from it?"

"You'll find the space-suits are equipped with small generators and gravity-plates which I helped Ku Sui develop. The switch and main control are in the left-hand glove."

"Thank you! Oh, thank you! You give us a chance!" exclaimed old Leithgow.

He turned and looked for the Hawk, and found him already in the lockers and pulling out three space-suits. The clumsy, heavy cone of a portable heat-ray lay on the table ready to hand.

They had little time to waste. The torrid temperature of a new smell of burned metal around the door they had just entered told them as well as words that the large projector in the corridor was at last being

used to bore a way in.

With surprising strength in one so slender, Carse lifted the ray and pointed it at an angle toward the middle of the ceiling. He pressed the control button, and a blinding stream of violet radiance splashed against the metal above. It hissed and sputtered where it touched; molten drops fell sizzling and splattering to the floor; then suddenly there was a flood of ruddy illumination, and the Hawk dropped the heat-ray, stepped forward and looked up.

Up through a neatly melted round hole, up at the great glasslike dome which arched over the whole settlement—up, past it, into the vast face of Jupiter, hanging out there oppressively near!

Friday, champing for action, left his post by the panel and dragged a long low cabinet to position under the hole. On top of it he placed the operating table, and, after he had tripped the table's small wheels, another table on top of that.

"You first, Eclipse!" his master rapped out as he finished. "I'll pass the suits to you; then swing Leithgow up."

The negro answered by acting. Swiftly he climbed the rude pile, and reached for the edge of the hole. It was still searingly hot, and he

gasped with hurt as his palms and fingers clenched over it, but he did not let go. Levering himself rapidly up, he got a leg through and then his body. A second later he peered back in and lowered his hands down.

"No one up here yet!" he reported. "All right for the suits!"

Carse passed the three bulky suits to him, and also two extra ray-guns he had found in the locker.

"Now, Eliot—up!"

With the Hawk's help, Leithgow clambered onto the cabinet. He was just mounting the operating table when, from behind, came a thin, metallic voice:

"Master Leithgow—Eliot Leithgow—please, a favor?"

Leithgow turned and stared, then understood. It was the coordinated brains. They had forgotten to return the switches. And now the cold voice was speaking of its own accord; and somehow—though it might have been imagination entirely—there seemed to be a tinge of loneliness to the words that sounded from its speaker.

Instantly Leithgow got down and hurried over to the grille. Seconds

were precious, but Carse and he were heavily obligated to the brains, and any request in reason had to be fulfilled.

"Yes. What can I possibly do?"

The lower hinge of one side of the barricaded door gave, burned out, and the door wrenched inward at a resumption of the battering. The other hinge still held, but it was bending with each mighty blow. Outwardly calm, Hawk Carse watched the weakening door, a gun in each hand.

"This," said the toneless voice: "Destroy me. Leave no slightest trace. I live in hell, and have no way to move.... There are old memories ... things that once were dear ... Earth ... my homes ... my lives there.... Eliot Leithgow, destroy me. But promise, on your honor as a Master Scientist, never to let a single word regarding my fate reach those on Earth who knew me, loved me...."

Leithgow looked at the Hawk. The adventurer nodded.

"I'll use the heat-ray," he said, with pity.

He ran and picked it up. But he had taken only one step in return when the second hinge of the yielding door wrenched free. An ear-

piercing screech rent the bedlam—and the door fell, half twisting, to lie in the doorway.

As if by a signal the crashing at the other doors stopped. In an extraordinary silence a mob of gray-smocked bodies pressed forward.

Orange streaks laced the dim laboratory. The Hawk shouted, "Up, Eliot! For God's sake, up!" as, with deadly effect, he poured his two ray-guns at the advancing men.

For a second, shaken by the terrible barrage, they fell back, leaving several sprawled bodies on the floor; but they came right back again.

Leithgow got safely to the top of the pile and was snatched out to temporary safety. Frantically Friday called down to his master; he seemed on the point of jumping down into the fight himself. But Hawk Carse had been party to a promise.

He was behind the structure of furniture under the hole he had made in the ceiling. With one gun he spat death at the coolies, while the other he emptied at the case of brains. Two stabbing streams of orange angled from him, one telling with awful effect on the men only two score feet away, and the other absolutely useless. All over

the still-glowing case it spat its hits, but the glasslike substance resisted it completely, and remained unscathed.

Carse swore harshly. He hurled one empty gun at the case, turned with a last salvo of shots at the coolies, and then was up on the pile and leaping for Friday's hands.

They caught and gripped his, swung him once—twice—and hauled him swiftly out. But as the Hawk disappeared he shouted down the case:

"I'll be back!"

Chapter 13: The Final Mystery

On the roof, Carse quickly scanned their situation. They were standing on the hub of the four-winged building. Far to the left was one set of the dome's great and small port-locks; exactly opposite was the other. Near the left hand ports; a little "north," lay the Scorpion. The whole area enclosed was a flat plain of gray soil.

Looming over the great transparent dome hung the flaming disk of Jupiter, so oppressively near that it seemed about to crash onto the asteroid. Its rays poured in a ruddy flood over the settlement, clearly illuminating each detail; and comparatively close against the face of the mighty planet they could see the whitish globe of Satellite III. It offered the nearest haven. They might arrive famished, but in the power-equipped space-suits which Friday was lugging they should be able to span the gap.

The Hawk nodded to the port-locks on the left.

"That one," he snapped. "We'll have two chances, the Scorpion and the port, but the port's safest; we could never get the whole ship underway and through the lock in time. To prevent pursuit, all we have to do is leave the lock open after us."

They hastened along the roof of the wing that ran that way. As yet there was no outside pursuit; most of the settlement's guards seemed to have been concentrated in the attack on the laboratory. But Carse knew it would only be a matter of seconds before coolies would emerge from half a dozen different points. He was trying to figure out which points they were likely to be when there passed, perilously close, the spit of an orange ray. He glanced back, to see the first of the crowd which had broken into the laboratory come clambering up through the roof. Then, as a second shot sizzled by, they arrived at the end of the wing.

Friday took the fifteen-foot drop without hesitation. Carse lowered Leithgow to him and then swung down himself. They panted forward again, over grayish, glittering soil.

Some three hundred yards of open space lay between them and the port-locks. Friday now led the way, weighted down under the heavy suits; the scientist came next and then the Hawk, his sole remaining gun replying at intervals to the ever-thickening barrage from behind. They had covered perhaps a half of that distance when the negro's steps suddenly faltered and he halted.

"Look there!" he groaned. "Cuttin' us off! We'll never make it, suh!"

Carse looked where he pointed, and saw a squad of half a dozen men emerging from a building well to their left. They were running at full speed for the lock, and, as Friday had said, it was obvious that they would get there first. He glanced quickly around. Pursuit from the laboratory in the rear was hot—and moreover three coolies were angling sharply out on each side, to outflank them! In a minute they would be surrounded! Unable to reach either the port or the ship!

And then came the crowning piece of ill-luck. Suddenly the Hawk winced; staggered; clapped a hand to his shoulder. A lucky shot from an enemy gun had caught him.

"You're hit!" cried Leithgow.

"It's nothing...."

The slender adventurer stood very still, thinking. He was trapped. But he was never more dangerous than when he was trapped.

Leithgow timidly ventured a suggestion.

"Why can't we put on our space-suits and rise up in the dome?"

Crisply the answer came back:

"Hard to maneuver laterally. Never get out ports. Sure death.... I have it!" he ended.

Tersely he gave the two men orders:

"We've a bare chance—if I'm lucky. Now listen, and obey me exactly. Put on your space-suits. Shut them tight. Lie flat. You, Friday, use your ray-guns and keep the guards from coming close. Wait here. Do absolutely nothing save keep them off. And keep your suits intact or you're dead!"

He grabbed one of the suits from Friday and crept toward the Scorpion on hands and knees. The three coolies from the pursuit at the rear had already cut him off from the ship. Friday could not control his alarm at this apparently crazy act. He called after:

"But you can't get to the ship through those guards! And if you did, you couldn't run it yourself—and pick us up!"

Carse turned, his face white with cold passion. "When will you learn to obey me implicitly?" he said harshly—and crept on.

Old Leithgow trusted his friend a little more. "Get your suit on, Friday," he said gently, and slipped into his own. The negro,

ashamed, followed his example; then both were flat on the ground, back to back, sniping—Leithgow also—as best they could under such conditions at the groups of men who now were bellying ever nearer from three directions.

The Hawk's plan might well have appeared hair-brained to one who did not know the man, and what he was capable of accomplishing under pressure. The very first step in this plan required the destroying of the three outflanking guards between him and the space-ship.

As so often in the great adventurer's career, he was lucky. The unthinking have always admitted his luck, but never seen that he forced it—forced it by doing the unexpected—attacking when he was attacked. He was doing that now. The three coolie-guards in his way must have known who he was, so their alarm at finding themselves, the attackers, attacked, will account for their making a move of poor strategy. Instead of scattering and defending the open entrance-port of the space-ship from a short distance, they in their alarm made haste to get inside to defend it from there. The interior was the best place to defend the ship—if they had already been inside—for they could lie in the inner darkness and sweep the open port when the Hawk entered.

But to try to pass through the port—that was bad judgment. It was only necessary for Carse to hold bead on it and fire when they passed in line.

This was the present "luck" of the adventurer. He might have sniped the guards anyway, but he had it easier. From fifty yards away, prone and carefully sighting, he took the three lives that had been so viciously, so subversively altered by Ku Sui.

A moment later, the way cleared, he was inside the ship—and his space-suit lay on the ground outside.

Rapidly the three groups of guards closed in on Leithgow and Friday. The two men made their advance as uncomfortable as possible, but they could do no accurate shooting at such difficult targets as crawling men, from within the cramped interiors of their cumbrous suits. Not even Friday, who was a crack shot. They could not hold out long—nor did they expect to.

They had been too occupied to notice what had become of Carse. Within their suits all was silence; they heard neither their friend's shots as he struck down the three coolies nor their own. Quick glances at the ship's open port revealed no one; nothing. Probably, they thought, the Hawk was dead. Even if he were not, they would

soon be. A matter of a minute. Maybe two. Their suits were still intact, but they could not remain so much longer. Ku Sui had this time ordered them destroyed.

And now half a dozen coolies were leaving the ring tightening around them and creeping to the Scorpion as additional guards....

It was then, in those last few seconds, with death staring them in the face, that Friday did a magnificent thing. It happened that Carse saw him do it as the adventurer jumped out of the Scorpion again and with frantic speed slipped into the space-suit he had left waiting. Friday stood straight up, a hundred feet from the enemy—a great bloated monster in his padded suit—and charged. Leithgow and the Hawk heard, by their suit helmet-radios, his battle yell of defiance, but the coolies did not. All silent, apparently, he rushed them—slowly, because of his hampering suit—his ray-gun spitting orange contempt—and other pencils of fiery death passing him narrowly by.

And then, while he still charged, the rays stopped stabbing past him, and he saw the faces of the coolie-guards turn upward. So surprised was the expression on their faces, that he turned and looked too—and saw the Scorpion, her entrance ports still open, forty feet off the ground and rising with swift acceleration.

Faster and faster she rose; all ray-guns were silenced before her astounding ascent. Higher and higher—faster and faster—till with a stunning, ear-deafening crash she struck the great dome and was through.

Then came chaos.

A huge, jagged gash marked the ship's passage, and through this the air inside the dome poured with cyclonic force, snatching into in maelstrom everything unfastened within the dome and hurling it crazily into space. For seconds the flood rushed out, a visible thing, gray from the soil which it scooped up; and while its fury lasted every building on the asteroid quivered and groaned from the terrific strain.

And where, a moment before, men had stood—two white men and a black, and a score of coolie-guards—there was now nothing save the flat rock under the gaping hole. The upper soil had been ripped out and flung forth like a concealing veil around the bodies that had gone with it....

For an interval Hawk Carse knew nothing. He had ceased to live, it seemed, and was soaring through Eternity. He never knew how much time passed before his numbed senses began to return and he

became aware of weight and of a furious roaring in his head.

He was moving forward at blinding speed. Something kept flashing before him—a wide stream of ruddy orange light: his dazed brain could connect it with nothing he had ever known. Soon the orange stream settled into spasmodic bursts, pitch blackness filling the intervals; and when it came more slowly he saw that it was in reality the vast flaming ball of Jupiter, streaking across the line of vision as he tumbled over and over, head over heels—free in space!

The realization helped his return to alertness. As the wild tumbling motion gradually ceased, and Jupiter tended to stay more and more under his feet, he peered around through his face-plate. To one side he glimpsed two grotesque, bulky figures, one half of them limned glaringly against the blackness of space by the near-by planet's light. He saw other figures, too, spread out in a scattered fringe—figures of men in smocks, dead and bloated and white.

They were the coolies, these last, and the other two were of course Leithgow and Friday. But had they survived the outrush of air? Carse felt in his left glove for the suit's gravity control lever; found it and tentatively moved it. His acceleration slowly increased. He brought the lever part-way back. Then, into the microphone encased inside the helmet, he called:

"Leithgow! Leithgow! Can you hear me? Friday!"

The radio broadcast his words. Soon welcome answers came in Eliot Leithgow's tired voice and the negro's emphatic bass.

"Maneuver together," Carse instructed them. "We must lock arms and stay close."

Slowly, clumsily, the three monstrous figures made toward each other, and presently they were reunited in a close group. Carse pointed an arm into the face of Jupiter where there hung poised a gleaming globe of white, dappled with dark splotches.

"Satellite III," he said, "—our goal. And we'll get there without interruption now that Ku Sui, his laboratory, his coordinated brains, are destroyed.... You are very quiet, Eliot. Aren't you happy at our success?"

"I am very tired," the old scientist said. "Oh, but we'll sleep and feast and game when we get back to my hidden lab on Three—won't we!"

"Chicken for me!" exclaimed Friday. "Even at twenty dollars a can!"

"Your shoulder, Carse—how is it?" asked the Master Scientist solicitously. "And how did you ever get out of that space-ship in

time, after you had given it such an acceleration?"

There was a tired smile in the adventurer's voice when he replied:

"My shoulder—a trifle. I have a dozen such burns. But my feet still hurt from the twenty-foot drop I took out of the Scorpion. I had to get out: the shock of the crash would have killed me.

"But I've been looking for the asteroid," he went on—and interrupted himself. "By the horn of the phanti!" he exclaimed in amazement. "Look, Eliot! That explains it all!"

His whole body was tilted back to allow him to look upward. Friday and the Master Scientist followed his startled gaze, and they too gaped in wonder.

For there was nothing above or around them—no dwindling fragment of rock—no sign of any asteroid: only the eternal stars.

"Yes," said Eliot Leithgow slowly, "that explains it all...."

"It explains what?" asked Friday, staring. "And where is the asteroid?"

"It's up there," the Hawk replied. "Don't you see now, Eclipse, why

no one's ever found it; why we could hunt forever for it and hunt in vain? Ku Sui made his whole asteroid invisible!"

133 The Hammer of Thor by Charles Willard Diffin

Like the Hammer of Thor was the clash of Danny O'Rourke with the mysterious giant of space.

Aproximate word count: 9,900

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

The Director General of District Three, Ural Division of the Russian States, was a fool. Danny O'Rourke had reached that conclusion some time before—a conclusion, however, that he was most careful to keep unexpressed.

And then Danny not only thought it; he knew the Director was a fool; and the amazing incident that proved it took place in Stobolsk, the Governmental Headquarters of District Three. Although Danny's regular station was on a lonely peak in the Sierra Nevada Mountains in the United States, the occurrence was nevertheless observed by him; and this happened for two reasons.

The New Soviet Government that took over control of all the Russias in 1943 wanted, among other things, to install the most modern fire-fighting system, the equal of anything in the world. They turned, quite naturally, to the United States of America for their instruction; and this was reason number one why Danny O'Rourke, pilot of the Air Fire Force, was where he was on the morning of June 13th.

The second reason was the tremendous timber wealth in the Ural Division and the threat to destroy it by fire.

Perhaps there might be mentioned a third reason: that this same Danny O'Rourke, red-haired, smiling, and debonair was listed on the Air Fire Force of the United States with the highest rating that the A. F. F. has to give its pilots. But Danny would have grinned at such a suggestion and would have countered with a denial that he was better qualified than "the rest of the boys."

But Danny was there; he had been talking at length with the Director General on the technical differences of the hot and cold nitrogen blasts for controlling fires on a wide front when suddenly the big man was brought in.

The great figure stooped almost double to enter the room, and Danny

ran a hand through his shock of red hair and stared open-mouthed at the giant when he straightened again and towered above the guard of Red soldiers who had brought him into the high-ceiled room.

He was clothed in a single garment of glinting blue that wrapped him about and fell in heavy folds to the floor. Danny felt the resemblance to the shimmering blue of steel that has passed through fire, and his eyes held to that garment in fascination until his gaze went on and up to the face.

The man's face was red, as if the flesh had been burned; here was one man Danny could not classify. He had met the people of many lands but never had he seen one like this.

In one quick staring glance, Danny caught a picture of heavy jaws—a flashing of yellow teeth when the mouth opened to emit guttural, unrecognizable words—nostrils that ran crosswise of the face in a nose broad and flat! The forehead above was low and sloping. From the straggling yellow hair it slanted down to brows that overhung deep-sunk and cavernous eyes.... And when Danny O'Rourke's own curious eyes met those of the stranger, they were held in a grip that was almost hypnotic.

"Like a dirty, crawlin' snake's!" he was telling himself over and over.

"Heaven help us if that boy ever gets rough. Who he is or what he is, I don't know, but if I was the Director, I'd treat him nice till I found out."

Danny and the Director were standing side by side. The giant figure fixed a cold stare on Danny and barked short sentences that seemed to the listener to be an explanation.

But Danny motioned helplessly to the official at his side. "Maybe you can savvy that," he suggested; "it's new talk to me."

The newcomer repeated the guttural sounds. Upon the Director's face was a frown of suspicion and puzzled wonder; the Director General did not like to encounter either happenings or persons he could not readily understand; it was disturbing to one's official dignity. The giant must have read some of this, for he tried to make himself clear.

He repeated the sentences slowly. Then he waved one huge hand in air and pointed upward, and the hand moved up and up as if to indicate some tremendous distance. He pointed to himself; then brought one aiming finger down as if he were coming from that far-off place. And Danny got the significance.

"It's happened!" he told the Director explosively. "I knew it would come some day—I knew they'd get here! And us monkeyin' with our stratosphere ships and thinkin' we were beatin' the rest of the Universe!"

The Director regarded the young American with about the same degree of disfavor as he had shown the giant. "What is it you say?" he questioned. "You mean—what? I do not understand."

And, in careful words, Danny explained. He told the Director of District Three something of his dreams that space might not be an insurmountable bar; he told him, with enthusiasm driving his words out faster and faster, that here was a man—or if not a man, a living creature of some sort—that had come out of space.

"Where did they find him?" he demanded. "Where is his ship?"

But he ceased to ask questions as he noticed the Director's mirth. For that official was rocking with roaring laughter that had a distinctly uncomplimentary sound. And he added some words in Russian that were as incomprehensible to Danny as the growling talk of the giant man, but the O'Rourke temper flamed as he saw the other Russians in the room smiling appreciatively.

Then: "Take him away!" the Director thundered. "We'll see where he comes from. Search him! And if he hasn't any passports—" The unended sentence was suggestive.

But an hour later, Danny saw the giant furnish his own ending to the incompleted order. He had left the Director's room. Across the street was the gray stone building where prisoners were held for disposition by the courts. And once more Danny O'Rourke's jaw dropped in open-mouthed, unbelieving amazement as he saw a section of gray stone wall fall outward where the edge of it was sharply outlined in white-hot, dripping stone.

A great figure stepped forth. In his hand was a rod like an elongated pencil attached to a heavy butt. And though nothing visible came from the rod, Danny saw it pointed back at the building where iron bars softened till they sent rivulets of molten steel splashing upon the pavement.

A squad of soldiers in the blood-red color of their service stood nearby. One gave an order, and a dozen rifles were swung toward their shoulders. But the rifles never came to rest.

Danny saw the quick swing of the slender rod. And he saw the men's mouths opened in screams that were never uttered. For, quicker than

nerves could send their message to human brain and muscles, some unseen force had slashed their bodies in two as if a fiery sword had been swung by invisible hands.

The pointing rod lingered upon the huddled bodies for an instant, while that which had been human flesh vanished in a bursting cloud of smoke; while the stones beneath turned to a seething pool of molten rock.... Then the rod moved slowly toward the frozen figure of Danny O'Rourke.

Did the strange being sense that Danny had not been disbelieving like the rest? Danny could never know. He knew only that he stood rigid with horror, entirely unable to move, while that rod swung upon him; he knew that the hand that held it released something that clicked, wherefore his life had been spared; and he knew that the savage face above wrinkled into something resembling a snarling, triumphant smile, as the rod was returned to its hiding place under the garment of shimmering blue, and the mysterious figure turned and strode savagely down the Avenue Stalin in the city of Stobolsk.

Danny O'Rourke was to carry that picture clearly in his mind—the figure that moved unhurriedly on, towering above the others, men and women, who scurried fearfully from his path. But he was to retain yet more vividly the recollection of a group of red-clad bodies

that were severed at their waists as a slim tube swung—then a bursting cloud of oily smoke, and a pool of molten rock where they had been.

Something of this, perhaps, was clouding the eyes of Danny O'Rourke, Pilot of the A.F.F. a month and more later, as he sat at lookout duty in a gleaming white tower on a high peak of the Sierras. Not that the job of lookout was part of O'Rourke's duty, now that he was back in the U. S. A., but a cylinder of scarlet rested on a great rack at the base of the tower, and Danny had no wish to hear the roar of that cylinder's stern exhaust for a time.

Even the novelty of flying the newest rocket-ship in the service had worn off. Besides, he had patrolled his route, and he told himself that the "Infant" needed a rest.

The "Infant," better known on the records of the A. F. F. as Morgan, David E., Lookout, Station 39-G, was sleeping soundly on the elevating table where a map of the district was mounted under glass. His cherubic face was pink and white, more suggestive of the age of three than of twenty-three. And O'Rourke, glancing at him protectingly, hung up a paper to keep the sunlight from striking the young man's face.

The Infant had been Danny's special charge from the day he entered the service, and now, except for the Chief and some other officials, only Danny knew that the Infant was there to teach and not to learn. For behind those eyes that might have been taken from one of Rafael's cherubim lay a brain that Danny had learned to respect.

"Fifteen minutes more. I'm givin' you," he said inaudibly; "then I'll be on my way, and you'll do your own squintin' and peekin'." But the Infant's fifteen minutes were cut to that many seconds—

Danny had been looking toward the south before he had turned to gaze at the Infant: his eyes came back to the same point to take up their reconnaissance. But now, where clear sky had made a blue back-drop for rugged peaks, was a line of black. And the line, while Danny watched in disbelief, moved like a smoky serpent: its head stretched out and out while from behind it there came the ominous line of black.

All this happened in a matter of seconds, and the moving head ceased at last to move; the line no longer grew. But, where it had been at first a thin mark of black, it changed now to billowing gray.

It was fifty miles away at least; but it showed clear and sharp. And the first gray had hardly bloomed from its black beginning before the

long arm of Danny O'Rourke had swept the sleeping Infant to the floor, while, with the other hand, he swung an instrument of telescopic sights upon distant smoke.

He set it in careful focus—took a reading for distance—another for direction—and while he was doing it he was vaguely conscious of one single sharp flash in the sky above that far-off cloud. In his range-finder it showed once, like a glittering star; then it vanished, but the trained eye of O'Rourke observed its passage like a ray of light overhead.

The pink-faced youngster on the floor was still protesting sleepily when O'Rourke slammed down a switch and heard a voice answer promptly from an instrument on the wall. Danny shouted out his bearings on the fire:

"Thirty-nine-G! O'Rourke speaking for Morgan. Reporting fire on a wide front—bearing Two-O-Seven to Two-Four-Nine! And for God's sake, Chief, get a line on this quick. The whole thing shot up in a second—fifty miles of fire!"

Another voice broke in excitedly. "Station Fourteen-Fourteen-Fourteen!" The voice was stammering in evident confusion. "The whole earth has exploded—it's on fire now! I—I—"

The Chief's voice broke in with a quiet, "Bearing, please! Report your bearing, Fourteen!"

And the stammering voice steadied to give a figure.

"Headquarters speaking," said the quiet voice. "Orders for O'Rourke. For the love of Pete, get on that fire, Danny. Every instrument in the office is chattering. Every patrol ship has spotted that blaze. You can't all be crazy. It's in Section Eight—never mind the exact bearings—you'll find it without any trouble I imagine. Now beat it! And let me know what kind of a fire this is that starts on a fifty-mile front! You're in charge till I come."

Ten seconds later, had the Infant been watching, which he had not—for his eyes were all on the distant smoke—he would have seen the beautiful curving sweep of a scarlet projectile, whose screaming propeller swept her off and up; he would then have seen it lie back flat as the great stern exhaust made a rocket of the ship to send it roaring into the heights.

And in the air-tight cabin of the newest fire-fighting machine of the A. F. F., Danny O'Rourke pulled his body out of the slumped position into which his quick acceleration had forced him; then set his ship on her course to where a distant smoke made puffballs of

gray against a cloudless sky. And, like his Chief, he was wondering with a wonderment that bordered upon disbelief what manner of fire this was that shot like a fifty-mile serpent across mountains and valleys.

He was over it in less than ten minutes, flying high to clear the tiny dots slipping swiftly across his view-finder. They were other firecraft; he saw them darting in and down from all sides. For himself, he took the line of smoke at its western end where it had begun. Here it would be at its worst, perhaps, although no reports were in as yet.

The radio had been bringing in messages unceasingly as patrols and firecraft answered the call. Some nearer than himself were reporting themselves "on the fire"; he saw them grouped in the usual echelon formation up to windward of the blaze. They darted down and in as he looked, and Danny thrilled at the sight which had never yet failed to reach the core of his emotional Irish nature.

The smoke and fire swallowed them up; their red bodies and short black wings drove unswervingly into the holocaust of flame.

"Like a bunch o' bats out o' hell!" said Danny admiringly. "And 'tis hell they're goin' into!" Which fact there was none to dispute with

Danny O'Rourke who knew, if any man did, the full truth of the remark.

He saw them as they struck the fire; saw the whirling blast of snow that drove under them as they went into the fight with the wildest enemy of man; and he knew that a smothering blanket of carbon dioxide was driving with hurricane force upon the flames.

On the instrument at his side flashed the "Ascend!" order of the squadron commander, and an instant later the flight reappeared a half mile away.

The commander must have sighted O'Rourke's ship. "Shall we repeat over same course?" the instrument spelled out, while Danny, circling above, watched the effects of the drive.

It had checked the flames, that first blast of the CO_2 squadron; he saw blackened, jagged trees where a roaring furnace had been. But the flames were building up again. "Repeat!" O'Rourke answered; then watched them drive in again.

From a wooded valley beyond a low range came a call for help. A lone ship in the red and black of the service had driven down into that valley that was like a cauldron of seething flame.

"I can't touch it!" a thin voice said. "The up-draft kills my blast."

Danny O'Rourke was sending out another call. The answer came from powerful sending instruments.

"Nitro squadron Hundred and One, on the fire!" it said, and gave a position in quick figures. Danny's own voice transmitter was on. He snapped out the position of the lone fighter. "Get in there!" he ordered; "Show your stuff! No—wait! Follow me; I'll lead you in!"

And to himself he added: "Now we'll see what pure nitrogen will do in a real scrap."

He closed a switch, and from a compartment at his back a low whine rose and grew to a scream. It was echoed in a shriek more shrill from the bow where a port had opened to take in the air. And Danny knew that that air, of which eighty percent was nitrogen, was being rid of its oxygen in the retort at his back, and the nitrogen alone was pouring out beneath him in a tremendous and ceaseless blast.

The squadron had appeared—a row of dots that came in on a long slanting drive from the ten thousand level. They swung into faultless formation to "ride his tail" into whatever flaming breath he might lead. And Danny O'Rourke threw his red ship down and into the

valley that seethed with a brew from the Pit itself.

There had been pines in that valley, and firs towering hundreds of feet in the air. They were living torches now, half seen through a whirling chaos of flame. It billowed as if the very gases that burned were tortured in the burning. The black-red of smoke-choked flames parted at times to show a deadlier white light below—a white, glaring heat in the heart of this gigantic, furnace—a scintillant, quivering horror on which Danny fixed the cross hairs of his sights as he rode his screaming meteor down into the pit.

"Bats out o' hell!" And now the brood was returning, it must have seemed. But beneath them, as they passed, that vivid whiteness went dead. Yet before it changed Danny saw unbelievable things—pools of molten rock, glaring white through the smoke.

Up and out at the end of the valley! And Danny gasped for breath even in the shelter of his cabin's insulated walls. And, used as he was to the red menace that they fought, he went sick at sight of a message that spelled itself beside his controls.

"Ship number six down. Failed to come out." It was signed with the name of the squadron commander who had followed where he led.

And the valley! For five miles they had laid a blanket of non-combustible gases. For five minutes, perhaps, their course could be seen. And at the end of that time it was as it had been before, and the flames raged on unchecked.

His own Chief's number flashed before him; then a message that clicked across his scanning plate:

"O'Rourke! Get out of that hole! Nitrogen won't touch it; we can't pour in enough. It's the same all along the line. We'll have to break it up—smother it one part at a time. Have you tried your sound dampener?"

And Danny O'Rourke had the grace to blush even through the flush that the fire's breath had given his face. "Forgot it!" he shouted into his voice sender. "Forgot the ship had the little doodad on it!"

The Chief responded audibly. "You didn't forget to go first into that doorway to hell," he said drily. "You fool Irishman, go back down and try the thing; give the 'little doodad' a chance!"

Once more the red ship fell swiftly under Danny's hand. As before, the valley yawned like the living threat of a volcano in eruption. But this time, instead of the whining nitro-producers, there came from

beneath the ship a discordant shriek like nothing that the quiet mountains had ever heard. And Danny's fingers played over a strange keyboard whose three keys were rheostats, and the crashing discord below rose to a horror of sound that tore and battered at the ship's thick walls to set the nerves of the crouching man a-jangle. But his eyes, watching through a lookout below, saw strange disturbances of the flames; he saw the masses of flame shiver as if stricken—fall apart—vanish!

And he held the sound controls at that same horrendous shriek while his ship swept on and the thunder of her passing was lost in the pandemonium that went before. But the valley, when the red ship had passed, was a place of charred skeleton trees—of gray, swirling ashes, and of embers, here and there, that blew back to life only to be smothered by the gases of the ships that followed in his wake.

And the voice that spoke from the instrument beside him still spoke drily. "There's fifty miles more of that ahead," said the voice. "Just keep moving along; we'll mop up behind you.... Oh, and by the way, O'Rourke, give my congratulations to the Infant on the success of his invention. His sound-dampener is some little doodad; we'll be needing more of them, I should say."

It was an hour or more later at the Headquarters of the Mountain

Division that the Chief amplified that remark in a way he himself could not have foreseen. He had been talking to Danny, and now on the wall of an adjoining room, where men sat at strange instruments, a red light flashed.

"We still don't know what started it all," the Chief was saying. "But it made a fine tryout for Morgan's invention. If I thought you and he could do it, I would believe you had started that fire yourselves for a"—his voice rose abruptly to a shout—"Man! There's the red on the board—a general alarm!"

"Throw the big switch!" he roared. "Cut us in, quick! Cut us in!"

Danny O'Rourke, under any ordinary circumstances would have been hugely amused at the extraordinary sight of the Chief of the Mountain Division in a ferment of excitement that was near hysteria. But the flashing of the red that swept like a finger of flame across every station number of the big board did not mean that ordinary matters were at hand. A voice was speaking; its high-pitched shrillness showed that the excitement of the moment was not confined to the office of the Mountain Division alone.

"A. F. F. Headquarters, Washington," it shrilled. "General Alarm. Chicago destroyed by fire. Flames sweeping in well defined paths

across the country. Originated in Mountain Division. Cause undetermined. Three lines of fire reported; coming east fast—unbelievable speed.... There! Cleveland has got it; reports a path of fire has cut across city melting steel and even stone.... Now Buffalo!... God knows what it is." The voice broke with excitement for an instant; Danny could almost see the distant man fighting for control of himself as a maze of instruments about him wrote incredible things.

"Orders!" said the voice now. "All A. F. F. ships report to your Division Headquarters. Division officers keep in communication with Washington. Mountain Division send all equipment east. Flying orders will be given you en route. The country—the whole world—is in flames!"

Beside him, Danny O'Rourke heard the voice of his Chief. "Unbelievable—impossible—preposterous!" His voice like that other was growing shrill. "The country—world—in flames!"

But he found voice to snap out a command to a waiting officer in the doorway of the adjoining room. "Repeat general order. Send all craft east!"

To Danny he whispered. "Your 'little doodad'—I wish to heaven we

had a thousand of them now! But what does it mean? Lanes of fire across the country—whole cities destroyed! What devil's work is this?... There's nobody who knows."

But Danny was staring as if he saw through the high, instrument-covered walls. Back to a valley of flame that was like a doorway to hell, where rocks, gray with the frosty years, had been melted to pools ... back to a glinting light where something swift and scintillant had flashed once in a cloudless sky ... back—far back ... back to a street in a town half across the world, and a figure of a giant who strode away with a smile of triumph on his ill-formed face ... but first that giant had melted his way through walls of stone; and, like the stone, steel bars and human flesh were as nothing before the invisible heat that come from a slender rod!

His own voice, when he moved his dry tongue to speak, came huskily; it was as if another person were speaking far off:

"I think you're wrong ... yes, I thing you're wrong, Chief. There's one man who knows and 'tis myself is that one.... One man—and the other is a beast like no livin' man on the face of the earth! He knows—he and the devils he's brought with him!"

It was an unsatisfactory interview that Danny had with the Chief.

"You're crazy!" was the verdict of that A. F. F. official when Danny had finished. "You're crazy, or else—or else—" His voice trailed off; his eyes were on the moving letters that flashed their message of disaster in an ever changing procession across the scanning screen on the wall.

"... outbreaks have ceased ... tremendous destruction ... no rational explanation ... meteors, perhaps ... thousands of lives ... no estimate...."

There seemed no end to the tale of disaster, and the Chief's voice died away into silence. If Danny was right he had no words to fit the unbelievable truth.

"Get into your new ship," the Chief ordered brusquely, "and take the Infant with you. I'll send a relief man to his station. Go east—lay your course for Washington; you'll get other orders on the way!"

And a half hour later the first rocket ship of the A. F. F. was blasting its way through the thin gases of the stratosphere eastward bound. But by now Danny O'Rourke had a more sympathetic listener than before.

"In big puddles it was, and lakes! 'Twas still melted, some of it, in

that valley."

"Why not?" asked the Infant casually. "Radiant heat moves with the speed of light. We wouldn't think anything of focusing ten million candle power of light energy into a spot like that. Why not heat? Just because we haven't learned to generate it—focus it—shoot it out in a stream like water from a hose—there's no use in denying that someone else has beat us to the punch."

The Infant's calm blue eyes were upon the luminous plates of the ship's microscope where the swift moving terrain beneath them was pictured clearly. The mountains were behind them now; endless miles of ripening grain made the land a sea of yellow and brown and, across that ocean, like the lines of foam that mark the wake of ships, lay three straight lines of black.

"Meteors!" sneered the Infant. "Yet if you'd tell your story to some of these wise men they would die of laughing—and maybe that wouldn't be a bad idea, either; they will be dying in a way that's a damned sight more unpleasant unless someone finds how to catch these birds."

Ahead of them the lookouts framed blue emptiness. Below, on direct sight, was but the vaguest blur that meant earth and clouds far

beneath. Only the magnification of the microscope brought out the details, and on its screen the unrolling picture showed those three lines broadening and merging to widespread desolation; then the smoke clouds came between to shut off a world reeking with the fumes of destruction. An occasional flash of red wings showed where the units of the A. F. F. were at work.

They beheld a city, below them—and smoking ruins where three great gashes had been torn with torches of flame. To Danny there came a thought that was sickening: it was as if some great three-toed beast had drawn one paw, red with the blood of helpless humans, ripping across the bosom of the land.

His number was flashing on the call board that had been registering incessant orders to other craft. He cut in on the Headquarters wave.

"O'Rourke—Mountain Division—Unit Five!" he reported. "Do you get my voice or shall I send by key?"

The man at Headquarters did not trouble to reply to the question. His voice came faint but clear:

"Number Five—O'Rourke—Orders! If that new ship of yours has any speed, show it now! Bear on Washington! Get here as quick as

the good Lord will let you! Mountain Division says you've got something good in that sound-dampener; if you have, we need it now!"

O'Rourke shot back a crisp acknowledgment; took a reading from two radio beacons; projected them on the map; and pricked a point at their intersection. He had his own ship on a line with the Capitol in a matter of seconds.

"And there's hell poppin' there, I'm bettin'! That Headquarters lad didn't tell much—he wouldn't be worth a dime on a newscast—but I gathered there was somethin' doin'."

He had spoken more to himself than to his companion who had been a silent listener to the incoming orders. But the Infant replied in his own peculiar way.

"The one you saw," he said inquiringly: "he did his dirty work with a little rod or tube, you said?"

With an effort, O'Rourke brought his thoughts in line with the question. "Oh, you mean the man-thing I saw in Stobolsk? Yes, that's right; he had a thing like a gun."

"And he held it in his hand?"

"In the big paw that passed for a hand, yes!"

"All right! Now think carefully, Danny, and tell me: was there anything fastened to it—a wire, perhaps—a connection of some kind with the ground?"

O'Rourke stared at the pink and white face of the cherub who sat with him in the control room of a rocket-ship that threw itself like a red meteor across the high skies. "You're a bit of a devil, yourself," he said wonderingly at last. "How in the names of the Saints did you know? Yes, there was a wire, and I had forgotten it myself. It hung down, I remember, from the butt of the thing. But not to the ground. Infant—you missed it there; 'twas looped back like into the folds of the damn blue nightie he wore."

"And then went to the ground," said the Infant imperturbably, "—through his shoes most likely; or, if the robe was metal, that may have dragged on the ground instead."

He smiled seraphically at the bewildered pilot as he added: "That's all, Danny, for the present. Fly your little tin ship. I've got some heavy thinking to do."

Danny heard him ask one cryptic question, but he asked it as one who knows that only from his own brain can come the answer.

"How do they get rid of it?" the Infant was demanding. "If they stay in the air, how do they get rid of the load?"

And Pilot O'Rourke was glad enough to leave the answer to that one to the Infant. For had not the Infant alone seen the only reasonable answer to the puzzle of the mysterious man? And Danny had learned that it takes a real man and a real mind to track truth to her hiding place and accept the absurd improbabilities on which truth rests.

They were approaching their destination when the Infant opened his Cupid's-bow mouth to pronounce one additional question. "How high," he asked, "will your little tin ship fly? I know they've reached just under a hundred thousand experimentally, but how high will this one go?"

"And that's a question neither you nor I can answer, Infant." Danny was working with careful fingers at tiny levers; their control room was filled with whining whispers and thin shrieks. "We're goin' down now," he continued, and again flipped over the switch that would put him in communication with the Washington office of the A. F. F.

"O'Rourke—Mountain Division—Unit Five," he said quietly. "Approaching Washington at altitude sixty-five thousand. Descending. Orders, please!"

Within the control room, where the voice of a Washington operator should have answered on the instant, there was silence. The rocket motor had been stilled. The two men were suddenly breathless with listening—listening!—where was heard only the whispering shrillness from without. The whispering grew as the red ship slanted down into denser air; it built up in volume; it varied its pitch and timber till it sounded like echoing voices ... ghostly voices and phantom words ... like orders from the dead....

And Danny O'Rourke found his eyes staring into those of the Infant, where he read only the confirmation of his own fears.

It was the Infant who first found words with which to break the dreadful silence.

"Headquarters is gone," he said in a strange, dry voice, "wiped out! They must have got it! It looks as if we were on our own.

"Where are you going?" he asked. "It's your ship."

And Danny answered with a single word, though he added other for emphasis under his breath:

"Down!" he said quietly. "And be damned to them!"

Rolling smoke clouds came to meet them. Danny O'Rourke was watching his altimeter sharply as he neared the ground. But he glanced more than once at the smoke. It was shot through with tongues of flame as they settled down; that was only what might be expected. But Danny was puzzled by the gray-white whirls that rose through the billowing smoke, until he knew it for the dust of powdered masonry, and realized that below him, where great buildings had been, were tumbled ruins.

Beside his control board a radio warning was telling of approaching ships. Danny cut in on then on emergency wave-length, and found that two full squadrons of nitro-ships were at hand with others coming.

"Let them tend to it!" the pale-faced youngster beside him choked—one does not see his country's capital destroyed without a tightening of the throat. "They can cool it with CO_2 and put down a rescue squad, though what they can do in that furnace is more than I can see."

Danny nodded mutely; he opened the exhaust to the full, and the rocket-plane swept out on whirlwinds of raging fire, and smoke, whose flames reached up even where they flew and licked hungrily at their ship.

Jarring explosions sent shudders through their craft. Ahead of them bright flashes illumined the swirling fumes where bursting shells marked the destruction of some ammunition stores outside the city.

And Danny, as he drove his red meteor into the clear air of the upper levels, was searching the heavens above for the enemy he had expected to sight down below. He knew now that his mad plunge into the seething flames was only a blind impulse—an effort to satisfy that demand within him for a foe upon whom to wreak revenge.

Beside him, his companion spun the dial of a receiving set for the Airnews Service; a voice was shouting excitedly into their cabin: "... physicists unable to find cause ... no meteoric material seen ... new rays ... enormous temperatures ... some new and unknown conditions encountered in space—"

"Hell!" said the Infant wearily, and snapped off the instrument. "Meteors! New conditions in space! But, come to think of it, we

can't blame them for being off the trail. You know that the bird that's doing this flies high and fast ... and when he stops there's nobody left alive to tell of it!... And don't look for him here."

"Why not?" Danny demanded aggressively. "This ship isn't armed, but if I get my sights on that flyin' devil—"

"You won't," said the Infant darkly. "He's off somewhere discharging the load he's accumulated."

He reached for a map, stuck his finger on a point in eastern New York State. "Let's go there, Danny—and I'd like to get there right now!"

And Danny O'Rourke, who, ordinarily was a bit particular about who gave him orders, looked at the Infant's blue eyes that had gone hard and cold, and he swung his roaring ship toward the north and a place that was marked by a steady finger on the map.

New York was a place of flashing reflections far beneath them as they passed. Danny pointed downward toward the miniature city, where a silvery river met the sea; where a maze of flaming lights in all of the colors of the spectrum gave indication of activity at the great Navy Field.

"How did he miss it, the murderin' devil?" he asked. "How come that he hit Washington first? Did he have some way of knowin' that it was the heart of the whole country?"

"And why pick on us here in this country? Or are we just the first, and will he spit his rage over the rest of the world before he's through? It it the end of the world that's come?"

To all of which there was no answer. And at last, when New York had vanished, they came to a smaller city and a broad expanse of roof that took their wheels.

Danny followed where his companion led into great buildings and a place of offices where excited officials stood in knots about news-casting cones; then they were in a quiet room, in the presence of a lean-bodied man whose hawklike face turned flinty at some request the Infant made.

"What the lad wants, I don't know," said Danny to himself, "but whatever it is he won't be gettin' it from old Gimlet-eyes."

But he saw the Infant write something on a card and he heard him say, as he handed it to the official: "Send that to the President—at once!" And though the words were hardly audible they had a quality

that brought an instant response; while the written words brought a portly man who shook the Infant's hand fervently and inquired what service a great electric company could render.

Danny heard Gimlet-eyes protesting; heard broken bits of sentences: "... the great Sorenson tube ... he knows of our disintegrator ... insists upon our furnishing ... preposterous...."

The portly man cut him short. "You will give Mr. Morgan whatever he wishes," he ordered crisply. Then Danny saw him clutch at a desk for support as still another man appeared at the open door to shout:

"New York! My God! New York's gone! Burning! The Empire State Building melted! Crashed!... The whole city is being destroyed!"

And in the moment of numbness that seized Danny O'Rourke he heard the Infant say: "How soon can we have it? I want it in our ship —up above—an hour? We'll be there." But Danny had no further interest in the Infant's arrangements for obtaining some unknown equipment; he was plunging through the doorway and running at full speed toward the ramp where they had descended.

He knew dimly that the younger man had followed and was crowding into the cabin after him. Danny, as he locked the port and

lifted his red ship off her guides, was fully conscious of only one fact: that a hundred miles south a city was being destroyed and that somewhere in the vast heights above the city he would find the destroyer.

The Hudson that had been a thread of silver was no longer bright as they approached the city at its mouth; burnished now with its reflection of black smoke clouds and red tongues of flame, it vanished at last under a mountain of black that heaped itself in turbulent piles and whirling masses until the winds swept the smoke out over the sea.

And high above it all—so high that all clouds were below it—there hung in a lucent sky one tiny, silvery speck. There was a delicate steering sight on Danny's ship; he could direct the red craft as if it were in very fact a projectile that could be controlled in flight. And under the cross hairs of that sight swung a silvery speck, while the man who looked along the telescopic tube cursed steadily and methodically as if in some way his hate might span the gap and reach that distant foe.

And then the speck vanished. Danny followed it with the powerful glasses of his sighting tube; he saw it swing inland—saw it move like a line of silvery light, almost, swifter in its motion than his

instrument could follow. But even in that swift flight Danny's eyes observed one fact: the enemy ship was coming down; it slanted in on that long volplane that must have ripped the air apart like a bolt of lightning. And Danny's red rocket swept out and around in a long, looping flight, while he laid the ship on the course that other had followed.

"That's one of them," he said savagely; "there must be two more. But I'll get this one if I have to crash him in air and smash my own ship right through him."

The mind of Danny O'Rourke was filled with only one idea; he had sighted his prey—the ship in which sat a man-thing who had sent a terrible death to Danny's fellows. And, though his hands moved carefully and methodically, though externally he was cool and collected, within him was a seething maelstrom of hate. All he saw was that giant figure as he had seen it before; all he knew was that he must overtake that speeding ship and send it to earth.

He had even forgotten Morgan; perhaps he was never fully conscious of his coming from the moment when that other trembling, shaken man had shouted: "New York! New York's gone!"

"There aren't two more," the Infant was saying from his seat at the

rear of the cabin: "there's just one. Those three lines were always parallel except when they widened out: that meant that he had gone up higher. If we ever see that ship, we'll see three discharge tubes for the ray."

Danny O'Rourke turned his eyes that had gone haggard and deep-sunk with the sights they had seen. He stared vacantly at the Infant.

"Didn't know," he said thickly, "—didn't know you were here. I'll set you down; I'll let you out before I ram him...."

For reply, the other pointed ahead. The red ship had torn through a layer of thick clouds; Danny was flying below them above a mountainous world of bare hill-tops and wooded valleys. Directly ahead, hovering high over a mountain higher than its fellows, was the white craft of the enemy; Danny, saw it in hard outline against the darker masses of clouds beyond. He saw that it was motionless, that a slender cable was suspended for a thousand feet below, and that the end of the cable, hanging close above the mountain top, was split into a score of wires that stood out in all directions, while, from each, poured a stream of blue fire.

And once more all this that he saw was as nothing to the pilot; all thought, too, of his fellow victim went from his mind. He could see

only the white ship, doubly hideous because of its seeming purity; and, as before, he brought the cross hairs of directional sights upon it while he opened the rocket exhaust to the full.

But even pilot O'Rourke, with the highest rating in the A. F. F., could not follow the lightning-swift leap of the snow-white thing that buried itself in the smother of cloud banks above.

Danny set his red ship down on that same barren hilltop; he motioned Morgan to follow as he stepped out.

"We're somewhere in Pennsylvania," he announced. "You're stayin' here. Sorry to dump you out like this, but you'll find a way out. Get to a radio—call a plane." He held out his hand in unspoken farewell.

But the other man disregarded it. "What's the idea?" he inquired.

Danny's reply came in short, breathless sentences. "Going up to find that ship. Ram it. No use of your getting smashed up, too. Good-by, Infant; you're a good old scout."

Danny's mind was all on what lay ahead; he was wildly eager to be off on the hunt. It took him an instant to comprehend the look from Morgan's steady, blue eyes.

"Listen!" the younger man was ordering. "You're not going to do that; I am! And not just that way, either."

"Did you see that cable and the electric discharges?" he demanded excitedly. "It's just as I thought: he accumulates a negative charge; he has to get rid of it—he's just like a thunder-cloud loaded with static—and the heat ray does it. I had it figured that way."

"Remember the little tube you saw before—that's why I asked about the wire. I knew he would have to ground it without its going through his body."

Danny O'Rourke was an intent listener now. When the Infant talked like this he was a person to be listened to with respect, even if all he said was not understood.

"Now," said the Infant with finality, "let's forget this idea of ramming him. You couldn't hit him anyway; even a cruiser couldn't do it. If it could you would have radioed for a squadron an hour ago—you know that."

The pilot nodded his acknowledgment. "But, my God, man," he exploded, "I've got to do something; I've got to try!"

"We'll do it," was the confident reply, "—or I will. Now we'll go back to the Consolidated Electric; they will have the Sorenson disintegrator ready. I'll put it in your machine and—"

"And what?" broke in the pilot. "Is this some new death ray? We've been hearing about them for years—just hearing about them. If that's what you mean, then your idea is all wet; it's worse than mine. I'm going up."

Perhaps the younger man saw something of the wild impatience in Danny's deep-sunk eyes. He laid a restraining hand on the pilot's arm while he explained:

"No death ray, Danny—that will come later; we haven't got it now. But we've got the disintegration of matter—the splitting of the atom, on something bigger than a laboratory scale. Sorenson did it. There is a flood of electrical energy poured out—streams of electrons—negative electricity. It leaves a positive charge that is tremendous if it isn't neutralized.

"I said that devilish white thing was like a thunder-cloud; well, I'll make your ship like the earth; then I'll bring them near each other—no need to ram him—and it will be like the hammer of Thor—"

The Infant's words ended in a crackling roar from above. Danny O'Rourke found his whole body tingling as if he were filled with stinging sparks; each single fiber of each muscle was twitching.

A blue light shone eerily overhead. He bent his stiffened, jerking neck till he could look—till he could see, with eyes that were filled with flashing fires of their own, other ripping blue flashes from the ends of outstanding wires, and above him a thousand feet, the belly of a white ship.

And through the brain-hammering clatter of the static discharge he heard the voice of the Infant, whose words came jerkily between the shudders that shook him:

"He doesn't dare, damn him! Can't let the wires touch us. Has to—discharge—in air.... But he'll burn us—afterwards!"

"Stand still!" said Danny through stiffened lips. "Don't make a move! He hasn't seen us, it may be!"

The crackling discharge had ceased; the rain of miniature lightning bolts that had shot around them and through them had ended. The

cable had gone up before their eyes and hidden itself in the white ship. The pilot's eyes clung to that white-bellied thing, so slender and round and gleaming against the dark clouds overhead; he saw it hang motionless for long minutes while it seemed that the breath in his throat must choke him. Then he saw that white roundness enlarge as the ship settled swiftly down.

It hung in another moment directly above their red ship. Danny saw three round holes open in the white shell—the three outlets that the Infant had predicted. It had descended noiselessly, but now there came from within a high-pitched whining hum. The dreaded heat and ray! They were about to see their own ship destroyed! And, as for themselves—! Danny was still waiting for the first, devastating blast of intolerable heat, when the ship settled softly down.

Green port-holes stared at him like eyes. A door was outlined with a line of black that spread to a round opening as a door swung wide. A huge door in the side of a huge ship, but it was none too large for the giant figure that crept through.

And Danny O'Rourke stared wordlessly at the flat-nosed face above a robe of chilled steel blue.

"'Tis him!" he gasped out that the Infant might hear. "The same one

—the devil I saw in Stobolsk!" And if any other identification were needed it came in the slender rod, whose heavy metal butt was gripped in the giant's hand. At sight of the wire looping back from the weapon; at remembrance of the Infant's shrewd guess; and with the conviction that now this same weapon was to annihilate the only two men who knew how to combat this destroyer, Danny threw back his head and laughed—until his harsh laughter died away in a snarl of rage.

"Go on and do it," he heard, "you ugly devil. You killed those Reds; you've killed thousands of us since, you murderin' beast! Go on and kill us, too!"

The slender tube was aimed at him squarely. Danny waited to hear the faint click that would mean his death as the invisible ray sawed into his body. Instead the huge figure leaned down to stare at the pilot; then straightened while a crooked smile of recognition appeared on the deformed face.... And the slender rod moved on—on—in a slow circle toward the other waiting man!

It clicked before it reached him. Danny heard it, and "No—no!" he screamed in a horrible voice. "Run, Infant! Beat it, for God's sake!"

The enemy was twenty feet away; it seemed as many miles to Danny

as he threw himself at the foe. He did not see the ray strike. He heard only the Infant's steady voice calling: "Remember Danny—the Sorenson machine—if you live."

Then a blast of reflected heat swept upon him, and he felt himself stifling. There was a pool of molten rock, white and glaring with heat ... and a puff of smoke, grayish black, and ashes that whirled in the wind that swept up from the pool....

Danny tried to raise himself from the hot stone where he had fallen, so near he was to the pool of death. He saw the grotesque figure of the giant move over toward the red ship, look at it, sneer contemptuously, and turn back to his own ship of doom. He saw the black entrance swallow the huge foe and he saw the door close, while the great ship, so innocently white in its sleek slender roundness, rose again in the air where the clouds took it up.

And Danny, resting on scorched but unfeeling hands, stared after him until he got the enemy's direction of flight as he entered the clouds, then he turned towards a place of glowing rock where the air rose in quivering waves.

"You said it, Infant," he whispered; "you knew I was just a fightin' fool that wouldn't think the way you would. You told me to get the

Sorenson machine—" He brushed at his suddenly blinded eyes with one seared hand, then turned to stare grimly and appraisingly where the white ship had gone.

"And I'm thinkin'," he told the beastly occupant of that carrier of death, "that you didn't shoot your damned ray quite quick enough. The Infant beat you to it! He got his message to me first!"

How he got to the flat-roofed landing zone of the Consolidated Electric, Danny, doubtless, could never have told. Nor was he aware of the hand that set in the forward cabin of his ship a strange machine. But he growled his instructions:

"Set it goin'! 'Tis the Infant's orders—I mean Mr. Morgan's. What the devil it is I don't know, but 'Turn it on!' he told me—'Have them put it on full!'" And, though a man whom Danny knew only as Gimlet-eyes stared at him curiously, he reached down to the apparatus, set a dial, closed a switch here and there, then stepped back.

But Gimlet-eyes ventured one protest. "You're not grounding it!" he exclaimed, in a voice that was tinged with horror. "You'll get an accumulation on your ship that will shoot off like lightning—millions of volts!"

"How long would that be takin'?" Danny inquired gruffly.

And Gimlet-eyes replied, as one who washes his hands of all responsibility in a rather horrible affair: "An hour—not more than an hour!"

"Then I'll just be drivin' around for an hour," said Danny, and slammed shut the door-port of the red ship.

The red rocket drove in slow circles that were a hundred miles across while that hour passed and the numbness of mind that had held Danny in a stupor slipped away. For the first time he realized the emptiness of the world that the Infant had left; he knew with a sharp stab of self-reproach how much had gone from his life in that instant when he sprang vainly toward the giant enemy.

He called himself wild names for his fancied sluggishness. Then that, too, passed, and at thought of the weapon the Infant had given him and of the work that lay ahead, his haggard face forgot the lines that horror had drawn and relaxed into a tired smile that told of a mind content.

Gradually his looping whirls had carried him toward the east. Another city was being devastated by the enemy; that Danny got

from the newscast. Only that and one other message broke the tedious eternity of that long hour.

Danny's number flashed on the screen beside his controls. Unconsciously he answered, but he sat up alertly at sound of his Chief's voice.

"I can't get anyone," the voice said. "Headquarters is gone; I just called you on a chance. And I believe you now, Danny. That devil wiped out a whole fleet of our planes; melted the cruisers with one shot, and the scouts couldn't go fast enough to escape. Only one got away....

"But where are you? What's to be done? I've just got here. My God! What can we do?"

"Wait," said Danny O'Rourke calmly, and glanced at his watch; "wait for another ten minutes! He's over Boston now. And he's waitin' there for me—though he doesn't know it yet. But I'll be droppin' in on him."

"Don't be an utter fool, Danny," urged the voice of the Chief; "there isn't a thing you can do. You try to come down on him, and he'll do as he did with the cruisers—just slip aside like lightning and nail you

with his damned heat ray when you're below! I'm near Boston now. You keep away. Where can I meet you? We've got to think—got to do something!"

And Danny, before he opened the switch that ended their talk, said meditatively: "Like lightnin' he moves ... but he'll have to move faster than lightnin' to dodge me. And if you're near Boston, stick around; I'm comin' now, but not to meet you, Chief; I've got another important engagement. I'm keepin' it for—for the Infant. And give the Infant the credit, Chief; give it all to him, he's earned it: he's paid for it in full." Then the snap of a switch cut off the sound of Danny's voice before it showed a tell-tale quaver.

It was steady some minutes later, when Danny swept in above the mounting clouds that he had learned to know. Beneath them invisible fingers of death were sweeping back and forth where men and women ran shrieking in terror or waited calmly and dry-eyed for the end. Above them a slender rounded thing wove its pattern of destruction back and forth ... back and forth. A spectral ship—a pale phantom, elusive and dimly seen until it came against the black of rolling smoke from below.

But to Danny O'Rourke, slanting down from tremendous heights, the white shape was never lost. On the cross hairs of his directional

sights the ghostly ship hung, and Danny threw his own red rocket like a living flame over and down where the white one sensed his coming and waited.

Beside him a human voice, high with horror, called to him. "Come back!" the Chief of the Mountain Division was commanding. "Danny! For the love of Heaven, turn back!"

But the voice was unheard by Danny O'Rourke. There was another voice speaking ... he could almost see the smiling pink and white face of one beside him who spoke of his "little tin ship" ... spoke, too, of a white ship that would be like a great thunder-cloud ... and of his own screaming meteor that was like the earth ... and there was to be a messenger of death like the hammer of Thor that would flash between the two....

Danny saw the white one slipping easily aside; the ship was swelling suddenly before him—it was close ... but the jagged lightning—the ripping flash of blue that joined the two craft in a crashing arc—was neither seen nor heard by Danny. Danny was too busy to notice, for he was engaged in smiling converse with one whom he called the "Infant" and whose pink and white face beamed gladly upon him "like a damned little cherub," as Danny was telling him....

But the Chief of the Mountain Division who saw all from afar could say nothing. He only stared from the lookout of his own speeding plane that framed a picture of two ships; where the red one, flaming from within, kept on in its swift, straight dive; while the white one fell slowly, turning sluggishly to show its gashed and blasted sides ... till the black clouds wrapped them both in a billowy shroud....

But clouds are no bar to man's inner vision. And the Chief looked through, as Danny had done, to see as in a lightning flash a world beaten to its knees, hopeless, ravaged and scarred—a world where courage might again be born—a world that would still be a world of men.

134 Vampires of Space by Sewell Peaslee Wright

Commander John Hanson recounts his harrowing adventure with the Electites of space

Aproximate word count: 7,700

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Sometimes, I know, I must seem a crotchety old man. "Old John Hanson," they call me, and roll their eyes as though to say, "Of course, you have to forgive him on account of his age."

But the joke isn't always on me. Not infrequently I gain much amusement observing these cocky youngsters who strut in the blue-and-silver uniforms of the Service in which, until more or less recently, I bore the rank of Commander.

There is young Clippen, for instance, a nice, clean youngster; third officer, I believe, on the Caliobre, one of the newest ships of the Special Patrol Service. He drops in to see me as often as he has leave

here at Base, to give me the latest news, and to coax a yarn, if he can, of the old days. He is courteous, respectful ... and yet just a shade condescending. The condescension of youth.

"Something new under the sun after all, sir," he commented the other day. That, incidentally, is a saying of Earth, whence the larger part of the Service's officer personnel has always been drawn. Something new under the sun! The saying probably dates back to an age long before man mastered space.

"Yes?" I leaned back more comfortably, happy, as always, to hear my native Earth tongue, and to speak it. The Universal language has its obvious advantages, but the speech of one's fathers wings thought straightest to the mind. "What now?"

"Creatures of space!" announced Clippen importantly, in the fashion of one who brings surprising news. "'Electites,' they call them. Beings who live in space—things, anyway; I don't know that you could call them beings."

"Hm-m." I looked past him, down a mighty corridor of dimming years. Creatures that lived in space.... I smiled in my beard. "Creatures perhaps twice the height of a man in their greatest dimension? In shape like a crescent, with blunted horns somewhat

straightened near the tips, and drawn close together?" I spoke slowly, drawing from my store of memories. "A pale red in color, intangible and yet—"

"You've heard, sir!" said Clippen disappointedly to me. "My news is stale."

"Yes, I've heard," I nodded. "'Electites,' they call them, eh? That's the work of our great scientific minds, I presume?"

"Er—yes. Undoubtedly." Clippen started to wander restlessly around the room. He had a great respect for the laboratory men, with their white coats and their wise, solemn airs, and he disliked exceedingly to have me present my views regarding these much overrated gentlemen. I have always been a man of action, and pottering over coils and glass vials and pages of figures has always struck me as something not to be included in a man's proper sphere of activity. "Well, I believe I'll be shoving off, sir; just dropped in for a moment," Clippen continued. "Thought perhaps you hadn't heard of the news; it seems to be causing a great deal of discussion among the officers at Base."

"Something new under the sun, eh?" I chuckled.

"Why, yes. You'll agree to that, sir, surely?" I believe the lad was slightly nettled by my chuckle. No one likes to bear stale news.

"I'll agree to that," I said, smiling broadly now. "'Tis easier than debating the matter, and an old man can't hope to hold his own in argument with you quick-witted youngsters."

"I've never noticed," replied young Clippen rather acidly, "that you were particularly averse to argument, sir. Rather the reverse. But I must be moving on; we're shoving off soon, I hear, and you know the routine here at Base."

He saluted me, rather carelessly, I should say, and I returned the salute with the crispness with which the gesture was rendered in my day. When he was gone, I turned to my desk and began searching in that huge and capacious drawer in which were kept, helter-skelter, the dusty, faded, nondescript mementoes of a thousand adventures.

I found, at last, what I was seeking. No impressive thing, this: a bit of metal, irregular in shape, no larger than my palm, and three times the thickness. One side was smooth; the other was stained as by great heat, and deeply pitted as though it had been steeped in acid.

Silently, I turned the bit of metal over and over in my hands. I had

begged hard for this souvenir; had obtained it only by passing my word its secret would never reach the Universe through me. But now ... now that seal of secrecy has been removed.

As I write this, slowly and thoughtfully, as an old man writes, relishing his words for the sake of the memories they bring before his eyes, a bit of metal holds against the vagrant breeze the filled pages of my script. A bit of metal, no larger than my palm, and perhaps three times the thickness. It is irregular in shape, and smooth on one side. The other side is eroded as though by acid.

Not an imposing thing, this ancient bit of metal, but to me one of my most precious possessions. It is, beyond doubt, the only fragment of my old ship, the Ertak, now in existence and identifiable.

And this story is the story of that pitted metal and the ship from which it came; one of the strangest stories in all my storehouse of memories of days when only the highways of the Universe had been charted, and breathless adventure awaited him who dared the unknown trails of the Special Patrol Service.

The Ertak, as I recall the details now, had just touched at Base upon the completion of a routine patrol—one of those monotonous, fruitless affairs which used to prey so upon Correy's peace of mind.

Correy was my first officer on the Ertak, and the keenest seeker after trouble I have ever known.

"The Chief presents his compliments and requests an immediate audience with Commander Hanson," announced one of the brisk, little attaches of Base, before I'd had time to draw a second breath of fresh air.

I glanced at Correy, who was beside me, and winked. That is, I quickly drew down the lid of one eye—a peculiar little gesture common to Earth, which may mean any one of many things.

"Sounds like something's in the wind," I commented in a swift aside. "Better give 'no leaves' until I come back."

"Right, sir!" chuckled Correy. "It's about time."

I made my way swiftly to the Chief's private office, and was promptly admitted. He returned my salute crisply, and wasted no time in getting to the point.

"How's your ship, Commander? Good condition?"

"Prime, sir."

"Supplies?"

"What's needed could be taken on in two hours." In the Service, Earth time was an almost universal standard except in official documents.

"Good!" The Chief picked up a sheaf of papers, mostly standard charts and position reports, I judged, and frowned at them thoughtfully. "I've some work cut out for you, Commander.

"Two passenger ships have recently been reported lost in space. That wouldn't be so alarming if both had not, when last reported, been in about the same position. Perhaps it is no more than a coincidence, but, with space travel still viewed with a certain doubt by so many, the Council feels something should be done to determine the cause of these two losses.

"Accordingly, all ships have been rerouted to avoid the area in which it is presumed these losses took place. The locations of the two ships, together with their routes and last reported positions, are given here. There will be no formal orders; you are to cruise until you have determined, and if possible, eliminated the danger, or until you are certain that no further danger exists."

He slid the papers across his desk, and I picked them up.

"Yes, sir!" I said. "That will be all?"

"You understand your orders?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Very well. Good luck, Commander!"

I saluted and hurried out of the room, back to my impatient first officer.

"What's up, sir?" he asked eagerly.

"Can't say that I know, to be truthful about it. Perhaps nothing; perhaps a great deal. Give orders to take on all necessary supplies—in double-quick time. I've promised the Chief we'll be ready to shove off in two hours. I'll meet you in the navigating room, and give you all the information I have."

Correy saluted and rushed away to give the necessary orders. Thoughtfully, I made my way through the narrow, ethon-lighted passageways to the navigating room, where Correy very shortly joined me.

Briefly, I repeated the Chief's conversation, and we both bent over the charts and position reports.

"Hm-m!" Correy was lost in thought for a moment as he fixed the location in his mind. "Rather on the fringe of things. Almost anything could happen out there, sir. That would be on the old Belgrade route, would it not?"

"Yes. It's still used, however, as you know, by some of the smaller, slower ships making many stops. Or was, until the recent order. Any guesses as to what we'll find?"

"None, sir, except the obvious one."

"Meteorites?"

Correy nodded.

"There's some bad swarms, now and then," he said seriously. I knew he was thinking of one disastrous experience the Ertak had had ... and of scores of narrow escapes. "That would be the one likely explanation."

"True. But those ships were old and slow, they could turn about and dodge more easily than a ship of the Ertak's speed. At full space

speed we're practically helpless; can neither stop nor change our course in time to avoid an emergency."

"Well, sir," shrugged Correy, "our job's to find the facts. I took the liberty of telling the men we were to be ready in an hour and a half. If we are, do we shove off immediately?"

"Just as soon as everything's checked. I leave it to you to give the necessary orders. I know I can depend upon you to waste no time."

"Right, sir," said Correy, grinning like a schoolboy. "We'll waste no time."

In just a shade less than two hours after we had set down at Base, we were rising swiftly at maximum atmospheric speed, on our way to a little-traveled portion of the universe, where two ships, in rapid succession, had met an unknown fate.

"I wonder, sir, if you could come to the navigating room at once?" It was Kincaide's voice, coming from the instrument in my stateroom.

"Immediately, Mr. Kincaide." I asked no questions, for I knew my second officer's cool-headed disposition. If something required my attention in the navigating room, in his opinion, it was something

important. I threw on my uniform hurriedly and hastened to Kincaide's side, wondering if at last our days of unrewarded searching were to bear fruit.

"Perhaps I called you needlessly, sir," Kincaide greeted me apologetically, "but, considering the nature of our mission, I thought it best to have your opinion." He motioned toward the two great navigating charts, operated by super-radio reflexes, set in the surface of the table before him.

In the center of each was the familiar red spark which represented the Ertak herself, and all around were the glowing points of greenish light which gave us, in terrestial terms, the locations of the various bodies to the right and left, above and below.

"See here, sir—and here?" Kincaide's blunt, capable forefingers indicated spots on each of the charts. "Ever see anything like that before?"

I shook my head slowly. I had seen instantly the phenomena he had pointed out. Using again the most understandable terminology, to our right, and somewhat above us, nearer by far than any of the charted bodies, was something which registered on our charts, as a dim and formless haze of pinkish light.

"Now the television, sir," said Kincaide gravely.

I bent over the huge, hooded disk, so unlike the brilliantly illuminated instruments of to-day, and studied the scene reflected there.

Centered in the field was a group of thousands of strange things, moving swiftly toward the ship. In shape they were not unlike crescents, with the horns blunted, and pushed inward, towards each other. They glowed with a reddish radiance which seemed to have its center in the thickest portion of the crescents—and, despite their appearance, they gave me, somehow, an uncanny impression that they were in some strange way, alive! While they remained in a more or less compact group, their relative positions changed from time to time, not aimlessly as would insensate bodies drifting thus through the black void of space, but with a sort of intelligent direction.

"What do you make of them, sir?" asked Kincaide, his eyes on my face. "Can you place them?"

"No," I admitted, still staring with a fixed fascination at the strange scene in the television disk. "Perhaps this is what we've been searching for. Please call Mr. Correy and Mr. Hendricks, and ask

them to report here immediately."

Kincaide hastened to obey the order, while I watched the strange things in the field of the television disk, trying to ascertain their nature. They were not solid bodies, for even as I viewed them, one was superimposed upon another, and I could see the second quite distinctly through the substance of the first. Nor were they rigid, for now and again one of the crescent arms would move searchingly, almost like a thick, clumsy tentacle. There was something restless, hungry, in the movement of the sharp arms of the things, that sent a chill trickling down my spine.

Correy and Hendricks arrived together; their curiosity evident.

"I believe, gentlemen," I said, "that we're about to find out the reason why two ships already have disappeared in this vicinity. Look first at the charts, and then here."

They bent, for a moment, over the charts, and then stared down into the television disk. Correy was first to speak.

"What are they?" he gasped. "Are they ... alive?"

"That is what we don't know. I believe they are, after a fashion. And,

if you'll observe, they are headed directly towards us at a speed which must be at least as great as our own. Is that correct, Mr. Kincaide?"

Kincaide nodded, and began some hasty figuring, taking his readings from the finely ruled lines which divided the charts into little measured squares, and checking speeds with the chronometers set into the wall of the room.

"But I don't understand the way in which they register on our navigating charts, sir," said Hendricks slowly. Hendricks, my youthful third officer, had an inquiring, almost scientific mind. I have often said he was the closest approach to a scientist I have ever seen in the person of an action-loving man. "They're a blur of light on the charts—all out of proportion to their actual size. They must be something more than material bodies, or less."

"They're coming towards us," commented Correy grimly, still bent over the disk, "as though they knew what they were doing, and meant business."

"Yes," nodded Kincaide, picking up the paper upon which he had been figuring. "This is just a rule-of-thumb estimate, but if they continue on their present course at their present speed, and we do

likewise, they'll be upon us in about an hour and a quarter—less, if anything."

"But I can't understand their appearance in the charts," muttered Hendricks doggedly, still turning that matter over in his mind. "Unless ... unless ... ah! I'll venture I have it, sir! The charts are operated by super-radio reflexes; in others words, electrically. They would naturally be extremely sensitive to an electrical disturbance. Those things are electrical in nature. Highly so. That's the reason for the flare of light on the charts."

"Sounds logical," said Correy immediately. "The point, as I see it, is not what they are, but what we're to do about them. Do you believe, sir, that they are dangerous?"

"Let me ask you some questions to answer that one," I suggested. "Two ships are reported lost in space—in this immediate vicinity. We come here to determine the cause of those losses. We find ourselves the evident objective of a horde of strange things which we cannot identify; which Mr. Hendricks, here, seems to have good reason to believe are somehow electrical in nature. Putting all these facts together, what is the most logical conclusion?"

"That these things caused the two lost ships to be reported missing in

space!" said Hendricks.

I glanced at Kincaide, and he nodded gravely.

"And you, Mr. Correy?" I asked.

Correy shrugged.

"I believe you're, right, sir. They seem like such rather flimsy, harmless things, though, that the disintegrator rays will take care of without difficulty. Shall I order the ray operators to their stations, sir?"

"Do that, please. And take personal charge of the forward projectors, will you? Mr. Hendricks, will you command the after projectors? Mr. Kincaide and I will carry on here."

"Shall we open upon them at will, or upon orders, sir?" asked Correy.

"Upon orders," I said. "And you'll get your orders as soon as they're in range; I have a feeling we're in for trouble."

"I hope so, sir!" grinned Correy from the door.

Hendricks followed him silently, but I saw there was a deep, thoughtful frown between his brows.

"I think," commented Kincaide quietly, "that Hendricks is likely to be more useful to us in this matter than Correy."

I nodded, and bent over the television disk. The things were perceptibly nearer; the hurtling group nearly filled the disk, now.

There was something horribly eager, horribly malignant, in the way they shone, so palely red, and in the fashion in which their blunt tentacles reached out toward the Ertak.

I glanced up at the Earth clock on the wall.

"The next hour," I said soberly, "cannot pass too quickly for me!"

We had decelerated steadily during the hour, but we were still above maximum atmospheric speed when at last I gave the order to open the invaders with disintegrator rays. They were close, but of course the rays are not as effective in space as when operating in a more favorable medium, and I wished to make sure of our prey.

I pressed the attention signal to Correy's post, and he answered instantly.

"Ready, Mr. Correy?"

"Ready, sir!"

"Then commence action!"

Before I could repeat the command to Hendricks, I heard the deepening note of the atomic generators, and knew Correy had already begun operations.

Together, and silently, Kincaide and I bent over the television disk. We watched for a moment, and then, with one accord, lifted our heads and looked into each other's eyes.

"No go, sir," said Kincaide quietly.

I nodded. It was evident the disintegrator rays were useless here. When they struck into the horde of crescent-shaped things coming so hungrily toward us, the things changed from red to a sickly, yellowish pink, and seemed to writhe, as though in some discomfort, but that was all.

"Perhaps at closer range...?" ventured Kincaide.

"I think not. If Mr. Hendricks is correct—and I believe he is—these

things aren't material; they're not matter, as we comprehend the word. And so, they can't be disintegrated."

"Then, sir, how are we to best them?"

"First, we'll have to know more about them. For one thing, their mode of attack. We should know very soon. Please recall Mr. Hendricks, and then order all hands to their posts. We may be in for it."

Hendricks came rushing in breathlessly.

"The rays are useless, sir," he said. "They'll be on us in a few minutes. Any further orders?"

"Not yet. Have you any ideas as to their mode of attack? What they can do to us?"

"No, sir. That is, no reasonable idea."

"What's your unreasonable theory, then, Mr. Hendricks?"

"I'd prefer, sir, to make further observation first," he replied. "They're close enough now, I think, to watch through the ports. Have I your permission to unshutter one of the ports?"

"Certainly, sir." The Ertak, like all Special Patrol ships of the period, had but few ports, and these were kept heavily shuttered. Her hull was double; she was really two ships, one inside the other, the two skins being separated and braced by innumerable trusses. Between the outer and the inner skin the air pressure was kept about one half of normal, thus distributing the strain of the pressure equally between the two hulls.

In order to arrange for a port or an exit, it was necessary to bring these two skins close together at the desired point, and strengthen this weak point with many braces. As a further protection against an emergency—and a fighting ship must be prepared against all emergencies—the ports were all shuttered with massive doors of solid metal, hermetically fitted. I am explaining this so much in detail for the benefit of those not familiar with the ships of my day, and because this information is necessary that one may have a complete understanding of subsequent events.

Hendricks, upon receiving my permission, sprang to one of the two ports in the navigating room and unshuttered it.

"The lights, please?" he asked, over his shoulder. Kincaide nodded, and switched off the ethon tubes which illuminated the room. The three of us crowded around the recessed port.

The things were not only close: they were veritably upon us! Even as we looked, one of them swept by the port so close that, save for the thick crystal, one might have reached out into space and touched it.

The television disk had represented them very accurately. They were, in their greatest dimension, perhaps twice the height of a man, and at close range their reddish color was more brilliant than I had imagined; in the thickest portion of the crescent, which seemed to be the nucleus, the radiance of the thing was almost blinding.

It was obvious that they were not material bodies. There were no definite boundaries to their bodies; they faded off into nothingness in a sort of fringe, almost like a dim halo.

An attention signal sounded sharply, and Kincaide groped his way swiftly to answer it.

"It's Correy, sir," he said. "He reports his rays are utterly useless, and asks for further orders."

"Tell him to cease action, and report here immediately." I turned to Hendricks, staring out the port beside me. "Well, what do you make of them now?"

Before he could reply, Kincaide called out sharply.

"Come here, sir! The charts are out of commission. We've gone blind."

It was true. The charts were no more than twin rectangles of lambent red flame, with a yellow spark glowing dimly in the center of each, the fine black lines ruled in the surface showing clearly against the wavering red fire.

"Mr. Hendricks!" I snapped. "Let's have your theory—reasonable or otherwise."

Hendricks, his face pressed at an angle against one side of the port, turned toward me, and swung the shutter into place. Kincaide snapped on the lights.

"It's no longer a theory, sir," he said in a choked, hushed voice, "although it's still unreasonable. These things—are eating us!"

"Eating us?" Correy's voice joined Kincaide's and mine in the exclamation of amazement. He had just entered the navigating room in response to my order.

"Eroding us, absorbing us—whatever you want to call it. There's one

at work close enough to the port so that I could see it. It is feeding upon our hull as an electric arc feeds upon its electrodes!"

"Farewell Ertak!" said Correy grimly. "Anything the rays can't lick —wins!"

"Not yet!" I contradicted him. "Kincaide, what's the nearest body upon which we can set down?"

"N-127, sir," he replied promptly. "Just logged her a few minutes ago." He poured hastily through a dog-eared index. "Here it is: 'N-127, atmosphere unbreathable; largely nitrogen, oxygen insufficient to support human life; no animal life reported; insects, large but reported non-poisonous; vegetation heroic in size, probably with edible fruits, although reports are incomplete on this score; water unfit for drinking purpose unless distilled; land area approximately __'"

"That's enough," I interrupted. "Mr. Correy, set a course for N-127 by the readings of the television instrument. Mr. Kincaide, accelerate to maximum space speed, and set us down on dry land as quickly as emergency speed can put us there. And you, Mr. Hendricks, please tell us all you know—or guess—about the enemy."

Hendricks waited, moodily silent, until the ship was coming around on her course, picking up speed every instant. Kincaide had gradually increased the pull of the gravity pads to about twice normal, so that we found it barely possible to move about. The Ertak was an old-timer, but she could pick up speed when she had to that would have thrown us all headlong were it not for the artificial gravity anchorage of the pads.

"It's all guess-work," began Hendricks slowly, "so I hope you won't place too much reliance in my theories, sir. I'll just give you my line of reasoning, and you can evaluate it for yourself.

"These things are creatures of space. No form of life, as we know it, can live in space. Therefore, they are not material; they are not matter, like ourselves.

"From their effect upon the charts, we decided they were electrical in nature. Not made up of atoms and electrons, but of pure electrical energy in an unfamiliar form.

"Then, remembering that they exist in space, and concluding that they were the destroyers of the two ships we know of, I began wondering how they brought about the destruction—or at least, the disappearance—of these two ships. Life of any kind must have

something to feed upon. To produce one kind of energy we must convert, apparently consume, some other kind of energy. Even our atomic generators slowly but surely eat up the metal in which is locked the power which makes this ship's power possible.

"But, in space, what could these things feed upon? What—if not those troublesome bodies, meteorites? And meteorites, as we know, are largely metallic in composition. And ships are made of metal.

"Here are the only proofs, if proofs you can call them, that these are not wild ideas: first, the disintegrator rays, working upon an electrical principle, reacted upon but did not destroy these things, as might be expected from the meeting of two not dissimilar manifestations of energy; and the fact that I did, from the port, see one of these space-things, or part of one, flattened out upon the body of the Ertak, and feeding upon her skin, already roughened and pitted slightly from the thing's hungry activities."

Hendricks fell silent, staring down at the floor. He was only a youngster, and the significance of his remarks was as plain to him as it was to the rest of us. If these monsters from the void were truly feeding on the skin of our ship, vampire-like, it would not be long before it would be weakened; weakened to the danger point, weakened until we would explode in space like a gigantic bomb, to

leave our fragments to whirl onward forever through the darkness and the silence of outer space.

"And what, sir, do you plan to do when we reach this N-127?" asked Correy. "Burn them off with a run through the atmosphere?"

"No; that wouldn't work, I imagine." I glanced at Hendricks inquiringly, and he shook his head. "My only thought was to land, so that we would have some chance. Outside the ship we can at least attack; locked in here we're helpless."

"Attack, sir? With what?" asked Kincaide curiously.

"That I can't answer. But at least we can fight—with solid ground under our feet. And that's something."

"You're right, sir!" grinned Correy. It was the first smile that had appeared on the faces of any of us in many minutes. "And fight we will! And if we lose the ship, at least we'll be alive, with a hope of rescue."

Hendricks glanced up at him and shook his head, smiling crookedly.

"You forget," he remarked, "that there's no air to breathe on N-127. An atmosphere of nitrogen. And no water that's drinkable—if the

reports are accurate. A breathing mask will not last long, even the new types."

"That's so," said Kincaide. "The tanks hold about a ten-hours' supply; less, if the wearer is working hard, or fighting."

Ten hours! No more, if we did not find some way to destroy these leeches of space before they destroyed the Ertak.

During the next half hour little was said. We were drawing close to our tiny, uninhabited haven, and both Correy and Kincaide were busy with their navigation. Working in reverse, as it were, from the rough readings of the television disk settings, an ordinarily simple task was made extremely difficult.

I helped Correy interpret his headings, and kept a weather eye on the gauges over the operating table. We were slipping into the atmospheric fringe of N-127, and the surface-temperature gauge was slowly climbing. Hendricks sat hunched heavily in a corner, his head bowed in his hands.

"I believe," said Kincaide at length, "I can take over visually now." He unshuttered one of the ports, and peered out. N-127 was full abreast of us, and we were dropping sideways toward her at a

gradually diminishing speed. The impression given us, due to the gravity pads in the keel of the ship, was that we were right side up, and N-127 was approaching us swiftly from the side.

"'Vegetation of heroic size' is right, too," said Correy, who had been examining the terrain at close range, through the medium of the television disk. "Two of the leaves on some of the weeds would make an awning for the whole ship. See any likely place to land, Kincaide?"

"Nowhere except along the shore—and then we'll have to do some nice work and lay the Ertak parallel to the edge of the water. The beach is narrow, but apparently the only barren portion. Will that be all right, sir?"

"Use your own judgment, but waste no time. Correy, break out the breathing masks, and order the men at the air-lock exit port to stand by. I'm going out to have a look at these things."

"May I go with you, sir?" asked Hendricks sharply.

"And I?" pleaded Kincaide and Correy in chorus.

"You, Hendricks, but not you two. The ship needs officers, you

know."

"Then why not me instead of you, sir?" argued Correy. "You don't know what you're going up against."

"All the more reason I shouldn't be receiving any information second-hand," I said. "And as for Hendricks, he's the laboratory man of the Ertak. And these things are his particular pets. Right, Hendricks?"

"Right, sir!" said my third officer grimly.

Correy muttered under his breath, something which sounded very much like profanity, but I let it pass.

I knew just how he felt.

I have never liked to wear a breathing mask. I feel shut in, frustrated, more or less helpless. The hiss of the air and the everlasting flap-flap of the exhaust-valve disturb me. But they are very handy things when you walk abroad on a world which has no breathable atmosphere.

You've probably seen, in the museums, the breathing masks of that period. They were very new and modern then, although they

certainly appear cumbersome by comparison with the devices of to-day.

Our masks consisted of a huge shirt of air-tight, light material which was belted in tightly around the waist, and bloused out like an ancient balloon when inflated. The arm-holes were sealed by two heavy bands of elastic, close to the shoulders, and the head-piece was of thin copper, set with a broad, curved band of crystal which extended from one side to the other, across the front, giving the wearer a clear view of everything except that which was directly behind him. The balloon-like blouse, of course, was designed to hold a small reserve supply of air, for an emergency, should anything happen to the tank upon the shoulders, or the valve which released the air from it.

They were cumbersome, uncomfortable things, but I donned mine and adjusted the menore, built into the helmet, to full strength. I wanted to be sure I kept in communication with both Hendricks and the sentries at the air-lock exit, and of course, inside the helmets, verbal communication was impossible.

I glanced at Hendricks, and saw that he was ready and waiting. We were standing inside the air-lock, and the mighty door of the port had just finished turning in its threads, and was swinging back

slowly on its massive gimbals.

"Let's go, Hendricks," I emanated. "Remember, take no chances, and keep your eyes open."

"I'll remember, sir," replied Hendricks, and together we stepped out onto the coarse gravel of the beach.

Before us, waves of an unhealthy, cloudy green rolled slowly, heavily shoreward, but we had no eyes for this, nor for the amazing vegetation of the place, plainly visible on the curving shores. We took a few hurried steps away from the ship, and then turned to survey the monsters which had attacked it.

They literally covered the ship; in several places their transparent, glowing bodies overlapped. And the sides of the Ertak, ordinarily polished and smooth as the surface of a mirror, were dull and deeply eroded.

"Notice, sir," emanated Hendricks excitedly, "how much brighter the things are! They are feeding, and they are growing stronger and more brilliant. They —look out, sir! They're attacking! Our copper helmets—"

But I had seen it as quickly as he. Half a dozen of the glowing things, sensing in some way the presence of a metal which they apparently preferred to that of the Ertak's hull, suddenly detached themselves and came swarming directly down upon us.

I was standing closer to the ship than Hendricks, and they attacked me first. Several of them dropped upon me, their glowing bodies covering the vision-piece, and blinding me with their light. I waved my arms and started to run blindly, incoherent warnings coming to me through the menore from Hendricks and the sentries.

The things had no weight, but they emitted a strange, electric warmth which seemed to penetrate my entire body instantly as I ran unseeingly, trying to find the ship, tearing at the fastenings of my mask as I ran. I could not, of course, enter the ship with these things clinging to my garments.

Suddenly I felt water splash under my feet; felt its grateful coolness upon my legs, and with a gasp I realized I had in my confusion been running away from the ship, instead of toward it. I stopped, trying to get a grip on myself.

The belt of the breathing mask came loose, and I tore the thing from me, holding my breath and staring around wildly. The ship was only

a few yards away, and Hendricks, his mask already off, was running toward me.

"Back!" I shouted. "I'm all right now. Back!" He hesitated for an instant until I caught up with him, and then, together, we gained the safety of the air-lock. Without orders, the men swung shut the ponderous door, and Hendricks and I stood there panting, and drawing in breaths of the Ertak's clean, reviving air.

"That possibility was one we overlooked, sir," said Hendricks. "Let's see what's happening."

We opened the shutter of a port nearby and gazed out onto the beach we had so hurriedly deserted. There were three or four of the glowing things huddled shapelessly around our abandoned suits, and ragged holes showed in several places in the thin copper helmets. Even as we looked, they dissolved into nothingness, and after a few seconds of hesitation, the things swarmed swiftly back to the ship.

"Well," I commented, trying to keep my voice reasonably free from the feelings which gripped me, "I believe we're beaten, Hendricks. At least, we're helpless against them. Our only chance is that they'll leave us before they have eaten through the second skin; so long as we still have that, we can live ... and perhaps be found."

"I doubt they'll leave us while there's a scrap of metal left, sir," said Hendricks slowly. "Something's brought them from their usual haunts. There's no reason why they should leave a certainty for an uncertainty. But we're not quite through trying. I saw something—have I your permission to make another try at them? Alone, sir?"

"Any chance of success, lad?" I asked, searching his eyes.

"A chance, sir," he replied, his glance never wavering. "I can be ready in a few minutes."

"Then, go ahead—on one condition: that you let me come with you."

"Very good, sir; as you wish. Have two other breathing masks ready. I'll be back very soon."

And he left me hastily, taking the steps of the companionway two at a time.

It was nearly an hour before Hendricks returned, bringing with him two of the most amazing pieces of apparatus I have ever seen.

To make each of them, he had taken a flask of compressed air from our emergency stores, and run a flexible tube from it into a cylindrical drinking water container. Another tube, which I

recognized as being a part of our fire-extinguishers, and terminating in a metal nozzle, sprouted from the water container. Both tubes were securely sealed into the mouth of the metal cylinder, and lengths of hastily-knotted rope had been bound around each contrivance so that the two heavy containers, the air flask and the small water tank could be slung from the shoulders.

"Here, sir," he said hastily, "get into a breathing mask, and put on these things as you see me do. No time to explain anything now, except this: as soon as you're outside the ship, turn the valve that opens the compressed air flask. Hold this hose, coming from the water container, in your right hand. Don't touch the metal nozzle. Use the hose just as you'd use a portable disintegrator-ray projector."

I nodded, and followed his instructions as swiftly as possible. The two containers were heavy, but I adjusted their ropes across my shoulders so that my left hand had easy access to the valve of the air flask, and the water container was under my right arm where I could have the full use of the hose.

"Let me go first, sir," breathed Hendricks as we stood again in the air-lock, and the door turned out of its threaded seat and swung open. "Keep your eyes on me, and do as I do!"

He ran heavily out of the ship, his burdens lurching. I saw him turn the pet-cock of the air flask, and I did likewise. A fine, powerful spray shot from the nozzle of the tube in my right hand, and I whirled around to face the ship.

Several of the things were detaching themselves from the ship, and instinctively, I turned the spray upon them. Hendricks, I could see out of the corner of my eye, did likewise. And now a most amazing thing happened.

The spray seemed to dissolve the crescent-shaped creatures; where it hit, ragged holes appeared. A terrible hissing, crackling sound came to my ears, even through the muffling mask I wore.

"It works! It works!" Hendricks was crying over and over, hardly aware, in his excitement, that he was wearing a menore. "We're saved!"

I put down three of the things in as many seconds. The central nucleus, in the thickest portion of the crescent, was always the last to go, and it seemed to explode in a little shower of crackling sparks. Hendricks accounted for four in the same length of time.

"Keep back, sir!" he ordered in a sort of happy delirium. "Let them

come to us! We'll get them as they come. And they'll come, all right! Look at them! Look at them! Quick, sir!"

The things showed no fear, no intelligence. But one by one they sensed the nearness of the copper helmets we wore, and detached themselves from the ship. They moved like red tongues of flame upon the fat sides of the Ertak; crawling, uneasy flames, releasing themselves swiftly, one after the other.

Our sprays met them in mid-air, and they dissolved like mist, one after the other.... I directed my death-dealing spray with a grim delight, and as each glowing heart crackled and exploded, I chuckled to myself.

The sweat was running down my face; I was shaking with excitement One side of the ship was already cleared of the things; they were slipping over the top now, one or two at a time, and as rapidly as they came, we wiped them out.

At last there came a period in which there were none of the things in sight; none coming over the top of the sorely tried ship.

"Stay here and watch, Hendricks," I ordered. "I'll look on the other side. I believe we've got them all!"

I hurried, as best I could, around to the other side of the Ertak. Her hull was pitted and corroded, but there was no other evidence of the crescent-shaped things which had so nearly brought about the ship's untimely, ghastly end.

"Hendricks!" I emanated happily. "'Nothing Less Than Complete Success!' And that's ours right now! They're gone—all of them!"

I slipped the contrivances from my shoulders and ran back to the other side of the ship. Hendricks was executing some weird sort of dance, patting the containers, swinging them wildly about his body, with an understandable fondness.

"Come inside, you idiot," I suggested, "and tell us how you did it. And see how it feels to be a hero!"

"It was just luck," Hendricks tried to make us believe, a few minutes later, when Kincaide, Correy, and myself were through slapping his back and shaking his hands. "When you, sir, splashed into the water, I had just torn off my mask. I saw some of the water fall on one of the things clustered upon your helmet, and I distinctly heard it hiss, as it fell. And where it fell, it made a ragged hole, which very slowly closed up, leaving a dim spot in the tentacle where the hole had been. As I figure it, the water—to put it crudely—short-circuited the

electrical energy of the things. That, too, is just a guess, but I think it's a good one.

"Of course, it was a long chance, but it seemed like our only one. There was nothing more or less than acidulated water in the containers; and the air flasks, of course, were merely to supply the pressure to throw the water out in a powerful spray. It happened to work, and there isn't anybody any happier about it than I am. I'm young, and there're lots of things I want to do before I bleach my bones on a little deserted world like this, that isn't important enough to even have a name!"

That was typical of Hendricks. He was a practical scientist, willing and eager to try out his own devices. A man of action first—as a man should be.

None of us, I think, spent a really easy moment until the Ertak was back at Base. Our outer hull was weakened by at least half, and we were obliged to increase the degree of vacuum there and thus place the major portion of the load on the inner skin. It was a ticklish business, but those old ships were solidly built, and we made it.

As soon as I had completed my report to the Chief, the Ertak was sent instantly to a secret field, under heavy guard, and a new outer

hull put in place.

"This can't be made public," the Chief warned me. "It would ruin the whole future of space travel, as people are just learning to accept it as a matter of course. You will swear your men to utter secrecy, and pass me your word, in behalf of your officers and yourself, that you will not divulge any details of this trip."

The scientists, of course, questioned me for days; they turned up their noses at the crude apparatus Hendricks had made, and which had saved the Ertak and all her crew—but they kept it, I noticed, for future reference.

All ships were immediately supplied with devices very similar, but more compact, the use of which only chief officers knew. And the scientists, to my knowledge, never did improve greatly on the model made for them by my third officer.

Whether or not these devices were ever used, I do not know. The silver-sleeves at Base are a close-mouthed crew. Hendricks always held that the group of things which so nearly caused the deaths of all of us had wandered into our portion of Universe from some part of space beyond the fringe of our knowledge.

But the same source which supplied one brood may supply another. Evidently, from young Clippen's report, this thing has happened. And since starting this account, I have determined why the powers that be are willing now to have the knowledge made public. The new silicide coating with which all space ships have been covered, is proof against all electrical action. That it is smoother and reduces friction, is, in my opinion, no more than a rather halty explanation. It is, in reality, the decidedly belated scientific answer to a question raised back in the hey-day of the Ertak, and my own youth.

That was many, many years ago, as the crabbed, uncertain writing on these pages proves.

And now, rather thankfully, I am about to place the last of these pages under the curious weight which has held the others in place as I have written. That irregular bit of metal from the hull of the Ertak, so deeply pitted on the one side, where the hungry things had sapped our precious strength.

"Electites," the scientists have dubbed these strange crescent-shaped things, young Clippen said. "Electites!" Something new under the sun!

New to this generation, perhaps, but not to old John Hanson.

April 1932

135 B.C 30,000 by Sterner St. Paul Meek

Back in the dim dawn of civilization Anak the Hunter stands in his might before the encroaching Neanderthal men.

Aproximate word count: 8,300

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Back in the dim dawn of civilization Anak the Hunter stands in his might before the encroaching Neanderthal men.

A scream of rage split the darkness. From the side of the fire where the women sat darted Esle, the High Priestess, a bloody bit of liver in her hand. Following her, and snarling like an enraged cat, came one of the maidens of the tribe. The aged hag, Esle, whose duty it was to declare to the tribe the will of Degar Astok, the mighty one who dwelt in the heavens and sent the storms to enforce his will, came to a pause before Uglik, the Chief and tribal Father.

"Una was eating of the man's piece," she shrilled as she held the

fragment aloft.

Uglik dropped the thigh bone from which he had been ripping the meat in huge chunks. He took the liver from Esle and examined it.

"Bring me my spear!" he roared as he lunged forward and grasped Una by the hair. "Una has stolen that which is tabu to her and I will punish her."

Una moaned with fright but attempted no resistance. Uglik grasped his spear and raised it over his head.

"Hold, Father!" came a clear voice from the group of hunters who sat near the chief.

Uglik paused in amazement at the interruption. Anak, the Chief Hunter, rose to his feet and made a step forward.

"She stole it not," he said. "Anak, the Chief Hunter, gave it to her."

Uglik released the girl and stared at the hunter in surprise. Anak returned the stare coolly and Uglik raised his throwing-spear threateningly. Anak did not let his gaze wander from the Father's, but his grasp tightened ever so slightly on the sharp flint smiting-stone which he had taken from the skin pouch which dangled from his

leather waist belt before he had made his announcement.

"Anak, the Chief Hunter, gave it to her," he repeated slowly. "Anak killed the buck, and half of the liver is, by the law of the tribe, his to dispose of. Does the Father deny the right?"

Uglik lowered the point of his spear and thought rapidly. Anak's act constituted unheard-of rebellion against his authority. On the other hand, the Chief Hunter was the cleverest tracker of the tribe and a mighty warrior in battle. The tribe of Ugar had lost most of its warriors in their long six-month march north from the fertile valley where the Mediterranean Sea now rolls. Uglik was too wise a leader to waste men on a trivial quarrel, able though he felt himself to kill Anak, should the latter cry the rannag, the duel to the death by which the Father must at any time prove to any challenger, his right to rule.

"It is the right of the killer to dispose of half of the liver of the kill," he conceded. "It is also the right of the stronger to take what he wills from the weaker. To Esle belongs the liver. The girl will not be punished. Anak will join me at meat."

Anak's face flushed momentarily at the arrogant tone of the Father's ruling. He realized, as well as Uglik, what had caused the Father to condone his semi-rebellion. He shrugged his shoulders and sat down

beside Uglik.

Uglik ate slowly, looking meditatively at Una as she tore off chunks of the meat with her strong teeth and swallowed them. The girl was about eighteen and in the first flush of womanhood. Her tawny brown skin gleamed like satin in the firelight, which was reflected from her slightly curling masses of black hair. She stood eight inches over five feet and her entire body was built on generous lines, lines of perfect health and almost masculine strength. Anak's eyes followed the direction of Uglik's gaze and he grew thoughtful in turn.

"Is the Father satisfied with the Chief Hunter?" he asked ceremoniously.

"The Father is," replied Uglik in similar vein.

"Then the Chief Hunter has a boon to ask."

"Name it."

"I desire that maiden, Una, be given to me."

"What?"

Uglik could hardly believe his ears. All of the women of the tribe belonged of immemorial right to the Father. While he might lend one for a time to a favored hunter as a mark of distinction, the suggestion that he completely relinquish his claim to one of them, and a young and handsome one at that, struck him with such astonishment that he was momentarily speechless.

"I desire that the maiden, Una, be given to me," repeated Anak. "She pleases me. I would have her carry my weapons on the march and sleep by my side in the camp."

Uglik leaped to his feet, spear in hand, but before the Chief Hunter's cool gaze, he wavered, again. Men were too scarce to waste, unless it became necessary.

"I will consider the matter," he said shortly. "I may lend her to you for a time, but I will not give her to you. Such is not the law."

"The Father who ruled before you gave women to his favored hunters," replied Anak. "I was the son of such a one."

"And Degar Astok assumed the form of a lion and punished him for his impiety by destroying him," retorted Uglik.

"Then Uglik killed the lion and so became Father," replied Anak, "since none dared challenge the slayer of Degar Astok. Is it not possible that Esle, who was young and who favored Uglik in those days, made a mistake? Despite his death, Degar Astok still has power."

Uglik's face flushed at the hunter's words.

"Degar Astok may be robbed of one body, but he still lives," he answered. "Say no more. I will consider your request."

Anak saluted and strode to the other side of the men's fire. He dropped down beside Invar, the youngest of the hunters. It was on his recommendation that Invar had been initiated into the ranks of manhood a full season before his time. The young hunter looked up with adoration in his eyes.

"This I saved for my friend, Anak," he said proudly as he extended a generous chunk of liver. "Invar will be honored if his friend will eat of the liver of his kill."

Anak took the morsel with thanks and ate it slowly. His thoughts ran to the tall maiden whom he had requested from the Father, and his blood boiled at the way he had been put off. He was half inclined to

cry the rannag, but he was not yet ready for the death duel which would determine whether he or Uglik would rule the tribe. There was no other solution, for, while he ruled, the Father's word was law, subject only to the higher law of Degar Astok as given out by the High Priestess. This overlordship was more nominal than actual, for those priestesses who lived long lives were invariably those who found that the will of the Father coincided exactly with the law of Degar Astok. Anak revolved the problem in his mind for a time, but the repletion of raw meat in his stomach was not conducive to protracted thought. Gradually his head slumped forward and he slept sitting. The other hunters followed his example, leaving the youths from ten to seventeen to guard the camp, keep the fires going, and rouse the hunters should need arise.

The night passed slowly without alarms. Womoo, the lion, roared in the distance, and from near at hand came the coughing laugh of Kena, the jackal, who always prowled around the camp when the tribe fed on meat. Gradually the sky grew lighter. One of the children moaned in his sleep and raised his head. He rose, and with a word to the youth on guard, trotted off toward the stream which gurgled near the camp. He disappeared in the darkness. Suddenly there came a sudden scream, shut off in mid-note. Hardly had the cry ceased than the hunters were on their feet with spears ready in their hands.

"What is it?" cried Uglik.

"Loda went to the stream to drink," stuttered the guard. "He screamed, and I saw a gray shape run off into the darkness. It ran like Grup, the bear, but it was small."

"Bring fire!" cried Anak.

The youth seized a burning brand and led the way toward the stream. By the light of the torch Anak scrutinized the ground carefully. With a sudden exclamation, he pointed out to Uglik the print of a long and narrow, but unmistakably human, foot in the mud by the river bank. Uglik studied it carefully.

"What think you?" he demanded of Anak.

"It is the mark of man, yet not of our tribe," replied the Chief Hunter. "Such marks have I never seen."

"Wait until Degar Astok sends the light," directed Uglik. "As soon as you can trail, the hunters will go in pursuit."

Slowly the light grew brighter. As soon as he could pick out the trail, Anak led the way, Uglik with the warriors and youths following closely. The trail led straight up the valley for a half mile before it

turned and followed a branch of the stream which came from a ravine in the valley wall. The hunters went a hundred yards up the ravine following Anak. The Chief Hunter paused and held up his hand. He sniffed the air and then led the way cautiously past a projecting shoulder of rock. On a ledge, half way up the hillside, sat two monstrous things.

They were manlike and yet hardly man. Their bodies were covered with stiff, coarse, gray hair which lengthened into a mane on the head and neck. Their foreheads were low and receding, an impression which was heightened by the enormously developed brow ridges, although the cranial capacity of the creatures was not small, as was evidenced by enormous bulges at the back of their heads. They walked on two legs but with a peculiar slouch, the torso inclined forward from the hips, and their eyes bent perpetually on the ground. Their arms were long and at times they bent forward so much that it appeared almost as though they were going on all fours. A close examination of their hands would have shown that it was impossible for them to hold a needle between the thumb and forefinger.

"Gumor, the gray ape!" cried one of the hunters.

"It is not Gumor," replied Anak, "although they are like his cousins.

See what they eat!"

As the hunters of the Cro-Magnon tribe of Ugar saw the meat which the Neanderthalers were tearing, a cry of wrath broke from them. Uglik stepped forward and raised the war cry of the tribe. The Neanderthalers looked stupidly down at him for a moment. The huge male dropped the meat he was eating and rose, his mane and beard bristling with rage. With a roar, he charged down the slope, a huge flint smiting-stone in either hand.

The hunters closed up on Uglik. As the attacker came within range, he was saluted with a shower of stones which sprang harmlessly from his huge rounded chest. Uglik hurled his spear. It pierced the apeman's shoulder but did not make him pause. Other spears were hurled and struck their mark, but without a pause the Neanderthaler came on with howls of rage and pain, bloody froth flying from his lips.

Anak had not thrown his spear, and Invar, who stood beside his hero, had likewise retained his weapon. The apeman came on with a rush. Uglik sprang forward to meet him, but another hunter was directly in the path of the attack. He swung his flint smiting-stone with a will, but his blow was futile. He went down before a sweep of the apeman's arm, his skull crushed to fragments.

Uglik struck at the attacker. The Neanderthaler turned toward him, but as he did so, Anak hurled his spear. At close range, the stone-tipped weapon passed nearly through the apeman. He stopped his rush and began to cough up blood from a pierced lung. Anak seized Invar's spear and sprang to the attack. An unfledged youth who craved distinction, rushed ahead of the Chief Hunter, but his act spelled his doom. One blow of the huge smiting-stone laid him dead. Anak hurled Invar's spear and again his weapon found its mark. The Neanderthaler roared with pain and sank gradually to his knees. Uglik dashed in, knife in hand. He threw himself on the prostrate monster and stabbed him again and again. The blows struck home, but with a last effort the apeman threw off his assailant and struck at him with the huge stone which had already robbed the tribe of two of its members. Before the blow could fall, Samo, one of the hunters, threw himself in the way and took the blow on his arm. The arm bone snapped like a pipestem, but it was the monster's dying effort. With a shudder, he fell back dead.

A ferocious howl rent the air. With a smiting-stone in each hand, the female charged down at them. She was somewhat smaller than the male, but still a match for any two of the men. Uglik's face paled as he wrenched Invar's spear from the dead male and turned to face her. The howl was repeated from farther up the ravine. Two more males were approaching at a lumbering run, smiting-stones in either hand.

Uglik was a brave man, but he was also a cautious leader. He did not care to expose his tribe to almost certain annihilation and he led a wild retreat down the valley, Samo, with his arm hanging limp, bringing up the rear. The Neanderthalers did not follow into the open valley.

Again at the camping place, Uglik called his hunters into council. The situation was grave enough. With the Neanderthalers so near them, it meant eventual annihilation to stay where they were, yet there was no place they could go. They had been driven from their old home by hordes of men who came up from the south. They had fought to retain their ancestral hunting grounds where they had dwelt since the beginning of time, but a series of defeats at the hands of overwhelming numbers had dwindled down the tribe until a migration was necessary. They had followed the migrating game toward the unknown north.

Several times they had tried to stop, but each time they had found the land in possession of other and stronger tribes. Their men had been killed and their women stolen until they again took up their march to the north. From the hundred that had formerly called Uglik "Father," there now remained only a score of women and children, a half dozen youths, and five able-bodied hunters, besides Uglik.

South, they dared not go. North, there lay unknown horrors. West lay the raging sea. East, the Neanderthalers blocked the way.

The council broke up with no action decided on. Faced with the alternatives of moving or staying, there seemed to be little choice. Only death faced them, whichever way they turned. Uglik posted guards about the camp and announced that he would retire and consult with Degar Astok as to their future course.

As he disappeared into the woods, Esle sidled up to Anak.

"It seems that Degar Astok no longer loves Uglik," she said slyly. "Does not the Chief Hunter agree with me?"

Anak looked at the withered hag coldly.

"Who am I to tell his Priestess whom Degar Astok loves?" he asked. "You are his voice and should know."

"True, Anak, I am his voice, and the God loves me," she went on, "yet it may be that men do not always love me. Uglik thinks that I have given him false counsel and he is ready for a new Priestess to announce the will of Degar Astok to him. He believes that a new and younger Priestess would bring back the favor of the God."

"What is that to me?" asked Anak.

"You desire the maiden, Una?"

"And if I do?"

"You are not to have her. Uglik will never grant your request. Already he plans to make her the High Priestess, should an accident happen to me."

Anak started. If Esle spoke the truth, it ended his chances of having Una. All women were tabu to all save the Father, but the High Priestess was doubly sacred.

"What am I to do?" he demanded.

Esle smiled slyly.

"I was the Voice of the God before Uglik was Father," she said in a low voice, "and I would be so after he is gone. Cry you rannag on him. I know many things, and I will cast a spell on him so that victory will be easy for you. Then will you be Father. The maiden Una will be yours, and old Esle will remain the High Priestess."

"To give me false counsel as you have Uglik, and in time to plot my

overthrow and death with another," said Anak sternly. "No, woman or devil, whichever you are, I want no help of yours. If I ever cry rannag on Uglik, I will defeat him by my strength or not at all. If I win to be Father, be assured that an 'accident' will happen to you shortly."

Esle frothed at the mouth with rage.

"You shall never have the maiden!" she screamed. "Rather will I kill her than that you shall have her. It was in my mind to make you Chief and to lead you from this trap that Uglik had brought you into, but you have sealed your doom and hers. I go to prepare a curse."

She turned to depart, but Anak grasped her by the arm.

"Listen, woman," he said sternly as he raised his spear, "it is in my mind to kill you and make an end of your evil plottings."

"Spare me! Spare me, noble Anak!" shrieked the hag, dropping to her knees as the flint point of Anak's spear hovered over her. "I will not harm her nor you, either. I will soften Uglik's heart toward you and make him give you the maiden. I will declare it is the will of the God."

Anak lowered the spear.

"As long as Una is safe, your life is spared," he said grimly; "but pray to Degar Astok to keep her safe. Should any harm befall her, your life will answer for it."

"I will weave spells to guard her from harm, Anak," she cried eagerly. "Only let me live, brave hunter!"

Anak spurned her contemptuously from him. The hag scuttled away and took the path into the woods which Uglik had taken earlier. Later in the day she returned with the Father. Uglik announced briefly that it was the will of Degar Astok that they remain at their present camping place.

Then began a time of horror for the children of the tribe. If one of them strayed for even a short distance from the circle of the camp fire at night, there came a scream from the darkness and the tribe would mourn another lost member. The tales of man-eating giants and ogres which even yet haunt the dreams of childhood have descended to us through the ages from those grim times when the race of men learned the lesson of fear of the dark that they are now slowly and painfully unlearning.

Anak did not renew his request for Una. He knew from her smiles that the maiden was more than willing to become his property, but in the face of their daily peril, he was not willing to precipitate a crisis which might easily cost the tribe most or all of their few remaining warriors. He kept a sharp watch on Esle and on Uglik, but neither the High Priestess nor the Father seemed to notice the girl.

As time went on, the Neanderthalers lost their fear of the fire and grew bolder. Their gray shapes could be seen prowling around at night, just outside the protecting circle of light. The climax came at last. There was a scream in the night. A howl of triumph came from the darkness. The quickly aroused hunters could see nothing at which to cast their spears.

"Who is missing?" demanded Uglik as the hunters returned empty handed.

"The maiden, Una," cried Esle shrilly.

Anak rushed at her, spear in hand.

"Unsay those words, hag of evil omen!" he roared. "Where have you hidden her?"

"Ask of the cousins of Gumor," she replied as she ducked behind the protecting frame of Uglik. "They have taken her from us."

Anak dropped his spear and buried his face in his hands. When he raised his head again, resolution showed in his handsome face.

"Prepare spears and throwing-stones," he cried. "To-morrow we attack the cousins of Gumor. Either they or we shall be no more when the night falls again."

A murmur of dissent went around the camp. Uglik sprang to his feet.

"What means the Chief Hunter of the tribe of Ugar?" he demanded.

"I mean that to-morrow we settle for all time who rules in this valley, the tribe of Ugar or the cousins of Gumor."

"And has the Father no voice in the council of the tribe?"

"We have come to the end," replied Anak. "If we do not strike now, soon we will be too weak to strike. To-morrow we attack!"

"I am Father of the tribe of Ugar," replied Uglik with a dangerous note in his voice. "No one gives orders here except me. On you, Anak, the Chief Hunter that was, I place the word of death! Slay

him!"

The hunters raised their spears doubtfully. Anak raised his, ready to cast it at Uglik. Before a blow could be struck, a figure sprang across the fire and took a stand, back to back with Anak.

"Who strikes my friend, strikes me!" cried Invar.

Uglik gave a gasp at this fresh defection from his authority. He roared to the hunters to strike. The three hunters remaining to the tribe advanced half-heartedly. None of them cared to face Anak; and Invar, young as he was, had already proven himself a mighty warrior. Uglik shouldered them aside with a roar of wrath. Before he could attack, Anak's cry stopped him.

"Hold, Uglik!" cried the Chief Hunter. "If you attack, the tribe will lose most or all of its hunters. You have put the death word on me, as is your right. I go now against the cousins of Gumor, and that, I think, is death. Let me go in peace and with weapons. Before they tear me limb from limb, at least one of them will not be alive."

"And I go with Anak!" cried Invar. "More than one of the cousins of Gumor will know that the Chief Hunter of the tribe of Ugar and his friend have visited their home."

Uglik paused. No trace of fear entered his heart, but the wily politician saw the force of Anak's argument. He would gain doubly by the course that the hunter had proposed.

"Go in peace, and with weapons," he said as he lowered his spear. "Esle will take your weapons and make spells over them that will increase their might. At dawn you shall go. The word of death is on you, so come not back to the tribe again. Once you leave the camp, you are outlaw."

"So be it!" replied Anak.

Shortly before the dawn, Esle crept to Anak's side.

"I've wrought spells over your weapons, Chief Hunter," she said softly, "and over those of your companion. Remember this when the cousins of Gumor attack you."

"I will, hag of evil," said Anak grimly. "Better will it be for you that we never return."

"Why leave?" came Esle's insinuating voice. "I am still ready to help you. Cry rannag on Uglik in the morning. Your weapons have had my attention and his have not. That alone would decide the fight.

Slay him and the warriors of the tribe will fight at your back. I know spells, and mayhap, they will prevail even against the cousins of Gumor."

"I go but for vengeance, Esle," said Anak wearily. "With Una gone, I have no desire to live."

"There are other maidens who are fair, Anak, and when you are Father you will have them all."

"Leave me, Esle," said Anak shortly. "I desire none but Una."

"And may the cousins of Gumor crack your bones between their teeth," she hissed venomously as she slipped away into the darkness.

As the sun rose above the horizon, Anak and Invar took their way up the valley. Each carried three flint-tipped throwing-spears, while a good supply of flint throwing-stones were in their skin pouches. Half a mile from camp, Anak turned to his companion.

"I thank you for coming with me," he said, his hand on Invar's shoulder. "It is the deed of a brave man."

Invar flushed and looked down.

"The least that I can do is to go to Degar Astok with my friend," he said.

"It is the deed of a brave man, yet I think we are not yet ripe to die."

"We go against the cousins of Gumor, do we not?" asked the lad.

"We do."

"And is that not death?"

"Mayhap, and yet, I have a plan. We may live."

"How can we two expect to do what all the tribe of Ugar dare not try?"

"The tribe of Ugar, or a dozen tribes of Ugar, could not conquer with Uglik leading them," replied Anak, "yet we two may do so. Hark now to my plan. Like Gumor, the gray ape, his cousins walk ever with their eyes cast down. While we have been hunting, I have been spying on them in their home. Never have I seen one look up, and it may be that they cannot. Above or on a level with us, they can easily kill us. If we stand on the rocks above them, they cannot see us and will be at our mercy. They can run as fast as we on level ground, but going uphill, we will leave them as Guno, the deer, leaves Kena.

They are few in number; I have watched and seen but two hunters and three females. It is my plan to scale the cliffs and watch them below us. When the time is ripe, we will launch our throwing-spears. If we fail to make a kill, we will bound up the hill and escape to strike again."

Invar looked with admiration at his leader. The habit of connected thought and reasoning was new in the world in those days. Such boldness of conception as was shown by Anak's plan was a thing for marvel. As the ramifications of the plan seeped into Invar's brain, his face glowed with enthusiasm.

"Anak should be Father of the tribe of Ugar!" he cried.

"That may yet come to pass," replied Anak enigmatically. "If I kill Uglik, however, it will be to avenge Una, not to win the chieftainship. Now keep silence, for here is the home of the cousins of Gumor."

Cautiously the two hunters passed the mouth of the ravine and climbed the slopes of the valley. Once on the level ground, they moved to the edge of the ravine and looked down into it. Nothing could be seen moving. Anak led the way a hundred yards farther up the ravine.

"Below us is a cave where dwell two," he whispered. "Make ready your spear while I sound the challenge."

He raised his voice in a wild howl of challenge. For a moment there was silence. Then from the ravine came a hoarse rumbling bellow. An enormous male made his appearance, his mane and beard bristling with rage. He darted his eyes hither and thither, seeking the source of the challenge. Again a hoarse roar came from his broad, thick lips. As it rose to a crescendo, Anak hurled his spear.

His aim was true. The point struck the Neanderthaler at the junction of his neck and shoulder. As it struck, the haft flew from the spear and bounded down the slope. The first point made only a surface wound.

The apeman roared with pain and rage. Still he did not see his enemies. With careful aim, Invar launched his weapon. The stone-tipped spear struck the giant's groin, but the haft broke and the head was barely buried in the flesh. The Neanderthaler pricked up his pointed, lobeless ears, and located the source of the shout. By bending back his torso, he looked upward. With a roar of rage he started up the slope, a huge flint smiting-stone grasped in each hairy paw.

Anak and Invar dashed up the slope ahead of him. The keenness of the Chief Hunter's powers of observation was attested by the fact that they easily increased their distance from their pursuer. As they ran, Invar's foot dislodged a boulder which thundered down the slope. The Neanderthaler did not see it coming until it was too late to dodge. The stone took him full in the chest and he rolled down the slope, a shower of smaller stones going with him.

He smashed against a tree. With shouts of triumph, Anak and Invar bounded down the slope. The Neanderthaler was dying, his chest crushed in. Invar raised a spear and drove it at his heart. The weapon struck fair, but again the head of the spear came off the shaft. A sudden thought illuminated Anak's brain.

"Esle!" he cried in rage. "She had our weapons last night!"

He studied the two spears remaining in his hand. Each of them had the hide lashing which bound the head to the haft cut through. The weapons were useless.

Invar's face paled. From up the slope a roar assailed their ears. The female was rushing down at them, smiting-stones in hand.

"Fly, Invar!" cried Anak. "Run up the slope and throw down stones

at her. I will hold her for a moment."

"Invar stays with his friend!" cried the boy stubbornly as he gripped his useless throwing-spear.

"Run up the slope!" stormed Anak. "It is our only chance. Remember how the male died!"

Slowly the idea penetrated Invar's brain. With a shout he dashed away. He circled the oncoming female and got above her. Anak hurled one of his crippled spears. It struck her full in the chest, but made only a flesh wound as the handle dropped away. The female roared with rage and hurled herself at the hunter. Anak leaped to one side and ran for dear life. The clumsy female checked her rush and turned after him. He rapidly gained on her. A shout from above reached him.

"Run to your left, Anak!"

The hunter swerved sharply to his left. Invar threw his shoulder against a huge boulder on the slope. The stone rocked but did not fall. Again the lad exerted himself until his muscles cracked under the strain. The boulder tottered for a moment and then rolled down the slope, gathering momentum as it rolled. It was deflected from the

direct line of the female's attack, but a smaller stone it dislodged struck her on the shoulder and knocked her from her feet.

"More stones, Invar!" cried Anak.

The two exerted themselves and an avalanche of rocks thundered down the slope. The female strove to rise, but she was overwhelmed. Down the slope rushed the two hunters, intent on finishing her with their smiting-stones and knives. She lay in a twisted heap, whimpering plaintively. Invar's knife found her heart, and she sank back dead.

"Well struck, Invar!" cried Anak. "Would that we had spears. Others of the cousins of Gumor are coming."

Bellowing roars came from higher up the ravine. The two hunters bounded back up the slope. Down the ravine came another female, followed by a fourteen-year-old boy. Contemptuous of their assailants, the hunters betrayed their whereabouts with shouts. The female accepted the challenge and climbed heavily up the slope toward them, the boy trailing her and aping her cries with shrill shouts.

The hunters allowed her to approach to within a few yards before

they threw their combined weight on a huge mass of rock. The boulder gave and thundered down the slope. It brushed past the female but did not strike her.

"Higher up and try again, Invar!" cried the Chief Hunter.

They bounded up the slope. Anak paused and hurled a flint throwing-stone with deadly aim. It struck the female a glancing blow on the face, tearing the flesh from one of the prominent brow ridges. She stopped, momentarily blinded. Invar raised a rock high above his head with both hands and cast it at her. It struck her on the chest and she fell backwards. Again Anak's strategy was successful and an avalanche of rolled rocks overwhelmed her. The boy turned to fly, but the fleet-footed Invar overtook him and the knives of the two hunters quickly put an end to his career.

As they bent over his dead body, a shrill scream rose on the air. It was not the voice of an apeman, or an apewoman, but held a human quality. The hunters straightened up and sought the source of it. Again came the scream. From the mouth of a cave above them bounded a girl. She won momentarily to freedom, but a huge Neanderthal male followed her from the cave. His hairy arm seized and dragged her back.

"Una!" cried Invar and Anak in one voice.

Forgotten were strategy and tactics. Anak bounded up the slope, Invar at his heels. Into the mouth of the cave they charged. The huge male dropped the girl and faced them with a growl. Anak hurled a throwing-stone, but his aim was poor. It rebounded harmlessly from the great arched chest of the Neanderthaler. With a roar, the apeman charged.

The hunter sidestepped the rush and swung his smiting-stone. The blow was deflected by the upraised arm of the apeman and fell on his shoulder. Invar hurled a throwing-stone which found the monster's face and made him pause. The apeman recovered himself and rushed at the youth. The boy met him, smiting-stone in hand, but one swing of the heavier flint broke through his guard and stretched him senseless on the floor, blood flowing from a gash in his head.

Anak hurled another throwing-stone which caught the apeman on the back of the head, dazing him. With a shout, Anak closed. The effects of the blow had been only momentary and the Neanderthaler met his rush with both his stones swinging. One of them tore a long gash down Anak's back while the other laid open his thigh. The apeman dropped his stones and wound his long hairy arms about the hunter's body. Anak threw himself back and the two rolled on the floor, the

apeman striving to crush the life out of his slighter opponent, while Anak smote futilely with his smiting-stone at the hairy body. Slowly, the hunter's ribs gave under the pressure. Spots of fire danced before his eyes. He strove valiantly, but his muscles were as a child's, compared to the enormous development of his opponent. With a gasp, his body went limp.

Una had watched the struggle with horror-stricken eyes. As the apeman's grip tightened about Anak's body, she gave a low moan. Her gaze fell on the discarded smiting-stones of the Neanderthaler. She sprang forward and lifted one in both hands. The apeman threw back his head to give a roar of victory. The note never issued from his throat. The huge flint which he had chipped patiently to a sharp edge, struck him on the back of the head. With a gasp and a convulsive shudder, the apeman rolled over, his skull crushed in.

Invar slowly recovered consciousness, and now sat up. He looked dully at the dead body of the Neanderthaler. Beside it, Anak lay in a pool of blood. He staggered to his feet, asking dully:

"Is Anak with Degar Astok?"

"Not yet," replied Una. "Help me to stop the flow of his blood."

"He said there were five of the cousins of Gumor," said the boy as he looked around apprehensively. "We have slain but four."

Una pointed toward the ravine.

"The other lies there," she said. "This one slew his mate an hour gone. I think he designed me to take her place."

Fever took Anak, and for three days he hovered between life and death. Then he slept and woke conscious, although his strength was badly sapped by the fever. There was no lack of food, for game was plentiful and Invar had found and mended the throwing-spears which Esle had tampered with. Slowly Anak recovered his strength. A month after the fight he stretched his muscles and announced himself as well.

"I return to-day to the tribe of Ugar," he announced.

"Can you return?" asked Invar doubtfully. "Remember the word of death."

"That, let Uglik answer," replied Anak. "In peace or in war, I will return. Soon the winter will come and here are warm caves and game in plenty. Here shall the tribe make a home."

"Where you go, there go I," exclaimed Invar.

"And I likewise," said Una.

"Una will stay here until we return," replied Anak in a tone which brooked no argument.

The girl pouted, but a sharp word from Anak settled the matter. Throwing-spear and smiting-stone in hand, the two hunters approached the camping place of Uglik's tribe. They were within a hundred yards before they were seen. Esle set up a shrill cry.

"Here come those on whom the Father passed the death word. Slay, oh, hunters!"

Anak raised his hand and made the sign of peace.

"Wait before you attack two such as we," he said. "We are bearers of good tidings. By our hands, the cousins of Gumor have died. Think you, do you care to attack two such as we?"

The hunters looked at one another doubtfully.

"He lies!" shrilled Esle.

"We do not lie!" retorted Anak. "Their bones, picked clear by Kena, lie in their ravine. We come in peace to lead you to their home. There are warm caves and game in plenty. We will rejoin the tribe if the Father will remove the death word. Otherwise, attack us if you dare, and the tribe of Ugar will join the cousins of Gumor."

Uglik's face plainly showed hesitation.

"The death word his been passed," he said doubtfully. "It can be withdrawn only by a sacrifice to Degar Astok."

"We two have offered five of the cousins of Gumor, and a boy. Is that not enough?"

"It must be a human sacrifice!" cried Esle.

"Then, hag of evil omen, traitor to Uglik, attempted slayer of Invar and me, I offer you!" cried Anak furiously, his spear raised.

"Sacrilege!" she shrilled, darting behind Uglik. "Slay the defamer of the God!"

"What mean these charges, Anak?" asked Uglik darkly.

"Esle tampered with our spears, which you ordered her to strengthen

for the battle with the cousins of Gumor," said Anak. "They broke in our hands. With only smiting-stones and knives, we overcame them. Further, she tried to plot with me to kill you and take your place."

"He lies!" cried Esle in a quavering voice. Uglik turned a black face on her.

"Enough!" he roared. "The sacrifice is sufficient. I withdraw the death word. Anak, the cause of dissension between us is gone. Rejoin the tribe in peace."

"I bow to the Father," replied Anak, suiting his action to his word. "The tribe of Ugar has gained three members."

"Three?" asked Uglik.

"The maiden, Una, was not slain, but borne away alive by the cousins of Gumor. I have rescued her and she waits in the valley of plenty."

"Then Degar Astok was right when he told me he should have a new High Priestess," said Uglik, licking his lips. "She shall come to my cave and take the place of that worn-out hag, Esle."

"She will dwell in mine," said Anak shortly. "I have taken her for

mine and I will not give her up."

"The word of the Father is the law of the tribe," said Uglik.

"That is true. I ask that the maiden whom I have taken in war be given to me in peace."

"The maiden, Una, dwells in the Father's cave!" said Uglik.

"Then cry I rannag on you, Uglik, the Father!" cried Anak. "I challenge you to the fight to death, which you may not refuse and continue to rule."

"And on you I pass the death word!" shouted Uglik. "Hunters—"

"The Father may not pass the death word on one who has cried rannag," retorted Anak. "Such is the law!"

"Such is the law!" echoed the hunters, glad of an excuse not to attack the two hunters of whose prowess they knew so much.

Uglik looked from one group to the other.

"When the sun starts to rest, the rannag will be fought," he answered. "When I have slain this traitor, Una becomes High Priestess.

Hunters, bind the hag, Esle, that she may not escape. Anak, lead the way to the valley of plenty."

Packing up was a simple matter for the tribe of Ugar. In five minutes they were following Anak to the valley of the Neanderthalers. When they arrived, Uglik picked out the largest of the caves, and told the hunters to choose their own. In a few minutes the tribe was established in their new home. Esle was released from her bonds, for it was essential that the High Priestess of Degar Astok prepare the ground for the rannag.

Anak and Invar walked slowly up to the cave where Una waited.

"Uglik is a mighty warrior," said Invar doubtfully.

"So is Anak," was the reply. "Further, I have a plan."

"Then are Uglik's days numbered," replied Invar with delight. "Tell me what I am to do to aid you."

"When we get to the cave, you may cut off my hair and beard."

Invar started back aghast.

"Your strength will go with it," he protested. "The glory of the

warrior is his beard."

"I do not believe it," said Anak. "By cutting it, I will rob Uglik of a handhold he could use to my downfall. Fear not, I know what I am doing."

With a flint knife, Invar slowly and painfully hacked off Anak's long hair and beard. When the operation was over, Anak smeared himself plentifully with the fat of a wild pig which had fallen to one of Invar's spears the day before. When he was ready, he threw himself down to sleep. When he had dropped off to slumber, Una rose. She took the liver of the pig from the back of the cave and approached the doorway.

"Where go you, Una?" demanded Invar.

"I take this to the Father that he may strengthen himself for the rannag," she said enigmatically. "Should not the best be given to the Father?"

Invar's hand tightened on his throwing-spear.

"Minded am I to slay you," he said darkly.

"And fight to the death with Anak when he awakens? Listen, oh,

fool, if the Father eats greatly, he will be slow and Anak may slay him with ease."

A light of admiration flashed into Invar's eyes.

"It is well thought," he said.

With a swift glance around, Una took from her girdle a tiny skin packet. She opened it and displayed a brown powder.

"This, Esle gave me," she whispered. "She said that Uglik had threatened her death and she wished Anak to kill him. If I give Anak this, Degar Astok would make him strong."

"Why did you not do so?"

"Because I am a woman, and I know a woman's heart. It would have the opposite effect. I will rub it into the liver I give to Uglik."

With the aid of the women, Esle laid out a rough oval on the ground where the two combatants were to meet. Throwing-stones and spears were not allowed in rannag, the two combatants fighting their duel with smiting-stones and flint knives only. At the appointed hour, the two combatants appeared, stripped to their loin-clothes only. The Father was hideous with streaks of paint, red, yellow, white, and

black. Anak glistened from his coat of grease, but his skin was bare of ornament.

The two combatants took their places, while around the fighting ground gathered the hunters and youths, throwing-spears in hand. Their privilege and duty it was to slay either of the fighters who fled or who was forced out of the ring. Esle intoned a long prayer to Degar Astok. The word for combat was given. The two men approached each other cautiously. The Father confident in his strength, but he felt heavy and lethargic. Anak was clear-eyed and alert, ready to take advantage of any opening offered him.

The two men circled, wary as great jungle cats. Anak, suddenly ducked his head and rubbed his eyes. With a roar of triumph, Uglik charged.

Outside the ring, there was a commotion. A woman's scream, rent the air. Invar leaped to Una's side, to find her wrestling with Esle.

"Kill her, Invar!" shrieked the girl. "She tried to cast a spell on Anak."

The young hunter forced open the High Priestess' hand. In it was grasped a bit of shiny quartz with which she had reflected the sun

into the hunter's eyes. With upraised hand, he struck her to the ground.

"She shall be judged after the rannag," he said. "Take you this spear, Una, and drive it through her if she moves."

The girl took the spear. Invar returned to watch the fight. Anak had sidestepped the first rush of the Father and his smiting-stone had bit heavily into Uglik's shoulder. Uglik had whirled and charged again. Anak made as if to leap to one side. As Uglik changed his direction to meet him, Anak swayed back. Again his smiting-stone bit heavily into the Father's side. With a cry of pain, Uglik paused and changed his tactics. He approached cautiously, ready to leap to either side. Farther and farther Anak retreated until the hunters at the end of the oval raised their spears in anticipation. Then Anak charged.

Uglik was taken by surprise. His blow glanced off Anak's upraised stone while an upward sweep of the weapon took him in the neck. He dropped his stone and threw his arms around Anak's body. Well had Anak planned when he greased his body, for Uglik's grip failed. Anak shook him loose and struck again. Once more Uglik grasped him, and this time threw him heavily to the ground. Again the grease made his hold slip. Anak struggled to his feet, but it was evident that the fall had hurt him.

Uglik followed up his advantage. He warded off the blow of the hunter's stone and again flung him to earth. Anak dropped his stone.

Uglik's hands fastened on the hunter's throat, and mercilessly he banged Anak's head on the rocky ground. Anak wound his mighty legs about the Father's middle. Silently they put forth their strength. Uglik's hold was the more deadly, and slowly the hunter weakened.

"The Father kills!" screamed Esle.

She strove to rise to her feet, but Una had her orders from Invar. She pressed home the spear. With a sob, Esle fell back.

Anak's tongue began to protrude from his mouth and his eyes swelled. An expression of triumph spread over Uglik's face, which suddenly changed to one of amazement, and then to pain and fear.

As they rolled over, Anak had felt something pierce his leg. The pain was nothing, but it persisted. As his consciousness slipped away, only that one feeling remained. He reached down to his leg. Thrust deep into his thigh was a knife-like sliver of flint. With a supreme effort, he rallied his failing consciousness and grasped it. The Father's chest was directly over him. With his last conscious effort, he thrust upward with the fragment of flint. His aim was true. Uglik

suddenly released his hold and raised himself to his knees, his hands plucking at his chest. For a moment he swayed forward and back. Then, with a cry, he pitched forward, blood gushing from his chest over the unconscious hunter.

Anak recovered consciousness to find his opponent lying dead before him, the sliver of flint buried in his heart. He staggered to his feet and tried to speak. His vocal cords refused to act and he massaged his throat gently.

"I am Father of the tribe of Ugar by right of rannag," he said hoarsely. "Do any challenge the right?"

There was no answer. Anak stepped to Una's side.

"Uglik spoke truth when he said that Una would be High Priestess of Degar Astok," he said. "This I now proclaim her. You, Esle, stripped of your office, shall do menial tasks for all who will until death claims you. If your homage wavers, death will not be long.

"Lo, I make a new law for the tribe. No longer shall all the women belong to the Father, but to those to whom the Father awards them. To each hunter, I now give one woman. He shall take her to his cave and hunt for her. She shall obey him and no other. The others shall

live in a woman's cave, and shall be tabu until they are chosen by one who has no woman, or until a hunter desires more than one woman to chip his flints and dress his skins. Hunters, choose your women and take up caves. Here stays the tribe of Ugar forever, and we will allow no others in the valley."

Followed by Una he strode toward the Father's cave. Below the hunters and the women eyed one another a trifle fearfully. At last Invar stepped forward and grasped one of them by the arm.

"Come to my cave!" he ordered.

The woman followed him submissively.

136 The Finding of Haldgren by Charles Willard Diffin

Summary goes here

Aproximate word count: 30,600

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Chapter 1: SOS

The venerable President of the Federation Aeronautique Internationale had been speaking. He paused now to look out over the sea of faces that filled the great hall in serried waves. He half turned that he might let his eyes pass over the massed company on the platform with him. The Stratosphere Control Board—and they had called in their representatives from the far corners of Earth to hear the memorable words of this aged man.

From the waiting audience came no slightest sound; the men and women were as silent as that other audience listening and watching in every hamlet of the world, wherever radio and television reached. Again the figure of the President was drawn erect; the scanty, white

hair was thrown back from his forehead; he was speaking:

" ... And this vast development has come within the memory of one man. I, speaking to you here in this year of 1974, have seen it all come to pass. And now I am overwhelmed with the wonder of it, even as I was when those two Americans first flew at Kittyhawk.

"I, myself, saw that. I saw with these eyes the first crude engine-bearing kites; I saw them from 1914 to 1918 tempered and perfected in the furnace of war; I saw the coming of detonite and the beginning of our air-transport of to-day. And always I have seen brave men—men who smiled grimly as they took those first crude controls in their hands; who laughed and waved to us as they took off in the 'flying coffins' of the great war; who had the courage to dare the unknown dangers of the high levels and who first threw their ships through the Repelling Area and blazed the air-trails of a new world.

"And to-day I, who have seen all this, stand before you and say: 'Thank God that the spirit of brave men goes on!'

"It has never ended—that adventurer strain—that race of Viking men. We have two of them here to-night. The whole world is pausing this instant wherever men are on land or water or air to do honor to these two.

"They do not know why they are here. They have been summoned by the Stratosphere Control Board which has delegated to me the honor of making the announcement."

The tall figure was commandingly erect; for an instant the fire of youth had returned to him.

"Walter Harkness!" he called. "Chester Bullard! Stand forth that the eyes of the world may see!"

Two men arose from among the members of the Board and came hesitantly forward. Strongly contrasting was the darkly handsome face of Harkness, man of wealth and Pilot of the Second Class, and the no less pleasing features of Chet Bullard, Master Pilot of the World. For Bullard's curling hair was as golden as the triple star upon his chest that proclaimed his standing to the world and all the air above.

The speaker was facing them; he turned away for a moment that he might bow to a girl who was still seated next to the chair where Walt Harkness had been.

"To Mrs. Harkness," he said, "who, until one month ago, was Mademoiselle Delacouer of our own beloved France, I shall have

something further to say. She, too, has been summoned by the Board, but, for now, I address these two."

Again he was facing the two men; and now he was speaking directly to them:

"Pilot Harkness and Master Pilot Bullard, for you the world has been forced to create a new honor, a new mark of the world's esteem. For you two have done what never men have done before. We who have preceded you have subdued the air; but you, gentlemen, you—the first of all created beings to do so—have conquered space.

"And to you, because of your courage; because of your dauntless pioneer spirit; because of the unconquerable will that drove you and the inventive genius that made it possible—because all these have set you above us more ordinary men, since they have made you the first men to fly through space—it is my privilege now to show you the honor in which you are held by the whole world."

The firm voice quavered; for a moment the old hands trembled as they lifted a blazing gem from its velvet case.

"Chester Bullard, Master Pilot, on behalf of the Stratosphere Control Board I bestow upon you—"

"Stop!"

Every radiophone in the world must have echoed that sharp command; every television screen must have shown to a breathless audience the figure whose blond hair was awry, whose lean face was afire with protest, as Chet Bullard sprang forward with upraised hand.

"You're wrong—dead wrong! You're making a mistake. I can't accept that!"

The master pilot's voice was raised in earnest protest. He seemed, for the moment, unaware of the thousands of eyes that were upon him; heedless of the gasp of amazement that swept sibilantly over the vast audience like a hissing wave breaking upon the beach. And then his face flushed scarlet, though his eyes still held steadily upon the startled countenance of the man who stood transfixed, while the jewel in his hand took the light of the nitron illuminators above and shot it back in a glory of rainbow hues.

From the seated group on the platform a man came forward. Commander of the Air, this iron-gray man; he was head of the Stratosphere Control Board, supreme authority on all matters that concerned the air levels of the whole world; Commander-in-Chief of

all men who laid hands on the controls of a ship. He spoke quietly now, and Chet Bullard, at his first word, snapped instantly to salute, then stood silently waiting.

"What is the meaning of this?" demanded the voice of authority. The voice seemed soft, almost gentle, yet each syllable carried throughout the hall with an unmistakable hint of the hardness of a steelite shell beneath the words.

"The eyes of the world are upon us here; the whole world is gathered to do you honor. Is it possible that you are refusing that which we offer? Why? You will speak, please!"

And Chet Bullard, standing stiffly at attention before his commander, spoke in a tone rendered almost boyish by embarrassment.

"I can't accept, sir. Pilot Harkness will bear me out in this. You would decorate us for being the first to navigate space; but we are not the first."

"Continue!" ordered the quiet voice as Chet paused. "You refer to Haldgren, probably."

"To Pilot Haldgren, sir."

"This is absurd! Haldgren was lost. It is supposed that he fell back into the sea, or struck some untraveled part of Earth."

"I have checked over his data, sir. It is my opinion that he did not fall; his figures indicate that he must have thrown his ship beyond the gravitational influence of Earth."

The Commander eyed the master pilot coldly. "And because you think that your conclusions are more accurate than those of my own investigating committee, you refuse this honor!

"Attention!" he snapped sharply. "The entire Service of Air is being rendered ridiculous by your conduct! I command you to accept this decoration."

"You are exceeding your authority, sir. I refuse!"

Suddenly the frozen quiet of the Commander's face was flushed red with rage. "Give me that insignia!" he demanded, and pointed to the triple star on Chet Bullard's breast. "Your commission is revoked!"

To the last breathless spectator in the farthest end of the great hall the white pallor of Chet Bullard's face must have been apparent. One

hand moved toward the emblem on his blouse, the cherished triple star of a master pilot of the World; then the hand paused.

"I have still another reason for believing Haldgren is alive," he said in a cold and carefully emotionless voice. "Are you interested in hearing it?"

"Speak!" ordered the Commander.

Chet Bullard, still wearing the triple star, crossed quickly to a phone panel in the speaker's stand at one side of the stage. He jerked out an instrument. The buzz of excited whispering that had swept the audience gave place to utter silence. Each quiet, incisive word that Chet spoke was clearly heard. He gave his call number.

"Bullard; Master Pilot, First Class; Number U.S. 1; calling Doctor Roche at Allied Observatory, Mount Everest. Micro-wave, please, and connect through for telefoto-projection."

A few breathless seconds passed, while Chet aimed an instrument of gleaming chromium and glass, whose cable connections vanished in the phone panel recess. He focused it upon an artificially darkened screen above and behind the grouped figures on the stage. Then:

"Doctor Roche?" Chet queried.

And, before the whole audience, the dark screen came to life to show a clear-cut picture of a man who sat at a telescope; whose hand held a radiophone; and who glanced up frowningly and said: "Yes, this is Doctor Roche."

Chet's response was immediate.

"Bullard speaking; Chet Bullard, at New York. When I was in your observatory yesterday, Doctor, you said that you had seen flashes of light on the Moon. You remember that, don't you? You saw them some months ago while I was on the Dark Moon."

The man in that distant observatory was no longer scowling at this interruption of his work. His smile was echoed by the cordial tone of his voice that rang clearly through the great hall.

"Correct, Mr. Bullard. An observer at our two hundred-inch reflector reported them on two successive nights. They were inside the crater of Hercules."

From his place at the center of the stage the waiting Commander of Air protested:

"Come—come! We know all about that, Bullard. Are you trying to say—"

The voice of the astronomer was speaking again:

"You will no doubt be interested to know that the lights occurred again yesterday at about this time.... Let me see if they are on now. I will have the two hundred-inch instrument used as before, and will show you what we see.

"Watch your screen, but don't expect to find any substantiation of your wild theory that these lights have a human origin." He laughed softly. "No atmosphere to speak of there, you know; we have determined that very definitely."

On the screen the picture of the smiling man flashed off; it was replaced by an unflickering darkness that came abruptly into softly shaded light. There was an expanse of volcanic terrain and a round orifice of tremendous size, where the sunlight cast black shadows. Other shaded portions about were like rocky, broken ground.

To Chet, staring at the strange conformation, came the quick sense of hanging above that ground and looking down upon it. And he knew that in New York he was looking through a great telescope down

under the world and was staring straight down into the throat of an extinct volcano on the Moon.

There were few wonders of the modern world that could thrill the master pilot with any feeling of amazement, but here was a new experience. He would have spoken, would have ejaculated some word of wonder, but for the new light that claimed his eyes and brain.

The volcano, even in death, was ages old; its cold desolation showing plainly on the screen. No fires poured now from a hot throat; the molten sea that once had raged within had hardened and choked that vast throat with rock that had frozen to make one enormous plain. Ringed about by the jagged sides of the tremendous volcano, the floor within seemed smooth by comparison, except for another depression at its upper edge.

Here was another and smaller crater inside the great ringed wall of Hercules. The light of the sun struck slantingly across to throw one side of the gigantic cup into shadow, while the opposite rim blared brightly in the lunar dawn. And within the smaller crater, too, one side was dead black with shadow.

Dead!—No moving thing—no sign of life or indication that life

might ever have been! A dead world, this!—its utter desolation struck Chet's half-uttered exclamation to a hoarse whisper of dismay. In all the universe what less likely place might one discover wherein to look for man?

His gaze was held in fascinated hopelessness on the barren, mountainous ring, on the inner inverted cone, on the shadow within that smaller crater—on a tiny pinpoint of light that was flashing there! ... He hardly knew when he raised one trembling hand and pointed, while a voice quite unlike his own said huskily:

"Look! Look! I told you it was so!... There! In that little crater!—it's signaling! Three dots—now three dashes—three dots again! The old S O S!—the old call for help! It's Haldgren!"

Again the screen showed the smiling scientist.

"Caught them just right," he said, "and glad to be of service. Now, if there's anything else I can do—"

"Thanks!" said Chet in that same strained voice. "Thanks! There's nothing else." A switch clicked beneath his hand, and once more the screen was dark.

"Those dots and dashes! The old S O S! Who could doubt now?" Chet was telling himself this when the Commander's voice broke in harshly.

"Even you must see the absurdity of this, Bullard. You have heard this astronomer tell you what the rest of us knew for ourselves—that there is no air on the Moon; that it is impossible for a human being to live there. And you would have us believe that a man has lived there for five years!

"But I am taking your distinguished record into account; I am overlooking your insubordination and the folly of your reasoning. Perhaps your feeling about Haldgren does you credit; but Haldgren is dead. Now I am giving you another chance: I order you to come forward and receive this honor, which is an honor to the entire Service of Air."

Chet was staring in open amazement. "No air on the Moon," this man had said. And what of that? Neither was there air in interplanetary space, yet he had traveled there. It was inconceivable that this imperious and dictatorial man could be so blind.

"I can't do it, sir," he tried to explain. "You surely can't disregard that message, the old call for help. We were using that, you know, when

Haldgren took off five years ago."

No longer did a masking softness overlay the hard brittleness of the Commander's voice.

"Your star!" he snapped. "You are no longer in the Service, Bullard!"

But Chet Bullard, as he stepped forward that the Commander might rip the triple star from his chest, was not alone. Walt Harkness was only a Pilot of the Second Class, but he stripped the emblem from his own silken blouse and placed it in the Commander's outstretched hand beside Chet's star.

"Permit me, sir, to share Mr. Bullard's enviable humiliation," he observed with venomous courtesy; and added:

"Whatever similar honors were in store for Mrs. Harkness and myself are respectfully declined. We, too, are of the opinion that Pilot Haldgren deserves them instead of us."

For an instant Chet's flashing smile drew his face into friendly lines. "Thanks!" he said.

But all friendliness was erased as he swung back upon the Commander.

No thought now of the thousands of staring faces or of the millions throughout the world who were watching him and were hearing his words. Chet Bullard clipped those words into curt phrases, and he shot them at his superior officer as if from a detonite gun:

"You think your judgment better than mine—you've dropped me from the Service—and you've got the power to make that stick! But you're wrong, sir, dead wrong! And I'll make you admit it, too.

"No—don't interrupt! I'm going to say what I please, and this is it, Commander:

"Hang onto that jewel you were giving me. Keep it ready. For I'm going to the Moon. I'm going to find Haldgren, if he's still living when I get there. And, at the least, I will bring back some record to show he is the man we should honor.

"Haldgren, alive or dead, was the first man to conquer space. Neither Harkness nor I would steal an atom of his glory. I'll have the proof when I come back. And when I come—"

For an instant the ready grin that marked Chet's irresistible good nature lighted up his face with a silent echo of some laugh-provoking thought occurring in his mind.

"—when I do come, Commander, I will make you eat your words. It's you who will be out of the Service then, laughed out!"

The Commander smiled, too; smiled coldly, complacently, while his head shook.

"Again you are mistaken," he told Chet; "never again will you fly as much as one foot above Earth."

And still Chet's grin persisted. "Commander," he said, "a man in your position should not make so many mistakes. I am going—I give you warning now—going to the Moon. And you haven't enough Patrol Ships in all the air levels of Earth to hold me back, once I'm on my way!"

And every television screen of Earth showed a remarkable scene: a red-faced, choleric Commander of the Air, who shouted that a group of officers might leap forward to do his bidding; a dark-haired man and a girl who sprang beside him. The bodies of the two were interposed for an instant between the officers' weapons and a fair-haired man.... And the lean young man, with his shock of golden hair thrown back from his face, leaped like a panther in that same instant; drew himself to an open window; threw himself through, and vanished among the brilliant lights and black shadows of a New

York night.

But, as he fought his way free of the throng outside, there came above the clamor of an excited crowd the voice of Walt Harkness in cryptic words:

"The ship is yours, Chet," the fugitive heard Harkness call; "it's in cold storage for you!"

Chapter 2: A Dirty Red Freighter....

Chet Bullard was more at home among the air-lanes of Earth than he was on solid ground. But he oriented himself in an instant; knew he was on a cross street in the three hundred zone; and saw ahead of him, not a hundred feet away, the green, glowing ring that marked a subway escalator.

In the passing throng there were those who looked curiously at him. Chet checked his first headlong flight and dropped to an unhurried walk.

About him, as he well knew, the air was filled with silent radio waves that were sounding the alarm in every sentry box of the great city. They would reach the aircraft terminals and the control room of every ship within a fixed radius. He had dared the wrath of one of the most powerful officials of Earth; no effort would be spared to run him down; his picture would be flashing within ten minutes on every television screen of the Air Patrol. And Chet Bullard knew only one way to go.

Of course they would be watching for him at the airports, yet he knew he must get away somehow; escape quickly—and find some corner of the world where he could hide.

He was in the escalator, and wild plans were flashing through his mind as he watched the levels go past. "First Level; Trains North and South; Local Service. Second Level; Express Stop for North-shore Lines. Third Level; Airport Loop Lines; Transatlantic Terminals—"

Chet Bullard, his hair still tangled on his hatless head, his blouse torn where a hand had ripped off the Master Pilot's emblem, stepped from the escalator to a platform, then to a cylindrical car that slid silently in before him and whose flashing announcement-board proclaimed: "Hoover Airport Express. No Intermediate Stops."

Would they be watching for him at the great Hoover Terminal on the tip of Long Island? Chet assured himself silently that he would tell the world they would be. But even a fugitive may have friends—if he has been a master pilot and has a lean, likable face with a most disarming grin.

Where would he go? He did not know; he had been bluffing a bit and the Commander had called him when his hand was weak; he had no least idea where he could find their ship. If only he had had a chance for a word with Walt Harkness: Walt had been flying it; he had left it apparently in a storage hangar.

But where? And what was it that Walt had called out? Chet was

racking his brains to remember.

"The ship is yours," Walt had shouted ... and something about "storage." But why should he have laid up the ship; why should he have stored it?

Chet saw the lights of subterranean stations flashing past as the car that held him rode silently through a tube that it touched not at all. He knew that magnetic rails made a grillwork that surrounded the car and that drew it on at terrific speed while suspending it in air. But he would infinitely have preferred the freedom of the high levels, and his own hand on a ship's controls.

A ship!—any ship!—but preferably his ship and Walt's. And Walt had said something of "storage—cold storage." The words seemed written before him in fiery lines. It was a moment before he knew what he had recalled. Then a slow smile tugged at the corners of his mouth, and he turned and stared through a window that showed only blackness.

"Cold storage!" That was good work on Walt's part. He had been forced to shout the directions before them all, yet tell none of those others about him where the ship was hidden. Chet was picturing that place of "cold storage" as he smiled. The fact that it was some

thousands of miles away troubled him not at all.

The great Hoover Terminal was a place where night never came. Its daylight tubes wove a network of light about the stupendous enclosure, their almost silent hissing merged to an unceasing rush of sound, so soft as to be unheard through the scuffing feet and chattering voices of the ever-hurrying crowds.

From subways the impatient people came and went, and from highway stations where busses and private cars drove in and away. The clock in the squat tower swung its electrically driven hands toward the figure 22; there lacked but two hours of midnight, and a steady stream of aircraft came dropping down the shaft of green light that reached to and through the clouds. There would be many liners leaving on the hour; these that were coming in were private craft that spun their flashing helicopters like giant emeralds in the green descending light, while the noise of their beating blades filled the air with a rush of sound.

Outside the entrance to the Passenger Station, Chet Bullard withdrew himself from the surging press of hurrying men and women and slipped into a shadowed alcove. Two passing figures in the gray and gold of the Air Patrol scanned the crowd closely; Chet drew himself into the deeper shadows and waited until they were by

before he emerged and followed the shelter of a coffee-house that extended toward another entrance to the field, where pilots and mechanics passed in and out.

A bulletin board showed in changing letters of light the official assignment of landing space. And, though every passing eye was turned toward it, Chet knew that each man was intent upon the board and not on the shadowed niche in the building behind it. He watched his chance and slipped into that shadow.

Unseen, he could see them as they approached: men in the multicolored uniforms of many lines, who paused to read, to exchange bantering shop-talk—and to pass on.

Many voices: "Storm area, over the South-shore up to Level Six. You birds on the local runs had better watch your step" ... "—coming down at Calcutta. Yeah, a dirty, red-bottomed freighter that rammed him. I saw it take off two of his fans, but Shorty set the old girl down like a feather on the lift of the four fans he had left. You said it—Shorty's a real pilot...."

Another pause; then a growling voice that proclaimed complainingly: "Lord, but I'm tired! All right, Spud; grin, you damned Irishman! But if you had been hauling the Commander all

over Alaska to-day and then got ordered out again just as you were set for a good sleep, you'd be sore. What in thunder does he want his ship for to-night, I ask you?"

Chet, crouching still lower in the little retreat, stiffened to attention at the reference to the Commander. So the "big boss" had ordered out his own cruiser again! He listened still more intently to the voice that replied.

"Sure, and it's thankful you sh'u'd be to be holdin' the controls on a fine, big cruiser like that; though, betwixt you and me, 'tis myself that don't envy you your job. Me and my old freighter, we go wallowin' along. And to-night I'm takin' her home for repairs—back to the fact'ry in Rooshia where they made her; and the devil of a job it will be, for she handles with all the grace of a pig in a puddle."

Chet risked a glance when the sound of heavy footsteps indicated that one of the two speakers had gone on alone to the pilots' gate. Before the huge bulletin board, in pilot's uniform and with the markings of a low-level man on his sleeve, stood the sturdy figure of the man called Spud. He started back at sight of the face peering out at him, but Chet whispered a command, and the man moved closer to the hiding place behind the board.

There were others coming in a laughing group up the walk; daylight tubes illuminated the approach. Chet spoke hurriedly.

"I'm in a devil of a mess, Spud. Will you lend a hand? Will you stand by for rescue work?"

And Spud studied the bulletin board as he growled:

"Lend a hand?—yes, and the arm with it, Mr. Bullard. You stud by me once whin I needed help; and now you ask will I stand by for rescue work. Till we crash—that's all, me bhoy!"

Spud's speech was tinged with the brogue of Erin; it grew perceptibly more pronounced as his quick emotions took hold of him.

"Quiet!" said Chet. "Wait till they pass!"

The newcomers stopped for no more than a glance. Then:

"I'm demoted," Chet told the round-eyed man who stared unbelievingly at the vacant place on Chet's blouse. "The air's hot with orders for my arrest. I've got to get out, and I've got to do it quick."

And now there was only a trace of the brogue in Spud's voice. Chet knew the trick of the man's speech; touch his heart and his tongue would grow thick; place him face to face with an emergency and he would go cold and hard, while the good-natured phrasing of his native sod went from him and he talked fast and straight.

"The devil you say!" exclaimed Spud. "What you've done I don't know, nor yet why you did it. But, whatever it was, I don't believe you let that triple star go for less than a damned good reason. Now, let me think; let—me—think—"

A figure in gray and gold was approaching, a member of the Air Patrol. Spud's tongue was lively with good-natured raillery as he fell into step and drew the officer with him through the pilots' gate, while Chet, from his shadow, saw with satisfaction the apparent desertion. He had known Spud O'Malley of old. Spud was square—and Spud had wanted time for thinking.

There were many who passed Chet's hiding place before a cautious whisper came to him and he saw a hand that thrust a roll of clothing around the edge of the bulletin board.

"Put 'em on!" was the order of Spud. "And smear your yellah hair with the grease! Work fast, me bhoy!"

The command was no less imperative for being spoken beneath Spud's breath, and for the first time Chet's hopes soared high within him. It had all been so hopeless, the prospect of actual escape from the net that was closing about him. And now—!

He unrolled the tight package of cloth to find a small can of black graphite lubricant done up in a jacket and blouse. Both were stained and smeared with grease; they were amply large. Chet did not bother to strip off his own blouse; he pulled on the other clothes over his own, and his face was alight with a grin of appreciation of Spud's attention to details as he took a daub of the grease, rubbed it on his hands, then passed them through his hair.

"Yellah," Spud had said, but the description was no longer apt. And the man who stepped forth beside Spud O'Malley in the uniform of an engineer of a tramp freighter looked like nothing else in the world but just that.

"Come on, now!" ordered Spud harshly, as a figure in gray and gold appeared around the corner of the coffee shop. "You're plinty late, me fine lad! Now get in there and clean up that dirty motor and get her runnin'! Try out every fan on the old boat; then we'll be off.

"You're number CG41!" he whispered. And Chet repeated the

number as he followed the pilot through the gate.

"O.K.," said the guard at the gate, "and I'll bet he gives you hell and to spare!"

Chet slouched his shoulders to disguise his real height and followed where Spud O'Malley, with every indication of righteous anger, strode indignantly down the pavement, at the far end of which was a battered and service-stained ship.

Her hull of dirty red showed mottlings of brown; she was sadly in need of a painter's gun. She would groan and squeal, Chet knew, when the fans lifted her from the hold-down clutch; and she couldn't fly at over twenty thousand without leaking her internal pressure through a thousand cracks that made her porous as an old balloon—but to Chet's eyes the old relic of the years was a thing of sheer beauty and grace.

O'Malley was leading through an open freight hatch; Chet followed, and, at his beckoning hand, slipped into a dingy cabin.

"Lay low there," the pilot ordered, and still, as Chet observed, his speech showed how clearly the man was thinking, since the emergency still existed "I've cleared some time ago, Mr. Bullard;

we're ready to leave as soon as we get the dispatcher's O.K."

The minutes were long where Chet waited in the pilot's cabin. Each sound might mean a last-minute search of departing ships, but he tried to tell himself that the attention of the officers would be centered upon the passenger liners.

Beyond, where he could see out into the control room, a white light flashed. He heard the bellowing orders of the Irishman at the controls. And, as other sounds reached his ears, he had to grip his hands hard while he fought for control of the laughter that was almost hysterical. For, beneath him, he felt the sluggish lift of the ship, and, from every joint and plate of this old-timer of the air, came squawking protests against the cruel fates that drove her forth again to face the buffeting, racking gales.

But the blue light of an ascending area was about them, and Spud O'Malley was shouting from the control room:

"Sure, and we're off, Mr. Bullard. Now do ye come up here and tell me all about it—but I warn you, I'll not be believin' a word—"

Chapter 3: Up From Earth

Chet had plenty of time in which to acquaint Pilot O'Malley with the facts. And, when he had told his story, it did his sick and worried mind good to hear the explosive stream of expletives that came from the other's lips. Yet, despite the Irishman's anger, it was noticeable that he closed the tight door of the control room before he said a word.

"Only a skeleton crew," he explained. "Just the relief pilot and the engineers and a man or two in the galley, and I trust 'em all. But you can't be too careful.

"The Commander," he concluded, "is gettin' to be more an emperor than a Commander, and somethin's got to be done. Discipline we must have, 'tis true; but this kotowin' to His Royal Highness and all o' that—devil a bit do I like it! If only you could show him up, Mr. Bullard—but of course you can't."

"I'm not so sure," Chet responded. "What I told the big boss wasn't all bluff. Haldgren did go out, five years ago this month. We have the record of a Crescent liner's captain who saw Haldgren's little ship shoot through the R.A. and go on out as if it were going somewhere. And now we have these flashes!

"Do you see what that means, Spud? An SOS! Nobody but an Earth-man would send that, and we wouldn't do it now. We would just press the lever of our emergency-call, and every receiver within a thousand miles would pick up the scream of it.

"But we've had this Dunston Emergency Transmitter less than four years. Haldgren knew only the old S O S. And remember this: three dots, three dashes and three dots don't just happen. They showed up on the Moon. They were repeated the next night. Somebody sent them! Who was it?"

And Pilot O'Malley gave the only obvious answer:

"There's only yourself and Mr. Harkness and Pilot Haldgren that could have got there. 'Twas Haldgren, of course! What a pity that you can't go; 'tis likely the poor bhoy needs help."

"Five years!" mused Chet. "Five long years since he left! He must have landed safely—and then what? After five years comes a signal and that signal a call for help that no pilot worthy the name would disregard....

"Where are we bound?" he demanded abruptly.

"Rooshia," said O'Malley. "I disremember the name—'tis on my orders—but I know it's a long way up north."

"Spud," said Chet, "you're a rotten pilot; you're one of the worst I ever knew. Careless—that's your worst fault—and if anybody doubts that they'll believe it after this trip. For, Spud, if you're any friend of mine, and I know you are, you're going to lose your bearings, and kick this old sky-hog a long way beyond that factory she is bound for. And you're going to set me down in a God-forsaken spot in the arctic where I'm pretty sure I'll find a ship waiting for me.

"And, if you just stick around for a while after that, you will see me take off for the Moon. Then, if Haldgren is there—"

Chet failed to finish the sentence; he was staring through a rear lookout, where, over the arc of the Earth's horizon, could be seen a thin crescent Moon; about it drifting clouds made a halo.

The eyes of Spud O'Malley followed Chet's, and his imaginative faculties must have been stimulated by Chet's words, for he gazed open-mouthed, as if for the first time he visioned that golden scimitar as something more substantial than a high-hung light. He drew one long incredulous breath before he answered.

"What position, sir? Say the word and I'll lose myself so bad we'll be over the Pole and half-way to the equator again!"

"Not that bad," was Chet's assurance. "Just spot this ship over 82:14 north, 93:20 east, and I'll give you local bearings from there."

Then to himself: "'Cold storage,' Walt said; he meant our old shop, of course. Probably had a hunch we would need it."

But to the pilot he said only the one word: "Thanks!"—though the grip of his hand must have spoken more eloquently.

The eastbound lanes of the five thousand level saw them plod slowly along, while faster and better-groomed ships slipped smoothly past; then the red hull rose to Level Twelve and swung out upon the great circle course that would bear them more nearly in the direction of the destination Chet had given. There were free levels higher up in which they could have laid a direct course, but the Irish pilot did not need Chet to tell him that the old hull would never stand it. Her internal pressure could never have been maintained at any density such as human lungs demanded.

But they were on their way, and Chet's customary genial expression gave place to one of more grim determination as he watched the

white-flecked ocean drift slowly past below.

Once a patrol ship spoke to them. Daylight had come to show plainly the silver hull with the distinctive red markings of the Service that slipped smoothly down from above to hang poised under flashing fans like a giant humming-bird. Her directed radio beam flashed the yellow call signal in O'Malley's control room.

Chet was beside him, and the two exchanged silent glances before O'Malley cut in his transmitter. He must give name and number—this signal was a demand that could not be disregarded—but on the old freighter was no automatic sender that would flash the information across to the other ship; the pilot's voice must serve instead.

"Number three—seven—G—four—two!" he thundered into the radiophone. "Freighter of the Intercolonial Line, without cargo—"

"For the love of Pete," shouted the loudspeaker beside him in volume to drown out the pilot's words, "are you sending this by short wave, or are you just yelling across to me? Calm down, you Irish terrier!"

Then, before the pilot could reply, the voice from the silver and red

patrol ship dropped into an exaggerated mimicry of the O'Malley brogue—

"And did yez say 'twas a freighter you had there? Sure, I thot at th' very last 'twas a foine big liner from the Orient and Transpolar run, dropped down here from the hoigh livils! All right, Spud; on your way! But don't crowd the bottom of the Twelve Level so close. This is O—sixteen—L; Jimmy Maddux. By—by! I'll report you O.K."

Again Chet looked at the pilot silently before he glanced back at the vanishing ship, already small in the distance. He repeated the Patrol Captain's words:

"You will 'report us O.K.'—yes, Jimmy, you'll do that, and if they want to find us again you can tell them right where to look."

"I'm pushin' her all I can, Mr. Bullard," said Spud. "'Tis all she can do.... And now do ye go into my cabin—there's two berths there—and we'll just turn in and sleep while my relief man takes his turn. But go in before I call him; there's not a soul on the ship besides ourselves knows that you're here."

And, in the cabin a short time later, Pilot O'Malley chuckled as he whispered: "I gave the lad his course. And Mac will follow it, but

it'll niver take him near to the part of Rooshia he expects it to. Still, the record's clear as far as he's concerned; I've got it in the log. Mac's a good lad, and I wouldn't have him get into trouble over this."

In the freighter's cabin the chronometer was again approaching the hour of twenty-two; for nearly twenty-four hours the ship had been on her plodding way. And, lacking the A.D.D.—the Automatic Destination Detector—and other refinements of instrumental installations of the passenger ships, Pilot O'Malley had to work out his position for himself.

And where a faster craft would have driven through with scarcely a quiver, the big ship trembled with the buffets and suction of a wintry blast that drove dry snow like sand across the lookout glasses. The twelve thousand level was an unbroken cloud of snow—a gray smother where the red ship's blunt and rusty bow nosed through.

O'Malley clung to the chart table as the air gave way beneath them and the ship fell a hundred feet or more before her racing fans took hold and jerked her back to an even keel. He managed to check his figures, then moved to the door of his cabin, opened it and called softly.

Chet was beside him in an instant. It had seemed best that he remain

in hiding, and he knew what the pilot's call meant. "Made it, did you!" he exclaimed. "Now I'll take a look about and pick up my bearing points."

But one look at the ports and he shook his head.

"That's dirty," he told O'Malley, and his eyes twinkled as he felt the old ship rear and plunge with the lift of a driving gale; "and how the old girl does feel it! She can't rip through, and she can't go above. You've had some trip, Spud; it's been mighty decent of you to go to all this—"

A flashing of yellow light on the instrument panel brought his thanks to a sudden halt. A voice, startling in its sudden loudness, filled the little room.

"Calling three—seven—G—four—two! Stand by for orders! Patrol O—sixteen—L sending; acknowledge, please!"

Chet's eyes were staring into those of O'Malley. That's Jimmy Maddux back on our trail," he said. "Now, what has got them suspicious?"

He glanced once at the collision instrument. "He's right overhead at

thirty thousand," he added; "and there are more of them coming in from all sides. Now what the devil—"

Spud O'Malley had his hand on the voice switch. "Be quiet!" he commanded; then spoke into the transmitter—

"Three—seven—G—four—two acknowledging!" he said, and again Chet observed how all trace of accent had departed from his voice; it was an indication of the moment's tenseness and of the pilot's full understanding of their position.

The answering order was crisply spoken; this was a different Jimmy Maddux from the one who had chaffed the Irish pilot some hours before.

"Stand by! We're coming down! Records at Hoover Terminal show two men reporting at pilots' gate under the number of your engineer, CG41. Hold your ship exactly where you are; we're sending a man aboard!"

Chet had moved silently to the controls. The old multiple-lever instrument—he knew it well! But he looked at Spud O'Malley and waited for his nod of assent before he presumed to trespass on another pilot's domain. Then he shifted two little levers, and the ship

fell away beneath them as it plunged toward the Earth.

And Pilot O'Malley was explaining to the Patrol Ship Captain as best he could for the rolling plunge of the careening ship:

"I can't hold her, sir. And you'd best be keepin' away. It's stormin' fearful down here, and I can't rise above it! Keep clear!—I'm warnin' you!" The hum of their helicopters rose to a shrill whine as Chet drove the ship out and down through the smothering clouds. "You must hear her fans on your instruments; you can see how we're pitchin'!"

He switched off the transmitter for a moment and faced Chet. "They've been checkin' close," he stated. "That was my engineer's number I gave you as we came through the gate. And, of course, he had given it before when he reported in. Now we're up against it."

The collision instrument was humming with the sound of many motors, and warning lights were giving their silent alarm of the oncoming ships.

"They're comin' in," Spud went on hopelessly, "like a flock of kites in the tropics when one of them's found somethin' dead—and it's us that's the carcass!"

But Chet was not listening. The snowy clouds had broken for an instant; their ship had driven through and beneath them. Through the wild, whirling chaos of white there came for an instant a rift—and far across an icy expanse Chet glimpsed a range of black hills!

He spoke sharply to the pilot. "That's Jimmy Maddux above us—kid him along, Spud! Tell him we're coming up, don't let him grab us with his magnets! This is putting you in a devil of a hole, old man. I'm sorry!—but we've got to see it through now.

"You can never set this ship down, Spud; that patrol would be on our backs in half a second. And they'd knock me out with one shot the minute I stepped outside."

The clear space in the storm had filled again with the dirty gray of wind-whipped snow; off at the right a dim glow of distant fires was the midnight sun as it shone for a brief moment. One blast, more malignant in its fury than those that had come before, tore first at the blunt bow, then caught them amidships to roll the big, sluggish freighter till her racked framework shrieked and chattered.

Spud pointed through a rear lookout where a silvery Patrol Ship flashed down through the clouds. "There's Jimmy!" he shouted. "He's takin' no chances of our landing—he's right on our tail!"

But Chet Bullard, his hands working at the control levers, was staring straight ahead into that gray blast; and his eyes were shining as he pulled back on a lever that threw them once more into the concealment of the whirling clouds above.

"Spud," he was shouting, "have you got a 'chute? You freighters have 'em sometimes. Get me a 'chute and I'll fool them yet! I saw the shed—our hangars—our work shop! There's where our ship is!"

They were lost once more in the snow that seemed to be driving past in solid drifts. Chet heard Spud shouting down a voice tube. And, curiously, it was plain that the Irish pilot had lost all tenseness from his voice; he was happy and as carefree as if he had found the answer to all his perplexing questions. He was calling an order to his relief pilot.

"Mac—do ye break out two parachutes, me lad! Bring 'em up here, and shake a leg! No, there's nothin' to worry about—divil a thing!"

Then, into the transmitter, he shouted thickly as he switched the instrument on:

"Jimmy, me bhoy, kape away! Kape away, I'm tellin' you, or ye'll have me Irish temper disturbed, and I'm a divil whin I'm roused!

What do I know about your twin ingineers? Wan of thim makes trouble enough for me! Now take yourself away, and don't step on the tail of this ship or we'll go down to glory together!—unless we go to another terminal and find oursilves in hell, and us all covered wid snow. Think how divilish conspicuous you'd be feelin'—"

A discord of voices silenced his laughing banter; on the instrument board the warning light was flashing imperatively. Above the bedlam of voices one stood out, and all other commands went silent before the voice of authority.

"Silence! This is the Commander of Air! Orders for O—sixteen—L: seize that ship! Your magnets!—disregard damage!—get your magnets on that ship and hold her. We are coming down—"

Chet reached for the transmitter switch and opened it that their voices might not go beyond the control room.

"Lots of company; they seem pretty certain that they're on the right track. And the big boss himself is coming down to call. Can't you hurry those 'chutes?"

The control room door was flung open as the figure of a young man stumbled through and dropped two bundles of cloth and webbing

upon the floor. He clung to the door-frame as Chet threw the big freighter into a totally unexpected maneuver that rolled them down and away from a silver-bellied ship above. Then the levers moved again, and the ship went hard-a-port as Chet caught again one fleeting glimpse of shadow below that could only be the markings of a building he had known well.

"Hold her there, Spud!" he shouted. "He'll be back in a minute or two! He'll get us next time!"

Chet was reaching for the straps of a 'chute. He had the webbing about him when he stopped to waste precious seconds in wide-eyed staring at the figure of Spud O'Malley.

Spud was pulling at a recalcitrant buckle. He had motioned the relief pilot to take the controls, and now the bulk of a parachute pack hung awkwardly behind him.

"Spud!" Chet shouted. "You're not stepping out too! It's no sure thing with these old 'chutes; they're probably rotten! Stay here! Tell 'em I stuck you up with a gun!—tell 'em I made you bring me—"

"If you must talk," said Spud O'Malley calmly, and pulled a strap tight across his chest, "do ye be tryin to work while you talk. Get

that harness on! If I let you stow away on my ship you can do no less than take me along on yours!"

A crashing impact drove the men to the floor in a sprawling heap; Chet pulled the last strap tight as he lay there. The lookouts were black above where the belly of a Patrol Ship clung close.

"Jimmy knows how to obey orders," said Chet as he came to his feet. "No cable magnets for Jimmy! He just smashed down on top of us, ripped off our fans and grabbed hold." He was helping Spud to his feet as he spoke.

"Mac, me bhoy," the pilot told his assistant, "the log has it all, the whole story. There'll be no trouble for you at all."

He yanked quickly at the port-opening switch, and the big steel disk backed slowly out of its threaded seat and swung wide.

Chet drew back one involuntary step as a blast of icy wind drove stinging snow into his face. Then, without a word, he gave Spud O'Malley a joyous grin and threw himself out into the void....

And, later, as he released the 'chute where a wind was dragging him violently across an icy expanse, he was laughing exultantly to see

another 'chute whirled into the enshrouding drifts, while the chunky figure of a man came scrambling to his feet that he might shake a fist into the air toward some hidden enemy and shout into the storm epithets only half-heard.

"—and be damned to ye!" Chet heard him conclude; then was close enough to throw one arm about the figure and draw him after where he made his way toward a building that was like a mountain of snow.

Spud must have marveled at the craft within; at her sleek, shining sides; the flat nose that ended in a black exhaust port. He was examining the other exhausts that ringed her round when Chet pulled out a lever from the streamlined surface and swung open an entrance port.

He motioned Spud into the brilliantly lighted interior, where nitron illuminators were almost blinding as they shone of gleaming levers and dials of a control room like none that Spud O'Malley had ever seen.

Chet had thrown the building's doors open wide; a whirling motor had drawn them back on hidden tracks. Now he closed the entrance port with care, then glanced at his instruments before he placed his hand on a metal ball.

It hung suspended in air within a cage of curved bars. It was a modification of the high-liner ball-control, and it was new. Walt Harkness had had it installed to replace a more crudely fashioned substitute that had brought them safely back from the Dark Moon. The name of that new satellite was on Chet's lips as his thin hand rested delicately upon the ball.

"It's not the Dark Moon this time, old girl," he told the ship, "though you've taken me there twice. But we're going up just the same, and I told the Commander he hasn't Patrol Ships enough to hold us back." His fingers were gripping the little ball—lifting it—moving it forward....

And, as if he lifted the ship itself, the silent cylinder came roaring into life. Within the great building was a thundering blast that made the voice of the storm less than a whispering breath. It came but faintly through the heavily insulated walls, but Chet felt the lift of the ship, and that joyous smile was crinkling about his eyes as the silvery cylinder floated smoothly out of her shelter into the grip of the wind.

His eyes were on an upper lookout, where clouds were driving away like a curtain unrolled. More cloud banks were coming, but, for a time, the heavens were clear where the great red hull of a rusty

freighter hung helpless beneath a red and silver Patrol Ship whose magnets held fast to its prey.

There were other shapes in the markings of the Service that shot slantingly down. Chet thought again of the carrion birds; then he saw the gold star on the bow of a great cruiser and knew from that ship that the Commander must be seeing their own below. Then he eased gently forward on a tiny ball—forward and forward, while the compensating floor of the control room swung up behind them and seemed thrusting up with unbearable weight.

There were flashes from the cruisers above, and flashes of red on the ice behind with fountains of shattered ice and rock; detonite works its most terrible destruction on a surface that is brittle and hard. But of what avail are detonite shells against a craft whose speed builds up to something greater than the muzzle velocity of a shell?—a silvery craft that sweeps out and out toward a black mountain range; then swings slowly up in a curve of sheer beauty that bends into banked masses of clouds—and ends.

But within the control room, Chet Bullard, no longer Master Pilot of the World, but master, in all truth, of space, knew that his ship's flight was far from ending. He turned to grin happily at his companion.

"We're off!" he shouted. "And it's thanks to you that we made it. If Haldgren's alive he'll have you to thank; for it's you that has done the trick so far!"

But Spud O'Malley answered soberly as he stared up and out into the blackness of levels he had never seen.

"I've helped," he admitted; "I've helped a bit. But it's a divil of a job of navigatin' that's ahead. And that's up to you, Chet Bullard; 'tis no job for an old omadhaun like mesilf!"

Chet felt the lift of the Repelling Area as they shot through. Ahead was the black velvet night that he knew so well; its silent emptiness was pricked through with bright points of fire.

"I found the Dark Moon," he said slowly, "and that you can't see at all. This other will be easy."

There was no boastfulness in the tone, and Spud O'Malley nodded as he glanced respectfully at the young man who threw back his disheveled mop of hair from a lean face and marked down some cryptic figures on a record sheet.

Chet Bullard was on the job ... and his passenger, it would seem, was

satisfied that his unbelievable adventure was well begun.

Chapter 4: Life Monstrous and Horrible

"It looks," said Spud O'Malley, "as if some bad little spalpeen of the skies had thrown pebbles at it when 'twas soft. It's fair pockmarked with places where the stones have hit."

He was staring through a forward lookout, where the whole sky seemed filled with a tremendous disk. One quarter was brilliantly alight; it formed a fat crescent within whose arms the rest of the globe was held in fainter glowing. By comparison, this greater portion was dark, though illuminated by earthlight far brighter than any moonlight on Earth.

But light or dark, the surface showed nothing but an appalling desolation where the rocky expanse had been still further torn and disrupted—pockmarked,as O'Malley had said, with great rings that had been the walls of tremendous volcanoes.

Chet was consulting a map where a similar area of circular markings had been named by scientists of an earlier day.

"Hercules," he mused, and stared out at the great circle of the moon. "The crater of Hercules! Yes, that must be it. That dark area off to one side is the Lake of Dreams; below it is the Lake of Death. Atlas!

Hercules! Suffering cats, what volcanoes they must have been!"

"I don't like your names," objected O'Malley. "Lake of Death! That's not so good. And I don't see any lake, and the whole Moon is wrong side up, according to your map."

Chet reached for the ball-control, moved it, and swung their ship in a slow, rotary motion. The result was an apparent revolution of the Moon.

"There, it's right side up," Chet laughed; "that is, if you can tell me what direction is 'up' out here in space. And, as for the names, don't let them disturb you; they don't mean anything. Some old-timer with a little three-inch telescope probably named them. The darker areas looked like seas to them. Astronomers have known better for a long time; and you and I—we're darned sure of it now."

The great sea of shadow, a darker area within the shaded portion whose only light came from the Earth, was plainly a vast expanse of blackened rock. An immense depression, like the bottom of some earlier sea, it was heaved into corrugations that Chet knew would be mountain-high at close range. Marked with the orifices of what once had been volcanoes, the floor of that Lake of Death was hundreds of miles in extent.

But as for seas and lakes, there was no sign of water in the whole, vast, desolate globe. An unlikely place, Chet admitted, for the beginning of their search, and yet—those flashes of light!—the S O S! They had been real!

The bow blast had been roaring for over an hour; their strong deceleration made the forward part of the ship seem "down." And down it was, too, by reason of the pull of the great globe they were approaching. But the roaring exhaust up ahead was checking their speed; Chet measured and timed the apparent growth of the Moon-disk and nodded his satisfaction at their reduced speed.

"This will stop us," he said. "I didn't know but we would have to swing off, shoot past, and return under control. But we're all right, and there is the place we are looking for—the big ring of Hercules, the level floor of rock inside it. And over at one side the smaller crater—"

He was gazing entranced at the mammoth circle that had been a volcano's throat—the very one he had seen flashed on the screen. He moved the control to open a side exhaust and change their direction of fall. He was still staring, with emotions too overwhelming for words, and Spud O'Malley was silent beside him, as the great ring spread out and became an up-thrust circle of torn, jagged mountains

some thirty or more miles across and directly below.

They fell softly into that circle. Its mountainous sides were high; they blocked off the view of the enormous terraces beyond that had been the crater's sloping sides.

From the direction that had suddenly become "east," the rising sun's strong light struck in a slant to make the bar rocks seem incandescent. On one side the giant rim of the encircling mountains was black with shadow. The shadow reached out across the vast, rocky floor almost to the foot of the opposite wall many miles away. It enveloped their falling ship like a cushioning, ethereal sea: velvety, softly black, almost palpable.

It was wrapping them about in the darkness of night as Chet's slender hand touched so delicately upon the ball-control—checked them, eased off, drew back again until the thundering exhausts echoed softly where their ship hung suspended a hundred feet above a rocky floor. The shrouding darkness erased the harsh contours of mountain and plain; it seemed shielding this place of desolation and horror from critical, perhaps unfriendly eyes of these beings from another world. And Chet laid their ship down gently and silently on the earthlit plain as if he, too, felt this sense of intrusion—as if there might be those who would resent the trespass of unwanted guests.

But Spud O'Malley must have experienced no such delicacy of feeling. He let go one long pent-up breath.

"And may the saints protect us!" he said. "The Lake of Death outside, and inside here is purgatory itself, or I don't know my geography. But you made it, Chet, me bhoy; you made it! What a sweet little pilot you are!"

"There's air here," Chet was telling his companion later; "air of a sort, but it's no good to us."

He pointed to the spectro-analyzer with its groupings of lines and light bands. "Carbon dioxide," he explained, "and some nitrogen, but mighty little of either. See the pressure gage; it's way down.

"But that won't bother us too much. We've got some suits stowed away in the supplies that will hold an atmosphere of pressure, and their oxygen tanks will do the rest. We were ready for anything we might find on our Dark Moon trip, but we didn't need them there. Now they'll come in handy."

"That's all right," O'Malley assured him; "I've gone down under water in a diving suit; I've gone outside a ship for emergency repairs in a suit like yours when the air was as thin as this; I can stand it

either way. But what I want to know is this:

"What the divil chance is there of findin' your man, Haldgren, in such a frozen corner of purgatory as this? How could he live here? Here you've come in a fine, big ship, and his was a little bit of a bullet by comparison. Yet I doubt if you could live here for five years with all your big oxygen supply. Now, how could he have done it with his little outfit?

"And what has he eaten? Does this look like a likely place for shootin' rabbits, I ask you? Can a man catch a mess of fish in that empty Lake of Death? Or did Haldgren bring a sandwich with him, it may be?"

Chet Bullard shook his head doubtfully.

"Don't get sarcastic!" he grinned. "You can't think of any wilder questions than I have asked myself.

"He couldn't have lived here, Spud; that's the only answer. It just isn't humanly possible. All I know is that he did it. I can't tell you how I know it, but I do. Those lights were a human call for help. No living man but Haldgren could have flashed them. He's alive—or he was then; that's all I know."

Spud crossed the control room as he had done a score of times to look through a glass port at the world outside. Chet, too, turned to the lookout by which he stood and stared through it. The men had found themselves surprisingly light within the ship. They had been compelled to guard against sudden motion; a step, instead of carrying them one stride, might hurl them the length of the room. This lowered gravitational pull helped to explain to the pilot that outer world.

There, close by, was the rocky plain on which he had landed the ship: Smooth and shiny as obsidian in places, again it was spongy gray, the color of volcanic rock, bubbling with imprisoned gases at the instant of hardening. It stretched out and down, that gently rolling plain, for a thousand yards or more, then ended in a welter of nightmare forms done in stone. It was like the work of some demented sculptor's tortured brain.

Jutting tongues of rock stood in air for a hundred—two hundred—feet. Chet hardly dared estimate size in this place where all was so strange and unearthly. The hot rock had spouted high in the thin air, and it had frozen as it threw itself frantically out from the inferno of heat that had given it birth. The jets sprayed out like spume-topped waves; they were whipped into ribbons that the winds of this world could not tear down, and the ribbons shone, waving white in the

earthlight. The tortured stone was torn and ripped into twisted contortions whose very writhing told of the hell this had been. Its grotesque horror struck through to the deeper levels of Chet's mind with a feeling he could not have depicted in words.

From the higher elevation where their ship lay he could look out and across this welter of storm-lashed rock to see it level off, then vanish where another crater mouth yawned black. Here was the inner crater! It had seemed small before; it was huge now—a place of mystery, a black, waiting throat into which Chet knew he must go—a place of indefinable terror.

But it was the place, too, whence strange flashes had come, flashes that had told of the distress and suffering of men since the time when wireless waves had been widely used. The old call—the S O S!—it had come from that throat; it had seemed a call sent directly to him! And Chet Bullard's eyes held steadily toward that place of mystery and of a sender unknown.

"I'm going down," he told himself more than O'Malley. "There's something about it I can't understand, something pretty damnable about it, I admit. But, whatever it is, that's what I am here to find out."

"'Tis a divil of a place to die," said O'Malley, "and not one I'd pick out at all. But it may be we won't have to. I'm goin' along, of course."

The master pilot was reaching for the flexible metal suit he had brought from the store room. It was air-tight, gas-proof; it would hold an internal pressure far beyond anything the wearer would demand; and its headpiece was flexible like the body of the suit, and would fit him closely.

He drew the suit up over the clothes he wore and closed the front with one pull of a metal tab. Within, soft rubber-faced cushions had interlocked; the body would fasten to the headpiece in the same way. But Chet paused with the headpiece in his hand.

He looked at the glass window that would be before his eyes; at the thin diaphragms that would come over his ears and that would admit all ordinary sounds; and he tried out the microphone attachment that he could switch on to bring to his ears the faintest whisper from outside. All this he examined with care while he seemed to be thinking deeply. Then he straightened and looked at his companion.

"No, Spud, you're not going," he said. "This is my job. You'll stay with the ship. You and I make a rather small army: we don't know

yet what we may be up against, and we mustn't risk all our forces in one advance. I'll see what is there; and, in case anything happens, you can take the ship back. I've taught you enough on the way over; I had this very thing in mind."

He slipped the helmet over his blond head before O'Malley could reply.

The ear-pieces and the microphone allowed him to hear. Another diaphragm in the center of the metal across his chest took his own voice and shouted it into the room.

"Sure, I know you want to go. Spud; but you'll have to stay in reserve. Now show me how well you can fly the ship. Lift her off; then drift over that crater, and we'll have a look-see!"

Spud O'Malley's face was glum as he obeyed. Spud had seen nothing but death in this place of horror—Chet had observed that plainly—yet it was equally plain that the Irish pilot was finding the order to live in safety a bitter dose. But Spud knew how to take orders; he lifted the little ball gently and swung the ship out toward the blackness of that deeper pit.

Chet was watching the changing terrain. He saw the place of solid-

spouted rock end; saw it flatten out to an undulating surface that had rolled and heaved itself into many-colored shapes. Even in the earthlight the kaleidoscopic colors were vivid in their changing reds and blues and yellow sheens. Then this surface sloped sharply away, though here it was rough with broken rock where half-hardened lava, coughed from that throat, had fallen back and adhered to the molten sides.

This rock in the inner crater was gray, pale and ghostly in the earthlight. It went down and still down where Chet's eyes could not follow—down to an utter blackness. Chet was staring speculatively at that waiting dark when the first flash came.

Blindingly keen! A flash of white light!—another and another! It blazed dazzlingly into their cabin in vivid dashes and dots—the same signal as before was being repeated!

A hundred yards away was a little shelf of rock. Chet jerked at O'Malley's shoulder with his metal-cased hand and pointed. "Set her down!" he ordered "Let me out there! We can't put the ship down where those lights are; the throat is too narrow; there may be air-currents that would smash us on a sharp rock. I'll go down! You wait! I'll be back."

He was opening the inner door of the entrance port. Another closure in the outer shell made an air-lock. He took time for one grip at the hand of Spud O'Malley, one grin of excited, adventurous joy that wrinkled about his eyes behind the window of his helmet—then he picked up a detonite pistol, examined again its charge of tiny shells, jammed it firmly into the holster at his waist and swung the big door shut behind him.

And Pilot O'Malley watched him go with a premonition that he dared not speak. He heard the closing of the outer door; saw the tall, slender figure in a metal suit like a knight of old as Chet waved once, settled the oxygen tank across his shoulders and picked his way carefully over a waste of shattered stone that led down and down into the dark.

Then the Irishman looked once at the suit he had expected to wear, stared back where the figure of Chet had vanished, then dropped his head upon his hands while his homely face was twisted convulsively.

It had come so soon! The great adventure was upon them before he had realized. The reconnaissance—the flashes—and then Chet had gone! And now he was alone in a silent ship that rested quietly in this soundless world. The silence was heavy upon him; it seemed pressing in with actual weight to bear him down. It was shattered at

the last by the faintest of whispered echoes from without.

Spud was on his feet in an instant, his eyes straining at one lookout after another, each giving him a view of only the desolation he knew and hated.

What could it have been? he demanded. He found and rejected a dozen answers before he saw, far down in the black crater-mouth, a flash of red; then heard again that ghost of a sound and knew it for what it was.

Thick walls, these of the space ship, and insulated well; and the thin atmosphere of this wild world could cut a blast of sound to a mere fraction of its volume! But the walls were admitting a fragmental echo of what must have been a reverberating voice. They were quivering to the roar of exploding detonite!

It was Chet! He was fighting, he was in trouble! Spud's trembling hands steadied upon the metal control; he lifted the ship as smoothly as even Chet might have done, and he drove it out and down into a throat too narrow for safety, but where the tiny, red flash of a weapon had called with an S O S as plain as any lettered call—a message to which brave men have everywhere responded.

He saw Chet but once. The master pilot had shown him the flare release lever; he moved it now, and the place of darkness was suddenly blinding with light. There were rocks close at hand; the crater had narrowed to a funnel throat that was cut and terraced as if by human hands. Below, it ended in a smooth stone floor where the lava had sealed it shut.

From a terrace came the gleaming reflection of Chet's suit. Miraculously the gleam was doubled, as if another in similar garb stood at his side. And beyond, from blocks of stone, came leaping things—living creatures!

The light died. Spud realized he had not opened the release lever full. He fumbled for it—found it, jammed it over! And in the light that followed he saw only empty, terraced walls where nothing moved, and a lava floor below that, for an instant, gaped open, then again was smooth and firm.

And the thunder of his ship's exhausts came back to him from those threatening walls to tell of a loneliness more certain and terrible than any solitude he had found in the silence where he had waited above.

But through all his dismay ran an undercurrent of puzzled wonderment. For here on a dead world, where all men agreed there

could be no life, he had seen the impossible.

Only one glimpse before the light had died; only for an instant had he seen the things that leaped upon Chet—but he knew! Never again could any man tell Spud O'Malley that the Moon was a lifeless globe ... and he knew that the life was of a form monstrous and horrible and malign!

Chapter 5: "And I've Brought You to This!"

The master pilot, when he stepped forth upon that weird globe which was the Moon, found himself plunged into a spectral world. Even from within the air-tight suit, through whose helmet-glass he peered, he sensed, as he had not when inside the ship, the vast desolation, the frozen emptiness of this rocky waste.

His suit of woven metal was lined throughout with heavy fabric of insuline fibers, that strange product brought from the jungle heat of the upper Amazon to keep out the bitter cold of this frozen world. His ship was felted with the same material between its double walls; without it there would have been no resisting the cold of these interstellar reaches.

But, despite the padding within his suit, he felt the numbing cold of this dead world strike through. And the bleak and frigid barrenness that met his gaze was so implacably hostile to any living thing as to bring a shudder of more than physical cold.

No warming sun, as yet, reflected from the rocks. About him was the blackness of a fire-formed lithosphere, whose lighter veining and occasional ashy fields were made ghostly in the earthlight.

One slow, all-seeing glance at this!—one moment of wondering amazement when he tilted his head far back that he might look up to the mouth of the crater and see, in a dead-black sky, the great crescent of earth—a vast, incredible moon peeping over the serrate edge. Then, as if the interval of time since leaving the ship had been measured in hours instead of brief seconds, he remembered the flashing lights that had signaled from below.

His first step carried him, slipping and sprawling awkwardly, across a rocky slope white with the rime of carbon dioxide frost. He came to his feet and turned once to wave toward the ship where he knew Spud O'Malley must be watching from a lookout. Then, moving cautiously, to learn the gage of his own strength in this world of diminished weights, he started down.

Rough going, Chet found; the wall of this great throat had not hardened without showing signs of its tortured coughing. But Chet learned to judge distance, and he found that a fifty-foot chasm was a trifle to be crossed in one leap; huge boulders, whose molten sides had frozen as they ran and dripped, could be surmounted by the spring of his leg muscles that could throw him incredibly through the air. And always he went downward toward the place where the lights had flashed.

They came once more. He had descended a thousand feet, he was estimating, when the black igneous rocks blazed blindingly with a reflected light like that of a thousand suns.

Another hundred feet below, down a precipitous slope, was a broad table of rock. He saw it in the instant before he threw one metal-clad arm across the eye-piece of his helmet to shut out the glare. And he saw, in that fraction of a second, a moving figure, another like himself, clad in an armored suit whose curves and fine-woven mesh caught the light in a million of sparkling flames.

It was Haldgren, he told himself; and there was something that came chokingly into his throat at the thought. That lonely figure—one tiny dot of life on a bleak and lifeless stage! It was pitiful, this undying effort to signal, to let his own world know that he still lived.

Chet did not put it into coherent words, but there was an overwhelming emotion that was part pity and part pride. He was suddenly glad and thankful to belong to a race of men who could carry on like this—who never said die. And, as the glare winked out, he threw himself recklessly down that last slope and brought up in a huddle at the feet of the one who had started back in affright. There was one metal-cased hand that went in a helpless gesture to the throat; the figure, all silvery white in the dim Earth-glow, staggered

back against a wall of rock; only by inches did it miss a fall from the precipice edge where the rock platform ended.

From the floor, where his fall had flung him in awkward posture, Chet saw this; saw it and marveled vaguely. What picture he had formed of Haldgren—what he had expected of him—he could not have told. Certainly it was not this slenderly youthful figure, nor this reaction that was more of fright than startled amazement. And the voice! Surely he had heard an involuntary, half-stifled scream!

He came slowly to his feet. And he was wondering now if his deductions had been wrong. He had been to sure that the sender of those messages was an Earth-man; he had been so certain of finding Haldgren.

Slowly he crossed the table of rock toward the waiting figure; gently he extended his hands, palms upward, in a gesture of peaceful promise. Whoever, whatever this was—this Moon-being who had signaled and in doing so had happened upon the letters that had a definite meaning of Earth—Chet knew he must not frighten him. One outstretched hand touched the metal that cased an arm; moved upward to the headpiece, as close-fitting as his own; tilted it that the light of Earth might shine within and show him what manner of being he had found.

And Chet, who had seen strange creatures on that Dark Moon where he and Harkness had explored, was prepared, despite the suit so like his own, to see some weird being of this newer world. But for what the soft light of that distant Earth disclosed he was entirely unprepared.

Eyes, blue and lovely as an azure sea but wide with terror and dismay; eyes that showed plainly a consternation of unbelief that changed slowly, as the blue eyes stared into Chet's gray ones, until they were suddenly misty with tears; and the figure sagged and would have dropped at his feet had he not caught it in his arms.

He heard his own voice exclaiming in wonderment: "A girl! One of our own kind! Out here! On the Moon!"

And another voice, sweetly tremulous, replied:

"Oh, it's true—it's true! You have come! You read my call! Oh, I hardly dared hope—"

Then the thrilling ecstasy of happiness in the voice gave place to accents of dismay as some horror of fear swept in upon her.

"And I've brought you to this! You will be lost! Quick! Climb for

your life! I will come after. Quick! Quick!"

There was agony in the voice now, and the figure wrenched itself from Chet's arms to point one slender hand upward in frantic urging, while yet the head turned that the eyes might look backward as if some danger threatened from below.

"I've got a ship," Chet assured her. "God knows who you are or how you got here, but it's all right now. We'll leave."

He had regained his grip upon one of those slender hands and was preparing to swing her up to the top of an incredibly high rock. Her scream checked him and sent his one free hand to the detonite pistol at his waist.

"Behind you!" she cried. "Look back! They have come out!"

The crater-pit behind and below them was black with the inky blackness of smooth, fire-formed rock. Its many facets were smooth and polished; they made mirrors, many of them, for the earthlight reflected from the crater mouth. They served to diffuse this dim light and throw it again upon the monstrous blacknesses that were swarming from below.

"Men!" thought Chef in one instant of half-comprehension. Then, as he saw the chalk-white bodies, the dead and flabby whiteness of their faces from which red eyes stared, he revised his estimate; here was nothing human.

The pistol was in his hand, but as yet he had not fired. Only the terror in the girl's voice had told him that these were enemies; he waited for a closer view or for some direct attack, and needed to wait but a moment.

Only an instant after he had seen, the chalk-white bodies clustered below were in motion. They came leaping up the smooth expanses of rock, and they were obscured at times as if by black curtains that were drawn across their bodies. Then they would flash out again in dead-white nakedness.

It was uncanny. Chet had a feeling that they were wrapping themselves in black invisibility. Only when a score of the white things threw themselves out into space did he know the truth.

Out and upward they sprang, to soar above Chet's head and land on the slope above. All escape was cut off now; but it was not this thought that held Chet motionless for that moment of horror. It was the glimpse he had had against the light of the crater mouth of

beating, flailing wings that whipped the thin air above him; of curved claws; and of long, horrible tails that might have belonged to giant rats. And the demoniac cries that the thin air brought him were no more suggestive of devils unleashed than were the leathery wings and the fleshy tails of the beasts.

Yet it was not this alone that stunned the mind of the master pilot, but the horrible incongruity, of this monstrous inhumanness allied with the human form of their bodies. And throughout he observed, with a curious sense of detachment, the furious beating of the wings, almost useless in the thin air, and the expansion and contraction of sac-like membranes on each side of the necks which he took to be auxiliary lungs.

It was the girl's action that brought Chet to his senses. She moved slowly across the smooth table of rock toward the three or four beasts who had gained its level. Her head was bowed in utter dejection; Chet sensed it as plainly as if she had spoken. She held out her hands helplessly toward the creatures—and in that instant Chet's pistol spoke.

Tiny shells, those of a detonite pistol, and the grain of explosive in the tip of each bullet is microscopic. But no body, human or inhuman, be it made of flesh, can withstand the shattering

concussion of that exploding shell.

The beasts beside that figure, slenderly girlish even in its metal sheath, fell into the pit beyond; their screams rang horribly as they fell. There were others who took their places, and they, too, vanished under the smashing shots.

And then, after timeless moments of waiting, while the only sound was the half-audible voice of the girl who sobbed: "Now you are surely lost. They will kill you—you should not have fired—I should never have brought you here"—there came the familiar thunder of a ship's exhausts.

Down from above, a black shadow came silently crashing; a blaze of light terrific in its brilliance brought an exclamation to Chet's lips and hope to his heart.

"Spud! You old fool, you're coming to get us!"

But the words ended with an avalanche of bodies that threw themselves down the black slope. There were others coming from below, leaping from the stones. The ledge was filled with them.

Chet was firing blindly as he felt himself borne down—felt long

fingers that ripped, then closed about his throat and jammed the metal of his suit in chokingly. He heard the beating of giant wings about him; felt himself half-carried and half-thrown toward a floor of rock far below.

There was an opening that loomed blackly in that floor; one glimpse of his surroundings Chet had before the press of bodies closed him in. They were forcing the shining, silvery figure of a girl into that black opening—dropping her! Then he felt himself hurled into the same void, while above him a ship of space thundered vainly from her great exhausts as if roaring in rage at her own futility.

Chapter 6: Heart of the Moon

In the grasp of the winged creatures' long, clawed hands Chet was helpless. He was struggling vainly when they released their hold and he felt himself falling into a pit that, as far as he knew, was a bottomless abyss. He was still struggling to right himself in mid-air when he struck.

To fall even so short a distance on Earth would have meant instant death. Here, where gravitation's pull was but one-sixth that of Earth, he still struck on a rocky floor with a thud that made him sick for lack of breath.

Above him was a pale circle of light. Tipping the edge of a vast crater mouth high above was a rim of brilliance. Earthlight! Chet was suddenly certain that he was seeing that glow for the last time as the circle went black, and there came to him the unmistakable clang of metal where a door was shut.

Through the countless mingled emotions that filled him he was wondering what manner of creatures these were into whose hands he had fallen. Intelligent, beyond a doubt, in their own way; he could not question the evidence of his own eyes and ears. They were able to work in metals and to seal the mouth of this lunar tomb.

But he was still alive; he could not give up now. This adventure upon which he had launched with such high hopes had turned out differently than expected; but, he told himself, it was not ended yet.

And, instead of a lifeless globe, he had found this: a place peopled with strange, half-human life. And, more marvelous still, instead of Haldgren, whom he had come to seek, there had been a girl!

Chet had recovered his ability to breathe, had made sure that the oxygen tank was intact; and now he called softly into the blackness of this dark vault where he had seen her thrown.

"Are you alive?" he asked. "Can you hear me?"

For answer came quick rustling of moving bodies, the smooth rasping of wings on leathery wings, hands that fumbled for him, then closed about arms and legs and throat, while in his ears was a chattering of high-pitched squeals. Again he was lifted in air, held there in the grip of a score of lean, long-fingered hands. He was nerving himself to undergo without flinching whatever new torture might be in store. Yet he thrilled inexplicably as through the sounds of these things about him, he heard a muffled: "Yes—yes! Oh, I am glad—"

The sentence was unfinished. Before Chet's eyes a light was growing. A mere slit at first, it grew to a luminous circle in the rocky floor. And as it opened, he felt the pressure of his metal suit upon his body, where before it had been slightly ballooned by the pressure of oxygen he had maintained.

With the opening of this door to another subterranean chamber had come a renewed atmospheric pressure. And now, in the denser gas, he saw, in ghastly silhouette against the lighted pit, flying figures that floated and soared on outstretched wings of inky black.

Beside him and above he heard the swishing flutter of other wings; he felt himself lifted from the floor; he was being floated out above the luminous pit by the flying things that held him.

No direct glare came from below, but a soft violet radiance. It shone full upon him—past him—to light up and give detail to those faces that had been featureless before. Chet had just one moment of fascinated staring into the diabolical, pasty faces where narrow, red eyes stared back into his. Then the squealing voices were stilled!

One, louder than the rest, rasped an order. And again Chet felt the hands relax; once more he was falling, down—down—and still down—until he knew that his velocity of fall meant an impact he

could never survive.

And, curiously, as he fell, his mind was entirely unconcerned with his own fate. For himself, he had accepted death. But he saw for what seemed like hours a vision of a familiar control room and an Irish pilot who sat by the controls. He was looking sharply ahead, he was checking speed, he was landing softly—safely—on a familiar field of Earth....

That passed; and, following, came a feeling of regret, a deep hurt and a rage at his own inability to be of help. For, above him, through the luminous air, he saw another body falling, and he knew that the girl, too, had been thrown to the same fate.

Those eyes of blue had locked with his for but a few brief seconds. Who she was—what she was—he had no way of knowing. But in that instant of mental meeting there had passed a flash between the two that had burned deeply into Chet's real and hidden self.

Chet, himself, had he been in laughing mood, might have smiled at the idea of affection being born in that brief time. Yet he might have asked instead how long was needed to bridge the sharp gap of a radio-power transmitter; how much time was needed for anode and cathode each to recognize the other. Something of this was passing

in confusion through his mind while his more conscious faculties were tensing his body for the fatal impact he knew must come.

Without thinking the thought in words he knew that the luminous walls had receded. They were more distant now; their glow came to him from far above, and, as his falling body turned again and again in air, he saw that below him was nothing but a vast emptiness filled with luminous vapors that swirled and writhed.

Then the last gleam of lighted walls faded; he was falling at terrific speed through a black tempest whose winds tore and screamed about him.

It was his own falling speed that made these winds; there remained with him enough of reasoning power to realize this. And he waited, and marveled that he could fall so tremendous a distance. First had been the great shaft down which he had plunged; then, as it widened, had come this greater void. The crater of Hercules must have opened, into a vast shell or a cavern of incredible depth. The winged things of the Moon knew of it; they had cast him to his death—him and the girl.

Her slowly turning body was not far away; it was as if they two hung suspended in air, while frightful blasts of whatever gas filled this

space whipped and shrieked past and wrapped them round with a terrific pressure. And then the tempest ceased. Slowly the blasts diminished; the pressure relaxed; gradually the sense of falling passed away, and with this there came a glimpse of light.

Again the walls glowed as they had before, but far off in the distance. Chet saw them grow luminous while he seemed hung motionless in space. Then once more they drew away from him; once more he knew he was falling away from that light—plunging again into the depths he had traversed.

And now, despite the oxygen that came to him uninterruptedly, he found his head swimming. The limit of human endurance had been reached.

Desperately he tried to bring his reason to bear upon this miracle that had happened. He had not struck; instead of falling to his death he had cushioned against something; he was falling again where, not far away, another metal-clad figure hung limply in air and fell as he fell. And with that knowledge the whirling turmoil within his brain ended in a blood-red flashing that went finally to merciful darkness....

That darkness still wrapped him thickly about when he regained consciousness—a darkness saved from utter black only by a faint

luminosity that seemed to penetrate and be part of the air about him.

Still hardly more than half-conscious, lying, it seemed, on a soft bed where he was weightless, he stirred and flung out one arm. From his fingertips he saw whirls of violet light sweep out and away, as vortices might have been set in motion by a swimmer in a more liquid medium.

Fascinated, failing utterly to comprehend where he was, he moved his hands deliberately, swept one arm from side to side—and a number of luminous whirlpools went spinning out into space. And then he remembered.

He remembered the terrific fall that miraculously brought him back to a place of light like that where his fall had begun. He remembered beginning the second fall; and, while he still could not know what it meant, he knew that he must have been unconscious for hours. And, with that, his thoughts came back to the girl. For the first time he found leisure to give mental voice to his wonderment.

The mystery of it all!—of her presence here on the Moon! Again he was overwhelmed with the wonder of his surprising discovery. It was nearly beyond belief; almost he doubted the reality of what his own eyes had seen.

But there was no doubting his own presence here in this strange place. The unreality of it—the strangeness of his own sensations—were borne in upon him. Where was he? he asked. What was this soft cushion upon which he rested so lightly? He tried to sit up and found that he merely twisted his body and set other eddies of light into motion.

Cautiously, he swung one arm out is far as he could reach. There was nothing there. He moved the arm down; reached with his hand beneath him—and still there was nothing tangible! Through his mind swept a gripping fear, a wordless, incoherent terror of something he could not name. Desperately he wanted to touch something firm and solid; lay his hands upon something he knew was real; and he flung out arms and legs in a paroxysm of futile effort.

He seemed hung in nothingness, an utter emptiness where nothing moved; only the ghostly whirls of light that ran lazily away from his beating hands until they died silently away into darkness, swallowed up in this unspeakable horror of soundless space. And, when he had quieted again, he knew with a dreadful certainty that there was nothing there; he was suspended in a great void—immersed in an ocean of some unknown gas.

The sense of loneliness that filled him was devastating. He could

have faced death as he had faced it before, unflinchingly; that was all in the day's work. But here was something that tested sanity itself. Could he but touch something substantial, he told himself, it would help him to keep a grip on reality; even to see and feel one of the winged horrors would be in a way a relief.

His struggles had ceased; all about him the atmosphere was quivering and writhing with whirling light that swirled and danced and mingled one glowing vortex with another. Then it, too, died; and, through the dark that was relieved only by the faint luminosity of the quiescent gas, he saw far off a point of light.

Here was something to which he could pin his eyes; something outside of himself and the horror of nothingness in which he was immersed. He stared through the window of his helmet while the light grew and expanded into nebulous, cloudy glowing that faded and was gone.

Again it came and died; and a third time. And then Chet Bullard swore loudly and harshly within the silence of his own metal sheath, while he cursed his own dullness that had kept him from instant comprehension.

That light was far away, but, "Keep moving!" Chet called, hoping

that his voice might span the void. "Keep moving so I can see your light! I'll try to swim over."

He threw himself over with a convulsive jerk and flattened the palms of his hands in a breaststroke, while he kicked with his feet against the dense atmosphere about him. And he saw with delight that the whirling ripples of light moved back of him; he felt that he was making some headway, slight though it must be.

He saw her at last, and heard her call:

"I am swimming, too," she cried. "How wonderful to see you! This loneliness! It is horrible—unbearable!"

"I understand," Chet said; "it is pretty bad."

Then, at sound of a stifled sob, he gripped one reaching hand hard and tried to bring himself out from under the pall that numbed his own mind; he even attempted to force a note of lightness into his words.

"I've flown everything with wings," he told her, "but this is the first time I ever flew myself. Guess I was never properly designed."

Feeble, this attempt at humor; but there was none to note the strained

edge in his tone, only a girl, whose metal-clad hand closed in a tight hold upon his.

"You can joke—now," she said with a catch in her voice that showed how desperately hard she was trying to meet Chet's fortitude and force her own words to steadiness. "That takes—real nerve. I like that!"

Then she added: "But it's hopeless; you know that. They've got us. And now that some of them have been killed they will—they will—"

And the trace of Chet's strained smile that lingered on his lips, could she have seen it, would have appeared grim.

"Whatever it was you didn't say, I agree with. I imagine the finish will not be pleasant." Once more he was facing the inevitable; and, as before, he faced it squarely and knowingly, then put it completely from his mind. There was so much he must know before that adventure's end was reached.

"Tell me," he demanded, "who are 'they'? Where are they? How many are there of them? And where have they got us? What kind of a place is this, where all natural laws are suspended, where gravitation is at zero?

"And, for heaven's sake, tell me: who are you? Where are you from? How did you get here on the Moon?"

That uncontrollable catch in the girl's voice had taken on a trace of brave laughter that overlay the trembling sob in her throat.

"That is a lot of information," she said, "and I am afraid it will not make much difference if you know. Oh, I wish I had some atom of encouragement for you! I do not know who you are either—and you have been so brave! You have come here, I brought you with my signals for help—brought you to your death.

"For it is death! This is the end of our adventuring—mine and yours as well—here at the center, the exact center of the Moon."

"Ah-h!" answered Chet Bullard softly, as understanding came to him. "I should have guessed it. The atmospheric pressure and density—and we fell past the center, then back again; we've been vibrating back and forth until we came to rest at last. And now we die! Well, it might have been worse."

He was staring out through the little window of his helmet, staring into the faintly luminous atmosphere, facing the end of his brave fling with fortune. It was an instant before he realized that there was

something moving in the void. He pressed softly upon the hand he held and pointed.

"See!" he said in a hushed tone. "There is something there!"

It took form slowly, a shapeless, round blur in the pale light. Inch by inch it drifted toward them, until Chet moved one hand abruptly and found he had created a ripple of light by which he could see more clearly. And he saw before him a bulging, membraneous sac.

It had been smoothly spherical before; it heaved itself into strange protuberances as he watched. He flipped his hand to set up another vortex of light, and he saw the first rip that formed in the membrane.

Before his staring eyes the bag burst open; and Chet, who had wished for some substantial thing, even a denizen of this wild world, found his wish fulfilled. For the thin membrane tore in a score of places to release a body from within—a shapeless, huddled mass of chalk-white flesh in a wrapping of black leather that unfolded before his eyes and became wings which waved feebly in their first attempt at flight.

The pallid body, supple as a giant worm, jerked spasmodically and turned sightless eyes toward the watching Earth-folk. Then, as if

drawn by some magnet, invisible in the distance, the black wings began to beat the air, and the creature moved off in a straight line toward some unknown goal.

Another of the membraneous spheres drifted past in the light that came from those fluttering wings. A second showed in repulsive shininess. Chet was aware that there were many of the things about.

"Eggs!" he exclaimed with a disgust that partook of nausea, "And the damnable thing hatched—right here!—before our eyes!"

And the girl gave the final explanation: "The Moon is just a great shell. They lay their eggs, these half-human creatures that you saw, and attach them to the inner surface of that shell. Then at a certain period they come loose and float away. I never knew what became of them; now I understand at last."

"You know all this!" protested Chet. "How can you know it? How long have you been here?"

"I kept track of time for a while," said the voice beside him; "then I forgot it when they took Frithjof away. But it must be about five years. Five years of terror and vain hopes and wild plans for escape! And now it ends—after five years!"

And Chet Bullard, within his metal helmet, was repeating in bewilderment: "Five years! Haldgren left five years ago! What does it mean?"

Nor did he pause to realize that through his amazement was woven a thread of another hue, tinged faintly with jealousy that demanded of him: "Frithjof! Who is Frithjof who was taken away?"

Chet's mind was filled with a confusion of questions that jostled one another to silence when he tried to give them expression. And there was little time for questioning.

He saw other floating eggs whose membraneous coverings had turned leathery and opaque. And he saw white phantom figures who gathered those eggs. One came near till Chet could make out the repulsive face and black, staring eyes with their fiery red center. It was one of the things that had captured him; he saw it move swiftly on broad wings. It held a leathery egg in its curled-claw hands while its long tail whipped around and laid the egg open with one slash of a sharp spiked point.

One more of the young of this horrible species was liberated and went winging away into the dark, only the whirls of light in the atmosphere marking the beating of its wings.

Chet's eyes followed it to see far out beyond a light that expanded as it drew near. The beaten atmospheric gas was whipped to cold flame where some ten or a dozen phantom demons came swiftly on toward the waiting humans.

They were swarming about in an instant. Chet had no time for even a shouted warning before he felt himself seized by their long, bony claws. Then a net of rough-fibered rope was flung about him, and he felt it draw tight as the winged beasts lifted him up and out into the void.

"Wrong again!" Chet told himself ruefully. "We don't die at the center of the Moon, after all!" But, as the whipping wings drove whirling blasts of violet light back upon him he could find nothing of comfort in the thought that some different experience still lay ahead.

Chapter 7: The Gateway to Hell

Spud O'Malley, at the controls of the ship, held the craft in a vertical lift while his eyes clung in horrible fascination to the mirrors that showed from a lower lookout the volcanic floor falling away. Amazement had almost stifled his breathing, until at last he let go a long breath that ended in a curse.

"The outrageous, damned things!" he breathed. "Jumping, they were, and leaping, and flying on their leather wings like a lot of black bats out o' hell! And I'm thinkin' that's where they've taken Chet Bullard, and never again will he hold a ship like 'twas in the hollow of his hand, and him settin' it down like a feather!

"And: 'Fly back home!' he says to me. I can do it, too; thanks to his teachin'. But fly back and leave that bhoy in the hands of those murderin' devils!—'tis little he knows the Irish!"

He was talking half under his breath, murmuring to himself as if it helped him to see clearly the situation that must be faced.

"But to get to him—that's the trouble. I saw a big door go shut in that stone floor. They're cunnin', clever beasts; I'll say that for 'em. And there was a raft of 'em; and plenty more down in hell where they

live, I've no doubt."

He moved forward on the ball-control, and the great ship swept like a silvery shadow through the night toward the distant, lighted crater rim. This he could see clearly, but the other side of the ring of mountains was black with shadow.

And, far out beyond, spread like a cloud over all the desolate world, was blackness. Spud drove the ship up another five thousand feet, and still that darkness spread out in inky pools where only an occasional mountain peak caught the flat rays of the sun.

And what had Chet called these dark areas? "Lake of Dreams" and "Lake of Death." Spud's superstitious mind was a-quiver with dread and an ominous premonition to which the empty, frozen wastes below him gave added force.

"I'll have to wait," he told himself. "The light of the Moon—I mean the Earth—is bright, but not bright enough. I'll just wait till the Sun climbs higher. When it shines down into that hole that is the gateway to hell—and well I know it—then I can see what is there. Then, maybe, I can find some way to get inside; and I hope the lad lives till I get there."

He circled back; swept down in a long, leisurely flight, and came again to the place of gently sloping rock where Chet had first landed. And he searched till he found the identical spot and laid the ship down on a level keel.

Far away the Sun was gilding the hard outlines of mountains that ringed them in. Spud did not know how long he must wait. Had he realized that it must be a matter of days it is probable he would have donned the metal suit and started out. But instead he busied himself in a careful investigation of the storeroom and a check-up of ammunition and supplies that were there.

The lunar day, as all Earth-men know, is a matter of nearly fifteen of Earth's days. Spud O'Malley was wild with impatience when at last the Sun was striking less flatly across the land and he knew that the time had come when he could start.

He had sensed the change that took place in the world outside; from the lookouts of the control room he had seen the bare rocks lose their white markings of hoar frost and at last actually quiver with heat as the Sun beat upon them. He had seen the growing things that crept from every crevice and hollow—pale, colorless mosses that threw out long tendrils which licked across the hot rocks as if hungry for the nourishment the thin air brought.

Spud knew nothing of the carbon dioxide which these pale green growths could combine with water under the Sun's hot rays and build into vegetable tissue. But he marveled again and again at the hungry things that made a mesh of ropy strands across the smooth area about the ship. They even hung in drooping masses from the weird rocks beyond; and, so light they were, they raised their heads hungrily in air, while the corded tendrils even threw themselves in contorted writhings at times when the Sun struck with increasing warmth.

"A dead world!" said Spud scornfully. "How much the scientists back there don't know! First those livin', flyin' devils; and now this! The whole place is fairly wrigglin' with life."

It was then that he made one last flight over the inner crater and saw light on the floor of stone in the funneled depths. Then he sent the ship like a rocket down to the shelf of rock where Chet had begun his descent; and he worked with trembling fingers to adjust the metal suit and regulate the oxygen supply.

He waited only to strap a couple of detonite pistols about him; then, with never a backward look, he let himself out through the air-locking doors and started pell-mell toward the inner crater.

Like Chet, he had learned to gage his tremendous strength; like the master pilot, he threw himself down the rocky slope. But where Chet had leaped and stumbled in the darkness, O'Malley worked in full light.

He came at last to the rocky floor where molten stone in ages past had hardened to seal the throat of this vent. Hundreds of feet across, Spud estimated; smooth in appearance from above, but broken with deep crevasses and excrescences where hot, fluid stone had frozen in its moment of bubbling turbulence. And, in one place, where the floor was smooth, Spud found what he was searching for: a circular, metal ledge that projected above the smooth rock; and, within it, a still smoother sheet of what appeared to be hammered metal.

"A door it is," whispered the pilot, half-fearful of listening ears, "and the gateway to Hell!" He grinned broadly at some thought. "And here I've been told 'twas, of all places, the easiest to get into; one little slip from grace and there you were! Sure, and the priests were as wrong as the scientists. It must be Heaven that's easy to crash, for the front door of Hades is shut fast without even a keyhole to peep through."

Then his face sobered to its customary homely lines. "The poor bhoy!" he exclaimed. "I've got to get in some way. I wonder how

hard and thick it is."

He was raising a mass of black, shining rock in his hands—a fragment that his strength would not have moved a fraction of an inch on Earth. He steadied it above his head, preparing to crash it upon the metal door; then waited; stared incredulously at the black metal sheet; lowered the great stone silently and turned to leap mightily yet with never a sound for the shelter of an upflung saw-toothed ridge.

And, from its shelter, he watched the black door swing smoothly into the air, while, from the gaping black mouth of the pit beneath, incredible man-shapes of fish-belly white drew themselves up to the edge of the pit and perched there, where they might stretch their long necks into the light of the Sun.

Below them, Spud saw, dangled long, rat-like tails; and their wings, black and leathery, hung down too from their backs or dragged on the rocks behind where some three or four of the owl-eyed creatures crawled out and walked across the rock toward the place where an Irish pilot waited and stared with unbelieving and horrified eyes from the concealment of his rocky fort.

Chapter 8: The Fires

Great vortices of whirling light rolled out to either side in an endless pyrotechnical display to show the power of those flailing wings that were bearing Chet and his companion through the dark void—bearing them to some destination Chet could not envisage.

His body turned in space at times, and he saw the spreading cone of luminous gas behind them like the wake of a great ship in a phosphorescent sea. The hiss and threshing of many wings came unceasingly. Once he swung close to another body clad like his own and, like him, enmeshed in a net. And he saw in the light of the luminiferous air the girl's wide, staring eyes. Then she was gone, and all about was only the whip of wings and the flashing whirls of light.

He tried to form some picture of this sphere through whose center, empty but for this gas, he was being swung. That first fall had carried him down the tube of some volcanic blow-pipe; he had fallen straight for what seemed like hours. And that had been through the crust of this great, hollow globe. Then the center!—but of this he dared make no estimate; he knew only that the huge leather wings were threshing the dense air in an untiring rhythm and that he was being carried for a tremendous distance at remarkable speed.

It became soothing, that rushing, swinging sweep of his body through space. There was death ahead, without doubt—but what of that? He was sleepy—sleepy—and beyond this nothing mattered. Just to sleep, to drift off in spirit into a void like this through which he was swinging....

And so traveled Chet Bullard, one time Master Pilot of Earth, through, the heart of another world—on and endlessly on, while leather-winged demons dragged him after, flying straight away from the center of the Moon toward a place and events unknown.

But Chet Bullard had ceased to note the passing hours or the swirling gases that came alight at the beating of those wings; he was asleep in a stupor that was as deep as it was timeless.

He opened his eyes at last; it seemed but a moment that he had slept. But now there was no rushing hiss of air, nor was he being lifted in a great net. He lay instead upon a support of some kind, and about him all was still.

Not at first did he observe the exquisite carving of the yellow bed on which he lay; that came later. The fact that its massive gold and its scrollwork of inlaid platinum were worth a fortune meant nothing to him then. His eyes were held by the immensity of the great room and

the intricate series of arches that made up a vaulted ceiling.

It shone with a light of its own, that carved ceiling; no least lovely detail was lost. And Chet found his eyes roving from one to another of angel figures that seemed suspended in air.

The white of purest alabaster was theirs; and their outstretched wings, too, were white. He realized confusedly that they were like the black demons—like them and yet entirely unlike. For, where the black-winged ones had been ugly of feature, with every mark of degeneracy, these were the ultimate of loveliness in face and form. Figures of men he saw, stalwart and strong, yet perfectly proportioned; and the others—the women and girls—were superhuman in their ethereal beauty.

"Angels!" breathed Chet and turned his head slowly to see the exquisite figures that seemed hovering above the whole vast room in silent benediction. "Angels—no less! And they're carved from stone! Those black devils never did it. What does it mean? What does it mean!"

And not until then did Chet realize a wonderful thing. So enthralled had he been by the wonder of this hovering angel band he had not realized that he was seeing them with no helmet glass between; he

was lying disrobed on his couch of pure gold.

For an instant, panic seized him. Without his helmet and the oxygen supply, he must strangle. And then he knew that he was breathing naturally in an atmosphere like that of Earth but for the strange fragrances that swept to him on the soft, warm air.

He came slowly to his feet and steadied himself with one hand on the scrollwork of the bed. Then memories rushed in upon him, and he lived again the long, sickening fall through the heart of this world, the finding of the girl of mystery, hung like himself in the immensity of the inner world, their capture; and the band of black-winged ones who swung them through space in nets that drew tightly about them.

The girl! Again he saw the clear look from those eyes of blue. It was she who had signaled; it was she whom he had come through vast space to rescue. And now she was lost!

Chet stared slowly about him at the magnificence of the tremendous room. He saw more delicate figures done in inlay on the walls; he knew that he was in a place whose beauty and wealth should have set his nerves tingling; and all he sensed was the loneliness of this place where he was the only living occupant.

He found his Earth-clothes beside the golden couch. He had put them on and was examining the suit and helmet to learn with relief that they were intact when the first sound came to him. From an arched entrance across the room were coming shuffling figures whose black wings were wrapped about their chalk-white bodies. Only their pallid faces showed, ghastly and inhuman, as the eyes glowed redly from their deep black sockets. Chet still held the suit in his hands as the black-winged ones came toward him across the floor, and he carried it with him as he moved unresistingly where they led him with the pull of their claw-like hands upon his arms.

"No gun!" he told himself hopelessly. "Not a chance if I put up a fight! They've got me and got me right. Now what I need to do is to be good—lay low—find out something about all this, and find her!" He could not name the girl whose eyes were haunting him in their appealing loveliness; he could think of her only as the mystery girl, and he accepted without surprise or denial the fact that the finding of her outweighed all else that this new world might hold for him.

As the shuffling figures closed about him and led him away he found relief in the thought of his ship, of Spud's safety, and of his return to the world that they both knew as home.

"Never again for me!" said Chet softly beneath his breath. "But Spud

will get there. Perhaps he is there now—no telling how long I have slept!"

He saw it all so plainly: saw the Irish pilot bringing the ship to rest at the great Hoover Terminal. And he saw, too, a relief expedition that would be organized by Harkness and that must arrive too late. To suppose that any help might reach him here inside this wild world was too much; Chet looked with judicially appraising eyes at the things about him and could not allow himself to be deceived. There was no hope; but he made one resolve and made it grimly in words that never reached his lips.

"Give me half a chance at them, Walt," he promised, "and if ever you do get inside here, you'll know where I've been. I'll find the girl first—I must do that—then I'll give these devils something to remember me by before they put us away for good!" And now the face of the pilot was almost happy as he stared at the snarling, twisted features of those that led him unresistingly through a series of stone rooms that seemed without beginning or end. He even disregarded the spiked tails that whipped at him with heavy blows to hurry him along.

"If I had a gun," he told them inaudibly, "I'd take you on right now. But you got that, or I lost it in the scuffle, so I'll just twist your

scrawny necks in my bare hands when the time comes. And it's coming, you ugly devils! It's coming!"

Their claws pulled roughly at him to hurry him into another room. And where before he could see nothing of a beautiful room because of the absence of a pair of smiling eyes, he now saw nothing else for their presence. For, across the great hall, whose walls and ceilings glowed softly with yellow light, his eyes swept unerringly to a slim figure in a pilot's suit—to an oval face and blue eyes and red lips that could still curve into a trembling smile of welcome as he drew near.

Forgotten was the grip of sharp-spiked, clawing hands; even the anticipated sweets of revenge were lost from Chet's mind. He knew only that he had found her—the mystery girl—and that the blue eyes were locked with his in an intimacy that set something deep within him into a turmoil of emotion.

And instead of the countless questions he had expected to launch upon her when again they met, he found his lips trembling and wordless—until they uttered one hoarse ejaculation of: "Thank God!"

But the girl seemed to understand, for she reached one slender hand to touch him lightly upon the arm where these gripping claws had

been. "Yes," she whispered; "I was afraid, too—afraid for you!"

More whispered words, but they were lost to Chet in the babel of sound that engulfed them. Those who had brought him had moved silently, and the throng of some hundred or more that waited beside the girl had been mute. But now they burst into a chorus of shrill cries whose keenness stabbed at Chet's ears.

A pandemonium of the same high-pitched squeals, he had beard before—this was all that he could distinguish at first. Then the shrill sounds broke into words and unintelligible phrases, and he knew they were talking among themselves.

They quieted at a sound from the girl. She had turned to face them, and she forced her own soft voice into a shrill pitch as she spoke to them. Their clamor broke out once more as she ceased, but it was more subdued. Chet could hear her as she turned toward him.

"They think you are Frithjof," she explained.

"You talked with them?" asked Chet incredulously.

"But certainly; have I not been here for five years? They have their language—but enough of that now. They are angry. They sent

Frithjof away; they tell me now that he escaped; they think you are he—that you have changed your appearance with magic—that the ship they saw was summoned by your magic. They say they will kill us both; throw us to the fires!"

"Wait!" almost shouted Chet to make himself heard above the din of shrieking voices. "I've got to know! Who are you? Who is Frithjof? How did you get here? Where are you from? Tell me quickly! It may give me something to go on; it may mean a chance for delay."

And if Chet had not been out of breath from the shouted questions, he would surely have been left breathless by their amazing answer.

"I thought you knew," said the girl as the din of shrillness subsided. There seemed to Chet a note of hurt in her voice. "I thought you knew, that you had come here knowing. I am Anita, and Frithjof is my brother—Frithjof Haldgren! I stowed away on his ship; he did not know. I was only thirteen then.... And now, is Frithjof forgotten back in that world that we left?"

Again that note of disappointment; the pilot sensed it even through the tenseness of the moment when both Earth-folk knew that death stood close at their side. He answered quickly:

"I came for your brother. I saw your signals. I came to find Haldgren and to save him. And I have failed. But if death, as you say, is all we can expect, let me say this: 'I have failed, but I have found you; and whatever comes I am content.'"

The blue eyes were wide; they were looking at him with a searching glance that changed to a childish candor while a flush stole over the pale face. She reached out one hand toward his. "We could have been happy," she said simply; "and now—now we must face the fires—together."

"I don't know just what you mean by that," spoke Chet softly, "but, whatever it is, there is a little matter of a fight first."

He released her hand and moved swiftly between her and the nearer of the throng; and his blood pulsed strongly through him as he faced a battery of hostile red eyes and knew that he was preparing for his last fight.

A hand clutched at his arm. "Not now!" begged Anita Haldgren's voice. "Wait! They will not all come. I too, can fight; but we cannot face so many!"

The rat-tails of the nearest beasts were whipping to and fro; the eyes

in the chalky faces were like living coals where the ashes have been freshly blown. Chet stepped back beside the girl, and he made no protest as the black claws seized him and the sharp talons dug into his flesh. But he whispered to the one who was hurried along beside him: "You are right; I'll be good as long as we stay together. But if not—if we're separated—if they take you away—"

And the girl nodded quick agreement with his unspoken words.

Chet set his teeth together to make more bearable the pain of those gripping claws; but the hurt was easier to bear when he saw that the girl was more carefully treated. She was close ahead as his captors hustled him from this room into others and yet others, all carved from the solid rock.

What a people this must be who could do such work as this! Again the sense of amazement struck through to Chet despite the pain—amazement and a feeling of an inexplicable incongruity when he saw the leather-winged creatures that had him in their grip. And again there were figures high overhead—white, floating figures on pinions of pure white; their faces, kindly and serene, looked down upon the motley throng.

"Look above you!" gasped Chet. "Anita! What are they? Not like

these devils!"

And the girl ahead half-turned her head to answer: "Ancestors! A thousand generations back! They have come down to this state now —degenerated."

Chet saw one of the beasts who held her jerk her sharply about, and he knew that his remaining questions must wait—wait forever, perhaps, and remain unsaid.

They came at last to a place where Chet found the answer to one question he had not dared ask; a place where gaping chasms in the floor glowed red with the wrath of unquenched fires. And the girl, Anita, when they had been placed by themselves against a glowing, lighted wall of rock, stared steadily at those pits and the sulphurous fumes that vomited out at times; then turned and spoke to the pilot in a voice steady and sure.

"It will be over quickly," she assured him. "Frithjof said that the heat, like the warmth of this whole inner world, comes from the contraction of the rocks in the cold of night. There is great pressure developed ... but he never learned the source of the light in the walls."

Talking to still the beating of a heart pulsing with dread, perhaps! Chet had no mind for explanations. Before him were a score of yawning clefts in a rocky floor; one was larger than the rest; there were figures whose white bodies glowed red in its reflected light as they floated on black wings high above; the light of those hidden fires blazed and died intermittently. There death was waiting, while these demons—these degenerate half-men, living products of a dying race—whipped the air in a frenzy of expectation as they darted above those chasms that were like rifts in the rock roof of hell.

Chet did not answer the statements of the girl. Instead he turned and gathered her once into his arms, while his lips met hers to find a ready response. Her face, so calm and pale, was turned upward to his. And his own voice trembled at first; then was steady and firm.

"I love you. I've come a long way to tell you, and I didn't know why I came. And now it is too late."

"Anita Haldgren," he said, and let his voice linger as he repeated the name, "Anita Haldgren—a beautiful name—a beautiful soul! And now—" He released her quickly and swung to meet a rush of beastly things that half-ran, half-flew across the great room.

Outstretched arms of white that ended in black claws! Snarling,

grinning teeth in faces of dead-white flesh! Barbed tails that hissed through the air as they swung down upon him! And Chet Bullard, his blond hair shining like the gold that was inlaid and encrusted upon the walls of the room—Chet Bullard, Master Pilot, once, of a distant Earth—did not wait for the assault to reach him, but sprang in upon the beastly things with swinging fists that came up from beneath to crash into grinning faces; to smash dully into white, scabrous flesh; or catch beneath the angle of out-thrust jaws jolt the ghastly faces into awkward angles.

They went down before him at first. Then the long rat-tails came whipping over, the demon-heads, ripping down with slashing blows on the pilot's head and shoulders. Off at one side, a dozen paces away, a slender figure tore loose from gripping claws. Chet saw it; he freed himself for an instant to leap to her side. She was tugging at a bar of gold, a scepter in the hands of a sculptured figure in the wall. It would have been a serviceable weapon, but it bent slowly. Another of the beasts was upon her as Chet sprang.

This one went down beneath the chopping right that Chet shot to a lean, white jaw; then a barbed tail caught him a blow that laid his shoulder open. Another descended—and another. The pilot sank to the floor. Anita was beside him, shielding him with her own body from the rain of blows. Then they were buried beneath a great

weight of odorous bodies—till Chet, after a time, felt himself dragged to his feet.

His head, was ringing with the shrieks of the shrill-voiced mob. He was still struggling, still fighting blindly, as the clamor ceased. Then he stood erect and motionless as he heard the voice of Anita Haldgren.

"It's Frithjof!" she cried. "Oh, my dear—my dear! It's Frithjof! I heard him!" But he can't reach us—he can't help us! I will try to reason with these beasts—bargain with them—make them afraid! I will tell them it is magic."

And, as her voice, high-pitched in the language of this race, rose in protest against them, Chet heard what the girl had detected first: a sharp, metallic rapping within the wall, a rapping that was dulled by distance but whose separate blows were distinct; and he knew, with a knowledge that came from somewhere else than his bewildered brain, that the raps were forming dots and dashes. They were talking Morse!

The girl's frenzied appeal ended in a din of shrieks; a horde of man-beasts swept into the air and launched themselves in a solid mass upon the two. Chet saw Anita for one instant as he felt himself lifted

in air. About him was a pandemonium of flailing wings; ahead and below was the red of hidden fires. They were being lifted out and over the pits.

One instant only, while tortured eyes smiled bravely into his; then a great pit-mouth that gaped a horrible welcome up ahead. So plainly Chet saw it! He could not tear his eyes away. He saw the red, smoking breath of it; he saw a rocky lip that shone like one great ruby.

It was impossible! Even the blast of air that tore at him meant nothing at first! But it was happening! Before his eyes it was happening! Chet watched dumbly, uncomprehendingly, as that great overhanging rock tore itself into fragments that rose screamingly into the air or fell to the depths beneath.

Another section of solid floor erupted a hundred feet across the room! The destruction was being kept away, Chet knew. And then, while a roar like all the thunders of Earth reverberated deafeningly through the rock room, the claws that gripped him relaxed their hold.

He fell, nor felt the impact of his fall. He came to his feet, ran stumblingly to the edge of the nearest pit where he threw his arms about the body of a girl and dragged her to safety. And while he did

it he was babbling in broken sentences:

"It's detonite! Your brother!... Where did he get it?... Detonite!... Oh, my dear—my dear!"

And his arms were tight about her while he held his body between her and the explosions that tore at the floor in an inferno of crashing explosions out beyond—until three of the demon-beasts, red with the reflected fires of that subterranean hell, flew down like black-winged bats bent on vengeance. And Chet, laughing at their numbers, sprang out with hard fists swinging in well-directed blows, and welcomed them as only an Earth-man could.

Chapter 9: O'Malley Investigates

Spud O'Malley's twinkling Irish eyes had seen strange sights in his years of piloting an Intercolonial freighter; he had touched at odd corners of the Earth. But never had he seen such creatures as confronted him now.

Sheltered behind a jagged ridge of volcanic rock in the inner crater of the great ring of Hercules, he stared in utter horror at the figures that approached. For to Spud, with all his inherited ancestral faith in gnomes and pixies, these bat-winged things were nothing less than people of the under world—demons from some purgatory of the Moon—devils, living and breathing, spewed out from that buried hell for a moment of relaxation from their horrid work.

And, coming directly toward him across a level lava bed, three of the things, with leather wings trailing, were approaching. Spud was unmoving; his feet might have been one with the volcanic rock on which he stood for any ability of his to raise them. Only his eyes turned slowly in their sockets to stare wildly at the three who drew near; who glimpsed his awe-stricken eyes behind his helmet glass; and who uttered shrill, screaming cries that brought the rest of the unholy crew leaping and flapping across the rocks.

And, within that helmet, Spud's lips moved unconsciously to repeat prayers he would have sworn were forgotten these many years. There was a pistol at his belt where his hand was resting; another hung at his other side. But the man made no move to defend himself; he was struck numb and nerveless, not through fear, but through that horror which comes with seeing one's most gruesome superstitions come true. Spud O'Malley, who would have laughed at devils and believed in them while he laughed, knew now that they were real. They had captured Chet; they were about to take him, too, to the hell that was their home.

And still he did not move while the demon figures pressed closer, while their wild, shrieking cries echoed within his helmet; while they lashed their scaly tails, and at last leaped in unison upon the helpless man.

And then, with that first touch, Spud O'Malley, who had not only seen strange creatures but had fought with them, came to himself—and the hand that rested upon a detonite pistol moved like the head of a striking snake.

The roar of detonite was strained and thin in the light atmosphere of this globe; it seemed futile compared with its usual thunderous report. But its effects were the same as might have been expected on

Earth!

Spud was hurled to the rocky floor, as much by the closeness of the exploding shells as by the weight of the bodies that came upon him. He fell free of the first leaping things that went to fragments in mid-air as his pistol checked them. And he made no effort to arise, but lay prostrate, while he swung that slender tube of death about him and saw the winged beasts shattered and torn—until there were but five who ran wildly with frantic, flapping wings; and these the tiny shells from Spud's gun caught as they ran when the Irishman sprang to his feet and took careful aim across the jagged rocks.

"Saints be praised!" the pilot was saying over and over. "Saints be thanked!—even the Devil's imps can't stand up to detonite shells! And Chet, the poor lad!—his gun must have been knocked from his hand; he was fightin' in the dark, too! And they took him down there, they did!—down where I'm goin' to see if the lad is still livin'."

And Spud O'Malley, though he believed fully in the demoniac nature of these opponents and never for an instant thought but that he was descending into an inferno of the Moon, strode with steady steps toward the portal of that Plutonic region and lowered himself within.

That ring of metal, huge and accurately formed, made Spud pause in

thought; the massive metal door that came up from below to fit that ring snugly—that, too, looked more like the work of human hands than of demons. The pilot was frankly puzzled as he tentatively moved a lever down below that door and saw the huge metal mass swing shut.

About him the walls were glowing. He saw, in the floor, another circular door, but found no lever with which to operate it. Nor did he search for one, since he could have no way of knowing that here was where Chet had gone. But, from the corridor where he stood other lighted passages led; and one slanted more steeply than the rest.

"That's the way I'm goin'," announced Spud. "I know that, and it's all I do know; I'm goin' down till I find some place where the devils live and where Chet may be."

The passage took him smoothly down. It turned at times, and smaller branches split off, but he followed the main corridor that he had selected for his route. And he paused, at last, beside a metal frame in the rock wall, where the door that fitted so tightly in the frame was not like the others he had seen. For the first ones, though cleverly fashioned and machined, were of iron, rusted red with the ages; while this one that was before him now was paneled and decorated with sweeping scrolls. And, above this portal that seemed

hermetically sealed, was a white figure such as Chet had seen.

Spud's gaze traveled up to it slowly, and his knees were trembling as they had not done when facing the black-winged ones. "'Tis an angel," he whispered, "or the statue of one! And that explains it all. 'Tis them that has done all this—these passages, and the sweet-fittin' doors. And do they live here? I wonder. Heaven help me if I meet them, for never could I shoot at one of them, the pretty things!"

He was still gazing in rapt wonder that was near to worship when the great door began to move. He saw the first hair-line crack, and the thin line of light was like a hot wire across his eyes, so quickly did he respond. Beyond, where he had not yet gone, was a branching passage. All the walls glowed softly with light—no shelter of darkness was his—but Spud leaped for the little passage and raced down it until a turn screened him from sight.

"That's movin'!" he congratulated himself. "What an athlete I'm becomin'!" And it was fortunate for the pilot that the ceiling was high, for his tremendous Earth-strength propelled him in unbelievable bounds.

He still moved on silently, for far ahead in the corridor something had caught his eyes. And he stopped finally beside a little car; then

saw that he had been following a single rail, buried under the dust of ages on the corridor floor.

The monorail car lay on its side. At one end of it was a motor. Not a motor such as men had built, Spud confessed, but an electric motor none the less. And beyond this, where the passage ended, was a wall veined thickly with gold.

Ropy strands of the metal shone reddish-yellow in the soft light of the walls; detached pieces lay on the floor and in the car itself. Spud regarded it with amazement, but the wealth he was witnessing left him cold; another thought was forcing itself into his brain.

That thought took more definite form when another corridor took him to rooms where great metal cases were neatly stacked; other adjoining rooms held strange machinery and appliances on metal stands.

"Lab'ratories!" said the amazed man explosively. "And storehouses, too! Neither angels nor devils did this; 'tis the work of men—and I know how to get along with men. I'll go find them. Belike they have saved the lad, Chet, and he'll be waitin' to see me."

He raced back along the corridor, but stopped short at its end, where

he had taken flight from the larger passage. There was sound of shrieking voices, and Spud dropped to the floor to present as small a view as possible to the half-human things that trailed their black wings past the metal entrance; then he crept cautiously to peer around the corner, when the last one had gone.

They were waiting out beyond; Spud watched them intently. They had great nets of rope in which were living things that struggled and writhed.

He saw one of the creatures stoop to break off a protruding end of pinkish, nameless substance; the thing seemed to struggle in his hands while he took it to his mouth and munched on it. Even when Spud realized that this living food was vegetation of some sort, he was still sickened with the sight of its being taken alive into the bodies of these Moon-beasts.

One of the ugly figures raised a black-clawed hand to seize a lever let flush into the wall. It had been concealed. Spud saw the door open; saw the waiting horde troop through, dragging their loaded nets; and he saw the door close silently, while the actuating lever moved back to its former position.

And Spud, speaking half aloud, counted slowly to a hundred, then

another hundred, as a gage of the time while he waited for those beyond the door to move on. But at the count of two hundred his eager hands were upon the lever, while his eyes were hungry to stare beyond the opening door.

They found nothing but emptiness when the door swung wide. Another room of luminous walls; another door in the farther wall. The man moved slowly through the doorway one cautious step at a time and stared about.

He found a lever like the others, moved it—and saw the door close silently behind him. Another lever was near the second door; he pulled carefully, steadily, upon it.

There was no movement of the door, but something had occurred as he knew by the hissing sound that came from above his head. Its source he could not find; its result was most startling. For, where before his suit had bulged out roundly with the inner pressure of one atmosphere, it now became less taut—and it hung loosely about him when the hissing ceased.

"An air-lock," said Spud joyfully, "or I'm a rat-tailed imp myself! That means a heavier air-pressure inside. And now I know 'tis men folks I'm goin' to see!"

The lever moved easily now, and the second door swung open and closed behind him as before. Spud tore recklessly at the fastening of his suit, regardless of the fact that an increased pressure might still come from some gas that would mean death to a human. But, like Chet, he found the air fragrant and pure, and he rid himself of the encumbering suit, strapped the pistols at his waist, rolled the suit to a bundle he could sling over one shoulder, and moved carefully as a cat as he went forward through a corridor that led down and still down.

As he went the empty labyrinth of halls filled him with a horrible depression; yet there was beauty everywhere—beauty whose delicacy of curve and color filled even the untrained mind of Spud O'Malley with a thrill of delight.

There were halls and vast rooms without number; there were carvings that glowed with a light of their own—figures so filled with the very spirit of livingness that they seemed stepping out from the cold walls to greet him; there were more celestial hosts of purest white poised apparently in mid-flight.

There were marvelous, rioting waves of color that pulsed and throbbed through the walls and the very air of some rooms; and there were articles of furniture—carved tables, chairs—objects whose

purpose Spud could not guess. But, except for the occasional sound of shrill, squeaking voices in the distance, there was no sign of the presence of the builders, the men Spud had hoped to find.

And he knew at last that his quest was hopeless. The dust of uncounted centuries that lay thickly upon all was evidence as convincing as it was mute.

"There's naught but the devils!" Spud despaired. "The others—saints be helpin' of them!—have been gone for more years than a man dares think of. So, the devils it is; I'll follow them—I'll go where they are. But I'm not so sure at all of findin' the lad now."

That high-pitched chattering that had come to him at times was his only guide now. It seemed echoing in greater volume from one passage that slanted down more sharply than the rest. Spud followed it, clinging with hands and feet to the steep-pitched floor; but some sudden impulse seized him and compelled him to stop at intervals while he drew a pistol from his belt. Its grip was of steelite that rang sharply as a bell when he struck it upon the walls. And he tapped out the general call of the Service time after time; then strained his faculties in eager listening until he went hopelessly on.

But he repeated the call. "For the lad may hear it and be heartened,"

he argued. "And if he's free to do it he'll answer—though I think I'd break down and cry with joy did I hear an answerin' rap."

And still the chattering grew louder, while the watching, creeping man moved stealthily on. A wave of gas came to him once and set him choking, while far ahead he saw a reflected glow more red than the pale, lucent shimmering of the walls.

He stopped dead still as once more there flooded through him a thousand unnamed fears of this domain of the Evil One where he would trespass. But he forced his feet to carry him on until he could peer down through a rift in the rock floor to behold another room whose walls glowed redly with the light of fires far down in hot-throated pits.

There were figures whose white bodies shone as redly in that glow—figures that floated on outspread leather wings of dead black. Small wonder that the mind of Spud O'Malley found here the confirmation of his worst fears; small wonder that his trembling lips whispered: "'Tis Hell! 'Tis Hell, at last!"

But there was that which froze his quivering nerves to cold quiet, which set his lips into a grim, straight line and held him motionless above the opening from which he saw the room below—as, from a

flurry of bodies against one far side, he saw a girl emerge.

She was in the hands of the black-winged beasts who carried her into the air then swung out toward the fiery pit. And Spud's incredulous: "Oh, the poor, beautiful darlin'!" rose unconsciously to his lips to die away in a quick-drawn breath. For, from the mass of bodies, another figure was tossed up into the air to be gripped by black, waiting claws—and Spud knew that he was seeing Chet Bullard, fighting, struggling, in the grasp of these demons from the Pit.

The fumes from that inferno rose straight up. They passed out at another funnel-shaped throat except for an occasional eddy that whirled back toward the watching man. But Spud O'Malley, hanging precariously from that opening above, knew nothing of the sulphurous fumes or of the tight band they clamped about his throat. He was taking careful aim at the first of the flying beasts, found Chet in his line of fire, and snapped forward his pistol to fire at the lip of the pit instead. And he slipped forward the continuous discharge lever that caused the pistol to shake in his hand as it emptied its capacious magazine in a furious rain of bullets whose every end was tipped with the deadliest explosive of Earth.

The floor rose up toward him in a spouting volcano of fire, while Spud glared wildly through glazed and blinded eyes and swung his

pistol to rake the flying horde where he knew Chet was not.

He saw, through the haze that was sweeping before him, Chet's sprawled body on the floor; he saw him leap to his feet and rush to the rescue of the girl. Then the empty pistol slipped from Spud's nerveless hand; and his other, that had clung with unshakable grip to a sharp edge of rock, relaxed, while he plunged headlong toward the floor below.

Chapter 10: One Stroke for Freedom

In that subterranean chamber of the Moon, where the angry red of still deeper fires flared fitfully; where winged demons, like evil creatures of a drug-crazed dreamer's mind, darted shrieking through the sulphurous air, it was a slender, blue-eyed girl who took control of events.

She it was who, when the explosions of detonite had ceased, saw the fall of a body from high above. She saw it strike upon a mound of dead Moon-beasts; saw the homely, human features as the body rolled to the floor; and it was she who threw herself upon it protectingly when one of the enemy wounded dragged his broken wings trailing across the stone that he might reach that human face with his distended claws.

"A man!" Anita Haldgren screamed. "It's a man—help me!" And Chet was beside her in an instant to drag the limp body to safety.

"Spud!" he shouted. "It's Spud O'Malley! He never went back! He came down here to save us!"

He grabbed up the gun where it had fallen; saw the empty magazine; then flung himself down beside the unconscious figure of Spud

while he tore at the fastenings of the second weapon.

"His suit!" he shouted to the girl. "Get his suit! It's there where he fell! Bring yours and mine, too!"

He was hardly able to gage his own strength here where all weights were one-sixth of their equivalent on Earth. He stooped and swung the chunky body of Spud across his shoulder as easily as he would have lifted a child. And, having done it, he was entirely at a loss as to where to go.

Across the great room was a throng of leaping, flapping things; more were pouring in from open doors. Chet stood hesitant and bewildered, until Anita spoke.

"Come!" she called, and darted toward a narrow entrance.

The clamorous shrieking from the horde of Moon-beasts marked their swooping assault upon the two, and Chet paused to send them three shots that checked the advance. Then, with the body of Spud held tightly, he sprang where Anita had gone.

She was waiting, but gave Chet no chance to question her. "Come!" she commanded again, and ran on as before. But, as Chet gained her

side, she offered between gasping breaths an explanation.

"Five years they kept us ... like animals in a cage ... but there was a place ... a sacred place ... they let us go there.... And they let us make signal lights from outside ... they called it magic.

"And now Frithjof has escaped ... he will go to the sacred room ... only there would he be safe...."

They had turned and twisted through narrow passages. Anita, it seemed, was plotting a course through less frequented thoroughfares of this strange city. But they came at last to a vast auditorium into which they peered from a half-opened door.

The room was of preposterous size, and Chet marveled at the minds that had conceived and wrought so tremendous an undertaking. And he saw plainly in his own mind the throngs of serene-faced beings who must have folded their white wings softly about them to gather there for worship. But more plainly still he saw the jostling, squealing crowd that was there that instant before his eyes.

Hundreds of them—thousands, it might be—and the sound of their shrill voices made hideous echoes from the high-flung ceiling of the great hall. The dry rustling of their leather wings was an unceasing

rush of sound.

Some who seemed to be leaders stood above the rest on a platform which formed the base of a terraced formation against the far wall of the room. Even at a distance Chet could see and wonder at the simple beauty of that place of metals and jewels where the great ones of an earlier race had once stood.

Back of those who harangued the crowd the terraces built themselves up to a pyramid against the rock wall; and on either side, opening upon the platform base, was a doorway of noble proportions, whose metal doors of burnished reds and browns were closed.

"The sacred room," whispered Anita, "beyond those doors. Frithjof has closed them. He is there. I know it—I know it!"

Chet was still holding the body of O'Malley. Only his choked breathing showed that he still lived, but now he stirred and struggled in Chet's grasp, while he struck out blindly and hoarse sounds came from his throat.

Chet clapped one hand over the pilot's mouth. "For the love of heaven, Spud," he said fiercely, "be still! Don't speak—don't say a

word! It's Chet—Chet Bullard! I've got you, we're all right!"

The pilot's struggles ceased, and Chet eased him to the floor where he sat still gasping for breath; the fumes from that place of death had been strangling in his throat.

Beside him Chet heard the girl repeating in softest tones the name she had heard for the first time.

"Chet—Chet Bullard! How odd a name! But I love it—I couldn't help but love it."

In the great room were some who had turned toward the sound of Chet's scuffling; they were walking slowly toward the half-opened door.

"Come!" said Anita Haldgren again, and fled like a slender, golden-haired wraith down the narrow hall.

More twisting passages until Chet was hopelessly lost. But he no longer needed to carry O'Malley, who was running beside him, and he had implicit faith in the girlish guide who went before. He was not surprised when they came after many detours to a narrow door of wrought metals in white and gold, whose inset designs were worked

in glowing jewels.

Nor was he surprised when the door opened in response to a series of knocks from Anita's hand that spelled SOS in the code he knew, and a man, whose long hair and beard hung about a face as handsome as that of a Viking of old, stood motionless in that doorway.

But the surprise of that flaxen-haired giant can be only imagined when a young man whom he had never seen on Earth or Moon stepped forward from his sister's side with outstretched hand.

"I am Bullard," said the slim young man, "Master Pilot of the World—or at least that was my rating up to the time I left in search of you. And now, Pilot Haldgren, we've a ship outside, and, if you'd care to go back with us—"

And with equal casualness the blond Viking replied: "You came in search of us! You saw our signals! After all this time! Yes, we shall be glad to go back with—we shall be glad—yes—"

But his deep, rumbling voice broke into something like a sob, and he turned with outstretched arms to stumble blindly toward his sister, who buried her face in his torn and ragged blouse.

"You came in search of us—you came through space just to find and rescue us!" Haldgren, it seemed, could not recover from the effects of this unbelievable fact. He was gripping hard at the hand of Chet Bullard, while his other great arm was thrown about the shoulders of Spud O'Malley.

"But now that you are here, what is to be done? Every exit will be guarded; we are shut off from the outer world by a hundred locked doors and by thousands of those beasts."

He took his arm from Spud's shoulder to point toward the great doors, beyond which was a rising clamor of shrill sound.

"They will break in here soon; they would have been here before had they known of the old lost entrance of the priests that Anita and I found. We're as bad off as ever, I am afraid. There will be no holding them now."

"I can hold some," said Chet, and touched his weapon. Haldgren nodded his shaggy head.

"Some, but not many of the thousands we must face before ever we fight our way through to the outer world. No, my friend Bullard, that will never save us; we are doomed!"

But Chet, unwilling to accept or share the other's convictions, was seeing again the great room beyond those doors—a room of vast proportions; of high-arched, vaulted ceiling where sweeping curves all centered and ended in one tremendous central point. It hung down, that point, a blazing pendant—an inverted keystone; through some magic of that ancient people all the colors of the spectrum had been made to ebb and flow like rainbows of living light.

But something deeper than the beauty of this had impressed Chet. A master pilot does not study design of structures, even structures meant for travel through the air, without gaining knowledge of architectural fundamentals; his mind, subconsciously, had been following strains and stresses through those super-imposed curves. He turned abruptly to Haldgren with a question.

"It seemed to me when I was following Anita that we climbed upward; we were always running upward through the passages. We must be near the surface of the Moon; is that true?"

Haldgren nodded slowly. "I think so—yes! In the great room out there are windows of quartz high in the ceiling. You could not see them from where you were, but they are there. I have seen them lighted; I think it was the light of the sun."

"In that case," said Chet quietly, "I will ask you to open those doors."

"But they will come in!" the big man protested.

"They will not come in."

Chet turned to the girl. "I will ask you, my dear, to accompany me—if you have faith."

And, to that, Anita Haldgren granted not even a word of reply. She moved more swiftly than her brother to a controlling lever in the wall ... and the ponderous doors swung slowly back.

Beyond those opening doors a din of shrieks went abruptly still. They rose again in a squeaking babel of amazement and again were silenced as Chet Bullard stepped through the arch. Beside him was the slender figure of Anita; following was a stocky man whose unhandsome, face was alight with a broad grin.

"Go to it, my bhoy!" Spud O'Malley was saying. "I don't know what you're up to, but you'll be countin' me in—and here's hopin' you give those devils hell!"

And, behind them all, in great strides that brought him up with the rest, came Haldgren, recovered now from the stupefaction that had

held him momentarily. The four went silently where Chet led to the highest point of the great terraced rostrum.

It was a stepped pyramid, Chet found, split in half and the half placed against the wall. There was a stairway of smaller steps where priests, some thousands of years before, had made their way to the top. And the dust of centuries arose in smoky puffs as the four trod that path where the holy ones had gone. Below them the silence was ending in sibilant hissing calls as the black-winged beast-men watched that procession to the heights. Some few had launched themselves into the air, Chet saw when he turned.

"Tell them to go back," he said to Anita; "tell them to listen to what I have to say!" There followed immediately the sound of Anita's soft voice distorted to shrill sounds that echoed throughout the hall.

"Tell them now," said Chet when the hall was still, "that I have come from another world. Tell them that I hold the thunderbolts of their ancient gods in my hands. Then tell them if they permit us to depart we will go and leave them in peace. But if they try to harm us, the temple of their gods will be destroyed, and they, too, shall die. Tell them!"

There was something of unwonted solemnity in the voice of the

master pilot—something of quiet power and the dignity that became a messenger of the gods—as he gave his orders and faced the throng.

And there was the patience of a god who is sickened of slaughter as he faced the discordant din and the threatening forward surge of the demon throng below. The girl had spoken, and the air was black with their threshing wings, while still Chet waited with outstretched hand.

To the creatures below—the things half-men and half-beasts—the shining tube in that extended hand meant nothing of threat. And even to the Irish pilot, who stood silently watching, the gesture seemed futile.

"You've overplayed your hand, lad," he said in a tone of despair. "'Tis no little gun like that will stop them now!"

He was watching that hand and the shining tube; watching in amazement as he saw it swing slowly up toward the advancing horde risen level with them in the air—up above their massed blackness of wings—on and up, until the tube was pointing toward the base of a carven pendant, whose blending colors were fairy lights at play.

And still the weapon waited until the snarling faces of the enemy were close. Then the pistol cracked once, and the roar of its

exploding shell came thundering after.

For an instant all motion ceased; the very wings of the flying beasts seemed frozen rigid in mid-flight. Then the whole of the vast room was in motion.

A rush of escaping air whirled upward the black-winged monsters in an inverted maelstrom of shrieking winds. And, falling to meet them, came an enormous pendant whose rioting colors seemed glorying in their own death. And with that came the swift disintegration of the vaulted arches where the one central supporting point of their intricate maze had been shattered; till, with a crashing avalanche of sound that obliterated the thundering echoes of the detonite charge, the entire ceiling, that seemed now like the roof of a mighty world, roared down to destruction.

The pyramidal rostrum was at one side. A cascade of shattered rock fell like a curtain before it—a kindly curtain that hid from human sight the hideous slaughter of a demoniac mob. It was still falling; the imprisoned air was gathering added force to rush upward, screaming as if the very winds were insane with joy at their release, when the great arms of Frithjof Haldgren closed about the others of the group and half carried them, half hurled them, down the slope.

The echoing clang of great doors was still with them as the bellowing voice of Haldgren was heard.

"Get into your suits! The internal pressure is lost." Even as he spoke the big man was clutching at his throat, though the closing doors of the sacred room had given them respite. "Quick! They have emergency doors. They will close them—but this part is cut off. In only minutes there will be no air!"

But it was Chet who snapped shut the closure of Anita Haldgren's suit before he pulled on his own. And he grinned happily through the glass of his helmet as he saw the others safely encased, while their suits slowly bulged as the pressure of the air about them went down and their own tanks of oxygen took up the task of maintaining one atmosphere of pressure.

In silence the great doors of the sacred room swung back; in silence, as before, the Earth-folk passed through where chaos had reigned. Chet checked them; he threw one arm clumsily around the figure of Anita Haldgren while he turned to her brother.

"The door is open, Frithjof Haldgren," he said, and pointed upward at the black vault of the heavens where a massive ceiling had been. In that immensity of space, framed in the torn outlines of a shattered

world, shone a great globe—a globe like a giant moon. The Earth, unbelievably bright, was beckoning them once more.

"The door is open," Chet repeated; "do you still wish to go home?"

Chapter 11: "Bullard, of the I.B.C.!"

The controls of a meteor ship held steady without the touch of the pilot's hand. Chet Bullard was staring at a radiocone on the instrument board in the control room where a voice from some super-powered station was calling. His own radio had been crackling a call, and now this response was coming across the void.

"Orders from the Stratosphere Control Board: You will proceed at once to New York. Radiobeacon 2X12 will guide you down. Your message received and we acknowledge report of the finding of the space-flyer, Pilot Haldgren. Do not discharge any passengers and land nowhere else than at New York without direct orders of the Board. Keep your directional signal on full power; our cruisers will pick you up in the highest level. Signed: Commander of Air."

Spud O'Malley, it was, who broke the silence of the room where only the sound of the terrific exhaust came thinly through.

"May divils confound him! And it's back on the Moon with those other beasts I'm wishin' I was. At least a man can get close enough to slam them in their ugly faces; but the Commander and his cruisers! Sure, there's nothin' we can do!"

"Just take our medicine," said Chet Bullard quietly. "But I have proved him wrong; Haldgren, here, is the living evidence of that. And I said I would laugh him from the Service—well, I'm not so sure of that."

"But surely," broke in Haldgren's booming voice, "there will be only praise for what you have done. I do not understand—"

"You don't know the Commander, my boy," Spud broke in dryly. "And you don't know that the lad, here, defied him to his face and ran the gantlet of his cruisers' guns to get away and go after you."

"Ah!" grunted the giant. "And now I understand. It is the old story—an incompetent man in a place of authority—"

Chet broke in.

"Not quite right; this Commander of ours has done much—he is a driver of men—but there are some of us who think he lacks vision. He can never see beyond the stratosphere he rules so ably; and his position is supreme."

"There is still the Governing Council—we will appeal—"

But the master pilot was not listening to Haldgren's words; his slim,

sensitive hand was reaching for the ball-control to build up still more the tremendous blast of a forward exhaust that was checking their speed and making them as heavy as if their bodies were of meteoric iron.

A forward lookout showed a black globe; its circle was rimmed with fire from the Sun that it blotted out. A hemisphere of night lay below —the black, mysterious night of a waiting Earth. But one strong signal came in on the instruments at Chet's side to show him where on that horizon was New York; and the call of a flagship of cruisers was flashing before him as the lift of the Repelling Area was felt.

"Follow!" flashed the order. "You will follow to New York!" And, through the black night, faint flashes of light marked the fleet of swift guardians of the skies that closed in, then swept downward and out—an impregnable convoy about the speeding, roaring ship.

And there was that in Chet's face as he handled the controls that brought Anita Haldgren to his side that she might lift his free hand in wordless comfort and press it to her face.

That venerable and beloved man, the President of the Federation Aeronautique Internationale, stood silent before a vast audience. Throughout the great auditorium was silence; each of the gathered

thousands was listening to the shrieking sirens from the landing field on the roof overhead.

Skylights above showed the night air ablaze with red, through which the vivid green of landing signals pierced in staccato bursts. From the roof of that building to the highest level of the stratosphere the air was cleared; no craft of the Service would venture to pierce the barrage of light and radio waves that hemmed that aerial shaft. And down the shaft, in a thunder of roaring exhausts, came a shining shape.

She sparkled and flashed in the crimson and green of that emergency light, and from her bow poured a tornado that blasted the air, then streamed out behind in hot gas like a comet of flame. Then the thunders died; the shining shape turned once slowly in air to show her blunt nose and cylindrical body before she settled softly as a homing bird to the embrace of great waiting arms of steel. And, inside the building, a white-haired man was saying:

"They are here! Thank God, they are here! Their radio has prepared us; our signals have guided them home. And now it is not New York, nor even the United States of America alone who attends; the whole world will be summoned. Look!"

Behind, and high above him on a wall, was a radio panel. Its signal lamps went suddenly dark. The thin, blue-veined hand of the speaker was pointing.

"Only twice has the world-call flashed: once when the Molemen came and the future of the world was at stake; once when the Dark Moon crashed down from the void and the serpents of space menaced aerial traffic. And now—once again!—the whole world is summoned! Every city and hamlet of Earth—every ship of the air and the sea—every vessel on the ocean, under the ocean, and in the air levels above—"

His voice broke sharply. From the panel there came a thin call, a quivering that was more a trembling than a sound; it reached out to touch raspingly the nerves of every listener. Then the whole board burst forth in a flash of fire where a flaming crystal leaped to life—and none could see that pulsing flame without thrilling to the knowledge that it was calling a whole world with its wordless summons.

The light died; a television detector whined as its motors came to speed; and each watcher knew that the waiting world was connected with that auditorium in New York; all that happened, there—each sight and sound—was circling the globe.

An announcer's voice roared briefly before the regulator cut down on its volume.

"You are seeing the Radio-central Auditorium in New York. On the landing stage above, after a journey of five hundred thousand miles, a strange craft has settled to rest. Its pilot: Chester Bullard, once rated as Master Pilot of the World! Its journey, now safely completed: from the Earth to the Moon, and return!

"The world is waiting to greet Pilot Bullard, though of this he, as yet, is unaware. World-wide radio control is now transferred to Radio-central Auditorium in New York! They are coming! They are entering!"

But the thousands gathered in that great hall heard no other words from the radiocone. Their attention was focused upon the broad stage, where, descending from a lift, a strange group stepped out upon the stage, stood an instant in startled wonder that was near embarrassment, then took the seats to which they were shown.

And again the venerable President of the Federation Aeronautique Internationale was speaking.

"It is less than a month since I stood here before you, when, as again

is true to-night, the entire personnel of the executives of the Stratosphere Control Board was gathered to do honor to the pioneers of space—the discoverer—"

On the stage near the speaker, Chet Bullard stared in consternation at a girl in a pilot's suit as grimed and ragged as his own. His gaze passed on to the set features of Pilot O'Malley—to the blue eyes of a flaxen-haired giant—then on to where Walt Harkness and Diane, his wife, sat regarding him with happy smiles. Dimly Chet heard the man at the speakers' stand.

"—and on that other occasion, Mr. Bullard refused a decoration tendered him and marking him as the first to travel through airless space.

"I have here"—the speaker smiled slightly as he extended his hand where a jewel flashed fire from a velvet case—"the identical jewel and medal. And to-night, while the peoples of Earth are gathered throughout the world to do honor to Mr. Bullard, it has been given to me the proud privilege of welcoming him home."

He turned and held out a beckoning hand toward Chet. In a daze the younger man arose and moved beside the one who had called him.

"And now, Chester Bullard, on behalf of the Governing Council of the Ruling Nations of this Earth, I greet you: Pilot of the Stratosphere no longer—but Pilot of Endless Space! The world welcomes you; and, through me, it places in your hands this jewel.

"But you will observe that we older ones may still learn, and we do not repeat our former mistake. We hand you this medal, emblematic of the first penetration of space, to do with as you will."

The thin hand was shaking as the speaker turned and swept the audience with one all-inclusive gesture.

"To you who are before me now; to you out beyond wherever parallels of longitude and latitude are known—I present the Columbus of the Stars!—Chester Bullard!"

And suddenly Chet found himself alone in a pandemonium of sound. From the countless faces that blurred into one unrecognizable sea came a roar of human voices like waves thundering against storm-worn cliffs; above the clamor was the sound of shrieking sirens; and through all, when it seemed that no other sound could be heard, came the full-volume, nerve-stunning clangor from the radiocone's wide-opened throat as the trumpets and brass of all the monster bands of Earth broke forth, under radio control, in one synchronous

song—till even that was drowned under the roaring welcomes in strange tongues as the nations of Earth cut in.

And Chet Bullard, his blouse still torn where a Commander of Air had ripped off a three-starred emblem of a Master Pilot, shook his blond head to clear it of the confusion that seemed beating him down. And he stared and stared, not at the rioting throng before him, but at something he could in part comprehend—a glowing, flashing jewel that rested in his hand. And slowly there crept into his eyes a look of understanding, while a ghost of a smile twitched and tugged at the corners of his mouth.

The hall, which one instant was a bedlam of roaring voices, went silent as Chet Bullard raised his hand. He was still smiling as he bowed toward the white-haired man whose happy face belied the moisture in his eyes; then he faced the throng, and his voice held no hint of trembling or uncertainty.

"The Columbus of the Stars! I thank you for that title, which I can accept only most humbly. For I ask you to go back with me into history and remember, as I am remembering, that before Columbus there were others whose names are lost.

"The Norsemen—those Vikings of old!—who dared the unknown

seas, were first. And again history repeats. But this time the pioneer will not remain unknown. I have been to the Moon; I have reached out into space—but I followed another's trail.

"Frithjof Haldgren!" he shouted, and extended a hand toward the gentle giant whose face was aflame as he came to Chet's side. "Frithjof Haldgren, I present you to the world. Only one can be the first; and yours is the honor and glory. This medal is yours alone; I place it where it belongs!"

And Frithjof Haldgren, white of face and lips now instead of fiery red, stood silent and trembling while Chet fastened a jewel upon his grimy tattered blouse; then retired to his chair as if beaten back by the rolling waves of sound.

But to Chet, as he watched the man go, came a quick sense of disappointment. Unconsciously, his hand went to the same place on his own chest where had rested an emblem he had prized above all else—and now his searching fingers found only the mark of his disgrace. Then he knew again that the aged President was speaking, while he held Chet beside him with one detaining hand.

"We older ones have served, perhaps; we have done what we could; we pray that the world is better for our efforts! And we shall

continue to serve; yet it is to youth that we must look for the progress which is to come.

"Today we face a new life whose horizons, once bounded by the limiting air, have been pushed back. We have conquered space, and before us is the waiting marvel of man's extension of his activities throughout the universe.

"How far shall we go in this new and endless sphere? With interplanetary travel, what is our goal? Only youth can give the answer. And in the hands of youth must the command of this great adventure be placed.

"Gentlemen, the Governing Council of the Ruling Nations of this Earth has created a new command. By the acts of this man who stands beside me, and by his fellow-explorer, Walter Harkness, the Council has been forced to take this step.

"That command will rank second only to the Governing Council itself; a body of men shall compose it who shall be known as the Interstellar Board of Control." He turned squarely toward Chet. "I am placing in your hands, Mr. Bullard, your commission as Commander of that Board. The best minds of all nations will be at your call. Will you accept—will you gather these men about you and

do your part in this great work for the greater future of mankind?"

The ears of a listening world waited long for an answer. But the eyes of that world saw a figure whose blond head was suddenly lowered as if to hide a betrayal of what was in his heart; they saw him raise his bowed head to stare mutely toward a girl whose eyes of blue were swimming with happy tears as she gave him a trembling smile —and only then did they see Chet Bullard draw himself erect, while his voice went out with the speed of light to a waiting world.

"I accept, Mr. President. Proudly—humbly—I accept!"

And the eyes of the world, if they were understanding eyes, must have smiled with his, as the Commander of the Interstellar Board of Control grasped, among others, the congratulatory hand of his subordinate, the Commander of Air.

But if there were any who expected to read mockery in those smiling eyes, they had yet to learn the measure of Commander Bullard —"Bullard, of the I.B.C.!"

137 The Einstein See-Saw by Miles John Breuer

In their pursuit of an unscrupulous scientist, Phil and Ione are swung into hyperspace—marooned in a realm of strange sights and shapes.

Aproximate word count: 9,100

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Tony Costello leaned glumly over his neat, glass-topped desk, on which a few papers lay arranged in orderly piles. Tony was very blue and discouraged. The foundations of a pleasant and profitable existence had been cut right out from under him. Gone were the days in which the big racket boss, Scarneck Ed, generously rewarded the exercise of Tony's brilliant talents as an engineer in redesigning cars to give higher speed for bootlegging purposes, in devising automatic electric apparatus for handling and concealing liquor, in designing beam-directed radios for secret communication among the gangs. Yes, mused Tony, it had been profitable.

Six months ago the Citizens' Committee had stepped in. Now the

police department was reorganized; Scarneck Ed Podkowski was in jail, and his corps of trusty lieutenants were either behind the bars with him or scattered far and wide in flight. Tony, always a free spender, had nothing left but the marvelous laboratory and workshop that Scarneck Ed had built him, and his freedom. For the police could find nothing legal against Tony. They had been compelled to let him alone, though they were keeping a close watch on him. Tony's brow was as dark as the mahogany of his desk. He did not know just how to go about making an honest living.

With a hand that seemed limp with discouragement, he reached into his pocket for his cigarette-case. As he drew it out, the lackadaisical fingers failed to hold it firmly enough, and it clattered to the floor behind his chair. With the weary slowness of despondence, he dragged himself to his feet and went behind his chair to pick up the cigarette-case. But, before he bent over it, and while he was looking fully and directly at it, his desk suddenly vanished. One moment it was there, a huge ornament of mahogany and glass; the next moment there was nothing.

Tony suddenly went rigid and stared at the empty space where his desk had stood. He put his hand to his forehead, wondering if his financial troubles were affecting his reason. By that time, another desk stood in the place.

Tony ran over this strange circumstance mentally. His mental processes were active beneath, though dazed on the surface. His desk had stood there. While looking fully at it, all his senses intact, he had seen it vanish, and for a moment there had been nothing in its place. While he stared directly at the empty space from which the desk had disappeared, another desk had materialized there, like a flash. Perhaps, there had been a sort of jar, a tremor, of the floor and of the air, of everything. But the point was that his own desk, at which he had been working one moment, had suddenly vanished, and at the next moment another desk had appeared in its place.

And what a desk! The one that now stood there was smaller than his own palatial one, and shabbier. A raw, unpleasant golden-oak, much scratched and scuffed. Its top was heaped and piled full of books and papers. In the middle of it stood a photograph of a girl, framed in red leather. Irresistibly, the sunny beauty of the face, the bright eyes, the firm little chin, the tall forehead topped by a shining mass of light curly hair, drew Tony's first glance. For a few moments his eyes rested delightedly on the picture.

In a moment, however, Tony noticed that the books and papers on the desk were of a scientific character; and such is the nature of professional interest, that for the time he forgot his astonishment at how the desk had got there, in his absorption in the things heaped on

top of it.

Perhaps it isn't fair to give the impression that the desk was in disorder. It was merely busy; just as though someone who had been deeply engaged in working had for the moment stepped away. There was a row of books across the back edge, and Tony leaned over eagerly to glance at the titles.

"'Theory of Parallels,' Lobatchevsky; 'Transformation of Complex Functions,' Riemann; 'Tensors and Geodesics,' Gauss," Tony read. "Hm—old stuff. But here's modern dope along the same line. 'Tensors,' by Christoffel; 'Absolute Differential Calculus,' by Ricci and Levi Civita. And Schrödinger and Eddington and D'Abro. Looks like somebody's interested in Relativity. Hm!"

He bent over, his constantly increasing interest showing in the attitude of his body; he turned over papers and opened notebooks crowded full of handwritten figures. Last of all he noted the batch of manuscript directly in front of him in the middle of the front edge of the desk. It was typewritten, with corrections and interlineations all over it in purple ink.

A title, "The Parallel Transformations of Equations for Matter, Energy, and Tensors," had been crossed out with purple ink, and

"The Intimate Relation between Matter and Tensors" substituted. Tony bent over it and read. He was so fascinated that it did not even occur to him to speculate on the happy circumstance that the mysteriously appearing desk had brought its own scientific explanation with it. The title of the paper told him that its sheets would elucidate the apparently supernatural phenomenon, and all he did was to plunge breathlessly ahead in his eager reading. The article was short, about seven typewritten sheets. He took out his pencil and followed through the mathematical equations readily. Tony's mind was a brilliant, even though an erring one.

Under the first article lay a second one. One glance at the title caused Tony to stiffen. Then he picked up the typewritten script and carried it across the big room of his laboratory, as far away from the desk as he could get. He put the girl's photograph in his pocket. Then he took heaps and armfuls of papers, books and notes and carried them from the desk to a bench in the far corner. For, as soon as he had read the title, "A Preliminary Report of Experimental Work in the Physical Manipulation of Tensors," a sudden icy panic gripped his heart lest the desk and its papers suddenly disappear before he had finished reading to the end of the fascinating explanation.

We might add that it did not. For many weeks the desk remained standing in Tony's shop and laboratory, and he had the opportunity to

study its contents thoroughly. But it took him only a few hours to grasp its secret, to add his own brilliant conception to it, and to form his great resolve. Once more Tony faced the world hopefully and enthusiastically.

PART II

Vanishing Valuables

The police understood Tony's share in the exploits of Scarneck Ed thoroughly, and, chagrined at their failure to produce proof that would hold in court, they maintained a close and constant watch on that gifted gentleman long after crime matters in the city seemed to have been cleaned up and forgotten. For one thing, they still had hopes that something would turn up to enable them to round off their work and lock him up with his former pals; for another, they did not fully trust his future behavior. Nevertheless, for three or four months it seemed as though Tony had genuinely reformed. He lived in and for his laboratory and shop. All day the scouts could see him laboring therein, and far into the night he bent over benches and machines under shaded lights. Then, some other astonishing occurrences distracted their attention from Tony to other fields.

One morning Mr. Ambrose Parakeet, private jewel broker, walked

briskly out of the elevator on the fourteenth floor of the North American Building and unlocked the door of his office. He flung it open and started in, but stopped as if shot, uttered a queer, hoarse gurgle, and staggered against the door-casing. In a moment he recovered and began to shout:

"Help! Help! Robbers!"

Before long, several people had gathered. He stood there, gasping, pointing with his hand into the room. The eagerly peering onlookers could see that beside his desk stood an empty crate. It was somewhat old and weatherbeaten and looked as though it might have come from a buffet or a bookcase. He stood there and pointed at it and gasped, and the gathering crowd in the corridor wondered what sort of strange mental malady he had been seized with. The elevator girl, with trained promptness had at once summoned the manager of the building, who elbowed his way through the crowd and stood beside Mr. Parakeet.

"There! There! Look! Where is it?" Mr. Parakeet was gasping slowly and gazing round in a circle. He was a little gray man of about sixty, and seemed utterly dazed and overcome.

"What's wrong, Mr. Parakeet?" asked the building manager. "I didn't

know you had your safe moved out."

"But, no!" panted the bewildered old man. "I didn't. It's gone. Just gone. Last night at five o'clock I locked the office, and it was there, and everything was straight. What did you do? Who took it?"

The building manager conducted the poor old man into the office, shut the door, and asked the crowd to disperse. He sat Mr. Parakeet down into the most comfortable chair he could find, and then barked snappily into the telephone a few times. Then he sat and stared about him, stopping occasionally to reassure the old man and ask him to be patient until things could be investigated.

The building manager was an efficient man and knew his building and his tenants. He knew, as thoroughly as he knew his own office, that Mr. Parakeet had a medium-sized A. V. & L. Co.'s safe weighing about three tons, that could not be carried up the elevator when Mr. Parakeet had moved in, and had been hoisted into the window with block and tackle. He knew that it was physically impossible for the safe to go down any of the elevators, and knew that none of the operators would dare move any kind of a safe without his permission. Nevertheless, with the aid of a police-sergeant, his night-shift, and the night-watchmen of his building and adjacent ones, it was definitely established that nothing had been moved in or out of

the North American Building during the preceding twenty-four hours, either by elevator or through a window to the sidewalk.

The newspapers took up the mystery with a shout. The prostrating loss suffered by Mr. Parakeet, amounting to over a hundred thousand dollars, added no little sensation to the story. A huge safe, disappearing into thin air, without a trace, and in its place an old wooden crate! What a mouthful for the scareheads! For several days newspapers kept up items about it, dwindling in size and strategic importance of position; for nothing further was ever found. Every bit of investigation, including that by scientific men from the University of Chicago, was futile; not a trace, not a suggestion did it yield.

Six days later the tall scareheads leaped out again: "Another Safe Disappears! Absolutely No Trace! Some time during the night, the six-foot steel safe of the Simonson Loan Company vanished into thin air. In the morning a dilapidated iron oil-cask was found in its place. The safe was so large and heavy that it could not have been moved without a large truck, special hoisting apparatus, a crew of men, and some hours of time. The store was brightly lighted during the entire night, and two watchmen patrolled it regularly. They report that they saw and heard nothing unusual, and were very much amazed when shown the oil-cask standing where the safe had been the night before." The accounts in the various papers were

substantially the same.

Newspaper readers throughout the city and its environs were very much intrigued. Such a thing was very exciting and mystifying; but it was so far out of touch with their own lives that it did not affect them very much at any time except when they were reading the paper or discussing it in conversation. The police were the ones who were doing the real worrying. And, when the following week two more safes disappeared, insurance companies began to take an interest in the matter; and everyone who had any considerable amount of valuables in store began to feel panicky.

The circumstances surrounding the disappearance of the last of the series, the fourth, were especially amazing. This was also a jewelry safe. Canzoni's is a popular firm that rents a quarter of a floor in a big department store, and does a large volume of moderate-priced business. The receipts are stored in a heavy portable safe in a corner of the silverware section until evening, when they are carried to the large vault of the big store. One Saturday afternoon after a particularly busy day, Mr. Shipley, Canzoni's manager, was watching the hands of the clock creep toward five-thirty. He leaned on a counter and watched the clerks putting away goods for the night; he glanced idly toward the safe which he intended to open in a few minutes. The doormen had already taken their stations to keep out

further customers. Then he glanced back at the safe, and it wasn't there!

Mr. Shipley drew a deep breath. The safe disappearances he had read about flashed through his mind. But he didn't believe it. It couldn't be! Yet, there was the empty corner with the birch panels forming the back of the show-windows, and no safe. In a daze, he walked over to the corner, intending to feel about with his hands and make sure the safe was really gone. Before he got there, there flashed into sight in place of the safe, a barrel of dark wood; and in a moment there was a strong odor of vinegar.

Things spun around with Mr. Shipley for a few moments. He grasped a counter and looked wildly about him. Clerks were hurrying with the covering of counters; no one seemed to have noticed anything. He stood a moment, gritted his teeth, and breathed deeply, and soon was master of himself. He stood and waited until the last customer was gone, and then called several clerks and pointed to where the safe had stood.

Within the space of a month, thirteen safes and three million dollars worth of money or property had disappeared. The police were dazed and desperate, and business was in a panic. Scientific men were appealed to, to help solve the riddle, but were helpless. Many of

them agreed that though in theory such things were explainable, science was as yet far from any known means of bringing them about in actuality. Insurance companies spent fabulous sums on investigation, and, failing to get results, raised their premiums to impossible levels.

PART III

The Lady of the Picture

Phil Hurren, often known as "Zip" Hurren, reporter on the Examiner, felt, on the day the managing editor called him into the sanctum, that fortune could smile on him no more brightly. There wasn't anything brighter.

"You stand well with the detective bureau," his boss had said; "and you've followed this safe-disappearing stuff pretty closely. You're relieved of everything else for the time being. Get on that business, and see that the public hears from the Examiner!"

Phil knew better than to say any more, for before he recovered from his surprise, the editor had turned his back, buried himself in his work on the desk, and forgotten that Phil was there. Nor did Phil waste any real time in rejoicing. That is why he was called "Zip."

When things happened, whether it was luck or system, Phil was usually there. In sixty seconds more, Phil was in a taxicab, whirling toward police headquarters.

Luck or system, he didn't know, but he struck it again. The big wagon was just starting away from the station door when he arrived, crowded inside with bluecoats and plainclothes-men. The burly, red-faced man with chevrons on his sleeve, sitting beside the driver, saw Phil jump out, and motioned with his hand. Phil leaped up on the back step of the vehicle and hung on for dear life with his fingers through the wire grating as they careened through the streets. The men on the inside grinned at him; a number of them knew him and liked him. Gradually the door was opened and he crowded in. He found Sergeant Johnson and eyed him mutely.

"How the hell do you find these things out, I'd like to know," the sergeant exclaimed. "Are you a mind-reader?"

"I don't really know anything," Phil admitted with that humility which the police like on the part of newspaper men and seldom meet with. "Do you mind?"

"No objection," grunted the sergeant. "Been watching all the old crooks since these safes have been popping. Nothin' much on any of

them, except this slippery wop, Tony Costello. No, we haven't caught him at anything. Seems to be keeping close and minding his own business. Working in his laboratory. Ought to make a good living if he turned honest; clever guy, he seems. But he's been too prosperous lately. Lots of machinery delivered to his place; we traced it to the manufacturers and find it cost thousands. Big deposits in his banks. But, no trace of his having sold anything or worked at anything outside his own place. So, we're running over to surprise him and help him get the cobwebs out of his closets."

The raid on Tony Costello's shop and laboratory disclosed nothing whatever. They surrounded the place effectively and surprised Tony genuinely. But a thorough search of every nook and cranny revealed nothing whatever of a suspicious nature. There was merely a tremendous amount of apparatus and machinery that none of the raiding party understood anything about. Tony's person was also thoroughly searched, and the leather-framed photograph of the beautiful unknown girl was found.

"Who's this?" the sergeant demanded. "She don't look like anyone that might belong to your crowd."

"I don't know," Tony replied.

"Whad'ya mean, don't know?" The sergeant gave him a rough shake. "What'ya carryin' it for, then?"

"I had really forgotten that it was in my pocket," Tony replied calmly, at his ease. "I found it in a hotel room one day, and liked the looks of it."

"I know you're lying there," the sergeant said, "though I'm ready to believe that you don't know her. Too high up for you. Well, it looks suspicious and we'll take the picture."

"Boy!" gasped Phil. "What a girl she must be in person! Even the picture would stand out among a thousand. May I have the picture, Sergeant?"

"You can come and get a copy of it to-morrow. We'll have it copied and see if we can trace the subject of it. That might tell us something."

The following morning Phil was at Police Headquarters to pick up further information, and to get a copy of the girl's photograph. Like the police, he could not keep his mind off the idea that there was some association between the crooked engineer and the disappearance of the safes. It seemed to fit too well. The scientific

nature of the phenomena, Tony Costello's well known reputation for scientific brilliance, and his recent affluence; what else could it mean? In some way, Tony was getting at these safes. But how? And how prove it? Most exhaustive searches failed to reveal any traces of the safes anywhere. If any fragment of one of them had appeared in New York or San Francisco, the news would have come at once, such was the sensation all over the country that the series of disappearances had caused. Tony's calm insolence during the raid, his attitude of waiting patiently till the police should have had their fun and have it over with so that he might be left at peace again, showed that he must be guilty, for anyone else would have protested and felt deeply injured and insulted. He seemed to be enjoying their discomfiture, and absolutely confident of his own safety.

"There's got to be some way of getting him," Phil mused; and he mused almost absent-mindedly, for he was gazing at the photograph of the girl. For many minutes he looked at it, and then put it silently into his pocket.

Five o'clock in the evening of that same day came the news of another safe disappearance. Phil got his tip over the phone, and in fifteen minutes was at the scene. It was too much like the others to go into detail about; a six-foot portable safe had suddenly disappeared right in front of the eyes of the office staff of The

Epicure, a huge restaurant and cafeteria that fed five thousand people three times a day. In its place stood a ragged, rusty old Ford coupe body. He went away from there, shaking his head.

Then suddenly in the midst of his dinner, he jumped up, and ran. An idea had leaped into his head.

"Right after one of these things pops is the time to take a peek at Tony," he said to himself, and immediately he was on the way.

But how to get his peep was not so easy a problem. When he alighted from his cab a block away from Tony's building, he was hesitant about approaching it. Tony knew him, and might see him first. Phil circled the brick building, keeping under cover or far enough away; all around it was a belt of thirty feet of lawn between the building and the sidewalk. Ought he have called the police and given them his idea? Or should he wait till darkness and see what he could do alone?

Then suddenly he saw her. Across the street, standing in the shelter of a delivery truck in front of an apartment, she was observing Tony's building intently. The aristocratic chin, the brightness of the eyes, the waves of her hair, and the general sunny expression! It could not be anyone else. Post haste he ran across the street.

"Pardon me!" he cried excitedly, lifting his hat and then digging hastily into his inner pocket. "I'm sure you must be the—"

"Well, the nerve!" the young woman said icily, and pointing her chin at the opposite horizon she walked haughtily away.

By that time Phil had dug out his picture and was running after her.

"Please," he said, "just a moment!" And he held the picture out in front of her face.

"Now, where in the world—?" She looked at him in puzzled and indignant inquiry, and then burst out laughing.

"It is you, isn't it?" Phil asked. "What are you laughing at?"

"Oh, you looked so abject. I'm sure your intentions must be good. Now tell me where you got my picture."

"Let us walk this way," suggested Phil, leading away from Tony's building.

And, as they walked, he told her the story. When he got through she stood and looked at him a long time in silence.

"You look square to me," she said. "You're working on my side already. Will you help me."

"I'll do anything—anything—" Phil said, and couldn't think of any other way of expressing his willingness, for the wonderful eyes bore radiantly upon him.

"First I must tell you my story," she began. "But before I can do so, you must promise me that it is to remain an absolute secret. You're a newspaper man—"

Phil gave his promise readily.

"My father is Professor Bloomsbury at the University of Chicago. He has been experimenting in mathematical physics, and I have been assisting him. He has succeeded in proving experimentally the concept of tensors. A tensor is a mathematical expression for the fact that space is smooth and flat, in three dimensions, only at an infinite distance from matter; in the neighborhood of a particle of matter, there is a pucker or a wrinkle in space. My father has found that by suddenly removing a portion of matter from out of space, the pucker flattens out. If the matter is heavy enough and its removal sudden enough, there is a violent disturbance of space. By planning all the steps carefully my father has succeeded in swinging a section of

space on a pivot through an angle of 180 degrees, and causing two portions of space to change places through hyperspace, or as you might express it popularly, through the fourth dimension."

Phil held his hands to his head.

"It is not difficult," she went on smiling. "Loan me your pocket knife and a piece of paper from your notebook. If I cut out a rectangular piece of paper from this sheet and mount it on a pivot or shaft at A B, I can rotate it through 180 degrees, just like a child's teeter-totter, so that X will be where Y originally was. That is in two dimensions. Now, simply add one dimension all the way round and you will have what daddy is doing with space. He does it by shoving fifty or a hundred pounds of lead right out of space; the sudden flattening out of the tensors causes a section of space to flop around, and two portions of space change places. The first time he tried it, his desk disappeared, and we've never seen it again. We've thought it was somewhere out in hyperspace; but this terrible story of yours about disappearing safes, and the fact that you have this picture, means that someone has got the desk."

"Surely you must have suspected that long ago, when the disappearances first began?" Phil suggested.

"I've just returned from Europe," said Miss Bloomsbury. "I was tremendously puzzled when I got my first newspapers in New York and read about the safes. Gradually I gathered all the news on the subject, and it seemed most reasonable to suspect this gangster engineer."

"Great minds and same channels," Phil smiled. "But your father. Why didn't he speak up when the safes began to pop?"

"Ha! ha!" she laughed a tinkly little laugh. "My father doesn't know what safes are for, nor who is President, nor that there has been a war. Mother and I take care of him, and he works on tensors. He has probably never heard about the safes."

"What were you going to do around here?" Phil asked, marveling at the courage of the girl who had come to look the situation over personally.

"I hadn't formed any definite plans. I just wanted to look about first."

"Well," said Phil, "as you will soon see by the papers, another safe has puffed out. It occurred to me that we might find out something by spying about here immediately after one of the disappearances. That's why I'm here. If you'll tell me where you live, or wait for me

at some safe place, I'll come and report to you as soon as I find out anything."

"Oho! So that's the kind of a girl you think I am!" She laughed sunnily again. "No, Mr. Reporter. Either we reconnoiter together, or each on our own."

"Oh, together, by all means," said Phil so earnestly that she laughed again. "And since we'd better wait for darkness, let's have something to eat somewhere. I didn't finish my dinner."

Phil found Ione Bloomsbury in person to be even more wonderful than her photograph suggested. Obviously she had brains; it was apparent, too that she had breeding. Her cheerful view of the world was like a tonic for tired nerves; and withal, she had a gentle sort of courtesy in her manner that may have been old-fashioned, but it was almost too much for Phil. Before the dinner was over, he would have laid his heart at her feet. It gave him a thrill that went to his head, to have her by his side, slipping along through the darkness toward Tony's building.

This building was a one-story brick affair with a vast amount of window space. From the sidewalk they could see faint lights glowing within, but could make out no further details. They therefore selected

the darkest side of the building, and made their way hurriedly across the lawn. Here, they found, they could see the crowding apparatus within the one long room fairly well. They looked into one window after another, making a circuit around the building, until Phil suddenly clutched the girl's arm.

"Look!" he whispered. "Straight ahead and a little to the left!"

At the place he indicated stood a tall safe. Across the top of its door were painted in gold letters, the words: "The Epicure."

"That's the safe that went to-night," whispered Phil. "That's all we need to know. Now, quick to a telephone!"

"Oh," said a gentle, ironic voice behind them, "not so quick!"

They whirled around and found themselves looking into two automatic pistols, and behind them in the light of the street lamps, the sardonic smile of Tony Costello.

"Charmed at your kind interest in my playthings, I'm sure," he purred. "Only it leaves me in an embarrassing position. I'm not exactly sure what to do about it. Kindly step inside while I think."

Phil made a move sidewise along the wall.

"Stop!" barked Costello sharply. "Of course," his voice was quiet again, "that might be the simplest way out. I think I am within my legal rights if I shoot people who are trying to break into my property. Yet, that would be messy—not neat. Better step in. The window swings outward."

At the point of his pistols they clambered through the window, and he came in after them. He kept on talking, as though to himself, but loud enough for them to hear.

"Yes, we want some way out that is neater than that. Hm! Violence distresses me. Never liked Ed's rough methods. Yet, this is embarrassing."

He turned to them.

"What did you really want here? I see that you are the Examiner's reporter, and that you are the lady of the photograph. What did you come here for? Ah, yes, the safe. Well, go over and look at it."

As they hesitated, he stamped his foot and shrilled crankily:

"I mean it! Go, look at the safe! Is there anything else you want to know?"

"Yes," said Phil coolly, his self-control returning, "where are the other safes?"

"Oh. Anything to oblige. Last requests are a sort of point of honor, aren't they. Ought to grant them. Stand close to that safe!"

He backed away, his guns levelled at them. He laid down the right one, keeping the left one aimed, and moved some knobs on a dial and threw over a big switch. A muffled rumbling and whirring began somewhere; and then, slowly, a block of tables and apparatus ten feet square rose upward toward the ceiling. A section of the floor on which they stood came up, supported by columns, and now formed the roof of a room that had risen out of the floor. In it were four safes.

"Poor old Ed!" sighed Tony. "There was a time when he had a lot of good stuff put away down there. I've got six rooms like that. Well, the good old times are over."

He threw out the switch and the whole mass sank slowly and silently downward till the floor was level and there was no further sign of it. Then he backed away to another table, across the room from them, keeping his gun levelled.

"Too bad," he said. "I don't like to do these things. But—" he sighed deeply, "self-preservation. Now I'm going to flip you out, yes, out, into a strange region. I've never been there. I don't know if there is food or drink there. I hope so, for you'll never get back here."

Phil stiffened. He determined to leap and risk a shot. But he was too late. Tony's hand came down on a switch. There was a sudden, nauseating jar. The laboratory vanished.

There was only the safe, Ione Bloomsbury and himself, and a small circle of concrete floor extending to a dim little horizon a dozen feet away. Beyond that, nothing. Not blue, as the sky is. Not black, as dark, empty spaces are. It suggested black, because there was no impression of light or color on the eyes; but it wasn't black. It was nothingness.

PART IV

Marooned in Hyperspace

"I suppose you realize what he has done?" Miss Bloomsbury inquired.

"Couldn't be too sure, but it looks like plenty. What's the equation for

it?" Beneath his jocularity, Phil felt a tremendous sinking within him. It looked serious, despite the fact that he did not understand it at all.

"He has swung us out into hyperspace, or into the fourth dimension, as your newspaper readers might understand it, and has let us hang there. Remember our slip of paper. Suppose X and Y were swung out of the plane of the paper and allowed to remain at an angle with it. We are at an angle with space, out in hyperspace."

There was a period of bewilderment, almost panic, in which they both felt so physically weak that they had to sit down on the concrete and stare at each other mutely. But this passed and their natural courage soon reasserted itself. Their first thought was to take stock of what information they could get on their situation; and their first step was to venture as close as possible to the queer little horizon which lay almost at their very feet. It gave them a frightened feeling, as though they were standing high up on a precipice or tower.

To their surprise, the horizon receded as they walked toward it, always remaining about a dozen feet away from them. At first they walked on concrete and then came to a crumbly edge of it and found themselves stepping on hard, sandy earth. Later there was rock, sometimes granite-like, sometimes black and shiny. But what they

saw underfoot was nothing, compared with the glimpses of things they got out in the surrounding emptiness. First there was a vast space in which a soft light shone, and in which there were countless spheres of various sizes, motionlessly suspended. The spheres seemed to be made of wood, a green, sap-filled, unseasoned wood. The scene was visible for a few seconds, and vanished suddenly as they walked on. This astonished them; so they stepped back a pace or two and saw it again; and as they moved on, it disappeared again.

Then there was a great stretch of water in which the backs of huge monsters rolled and from which a hot wind blew for a few instants until they passed on and the scene vanished. There was a short walk with nothing but emptiness, and then there appeared huge, oblique, cubistic looking rows of jagged rocks in wild, dizzy formations that didn't look possible; and farther on, after another interval of emptiness, a tangle of brown, ropey vines with black-green leaves on them, an immense space filled with serpentine swinging loops and lengths of innumerable vines. Several loops projected so near them that they could have reached out and touched them had they wished.

"This is too much for me!" Phil gasped. "Have we gone crazy? Or did he kill us, and is this Purgatory?"

Ione smiled and shook her little head in which she had a goodly store

of modern mathematics stored away.

"These must be glimpses of other 'spaces' besides our own space. If we could see in four dimensions we could see them all spread out before us. But we can only perceive in three dimensions; therefore, as we walk through hyperspace, past the different 'spaces' which are ranged about in it, we get a glimpse into such of them as are parallel with our own space. Can you understand that?"

"Oh, yes," groaned Phil. "It sounds just about like it looks. But, don't mind me. Go on, have your fun."

"I've been thinking about those wooden spheres," continued Ione. "I'm sure they must be sections of trees that are cut crosswise by our 'space;' they grow in three dimensions, but only two of them are our dimensions and a third is strange to us. We see only three-dimensional sections of them, which are spheres. There is more of them, that we cannot see, in another dimension."

"Yes, yes. Just as plain as the Jabberwock!"

"Look! There's a real Jabberwock!" exclaimed Ione.

On ahead of them they saw a number of creatures that seemed to be

made of painted wooden balls in different colors, joined together.

"Tinkertoys!" exclaimed Phil. "Live ones! Big ones!"

The animals, though they looked for all the world as though they were made of painted wood, moved with jerky motions and clattered and snarled.

"There is probably more to them in another dimension," Ione said.

Suddenly one of the beasts approached them with a leap. There were two big eyes and two rows of teeth that came together with a snap, right on Phil's trouser-leg. He jerked himself away, sacrificing some square inches of trouser-leg, and, whirling around, kicked at the thing with all his force. It almost paralyzed his foot, for the animal seemed to be made of wood or bone. But it disappeared, and, as it did, both of them felt a queer, nauseating jolt. A few more minutes' walk brought them back to the safe without seeing any more spaces; and the sight of its black iron bulk filled them with a home-like relief, which in a moment they recognized as a mockery.

"Are we on a sphere of some sort?" Phil asked.

"Probably on an irregular mass of matter," Ione replied, "part of

which is Tony's concrete floor, and part of which comes out of some other dimension. This mass of matter is at one end of a long, bar-like portion of space, the middle of which is pivoted in our world, somewhere in Chicago, and both ends of which are free in hyperspace."

"Then," suggested Phil, "why can't we walk down to the axle on which it is balanced, and step out into Chicago?"

"Because there isn't any matter for us to walk on. We are not able to move about in space, in three dimensions, you know. We can only get around in two dimensions, on the surface of matter."

"Well, let's try another exploration trip at right angles to our first one. After all, these 'spaces' are an interesting show, and I want to see some more."

They started out in the selected direction, and after a short walk got a glimpse of a vast space dotted with stars and nebulae, with two bright moons sailing overhead. A few steps farther on was a wall of solid granite, near enough to touch with their hands. Again, there was an intensely active mass of weaving bright stripes and loops and circles, seeming to consist of light only, and making them dizzy in a few seconds. Ione wondered if it might not be something like an

organic molecule on a large scale. Again, odd, queer, indescribable shapes and outlines would appear and disappear, obviously three-dimensional sections of multi-dimensional things, cut by space. Once they passed a place of intense cold and terrific noise and escaped destruction or lunacy only because it took them the merest instant to get past.

They arrived back at the safe, very much fatigued from the strain, their minds woefully confused. Hunger and thirst were beginning to thrust up their little reminders; and for the first time the terrors of their position, flung out into hyperspace on a small, barren piece of matter, began to seem real.

After a rest they started out again. As Phil had touched, in kicking it, a creature from another "space," perhaps they might find water and even food somewhere. They retraced their first steps to the spot where they had at first seen water. They found it again and were able to dip their hands into it. It was warm, and too salty to drink. They came to the place with the creepers or vines, and Phil reached out and seized one of them. It was heavy, rubbery, and elastic, stretching readily as he pulled it.

"These little lurches that we feel must be the snapping back of the space-puckers as expressed by tensors," Ione remarked. "Every time

matter goes in or out of space, the nature of space is altered."

"Well," observed Phil, releasing the vine, "I'd better be careful. If one of these things hauls me off here, our last bond with home is gone. I don't want to get lost in some other space."

As he released the vines they snapped back to their places, and the forest of them dimmed a little and reappeared.

They made the round again, dodging cautiously past the point where they had previously found the "Tinkertoy" animals, and succeeded in getting past their snapping teeth. But no promise of food or water did they find anywhere.

"Looks like we're sunk," observed Phil, as they dropped down on the concrete to rest, leaning their backs against the safe.

How time counted in hyperspace, neither Phil nor Ione could tell; Phil knew that his watch was running. He knew that it was ages and ages that he sat with his back against the safe, reviewing all the events of his put life, and thinking of this ignominious end to a lively career! He swore half aloud; then suddenly looked at Ione, ready to apologize. He found her weeping silently.

"I should never have let you come into the building with me," he stammered in confusion at her tears.

"Oh, what do I care what becomes of me!" she exclaimed angrily. "But who will take care of poor daddy? He doesn't even know when it's time to eat." And she burst into a fresh fit of weeping.

Phil bent his head in the dumbness of profound despair.

PART V

The Reversible Equation

Despair, however, is a luxury. Necessity is a stimulus. With the parchings of thirst and the gnawings of hunger, the two young people ceased swearing and weeping. Phil got up and paced about and sat down again. Ione's tears stopped and dried, and she sat and thought.

In the back of her mind there had been forming a vague sort of an idea, which had signalled ahead of itself that there was hope. She sat there and desperately drove her reason to its utmost efforts, to find that idea and bring it to the surface of consciousness. Hand to hand fights with wild animals, battles between ships of the line, vicious

duels between ace-aviators in the clouds are tense fights; but they cannot compare in anxious difficulty with the struggle to bring up an unformed idea out of the subconscious mind—especially when one knows that the idea is there, and that it must be found to save one's life.

"Ione!" exclaimed Phil. It was the first time he had used the name. "What is the matter? You are as tense as a—"

"Ah!" cried Ione, springing up. "Tense! Tensors! I have it!"

Phil gazed at her in alarm. She laughed; at first it was a strained laugh, but gradually it melted into her sunny one.

"No, I'm not crazy. I knew there was a way out, and I've been trying to reason it out. How simple. You remember the little jolts when you pulled at the vines and when you kicked the funny animal? Tensors. Matter and space are so closely interrelated that you can't move matter in or out of space without causing disturbance, recoils, and tremors in space. Those bits of matter were small, and produced only a slight disturbance. It takes about a hundred pounds of lead to swing this segment—"

"Oho! Got you!" exclaimed Phil. "Not so dumb! The safe!"

"Yes. The safe!" Ione cried.

"Throw it off and watch us swing, eh? What would happen?"

"I might calculate it if I knew the weight of the safe."

"No calculating when I'm around," Phil said. "It couldn't make things any worse. Try it first and calculate afterwards."

They got behind the safe and pushed, and their combined strength against it was about as effective as it would have been in moving the Peoples' Gas Building. They sat down again in despair.

"Suppose we could budge it," Ione said. "All we could do would be to push it around, this piece of matter we are on. That wouldn't help. We've got to get it out of space. We can't push it hard enough to do that. It's got to be shot out suddenly—"

"And we haven't got a gun handy," Phil remarked droopingly.

"Not exactly a gun. A sort of sling—"

Phil leaped to his feet.

"A sling. Why! To be sure! The vines!"

Without another word, both of them got up and ran. They hastened in a direction opposite to the one they had at first taken on their trip of exploration, and this brought them first past the "space" of the Tinkertoy-like animals. As they went by, several of these beasts darted at them, one of them snapping at Ione's heels. She uttered a scream, causing Phil to turn about and kick right and left among them. He drove them back and escaped from them, rejoining Ione.

"Wait," he said, when they reached the vines. "Remember those wooden balls. If I could get a few to throw at those critters—"

In a moment they were off, and finally arrived at the point from which they first saw the balls. Odd it seemed, how they hung suspended in space, thousands of them, all sizes. Phil reached out and grasped one about the size of a baseball and drew it toward himself. He felt a dizzy lurch and heard Ione scream.

"Let go!" she screamed again.

When he suddenly realized what was going on, he found himself prostrate on the ground, with Ione across him, her arms about his knees.

"Do you realize," she panted, disentangling herself, "that you were

pulling yourself out of this space into that one?"

"Thanks!" said Phil. "Never say die. More careful this time, and a smaller one."

He reached out and grasped a ball smaller than a golf-ball, and pulled carefully, keeping an eye upon Ione. There was resistance to his pull, but gradually the ball came. It seemed heavy. There was a crack as of breaking wood, and he fell backward, with a wave of nausea sweeping strongly over him. He gazed in amazement at a heavy wooden stick that he held in his hands. The only thing about it that suggested the ball for which he had reached was its diameter.

"Can't understand it, but appreciate it just the same," he said. He broke the stick in two, and had two excellent clubs.

"Simple," Ione replied. "The balls are cross-sections of these trees or sticks which grow in a 'space' at right angles to our own; and we only see their three-dimensional cross-sections."

"Yes," said Phil. "Cabbages and kings. I'm for you and the party."

A short walk brought them to the "space" of the vines. After testing the matter out carefully, they found that they could each pull two of

them at a time. The vines stretched amazingly when they found those whose far ends were fixed firmly in the tangle, permitting them to carry their own ends along with them toward the safe. Phil wound his vines around his left arm and stuck one club through his belt. The other he got ready for the wooden animals.

He needed it. The size of the pack was doubled, and he rapped them till his hand was numb before he and Ione got by. Their vines drew out thin, but held until they were firmly tied about the safe. They went back after four more.

"I should judge," said Phil, "that by the time we get thirty or forty, the elastic pull will be strong enough to drag the safe back with them as they snap back home."

Trip after trip they made, fighting the wooden animals with their clubs each time. Their clothes were torn, and their legs bleeding; their throats were dry and lips cracked. The hard animals seemed to have a persistent, mechanical ferocity that was undismayed by hammering with the clubs and by repeated repulses. Phil could not seem to hurt them; he merely knocked them away. Finally, on the ninth trip, Ione collapsed when she reached the safe. As she fell, the

elasticity of the vines began slowly to drag her back with them. Phil was forced to sit across her knees while he tied his own vines about the safe. Then he released her and added her vines to the great cable about the safe.

An overbold hard animal rattled up and snapped at her. Goaded to fury, Phil swung at it with his club and hurled it through the air. He could feel the lurch as it left his space and entered another. Then he pushed with his mightiest effort against the safe. It budged, and slid a few inches. He used his stick as a lever. It moved again, a little faster. Ione struggled to her feet and tried to help, but her efforts were ineffectual.

With one arm about her, Phil pried again under the safe, knowing that another trip after vines was out of question. Another animal snapped at their heels. For a while, it was kick backwards, then a shove at the safe. Each time the safe moved. The sight of its movement revived Ione, so that she was able to push also. Gradually it acquired a steady motion, pulled by the contraction of the vines; its progress soon became faster and faster. Phil was about to follow it and give it another push, when Ione drew him back.

Suddenly they experienced a sinking sensation and a fearful vertigo. The snapping animals faded. Ahead of them was the forest of vines,

and they saw the safe hurled into it, crashing, plunging into the tangled mass. The whole view crumpled and moved upwards like a swirl of leaves in a wind, and then vanished with a snap.

They were sick and dizzy, but tremendously curious to see everything. The water, the cubistic cliffs, the vast space full of balls, all curiously blurred, appeared in succession. There were blank spaces and then blurred sights of things which they did not recognize, never having seen them before. Then the dizziness and the nausea abated, and ahead of them was a vast yellow blue, a huge nebula, and in it were double-colored suns and ringed planets with swarms of moons; this glorious sight remained for many seconds, as they gazed at it in panting astonishment, half reclining on the concrete; and then it faded. Again the nausea came on; again the succession of blurred views. Eventually the myriad spheres, the water with the leviathans, the forest of vines, each succeeding scene grew more blurred. Their nausea was correspondingly increased, till they were forced to lie down on the ground from illness.

When their giddiness abated, there were blurring views again. There was an impression as though the speed of a train were decreasing as one looks out of the window. And how one view held for several seconds, a vast and wild mountain-range with glaciers and snow peaks by moonlight. When this faded gradually, the scenes began to

flick by, more and more rapidly, and grew blurred. Phil and Ione were attacked by nausea until, again, they had to lie down. After that came the familiar succession: the wooden animals, the tangle of vines, the vast sea, the spheres, and more blurred scenes. Then came a pause, with the nebula and the glorious suns swinging into view once again.

"Oh, I understand!" Ione exclaimed; "We're swinging. The safe was so heavy that we swung too violently, too far, and back again—"

"And we keep going till it knocks us out, or till the old cat dies," added Phil.

However, they found that after a number of repetitions of the same program, their giddiness was becoming less; and instead of lying down in the middle of the swing, they could look about. Then it occurred to Phil to time the interval between the nebula and the mountain-range. When the exact halfway point was determined, and after several more swings, they could see dimly the windows and machinery of Tony's laboratory flash by when they passed the middle.

"I don't mean to be a crepe-hanger, but how do you know we will stop at the right point?" Phil asked.

"I don't," replied Ione cheerfully. "But mathematics says so. A freely oscillating segment of space would naturally come to equilibrium in a position parallel to the rest of its own space, would it not?"

There came a swing when they did not reach the nebula on the one hand and the mountain-range on the other. After that, views dropped off from either end of the swing quite rapidly, and before many minutes, they looked into Tony's laboratory a large portion of the time. For many seconds the laboratory held; then it would gradually fade, and reappear again, only to fade into empty nothingness all around.

"The old cat's dead," Phil finally announced.

They sat and stared about them as the laboratory held steady and no further intervening periods of blankness intervened. They both sighed deeply and slumped over on the ground to rest.

"Bang! bang! bang!"

Some sort of hammering woke them up. They looked about them in a daze. It was broad daylight, and things looked queer in the laboratory. There was a smell of scorched rubber and hot oil. Great loops of wire sagged down from above. Several nondescript heaps

stood about that might once have been machinery, but now suggested melting snow-men, all fused into heaps. At a table sprawled a queer, misshapen figure that suggested human origin. Both of its hands were burned to cinders to the elbows. Great holes were scorched into the clothes. But the face was recognizable. Tony's playthings had got him at last.

"Looks like something's happened in here!" Phil gasped, in amazement.

"I'll bet it has, too," Ione exclaimed. "This is the first time it occurred to me that our recoil from throwing the safe overboard and the oscillation of our space-segment must have created a tremendous electrical field in the tetra-ordinate apparatus. The reaction is reversible, you see. The field swings the space-segment, or the swinging of the space-segment creates the field. And the field was too much for Tony."

At this point the door fell under the blows of the police, and the raiding squad rushed into the room.

138 The Great Dome on Mercury by Arthur Leo Zagat

Trapped in the great dome, Darl valiantly defends Earth's outpost against the bird-man of Mars and his horde of pigmy henchmen.

Aproximate word count: 8,500

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Darl Thomas mopped the streams of perspiration from his bronzed face and lean-flanked, wiry body, nude save for clinging shorts and fiber sandals. "By the whirling rings of Saturn," he growled as he gazed disconsolately at his paper-strewn desk. "I'd like to have those directors of ITA here on Mercury for just one Earth-month. I'll bet they wouldn't be so particular about their quarterly reports after they'd sweated a half-ton or so of fat off their greasy bellies. 'Fuel consumption per man-hour.': Now what in blazes does that mean? Hey, Jim!" He swiveled his chair around to the serried bank of gauge-dials that was Jim Holcomb's especial charge, then sprang to his feet with a startled, "What's the matter?"

The chunky, red-haired control-man was tugging at a lever, his muscles bulging on arms and back, his face white-drawn and tense. "Look!" he grunted, and jerked a grim jaw at one of the dials. The long needle was moving rapidly to the right. "I can't hold the air pressure!"

"Wow, what a leak!" Darl started forward. "How's it below, in the mine?"

"Normal. It's the Dome air that's going!"

"Shoot on the smoke and I'll spot the hole. Quick, man!"

"Okay!"

Thomas' long legs shot him out of the headquarters tent. Just beyond the entrance flap was one of the two gyrocopters used for flying within the Dome. He leaped into the cockpit and drove home the starter-piston. The flier buzzed straight up, shooting for the misted roof.

The Earthman fought to steady his craft against the hurricane wind, while his gray eyes swept the three-mile circle of the vault's base. He paled as he noted the fierce speed with which the white smoke-jets

were being torn from the pipe provided for just such emergencies. His glance followed the terrific rush of the vapor. Big as a man's head, a hole glared high up on the Dome's inner surface. Feathered wisps of tell-tale vapor whisked through it at blurring speed.

"God, but the air's going fast," Darl groaned. The accident he had feared through all the months he had captained Earth's outpost on Mercury had come at last. The Dome's shell was pierced! A half-mile high, a mile across its circling base, the great inverted bowl was all that made it possible for man to defy the white hell of Mercury's surface. Outside was an airless vacuum, a waste quivering under the heat of a sun thrice the size it appears from Earth. The silvered exterior of the hemisphere shot back the terrific blaze; its quartz-covered network of latticed steel inclosed the air that all beings need to sustain life.

Darl tugged desperately at the control-stick, thrust the throttle over full measure. A little more of this swift outrush and the precious air would be gone. He caught a glimpse of the Dome floor beneath him and the shaft-door that gave entrance to the mine below. Down there, in underground tunnels whose steel-armored end-walls continued the Dome's protection below the surface, a horde of friendly Venusians were laboring. If the leak were not stopped in a few minutes that shaft door would blow in, and the mine air would whisk through the

hole in its turn. Only the Dome would remain, a vast, rounded sepulcher, hiding beneath its curve the dead bodies of three Earthmen and the silent forms of their Venusian charges.

Darl's great chest labored as he strove to reach the danger spot. Invisible fingers seemed to be clamped about his throat. His eyes blurred. The gyrocopter was sluggish, dipped alarmingly when it should have darted, arrow-like, to its mark. With clenched teeth, the Terrestrian forced the whirling lifting vanes to the limit of their power. They bit into the fast thinning air with a muffled whine, raised the ship by feet that should have been yards.

By sheer will he forced his oxygen-starved faculties to function, and realized that he had reached the wall. He was drifting downward, the hole draining the Dome's air was five feet above him, beyond his reach. The driven vanes were powerless to stem the craft's fall.

One wing-tip scraped interlaced steel, a horizontal girder, part of the vault's mighty skeleton. Darl crawled along the wing, dragging with him a sheet of flexible quartzite. The metal foil sagged under him and slanted downward, trying like some animate thing to rid itself of the unwonted burden. He clutched the beam, hung by one leg and one arm as his craft slid out from beneath him. The void below dragged at him. He put forth a last tremendous spurt of effort.

Two thousand feet below, Jim Holcomb, dizzy and gasping, manipulated the controls frenziedly, his eyes fastened on the dropping pressure-gauge. From somewhere outside the tent a dull thud sounded. "Crashed! Darl's crashed! It's all over!" Hope gone, only the instinct of duty held him to his post. But the gauge needle quivered, ceased its steady fall and began a slow rise. Jim stared uncomprehendingly at the dial, then, as the fact seeped in, staggered to the entrance. "That's better, a lot better," he exclaimed. "But, damn it, what was that crash?"

The headquarters tent was at one edge of the circular plain. Jim's bleary eyes followed the springing arch of a vertical girder, up and up, to where it curved inward to the space ship landing lock that hung suspended from the center of the vaulted roof. Within that bulge, at the very apex, was the little conning-tower, with its peri-telescope, its arsenal of ray-guns and its huge beam-thrower that was the Dome's only means of defense against an attack from space. Jim's gaze flickered down again, wandered across the brown plain, past the long rows of canvas barracks and the derrick-like shaft-head. Hard by the further wall a crumpled white heap lay huddled.

"My God! It was his plane!" The burly Earthman sobbed as his ten-foot leaps carried him toward the wreck.

Darl was his friend as well as Chief, and together they had served the Interplanetary Trading Association, ITA, for years, working and fighting together in the wilds of the outer worlds. A thought struck him, even as he ran. "What in th' name o' Jupiter's nine moons stopped th' leak?" He glanced up, halted, his mouth open in amazement. "Well, I'm a four-tailed, horn-headed Plutonian if there ain't th' boy himself!"

Far up in the interlaced steel of the framework, so high that to his staring comrade he seemed a naked doll, Darl stood outstretched on a level beam, his tiny arms holding a minute square against the wall. Lucky it was that he was so tall and his arms so long. For the saving plate just lapped the upper rim of the hole, and stemmed the fierce current by only a half-inch margin.

The throbbing atmosphere machine in the sub-surface engine-room was replacing the lost air rapidly, and now the increasing pressure was strong enough to hold the translucent sheet against the wall by its own force. Jim saw the extended arms drop away. The manikin waved down to him, then turned to the shell again, as if to examine the emergency repair. For a moment Darl stood thus, then he was running along the girder, was climbing, ape-like, along a latticed beam that curved up and in, to swing down and merge with the bulge of the air-lock's wall.

"Like a bloomin' monkey! Can't he wait till I get him down with th' spare plane?"

But Darl wasn't thinking of coming down. Something he had seen through the translucent repair sheet was sending him to the look-out tower within the air-lock. Hand over hand he swung, tiny above that vast immensity of space. In his forehead a pulse still jumped as his heart hurried new oxygen to thirsty cells. He held his gaze steadily to the roof. A moment's vertigo, a grip missed by the sixteenth of an inch, the slightest failure in the perfect team-play of eye and brain, and rippling muscle, and he would crash, a half mile beneath, against hard rock.

At last he reached the curving side of the landing lock. But the platform at the manhole entrance jutted diagonally below him, fifteen feet down and twelve along the bellying curve. Darl measured the angle with a glance as he hung outstretched, then his body became a human pendulum over the sheer void. Back and forth, back and forth he swung, then, suddenly, his grasp loosened and a white arc flashed through the air.

Breathless, Jim saw the far-off figure flick across the chasm toward the jutting platform. He saw Darl strike its edge, bit his lip as his friend teetered on the rim and swayed slowly outward. Then Darl

found his balance. An imperative gesture sent the watcher back to his post, his sorrel-topped head shaking slowly in wonderment.

Darl Thomas ran headlong up the staircase that spiralled through the dim cavern. "No mistake about it," he muttered. "I saw something moving outside that hole. Two little leaks before, and now this big one. There's something a lot off-color going on around here."

Quickly he reached the little room at the summit. He flung the canvas cover from the peri-telescope screen. Tempered by filters as it was the blaze of light from outside hit him like a physical blow. He adjusted the aperture and beat eagerly over the view-table.

Vacation jaunts and travel view-casts have made the moon's landscape familiar to all. Very similar was the scene Darl scanned, save that the barren expanse, pitted and scarred like Luna's, glowed almost liquid under the beating flame of a giant sun that flared in a black sky. Soundless, airless, lifeless, the tumbled plain stretched to a jagged horizon.

The Earthman depressed the instrument's eye, and the silvered outside of the Dome, aflame with intolerable light, swept on to the screen disk. The great mirror seemed alive with radiant heat as it shot back the sun's withering darts. The torrid temperature of the

oven within, unendurable save to such veterans of the far planets as Darl and Jim Holcomb, was conveyed to it through the ground itself. The direct rays of the sun, nearer by fifty million miles than it is to Earth, would have blasted them, unprotected, to flaked carbon in an eye-blink.

An exclamation burst from Darl. A half-inch from the Dome's blazing arc, a hundred yards in actuality, the screen showed a black fleck, moving across the waste! Darl quickly threw in the full-power lens, and the image leaped life-size across the table. The black fleck was the shadow of a space-suited figure that lumbered slowly through the viscous, clinging footing. How came this living form, clad in gleaming silver, out there in that blast-furnace heat? In one of the space suit's claw-like hands a tube flashed greenly.

Darl's hand shot out to the trigger of the beam-thrower. Aimed by the telescope's adjustment, the ray that could disintegrate a giant space flier utterly flared out at his finger's pressure. Against the lambent brown a spot glowed red where the beam struck. But, warned by some uncanny prescience, the trespasser leaped aside in the instant between Thomas' thought and act. Before Darl could aim and fire again the foe had dodged back and was protected by the curve of the Dome itself.

Two white spots showed on either side of Darl's nostrils. His mouth was a thin white slit, his eyes gray marbles. Standing against the wall beside him was a space suit, mirror-surfaced and double-walled against the planet's heat. In a few moments he was encased within it, had snatched a pocket ray-gun from the long rack, and was through the door to the auxiliary air-lock. The air soughed out in response to his swift thrust at a lever, a second door opened, and he was on the outside, reeling from the blast of that inferno of light and heat.

For a moment the Earthman was dazzled, despite the smoked quartz eye-pieces in his helmet. Then, as his eyes grew used to the glare, he saw, far below, the erect figure of the stranger. The man was standing still, waiting. His immobility, the calm confidence with which he stood there, was insolently challenging. Darl's rage flared higher at the sight.

Scorning the ladder that curved along the Dome to the ground, he threw himself at the polished round side of the great hemisphere. With increasing speed he slid downward, the gleaming surface breaking only slightly the velocity of his fall. On Earth this would have been suicidal. Even here, where the pull of gravity was so much less, the feat was insanely reckless. But the heat-softened ground, the strength of his metal suit, brought Darl safely through.

He whirled to meet the expected onslaught of the interloper. The green tube was aimed straight at him! The Earthman started to bring his own weapon up when something exploded in his brain. There was a moment of blackness; then he was again clear-minded. But he could not move—not so much as the tiny twist of his wrist that would have brought his own weapon into play.

Frozen by this strange paralysis, Darl Thomas saw the giant figure approach. The apparition bent and slung him to its shoulder. Glowing walls rose about him, dimmed. The Terrestrian knew that he was being carried down into one of the myriad openings that honeycombed the terrain. The luminescence died; there was no longer light enough to penetrate to his helmet's darkened goggles.

Frantic questions surged through the captured Earthman's mind. Who was his captor? From where, and how, had he come to Mercury? Jim, Angus McDermott, and himself were the only Terrestrians on the planet; of that he was certain. Only one or two of the reptile-skinned Venusian laborers had sufficient intelligence to manipulate a space suit, and they were unquestionably loyal.

This individual was a giant who towered far above Darl's own six feet. The Mercurian natives—he had seen them when ITA's expedition had cleaned out the burrows beneath the Dome and

sealed them up—were midgets, the tallest not more than two feet in height. Whatever he was, why was the stranger trying to destroy the Dome? Apparently Thomas himself was not to be killed offhand: the jolting journey was continuing interminably. With enforced patience the Earthman resigned himself to wait for the next scene in this strange drama.

In the headquarters tent Jim's usual grin was absent as he moved restlessly among the switches and levers that concentrated control of all the Dome's complex machinery. "Darl's been gone a devilish long time," he muttered to himself. "Here it's almost time for shifts to change and he's not back yet."

A bell clanged, somewhere up in the mass of cables that rose from the control board. For the next ten minutes Holcomb had no time for worry as he rapidly manipulated the innumerable wheels and handles in accord with the vari-colored lights that flickered on a huge ground-glass map of the sub-Mercurian passages. On the plain outside there was a vast rustling, a many-voiced twittering and squeaking that was not quite bird-like in tone. Through the opened tent-flap one could see the stream of Venusian workers, their work-period ended, pouring out of the shaft-head and filing between the ordered ranks of others whose labors were about to begin.

They were queer-looking specimens, these gentle, willing allies of the Earthmen. Their home planet is a place of ever-clouded skies and constant torrential rains. And so the Venusians were amphibians, web-footed, fish-faced, their skin a green covering of horny scales that shed water and turned the sharp thorns of their native jungles. When intrepid explorers discovered in the mazes of Mercury's spongy interior the surta that was so badly needed as a base material for synthetic food to supply Earth's famine-threatened population, it was to these loyal and amiable beings that ITA's engineers turned for workers who could endure the stifling heat of the underground workings.

The tent-flap was thrust aside, and a hawk-nosed Scot came sleepily in, to be enthusiastically greeted by Jim.

"Hello, you old Caledonian. 'Bout time you showed up."

The newcomer fixed the speaker with a dour gaze. "An' why should I commence my tour o' dooty befair the time?"

"Because your chief, Mr. Darl Thomas, decided that he's a filliloo bird or somethin', flew to his little nest up top, an' forgot to come down again."

"Is this ain o' your jests, James Holcomb? I eenquire mairly that I may ken when to laugh."

"It's no joke, Mac. Last I see o' him he's skippin' around the roof like he has a buzzin' propeller stuck to his shoulder blades. He lights on th' air-lock platform, pops inside, an' goes dead for all I know."

From his bony legs to his scrawny neck the Scotchman's angular body, as nearly nude as that of the others, radiated the doubt that was expressed in every seam and wrinkle of his hatchet face.

"That's straight, Angus, may I kiss a pink-eared vanta if it ain't. Here's what happened." The bantering grin disappeared from Jim's countenance as he detailed the events that had preceded Darl's vanishing. "That was two hours ago," he concluded, "and I've been getting pretty uneasy about him."

"Why did na ye call me, so that ain o' us micht eenvestigate?"

"Hell. Darl wasn't born yesterday, he can take care of himself. Besides, your last shift was pretty strenuous, an' I thought I'd let you sleep. No tellin' what might happen next; this forsaken place has been givin' me the jim-jams lately."

"Your conseederation is touching, but—" A scratching at the door, accompanied by a high squeak, interrupted him.

To Jim's shouted "Come in," there entered a Venusian, whose red rosette fastened to the green scales of his skin marked him an overseer. In the thread-like fingers of his hand he held a time-sheet, but the nervous pulsing of his gill-membranes caused Holcomb to exclaim anxiously: "What's wrong, Ran-los? No accident, I hope?"

The shrill combination of squeaks and twitterings that came from the man-reptile's toothless mouth meant nothing to the Scot, but Jim's last service had been on Venus and he had gained a working knowledge of the language. Finally the interchange was ended, and Ran-los bowed himself out. Jim turned to his companion.

"There's some more queer stuff for you, Angie. Just before shift-change, Ran-los heard odd sounds from the other side of the barrier at the end of gallery M-39. Says they seemed like signals o' some kind. He's a wise old bird and if he's worried about something it's damn well worth lookin' into. I don't know whether to find out first what's happened to Darl, or—"

Again there was an interruption; this time from the usually silent radio-communication set in the far corner. Jim leaped to the

instrument and snapped on the head-set. Angus leaned over him, watching his intent face.

Faintly, as from an immense distance, came the thin whistle of space-radio. "S-W-A ... S-W-A ... S-W-A...." The general attention signal for all Earth's far-flung outposts from Jupiter to Mercury! The signal was coming from "M-I-T-A," the Earth company's home station on the Moon, outside the Heaviside layer. "S-W-A ... S-W-A ... M-I-T-A ... M-I-T-A." Again the signal rose and fell.

Jim reached for the sending key and pounded out his acknowledgement: "K; M-E-R ... K; M-E-R ... K; M-E-R." He listened again, heard Venus answer, and Jupiter. Across five hundred million miles of space ITA men were responding to the roll-call of Earth. A reminiscent smile crossed Jim's face as he recognized the stuttering fist of Rade Perrin, on Eros. Rade always sent as if he were afraid the instrument would snap at his fingers.

M-I-T-A was signalling again, and now came the message: "S-W-A. All trading posts, mines and colonies are warned to prepare for possible attack. The Earth Government has just announced the receipt of an ultimatum from—" A raucous howl cut across the message and drowned it out. The siren blast howled on and on, mocking Jim's straining ears. "Well I'll be—Interference! Deliberate

blanketing! The rats! The—" He blazed into a torrent of profanity whose imaginativeness was matched only by its virulence.

Mac was clutching his shoulder, stirred for once out of his vaunted "deegnity." "What is it, mon, what is it?"

"War, you bloody Scotchman, war! That's what it is!"

"War! Foosh, man, 'tis eempossible!"

"The hell it's impossible! Damn, and Darl not here! Take over, Mac; I've got to go up an' get him!"

In the meantime Thomas' helpless journey had come to an end. After an interminable descent in what to him had been pitch darkness, the giant who was carrying him halted. Darl had heard the whistling inrush of air into some lock, then the clanging of a door. He felt himself hurled to the ground. Fumbling hands tugged at him, drew off his space suit.

The dim light of the cavern, as the helmet was dragged from his head, hurt Darl's eyes. Salt sweat stung them. It was hot, hotter than the Dome, hot as it was in the surta mine, where only the nerveless Venusians could work for any length of time.

Darl struggled to focus his eyes on a blurred blue form that towered above him. He felt sharp claws scratch at him and realized that cords were being passed around his limp body. They cut tightly into his legs and his arms. Then he was staring at a tube in the hand of his captor. Its end glowed with a brilliant purple light, and he felt a flood of reawakened energy warm him. His head jerked up, he strained against the taut, strong fibers binding him. The paralysis was gone, but he was still helpless.

A husky, rumbling voice broke the silence. "I wouldn't struggle, Earthman, if I were you. Even should you get free I still have my ray-tube. And my little friends would ask nothing better than your body to play with."

Darl writhed to a sitting posture. Now he could see his mysterious abductor clearly. This eight-foot, blue-feathered individual, with curved beak and beady eyes glittering from his naked, repulsively wrinkled head, was a Martian! Despite the human shape of his body, despite his jointed limbs and thumbed hands, this denizen of the red planet resembled a vulture far more than he did any other Earth creature.

The Earthman's pride of race came to his rescue. "What's the game?" he growled. "Looking for trouble?" There was nothing in Darl's

voice to show the fear that chilled him. Behind the Martian he could see vaguely a group of little yellow Mercurians.

"I'll ask all the questions here. And you'll answer them, too, if you're wise. Even your dull mind should comprehend that you are in my power."

Darl decided to proceed more cautiously. "What do you want from me?" he asked.

"I want," the Martian answered, "the recognition signal of Earth's space-ships."

"What!" The ejaculation burst from Darl's throat. This alien wanted the secret code, the watch-word that distinguished Earth's space ships, that gained for them free admittance to ITA's armed posts on the outer planets! This could mean only one thing, that the long rivalry, the ancient dispute between Earth and Mars was about to flare into open war. Any friendly visit from a foreign flier would be heralded by word from M-I-T-A. Thomas' face became a stony mask, covering the tumult of his mind.

"You understood. I want the Earth recognition signal at once—and after that, the surrender of the Dome." The very calmness of the

husky tones was a threat.

"Never!"

"I warn you, Darl Thomas. It would be the better part of wisdom for you to yield willingly what I ask. You will give in eventually, and the means of persuasion I shall use will not be exactly—pleasant."

"You'll get nothing from me!"

The outlander's lidless eyes were filmed with a gray membrane. His head thrust forward, the feathered ruff beneath it bristled. Darl braced himself to withstand the swooping pounce that seemed imminent, the slash of the sharp beak. A burring rattle broke the momentary hush. The Martian relaxed, turned to the Mercurian from whom the sound had come and replied with staccato vibrance.

As the cave filled with a whirring tumult Darl had a chance to examine the Mercurian natives crowding around his prostrate body. They were little yellow midgets, ranging from eighteen inches to two feet in height. Half of their small stature was taken up by snouted heads, with saucer-like, crimson eyes, and long white tusks jutting from foam-flecked mouths. The trunks were globular. The spindling legs and thin arms ended in sharp claws. There was an impression of

animal ferocity about these tiny beings that stamped them as utter savages.

His captor was speaking to the Earthman again, his horny beak parted in what might have been a grim smile. "My friends remind me that I promised you to them. They have not forgotten how you and your fellows drove them from their burrows."

Darl was suddenly cold, though the sweat still streamed from his bound body. An uncontrollable shudder took him as he saw what the diminutive claws of the midgets held. While the Dome was still an unfinished framework one of the Terrestrian artisans had somehow been isolated from his fellows. Thomas had been of the party that found what was left of him, and the memory was still a throbbing nightmare.

"Once more! Will you give me the recognition signal?"

Darl shook his head, and prayed for sudden death. The Martian spoke to the dwarfs. They started forward, saliva drooling from their tusks. Darl gritted his teeth. He would hold out as long as was humanly possible.

A shrill rhythmic whistle came from somewhere outside. The blue

giant started and snapped something to the Mercurians. Then he turned to Darl. "I must leave you for a little while," he said. "You have till I return to change your mind." With a parting admonition to the savages he was gone through a side door that Thomas had not noticed before.

Grateful for the postponement, however short, of the inescapable ordeal, Darl took stock of his situation. He lay, firmly bound, on the gritty rock floor of a low-ceiled cave about twelve feet square. In one wall was a door of red metal. The portal through which the Martian had vanished was next to it. Darl repressed an exclamation when he saw the opposite wall. It was of solid metal, bluishly iridescent. That was beryllium steel, the alloy from which the barriers at the terminals of the surta mine were fashioned. He forced his head higher. There were the marks of the jointures, the weldings that he himself had made.

The discovery seemed only to emphasize the helplessness of his predicament. His faithful Venusians, Ran-los, Ta-ira, and the rest were just on the other side of the three-inch plate of toughened steel. Three inches—yet it might have been as many hundred miles for all the help they could give him.

The yellow pigmies were circling in a macabre dance, their crimson

eyes turned always toward him, hate glowing from their crawling depths. The whistle beyond changed in character. Darl recognized it. It was a Martian space-radio, the code of which Earth scientists had never been able to decipher. The Mercurian circle tightened, the fetid smell of the dwarfs was overpowering. Low at first, then louder and louder came the rattling cacophony of their chant. It filled the confined space with an overpowering clamor.

Darl writhed again, rolling over and over till he had reached the barrier. The pigmies gave way before him; evidently they had been warned to keep their claws off. With his insteps Thomas could reach the helmet of his space suit, where it had been dropped against the wall. He drove it against the metal and the clangor of its striking reverberated through the chamber. Darl managed to regulate the sound. He was now hammering out double knocks, long and short, spaced in the dots and dashes of the Morse code. "H-E-L-P D-A-R-L H-E-L-P D-A-R-L H-E-L-P...."

It was like some scene out of a madman's dream, this dim-lit cavern with its circling, dancing pigmies, the human figure lying sidewise on the ground, the rattling, savage chant and the metallic tattoo of Darl's hopeless message. A diabolic orgy of weird sound and crisscrossing shadows.

It seemed hours that he pounded the helmet against the wall, hoping that the sound of it would be audible above the clamor of the midgets. His knees and hips were aching and numb, his leg ripped, almost to the bone by the sharp edges of the jagged floor. A sudden thought struck him. The fiber thongs that bound him were also rubbing against the rock. His flesh was terribly torn. Perhaps the thongs, too, had been frayed, weakened by the long continued friction.

He stopped the pounding signals and began to force his knees apart with all the power of his burly calves. The cords cut into his bulging muscles, cut into and through his skin. The veins stood out on his forehead, his neck was a corded pillar, his teeth bit through his lip as he stifled a scream of pain. Then, startlingly, the fibers snapped. His legs at least were free! He could fight, die fighting, and take these others with him into oblivion!

Darl leaped to his feet. Before the astounded natives realized what was up he was charging into their circle. A well aimed kick sent one crashing against the further wall. Another crunched against the rock. Then they were on him, a frothing wave of tiny furies. A score or more, they swarmed over him as a pack of African wild dogs swarms over a huge water-buffalo marked for the kill. Their claws scratched and tore, their sharp fangs stabbed into his flesh. His arms were still

tightly bound to his sides, and he lashed out with his sandaled feet, swung his shoulders like battering rams, whirled in a dervish dance. Their brittle bones cracked under his hammer blows. They dropped from him like squashed flies. But, small as they were, he was terrifically outnumbered. By sheer weight of numbers they dragged him down, and piled on top of him as he lay, quivering and half-conscious, on the blood-soaked floor.

Through the blackness that welled and burst in his brain, one thought held. He had fooled the Martian, for in another instant the enraged savages, would kill him and the password to Earth's outposts would be safe. Already, he felt their fangs at his throat.

A whirring rattle cut through the turmoil like a whip-lash, and the heap of pigmies swiftly scattered. The man-bird from Mars was in the room. To Darl he was a blurred blueness from which glittered those two jet beads of eyes. As from a distance he heard a rumble, its meaning beating dully to him. "Not so easy, Thomas, not so easy. I want that signal, and by Tana, I'm going to have it."

The Earthman felt a current of cooler air. Instinctively he drew it into his lungs. It swept him up from the blackness that was closing in about him, brought him back to consciousness and despair. The chattering Mercurians crowded round to commence their interrupted

orgy. "For the last time, Earthman, will you talk?"

Darl shook his head weakly and closed his eyes. In a moment—

Suddenly there was a crash of metal on metal. Another! The clangor of falling steel. Now someone was shouting, "Darl, Darl, are you alive?" All about him were shrill twitterings, squeaking calls, squeals and scutterings. Darl's nostrils stung with the odor of burned flesh. A door slammed....

He opened his eyes on a confused riot, saw Jim crouched, flashing ray-gun in hand. There was a hole in the barrier, and a mob of green-scaled Venusians were crowding through. Jim's ray caught the last Mercurian and the dwarf vanished in a cloud of acrid, greasy smoke.

"Thank God you've come!" Darl managed to gasp. Then cool blackness closed around him.

Darl Thomas lay on a cot in the headquarters tent, swathed from head to foot in an inch-thick wrapping of bandages. Jim's theory was that if one bandage was good, two were better, and he had cleaned out the post's slender stock. The red-haired Earthman was seated at the cot's side, watching the taciturn Scot operating the control board. He was telling Darl of the stirring message from M-I-T-A, and of the

blanketing interference that marred the completion of the message.

"I didn't know what to do first," he continued, "whether to go down below and find out what Ran-los was battin' about, or shoot up to you in the connin' tower with the message. Like the thick-head I am, I picked the wrong thing. I sure got the gimmicks when I found the look-out empty, an' a space suit an' ray-gun gone." Jim grinned mirthlessly. "I was runnin' around in circles. You were outside, God alone knows how long. Believe me, I had you crossed off the list! That left two of us. With a war on, somebody had to stand guard in the look-out, the control board here had to be watched, an' somebody else had to get below.

"I was just tryin' to figure out a way o' cuttin' myself in half when I thought o' Ran-los. For a Weenie he's got a heck of a lot of sense. I zoomed down, hauled him out o' his bunk, scooted back up, showed him how to work the peri-telescope an' the big beam-thrower, an' left him there on guard."

"Best thing you could have done." Darl's voice was muffled by the bandages in which his head, as well as the rest of his body, was swathed. "He's got a head on his shoulders, that bird."

"Somethin' told me to take a ray-gun down in the mine with me. I

was just steppin' out o' the elevator when I caught your last signal; -L-P D-A-R-L was all I got, but it was enough. How you ever got the other side of the barrier had me wingin', but you were there right enough, and yellin' for help. Ran-los had been doin' some repairs on a head support an' his weldin' machine was still there. Takin' an awful chance on there bein' air on the other side, I butted it up against the wall, shot the flame against the steel, and when she was soft enough had some of the Weenies smash her in with sledge-hammers. First thing I see is you, stretched out in a pool o' blood, with a couple of those yellow imps just gettin' to work on you. I clipped them first—that gave the Martian a chance to get away. An' then—well, you know the rest."

"I owe you one for that, Jim. Too bad, though, the big fellow escaped; we'll hear from him again, or I don't know the breed. Wonder how he got on the planet."

"The sucker must 'a' stowed away on the last recruit ship from Venus, slipped in a case o' tools or somethin'. Mars has labor agents there, too, you know, for their farms on Ganymede."

"Possibly. He knew my name, and that I was chief here. He's rigged up an air-lock out there, though I can't figure out how he gets the air."

"That's easy. While I was repairin' the barrier I found a pipe runnin' through. He's been stealin' ours. Which, by the same token, is why he was punchin' holes in the Dome rather than down below, where he would have been safer from discovery."

"So that's it. Get anything more on the space-radio?"

"Nope. Angus has kept the ear-flaps on, but the ether is still jammed. Hey, what're you up to?"

Darl was swinging his bandaged body up from the cot that had been set up in the headquarters tent at his insistence. "Can't lie on my back," he panted, "with that devil loose on the planet. Lord knows what he's up to now. We're short-handed enough as it is."

He rose to his feet, staggering with weakness and loss of blood. But his indomitable will drove him on. "I'll take over the control board. Send Angus up to relieve Ran-los, and you get below and speed up production. Earth will need double quantities of surta for food, now that there's a war on."

Jim turned to convey the order to the Scot, but he whirled to the tent-flap instead as a riot of sound exploded outside. He tore aside the canvas, and now there was a burst of shrill, frightened Venusian

cries, and a deeper, rattling chorus. Out on the Dome floor, pouring from the shaft-head in a panic torrent, came the Venusians. And among them, leaping, slashing, dragging them down, were countless little yellow men, their fangs and tusks and curving claws crimson with the blood of their victims.

"Darl, Mac, they've broken through! The Mercs have broken through!" The brown plain was a blood-spattered battlefield. Here and there little groups of the green men, braver than the rest, fought with spanner and hammer and whatever improvised weapon they may have found. "Come on, give 'em hell!" The three Earthmen dashed out, weapons in hand. But friend and foe were so intermingled that they could not use the devastating ray of their hand-guns. The fighting Venusians were vanishing under a tossing sea of yellow imps. And still the dwarfs poured forth from the mine entrance.

A blue form towered, far back, where all green had vanished, and only Mercurians were left. The Martian's beak opened in a rattling call. A group of hundreds of pigmies suddenly left the main fight, and came forward with short, swift steps. They dashed straight for the Earth trio and cut them off from the Venusians they were running to aid.

Side by side the three fought. Their weapons grew hot in their hands as the beams cut great swaths in the seething ranks. The attackers halted, gave back, then surged forward again as the roar of their alien commander lashed them on.

The Earthmen faced the frenzied throng. A cleared circle was still around them. Beyond, the Venusians were all down. The Mercurian mob was closing in, the Terrestrians' rays had lost half their range. In moments now the ray-guns would be exhausted.

"The plane!" Darl shouted. "Back to the plane, it's our only chance."

The gyrocopter that could carry them aloft, out of the rout, was fifty feet away. They fought through to it and reached it just as the last faint charge flashed from Mac's tube. Jim was at the controls, Darl smashed his useless projector into the chattering face of a dwarf that had leaped on the Scot's shoulders and dragged Angus into the cockpit.

The overloaded flier zoomed to the landing at the lofty air-lock's manhole and hovered as Darl and Angus slipped home the hooks that held it to the platform. "The spy has the Dome," Jim grunted, "but by God, he hasn't got us. We'll be safe in the lock up here, till help comes. And then—"

"Safe is it?" Angus broke in. "Mon, luik ye what those bairns fra hell are up to the noo."

A yellow tide was rising about the base of each of the latticed steel arches that vaulted to the Earthmen's refuge. On every side the dwarfs were climbing, were swarming up the walls in numbers so great that they concealed the metal beneath. Up, up they came, slowly but surely. And right in the center of the plain, ankle-deep in the torn fragments of the murdered Venusians, was the Martian, directing the attack.

Jim groaned. "I might've known he'd never let us get away. It's slow bells for us, I guess. Hey, where's Darl?"

"Gone weethin. No, guid losh, he's here!"

Darl appeared, his features pale and drawn, carrying an armful of ray-guns. "Grab these," he snapped. "We're not licked yet."

"Licked, hell!" Jim's roar reverberated. "We've just begun to fight!" The Scot was silent, but the battle light shone in his eyes. In another moment the Terrestrians were kneeling, were raking the roof girders as the mounting Mercurians came within range. Each had two ray-guns in his hands, and a little pile of extra tubes beside him. They

fought silently, wasting not a single blast.

Six white rays flamed through the misty, humid air, and striking the teeming girders, swept them clean. A greasy, horrible smoke cloud gathered along the shell and drifted slowly down, till the concrete blocks from which the steel framework sprang were hidden in a black pall. Fighters, these three, true ITA men who had left memories of their battle-prowess on more than one wild planet! Gaunt-bodied demi-gods of war, they hurled crackling bolts of destruction from their perch at the Dome top. By hundreds, by thousands, the Mercurian pigmies vanished in dark vapor, or plunged, blackened corpses, into the fog that billowed below.

One by one the tubes were discharged and tossed down at the seething mob. The heaped weapons dwindled, and still the climbing hordes renewed themselves, came on in endless mounting streams to sure destruction. The open tunnel vomited forth a torrent of gibbering dwarfs. From the uttermost burrows of the planet the pigmies were flooding in at the call of the Martian who stood scatheless beneath and lashed them on with the strange dominance he held over them. The Earthmen fought on, endlessly, till they were sick of killing, nauseated with slaughter. And still the snouted, red-eyed imps came on.

Jim snatched up his last two ray-guns. Out of the corner of his eye he noted that Darl was using but one, the other, his last, was thrust into the chief's belt. He wondered at this, but a new spurt of yellow above the oily fog wiped the question from his lips. "Swallow that, you filthy lice! Hope you like the way it tastes!" His guns spouted death.

"I'm through!" The call came at last from McDermott. "Me too!" Jim Holcomb hurled his final, futile tubes down at the blue figure of the Mars man. A moment's hush held the trio. Then Jim flexed his great hands. "Well, these'll take care of a couple more o' them before I check in."

"No you don't," Darl barked, his face a graven image. "Inside with you. The lock will hold 'em off."

"Yeah? Look."

Thomas swung in the direction Jim was pointing. Rising above the murk, something glinted in the pale light. On the furthest upright a clumped group of climbing savages were struggling to drag up one of the welding machines, a long black hose snaking from its cylindrical bulk.

"They'll cut through the steel in fifteen minutes with that. The

bloody bugger ain't missin' a trick."

"Inside, I tell you." Darl's crisp tone of command brooked no denial. The three crowded into the cool recesses of the manmade aerie. Angus slammed the steel door shut. Even if by some miracle the Dome wall should be pierced and the air in the main vault dissipated into outer space, this air-tight compartment hung from the hemisphere's roof would remain, a last refuge, till the atmosphere within had become poisonous through the Earthmen's slow breathing. But the Martian had anticipated Darl's final move. The oxy-hydrogen jet of the welding machine the dwarfs were hoisting would make short work of their final defense.

From the conning-tower above Ran-los called excitedly. Through all the long battle the Venusian had remained steadfast at the peri-telescope, scanning the vacant terrain outside, and the heavens. As Darl and Jim dashed for the stairs Mac ran after them, crying out, "What did he say, mon?"

"Space ship in sight," Darl flung over his shoulder as he reached the upper landing.

"Praise be! Noo the haythan weel get his desairts!"

"Yeah, maybe—if it's an Earth ship. But we won't be here to see it."

Jim's red head was bending over the peri-telescope view-screen. "She's still thirty thousand miles away. Give her a speed of fifteen per second—she'll have to slow up to land, can't make it under forty-five minutes. By then we'll be in little pieces. It took me ten minutes to burn through the barrier when I rescued Darl, and it won't take the Mercs any longer to get at us."

Darl was very sober as he looked on with narrowed eyes. Against a background of velvet black, gold spangled, the slim space-traveler showed. The sun's rays caught her, and she was a tiny silver fish in the boundless void.

"Luik ye, mon, luik ye!" Angus, fairly dancing with excitement, elbowed Darl aside. "She's from Airth, richt enow!" At the nose of the oncoming flier a rapid succession of colored lights had flashed, the recognition signal that should give her safe access to the Dome. Again there was a coruscation of coded flashes. "She's a battle cruiser, what's mair!" the Scot exclaimed.

Darl sprang to the keyboard that manipulated the signal lights from the Dome's roof. "No use," he said, after a short while. "The Martian has cut off the current from the dynamos. I can't warn the ship." He

made a hopeless gesture.

Jim looked at him wonderingly. "Warn 'em? What for? Even if we are all dead when she reaches here, at least she'll clean up the Mercs, and retake the Dome for Earth."

"Don't you see it? When the Mars man has once blasted his way in here and disposed of us, he'll be ready for the space ship. Her captain can't suspect anything wrong. He must have left Earth at the time of the ultimatum, and would easily get here before any ship could be sent out from Mars. He'll come on till he's within range of the beam-thrower, and the Martian will aim, press the trigger and the Earth ship and her crew of a half a thousand brave lads will be star-dust."

"Oh God!" Jim was white-faced. "Isn't there anything we can do? Maybe if he doesn't get our all-clear signal he'll sheer off." This was clutching at straws.

"Why should he? He must know how short-handed we are, and will simply think we're not on watch, or that our signal lights are out of order. Matter of fact, if he were at all suspicious he should be alternating his course right now—and he hasn't. Look."

Seemingly motionless, but really splitting the ether with terrific

speed, the warship was coming straight on to garrison the beleaguered post. She had never wavered from her straight course for the Dome. The little group was silent, watching the help that was coming at last, coming too late.

From below there came a thunder of sound. Jim slid down the stairs. An irregular disk on the wall was glowing cherry-red from the heat of the blow-torch without, and the metal was quivering under the Mercurian's sledge-hammer blows. "Darl's right," he almost sobbed as he gazed helplessly. "They'll be through in no time. The Dome's gone, we're gone, the space ship's gone!"

"Let me pass, Jim." Thomas' quiet voice sounded behind him. Holcomb turned. His leader was in a space suit, the helmet still unfastened.

"Blazes! Where the devil are you going?"

"Here, cover me with this till I reach the gyrocopter, then get back quick, and seal the air-lock." Darl thrust into Jim's hand the ray-gun he had previously reserved. "There's only one way to kill off the Martian and his mob. I'm taking it."

Suddenly Jim Holcomb understood. "No, Darl, no—you can't do it!

Not you! Let me go! I'm just a dumbhead. Let me go!"

"Thanks, Jimmy, but it's my place." Darl's voice was low, and very calm. "I was in charge, and I lost the Dome. If I can save the boys on the ship, and you two, it's the least I can do. Good-by, old man. Give my regards to Earth."

Thomas' face was gray-white. The thick bandages that still swathed him, Jim glimpsed them through the open neckpiece of the suit, gave him the semblance of a mummy. The helmet clicked shut.
Swallowing a lump that rose in his throat, Jim pulled open the door. A wave of Mercurians surged in, to be seared into nothingness by his weapon. He was in the doorway, his ray sweeping the platform clear.

Darl was out now, stepping into the flier that still hung by its hooked moorings. Jim caught a flash of blue and looked up. The Martian was hanging to a girder just above, his green tube pointing straight at Darl. A white ray spurted from Jim's gun. The Martian's weapon and the hand that held it vanished in the sizzling blast. The plane was loose! Jim leaped inside the air-lock, slammed the steel door shut, clamped it, and sprang for the quartz peer-hole.

Darl's gyrocopter was diving on a long slant for the Dome wall. Faster and faster it went, till all Jim could see was a white streak in

the smoky dimness. And now he could see the vast interior, the teeming plain, the dwarf-festooned girders and roof-beams. He stood rigid, waiting breathlessly. Then the plane struck—fair in the center of a great panel of quartz. The wall exploded in a burst of flying, shattered splinters. A deafening crash rocked the Dome.

Jim clung to his port-hole, tears rolling down his cheeks, unashamed. The plane, and Darl, vanished. Jim saw the black smoke masses whirl through the jagged hole in the Dome's wall as the air burst out in a cyclonic gust. He saw the vast space filled with falling Mercurians, saw a blue form plunge down and crash far below. He knew that in all that huge hemisphere, and in the burrows beneath it, there was no life save himself, and Angus, and the faithful Ran-los. For only in this compartment that clung to the roof of the Dome was there left air to breathe. And, from the void beyond, the silver space ship sped on toward Mercury, sped on to a safe landing that, but for Darl Thomas's sacrifice, would have been her doom....

Guided by Jim and Angus, a party of men from the battle-flier, equipped with oxygen respirators, went to the aid of Darl. They dug him out from under his crumpled plane and the piled splinters of quartz. His metal was dented and twisted, but unpierced. They carried him tenderly to the space ship, and carefully set him down. The ship's physician listened long with his stethoscope, then looked

up and smiled.

"He's alive," the doctor said, "just barely alive. The thick padding of bandages must have saved him from the full shock of the crash. They're hard to kill, these ITA men. I'll be able to bring him around, God willing."

May 1932

139 Pirates of the Gorm by Nat Schachner

The trail of vanished space ships leads Grant Pemberton to a marvellous lake of fire.

Aproximate word count: 9,800

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Grant Pemberton sat up suddenly in his berth, every sense straining and alert. What was it that had awakened him in the deathly stillness of the space-flier? His right hand slid under the pillow and clutched the handle of his gun. Its firm coolness was a comforting reality.

There it was again. A tiny scratching on the door as though someone was fumbling for the slide-switch. Very quietly he sat, waiting, his finger poised against the trigger. Suddenly the scratching ceased, and the panel moved slowly open. A thin oblong patch glimmered in the light of the corridor beyond. Grant tensed grimly.

A hand moved slowly around the slit—a hand that held a pencil-ray.

Even in the dim illumination, Grant noted the queer spatulate fingers. A Ganymedan! In the entire solar system only they had those strange appendages.

Pemberton catapulted out of his berth like a flash. Not a moment too soon, either. A pale blue beam slithered across the blackness, impinged upon the pillow where his head had lain only a moment before. The air-cushion disintegrated into smoldering dust. Grant's weapon spat viciously. A hail of tiny bullets rattled against the panel, and exploded, each in a puffball of flame.

But it was too late. Already the unknown enemy was running swiftly down the corridor, the sucking patter of his feet giving more evidence of his Ganymedan origin. Pemberton sprang to the door, thrust it open just in time to see a dark shape disappearing around a bend in the corridor. There was no use of pursuit; the passageway ended in a spray of smaller corridors, from which ambush would be absurdly easy.

He glanced swiftly around. The corridor was empty, silent in the dim, diffused light. The motley passengers were all sound asleep; no one had been disturbed by the fracas. Earthmen, green-faced Martians, fish-scaled Venusians, spatulate Ganymedans and homeward-bound Callistans, all reposing through the sleep-period in

anticipation of an early landing in Callisto.

All were asleep, that is, but one. That brought Pemberton back to the problem of his mysterious assailant. Why had this Ganymedan tried to whiff him out of existence? Grant frowned. No one on board knew of his mission, not even the captain. On the passenger list he was merely Dirk Halliday, an inconspicuous commercial traveler for Interspace Products. Yet someone had manifestly penetrated his disguise and was eager to remove him from the path of whatever deviltry was up. Who?

Grant gave a little start, then swore softly. Of course! Why hadn't he thought of it before! The scene came back to him, complete in every detail, as though he were once more back on Earth, in the small, simply furnished office of the Interplanetary Secret Service.

The Chief of the Service was glancing up at him keenly. Beside him was a tall, powerfully shouldered Ganymedan, Miro, Inspector for Ganymede. Grant looked at him with a faint distaste as he sat there, drumming on the arm of his chair with his spatulate fingers, his soft-suction padded hoofs curled queerly under the seat. There was something furtive, too, about the red lidless eyes that shifted with quick unwinking movements.

But then, Pemberton had small use for the entire tribe of Ganymedans. Damned pirates, that's all they were. It was not many years back since they had been the scourge of the solar system, harrying spatial commerce with their swift piratical fliers, burning and slaying for the mere lust of it.

That is, until an armada of Earth space-fliers had broken their power in one great battle. The stricken corsairs were compelled to disgorge their accumulations of plunder, give up all their fliers and armament, and above all, the import of metals was forbidden them. For, strangely enough, none of the metallic elements was to be found on Ganymede. All their weapons, all their ships, were forged of metals from the other planets.

It was now five years since Ganymede had been admitted once again to the Planetary League, after suitable declarations of repentance. But the prohibitions still held. And Grant placed small faith in the sincerity of the repentance.

The Chief was speaking.

"We've called you in—Miro and I," he said, in his usual swift, staccato manner, "because we've agreed that you are the best man in the Service to handle the mission we have in mind."

Grant said nothing.

"It's a particularly dangerous affair," the Chief continued. "Five great space-fliers, traveling along regular traffic routes, have all vanished within the space of a month—passengers, crews and all. Not a trace of them can be found."

"No radio reports, sir?"

"That's the most curious part of the whole business. Everyone of the fliers was equipped with apparatus that could have raised the entire solar system with a call for help, and yet not the tiniest whisper was heard."

The Chief got up and paced the floor agitatedly. It was plain that this business was worrying him. Miro continued to sit calmly, seemingly indifferent. "It's uncanny, I tell you. Gone as though empty space had swallowed them up."

"You've applied routine methods, of course," Grant ventured.

"Of course," the Chief waved it aside impatiently. "But we can't discover a thing. Battle fliers have patrolled the area without success. The last ship was literally snatched away right under the

nose of a convoy. One minute it was in radio communication, and the next—whiff—it was gone."

"Where is this area you mention?" Already Pemberton's razor-edged brain was at work on the problem.

"Within a radius of five million miles from Jupiter. We've naturally considered placing an embargo upon that territory, but that would mean cutting off all of the satellites from the rest of the system."

Miro stirred. His smooth slurred voice rolled out.

"And my planet would suffer, my friend. Alas, it has already suffered too much." He evoked a sigh from somewhere in the depths of his barrel chest, and tried to cast up his small red eyes.

Grant suffered too, a faint disgust. Damn his eyes, what business had an erstwhile pirate, not too recently reformed, being self-righteous?

"Miro thinks," the Chief continued unheeding, "that the Callistans know more about this than they admit. He has a theory that Callisto is somehow gathering up these ships to use in a surprise attack against his own planet, Ganymede. He says Callisto has always hated them."

"Damn good reason," Grant said laconically.

Miro's lidless eyes flamed into sudden life. "And what do you mean by that, my friend?"

Pemberton replied calmly. "Simply that your people have harried and ravaged them for untold centuries. They were your nearest prey, you know."

Miro sprang to his feet, his soft suction pads gripping the floor as though preparatory to a spring. Gone was the sanctimonious unction of his former behavior; the ruthless savage glared out of the red eyes, the flattened fingers were twisting and curling.

"You beastly Earthling," he cried in a voice choked with rage, "I'll __"

The Chief intervened swiftly. "Here, none of that," he said sharply to Miro. "Don't say anything you'll regret later." Then he turned to Grant, who was steadily holding his ground: "There was no reason, Pemberton, to insult an inspector of the Service. Consider yourself reprimanded." But the edge of the rebuke was taken off by the slight twinkle in the Chief's eye.

Somehow a truce was patched up. Grant was to ship as an ordinary passenger on the Althea, the great passenger liner that plied between Callisto and the Earth. It was not his duty to prevent the disappearance of the vessel, the Chief insisted, but to endeavor to discover the cause. It was up to Grant then to escape, if he could, and to report to Miro on Ganymede immediately with his findings. Miro was leaving by his private Service flier at once for Ganymede, to await him. Grant thought he saw a faint sardonic gleam in the Inspector's eyes at that, but paid no particular heed to it at the time.

Now, as Grant stood in the corridor of the great space-flier, listening intently for further sounds from his hidden foe, it flashed on him. Miro knew he was on board. It was a Ganymedan who had treacherously attacked him. The puzzle was slowly fitting its pieces together. But the major piece still eluded him. What would happen to the ship?

As he turned to go back to his room, a ripping, tearing, grinding sound came to his startled ears. It was followed by a sudden swishing noise. Grant knew what that meant. A meteor had ripped into the vitals of the space-flier, and the precious air was rushing through the fissure into outer space. He whirled without an instant's hesitation and sprang down the long corridor toward the captain's quarters. If caught in time, the hole could be plugged.

Even as he ran, there was another grinding smash, then another, and another. Good Lord, they must have headed right into a meteor shower. Panels were sliding open, and people, scantily attired, thrust startled heads out into the corridor. Someone called after him, but he did not heed or stop his headlong race. He must get to the control room at once.

Already the air in the corridor was a sucking whirlpool that beat and eddied about him in its mad rush to escape. It sounded like the drumbeat of unsilenced exploders. A meteor shower of unprecedented proportions! In the back of Grant's mind as he ran, hammered a thought. Every swarm of meteors in the solar system was carefully plotted. The lanes of travel were routed to avoid them. There was no known shower in this particular area!

He collided violently with a strange ungainly figure. In his desperate haste he did not give much heed, but tried to push his way past. The figure turned on him, and then Grant stopped short, an exclamation frozen to his lips. Red unwinking eyes stared out at him from goggles set in a helmet. The body was completely inclosed in lusterless creatoid. It was a Ganymedan in a space-suit!

Grant saw the quick movement of the other toward an open side flap. He did not hesitate an instant. His fist shot out and caught the

Ganymedan flush in the throat, while his left hand simultaneously seized the creatoid-covered arm that gripped a pencil-ray. The helmeted head went back with a sickening thud. But the Ganymedan was a powerful brute. Even as he staggered back from the force of the blow, vainly trying to release the pencil-ray for action, his right foot jerked forward. The next moment both were rolling on the floor, twisting and heaving in silent combat. Frightened passengers rushed down the corridor, screaming with terror, half carried along by the hurricane wind, clambering over the combatants in an insane desire to get away, where, they knew not; and still neither relaxed his grip, seeking a mortal hold.

Pemberton was certain that his silent unknown foe held the clue to the mystery he was trying to fathom. He fought on, silently, grimly. The cold creatoid fabric was slippery, but a sudden jerk of an arm, a certain quick twist that Grant was familiar with, and his enemy went limp. Grant's breath was coming in quick, labored gasps. There was very little air left now. But he did not care. He tugged at the fastenings on the helmet. He must see who his captive was, wrest from him the heart of the mystery.

There came a clatter of feet behind him, a sudden rush of space-suited figures that overwhelmed and passed over him with trampling strides. He was torn loose from his prey, rolled over and over,

gasping for air. When he staggered to his feet again, bruised and shaken, the corridor was swept clean of figures. His assailants had carried his opponent away with them.

A wild surge of anger swept through him. More Ganymedans, these rescuers, all accoutered for airless space. They had been carefully prepared for this. Heedless of all else, he swayed groggily after them, intent only on joining battle once again. The illumination was dim now, the cries of fear that had rung through the ship were gone; only a deathly silence reigned now. His lungs were burning for want of air; even the whirlwind had died down for lack of fuel. But still he kept on, like a bloodhound on the trail.

He rounded a corner. A slight figure, swaying like a reed, collided with him and would have fallen if he had not thrust out a supporting arm. It was a girl. Even in the shadowy light he saw that she was beautiful. Her delicately molded features were drained white, but her deep pooled eyes were level in their gaze, unafraid.

"I'm sorry," he managed, finding utterance labored, "Are you hurt?"

"Quite all right," she said, with a wan smile, "if only I had some air to breathe."

The essential bravery of her touched him. He forgot all about the escaped Ganymedans.

"We'll have to try some other portion of the ship. Maybe some of the bulkheads are uninjured."

She shook her head. "I just saw the captain," she enunciated faintly. "Every bulkhead is riddled. Said—I—should get space-suit—in stateroom—though no use—doomed. Something wrong—wireless—not working...." Her voice trailed. She had fainted.

Grant caught up her slight form and lurched unsteadily into the nearest cabin. The blood was roaring in his ears now, his heart was pumping madly, but he forced himself on. His eyes strained toward the compartment where the emergency space-suit was neatly compacted. Thank God. It was still there. The inmate had evidently rushed out at the first alarm to join the terror-maddened crush.

Pemberton worked with feverish haste. Somehow he thrust the unconscious girl into the suit, tightened the helmet into position, opened the valve that started the steady measured flow of life-giving oxygen. Then, with dark spots dancing before his eyes, he deposited her gently on the floor, and managed to force himself in the now almost total darkness toward another room.

His swelling hands fumbled. The compartment was empty. Despairing, conscious only of a desire to lie down, to rest, he tried another. It, too, was empty. He stumbled over sprawled bodies, fell, managed to get up again. Again he fumbled into a compartment. The clammy feel of the creatoid never was more welcome. His breath was coming in whistling gasps. It seemed ages of strangulation before the first cool rush of oxygen expanded his tortured lungs. For a full minute he stood there, inhaling deep draughts. Then once more he was himself, his brain functioning with keen clarity.

He must find the Ganymedans and come to grips with them. There was no doubt in his mind that somehow they had been responsible for the cataclysm. Just how, he did not know, but he would find out.

But the girl. He could not leave her. Duty and something else stirred into conflict. He hesitated. In the flap of the suit was an emergency flash. Throwing the beam on the walls and flooring, he managed to retrace his steps to the cabin where he had left her. As he flashed it inside, his heart gave a great bound. She was standing now.

"Feel all right?" he spoke into the tiny transmitter that was part of the regulation equipment.

"Fine." Her warm, rich voice spoke in his ear. "But I'm not thinking

of myself. Are the others on board safe? What happened?"

"I'm afraid we are the only ones alive," he told her gravely. "As to what happened, I can only guess. We seem to have hit an unusually heavy meteor shower that riddled us through and through, though—" He paused.

"Though what?"

He ignored her question. "The first thing we've got to do is find out where we are." His flash sought the window switch and found it. He went over and pressed it. A section of the beryllium-steel casing slid smoothly open, disclosing a thick flawless quartzite port. He stared out at the dark pattern of space. Long he gazed, then a stifled exclamation reached the girl.

"What is it?" she cried.

"Come and look," he told her gravely, and made room for her.

At first she saw only the unwinking stars of space. Then her eyes shifted forward. Jupiter lay ahead, a vast cloud-girt disk. It was ominously near. Somehow it gave the effect of rushing straight at her.

Right along the equator floated, or seemed to float, a huge red oval—the Great Red Spot of Jupiter. She had heard of it before. But what caught her immediate attention was a tiny flare of intense illumination, right in the very heart of the Spot. Bright orange it was, tinged with yellow, dazzling even at this distance. She watched it eagerly. Then she gave a sudden start.

"You've seen it." Grant's voice sounded quietly in her helmet.

"Yes. Why, it—it pulsates!"

"Exactly. Now look along the hull of the ship."

She did so, and gasped again. The steel-shod sides were bathed in an unearthly orange glow.

"Why, that must be the light from the orange spot down there."

Grant nodded. "Yes, and more than that. They are power waves of a nature that we've known nothing of before. We are being pulled down along that beam straight for Jupiter, straight for the source of that light!"

"But that means there are intelligent beings on Jupiter."

"No doubt."

"But—but everyone know that there's no life on Jupiter. It's a frozen waste swathed in impenetrable whirlwind clouds."

"How does everyone know?" Grant retorted. "Has anyone ever penetrated through those clouds?"

"No," she admitted; "though there have been plenty of expeditions that tried, and never came back."

"That of course doesn't prove anything. Mind you," he added. "I didn't say there was native life existing on Jupiter. I merely said there were intelligent beings operating that illumination."

"Who could it be then?"

"We'll find out when we get down there."

The very calmness of his matter-of-fact statement brought her back abruptly to their precarious situation.

"But, great heavens, we'll smash and be killed. Can't we do something?"

"We'll not smash." Grant said positively. "Though very likely we shall be killed. As for doing something, we can only wait and take our chances, if the gentry who are hauling us in will only give us an opportunity. You know," he added with a fine inconsecutiveness, "I don't even know your name."

She bubbled with sudden laughter. "Nona—Nona Gail. I was on my way to Callisto, to meet my father," she explained. "He's an engineer, doing some construction work for Interspace Products. But now that I've told you all, what and who may you be?"

He was frank. There was now no need for concealment. "Grant Pemberton, an unimportant unit of the Interplanetary Secret Service."

"Then you knew that the trip would be dangerous," she challenged.

"Yes."

"Why did you come?"

"It is part of my duties."

There was silence between them. He turned to stare out of the quartz port-hole again. Jupiter was perceptibly nearer; an enormous, convex

globe that blotted out half the heavens. They were being drawn at a frightful velocity toward the mysterious pulsating point, now blinding in its brilliance.

They both saw it simultaneously: a space-suited figure, far out in the depths of interstellar space, caught up in a sudden flare of orange illumination. The strange figure seemed to whirl around, straighten up, and shoot at breakneck speed headlong for Jupiter. Behind it, and in a direct line with the winking flame in the Great Spot, another space denizen glowed luridly, startlingly, out of the blackness beyond, whirled, and shot down the long invisible path.

Nona cried out: "Grant, tell me quickly, what are they; what is pulling them?"

Even as she spoke, more and more figures were blazoned in that orange ray, until a long file of beings were catapulting in a single straight line past the space-ship, outdistancing it until they became faint specks in the distance.

Pemberton's hand was upon her shoulder, his eyes literally blazing through the goggles, while his voice shouted in her ears. "Come with me: We haven't a second to lose."

"But," she gasped, "you haven't told me—"

"No time," he interrupted, and, shoving her in front of him, he rushed her through corridor after corridor until they came to the air-lock of the liner.

"If only we have time," he groaned, and cursed himself for a bungling fool for not having surmised the maneuver earlier.

Just as he had expected, the great lock was open. The ship was as silent as the grave. There was no air anywhere, only the unutterably cold airlessness of space. Without pausing in his headlong rush, he pushed the bewildered girl through the open port, out into the overwhelming, intangible blackness. Nona's smothered cry of fear came to him as the next instant he stepped forward and left the solid footing to float in sudden weightlessness in a vast sea of nothingness.

The girl reached out and caught his arm convulsively. Even through the fabric of their suits he could feel her trembling. Pemberton had taken good care to retain a hold on the edge of the open air-lock. The two swung unsteadily.

"What is the reason for this?" Grant sensed, rather, than heard, the

tremor in her voice. She was making a desperate effort to control herself. "We'll be lost—out here in space."

"Don't worry," he said soothingly. "I'll explain in due course. In the meantime you'll have to trust me. Did you see where that invisible ray held when it illumined the last Ganymedan?"

"Ganymedan?" she echoed in surprise. "What makes you think—"

"Never mind that. Did you?" he insisted.

"Yes," she admitted, "it was about over there." She indicated the spot with an outthrust arm. "About a hundred yards, I should judge."

"Exactly," he agreed. "Well, young lady, our lives, and far more, depend upon our reaching that exact line in space immediately."

"I don't know what you are talking about, but even so, how can we make it? I'm not a rocket."

"It's difficult, I admit, but we must. Now hold on tight to my arm, and press your feet firmly against the wall of the ship." She obeyed.

"Now when I count three, shove off violently, and pray that we're going straight. Are you game?"

She stiffened; then, very slowly, "All right; start counting."

"Good girl," Grant said approvingly. "One—two—th-r-ee-ee!"

They flexed their legs in perfect unison. And shoved off.

Out into the blackness of space they shot, lost to all sense of motion: yet the hull of the space-flier, dimly gleaming in the thin light of the far off sun, retreated from them with terrifying swiftness.

They were alone in space! It was an uncanny, a horribly helpless sensation. All about them was infinity, a vast void out of which peered at them the cold, unwinking stars. They were like swimmers in mid-ocean, without even the buoyant feel of the salt water to comfort them.

Nona's grip on Grant's arm was agonizing in its intensity.

"Scared?" Grant queried.

"A—a little," she admitted; "but don't bother about me. I'm all right."

She could be depended upon to keep up her end, Grant thought admiringly.

On and on they floated in the welter of space. And still there was no ray, nothing but unrelieved blackness. Pemberton was somewhat worried. Had the saving ray been quenched at the source? Were they too late? If so, they were doomed to a frightful obliterating fall to the surface of the planet, or worse still, they were destined to swing endlessly in space. Already the liner was far away, out of their grasp, even had they desired to return.

His breath was coming in quick gasps now. "Scared?" he once more asked the silent figure beside him.

"Frightfully—but carry on. We'll get there, wherever it is."

Her gay determination strengthened him wonderfully. On and on they floated.

Suddenly the dim, dark bulk of the girl caught the uncanny orange light. The next instant the creatoid fabric of his own suit caught it, too.

"Thank God," he cried joyously. "It's still on. Just relax, Nona, the ray will take care of us now."

He felt a powerful tug at his body, he was whirled completely

around, and then there was a steady pull. He was being catapulted down the ray to the mysterious point of brilliance in the Great Red Spot. The girl was right beside him. The space-liner was passed with a smooth rush, and soon receded to a dwindling speck.

"Now will you explain?" asked Nona impatiently, after she had caught her breath in sudden relief.

Grant stretched luxuriously before he began.

"Certainly. There's nothing for us now to do but wait until we get pulled down to Jupiter, and that'll take some time. I hope we look like Ganymedans."

"Will you get on with your story!" she cried.

He obeyed. He started from the beginning and went right up to the time when he had so rudely thrust her out into space.

"You see," he explained. "I had put the puzzle together a bit, but there were still pieces missing. For instance, those chaps down there know that every space-liner is equipped with emergency space-suits. Why pull the ship down with live men on board? That would naturally mean a fight, and we have no mean weapons, what with

disintegrator ray-projectors and explosive electro-bullets." Then, again, for some reason, there were Ganymedans on board. They would very likely be whiffed out in the mêlée. The ship might be destroyed also, and they evidently are very careful about getting the ship down intact. The little meteor holes can easily be plugged up, and the liner made as good as new. At least that was my guess.

"I was trying to puzzle it out, rather hopelessly," he continued, "when I saw the ray out in space pick up those floating figures. That was the last little piece in the jigsaw.

"The Ganymedans evidently had to leave the ship because, as it approaches the planet, something will be done to kill off any unfortunates who are still alive, waiting their chance to fight the invisible enemy. Possibly a penetrating lethal gas that will be forced into the interior. So they evolved the ray to carry the Ganymedan passengers down gently, safely. And we are stowaways," he concluded grimly.

Nona had listened intently to the long recital.

"But why," she expostulated, "was it necessary to have their own people on board? The meteors that riddled the ship were projectiles shot from their station on Jupiter. So was the attraction-ray that pulls

the ship down."

"Because they required a sufficient force to disable the radio apparatus. All radio waves used on interplanetary liners are shielded from interference. It is impossible to blank them out. And with the radio intact, every battle flier in space would be on their trail in a hurry."

Several hours passed, and still they fell endlessly through space, unaware of their motion except that Jupiter was now a huge orb blotting out the universe. The grim face of the giant planet was enswathed in endless billowing clouds. No one had ever penetrated to the real core. But what held their eager, straining attention was a vast blood red disk, cyclonic in character, directly beneath them. The Great Red Spot! And immediately in the center of it was the tiny, blindingly brilliant yellow orange oval, winking up at them with quick, steady pulsations.

"What can it be?" Nona wondered.

"The source of their power, evidently. But what interests me more just now is where the Ganymedans have their hangout in those clouds, and what they're doing with the ships they capture."

Jupiter was now a flat level stretch that reached on all sides as far as the eye could see. Grant felt a sudden sensation of weight again, as though something was pressing with crushing force against his chest.

"Hello," he said, "our fall is being checked. They're making sure their friends come to no harm." And he laughed bitterly, thinking of the men and women lying with lungs ruptured, cold and stiff, in the interior of the Althea; of the possible few wretches who had managed to huddle into space-suits, ignorant of the deadly gas that was soon to search out their seemingly impenetrable habiliments.

Slowly, ever more slowly, they fell. Thin wisps of reddish vapor rushed upward toward them, and then they were enveloped in vast swirls of cloud masses. They were within the Great Spot!

Then the lurid clouds parted suddenly, revealing a deep hole, at the bottom of which flamed and flared the mysterious yellow-orange brilliance. Down the long shaft they fell, while all around its invisible walls dark red cyclones stirred and beat in vain.

Just as it seemed as if they were doomed to fall headlong into the blaze, they were swerved violently into an opening that angled off from the main shaft. Down this branching shaft they continued to fall—interminably—when suddenly it widened, and they were

dropping through the interior of a great dome of which the arched roof was the swirling clouds they had just penetrated. Directly beneath floated a flat island of smooth rock, supported and upheld by a shining sea of vapors.

The girl exclaimed sharply, but Grant only nodded to himself with grim satisfaction. He had expected something like this. For, clustered in serried rows at the end of the island directly beneath them were sleek, stream-lined grayhounds of the interplanetary traffic lanes, now resting immovably on the smooth gray stone—the missing space-liners!

The island was bisected by a huge forbidding wall, over which, at their angle, Grant was unable to see.

The ground was encumbered too with clumps of intricate machinery, all of the same polished gray stone; Ganymedan stone, Ganymedan machinery, Pemberton recognized at once. Hundreds of figures were scurrying awkwardly around, clad in the inevitable space-suit. Several were working desperately at a huge concave glass reflector. Others were pointing a stone nozzle, extending out of a pit, directly upward.

"I'm afraid." Nona shuddered and pressed closer to Grant.

"Don't be," he assured her. "Just say nothing when we land. Let me do the talking."

All this while they had been floating gently downward toward what they now saw to be a miniature replica of the vaster orange brightness at the bottom of the main shaft from which they had been diverted. It was a pool of liquid fire, so intense in its brilliance that their eyes were dazzled staring at it. It rose and fell in regular pulsations. They were not far above it now, and still no one on the strange island seemed to be aware of their coming.

Nona cried out, "Grant, we're going to fall right into it!"

Pemberton looked down at the small fiery pool with anxious eyes. Unless something happened, and that quickly, they would be seared to a crisp. Already the heat was uncomfortable, even through their suits. He tried to kick himself aside, but the pull of the liquid was too powerful for him. Then he resolved on a desperate expedient.

"Say, you fellows down there," he cried in the smooth, slurred Ganymedan speech. "What are you trying to do, fry us? Hurry up and prepare our landing."

For a moment they were tense with the tenseness of imminent death.

Were the Ganymedans equipped with communication disks; would they sense the strangeness of the accent? Nona was gripping his hand with a pressure that penetrated the fabric. And every second brought them down closer and closer to the dread lake.

"Ah!" Nona's breath came in a shuddering sigh. For one of the figures glanced upward and saw them dropping. He shouted something to his fellows, and darted for a lever set in the stone next to the pool. He threw it over swiftly. Immediately what seemed to be a smooth slab of transparent glassite shot into position over the pulsating flame, not an instant too soon, either, for it had barely covered the flaming death when the Earthlings' feet were already touching it.

"It would have served you two fools right if I had let you drop in," their savior grumbled disgustedly. "What in Jupiter took you so long? Everyone else arrived hours ago. Didn't know there were any more."

"Sorry, but we couldn't help it," Grant responded carefully. "You see, we got mixed up in a scrap with some Earthmen who evidently suspected us, just as we were diving out of the air-lock. We had the devil's own job of beating them off."

"You too! The Chief came down foaming at the mouth. Some dumb Earthman almost throttled him before he got away. He swears he'll blast Earth out of space. He's that mad. But here, I've got no time to be talking to your fellows. I've got work to do. Better report to the Chief at once, and heaven help you. He's sure in a black rage at this minute."

With that he moved away, over to the gang of Ganymedans holding the stone nozzle and looking expectantly up at the large, round hole in the cloud ceiling.

Nona stood close to Grant. "What are they doing with the queer affair?" She indicated the nozzle.

"I'm afraid we'll find out only too soon," he answered grimly. "Look —" he broke off.

Far overhead, through the great round orifice, darted a tremendous shape, pointed, glittering.

"Why, that's the Althea," Nona exclaimed.

"Yes. Now watch. Damn—all we can do is watch," Grant gritted between his teeth.

Down sped the gleaming liner, pride of the fleet. The men at the mirror were swerving it on gimbals until a ray from it flashed on the burnished nose. As though it were a physical impact, the vessel slackened its tremendous speed and hung suspended midway between the cloud concavity and the island.

The men with the nozzle spurred into activity. A thin stream of fluid shot out of the orifice straight up for the captive liner. The tip of the expanding spray impinged on the hull—and Nona gasped her astonishment. For the liquid passed clean through the hull as though it were a porous network instead of four-inch thick beryllium-steel.

"Just as I thought," Grant groaned. "Lethal gas that penetrates everything. Those poor people on board—for their own sakes I hope none remained alive to hit this."

"Can't we do anything?" Nona asked desperately.

"Nothing for the Althea. But plenty to prevent any more disasters like it." There was a hard ring to his voice. "Come on." He stepped off the transparent slab onto the stone floor of the island.

"Where to?" asked Nona, following.

"We're going to locate that orange oval we saw from the Althea. That's the secret of all this. The pool of liquid fire here is unimportant, secondary."

They were at one edge of the floating island. The other side was hidden from them by the solid wall that stretched across its full diameter.

"We'll scout beyond there," Grant pointed out. "I'll miss my guess if what we're looking for is not on the other side."

As they started for the wall, they saw the Althea brought slowly down to the rock, another captive to swell the motionless fleet. It did not take them long to reach the barrier. Some fifty feet high it was, of smooth polished Ganymedan stone, and no door or opening in its straight unbroken surface.

"How shall we get through?" Nona asked.

Grant surveyed it thoughtfully.

"There must be a hidden spring somewhere," he said.

He walked carelessly along the wall, tapping it idly here and there. His quick probing fingers were searching.

With a sharp "Ah!" he stopped short. He bent over a moment; his fingers moved deftly. Then he straightened with a grunt of satisfaction. A section of the seemingly solid, immovable stone was sliding silently open. He looked through.

Nona saw him jerk his head back, heard his involuntary cry of horror. Then she heard another cry: an excited warning shout. She whirled around in time to see a Ganymedan running toward them from behind. A deadly pencil-ray pointed straight at her companion. Without a moment's hesitation she sprang at Grant, pushed him violently so that he staggered and fell through the opening to the other side. In so doing, she tripped over his body, and fell prone. That saved her life, for a blue flame sheared clean through the stone, inches above her head.

Grant squirmed around underneath. The electro-gun was somehow out of the side flap and now it spat its explosive hail. The tiny bullets flared into little puff balls of flame against the space-suit of the Ganymedan. A long howl of anguish came to them as he threw up his hands and fell into a shapeless heap. But a moment later there were other cries, angry shouts. Pemberton was on his feet again with the quickness of a cat. He pulled Nona up after him, thrust her to one side, behind the protection of the wall. His eyes were blazing now, aflame with the ardor of battle. Very carefully he leaned out and

pressed the trigger. The surging mob was caught in full flight. The electro-bullets spread fanwise, exploded into flaming deaths. The Ganymedans went down as though a huge scythe had swept through their ranks. The survivors scattered hastily, throwing themselves headlong to the surface of the rock to escape further execution.

"That'll hold them for a while," Grant laughed grimly.

"Drop your gun, and turn around—both of you." A cold, smooth voice spoke in deadly menace directly behind them—a voice that came from the mysterious inner side of the wall.

Grant spun around, his gun ready to fire. A ray snapped out at him, a ray with a greenish tinge. The fingers of his gun hand grew suddenly nerveless; the weapon dropped unresistingly from his paralyzed hand.

A tall Ganymedan towered before him, unhidden by a space-suit. Evidently there was a layer of air in here. The red lidless eyes were filled with a cold fury. Spatulate fingers tensed on the button of a pencil ray.

"Miro," Grant breathed to himself unbelievingly. A great light burst upon him.

The Inspector of the Service for Ganymede did not recognize him, swathed as Grant was in the depths of his space-suit, nor did he notice the little movement of surprise. He was too furiously angry. His words came tumbling out in a tremble of rage.

"You damned scoundrels; have you gone mad? What do you mean by coming in here through the secret way? Don't you know it is death for anyone to pass the barrier? And what do you mean by shooting down your fellows with an Earth weapon? Answer, damn you, before I thrust you into the Gorm."

Both were silent; Nona because she did not know what to say, and Grant because he knew his voice would be recognized by Miro's keen ears. He kept his eyes fixed on the Ganymedan, waiting hawk-like for one false move, for the tiniest wavering of attention. But the pencil-ray was pointed squarely at his breast.

"You won't talk?" Miro's voice was choked with passion. "Well, there are ways to make you." With one foot he kicked at the open slab, while his weapon commanded them unwaveringly. There was a smooth soundless rush. Grant knew that the wall was an unbroken surface again. They were cut off on the secret side of the island, alone with Miro.

Yet that was the horror of it. They were not alone. For Grant's first darting look inside when he had first opened the panel had shown him the others. Hundreds of them there were, men of all races and planets, a motley crew. And each man walked stiffly, unnaturally, looking neither to the right nor to the left. Their eyes were fixed and glassy; the skin of their faces, no matter what their origin, was uniformly parched and gray. A cold sweat broke out on Grant's forehead. They looked like automatons: beings from whom life had been drained. He heard a little choked cry from Nona; she had seen them, too.

Miro plucked out with his free hand a little pear-shaped mechanism punctured with innumerable holes. He blew into it, once—twice. It gave forth a high whining note. Instantly two of the strange lifeless men wheeled angularly, and with queer mechanical movements headed straight for them. A bloodless hand stretched out, grasped Nona. Grant heard her scream and saw her struggling in a loathsome grip.

Forgetting everything, forgetting the deadly ray in Miro's hands, he sprang to her rescue. The next instant he was in the grip of a similar hand, a frail, dead-white naked arm, yet endowed with the strength of steel. Struggle as he might, dash his fist as hard as he could against the unresisting blank face, he could not loose that grip. Miro

watched his futile strugglings mockingly.

"Take these traitors over to the Gorm and let me look at their faces," he ordered.

Grant and Nona were picked up in those emaciated, powerful arms as easily as though they were children, and the unhuman creatures proceeded at a slow, awkward pace away from the hall, toward the outer edge of the island. From his uncomfortable vantage point, Pemberton noticed that they were passing clumps of intricate stone machinery. Dead-faced automatons, similar to their captors, were tending the whirring machinery with ordered, stiff-legged movements.

Then, straight ahead, Grant saw the edge of the island, against which beat and billowed in furious, gigantic heaves, the reddish overarching clouds of the Great Spot. Strangely enough, though they whirled and eddied, they could not seem to break through the invisible barrier. And then the lake of fire sprang into view—the mysterious place of flame they had seen from afar, that had pulled the hapless Althea out of its course down to destruction on Jupiter. This then was the Gorm!

A wide circular pool it was, of an unearthly yellow-orange brilliance.

The midday sun was no more dazzling to the eye. Out it stretched from the island into the vapors of the Great Red Spot, only touching the stone rim of the island at one thin point. Its liquid fires were waveless now, oily, yet there was something horrible, too, about its smooth quiescence.

Miro whistled. The rigid guards dropped their burdens roughly and stood at attention. One was an Earthman, the other a fish-faced Venusian. Yet the queer dead look of their eyes was exactly the same.

"Will you remove your helmets, or shall I ask the Doora to assist you?" Miro's voice was silky.

Because there was nothing else to do, Grant unscrewed his helmet and let it fall back on its hinge. Then he looked very calmly and steadily at the Inspector of the Service for Ganymede.

A dull flame leaped into Miro's eyes at the sight of his captive.

"You!" Then he smiled, a peculiarly horrible smile. "You are cleverer than I thought, my Earth friend. You should have been strangled to death on the Althea, or made into one of—"

He stopped short, and the smile widened cruelly. "But it is not too late. No, it is not too late."

Grant disregarded his cryptic phrases. He smiled, too, a contemptuous smile that cut like a lash.

"You, Miro, an Inspector of the Service, are only a lying, treacherous, butchering Ganymedan. Filthy scum of the Universe."

Miro started forward with a roar, a dark flush of rage suffusing his green-tinged countenance. His blunt-edged finger trembled on the button of the pencil-ray. Grant knew he was perilously on the verge of sudden death, yet his scornful glance did not waver.

It was Nona, hitherto unnoticed, her helmet removed, who darted upon the giant Ganymedan with small beating fists. Miro saw her coming and swung her sprawling away with one sweep of his free hand, while he covered Grant with the other.

He had recovered his composure. Some secret merriment seemed to convulse him.

"Ho! ho!" he shouted. "Who is this little spitfire? By Jupiter, she is a tempting morsel." And his red eyes took in the flushed beauty of the

panting girl speculatively.

Grant tensed for a quick spring.

"Stand where you are," Miro barked. "One move and it will be your last." Gone was the smooth unctuous speech of former times. His tone now was cutting, deadly.

"You damned Earthmen have been crowing long enough," he said. "When Miro and Ganymede get through with you, the very memory of your filthy planet will have been erased from the solar system." His voice rose higher. "You thought you had us beaten down with your space-battleships and your embargoes on metals. And we were meekly repentant. Oh yes, we were! We took you in nicely. Why, they even made me, Miro, Inspector of your rotten Service.

"But we have been preparing against the day for years. Here on this island that we built we worked, hidden from interference. We are ready now. Our fleets will sail out, in your own ships, to smash the combined space navies of the solar system."

In spite of himself Grant could not hide a sudden grin of relief. The man was mad, to think of pitting a few liners against armored battle craft. Miro saw that grin.

"You think I'm mad, don't you?" he gloated. "Just listen to this, then. We have found a substance that no ray, no electro-bullet can penetrate. Every ship will be coated with it. And the Gorm here"—he pointed to the oily lake—"will draw your proud cruisers down to destruction, or thrust them far out into the uncharted spaces, helpless, just as it pleases us. You wonder how it works? Look! Now it attracts, and powerfully. But when I reverse the current passing through it like this"—he leaned over and pulled a switch set in the rock right by the edge—"it repels everything. We'll just stand off in space and pick off your proud warships one by one, without a scratch to ourselves. See?" He fairly hissed the last word.

Grant saw, and the cold sweat burst out on his forehead. His brain raced desperately in a vain effort to find some way out, some method of foiling this beast.

"You sure talk big, Miro," he said in bored fashion, feigning indifference; "but it means nothing to me. The point is, what do you intend doing with us?"

The Ganymedan's lips writhed. "Nothing at all to your pretty friend," he leered. "I have plans for her. But as for you—see these creatures all about?"

"Well?"

"You are going to be one of them. They are passengers and crews who had the misfortune to be alive when the captured ships were sprayed with our gas. It does not kill. Oh, no! It just numbs their faculties, paralyzes them. Then our surgeons get busy. They know how to remove the memory and reasoning areas of the brain and leave just machines, automata, to do our bidding. Clever, aren't they? When Earth is captured, I intend subjecting all your damned breed to the operation. They make very willing slaves, I've found. Two blasts on this toy"—he raised the whistle to his lips—"and an Earth-Doora comes for you."

Nona sprang forward. "No, no, Miro. Please do not touch Mr. Pemberton. I'll—I'll—"

"What will you?" The Ganymedan's pig-eyes devoured her.

"I'll—" Then, to Grant's eternal horror, she sank into Miro's arms. The surprised look on Miro's face changed slowly to one of passion, as he held her close to him with his great hairy arm.

"Nona!" Grant gasped and saw red. Heedless of the unwavering weapon at his breast, he sprang. Miro snarled as he saw him coming.

His finger pressed down. But at that instant the Earth girl struck out with all the power of her slender arm. It was not much of a blow, but it managed to jar the weapon aside. The blue flame leaped hissing through the air.

Miro roared with rage, and flung her yards away, to lie, an unmoving pathetic bundle. Then he swung his ray back into play.

But he never had a chance to use it. All the strength and fury of Grant's lithe, steel sinews and bone were behind the solid smash that landed squarely on the Ganymedan's chin. He went down in a slump, completely out.

Grant stooped to pick up the fallen pencil-ray, thrust it in the side flap, then hurried over to the limp figure of Nona.

"Darling," he cried, "if anything's happened to you, I'll—"

The still form stirred, sat up.

"Say that again." She was smiling weakly, but happily.

Grant flushed. "As many times later as you'll want," he said, "but now that you're not hurt, we can't waste any time in trying to get out of here."

He walked over to Miro, who was just coming to.

"Listen, you rat," he told the Ganymedan, who was rubbing his chin and groaning: "you do exactly as I say, if you know what's good for you." He shook the pencil-ray significantly.

"You can't get away with it," Miro snarled, muttering a string of curses. There was baffled rage in his red pig-eyes.

Grant surveyed him coldly.

"We'll see about that," he snapped. "Get up." He reinforced his demand with a well-placed kick. The huge Ganymedan came quickly to his feet.

"Walk to the wall," was the next order, "and open the trick door."

With a glance of savage hate, Miro obeyed. Grant followed him with his pistol in readiness. The poor mindless creatures paid no heed to what was going on, but dully continued their appointed tasks.

Pemberton hid himself behind the wall to one side. Nona did likewise, having picked up the electro-gun meanwhile. Only Miro stood before the opening.

"Now tell your cutthroat friends out there we want one of the liners brought directly over the Gorm, you understand. Not the Althea, though—that's still full of holes. And only one Ganymedan to guide her over the wall. Be very explicit, and not a false move out of you, or it'll be your last."

With the knowledge that two deadly weapons were pointing squarely at him, Miro shouted unwillingly the necessary instructions to his subordinates outside. Then Grant leaned over and kicked the slide shut.

There followed tense moments of waiting. Would the workers beyond obey their leader? Had they become suspicious, and were even now massing for a surprise attack? Grant had no means of telling.

Then to his ears came the most welcome soft roar of muted rockets. A huge shape swept over the high wall, soared directly over the Gorm, and nestled down in little jets of flame until the stern rested on the solid rock, and the bow swung idly over the brilliant pool.

"Keep your gun trained on this bird," Grant told Nona swiftly. She nodded. The air-lock door on the ship was already sliding open. A Ganymedan, space-suited, was coming through. He saw them, tried

to spring back into the shelter of the ship. But a blue ray stabbed out and caught him in mid-flight. There was a spatter of dust, and the hapless creature disintegrated into thin air.

"Sorry I had to do it, but I couldn't afford to let him give the alarm. Now for the dirty work, Nona. You hustle this big bully into the ship, and keep him covered. I'll be right along."

The girl cast him a look of anxiety. "What do you intend doing?"

"Don't worry," he assured her; "I won't get hurt."

After he had seen them within the liner, he got to work. First he brought out from the ship coils of wiring and jumbles of instruments. He took them over to the edge of the Gorm, to the place where he had seen Miro pull the switch, and for the next ten minutes was busy connecting wires, attaching batteries, putting his instruments in place. Then, when he was satisfied that everything was ready, he reversed the switch. The great space-ship, some fifty feet away, was already trembling in every line.

Just as he was rising to sprint for the slowly moving liner, he heard a smooth rushing noise. He whirled. The slide was opening in the wall. A mob of Ganymedans were pouring through. They paused

uncertainly a moment, then, as they spied him, there was a concerted rush forward.

Grant acted quickly. Already the space-ship was off the ground, soaring upward. He had not an instant to spare. He dove toward it. The mob yelled, and raced forward to cut him off. His pencil-ray was useless—the distance was too great for its limited range. But then, that applied equally to the weapons of the Ganymedans.

The blue rays snapped forward at him angrily, but fell short. The ship was moving faster now. It was already several feet off the ground. Grant's heavy space-suit impeded his progress. The charging Ganymedans were dangerously close now. That last beam had missed him by inches. The ship was gathering speed. He was five feet away from the open air-lock when they got the range. A sharp searing pain right across his shoulder. The creatoid material of his suit was cut away as with a knife. A layer of flesh lay exposed. The skin had been whiffed into nothingness.

But that very instant he was leaping off the ground with a mighty effort. The ship was going upward with a rush now. His fingers clawed desperately at the edge of the air-lock. For one breathless instant he clung; then, to his horror, the smooth creatoid covering refused to hold. Slowly he slipped, in spite of every effort, as the

surface of the hull refused purchase to his bleeding hands, then down he went with a thud.

A cry of triumph arose from the onrushing Ganymedans as Grant scrambled to his feet, bruised and shaken. He cast a swift, despairing glance upward. The huge liner was a hundred feet up now, gathering speed swiftly. To one side was the Gorm, a place of dread and menace. The gloating enemy were almost upon him. Even the comfort of a weapon, the grim satisfaction of taking some of his foes to death with him, was denied him.

The pencil-ray had been jarred out of his hand by the impact and had doubtless fallen into the Gorm.

Grant felt that he had come to the end of the rope. There was no tremor of fear in him, only regret that he had met the girl and lost her so soon. What would she do, out in space, alone with Miro? No time to think of that now, though. The foremost of the Ganymedans were almost upon him. They intended taking him alive, did they? He braced himself for the attack, ready to go down fighting.

Then a brilliant plan beat suddenly upon his dazzled mind. It was breath-taking, so simple, yet so desperate did it appear. If it worked —he would win through. If not—but Grant dismissed that thought

quickly; one form of death was no worse than another.

Without an instant's hesitation, he whirled and jumped as high as he could—directly over the Gorm! There was a yell of astonishment from the Ganymedans—one had already clutched at his intended victim—as they fell back in horror from the edge. This Earthling was mad to brave the terrors of the Gorm!

But Grant heard nothing. He was instantly conscious of a searing, racking pain that penetrated his every fiber. He forced his eyes upward, anywhere but beneath him. Was his theory correct, or was he destined to drop into the fiery lake. For a single interminable instant, he suffered untold agonies.

Then his body quivered, and he felt an unmistakable push against him. He was moving upward, just as he had hoped. The Gorm was repelling him, even as it had the ship.

Faster and faster he shot up, chasing the liner. Would he catch up with it? He strained his eyes. Exultation flooded through him as he realized that the distance was rapidly lessening between them. The added impetus of his leap over the Gorm had given him the required

extra fillip of speed. By now, rays were streaking by him.

Soon he was directly underneath. For an instant he had a quick fear that he might overshoot his mark. But no—he was sliding past the open air-lock. He threw himself sideways and caught at it. This time his fingers held.

As he squirmed and wriggled into the lock, they were already careening into the orange tube through the red swirling clouds. There was no longer any air. Choking, he managed with numbed fingers to screw his helmet on. Then, closing the lock, he proceeded into the ship.

Nona was guarding her prisoner vigilantly. Miro sat there, sullen, defiant. Her glad, welcoming cry filled Grant with a new strange warmth.

"I was so afraid for you when the ship started and you didn't show up," she said, "but I didn't dare leave him alone." She indicated Miro.

"Good girl," he said admiringly. "We'll bind him now and then I want to show you something."

They stood a little later at the bow quartz port-hole. Down the long shaft through which they had risen they saw the glaring flame of the Gorm. As they looked, its regular pulsations turned irregular: it leaped and splashed as though it was a stormy, choppy sea. Then it gave one final mighty heave, and the universe seemed to shatter beneath them. The "walls" of the shaft collapsed about them and they were enswathed in a raging storm of red clouds.

Nona turned to Grant. "Now, will you explain?"

"Certainly," he grinned boyishly. "I simply reversed the switch that changes the current of the Gorm. I knew that it would then repel the liner out into space, as Miro was incautious enough to inform me.

"Then I figured that if instead of direct current, an alternating flow could be induced, so as to attract and repel in quick succession, enough of a disturbance would be raised in that highly unstable mixture to start fireworks. So I rigged up an automatic break in the circuit, timed it to permit us to get up enough speed from the repulsion to be safely on our way before it would start. The circuit-breaker worked and the alternating current did the rest. That island is wiped out, and so is the Gorm. There'll be no further threat of danger to the solar system from that."

"And Miro, what are we going to do with him?"

"Turn him over to the Service. They'll take care of him. And now, young lady, if you have no further questions, shall I say it again?"

She smiled up at him tenderly, answering:

"If you wish."

140 The Martian Cabal by Roman Frederick Starzl

Sime Hemingway, of the I. F. P., strikes at the insidious interests that are lashing high the war feeling between Earth and Mars.

Aproximate word count: 28,000

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Chapter 1: Strange Intruder

Sime Hemingway did not sleep well his first night on Mars. There was no tangible reason why he shouldn't. His bed was soft. He had dined sumptuously, for this hotel's cuisine offered not only Martian delicacies, but drew on Earth and Venus as well.

Sime Hemingway, of the I. F. P., strikes at the insidious interests that are lashing high the war feeling between Earth and Mars.

Yet Sime did not sleep well. He tossed restlessly in the caressing softness of his bed. He turned a knob in the head panel of his bed, tried to yield to the soothing music that seemed to come from

nowhere. He turned another knob, watched the marching, playing, whirling of somnolent colors on the domed ceiling of his room.

At last he gave it up. Some sixth sense had him all jumpy. It was not usual for Sime Hemingway to be jumpy. He was one of the coolest heads in the I. F. P., the Interplanetary Flying Police who patrolled the lonely reaches of space and brought man's law to the outermost orbit of the far-flung solar system.

Now he jumped out of bed and examined the fastening of his door, the door to the hotel corridor. There was only one, and it was secure. Windows there were none, and investigation showed that the small ports were all covered with their pivoted safety plates. He extinguished the light, swung aside one of the plates, and peered out into the Martian night. It was moonlight—both Deimos and Phobos were racing across the blue-black sky. The waters of Crystal Canal stretched out before him, seemingly illimitable. Sime knew that the distance to the other side was twenty miles or more. Clear-cut through the thin atmosphere of Mars, he could see the jeweled lights of South Tarog, on the other side.

The hotel grounds, too, were well lighted. Long, luminous tubes, part of the architecture of the buildings, aided the moons, shedding their serene glow on the gentle slope of the red lawns and terraces,

the geometrically trimmed shrubs and trees. They were reflected warmly in the dancing waves of the canal, though Sime knew that even in this, the height of the summer season, the outside temperature was very near freezing.

Now a hotel guard came along. He carried at his belt a neuro-pistol, a deadly weapon whose beam would destroy the nervous structure of any living creature. He went past the port with measured stride, and Sime slid back the safety plate with a puzzled frown.

Why was he so nervous? This wasn't the first dangerous mission on which he had embarked in the course of his official duty. And danger was the element that gave zest to his life.

Clinging like leeches to the wall, the two men resisted the warped gravitational drag. Clinging like leeches to the wall, the two men resisted the warped gravitational drag.

He began a methodical examination of his room, peering under the bed, into closets, a wardrobe. Yet there was no sign of danger. Carefully he inspected his bed for signs of the deadly black mold from Venus that would, once it found lodgment in the pores of a man's skin, inexorably invade his body and in the space of a few hours reduce him to a black, repulsive parody of humanity. But the

sheets were unsullied.

Then his gaze fell on the mist-bath. Travelers who have visited Mars are, of course, familiar with this simple device, used to overcome to some extent the exceeding dryness of the red planet's atmosphere. Resembling the steam bath of the ancients, there was just enough room in the cylindrical case for a man to sit inside while his skin was sprayed with vivifying moisture. But his head would project, and there was no head visible.

Nevertheless, so strong was Sime's intuition, he leveled his neuro-pistol at the cabinet and approached. With a sweep of his muscular arm he swung it open—and gasped!

The sight that greeted him was enough to make any man gasp, even one less young and impressionable than Sime. In all of his twenty-five years he had not seen a woman so lovely. Her complexion was the delicate coral pink of the Martian colonials—descendants of the original human settlers who had struggled with, and at last bent to their will, this harsh and inhospitable planet. She was little over five feet tall, although the average Martian is perhaps slightly bigger than his terrestrial cousin. Her hair was dark, like that of most Martians, drawn back from her forehead and fastened at the nape of her neck, from there to fall in an abundant, rippling cascade down her slim,

straight back. Her figure was like those delicate and ancient creations of Dresden china to be seen in museums, but elastic, and full of strength. She was dressed in the two-piece garment universally worn by both sexes on Mars—a garment, so historians say, that was called "pyjamas" by our forebears.

And she was defiant. In her hand was a stiletto with long, slim blade. Sime made a darting grasp for her wrist and wrung the weapon from her. It fell to the metal floor with a tinkling clatter.

"And now tell me, young lady, what's the meaning of this?"

Suddenly she smiled.

"I came to warn you, Sime Hemingway." She spoke softly and sweetly, and with effortless dignity.

"You came to warn me?"

"You are in grave danger. Your mission here is known, and powerful enemies are preparing to destroy you."

"You talk like you knew something, kid," Sime admitted. "What is my mission here?"

"You have been sent to Mars by the I. F. P. in the guise of a mining engineer. You are to discover what you can about a suspected plot of interplanetary financiers to plunge the Earth and Mars into a war."

"How so?" Sime asked enigmatically, concealing his dismay at the girl's ready reply. Here was inside information with a vengeance!

"Several shiploads of gray industrial diamonds from Venus have been seized by war vessels carrying the insignia of the Martian atmospheric guard."

Sime nodded. "Go on!"

"Curiously enough, these raids were so timed that they were witnessed by the news telecasters. All of the people on Earth were thus eye-witnesses, and feeling ran high. Am I right?"

"Go on!"

"And of course you know about the raids on the Martian borium mines by pirates armed with modern weapons. In the fights, some of the pirates' weapons were captured. They bore the ordnance marks of the terrestrial government."

"I'm way ahead of you, girlie!" Sime conceded. "Certain financial

interests would like to see a war. They're cookin' up these overt acts to get the people all steamed up till they're ready to fight. I'll go further, since you seem to know all about it anyway, and admit that I'm here to find out just who's back of all this. And how does all that tie up with you hiding in my mist-bath with a long and mean lookin' knife?"

The girl dropped her dark lashes in a sidelong glance at the stiletto on the floor. There was a little smile on her lips.

"My usual weapon. Don't you know most of us Martians go armed all the time?"

"Yeh?" Sime grinned skeptically. "And is it a habit of yours to hide in the bedroom of visiting policemen? Come on, kid. I'm going to turn you over to the guard."

For a second it looked as if she would make a dash for the blade glistening there on the floor. But she straightened up, and with a look of infinite scorn said:

"So the mighty policeman of the Sun calls a hotel guard, does he? Please! Believe me, I am myself working for the same object as yourself—the prevention of a horrible war!"

She was pleading now.

"Believe me, you are against forces that you don't understand! I can help you, if you will listen. Let me tell you, the Martian government is itself corrupted. The planetary president, Wilcox, is in alliance with the war party. You will have to fight the police. You will have to fear poison. You will be set upon and killed in the first dark passage. Yet if you help me you may accomplish your object. You must help me!"

"What do you want of me?"

"Help me change our government!"

Sime laughed shortly. He began to suspect that this amazing girl was demented. He thought of the powerfully entrenched rulers of this theoretically republican government. For more than two hundred years, if he remembered rightly, the Martians had been ruled by a small group of rich politicians.

"You propose a revolution?" he asked curiously.

"I propose the return of Princess Sira to the throne!" she declared vehemently. "But enough! Are you going to betray me—I, who have

risked much to warn you? Or are you going to let me go?"

Sime looked into her warm, earnest little face. Her lips were parted softly, showing perfect little teeth, and she was breathing quickly, anxiously. Sime was woman hungry, as men of the service often are on the long, lonely trail. He seized her quickly, pressed her little figure to him and kissed her.

For a thrilling instant it seemed that she relaxed. But she tore away, furious, her eyes cold with anger.

"For that," she panted, raging, "you must die!"

She reached the door before he could stop her, and in a trice she was out in the gallery. He raced after her, staring stupidly. Surprisingly, when her escape was assured, she turned back. Her look was still hurt, angry, as she called to him in low tones:

"Look out for Scar Balta, you brute!"

"Who is Scar Balta?" Sime asked himself after locking the door again. The name was not unusual and did not bring any familiar associations to his mind. The given name, Scar, once a nickname, had been in general use for centuries. As for Balta—oh, well—

His mind reverted to the girl again. Her warm, palpitant presence disturbed him.

He composed himself to sleep, strapping his dispatch belt around his waist before crawling into bed. He did not believe that the girl had hidden in his room with murderous intent; rather that she had hoped to inspect and perhaps to steal any papers that he carried. But his last conscious thought of her had nothing to do with her connection with this planet of intrigue, but the soft curve of her throat.

Chapter 2: Scar Balta

Sime breakfasted on one of the juicy Martian tropical pears, and as he dug into the luscious fruit with his spoon he looked about the spacious dining hall, filled with wide-eyed tourists on their first trip to Mars, blissful and oblivious honeymooners, and a sprinkling of local residents and officials.

Through broad windows of thick glass (for on Mars many buildings maintain an atmospheric pressure somewhat higher than the normal outside pressure) could be seen the north banks of the canal, teeming with swift pleasure boats and heavily loaded work barges. Down the long terraces strolled hundreds of people, dressed in garments of vivid colors and sheer materials suitable to the hot and cloudless days. Brilliant insects floated on wide diaphanous wings, waiting to pounce on the opening blossoms.

But the terrestrial agent felt that in this scene of luxury there was a menace. Out of sight, but instantly available, were frightful engines of destruction, waiting to be mobilized against the Earth branch of the human race. And on that distant green planet were people much like these, unconscious still of the butchery into which they were being deftly maneuvered by calculating psychologists, expert war-makers.

His meal completed, Sime sauntered out into the wide, clean streets of North Tarog. He purchased a desert unionall suit, proof against the heat of day and cold of night, and a wide-brimmed Martian pith helmet. Hailing a taxi, he relaxed comfortably in the cushions.

"Nabar mine," he told the driver.

The driver nosed the vehicle up, over the domed roofs of the city and over the harsh desert landscape. The rounded prow cut through the thin air with a faint whistling, and the fair cultivated area along the canal was soon lost to sight.

After half an hour the metal mine sheds grew out of the horizon. But even from a distance of several miles Sime could see that everything was not as it should be. There were no moving white specks of the laborers' white fatigue uniforms against the brown rocks, and no clouds of dust from the borium refuse pile.

The levitator screws of the taxi sank from their high whine to a groan, and the wheels came to the ground before the company office. A man in the Martian army uniform came out. His beetle-browed face was truculent, and his hand rested on the hilt of his neuro-pistol.

"No visitors allowed!" snapped the guard.

"I'm not exactly a visitor," Sime objected, but making no move to get out of the taxi. "I'm an engineer sent here by the board of directors to see why the output of this mine has dropped. Where's Mr. Murray?"

"All settled!" the guard retorted. "Murray's in jail for mismanagement of planetary resources, and the mine's been expropriated to the government. Now, you—off!"

The driver needed no further order from his fare. The taxi leaped into the air and tore back toward the city. It was clear that the military rules of Mars brooked no nonsense from the civilian population, and that the latter were well aware of it.

"Fast work!" Sime said to himself with grudging admiration. Murray was a trusted agent of the terrestrial government. It was he who had first uncovered the war cabal. Sime knew his face well from the stereoscopic service record—a bald, placid man of about forty, a bonafide engineer, a spy with an unbroken record of success, until now. And a fighter who asked no odds, who could manage very well on less than an even break. Well, he was up against something now.

They passed the line of shield-ray projectors, North Tarog's first line of defense against an attack of space, hovered over the teeming streets and parks, and settled on the pavement at the Hotel of the

Republic. Sime wanted to go to his room and think things over.

From the concealment of a doorway an officer with a squad of soldiers came up quickly.

"You are under arrest!" said the officer, placing, his hand on Sime's shoulder, while the soldiers rested their hands on their neuro-pistols.

"Would it be asking too much to inquire on what charge?" Sime asked politely.

"Military arrests do not require the filing of charges," the officer explained stiffly. "Come out of there now, Mr. Hemingway."

"I demand to see the terrestrial consul," Sime said, getting out.

"How about my fare?" asked the taxi-driver.

Sime put his hand into his pocket, where he kept a roll of interplanetary script; but the officer restrained him.

"Never mind now," he said ironically. "You are a guest of the government." Then to the driver he added:

"Get on, now! Get on! File your claim at the divisional office."

The driver departed, outwardly meek before the power of the military, and Sime was hustled into an official car. He had little hope that his demand to see the terrestrial consul would be complied with, and this opinion was verified when the car rose into the air and sped over the waters of the canal to South Tarog. It did not pause when it came over the military camps there—the massive ordnance depots in which were stored new and improved killing tools that had long been idle in that irksome interplanetary peace.

They flew on, over the desert, until the Gray Mountains loomed on the horizon. On, over the tumbled rocks, interspersed with the strange red thorny vegetation common in the Martian desert.

Far below them, in a ravine, a cylindrical building was now visible, and toward this the car began to drop. It landed on a level space before the structure. A sliding gate opened, and the car wheeled into a sort of courtyard, protected from the cold of night by an arching roof of glass.

Sime was hustled out and led into an office located on the lower floor of the fortification, or whatever the structure was.

As he saw the man who sat at the desk he gave a startled explanation.

"Colonel Barkins!"

The elderly, white-haired man smiled. He brushed back his hair with a characteristic gesture, and his twinkling blue eyes bored into those of the I. F. P. special officer. The colonel wore the regular uniform of the service; his little skullcap, with the conventionalized sun symbol denoting his rank, was on the table before him. He put out his lean, strong hand.

"Surprised to see me, eh, Hemingway?" he inquired pleasantly.

Sime managed an awkward salute. "I don't quite understand, sir. You gave me my instructions at the Philadelphia space port just before I made the Pleadisia. She's the fastest passenger liner in the solar system: I've barely landed here, and it seems you got here before me. It don't seem right!"

Sime watched the colonel narrowly, a vague suspicion in his mind, and he thought he saw a slight flicker in the man's eye when Sime spoke.

But the colonel answered smoothly, with a hint of reproof.

"Never mind questioning me now, Hemingway. The mission is

important. I want to know if you remember every detail of what I told you." He nodded to the men, and they filed out of the room. "Repeat your orders."

"Nothing doing, Colonel!" Sime replied promptly and respectfully. "In fact, Colonel, you can go to hell! This is the first time that a man of the I. F. P. has turned traitor, and if your men hadn't so thoughtfully taken my neuro I'd be pleased to finish you right now!"

"But you observe I have a neuro in my hand," remarked the colonel pleasantly, "and so you will remain standing where you are."

So saying, he slipped off the white wig he was wearing, wiped his face so that the brown powder came off, and sat, obviously pleased with the success of his masquerade, useless though it was. He was a typical Martian, dark, sleek-haired, coral-skinned.

"I hate to send a man to his death mystified," said the Martian after a moment, "so I'll explain that I am Scar Balta!"

"Scar Balta!"

"You've heard of me?"

"Uh—yes and no," Sime suddenly remembered the girl of the

evening before—the imperious little Martian. She had warned him of Scar Balta.

"If I do say it," said the Martian, "I am the best impersonator in the service of the interests I represent. I did not expect to get information of great value from you, but we do not neglect even the most unpromising leads."

He pressed a button; two Martian soldiers answered promptly.

"Take this man to the cell," Balta ordered. "Provide him with writing materials so that he can write a last message to his family. In the morning take him to the end of the ravine and finish him with your short sword."

"Yes, Colonel!"

"The fellow's a colonel, anyway," Sime thought as they led him away.

They led him downward, along a straight corridor that evidently went far beyond the boundaries of the ravine fortress. In places the walls, adequately lit by the glow-wands the guards carried, were plainly cut out of the solid rock; in others they were masonry, as

though the channel were passing through pockets of earth; or—the thought electrified him—through faults or natural caverns.

At last they came to the end. One of the guards unlocked a metal door, motioned his prisoner into the prison cell. A light-wand, badly run down and feeble, with only a few active cells left, gave the only light. As the door slammed behind him, Sime took in the depressing scene.

The stone walls were mildewed, leprous. The only ventilation was through small holes in the door. Chains, fastened to huge staples in the uneven stone floor, with smooth metal wrist and ankle cuffs, were spaced at regular intervals, and musty piles of canal rushes showed where some forgotten prisoner had dragged out his melancholy last days. Sime was glad they had not chained him down. Probably didn't consider it necessary unless there were many prisoners, who might rush the guards.

"Ho, there, sojer!"

The voice was startling, so hearty and natural in this sad place. Sime saw something coming out of a far corner. It was a man in the blouse and trousers of civilian wear; a bald and good-natured man, with a shocking growth of beard.

"Murray's the name," said this apparition with mock ceremony. "And you?"

"I'm Hemingway, Sime Hemingway. Sergeant Sime Hemingway, to be exact. Suppose you'd like to hear my orders?"

"I don't get you," said Murray, shaking hands.

"I mean," Sime explained elaborately, "that I'd like to know if you're Scar Balta, or really Murray, as you say you are."

The other laughed.

"I'm Murray, all right. Feel this scalp. Natural, ain't it? That's one thing Balta won't do—shave off his hair. Too vain. He'd hate to have the Princess Sira see him that way. Ever hear of her? Say, she's a raving beauty. This Balta'd like to be elected planetary president, see—to succeed Wilcox, who has bigger plans. There's always been a strong sentiment for the old monarchy, anyway. The oligarchy never did go big. Follow me?"

"Yeh; go on."

"Well, this Princess Sira has ideas. She wouldn't mind sitting on the throne again. Her great-great-grandpa was jobbed and murdered, and

the nobles who did it formed a closed corporation and called it a republican government. So Sira started holding audiences, and gained a lot of power. Among the people—even among some of the nobles.

"Get the idea? Scar Balta is one of the electors. If he married Sira he'd have the backing of the monarchists, and of course he's done a lot for the bosses. They'd elect him to head off the monarchists, anyway. Then heigh-ho for a war with the Earth, to kill off a lot of the kickers—and soft pickins in a lot of ways. Neat, huh?"

"Very neat!" Sime assented drily. "But we won't live to see it. Anyway, I won't. They're going to bump me off in the morning."

"As they have a lot of our men," Murray agreed. "But they won't do it in the morning. Or for several days. Look here!"

He held up his hand. On the back of it was what appeared to be a boil.

"But it isn't a boil," Murray explained. "That was done by a stream of water, fine as a needle, under a thousand pounds pressure. They held it there for a minute at a time—I don't know how many times, because I keeled over. Any time I was willing to give them the

information they wanted they'd turn it off. Wasn't important info, either. But what is it to them, how much they make me suffer for a trifle?"

Sime couldn't help the lump that rose in his throat. Men like Murray certainly justified the world's faith in the service.

"Listen, old man," Sime said in a low voice, "out in the corridor—"

But Murray squeezed his hand warningly, pulled him to the floor.

"Might as well get some sleep," the old man said in ordinary tones. "Plenty cool here. Let's lie together."

He kept his hold on Sime's wrist, and, by alternately squeezing and releasing, began to talk in a silent telegraphic code.

"Don't say anything of importance," he spelled out. "They have mikes in here to pick up all we say. Probably infra-red telenses too, so they can see what we do."

So Sime told him, as they huddled together in simulated sleep, about the walled passages, and they speculated on the possibility of felling the guards and breaking their way to freedom through some underground cavern. But at last they slept soundly to await the

tortures of the next morning.

Chapter 3: The Price of Monarchy

Had Sime been able to follow and watch the girl he had kissed under such unusual circumstances on the night of his arrival on Mars, he would have been both puzzled and enlightened. After her final warning about Scar Balta she dashed into the luxurious gloom of the passage. At an intersection a maid was awaiting her. She curtseyed as she threw a cape over the girl's shoulder, and together they hurried out into the night.

A magnificently uniformed hotel servant called a private car, drew the vitrine curtains, and saluted as the car lifted sharply into the chilly night air. The car sped across the canal to the jeweled city across the water, to a residence district whose magnificence even the pale night light revealed.

The two women entered a mansion of glittering metal and came to a private apartment.

"Everybody's gone to bed," said the girl, addressing her maid. "That's one thing we can be thankful for."

"Yes, Your Highness. Did you discover anything of importance in the man's room?"

"No. Draw me a bath, Mellie. He—he caught me—and kissed me!"

The maid, with flasks of perfume and aromatic oils in her hand, paused, discreetly impudent.

"You seem not displeased, Your Highness."

"But of that he had no inkling." And Princess Sira laughed. "I left him standing, utterly at a loss. He took me for a common assassin, and yet he wanted to kiss me. That pleased me. But if he had valuable information he kept it. And I promised him death for his kiss."

As Princess Sira, claimant to the throne of a planet, slipped into the tepid waters of her bath, Mellie stood by, her smooth little Martian's face disturbed. For she loved her mistress, and could not comprehend the things she did under ambition's sway.

"Your Highness, couldn't you let your royal friends do these dangerous things for you?"

"For what? For fear? And how could a Martian princess who knows fear lay claim to a throne? No, Mellie, one gets used to it. The enemies of the house of Sira are ever alert. Didn't they murder my

father and my mother, and my only brother? My peril in this palace is as great as in the room of a terrestrial detective. Only their fear of the people—"

She was interrupted by the tinkling of a bell. The maid left the alcove, and returned a moment later with the news that Joro, Prince of Hanlon, awaited the princess's pleasure in the ante-room.

"At this hour!" exclaimed the princess. "Did he say what brought him here?"

"Something about a new plot."

"Plots! They fall thicker than rain on Venus. Bid him wait."

Fifteen minutes later, swathed in a trailing orange silk robe that made her look like a Venus orchid, she greeted the prince.

"Greetings, Joro. We seem to have the unusual this night."

The prince, a thin, elderly man of medium stature, smiled admiringly. His sharp features and bright little button eyes gave some hint of the energy which suffused him. Here was a man both ruthless and loyal to his royal house. He addressed her by her given name.

"The hour seems to make no difference with you; Phobos has set, but as long as you are awake there is loveliness enough. I have come, dear one, to tell you that success is ours at last!"

Sira smiled. "I will restrain my joy, my good Joro, until I hear the price."

"Always the same!" Joro chuckled. "A price, 'tis true, but not too heavy, since you are, in a manner, fond of him."

"I've had vague promises from Wilcox," Sira said, with a wry smile. "I would rather trade places with Mellie than be espoused by that madman."

"Not Wilcox, but Scar Balta. He is badly smitten, for which I can not blame him. He has great political power, and the backing of the military. He could have dictated better terms, but for love of you has yielded, point after point. He wants nothing now but your hand in marriage, and is prepared to cede to the royal cause all the advantages he has gained—"

"Not to mention," Sira interjected, "the royal prestige he will gain with the common people."

Joro laughed, a little impatiently.

"True, true! But after all, what does the support of the people amount to? They are powerless. If you are ever to establish your royal house you must have other help."

"And I suppose," Sira continued sweetly, "that you have also arranged a deal with the central banks and the secret war interests?"

Joro coughed uncomfortably.

"As a matter of fact—you see, my dear princess, there are certain commercial interests—transportation, mining, and so forth. They have defied the power of the bankers. They are likely to upset our whole order of society. They need a set-back. And the military men are chafing at their inaction. The war will be ended before too much harm is done, by agreement of the interplanetary bankers. You see __"

"No!" Sira interrupted him coldly. "No! No! No! Oh, I'm sick of the whole thing! I'm sick of the men I know! I hate Scar Balta, and you too. I would rather be the wife of a common interplanetary patrolman than queen of Mars! I withdraw, now!"

Joro, struck by her vehemence, paled. The muscles of his jaw lumped. From a pocket he took a portable disk-radio, an inch in diameter, and spoke a few words. From outside there was a sudden uproar, shouts and curses. The draperies moved, as with an outrush of air caused by the careless handling of an airlock, and the temperature dropped suddenly.

Sira was irresolute only a split second. With a cat-like leap she seized a short sword from the wall, made a lunge at the prince. But Joro, the veteran of many a battle of wits and arms, parried the stroke with the thick barrel of his neuro-pistol, caught the girl's wrist and disarmed her. The screams of the maid went unheeded.

From the other parts of the palace came sounds of struggle, the clashing of sword on sword.

"Sira! Sira!" Joro panted, struggling to hold the girl. "You must give up your impractical ideas! Take the world as it is. Do as I tell you and you'll not be sorry."

"I relinquish my claims!" the girl cried fiercely. "To-morrow I will publicly announce that decision. All my life has been spent feeding that hopeless ambition. Now I will be free!"

"I am loyal to the monarchy," Joro grunted, pinioning her arms at last. "I will guard your interest against yourself."

He began to shout:

"Hendricks, Mervin, Carpender, Nassus! Here, to the princess's chamber."

Several men, after further delay and fighting, responded. They wore civilian blouses and trousers, but there was that something in their alert carriage that proclaimed them trained fighting men. One of them sat down with a grunt on the threshold, holding his hand to a bleeding wound under his armpit. He appeared to be mortally wounded.

Most of the others carried minor wounds, showing that the palace guards had put up a good battle in the sword-play. Both sides had refrained from using the neuro-pistols for fear that the beams, which readily penetrated walls at short range, might injure the princess.

"Let go!" Sira wrenched herself free. "Where is Tolto? Has Tolto turned traitor? How did you get past Tolto?"

"Do not use that ugly word against me. I implore you!" Joro

protested. "What we are doing is out of loyalty to the monarchy—not treason. The monarchy is of greater importance than individuals. Consider your duty to the rule of your fathers! As for Tolto—"

He issued a curt command, and there was the sound of movement. Presently four men staggered in, one to each leg, each arm, of the most impressive giant Mars had ever produced—Tolto, to whom there was no god but the one divinity: and Princess Sira was she. Slow of perception, mighty of limb, he had come into her service from some outlying agricultural region of the red planet. His tremendous muscles were hers to command or destroy, as she wished. He would not have consented to this invasion of her home, she knew!

And he had not. Joro had been too wise to try. A dose of marchlor in a glass of wine had done what fifty men could not have accomplished by main strength. Tolto was in a drugged sleep.

Joro said: "He isn't hurt. We will simply send him back to his valley, and you, my dear princess, will do your duty to your subjects!"

And there, though he probably did not know it, Prince Joro harked back to the youth of the human race—the compensatory, atavistic principle that gods, rulers, kings, must hold themselves in readiness

as sacrifices for the good of their subjects. Joro might have been a tribal high priest invoking their dread rule in the dawn of time. The Martians were, for all their scientific advancement, still the descendants of those prehistoric human savages. Sira knew, instinctively, that the people who loved her would nevertheless approve of Joro's judgment.

Chapter 4: Torture

When Sime awoke it was to the rattling of the door. Murray stirred. The light was even weaker than before.

"If they offer you a drink, drink hearty!" Murray muttered, sitting up. "I've got an idea it's going to be a hard day."

But they were not offered any water. Instead they were again conducted before Scar Balta, who looked at them morosely. At last he remarked gruffly:

"If you tin sojers weren't so cursed stubborn, you could get yourself a nice berth in the Martian army. Ever consider that?"

"Talk sense!" Sime said contemptously. "If I threw down the service how could you trust me?"

"That'd be easy," Balta rejoined. "Once the I. F. P. finds out you joined us you'd have to stick with us to save your skin."

He laughed at his prisoners' look of surprise.

"Come, come!" he bantered. "You didn't think that I was ignorant of your purpose here? You, Murray; your spying was excellent, I'll

admit. You were the first to give away certain plans of ours. Well, well! We don't hold that against you. Wheels within wheels, eh? It would perhaps astonish certain braided gentleman of our high command to learn that I, a mere colonel, control their destinies. As our ancestors would say, it's dog eat dog.

"Now, how about it? I can make a place for you in my organization. It seems to run to secret service, oddly enough. You will be rewarded far beyond anything you could expect in your present career of chasing petty crooks from Mercury to Pluto and back again."

"Is that all?" Murray asked softly, with a bearded grin.

"Oh no. You will turn over to me all the information you can about the I. F. P. helio code. You will name and describe to me each and every plainclothes operative of the service—and you should have an extensive acquaintance."

"Before you answer," Murray said quietly at Sime's side, "let me suggest that you consider what's in store for us—or you—if you don't take up this offer."

"Why, you—" Sime whirled in astonished fury upon his companion. "Didn't you—"

But he did not complete his reference to last night's surreptitious conversation. It seemed that he saw the merest ghost of a flicker in Murray's left eye.

"—Didn't you say you'd stick no matter what they did?" he finished lamely.

Murray hung his head.

"I'm getting along," he muttered. "Not as young as I used to be. This life is getting me nowhere. Why be a fool? Come along with me!"

"Why, you dirty, double-crossing hound!" Sime's exasperation knew no bounds. For an instant he had believed that Murray was enacting a little side-play in the pursuit of a suddenly conceived plan. But he looked so obviously hangdog—so guiltily defiant....

Crack! Sime's fist struck Murray's solid jaw, scraping the skin off his knuckles, but Murray swayed to the blow, sapping its force, and came in to clinch. They rolled on the floor. Murray twisted Sime's head painfully, bit his ear. But in the next split second he was whispering:

"Keep your head, Sime. Can't you see I'm stringing him? Take that!"

And he planted a vicious short hook to Sime's midriff.

Balta had squalled orders, and now Martian soldiers were bursting the buttons off their uniforms in the scrimmage to separate the battlers. Bruised and battered, they were dragged apart. Murray's one eye was now authentically closed, and rapidly coloring up. Unsteadily he got to his feet. With mock delicacy he threw a kiss to his late antagonist.

"Farewell, Trueheart!" He bowed ironically, and the men all laughed.

Balta grinned too. "Still the same mind, Hemingway? All right, men, take him up to the observation post. Here, Murray, have a drink."

Sime was led up a seemingly endless circular staircase. After an interminable climb he saw the purplish Martian sky through the glass doors of an airlock. Then they were outside, in the rarefied atmosphere that sorely tried Sime's lungs, still laboring after the fight and long ascent. The Sun, smaller than on Earth but intensely bright, struck down vindictively.

"A good place to see the country," laughed the corporal in charge. "Off with his clothes!"

It was but a matter of seconds to strip Sime's garment from him. They dragged him to an upright post, one of several on the roof, and with his back to the post, tied his wrists behind it with rawhide. His ankles they also tied, and so left him.

It was indeed an excellent point of vantage from which to see the country. The fortress was high enough to clear the nearby cliffs of low elevation, and on all sides the Gray Mountains tumbled to the horizon. To the north, beyond that sharply cut, ragged horizon, lay the big cities, the industrial heart of the planet. To the south, at Sime's back, was the narrow agricultural belt, the region of small seas, of bitter lakes, of controlled irrigation. Here the canals, natural fissures long observed by astronomers and at first believed to be artificial, were actually put to the use specified by ancient conjecture, just as further north they had been preempted as causeways of civilization. Sime painfully worked his way around the post so that he could look south. But here too nothing met his eye but the orange cliffs with their patches of gray lichen. There was no comfort to be had in that desolate landscape. Nevertheless, Sime kept moving around, to keep the post between himself and the Sun. Already it was beginning to scorch his skin uncomfortably.

By the time it was directly overhead Sime had stopped sweating. The dry atmosphere was sucking the moisture out of his body greedily,

and his skin was burned red. His suffering was acute.

The Martian day is only a little more than a day on Earth, but to Sime that afternoon seemed like an eternity. Small and vicious, with deadly deliberation, the sun burned its way down a reluctant groove in the purple heavens. Long before it reached the horizon, Sime was almost unconscious. He did not see its sudden dive into the saw-edge of the western mountains—knew only that night had come by the icy whistle of the sunset wind that stirred and moaned for a brief interval among the rocks. The keen, thin wind that first brought relief and then new tortures, to be followed by freezing numbness.

Above, in the blackness, the stars burned malignantly. Drug to his misery they were, those familiar constellations, which are about the only things that look the same on all planets of the solar system. But they were not friendly. They seemed to mock the motionless human figure, so tiny, so inconsequential, that stared at them, numerous tiny pinpricks of light, so remote.

There was no dawn, but after aeons Sime saw the familiar green disk of Earth coming up in the east, one of the brightest stars. Sime fancied he saw the tiny light flick of the moon. There would be a game of blackjack going on somewhere there about now. He groaned. The Sun would not be far behind now.

But he must have slept. The Sun was up before he was aware of it. A man with a caduceus on his blouse collar was holding his wrist, feeling his pulse. He seemed to be a medical officer of the Martian army. His smooth, coral face was serious as he prodded Sime's shriveled tongue.

"Water, quick!" he snapped,—"or he's done for."

His head was tipped back and water poured into his mouth, but Sime could not swallow. The soldier with the bucket poured dutifully, however, almost drowning the helpless man. It helped, anyway; and Sime returned to half-consciousness. A few minutes later, when Scar Balta came to inquire if he had changed his mind, Sime was able to curse thickly. And around noon, when Murray, jauntily dressed in the uniform of a Martian captain, bid him a cheerful good-by, Sime was almost fluent.

His torture had now reached the pitch of exquisite keenness that made it something spiritual. Solicitously they kept him alive, and far back in his mind Sime wondered why they bothered to do that. Couldn't they be satisfied with what they could learn from Murray?

So passed the second day, and the third.

On the fourth day Sime was able to drink water freely, and to eat the food they placed into his mouth, a fact which the medical officer noted. The torture was wearing itself out. Sime's body was emaciated, stringy, burnt black. But his extraordinary toughness was weathering conditions that would kill most men. Balta shook his head in wonderment when this was reported to him.

"Can't wait any longer for him. Must get back to Tarog. You might as well put him out of his misery. By the way, I'm convinced that Murray is double-timing me. But I'll attend to that personally."

From his post of pain Sime saw the official car leave toward Tarog. Had he known of Balta's remark he would not have been puzzled so much by what he saw.

As the ship was about to disappear over the ragged northern horizon, Sime's bleared eyes saw, or he thought they saw, a human figure silhouetted against the pitiless sky. It was a tiny-seeming figure at that distance, but it was clear-cut in the rare atmosphere. Then it plunged from sight.

"Somebody taken for a ride," he muttered, half grateful for the brief distraction from his own misery.

The medical officer, to whom the long climb was arduous, delayed his mission to the roof, and that was why, several hours later, Sime was still alive to see another ship appear to the north. It was large, sumptuous, evidently a private yacht. Its course would bring it within a mile of the fortress, and with sudden wild hope Sime realized that if he were seen he might expect relief. He began to tug at his bonds. They were tough, but they would stretch a little. His haphazard movements had already worn them against the rough post, and now he began to struggle violently. If he could only get his hands loose, he could wave....

The thongs cut into his flesh, but his wrists were numb and swollen, and he did not mind the pain. His muscles stood out hard and sharp, and with a supreme effort, aided by the growing brittleness of the rawhide in the dry atmosphere, he snapped his bonds.

The ship was now quite near, and he waved frantically. He fancied he saw movement back of the pilot ports. Faintly he heard the hum of the levitators. Now it turned—no! It yawed, now toward him, now away, purposelessly, like a ship in distress. It made an abrupt downward plunge that scraped a crag, and just missed a canyon wall.

Again it twisted, came down with a long, twisting motion, struck a rock upside down, slitting a long gash in its skin, clattered to the

rocks so close to the fortress that Sime could not see it. Now desperation gave the prisoner superhuman strength. Regardless of the pain, he burst the thongs about his ankles, tottered to the edge of the roof.

There was a battle going on below. Men seemed to be running, shouting. Someone, using a massive plate of metal as a partial shield against the neuro-pistols, was creating havoc. Sime tried to focus his giddy eyes on the scene. It seemed always to be turning to the left, to be circling around him. With tottering steps he tried to follow it, keeping to the brink of that lofty tower—uselessly. Now it was rocking, flying straight toward him, and, gratefully, Sime gave up the struggle, closed his eyes.

Chapter 5: The Wrath of Tolto

Tolto awoke from his drugged sleep in the cargo room of a pleasure ship. He was thoroughly trussed up, for Prince Joro's servants had a wholesome respect for the giant's strength. Even in his supine position power was evident in every line of his great torso, revealed through great rents in his blouse. His thighs were as big around as an ordinary man's body, and the smooth pink skin of his mighty arms and shoulders rippled with every movement that brought into play the broad, flat bands of muscle underneath.

A chain of beryllium steel was passed around Tolto's waist, and close in front of him the smooth, shining cuffs of steel around his wrist were locked to the chain. Short lengths of chain led to cargo ringbolts in the floor, holding fast Tolto's cuffed ankles.

To anyone looking at Tolto, just then, these extreme precautions might have seemed absurd. Prince Joro, however, was a good judge of men. It would have pleased him best if Tolto had been quietly eased from his sleep into death, but he knew that such a murder would have destroyed forever his chances of winning Sira to his plans. He meant to see Tolto safely and demonstrably returned to his home valley, and in order to accomplish this the more surely, he had him loaded aboard his own ship, and instructed his captain to take

the little used desert route.

Tolto lifted his hands as far as he could and looked wonderingly at them. His child-like face, with the soft, agate eyes, expressed only bewilderment. He lifted his voice, a powerful bass.

"Hi, hi! Let Tolto go! The princess may call!"

There was no answer, only the rhythmic hum of the levitators. Again Tolto cried out. But there was no answering sound. The Sun poured in through the ports, and when presently the ship changed its course, the light fell full in his face, almost blinding him. The giant endured this without complaint.

Several hours later, however, his patience snapped, and he roared and bellowed so loudly that a door opened and a frightened face appeared. Back of it was the chromium glitter of the ship's galley.

"Be still, big one!" admonished the cook. "The captain is resting. He will have you chained standing if you disturb him with your bellowing."

"I wanted only to know where I am," Tolto replied, subsiding meekly. "I drank overmuch and some larksters tied me up like this.

Release me, so that if the princess calls I may answer."

"The princess will have to call loudly for you to hear," the cook answered jocularly.

"The princess need only whisper for Tolto to hear," the giant boasted, "Come now, shrimp, take these things off!"

"Are you really as dumb as that?" the cook marveled. "Why, sonny boy, the princess couldn't even hear you! Don't you know where you're goin'?"

Vague alarm began to creep over Tolto.

"Where is she?" he asked anxiously. "Isn't she in this ship? Princess Sira never goes anywhere without Tolto. Ask her. Ask anybody."

"The princess may never go anywhere without you, you head of bone," remarked the cook, rather enjoying his own humor, "but this time you're going somewhere without her."

"You talk funny talk, but I can't laugh at it. Little bug, tell me now what this is all about, or I will take you between my fingers and squash you!"

The cook's coral face paled almost to white despite himself.

"Listen, big one," he said placatingly. "Have an orange?"

Tolto refused the gift, although he knew this rare and luscious importation from the Earth and was very fond of it.

"Once more I ask you, bug, where is she?"

"Aw, now, listen!" the cook whined. "Don't blame me! I'm only a servant around here. How can I help what they do? Don't glare at me so. Well, she's at Tarog."

"But why—why does she send me away?"

The cook failed to recognize his opportunity to lie in time.

"Well, the fact is—" he hesitated. "The boss—Prince Joro's sending you away. You see, she's going to get hitched up-big important guy. They didn't want you around, bustin' up things every time you turn around. So they're sendin' you back home."

"The princess would not send me home like this," Tolto objected. But he held his peace, and the cook went back to his work, satisfied that he had subdued this dangerous prisoner.

In this he was guilty of no greater error than Prince Joro and the other monarchists. For ages there had been an unfounded opinion that big men are generally slow and stupid. They may often act so, for their great strength serves as a substitute for the quick wit of smaller men. But in Tolto, at all events, this prejudice was wrong. In Tolto's bullet head was a healthy, active brain, and a primitive cunning.

So instead of wasting his strength in vain struggles against the tough steel, he rested, marshalling the facts in his mind.

He utterly rejected the thought that Princess Sira had consented to his removal in this manner, or in any manner. That meant that she was being coerced, and Tolto's eyes grew small and hard at the thought.

Presently he began to test the chains. They were of great hardness and toughness, and so smooth that he could not twist them, for the links slid over one another harmlessly. However, after much quiet effort he found that he could shift his body several inches toward either side of the narrow hold. Here there were a number of locked boxes. One of them, he reasoned, might contain tools.

His closely confined hands were practically useless. He found that

he could not reach any of the boxes with his fingers, strain as he might. But he grinned with hope when his head struck one of the handles. His strong teeth closed down on it.

That would have been something to see! The box was of thin, strong metal, but it was heavy. With no other purchase but his teeth, Tolto dragged it to him, on top of him. Now his hands could help a little. He inched it down toward his knees, fearful each moment that a lurch of the ship might precipitate it to the floor with a crash. When his head could push no longer his knees grasped the end of the chest, and managed to pull it down.

Tolto had never heard of the wrestling hold known as the scissors, but he applied it to that box. His mighty sinews cracked under the strain, and stabbing pain tore at his hips. But he persisted, and with a protesting rasp the lid was telescoped inward, breaking the lock.

Breathless, he waited. After minutes he decided that the sound had not attracted attention.

Again he brought his teeth into play, and this time, when the box stood open, Tolto's lips were lacerated by the jagged edges of twisted metal. Triumphantly, he looked inside.

The box contained a set of counterweights for the hydrogen integrator motors.

No bar, nothing that might be utilized to twist off the eyebolts!

Again he set to work. The next box was longer, heavier. It was coated with unpleasantly rancid oil. Tolto's broad chest was covered with blood, partly from gouges in his skin, partly from his crushed lips. But this time he found a bar. It was in the bottom, under some extra valves, but eventually his teeth closed on it, and he fell back, nearly exhausted, for a moment's rest.

He heard a door slam beyond the galley. The words floated out:

"—better go see how he's coming along."

The horrified mate saw the wrecked boxes, the blood-covered giant with a thick steel bar in his teeth, the extra valves scattered about the floor. He whipped out his neuro-pistol, pointed it at Tolto.

But Tolto made no move to resist when the shaken officer gingerly took the bar out of his mouth. He did not move when several shipmen, called by the officer, moved everything out of reach. After half an hour, with many awed comments, they left him alone.

Tolto's battered lips opened in what might have been a grin. Painfully he rolled off the single valve that had been digging into the small of his back. He patiently resumed the tedious task of bringing the valve in reach of his locked hands.

The valve stem was stout, and a foot long. It was just long enough so that Tolto, by lying on his side, could reach one of the eyebolts.

Inserting the stem, Tolto pulled toward him.

The eyebolt turned without resistance. It was free to rotate, and could not be twisted off. A groan escaped from the prisoner.

But in a few moments he tried bending upward. The leverage was highly disadvantageous that way. Still, straining with the last ounce of his strength, he was just able to do it. Pulling down was not so hard.

It took fifty-four motions, up and down, before the tough metal cracked and one chain trailed free.

It was not long afterward that the cook, turning from his work at the electric grill, stared into a face that had once been innocent and peaceful. It seemed the face of a demon.

He would have shrieked, but Tolto took his arm between thumb and forefinger, saying gently:

"Remember, little bug, what I said!"

He was cast, dumb with fear, into the late prisoner's cell.

Tolto had not bothered to remove the chains, but only to twist them apart by means of such tools as he could find to permit free movement of his arms and legs. They dangled from him, tinkling musically.

Now he strode into the main cabin. The ship's crew, having no guests, were playing the part of guests. A man who was shuffling cards, was the first to see him. The cards flew up and showered all over the room.

"He's loose!" this shipman croaked, diving under the table.

"Mr. Yens! Mr. Yens!" shouted the captain, a small, bristling Martian with graying, stiff hair. He snatched the neuro-pistol at his side, pointed it at Tolto, pressed the trigger.

Tolto felt a numbing cold as the ray struck him. But his great body absorbed the weapon's energy to such an extent that he was not

killed at once. His flailing arms continued their arc, and one end of chain, whistling through the air, struck the weapon from the officer's hand. Tolto stumbled, recovered. He picked up the pistol and stuck it in his chain belt.

His impulse was to rend, to crush with his hands. The shipmen, except for the officers, were unarmed, and they went down helplessly before the giant fists. Some of them found riot guns, but they might as well have pounded a Plutonian mammoth for all the effect they had on Tolto.

Mr. Yens, the mate, sitting at the controls in the glassed-in cabin forward, turned his head at the captain's cry, and, looking down the short corridor into the main cabin, saw the blood-covered giant coming toward him. Mr. Yens was a brave man; but he had been careless. His neuro-pistol was in his own cabin. He did the best he knew, and snapped the lock.

But Tolto's great bulk smashed in the door as if it were nothing. The unbreakable glass did not splinter, but it bent like sheet metal, and a blow of the giant's fist broke the mate's neck.

The mate had not engaged the gyroscopic control, and immediately the ship began a series of eccentric maneuvers, so sharp and

unexpected that no one on board could keep his feet. For a few seconds she straightened, and one of the crew bethought himself of the pistol in the mate's cabin. He sighted on Tolto, clearly visible ahead. Before he could release the ray the ship went into another breath-taking maneuver.

A mountain peak came sliding toward them ominously. They scraped by. The ship dived, throwing Tolto forward, and his instinctive grab threw the elevator up. The levitators screamed madly as they lost their purchase on the air, due to the ship's unstable keel.

"We're goners!" someone shouted. "Kill that fool!"

They bounced off a cliff, turned over and over like a tumbleweed. A cylindrical building, unexpected in this wilderness, loomed up. They seemed about to hit it, but floated past. The rock floor of the valley rushed up. With a crash the ship rolled over, split wide open.

Chapter 6: The Fight in the Fort

Its coming had been observed. Men wearing the uniforms of the Martian army dashed out, their pistols ready. A man dropped out of a gaping hole in the ship's skin, sat down unsteadily. Others dribbled out.

"Crazy man in there!" one of them shouted. "Look out, he's murderous!" The pistols came up. The soldiers began to close in, showing a certain professional eagerness.

They were perhaps within ten feet when a metal plate, sheared off from the pilot's cabin in the fall, lifted up. Barely visible under it was a pair of large, running feet. One soldier, trying to oppose it with his hands, was knocked senseless and bleeding. He might as well have tried to stop an oncoming rocket ship.

Neuro-pistols, bearing from every side, spanged briskly. They partly neutralized one another. Their charges were partly reflected by the metal and partly absorbed by Tolto's great bulk. He was thoroughly confused now. Every way he looked in this glaring wilderness of desert and rocks were enemies.

But there! An opening loomed, cool and dark. The fortress entrance.

Tolto dashed into it. There was the sharp challenge of a guard, unanswered; the futile hiss of a weapon.

The improvised shield wedged on a narrowing stairway. Tolto let it stick, ran up alone. The stairway went round and round, climbing ever higher. The fugitive's lungs were bursting.

At last he came to an airlock. He did not know how to operate it, so smashed through. There was no rush of air, because the pressure had already been equalized in the rush to the wreck at ground level. Panting, listening for pursuers, Tolto looked around.

He found himself on a circular roof, bare except for the airlock and a number of upright posts, whitened by the Sun.

It was some moments before he saw the unconscious figure of a man lying on the very edge of the lofty tower on which he was standing —a man naked and blackened. He was lying on his face, one arm and one foot hanging over space as though he had fallen unconscious at the very edge of the abyss.

Tolto collected his excited wits. This, at least was no enemy. His enemies were in power here. This must be a victim, a possible ally.

The man was stirring. The overhanging arm was feebly trying to grasp something. If he were to roll over—

He did not have time. Tolto dragged him in to the safety of the airlock opening, where he could watch.

There were sounds of pursuit, faint and cautious.

Tolto grinned at the naked stranger.

"Who are you, little bug?" he asked.

Sime Hemingway tried to tell him but his swollen tongue would not behave. Instead, he waved in the general direction of the Sun.

Tolto understood. "From Earth? Good guy, prob'ly. Want this dingus?"

Sime was able to take the neuro-pistol. He knew what was expected of him, and strove to collect his faculties so he could obey orders. He crawled a little way into the lock, where he could be in comparative darkness, setting the little focalizer wheel at the side of the pistol for maximum concentration. Such a beam would require good aiming, being narrow, but if it touched a vital center would be infallibly fatal.

Meanwhile Tolto appraised one of the posts on the roof. It was firmly set in masonry, but he found he could loosen it a little by shaking it. Presently he had it uprooted. It made a splendid battering ram, a war club fit for a giant such as he.

"Here they come!" Sime croaked, and, peering around a corner, took careful aim at the foremost attacker. At the first whispering impact of the beam the Martian sprawled, dead.

The soldiers were caught at a disadvantage. They were expecting club or fist, but not the neuro-beam. Nevertheless Sime had no more easy opportunities. The Martians flung themselves down behind the bulge of the curved stairway, and the air became acrid under the malignant neuro-beams.

None of them reached Sime directly, but the stone walls reflected them to some extent, and even under their greatly weakened power he become cold and sick.

The situation was by no means to his liking. There were other weapons to be reckoned with, and he tried to keep consciousness from slipping away from him. When at last his breathing became easier and his diaphragm moved without pain, Sime knew that danger was greatest. For this relief meant that the Martians had

withdrawn down the stairway.

"Good-by, boys!" he thought, as he sprinted up into the comparative safety of the open. He motioned to Tolto, who stood hopefully waiting with his great war club, to stand clear.

There it was! Sime saw the faint phosphorescent reflection against the stone where the stairway curved. He did not wait to see the tiny pellet of the atomic bomb floating up, but threw himself flat on the roof, tugging at Tolto, who understood and followed suit.

Even lying prone, and below the edge of the explosion cone, they were nearly blown off the roof. Though no larger than a pinhead, the bomb had the power of a thousand times its weight in fulminate of mercury. When the rain of small stones and dust had subsided, they rubbed their eyes and saw that the airlock was no more. In its place was a shallow pit, ending with the top of the battered stairway.

"Down after 'em!" Sime husked out of a raw throat. "Before they think it's safe to come after us!"

He led the way, the giant after him, carrying his club and a huge rock fragment. Sime saw a cautious peering head, and that Martian died instantly. Then they were around the bend and in the middle of a

fight. Sime deflected a hand that held a pistol, and its beam killed another Martian who was about to let Tolto have it at close range.

There was a light-wand affixed to the wall a trifle further down. Tolto waded through the ruck of smaller men, tore it from its socket and hurled it up the stairs. A short sword bit into Sime's shoulder, but there was no force in the stroke, for in that instant Sime paralyzed his enemy's heart with the beam.

An officer barked a command, and the spang of neuro-beams ceased, to be followed by the lethal rustling of swords. The passage was too crowded for the neuro-pistols, giving the outnumbered prisoners the advantage.

Tolto could not swing his club, but he hurled it, like a battering ram, into the middle of twenty or twenty-five of the garrison who were still below him on the steps, trying to get closer. The heavy timber cleared a lane and the two stumbled down over crushed bodies. Sime was now the only one to use his pistol, for he had no friends there to kill accidentally.

The Martians, were putting up a game battle. They were heirs to the traditions and the spirit of Earth's best fighting men. Science had given them deadly and powerful weapons that could kill over long

distances, but they preferred to get close to their adversaries.

But Tolto was a Martian too. He had seized a sword from a dying hand and was wielding it with aptitude and power. No formal thrust and parry for him, but merely a savage sweep that sent swords, arms and heads flying indiscriminately.

Sime, following him, his neuro hissing death from side to side, marveled at his ferocity. He saw a bare-bodied, bleeding fighter leap to Tolto's back, his sword poised for a downward stab for the jugular. Kicking viciously at the man who was just then coming at him, Sime tried to bring Tolto's would-be killer down. But Tolto himself attended to him, dashing him to his death with the elbow of his sword arm.

That diversion nearly cost Sime his life. Fortunately for him he tripped, and the sword-thrust that was to disembowel him merely gashed his side. Sime was beginning to enjoy the fight. The exercise was loosening up his cramped muscles, and the shaky feeling due to the reflected beams of the neuro-pistols was leaving him.

Tolto had smashed down the light-wands as they fought their way down the steps, so that now they were in almost complete darkness. One could still see the occasional rise and fall of a glinting sword

and the dark shadow of an arm or head. They were almost clear when Tolto received his first serious wound, a stab in the abdomen that let out a sticky stream of blood.

There was an interval of silence, broken only by the groans of the wounded. The air was thick with the odor of raw blood and pungent with ozone. They had fought their way down perhaps two hundred feet of the stairway, and due to its curve they could see neither top nor bottom.

"I'm stuck!" Tolto muttered.

"Bad?" Sime edged to his side, stepping, in the darkness, on the body of the man who had succeeded in delivering that sword-stroke before Tolto's own blade had cleft him. He felt the edges of the wound, but in the darkness could not tell how serious it was.

"Feel sick? Any retching?" he croaked anxiously.

"Tolto's all right," the giant assured him. "I just said I was stuck."

Sime managed to make a hurried bandage out of the slashed fragment of Tolto's blouse, and again they resumed their descent. Strangely, their enemies further up made no move to attack, although

there were many left alive.

Sime laid his hand on Tolto's arm.

"Something wrong here. There's somebody at the bottom of the steps, and the fellows above want to give him elbow room. Well, we'll soon see!"

They crawled up a short distance, began to haul inert bodies down, dragging them as far as the last curve, until they had formed a barricade of nineteen or twenty of their late enemies. It was unpleasant work, but justified by following events.

"Can you just see the loom of it?" Sime asked.

"Yes."

"Watch!"

Sime felt about until he found a small fragment broken from the stone steps. Keeping well within the shelter of the convex wall, he crept toward the bend.

"Dig your fingers into a joint and hold on," he instructed Tolto, locating a crack for himself. Then he tossed the fragment gently over

the barricade of bodies.

There was the click of its fall, and a moment later things seemed to turn around. Clinging like leeches to the wall, the two men resisted the warped gravitational drag that would have flung them down upon their waiting enemies below. They seemed to be hanging in a well. Sime had a confused impression of piled-up bodies hurtling down—down.

Thereafter everything was normal again, and they were running down the normal steps. Both had swords in their hands now, and within a hundred feet they were upon the "gravitorser" gun. It was a rather cumbersome weapon, comprising a great deal of electrical apparatus, with a D-solenoid surmounting, whose object was to twist the normal lines of gravitation. It was intended for large-scale operations in the open; the few men remaining below had tried a rather risky experiment, for they might have brought the whole fortress down upon them. Now they were untangling themselves from the corpses that had flown at them as iron flies to a magnet.

Sime and Tolto struck them like a tempest. The light was good and the battle short and sweet. Tolto was slowed up a little, but was irresistible, nevertheless. There is nothing surprising about the seeming immunity of a reckless man in battle. He fights by instinct,

taking short-cuts that are not as dangerous as they look because the enemy is not expecting them. So Sime and Tolto fought their way down, until there was no one able to oppose them.

Sime pressed a neuro-pistol into Tolto's hand, warned him to sweep the stairs with it, while he coursed around for some of the pellet bombs. He found them, and two of them closed that avenue of attack with a mass of jumbled ruins.

Now they had a breathing spell. A combination of blind luck and foolhardiness had given them temporary possession of this desert outpost. That was their pawn in the game of life and death—the chance to get back and hide among the millions in the cities of the industrial belt. Certain routine precautions had to be taken. They destroyed the radio apparatus, picked a few days supply of food, threw a couple more bombs and made a search for means of transportation: for there was a desert wilderness of four or five hundred miles to be traversed.

They discovered the egg-shaped hull of an enclosed levitator car in the covered courtyard. It was distinguished by the orange and green stripes which are the Martian army standard. Like all army equipment, it was in excellent condition. The hydrogen gages showed a full supply of fuel.

"We're getting the breaks," Sime crowed to Tolto at they surfeited themselves with water before starting. He had covered his nakedness with an ill-fitting fatigue suit.

"Yeh," Tolto agreed, referring to their numerous wounds with sly humor: "lots of 'em."

Nevertheless, they felt pretty happy when the levitator screws took up their melancholy whine. The rocky valley floor dropped away, and the windowless stone walls of the fortress slid down past them. Now they were even with the top.

Through the ports they could see a group of their late adversaries on the roof, standing in strained attitudes. Their immobility was explained a moment later by an electric blue spark from something in the shadow of their bodies.

Instantly Sime, who was at the controls, threw her hard-a-port, dived, looped up. The first explosion of the tiny projectile tossed them up like a monstrous wave, allowed them to drop sickeningly. The exhaust tubes poured out a dense haze as Sime sought for distance. But they were following him. He was five miles away when they finally got the range. The vessel was jarred as if it had hit a rock. One of the atomic pellets had exploded within a few feet of

it. There was a dismaying lurch. Sime picked himself up from the floor and dashed to the controls.

"Everything's all right!" he shouted excitedly.

Tolto, however, was listening anxiously. There was a sharp crackling at the stern, where, in a narrow space, the reaction motors provided the forward motive power. In moments of excitement he referred to himself in the third person. He did so now.

"Tolto's afraid that something's wrong! Smells hot, too!"

"Here, take the wheel!" Sime ordered. The explosions of the shells were becoming less dangerous; they were getting too far away.

Sime burned his hand opening the narrow door. The paint was already blistering off it. The trouble was immediately apparent. One of the integrator chambers, in which atomic hydrogen was integrated to form atomic iron and calcium (sometimes called the Michelson effect), had sprung a leak. The heat escaping into the little room was not the comparatively negligible heat of burning hydrogen, but the cosmic energy of matter in creation. Sime slammed the door. The radiated light was so intense that it stung even his hardened skin.

Looking through the rear range-finding periscope, he saw that they were about twenty miles from the fort. They had ceased firing.

"Won't be long, Tolto," he said, taking over the controls himself again, "before our tail's going to drop off. Got to make time."

It was, in fact, about ten minutes when, without warning, their nose dropped.

"Tail's gone!" Sime announced.

Their momentum, under the destructive rate of speed they had been making, was great, and as the levitators, with independent power supply, still held them up, Sime continued to steer a course for the twin cities of Tarog. He was aided by a light breeze, and the Sun was nearing the western horizon by the time their rate of motion had become negligible.

"Might at well land," Sime decided. "Conserve fuel. If we get a favorable wind to-morrow we can go up and drift with it."

But Tolto, who had been narrowly scanning the terrain, advised continuing a little longer.

"I thought I saw a little smoke, a few miles ahead. Seems to be gone

now. But we're still drifting slow."

Sime searched the indicated spot in the ground glass of the forward magnifying periscope. After a few minutes he discovered a blackened spot which might be the remains of a fire. It was surrounded by huge blocks of orange rock, the igneous rock which is the outstanding feature of the Martian desert landscape.

"Looks like he built the fire around there so nobody on the same level would see him," he hazarded. He set the altitude control to fifty feet. There was part of the globular skeleton of a desert hog in the fire; whoever had built it had dined most satisfyingly not long before, and as the fugitives looked their stomachs contracted painfully.

"I could eat a whole one of them myself," Tolto said wistfully.

The urge to descend here was strong upon Sime too. He realized that the fire might have been made by some dangerous criminal—a fugitive from justice; but dangerous men are no novelty to the I. F. P. On the other hand, there was a possibility that it was just some political offender, driven into the desert by persecution. Or a prospector. At any rate, he would have food, or would know where it could be procured.

They had drifted some hundreds of yards farther and the ground was getting constantly more broken, so the best time to land was as soon as possible. Slowly the little ship settled, scraped on a rock and arrested its slight forward motion, crunching solidly in the stony soil.

"Take a neuro, Tolto," Sime advised. "Whoever's here, if he or they are dangerous, we won't get close enough to touch 'em with a sword."

Tolto took the weapon without a word. They locked the door of the ship. Men have been marooned for neglecting that little precaution.

They walked in a spiral course, making an ever-widening circle, looking sharply from left to right. Presently they came to the remains of the fire. The ashes were hotter than the ground, proving that they had been recently made.

But nowhere was there any sign of men. They shouted, but only weird echoes answered.

The ship was now out of sight, and solitude pressed upon them. They felt an uneasy desire to get within comfortable constricting walls.

They found the ship without difficulty.

"Well, whoever it was has lammed," Sime concluded. "Tolto, you climb on top of that rock. Watch me. If you see anybody after me, let 'em have it. I'm going to see if I can scare up a desert hog somewhere."

Neither had stirred from his place, however, before they were suddenly stricken to the ground. They felt the familiar sensation of cold and suffocation—the paralysis caused by a diffused beam from a neuro-pistol. Tolto was a little slower to fall, but he only lasted a second longer. They knew that someone was taking the weapons out of their helpless hands. Then life returned.

"Get up," said a languid voice back of them, "and let's have a look at the looks of ye."

Chapter 7: The Flight of a Princess

The province of Hanlon, Prince Joro's hereditary domain, began about fifty miles west of South Tarog. It was a region of thorn forests, yielding a wood highly valued for ship-building, and the canal was lined with shipyards, most of which belonged to the prince. The so-called republic had been established before Joro was born, but the reigning family of Hanlon had always been richly endowed with astuteness. Deprived of their feudal holdings by a coup of state, they had won back nearly all they had lost in the fields of finance and trade. Joro was a monarchist for sentimental reasons, not for the profits that might accrue to him.

It was the purity of Joro's devotion to his ideal that made him so dangerous to all who might oppose him. Lesser men might be bribed, frightened, distracted. Not Joro: he believed that the monarchy would soothe the rumblings of internal dissension that continually disturbed the peace and tranquillity of Mars. He drove forward to that consummation with a steadfastness and singleness of purpose such as have carried other fanatics to glory or to the grave. And in addition to his zeal he carried into the struggle his exceptional ability, a knowledge of government and of people.

He had need for all of his rare skill now. It had been an easy matter

to carry forcibly the Princess Sira to his palace in Hanlon. Tolto was safely out of the way; Mellie had been dismissed. As for the other palace servants, they had been silenced with bribery or the stiletto.

But Sira had remained adamant, and Joro, abstractedly toying with his laboratory apparatus in the basement of his palace, tried to find the key to her change of heart.

"Can't understand it!" he mused. "She always seemed to have all the royal instincts: cold to suitors, with that delicacy and reserve one finds ideal in a princess. She does all things well, handles a sword nearly as well as I do. Her mind is as keen and limpid as a diamond. She swims like an eel...."

He sighed. "I thought she and I saw eye to eye in this matter. Not more than a week ago she seemed eager for news of the accord I was arranging. She had no great aversion to Scar Balta. Now she says she will die before she espouses him."

He paused, thought a moment, added, with that absolute fairness and impartiality that was characteristic of him:

"True, Balta is not the ideal prince consort. He would not add kingly qualities to the royal line. But he would confer cunning upon his

offspring; and energy—neither to be despised in a royal family that must forever resist intrigue." He sighed again. "The responsibility of king-making is a hard one!"

A sudden thought struck him. "She spoke warmly about the proposed war; could that be at the root of her strange change of heart? After all, she is a woman, and with all her fine, true temper she has a gentle heart. To her the death of a few thousands of her subjects may not outweigh the unhappiness that millions are now experiencing. But the financiers demand the war to consolidate their position, and Wilcox is solidly with them."

With new hope he set down the beaker he was toying with. "Perhaps we can outwit them."

He left the laboratory, climbed a flight of stairs, entered the spacious reception hall. This, like most Martian buildings, was domed. It was richly furnished. The walls were hung with burnished, metallic draperies of gorgeous colors, the floor a lustrous black, the furniture of glittering metal. As the prince entered a servant stepped forward.

"Go at once to the Princess Sira's chamber!" Joro commanded sharply. "Request her to come here. Tell her I have thought of the solution to our difficulty."

Impatiently he paced up and down, stopping at a window for a moment and looking out into the night.

"Your Highness! Your Highness!" The servant was sobbing with excitement. "Your Highness, Princess Sira has escaped!"

Joro left the man babbling, dashed up the broad stairs, unheeding the servants who scattered before him. Their punishment could wait. Just inside the princess's chamber, still unconscious from a blow on the head, lay the guard whose duty it had been to stand before that door. How long ago had she gone? Probably not more than a few minutes.

Joro saw to it that her start would not be much longer. In a few seconds men and women were scouring the palace grounds, and radio orders to the provincial police of Hanlon were crowding the ether.

Sira had contrived her escape without any particular plan in mind. In fact, it had been initiated on impulse. The fellow on guard at her door had excited intense dislike in her. High-strung, and excited by her kidnaping, she had been further annoyed by his officiousness, his fawning, which thinly disguised impudence. The third or fourth time that he intruded on her privacy to ask if she wanted anything she was

ready, with the heavy leg, unscrewed from a chair. She felled him in the middle of a smirk, and seized the opportunity created.

It happened that there was a service corridor close at hand. Down this she sped, into the darkness of a boat-house. The doors were barred and locked, of course, but the depths of the water showed a faint greenish glimmer of light. Sira dived in, unhesitatingly, and after an easy underwater swim she emerged in the open canal. There was a considerable swell, for there was a slight breeze blowing from the north across twenty miles of water, but this did not distress Sira at all. She undulated through the waves with perfect comfort. Phobos was just rising in the west, and orientating herself by this tiny moon she struck out in a north-easterly direction, seeking a favorable current to carry her toward Tarog.

Early explorers on Mars were astonished to find that the canals were not stagnant bodies of water, but possessed currents, induced by wind, by evaporation, and the influx of fresh water from the polar ice caps.

This was near the equator, however, and the water was not unreasonably cold, although the night air was, as usual, chilly. After a few minutes Sira discarded her clothing, and so settled down to a long swim.

Ten miles out she struck a brisk easterly current, flowing toward Tarog, and she gave herself up to it. Floating on her back she saw the lights of the prince's ships flying back and forth over the water in search of her—or her body. But none came near her, and she was content.

The abrupt tropical dawn found her in mid-canal, half-way to Tarog. She had no intention of swimming all the way to the capital city, to be fished ignominiously out of the canal by the police. She was in need, not only of clothing, but of clothing that would disguise her. Her coral pink body near the surface of the water would attract attention for considerable distance, and would lead to unwelcome inquiries.

She was glad when she saw a fishing scow anchored in the current ahead of her. The man who owned it had his back to her, fishing down-current. She approached the boat silently and worked her way around it by holding to the gunwale.

Sira now saw that the fisherman was old, gnarled and sunburned so dark that he was almost black, despite the dilapidated and dirty pith helmet he was wearing. His lumpish face was deeply seamed and wrinkled. His sunken mouth told of missing teeth, and his long, unkempt hair was bleached to a dirty gray.

"Have you an old coat you can lend me?" Sira asked, swimming into view.

The rheumy eyes rolled, settled on the water nymph. The old man showed no surprise, but pious disgust. His eyes rolled up, and in a cracked voice intoned:

"Wicked, wicked! O great Pantheus, thy temptations are great—thy visions tormenting. In my old age must I ever and ever live over—"

"Foolish old man!" Sira snapped. "I'm not a vision!" She dragged down an old sack that hung over the gunwale, washed it, and tearing holes in the rotten fabric for her arms and head, slipped it on. It was a large sack, coming to her knees; satisfied, she climbed aboard, where she spread her black hair to dry.

"Not a vision?" the old man quavered. "Then thou art reality, come to gladden my old age—nay—to return youth to me! In my hut there is an old hag. She shall go—"

Sira did not answer. She was neither disgusted nor amused by the dark torrent that stirred in this decrepit old fisherman. She saw only that he had pulled in his nets and was bowing his long arms to the oars, pulling for shore.

It took about two hours before they reached the fisherman's hut, a nondescript, low-ceilinged shelter of logs, driftwood and untarnished metal plates off some wreck. Several times they were hailed by other fishermen, who addressed the old man as "Deacon" and asked jocularly about what kind of a fish he had there.

The deacon's wife awaited them. The old man's description of her as a hag had not been far wrong. She, was as diminutive and weakened as he was ponderous and heavy. She was acid. Her skin was like a pickled apple's; her expression sour, her voice sharp.

"Hoy there, you old hypocrite!" she hailed when they came in earshot. "So this is the way you lose a day! Who's the hussy with you?"

The deacon nosed the old and evil-smelling scow into the bank. His eyes rolled piously.

"The great Pantheus sent her. He said—"

The old woman came closer and inspected Sira, who endured her gaze calmly. That look was like the bite of acid that reveals the structure of crystal in metals.

"Why, she's a lady!" she exclaimed then. "Not fittin' to be on the same canal with you! Come in, my dear. You must be nearly dead!"

She conducted Sira into the hut, which was far neater and cleaner than its exterior suggested.

"A lady!" she repeated. "In that heat! Young woman, what made you do it? Look at those arms—near burnt! Let me take off that old sack. But wait!"

She tip-toed to the door, threw back the faded curtain sharply. The deacon, too surprised to move, was standing there in the attitude of one who seeks to see and hear at the same time. He lingered long enough to receive two resounding slaps before fleeing to his boat, followed by a string of curdling remarks.

Back inside, she proceeded to anoint Sira's body, exclaiming her pleasure at its perfection. The oil smelled fishy, but it was soothing, and it was not long before the claimant to the throne of Mars was deep in restful slumber.

Late that afternoon the deacon returned and hung his nets up to dry. He was dour, his fever having left him. But he had a strange story to impart.

"I think that girl I picked up is the Princess Sira," he told the old woman. "On the fish buyer's barge, in the teletabloid machine, I saw the forecast of her wedding to Scar Balta. And I'll swear it's the same girl!"

"And why," queried his wife, "would she be swimming in the middle of the canal if she was getting ready to marry Scar Balta?"

"That's just it!" the deacon exclaimed, and his eyes began to roll again. "They say it's not a love match! Oh, not in the teletabloid! They wouldn't dare hint such a thing. But the men on the barge. They say there's a rumor that she ran away. And she looks like the girl I picked up, though I thought—"

"Never mind what you thought!" she snapped. "It may be, I served the oligarchy and the noble houses—before I was fool enough to run away with a no-good fisherman—and I can see she is a lady. Well, she can trust in me."

"They say," the deacon hinted, "that if one went to Tarog, and inquired at the proper place, there would be a reward."

The little old woman chilled him, she looked so deadly.

"Deacon Homms!" she hissed. "If you sell this poor little girl to Scar Balta, your hypocritical white eyes will never roll again, because I'll tear them out and feed them to the fish. Understand?"

Considerably shaken, the deacon said he understood.

But the next morning, on the placid bosom of the canal, he forgot her warning. The fleshpots of Tarog called him. Tarog, where he had spent youth and money with a lavish hand. Tarog, where a reward awaited him.

He hauled in his anchor, gave the unwieldy boat to the current and bent to the oars.

Back in the hut, unsuspecting of treachery, Mrs. Homms and Sira were rapidly striking up a friendship. A shrewd judge, of character herself, Sira did not hesitate to admit her identity, and without any prying questioning the old woman soon had the whole story. It thrilled her, this review of the life she had once seen as a servant.

"I wonder if I will ever see Tarog again!" she sighed wistfully.

"You shall!" Sira promised, "if you help me."

"I will do what I can gladly."

"I need a workingman's trousers and blouse, and a sun-hat that will shade my face. I have a plan, but I must get to Tarog. Can you get me these things?"

"I have no money, but wait!" She rummaged with gnarled fingers in a chink in the wall, withdrew a small brooch-pin of gold, with a pink terrestrial pearl in its center.

"My last mistress gave me this," she said smiling sadly. "I will row to the trading boat and buy what you need. There will be a little money left to buy your passage on a freight barge."

And that was why, when the deacon arrived at the head of a squad of soldiers that evening, there was no girl of any description to be found. Ignoring the cowering and unhappy reward seeker, the old woman delivered her dictum to the sergeant in charge.

"Princess? Ha! The deacon, sees princesses and mermaids in every mud bank. His imagination grew too and crowded out his conscience. No, mister, there ain't any princess here."

Chapter 8: In the Desert

Mellie, Sira's personal maid, was too disturbed by her mistress's kidnaping to seek other employment. She saw the teletabloid forecasts of the wedding, made life-like by clever technical faking, but rumors of the princess' escape were circulating freely despite a rigid censorship. She imagined that lovely body down in the muck of the canal, crawled over by slimy things, and she was sick with horror.

Mellie lived with her brother, Wasil Hopspur, and her aged mother. Wasil was an accomplished technician in the service of the Interplanetary Radio and Television Co., and his income was ample to provide a better than average home on the desert margin of South Tarog. Here Mellie sat in the glass-roofed garden, staring moodily at the luxuriant vegetation.

She looked abstractedly at the young man coming down the garden walk, annoyed by the disturbance. There was something familiar in the sway of his hips as he walked.

And then she flew up the path. Her arms went around the visitor, and Mellie, the maid, and Princess Sira kissed.

Mellie was immediately confused. A terrible breach of etiquette, this. But Sira laughed.

"Never mind, Mellie. It is good for me, a fugitive, to find a home. Will you keep me here?"

"Will I?" Mellie poured into these words all her adoration.

"Mellie, the time has come for action. Not for the monarchy. I am sick of my claims. I would give it all—You remember the young officer of the I. F. P.? The one who kissed me?"

"Yes."

"Well, that comes later. First I must consider the war conspiracy. Have you heard of it?"

"There are rumors."

"They are true. Will Wasil help me?"

"He has worshiped you, my princess, ever since the time I let him help me serve you at the games."

"One more question." Sira's eyes were soft and misty. "My dear

Mellie, you realize that I may be trailed here? What may happen to you?"

"Yes, my princess. And I don't care!"

As Murray parted from his brother-in-arms, Sime Hemingway, on the roof of the cylindrical fortress in the Gray Mountains, he felt the latter's look of bitter contempt keenly. He longed bitterly to give Sime some hint, some assurance, but dared not, for Scar Balta's cynical smile somehow suggested that he could look through men and read what was in their hearts. So Murray played out his renegade part to the last detail, even forcing his thoughts into the role that he had assumed in order that some unregarded detail should not give him away. He convinced the other I. F. P. man, anyway.

But Murray had an uneasy feeling that Balta was laughing at him, and when the shifty soldier politician invited him into his ship for the ride back to Tarog, Murray had a compelling intuition that he would not be in a position to step out of the ship when it landed on the parkway of Scar Balta's hotel.

Having infinite trust in his intuitions, Murray thereupon made certain plans of his own.

He noted that the ship, which was far more luxurious than one would expect a mere army colonel to own, had a trap-door in the floor of the main salon. Murray pondered over the purpose of this trap. He could not assign any practical use for it, in the ordinary use of the ship.

But he could not escape the conviction that it would be a splendid way to get rid of an undesirable passenger. Dropped through that trap-door a man's body would have an uninterrupted fall until it smashed on the rocks below.

Murray then examined the neuro-pistol that had been given him. It looked all right. But when he broke the seal and unscrewed the little glass tube in the butt, he discovered that it was empty. The gray, synthetic radio-active material from which it drew its power had been removed.

Murray grinned at this discovery, without mirth. It was conclusive.

At the first opportunity he jostled one of the soldiers, knocking his neuro-pistol to the floor—his own, too. And when he apologetically stooped and retrieved them the mollified soldier had the one with the empty magazine.

So far, so good. Murray noted that the wall receptacles were all provided with parachutes. It would be simple to take one of these, make a long count, and be on the ground before he was missed. Provided that he could leave unobserved.

The ship was now well in the air, and beginning to move away from the fort. But they were only ten miles away, and Murray had hardly expected that Balta would be in such a hurry.

"You get off here!" Balta said, and Murray felt the muzzle of the neuro-pistol on his spinal column.

A grinning soldier seized a countersunk ring and raised the trap-door.

"So you're going to murder me," Murray said, speaking calmly.

"I take no chances," was Balta's short answer. "Step!"

Murray stepped, swaying like a man in deadly fear. He lowered his feet through the hole. Looking down, he saw that they were about to pass over a bitter salt lake, occasionally found in the Martian desert. He looked up into the muzzle of the menacing neuro-pistol.

"Balta, you're a dog!" he stated coldly.

"A live dog, anyway," the other remarked with a twisted grin. "You know the saying about dead lions."

Murray's fingers clenched on the edge of the rug. It was thin and strong, woven of fine metal threads. They were just over the edge of the salt lake.

Murray dropped through, but retained his death-like grip on the rug. It followed jerkily, as the men above tripped, fell, and rolled desperately clear.

Murray's heart nearly stopped as he fell the first thousand feet. The rug, sheer as the finest silk, failed to catch the wind. It ran out like a thin rivulet of metal, following Murray in his unchecked drop.

But he had a number of seconds more to fall, and he occupied the time left to him. He fumbled for corners, found two, lost precious time looking for the others. He had three corners wrapped around one hand when the wind finally caught the sheer fabric, bellied it out with a sharp crack. The sudden deceleration nearly jerked his arm out.

Even so, he was still falling at a fearful rate. The free corner was trailing and snapping spitefully, and the greasy white waters of the

lake were rushing up!

At any rate, the rug held him upright, so that he did not strike the water flat. His toes clove the water like an arrow, and the rug was torn from his grasp. The water crashed together over his head with stunning force. After that it seemed to Murray that he didn't care. It didn't matter that his eyes stung—that his throat was filled with bitter alkali. All of his sensations merged in an all-pervading, comfortable warmth. There was a feeling of flowing blackness, of time standing still.

Murray's return to consciousness was far less pleasant. His entire body was a crying pain: every internal organ that he knew of harbored an ache of its own. He groaned, and by that token knew that he was breathing.

As unwillingly he struggled back to consciousness he realized that he was inside a rock cave, lying on a thin, folded fabric that might well be the rug that had served as an emergency parachute. He could see the irregular arch of the cave opening, could catch hints of rough stone on the interior.

He sat up with an effort. There was a vile taste in his mouth, and he looked around for something to drink. There was a desert water

bottle standing on the floor beside him. That meant he had been found and rescued by some Martian desert rat who had probably witnessed his fall. He rinsed out his mouth with clean, sweet spring water from the bottle, drank freely. His stomach promptly took advantage of the opportunity to clear itself of the alkali, and Murray, controlling his desire to vomit, crawled outside into the blinding light of the Martian afternoon. He saw that the cave was high up on the side of one of the more prominent cliffs. There were many such hollowed places, indicating that the sloping shelf on which he now lay had once been the beach of a vast sea which at some time must have covered all but the higher peaks of the Gray Mountains. It was, of course, the sea that had deposited the scanty soil which here and there covered the rocks. During geologic ages it shrunk until it all but disappeared, leaving only a few small and bitter lakes in unexpected pockets.

There was a succession of prehistoric beaches below Murray's vantage point, marking each temporary sea level, giving the mountain a terraced appearance. A thousand feet below was the white lake, sluggish and dead.

Murray was looking for the man who had saved him. He was able to discern him, after a little effort, toiling up the steep slopes. He was still nearly all the way down. He could see only that he seemed to be

dressed in white desert trousers and blouse, and that he wore a broad-brimmed sun helmet. He was carrying something in a bag over his shoulder. He was making the difficult ascent with practiced ease, his body thrown well forward, making fast time for such an apparently deliberate gait.

The desert glare hurt Murray's eyes. He closed them and fell asleep. He awoke to the shaking of his shoulder, looked up into a black-bearded face, a beard as fierce and luxuriant as his own. But where Murray was bald, this man's hair was as thick and black as his beard. He had thrown off his helmet, so that his massive head was outlined against the sky. His torso was thick, his shoulders broad. Large, intelligent eyes and brilliant coral skin proclaimed the man to be a native of Mars.

The man's white teeth flashed brilliantly when he spoke.

"Feeling better? Man, you can feel good to be here at all! Time and again have I seen Scar Balta drop 'em into that lake, but you're the first one ever to break the surface again. He gave you a break, though. First time he ever gave anybody as much as a pocket handkerchief to ease his fall. That lake is useful to Scar. It keeps the bodies he gives it, and none ever turn up for evidence."

Murray was still struggling with nausea. "Want to thank you," he managed. "I got it bad enough. Ow! I feel sick!"

The Martian bestirred himself. He scraped up the ancient shingle, making a little pillow of sand for Murray's head. The Sun was already nearing the western horizon, and its heat was no longer excessive. Murray watched through half-closed lids as the big man descended a short distance, returning with an armful of short, greasy shrubs. He broke the shrub into bits, made a neat stack; stacked a larger ring of fuel around this, until he had a flat conical pile about eight inches high and two feet in diameter.

From a pocket safe he procured a tiny fire pellet. This he moistened with saliva and quickly dropped into the center of his fuel stack. The pellet began to glow fiercely, throwing off an intense heat. In a few seconds the fuel caught, burning briskly and without smoke.

"Wouldn't dare do this in the open," the Martian explained, "if this stuff gave off any smoke at all. The pulpwood mounds down in the flats make a nice fire, but they smoke and leave black ashes, easy to see from the sky. Now you just rest easy. You'll feel better soon as you get some skitties under your belt."

The skitties proved to be a species of quasi-shellfish, possessing

hemispherical houses. In lieu of the other half of their shell they attached themselves to sedimentary rocks. They were the only form of life that had been able to adapt themselves to the chemicalization of the ancient sea-remnant. The Martian had left them thin flakes of rock. Now he placed the shells in the red-hot coals, and in a very short time the skitties were turning out, crisp and appetizing. Following his host's example, Murray speared one with the point of his stiletto, blew on it to cool it. It proved to be delicious, although just a trifle salty.

"Drink plenty water with it," the Martian advised him. "Plenty more about five hundred feet down. Artesian spring there. Fact is, that's all that keeps that lake from drying up. You ought to see the mist rise at night."

Murray ate four of the skitties. Then, because the sun was getting ready to plop down, they carefully extinguished the fire, scattering the ashes. The I. F. P. agent felt greatly strengthened by his meal and assisted his host with the evening chores. Nightfall found them in their darkened cave, ready for an evening's yarning.

"I took the liberty of examining your effects," the Martian began. "Sort of introduced you to myself. The fact that you wore the Martian army uniform was no fine recommendation to me, though I

once wore it myself. Your weapons I hid, except for the knife you needed to eat. But you'll find them in that little hollow right over your head. The fact that you're an enemy of Scar Balta is enough for the present. That alone is repayment for the labor of carrying you up all this way."

Murray then told him of work on Mars. There was no use concealing anything from one who was obviously a fellow fugitive, and who might be persuaded to do away with his guest, should he have strong enough suspicions. He told of the war cabal, of the financial-political oligarchy and its opposing monarchists. He related his own discovery and arrest; the pretended enlistment in Scar Balta's forces which terminated in Scar's prompt and ruthless action. When he finished he sensed that he had made a deep impression on his host. The latter spoke.

"What you have told me, Murray, relieves me very much," he said. "I know that we can work together. You might as well know how I came to be here. Perhaps I look forty or fifty years old. Well, I'm thirty. I was news director for the televisor corporations. I didn't have to be very smart to realize that a lot of the stuff we were ordered to send out was propaganda, pure and simple. Propaganda for the war interests, propaganda for the financiers. Commercial propaganda too.

"Why, the stuff we put out was a crime! The service to the teletabloids was the worst. You know how they outstrip the news; hired actors take the part of personages in the news. Ever watch 'em? The way they enact a murder is good, isn't it?"

"We got orders to bear down on your service too, the I. F. P. Your crew has too many points of contact, hiking from planet to planet. The high command couldn't see things the bankers liked, I guess.

"So whenever a man of the I. F. P. figured in the news we always gave him the worst of it. We hired bums to play his part, criminals, vicious degenerates. People believe what they see—that's the idea. I had seen very few of your men but I knew we were giving them a dirty deal. Orders were orders, though. We got lots of orders we didn't understand. Then secret deals were made, and those orders countermanded.

"But the order against the I. F. P. remained standing, and we certainly did effective work against 'em. The people had no way of knowing the difference, either, for the company controls all means of communication, and the I. F. P. does most of its work in out of the way places. Why just to show you how effective our work was—the people, in a special plebiscite, voted to withdraw their support from the Plutonian campaign! But that was going too far; the financiers

quietly reversed that.

"At the same time, we got orders to glorify Wilcox, the planetary president. It was Wilcox signing a bill to feed the hungry—after their property had been stripped by the taxes. It was Wilcox the benevolent; Wilcox the superman. Wilcox, in carefully rehearsed dramatic situations, reproduced on the stereo-screens in every home. You know who put over the slogan, 'Wilcox, the Solar Savior?' We did it. It was easy!" He laughed shortly.

"The only time we failed was, when they wanted to end, once and for all, the prestige of the royal house. That was after they had bought the assassination of the claimant, his wife and their son. Didn't dare take Princess Sira too, because she has always been a popular darling. It would have been too raw, wiping out the whole family. They left one claimant, see? And then put it up to us to discredit her!

"Man! That fell down! The first attempt was very smooth, at that. But it brought in such a storm of condemnation they had to drop that.

"You can guess how we boys at the central office felt about it. No wonder we got cynical and lost all self-respect. We couldn't have

stood it at all, but sometimes we'd put on a special party, just to let off steam. Did we rip 'em up high and handsome? The more outrageous the flattery we sent out, disguised as news, the more baldly truthful we were in those early morning rehearsals, with the mikes and telegs dead. Wilcox was our special meat.

"Of course, it was foolhardy. One night a mixer in the room below us got his numbers mixed, killing a banquet program on a trunk channel and sending our outrageous burlesque out instead. When the poor fellow discovered his mistake he made for the bottom of the canal. As for me, I made for the desert. I never heard what became of the others, and that was six years ago. I wonder if I've changed much."

"What's your name?" Murray asked suddenly.

"Tuman. Nay Tuman."

"The others must have been caught. As for yourself, orders have been sent all over the solar system to kill you on sight. They hung the killing of that electrician on you."

"That's their way!" Nay Tuman absented gloomily. "A price on my head. They thought I'd stow away on some rocket liner, I suppose."

"Weren't you afraid some desert rat would give you away?"

"No danger. They're just about all fugitives themselves. They hid me till I grew this foliage. They showed me how to find food and water where seemingly there was none. The desert isn't sterile. Why, I know of three or four men within fifty miles of here! Sometimes they stop at my spring for water. As for the harness frames at the fort, those sojers might as well be blind, considering all they miss."

"You asked a while ago if you've changed much. You have. I remember your picture. All of us studied it, because there's a 100,000 I. P. dollar reward out. You were a slim lad then, not the fuzzy bear you are now. How would you like to go in to Tarog with me? They seem to have us licked now—but did you ever hear that the I. F. P. is most dangerous when it's been thoroughly licked?"

"I don't know—I'm used to the solitude," Tuman demurred. "In the city I'd be lost."

But Murray won him over. He had a persuasive way with him.

The next morning they started, guiding their course by the Sun. They made no attempt to travel fast, but the going was easy. Although they rested during the heat of the day, and buried themselves for the

nights in the sun-warmed sand, they made about fifteen miles a day. They saw no other human being. These desert dwellers did not meet for mere sociability.

They left the mountains on the second day, descending to the lower level of a broad, sterile plain which was studded by the low, greenish pulp-mounds, that resembled mossy rocks more than vegetation. After two days more they came to a region where huge blocks of stone, of the prevailing orange or brick color, lay scattered around on the plain.

"They look good to me," Tuman said. "If some patrol comes along now we'll have plenty of cover, at least. This belt is a hundred miles wide, maybe a little more. Good hunting there. Plenty of desert hogs, as fat and as round as a ball of bovine butter. I can knock 'em over with a rock, and you can use your neuro, in a pinch."

They did, in fact, succeed in capturing one of the little creatures soon afterward, and, dropping a moistened fire pellet on top of a pulp-mound, soon were roasting their meat.

Not once, however, did either one relax his vigilance. Almost simultaneously they discovered the little black dot that seemed to pop out of the irregular southern horizon. They leaped to their feet,

kicked out the fire. They would have covered the ashes with sand but for hundreds of feet in either direction there was nothing but bare rock.

"Never mind!" Murray said. "Let's make for cover. They may think it's an old fireplace. With rains only about once in three years that spot will look like that indefinitely."

"Yes," Tuman agreed, running along, "if they didn't see the smoke!"

As the craft neared they could make out the orange and green of the Martian army.

"From the fort," Murray guessed. "Scar Balta must have had his doubts about me. He ordered them out to finish the job, if necessary."

"It's drifting," Tuman observed. "The driving tail seems to be missing."

"Well, anyway, it's coming down, and where an army ship comes down is no place for us."

They heard the scrape of her keel as she settled down. Murray gave a gasp of surprise.

"Tuman," he muttered, "that fellow wearing the Martian uniform is an I. F. P. agent named Hemingway. The uniform doesn't fit and I bet the man he took it from is no longer alive. Do you know the giant with him?"

"Under that dirt and blood, I'd say he's Tolto, Princess Sira's special pet. No other man of Mars could be that big! Seven or eight years ago—she was just a kid, you know—she picked him up in some rural province. Kids just naturally do run to pets, don't they? And the princess was no exception. But he looks like nobody's pet now. I'd rather have him peg me with his neuro, though, than to take me in his hands!"

They watched as Sime and Tolto slowly walked about in widening circles, and when they were sufficiently far away Murray and Tuman closed in. They had no expectation of finding the ship unlocked, and wasted no time trying to get it. Instead they climbed a flat-topped block of stone about ten feet high. From this position they could command, with Murray's neuro, anyone who might seek to enter the ship.

"These fellows are our best hope," Murray told Tuman. "But we have to convince 'em that we're friends first. Otherwise we're liable to be cold meat, and cold meat can't convince anybody. Keep your

head down."

The necessity of lying flat, in order to keep from silhouetting themselves against the sky, deprived them of the opportunity to see. Nevertheless, they could tell, by the sound of their voices, when Sime and Tolto returned. When it seemed that they were directly beneath, Murray risked a look. There they were.

Murray carefully set the little focalizer wheel for maximum diffusion. He felt sure that it would not be fatal, considering the distance and the physical vigor of the men he meant to hold. He pressed the trigger.

"Get down quick!" he snapped. "I'll let up for a second; you grab their neuros."

Tuman executed the order with dispatch. Stepping back, he trained the pistols on their late owners, while Sime and Tolto, a little dazed, stumbled to their feet. A man may argue, or take chances, when menaced by a needle-ray, but mere bravery does not count with the neuros. All men's nervous systems are similar, and when nerves are stricken, courage is of no avail.

Chapter 9: Plot and Counter-Plot

As these four men faced one another in the slanting rays of the setting Sun far out on the desert, the planetary president, Wilcox, sat in his office in the executive palace in South Tarog, situated, as were so many of the public buildings, on the banks of the canal.

Wilcox was in his sixties. A gray man, pedantic in his speech, his features were strong: his nose, short and straight, somehow, expressed his intense intolerance of opposition. His long, straight lower jaw protruded slightly, symbolizing his tenacity, his lust for power. His eyes, large, gray, intolerant, looked before him coldly. Wilcox was the result of the union of two root-stocks of the human race, of a terrestrial father, a Martian mother. He had inherited the intelligence of both—the conscience of neither.

Now he sat in a straight, severe chair, before a severe, heavy table. Even the room seemed to frown. Wilcox's face was free of wrinkles, yet it frowned too. He seemed not to see the flaming path the setting Sun drew across the broad expanse of the canal, for he was thinking of bigger things. Wilcox was a little mad, but he was a madman of imagination and resource, and he was not the first one to control the destinies of a world.

"Waffins!" His voice rang out sharp and querulous. A servant, resplendent in the palace livery of green and orange, was instantly before him bowing low.

"Who awaits our pleasure?"

"Scar Balta, sire," answered Waffins, bowing low again.

"We will see him."

Waffins disappeared. Scar Balta came in alone, sleek as usual showing no trace of his irritation over his long wait. He did not even glance at the somber hangings that concealed a number of recesses in the wall. Scar knew that guards stood back of those hangings, armed with neuro-pistols or needle-rays as a precaution against the ever-present menace of assassination. And of the loopholes back of these recesses, with still other armed men, as a constant warning to any of the inner guards whose thoughts might turn to treachery.

Scar Balta bowed respectfully.

"Your Excellency desired to see me?"

"I wished to see you, or I should not have had you called," Wilcox replied irritably. "I wish to have an explicit understanding with you

as to our proceeding next week at our conference with the financial delegates. Sit here, close to me. It is not necessary for us to shout our business to the world."

Balta took the chair beside Wilcox, and they conversed in low tones.

"First of all," Wilcox wanted to know, "how is your affair with the Princess Sira progressing?"

"Your Excellency knows." Balta began cautiously, "that the news agencies have been sending out pictorial forecasts—"

"Save your equivocation for others!" Wilcox interrupted sharply. "I am aware of the propaganda work. It was by my order that the facilities were extended to you. I am also aware that the princess escaped from Joro's palace. An amazing piece of bungling! Did she really escape or is Joro forwarding some plot of his own?"

"He seems genuinely disturbed. He has spent a fortune having the canal searched by divers, flying ships and surface craft. If Sira fails to marry me Joro's life ambition will fail, for the hopes of the monarchists will then be forever lost."

"True; but his Joro some larger plan? His is a mind I do not

understand, and therefore I must always fear. A man with no ambition for himself, but only for an abstract. It is impossible!"

"Not impossible!" Balta insisted. "Joro is a strange man. He believes that the monarchy would improve conditions for the people. And, Your Excellency, wouldn't I be a good king?"

Wilcox looked at him morosely. His low voice carried a chill.

"Do not anticipate events, my friend! There are certain arrangements to be made with the bankers regarding the election of a solar governor!" His large gray eyes burned. "Solar governor! Never in history has there been a governor of the entire solar system. Destiny shapes all things to her end, and then produces a man to fill her needs!"

"And that man sits here beside me, Balta added adroitly. Wilcox did not sense the irony of the quick take-up. He had been about to complete the sentence himself. But his mind was practical.

"The bankers must be satisfied. The terrestrial war must be assured before they will lend their support."

"It is practically assured now," Balta insisted. "Our propaganda

bureau has been at work incessantly, and public feeling is being worked up to a satisfactory pitch. Only last night two terrestrial commercial travelers were torn to pieces by a mob on suspicion that they were spies."

"Good!" Wilcox approved. "Let there be no interruption in the work. Our terrestrial agents report excellent results on Earth. They succeeded in poisoning the water supply of the city of Philadelphia. Thousands killed, and the blame placed on Martian spies. Our agents found it necessary to inspire a peace bloc in the pan-terrestrial senate in order to keep them from declaring war forthwith. But these things are of no concern to you. Have you made the necessary arrangements with the key men of the army?"

"I have, Your Excellency. They are chafing for action. The overt act will be committed at the appointed time, and the terrestrial liner will be disintegrated without trace."

"And have you made arrangements for the disposal of the ship's records?"

"Our own ship? I thought it best to have a time bomb concealed aboard. That way not only the records will be destroyed but there will be no men left to talk when the post-war investigating

commission comes around."

"Well managed!" Wilcox approved shortly. "See that there is no failure!" He dismissed the young man by withdrawing to his inner self, where he rioted among stupendous thoughts.

Scar Balta emerged into the streets, brightly illuminated with the coming of night, and his thoughts were far from easy. The absence of the princess was a serious handicap—might very easily be disastrous. With her consent and help it would have been so simple! The people, entirely unrealizing that their emotions were being directed into just the channels desired, could most easily be reached through the princess.

First the war, of course, and then, when the threatened business uprising against financial control had been crushed, a planet-wide sentimental spree over the revival of the monarchy and the marriage of the beautiful and popular princess. As prince consort, Scar would then find it a simple matter to maneuver himself into position as authentic king.

But without the princess! Ah, that was something else again! For the first time in his devious and successful career, Scar Balta felt distinctly unhappy. He had schemed, suffered and murdered to put

himself in reach of this glittering opportunity, and he would inevitably lose it unless he could find Sira.

In the midst of his unhappy reflections he thought of Mellie.

Sira knew well that Wasil adored her. He had for her the same dog-like devotion that Mellie had. She knew she could ask for his life and he would give it. And what she had planned for him was almost equivalent to asking for his life.

She told him as much, sitting beside him on a bench in the garden. His smooth coral face was alight, his large eyes inspired.

"I will do just as you have commanded me!" he declared solemnly, and would have kissed her hand.

"You must not only do it; you must keep every detail to yourself. You must not even tell Mellie. Do you promise?"

"I promise!"

She kissed him on the forehead. "Farewell, Wasil. I have been here two days already—far longer than prudence allows. They will be here looking for me. Have you any money?"

Wasil produced a roll of I. P. scrip; handed it to her.

"Kiss Mellie for me," she called, as she slipped out of the garden. She was still dressed in the coarse laborer's attire that she had bought on the trading boat, and mingled readily with the crowds in the streets. She hoped she would not meet Mellie, for the girl's devotion might outweigh her judgment.

The rest of that day Sira prowled about the city. Mingling with the common people, she came to have a new insight in their struggles, their sorrows. Passing the walls of her own palace, now locked and sealed, she felt, strangely, resentment that there should be such piled-up wealth while people all around lacked almost the necessities of life.

She surprised herself, also, by a changing attitude toward the life ambition of Prince Joro. The old man's discussions of social conditions that could be corrected by a benevolent monarch had always before seemed to her merely academic and without great interest. Such co-operation as she had given him was motivated entirely by personal ambition. Now she recalled some of Joro's theories, reviewed them in her mind, half consenting.

Always she would strike a barrier when she came to Scar Balta. The

more she thought of him the more he repelled her. She puzzled over that. Scar was quite personable.

Tarog, every industrial city along the equatorial belt, and even the remotest provinces, were seething with war talk. The teletabloids at the street corners always had intent audiences. Sira watched one of them. Disease germs had been found in a shipment of fruit juices from the Earth. The teletabloids showed, in detail, diabolical looking terrestrials in laboratory aprons infecting the juices. Then came shocking clinical views of the diseases produced. Men, on turning away, growled deep in their throats and women chattered shrilly. The parks were milling with crowds who came to hear the patriotic speakers.

There was hardly anyone at the stereo-screens, where the news of real importance was given.

"President Wilcox announced to-day that an interplanetary conference of financiers will be held in his office three days from to-day, beginning at the third hour after sunrise. President Wilcox, whose efforts have been unremitting to prevent the war which daily seems more inevitable, declared that the situation may yet be saved unless some overt act occurs." At the same time the device showed a three-dimensional picture of the planetary president, impressive,

dominating, stern with a sternness that could mean almost anything.

Sira, hurrying home to an inexpensive lodging house, thought:

"Three days from to-day! I have done what I could. The hopes of the solar system now rest with Wasil. I am only a helpless spectator."

Tarog awaited the conference on the morrow bedecked like a bride. The Martian flag, orange and green, fluttered everywhere. On both sides of the canal the brilliantly lighted thoroughfares were restless with pedestrians, and the air was swarming with taxicabs. Excitement was universal, and business was good.

The glare of the twin cities could be seen far out in the cold desert. Four men, stumbling along wearily, occasionally estimated the distance with wearied eyes and plodded onward.

After a long silence Murray remarked:

"It's just as well that the levitators gave out when they did. We were drifting mighty slow—making practically no time at all. Probably we'd have been spotted if we'd gone much further."

"Yeh?" Sime Hemingway conceded doubtfully. "But they may spot us anyway. We have no passes, and none of us looks very pretty. As

for Tolto, we could hide a house as easy as him."

"But we must go on," said Tuman, the Martian. "Yonder lights seem too bright, too numerous for an ordinary day. There's some kind of celebration."

They trudged on for several hours more. Although weariness made their feet leaden and pressed on their eyelids, they dared not halt. Each one nursed some secret dread. Tolto thought of his princess, his child goddess, and mentally fought battle with whomever stood between him and her. Sime and Murray saw in those lights only war, swift and horrible. Tuman imagined a city full of enemies, ruthless and powerful.

Gradually, as they came closer, the lights began to go out one by one. The city was going to bed.

An hour later they came to an illuminated post marking the end of a street. A teletabloid was affixed to this post, buzzing, but its stereo-screen blank. Murray found a coin, inserted it in the slot.

"Marriage of the Princess Sira and Scar Balta will be held immediately after the financial congress," the machine intoned briskly, and in time with its running comments it began to display

pictures.

Sime, watching indifferently, caught his breath. It seemed to him that he knew this girl, who appeared to be walking toward him up a stately garden alley. She came steadily forward with a queenly, effortless stride. And now it seemed as if she had seen him, for she turned and looked straight into his eyes. It seemed that her expression changed from laughing to pleading. And he recognized the girl with the stiletto whom he had caught in his hotel room.

He said nothing, however. He could hardly explain the feeling of sadness that came over him. He stood silent, while the others commented excitedly over the overshadowing war news.

"It's all in the box," Tuman said gloomily. "Many times I've helped cook up something like this. The boys in the central offices are laughing, or swearing, as the cast may be. The poor devils don't own their own souls, if they're equipped with any. I'd rather be here, expecting to be thrown into a cell by daylight!" He shivered in the night chill.

They ran into a little luck when they needed it most. A roving taxi swooped down upon them, hailed them for fares. They flew the rest of the way in. Their luck held. A city policeman, noting their

stumbling walk as they lurched into a cheap hotel, did not trouble them for their passes. He had seen many such men that night, soldier and civilian, with clothes bloody and torn. The excitement of the day, coupled with the fact that nearly everyone carried arms, had led to numerous fights, not a few of which ended fatally.

"Merclite!" grinned the policeman, suppressing a hiccup of his own. "And besides, that big 'un would make two of me."

Chapter 10: One Thousand to One

The scheme that Sira had imparted to Wasil was simple—simple and direct. Moreover, it was sure, provided it succeeded. Its execution was something else again. Its chances were, mathematically expressed, about as follows:

If every single detail worked as expected, a great and smashing success. Ratio: 1:1,000.

If one single detail failed, immediate and certain death for Wasil. Ratio: 1,000:1.

The princess knew that the power of Wilcox, his supporting oligarchy and the interplanetary bankers, was all based on the skilful use of propaganda. If the people of Mars and of Earth knew the forces that were influencing them, their revulsion would be swift and terrible. There would be no war. There would be events painful and disastrous to their present rulers, but a great betterment of humanity's condition.

The key to the situation was the news monopoly, the complete control of all broadcasting—of the stereo-screens, the teletabloids—that colored all events to suit the ends of the ruling group. The

people of Mars as well as of Earth were capable of intelligent decision, of straight thinking, but they rarely had an opportunity to learn the truth.

They had now, by a knowing play on their emotions, directed by psychologists, been wrought to a point of frenzy where they demanded war. Their motives were of the highest in many individuals—pure patriotism, the desire to make the solar system safe for civilization. The bright, flaming spirit of self-sacrifice burned clear above the haze and smoke of passion.

What would happen if all these eager millions of two neighboring planets were to learn the true state of affairs? Sira knew what transpired in those secret conventions, when double guards stood at all doors and at the infrequent windows; when all communication was cut off and the twin lenses of the telestereos and the microphones were dead. Prince Joro had told her, with weary cynicism. But Joro had also told her that the oligarchs guarded this vital and vulnerable point with painstaking care.

Sira had reached inside their first defense, however. Wasil was loyal to his salt, but he had both loyalty and affection for Princess Sira. As the day of the interplanetary financial conference leaped into being, he was on his way to the executive hall that lay resplendently on the

south canal bank, ready to lay down his life.

The hall proper was really only the west wing of the magnificent, high-arched building. Its brilliant, polished metal facade reflected the light of the rising Sun redly. The east wing, besides housing various minor executive offices, also contained the complicated apparatus for handling the propaganda broadcastings. On the roof, towering high into the air, was a huge, globular structure, divided into numerous zones, from which were sent various wave bands to the news screens both on Mars and on Earth. The planetary rulers had taken no chances of tampering with their propaganda. The central offices, where news and propaganda were dramatized, were in another building, but as everything from that source had to pass the reviewing officer, a trusted member of the oligarchy himself, in his locked and guarded office, this did not introduce any danger of the wrong information going out to the public.

When Wasil reached the broadcasting plant, he was admitted by four armed guards. He locked the door behind him, to find his associates already busy, testing circuits and apparatus. Stimson, the chief engineer, was sitting at his desk studying orders.

A few minutes later he called the men to him. There were three others besides Wasil: young Martians, keen, efficient, and, like most

technies, loyal to the government that employed them.

"Sure are careful to-day," Stimson grunted, scratching his snow-white hair, which was stiffly upstanding and showed a coral tinge from his scalp. "Must be mighty important to get this out right. Wilcox personally wrote the order. If any man fumbles to-day, it's the polar penal colony for him!" The Sun-loving old Martian shivered.

"And here's another bright idea. Only one man's to be allowed in the plant after the circuits are all tested! How'n the name of Pluto will he handle things if a fuse blows? But what do they care about that! We're technies! We're supposed to know everything, and never have anything go wrong!"

"But why only one man?" cried Scarba, one of the associate engineers. "It's asking too much! I'll not take it on, far as I'm concerned. My resignation will be ready soon's I can get a blank!"

"I too! I'm with you, Scarba!" "We work like dogs to get everything in first-line condition, and then—" The hard-working and uncomplaining technies were outspoken in their resentment.

"Oh, I see your point," Stimson agreed. "I could stand Balta, but

Wilcox is just one too many for me. But do you boys think for one minute we could get away with a strike?" He laughed angrily. "I can remember when the technies were able to demand their guild rights. But you boys weren't even born then. Now, let's get this straight:

"We are going to do just as we are told. Wilcox, of course, never explains an order, but the reason for having only one operator on the job is simply to concentrate responsibility on that one man. There will be no excuse if he fails. Before the convention starts, and after it is over, there will be a message to send out. The convention itself will be secret, as usual. During the convention, there will be some kind of filler stuff from the central office."

"Yeh!" snorted one of the men. "That's the dope, all right. One of us is stuck, but if it's me I'll walk out and head for the desert."

Stimson looked at him with a sardonic smile. "I forgot to mention: the doors will be locked and barred, and of course there's no such thing as windows."

Wasil whistled. "They're sure careful. Well, Stimson. I haven't a thing to do all day. I'll take it on."

They all looked at him, not sure that they had heard him right.

"What's the matter, sonny?" Stimson said slowly. "Too much Merclite last night? You're shaking!"

"It's an opening!" Wasil insisted.

"An opening to tramp ice at the pole for the rest of your life!"

"All right. I'll chance it!"

They consented, without very much argument, to let Wasil have the dangerous responsibility. At 2:30, two and a half hours after sunrise by the Martian reckoning, he signed a release acknowledging all circuits to be in proper order, and was locked behind the heavy doors, alone with a maze of complicated apparatus and cables that filled the large room from floor to ceiling.

Now it was done! Chance had thrown Wasil into a position where he could, without great danger of failure, carry out his plan. But at the same time things had so fallen that he, Wasil, must now die, regardless of the outcome!

If he succeeded in broadcasting the proceedings of the convention, and if they had the effect of arousing the public against Wilcox, there would still be no escape for Wasil. Wilcox, or Scar Balta, would

come straight for this prison, neuro-pistol or needle-ray in hand!

Even if he should fail, death would be his portion for the attempt.

So thinking, Wasil sat down and carefully re-checked the circuits. The filler broadcast from central office must be sent to the twin cities of Tarog. Otherwise the convention would learn too soon what was happening, and would interrupt its business. The thousands who waited outside on the broad terraces must be regaled with entertainment, as had been originally planned.

But as for the rest of Mars, and Earth, they would get the truth for once. Those bankers would speak frankly, in the snug isolation of the hall. No supervision here. Conventions, empty politeness, would be forgotten. Sharp tirades, biting facts, threats, veiled and open, would pass across the table between these masters of money and men.

But this time they would be pitilessly bared to the worlds!

Feverishly, Wasil inspected the repeater. It was a little-used device that would, an hour or two later, as desired, give out the words and pictures fed into it. Although Tarog would not learn the convention's secrets as quickly as the rest of Mars, or Earth, Tarog would learn. Wasil threw over the links and clamped down the bolts with a grunt

of satisfaction. When a man is about to die, he wants to do his last job well.

Suddenly a red light glowed, and a voice spoke.

"Special broadcast. Tarog circuit only!"

"Mornin', Lennings," Wasil remarked to the face in the screen. "All set? Go ahead."

The central office man held up a thick bundle of I. P. scrip, smiled pleasantly, saying:

"Somebody in North or South Tarog, or in the surrounding territory, is going to be 100,000 I. P. dollars richer by to-morrow. How would you like to have 100,000 dollars? You all would like this reward. It represents the price of a snug little space cruiser for your family; a new home on the canal; maybe an island of your own. It would take you on a trip to the baths of Venus and leave you some money over. Of course you all want this reward!

"Now, if you'll excuse me a moment—"

The man's picture faded, and the screen glowed with the life and beauty of Princess Sira—Sira, smiling and alluring.

"You all know this young lady," the announcer's voice went on. "The beloved and lovable Sweetheart of Mars, the bride of Scar Balta—"

The Martian's sleek and well-groomed head appeared beside that of the girl.

"—Scar Balta, whose services to Mars have been great beyond his years; who, in the threatening war with Earth, would be one of our greatest bulwarks of security."

The announcer's face appeared again, stern and sorrowful.

"A great disaster has befallen these lovers—and all the world loves a lover, you know. Some thugs, believed by the police to be terrestrial spies, have kidnapped the princess from the palace of her uncle, Prince Joro of Hanlon. It is believed that they had drugged her and hypnotized her, so that she has forgotten her duty to her lover and her country."

The green light flashed, and Wasil broke the circuit. The central man lingered a moment, favoring Wasil with a long wink.

"What a liar you're getting to be!" Wasil remarked coldly. But the central man, not offended, laughed.

So they were offering a reward! And urging further treachery as an act of patriotism! Wasil was not too much excited, however. The disguise the princess had chosen would probably serve her well. Besides, she had promised to keep in retirement as much as possible.

Clack! Clack! The electrically controlled lock of the door was opening. Only Wilcox knew the wave combination. Wasil felt a chill of apprehension as the door opened and Scar Balta strode in. He was fully armed, dressed in the military uniform; but the former colonel was now wearing on his shoulder straps the concentric rings denoting a general's rank.

Chapter 11: Giant Against Giant

Although Princess Sira had promised to keep out of the way, she could not resist the powerful attraction of the executive hall, in which, on this day, the fate of two planets was to be decided. As the crowds of people began to drift toward the hall, she joined them, still dressed in her laboring man's shapeless garments, the broad sun-helmet hiding her face effectively. Her long, black hair was concealed under the clothing. Having nearly been drawn into a brawl the day before, she now carried a stained but still very serviceable short sword that she had purloined from a merclite-drunken reveler in a gutter.

Thousands were already on the terraces surrounding the government buildings. They were milling about, for it was still too soon after the night's chill to sit down or lie on the rubbery red sward. Taxis were bringing swarms over the canal from North Tarog, and water vehicles were crossing over in almost unbroken lines.

Already the merclite vendors were busy, making their surreptitious way from group to group, selling the highly intoxicating and legally proscribed gum that would lift the users from the sordid, miserable plane of their daily existence to exalted, reckless heights.

War vessels now began to course overhead, their solid, heavily plated hulls glinting dully in the sun. Their levitator helices moaned dismally, and as their long, slanting shadows slid over the assembled thousands, it seemed that they cast a prophetic pall; that there was a hush of foreboding.

But the psychological expert high in a nearby tower immediately noted the slump in the psycho-radiation meter whose trumpet-shaped antenna pointed downward. At the turn of the dial the air was filled with throbbing martial music, and the expert noted with contemptuous satisfaction that the needle now stood even higher than before.

Sira, caught like all the rest of the people in that stirring flood of music, felt her own pulse leap. But she thought:

"This is the day! Wasil, could I only be with you!"

She thought sadly of Joro, whose shrewd observations and counsel she missed more than she had ever thought possible.

"Poor, dear Joro! You would be a better king than any man you could ever find! I wish I could have done as you wished me to."

There was a stir near the main entrance of the hall. A large private yacht was slowly descending. She was bedecked with the green and gold bunting of the terrestrial government, the green and orange of Mars. Her hull glittered goldenly.

"Back!" shouted the captain of a Martian guard detail, the soldiers running with pennant-decked ropes looping after them. The crowd surged against the barrier, but more guards were sent out as reinforcements, until they had cleared a space for the ship and a lane to the hall entrance.

"Mars greets the distinguished guests from our sister planet!" boomed the giant loudspeaker in the tower. Immediately afterward came the strains of the song—"Terrestria—Fair Green Terrestria"—in a rushing torrent of sound. But the frank and fluent melody was strangely distorted, with unpleasant minor turns and harsh whisperings of menace, and the tower psychologist noted a further rise of the needle.

There was a diversion of interest now. The mob of first arrivals, as well as the ever-freshening stream of newcomers, was moving toward the teletabloids and the more conservative stereo-screens. On this occasion they were both carrying the same message, however. Sira heard the propaganda division's latest fabrication about her

alleged kidnaping by terrestrial agents. She needed no radiation meter to tell her of the intense wave of hatred for the Earth that swept over the densely packed area. And this was followed by another emotion—a wave of cupidity—set up by the offer of 100,000 I. P. dollars reward for her return. She saw about her faces greedy, faces wistful, even compassionate faces. But outnumbering them by far were faces set in truculent mold.

Sira moved restlessly from place to place, feeling more deeply depressed with every moment. She felt as if she had been left entirely out of life, friendless, alone. Among all these thousands she had no friend. It seemed to her that never before had there been such a paucity of monarchists. Sharp-featured, with a wire-drawn manner of efficiency and resolution about them, they had constituted almost another race among this practically enslaved people, maintaining for themselves a tolerable position despite the opposition of the oligarchy. Now, however, they seemed to have vanished. All that morning Sira had not seen one. She would not have disclosed her identity, but it would have been comforting to see one of those friends of old.

She was stopped by a jam. Looking between the bodies of two large and sweaty men, she realized that someone was standing on a surveyor's marking block, delivering a speech.

"The great Pantheus has so decreed it," the speaker was shouting in a cracked voice that at times dribbled into a whine. "We must shake off forever this menace from the green planet—this planet dominated by wicked women.

"Oh, my friends, last night they came to me in dreams, these pale women of the green star. They tempted me and they mocked me. They laid their cold hands on my throbbing brow, and their cold hands burned me!

"Oh great Pantheus! How I have suffered! The creatress who in her malice created this wicked world beyond the gulf—"

The Martians were entertained by the quavering denunciation. Some grinned broadly at one another; others placed their thumbs in their ears and wiggled their fingers. But the old man continued. Finally, two of the foremost spectators, sensing the tiny body crowded between them, stepped aside.

"Don't miss this, my little man. Listen, and maybe you will laugh yourself a little bigger." He gave Sira a gentle shove, so that she almost stumbled over the block on which the speaker was standing.

And that old man suddenly stopped talking, so that his toothless

mouth sucked in, then stood agape. The rheumy eyes rolled, and a wisp of dirty gray hair strayed across his gnarled face. He lifted a shaking hand, pointed a knotty finger.

"There she is!" he croaked. "There she is! I claim—"

"There she is!" guffawed a tipsy merclite chewer. "The creatress, come to punish you! Cut off his nose, O creatress, and stuff it into his mouth!"

There were shouts of laughter, a surge to see better.

"No! No! I, Deacon Homms, claim the reward!" the old man screamed. "She is the princess; I know her. She came out of the canal to tempt me! She is the Princess Sira. Now shall I at last enter the Palace of Joys! I claim the 100,000 dollars!"

But he still had to catch Sira. The crowd, suddenly sensing that this old fanatic might be telling the truth, rushed in savagely, each eager to seize the prize, or at least to establish some claim to a share of the award. Men and women went down, to be trampled mercilessly. Inevitably they got in one another's way, and soon swords were rising redly, falling again.

"Guards! Guards! A riot!" Some were fleeing the scene; others rushing in, grateful for the opportunity to expend excess pugnacity. A fresh platoon of soldiers tumbled out of a kiosk leading to an underground barracks like ants out of a disturbed nest. They deployed, holding their neuro-pistols before them, focalizers set for maximum dispersion, therefore non-fatal—merely of paralyzing intensity. Some of the rioters now turned to run, but others persisted, willing to be rendered unconscious, just so it would be near the valuable princess.

A few moments later the captain of the guard surveyed the mass of paralysed bodies and the sword-slashed corpses, all intermingled.

"What's this all about?" he demanded of a scarred, evil-looking fellow who was the first to rise to his elbow.

"The Princess Sira! I claim the reward. In there! She stood right there!"

"Get out, you galoon!" the captain growled, knocking the fellow unconscious with the heavy barrel of his neuro. "Sort 'em out there. Moggins, Schkamitch. On the double. You will share, according to rank."

But eagerly as they searched, they did not find Sira. Creeping between the legs of the maddened reward seekers, she had fought clear, had gained the shelter of a tall, red conical tree whose closely laced branches pressed her to the ground, clinging to the greasy trunk.

She realized that her sanctuary was none too secure. There would surely be a methodical search after the first excitement, and she would be discovered. She had lost her sun-helmet, but nevertheless she must risk making a break. A large proportion of the people were wearing such helmets. Perhaps she could snatch one.

But before such an opportunity came, she saw a chance to dash to a nearby clump of shrubbery. On the other side was a long hedge, leading to an alley back of a group of warehouses. If she could gain this alley, she felt sure she would be safe for the time being.

All over the park, which was thirty or forty acres in extent, there were minor riots, as some unfortunate was mistaken for the princess and blindly struggled for.

Sira lost no time. She scuttered along the hedge like a frightened kangrat. But as she crossed a small open space, a stentorian voice shouted:

"There she is! That's her! The princess!"

Out of the corner of her eye she saw him, running toward her lumberingly, his great arms outspread. Tuman had been wrong in saying that on all of Mars there was no man as big as Tolto. This one was, and he looked more formidable. Instead of Tolto's normally good-natured face, this one looked like an enraged terrestrial gorilla, although at the moment it was really expressing joy and eagerness.

Several other men joined the chase, and then scores. They were fleeter of foot than the ape-man, but as they passed him in the narrow alley he smashed them to the pavement with casual blows of his terrifying hands. Thereafter he was undisputedly in the lead; the others content to follow in his rear, although many were armed, and the giant was not.

This was an advantage to Sira. The whole mob was slowed by the lumbering pace of the ape-man, and she was able to keep in the lead without difficulty. Several times some of her pursuers ran ahead by other routes, intent on snatching her into some doorway. But each time she slashed at them with her sword, springing past.

She had not run very far when her fear of another danger was realized. There was a high, keen whistle overhead, and a scouting

police car flashed near. Under the neuro-pistols both hounds and hare would be paralyzed, and she would be easily taken. Sira longed for one of these handy weapons herself, but they were too expensive: she had been unable to secure one.

Now the police car was coming back. The sliding forward door was drawn back, and a man was leaning out, neuro alert. Judging the distance expertly, he pulled the trigger, and a hundred men fell unconscious.

"Got 'em!" he snapped over his shoulder. "The princess as well. Down quick!"

Sira, spared because of the officer's unwillingness to take a chance on injuring her, leaped through a gap in a wall and sprinted through a garden smothered with thick, leathery-leaved weeds, some of them higher than her head. She almost laughed with relief, but as she flitted around the corner of a house toward the street she saw the gorilla faced giant again in pursuit, and beyond the garden wall the police ship was just settling to the ground.

It just seemed to be raining giants that day. Sira ran out of a narrow gate at the front of the house into the street, to be stopped by a tremendous human framework as solid and unyielding as a

mountain. She stepped back, drew her sword—

"Softly! Softly!" a rumbling bass implored. "Doesn't the Princess Sira recognize her servant, Tolto?"

"Tolto!" All at once the tautness went out of her, and Sira leaned against the wall, divided between laughing and crying.

"Tolto and his good friends were looking for you," the big man rumbled anxiously. "The teletabloids said there was a riot coming—"

He got no further. The gorilla-faced pursuer catapulted himself sideways through the portal, being too wide to go through in the regular way. He emitted a raucous shout of triumph:

"I got her! It's her, all right! I claim—"

As he reached out his enormous sun-blackened arm there was a thud that seemed to shake the ground. Instantly enraged, the man's little red-rimmed eyes jerked quietly to the dealer of that shocking blow. Then the conical little head sank between the bulging shoulders, the long, thick arms bowed outward, and the ape-man launched himself at Tolto.

That was a battle! On the one side devotion, simple-minded loyalty

and a fighting heart in a body of such mechanical perfection as Mars had never seen before or since. On the other side a primal beast, just as huge, rage-driven, atavistic, savage.

Fists as large as an average man's head, or larger, crashed against unprotected face and body. Gigantic muscles rippled and crackled. Blows echoed from wall to house and seemed to thud against the hearts of the spectators.

It was as if time and memory had come to a standstill. The present was not, nor present ambitions and duties. The soldiers came plunging out into the street, swords in their hands, but they stopped to watch. Sime, Murray and Tuman, used to instant and automatic battle, watched. A struggle so titanic, by tacit, by unconsidered consent, must be left to decide its own course.

Tolto seemed to be slowly gaining an advantage. During his novitiate as a palace guard the other men had instructed him in the science of their pastime-fighting. Although he scorned to guard against the blows of his savage antagonist, he placed his own punches more shrewdly, more effectively. The ape-faced one, through a red film, sensed that he was being beaten, and that this fight would end in death.

Suddenly he changed his tactics. Rushing in, he threw his arms around Tolto's great torso. He opened his jaws, and his long yellow fangs bit into the flesh of Tolto's shoulder.

Tolto, taken slightly by surprise, met this new menace promptly. Placing his powerful forearm against the battered, hairy face, he attempted to bend the head back. But it was so small, in proportion, and so slippery with blood, that he was unable to dislodge it.

So Tolto matched brute strength against brute strength. His arms encircled his enemy's body, and the tremendous muscles of his shoulders and body began to arch.

So they stood poised for a few seconds, as if on the brink of eternity.

"Go-o-o-wie!" exclaimed one of the soldiers, awed.

Slowly, like the agonizingly slow plastic creep of metal under great pressure, the gorilla-faced giant was yielding. His dark skin became mottled. His breath came gaspingly. His rope-knotted arms slipped a little.

But it was not in him to surrender, which might still have saved his life. With a vicious twisting motion of his head he tried to drag his

fangs through the thick muscles of Tolto's shoulder. The wound began to bleed more freely, choking the savage at each labored breath.

Now Tolto began to walk forward. Always his antagonist had to yield a little, unwillingly, grudgingly, just enough to keep the paralyzing pressure on his spine from becoming unbearable. And slowly, inexorably, Tolto followed. His arms tightened. His leg slipped suddenly between the ape-faced man's supports. Tolto grunted. The sound seemed to labor upward from his innermost being, his body's protest as he called upon it for its last reserve of strength.

Like an echo, there was a dull crack, a brief, agonized moan from the ape-faced one; and the savage, unknown giant slumped to the pavement, dead with a broken back. Tolto staggered to the wall, breathing deeply.

"Man, what a fight! What a fight!" The young Martian captain passed a shaking hand over his face. The battle had stirred him more deeply than he wanted to admit. But in a few seconds he came out of his mental maze.

"Attention! All right, men, you're under arrest. As for the girl—"

"As for the girl," came a clear feminine voice, as Sira stepped out from the shelter of a buttress some dozen feet away, "—the girl took advantage of your preoccupation to relieve you of your neuros. As you see I have two of them in my hand. The rest of them are over by that wall. No! Don't try to rush! You are welcome to your swords, but they are useless here."

Chapter 12: "He Must Be a Man of Earth"

Friend and foe looked stupefied. But they were used to the give and take of battle. That this girl should disarm a detachment of soldiers while they and their own men were absorbed in such a common thing as a fight struck them as humorous. They laughed.

"This is a better break then we deserve," Sime said, grinning with a trace of sheepishness. "Captain, you take your men across the street and hold 'em there. We're going to borrow your car. No funny stuff!" Civilians were flooding into the streets. There would soon be a mob.

"We will not," replied the captain, "try any funny stuff. Some day, my friend, I hope to open you up with my sword," he added.

"By all means," Sime agreed pleasantly. "My time is pretty well occupied, but there's no telling when I may meet you again, in my business. Good day, Captain!"

Tuman stayed at the front gate with his neuro while the others struggled through the weedy garden to the police ship in the alley, rejoining them as they were ready to rise.

A crowd had gathered. If they wondered at the appearance of these

ragged, scarred and bewhiskered men; at sweat and blood-covered giant Tolto; the obviously high-bred girl in the laboring man's garments, they wisely refrained from comment or action, in deference to the neuros with which the party was bristling.

Once inside and safely in the air, they had time to breathe. Murray, with a gallantry that sat ill on the scarecrow figure he was, cleared matters up a trifle.

"Princess Sira? As I thought. Princess, or Your Highness, to be formal, I am your humble and disreputable servant, Lige Murray, of the Interplanetary Flying Police. Likewise this gentleman behind the brush—Sime Hemingway. You know Tuman? You've missed something, Your Highness! And Tolto! Lucky man!"

Sira recovered quickly from her reaction following the fight. She found a first-aid kit, bandaged Tolto's wounded shoulder skilfully and quickly. She had given no sign of recognition as Sime awkwardly bowed, during Murray's introduction, but now, as Sime held a roll of bandage for her, she gave him a sidewise look, agleam with mischief.

"But I have decided to remit the punishment—the sentence I passed on you, Mr. Hemingway," she said, her sweet, child-like face

innocent.

"What punishment?" Sime gasped.

"Why, the punishment of death! For kissing me that night!" she laughed, turning her back.

Murray was heading back for the government park. It was a short distance with the police car. Soon the broad grounds, with their scattered, magnificent buildings, lay below them. But the parks were strangely bare of living creatures. Here and there lay the bodies of men or women.

"Something's happened!" Murray shouted excitedly. "Look out!"

He swerved the ship sharply. They escaped damage as an atomic bomb, unskilfully aimed, exploded far to one side.

"Funny thing, firing on a police car," Sime puzzled. "They might have got news from that detachment we grounded, but how do they know this isn't some other police or military car?"

"Those aren't soldiers," Murray decided. "There's been a riot, and some civilian's got hold of an ato-projector."

"I know what's happened!" Sira exclaimed suddenly. "Wasil—a technie—has managed to broadcast the secret session! That upset their psychology. Oh!" Her face was alight, and she threw up her arms in ecstasy. As quickly she subsided, and tears came to her eyes.

"Wasil!" she cried. "If he is dead, Mellie will never forgive me!"

"Where is this technie?" Sime asked bruskly.

"In the broadcast room. But they have probably killed him."

"Never can be sure. Head her smack for the main entrance, Murray!"

Murray threw the car into a steep dive, and the hall portal rushed up to meet them. A soldier came partially out of concealment, waved a signal. Murray paid him no heed.

They struck with a crash. The stout car crushed through the glittering doors of metal and glass, and before the fragments fell the four men were in the thick of short, sharp and decisive battle. Their neuros hissed venomously, spanged as they met opposing beams. And the princess, struggling through the wreckage, wept tears of rage as the coarse fabric of her clothing caught, entangled hopelessly, and held her.

"Something queer!" Murray said, as they halted for breath after routing what little opposition they had encountered. "Maybe it's a trap. But what an expensive trap for somebody! Where's this broadcasting plant?"

"This way!" Tuman called eagerly. "Maybe we can still save the poor fellow who turned the trick. Broadcast the secret sessions! Don't tell me that little girl isn't fit to rule!"

The heavy metal doors were open, and they hurried in. But Tolto, noting that the princess had not followed, hurried out in search for her.

Sime stumbled over a body. It had been a dark, sleek, youngish man. A jagged burn on his throat told of the needle-ray. "Who's this fellow, Murray?"

Murray glanced at the body. He smiled a brief smile of satisfaction.

"That's Scar Balta. Got what's coming to him at last. Help me with this bird: he's still alive. Cold, though!"

"Got a shot of neuro. Could this be the technie?"

Sime found a fountain of water. He filled a cup, dashed it over the

still face. The shock made the man's lips move.

"Mellie, I did it!" he whispered.

"Who's Mellie?" Sime asked.

"Mellie? Seems to me the princess mentioned her name, This is her brother. He's the right guy! Take it easy, brother!"

But Wasil was able to sit up.

"I sure fooled him!" he gasped. "Mixed up the circuits. Scar Balta sat right here while I broadcast the secret sessions, and he was watching a lot o' haywah in the control screen.

"When Wilcox got word from outside he knew he was done. He thought Scar'd double-exed him, so came here in person and gave him the needle-ray."

Despite his nausea, Wasil looked happy.

"Wilcox tried for me, but I dodged back of those frames. So he tried for me with the neuro. The mob was getting wild outside; there was __"

He could not finish. There was an explosion that shook the building to its foundations. Tolto came running in. Sira close after him:

"Joro is coming. Joro has detonated the warships. The hall guards have surrendered. The council is locked up. It can't escape!"

Events were transpiring too fast for comprehension. It was several days later, on a bench in Prince Joro's palace grounds, that Sira summed it up for Sime Hemingway.

"I'm going to accept the throne!" she said. "I'm going to be a real queen. Joro has convinced me that it will be a real service to Mars. The dear old man has schemed and worked so long, so unselfishly."

"Yeh, and he wasn't afraid to fight!" Sime added admiringly. "When he came charging out of those ships with his gang of monarchists, swords flashing, it was a pretty sight to see. And when they closed in on that gang of cheap politicians! Talk about rats in a corner!"

"The prince can fight with his brains as well as with his sword." Sira submitted. "The whole thing would have been hopeless, if he hadn't invented the detonating ray that disposed of the warships. You remember those heavy explosions, shortly after we dropped in the hall, as one might say? Those were the last of them."

A silence fell between them, and Sime was now conscious of the fragile-seeming, so deceiving beauty of this Martian girl. Something had come between them, stripped away the masculine frankness that had existed during their short and dangerous time together. Perhaps it was the softly revealing drape of the thread-of-gold robe she was wearing—true queenly garb, donned by her for the first time.

"There is one requirement that Joro insists on," Sira said in a low voice.

"What's that?" asked Sime, marveling that such transparently pink fingers should handle a sword so well.

"He says that I must choose a mate, to insure the stability of the royal house."

It seemed to Sime that this announcement gave him a pang out of all proportion.

"That should be easy," he managed. "Every Martian is crazy about you."

"He may not be a Martian. He must be a man of Earth," Sira stated firmly.

"Is that so?" Sime asked, genuinely surprised. "Why does Joro insist on that?"

"It is not Joro who insists. It is myself."

Sime found himself looking into eyes filled with shy pleading. He could not, would not, for all of the solar system, have committed the unpardonable affront of rejecting the love so frankly offered. And yet he did not know how to accept this miracle. He did it clumsily, haltingly disclosing the secret recesses of his own heart and what had transpired there since the night he had taken the knife away from her and kissed her.

141 The Great Drought by Sterner St. Paul Meek

Another episode in Dr. Bird's extraordinary duel with the scientific wizard Saranoff.

Aproximate word count: 8,500

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

"Is the maneuver progressing as you wish. Dr. Bird?" asked the Chief of the Air Corps.

The famous scientist lowered his binoculars and smiled.

"Exactly, General," he replied. "They are keeping a splendid line."

"It is the greatest concentration of air force that this country has ever seen," said General Merton proudly.

With a nod, Dr. Bird raised his glasses to his eyes and resumed his steady gaze. Five thousand feet below and two miles ahead of the

huge transport plane which flew the flag of the Chief of the Air Corps, a long line of airplanes stretched away to the north and to the south. Six hundred and seventy-two planes, the entire First Air Division of the United States Army, were deployed in line at hundred-yard intervals, covering a front of nearly forty miles. Fifteen hundred feet above the ground, the line roared steadily westward over Maryland at ninety miles an hour. At ten-second intervals, a puff of black dust came from a discharge tube mounted on the rear of each plane. The dust was whirled about for a moment by the exhaust, and then spread out in a thin layer, marking the path of the fleet.

"I hope the observers on the planes are keeping careful notes of the behavior of those dust clouds," said Dr. Bird after an interval of silence. "We are crossing the Chesapeake now, and things may start to happen at any moment."

"They're all on their toes, Doctor," replied General Merton. "I understood in a general way from the President that we are gathering some important meteorological data for you, but I am ignorant of just what this data is. Is it a secret?"

Dr. Bird hesitated.

"Yes," he said slowly, "it is. However, I can see no reason why this secret should not be entrusted to you. We are seeking a means of ending the great drought which has ravaged the United States for the past two years."

Before General Merton had time to make a reply, his executive officer hastened forward from the radio set which was in constant communication with the units of the fleet.

"Two of the planes on the north end of the line are reporting engine trouble, sir," he said.

Dr. Bird dropped his glasses and sat bolt upright.

"What kind of engine trouble?" he demanded sharply.

"Their motors are slowing down for no explainable reason. I can't understand it."

"Are their motors made with sheet steel cylinders or with duralumin engine blocks?"

"Sheet steel."

"The devil! I hadn't foreseen this, although it was bound to happen if

my theory was right. Tell them to climb! Climb all they know! Don't let them shut off their motors for any reason, unless they are about to crash. Turn this ship to the north and have the pilot climb—fast!"

A nod from General Merton confirmed the doctor's orders. The line of planes kept on to the west, but the flagplane turned to the north and climbed at a sharp angle, her three motors roaring at full speed. With the aid of binoculars, the two ships in trouble could be picked out, falling gradually behind the line. They were flying so slowly that it seemed inevitable that they would lose flying speed and crash to the ground.

"More speed!" cried the doctor. "We've elevation enough!"

The altimeter stood at eight thousand feet when the pilot leveled out the flagplane and tore at full speed toward the laboring ships. The main fleet was twenty miles to the west.

They were almost above the point where the two planes had first began to slow down. As they winged along, the three motors of the flagplane took on a different note. It was a laboring note, pitched on a lower scale. Gradually the air-speed meter of the ship began to show a lower reading.

"Locate us on the map, Carnes!" snapped Dr. Bird.

Operative Carnes of the United States Secret Service bent over a large-scale map of Maryland, spread open on a table. With the aid of the navigating officer, he spotted on the map the point over which the plane was flying.

"There goes Burleigh's ship!" cried the executive officer.

There was a gasp from the occupants of the flagplane's cabin. Far below them, one of the crippled planes had slowed down until it had lost flying speed. Whirling like a leaf, it plunged toward the ground. Two small specks detached themselves from the falling mass. They hovered over the falling plane for an instant. Suddenly a patch of white appeared in the air, and then another. The two specks fell more slowly.

"Good work!" exclaimed General Merton. "They took to their 'chutes just in time."

"We'll be taking them in a few minutes if our motors don't pick up!" replied the executive officer.

Far below them, the doomed plane crashed to the ground. As it

struck there was a blinding flash followed by vivid flames as the gasoline from the bursted tank ignited. The two members of the crew were drifting to the east as they fell. It was evident that they were in no danger.

"Where is Lightwood's plane?" asked General Merton anxiously.

"It's still aloft and making its way slowly north. He intends to try for an emergency landing at the Aberdeen Proving Ground field," replied the executive officer.

"That's where we had better head for," said Dr. Bird. "I hope that the charge on Captain Lightwood's plane discharges through the tail skid when he lands. If it doesn't, he'll be in serious danger. Follow him and we'll watch."

Five thousand feet below them, the crippled plane limped slowly along toward Aberdeen. It was gradually losing elevation. Two specks suddenly appeared in the air, followed by white patches as the parachutes opened. Captain Lightwood and his gunner had given up the unequal fight and taken to the air. As the ship struck the ground, again there was a blinding flash, followed by an inferno of roaring flames.

"We're not in much better shape than they were, General," said the executive officer as he came back from the control room where the pilots were heroically striving to keep their motors turning over fast enough to keep up flying speed. "We'd better get into our 'chutes."

"The Proving Ground is just ahead," said the doctor. "Can't we make it by sacrificing our elevation?"

"We're trying to do that, Doctor, but we're down to four thousand now and falling fast. Get ready to jump."

Dr. Bird buckled on the harness of the pack parachute which the executive officer offered him. The rest of the crew had hurriedly donned their packs and stood ready.

For another five minutes the plane struggled on. Suddenly a large flat expanse of open ground which had been in sight for some time, seemed to approach with uncanny rapidity.

"There's the landing field!" cried the General. "We'll make it yet!"

Lower and lower the plane sank with the landing field still too far away for comfort. The pilot leveled off as much as he dared and drove on. The motors were laboring and barely turning over at idling

speed. They passed the nearer edge of the field with the flagplane barely thirty feet off the ground. In another moment the wheels touched and the plane rolled to a halt.

"Don't get out!" cried Dr. Bird.

He looked around the cabin and picked up a coil of bare antenna wire which hung near the radio set. He wrapped one end of the wire around the frame of the plane. To the other end, he attached his pack 'chute.

"Open the door!" he cried.

As the door swung open, he threw the 'chute out toward the ground. As it touched, there was a blinding flash, followed by a report which shook the plane. A strong odor of garlic permeated the air.

"All right!" cried the doctor cheerfully. "All out for Aberdeen. The danger is past."

He set the example by jumping lightly from the plane. General Merton followed more slowly, his face white and his hands shaking.

"What was it, Doctor," he asked. "I have been flying since 1912, yet I have never seen or heard of anything like that."

"Just a heavy charge of static electricity," replied the doctor. "That was what magnetized your cylinder walls and your piston rings and slowed your motors down. It was the same thing that wrecked those two ships. Unless it leaks off, the men of some of your other ships are due to get a nasty shock when they land to-night. I discharged the charge we had collected through a ground wire. Here comes a car, we'll go up to Colonel Wesley's office. Carnes, you have these maps?"

"Surely, Doctor."

"All right, let's go."

"But what about this ship, Doctor?" objected the General. "Can't something be done about it?"

"Certainly. I hadn't forgotten it. Have your crew stand by. I'll telephone Washington and have some men with apparatus sent right down from the Bureau of Standards. They'll have it ready for flying in the morning. We'll also have search parties sent out in cars to locate the crews of those abandoned ships and bring them in. Now let's go."

Colonel Wesley, the commanding officer of the Aberdeen Proving

Ground, welcomed Carnes and Dr. Bird warmly.

"I'll tell you, General Merton," he said to the Chief of the Air Corps, "if you ever get up against something that is beyond all explanation, you want to get these two men working on it. They are the ones who settled that poisoning case here, you know."

"Yes, I read of that," replied the general. "I am inclined to think that they are up against something even queerer right now."

Colonel Wesley's eyes sparkled.

"Give your orders, Dr. Bird!" he cried. "Since our last experience with you, you can't give an order on this post that won't be obeyed!"

"Thank you, Colonel," said Dr. Bird warmly. "One reason why I came here was that I knew that I could count on your hearty cooperation. The first thing I want is two cars. I want them sent out to bring in the crews of two ships which were abandoned some eight miles south of here. Carnes will locate them on the map for your drivers."

"They'll be ready to start in five minutes, Doctor. What next?"

"Turn out every man and every piece of transportation you have to-

morrow morning. I want the men armed. They will have to search a stretch of swamp south of here, inch by inch, until they find what I'm looking for."

"They'll be ready, Doctor. Would it be indiscreet for me to ask what it's all about?"

"Not at all, Colonel. I was about to explain to General Merton when trouble started. I am searching for the cause of the great drought which has been afflicting this country for the past two years. If I can find the cause, I hope to end it."

"Oh! I had a sneaking hope that we were in for another skirmish with that Russian chap, Saranoff, whose men started that poison here."

"I rather think we are, Colonel Wesley."

General Merton laughed.

"I'll swallow a good deal, Dr. Bird," he said, "but when you talk of an individual being responsible for the great drought, it's a little too much. A man can't control the weather, you know!"

"Yet a man, or an incarnate devil—I don't know which he is—did

control the weather once, as well as the sun. But for the humble efforts of two Americans, aided by a Russian girl whose brother Saranoff had murdered, he might be still controlling it."

General Merton was silent now.

"Carnes, let me have that map," went on the doctor. When the detective had unrolled a map of the United States on Colonel Wesley's table, Dr. Bird continued, pointing to the map as he spoke.

"On this map," he said, "is plotted the deficiency in rainfall for the past year, from every reporting station in the United States. These red lines divide the country into areas of equal deficiency. The area most affected, as you can see, is longer east and west, than it is north and south. It is worst in the east, in fact in this very neighborhood. Even a casual glance at the map will show you that the center of the drought area, from an intensity standpoint, lies in Maryland, a few miles south of here."

"In fact, just about where those two planes went down," added Carnes.

"Precisely, old dear. That was why we went over that section with the fleet. Now, gentlemen, note a few other things about this

drought. The areas of drought follow roughly the great waterways, the Ohio and the Potomac valleys being especially affected. In other words, the drought follows the normal air currents from this point. If something were to be added to the air which would tend to prevent rain, it would in time drift, just as the drought areas have drifted."

General Merton and Colonel Wesley bent over the map.

"I believe you're right, Doctor," admitted the general.

"Thank you. The President was convinced that I was before he placed the First Air Division under my orders. Frankly, that search was the real object of assembling the fleet. The maneuvers are a mere blind."

General Merton colored slightly.

"Now, I'll try to give you some idea of what I think is the method being used," went on the doctor, ignoring General Merton's rising color. "In the past, rain has been produced in several cases where conditions were right—that is, when the air held plenty of moisture which refused to fall—by the discharge from a plane of a cloud of positively charged dust particles. Ergo, a heavy negative charge in the air, which will absorb rather than discharge a positive charge,

should tend to prevent rain from falling. I believe that a stream of negative particles is being liberated into the air near here, and allowed to drift where it will. That was my theory when I had the First Air Division equipped with those dust ejector tubes.

"I knew that if such a condition existed, the positively charged dust would be pulled down toward the source of the negative particle stream, which must, in many ways, resemble a cathode ray. That was why I wanted the behavior of the dust clouds watched and reported. What I did not foresee was that the iron and steel parts of the plane, accumulating a heavy negative charge, would be magnetized enough to slow down the motors and eventually wreck the ships."

"We have had eight ships wrecked unexplainably within twenty miles of here, all of them to the south, during the past year," said Colonel Wesley.

"It had slipped my notice. At any rate, the behavior of the ships this afternoon showed me that my theory is correct, and that some such device exists and is in active operation. Our next task is to locate it and destroy it."

"You shall have every man on the Proving Ground!" cried Colonel Wesley.

"Thank you. General Merton, will you detach three ships from the First Air Division by radio and have them report here? I want two pursuit ships and one bomber, with a rack of hundred-pound demolition bombs. All three must have duralumin cylinder blocks."

"I'll do it at once, Doctor," the general agreed.

"Thank you. Carnes, telephone Washington for me. Tell Dr. Burgess that I want Tracy, Fellows and Von Amburgh, with three more men down here by the next train. Also tell him to have Davis rig up a demagnetizer large enough to demagnetize the motors of a transport plane and bring it down here to fix up General Merton's ship. When you have finished that, get hold of Bolton and ask for a dozen secret service men. I want selected men with Haggerty in charge."

"All right, Doctor. Shall I tell Miss Andrews to come down as well?"

Dr. Bird frowned.

"Certainly not. Why would she come down here?"

"I thought she might be useful, Doctor."

"Carnes, as you know, I dislike using women because they can't control their emotions or their expressions. She would just be in the

way."

"It seems to me that she saved both our lives in Russia, Doctor, and but for her, you wouldn't have come out so well in your last adventure on the Aberdeen marshes."

"She did the first through uncontrolled emotions, and the second through a flagrant disobedience of my orders. No, don't tell her to come. Tell her not to come if she asks."

Carnes turned away, but hesitated.

"Doctor, I wish you'd let me have her come down here. I didn't trust her at first when you did, but she has proved her loyalty and worth. Besides, I don't like the idea of leaving her unguarded in Washington with you and me down here, and with Haggerty coming down."

Dr. Bird looked thoughtful.

"There's something in that, Carnes," he reflected. "All right, tell her to come along, but remember, she is not in on this case. She is being brought here merely for safety, not to mix up in our work."

"Thanks, Doctor."

The detective returned in ten minutes with a worried expression.

"She wasn't in your office, Doctor," he reported.

"Who? Oh, Thelma. Where was she?"

"No one seems to know. She left yesterday afternoon and hasn't returned."

"Oh, well, since I am out of the city, I expect she decided to take a vacation. Women are always undependable. Did you get hold of the rest?"

"They'll be down at midnight, all but Davis. He'll come down in the morning."

"Good enough! Now, Colonel, if you'll have the officers who are going out to-morrow assembled, we'll divide the territory and make our plans for the search."

A week later, the situation was unchanged. Secret service operatives and soldiers from the Proving Ground had covered, foot by foot, square miles of territory south of the Proving Ground, but without result. Not a single unexplainable thing had been found. Sensitive instruments sent down from the Bureau of Standards, instruments so

sensitive that they would detect an electric light burning a mile away, had yielded no results. As a final measure, General Merton had ordered a dozen planes with steel-cylindered motors to the Proving Ground and they had repeatedly crisscrossed the suspected territory, but had acquired no static charge large enough to affect them. It was evident that Saranoff's device, if it existed, had been moved, or else was not in operation.

Also, to Carnes' openly expressed and Dr. Bird's secret worry, Thelma Andrews had not returned to the Bureau of Standards. The Russian girl, formerly known as Feodrovna Androvitch, a tool and follower of Ivan Saranoff, had acted with Carnes and the doctor in their long drawn-out fight with the arch-communist often enough to be a marked woman.

Urged by Carnes, Bolton, the head of the Secret Service, put a dozen of his best men on her trail, but they found nothing. She had disappeared as thoroughly as if the earth had opened and swallowed her up. At last, as the combing of the Aberdeen marshes yielded no results, Dr. Bird acceded to Carnes' request, and the detective left for Washington to take personal charge of the search. Dr. Bird sat alone in his quarters at the Officers' Club, futilely wracking his brains for a clue to his further procedure.

The telephone rang loudly. With a grunt, he took down the receiver.

A feminine voice spoke with a strong foreign accent.

"I vant der Herr Doktor Vogel, plees!"

"You want who? Oh, yes. Vogel—bird! This is Dr. Bird speaking."

The voice instantly lost both its foreign accent and its guttural quality.

"I thought so when you spoke, Doctor, but I wanted to make sure. This is Thelma Andrews."

"Where the devil have you been? Half the Secret Service is looking for you, including Carnes, who deserted me and is in Washington."

"He is? I'm sorry. Listen, Doctor, it's a long story and I can't go into details now. I got a clue on the day you left. As I couldn't get in touch with you, I followed it myself. I've located Saranoff's main base in the Bush River marshes."

"You have! Where is it?"

"It's underground and you've passed over it a dozen times during the

past week. It's unoccupied now and the machines are idle until your search is over. I know the way to it. If you'll join me now, we can get in and hopelessly wreck the device in a short time. To-morrow you can bring your men down here and take charge of it."

Dr. Bird's eyes glistened.

"I'll come at once, Thelma!" he cried. "Where are you?"

"I'm down on Romney Creek. Come down to the Water Impact Range below Michaelville, and I'll meet you at the wharf. You'd better come alone, because we'll have to sneak."

"Good for you!" cried the doctor. "I'll be down in an hour."

"All right, Doctor. I'll be waiting for you."

At Michaelville, Dr. Bird left his car and stepped on the scooter which ran on the narrow gauge track connecting the range house with the wharf on Romney Creek. He started it with no difficulty and it coughed away into the night. For three and a half miles, nothing broke the monotony of the trip. Dr. Bird, his hand on the throttle, kept his eyes on the twin ribbons of steel which slid along under the headlight. The road made a sharp turn and emerged from the thick

wood through which it had been traveling. Hardly had the lights shot along the track in the new direction than Dr. Bird closed the throttle and applied the brakes rapidly. A heavy barricade of logs was piled across the track.

The doctor pressed home on the brake lever until the steel shoes screamed in protest, but no brakes could bring the heavy scooter to a stop as swiftly as was needful to avoid a crash. It was still traveling at a good rate of speed when it rammed into the barricade and overturned.

Dr. Bird was thrown clear of the wrecked scooter. He landed on soft mud beside the track. As he strove to rise, the beam of a flashlight struck him in the eyes and a guttural, sneering voice spoke through the darkness.

"Don't move, Dr. Bird. It will be useless and will only lead to your early death, a thing I should regret."

"Saranoff!" cried Dr. Bird.

"I am flattered, Doctor, that you know my voice. Yes, it is I, Ivan Saranoff, the man whom you have so often foiled. You drove me from America and tried to bar the road against my return, but I only

laughed at your efforts. I returned here only for one purpose, to capture you and to compass your death."

Dr. Bird rose to his feet and laughed lightly.

"You've got me, Saranoff," he said, "but the game isn't played out yet. I represent an organization which won't end with my death, you know."

A series of expletives in guttural Russian answered him. In response to a command from their leader, two men came forward and searched the doctor quickly and expertly, removing the automatic pistol which he carried under his left armpit.

"As for your organization, as you call it—*pouf!*" said the Russian scornfully. "Carnes, a brainless fool who does only as you tell him, a few half-wits in the Bureau of Standards, some of them already in my pay, and one renegade girl. She shall learn what it means to betray the Soviets and their leader."

"You'll have to catch her first," replied Dr. Bird, a sardonic grin on his face.

"I have but to snap my fingers and she will come whining back,

licking my hand and imploring mercy," boasted the Russian. "Bring him along!"

Two men approached and seized the doctor by his arms. Dr. Bird shook them off contemptuously.

"Keep your filthy paws off me!" he cried. "I know when I'm bested, and I'll come quietly, but I won't be dragged."

The men looked at their leader for orders. From behind his light, the Russian studied his opponent. He gave vent to a stream of guttural Russian. The men fell back.

"For your information, Doctor," he said in a sneering tone. "I have told my men to follow you closely, gun in hand. At the slightest sign of hesitation, or at the first attempt to escape, they will fire. They are excellent shots."

"Lead on, Saranoff," was Dr. Bird's cheery comment.

With a shrug of his shoulders, the leader of the Young Labor party turned and made his way along the track toward the wharf. Dr. Bird looked anxiously ahead as they approached, fearing that Feodrovna Androvitch would be discerned in her hiding place. Saranoff

correctly interpreted his gaze.

"Does der Herr Doktor Vogel eggspect somevun?" he asked in the voice which had first come over Dr. Bird's telephone. The doctor started and the Russian went on in the voice of the doctor's secretary. "I'm so glad you came, Dr. Bird. I am going to take you directly to the main base of our dearly beloved friend, Ivan Saranoff."

An expression that was a mixture of chagrin and relief spread over Dr. Bird's face.

"Sold, by thunder!" he cried.

The Russian laughed sardonically and tramped on in silence. Tied to the Romney Creek wharf was a boat with powerful electric motors, driven by storage batteries. At a nudge from his captors, Dr. Bird took his place in the craft. It glided silently away down the creek toward the Chesapeake's mouth.

In the bay, the boat veered to the south and ran along the shore until the mouth of Bush River opened before them. It turned west up the river, coming to a halt at one of the occasional bits of high ground which bordered the river.

"We get off here, Doctor," said Saranoff. "My base, which you have wasted so much time seeking, lies within a hundred yards of this point. Before I take you there, you may be interested in watching us conceal our boat."

Before the doctor's surprised gaze, the edges of a huge box rose above the surface of the water, around the electric boat. The boat was raised and water could be heard running out of the box which held it. When the box was drained, a man leaped in and made some adjustments. A cover, hinged on one side, swung over and closed the box tightly with the boat inside. Men closed clamps which held it in position. As they sprang to shore, the box sunk silently out of sight below the surface of the water.

"It is now beneath a foot of mud, Doctor," laughed the Russian, "and there is nothing to lead a searching party to suspect its existence. Now I will take you to my base."

He led the way for a hundred yards over the ground. Before them loomed an old abandoned fisherman's shack. They entered to find merely a barren room. The Russian stepped to the far side and manipulated a hidden lever. Half of the floor slid to one side,

disclosing a flight of steps leading down into Stygian darkness.

Flashlight in hand, Saranoff descended, Dr. Bird following closely on his heels. They went down twenty-one steps before the stairs came to an end. Above them, the floor could be heard closing. There was a sharp click and the cavern was flooded with light.

Dr. Bird looked around him with keen interest. Before him stood a static generator of gigantic proportions and of a totally unfamiliar design. Attached to it was an elliptic reflector of silvery metal, from which rose a short, stubby projector tube.

"I suppose, Dr. Saranoff—" began Dr. Bird.

"*Ivan* Saranoff, if you please, Doctor," interrupted the Russian. "I have renounced the trumpery distinctions of your bourgeois civilization as far as I am concerned."

"I suppose, Ivan Saranoff," said Dr. Bird obligingly, "that this is the apparatus with which you send out a stream of negative particles."

"It is, Doctor. I had no idea that the nature of it would ever be discovered; at least not until I had changed the United States to a second Sahara desert. I reckoned without you. In point of fact, at the

time that I built this device and started it in operation, I had not clashed with you. Now, I know that my plan is a failure. You have left data on which other men can work, have you not?"

"Surely."

"I would not have believed you had you said otherwise," replied the Russian with a sigh. "Yet this device has done much good. Now it shall be destroyed. It has not been a failure, for its destruction will accomplish both yours and that of your friend, Carnes."

"You haven't caught Carnes yet."

"That is easy. The same bait which caught you has caught him even more easily. I have a real sense of humor, Doctor, and before I went out of my way to bring you here, my plans were carefully laid. Mr. Carnes is now on his way here from Washington, lured by my voice. He is rushing, he thinks, to your rescue."

"What—"

Dr. Bird was suddenly silent.

"I am glad you comprehend my plan so readily, Doctor. Yes, indeed, Mr. Carnes knows that I have captured you. He knows the exact

location of this cavern and, more important, he knows the location of the power line which feeds my device when it is in operation. He also knows that there is stored in this cavern, fifty pounds of radite, your ultra-explosive. He knows that you are chained close to the explosive and that it is rigged with a detonator, connected with the power line. In only one thing is he in error.

"He thinks, that if he can sever the power line before he attempts to penetrate the cavern, that the charge will be rendered harmless, and that you will be safe. In point of fact, the charge is set with an interrupter detonator which will explode as soon at the power line is severed. It pleases my sense of humor that it will be the hand of your faithful friend, Carnes, that will send you in fragments to eternity."

Beads of sweat shone on Dr. Bird's head as the Russian finished his speech, but his expression of amused interest did not change. Neither did his voice, when he spoke, betray any nervousness.

"And I presume that Carnes is also to be blown into bits by the explosion?" he asked.

"No, indeed, Doctor, that would frustrate one of the most humorous angles of the whole affair. He will cut the line at the base of a large rock, some two hundred yards from here, far enough away that he

will not be seriously injured by the force of the explosion. Thus he will witness the explosion and realize what he has done. In order to be sure that he knows, as soon as he cuts the wire, my men will capture him. I, personally, will tell him of it. I wish to see his face when he realizes what he has unwittingly done."

"Then, I presume, you'll kill him?"

"I doubt it. I rather think I'll let him live. He should be useful to me."

"Carnes will never work for you!"

"With Feodrovna in my power, I rather think that Mr. Carnes will be an efficient and loyal servant. If not, he shall have the pleasure of watching me wreak my vengeance on her before he, himself, takes his last long trip."

"Saranoff," said Dr. Bird in a level voice, his piercing eyes boring straight into the Russian's, "I will remember this. Later, when you grovel at my feet and beg for mercy, it will be my friend, Operative Carnes, who will read your doom to you and choose the manner of it. I can promise you that your death will not be an easy one."

The Russian laughed, albeit the laugh had more of uneasiness than

humor in it.

"When you have me in your power, Doctor, you may do as you like," he said, "but I do not fear dead men. In another two hours, you will be among the dead."

He turned to the three Russians who stood behind him.

"Seize him!" he cried.

The Russians leaped forward, but Dr. Bird was not caught napping. The first one went down like a felled tree before the doctor's fist. The other two came in cautiously. Dr. Bird sprang forward, feinting. As he leaped back, his foot struck a rod which Ivan Saranoff had thrust behind him. He staggered and fell. Before he could recover his balance, the two burly Russians were on him.

Even then, they had no easy task. Dr. Bird weighed over two hundred and there was not an ounce of fat or surplus flesh on him. First one, and then the other, of the Russians was thrown off him, but they returned to the attack, unsubdued by the crashing blows which the doctor landed on their faces and heads.

Gradually their ardor began to evaporate. With a sudden effort, Dr.

Bird strove to regain his feet. A crash as of all the thunders of the universe sounded in his ears, and flashes of vivid light played before his eyes. He felt himself falling down ... down....

He recovered consciousness to find his feet shackled and fastened to rings set in the concrete of the cavern wall. His head throbbed horribly. He raised his hands and found a huge bump on his head, from which thickened blood trickled sluggishly down his cheek. The cavern was flooded with light. On the wall before him, a clock told off the seconds with a metallic tick. He bent down and examined his shackles.

"I'm afraid you can't unfasten them, Doctor," said a sardonic voice.

He looked up to see Saranoff.

"I'm sorry I had to hit you so hard," went on the Russian. "Your half hour of unconsciousness has lessened by that much the time which is yours to indulge in an agony of apprehension. Look."

Dr. Bird's gaze followed the Russian's finger. On the floor, twenty feet from where he was shackled, stood a yellow can with the mark of the Bureau of Standards on its side. He recognized it at once as a radite container, a can of the terrible ultra-explosive which he

himself had perfected. He shuddered at the thought of the havoc which its detonation would cause.

"Yes, Doctor, that is a can of radite," said the Russian. "Allow me also to call your attention to the interrupter fuse which is attached to it. When Mr. Carnes cuts the wire outside, you know well enough what will happen. Now, let me invite your attention to the clock on the wall before you. Mr. Carnes arrived at the Bush River station of the P. B. and W. at 2:15 A.M. He had a little trouble getting a boat, but he is now on his way here. It is 2:25. I think he will arrive between 3:30 and 4:00. Perhaps five minutes later, he will find the wire.

"You have a little over an hour in which to contemplate your total extinction, an extinction which will remove from my path the one great obstacle to my domination of the world. I hope you will enjoy your remaining moments. In order to help you to enjoy them, and to realize the futility of human endeavor, I have placed the key of your shackles on the floor here in plain sight, but, alas, out of your reach. I would like to stay and watch your struggle, to see the self-control on which you pride yourself vanish, and to watch you whimper and pray for the mercy you would not find; but I am deprived of that pleasure. I must take personal charge of my men to be sure that there is no slip. Good-by, Doctor, we will never meet again, I fear."

"We will meet again, Saranoff," said Dr. Bird in even tones of cold ferocity which made even Saranoff shiver. "We will meet again, and when you whimper and beg for mercy, remember this moment!"

The Russian started forward with an oath, his hand raised to strike. He recovered himself and essayed a sickly smile.

"I will remember, Doctor," he said in a voice which, despite himself, had a tremor of fear in it. "I will remember—*when* we meet again."

He ran lightly up the stairs and Dr. Bird heard the floor close above him. With a grunt, he bent down and examined his shackles closely. They were tight fitting and made of hardened steel. A cursory examination showed the doctor that he could neither force them nor slip them. He turned his attention to the key which Saranoff had pointed out. It lay on the floor, about ten feet, as nearly as he could judge, from where he stood.

He knelt and then stretched himself out at full length on the floor. By straining to the uttermost, his groping fingers were still six inches from the key. Saranoff had calculated the distance well.

Convinced that he could not reach the key by any effort of stretching, Dr. Bird wasted none of his precious time in vain regrets

or in useless efforts to accomplish the impossible. He rose to his feet and calmly took stock of the room, searching for other means of freeing himself. The shackles themselves offered no hope. He searched his pockets. The search yielded a pocket knife, a bunch of keys, a flashlight, a handkerchief, a handful of loose change, and a wallet. He examined the miscellany thoughtfully.

A light broke over his face. He tied one end of the handkerchief to the knife and again took a prone position on the floor. Cautiously he tossed the knife out before him. It fell to one side of the key. He drew it back and tried again. The knife fell beyond the key. Slowly he drew it back toward him by the handkerchief. When it reached his hand, he saw to his joy, that the key was a good inch nearer. With a lighter heart, he tried again.

His toss was good. The knife fell over the key, and again he drew it to him. To his disgust, the key had not moved. Again and again he tried it, but the knife slid over the key without moving it. He looked more carefully and saw that the key was caught on an obstruction in the flooring.

With careful aim, he threw his knife so as to drive the key further away. He threw the knife again and tried to draw the key to him from its new position. It came readily until it reached the inequality in the

floor which had stopped it the first time. All of his efforts to draw it nearer were fruitless. He give vent to a muttered oath as he looked at the clock. Thirty minutes of his time had gone.

A second time he knocked the key away and strove to draw it to him with no success. The clock bore witness to the fact that another ten minutes had been wasted. He rose to his feet and carefully surveyed his surroundings.

A cry of joy burst from his lips. On the floor was a tiny metallic thread which he knew for a wire. He bent down and picked it up. It was fine and very flexible. He doubled it three times and strove to bend a hook in it. The wire was too short to offer much hope, but he threw himself prone and began to fish for the key.

The wire reached it readily enough, but it did not have rigidity enough to pull the key over the little bump which held it. A glance at the clock threw him into an agony of despair. A full hour had passed since Saranoff had left him. Carnes might even now be walking into the trap which had been laid for him.

He rose to his feet and thought rapidly, twisting the wire idly around the knife as he did so. He glanced at the work of his hands, and an oath broke from his lip.

"Fool!" he exclaimed. "I deserve to die! The means for liberation were in my hands all the time."

With feverish activity, he ripped open the flashlight. He held the two ends of the wire against the terminals of the light battery and touched the knife to his steel key ring. To his joy, the ring adhered to the knife. Under the influence of the battery, the wire-wrapped knife had become a small electromagnet.

In a moment the doctor was prone on the floor. He tossed the knife out to the key. His aim was good and it fell directly beyond. With trembling hands he drew the knife toward him. It reached the key. Scarcely daring to breathe, he pulled it closer. The key had risen over the ridge which had held it, and was adhering to the knife. In another moment, he stood erect, freed from the shackles which had bound him.

He made for the door at a run, but a sudden thought stopped him. The clock showed him that an hour and twenty minutes had passed.

"Carnes must be nearly here!" he cried. "If I go blundering out, I'm liable to run right into the trap they have laid for him, and then we're both gone. If I yell to warn him, the fool will come ahead at full tilt. What the dickens can I do?"

His gaze fell on the can of radite. The wires leading to the interrupter fuse gleamed a dull gold with a malign significance.

"If Carnes and I are both washed out, there will be only Thelma left. She can't fight Saranoff alone. Carnes knows the man and his methods. There is only one way that I can see to warn him out of the trap."

He shuddered a moment. With a steady step he walked across the cave to the can of deadly explosive. A pair of pliers lay on a nearby bench. He picked them up. He dashed his hand across his face for a moment, but looked up with steady eyes. With hands that did not tremble, he bent down over the can. With a quick snip, he severed the wires leading to the can of radite.

Operative Carnes jumped ashore as the boat reached the bank of Bush River. Before him stretched a dismal swamp, interspersed with occasional bits of higher ground. He looked back over the river for a moment, taking his bearings with great care. A luminous lensatic compass gave him the orientation of the points he had chosen for markers.

"Are you sure we are at the right place?" he asked in an undertone.

"Sure as shootin', Mister," replied the boatman. "It's the only place of its kind in five miles. The rock you're hunting for is about a hundred rods due east."

"It looks right," said Carnes. "Come on, men."

Operatives Haggerty and Dillon scrambled out of the boat and stood by his side.

"Follow me," said Carnes in a whisper.

Both detectives nodded silently. They drew their pistols and fell in behind their leader. Keeping his direction with the aid of his compass, Carnes led the way forward, counting his steps. At five hundred he paused.

"It should be right here," he whispered.

Haggerty pointed in silence. In the starlight, a large rock loomed up a few yards away. With an exclamation of satisfaction, Carnes led the way to it.

"Dig on the south side," he whispered, "and hurry! The damned thing is due to go off in less than twenty minutes. Unless we can find and cut the wire before then, the doctor is a gone gosling."

The two detectives drew intrenching shovels from their pockets and dug feverishly. For five minutes they labored. Dillon gave an exclamation.

"Here it is, Chief!" he said.

Carnes bent down and ventured a short flash from a carefully guarded light. The detective's shovel had unearthed a powerful cable running through the earth.

"Get something to cut on!" cried Carnes.

Haggerty lifted a rock which they had unearthed and thrown to one side. Carnes raised the cable and laid it on the rock.

"Now for your ax, Dillon!" he exclaimed.

He turned on his flashlight. Dillon raised a hand-ax and took careful aim. Sparks flew as the ax fell on the rock, severing the cable cleanly. Carnes rose to his feet.

"The doctor's safe!" he cried.

He started at a run toward the north. He had gone only a few feet when a beam of light flashed across the marsh, picking him out of

the darkness. He paused in amazement.

A flash of orange light stabbed the darkness and a heavy pistol bullet sang past his head. The detective raised his weapon to reply, but three more flashes from the darkness were followed by the vicious cracks of large caliber automatics.

"Down, Chief!" cried Haggerty.

Carnes dropped to the ground, the beam of light following his movements. Four more flashes came from the darkness. Mud was thrown up into his face. Dillon's gun joined Haggerty's in barking defiance into the night.

A groan came from Haggerty.

"Hit, Tom?" asked Carnes anxiously.

"A little, but don't let that bother you. Get that damned light!"

He fired again, groaning at he did so. There was a crash from over the marsh and the light went out.

"Good work, Tom!" cried Carnes.

He raised his pistol and fired again and again into the darkness, from which still came the flashes of orange light. A cry of pain rewarded him.

"Come on, men, rush them!" he cried.

He jumped to his feet and dashed forward. A fresh beam of light stabbed a path through the darkness. A volley of fire came from behind it. Haggerty stumbled and fell.

"They've got me, Chief!" he cried faintly.

Disregarding the storm of bullets, Carnes charged ahead, Dillon at his heels. A sudden shout came from his left. A fresh beam of light made a path through the darkness and Carnes could see his opponents lying prone on the marsh. A cry of dismay came from them. Carnes fired again as he rushed forward. The men leaped to their feet and fled away into the darkness.

"Your light, Dillon!" he cried.

Dillon's light shone out and picked up one of the fleeing figures. The beam from the left was centered on another.

"Halt!" came a stern voice from behind the light. "You are

surrounded! If I give the word to fire, you are dead men!"

"Dr. Bird!" cried Carnes in amazement.

The fleeing man in the beam of Dillon's light paused.

"Drop your gun!" cried Carnes sharply.

There was a moment of hesitation before the man's gun fell and his hands went up.

"Get him, Carnes!" came Dr. Bird's voice. "I've got another one held out here. I hope one of them is the man we want."

As Dillon slipped handcuffs on his prisoner, Dr. Bird came forward, driving another Russian before him. In his hand was a piece of iron pipe.

"Cuff him, Carnes!" he said.

The detective slipped handcuffs on the man while Dr. Bird bent down and examined the face of each of the prisoners with his light. He straightened up with an exclamation of anger.

"These are nothing but tools," he said bitterly. "We had the arch-

conspirator himself in our hands and let him escape."

"The arch-conspirator!" gasped Carnes. "You don't mean Saranoff?"

"Yes, Ivan Saranoff. He was here on this marsh to-night. There were four of his men and we got two, letting the most important one get away."

"You've got four, Dr. Bird," said a guttural voice from the dark.

Dr. Bird whirled around and shot out the beam of his light. A third Russian was revealed in its gleam.

"Hands up!" cried the doctor.

"I'm willing to be captured, Doctor," said the Russian. "Your search for Saranoff is useless. He has been gone for an hour. He is not one to risk his own skin when others will risk theirs for him. He fled after he left the cave."

"Do you know where he has gone?"

"I wish I did, Doctor. If I knew, we'd soon have him, I hope."

The Russian's voice had changed entirely. Gone were the heavy

guttural tones. In their place was a rich, rather throaty contralto. Carnes gave a cry of astonishment and turned his light on the prisoner.

"Thelma!" he gasped.

The Russian smiled.

"Surely, Mr. Carnes," she said. "Congratulations on your acumen. Dr. Bird saw me for half an hour this evening, but he didn't recognize me. He even knocked me out with his fist back in the cavern."

"The devil I did!" gasped the doctor. "What were you doing there?"

"Helping Saranoff capture you, Doctor," she replied. "The day you left, I saw one of his men on the street. I dared not summon help lest he should escape, so I followed him. I captured him and learned from him the location of the gang headquarters.

"I disguised myself and took his place for a week, fooling them all, even Saranoff himself. I was one of those chosen to carry out your capture and your murder. This afternoon, unknown to Saranoff, I tampered with that radite can and removed the fuse. That was why

there was no explosion when Mr. Carnes cut the wire. I had no chance to warn him. I managed to shoot one of Saranoff's men when they broke and ran."

Her voice trembled in the darkness.

"I hated to kill him—" she said with a half sob.

A faint hail came from the night.

"Haggerty!" cried Carnes.

"All right, Chief," came Dillon's voice. "He's got a bullet in his shoulder and one through his leg, but no bones broken. He'll be all right."

Carnes turned again to the girl.

"What about that Russian whose place you took?" he asked. "Maybe we can pump something out of him."

Thelma swayed for a moment.

"Don't, Mr. Carnes," she cried, her voice rising almost to a shriek. "Don't make me think of it! I—I had to—to stab him!"

She swayed again. Carnes started toward her, his arms outstretched. Dr. Bird's voice stopped him.

"Miss Andrews," said the doctor sternly, "you know that I demand control of the emotions from all my subordinates. You are crying like a hysterical schoolgirl. Unless you can learn to control your feelings instead of giving way to them on every occasion, I will have to dispense with your further services."

The girl swayed toward him for a moment, a look of pain in her eyes. She shuddered and then recovered herself. She straightened up and faced Dr. Bird boldly.

"Yes, Doctor," came in level expressionless tones from her lips.

142 The Bluff of the Hawk by Desmond W Hall

"A trick? Carse was famed for them. A trap? But how?"

Aproximate word count: 12,600

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Had not old John Sewell, the historian, recognized Hawk Carse for what he was—a creator of new space-frontiers, pioneer of vast territories for commerce, molder of history through his long feud with the powerful Eurasian scientist, Ku Sui—the adventurer would doubtless have passed into oblivion like other long-forgotten spacemen. We have Sewell's industry to thank for our basic knowledge of Carse. His "Space-Frontiers of the Last Century" is a thorough work and the accepted standard, but even it had of necessity to be compressed, and many meaty episodes of the Hawk's life go almost unmentioned. For instance, Sewell gives a rough synopsis of "The Affair of the Brains," but dismisses its aftermath entirely, in the following fashion (Vol. II, pp. 250-251):

"... there was only one way out: to smash the great dome covering one end of the asteroid and so release the life-sustaining air inside. Captain Carse achieved this by sending the space-ship Scorpion crashing through the dome unmanned, and he, Friday and Eliot Leithgow were caught up in the out-rushing flood of air and catapulted into space, free of the dome and Dr. Ku Sui. Clad as they were in the latter's self-propulsive space-suits, they were quite capable of reaching Jupiter's Satellite III, only some thirty thousand miles away.

"Then speeding through space, Captain Carse discovered why he had never been able to find the asteroid-stronghold. He could not see it! Dr. Ku Sui had protected his lair by making it invisible! But Carse was at least confident that by breaking the dome he had destroyed all life within in, including the coordinated brains.

"So ended The Affair of the Brains.

"The three comrades reached Satellite III safely, where, after a few minor adventures, Captain Carse...."

Sewell's ruthless surgery is most evident in that last paragraph. Of course his telescoping of the events was due to limited space; but he did wish to draw a full-length, character-revealing portrait of Hawk

Carse, and with "... reached Satellite III safely, where, after a few minor adventures, Captain Carse ..." learned old John Sewell slid over one of his greatest opportunities.

The resourcefulness of Hawk Carse! In these "few minor adventures" he had but one weapon with which to joust against overwhelming odds on an apparently hopeless quest. This weapon was a space-suit—nothing more—yet so brilliantly and daringly did he wield its unique advantages that he penetrated seemingly impregnable barriers and achieved alone what another man would have required the ray-batteries of a space-fleet to do.

But here is the story, heard first from Friday's lips and told and re-told down through the years on the lonely ranches of the outlying planets, of that one dark, savage night on Satellite III and of the indomitable man who winged his lone way through it. Hawk Carse! Old adventurer! Rise from your unknown star-girdled grave and live again!

Thirty thousand miles was the gap between Dr. Ku Sui's asteroid and Satellite III, the nearest haven. Thirty thousand miles in a space-ship is about the time of a peaceful cigarro. Thirty thousand miles in a cramped awkward space-suit grow into a nightmare journey, an eternity of suffering, and they will kill a good number of those who

traverse them so.

For, take away the metal bulkheads and walls, soft lights and warmth of a space-liner, get out in a small cramped space-suit, and space loses its mask of harmlessness and stands revealed as the bleak, unfeeling torturer it is. There is the loneliness, the sense of timelessness, the sensation of falling, and above all there is the "weightless" feeling from pressure-changes in man's blood-stream—changes sickening in effect and soon resulting in delirium. Nothing definite; no gravity; no "bottom," no "top"; merely a vacuum, comprehended by the human mind through an all-enveloping nausea, and seen in confused spectral labyrinths as the whole cold panorama of icy stars staggers and swirls and the universe goes mad. Such a trip was enough to churn the resistance of the hardiest traveler, but for Hawk Carse, Friday and Eliot Leithgow there was more. On Ku Sui's asteroid they had gone through hours of mental and physical tension without break or relaxation, and they were sleep-starved and food-starved and their brains fagged and dull. What would have been a strong reaction on land hit them, in space, with tripled force.

So Friday—our ultimate authority—remembered little of the transit. He had bad short periods of wakefulness, when the recurring agony of his body woke and racked him afresh, and only during these did he see the other two grotesque figures, sometimes widely separated,

sometimes close, dazzlingly half-lit by Jupiter's light. But he was conscious that one of the three was keeping them more or less together, though only later did he know that this one was Carse—Carse, who hardly slept, who drove off unconsciousness and fought through nausea to keep at his task of shepherding, failing which they would have drifted miles apart and become hopelessly separated. He was able to maintain them in a fairly compact group by his discovery of a short metal direction rod on the breast of the suit, which gave horizontal movement in the direction it was pointed when its button was pressed.

But though it seemed endless, the journey was not; Satellite III grew and grew. Its pale circle spread outward; dark blurs took definition; a spot of blue winked forth—the Great Briney Lake. The globe at last became concave, then, after they entered its atmosphere, convex. This last stretch was the most grueling.

Friday remembered it in vivid flashes. Time after time he dropped into confused sleep, each time to be awakened by Carse jarring into him, shouting at him through the suits' small radio sets, keeping him—and Leithgow—attentive to the job of decelerating. The man's efforts must have been terrific, taxing all his enormous driving power, for he at that time was without doubt more exhausted than they. But he succeeded, and he was a haggard-faced, feverish shell

of himself when at last he had them in a dangling drunken halt in the air a hundred feet from the surface.

Primal savagery lay stretched out below, and there seemed to be no safe spot whereon to land. The foul, deep swamp that reached for miles on every side, the towering trees that sprouted their spiny trunks and limbs from it, the interlaced razor-edged vines and creeper-growths—all was a stirring welter of tropic life, life varied and voracious and untamed. From the tiny poisonous bansi insects layers deep on the nearest tree to the monster gantor that crouched in a clump of weeds, gently sawing his fangs back and forth, all the creatures of this world were against man.

Carse scanned the scene wearily. They had to land; had to sleep under normal conditions, and eat and drink, before they could go further. But where? Where was haven? He snapped out the direction rod, moved away a short distance, and then glimpsed, below and to the left, a small peninsula of firm soil which seemed safe and uninhabited. And there was a pool of fairly clear water before it, containing nothing but an old uprooted stump. He came back to the others, shook them, and led them down to the place he had discovered.

They landed with a thump which seemed to shake all life from two

of them. Friday and Eliot Leithgow collapsed into inert heaps, asleep immediately. Carse extracted a ray-gun from the belt of Leithgow's suit and prepared to stand watch. But that was too much. He over-estimated his capacity. He had come through thirty hours of hellish sleep-denied delirium, and he could not stave sleep off any longer. He staggered and went down, and his eyelids were glued in sleep when his body hit the ground.

But mechanically, with an instinct that sleep could not deny, his left hand kept clasped around the butt of the ray-gun....

Satellite III's day has an average of seven hours' duration, her night of six. It was perhaps the last hour of daylight when the three metal and fabric-clad figures lying outsprawled on the little thumb-shaped piece of soil had landed. Now quickly the huge sweeping rim of Jupiter plunged down, and night fell over the land.

Fierce darkness. Jungle and swamp awoke with their scale of savage life. Swift swooping shapes winged out from the trees, prey-hungry eyes gleaming green. And from the swamps came bellowings and stirrings from monster mud-encrusted bodies, awakening to their nocturnal quest for food. The night reechoed with the harsh cacophony of their cries.

With lumbering caution, its smooth knob head waving on a long reptilian neck, its heavy armored tail dragging behind its body's folds of flesh, a giant night-thing came stumping out of a copse of jungle growth—a buru. Its eyes were watchful, but centered mainly on the pool of water to one side of the peninsula of firm soil. Its drinking water was there. With several pauses, it went right out on the spit, and a flat-bottomed foot twice the size of an elephant's missed one of the sleeping forms by inches. But the buru cared not for them. It was not a flesh-eater. Its undulating neck stretched far out; its head dipped; water was lapped up—until it caught sight of the uprooted giant stump lying pitched in the pool. The beast drank but little after that, and retreated as cautiously as it had come.

Five or six of its fellows of the swamps followed at intervals to the water, grotesque hulking shapes, odorous and slimy with mud. All drank from the same spot; all ignored, save for a tentative rooting snuffle, the unconscious figures lying puny beneath them. But all noticed the twisted roots of the stump, sticking out in a score of directions, and avoided them.

And then there came smaller, more cautious animals who did not drink from the favored spot, who surveyed it, sniffed, hesitated, and finally retreated. There was a good reason for this caution.

For with the falling of night the stump had been at least thirty feet out in the water; now it was not ten feet from the side of the spit, and not twelve feet from the nearest sleeping figure. The suits that clad the three figures were sealed, the face-plates closed, so there was probably—after their trip through the void—no man smell to attract the giants of swamp and trees. But those three figures had moved. That was lure enough for one monster.

When the first ruddy arrows of Jupiter's light laced through the jungle's highest foliage, the twisted, gnarled stump was settled on the peninsula's rim, half out of the water. And when day burst, when Jupiter's flaming arch pushed over into view, the long seeming-roots eeled forward in sinuous reptilian life.

In one second Hawk Carse was snatched from sleep into the turmoil of a fight for life.

Something hard and enormously powerful was wrapping his waist with a vise-like grip that threatened to cut him in two. He felt a leg go up and crumple back, almost breaking under the force of a lashing blow. He was squeezed in, caged, compressed, by a score of tough, encircling tentacles, and his whole body was drawn toward a wide, flexible, black-lipped mouth yawning in the center of the monster he had thought a stump. Moving with loathsome life, its

sinewy root-tentacles sucking him whole into the maw, the thing hunched itself back to the water.

The water frothed around Carse. He had been too dazed to resist; he had not known what had gripped him in his unconsciousness and weakness. But he remembered his ray-gun.

The lips of the hideous mouth were pressing close. Both were now under the surface. Carse's suit was still tight and he could breathe even while totally submerged in the water. He strained his left arm against the tentacle that looped it, worked the ray-gun still clasped in his hand in line with the thing's monstrous carcass, and at once, gasping and sick, pulled the trigger clear back.

The orange stream sizzled as it cleared a path through the water and bit true into the gaping mouth. There sounded a curious, subterranean sob; beady eyes on each side of the mouth bulged; the woodish body quivered in agony. Its tentacles slackened, and, half fainting, the Hawk wrenched free. He staggered up onto the land, streams of water running off the suit, and toppled over; and from there he saw the thing drag its writhing shuddering shape farther out from the shore. When perhaps sixty feet away it again subsided into a "harmless" uprooted old stump....

Carse lay resting and collecting himself for a quarter of an hour, while Leithgow and Friday slept on, unconscious of what had happened; then he got to his feet, opened their face-plates and bathed Leithgow's pale brow with water. The scientist awoke with the quickness of old men, but Friday stirred and stretched and blinked and sat up at last, yawning.

The Hawk answered their questions about his wet suit with a brief explanation of the fight, then got down to business.

"There's water here, but we must have food," he said. "Friday, you go back and find fruit; some isuan weed, too, if it's growing nearby. A chew of it will stimulate us. Keep your ray-gun ready. I wouldn't be here if I'd not had mine."

The isuan was a big help. In its prepared form it is degrading, mind-destroying, but in natural state it gives a powerful and comparatively harmless stimulation. Chewing on the leaves that the Negro brought back, they made strength and renewed vitality for their bodies, and came, for the first time since they had started their flight through space, to a near-normal state. Meaty, yellow globules of pear-like fruit, followed by prudent drafts of water, aided also. Friday's long-absent grin returned as he bit into the juicy fruit, and he announced through a mouthful:

"Well, things're lookin' sunny again! We've got food and water inside us; we can reach Master Leithgow's laboratory in these here suits; an' to top it all we've finished high an' mighty Ku Sui. He's dead at last! Boy, it sure feels good to know it!"

Eliot Leithgow was lying back, breathing deeply of the fresh morning air. His lined, worn face and body were relaxed. "Yes," he murmured, "it is good to know that Dr. Ku is now just a thing of the past. He and his coordinated brains." He glanced aside at the Hawk, sitting silent and still, and stroking, as always when in meditation, the bangs of flaxen hair which obscured his forehead. "Why so serious, Carse?" he asked.

The adventurer's gray eyes were cold and sober. No relaxation showed in them. His hand paused in its slow smoothing movement and he spoke.

"Why I overlooked it before," he said quietly, almost as if to himself, "I don't know. Probably because I was too tired, and too busy, and too sick to think. But now I see."

"What?" Leithgow sat up straight.

"Eliot," said the Hawk clearly, "doesn't it seem strange to you that

Ku Sui's asteroid continued to be invisible after we had smashed through its dome?"

"What do you mean?"

"We've assumed that our smashing the dome and opening it to space killed Ku Sui and everyone inside, and destroyed all the mechanisms, including the coordinated brains. But the mechanism controlling the asteroid's invisibility was not destroyed. The place remained invisible."

The old scientist's face grew tense. Carse paused for a moment.

"That means," he went on, "that Ku Sui provided the invisibility machine with special protection for just such an emergency. And do you think he would give it such protection and not his coordinated brains? Wouldn't he first protect the brains, his most cherished possession?"

Eliot Leithgow knew what this meant. The Hawk had promised the brains in that machine—brains of five renowned scientists, kept cruelly, unnaturally alive by Dr. Ku—that he would destroy them. And his promises were always kept.

There was no evading the logic of this reasoning. The Master Scientist nodded. "Yes," he answered. "He certainly would."

"I couldn't damage the case they were in," Carse continued. "The whole device seemed self-contained. It means just one thing: special protection. Since the mechanism for invisibility survived the crashing of the dome, we may be sure that the brain machine did too. And more than that: we may assume that there was special protection for the most precious thing of all to Dr. Ku Sui—his own life."

Friday's mouth gaped open. The old scientist cried out:

"My God! Ku Sui—still alive?"

"It would seem so," said Hawk Carse.

He amplified his evidence. "Look at these space-suits we're wearing. We got them and escaped by them, but they're Dr. Ku's. Couldn't he have protected himself with one too? He had plenty of time. And then the construction of the asteroid's buildings—all metal, with tight, sealed doors! Oh, stupid, stupid! Why didn't I see it all before? Here, in my weakness and sickness, I thought we'd killed Ku Sui and destroyed the coordinated brains!"

Leithgow looked suddenly very old and tired. The calamity did not end there. There were other angles, and an immediate one of high danger. In a lifeless voice he said:

"Carse, our whole situation's changed by this. We intended to go straight to my laboratory, but we may not be able to. The laboratory may already be closed to us. And even if not, there'd be a big risk in going there."

"Closed to us by what?" the Hawk demanded sharply. "At risk from what?"

Old Leithgow pressed his hands over his face. "Let me think a moment," he said.

There were very good reasons why Eliot Leithgow maintained his chief laboratory on the dangerous Satellite III. Other planets might have offered more friendly locations, but III possessed stores of accessible minerals valuable to the scientist's varied work, and its position in the solar system was most convenient, being roughly halfway between Earth and the outermost frontiers. Leithgow had counterbalanced the inherent peril of the laboratory's location by ingenious camouflage, intricate defenses and hidden underground entrances; had, indeed, hidden it so well that none of the scavengers

and brigands and more personal enemies who infested Port o' Porno remotely suspected that his headquarters was on the satellite at all. Ships, men, could pass over it a score of times with never an inkling that it lay below.

After a short silence, Eliot Leithgow began his explanation.

"You'll remember," he told the intent Hawk, "that Ku Sui's men kidnapped me from our friend Kurgo's house in Porno. There were five of them: robot-coolies. They took us entirely by surprise, and killed Kurgo and bore me to Ku Sui's asteroid.

"Well, I had come to Kurgo's house in the first place to arrange for supplies for building an addition to my laboratory, and I had with me a sheaf of papers containing plans for this addition. The plans are not important; they tell nothing—but there was a figure on one of the papers that might reveal everything! The figure 5,576.34. Do you know what that stands for?"

The adventurer thought for a moment, then shook his head. Leithgow nodded. He went on:

"Few would. But among the few would be Ku Sui!

"You'll remember that on building my laboratory we considered it extremely important to have it on the other side of the globe from Port o' Porno—diametrically opposite—so that the movements of our ships to and from it would be hidden from that pirate port. Diametrically opposite—remember? Well, the diameter of Satellite III is 3,550 miles. This diameter multiplied by 3.1416 gives 11,152.63 miles as the circumference, and one half the circumference is 5,576.34 miles—the exact distance of my laboratory from Port o' Porno!"

"I see," Carse murmured. "I see."

"That figure meant nothing to you, nor would it to the average person; but to a mathematician and astronomer—to Dr. Ku Sui—it would be a challenge! He would be studying the paper on which it is written down. One of Eliot Leithgow's papers. Plans for an addition to a laboratory. Therefore, Eliot Leithgow's laboratory. And then the figure: half the circumference of Satellite III. Why, he would at once deduce that it gave the precise location of my laboratory!"

The Hawk rose quickly. "If those papers fell into Dr. Ku's hands—"

"He would know exactly where the laboratory is," Leithgow finished. "He would search. Its camouflage would not hold him long.

And that would be the end of my laboratory—and us too, if we were caught inside."

"Yes," snapped the Hawk. "You imply that the papers were left in Kurgo's house?"

"I had them in the bottom drawer of the clothes-chest in the room I always use. The coolies did not take them. At that time they wanted nothing but me."

Friday, rubbing his woolly crown, interjected: "But, even if Ku Sui's still alive, he wouldn't know about them papers. Far's I can see, they're safe."

"No!" Leithgow cried. "That's it! They're not! Follow it logically, point by point. Assuming that Dr. Ku's alive, he has one point of contact with us—Kurgo's house, in Porno, where I was kidnapped. He wants us badly. He will anticipate that one of us will go back to that house: to care for Kurgo's body, to get my belongings—for several reasons. So he will radio down—he probably can't come himself—for henchmen to station themselves at the house and to ransack it thoroughly for anything pertaining to me. The papers would fall into their hands!"

"All right," said Carse levelly. "We must get those papers. They will either be still in the house or in the possession of Dr. Ku's men at Porno. But whichever it is—we must get them before Ku Sui does." He paused.

"Well," he said, "that means me." He turned and looked down at the old man and smiled. "There's no use risking the three of us. I'll go to Kurgo's house myself."

"If the papers are gone, suh?" asked Friday.

"I don't know. What I do will depend on what I discover there."

"But," said Leithgow, "there may be guards! There may be an ambush!"

"I have a powerful weapon. M. S. Unknown, so far; new to Satellite III. Ku Sui himself supplied it. This space-suit."

The Hawk scanned the "western" sky and began giving brisk orders.

"Eliot, you've got to go to some place of safety until this is all over. You too, Eclipse, to take care of him. Let me see.... There's Cairnes, and Wilson.... Wilson's the one. He should be at his ranch now. You remember it: Ban Wilson's ranch, on the Great Briney Lake? Right.

Both of you will go there and wait. I'll meet you there when I'm finished. And at that time I'll either have the papers or know that Ku Sui has found the laboratory."

Again on his feet, the old Master Scientist regarded anxiously this slender, coldly calculating man who was his closest friend. He was afraid. "Carse," he said, "you're going back alone into probable danger. The papers—the laboratory—they're important—but not so important as your life."

There was visible now in the Hawk's face that hard, unflinching will-to-do that had made him the spectacular adventurer that he was. "Did you ever know me to run from danger?" he asked softly. "Did you ever know me to run from Ku Sui?..." And Eliot Leithgow knew that the course was set, no matter what it might hold.

Carse again glanced at Jupiter, hanging massive in the blue overhead. "About three hours of daylight left," he observed. "Now, close face-plates. We must go up—far up—to get our bearings."

Altitude swept back the horizon as they arrowed up through the warm, glowing air. From far in the heavens, perhaps twenty miles, Carse saw what he looked for—a bright gleam of silver in the monochrome of the terrain, where Jupiter's light struck on the

smooth metal hides of a group of space-ships resting in the satellite's lone port, Porno. Eighty, a hundred miles away—some such distance. Into the helmet's tiny microphone he said:

"That's Porno, over to the 'north,' and there to one side is the Great Briney. It's not far: you won't have to hurry, Eliot. Head straight for the lake and follow the near shoreline toward Porno, and you'll come to Ban Wilson's ranch. Now we part."

The three clinging, giant forms separated. The direction-rods for horizontal movement were out-hinged. A last touch of mitten-gloves on the bloated suits fabric; a nod and a smile through the face-plates; and a few parting words:

"Good luck, old comrade!"—in Leithgow's soft voice; and the Negro's deep, emphatic bass: "Don't know how far these little sets work, suh, but if you need me, call. I'll keep listenin'!"

And then white man and black were speeding away in the ruddy flood of Jupiter-light, and Hawk Carse faced the danger trail alone, as was his wont.

Caution rather than speed had to mark his journey, Carse knew. Several ranches lay scattered in the jungle smother between him and

the port—stations where the weed isuan was collected and refined into the deadly finished product. They were worked for the most part by Venusians allied with Ku Sui: the Eurasian practically controlled the drug trade; and therefore, if any alarm had been broadcast, many men would already be on the lookout for him.

So the Hawk dropped low, and chose a course through the screening walls of the jungle. It did not take him long to attain full mastery of the suit's controls, and soon he was gliding cleanly through the hollows created by the mammoth outthrusting treetops in a course crazy and twisted, but one which kept him pointing always towards Porno. Presently he found an easier highway and a faster—a sluggish, dirty yellow stream, quite broad, which ended, he was sure, in a swamp within a mile of his destination.

Flanked by the jungle growth which sprouted thickly from each bank, a gray, ghostly shape in the shadows lying over the water, he sped through the dying afternoon. He kept at least ten feet above the surface, well out of reach of such water beasts as from time to time reared up through the placid surface to scan him. Once a huge gantor, gulping a drink from the bank, snorted and went trumpeting away at the grotesque sight of him—flying without wings!—and once too, on rising cautiously above the treetops to reconnoiter, Carse saw life far more perilous to him: a small party of men,

stooping over a swamp-brink and plucking the ripe isuan weed. At this he dived steeply and fled on; and he knew he had gone unobserved, for there came no outcry of discovery from behind.

Jupiter lowered its murky disk as the miles streamed past, breeding a legion of shadows welcome to the fabric-clad monster skimming through them and to the creatures who blinked and stirred as night approached. The stream broadened into shallow pockets; patches of swamp appeared and absorbed the stream; and Carse knew he was close to his destination.

He cut his speed and glanced around. Ahead, the dark spire of a giant sakari tree climbed into the gloom. It would be a good place. The man rose slowly; like a wraith on the wind he lifted into its top-most branches; and there, in the broad, cuplike leaves, he warily ensconced himself. For man-sounds came into his opened helmet, and through a fringe of leaves, across a mile of tumbled swamp and marsh, he could see the guarding fences of the cosmetropolis of Porno.

A last slice of blotched, flaming red, the rim of setting Jupiter, still silhouetted Porno, sprawled inside its high, electric-wired fences, and the flood of fading light brushed the town with beauty. The rows of tin shacks which housed its dives, the clustered, nondescript

hovels, the merchants' grim strongholds of steel—all merged into a glowing mirage, a scene far alien to the brooding swamp and savage jungle in whose breast it lay. Here and there several space-ships reared their sunset-gilded flanks, glittering high-lights in the final glorious burst of Jupiter-light....

The planet's rim vanished abruptly, and Porno returned to true character.

For a moment it appeared what it was: a blotched, disordered huddle, ugly, raw, fit companion of the swamp and jungle. Then beads of light appeared, some still, some winking, one crooked line of flaring illumination marking the Street of the Sailors, along which the notorious kantrans flourished, now ready for their nightly brood of men who sought forgetfulness in revelry. Soon, Carse knew, the faint man-noises he heard would grow into a broad fabric of sound, stitched across by shrieks and roars as the isuan and alkite flowed free. And all around the lone watcher in the sakari tree the night-monsters were crawling out in jungle and swamp on the dark routine of their lives as, in the town, two-legged creatures even lower in their degradation went abroad after the dope and liquor which gave them their vicious recreation.

The night flowed thicker around him.

From somewhere behind, the Hawk heard a suck of half-fluid mud as a giant body stretched in its sleeping place. A tree close to his suddenly fluttered with the unseen life it harbored. A hungry gantor raised its long deep bellow to the night, and another answered, and another.

It grew pitch black. Only a sprinkling of pin-points of light marked Porno to the eye. The sky beyond the town matched the sky to the rear. Jupiter's light now had fled the higher air levels. The time had come.

Cautiously Carse brushed the branches aside, rose upright and pressed the mitten switch over to repulsion. In instant response his giant's bulk lifted lightly. He sped upward, straight and fast; and at two thousand feet, still untouched by the sinking planet's rays, he brought himself to an approximate halt and peered below.

Port o' Porno lay spread out beneath, one thin line of light-pricks off which angled fainter lines, extending only a short distance and then dying widely off. There were perhaps two thousand men in the town —men from all the countries of the three planets inhabited by creatures that could be called human—and of these at least three quarters knew Hawk Carse as an enemy, because of his intolerance for their dope-trade. His approach to the house Number 574 had to

be swift, direct, unseen, unheard.

He was able to make it so. Pointing the direction rod, he winged forward until directly above an estimated spot, then dropped a thousand feet. A pause while he searched; another drop. He knew Kurgo's house well, but the scene was confusing from above, and the street the house was on was always dark at night.

He made it out at last. The squat two-storied structure, similar to other merchants' strongholds, seemed unlit and unwatched. Carse swung back the hinged mittens of the suit and slid his hands out ready for action. In his left he took his ray-gun; then, pressing the mitten-switch, he dropped straight, silent, swift, like the Hawk he now truly was.

A single window-port, high up, broke the smooth rear of Kurgo's house. It faced a silent alleyway. The steel shutters were closed, but a pull swung them noiselessly outward. For a brief moment Carse's bulging giant's figure of metal and fabric hung black against the shadowed window-port. The room he peered into was solid black. He heard no sound. Clumsily he thrust out and stepped in.

Silence. Inky nothingness—but the air was weighted with many things, and among them one which brought the short hairs on the

Hawk's neck prickling erect. A smell! It was not to be mistaken—a faint, but rank and fetid and altogether identifying smell—the body-smell of a Venusian!

For a moment Hawk Carse's breathing stopped. Metal clanked on metal for an instant as he moved from the window-port and became one with the darkness inside; then silence again, as his eyes trained into the vault and his hand held ready on the ray-gun. He waited.

Was it a trap? He had seen no guards watching the house; had sensed it deserted. But the steep shutters, unlocked, readily permitting entrance—and the smell! Even if not still there, a Venusian had been in the room, and a Venusian of Port o' Porno was an enemy. A Venusian.... There were only some sixty on the whole satellite, and, of these, fifty were the men of Lar Tantril. Lar Tantril, powerful henchman of Dr. Ku Sui, director of the Eurasian's drug trade on Satellite III. But that line of thought had to wait.

"I see you!" he whispered suddenly and sharply. "My gun's on you. Come forward!"

No answer; not the slightest sign or stir in the darkness. He breathed again.

Carse knew the arrangement of Kurgo's house. He was in his second-story sleeping-room. There was a door in the wall ahead, leading into the room Leithgow was accustomed to use on his visits, and there the papers should be. But first he would have to have light.

His ears pitched for any betraying sound, Carse moved heavily to his left until a wall arrested him. He felt along it, located the desk he sought for and scoured through it. His fingers found the flash he knew was there.

The darkness then was slit by a hard straight line of white. It shot over the room picking out overturned chairs, a bowl that had toppled to the floor, scattering its contents of ripe akalot fruit, a sleeping couch, its sheets and pillows awry, and—something human.

A half-clothed body lay sprawled beside the couch, its hands thrust clutching forward and its unseeing eyes still staring at the door whence had come the shots that had burnt out the left side of its chest. Dead. Three days dead. The murdered master of the house, Kurgo, lying where Ku Sui's robot-coolies had shot him down.

The Venusian-smell swept more strongly into his nostrils as the adventurer opened the door into Leithgow's room. No Venusian had ever been in those rooms before the abduction.

Carse's light danced over the room's confusion: a laboratory table overturned; apparatus spilled; several chains flung around, one splintered: mute signs of the struggle Eliot Leithgow had offered his kidnappers.

In a corner stood a metal chest. In the bottom drawer was the all-significant answer. Hawk Carse crossed the room and slid it open.

The papers were gone!

Methodically Carse hunted through every drawer and corner of the room, but he found no trace of them. Every article that would be of value to an ordinary thief was left; the one thing important to Dr. Ku Sui, the sheaf of papers, was missing.

The presence of the Venusian body-smell started an important train of thought in the Hawk's mind. It signified that the papers had been taken by henchmen of Ku Sui, which in turn signified that Ku Sui had survived the crashing of the dome and was alive and again aggressively dangerous. But was the Eurasian already on Satellite III? Was he already in personal possession of the papers?—perhaps conducting a search for Leithgow's laboratory?

Or did it mean that Dr. Ku had merely radioed instructions for his

Venusian henchmen to ransack the house, take whatever pertained to Leithgow, and wait for him?

Venusians.... There was only one logical man; and as Hawk Carse thought of him in that dark and silent house of tragedy, his right hand slowly rose to the bangs of hair over his forehead and began to stroke them....

His bangs were an unusual style for the period; they stamped him and attracted unwanted attention; but he would wear his hair in that fashion until he went down in death. For he had once been trapped—trapped neatly by five men, and maltreated: one, Judd the Kite, whose life had paid already for his part in the ugly business; two others whom he was not now concerned with; the fourth, Dr. Ku Sui; and the fifth—a Venusian....

That fifth, the Venusian, was Lar Tantril, now one of Ku Sal's most powerful henchmen, and director of his interplanetary drug traffic—Lar Tantril, who possessed an impregnable isuan ranch only twenty-five miles from Port o' Porno—Lar Tantril, who probably had directed the stealing of the papers from this room! The papers, if not already in Ku Sui's hands, should be at Tantril's ranch.

Carse's deduction was followed by a swift decision. He had to raid

Lar Tantril's ranch.

He knew the place fairly well. Once, even, he had attacked it, in his Star Devil, seeking to wipe out his debt against Tantril; but he had been driven off by the ranch's mighty offensive rays.

It was impregnable, Tantril was fond of boasting. Situated on the brink of the Great Briney, its other three sides were flanked by thick, swampy jungle, in which the isuan grew and was gathered by Tantril's Venusian workers. Ranch? More a fort than a ranch, with its electrified, steel-spiked fence; its three watch-towers, lookouts always posted there against the threat of hijackers or enemies; its powerful ray-batteries and miscellany of smaller weapons. A less vulnerable place for the keeping of Eliot Leithgow's papers could hardly have been found in all the frontiers of the solar system.

He, Carse, had raided it in a modern fighting space-ship, and failed. Now, with nothing but a space-suit and a ray-gun, he had to raid it again—and succeed!

The adventurer did not leave immediately. He thought it wise to make what preparations he could. His important weapon was the space-suit; therefore, he took it off and studied and inspected its several intricate mechanisms as well as he could in the carefully

guarded light of his flash.

It was motivated, he saw, by dual sets of gravity-plates, in separate space-tight compartments. One set was located in the extremely thick soles of the heavy boots; the other rested on the top of the helmet. He saw why this was. The gravity-plates for repulsion were those in the helmet; for attraction, those in the boot-soles. This kept the wearer of the suit always in an upright, head-up position.

The logical plan of attack had grown in Carse's mind: down and up! Down to the papers, then up and away before the men on the ranch knew what was happening: he could suppose that they, like all others on the satellite, had no knowledge of a self-propulsive space-suit. The success of his raid depended entirely on keeping the two gravity mechanisms intact. If they were destroyed, or failed to function, he would be locked to the ground in a prison of metal and fabric: clamped down, literally, by a terrific dead weight! The suit was extremely heavy, particularly the boots, and Carse learned that the wearer was able to walk in it only because a portion of the helmet's repulsive force was continually working to approximate a normal body gravity.

A chance to succeed—if the two vital points were kept intact! If they failed, he would have to slip out of the imprisoning suit and use his

quick wits and deadly ray-gun in clearing a path to Ban Wilson, his nearest friend, whose ranch, fourteen miles from Tantril's stronghold, was where Eliot Leithgow and Friday would be awaiting him.

It was characteristic of Hawk Carse that he never even considered calling on Wilson's resources of men and weapons to help him. A Hawk he was: wiry, fierce-clawed, bold against odds and danger, most capable and deadly when striking alone....

After scanning the whole project, Carse attended to other needs. He ate some of the akalot fruit spilled over the floor of the adjoining room; opened a can of water and drank deeply; limbered his muscles well; even rested for five minutes. Then he was ready to leave.

He soon was again in the cold space-suit, fastening on the helmet. He left the face-plate open. The left mitten he hinged back, so as to be able to grip the ray-gun in his bare hand. Then, a looming giant shadow in the darkness, he shuffled to the rear window-port.

Carse steadied himself on the sill. The night-bedlam from the Street of the Sailors, punctuated by far, hungry bellows from swamp monsters, sounded in his ears. Enemies, human and animal, ringed him in Kurgo's house: but up above lay a clean, cold highway, an open highway, stretching straight to the heart of the danger which

was his destination. He turned the mitten-switch over to quick repulsion and leaped up to the waiting heavens.

On the ground was a world of night: a mile up showed a great circle of black, one edge of which was marked by a faint, eery glow from further-setting Jupiter.

Save for that far-off spectral hint of the giant occulted planet, Hawk Carse sped in darkness. Through the open face-plate the night wind buffeted his emotionless, stone-set face: his suit whistled a song of speed as the gusts laced by it. Down and ahead his direction rod pointed, and with ever-gathering momentum he followed its leading finger. The lights of Porno dwindled to points; grew yet finer, then were gone. Several times a sparse cluster of other lights, lonely in the black tide of III's surface, ran beneath him, signaling a ranch. The last of these melted into the ink behind, and there was a period unrelieved by sign of man's presence below.

And then at last one bright solitary spot of light appeared, far ahead. It was a danger signal to the Hawk. He had to descend at once. From then on, speed had to be forsaken for caution. Watchful eyes were beneath that light, lying keen on the heavens; a whole intricate offense and defense system surrounded it. It was the central watch-beacon of Lar Tantril's ranch.

Carse swooped low.

He came into the night-world of the surface. No faint-lit horizon showed; there was only the darkness, and darker shadows peopling it. At the height of a mile there had been no signs of the satellite's native life, but at an elevation scarcely above the treetops the flying man was brought all too close to the reality of the denizens of the gloomy jungle below. Out of the black smother came clues to the life within it: sounds of monstrous bodies moving through the undergrowth and mud, recurring death-screams, howls and angry chatterings....

This below; there was more above. He was not the only living thing that soared in the night. Swift fleeting batlike shapes would appear from nowhere for one sharp second, would beset him one after another in an almost constant stream, thinking his comparatively clumsy, bloated bulk easy prey, and then be gone. He snapped shut his face-plate under their assault. Sometimes there came different, more powerful wings, and he would duck in mechanical reaction, sensing the wings sweep past, often feeling them as, with sharp pecks and quick thudding blows, they sought to stun him. But the suit was stout; the repulsed attackers could only follow a little, glaring at him with fire-green malevolent eyes, then leave to seek smaller prey.

The watch-beacon began to wink more often through the ranks of intervening trees as he neared the ranch. Carse was gliding so low that often branches raked and twisted him in his course. His low transit allowed one tree to loose great peril upon him.

The tree loomed a black giant in his path. Fifty feet away, he was swerving to wind around it when he noticed its dark upper branches a-tremble. He had only this for warning when, with chilling surprise, what appeared to be the entire top of the tree rose, severed itself completely from the rest and soared right out to meet him.

A shape from a nightmare, it slid over the adventurer. He saw two green-glowing saucer-sized eyes; heard the wings rattling bonily as they spread to full thirty feet; heard the monster's life-thirsty scream is it plunged. The stars were blotted out. It was upon him.

But even in the sudden confusion of the attack, Carse knew the creature for what it was: a full-grown specimen of the giant carnivorous lemak, a seldom-seen, dying species, too clumsy, too slow, too huge to survive. His ray-gun came around, but he was caught in a feathered maelstrom and knocked too violently around to use it. Without pause the lemak's claws raked his suit. Unable to rend the tough fabric, it resorted to another method. With a strength so enormous that it could overcome the force of the gravity-plates and

his forward momentum, the creature tossed him free. Dizzy, he hurtled upward. But he knew that the bird's purpose was to impale him on the long steely spike of its beak as he came twisting down.

The lemak poised below, snout and spear-like beak raised. But it waited in vain, for Carse did not come dropping down. A touch of the control switch and he stayed at the new level, collecting himself. The lemak, puzzled and angry, wheeled up to see what had become of the victim that did not descend, and found instead a searing needle of heat which burnt through its broad right wing. Then, screaming with pain and in a frenzy to escape, it went with a rush into the far darkness.

The Hawk dropped low again, hoping that his gun's quick flash had not been observed. He had not wished to wound the lemak mortally, for no matter how accurate his shot the monster would take long to die, and scream and thrash as it did so. One short spit of orange was preferable to a prolonged hullabaloo. But even that might have betrayed him....

With elaborate caution, he reconnoitered Lar Tantril's ranch.

From above, the ranch clearing was a pool of faint light contained in black leagues of jungle and the edge of the Great Briney. Slanting

shadows and the dark bulks of buildings that were unlit rendered the details vague, but under prolonged scrutiny the appointments of the ranch became visible.

The clearing was a circle some two hundred yards in diameter. Just inside the jungle wall was the first line of protection, a steel-barbed, twenty-foot-high fence, its strong corded links interwoven with electrified wires. Well within this fence stood five buildings, low, squat and one-storied, four of them forming a broken square around the central fifth. Two buildings were pierced by low rows of lighted windows, evidence that they were the barracks of the workers; two others, devoted to the processing of the isuan weed, were now dark and silent. The central building was smaller, with window-ports that were glowing eyes in the smooth metal walls. It was the dwelling of the master, Lar Tantril.

Close to the central building rose a hundred-foot tower, topped by the watch-beacon. At three equi-distant points around the encompassing fence, small, square platforms were held sixty feet aloft by mast-like triangular towers, up which foot-rungs led. And on each platform could be made out the figure of a Venusian guard.

Ceaselessly these guards turned and scanned the jungle, the heavens, the unbroken dark prairie of the lake, alert for anything of suspicion.

Lar Tantril had good reasons for maintaining a constant watch over his stronghold, and his guards' eyes were sharpened by knowledge of the severe payment laxness would bring. Close at hand in the platforms were knobs which, pressed, would ring a clanging alarm through all the buildings below; and each guard wore two ray-gun holsters.

Despite the guards and the ugly spikes of the fence, however, the ranch from above appeared peaceful, calm and harmless. No men were visible on its shadow-dappled clearing. Even the surrounding jungle, in the watch-beacon's shaded underside, might have been nothing but a stage set, were it not for the occasional signs of the life that crept unseen through it—a long, far-distant howl, a quickly receding crashing in the undergrowth, a thumping from some small animal.

The guards were used to this pattern of nocturnal sounds. It was only when, from a tree not thirty feet from one of the platforms, there came a sudden sharp shaking in the upper branches, that the Venusian on that platform deigned to grip his ray-gun and peer suspiciously. All he saw was a large bird that flapped out and winged across the clearing, mewing angrily.

The guard released his grip on the gun. A snake, probably, had

disturbed the bird. Or some of those devilish little crimson bansis, half insect, half crab....

Hawk Carse breathed again. He had been sure his position would be revealed when, drifting with almost imperceptible motion into the tree, the bird had pecked at him, then flapped away in alarm. A long, painfully cautious approach from tree to tree to the selected one had been necessary to the daring scheme of attack he had evolved.

He seemed to be safe. Through a fringe of leaves he saw the guard on the platform glancing elsewhere. Carse steadied himself, rose slightly and again scanned the ranch.

Yes, it looked harmless, but he knew that nothing could be further from the reality. Spaced around the inside edge of that spiky fence were small metal nozzles protruding a few inches from the ground; and on the turning of a control wheel, they would hurl forth a deadly orange swathe, fanning hundreds of feet into the sky. He had tasted their hot breath once when attacking the ranch in his Star Devil. Then there were the long-range projectors whose muzzles studded the central building. And the ray-guns of the tower guards.

These were dangers that he knew, for he had experienced them. What others the ranch held, he could not well surmise. But he saw

one significant thing that gave him pause and brought lines to his brow.

The ranch was expecting trouble. Over to one side of the clearing rested a great rounded object, on whose smooth hull gleamed coldly the light from the beacon—Lar Tantril's own personal space-ship—and alongside it a smaller, somewhat similar shape, the ranch's air-car! The space-ship signified that the Venusian chief was present; the air-car, that all his men were gathered in the barracks, and not, as was their custom, in Port o' Porno for a night of revelry!

All waiting—all gathered here—all ready! All grouped for a strong defense! Did it mean what it would appear to—that he, the Hawk, was expected?

He could not know. He could not know if a trap was lying prepared there against his coming. He could but go ahead, and find out.

The only plan of attack he could think of had grown in his mind. Down and up: that was the essence of it: but the details were difficult. He had worked them out as far as he could with typical thoroughness. He had to reach the heart of the fort lying before him: had to reach the central house, Lar Tantril's own. The precious papers would be there, if anywhere.

The Hawk was ready.

He gathered his muscles. His face was cold and hard, his eyes mists of gray. There was no least sign in the man that, in the next few all-deciding minutes, death would lick close to him.

He poised where he was precariously balanced. His ray-gun was in his bare left hand; his face-plate was locked partly open. He raised his fingers to the direction rod on the suit's breast, gazed straight at the guard on the nearest watch-platform and snapped the direction rod out, pointing it at that guard.

What happened then struck so fast, so unexpectedly, that it took only thirty seconds to plunge the quiet ranch into chaos.

The Hawk came like a thunder-bolt, using to its full power his only weapon, the space-suit. The sight of him might alone have been enough to strike terror. From the dark arms of the tree he hurtled, his bloated monstrous shape of metal and fabric dull in the glow of the watch-beacon, and crashed with a clang of metal into the platform he aimed at. Nothing there could withstand him. One second the guard on it was calmly gazing off into the sky: the next, like a nine-pin he was bowled over, to topple heels and head whirling to the ground sixty feet beneath. He lived, he kept consciousness, but he was

sorely injured; and he never saw the outlandish projectile that struck him, nor saw it streak to the second watch-platform, bowling its guard out and to the ground likewise, and then repeating at the third and last!

A crash; a pause; a crash; a pause; then a third crash, and the thing of metal had completed the circuit, and all three watch-platforms were scooted empty!

Then came confusion.

There had been screams, but now a crazed voice began crying out mechanically, over and over:

"Space-suit! Space-suit! Space-suit! Space-suit!"

It came from the second guard, who lay twisting on the ground. His tongue, by some trick of nervous disorganization, beat out those words like a voice-disk whose needle keeps skipping its groove—and the effect was macabre.

The central buildings disgorged a crowd of men. Shorty, wiry, thin-faced Venusians, each with skewer-blade strapped to his side and some with ray-guns out, they came scrambling into the open,

swearing and wondering. The second guard's insane repetitions directed most of them in his direction; and they piled in a crowd around him. They had no attention for what was happening behind, within the buildings they had emptied. That was what Hawk Carse had planned.

A voice of authority roared up over the general hubbub.

"Rantol! Guard! Rantol, you fool! What happened? What attacked you? Cut that crazy yelling! Answer me!—you, Rantol!"

"Space-suit! Space-suit! Space-suit! Space—"

"Lar Tantril!" A man with suspicious eyes caught the attention of the one who had spoken first. "Space-suit, he says! A flying space-suit! Only Ku Sui has space-suits that fly; or only Ku Sui had them, rather. You know what that must mean!"

He paused, peering at his lord. The coarse yellowy skin of Tantril's brow wrinkled with the thought, then his tusk-like Venusian teeth showed as his lips drew apart in speech.

"Yes!" Lar Tantril said. "It's Carse!"

And he ordered the now silent men around him:

"Circle my house, all of you, your guns ready. You, Esret"—to his second in command—"out gun and come with me."

Even as Lar Tantril spoke, a giant shape was passing clumsily through the kitchen of his house. Carse had entered from the rear, unseen. With gun in hand and eyes sharp he crossed the deserted kitchen with its foul odors of Venusian cookery. Quickly, his metal-shod feet creating an unavoidable racket, he was through a connecting door and into the well-furnished dining room. All was brightly lit; he could easily have been seen through the window-ports rimming each wall; but he counted on the confusion outside to keep the Venusians engaged for several minutes more.

Then he went shuffling into the front room of the house, and saw at once the most likely place.

It was in one corner—a large flat desk, and by it the broad panel of a radio. Scattered over the desk were a number of papers. In seconds Carse was bending over them, scanning and discarding with eyes and hands.

Reports of various quantities of isuan ... orders for stores ... a list that seemed an inventory of weapons—and then the top page of a sheaf covered with familiar, neat, small writing. Yes!

Plans and calculations dealing with a laboratory! And, down in the margin of the first page, the revealing, all-important figure—5,576.34!

He had them—and before Ku Sui! Now, only to get away; out the front door, and up—up from this trap he was in—up into clean and empty space, and then to Leithgow and Friday at Ban Wilson's!

But, as the Hawk turned to go, his eye took in a little slip on the desk, a radio memo, with the name of Ku Sui at its top. Almost without volition he glanced over it, hoping to discover useful information about Ku Sui's asteroid—and with the passing of those few extra seconds his chance for escaping out the door passed too.

Carse's back was partly toward the front door when a voice, hard and deadly, spoke from it:

"Your hands up!"

The adventurer's nerves twanged; he wheeled; and even as he did so another voice bit out from the rear door:

"Yes, up! One move and you're dead!"

And Hawk Carse found himself caught between ray-guns held

unswervingly on his body by a man at each door. He was not fool enough to try to shoot, even though his own gun was in his hand; his best speed would be slow-motion in the hampering space-suit. He was fairly caught—because for a few precious seconds he had let his mind slip from the all-important matter of escaping.

At a shout from someone, both doors filled with men, and thin faces appeared at the window-ports. Their ray-guns made an impregnable fence around the netted Hawk.

And then a well-remembered voice, harsh as the man from whom it came, cut through the room.

"Apparently you're caught, Captain Carse!"

The cold gray eyes narrowed, scanned the room, the blocked doors, the barricade of guns held by the grim men at doorways and window-ports.

"Yes," Hawk Carse murmured. "Apparently I am."

Lar Tantril, the Venusian chief, smiled. He was tall for one of his race, even taller than the prisoner he faced. Clad in tight-fitting, iron-gray mesh, he had the characteristic wiry body, thin legs and arms of

his kind. Spiky short-cropped hair grew like steel slivers from the narrow dome of his long hatchet head, and the taut-stretched skin of his face was burned a deep hard brown. He looked what he was: a bold and unscrupulous leader of his men.

"The gun in your belt," he said, "—drop it. Right on the floor. There —better. I like you not with a gun near your hand, Carse."

The Hawk regarded him frigidly.

"And now what?" he asked.

Lar Tantril continued smiling. His ray-gun did not move for an instant from the line it held on the metal and fabric giant. He said at a tangent, quite pleasantly:

"Think fast, Captain Carse—think fast! Isn't that one of Dr. Ku's new suits?—a little space-ship all your own? Why not plan a sudden sweep for that door in an attempt to crash through my men and get free up in the air—eh?"

"Why not?" said the Hawk.

"It might be possible," Tantril continued, "with your luck. Unless something went wrong with your helmet gravity-plates."

At this the Venusian's gun moved. Deliberately it came up and aimed at the crown of the adventurer's helmet. Tantril squeezed the trigger.

Spang!

A pencil-thin streak of orange stabbed between Venusian and Earthling; sparks hissed out where it struck the tip of the helmet; and for an instant life and strength seemed to leave the grotesquely clad figure. Carse slumped down under a quick crushing weight. Weight! It bent him low, and it was only with a great effort that he was able to straighten again. For the suit's full load of metal and fabric was upon him now, its enormous boots binding him to the ground since their weight was unrelieved by the partial lift of the helmet plates. An inch-wide, black-rimmed hole in the mechanism above the helmet told what had happened.

Lar Tantril chortled, and his men, most of them only half comprehending what he had done, echoed him.

"But even yet you've got a chance," the Venusian went on. "There's another set of plates in the boot-soles, for attraction. If you got a chance to stand on your head outside, you'd be gone! So—"

This time he lowered the gun, and carefully, accurately, he sent two

spitting streams of orange through the soles of the great boots.

The danger Carse had feared had come to pass. His one weapon had been destroyed. He was worse than helpless; he was in a cumbersome prison, all power of quick movement gone. He was a paralyzed giant, tied to the soil, the ways of the air hopelessly closed. The slightest step would cost great effort.

"You have protected yourself well, Lar Tantril," he said slowly.

Now Tantril laughed deeply and unrestrainedly. "Yes, and by Mother Venus," he cried, "it's good to see you this way, Carse, unarmed and in my power!" He turned to his circle of men and said: "Poor Hawk! Can't fly any more! I've put him in a cage! So thoughtful of him to bring his cage along with him so I could trap him inside it! His own cage!" He guffawed, shaking, and the others laughed loud.

Through it all Hawk Carse stood motionless, his face cold and graven, his slender body bent under the burden of the dead suit. He still held in his right hand, limp by his side, the sheaf of papers and their all-important figure—and the thumb and forefinger of his hand were moving, so slowly as to be hardly noticeable, in what seemed to be a lone sign of nervous tension.

"You know, Carse," Tantril observed after his laugh, "I've been half expecting you, though I don't see how you knew I was the one who took those papers you're holding. Dr. Ku radioed me, you see. I think you were reading his message at the time I entered. Did you finish it?"

"No," said the Hawk.

"You'll find it interesting. Let me read it to you." And Tantril took up the memo.

"From Ku Sui to Lar Tantril: Search House No. 574 in Port o' Porno closely for anything pertinent to Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow or giving clue to his whereabouts. Keep what you obtain for me; I will come to your ranch in five days. Watch for Hawk Carse, Eliot Leithgow and a Negro, arriving from space at Satellite III in self-propulsive space-suits." There followed some details concerning the suits' mechanism; then: "Carse caused me certain trouble and came near hurting my major inventions. I want him badly."

At this the adventurer's face tightened; his gray eyes went frosty. All he and Leithgow had deduced, then, was true. Dr. Ku had survived the crashing of the asteroid's dome. The mechanisms had also survived—and certainly the coordinated brains—the brains he,

Hawk Carse, had promised to destroy! Now trapped, it seemed that promise could never be fulfilled....

Yet even through this torturing thought of a promise unkept, the Hawk's thumb and forefinger moved in their slight grinding motion on the first sheet of the sheaf of papers....

Lar Tantril reached out his hand for the sheaf. "So, obeying Dr. Ku's orders, I had the house searched and got these papers. They, must be valuable, Carse, since you wanted them so badly. Ku Sui will be pleased. Hand them over."

With but the barest flick of gray eyes downward. Hawk Carse gave the sheaf to Tantril.

But his brief glance at the top-most sheet told him all he wanted to know. Gradually, methodically, the motion of thumb and forefinger had totally effaced the revealing figure 5,576.34, the one clue to the location of Leithgow's laboratory. Enough! What he had set out to do was finished. The chief task was achieved!

"And now, perhaps," Lar Tantril chuckled, "a little entertainment."

His men pricked up their ears. This language was more

understandable. Entertainment meant playing with the prisoner—torture. And alkite, probably, and isuan. A night of revelry!

But Hawk Carse smiled thinly at this.

"Entertainment, Tantril?" his cold voice said. He paused, and then added slowly: "What a fool you are!"

Lar Tantril was not annoyed by the words. He only laughed and slapped his thigh.

"Yes?" he mocked. "Truly, Captain Carse, you must be frightened, to try and anger me so I'll shoot! Do you fear a skewer-blade so much? We would leave most of you for Ku Sui!"

Carse shook his head. "No, Lar Tantril, I don't want you to shoot me. I'm telling you you're a fool—because you think me one."

With a wave of his hands the Venusian protested: "No, no, not at all. You're infernally clever, Carse. I'll always be the first to admit it."

"Then do you think I'd attack your ranch alone?"

"You'd like me to believe you have friends hidden somewhere?" Tantril asked, smiling tolerantly.

Carse's voice came back curtly. "Believe what you like, but learn this: It's your boast that your ranch is impregnable, guarded on every side and from every angle. I'm telling you it's not. Its vulnerable. It's wide open to one way of attack and my friends and I know it well."

For a second the Venusian's assurance wavered.

"Vulnerable?" he said. "Open to attack? You're just stalling!"

Whip-like words cut through.

"Wait and see. Wait till the ranch is stormed and wiped out. Wait twenty minutes! Only twenty!"

Hawk Carse was always listened to when he spoke in such manner. Lar Tantril stared at the hard gray eyes boring into his.

"Why do you tell me this?" he asked. Then, with a smile: "Why not wait until my ranch is wiped out, as you say?" His smile broadened. "Until these hidden friends attack?"

"Simply because I must insure my living. Nothing my friends could do would prevent your having plenty of time to kill me before you yourselves were destroyed. I think, under the circumstances, you would kill me. And I must go free. I have made a promise. A very

important promise. I must be free to carry it out."

"Just what are you aiming at?"

"I'm offering," said the Hawk, "to show you where your fort is vulnerable—in time for you to protect it. I'll do this if you'll let me go free. You need not release me till afterwards."

Lar Tantril's mouth fell half open at this surprising turn. He was unquestionably taken aback. But he snapped his lips shut and considered the offer. A trick? Carse was famed for them. A trap? But how? He scanned his men. Fifty to one; fifty ray-guns on an unarmed man helpless in a hampering prison of metal and fabric. If a trap, Carse could not possibly escape death. But yet....

Tantril walked over to his man Esret, and, stepping apart, they conferred in whispers.

"Is he trying to trick us?" the chief asked.

"I don't see how he can hope to. He can hardly move in that suit. It ties him down. We could keep tight guard upon him. He couldn't possibly get away. And at the slightest sign of something shady—"

"Yes; but you know him."

"What he says is sensible. Naturally he wants to live. He knows we'll shoot him if he tries to trick us, and he knows we'll do it if we're attacked! We'll of course leave men at all defensive stations. If there is a weakness here, if the ranch is vulnerable—we should learn what it is. It'll cost us nothing. We can't lose, and we might be saving everything. Of course we won't let him go afterwards."

Tantril considered a moment longer, then said:

"Yes, I think you are right."

He turned back to the waiting Carse.

"Agreed," he said. "Show this vulnerable point to us and you'll be released. But no false moves! One sign of treachery and you're dead!"

The Hawk's strong-cut face showed no change. It was only inwardly that he smiled.

Their very manner of accompanying him showed their respect for the slender adventurer.

He had no gun; he was stooped by the unrelieved weight of the massive helmet, the suit itself and the chunky blocks of metal which

were the boots; his every dragging step was that of a man shackled by chains—but he was Hawk Carse! And so, as he shuffled out through the front door of the house and lumbered with painful effort across the clearing, he was surrounded by a glitter of ray-guns held by the close-pressing circle of men. Tantril's own gun kept steady on his broad fabric-clad back, and of its proximity he kept reminding Carse.

New guards were already on watch on each of the three watch-platforms, their eyes sweeping around the clearing and the jungle and the dark stretch of the lake, and often returning to the crowd which marked the stumbling giant's progress below. Each point of defense was manned. In the ranch's central control room, a steel-sheathed cubby in the basement of Tantril's house, men stood watchful, their hands ready at the wheels and levers which commanded the ranch's ray-batteries, their eyes on the vision-screen which gave to this unseen heart of the place a panoramic view of what was transpiring above. And all waited on what the grotesque, bloated figure they watched might reveal.

Watch—watch—watch. A hundred eyes, below, above, beside the Hawk, were centered and alert on each move of his clumsy progress. The barrels of two-score ray-guns transfixed him. Under such guard he arrived at the ranch's fence where it approached the Great Briney.

"Open the gate," said the Hawk curtly. "It's down there."

He pointed to where the lake's pebbled beach shelved downward to the tiny murmurous waves, a ten-foot stretch of ghostly white between the guarding fence and the water.

"Down there?" repeated Tantril slowly. "Down to the lake?"

"Yes!" Carse snapped irritably. "Well, will you open the gate? I'm very tired: I can't bear this suit much longer."

Lar Tantril conferred uneasily with Esret, while his men cast shivering glances out over the dark wind-rippled plain of the lake. But no enemy showed there. The beach was clear for fifty yards on each side.

"By Iapetus!" the adventurer complained harshly, "are you children, to be afraid of the dark? Tantril, put your gun into me, and shoot if I try anything suspicious! Open the gate!"

Finally the lock was unfastened and the gate swung out. Tantril stationed a man there, ready to close and lock it in case of need, and then, Hawk Carse, still surrounded by the alert Venusians, shuffled down to the edge of the water.

Over the Great Briney was silence. No shape broke its calm. The air held only the nervous whispers of the crowd and the scrape and crunch of the lone Earthling's dragging boots as they made wide furrows in the hard pebbly soil of the beach.

The men had fallen back a little, and now were a half circle around him down to the water's brink. The watch-beacon's light caught them full there, and threw great blots of shadows lakeward from them. Their ray-guns were gripped tighter as their shifty eyes darted from his huge bulk to the water ahead, and back. Doubt and fear swayed them all.

The Hawk wasted no time, but stepped out to knee-high level on the sharply shelving bottom. At this Tantril objected.

"Hold, Carse!" he roared. "You play for time, I think! Where is this point of attack?"

The bloated figure did not answer him, but bent over as if searching for something under the tiny waves which now were slapping his thigh. He reached one hand down and probed around with it, apparently feeling. The eyes watching him were wide and fear-fascinated.

"Here—or no," the Hawk muttered to himself, though a dozen could hear him. "A little farther, I think.... Here—but no, I forgot: the tide has come in. A little farther...." He stopped suddenly and straightened, turned to the Venusian chief. "Don't forget. Lar Tantril, you have promised I can go free!"

Then he resumed his search of the bottom, the black surface of water up to his waist. Again the fearful Venusian leader roared an objection:

"You're tricking us. Carse, you little devil—"

"Oh, don't be an ass!" Carse snapped back. "As if I could get away—your ray-guns on me!"

Another half minute passed; a few more short steps were taken. A muttered oath came from one of the wet, uncomfortable men in the grip of fear. Several there were on the brink of turning in, a panicky dash for the safety of the enclosure behind, the warm buildings, guarded by ray-batteries—and yet an awful fascination held them. What metallic horror of the deeps was being exposed?

"Just a second, now," the Hawk was murmuring. "You'll all see.... Somewhere ... right ... here ... somewhere...."

He held them taut, expectant. The water licked around the waist of his suit. One more slow step; one more yet.

"Here!" he cried triumphantly, and clicked his face-plate closed. And the men who stared, faces pale, hearts pounding, ray-guns at the ready, saw him no longer. The water had closed over that shiny metal helmet. Only a mocking ripple was left.

Hawk Carse was gone!

Gone!—and laughing to himself.

The space-suit, his heavy prison of metal and fabric, would protect him from water as well as from space! It offered his golden—his only—opportunity. It had been pierced by Tantril's shots, back in the house, but only the gravity-plate compartments, which were sealed and separate. It was still—after he had closed the mittens—air-tight, an effective little submarine in the dark waters of the Great Briney!

So Carse followed his black course over the lake-bottom laughing and laughing. In his mind he could see what he had left behind: the men, shivering there in the water for an instant, completely befogged, and perhaps firing one or two shots at where he had disappeared; then turning and breaking back in a grand rush for the

fence and safety. And the ray-batteries, all manned and centered on the lake; Tantril, in a very fury of rage, but fearful, preparing for a siege; preparing for anything that might loom suddenly from the water! And all of them wondering what lay beneath its calm surface; what he, Hawk Carse, had gone to join!

For days they would stare fearfully at the lake, while the tides rolled steadily in and out; for days the ray-batteries would be held ready, and none would venture outside the fence. It might take hours for the realization of his trick to sink in—but they still would not be sure of anything, and would have to keep vigilant against the still-possible attack.

Fourteen miles up the coast was Ban Wilson's ranch, and Eliot Leithgow and Friday waiting there. He would rest for a while, and then the three of them would go home to the laboratory—whose location was now still secret. And then, later, there was his promise to the coordinated brains to be kept....

But that was in the future. For the present, he went his dark, watery way, laughing. Laughing and laughing again....

Yes, John Sewell, first of all Hawk Carse's traits was his resourcefulness!

June 1932

143 Vulcan’s Workshop by Harl Vincent

Mighty Luke Fenton swaggers defiantly in Vulcan's Workshop, most frightful of Martian prisons.

Aproximate word count: 9,300

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Savagely cursing, Luke Fenton reeled backward from the porthole, his great hairy paws clapped over his eyes. No one had warned him, and he did not know that total blindness might result from gazing too earnestly into the sun's unscreened flaming orb, especially with that body not more than twenty million miles distant in space.

He did not know, in fact, that the ethership was that close: Luke had Mighty Luke Fenton swaggers defiantly in Vulcan's Workshop, most frightful of Martian prisons. not the faintest notion of the vast distances of the universe or of the absence of air in space which permitted the full intensity of the dazzling rays to strike into his optics unfiltered save by the thick but clear glass which covered the

port. He knew only that the sun, evidently very near, was many times its usual size and of infinitely greater brilliance. And he was painfully aware of the fact that the fantastically enlarged and blazing body had seared his eyeballs and caused the floating black spots which now completely obscured his vision.

Stumbling in his blindness, he fell across the hard cot that was the sole article of furniture in the cell he had occupied for more than two weeks. Lying there half dazed and with splitting head, he cursed the guard who had opened the inner cover of the port; cursed anew the fish-eyed Martian judge who had sentenced him to a term in Vulcan's Workshop.

Several of Luke's thirty-eight years had been spent in jails and sundry other penal institutions devised by Earthman and Martian for the punishment of offenders against the laws of organized society. And yet they had failed to break his defiant spirit or to convince him of the infallibility of his creed that might makes right. Nor had they taken from him the gorillalike strength that was in his broad squat body, the magnificent brute lustihood that made him a terror to police and citizen alike. Instead, the many periods of incarceration had only served to increase his hatred of mankind and his contempt of the forces of law and order. Especially was he contemptuous of the book-learning that gave the authorities their power.

As the pain back of his eyes abated, Luke could see dimly the shaft of light that slanted down from the porthole to the bare steel floor. His sight was returning, yet he lay there still, growling in his throat, his mind occupied with thoughts of his checkered past.

Steel-worker, mechanic, roustabout, he had worked in most of the populous cities of Earth and had managed to get into serious trouble wherever he went. It was his boast that he had never killed a man except in fair fight. And yet, at thirty, finding himself wanted by the police of a half dozen cities of Earth, he had signed up in the black gang of a tramp ethership bound for Mars, knowing he would never return and caring not at all.

At first, he had been riotously happy in the changed life on the new world. There had been plenty of soul-satisfying brawls and plenty of chulco, the fiery Martian distillate. On his many and frequent jobs there were excellent opportunities to rebel against authority, and he had fomented numerous mutinies in which he was always victorious but which usually landed him in one of the malodorous Martian jails for a more or less extended stay.

Then had come that final fracas in the Copau foundry on the bank of Canal Pyramus. Overly optimistic, Luke's new boss had struck out at the chunky, red-headed Earthman during an inconsequential

argument and had promptly measured his length in a sand pile as a hamlike fist crashed home in return. They had picked up the foreman and taken him to the infirmary where it was found that his skull was fractured and that he had little chance for life. There were the red police after that, and Luke, single-handed, trounced four of them so soundly and thoroughly that someone sent in a riot call. It had taken a dozen of the reserves to club him into submission at the last.

That was too much for Martian justice. In pronouncing sentence the judge had termed Luke an incurably vicious character and a menace to society such as the planet had never harbored. And Luke, his head swathed in bandages from which his wiry red hair bristled like the comb of a gamecock, had grinned evilly and snarled his defiance.

And so they were taking him to the dread prison camp known as Vulcan's Workshop, a mysterious place of horror and hardship from which no convict had ever returned. Vaguely Luke knew that it was located on still another world, away off somewhere in the heavens. He had seen the lips of men go white when they were condemned to its reputed torture, had heard them plead for death in preference. Yet its terrors had not awed him; they did not awe him now. He had beaten the law before; he'd beat it again—even in Vulcan's Workshop.

A key rattled in the lock and Luke Fenton leaped to his feet, facing the barred door with feet spread wide and with his massive shoulders hunched expectantly. He could see now, with much blinking and watering of his still aching eyes, and he looked out with sneering disapproval at the three guards in the corridor. They were afraid of him, singly, these Martian cops, even though armed with the deadly dart guns and with shot-loaded billies. So afraid, Luke chuckled inwardly, that they had kept him from the other prisoners throughout the trip, kept him in solitary confinement.

The door was opening and it came to Luke that the ethership was strangely and hollowly silent. The rocket tubes were stilled, that was it, and even the motors that drove the great ventilating fans had been stopped. They had arrived.

No time now to start anything. He would have to submit tamely to whatever they might mete out to him in the way of punishment—until he got the lay of the land. It would require some time to study things out and to plan. But plan he would, and act; they'd never hold him here until he died of whatever it was that killed men quickly in Vulcan's Workshop. Not Luke Fenton.

Sullenly docile, he was prodded forward to the air-lock. A draft of hot fetid air swept through the corridor, carrying with it the

forewarning of unspeakable things to come. And a shriek of mortal terror wafted in from outside by the stinking breeze, told of some poor devil already demoralized. The thick muscles of Luke's biceps tightened to hard knots under his black prison jacket.

They were outside then and Luke essayed a deep breath, a breath that was chokingly acrid in his throat.

"Waugh!" he coughed, and spat. One of the guards laughed.

Any foul epithet that might have formed on Fenton's lips was forgotten in the sight that met his eyes. A barren and rugged terrain stretched out from the landing stage, a land utterly desolate of vegetation and incapable of supporting life. Pockmarked with craters and seamed with yawning fissures from which dense vapors curled, it was seemingly devoid of habitation. And the scene was visible only in the lurid half light of flame-shot mists that hung low over all. In the all too near distance, awesomely vast and ruddy columns of fire rose and fell with monotonous regularity. For the first time, Luke experienced something of the superstitious fear exhibited by even the most hardened criminals when faced with a term at Vulcan's Workshop. That term, to them, meant horror and misery, torture and swift death. And he, too, was ready to believe it now.

He was prodded down an incline that led from the landing stage to the rocks below. The guards from the ethership, he saw, remained behind on the platform and there were new guards awaiting him below. Husky fellows, these were, in strange bulky clothing and armed with the highest powered dart guns. The other prisoners from the vessel were already down there, a huddled and frightened mass —a squashed pile, almost—silent now and watchful of their jailers.

"

Come on, show some speed, tough guy!" a guard yelled from the foot of the runway. "Think this is a reception?"

Another of the guards guffawed hoarsely, and Luke choked back the blasting retort that rose in his throat. Plenty of time yet before he'd be ready to make things hot for those birds.

The runway, he observed, was a strip of yielding metal that glowed faintly with an unnatural greenish light. He was nearing its lower end when the siren of the ethership shrieked and he heard the clang of the outer door of its air-lock as it swung to its seat.

Then he stepped out to the smooth stone slab on which the nearest of the guards was standing. Immediately it was as if a tremendous

weight was flung upon him, bearing him down until his knees buckled beneath him. He was rooted to the spot by an enormous force which dragged at his vitals and weighted his limbs to leaden uselessness. With a mighty effort he raised his head to look up into the grinning yellow face of the guard, and his thick neck muscles were taut gnarled ridges under the strain.

"Damn your hide!" he howled. "It's a trick. I'll break you in two for this, you slob!"

His huge biceps tensed and his fists came up. But they came up slowly and ineffectually, ponderous things he could scarcely lift. A great roaring of rocket tubes was in his ears then, and the ethership screamed off through the red mists while he dabbed futilely at the leering yellow face. And vile curses rasped from between his set teeth at the laughter of the guards.

Luke Fenton never had taken the trouble to learn or he would have known something about this planet Vulcan on which he was a prisoner. As far back as 1859, by Earth chronology, its existence within the orbit of Mercury had been reported by one Lescarbault, a French physician. But other astronomers had failed to confirm, in fact had ridiculed his discovery, and it was not until some years after the establishing of interplanetary travel in the first decade of the

twenty-first century that the body was definitely located.

Vulcan, the smallest and innermost of the planets, circles the sun with great rapidity at a mean distance of twenty million miles. Its periods of rotation and revolution are equal, so that it always presents the same face toward the solar system's great center of heat and light—for which reason one side is terrifically hot and the other, that facing into outer space, unbearably cold.

There is no life native to the body, and mankind has found it possible to exist only in the narrow belt immediately on the dark side of the terminator, the line of demarcation between night and day. Here there are the dense vapors, illuminated perpetually by refracted light from the daylight side and by the internal fires of the planet itself, fires which erupt at regular intervals through many fissures and craters. And it is only under greatest hardship that man can exist even here, what with the noxious gases and the extremes of heat and cold to which his body it subjected. There is no natural source of water or of food, so these essentials must of necessity be conveyed from Mars or Earth by ethership.

In spite of all this, man has persisted in establishing himself in the vapor belt of Vulcan for the sake of wresting from the rocky soil its vast deposits of rare ores, and a great number of mining operations

are continually in progress. All of these are commercial projects and are worked by adventurous seekers of fortune, save only the penal colony known as Vulcan's Workshop: But no Terrestrial or Martian, however greedy for riches, would dare to remain longer than two lunar months, which is the average time limit of human endurance. Only the condemned remain, and these remain to die.

Though hardly more than two hundred miles in diameter, Vulcan is possessed of a surface gravity almost six times greater than that on Earth. This is due to the planet's core of neutronium, the densest known substance of the universe, a little understood concentration of matter whose atoms comprise only nuclei from which all negative electrons have been stripped by some stupendous cataclysm of nature.

And so it was that Luke Fenton, uninsulated from the tremendous gravity pull when he stepped from the charged metal of the runway, was struggling against his own bodily weight, suddenly increased to more than twelve hundred pounds.

Doggedly, the Earthman pitted his mighty sinews against the force he could not understand. Here was an intangible thing, yet it was a power that challenged his own brute strength, and he exerted himself to the limit in accepting the challenge. With legs spread wide and

with sweat oozing from every pore, he heaved himself erect, straightening knees and spine and standing there firmly on his two feet.

"He's carrying it!" came the husky whisper of a guard. "This bird is tough."

Craftily, Luke bared his white, even teeth in a good-humored grin. He had seen what they were doing with the other prisoners, fitting them one by one with the strange bulky breeches—garments that gave forth a faint greenish glow like that of the runway. And each of the men, so attired, was enabled somehow to get to his feet easily and walk about as if unhampered by the force which had flattened him to the rocks and which still held Luke's straining body in its grip.

The yellow-skinned guard, a Terrestrial of Asiatic origin, was solemnly engaged now in lacing the slitted legs of a similar garment to Luke's rigid nether limbs. Yet there was no cessation of that awful weight when the thing was done. The guard stepped back and leered wickedly. He had slung his dart gun over his shoulder and now produced a slender black tube which he leveled at Luke's midsection.

"You walk now, Fenton," he snarled.

The Earthman rose upward as if he would leave the ground. Two or three inches seemed added to his stature, and his muscles trembled from the sudden release. He stepped a pace forward.

Then a light beam flashed forth from the black tube and Luke sagged down with an astonished oath squeezed grunting from his throat. The swift renewal of the inexplicable force had caught him off balance and he dropped ignominiously to his knees.

"Ha!" gloated the Oriental. "It is thus we control the tough ones, Fenton. I've given you a warning; now get up—and march!"

On the last word came blessed release and the return of Luke's strength. He marched, meekly falling in with the file of new prisoners. He even smiled through the red stubble of his beard. But black hatred was in his heart, and renewed determination that he'd get away from this place somehow—alive.

Time would show him the way.

Fenton's slow but retentive mind absorbed many things during the succeeding few days. There was neither day nor night in this hellish place—only the flame-lit mists; but they had clocks like those of Earth, and you worked fourteen hours on the slope or in the smelter

and had the rest of each so-called day of twenty-four hours in which to eat and sleep.

The food was coarse, but there was plenty of it. There was only water to drink, lukewarm stinking stuff, doled out sparingly in rusty tin cups. And, during the sleeping periods, you were required to take off the gravity-insulated garments and sleep in huts with insulated floor coverings. The charged floor, of course, allowed you to sleep without being smashed flat on the uncomfortable cots. But they had you safe in these sleeping huts; they took away your clothes and you couldn't step out of the door without taking on the weight of a half a dozen men.

The Workshop itself was in a vast excavation from whose slopes a silvery-veined ore was being removed. There were the blast furnace and reduction plant on the one side and the convicts' huts and more pretentious houses of the guards on the other. And the choking mists, and the lurid flame behind. The stifling heat, Luke learned, too, that every ninth day, with what they called the libration of Vulcan, there came an equal period of raw and biting cold to replace the heat. As bad or worse, that would be.

There were perhaps three hundred prisoners here, Luke guessed, and a guard allotted to each squad of fifteen men. Not many guards for

so large a number of convicts—but enough. The weird gravity of Vulcan had taken care of that, and the flashlight things they always carried—queer lights that would instantly neutralize the insulating property of his clothing and render a man helpless.

Luke was working high up on the slope, with rock drill and pick. The group to which he had been assigned was composed entirely of new prisoners, mostly white men, but with a few blacks and one coppery-skinned drylander of Mars. Whimpering, hopeless creatures, all of them; not worth his notice. All day he labored without speaking to any of them and the quantities of ore he removed gave mute evidence of his tireless vigor. If Kulan, the giant Martian guard, took any notice of it he gave no sign.

During the sleeping period, which they persisted in calling night, things were different. No guards were needed in the escape-proof huts and there was some surreptitious fraternizing among the prisoners. As long as they made no undue noise, they were left to their own devices. But for the most part they went to sleep heavily and wordlessly as soon as they flung into their bunks. A broken-spirited lot.

Luke saw men suffering from some horrible malady that made them cough and scream and bleed from nose and mouth. Old-timers, these

were, men who had survived for as many as three of four months. He saw them, in their agony, beg the guards for merciful death; heard the brutal laughter of their tormentors. Only when they were no longer able to rise from their bunks were they put out of their misery by one of the singing darts from the senior guard's gun.

Novak had it, this malady known as X.C.—Novak, the scar-faced, yellow-fanged rat who occupied the bunk beneath Luke's and who talked to him in hoarse whispers long after the others had gone to sleep. It was from Novak that Luke was learning, and the knowledge he gained by listening to the doomed man served only to intensify the flame of hate that smoldered deep in his barrel-like chest.

After three red-lit days of grueling labor and three similarly red-lit nights of listening to Novak, he reached the grudging conclusion that escape from this place was impossible. With this conviction there came to him a deeper bitterness and the resolve that he, Luke Fenton, would have his revenge before he went the way of the rest.

Perhaps the law had him for keeps this time—it certainly seemed so; but he'd leave his mark on its representatives yet.

At inspection preceding the next labor period, Luke began doing things.

The prisoners were lined up and the guards were parading the line, reassigning them to new working squads, which were shifted and rearranged every third day. Kulan, the big Martian, selected Luke.

"You, Fenton," he snapped, "ten paces forward."

Luke grinned but made no move.

Amazed, the guard stepped closer. "You heard me!" he roared. "I'm keepin' you in my squad, tough guy."

A ripple of astonished comment ran along the line and the other guards bellowed for silence. Kulan fingered the black tube of his neutro-beam and his broad face was chalky white.

Luke advanced two paces, still grinning. And he looked up sneeringly into the grim face that was a foot above his own.

"That's right, you big ape," he grated, "you ain't man enough to fight the way men fight. Gotta use dart guns, or gravity."

It was sheer baiting of the big Martian. Fenton was shrewd and he knew the fellow's kind, quick to resent insult and prouder of their physical size and prowess than of any other possession. He saw the flush that rose to replace the guard's pallor, saw the huge lithe body

go tense. Laughing derisively, he completed his ten paces with leisurely aplomb.

Speechless with rage, Kulan stood rigid. Furtive boos and a few hoarse cheers came from somewhere in the long line of convicts, and Luke saw several men flattened to the ground by swift darting neutro-beams.

And then the head guard came running from the small bastion. "What the hell?" he demanded of Kulan. "Any trouble?"

Kulan saluted, and his eyes were narrow slits. "No sir," he returned stiffly, "no trouble."

Eyeing Luke suspiciously, the senior guard grunted, then moved on along the line. And the work of reallotting squads went on.

It was exactly as Fenton had expected. This Kulan, a head over him in stature and broad in proportion, was sure in his mind that he could handle the red-headed Earthman without resort to weapons. And the taunt as to his physical ability had struck home. In some way that guard would maneuver matters so the encounter could come about. Besides, he would endeavor to keep Luke in his squad where he would be able to drive him to the utmost. The guards, Novak had

said, were on the job only a month when they were replaced by fresh recruits—and their pay was based on the productivity of the squads they commanded. Kulan had seen that the Earthman was a real sapper; worth three of the others. And he'd try to keep it so.

That working period was a highly gratifying one to Luke. With the rankling hatred concentrated and directed at Kulan, he was positively gleeful. And yet he was content to bide his time. He swung his pick and wielded his rock drill with joyful abandon, so that three men were kept busy loading the ore he removed.

Kulan, he saw with satisfaction, was sullen and watchful. But no word passed between the two. And the Earthman knew he had planted a seed that was bound to sprout and grow until it bore fruit.

At the midday mess it happened. The shifting of men had brought Novak in the same squad with Luke and they came in to sit at the long table together. Kulan eyed them narrowly from the head of the board.

"Say," Novak whispered, "yuh got under Kuley's skin, know it? He'll run yuh ragged."

"Yes?" Luke looked up at the guard, saw he was scowling darkly in

their direction, and grinned evilly. "I'll run him, you mean. I'll bust him in two if I get my hands on him."

"Yuh ain't got a chance, I tell yuh. I seen a guy once, take a poke at a guard, and what they done to him was plenty. They——"

With that, the wasted body of Novak bent double and he dropped to the ground screaming. Blood gushed from his nostrils. Luke had seen the same thing happen to several others and he knew what to expect. It was all over for Novak, or nearly over.

Kulan came running and turned the stricken man face up.

"You'll last another period," he snarled. "Get up and eat."

He yanked Novak to his feet and shook him as he would a sack of meal. The sick man moaned and begged, his head rolling from side to side and his eyes filmed with pain.

"Let me have it," he whimpered. "I'm done, I tell yuh Kuley. Get Gannett, if yuh don't believe me."

Kulan slapped him heavily with the flat of his massive hand. "You'll work another period, sewer rat, if I have to prop you up!"

Then Luke Fenton took a chance. He didn't care particularly for Novak, nor was he overly concerned by what might happen to him. But this gave him an excuse, an opening.

He hooked his thick fingers in the collar of Kulan's jacket and twisted until the big Martian loosed Novak and whirled around. Then Luke drove a hard fist to his jaw—a pulled punch so as not to betray his real strength. Nevertheless it set the guard back on his heels and split the taut skin where it landed.

Pandemonium broke loose in the mess hall. Gannett, the senior guard, came bellowing down the aisle, and the squad guards were on their feet in an instant, neutro-tubes and dart guns ready. The uproar of the prisoners died down.

Kulan shook his shaggy head and crouched low as he circled the Earthman. Murder was in his heart, and the urge to break this tough guy Fenton with his bare hands. But Gannett was between them.

"Hell's bells!" he yelped. "What goes on here?"

Then he saw Novak—and heard him. Novak was writhing on the ground, begging for death. And the chief guard's dart gun twanged as its needlelike missile sped forth and drove into the sick man's breast

where it sang its shrill song of vibratory dissolution.

In the twinkling of an eye where Novak had lain was only the dust of complete disintegration and a few scintillating, dancing light flecks that swiftly snuffed out. A speedy and merciful end.

In the silence that followed, Gannett turned on Kulan. "Why didn't you send for me?" he demanded.

The guard, white with rage, indicated Luke.

"So—the tough guy Fenton again. Can't you handle him?"

Kulan's yellow eyes flashed fire. "Sure I can; I will. But I want your permission, sir. With my hands."

"No,"—flatly. And then Gannett whirled to look over the mess tables, whence a few scattered hisses had arisen.

His gaze was solemn when he returned it to Kulan. Swiftly his black eyes measured the Martian's giant body, and then they swung to Luke. The comparison evidently pleased him, for he changed his mind.

"On second thought, yes," he said to Kulan. "It'll be good for

discipline. Only don't disable him; he's too valuable a worker."

Luke concealed his unholy glee; stood glowering savagely. "In fair fight?" he put in.

"In fair fight," sneered Gannett. He took personal charge of Kulan's weapons. "All right, you," he yelled then to the mess, "you can watch this. But if there's a sound or a move from any one of you there'll be the neutro-broadcast and full gravity for an hour for the whole flea-bitten gang of you."

He drew back, motioning Luke and Kulan to an open space nearby. There was not the slightest doubt in his mind as to the outcome, for the Martian towered over his stocky opponent and was fully fifty pounds heavier. This irregular procedure would put a stop to some of the open homage paid to this reputed tough guy by the prisoners, and to the restlessness among them which his coming had occasioned.

They fought instantly and with silent deadliness of purpose, these two. Luke drove in two terrible blows to the big Martian's body in the split-second before they closed, breathtaking punches that rocked Kulan yet did not slow him up in the least. And then the tangle of arms and legs and bodies of the two was so swift moving and violent that the watchers could not follow them.

Now they were up, slugging, clinching; now down, rolling over and over, straining and tearing at each other like beasts of the jungle. Once, breaking free, Luke was seen to batter Kulan's face to a bloody mass with swift, hammering fists that thudded too rapidly to count. And then the Martian had flung him to the rocky ground so heavily that it seemed certain the Earthman's end had come. But such was not the case, for there was a flailing scramble and Luke Fenton rose up with the great body of Kulan across his shoulders. He spread his legs wide and heaved mightily.

The Martian guard kicked and squirmed, lashing out with his huge fists at the squarely-built and squarely-planted body of the Earthman below him. But to no avail. Grasping a shoulder and a thigh, Fenton straightened his thick arms and Kulan was hoisted aloft. Amazingly then, the madly struggling guard was flung out and away to land with a sickening thud, smashed and crumpled on the rocks.

Luke stood swaying on those spreadeagled legs and his lungs were near bursting from the exertion in the noxious atmosphere. "There you are, Gannett," he howled through swollen lips. "That fair enough for you?"

In the ominous silence a cracked voice yelped: "Attaboy Fenton!"

Wild disorder followed. Immediately there was the raucous call of the general alarm siren and a flashing light from the bastion that paled the red mists to a sickly, luminous pink. Full gravity coming down with crushing force on the hapless prisoners.

Luke, as he was flattened, gasping painfully under the enormous pressure, saw that Gannett and the rest of the guards were not affected by the neutro-broadcast. They stood erect and moved freely among the prisoners who sprawled everywhere in grotesque squashed heaps. Queer. There was no way of beating the authorities at this game.

Gannett transferred Luke to the dreaded sealed cell in the reduction plant, a room spoken of in hushed whispers by the convicts, and in which it was reported an inmate suffered indescribable tortures for the better part of three weeks. Then he died in horrible misery, for one could not survive longer than that.

Kulan had not been killed. He would recover, but was pretty well smashed up, with a fractured hip and several broken ribs, one of which had punctured a lung. It would be necessary to return him to Mars on the next ethership, due in two days. Strangely, the news brought Luke no great amount of satisfaction.

When they locked him up in the sealed cell for his first period of labor he saw there was only one other occupant. A tall lanky Earthman with narrow aristocratic features and keen gray eyes. He was perhaps forty-five, slightly stooped, and with thin graying hair. Luke had seen him several times at mess and had contemptuously classed him as a highbrow. Fuller, his name was.

This was a small room where several slender chutes brought down tumbling crystals of a silvery salt from somewhere above, emptying it into glass containers that stood in endless rows in wooden racks. You filled these containers with the salt, then sealed them in lead tubes and packed them for shipment. There was a faint pungent odor in the air of the room, a new smell that widened Luke's nostrils and caught at his throat and lungs.

In this place you were watched by a guard who came regularly each half hour and spied on you through a peephole.

Child's play, the work in the sealed cell. Luke went at it half-heartedly and he spoke no word to Fuller after the heavy door had closed them in. After ten minutes of silence he caught himself watching his companion furtively.

What was there about Fuller that marked him as superior to Luke

and the rest of the convicts? A good gust of wind would blow the man away; a woman might easily beat him in a rough and tumble. Yet this man had something which unmistakably proclaimed greatness, the same something that gave authority and power to the smart guys of Earth and Mars. Brains—book-learning! Luke snorted.

Fuller was looking at him with calmly appraising gaze. Luke scowled darkly, but the keen eyes that measured him did not waver.

"You're a fool, Fenton," came from the thin lips.

"What!" Luke advanced threateningly.

"I repeat: you are a fool." Still the gray eyes were unwavering.

"Why, you—you——" Spasmodically Luke's fingers closed down on the spare shoulder with crushing force.

By not so much as the flicker of an eyelash did Fuller betray the pain that must have come with that grip. He did not even wince, but swiftly lashed out with a bony fist, raking Luke's cheek with sharp knuckles. The blow stung, but was utterly futile. With a single cuff Luke could send the man sprawling; with a single wrench of his powerful hands, snap his spine. Yet he did neither, and the impulse to

laugh coarsely died in his throat. Here was courage of a kind he never had encountered; here a man in whose bright eyes fearlessness and defiance mingled with a cool disdain that brought the first real feeling of inferiority Luke ever had experienced.

He relaxed his grip of Fuller's shoulder and his big hands fell loosely at his sides. It was that action which saved Fenton. He did not know it at the time, nor would he have believed it. But he was to remember many times and finally to realize it, though he never fully understood.

"That's better," breathed Fuller. And the ghost of a smile crinkled the corner of his mouth.

At the old man's warning Luke returned to his own work bench and was industriously engaged when the guard's eye showed at the peephole. Then the eye was gone and he grinned over at Fuller.

"How long you been in here?" he ventured.

"Five days in the sealed cell; ten altogether in the Workshop."

Luke pondered this. "How'd you get in the cell?"

"Same way you did—I struck a guard."

"No!" marveled Luke. "Mean to tell me you——"

"I had a reason to get in here," Fuller broke in mildly.

"You—you wanted to get in?" Luke was incredulous.

"I did."

"My God, you ain't crazy, are you—wantin' to get yourself killed off quicker?"

"

No, that isn't it," Fuller explained patiently. "I've a plan to escape and only by taking the chance of spending some time here could I obtain access to the necessary materials. Fenton, I'm a scientist and I know ——"

"Escape!" Luke snorted. "You are crazy. Where you goin' to go?"

"Listen, Fenton." The other dropped his voice. "I'm not doing this blindly; I have friends outside. And you can help me. You can get away yourself, alive. I called you a fool and by that I meant that you have relied too much on brute force in your lifetime and had not sense enough to realize that this brought only trouble. Combine your

brawn with my brains, now, and do as I say—if you will I promise you freedom. Will you do it, or do you want to keep on being a fool?"

Luke bristled, but the earnestness of that steady gaze served to check his rising temper. "I still think you're nuts," he growled, "but hell, I ain't fool enough to pass up any kind of chance of gettin' outa here. Gimme the dope."

Fuller coughed slightly and a fleck of red-tinged foam appeared at his lips. "It'll have to be to-day," he whispered. "One more day in this place and it'll be too late for me."

X.C.! Luke stared, horrified. Fuller had it already and didn't know it. Poor devil; he was a goner before he started this crazy break of his. Strangely, Luke was deeply concerned. It was a new experience, this feeling of compassion for a fellow man.

"To-day!" he grunted. "You ain't figurin' on gettin' out to-day?"

"Positively—it must be to-day. I'll explain."

Much of what followed was unintelligible to Luke Fenton, but he absorbed enough of the scientist's explanation to understand that his

plan was not impossible of realization. He waxed enthusiastic.

Tom Fuller was vague concerning his own past, but Luke gathered that a political crime had been responsible for his sentence to the Workshop. There was much bitterness in the scientist's refusal to dwell on this point. This, too, Luke was able to understand. The bond between them strengthened.

"It's like this," Fuller told him: "these suits which enable us to move about comfortably in Vulcan's gravity are really quite simple in their functioning. A maze of fine wires is woven into the fabric, and these wires are charged with anti-gravity energies from tiny capsules which are inserted under the belt of the garment. The capsules are really miniature atomic generators and are replaced with fresh ones each night during the sleeping period, since the initial charge lasts only eighteen hours. The generated energies neutralize more than eighty percent of the effect of gravity and our weight thus becomes approximately the same as it is on Earth. Such garments are worn by all prospectors and other visitors to Vulcan."

"How come the neutro-beams?" asked Luke.

They are used only here in the Workshop and they operate the same as the neutro-broadcast from the bastion, the only difference being

that the broadcast blankets an area of about two miles in all directions. In both cases vibratory ether waves are sent out and these are of such frequency and wave form as to neutralize the anti-gravity energies originating in our capsules. They render our suits useless, but those of the guards are provided with insulating coverings which block off the waves and thus permit their own garments to function even when the neutro-broadcast is in operation."

"Smart guys," commented Luke. "Too smart. How the devil we gonna get away, then? They'll send out the alarm and——"

"Ah, that is where we fool them, Fenton. With the radium."

"Radium!"

"

Yes, didn't you know? This ore we mine here contains a higher percentage of that valuable element than any on Earth or Mars. Its emanations, together with certain atmospheric gases of Vulcan, are what cause X.C.—a swift destruction of tissue in the lungs and other vital organs. And this concentrate"—Fuller waved his hand toward the rows of tubes before him—"is most highly radioactive of all the products of the Workshop. That is why the sealed cell is so very

dangerous to work in. But it is this radioactive salt that gives us the means for escape——"

Both men turned quickly to their labors on hearing the footsteps of the guard.

"My suit is already prepared," continued Fuller, when the eye had gone from the peephole. "Now to prepare yours. I discovered that this radioactivity can be used to defeat the purpose of the neutro-rays as well or better than the regular insulation, which, of course, we can not obtain. That is why I wanted to be in the sealed cell for a time. We merely pack a quantity of the radioactive salt around the capsules in the lining of our garments, and the radium emanations continue the excitation of the tiny atomic generators even under the influence of the neutralizing vibrations. Do you follow me?"

"Yes."

Luke did comprehend, even though the technical explanation was beyond his understanding. They would be able to defy this terrible gravity of Vulcan. They could fight unhampered; walk, or run—to meet these mysterious friends of Fuller's. The flashlights and the broadcast would be useless against them.

The lanky scientist outlined the further details of his plan in swift whispers while he worked with the energizing capsule of Luke's garment.

Actual escape was surprisingly easy. They waited until the labor period was finished, when Chan Dai, the yellow-skinned guard, came to unlock the door. As agreed, Tom Fuller came out first and Luke held back, dragging his feet and cursing softly to himself.

"What'd you say?" the guard snarled.

Luke grinned disarmingly. "Nothin'," he drawled. Still he hung back, scarcely moving from where he stood just within the door.

"Come on, tough guy, a little speed." Chan Dai reached for him.

And then Luke was upon him. The neutro-beam flashed harmlessly. Luke's big hands moved with lightning swiftness, his left one scooping the guard's dart gun from its shoulder strap and his right closing on the astonished Oriental's wind-pipe. It was the work of only an instant to choke him in unconsciousness and lock him in the sealed cell.

"Quick, the chute!" hissed Fuller. He dived head foremost into a

rectangular wooden trough that was used for the disposal of the gangue from a crushing mill above. This chute, Fuller had said, led to the outside at the back of the reduction plant.

Across the passage Luke saw a squad of convicts and two guards emerging from the lift. Then he plunged down the steeply inclined trough after Fuller. As he slid and tumbled into the darkness, he heard the hoarse shouting of the guards.

He landed heavily in the pile of gangue at the base of the chute; then was scrambling and slipping down with an avalanche of the sharp edged stone. At the bottom, he saw that Fuller had already started up the slope of the great pit which enclosed the Workshop. Luke darted after him.

They were hidden from the bastion by the buildings of the smelter and reduction plant. But the loud yelling of guards back there in the pit gave evidence that word of the escape was being passed along to Gannett. Before they were halfway up the slope there was the shriek of the alarm siren, and Luke felt his body sag with a sudden increase of weight. Fool that he had been to trust the scrawny scientist!

"It's the broadcast," panted Fuller, beside him. There is some effect, of course. You're probably carrying fifty extra pounds."

"Huh!" Luke hoped it would be no worse.

Fuller slipped into a narrow crevasse that ran slantwise of the slope and extended upward to the rim of the pit. The going was much easier here and they made rapid progress toward the top. Suddenly Luke realized that it was growing very cold; there was a bite to the foul air, and moisture from the red mist was frosting his beard. The liberation of the tiny planet and consequent shifting of the terminator was bringing frigidity to Vulcan's Workshop.

They came up out of the crevasse at the top of the pit and Luke could not resist looking back. Every convict in sight was flattened to the ground. They sprawled singly and in heaps, each one a squashed inert thing that would not move again until the neutro-broadcast was discontinued. The guards, confident they would find the escaped prisoners in like condition, were searching the slope below them.

Luke raised Chan Dai's, dart gun to his shoulder.

Fuller struck aside the muzzle of the weapon. "No!" he protested, "No unnecessary killing, Fenton. They're completely fooled, and we'll be well on our way before they know the truth."

Grumbling, Luke drew back from the rim of the excavation.

Up here the ground was fairly level, but there were many fissures and small craters which made the footing precarious. The mists were so dense they could see scarcely two hundred feet ahead.

"We'll be lost in the vapors when they finally wake up and come out after us," Fuller said. "And look Fenton, off there to the left are the three columns of fire that mark the rendezvous."

They plunged on through the red mist toward the flaming pillars. Those beacons, even though they subsided at regular intervals, quickly reappeared after each cessation. And their brilliance penetrated the mists with ease at this distance of about two miles. There was no fear of missing their destination.

"Sure your friends'll be there?" Luke asked doubtingly. He was beginning to have some misgivings about the matter—the scientist had been anything but explicit as to who these friends were. And the longer his thoughts dwelt upon the things Fuller had told him the more suspicious he became. Pretty cagey about everything but the actual getting away from the Workshop, Fuller had been.

"Certainly they will; they've been waiting two days." Fuller's tone was impatient and his words came painfully. "You leave that part of it to me, Fenton," he gasped. There was a fleck of blood at his lips.

As the scientist stumbled on through the mists, Luke's doubts increased and he began to lose his respect for the man's intellect and for the cunning which had enabled him to outwit the neutralizing energies used by the guards. After all, he was a weak and puny specimen. They all were, the smart guys who held the people of two worlds in their power by exercising the knowledge they had learned from books. And this one had failed even in that; whatever he might have been, he had run afoul of the law himself and was already a doomed man. Tricks! This trick of Fuller's had gotten them away, but of what use was it without the brute force necessary to carry on to a successful end?

The brawn Tom had spoken of so slightingly was what they needed from this time on, and nothing else would save them. Luke had that brawn; Fuller did not. The scientist slipped and nearly lost his balance at the edge of a fissure, but Luke made no move to help him. It was every man for himself at this stage of the game.

Increasing difficulty came with every step. Now they were sliding and rolling into a deep crater, now scrambling up its steep sides with hands torn and bodies bruised by the jagged boulders. A yawning crevasse opened before them and they were forced to skirt its edge for fully a half mile in the wrong direction before they found a crossing. And the cold was unbelievably intense. Numbed and silent,

with their eyes half blinded and lungs seared by the frosty air, they struggled on toward the three pillars of flame.

And still Tom Fuller carried on, though Luke was now in the lead.

They had covered probably half the distance to the flaming columns when shouts arose behind them. The guards were on their trail.

"Can't—find us," Fuller panted. "The mists——"

"Hell, the mists are clearing," Luke snarled. "You ain't so damn smart as you think."

What he said was true. Though there was less light on account of the new angle with the sun farther below the horizon, the red mist was definitely lighter in color, noticeably less dense. Visibility was good to several hundred yards. Luke turned his head, but could see nothing of their pursuers.

"They can't," Fuller insisted weakly.

Luke, pushed on with renewed vigor, ignoring him, cursing.

And then there came faintly to his ears the twang of a dart gun; the shrill scream of its deadly vibrating missile; a violent blow that flung

him headlong.

Like a cat, he bounced to his feet, crouching with Chan Dai's dart gun at his shoulder. A strangely grotesque heap was at his feet—Tom Fuller. Off there in the thinning mist he saw a shadowy figure and he fired at it twice. Whether his darts found their mark he was never to know, for a wall of white swept down suddenly to obscure his vision. Snow! Great massed flakes falling endlessly—the moisture of the mist crystallized and closing in on him to hide him even more safely, than had the mists themselves.

He was on his knees then at Fuller's side. A brilliant flash and a screaming roar over amongst the rocks apprised him of the fact that the guard's dart had gone wide. And yet Fuller was down, moaning with pain. Luke tried to turn him over and found that his body had taken on tremendous weight. He was flattened, crushed to the rocky surface of Vulcan by the full force of its gravity!

"What the devil!" he grunted as he heaved and strained. "What'd they do to you, old man?"

With great effort he succeeded in turning the scientist face up. Then he saw what had happened, and knew in a flash that Fuller had saved him from the singing dart whose energy was making a sizzling

puddle of the stones where it had landed. The missile, in passing, had carried away the belt and part of the fabric of Tom's garment—carried away the capsule and the radium that energized it. Made the thing worse than useless. And Fuller had done this for him; he had flung himself upon Luke to shove him out of the line of fire ... risking his own life gladly ... lucky the deadly dart had missed his body, but....

"

You go on, Fenton," the scientist was whispering through lips that were blue and stiff. "Leave me here. I'm licked. But you can carry on the work; go to my friends and tell them—everything. Tell them what you saw back there—tell them——"

"Shut up!" Luke's words were softly growled. There was a new and utterly unaccountable huskiness in his voice as he straddled the prone body and locked his strong fingers underneath. "You ain't gonna be left behind," he grunted. "We're goin' on, brother, together."

His back straightened and Fuller was swung clear of the ground. His huge biceps tensed and the scrawny scientist was in the air, up and above the bowed head, then let down gently to rest across the broad

shoulders of Luke Fenton. Fuller hung there, bent double by the immense weight of him, crushed to painful contact with the taut muscles that carried the strain.

On Earth, Fuller might have tipped the scales at a scant one hundred and thirty pounds; now his sagging body was a load in excess of seven hundredweight. With that load upon him, and glorying in the effort it cost, Luke staggered on toward the triple red glow, which, even in the blinding whiteness of the snowfall, marked the location of the columns of fire.

That all feeling had left his limbs in the deep-biting cold meant nothing; that his lungs were near bursting under the terrific strain meant even less. Luke Fenton had found a man. One he would fight for, not against. And, miraculously, he had found himself.

After that there was a blur of interminable torture. Reeling and stumbling, his leg and back muscles shot through with stabbing pain as the frost worked slowly upward, Luke plodded doggedly ahead. An occasional shout came from far behind where the guards still searched the rocky plateau.

Across his great shoulders, Luke's burden was a dead weight, of corpselike rigidity and stillness. Yet Luke clung to it tenaciously,

disposing the drooping leaden limbs as comfortably as possible by the judicious spreading of his own brawny arms.

Fuller, he was sure, had not long to live in any event. X.C. had already progressed to such a point that it was hardly possible he could recover. And yet, these smart guys Luke always had detested —the doctors and surgeons and such—they might be able to do something for the poor devil. Anyway, he determined, he'd get the scientist to his friends dead or alive, and he'd see to it that they treated him right. If they didn't....

The red glow was suddenly very bright and a silvery metallic shape loomed up before him in the whiteness. An ethership! Luke tried to call out but his bellowing voice was gone; only faint gurgling sounds came from his throat. He pushed forward with a savage summoning of his last ounce of energy and Fuller's weight was that of a mastodon upon him. The curved hull of the vessel was overhead when he slipped and fell to one knee in the thick carpet of snow.

Luke saw them then, a dozen strangers running from the open air-lock of the ship. In uniform, some of them—government officials of Earth and Mars. Damn them, it was a trap!

Knowing vaguely that they had surrounded him, he let Fuller slip

from his shoulders and lowered him gently to the snow. Lurching to his feet, he stood swaying above the scientist's body, ready to defend the helpless man against any who came to take him. Defiant curses died in his paralyzed throat as darkness swooped down to blot out all consciousness. His steel-sinewed body, beaten at last, slumped protectingly over the lanky form of his new-found friend.

When Luke next saw the light he stared long and hard at immaculate white walls and ceiling that shut him in. A gentle purring was in his ears and he knew he was in an ethership that was under way. He lay weak and helpless beneath snowy covers, on an iron hospital bed.

There were voices in the room, hushed, awed voices, and Luke moved his head painfully to stare across the room. Fuller, he saw, was stretched on another cot, pale and still. And a white-clad nurse was there, bending over him, talking softly to a doctor. The words that passed between them brought enlightenment to Luke—and more. They brought a new elation, and understanding, and hope.

When the doctor and nurse had left, Luke lay for a long time with his thoughts. There was a man—Tom Fuller. Unafraid, as an agent of a special governmental committee investigating prison conditions he had volunteered to get the evidence on Vulcan's Workshop. And he had done it, even though it was almost certain that his own life was

to be the price. He had dared the misery and hardship, dared X.C. and the horrible death it brought, that this hellhole of Vulcan might be exposed, that it might be wiped out of existence by government agreement. Vulcan's Workshop, where the gold dust of a certain political clique, brought torture and disease and extinction to hapless prisoners who might otherwise be remade into useful members of society by the use of scientific methods—all this was to be no more.

Fuller had succeeded where many others had failed. And Fuller was not to die. Only one of his lungs had been affected by X.C. and this not too extensively to respond to treatment. Many months of careful attendance would be required, and many more months of convalescence. But Fuller, they were sure, would live, Luke gloated.

From what he had heard, Luke gathered that there was to be no trouble about his own pardon. Oddly enough, this gave him no satisfaction. Something had happened to him—inside. For the first time he realised his debt to society and would have preferred that just sentence be carried out upon him. But not in that place, not in Vulcan's Workshop! Luke shuddered.

And lying there, he swore a mighty oath that the remainder of his life was to be devoted to entirely different pursuits. It was not too late to face about, not too late to learn. If Fuller would help him, he

would learn. He had acquired a healthy respect for the book-learning he formerly ridiculed, and he wanted some of it for himself—as much as he could get. His old creed was forgotten, and his bitterness vanished.

"Luke!" At the scientist's husky whisper he turned his head. Fuller was gazing at him with wide, solemn eyes.

"Thanks, Luke," the thin lips murmured.

"Thanks yourself. Where'd we be right now if it wasn't for your radium?"

There was silence as they regarded one another.

"I need you, Luke," Fuller whispered then, "in my laboratory back home. I'll be laid up for a long time, you know, and there's much to be done. Your brawn and my brain—we'll both profit. What do you say to that, Fenton, will you do it?"

Luke grinned. "Will I? Just watch me!"

Then, with a queer lump choking him, Luke looked away. He could think of no words to suit the occasion; he couldn't think at all somehow.

Blissfully, he fell asleep.

144 Two Thousand Miles Below by Charles Willard Diffin

Rawson learns to his cost that the life-spark of a fabled race glows in the black heart of a dead, Western volcano.

Aproximate word count: 55,900

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Prologue

In the gray darkness the curved fangs of a saber-toothed tiger gleamed white and ghostly. The man-figure that stood half crouched in the mouth of the cave involuntarily shivered.

Rawson learns to his cost that the life-spark of a fabled race glows in the black heart of a dead, Western volcano.

"Gwanga!" he said. "He goes, too!"

But the man did not move more than to shift a club to his right hand. Heavy, that club, and knotted and with a head of stone tied and

wrapped with leather thongs; but Gor of the tribe of Zoran swung it easily with one of his long arms. He paid only casual attention as the great cat passed on into the night.

One leathery hand was raised to shield his slitted eyes; the wind from the north struck toward the mouth of the cave, and it brought with it cold driving rain and whirling flurries of frozen pellets that bit and stung.

Snow! Gor had traveled far, but never had he seen a storm like this with white cold in the air. Again a shiver that was part fear rippled through his muscles and gripped with invisible fingers at his knotted arms.

"The Beast of the North is angry!" he told himself.

Through the dark and storm, animals drifted past before the blasts of cold. They were fleeing; they were full of fear—fear of something that the dull mind of Gor could not picture. But in that mind was the same wordless panic.

Gor, the man-animal of that pre-glacial day, stared wondering, stupidly, into the storm with eyes like those of the wild pig. His arms were long, almost to his knees; his hair, coarse and matted, hung in

greasy locks about his savage face. Behind his low, retreating forehead was place for little of thought or reason. Yet Gor was a man, and he met the threat of disaster by something better than blind, terrified, animal flight.

A scant hundred in the tribe—men and women and little pot-bellied brown children—Gor gathered them together in the cave far back from the mouth.

"For many moons," he told them by words and signs, "the fear has been upon us. There have been signs for us to see and for all the Four-feet—for Hathor, the great, and for little Wahti in his hole in the sand-hill. Hathor has swung his long snout above his curved tusks and has cried his fear, and the Eaters of the Dead have circled above him and cried *their* cry.

"And now the Sun-god does not warm us. He has gone to hide behind the clouds. He is afraid—afraid of the cold monster that blows white stinging things in his breath.

"The Sun-god is gone—now, when he should be making hot summer! The Four-feet are going. Even Gwanga, the long-toothed, puts his tail between his legs and runs from the cold."

The naked bodies shivered in the chill that struck in from the storm-wrapped world; they drew closer their coverings of fur and hides. The light of their flickering fires played strange tricks with their savage faces to make them still uglier and to show the dull terror that gripped them.

"Run—we must run—run away—the breath of the beast is on us—he follows close—run...." Through the mutterings and growls a sick child whimpered once, then was still. Gor was speaking again:

"Run! Run away!" he mocked them. "And where shall the tribe of Zoran go? With Gwanga, to make food for his cat belly or to be hammered to death with the stones of the great tribes of the south?"

There was none to reply—only a despairing moan from ugly lips. Gor waited, then answered his own question.

"No!" he shouted, and beat upon his hairy chest that was round as the trunk of a tree. "Gor will save you—Gor, the wanderer! You named me well: my feet have traveled far. Beyond the red-topped mountains of the north I have gone; I have seen the tribes of the south, and I brought you a head for proof. I have followed the sun, and I have gone where it rises."

In the half light, coarse strands of hair waved as hideous heads were nodded in confirmation of the boast, though many still drooped despairingly.

"If Gor leads, where will he go?" a voice demanded.

Another growled: "Gor's feet have gone far: where have they gone where the Beast cannot follow our scent?"

"Down!" said Gor with unconscious dramatic effect, and he pointed at the rocky floor of the cave. "I have gone where even the Beast of the North cannot go. The caves back of this you have seen, but only Gor has seen the hole—the hole where a strong man can climb down; a hole too small for the great beast to get through. Gor has gone down to find more caves below and more caves below them.

"Far down is a place where it is always warm. There is water in lakes and streams. Gor has caught fish in that water, and they were good. There are growing things like the round earth-plants that come in the night, and they, too, were good.

"Will you follow Gor?" he demanded. "And when the Beast is gone and the Sun-god comes back we will return—"

The blast that found its way inside the cave furnished its own answer; the echoing, "We follow! We follow!" spoken through chattering teeth was not needed. The women of the tribe shivered more from the cold than from fear as they gathered together their belongings, their furs and hides and crude stone implements; and the shambling man-shape, called Gor, led them to the hole down which a strong man might climb, led them down and still down....

But, as to the rest—Gor's promise of safe return to the light of day and that outer world where the Sun-god shone—how was Gor to know that a mighty glacier would lock the whole land in ice for endless years, and, retreating, leave their upper caves filled and buried under a valley heaped with granite rocks?

Even had the way been open to the land above, Gor himself could never have known when that ice-sheet left. For when that day came and once more the Sun-god drew steamy spirals from the drenched and thawing ground, Gor, deep down in the earth, had been dead for countless years. Only the remote descendants of that earlier tribe now lived in their subterranean home, though even with them there were some who spoke at times of those legends of another world which their ancestors had left.

And through the long centuries, while evolution worked its slow

changes, they knew nothing of the vanishing ice, of the sun and the gushing waters, the grass and forests that came to cover the earth. Nor did their descendants, exploring interminable caves, learning to tame the internal fires, always evolving, always growing, have any remote conception of a people who sailed strange seas to find new lands and live and multiply and build up a country of sky-reaching cities and peaceful farmlands, of sunlit valleys and hills.

But always there were adventurous souls who made their way deeper and deeper into the earth; and among them in every generation was one named Gor who was taught the tribal legends and who led the adventurers on. But legends have a trick of changing, and instead of searching upward, it was through the deeper strata that they made their slow way in their search for a mystic god and the land of their fathers' fathers....

Chapter 1: A Man Named Smith

Heat! Heat of a white-hot sun only two hours old. Heat of blazing sands where shimmering, gassy waves made the sparse sagebrush seem about to burst into flames. Heat of a wind that might have come out of the fire-box of a Mogul on an upgrade pull.

A highway twisted among black masses of outcropping lava rock or tightened into a straightaway for miles across the desert that swept up to the mountain's base. The asphalt surface of the pavement was almost liquid; it clung stickily to the tires of a big car, letting go with a continuous, ripping sound.

Behind the wheel of the weatherbeaten, sunburned car, Dean Rawson squinted his eyes against the glare. His lean, tanned face was almost as brown as his hair. The sun had done its work there; it had set crinkly lines about the man's eyes of darker brown. But the deeper lines in that young face had been etched by responsibility; they made the man seem older than his twenty-three years, until the steady eyes, flashing into quick amusement, gave them the lie.

And now Rawson's lips twisted into a little grin at his own discomfort—but he knew the desert driver's trick.

"A hundred plus in the shade," he reasoned silently. "That's hot any way you take it. But taking it in the face at forty-five an hour is too much like looking into a Bessemer converter!"

He closed the windows of his old coupe to within an inch of the top, then opened the windshield a scant half inch. The blast that had been drawing the moisture from his body became a gently circulating current of hot air.

He had gone only another ten miles after these preparations for fast driving, when he eased the big weatherbeaten car to a stop.

On his right, reaching up to the cool heights under a cloudless blue sky, the gray peaks of the Sierras gave promise of relief from the furnace breath of the desert floor. There were even valleys of snow glistening whitely where the mountains held them high. A watcher, had there been one to observe in the empty land, might have understood another traveler's pausing to admire the serene majesty of those heights—but he would have wondered could he have seen Rawson's eyes turned in longing away from the mountains while he stared across the forbidding sands.

There were other mountains, lavender and gray, in the distance. And nearer by, a matter of twenty or thirty elusive miles through the

dancing waves of hot air, were other barren slopes. Across the rolling sand-hills wheel marks, faint and wind-blown, led straight from the highway toward the parched peaks.

"Tonah Basin!" Rawson was thinking. "It's there inside these hills. It's hotter than this is by twenty degrees right this minute—but I wish I could see it. I'd like to have one more look before I face that hard-boiled bunch in the city!"

He looked at his watch and shook his head. "Not a chance," he admitted. "I'm due up in Erickson's office in five hours. I wonder if I've got a chance with them.…"

Five hours of driving, and Rawson walked into the office of Erickson, Incorporated, with a steady step. Another hour, and his tanned face had gone a trifle pale; his lips were set grimly in a straight line that would not relax under the verdict he felt certain he was about to hear.

For an hour he had faced the steely-eyed man across the long table in the Directors Room—faced him and replied to questions from this man and the half-dozen others seated there. Skeptical questions, tricky questions; and now the man was speaking:

"Rawson, six months ago you laid your Tonah Basin plans before us—plans to get power from the center of the Earth, to utilize that energy, and to control the power situation in this whole Southwest. It looked like a wild gamble then, but we investigated. It still looks like a gamble."

"Yes," said Rawson, "it is a gamble. Did I ever call it anything else?"

"The Ehrmann oscillator," the man continued imperturbably, "invented in 1940, two years ago, solves the wireless transmission problem, but the success of your plan depends upon your own invention—upon your straight-line drills that you say will not wander off at a tangent when they get down a few miles. And more than that, it depends upon you.

"Even that does not damn the scheme; but, Rawson, there's only one factor we gamble on. No wild plans, no matter how many hundreds of millions they promise: no machines, no matter what they are designed to do, get a dollar of our backing. It's men we back with our money!"

Rawson's face was set to show no emotion, but within his mind were insistent, clamoring thoughts:

"Why can't he say it and get it over with? I've lost—what a hard-boiled bunch they are!—but he doesn't need to drag out the agony." But—but what was the man saying?

"Men, Rawson!" the emotionless voice continued. "And we've checked up on you from the time you took your nourishment out of a bottle; it's you we're backing. That's why we have organized the little company of Thermal Explorations, Limited. That's why we've put a million of hard coin into it. That's why we've put you in charge of operations."

He was extending a hand that Dean Rawson had to reach for blindly.

"I'd drill through to hell," Dean said and fought to keep his voice steady, "with backing like that!"

He allowed his emotion to express itself in a shaky laugh. "Perhaps I will at that," he added: "I'll certainly be heading in the right direction."

Under another day's sun the hot asphalt was again taking the print of the tires of Rawson's old car. But this time, when he came to the almost obliterated marks that led through the sand toward distant mountains, he stopped, partially deflated the tires to give them a grip

on the sand, and swung off.

"A fool, kid trick," he admitted to himself, "but I want to see the place. I'll see plenty of it before I'm through, but right now I've got to have a look; then I'll buckle down to work.

"Thermal Explorations, Limited!" The name rang triumphantly in his mind. "A million things to do—men, crews for the drills, derricks.... We'll have to truck in over this road; I'll lay a plank road over the sand. And water—we'll have to haul that, too, until we can sink a well. We'll find water under there somewhere. I've got to see the place...."

The black sides of the mountains were nearer: every outcropping rock was plainly volcanic, and great sweeping slopes were beds of ash and pumice; the wheel marks, where they showed at all, wound off and into a canyon hidden in the tremendous hills that thrust themselves abruptly from the desert floor.

The mountains themselves towered hugely at closer range, but the road that Rawson followed climbed through them without traversing the highest slopes. It was scarcely more than a trail, barely wide enough for the car at times, but boulder-filled gullies showed where the hands of men had worked to build it.

He came at last into the open where a shoulder of rock bent the road outward above a sea of sand far below. And now the mountains showed their circular arrangement—a great ring, twenty miles across. At one side were three conical peaks, unmistakable craters, whose scarred sides were smothered under ash and sand that had rained down from their shattered tops in ages past. Yet, so hot they were, so clear-cut the irregularly rimmed cups at their tops, that they seemed to have pushed themselves up through the earth in that very instant. At their bases were signs of human habitation—broken walls, scattered stone buildings whose empty windows gaped blackly. This was all that remained of New Rhyolite.

Rawson looked at the "ghost town" which had never failed to interest him, but he gave no thought now to the hardy prospectors who had built it or to the vein of gold that had failed them. His searching eyes came back to the fiery pit, the Tonah Basin, a vast cauldron of sand and ash—great sweeps of yellow and gray and darker brown into which the sun was pouring its rays with burning-glass fierceness.

But to Rawson, there was more than the eye could see. He was picturing a great powerhouse, steel derricks, capped pipes that led off to whirring turbines, generators, strings of cables stretching out on steel supports into the distance, a wireless transmitter—and all of

this the result of his own vision, of the stream he would bring from deep in the earth!

Then, abruptly, the pictures faded. Far below him on the yellow, sun-blasted floor, a fleck of shadow had moved. It appeared suddenly from the sand, moved erratically, staggeringly, for a hundred feet, then vanished as if something had blotted it out—and Dean Rawson knew that it was the shadow of a man.

The road widened beyond the turn. He had intended to swing around; he had wanted only to take a clear picture of the place with him. But now the big car's gears wailed as he took the downgrade in second, and the brakes, jammed on at the sharp curves, added their voice to the chorus of haste.

"Confounded desert rats!" Rawson was saying under his breath. "They'll chance anything—but imagine crossing country like that! And he hasn't a burro—he's got only the water he can carry in a canteen!"

But even the canteen was empty, he found, when he stopped the car in a whirl of loose sand beside a prone figure whose khaki clothes were almost indistinguishable against the desert soil.

Before Rawson could get his own lanky six feet of wiry length from the car, the man had struggled to his feet. Again the little blot of shadow began its wavering, uncertain, forward movement.

He was a little shorter than Rawson, a little heavier of build, and younger by a year or two, although his flushed face and a two days' stubble of black beard might have been misleading. Rawson caught the staggering man and half carried him to the shadow of the car, the only shelter in that whole vast cauldron of the sun.

From a mouth where a swollen tongue protruded thickly came an agonized sound that was a cry for, "Water—water!" Rawson gave it to him as rapidly as he dared, until he allowed the man to drink from the desert bag at the last. And his keen eyes were taking in all the significant details as he worked.

The khaki clothes earned a nod of silent approval. The compact roll that had been slung from the younger man's shoulders, even the broad shoulders themselves, and the square jaw, unshaved and grimy, got Rawson's inaudible, "O. K.!" But the face was more burned than tanned.

He introduced himself when the stranger was able to stand. "I'm Rawson, Dean Rawson, mining engineer when I'm working at it," he

explained. "I'm bound north. I'll take you out of this. You can travel with me as far as you please."

The dark-haired youngster was plainly youthful now, as he stood erect. His voice was recovering what must have been its usual hearty ring.

"I'm not trying to say 'thank you,'" he said, as he took Rawson's hand. "I was sure sunk—going down for the last time—taps—all that sort of thing! You pulled me out—the good old helping hand. Can't thank a fellow for that—just return the favor or pass it on to someone else. And, by the way—you won't believe it—but my name is Smith."

Rawson smiled good-naturedly. "No," he agreed, "I don't believe it. But it's a good, handy name. All right, Smithy, jump in! Here, let me give you a lift; you're still woozy."

Rawson found his passenger uncommunicative. Not but what Smithy talked freely of everything but himself, but it was of himself that Rawson wanted to know.

"Drop me at the first town," said Smithy. "You're going north: I'm south-bound—looking for a job down in Los. I won't take any more

short cuts; I was two days on this last one. I'll stick to the road."

They were through the mountains that ringed in the fiery pit of Tonah Basin. Smooth sand lay ahead; only the shallow marks that his own tires had ploughed needed to be followed. Dean Rawson turned and looked with fair appraisal at the man he had saved.

"Drifter?" he asked himself silently. "Road bum? He doesn't look the part; there's something about him...."

Aloud he inquired: "What's your line? What do you know?"

And the young man answered frankly: "Not a thing!"

Dean sensed failure, inefficiency. He resented it in this youngster who had fought so gamely with death. His voice was harsh with a curious sense of his own disappointment as he asked:

"Found the going too hard for you up north, did you? Well, it won't be any easier—" But Smithy had interrupted with a weak movement of his hand.

"Not too hard," he said laconically; "too damn soft! I don't know what I'm looking for—pretty dumb: got a lot to learn!—but it'll be a job that needs to take a good licking!"

"'Too damn soft!'" Dean was thinking. "And he tackled the desert alone!" There was a lot here he did not understand. But the look in the eyes of Smithy that met his own searching gaze and returned it squarely if a bit whimsically—that was something he *could* understand. Dean Rawson was a judge of men. The sudden impulse that moved him was founded upon certainty.

"You've found that job," he said. "The desert almost got you a little while ago—now it's due to take that licking you were talking about. I'm going to teach it to lie down and roll over and jump through hoops. Fact is, my job is to get it into harness and put it to work. I'll be working right out there in the Basin where I found you. It will be only about two degrees cooler than hell. If that sounds good to you, Smithy, stick around."

He warmed oddly to the look in the younger man's deep-set, dark eyes, as Smithy replied:

"Try to put me out, Rawson—just try to put me out!"

Chapter 2: Gold!

"Ten miles down, drillers! Hell-bound, and proud of it! Ten miles down, drillers! Hark to what I say: You're pokin' through the crust of hell And braggin' too damn loud of it, For, when you get to hell, you'll find The devil there to pay."

From the black, night-wrapped valley, far below, the singer's voice went silent with the slamming of a door in one of the bunkhouses. The song was popular; some rimester in the Tonah Basin camp had written the parody for the tormenting of the drill crews. And, high on the mountainside, Dean Rawson hummed a few bars of the lilting air after the singer's voice had ceased.

"Ten miles down!" he said at last to his assistant, sprawled out on the stone beside him. "That's about right, Smithy. And maybe the rest of the doggerel isn't so far off either. 'Pokin' through the crust of hell'—well, there was hell popping around here once, and I am gambling that the furnaces aren't all out."

They were on the outthrust shoulder of rock where the mountain road hung high above the valley floor. Below, where, months before, Rawson had rescued a man from desert death, was blackness punctured by points of light—bunkhouse windows, the drilling-floor

lights at the foot of a big derrick, a single warning light at the derrick's top. But the buildings and the towering steelwork of the derrick that handled the rotary drills were dim and ghostly in the light of the stars.

"We've gone through some places I'd call plenty warm," said Smithy, "but you—you craves it *hot*! Think we're about due?" he asked.

Rawson answered indirectly.

"One great big old he-crater!" he said. His outstretched arm swept the whole circle of starlit mountains that enclosed the Basin. "That's what this was once. Twenty miles across—and when it blew its head off it must have sprayed this whole Southwest.

"Now, those craters"—he pointed contemptuously toward the three conical peaks off to the right—"those were just blow-holes on the side of this big one."

In the ragged ring of mountains, the throat of some volcanic monster of an earlier age, the three cones towered hugely. Their tops were plainly cupped; their ashy sloping sides swept down to the desert floor. At their base, the gray walls of stone in the ghost town of Little Rhyolite gleamed palely, like skeleton remains.

"I've seen steam, live steam," Rawson went on, "coming out of a fissure in the rocks. I know there's heat and plenty of it down below. We're about due to hit it. The boys are pulling the drill now; they cut through into a whale of a cave down below there—"

He broke off abruptly to fix his attention on the dark valley below, where lights were moving. One white slash of brilliance cut across the dark ground; another, then a cluster of flood lights blazed out. They picked the skeleton framework of the giant derrick in black relief against the white glare of the sand. From far below; through the quiet air, came sounds of excited shouting; the voices of men were raised in sudden clamor.

"They've pulled the drill," said Rawson. "But why all the excitement?"

He had already turned toward their car when the crackle of six quick shots came from below. His abrupt command was not needed; Smithy was in the car while still the echoes were rolling off among the hills. Their own lights flashed on to show the mountain grade waiting for their quick descent.

The sandy floor of this part of the Tonah Basin was littered with the orderly disorder of a big construction job—mountains of casing,

tubular drill rod, a foot in diameter; segmental bearings to clamp around the rod every hundred feet and give it smooth play. Dean drove his car swiftly along the surfaced road that was known as "Main Street" to the entire camp.

There were men running toward the derrick—men of the day shift who had been aroused from their sleep. Others were clustered about the wide concrete floor where the derrick stood. Clad only in trousers and shoes, their bodies, tanned by the desert sun, were almost black in the glare of the big floods. They milled wildly about the derrick; and, through all their clamor and shouting, one word was repeated again and again:

"Gold! Gold! Gold!"

The big drill head was suspended above the floor. Dean Rawson, with Smithy close at hand, pushed through the crowd. He was prepared to see traces of gold in the sludge that was bailed out through the hollow shaft—quartz, perhaps, whose richness had set the men wild before they realized how impossible it would be to develop such a mine. But Rawson stopped almost aghast at the glaring splendor of the golden drill hanging naked in the blinding light.

Riley, foreman of the night shift, was standing beside it, a pistol in his hand. "L'ave it be," he was commanding. "Not a hand do ye lay on it till the boss gets here." At sight of Rawson he stepped forward.

"I shot in the air," he explained. "I knew ye were up in the hills for a breath of coolness. I wanted to get ye here quick."

"Right," said Rawson tersely. "But, man, what have you done with the drill? It's smeared over with gold!"

"Fair clogged wid it, sir," Riley's voice betrayed his own excitement. "You remimber we couldn't pull it at first—the drill was jammed-like after it bruk through at the ten-mile livil. Then it come free—and luk at it! Luk at the damn thing! Sent down for honest work, it was, and it comes back all dressed up in jewelry like a squaw Indian whin there's oil struck on the reservation! Or is it gold ye were after all the time?" he demanded.

"Gold! Gold!" a hundred voices were shouting. Dean hardly heard the voice of the foreman, made suddenly garrulous with excitement. He stared at the big drill head, heaped high with the precious metal. It was jammed into the diamond-studded face of the drill; it filled every crack and crevice, a smooth, solid mass on top of the head and against the stem. A workman had brought a singlejack and chisel; he

was prying at a ribbon of the yellow stuff. Riley went for him, gun in hand.

"L'ave it be!" he shouted.

"But, confound it all, Dean," Smithy's voice was saying in a tone of disgust, "I thought we were working on a power plant. Not that a gold mine is so bad; but we can't work it—we can't go down after it at ten miles."

"Gold mine!" Rawson echoed. "I'll say it's a gold mine—but not because of the gold. Do you notice anything peculiar about that, Smithy?"

His assistant replied with a quick exclamation:

"You're right, Dean! I knew there was something haywire with that. Solid chunk—been cast around that stem—melted on. And that means—"

"Heat," said Rawson. "It means we've found what we're after. Give the gold to the men; tell them we'll divide it evenly among them. There's more down there, but there's something better: there's energy, power!"

He snapped out quick orders. "Get the temperature. Drop a recording pyrometer. Let me know at once. There'll be plenty doing now!"

Drill rods and cables, all were made of the newest aluminum alloy. The long tube that held the pyrometer was formed of the same metal. Smithy sent it down to get a recording of the temperatures of that subterranean cave into which their tools had plunged.

He adjusted the recording mechanism himself and stood beside the twenty-inch casing that held back the loose sand from the big bore. Then he watched ten sections of cable, each a mile in length, each heavier than the last, as they went hissing into the earth.

From the cable control shed the voice of Riley was calling the depth.

"Fifty-two thousand." Then by hundreds until he cried: "Fifty-two-seven. We're into the big cave! Now another hundred feet."

The cable was moving slowly. In the middle of Riley's call of "Fifty-two-eight," a jangling bell told that the bottom of the pyrometer carrier had touched.

"Up with it," Smithy ordered. "Make it snappy. We'll see if we've got another cargo of gold."

There was an undeniable thrill in this reaching to a tremendous distance underground, this groping about in a deep-hidden cave, where molten gold was to be found. What had they tapped?—he asked himself. He saw visions of some vast pool of hot, liquid gold. Perhaps Dean would have to change his plans. They could rig up some kind of a bailer; they could bring out thousands of dollars at a time.

He was watching for the first sight of the metal carrier, far more interested in what might be clinging to it than in the record of the pyrometer it held. He saw it emerge—then he stared in disbelief at the stubby mass at the cable's end, where all that remained of the long tube he had sent down was a dangling two feet of discolored metal, warped and distorted. The lower part, a full twenty feet in length, had been fused cleanly off.

Dean Rawson was there to watch the next attempt. Again Riley's roaring bass rolled out the count, but this time the call stopped at fifty-two-seven. The jangling bell told that the carrier had touched.

"Divil a bit do I understand this," Riley was calling. "We're right at the point where we dropped through into the clear. Right at the roof of the big cave—fifty-two-seven, it says—and no lower do we go. The bottom of the hole is plugged!"

Rawson made no reply. He was scowling while he stared speculatively at the mouth of the twenty-inch bore—a vertical tunnel that led from the drilling floor down, down to some inner vault. "Molten gold," he was thinking. "It melted a cylinder of the new Krieger alloy—melted it when its melting point is way higher than that of any rock that we've hit. And now the bore is closed...."

He was trying vainly to project his mental vision through those miles of hard rock to see what manner of mystery this was into which he had probed. He shook his head slowly in baffled speculation, then spoke sharply.

"Drill it out!" he ordered. "We're into a hot spot sure enough, though I can't just figure out the how of it. But we'll tame it, Smithy. Send down the drill. Clean it out. Then we'll poke around down there and get the answer to all this."

Five days were needed to send down the big drill with a new drill-head replacing the other too fouled with gold for any use. The tubular sections, a hundred feet in length, were hooked together and lowered one by one. Each joint meant the coupling of the air-pipe as well. Air, mixed with water from the outer jacket, must come foaming up through the central core to bring the powdered rock to the surface.

Five days, then one hour of boring, and another five days to pull out the drill before Rawson could hope for his answer. But he found it in the severed shaft of the great drill where the head had been melted completely off. The big stem that would have resisted all but electric furnace heat, and been cut through like a tallow candle in the blast of an oxy-acetylene flame.

Chapter 3: Red Drops

The flat-roofed shack of yellow boards that was Dean Rawson's "office" had a second canopy roof built above it and extending out on all sides like a wooden umbrella. Thick pitch fried almost audibly from the fir boards when the sun drove straight from overhead, but beneath their shelter the heat was more bearable.

By an open window, where a hot breeze stirred sluggishly, Rawson sat in silent contemplation of the camp. His face was as copper-colored as an Apache's and as motionless. His eyes were fixed unwaveringly upon a distant derrick and the blasted stub of a big drill that hung unmoving above the concrete floor.

But the man's eyes did not consciously record the details of that scene. He saw nothing of the derrick or of the heat waves that made the steel seem writhingly alive; he was looking at something far more distant, something many miles away, something vague and mysterious, hidden miles beneath the surface of the earth.

"Heat," he said at last, as if talking in a dream. "Heat, terrific temperatures—but I can't make it out; I can't see it!"

The younger, broad-shouldered man, whose khaki shirt, thrown open

at the neck showed a chest tanned to the black-brown of his face, stopped his restless pacing back and forth in the hot room.

"Yes?" he asked with a touch of irritation in his tone. "There's plenty of heat there—heat enough to melt off the shaft of that high-temp alloy! What the devil's the use of wondering about the heat, Dean? What gets me is this: the shaft has been plugged again. Now, what kind of...."

Dean Rawson's face had not moved a muscle during the other's outburst. His eyes were still fixed on that place that was so far away, yet which he tried to bring close in his mind, close enough to see, to comprehend the mystery that should be so plain.

"Lava wouldn't do it!" he said softly. "No melted stone would melt the Krieger alloy, unless it was under pressure, which this was not. There was no blast coming out of our shaft. Yet we dipped into that gold; we stuck the drill right down into it. But what did we go into the next time? What did we dip into?"

He swung quickly, violently, toward Smithy who was facing him from the middle of the room. He aimed one finger at him as if it were a pistol, and his words cracked out as sharply as if they came from a gun:

"That tube you sent down—that piece of casing! How was it burned? Were there straggling ends, frozen gobs of metal? Did it look like an old-fashioned molasses candy bar that's been melted? Did it?"

"Why, no," said Smithy. "It hadn't dripped any; it was cut off nice and clean."

"Cut!" Rawson almost shouted the word. "You said it, Smithy. So was the shaft of the drill. And if you ever saw a piece of this alloy being melted you know that it's as gummy as a pot of old paint. It was cut, Smithy! Dipping into that melted gold threw us off the track; we were thinking of ramming the drill down into a mess of lava. But we didn't. It was cut off by a blast of flame so much hotter than lava that melted rock would seem cold!"

"And that helps us a lot, doesn't it," asked Smithy, scornfully, "when the flame melts the end of the shaft shut as fast as we open it?"

Dean Rawson's lean, muscular hands took Smithy's broad shoulders and spun the younger man around. "Cheer up," Dean told him. "We've got it licked. Why it doesn't blow out of that shaft like hell out for noon is more than I can see; but the heat's there! We've won!"

"But—" Smithy began. Rawson sent him spinning toward the door

in a good-natured showing of strength that his assistant had not yet guessed.

"Soup!" he ordered. "Break out the nitroglycerine, Smithy. Get that Swede, Hanson, on the job; he's a shooter. He knows his stuff. We'll blow open the bottom end of our shaft so it'll never go shut!"

Hanson knew his stuff and did it. But he met Rawson's inquiring eyes with a puzzled shake of his head when the open mouth of the twenty-inch bore gave faint echo of the deep explosion and followed after a time with only a feeble puff of air.

"Like a cannon, she should have gone," Hanson stated. "And she yoost go *phht*!"

"It's open down below," said Rawson briefly. "This is a different kind of a well from the kind you've been shooting."

To the waiting Riley he said: "Hook a bailer onto that cable and send it down. See what you can tell about the hole."

Again ten miles of cable hissed smoothly down the gaping throat. Then it slowed.

"Fifty-two-seven," said Riley, "and she's open. Seven twenty-five!

Seven fifty, and we're on bottom!"

"Up," Rawson ordered, "if there's anything left of the bailer. It's probably melted into scrap."

But strangely it was not. It hung from the dangling cable spinning lazily until Riley stepped in to check its motion.

There was a check valve in the bottom—a door that opened inwardly, to take in water and fragments of rock when need arose. Riley, disregarding the possible heat of the twirling bailer, reached for it with bare hands. He drew them back, then held them before him—and a hundred watching eyes saw what had been unseen before: the slow dropping of red liquid from the bailer's end. The same drops were falling from Riley's hands that had touched that end.

"Blood!" The word came from the foreman's throat in one horrified gasp. It ran in a whispering echo from one to another of the watching crew. From far across the hot sands came the rattle of a truck that brought the first of many loads of cement and steel for Rawson's buildings. Its driver was singing lustily:

"Hark to what I say: You're pokin' through the crust of hell And

braggin' too damn loud of it, For, when you get to hell, you'll find
The devil there to pay!"

But Rawson, looking dazedly into Smithy's eyes, said only: "It's cold —the bailer's cold. There's no heat there."

Chapter 4: The Light in the Crater

“Of course it wasn't blood!" said Smithy explosively. "But try to tell the men that. See how far you get. 'Devils!' That's been their talk since yesterday when Riley got smeared up—and now that the bailer's gone we can't prove a thing."

Again he was pacing restlessly back and forth in the little board shack that was Rawson's field head-quarters. Rawson, seated by the window, was looking at tables of comparative melting points. He glanced up sharply.

"You haven't found it yet?" he questioned. "A forty-foot bailer! Now that's a nice easy little thing to mislay."

Riley had followed the excited Smithy into the room; he stood silently by the door until he caught Rawson's questioning glance.

"Forty feet or forty inches," he said, "'tis gone! 'Twas there by the derrick last night, and this marnin'—"

"That's fine," Rawson interrupted with heavy sarcasm. "I haven't enough down below ground to keep my mind occupied—I need a few mysteries up top. Now do you really expect me to believe that a

thing like that bailer has been carried off?"

This time it was Smithy who interrupted. "You can just practise believing on that, Dean," he said. "When you get so you can believe a forty-foot bailer can vanish into thin air, then you'll be ready for what I've got. This is what I came in to tell you: that one truckload of steel grillage beams for the turbine footings—they were put out where we surveyed for the first power house—dumped on the sand...."

"Well?" questioned Rawson, as Smithy paused. His look was daring Smithy to say what he knew was coming.

"Five tons of steel beams," said Smithy softly, "gone—just like that! Just a hollow in the sand!"

The big figure of the Irish foreman was still beside the door. Rawson saw one clumsy hand make the sign of the Cross; then Riley held that hand before him and stared at it in horror. "Divils' blood," he whispered. "And I dipped my hands in it. Saints protect us all!"

"That will be all of that!" Dean Rawson's usually quiet voice was as full of crackling emphasis as if it had been charged with electrical energy. "If anyone thinks that I have gone this far, just to be scared

out by some dirty sabotage....

"I see it all. I don't know how they did it, but it's all come since the gold was found. Someone else wants it. They think they can scare off the men, maybe take a pot-shot at me, come back here and clean up later on, pull up gold by the pailful, I suppose—"

Riley leaped forward and banged his big fist down on the table. "Right ye are!" he shouted, until loitering men in the open "street" outside stared curiously. "Divils they are, but they're the kind of divils we know how to handle. And now I'll tell ye somethin' else, sir: I know where they are hidin'.

"There was no work for anyone last night, but I'm used to bein' up. I couldn't sleep. I was wanderin' around, thinkin' of nothin' at all out of the way, and I thought I saw some shadows, like it might be men, way off on the sand. Then later over to the old ghost town, d'ye mind! I saw a light, a queer, green sort of light. Sure, a fool I was callin' meself at the time, but now I believe it."

Dean Rawson had crossed the room while the man was still speaking. He dragged a wooden case from beneath his cot and smashed at the lid with a wrecking bar. Then he reached inside and drew forth a blue-black .45.

He tossed the pistol to Riley. "Know how to use one of these?" he asked. The manner in which the big Irishman snapped open the side ejection was sufficient answer. Dean handed another gun to Smithy, then pulled out more and laid them on his cot together with a little pile of cartridge boxes.

"You're all right, Riley," he said. "Just keep your head. Don't let your damned superstitions run away with you, and I wouldn't ask for a better man to stand alongside of in a scrap."

The foreman beamed with pleasure: Rawson went on in crisp sentences:

"Take these guns. Take plenty of ammunition. Pick five or six men you know you can depend on. Mount guard around this camp to-night. I'll post an order saying you're in charge—and I'm telling you now to use those guns on anything you see.

"Smithy," he said to the other man who had been quietly listening, "you and I are going to start for town. Only Riley will know that we're gone for the night. We'll have a little listening post of our own up here in the hills."

But Rawson postponed their going. More material was arriving; one

casting in particular needed all the men and Rawson's supervision to place it on the sand where an erection crew could swing it into place at some later date. And then, when he and Smithy had driven away from camp with the distant city as their announced destination, Rawson still did not go directly to the mountain grade. He swung off instead where rolling sand-hills blocked all view from the camp, and he headed the car into a gusty wind that brought whirling clouds of dust; they almost obscured the crumbling walls at the volcano's base.

The ghost towns that are found here and there in the forsaken wilderness of the West are depressing to one who walks their empty streets. Little Rhyolite was no exception. In gray, ghostly walls, empty windows stared steadily, disconcertingly like sockets of dead eyes in tattered, weatherbeaten skulls.

Dean and Smithy walked among the roofless ruins. Lizards, the color of the cold, gray walls, slipped from sight on silent, clinging feet. Once a sidewinder, almost invisible against the sand, looped away from the intruders with smooth deliberation.

"No marks here," said Rawson at last. "Even an Indian can't read sign in this ashy sand when the wind has dusted it off."

He turned his head from a whirl of fine ash where the wind,

sweeping around a wall of stone, was scouring at a sand dune's sloping side.

"Dean," said Smithy, "old Riley may have been looking for banshees when he saw these lights. Superstitious old cuss, Riley! Maybe there wasn't anything here. But, Dean, there's some confoundedly funny things happening around here."

"Are you telling me?" Rawson asked grimly. "But we want to remember one thing," he added: "We've punched a hole in the ground, and we've got into a place that is hot enough to melt Krieger alloy one minute and is stone cold the next. That's disturbing enough, but we don't want to get that mixed up with what's happening up top. There's dirty work going on—"

He stopped. His eyes, that had never ceased to search for some mark of special meaning, had come to rest upon an object half hidden in the sand. He stooped and picked it up.

"Now what the devil is this?" Smithy began. But Rawson was staring at the smooth lava block that was in his hand. It was tapered; it was pierced through with a straight, smooth hole, and its base was round and ringed as if it had been held in a clamp.

"That," he said at last, "was brought in from outside. Outside, Smithy—get that."

Dean Rawson's face was wreathed in a sudden smile of pure pleasure. "No, I don't know what the darn thing is," he admitted. "And I don't care. But I know that someone, or some bunch of someones—outsiders—are trying to horn in. I might even go so far as to say that I suspect the power monopoly gentlemen. I think they have started in on us, plan to run off our men, interfere in every way and drive me out of the field with the boring a failure. Smithy, I begin to think I'm going to enjoy this job!"

Again the hot wind, only beginning to cool with the setting of the sun, swept around the building where they stood and tore at the hill of sand. "Come on," said Rawson. "It's getting dark. We'll get up to our lookout—"

"Hold on!" called Smithy sharply.

Rawson turned. Smithy was rubbing his eyes when the whirl of wind-borne sand had passed; he was staring at the sand dunes.

"I'm seeing things, I guess," he said. "I thought for a minute there was a hole there, and the sand was slipping. I'm getting as bad as

Riley."

The two went back through the gathering shadows to their waiting car. And Smithy's involuntary shiver told Rawson that he was not the only one to feel a sense of relief at the sound of the exhaust as their car took them away from the dead bones of a dead city in a barren, trackless waste.

The shoulder of rock, where the mountain road swung out, gave a comprehensive view of camp and desert and the encircling mountains. Above in a vault of black was the dazzling array of stars as the desert lands know them; so low they were, the ragged, broken tops of the three ancient craters seemed touching the warm velvet of the sky on which the stars were hung. Beyond their smooth slopes a spreading glow gave promise of the rising moon.

Rawson headed the car downgrade in readiness for a quick return; he ran it close to the inner wall of rock out of which the road had been carved, then seated himself on the outer rim without thought of the thousand-foot sheer drop beneath his dangling legs. With a glass he was sweeping the foreground where the scattered lights of the camp were like vagrant reflections of the stars thrown back to them from the dead sea of sand.

"Riley's on the job," he told Smithy when he passed over the glass later on. "And I've got my pocket portable." He took the little radio receiver from his pocket as he spoke. "Riley will signal me from my office if he sees anything."

The moon had cleared the mountains; its flood of light poured across their rugged heights and filled the bowl of Tonah Basin as some master of a great theatrical switchboard might have flooded a dark stage with magic illumination, half concealing, transforming whatever things it touched.

All the hard brilliance of sunlit sands was gone. The rolling dunes were softly mellow; the more distant mountains were dream-peaks. Half real, they seemed, and half imagined in a veil of haze. Even the buildings, the scattered piles of material, the gaunt skeleton of the derrick—their stark blackness of outline and clear-cut shadow were gone; the whole land was drenched in the mystery and magic of a desert moon.

Rawson and the man beside him were silent. Even a mind perplexed by unanswerable problems must pause before the witchery of nature's softer moods.

"If Riley were here," said Smithy softly at last, "he wouldn't be

seeing any devils. Fairies, pixies, the 'little people'—he'd be seeing them dancing."

Rawson shot his companion a sidelong, appraising glance. He had never penetrated before to this sub-stratum of Smithy's nature. He had never, in fact, felt that he knew much about Smithy, whose past was still the one topic that was never mentioned. He saw his thick mop of black hair and the profile of his face as Smithy stared fixedly down toward the sleeping camp. It was a matter of a minute or so before he knew that the head was outlined against an aura of red light.

Smithy was seated at his right. Off beyond him the three extinct craters made a dark background where the moonlight had not yet reached to their inner slopes. Smithy's head was directly in line with the largest crater's irregularly broken top; and about it was the faintest tinge of red.

For a moment the light flamed close; it seemed to be hovering about the head of the silent, seated man. Then Rawson moved, looked past, and found a true perspective for the phenomenon. One rugged cleft in the rim of the crater's cup made a peephole for seeing within. It was plainly red—the light came from inside the age-old throat.

“It's alive!" Rawson whispered in quick consternation. Almost he expected to see billowing clouds of smoke, the fearful pyrotechnics of volcanic eruption.

He sensed more than saw that Smithy had not turned his head. "Look!" he was shouting by now. "Wake up, Smithy! Good Lord!"

He stopped, open-mouthed. The red glow had meant volcanic fires; to have it change abruptly to a green radiance was disconcerting.

Green—pale green. Only through the gap, like a space where a tooth was missing in the giant jaw, could Dean Rawson see the changed light. Only from this one point could the view be had—there would be nothing visible from the camp below. And as quickly as it had come all thought of volcanic fires left him; he knew with quick certainty that this was something that concerned him, that threatened, and that was linked up with the other threatening, mysterious happenings of the recent nights and days.

Still Smithy had not turned. Rawson felt one quick flash of annoyance at his helper's dullness—or indifference; then he knew that Smithy's dark-haired head was reached forward, that he was bending at a precarious angle to stare below him into the valley. Then:

"They're there!" said Smithy in a hushed voice, as if someone or something on that desert floor far below might hear and take alarm. "Look, Dean. Where's your glass? What are they?"

His cautious whispering was unnecessary. Below them a thin line of light pierced the darkness; another; then three more in quick succession before the sharp crack of pistol fire came to the men a thousand feet above. Rawson had snatched up his binoculars.

"To the left," Smithy was directing. "Off there, by the big casting. Great Scott! what's that light?"

Rawson got it in the glass—a single flash of green that cut the blackness with an almost audible hiss. It was gone in an instant while a man's voice screamed once in fear and agony, one scream that broke like brittle steel in the same instant that it began.

Dean found the big casting in the circle of his glass. There were black figures moving near it; they were indistinct. He changed the focus—they were gone before he could get their images sharp.

But the casting! Plainly he saw its great bulk that many men had worked to ease down to the sand. It was outlined clearly now until its edge became a blur, until the sand rolled in upon it, and its black

mass became a circle that shrank and shrank and vanished utterly at the last.

"It's gone!" Rawson shouted. "It sank into the sand! I saw it...."

He was running for the car. A clamor of voices was coming from below; the sound died under the thunder of the car's exhaust as Rawson gave it the gun and sent the big machine leaping toward the waiting curves.

Chapter 5: The Attack

Every light of the camp was on as Rawson and his assistant approached. A shallow depression in the sand marked the place where the big casting had been. Beyond it a hundred feet was a black swarm of men that parted as the car drew near. They had been gathered about a figure upon the sand.

Dean sensed something peculiar about that figure as the big car ploughed to a stop. He leaped out and ran forward.

He knew it was Riley there on the ground, knew it while still he was a score of feet away. Only when he was close, however, did he realize that the body ended in two stubs of legs; only when he leaned above him did he know that the Irish foreman's big frame had been cut in two as if by a knife.

The severed legs lay a short distance beyond the body; they had fallen side by side in horrible awkwardness, their stumps of flesh protruding from charred clothing—and suddenly, shockingly, Rawson knew that the flesh of body and legs had been seared. The knife had been hot—its blade had been forged of flame!

He heard Smithy cursing softly, unconsciously, at his side.

"The green light," Smithy was saying in horrified understanding. "But who did it? How did they do it? Where did they go?"

"Quiet!" ordered Rawson sharply. He dropped to his knees beside the mutilated body. Riley's eyes had opened in a sudden movement of consciousness.

The voice that came from his lips was a ghastly whisper at first, but in that stricken thing that had been the body of Riley, foreman of the night drilling crew, some reservoir of strength must still have remained untapped.

He drew upon it now. His voice roared again as it had done so many times before through the Tonah Basin camp. It reached to every listening ear where crowding men stood hushed and motionless; and the overtone of terror that altered its customary timber was apparent to all.

"Devils!" said Riley. "Devils, straight out o' hell!... I saw 'em—I saw 'em plain!... I shot—as if hot lead could harm the imps of Satan....

"Oh, sir,"—his eyes had found those of Dean Rawson who was leaning above—"for the love of hivin, Mister Rawson, do ye be quittin' drillin'. The place is damned. L'ave it, sir; go away...."

His eyes closed. But he started up once more; he raised his head from the sand with one final convulsive movement, and his voice was high and shrill.

"The fire! The fire of hell! He's turnin' it on me! God help...."

But Riley, before his failing mind could recall again that torturing jet of flame, must have slipped away into a darkness as softly enveloping as the velvet shadow world behind the low-hung stars. Rawson's hand that felt for a moment above the heart, confirmed the message of the closed eyes and the head that fell inertly back.

He came slowly to his feet.

"Keep the floods on!" he ordered. "Take command of the armed guard, Smithy; keep the whole camp patrolled."

Then to the men:

"Boys, Riley was wrong. He believed what he said, all right, but Smith and I know better. Don't worry about devils. These're just some dirty, skulking dogs who got away with murder this time but who won't do it again. We know where they're hiding. I'm checking up on them right now. After that you'll all get a chance to square

accounts for poor old Riley!"

“But the casting!" Smithy protested when he and Rawson were alone. "You can't explain that disappearance so easy, Dean."

"No, I can't explain that," Rawson's words came slowly. "They've got something that we don't understand as yet—but I'm going to know the answer, and I'm going to find out to-night!"

He was seated behind the wheel of his old car.

"I'm as good a desert man as there is in this crowd," he told Smith. "And it's my fight, you know. I'm going alone. But there'll be no fighting this trip; I'll just be scouting around."

He leaned from the car to grip Smithy's shoulder with a hand firm and steady.

"You didn't see the crater when the show was on. You think that I'm crazy to believe it, but up in that crater is where I'll find the answer to a lot of questions. Lord knows what that answer will be. I've quit trying to guess. I'm just going up there to find out."

He was gone, the rear wheels of the car throwing a spray of sand as he started heedless of Smithy's protests against the plan. Rawson

was in no mood to argue. He must climb the mountain while it was night; under the sun he would never reach the top alive. He would go alone and unseen.

He swung wide of the deserted town at the mountain's base. The spectral walls of Little Rhyolite still showed their empty windows that stared like dead eyes, and the man guided his car without lights along a hidden stretch of hard, salt-crusted desert. He felt certain that other eyes were watching.

He began his climb at a point five miles away. The slopes that seemed smooth and hard from a distance became, at closer range, a place of wind-heaped, sandy ash, carved and scoured into fantastic forms. But its very roughness offered protection, and Rawson fought the dragging sand, and the gray, choking ash that dried his throat and cut it like emery, without fear of being observed.

He fought against time, too. Above Little Rhyolite, whatever mysterious men were making the ascent would find the going easy. There were windswept areas, long fields of pumice; a man could make good time there. Rawson had none of these to aid him. He cast anxious glances toward the eastern sky as he struggled on, till he saw gray light change to rose and gold—but he stood in the titanic cleft in the crater's rim as the first straight rays of the sun struck across.

The volcano's top had been stripped clean by the winds of countless years. Rocks, black, brown, even blood-red, were naked to the pitiless glare of the sun. Their colors were mingled in a weird fantasy of twisted lines that told of the inferno of heat in which they had been formed.

They towered high above the head of Dean Rawson as he stood, panting and trembling with exhaustion. The cleft before him had become enormous: it was a canyon, half filled with pumice and coarse ash.

Rawson stood for long minutes in quiet listening. At the canyon's end would lie the crater, and in that crater he would find.... But there was no slightest picture in his mind of what he might see. He knew only that he himself must remain unseen. He went forward cautiously.

Rocky walls; a floor of sand where his feet left no mark. He was watching ahead and above him. His gun was ready in his hand; he did not propose to be ambushed. He moved with never a sound.

The silence persisted; no living thing other than himself lent any flicker of motion to the scene. Not even a lizard could hope for existence amid these dead and barren heights. He was alone—the

certainty of it had driven deeply into his mind before the canyon end was reached. And, desert man though he was and accustomed to traveling the waste places of the earth, Rawson learned a new meaning and depth of solitude.

Here was no voiceless companionship of trees or brush or cactus; no little living things scuttled across the rocks—he was alone, the only speck of life in a place where life seemed forbidden.

So sure of this was he that he stepped boldly from the canyon's end. He knew before he looked that he would see only more of the same desolation. And his mind was filled equally with anger and disappointment.

Something was opposing him! Something had come into their camp—had killed old Riley. And he, Rawson, had been so sure he would find traces here that would allow him to give that opposing force a name....

He stared out from the rocky cleft into a sun-blasted pit. Already the rising sun was pouring its energy ever the jagged rim of bleak rocks and down into the vast throat, choked and filled with ash.

It sloped gently from all sides, the gray-brown powder that had been

coughed from within the earth. It made a floor where Rawson could have walked with safety. But he did not go on.

"Damn it!" he said with sudden savagery. "What a fool I was to think of finding anyone here. Who would ever pick out a spot like this for a base of operations?"

He stared angrily at the floor of ash, at the black, outcropping masses of tufa. He was angry with himself, angry and baffled and tired from his climb. Far down in the vast, shallow pit blazing sunlight glinted from massive blocks whose sides were mirror-smooth. A whirl of wind eddied there for a moment and lifted the dust into a vertical gray column—the only sign of motion in the whole desolate scene. Rawson turned and tramped back toward the long hot descent to the floor of the Basin.

He tried to maintain an air of confidence before the men. He kept them busy placing and stacking materials; to all appearances the work would go on despite the mysterious happenings of the night.

Dean even prepared to resume drilling operations. He sent down another bailer on the end of the ten-mile cable, but he left it there; he did not care to raise it and risk more inexplicable results with the consequent destruction of the men's morale.

"Too late to do any more," he said to Smithy that afternoon. "We'll drop all work—let the men get a good night's sleep. I'll take guard duty to-night, and you can run the job to-morrow."

There were men of the drilling crew standing near, though Rawson was handling the hoisting drums himself. A ratchet release lever hooked its end under a ring on Rawson's hand and pinched the flesh. Dean made this an excuse for waiting a moment while the drillers walked away.

"Ought not to wear it, I suppose," he said, and dabbed at a spot of blood under the gold band. "But it's an old cameo—it belonged to my Dad."

He was showing the ring to Smithy as the men passed from hearing.

"Don't want to be seen talking," he explained tersely. "Mustn't let the men know we are on edge—they're about ready to bolt. But you be ready for a call. Have your men armed. I am looking for more trouble to-night."

The two were laughing loudly as they followed the men toward the building where the cook was banging on an iron tire that served as a bell.

Some three hours later Rawson was not smiling as he climbed the steel ladder of the great derrick; he was grimly intent upon the job at hand.

All thought of his drilling operations had gone from him. He was not anxious about the project. This was merely an interruption; the work would go on later. But right now there was an enemy to be met and a mystery to be solved.

A rifle slung from his shoulder bumped against him satisfyingly as he climbed. A man was on duty at a master switch—he would flood the camp with light at the rifle's first crack.

Dean seated himself at the top of the derrick. The cylinder of a huge floodlight was beside him. Beyond was the massive sheave block; the cables ran dizzily down to the concrete drilling floor so far below. And on every side the quiet camp spread out dark and silent in the night. Dean surveyed it all with satisfaction. Nothing would get by him now.

But his further reflections were not so satisfying.

"Who did it? How? Where did they go?" He was echoing Smithy's questions and finding no ready answers. And that flame-thrower that

had cut down old Riley—how was that worked? Its one green flash had been almost instantaneous.

He was puzzling over such futile questioning when he saw the first sign of attack.

At the foot of the derrick was the hoisting shed. Except for that, there was clear sand for a radius of fifty feet around the derrick's base. Dean was staring suspiciously at that open space almost directly underneath.

Moving sand! He hardly knew what he had seen at first. Then the sand at one point bulged upward unmistakably.

For one instant Dean's thoughts shot off at a tangent. It was like the work of a huge gopher—he had seen the little animals break through like that. Then the sand parted, and something, indistinct, blurred, dark against the yellow background, broke from cover.

Rawson swung the rifle's muzzle over and down. Below him the vague shadow had moved. Dean caught the blurred mass beyond his sights, then swung the weapon aside. Who was it? He would have a look first.

The thin crack of his rifle ripped the silence of the sleeping camp. Dean had aimed to one side and he regretted it in the instant of firing. For, in the same second, there had come from the moving shadow the gleam of starlight reflected upward from polished metal.

Dean swung the rifle back. He fired quickly a second time. Beside him the big light hissed into action and the whole camp sprang to sudden, blazing light. And through the quick brilliance, more dazzling even than the white glare itself, was one blinding line of green flame.

Dean saw it as it began. It came from the dim shadow that had sprung suddenly into sharp outline as the big lights came on. He saw the figure. He sensed that it was a man, though he knew vaguely that the figure was grotesque and hideous in some manner he had no time to discern.

The thin line of green flame ripped straight out, swinging in a quick, sweeping trajectory, slashing through the steelwork of the great derrick itself!

Dean knew he was lost in the blinding instant while that fiery jet was sweeping in a fan-shaped sector of vivid green. A knife of flame! It had destroyed a man: it was now cutting down a framework of steel

as well!

The derrick was falling as he fired again. There came a crushing jar downward as the metal melted and failed, and the wild outward swing in the beginning of the toppling fall. In the mind of Dean Rawson was but one thought: the sights—and a something blurred beyond—a trigger to be pressed.

He was still firing when the shriek of torn steel went to thundering silence, and even the lights of Tonah Basin Camp were swallowed up in the whirling night....

Chapter 6: Into the Crater

Smithy's agonized face was above him when he came back to life. "God!" Smithy was breathing. "I thought you were gone, Dean! I thought you were dead!"

As it had been with Riley, there was one thought uppermost in Rawson's bewildered mind: "The fire!" he choked. "He's swinging it...."

Then, after a time: "The derrick—it's falling! I went down with it!... I hit—"

"I'll say you did," said the relieved Smithy. "The derrick smashed across the bunkhouse, snapped you off, sent you skidding down the side of a sand dune. It darned near scoured the clothes off you at that."

Slowly Rawson began to feel the return flow of life through his body; the shock had jarred every nerve to insensibility. Slowly he remembered and comprehended what had happened.

He was in his little office; he recognized his surroundings now. The windows were open. Outside the sun was shining. He realized at last

the utter silence of that outer world.

He tried to raise himself from the cot, but fell back as his surroundings began to spin. "The camp!" he gasped weakly. "The men—I don't hear them."

"Gone!" Smith told him, while his eyes narrowed at some recollection and his hand came up unconsciously to a bruise of his cheek. "They beat it—went last night after the derrick fell. I tried to stop them. The fools were crazy with fear—devils, hell, all that kind of stuff. It all wound up in a fight—I couldn't hold 'em.

"You've got to get better kind of fast," he told Rawson. "We've got to get out of here ourselves—that flame-throwing stuff is too strong for me to take."

Rawson suddenly remembered the vague figure that had directed that flame. "Did I get him?" he demanded eagerly.

"You got him, yes, but then a whole swarm of things boiled up out of nowhere and carried him off! We weren't any of us close enough to see. The men said they were devils; I'm not sure they were wrong, either. Dean, old man, we're up against something rotten. We've got to get fixed for a fight; we can't handle this by ourselves."

Rawson was silent. He spoke slowly at last:

"You mean we've got to quit—quit without knowing what we're up against. Can you imagine what they'll say to me back in town? Scared out, licked by something I've never even seen!"

"Scared?" Smithy inquired. "You couldn't find a better word for it if you hunted through the whole dictionary. Scared? Why, say, I'm so damn scared I'm shaking yet, and the only thing that will cure me of it is to look at those devils along the top of a machine gun! We'll go catch us some equipment and a few service men—"

"You're a good guy, Smithy," Rawson reached out and gripped one brown hand. "And we'll do as you say; but first I've got to get a line on things. I'm becoming as irrational as the men. I'm imagining all sort of crazy things."

"You don't have to imagine them." Smithy's voice was strained; it showed the tension under which he was laboring. "Men or beasts—God knows what they are!—but when they come up from nowhere—"

"Out of the sand," Rawson explained.

Smithy stared at him. "Out of the sand," he repeated. "Then, when they cut a man in two, melt steel as if it were butter, pull a few tons of metal down out of sight as easy as we would sink it in the ocean, flash their lights over in the ghost town, up on top of a volcano—"

"Stop!" shouted Rawson unexpectedly. Some sudden gleam of understanding had flashed through his mind. He dragged himself to his feet and staggered to the doorway where he clung until the nausea of a whirling world had passed. "The dust! The dust!" he gasped.

Smithy put a hand on his shoulder. Plainly he thought Rawson out of his mind. "Easy, old-timer," he cautioned. "We'll get out of here. I hate to make you walk in the shape you're in, but the dirty cowards ran off with the trucks. They even took your car; there isn't a thing here on wheels."

But Rawson did not hear. He was staring off across the sand, and he was muttering bitter words.

"Fool! Oh, you utter fool!" he said. "The dust—the dust." Then he let the roughly tender hands of Smithy guide him back to the cot where he fell into a troubled sleep.

The comparative coolness of dusk was tempering the feverish midday heat when Rawson awoke. And, strangely, his troubles and all his conflicting plans had been simplified by the magic of sleep. His course was entirely plain. He was going to the crater again.

"What's there?" Smithy demanded. "What do you think that you'll find?"

"I don't know," was the reply.

"Then why—what the devil's the idea?"

"It's my job. They put it up to me, Erickson and his crowd. I've got to go."

And nothing Smithy could say seemed able to reach Rawson and swerve him from his single idea.

"You'll be safe on the road," Rawson told him, while he filled a canteen with water in preparation for his own trip. "You can get to the highway by morning."

Smithy did not trouble to reply. Was Rawson out of his mind? He could not be sure. Certainly he had got an awful bump, but there were no bones broken. However, it might be that he was still dazed

—a crack on the head might have done it.

But there was no use in further argument, he admitted to himself. Dean was going to the crater again—there was no stopping him—but he was not going alone; Smithy could see to that.

Again Rawson took the more difficult ascent. They went first to the ghost town: the slope above Little Rhyolite would save weary miles. But, once there, they knew that the route was not a place where they would care to be in the night. The realization came when Smithy, walking where they had been the day before, passing the sand dune where the wind had been scouring, seized Rawson's arm.

"I thought so," he said softly. "I thought I saw something there the other day, but the sand fell in and hid it. I didn't know the old-timers went in for subways in Little Rhyolite."

And Rawson looked as did Smithy, in wondering amazement, at the roughly round opening in the sand, a tunnel mouth, driven through the shifting sands—a tunnel, if Rawson was any judge, lined with brown glistening glass.

Understanding came quickly.

"The jet of flame!" he exclaimed half under his breath. "They melted their way through; the sand turned to glass; they held it some way for an instant while it hardened." He walked cautiously toward the dark entrance and peered inside.

Darkness but for the nearer glinting reflections from walls that had once been molten and dripping. The tunnel dipped down at a slight angle, then straightened off horizontally. Rawson could have stood upright in it with easily another two feet of headroom to spare.

"And that," said Smithy, "is how the dirty rats got over to the camp. Like moles in their runway. No wonder they could pop up from nowhere. But, Dean, old man, I'm thinkin' we're up against something we haven't dared speak of to each other. Don't tell me that it's just men we've got to meet—"

"Wait," Rawson begged in a hushed whisper. "Wait till we know. That's why I didn't dare go out without something definite to report. We'll go up—but not here. We'll get a line on this up top."

He led the way from the crumbling walls and skirted the mountain's base to the place where he had climbed before. And, with the help of a supporting arm at times, he found himself again in the great cleft in the rocks.

Darkness now made the passageway a place of somber shadows. The broad cupped crater lay beyond in silent waiting; the vast sand-filled pit seemed, under the starlight, to have been only that instant cooled. The twisted rocks that formed the rim had been caught in the very instant of their tortures and frozen to deep silence and eternal death: the black masses of tufa, protruding from the packed ashy sand might have been buried by the smothering mass but a moment before. It was a place of death, a place where nothing moved—until again the breeze that whirled gustily over the saw-tooth crags snatched at the sand in that lowest pit and drew it up in a spiral of dust.

The word was on Rawson's lips. "Dust—dust in the crater. Fool! I said I could read sign; I thought I was a desert man."

"Dust? And why shouldn't there be dust? How do you usually have your volcanoes arranged, old man?"

"Fine dust!" Rawson interrupted in the same whisper. He was glancing sharply about him as if in fear of being overheard. "See, the wind is blowing it. Coarse sand and pumice—that's to be expected; but light dust in a place that the winds have been sweeping for the last million years! I don't have them arranged that way, Smithy—not unless the sand has been recently disturbed!"

He moved soundlessly across the sand. There was no chance for concealment; the surface was too smooth for that. Yet he wished, as he moved onward down the long, gentle slope, that he had been able to keep under cover. In all the wide bowl of the great crater top was nothing but dead ashes of fires gone long centuries before, coarse, igneous rock—nothing to set the little nerves of one's spine to tingling. Rawson tried to tell himself he was alone. Even the gun in his hand seemed an absurd precaution. Yet he knew, with a certainty that went beyond mere seeing, that invisible eyes were upon him.

The blocks were massive when he drew near to them. They were buried in the sand, their sides like mirrors, their edges true and straight. "Crystals," Rawson tried to tell himself, but he knew they were not.

Gun in hand, he moved among the great rocks. Open sand lay beyond, running off at a steeper pitch to make a throat—a smaller pit in the great pit of the crater itself. Rawson noted it, then forgot it as he stooped for something that lay half hidden, its protruding end shining under the light of the stars, as he had seen it gleam before at the derrick's base.

He snatched up the metal tube, noting the lava tip, and that it was like the one Smithy had found in the ghost town. The tube, clearly,

was part of some other mechanism, and Rawson realized with startling suddenness that he was holding in his hand the jet of a flame-thrower—the same one, perhaps, that had almost sent him to his death.

The thought, while he was still thinking it, was blotted from his mind. He was thrown suddenly to the sandy earth; the sand was slipping swiftly from beneath his feet; he was scrambling on all fours, clawing wildly for some anchorage that would keep him from being swept away.

He touched a corner of shining stone, drew himself to it, reached its slanting side, then scrambled frenziedly to the top and threw himself about to face the place of slipping sands. But where the sand had been, his wildly glaring eyes found only a black hole—a vertical bore, like the ancient throat of the volcano; and this, like the tunnel in the sand, was lined with smooth and glistening glass.

It was black at first, a yawning, ominous maw, till the polished sides caught a reflection from below and blazed red with the glare of hidden fires.

No time was needed for Dean's quick searching eyes to grasp the meaning of the change. Whatever had menaced the camp had set this

trap. He swung sharply to leap from the block, but stopped at the sight of Smith's chunky figure coming slowly across the sand.

"Back!" he shouted. His voice was almost a scream, shrill and crackling with excitement. "Get back, Smithy! I'm coming!"

He would have leaped. Below the block the sand bulged upward as a yellow animal-thing came clawing up into the night. Dimly he saw it—saw this one and the others that must have been hidden in the sand. They were between him and Smithy! A blaze of red came from behind him—there must be others there! He snatched his gun from its holster as he turned.

Flames were hissing into the darkness, five or six of them in lines of hot crimson fire. They changed to green as he watched, and the livid light spread out in ghastly illumination over the creatures that directed them.

He saw them now—saw them in one age-long instant while he stood in horror on the black shining rock. He saw their heads, red-skinned, pointed, their staring eyes as large as saucers—owl-eyes. They were naked, and their bodies, that would have been almost crimson in the light of day, were blotched and ghastly in the green light. And each one held in long clawlike hands a thing of shining metal—a lava tip

like the one he had found projected and ended in the hissing line of green.

A flame slashed downward. For one sickening second he waited to feel the heat of it, though it was many feet away; in his mind he cringed involuntarily from the ripping knife-cut of the fiery blade that would blast the life from him; then he knew that the flame had passed—it was tearing at the rock beneath his feet. And the cold stone turned to liquid fire at that touch.

It leaped in a splashing fountain to the sand. The blaze turned the whole pit to flame. On even the farthest rugged crag of the crater's rim the red light glowed. Before Rawson could raise his own weapon the blast had torn the rock from beneath his feet. The great mass tipped, rolled. Rawson's arms were flung wide in an effort to save himself. Then below him was the black throat with its walls of glass: he was plunging headlong into it, turning as he fell—and somewhere, far down in that throat, was the red glow of waiting fires. He saw it again and again as he fell....

Chapter 7: The Ring

One of them pointed at the shaft Rawson had drilled.

“Smithy," Rawson had called him when he found the youngster fighting gamely with death in the heat of Tonah Basin. And Gordon Smith was the name on the company records. Yet he remained always "Smithy" to Rawson, and the name, which Rawson never ceased to believe was assumed, became a mark of the affection which can spring up between man and man.

Town after town is fired by the emerging Red Ones as Rawson lies helpless, a prisoner, far down in their home within the earth.

And now Smithy stood like a rigid carven statue in the midst of a barren sandy waste in the vast cup of a towering volcano top—sand that was in reality coarse pumice and ash. This was a place of death, a place where raging fires had left nothing for plant or animal life. And, over all, the desert stars shone down coldly and added to the desolation with their own pale light.

Smithy had seen Rawson pull himself to the top of the great square-

edged rock. Sensing that danger of some sort was threatening, he had started to run to the aid of the struggling man. Then came Rawson's cry.

"Back!" he shouted. "Get back, Smithy! I'm coming—"

But he did not come; and Smithy, halted by the command, was frozen to sudden, panic-stricken immobility by that which followed.

He saw the leaping things, like grotesque yellow giants. They came from the sand; then red ones leaped up from the open throat that had suddenly formed. They held flame throwers, the red ones; and the green lines of fire melted the rock from beneath Rawson's feet. All in the one second's time, it was done, and Rawson's body, his arms wide flung, was hurtling downward into the waiting throat and the threatening red glow from within. Then the carriers of the flame throwers vanished again into the pit, and there was left only a huddle of giant figures that tore at the loose sand and ash with their hands.

They threw the material in a continuous stream; the air was full of cascading sand. To Smithy they were suddenly inhuman—they were almost animals; men like moles. And they and their companions had captured Dean Rawson—sent him to his death. Slowly the watching man raised himself from the crouched position that had kept him

hidden.

They were through with their work, these great yellow-skinned naked men—or mole-men. Six of them—Smithy counted them slowly before he took aim—and two were armed with flame-throwers.

Smithy rested his arm across the little hummock of gritty ash that had sheltered him and sent six flashes of flame through the night toward the cluster of bodies.

He made no attempt to aim at each individual—the shapes were too shadowy for that. And he had no knowledge of what other weapons they might have. One thing was sure: he must take no chances on facing the red ones single-handed. He rammed his empty pistol back into its holster as he turned and ran—ran with every ounce of energy he possessed to drive his flying feet across the crater floor, out through the cleft in the rocks and down the steep mountainside.

He was stunned by the suddenness of the catastrophe that had overtaken them. The horror of Dean Rawson's going; the fearful reality of those "devils from hell" that old Riley had seen—it was all too staggering, too numbing, for easy acceptance. Time was required for the truth to sink in; and through the balance of the night Smithy

had plenty of time to think.

He dared not go back to the camp where ripping flashes of green light told him the enemy was at work. And then, even had it been possible to creep up on them in the darkness, that one chance vanished as the desert about the camp sprang into view. One after another the buildings burst into flame, and Smithy was thankful for the concealment of the vast, empty desert.

The embers were still glowing when he dared go near. This enemy, it seemed, worked only at night, and Smithy waited only for the sun to show above distant purple ranges. It had been their enemy once, that fiercely hot sun; they had fought against the heat—but never had the sun wrought such destruction as this.

Smithy looked from haggard, hopeless eyes upon the wreckage of Rawson's camp. For the men who had worked there, this had meant only a job; to Smithy it had been a fight against the desert which had defeated him once. But to Rawson it meant the fruit of years of effort, the goal of his dreams brought almost within his reach.

Smithy looked at the smoldering heaps of gray where an idle wind puffed playfully at fluffy ash or fanned a bed of coals to flame. Twisted steel of the wrecked derrick was still further distorted; the

enemy had ripped it to pieces with his stabbing flames. Even the unused materials, the steel and cement that had been neatly stacked for future use—the flames had been turned on it all.

And Smithy, though his voice broke almost boyishly from his repressed emotion, spoke aloud in solemn promise:

"It's too late to help you, Dean. I'll go back to town, report to the men who were back of you, and then.... They're going to pay, Dean! Whoever—whatever—they are, they're going to pay!"

He turned away toward the mountains and the ribbon of road that wound off toward the canyon. Then, at some recollection, he swung back.

"The cable's still down—he would have wanted it left all shipshape," he whispered.

Where the derrick had stood was the mouth of the twenty-inch casing. The cable that ran from it was entangled with the wreckage of the derrick, but it had not been cut. Smithy set doggedly to work.

A little gin-pole and light tackle allowed him to erect a heavier tripod of steel beams; it hoisted the big sheave block into place, and

gave Smithy's two hands the strength of twenty to rig a temporary hoist. The juice was still on the main feed line, and the hoisting motors hummed at his touch. The ten miles of cable wound slowly onto the drums.

"It's nonsense, I suppose," he told himself silently. But something drove him to do this last thing—to leave it all as Rawson would have had it.

The long bailer came out at last; there was just room to hoist it clear and let it drop back upon the drilling floor. A glint of gold flashed in the sunlight as Smithy let the long metal tube down, and he broke into voluble cursing at sight of the bit of metal that was caught near the bailer's top.

The gold had started it all! That first finding of the gold on the big drill had begun it.... He crossed swiftly to the gleaming thing that seemed somehow to symbolize his loss.

He stooped to reach for it, intending to throw it as far as he could. Instead he stood in an awkward stooping attitude—stood so while the long uncounted minutes passed....

His eyes that stared and stared in disbelief seemed suddenly to have

turned traitor. They were telling him that they saw a ring—a cameo—jammed solidly into the shackle at the bailer's end. And that ring, when last he had seen it, had been on Dean Rawson's hand! Dean had caught it; he had hooked it over a lever in this very place—and now, from ten miles down inside the solid earth, it had returned. It meant—it meant....

But the stocky, broad-shouldered youngster known as Smithy dared not think what it meant. Nor had he time to follow the thought; he was too busily engaged in running at suicidal speed across the hot sand toward barren mountains where a ribbon of road showed through quivering air.

Chapter 8: The Darkness

Darkness; and red fires that seemed whirling about him as his body twisted in air. To Dean Rawson, plunging down into the volcano's maw, each second was an eternity, for, in each single instant, he was expecting crashing death.

Then he knew that long arms were wrapped about him, holding him, supporting him, checking his downward plunge ... and at last the glassy walls, where each bulbous irregularity shone red with reflected light, moved slowly past. And, after more eons of time, a rocky floor rose slowly to meet him.

His body crashed gently; he was sprawled face downward on stone that was smooth and cold. The restraining arms no longer touched him.

He lay motionless for some time, his mind as stunned and uncomprehending as if he had truly crashed to death upon that rocky floor. Then, at last, he forced his reluctant nerves and muscles to turn his body till he lay face upward.

Darkness wrapped him as if it were the soft swathing of some black cocoon. The world about him was at first a place of utter night-time

blackness; and then, far above him, there shone a single star ... until that feeble candle-gleam, too, was snuffed out.

A hand was gripping his shoulder; it seemed urging him to arise. He felt each separate finger—long, slender, like bands of steel. The nail at each finger-end was more nearly a claw, the whole hand a thin, clutching thing like the foot of some giant ape. And, even as he shrank involuntarily from that touch, Rawson wondered how the creature could reach out and grip him so surely in the dark. But he came to his feet in response to that urging hand.

The night was suddenly sibilant with eery, whistling voices. They came from all sides at once; they threw themselves back and forth in endless echoes. To Rawson it was only a confused medley of conflicting sounds in which no one voice was clear. But the creature that held him must have understood, for he heard him reply in a sharp, piercing tone, half whistle, half shriek.

What had happened? Where was he? What was this thing that pushed him, stumbling, along through the dark? With all his tumultuous questioning he knew only one thing definitely: that it would be of no use to struggle. He was as helpless as any trapped animal.

He was inside the earth, of course; he had fallen he had no least idea how far; and, in some strange manner, this long-armed thing had supported him and eased him gently down. But what it meant or what lay ahead were matters too obscure for him to try to see clearly.

He held his hands protectingly before him while the talons gripping into his shoulder hurried him along. He stumbled awkwardly as his foot struck an obstruction. He would have fallen but for the grip that held him erect.

For that creature, whatever it was, the darkness held no uncertainty. He moved swiftly. His shrill shriek and the jerk of his arm both gave evidence of his astonishment that his captive should walk so blunderingly.

Then it seemed that he must have comprehended Rawson's blindness. A green line of light passed close behind Dean's head. It was cold—there was no radiant warmth—but, when it struck the face of a wall of stone some twenty feet away, the solid rock turned instantly to a mass of glowing yellow-red.

The cold green ray swung back and forth, leaving a path of radiant rock behind it wherever it touched. And the rock was hot! Once the green light held more than an instant in one place, and the rock

softened at its touch, then splashed and trickled down to make a fiery pool.

Abruptly Rawson was able to see his surroundings. Also, he knew the source of the red glow that had seemed like volcanic fires. There had been others like his captor; they had been down below, and had played their flames upon the rocks deep in the volcano. It was thus that they made light.

With equal suddenness, and with terrible clearness, Dean found the answer to one of his questions. He wrenched himself about to stare behind him at the creature that held him in its grip. And, for the first time, the wild experience became something more than an unbelievable nightmare; in that one horrifying instant he knew it was true.

Only a few minutes before, he had been walking across the cindery sand of the crater top, walking under the stars and the dark desert sky—Dean Rawson, mining engineer, in a sane, believable world. And now...!

He squinted his eyes in the dim light to see more plainly the beastly figure, more horrible for being so nearly human. He had seen them briefly up above; the closer view of this one specimen of a strange

race was no more pleasing. For now he saw clearly the cruelty in the face. It was there unmistakably, even though the face itself, under less threatening circumstances, might have been a ludicrous caricature of a man's.

Red and nearly naked, the creature stood upright, straps of metal about its body. It was about Rawson's height; its round, staring eyes were about level with his own, and each eye was centered in a circular disk of whitish skin. The light went dim for a moment, and Dean, staring in his turn, saw those other huge eyes enlarge, the white covering of each drawing back like an expanding iris.

Some vague understanding came to him of the beast's ability to see in the dark. They used these red-hot stones for illumination, but this thing had seemed to see clearly even when the stones had ceased to glow. And again, though indistinctly, Dean knew that those eyes might be sensitive to infra-red radiations—they might see plainly by the dark light that continued to flood these rocky chambers, though, to him, the rocks had gone lightless and black.

Even as the quick thoughts flashed through his mind, he was thinking other thoughts, recording other observations.

The rest of the face was red like the body; the head was sharply

pointed, and crowned with a mass of thin, clinging locks of hair. The mouth, a round, lipless orifice, contracted or dilated at will; from it came whistling words.

Out of the darkness, giant things were leaping. They clutched at Rawson, while the first captor released his hold and drew back. Taller, these newcomers were, bigger, and different.

In the red light from the hot rocks Dean saw their faces, in which were owl eyes like those of the first one, but yellow, expressionless and stupid. Their great bodies were yellow: their outstretched hands were webbed.

For one instant, as Rawson's hand touched his pistol in its holster, a surge of fighting rage swept through him. His whole being was in a spasm of revolt against all this series of happenings that had trapped him; he wanted to lash out regardless of consequences. Then cooler judgment came to his aid.

Other figures, with faces red and ugly, expressive of nameless evil, were gathered beside the one who still played the jet of cold fire upon the walls. Like him they were naked save for a cloth at the waist and the metal straps encircling their bodies. They, too, had flame-throwers—he saw the long metal jets and their lava tips. Yet

the temptation to fire into that group as fast as he could pull trigger was strong upon him.

Instead he allowed these other giant things to grip him with their webbed hands and lead him away.

The wavering light had shown many passages through the rock. Glazed, all of them. Either they had been blown through molten rock which had then solidified to give the glassy surfaces, or else—and this seemed more likely—the flame-throwers had done it. Rawson, scanning the labyrinth for some recognizable strata, had a quick vision of these caverns being cut out and enlarged, and of their walls melted just as they were being melted now—melted and hardened again innumerable times by succeeding generations of red and yellow-skinned men.

Yes, they were men. He admitted this while he walked unresistingly between two of the giants. Another went before them and lighted the way with the green ray of a flame-thrower on the melting rock. These were men—men of a different sort. Evolution, working strange changes underground, had made them half beasts, diggers in the dark, mole-men!

They were passing through a long tunnel that went steadily down.

Cross passages loomed blackly; ahead of them the leader was throwing his flame upon the walls of a great vault.

Rawson had ceased to take note of their movements. What use to remember? He could never escape, never retrace his steps.

He tried to whip up a faint flicker of hope at thought of Smithy. Smithy had seen him go, had seen the red mole-men, of course. And he had got away—he must have got away! He would go for help....

But, at that, he groaned inwardly. Smithy would go for help, and then what? He would be laughed out of any sheriff's office; he would be locked up as insane if he persisted. Why should he persist—for that matter, why should he go at all? Smithy would not believe for a single minute that Rawson was still alive.

His thoughts ended. Webbed hands, wrapped tightly about his arms, were thrusting him forward into a great room. The green flame had been snapped off. One last hot circle on the high wall showed only a dull red. But before it faded, Dean saw dimly the outlines of a tremendous cavern. He saw also that these walls were unglazed, raw; they had never been melted.

Below the rough and shattered sides heaps of fragments were piled

about the room.

Fleetingly he saw the shadowed details; then darkness swallowed even that little he had seen. Clanging metal told of a closing door; a line of red outlined it for an instant to show where it was welded fast. He was a prisoner in a cell whose walls were the living rock.

For a long time he stood motionless, while the heavy darkness pressed heavily in upon his swimming senses; he sank slowly to the floor at last. He was numbed, and his mind was as blank as the black nothingness that spread before his staring eyes. In a condition almost of coma, he had no measure or count of the hours that passed.

Then a fever of impatience possessed him; his thoughts, springing suddenly to life, were too wildly improbable for any sane mind, were driving him mad. He forced himself to move cautiously.

On the floor he had seen burnished gold, shining dully as he entered. There had been a thick vein of yellow in the rock. The floor, at that place, was rough beneath his feet, as if the hot metal had been spilled.

His hands groped before him as he remembered the heaps of rock fragments. Then his feet found one of them stumblingly, and he

turned and moved to one side. He remembered having seen a dim shape off there that had made a straight slanting line. His searching hands encountered the object and kept him from walking into it.

The feeling of helplessness that drove him was only being increased by his blind and blundering movements. He told himself that he must wait.

Silently he stood where he had come to a stop, hands resting on the object that barred his way—until suddenly, stiflingly, his breath caught in his throat. Some emotion, almost too great to be borne, was suffocating him.

Slowly he moved his hands. Inch by inch he felt his way around the smooth cylinder, so hard, so coldly metallic. Then, with a rush, he let his hands follow up the slanting thing, up to a rounded top, to a heavy ring and a shackle that was on the end of a cable, thin and taut. And, while his hands explored it feverishly, the metal moved!

He clung to the smooth roundness as it slipped through his hands. It was the bailer, part of his own equipment. That slender cable reached up, straight up to the world he knew. And Smithy was there—Smithy was hoisting it!

He clung to the cylinder desperately. The bore, at this depth, had been reduced to eight inches; the bailer fitted it loosely. And Rawson cursed frantically the narrow space that would let this inanimate object return but would hold him back, while he wrapped his arms about the cold surface of the metal messenger from another world.

It lifted clear, then settled back. This time it dropped noisily to the floor. And suddenly Dean was tearing at the ring on one of the swollen fingers of his left hand.

It came free at last; it was in his hand as the cable tightened again. Swiftly, surely, he worked in the darkness to jam the ring through the shackle at the bailer's top. Then the bailer lifted, clanged loudly as it entered the shattered bore in the rocks above, and scraped noisily at the sides. The sound rose to a rasping shriek that went fainter and still fainter till it dwindled into silence.

But Dean Rawson, standing motionless in the darkness of that buried vault, dared once more to let himself think and *feel* as he stared blindly upward.

Up there Smithy was waiting. Smithy would know. And with Smithy fighting from the outside and he, Rawson, putting up a scrap below.... He smiled almost happily as his hand rested upon his gun.

Hopeless? Of course it was hopeless. No use of really kidding himself—he didn't have the chance of a pink-eyed rabbit.

But he was still smiling toward that dark roof overhead as the outlines of a metal door grew cherry red. They were coming for him! He was ready to meet whatever lay ahead....

Chapter 9: A Subterranean World

The metal plate that had sealed him in this tomb fell open with a crash. Beyond it the passageway was alive with crowding red figures. Above their heads the nozzles of a score of flame-throwers spat jets of green fire. Rawson drew back in sudden uncontrollable horror as they came crowding into the room.

The familiar feel of the bailer's cold metal had given him a momentary sense of oneness with his own world. Now this inrush of hideous, demoniac figures beneath the flare of green flames was like a fevered vision of the infernal regions come suddenly to actuality.

Rawson retreated to the shattered, rocky wall and prepared for one last fight, until he realized that the evil black eyes in their ghastly circles of white skin were fixed upon him more in curiosity than in active hatred.

They formed a semicircle about him—a wall of red bodies, whose pointed heads were craned forward, while an excited chatter in their broken, whistling speech filled the room with shrill clamor. Then one of them pointed above toward the open shaft that Rawson had drilled, the shaft up which the bailer had gone. And again their voices rose in weird discord, while their long arms waved, and red,

lean-fingered hands pointed.

Only a moment of this, then one of them gave an order. Two of the red figures came toward Rawson where he was waiting. They were unarmed. They motioned that he was to go with them. And Dean, with a helpless shrug of his shoulders, allowed them, one on each side, to take him by the arms and hurry him through the open door. Two others went ahead, the green jets of flame from their weapons lighting the passage.

The system of communicating tunnels seemed at first only the vents and blow-holes from some previous volcanic activity. And yet, at times they gave place to more regular arrangement that plainly was artificial. The air in them was pure, though odorous with a pungent tang which Dean could not identify. Through some of the passages it blew gently with uncomfortable warmth.

The guard of wild red figures hurried him along through a vast world of caverns and winding passages which seemed one great mine. The richness of it was amazing. Dean Rawson was a man, a human being, facing death in some form which he could not yet know, and, so fast had his wild experiences crowded in upon him, he seemed numbed to all normal emotions; yet through it all the mind of the engineer was at work, and Dean's eyes were flashing from side to

side, trying to see and understand the ever-changing panorama of a subterranean world.

Mole-men, both red and yellow, were everywhere. But it was apparent at a glance that the yellow giants were a race of toilers—slaves, driven by the reds.

Their great bodies glowed orange-colored with the reflected heat of the blasts of flame used to melt the metals from their ores. Gold and silver, other metals that Rawson could not distinguish in the half light—the glow of the molten stuff came from every distant cave that the passages opened up.

The sheer marvel of it overwhelmed him. His own danger, even the death that waited for him, were forgotten.

A world within a world—and who knew how far it extended? Mole-men, by scores and hundreds, the denizens of a great subterranean world, of which his own world had been in ignorance. Here was civilization of a sort, and now the barriers that had separated this world from the world above had been broken down; the two were united. Suddenly there came to Rawson's mind a flashing comprehension of a menace wild and terrible that had come with the breaking of those barriers.

They were passing through a wider hall when the whistling chatter of Dean's escort ceased. They were looking to one side where a cloud of smoke had rolled from a slope beyond. One of the red figures staggered, choking, from the cloud. Two yellow mole-men followed closely after.

The red mole-man was unarmed; each yellow one had a flame-thrower that was now so familiar a sight to Dean. His own escort was silent; they had halted, watching those others expectantly.

In the silence of that rocky room the single red one whistled an order. One of the two yellow men placed his weapon on the floor. Another shrill order followed, and the remaining worker, without a moment's hesitation, turned the green blast of his own projector upon his comrade.

It was done in a second—a second in which the giant's shriek ended in a flash of flame for which his own flesh was the fuel. A wisp of drifting smoke, and that was all. And the red creatures who had Rawson in their charge, after a moment of silence, filled the room with shrill-voiced pandemonium, while they shrieked their approval of the spectacle.

But Dean Rawson's lips were forming half-whispered words, so

intently was he thinking the thoughts. "The damned red beast! That poor devil's flame hit some sulphur, I suppose—burned it to SO_2—then he got his!"

But, even while he searched his mind for words to describe the evil of this red race, he was realizing another fact. These yellow giants, countless thousands of them, perhaps, were held in subjection by their red masters. They would do as they were told. Dimly, vaguely, through his horrified mind, came the picture of a horde of red and yellow beasts turned loose upon the world above.

There were fears now which filled Dean Rawson, shook him with horrors as yet only half comprehended. But the fears were not for himself, one solitary man in the grip of these red beasts—he was fearing for all mankind.

His guard was hurrying him on, but now Dean hardly saw the scenes of feverish activity through which they passed. Another thought had come to him.

That shaft, the hole which he himself had drilled—what damage had it done? It was he who had broken down the barriers. His drill had told these beasts that there was other life above. It had guided them. They had realized that they were near to some other place where

men worked and drove tunnels through the rocks. They had followed up these forgotten passages that led to the old craters, had ascended inside the volcano, made their way through the top and emerged into another world—a clean and sunlit world.

Now Rawson's eyes found with new understanding the activity about him.

The mining operations had been left behind. Here were branching passages, great cavelike rooms—a world within a world, in all truth. Throughout it, demoniac figures were hurrying, driving thousands of giant yellow slaves where the light shone sparkling from innumerable heaps of metal weapons—flame-throwers and others, the nature of which Rawson could not determine. And everywhere was the shouting and hurry as of a nation in the throes of war.

His speculations ended abruptly. They were approaching a room, a vast open place. High on the farther wall was a recess in the rock in which tongues of flame licked hungrily upward. The heat of the fires struck down in a ceaseless hot blast. Close to the fires, unmindful of the heat, a barbaric figure assumed grotesque and horrible postures, while its voice rose in echoing shrillness.

Below were crowding red ones who prostrated themselves on the

rocky floor.

"Fire worshipers!" The explanatory thought flashed through Dean Rawson's mind. "Here was one of their holy places, a place of sacrifice, perhaps, and he was being taken there, helpless, a captive!"

Chapter 10: Plumb Loco

The sheriff of Cocos County was reacting exactly as Rawson had anticipated. Smithy stood before him, a disheveled Smithy, grimy of face and hands. He had made his way to the highway and caught a ride to the nearest town, and now that he had found Jack Downer, sheriff, that gentleman leaned back in his old chair behind the battered desk and regarded the younger man with amused tolerance.

"Now, that's right interesting, what you say," he admitted. "Tonah Basin, and the old crater, and red devils settin' fire to everything. I've heard some wild ones since this Prohibition went into effect and some of the boys started makin' their own, but yours sure beats 'em all. Guess likely I'll have to take a run up Tonah way and see what kind of cactus liquor they're makin'."

"Meaning I'm drunk or a liar." Smithy's voice was hot with sudden anger, but the sheriff regarded him imperturbably.

"Well, I'd let you off on one count, son. You do look sort of sober."

Smithy disregarded the plain implication and fought down the anger that possessed him.

"May I use your phone, Mr. Downer?" he asked.

He called the office of Erickson and his associates in Los Angeles and told, as well as he could for the constant interruptions from his listener, the story of what had occurred. And Mr. Erickson at the other end of the line, although he used different words, gave somewhat the same reply as had the sheriff.

"I refuse to listen to any more such wild talk," he said. "If our property has been destroyed, as you say, there will be an accounting, you may be sure of that. And now, Mr. Smith, get this straight, you tell Rawson, wherever he is hiding, to come and see me at once."

"But I tell you he has been captured," said Smithy desperately. "He's gone."

"I rather think we will find him," was the reply. "He had better come of his own accord. His connection with us will be severed and all drilling operations in Tonah Basin will be discontinued, but Mr. Rawson will find that his responsibility is not so easily evaded."

The sheriff could not have failed to realize the unsatisfactory nature of the conversation; he must have wondered at the satisfied grin that spread across Smithy's tired face.

"Do you mean you're through?" he demanded. "You're abandoning Rawson's work?"

"Exactly," was Mr. Erickson's crisp response.

Smithy, as the telephone clicked in his ear, turned again to the sheriff. "That unties my hands," he said cryptically. "One more call, if you please."

Then to the operator: "Get me the offices of the Mountain Power and Lighting Corporation in San Francisco. I will talk with the president."

The sheriff of Cocos County chuckled audibly. "You'll talk to the president's sixteenth assistant secretary, son," he told Smithy. "And I take back what I said before—now I know you're plumb loco. By the way, son, it costs money for telephone calls like that. I hope you ain't, by any chance, overlookin'—"

But Smithy was speaking into the telephone unmindful of the sheriff's remarks.

"Is Mr. Smith in his office?" he was inquiring. "Yes, President Smith.... Would you connect me with him at once, please? This is

Gordon Smith talking."

"Hello, Dad," he said a moment later. "Yes, that's right. It's the prodigal himself. Now, listen, Dad, here's something important. Can you meet me in Sacramento and arrange for us to see the Governor —get his private, confidential ear? I'll beat it for Los Angeles— charter the fastest plane they've got...."

There was more to the conversation, much more, although Smithy refrained from giving details over the phone. An operator was breaking in on the conversation as he was about to hang up.

"Emergency call," the young woman's voice was saying. "We must have the line at once."

Smithy handed the telephone to the sheriff. "Someone's anxious to talk to you," he said. He searched his pockets hurriedly, found a ten-dollar bill which he laid on the sheriff's desk. "That will cover it," he said with a new note in his voice. "Perhaps you're not just the man for this job, sheriff. It's going to be a whole lot too hot for you to handle."

He had turned quickly toward the door, but something in the sheriff's excited voice checked him. "Burned? Wiped out, you say?"

Halfway across the room Smithy could hear another hoarse voice in the telephone. The sheriff repeated the words. "Red devils! They wasn't Injuns? The whole town of Seven Palms destroyed!"

"I thought," said Smithy softly to himself, "that we'd have to go down *there* to find *them*, and instead they're out looking for us. Yes, I think this will be decidedly too hot for you to handle, sheriff." He turned and bolted out the door.

An attentive audience was awaiting Gordon Smith on his arrival in Sacramento. Smithy's father was not one to be kept waiting even by the Governor of the state. Also, Smithy was coming from the Tonah Basin region, and the news of the destruction of the desert town of Seven Palms had preceded him. Even the swift planes of the Coastal Service could not match the speed of the radio news.

There were only two men in the room when Smithy entered. One of them, tall, heavily built, as square-shouldered as Smithy, came forward and put his two hands on the young man's shoulders. Their greetings were brief.

"Well, son?" asked the older man, and packed a world of questioning into the interrogation.

"O. K., Dad," said Smithy simply.

His father nodded silently and turned to the other man. "Governor, my son, Gordon. He got tired of being known as the 'Old Man's son'—started out on his own—not looking for adventure exactly, but I judge he has found it. He's got something to tell us."

And again Smithy told his wild, unbelievable tale. But it was not so incredible now, for, even while Smithy was talking, the Governor was glancing at the report on his desk which told of the destruction of the little town of Seven Palms.

"I can't tell you what it means," Smithy concluded. He paused before venturing a prediction which was to prove remarkably accurate. "But I saw them—I saw them come up out of the earth, and I'm betting there are plenty more where they came from. And now that they've found their way out, we've got a scrap on our hands. And don't think they're not fighters, either. They're armed—those flame-throwers are nothing we can laugh off, and what else they've got, we don't know."

He leaned forward earnestly across the Governor's desk. "But that's your job," he said. "Mine is to find Dean Rawson. He's alive, or he was. He sent up his ring as proof of it. I've got to find him—I've got to go down in that pit and I want your help."

Chapter 11: The White-Hot Pit

How far his guard of wild, red man-things had taken him Dean Rawson could not know. Many miles, it must have been. And he knew that the air had grown steadily more stiflingly hot. But the heat of those long tunneled passages was like a cool breeze compared with the blasting breath of the room into which he was plunged.

It seared his eyeballs; it struck down from the tongues of flame that played in red fury in the recess high up on the farther wall. And the vast room, the fires, the hundreds of kneeling figures, all blurred and swam dizzily before him.

The hot air that he breathed seemed crisping his lungs. Vaguely, for the stupefying, brain-numbing heat, he wondered at the figure he saw dimly in its grotesque posturing close to the flames. And the hundreds of others—how could they live? How could he himself go on living in this inferno?

They had been chanting in unison, the kneeling red ones. Dean heard the regular beat of their repeated words change to an uproar of shrill, whistling voices. But he could neither see nor hear plainly for the unbearable, suffocating heat.

The clamor was deafening, confusing; it echoed tremendously in the rocky room and mingled with the steady, continuous roar of the flames. The mass of bodies that surged about him made only a blurring impression; he tried to make himself see clearly. He must fight—fight to the last! Only this thought persisted. He was striking out blindly when he knew that his red guard had cleared a way through the mob and was dragging him forward.

He knew when they reached the farther wall. Somewhere above him was the deep-cut niche in which the fires roared. And then, when again he could see from his tortured eyes, he found directly ahead another doorway in the solid rock. Beyond it all was black; it gave promise of coolness, of relief from the stifling air of the room. Red hands were thrusting him through.

The burst of water, icy cold, that descended upon him from above shocked him from the stupor that claimed his senses. He was drenched in an instant, strangling and gasping for breath. But he could think! And, as the lean hands seized him again and hurried him forward, he almost dared to hope.

To his eyes the passageway was a place of utter darkness, but the red ones, their great owl eyes opened wide, hurried him on. His stumbling feet encountered a flight of steps. With the red guard he

climbed a winding stair where the tunnel twisted upward.

That icy deluge had set every nerve aquiver with new life. He hardly dared ask himself what might lie ahead. Yet he had been saved from that mob; it might be his life would be spared, that in some way he could learn to communicate with these people, learn more of this subterranean world—which must be of tremendous extent. Without any sure knowledge of their plans, he still was certain in his own mind that they intended to swarm out upon the upper world. He might even be able to show them the folly of that.

A thousand thoughts were flashing through his mind when the tunnel ended. Beyond a square-cut opening the air was aglow with red. An ominous thunder was in his ears. Then a score of hands lifted him bodily and threw him out upon a rocky floor that burned his hands as he fell.

Heat, blistering, unbearable, beat upon him. He was wrapped in quick-rising clouds of steam from his wet clothes.

The platform ended. Far below was a sea of red faces, grotesque and horrible, where each held two ghastly white disks, and at the center of each disk a mere pinpoint eye.

He saw it all in the instant of his falling—the inhuman, shrieking mob, the blast of hot flame not forty feet away at the back of the rocky niche, and, between himself and the flame, a giant figure that leaped exultantly, while its body, that appeared carved from metallic copper, reflected the red fires until it seemed itself aflame.

Dean knew in the fraction of a second while he scrambled to his feet, that the great room had gone silent. The roaring of the flames ceased; even the clamor of shrill voices was stilled. He had thrown one arm across his face to shield his eyes; the heat still poured upon him like liquid fire. But his instant decision to throw himself out and down into the waiting mob was checked by the sudden stillness.

To open his eyes wide meant impossible torture, yet he forced himself to peer through slitted lids beneath the shelter of his arm.

The flame was gone. Where it had been was a wall of shimmering red rock above a gaping throat in the floor, whose rim was quivering white with heat. Here the blast from some volcanic depth had come.

Then he saw it, saw the great coppery figure leaping upon him—and saw more plainly than all this the end that had been prepared for him.

Fire worshipers! Demons of an under world paying tribute to their god. And he, Dean Rawson, was to be a living sacrifice, cast headlong to that waiting, white-hot throat!

The coppery giant was upon him in the instant of his realization. Somehow in that moment Dean Rawson's wracked body passed beyond all pain. With the inhuman, maniacal strength of a man driven beyond all reason and restraint he tore himself half free from those encircling arms and drove blow after blow into the hideous face above him.

Only his left arm was free. That, too, was clamped tightly against his body an instant later.

The giant had been between him and the glowing rocks. Now he felt himself whirled in air, and again the blast of heat struck upon him. He was being rushed backward; and there flashed through his mind, as plainly as if he could actually see it, the scintillant whiteness of that hungry throat.

He tried to lock his legs about the big body to prevent that final heave and throw that would end a ghastly ceremony. The rocks were close, their radiant heat wrapped about him like a living flame. Abruptly his strength was gone—the fight was over—he had lost!

His heart sent the blood pounding and thundering to his brain; his lungs seemed on fire.

The high priest of the red ones had his priestly duty to perform—the sacrifice must be offered. But even the high priest, it would seem, must have been not above personal resentment. Sacrilege had been done—a fist had smashed again and again into the holy one's face. This it must have been that made him pause, that brought one big hand up in a grip of animal rage about Dean's throat.

Only a moment—a matter of seconds—while he vented his fury upon this white-skinned man who had dared to oppose him. Dean felt the hand close about his throat. So limp he was, so drained of strength, he made no effort to tear it loose. He was *dead*—what mattered a few seconds more or less of life? And then a thrill shot through him as he knew his right hand was free.

That hand made fumbling work of drawing a gun from its smoking, leather holster. He could hardly control the numbed, blistered fingers, yet somehow he crooked one about the trigger; and dimly, as from some great distance, he heard the roar of the forty-five.... Then, from some deep recess within him, he summoned one last ounce of strength that threw him clear of the falling body.

Instinctively he had heaved himself away from the fiery rocks; the same effort had sent his big coppery antagonist staggering, stumbling, backward. And Dean, sprawled on the stone floor, whose heat where he lay was just short of redness, heard one long, despairing shriek as the giant figure wavered, hung in air for a moment in black outline against the fierce red of a rocky wall above a white-hot pit, then toppled, pitched forward, and vanished.

Sick and giddy, he forced himself to draw his body up on hands and knees. Then he straightened, came to his feet, and staggered forward.

Below him was pandemonium. The sea of faces wavered and blurred before his eyes. From a distant archway other figures were coming. He saw the gleam of metal, heard the wild blare of trumpets, and knew that the hundreds of red ones below him were standing stiffly, both hands raised upright in salute as another barbaric figure entered. The air was clamorous with a shrill repeated call. "Phee-e-al!" the red ones shrieked. "Phee-e-al!"

But Rawson did not wait to see more. Behind him, the flames that had been fed with human flesh—if indeed these red ones were human—roared again into life. He had returned the pistol to its holster when first he came to his feet; his weak hands had seemed unable to hold it. And now his two hands were thrust outward before

him as he staggered blindly toward the tunnel mouth.

It was where he had emerged upon the platform. His reaching hands found the side entrance where the stairs led down to the main hall. In the darkness he made his way past. Stumbling weakly he pushed on down the long tunnel whose floor slanted gently away.

Ahead of him was a light. The comparative coolness of these rocks had served to revive him somewhat. He had no hope of escape, yet the light seemed comforting, somehow.

He stopped. His stinging eyes were wide open. He stared incredulously at the glowing spot on a distant wall, where a flame must have touched, and at the figure beneath it.

The figure of a woman! A young woman, tall, slender, fair-haired, whose skin was white, a creamy white, whiter than snow.

A woman? It was a mere girl, slender and beautiful, her graceful young body poised as if, in quick flight, she had been caught and held for a moment of stillness.

What was she doing here? His exhausted brain could not comprehend what it meant. He had seen women of the Mole-men

tribe mingling with the men. Like them their heads were pointed, their faces grotesque and hideous. Rawson gave an inarticulate cry of amazement and staggered forward.

Between him and the distant figure a crowd of Reds swarmed in. They came from a connecting passage. Above their heads the lava tips of flame-throwers were spitting jets of green fire. Every face was turned toward him at his cry.

Beyond them the white figure vanished. Dean, leaning weakly against the wall, told himself dully that it had been a phantom, a product of his own despairing brain and his own weakness. Then that weakness overcame him; and the red Mole-men, their white and hideous eyes, the threatening jets of green flame, all vanished in the quick darkness that swept over him....

Chapter 12: Dreams

The black curtain of unconsciousness which descended so quickly upon Rawson was not easily thrown off. For hours, days or weeks—he never knew how long he lay in the citadel of the Reds—it was to wrap him around.

Nor was his waking a matter of a moment. Many and varied were the impressions which came to him in times of semiconsciousness, and which of them were realities and which dreams, he could not tell.

He was being tortured with knives, lances tipped with pain that dragged him up from the black depths in which he lay. Dimly he realized that his clothes were being stripped from him and that the piercing knives were none the less real for being only the touch of hands and rough cloth upon his blistered body. Then from head to foot he was coated with a substance cool and moist. The pain died to a mere throbbing and again he felt himself sinking back into unconsciousness.

There were other visions, many others, some of them plain and distinct, some blurred and terrifying to his fevered brain trying vainly to bring order and reason into what was utterly chaotic.

Once a bedlam of shrieking voices roused him. He tried to open his eyes, whose lids were too heavy for his strength. And by that he knew he was dreaming. Yet from under those lowered lids he seemed to see a wild medley of red warriors, their faces blotched and ghastly in the green light of their weapons. They were carrying a charred body which they threw heavily upon the floor beside him as if to compare the two. He saw the face which the flames had not touched, the face of Jack Downer—Downer, the sheriff of Cocos County. His sandy hair had been scorched to the scalp.

Dreams ... and the steady beat of metal-shod feet of marching men. He saw them passing some distance away. The repeated *thud-thud* of metal on stone echoed maddeningly through his brain for hours.... Dreams, all of them.

And once there came to him a vision which beyond all doubt was unreal.

Silence had surrounded him. For what seemed hours not one of the red mole-men had come near. And then, in the silence, he heard whisperings and the sound of stealthy feet; and, for a moment, the same white figure that had met him in his flight stood where he could see.

Only the merest trace of dim light relieved the utter darkness of the room. The girl's figure was ghostly, unreal. Yet he saw the dull sparkle of jeweled breast-plates against her creamy white skin. Loose folds of cloth were gathered about her waist; her golden hair was drawn back except for vagrant curls that only accentuated the perfect oval of her face.

There were others with her, dim shapes of men; how many Rawson could not tell. They looked down at him, whispering softly, excitedly, amongst themselves; but their words were like nothing he had ever heard.

For an instant Dean felt his stupefied mind coming almost to wakefulness. Phantom figures, ghostly and unreal—but the faces were human, and the eyes looked down upon him pityingly. He tried to rouse himself, tried to call out, then settled limply back, for the girl was speaking—or he was catching her thoughts. It seemed almost that he heard her whispered words:

"They take him to *Gevarro*, to the Lake of Fire which never dies! Gor told me—he overheard their plans. But, by the Mountain I swear...." Then footsteps echoed in a far-off passage, and the white ones vanished like drifting smoke.

Dreams, all of them. Yet the time came when Dean knew that he was awake—knew too that further experiences awaited him in this demoniac land.

Again red guards came. The wicked breath of their weapons filled the great room where Rawson had been with green, flickering light. Dean, dragged to his feet, was unable to stand. One of the giant yellow workers came forward at a whistled order and held him erect. Another brought a bowl carved from rock crystal and filled with a liquid golden-green with reflected light. He put it to Rawson's lips and with the first touch Dean knew that he must have been filled with a burning thirst beyond anything he had ever known. He gulped greedily at the liquid, drained the bowl to the last drop, then marveled at the thrilling fire of strength that flowed through him.

"Wine," he thought, "wine of the gods—or devils." He came to himself with a start. He knew that he was naked and that his body was encased in a coating of stiff gray plaster. It was this that prevented his arms and legs from flexing.

Another order and the giant worker picked him up in his arms and carried him where the others led to a distant room. A stream trickled through a cut in the rocky floor. At the center of the room was a pool. Unable to resist, Dean felt the giant arms toss him out and

down.

The water was warm. At its first touch the hard plaster melted like snow. Sputtering and choking for breath, Rawson came to the surface. He found he could move freely, then reaching hands hauled him out upon the floor, and through all his dread he found time to marvel at his own firm muscles and the healthy white of his skin that had been seared and blistered.

He obeyed when the red guards pointed and motioned him into a dark passageway. He tried to keep up with them as they hurried him on. Evidently his pace was too slow, for again the big worker picked him up, swung him into the air and seated him firmly on one broad shoulder, and, with red guards ahead and behind them, hurried on.

To find himself a child in the hands of this big yellow man was disconcerting. To be calmly lugged off was almost humiliating. No one who was not a good sport could have grinned as Rawson did at his own predicament.

"Not exactly a triumphal procession," he told himself, then his lips set grimly. "They've got my gun," he thought, "and now, whatever comes, all I can do is stand and take it. Still, they've saved my life. But what for?"

Always the way led downward, and Rawson, perched on his strange, half-human steed, let his gaze follow up every branching tunnel and widespread cave. Not all of these were as dark as the broad thoroughfare they followed. In some, strange lights glowed, and Rawson saw weird, towering plant growths that yellow workers were harvesting.

Life, life, everywhere, and seemingly this underground world was endless.

Troops of red warriors passed them, upward bound. The dancing flames of their weapons, where occasional ones were in action, glowed from afar. They bobbed and waved like green fireflies as the Mole-men came on at a half-run.

"And this means trouble up top," he thought. "There's going to be hell to pay up there."

But workers, fighters, everyone they met stood aside to let the red guard pass. Again Rawson heard the strange word or call that had come to him in the temple of fire. One of the guides would give a whistling call that ended in the same strange shrill cry of "Phee-e-al," and instantly the way was cleared.

A wild journey, incredible, unreal. Rawson, as he met the countless staring white eyes of the creatures they passed, found his thoughts wandering. He had had wild dreams. Surely this was only another in that succession of phantom pictures. Then, seeing the cold, implacable hatred in those staring eyes, he would be brought back with sickening abruptness to a full knowledge of his own hopeless situation.

"Gevarro, the lake of fire which never dies"—what was it the white ones had said? But no, that certainly was a dream like that other in which he had seemed to see the charred body of a man, the sheriff who had called to see him at his camp in Tonah Basin.

Dreams—reality—his brain was confused with the wild kaleidoscope of unbelievable pictures.

He was suddenly aware that through it all he had been mentally tabulating their route, remembering the outstanding features when there was light enough to see. He knew that unconsciously his mind had been thinking of escape. Wilder than all the other visions, he had been picturing himself retracing his route, alone, free. He did not know that he had laughed aloud, harshly, hopelessly, until he saw the curious eyes of his red guard upon him.

"Yes," he told himself in silent bitterness, "I could find my way back, if...."

The guard had swung off from the great tunnel which must have been one of the main thoroughfares of the Mole-men's world. They crowded through a narrower passage and again Rawson found himself in one of the great, high-ceilinged caves like the others he had seen. But unlike the others this was brightly lighted.

Massive limestone formation. His eyes squinted against the glare and caught the character of the rock before he was able to distinguish details, and in the black limestone big disks of gray mineral had been set. Jets of flame played upon them and turned them to blazing, brilliant white.

The big yellow Mole-man who had carried him dropped him roughly to the floor and backed away. About him the red guard was grouped. Rawson caught a glimpse of hundreds of other thronging figures. The crowd about him separated. A space was cleared between him and the farther end of the room, a lane lined on either side by solid masses of savage Reds. And beyond them, more barbaric than any figure in the foreground, was another group.

Across the full width of the room a low wall was raised three or four

feet from the floor. It was capped with rude carvings. The whole mass gleamed dully golden in the bright light. Beyond the wall in semicircular formation, resembling a grouping of bronze statues, were men like the one with whom Rawson had fought. Priests, tenders of the fires. He knew in an instant that here were more of the red one's holy men. They stood erect, unmoving. At their center was another seated man-shape that might have been cast from solid gold.

His naked body was yellow and glittering, contrasting strongly with the black metal straps like those the warriors wore. On his head a round, sharply-pointed cap was ablaze with precious stones.

Rawson took it all in in one quick glance. He knew that those copper bodies were not encased in metal, for the flesh of the one he had fought with had sunk under his blows. Their skin was coated with a preparation, heat resistant without a doubt, and the golden one must have been treated in somewhat the same way.

His thoughts flashed quickly over this. It was the face of that seated figure that riveted his attention, a white face, milk-white, so white it seemed almost chalky!

For one breathless second Rawson was filled with a wordless hope. Those white ones of his dream had looked upon him with kindly

eyes. They were human—men of another race, but men. Then beneath the chalky whiteness of the face he found the hideous features of the red Mole-men, and knew that the white color of the face was as false as that of the golden body.

But he was their leader. He was someone of importance. Rawson had started forward impetuously when he saw the figure rise. At the first motion the hands of every red one in the room were flung in air. They stood stiffly at salute. Even the priests' coppery arms flashed upward. And "Phee-e-al!" a thousand shrill voices were shouting. "Phee-e-al! Phee-e-al!"

Rawson stopped, then walked slowly forward, one defenseless, naked man of the upper world, between two living walls formed by men of a hidden race.

"Phee-e-al," he was thinking. "He's the one I saw coming into their temple back there. They got out of our way when they knew we were coming to see him. He's the big boss here, all right."

He did not pause in his steady, forward progress until his hands were resting upon the golden barrier. Strange thoughts were racing through his mind. Phee-e-al, he was facing Phee-e-al, king of a kingdom ten miles or more beneath the surface of the earth, a place

of devils more real and terrible than any that mythology had dared depict. And he, Dean Rawson, a man, just one of the millions like him up there in a sane, civilized world, was down here, standing at a barrier of gold before a tribunal that knew nothing of justice or mercy.

Thoughts of communicating with them had mingled with other half-formed plans in his racing mind. Sign language—he had talked with the Indians; he might be able to get some ideas across. He met the other's fierce scrutiny fearlessly, then, waiting for him to make the first advance, let his gaze dart about at closer range. He could not restrain a start of surprise at sight of his own clothing, his pocket radio receiver and his pistol spread out on a metal stand.

They had been curious about them. Rawson took that as a good sign. Perhaps he had been mistaken in his interpretation of what he had seen. For himself, he could have no real hope, but it might be that the outpouring of these demons into his own world was a threat that lay only in his own imagination.

His eyes came back to meet that gaze which had never left him. The eyes were mere dots of jet in a white and repulsive face. The rounded mouth opened to emit a shrill whistled order.

In the utter silence of the great room one of the copper-skinned priests moved swiftly toward the rear. There were chests there, massive metal things afire with the brilliance of inlaid jewels. The priest flung one of them open with a resounding clang.

The room had been warm, and the chill which abruptly froze Rawson's muscles to hard rigidity came from within himself. Dreams! He had thought them dreams, those marching thousands, and the others who returned. He had dared to hope he might avert an invasion by this inhuman horde.

And now he knew his worst imaginings were far short of the truth. He saw clearly his own fate. For the priest returning was holding an object aloft, a horrible thing, a naked body, scorched and charred. And above it a head lopped awkwardly. The hair was sandy; half of it had been burned to the scalp in a withering flame. Below, staring from sightless eyes, was the face of the man who had once been sheriff of Cocos County.

Chapter 13: "*N-73 Clear!*"

“You fly, of course?" demanded Governor Drake.

Smithy nodded. "Unlimited license—all levels."

They had spent the night in the executive mansion, and now the Governor had burst precipitately into the room where Smithy and his father had just finished dressing. The two had been deep in an earnest conversation which the Governor's entrance had interrupted.

"I am drafting you for service," said the Governor. "I want you to go out to Field Number Three. A fast scout plane—National Guard equipment—will be ready for you—"

He broke off and stared doubtfully at a paper in his hand, a radiophone message, Smithy judged. "I'm in a devil of a fix," the Governor exclaimed, after a pause. Then:

"I don't doubt your sincerity," he told Smithy. "Never saw you till yesterday, but your father's 'O.K.' goes a hundred per cent with me. Old 'J. G.' and I have been through a lot of scraps together." His frowning eyes relaxed for a moment to exchange twinkling glances with the older man.

"No, it isn't that," he added, "but...." Again he stared at the flimsy piece of paper.

"What's on your mind, Bill?" asked Smith senior. "That stuff the boy told us was pretty wild"—he laid one hand affectionately upon Smithy's shoulder—"but he's a poor liar, Gordon is, and, knowing his weakness, he usually sticks to the truth. And there's no record of insanity in the family, you know. If there's something sticking in your crop, Bill, cough it up."

And the Honorable William B. Drake obeyed. "Listen to this," he commanded, and read from the paper in his hand:

"'Replying to your inquiry about the doings at Seven Palms. Some Indians did that job. No help needed. I can handle this. Posse organized and we are leaving right now.—Signed, Jack Downer, Sheriff, Cocos County.'"

"That sounds authentic," said Smithy drily. "I've met the sheriff."

"Now, if it *was* Indians that got tanked up and came down off the reservation, burned Seven Palms and cleaned up your camp—" began Governor Drake.

"It wasn't!" Smithy interrupted hotly. "I told you—" He felt his father's hand gripping firmly at his shoulder.

"Steady," said Smith, senior. "Let him talk, son."

"There's an election three months from now, J. G.," said the Governor, "and you know they're riding me hard. Let me make one false move—just one—anything that the opposition can use for a campaign of ridicule, and my goose is cooked to a turn."

Gordon Smith shook off his father's restraining hand and took one quick forward step. His face, even through the tan of the desert sun, was unnaturally pale.

"Election be dammed!" he exploded. "Dean Rawson has been captured by those red devils—he's down there, the whitest white man I ever met! I've been to the sheriff; now I've come to you! Do you mean to tell me there isn't any power in this state to back me up when—"

He stopped. There was a tremble in his voice he could not control.

"Good boy," said Governor Drake softly. "Now I know it's the truth. Yes, you'll be backed up, plenty, but for the present it will be strictly

unofficial. Now pull in your horns and listen.

"You know the lay of the land. I want your help. Go out to Field Three; there'll be a man there waiting for you. Don't call him 'Colonel'—he's also strictly unofficial to-day. The sheriff and his posse will be there at Seven Palms inside an hour; I want you to be there, too, about five thousand feet up.

"Tell Colonel Culver—I mean Mr. Culver—your story; tell him everything you know. He'll be in charge of operations if we have to send in troops; he'll give you that private and unofficial backing I spoke of if we don't.

"Now get down there; keep your eye on the sheriff's crowd and see everything that happens!"

But Smithy's parting remark was to his father; it was a continuation of the subject they had been discussing before.

"You can buy at your own price," he said. "They've got rights to the whole basin. But they've quit; I'm not treating them to a double-cross."

And he added as he went out of the room: "Buy it for me if you don't

want it yourself."

It was a two-place, open-cockpit plane that Smithy found had been set aside for him. Dual control—the stick in the forward cockpit carried the firing grip that controlled the slim blue machine guns firing through the propeller. Behind the rear cockpit a strange, unwieldy, double-ended weapon was recessed and streamlined into the fuselage. The scout seemed quite able to protect itself in an emergency.

Beside the plane a tall, slender man in civilian attire was waiting. He stuck out his hand, while the gray eyes in his lean, tanned face scanned Smithy swiftly.

"I'm Culver. Understand I'm to be your passenger to-day. How about it—can you fly the ship? Seven hundred and fifty DeGrosse motor—retractable landing gear, of course. She hits four-fifty at top speed—snappy—quick on the trigger."

Smithy shook his head dubiously. "Four-fifty—I'm not accustomed to that. But you can take the stick, Mr. Culver, if I get in a hurry and jump out and run on ahead. You see I'm used to my own ship, an *Assegai*—special job—does five hundred when I'm pressed for time."

The lean face of Mr. Culver creased into a smile. "You qualify," he said. "But keep your hands off the dead mule."

At an inquiring glance he pointed to the heavy, half-hidden weapon that Smithy had noticed. "Can't kick," he explained, "—hence 'dead mule.' It's the new Rickert recoilless; throws little shells the size of your thumb—but they raise hell when they hit."

"Sounds interesting." Smithy climbed into the rear cockpit and strapped himself in. "Show me how it works, then I won't do it."

A pistol grip moved under Culver's reaching hand and the strange weapon sprang from concealment like something alive. The pistol grip moved sideways, and the gun swung out and down, its muzzle almost touching the ground. Smithy was suddenly aware that a crystal above his instrument board was reflecting that same bit of sun-baked earth. A dot of black hung stationary at the crystal's center.

"That's your target." Culver's voice held all the pride of a child with a new toy, but he released the grip, and the ungainly gun swung smoothly back to its hiding place.

He settled himself in the forward cockpit. "You will find a helmet

there," he said. "It's phone-equipped; you can tell me all about that wild nightmare of yours while we jog along."

The white beam from the despatcher's tower had been on them while they talked. Other planes were waiting on the field. Smithy smiled as he settled the helmet over his head. "For a strictly unofficial flight," he thought, "we're getting darned good service."

He taxied past a hangar where uniformed men pointedly paid them no attention. He swung the ship to the line as Airboard regulations required.

"N-73" was painted on the monoplane's low wings that seemed scraping the ground. "N-73 Clear!" the despatcher's voice radioed into Smithy's ears. Then the seven-hundred-and-fifty-horsepower DeGrosse let loose its voice as Smithy gunned her down the field.

Whatever doubts Colonel Culver may have had of Smithy's ability were dissipated as they made their way cautiously through the free-flying area under five thousand. Everywhere were mail planes, express and passenger ships taking off for the transcontinental day run, and private planes scattering to the smaller landing areas among the flashing lights of the flat-topped business blocks. Among them Smithy threaded his way toward the green-lighted transfer zone,

where he spiraled upward.

At ten thousand he was on his course. He set the gyro-control which would fly the ship more surely than any human hands, and the air-speed indicator crept up to the four hundred and fifty miles an hour that Culver had promised. Not till then did he give the man in the forward cockpit the details of his "nightmare."

He had not finished answering the other's incredulous questions when he throttled down to slow cruising speed and nosed the ship toward a distant expanse of sage-blurred sand.

Outside the restricted metropolitan area he had already dropped out of the chill wind that struck them at ten thousand. Behind them and off to the right was the gray rampart of the Sierra. Ahead a rough circle of darker hills enclosed the great bowl he had learned to know as Tonah Basin.

Some feeling of unreality in his own experiences must have crept into his mind; unconsciously he had been questioning his own sanity. Now, at sight of the sandy waste where he and Rawson had labored, with the dark slopes of desolate craters looming ahead and a blot of burned wreckage directly below to mark the site of their camp, the horrible reality of it gripped him again.

He could not speak at first. The air of the five-thousand level was not uncomfortably warm, but Smithy was feeling again the baking heat of that desert land; again he was with Rawson in the volcanic crater; Dean was calling to him, warning him....

A sharp question from Culver was repeated twice before Smithy could reply.

He side-slipped in above the crater's ragged rim, heedless of down-drafts—the power of the DeGrosse motor would pull them out of anything in a ten-thousand-foot vertical climb if need arose. Smithy was pointing toward a confusion of shining black rock.

"Over there," he told Culver. Then he was shouting into the telephone transmitter. "It's open," he said. "That's where Dean went down—and there they are! Look, man, there—there!"

Chapter 14: Emergency Order

The throat of the old volcano was a pit of blackness in the midst of gray ash and the red-yellow of cinders. Beside it were other flecks of color: red, moving bodies; metal, that twinkled brightly under the desert sun—and in an instant they were gone. Nor did Smithy, throwing the thundering plane close over that place, know how near he had passed to sudden, invisible death. Rugged pinnacles of rock were ahead. The plane under Smithy's hands vaulted over them and roared on above the desert.

"Did you see them?" Smithy was shouting.

The man in the forward cockpit turned to face his pilot. "I am apologizing, Smith, for all the things I have been thinking and haven't said. We've got a job on our hands. Now let's find that fool sheriff who thinks he's hunting for drunken Indians. We must warn him."

Smithy wondered at the wisps of blue smoke still rising from the ruins of Seven Palms as he drove in above it. It seemed years since he had left the Basin, yet the wreckage of this little town, only five miles outside, still smoldered.

Colonel Culver was shouting to him. "East," he said. "Swing east. There's fighting over there." Then, in his usual cool tone: "I'll take the ship, Smith. Give then a burst or two from up here—perhaps the sheriff can use a little help."

Across the yellow sand ran a desert road. Ten miles away black smoke clouds were lifting. Smithy knew there had been a little settlement there. A dozen houses, perhaps, and a gasoline station. At half that distance the clear sunlight showed moving objects on the sand: automobiles, smaller dots that were running them. They came suddenly to sharp visibility as the plane drew near. Tiny bursts of white meant rifle fire.

They were a thousand feet up and close when Smithy saw the first car vanish in flame. Others followed swiftly. Men were falling. A dozen of them had made up the sheriff's posse, and now, like the cars, they, too, burst into flame and either vanished utterly or, like living torches, were cast down upon the sand.

Still no sign of the enemy, more than the ripping stab of green fire from a sand dune at one side. They were over and past before Smithy, looking back, saw the red ones leap out into view.

Culver must have seen them in the same instant. He throttled down

to a safe banking speed. Opened full, the DeGrosse would have whipped them around in a turn that would have meant instant death. From five miles distant they shot in on a long slant. Smithy's hands were off the stick. It was Culver's ship now.

He saw the man peering through his sights, then the roar of the motor held other, sharper sounds. Thin flames were stabbing through the propeller disk, and he knew that the bow guns were sending messengers on ahead where red figures waited on the sand.

Their trajectory flattened. Culver half rolled the ship as they sped overhead. "He wants a look at them," Smithy was thinking. Then a blast of heat struck him full in the face.

It was Smithy's hand on the stick that righted the ship; only the instant response of the big DeGrosse motor tore them up and away from the sands that were reaching for those wings.

His face was seared, but the pain of it was forgotten in the knowledge that their drunken, twisting flight had whipped out the fire licking back from the forward cockpit. He saw Culver's head, fallen awkwardly to one side. The helmet in one part was charred to a crisp.

He leveled off. He was thinking: "Another man gone! Can't I ever fight back? If I only had a gun!" Then he knew he was looking at the pistol grip, where Colonel Culver's brown hand had brought an awkward weapon to life. His lips twisted to a whimsical smile, though his eyes still held the same cold fury, as he whispered: "And I don't even know that the damn thing's loaded—but I'm going to find out!"

They were clustered on the sands below him as he roared overhead. He was flying at two thousand, the throttle open full. Beside the ship a gun swung its long barrel downward. It sputtered almost soundlessly—but where it passed, the sand rose up in spouting fountains.

But his wild speed made the gunfire almost useless. The shell-bursts were spaced too far apart; they straddled the blot of figures.

He came back at five thousand feet, slowly—until the ship lurched, and he saw the right wing tip vanish in a shower of molten metal. He threw the ship over and away from the invisible beam; the plane writhed and twisted across the last half mile of sky. He was over them when he pulled into a tight spiral, then he swung the pistol grip that controlled the gun until the dot in the crystal was merged with the target of clustering red forms. The gun sputtered.

Below the plane, the quiet desert heaved its smooth surface convulsively into the air. Even above the roar of the motor Smithy heard the terrific thunder of that one long explosion.

Above the rim of the forward cockpit Culver's head rolled uneasily; his voice, thick and uncertain, came back through the phone; and later—only a matter of minutes later, though fifty miles away—Smithy set the plane down on a level expanse of sand and tore frantically at his belt. Colonel Culver was weakly raising his head.

“What hit us?" he demanded when Smithy got to him. "Did I crash?" He looked about him with dazed eyes from which he never would have seen again, but for the protection of his goggles.

"Fire," said Smithy tersely. "They did it, the devils, and it wasn't a flame-thrower, either. There wasn't a flash of their cursed green light. It just flicked us for a second. You got the worst of it. Your half roll saved us. That thing, whatever it was, would have ripped our left wing off in a second."

He was looking at the forward cockpit where the metal fuselage was melted. The leather cushioning around the edge was black and charred. Culver's helmet had protected him, but half of his face was seared as if it had been struck by a white flame.

"But we got some of them: they know we can hit back...." Smithy began, but knew he was speaking to deaf ears. Again his passenger had lapsed into unconsciousness.

Quickly he disconnected their own radio receiver and threw on the emergency radio siren. Ahead of them for a hundred miles an invisible beam was carrying the discordant blast. Then, with throttle open full, regardless of levels and of air traffic that tore frenziedly from his path, he drove straight for the home field.

In the office of the Governor, the radio newscaster was announcing last-minute items of interest. The Governor switched off the instrument as Smithy entered, supporting the tall figure of Colonel Culver, whose face and head were swathed in bandages. Culver had insisted upon accompanying him for the rendering of their report, though Smithy had to do the talking for both of them.

He outlined their experience in brief sentences. "And now," he was saying grimly, "you can go as far as you please, Governor. You've got a man's sized fight on your hands. We don't know how many there are of them. We don't know how fast they'll spread out, but—"

A shrill wail interrupted him. From the newscasting instrument came a flash of red that filled the room. The crystal, the emergency call,

installed on all radios within the past year and never yet used, was clamoring for the country's attention.

Governor Drake sprang to switch it on, and tried to explain to Smithy as he did so. "It's out of my hands now," he said. "Washington has—" Then the radio came on with a voice which shouted:

"Emergency order. All aircraft take notice. Mole-men"—Smithy started at the sound of the word; it was the name he had given them himself—"Mole-men are invading Western states. A new race. They have come from within the earth. In Arizona, three ships of the Transcontinental Day Line, Southern Division, have been destroyed with the loss of all passengers and crew. Shattered in air.

"It is war, war with an unknown race. Goldfield, Nevada, is in ruins. Heavy loss of life. Federal Government taking control. Air-Control Board orders traffic to avoid following areas...."

There followed a list of locations, while still the red crystal blazed its warning across the land and to all aircraft in the skies. Southern California, Arizona, Nevada—Southern Transcontinental Routes closed; all except military aircraft grounded in restricted areas.

Smithy's excitement had left him. In his mind he was looking far off, deep under the surface of the world. "They've been there," he said quietly, "thousands of years. A new race—and they've just now learned of this other world outside. Three ships downed! They picked them off in the air just as they tried to do with us. I knew we had a fight on our hands."

His voice died to silence in the room where now the new announcer was giving a list of the dead—a room where men were speechless before an emergency no man could have foreseen. But Smithy's eyes, gazing far off, saw nothing of that room. Again he was seated on an outthrust point of rock, Dean Rawson beside him, and from the black depths beneath a man's voice was rising clearly, mockingly it seemed, in song:

"You're pokin' through the crust of hell And braggin' too damn loud of it, For, when you get to hell, you'll find The devil there to pay!"

"The devil is there to pay," Smithy repeated softly. He leaned across and placed one hand on Colonel Culver's knee. "With your assistance, Colonel, I'd like to go down there and find him. You and I, we know the way—we'll organize an expedition. Maybe we can settle that debt."

Chapter 15: The Lake of Fire

Before a barrier of gold, waist-high, Dean Rawson stood tense and rigid. Behind him the great cave-room swarmed with warriors, leaders, doubtless, of the unholy hordes. But beyond the barrier were the real leaders of the Mole-men tribes—Phee-e-al, ruler in chief, and his clustering guard of high priests. In the flooding light from the wall, their eyes were circles of dead-white skin. A black speck glinted wickedly in the center of each.

Phee-e-al was speaking. His artificially whitened face grimaced hideously; the shrill whistling voice made no comprehensible sound. But in some manner Rawson gathered a dim realization of what his gestures meant.

Phee-e-al pointed at the captive; and one lean hand, with talons more suggestive of a bird of prey than of a human hand, pointed downward. "Gevarro," he said. The word was repeated many times in the course of his whistling talk.

"Gevarro"—what did it mean? Then Rawson remembered. It was the word he had heard in his dreams, the name of the lake of fire.

The voices of the priests rose in a shrill chorus of protests, and even

Phee-e-al stood silent. They crowded about their ruler, and Rawson knew they were demanding him for themselves. Then the one who still held a human body in his arms sprang forward and his long talons worked unspeakable mutilation upon the body and face.

Rawson averted his eyes from the ghastly spectacle. For, swiftly, he was seeing something more horrifying than this desecration of a dead body; he was seeing himself, still living, tortured and torn by those same beastly hands. The dead face of Sheriff Downer was staring at him from red, eyeless sockets as with one leap Rawson threw himself over the golden wall. Ten leaping strides away was his gun. In that instant of realization, he knew why his life had been spared.

In the room of fire he had destroyed their priest. They had saved him for further torture.

To get his hands on the gun, to die fighting—the thought was an unspoken prayer in his mind. Behind him the room echoed with demoniac shrieks. Before him was the metal stand. His outstretched hands fell just short of the blue .45 as he crashed to the floor. The copper ones were upon him.

Half stunned by the fall, he hardly knew when they dragged him to

his feet. He was facing the golden figure of Phee-e-al, but now the ruler's indecision had vanished. He was exercising his full authority and even Rawson's throbbing brain comprehended the doom that was being pronounced.

"Gevarro!" he was shrieking. "Gevarro!"

Beside him a priest swept the metal table clear. Rawson's clothing, the gun, the radio receiver, all were snatched up and hurled into one of the massive chests. Phee-e-al was still shouting shrill commands. An instant later Rawson was lifted in air, rushed to the barrier and thrown bodily from the sacred premises he had invaded. Then the hands of the red guard closed about him before he could struggle to his feet. A shining object swung down above his head. It was the last he knew.

His dreams were of falling. Always when he half roused to consciousness he was aware of that smooth, even descent, and he knew it had continued for hours.

Once he saw black walls slipping smoothly past, upward, always upward. Gropingly he tried to marshal his facts into some understandable sequence. He was falling, falling toward the center of the earth, and this that he saw was not rock, or any metal such as he

knew.

"It's all different," he told himself dully, "new kind of matter. Rock would flow; this stands the pressure." But he knew the air pressure had built up tremendously. The blood was pounding in his ears. He wanted to sleep.

It was the heat that awakened him. The air was stifling him, suffocating. He was struggling to move his heavy body, fighting against this nightmare of heat when he opened his eyes and knew that he was in a place of light. First to be seen were walls, no longer black, no longer even with the characteristics of rock, or even metal. Here, as Rawson had sensed, was new material to form the core of a world. It would have been red in an ordinary light. It was transformed to orange, strangely terrifying in the blazing flood of yellow brilliance that came from the tunnel's end.

Rawson's brain was not working clearly. An unendurable weight seemed pressing upon him—the air pressure, he thought, to which he had not yet become accustomed. And the air, itself, hot—hot!

A breeze blew steadily past toward that place of yellow horror at the tunnel's end. Yellow, that reflected light; but its source was a searing, dazzling white in the one brief instant when Rawson dared turn his

eyes.

Hands held him erect, red, gripping hands. One, whose body seemed molten copper in that fierce glare, approached. His hand described a circle over Rawson's bare chest. Straight lines radiated out from the circle, lines of stabbing pain for the helpless man. He had seen the same emblem in the temple of fire, again in the big room where Phee-e-al had stood.

The living sacrifice was prepared. Burned into his bare flesh was the emblem of their legendary sun-god. The priests, their bodies coated with a flashing coppery film that must somehow be heat-resistant, had him in their grasp.

The red warriors had fallen back. Then Phee-e-al appeared; he joined the march of death of which Dean Rawson formed the head. Voices were chanting—somewhere a trumpet blared. Then Rawson, moving like one in a dream, knew the priests were guiding him toward that waiting, incredible heat.

The tunnel's end was near. About him was an inferno where heat and hot colors blended. The whole world seemed aflame, but beyond the tunnel's end was a seething pit upon which no human eyes could look and live.

One glimpse only of the unbearable whiteness beneath which was the lake of fire, then the chains of his stupor broke and Dean Rawson struggled frenziedly in the grip of two copper giants.

They had been chanting a shrill monotonous refrain. They ceased now as they fought to throw the man out past that last ten paces where even they dared not go.

Rawson was beyond conscious thought. Eyes closed against the unendurable heat, he fought blindly, desperately, then knew his last strength was going from him. Still struggling he opened his eyes; some thought of meeting death face to face compelled him.

A hideous coppery face glared close into his own. Miraculously it vanished, disappeared in a cloud of white. Then the blazing walls were gone—there was nothing in all the world but rushing clouds of whiteness, shrieking winds, the roar of an explosion—and cold, so biting that it burned like heat.

Vaguely he wondered at the hands that still clutched at him. Dimly he sensed other bodies close to his, other hands that tore him free where he lay, still struggling with the priests, upon the floor. A narrow opening was in the wall, a blur of darkness in the billowing white clouds. They were dragging him into it, those others who held

him, and they were white—white as the vapor that whirled about him.

Ahead, the girl of his former dreams was guiding him, her hand cool and soft in his. Others helped him; he ran stumblingly where they led down a steep and narrow way.

The White Ones! In a vision they had reached out to him before. Was this, too, a dream? Was it only the delirium of death? That burst of cold—had it truly been liquid fires, wrapping him around?

Dean Rawson could not be sure. He knew only that his fate lay wholly in the hands of these White Ones—and that hideous eyes in the coppery face of a priest had glared at them as they fled.

Chapter 16: The Metal Shell

She was motioning for him to follow.

Dean Rawson had passed through a nerve-racking experience. It was not a question of courage—Rawson had plenty of that—but there are times when a man's nervous system is shocked almost to insensibility by sheer horror. Not at once did he realize what was happening.

The Voice of the Mountain heralds Rawson's Messianic coming to the White Ones in their hour of need.

Perhaps it was the sound of pursuit that jarred him out of the fog clouding all his thoughts and perceptions. It was like the sound of fighting animals—cat-beasts—whose snarls had risen to screaming, squalling shrieks of rage. It was sheer beastliness, the din that echoed through that narrow passage.

Ahead of him the girl was running. She held a light in her hand. Soft wrappings of cloth hung loosely from her waist; like her golden hair, it was flung backward in the strong draft of air against which they

were struggling. She was outlined clearly before the red, rock-like masses where her light was falling; she was running swiftly, gracefully, like a wild, woodland nymph.

Two men, their milk-white bodies naked but for the thick folds of their loin cloths, were beside Rawson, helping him along. Two others followed. And, by their haste and their odd whispered words of alarm, he knew that pursuit had not been expected; they must have thought to get away unobserved.

Rawson felt his strength returning. He shook himself free from those who tried to aid him. He was amazed at how easily he ran: his weight was a mere nothing; his efforts were expended in driving his body against the blast of wind. The air seemed dense, thick; he had almost the feeling of forcing himself through water.

Ahead of him the girl darted abruptly through a narrow crack in the wall. Rawson followed—and then began a wild race through a network of connecting passages, a vast labyrinth of caves, more like fractures in this strange red substance which Rawson could think of only as rock, for lack of a more accurate name, until at last there was no sound except that of their own hurrying feet.

They stopped and stood panting in one of the wider passages. He

heard nothing but the endless rush of the wind. For the first time Rawson became aware of his own almost naked condition.

The mole-men had prepared him for the sacrifice. They had decked him with a loin cloth of woven gold. It felt cold to the touch, and Rawson did not doubt its being made of fine threads of the precious metal. About his neck hung a gold chain with a heavy object suspended; he tore it off, and found again a representation of a golden sun. The copper priests had arrayed him to meet their fire-god, and again Rawson wondered at the emblem they employed.

"What in the name of the starlit heavens," he demanded silently of himself, "could this buried race know of the sun?"

The others were watching him. In the glow of that strange light held by the girl he saw them smiling. They were congratulating one another with odd, soft-syllabled words. And Rawson, ignorant of their tongue, was mute, when his whole soul cried out to thank them.

He gripped the hands of the men. They were as tall as himself, their gaze level with his own. Their faces were human, friendly; their eyes sparkled and smiled into his. Then he turned to the girl.

She had seen the method of greeting this stranger employed. She

extended her hand—a white hand, slim, soft, cool. And Rawson, choking with emotion, knowing that here was the one who had first seen him and who had returned to save him, a stranger, bent low above that hand, held in his own so rough and burned, and pressed his lips to the slender fingers in a quick caress.

When he raised his head she was looking at him oddly; her eyes were deep, serious and unsmiling. He wondered if, blunderingly, he had offended her. He could not know; he did not know their customs.

Again the slim girlish figure turned; her jeweled breast-plates flashed as she led the others on where always the way led upward and the wind pressed against them unceasingly.

The White Ones wore sandals that seemed woven of glass. Rawson's bare feet were bruised and sore, for those narrower clefts had been paved only with broken fragments of the red walls. He moved less easily now. The heavy, beating air tired him; the lightness of his body made it all the more difficult to fight the steady wind. Still he followed the white figure of the girl where her light was flashing on endless walls of red.

In his ears a new sound was registering. Above the rush of the air, that now was soft and warm, a new note had risen to a hollow,

unremitting roar. He knew that for some time he had been hearing it faintly. It grew louder, one long, steady, unchanging note, as they advanced. It was a deafening reverberation that seemed shaking the whole earth when they came at last to an open room.

It beat upon him thunderously. As deep as the deepest tone of a mighty organ, like a thousand gigantic organs welded in one, it roared and shook him through and through with its single note.

Exhausted by his wild flight, surrounded by this maelstrom of sound, he sank to the floor and let his laboring lungs have their way. But his eyes were searching the big room.

The great cave was too regularly formed to have had a natural origin. The light that the girl had carried gave only feeble illumination in so great a space that had so evidently been hollowed out of the solid red matter.

The light flashed here and there as the girl and her companions moved away. They were circling the room. Rawson saw the irregular outlines of entrances to many dark passages like the one through which they had come. The red rock-mass seemingly had been riven and torn, and apparently in front of each opening the white figures fought against the rush of outgoing air. Rawson felt the same current

sweeping and whirling gustily about him.

Now his companions were across the room, and between him and them in the center of the floor he saw the mouth of a black well, a pit some twenty or more feet across. Directly above, where the red rock stuff formed a domed ceiling, he found a counterpart of the pit below—another great bore or open shaft, roughly circular. Apparently it went straight on up and was a continuation of that lower pit.

"This room was cut out," Rawson was thinking, "by the white people or the mole-men—Lord knows who, or when, or why. Cut out around this big shaft...."

His thoughts trailed off. Even thinking seemed impossible under the battering of the roaring noise that pounded about him. Then another thought pierced through the bedlam. He had found the source of the uproar.

That upper shaft, the hole that went on up, must be plugged. There was no outlet that way, and this air that drove endlessly upward from the room must be coming from the lower shaft. It was striking up into that upper cavity.

An organ pipe, truly. But whence came the unending blast of air to

keep that gigantic instrument in operation? Rawson dropped to his knees and crept slowly across the floor toward the pit. He must test his theory—see if that was where the air was driving in.

Just short of the brink he stopped. The girl had called—a cry of alarm. She was running swiftly toward him, circling the pit. And Rawson, as she tugged at him, trying to draw him back, knew that she had mistaken his motive. She had thought he was going to cast himself down.

He did not need to go farther. He was close to the edge. And now, even above that roaring sound he heard the rush of the column of air. He seated himself on the stone floor and smiled up at the girl reassuringly. Her eyes that had been dark with fear changed swiftly to a look so sweetly, beautifully tender that Dean Rawson found himself thrilled and shaken by an emotion that set his nerves to quivering even more than did the sonorous vibration from above.

Her companions had joined her. Dean saw her eyes regarding them steadily. Then, as if reaching some sudden final conclusion in her own mind, she dropped swiftly to her knees beside him, raised one of his hands in hers and pressed her soft lips against it.

And Dean, even had he known their language, could not in that

moment have spoken. There had been something in the look of her eyes and the soft touch of her lips that of themselves went far beyond words.

"You darling," he was whispering softly to himself as the girl sprang to her feet and walked swiftly away, the others following.

"An angel, no less—down in this damned place!"

He wondered, as he watched the flickering light far across the room, what destination they could be bound for. Surely no one so radiantly beautiful could inhabit a world of endless dungeons like that where the mole-men lived. But if not that, then what? Where would their next journey take them? And in what direction would they go?

Again Rawson's thoughts were submerged beneath his own weariness. This air that beat about him had seemed cool after the terrific heat that drove in off the Lake of Fire. Now he realized that the air itself was hot. His one spurt of strength and energy had been expended.

He watched the men disappear into one of the passages, but he roused himself when they returned. They were clinging to a strange device, a metal cylinder that floated in air above their heads like a

dirigible on end. It was about eight feet in diameter and some fourteen feet in height; both upper and lower ends were rounded. A cage of parallel bars enclosed it from end to end; like springs of steel they extended from top to bottom where they curved in and were attached to the rounded ends.

Rawson sat up quickly and stared in startled amazement at the thing glinting like polished aluminum in the light. And his engineer's mind responded as much to that smooth finish and the evident workmanship that had entered into the making of this thing as it did to the object itself.

The girl placed her light on the floor. She, too, reached up and gripped a bar of the protecting cage to which the others were holding. With her added weight and strength they drew it down almost to the floor. Rawson knew by their efforts that they were dealing with something actually buoyant, a metal balloon. One of the men, still putting his weight on the bars, reached in and opened a door in the smooth shell. He stepped inside, and a moment later the big shell dropped to the floor and, still vertical, stood on the lower rounded end of the protecting cage, rocking gently as the hot whirling wind hit it.

They were communicating among themselves by signs. Rawson saw

them motioning. Speech was useless in that roaring, pandemonium-filled room.

She was motioning for him to follow. One of the men circled that central pit, came beside Rawson and helped him to his feet, steadying him as they crossed the room. The girl had entered the big metal shell. Dean saw the glow of her torch shining through the open doorway and through two other windows of crystal glass.

The big room had grown dimmer. The high ceiling was lost in murky shadows. All the room was dark save where that light struck upon walls and floor to make them glow blood-red. The waiting lighted shell seemed a haven of refuge. To get inside, close the door, lock out some of this unendurable, battering sound—it was all Rawson asked, all he could think.

The door closed. He was within the shell, standing on a smooth metal floor. The others were beside him. Dully he wondered what wild adventure was ahead.

He had expected—he hardly knew what. But there should have been machinery of some sort. If this weird balloon thing was actually to carry them, there must be some mechanism, some propelling power. And instead he saw nothing but the shining walls of the circular

room and at the exact center, reaching from floor to ceiling, a six-inch metal post that thickened to a boxlike form on a level with his eyes. There was a plate on the side of that box, a cover, and clamps that held it in place, and on an adjoining side two little levers, one near the top of the box, the other near the bottom.

His one all-inclusive glance showed him bull's-eye windows in the ceiling. There were more of them in the floor. One curved bar, circling the room, was mounted on brackets against the wall. They were telling him by signs that he was to put his hands on it and hang on. One of the men was beside that central post. He too gripped at a projecting hand-hold. His other hand was on the lower lever.

Rawson knew his disappointment was unreasonable, but his weary mind was tired of mysteries. Some understandable bit of machinery would have been reassuring. And then in his next thought he asked himself what difference did it make. If this childish balloon thing were really capable of carrying them somewhere, what of it? It could only mean more of this hideous inner world that grew more unbearably fantastic with each new experience.

His life had been saved. True, but for what end? The girl's eyes were upon him, reading the expression on his face. She smiled encouragingly. Then Rawson's hands tightened upon the metal bar.

The man who stood by the central post had moved one lever the merest trifle. Rawson felt the floor lifting beneath him. Then the shell, like a bubble of metal, pitched and tossed as the powerful air currents caught it.

His own lightness saved him from injury. He gripped the bar and held himself free of the wall. The round top of their strange craft grated against the domed roof. Then again the ship steadied and seemed motionless, and Rawson knew they had slipped up into the still air of that upper shaft.

For one wild instant, filled with impossible hope, Rawson saw this as a means of ascent to his own world. Then reason tore those wild hopes to shreds.

"It's closed up above," he thought. "It must be. That's why it sounded that way. That's why the air drove off through those side passages."

The next instant held no time for thought. Rawson's whole attention was concentrated upon the bar to which he clung. For, quicker than thought, the metal shell, the little cylindrical world in which he and these others were, fell swiftly beneath them.

His body twisted in mid-air. He knew the others were being thrown

in the same manner. Then, what an instant before had been the ceiling was now a floor beneath his feet, pressing up against him and giving him weight—and by the whistling rush of the air that tore past their shell he knew they had fallen with marvelous swiftness straight down through the throat of that lower shaft.

And now what had been down was up. The ceiling of this strange room was now their floor, but Rawson was not deceived. "Acceleration," he said. "It's crowding us. The shell tends to fall faster than we do. It's like an elevator traveling downward at a swifter rate than a free falling body."

He had glimpsed the glassy-side of that well into which he knew they had been flung. He knew that the shrieks that filled the room time and again were caused by the touching of their shell's guiding and protecting bars against one glassy wall. Those sounds came always from the same side and Rawson found momentary satisfaction in his own understanding of the phenomenon.

"We're falling free," he argued within his own mind, "falling toward the center of the earth. And a falling body wouldn't follow a vertical course. It would tend to hug against one wall." And by that he knew something of their speed. The necessity for it was apparent a moment later.

Above his head the bull's-eyes pointing forward in the direction of their flight were faintly red. Swiftly they changed to crimson. Rawson was standing beside a window in the wall of their craft. That, too, grew quickly to an area of dazzling brightness. Slowly the heat struck in. The air in the little room was stifling. He saw the girl turn her head and give a sharp order.

The man by the central post responded with another slight movement of the lever. Beneath Rawson's feet the floor pressed upward in a surge of speed that bent his knees and bore him downward. Under his hands the rod to which he clung was hot. The shining walls were dimly glowing. They were being hurled through the very heart of hell....

And then it was past. The crimson horror beyond those windows grew dull and then black. In the blunt nose of their craft a tiny crevice must have opened. The one who drove that projectile in its shrieking flight had touched another control that Rawson had not before seen. And with a piercing shriek a thin jet of cold air drove down into the hot room.

No wine could have been one-half so potent. That thin jet filled the room with buffeting whirlwinds that grew quickly cold.

Then their speed was checked. Abruptly Rawson was weightless, his body hanging in air, moved only as he moved his hand upon the bar. Only a few feet away was the body of the girl floating weightless like himself. The others were shouting loud words of satisfaction, but her face was turned toward Rawson, her eyes were smiling into his; while, outside the little shell that fell in meteor flight, were only shrieking winds and the blackness into which they plunged.

Chapter 17: Gor

Through an ordinary experience, Dean Rawson, like any other man, would have kept unconscious measurement of the passing time. An hour, no matter how crowded, would still have been an hour that his mind could measure and grasp. But now he had no least idea of the hours or minutes that had marked their flight. Each lagging second was an age in passing. Even the flashing thoughts that drove swiftly through his mind seemed slow and laborious. Painstakingly he marshaled his few facts.

"They know what they're about, that's one thing dead sure. They're onto their job, and they've got something here that beats anything we've ever had." He mentally nailed that one fact down and passed on to the next. "And that's the bow end of our ship, up there." He looked above him at a dented place in the ceiling, the ceiling that had been the floor of the room when first he stepped into it. "There isn't any up or down any more. I've been flipped back and forth every time we slowed down or accelerated until I don't know where I'm at, but I saw that dented plate in the floor when I got in and we started falling in that direction. But whether we're falling toward the center of the earth still or whether we passed the center back there at that hot spot and now this crazy, senseless shell is flying on and up, perhaps these people know—I don't!"

Then fact No. 3. "They live somewhere inside here. They're taking me there, of course. It must mean there's a race of them—and they don't like the mole-men. They know the way back, too, and if they'll help me.... Perhaps the fighting's not over yet!"

Through more endless, age-long seconds there passed through Rawson's mind entrancing visions. An army of men like these White Ones, himself at their head. They were armed with strange weapons; they were invading the mole-men's world....

The girl was reaching toward him. She laid one hand upon his, then pointed overhead.

Rawson looked quickly above. The glowing bull's-eyes startled him, then he knew it was white-light he was seeing, not the red threat of glowing rock. Their speed had been steadily cut down as the air pressure lessened. "They're decompressing," he thought. "They're working slowly into the lesser pressure."

The passing air no longer shrieked insanely. Above its soft rushing sound he heard the girl's voice; it was clear, vibrant with happiness. Her hand closed convulsively over his; her eyes beneath their long lashes smiled unspoken words of welcome, of comradeship, and of something more.

Within their room her light, which at close range seemed only a slender bar of metal with a brilliantly glowing end, had been clamped in a bracket against the wall. The illumination had seemed brilliant, now suddenly it was pale and dim.

Through the bull's-eyes above, a brighter light was shining, clear and golden, like the light of the sun on a brilliant and cloudless day. And to Rawson, who felt that he had spent a lifetime in the gloomy dungeons of that inner world, that flooding brilliance was more than mere light. It was the promise of release, the very essence of hope. His eyes clung to these little round windows; then the larger glass beside him blazed forth with the bright sunlight of an open world that was unbearable to one who had lived so long in darkness.

He held tightly to that slim hand that remained so confidingly within his own.

"It isn't true," Rawson was telling himself frantically. "It can't be true. It must be a delusion, another dream."

He gripped the girl's hand in what must have been a painful clasp. He told himself that she at least was real. Her lovely face was before him when at last he could bear to open his eyes.

About him were the others. The cylinder rested firmly upon a surface of pale-rose quartz. Inside the shell he saw the floor where he had stood, and with that he added one more fact to the few he had gotten together. There was no dent in the floor. The shell's position was reversed. What had been up was now down. Rawson knew he was standing firmly, with what seemed his normal earth weight, upon a smooth surface of rock; he knew that he was standing head down as compared with his position at the beginning of their flight—as compared, too, with the way he had stood in the mole-men's world and in his own world up above.

"I've passed the center of the world." The words were ringing in his brain. And then reason shot in a quick denial. "You're as heavy as you were on earth," he told himself. "You'd have to go through and on to the other side, the opposite surface of the world, before your weight would come back like that!"

"What could it mean?" he was demanding as his eyes came back from the machine and swept around over a gorgeous, glittering panorama of crystal mountains, rose and white. Fields of strange plants, vividly green; a whole world that rioted madly in a luxury of color. Before him the girl stood smiling. Every line of her quivering figure spoke eloquently of her joy in seeing this world through Rawson's eyes.

A man was approaching, a man like the others, yet whose oval face strangely resembled that of the girl. She led Rawson toward him, then Rawson, stopping, jerked backward in uncontrollable amazement, for the tall man drawing near had spoken. His lips were open, moving, and from them came sounds which to Rawson were absolutely unbelievable:

"Stranger," said the newcomer, "in the name of the Holy Mountain, and in the Mountain's language and words, I bid you welcome."

And Rawson, too stunned for coherent thought, could only stammer in what was half a shout: "But you're speaking my language. You're talking the way we talk on earth. Am I crazy? Stark, raving crazy?"

But even the sound of the man's voice could not have prepared him for what followed. There was amazement written on the face of the man. And the girl who stood beside him—her eyes that had been smiling were wide and staring in utter fear. Then she and the man and the other white figures nearby dropped suddenly to kneel humbly before him. Their faces were hidden from him, covered by their hands as they bent their heads low. He heard the man's voice:

"He speaks with the tongue of the Mountain! He comes from the Land of the Sun, from Lah-o-tah, at the top of the world! And I, Gor,

am permitted to hear his voice!"

Chapter 18: The Dance of Death

Through an airplane's thick windows of shatter-proof glass, so tough and resilient that a machine-gun bullet would only make a temporary dent, the midday sun flashed brightly as the big ship rolled. Along each side of the small room, high up under the curve of the cabin roof, windows were ranged. Others like them were in the floor. And, above, the same glass made a transparent dome from which an observer could see on all sides.

Outside was the thunderous roar of ten giant motors, but inside the cabin—the fire-control room of a dreadnought of the air—that blast of sound became more a reverberation and a trembling than actual noise.

Certainly the sound of motors and of slashing propellers, as the battle plane roared up into the sky, did not prevent free conversation among the three men in the room. Yet there was neither laughter nor idle talk.

At a built-in desk, before a battery of instruments, sat Farrell, the captain of the ship. Farther aft, in solidly anchored chairs, Colonel Culver and Smithy were seated. Occasionally the captain spoke into a transmitter, cutting in by phone on different stations about the ship.

"Check up on that right-wing gun, Sergeant—number two of the top wing-battery. Recoil mechanism is reported stiff.... Tell Chicago, Lieutenant, we will want one thousand gallons in the air—gas only—no oil needed.... Gun room? Have the gun crews get some sleep. They'll have to stand by later on...."

Colonel Culver spoke musingly. "Guerilla warfare, the hardest kind to meet."

Smithy nodded absently. He rose and stared from one of the side windows that was just level with his eyes. He could see nothing but the broad expanse of wing, a sheet of smooth gray metal. Along its leading edge was a row of shimmering disks where great propellers whirled. From the top of the wing a two-inch Rickert recoilless thrust forth its snout; it rose in air till the whole weapon was visible, then settled again and buried itself inside the wing.

They were testing a gun. Smithy knew that inside that wing section were other guns, and men, and smoothly running motors. The whole ship was only a giant flying wing of which their own central section was merely a thickening.

He looked down through a bull's-eye in the floor. The city they had just left was beneath them. Washington, the nation's capital; the

golden dome of the Capitol Building was slipping swiftly astern. Only then did he make a belated reply to Culver's statement.

"Well," he said shortly, "they'll have to meet it their own way. We told them all we knew. And a lot of good that did—not!"

"Five days!" said Culver. "It seems more like five years since the devils first came out. Nobody knows where they will hit next. But they're working north—and there's no trouble in telling where they've been."

Smithy's voice was hot in reply, hot with the intense anger of a young, aggressive man when confronted by the ponderous motion of a big organization getting slowly under way.

"If only we'd gone down underground," he exclaimed; "carried the fight to them! They live there—there must be a whole world underground. We could have carried in power lines, lighting the place as we went along. We could have fought 'em with gas. We'd have paid for it, sure we would, but we'd have given them enough hell to think of down below so they wouldn't raise so much of it up above.

"But no! We had to fight according to the textbooks. And those red

devils don't fight that way; they never learned the rules."

“Guerilla warfare," Colonel Culver repeated. "There are certain difficulties about fighting enemies you can't see."

"They're clever," Smithy admitted. "We taught them their lesson down there in the desert—they've never been seen in daylight since. Out at night—and their invisible heat-rays setting fire to a city a mile away, then mopping up with their green flame-throwers if anyone's left. They pick our planes out of the sky even when they're flying without lights. Darkness means nothing to them! It was murder to send troops in against them, troops wiped out to a man! Artillery—that's no good either when we don't know how many of the devils there are, or where they are. There's no profit in shelling the place when the brutes have gone back underground."

Colonel Culver shot a warning glance from Smithy to the seated officer. "About a hundred square miles of the finest fruit country on earth laid waste," he admitted gravely; then sought to turn Smithy from his rebellious mood:

"What's underground, I wonder? Must be a world of caves. Or perhaps these mole-men can follow up a mere crack or a fault line and open it out with their flame-throwers to make a tunnel they can

go through."

The plane's captain had caught Culver's glance. "Speak your piece," he said pleasantly. "Don't stop on my account. There's a lot to what Mr. Smith says—but you don't know all that's going on."

He had been half turned. Now he swung about in his little swivel chair, whose base was riveted solidly to the floor and whose safety belt ends dangled as he turned.

"My orders are to deliver you two gentlemen at San Francisco. But there's a show scheduled for to-night down south of there—two hundred planes, big and little, scouts, cruisers, battle planes. They're going to swarm in over when the enemy makes his first crack. There's a devil of a storm in the mountains along the route we would usually take. I'm afraid I'll have to swing off south." He was grinning openly as he turned back to his desk.

Colonel Culver smiled back. "Attaboy!" he said.

But Smithy's forehead was still wrinkled in scowling lines as he walked forward to an adjoining room. "Underground," he was thinking. "We've got to carry the fight to them; got to lick 'em so they'll stay licked. But Rawson—good old Dean—we're too late to

help him. And the lives of all the devils left in hell can't pay for that."

Smithy had been dozing. The shrill whistle of a high-pitched siren brought him fully awake in an instant. Culver, too, sprang alertly to his feet. Both men knew the signal was the call to quarters.

They had spread blankets on the floor of the fire-control room. Culver immediately folded his into a compact bundle, and Smithy followed suit, as he said: "That's right; we don't want any feather beds flying around here in case of a mix-up."

Even Culver's simple act of stowing the blankets back in their little compartment thrilled him with what it portended. His nerves were suddenly aquiver with anticipation. A real fight! A determined effort! No telling what these big dreadnoughts could do. Two hundred, big and little, Captain Farrell had said. If they could catch the enemy out in the open, show him up in a blaze of enormous flares....

Captain Farrell was calling them. A section of the floor had been raised up mysteriously to form a platform beneath the shallow dome of the conning tower. Farrell was there, headphones clamped to his ears, one hand on the little switchboard at the base of the glass dome that kept him in touch with every station on the ship. Beside him was

the fire-control officer similarly equipped, though his headphone was connected only with the gun crews.

“The enemy's out!" said Captain Farrell. "And not just where they were expected—they're raising fourteen kinds of hell. The ships have been ordered in. I'm hooked up with the radio room now. They're less than a hundred miles ahead. Of course we won't mix in on it, but I thought it best to have my men standing by."

He pressed a little lever on his switchboard and spoke into the mouthpiece of his head-set. "Pilot room? Our two passengers, Colonel Culver and Mr. Smith, are coming forward. Let them see whatever they can of the show."

He gave the two a quick smile and a nod and waved them forward with the binoculars in his free hand. "It will be 'lights out' after you get there. We'll be flying dark except for wing and tail lights up on top. The enemy's movements are uncertain; perhaps he can see us anyway, but we won't advertise ourselves to him."

The ship's bow was a blunt, rounded nose of glass, cut by cross bars of aluminum alloy. That deeper central portion of the big flying wing was carried ten feet forward; it was but one of many details that Smithy had looked at with interest when he had seen the ship

waiting for them on the field.

The pilot room was dark when they entered. Only the glow from the instrument panel showed the two men who were seated behind the wheel controls. One of them turned and nodded a welcome.

"Can't offer you gentlemen seats," he said, "but if you'll stand right here behind us you can see the whole works." He did not wait for a reply, but turned back toward the black night ahead.

Smithy glanced past him at the lighted instruments and found the altimeter. Twelve thousand—yes, there was nasty country hereabouts. Then he, too, stared out into the dark at the sky sprinkled with stars, at the vague blur of an unlighted world far below, and off at either side and behind them the quivering lines of cold light where starlight was reflected dimly from the spinning propellers.

Other wing lights winked out as he watched, and he knew that from that moment on, they were invisible from below—invisible to human eyes at least—that they were sweeping on through the darkness like some gargantuan night bird pursuing its prey.

"Flares ahead, sir," one of the pilots had spoken into the mouthpiece of his telephone, spoken lightly, reporting back to Captain Farrell.

The words whipped Smithy's head about, and he, too, saw on a distant horizon, the beginning of a white glare.

They were fighting there—two hundred planes roaring downward, one formation following another. In his mind he was seeing it so plainly.

The white blaze of light dead ahead grew broader. It had not been as far distant as he had first thought, and the scene that he had pictured came swiftly to reality.

Their own ship was still at the twelve-thousand-foot level. Ahead, and five thousand feet below, tiny lights, red and white and green, lights whose swift motion made their hundreds seem like thousands instead, were weaving intricate patterns in the night. The flying lights of the fighting planes were on for the planes' own protection; and, too, no further concealment was possible in the glare that shone upward from below.

Settling downward were balls of blinding fire, flares dropped by the squadron of scout planes that had torn through in advance. They lighted brilliantly a valley which, a few hours before, had been one of many like it—square fields, dark green with the foliage of fruit trees, straight lines of crossing roads, houses, and off in the distance

a little city.

And now the valley was an inferno of spouting flame. That city was a vast, roaring furnace under smoke clouds of mingled blood-red and black. The valley floor was a place of desolation, of drifting smoke and of flashing shell-bursts as the fleet swept in above.

The myriad lights of the planes had drawn into a circle, a great whirlpool of lines that revolved above a mile-wide section of that valley.

Beside Smithy a wheel control was moving. He clung to the pilot's seat as their own plane banked and nosed downward. And now he shouted aloud to Culver:

"The mole-men! There they are! Thousands of them!"

He was pointing between the two pilots as their own plane swept down. He could see them plainly now, clotted masses of dark figures surging frenziedly to and fro. For an instant he saw them—then that part of the world where they had been was a seething inferno of bursting bombs and shells.

Beside him Colonel Culver spoke quietly: "Caught them cold! That's

handing it to them."

Their own plane had leveled off. With motors throttled they were drifting slowly past, only a thousand feet higher than the circling planes just off at one side. Culver's quiet tones rose to a hoarse shout: "The ships! My God, they're falling!"

His wild cry ended in a gasp. Beside him Smithy, in breathless horror, like Culver, was staring at that whirlpool of tiny lights that had gone suddenly from smooth circular motion into frenzied confusion, or vanished in the yellow glare of exploding gas tanks. The light of their own white flares picked them out in ghastly clarity as they fell.

Straight, vertical lines of yellow were burning planes. Again they made horrible zigzag darts and flashed down into view torn and helpless, while others, tens and scores of others with crumpled wings, joined the mad dance of death.

Smithy knew that he could never tear his eyes away from the sight. Yet within him something was clamoring for his attention. "They didn't do it from below!" that something was shouting. "Not down in that hell. There are more of them somewhere." Then somehow, he forced his eyes to stare ahead and outside of that circle of fearful

fascination and he knew that for an instant he was seeing a single stab of green flame.

One single light on the darkness of a little knoll that stood close beside this place of white flame and destruction. One light—and in the valley there had flashed a million brighter. It had shone but an instant, but, to Smithy, watching, it was the same he had seen when their own camp was attacked. And now it was Smithy who was abruptly stone cold.

One hand closed upon a pilot's shoulder with a grip of steel; his other pointed. "Down there—they're hiding back of that hill, picking off our ships from the side." And then, like a guiding beacon, a point of green showed once more.

The plane banked sharply while one of the pilots spoke crisp, clearly enunciated words into his phone. He listened; then: "Right!" he snapped. "Power dive for bow-gun firing. Level off for bombing from five hundred feet."

Off into the night they were headed. Then a left bank and turn brought the place of blazing flares and falling planes swinging smoothly into view; they were flying toward it.

Against the white glare in the valley of death was a hill, roundly outlined. Then the ship's nose sank heavily down; and, from each broad wing, in straight, forward-stabbing lines, was the steady lightning of the Rickert batteries in action.

The pilot's room was a place of unbearable sound. The crash of gunfire, it seemed, must crush the glass wall like an eggshell by the sheer impact of its own thunder. In that pandemonium Smithy never knew when they flattened out. He knew only that the hill ahead twinkled brilliantly, and that each flashing light was an exploding shell. He knew when the hill passed beneath them.

Then, in the night, close beside them and just outside the pilot-room glass, was a quick glow of red. The plane lurched and staggered. Smithy clung desperately to the seat ahead. The pilot was fighting madly with the wheel. The roar of bombs from astern, where the bombers had launched their missiles at the approaching hill, was unheard. In a world suddenly gone chaotic he could hear nothing. He knew only that the valley dead ahead was whirling dizzily—that it sank suddenly from sight.

They were crashing. That red glow—they had been hit. Then something hard and firm was pressing against him, pressing irresistibly. It was the last conscious impression upon Smithy's mind.

Chapter 19: The Voice of the Mountain

In a strange new world surrounded by a group of kneeling figures of whom one, who called himself Gor, had spoken in Rawson's own tongue, Dean Rawson stood silent. It was all too overwhelming. He could not bring words together to formulate a reply. He only stood and stared with wondering eyes at the exquisite beauty of the world about him, a world flooded with a golden light, faintly tinged with green. Then he looked above him to see the source of that light and found the sun.

Not the sun that he had known, but a flaming ball nevertheless. Straight above it hung, in the center of the heavens, a gleaming disk of pale-green gold, magnificently brilliant. He saw it through lids half closed against its glare. Then his gaze swept back down the blue vault of the heavens, back to a world of impossible beauty.

Directly ahead was a land of desolation, radiant in its barrenness. For every rock, every foot of ground, was made of crystal. Nearby hills were visions of loveliness where the colors of a million rainbows quivered and flashed. Veins of metal showed the rich blues and greens of peacock coloring. Others were scarlet, topaz, green, and all of them took the strange sunlight that flooded them and threw it back in blendings radiant and delicate.

The little hills began a short distance off, two low ranges running directly away. One on either side, they made brilliant walls for the flat valley between, whose foreground was barren rock of rose and white. But beyond the glistening barren stretch were green fields of luxuriant vegetation and in the distance, nestled in the green were clustered masses that might have been a city of men. Still farther on, a single mountain peak, white beyond belief, reared its graceful sweeping sides to a shining apex against the heavens of clear blue.

Slowly Rawson turned. A hundred yards away, at his left, there was water, a sea whose smooth rollers might have been undulating liquid emeralds that broke to infinite flashing gems upon the shore. He swung sharply to the right and found the same expanse of water, perhaps the same distance away.

Then he turned toward the shell, which had been behind him and the shaft from which it had emerged, and into which the air was driving with a ceaseless rushing sound. Now, looking beyond them, he found the same ocean; he was standing on a blunt point of rock projecting into the sea. The rest of this world was one vast expanse of water.

Suddenly Rawson knew that it was unlike any ocean of earth. Instead of finishing on a sharply-cut horizon, that sea of emerald green reached out and still out, and *up*! It did not fall away. It curved

upward, until it lost itself in the distance and merged with the blue of the sky. It was the same on all sides.

He swung slowly back to face the land that perhaps was only an island. The kneeling ones had raised their bowed heads. They were regarding him from shining, expectant eyes. Only the girl kept her face averted. Rawson spoke to none of them; the exclamations that his amazement and dismay wrung from his lips were meant for himself.

"It's concave! It curves upward! I'm on the inside of the world! And that sun is the center! But what holds us here? What keeps us from falling?" He passed one hand heavily across his eyes. The excitement of the moment had lifted him above the weariness of muscle and mind. Now fatigue claimed him.

"Sleep," he said dully. "I've got to sleep. I've got to. I'm all in."

Gor was beside him in an instant. "Whatever you wish is yours," he promised.

Rawson was to remember little of that journey toward the habitations of this people. Gor had spoken at times along the way: "... the Land of the Central Sun.... The People of the Light, peaceful

and happy in our little world...."

Rawson had roused himself to ask: "Who it at the head of it? Who is the king, the ruler?"

And the tall man beside him had answered humbly: "Always since the beginning one named Gor has led. My father, and those who came before him; now it is I. And when I have gone, my little son will take the name of Gor."

He had glanced toward the girl and his voice had dropped into the soft, liquid syllables of their own tongue. She had smiled back at Gor, though her eyes persistently refused to meet those of Rawson.

Again Gor spoke in words that Rawson could understand.

"I think at times," he said, "it is my daughter Loah, my little Loah-San who really rules. I, knowing not who you were, did not approve of this expedition, but Loah insisted. She had seen you, and—" A glance from the girl cut him short.

The words lingered in Rawson's mind when he awoke. The horrible experience of the past days were no longer predominant. Even his own world seemed of a dim and distant past.

He awoke refreshed. He was in a new world and, for the moment, he asked nothing except to explore its mystery. He bathed under a fountain in an adjoining room, and grinned broadly as he wrapped the folds of the long golden loin cloth about him.

"As well be dead as out of style," he quoted. "And now to find Gor and Loah, and see what the devil all this is about—a talking mountain and a buried race that speaks first-rate American."

Gor was waiting for him in a room whose translucent walls admitted a subdued glow from outside. There was food on a table, strange fruits, and a clear scarlet liquid in a crystal glass. Rawson ate ravenously, then followed Gor.

Outside were houses, whose timbered frames of jet-black contrasted startlingly with the quartz walls they enclosed. The street was thronged with people who drew back to let them pass, and who dropped to their knees in humble worship. Like Gor, the men wore only the loin cloth, but for this gala day, that simple apparel added a note of flashing color. The long cloths wrapped about their hips, and brought up and about the waist where the ends hung free, were brilliant with countless variations of crimson and blue and gold. The same rainbow hues were found in the loose folded cloths that draped themselves like short skirts from the women's waists. Here and there,

in the sea of white bodies and scintillant jeweled breast-plates, was one with an additional flash of color, where brilliant silken scarves had been thrown about the shoulders of the younger girls.

"From all the land," said Gor, "they have come to do you honor."

Hardly more than a village, this cluster of strangely beautiful shelters for the People of the Light. Beyond, Rawson saw the country, pastures where animals, weird and strange, were cropping the grass so vividly green; fields of growing things; little crystal houses like fanciful, glistening toys that had miraculously grown to greater size. The dwellings were sprinkled far into the distance across the landscape. Beyond them was the base of the mountain, magnificent and glorious in its crystal purity of white, and the striations, vertical and diagonal, that flashed brilliantly with black jet and peacock green.

Rawson knew them for mineral intrusions, and knew that the mountain was only one crystalline mass of all the quartz formation that made of the world's inner core a gigantic geode, gleaming in eternal brilliance under the glow of the central sun. And still, in it all, Dean Rawson had seen a lack without which perfection could not be complete.

"Where is Loah?" he asked of Gor. "I thought—I had hoped...."

Something in Gor's face told Rawson that his companion was troubled. "She refused to come," he said. "But the wish of one of the great ones from the Land of the Sun is a command." He shouted an order before Rawson could put in a protest. A man darted away.

"Always happy, my little Loah-San," said Gor. His eyes held a puzzled look. "Always until now. And now she weeps and will not say why. Come, we will walk more slowly. There were questions you wished to ask. I will answer them as we walk."

"Questions?" exclaimed Rawson. "A thousand of them."

And now for the first time since, at the top of a barren peak, in the dark of the desert night, his wild journey had begun, he found answers, definite and precise, to the puzzles he had been unable to solve.

Their speech—their language—how was it they could talk with him? He fired the questions out with furious eagerness, and Gor replied.

As to their speech—the Holy Mountain itself would explain. And yes, truly, this was the center of the world, or the sun above them

was. The central sun did not attract, but instead repelled all matter from it—all things but one, the sun-stone, of which Gor would speak later.

Rawson pounced upon that and demanded corroboration.

"All the power of earth tends to draw every object to its center, yet we're here on an inner surface. We're walking actually head down. And our bodies, every stone, every particle of matter, ought by well-known laws to fall into that flaming center. But we don't! That proves your point—proves a counter gravitation. Then there must be a neutral zone. A place where this upward thrust is exactly equalled by gravity's downward pull.

"The zone of fire," said Gor. "You passed through it. Did you not see?"

"Saw it and felt it!" Rawson's mind leaped immediately to the next question.

"And we must have come through it at, surely, a thousand miles an hour. What drove us? That shell must have gone in from here. I can understand its falling one way, but not two. We should have come to rest in that very spot—and we'd have lasted about half a second if

we had."

"Oro and Grah," said Gor. "Oro, the sun-stone, and Grah, the stone-that-loves-the-dark. But they are not stones, neither are they metal. We find them deep in the ground, clinging to the caves. A fine powder, both of them."

"Still I don't get it," said Rawson. "You drive that shell in from here, and then you drive it back again."

"That, too, I will explain later. It is simple; even the Dwellers in the Dark—those whom you call the mole-men—have Oro and Grah to serve them."

Gor launched into a long account of their tribal legends, of that time in the long ago when an angry sun god had driven his children inside the earth; of how Gor, and the son of Gor, and his son's sons tried always to return.

Rawson was listening only subconsciously. They were circling the white mountain, ascending its lower slope. Now he could see beyond it as far as the land extended, and he was startled to find this distance so short. They were on an island, ten miles or so in length, and beyond it was the sea; he must ask Gor about that.

"It is all that is left," said Gor, when Rawson interrupted his narrative. "Once the land was great and the sea small—this also in the long ago—but always it has risen. The air we breathe and the water in the sea come from the central sun. The air rushes out, as you know; the water has no place to retreat."

Again he took up his tale, but Rawson's eyes were following the upward curve of that sea. They, seemed to be in the bottom of a great bowl; he was trying to estimate, trying to gage distance.

"... and so, after many generations had lived and died, they found the Pathway to the Light," Gor was saying. "It is our name for the shaft through which you came. This was thousands of your years ago, when he who was then Gor, and the bravest of the tribe, descended. Even then they were workers in metal and they knew of Oro and Grah. They were our fathers, the first People of the Light."

Rawson had a question ready on his tongue, but Gor's words suggested another. "That shaft," he said, "the Pathway to the Light—do you mean it extends clear up to the mole-men's world? Why don't they come down?"

"To them the way is lost; the Pathway is closed above the zone of fire. That other Gor did that. And those who remained—the mole-

men—have forgotten. They could break their way through if they knew—they are master-workers with fire—but for them the Pathway ends, and below is the great heat. But we know of a way around the closed place, the hidden way to the great Lake of Fire."

"They could break their way through if they knew!" repeated Rawson softly. For an instant he stood silent and unbreathing; he was remembering the ugly eyes in a priest's hideous face. The eyes were watching him as the White Ones took him away.

He forced his thoughts to come back to the earlier question. "What," he asked, "is the diameter, the distance across the inside world? How far is it from here to your sun? How many miles?"

"Miles?" questioned Gor. "We know the word, for the Mountain has told us, but the length of a mile we could not know. This I can say: there were wise men in the past when our own world was larger. They worked magic with little marks on paper. It is said that they knew that if one came here from our sun and kept on as far again through the solid rock, he would reach the outside—the land, of the true sun, from which our forefathers came."

Rawson nodded his head, while his eyes followed that sweeping green bowl of the sea. "Not far off," he said abstractedly. "Two

thousand miles radius—and the earth itself not a solid ball, but a big globular shell two thousand miles thick. I could rig up a level, I suppose; work out an approximation of the curvature."

From the smooth winding path which they had followed there sounded behind them hurrying footsteps; a moment later Loah stood beside him.

Her eyes gave unmistakable corroboration of what Gor had said of that torrent of tears, but she looked at Dean bravely, while every show of emotion was erased from her face. "You sent for me," she said.

And Rawson, though now he knew he could speak to her and be understood, found himself at a loss for words.

"We wanted you with us, Gor and I," he began, then paused. She was so different from the girl whose smiling eyes had welcomed him. The change had come when he spoke those first words on his arrival, and now she was so coldly impersonal.

"I wanted to thank you. You saved my life; you were so brave, so...." Again he hesitated; he wanted to tell her how dear, how utterly lovely, she had seemed.

"It was nothing; it has pleased me to do it," she said quietly, then walked on ahead while the others followed. But Rawson knew that that slim body was tense with repressed emotion. He had not realized how he had looked forward to seeing again that welcoming light in her eyes. He was still puzzling over the change as they entered a natural cave in the mountainside.

A winding passage showed between sheer walls of snow white, where giant crystals had parted along their planes of cleavage. Then the passage grew dark, but he could see that ahead of them it opened to form a wider space. There were lights on the walls of the room, lights like the one that Loah had carried. And on the floor were rows of tables where men were busy at work, writing endlessly on long scrolls of parchment.

The Wise Ones," Gor was saying. "Servants of the Holy Mountain." Yet even then men knelt at Rawson's coming as had the other more humble people. They then returned to their tables, and in that crystal mountain was only the sound of their scratching pens and the faint sigh of a breeze that blew in through a hidden passage to furnish ventilation.

Yet there were some at those tables whose pens did not move; they seemed to be waiting expectantly. One of them spoke. "The time is

near," he said. "Are the Servants prepared?"

And the waiting ones answered: "We are prepared."

Rawson glanced sharply about. "What hocus-pocus is this?" he was asking himself. Still the silence persisted. He looked at the waiting men, motionless, their heads bent, their hands ready above the parchment scrolls. He saw again the white walls, the single broad band of some glittering metal that made a continuous black stripe around walls and ceiling and floor.

"What kind of ore is that?" he was asking himself silently. "It's metallic; it runs right through the mountain. I wonder—"

His idle thoughts were never finished. A ripping crash like the crackle of lightning in the vaulted room! Then a voice—the mountain itself was speaking—speaking in words whose familiar accent brought a sob into his throat.

"Station K-twenty-two-A," said the voice of the mountain, "the super-power station of the Radio-news Service at Los Angeles, California."

“It's tuned in!" gasped Rawson. "Tuned in on the big L. A. station! A

gigantic crystal detector! Those heavy laminations of imbedded metal furnish the inductance." Then his incoherent words ended—the mountain was speaking.

"Radiopress dispatch: The invasion of the mole-men has not been checked. Army Air Force fought a terrific engagement about midnight, last night, and met defeat. Over one hundred fighting planes were brought down in flames. Even the new battle-plane type, the latest dreadnoughts of the air, succumbed.

"Heavy loss of life, although civilian population of three towns had been evacuated before the mole-men destroyed them. Gordon Smith is reported killed. Smith was associated with Dean Rawson in the Tonah Basin where the mole-men first appeared. With Colonel Culver of the California National Guard, Smith was returning from Washington in an Army dreadnought which crashed back of the enemy's lines."

Rawson's tanned face had gone white; he knew the others were looking at him curiously, all but the men at the tables whose pens were flying furiously across the waiting scrolls. Before him the face of Loah, suddenly wide-eyed and troubled, swam dizzily. He could scarcely see it—he was seeing other sights of another world.

"They're out," he half whispered. "The red devils are out—and Smithy—Smithy's gone!"

Chapter 20: Taloned Hands

Simple, pastoral folk, the People of the Light! In their inner world, a vanishing world, where nearly all of what once had been a vast country was now covered by the steadily encroaching sea, they had resisted the degeneration which might easily have followed the destruction of a complex civilization. Living simply, and clean of mind, they had clung to the culture of the past as it was taught them by their Wise Ones. And now the People of the Light had found a new god.

Not that Dean Rawson had asked for that exalted position; on the contrary he had tried his best to make them understand that he was only one of many millions, some better, some worse, but all of them merely humans.

His speaking the language of the holy mountain had convinced them first. But when old Rotan, oldest and grayest of the mountain's servants, went into a trance, then Rawson could no longer escape the honors being thrust upon him.

"The time of deliverance is at hand," old Rotan said when he awoke. His voice that so long had been cracked and feeble was suddenly strong, vibrant with belief in the visions that had come to him.

They were in the inner chamber of the white mountain, where Dean Rawson, heartsick, lonely and hopeless, had spent most of his time listening to the voice from the outer world. Gor was there, and Loah; and the writers had left their desks to gather around old Rotan, where now the old servant of the mountain stood erect, his glistening eyes fixed unwaveringly upon Rawson.

"Listen," he commanded. "Rotan speaks the truth. Never shall the People of the Light return to the outer world; it is here we stay. For now our world which is lost shall be returned to us." His eyes, unnaturally bright, met the wondering gaze of his own people gathered around, then came back to rest again upon Rawson.

“Dean—Rah—Sun!" he said. "'Rah'—do you not see? It is our own word, Rah—the Messenger! Dean—Messenger of the Sun! The sun-god has sent him—he will set us free. He will restore our lost cities. The People of the Light will spread out to fill the new land; they will multiply, and once more will be a mighty nation, living happily as of old in their own lost world.

"Dean!" he called. "Dean—Messenger of the Sun!" He was drawn to his full frail height, his arms outstretched. But Rawson saw the old eyes close, sensed the first slackening of that tense body; it was he who sprang and caught the sagging figure in his arms, then lowered

the lifeless body to the floor of crystal white.

Even happiness can kill. A feeble heart can cease to beat under the stress of emotions too beautiful to be borne. And Rotan, wisest of the wise, had passed on to serve his sun-god in another world.

And thereafter, Rawson, Dean-Rah-Sun, was undeniably a god. But he wondered, even then, while the others dropped to their knees in humble worship, why Loah, her eyes brimming over with tears, had broken suddenly into uncontrollable sobs and had rushed blindly, swiftly, from the room.

To Rawson the unwavering, simple faith of the White Ones was only an added misery. Rotan's vision was accepted by them unquestioningly; their adoring eyes followed Rawson wherever he went, while the children carpeted his path to the holy mountain with golden flowers.

And there Rawson would sit, cursing silently his own helplessness, while the voice of the mountain told of further devastation up above. His plans for leading a force against the mole-men were abandoned. On the island, all that was left of this inner world, were only some two thousand persons, men, women and children. And the children were few; the population had been rigorously kept down. Their

present number was all that the island would support, though every possible foot of ground was tilled.

"Only a handful of them," Rawson admitted despondently, "and not a weapon of any sort. They've kept by themselves. Only Loah and a few of the others had enough curiosity and nerve to scout around where the mole-men live. She even understands their talk! Lord, what I'd give for a thousand like her, a thousand men with her nerve! Then, with weapons, and means of transportation...." But at that he stopped, aware of the futility of all such thoughts.

He had tried to talk to Gor, tried to tell him of his own limitations. And Gor had only smiled pleasantly and repeated "Rotan has spoken. It will come to pass!"

Ceaselessly his thoughts revolved about the hopelessness of his situation. He was alone. Whatever was to be done he must do single-handed—and there was nothing he could do! But he would not admit to himself that the aching loneliness came to a focus in the memory of a girl's smiling eyes, the touch of her soft hand.

"They're fighting up there," he argued, "fighting for their lives, and I can't help. What right have I to think of Loah or myself?" In spite of which he sprang abruptly to his feet, left the mountain and the voice

of the mountain behind him, and went in search of the girl.

"I've got to make her understand," he exclaimed. "I've got to have someone to talk to. But I can't make her out. She's so confoundedly respectful—acts as if I were a little tin god. And yet—she wasn't always that way!"

At the home of Gor he found Loah, slim and beautiful as always. She had just come from the bath. The creamy texture of her skin had flushed to rosiness in the cold fountain. Her jeweled breast-plates sparkled. A cloth that shone like silk enwrapped her hips in soft folds of pale rose and hung in an absurd little skirt. She might have been the spirit of youth itself, a vision of loveliness; yet Rawson felt an almost uncontrollable desire to take her in his two hands and shake her when she bowed humbly and treated his request as if it were a royal command.

"To walk with Dean-Rah-Sun! But certainly, if that is his wish!"

In silence they left the village and walked toward the island's end where Rawson had emerged from the under-world.

The island was not large. On either side were low hills, mere knolls, of white crystal, where, in every hollow, men and women were

harvesting strange grain. Between the two ranges of hills were flat fields of green, reaching out toward the point some three miles distant.

Rawson made no attempt to talk as he led Loah along the roadway that cleft the green expanse in half. Other workers were there, and Dean acknowledged their smiling, worshipful salutations. He did not want to talk now; he wanted to find some place where he and Loah could be by themselves. There was so much he must tell her. He must try to make her understand. And after that, perhaps, with her help, he could find some way to be of aid to his own beleaguered people—something he could do even single-handed.

Where the fields ended, and from there on toward the point, had been an expanse of glistening white. Rawson remembered it plainly. So now, when he found it a place of flaming crimson, he stared in amazement. Across the full width of the valley a brilliant carpet had spread itself, a covering of flowers. A blossoming vine had sprung up in the few days since his arrival and had woven a thick mat of vegetation.

He wanted to go on out to the extreme end of the point. There they would be alone. But Loah objected when he started to enter the red expanse.

"No!" she said in quick alarm. "We must not cross. It is the Place of Death. We will go around it, following the hills."

"We crossed it the other day when it was a plain of white salt," argued Rawson.

"But now the flowers have come. Even now it might be safe—but when they die then nothing can cross here and live."

Loah could not give the reason. Dean gathered from what she could tell that a gas of some sort was formed, perhaps by the decomposing vegetation. Perhaps it combined with the sparkling white shale. But all this was of no consequence compared with his own problems. He did not argue the matter but followed where Loah led.

"Where is the shell?" he asked, when they stood at last near the open mouth of the great shaft into which the air was rushing. "Where is the machine that we came here in? I wanted to see it—thought perhaps I could use it later on.

"The jana—the shell, as you call it—is safely locked in a great room of Gor's house. Not all understand its use; it must be kept away from careless hands."

Then Rawson put that thought aside. He took Loah's hand and led her some distance away toward the shore. Beyond a rocky, crystalline mass, where fragments had been heaped, the sound of the rushing air was lost; only the flashing emerald waves whispered softly on the shore beyond. And there in that quiet place, under the brilliance of the central sun, Rawson told her of himself and of the great outer world. He told her of his work, of everything that had happened, of how he was only one of many millions of men and women like, and yet unlike, the People of the Light. And at last he knew that she understood.

He had spoken softly, though he knew there were no other listening ears. Loah had been seated before him on one of the white blocks. She rose to her feet. Her eyes were troubled. Vaguely he sensed behind them a conflict of emotions.

"I must think," she said. "I will walk by myself for a time; then I will return."

Rawson reached for her hand. "You're a good sport," he said huskily. Then he felt the trembling of that hand in his; and, as if it had been an electric current, his own body responded.

Shaken in every nerve, his poise deserted him. He could not think

clearly. He knew only that that horrible loneliness was somehow gone. By force of will alone he kept his arms from reaching out toward that radiant figure. Instead, he raised her hand toward his lips.

She withdrew it sharply. "No," she said, "our Wise Ones were mistaken. For years they have listened to the mountain; they have written down its words. Slowly they have learned their meaning. A kiss, they said, was a symbol of love in your world. They were mistaken—as was I. Now I will walk alone for a time."

Rawson let her go. She seemed hardly looking where she went; her eyes were downcast. She moved slowly around the sheltering rock and on toward the level ground and the rushing winds of the shaft.

His own thoughts were in a whirl, too confused with emotion for clear thinking. "A symbol of love!" And back there in that cave world she had pressed her lips to his hand. Then they had come here, and he had been transformed to a god, a being who could never have more than an impersonal affection for one as humble as she.

The rising flood of happiness within him was abruptly frozen, changed to something which filled his veins with ice. For, from beyond the crystal barrier that hid Loah from his view, her voice had

come in one single cry of terror. Then, "Dean!" she called. "Dean San!" But by then, Rawson was throwing himself madly around the barricade of rocks.

Like a sensitized plate when the camera's shutter is opened a merest fraction of a second, Rawson's brain took the imprint of every detail that was there. The black mouth of the shaft, and, on the rock beside it, something metallic, brilliantly gleaming—a flame-thrower! Beyond the pit was Loah, half crouching, her slim body tense as if checked in mid-flight. She had been running toward him, coming to warn him. And between her and the shaft, his back turned squarely toward Rawson, was the hideous figure of a mole-man, one of the Reds! His grotesque, pointed head was bent forward toward the girl; his arms were reaching, the long fingers like talons.

Rawson did not know when he called the girl's name. But he knew the instant that he had done it and he knew it was a mistake. He should have crept quietly, seized the weapon—and now his feet tore madly on the white rock floor as he raced toward the shining implement of death. From beyond, the red figure, whirling at his call, leaped wildly for the same prize.

The taloned hands were on the flame-thrower first. Rawson saw the red body straighten, saw the weapon swing, glistening in air,

swinging over and down. From its tip green fire made a straight line of light.

He leaped in under the descending flame, felt the nozzle of the projector as it crashed upon his right shoulder and the green fire spat harmlessly beyond his back. That last spring had thrown him bodily against the red monster. They were both knocked off balance for a moment, then Rawson caught himself and swung with his left. He set himself in that fraction of a second, felt the first movement of that shining, crook-necked tube that meant the green flame was being drawn back where it could reach him; then his fist crashed into a yielding jaw.

Not five feet from the brink of that nearly bottomless shaft he stood wavering in the rush of air. He knew that the ugly red figure had toppled sideways, that the weapon had fallen with him, the blast swinging upward in a vertical, hissing arc—then man and weapon had dropped silently into the pit.

He was alone, save for the girl, who, her eyes wide with horror, threw herself upon him and clung trembling, while she murmured incomprehensible endearments in her own tongue wherein his own name was mingled: "Dean, dear! My own Dean-San!"

But the mole-men! Dean Rawson's mind was aghast with the horror of it: the mole-men had now found the way.

Chapter 21:Suicide?

Gordon Smith, sometimes known as Smithy, was to remember little of the happenings that followed the crash of the big Army dreadnought. It was Colonel Culver who dragged him from the pilot-room wreckage, Colonel Culver and one of the pilots whom he had restored to consciousness. They lowered Smithy carefully to the ground, then explored the rest of the ship.

Their hands were red when they returned—and empty. Captain Farrell and the rest of the crew had ceased to be units of the United States Army Air Force; henceforth they would be only names on a casualty list grown ominously long.

"Stood plumb on her tail," said the pilot, staring at the wreck. "They hit us just once, and the left wing crumpled like cardboard. Last I remember was pulling her up off the trees." He stared at the mass of twisted metal and the center section where the wing had torn loose; it stood upright, almost vertical, resting on the crushed tail.

"Funny," said the pilot in the same flat, level tone that seemed the only voice he had since that last pull on a whipping wheel. "Damn funny—mostly we get it first up there."

"Come here!" snapped Colonel Culver. "Lend a hand here with Smith; we've got to carry him. And don't talk so loud—those red devils will be out here any minute."

Smithy was taking a more active interest in his surroundings when he sat a week later in the Governor's office.

"There's a detachment moving in there from the south," said the Governor. "We're going to follow your advice, to some extent at least. We're sending troops to Tonah Basin. If the top of that dead crater is closed they will blast it open; then a scouting party's going down. Call it a reconnaissance, call it suicide—one name's just as good as the other. Colonel Culver, here, is going. But you know the lay of the land there; you could be of great help. How about it?"

"Are you asking me?" Smithy inquired.

He stood up, flexed his arms, while he grinned at Colonel Culver. "Hinges all greased and working! As a flier, Colonel, you're a darn good first-aid man. I'll say that! When do we start?"

Which explains why Smithy, some time later, hidden under the grotesque disguise of a gas mask, was one of fifty, similarly attired, who stood waiting about the black open maw in the great cinder-

floored crater of one of the peaks that surrounded Tonah Basin.

Night. And the big stars that hang so low in the black desert sky should have been brilliant. They were lost now in the white glare that streamed upward. The crater was a fortress. Around the circle of the entire rim, on the inner side of the rough crags, men of the 49th Field Artillery stood by their guns. Lookouts trailed their telephone wire to the higher peaks, where they perched as shapeless as huddled owls; and, like owls, their eyes swept the mountain's slopes and the desert at its base, where the searchlight crews played long fingers of light incessantly—and where nothing moved.

But the empty silence of the desert was misleading, as the men in the crater knew.

They had begun arriving with the earliest light of morning. Smithy had come in with the first lot. And when the first big auto-gyro transport had settled and risen again from the crater, another had taken its place, and another and many others after that.

That first crew had been a machine-gun battalion, and Smithy had smiled with grim satisfaction at the unhurried way in which their young captain had snapped them into position without the loss of a second. And their guns, Smithy noticed, were trained inward upon

the crater itself.

Inside that protecting circle the other transports landed one by one: men, mobile artillery, ammunition cases, big searchlights, and a dozen engine-generator outfits. The last transports brought in strange cargo—short sections of aluminum struts with bolts and splice plates to join them together: blocks, and tackle and sheaves; then spools of steel alloy cable at least ten miles in length.

From the last ship they took a hoisting engine and an assortment of aluminum plates and bars which were bolted together by waiting mechanics, and which grew magically to a crude but exceedingly substantial elevator, on which fifty men, by considerable crowding, could stand.

Only a floor of bolted plates, with corner posts and diagonal bracing and a single guard rail running around the four sides—but for the first time Smithy began to feel that he was actually going down; that this was not all make-believe, or a futile gesture. He would stand on that platform; he would go down where Dean had gone. And then.... But what would come after he knew he could never imagine.

A little crane swung the first metal work into position above the shaft. One end of the assembled framework of aluminum alloy

dragged loosely on the ground; the other end swung out and projected above the shaft, swayed for an instant—and then came the first direct knowledge of the enemy's presence. The end of a metal strut, though nothing visible was touching it, grew suddenly white hot, sagged, then broke into a shower of molten, dazzling drops that rained down into the pit.

"Good," said Colonel Culver, who was standing beside Smithy. "Now we know they are there—but it means we will have to go down there with our gas masks on."

To Smithy it was not immediately apparent how gas masks were to protect them from the deadly invisible ray. He got the connection of thoughts when a bomb was slid over the edge. The dull thud of the explosion quickly came back to them.

"They popped that one off in the air—hit it with their heat ray," said a cheerful voice beside them. "But the phosgene will keep on going down. Give them another!"

The interval this time was longer. "Now for a dirty crack," said the cheerful voice. "Time this one."

A youngster nearby snapped a stop-watch as the bomb was released.

He held some printed tables in his hands. Odd receivers from which no wire led were clamped over his ears. This time the dull thud was long in coming. It was hardly perceptible when the young man with the stop watch announced: "Fifty thousand feet, sir."

"Give 'em another. Time it again." A second high explosive bomb was released.

"Fifty thousand feet, sir."

"Good. That measures it. And those last bombs have knocked the devil out of whatever machinery they've got down there. Now we'll give them a real taste of gas. Two of the green ones there, men. Put ten miles of cable on the drums. Get that hoisting frame into place."

But night had come, though searchlights outside the crater and floodlights within had robbed the night of its terror, when Smithy, with Culver beside him, climbed over the guard rail of the lift that hung waiting just over the pit.

A gas mask covered his entire face. Through its round eye plates he looked at the others who crowded about him. Grotesque, almost ludicrous—twenty men, armed with clumsy sub-machine guns; the others would follow later. A searchlight was on a tripod at the center,

and a spool of electric cable.

The light sizzled into life and swung slowly about. Then the platform jarred, and the spool of cable began slowly to unwind. Beside him Colonel Culver was returning the salute of an officer outside on the ashy ground. Smithy raised his hand, but the brink of that pit had moved swiftly up—there was nothing before him but a glassy wall.

Reconnaissance? Suicide? One word was as good as another. But he was going down—down where Dean Rawson had gone—down where there was a debt to be paid.

Chapter 22: The Red-Flowering Vine

“Rotan," said Gor slowly, sadly, "was wrong. His vision was not the truth. The Red Ones have come. And now—we die."

"Without a fight?" Rawson demanded incredulously.

"We are not a fighting people. We have no weapons. We can only die."

Rawson turned to Loah. They were inside the mountain, and the servants of the mountain, with terror and dismay written plainly on their faces, were gathered about. "At the Lake of Fire," said Rawson, "when you saved me, there was an explosion and clouds of white fumes. What was it?"

"It was like water," Loah said. "We found it deep inside the earth in a place where it is very cold. When warmed it turns to white clouds. We threw a flask of it on the hot rocks, hoping to reach you while they could not see."—she paused and shook her head slowly—"but we can get no more. The Pathway of Light is closed to us, now that the Red Ones are there."

"Liquefied gas of some sort," said Rawson briefly, "caught in

enormous rock pressure. But that's out! Now what about this Place of Death? There's an idea there."

The White Ones were numbed with fear, but Loah and Gor accompanied him when Rawson returned to the red field. The flowers were still in bloom; they waved gently in the breeze that blew always from the mountain across the fields and out toward the point, where even now dark figures could be seen near the mouth of the shaft.

"It will be many of your days," said Loah, "before the flowers die. If you thought to trap the Red Ones in the Place of Death, there will not be time...." But Rawson had left them; he had advanced into the scarlet field and dropped to his knees.

He was crushing the vines in his hands, grinding them into the white, salty earth underneath. Then he passed his hands guardedly before his face as if to detect an odor.

Loah and Gor saw him shake his head slowly while he spoke aloud words that they could not understand. "Cyanide," Dean Rawson was saying. "It's a cyanide of some sort—releases hydrocyanic acid gas. I could have rigged a generator, though I've forgotten about all of my chemistry—and now there isn't time." Off in the distance the dark

figures still moved near the end of the point.

He made no effort to conceal his dejection as he returned. The edge of the Place of Death made a winding line across the scant half mile of valley where the green fields ended abruptly.

Dean stepped high over the stone trough a half mile long that marked that dividing line. There was water in it; it was part of their irrigation system. A little beyond, in the midst of the green, stood a tiny flat-topped knoll on which he knew was a pool that supplied the crude system. Beyond it Loah and Gor were waiting.

Gor read the look on Rawson's face. "It is useless," Gor said. "And now I have decided. The People of the Light must die—but not in the fires of the Reds. With my people I shall walk into the sea."

And Rawson could not protest. He could only follow as Gor turned back toward the village and the mountain beyond.

From a spur on the mountainside Rawson could see the full length of the island. One way lay the village; beyond it the green fields; then the wide scarlet band of the Place of Death. And beyond that the little crystal hills and the valley between that led out to the point. It was now dark with massed clusters of bodies, red even at that

distance. He could even see the glint of metal from time to time.

And behind the mountain were the People of Light, where Gor was only waiting for the attack to lead them out to the island's farther end and then on to a kindlier death in the emerald sea. Only Loah was with Dean, although there were others of the White Ones not far away, watching, ready to warn Gor when the attack began.

Not an hour before, Rawson had stood in the inner chamber and had listened to the mountain as it repeated the words of a far-distant man: "Attack of the mole-men growing increasingly ferocious ... heat-ray projectors—almost invincible ... our forces have entered the Tonah Basin—they are descending into the crater. But whether warfare can be carried on advantageously under ground is problematical...." Rawson unconsciously gritted his teeth behind his set lips as he watched the Reds.

He knew why they had been so slow in attacking. They must have a carrier of some sort, a shell like that of Loah's, and they were bringing their fighters one shell-load at a time. When the entire force was ready they would attack. And Rawson was convinced that this force would be limited in number.

"They'll have plenty to keep them busy up there," he argued. "If only

we could wipe out this one lot we could prepare to defend ourselves." And now, standing on the side of the mountain, he startled Loah with the fury of his sudden ejaculation.

"Fool! Quitter! Waiting here for them to come and get you! There's one chance in a million—" Then he was rushing at full speed along the roadway that circled the mountain toward Gor and the terrified throng.

The waiting savages must have laughed, if indeed laughter was possible for such a race, at sight of the White Ones creeping timidly down. Off a mile and more they could see them harvesting their strange crop—harvesting!—storing up supplies of food, no doubt, when the mole-men with their flame-throwers would reap the harvest so soon!

But in a crimson field Dean and Gor and Loah led the others where they swarmed across the Place of Death, gathering huge armfuls of the red-flowering vine, carrying them to the village and returning for more. Where they trod it was as if peach pits were crushed beneath their feet. And there was a curious fragrance which Rawson told them not to breathe, but to keep their faces always into the wind.

Their hands and bodies were sore and burned by the strong juice of

the vines. They stopped often to cast apprehensive glances at the distant group of red figures, and always Rawson drove them in a frenzy of haste. At last he made them move the long trough of stone beyond the edge of the green field and over into the Place of Death.

Rawson kept no track of the time. The voice of the mountain was his only measure of hours in a world of perpetual day. But more hours—another day, perhaps—had passed when the Red force at last began to move.

They did not spread out wide across the valley, but formed a straggling line that was denser toward the center. They could not know what opposition they would meet; for the present they would stay together. Above them as they came were twinkling lights of pale-green fire.

The radio had spoken of heat rays; Rawson wondered if that meant some newer and more horrible instrument. But he saw nothing but the flame-throwers in the armament of this force.

He was waiting by the irrigation pool, hidden for the moment behind the little knoll. Loah was with him; he had tried in vain to induce her to stay with Gor and the others who were waiting beyond the mountain.

There were watchers, some of them within hearing, whose voices relayed the news of the enemy's advance. Then they ran; panic was upon them.

"*Tur—gona!*" they cried, "*Nu—tur—gona!* We die! Quickly we die!" Rawson heard the shout carried on toward the hidden throng.

Cautiously he peered from the little knoll. They were coming. Already they were trampling the remaining red blooms on the farther edge of the field. But he waited till they were halfway across before he leaped to the top of the knoll, grasped a pole he had placed there in readiness and rammed it down through the pool, turbid yellow with the juice from the vines, and broke open the outlet he had plugged in the base.

One green light slashed above his head. One flicked at the knoll near his feet, where green growing things burst into flame—then he threw himself backward down the short rocky slope while the stones tore at his nearly nude body. He sprang to his feet and held Loah close. On either side of the knoll was a holocaust of flame where green lights played. He waited breathlessly. The fires brought in a little back draft of air, the scent of peach pits was strong—and then the green lights ceased. The unripe grain of the fields smoldered slowly.

Then Rawson stepped from his hiding and stared out at the Place of Death.

Nearby was a huddle of bodies. On either side, in a long, straggling line, they lay now on the ground—a windrow where Death had reaped. The flames of their weapons still in action were all that moved. The white earth turned molten wherever those flames struck.

Farther off there were red things that were running. The yellow liquid from the pool, charged with the acid of the vines, had been slow in flowing out through that long trough. The savages could only see that their fellows had fallen. Some mystery, something invisible and beyond their comprehension had struck them. They ran toward the center at first, then turned and fled—and by then the soft air blowing gently about them had brought that strange fragrance of death. Then they, too, lay still.

From the distance came faintly a booming chant, two thousand voices raised in unison. "*Tur—gona! Nu—tur—gona!*" The last of a once mighty people were marching to their death.

Rawson and Loah turned with one accord. Victory was theirs, but there was no time to taste the fruits of victory. They ran with straining muscles and gasping breath toward the distant mountain

and the marching host beyond.

“My plans are made," Rawson spoke quietly. "I must go. I shall take the shell—the jana—and go back to the mole-men's world. I shall go alone, and I shall die, but what of that?" His eyes lit up for a moment. "I'll try to find *Phee-e-al* first. If I can get him before they get me, that will help."

They were standing on the mountain's lower slope, Gor and Leah and the servants of the mountain gathered near. Below, the White Ones were massed in worshiping silence. Had not Dean-Rah-Sun saved them? And now what else would come to pass?

The same question had been asked by the Wise Ones, and now Rawson turned and spoke to them. "Rotan was right," he told them. "His vision was true. There is work I must do here before I go. Your lands, or some of them at least, will be restored. And you will be safe forever from what we have seen to-day. Gor will lead you wisely, and Loah...." His voice faltered; he had kept his eyes resolutely away from the slim figure of the girl, who had been wordless, scarcely breathing. Now she stepped swiftly before him.

"You must go, Dean-San," she said gently. He knew it was a term of endearment. "You must go if you say you must. But you do not go

alone, nor die alone. Long ago the voice of the mountain spoke beautiful words. I know now it was one of your priests telling of a woman of your own race. Always have I remembered. 'Wheresoever thou goest, I shall go; thy people....'"

But Dean Rawson had gathered the slender figure, starry-eyed and sobbing into his arms.

Chapter 23: Oro and Grah

Then there were footsteps approaching the chest.

“The Place of Death!" said Dean Rawson. "Whoever named it had the right idea."

As part of their titanic plan, Rawson and Loah-San return to sacrifice themselves in the flaming caverns of the Red Ones.

He looked out across the wide stretch of ground with its covering of white salt almost entirely stripped of the carpet of vines. The bodies of the mole-men lay where they had fallen; their flame-throwers still tore futilely at the earth or stabbed upward in vain, thrusting toward the green-gold sun that shone pitilessly down.

"Still I do not understand," said Gor. "My people pressed the strong, burning water from the vines and poured it into the pool as you directed. But the Red Ones did not touch it—how could it burn them?"

"I'll say it was strong!" said Rawson. He looked at his hands, red and burned where the liquid had touched. "And it got stronger by

standing. It was an acid, and when it touched the white earth a gas was formed—hydrocyanic acid gas. And that's nothing to fool with."

He walked cautiously out where the liquid had been poured over the white ground. No odor remained; the air was clean. Then he picked up one of the flame-throwers and experimented with it until he found the sliding sleeve that shut off the blast.

"All right," he called to Gor. "Bring on your men; we've got to clean up this place and get rid of the bodies before the sun gets in its work. They're the ones that will go into the ocean instead of you." He moved carefully along the straggling line of bodies, salvaging the weapons and turning off their fearful blasts.

They worked and slept and worked again before their gruesome task was done and Rawson was ready to begin the other work that he had in mind.

Beside the mouth of the great shaft, resting on the rocks, was a cylinder, almost exactly a counterpart of the one Loah had used. But this was larger—fully fifty of the red savages could have crowded inside.

"It is the only one they had," said Loah. "I have seen, and I know."

"But they can make more," Gor argued. "This one and the one we have," he told Rawson, "were made thousands of years ago. There were masters of metal-work among them, and they had learned to use Oro and Grah. Even then the people were divided. He who was then Gor and his followers fought with the others. But he left them one *jana*—this very one here. Then Gor followed the Pathway to the Light, though he sealed it as you know. But—but they will build others. Sooner or later they will come."

"I think not," said Rawson. "Now what about this Oro and Grah material? What was it you called them—the Sun-stone and the Stone-that-loves-the-dark? I must know how they work." But Loah was reluctant to experiment with the *jana* of the Reds; she had her own shell brought instead—and then Rawson learned the secret of what seemed its miraculous flight.

A cylindrical metal bubble, just buoyant enough to lift itself above the ground—Gor and some of the others brought it from the village. Gor brought, too, a little box which he carried with great difficulty.

“It is Grah," he said, when he showed Rawson a little scattering of black dust within the box. "Always it tries to fall back under the ground. Both Oro and Grah grow deep down near the Zone of the Fires; we find them in the caves, Oro on one side and Grah on the

other. Oro is as heavy in its upward falling as Grah is in its downward.

"Then"—he pointed to the central vertical tube in the shell—"we put both of them in here, bringing it a few grains at a time. One falls to one end and the other to the other. And then, with these simple valves, we let out a little of whichever we wish—release it a grain at a time, if that is best. We let out a few grains of Grah, and Oro, being stronger, draws us upward; or we let a little of the Oro escape, and we fall downward swiftly. You see it is simple, as I said."

Rawson's reply was not an answer to Gor so much as it was an argument with himself. "Heavy," he said. "Specific gravity beyond anything we've ever known. Osmium, the heaviest substance we have, would be light as a feather compared to this. But wait. This Grah, as you call it, falls downward, but that means it falls toward the outside of the earth. With us it would be light—light! And Oro would be heavy. New substance—new matter! One feels only the attraction of our normal gravitation; the other doesn't react to that at all, but is driven outward with tremendous force by counter-gravitation, the repulsion of this Central Sun. You've used it cleverly, but we'd have done more with it up on top."

He was lost in thought for some minutes, muttering figures and

calculations half aloud. "Two thousand miles from the Central Sun to us; two thousand more through the solid earth. And if that repelling force follows Newtonian laws it will decrease as the square.... But, coming down from up on top, normal gravity would decrease directly as the distance!" He made scratches with one small stone upon a larger one in lieu of paper and pencil, but, to his listeners, his muttered words could have meant nothing.

"Around six seventy-six hundred and seventy miles to the neutral zone, the Zone of Fire. And a column of water—it would carry on by, plug the shaft, check the back-pressure, and then...." For the first time since that night when the mole-men had poured out into the crater, his eyes were alight with hope, though his face seemed tense and grim. Then the lines about his lips relaxed; he smiled at Loah.

"I would like to investigate this under-world," he said, "—not very far down. Will you take me?"

The girl's adventurous spirit had led her on many exploring trips in that subterranean world. She laughed happily when Rawson told her what he wanted. "But, yes," she said; "of course I know such a place." And from some two or three miles below, after anchoring the *jana* securely, she led him through a winding tunnel where he knew he was steadily climbing.

It was a wide corridor that they followed, where the walls came together high above their heads; he could hardly see where they met by the light of Loah's torch. Now and then there were lateral passages, but they were narrow, hardly more than cracks; and Rawson, looking into them, nodded his head with satisfaction.

Occasionally his footsteps rang hollowly on the stone, and he knew that the floor was thin between this and other caverns below. "What an old honeycomb it is!" he exclaimed. "And we had it all figured as being solid. The weight is all here, of course, but it's concentrated in that red stuff down near the neutral zone. But anyway, Loah has shown me just what I wanted."

He had gathered a handful of little fragments, and, keeping count of his steps, had shifted a bit of rock to his left hand for every hundred paces. By this he knew they must have gone five or six miles when he reached the tunnel's high point. Many times it had widened. Here, too, was a cave more than a hundred feet across.

From the farther side the tunnel continued, pitching sharply downward, but Rawson did not explore farther. "I can seal that off with a flame-thrower," he said. "I've seen how they use them." Then he took Loah's light and looked with every evidence of approval at the rocky walls and the roof that seemed heavy with dew.

He had wondered about the air, but he found that it seeped through from that central shaft, although Loah told him that in some deeper passages the air was bad. Here, although it was moving gently, it seemed wet as if charged with moisture. Rawson, staring upward, felt a drop strike him in the face, dripping from the rocks above.

"It's a gamble," he said, "just a gamble. But the stakes are worth while. And now, Loah-San, we will return."

He made crude work with the flame-throwers at first but finally he got the knack, and the mouth of the tunnel beyond the big room was sealed. Then, with the help of Loah and some few of the others, he brought in more and more weapons of the Reds. He was curious as to their construction, but his curiosity had to go unsatisfied. They were only cylinders, so far as he could see, cylinders a foot long and six inches through, of some metal with the dull lustre of aluminum. But they were sealed, and he dared not cut one open with another flame-thrower for fear of what might come forth.

On the top of each cylinder a tube was connected that ended in a lava tip; but at the base of the tube, where it joined the cylinder, was a sliding sleeve that checked the flame to nothing when it was moved, or opened it to the full blast.

He had a hundred of them in the room when at last he was through—one hundred fearful instruments of destruction. And still he told no one of his plans; he only told Gor what he wanted done later on. "It may not work," he had to admit to himself. "I'm just guessing at the thickness of the rock and the power of these machines. It's a gamble, nothing but a gamble."

He arranged the flame-throwers in a circle along the outer wall. The tops of the cylinders were curved, but the bottoms were flat and they set solidly on the rock. But he tipped them backward and braced them firmly with fragments of stone until every crooked-neck tube was pointed upward and toward the center. Finally he was done.

It was only a matter of a few hours later when Rawson stood on the island's end by the mouth of the shaft. In his ears was the ceaseless rush of the air as it entered the pit; it was the only sound in a silent world. And for the first time there came overwhelmingly upon him a realization of what this moment meant.

The time had come. Loah was beside him, her lovely eyes unnaturally bright in her face from which all the blood seemed to have flowed. He felt the slight trembling of her body as she pressed against him; he knew she was struggling to keep back the tears. Then Rawson half turned with one final entreaty that she let him go alone;

but he left the words unsaid—he had argued it several times before.

Before them stood Gor, then the Wise Ones, the Servants of the Mountain, deserting their post for the first time since the Mountain had been given a voice. Beyond them all the people of this little world were gathered.

It had seemed only a fanciful dream, this thought of going; in fact, he had been too busy, too pressed with his own preparations, to give it thought. Now he was learning to his own surprise how closely he had identified himself with this world and its people. It had given him Loah; it had been a haven, a sanctuary.

He let his eyes slowly take in the full splendor of that emerald sea, the shining land under a green-gold sun, the Mountain in white, crystal purity against a green-blue sky. And he was leaving it, he and Loah; they were going to—death!

“You will remember," he said to Gor. His voice sounded dull and heavy; it hardly seemed himself who was speaking. "You know the day and the hour. This is the nineteenth. It is now noon—twelve o'clock in my world. When the Voice of the Mountain says that noon again has come you will do as I said."

"The Mountain speaks without ceasing now," said Gor, "telling always of what the Red Ones do. We will count the hours as they pass. In twenty-four of those hours Gor will descend in the *jana* of the Reds to do as Dean Rah-Sun has commanded."

Rawson held out his hand. He was suddenly wordless. Then Loah threw herself into Gor's arms in one last passionate embrace—but it was she who entered the *jana* first.

"Come," she said to Dean. "Oh, come quickly, Dean-San!" Then he, too stepped inside and made the heavy door fast.

Men of the White Ones had been holding the big cylinder down. But Rawson, staring through the window, saw that it was Gor's own hands that swung them out at last above the pit.

Their craft hung quivering for an instant in the rushing air; then Loah moved one of the levers a trifle and the blackness took them, and only the little bull's-eyes in the metal ceiling showed the fading glow of the Inner World, the home of the People of the Light, which their eyes never again would see.

Chapter 24: The Bargain

Rawson had taken one flame-thrower with him. He tied it securely inside the shell so it could not shift with the changing gravity, or be accidentally turned on. Again he clung to the curved bar against the wall. Loah stood at the center, directing the craft.

Once again he floated in air, then found himself standing on what had been the ceiling of the room. The girl had released a considerable quantity of the lifting element in the *jana's* end, and now the black powder in the other end of the central tube was dragging them at terrific speed as it rushed away from the earth's center.

Over six hundred miles, Rawson had figured, from that inner surface to the neutral zone where the red substance of the earth, that was neither rock nor metal, under terrific pressures, glowed with fervent heat or formed pools like the Lake of Fire.

Perhaps a hundred miles thick, that zone of incessant energy, and their little craft tore through it at tremendous speed. Even so, he was gasping for breath in the heated room when the glow faded and again he swung over and down upon the floor as Loah checked the speed of the flying projectile and the little ship crept slowly up into

the room where first he had seen it.

The first that he noticed was the absence of the roar. The *jana* drifted slowly to one side, and Loah let it come to rest upon the floor. Staring from the open door, Rawson saw the same familiar red walls and floor and the black opening of the shaft from which they had come. But the reverberating roar of the great organ-pipe was gone. He knew that the air, for the greater part, was driving on past through the upper shaft that was now open. The way was clear for them to ascend. He turned to the girl.

“If my figures are right, it's some thirteen hundred miles from here on. How did you get up there before?"

Loah pointed to the passage where the *jana*, on that other excursion, had been hidden. "We went through there," she said, "taking the *jana* with us. We went up many miles through a great crack, but it was not straight; we had to go carefully till another passage opened through to the shaft far above where it was sealed."

"And the mole-men never found it?"

"Oh, yes," said Loah, "they must have known of the crack, but they did not know where it led. Its air was bad—a gas that choked; one

could not breathe it and live. But in our little *jana* we were safe. They could not use theirs; it was too large. Besides, only the priests came down. They had their Lake of Fire, where they did horrible things. They did not know that the shaft began again below."

"O. K.," said Rawson, and closed the door.

"But I wish to get out," Loah protested, "to gather more of the Oro. We may need more, should we return."

"We will never need it," Rawson spoke softly. "From the time we left Gor we had just twenty-four hours to live. We must go on, and go fast."

They had no way of measuring time, and Rawson could only guess at the hours that passed while their little ship tore swiftly upward through the dark. He wondered if the occasional shrill shriek that followed the touching of their metal guides on the glassy walls could be heard up above.

Then, at last, Loah was driving the *jana* slowly while she held her light so it would shine through a window. Rawson had to restrain himself to keep from pacing the little room like a caged animal while the precious minutes slipped by. Now that the enemy was near he

wanted nothing but to drive on up to the end of the shaft, come out into that world wherever the shaft ended, then try to fight his way through to the great hall where he hoped to find Phee-e-al. And his haste made him overestimate the passing time; their journey had been swifter than he knew.

"I may have passed it," Loah was saying doubtfully. "I may have come too far." Then she interrupted herself and sprang to the controls.

They drifted slowly back. "It is different now," Loah said; "the air rises more swiftly than before." She stared from the windows while she drove the *jana* slowly up and down, trying to bring it to equilibrium in the strong up-draft.

The air entered the shell through a little opening with the same pungent tang Rawson had noticed before. He had wondered about the air. Down near the neutral zone it was dense, yet he had not minded the pressure too greatly—and that had been puzzling.

"Rock pressure and air pressure," he had reasoned; "they are two different things. If the rock flowed, any air that it trapped would be squeezed to a liquid. But it doesn't flow—that red stuff is solid; so the air pressure is only the weight of the air column itself. But even

that should be enormous."

He could only conclude that the lessened pressure came from that strange counter-gravitation, the repelling force from the center of the earth. Perhaps it tended to dissipate the molecules, held them farther apart, prevented their squeezing in together, and battering with a thousand little impacts on a point where one had hit before.

Their *jana* swayed gently as if the smooth air currents were disturbed and were drifting them sideways; and then, at last, Loah, peering from a window, sprang back and moved a lever. Beneath them was the softly-cushioned thud of the shell seating itself on firm rock.

They were in another of the interminable caves, Rawson found when he opened the door. The *jana* was resting a few feet in from the edge of the shaft. Cautiously they got out, but even without their weight it had a slight negative buoyancy.

"Oro is pulling more strongly than Grah," Dean said, and smiled. Already the names seemed familiar to him.

The two lifted the *jana* and carried it back some twenty feet more before Rawson realized how unnecessary this was.

"We'll never be using it again," he said. "If I've guessed right it will stay here as long as the rocks; if not—but we'll never know the difference anyway."

He took the flame-thrower from the car in sudden haste. "Quick, dear," he told Loah. "God knows when the end will come. Quick, show me the way."

Loah knew every step of the route that took them on and upward through a maze of twisting passages, and Rawson marveled at her sense of direction. She flashed her light at times—the little bar of metal that had in one hollow end a substance which absorbed the light-energy of the Central Sun. Rawson knew how it worked. Even the lights in the mountain room were taken out from time to time and exposed to the sunlight that brought them back into glowing life. He had seen similar phenomena on earth. But, for the most part, Loah kept the little metal cap in place on the end of her torch, and they moved cautiously through the dark.

Sounds of the Red Ones came to them at times. And once they hid in a narrow branching cleft that came abruptly to a dead end, while a force of red warriors marched hurriedly through the passage they had just left. Back in their hiding place Rawson stood tense and ready, with his weapon till the last of the enemy was gone.

Always he was frantic at thought of the time that was slipping past—until, at last, the narrow passage that they followed cut transversely through another large runway that glowed faintly from some distant light.

With that first gleam of light there came over Dean Rawson an odd change. Something within him had been cold with fear. Fear of the flying minutes. Fear that Loah might have lost her way in this tangled labyrinth of winding ways. And now, suddenly, he was care-free, filled with an absurd joy. Nothing mattered. They were to die, but what of that? Loah had chosen death; he would see that when it came to her, it would be quickly and without pain. And as for himself, if before he died he could remove this ruler of an enemy race....

So when Loah leaned close and whispered, "The light—it shines from the council room of Phee-e-al," Dean replied almost gaily; "I've got to hand it to you—you sure do know all the back alleys." Then he stuck his head cautiously out into the dimly-lighted corridor.

It was broad. He saw where their own little passageway went on from the opposite side. But the light—the light! At his left, not a hundred steps away, was a room, brilliantly lighted. And across it, in gleaming splendor, stretched a low wall—a barrier of gold. It was

the council room, where once before he had faced Phee-e-al in all that savage's hideous splendor.

He listened. All was silent. Then Loah whispered: "Phee-e-al comes this way when he goes to the council room. But when he comes, or how often, I do not know."

Dean pressed her back into the narrow way with his hands. "Wait here!" he said, and gave her the flame-thrower. "I've an idea!" He stepped softly out into the broad passage and on naked, noiseless feet, moved swiftly toward the lighted room.

It was empty. Beyond the barrier were no red figures, nor were there whistling voices to echo as he had heard them before. Here was the throne where Phee-e-al had sat; here the priests had stood; there, along the wall, were the chests.

Fully twenty of them, each eight feet long, they stood ranged along the three walls of that part of the room protected by the barrier. No two of them alike; all of them were oddly carved and studded with jewels.

The chests were ranged in a straight row a foot or more out from the wall. He crossed to them swiftly. About here was where that priest

must have gone. He raised one of the heavy lids till the light struck within.

Bones! Only fragments of a skeleton, blackened by age; a necklace of teeth from some animal's jaw; worthless trifles for the mummery of the priests. Then, beneath them, he saw two great fangs, a foot in length. They were curved, sharply pointed and yellow as old ivory.

What was it Gor had said of legends that told of ancestors coming from the outer world? Rawson knew that he was looking at priceless relics of the tribe, at the tusks of man's long extinct enemy, the great sabre-toothed tiger.

But he had neither time nor thoughts to spare for marvels new or old —he must find his gun. Yet, even then, he wondered what undreamed-of treasures the other chests might hold—what jewels, what paraphernalia of ancient kings.

He must be silent! Perhaps the next great glittering container might hold the blue gleam of his gun. And this time as the gem-studded lid was swung upward and back to rest noiselessly against the rock wall, Dean could not repress the audible gasp that came to his lips.

His own pistol! He had expected to find the one weapon, but,

instead, the chest was filled with all it would hold of rifles and side arms and cartridge belts, all mingled in one indiscriminate heap.

They were twisted, some of them, and bent; discolored, too, evidently by flames. On some the stocks had been burned off.

Rawson's hands were suddenly trembling. There was one rifle that seemed unharmed; he brought it out, and hardly heard the little clatter that it made among the other weapons. An ammunition belt—he slipped out a clip of cartridges, made sure they fitted his gun, and threw one up into the firing chamber. He was fumbling for more of the clips when there pierced through his tumultuous thoughts the realization that he was hearing sounds not made by his own suddenly clumsy hands.

Marching feet, whistling voices—they came from beyond the room's farther end, beyond the entrance through which he had once been brought a captive. He took one step back toward the broad tunnel, then knew there were others coming there.

There was no possible avenue of escape. He threw himself in one wild dive into the narrow space between the chests and the wall, and pulled himself forward under the shelter of the one back-turned lid. The rifle was still gripped in his hands.

By the sounds that came to him, he knew that the outer room had filled with red warriors, and that another smaller group had come scuffing from the passage where he had just entered. And, by the echoing cry of shrill voices that shouted, "Phee-e-al! Phee-e-al!" he knew that the ruler was near.

Then there were footsteps approaching the chest. A priest no doubt; shrill whistling told of his anger. The concealing cover was jerked outward and down, and Rawson, staring above him, saw not the coppery face that he had expected, but the hideous white visage of Phee-e-al himself.

For an instant the ruler of the mole-men stood half stooped in petrified astonishment, and in that moment Rawson dragged himself to his feet. No chance to use the gun—the other was upon him, his gripping talons tearing Rawson's bare flesh. In one flashing thought, Dean cursed himself for the uselessness of his weapon—he should have taken a pistol, an automatic. Then, body to body with the savage, he was dragged out over the chest.

He had been holding the rifle above him, as he struggled from his cramped quarters. The savage had grabbed him about the shoulders, but his hands were still free; they held the gun on high. And in the second when he found his feet under him, as Phee-e-al dragged him

clear of the chest, Rawson brought the breech of the gun crashing down upon the pointed skull.

He felt the talons release their hold. The priests were rushing upon him. Phee-e-al, too, had been only momentarily stunned—he was springing. Then Rawson whipped the rifle down in line, and the clamoring shrieks that filled the room with tumult were drowned under another roar.

He saw Phee-e-al fall. Even then, through all the pandemonium within his own mind, he thrilled with satisfaction at sight of a little dot and a spreading stain above Phee-e-al's heart, where only bare skin had been before.

The next shot took the foremost of the priests. The others paused, hesitant for a moment, ranged out in an irregular line. Past them, beyond the golden barrier, Rawson caught a confused glimpse of a sea of red faces. Green flames were stabbing upward from their ready weapons. The priests were between him and them, and there came to Rawson in that instant, through all the chaos of fighting and half-formed plans, the knowledge that these priests were a living barrier that held off the flames.

He fired once more to check them, then sprang for the wide entrance

of the tunnel. He fired again back of him, shooting wildly as he ran, then saw Loah as she came from her hiding place with the flame-thrower ready in her hand.

"Quick!" he gasped. "Get back!" Then, with her, he was running stumblingly through the dark.

There could be no escape; even while they fled he knew it. And yet they almost made it—though the end, when it came, was one that neither could possibly have foreseen.

They were following a wide passage, one of the countless thoroughfares of the Reds. It was deserted. Loah flashed her light freely. Ahead of them the passage turned. Just short of that bend was a rift in the rocks.

"There!" Loah gasped. "Turn there. It will take us back to the *jana*." But the words were followed by a flash of green from dead ahead.

The flames that made it came quickly after and a dozen of the red warriors were before them, the light of their weapons slanting just above Rawson's head. His rifle was half raised—they would at least fight to the last. Then he realized that the green death was not swinging downward.

From behind them, in the corridor through which they had raced, came a chorus of whistling shouts. Rawson whirled to find more of the red fighters, and again, though their hissing green flames were held ready, they did not descend.

A priest, copper-colored, shining resplendently in the weird glow, detached himself from the group and stepped forward under the protection of their weapons. Loah's hand was depressing the muzzle of Rawson's rifle. "Wait!" she said. "He wishes to speak."

The priest stopped and addressed them. Loah answered; and to Rawson it seemed horrible that her lips and throat should be called upon to form those whistling words. Then she turned toward him.

"He says they will not harm you now if you surrender. Later, when they select a new ruler, he may order you set free."

Rawson was doing some quick thinking. The priest was lying, clumsily, childishly, but it might be he could bargain with them.

"Tell them this," he ordered Loah: "they are to let you go free—let you go right now! If they do that, I'll lay down my gun. If they don't, that priest will die before they get me. I don't think you can make it," he added, "but go back to the *jana*. Don't stop for anything. Drive it

as fast as you can; you may still get there before Gor does his stuff. And take the flame-thrower in case you are followed—" He stopped; Loah was laughing.

"Did you really think, Dean-San, that I would desert you?" Again she laughed softly—laughing squarely in the face of that waiting death, a laugh that was half a sob, that caught suddenly in her throat as she stared at Dean.

He could not read the look in her eyes as their expression changed. "Yes," she said slowly, "yes, you are right. If I stay we both die, quickly."

Again her voice made whistling sounds; the priest replied. Then Loah threw her arms around Dean and kissed him. He was gripping his rifle; before he could take her in his arms, she was gone. She walked swiftly, the flame-thrower in her hands, toward the dark cleft in the rocks, through which she disappeared. And Dean, though she had done what he really wished, felt that all of his life and strength had gone with him with that fleeing figure.

He placed his rifle on the floor and, straightening, held out his empty hands; the priest's talons were upon his flesh.

"But I got Phee-e-al, anyhow," he was thinking dully.

Chapter 25: Smithy

Scarcely more than a vault in the solid rock, the room where Rawson lay. He had seen it for an instant when the priest, after tying his hands behind him, had hurled him viciously into the room. It had but one entrance, though up high on one wall was a crack some two feet in width that admitted fresh air. A little room, only some twenty feet square; but he would not suffocate—the priests did not intend that he should die—not yet.

He saw one of the giant yellow workers bring a big metal plate. He put it before the doorway; then, by the red glow, he knew that they had sealed him in.

"I got Phee-e-al," he thought. "I did that much to help. That may put a crimp in their plans, check the invasion up above. But Gor didn't do as I told him, or it didn't work. The twenty-four hours must have gone by."

Then, even in that thought, he found happiness. "That means that Loah is safe," he told himself. "The shaft is clear; she's on her way back right now."

He pictured the *jana* falling swiftly through that dark shaft. He saw

in his mind the beautiful figure of the girl, lithe and slender, standing at the controls.

About him was a silence like that of the grave; his blood pounded in his temples like a throbbing drum. It was some time before he knew that, with that throbbing, other faint sounds were mingled.

They came from the wall beside him, sharp tappings muffled by distance, the faintest whispering echo of rock striking upon rock. *Tap-tap ... tap*. A longer pause.... *Tap.* They were making dots and dashes that blurred with the beating in his own brain.

In that dreadful silence he strained every nerve in an agony of listening. There was nothing more.

He had been roughly handled by the savages. His whole body was bruised and aching, his thoughts hazy and blurred. "Woozy," he told himself. "Guess the old bean must have got a bad crack. Hearing things—mustn't do that."

Again he tried to picture the girl, speeding on toward that inner world. Was she thinking of him? Surely she was. He could hear her calling his name. "Dean," she was saying. "Dean-San." The words were repeated, an agonized, ghostly whisper—repeated again,

"Dean-San—oh, Dean-San," before he knew that the sound was coming from overhead. Then a light flashed once in the little room, and he saw her face, looking down.

She was beside him an instant later. "Dean-San," she was saying, "did you think that I really would leave you?" She was pressing her lips to his. Uncovering her light, she worked frenziedly at the metal cords that bound his wrists, pausing only to repeat her caresses—and at last he was free.

"I reached the *jana*," she told him in hurried whispers, "and then I came up. Their great room, where the Pathway to the Light begins, was deserted. With a cord I pulled the lever, and the *jana* vanished. I could not leave it for them to use. Then I followed—I knew by the sounds where they were taking you. And now, what can we do, Dean-San? Where can we go?"

It was real! Loah was there beside him; he had her in his arms, his bruised, bleeding arms whose hurts he no longer felt. And then, through his mind, flashed the question: if this was real, what of the other—the rappings he had heard? Perhaps it hadn't been a dream.

He lifted a fragment of rock and crashed it against the wall from which those rappings apparently had come. Laboriously he spelled

out his name, remembering the dots and dashes from earlier flying days when planes had been equipped with key-senders. He spelled it slowly and waited, while only the silence beat upon him and the blood pounded in his ears. Then he heard it. The answer came from a quicker hand:

"Rawson—this is Smithy."

But Smithy was dead! What could it mean? Slowly Rawson pounded out the letters of his question: "Where—are—you?" The answer dispelled his last doubt as to the reality of what he had heard.

It *was* Smithy. Others were with him, for Smithy said "we," and they were prisoners, sealed up in a living tomb. But where? Smithy did not know. He knew only that they were in a big room where the rocks had been shattered and molten gold spilled on the floor. There was a hole in the roof, but too small to get through—a round hole, about eight inches in diameter. And, at that, Rawson interrupted to tap out a single word.

"Coming!" he said, and turned toward Loah and the light.

The girl had found a metal rope in her wanderings; she had used it to let herself down into the cave. And now it was she who helped Dean

to pull his bruised body up and into the narrow crack. Loah had clung to the flame-thrower; they found it where she had left it up above.

The tapping rocks she could not understand, but she knew Dean had a definite plan in mind when he whispered: "The room where you first found me—do you remember? Do you know the way?"

"I will always remember," she said simply. "And, yes, I know the way."

Rawson caught glimpses now and again of that broad thoroughfare along which he had once traveled, a prisoner of the mole-men. But Loah knew other and seldom-used passages that roughly paralleled it; and then, after a time, Rawson himself knew in what direction they must go.

He knew, too, that they had followed a circular route, and that the room in which he had been sealed was not a great way from the place in which Smithy was a prisoner. Yet this had been his only way to reach it.

When they came to a sudden sharp turn, he realized that they were close. Beyond that bend would be the branching, lateral tunnel that

led to Smithy's prison.

The main runway had been deserted by the Reds. Stopping often to listen, starting at times into side passages at some fancied alarm, they had met with no opposition. But now, from beyond the angling passage, came the familiar shrillness of the mole-men's voices.

Again the two concealed themselves, but no one approached. "It's a guard we hear," Rawson whispered. "They're guarding that entrance where we must go. They're taking no chances on Smithy's escaping." Then he crept to the point where the passage turned, the flame-thrower ready in his hand.

He drew back. For the moment it seemed to him physically impossible to turn this weapon upon them. They were savages, true, but it seemed horrible to slash living bodies with a weapon like this. Then he thought of the devastation those same weapons had wrought among the people of his own world. His momentary hesitation vanished. With one spring he leaped into the open where, a hundred feet away, red bodies were massed, and the air above was quivering with the green jets of their weapons.

His own flame-thrower he had turned to a tiny point of light; now it roared forth in fury as he swung it forward. They had no time even

to aim their weapons or to turn them on. They were stampeded by the astounding attack. And still Rawson sickened as he saw them fall.

There were some who, panic-stricken, dropped their cylinders and leaped for safety in a narrow branching way. Rawson knew he should have killed them, knew it in the instant that they vanished, but that momentary, uncontrollable revulsion within him had stayed his hand.

He rushed forward now, Loah still bravely at his side—past the fallen bodies, through the choking odor of burned flesh. Grabbing up one of the weapons that had been dropped, he thrust it into her hands and said: "Wait here. Stand them off if they come back." Then he was rushing up the side corridor toward a room where once, in a far-distant past, he himself had been confined.

The flame-thrower lighted the way. It showed him the metal plate and the smooth, glassy rock that had been melted around its edge. He pounded on the metal and shouted Smithy's name.

Voices answered from within—voices almost unintelligible for the wonder and unbelief and joy that made them a confusion of wordless shouts. Then he stepped back and turned the blast of his weapon

upon the rock at the edge of the plate.

The metal sheet moved at last, its top swinging slowly outward. Its base was held by the gummy, hardening rock. Then it broke free and crashed to the floor, and the light of Dean's weapon showed through the black opening upon the blanched faces of men, where eyes were still wide in disbelief.

Though they were looking at one of their own kind, it must have taken then a moment to realize that the naked body, clad only in a golden loin cloth, and the hands that held one of the fearful, green-flamed weapons, were those of a human. Then one of them broke from the others, sprang heedlessly across the still-glowing plate, and threw his arms about the barbaric figure.

"Dean!" he choked. "Dean, it's really you! You're alive!"

And Rawson's voice, too, was husky as he said: "Smithy, I thought you were gone. The radio said they had got you, old man."

Then other khaki-clad bodies, a dozen of them, were crowding through the hot portal, and Rawson came suddenly to himself.

"Quick!" he shouted. "They'll be after us in a second. Follow me."

Loah was waiting. Her own flame-thrower spat a little jet of green; it was the only light. Rawson saw here she had gathered up the other weapons and had turned them off so that even their little light would not blind her as she kept watch down the dark passage.

"Do we want them?" Dean shouted to the others. And Smithy echoed the question:

"Do we want them, Colonel?"

Colonel Culver, his face almost unrecognizable under its smears of powder stains and blood, snapped a quick answer: "No. We outrange them with our rifles. They're only flame-throwers, not ray projectors. Beat it! Run like the devil!"

Rawson snatched Loah's weapon and threw it with the others. It would be hard going, ahead—she must not be uselessly burdened. But he kept his own. Then with his one free hand he swept her up till she was racing beside him as they led the way.

"I should have kept the fire weapon," the girl protested; "I, too, can fight."

Rawson, speaking between breaths, reassured her: "Too heavy. Their

guns will protect us—"

Behind them, a man's voice cried out once, a single, hoarse scream of agony; then the rock wall took the sharp crackle of rifle fire and threw the sound into crashing, thundering echoes.

Chapter 26: Power!

A girl whose creamy body was strangely unsoiled by smoke or grime, whose jeweled breast-plates flashed in the light of her torch while the loose wrappings about her waist whipped against her as she ran. And Rawson, naked but for the golden loin cloth, running beside her. Then Smithy, and ten others in the khaki uniform of the service—it was all that was left of the fifty who had dared the depths. And now all of them were harried and driven like helpless animals in the burrows and runways of that under-world.

But not entirely helpless. Colonel Culver had been right: their rifles outranged the flame-throwers. And Rawson, looking past that first burst of rifle fire, saw the one flame that had reached them whip upward as its owner fell. Others of the Reds came crowding in after, and the jets of their weapons made little areas of light as they crashed to the floor. Then Colonel Culver took charge of the retreat.

Ahead of them and behind them was impenetrable darkness; only the nearby walls were illumined by the torch that Loah had been forced to turn on. And out of that darkness at any moment might come devastating flames. Culver detailed two men as a rear guard and two others to run ahead a few paces in advance. At intervals of a minute or two their rifles would crack, and the echoes would be pierced by

the whining scream of ricochets, as their bullets glanced from the walls.

"We may not need them up ahead," Culver shouted to Rawson. "I don't understand it. The place seems deserted—there were plenty of them here before!"

"They've got something else to think of," Rawson shouted in reply. "I killed Phee-e-al—he was their leader. But they're after us now. They'll be running through other passages, cutting in ahead of us."

The tunnel turned and bent upward. For a full half mile they ran straight in a stiff climb. Between gasping breaths Colonel Culver shouted hoarsely: "Won't it ever turn? If they bring up their damned heat-ray machines they'll get us on a straightaway like this!"

Then Smithy's voice outshouted his with a note of hope: "We're almost there; I remember this place. There's where we mounted the searchlight. They've ripped everything out. Up ahead, one turn to the right, then a quarter mile, then a turn toward the crater. That runs straight for a mile, but there's a field gun at the bottom of the volcano. We'll be safe when we're on that last stretch."

Ahead of them the rifles of the two who ran in advance crashed out

in a fury of fire as a green glow appeared. But this time the flame did not die; and Rawson, staring with hot, wide-opened eyes, saw that the ribbon of green swept transversely across the tunnel.

He could hardly stand when he came to a stop. Beside him Loah was swaying with weariness. The walls echoed only the hoarse, panting breath of the men. Then they crept slowly forward, where the passage went steadily up. Loah's light was out; she had slipped the cap on the torch at the first sight of that green.

They stopped but ten feet short of the deadly blaze. From a narrow rift in the left wall it streamed outward, the rock at the edges of that crack turning to red at its touch. It beat upon the opposite wall, where already the stone was melting to throw over them a white glare and the glow of heat. And, like a shimmering, silken barrier, whose touch could mean only instant death, it reached across the wide tunnel at the height of a man's waist and moved slowly up and down. The heaviest armor plate ever rolled could have formed no more impenetrable a barrier.

"And we almost made it," said Smithy slowly. "Look, beyond there —another hundred feet. There's the bend in the tunnel, a sharp turn —and we almost got around!"

Rawson reached for Loah's light. In the wall where the flame was striking, only a dozen steps back, he had seen another dark mouth, a ragged crack in the rock. He sprang to the entrance; it might be there was another way around. His first glance told the story, for he saw the walls draw together again not a hundred feet off.

"A blind alley," he groaned.

One of the two who had been their advance guard snapped his rifle to his shoulder. He was aiming at the glowing crack where the green light was issuing.

"A ricochet," he growled. "It may go on in and mess 'em up." But there was no whine of a glancing bullet that followed his shot; the softened wall had cushioned the impact.

Another man sprang beside him. He was shouting at the top of his voice while one hand reached into a bag that hung at his waist. "Get back, everyone," he said. "If I miss...." He did not finish the sentence, but pulled the pin from a hand grenade, then took careful aim and threw.

It went high—thrown there purposely; he had not dared aim it into the flame. But it struck the crevice fairly, and they heard it rattle on

inside. The next instant brought the crack and roar of its explosion.

Like a winking signal light the green barrier vanished. Where it had been was only blackness and the dying glow of molten rock. Then, a hundred feet beyond, up close to the roof, the bend of the tunnel turned red; it seemed bursting into flame. Far back of them, down the long sloping way where they had come, shrill voices were screaming—and still there was no green flame to account for that tunnel end flaming red.

Rawson stood motionless. Loah, and the others beside him, seemed likewise petrified, until the voice of Culver jarred them into action.

"The ray!" he shouted. "It's the heat ray, damn them! Quick, jump into that cave!"

They had all retreated through fear of the grenade; they were opposite the black place into which Rawson had looked. Loah was close beside Dean; he threw her with all his strength into the black mouth of the cave, then he was one of a crowding, stumbling mass of men who followed after, and their going was lighted by a terrible torch of flame.

One man had stood apart from the others, farther across the wide

corridor. His khaki-clad body flashed suddenly to incandescence, then fell to the floor. And inside the cave, where the walls came abruptly together to cut off any further retreat, Colonel Culver spoke softly.

"One more gone," he said. "That was Oakley. Well, he never knew what it was that hit him—and it looks as if we'll all get the same."

Through it all, Rawson had clung to his flame-thrower; unconsciously his hand had held fast to the bent handle of the cylindrical weapon. Now he set it down slowly upon the floor, then straightened his aching body laboriously.

Loah's light was still gleaming. He saw her eyes searching for his, half in terror, half in wonderment. Strange men with strange thundering weapons—he knew she was wondering if they still dared hope, wondering if these warriors of Rawson's race might be able to work further magic.

Dean put one arm tenderly about her and drew her close and his other hand came to rest upon Smithy's shoulder.

"It's the end, dear," he told the girl softly. "It's the end of our journey. You've been so dear and so brave. Pretty tough to lose out when we'd

almost fought clear." Then, to Smithy: "Loah came back to save me—refused to go when she could have got away and been safe."

Already the air was stifling. The tunnel beyond the mouth of the cave was hot, though only at its end, where the invisible ray struck the rock surface squarely, was there red, glowing heat. Rawson suddenly saw none of it. He was seeing in his mind the world up above, his own world of great, free, sunlit spaces. Suddenly he was hungry for some closer link, no matter how slight, to bind him to that world.

"What day is it?" he asked. "Have you kept track of time?"

Smithy looked at him wonderingly. "Yes," he said, then added: "Oh, I see. You want to know what day this is when we die. It's the twentieth, Dean"—he looked at the watch on his wrist—"just two o'clock, the afternoon of the twentieth."

Within him, Rawson felt a dull resentment. He was being denied even this last trifling solace. "You're wrong," he said sharply. "You slipped up on your count."

"It doesn't make any real difference," Smithy said. But Rawson went on:

"We left the inner world on the nineteenth. At noon on the twentieth Gor was to cut loose the flame-throwers, melt a hole in the floor of the ocean. But it didn't work. I had hoped I could wipe out the mole-men, turn a solid stream of water down a shaft for over six hundred miles. It would have gone through the Zone of Fire, come flooding up into the mole-men world and spread out all over down deep where it's hot. It would have hit the Lake of Fire—all that!"

"I don't know what you are talking about, Dean." Smithy's voice was intentionally soothing; he knew Rawson was talking wildly. "But I know I am right on the time. We've kept track of it every hour since __"

Rawson's talk had sounded like insanity in Smithy's ears. He would have gone on—he didn't want to see Dean Rawson go out like that—but now he stopped. The rock was quivering beneath his feet.

And now Rawson, with a wild wordless cry, threw himself toward the flame-thrower on the floor. His voice rose to what was almost a scream. "It's worked!" he shouted in a delirium of joy. "It's the end of the brutes!"

Then, in words which the others could not comprehend but which somehow fired them with his own emotion: "Gor has cut it loose!

Water, millions of tons of it! The Zone of Fire—steam!..." He threw himself flat on the floor as close to the hot mouth of the cave as he dared go, and the green flame of his weapon ripped outward and up as he aimed it.

From the passage, where it sloped downward toward the source of the heat ray, the sound of shrill, whistling voices had swelled louder. The whole tunnel now glowed green from the flames of an advancing horde. They were bringing their ray projector with them, Rawson knew, not that its beam was visible, but the white, dazzling glow from the end wall where the tunnel turned was still there.

"Shoot above me!" Rawson shouted. "Don't stick your guns out into that ray, but aim as straight down the tunnel as you can. Keep 'em busy. Keep 'em from coming too close."

Above his head he heard the beginning of rifle fire as the men crowded close to aim at the opposite wall at as flat an angle as they could. The air grew shrill with the sound of ricochets as the bullets glanced, but still the enemy came on, as their screeching voices told.

His own weapon was aimed up above. The roof of the tunnel was rough and broken. He directed the flame against the top of a great black granite block. In one place it was fractured. If he could cut it

off above, make it fall to the steeply slanting floor.... He worked the full force of the blast methodically along the line he had chosen.

The air of the tunnel had been blowing gently, but now it came in sharp gusts that whipped in through the mouth of the cave, while it brought an unending growl and roar like distant gunfire from deep within the earth. The breeze had swelled to a steady blast when the rock crashed down.

"But that's no use," Culver had shouted, when the deafening sound of its fall had ceased. "They'll melt it in a second with their ray." Even as he spoke the great mass of granite softened and rolled downward as the enemy shot their ray on its lower side. The heat of it struck blastingly into the entrance to their retreat, yet still Rawson kept on, sawing doggedly with the weapon of flame at other great blocks above.

Now that distant thunder grew hugely in volume, and again the rocks trembled beneath them. The wind in the tunnel grew suddenly to a wild blast. It brought to them from a thousand other passages, the shrill, demoniac shrieking of air that was torn and ripped on projecting ledges of rock. Mingled with it was the sound of voices that screamed in terror, and the echo of feet running in mad flight down the tunnel.

The mass of stone, that had been melting under the invisible ray, cooled to red, then to black. Outside, the tunnel, now a place of roaring winds, was lighted only by the single flame of Dean's weapon.

"They've gone!" Culver shouted. "The ray's off. Get outside! Now we'll run for it!" And, with the others, Rawson sprang to his feet and leaped out into the tunnel which was no longer a place of death.

He heard the sound of their hurrying feet and a voice that cried: "Look out for the turn—the rock's hot," but he did not look after them. He was standing squarely, bracing himself in the blast of air, still directing the flame upon a block that hung stubbornly and would not let go.

He knew that Loah alone stood near. He heard other feet; someone was returning. Then Smithy was upon him, almost jarring him from his careful pose. Smithy was shouting.

"Come back, Dean!" he cried. "Are you crazy? Don't you know they'll be after us again?"

Rawson sprang as the big rock let go. It, too, crashed deafeningly upon the floor and rolled sluggishly downward beside the high

hummock of glass that the first rock had become. They bulked hugely in the passage. They were eight or ten feet high, reaching across from one wall to the other.

Above them was still a space of four feet; Rawson estimated it carefully while he looked at the ceiling above. Then he shook off Smithy's hand that was dragging at him and returned to the attack; for now, above the top of the barricade he had built, white ribbons of vapor were streaming. He had to shout to his utmost to make Smith hear above the shrill shriek of the blast.

"Steam!" he screamed into Smithy's ear. "Live steam! We could never make it—before we got to the top we'd be cooked to a pulp. I've got to block it, got to seal it off." A whole section of the ceiling tore loose as he spoke, and the wind raised its voice like the scream of a wounded animal—or the cry of an overwhelmed and stricken people—as it tore through the space that remained.

It whipped the molten drops as they fell and made of them a deadly rain. Rawson, staring through the clouds of hot steam that now wrapped him about, called to Smithy to take Loah to safety, and kept the flame where it should be—until at length the last aperture was closed, the last gap in the wall filled in. And even after that Rawson kept the flame still playing above that wall till he had melted rock

and more rock that flowed down to make the barrier a single heavy, solid mass.

Steam was coming now from the narrow cleft where the green light had flashed out to bar their way. But that was simple, and he sealed the gap shut with his flame.

He was gasping. The radiant heat from that molten mass had been torture that his naked body could never have borne but for the desperate necessity that drove him.

Smithy and Loah were again beside him. "Now," he choked, "we can go, but if there are any cross passages I'll have to block them too."

"There aren't," said Smithy, and added: "I thought you were crazy. You've saved us all, Dean; we never could have made it to the top. That steam was getting hot—hot as if it had come right out of hell."

"It did," said Rawson. Then the flame-thrower fell from his nerveless hand. He was swaying; his knees were trembling with weakness when Smithy and Loah, on either side, took his burned arms tenderly and helped him on where the others had gone.

Colonel Culver and a rescue party met them halfway. The Colonel

had seen his men safely to the bottom of the volcanic pit. Others had run from their station beside a field gun to meet them; then Culver had called for volunteers and had gone back. And now there were plenty of willing arms to help.

The big lift, with its platforms of metal plates, awaited them at the tunnel's end. There was room on it now for all who were left; there was no crowding of men's bodies as there had been on the downward passage. Rawson was stretched on the floor-plates, whose touch was cool to his tortured body. Loah was seated that his head might rest in her lap on that absurd little fragment of skirt. She bent above him, whispering brokenly: "Dean-San—my dear—my own Dean-San! We live, Dean-San. I can scarcely believe it, but I know that we live, for I still have you."

But Dean was able to stand when that journey was done. First, though, there were men who placed him carefully on a stretcher and carried him, when he commanded, to the crater's outer rim. On the ashy floor of the crater a big transport was waiting with idling motors, but Dean would not let them put him inside. He wanted to look out across the world, to see it in reality as he had seen it in his own mind when all hope was gone. He wanted to look out once more across Tonah Basin and let his eyes rest upon country he had known.

Loah and Smithy walked beside him, as the first-aid men carried him toward that distant rim. The rocks there were cleft—it was the place where he first had seen the inside of the crater's cup. There he had them put him down; and, with the help of Loah and Smithy, he got slowly to his feet. While they lifted him, he wondered at the sound in this desert world where no sound should be. A terrific rushing, an endless roar—and then his eyes found the clouds of steam.

Below him was the Basin, the tangled wreckage of his camp. And there, where the derrick had stood, was a tall plume of white. It did not begin close to the ground—superheated steam, until it cools and condenses to water vapor, is invisible—but a hundred feet above the sand. And, from there on up, two thousand feet sheer into the air, was a straight shaft of vapor, rolling up for another thousand feet into billowing clouds that the afternoon sun turned to glorious white.

"Power!" gasped Rawson. "Power—and it will be like that indefinitely!" Then he laughed weakly. "I had to go down there to do it, to make Erickson richer, but it was worth it. In there the ocean will slowly subside. Gor and his people will find their lost lands; the column of water in the shaft will hold the back-pressure of steam. And here, I have Loah, and that's all—but that's enough!"

He put one arm, still with the bandages of the first-aid men, about

the girl. "I hope you'll be happy, dear," he said softly, and turned back. But Smithy barred the way.

"That isn't all," said Smithy jubilantly. "You see, Dean, Erickson fired you—Erickson thought you had run out on him. Instead of backing you up, he quit. So I bought them all out. Whatever is there, Dean—and it's worth more millions than I dare to think about—you own half of! Now get back on that stretcher. Just because you've saved all our necks up here on top of the earth, you mustn't think you can keep an Army ship waiting all day!"

145 Hellhounds of the Cosmos by Clifford D. Simak

Weird are the conditions of the interdimensional struggle faced by Dr. White's ninety-nine men.

Aproximate word count: 9,700

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

The paper had gone to press, graphically describing the latest of the many horrible events which had been enacted upon the Earth in the last six months. The headlines screamed that Six Corners, a little hamlet in Pennsylvania, had been wiped out by the Horror. Another front-page story told of a Terror in the Amazon Valley which had sent the natives down the river in babbling fear. Other stories told of deaths here and there, all attributable to the "Black Horror," as it was called.

The telephone rang.

"Hello," said the editor.

"London calling," came the voice of the operator.

"All right," replied the editor.

He recognized the voice of Terry Masters, special correspondent. His voice came clearly over the transatlantic telephone.

"The Horror is attacking London in force," he said. "There are thousands of them and they have completely surrounded the city. All roads are blocked. The government declared the city under martial rule a quarter of an hour ago and efforts are being made to prepare for resistance against the enemy."

"Just a second," the editor shouted into the transmitter.

He touched a button on his desk and in a moment an answering buzz told him he was in communication with the press-room.

"Stop the presses!" he yelled into the speaking tube. "Get ready for a new front make-up!"

"O.K.," came faintly through the tube, and the editor turned back to the phone.

"Now let's have it," he said, and the voice at the London end of the

wire droned on, telling the story that in another half hour was read by a world which shuddered in cold fear even as it scanned the glaring headlines.

"Woods," said the editor of the Press to a reporter, "run over and talk to Dr. Silas White. He phoned me to send someone. Something about this Horror business."

Henry Woods rose from his chair without a word and walked from the office. As he passed the wire machine it was tapping out, with a maddeningly methodical slowness, the story of the fall of London. Only half an hour before it had rapped forth the flashes concerning the attack on Paris and Berlin.

He passed out of the building into a street that was swarming with terrified humanity. Six months of terror, of numerous mysterious deaths, of villages blotted out, had set the world on edge. Now with London in possession of the Horror and Paris and Berlin fighting hopelessly for their lives, the entire population of the world was half insane with fright.

Exhorters on street corners enlarged upon the end of the world, asking that the people prepare for eternity, attributing the Horror to the act of a Supreme Being enraged with the wickedness of the

Earth.

Expecting every moment an attack by the Horror, people left their work and gathered in the streets. Traffic, in places, had been blocked for hours and law and order were practically paralyzed. Commerce and transportation were disrupted as fright-ridden people fled from the larger cities, seeking doubtful hiding places in rural districts from the death that stalked the land.

A loudspeaker in front of a music store blared forth the latest news flashes.

"It has been learned," came the measured tones of the announcer, "that all communication with Berlin ceased about ten minutes ago. At Paris all efforts to hold the Horror at bay have been futile. Explosives blow it apart, but have the same effect upon it as explosion has on gas. It flies apart and then reforms again, not always in the same shape as it was before. A new gas, one of the most deadly ever conceived by man, has failed to have any effect on the things. Electric guns and heat guns have absolutely no effect upon them.

"A news flash which has just come in from Rome says that a large number of the Horrors has been sighted north of that city by airmen.

It seems they are attacking the capitals of the world first. Word comes from Washington that every known form of defense is being amassed at that city. New York is also preparing...."

Henry Woods fought his way through the crowd which milled in front of the loudspeaker. The hum of excitement was giving away to a silence, the silence of a stunned people, the fearful silence of a populace facing a presence it is unable to understand, an embattled world standing with useless weapons before an incomprehensible enemy.

In despair the reporter looked about for a taxi, but realized, with a groan of resignation, that no taxi could possibly operate in that crowded street. A street car, blocked by the stream of humanity which jostled and elbowed about it, stood still, a defeated thing.

Seemingly the only man with a definite purpose in that whirlpool of terror-stricken men and women, the newspaperman settled down to the serious business of battling his way through the swarming street.

"Before I go to the crux of the matter," said Dr. Silas White, about half an hour later, "let us first review what we know of this so-called Horror. Suppose you tell me exactly what you know of it."

Henry Woods shifted uneasily in his chair. Why didn't the old fool get down to business? The chief would raise hell if this story didn't make the regular edition. He stole a glance at his wrist-watch. There was still almost an hour left. Maybe he could manage it. If the old chap would only snap into it!

"I know no more," he said, "than is common knowledge."

The gimlet eyes of the old white-haired scientist regarded the newspaperman sharply.

"And that is?" he questioned.

There was no way out of it, thought Henry. He'd have to humor the old fellow.

"The Horror," he replied, "appeared on Earth, so far as the knowledge of man is concerned, about six months ago."

Dr. White nodded approvingly.

"You state the facts very aptly," he said.

"How so?"

"When you say 'so far as the knowledge of man is concerned.'"

"Why is that?"

"You will understand in due time. Please proceed."

Vaguely the newspaperman wondered whether he was interviewing the scientist or the scientist interviewing him.

"They were first reported," Woods said, "early this spring. At that time they wiped out a small village in the province of Quebec. All the inhabitants, except a few fugitives, were found dead, killed mysteriously and half eaten, as if by wild beasts. The fugitives were demented, babbling of black shapes that swept down out of the dark forest upon the little town in the small hours of the morning.

"The next that was heard of them was about a week later, when they struck in an isolated rural district in Poland, killing and feeding on the population of several farms. In the next week more villages were wiped out, in practically every country on the face of the Earth. From the hinterlands came tales of murder done at midnight, of men and women horribly mangled, of livestock slaughtered, of buildings crushed as if by some titanic force.

"At first they worked only at night and then, seeming to become bolder and more numerous, attacked in broad daylight."

The newspaperman paused.

"Is that what you want?" he asked.

"That's part of it," replied Dr. White, "but that's not all. What do these Horrors look like?"

"That's more difficult," said Henry. "They have been reported as every conceivable sort of monstrosity. Some are large and others are small. Some take the form of animals, others of birds and reptiles, and some are cast in appalling shapes such as might be snatched out of the horrid imagery of a thing which resided in a world entirely alien to our own."

Dr. White rose from his chair and strode across the room to confront the other.

"Young man," he asked, "do you think it possible the Horror might have come out of a world entirely alien to our own?"

"I don't know," replied Henry. "I know that some of the scientists believe they came from some other planet, perhaps even from some

other solar system. I know they are like nothing ever known before on Earth. They are always inky black, something like black tar, you know, sort of sticky-looking, a disgusting sight. The weapons of mankind can't affect them. Explosives are useless and so are projectiles. They wade through poison gas and fiery chemicals and seem to enjoy them. Elaborate electrical barriers have failed. Heat doesn't make them turn a hair."

"And you think they came from some other planet, perhaps some other solar system?"

"I don't know what to think," said Henry. "If they came out of space they must have come in some conveyance, and that would certainly have been sighted, picked up long before it arrived, by our astronomers. If they came in small conveyances, there must have been many of them. If they came in a single conveyance, it would be too large to escape detection. That is, unless—"

"Unless what?" snapped the scientist.

"Unless it traveled at the speed of light. Then it would have been invisible."

"Not only invisible," snorted the old man, "but non-existent."

A question was on the tip of the newspaperman's tongue, but before it could be asked the old man was speaking again, asking a question:

"Can you imagine a fourth dimension?"

"No, I can't," said Henry.

"Can you imagine a thing of only two dimensions?"

"Vaguely, yes."

The scientist smote his palms together.

"Now we're coming to it!" he exclaimed.

Henry Woods regarded the other narrowly. The old man must be turned. What did fourth and second dimensions have to do with the Horror?

"Do you know anything about evolution?" questioned the old man.

"I have a slight understanding of it. It is the process of upward growth, the stairs by which simple organisms climb to become more complex organisms."

Dr. White grunted and asked still another question:

"Do you know anything about the theory of the exploding universe? Have you ever noted the tendency of the perfectly balanced to run amuck?"

The reporter rose slowly to his feet.

"Dr. White," he said, "you phoned my paper you had a story for us. I came here to get it, but all you have done is ask me questions. If you can't tell me what you want us to publish, I will say good-day."

The doctor put forth a hand that shook slightly.

"Sit down, young man," he said. "I don't blame you for being impatient, but I will now come to my point."

The newspaperman sat down again.

"I have developed a hypothesis," said Dr. White, "and have conducted several experiments which seem to bear it out. I am staking my reputation upon the supposition that it is correct. Not only that, but I am also staking the lives of several brave men who believe implicitly in me and my theory. After all, I suppose it makes little difference, for if I fail the world is doomed, if I succeed it is

saved from complete destruction.

"Have you ever thought that our evolutionists might be wrong, that evolution might be downward instead of upward? The theory of the exploding universe, the belief that all of creation is running down, being thrown off balance by the loss of energy, spurred onward by cosmic accidents which tend to disturb its equilibrium, to a time when it will run wild and space will be filled with swirling dust of disintegrated worlds, would bear out this contention.

"This does not apply to the human race. There is no question that our evolution is upward, that we have arisen from one-celled creatures wallowing in the slime of primal seas. Our case is probably paralleled by thousands of other intelligences on far-flung planets and island universes. These instances, however, running at cross purposes to the general evolutional trend of the entire cosmos, are mere flashes in the eventual course of cosmic evolution, comparing no more to eternity than a split second does to a million years.

"Taking these instances, then, as inconsequential, let us say that the trend of cosmic evolution is downward rather than upward, from complex units to simpler units rather than from simple units to more complex ones.

"Let us say that life and intelligence have degenerated. How would you say such a degeneration would take place? In just what way would it be manifested? What sort of transition would life pass through in passing from one stage to a lower one? Just what would be the nature of these stages?"

The scientist's eyes glowed brightly as he bent forward in his chair. The newspaperman said simply: "I have no idea."

"Man," cried the old man, "can't you see that it would be a matter of dimensions? From the fourth dimension to the third, from the third to the second, from the second to the first, from the first to a questionable existence or plane which is beyond our understanding or perhaps to oblivion and the end of life. Might not the fourth have evolved from a fifth, the fifth from a sixth, the sixth from a seventh, and so on to no one knows what multidimension?"

Dr. White paused to allow the other man to grasp the importance of his statements. Woods failed lamentably to do so.

"But what has this to do with the Horror?" he asked.

"Have you absolutely no imagination?" shouted the old man.

"Why, I suppose I have, but I seem to fail to understand."

"We are facing an invasion of fourth-dimensional creatures," the old man whispered, almost as if fearful to speak the words aloud. "We are being attacked by life which is one dimension above us in evolution. We are fighting, I tell you, a tribe of hellhounds out of the cosmos. They are unthinkably above us in the matter of intelligence. There is a chasm of knowledge between us so wide and so deep that it staggers the imagination. They regard us as mere animals, perhaps not even that. So far as they are concerned we are just fodder, something to be eaten as we eat vegetables and cereals or the flesh of domesticated animals. Perhaps they have watched us for years, watching life on the world increase, lapping their monstrous jowls over the fattening of the Earth. They have awaited the proper setting of the banquet table and now they are dining.

"Their thoughts are not our thoughts, their ideals not our ideals. Perhaps they have nothing in common with us except the primal basis of all life, self-preservation, the necessity of feeding.

"Maybe they have come of their own will. I prefer to believe that they have. Perhaps they are merely following the natural course of events, obeying some immutable law legislated by some higher being who watches over the cosmos and dictates what shall be and

what shall not be. If this is true it means that there has been a flaw in my reasoning, for I believed that the life of each plane degenerated in company with the degeneration of its plane of existence, which would obey the same evolutional laws which govern the life upon it. I am quite satisfied that this invasion is a well-planned campaign, that some fourth-dimensional race has found a means of breaking through the veil of force which separates its plane from ours."

"But," pointed out Henry Woods, "you say they are fourth-dimensional things. I can't see anything about them to suggest an additional dimension. They are plainly three-dimensional."

"Of course they are three-dimensional. They would have to be to live in this world of three dimensions. The only two-dimensional objects which we know of in this world are merely illusions, projections of the third dimension, like a shadow. It is impossible for more than one dimension to live on any single plane.

"To attack us they would have to lose one dimension. This they have evidently done. You can see how utterly ridiculous it would be for you to try to attack a two-dimensional thing. So far as you were concerned it would have no mass. The same is true of the other dimensions. Similarly a being of a lesser plane could not harm an inhabitant of a higher plane. It is apparent that while the Horror has

lost one material dimension, it has retained certain fourth-dimensional properties which make it invulnerable to the forces at the command of our plane."

The newspaperman was now sitting on the edge of his chair.

"But," he asked breathlessly, "it all sounds so hopeless. What can be done about it?"

Dr. White hitched his chair closer and his fingers closed with a fierce grasp upon the other's knee. A militant boom came into his voice.

"My boy," he said, "we are to strike back. We are going to invade the fourth-dimensional plane of these hellhounds. We are going to make them feel our strength. We are going to strike back."

Henry Woods sprang to his feet.

"How?" he shouted. "Have you...?"

Dr. White nodded.

"I have found a way to send the third-dimensional into the fourth. Come and I will show you."

The machine was huge, but it had an appearance of simple construction. A large rectangular block of what appeared to be a strange black metal was set on end and flanked on each side by two smaller ones. On the top of the large block was set a half-globe of a strange substance, somewhat, Henry thought, like frosted glass. On one side of the large cube was set a lever, a long glass panel, two vertical tubes and three clock-face indicators. The control board, it appeared, was relatively simple.

Beside the mass of the five rectangles, on the floor, was a large plate of transparent substance, ground to a concave surface, through which one could see an intricate tangle of wire mesh.

Hanging from the ceiling, directly above the one on the floor, was another concave disk, but this one had a far more pronounced curvature.

Wires connected the two disks and each in turn was connected to the rectangular machine.

"It is a matter of the proper utilization of two forces, electrical and gravitational," proudly explained Dr. White. "Those two forces, properly used, warp the third-dimensional into the fourth. A reverse process is used to return the object to the third. The principle of the

machine is—"

The old man was about to launch into a lengthy discussion, but Henry interrupted him. A glance at his watch had shown him press time was drawing perilously close.

"Just a second," he said. "You propose to warp a third-dimensional being into a fourth dimension. How can a third-dimensional thing exist there? You said a short time ago that only a specified dimension could exist on one single plane."

"You have missed my point," snapped Dr. White. "I am not sending a third-dimensional thing to a fourth dimension. I am changing the third-dimensional being into a fourth-dimensional being. I add a dimension, and automatically the being exists on a different plane. I am reversing evolution. This third dimension we now exist on evolved, millions of eons ago, from a fourth dimension. I am sending a lesser entity back over those millions of eons to a plane similar to one upon which his ancestors lived inconceivably long ago."

"But, man, how do you know you can do it?"

The doctor's eyes gleamed and his fingers reached out to press a bell.

A servant appeared almost at once.

"Bring me a dog," snapped the old man. The servant disappeared.

"Young man," said Dr. White, "I am going to show you how I know I can do it. I have done it before, now I am going to do it for you. I have sent dogs and cats back to the fourth dimension and returned them safely to this room. I can do the same with men."

The servant reappeared, carrying in his arms a small dog. The doctor stepped to the control board of his strange machine.

"All right, George," he said.

The servant had evidently worked with the old man enough to know what was expected of him. He stepped close to the floor disk and waited. The dog whined softly, sensing that all was not exactly right.

The old scientist slowly shoved the lever toward the right, and as he did so a faint hum filled the room, rising to a stupendous roar as he advanced the lever. From both floor disk and upper disk leaped strange cones of blue light, which met midway to form an hour-glass shape of brilliance.

The light did not waver or sparkle. It did not glow. It seemed hard

and brittle, like straight bars of force. The newspaperman, gazing with awe upon it, felt that terrific force was there. What had the old man said? Warp a third-dimensional being into another dimension! That would take force!

As he watched, petrified by the spectacle, the servant stepped forward and, with a flip, tossed the little dog into the blue light. The animal could be discerned for a moment through the light and then it disappeared.

"Look in the globe!" shouted the old man; and Henry jerked his eyes from the column of light to the half-globe atop the machine.

He gasped. In the globe, deep within its milky center, glowed a picture that made his brain reel as he looked upon it. It was a scene such as no man could have imagined unaided. It was a horribly distorted projection of an eccentric landscape, a landscape hardly analogous to anything on Earth.

"That's the fourth dimension, sir," said the servant.

"That's not the fourth dimension," the old man corrected him. "That's a third-dimensional impression of the fourth dimension. It is no more the fourth dimension than a shadow is three-dimensional. It, like a

shadow, is merely a projection. It gives us a glimpse of what the fourth plane is like. It is a shadow of that plane."

Slowly a dark blotch began to grow in the landscape. Slowly it assumed definite form. It puzzled the reporter. It looked familiar. He could have sworn he had seen it somewhere before. It was alive, for it had moved.

"That, sir, is the dog," George volunteered.

"That was the dog," Dr. White again corrected him. "God knows what it is now."

He turned to the newspaperman.

"Have you seen enough?" he demanded.

Henry nodded.

The other slowly began to return the lever to its original position. The roaring subsided, the light faded, the projection in the half-globe grew fainter.

"How are you going to use it?" asked the newspaperman.

"I have ninety-eight men who have agreed to be projected into the fourth dimension to seek out the entities that are attacking us and attack them in turn. I shall send them out in an hour."

"Where is there a phone?" asked the newspaperman.

"In the next room," replied Dr. White.

As the reporter dashed out of the door, the light faded entirely from between the two disks and on the lower one a little dog crouched, quivering, softly whimpering.

The old man stepped from the controls and approached the disk. He scooped the little animal from where it lay into his arms and patted the silky head.

"Good dog," he murmured; and the creature snuggled close to him, comforted, already forgetting that horrible place from which it had just returned.

"Is everything ready, George?" asked the old man.

"Yes, sir," replied the servant. "The men are all ready, even anxious to go. If you ask me, sir, they are a tough lot."

"They are as brave a group of men as ever graced the Earth," replied the scientist gently. "They are adventurers, every one of whom has faced danger and will not shrink from it. They are born fighters. My one regret is that I have not been able to secure more like them. A thousand men such as they should be able to conquer any opponent. It was impossible. The others were poor soft fools. They laughed in my face. They thought I was an old fool—I, the man who alone stands between them and utter destruction."

His voice had risen to almost a scream, but it again sank to a normal tone.

"I may be sending ninety-eight brave men to instant death. I hope not."

"You can always jerk them back, sir," suggested George.

"Maybe I can, maybe not," murmured the old man.

Henry Woods appeared in the doorway.

"When do we start?" he asked.

"We?" exclaimed the scientist.

"Certainly, you don't believe you're going to leave me out of this. Why, man, it's the greatest story of all time. I'm going as special war correspondent."

"They believed it? They are going to publish it?" cried the old man, clutching at the newspaperman's sleeve.

"Well, the editor was skeptical at first, but after I swore on all sorts of oaths it was true, he ate it up. Maybe you think that story didn't stop the presses!"

"I didn't expect them to. I just took a chance. I thought they, too, would laugh at me."

"But when do we start?" persisted Henry.

"You are really in earnest? You really want to go?" asked the old man, unbelievingly.

"I am going. Try to stop me."

Dr. White glanced at his watch.

"We will start in exactly thirty-four minutes," he said.

"Ten seconds to go." George, standing with watch in hand, spoke in a precise manner, the very crispness of his words betraying the excitement under which he labored.

The blue light, hissing, drove from disk to disk; the room thundered with the roar of the machine, before which stood Dr. White, his hand on the lever, his eyes glued on the instruments before him.

In a line stood the men who were to fling themselves into the light to be warped into another dimension, there to seek out and fight an unknown enemy. The line was headed by a tall man with hands like hams, with a weather-beaten face and a wild mop of hair. Behind him stood a belligerent little cockney. Henry Woods stood fifth in line. They were a motley lot, adventurers every one of them, and some were obviously afraid as they stood before that column of light, with only a few seconds of the third dimension left to them. They had answered a weird advertisement, and had but a limited idea of what they were about to do. Grimly, though, they accepted it as a job, a bizarre job, but a job. They faced it as they had faced other equally dangerous, but less unusual, jobs.

"Five seconds," snapped George.

The lever was all the way over now. The half-globe showed, within

its milky interior, a hideously distorted landscape. The light had taken on a hard, brittle appearance and its hiss had risen to a scream. The machine thundered steadily with a suggestion of horrible power.

"Time up!"

The tall man stepped forward. His foot reached the disk; another step and he was bathed in the light, a third and he glimmered momentarily, then vanished. Close on his heels followed the little cockney.

With his nerves at almost a snapping point, Henry moved on behind the fourth man. He was horribly afraid, he wanted to break from the line and run, it didn't matter where, any place to get away from that steady, steely light in front of him. He had seen three men step into it, glow for a second, and then disappear. A fourth man had placed his foot on the disk.

Cold sweat stood out on his brow. Like an automaton he placed one foot on the disk. The fourth man had already disappeared.

"Snap into it, pal," growled the man behind.

Henry lifted the other foot, caught his toe on the edge of the disk and

stumbled headlong into the column of light.

He was conscious of intense heat which was instantly followed by equally intense cold. For a moment his body seemed to be under enormous pressure, then it seemed to be expanding, flying apart, bursting, exploding....

He felt solid ground under his feet, and his eyes, snapping open, saw an alien land. It was a land of somber color, with great gray moors, and beetling black cliffs. There was something queer about it, an intangible quality that baffled him.

He looked about him, expecting to see his companions. He saw no one. He was absolutely alone in that desolate brooding land. Something dreadful had happened! Was he the only one to be safely transported from the third dimension? Had some horrible accident occurred? Was he alone?

Sudden panic seized him. If something had happened, if the others were not here, might it not be possible that the machine would not be able to bring him back to his own dimension? Was he doomed to remain marooned forever in this terrible plane?

He looked down at his body and gasped in dismay. It was not his

body!

It was a grotesque caricature of a body, a horrible profane mass of flesh, like a phantasmagoric beast snatched from the dreams of a lunatic.

It was real, however. He felt it with his hands, but they were not hands. They were something like hands; they served the same purpose that hands served in the third dimension. He was, he realized, a being of the fourth dimension, but in his fourth-dimensional brain still clung hard-fighting remnants of that faithful old third-dimensional brain. He could not, as yet, see with fourth-dimensional eyes, think purely fourth-dimensional thoughts. He had not oriented himself as yet to this new plane of existence. He was seeing the fourth dimension through the blurred lenses of millions of eons of third-dimensional existence. He was seeing it much more clearly than he had seen it in the half-globe atop the machine in Dr. White's laboratory, but he would not see it clearly until every vestige of the third dimension was wiped from him. That, he knew, would come in time.

He felt his weird body with those things that served as hands, and he found, beneath his groping, unearthly fingers, great rolling muscles, powerful tendons, and hard, well-conditioned flesh. A sense of well-

being surged through him and he growled like an animal, like an animal of that horrible fourth plane.

But the terrible sounds that came from between his slobbering lips were not those of his own voice, they were the voices of many men.

Then he knew. He was not alone. Here, in this one body were the bodies, the brains, the power, the spirit, of those other ninety-eight men. In the fourth dimension, all the millions of third-dimensional things were one. Perhaps that particular portion of the third dimension called the Earth had sprung from, or degenerated from, one single unit of a dissolving, worn-out fourth dimension. The third dimension, warped back to a higher plane, was automatically obeying the mystic laws of evolution by reforming in the shape of that old ancestor, unimaginably removed in time from the race he had begot. He was no longer Henry Woods, newspaperman; he was an entity that had given birth, in the dim ages when the Earth was born, to a third dimension. Nor was he alone. This body of his was composed of other sons of that ancient entity.

He felt himself grow, felt his body grow vaster, assume greater proportions, felt new vitality flow through him. It was the other men, the men who were flinging themselves into the column of light in the laboratory to be warped back to this plane, to be incorporated in his

body.

It was not his body, however. His brain was not his alone. The pronoun, he realized, represented the sum total of those other men, his fellow adventurers.

Suddenly a new feeling came, a feeling of completeness, a feeling of supreme fitness. He knew that the last of the ninety-eight men had stepped across the disk, that all were here in this giant body.

Now he could see more clearly. Things in the landscape, which had escaped him before, became recognizable. Awful thoughts ran through his brain, heavy, ponderous, black thoughts. He began to recognize the landscape as something familiar, something he had seen before, a thing with which he was intimate. Phenomena, which his third-dimensional intelligence would have gasped at, became commonplace. He was finally seeing through fourth-dimensional eyes, thinking fourth-dimensional thoughts.

Memory seeped into his brain and he had fleeting visions, visions of dark caverns lit by hellish flames, of huge seas that battered remorselessly with mile-high waves against towering headlands that reared titanic toward a glowering sky. He remembered a red desert scattered with scarlet boulders, he remembered silver cliffs of

gleaming metallic stone. Through all his thoughts ran something else, a scarlet thread of hate, an all-consuming passion, a fierce lust after the life of some other entity.

He was no longer a composite thing built of third-dimensional beings. He was a creature of another plane, a creature with a consuming hate, and suddenly he knew against whom this hate was directed and why. He knew also that this creature was near and his great fists closed and then spread wide as he knew it. How did he know it? Perhaps through some sense which he, as a being of another plane, held, but which was alien to the Earth. Later, he asked himself this question. At the time, however, there was no questioning on his part. He only knew that somewhere near was a hated enemy and he did not question the source of his knowledge....

Mumbling in an idiom incomprehensible to a third-dimensional being, filled with rage that wove redly through his brain, he lumbered down the hill onto the moor, his great strides eating up the distance, his footsteps shaking the ground.

At the foot of the hill he halted and from his throat issued a challenging roar that made the very crags surrounding the moor tremble. The rocks flung back the roar as if in mockery.

Again he shouted and in the shout he framed a lurid insult to the enemy that lurked there in the cliffs.

Again the crags flung back the insult, but this time the echoes, booming over the moor, were drowned by another voice, the voice of the enemy.

At the far end of the moor appeared a gigantic form, a form that shambled on grotesque, misshapen feet, growling angrily as he came.

He came rapidly despite his clumsy gait, and as he came he mouthed terrific threats.

Close to the other he halted and only then did recognition dawn in his eyes.

"You, Mal Shaff?" he growled in his guttural tongue, and surprise and consternation were written large upon his ugly face.

"Yes, it is I, Mal Shaff," boomed the other. "Remember, Ouglat, the day you destroyed me and my plane. I have returned to wreak my vengeance. I have solved a mystery you have never guessed and I have come back. You did not imagine you were attacking me again

when you sent your minions to that other plane to feed upon the beings there. It was I you were attacking, fool, and I am here to kill you."

Ouglat leaped and the thing that had been Henry Woods, newspaperman, and ninety-eight other men, but was now Mal Shaff of the fourth dimension, leaped to meet him.

Mal Shaff felt the force of Ouglat, felt the sharp pain of a hammering fist, and lashed out with those horrible arms of his to smash at the leering face of his antagonist. He felt his fists strike solid flesh, felt the bones creak and tremble beneath his blow.

His nostrils were filled with the terrible stench of the other's foul breath and his filthy body. He teetered on his gnarled legs and side-stepped a vicious kick and then stepped in to gouge with straightened thumb at the other's eye. The thumb went true and Ouglat howled in pain.

Mal Shaff leaped back as his opponent charged head down, and his knotted fist beat a thunderous tattoo as the misshapen beast closed in. He felt clawing fingers seeking his throat, felt ghastly nails ripping at his shoulders. In desperation he struck blindly, and Ouglat reeled away. With a quick stride he shortened the distance between

them and struck Ouglat a hard blow squarely on his slavering mouth. Pressing hard upon the reeling figure, he swung his fists like sledge-hammers, and Ouglat stumbled, falling in a heap on the sand.

Mal Shaff leaped upon the fallen foe and kicked him with his taloned feet, ripping him wickedly. There was no thought of fair play, no faintest glimmer of mercy. This was a battle to the death: there could be no quarter.

The fallen monster howled, but his voice cut short as his foul mouth, with its razor-edged fangs, closed on the other's body. His talons, seeking a hold, clawed deep.

Mal Shaff, his brain a screaming maelstrom of weird emotions, aimed pile-driver blows at the enemy, clawed and ripped. Together the two rolled, locked tight in titanic battle, on the sandy plain and a great cloud of heavy dust marked where they struggled.

In desperation Ouglat put every ounce of his strength into a heave that broke the other's grip and flung him away.

The two monstrosities surged to their feet, their eyes red with hate, glaring through the dust cloud at one another.

Slowly Ouglat's hand stole to a black, wicked cylinder that hung on a belt at his waist. His fingers closed upon it and he drew the weapon. As he leveled it at Mal Shaff, his lips curled back and his features distorted into something that was not pleasant to see.

Mal Shaff, with doubled fists, saw the great thumb of his enemy slowly depressing a button on the cylinder, and a great fear held him rooted in his tracks. In the back of his brain something was vainly trying to explain to him the horror of this thing which the other held.

Then a multicolored spiral, like a corkscrew column of vapor, sprang from the cylinder and flashed toward him. It struck him full on the chest and even as it did so he caught the ugly fire of triumph in the red eyes of his enemy.

He felt a stinging sensation where the spiral struck, but that was all. He was astounded. He had feared this weapon, had been sure it portended some form of horrible death. But all it did was to produce a slight sting.

For a split second he stood stock-still, then he surged forward and advanced upon Ouglat, his hands outspread like claws. From his throat came those horrible sounds, the speech of the fourth dimension.

"Did I not tell you, foul son of Sargouthe, that I had solved a mystery you have never guessed at? Although you destroyed me long ago, I have returned. Throw away your puny weapon. I am of the lower dimension and am invulnerable to your engines of destruction. You bloated...." His words trailed off into a stream of vileness that could never have occurred to a third-dimensional mind.

Ouglat, with every line of his face distorted with fear, flung the weapon from him, and turning, fled clumsily down the moor, with Mal Shaff at his heels.

Steadily Mal Shaff gained and with only a few feet separating him from Ouglat, he dived with outspread arms at the other's legs.

The two came down together, but Mal Shaff's grip was broken by the fall and the two regained their feet at almost the same instant.

The wild moor resounded to their throaty roaring and the high cliffs flung back the echoes of the bellowing of the two gladiators below. It was sheer strength now and flesh and bone were bruised and broken under the life-shaking blows that they dealt. Great furrows were plowed in the sand by the sliding of heavy feet as the two fighters shifted to or away from attack. Blood, blood of fourth-dimensional creatures, covered the bodies of the two and stained the

sand with its horrible hue. Perspiration streamed from them and their breath came in gulping gasps.

The lurid sun slid across the purple sky and still the two fought on. Ouglat, one of the ancients, and Mal Shaff, reincarnated. It was a battle of giants, a battle that must have beggared even the titanic tilting of forgotten gods and entities in the ages when the third-dimensional Earth was young.

Mal Shaff had no conception of time. He may have fought seconds or hours. It seemed an eternity. He had attempted to fight scientifically, but had failed to do so. While one part of him had cried out to elude his opponent, to wait for openings, to conserve his strength, another part had shouted at him to step in and smash, smash, smash at the hated monstrosity pitted against him.

It seemed Ouglat was growing in size, had become more agile, that his strength was greater. His punches hurt more; it was harder to hit him.

Still Mal Shaff drilled in determinedly, head down, fists working like pistons. As the other seemed to grow stronger and larger, he seemed to become smaller and weaker.

It was queer. Ouglat should be tired, too. His punches should be weaker. He should move more slowly, be heavier on his feet.

There was no doubt of it. Ouglat was growing larger, was drawing on some mysterious reserve of strength. From somewhere new force and life were flowing into his body. But from where was this strength coming?

A huge fist smashed against Mal Shaff's jaw. He felt himself lifted, and the next moment he skidded across the sand.

Lying there, gasping for breath, almost too fagged to rise, with the black bulk of the enemy looming through the dust cloud before him, he suddenly realized the source of the other's renewed strength.

Ouglat was recalling his minions from the third dimension! They were incorporating in his body, returning to their parent body!

They were coming back from the third dimension to the fourth dimension to fight a third-dimensional thing reincarnated in the fourth-dimensional form it had lost millions of eons ago!

This was the end, thought Mal Shaff. But he staggered to his feet to meet the charge of the ancient enemy and a grim song, a death chant

immeasurably old, suddenly and dimly remembered from out of the mists of countless millenniums, was on his lips as he swung a pile-driver blow into the suddenly astonished face of the rushing Ouglat....

The milky globe atop the machine in Dr. White's laboratory glowed softly, and within that glow two figures seemed to struggle.

Before the machine, his hands still on the controls, stood Dr. Silas White. Behind him the room was crowded with newspapermen and photographers.

Hours had passed since the ninety-eight men—ninety-nine, counting Henry Woods—had stepped into the brittle column of light to be shunted back through unguessed time to a different plane of existence. The old scientist, during all those hours, had stood like a graven image before his machine, eyes staring fixedly at the globe.

Through the open windows he had heard the cry of the newsboy as the Press put the greatest scoop of all time on the street. The phone had rung like mad and George answered it. The doorbell buzzed repeatedly and George ushered in newspapermen who had asked innumerable questions, to which he had replied briefly, almost mechanically. The reporters had fought for the use of the one phone

in the house and had finally drawn lots for it. A few had raced out to use other phones.

Photographers came and flashes popped and cameras clicked. The room was in an uproar. On the rare occasions when the reporters were not using the phone the instrument buzzed shrilly. Authoritative voices demanded Dr. Silas White. George, his eyes on the old man, stated that Dr. Silas White could not be disturbed, that he was busy.

From the street below came the heavy-throated hum of thousands of voices. The street was packed with a jostling crowd of awed humanity, every eye fastened on the house of Dr. Silas White. Lines of police held them back.

"What makes them move so slowly?" asked a reporter, staring at the globe. "They hardly seem to be moving. It looks like a slow motion picture."

"They are not moving slowly," replied Dr. White. "There must be a difference in time in the fourth dimension. Maybe what is hours to us is only seconds to them. Time must flow more slowly there. Perhaps it is a bigger place than this third plane. That may account for it. They aren't moving slowly, they are fighting savagely. It's a fight to the death! Watch!"

The grotesque arm of one of the figures in the milky globe was moving out slowly, loafing along, aimed at the head of the other. Slowly the other twisted his body aside, but too slowly. The fist finally touched the head, still moving slowly forward, the body following as slowly. The head of the creature twisted, bent backward, and the body toppled back in a leisurely manner.

"What does White say?... Can't you get a statement of some sort from him? Won't he talk at all? A hell of a fine reporter you are—can't even get a man to open his mouth. Ask him about Henry Woods. Get a human-interest slant on Woods walking into the light. Ask him how long this is going to last. Damn it all, man, do something, and don't bother me again until you have a real story—yes, I said a real story—are you hard of hearing? For God's sake, do something!"

The editor slammed the receiver on the hook.

"Brooks," he snapped, "get the War Department at Washington. Ask them if they're going to back up White. Go on, go on. Get busy.... How will you get them? I don't know. Just get them, that's all. Get them!"

Typewriters gibbered like chuckling morons through the roaring

tumult of the editorial rooms. Copy boys rushed about, white sheets clutched in their grimy hands. Telephones jangled and strident voices blared through the haze that arose from the pipes and cigarettes of perspiring writers who feverishly transferred to paper the startling events that were rocking the world.

The editor, his necktie off, his shirt open, his sleeves rolled to the elbow, drummed his fingers on the desk. It had been a hectic twenty-four hours and he had stayed at the desk every minute of the time. He was dead tired. When the moment of relaxation came, when the tension snapped, he knew he would fall into an exhausted stupor of sleep, but the excitement was keeping him on his feet. There was work to do. There was news such as the world had never known before. Each new story meant a new front make-up, another extra. Even now the presses were thundering, even now papers with the ink hardly dry upon them were being snatched by the avid public from the hands of screaming newsboys.

A man raced toward the city desk, waving a sheet of paper in his hand. Sensing something unusual the others in the room crowded about as he laid the sheet before the editor.

"Just came in," the man gasped.

The paper was a wire dispatch. It read:

"Rome—The Black Horror is in full retreat. Although still apparently immune to the weapons being used against it, it is lifting the siege of this city. The cause is unknown."

The editor ran his eye down the sheet. There was another dateline:

"Madrid—The Black Horror, which has enclosed this city in a ring of dark terror for the last two days, is fleeing, rapidly disappearing...."

The editor pressed a button. There was an answering buzz.

"Composing room," he shouted, "get ready for a new front! Yes, another extra. This will knock their eyes out!"

A telephone jangled furiously. The editor seized it.

"Yes. What was that?... White says he must have help. I see. Woods and the others are weakening. Being badly beaten, eh?... More men needed to go out to the other plane. Wants reinforcements. Yes. I see. Well, tell him that he'll have them. If he can wait half an hour we'll have them walking by thousands into that light. I'll be damned if we won't! Just tell White to hang on! We'll have the whole nation

coming to the rescue!"

He jabbed up the receiver.

"Richards," he said, "write a streamer, 'Help Needed,' 'Reinforcements Called'—something of that sort, you know. Make it scream. Tell the foreman to dig out the biggest type he has. A foot high. If we ever needed big type, we need it now!"

He turned to the telephone.

"Operator," he said, "get me the Secretary of War at Washington. The secretary in person, you understand. No one else will do."

He turned again to the reporters who stood about the desk.

"In two hours," he explained, banging the desk top for emphasis, "we'll have the United States Army marching into that light Woods walked into!"

The bloody sun was touching the edge of the weird world, seeming to hesitate before taking the final plunge behind the towering black crags that hung above the ink-pot shadows at their base. The purple sky had darkened until it was almost the color of soft, black velvet. Great stars were blazing out.

Ouglat loomed large in the gathering twilight, a horrible misshapen ogre of an outer world. He had grown taller, broader, greater. Mal Shaff's head now was on a level with the other's chest; his huge arms seemed toylike in comparison with those of Ouglat, his legs mere pipestems.

Time and time again he had barely escaped as the clutching hands of Ouglat reached out to grasp him. Once within those hands he would be torn apart.

The battle had become a game of hide and seek, a game of cat and mouse, with Mal Shaff the mouse.

Slowly the sun sank and the world became darker. His brain working feverishly, Mal Shaff waited for the darkness. Adroitly he worked the battle nearer and nearer to the Stygian darkness that lay at the foot of the mighty crags. In the darkness he might escape. He could no longer continue this unequal fight. Only escape was left.

The sun was gone now. Blackness was dropping swiftly over the land, like a great blanket, creating the illusion of the glowering sky descending to the ground. Only a few feet away lay the total blackness under the cliffs.

Like a flash Mal Shaff darted into the blackness, was completely swallowed in it. Roaring, Ouglat followed.

His shoulders almost touching the great rock wall that shot straight up hundreds of feet above him, Mal Shaff ran swiftly, fear lending speed to his shivering legs. Behind him he heard the bellowing of his enemy. Ouglat was searching for him, a hopeless search in that total darkness. He would never find him. Mal Shaff felt sure.

Fagged and out of breath, he dropped panting at the foot of the wall. Blood pounded through his head and his strength seemed to be gone. He lay still and stared out into the less dark moor that stretched before him.

For some time he lay there, resting. Aimlessly he looked out over the moor, and then he suddenly noted, some distance to his right, a hill rising from the moor. The hill was vaguely familiar. He remembered it dimly as being of great importance.

A sudden inexplicable restlessness filled him. Far behind him he heard the enraged bellowing of Ouglat, but that he scarcely noticed. So long as darkness lay upon the land he knew he was safe from his enemy.

The hill had made him restless. He must reach the top. He could think of no logical reason for doing so. Obviously he was safer here at the base of the cliff, but a voice seemed to be calling, a friendly voice from the hilltop.

He rose on aching legs and forged ahead. Every fiber of his being cried out in protest, but resolutely he placed one foot ahead of the other, walking mechanically.

Opposite the hill he disregarded the strange call that pulsed down upon him, long enough to rest his tortured body. He must build up his strength for the climb.

He realized that danger lay ahead. Once he quitted the blackness of the cliff's base, Ouglat, even in the darkness that lay over the land, might see him. That would be disastrous. Once over the top of the hill he would be safe.

Suddenly the landscape was bathed in light, a soft green radiance. One moment it had been pitch dark, the next it was light, as if a giant search-light had been snapped on.

In terror, Mal Shaff looked for the source of the light. Just above the horizon hung a great green orb, which moved up the ladder of the

sky even as he watched.

A moon! A huge green satellite hurtling swiftly around this cursed world!

A great, overwhelming fear sat upon Mal Shaff and with a high, shrill scream of anger he raced forward, forgetful of aching body and outraged lungs.

His scream was answered from far off, and out of the shadows of the cliffs toward the far end of the moor a black figure hurled itself. Ouglat was on the trail!

Mal Shaff tore madly up the slope, topped the crest, and threw himself flat on the ground, almost exhausted.

A queer feeling stole over him, a queer feeling of well-being. New strength was flowing into him, the old thrill of battle was pounding through his blood once more.

Not only were queer things happening to his body, but also to his brain. The world about him looked queer, held a sort of an intangible mystery he could not understand. A half question formed in the back of his brain. Who and what was he? Queer thoughts to be thinking!

He was Mal Shaff, but had he always been Mal Shaff?

He remembered a brittle column of light, creatures with bodies unlike his body, walking into it. He had been one of those creatures. There was something about dimensions, about different planes, a plan for one plane to attack another!

He scrambled to his bowed legs and beat his great chest with mighty, long-nailed hands. He flung back his head and from his throat broke a sound to curdle the blood of even the bravest.

On the moor below Ouglat heard the cry and answered it with one equally ferocious.

Mal Shaff took a step forward, then stopped stock-still. Through his brain went a sharp command to return to the spot where he had stood, to wait there until attacked. He stepped back, shifting his feet impatiently.

He was growing larger; every second fresh vitality was pouring into him. Before his eyes danced a red curtain of hate and his tongue roared forth a series of insulting challenges to the figure that was even now approaching the foot of the hill.

As Ouglat climbed the hill, the night became an insane bedlam. The challenging roars beat like surf against the black cliffs.

Ouglat's lips were flecked with foam, his red eyes were mere slits, his mouth worked convulsively.

They were only a few feet apart when Ouglat charged.

Mal Shaff was ready for him. There was no longer any difference in their size and they met like the two forward walls of contending football teams.

Mal Shaff felt the soft throat of the other under his fingers and his grip tightened. Maddened, Ouglat shot terrific blow after terrific blow into Mal Shaff's body.

Try as he might, however, he could not shake the other's grip.

It was silent now. The night seemed brooding, watching the struggle on the hilltop.

Larger and larger grew Mal Shaff, until he overtopped Ouglat like a giant.

Then he loosened his grip and, as Ouglat tried to scuttle away,

reached down to grasp him by the nape of his neck.

High above his head he lifted his enemy and dashed him to the ground. With a leap he was on the prostrate figure, trampling it apart, smashing it into the ground. With wild cries he stamped the earth, treading out the last of Ouglat, the Black Horror.

When no trace of the thing that had been Ouglat remained, he moved away and viewed the trampled ground.

Then, for the first time he noticed that the crest of the hill was crowded with other monstrous figures. He glared at them, half in surprise, half in anger. He had not noticed their silent approach.

"It is Mal Shaff!" cried one.

"Yes, I am Mal Shaff. What do you want?"

"But, Mal Shaff, Ouglat destroyed you once long ago!"

"And I, just now," replied Mal Shaff, "have destroyed Ouglat."

The figures were silent, shifting uneasily. Then one stepped forward.

"Mal Shaff," it said, "we thought you were dead. Apparently it was

not so. We welcome you to our land again. Ouglat, who once tried to kill you and apparently failed, you have killed, which is right and proper. Come and live with us again in peace. We welcome you."

Mal Shaff bowed.

Gone was all thought of the third dimension. Through Mal Shaff's mind raced strange, haunting memories of a red desert scattered with scarlet boulders, of silver cliffs of gleaming metallic stone, of huge seas battering against towering headlands. There were other things, too. Great palaces of shining jewels, and weird nights of inhuman joy where hellish flames lit deep, black caverns.

He bowed again.

"I thank you, Bathazar," he said.

Without a backward look he shambled down the hill with the others.

"Yes?" said the editor. "What's that you say? Doctor White is dead! A suicide! Yeah, I understand. Worry, hey! Here, Roberts, take this story."

He handed over the phone.

"When you write it," he said, "play up the fact he was worried about not being able to bring the men back to the third dimension. Give him plenty of praise for ending the Black Horror. It's a big story."

"Sure," said Roberts, then spoke into the phone: "All right, Bill, shoot the works."

146 The Raid on the Termites by Paul Ernst

Armed with splinters of steel, two ant-sized men dare the formidable mysteries of a termitary.

Aproximate word count: 26,000

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Chapter 1: The Challenge of the Mound

It was a curious, somehow weird-looking thing, that mound. About a yard in height and three and a half in diameter, it squatted in the grassy grove next the clump of trees like an enormous, inverted soup plate. Here and there tufts of grass waved on it, of a richer, deeper color, testifying to the unwholesome fertility of the crumbling outer stuff that had flaked from the solid mound walls.

Like an excrescence on the flank of Mother Earth herself, the mound loomed; like an unhealthy, cancerous growth. And inside the enigmatic thing was another world. A dark world, mysterious, horrible, peopled by blind and terrible demons—a world like a

Dante's dream of a second Inferno.

Such, at least, were the thoughts of Dennis Braymer as he worked with delicate care at the task of sawing into the hard cement of a portion of the wall near the rounded top.

His eyes, dark brown and rimmed with thick black lashes, flashed earnestly behind his glasses as they concentrated on his difficult job. His face, lean and tanned, was a mask of seriousness. To him, obviously, this was a task of vital importance; a task worthy of all a man's ability of brain and logic.

Obviously also, his companion thought of the work as just something with which to fill an idle afternoon. He puffed at a pipe, and regarded the entomologist with a smile.

To Jim Holden, Denny was simply fussing fruitlessly and absurdly with an ordinary "ant-hill," as he persisted in miscalling a termitary. Playing with bugs, that was all. Wasting his time poking into the affairs of termites—and acting, by George, as though those affairs were of supreme significance!

He grinned, and tamped and relighted the tobacco in his pipe. He refrained from putting his thoughts into words, however. He knew,

of old, that Denny was apt to explode if his beloved work were interrupted by a careless layman. Besides, Dennis had brought him here rather under protest, simply feeling that it was up to a host to do a little something or other by way of trying to amuse an old college mate who had come for a week's visit. Since he was there on sufferance, so to speak, it was up to him to keep still and not interrupt Denny's play.

The saw rasped softly another time or two, then moved, handled with surgeon's care, more gently—till at last a section about as big as the palm of a man's hand was loose on the mound-top.

Denny's eyes snapped. His whole wiry, tough body quivered. He visibly held his breath as he prepared to flip back that sawed section of curious, strong mound wall.

He snatched up his glass, overturned the section.

Jim drew near to watch, too, seized in spite of himself by some of the scientist's almost uncontrollable excitement.

Under the raised section turmoil reigned for a moment. Jim saw a horde of brownish-white insects, looking something like ants, dashing frenziedly this way and that as the unaccustomed light of

sun and exposure of outer air impinged upon them. But the turmoil lasted only a little while.

Quickly, in perfect order, the termites retreated. The exposed honeycomb of cells and runways was deserted. A slight heaving of earth told how the insects were blocking off the entrances to the exposed floor, and making that floor their new roof to replace the roof this invading giant had stripped from over them.

In three minutes there wasn't a sign of life in the hole. The observation—if one could call so short a glimpse at so abnormally acting a colony an observation—was over.

Denny rose to his feet, and dashed his glass to the ground. His face was twisted in lines of utter despair, and through his clenched teeth the breath whistled in uneven gasps.

"My God!" he groaned. "My God—if only I could see them! If only I could get in there, and watch them at their normal living. But it's always like this. The only glance we're permitted is at a stampede following the wrecking of a termitary. And that tells us no more about the real natures of the things than you could tell about the nature of normal men by watching their behavior after an earthquake!"

Jim Holden tapped out his pipe. On his face the impatiently humorous look gave place to a measure of sympathy. Good old Denny. How he took these trivial disappointments to heart. But, how odd that any man could get so worked up over such small affairs! These bugologists were queer people.

"Oh, well," he said, half really to soothe Denny, half deliberately to draw him out, "why get all boiled up about the contrariness of ordinary little bugs?"

Denny rose to the bait at once. "Ordinary little bugs? If you knew what you were talking about, you wouldn't dismiss the termite so casually! These 'ordinary little bugs' are the most intelligent, the most significant and highly organized of all the insect world.

"Highly organized?" he repeated himself, his voice deepening. "They're like a race of intelligent beings from another planet—superior even to Man, in some ways. They have a king and queen. They have 'soldiers,' developed from helpless, squashy things into nightmare creations with lobster-claw mandibles longer than the rest of their bodies put together. They have workers, who bore the tunnels and build the mounds. And they have winged ones from among which are picked new kings and queens to replace the original when they get old and useless. And all these varied forms,

Jim, they hatch at will, through some marvelous power of selection, from the same, identical kind of eggs. Now, I ask you, could you take the unborn child and make it into a man with four arms or a woman with six legs and wings, at will, as these insects, in effect, do with theirs?"

"I never tried," said Jim.

"Just a soft, helpless, squashy little bug, to begin with," Denny went on, ignoring his friend's levity. "Able to live only in warm countries —yet dying when exposed directly to the sun. Requiring a very moist atmosphere, yet exiled to places where it doesn't rain for months at a time. And still, under circumstances harsher even than those Man has had to struggle against, they have survived and multiplied."

"Bah, bugs," murmured Jim maddeningly.

But again Denny ignored him, and went on with speculations concerning the subject that was his life passion. He was really thinking aloud, now; the irreverent Holden was for the moment nonexistent.

"And the something, the unknown intelligence, that seems to rule

each termitary! The something that seems able to combine oxygen from the air with hydrogen from the wood they eat and make necessary moisture; the something that directs all the blind subjects in their marvelous underground architecture; the something that, at will, hatches a dozen different kinds of beings from the common stock of eggs—what can it be? A sort of super-termite? A super-intellect set in the minute head of an insect, yet equal to the best brains of mankind? We'll probably never know, for, whatever the unknown intelligence is, it lurks in the foundations of the termitaries, yards beneath the surface, where we cannot penetrate without blowing up the whole mound—and at the same time destroying all the inhabitants."

Jim helped Denny gather up his scientific apparatus. They started across the fields toward Denny's roadster, several hundred yards away—Jim, blond and bulking, a hundred and ninety pounds of hardy muscle and bone; Denny wiry and slender, dark-eyed and dark-haired. The sledge-hammer and the rapier; the human bull, and the human panther; the one a student kept fit by outdoor studies, and the other a careless, rich young time-killer groomed to the pink by the big-game hunting and South Sea sailing and other adventurous ways of living he preferred.

"This stuff is all very interesting," he said perfunctorily, "but what

has it to do with practical living? How will the study of bugs, no matter how remarkable the bug, be of benefit to the average man? What I mean is, your burning zeal—your really bitter disappointment a minute ago—seem a bit out of place. A bit—well, exaggerated don't you know."

Denny halted; and Jim, perforce, stopped, too. Denny's dark eyes burned into Jim's blue ones.

"How does it affect practical living? You, who have been in the tropics many times on your lion-spearing and snake-hunting jaunts, ask such a thing? Haven't you ever seen the damage these infernal things can do?"

Jim shook his head. "I've never happened to be in termite country, though I've heard tales about them."

"If you've heard stories, you have at least in idea of their deadliness when they're allowed to multiply. You must have heard how they literally eat up houses and the furnishings within, how they consume telegraph poles, railroad ties, anything wooden within reach. The termite is a ghastly menace. When they move in—men eventually move out! And their appearance here in California has got many a nationally famous man half crazy. That's what they mean to the

average person!"

Jim, scratched his head. "I didn't think of that angle of it," he admitted.

"Well, it's time you thought of something besides fantastic ways of risking your life. The termite has been kept in place, till now, by only two things: ants, which are its bitterest enemies, and constantly attack and hamper its development; and climatic conditions, which bar it from the temperate zones. Now suppose, with all their intelligence and force of organization—not to mention that mysterious and terrible unknown intelligence that leads them—they find a way to whip the ants once for all, and to immunize themselves to climatic changes? Mankind will probably be doomed."

"Gosh," said Jim, with exaggerated terror.

"Laugh if you want to," said Dennis, "but I tell you the termite is a very real menace. Even in its present stage of development. And the maddening thing is that we can't observe them and so discover how best to fight them.

"To get away from the light that is fatal to them, they build mounds like that behind us, of silicated, half-digested wood, which hardens

into a sort of cement that will turn the cutting edge of steel. If you pry away some of the wall to spy on them, you get the fiasco I was just rewarded with. If you try to penetrate to the depths of the mystery, yards underground, by blowing up the termitary with gun powder, the only way of getting to the heart of things—you destroy the termites. Strays are seldom seen; in order, again, to avoid light and air-exposure, they tunnel underground or build tubes above ground to every destination. Always they keep hidden and secret. Always they work from within, which is why walls and boards they have devoured look whole: the outer shell has been left untouched and all the core consumed."

"Can't you get at the beasts in the laboratory?" asked Jim.

"No. If you put them into glass boxes to watch them, they manage to corrode the glass so it ceases to be transparent. And they can bore their way out of any wood, or even metal, containers you try to keep them in. The termite seems destined to remain a gruesome, marvelous, possibly deadly mystery."

He laughed abruptly, shrugged his shoulders, and started toward the car again.

"When I get off on my subject, there's no telling when I'll stop. But,

Jim, I tell you, I'd give years of my life to be able to do what all entomologists are wild to do—study the depths of a termite mound. God! What wouldn't I give for the privilege of shrinking to ant-size, and roaming loose in that secretive-looking mound behind us!"

He laughed again, and slapped Holden's broad back.

"There would be a thrill for you, you bored adventurer! There would be exploration work! A trip to Mars wouldn't be in it. The nightmare monsters you would see, the hideous creations, the cannibalism, the horrible but efficient slave system carried on by these blind, intelligent things in the dark depths of the subterranean cells! Lions? Suppose you were suddenly confronted by a thing as big as a horse, with fifteen-foot jaws of steely horn that could slice you in two and hardly know it! How would you like that?"

And now in the other man's eyes there was a glint, while his face expressed aroused interest.

Every man to his own game, thought Denny curiously, watching the transformation. He lived for scientific experiments and observations having to do with termites. Holden existed, apparently, only for the thrill of pitting his brain and brawn against dangerous beasts, wild surroundings, or tempestuous elements. If only their two supreme

interests in life could be combined....

"How would I like it?" said Jim. "Denny, old boy, when you can introduce me to an adventure like that ..." He waved his arm violently to complete the sentence. "What a book of travel it would make! 'The Raid on the Termites. Exploring an Insect Hell. Death in an Ant-hill....'"

"Termitary! Termitary!" corrected Denny irritably.

"Whatever you want to call it," Jim conceded airily. He dumped the apparatus he was carrying into the rear compartment of the roadster. "But why speak of miracles? Even if we were sent to a modern hand laundry, we could hardly be shrunk to ant-size. Shall we ramble along home?"

Chapter 2: The Pact

"What are we going to do to-night?" asked Jim.

Dennis looked quizzically at his big friend. Jim was pacing restlessly up and down the living room of the bachelor apartment, puffing jerkily at his eternal pipe. Dennis knew the symptoms. Though he hadn't seen Jim for over a year, he remembered his characteristics well enough.

Some men seem designed only for action. They are out of step with the modern era. They should have lived centuries ago when the world was more a place of physical, and less of purely mental, rivalry.

Jim was of this sort. Each time he returned from some trip—to Siberia, the Congo, the mountainous wilderness of the Caucasus—he was going to settle down and stop hopping about the globe from one little-known and dangerous spot to another. Each time, in a matter of weeks, he grew restless again, spoiling for action. Then came another impulsive journey.

He was spoiling for action now. He didn't really care what happened that evening, what was planned. His question was simply a bored

protest at a too tame existence—a wistful hope that Denny might lighten his boredom, somehow.

"What are we going to do to-night?"

"Well," said Denny solemnly, "Mrs. Van Raggan is giving a reception this evening. We might go there and meet all the Best People. There is a lecture on the esthetics of modern art at Philamo Hall. Or we can see a talkie—"

"My Lord!" fumed Jim. Then: "Kidding aside, can't you dig up something interesting?"

"Kidding aside," said Dennis, in a different tone, "I have dug up something interesting. We're going to visit a friend of mine, Matthew Breen. A young man, still unknown, who, in my opinion, is one of our greatest physicists. Matt is a kind of savage, so he may take to you. If he does—and if he's feeling in a good humor—he may show you some laboratory stunts that will afford you plenty of distraction. Come along—you're wearing out my rugs with your infernal pacing up and down!"

Matt Breen's place was in a ratty part of the poorer outskirts of town; and his laboratory was housed by what had once been a barn. But

place and surroundings were forgotten at sight of the owner's face.

Huge and gaunt, with unblinking, frosty gray eyes, looking more like an arctic explorer than a man of science, Matt towered over the average man and carelessly dominated any assembly by sheer force of mentality. He even towered a little over big Jim Holden now, as he absently shook hands with him.

"Come in, come in," he said, his voice vague. And to Denny: "I'm busy as the devil, but you can watch over my shoulder if you want to. Got something new on. Great thing—though I don't think it'll have any practical meaning."

The two padded after him along a dusty hallway, up a flight of stairs that was little more than a ladder, and into the cavernous loft of the old barn which had been transformed into a laboratory.

Jim drew Denny aside a pace or two. "He says he's got something new. Isn't he afraid to show it to a stranger like me?"

"Afraid? Why should he be?"

"Well, ideas do get stolen now and then, you know."

Denny smiled. "When Matt gets hold of something new, you can be

sure the discovery isn't a new kind of can-opener or patent towel-rack that can be 'stolen.' His ideas are safe for the simple reason that there probably aren't more than four other scientists on earth capable of even dimly comprehending them. All you and I can do—whatever this may turn out to be—is to watch and marvel."

Matt, meanwhile, had lumbered with awkward grace to a great wooden pedestal. Cupping down over this was a glass bell, about eight feet high, suspended from the roof.

Around the base of the pedestal was a ring of big lamp-affairs, that looked like a bank of flood-lights. The only difference was that where flood-lights would have had regular glass lenses to transmit light beams, these had thin plates of lead across the openings. Thick copper conduits branched to each from a big dynamo.

Matt reached into a welter of odds and ends on a bench, and picked up a tube. Rather like an ordinary electric light bulb, it looked, save that there were no filaments in the thin glass shell. Where filaments should have been there was a thin cylinder of bluish-gray metal.

"Element number eighty-five," said Matt in his deep, abstracted voice, pointing at the bluish cylinder. "Located it about a year ago. Last of the missing elements. Does strange tricks when subjected to

heavy electric current. In each of those things that look like searchlights is one of these bulbs."

He laid down the extra tube, turned toward a door in the near wall, then turned back to his silent guests again. Apparently he felt they were due a little more enlightenment.

"Eighty-five isn't nearly as radioactive as the elements akin to it," he said. Satisfied that he had now explained everything, he started again toward the door.

As he neared it, Dennis and Jim heard a throaty growling, and a vicious scratching on the wooden panels. And as Matt opened the door a big mongrel dog leaped savagely at him!

Calmly, Matt caught the brute by the throat and held it away from him at arm's length, seeming hardly to be aware of its eighty-odd pounds of struggling weight. Into Jim's eyes crept a glint of admiration. It was a feat of strength as well as of animal management; and, himself proficient in both, Jim could accord tribute where it was due.

"You came just as I was about to try an experiment on the highest form of life I've yet exposed to my new rays," he said, striding easily

toward the glass bell with the savage hound. "It's worked all right with frogs and snakes—but will it work with more complex creatures? Mammalian creatures? That's a question."

Denny forbore to ask him what It did, how It worked, what the devil It was, anyway. From his own experience he knew that the abstraction of an experimenter insulates him from every outside contact. Matt, he realized, was probably making a great effort to remain aware that they were there in the laboratory at all; probably thought he had explained in great detail his new device and its powers.

Vaguely wrapped in his fog of concentration, Matt thrust the snarling dog under the bell, which he lowered quickly till it rested on the pedestal-floor and ringed the dog with a wall of glass behind which it barked and growled soundlessly.

Completely preoccupied again, Matt went to a big switch and threw it. The dynamo hummed, raised its pitch to a high, almost intolerable keening note. The ring of pseudo-searchlights seemed in an ominous sort of way to spring into life. The impression must have been entirely imaginary; actually the projectors didn't move in the slightest, didn't even vibrate. Yet the conviction persisted in the minds of both Jim and Dennis that some black, invisible force was

pouring down those conduits, to be sifted, diffused, and hurled through the lead lenses at the dog in the bell.

Thrilled to the core, not having the faintest idea what it was they were about to see, but convinced that it must surely be of stupendous import, the two stared unwinkingly at the furious hound. Matt was staring, too; but his glance was almost casual, and was concentrated more on the glass of the bell than on the experimental object.

The reason for the direction of his gaze almost immediately became apparent. And as the reason was disclosed, Dennis and Jim exclaimed aloud in disappointment—at the same time, so intense was their nameless suspense, not knowing they had opened their mouths. It appeared that for yet a little while they were to remain in ignorance of the precise meaning of the experiment.

The glass of the bell was clouding. A swirling, milky vapor, not unlike fog, was filling the bell from top to bottom.

The dog, rapidly being hidden from sight by the gathering mist, suddenly stopped its antics and stood still in the center of the bell as though overcome by surprise and indecision. Motionless, staring vacantly, it stood there for an instant—then was concealed completely by the rolling vapor.

But just before it disappeared, Jim turned to Denny in astonishment, to see if Denny had observed what he had; namely, that the fog seemed not to be gathering from the air penned up in the bell, but in some strange and rather awful way to be exuding from the body of the dog itself!

The two stared back at the bell again, neither one sure he had been right in his impression. But now the glass was entirely opaque. So thick was the vapor within that it seemed on the point of turning to a liquid. Inside, swathed in the secrecy of the fleecy folds of mist—what was happening to the dog? The two men could only guess.

Matt glanced up at an electric clock with an oversized second hand. His fingers moved nervously on the switch, then threw it to cut contact. The dynamo keened its dying note. A silence so tense that it hurt filled the great laboratory.

All eyes were glued on the bell.

The thick vapor that had been swirling and crowding as if to force itself through the glass, grew less restive in motion. Then it began to rise, ever more slowly, toward the top.

More and more compactly it packed itself into the arched glass

dome, the top layers finally resembling nothing so much as cloudy beef gelatin. And now these top layers were solidifying, clinging to the glass.

Meanwhile, the bottom line of the vapor was slowly rising, an inch at a time, like a shimmering curtain being raised from a stage floor. At last ten inches showed between the pedestal and the swaying bottom of the almost liquid vapor. Jim and Denny stooped to peer under the blanket of cloud. The dog! In what way had it been affected?

Again they exclaimed aloud, involuntarily, unconsciously.

There was no dog to be seen.

With about fourteen clear inches now exposed, they looked a second time, more intently. But their first glance had been right. The dog was gone from the bell. Utterly and completely vanished! Or so, at least, they thought at the moment.

The rising and solidifying process of the vapor went on, while Dennis and Jim stood, almost incapable of movement, and watched to see what Breen was going to do next.

His next move came in about four minutes, when the crowding vapor had at last completely come to rest at the top of the dome like a deposit of opaque jelly. He stepped to the windlass that raised the bell, and turned the handle.

Immediately the two watchers strode impulsively toward the exposed pedestal floor.

"Wait a minute," commanded the scientist, his eyes sparkling with almost ferocious intensity. The two stopped. "You might step on it," he added, amazingly.

He caught up a common glass water tumbler, and cautiously moved to the edge of the platform. "It may be dead, of course," he muttered. "But I might as well be prepared."

Wonderingly, Jim and Dennis saw that he was intently searching every square inch of the pedestal flooring. Then they saw him crawl, like a stalking cat, toward a portion near the center—saw him clap the tumbler, upside down, over some unseen thing....

"Got him!" came Matt's deep, fuzzy voice. "And he isn't dead, either. Not by a long way! Now we'll get a magnifying glass and study him."

Feeling like figures in a dream, Jim and Dennis looked through the lens with their absorbed host.

Capering about under the inverted tumbler, like a four-legged bug—and not a very large bug, either—was an incredible thing. A thing with a soft, furry coat such as no true insect possesses. A thing with tiny, canine jaws, from which hung a panting speck of a tongue like no bug ever had.

"Yes," rumbled Matt, "the specimen is far indeed from being dead. I don't know how long it might exist in so microscopic a state, nor whether it has been seriously deranged, body or brain, by the diminishing process. But at least—it's alive."

"My God!" whispered Dennis. And, his first coherent sentence since the physicist had thrown the switch: "So this—this—is the overgrown brute you put under the bell a few minutes ago! This eighth-of-an-inch thing that is a miniature cartoon of a dog!"

Jim could merely stare from the tumbler and the marvel it walled in, to the man who had worked the miracle, and back to the tumbler again.

Denny sighed. "That thick, jellylike substance in the top of the bell,"

he said, "what is it?"

"Oh, that." The miracle worker didn't lift his eyes from the tumbler and the very much alive and protesting bit of life it housed. "That's the dog. Rather, it's practically all of the dog save for this small residue of substance that clothes the vital life-spark."

Jim dabbed at his forehead and found it moist with sweat. "But how is it done?" he said shakily.

"With element eighty-five, as I told you," said Breen, most of whose attention was occupied by a new stunt he was trying: he had cut a microscopic sliver of meat off a gnawed bone, and was sliding it under the glass. Would the dog eat? Could it...?

It could, and would! With a mighty bound, that covered all of a quarter of an inch, the tiny thing leaped on the meat and began to gnaw wolfishly at it. The effect was doubly shocking—to see this perfect little creature acting like any regular, full-sized dog, although as tiny as a woman's beauty spot!

"Marvelous stuff, eighty-five," Matt went on. "Any living thing, exposed to the lead-filtered emanations it gives off when disintegrated electrically to precisely the right degree, is reduced

indefinitely in size. I could have made that dog as small as a microbe, even sub-visible perhaps, if I chose. Curious.... Maybe the presence of eighty-five in minute quantities on earth is all that has kept every living thing from growing indefinitely, expanding gigantically right off the face of the globe...."

But now Dennis was hardly listening to him. A notion so fantastic, so bizarre that he could not at once grasp it fully, had just struck him.

"Listen," he said at last, his voice so hoarse as to be almost unrecognizable, "listen—can you reverse that process?"

Matt nodded, and pointed to the viscous deposit in the dome of the bell. "The protoplasmic substance is still there. It can be rebuilt, remolded to its original form any time I put the dog back in the bell and let the particles of eighty-five, which are suspended in the vacuum tubes, settle back into their original, inert mass. You see, there is such a close affinity—"

Dennis cut him short almost rudely. It wasn't causes, marvelous though they might be, that he was interested in; it was results.

"Would you dare ... that is ... would you like to try that experiment on a human being?"

Now for once the inventor's entire interest was seized by something outside his immediate work. He stared open-mouthed at Dennis.

"Would I?" he breathed. "Would I like ..." He grunted. "Such a question! No experiment is complete till man, the highest form of all life, has been subjected to it. I'd give anything for the chance!" He sighed explosively. "But of course that's impossible. I could never get anyone to be a subject. And I can't have it tried on myself because I'm the only one able to handle my apparatus in the event that anything goes wrong."

"But—would you try it on a human being if you had a chance?" persisted Denny.

"Hah!"

"And could you reduce a human being in stature as radically as you did the dog? For example, could you make a man ... ant-size?"

Matt nodded vigorously, eyes fairly flaming. "I could make him even smaller."

Dennis stared at Jim. His face was transfigured. He shook with nervous eagerness. And Jim gazed back at Dennis as breathlessly

and as tensely.

"Well?" said Dennis at last.

Jim nodded slowly.

"Yes," he said. "Of course."

And in those few words two men were committed to what was perhaps the strangest, most deadly, and surely the most unique, adventure the world has yet known. The improbable had happened. A man who lived but for dangers and extraordinary action, and a man who would have gambled his soul for the scientist's ecstasy of at last learning all about a hidden study—both had seen suddenly open up to them a broad avenue leading to the very pinnacle of their dreams.

Chapter 3: Ant-Sized Men

Next morning, at scarcely more than daybreak, Jim and Denny stood, stripped and ready for the dread experiment, beside Matthew Breen's glass bell. The night, of course, had been sleepless. Sleep? How could slumber combat the fierce anticipations, the exotic imaginings, the clanging apprehensions of the two?

Most of the night had been spent by Denny in dutifully arguing with Jim about the advisability of his giving up the adventure, in soothing his conscience by presenting in all the angles he could think of the risks they would run.

"You'll be entering a different world, Jim," Denny had said. "An unimaginably different world. A terrible world, in which you'll be a naked, soft, defenseless thing. I'd hate to bet that we'd live even to reach the termitary. And once inside that—it's odds of seven to one that we'll never get out again."

"Stow it," Jim had urged, puffing at his pipe.

"I won't stow it. You may think you've run up against dangers before, but let me tell you that your most perilous jungle is safe as a church compared to the jungle an ordinary grass plot will present to us, if, as

we plan, we get reduced to a quarter of an inch. I'm going in this with a mission. To me it's a heaven-sent opportunity—one I'm sure any entomologist would grab at. But you, frankly, are just a fool—"

"All right," Jim had cut in, "let it go at that. I'm confirmed in my folly. You can't argue me out of it, so don't try any more. Now, to be practical—have you thought of any way we could arm ourselves?"

"Arm ourselves?" repeated Dennis vaguely.

"Yes. It's a difficult problem. The finest watch-maker couldn't turn out a working model of a gun that could be handled by a man a quarter of an inch tall. At the same time I have no desire to go into this thing bare-handed. And I think I know something we can use."

"What?"

"Spears," said Jim with a grin. "Steel spears. They make steel wire, you know, down to two-thousandths of an inch and finer. Probably our friend has some in his laboratory. Now, if we grind two pieces about a quarter of an inch long off such a wire, and sharpen the ends as well as we can, we'll have short spears we could swing very well.

"Then, there's the matter of clothes." He grinned again. "We'll want a

breech clout, at least. I propose that we get the sheerest silk gauze we can find, and cut an eighth-inch square apiece to tie about our middles after the transformation."

He slapped his fist into his palm. "By George! Such talk really begins to bring it home. Two men, clad in eighth-inch squares of silk gauze, using bits of almost invisibly fine steel wire as weapons, junketing forth into a world in which they'll be about the smallest and puniest things in sight! No more lords of creation, Denny. We'll have nothing but our wits to carry us through. But they, of course, will be supreme in the insect world as they are in the animal world."

"Will they be supreme?" Denny said softly. That unknown intelligence—that mysterious intellect (super-termite?) that seemed to rule each termite tribe, and which appeared so marvelously profound! "I wonder...."

Then he, in his turn, had descended to the practical.

"You've solved the problem of weapons and clothing, Jim," he said, "and now for my contribution." He left the room and came back in a few minutes with something in his hands. "Here are some shields for us.

"Oh, not pieces of steel armor. Shields in a figurative more than a literal sense."

He set down a small porcelain pot, and opened it. Within was a repulsive-looking, whitish-brown paste.

"Ground-up termites," he explained. "If we're to go wandering around in a termitary, we've got to persuade the inmates that we're friends, not foes. So we'll smear ourselves all over with this termite-paste before ever we enter the mound."

"Clever, these supposedly impractical scientists," murmured Jim, with a lightness that did not quite succeed in covering his real admiration of the shrewdness of the thought.

And now they stood in front of Breen's glass bell, with Breen beside them all eagerness to begin the experiment.

"What am I supposed to do after I've reduced you to the proper size?" he asked.

"Take us out to Morton's Grove, to the big termitary you'll find about a quarter of a mile off the road," said Denny. "Set us down near the opening to one of the larger termite tunnels. Then wait till we come

out again. You may have to wait quite a while—but that isn't much to ask in return for our submission to your rays."

"I'll wait a week, if you wish. Let's see, what had I better carry you in?"

It was decided—with a lack of forethought later to be bitterly regretted—that an ordinary patty-dish of the kind in which restaurants serve butter, would make as good a conveyance as anything else.

Matt got the patty-dish and placed it on the pedestal floor, tipping it on edge so Jim and Denny would be able to climb into it unaided (he wouldn't dare attempt to lift bodies so small for fear of mortally injuring them between thumb and forefinger). Into the patty-dish, so they could be readily located, were placed the bits of wire, the tiny fragments of silk gauze to serve as breech clouts, and a generous dab of termite-paste; and the two men stepped inside the glass dome to share the fate that, the night before, had been the dog's.

The bell was lowered around them. They watched the inventor step to the switch and pull it down....

At first there was no sensation whatever. Almost with incredulity,

they watched the glass walls cloud, realized that the fogging vapor was formed of exudations from their own substance. Then physical reaction set in.

The first symptom was paralysis. With the vapor wreathing their heads in dense clouds, they found themselves unable to move a muscle. The paralysis spread partially to the involuntary muscles. Heart action was retarded enormously; and they ceased almost entirely to breathe. In spite of the cessation of muscular functioning, however, they were still conscious in a vague way. Conscious enough, at all events, to go through a hell of agony when—second and last stage—every nerve in their bodies seemed of a sudden to be rasped with files, and every tiny particle of their flesh jerked and twitched as if to break loose from the ever-shrinking skin.

Time, of course, was completely lost sight of. It might have been ten hours, or five minutes later when they realized they were still alive, still standing on their own feet, and now able to breathe and move. The spell of rigidity had been broken; nerves and muscles functioned smoothly and painlessly again. Also they were in clear air.

"I guess the experiment didn't work," Dennis began unsteadily. But then, as his eyes began to get accustomed to his fantastically new, though intrinsically unchanged surroundings, he cried aloud.

The experiment had worked. No doubt of that! And they were in a world where all the old familiar things were new and incredible marvels.

"What can be the nature of this stuff we're standing on?" wondered Jim, looking down.

Following his gaze, Denny too wondered for an instant, till realization came to him. "Why, it's ordinary wood! Just the wood of the pedestal platform!"

But it didn't seem like wood. The grain stood out in knee-high ridges in all directions to the limit of visibility. It was like a nightmare picture of a frozen bad-lands, split here and there by six-feet-broad, unfathomable chasms—which were the cracks in the flooring.

"Where's the patty-dish?" queried Jim.

Dennis gazed about. "We were standing right over it when the reducing process started.... Oh, there it is!"

Far off to the right an enormous, shallowly hollowed plateau caught their eyes. They started toward it, hurdling the irregular ridges, leaping across the dizzy chasms.

The tiny dish had been tipped on edge—but when they reached it they found its thickness alone a daunting thing.

"It's a pity Matt didn't select a thinner kind of china," grumbled Dennis; gazing at the head-high wall that was the edge of the plate. "Here—I'll stand on your shoulders, and then give you an arm up. Look out—it's slippery!"

It was. Their feet slid out from under them on the glazed surface repeatedly. It was with the utmost effort that they finally made their way to the center of the shallow plateau.

There, lying beside two heaps of coarse cloth and a mound of horrible-smelling stuff that he recognized as the dab of termite-paste, they saw two glistening steel bars. About five feet long, they seemed to be, and half an inch in diameter. The wire-ends which, a few moments ago, they had been forced to handle with tweezers for fear of losing!

Jim picked one up and drew it back for a pretended spear-thrust. He laughed, vibrantly, eagerly.

"I'm just beginning to realize it's really happened, and that the hunt has started. Bring on your bugs!"

Dennis stooped and picked up his spear. It was unwieldy, ponderous, the weight of that long, not-too-thin steel bar. Jim's great shoulders and heavy arms were suited well enough to such a weapon; but Dennis could have wished that his were some pounds lighter.

They turned their attention to the evil-smelling hill of termite-ointment. With many grimaces, they took turns in smearing each other from head to feet with the repulsive stuff. Then they knotted about them the yard-square pieces of fabric—once sheer silk gauze, now cloth as stiff and cumbersome as sail-cloth. They faced each other, ready for their trip.

The heavens above them, trailing up and up into mysterious darknesses, suddenly became closer and sparkled with a diamond sheen. Stretching off and up out of sight was a mountainous column that might conceivably be a wrist.

"Matt's looking at us through a magnifying glass," concluded Denny.

Abruptly the ridged bad-lands about them began to vibrate. Thunder crashed and roared around their ears.

"He's trying to say something to us," said Denny, when the awful din had ceased. "Oh, Matt—we're ready to go!"

Jim echoed his shout. Then Denny snorted. "Fools! Our voices are probably pitched way above the limit of audibility. He can't hear us any more than we can understand him!"

They gazed at each other. More than anything else that had happened, this showed them how entirely they were cut off from their old world. Truly, in discarding their normal size, they might as well have been marooned on another planet!

A tremendous, pinkish-gray wall lowered near them, split into segments, and surrounded their plateau. The plateau was lifted—with a dizzy swiftness that made their stomachs turn.

With sickening speed the plateau moved forward. The texture of the heavens above them changed. The sun—the one thing in their new universe that seemed unchanged in size and aspect—shone down on them. The plateau came jarringly to rest. Great cliffs of what seemed black basalt gleamed high over them.

Matt had carried them out of the building, and had set the patty-dish on the black leather seat of his automobile.

There was a distant thundering, as though all the worlds in the universe but Earth were being dashed to pieces. That was the motor

starting. And then, as the car moved off, Jim and Dennis realized their mistake in choosing a patty-dish to ride in!

In spite of the yielding leather cushion on which their dish was set, the two quarter-inch men were hurled this way and that, jounced horribly up and down, and slid headlong from one end of the plateau to the other as the automobile passed over the city streets. Impossible to stand. They could only crouch low on the hard glazed surface, and try to keep from breaking legs and arms in the worst earthquake it is possible to imagine. Anyone who has ever seen two bugs ill-advisedly try to walk across the vibrating hood of an automobile while the motor is running, will have some idea of the troubles that now beset Dennis and Jim.

"The ass!" groaned Jim, in a comparatively quiet spell. "Why doesn't he drive more carefully?"

"Probably," groaned Denny, "he's doing the best he can."

Probably! All that was left them was conjecture. They could only guest at what was happening in the world about them!

Matthew Breen's face and body were lost in sheer immensity above them. They knew they were riding in a car; but they couldn't see the

car. All they could see was the black cliff that was the seat-cushion behind them. The world had disappeared—hidden in its bigness; the world, indeed, was just at present a patty-dish.

Somehow they endured the ride. Somehow they avoided broken bones, and were only shaken up and bruised when the distant roar of the motor ceased and the wind stopped howling about their ears.

"Well, we're here," said Dennis unsteadily. "Now for the real—"

His words were stopped by the sudden rising of the plateau. Again they felt the poignantly exaggerated, express-elevator feeling, till the plateau finally came to rest.

The crashing thunder of Matt's voice came to them, words utterly indistinguishable. The saucer was tipped sideways....

Doubtless Matt thought he was acting with extreme gentleness; but in fact the dish was tilted so quickly and so without warning that Jim and Dennis slid from its center, head over heels, to fall over the edge and land with a bump on the ground. Their spears, sliding after, narrowly missed impaling them.

Once more came the distant crashing of Matt's voice. Then there was

silence. Their gigantic protector, having dumped them unceremoniously into the grass of Morton's Grove, had ushered them squarely into the start of their insane adventure. From now on their fate belonged to them alone.

Chapter 4: The Raid

Bewilderedly, they looked around them.

Ahead of them, barely to be seen for the trunks of giant trees intervening, was a smoothly-rounded mountain. Majestic and aloof it soared, dwarfing all near it—the termitary which, yesterday, had been but waist-high. There was their eventual goal; but meanwhile their immediate surroundings roused their greater interest—and all their alertness!

When Dennis had said they would find a common grass plot a wild and exotic jungle, he had spoken perhaps more truly than he knew. At any rate, the jungle they now found themselves in was something to exceed man's wildest dreams.

Far over their heads towered a wilderness of trees. But such trees! Without branches, shooting up and over in graceful, tangling curves, their trunks oddly flat and ribbonlike and yellow-green. It was impossible to look on them as grass stems.

Here and there the trees had fallen, presenting a tangled wilderness of leathery, five-foot-wide strips. Webs of roots, tough and gnarled, whitish in color, curled in all directions to catch the feet and baffle

the eye. It was an appalling underbrush. And it was an underbrush, moreover, in which there was plenty of wild life!

A hairy, pulpy thing, reddish in color, with gauzy wings and a myriad flashing eyes scuttled close to them as though drawn by curiosity to inspect them. As big as an eagle it appeared to them; both grasped their spears; but soon, with a wild whistle of its wings, it rose up through the tangle of underbrush and hummed off. A fruit fly.

And now a monstrous thing appeared far off, to stalk like a balloon on twenty-foot legs in their direction. With incredible quickness it loomed over them. Six feet through, its body was roughly spherical, and carried on those amazingly long, jointed legs. It stared at them with beady, cruel eyes, but finally teetered on its way again, leaving them untouched.

"I'll never again be able to see a daddy longlegs without shivering," said Jim. His voice was unconsciously sunk to little more than a whisper. This was a world of titanic dangers and fierce alarms. Instinct cautioned both of them to make no more noise than necessary. "We had better make for your termitary at once."

Dennis had been thinking that for some time. But he had been unable

to locate a termite tunnel anywhere. Matt had been supposed to set them down near one. No doubt, to his own mind, he had placed them near one of the termite highways. But his ideas of distance were now so radically different from theirs that Dennis, at least, was unable to see a tunnel opening anywhere.

He spoke his thoughts to Jim. "There must be a tunnel opening somewhere very near us," he concluded. "But I—Good heavens!"

Both crouched in wary alarm, spears held for a thrust, if necessary, at the frightful thing approaching them from the near jungle.

Thirty feet long, it was, and six feet through, a blunt-ended, untapered serpent that glistened a moist crimson color in the rays of the sun. The trees quaked and rocked as it brushed against them in its deliberate advance. Dead leaves many feet across and too heavy for the combined efforts of both men to have budged, were pushed lightly this way and that as the monster moved. The very ground seemed to shake under its appalling weight.

"If that comes after us," breathed Jim, "we're through!"

But now Denny drew a long breath of relief.

"Be still," he said. "Make no sound, and no move, and it will probably pass us by. It's blind, and couldn't harm us in any way—unless it rolled on us."

The two stood motionless while the nightmare serpent crashed by. Then, with the earthworm fading into the distance, they resumed their hunt for the near tunnel entrance.

Jim, whose eyes were more accustomed to searching jungle depths, finally saw it—a black hole leading down into a small hill about two hundred yards ahead of them. He pointed.

"There we are. Come on."

Laboriously they set out toward it. Laboriously because at every step some almost insuperable hurdle barred their way. A fallen grass stalk was a problem; sometimes they had to curve back on their tracks for sixty or eighty feet in order to get around it. A dead leaf, drifted there from the trees near at hand, was almost a calamity, necessitating more circuitous maneuvering.

With every yard the realization of the stark peril that was now theirs increased.

A grasshopper, blundering to the ground within a rod of them, nearly crushed them with its several tons of weight. A bumblebee, as big as a flying elephant and twice as deadly, roared around them for several minutes as though debating whether or not to attack them, and finally roared off leaving them shaken and pale. But the most startling and narrow of their narrow escapes occurred an instant after that.

They had paused for an instant, alert but undecided, to stare at a coldly glaring spider that was barring their path. It was a small spider, barely more than waist-high. But something in its malevolent eyes made the two men hesitate about attacking it. At the same time it was squatting in the only clear path in sight, with tangles of stalks and leaves on either side. A journey around the ferocious brute might be a complicated, long-drawn-out affair.

Their problem was decided for them.

Overhead, suddenly roared out a sound such as might have been made by a tri-motored Fokker. There was a flash of yellow. The roar increased to an ear-shattering scream. Something swooped so breathlessly and at the same time so ponderously that the men were knocked flat by the hurricane of disturbed air.

A fleeting struggle ensued between some vast yellow body and the unfortunate spider. Then the spider, suddenly as immobile as a lump of stone, was drawn up into the heavens by the roaring yellow thing, and disappeared. A wasp had struck, and had obtained another meal.

"Thank God that thing had a one-track mind, and was concentrating on the spider," said Jim, with a rather humorless laugh.

Dennis was silent. He was beginning to realize that he knew too much about insects for his peace of mind. To Jim, insects had always heretofore been something to brush away or step on, as the circumstance might indicate. He had no idea, for example, of exactly what fate it was he had just missed. But Denny knew all about it.

He knew that if the wasp had chosen either of them, the chosen one would have felt a stabbing thing like a red-hot sword penetrate to his vitals. He knew that swift paralysis would have followed the thrust. He knew that then the victim would have been taken back, helpless and motionless as the spider was, to be laid side by side with other helpless but still conscious victims in the fetid depths of the wasp's nest. And he knew that finally an egg would have been laid on the victim's chest; an egg that would eventually hatch and deliver a bit of life that would calmly and leisurely devour the paralyzed food supply alive.

"Let's hurry," he suggested, glancing up to see if any more wasps were hovering about.

The lowering tunnel mouth was very near now. Barely twenty yards away. What with the crowding monsters around them, the tunnel began to look like a haven. Almost at a run, they continued toward it.

Then a commotion like that which might be made by a mighty army sounded in the underbrush behind them. Dennis looked back over his shoulder.

"Hurry!" he gasped, suddenly accelerating his pace into frank flight. "Ants...."

Jim glanced back, too—and joined Denny in his flight. Pouring toward them at express train speed, flinging aside fallen stalks, climbing over obstructions as though no obstructions were there, was coming a grim and armored horde. Far in the lead, probably the one that had seen the men first and started the deadly chase, was a single ant.

The solitary leader was a monster of its kind. As tall as Jim, clashing in its horny armor, it rushed toward the fugitives.

"It's going to reach the tunnel before we do," Jim panted. "We've got to kill the thing—and do it before the rest get to us...."

The monster was on them. Blindly, ferociously it hurled its bulk at the things that smelled like termites however little they resembled them. The termite-paste was, in this instance, the most deadly of challenges.

Jim stepped to the fore, with his spear point slanted to receive the onslaught, spear butt grounded at his feet.

Whether the six-legged horror would have had wit enough to comprehend the nature of the defense offered, and would have striven to circumvent it, had time been given it, is a question that will never be answered. For the thing wasn't given the time.

In mid-air it seemed to writhe and try to change the direction of its leap. But it was on the point and had transfixed itself before its intelligence, however keen, could have functioned.

The fight, though, was by no means over. With five feet of steel piercing it through, it whirled with hardly abated vitality toward Dennis. Its gargoyle head came close and closer.

Dennis sprang sideways along its length, lifted the pointed bar he held, and dashed it down on what looked to him a vital spot—the unbelievably slender trunk that held its spatulate abdomen to its armored chest.

There was a crack as the bar smashed down on the weak point. The monster sank quivering to the ground. An instant later it was up, but now its movements were dazed and sluggish as it dragged its half-paralyzed abdomen after it, and fumbled and caught on the heavy bar that transfixed it.

Jim caught the bar and tugged it. "My spear!" he cried. "Denny—help!"

Together the two wrenched to jerk the spear loose from the horny armor of the dying ant. The rest of the pack were very near now.

"We'll have to let it go...." panted Denny.

But at that instant their desperate efforts tore it loose from the convulsively jerking hulk. They darted into the tunnel mouth with the racing horde scarcely twenty yards behind them.

Without hesitation the ants poured in after them. Jim and Dennis

leaped forward, in pitch darkness, now and then bumping heavily against a wall as the tunnel turned, but having at least no trouble with their footing: the floor was as smooth as though man-made.

Behind them they could hear the armored horde crashing along in the blackness. The smashing noise of their progress was growing louder. The two had run perhaps fifty yards in the darkness. Another fifty, and they would be caught!

But now, just as their eyes—sharpened also by the danger they were in—began to grow accustomed to the gloom, they saw ahead of them a thing that might have stepped straight out of a horrible dream.

Six feet of vulnerable, unarmored body, amply protected by horny head and shoulders and ten feet of awful, scissor-mandibles, faced them. The creature was doing a strange sort of war dance, swaying its terrible bulk back and forth rhythmically, while its feet remained immovable. An instant it did this, then it charged at the two men. Simultaneously the crashing of the fierce horde behind sounded with appalling nearness—the noise and odor of the ants preventing the huge termite guard in front of the men from recognizing and approving the smell of the termite-paste that covered their bodies.

"Follow me!" snapped Denny, remembering that the hideous attacking thing before them was blind, and gaining from that knowledge swift inspiration.

Jim gathered his muscles to follow at command. But he almost shouted aloud as he saw Denny leap—straight toward the enormous, snapping mandibles.

In an instant, however, Denny's idea was made clear. With a slide that would have done credit to any baseball player, the entomologist catapulted on his chest past the snapping peril. Jim followed, with not a foot to spare. They were not past the soft rear-parts of the thing, but they were at least past its horrible jaws. And before the monster could turn its unwieldy bulk in the tunnel, the ants were upon it.

For a few seconds, blinded to their own danger by the fascination of the struggle going on before them, the two men witnessed the grim watcher of the tunnel as it drove back wave after wave of attacking ants.

Two at a time, the invaders charged that wall of living horn. And two at a time they were swept against the walls, or slashed in two by the enormous mandibles. One against an army; but it was a full minute

or so before the one began to weaken.

"Come," whispered Dennis, at last. "If what I think is going to happen occurs, this will be no place for us."

They went ahead, with the din of battle dying behind them, till they saw a small tunnel branching off beside the main stem. Into this they squeezed. But as Jim started to go farther down its constricted length, Dennis stopped him.

"We're fairly safe here, I think. We'll stay and watch...."

Silently, motionless, they lurked in the entrance of the side-avenue, and peered out at the main avenue they had just left. And now that avenue began to buzz with traffic.

First, more of the horrors with the enormous scissor-mandibles began to stream past them. In twos and threes, then in whole squads, they lumbered by, bound for the ant army that had invaded their sanctum.

Not quite too far ahead to be out of sight, the defenders halted. Several of their number went forward to help the dying Horatius. The rest lined up in a triple row across a wide patch in the tunnel,

presenting a phalanx it would appear that nothing could beat.

"How do they know enough to gather here from distant parts of this hollow mountain?" whispered Jim to Denny. "How do they know their city is besieged just at this spot, and that their help is needed?"

Dennis shrugged. His eyes were shining. This was the kind of thing he had come here for. This unhampered observation of a strange and terrible race at war and at work—it was well worth all the personal risks he might run.

"No man can answer your question, Jim. They're blind—they can't see their danger so as to know how to combat it. They couldn't hear, and be alarmed by, the vibrations of battle for a distance of more than a few yards. My only guess is that they are constantly and silently commanded by the unknown intelligence, the ruling brain, that hides deep in the earth beneath us and directs these 'soldier' termites in some marvelous way—though itself never seeing or hearing the actual dangers it guards against."

"The queen?" suggested Jim.

Again Denny shrugged. "Who knows? She might be the brains, as well as the egg layer, of the tribe. But don't talk too much. The

vibration of our voices might lead them to us in spite of their blindness."

Now the main avenue before them was humming with a new kind of traffic. From side to side it was being filled with a new sort of termite. These were smaller than the soldiers, and entirely unprotected by either horn armor plate or slashing mandibles.

Each of these carried an unwieldy block of gleaming substance. And each in turn dropped its block in a growing wall behind the savage defenders against the ants, and fastened it in place with a thick and viscous brown liquid that dried almost immediately into a kind of cement.

"The workers," whispered Dennis, enthralled. "The building blocks are half-digested wood. The cement is a sort of stuff that exudes from their own bodies. In ten minutes there will be a wall across the tunnel that no ants on earth could penetrate!"

"But the home guards, the brave lads and all that sort of thing, will be shut off on the outside of the wall with the enemy. And there are hundreds of the enemy," protested Jim.

"A necessary sacrifice," said Denny. "And so perfect is their

organization that no one, including the soldiers to be sacrificed, ever makes any objection."

Jim shivered a little. "It's terrible, somehow. It's—it's inhuman!"

"Naturally. It's insectian, if there is such a word. And a wise man once predicted that the termite organization, being so much more perfect a one than man's, indicated the kind of society man would at some time build up for himself. In ten or twelve more centuries we, too, might go off in millions and deliberately starve to death because the ruling power decided there were too many people on earth. We, too, might devour our dead because it was essential not to let anything go to waste. We, too, might control our births so that we produced astronomers with telescopes in their heads instead of regular eyes, carpenters with hammer and saw instead of hands, soldiers with poison gas sacs in their chests so they could breathe death and destruction at will. It would be the perfect state of society."

"Maybe—but I'm glad I'll be dead before that times comes," said Jim with another shiver.

By now the wall ahead of them was complete. On the other side of it the soldier termites stolidly fought on to their certain death. On the

near side, the workers retreated to unknown depths in the great hollow mountain behind them. The main avenue was once more clear, and, save for a few workers hastening on unknown errands, deserted.

"That act's over," sighed Dennis. "But it may well be no more than a curtain raiser to the acts to come. Shall we be on our way? We're hardly on the fringe of the termitary yet—and I want to get at the heart of it, and into the depths far beneath it. Depths of hell, we'll probably find them, Jim. But a marvelous hell, and one no man has ever before seen."

They left their little haven and moved along the main tunnel toward the heart of the termitary, walking easily upright in this tunnel which was only one of many hundreds in the vast, hollowed mountain—which loomed into the outer sunshine to almost a height of a yard.

Chapter 5: Trapped

On along the tunnel they went. And as they progressed, Dennis got the answer to something that had troubled him a great deal before their entrance here—a problem which had been solved, rather amazingly, of itself.

Termitaries, as far as the entomologist knew, were pitch-black places which no ray of light ever entered. He had been afraid he would be forced to stumble blindly in unlit depths, able to see nothing at all, on a par with the blind creatures among whom he moved. Yet he and Jim could see in this subterranean labyrinth.

He observed now the reason for that. The walls on all sides, made of half-digested cellulose, had rotted just enough through long years to be faintly phosphorescent. And that simple natural fact was probably going to mean all the difference between life and death: it gave the two men at least the advantage of sight over the eyeless savage creatures among whom, helped by the termite-smell given by the paste, they hoped to glide unnoticed.

However, even the termite-paste, and the fact that the termitary citizens were blind, didn't seem enough to account for the immunity granted the two men as they began to come presently to more

crowded passages and tunnels near the center of the mound.

On every side of them now, requiring the utmost in agility to keep from actually brushing against them, were hordes of the worker termites, and dozens of the frightful soldiers. Yet on the two men moved, ever more slowly, without one of the monsters attempting to touch them. It was odd—almost uncanny.

"Surely the noise of our walking, tiptoe as we may, must be heard by them—and noted as different from theirs," whispered Dennis. "Yet they pay no attention to us. If it is due to the paste, I must say it's wonderful stuff!"

Jim nodded in a puzzled way. "It's almost as if they wanted to make our inward path easy. I wonder—if it's going to be different when we try to get out again!"

Dennis was wondering that, too. It seemed absurd to suspect the things of being intelligent enough to lay traps. But it did look almost as though they were encouraging their two unheard-of visitors from another world to go on deeper and deeper into the heart of the eerie city (all the tunnels sloped down now), there perhaps to meet with some ghastly imprisonment.

He gave it up. Sufficient for the moment that they were unmolested, and that he had a chance at first hand to make observations more complete than the world of entomology had ever dreamed of.

They stumbled onto what seemed a death struggle between one of the giant soldiers and an inoffensive-looking worker. The drab, comparatively feeble body of the worker was wriggling right in the center of the great claws which, with a twitch, could have sliced it in two endwise. Yet the jaws did not twitch; and in a few moments the worker drew unconcernedly out and moved away.

"The soldier was getting his meal," whispered Denny, enthralled. "Their mandibles are enlarged so enormously that they can't feed themselves. The workers, who digest food for the whole tribe, feed them regularly. Then if a soldier gets in the least rebellious, he can simply be starved to death at any time."

"Ugh!" Jim whispered back. "Fancy being official stomach to three or four other people! More of your wonderful 'organization,' I suppose."

They went on, down and down, till Denny calculated they had at last reached nearly to the center of the vast city. And now they stumbled into something weird and wonderful indeed. Rather, they half fell

into it, for it lay down a few feet and came as a complete surprise in the dimness; and not till they had recovered from their near fall and looked around for a few seconds did they realize where their last few steps—the last few steps of freedom they were to have in the grim underground kingdom—had taken them.

They were in a chamber so huge that it made the largest of man-made domes shrink to insignificance by comparison.

A hundred yards or more in every direction, it extended. And far overhead, lost in distance, reared the arched roof. A twenty-story building could have been placed under that roof without trouble.

Lost in awe, Dennis gazed about him; and he saw on the floor, laid in orderly rows in countless thousands, that which gave further cause for wonderment: new-hatched larvae about the size of pumpkins but a sickly white in color—feeble, helpless blobs of life that one day develop into soldiers and workers, winged rulers or police. The termite nursery.

"Whew!" gasped Jim, wiping his face. "From the heat in here you'd think we were getting close to the real, old-fashioned hell instead of an artificial, insect-made one. What are all these nauseating-looking blobs of lard lying about here, anyway?"

Denny told him. "Which is the reason for the heat," he concluded. "Jim, it's twenty degrees warmer in here than it is outdoors. How—how—can these insects regulate the temperature like that? The work of the ruling brain again? But where, and what, can that brain be?"

"Maybe we'll find out before we leave this place," said Jim, more prophetically than he knew. "Hello—we can't get out through the door we entered. We'll have to find another exit. Look."

Dennis looked. In the doorway they had just come through was a soldier—a giant even among giants. Its ten-foot jaws, like a questing, gigantic vise, were opening and closing regularly and rapidly across the opening of the portal. It made no attempt to enter the great nursery, just stood where it was and sliced the air rhythmically with its jaws.

"We haven't a chance of walking through that exit!" Dennis agreed. "Let's try the other side."

But before they could half cross the great room—walking between rows of life that weakly stirred like protoplasmic mud on either side of them—a soldier appeared at that door, too. Like the first, it stationed itself there, and began the same regular, swift slicing movements of jaws that compassed the doorway from side to side

and halfway from top to bottom.

"We might possibly be able to run through that giant's nut-cracker before it smashed shut on us," said Jim dubiously. "But I'd hate to try it. There's a door at the end, too."

They made for this, running now. But a third soldier appeared to block the way out with those deadly, clashing mandibles.

"You're sure they can't see?" demanded Jim, clutching his spear while he hesitated whether to try an attack on the fearful guard or to turn tail again. "Because they certainly act as if they did!"

"Direct commands from the ruling brain," Denny surmised soberly. "Somewhere, perhaps half a mile down in the earth, Something is able to see us through solid walls, read in our minds our intentions of what we're to do next, and send out wordless commands to these soldiers to execute countermoves."

"Rot!" said Jim testily. "These things are bugs, not supermen. And the fact that they're now bigger than we are, and much better armed, doesn't keep them from being just bugs. There's no real brain-power in evidence here."

But an instant later he changed his mind. They approached the fourth and last exit from the giant chamber. And here there was no guard. They were able to race out of it without interference. The oddity of that was glaring.

"Denny," gasped Jim, "we're being herded! Driven in a certain direction, and for a certain reason, by these damned things! Do you realize that?"

Dennis did realize it. And a moment later, when he glanced behind, he realized it more.

Behind them, marching in orderly twos that filled the tunnel from side to side, moved a body of the soldiers. As the men moved, they moved; never coming nearer and never dropping behind.

Experimentally, Dennis stopped. The grim soldiers stopped, too. Dennis walked back toward them a step or two, spear held ready.

The monsters did not try to attack. On the other hand they did not give ground, either; and as Denny got to within a few yards of them, one in the front line suddenly opened and shut his ponderous jaws.

They clashed together a matter of inches from Denny's torso—a

clear warning to get on back in the direction he had come.

Jim came and stood beside him, heavy shoulder muscles bunched into knots, standing on the balls of his feet as a boxer stands before flashing in at an opponent.

"Shall we have it out with them here and now?" said Jim, his jaws set. "We wouldn't have a chance—but I'm beginning to get awfully doubtful about the fate these things have in store for us. I can't even guess at what it may be—but I've an idea it may be a lot worse than a quick, easy death!"

Denny shook his head. "Let's see it through," he muttered, looking at the nightmare jaws of their guard. Two sweeps of those jaws and he and Jim would lie in halves.

They started back down the corridor, the monstrous shepherds moving as they did. The way descended so steeply now that it was difficult for them to keep their footing. Then, yards below the level of the horrible nursery, the tunnel narrowed—and widened again into a chamber which had no other opening save the one they were being herded into. A blind end to the passageway.

"The bug Bastille," said Jim with a mirthless grin. "Here, I guess,

we're going to wait for the powers-that-be to judge us and give us our sentence."

The giant soldiers halted. Two of them stood in the narrowed part of the tunnel, one behind the other, blocking it with a double, living barrier. Their jaws commenced moving regularly, savagely back and forth, open and closed. Blind these guards might be; but no living thing, even though it bristled with eyes, could creep out unscathed through the animated threshing machine those jaws made of that doorway. The two men were more securely held in their prison cell than they would have been by two-inch doors of nickel-steel. They could only wait there, helpless prisoners, to learn the intentions of the unknown Something that ruled the great city, and that held them so easily in its grasp.

Chapter 6: In the Food Room

Restlessly, Jim paced back and forth in the narrow dank cell. At the doorway the two guards opened and closed their jaws, regularly, rhythmically, about sixty to the minute. Hours, the two men calculated, they had been there. And still the clashing of those jaws rang steadily, maddeningly in their ears.

Clash-clash-clash. The things seemed as tireless as machinery. Clash-clash-clash. And into that savage, tireless movement, Denny read a sort of longing refrain.

"Try—to—es—cape! Try—to—es—cape!"

He shivered. At any time, did he and Jim grow too fearful of the dark future or too nerve-wracked by the terrific suspense, they could step into these gigantic, steel-hard jaws. But to be sliced in two ...

Jim stopped his pacing, and stared speculatively at the wall of their cell. For the dozenth time he raised his ponderous spear and thrust the pointed end at the wall with all his strength. And for the dozenth time he was rewarded only by seeing a flake no larger than his clenched fist fall out.

"Might as well be cement!" he rasped. "God, we're caught like flies in a spiderweb!"

"Well, you wanted excitement," remarked Dennis, a bit acidly. The strain was telling on him more than on the less finely strung Holden; but he was struggling to keep himself in hand.

"So I did want excitement," said Jim. "But I want at least a sporting chance for my white-alley, too. But—"

He stopped; and both stared swiftly toward the door.

The ponderous, gruesome clashing of jaws had stopped. The two nightmare guards stood motionless, as though at command. Then they moved into the cell, straight toward the two men.

"It's come!" said Jim through set teeth. He swung his spear up, ready to shoot it at the horny breastplate of the nearest monster with all his puny strength. "We're going to catch it now!"

But Dennis gazed more intently; and he saw that the blind but ferocious creatures showed no real signs of molesting them. Instead, they were edging to one side. In a moment, as the two men moved warily to keep their distance, they found suddenly that the soldiers

were behind them, and that the doorway was free to them.

The glimpse of freedom, however, was not inspiring. The meaning of the move was too apparent: they were again being herded.

Whatever reigning power it was that had let them penetrate so deeply into the trap, and then had surrounded and imprisoned them —was now going to honor them with an audience.

"His Majesty commands," commented Jim, reading the sinister gesture as clearly as Denny had. "I'll wager we're about to meet your 'unknown intelligence,' Denny. But be it 'super-termite' or be it Queen—whatever it may be—I want just one chance to use this spear of mine!"

Reluctantly he stepped forth before the fearful guard; reluctantly, but in full command of his nerves now that the wearing inactivity was ended and something definite was about to happen. Which proves but once again the wisdom of the gods in not allowing man to read the future. For could Jim Holden have foreseen the precise experience awaiting them, his nerve control—and Denny's, too—might not have been so firm.

Again their way led sharply down, through tunnels loftier and

broader and glowing more brilliantly with phosphorescence which was a testimonial to their greater age.

The efficiency of their herding was perfect. At each side entrance along the way stood one of the ghastly soldiers, jaws clashing with monotonous deadliness. Now and again several of the monsters appeared straight ahead, barring the avenue, and leaving no choice but to turn to right or left into off-branching tunnels. Small chance here of missing the path! And always behind them marched their two particular guards, closing off their retreat.

"How do you suppose they sense our approach?" wondered Jim, who had noticed that the menacing jaw-clashing began while they were still fairly far from whatever side entrance was being barred to them. And again: "You're sure they can't see?"

"There isn't an eye in the lot of them," said Denny. "They must sense our coming by the vibration of our footsteps."

But when they tried tiptoeing, on noiseless bare feet, the result was the same. Surely the things could not hear them for more than a few feet; yet with no sound to guide them, the blind guards commenced automatically opening and closing those invulnerable jaws with the distant approach of the two men just the same. They could only

ascribe it to the same force that seemed able to follow them, step by step and thought by thought, though it was far away and out of sight —the ruling brain of the termite tribe.

Ever hotter it grew as they descended, till at length a blast of heat like a draft from a furnace met them as they rounded a corner and stepped into a corridor that no longer led downward. They knew that they were very near the ruler's lair now, on the lowest level, deep in the foundations of the vast pile.

Dennis wiped perspiration, caused as much by emotion as by heat, from his face. He alone of all students on earth was going to penetrate the very heart of the termite mystery. He alone was going to have at least a glimpse of the baffling intelligence that science had guessed about for so many decades He ... alone. For it was hardly likely that he would ever get back up to the surface of earth to share his knowledge.

How different was this adventure from what he had hoped it might be! He had thought that the two of them might simply enter the termitary, mingle—perilously, but with at least a margin of safety—with the blind race it housed, and walk out again whenever they pleased. But from the moment of entering they'd had no chance. They had been hopelessly in the clutch of the insects; played with,

indulged, and finally trapped, to be led at last like dogs on a leash to the lair of the ruling power.

They rounded another corner and now, ahead of them, they saw what must be the end of this last and deepest of all the tunnels. This end showed as a glare of light. Real light, not the soft gleam of the rotting wood walls which was already paling feebly in comparison. The glare ahead of them, indeed, had something of the texture of electric light. Neither Jim nor Dennis could repress a sudden start; it was like coming abruptly onto a man-made fact, a bit of man-made world in the midst of this insect hell.

The damp heat was almost paralyzing now. Their limbs felt weak as they stumbled toward the light. But they were inexorably herded forward, and soon were at the threshold of the oddly illuminated chamber.

Now the two stopped for an instant and sniffed, as a peculiar odor came to their nostrils. It was a vague but fearsome odor, indescribable, making their skin crawl. A smell of decay—of death—and yet somehow of rank and fetid life. A combination of charnel-house and menagerie smell.

Denny blanched as an inkling of what was before them came to his

mind. He remembered the swooping wasp, that had so narrowly missed them at the start of their adventure. The wasp, he knew, was not the only insect that had certain dread ways of stocking its larder and keeping the contents of that larder fresh! The termites did not customarily follow these practises. Yet—yet the odor coming from the place before them certainly suggested ... But he tried to thrust such apprehensions from his thoughts.

They entered the chamber. The two gigantic soldiers stopped on the threshold behind them and took up their standard guard attitudes. The men stared about them....

It was huge, this chamber, almost as huge as the nursery chamber they had blundered into. The source of the light was not apparent. It seemed to glow from walls and floor and ceiling, as though it were a box of glass with sunshine pouring in at all six sides.

And now horror began to mingle with awed interest, as they took in more comprehensively the sights in that place, and saw precisely what it contained.

Denny's apprehensions had been only too well founded. For larder, food storeroom, the chamber certainly was. But what a storeroom! And in what state the "food" that stocked it was!

All along the vast floor were laid rows of inert, fantastic bodies. Insects. The whole small-insect world seemed to be represented here. One or more of everything that crawled, flew, walked or bored, seemed gathered in this great room. Grubs, flies, worms, ants, things soft and slimy and things grim and armored, were piled side by side like cordwood.

These hulks, nearly all larger than the two quarter-inch men, lay stark and motionless where they had been dropped. From them came the odor that had stopped Jim and Denny on the threshold—the strange odor of blended life and death. And the reason for the queer odor became apparent as the two gazed more closely at the motionless hulks.

These things, like figures out of a delirium in their great size and exaggerated frightfulness, were rigid as in death—but they were nevertheless not dead! Helpless as so many lumps of stone, they were still horribly, pitifully alive. Paralyzed, in some inscrutable termite fashion, probably fully conscious of their surroundings, they could only lie there and wait for their turn to come to be devoured by the ferocious creatures that had dragged them down to this, the bowels of the mound city.

Besides these things bound in the rigidity of death, there was more

normal life. There were termites in that vast storeroom, too; but they were specialized creatures, such as termitary life abounds in, that were so distorted as to be hardly recognizable as termites.

Along one wall of the place, hanging head down and fastened there for life, was a row of worker termites whose function was obviously that of reservoirs: their abdomens, so enormously distended as to be nearly transparent, glistened in varying colors to indicate that they contained various liquids whose purpose could only be guessed at.

Living cisterns, never to move, never to know life even in the monotonous, joyless way of the normal worker, they hung there to be dipped into whenever the master that reigned over this inferno, or his immediate underlings, desired some of their contents!

In addition, there were several each of two forms of termite soldier such as they had not seen before, standing rigidly at attention about the place.

At the door, of course, were the two creatures with the enormous mandibles that had escorted the pigmy men to the larder. But these others were as different as though they belonged to a different race.

Three had heads that were hideously bulbous in form, and which

were flabby and elastic instead of armored with thick horn as were the heads of the usual soldiers. Like living syringes, these heads were; perambulating bulbs filled with some defensive or offensive liquid to be squirted out at the owner's will.

The third kind of soldier was represented in the spectacle of termites with heads that were huge and conical, resembling bungs, or the tapered cylindrical corks with which one plugs a bottle. These, Denny knew from his studies, had been evolved by termite biology for the purpose of temporarily stopping up any breach in termitary mound-wall or tunnel while the workers could assemble and repair the chink with more solid and permanent building material.

But how fantastically, gruesomely different these colossal figures looked, here in the deepest stronghold of termitedom, than as scurrying little insects viewed under an entomologist's glass! And how appallingly different was the viewpoint from which they were now being observed—here where the human observers were equal in size, and doomed at any moment perhaps to be paralyzed and piled with the helpless live things that made up the rest of the "larder"!

And the presiding genius of this mysterious, underground storeroom —where was it? Denny and Jim looked about over the rows of live food, and among the termite soldiers with their odd heads, in vain

for a creature that might conceivably be the super-insect that so omnipotently ruled the mound.

Off in a corner they saw two more termites—standard worker types, standing motionless side by side, with a queer sort of mushroom growth linking them together—a large, gray-white ball borne mutually on their backs. But that was all. The listing of those two workers concluded the roll-call of termites in the chamber as far as the two men could see. And the two were—just ordinary workers.

"I guess His Majesty is out," said Jim. But his voice, in spite of the attempted levity of the words, was low-pitched and somber. "Most impolite to keep us waiting—"

He stopped as Denny sharply threw up his hand. And he too gazed at the maneuver that had caught Denny's wary attention.

This was nothing save that the various soldiers in the chamber—seven of them, besides the two that never left their stations at the door—had moved. But they had moved in concert, almost as harmoniously in unison as if performing some sort of drill.

In a single line they filed across the rows of inert, palpitating, paralyzed bodies; and in a line they surrounded Jim and Denny in a

hollow square about twenty feet across. There they took up their stations, the three soldiers with the syringe-heads, and the four with the unwieldy craniums that resembled bungs.

So perfectly had the move been executed, so perfectly and in unison had it been timed, that there could be little doubt it had resulted from a direct order. But where was the thing to give the command? Where was the head-general? In some far place, on his way to inspect the new and odd kind of prisoners, and giving orders to hold them yet more closely in anticipation of that inspection?

Jim turned to Denny and started to voice some of his thoughts. But the words were killed by the light that had appeared suddenly in Denny's eyes. In them had appeared a gleam of almost superstitious terror.

"Jim!" gasped Denny, raising his hand and pointing with trembling forefinger. "Jim—look!"

Jim turned to gaze, and his spear, clutched with almost convulsive desperation till this moment, sagged to the floor from his limp hinds.

The thing Denny had pointed at was the curious, large mushroom growth supported jointly on the backs of the two worker termites. It

had been across the chamber from them when they first saw it. Now it was moving toward them, steadily, borne by the team of workers. And now, clearly, for the first time, they saw what it really was.

It was a head, that mushroom growth. Rather, the whitish-gray, soft-looking thing was a brain. For it had long ago burst free of the original insect skull casing in which it had been born. Evidence that it had once been a normal, termite head was given by the fact that here and there, on sides and top of the huge, spongy-looking mass, were brownish scales—fragments of the casing that had once contained its bulk.

Set low down under the sphere, with the whitish-gray mass beetling up over them like a curving cliff, were eyes; great, staring, dull things of the type termites have during the short-winged periods of their existences. Like huge round stones, those eyes regarded the two men as the team of termites marched closer.

Hanging down from the great mass was an abortive miniature of a body—soft, shriveled abdomen, almost nonexistent chest, and tiny, sticklike legs that trailed helplessly along the floor as the termites—in the manner of two men who support a helpless third man between them—bore it forward.

Here, then was the Intellect that ruled the tribe, the super-termite, the master mind of the mound! This travesty of a termite! This thing with wasted limbs and torso, and with enormous, voracious brain that drained all sustenance constantly from the body! It was, in the insect world, a parallel to the dream that present-day Man sometimes has of Man a million years in the future: a thing all head and staring eyes, with a brain so enlarged that it must be artificially supported on its flabby torso.

"I guess His Majesty is out," Jim had said, with a shaky attempt at lightness.

But he now realized his mistake. His Majesty hadn't been out. His Majesty had been with them all along—a four-foot, irregular sphere of grayish-white nerve matter and intricately wrinkled cortex dependent for movement on borrowed backs and legs—and was now peering at them out of the only pair of eyes in the termitary as though in doubt as to what to do first with his helpless-seeming captives.

Chapter 7: "Clinging Brown Stuff"

Bemused, appalled, the two gazed at this almost disembodied brain that held them captive. It continued to come steadily toward them, carried by its two faithful slaves; and the grotesque termite soldiers, that had closed about them in a hollow square, parted to let it through.

Such was the bewitchment of the two men as they stared at the monstrosity, that they did not hear the slight clashing of horn that accompanied a swift movement of one of the soldiers behind them.

The first thing they knew of such a movement was when they felt their arms pinioned to their sides with crushing force, and looked down to find a pair of hard, jointed forelegs coiled about their bodies. In answer to some voiceless command, one of the termites with the conical heads had approached behind them and wound a leg around each.

Sweat stood out on Denny's forehead at the repellent touch of that living bond. He turned and twisted wildly.

Jim was struggling madly in the grip of the other foreleg. Great shoulders bulging with the effort, muscles standing in knots on his

heavy arms, he nearly succeeded in breaking free. Denny felt the tie that bound him relax ever so little as the monster centered its attention on the stronger man.

With a last effort, he tore his right arm free, and wriggled partly around in the thing's grip. He raised the spear and plunged it slantingly down into the hideous body.

This type of termite was armored more poorly than the others. Only its head was plated with horn; chest and abdomen were soft and vulnerable as those of any humble worker in the mound. The spear tore into it for two-thirds its length. There was a squeak—the first sound they had heard—from the wounded monster. The clutching forelegs tightened terribly, then began to loosen, quivering spasmodically as they slowly relinquished their grasp.

Denny bounded free and again sent the length of his spear into the loathsome body. Jim, meanwhile, had leaped toward his fallen spear. He stooped to pick it up—and was lost!

Obeying another wordless order, one of the ghastly, syringe-headed monsters had stepped out of line with the start of the short struggle. This one bounded on Jim just as he leaned over for his weapon.

Denny shouted a warning, started to run to his friend's aid. The dying termite, with a last burst of incredible vitality, caught his leg and held him.

In an instant it was done. The termite with the distorted head had drenched Jim with a brown, thick liquid that covered him from shoulder to feet—and Jim was writhing helplessly on the floor.

Denny burst loose at last from the feebly clutching foreleg. He straightened, poised his spear, and with a strength born of near madness shot it at the syringe-headed thing's chest.

But this one was different, armored to the full save for its soft cranium. The steel bar glanced harmlessly from the heavy horn breastplate. In answer, the monster wheeled and drenched Dennis, too, with the loathsome liquid.

On the instant Dennis was helpless. As Jim had done, he sank to the floor, his body constricted in a sheath that tightened as it dried and which bound him as securely as any straitjacket might have done.

The two rolled on the floor, trying to shed the terrible coating of hardening fluid that contracted about them. But they were as impotent as two flies that had rolled in the sticky slime of some

super-flypaper. At last they gave it up.

Panting, helpless as mummies, they glared up at the stony eyes of the ruler-termite. The team of workers moved, bearing their burden of almost bodiless, mushroom brain like well-oiled machines.

Their forelegs went out. The two men were shoved along the floor ahead of the monarch—and were laid in one of the lines of paralyzed insects so patently held as the ruler's private food supply!

The great, stony eyes were next bent, as though in curiosity, on the spears that had done such damage to the termite with the conical head. In the true insect world there was no such phenomenon as those glittering steel bars; and it appeared that the over-developed brain of the monarch held questions concerning their nature.

The team of termites wheeled, and walked over to the nearest spear, trailing the feeble, atrophied legs of their rider as they went. They squatted close to the floor, and the staring eyes examined the spears at close range. Then the owner of the eyes apparently sent out another command; for one of the guards at the door left its post and drew near, scissor-mandibles opened in obedience.

The hard mandible's clashed over one of the steel bars. The jaws

crunched shut, with a nerve-rasping grind. They made, naturally, no impression on the bar. The guard retired to its post at the doorway.

The termite-ruler seemed to think this over, for a moment. Then at some telepathic order, its two bearers picked up the spear and carried it, and their physically helpless ruler, over to one of the living cisterns—one filled with a dark red liquid.

One of the beasts of burden reached up and thrust an end of the spear into the hugely distended abdomen filled with the unknown red liquid. The spear was withdrawn, with about a foot of its blunt end reddened by the fluid. The termite laid it down; the staring, dull eyes watched it....

Slowly the end of the bar dulled with swift oxidation; slowly it turned brownish and flaked away, almost entirely consumed. The acid—if that was what the red stuff was—was awesomely powerful, at least with inorganic substances.

The termite team turned away from the bar, as if it were now a matter of indifference to the bloated brain borne on their backs. It approached the men again.

"I suppose," groaned Jim, "that our turn is next. The thing will

probably have us dipped into the red stuff, to see if we're consumed, too."

But here His Majesty's curiosity was interrupted while he partook of nourishment.

The clashing jaws of the two termite soldiers at the door stopped for a moment. Jim and Dennis struggled to turn their heads—all of them they could move—to see what the cessation of jaw-clashing might mean.

Three worker termites squeezed past. They approached one of the line of paralyzed insect hulks, and sank their mandibles into a garden slug. They tugged at this until they had it under the live cistern of red liquid into which the spear had been thrust.

One of the three flicked drops of the reddish stuff onto the inert slug, till it was well sprinkled. Then they dragged the carcass back to the termite-ruler.

They got it there barely in time. In a matter of seconds after they had dropped it before the monarch, the slug had collapsed into a half-liquid puddle of decomposed protoplasm on the floor. One of the main functions—if not the main function—of the red acid, it

seemed, was to act as a powerful digestive juice for His Majesty's food, predigesting it before it was taken into the feeble body for nourishment.

The termite team settled down over the semi-liquid mess that had been the slug, and tilted back. Now, under the huge globe of the brain, Jim and Denny saw exposed a small, soft mouth fringed by the tiny rudiments of atrophied mandibles. The repulsive little mouth touched the acid-softened mass....

The withered abdomen filled out. The whitish-gray lump of brain-matter grew slightly darker. It looked as though the mass of the dead slug were as large as the total bulk of the termite ruler; but not until the meal was nearly gone did the voracious feeding stop.

The three workers that had spread the banquet before their monarch, left the chamber. The guards resumed their interrupted jaw-clashing, which seemed senseless now: the captives, though not paralyzed as were the other captives there, were held so helpless by the dried and hardened fluid that escape was out of the question.

The misshapen burden of the termite team seemed to relax a little, lethargically, as though so gorged with food as to render almost inactive the grotesquely exaggerated brain. The stony eyes became

duller. Plainly the captives were to have a brief respite while the huge meal was assimilated.

"If I could get loose for just one minute," Jim took the opportunity to whisper to Denny, "and get at my spear—I think there would be one termite-ruler less in the world!"

Denny nodded. He had been thinking along the same lines as Jim: that bloated, swollen brain seemed a very vulnerable thing. Soft and boneless and formless, contained only by the dirty-white, membranous skin, it did appear a tempting target for a spear thrust. And now, sluggish with its meal, it seemed less alert and on guard.

Jim went on with his thought.

"I think you scientists are wrong about all the termites having intelligence," he whispered. "I believe that thing has the only reasoning mind in the mound. Look at those two guards at the door, for instance. There's no earthly need for them to keep guard as eternally as they do. We can't even move, let alone try to escape. They're utterly brainless, commanded to guard the entrance with their mandibles, and continuing to guard it accordingly although the need for it is past."

Jim worked almost unthinkingly at his bonds. "If we could kill the wizened, little, big-headed thing, we might have a chance. There'd be nothing left to guide the tribe, no ruling power to direct them against us. We might even ... escape!"

"Through the entire city—with untold thousands of these horrible things on our trail?" objected Denny gloomily.

"But if the untold thousands were dummies, used to being directed in every move by this master brain," urged Jim, "they might just blunder around while we slipped through the lines...."

His words trailed into silence. Escape seemed so improbable as to be hardly worth talking about. Quiet reigned for a long time.

It was broken finally by Dennis.

"Jim," he breathed suddenly, "can you see my legs?"

With difficulty Jim turned his head. "Yes," he said. "Why?"

"It seems to me I can move my left knee—just a little!"

Jim looked more closely. "By heaven!" he exclaimed. "Denny, I think the brown stuff is cracking! Maybe it was never intended to be

more than a temporary bond, to hold an enemy helpless just long enough for it to be killed! Maybe it hardens as it dries so that it loses all resiliency! Maybe—"

He stopped. A faint quivering of the ruler's withered little legs heralded its reawakening consciousness.

"Act helpless!" whispered Denny excitedly, as he too saw that faint stir of awakening. "Don't let the thing get an idea of what we're thinking. Because ... we might get our moment of freedom...."

Both lay relaxed on the floor, eyes half closed. And in the hardening substance that covered them all over like a shell of cloudy brown bakelite, appeared more minute seams as it dried unevenly on the flexible human flesh beneath it. Whether Jim's guess that it was only a temporary bond was correct, or whether it had been developed to harden relentlessly only over unyielding surfaces of horn such as the termites' deadliest enemy, the ants, wear for armor, will never be known. But in a matter of moments it became apparent that it was going to prove too brittle to continue clamping flesh as elastic as that of the two humans!

By now the termite-ruler seemed to have recovered fully from its gargantuan meal. And while, of course, there was no expression of

any kind to be read in the stony, dull eyes, its actions seemed once more to indicate curiosity about these queer, two-legged bugs that wandered in here where they had no business to be.

The team of workers bore it close again, lowered the great head close to Denny. One of the team began chipping at the brown shell where it encased and held immovably to his body Denny's left hand.

A bit of the shell dropped away, exposing the fingers. Delicately, accurately, the worker's normal-sized but powerful mandibles edged the little finger away from the rest—and closed down over it....

"Denny!" burst out Jim, who could just see, out of the corners of his eyes, what was being done. "My God ... Denny...."

Dennis himself said nothing. His face went white as chalk, and great drops of perspiration stood out on his forehead. But no sound came from his tortured lips.

The finger was lifted to the terrible little mouth under the gigantic head. The mouth received it; the worker nuzzled with its mandibles for another finger. The monarch, having tried the taste of this latest addition to his larder, had found it good.

Jim writhed and twisted in his weakening bonds. There was a soft snapping as several now thoroughly dried sections of the brown substance cracked loose. The termite team whirled around; the ruler stared, as though in sudden realization of danger.

More furiously Jim fought his bonds. Dennis was still, recovering slowly from the nauseating weakness that had followed the pain of his mutilated hand. There was less blood flow than might have been expected, due, perhaps, to the fact that the nipping mandibles had pinched some of the encasing shell tight over the wound.

With a dull crack, a square foot of the brown stuff burst from Jim's straining chest. But now the monarch moved to correct the situation.

The two giant soldiers at the doorway started across the great room toward them. Simultaneously, a second of the syringe-headed termites moved to renew the bonds that were being broken.

But the move had come a shade too late. Jim kicked his legs free with a last wild jerk, and staggered to his feet. His arms were still held, in a measure, in spite of his utmost efforts to free them of the clinging brown stuff. But he could, and did, run away from the body of soldiers surrounding the monarch just before the deadly syringe of the first attacking termite could function against him.

The great, flabby head hurtled his way. But he knew what to expect, now. As the slimy brown stream, directed by the agitated termite-ruler, squirted toward him, he leaped alertly aside—leaped again as the head swung around—and saw with savage hope that the monster had exhausted its discharge!

The two soldiers from the doorway closed in on him now. With their apparent command of the situation, the monstrosities with the bung- and syringe-heads closed in more tightly around their monarch. Theirs, evidently to protect that vulnerable big brain, and leave the attacking to others.

Jim fled down between the rows of paralyzed insects. The two great guards from the doorway, mandibles reaching fiercely toward the fugitive, followed. And there commenced, there in that deep-buried insect hell, a chase for life.

Chapter 8: The Coming of the Soldiers

For a moment Jim was handicapped in fleetness and agility by the fact that his arms were hampered. But the two hideous guards, though each was a dozen times more powerful than any man its size, were handicapped in a chase, too—by the very weight of their enormous mandibles. In their thundering chase after Jim, they resembled nothing so much as two powerful but clumsy battleships chasing a relatively puny but much more agile destroyer.

Behind the great bulk of a paralyzed June bug, Jim halted for a fraction while he tore his arms at last free of the clinging brown stuff. The guards rushed around the June bug at him.

He leaped for the row of hanging cisterns; and there, while he dodged from one to another of the loathsome vats, he thought over a plan that had come to his racing mind. It wasn't much of a plan, and it seemed utterly futile in the face of the odds against him. But he had boasted, before starting this mad adventure, that Man's wits were superior to any bug's. It was time now to see if his boast had been an empty one.

He feinted toward the far end of the laboratory. The guards, acting always as if they had a dozen eyes instead of none, rushed to prevent

this, cutting across his path and closing the exit with clashing jaws.

Jim raced toward the spot where Denny lay. This was within twenty yards of the spot where, behind his ring of guards, the big-brained ruler now cowered. But, while one of the syringe-monsters sent a brown stream blindly toward the leaping, shifting man, no other attacking move was made. The soldiers remained chained to their posts. Jim retrieved his spear—and the first part of his almost hopeless plan had succeeded!

It was good, the feel of that smooth steel. He balanced the ponderous weapon lightly. An ineffective thing against the plates of living armor covering the scissor-mandibles. But it was not against them—at least not directly—that he was planning to use it now!

Once more he darted toward the living cisterns. The soldiers followed close behind.

Under the bulging abdomen of the termite containing the reddish acid, Jim halted as though to make a defiant last stand against the guards. They stopped, too, then began to advance on him from either side, more slowly, like two great cats stalking a mouse.

Muscles bunched for a lightning-quick move, eyes narrowed to mere

slits as he calculated distances and fractions of a second. Jim stood there beneath the great acid vat. The mandibles were almost within slicing distance now.

The guards opened wide their tremendous jaws, forming two halves of a deadly horn circle that moved swiftly to encompass him. They leaped....

With barely a foot left him, Jim darted back, then poised his spear and shot it straight toward the bulging, live sack that held the acid above the guards.

The acid spurted from the spear hole. Jim clenched his fists and unconsciously held his breath till his chest ached, as the scarlet liquid spread over the great hulks that twisted and fought in ponderous frenzy to untangle legs and antennae and mandibles from the snarl their collision had made of them.

The acid bit through steel and human flesh. On the other hand, it had not harmed the horny flipper of the termite worker that had flicked it onto the garden slug. Did that mean that the flipper was immunized to the stuff, like the lining of the stomach, which is unharmed by acids powerful enough to decompose other organic master? Or did it mean that all horn was untouched by it?

He groaned aloud. The two great insects had drawn apart by now, and had sprung from under the shattered acid vat. Again they were on the trail. The maneuver had been fruitless! The chase was on again, which meant—since he could not hope to elude the blind but ably directed creatures forever—that all hope was lost....

Then he shouted with triumph. A massive foreleg dropped from one of the guards, to crash to the floor. Whether or not the acid was able to set on the horny exterior of the termites, it was as deadly to their soft interiors as to any other sort of flesh! The acid had found the joint of that foreleg and had eaten through it as hot iron sinks through butter!

Still the injured creature came on, with Jim ever retreating, twisting and dodging from one side of the huge room to the other, leaping over the smaller paralyzed insects and darting behind the larger carcasses. But now the thing's movements were very slow—as were the movements of its companion.

Another leg fell hollowly to the floor, like an abandoned piece of armor; and then two at once from the second termite.

Both stopped, shuddering convulsively. The agony of those two enormous, dumb and blind things must have been inconceivable.

The acid was by now spending its awful force in their vitals, having seeped down through every joint and crevice in their living armor. They were hardly more than huge shells of horn, kept alive only by their unbelievable vitality.

One more feeble lunge both made in concert, toward the puny adversary that had outwitted them. Then both, as though at a spoken command, stopped dead still. Next instant they crashed to the floor, shaking it in their fall.

For a second Jim could only stand there and gaze at their monstrous bodies. His plan had succeeded beyond all belief; and realization of this success left him dazed for an instant. But it was only for an instant.

Recovering himself, he raced to the acid vat to recover the spear he'd punctured it with—only three feet of it was left: the rest had been eaten away by the powerful stuff—and then wheeled to help Denny.

By now the crackling brown stuff had fallen from Denny, too—enough, at least for him to struggle to his feet and hasten its cracking by tearing at it with partially loosened hands. As Jim reached him, he freed himself entirely save for the last few bits that stuck to him as bits of shell cling to a newborn chick.

They turned together toward the corner where the termite-ruler was cowering behind the guards that surrounded it. Intellect to a degree phenomenal for an insect, this thing might have; but of the blind fierce courage possessed by its subjects, it assuredly had none! In proof of this was the fact that when the half dozen specialized soldiers ringing it round might have leaped to the aid of the two clumsy door guards and probably have ended the uneven fight in a few minutes, the craven monarch had ordered them to stay at their guard-posts rather than take the risk of remaining unguarded and defenseless for a single moment! Increasing intelligence apparently had resulted (as only too often it does in the world of men) in decreasing bravery!

An attack on the thing, closely guarded as it was, seemed hopeless. Those enormous, flat-topped heads held ready to present their steely surfaces as shields! Those armored terrors with the syringe-heads—one of which still held a full cargo of the terrible brown fluid that at a touch could bind the limbs of the men once more in the straitjacket embrace! What could the two do against that barrier?

Nevertheless, without a word being spoken, and without a second's hesitation, Jim and Denny advanced on the bristling ring—and the heart of termite power it enclosed. Not only was the slimmest of hopes of escape rendered impossible while the super-termite lived to

direct its subjects against them—but also they had a reckoning to collect from the thing if they could....

Denny glanced down at his hand, from which slow red drops still oozed.

At their approach, the guarding ring shifted so that the soldier whose head was still bulging with the brown liquid, faced them. The two men stopped, warily. They must draw the sting from that monster before they dared try to come closer.

Jim feinted, leaping in and to one side. The guard turned with him, moved forward a bit as though to discharge a brown stream at him—but held its fire. Jim moved still closer, then leaped crabwise to one side as the brain behind the guards telepathed in a panic for its blind minion to release some of its ammunition. The flood missed Jim only by inches.

Denny took his turn at gambling with death. He shouted ringingly, and ran a dozen steps straight at the monster that was the principal menace. At the last moment he flung himself aside as Jim had done—but this time the stream was not to be drawn.

Still most of the deadly liquid was left; the thing's head bulged with

it. And no real move could be made till that head was somehow emptied.

"Your spear!" panted Denny, who was armed only with the three-foot club which was all that was left of the spear that had entered the acid bag.

Jim nodded. As he had done under the acid vat, he drew it back for a throw—and shot it forward with all the power of his magnificent shoulders.

The glittering length of steel slashed into the flabby, living syringe. A fountain of molasseslike liquid gushed out.

The move had not been elaborately reasoned out; it had been a natural; almost instinctive one, simply a blow struck for the purpose of draining the dread reservoir of its sticky contents. But the results—as logical and inevitable as they were astounding and unforeseen—were such that the move could not have been wiser had all the gods of war conspired to help the two men with shrewd advice.

The searching spear-point had evidently found the brain behind the syringe of the thing; for it reared in an agony that could only have been that of approaching death, and ran amuck.

No longer did the ruling brain that crouched behind it have the power to guide its movements, it seemed. The telepathic communications had been snapped with that crashing spear-point. It charged blindly, undirected, in havoc-wreaking circles. And in an instant the whole aspect of the battle had been changed.

The ring of living armor presented by the other soldiers was broken as the enormous, dying termite charged among them. Furthermore, the fountain of thick brown liquid exuding from its head, smeared the limbs of the soldiers the blind, crazed thing touched, as well as its own.

In thirty seconds or less the wounded giant was down, still alive, but wriggling feebly in a binding sheath of its own poison. And with it, so smeared as to be utterly out of the struggle, were three of the others.

Quick to seize the advantage, Jim leaped to wrench his spear from the conquered giant's head. And side by side he and Denny started again the charge against the ruler's guards, which, while still mighty in defense, were by their very nature unable to attack.

Three of these guards were left. Two of them were the freaks with the great, armored, bung-heads—and the soft and vulnerable bodies.

The third was of the syringe type, with invulnerable horn breastplate and body armor—but with a head that, now its fatal liquid was exhausted, was useless in battle.

"Take 'em one by one," grunted Jim, setting the example by swinging his spear at the body of the nearest guard. "We'll get at that damn thing with the overgrown brains yet!"

His spear clanged on iron-hard horn as the termite swung its unwieldy head to protect its unarmored body. The force of the contact tore the spear from his hand; but almost before it could drop, he had recovered it. And in that flashing instant Denny had darted in at the side of the thing and half disembowelled it with a thrust of the acid-blunted point of his three-foot bar, and a lightninglike wrench up and to the side.

"Only two left!" cried Jim, stabbing at the flabby head of the syringe-monster that loomed a foot above his own head. "We'll do it yet, Denny!"

But at that moment a clashing and rattling at the doorway suddenly burst in on the din of the eery fight. Both men stared at each other with surrender in their eyes.

"Now we are all through!" yelled Jim, almost calm in his complete resignation. "But we'll try to reach that devilish thing before we're doomed!"

In the heat of the swift, deadly fray, the two men had forgotten for the moment, that these few soldiers ranged against them were not all the fighters in the mound city. But the quaking intellect they were striving to reach had not forgotten! At some time early in the one-sided struggle it had sent out a soundless call to arms. And now, in the doorway, struggling to force through in numbers too great for the entrance's narrow limits, were the first of the soldier hordes the ruler had commanded to report here for fight duty. And behind them, as far as the eye could see, the tunnel was blocked by yet others marching to kill the creatures that menaced their leader. The abortive effort at escape, it seemed, was doomed.

The strength of desperation augmented Jim's naturally massive muscular power. He whirled his spear high over his head, clubwise. Disdaining now to try for a thrust behind and to one side of the great conical head that faced him, he brought the bar down with sledge-hammer force on the horn-plated thing.

As though it had been a willow wand, the big bar whistled through the air in its descent. With a crack that could be heard even above the

crashing mandibles of the soldiers pouring across the hundred-yard floor toward the scene of battle, the bar landed on the living buckler of a head.

The head could not have been actually harmed. But the brain behind it was patently jarred and numbed for an instant. The great creature stood still, its head weaving slowly back and forth. Jim swung his improvised club in another terrific arc....

Denny darted around behind the ponderously wheeling bulk of the last remaining guard to the team of worker termites. He, too, swung his arms high—over the bloated brain-bag that cowered down between the backs that bore it—leaping here and there to avoid the blunt mandibles of the burden bearers. He, too, brought down his three-foot length of bar with all the force he could muster, the sight of that swollen, hideous head atop the withered remnants of termite body lending power to his muscles.

And now, just as the nearest of the soldiers reached out for them, the termite-ruler lay helpless on the backs of its living crutches, with its attenuated body quivering convulsively, and its balloonlike, fragile head cleft almost in two halves. It was possible that even that terrific injury might not be fatal to a thing so great and flexible of brain, and so divorced from the ills as well as the powers of the flesh. But for

the moment at least it was helpless, an inert mass on the patient backs of the termite team.

"To the acid vat," snapped Jim. "We'll make our last stand there."

Dodging the nearest snapping mandibles, Denny ran beside his companion to where the termite, dead now, with its distended abdomen deflated and the last of the acid trickling from the hole caused by Jim's spear, still hung head down from the ceiling.

The powerful ruler of this vast underground city was crushed—for the moment at least. But the fate of the two humans seemed no less certain than it had before. For now the huge chamber was swarming with the giant soldiers. In numbers so great that they crashed and rattled against each other as they advanced, they marched toward the place where the broken monarch still quivered in weak convulsions—and behind which, near the acid vat, the two men crouched.

Chapter 9: The Cannibalistic Orgy

At first Jim and Dennis could only comprehend the numbers of the foe—could only grip their bars and resolve to die as expensively as possible. But then, as a few seconds elapsed during which they were amazingly not charged by the insects, they began to notice the actions of the things.

They were swarming so thickly about the spot where their leader had fallen that all the men could see was their struggling bodies. And the movements of these soldiers were puzzling in the extreme.

The things seemed, of a sudden, to be fighting among themselves! At any rate, they were not hurrying to attack the unique, two-legged bugs by the deflated acid bag.

Instead, they seemed to be having a monstrous attack of colic as they rolled about their vanquished monarch. With their antennae weaving wildly, and their deadly jaws crashing open and shut along the floor, they were fairly wallowing about that section. And the crowding ring of soldiers surrounding the wallowers were fighting like mad things to shove them out of place.

Over each other they struggled and rolled, those on the top and sides

of the solid mass pressing to get in and down. In stark astonishment, the two men watched the inexplicable conflict—and wondered why they had not already been rushed and sliced to pieces by the steely, ten-foot mandibles.

In Dennis' mind, as he watched, wide-eyed, the crazy battle of the monsters around the spot, a memory struggled to be recognized. He had seen something vaguely like this before, on the upper earth, what was it?

Abruptly he remembered what it was. And with the recollection—and all the possibilities of deliverance it suggested—he shouted aloud and clutched Jim's arm with trembling fingers.

That scene of carnage suggested to his mind the day he had seen a cloud of vultures fighting over the carcass of a horse in the desert. The mad pushing, the slashing and rending of each other as all fought for the choice morsels of dead flesh! It was identical.

The termites, he knew, were deliberately cannibalistic. A race so efficiently run, so ingenious in letting nothing of possible value go to waste, would almost inevitably be trained to consume the bodies of dead fellow beings. And now—now ...

The gruesome monarch, that thing of monstrous brain and almost nonexistent body, was no longer the monarch. It was either dead, or utterly helpless. In that moment of death or helplessness—was it being fallen upon and eaten by the horde of savage things it normally ruled? Did the termite hordes make a practice of devouring their helpless and worn-out directing brains as it was known they devoured all their worn-out, no longer potent queens?

It certainly looked as if that was what the leaderless horde of soldiers was doing here! Or, at any rate, trying to do; accustomed to being fed by the workers, with mandibles too huge to permit of normal self-feeding, they would probably be able to hardly more than strain clumsily after the choice mass beneath them and absorb it in morsels so small as to be more a source of baffled madness than of satisfaction.

Which latter conjecture seemed certainly to support the theory that the soldier termites were not trying to help their fallen monarch, but were trampling and slashing it to death in an effort to devour it!

"Quick!" snapped Denny, realizing that it was a chance that must not be overlooked; that even if he were wrong, they might as well die trying to get to the doorway as be crushed to death where they stood. "Run to the exit!"

"Through that nightmare army?" said Jim, astounded. "Why, we haven't a chance of making it!"

"Come, I say!" Denny dragged him a few feet by main force. "I hope—I believe—we won't be bothered. If a pair of jaws crushes us, it will probably be by accident and not design—the brutes are too busy to bother about us now."

Still gazing at Denny as though he thought him insane, Jim tarried no longer. He began to edge his way, by Denny's side, toward the distant door.

In a very few feet Denny's theory was proved right. None of the gigantic insects tried to attack them. But even so that journey to the exit, a distance of more than the length of a football field, was a ghastly business.

On all sides the giant, armored bodies rushed and shoved. The clash of horn breastplates against armored legs, of mandibles and granitic heads against others of their kind, was ear-splitting. The monsters, in their effort to indulge the cannibalistic instinct—at once so horrible to the two humans, and so fortunate for them—were completely heedless of their own welfare and everything else.

Like giant ice cakes careening in the break-up of a flood, they crunched against each other; and like loose ice cakes in a flood, every now and then one was forced clear up off its feet by the surrounding rush, to fall back to the floor a moment later with a resounding crash.

It would seem an impossibility for any two living things as relatively weak and soft as men to find a way through such a maelstrom. Yet—Jim and Denny did.

Several times one or the other was knocked down by a charging, blind monster. Once Denny was almost caught and crushed between two of the rock-hard things. Once Jim only saved himself from a pair of terrific, snapping jaws that rushed his way, by using his short spear as a pole and vaulting up and over them onto the monster's back, where he was allowed to slide off unheeded as the maddened thing continued in its rush. But they reached the door!

There they gazed fearfully down the corridor, sure there would be hundreds more of the soldiers crowding to answer the last call of their ruling, master mind. But only a few stragglers were to be seen, and these, called to the grim feast by some sort of instinct or perhaps some sense of smell, rushed past with as little attempt to attack them as the rest.

The two men ran down the tunnel, turned a corner into an ascending tunnel they remembered from their trip in, raced up this, hearts pounding wildly with the growing hope of actually escaping from the mound with their lives—and then halted. Jim cursed bitterly, impotently.

Branching off from this second tunnel, all looking exactly alike and all identical in the degree of their upward slant, were five more tunnels! Like spokes of a wheel, they radiated out and up; and no man could have told which to take. They stopped, in despair, as this phase of their situation, unthought of till now, was brought home to them.

"God! The place is a labyrinth! How can we ever find, our way out?" groaned Jim.

"All we can do is keep going on—and up," said Denny, with a shake of his head.

At random, they picked the center of the five underground passages, and walked swiftly along it. And now they began to come in contact again with the normal life of the vast mound city.

Here soldiers were patrolling up and down with seeming

aimlessness, while near-by workers labored at shoring up collapsing sections of tunnel wall, or at carrying staggering large loads of food from one unknown place to another. But now there seemed to be a certain lack of system, of coordination, in the movements of the termites.

"Damned funny these soldiers aren't joining in the rush with the rest to get to the laboratory in answer to the command of the ruler," said Jim, warily watching lest one of the gigantic guards end the queer truce and rush them. "And look at the way the workers move—just running aimlessly back and forth with their loads. I don't get it."

"I think I do," said Denny. He pitched his voice low, and signed for Jim to walk more slowly, on tiptoe. "These soldiers aren't with the rest because only a certain number was called. It's simple mathematics: if all the soldiers in the mound tried to get in that room back there where the ruler was, they'd get jammed immovably in the tunnels near-by. The king-termite, with all the astounding reasoning power it must have had, called only as many as could crowd in, in order to avoid a jam in which half the soldiers in the city might be killed.

"As for the aimless way the workers are moving—you forget they haven't a leader any more. They are working by habit and instinct

only, carrying burdens, building new wall sections, according to blind custom alone, and regardless of whether the carrying and building are necessary."

"In that case," sighed Jim, "we'd have a good chance to getting out of here—if we could only find the path!"

"I'm sure we can find the path, and I'm sure we can get out," said Denny confidently. "For in a mound of this size there must be many paths leading to the upper world, and there is no reason—with the omnipotent ruling brain dead and eaten—why any of these creatures should try to stop or fight us."

Which was good logic—but which left entirely out of consideration that one factor which man so often forgets but is still inevitably governed by: the unpredictable whims of fate. For on their way out they were to blunder into the one place in all the mound which was—death or no death of the ruling power—absolutely deadly to them; and were to arouse the terrible race about them to frenzies that were based, not on any reasoned thought processes, or which in any case they were of themselves incapable, but on the more grim and fanatic foundations of unreasoned, primal, outraged instinct.

Chapter 10: The Termite Queen

The slope of the upward-leading tunnels had become less noticeable, from which fact the two men reasoned hopefully that they were near ground level. And now they began to see termite workers bearing a new sort of burden: termite eggs, sickly looking lumps that had only too obviously been newly laid.

A file of workers approached. In a long line, each with an egg, looking for all the world like a file of human porters bearing the equipment of a jungle expedition. Slowly, the things moved—carefully—bound for some such vast incubator as the one Jim and Dennis had stumbled into some hours before.

"We want to go in the opposite direction from them," Denny whispered. "They're coming from the Queen termite's den—and we don't want to blunder in there!"

They about-faced, and moved with the workers till they came to the nearest passage branching away from the avenue on which the file marched. Denny dabbed at his forehead.

"Lucky those things came in time to warn us," he said. "From what little science knows of the termites, I can guess that the Queen's

chamber would be a chamber of horrors for us!"

They walked on, searching for another main avenue, such as the one they had left; which might be an artery leading to the outside world. But they had not gone far when they were again forced to change their course.

Ahead of them, marching in regular formation, came a band of soldiers larger than the usual squad. They filled the tunnel so compactly that the two men did not dare try to squeeze past them.

"Here," whispered Jim, pointing to a side tunnel.

They stole down it; but in a moment it developed that their choice had been an unlucky one: the crash of the heavy, armored bodies continued to follow them. The soldiers had turned down that tunnel, too.

"Are they after us again?" whispered Jim.

Denny shrugged. There was still a remnant of the disguising termite-paste on their bodies to fool the insects. It seemed impossible that the ruling brain behind them had survived the cannibalistic rush and taken command of the mound again? But—was anything impossible

in this world of terror?

Steadily the two were forced to retreat before the measured advance of the guards. And now the tunnel they were in broadened—and abruptly ended in another of the vast chambers that seemed to dot the mound city at fairly regular intervals. But this one appeared to be humming with activity, if the noise coming from within it was any indication.

The two passed at the threshold, dismayed at the evidence of super-activity in the chamber ahead of them. But while they paused there, the soldiers behind them rounded a corner. They could not go back. There were no more of the opportune side entrances to dodge into. All they could do was retreat still farther—into the vast room before them.

They did so, reluctantly, moving step by step as the marching band behind them crashed rhythmically along. But once inside the great chamber, they shrank back against the wall with whispered imprecations at the final, desperate trick fate had played on them.

Their path of retreat, leading around labyrinthine corners and by-passages, had doubled back on them without their having been aware of it. They were in the very place Dennis had wished so much to

avoid—the chamber of the Queen termite!

High overhead, almost lost in the dimness, was the arching roof. Around the circular walls were innumerable tunnel entrances. At each of these stood a termite guard—picked soldiers half again as large as the ordinary soldiers, with mandibles so great and heavy that it was a marvel the insects could support them.

Hurrying here and there were worker termites. And these were centering their activities on an object as fearful as anything that ever haunted the mind of a madman.

Up and back, this object loomed, half filling the enormous room like a zeppelin in a hangar. And like a zeppelin—a blunt, bloated zeppelin—the object was circular and tapered at both ends. But the zeppelin was a living thing—a horrible travesty of life.

At the end facing the two men was a tiny dot of a head, almost lost in the whitish mass of the enormous body. Around this a cluster of worker termites pressed, giving nourishment to the insatiable mouth. At the far end of the vast shape another cluster of termites thronged. And these bore away a constant stream of termite eggs—that dripped from the zeppelinlike, crammed belly at the rate of almost one a second.

Her Highness, the Queen—two hundred tons of flabby, greasy flesh, immobile, able only to eat and lay eggs.

"My God," whispered Jim. Utterly unstrung, he gazed at that mighty, loathsome mass, listening to its snapping jaws as it took on the tons of nourishment needed for its machinelike functioning. "My God!"

Instinctively he whirled to run back through the entrance they had come through. But now, with the admittance of the soldier band that had pressed them in here, the entrance was guarded again by one of the giants permanently stationed there.

"What had we better do?" he breathed to Denny.

Dennis stared helplessly around. He had noticed that the termites in here were acting differently from the others they had encountered since leaving the lair of the termite-ruler. These were moving uneasily, restlessly, stopping now and again with waving, inquisitive antennae. It looked ominously as though they had sensed the presence of intruders here in the sanctum where their race was born, and were dimly wondering what to do.

"We might try each tunnel mouth, one by one, on the chance that we can find a careless guard somewhere," Dennis muttered at last. "But

for heaven's sake don't touch any of the brutes! I think that at the slightest signal the whole mob of the things would spring on us and tear us to pieces. Most of the paste is rubbed off by now."

Jim nodded. He had no desire to brush against one of the colossal, special guard of soldiers if he could help it, or against any of the relatively weak workers that might give the signal of alarm.

Stealing silently along among the blind, instinctively agitated monsters, they worked a circuitous way from one exit to another. But nowhere did any chance of getting out of the place present itself. Across each tunnel mouth was placed one of the enormous guards, twelve-foot mandibles opened like a waiting steel trap.

Halfway around the tremendous room they went, without mishap, but also without finding an exit they could slip through. And then, in the rear of the vast bulk of the Queen, it happened.

One of the worker termites, bearing an egg in its mandibles, faltered, and dropped its precious burden. The thing fell squashily to the floor within a foot of Jim, who had brushed against the wall to let the burden bearer pass without touching him. Jim, attempting to sidestep away from the spot, as the worker put out blind feelers, to search for the dropped egg, lost his balance for a fraction of a second—and

stepped squarely on the nauseous ovoid!

Frantically he stepped out of the mess he had created, and the two stood staring at each other, holding their breaths, fearful of what might result from that accidental destruction of budding termite life.

The worker, feeling about for its burden, came in contact with the shattered egg. It drew back abruptly, as though in perplexity: soft and tough, the egg should not have broken merely from being dropped. Then it felt again....

For a few seconds nothing whatever occurred. The two breathed again, and began to hope that their fears had been meaningless. But that was not to be.

The worker termite finally began to rush back and forth, antennae whipping from side to side, patently trying to discover the cause of the tragedy. And Jim and Dennis rushed back and forth, too, engaged in a deadly game of blind man's buff as they tried to avoid the questing antennae—which, registering sensation by touch instead of smell, was not to be fooled by the last disappearing traces of the termite-paste.

The game did not last long. One of the feelers whipped against

Dennis' legs—and hell broke loose!

The worker emitted a sound like the shriek of a circular saw gone wild. And on the instant all its fellows, and the gigantic guards at the exits, stiffened to rigid attention.

Again came the roaring sound, desolate, terrible, at once a call to arms and a funeral dirge. And now every termite in the dim, cavernous chamber began the battle dance Jim and Dennis had seen performed by the termite guard when it was confronted by the horde of ants. Not moving their feet, they commenced to sway back and forth, while long, rhythmic shudders convulsed their grotesque bodies. It was a formal declaration of war against whatever mad things had dared invade the fountain-spring of their race.

Jim and Dennis leaped toward the nearest exit, determined to take any risk on the chance of escaping from the horde of things now aware of their presence and ravening for their blood. But in this exit—the only one accessible to them now—the guard had commenced the jaw-clashing that closed openings more efficiently than steel plates could have done. An attempt to pass those enormous mandibles presented no risk; what it presented was suicide.

By now the dread war dance had stopped. All the termites in the

chamber were converging slowly toward the spot where the termite had given the rasping alarm. Even the workers, ordinarily quick to run from danger, were advancing instead of retreating. Of all living things in the room only the Queen, unable to move her mountainous bulk, did not join in the slow, sure move to slash to pieces the hated trespassers.

Again the questing antennae of the worker that had given the alarm touched one of the men. With a deafening rasp it sprang toward them, blind but terrible.

Dennis swung his steel club. It clashed against the scarcely less hard mandibles of the worker, not harming them, but seeming to daze the insect a little.

Jim followed the act by plunging his longer spear into the soft body. No words were wasted by the two men. It was a fight for life again, with the odds even more heavily against them than they had been in the ruler's lair.

Behind them, blocking the only exit they had any chance whatever of reaching, the guard continued its clashing mandible duty. If only it, too, would join in the blind search for the trespassers, thus giving them an opportunity of slipping out! But the monster gave no

indication of doing such a thing.

Another worker termite flung its bulk at them. Its mandibles, tiny in comparison with those of the great guards but still capable of slicing either of the men in two, snapped perilously close to Jim's body. There was a second's concerted action: Dennis' club lashed against the thing's head, Jim's spear tore into the vulnerable body.

Ringing them round, the main band of the termites moved closer. They moved slowly, in no hurry, apparently only too sure the enemy could not possibly get away from them. And the two worker termites killed were mere incidents compared to the avalanche of mandible and horn that would be on them in about thirty seconds.

However, the two dead termites gave Jim a sudden inspiration. He glanced from the carcasses to the mechanically moving, deadly jaws of the guard that barred the nearest exit.

"Denny," he panted, "feed it this."

He pointed first toward the nearest carcass and then toward the rock-crushing, steadily snapping jaws.

"I'll try to hold the bridge here—"

But Dennis was on his way, catching Jim's idea with the first gesture.

He stooped down, and caught the dead termite by two of its legs. Close to two hundred pounds the mass weighed; but strength is an inconstant thing, and increases or decreases according to the vital needs of life-preservation.

Clear of the floor, Denny lifted the bulk, and with its repulsive weight clasped in his arms, he advanced toward the mighty guard.

Behind him, Jim glared desperately at the third termite that was about to attack. No feeble worker this, but one of the most colossal of all the Queen's guard.

Towering over Jim, mandibles wide open and ready to smash over its prey, the giant reared toward him. And behind him came the main body of the horde. It was painfully evident that the clash with the lone soldier would be the last single encounter. After that the hundreds of the herd would be on the men, tearing and trampling them to bits.

During the thing's steady, inexorable approach, which had taken far less time than that required to tell of it, Jim had clenched his fingers around his spear and calculated as to the best way to hold the

monster off for just the few seconds needed by Denny to try the plan suggested.

The monster ended its slow advance in a lunge, that, for all its great bulk, was lightning quick. But a shade more quickly, Jim sidestepped the terrible mandibles, leaped back along the armored body till he had reached the unarmored rear, and thrust his spear home with all his force.

The hideous guard reared with pain and rage. But this was no worker termite, to be killed with a thrust. As though nothing had happened, the huge hulk wheeled around. The mandibles crashed shut with deafening force over the space Jim had occupied but an instant before.

And now the inner circle of the multiple ring of death was within a few yards. Jim leaped to put himself behind the living barrier of the attacking soldier. But it was only a matter of a few seconds now, before he and Denny would be caught in the blind bull charges of the wounded soldier or by the surrounding ring of maddened termites.

"Denny?" he shouted imploringly over his shoulder, not daring to take his eyes off the danger in front of him.

"Soon!" he heard Dennis pant.

The entomologist had got almost up to the twelve-foot jaws that closed the exit. He paused a moment, gathering strength. Then he heaved the soft mass of the dead termite into the clashing mandibles.

"Jim!" he cried, as the burden left his arms.

Jim turned, raced the few yards intervening between the ring of death and the doorway. Together they waited to see if their forlorn hope would work....

It could not have lasted more than a second, that wait, yet it seemed at least ten minutes. And then both cried aloud—and crouched to repeat the maneuver that had saved them from death when they had first entered this insect hell.

For the enormous, smashing jaws had caught the body of the worker termite with ferocious eagerness, and were worrying the inanimate carcass with terrible force.

The great jaws were occupied just an instant before the monster sensed that it was one of his own kind that he was mangling so thoroughly. But in that instant Jim had slid on his chest along the

floor past the armored head and shoulders, and Dennis had leaped to follow.

But Dennis was not to get off so lightly.

The charging ring of termites had closed completely in by now. The snapping mandibles of the nearest one were up to him. They opened; shut.

They caught Denny on the back swing, knocking him six feet away instead of slicing him wide open. Denny got to his feet almost before he had landed; but between him and the exit was the bulk of the termite that had felled him, and in the doorway the guard had dropped the body it was slashing to bits, and had recommenced its slashing jaw movements.

"Jim! For God's sake...." shrieked the doomed man.

Beside himself, he managed to hurdle clear over the massive insect between him and the doorway. But there he stopped, with the guard's great mandibles fanning the air less than a foot from him. "Jim!" came the agonized cry again.

And behind the gigantic termite, in the tunnel, with at least a

possibility of safety lying open before him, Jim heard and answered the call.

Savagely he plunged his spear into the unarmored rear of the guard, tore it out, thrust again....

The thing heaved and struggled to turn, shaking the tunnel with its rasping anger—and taking its attention at last away from the duty of closing that tunnel mouth.

With no room to run and slide, Denny fell to the floor and commenced to creep through the narrow space between the trampling guard's bulk and the wall. He felt his left arm and shoulder go numb as he was crushed for a fleeting instant against the wood partition. Broken, he thought dimly. The collar-bone. But still he kept moving on.

He moved in a haze of pain and weakness. He did not see that he had passed clear of the menacing hulk—that his slow crawling had been multiplied in results by the fact that the termite guard had finally, stopped trying to turn in the narrow passage and had rushed ahead into the Queen's chamber, to turn there and come dashing back. He did not see that Jim was finally disarmed and completely helpless, with his spear buried beyond recovery in the bulk of the maddened

guard. He hardly felt Jim's supporting arm as it was thrust under him, to half drag and half lead him along the tunnel away from the horde behind.

He only knew that they were moving forward, with the din behind them—as the grim cohorts of the Queen fought to all crowd ahead in the narrow passage at once—keeping pace with them in spite of all they could do to make haste. And he only knew that finally Jim gave a great shout, and that suddenly they were standing under a rent in a tunnel roof through which sunlight was pouring.

Several worker termites were laboring to close up the chink and cut off the sunlight; but these, not being of the band outraged by the destruction of the egg in the Queen's chamber, moved swiftly away as the two men advanced.

Jim reached up and tore with frantic hands at the crumbling edges of the rotten wood overhead. Ignoring his gashed and bleeding fingers, he widened the breach till he, could pull himself up through it. Then he reached down, caught Denny's sound arm, and raised him by main strength.

They were in the clear air of the outer world once more, on a terrace in the mound low down near its base.

Jim and Dennis half slid, half fell down the near terrace slope to the jungle of grass stalks beneath. And there Denny bit his lip sharply, struggled against the weakness overcoming him—and fainted.

Jim caught him up over his shoulder, and staggered forward through the jungle. Behind, the termites poured out through the broken wall in an enraged flood, braving even the sunlight and outer air in their chase of the invaders that had, profaned the Queen's chamber.

"Matt!" shouted Jim with all the strength of his lungs, forgetting that his voice could not be heard by normal human ears. "Matt!"

But if Matthew Breen could not hear, he could see. The slightest inattention at his guard duty at that second would have resulted in two deaths. But he was on the alert.

Jim saw the sun blotted out swiftly, saw a huge, pinkish-gray wall swoop down between him and Denny, and the deadly horde of termites pursuing them. Then he saw another pinkish-gray wall, in which was set something—a shallow, regular, hollowed plateau—that looked familiar. The patty-dish in which he and Denny had been carried to this place of death and horror.

Jim knew he could not clamber into that great plateau; he was too

exhausted. But the necessity was spared him.

The patty-dish scooped down under him, uprooting huge trees, digging up square yards of earth all around him. He was flung from his feet to roll helplessly beside the unconscious Dennis, as men and earth and all were shifted from the dish's rim to its center.

Like gigantic express elevator the dish soared dizzily up in the tremendous hand that held it, over the vast pile of the mound city, over all the surrounding landscape, and was borne back toward Matt's automobile—and toward the laboratory where the bulk of their bodies waited, in protoplasmic form, in the dome of the glass bell.

Chapter 11: Back to Normal

"I think," said Jim, loading his pipe, "that now I really will settle down. No other adventures could seem like much after the one"—he repressed a shiver—"we've just passed through."

"And I think," said Dennis, following his own line of thought, "that as far the world of science goes, my exploring has been for nothing. Try to tell sober scientists of the specially evolved, huge-brained thing that rules the termite tribe and forms and holds the marvelous organization it has? Try to tell them—now that Matt has to stubbornly decided to keep secret his work with element eighty-five—that we were reduced to a quarter of an inch in height, and that we went through a mound and saw at first hand the things we describe? They'd shut me in an asylum!"

The two were sitting in Denny's apartment, once more conventionally clothed, and again their normal five feet eleven, and six feet two.

The reassembling of Denny's body had done odd things. Jim had set the broken bone with rough skill before stepping under the glass bell; and the fracture had been healed automatically by the growing deposit of protoplasmic substance resulting when Matt threw his

switch.

But Denny's missing finger had baffled the reversing process. With no tiny pattern to form around, the former substance of his finger had simply gathered in a shapeless knob of flesh and bone like a tumorous growth sprouting from his hand. It would have to be amputated.

But the marvels performed under Matthew Breen's glass bell were far secondary to the two men. The things they had recently seen and undergone, and the possibility of telling folks about them, occupied their attention exclusively.

"Then you're not going to write a monograph on the real nature of termites, as you'd planned?" Jim asked Denny.

Denny shrugged dispiritedly. "People would take it for a joke instead of a scientific treatise if I did," he said.

Jim puffed reflectively at his pipe. A thought had come, to him that seemed to hold certain elements of possibility.

"Why not do this," he suggested: "Write it up first as a straight story, and see if people will believe it. Then, if they do, you can rewrite it

as scientific fact."

And eventually they decided to do just that. And—here is their story.

147 Priestess of the Flame by Sewell Peaslee Wright

Commander John Hanson recounts the extraordinary story of Liane, Priestess of the Flame.

Aproximate word count: 11,400

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

I have been rather amused by the protests which have come to me regarding the "disparaging" comments I have made, in previous tales of the Special Patrol Service, regarding women. The rather surprising thing about it is that the larger proportion of these have come from men. Young men, of course.

Now, as a matter of fact, a careful search has failed to reveal to me any very uncomplimentary remarks. I have suggested, I believe, that women have, in my experience, shown a sad lack of ability to understand mechanical contrivances. Perhaps I have pictured some few of them as frivolous and shallow. If I have been unfair, I wish now to make humble apology.

I am not, as some of my correspondents have indicated, a bitter old man, who cannot remember his youth. I remember it very well indeed, else these tales would not be forthcoming. And women have their great and proper place, even in a man's universe.

Some day, perhaps, the mood will seize me to write of my own love affair. That surprises you? You smile to think that old John Hanson, lately a commander of the Special Patrol Service, now retired, should have had a love affair? Well, 'twas many years ago, before these eyes lost their fire, and before these brown, skinny hands wearied as quickly as they weary now....

But I have known many women—good women and bad; great women and women of small souls; kindly women, and women fierce as wild bears are fierce. Divinity has dealt lavishly with women; has given them an emotional range far greater than man's. They can sink to depths unknown to masculinity; they can rise to heights of love and sacrifice before which man can only stand with reverently bowed head and marvel.

This is a story of a woman—one of those no man could know and not remember. I make no apologies for her; I pay her no homage. I record only a not inaccurate account of an adventure of my youth, in which she played a part; I leave to you the task of judging her.

We were some three days out from Base, as I recall it, on a mission which promised a welcome interlude in a monotonous sequence of routine patrols. I was commander then of the *Ertak*, one of the crack ships of the Service, and assisted by the finest group of officers, I believe, that any man ever had under him.

I was standing a watch in the navigating room with Hendricks, my junior officer, when Correy brought us the amazing news.

Correy was my first officer, a square-jawed fighting man if one ever breathed, a man of action, such as these effete times do not produce. His eyes were fairly blazing as he came into the room, and his generous mouth was narrowed into a grim line.

"What's up, Mr. Correy?" I asked apprehensively. "Trouble aboard?"

"Plenty of it, sir!" he snapped. "A stowaway!"

"A stowaway?" I repeated wonderingly. A new experience, but hardly cause for Correy's obvious anger. "Well, send him below, and tell Miro to put him to work—the hardest work he can find. We'll make him—"

"*Him?*" blurted Correy. "If it were a him it wouldn't be so bad, sir.

But it's a *she*!"

To understand the full effect of the statement, you'd have to be steeped in the traditions of the Service. Women are seldom permitted on board a ship of the Service; despite their many admirable qualities, women play the very devil with discipline. And here were we, three days out from Base on a tour of duty which promised more than a little excitement, with a female stowaway on board!

I felt my own mouth set grimly.

"Where is she, Mr. Correy?" I asked quietly.

"In my quarters, under guard. It was my watch below, as you know, sir. I entered my stateroom, figuring on catching forty winks, and there she was, seated in my big chair, smiling at me.

"Well, for a second I couldn't speak. I just stared at her, and she kept smiling back at me. 'What are you doing here?' I managed to ask her, at last. 'Do you know where you are?'

"'I'll talk to your commanding officer,' she told me, cool as you please. 'Will you bring him, please?'

"'You'll see him plenty soon enough,' I snapped at her, getting over

my surprise somewhat by that time. I called in a couple of men to keep her from getting into mischief, and reported to you. What are your orders, sir?"

I hesitated a second, wondering. From Correy's account, she must be a rather remarkable person.

"Bring her up here, if you will, Mr. Correy. I'd like to see her before we put her in the brig." The brig, I might explain, was a small room well forward, where members of the crew were confined for discipline.

"Right, sir!" It seemed to me that there was a peculiar twinkle in Correy's eyes as he went out, and I wondered about it while we waited for him to return with the prisoner.

"What an infernal nuisance, sir!" complained Hendricks, looking up from his glowing charts. "We'll be the laughing-stock of the Service if this leaks out!"

"*When* it leaks out," I corrected him glumly. I'd already thought of the unpleasant outcome he mentioned. "I'll have to report it, of course, and the whole Service will know about it. We'll just have to grin and make the most of it, I guess." There was still another

possibility which I didn't mention: the silver-sleeves at Base would very likely call me on the carpet for permitting such a thing to happen. A commander was supposed to be responsible for everything that happened; no excuses available in the Service as it was in those days.

I scowled forbiddingly as I heard Correy open the door; at least I could make her very sorry she had selected the *Ertak* for her adventure. I am afraid, however, that it was a startled, rather than a scowling face to which she lifted her eyes.

"This is the stowaway, sir," said Correy briskly, closing the door. He was watching my face, and I saw, now, the reason for the twinkle in his eye when I mentioned placing the stowaway in the brig.

The woman was startlingly beautiful; one of the most beautiful women I have ever seen, and I have roamed the outer limits of space, and seen the women of many worlds. Hendricks, standing behind me, gasped audibly as his eyes fell upon her.

The stowaway was regally tall and exquisitely modeled. Her hair was the color of pale morning sunlight on Earth; her eyes an amazing blue, the equal of which I have never seen.

She was beautiful, but not coldly so. Despite her imperious bearing, there was something seductive about the soft curves of her beautiful body; something to rouse the pulses of a man in the langour of her intensely blue eyes, and the full, sensuous lips, scarlet as a smear of fresh blood.

"So this is the stowaway," I said, trying to keep my voice coolly indifferent. "What is your name?"

"I should prefer," she replied, speaking the universal language with a sibilant accent that was very fascinating, "to speak with you privately."

"You will speak with me," I informed her crisply, "in the presence of these officers. I repeat: what is your name?"

She smiled faintly, her eyes compelling mine.

"I am called Liane," she said. "Chief Priestess of the Flame. Mother of Life. Giver of Death. I believe my name and position are not unknown to you, Commander Hanson?"

Known to me? If Base was not in error—and for all their faults, the silver-sleeves are seldom wrong in matters of this sort—this woman

was the reason for our present mission.

"They are known to me," I admitted. "They do not explain, however, your presence here."

"And yet they should," protested Liane gently. "I was taken from my own people by those who had no right to command me. I was subjected to the indignity of questioning by many men. I have merely taken the simplest and quickest way of returning to my own people."

"You know, then, our destination?"

"I was informed of that by those who questioned me," nodded Liane. "Then, since I had been assured I was an honored guest, and no prisoner, I secreted myself aboard the ship, hiding in a small room nearly filled with what I took to be spare parts. I had provisions, and a few personal belongings. When I felt sufficient time had elapsed to make a return improbable, I donned attire more fitting than the masculine workman's guise in which I had secreted myself, and—I believe you are acquainted with the remaining facts."

"I am. I will consider your case and advise you later. Mr. Correy, will you conduct the stowaway to my quarters and place her under

guard? Return when you have attended to this matter, and ask Mr. Kincaide to do likewise."

"To your quarters, you said, sir?" asked Correy, his eyes very serious, but not sufficiently so to entirely disguise the twinkle in their depths. "Not to the brig?"

I could cheerfully have kicked him.

"To my quarters," I repeated severely, "and under guard."

"Right, sir," said Correy.

While we were awaiting Correy and Kincaide, I briefly considered the rather remarkable story which had been told me at Base.

"Commander Hanson," the Chief of Command had said, "we're turning over to you a very delicate mission. You've proved yourself adept at handling matters of this kind, and we have every confidence you'll bring this one to a highly successful conclusion."

"Thank you, sir; we'll do our best," I had told him.

"I know that; the assurance isn't necessary, although I appreciate it. Briefly, here's what we're confronted with:

"Lakos, as you know, is the principal source of temite for the universe. And without temite, modern space travel would be impossible; we would have to resort to earlier and infinitely more crude devices. You realize that, of course.

"Now, for some time, those in charge of operations on Lakos have complained of a growing unrest, increasing insubordination on the part of the Lakonians, and an alarming decrease in production.

"It has been extremely difficult—indeed, impossible—to determine the reasons for this, for, as you are perhaps aware, the atmosphere of Lakos is permeated with certain mineral fumes which, while not directly harmful to those of other worlds, do serve to effectively block the passage of those rays of the sun which are essential to the health of beings like ourselves. Those in charge of operations there are supplied artificially with these rays, as you are in your ship, by means of emanations from ethon tubes, but they have to be transferred at frequent periods to other fields of activity. The constant shifting about produces a state of disorder which makes the necessary investigation impossible. Too, operations are carried on with an insufficient personnel, because it is extremely difficult to induce desirable types of volunteer for such disagreeable service.

"We have, however, determined a few very important facts. This

unrest has been caused by the activities of a secret organization or order known as the Worshipers of the Flame. That's as close a translation as I can give you. It sounds harmless enough, but from what we gather, it is a sinister and rather terrible organization, with a fanatical belief amounting, at times, to a veritable frenzy. These Lakonians are a physically powerful but mentally inadequate people, as perhaps you are aware.

"The leader of this order or cult call it what you will—seems to be a woman: a very fascinating creature, infinitely superior to her people as a whole; what biologists call a 'sport,' I believe—a radical departure from the general racial trend.

"This leader calls herself Liane, Chief Priestess of the Flame, Mother of Life, Giver of Death, and a few other high-sounding things. We have called her here to Base for questioning, and while she has been here some time, we have so far learned next to nothing from her. She is very intelligent, very alluring, very feminine—but reveals nothing she does not wish to reveal.

"Our purpose in having her brought here was two-fold: first, to gain what information we could from her, and if possible, prevail upon her to cease her activities; second, to deprive her cult of her leadership while you conducted your investigation.

"Your orders, then, are simple: you will proceed at once to Lakos, and inquire into the activities of this order. Somehow, it must be crushed; the means I shall leave to you. You will have complete coöperation of those in charge of operations on Lakos; they are Zenians and natives of Earth, and you may depend upon them implicitly. Do not, however, place any faith in any Lakonians; the entire native populace may well be suspected of participation in the rites of this cult, and they are a treacherous and ruthless people at best. Have you any questions, Commander?"

"None," I had told him. "I have full authority to take any action I see fit?"

"Yes, at your discretion. Of course," he had added rather hastily, "you appreciate the importance of our supply of temite. Only Lakonians can gather it in commercial quantities, under the existing conditions on Lakos, and our reserve supply is not large. We naturally wish to increase production there, rather than endanger it. It's a delicate mission, but I'm trusting you and your men to handle it for us. I know you will."

He had arisen then, smilingly, and offered his hand to me in that gesture which marks a son of Earth throughout the universe, thus bringing the interview to a close.

In talking the things over with my officers, we had decided the mission promised to be an interesting one, but full of difficulties. The *Ertak* had set down on Lakos more than once, and we all had unpleasant memories of the place.

The sunlight on Lakos, such as it was, was pale green and thin, lacking in warmth and vitality. The vegetation was flaccid and nearly colorless, more like a mushroom growth than anything else; and the inhabitants were suspicious and unfriendly.

Remembering the typical Lakonians, it was all the more surprising that a gracious creature like Liane could have sprung from their midst. They were a beetle-browed, dark race, with gnarled muscles and huge, knotted joints, speaking a guttural language all their own. Few spoke the universal language.

But Liane, Chief Priestess of the Flame! The image of her kept drifting back to my mind. There was a woman to turn any man's head! And such a turning would be dangerous, for Liane had no soft woman's soul, if I had read her brilliant blue eyes aright.

"Rather a beauty, isn't she, sir?" commented Hendricks as I paused in my restless pacing, and glanced at the two-dimensional charts.

"The stowaway? Rather," I agreed shortly. "And chief instigator of the trouble we've been sent to eliminate."

"That seems almost—almost unbelievable, doesn't it?"

"Why, Mr. Hendricks?"

Correy and Kincaide entered before my junior officer could reply. I think he was rather glad of the excuse for not presenting his reasons.

"Well, sir, she's under guard," reported Correy. "And now what's to be done about her?"

"That," I admitted, "is a question. After all, she's an important personage at home. She was brought to Base as a guest, probably something of a guest of honor, of the Council, I gather. And, considering the work that's cut out for us, it would seem like a poor move to antagonize her unduly. What do you gentlemen think?"

"I think you're right, sir," said Hendricks quickly. "I believe she should be given every consideration."

Kincaide, my level-headed second officer, glanced curiously at Hendricks. "I see she's made one friend, anyway," he said. "Don't let yourself slip, my boy; I've run across her kind before. They're

dangerous."

"Thanks, but the warning's not necessary, Mr. Kincaide," replied Hendricks stiffly, an angry flush mounting to his checks. "I merely expressed a requested opinion."

"We'll let that phase of it drop, gentlemen," I cut in sharply, as I saw Kincaide's eyes flash. Trust a woman to stir up strife and ill-feeling! "What shall we do with her?"

"I believe, sir," said Correy, "that we'd be nice to her. Treat her as an honored guest; make the best of a bad situation. If she's what the Chief thought she is, the boss of this outfit we've got to lick, then there's no need of stroking her the wrong way, as I see it."

"And you, Mr. Kincaid?"

"I see no other way out of it. Under the circumstances, we can't treat her like a common culprit; both her position and her sex would prevent."

"Very well, then; we seem to be agreed. We'll find suitable quarters for her—"

"I'll give her mine," put in Hendricks. "Correy will let me double up

with him, I imagine."

"Sure," nodded Correy.

Kincaide glanced sharply at Hendricks, but said nothing. I knew, however, that he was thinking just what I was: that my young third officer was in for a bad, bad time of it.

Just how bad, I think neither of us guessed.

Liane became a member of the officers' mess on the *Ertak*. She occupied Hendricks' stateroom, and, I must confess, with uncommon good judgment for a woman, remained there most of the time.

She knew the reason for our mission, but this was one subject we never discussed. Nor did we mention the sect of which, according to the Chief of Command, she was the head. We did talk freely, when brought together at the table, on every other general topic.

Liane was an exceedingly intelligent conversationalist. Her voice was fascinating, and her remarks were always to the point. And she was a very good listener; she paid flattering attention to the most casual remark.

It seemed to me she was particularly gracious to Hendricks. Her

strangely arresting blue eyes seldom left his face when he was speaking, and the greater portion of her remarks seemed addressed to him. Naturally, Hendricks responded as a flower responds to the warming rays of the sun.

"We'll do well, sir, to keep a weather eye on the youngster," opined Correy one morning. (I think I have previously explained that even in the unchanging darkness of space, we divided time arbitrarily into days and nights). "Unless I'm badly mistaken, Hendricks is falling victim to a pair of blue eyes."

"He's young," I shrugged. "We'll be there in two more days, and then we'll be rid of her."

"Yes," nodded Correy, "we'll be there in a couple of days. And we'll be rid of her, I hope. But—suppose it should be serious, sir?"

"What do you mean?" I asked sharply. I had been thinking, rather vaguely, along much the same lines, but to hear it put into words came as rather a shock.

"I hope I'm wrong," said Correy very gravely. "But this Liane is an unusual woman. When I was his age, I could have slipped rather badly myself. Her eyes—that slow smile—they do things to a man.

"At the same time, Liane is supposed to be the head of the thing we're to stamp out; you might say the enemy's leader. And it wouldn't be a good thing, sir, to have a—a friend of the enemy on board the *Ertak*, would it?"

A rebuke rose to my lips, but I checked it. After all, Correy had no more than put into words some fears which had been harassing me.

A traitor—in the Service? Perhaps you won't be able to understand just what that thought meant to those of us who wore the Blue and Silver in those days. But a traitor was something we had never had. It was almost unbelievable that such a thing would ever happen; that it could ever happen. And yet older men than Hendricks had thrown honor aside at the insistence of women less fascinating than Liane.

I had felt the lure of her personality; there was not one of us on board the *Ertak* who had not. And she had not exercised her wiles on any of us save Hendricks; with the shrewdness which had made her the leader she was, she had elected to fascinate the youngest, the weakest, the most impressionable.

"I'll have a talk with him, Mr. Correy," I said quietly. "Probably it isn't necessary; I trust him implicitly, as I am sure you do, and the rest of us."

"Certainly, sir," Correy replied hastily, evidently relieved by the manner in which I had taken his remarks. "Only, he's very young, sir, and Liane is a very fascinating creature."

I kept my promise to Correy the next time Hendricks was on watch.

"We'll be setting down in a couple of days," I commented casually. "It'll be good to stretch our legs again, won't it?"

"It certainly will, sir."

"And I imagine that's the last we'll see of our fair stowaway," I said, watching him closely.

Hendricks' face flushed and then drained white. With the tip of his forefinger he traced meaningless geometrical patterns on the surface of the instrument table.

"I imagine so, sir," he replied in a choked voice. And then, suddenly, in a voice which shook with released emotion. "Oh, I know what you're thinking!" he added. "What you've all been thinking; you, sir, and Correy and Kincaide. Probably the men, too, for that matter.

"But it's not so! I want you to believe that, sir. I may be impressionable, and certainly she is beautiful and—and terribly

fascinating; but I'm not quite a fool. I realize she's on the other side; that I can't, that I must not, permit myself to care. You—you do believe that, sir?"

"Of course, lad!" I put my hand reassuringly on his shoulder; his whole body was shaking. "Forget it; forget her as soon as you can. None of us have doubted you for an instant; we just—wondered."

"I could see that; I could feel it. And it hurt," said my junior officer with shame-faced hesitancy. "But I'll forget her—after she's gone."

I let it go at that. After all, it was a rather painful subject for us both. The next day it did seem that he treated her with less attention; and she noticed it, for I saw the faint shadow of a frown form between her perfect brows, and her glance traveled meditatively from Hendricks' flushed face to my own.

The next morning, after the first meal of the day, she walked down the passage with me, one slim white hand placed gently within the curve of my arm.

"Mr. Hendricks," she commented softly, "seems rather distraught the last day or so."

"Yes?" I said, smiling to myself, and wondering what was coming next.

"Yes, Commander Hanson." There was just the faintest suggestion of steeliness in her voice now. "I fancy you've been giving him good advice, and painting me in lurid colors. Do you really think so badly of me?" Her hand pressed my arm with warm friendliness; her great blue eyes were watching me with beseeching interest.

"I think, Liane," I replied, "that Mr. Hendricks is a very young man."

"And that I am a dangerous woman?" She laughed softly.

"That, at least," I told her, "your interests and ours are not identical."

"True," she said coolly, pausing before the door of her stateroom. Her hand dropped from my arm, and she drew herself up regally. In the bright flow of the ethon tubes overhead she was almost irresistibly beautiful. "Our interests are not identical, Commander Hanson. They are widely divergent, directly opposed to each other, as a matter of fact. And—may I be so bold as to offer you a bit of advice?"

I bowed, saying nothing.

"Then, don't attempt to meddle with things which are more powerful, than you and the forces you control. And—don't waste breath on Mr. Hendricks. Fair warning!"

Before I could ask for more complete explanation, she had slipped inside her stateroom and firmly closed the door.

We set down on Lakos late that afternoon, close to the city—town, rather—of Gio, where those in charge of operations made their headquarters. With Liane and Correy, leaving the ship in charge of Kincaide, I made my way quickly toward the headquarters building.

We had gone but a few steps when Liane was surrounded by a shouting throng of her fellow Lakonians, and with a little mocking wave of a white hand, she stepped into a sort of litter which had been rushed to the scene, and was carried away.

"For one," commented Correy with a sigh of relief, "I'm glad she's out of sight. If I never see her again, it'll be too soon. When do we start something?"

"Not until we've talked with Fetter, who's in command here. I have a letter for him from the Chief. We'll see what he has to say."

One thing was certain; we could look for no assistance of any kind from the natives. They regarded us with bleak scowls, from beneath shaggy, lowering brows, our uniforms of blue, with the silver ornaments of our service and rank, identifying us clearly.

In the greenish Lakonian twilight, they were sinister figures indeed, clothed all alike in short, sleeveless tunics, belted loosely at the waist, feet and legs encased in leather buskins reaching nearly to the knees, their brown, gnarled limbs and stoop-shouldered postures giving them a half-bestial resemblance which was disturbing. Their walk was a sort of slow shuffle, which made their long arms dangle, swinging disjointedly.

We entered the administration building of gray, dull stone, and were ushered immediately into the office of the head of operations.

"Hanson?" he greeted me. "Mighty glad to see you. You too, Correy. Terrible hole, this; hope you're not here for long. Sorry I couldn't meet you at the ship; got your radio, but couldn't make it. Everything's in a jam. Getting worse all the time. And we're shorthanded; not half enough men here. Sit down, sit down. Seem good to feel firm ground under your feet?"

"Not particularly; your air here isn't as good as the *Ertak's*." Correy

and I seated ourselves across the desk from the garrulous Fetter. "I've a letter here from the Chief; I believe it explains why we're here."

"I can guess, I can guess. And none too soon. Things are in terrible shape. Terrible." Fetter ripped open the letter and glanced through it with harried eyes.

"Right," he nodded. "I'm to help you all I can. Place myself at your disposal. What can I do?"

"Tell us what's up," I suggested.

"That would be a long story. I suppose you know something about the situation already. Several reports have gone in to Base. What did the Chief tell you, Hanson?"

Briefly, I sketched the Chief's report, Fetter nodding every few words. When I had finished, he rubbed his long, thin fingers together nervously, and stared down, frowning at the littered top of his desk.

"Right as far as he went," he said. "But he didn't go far enough. Wanted you to find out for yourself, I suppose.

"Well, there *is* a secret society working against us here. Sect, I'd call it. Undermined the whole inhabited portion of Lakos—which isn't a

great area, as you know."

"The Chief Priestess is Liane. I believe you said she stowed away on the *Ertak* with you?"

I nodded.

"You're keeping her under guard?" asked Fetter.

"No; under the circumstances, we couldn't. We had no authority, you see. A crowd of natives bore her away in triumph."

"Then your work's cut out for you," groaned Fetter. "She's a devil incarnate. Beautiful, irresistible, and evil as corruption itself. If she's back, I'm afraid there's nothing to be done. We've been sitting on a volcano ever since she left. Pressure growing greater every instant, it seemed. She's just what's needed to set it off."

"We'll have to take our chances," I commented. "And now; just what is the set-up?"

"The Worshipers of the Flame, they call themselves. The membership takes in about every male being on Lakos. They meet in the great caverns which honeycomb the continent. Ghastly places; I've seen some of the smaller ones. Continent was thrust up from the

sea in a molten state, some scientific chap told me once; these caverns were made by great belches of escaping steam or gas. You'll see them.

"She—Liane—and her priests rule solely by terror. The Lakonians are naturally just horses" (a draft animal of ancient Earth, now extinct), "content to work without thinking. Liane and her crew have made them think—just enough to be dangerous. Just what she tells them to think, and no more. Disobedient ones are punished by death. Rather a terrible death, I gather.

"Well, her chief aim is to stop the production of temite. She wishes to bargain with the Council—at her own terms."

"What's her price?" I asked. "What does she want, wealth?"

"No. *Power!*" Fetter leaned forward across the desk, hammering it with both fists to emphasize the word, his eyes gleaming from their deep sockets. "Power, Hanson, that's what she craves. She's insane on the subject. Utterly mad. She lusts after it. You asked her price; it's this: a seat in the Council!"

I gasped audibly. A seat in the Council! The Council, composed of the wisest heads of the universe, and ruling the universe with

absolute authority!

"She *is* mad," I said.

"Crazy," grunted Correy. "Plain crazy. A woman—in the Council!"

Fetter nodded solemnly.

"Mad—crazy—use your own terms," he said. "But that's her price. The Chief didn't tell you that, did he? Well, perhaps he didn't know. I learned it in a very roundabout way. She'll make the formal demand when the time is ripe, never fear. And what's more, unless these Worshipers of the Flame are stamped out—*she'll get what she demands!*"

"Impossible!"

"Not at all. You know what this place is. Only a Lakonian can stand this atmosphere long. No vitality to the light that does come through this damned green stuff they breathe for air; and after a few days, the acid, metallic tang of it drives you frantic. Never can get used to it.

"So the Lakonians have to mine the temite. And the universe must have temite, in quantities that can't be supplied from any other source. If the Lakonians won't mine it—and they won't, when Liane

tells them to quit—what will the Council and your Service do about it?"

"Plenty," growled Correy.

"Nothing," contradicted Fetter. "You can kill a man, disintegrate him, imprison him, punish him, as you will, but you can't make him work." And there that phase of the matter rested.

I asked him a number of questions which I felt would help us to start our work properly, and he answered every one of them promptly and fully. Evidently, Fetter had given his problem a great deal of thought, and had done more than a little intelligent investigating of his own.

"If there's anything else I can do to help you," he said as he accompanied us to the door, "don't fail to call upon me. And remember what I said: trust no one except yourselves. Study each move before you make it. These Lakonians are dull-witted, but they'll do whatever Liane tells them. And she thinks fast and cunningly!"

We thanked him for his warning, and hurried back to the ship through the sickly-green Lakonian dusk. The acrid odor of the atmosphere was already beginning to be disagreeable.

"Decent sort of a chap, Fetter," commented Correy. "All wrought up, isn't he? Worried stiff."

"I imagine he has cause to be. And—he might have been right in saying we should have held Liane: perhaps we could have treated with her in some way."

"No chance! Not that lady. When we treat with her, we'll have to have the whip hand, utterly and completely."

The heavy outer door of the *Ertak's* exit was open, but the transparent inner door, provided for just such an emergency, was in place, forming, in conjunction with a second door, an efficient air-lock. The guard saw us coming and, as we came up, had the inner door smartly opened, standing at salute as we entered. We returned his salute and went up to the navigating room, where I proposed to hold a brief council of war, informing Kincaide and Hendricks of what we had learned from Fetter, and deciding upon a course of action for the following day. Kincaide, whom I had left on watch, was there waiting.

"Well, sir, how do things stack up?" he asked anxiously.

"Not so good. Please ask Mr. Hendricks to report here at once, and

I'll give you the whole story."

Kincaide pressed the attention signal to Hendricks' room, and waited impatiently for a response. There was none.

"Try my room," suggested Correy. "Maybe he hasn't moved back to his own quarters yet."

"That's what he said he would be doing," replied Kincaide. But that signal too failed to bring any response.

Correy glanced at me, a queer, hurt expression in his eyes.

"Shall I go forward and see if he—if he's ill?" he asked quickly.

"Please do," I said, and as soon as he was gone I turned to the microphone and called the sentry on duty at the exit.

"Commander Hanson speaking. Has Mr. Hendricks left the ship?"'

"Yes, sir. Some time ago. The lady came back, saying she had word from you; she and Mr. Hendricks left a few minutes later. That was all right, sir?"

"Yes," I said, barely able to force the word from between my lips.

Hendricks ... and Liane? Hendricks ... a traitor? I cut the microphone and glanced at Kincaide. He must have read the facts in my eyes.

"He's ... gone, sir?"

"With Liane," I nodded.

The door burst open, and Correy came racing into the room.

"He's not there, sir!" he snapped. "But in his room I found this!"

He held out an envelope, addressed to me. I ripped it open, glanced through the hasty, nervous scrawl, and then read it aloud:

"Sir:

I am leaving with Liane. I am sorry. It had to be.

Hendricks."

"That, gentlemen," I said hoarsely, after a long silence, "will make the blackest entry ever spread upon the log of the *Ertak*—upon any ship of the Service. Let us dismiss this thing from our minds, and proceed."

But that was easier, by far, to propose than to accomplish.

It was late indeed when we finished our deliberations, but the plan decided upon was exceedingly simple.

We would simply enforce our authority until we located definite resistance; we would then concentrate our efforts upon isolating the source of this resistance and overcoming it. That we would find Liane at the bottom of our difficulties, we knew perfectly well, but we desired to place her in a definite position as an enemy. So far, we had nothing against her, no proof of her activities, save the rather guarded report of the Chief, and the evidence given us by Fetter.

There were three major continents on Lakos, but only one of them was inhabited or habitable, the other two being within the large northern polar cap. The activities of The Worshipers of the Flame were centered about the chief city of Gio, Fetter had told us, and therefore we were in position to start action without delay.

Force of men would avail us nothing, since the entire crew of the *Ertak* would be but a pitiful force compared to the horde Liane could muster. Our mission could be accomplished—if, indeed, it could be accomplished at all—by the force of whatever authority our position commanded, and the outwitting of Liane.

Accordingly, it was decided that, in the emergency, all three of us would undertake the task, leaving the ship in charge of Sub-officer Scholey, chief of the operating room crew, and a very capable, level-headed man. I gave him his final instructions as we left the ship, early the next morning:

"Scholey, we are leaving you in a position of unusual responsibility. An emergency makes it necessary, or at least desirable, for Mr. Correy, Mr. Kincaide and myself to leave the ship. Mr. Hendricks has already departed; therefore, the *Ertak* will be left in your charge.

"Remain here for five days; if we do not return in that time, leave for Base, and report the circumstances there. The log will reveal full authority for your actions."

"Very well, sir!" He saluted, and we passed through the air-lock which protected the *Ertak* from the unpleasant atmosphere of Lakos, armed only with atomic pistols, and carrying condensed rations and menores at our belts.

We went directly to the largest of the mines, the natives regarding us with furtive, unfriendly eyes. A great crowd of men were lounging around the mouth of the mine, and as we approached, they tightened their ranks, as though to block our passage.

"We'll bluff it through," I whispered. "They know the uniform of the Service, and they have no leader."

"I'd like to take a swing at one of them," growled Correy. "I don't like their looks—not a bit. But just as you say, sir."

Our bluff worked. We marched up to the packed mass as though we had not even noticed them, and slowly and unwillingly, they opened a path for us, closing in behind us with rather uncomfortable celerity. For a moment I regretted we had not taken a landing crew from the *Ertak*.

However, we won through the mouth of the mine without violence, but here a huge Lakonian who seemed to be in authority held up his hand and blocked our way.

"Let me handle him, sir," said Correy from the corner of his mouth. "I understand a little of their language."

"Right," I nodded. "Make it strong!"

Correy stepped forward, his head thrust out truculently, thumbs hooked through his belt, his right hand suggestively near his automatic pistol. He rapped out something in unpleasant gutturals,

and the tall Lakonian replied volubly.

"He says it's orders," commented Correy over his shoulder. "Now I'll tell him who's giving orders around here!"

He stepped closer to the Lakonian, and spoke with emphatic briefness. The Lakonian fell back a step, hesitated, and started to reply. Correy stopped him with a single word, and motioned us to follow him. The guard watched us doubtfully, and angrily, but he let us pass.

"He told me," explained Correy, "that *she* had given orders. Didn't name her, but we can guess, all right. I told him that if she wished to say anything to us, she could do it in person; that we weren't afraid of her, of him, or all the Lakonians who ever breathed green soup and called it air. He's a simple soul, and easily impressed. So we got by."

"Nice work," I commended him. "It's an auspicious start, anyway."

The mouth of the mine was not the usual vertical shaft; as Fetters had told us, it was a great ramp, of less than forty-five degrees, leading underground, illuminated by jets of greenish flame from metal brackets set into the wall at regular intervals, and fed by a

never-failing interplay of natural gas. The passageway was of varying height and width, but nowhere less than three times my height from floor to ceiling, and it was broad enough at its narrowest so that ten men might have marched easily abreast.

The floor, apparently, had been smoothed by human effort, but for the rest, the corridor was, to judge from the evidence, entirely natural for the walls of shiny black rock bore no marks of tools.

At intervals, other passages branched off from the main one we were following, at greater and less angles, but these were much narrower, and had very apparently been hewn in the solid rock. Like the central passage, they were utterly deserted.

"We'll be coming out on the other side, pretty soon," commented Correy after a steady descent of perhaps twenty minutes. "This tunnel must go all the way through. I—what's that?"

We paused and listened. From behind us came a soft, whispering sound, the nature of which we could not determine.

"Sounds like the shuffle of many feet, far behind," suggested Kincaide gravely.

"Or, more likely, the air rushing around the corners of those smaller passages," I suggested. "This is a drafty hole. Or it may be just the combined flarings of all these jets of flame."

"Maybe you're right, sir," nodded Correy. "Anyway, we won't worry about it until we have to. I guess we just keep on going?"

"That seems to be about all there is to do; we should enter one of the big subterranean chambers Fetters mentioned, before long."

As a matter of fact, it was but a minute or two later, that we turned a curve in the corridor and found ourselves looking into a vast open space, the roof supported by huge pillars of black stone, and the floor littered with rocky debris and mining tools thrown down by workmen.

"This is where they take out the temite ore, I imagine," said Kincaide, picking up a loose fragment of rock. He pointed to a smudge of soft, crumbly gray metal, greasy in appearance, showing on the surface of the specimen he had picked up. "That's the stuff, sir, that's causing us all this trouble: nearly pure metallic temite." He dropped the fragment, looking about curiously. "But where," he added, "are the miners?"

"I'm inclined to believe we'll find out before we get back to the *Ertak*," said Correy grimly. "Everything's moved along too sweetly; trouble's just piling up somewhere."

"That remains to be seen," I commented. "Let's move on, and see what's beyond. That looks like a door of some sort, on the far side. Perhaps it will lead us to something more interesting."

"I hope it does," growled Correy. "This underground business is getting on my nerves!"

It was a door I had seen, a huge slab of light yellow-green metal. I paused, my hand on the simple latch.

"Stand to one side," I said softly. "Let's see what happens."

I lifted the latch, and the heavy door opened inward. Cautiously, I stared through the portal. Inside was blackness and silence; somewhere, in the far distance, I could see two or three tiny pin-pricks of green light.

"We'll take a look around, anyway," I said. "Follow me carefully and be ready for action. It seems all right, but somehow, I don't like the looks of things."

In single file, we passed beyond the massive door, the light from the large room outside streaming ahead of us, our shadows long and grotesque, moving on the rocky floor ahead of us.

Then, suddenly, I became aware that the path of light ahead of us was narrowing. I turned swiftly; the door must be closing!

As I turned, lights roared up all around us, intense light which struck at our eyes with almost tangible force. A great shout rose, echoing, to a vaulted ceiling. Before we could move or cry out, a score of men on either side had pinioned us.

"Damnation!" roared Correy. "If I only had the use of my fists—just for a second!"

We were in a great cavern, the largest I have ever beheld. A huge bubble, blown in the molten rock by powerful gases from the seething interior of the world.

The roof was invisible above our heads, and the floor sloped down gently in every direction, toward a central dais, so far away that its details were lost to us. From the center of the dais a mighty pillar of green flame mounted into the air nearly twenty times the height of a man. All around the dais, seated on the sloping floor of the cavern,

were Lakonians.

There were hundreds of them, thousands of them, and they were as silent and motionless as death. They paid no heed to us; they crouched, each in his place, and stared at the column of greenish flame.

"It was a trap," muttered Kincaide as our captors marched us rapidly toward the dais in the center of the huge amphitheater. "They were waiting for us; I imagine we have been watched all the time. And we walked into the trap exactly like a bunch of schoolboys."

"True—but we've found, I believe, what we wished to find," I told him. "This is the meeting place of the Worshipers of the Flame. There, I imagine is the Flame itself. And unless I'm badly mistaken, that's Liane waiting up there in the center!"

It was Liane. She was seated on a massive, simple throne of the greenish-yellow metal, the column of fire rising directly behind her like an impossible plume. In a semicircle at her feet, in massive chairs made of the odd metal, were perhaps twenty old men, their heads crowned with great, unkempt manes of white hair.

And standing beside Liane's throne, at her right hand, was—

Hendricks!

His shoulders drooped, his chin rested upon his breast. He was wearing, not the blue-and-silver uniform of the Service, but a simple tunic of pale green, with buskins of dark green leather, laced with black. He did not look up as we were ushered before this impressive group, but Liane watched us with smiling interest.

Liane, seated there upon her throne, was not the Liane of those days in the *Ertak*. There, she had been scarcely more than a peculiarly fascinating young woman with a regal bearing and commanding eyes. Here, she was a goddess, terrifyingly beautiful, smiling with her lips, yet holding the power of death in the white hands which hung gracefully from the massive arms of the throne.

She wore a simple garment of thin, shimmering stuff, diaphanous as finest silk. It was black, caught at one shoulder with a flashing green stone. The other shoulder was bared, and the black garment was a perfect foil for the whiteness of her perfect skin, her amazing blue eyes, and the pale gold of her hair.

She lifted one hand in a slight gesture as our conductors paused before the dais; they fell away and formed a close cordon behind us.

"We have awaited your coming," she said in her sibilant voice. "And you are here."

"We are here," I said sternly, "representing, through our Service, the Supreme Council of the universe. What word shall we take back to those who sent us?"

Liane smiled, a slow, cruel smile. The pink fingers of one hand tapped gently on the carven arm of her throne. The eyes of the semicircle of old men watched us with unwavering hatred.

"The word you carry will be a good word," she said slowly. "Liane has decided to be gracious—and yet it is well that you have full understanding of Liane's power. For while the word Liane shall give you to bear back is a good word, still, Liane is but a woman, and women have been known to change their minds. Is that not so, Commander Hanson?"

"That is so, Liane," I nodded. "And we are glad to hear that your wisdom has led you to be gracious."

She leaned forward suddenly, her eyes flashing with anger.

"Mark you, it is not wisdom but a whim of mine which causes me to

be graciously minded!" she cried. "Think you that Liane is afraid? Look about you!"

We turned slowly and cast our eyes about that great gathering. As far as the eye could reach, in every direction, was a sea of faces. And as we looked, the door through which we had entered this great hall was flung open, and a crowd of tiny specks came surging in.

"And still they come, at Liane's command," she laughed. "They are those who played, to disarm your suspicions, at blocking your entry to this place. They did but follow you, a safe distance behind."

"I thought so," murmured Correy. "Things were going too smoothly. That was what we heard, sir."

I nodded, and looked up at Liane.

"You have many followers," I said. "Yet this is but a small world, and behind the Council are all the worlds of the universe."

Liane threw back her head and laughed, a soft, tinkling sound that rose clearly above the hollow roar of the mighty flame behind her throne.

"You speak bravely," she said, "knowing that Liane holds the upper

hand. Did your Council take armed action against us, we would blow up these caverns which are the source of your precious temite, and bury it so deeply no force that could live here could extract it in the quantities in which the universe needs it.

"But enough of this exchange of sharp words. Liane has already said that she is disposed to be gracious. Does that not content you?"

"I will bear back to those who sent me whatever word you have to offer; it is not for me to judge its graciousness," I said coolly.

"Then—but first, let me show you how well I rule here," she said. She spoke to one of the old men seated at her feet; he arose and disappeared in a passage leading from directly beneath the dais.

"You will see, presently, the punishment of Liane," she said smilingly. "Liane, Chief Priestess of the Flame, Mother of Life, Giver of Death, Most Worshiped of the Worshipers.

"Perhaps you wonder how it came that Liane sits here in judgment upon a whole people? Let me tell you, while we await the execution of Liane's judgment.

"The father of Liane, and his father before him, back unto those

remote days of which we have no knowledge, were Chief Priests of the Worshipers of the Flame. But they were lacking in ambition, in knowledge, and in power. Their followers were but few, and their hands were held out in benediction and not in command.

"But the father of Liane had no son; instead he had a daughter, in whom was all the wisdom of those who had been the Chief Priests. She gathered about her a group of old men, shrewd and cunning, the lesser priests and those who would know the feel of power, who were not priests. You see them here at the feet of Liane.

"And under Liane's guidance, the ranks of the Worshipers grew, and as this power grew, so grew the power of Liane, until the time came when no man, no woman, on the face of Lakos, dared question the command of the Chief Priestess. And those who would have rebelled, were made to feel the power of Liane—as these you see here now."

The old man had reappeared, and behind him were two miserable wretches, closely guarded by a dozen armed men. Liane spoke briefly to the old man, and then turned to us.

"The first of these is one who has dared to disobey," she explained. "He brought out more of the ore than Liane had ordered. Do you

hear the multitude? They know already what his fate will be."

A long, shuddering whisper had arisen from the thousands of beings crouched there in the amphitheater, as the uncouth figure of the prisoner was led up a flight of steep, narrow steps to the very base of the flame.

Hendricks, still hiding his face from us, bent over Liane and whispered something in her ear; she caressed his arm softly, and shook her head. Hendricks leaned more heavily against the throne, shuddering.

Slowly, the flame was dying, until we could see that it was not a solid pillar of fire, but a hollow circle of flame, fed by innumerable jets set at the base of a circle of a trifle more than the length of a man across.

Into those deadly circles the condemned man was led. His legs were bound swiftly, so that he could not move, and the old man stepped back quickly.

As though his movement had been a signal, the flames shot up with a roar, until they lost themselves far over our heads. As one man, the three of us started forward, but the guards hemmed us in instantly.

"Fools!" cried Liane. "Be still! The power of Liane is absolute here."

We stared, fascinated, at the terrible sight. The flame spouted, streaks of blue and yellow streaking up from its base. Mercifully, we could not see within that encircling wall of fire.

Slowly, the flame died down again. A trap-door opened in the circle, and some formless thing dropped out of sight. Liane questioned the old man again, her eyes resting upon the other prisoner. The old man answered briefly.

"This one spoke against the power of Liane," she explained smilingly. "He said Liane was cruel; that she was selfish. He also must feel the embrace of the sacred Flame."

I heard, rather than saw, the ghastly drama repeated, for I had bent my head, and would not look up. Liane was no woman; she was a fiend. And yet for her a trusted officer, a friend, had forsworn his service and his comrades. I wondered, as I stood there with bowed head, what were the thoughts which must have been passing through Hendricks' mind.

"You fear to look upon the punishment of Liane?" the voice of the unholy priestess broke in upon my shuddering reverie. "Then you

understand why her power is absolute; why she is Mother of Life, and Giver of Death, throughout all Lakos. And now for the word I promised you, a gracious word from one who could be terrible and not gracious, were that her whim.

"It has been in the mind of Liane to extend her power, to make for herself a place in this Supreme Council of which you speak with so much awe and reverence, Commander Hanson. But, by happenchance, another whim has seized her."

Liane looked up at Hendricks, smilingly, and took one of his hands in hers. It was wonderful how her face softened as he returned, fiercely, the pressure of her soft hands.

"I know it will sound strange to your ears," she said in a voice almost tender, "but Liane is, after all, a woman, with many, if not all, a woman's many weaknesses. And while even in his presence Liane will say that her lover was at the beginning looked upon as no more than a tool which might further Liane's power, he has won now a place in her heart."

I saw Hendricks tremble as she admitted her love, and that portion of his face which we could see flushed hotly.

"And so, Liane has elected to give up, at least for the present, the place in the Council which she could command. For after all, that would be a remote power, lacking in the elements of physical power which Liane has over these, her people, and in which she has learned to delight.

"So, Commander Hanson, bear to your superiors this word: Liane will permit a production of whatever reasonable amount of temite is desired. She will remain here with her consort, brooking no interference, no changes, no commands from any person or organization. Go, now, and take with you the words of Liane!"

I looked up at her gravely, and shook my head.

"We shall go," I said, "and we shall take with us your words. But I warn you that the words you have spoken are treason to the universe, in that you have defied the Council!"

Liane leaped from her throne, her scarlet lips drawn back against her white and gleaming teeth. Her eyes, dilated with anger, blazed down upon us almost as hotly as the flame which rose behind her.

"Go! And quickly!" she fairly screamed. "If you have no desire to feel the embrace of the sacred Flame, then *go*!"

I bowed silently, and motioned to Correy and Kincaide. Swiftly, we made our way down a long aisle, surrounded by motionless figures staring unwinkingly at the column of fire, toward the door by which we had entered this great chamber.

Behind us, I could hear Liane's clear voice lifted in her own guttural language, as she addressed the multitude.

Safely within the *Ertak*, we discussed the morning's adventure over a late luncheon.

"I suppose," said Kincaide, "there's nothing left to do but tell Fetter as much as seems wise, to reassure him, and then return to Base to make our report."

"We'll come back, if we do," growled Correy. "And we'll come back to *fight*. The Council won't stand for her attitude."

"Undoubtedly that's true," I admitted. "Still, I believe we should put it up to Base, and through Base to the Council, before doing anything more. Much, if not all, of what she said was perfectly true."

"It was that," nodded Kincaide. "There were scores, if not hundreds of doors leading into that big chamber; I imagine it can be reached,

underground, from any point on the continent. And those winding passages would be simple to defend from any form of invasion."

"But could these Lakonians fight?" asked Correy. "That's what I'd like to know. I doubt it. They look like a sleepy, ignorant lot."

"I think they'd fight, to the death, if Liane ordered them to," I replied thoughtfully. "Did you notice the way they stared at the flame, never moving, never even winking? My idea is that it exercises a sort of auto-hypnotic influence over them, which gives Liane just the right opportunity to impress her will upon them."

"I wondered about that," Kincaide commented. "I believe you're right, sir. Any idea as to when we'll shove off?"

"There's no particular hurry; Fetter will be busy until evening, I imagine, so we won't bother him until then. As soon as we've had a chat with him, we can start."

"And without Hendricks," said Kincaide, shaking his head sadly. "I wonder—"

"If you don't mind, Mr. Kincaide, we won't mention his name on the *Ertak* after this," I interrupted. "I, for one, would rather forget him.

Wouldn't you?"

"I would, sir, if I could," said Kincaide softly. "But that's not easy, is it?"

It wasn't easy. As a matter of fact, it was impossible. I knew I would never forget my picture of him, standing there shaken and miserable, beside the woman for whom he had disgraced his uniform, hiding his head in shame from the eyes of the men he had called comrades, and who had called him friend. But to talk of him was morbid.

It was late in the afternoon when I called Correy and Kincaide to the navigating room, where I had spent several hours charting our return course.

"I believe, gentlemen," I remarked, "that we can call on Mr. Fetter now. I'll ask you to remain in charge of the ship, Mr. Kincaide, while Mr. Correy and I—"

An attention signal sounded sharply to interrupt me. I answered it instantly.

"Sentry at exit, sir," said an excited voice. "Mr. Hendricks and the woman stowaway are here asking for you. They say it is very

urgent."

"Bring them both here at once, under guard," I ordered. "Be sure you are properly relieved."

"Right, sir!"

I turned to Correy and Kincaide, who were watching me with curious eyes. My excitement must have shown upon my face.

"Mr. Hendricks and Liane are at the exit, asking to see me," I snapped. "They'll be here in a moment. What do you suppose is in the air?"

"Hendricks?" muttered Correy, his face darkening. "It seems to me he has a lot of nerve to—"

There was a sharp tap on the door.

"Come!" I ordered quickly. The door opened and Liane, followed by Hendricks, hurried into the room.

"That will do," I nodded to the guard who had accompanied them. "You may go."

"You wonder why we're here, I suppose?" demanded Liane. "I'll tell you, quickly, for every instant is precious."

This was a very different Liane. She was no longer clad in diaphanous black; she was wearing a tunic similar to the one she had worn on board the *Ertak*, save that this one was torn and soiled. Her lips, as she talked, twitched with an insane anger; her amazing eyes were like those of a cornered beast of the wilderness.

"My council of wise old men turned against me when I told them my plans to marry the man of my choice. They said he was an outsider, an enemy, a foreigner. They would have none of him. They demanded that I give him to the Flame, and marry one of my own kind. They had not, of course, understood what I had said to you there in the great chapel of the Flame.

"I defied them. We escaped through a passage which is not known to any save myself, and the existence of which my father taught me years ago. We are here, but they will guess where we have gone. My old men are exciting my people against me—and for that shall all, down to the last one, know the embrace of the Flame!" She gritted her teeth on the words, her nostrils distended with rage.

"I—I am safe. I can command them; I can make them know my

power, and I shall. The Flame will have much to feed upon in the days which are to come, I promise you. But my beloved would not be safe; at this moment I cannot protect him. So I have brought him back. I—I know he ... but I will not be weak. I am Liane!"

She faced Hendricks, who had stood there like a graven image, watching her. Her arms went about his neck; her lips sought his.

"My beloved!" she whispered. "Liane was but a woman, after all. Darling! Good-by!" She kissed him again, and hurried to the door.

"One more thing!" she cried. "I must master them myself. I must show them I—I, Liane—am ruler here. You promise? You promise me you will not interfere; that you will do nothing?"

"But—"

Liane interrupted me before I could put my objections into words.

"Promise!" she commanded. "There are hundreds, thousands of them! You cannot slay them all—and if you did, there would be more. I can bend them to my will; they know my power. Promise, or there will be many deaths upon your hands!"

"I promise," I said.

"And you—all of you?" she demanded, sweeping Correy and Kincaide with her eyes.

"Commander Hanson speaks for us all," nodded Kincaide.

With a last glance at Hendricks, whose eyes had never left her for an instant, she was gone.

Hendricks uttered a long, quivering sigh. His face, as he turned to us, was ghastly white.

"She's gone," he muttered. "Forever."

"That's exceedingly unfortunate, sir, for you," I replied crisply. "As soon as it's perfectly safe, we'll see to it that you depart also."

The sting of my words apparently did not touch him.

"You don't understand," he said dully. "I know what you think, and I do not blame you. She came back; you know that.

"'You are coming with me,' she said. 'I care for you. I want you. You are coming with me, at once.' I told her I was not; that I loved her, but that I could not, would not, go.

"She opened a port and showed me one of her countrymen, standing not far away, watching the ship. He held something in his hand.

"'He has one of your hand bombs,' she told me. 'I found it while I was hidden and took it with me when I left. If you do not come with me, he will throw it against the ship, destroy it, and those within it.'

"There was nothing else for me to do. She permitted me to explain no more than I did in the note I left. I pleaded with her; did all I could. Finally I persuaded her to give you the word she did, there before the great flame.

"She brought me back here at the risk of her own life, and, what is even more precious to her, her power. In—in her own way, she loves me...."

It was an amazing story; a second or two passed before any of us could speak. And then words came, fast and joyous; our friend, our trusted fellow-officer had come back to us! I felt as though a great black cloud had slid from across the sun.

And then, above our voices, rose a great mutter of sound. We glanced at one another, wonderingly. Hendricks was the first to make a move.

"That's the mob!" he said, darting toward the door. We followed him swiftly to the exit of the ship, through the air-lock, out into the open.

Hendricks had spoken the truth. Liane was walking, very slowly and deliberately, her head flung back proudly, toward the city. Coming toward her, like a great ragged wave, was a mighty mass of humanity, led by capering old men—undoubtedly the lesser priests, who had turned against her.

"The portable projectors, sir!" begged Correy excitedly. "A pair of them, and that mob—"

"We're bound by our promise," I reminded him. "She's not afraid; her power is terrible. I believe she'll win without them. Look!"

Liane had paused. She lifted one hand in a gesture of command, and called out to the rabble. Correy translated the whole thing for me later.

"Halt!" she cried sharply. "Who moves upon the Chief Priestess of the Flame earns the embrace of the Flame!"

The crowd halted, cowering; then the old man shouted to them and gestured them onward. With a rush, the front ranks came on.

"So!" Liane called out to them. "You would disobey Liane? Yet even yet it is not too late; Liane gives you one chance more. You little know the Chief Priestess of the Flame if you think she will tolerate an encroachment of her power. Back! Back, I say, or you all shall feel the might of Liane!"

Before her tirade the mob faltered, but again the crazed old men led them on.

Liane turned, saw us, and made a regal gesture of farewell. From the bosom of her tunic she snatched a small black object, and swung it high above her head.

"The bomb!" shouted Hendricks. "She has it; she—"

At the very feet of the onrushing crowd the black object struck. There was a hollow roar; a blast of thundering air swept us backward to the ground.

When we scrambled to our feet, Liane was gone. The relentless mob had gone. Where they had been was a great crater of raw earth, strewn with ghastly fragments. Far back toward the city a few straggling figures ran frantically away from that scene of death.

"Gone!" I said. "Power was a mania, an obsession with her. Even her death was a supreme gesture—of power, of authority."

"Liane," Hendricks whispered. "Chief Priestess of the Flame ... Giver of Death...."

With Liane gone, and with her the old men who had tried to snatch her power from her hand, and who might have caused us trouble, the rebellion of the Lakonians was at an end.

Leaderless, they were helpless, and I believe they were happy in the change. Sometimes the old ways are better than the new, and Liane's régime had been merciless and rather terrible.

There are many kinds of women: great women, and women with small souls; women filled with the spirit of sacrifice; selfish women, good women and bad.

And Liane? I leave her for you to judge. She was a woman; classify her for yourself.

After all, I am an old man, and perhaps I have forgotten the ways of women. I do not wish to judge, on one hand to be called bitter and hard, on the other hand to be condemned as soft with advancing age.

I have given you the story of Liane, Chief Priestess of the Flame.

How, you clever and infallible members of this present generation, do you judge her?

September 1932

148 Loot of the Void by Edwin K. Sloat

Into the Trap-Door City of great spiders goes Penrun after the hidden plunder of the space-pirate Halkon.

Aproximate word count: 8,600

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Dick Penrun glanced up incredulously.

"Why, that's impossible; you would have to be two hundred years old!" he exclaimed.

Lozzo nervously ran a hand through his white mop of hair.

"But it is true, Sirro," he assured his companion. "We Martians sometimes live three centuries. You should know that I am only a hundred and seventy-five, and I do not lie when I say I was a cabin boy under Captain Halkon."

His voice sank to a whisper, and he glanced apprehensively about the buffet of the Western Star which was due now in three days at the Martian city of Nurm. Penrun's eyes followed his anxious glances curiously. The buffet was partly filled with passengers, smoking, gossiping women, and men at cards, or throwing dice in the Martian gambling game of diklo, which was the universal fad of the moment. No place could have been safer, Penrun reflected. Doubtless the old man's caution was a lifelong habit acquired in his youth, if he had actually served under Halkon.

Before long the old codger would be saying that he knew the hiding place of Halkon's treasure, about which there were probably more legends and yarns than anything else in the Universe. A century had elapsed since the death of the famous pirate who had preyed on the shipping of the Void with fearless, ruthless audacity and had piled up a fabulous treasure before that fatal day when the massed battle spheres of the Interplanetary Council trapped his ships out near Mercury and blew them to atoms there in the sun-beaten reaches of space. Some of the men had been captured; old Lozzo might have been one of them. Penrun knew the history of Halkon from childhood, and for a very good reason.

The ancient Martian stirred uneasily. His piercing blue eyes turned again to Penrun's face.

"Every word I have said is true, Sirro," he repeated hurriedly. "I boarded this ship at New York with the sole intention of discharging my sworn duty and giving a message to the grandson of Captain Orion Halkon, his first male descendant."

Penrun's eyes widened in startled amazement. He, himself, was the grandson of the notorious Halkon, a fact that not more than half a dozen people in the Universe knew—or so he had always believed. His mother, Halkon's only daughter, good and upright woman that she was, had hidden that family skeleton far back in the closet and solemnly warned Dick Penrun and his two sisters to keep it there. Yet this old man, who had singled him out of the crowd in the buffet not thirty minutes ago and drew him into conversation, knew the secret. Perhaps he really had been a cabin boy under Halkon!

"I have been serving out the hundred-year sentence for piracy the judges imposed on me, a century in your own Earth prison of Sing Sing," muttered Lozzo. "I have just been released. Quick! My inner gods tell me my vase of life is toppling. I swore to your grandfather that I would deliver the message. It is here. Guard well your own life, for this paper is a thing of evil!"

His hand rested nervously on the edge of the table. The ancient blue eyes swept the buffet with a lightning glance. Then he slid his hand

forward across the polished wood. Penrun glimpsed a bit of yellow, folded paper beneath it. Then something tweaked his hair. A deafening explosion filled the buffet. Lozzo stiffened, his mouth gaped in a choked scream, and he sprawled across the table, dead.

As he fell, a fat white hand darted over the table toward the oblong of folded, yellow paper lying unprotected on its surface. Penrun clutched at it frantically. The fat fingers closed on the paper and were gone.

Penrun whirled about. The drapes of the doorway framed a heavy, pasty face with liquid black eyes. The slug gun was aiming again, this time at Penrun. He hurled himself sideways out of his chair as it roared a second time. The heavy slug buried itself in the corpse of the old Martian on the table. The face in the doorway vanished.

The next instant Penrun was through the door and racing down the long promenade deck under the glow of the electric lights, for the quartering sun was shining on the opposite side of the ship. Far down the deck ahead fled the slayer.

The killer paused long enough to drop an emergency bulkhead gate. Five minutes later when Penrun and the other passengers succeeded in raising it, he had disappeared. One of the emergency space-suits

beside the air-lock was missing. Penrun sprang to a nearby port-hole.

Far back in space he saw the tiny figure shining in the sunlight, while the long flame of his Sextle rocket-pistol showed that he was checking his forward momentum as rapidly as possible. Unquestionably he would be picked up by some craft now trailing the liner, for the murder and theft of the paper must have been carefully planned. Penrun turned from the port-hole thoughtfully.

The liner was in an uproar. News of the murder had spread like wild-fire. Women were screaming hysterically and men shouting as they rushed about in terror, believing that the ship was in the hands of pirates. A squad of sailors passed on the double to take charge of the buffet. There would be an inquest shortly. Penrun started for his stateroom. He wanted to be alone a few minutes before the inquest took place.

His room was on the deck above. The sight of the empty passage relieved him, but he was surprised to discover that he had not locked the door when he left an hour ago. He stepped into the room.

Instantly his hands shot upward. Something was prodding him in the back.

"One move or a sound, and I shoot," warned a sharp whisper. "Stand as you are till I find what I want."

His billfold was opened and dropped with an exclamation of disappointment. The searcher hurried. Penrun calmly noted that the fingers seemed to fumble and were not at all deft at this sort of work. He glanced down, and smiled grimly. A woman! He jerked his body away from the prodding pistol, gripped the slender hand that was about to plunge into his coat pocket, and whirled round, catching the intruder in his arms.

Big, terrified dark eyes stared up at him out of a pale, heart-shaped face. Then with a sob the girl wrenched free, ran out of the door and was gone.

He did not follow, but instead carefully locked the door and placed a chair against it. Things had been moving too rapidly for him to feel sure he was safe even now. Opening his left hand, he gazed down at a bit of crumpled yellow paper he was holding there. That much he had saved of the message from his long dead grandfather when the murderer grabbed the folded paper from the buffet table and fled.

It proved to be the bottom third of a sheet of heavy paper, and on it was drawn a piece of a map, showing a large semi-circle, which

might have been a lake, and leading off from it were what might be a number of crooked canals. At the end of one of these was an "X" and the word "Here."

Below the sketch were some words that had not been torn off. He read them with growing amazement. "... aves of Titan. I swear this to be the true and correct place of concealment of ... may he who comes to possess it do much good and penance, for it is drenched in blood and ... Captain Orion Halkon."

Penrun sat for a long time in thought. Titan, the sixth moon of Saturn! Nightmare of killing heat, iron cold, and monstrous spiders! How many men had died trying to explore it! And who knew it better than Penrun himself, the only one who had ever escaped from that hellish cavern of the Living Dead? Old Halkon had hidden his treasure well indeed.

Penrun had never found the Caves. Legend described them as the one safe place on the satellite where a man might live without danger of being attacked by the spiders because the Caves were too cold for them.

Penrun doubted if there was any place that would be safe from the monstrous insects.

At any rate old Halkon had hidden his treasure there, and that part of the map that Penrun had thought was a lake was apparently the main cavern, and the canals, side passages. Old Halkon believed that he had hidden his treasure well, but he could not foresee just how well. Two thirds of the map, showing the location of the entrance to the Caves, had been taken by the murderer of the Martian, Lozzo. The remaining third, which showed the location of the treasure inside the Caves, was in Penrun's possession.

The murderer could find the Caves, but not the treasure inside; and Penrun could find the treasure inside, but not the Caves.

Penrun folded up the crumpled bit of paper and placed it carefully in his shoe. Unless his guess was wrong, another attempt to get it would be made shortly. Undoubtedly the girl had by now reported her failure to the rest of the gang.

The inquest was brief. The white-sheeted body of the Martian lay on the table where he had been slain. The captain of the liner called Penrun as the chief witness. He told a straightforward story of a chance acquaintance with Lozzo who, he said, seemed to be afraid of something. He had declared, so Penrun testified, that he was being hounded for a map of some kind and he wanted Penrun to see it. Then the murder had been committed, the map was stolen, and the

murderer had fled. That was all, Penrun concluded, he knew about the matter.

Other passengers corroborated his story and he was dismissed.

Throughout the inquest Penrun studied the crowd of passengers that jammed the buffet, hoping he might catch a glimpse of the slender, dark-eyed girl who had tried to rob him. She was nowhere to be seen. He thought of telling the captain about her, but decided not to. She might make another attempt to get the map, and thereby give him the opportunity of rounding up the whole gang, or at least of learning who they were. He told himself grimly that if he could lay hold of her again, she would not escape so easily.

If Penrun didn't realize before that he was a marked man, it was impressed on him more forcefully three hours later on the lower deck when two men attacked him in the darkened passage near the stern. There was no time for pistols. A series of hurried fist-blows. He slugged his way free and fled to the safety of his stateroom.

Once there he locked the door and sat down to consider his position. It was obvious now that he would be followed to the outposts of space, if necessary, in an attempt to get the map from him.

After half an hour's hard thinking he tossed away his fourth cigarette, loosened the pistol in his armpit holster, and slipped out of the room. He went to the captain.

"You think, then, that your life is in danger because you happened to be talking to that old Martian when he was murdered?" asked the captain, when Penrun had finished.

"No question about it," declared Penrun. "Two attempts have been made already."

"Hmm," said the captain, frowning. "A most remarkably strange business. I've never had anything like it aboard my ship in the twenty years I've been traveling the Void."

"I can pay for the space-sphere," urged Penrun. "My certificate of credit will take care of it with funds to spare. All you have to do is to let me cast off at once. If any questions are asked, you can say it was my wish."

"Hmm! Really, Mr. Penrun, this is a most unusual request. I'm not inclined—"

He stared at the communication board. The meteor warning dial was

fluctuating violently, showing the presence of a rapidly approaching body—a meteor, or perhaps a flight of them. Gongs throughout the liner automatically began to sound a warning for the passengers to get into their space suits. The captain sat as though petrified.

Penrun sprang to the small visi-screen beside the board and snapped on the current. Swiftly he revolved the periscope aerial. There appeared on the screen the hull of a long, rakish, cigar-shaped craft which was overhauling the liner. The stranger was painted dead black and displayed no emblem.

"There's your meteor, Skipper," he remarked ironically. "And I am the attraction that is drawing it to your ship for another murder. Do I get the space-sphere?"

The captain sprang to his feet. "You get it, Penrun. You'll have to hurry. I want no more murders aboard my ship. Here, down this private stairs to the sphere air-lock. I'll make arrangements by phone. Once you are free of the liner I'll slow down so that the black ship will have to slow down, too. That will give you a chance to pull away and get a good start on them."

Five minutes later Penrun's newly acquired craft was sliding out of its air-lock in the belly of the monstrous liner. He pulled away and

glanced back.

The liner was already slowing down. The black pursuing craft was hidden by its vast, curving bulk. Penrun crowded on speed as swiftly as he dared. By the time the strange craft had made contact with the Western Star his little sphere had dwindled to a mere point of light in the black depths of space and vanished.

Penrun leaned over his charts grimly, as he set a new course for the sphere to follow. He, too, could play at this game. He'd carry the battle to the enemy's gate. Out to Titan he'd go and match his familiarity with the little planet against the superior numbers of his enemies.

Ten days later, Earth time, he was circling Titan, while he searched the grim, forbidden terrain beneath. After days of studying and speculation he had decided that the Caves must be situated in the Inferno Range, a place so particularly vicious that no man, so far as was known, had ever explored it. During the day the heat would boil eggs, and at night the sub-zero cold cracked great scales off the granite boulders. And here, too, lay the Trap-Door City of the monster spiders!

The grim, fantastic range soon appeared over the horizon, stabbing

its saw-tooth peaks far into the sky. Dawn was still lighting the world, and a great snow-storm, a howling, furious blizzard, concealed the lower slopes of the mountains. Penrun knew that presently the driving snow-flakes would change to rain-drops, and the shrieking, moaning voice of the gale would give way to the crashing, rolling thunder of the tempest. As the day advanced the storm would die abruptly and the clouds vanish under the deadly heat.

Then the Trap-Door City, which covered the slopes above the plateau at the three-thousand-foot level like a checker-board of shimmering, silken circles, would spring to febrile life as the spider monsters went streaking and leaping across the barren, distorted granite on the day's business, the hunt for food in the lowlands, and the opening of the trap-doors to gather in the heat of the day in the silken tunnel homes set in the gorges and among the boulders. At sunset the doors would all be closed, for then the rain and the electrical storm would return, and at night the blizzard. The storm-and-heat cycle was the deadly weather routine of the Infernos.

Penrun steered for a tall, cloven peak that towered high above the Trap-Door City. In its thin air and continuous cold he would be comparatively safe from marauding spider scouts, and from the peak he could watch not only the city of the monsters but the better part of

the Inferno Range as well.

He was convinced that before long the mysterious black craft would put in an appearance somewhere near this spot. Penrun knew it all too well. There by the cataract of the White River, half a mile across the plateau from the insect city, he had once been captured.

Next morning when he looked down on the plateau just below the Trap-Door City he laughed triumphantly. There sat the long black-hulled space craft he had seen overhauling the liner.

But a moment later he shook his head dubiously. Too brazen, that landing. It was almost in the insect city. Of course, the ship was large and heavily armed with ray-guns which poked out their sharp snouts here and there about the hull. None the less, an experienced explorer of Titan would never have flung such defiance at the spiders.

The city was feverishly alive with the monsters now. They gathered in groups to stare down at the strange craft, then raced away again, darting in and out of their trap-door homes and streaking here and there across the twisted, tortured granite of the mountainside. The Queen's palace, a vast, raised cocoon of shimmering, silken web, was a veritable bee-hive. Something was brewing!

Abruptly the trap-door homes vomited forth monstrous insects by the thousands which spread with prodigious speed along the mountainside. At an unseen signal they poured down upon the plateau and charged the space-ship.

The black craft's heavy ray-guns broke into life. Attacking monsters curled up and died as the rays bit into their onrushing ranks. The first wave melted, but an instant later the following waves buried the ship.

Insects in the rear darted here and there, dragging away dead and dying spiders. Here was food aplenty! The denizens of the Trap-Door City would live well on their dead for a few days.

Abruptly the attack ceased. The crackling ray-guns were still taking toll as the monsters scurried back to the safety of their city, leaving their dead piled high about the hull of the ship.

Penrun wondered if the monsters would abandon the heaps of their dead. He rather expected that frenzied efforts would be made to retrieve them for food. The problem was solved by those aboard the space-ship, for presently it rose a score of feet in the air and moved a few hundred yards nearer the waterfall that marked the headwaters of the White River.

At once a frantic wave of spiders swept down across the plateau scouring it clean of the dead monsters.

After that the Trap-Door City seemed deserted. Not a spider could be seen near the shining, circular doors. Only here and there crouched a huge, bristly warrior safe behind a jutting rock with his glittering eight eyes fixed on the motionless black ship below.

Again the weary waiting. Penrun could only hope that it would not be long before those aboard the black ship gave him some hint of where the entrance to the Caves might be. Time and again he trained his glasses on the ship only to drop them resignedly. But when noon had passed and the heat of the day was scorching the rock he did not drop his glasses when he looked through them once again. Instead he stood erect in horror and dismay.

A girl had dashed out of the air-lock of the ship. She seemed to be familiar. Then he recognized her as the girl who had tried to rob him aboard the Western Star. Her face was drawn with agony in the stifling, overpowering heat. She had advanced but a few yards, but she was already staggering uncertainly.

What in Heaven's name possessed her to try to venture out in that killing heat? She wasn't even dressed in a space-suit, which would

have protected her against heat as well as cold. There was the danger of the monster spiders! Rescue would have to be quick!

Even as the thought flashed through his mind he knew she was past saving. Down from the nearest pinnacle of rock streaked a gigantic spider.

The girl saw it, screamed, clutched her throat and fell. Ray-guns of the ship crackled frenziedly. In vain! The insect swept the helpless girl up in its powerful mandibles, sprang clear over the ship and was streaking back up among the rocks in a black blur of speed before the men inside the ship could train the guns on that side, even if they had dared to.

Penrun watched with fascinated dread. To the cavern of the Living Dead! The monster carrying the limp girlish form was now running up through the city toward it, guarded by two other huge insects that had appeared from nowhere. Through the entrance of the cavern they darted and disappeared.

Surely those aboard the ship would make an effort to rescue her, thought Penrun, tense with horror. At least they would retaliate by

raying the city with their heavy artillery. But no! The black ship only continued to rest there wavering in the heat. Penrun swore vividly. The cowards! Still, perhaps they were afraid to unlimber their heavy artillery for fear of killing the girl. Or perhaps, which was more likely, they thought she was already dead and devoured. Few persons knew about the Living Death.

Ah, well, he'd forget about her. She was an enemy, she was one of the group that was trying to rob and perhaps kill him. Perhaps her companions knew that she wouldn't be killed for two or three days, and would make an effort to rescue her. And perhaps they wouldn't.

But before an hour had passed Penrun knew that he was going to master his horror of that cavern and save her himself, or die in the attempt. He, and he alone, had been in the cavern of the Living Dead and knew what to expect—the fate that might be his as well as the girl's.

He wondered if that Englishman, that old man with the great beard who said he had known Shakespeare and Bacon personally, was still lying in his silken hammock at the far end of the cave. Know Shakespeare personally? Impossible! Yet was it more impossible than the cavern itself? The man's English was quaint and nearly unintelligible. His description of that comical old space-ship of brass

and wood was plausible. Perhaps he had known the Bard of Avon.

Night had descended when Penrun finally emerged from his little ship. The air was bitterly cold, and overhead the stars burned brilliantly. He paused to marvel a little that the Big Dipper, Cassiopeia, and the other constellations appeared just the same out here hundreds of millions of miles from Earth as they did at home. It made one feel infinitely small to realize the pinpoint size of the Solar Universe. He shivered for the temperature was nearly forty below zero, and snapped on the current of his Ecklin electro-heater which was connected with his clothing and would keep him warm even in that cold.

Another suit of slip-on clothes with an Ecklin heater, and his lounging moccasins were in a pack on his back. If he succeeded in releasing the girl, she would need them. The spider monsters didn't leave their Living Dead victims any clothing usually; and little good would it have done the Living Dead if they had.

Swiftly he descended the peak, leaping easily from rock to rock, thanks to the small gravity of the planet, and presently entered the clouds above the insect city. Abruptly the storm broke in all its fury with the shrieking of the gale and driving snow. In the blackness the pencil of light from his tiny flash showed only a few yards through

the swirling, driving flakes that bit and numbed his bare face. With pistol ready he forged slowly ahead toward the cavern of the Living Dead.

He bumped into the snow-covered rock before he realized he was close to the place. With every nerve alert and the shrieking, freezing gale forgotten he slipped the flashlight back into its holder and drew another pistol. The door, he recalled, opened inward. It was not fastened, but just inside the entrance crouched a gigantic insect on guard.

Penrun was tense and ready. He kicked the door so viciously that its elastic, silken frame sagged inward under the impact of his foot. Against the glow of the green light inside the cavern he saw a nightmarish monster rising to its feet. Both pistols stabbed viciously as the monster thrust forward a thick, bristly leg to shut the door again.

A ray bit off the leg at the second joint. The other ray ripped open the soft, tumid abdomen. Penrun had barely time to throw himself aside as the convulsed, dying monster hurled itself tigerishly forward through the doorway out into the driving storm in a final frenzied effort to seize and rend his frail human enemy.

Penrun slipped into the cavern. The deathly cold outside would finish the horrible insect. As he kicked the big door shut he was crouched and tense, for the ancient gray attendant monster whose poisoned bite had paralyzed thousands for this living hell was moving forward curiously.

Both pistols flamed to life. The fearsome head of the monster with its poisoned mandible shriveled to nothing under the searing rays. Penrun sprang backward and jerked open the door. Then he closed it again. The old spider was moving feebly. Instead of the galvanic death of the guard, the huge gray insect's legs buckled under it and it slumped down to the floor of the cave where it quivered a few seconds, then relaxed in death.

As Penrun stepped forward around the carcass the cave filled with hysterical screams and hoarse insane shouting of joy and terror. He looked up at the high vaulted roof where the strange diamond-shaped crystal diffused its green light along the shimmering silken web, then turned his gaze downward to the rock floor beneath his feet. At last he gritted his teeth and forced himself to look at the walls.

Again he saw tier upon tier of hammocks, each holding a naked human being, helpless and paralyzed from the poisoned bite of the

attendant monster spider. Some could weep, some could smile, some could talk, yet none could move either hand or foot. A few were mercifully unconscious, but the rest were not. Many were insane. Yet they all lay alike year after year, century after century, if need be, kept alive by the rays of the strange green light in the roof. This was the cavern of the Living Dead!

Penrun knew the tragic future of these unfortunates. A few, perhaps, would go as food for the Queen in times of famine. The remainder would become living incubators for the larvae of the Queen which would be planted in their living bodies by the monster attendant to eat away the vitals until death mercifully ended the victim's life, and the growing spider emerged to feed on a new victim, or to go its way.

A thousand helpless human beings swung in their silken hammocks awaiting their fate. Penrun had learned about them during those two horrible days he had been held prisoner here before he had succeeded in raying the novice attendant and the monster guard with the pistol from his armpit holster that the spiders had overlooked when they captured him. He recalled again how he had dashed frantically from hammock to hammock trying to rouse some of the Living Dead to escape with him. Not one of them could respond.

Reports to the Interplanetary Council? He had made them, written and oral, and had only been laughed at for a half-crazy explorer. The Council would not even investigate.

Now Penrun did not tarry. He strode swiftly back to the far end of the cavern.

"The girl who was just brought in, is she safe?" he asked hoarsely.

None seemed to know, but presently he knew she was still unhurt, for he found her bound hand and foot to the rock wall with heavy silken webs. Nearly all her clothing had been torn off her. She looked up hopelessly. A great fear appeared in her eyes.

"You!" she gasped. "Are you responsible for this?"

"I have come for you," he replied in a matter-of-fact tone, swiftly removing the pack from his back.

She cowered against the wall.

"You—you inhuman beast!" Her face was white with horror.

He cut the silken bonds.

"Don't be a fool!" he said roughly. "I have no power over these monsters. Hurry into those clothes! Do you want to be bitten in the small of the back and lie paralyzed for years in a hammock like these other unfortunates, then suffer untold agony for months while spiders' larvae eat out your vitals? Hurry, I say! We must get out of here at once!"

He turned away. He wanted to see that old Englishman who said he had known Shakespeare. His wish was in vain. The old man's sightless eyes stared up at the silken roof. The long, heavy beard that lay across the breast stirred. The beady, glittering eyes of an infant spider peeped out. Penrun uttered a curse of loathing. His pistol stabbed death into the foul insect.

He felt a touch on his arm. The girl was waiting.

"I am ready," she said quietly. "Oh, let us hurry!"

Dawn was lighting the world outside, and the driving blizzard was already changing to rain. Penrun seized the girl's hand and ran madly up the mountainside toward the peak. The spiders usually did not venture out in the rain, but in the face of danger from the ship they would be abroad as early as possible this morning.

Penrun suddenly spurted madly. Half a dozen gigantic spiders were moving cautiously along the lower edge of the city, their bodies looming up grotesquely in the misty rain. The girl stumbled, struck her head against a boulder, and lay still. Penrun caught her up in his arms and sprinted madly up the steep slope.

A rock loosened by his flying feet rattled and pounded down the hillside. Instantly the monsters whirled round, sighted him and started in pursuit. With a mighty leap he cleared a ten-foot ledge, carrying his unconscious burden, and plunged into the sheltering mist of the clouds. Up, up! Thank God for the weak gravity!

A swishing rattle of claws on rock shot by them in the fog, turned and swept back. Penrun sprang straight upward, rising nearly a dozen feet in the air as the monsters streaked past underneath.

Only a little farther! Savagely he forced his failing strength to carry them up the slope. The air was chilling fast and the mist thinning. He broke into clear air as the fog behind them filled with the rattle of racing claws on the barren granite and the grating roar of the baffled monsters, seeking frantically for their intended victims.

He staggered on another hundred yards before he collapsed with lungs laboring desperately in the rarefied air.

Below them a bristly monster charged out of the fog, sighted them lying up among the rocks, and leaped after them. Penrun jerked up a pistol with trembling fingers and loosed its deadly ray. The huge spider stumbled and ploughed head-on among the rocks with a flurry of legs. It rose loggily, for its fierce energy was dwindling rapidly in the biting cold. Again the pistol crackled. The gigantic insect toppled over and rolled down the mountainside into the fog and vanished.

"Are we safe now?"

Penrun turned. The girl was now sitting up somewhat unsteadily, with an ugly bruise on her forehead.

"I think so," he replied. "Up there in my space-sphere we shall be quite safe."

Together they plodded silently up the sharp incline of the peak, her hand in his. And as they went he marveled that her eyes could be so beautiful now that the fear and horror had vanished from their depths.

The storm clouds below had broken up and dissolved under the increasing heat, revealing the Trap-Door City, seemingly deserted, and the motionless black ship still resting on the plateau. Penrun

turned to the girl beside him in the control nest of the space-sphere.

"What are your friends waiting for all this time?" he asked abruptly.

"They're not my friends," she retorted. "And you might have guessed that they are waiting for you to arrive with the other third of the map. They are planning to surprise you and rob you of it. The entrance to the Caves is under the edge of the Cataract over there, and by waiting here they are sure to be on hand when you arrive. Only"—her brows puckered in a little frown—"I don't understand why they remain out there on the open rock after Helgers has picked a hiding-place for the ship."

"Helgers?"

"He is the leader of the gang, and he is the man who killed that poor old Martian aboard the Western Star for the map. Helgers learned about the treasure and the existence of the map through a convict who was with Lozzo in the prison. Helgers pretends to be an importer in Chicago—he actually owns a nice little business there—but in reality he is one of the biggest smugglers in the Universe."

"How do you come to be with him?"

"I was coming to that," she replied. "My parents live on Ganymede."

Penrun nodded. He was familiar with the fourth satellite of Jupiter and its fertile provinces.

"My father is an American, but my grandfather on my mother's side was a Medan nobleman. He was ruined by that notorious pirate, Captain Halkon, who descended with his ships on our city and carried off everything of value, including the vast amount of scrip credits owned by the state which were entrusted to my grandfather. You know the Ganymedan debtor's law?"

He did indeed! It was one of the most infamous laws of the Universe: ruling that the debts of the father descended to the children and their children's children until paid.

"My family is now poor," she went on. "For a century or more we have striven to pay off the debt caused by the loss of those state funds. That's the way matters stood when I received a letter from my brother Tom in Chicago, who was employed in the office of Helgers' legitimate importing business, little aware of the smuggling. Tom had somehow got wind of the near discovery of Halkon's treasure, and I saw a chance to get a part of it by joining Helgers' party. He might not want us, but he would be practically forced to take us to

keep our mouths shut. I felt that we were honestly entitled to a part of that treasure which had been stolen from our family, and with it we could pay off that old debt that had ridden our family like an Old Man of the Sea for more than a century.

"Getting into the expedition proved much simpler than I had expected. When Tom told Helgers about me he was very eager to help us—he is one of those men who is always anxious to help a girl if he thinks she is good-looking enough. So you see when I held you up in your stateroom I was merely performing my part of the scheme, although I didn't know then that Helgers had already slain the old Martian and leaped out into space.

"After that the Osprey—the ship down there on the plateau—overhauled the Western Star and took us off, and shortly afterward I learned most unpleasantly that Helgers had no intention of giving Tom and me our share unless I gave myself to him in exchange. I told Tom, and trouble started. It came to a head yesterday and there was a fight and—and Helgers killed Tom."

She began to weep quietly. Penrun stared grimly down at the black, motionless ship. Presently the girl resumed her story.

"I managed to get the air-lock open and escaped from the ship. Then

that horrid spider caught me. You know the rest."

Her voice trailed off. Penrun remained silent for a while.

"You haven't even told me your name," he reminded her gently.

"Irma Boardle," she replied with a wan smile.

"I am Dick Penrun, in case you don't already know me. Captain Halkon was my grandfather. We always tried to keep the knowledge of it a family secret, since we were ashamed of it. If I—we get our hands on that treasure, I can promise you that the debt hanging over your family shall be paid first, Miss Boardle."

"Not Miss Boardle. Call me Irma," she said, the wan smile growing suddenly warm.

Penrun looked at her thoughtfully.

"But we aren't near the treasure yet," he said. "Between the spider monsters and the human monsters in the ship, our chances are rather slim. We'll just have to wait until we get a break."

As the day wore on there was a note of menace in the silence that hung over the Trap-Door City. It was nothing tangible, unless it was

the appearance of two long silvery rods mounted on the top of the huge cocoon-palace of the Queen aiming down at Helgers' ship. Penrun could have sworn they were not there yesterday. The sight of them made him uneasy.

Helgers must have interpreted the silence differently, for presently a man emerged from the ship, protected against the heat by a clumsy space-suit. He hesitated, then walked slowly away from the ship, and paused again, waiting for the spiders to attack. Not a movement was made in the city. Presently he moved on again toward the cataract which had dwindled in the heat of the day to a mere trickle of hot water down to the pool in the gorge more than half a mile below.

After a time the man reached the cataract. He descended the short path that led down under the lip of rock to another ledge a few feet below it. The entrance to the Caves opened out onto this lower ledge. Little wonder, thought Penrun, that no one knew where the Caves were.

Some time later two other men from the ship followed him.

"Fools!" muttered Penrun, following them through his glasses. "They think the spiders are afraid of their ray artillery. I'll bet the monsters are either waiting until all the men wander out of the ship,

or else they're getting ready to spring some hellish surprise."

Other men came out of the ship, carrying rock drills, a roll of cable and a powerful little windlass. Instead of going to the Caves, they went round the ship to the other side under the doubtful protection of the ray-guns, and sank two shafts into the granite. Into these they drove steel posts and anchored the windlass. One end of the cable was attached to the windlass and the other to the nose of the ship. Then they slowly dragged the big craft across the plateau on rollers from the ship's store room.

"That's strange!" exclaimed Penrun. "The ship can't rise! I wonder what's wrong, and why they are pulling it away from instead of toward the Caves."

"I don't know what's the matter with the ship, but I believe I know why they are moving it," volunteered Irma. "They're taking it to that hiding-place I told you Helgers picked out—there behind that upthrust of rock. You see, they think you know where the Caves are because you have explored Titan, and they think you will come directly here, so they want the ship hidden to make sure you land."

Half a hundred men in their space-suits toiled like ants about the big cylindrical craft until they at last jockeyed it into position behind the

natural screen of rock. Even before it was in place other men were swarming over the ship with paint machines, coloring it a granite gray. When they had finished the ship was nearly invisible from the sky.

Penrun paid little attention to their preparations. His attention was centered on those two shining rods atop the Queen's silken palace. They now aimed at the ship in its new position. A strange idea flashed through his mind. Those rods had in some mysterious way put the elevating machinery of the Osprey out of commission!

Suppose the spiders turned them next on his own space-sphere up here on the peak? The thought sent a shudder through him. Visions of the final flight across the nightmarish, distorted granite, the running down and capture of himself and Irma, the paralyzing bite of the monsters in the cavern of the Living Dead flashed across his mind. Cold sweat stood out on his forehead. Instinctively his hand leaped to the propulsion control and hovered there.

Yet why hadn't the spiders attacked the ship, now that they had it helpless? It was not their usual tactics to give their victims a chance to free themselves. Why, why? There could be only one answer. They were waiting for something! Penrun's eyes glinted suddenly.

"Irma," he said rapidly, "we are in serious danger. The spiders have obviously put the elevating machinery of the Osprey out of commission. Helgers and his men are doomed to the Living Death as surely as though they were already lying in the silken hammocks. If the monsters choose, they could do the same thing to our sphere and doom us to the same fate. I believe they are waiting for something. While they wait we have a chance to get the treasure and escape. Shall we risk it, or shall we go while we know we are safe?"

She looked up at him evenly.

"If you think we have a fair chance to get the treasure and escape, I say let's risk it," she said firmly.

"Good!" he exclaimed. "Here we go!"

The little sphere slipped out of its cleft in the peak and dropped swiftly into the valley on the side opposite the Trap-Door City and its mysterious menace. Day was swiftly dying, and the lower passes of the mountains were already hazy with rapidly forming storm-clouds.

"Look!" cried Irma excitedly. "What are those things?"

Far in the distance a long line of wavering red lights snaked swiftly through the dusky valley toward them. Penrun picked up his binoculars.

"Spiders," he announced. "Scores of them. Each is carrying a sort of red torch. I have a feeling that those are what the monsters of the Trap-Door City have been waiting for."

He urged the sphere to swifter flight along the range. Miles from the Caves, he swept up over the peaks, and dropped down on the lowlands side. Dusk was deepening rapidly as he raced back toward the White River cataract under the pall of the gathering storm.

Among the boulders on the rough mountainside near the mouth of the Caves he eased the craft down to a gentle landing.

"Wait here," he told Irma. "I'll investigate and see if it is safe to enter the Caves."

They had seen the three men return to the ship, but others might have gone to the Caves after that. Penrun made his way down the slope to the lip of the cataract and the yawning blackness of the abysmal gorge below it.

Overhead the storm was gathering swiftly, and the saffron light of the dying day illuminated the plateau eerily. Half a mile away the Trap-Door City shimmered fantastically in the uncertain light. Penrun repressed a shudder. The Devil's own playground! Thank God, he and Irma would be out of it soon!

He crept down the narrow path that led under the ledge of the trickling cataract. Outside, a bolt of lightning stabbed down from the darkened heavens. Its lurid flash revealed the huge figure of a man, pistol in hand, beside the entrance to the Caves.

Too late to retreat now, even had he wished to. Penrun's weapon flashed first. A scream of pain and fury answered the flash, and the man's pistol clattered down on the rock. The next instant Penrun was helpless in the clutch of a mighty pair of arms that tried to squeeze the life out of him.

"Burn, me, will ye, ye dirty scum!" roared the giant of a man tightening his grip. "I'll break your damned back for ye and heave ye into the gorge!"

Penrun writhed frenziedly, trying to twist his pistol around against his enemy's back, while they struggled desperately about the ledge above the dizzy blackness of the gorge. But the pistol struck the wall

beside the entrance and fell under their trampling feet.

Penrun was gasping in agony at the intolerable pain in his spine. Darting points of light danced before his eyes. Then from the opening in the rock showed a beam of white light and a man slowly emerged from the Caves. The grip on Penrun relaxed slightly as the man came toward the two combatants. Penrun could distinguish him closely now. A heavy, pasty face with liquid black eyes and a crown of thinning hair. Helgers! He was staggering and grunting under the weight of a heavy metal box.

"What's the matter, Borgain?" he asked.

"Got this bird, Penrun, we been waitin' for!"

"We don't need him, now that we already have the treasure. Still, it's a good thing we found him. Just as well to have no tales circulating about the Universe about our find. Toss him into the gorge, and go down and watch the other three chests until I get—"

"Dick, Dick!" Irma's excited voice floated down from up among the boulders. "The spiders with those red cylinder torches have arrived! They are attacking the Osprey!"

Helgers jerked up his head.

"Why, if it isn't the little spitfire!" he exclaimed in pleased astonishment. "I thought the damned spiders had eaten her long before this. Rather changes things, Borgain. I'll just go on up and let my little playmate know I am here. Toss our friend over the edge there, and bring up another treasure chest."

"What was that she was sayin' about the spiders attackin' the Osprey?" Borgain's voice was anxious.

"Oh, that's nothing the boys can't handle," said Helgers confidently. "In case they don't, we'll have to feel sorry for them and take our friend's sphere. Only have to split the treasure two ways, in that case," he added, moving up the slope.

Borgain's answer was a grunt of surprise, for his captive had squirmed suddenly out of his clutch. The big man plunged forward recklessly with arms outstretched in the groping darkness. Penrun, desperately remembering the sickening drop at their feet to the pool three thousand feet below, backed against the rock.

A flash of lightning. Borgain's ape-like arms were nearing him. Penrun lashed out at the darkened features. His knuckles bit deep

into the flesh. He slipped aside as Borgain, mouthing fearful curses, rammed into the rock wall and rebounded.

Again the fumbling search. Another lightning flash. Penrun struck with frenzied desperation. Borgain took the blow behind the ear and staggered. He whirled, wild with fury, and charged vainly along the narrow ledge.

"I'll get ye this time, damn your dirty carcass—ugh!"

Guided by the sound of his voice, Penrun struck with all his strength. Borgain's nose flattened under the blow. He whirled half around.

"I'll kill ye! I'll kill—help, help—a-ah!"

Lost in the blackness he had plunged over the lip of the rock, thinking he was charging Penrun. Down into the yawning gorge his body hurtled, the sound of his frenzied, dwindling screams floating up eerily out of the black, ominous depths.

Penrun crouched against the wall, sick and trembling. Irma, Helgers! He must hurry! He fumbled again for the pistols. They were gone. Crawling forward now, still shaken by his narrow escape from death, he gained the pathway. The rain was drumming wildly on the barren

granite now, and the pitch-blackness was shattered only by ghastly lightning bolts.

Guided by the flashes, he clambered up the slope and halted abruptly. The door of the space-sphere was open, and, silhouetted against the soft glow of light within it, was Irma, seated dejectedly with bowed head, heedless of the cold rain beating down upon her. Helgers was nowhere to be seen. Penrun dashed forward.

"Irma, Irma!" he cried. "What has happened? Where is he?"

She raised her head slowly and stared at him as at one risen from the dead. Then she burst into tears.

"He said they had killed you—had thrown your body into the gorge," she sobbed. "I—I just didn't want to live after that. Are you hurt?"

"Not a bit," he assured her fervently. "But where is Helgers?"

"I pistoled him," she said quietly. "I had no choice. He came at me after I warned him to keep away. He fell over there among the rocks. Oh, Dick, let us hurry away from this mad place!"

He stared at the rain-swept rocks. The heavy metal treasure chest lay a few yards away where Helgers had dropped it. Penrun moved

cautiously toward the spot where he had fallen. He was gone. The rain had washed away any traces of blood that might have remained.

While Penrun hesitated, the roar of the tempest was split by a man's scream of agony. A lurid flash of lightning an instant later revealed a gigantic spider down by the cataract with Helgers' struggling body in his mandible jaws. Returning blackness blotted out the scene.

Irma's pistol stabbed a ray through the driving rain at the hideous monster. Instantly its grating roar for help rang out, and a group of red lights from the doomed Osprey across the plateau, detached themselves from the others and came streaking for the cataract.

Penrun seized the heavy treasure chest and staggered to the sphere.

"Hurry, here they come!" screamed the girl.

He fell through the door with his burden just as the foremost monster leaped the river. The next instant Irma sent the sphere rocketing upward. Just before they plunged into the clouds they caught a last glimpse of the Osprey with her ray guns melted off by the red cylinder torches, and great holes gaping in her sides through which the monsters were carrying out the members of the crew to their cavern of the Living Dead.

As the sphere burst through the storm cloud into the frigid air above it, Irma gave a cry and pointed at the peak where they had hidden in the sphere. The peak was now alive with moving red lights of monsters searching vainly for them. The scene dropped swiftly below as the sphere gathered speed for its homeward journey.

"We got only a small portion of the treasure, but it will be enough," said Penrun. "After we pay your family's debt, I want to spend a hundred thousand or so for a specially chartered battle-sphere which will come back here to Titan. If the Interplanetary Council will do nothing about the Trap-Door City, I shall, independently. Not rays, but good old primitive bombs such as they used back in the Twentieth Century. I'll blow the hellish place off the face of the map and with it the cavern of the Living Dead. I think those lying in the hammocks would thank me for releasing them in that way."

149 Disowned by Victor A Endersby

The tragic misadventure of a man to whom the sky became an appalling abyss, drawing him ever upward.

Aproximate word count: 7,400

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

The sky sagged downward, bellying blackly with a sudden summer rain, giving me a vision of catching my train in sodden clothing after the short-cut across the fields, which I was taking in company with my brother Tristan and his fiancée.

The sullen atmosphere ripped apart with an electric glare; our ears quivered to the throbbing sky, while huge drops, jarred loose from the air by the thunder-impact, splattered sluggishly, heavily, about us. Little breezes swept out from the storm center, lifting the undersides of the long grass leaves to view in waves of lighter green. I complained peevishly.

"Ah, mop up!" said Tristan. "You've plenty of time, and there's the big oak! It's as dry under there as a cave!"

"I think that'll be fun!" twittered Alice. "To wait out a thunder-storm under a tree!"

"Under a tree?" I said. "Hardly! I'm not hankering to furnish myself as an exhibit on the physiological effects of a lightning stroke—no, sir!"

"Rats!" said Tristan. "All that's a fairy-tale—trees being dangerous in a thunder-storm!"

The rain now beat through our thin summer clothing, as Tristan seized Alice's hand and towed her toward the spreading shelter. I followed them at first, then began to lag with an odd unwillingness. I had been only half serious in my objection, but all at once that tree exercised an odd repulsion on me; an imaginary picture of the electric fluid coursing through my shriveling nerve-channels grew unpleasantly vivid.

Suddenly I knew I was not going under that tree. I stopped dead, pulling my hat brim down behind to divert the rivulet coursing down the back of my neck, calling to the others in a voice rather cracked

from embarrassment. They looked back at me curiously, and Alice began to twit me, standing in the rain, while Tristan desired to know whether we thought we were a pair of goldfish; in his estimation, we might belong to the piscine tribe all right, but not to that decorative branch thereof. To be frank, he used the term "suckers." Feeling exceptionally foolish, I planted myself doggedly in the soaking grass as Alice turned to dash for the tree.

Then the thing happened; the thing which to this hour makes the fabric of space with its unknown forces seem an insecure and eery garment for the body of man. Over the slight rise beyond the tree, as the air crackled, roared and shook under the thunder-blasts, there appeared an object moving in long, leisurely bounds, drifting before the wind, and touching the ground lightly each time. It was about eighteen inches in diameter, globular, glowing with coruscating fires, red, green, and yellow; a thing of unearthly and wholly sinister beauty.

Alice poised with one foot half raised, and shrieked at Tristan, half terrified, half elated at the sight. He wheeled quickly, there under the tree, and slowly backed away as the thing drifted in to keep him company in his shelter. We could not see his face, but there was a stiffness to his figure indicating something like fear. Suddenly things I had read rose into my memory. This was one of those objects

variously called "fire-balls," "globe-lightning," "meteors," and the like.

I also recalled the deadly explosive potencies said to be sometimes possessed by such entities, and called out frantically:

"Tristan! Don't touch it! Get away quickly, but don't disturb the air!"

He heard me and, as the object wavered about in the comparative calm under the tree, drifting closer to him, started to obey. But it suddenly approached his face, and seized with a reckless terror, he snatched off his hat and batted at it as one would at a pestilent bee. Instantly there was a blinding glare, a stunning detonation, and a violent air-wave which threw me clear off my feet and to the ground. I sat up blindly with my vision full of opalescent lights and my ears ringing, unable to hear, see, or think.

Slowly my senses came back; I saw Alice struggling upright in the grass before me. She cast a quick glance toward the tree, then, still on her knees, covered her face and shuddered. For a long time, it seemed, I gazed toward the tree without sight conveying any mental effect whatever. Quite aside from my dazed state, the thing was too bizarre; it gave no foothold to experience for the erection of understanding.

My brother's body lay, or hung, or rested—what term could describe it?—with his stomach across the *under* side of a large limb a few feet above where he had stood. He was doubled up like a hairpin, his abdomen pressed tightly up against this bough, and his arms, legs and head extended stiffly, straightly, skyward.

Getting my scattered faculties and discoordinate limbs together, I made my way to the tree, the gruesome thought entering my mind that Tristan's body had been transfixed by some downward-pointing snag as it was blown up against the limb, and that the strange stiffness of his limbs was due to some ghastly sudden rigor mortis brought on by electric shock. Dazed with horror and grief, I reached up to his clothing and pulled gently, braced for the shock of the falling body. It remained immovable against the bough. A harder tug brought no results either. Gathering up all my courage against the vision of the supposed snag tearing its rough length out of the poor flesh, I leaped up, grasping the body about chest and hips, and hung. It came loose at once, without any tearing resistance such as I had expected, but manifesting a strong elastic pull upward, as though some one were pulling it with a rope; as I dropped back to the ground with it, the upward resistance remained unchanged. Nearly disorganized entirely by this phenomenon, it occurred to me that his belt or some of his clothing was still caught, and I jerked sidewise to pull it loose. It did not loosen, but I found myself suddenly out from

under the tree, my brother dragging upward from my arms until my toes almost left the ground. And there was obviously no connection between him and the tree—or between him and anything else but myself, for that matter. At this I went weak; my arms relaxed despite my will, and an incredible fact happened: I found the body sliding skyward through my futile grasp. Desperately I got my hands clasped together about his wrist, this last grip almost lifting me from the earth; his legs and remaining arm streamed fantastically skyward. Through the haze which seemed to be finally drowning my amazed and tortured soul, I knew that my fingers were slipping through one another, and that in another instant my brother would be gone. Gone—where? Why and how?

There was a sudden shriek, and the impact of a frantic body against mine, as Alice, whom I had quite forgotten, made a skyward running jump and clasped the arm frantically to her bosom with both her own. With vast relief, I loosed my cramped fingers—only to feel her silken garments begin to slide skyward against my cheek. It was more instinct than sense which made me clutch at her legs. God, had I not done that! As it was, I held both forms anchored with only a slight pull, waiting dumbly for the next move—quite *non compos* by this time, I think.

"Quick, Jim!" she shrieked. "Quick, under the tree! I can't hold him

long!"

Very glad indeed to be told what to do, I obeyed. Under her direction we got the body under a low limb and wedged up against it, where with our feet both now on the ground, we balanced it with little effort. Feverishly, once more at her initiative, we took off our belts and strapped it firmly; whereupon we collapsed in one another's arms, shuddering, beneath it.

The blasé reader may consider that we here manifested the characters of sensitive weaklings. But let him undergo the like! The supernatural, or seemingly so, has always had power to chill the hottest blood. And here was an invisible horror reaching out of the sky for its prey, without any of the ameliorating trite features which would temper an encounter with the alleged phenomena of ghostland.

For a time we sat under that fatal tree listening to the dreary drench of rain pouring off the leaves, quivering nerve-shaken to the thunderclaps. Lacking one another, we had gone mad; it was the beginning of a mutual dependence in the face of the unprecedented, which was to grow to something greater during the bizarre days to follow.

There was no need of words for each of us to know that the other was struggling frantically for a little rational light on the *outre* catastrophe in which we were entangled.

It never once occurred to us that my brother might still be alive—until a long shuddering groan sounded above us. In combined horror and joy we sprang up. He was twisting weakly in the belts, muttering deliriously. We unfastened him and pulled him to the ground, where I sat on his knees while she pressed down on his shoulders, and so kept him recumbent, both horrified at the insistent lift of his body under us.

She kissed him frantically and stroked his cheeks, I feeling utterly without resource. He grew stronger, muttered wildly, and his eyes opened, staring upward through the tree limbs. He became silent, and stiffened, gazing fixedly upward with a horror in his wild blue gaze which chilled our blood. What did he see there—what dire other-world thing dragging him into the depths of space? Shortly his eyes closed, and he ceased to mutter.

I took his legs under my arms—the storm was clearing now—and we set out for home with gruesomely buoyant steps, the insistent pull remaining steady. Would it increase? We gazed upward with terrified eyes, becoming calmer by degree as conditions remained

unchanged.

When the country house loomed near across the last field, Alice faltered:

"Jim, we can't take him right in like this!"

I stopped.

"Why not?"

"Oh, because—because—it's too ridiculously awful. I don't know just how to say it—oh, can't you see it yourself?"

In a dim way, I saw it. No cultured person cares to be made a center of public interest, unless on grounds of respect. To come walking in in this fashion, buoyed balloon-like by the body of this loved one, and before the members of a frivolous, gaping house party—ah, even I could imagine the mingled horror and derision, the hysterics among the women, perhaps. Nor would it stop there. Rumors—and heaven only knows what distortions such rumors might undergo, having their source in the incredible—would range our social circle like wildfire. And the newspapers, for our families are established and known—no, it wouldn't go.

I tied Tristan to a stile and called up Jack Briggs, our host, from a neighboring house, explained briefly that Tristan had met with an accident, asked him to say nothing, and explained where to bring the machine. In ten minutes he had maneuvered the heavy sedan across the rough wet fields. And then we had another problem on our hands: to let Jack into what had happened without shocking him into uselessness. It was not until we got him to test Tristan's eery buoyancy with his own hands that we were able to make him understand the real nature of our problem. And after that, his comments remained largely gibberish for some time. However, he was even quicker than we were to see the need for secrecy—he had vivid visions of the political capital which opposing newspapers would make of any such occurrence at his party—and so we arranged a plan. According to which we drove to the back of the house, explained to the curious who rushed out that Tristan had been injured by a stroke of lightning, and rushed the closely wrapped form up to his room, feeling a great relief at having something solid between us and the sky. While Jack went downstairs to dismiss the party as courteously as possible, Alice and I tied my brother to the bed with trunk straps. Whereupon the bed and patient plumped lightly but decisively against the ceiling as soon as we removed our weight. While we gazed upward open mouthed, Jack returned. His faculties were recovering better than ours, probably because his affections were not so involved, and he gave the answer at once.

"Ah, hell!" said he. "Pull the damn bed down and spike it to the floor!" This we did. Then we held a short but intense consultation. Whatever else might be the matter, obviously Tristan was suffering severely from shock and, for all we knew, maybe from partial electrocution. So we called up Dr. Grosnoff in the nearest town.

Grosnoff after our brief but disingenuous explanation, threw off the bed covers in a business-like way, then straightened up grimly.

"And may I ask," he said with sarcastic politeness, "since when a strait-jacket has become first-aid for a case of lightning stroke?"

"He was delirious," I stammered.

"Delirious my eye! He's as quiet as a lamb. And you've tied him down so tightly that the straps are cutting right into him! Of all the—the—" He stopped, evidently feeling words futile, and before we could make an effective attempt to stop him, whipped out a knife and cut the straps. Tristan's unfortunate body instantly crashed against the ceiling, smashing the lathing and plaster, and remaining half embedded in the ruins. A low cry of pain rose from Alice. Dr. Grosnoff staggered to a chair and sat down, his eyes fixed on the ceiling with a steady stare—the odd caricature of a man coolly studying an interesting phenomenon.

My brother appeared to be aroused by the shock, struggling about in his embedment, and finally sat up. Up? *Down*, I mean. Then he *stood*, *on the ceiling*, and began to walk! His nose had been bruised by the impact, and I noticed with uncomprehending wonder that the blood moved slowly *upward* over his lip. He saw the window, and walked across the ceiling to it upside down. There he pushed the top of the window down and leaned out, gazing up into the sky with some sort of fascination. Instantly he crouched on the ceiling, hiding his eyes, while the house rang with shriek after shriek of mortal terror, speeding the packing of the parting guests. Alice seized my arm, her fingers cutting painfully into the flesh.

"Jim," she screamed. "I see it now—don't you? His gravity's all changed around—he weighs *up*! He thinks the sky's *under* him!"

The human mind is so constructed that merely to name a thing oddly smooths its unwonted outlines to the grasp of the mind; the conception of a simple reversal of my brother's weight, I think, saved us all from the padded cell. That made it so commonplace, such an everyday sort of thing, likely to happen to anybody. The ordinary phenomenon of gravitation is no whit more mysterious, in all truth, than that which we were now witnessing—but we are born to *it*!

Dr. Grosnoff recovered in a manner which showed considerable caliber.

"Well," he grunted, "that being the case, we'd best be looking after him. Nervous shock, possible electric shock and electric burns, psychasthenia—that's going to be a long-drawn affair—bruises, maybe a little concussion, and possibly internal injury—that was equivalent to a ten-foot unbroken fall flat on his stomach, and I'll never forgive myself if.... Get me a chair!"

With infinite care and reassuring words, the big doctor with our help pulled my brother down, the latter frantically begging us not to let him "fall" again. Holding him securely on the bed and trying to reassure him, Grosnoff said:

"Straps and ropes won't do. His whole weight hangs in them—they'll cut him unmercifully. Take a sheet, tie the corners with ropes, and let him lie in that like a hammock!"

It took many reassurances as to the strength of this arrangement before Tristan was at comparative peace. Dr. Grosnoff effected an examination by slacking off the ropes until Tristan lay a couple of feet clear of the bed, then himself lay on the mattress face up, prodding the patient over.

The examination concluded, he informed us that Tristan's symptoms were simply those of a general physical shock such as would be expected in the case of a man standing close to the center of an explosion, though from our description of the affair he could not understand how my brother had survived at all. The glimmering of an explanation of this did not come until a long time afterward. So far as physical condition was concerned, Tristan might expect to recover fully in a matter of weeks. Mentally—the doctor was not so sure. The boy had gone through a terrible experience, and one which was still continuing—might continue no one knew how long. We were, said the doctor, up against a trick played by the great Sphinx, Nature, and one which, so far as he knew, had never before taken place in the history of all mankind.

"There is faintly taking shape in my mind," he said, "the beginning of a theory as to how it came about. But it is a theory having many ramifications and involving much in several lines of science, with most of which I am but little acquainted. For the present I have no more to say than that if a theory of causation can be worked out, it will be the first step toward cure. But—it may be the only step. Don't build hopes!"

Looking Alice and me over carefully, he gave us a each a nerve sedative and departed, leaving us with the feeling that here was a

man of considerably wider learning than might be expected of a small-town doctor. In point of fact, we learned that this was the case. The specialist has been described as a "man who knows more and more about less and less." In Dr. Grosnoff's mind, the "less and less" outweighed the "more and more."

Tristan grew stronger physically; mentally, he was intelligent enough to help us and himself by keeping his mind as much as possible off his condition, sometimes by sheer force of will. Meantime, Dr. Grosnoff, realizing that his patient could not be kept forever tied in bed, had assisted me in preparing for his permanent care at home. The device was simple; we had just taken his room, remodeled the ceiling as a floor, and fitted it with furniture upside down. Most of the problems involved in this were fairly simple. The matter of a bath rather stumped us for a while, until we hit upon a shower. The jets came up from under Tristan's feet, from the point of view of his perceptions; he told us that one of the strangest of all his experiences was to see the waste water swirl about in the pan *over* his head, and being sucked up the drain as though drawn by some mysterious magnet.

My brother and I shared a flat alone, so there was no servant problem to deal with. But he was going to need care as well as companionship, and I had to earn my living. For Alice, it was a case

where the voice of the heart chimed with that of necessity; and I was best man at perhaps the weirdest marriage ceremony which ever took place on this earth. Held down in bed with the roped sheet, all betraying signs carefully concealed, Tristan was married to Alice by an unsuspecting dominie who took it all for one of those ordinary, though romantic sick-bed affairs.

From the first, Tristan felt better and more secure in his special quarters, and was now able to move about quite freely within his limits; though such were his mental reactions that for his comfort we had to refinish the floor to look like a plaster ceiling, to eliminate as far as possible the upside-down suggestions left in the room, and to keep the windows closely shaded. I soon found that the sight of me, or any one else, walking upside down—to him—was very painful; only in the case of Alice did other considerations remove the unpleasantness.

Little by little the accumulation of experience brought to my mind the full and vivid horror of what the poor lad had suffered and was suffering. Why, when he had looked out of that window into the sky, he was looking *down* into a bottomless abyss, from which he was sustained only by the frail plaster and planking under his feet! The whole earth, with its trees and buildings, was suspended over his head, seemingly about to fall at any moment with him into the

depths; the sun at noon glared *upward* from the depths of an inferno, lighting from *below* the somber earth suspended overhead! Thus the warm comfort of the sun, which has cheered the heart of man from time immemorial, now took on an unearthly, unnatural semblance. I learned that he could never quite shake off the feeling that the houses were anchored into the earth, suspended only by the embedment of their foundations in the soil; that trees were suspended from their roots, which groaned with the strain; that soil was held to the bedrock only by its cohesion. He even dreaded lest, during storms, the grip of the muddy soil be loosened, and the fields fall into the blue! It was only when clasped tight in Alice's arms that the horrors wholly left him.

All the reasoning we might use on his mind, or that he himself could bring to bear on it, was useless. We found that the sense of up and down is ineradicably fixed by the balancing apparatus of the body.

Meanwhile, his psychology was undergoing strange alterations; the more I came to appreciate the actual conditions he was living under, the more apparent it seemed to me that he must have a cast-iron mental stamina to maintain sanity at all. But he not only did that; he began to recover normal strength, and to be irked unbearably by his constant confinement. So it came about that he began to venture a little at a time from his room, wandering about on the ceiling of the

rest of the house. However, he could not yet look out of windows, but sidled up to them with averted face to draw any blinds that were up.

As he grew increasingly restless, we all felt more and more that the thing could not continue as it was; some way out must be found. We had many a talk with Grosnoff, at last inducing him to speak about the still half-formed theory which he had dimly conceived at the first.

"For a good many decades," he said, "there have been a few who regarded the close analogies between magnetism and gravitational action as symptomatic of a concealed identity between them. Einstein's 'Field Theory' practically proves it on the mathematical side. Now it is obvious that if gravitation is a form of magnetism—and if so it belongs to another plane of magnetic forces than that which we know and use—then the objects on a planet must have the opposite polarity from that of the planet itself. Since the globe is itself a magnet, with a positive and negative pole, its attraction power is not that of a magnet on any plane, because then the human race would be divided into two species, each polarized in the sign opposite to its own pole; when an individual of either race reached the equator, he would become weightless, and when he crossed it, would be repelled into space."

"Lord!" I said. "There would be a plot for one of your scientific fiction writers!"

"I can present you with another," said Dr. Grosnoff. "How do we know whether another planet would have the opposite sign to our own bodies?"

"Well," I chuckled, "they'll find that out soon enough when the first interplanetary expedition tries to land on on of 'em!"

"Hmf!" grunted the medico. "That'll be the least of their troubles!"

"But you said the polarity couldn't be that of a magnet; then what?"

"Don't you remember the common pith ball of your high school physics days? An accumulation of positive electricity repels an accumulation of negative—if indeed we can correctly use 'accumulation' for a negativity—and it is my idea that the earth is the container of a gigantic accumulation of this meta—or hyper-electricity which we are postulating; and our bodies contain a charge of the opposite sign."

"But, Doctor, the retention of a charge of static electricity by a body in the presence of one of the opposite sign requires insulation of the

containing bodies; for instance, lightning is a breaking down of the air insulation between the ground and a cloud. In our case we are constantly in contact with the earth, and the charges would equalize."

"Please bear in mind, Jim, that we are not talking about electricity as now handled by man, but about some form of it as yet hypothetical. We don't know what kind of insulation it would require. We may be *constitutionally* insulated."

"And you think the fire-ball broke down that insulation by the shock to Tristan's system?" I asked. The logic of the thing was shaping up hazily, but unmistakably. "But, then, why don't we frequently see people kiting off the earth as the result of explosions?"

"*How do you know they haven't?* Don't we have plenty of mysterious disappearances as the result of explosions, and particularly, strangely large numbers of missing in a major war?"

My blood chilled. The world was beginning to seem a pretty awful place.

Grosnoff saw my disturbance, and placed a reassuring hand on my shoulder.

"I'm afraid," he said, smiling, "that I rather yielded to the temptation to get a rise out of you. That suggestion *might* be unpleasantly true under special circumstances. But I particularly have an eye out for the special capacities of that weird and rare phenomenon, the fire-ball. It isn't impossible that the energy of the fire-ball went into the re-polarization rather than into a destructive concussion—hence Tristan's escape."

"You mean its effect is *qualitatively* different from that of any other explosion?"

"It may be so. It is known to be an electric conglomeration of some kind—but that's all."

Meantime circumstances were not going well with us; the financial burden of Tristan's support, added to the strain of the situation, was becoming overwhelming. Tristan knew this and felt it keenly; this brought him to a momentous decision. He looked down at us from the ceiling one day with an expression of unusual tenseness, and announced that he was going out permanently, and to take part in the world again.

"I've gotten now so that I can bear to look out of the windows quite well. It's only a matter of time and practise until I can stand the open. After all, it isn't any worse than being a steel worker or steeplejack. Even if the worst came to the worst, I'd rather be burst open by the frozen vacuum of interstellar space than to splash upon a sidewalk before an admiring populace—and people do *that* every day!"

Dr. Grosnoff, who was present, expressed great delight. His patient was coming along well mentally, at least. Alice sat down, trembling.

"But, good Lord, Tristan," I said, "what possible occupation could you follow?"

"Oh, I've brooded over that for weeks, and I've crossed the Rubicon. I think we're a long way past such petty things as personal pride. Did it ever occur to you that what from one point of view is a monstrous catastrophe, from another is an asset?"

"What in the dickens are you talking about?" I asked.

"I'm talking about the—the—" he gulped painfully—"the stage."

Alice wrung her hands, crying bitterly:

"Wonderful! Splendid! Tristan LeHuber, The World's Unparalleled

Upside-Down Man! He Doesn't Know Whether He's On His Head Or His Heels. He's Always Up In The Air About Something, But You Can't Upset Him! Vaudeville To-night—The Bodongo Brothers, Brilliant Burmese Balancers—Arctic Annie, the Prima Donna of Sealdom, and Tristan LeHuber, The Balloon Man—He Uses An Anchor For A Parachute!" At last indeed the LeHuber family will have arrived sensationally in the public eye!

"There are," Alice raved, "two billion people on the earth to-day. Counting three generations per century, there have been about twelve billion of us in the last two hundred years. And out of all those, and all the millions and billions before that, we had to be picked for this loathsome cosmic joke—just little us for all that distinction! Why, oh, why? If our romance *had* to be spoiled by a tragedy smeared across the billboards of notoriety, why couldn't it have been in some decent, human sort of way? Why this ghastly absurdity?"

"From time immemorial," said Grosnoff, "there have been men who sought to excite the admiration of their fellows, to get themselves worshiped, to dominate, to collect perquisites, by developing some wonderful personal power or another. From Icarus on down,

levitation or its equivalent has been a favorite. The ecstatics of medieval times, the Hindu Yogis, even the day-dreaming schoolboy, have had visions of floating in air before the astounding multitudes by a mere act of will. The frequency of 'flying dreams' may indicate such a thing as a possibility in nature. Tradition says many have accomplished it. If so, it was by a reversal of polarity through *an act of will*. Those who did it—Yogis—believed in successive lives on earth. If they were right about the one, why not the other? Suppose one who had developed that power of will, carried it to another birth, where it lay dormant in the subconscious until set off uncontrolled by some special shock?"

Alice paled.

"Then Tristan might have been—"

"He might. Then again, maybe my brain is addled by this thing. In any case, the moral is: don't monkey with Nature! She's particular."

Tristan's vaudeville scheme was not as easily realized as said. The first manager to whom we applied was stubbornly skeptical in spite of Tristan's appearance standing upside down in stilts heavily

weighted at the ground ends; and even after his resistance was broken down in a manner which left him gasping and a little woozy, began to reason unfavorably in a hard-headed way. Audiences, he explained, were off levitation acts. Too old. No matter what you did, they'd lay it to concealed wires, and yawn. Even if you called a committee from the audience, the committee itself would merely be sore at not being able to solve the trick; the audience would consider the committee a fake or merely dumb. And all that would take too much time for an act of that kind.

"Oh, yeh, I know! It's got me goin', all right. But I can't think like me about this sorta thing. I got to think like the audience does—or go outa business!"

After which solid but unprofitable lesson in psychology, we dropped the last vestige of pride and tried a circus sideshow. But the results were similar.

"Nah, the rubes don't wear celluloid collars any more. Ya can't slip any wire tricks over on 'em!"

"But he can do this in a big topless tent, or even out in an open field, if you like."

"Nope—steel rods run up the middle of a rope has been done before."

"Steel rods in a rope which the people see uncoil from the ground in front of their eyes?"

"Well, they'd think of somethin' else, then. I'm tellin' ya, it won't go! Sure, people like to be fooled, but they want it to be done *right*!"

"Yes!" I sneered. "And a hell of a lot of people have fooled themselves *right* about this matter, too!"

He looked at me curiously.

"Say, have ya really got somethin' up y'r sleeve?"

"You'd be surprised!"

Thus he grudgingly gave us a chance for a tryout; and he was surprised indeed. But on thinking it over, he decided like the vaudeville man.

"Listen!" said Tristan suddenly, in a voice of desperation. "I'll do a parachute jump into the sky, and land on an airplane!"

"Tristan!" shrieked Alice, in horror.

The circus man nearly lost his cigar, then bit it in two.

"Sa-ay—what the—I'll call that right now! I'll get ya the plane and chute if y'll put up a deposit to cover the cost. If ya do it, we'll have the best money in the tents; if ya don't, I keep the money!"

"If I don't," said Tristan distinctly, "I'll have not the slightest need for the money."

But the airplane idea was out; we could think of no way for him to make the landing on such a swiftly-moving vehicle.

Again Alice solved it.

"If you absolutely must break my heart and put me in a sanitarium," she sobbed, "get a blimp!"

Of course! And that is what we did—on the first attempt coming unpleasantly close to doing just that to Alice.

The blimp captain was obviously skeptical, and betrayed signs of a

peeve at having his machine hired for a hoax; but money was money and he agreed to obey our instructions meticulously. His tone was perfunctory, however, despite my desperate attempts to impress him with the seriousness of the matter; and that nonchalance of his came near to having dire consequences.

The captain was supplied with a sort of boat-hook with instructions to steer his course to reach the parachute ropes as it passed him on its upward flight. And he was seriously warned of the fact that, after the chute reached two or three thousand feet, its speed would increase because of the rarefaction of the air; and in case of a miss, it would become constantly harder to overtake. These directions he received with a scornful half smile; obviously he never expected to see the chute open.

We got all set, the blimp circling overhead, Tristan upside down in his seat suspended skyward, a desperately grim look on his face; and Alice almost in collapse. We were all spared the agony of several hundred feet of unbroken fall; the parachute was open on the ground, and rose at a leisurely speed, but too fast at that for the comfort of any of us. I don't think the wondering crowd and the dumbfounded circus people ever saw a stranger sight than that chute drifting upward into the blue. We heard nothing of "hidden wires," then or ever after! The white circle grew pitifully small and forlorn against

the fathomless azure; and suddenly we noticed that the blimp seemed to be merely drifting with the wind, making no attempt to get under—or over—Tristan. Our hearts labored painfully. Had the engines broken down? Alice buried her face against my sleeve with a moan.

"I can't look ... tell me!"

I tried to—in a voice which I vainly tried to make steady.

All at once the blimp went into frenzied activity—we learned afterwards that its crew of three, captain included, had been so completely paralyzed by the reality of the event that they had forgotten what they were there for until almost too late. Now we heard the high note of its overdriven engines as it rolled and rocked toward the rising chute. For a moment the white spot showed against its gray side, then tossed and pitched wildly in the wake of the propellers as, driven too hastily and frenziedly, the ship overshot its mark and the captain missed his grab.

I could only squeeze Alice tightly and choke as the aerial objects parted company and the blue gap between them widened. Instantly, avid to retrieve his mistake, the captain swung his craft in a wild careen around and a spiral upward. But he tried to do too many

things at a time—make too much altitude and headway both at once. The blimp pitched steeply upward to a standstill, barely moving toward the parachute. Quickly it sloped downward again and gathered speed, nearing the chute, and then making a desperate zoom upward on its momentum. Mistake number three! He had waited too long before using his elevator; and the chute fled hopelessly away just ahead of the uptilted nose of the blimp. I could only moan, and Alice made no sound or movement.

Next we saw the blimp's water ballast streaming earthward in the sun, and it was put into a long, steady spiral in pursuit of the parachute, whose speed—or so it seemed to my agonized gaze—was now noticeably on the increase. The altitude seemed appallingly great; the blimp's ceiling, I knew, was only about twenty thousand; and my brother, even if not frozen to death by that time, would be traveling far faster then than any climbing speed the blimp could make; as his fall increased in speed, the climb of the bag decreased.

At last, with a quiver of renewed hope, I saw the blimp narrowing down its spirals—it was overtaking! Smaller and smaller grew both objects—but so did the gap between them! At last they merged, the tiny white dot and the little gray minnow. In one long agony I waited to see whether the gap would open out again. Lord of Hosts—the blimp was slanting steeply downward; the parachute had vanished!

Then at last I paid some attention to the totally limp form in my arms; and a few minutes later, amid an insane crowd, a pitifully embarrassed and nerve-shaken dirigible navigator was helping me lift my heavily-wrapped, shivering brother from the gondola, while the mechanics turned their attention to the overdriven engines and wracked framing. Did I say "helping me lift?" Such is the force of habit—but verily, a new nomenclature would have to come into being to deal adequately with such a life as my poor brother's!

Tristan seized my hand.

"Jim!" he said through chattering teeth, "I'm cured—cured of the awful fear! That second time he missed, I just gave up entirely; I didn't care any longer. And then somehow I felt such a sense of peace and freedom—there weren't any upside-down things around to torture me, no sense of insecurity. I just was, in a great blue quiet; it wasn't like falling at all; no awful shock to meet, no sickness or pain—just quietly floating along from Here to There, with no particular dividing line between, anywhere. The cold hurt, of course, but somehow it didn't seem to matter, and was getting better when they caught me. But now—I can do things you never even imagined!"

Thus began my brother's real public career—he had arrived. After that he was able to name his own compensation, and shortly during

his tours, began to sport a private dirigible of his own, which he often used for jumps between stands. He told me jokingly that it was very fitting transportation for him, as his hundred and sixty pound lift saved quite a bit of expense for helium!

He developed an astonishing set of tricks. After the jump, he would arrive on the field suspended above the dirigible doing trapeze tricks. After that, in the show tent, he would go through some more of them, with a few hair raisers of his own invention, one of which consisted of apparently letting go the rope by accident and shooting skyward with a wild shriek, only to be caught at the end of a fine, especially woven piano wire cable attached to a spring safety belt, the cable being in turn fastened into the end of the rope.

Needless to say, Alice was unable to wax enthusiastic about any of these feats, though she loyally accompanied him in his travels. She would sit in the tent gazing at him with a horrible fascination, and month by month grew thinner and more strained. Tristan felt her stress deeply; but was making money so fast that we all felt that in a short time, if not able to finance the discovery of a cure, at least he could retire and live a safer life. And he found his ideal haven of rest —in a Pennsylvania coal mine! Thus, the project grew in his mind, of buying an abandoned mine and fitting it with comfortable and spacious inverted quarters, environed with fungus gardens, air ferns

and the like, plants which could be trained to grow upside down; he emerging only for necessary sun baths.

As time went on, I really grew accustomed to the situation, though seeing less and less of Tristan and Alice; during summers they were on tour, and in winter were quartered in Tristan's coal mine, which had become a reality.

So one summer day when the circus stopped at a small town where I was taking vacation, I was overjoyed at the opportunity to see them. I timed myself to get there as the afternoon performance was over, but arrived a little early, and went on into the untopped tent.

Tristan waved an inverted greeting at me from his poise on his trapeze, and I watched for a few minutes. There was an odd mood about the crowd that day, largely due to a group of loud-mouthed hill-billies from the back country—the sort which is so ignorant as to live in perpetual fear of getting "something slipped over," and so disbelieves everything it is told, looking for something ulterior behind every exterior. Having duly exposed to their own satisfaction the strong man's "wooden dumbbells," the snake charmer's rubber serpents, the fat woman's pillows, and the bearded lady's false whiskers (I don't know what they did about the living skeleton), these fellows were now gaping before Tristan's platform, and

growing hostile as their rather inadequate brains failed to cook up any damaging explanation.

"Yah!" yelled a long-necked, flap-eared youth, suddenly. "He's got an iron bar in that rope!" They had come too late to see the parachute drop. Tristan grinned and pulled himself down the rope, which of course fell limp behind him. At this, the crowd jeered and booed the too-hasty youth, who became so resentfully abusive of Tristan that one of the attendants pushed him out of the tent. As he passed me, I caught fragments of wrathy words:

"Wisht I had a ... Show'm whether it's a fake...."

Tristan closed his act by dropping full-length to the end of his invisible wire, then pulled himself down, got into his stilts, and was unfastening the belt, when the manager rushed in with a request that he repeat, for the benefit of a special party just arrived on a delayed train.

"Go on and look at the animals, old man." Tristan called to me. "I'll be with you in about half an hour!"

I strolled out idly, meeting on the way the flap-eared youth, who seemed bent on making his way back into the tent, wearing a

mingled air of furtiveness, of triumph, and anticipation. Wondering casually just what kind of fool the lad was planning to make of himself next, I wandered on toward the main entrance—only to be stopped by an appalling uproar behind me. There was a raucous, gurgling shriek of mortal terror; the loud composite "O-o-o!" of a shocked or astonished crowd; a set of fervent curses directed at some one; loud confused babbling, and then a woman's voice raised in a seemingly endless succession of hysterical shrieks. Thinking that an animal had gotten loose, or something of that kind, I wheeled. Unmistakably the racket came from Tristan's own tent.

Cold dread clutching at my heart, and with lead on my boot soles, I rushed frantically back. At the entrance I was held by a mad onrush of humanity for some moments. When I reached the platform, Tristan was not in sight. Then I noticed the long-necked boy sitting on the platform with his face in his hands, shrieking:

"I didn't mean to! I didn't mean to! Damn it, don't touch me! I thought sure it was a fake!"

I saw a new, glittering jack-knife lying on the platform beside the limp, foot-long stub of Tristan's rope. Slowly, frozenly, I raised my eyes. The blue abyss was traceless of any object....

150 Raiders of the Universe by Donald Albert Wandrei

Childlike, the great astronomer Phobar stands before the metallic invaders of the ravished solar system.

Aproximate word count: 7,900

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

It was in the thirty-fourth century that the dark star began its famous conquest, unparalleled in stellar annals. Phobar the astronomer discovered it. He was sweeping the heavens with one of the newly invented multi-powered Sussendorf comet-hunters when something caught his eye—a new star of great brilliance in the foreground of the constellation Hercules.

For the rest of the night, he cast aside all his plans and concentrated on the one star. He witnessed an unprecedented event. Mercia's nullifier had just been invented, a curious and intricate device, based on four-dimensional geometry, that made it possible to see occurrences in the universe which had hitherto required the hundreds

of years needed for light to cross the intervening space before they were visible on Earth. By a hasty calculation with the aid of this invention, Phobar found that the new star was about three thousand light-years distant, and that it was hurtling backward into space at the rate of twelve hundred miles per second. The remarkable feature of his discovery was this appearance of a fourth-magnitude star where none had been known to exist. Perhaps it had come into existence this very night.

On the succeeding night, he was given a greater surprise. In line with the first star, but several hundred light-years nearer, was a second new star of even more brightness. And it, too, was hurtling backward into space at approximately twelve hundred miles per second. Phobar was astonished. Two new stars discovered within twenty-four hours in the same part of the heavens, both of the fourth magnitude! But his surprise was as nothing when on the succeeding night, even while he watched, a third new star appeared in line with these, but much closer.

At midnight he first noticed a pin-point of faint light; by one o'clock the star was of eighth magnitude. At two it was a brilliant sun of the second magnitude blazing away from Earth like the others at a rate of twelve hundred miles per second. And on the next evening, and the next, and the next, other new stars appeared until there were

seven in all, every one on a line in the same constellation Hercules, every one with the same radiance and the same proper motion, though of varying size!

Phobar had broadcast his discovery to incredulous astronomers; but as star after star appeared nightly, all the telescopes on Earth were turned toward one of the most spectacular cataclysms that history recorded. Far out in the depths of space, with unheard-of regularity and unheard-of precision, new worlds were flaming up overnight in a line that began at Hercules and extended toward the solar system.

Phobar's announcement was immediately flashed to Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn, the other members of the Five World Federation. Saturn reported no evidence of the phenomena, because of the interfering rings and the lack of Mercia's nullifier. But Jupiter, with a similar device, witnessed the phenomena and announced furthermore that many stars in the neighborhood of the novæ had begun to deviate in singular and abrupt fashion from their normal positions.

There was not as yet much popular interest in the phenomena. Without Mercia's nullifier, the stars were not visible to ordinary eyes, since the light-rays would take years to reach the Earth. But every astronomer who had access to Mercia's nullifier hastened to

focus his telescope on the region where extraordinary events were taking place out in the unfathomable gulf of night. Some terrific force was at work, creating worlds and disturbing the positions of stars within a radius already known to extend billions and trillions of miles from the path of the seven new stars. But of the nature of that force, astronomers could only guess.

Phobar took up his duties early on the eighth night. The last star had appeared about five hundred light-years distant. If an eighth new star was found, it should be not more than a few light-years away. But nothing happened. All night Phobar kept his telescope pointed at the probable spot, but search as he might, the heavens showed nothing new. In the morning he sought eagerly for news of any discovery made by fellow-watchers, but they, too, had found nothing unusual. Could it be that the mystery would now fade away, a new riddle of the skies?

The next evening, he took up his position once more, training his telescope on the seven bright stars, and then on the region where an eighth, if there were one, should appear. For hours he searched the abyss in vain. He could find none. Apparently the phenomena were ended. At midnight he took a last glance before entering on some tedious calculations. It was there! In the center of the telescope a faint, hazy object steadily grew in brightness. All his problems were

forgotten as Phobar watched the eighth star increase hourly. Closer than any other, closer even than Alpha Centauri, the new sun appeared, scarcely three light-years away across the void surrounding the solar system. And all the while he watched, he witnessed a thing no man had ever before seen—the birth of a world!

By one o'clock, the new star was of fifth magnitude; by two it was of the first. As the faint flush of dawn began to come toward the close of that frosty, moonless November night, the new star was a great white-hot object more brilliant than any other star in the heavens. Phobar knew that when its light finally reached Earth so that ordinary eyes could see, it would be the most beautiful object in the night sky. What was the reason for these unparalleled births of worlds and the terrifying mathematical precision that characterized them?

Whatever the cosmic force behind, it was progressing toward the solar system. Perhaps it would even disturb the balance of the planets. The possible chance of such an event had already called the attention of some astronomers, but the whole phenomenon was too inexplicable to permit more than speculation.

The next evening was cloudy. Jupiter reported nothing new except

that Neptune had deviated from its course and tended to pursue an erratic and puzzling new orbit.

Phobar pondered long over this last news item and turned his attention to the outermost planet on the succeeding night. To his surprise, he had great difficulty in locating it. The ephemeris was of absolutely no use. When he did locate Neptune after a brief search, he discovered it more than eighty million miles from its scheduled place! This was at one-forty. At two-ten he was thunderstruck by a special announcement sent from the Central Bureau to every observatory and astronomer of note throughout the world, proclaiming the discovery of an ultra-Plutonian planet. Phobar was incredulous. For centuries it had been proved that no planet beyond Pluto could possibly exist.

With feverish haste, Phobar ran to the huge telescope and rapidly focused it where the new planet should be. Five hundred million miles beyond Neptune was a flaming path like the beam of a giant searchlight that extended exactly to the eighth solar planet. Phobar gasped. He could hardly credit the testimony of his eyes. He looked more closely. The great stream of flame still crossed his line of vision. But this time he saw something else: at the precise farther end of the flame-path a round disk—dark!

Beyond a doubt, a new planet of vast size now formed an addition to the solar group. But that planet was almost impervious to the illuminating rays of the sun and was barely discernible. Neptune itself shone brighter than it ever had, and was falling away from the sun at a rate of twelve hundred miles per second.

All night Phobar watched the double mystery. By three o'clock, he was convinced, as far as lightning calculations showed, that the invader was hurtling toward the sun at a speed of more than ten million miles an hour. At three-fifteen, he thought that vanishing Neptune seemed brighter even than the band of fire running to the invader. At four, his belief was certainty. With amazement and awe, Phobar sat through the long, cold night, watching a spectacular and terrible catastrophe in the sky.

As dawn began to break and the stars grew paler, Phobar turned away from his telescope, his brain awhirl, his heart filled with a great fear. He had witnessed the devastation of a world, the ruin of a member of his own planetary system by an invader from outer space. As dawn cut short his observations, he knew at last the cause of Neptune's brightness, knew that it was now a white-hot flaming sun that sped with increased rapidity away from the solar system. Somehow, the terrible swathe of fire that flowed from the dark star to Neptune had wrenched it out of its orbit and made of it a molten

inferno.

At dawn came another bulletin from the Central Bureau. Neptune had a surface temperature of 3,000° C, was defying all laws of celestial mechanics, and within three days would have left the solar system for ever. The results of such a disaster were unpredictable. The entire solar system was likely to break up. Already Uranus and Jupiter had deviated from their orbits. Unless something speedily occurred to check the onrush of the dark star, it was prophesied that the laws governing the planetary system would run to a new balance, and that in the ensuing chaos the whole group would spread apart and fall toward the gulfs beyond the great surrounding void.

What was the nature of the great path of fire? What force did it represent? And was the dark star controlled by intelligence, or was it a blind wanderer from space that had come by accident? The flame-path alone implied that the dark star was guided by an intelligence that possessed the secret of inconceivable power. Menace hung in the sky now where all eyes could see in a great arc of fire!

The world was on the brink of eternity, and vast forces at whose nature men could only guess were sweeping planets and suns out of its path.

The following night was again cold and clear. High in the heavens, where Neptune should have been, hung a disk of enormously greater size. Neptune itself was almost invisible, hundreds of millions of miles beyond its scheduled position. As nearly as Phobar could estimate, not one hundredth of the sun's rays were reflected from the surface of the dark star, a proportion far below those for the other planets. Phobar had a better view of the flame-path, and it was with growing awe that he watched that strange swathe in the sky during the dead of night. It shot out from the dark star like a colossal beam or huge pillar of fire seeking a food of worlds.

With a shiver of cold fear he saw that there were now three of the bands: one toward Neptune, one toward Saturn, and one toward the sun. The first was fading, a milky, misty white; the second shone almost as bright as the first one previously had; and the third, toward the sun, was a dazzling stream of orange radiance, burning with a steady, terrible, unbelievable intensity across two and a half billions of miles of space! That gigantic flare was the most brilliant sight in the whole night sky, an awful and abysmally prophetic flame that made city streets black with staring people, a radiance whose grandeur and terrific implication of cosmic power brought beauty and the fear of doom into the heavens!

Those paths could not be explained by all the physicists and all the

astronomers in the Five World Federation. They possessed the properties of light, but they were rigid bands like a tube or a solid pillar from which only the faintest of rays escaped; and they completely shut off the heavens behind them. They had, moreover, singular properties which could not be described, as if a new force were embodied in them.

Hour after hour humanity watched the spectacular progress of the dark star, watched those mysterious and threatening paths of light that flowed from the invader. When dawn came, it brought only a great fear and the oppression of impending disaster.

In the early morning, Phobar slept. When he awoke, he felt refreshed and decided to take a short walk in the familiar and peaceful light of day. He never took that walk. He opened the door on a kind of dim and reddish twilight. Not a cloud hung in the sky, but the sun shone feebly with a dull red glow, and the skies were dull and somber, as if the sun were dying as scientists had predicted it eventually would.

Phobar stared at the dull heavens in a daze, at the foreboding atmosphere and the livid sun that burned faintly as through a smoke curtain. Then the truth flashed on him—it was the terrible path of fire from the dark star! By what means he could not guess, by what appalling control of immense and inconceivable forces he could not

even imagine, the dark star was sucking light and perhaps more than light from the sun!

Phobar turned and shut the door. The world had seen its last dawn. If the purpose of the dark star was destruction, none of the planets could offer much opposition, for no weapon of theirs was effective beyond a few thousand miles range at most—and the dark star could span millions. If the invader passed on, its havoc would be only a trifle smaller, for it had already destroyed two members of the solar system and was now striking at its most vital part. Without the sun, life would die, but even with the sun the planets must rearrange themselves because of the destruction of balance.

Even he could hardly grasp the vast and abysmal catastrophe that without warning had swept from space. How could the dark star have traversed three thousand light-years of space in a week's time? It was unthinkable! So stupendous a control of power, so gigantic a manipulation of cosmic forces, so annihilating a possession of the greatest secrets of the universe, was an unheard-of concentration of energy and knowledge of stellar mechanics. But the evidence of his own eyes and the path of the dark star with flaming suns to mark its progress, told him in language which could not be refuted that the dark star possessed all that immeasurable, titanic knowledge. It was the lord of the universe. There was nothing which the dark star could

not crush or conquer or change. The thought of that immense, supreme power numbed his mind. It opened vistas of a civilization, and a progress, and an unparalleled mastery of all knowledge which was almost beyond conception.

Already the news had raced across the world. On Phobar's television screen flashed scenes of nightmare; the radio spewed a gibberish of terror. In one day panic had swept the Earth; on the remaining members of the Five World Federation the same story was repeated. Rioting mobs drowned out the chant of religious fanatics who hailed Judgment Day. Great fires turned the air murky and flame-shot. Machine guns spat regularly in city streets; looting, murder, and fear-crazed crimes were universal. Civilization had completely vanished overnight.

The tides roared higher than they ever had before; for every thousand people drowned on the American seaboards, a hundred thousand perished in China and India. Dead volcanoes boomed into the worst eruptions known. Half of Japan sank during the most violent earthquake in history. Land rocked, the seas boiled, cyclones howled out of the skies. A billion eyes focused on Mecca, the mad beating of tom-toms rolled across all Africa, women and children were trampled to death by the crowds that jammed into churches.

"Has man lived in vain?" asked the philosopher.

"The world is doomed. There is no escape," said the scientist.

"The day of reckoning has come! The wrath of God is upon us!" shouted the street preachers.

In a daze, Phobar switched off the bedlam and, walking like a man asleep, strode out, he did not care where, if only to get away.

The ground and the sky were like a dying fire. The sun seemed a half-dead cinder. Only the great swathe of radiance between the sun and the dark star had any brilliance. Sinister, menacing, now larger even than the sun, the invader from beyond hung in the heavens.

As Phobar watched it, the air around him prickled strangely. A sixth sense gave warning. He turned to race back into his house. His legs failed. A fantastic orange light bathed him, countless needles of pain shot through his whole body, the world darkened.

Earth had somehow been blotted out. There was a brief blackness, the nausea of space and of a great fall that compressed eternity into a moment. Then a swimming confusion, and outlines which gradually came to rest.

Phobar was too utterly amazed to cry out or run. He stood inside the most titanic edifice he could have imagined, a single gigantic structure vaster than all New York City. Far overhead swept a black roof fading into the horizon, beneath his feet was the same metal substance. In the midst of this giant work soared the base of a tower that pierced the roof thousands of feet above.

Everywhere loomed machines, enormous dynamos, cathode tubes a hundred feet long, masses and mountains of such fantastic apparatus as he had never encountered. The air was bluish, electric. From the black substance came a phosphorescent radiance. The triumphant drone of motors and a terrific crackle of electricity were everywhere. Off to his right purple-blue flames the size of Sequoia trees flickered around a group of what looked like condensers as huge as Gibraltar. At the base of the central tower half a mile distant Phobar could see something that resembled a great switchboard studded with silver controls. Near it was a series of mechanisms at whose purpose he could not even guess.

All this his astounded eyes took in at one confused glance. The thing that gave him unreasoning terror was the hundred-foot-high metal monster before him. It defied description. It was unlike any color known on Earth, a blinding color sinister with power and evil. Its shape was equally ambiguous—it rippled like quicksilver, now

compact, now spread out in a thousand limbs. But what appalled Phobar was its definite possession of rational life. More, its very thoughts were transmitted to him as clearly as though written in his own English:

"Follow me!"

Phobar's mind did not function—but his legs moved regularly. In the grasp of this mental, metal monster he was a mere automaton. Phobar noticed idly that he had to step down from a flat disk a dozen yards across. By some power, some tremendous discovery that he could not understand, he had been transported across millions of miles of space—undoubtedly to the dark star itself!

The colossal thing, indescribable, a blinding, nameless color, rippled down the hall and stooped before a disk of silvery black. In the center of the disk was a metal seat with a control board near-by.

"Be seated!"

Phobar sat down, the titan flicked the controls—and nothing happened.

Phobar sensed that something was radically wrong. He felt the

surprise of his gigantic companion. He did not know it then, but the fate of the solar system hung on that incident.

"Come!"

Abruptly the giant stooped, and Phobar shrank back, but a flowing mass of cold, insensate metal swept around him, lifted him fifty feet in the air. Dizzy, sick, horrified, he was hardly conscious of the whirlwind motion into which the giant suddenly shot. He had a dim impression of machines racing by, of countless other giants, of a sudden opening in the walls of the immense building, and then a rush across the surface of metal land. Even in his vertigo he had enough curiosity to marvel that there was no vegetation, no water, only the dull black metal everywhere. Yet there was air.

And then a city loomed before them. To Phobar it seemed a city of gods or giants. Fully five miles it soared toward space, its fantastic angles and arcs and cubes and pyramids mazing in the dimensions of a totally alien geometry. Tier by tier the stupendous city, hundreds of miles wide, mounted toward a central tower like the one in the building he had left.

Phobar never knew how they got there, but his numbed mind was at last forced into clarity by a greater will. He stared about him. His

captor had gone. He stood in a huge chamber circling to a dome far overhead. Before him, on a dais a full thousand feet in diameter, stood—sat—rested, whatever it might be called—another monster, far larger than any he had yet seen, like a mountain of pliant thinking, living metal. And Phobar knew he stood in the presence of the ruler.

The metal Cyclops surveyed him as Phobar might have surveyed an ant. Cold, deadly, dispassionate scrutiny came from something that might have been eyes, or a seeing intelligence locked in a metal body.

There was no sound, but inwardly to Phobar's consciousness from the peak of the titan far above him came a command:

"What are you called?"

Phobar opened his lips—but even before he spoke, he knew that the thing had understood his thought: "Phobar."

"I am Garboreggg, ruler of Xlarbti, the Lord of the Universes."

"Lord of the Universes?"

"I and my world come from one of the universes beyond the reach of

your telescopes." Phobar somehow felt that the thing was talking to him as he would to a new-born babe.

"What do you want of me?"

"Tell your Earth that I want the entire supply of your radium ores mined and placed above ground according to the instructions I give, by seven of your days hence."

A dozen questions sprang to Phobar's lips. He felt again that he was being treated like a child.

"Why do you want our radium ores?"

"Because they are the rarest of the elements on your scale, are absent on ours, and supply us with some of the tremendous energy we need."

"Why don't you obtain the ores from other worlds?"

"We do. We are taking them from all worlds where they exist. But we need yours also."

Raiders of the universe! Looting young worlds of the precious radium ores! Piracy on a cosmic scale!

"And if Earth refuses your demand?"

For answer, Garboreggg rippled to a wall of the room and pressed a button. The wall dissolved, weirdly, mysteriously. A series of vast silver plates was revealed, and a battery of control levers.

"This will happen to all of your Earth unless the ores are given us."

The titan closed a switch. On the first screen flashed the picture of a huge tower such as Phobar had seen in the metal city.

Garboreggg adjusted a second control that was something like a range-finder. He pressed a third lever—and from the tower leaped a surge of terrific energy, like a bolt of lightning a quarter of a mile broad. The giant closed another switch—and on the second plate flashed a picture of New York City.

Then—waiting. Seconds, minutes drifted by. The atmosphere became tense, nerve-cracking. Phobar's eyes ached with the intensity of his stare. What would happen?

Abruptly it came.

A monstrous bolt of energy streaked from the skies, purple-blue death in a pillar a fourth of a mile broad crashed into the heart of

New York City, swept up and down Manhattan, across and back, and suddenly vanished.

In fifteen seconds, only a molten hell of fused structures and incinerated millions of human beings remained of the world's first city.

Phobar was crushed, appalled, then utter loathing for this soulless thing poured through him. If only—

"It is useless. You can do nothing," answered the ruler as though it had grasped his thought.

"But why, if you could pick me off the Earth, do you not draw the radium ores in the same way?" Phobar demanded.

"The orange-ray picks up only loose, portable objects. We can and will transport the radium ores here by means of the ray after they have been mined and placed on platforms or disks."

"Why did you select me from all the millions of people on Earth?"

"Solely because you were the first apparent scientist whom our cosmotel chanced upon. It will be up to you to notify your Earth governments of our demand."

"But afterwards!" Phobar burst out aloud. "What then?"

"We will depart."

"It will mean death to us! The solar system will be wrecked with Neptune gone and Saturn following it!"

Garboreggg made no answer. To that impassive, cold, inhuman thing, it did not matter if a nation or a whole world perished. Phobar had already seen with what deliberate calm it destroyed a city, merely to show him what power the lords of Xlarbti controlled. Besides, what guarantee was there that the invaders would not loot the Earth of everything they wanted and then annihilate all life upon it before they departed? Yet Phobar knew he was helpless, knew that the men of Earth would be forced to do whatever was asked of them, and trust that the raiders would fulfill their promise.

"Two hours remain for your stay here," came the ruler's dictum to interrupt his line of thought. "For the first half of that period you will tell me of your world and answer whatever questions I may ask. During the rest of the interval, I will explain some of the things you wish to learn about us."

Again Phobar felt Garboreggg's disdain, knew that the metal giant

regarded him as a kind of childish plaything for an hour or two's amusement. But he had no choice, and so he told Garboreggg of the life on Earth, how it arose and along what lines it had developed; he narrated in brief the extent of man's knowledge, his scientific achievements, his mastery of weapons and forces and machines, his social organization.

When he had finished, he felt as a Stone Age man might feel in the presence of a brilliant scientist of the thirty-fourth century. If any sign of interest had shown on the peak of the metallic lord, Phobar failed to see it. But he sensed an intolerant sneer of ridicule in Garboreggg, as though the ruler considered these statements to be only the most elementary of facts.

Then, for three quarters of an hour, in the manner of one lecturing an ignorant pupil, the giant crowded its thought-pictures into Phobar's mind so that finally he understood a little of the raiders and of the sudden terror that had flamed from the abysses into the solar system.

"The universe of matter that you know is only one of the countless universes which comprise the cosmos," began Garboreggg. "In your universe, you have a scale of ninety-two elements, you have your color-spectrum, your rays and waves of many kinds. You are subject to definite laws controlling matter and energy as you know them.

"But we are of a different universe, on a different scale from yours, a trillion light-years away in space, eons distant in time. The natural laws which govern us differ from those controlling you. In our universe, you would be hopelessly lost, completely helpless, unless you possessed the knowledge that your people will not attain even in millions of years. But we, who are so much older and greater than you, have for so long studied the nature of the other universes that we can enter and leave them at will, taking what we wish, doing as we wish, creating or destroying worlds whenever the need arises, coming and hurtling away when we choose.

"There is no vegetable life in our universe. There is only the scale of elements ranging from 842 to 966 on the extension of your own scale. At this high range, metals of complex kinds exist. There is none of what you call water, no vegetable world, no animal kingdom. Instead, there are energies, forces, rays, and waves, which are food to us and which nourish our life-stream just as pigs, potatoes, and bread are food to you.

"Trillions of years ago in your time-calculation, but only a few dozen centuries ago in ours, life arose on the giant world Kygpton in our universe. It was life, our life, the life of my people and myself, intelligence animating bodies of pliant metal, existing almost endlessly on an almost inexhaustible source of energy.

"But all matter wears down. On Kygpton there was a variety of useful metals, others that were valueless. There was comparatively little of the first, much of the second. Kygpton itself was a world as large as your entire solar system, with a diameter roughly of four billion miles. Our ancestors knew that Kygpton was dying, that the store of our most precious element Sthalreh was dwindling. But already our ancestors had mastered the forces of our universe, had made inventions that are beyond your understanding, had explored the limits of our universe in space-cars that were propelled by the free energies in space and by the attracting-repelling influences of stars.

"The metal inhabitants of Kygpton employed every invention they knew to accomplish an engineering miracle that makes your bridges and mines seem but the puny efforts of a gnat. They blasted all the remaining ores of Sthalreh from the surface and interior of Kygpton and refined them. Then they created a gigantic vacuum, a dead-field in space a hundred million miles away from their world. The dead-field was controlled from Kygpton by atomic-projectors, energy-absorbers, gravitation-nullifiers and cosmotels, range-regulators, and a host of other inventions.

"As fast as it was mined and extracted, the Sthalreh metal was vaporized, shot into the dead-field by interstellar rays, and solidified

there along an invisible framework which we projected. In a decade of our time, we had pillaged Kygpton of every particle of Sthalreh. And then in our skies hung an artificial world, a manufactured sphere, a giant new planet, the world you yourself are now on—Xlarbti!

"We did not create a solid globe. We left chambers, tunnels, passageways, storerooms throughout it or piercing it from surface to surface. Thus, even as Xlarbti was being created, we provided for everything that we needed or could need—experimental laboratories, sub-surface vaults, chambers for the innumerable huge ray dynamos, energy storage batteries, and other apparatus which we required.

"And when all was ready, we transferred by space-cars and by atomic individuation all our necessities from Kygpton to the artificial world Xlarbti. And when everything was prepared, we destroyed the dead-field by duplicate control from Xlarbti, turned our repulsion-power on full against the now useless and dying giant world Kygpton, and swung upon our path.

"But our whole universe is incredibly old. It was mature before ever your young suns flamed out of the gaseous nebulæ, it was decaying when your molten planets were flung from the central sun, it was dying before the boiling seas had given birth to land upon your

sphere. And while we had enough of our own particular electrical food to last us for a million of your years, and enough power to guide Xlarbti to other universes, we had exhausted all the remaining energy of our entire universe. And when we finally left it to dwindle behind us in the black abysses of space, we left it, a dead cinder, devoid of life, vitiated of activity, and utterly lacking in cosmic forces, a universe finally run down.

"The universes, as you may know, are set off from each other by totally black and empty abysms, expanses so vast that light-rays have not yet crossed many of them. How did we accomplish the feat of traversing such a gulf? By the simplest of means: acceleration. Why? Because to remain in our universe meant inevitable death. We gambled on the greatest adventure in all the cosmos.

"To begin with, we circled our universe to the remotest point opposite where we wanted to leave it. We then turned our attraction powers on part way so that the millions of stars before us drew us ahead, then we gradually stepped up the power to its full strength, thus ever increasing our speed. At the same time, as stars passed to our rear in our flight, we turned our repulsion-rays against them, stepping that power up also.

"Our initial speed was twenty-four miles per second. Midway in our

universe we had reached the speed of your light—186,000 miles per second. By the time we left our universe, we were hurtling at a speed which we estimated to be 1,600,000,000 miles per second. Yet even at that tremendous speed, it took us years to cross from our universe to yours. If we had encountered even a planetoid at that enormous rate, we would probably have been annihilated in white-hot death. But we had planned well, and there are no superiors to our stellar mechanics, our astronomers, our scientists.

"When we finally hurtled from the black void into your universe, we found what we had only dared hope for: a young universe, with many planets and cooling worlds rich in radium ores, the only element in your scale that can help to replenish our vanishing energy. Half your universe we have already deprived of its ores. Your Earth has more that we want. Then we shall continue on our way, to loot the rest of the worlds, before passing on to another universe. We are a planet without a universe. We will wander and pillage until we find a universe like the one we come from, or until Xlarbti itself disintegrates and we perish.

"We could easily wipe out all the dwellers on Earth and mine the ores ourselves. But that would be a needless waste of our powers, for since you can not defy us, and since the desire for life burns as high in you as in us and as it does in all sensate things in all universes,

your people will save themselves from death and save us from wasting energy by mining the ores for us. What happens afterwards, we do not care.

"The seven new suns that you saw were dead worlds that we used as buffers to slow down Xlarbti. The full strength of our repulsion-force directed against any single world necessarily turns it into a liquid or gaseous state depending on various factors. Your planet Neptune was pulled out of the solar system by the attraction of Xlarbti's mass. The flame-paths, as you call them, are directed streams of energy for different purposes: the one to the sun supplies us, for instance, with heat, light, and electricity, which in turn are stored up for eventual use.

"The orange-ray that you felt is one of our achievements. It is similar to the double-action pumps used in some of your sulphur mines, whereby a pipe is inclosed in a larger pipe, and hot water forced down through the larger tubing returns sulphur-laden through the central pipe. The orange-ray instantaneously dissolves any portable object up to a certain size, propels it back to Xlarbti through its center which is the reverse ray, and here reforms the object, just as you were recreated on the disk that you stood on when you regained consciousness.

"But I have not enough time to explain everything on Xlarbti to you; nor would you comprehend it all if I did. Your stay is almost up.

"In that one control-panel lies all the power that we have mastered," boasted Garboreggg with supreme egotism. "It connects with the individual controls throughout Xlarbti."

"What is the purpose of some of the levers?" asked Phobar, with a desperate hope in his thoughts.

A filament of metal whipped to the panel from the lord of Xlarbti. "This first section duplicates the control-panel that you saw in the laboratory where you opened your eyes. Do not think that you can make use of this information—in ten minutes you will be back on your Earth to deliver our command. Between now and that moment you will be so closely watched that you can do nothing and will have no opportunity to try.

"This first lever controls the attraction rays, the second the repulsion force. The third dial regulates the orange-ray by which you will be returned to Earth. The fourth switch directs the electrical bolt that destroyed New York City. Next it is a device that we have never had occasion to use. It releases the Krangor-wave throughout Xlarbti. Its effect is to make each atom of Xlarbti, the Sthalreh metal and

everything on it, become compact, to do away with the empty spaces that exist in every atom. Theoretically, it would reduce Xlarbti to a fraction of its present size, diminish its mass while its weight and gravity remained as before.

"The next lever controls matter to be transported between here and the first laboratory. Somewhat like the orange-ray, it disintegrates the object and reassembles it here."

So that was what Phobar's captor had been trying to do with him back there in the laboratory! "Why was I not brought here by that means?" burst out Phobar.

"Because you belong to a different universe," answered Garboreggg. "Without experimentation, we cannot tell what natural laws of ours you would not be subject to, but this is one of them." A gesture of irritation seemed to come from him. "Some laws hold good in all the universes we have thus far investigated. The orange-ray, for instance, picked you up as it would have plucked one of us from the surface of Kygpton. But on Xlarbti, which is composed entirely of Sthalreh, your atomic nature and physical constitution are so different from ours that they were unaffected by the energy that ordinarily transports objects here."

Thus the metal nightmare went rapidly over the control-panel. At length Phobar's captor, or another thing like him, reentered when Garboreggg flicked a strange-looking protuberance on the panel.

"You will now be returned to your world," came the thought of Garboreggg. "We shall watch you through our cosmotel to see that you deliver our instructions. Unless the nations of Earth obey us, they will be obliterated at the end of seven days."

A wild impulse to smash that impassive, metallic monster passed from Phobar as quickly as it came. He was helpless. Sick and despairing, he felt the cold, baffling-colored metal close around him again; once more he was borne aloft for the journey to the laboratory, from there to be propelled back to Earth.

Seven days of grace! But Phobar knew that less than ten minutes remained to him. Only here could he possibly accomplish anything. Once off the surface of Xlarbti, there was not the remotest chance that all the nations of Earth could reach the invaders or even attempt to defy them. Yet what could he alone do in a week, to say nothing of ten minutes?

He sensed the amused, supercilious contempt of his captor. That was really the greatest obstacle, this ability of theirs to read thought-

pictures. And already he had given them enough word-pictures of English so that they could understand....

In the back of Phobar's mind the ghost of a desperate thought suddenly came. What was it he had learned years ago in college? Homer—"The Odyssey"—Plutarch.... From rusty, disused corners of memory crept forth the half-forgotten words. He bent all his efforts to the task, not daring to think ahead or plan ahead or visualize anything but the Greek words.

He felt the bewilderment of his captor. To throw it off the track, Phobar suddenly let an ancient English nursery rime slip into his thoughts. The disgust that emanated from his captor was laughable; Phobar could have shouted aloud. But the Greek words....

Already the pair had left the mountain-high titan city far behind; they rippled across the smooth, black surface of Xlarbti, and bore like rifle bullets down on the swiftly looming laboratory. In a few minutes it would be too late forever. Now the lost Greek words burst into Phobar's mind, and, hoping against hope, he thought in Greek word-pictures which his captor could not understand. He weighed chances, long shots. Into his brain flashed an idea.... But they were upon the laboratory; a stupendous door dissolved weirdly into shimmering haze; they sped through.

Phobar's hand clutched a bulge in his pocket. Would it work? How could it?

They were beyond the door now and racing across the great expanse of the floor, past the central tower, past the control-panel which he had first seen....

And as if by magic there leaped into Phobar's mind a clear-cut, vivid picture of violet oceans of energy crackling and streaking from the heavens to crash through the laboratory roof and barely miss striking his captor behind. Even as Phobar created the image of that terrific death, his captor whirled around in a lightning movement, a long arm of metal flicking outward at the same instant to drop Phobar to the ground.

Like a flash Phobar was on his feet; his hand whipped from his pocket, and with all his strength he flung a gleaming object straight toward the fifth lever on the control-panel a dozen yards away. As a clumsy arrow would, his oversize bunch of keys twisted to their mark, clanked, and spread against the fifth control, which was the size regulator.

As rapidly as Phobar's captor had spun around, it reversed again, having guessed the trick. A tentacle of pliant metal snaked toward

Phobar like a streak of flame.

But in those few seconds a terrific holocaust had taken place. As Phobar's keys spattered against the fifth lever, there came an immediate, growing, strange, high whine, and a sickening collapse of the very surface beneath them. Everywhere outlines of objects wavered, changed melted, shrank with a steady and nauseatingly swift motion. The roof of the laboratory high overhead plunged downward; the far-distant walls swept inward, contracted. And the metal monsters themselves dwindled as though they were vast rubber figures from which the air was hissing.

Phobar sprang back as the tentacle whipped after him. Only that jump and the suddenly dwarfing dimensions of the giant saved him. And even in that instant of wild action, Phobar shouted aloud—for this whole world was collapsing, together with everything on it, except he himself who came of a different universe and remained unaffected! It was the long shot he had gambled on, the one chance he had to strike a blow.

All over the shrinking laboratory the monsters were rushing toward him. His dwindling captor flung another tentacle toward the control-panel to replace the size-regulating lever. But Phobar had anticipated that possibility and had already leaped to the switchboard, sweeping

a heavy bar from its place and crashing it down on the lever so that it could not be replaced without being repaired. Almost in the same move he had bounded away again, the former hundred-foot giant now scarcely more than his own height. But throughout the laboratory, the other metal things had halted in their tasks and were racing onward.

Phobar always remembered that battle in the laboratory as a scene from some horrible nightmare. The catastrophe came so rapidly that he could hardly follow the whirlwind events. The half dozen great leaps he made from the lashing tentacles of his pursuer sufficed to give him a few seconds' respite, and then the weird, howling sound of the tortured world swelled to a piercing wail. His lungs were laboring from the violence of his exertions; again and again he barely escaped from the curling whips of metal tentacles. And now the monster was hardly a foot high; the huge condensers and tubes and colossal machinery were like those of a pygmy laboratory. And overhead the roof plunged ever downward.

But Phobar was cornered at last. He stood in the center of a circle of the foot-high things. His captor suddenly shot forth a dozen rope-like arms toward him as the others closed in. He had not even a weapon, for he had dropped the bar in his first mad bound away from the control-panel. He saw himself trapped in his own trick, for in

minutes at most the laboratory would be crushing him with fearful force.

Blindly Phobar reverted to a primitive defense in this moment of infinite danger and kicked with all his strength at the squat monster before him. The thing tried to whirl aside, but Phobar's shoe squashed thickly through, and in a disorder of quivering pieces the metal creature fell, and subsided. Knowing at last that the invaders were vulnerable and how they could be killed, Phobar went leaping and stamping on those nearest him. Under foot, they disintegrated into little pulpy lumps of inert metal.

In a trice he broke beyond the circle and darted to the control-panel. One quick glance showed him that the roof was now scarcely a half dozen yards above. With fingers that fumbled in haste at tiny levers and dials, he spun several of them—the repulsion-ray full—the attraction-ray full. And when they were set, he picked up the bar he had dropped and smashed the controls so that they were helplessly jammed. He could almost feel the planet catapult through the heavens.

The laboratory roof was only a foot over his head. He whirled around, squashed a dozen tiny creeping things, leaped to a disk that was now not more than a few inches broad. Stooping low, balancing

himself precariously, he somehow managed to close the tiny switch. A haze of orange light enveloped him, there came a great vertigo and dizziness and pain, he felt himself falling through bottomless spaces. …

So exhausted that he could scarcely move, Phobar blinked his eyes open to brilliant daylight in the chill of a November Indian summer noon. The sun shone radiant in the heavens; off in the distance he heard a pandemonium of bells and whistles. Wearily he noticed that there were no flame-paths in the sky.

Staggering weakly, he made his way to the observatory, mounted the steps with tired limbs, and wobbled to the eyepiece of his telescope which he had left focused on the dark star two hours before. Almost trembling, he peered through it.

The dark star was gone. Somewhere far out in the abysses of the universe, a runaway world plunged headlong at ever-mounting speed to uncharted regions under its double acceleration of attraction and repulsion.

A sigh of contentment came from his lips as he sank into a heavy and profound sleep. Later he would learn of the readjustments in the solar system, and of the colder climate that came to Earth, and of the

vast changes permanently made by the invading planet, and of a blazing new star discovered in Orion that might signify the birth of a sun or the death of a metallic dark world.

But these were events to be, and he demanded his immediate reward of a day's dreamless slumber.

151 Slaves of Mercury by Nat Schachner

Hilary returns to find alien diskoids in Earth's stratosphere, and out-world lords patrolling her cities.

Aproximate word count: 30,400

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

Chapter 1: The Space Wanderer Returns

Hilary Grendon piloted his battered, time-worn space flier, the Vagabond, to the smiling Earth that rose rapidly to greet it. Only the instinctive ease of long practise prevented a smash-up, his hands trembled so at the controls.

Hilary returns to find alien diskoids in Earth's stratosphere, and out-world lords patrolling her cities.

Home again—the old familiar Earth! He could scarcely believe it! Perhaps it was only a dream, and he'd wake up among the unhuman

glittering cylinders of Saturn, shuddering and crawling with the iciness of their fixed regard.

Hilary's eyes blurred with unaccustomed mistiness as he drank in the warm sunlight, the soft green of the grass and the gracious lines of the slender birches as they fluttered their leaves daintily in the unhurrying breeze. How different it all was from the harsh red angularities of Mars!

He was outside, breathing deeply, inhaling the perfumed air with delight. This was the only heaven; beyond—that far-flung immensity of planetary orbs—was hell! He, Hilary Grendon, the carefree, smiling skeptic of old, was a Fundamentalist now.

How long was it since they had started out on the first flight that man had taken into outer space—he and those stanch comrades? Five years? God! Had it been so long? Yet here he was, back on Earth again, the kindly, blessed Earth their eyes had clung to when they were fighting desperately for their lives against the protoplasmic things that inhabited Ganymede.

Hilary brushed a tear away as he thought of those brave, loyal friends. Dick lay as he fell on Saturn, transfixed by an icicle dart; Martin had been engulfed in an unholy maw on Ganymede; Dorn

was a frozen idol to the spiral beings of Pluto; and poor Hurley, his fate was the worst of all: his hideously bloated body was swinging in an orbit around Mars, a satellite through all eternity.

He, Hilary Grendon, was the sole survivor of that tremendous Odyssey!

Hilary shook his head vigorously to clear away the flood of recollections. Enough that he had returned. Then a sudden eagerness surged through him, a joyous intensity of emotion. What a story he had to relate—how the Earth people would hang with bated breath upon his adventurings! And Joan—his heart gave a queer leap at the thought of that slender ardent wisp of a girl with her shining head and steady gray eyes. She had promised to wait for him, forever, if need be. She had said it simply, without heroics; yet Hilary knew then that she would keep her promise.

A rush of impatience succeeded the inaction of his memories. He must get to New York at once. He could not wait any longer. Joan first—then Amos Peabody, the venerable President of the United States—to report his return. He smiled at the stupefaction that would greet him. No doubt he had long been given up for dead. The world had been skeptical of the space ship he had invented; had, except for a faithful few, mocked at his plans. Indignantly he had taken his

calculations, his blue prints of the spheroid, along with him. If the flight was a success, well and good; if not, they would not be worth much anyway.

In spite of his fever to be off, he carefully locked the controls, sealed the outer air-lock. Hilary Grendon was a methodical man: that was the reason he had survived.

Then he struck across country, walking very fast. He knew where he was: in the wilderness of the Ramapos, some forty miles from New York. Sooner or later, he reasoned, he would strike one of the radiating conveyors that led into the metropolis, or a human being that would set him on the right track.

A half hour's sturdy tramping brought him out of the tangled hills into civilization. There was a glitter of metal and vita-crystal dwellings that stood four-square to the sun and the winds. A broad ribbon-conveyor hurled its shining length in ceaseless rush down the narrow valley. Human beings—normal homely Earth men with the ordinary number of legs and arms, with honest-to-God faces and warm living flesh, were seated on the conveyor-benches as they flashed by. Hilary could have wept with delight. It was two years since he had seen his own kind; two years since Hurley's tragic misstep through the breach in the air-lock made by a meteor as they

were nearing Mars.

Hilary leaped on the slow-moving ramp, skilfully worked his way across the graded speed belts until he was on the express conveyor that led straight on to New York.

He sank into a cushioned seat next to an oldish man with iron-gray hair through which the speed of their flight whipped and pulled. Hilary was bursting for real human conversation again; he grinned to himself at the excited astonishment of this impassive stranger if he should announce himself. How should he do it? Should he remark casually without any preamble: "Pardon me for addressing you, sir, but I'm Hilary Grendon, you know." Just like that, and lean back for the inevitable gasp: "What, not the Hilary Grendon!" And he would nod offhandedly as though he had just taken a little trip to Frisco and back.

He stole a sidelong glance at the sternly-etched profile. The man was staring straight in front of him, looking neither to the left nor to the right. It did not seem as if he were aware of Hilary's existence. So with a sigh Hilary decided against that method of approach as a trifle too abrupt.

"Nice day to-day, isn't it?" The sound of his own voice startled him.

English was an alien language to his unaccustomed tongue after the hissing syllables of the Martians.

With pathetic eagerness he awaited the inevitable answer to this commonplace introduction; that he might once more hear normal Earth tones in friendly converse, see the smile of greeting on a real Earth face.

But there came no answer. The man continued staring straight ahead, immobile, fixed. There was no slightest turn to the etched profile. It was as if he had not heard.

Hilary felt a sudden surge of anger. Damn discourteous, this first Earthman he had met. What had happened to the old hospitality? Had it passed out while he was roaming the spaces? He leaned over, harsh words tumbling for exit, when suddenly he checked himself. There was something strange about that fierce blank stare. The man's face, too, he saw now, was lined and worn; suffering had left its multitudinous imprint upon an ordinarily rotund countenance.

Hilary shouted suddenly: "Good morning." The man did not answer, nor did he stir from his unvarying pose. Deaf! The returned Earthman suffered swift pity. With gentle forefinger he prodded the man.

The reaction was astounding. The man cowered like a pricked balloon; little strangling moans forced themselves out of clenched teeth. Dumb, too! His face jerked around to the direction of Hilary's gentle prodding. Merciful heavens, the man was blind also! Two vacant red-rimmed sockets stared pitifully at him—the eyeballs were gone, ripped out.

But what struck Hilary particularly was the mortal terror that was depicted on the blind man's face. It was as though he expected some cruel, crippling blow to follow; as though it were the last straw on the back of unmentionable former agonies. Hilary shuddered. It was not good to witness such animal fear. A dark shadow blotted out the brightness of the Earth-day for him. There was something wrong here, something that required a good deal of explanation.

His probing eyes went thoughtfully over the poor cowering wretch. Those careworn features were familiar, somehow. Where had he seen the man before? Suddenly he stiffened, choking an exclamation. The man was bound immovably to his seat. Thin metal links, almost invisible, encircled his feet; held the elbows taut against the fluted columns of the seat-back.

Hilary's space-tanned features hardened; the light gray of his eyes darkened. All the pleasure of his homecoming vanished. The kindly

Earth seemed suddenly grown inimical. What had happened in the five long years of his absence? This would have been impossible on the Earth he had known; a man, manifestly the victim of hideous tortures, bound like a wild animal to the seat of a public conveyor.

He went swiftly into action. From the depths of a capacious pocket he fished a sheathed blade of stellite, triply keen; its razor-sharp edge sawed smoothly at the bonds.

In his mounting anger Hilary had paid no attention to the scattering of people occupying the cushioned chairs of the speeding conveyor. But a smothered nearby gasp caused his head to jerk up. He met the incredulous stare of a paunchy, heavy-jowled man seated some chairs away. There was more than incredulity, there was furtive fear in the small beady eyes sunken in folds of fat.

Hilary gave way to unreasoning anger.

"Stop looking like a stuck pig," he called sharply. "Give me a hand with this poor fellow."

The response was surprising. The man got up from his chair precipitately, stark panic written all over him. The sweat oozed from his shiny forehead as he backed cautiously away. He tripped over the

edge of the seat behind, and fell. Once more he scrambled to his feet, and as if the fall had released his trembling muscles, he turned and ran, stumbling and dodging across the local conveyors, never once looking back.

Hilary watched his mad flight wonderingly. "Good Lord," he thought, "does my face frighten people so? Maybe I've turned into a Martian."

He turned to appeal to the others on the conveyor, and received another shock. The few men within earshot were already on their feet and moving away from there with unostentatious celerity. Hilary surveyed their receding backs thoughtfully. What was there about himself to frighten grown men out of their wits? Or was it the poor tortured wretch he was trying to release who was responsible for the exodus?

Already the express was almost clear. He saw the deserters throwing themselves guiltily into seats on the local belts, and then he was carried swiftly past. Only one man remained stubbornly in his seat, some fifteen rows back. He was a huge mountain of a man, a giant upon Earth, and there was a strangeness in his wide stare.

Hilary frowned, then shook his head, and dropped down to his task

again. The blind man moaned and jerked as he felt the bite of stellite upon his fetters. Hilary made soothing sounds, forgetful that he could not hear, and worked steadily. There was a little clinking noise and the links that bound the arms fell apart. He attacked the leg shackles next.

There was a tap on Hilary's shoulder, light, electric, yet strangely heavy in its implications. Hilary turned his head sharply, saw the landscape blotted out by a huge overshadowing bulk. Five years in a hostile universe had made him cautious. He pivoted on his heels and rose in a single flowing motion, stellite blade ready for instant action.

Chapter II

The Strange Guard

There confronted him the hugest figure of a man he had ever seen. Hilary was not lacking in inches himself—he was well over six feet; but the giant staring quizzically down at him was nearer seven, with shoulders to match. The features of his face were gargantuan in their ruggedness, yet singularly open, while a pair of mild blue eyes, childlike in expression, looked in perpetual wonder out upon the world.

In spite of his annoyance, Hilary instinctively liked the giant.

"What do you want?" he inquired gruffly.

The Colossus surveyed him with his child's eyes.

"Man, you are crazy." He spoke in a deep bass rumble, without emotion or inflection. He was simply stating a fact.

A surge of annoyance swept over the returned wanderer from the far spaces. This was the last straw.

"I may be," he admitted coldly, "but I like my particular form of craziness."

"You know the penalty of course for what you are doing?" the big man inquired unemotionally.

Hilary swore deeply. "Damn the penalties, whatever you mean by that. Here's a man who has been tortured unmercifully—chained like a dog. I intend to free him."

The mild blue eyes contained the hint of a gleam.

"But you know the penalties," he repeated. His murmur sounded like

the rumble of a distant earthquake.

Hilary straightened sharply, poked his finger at the midriff of the giant.

"I don't know what you are talking about," he stabbed. "What is the meaning of all this? Who is this unfortunate, and why did everyone disappear as though I had the plague when I sat next to him?"

A look of bewilderment swept over the massive face, bewilderment tinged with a dawning suspicion of the questioner's sanity.

"You mean to say you don't know?" The tone held incredulity.

"I've just told you so," Hilary pointed out. He felt a growing unease.

The giant eyed him closely. "Man, where on earth have you been these last three years?"

Hilary grinned. "I haven't."

"You haven't?" echoed the other. Suspicion hardened the childlike eyes into cold flame. The man was dangerous when aroused. He thrust his jaw down at Hilary. "If you are jesting with me...." He left the sentence unfinished, but the clenching of a huge fist left no doubt

as to his intention.

"I am not jesting," Hilary assured him grimly. "I have been away from the Earth for five years. I've just returned."

The great hand clenched tighter. "Now I know you are crazy, or—Who are you?" he ended abruptly.

"Hilary Grendon."

"Hilary Grendon—Hilary Grendon," rumbled the other in manifest perplexity. It was evident the name meant nothing to him.

This then was the homecoming he had dreamed of in the unfathomable reaches of space. Hilary thought bitterly. Five short years and he was already forgotten. Then the irony of it struck him, and he laughed aloud.

"Yes," he said. "Five years ago I led the Grendon Expedition to explore interplanetary space in the space-ship I had invented. I've come back—alone."

It was amazing to watch long-overlaid memories struggling up through the subconscious. At last the giant spoke.

"Oh, yes," he said meditatively, "I seem to remember something about it." He surveyed Hilary with a new interest. "So you were one of those chaps, eh?"

The explorer admitted it, humbly. Of such are the uses of fame.

"Well, now," said the giant, "that might explain it. Though it sure beats all." And he shook his head as though he still did not understand.

"Who is that man?" Hilary stabbed a forefinger at the blind man, who sat immobile as before, his worn etched face ever to the front. "It's monstrous. Amos Peabody shall hear of it."

The Colossus looked at him mildly.

"That," he said, "is Amos Peabody!"

Silence lay like a live thing between them. Hilary whirled in a kaleidoscope of emotion. Was this wasted, tortured being the portly, dignified President of the United States who had bade him Godspeed at the start of his tremendous journey five years before? His pitying eyes searched the lineaments of the poor wretch. There was no doubt of it now; it was Amos Peabody.

Hilary gripped his informant's arm. His voice was deadly calm. "I want the truth about this, and I want it fast."

"The truth," echoed the big man with strange laughter; "now that is something—"

His eyes widened over Hilary's shoulder. With a swiftness remarkable in one of his bulk he shook off Hilary's restraining grip, caught him by the shoulder and thrust him, all in one motion, into a chair several removed from Peabody. In a trice his huge bulk was safely ensconced in the adjoining one.

Hilary's hand went to the butt of the automatic within his blouse. The giant saw the movement. He leaned forward.

"Don't make a move," he warned, "the guard is coming."

"What guard?"

"You'll see fast enough. Appear unconcerned if you value your life. Don't look back."

Hilary complied. His face became an expressionless mask as he lounged in his chair, but his thoughts seethed and boiled. What terrible mystery had enveloped the Earth during his absence? Why

was Amos Peabody tortured and made into a public mockery?

There was a slight whirring noise behind him. Heedful of his companion's admonition he relaxed in apparent unconcern, but his hand stole once more to the fold in his blouse. His long fingers rested caressingly upon the butt of his automatic. There were still three good Earth bullets in the chamber.

The whirring ceased. There was a slight jar as of something landing on the speeding conveyor. Yet Hilary did not look back, though his grip tightened. A heavy body stumbled toward them, cursing in strange phrases. It passed from behind, came to a halt before the giant. Hilary shot a sharp glance upward from under veiled lids. An exclamation sprang full-throated to his lips, died unheard under a tremendous effort of his will.

Before them stood a being—it could not be called a man. He was no denizen of the Earth, that was evident, yet Hilary had visited all the planets outward from our own without encountering such a monster.

He hulked before them like a behemoth, even dwarfing Hilary's companion with his enormous stature; but it was noticeable that he supported his weight ill, as if Earth's gravitation was too strong for him. Manlike he was in every essential, but the skin of his face was a

pasty dull gray, and ridged and furrowed with warty excrescences. Two enormous pink eyes, unlidded, but capable of being sheathed with a filmy membrane, stared down at them with manifest suspicion. A gray, three-fingered hand held an angled tube significantly. A lens gleamed transparent in the sunlight from the open end.

Hilary did not move under the stare, nor did his companion. The mild blue eyes were childlike as ever. The guard's gaze shifted from them to the trembling figure of Amos Peabody. He bent over him, thrust at him with ungentle hand. The automatic under Hilary's fingers crept farther out from the blouse, but a warning gesture from his companion stopped him.

The guard amused himself with shaking the blind man; then he bent suddenly. He had seen the broken links. With ominous deliberation he turned his vast weight upon them. His baleful pink eyes fastened upon Hilary's companion.

"You!" he growled throatily, "what do you know about this?" He spoke in English, but it was obviously not his native tongue.

Mildly innocent was the giant's face.

"I know nothing, Magnificent," he said humbly. "I am on my way to Great New York on my own insignificant affairs, and I bother my head with nothing else."

"The bonds of this dog, Peabody, have been severed," the guard insisted, "and recently, too. Speak up, Earthman, or—you know the penalty."

"I know the penalty," he answered respectfully, "but I have been seated here only five minutes, and I know nothing of this Peabody."

The guard fingered his tube.

"Let me see your tag," he said suddenly.

The other opened his blouse obediently and exposed a thin copper disk suspended on his chest. The guard tugged at it brutally to bring it within range of his vision. The pull jerked the giant's head forward, and the thin metal strand cut cruelly into the back of his neck. Hilary saw a flush of red sweep like a wave up to his forehead, and the mild blue eyes turned hard like glinting blue pebbles. But not a word escaped his lips.

"Grim Morgan," the guard read, "A46823 Great New York. Pah,

what barbarous names you Earthmen have." He shoved the giant back heavily into his seat, and turned his baleful glare upon Hilary.

"You, what do you know about this?"

Grim Morgan interposed hastily. "Nothing, Magnificent. He came on the express conveyor after I did."

The guard's free hand went back. Very deliberately he struck him across the face with three ridged fingers. An angry welt raised.

"That will teach you to keep your mouth shut when not spoken to."

The big man's eyes were mild, but his hands tensed as though they were curled around a throat. He said nothing.

The guard turned to Hilary again. "Answer me," he barked.

"My friend told the truth," Grendon said simply.

"Your tag?"

"I have none."

Suspicion flared openly in the pink eyes.

"Where is it?"

"I never had one."

"Ah!" There was a world of meaning to the exhalation. "You know of course that every Earthman must be registered. The penalty for non-obedience is—death."

The angled tube came up with the swiftness of light. Grim Morgan cried out sharply, lunged out of his seat. Hilary tore at his gun, knowing sickeningly that the draw would be slower than the action of the strange weapon in the guard's hand.

There was a sneer on the monster as he pressed something on the tube. Hilary's automatic was only half out of his blouse. Grim's lunge would never reach in time. He was too far away.

Chapter III

The Death of Amos Peabody

Just how any inkling of what was happening penetrated the pain-swept consciousness of the blind and deaf President could never be determined. Possibly a thin repercussion of Grim's cry, possibly an intuition that comes to sense-bereft men. But he had jerked

spasmodically erect. There was a sharp tinkling as the weakened leg links broke. He threw himself in a queer, awkward movement forward, directly in the path of the tubed weapon. A blinding beam flashed out of the orifice, sheared through Peabody's middle as though he were cut cleanly in half with a gigantic knife. He toppled in two sections to the floor of the conveyor—released from all humiliation, all suffering.

At the same time two other things happened. Grim Morgan hit the guard like a crashing thunderbolt and Hilary's gun barked once. The monster tottered under the impact. A puzzled expression flitted over his pinkish eyes, a filmy sheath spread over them like a veil, and he fell heavily, a neat bullet hole square between his eyes.

Hilary shoved the gun back in his blouse, and stared alternately at the huddled form of the grotesque being and all that remained of Amos Peabody. The old President had saved his life at the cost of his own. Instinctively his hand went up in formal salute to the gallant old man.

Grim Morgan shook him by the shoulder.

"Man," he said quietly, "we have killed a Mercutian guard. Within the hour we shall be dead men too."

Hilary looked up at him sharply.

"A Mercutian," he echoed. "You mean—"

"That for three years now the Earth has been a conquered province of these devils from Mercury," Grim interposed swiftly. "We have committed the unforgivable offense and must pay for it."

Hilary glanced swiftly around. The express conveyor was clear of passengers for over a hundred yards each way. All the people within range had cleared off when Hilary had attempted to release Peabody. The small figure of a man got up from his chair beyond the charmed circle, and was threading his way forward. The local conveyors seemed to be moving backward at graded speeds. Beyond was the open country, gradually thickening into scattered rows of crystal buildings. They were in the suburbs of Great New York. Within ten minutes the conveyor terminal would be reached.

Hilary's eyes flicked speculatively to the tiny cigar-shaped boat in which the dead guard had flown down to them. Its smooth gray-gleaming surface was devoid of wings or other lifting devices. Only a fan-shaped fin projected from the stern like the tail of a fish. The cockpit, if such it could be called, was tiny, just ample enough to accommodate the Mercutian's girth. The sunlight dazzled back from

a bewildering jumble of tiny lenses inset in the instrument board. Arranged along the hull, on either side, were larger disks of the same quartz-like material.

"Let's get away in the flier," he said.

"Can't," Grim said. "Those lenses you see on the instrument board are the controls. No one knows how to operate them except the Mercutians. Our people managed to capture a few, but couldn't do a thing with them."

Hilary stared at the motionless flier with interest. "What are those round glass disks stretched along the hull in a double row?" he asked. "They look like burning glasses."

"That's just what they are," said Grim sadly. "The top row are sun-lenses, that throw a terrible ray for a distance of two to three hundred feet. Melts everything in its path—men trees, rocks even. You saw one in action in the sun-tube with which poor old Peabody was cut in half. The lower row of lenses on the flier are search beams."

"Search beams?" Hilary echoed inquiringly.

"Yes. They act like X-rays, more powerful though, and with the

further property of rendering everything they touch transparently crystal for depths of ten to fifteen feet. Lead is the only element they can not penetrate. Another secret our scientists can not fathom, so they talk learnedly about the stream of rays polarizing the structure of matter along a uniaxis."

"Can't those lenses be duplicated, and turned as weapons against the Mercutians?"

"No. They are made of a peculiar vitreous material native to Mercury."

"And no one has found out the principle on which they work?"

"Well, there have been theories. We haven't many scientists left, you know. But the most popular one is that these lenses have the power of concentrating the rays of the sun to an almost infinite degree, and then spreading them out again, each individual beam with the concentrated energy of the whole. Some new way of rearranging quanta of energy."

"Hmm!" Hilary's brow was wrinkled. For a long moment he stared and thought.

At last he snapped back to their present situation: the dead guard at their feet, the dismembered body of Amos Peabody, the cowed groups of Earthmen on the speeding conveyors, keeping respectful distances.

"We'd better start moving if we want to get away," he said.

"It's no use." Grim spread his hands resignedly. "We'll have to take our medicine."

Hilary flared angrily. "You're talking nonsense. What's to prevent us from hopping to another platform? There is no other Mercutian in sight."

"No, but there were plenty of Earthmen who saw us."

"They won't tell."

"Oh, won't they?" Grim shook his head quietly. "You don't realize what has happened. Their spirit has been crushed until they are actually slavish in soul as well as in body. They fought bravely enough on the first invasion. Even after the conquest there were plenty of men looking for an opportunity to fight them again. Amos Peabody headed the revolt. It was smothered in blood, so effectually

that only slaves are left. Peabody was left as a horrible warning. He was sent from city to city to be exhibited to the populace, unattended on the way, so confident were the Mercutians of the terror they had inspired."

"So you think those Earthmen who saw us will report to their masters," Hilary said slowly.

Grim nodded.

"I know it—they'll expect to curry favor in return."

Hilary felt a web of circumstance tighten around him. His jaw tautened. Thank the Lord he had been away—on his own. He had not the soul of a slave—yet.

"Won't you fight for your life?" he asked the big man curiously.

A spark lit in the mild blue eyes, died down.

"Yes if there were a chance," he said dully. "But there is none. The whole Earth is honeycombed with their guards. They have fliers, sun weapons, invisible search beams. We'd never elude them."

Hilary snorted impatiently. "We have good Earth brains, haven't we?

I've traveled all the outer planets and never met any intelligence equal to that of a man, and I won't admit for a moment that the Mercutians are any exceptions."

A man stepped casually onto the express, took one startled look at the dead guard, at them, and fled precipitately back.

Another one to spread the alarm," Morgan said grimly. "There'll be a dozen guards dropping down on us in the next five minutes."

"Let's get going then." Hilary was pulling the big man along by main force when he heard a movement in back of them. He stopped, whirled, automatic thrusting its blue nose forward.

The little man who had gotten up before on the express was pushing rapidly toward them.

"Stop." Hilary's voice was harsh with command.

But the little man did not heed. He literally stumbled in his haste, crying: "You've killed a Mercutian."

"What of it, my bantam?" Hilary inquired softly, the muzzle of his gun boring into a lean flat stomach. The little man was actually pressing against the automatic in his excitement.

"What of it?" he shrilled excitedly. "God, all this time I've been waiting to find someone with guts enough to smash one of them. Sir, I'm proud to shake your hand."

He reached over the wicked-looking muzzle, gripped Hilary's fist, still tight on the gun butt, and pumped vigorously. He dropped the hand, swerved on Grim.

"And you too, sir." His little fingers were engulfed in a mighty paw. "I saw it all, I tell you," he babbled. "We've got them on the run. We'll sweep the filthy devils clean off the Earth. We'll annihilate them."

"Whoa there, my little gamecock." Morgan grinned down at the excited little man. "One Mercutian doesn't make a Roman holiday. They're plenty more where he came from. You'd better clear out before they come, or you'll be included in the party."

The little fellow—he was not much more than five feet no inches tall—drew himself up to his full height. "What," he ejaculated, "me desert my friends? Wat Tyler's never had that said of him yet. We stick together, to hell and back again."

Hilary grinned as he slipped the weapon back into his blouse. He

was beginning to like this little firebrand. In truth, Grim had rather fairly described him as a gamecock. His stature, the bristly red hair that flamed above a freckled face, the lightest of blue eyes that snapped with excitement, the peculiar strut of him.

"You'll do," he said briefly.

At a safe distance a crowd was gathering, a crowd of Earthmen. Grim surveyed them carefully. They were milling back and forth, but no one dared come closer. "Slaves," he grunted, "not a spark left in them." His eyes swept the heavens. Two faint black specks appeared in the blue distance, from the direction of Great New York.

"They're coming for us," he said quietly.

"Let them," crowed the fiery little bantam, "we'll meet them man to man."

He wrenched the tube from the stiffened fingers of the dead guard, swung it exultingly aloft.

"You little fool," Hilary cried sharply, and struck it down again. "We're not waiting for them. That's suicide. Come. I'm afraid it's too late for you to turn back now. You've been seen with us."

He dashed across the moving belts, Grim and Wat, a grotesquely assorted pair, directly behind him.

Passengers, men and women both, scattered at their approach, stark, servile fear smothering their dulled countenances. Cries arose on all sides. "The Magnificents are coming."

The black specks became larger, forming themselves into swift one-man fliers. The three men pelted across the graded conveyors as hard as they could run. No Earthman tried to stop them; one look at their grim faces would have been a most potent dissuader. And fortunately there were no Mercutians within hailing distance other than the rapidly nearing fliers.

They flung themselves off the last slow-moving platform, panting.

"Which way now?" Hilary asked. His quick eye raked the scene for possible hideouts. They were on a smoothly clipped lawn, heaving gently up to a pretty rambling structure, built on an antique design, pleasingly irregular and nestling to the ground as though it were indigenous to the soil. The walls were modern, though, of vita-crystal, which possessed the peculiar property of permitting all of the beneficial rays of the sun to penetrate, and yet presented a perfectly opaque appearance to the outside world.

No other hiding place was in sight. The lawn stretched smooth on all sides except for a scattering of trees—poor enough cover. The Mercutians were almost directly overhead now, preparing to swoop.

Our only chance seems to be the house," Hilary answered his own question quietly.

Grim shook his head. "Their search beams can penetrate the vita-crystal walls as though they were transparent glass."

Hilary's heart sank. "Can't help it," he said laconically. "Come on."

The three men broke into a run. It was only a hundred yards, but the Mercutians were coming down fast. They had been seen. A flash as of molten metal gleamed overhead. A blinding ray leaped for the ground, struck viciously a little ahead of the running men. The velvet green grass crisped to ash; the soil underneath scorched.

"Scatter!" Hilary shouted.

Instantly the men spread out. Another blast hissed down at them, so close to Hilary that the heat seared his left side like a red-hot iron. The Mercutians were getting the range. Wat Tyler stopped short with a howl of defiance. He whipped the hand tube he had taken from the

dead guard out of his blouse.

"Hide it, you fool!" Hilary yelled back at him. "We don't want them to known we are armed."

Wat obeyed reluctantly. He shook his fist high in the air, and started to run again. It was not an instant too soon, either. A beam slithered down the smoldering air, and the Earth literally boiled under its impact, directly on the spot where Wat had stopped to shake his fist. All about them the terrible rays were slashing now.

But a last desperate burst of speed carried the Earthmen onto a wide enclosed portico, in the old manner. Hilary pounded on the vita-crystal door. It was tightly locked.

Step back a moment," Morgan rumbled.

Hilary obeyed. The big man spat thoughtfully upon his hands, worked his shoulders tentatively. Then he too retreated to the outermost edge of the portico. Above, the crystal suddenly shattered. Sharp-edged fragments showered down upon them. There was little time to waste.

Grim heaved forward in a slanting rush, right shoulder extended. He

crashed into the locked door like a runaway train. There was a grinding noise, a smash of crystal, and his shoulder was through, incased in a halo of bright, sharp edges.

The big man staggered back, his shoulder streaming blood from a hundred cuts. His face was pale and drawn.

"Good fellow," Wat yelled, "even though you are an overgrown ox." He darted in behind the man-mountain like a twisting snake. His deft fingers reached in through the shattered crystal, pressed something on the inside. The door slid into its wall pocket with a sound of grinding glass.

Wat burst into the opened room first, Grim right behind him. Hilary brought up the rear, Grim's great bulk blotting out for the moment any view of the interior.

There was a sudden gasp—a girl's voice.

"Wh—What does this mean?" She was tremulous, yet unafraid.

Hilary stopped suddenly as though brought up against a solid wall. His heart pounded madly. That voice—but it was utterly impossible!

Wat answered, gallantly. "Sorry to annoy you, miss, but they're after

us. My partner here's wounded."

"Oh, you poor man." There was quick sympathy in the clear tones. "But who is after you?"

A splintering crash resounded outside.

"The Mercutians, as you no doubt hear," the little man responded with faint irony.

The girl gasped again. "Oh my God!"

There was silence. Hilary strained his ears, yet took care to keep hidden behind Grim's huge frame. What would she do now? It seemed to him as if the whole world depended on her reply.

The girl broke the silence. She had come to a swift decision.

"They must not get you. Go upstairs, quietly, into the chamber on the left of the hall. It's my bedroom. Their search beams can not penetrate it; the walls are draped with lead-encrusted curtains. I'll stay down here and try to throw them off the trail."

Hilary's heart recommenced beating. A gush of joy overwhelmed him. The girl had proven herself.

Grim spoke, for the first time.

"You know the penalty of course, for hiding us."

She did not answer directly. "I can't help it. I can't surrender Earthmen to those beasts. Besides"—there was a catch in her voice—"it does not matter much since—"

Hilary stepped quietly from behind Grim's overshadowing bulk.

The girl's eyes went wide at the sight of him; her slender white hand flew to her throat. She looked as if she had seen a ghost.

"You—you!" she choked. "Hilary!"

She swayed and would have fallen, had Hilary not jumped to catch her. His heart was beating thickly with excess of emotion. Joan Robbins in his arms again—how he prayed for this moment in the icy reaches of interplanetary space. Yet what was she doing here in Bronxville? Her home had always been atop the windswept Robbins Building in Great New York.

Her hand went softly over his features, as though to assure herself that it was really he.

"Oh, my dear," she whispered brokenly. "I had almost given up all hope. Everyone was certain you were lost—long ago."

Whirrings sounded outside.

"Sorry to break up your reunion," Grim interrupted in his bass rumble, "but the Mercutians have landed on the lawn. They'll be in here right away."

Joan tore herself out of Hilary's arms. Her slim straight figure tautened; her velvet soft eyebrows puckered over deep-lit pools.

"Upstairs quickly, all of you," she cried. "I'll manage them somehow."

Hilary said quietly, "I won't leave you alone with those brutes. You go along up, and I'll remain here." The automatic gleamed in his hand.

"No, no," she panted, "you mustn't. You wouldn't have a chance. Leave it to me." She literally pushed them with her little hands to the stairway. "Go, if you love me."

"The girl's right," Grim said, "there's a chance. If not," he shrugged his shoulders, "we can always come down again."

Outside were heavy thuddings on the portico.

"You in there," a heavy alien voice resounded, "open or we blast our way in." The door had been slid back into position.

There was no room for further argument. Very reluctantly Hilary followed his companions up the winding stairway.

At the top of the stairs an entrance slide showed darker on the left. Wat fumbled for a moment until he found the button. The door whirred open, even as they heard Joan's clear voice below: "Come in, Magnificents!" There was a trampling of feet.

Chapter IV

The Kidnapping of Joan

The Earthmen moved quickly and quietly into Joan's room. Thin, crinkly draperies of heavy silk impregnated with lead in colloidal solution, covered all the walls, the door itself. But Hilary shot no more than a cursory glance around; he had left the slide slightly ajar; he was listening intently. The gun was in his hand. There were only two bullets in the chambers—all that were left of the thousands of rounds the expedition had started out with. He must not waste them.

The thick rough voice of a Mercutian floated up from below.

"Three Earth slaves came in here. Where did they go?"

"They did," Joan admitted readily. "They frightened me out of my wits. I screamed and they ran through the house and out the back way."

The Mercutian was suspicious.

"Hmm. Funny there's no sign of a struggle here. Nothing is upset."

"They ran out the back way," the girl repeated tonelessly.

"We'll see; but if you are lying...." He said no more, but the pause was significant in its implications.

"I would not lie to the Magnificents."

"Not if you are wise." He seemed to be the leader. He evidently turned to his companion, for there issued a flood of throaty consonants to which the other grunted once. Then the listeners heard his heavy stamping as he walked through the house to the rear. A door whirred; he had gone out.

The remaining Mercutian said suddenly: "He won't find them."

"Why not?" Joan asked, a bit tremulously.

The Mercutian laughed harshly. "Because you lied. You've hid them in the house."

Hilary heard Joan's sudden sharp intake of breath.

"No, no, Magnificent," she cried.

The Mercutian laughed again—a hard cruel laugh. There was no mirth in it.

"All Earthwomen are liars. I know where you hid them. In your bed chamber. The trick is too old already. We may not be able to see through the lead curtains, but we can break down the door. I warned Artok not to permit the use of the lead curtains, but he has a soft streak. He listened to the women's pleadings for privacy. Privacy, pah! A cloak for conspiracies, that's all it comes to. When Gurda returns, we search upstairs and drag out your rats from their hole."

He laughed smugly, pleased with his own cleverness.

"It is not so." Strange how calm Joan sounded. "They are not in the

house. Only my dying mother is here. She is bedded upstairs. The doctor ordered absolute quiet. The slightest noise would be fatal."

The Mercutian sneered. "We'll take a look at that dying mother of yours right now."

"You mustn't," the girl panted. "She will die, I tell you."

"And what does it matter to me?"

There was the sound of a struggle, a sharp cry, followed by a dull thud.

Hilary was out through the door like a flash, down the corridor to the head of the stairs with automatic extended. The monster Mercutian was coming heavily up the treads. They saw each other simultaneously.

The Mercutian's pink eyes turned a vicious red; the tube dangling in his hand jerked sharply up. Hilary squeezed the trigger. The gun barked. The Mercutian spun half around with the force of the tearing bullet. The deadly beam from his weapon slithered over the wall, searing a great molten gash in the crystal. He was badly hurt, but he did not fall. Howling with pain and rage, he slewed himself around

again, pointed his sun weapon unsteadily upward.

Hilary let him have the other slug. The big body jerked, and fell backward with a crash to the bottom of the stairs, there to lie oddly contorted and still.

There was a thundering rush from the rear of the lower floor, a hoarse throaty cry. Hilary tore down the steps three at a time, Grim and Wat slithering behind him.

The other Mercutian was bending over Joan's semiconscious form, sweeping her into the crook of a huge arm. He shot a startled glance at the down-pouring Earthmen, swerved the girl around, and aimed his tube.

Hilary pulled the trigger as he swerved. There was a sharp click, but no explosion. Hilary cursed and threw himself down. He had forgotten that there were no more bullets. The speeding flash scorched overhead.

Grim and Wat crouched low. Wat's tube, the one he had wrested from the dead guard on the conveyor, was being slowly raised. The Mercutian saw it, shifted the inanimate girl in front of himself, and backed stealthily toward the splintered door.

"Don't shoot," Hilary cried sharply. "You'll kill Joan."

Wat lowered the tube disgustedly. Hilary groaned aloud. If only he had had one more bullet. There was enough of the gigantic body exposed to offer an excellent target to a steel slug without harming Joan, but the sun weapon sent out its beam in a flat spray.

The Mercutian sensed their dilemma as they crouched on the stairs. He laughed unpleasantly as he backed through the doorway, Joan's limp body held straight in front of him.

"Good-by, Earth slaves," he taunted. "I take your pretty Earth maiden with me. In five minutes I return, with others. You cannot escape. Good-by."

He jumped clumsily through the door. The crouching Earthmen heard a click. It had closed behind him.

Hilary and his companions cleared the stairs in almost a single bound. He had snatched the sun-tube out of Wat's hand. Through the splintered slide he saw the Mercutian climbing into his flier, but a great crystal column of the portico intervened. Nevertheless, while Wat fumbled for the button that released the slide, he took a chance. Every split second was precious now. He aimed the weapon, pressed

the spring. A white dazzling ray darted fanwise from the orifice. It touched the column, fused it into molten, running glass. But the Mercutian was already in his seat, Joan limp beside him. He was fumbling at the controls.

The door slid open at last. Hilary shot through like a bullet from a rifle. The flier had already taken off on a long slanting rise. A three-fingered hand waved mockingly down at him. Hilary raised his weapon, then lowered it with a groan. The flier was well within range yet, but if he aimed the terrible beam at it, there would be a crash of fused twisted material, and—Joan was in it. What a dilemma! If he didn't shoot, she would be borne away—he dared not think to what horrible fate.

Grim's hand rested lightly on his shoulder as he watched the flier become a faint black speck in the direction of Great New York.

"She was your sweetheart." His gruff voice was oddly gentle.

Hilary brushed a weary hand over his forehead. The Earth, the universe itself, were suddenly dead, meaningless gobs of matter.

"Yes," he said tonelessly. "Five years ago she promised to wait for my return. She kept her word. I found her again—only to lose her."

Grim said quietly: "I too once loved a girl. I joined the last rebellion under Amos Peabody. The Mercutians threatened to seize the wives, sisters, sweethearts of the revolters if they persisted. Many of the men surrendered. I was one of those who refused. When the revolt was over, smothered in flame from their giant sun-tubes, I found that they had made good their threats. My girl was gone, vanished. Two Mercutians had taken her away. She was never found again."

He paused in brooding silence. "They are up to their old tricks again." His eyes were steely blue now. Hilary pressed his hand in silence. They were welded together by a common loss.

Wat Tyler broke in upon them. "If you fellows want to hang around here, I'll be on my way. That Mercutian hyena will be back here with a dozen others just like him in less than no time."

Hilary snapped out of his sorrow. He could not help Joan by having himself captured or killed, nor was it fair to Grim and Wat. They had placed themselves unquestioningly under his leadership. Something else too was growing into burning life in his mind. This was his Earth, his and Grim's and Wat's, and of millions of other normal human beings. The Mercutians were interlopers, brutal conquerors. He would devote his now otherwise meaningless life to driving them off the planet, wiping them out of the solar system. A tall order, yes,

but not for nothing had he fought almost single-handed against those other monstrosities on other worlds: Martians, Ganymedans, Saturnians. The Mercutians were no stronger than they. Besides, there was Joan.

"Men," he said crisply, once more the clear-headed commander of his space expedition, "I intend to fight these Mercutian invaders until Earth is free once more, or—I am dead. I have no illusions about the magnitude of the job, of its practical hopelessness. But that does not mean that you two have to throw away your lives also. I am a marked man, without any identification tag. You on the other hand, can get away from here, mingle indistinguishably with the hordes of people in Great New York. You would be safe. Our ways part here, if you desire it so." He added hastily, "I would be the last to blame you."

Grim Morgan and Wat Tyler looked at each other, a great giant of a man and an undersized bantam. Yet some electric spark of sympathy seemed to dart between them, these so dissimilar beings.

Wat elected to be the spokesman. His voice rose shrilly, as it always did when he was laboring under stress of excitement or emotion.

"You won't blame us," he almost squeaked. "Who asked you? Damn

it, haven't we consciences of our own? Are we quitters, yellow-bellied Mercutians to quit a pal? Are we, Grim Morgan? Speak, you big ox."

He wheeled abruptly and shook a small fist high in the air. It barely reached under Grim's nose. The big man looked down at the little gamecock unsmilingly.

"No, Wat Tyler, we are not," he said gravely.

Wat turned to Hilary triumphantly.

"There, you see," he crowed, "we stick together. We'll lick those Mercutian monsters; we'll sweep them into the ocean, into space. And what's more, we'll rescue your girl too." He stopped to catch his breath. Grim was nodding slowly. He had not the little man's exuberance. His girl could not be rescued any more, but he could remember.

Hilary's frozen heart warmed into life again. With loyal comrades such as these, even the impossible might be accomplished. Very quietly, without heroics, the three men shook hands. Nothing more, yet they knew that they were bound indissolubly together, as long as there was a gasp of breath in any of them.

Hilary's brain functioned with racing smoothness. In minutes the Mercutians would be back.

"We must find a secure hiding place at once," he said. "Know of any?"

Grim shook his head negatively. "There is none," he spoke slowly. "Their search beams penetrate everything."

"Except lead," Hilary interposed.

"Except lead," he conceded.

"Very well then. We shall have to find a place we can line with lead. In the meantime. I have my space flier up in the Ramapos. If it hasn't been discovered yet, it will be essential to our task. We'll have to get there quickly."

"How?" Wat asked,

"By the conveyors, of course."

"No good," the little man declared. "Mercutian guards will be patrolling them. You have no identification tag. You would be caught."

Hilary considered that. "Suppose you two go on along," he suggested. "Find it and wait for me. I'll manage somehow."

"No," they answered unanimously; "we go together or not at all."

Hilary did not try to argue. He would have replied himself in exactly the same terms. He looked longingly at the abandoned flier of the gray-faced Mercutian, lying cold and still within the house.

"If only we could operate the ship," he said.

Then, characteristically, he dismissed the vain longing and bent to the business in hand. "That means we'll have to make it on foot, and keep under cover all the way. Come on."

As the three men moved rapidly over the great lawn toward the nearest covert, a little wood a quarter of a mile away, the horizon that was Great New York showed silhouetted against the westering sun numerous little black dots. The Mercutians were coming.

Chapter V

Outlaws of Earth

Three days later three footsore, weary, hungry men skulked in the

edge of the woods near a little clearing in the Ramapos. For three days they had ducked and dodged and literally burrowed into the ground by day, traveling only at night. Above and around them the noise of pursuit rolled. The Mercutians were persistent.

Speedy one-man fliers patrolled the airways, their search beams casting invisible rays in wide sweeping arcs over the uneven terrain. Wherever they touched, the ground sprang into vivid illumination, crystal clear to depths of ten to fifteen feet. Several times the crystal swath swept breathlessly close to the place where the fugitives crouched in covert. The conveyors carried back and forth armed companies of guards. The Mercutians were making a mighty effort to capture their prey.

But somehow the Earthmen had won through, and eager eyes searched the little glade. Hilary exhaled sharply. The Vagabond, stanch and faithful companion of all his travels, rested immovably on the deep green grass. It had escaped the questing eyes of the Mercutians. The travel lanes did not touch this secluded spot.

"So that's your space ship, eh?" said Grim, surveying the tarnished, pitted spheroid with something of awe.

"Yes," said Hilary lovingly as he unlocked the outer port side. A

hasty glance around inside showed that nothing had been touched. Everything was orderly, methodical, just as he had left it.

Grim and Wat examined with interest the banked controls, the polarization apparatus that set up repulsion waves and literally kicked the ship out into space away from the planet against which it had been set.

"Time enough to inspect," Hilary warned them. "Never can tell when those damned Mercutians may spy on us."

He set the polarization controls so that the mere pulling of a switch would send the flier careening off into space. He surveyed the apple-pie order of the interior with vast satisfaction.

"Now let them come," he said, "the Vagabond can show anything that flies a clean pair of heels. Let's eat."

He dragged an aluminum box out of its locker, opened it to disclose a gray funguslike mass. He cut off huge slices and offered it to his companions.

They looked at it doubtfully.

"Ugh," Wat shuddered violently, "I never saw stuff like that before.

It doesn't look good." The little man, they soon discovered, had violent discriminations in food.

"Try it." Hilary assured him. "It's a Martian growth, and delicious. We had to live on the land so to speak, on our journey. Our Earth food gave out long before the finish."

Wat looked at it with manifest distaste, but Grim was already wolfing his portion and making little pleased sounds. Wat bit into a portion gingerly, found it tasted somewhat like truffles, and soon was not far behind in gulping it down.

When their appetites had been appeased, Hilary called a council of war.

"First of all," he told them, "we'll have to find a hideout. That presupposes two things: a place large enough to store the Vagabond, and hidden from view, either from the naked eye or their search beams."

"That sounds like a large cavern lined with lead," said Grim.

"Exactly."

"And there are none such in this territory," Grim replied quietly.

"I will not move too far from New York," Hilary spoke with determination; "there is Joan...."

Grim looked blank. There was Joan, of course.

Wat got up suddenly. "I know a place," he said, "within a mile of here, and it's not a cave. Come on; I'll show you. I was a Ranger in the Ramapo Game Preserve in the old days."

Hilary asked no more. The polarization switch made contact, and the Vagabond left the Earth with a swift rush. It maneuvered with the ease of an Earth flier. Wat directed him, scanning the rugged tree-clad mountains with eager eye.

"There," he said finally, "set her down right there. Easy."

Hilary saw no break in the uninterrupted line of the mountain, but he followed directions. He had come to have an abounding faith in the little red-haired man.

The space flier eased gently down. Just as it seemed as if it would perforce come to rest upon serrated tree tops, a faint glimmer showed amid the darker green. There was an opening, just barely room for the Vagabond.

Hilary jockeyed skilfully through, kept on descending into a narrow cleft in the slope. The walls rose almost perpendicularly on either side. About fifty feet down there was a sharp turn and the gorge angled downward for another fifty feet. When the flier came to rest at the bottom, it was securely hidden in a slanting cleft, some forty feet wide and several hundred long. A mountain brook brawled at one side, assuring plentiful water. The outside world was absolutely invisible. Perpetual twilight reigned; only a pale dim religious light filtered through.

"Just the thing," Wat exulted. "We'll never be found here, no matter how much they search, unless someone actually stumbles into the opening. There's almost eighty feet of solid rock above us, and their search beams only penetrate about ten to fifteen."

"Splendid." Hilary said. "Now we've got to get to work."

For two days they toiled incessantly. A rope ladder was fabricated to insure ease of entrance and exit without recourse to the ship. Wat, as the least conspicuous, was delegated to scour the countryside and bring in stores of provisions. The bottom of the gorge was leveled off with infinite labor. Rough wood shelters were erected. Spares and electrical equipment to replace worn parts in the Vagabond were also purchased by Wat, in cautious small purchases. It necessitated long

trekking through mountain trails, but there was no murmur from him. The search, he reported, seemed to be slackening. Only the routine guards whizzed by on the conveyors, and the usual Mercutian fliers that kept to the regular air lanes.

At last even Hilary was satisfied. He was ready now for the plan that had been slowly forming in his mind during the days of their flight and of work. He was going to attempt a rescue of Joan. She had never left his thoughts once; he was burning with inward anxiety, though his face was a mask to cover his true feelings.

The last evening he sat with the others within one of the wooden shelters. A huge fire of fragrant pine knots blazed up a crude boulder chimney.

"I am going out now to find Joan," he told them quietly.

"When do we start?" asked Wat.

"I am going alone." There was a movement of protest. He checked it at once. "You can understand the reasons. One man can worm his way where three men cannot. It isn't a question of force, of brute strength. Besides, if anything should go wrong, there are still the two of you to carry on—to be the focus of a new revolt. If all of us were

caught, there would be no further hope for the Earth."

"It's a hell of a note," Wat grumbled, unconvinced. "There's fighting to be done, and me cooped up here like a sick hen."

"Hilary's right," Grim interposed thoughtfully. "It's a one-man job. We'll have our chance later." He turned on Hilary. "But if anything does happen to you, you understand we won't stay quietly. We'll come—if you are still alive. Promise you will let us know—if you can."

"I'll promise that," Hilary agreed. "There is a way."

He got up and went out of the hut. In a few minutes he was back, holding three small flat disks enmeshed in a spray of fine wires for them to see.

"I've just removed the communication disks from our space suits. Strap them in position on your right shoulder blade, hook the wires—so—and you can talk to me or to each other over distances of one hundred miles. Underneath your clothing they cannot be seen. Should I require your assistance, I'll call, and further, I'll show you both how to run the Vagabond, in case...." His voice trailed.

"Yes, yes, of course," Grim interposed hastily, "but you'll be here to run it when the time comes."

"Perhaps," Hilary smiled faintly. Then he leaned forward. "I've gotten a pretty good idea of what's happened on Earth since I went away, but now I need more details. Otherwise I'll run into things that will surprise me, and that might not be so—pleasant."

They told him, interrupting each other, arguing over details, Hilary interposing questions every now and then.

About a year and a half after Hilary's departure into trackless space, a huge flat diskoid came hovering to the ground near Great New York. It carried a party of Mercutians on a friendly exploration, so they said, once communication could be established between Earth linguists and themselves. They were welcomed, made much of. They seemed friendly enough. At their own request they were whirled over the Earth in Earth planes on a tour of inspection.

When they departed, with much protestation of friendship, they assured President Peabody they would return some day, they and others of their race. Just what hidden threat there was in that promise, no one on Earth realized. It was taken at face value.

Just a year later, almost to the day, the by this time familiar diskoid was seen hovering once more over Great New York. The Mercutians were returning. The people of New York suspected nothing. No troops were rushed to the scene to repel invasion; no guns were trained on the space ship. It was just another friendly visit, and hurried preparations were commenced for a rousing welcome on their landing.

What New York did not know was that simultaneously with the appearance of the Mercutian flier over their city, a hundred others were even then hovering over the strategic capitals of the world. The first Mercutian ambassadors had put to good advantage that hurried tour of inspection.

No one was alarmed. Each capital city thought itself signally honored by the reappearance of the lone Mercutian over it. The plan was clever, the timing perfect.

At a signal flashed through the ether, things started happening.

The great diskoids, hovering high in the stratosphere, suddenly blazed into blinding light. To the dazzled onlookers below, a new sun seemed to have been born. A truncated cone of flame leaped downward. The diskoid was the apex, the spreading base all of Great

New York. The sheeted brilliance enveloped the doomed city. It was a holocaust. New York became a roaring furnace. Stone and steel heated to incandescence.

The affrighted people had no chance for their lives. Like moths in a flame they died on the streets, in the ovens of their homes, in the steaming rivers into which they had thrown themselves to escape the awful heat. There were few survivors, only those who happened to be inside the giant skyscrapers, protected by many thicknesses of crystal and steel.

As Great New York went, so went a hundred other cities. The Earth was caught unawares, but the governments, the people, responded nobly. Troops were mobilized hurriedly, preparations rushed for warfare.

But the Earthmen did not have a chance. The great sinister diskoids moved methodically over the Earth, high in the stratosphere, where the futile Earth planes could not reach them, and sent the terrible blaze of destruction down unerringly upon armies, cities, towns.

It was over soon. One after another, the Earth governments capitulated. America was the last—old Amos Peabody vowed he would rather go down to utter destruction than yield—but he was

out-voted in Council. It was pure slaughter otherwise, without a chance to fight back.

At once the Mercutians set up their government. The Earth was turned into a colony. The leader of the invaders, the son of the Mercutian emperor, became Viceroy, with absolute powers. Sooner or later, it was their intention to transport the entire Mercutian race to the Earth, and make it their permanent home. Mercury was not an ideal place to live on; in the restricted area around the poles where life was possible, terrific storms alternated with furnace droughts, to which the hottest part of the Sahara was an Arctic paradise. No wonder the first Mercutian expedition had broached the subject of Earth as an easy conquest when they returned.

The Mercutians treated the Earth people as slaves. Their rule was brutal and arrogant in the extreme. The Earth people revolted, under the leadership of Amos Peabody. Weaponless, except for small hidden stores of rifles and revolvers—the Mercutians had cannily disarmed their slaves—they fought desperately with axes, knives, clubs, anything, against the overlords.

The result could have been expected. The rebellion was smothered in blood and fire. The bravest of the Earthmen died in battle, or were executed afterwards. The slaves, the weaklings, were left. Old Amos

Peabody was treated as Hilary had seen. He was exhibited in city after city as a public warning.

Hilary's blood was boiling as the terrible narration went on and on. But his face was calm, immovable.

"How do the diskoids operate?" he asked.

"Something like the sun rays on the one-man fliers," Grim told him, "only vastly more powerful. They are not limited in range, for one thing. It took only one, fifty miles up in the stratosphere, to destroy all New York. I saw the one that first spied on the Earth. It was about five hundred feet in diameter, made of the same vitreous material, and shaped like a huge lens. No doubt, besides being a space ship, it is just that. The sun's light flashes through it, is rearranged into terrible burning rays, and sears all in its path."

"Hm'm!" Hilary meditated. "So everything the Mercutians have in the way of weapons and armament depends directly on the sun's rays."

"Yes," Grim agreed. "After all, you must remember that with Mercury exposed as it is to the fierce heat of the sun, it would be only natural for them to develop weapons that utilized its rays."

"Then the tubes and the fliers cannot operate at night?"

"Yes, because then they receive the reflected waves from the diskoids that are stationed out in space, in eternal sunlight."

Hilary considered this a moment.

"Where do you think it possible Joan was taken?" he changed the subject abruptly.

"It is hard to say," Grim answered slowly. "But your best chance would be with the Viceroy himself. There have been rumors—when pretty girls disappear."

Hilary's jaw set hard.

"I think I'll interview His Mercutian Magnificence," he said. "Where are his quarters?"

"The Robbins Building."

"Good Lord, that's Joan's...." So that was why Joan was up in the Bronxville suburb. "What happened to her father, Martin Robbins?"

"Executed after the revolt," Wat interposed. "Your girl must have

escaped, otherwise she'd have been treated then like the other girls whose relatives had fought."

Hilary smiled unaccountably, the first smile since Joan had been taken. He knew the Robbins Building well; he had been a frequent visitor there in the old days. There were surprises in store for His Nibs the Mercutian....

Chapter VI

Mutterings of Revolt

The next morning, as dawn burst over the mountain tops, he started on his perilous mission. But no one who knew Hilary Grendon would have recognized him in the meek, shambling, slightly bent Earth slave who climbed the last rung of the rope ladder out of the hidden gorge.

He had changed his clothes for an old, space-worn suit that one of his former comrades could never have any further use for. The skilful application of wood ash and powdered charcoal to the hollows around the eyes, the pits beneath the cheekbones, gave him a gaunt, careworn appearance, suitable to an Earthman too brow-beaten to dream of defying his overlords.

Wat, who had artistically applied the make-up, viewed his handiwork with admiration. "You'll do," he grinned. "The way you look, even a little fellow like me would be perfectly safe in spitting upon you."

Before he went, he explained the mechanism of the Vagabond thoroughly to his friends. Finally they nodded; they would know how to work the controls.

There was the question of weapons. The captured sun-tube was out of the question; it could not be secreted beneath the dark-blue blouse. Hilary fondled his automatic wistfully.

"If only I had some bullets," he sighed.

"Hell, man, I know where you can get plenty," said Wat. There was a hidden cache, not far from where they were, stored against the day. There were still some brave spirits left on Earth who hoped and plotted. Wat had been one of them. Hilary's spirits rose immeasurably. With his gun loaded he could face the whole Mercutian planet.

Hilary made the return journey to Great New York in an hour. He wormed his way carefully to the nearest conveyor, and made his way

openly to the express platform, secure in his disguise.

There was an air of unrest, of tension in the air. The Earth passengers no longer sat dully, apathetically, as they were whizzed along. Little groups buzzed together, excited, gesticulating.

Hilary unostentatiously joined one. There was a sudden silence as he sank quietly into his seat, glances of uneasy suspicion. But he looked thoroughly innocuous, and the chief whisperer felt emboldened to resume the thread of his interrupted discourse.

"There are men left on Earth," he mouthed secretively to the little circle of heads. "The Mercutians went down like animals—fifteen of them killed, I hear. The whole company of guards retreated in a hurry"—he paused for greater effect, and continued slowly and impressively—"from—three—Earthmen."

Hilary raised his head sharply. They were discussing his exploit, evidently. With exaggerations of course. That was inevitable.

"Yes, sir," the speaker proceeded, "that shows you. These damned Mercutians are not invulnerable. They can be overcome, chased off the Earth. But we've got to be men, not slaves."

High excitement shone in the surrounding faces.

"But we ain't got no weapons," a small, weak-chinned man protested.

The other spat carefully: "No weapons, huh? Man, I could show you —"

A dark, silent man standing uninterestedly next to him jabbed him in the ribs. The orator gulped and stammered: "I—I mean—"

"Psst," someone hissed hurriedly, "the Mercutians."

Three giant Mercutian guards, their sun-tubes at the ready, stumbled heavily down the aisles of the express, sagging with the pull of Earth's gravitation. Their gray, warted faces were black as thunderclouds.

They stopped before the hastily scattered group.

"You heard the orders," the hugest one barked: "no congregating of Earth slaves on the conveyors or elsewhere. Next time you disobey, I'll ray you. You understand?"

"Yes, Magnificent," the weak-chinned man muttered hurriedly.

But the little knot reformed immediately after the guards had passed on.

"Magnificents!" The first speaker spat viciously. "I'd like to wring their necks."

Hilary shifted unobtrusively to another excited cluster. There the same procedure was followed. A quiet-voiced man was talking, lauding the exploit of the three embattled Earthmen, skillfully and subtly enkindling enthusiasm, raising wholesome doubts as to the invulnerability of the hated Mercutians.

Numerous patrols of guards stalked up and down the conveyors, arrogant, manifestly itching for a pretext to ray the conquered. But the Earthmen gave them no opportunity. The groups melted at their approach into meek, vacuous individuals; reformed instantly as they moved on. And there were no informers. The Earthmen had resumed their almost forgotten Earth solidarity in fronting the invaders.

Hilary watched the restless shifting groups with a glow of pride. This was his work, the spark he had kindled was being fanned into a steady blaze. These whisperers, these exhorters, who were they? Members of an underground organization? Possibly. Wat and Grim had both belonged to loose circles, vague and shifting in

membership. Possibly they were coalescing now, joining up into a world-wide organization. He hoped so. It would make his task easier, it also helped restore his pride in being an Earthman. He had almost thought that this supine listless race of his was not worth rescuing.

He reached the terminal in Great New York without untoward incident. No one challenged this meek, shabby-looking Earthman. The Mercutians gave him barely a glance; the Earthmen disregarded him when they whispered together. Hilary was content; he was not seeking undue notice.

The terminal was the scene of unwonted activity. The conveyors were disgorging crowds of Earthmen, grim, determined-looking individuals. They scattered purposefully through the various exits of the huge building. Hilary noted with interest that there were no women, no children, on the constantly incoming expresses.

The Mercutians were massing, too. The terminal was crowded with guards. They stalked heavily about, shouldering their Earth slaves rudely out of the way, sending them sprawling with sudden quick shoves. It would take only an untoward word, a false movement, to start a massacre. The Mercutians were deliberately trying to egg them on.

But the Earthmen took the abuse, the physical violence, quietly. They picked themselves up, disappeared through the exits, giving way to new arrivals. Once Hilary caught a gleam of familiar steel in the unbuttoned recess of a man's blouse pocket. He smiled. There were untoward events impending.

But first he must take care of his own private matter. Joan was a captive in the hands of the Mercutian Viceroy. What was his name? Wat had told him. That was it—Artok.

He was out in the street now, a wide vita-crystal paved thoroughfare, one of the many that radiated from the terminal like the spokes of a wheel. On either side was an upflung spray of tall receding towers, dazzling in the sunshine.

It struck Hilary suddenly. There had been bright unclouded skies during the days since his arrival. Only at night had it rained, like clockwork: every night for fifteen minutes immediately after midnight. A light steady shower that ceased as suddenly as it sprang up. It was unusual. This was April in the Spring of 2348 and April was always a month of showery heavens. Had the Mercutians, accustomed to the blazing light of their own planet, deliberately managed some way to create perpetual sunshine on Earth? Very likely, considering the clockwork night showers, no doubt for the

purpose of preventing droughts. There was the matter of weapons and power, too. They all depended on the sun.

Hilary took the inside moving platform. It would take him to the Robbins Building. The street was black with people, surging back and forth, restless, ominous.

Mercutians stalked purposefully along, in companies of ten. Their guttural voices were harsh with command. The Earthmen scattered out of their way. Those who were not nimble enough were knocked down, trampled underfoot.

One Earthman, braver than the rest, or more foolish, gave vent to a scream of rage, when a young girl, with whom he was arm in arm, was wrested brutally away. His fist shot out, caught the leering guard flush on his chin.

The Mercutian staggered, then bellowed with rage. His tube flashed upward. The Earthman's eyes opened wide as with wonder, then he collapsed, cut cleanly in half.

There was a full-throated growl from the jammed thoroughfare, a sudden surging forward. But the guards, reinforced by others, had their tubes lifted, ominous, death-dealing. The crowd ebbed back

hastily.

Hilary had joined the first rush. His blood pounded in his veins at the unprovoked brutality. For a hasty moment he visioned the commencement of the revolt. But as the mob retreated before the weapons, his brain cooled. The time was not ripe yet. It would be pure slaughter. Besides, there was Joan.

Once more he was the meek, downtrodden slave. He got off the platform, shambled over to the Robbins Building, an imposing pile of vita-crystal. It rose high into the air, overtopping even the great Memorial Tower. Martin Robbins had been wealthy, very much so. He had been a physicist of world repute, and this building was a monument to his inventive genius. The top floors were devoted to marvelously equipped laboratories. On the roof were the living quarters—dwelling of many rooms surrounded by an alpine garden. All Great New York stretched beneath. In the distance the green waters of the Atlantic dazzled in the sunshine.

Hilary knew the layout well. It had been his second home before.... He put the bitter thoughts determinedly behind him. There was work ahead. The stooped, hollow-cheeked creature shambled aimlessly up to the entrance. It was filled with Mercutian guards.

He edged his way along, hoping to pass through unnoticed.

"Here, you," a burly Mercutian barred his way, "get out of here before I ray you."

Hilary seemed to shrivel together in mortal terror. He turned to slink out again. The guard had him by the shoulder, was propelling him with ungentle paws toward the exit. Hilary let himself be shoved.

A cold curt voice spoke a sharp command:

"What have you there?"

Where had Hilary heard that voice before?

The pushing guard spun him around hastily.

"He was trying to get into the building, Cor Urga," he said respectfully. "These damned Earth slaves are everywhere under foot. It's time we rayed a few to teach them a lesson."

Hilary found himself gazing at the gray saturnine countenance that had burnt itself into his memory. Urga—the Mercutian who had kidnaped Joan! His muscles tensed suddenly for a quick spring, then relaxed. He must play the game.

Urga looked him over carefully, puzzled.

"Strange," he grunted, "I've seen this fellow before, but I cannot remember where."

Hilary was taut. Would he be recognized?

But the Mercutian Cor—in Earth terms, Captain of a Hundred—shook his head finally, and turned away. The disguise had held up.

"All these Earth slaves look alike. This one is a particularly poor specimen. Turn him loose. If he tries to come in again, kill him.

"Get," the guard growled viciously, and sent Hilary sprawling out into the street to the muttering accompaniment of the seething Earth crowds. The temper of the people was rapidly reaching the explosion point.

But Hilary picked himself up, meekly brushed himself off, and melted unostentatiously into the moving crowd. He desired no undue attention.

Strangely enough, there were no Mercutians in sight. Only the surging, growling Earthmen. Hilary felt their mysterious disappearance to be ominous—as though they had been warned by

some secret signal. Something terrible was about to happen. He must get to that certain passageway he knew, and quickly. If only it were not guarded.

A cry went up about him, a yell of many voices.

"The Mercutians are coming."

Hilary whirled. Down the street, issuing from the terminal, deployed a full regiment of guards, bowed under the strong pull of the Earth, but formidable enough. Sun-tubes glinted dangerously. A stentorian voice reached him. "Clear the streets, you Earth dogs," it roared. "You're been warned enough. One minute to obey and I'll burn you all down."

A babel of excited voices went up. The crowds farther down, near the advancing Mercutians, melted into a wild scramble. Men trampled each other underfoot in a mad attempt to reach safety before the minute's expiration.

Where Hilary had paused, there was a milling indecisiveness. Men were already quietly edging their way toward adjoining buildings, into side thoroughfares; others were more belligerent.

"Kill the bloody beasts!" a man suddenly screamed near Hilary, drawing a pistol from beneath his blouse. He waved it frantically in the air. There was an ugly surge, a low-throated growl. It needed very little for the mob to get out of hand and hurl itself upon the steadily approaching Mercutian regiment.

Hilary acted swiftly. He caught the man's pistol arm, thrust it down sharply out of sight. A quick wrench, and the gun was in his own hand. The man, wild-eyed, opened his mouth to shout.

"Shut up," Hilary hissed fiercely. "Are you mad? You wouldn't have a chance. They'd ray us all clean out of existence." He thrust the pistol back into the man's blouse. "Wait; our chance will come."

"Oh, my God! Look!" someone screamed.

A command shattered the air; the tubes of the Mercutians uplifted; a blinding sheet of flame blazed solidly down the street. The minute's grace was up.

Even at this distance, the heat scorched and seared. There were many unfortunates caught farther down, men who had had no chance to seek safety in time. They melted in the furnace blast as though they were bits of metal in an electric arc.

"Run for your lives!" the shout went up. All thought of resistance was gone. It was every one for himself. The man with the gun was the first to run. Hilary found himself caught in the mad rush. The Mercutians were pounding along methodically raying in front of them.

Hilary was thrust into a little eddy of men to one side. It swirled and shoved. The entrance of the Pullman Building loomed ahead. The sight of it gave Hilary new vigor. That was his destination. If only he could make it.

He straightened out of his stoop, squared his shoulders. The next instant a human battering ram crashed through the twirling, yelling mob. Head down, right shoulder and elbow working in unison, a path magically opened where no path had been before. Every second was precious now. The heat of the tubes was engulfing him in waves, raising little blisters on the unprotected skin.

Hilary plunged into the open entrance of the Pullman Building. It was packed with humanity, struggling for the lift platforms, to take them to the upper stories, out of reach of the awful rays. Hilary was thankful for that. His destination was beneath, in the sub-levels. A moving escalator led downward. It was deserted.

A fierce, wild screaming arose outside, screams that gurgled and died horribly. Hilary felt sick inside. The full blast of the rays had reached the milling crowd. It would be a hideous and merciless slaughter.

Hilary's gray eyes burned, his lips set in a straight, hard line. The beasts would pay for this. He shot down the escalator at full speed. A spray of passageways met him. He did not hesitate. He chose the one farthest to the left and dashed along its winding length until he came to a dead end. The vita-crystal gleamed blankly back at him.

But Hilary knew what he was doing. Long ago Martin Robbins had told him of the secret connection between the two adjoining buildings. A passageway that led between the outer and inner shells of crystal walls; lifts that shot smoothly to the laboratories and pent-apartments on the roofs of the two structures. For Simeon Pullman had been a close friend of Robbins; a fellow physicist, in fact. They interchanged theories, results of experiments, and found this swift connection most convenient.

Both men were dead now—Pullman as the result of a premature explosion, and Robbins, executed by the Mercutians. But the secret passageway remained.

Hilary pressed the secret spring he knew of. A gleaming oblong of crystal slid silently open. He went in without hesitation and the slide closed with a little whir behind him.

A low tunnel confronted him, just barely high enough for him to move without stooping. The walls here were of burnished metal, glowing with impregnated cold-light. It was empty, silent. Evidently it had been undisturbed for years. The Mercutians had not discovered this secret way then.

The tunnel slanted downward for several hundred yards, then turned sharply upward until a vita-crystal wall barred the way. Hilary could hear vague sounds from the other side. He was in the Robbins Building. He turned to the left, where a shaft stretched upward, completely enclosed by crystal walls. A thin oblong edging showed the platform beneath. He stepped on it, hesitated for a moment. There were two control buttons; one that stopped the lift in the laboratory, the other in the sleeping room that once was Martin Robbins'.

Hilary decided in favor of the penthouse; there was less chance of a present occupant of the room. If there was—he shrugged his shoulders and loosened the automatic in his blouse. He pressed the button.

The platform shot smoothly upward, up, up, thrusting a thousand feet up. At length it came to a gliding halt. Hilary knew he was on the roof now, in the interior of the wall making one side of the sleep-apartment. The vita-crystal gleamed mockingly opaque at him. If only he could see through; if only he had a Mercutian search beam now. Was there someone in the room on the other side of the wall? He strained his ears to listen, but the crystal was pretty much sound-proof.

Very quietly Hilary drew his gun, broke it, examined the chamber. The six bullets lay snug. He snapped it back in position, held the automatic butt against his side, reached over and pressed the release button.

The slide whirred open. Hilary waited a second, tense, ready to shoot at the slightest sound. His eyes bored through the oblong. Nothing was in sight except the luxurious furnishings he remembered so well; nothing stirred. But his vision was limited to that part of the room framed by the slide. With infinite caution he peered out, his searching gaze flicking swiftly, around the sleep-apartment. It was a man's room with built in divans, automatic sleep-spray, wall rack to hold illuminated book sheets, magnified so as to be read comfortably from a reclining position on the divan—in short, the usual ordered luxuries of a well-furnished sleep-room.

It was empty—but the divan was touseled, certain small things disarranged. Someone used this room. Hilary stepped out, leaving the slide behind him open in case of an enforced retreat. He paused to think. Where could Joan be held prisoner—if, and it was a big if—she were really here. He ran over the possibilities.

The laboratories were out of the question. The great master room then. No doubt Artok, the Viceroy, had installed himself there. It was regally magnificent. That might repay a visit. A bold scheme flashed across his mind. Seize Artok himself, abduct him into the secret passage, and compel him to disclose Joan's whereabouts, give her up. Hilary smiled grimly. Sheerly suicidal, yes, but he was desperate now, and there seemed no other way.

Gun shifted back into his blouse, with his right hand thrust in, on the butt, he glided softly out of the chamber. No one was in sight. The passageway seemed oddly deserted. Possibly the staff had been attracted to the outer rim of the terrace by the commotion below.

At the end of the passageway, facing him, was the master room. Another swift look about, and Hilary was moving down the long corridor, close to the wall, his footfalls deadened by the soft composition rug.

Slowly, very slowly, he pressed the button to release the slide. It slid open at a barely perceptible rate. As the slender crack widened, Hilary, looked in, taking care to keep his body to one side.

Chapter VII

In the Hands of the Mercutians

A Mercutian was lolling in a reclining chair, his gray, warty face turned half away from Hilary. He was rather undersized for a Mercutian, standing not more than seven feet, and his gray, unwieldy body was heavy and gross as though thickened with good living and debauch. A fleshy three-fingered hand was pounding vehemently on the arm of the chair. His guttural roughened voice came clearly to the listener. He was talking to someone unseen from the angle of the slowly widening slit. He was annoyed.

"For the last time I give you the opportunity," the Mercutian howled —in English. "If you refuse I turn you over to Urga; he wants you."

The crack in the door had widened perceptibly. Hilary's heart gave a tremendous leap. Disclosed to his vision was a figure standing opposite the Mercutian, slim, defiant, proud—Joan.

What unimaginable luck! The automatic leaped like a live thing into, his hand. He crouched, the blood pounding in his temples, waiting for the slide to come completely open. He dared not reach over for the button control to shift the speed; the movement might be heard inside.

The path was clear now. Overpower the Mercutian, escape with Joan down the deserted corridors back to the secret passageway, emerge below, return to their hideout in the Ramapos and plan for revolt. It was all as simple as that.

We must have these Earth slaves," the Mercutian continued, unheeding. "They, must be made an example of. They are responsible for the unrest. They have killed Magnificents; and the Earth fools think they can do the same. They will find out their error soon enough. But as long as those three live, so long will the slaves hope, and plot."

"I cannot tell you anything about them," Joan said monotonously. It was evident that this was not the first time she had said so.

"Yes you can," the Mercutian said as softly as his gutturals would permit. "There is one in particular you know a great deal about. Urga told me. A long-lost lover, no?" His gray-ridged countenance

contorted into a thick disgusting leer.

"There it something mysterious about him. He has no identification tag; he releases Peabody; seems not to know the penalties. He has a pistol, a forbidden weapon; he dares to kill a Magnificent; he eggs on two others, ordinary Earth slaves to join him; he disappears out of sight, in spite of all search." He was shouting now, pounding the chair arm with complete loss of dignity. "Who is he, where does he come from, where did he go? Answer me?"

The girl faced him boldly.

"You are afraid of him, Viceroy," she challenged. "You fear his example. He has shown what a brave man can do; the Earth people will follow him. The Mercutians are not invulnerable."

"Yes," the Viceroy said heavily. He was talking more to himself. Then he realized his mistake. "No, of course not," he growled hurriedly. "Enough of this. You tell me what I want to know or I call Urga in."

Joan's face went white, but she faced him unflinchingly.

"I do not know where he is, and if I did, I would not tell you."

"Very well then." The Viceroy leaned over to the table.

The slide was completely open now.

"I wouldn't call anyone if I were you."

The Viceroy whirled in his chair at the sound of the calm Earth voice, calm yet deadly in its implications. He found himself staring into the stubby opening of an Earth automatic, a forbidden weapon. The hand that held it was steady, and the gray eyes that bored into his were hard as pebbles.

There was a smothered gasp from Joan. "Hilary."

"Yes; come to take you away." He spoke swiftly. "We have no time to waste, Joan. Is there any binding material in the room?"

"I—I believe there is. Dad always kept odds and ends in the store chest near the bookshelves."

"Go and get it then. We'll truss up his most Mercutian Magnificence —No you don't," Hilary said harshly; "keep your hands in front of you and don't move."

The Viceroy was stealthily reaching for the sun-tube dangling from

his belt. He jerked his hand back, a cold sweat beading his forehead. Hilary's finger had compressed on the trigger; the slightest extra pressure meant flaming death.

"That's better," Hilary approved.

"You shall pay for this," howled the Mercutian, finding voice again. "You shall suffer a hundred deaths in one."

"Softly," Hilary grinned. "Just a little while ago you were very anxious to meet me. Now that I'm here you don't seem overmuch pleased." Joan was rummaging frantically in the open chest.

The Viceroy started, his unlidded pink eyes opened wider. But he was careful to keep his hands in plain view.

"You are the Earth dog who killed the Magnificents."

"I wouldn't call names," Hilary advised. "It might be unhealthy. But I am that very individual. And I trust"—he bowed mockingly-"to have more notches on my gun before I am through."

"You—you—shall be taken to Mercury. My father has special places for such as you." Joan was coming now swiftly with lengths of wire, soft thick material for swathing.

"Get me there first," Hilary said indifferently. "Gag him, Joan, so he can't open his ugly mouth any more. Then tie him up, well."

Joan thrust the gag into the thick gash of a mouth, choking off a torrent of imprecations in the guttural Mercutian tongue. Then she proceeded to truss him, expertly, efficiently.

"Good job," Hilary approved. "Now with your kind permission, Most Viceregal Magnificence, we shall go." He bowed mockingly. "Come, Joan."

"Not so fast, Earth slave." A cold saturnine voice resounded like the clang of doom behind him. He whirled, shifting his gun swiftly for a quick shot.

A little gush of heat caught his trigger hand as the index finger contracted desperately. The smarting pain tore the pistol out of his hand. It dropped to the floor, unheeded. Hilary found himself staring into the gross unpleasant face of Urga, a sun-tube trained directly at his midriff.

The Earth slave who tried to slink into the building," Urga said, surprised. "How did he get up here?"

"I don't know," the Viceroy said shortly, working the gag out of his mouth. "Don't stand there like a fool. Untie me." Gratitude was not among the Viceroy's virtues.

Urga's face mottled as he hastened to obey. When Artok stood finally released, he glared heavily at Hilary and Joan. Then slowly a smile broke over his warty features, a smile that boded unutterable things. Hilary waited quietly, ready to seize the slightest opening; Joan pressed wide-eyed against his shoulder.

"Know this Earth dog?" the Viceroy jerked at Hilary.

Urga's glance was puzzled. "I told you I threw him out of the entrance, but even then I felt I had seen him before."

"You have, Cor Urga," the ruler laughed shortly. "This is the one who is responsible for the mutterings of the slaves. He slew your comrade, Gornu."

The captain started, peered into his captive's unflinching countenance.

"He's disguised!" he cried. "Let me kill him, Magnificent." He fingered his sun-tube significantly.

The Viceroy was in high good humor now.

"Not so fast. You would let him off too easy. I have a better scheme. We shall show the mutinous dogs how we treat those who revolt against our will."

A cruel smile broke over Urga.

"I understand, Magnificent. Make a public warning of him like that fool Peabody. Rip out his tongue and his eyes, smash his eardrums, and ride him from city to city, in chains."

"Exactly."

Joan shuddered, convulsively. "No, no," she cried aloud in her terror, "don't do that. I'll tell you everything; I'll do—"

"Joan," Hilary interrupted sharply, "not another word." His arm went around her.

She collapsed against his shoulder, sobbing.

"It is too late for bargains now," the Viceroy shrugged indifferently. "We have the man we wanted. As for the other two, you will tell us where they are hiding anyway."

Urga turned to him expectantly.

"Your Magnificence," he urged respectfully, "you promised me the girl, if—"

"Yes, take her." The Viceroy waved a weary hand. "I don't want her; I have too many as it is."

The captain's face lit up with an unhealthy glow. He approached eagerly to seize his prize. Joan gave a little cry of dismay, and shrank closer to her lover.

Hilary tensed in every muscle. Though it meant instant death, he would not permit that towering brute to lay his clumsy paw on Joan.

Urga reached out to clasp the frightened girl. Hilary seemed to uncoil. His fist shot straight up with all the power of his body behind it. It crashed into the jutting jaw of the Mercutian like a charge of high explosive dynol. For all his height and massive strength, the giant toppled over, thudding heavily against the floor.

For the moment Hilary saw freedom ahead. The sun-tube had fallen from the nerveless fingers. He darted for it with the speed of a striking snake. Even as his fingers curled around the handle, there

came a roar from the Viceroy.

"Drop it, or I'll cut you in two."

Hilary knew when he was beaten. Slowly, reluctantly, his fingers uncurled. He arose, to meet the gleaming opening of the Viceroy's weapon, and the surprised stare in back of it.

Urga got up groggily, feeling gingerly the tender point of his jaw. There was unfathomable hatred in his lidless eyes.

The Viceroy chuckled throatily.

"I never thought, Cor Urga, to have seen a puny Earthman, a mere midget, overcome a Mercutian. Especially you, a winner of the prize of strength three times running in the arenas."

Urga flushed darkly.

"It was an unexpected blow; it caught me unawares," he said heatedly. "I'll break the slave in two."

"Try it—without your sun-tube," said Hilary laconically.

The captain made a movement toward him.

"Leave him alone," Artok cried sharply. He seemed to enjoy his Captain's discomfiture. "I have other plans for him. Now go. Take the girl with you. I'll watch this presumptuous Earthling."

Urga advanced with an evil grin. Hilary thrust Joan suddenly behind him; crouching like a cat. He would go down fighting. For all his bulk, the Viceroy wheeled on his flank, raised his weapon.

"One false move, and you are dead carrion," he said coldly. His weapon was raised. Hilary was caught between two fires, exposed to the searing blasts that would issue at the slightest pressure.

Nevertheless he intended to strike. A sudden swerving jump, and he might throttle one before he would be blasted into nothingness. It would be Urga, he decided grimly. He tensed for the final desperate, suicidal spring. The two Mercutians were watching him like unsheathed hawks.

"Good-by, Joan," he whispered, and his muscles went taut.

Urga paused, his weapon came up sharply. One little pressure, and—

There was a commotion in the outer hall, the sound of padding feet. The four in the master room froze into immobility. Two Mercutian

guards stumbled panting into the room. They came to a jerking halt, threw themselves prone upon the floor, arms outstretched in obeisance.

"May we speak, oh Magnificent?" they asked humbly.

"Say your say," the Viceroy said crossly.

They rose to their feet heavily, and one of them spoke.

"The Earth dogs are revolting. The Cors of the outlying districts report that the slaves are massing and are marching on Great New York. They are armed with Earth weapons. The Cor of the Third District reports two men responsible—one is a giant among them, almost as tall as our own kind; and the other a puny red-haired firebrand. The Cor has tried to capture them, but they are elusive. Even the search beams cannot disclose their hiding place."

Hilary's heart gave a great bound. Grim and Wat had not waited then.

The Viceroy's face darkened with anger.

"The filthy scum," he growled; "this morning's lesson was not enough. This time I'll slay, burn, smash until there isn't a single rebel left. I'll fertilize their damned Earth with their own black blood. You,

Cor Urga," he snapped, "transmit my orders to the Cors of the Hundreds. They are to mobilize their men at once, and proceed in accordance with instructions known to them as General Order One. All conveyors to be stopped except for troop movements. Every slave found with weapons, or acting suspiciously, to be slain on the spot. Flying patrols to scatter in pairs, observe for concentrations of slaves. Ray any gathering without warning. Inform Cor Algor of the Tora (this was the great armed diskoid of the Mercutians that had previously reduced Great New York, Hilary found out afterwards) to resume his station over the city, ready to act when I give the signal."

Even in the conflict of emotions, Hilary marveled at the unhesitating, snapped flow of orders. The Viceroy, in spite of his seeming gross lethargy, was a soldier, and an efficient one to boot.

"Yes, Magnificent." Urga bowed low, and departed, thrusting a malignant glance at Hilary.

The Viceroy thrust off from him his bright yellow robes, wriggled his vast bulk swiftly into a close-fitting dull-gray tunic. To his belt he fastened little round knobs; the sun-tube dangled swankily at one side. He was accoutered for battle.

He seemed to have forgotten the existence of the Earthlings.

"You," he snapped to one of the waiting guards, "go to the laboratory at once; convey my strict orders to Cor Eela that the weather machine must function perfectly. There must be no slip-up—his life will answer for it."

"Yes, oh Magnificence." The guard prostrated himself once more, then departed hastily.

Vast echoes resounded in Hilary's mind. "Weather machine—weather machine," he puzzled, holding Joan the tighter. There was more to this than met the eye. He must think.

The Viceroy turned suddenly, stared at them, fingering his tube.

"I could of course have you killed at once," he thought aloud, "and have no further trouble; but then Urga would be angry." His lidless eyes rested fleetingly on Joan. "And I would lose my public warning to the few Earth dogs who will survive. If it weren't that I needed them to till the fields, and work the machines, I would not leave a single one alive."

He seemed to come to a decision. "You'll wait my return." He spoke sharply to the guard. "Bind them up well. Thrust gags into their mouths." He grimaced. "I can taste mine yet. And remember, if they

escape, just turn that sun-tube of yours on yourself. It will be pleasanter for you. Understand?"

"Yes, Magnificent."

The obsequious guard caught hold of Hilary, under the watchful tube of Artok, and proceeded with clumsy weighted fingers to tie him up. Hilary did not resist. An idea was slowly forming in his mind. Joan's turn came next.

When they were trussed so tightly that neither could move, the Viceroy smiled mockingly. "We shall meet again, Earth dogs," he said, and was gone.

Chapter VIII

Rescued

The guard looked at his captives sourly, kicked viciously at Hilary to relieve his feelings. There was fighting to be had outside; Earth slaves to be tortured and slain, and he was out of it—wet nurse to a couple of prisoners.

He growled disconsolately. Through an open slide window giving out on the terrace, a confused roaring, a babel of sounds came

filtering through. There was trouble below—fighting already, very likely. The Mercutian glanced back at his bound and gagged prisoners. They were immobile, helpless. He looked guiltily about. The great room was bare, silent. With almost furtive movements he opened the door leading to the terrace, stumbled out, and was leaning over the parapet, absorbed in the spectacle of Great New York below.

Instantly, Hilary lifted his head, exerting to the utmost his muscles. He could just see the guard's back, strained over the side. Hilary relaxed rolled painfully over to Joan. She stared at him wide-eyed.

If only he could make her understand. He must get the gag out of his mouth. Every moment was precious; the guard might return momentarily. He screwed his face into tremendous contortions, wiggled his feet as much as he could, worked his jaws, trying desperately to convey his meaning.

Joan watched him puzzled; trying to follow those strange contortions. Beads of perspiration started on his brow as her face registered blank incomprehension. Just as he was giving up in despair, she grasped the idea. Her face brightened, and her shapely head nodded stiffly.

The trussed-up pair started at once to pivot around on the floor. Fortunately the composition was polished, affording little friction. With infinite pains the maneuver was completed. They lay side by side now. Joan's trim feet close to Hilary's head.

Writhing and contorting, she worked the sharp heel of her foot against the thick wad of the gag in Hilary's mouth, and pushed. It was solidly tied, but it gave a little. Encouraged, she redoubled her efforts, pushing with all the limited force of her bound limbs.

The yielding gag cut cruelly, the sharp heel scraped and gouged into Hilary's cheeks, but he did not mind. He was in a fever of apprehension. If only the guard's interest were held by the events below until he had accomplished what he intended!

At last his mouth was free. The gag had been pushed over his nose. Joan rolled away. She had accomplished the task Hilary had set her, but she was still puzzled. What earthly good would it do him to talk?

She found out almost immediately. He was twisting his head, burrowing with his nose against the blouse over his right shoulder. The open tunic give a bit, and he burrowed painfully, Joan watching with growing fascination, until one of the binding wires stopped further progress. But it seemed far enough, judging from the

satisfied illumination in Hilary's eyes.

He spoke, his mouth pressed close against the shoulder blade, his tones queerly muffled, thick.

"Grim Morgan, Wat Tyler, Grim Morgan, Wat Tyler," he whispered over and over again. He could not hear if there was any response; his ears were muffled now by the spread gag. He could not help that.

"Grim Morgan, Wat Tyler," he muttered monotonously, "Hilary Grendon calling. Held prisoner with Joan, top of Robbins Building. Guarded. Urgent you free us. Artok has sent out general death orders. I have plan to stop him. Come, quickly."

Over and over he murmured the message, hoping desperately they would hear him in the communication disks strapped to their shoulders.

"Come quickly," he repeated; and then the guard, tiring of the view below, or the streets having been cleared of rebels, came softly into the room. Hilary's head jerked quickly back, the shoulder of his tunic falling back into position.

"Here, what's this?" the guard growled suspiciously, catching sight

of the displaced gag. "How on Mercury did you do that?"

He knelt swiftly, thrust the gag back into position with ungentle paw, kicked the unresisting form in the side to show his displeasure, and rose. Hilary's heart pounded; the guard had not seen the inconspicuous disk under the tunic. He was in an agony of expectation. Had his comrades caught his message? Could they rescue him even if they had? Questions that only time could answer.

The guard was alert now; he did not like that queer removal of the gag. There would be no further chance to unbind themselves. What seemed hours passed as they lay cramped, immobile.

The air grew thick and warm, or was it only his imagination? No, for the guard felt it, too. Then something buzzed, intermittently. One long, two short. It seemed to emanate from a round black button on the sleeve of his gray tunic. A signal!

The guard exclaimed something in guttural Mercutian, rose hastily, and closed the open door and window. He pressed another button, and sheeted lead curtains rolled swiftly over the vita-crystal roof, darkening the room, cutting off the rays of diffused sunlight. Then he seated himself not far from the captives, facing them, grinning savagely. Hilary wondered why.

Again what seemed hours passed. Behind the lead curtain, the room had become definitely, uncomfortably warm. The Earthlings perspired; the atmosphere was literally steaming; and in their cramped limbs, the torture was fast becoming unbearable. Only the Mercutian guard did not seem to mind. He was accustomed to far higher temperatures on the arid planet that was his home.

Just as the prisoners were gasping almost their last gasp, the heat seemed to recede, swiftly. At once the guard rolled back the leaden shade opened the door and window again. His grin was broadly triumphant. Something clutched at Hilary's heart; he understood now. The beastly invaders! He struggled furiously at his bonds, but they did not give. He ceased his efforts, panting.

The moments passed. Hilary was giving up whatever slender hopes he had had. Wat and Grim had not heard, or if they did, they could do nothing. A slow, sullen despair enveloped him.

He was watching the guard. That gray-faced giant turned his head suddenly, jumped up as fast as his lumbering alien weight could move, snatched at his sun-tube.

"Don't move an inch, if you want to live," a deep, slow voice vibrated through the room. A well-remembered voice. Hilary would

have laughed aloud his relief, but he was gagged. His comrades had not failed them.

The guard dropped his half-raised weapon sullenly, staring at the intruders in dazed incomprehension. Hilary jerked his head around. Framed in the doorway was Grim—good old Grim—a long-barreled dynol pistol steady in his hand. From behind him there darted a little figure, red-haired, freckled, shrill with delight. An old-fashioned submachine gun, abstracted from some museum, weighed heavily under his arm.

It clattered unheeded to the floor as the bantam dived for Hilary and Joan.

"We came as fast as we could when we got your message," he crowed. "Dropped everything." His nimble fingers were making havoc of the knotted bonds, while his nimbler tongue wagged on. "Boy, we have them on the run. We'll sweep them out into space by the time we're through."

Hilary and Joan were free now. Very painfully they rose to their feet, stamping and pounding their arms to make the sluggish blood circulate again. Wat hopped about in his excitement.

"Here, you little runt," Grim's voice boomed at him, "stop jumping around, and tie up this Mercutian. We have no time to waste."

Wat groaned comically. "See how that big ox orders me around," he proclaimed, but he picked up the wire and in a trice had the guard helpless and glaring.

Hilary had recovered his speech.

"Thanks, boys," he told them simply. "I knew you'd come if it was humanly possible. But how did you manage to get through the Mercutians? The building is honeycombed with them."

Morgan grinned. "We came in the Vagabond," he said.

"What," almost yelled Hilary, "you mean—"

"That your ship is resting comfortably outside on the terrace. When little Wat here caught your message in the communication disk, we were busy organizing companies of Earthmen in the hills back of Suffern. As recruits poured in, we'd tell them off in hundreds, appoint officers, see that they had arms, or gave them directions where to find the old caches, and hustled them off. Had to shift our quarters continually, because Mercutian fliers would pick us up with

their search-beams, and start raying. Had some close shaves. But when we heard you were caught, we turned over the command to the nearest new officer, hurried to the gorge, and here we are. The Vagabond handled beautifully."

"I could take her myself to the Moon," Wat boasted.

"Hadn't we better be going?" Joan asked anxiously.

"There is work first to be done," Hilary, answered grimly. "There's a certain weather machine in the laboratory I want to take a look at."

"Weather machine?" Grim echoed, puzzled.

"Yes. The Viceroy let something slip about it. For some reason it's very important to them that it continues to function. I'm curious."

A gasp from Joan. Surprised, the men turned to her.

"Of course," she said breathlessly. "Father had been working on it for the longest time. It was a machine to control weather. Something to do with broadcasting tremendously high voltages, ionizing the air and causing rain clouds to form or reversing the process and scattering clouds back into thin air. This was the Master Machine. All over the Earth, at spaced distances, were smaller replicas,

substations, controlled from this one. He had great hopes of furnishing equable weather to all the Earth. It was just completed, when...." She trailed off.

Grim frowned. "Very interesting, but what is so terribly important about it now?"

"You fool," Hilary exploded, "it's as important as hell. Don't you see? What are the Mercutians' weapons? Sun-tubes, sun-rays from their fliers, tremendous burning disks that are their space-ships. Sun—sun—everything they have depends upon the sun. Take away the sun, and what have they? Nothing but their hideous giant bodies—they are weaponless. Now do you see?" He fairly shouted at him.

Grim's face lit up heavily; Wat was dancing insanely.

"Get hold of the machine, reverse the process. Make it form clouds, great big woolly ones. Start a rain that'll make the Deluge look sick; forty days—a year—and we'll drown them all," Wat cried.

"Exactly," Hilary nodded. "Joan darling, you and Wat get into the Vagabond, and wait for us. Grim and I will take care of the laboratory."

"What?" Tyler ejaculated. "Leave me cooped up when there's a fight on. I'm coming."

"So am I," Joan was pale but determined.

"Oh, Lord," Hilary groaned. "Listen to me, please," he said patiently. "Time is precious, and I can't argue. Joan, you would only be a hindrance. I for one would be thinking more of protecting you than fighting. As for you, Wat," he turned to the furious bantam, "I'm sorry, but you'll have to take orders. The Vagabond must be guarded. If we're cut off, we're through. And there's Joan."

"Well. If you want to put it that way," Wat grumbled.

"I knew you'd be sensible," Hilary said hurriedly, not giving them a chance to change their minds. "At the slightest alarm, take off. Don't try to rescue us if we don't return. The Earth cause is more important than any individual. If you get caught, too, the revolt will be leaderless; at an end."

The men shook hands gravely. Joan, white-faced, kissed Hilary passionately. "Be careful, my dear."

Then the two men were gone, moving cautiously down the corridor

with deadened footfalls. Hilary had retrieved his automatic; Grim had his more modern dynol pistol. The guard had been thrust into a corner, bound, unnoticed.

The laboratory was on the floor below. They trod carefully down the inclined ramp connecting all the floors. The corridors, the ramp, were deserted.

"All out fighting," Hilary whispered. "The revolt must be spreading."

Grim swore. "The idiots. I told them not to start anything until I returned. They'll be wiped out—they weren't ready."

Hilary nodded slowly. He thought of the strange heat while he had been captive. There would be very few Earthmen left alive in Great New York now.

They were at the foot of the ramp now. Just ahead gleamed an open slide. A pale-blue light streamed out at them; in the oblong of the interior they could see moving shapes, weirdly cut off, crossing their field of vision; bright gleaming machines, segments of tremendous tubes flooded with the pale-blue light. And over all was a constant hum, a crackling, a whining of spinning parts. The laboratory!

Chapter IX

The Weather Machine

The two men flattened themselves against the wall so that they could not be seen by a casual glance from the Mercutians inside the laboratory.

"There are a lot of them," Grim whispered.

"Can't help it," Hilary answered grimly. "Have to take our chances."

"Of course," Grim said simply. There was no backing out.

Silently, with catlike tread, they inched their way forward flat against the wall, keeping out of the blue flood of illumination. The shapes, or rather segments of shapes within, moved about, engrossed in the business at hand, unaware of the creeping death.

The Earthmen had reached their stations unobserved, one on either side of the open slide. Very carefully Hilary protruded his head around the vita-crystal, and ducked back almost instantly. But his quick eye had taken in all the essential details in that momentary vision.

There were about a dozen Mercutians in the long laboratory, and each had a sun-tube dangling from his belt, ready at hand. The laboratory was crowded with apparatus, but what had drawn Hilary's attention was a gigantic gleaming metallic sphere set up prominently in the center of the room. Protruding from it at all angles were great quartz tubes, through which a blue light pulsed and flamed. It was connected by huge cables to a spark-bathed dynamo. Other cables writhed through the translucent ceiling. The weather machine!

Hilary took a firmer grip on his automatic, nodded once to Grim. The two Earthmen stepped simultaneously through the open door.

"Raise your paws high and keep them up." Hilary's voice cracked like a whip through the busy confusion of the laboratory. The Mercutians, scattered as they were, whirled around from their tasks to face two deadly weapons held by two determined-looking men.

There was a chorus of strange guttural oaths, but every hand moved skyward, reluctantly.

Hilary picked out the most blasphemous sounding of the cursers, rightly deeming him the Cor in charge.

"You," he said, "what switches regulate the weather machine?"

The Mercutian Cor was a particularly ugly specimen. The gray warts were gigantic, hiding whatever semblance of manlike features there might have been beneath.

"I'll see you dogs burned to a cinder in the sun first," he growled.

"Keep them covered, Grim," Hilary said sharply. "I'll take care of this fellow personally."

He walked straight across the room for the Cor, eyes blazing, index finger on trigger. The Cor, fear staring out of his lidless eyes, backed slowly away from the approaching death. There was a hushed silence.

"I'll tell, I'll tell!" the Cor screamed, as the relentless weapon almost touched his paunchy stomach.

"I thought you would," Hilary said grimly, not for an instant relaxing the pressure against the trigger. "If you value your worthless hide, you'd better talk, and talk fast. What switch reverses the machine, to bring on rain? If you are wise, you won't try to fool me."

The wretch almost stumbled in his eagerness. "By the gray soil of Mercury I'll tell you the truth." His arm flung up, pointing. "That

knob over there controls the—"

Hilary never heard the rest. There was a crash at the other end of the laboratory. One of the Mercutians, tired of keeping his arms high extended, had attempted to rest his huge bulk against a laboratory table. It went over with a splintering crash of glassware.

Hilary whirled around to face the noise. As he did so, the Cor seized his opportunity. His right arm dropped to his side, jerked up his sun-tube. Hilary heard Grim's warning cry, tried to pivot back again. But Grim beat him to it. The dynol pistol exploded sharply; the flaming pellet caught the Cor square in his side. There was a dull explosion and the Cor was torn violently into bits. He dropped, a mass of shapeless blobs.

But now hell had broken loose. The Mercutians were not cowards. At the moment of the diversion, every one of them had gone for his sun-tube. A flame streaked close to Hilary's head, shivered the opposite wall into molten fragments. He ducked behind a table and fired. A Mercutian threw up his hands, staggered and pitched forward heavily. Grim's dynol bullets whined in their passage, spattered the laboratory with flying blobs of flesh. They did terrible execution. Hilary's automatic spat its leaden hail.

But the Mercutians were entrenched now behind tables, machinery, whatever cover they could find. The beams from half a dozen sun-tubes slithered across the room, burning flaming paths through the overheated air, bringing the very walls down about them. It could not last long. Already Hilary had a nasty burn across one shoulder; there was a streak of red across Grim's forehead as he hid behind the panel of the entrance, whipping his pistol around to fire, and ducking back again. There were too many of the enemy, and overwhelming reinforcements could be expected any moment. The Earthmen's position was desperate.

Through it all the great weather machine hummed and crackled; the tubes were sheets of surging flame. Hilary cursed softly. If only the Cor had completed his sentence before he died. Hilary would have chanced a sudden rush forward to reverse it, to bring on a deluge of rain and clouds, even though it meant certain death. The machine seemed to gleam at him mockingly; the hum continued with tantalizing smoothness.

"Look out," Grim's voice came to him sharply. He jerked his head back, just in time. A ray streaked past his ear like a thunderbolt. The heat from it scorched his face.

The Mercutians were stealthily crawling nearer, pushing heavy,

tables in front of them as shields. He was almost outflanked now. In another minute he would be exposed.

Hilary thought rapidly. His position was untenable. He would have to run for it. A sudden dash to the door might possibly win through. But the machine! He set his teeth hard. If he could not change the weather, at least he could destroy the infernal thing, stop its grinding out perfect sunshine for the Mercutians.

He lifted his weapon. Off to one side a Mercutian arm advanced cautiously, bringing up a sun-tube. He swung on it and fired. The sun-tube clattered to the floor and the arm jerked back, accompanied by a howl of anguish. Hilary smiled grimly, took careful aim at the metal sphere of the machine. The bullet leaped true for its mark. A little round hole showed—but nothing happened. The infernal machine hummed softly as ever.

He cursed, fired again. Another round hole, and that was all. With increasing viciousness he turned his aim on the quartz tubes, pierced them through and through. Before his very eyes, the quartz seemed to run and melt around the holes, to seal them tight as if he had never shot. The blue flames leaped and surged mockingly. The Mercutians were jeering now; raucous calls went up.

Hilary felt a sinking despair. He had failed; would have to run for it now. Small chance to make it, too. Then he heard Grim's deep bass. "Hold it a moment," he said as if he had read his thoughts.

Fascinated, Hilary saw the giant's pistol slowly thrust its long barrel around the edge of the crystal slide. A half dozen rays leaped viciously, for it. But a flaming pellet streaked out of its orifice before it was jerked back.

Hilary could see its red path as it struck the sphere of the machine. The next instant there was a dull explosion and the whole machine disintegrated into a smother of flying fragments. The expanding dynol had done the trick where lead had failed. There would be no more weather control.

But Hilary did not pause to see the finish. Even as the machine burst, he was running across the room, bending low. Fragments whizzed by him at a fearful clip; rays crisscrossed all about him.

But somehow he was through. Grim's finger was on the slide button. It closed with a snap behind him, cutting off the pursuing howls of rage.

Silently the two men darted up the ramp to the pent-apartment,

dashed into the master bedroom. The Mercutian guard whom they had left securely bound, was gone. The Earthmen looked at each other, a great fear in their eyes. In one bound Hilary was at the door slide, thrusting it open. He tore out upon the open terrace, Grim right behind him.

They looked wildly about. The terrace was empty. There was no sign of the Vagabond, or of Joan and Wat. High overhead hovered a great burnished diskoid. Long streamlined Mercutian fliers darted through the air, but nowhere was there a sign of the familiar sphere.

Hilary gripped his companion's arm. "They've been captured, Grim," he choked.

"Nonsense," the giant said gruffly, to hide his own misgivings. "They just took alarm at something and winged off."

"But where is the guard then?"

Grim shook his head. He could not answer that. Despair overwhelmed Hilary. After all he had gone through, to have Joan snatched away from him at the moment of success. It was terrible. Wat too, that freckled-faced bantam.

"I should never have left them alone," he accused himself remorsefully.

"Here," said Grim sharply, "none of that. You did exactly the proper thing. We'll find them yet."

It was a confidence that he did not feel. There was the noise of padding feet up the ramp. The Mercutians were coming, in force.

Grim gripped Hilary by the shoulder, shook him vigorously. "They're coming. We're trapped."

Grendon snapped out of the lethargy into which he had sunk, face drawn and gray.

"No. There is a way. Follow me."

The first of the Mercutians pounded heavily into the room when Hilary had thrust Grim into the secret lift. He whirled and fired. The Mercutian coughed and fell forward. Other gray warty faces, furious, thrust from behind their dying comrade. But Hilary was in the lift, pressing the button for full speed down. A darting ray showered them with rounded smoking bits of vita-crystal, but they were dropping headlong through the building.

Ten minutes later they emerged cautiously from the entrance to the Pullman Building. It was deserted, deathly still. The two Earthmen stopped short, horror-struck at what they saw.

The streets were shambles. Hundreds of bodies lay sprawled in tumbling twisted heaps. Earthmen all, with here and there the grotesque huge bulk of a Mercutian who had failed to hear the warning signal. The bodies were scorched, blackened. Raw agony appeared on contorted desperate faces. It was not good to look upon.

"Wh—what has happened?" Grim gasped, his breath coming heavily.

"Just a little pleasantry of the Mercutians," Hilary said bitterly. He looked upward. High overhead hovered a gigantic shape, motionless.

Its great disk, burnished and dazzling in the cloudless sky, seemed to cast a sinister shadow over the city it had destroyed a second time.

"There's the toy that did it," said Hilary. "I felt the heat while I was a captive up in the Robbins Building. You must have flown over after, and missed it."

Grim shook a great brawny fist aloft. His deceptively mild eyes were

hard flames now. His face was set in great strong ridges. Hilary had never seen him this way before.

"I'll rip every Mercutian to pieces with my bare hands—shred him into little bits." He meant it too. Hilary shuddered.

Far off down the wide thoroughfare came the glint of weapons, the sight of massed ranks. A Mercutian patrol was shambling along, heavy-gaited.

"Come on, Grim, let's get out of here," said Hilary.

They flattened like shadows against the wall, slunk stealthily through radiating streets. As much as possible they kept their eyes away from the sickening sights, the poor burned bodies of their fellow men. Steadily they headed for the branch local conveyors as being less likely to be under surveillance.

The Ramapos was their destination. Hilary went dully, listlessly. Joan was gone again; this time he could not possibly know where. Every step he took though, seemed to lead him farther away from her. His glazed eye searched the shining skies as he stumbled along. Not a sign anywhere of the Vagabond. Only the hateful swift-moving Mercutian fliers.

It was only Grim's insistence that kept him going. The secret gorge was the headquarters of the revolt, he argued. If the fools he had left in charge hadn't thrown their men recklessly on New York against his instructions to join that last foolhardy heroic attack, there was still a chance of salvaging the revolution.

Chapter X

Back to the Ramapos

It was dark when they reached the first swellings of the Ramapo Range. It was dangerous to try and make their way through tangled brush and mountain trails. All night they camped on the bare ground, sleeping fitfully, cramped cold, shivering. They dared not light a fire; it would draw instant unwelcome attention.

When dawn came, they were on the move, glad to stretch their sodden limbs. Unerringly Grim homed for the invisible cleft. Nothing stirred in the forests, even the birds seemed gone. The fog had lifted, the sun blazed forth in unclouded majesty. The damp on them dried quickly.

But Grim shook his fist at the unwitting orb.

"Damn that weather machine," he growled. "Breaking it seems to have made matters worse. Even the regular midnight shower has stopped. I'd give ten years of my life for the sight of a cloud."

"It will never rain again," Hilary said wearily. "It has forgotten how."

The bright sunny sky seemed a brazen hell to the footsore Earthmen. It mocked and jeered at them with sparkling waves of warmth.

Before them was an unbroken mass of underbrush. The next instant they were on the brink of the chasm.

"They haven't found us yet," said Morgan, surveying the looped end of the rope ladder. They climbed swiftly down the swaying rungs. The rock slanted with them, turned sharply and fell sheer. Below there was a confused murmur, the sound of movement.

A voice came floating up to them, sharp, commanding.

"Stop where you are, you two. You're covered."

"It's Morgan," Grim bellowed, not pausing an instant in his descent.

The next instant he dropped lightly to the floor of the gorge. A moment later Hilary stepped beside him.

Men were crowding about Grim, clean-cut, determined-looking Earthmen. Nothing like the men he had encountered on his first trip on the express conveyor. The bottom of the gorge had all the appearance of a wartime camp.

There were at least a hundred men encamped in the narrow cleft, crowded and crowding. A tall man thrust himself forward, spare, angular.

Welcome, Captain Morgan," he cried. "We had given up all hopes of seeing you again."

"Hello, Waters," said Grim. "Where's Lieutenant Pemberton?"

The other looked shamefaced.

"He's, gone," he muttered. "Took two hundred men with him."

Morgan's face was awful. "Disobeyed orders, did he? Where did he go?"

"To join in the attack on Great New York. Reports came in that the countryside was up in arms, moving to attack the Mercutians. I couldn't hold him. Said you were crazy, never coming back. He went, and two hundred of the boys went with him."

Grim said: "Know what happened?"

Waters shook his head. "Our radio communication went dead yesterday afternoon."

"He's dead," said Grim softly. "The others too."

A groan went up as he described swiftly the holocaust of the day before. "That was why I warned you all to wait. We can't fight them yet. But I'm forgetting...." He turned to Hilary, who had remained quietly aside. "This is Hilary Grendon, your Chief. He's the man who is responsible for the revolt. I told you about him. We all take orders from him hereafter. If anyone can beat the Mercutians, here's your man."

A babel of sound burst about him like a bomb. Men patted him on the back, shook his hand, crowded him until he was almost smothered. It was a rousing reception. The kind Hilary had dreamed of on his return from his tremendous flight through space—and had not received.

For his act of revolt, unwitting as it was, had fired the imaginations of the Earth people, who in their degradation and despair had come to believe the Mercutian overlords invulnerable. It had been the little

spark that touched off a far-reaching train of events. In the few days that had elapsed Hilary had become a legendary figure.

The sparkle came back to his eyes, his brain cleared of the fog of hopelessness as he took command. Joan was lost—yes—but there was the Earth to be saved.

His orders crackled. The little gorge became a hive of activity. With Grim and Waters as efficient assistants he soon whipped the tiny company into ordered discipline. Absurdly few to fight the Mercutians, but Hilary counseled patience. They were a nucleus merely, he told them. When the time arrived to fight in the open, the peoples of the Earth would swell their ranks.

To provide against the day, he sent scouts out to filter through the surrounding villages and towns; unarmed, to all seeming meekest of the Earthlings. They stirred the embers of revolt with muted whisperings; they found trustworthy leaders in each community to organize secretly all able-bodied men; they returned with tidings of the outside world, with food and other necessities.

Sometimes they did not return. Then others went out to take their places. It was the fortune of war. Day and night a sentinel was posted in a dugout directly under the overhanging lip of the gorge. It was

his duty to warn of impending attack; above all, to rake the sky ceaselessly with a crudely-contrived periscope for signs of gathering clouds, be they no bigger than a handsbreadth.

But the heavens were a brass blaze by day and a glittering mask of stars by night. Weather machine or none, in truth it seemed that it had forgotten to rain.

Hilary was hard put to it to restrain the impatience of his men. Reports drifted in from the scouts. The premature revolt had been crushed in blood and agony. New York was deserted except for the Mercutians. The country round had been ruthlessly rayed; not only had the armed bands of Earthmen been ferreted out and destroyed, but peaceful communities had been wantonly burned into the ground.

Strong reinforcements had been rushed to the Great New York territory from more peaceful sectors of the world. There were three of the terrible diskoids hovering within a radius of one hundred miles, ready to loose their hideous destruction at the slightest sign of disaffection.

But this time the spirit of the Earthmen was not broken. Their gait was springier, their glance more forthright than heretofore. For every

one knew that Hilary Grendon, the prime mover, the defier of the Mercutians, had escaped. The invaders sought him ceaselessly, offering huge rewards for knowledge of his whereabouts. But there were no traitors. Even these few who knew would suffer unimaginable tortures rather than reveal him to the enemy.

"Patience," Hilary counseled his little band. "I know it is hard; I have my own scores to even. But we could only bring disaster upon ourselves and the cause of Earth's freedom by premature action. What have we? A handful of men, poorly armed. A few pistols; only, three of which can use the dynol pellets; a little ammunition. The rest of you have knives, axes, pitchforks. Poor enough weapons against the terrible rays of the Mercutians. We must wait."

Someone grumbled. "For what? Until the Mercutians finally trace our hideout and ray us out of existence?"

"We must take that chance," Hilary told him quietly. "Let it but rain, and we move at once."

"It never will," someone averred with profound conviction.

It began to seem so as the days passed, and the sun blazed pitilessly as ever. The brief night showers had ceased completely. That seemed

the only effect of the weather machine's destruction. Some of the weaker spirits among the men were for disbanding. They were afraid of eventual discovery; anxious about their families, left to the tender mercies of the outlanders. Hilary argued, dissuaded, but to no effect. They were determined to go. If by the end of the week there was no action, they said, they would leave. It was Wednesday then.

Thursday and Friday passed. No change. On Saturday a scout brought breathless tidings. One of the great diskoids had crashed to the ground from its station fifty miles up in a smother of flame and flying fragments. No one knew what had happened; the Mercutians of course threw a strict censorship about the affair.

But rumors flew on winged whisperings. Some war vessel from space had attacked the Mercutian, brought it down. More diskoids were rushed to New York; there were five now menacing the territory.

Grim looked steadily at Hilary when the news was brought to them. A momentary wild hope flared in his friend's eye that died out quickly.

"I know what you're going to say," said Hilary. "You think it is Wat Tyler and Joan, somehow escaped in the Vagabond."

The giant nodded slowly. "Why not?" he challenged.

"It's impossible," muttered the other. "Where could they have been all this time? Surely they would have returned to this place. And you forget that Mercutian guard who was freed. No, my friend, they have been killed, the Vagabond seized, and that was the end to that."

Morgan shook his head skeptically.

Saturday was cloudless. Sunday morning the malcontents were to leave, to dribble back quietly to their homes. They were sullen, defiant in the face of the openly expressed scorn of the loyal men, but determined.

"No use getting ourselves killed for nothing," they muttered.

Double sentries were posted that night. A gloom hung over the camp. Hilary went to sleep heavy-hearted. This seemed the end of all his visions. Joan dead, Wat too; no hope of freeing the Earth from its slavery. If only he had the Vagabond, he'd take off again for the uncharted reaches of spaces, find some little habitable asteroid, live out the rest of his meaningless life there. With these gloomy thoughts he fell at last into fitful slumber.

He was awakened, hours later by a sudden uproar. The camp was in confusion. Sleepy voices tossed back and forth in inextricable babble. Hilary was on his feet in an instant, instinctively slipping his automatic into his blouse. Grim looked huge at his side, unperturbed.

"What's happened?" Hilary shouted to make himself heard.

"Don't know," grunted the other, "but we'll soon find out."

He pushed massively through the milling crowd of sleep-frightened men like a ship shouldering the waves, Hilary in his wake. One of the sentinels appeared suddenly before them.

"You," spat Hilary, "why aren't you at your post?"

The man saluted automatically and gasped.

"The Mercutians have come."

"What do you mean?" Hilary demanded, as a groan went up.

One of the weak-kneed men, sir," the sentry ejaculated, "wouldn't wait until morning to make his get-away. We found him climbing out. Said it would be dangerous in broad daylight. He was in a terrible funk. We had no orders to stop anyone who wanted to leave,

so we just jeered him, and let him go. My comrade leaned out to watch.

"As he hit the ground, he was bathed suddenly in light. The next instant the blackness of the night was split by a sizzling flame. It crisped the poor fellow to a cinder, and sheared the head of my comrade clean off. I caught the body, pulled it back into the dugout, but it was too late.

"I knew what had happened, sir. Some damned Mercutian flying patrol had spotted us with their search beam. I didn't wait for more, but scrambled out of the dugout as fast as I could. Up above I saw a one-man flier slanting down for me. It was a-sparkle, ready for another ray. I came down the ladder in a hurry, I tell you."

The man was panting, white-faced. Someone cried: "It's all over; they'll smother us in now."

Hilary swung around. It would take very little to start a panic.

"Stop that," he said sharply. "Now is no time to play the coward." He turned again to the sentinel.

"A one-man flier, you said?" he reflected aloud.

"Yes, sir," the other answered, "and I'll bet he's calling for help right now."

"That's just what I intend putting a stop to," said Hilary grimly. He shifted his gun to an easier drawing position, swung himself aloft on the ladder. "Take over, Grim, until I come back," he shouted down. "If I don't, send others up to get that Mercutian."

"Come down," Grim yelled after him, alarmed. "I'll go up; you're the leader here."

"That's why it's my job. So long."

The men stared up after the tiny ascending figure, lumps in their throats. They would die gladly for Hilary Grendon now; he was proving himself. Grim fumed and waited. Hilary had disappeared above the angled bend.

Chapter XI

Driven from Cover

Far overhead, Hilary climbed swiftly. He realised the seriousness of their situation. Let that Mercutian flash his message to Headquarters and there would be a swarm of fliers upon them within an hour's

time. They would be caught like rats in a trap, without a chance for their lives.

He gritted his teeth and swung himself up the faster. He turned the bend. There was the dark sky above, faintly spangled with stars. The flier was not in sight. Hilary stifled an imprecation. If he had taken off, they were doomed.

He moved more cautiously now, stepping gingerly from rung to rung up the swaying ladder. The cleft widened; he was near the top. He paused. There was not the slightest sound. But Hilary was taking no chances.

With infinite slowness he raised his head over the matted underbrush that masked the entrance. For the moment he could see nothing in the pitchy blackness. Then a dim shape loomed to one side. From within it there came a tiny hum, intermittent, almost inaudible.

Hilary knew what that was: a transmitter. Even then the fatal message was winging through the ether. He did not hesitate. He lofted to the ground with one quick heave, steadied on his swaying feet as the automatic flashed into his hand.

"Throw up your hands, Mercutian," he shouted at the dimly-

perceived bulk. "I have you covered." He tensed, straining his ears for any movement that might locate the hidden foe.

The tiny humming ceased abruptly. There was painful silence.

"Don't try—" Hilary commenced. He stopped, swerved his body suddenly to one side. A red glow had warned him. The hurtling ray scorched past him with a crackling blaze. Hilary was off balance, teetered, and went down with a crash into the thorny underbrush, his automatic exploding into sharp flame.

A hoarse guttural laugh came from the flier. "Got you that time, Earth dog," the invisible Mercutian taunted. There was silence. Another belt crashed from the ship, heaved the ground under its impact. Another and another. Still no break in the silence, no cry.

The Mercutian muttered to himself: "The dog is dead, all right." He peered out cautiously. The underbrush was black, sullenly quiet. Great swaths showed where the rays had swept the Earth. With a hoarse chuckle the grotesque giant climbed over the side of his ship. A search beam swung in his hand. He was in deep shadow. He swung the beam in a short arc. There was nothing, only matted vegetation. There was one thick thorny bush he noted, however, extending its bulk behind the bow of the ship. He stepped out a bit,

away from the flier's shadow, and swung his beam directly at it. The invisible ray pierced through the interlacing twigs with ease. It picked out a prone figure, lying with arm extended.

The Mercutian chuckled again, but the chuckle changed almost immediately to a throaty cry of alarm. With a swiftness that went incongruously with his awkward bulk, his free arm dropped for his hand ray. There was a sharp burst of flame, a staccato bark. The Mercutian staggered, swayed with sullen pain-widened eyes, and pitched headlong forward.

The prone figure in the bush leaped up, ran for him. The Mercutian was dead, drilled through the heart. Hilary sheathed his weapon grimly. His task was done. One thing, though. How much of the message had been transmitted? He must know. He vaulted over the side of the flier, fumbled around until he found the receiving apparatus. Then he waited, dreading to hear the silence broken. A minute passed, two minutes, and Hilary breathed a sigh of relief. The message had not gotten through.

Then it came—a tiny sparking, an intermittent hum. Hilary's heart sank with hammering blows. He tried to read the signals, but they were in code, or in the Mercutian tongue, which was just as bad. It was not necessary, though. Headquarters had heard; they knew.

Hilary did not waste an instant in vain regrets. Within an hour the gorge would be a vicious trap; he must get his men out at once. What then he did not know, nor bother. There was the more immediate problem.

He went down the swinging ladder hand over hand, not pausing for the rungs. Every instant was precious now. His hands scorched, but he did not feel the pain.

His flying body collided thudding with a heavy bulk beneath. There was a grunt, the rope jerked from his hands, and two bodies fell cursing, entangled, to the ground. Luckily it was not far distant. He sprang to his feet, found Grim heaving his bulk up more slowly.

"I was coming up after you," the giant growled. "You were gone too long. That's the thanks I get."

Hilary had no time for idle talk.

"Attention, men," he snapped. "We leave at once. You have five minutes to get your arms, ammunition clips and rations, light marching order."

Without a word they scattered alertly to their tasks. It was the

discipline of veterans.

"You didn't get the Mercutian?" Grim was troubled.

"I got him all right," answered his leader laconically, "but too late. His message had gone through."

Five minutes later to the dot, the camp was lined up, accoutered complete. They were silent, tense, but smartly erect. Hilary's flash glowed over them in the dark. Then he nodded approvingly.

"Fine work, men. Up that ladder, one at a time," he said. "Each man counts twenty slowly, one—two—three before he follows. Keep your distance, and move fast."

The first man sprang to the ladder, went up swiftly. Twenty seconds later, the next man's foot was on the bottom rung. Up and up they went, one after the other, each man counting off and climbing. Hilary watched them anxiously.

"Hope we make it," he muttered to Grim. "It'll take all of forty minutes to evacuate, and the Mercutians may be on us by then."

It was almost forty minutes to the dot when Hilary's head emerged from the cleft. He was the last man out. The men were lined up on a

level bit, nervous, apprehensive. In spite of the discipline, heads automatically jerked upward, raked the sky for sign of the enemy.

Where to now?—thought Hilary. There were no more hiding places as perfect as the one they had just left. They were forced into the open, easy prey for the first lynx-eyed Mercutian. Sooner or later, they would be discovered, and then.... A last hopeless glance at the mocking stars. Never had man yearned more for rain, oceans and oceans of it.

Hilary roused himself. Whatever of despair he felt did not appear in his staccato orders.

"We march at once, men," he said. "Scatter formation, five paces between. At the signal, take nearest cover, and prepare for action. Forward—"

"Too late." Grim's voice was flat, controlled.

Hilary looked around sharply. "What do you mean?"

"Look." Morgan's hand swept aloft. Through the darkling night, faintly visible in the feeble starlight—there was no moon—were driving shapes, a full score of them converging upon the little band.

One look was sufficient. Mercutian fliers hurrying in response to their fellow's signal. There was no time, no chance to escape.

"Very well, men." Hilary commanded, coldly calm. "Take cover. Do not fire until I give the order."

There was instant scattering. The men dived for whatever poor bit of protection they could find: jutting rocks, tree trunks, thin thorny bushes even.

Grim and Hilary crouched together behind a great boulder.

"How many pistols are there in the crowd?" Hilary asked quietly.

"Not many. Outside of your automatic and my dynol pistol, there are two other dynols and not more than a dozen automatics. If only we had the submachine gun with us, but Wat took it along, and he's gone."

"Not much chance, I'm afraid," said Hilary; "but we'll fight it out. Here they come."

The two men crouched lower. All about them was silence; not even a leaf stirred in the heavy breathlessness.

The driving fliers were easily visible now. Ominous hurtling projectiles, coming to crush out the last vestige of revolt on the conquered planet. On they came, purposefully, directly, knowing their way; a full score, converging in a scream of wind against their bows as they dropped straight for the hidden gorge.

It seemed to the hidden watchers as though they would crash to Earth with the speed of their swoop. But at one hundred feet aloft the fliers braked their headlong flight, hovered motionlessly in echelon formation.

A moment's breathless pause—to the hiding men it seemed eternity—and all the uneven terrain, rocks, trees, bushes, the soil itself, burst into glowing white crystal clearness. The Mercutians had turned on their search beams.

Hilary gazed clear through the rock behind which he crouched as though it were a transparency. All around him he saw the prone bodies of his men, naked to the view of all and sundry.

A hoarse derisive chuckle rasped from above. Hilary sprang to his feet; further attempt at concealment was useless. As he did so, the air seemed to split in two, there was a blinding rending crash. Not ten feet from where he stood, the ground tossed in torture. A man

screamed—terribly. The first blow had been struck.

Hilary burned with a cold consuming anger. "Up, men, and fire. Aim forward about three feet back of the prow." That was where the pilot would be.

A scattered burst of cheers answered him. On all sides, like crystal ghosts, the Earthmen rose to their feet. They were fighting men.

Hilary took careful aim at a flier almost directly overhead and fired. He could have sworn he hit it, but nothing happened. Grim's dynol pistol flamed redly nearby. The tracer pellet scorched upward, impacted, against the hull of a flier. There was a faint detonation, and the next instant the air was full of flying fragments.

"Got that one," he said softly.

Hilary was conscious of a faint envy. His automatic seemed like a harmless popgun against that deadly weapon. But he drew another bead and fired again. With bated breath he awaited the result. Nothing. Hilary groaned, made as if to throw the useless gun away, when the flier he had aimed at wabbled, tried to right itself, and crashed in a swift erratic loop.

By now the pitifully few weapons of the Earthmen were popping. Two more of the enemy fliers hurtled to destruction. But as at a given signal, the air above them seemed suddenly to flame destruction. With the noise of a thousand thunderbolts the massed rays struck.

The groaning Earth tossed and heaved in billowing waves to escape its torture. The trees were blazing pyres. It seemed impossible for anything that lives within that area to escape instant destruction.

Hilary felt a wave of blinding heat envelop him, and he was thrown flat to the quaking ground. Frightful cries, screams of agony, came to his dulled ears as from a great distance. He heaved himself up wearily, scorched, smoldering, but otherwise unhurt.

Grim," he whispered through thick cracked lips. "Grim, where are you?"

"Here." Strange how tranquil he sounded. A scarecrow of a figure arose almost at his right from a smoldering bush, a giant clothed in smoking rags. In the strange illumination of the search beams he seemed the wraith of a scarecrow.

"Thank God you're alive," Hilary croaked. "The others...?"

Figures were staggering up from the holocaust about them.

Grim's practised eyes counted. "About fifty left," he said, "just one half."

Hilary's voice rose suddenly, strongly. "Keep on firing, men." Once again his pistol barked defiance.

A faint, ragged cheer answered him. A few guns flamed; there were only a handful left.

"God!" someone cried.

The massed ships above were gleaming faintly. Little shimmering sparkles ran over the hulls. They were going to ray again. Hilary went berserk, screamed strange oaths, fired again and again. Grim fired, more slowly. Two of the enemy ships left the formation, plunged headlong. But the shimmering grew brighter. In seconds the terrible bolts would be loosed. It was the end. The Earthmen knew it. They could not survive a second raying.

Grim shouted. Never before had Hilary heard him raise his voice to that pitch. His great arm was upflung. "Look!" he screamed.

Chapter XII

The Vagabond

High up, a dark blob against the feeble starlight, something was dropping; dropping with the speed of a plummet, straight for the massed Mercutian fliers. From outer space it seemed to come, a plunging ripping meteor.

A search beam must have swung hurriedly aloft, for it flamed into startling being; a spheroid, compact, purposeful, dropping with breathtaking velocity.

Something seemed to explode in Hilary's brain. A great cry wrenched out of his torn throat.

"The Vagabond."

Unbelievable, impossible. Yet he could not be mistaken. The Vagabond was coming home again!

By this time the Mercutians had seen it too. It meant suicide, that rushing projectile from outer space, but it would take along with it in the crash of its flight a goodly number of the Mercutian fliers. The Mercutians were no cowards, but death stared them openly in the face.

Instantly, all was in confusion. Forgotten the rebellious Earthmen below, forgotten everything but escape from the down-rushing thunderbolt.

Hilary, staring upward, could visualize the fliers working desperately at their controls. The clustered ships vibrated like a school of frightened fish poised for instant flight. Then they were in motion; scattering, wabbling in the terror of their retreat.

The Vagabond hurtled down among them like a hawk among pigeons. Its surface glowed with the speed of its flight. To Hilary's fascinated gaze it seemed as if there would be a terrific smash. But the Vagabond came to a screaming, braking halt directly in the center of the milling, scattering Mercutians.

Almost simultaneously the air resounded with staccato bursts. Ratatat-tat-a-tat.

"Good little Wat," Grim danced insanely. "He's cutting loose the submachine gun."

Hilary woke from his amazement with a start.

"Shoot, and shoot to kill," he shouted above the turmoil. "Don't let a

single one get away."

Automatics spat their leaden hail, dynol pellets flamed redly, and over all resounded the rapid drum fire of the machine gun, pouring steel-jacketed death into the confused ranks of the Mercutians.

The monster invaders had lost their heads. Even then, they could have destroyed the Earthmen with their deadly spreading rays. But the strange apparition from above had demoralized them. No one thought of fighting: flight, safety, were the only thoughts in their minds.

Flier after flier went tailspinning to horrible death while his comrades fled in all directions.

It was soon over. The greater number of the Mercutians were twisted smoldering wrecks. The few who escaped were rapidly diminishing dots in the cold starlight.

Its work finished, the rescuing space flier settled softly to the ground, in the midst of the embattled cheering Earthmen, temporarily gone insane.

The air-lock port yawned, and a slim figure darted out, straight into

Hilary's outstretched arms.

"Joan!"

Behind her danced a small red-haired individual, his homely features grinning with delight. Under his arm swung heavily a submachine gun. He disappeared almost immediately into the vast bearlike grip of his gigantic friend. His shrill voice went on unceasingly, but strangely muffled, as Grim hugged him. Finally he extricated himself, ruffled, breathless, but still talking.

"What did I tell you, you big ox?" he shrilled. "We'll chase them off the Earth, sweep 'em out into space."

"Why, you little gamecock," the giant observed affectionately, "I'm beginning to believe you can do it."

"We thought you had gone for good," said Hilary, holding Joan tightly to him as if he feared to lose her again. "What happened to you on the Robbins Building?"

"Can't get rid of us that easily, can he, Joan?" The little man smirked knowingly at the girl. "It was all very simple," he went on. "No sooner had you two left us than we heard the thud of a flier landing

on the other end of the roof. The pilot looked out at us startled. We recognized each other simultaneously. It was our old friend—Urga."

Hilary clenched his fist. He had a good many scores to settle with the Cor.

Wat saw his action. "I did my best," he stated apologetically. "I ran for the machine gun. But by that time Urga had shot aloft again. Didn't seem as though he wanted to wait. I heard his whistle shrilling in the air. Fliers came thick as flies."

He spread his hands in a quaint gesture. "What could I do, Hilary?" his voice was appealing. "Any minute I expected to have a ray on us. I couldn't wait for you two, the Vagabond would have been a little pile of ashes. Besides, there was Joan. She kicked and struggled: she wanted to stay for you, but I shoved her in the ship, locked the port, and went scooting up like a rocket. You should have seen the Mercutians scatter."

For the first time in his life words seemed to fail him. "You—are—not—angry?" he fumbled, looking for all the world like a bedraggled dog who knows he has been in mischief.

"Angry?" Hilary fairly whooped. "What for? For saving the ship,

Joan, all of us? Why, you little bit of pure gameness, you did the only sensible thing."

Wat grinned from ear to ear.

"But why," Grim interrupted, "didn't you have sense enough to come back here, instead of scaring everybody to death?"

Wat turned on him indignantly. "Sure," he squeaked, "and bring all the Mercutians along with me? No sir, I shot straight up into the stratosphere, and headed for the Canadian woods. Felt we'd be safe there."

Hilary looked at him. "I've heard," he said overcasually, "that an accident happened to one of the Mercutian diskoids. Know anything about it?"

The redhead grinned. "I was the accident. I wasn't staying cooped up in the wilderness. Joan and I decided we'd do some scouting before we came back; see what was happening over the rest of the world. We were returning from one of those little expeditions, cruising about fifty miles up, when we almost bumped into the diskoid. We saw them first; we had just come out of the shadow of the Earth; they were in the sun. I let them have it before they had a chance to

turn on their rays. The bullets punctured them clean; must have let out their air. I didn't wait to see; ducked back into the shadow again."

"How did you get here in the nick of time?" asked Hilary suddenly. "A few minutes later and there would have been no rescue."

Wat looked, at him in some surprise.

"Why, we got your signal, of course."

"Signal?" Hilary echoed. "I never—" Then he paused. Morgan was grinning sheepishly, "Here, what do you know about this?" he queried sharply.

The giant's grin widened. "Just a little," he admitted. "I'd been playing around with my transmitter. Used some of the spare equipment we had cached for the Vagabond, and stepped up the sending radius to a thousand miles or so."

"We received your call in the woods north of Lake Ontario," Joan interrupted.

Grim nodded, gratified. "I thought it might work," he rumbled. "You see," he explained to Hilary, "ever since I heard about that diskoid, I knew that the Vagabond was responsible. But you refused to believe

it. So I worked in secret, rigging up the apparatus. Didn't want to stir up false hopes. I finished it yesterday. When we were discovered, I started sending."

"It took us just ten minutes over the hour to get here from a standing start," Wat boasted. "We almost burned up the old machine smashing through the air, didn't we Joan?"

She nodded happily from her cozy position in the crook of Hilary's arm.

Hilary looked long and steadily at his friends.

"Well—" he finally began, when someone cried out sharply.

A dark shape shot over the rim of the mountainside, swooped down at them in one fierce lunge. Involuntarily the Earthmen threw themselves flat on the ground to avoid the tremendous rush of its flight. At one hundred feet it banked sharply, a circle of light gleamed, and a long blazing streamer thrust its relentless finger at the prostrate figures of the Earthmen.

There was a blinding flash, a roar. Hilary was on his feet, bullets spitting rapidly. But already the lone Mercutian flier had completed

his bank, and was zooming out of range. Hilary watched the flier grow fainter and fainter in the starlit distance. Almost he could hear the far-off hoarse chuckle of its pilot.

Then he turned to survey the damage. The Earthmen were up, growling low heartfelt curses. That one blast had been catastrophic.

There on the ground lay the smoking ruins of the Vagabond, beloved companion of his space wanderings. For a moment Hilary gave way to a deep-seated despair. This was the end of all his plannings. He had built high hopes on the Vagabond in his carefully laid schemes for overcoming the Mercutians. He stood as one stunned.

Someone cried: "A curse is upon us; let us scatter before it is too late!"

It acted on Hilary like a cold shower, that cry of despair.

"No," his voice resounded strong and vibrant. "We did not need the Vagabond. It never was part of my plans." A lie, of course, but most necessary. "That Mercutian saved me the trouble of finding a hiding place for it. Come, let us march. At dawn it rains, I know it will."

"You've said that every day since the weather machine was

smashed," a voice cried out from the rear.

Hilary paused, thrown off his balance momentarily. Yet a second's hesitation would be fatal. It was Joan who answered for him. She sprang forward, lithe and exalted, her dark eyes flashing even in the dark.

"I'll tell you how he knows. I myself had almost forgotten. Tomorrow is exactly two weeks since the weather machine was destroyed. My father, Martin Robbins, built it. He told me then that its effects were so powerful that they lasted for two weeks, even with the machine turned off. Only positive action could bring an immediate reversal, of weather conditions. That's how he knows."

Joan had turned the tide. The waverers turned as one man to Hilary. "Lead on! We follow!"

"Very well," he stated quietly. "We can't remain here. The Mercutians will be back soon in overwhelming force, burning for revenge. We march."

To Joan, in barely audible tones: "Is that true, what you said?"

"I—I think so. I remember Dad mentioned a time limit. I think it was

two weeks."

"If it isn't, we're facing a damned unpleasant prospect to-morrow," he said grimly.

Chapter XIII

The Last Battle

Dawn found the little band still struggling over the thick-forested mountains in a desperate attempt to avoid detection. They were footsore, weary, their clothes shredded by innumerable sharp thorns, their eyes bloodshot from lack of sleep. Overhead, the paling sky was already dotted with the fliers of the Mercutians; faint sounds came to them of the clumsy thrashing of enemy patrols as they beat the woods for the fugitives. The Mercutians were putting forth all their resources to seek out and destroy these irritant foci of revolt.

At length Hilary called a halt. They were in a little valley, not far from Bear Mountain. It offered some protection from the searchers. The enclosing hills would mask them, from all but search beams directly overhead.

"It is no use going any farther," he said wearily. "We all need sleep

and rest. Sooner or later they'll find us, no matter where we go, and then—" He shrugged his shoulders.

The weary, panting men threw themselves down upon the ground, too tired even to eat. Immediately they were in a drugged sleep. Joan was sleeping too, her face pale drawn, but like a little child's in her slumber. Hilary watched her with a sharp pang in his heart. What would the next few hours bring to her, to all of them?

Nor did Grim and Wat sleep either. The three of them squatted on their heels, silent, as the cold dawn wind swept with a great sigh through the valley.

The stars were paling now, the purple sky was enswathing itself in pearly grays. Something glowed pinkly overhead; and was extinguished almost immediately by the prevailing gray.

Hilary started violently. "Did you see that?"

"See what?" Grim was drunk for lack of sleep.

Hilary was on his feet, peering upward. "I thought I saw—there, there it is again."

The other two were on their feet also, weariness forgotten, heads

thrown back.

High overhead, in the overturned cup of the sky, an irregular pink wisp formed before their wondering eyes, and vanished again. But more slowly, than the first time.

"Well?" asked Wat, puzzled.

"A cloud." Hilary's voice was a prayer.

"Hell," said Wat disgustedly. "If that's a cloud I'm a Mercutian. There wouldn't be enough water there to moisten a canary seed."

"And even if there were it wouldn't matter now," said Grim calmly. "We're discovered."

A long slim flier shot athwart the brightening sky, paused suddenly in flight as though jerked by an invisible string. The next instant the valley was illumined by a transparent glow. It enveloped the Earthmen, made crystal figurines of the most solid among them. They seemed like wraiths through which, as in a glass, more could be seen beyond. The solid ground, the rocks, were transparencies floating in an ocean of airy nothingness. A search beam!

The flier hung steady, high overhead, holding them in the dissolving

area of his beam. Too high to ray them but also too high for their futile bullets. The Mercutians no longer underrated the fighting abilities of their erstwhile slaves.

"He's sending out messages for help," observed Hilary.

"Let's take it on the run," Wat suggested.

"No good. Where could we run to that his beam couldn't follow?"

"Well, we can only die once," Wat observed cheerfully.

"And take as many Mercutians with us as we can," Grim amended. "That's one lucky thing. Their rays have no greater range than our bullets."

"Except the diskoids," said Hilary. "Here's your chance, Wat, to play with your rattle."

The red head, who had lugged the heavy machine gun all the way with him, patted its snout affectionately. "It plays the devil's tattoo," he said.

More fliers materialized in the by now brighter blue of early morning. The sun was just peeping over the serrated tops of the

mountains. But still they did not attack.

"Afraid of us," Wat chuckled. "Bet they'll send to Mercury for the whole damn army before they come for us."

The first shock was over. With the inevitable staring them in the face, the men had achieved something of a gay recklessness. Hilary found some natural recessions under overhanging masses of rocks that would afford protection from the searing power of the rays. To be effective, the fliers would have to land in the valley or fly low, thus exposing themselves to the raking fire of the Earthmen's weapons. Hilary posted his little band skilfully underneath these natural shelters in such a way that they would be able to command the bit of sky from every angle.

The men jerked and fidgeted. The heavens darkened with massed fliers, and still they came. The Mercutians were taking no chances.

"Plenty of guests at our funeral," Wat chuckled, sighting along the barrel of his gun.

Hilary left the jesting to the others. He was watching the skies intently.

Joan slipped her arm through his. "You see something that we don't. What is it?"

He nodded with an intent frown. "There are clouds forming up there. The first I've seen since I came back to this planet. Rain clouds, too, if I know anything about it. Look."

Joan tilted her head backward. Thin scuds of vapor darted across the sky, driven by the morning breeze; dissolved and reformed a little farther on. Tenuous wisps, evanescent, wraithlike. The sun shone steadily, unobscured.

"Those little things," said Joan unbelievingly. "Why, if that's all you're depending on, we're finished."

"Nevertheless they are rain clouds. But when the rain will come is another matter. Very likely too late."

Grim came hurriedly over from his post near the entrance to the little valley. His face was placid as ever, but his eyes were worried.

"We are being surrounded," he stated calmly.

Hilary sprang to his feet. "What do you mean?"

"Listen. Do you hear it?"

Far down the overgrown trail they had followed into the valley came the noise of heavy stumbling feet, innumerable feet.

"They are taking no chances," said Grim, his countenance unchanged.

Hilary looked swiftly around. The valley was a cul-de-sac, surrounded on three sides of its narrow oblong by precipitous hills. From the fourth side, the Mercutians were coming—an army, from the sound of them. Overhead were a hundred fliers, and more coming. The trap was sprung!

Hilary's voice rang out. "All men without guns down the valley to repel invaders. Those with guns remain at your positions; watch the fliers. Wat Tyler in command."

With a joyous cry the Earthmen started for the narrow mouth of the valley, all without guns. Gone was the helpless feeling of before; now they could fight too. Axes, spades, pitchforks, sticks and stones even, were their weapons.

Hilary thrust his automatic into Joan's hand. "You use it, dear. I won't

need it. Come on, Grim."

Morgan smiled slowly, handed over his dynol pistol without a word to a weaponless man and stalked after his leader. His great hand clutched and unclutched unconsciously. This was what he wanted, hand-to-hand fighting.

By the time they reached the foot of the valley, the noise of the oncoming Mercutians sounded like the rumbling of thunder. Secure in their numbers there was no thought of concealment.

The Earthmen were pitifully few, only thirty of them, and wretchedly armed. Hilary disposed of them up the slope of the hill on either side, set them to loosening jutting boulders. He was in command on one slope. Grim on the other.

In a minute the Mercutians would be upon them. A simultaneous attack, no doubt; the fliers dropping low to loose their deadly rays from above as the land force attacked with their hardly less deadly hand rays.

Hilary shot a last hasty glance aloft. His heart gave a great bound. The thin insubstantial vapors of a little before had solidified, taken on a grosser leaden hue. The sky was a sullen gray, shot through

intermittently with the broad flares of a sun valiantly struggling to reassert its long undisputed sway. Little flickers of lightning played around the ragged edges of the clouds.

To the most unobservant it was evident now that a storm was in the making. But might it not be too late? The sun still shone, and as long as its light pierced through, the weapons of the Mercutians held all their deadly potency.

The alien invaders sensed the urgent necessity for quick action, for the fliers were dropping now, hundreds of them, to within range. Hilary heard the shouted orders of the Mercutians Cors, the crashing forward of a mighty host, and then the front of the attack burst out of the trees in an engulfing flood of gigantic unwieldy bodies and gray warty faces.

A quick view of the stout ungainly Viceroy, Artok, another of the coldly saturnine visage of Urga in the front rank, and with a roar of gutturals, the attack was on.

Down from above came a myriad blinding flashes, turning the inclosed valley into an inferno of heat and rocking, boiling, shattered ground. Up the valley shot the massed hand rays of the hundreds as they swept along in close-packed trot.

It seemed as if nothing could exist in that blazing, screaming hell. Hilary, stunned, shaken, scorched, felt as if he were the only one alive. Yet as the front of the attack washed up before him, he did not hesitate. He sprang to his feet, swung the nicely hefted long-handled ax he had picked up, uttered a war whoop that went back to remote ancestors, and flung himself headlong into the boiling mass of Mercutians.

As he did so, he caught a fleeting, comforting glimpse of Grim rising to his full height on the other slope, huge hands raised, and crashing down barehanded, silent, into the ranks of the enemy. A cheer went up, a faint ragged cheer, and other figures popped up out of nowhere and dropped feet first into the fray.

Hilary found himself engulfed in a welter of figures that towered heads above him. His ax swung up and down, bit into something soft and yielding. The Mercutian screamed horribly; blood spouted from his wide-split shoulder. He fell stumbling to his knees, and Hilary stepped into the little open space. That gave him more elbow room. A furious towering monster swung his tube around in the press. Hilary ducked as the sizzling ray sped over his head. There were howls of pain as the spreading beam cut a burning swath through the packed Mercutians.

Thereafter no more tubes were raised. The quarters were too close. It was to be hand-to-hand fighting; thousands of giant Mercutians against a handful of puny Earthmen.

Hilary swung his red-dripping ax in ever-widening circles. At every swing a Mercutian tumbled. A little space opened around him, literally hewn out of living flesh. But with strange fierce cries he threw himself again and again into the wall of bodies. There and there only was salvation possible where the sun-tubes could not be used.

Far over to one side he caught glimpses of bodies in violent upheavings, bodies that thrust explosively to either side as from the sharp prow of an invisible ship. Then a great figure heaved staggering into view, bloody, gashed, great arms encircling Mercutian heads, smashing them together like eggshells, flinging them apart, seizing others. Grim Morgan, berserk with bare hands.

Here and there in his own travail Hilary sighted little foci of struggle, Earthmen with ax and pitchfork and spade battling valiantly in a sea of Mercutians. A swirl, an eddy, and all too often a sudden surge and flowing of gray warty faces, and smooth rippleless heads where an Earthman had gone down, trampled into pulp.

Hilary's first rush with swinging flashing ax had caught the Mercutians unawares. They had relied upon their sun-tubes, and in the mêlée succeeded only in inflicting frightful havoc on their own kind. Now, however, they came for Hilary in a solid mass, huge three-fingered hands flailing, seeking to thrust him down by sheer weight of numbers. He swung and swung again, the ax bit deep, but still they came. His arm grew weary from so much slaughter, it rose more and more slowly, and then it rose no more. The bloody ax was wrenched from his nerveless fingers, and he was down, smothered by innumerable trampling bodies. Over him the tide swirled smooth. Heavy feet kicked and battered at his body, hands reached down to pluck and rip at him.

Feebly he tried to fend them off, but the shodden hoofs smashed him down again, gouged at his unprotected face. He struggled, but soon he would not struggle any more.

From afar came to his dimming ears below, a huge shout that shook the ground. Feet pounded him down into semi-unconsciousness; there was a mighty shuffling to and fro over him, and then the feet were gone. A huge well-remembered hand, caught him, heaved him upright. It was Grim. His face was a wreck, battered out of all semblance, but those blue mild eyes were flaming with an unholy light.

Hilary tottered, and the giant shook him.

"Wake up," he bawled; "they're coming again."

With a great effort Hilary cleared his numbed brain, saw the resurgence of the temporarily beaten herd. His fists clenched automatically.

"Good boy," Grim whooped. "Let's get them."

Then they were engulfed, fighting back to back. Hilary seemed to be fighting in a dream. He never had a clear conception of what happened. Faces thrust themselves into his own, furious, contorted; his fist went out mechanically, thudded against something soft, and the face disappeared. Hands reached plucking for him; he thrust them off, and swung left and right again.

Once he looked dully upward. The sky was gray slate now, festooned with bellying black. No sign of the sun; not the least ray could pierce. The fliers hung aimless overhead, no sparkle to their hulls. The valley was dark too; the terrible rays had ceased raking it with an inferno of heat.

Just before he lowered his upflung face to smash his fist into another

face, something wet blobbed on his forehead. A raindrop? Perhaps, but he was too far gone to care now. Life was an endless series of howling Mercutians to thrust fists into.

A cheer rose high, punctured by quick sharp explosions of sound. Guns. Those few remaining of the fighting Earthmen farther up the valley, no longer menaced by the futile fliers, had come down to help their weaponless brethren. Wat's voice was shrill in the land, yelling, exhorting, screaming. A familiar rat-a-tat-a-tat came down the wind. The submachine gun was spitting steel-jacketed death. Where was Joan? Hilary wondered wearily.

A face towered over him, a face he knew. Urga. The Mercutian was no longer impassive; his gray countenance was distorted with hideous hate. "I'll break you in two," he mouthed, and lunged for Hilary.

The Earthman came out of his daze at the sight of the other. Strength seemed to flow back into his weary body. His fist came up, clean with all the power that was left in him. It went home with a soul-satisfying crunch. Urga's gray gash of a mouth seemed to smear slowly over the rest of his face. A wild animal scream burst from him as he sagged. Then a swirl of other Mercutians anxious to get at the Earthman eddied him out of view.

Hilary felt better. Now he could die content. Even with their guns, what could a handful of Earthmen do against the resistless, ever-coming tide of Mercutians, thousands of them?

It was raining now, slowly at first, large scattered drops, then heavier and heavier, until the fogged air was a driving sheet of water.

What of it?—thought Hilary bitterly as he fought and slipped and stumbled in the slimy, bloody muck that was now the ground. The Mercutians' weapons were useless, but they did not need them any more. Sheer numbers would overwhelm the Earthmen.

Then to his amazement something happened. The heavens, long outraged by the artificial repression of the weather machine, kicked over all traces and opened their sluices in earnest. The sky was one vast waterfall. The elements roared and rocked; the valley was knee deep already in a spate of waters.

Hilary splashed and waded after his enemies. But they were going. They staggered and trembled in every shaking limb, heedless now of the Earthmen. They slipped and fell into the flood, and stayed there, motionless under the waters. Like Pharaoh's army they were being drowned before the amazed Earthmen's very eyes.

On their own planet it never rained; there was no water except for carefully hoarded underground lakes. This first taste of real Earth weather was too much for them. They could not withstand the driving rain, the water swirling round their knees. All the strength went out of their shaggy frames, their knees buckled and down they went, helpless, destroyed by a natural phenomenon to which they were unaccustomed. They had actually been smothered by the humidity!

Hilary's voice was strong again. With great shouts, he rallied his men. A pitiful handful; only fifteen of the fifty that had entered the valley. But Joan was alive, her face black with burned skin, otherwise unhurt. Wat's grin rose superior to a mask of raw flesh, and Grim, bleeding from a hundred wounds, was still a tower of strength.

It was a strange sight as they stood almost waist deep in the flood, the storm beating down upon them, hundreds and hundreds of bodies floating, bumping against them.

"We must clinch our victory, men," Hilary shouted above the roar of the elements. "We must go to arouse the Earth, sweep the Mercutians into the oceans while the storm lasts, or all our work will go for naught."

A great cheer went up from the little band, and without resting, without food or sleep, they waded their way out of the valley, into civilization once more, carrying their message, arousing the peoples, gathering to themselves like a tiny snowball rolling down a mountainside, a huge swelling army of jubilant Earthmen, Earthwomen, too, moving in resistless flood down upon New York.

The rest is history. Like a torrent they swept down upon the cowed, weakened Mercutians. Those that did not escape in the great diskoids back to their own torrid, waterless planet were searched out, torn to pieces by the infuriated Earth peoples.

For five days and five nights the storm raged, all over the world. The floodgates were opened; outraged nature was taking her revenge. For five days and five nights the sun was hidden behind bucketing gray skies. And for five days and five nights, Americans, English, Chinese, Zulus, Australians, Russians, Bushmen, Argentinians, animated by a common purpose, rose gleefully and smote the invaders. When the sun finally peeped once more from behind the thick blanket of clouds, not a Mercutian remained. Few had escaped; the rest would never see Mercury again.

"We've won," Joan sighed happily, after it was all over, and was able to nestle once more comfortably in Hilary's arms. "Thanks to you."

"You forget Grim Morgan and Wat Tyler, dear."

"Ye-es, they helped, too," she admitted grudgingly; "but without you, what could they have done?"

Hilary started to protest, but over her crown of shining hair, he saw Grim and Wat watching him, grinning like two monkeys. Wat's thumb was raised to his nose in an immemorial gesture.

"You're right," said Hilary defiantly. "What could they have done?"

November 1932

152 The Cavern of the Shining Ones by Hal K Wells

Layroh's hiring of husky down-and-outers for his expedition is part of a plan made ages past.

Aproximate word count: 8,500

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

It was shortly after midnight when a persistent nightmare aroused Don Foster from sleep. For a moment he lay drowsily in his blankets there on the sand, with memory of the nightmare still vivid.

It had been a monstrous flying thing like a giant blue-bottle fly that he had been battling in his sleep. Memory of the thing's high-pitched, droning buzz still rang in his ears. Then abruptly he realized that the peculiar buzzing was no mere echo of a nightmare. It was an actual sound that still vibrated from somewhere within the camp.

Startled into full awakening, Foster propped himself up on one elbow. The sound was penetrating, but not particularly loud. He was

apparently the only one whom it had awakened. In the gray gloom of the desert starlight he saw the blanket-shrouded figures of the rest of the men still deep in slumber.

He realized the source of the sound now. It came from inside the black walls of Layroh's tent, pitched there in its usual isolation on a slight rise fifty yards from the sleeping group. Foster grunted disgustedly to himself. More of Layroh's scientific hocus-pocus! The man seemed to go out of his way to add new phases of mystery to this crazy expedition of his through the barren wastelands of the Mojave.

For a solid week now they had been working their way back and forth over a thirty-mile stretch of desert, while Layroh labored with his intricate instruments searching for something known only to himself. Whatever reason Layroh had for recruiting a party of fifteen to accompany him was still a mystery. So far the men had done practically nothing except trail along after Layroh while he worked with his apparatus.

It was a state of affairs that caused the men little worry. As long as they had enough to eat they were quite content. They were down-and-outers, all of them, human derelicts recruited from the park benches and cheap flop houses of Los Angeles. They had only one

thing in common: all of them were large and powerful men.

Don Foster was the youngest of the fifteen, and the only college man in the group. A succession of bad breaks had finally landed him broke and hungry on a park bench, where Layroh found him. Layroh's offer of ten dollars a day and all expenses had seemed a godsend. Foster had promptly jumped at the offer. Layroh's peculiar conditions and rules had seemed trivial details at the time.

Foster scowled as he lit a cigarette and stared through the gloom at the violet-lighted tent from which the disturbing sound still came. Seven days of experience with Layroh's peculiarities had begun to make them a little irritating. His sternly enforced code of rules was simple enough. Never approach Layroh unless called. Never touch Layroh's instruments. Never approach Layroh's tent. Never ask questions.

Layroh neither ate with the men nor mingled with them in any way that could possibly be avoided. As soon as they made camp each night he set up his small black tent and remained inside it until camp was broken the next morning. No one knew whether the man ever slept. All night long the violet light glowed inside the black tent. The men had wondered about the unusual color of that light, then had finally decided it was probably something required by the same eye

weakness that made Layroh wear heavily smoked goggles, both day and night.

Strange sounds in the night as Layroh worked with his apparatus in the black tent were nothing unusual, but to-night was the first time that Foster had ever heard this peculiar whining buzz. As he listened it rose in a sudden thin crescendo that rippled along his spine like a file rasping over naked nerve-ends. For one shuddering second there seemed to be an intangible *living* quality in that metallic drone, as though some nameless creature sang in horrible exultance. Then abruptly the sound ceased.

Foster drew a deep breath of relief and ground his cigarette into the sand beside him. Better try to get to sleep again before Layroh started some new disturbance with his infernal apparatus.

He was just settling down into his blankets when a movement in the tent drew his attention back to it. Layroh was apparently changing the position of the violet light, for his tall figure was suddenly silhouetted against the tent wall in sharp relief.

Foster started in surprise as another figure loomed darkly beside that of Layroh. For a moment he thought that the unprecedented had happened and some member of the expedition was inside those

jealously guarded tent walls with Layroh. Then he saw that the figure must be a mere trick of the shadows cast by the moving light upon some piece of luggage. It looked like the torso of a man, but the head was a shapeless blob and the arms were nothing more than boneless dangling flaps. A moment later the light moved on and both shadows vanished.

Foster grinned sheepishly over the momentary start the distorted shadow had given him, and determinedly rolled himself in his blankets to sleep. It was after sunrise when he awoke. The rest of the camp was already up, but there was one member of the party missing.

Jeff Peters' empty blankets were still spread there on the sand, but no one had seen the big Negro since the camp turned in the night before. The expedition's daily travels under the blazing sun of the Mojave never had appealed particularly to Jeff, and he had apparently at last made good his repeated threats to desert.

The men were just getting up from breakfast when Layroh finished packing his tent and apparatus in his sedan, and started down toward the camp. As usual, he halted some five yards away from them, standing there for a moment in stony silence.

Physically, the man was a giant, towering well over six feet in height. On several occasions when the expedition's cars had stalled in deep sand he had strikingly demonstrated the colossal strength in his tall body.

His aquiline features, his red-bronze complexion, and his long black hair, were all suggestive of Incan or Mayan ancestry. No one had ever seen any trace of feeling or emotion upon his impassive features. Foster would have given a good deal for just one glimpse of the eyes hidden behind the dark-colored goggles. In their depths he might be able to find some reason for the tingling surge of nameless dread that Layroh's close approach always inspired.

Layroh noted Jeff Peters' absence at once. "We seem to have our first deserter," he commented evenly. His voice was as richly resonant as the tone of some fine old violin. He hesitated almost imperceptibly between words, like one to whom English was not a native tongue.

"It does not matter," he continued indifferently. "We can spare one man easily enough. To-day we shall continue toward the east. Pack the truck at once. We are ready to start."

Without waiting for an answer, he turned and strode back to the sedan. A curious thought struck Foster as he stared after Layroh's

retreating figure. What if the oddly distorted shadow he had seen against the tent wall last night had really been that of a man—had been that of Jeff Peters?

For only a moment did Foster mull over the idea. Then he promptly dismissed it as being absurd. He could imagine no possible reason for Jeff Peters being in Layroh's tent in the middle of the night. The shadow had been only remotely like that of a man, anyway. There had been neither head nor arms to the figure, only shapeless masses totally unlike anything human.

They finished packing the breakfast stuff in the supply truck, and the party started out along the trail with Layroh's sedan leading the way. For nearly two hours they followed their usual routine, working steadily eastward and stopping at regular intervals while Layroh made his methodical tests with his instruments.

Then near the end of the second hour something happened that abruptly sent a thrill of excitement through the entire expedition. Layroh had just set his apparatus up on a small sand dune beside the trail. The mechanism looked somewhat like a portable radio, with two slender parallel rods on top and a number of dials on the main panel.

Layroh swung the rods slowly around the horizon while he carefully tuned the various dials. It was when the rods pointed toward the southeast that there suddenly came the first response he had ever received. From somewhere within the mechanism there came a faint staccato ripple of clear beauty like countless tiny hammers beating upon a crystal gong.

The sound galvanized Layroh into the nearest approach to emotion anyone had ever seen him display. The giant moved with the furious speed of a madman as he returned the apparatus to the sedan and swung the car out across the sand toward the southeast. After a mile he stopped and hurriedly set the apparatus up again. This time the crystalline signal came in with a noticeable increase in volume.

From then on the progress of the party became a mad dash that taxed the endurance of everyone except Layroh himself. After the first hour they entered a terrain so rugged that the cars had to be abandoned and they fought their way forward on foot. Layroh was forced to turn the radiolike apparatus over to one of the men, while he himself carried another mechanism that consisted of a heavy silver cylinder with four flexible nozzles emerging from one end.

They held as rigidly as possible to a straight line toward the southeast, scrambling over whatever obstacles intervened. Their only

stops were at regular intervals when Layroh checked their course. Each time the crystalline signal came in with greater volume.

Their objective appeared to be a cone-shaped peak several miles ahead that loomed up high above the surrounding rock masses. The oddly shaped mountain was identified by one of the men who had once been a Mojave desert rat.

"Lodestone Peak," he announced succinctly. "Full of iron, or somethin'. A compass always goes haywire within a radius of ten miles of it."

It was early afternoon when they finally arrived at a level area at the base of the mountain. For the last two miles Layroh had not stopped long enough to make any tests. Now he set the radiolike apparatus in place some ten yards from the face of a sheer cliff that towered high above them.

The crystalline signal came in a rippling flood. He spun the dials. The sound ceased, and the pointing rods glowed with an aura of amber light at their tips. Swift and startling answer came from deep within the heart of the cliff, a mighty note of sonorous beauty like the violent plucking of a string on some colossal bass viol. So powerful was the timbre of the pulsing sound that the entire side of

the mountain seemed to vibrate in harmony with it.

Layroh snapped off the apparatus and the sound ceased. Carefully searching until he found a certain spot on the cliff face, he stepped close to it and unlimbered the nozzles of the silver cylinder. Foster noted that at the place selected by Layroh there was a five-foot-wide stratum of slightly lighter-colored rock extending from the sand to a point high up on the cliff face.

From the metal nozzles of the cylinder there spurted a broad beam of dead black. There was a searing flash of blue-white flame as the black beam struck the cliff face. There followed a brief second during which the rock melted into nothingness in the heart of that area of blue radiance. Then the stabbing beam bored steadily on back into the cliff like the flame of a blow torch melting a way through a block of butter.

Layroh adjusted the nozzles until the black beam was a solid shaft of opacity seven feet in height and nearly five in width. The hole in the cliff became a tunnel from which blue radiance surged outward in a shimmering mist as the black beam steadily bit deeper into the rock.

"Follow me," Layroh ordered the men, "but do not approach too close."

He stepped forward and entered the mouth of the tunnel. Shaken by the spectacular thing occurring before their eyes, yet, driven by curiosity as to what might lie at the end of that swift-forming tunnel, the men came crowding obediently after him. A moment later they were within the passage, stumbling dazedly forward through the billowing fog of bluish radiance. There was an odd, almost electric, tingle of exhilaration in that radiant mist as it surged about their bodies.

Fragments of almost-forgotten scientific lore flitted through Foster's brain as he groped for a clue to the action of the strange ray. Not quite complete disintegration of matter, but something very close to it—probably the transformation of matter into radiant energy, an ingenious harnessing of the same forces that are forever at work in the cosmic crucibles of the universe's myriad suns.

The action of the black ray was amazingly rapid. They were forced to hurry forward at a fast walk to keep their distance behind Layroh. The vertical stratum of lighter-colored rock continued straight back into the heart of the mountain. It apparently served as a guide. The color of the blue flame-mist changed perceptibly whenever Layroh allowed the black ray to stray into the rock at either side of it.

For nearly two hundred yards they bored their way steadily into the

mountain, their path gradually sloping downward. The walls and floor of the swift-forming tunnel were as smooth and hard as though glazed with a film of diamond.

Then abruptly Layroh shut the black ray projector off as the rock ahead of them ended and they broke through into another larger tunnel, dimly lighted by small globes of violet radiance set at intervals in the glassy ceiling. After thirty yards of travel along this tunnel they found their way barred by a massive door of copper-colored metal.

At Layroh's imperious gesture the men halted a dozen feet back of him in the tunnel while he brought something out of his leather belt-case. Foster was the only one of the group who was near enough to see that the object was a small tube closely resembling a pocket flashlight.

The only break in the surface of the great door was a six-inch disk over near its right-hand edge. Layroh slid this disk aside. Into the opening that was revealed he sent a series of flashes of colored light from the tube—two red, three green, and two blue. The colors were the combination to the light-activated mechanism of the lock. At the last of the blue flashes there was a whirring of hidden mechanism and the portal swung slowly and ponderously open.

Layroh beckoned to the men to follow him as he strode swiftly on into a vast room that was flooded with bluish light from scores of the radiant globes. As the men passed through the door it reached the limit of its opening swing and began automatically closing again behind them, but they were too completely engrossed in the scene before them to notice it.

They were in a great cavern whose glass-smooth floor was nearly a hundred yards square, and whose ceiling was so high that it was lost in the shadows above the maze of metal girders and cables that made a webwork some forty feet overhead. There was a feeling of almost incredible age about the place, as though it had been sealed away there in the heart of the mountain for countless centuries.

On every hand there was evidence that the cavern and all its contents were the products of a race of beings whose science was one that was utterly strange to that of the modern world. At the end of the room where they stood were row after row of different machines, great engines with bodies of dull silver metal and with stiltlike legs and jointed arms that made them look like giant metal insects. Foster could understand few of the details of the machines, but he felt that in efficiency and versatility they were far ahead of Earth's best modern efforts.

Grouped together in the center of the cavern were many assemblies of apparatus linked together by small cables that descended from main cables in the girder-crisscrossed ceiling overhead. There was a soft hissing of sparks leaping between terminals and a steady glow from oddly shaped tubes which indicated that the mechanisms were still functioning in silent and efficient performance of their unknown tasks.

The piece of apparatus nearest the door was an upright skeleton framework of slender pillars housing in their center a cluster of coils set around a large drumlike diaphragm. Foster wondered if this were not the signal device with which Layroh had tuned in his own portable instrument. The principal piece of mechanism in the central space, however—a great crystal-walled case filled with an intricate array of rods and wires—was something at whose purpose Foster could not even guess.

Layroh strode on past the central apparatus toward the back wall. The men followed him. Then as they rounded the apparatus and saw for the first time the incredible things lining that rear wall, tier upon tier, they stopped short in utter stupefaction. Before them was Life, but Life so hideously and abysmally alien that their brains reeled in horror.

Great shining slugs slumbered there by the hundreds in their boxlike crystal cells, their gelatinous bodies glowing with pale and ever-changing opalescence. The things were roughly pear-shaped, with the large end upward. Deep within this globular portion glowed a large nucleus spot of red. From the tapering lower part of each slug's body there sprouted scores of long slender tendrils like the gelatinous fringe of a jelly-fish.

The things measured nearly four feet in height. Each was suspended upright in an individual glass-walled cell, its body supported by a loop of wire that dropped from larger cables running between each row of cells. There was steady and exhaustless power of some kind coursing through those cables. Where they branched at the end of each cell-row there was a small unit of glowing tubes and silver terminals whose tips glowed with faint auras of leaping sparks.

The slugs were dormant now but the regular changes in the opalescent sheen which coursed over their bodies like the slow breathing of a sleeping animal, gave mute evidence that life was still in those grotesque forms, waiting only to be awakened.

Fascinated by the tiers of glowing things, one of the men started slowly forward with a hand outstretched as though to touch one of the cells. His advance aroused Layroh to swift action. The bronze-

faced giant whirled and swung the nozzles of the black ray projector into line with the man.

"Back, *yaharigan*, back!" he ordered imperiously. "The Shining Ones have slumbered, undisturbed for a thousand centuries. They shall not awake from their long sleep to find the filthy fingers of a *yaharigan* defiling their crystal cells. Back!"

Panic-stricken at the threat of the black ray, the man stumbled backward to join his fellows. Layroh's startling statement of the incredible age of the shining things in the cases erased all thought of the expedition's code of rules from Foster's mind.

"You mean that those—those *things*—moved and lived in the outside world a hundred thousand years ago?" he asked dazedly. "But there is no indication of there ever having been any such creatures among Earth's early forms of life."

"Fool!" There was angry disdain in Layroh's resonant voice. "They who slumber here are a race born far from this planet. They are the Shining Ones of Rikor. Rikor is a tiny planet circling a wandering sun whose orbit is an ellipse so vast that only once in a hundred thousand years does it approach your solar system. Rikor's sun was nearly dead and the Shining Ones had to find a new home soon or

else perish. Then their planet swung near the Earth, and their scouts returned with the news that Earth was ideally suited for their purpose. There were barely five hundred of the Shining Ones all told, and they migrated to Earth in a body."

"And they've been in this cavern ever since, sealed up like tadpoles in fish bowls?" The question came from Garrigan, a strapping sandy-haired Irishman whose first blind panic at the black ray's menace was swiftly giving way to curiosity.

"It was your ancestors who drove the Shining Ones into their retreat here," Layroh answered grimly. "When the Shining Ones arrived upon Earth they found the planet already in the possession of a race of human beings whose science was so far advanced that it compared favorably even with the science of Rikor. This race was comparatively few in numbers, and was concentrated upon a small island-continent known as Atlantis. Shining Ones and Atlanteans met in a war of titans, with a planet as the stake. The Shining Ones were vanquished in that first battle. They lost a fifth of their number and barely half a dozen of their smallest space ships escaped destruction.

"Planning a new and decisive assault, the Shining Ones planted atomic mines throughout the foundations of Atlantis. But the Atlanteans struck first by a matter of hours. At a set moment every

volcanic vent on the Earth's surface belched forth colossal volumes of a green gas. Though that gas was harmless to creatures of Earth, it meant slow but certain death to all Rikorians. Furiously the Shining Ones struck their own blow, setting off the cataclysmic explosion that sank Atlantis forever beneath the waters of the Atlantic. Scarcely a handful of Atlanteans escaped, but Rikor's victory was a hollow one. Earth's air was so thoroughly poisoned that it would require centuries of slow ionization by sunlight to again make it fit for Rikorian breathing. The Shining Ones had at most three months before the slow poison would weaken their bodies to the danger point."

"Why didn't they go back to their own planet, then, where they belonged?" broke in the truculent voice of Garrigan again.

"That was impossible," Layroh answered impatiently. "The few space ships they had left would carry barely a score, and Rikor's sun was already so far advanced in its swing away from Earth that there would be time for only one trip. There was only one chance for survival remaining to them. They knew of a process of suspended animation in which their bodies could survive almost indefinitely without being harmed by the Atlantean gas. They would require outside aid to be awakened from that dormant state, so a small group of them must remain active and embark for Rikor, to try to survive

there until Rikor returned near enough to the Earth for them to again cross the void.

"The dormant ones must have a retreat so well hidden that they would not be disturbed during the thousand centuries that must elapse before they could be awakened. The Shining Ones sped back to their base on the North American continent and in the three months remaining to them they prepared this cavern here in the heart of the mountain. Radium bulbs supplied its light. For the unfailing source of electrical energy needed to course through the dormant bodies and keep them alive they tapped the magnetic field of the planet itself, the force produced as the Earth rotates in the sun's electrical field like an armature spinning within the coils of a dynamo."

It was Foster who broke in with the question that was in the thoughts of the entire party. "Just where do *you* come in on all this?" he asked bluntly. "And what was your reason for bringing us here?"

There was blazing contempt in Layroh's rich voice as he turned toward Foster. "*Yaharigan* of Earth!" he jeered. "Your brain is as stupid as the feeble brains of those true *yaharigans* of Rikor whose physical structure your human bodies so closely resemble. Have you not guessed yet that I am no contemptible creature of Earth—that

this human shell I wear is nothing but a cleverly contrived disguise? Look, *yaharigans*, look upon the real face of the one who has come to restore the Earth to its rightful masters!"

With a single swift movement, Layroh snatched the colored goggles from his face and flung them aside. There was a smothered gasp of horror from the group. They saw now why Layroh had always worn those concealing lenses. There were no eyes in that bronzed face, nothing but two empty sockets. And from deep within the skull there glowed through those gaping sockets a seething pool of lurid red—the nucleus spot of a Shining One!

Reeling backward with the rest of the men from the horror of the glowing thing within the skull, Foster dazedly heard Layroh's resonant voice ring exultantly on: "My ancestors were among the twenty Shining Ones who remained active. After placing their comrades in their long sleep those twenty survivors set up signal apparatus in the cavern so that it could be found again no matter how much the outside terrain might change. Then they filled in the entrance tunnel with synthetic rock and embarked for Rikor.

"There upon that dying planet generations passed. When the time came that Rikor's sun again neared Earth, so rigorous had life become upon Rikor that only six Rikorians remained alive. In order

to increase our chances of winning through on the perilous trip to Earth, each of us traveled in a separate space ship. The precaution was well taken. We encountered a dense cloud of meteors near Alpha Centauri and I was the only survivor."

Layroh gestured briefly toward the rows of many-armed metal engines. "There are the normal vehicles for a Shining One's body—armored machines powered by sub-atomic motors and with appendages equipped for every task of peace or war. This synthetic human figure which I now wear was donned only in order that I might have no difficulty in mingling with Earthmen while I sought the cavern. It is an exact replica of the body of an Atlantean, including artificial vocal chords. Even the colored goggles necessary to hide the glowing red of my nucleus are similar to those worn by Atlantean scientists while working with their ray machines—"

Layroh was abruptly interrupted by a scream of maniacal fury from Olsen, a shambling Swede who stood near the edge of the group. Ever since Layroh's unmasking the Swede had been staring at him with eyes rigidly wide in terror like those of a bird confronting a snake. The steady contemplation of the horror of the blaring red thing behind Layroh's empty eye-sockets had apparently at last driven the Swede completely insane. He snatched a revolver from his belt as he leaped forward, and fired once. His shot struck Layroh

in the forehead.

The bullet ripped through the surface of Layroh's face, then glanced harmlessly aside as it struck metal underneath. Layroh never even staggered from the impact. The black ray from the projector caught Olsen before he could fire again. There was a searing flash of flame, then a swiftly melting cloud of blue-white radiance, and the Swede was gone.

Layroh swung the projector back to menace the others. "I had forgotten that *yaharigans* of Earth have weapons that might be annoying," he said evenly. "Two more of you have pistols—Garrigan and Ransome. Toss them away from you at once. Hesitate—and the black ray speaks again."

Sullenly the two men obeyed his order.

"Good," commended Layroh. "In the pits where you are going you will have little use for pistols. When I again take you from those pits you will quickly learn why I brought you with me. *Yaharigans*, I have called you, and *yaharigans* you shall be—Earthly counterparts of those miserable beasts of Rikor who have for ages been bred only for the one purpose of supplying food for the Shining Ones. I knew that when I found the cavern the process of awakening the Shining

Ones would require that they be carefully fed with the calcium and lime from the bones of living *yaharigans*, the normal food of all Rikorians.

"The few *yaharigans* I had brought from Rikor were consumed on my long trip to Earth. So I had to recruit a party of human beings to go with me and serve as the necessary food for the Shining Ones. My search for the cavern took longer than I had expected for I knew only its approximate location. My own body at last had to have sustenance. Last night the Negro, Jeff Peters, provided that sustenance.

"I shall feed those of you who remain to the first group of Shining Ones to be awakened. After that we shall be strong enough in numbers to sally forth and capture ample food for awakening the rest of our comrades. Then in our full strength we shall emerge and again become masters of a planet upon which your crude race shall exist only as *yaharigan* herds for our sustenance."

Layroh's resonant voice ceased. Keeping the black ray projector alertly covering the men, he strode over to a closed metal door in the wall just beyond them. He took a small tube from a rack beside it and opened the door by sending a flash of yellow light into the mechanism of its lock.

"Into the pits until I am ready for you," he commanded curtly. "They were first constructed for keeping our own *yaharigans* while we were working in the cavern, and they should serve just as well for you."

With the memory of Olsen's tragic fate still fresh in their minds, the men obediently filed into the next room, with Layroh bringing up the rear. The room was little more than a single large cell carved from the living rock, and lighted by a single radium bulb in the ceiling.

Its smooth glasslike floor was broken at intervals of ten feet by circular pits fifteen feet deep. At Layroh's order the men entered the floor-pits, one man to each pit. As Foster lowered himself into one of them he saw how grimly efficient a trap the pit was.

An unusually tall and active man might be able to jump high enough to touch the edge, but the effort would be useless. Those glass-smooth edges were so cunningly rounded that they offered no possible purchase for clutching fingers. The diameter of the pit, ten feet, was too great to permit any effort at climbing by wedging one's body between two opposing walls.

Layroh sent every man into the pits but one.

"You will return to the cavern with me, Carter," he ordered. "I have need for you at once."

They heard the door clang shut as Layroh and Carter left the pit room. Chaos reigned as the men flung their bodies against the pit walls in efforts to escape. There was the click of metal as several of them tried with pocket knives to chip finger-holes in the walls, but the glassy surfaces were of diamond hardness.

Foster's brain was numb with despair as he began to realize the true meaning of those sleeping things out in the cavern. Death in some unknown and horrible form was imminent for himself and his companions, he knew, but his thoughts were going far beyond that, to the time when the Shining Ones would emerge in all their resistless power to ravage and conquer a helpless world.

There could be little doubt as to the futility of Earth's best efforts against the advanced science of these invaders from far-off Rikor. Encased in their colossal machine-bodies of glittering metal, and armed with such terrible weapons as the black ray projector, the Shining Ones would be as invulnerable as men trampling an anthill underfoot.

The future status of mankind upon the Earth would be that of vast

herds of human *yaharigans*, probably bred for ever greater bone content as men breed cattle for superior food values. The picture aroused Foster to a fury of cold desperation. If they could only escape from the pits there might be a chance to trap Layroh and slay him before he brought those hordes of opalescent slugs to life. Then escape from the cavern itself would be an easy matter. Even if the outer door had been locked since they passed through it Layroh had the light-key and Foster remembered the combination.

Half a dozen wild schemes flitted through Foster's brain, only to be discarded as futile. Then suddenly he thought of something that had every chance of success if only they were given time enough. Layroh in his arrogance had forgotten that his prisoners were not naked brutes of Rikor. In the very clothing the men wore was the means of escape from the pits.

Foster's voice cut through the babel in the room until he gained everyone's attention.

"Our only chance for escape is to get a rope between two pits," he said curtly. "Then one man can climb out while the other holds the rope. We'll have to make that rope from our clothing. No one man can get a strip strong enough, so we'll have to work the strips to a central man who can braid them into a single heavy rope. I'm near

the center. Get the strips to me. Tear your clothing into ribbons, and knot them together. Use your knives, watches, anything to weight one end of the strip. Then cast until you get contact with the pit next to you. That way all the strips can be worked to me."

A period of feverish activity followed while the men went to work. Layroh also was busy. Through several narrow ventilating slits high in the cavern wall they heard the hum of machinery.

The first of the men finished knotting their ropes together. With weighted ends muffled to deaden their fall upon the rock floor, they began casting to get contact with their neighbors.

Success came slowly. There were often scores of blind casts made before a weighted end came into an adjoining pit. But the time finally came when Foster had a twenty-five-foot length of rope strong enough to bear his weight. He already had a single strand making contact with Garrigan in the next pit. Garrigan drew the heavier rope in to him, then acted as an anchor while Foster climbed to the floor above.

His downstretched hand pulled Garrigan to freedom. Getting the other men up to the floor was the work of but a few moments. They were a weird-looking crew in the torn fragments of clothing that

remained to them. Foster stationed them beside the locked cavern door so that they would be hidden behind it when it opened.

"Wait till Layroh is safely inside," he ordered, "then rush him. Get that black ray thing out of commission first. Without that, we should be more than a match for him. In the meantime you come with me, Garrigan. Maybe we can get a look into the cavern."

By climbing on Garrigan's broad shoulders Foster found that he had a clear view through one of the narrow ventilating slits. Layroh had made efficient use of the time since he had left the pit room. Suspended from softly glowing wires in the large central glass case was a circular group of ten of the Shining Ones.

Foster's eyes widened in horror as he saw the object in which the trailing tendrils of the luminous slugs were sunk. It was the naked body of Carter. As those sucking tendrils drew out the substance of his skeleton, Carter's body was changing slowly, horribly, sinking into a flabby mass of puttylike flesh.

The dormant bodies of the great slugs glowed perceptibly brighter as they fed, and the pulsations of opalescence quickened. The Shining Ones were beginning to awaken. Faint but unmistakable there came to Foster's ears a low singing drone from the group.

He shuddered. He knew now why Jeff Peters' shadow had seemed so grotesquely *boneless*. That droning buzzing sound he had heard from the black tent had been the feeding cry of a Shining One—of Layroh. Then, his horrible feast ended, Layroh had blasted what remained of his victim into nothingness with the black ray.

Foster was abruptly startled into action as Layroh turned from watching the central case. Picking up the black ray projector, he started toward the pit-room door. Foster scrambled down. With Garrigan he joined the tensely waiting group beside the door.

There was the sound of the mechanism unlocking. The door opened and Layroh came striding in. In a concerted rush the men were upon him. Foster's hurtling dive for the black ray projector knocked the apparatus out of Layroh's hands. It crashed to the floor with a violence that left it shattered and useless. Swept off his feet by the savage fury of the unexpected attack, Layroh went to the floor beneath the writhing group of men.

The metal sinews of his magnificent body brought him to his knees in one mighty effort, but the numbers of his assailants were too great. Again he was beaten down while powerful hands tore at his limbs. The metal of the ingenious machine that was Layroh's body began twisting and giving way before the savagery of the assault.

He staggered to his feet, flinging the men aside in one last mad surge of power, and lurched toward the cavern. His effort to slam the door closed behind him was blocked by the swift leap of two of the men. Layroh staggered on into the cavern. Then suddenly the torn framework of his legs collapsed completely, and he fell heavily on his back.

The men surged forward with a shout of triumph. But before they could reach Layroh's prostrate figure one of his hands reached up and opened his skull as one opens the hinged halves of a box. From within the skull there rolled a great shining slug, a sinisterly beautiful figure of glowing opalescence, with a scarlet nucleus! For one breath-taken instant it rose to its full height of four feet, hesitated, as if warily regarding the horror-struck men, then with tendrils pressed into its body until it was nearly spherical, the slug that had been Layroh rolled like a ball of living fire across the cavern toward the cluster of machines. Foster snatched up one of the discarded pistols from the floor and fired twice at that hurtling globe of flame, but both shots missed.

A moment later the slug reached the machines. It fled swiftly past a group of smaller mechanisms and selected a gleaming metal colossus whose size and formidable armament indicated that it was designed primarily as an instrument of war. With whipping tendrils

the slug swarmed up one of the metal legs and into a small crystal-walled compartment in the forward end of the machine.

There was the crackling hiss of unleashed sub-atomic forces somewhere within the metal body. The machine moved in fumbling uncertainty for a moment as the slug fought to get control of mechanism that had lain idle for a thousand centuries! Then swiftly full control came, and the machine came charging toward the men.

They broke in wild panic before the onslaught of the metal monster. As an engine of war it was invincible. Six feet in height and nearly twenty feet in length, it maneuvered upon its jointed legs with bewildering speed and efficiency. A score of rodlike arms projected from the main trunk, arms that were equipped for nearly every purpose. Some ended in pincers, others in barbed points, and others in clusters of flexible metal tentacles.

One of the men screamed in terror and broke for the door back into the pit room. Foster flung him aside and slammed the door shut and locked.

"You'd be trapped like a rat in there," he grated. "Our only chance is to stick together and fight it out."

It was a chance that seemed increasingly slight as they tried to close in upon the machine. Garrigan had recovered the other pistol from the floor. He emptied it into the metal monster at a range of less than ten feet but the bullets glanced harmlessly off as from armor plate.

The machine fought back with deadly efficiency. One of the dagger-pointed arms impaled a man like a speared fish. Pincers closed upon the neck of another, half tearing his head from his body. With the strength of desperation the men wrecked the pillars-and-diaphragm apparatus and from the debris tore metal fragments to serve as clubs. Their blows against the thing's pistonlike legs failed to even shake it. Two more men died before the grim efficiency of the stabbing arms.

Foster had held the remaining bullets in his own pistol, waiting for a chance to use them against some vulnerable spot in the machine, but he saw none. There was a bare chance that if he could gain the machine's back he might find some crevice through which he could send a telling shot. Cramming the pistol into his belt, he watched his chance, then used the debris of the wrecked apparatus as a stepping stone for a running leap that landed him solidly on top of the metal bulk just back of the crystal compartment.

He fumbled for the pistol in his belt, but before he could even touch it a tentacle-tipped arm lashed down toward him, picked him off the

thing's back, and flung him with terrific force high into the air....

For a breathless moment he saw the girders and cables of the ceiling hurtling toward him. Instinctively he grabbed with both hands at one of the lower girders as his body thudded into it. His clutching fingers slipped momentarily, then held, leaving him dangling there at arms' length thirty feet above the floor.

His wits swiftly clearing from the shock of that mighty toss through space, Foster scrambled up on the narrow girder. Sitting astride the metal beam, he looked down at the scene below.

The battle down there was nearly over. The glowing slug in the machine was now obviously trying to capture the remaining men alive for further use. Instead of slaying, its lashing arms fought only to stun and cripple.

Six of the men still remained on their feet but they were trapped in an angle between heavy apparatus and one of the walls. In the central case the ten semi-dormant slugs, still too inactive to take part in the battle themselves, seemed watching the conflict with great unwinking eyes of crimson.

Foster groaned. The metal colossus was too powerful for their feeble

efforts. It would take a bolt of lightning to have any effect upon that mighty engine of war. At the thought, Foster's heart leaped in sudden inspiration. There was lightning, the terrific electrical force of a spinning planet, in the cables up here among the girders, if he could only release it.

Slightly below his position and barely six feet away from him one of the main power cables of the cavern was suspended from heavy insulators. If the cable had ever had an insulating sheath around it the fabric had vanished during the centuries for the dull silver-colored metal was now completely bare.

If that naked cable could be dropped into contact with Layroh's machine-body, the entire power of one of the cavern's main lines would be grounded through the metal of the machine. The position of the cable with regard to where the machine was now, was perfect for the scheme. If Foster could sever the cable just opposite him there was an excellent chance that the longer one of the free ends would drop directly upon the machine.

And in his possession he had a possible means of severing that cable —the pistol that was still crammed in his belt. There were four shots remaining in the pistol. The cable was barely half an inch thick, but the range was so short that he could not very well miss. If the silver-

colored metal was as soft as it looked, the heavy bullets should be enough to tear through it.

Foster thrust the pistol as close to the cable as he could reach. Then, with the muzzle scarcely a yard from the silver strand, he fired. The heavy bullet caromed from the cable's surface, but not before it had torn a gash nearly a third of the way through it.

There was a sudden cessation of activity below as the slug in the machine looked up at the sound of the shot. Swift inspiration seized Foster and he promptly sent his next shot down at the machine itself. The bullet glanced harmlessly off, but his ruse worked. Apparently believing that Foster was merely trying another futile attack upon it, the machine turned its attention back to the men it had cornered. Foster could be attended to later.

Foster slipped and nearly fell just as he fired at the power line the next time and his shot missed. That left him only one remaining cartridge. Aiming with infinite care he sent his last shot smashing squarely into the part of the cable remaining intact.

It trembled and sagged as the bullet cut the remaining metal nearly through. Only a bare thread was left, yet that thread held. Sick at heart over the narrow margin by which his effort had failed, Foster

stared in despair at the nearly severed cable. It needed only one solid blow to tear that last thread of metal apart, but the cable was just far enough away to be effectively beyond his reach.

Then suddenly Foster's eyes narrowed. There was a way remaining by which the weakened power line could be broken. A single hurtling dive out and downward from the girder would send his own body crashing squarely into the metal strand. Beneath the smashing impact of his one hundred and eighty pounds the nearly severed cable was certain to break.

Foster shuddered as he realized what that dive into space would mean. He was not thinking of the fall itself. The thirty-foot drop to the diamond-hard floor of the cavern would in all probability mean death or broken bones, but that was a hazard which Foster was willing to take.

It was the thought of what would happen in the brief moment of contact when his body met that bare cable that drained the color from Foster's face. There was the terrific electrical energy from a spinning world coursing through that silver strand, a force that in all probability was powerful enough to instantly char a human body to a glowing cinder!

If he could only insulate his body at the point where it would touch the cable he might have at least a chance of surviving the contact. The only possible insulating medium he had was the clothing he wore—a pair of heavy corduroy trousers and the sleeveless remnant of a woolen shirt. They could be rolled into a bundle that would be bulky enough to at least give him some protection from contact with the bare cable.

Laying the empty pistol on the girder beside him, he stripped as quickly as his precarious perch would permit. Then, using the pistol as a central core to give body to the bundle, he swathed it deep within the folds of the clothing, making a thick roll that he could hold in his right hand as he leaped.

At best the insulating qualities of the roll would be far from perfect, yet it might serve to minimize the effects of the cable's charge enough to give him some chance of escaping alive. His contact with the power line would be only for the fractional part of a second and his body would be completely in the air at the time, out of direct contact with anything through which the cable's charge might ground.

Foster crouched on the girder, his eyes fixed upon the scene below as he tensely waited for the best moment to make the leap. The

machine had shifted its position slightly while he had been stripping. It was now too far over the right to be under the cable when it fell.

For a moment as the machine maneuvered still farther over to the right in its conflict with the cornered men, Foster was afraid that his opportunity had passed. An idea came to him and he yelled directions. One of the men suddenly dashed to the left, apparently in a last frantic effort to escape the metal colossus. The machine flashed quickly over to head the fugitive off. The maneuver brought it for the moment directly under Foster's position.

Foster's muscles tensed swiftly, then flung his body headlong out into space. His aim was perfect. The bulky roll of cloth in his outstretched right hand struck the cable squarely with all the force of his hurtling body behind it.

There was a searing flash of blue flame as the last thread of the cable snapped, and a tearing flood of agony that blotted all consciousness from Foster's brain as his falling body hurtled on toward the cavern floor.

He struggled slowly back to consciousness to find Garrigan and another of the men working over him. There was the stabbing pain of broken bones in his left ankle. With the men helping him, he sat

up and looked around.

The scene was one of utter chaos and destruction. The falling cable had obviously found its mark on Layroh's machine-body and in its last furious convulsions the metal colossus had completely wrecked the great glass case in the center of the cavern floor.

The machine itself was now nothing more than a tangled heap of twisted metal. In its shattered crystal compartment was a torn blob of swiftly blackening gelatin—all that remained of Layroh, the Shining One. Other shredded figures of dead flesh marked where the ten half-awakened slugs had died in the wreckage of the glass-walled case.

And in the many tiers of small cells along the cavern's back wall were more figures of death. The severed cable had been the source of the energy that had kept those dormant figures alive. When that energy ceased death had come quickly. Those figures in the cells were no longer Shining Ones. Their bodies were already swiftly darkening in decay.

Foster smiled grimly as he looked around the cavern. There were scientific treasures here that would revolutionize a world. It was a fitting retribution for the Shining Ones. When they had destroyed

Atlantis they had robbed Earth of countless centuries of scientific knowledge and progress. Now, here in the cavern that had at last become their tomb, they were leaving a legacy of science that would go far toward repaying that ancient debt.

153 A Scientist Rises by Desmond Winter Hall

Summary goes here

Aproximate word count: 2,600

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

On that summer day the sky over New York was unflecked by clouds, and the air hung motionless, the waves of heat undisturbed. The city was a vast oven where even the sounds of the coiling traffic in its streets seemed heavy and weary under the press of heat that poured down from above. In Washington Square, the urchins of the neighborhood splashed in the fountain, and the usual midday assortment of mothers, tramps and out-of-works lounged listlessly on the hot park benches.

As a bowl, the Square was filled by the torrid sun, and the trees and grass drooped like the people on its walks. In the surrounding city, men worked in sweltering offices and the streets rumbled with the never-ceasing tide of business—but Washington Square rested.

And then a man walked out of one of the houses lining the square, and all this was changed.

He came with a calm, steady stride down the steps of a house on the north side, and those who happened to see him gazed with surprised interest. For he was a giant in size. He measured at least eleven feet in height, and his body was well-formed and in perfect proportion. He crossed the street and stepped over the railing into the nearest patch of grass, and there stood with arms folded and legs a little apart. The expression on his face was preoccupied and strangely apart, nor did it change when, almost immediately from the park bench nearest him, a woman's excited voice cried:

"Look! Look! Oh, look!"

The people around her craned their necks and stared, and from them grew a startled murmur. Others from farther away came to see who had cried out, and remained to gaze fascinated at the man on the grass. Quickly the murmur spread across the Square, and from its every part men and women and children streamed towards the center of interest—and then, when they saw, backed away slowly and fearfully, with staring eyes, from where the lone figure stood.

There was about that figure something uncanny and terrible. There,

in the hot midday hush, something was happening to it which men would say could not happen; and men, seeing it, backed away in alarm. Quickly they dispersed. Soon there were only white, frightened faces peering from behind buildings and trees.

Before their very eyes the giant was growing.

When he had first emerged, he had been around eleven feet tall, and now, within three minutes, he had risen close to sixteen feet.

His great body maintained its perfect proportions. It was that of an elderly man clad simply in a gray business suit. The face was kind, its clear-chiselled features indicating fine spiritual strength; on the white forehead beneath the sparse gray hair were deep-sunken lines which spoke of years of concentrated work.

No thought of malevolence could come from that head with its gentle blue eyes that showed the peace within, but fear struck ever stronger into those who watched him, and in one place a woman fainted; for the great body continued to grow, and grow ever faster, until it was twenty feet high, then swiftly twenty-five, and the feet, still separated, were as long as the body of a normal boy. Clothes and body grew effortlessly, the latter apparently without pain, as if the terrifying process were wholly natural.

The cars coming into Washington Square had stopped as their drivers sighted what was rising there, and by now the bordering streets were tangled with traffic. A distant crowd of milling people heightened the turmoil. The northern edge was deserted, but in a large semicircle was spread a fear-struck, panicky mob. A single policeman, his face white and his eyes wide, tried to straighten out the tangle of vehicles, but it was infinitely beyond him and he sent in a riot call; and as the giant with the kind, dignified face loomed silently higher than the trees in the Square, and ever higher, a dozen blue-coated figures appeared, and saw, and knew fear too, and hung back awe-stricken, at a loss what to do. For by now the rapidly mounting body had risen to the height of forty feet.

An excited voice raised itself above the general hubbub.

"Why, I know him! I know him! It's Edgar Wesley! Doctor Edgar Wesley!"

A police sergeant turned to the man who had spoken.

"And it—he knows you? Then go closer to him, and—and—ask him what it means."

But the man looked fearfully at the giant and hung back. Even as

they talked, his gigantic body had grown as high as the four-storied buildings lining the Square, and his feet were becoming too large for the place where they had first been put. And now a faint smile could be seen on the giant's face, an enigmatic smile, with something ironic and bitter in it.

"Then shout to him from here," pressed the sergeant nervously. "We've got to find out something! This is crazy—impossible! My God! Higher yet—and faster!"

Summoning his courage, the other man cupped his hands about his mouth and shouted:

"Dr. Wesley! Can you speak and tell us? Can we help you stop it?"

The ring of people looked up breathless at the towering figure, and a wave of fear passed over them and several hysterical shrieks rose up as, very slowly, the huge head shook from side to side. But the smile on its lips became stronger, and kinder, and the bitterness seemed to leave it.

There was fear at that motion of the enormous head, but a roar of panic sounded from the watchers when, with marked caution, the growing giant moved one foot from the grass into the street behind

and the other into the nearby base of Fifth Avenue, just above the Arch. Fearing harm, they were gripped by terror, and they fought back while the trembling policemen tried vainly to control them; but the panic soon ended when they saw that the leviathan's arms remained crossed and his smile kinder yet. By now he dwarfed the houses, his body looming a hundred and fifty feet into the sky. At this moment a woman back of the semicircle slumped to her knees and prayed hysterically.

"Someone's coming out of his house!" shouted one of the closest onlookers.

The door of the house from which the giant had first appeared had opened, and the figure of a middle-aged, normal-sized man emerged. For a second he crouched on the steps, gaping up at the monstrous shape in the sky, and then he scurried down and made at a desperate run for the nearest group of policemen.

He gripped the sergeant and cried frantically:

"That's Dr. Wesley! Why don't you do something? Why don't—"

"Who are you?" the officer asked, with some return of an authoritative manner.

"I work for him. I'm his janitor. But—can't you do anything? Look at him! Look!"

The crowd pressed closer. "What do you know about this?" went on the sergeant.

The man gulped and stared around wildly. "He's been working on something—many years—I don't know what, for he kept it a close secret. All I knew is that an hour ago I was in my room upstairs, when I heard some disturbance in his laboratory, on the ground floor. I came down and knocked on the door, and he answered from inside and said that everything was all right—"

"You didn't go in?"

"No. I went back up, and everything was quiet for a long time. Then I heard a lot of noise down below—a smashing—as if things were being broken. But I thought he was just destroying something he didn't need, and I didn't investigate: he hated to be disturbed. And then, a little later, I heard them shouting out here in the Square, and I looked out and saw. I saw him—just as I knew him—but a giant! Look at his face! Why, he has the face of—of a god! He's—as if he were looking down on us—and—pitying us...."

For a moment all were silent as they gazed, transfixed, at the vast form that towered two hundred feet above them. Almost as awe-inspiring as the astounding growth was the fine, dignified calmness of the face. The sergeant broke in:

"The explanation of this must be in his laboratory. We've got to have a look. You lead us there."

The other man nodded; but just then the giant moved again, and they waited and watched.

With the utmost caution the titanic shape changed position. Gradually, one great foot, over thirty feet in length, soared up from the street and lowered farther away, and then the other distant foot changed its position; and the leviathan came gently to rest against the tallest building bordering the Square, and once more folded his arms and stood quiet. The enormous body appeared to waver slightly as a breath of wind washed against it: obviously it was not gaining weight as it grew. Almost, now, it appeared to float in the air. Swiftly it grew another twenty-five feet, and the gray expanse of its clothes shimmered strangely as a ripple ran over its colossal bulk.

A change of feeling came gradually over the watching multitude. The face of the giant was indeed that of a god in the noble, irony-

tinged serenity of his calm features. It was if a further world had opened, and one of divinity had stepped down; a further world of kindness and fellow-love, where were none of the discords that bring conflicts and slaughterings to the weary people of Earth. Spiritual peace radiated from the enormous face under the silvery hair, peace with an undertone of sadness, as if the giant knew of the sorrows of the swarm of dwarfs beneath him, and pitied them.

From all the roofs and the towers of the city, for miles and miles around, men saw the mammoth shape and the kindly smile grow more and more tenuous against the clear blue sky. The figure remained quietly in the same position, his feet filling two empty streets, and under the spell of his smile all fear seemed to leave the nearer watchers, and they became more quiet and controlled.

The group of policemen and the janitor made a dash for the house from which the giant had come. They ascended the steps, went in, and found the door of the laboratory locked. They broke the door down. The sergeant looked in.

"Anyone in here?" he cried. Nothing disturbed the silence, and he entered, the others following.

A long, wide, dimly-lit room met their eyes, and in its middle the

remains of a great mass of apparatus that had dominated it.

The apparatus was now completely destroyed. Its dozen rows of tubes were shattered, its intricate coils of wire and machinery hopelessly smashed. Fragments lay scattered all over the floor. No longer was there the least shape of meaning to anything in the room; there remained merely a litter of glass and stone and scrap metal.

Conspicuous on the floor was a large hammer. The sergeant walked over to pick it up, but, instead, paused and stared at what lay beyond it.

"A body!" he said.

A sprawled out dead man lay on the floor, his dark face twisted up, his sightless eyes staring at the ceiling, his temple crushed as with a hammer. Clutched tight in one stiff hand was an automatic. On his chest was a sheet of paper.

The captain reached down and grasped the paper. He read what was written on it, and then he read it to the others:

There was a fool who dreamed the high dream of the pure scientist, and who lived only to ferret out the secrets of nature, and harness

them for his fellow men. He studied and worked and thought, and in time came to concentrate on the manipulation of the atom, especially the possibility of contracting and expanding it—a thing of greatest potential value. For nine years he worked along this line, hoping to succeed and give new power, new happiness, a new horizon to mankind. Hermetically sealed in his laboratory, self-exiled from human contacts, he labored hard.

There came a day when the device into which the fool had poured his life stood completed and a success. And on that very day an agent for a certain government entered his laboratory to steal the device. And in that moment the fool realized what he had done: that, from the apparatus he had invented, not happiness and new freedom would come to his fellow men, but instead slaughter and carnage and drunken power increased a hundredfold. He realized, suddenly, that men had not yet learned to use fruitfully the precious, powerful things given to them, but as yet could only play with them like greedy children—and kill as they played. Already his invention had brought death. And he realized—even on this day of his triumph—that it and its secret must be destroyed, and with them he who had fashioned so blindly.

For the scientist was old, his whole life was the invention, and with its going there would be nothing more.

And so he used the device's great powers on his own body; and then, with those powers working on him, he destroyed the device and all the papers that held its secrets.

Was the fool also mad? Perhaps. But I do not think so. Into his lonely laboratory, with this marauder, had come the wisdom that men must wait, that the time is not yet for such power as he was about to offer. A gesture, his strange death, which you who read this have seen? Yes, but a useful one, for with it he and his invention and its hurtful secrets go from you; and a fitting one, for he dies through his achievement, through his very life.

But, in a better sense, he will not die, for the power of his achievement will dissolve his very body among you infinitely; you will breathe him in your air; and in you he will live incarnate until that later time when another will give you the knowledge he now destroys, and he will see it used as he wished it used.—E. W.

The sergeant's voice ceased, and wordlessly the men in the laboratory looked at each other. No comment was needed. They went out.

They watched from the steps of Edgar Wesley's house. At first sight of the figure in the sky, a new awe struck them, for now the shape of

the giant towered a full five hundred feet into the sun, and it seemed almost a mirage, for definite outline was gone from it. It shimmered and wavered against the bright blue like a mist, and the blue shone through it, for it was quite transparent. And yet still they imagined they could discern the slight ironic smile on the face, and the peaceful, understanding light in the serene eyes; and their hearts swelled at the knowledge of the spirit, of the courage, of the fine, far-seeing mind of that outflung titanic martyr to the happiness of men.

The end came quickly. The great misty body rose; it floated over the city like a wraith, and then it swiftly dispersed, even as steam dissolves in the air. They felt a silence over the thousands of watching people in the Square, a hush broken at last by a deep, low murmur of awe and wonderment as the final misty fragments of the vast sky-held figure wavered and melted imperceptibly—melted and were gone from sight in the air that was breathed by the men whom Edgar Wesley loved.

154 When the Sleepers Woke by Arthur Leo Zagat

Only two small groups of people—enemies—survive the vast desolation of the Final War.

Aproximate word count: 11,200

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

"Prepare for battle!" The command crackled in Allan Dane's helmet. "Enemy approaching from southeast! Squadron commanders execute plan two!" Allan settled back in the seat of his one-man helicopter, his broad frame rendered even bulkier by the leather suit that incased it. He was tensed, but quiescent. Action would be first joined sixty miles away, and his own squadron was in reserve.

Over New York and its bay the American air fleet was in motion. Suddenly movement ceased, and the formation froze. Ten flying forts were each the apex of a far-spread cone, axis horizontal, whose body was the fanned back-ranging of its squadron of a thousand helicopter planes. The cones bristled oceanward from the sea-margin

of New York, their points a fifty-mile arc of defiance, their bases tangent to one another, almost touching the ground at their lower edges, then circling upward for ten thousand feet. From van to rear each formation was five miles in length.

Behind and above, the main body of the fleet sloped in echeloned ranks, hiding the threatened city with an impenetrable terraced wall of buzzing helios and massive forts. Up, back, up, back, the serried masses reached, till the rearmost were twenty-five thousand feet aloft. And farther behind, unmoving on their six-mile level, were the light 'copters of the reserve. Dane gazed down that tremendous vista to the far-off front line, and swore softly. Just his luck to be out of the scrap: the enemy would never penetrate to these northern outskirts of New York.

"Men of the fleet!" General Huntington's voice sounded from his flagship, the Washington. Somehow its gruffness overrode the mechanical quality of the intra-fleet radio transmission. Almost it seemed he was there in the tiny cabin. "Reports have at this moment been received that our attack fleets have been everywhere successful. Our rocket ships have destroyed Tokyo, Addis Ababa, Odessa, Peiping and Cape Town, and are now ranging inland through enemy territory."

Even through the double leather of his helmet a roar came to Allan. He felt his craft vibrate to the exultant cheers of the fleet. His own mouth was open, and his throat rasping....

"But"—the single syllable choked the surge of sound—"London, Paris, and Berlin have fallen to the enemy." The words thudded in the pilot's ear-phones. "San Francisco is being attacked. Communication with New Orleans has failed. The enemy are in sight of Buenos Aires—" The general broke off, and Allan sensed dully that there was other news, news that he dared not give the fleet.

The gruff voice changed. "Men of the fleet, New York is in our charge. The enemy is upon us, the battle is commencing. The issue is in your hands."

Pat on his last word, a dark cloud spread along the south-eastern horizon. From the spear-heads of the cone formations great green beams shot out across the sea. Orange flame flared in answer, all along the black bank that was the enemy fleet. Where the green beams struck the orange blinked out, and the blue of sky showed through. And the American ships were as yet untouched. A great shout rose to Allan's lips—that they had the range on the enemy, and the attack defeated before it was well begun.

But was it? Swift as the American rays scythed destruction along the enemy line, the gaps filled and lethal orange leaped out again. Now the black cloud was piling up, was rising till it was a towering curtain against the sky. On it came, like some monstrous tidal wave. Great rents were torn through it by the stabbing beams of the flying forts, holes where ships and men had been whiffed into dust by the hundred. But the attack came on.

Now all the great defensive cones burst into an emerald blaze as the smaller ships loosed their bolts. And from the terraced slope of the supporting fleet a hundred steel ovoids lumbered forward to meet the threat. All the vast space between the hosts, mountain-high from the sea's surface, was filled with dazzling light, now green, now orange, as the conflicting beams crossed and mingled. There were gaps in the advancing curtain that did not fill, but the defending cones were melting away, were disappearing, were gone.

"Flight ZLX prepare for action!" Dane's eyes flicked over the gages, checking in routine precaution. He started when he saw the V of the chronometer's hands. Only six minutes had passed since the battle's start—it seemed hours. And already the reserve was being called on! He was suddenly cold. Out there, over the bay, the enemy forces had ceased their advance. The American first line cones were gone—true enough, but the support fleet was still intact. Some new element had

entered the battle, visible as yet only in the Washington's powerful television view-screens. The flight adjutant's voice again snapped a command:

"Direction vertical. Thirty thousand feet. Full speed. Go!"

Dane jerked home his throttle. The battle shot down, and his seat thrust up against him. Something hurtled past, blurred by the speed of its descent. The plane rocked to a sudden detonation, and Allan fought to steady it. Then he had reached the commanded height. At sixty thousand feet the helio vanes were useless, only the power of the auxiliary rocket-tubes maintained his altitude.

"Formation B. Engage the enemy!" came the order.

They were just ahead, a dozen giant craft, torpedo-shaped and steel-incased, the scarlet fire of their gas blasts holding them poised steady in their fifty-mile-long line. From curious swellings that broke the clean lines of their under-bodies black spheres were dropping in steady streams. Allan knew then whence came the crash that had rocked his ship as she rose. These were bombs, huge bombs, charged with heaven alone knew what Earth-shaking explosive. They were catapulting down, an iron death hail, on the fleet and the city twelve miles below!

The enemy's strategy was clear. While his main fleet was engaging the American defense in a frontal attack, these huge rocket-bombers had looped unseen through the stratosphere to this point of vantage. The planes that had leaped to this new menace swept toward the bombers in three parallel lines, above, to right and left of them. Allan's plane leaping to position at the very end of one long line. The three leaders reached the first rocket-ship, and their green beams shot out. In that instant the enemy craft seemed to explode in intense blue light. Then the awful dazzle was gone. The rocket ship was there, just as before, but the American helio-planes were gone, were wiped out as though they had never been. The next trio, and the next, rushed up. Again and again came that flash of force, annihilating them. Superbly the tiny gnats that were the American planes plunged headlong at the hovering Leviathan of the air and were whiffed into nothingness. Sixty brave men were dancing motes of cosmic dust before the shocked commander could sound the recall.

The helicopter squadron curved away, still keeping its ordered lines, but orange flame leaped out from all twelve of the enemy vessels, orange flame that caught them, that ran along their ranks and sent them hurtling Earthward—blackened corpses in blazing coffins. "Abandon ships!" The adjutant's last order crisped, coldly metallic, soldierly as ever. In the next breath, as Allan reached for the lever that would open the trapdoor beneath him, he saw the command-ship

plunge down, a flaring comet.

Above Allan Dane, the twenty-foot silk of his parachute bellied out in the denser air of the lower heights. His respirator tube was still in his mouth, and the double, vacuum-interlined leather of his safety suit had kept him from freezing in the spatial cold of the stratosphere. He looked south.

All the proud thousands of the defense fleet were gone, blown to fragments by the time bombs from above. The city was hidden in a thick, muddy-yellow fog. "Queer," the thought ran through his brain, "that there should be fog in mid-afternoon, under a blazing sun." Then he saw them, the circling black ships of the enemy, trailing behind them long wakes of the drab yellow vapor that drifted heavily down to shroud New York with—gas!

Allan felt nauseated as he imagined a fleeting picture of the many-leveled city, of its mist-darkened streets with swarming myriads of slumped bodies clogging the conveyor belts that still moved because no hand was left to shut them off; of women and children, and aged or crippled men strewn in tortured, horrible attitudes in all the roof-parks, in their homes, in every nook and cranny of the murdered city. He looked beneath his drifting descent and saw roads that were rivers, alive with every manner of fleeing conveyance, and he

groaned, knowing that in moments the pursuing ships would send down their lethal mist to put an end to that futile flight.

Sugar Loaf Mountain rose toward him. At its very summit was a clearing among the trees, and, incongruously motionless in that world where every one was rushing from inescapable death, a man stood calmly there, gazing up at him. Allan screamed down to him! "Run! You fool. Run or the gas will get you!"

Of course the man could not hear that cry, but one tiny arm rose and pointed south. Allan followed the direction of the gesture and saw a black plane veering toward him. Then orange flared from it, though it was distant, and a wave of intolerable heat enveloped him. Something cried within him: "Too far—he's too far off to kill me with his beam!" Then he knew no more.

From New York, from devastated San Francisco, from Rio, from Buenos Aires, from fifty other desolated points along the seaboards of the Americas, the black fleets swept along the coasts and inland, vomiting their yellow death till all the continents were blanketed with life-destroying gas. And in Europe and Australasia the destroying hordes, having smashed the proud defenses of the coastlines, engaged in the same pursuit, till in one short week all the lands of the Western Allies were swept clear of life. Then the Eastern

ships turned homeward, to wait until the vapor they had strewn had lost its virulence, and the teeming masses of the East might take possession of the half world the ebony-painted destroyers had conquered. The black fliers turned homeward, but there was no homeland left for them to seek!

For though the defense fleets of the Western Coalition had been everywhere beaten, their attack squadrons had been everywhere successful. All Asia and Africa lay under a pall of milky emerald gas as toxic, as blasting, as the Easterners' yellow.

And the Westerners were returning too!

In their teleview screens the commanders of the black swarms, and of the white thousands, sought their home ports, and saw the world to be a haze-covered sphere where not even a fly could live. Then, as if by common accord, the white ships and the black sped across lifeless hemispheres to meet in mid-air over the long green swells of the Pacific. They met, and on the instant they were at each others' throats like two packs of wild dogs, killing, killing, killing till they themselves were killed. No quarter was asked in that fight, and none given. No hope of victory was there, nor fear of defeat. Better swift death in the high passion of combat, than slow, hopeless drifting over a dead world.

But there was one black ship that slunk out of that mass suicide of man's last remnant. Within its long hulk three motionless forms lay in a welter of blood that smeared their officers' badges, and a dozen gibbering men labored at the controls of their craft. The long black shadows came at last to veil an empty sky, and a sea whereon there was drifting wreckage but not one sign of any life. And as far to the north a shadowed airship sped athwart the moon, searching for one spot, one tiny patch of solid ground, that was free from the dread gas.

Consciousness came slowly back to Allan Dane. At first he was aware, merely, that he was alive. That was astonishing enough. Even if the orange beam had not killed him with its heat, the gas should have struck his leather suit. The Easterners could not be behind his own forces in their development of that terrible weapon.

Allan felt a coolness on his face, his hands, that could mean only that his helmet and gloves had been removed. He heard movement, and opened his eyes.

At first he could see only blueness, pale and lambent. He gazed dully up at a lustrous, glasslike substance that arched above him. The sound of some one moving came again, and Allan turned his head to it. His neck muscles seemed stiff, that simple motion drew

tremendously on his strength.

About fifteen yards away, a man bent over a transparent, boxlike contrivance in which something fluttered. From this device a metal tube angled away into the wall. There was other apparatus on the long table at which the man was—

"At last! Clear at last!" a mellow, rounded voice exclaimed jubilantly.

"Clear? Are you sure, Anthony, are you sure?" This other voice, throbbing with vibrant repression as if its owner feared to believe longed-for tidings come at last, was a woman's. As the man half turned, its owner came between him and Allan. All he could see of them was that the one called Anthony was very tall, and thin, and the woman almost as tall, and that both wore hooded white robes, the woman's falling to her heels, the man's to his knees, waist-girdled with black cords.

"Look for yourself, Helen."

She bent over the transparent cage. "Oh Anthony, how wonderful!"

Allan attempted to rise. He was unutterably weak; to move a finger

was a gigantic task, to do more impossible. He tried to call out. No sound came from his straining throat.

The couple straightened. The man spoke, too low for Dane to hear. Each took something from the table, something that gleamed metallically. Then they turned—and Allan saw what the white robes clothed!

Skulls leered at him from beneath the hoods—fleshless skulls; tinted a pale green! Jutting jawbones, cavernous cheeks, lipless mouths that grinned mirthlessly—his eyes froze to them and a scream formed within him that he could not utter. Hands appeared from within the flowing sleeves, and they were skeleton hands, each phalanx clearly marked. They moved, that was the worst of it, the hands moved; and deep in the shadowed eye-pits of the skulls blue light glowed in living eyes that peered at something to Allan's right.

His eyes followed the direction of their gaze. Ranged along the wall, and jutting out, he saw four couches. On each was a figure, shrouded and hooded in white. Utterly still they were—and the cadaverous countenances exposed between robe and hood betrayed not the slightest twitch. The arms were crossed on each breast. Allan realized that his own arms were similarly crossed. He looked down at them, saw the white gleam of a robe that fell down his length in

smooth, still folds, saw his hands—greenish skin stretched tight over fleshless bones. Suddenly it seemed to him that the air was musty and fetid.

Footsteps slithered across the floor. The woman-form bent over the farthest couch. With one skeleton hand she bared an arm of the corpselike figure; the other hand lifted—metal glinted in it and plunged into the unshrinking limb! A slow movement of the bony fingers and the threadlike, silvery thing was withdrawn. She stared ghoulishly—and the man, too, gazed tensely at her victim. A long quiver ran through the recumbent shape, another. The death's-head on the pallet moved slightly—and merciful blackness welled up in Allan's brain....

A cool liquid was in his mouth. He swallowed instinctively, and warmth ran through his veins. He felt strength flooding back into him—and he remembered horror.

"That's better," a mellow voice said, close above him. "Drink just a little more." The cool liquid came up against Allan's lips again, pungent, and he drank. Once more strength surged warmingly within him. "That's a good fellow. A little more now."

Fingers were on Allan's wrist, life-warm. There was friendliness in

the voice that was speaking to him, and solicitude. He dared to look.

A skull-like head was right before him. But seen thus closely, the terror of it was lessened. Fleshless indeed it was. But a parchment skin was tightly drawn over the bones, and Allan could see that its true shade was a sere yellow. It was the bluish light that had given it the green of decay. The deep-sunk eyes were kindly; they gleamed with pleasure as Allan's opened; and the voice asked:

"How do you feel?"

Allan made shift to reply, though a strange lassitude still enervated him, and his mouth was full of tongue. "Much better, thank you. But who—who...?"

With a sudden access of energy Allan sat up on his couch. He looked about him, and his fears were back full flood.

He was in a chamber with neither door nor window—floor, walls, and arched ceiling entirely formed of the palely lustrous, glasslike substance. The room was perhaps twenty by forty feet, its ceiling curving to about five yards from the floor at its highest point, and the spectral blue glow that filled it was apparently sourceless. It lit three vacant couches to his left. To his right were the four he had already

seen. The woman was ministering to the occupants of these—living skeletons that lay flaccid, but whose heads were moving, barely moving from side to side. Like nothing else but a sepulcher the place seemed, a tomb in which the dead had come to life!

Allan clutched at Anthony's arm, grasped textured fabric that was cold to his frantic touch, and thin bone beneath. "In Heaven's name," he mouthed, "tell me what sort of place this is before—" He stopped, appalled by a sudden thought. Perhaps he was insane, this seeming tomb really some hospital ward transformed by his crazed brain. A wave of weakness overcame him, and he fell back.

"Careful," the other spoke soothingly, "you must give the plasma time to act or you may harm yourself."

If Allan shut out sight with his eyelids, and listened only to the resonance of Anthony's voice, he could hold his slipping grip on reason. He felt that the cloth of his robe was metal, fine spun and woven. That was strangely reassuring.

"How long do you think you have slept?"

"How long?" Dane murmured. Something told him that he had been unconscious for a long time. "A week?"

Anthony sighed. "No. Longer than that, much longer." There was reluctance in his tone. "You have lain here for twenty years."

Allan's eyes flew open, and he stared up into the speaker's face. Twenty years! Somehow it did not occur to him to disbelieve this astounding statement. He struggled hard to realize its implication. Two decades had passed since last he remembered. He had been a youth then. Now he was forty-four.

Anthony continued. "That may be a shock to you, but this will be a greater. Unless I am greatly mistaken, we seven, we four men and three women, are the only living humans left on Earth."

The words dripped into Allan's consciousness. Beyond them, he could hear movements, exclamations. But they meant nothing to him. Only the one thought tolled, knell-like, within him. "We seven are the only living humans left on Earth."

Dimly he knew that Anthony was talking. "There is a possibility, a bare possibility, that somewhere near here there are two others. That chance is faint indeed. Otherwise humanity is dead, killed by its own hand."

Through a dizzy vertigo that blurred sight and sound Allan heard the

rounded voice go on and on, telling the story of the doom that Man's own folly had brought. And intermingled with that tale of a world gone mad there came back to the listener the clear-cut vision of the day of horror that to him seemed but yesterday. He remembered the sudden ultimatum of the Easterner's, the Western Coalition's stanch defiance. Again he saw a supposedly invincible fleet utterly destroyed, saw comrades whiffed out of existence in infinitesimal seconds. Again he watched a city of twenty millions inundated by a muddy yellow gas in which no human being, no animal, might live. He waked once more to find himself helpless with weakness, among living corpses, in a place that seemed a tomb.

"All this we saw in our long-distance televisoscope." Anthony gestured to a blank screen above the apparatus ranged along the opposite wall. "Then, just as that last weird battle ended, something happened to the eye-mast outside, and we were isolated." He fell silent, in a brooding reverie, and Allan, recovered somewhat, saw that the other strange occupants of the place had risen and were clustered about that cage where something fluttered.

He turned to his mentor. "But I still don't understand. How is it that we escaped the holocaust?"

"Four of us, members of the scientific faculty of the National

University, having foreseen the inevitable result of the course of world events, had joined forces and developed a substance—we called it nullite—so dense and so inert that no gas could penetrate it or chemical break it down. We offered it to the Western General Staff, and were laughed at for our pains. Then we decided to use it to preserve our families from the danger we foresaw.

"At first we sheathed one room in each of our own dwellings with the nullite. Later we decided that the deposited gas might last for many years, and blasted out this cave, a hundred feet below the summit of Sugar Loaf Mountain, for a common refuge.

"When the red word flared from the newscast machines, 'War!', we fled here with our wives, as we had planned. All, that is, save one couple, the youngest of us. They never arrived—I waited for them in the clearing at the entrance to the shaft. At the last moment I saw you dropping in your parachute, saw the death beam just miss you, saw you land at my feet, unconscious, but still breathing. I carried you in with me. There were two vacant spaces: you could occupy one of them. Then we sealed the last aperture with nullite, and settled to our vigil. We did not know how long the gas would last, but we had sufficient concentrated food, and enough air-making chemicals, to last two persons for a century."

"Two people," Allan interjected. "But there were seven here."

Anthony nodded. "We had worked out every detail of our plan. When release came we needs must be in the full vigor of our prime. From our loins must spring the new race that will repopulate the Earth; that will found a new civilization, better, we hope, and wiser than the one that had died. By injecting a certain compound we suspended animation in all but a single couple. Those so treated were to all intents dead, though their bodies did not decay. The two who remained awake kept watch, making daily tests of the outside atmosphere, drawn through tubes of nullite that pierced the seal. At the end of six months they revived another couple by the use of a second injection, and were themselves put to sleep. We exempted you from the watch, since you could have no companion, so that while we have lived about seven years in the twenty, you have not aged at all."

"Not aged at all!" Dane exclaimed. "Why, I have wasted away to a mere bagful of bones, and you others also."

The other smiled wistfully. "Even though life was the merest thread there was still an infinitely slow using of bodily tissue. But the drink we partook of as we awoke is a plasma that will very quickly restore the lost body elements. In an hour we shall all have been

rejuvenated. You will be again the age you were on that fateful day in 2163, and the rest of us but seven years older. Look!" He moved aside, so that Allen could see the others, who had gathered around his couch. They were a curious semicircle of gaunt figures, but he could see that they had subtly changed. Still emaciated beyond description, they were no longer simulacra of death. The contours of their faces were rounding, were filling out, and the faintest tinge of pink was creeping into the yellow of their skins.

"Anthony, isn't it time that we opened the seals and went outside? Haven't we been long enough in this prison?" It was a short man who spoke, his voice impatient, and there was an eager murmur from the others.

"I am as anxious as you." Anthony's slow words were dubious. "But it may still be dangerous. The gas may have cleared away only from our immediate vicinity. In hollows, or places where the air is stagnant, it may still be toxic. It is my opinion that only one should go at first, to investigate."

A babble of volunteering cries burst out, but Dane's voice cut through the others. "Look here," the sentence tumbled from his lips. "I'm an extra here. It doesn't matter whether I live or die—I have no special knowledge. I cannot even father a family, since I have no

wife. I am the only one to go out as long as there is danger."

"The young man is right," some one said. "He is the logical choice."

"Very well," agreed Anthony, who appeared the leader. "He shall be the first."

His instructions were few. One plane had been preserved, and was in the shaft. Allan was to make a circuit of the neighborhood. If he deemed it safe he was to visit the building, described to him, where the fourth couple had lived, and see if he could find trace of them. Then he was to return and report his findings.

All stuffed their ears with cotton wool, and crowded against one end of the chamber. Anthony had the end of a long double wire in his hand, and it curled across the floor to the farther wall. He pressed the button of a pear-switch—and there was a concussion that hurled the watchers against the wall behind them. A great gap appeared in the farther wall, beyond it a black chasm, and a helicopter that was dimly illumined by the light from within the room. A quick inspection of the flier revealed that its alumino-steeloid had been unaffected by the passage of time, and Allan climbed into it. A wave of his hand simulated an insouciance he did not feel. Then he was rising through darkness. The sun's light struck down and enveloped

him, and he was in the open air. He rose above the trees.

Desolation spread out beneath him. In all the vastness that unfolded as the lone 'copter climbed into a clear sky, nothing moved. The air, that from babyhood Allan had seen crowded with bustling traffic, was a ghastly emptiness. Not even a tiny, wheeling speck betrayed the presence of a bird. And below—the gas that was fatal to animal life seemed to have stimulated vegetable growth—an illimitable sea of green rolled untenanted to where the first ramparts of New York rose against the sky. Roads, monorail lines, all the countless tracks of civilization had disappeared beneath the green tide. Nature had taken back its own.

Heartsick, he turned south, and followed the silver stream of the Hudson. The river, lonely as the sky, seemed to drift oily and sluggish down to plunge beneath the city at the lower end of the Tappan Zee. Allan Dane came over New York, gazed down at the ruin of its soaring towers, at the leaping arabesque of its street bridges. He peered into vast rifts of tumbled, chaotic concrete and steel. Nothing moved in all that spreading wonder that had housed twenty millions of people.

Allan drifted lower, and saw that from what had been gardened roof-parks, now a welter of strewn earth, the green things had spread till

they covered the heaped jetsam with a healing blanket of foliage. Not all the city had been laid waste, however. Here and there, great expanses of the cliff-like structures still stood, undamaged, and in the midst of one of these areas he saw the high-piled edifice to which he had been directed. Its roof was lush with vegetation but by dextrous handling he set his helicopter down upon it.

The engine roar diminished and died. Silence folded around him, a black, thick blanket.

Dane got heavily from his seat, oppressed by the vast soundlessness, and pushed through curling plants that caught at his heels. The sound of his passage was like crackling thunder. A decaying door was marked, in faded, almost undecipherable letters, "Emergency Stairs." It was half open, and Allan squeezed around its edge. Spiral steps curved down into blackness. He hesitated a moment. He could feel the awful silence, the emptiness below was a pit of death. Anthony's words came back to him, echoed in his ears: "We seven are the only living humans left on Earth."

In that moment, out of the pitch-black well of soundlessness, a scream shrilled! No words, only a red, thin thread of sound, rising, and falling, and rising again out of depths where not even a living mouse should be! It came again, ripping the silence—a woman's

scream, high-pitched, quivering with fear!

Allan plunged down into the darkness, caroming from wall to wall as he half ran, half fell, down the twisting stairs. Another sound reverberated from unseen walls, and Dane realized that it was his own voice, shouting.

His feet struck level floor. A pale rectangle of light showed before him, and he dived through it. He was in a corridor, dim-lit by phosphorescent fungi that cloaked the damp walls. He halted, at fault. The long hall stretched away to either side, cluttered with grimed bones, slimy with mold. By the age-blistered name cards on closed doors he knew himself to be on a residential level. But which way should he turn? Whence had come that scream? He crouched against the wall, his heartbeats thudding loud in his ears, and listened for a clue.

A muffled sound of scuffling came from his left. Allan whirled toward it and sped down the corridor. He was breathing in great gasps, and the air he breathed was thick and musty. Too late to stop, he saw a slick of green slime on the floor. His foot struck it, flew out from under him, he fell and slid headlong.

Something stopped him, something that crunched sickeningly as his

sliding body crashed into it: two skeleton forms, clasped in each others' arms, moldering fabric hanging in rags from them. They lay across the threshold of a door, and just within Dane heard snarls, snufflings, bestial growls, the sounds of a struggle. Something thumped against the door and fell away. He heaved to his feet and his hand found the doorknob. But suddenly he was powerless to turn it. Panic tugged at him with almost palpable fingers, drove him to go back to his plane and safety. Almost he fled—but he remembered in time that it was a human scream he had heard.

The portal gave easily to his lunge. Bluish light flooded the chamber, dazzling after the fungous dimness. A bulking form, whether ape or man he could not make out, so brutish the face, so hairy the dark body revealed by its tattered rags bent over the sprawled shape of a girl. Dane saw her in a fleeting glimpse—the slim length of her, the tumbled, golden hair half hiding, half revealing white curves of beauty, a shoulder from which the tunic had been torn away. Then her attacker whirled toward the intruder. Allan leaped from the threshold, his fist arcing before him. The blow landed flush on the other's jaw.

Yellow, rotted fangs showed in a jet-black face, and the huge Negro lunged for Dane, roaring his rage. Before the American could dodge or strike again the other's long arms were around him. Allan was

jerked against a barrel chest, felt his bones cracking in a terrific hug. Eyes, tiny and red, stared into his. Dane drove knees and fists into the Negro, but the awful pressure of those simian arms across his back increased till he could no longer breathe. The American was almost gone, the black face blurred, and the continuous snarling of the brute was dull in his ears.

Suddenly Dane went limp. Victory flashed into the red eyes. The squeezing arms relaxed, and in that moment Allan's legs curled around the black's, heels jerking into the hollows behind his captor's knees. At the same instant, levering from that heel hold, Dane butted sharply up against the rocky jaw. All the strength that was left in him went into that trick, and it worked! The Negro crashed backward to the floor. Allan twisted, and rolled free. He was up, looking desperately around for some weapon. But it was not needed; the hulk on the floor never moved. The back of the Negro's head had smashed against the floor, and he was out.

Dane turned and bent to the girl. She, too, was motionless, but to his relief her breast rose and fell steadily. He glanced about looking for water to revive her. Then he saw that this room was sheathed with nullite. Then this was one of the chambers prepared before the plans were changed. But the girl could not be of the fourth couple—the missing two that had never appeared. She was no more than

eighteen. And whence had come the giant black who had attacked her?

"Stick up your hands. Quick!"

Allan whirled to the sudden challenge. The man in the doorway was pointing a ray-gun steadily at him! Dane's hands went up, and he gasped inanely: "Who are you?"

"What is going on here? Where did you come from?" The newcomer's English was precise, too precise. No hulking brute, this. A yellow man, slitted eyes slanted and malevolent; broad, flat nose above thin lips that were purple against the saffron skin. The uniform he wore showed signs of some attempt to keep it in repair, and to its threadbare collar still clung a tarnished insignia: the seven-pointed star, emblem of the enemy Allan had fought on a yesterday that was two decades gone.

"Well? Have you lost the power of speech?" The ray-gun jerked forward impatiently.

An obscure impulse prompted Allan's reply. "Almost. I've spoken to no one for twenty years."

"So-o,"—softly. The Oriental's eyes flicked past Dane, and a sudden light glowed in them. "You have been alone for twenty years in this city we thought was empty, but you were on hand to fight with Ra-Jamba for this delightful creature." Something leered from his face that sent the hot blood surging to Allan's temples. The Easterner stepped catlike into the room, shutting the door behind him with his free hand.

"That is true," the American said, with what calmness he could muster. Through the dizzy whirl of his mind he clung to one thought: he must conceal the existence of the little group on Sugar Loaf Mountain at all costs. "I had just discovered that it was safe to leave the room, similar to this, in which I had hidden from the gas, when I heard a scream. I reached here just in time to—"

"To interfere with Ra-Jamba's pleasure, and save the little white dove—for me. My thanks." The yellow man bowed mockingly. "Too bad," he purred, "that you should be robbed of the spoils of your fight." Then he asked irrelevantly. "So some of you Americans found a way to cheat our gas. How many?"

Allan temporized. There had been several similar refuges prepared, he said, but he did not know whether they had been used. This was the first he had visited beside his own. But how was it that the

questioner knew so little about what had happened here? Had his people simply laid this country waste and never revisited it?

The Oriental shrugged. "My people are gone, wiped out by your gas as yours were wiped out by ours." He retold Anthony's story. "The crew of my own ship mutinied," he concluded. "We fled north, from that last terrible fight, north, ever north, till at the top of the world we found a little space that was not gas-covered. There was nothing there, just the ice, and the snow, and the cold. We lived there, twelve of us, all men. There were a few bears and seals. We slew them for food—and we grew a little mad. We were men—all men—do you understand?"

As he said this last, his thin voice rose to a shriek, and his eyes darted to the girl's recumbent form. At length, he went on, the gas began to retreat, and they followed it down. They had searched town after town, city after city, had found food in plenty, and all the trappings of civilization. But there was never a living being. And the fever in their blood drove them on.

That very morning the insane search had reached New York. They had landed on the roof of this very building. "We separated to hunt—and Ra-Jamba was the lucky one. But I—Jung Sin—am still luckier." He crept nearer to Allan, and tapped him on the chest with

his weapon. "For look you—while those fools used all their ray-gun charges, even the charge of the big tube on our ship, to kill food, I husbanded mine." He laughed shrilly. "So you see, I have the only ray-gun in the world. It shall make me master of the Earth." Again he laughed wildly.

"Now I'm going to kill you." The black cylinder leveled, and Dane stared at death. Alone, he would almost have welcomed it, but the thought of the girl in the filthy power of this beast seared through him. Jung Sin, the little red worms of madness crawling in his brain, paused for a final taunt.

"Let the thought of the white dove in my arms cons—" Allan's sandaled foot shot out into the man's stomach. In the same movement his hands came down, one snatched at and caught the ray-gun, the other smashed into the yellow face. Jung Sin lifted to the drive of fist and foot, crashed into the wall, fell to its foot. From the crumpled heap rose a shriek, a long piercing wail that ended in a gurgle.

Dane froze, the captured cylinder in his hand, and listened. There were others of the unholy band about. Had they heard? Dim sounds came to him. He leaped to the door, flung it open. Faint footfalls, a distant shout, came from far down the corridor, away from the

direction of the stairs. Allan glimpsed dark forms, rushing toward him. He darted back to the girl, swung her, still unconscious, to his shoulder, and was out. The floor was slippery beneath his feet. He reeled as he ran, and the sounds of pursuit gained on him. The heavy burden weighed him down, the dim hallway stretched endlessly before him. From close behind came hoarse, guttural shouts that chilled him.

The pack was not twenty feet away when Allan reached the stair door. He slammed it behind him, heard the latch click. He mounted the narrow, winding steps with the last dregs of energy draining from him, and heard a crash below that told of the collapse of the barrier. But he had reached his plane, had flung the girl into it, and was pulling himself in when the first of the pursuers burst out on the roof.

Allan thrust home the throttle, the helio-vanes whined, and his 'copter leaped skyward. He glimpsed men running across the roof; they vanished behind a leafy arbor. Dane turned the nose of his craft toward Sugar Loaf, amethyst in the haze of distance, but from that green arch a black aircraft zoomed up and shot after him. The American shook his head free of the cobwebs of fatigue, and veered westward. He must not lead the Easterners to Anthony's refuge.

Through the dead air, over a dead world they shot—Allan's white flier and the ebony plane with the bloody emblem of the seven-pointed star emblazoned on its nose. Allan wheeled again as the pursuers reached his level on a long, climbing slant.

But they continued rising! They, were five hundred, a thousand feet above him. Then they leveled out, and dived down. Their strategy flashed on him—they were planning to shepherd Dane down, to force him to land where they would have him at their mercy. And their craft was the faster!

The black ship was right on his tail; Allan flicked his controls and his 'copter slid sidewise on one wing. The other plane banked in a tight arc and sped for him; Dane countered with a lightning loop that brought him behind his enemy. His gray eyes were steel-hard, his lips were a straight, thin gash. The other ship was faster, but his, lighter and smaller, was more flexible. He could not get away, but—They flipped up and back in an inside loop; Allan's little craft barrel-rolled from under.

This sort of thing could not last forever. With each maneuver he was losing altitude. Serrated roof-tops were already a scant fifteen hundred feet beneath him, gaunt gray fingers that reached up to pluck him from the sky.

Only half Allan's mind was concentrated on the aerial acrobatics. The other half plodded a weary treadmill. In the nullite chamber beneath Sugar Loaf's summit, he thought, were three couples whose knowledge and wisdom had preserved them for the repeopling of the Earth. Their children, and their children's children—starting from such a source what heights might not the new race attain?

On the other hand, the ship that pursued him carried cowards who had failed in mankind's supreme test; men who had lost their manhood, ravening demi-beasts, half mad with loneliness and desire. As long as they remained alive they would be a menace to those others, an unclean band that would forever sully the new world with the old world's evils. Even should Allan himself escape them by some trick of fortune, they must inevitably find the little band of men—and women. A cold chill ran through Dane as he visioned the result.

He was not afraid to die. And the girl in the cabin behind him—better that she never awake than that she be the sport of Ra-Jamba's kind. A grim resolve formed itself, and he watched for a chance to put it into execution.

It came. At the end of a shifting maneuver the black 'copter was above and behind the white. Dane's fingers played swiftly over the

control board. His ship flipped over backward, rolling on its long axis as it somersaulted. It was directly beneath the other. Then the helio-vanes screamed, and the American plane surged straight up!

A resounding crash split the air. Metal ripped, a fuel tank exploded. A black wing scaled earthward, zigzagging oddly. Dane's craft and the Eastern ship clung in an embrace of death. They started to drop. But, queerly, the black plane fell faster, left the white one behind as its descent gained speed till it splashed against concrete below. The American helicopter was dropping, too, but sluggishly. Something was buoying it up. Allan, momentarily struggling out of the welter of blackness and pain into which the concussion had thrown him, heard a familiar whine. His helio-vanes were still twirling, limply, stutteringly, bent and twisted, but gripping the air sufficiently to brake his crushed plane's fall.

Afterwards, Allan figured it out. The black pilot had slipped sidewise in that last frantic moment. His effort to escape had been futile, but instead of his ship's body, Dane's plane had struck the wing and torn it off. The impact had irreparably damaged the American craft, but the helicopter motor and vanes had somehow continued to function —just enough. The stanch alumino-steeloid fuselage, though bent and disfigured, had fended the full force of the crash from Allan and his passenger.

Just now, however, Allan Dane was doing no figuring. Pain welled behind his eyes, his left arm was limp, and a broken stanchion jammed his feet so they couldn't move. The vane motor stuttered and stopped, the plane floor dropped away from beneath him, then thudded against something. The jar jolted Allan into a gray land where there was nothing....

Someone was talking. He couldn't make out the words, but the sound was pleasant. It soothed the throb, throb in his head. Gosh, that had been some party last night, celebrating Flight ZLX's first prize in maneuvers! Great bunch, but would they be as good in real war—sure to come soon? Dane's stuff had too much kick; he must have passed out early.

Somebody shaking him.

"Lea' me 'lone; wanna sleep."

"Oh, wake up, please wake up."

Girl's voice. Nice voice. Voice like that should have pretty face. Better not look, though; too bad if she had buck teeth or squint eyes.

"Oh, what will I do? You're not dead? Please, you're not dead?"

"Don't think so. Head hurts too much." Allan opened his eyes. "Wrong again. Mus' be dead. Only angel could look like that. Not in right place, though. Mistake in shipping directions—tags switched or something."

A cold hand lay across his brow, and he felt it quiver. "Don't talk like that. Wake up." There was hysteria in the limpid tones.

Allan's brain mists cleared, and he grinned wryly. "I remember now. You all right?"

"Yes. But who are you? Are you Anthony Starr?"

"No. But Anthony sent me." Allan struggled to rise. He saw twisted wreckage beside him. He gasped. "I seem to be a bit conked. But what—what do you know about Anthony?"

The girl fumbled in her garments, brought out a paper. Allan found that he could move his right arm without much pain. He took the yellowed sheet, and read the faded writing.

Dear Naomi:

You are asleep, and we have been standing by your couch, drinking in the dear sight of you. You sleep soundly, tired as you are

by the long-promised story we told you on this, your sixteenth birthday, the tale of how the world you know only from our teachings was destroyed, of how we planned with our friends to escape the general fate, of how an accident separated us from them and immured us here alone, of how you were born in this room and why you have lived here all your short life. We told you all that, but there is one thing we did not tell you.

Our food supply has run low, and the gas outside shows no signs of abatement. With careful husbanding we could all three live for another four months, but there is no prospect that we shall be released in so short a time. Alone, you will have sufficient for a year. If we had had some of Carl Thorman's life-suspension serum—but it was his perfection of that which caused the change of plan to a common refuge, and we never thought to stock with it the discarded rooms in our own apartments.

We have talked it over, and have decided that you must have that eight months' extra chance. And so, dear daughter, this must be farewell.

When the gas is gone Anthony will come to seek us, if he still lives. You will know him by the white robe of metal fabric he will wear, with its black girdle. Trust yourself to him; he was our friend.

If all the food has been consumed, and he still has not come, open the door. But fate will not be so cruel to you.

We are weary of the long waiting, Naomi. Do not grieve for us. We shall go out into the gas hand in hand, and release will be welcome.

God guard you.

Allan was deeply moved by the love and sacrifice so simply worded. He looked at the girl, and had to blink away a mist that hazed his sight before he could see her. "I see," he said. "When the year ended and Anthony had not come, you opened the door—"

"And the gas was gone. Then I heard someone moving far down the corridor. I was so happy. Who could it be but Anthony? I called. A hairy, black giant came running, bellowing in some strange language. I was terribly frightened: I think I screamed, and tried to shut the door. But he was too quick for me: he was in the room, and his filthy paws reached out for me. I screamed again, dodged away from him. He pursued me. I threw myself backward, tripped, and fell. My head crashed against the floor.

"The next thing I knew I was here, and you were twisted and

jammed there in front of me. At first I wanted to run, then I saw your robe. I dragged you out. Then I spied that other pile of wreckage, and I thought you too were dead...." She covered her face with her hands.

Allan turned his head, saw for the first time the crumpled debris of the black ship, a hundred feet away, saw stark forms. "There's nothing to be afraid of now," he said. "It's all over. We'll soon be with your father's friend, with Anthony."

A little smile of reassurance trembled on the girls lips. "Oh, do you think so?"

Allan nodded.

"Sure thing! Just trust to me, Miss ...?"

"Call me Naomi."

"I'm Allan." The pilot thrust out his big hand, full fleshed now, and a little white one fluttered into it. An electric thrill rippled at the contact, and the two hands clung. The girl gave a little gasp, and pink flushed her cheeks.

Naomi shivered a little, and Allan realized that a chill breeze was

sweeping across the roof-tops and that daylight was almost gone. "Look here, partner, we'd better get started, somewhere." He pulled himself to his feet. Pain shot through him and his head still throbbed. "I'd better take a look at that." He gestured to the wreck of the Eastern ship. "You wait here."

When he returned his face was pallid, and there was a sick look in his eyes. The girl asked sharply: "What is it? What's wrong? Tell me, Allan!"

He looked at her grimly, started to say something, thought better of it. Then: "It wasn't a pleasant sight." He shrugged. "Come on, let's see what we can find. We'll have to spend the night here, and start for Sugar Loaf Mountain in the morning."

Once more Allan descended a narrow, spiral staircase into darkness and silence. But this time someone was at his side, and a warmness ran through him at the thought.

The topmost floor of this building was a residential level. Like the one where he had found Naomi, a green mold covered everything, and pallid fungi, emitting a pale-green phosphorescence, clung to the walls and ceiling of the long corridor. Apparently the dwellers here had rushed out at the first alarm, had died elsewhere. "This is luck,"

Allan said. "We shall have a comfortable place to sleep, and food is not far away."

"How is that?"

"Why, the stores level is not far below. Most of New York's structures have a number of residential levels at the top, then a floor of retail stores, and below that amusement places, offices, and factories."

"But whatever food there was must be decayed by this time."

"The fresh food, yes. But there was a lot of canned stuff, and that is probably all right." He pushed open a door. In the eery light a well-furnished living room was revealed. "You wait here, and I'll see what I can rustle up."

"But I want to go with you."

Allan was inflexible. "Please do as I say. I have my reasons."

The girl turned away. "Oh, very well," she said flatly, "if you don't want me with you."

"That's a good scout. I'll be back just as quickly as I can. And, by the

way, lock the door from the inside, and don't open it till you hear my voice."

The girl looked at him wonderingly. "But—" she began.

"Don't ask me why. Do it." There was a curious note in Allan's voice, one that cut off Naomi's question. The door shut, and Dane heard the bolt shoot home.

He stood in the corridor, listening intently, his face strained. There was no sound save that of Naomi's movements behind the locked door. Allan turned to search for the auxiliary staircase that must be somewhere near the bank of ascendor doors.

Silence was again around him, almost tangible in its heaviness. His footsteps reverberated through dead halls, the echo curiously muffled by the coating of slime that spread dankly green. Allan found the staircase well, descended cautiously, pausing often to listen. Not even the faint scuttering of vermin rewarded him.

At last, three stories down, he reached the stores level. Here, in a great open hall, were the numerous alcoved recesses of the shops. Once thronged, and gaudy with the varicolored goods brought by plane and heavy-bellied rocket-freighter from both hemispheres, the

vast space was a desert of moldering dust heaps, brooding. There was a faint odor in the stagnant air—of spices, and rustling silks, of rare perfumes, of all the luxury of the Golden Age that Man's folly had ended.

Allan searched the long shelves feverishly, a nervous urge to complete his task and get back to Naomi tingling in his veins. Once he stopped suddenly, his body twisting to the stair landing. He seemed to have heard something, an indefinable thudding, the shadow of a sound. But it did not come again, and he dismissed it as the thumping of his own blood in his ears, audible in that stillness.

At the end of a long aisle, neat rows of cans greeted him, the labels rotted off, the metal rust-streaked, but apparently tight and whole. He found a metal basket, a roll of wire, twisted a handle for the basket and filled it, choosing the cans by their shape. He should have liked to explore further, but the urge to return tugged at him. He went up the stairs three at a time.

There was a dark, oblong break in the long glowing wall of the upper corridor! The door—it was the door of the apartment where he had left Naomi! He leaped down the hall, shouting. The portal hung open, shattered: the rooms were stark, staring empty. Allan reeled out again. There were the marks of footprints, of many footprints, in

the green scum of the hall floor, their own among them, that had led the marauders straight to the girl!

Fool that he had been! He had thought she would be safer behind a bolted door! Allan berated himself. He had thought not to worry her. There had been only four bodies in the wreckage of the black plane—but how had the rest gotten here so soon?

There was a humming whine from above. Dane hurtled toward the roof stairs. He burst from the upper landing, fists clenched, face a furious mask. A helicopter was just rising. Allan jumped for it, his fingers caught and clung to the undercarriage. But the down-swing of his body broke his hold, and Dane crashed to the roof.

He watched the plane, saw it zoom up, turn east, saw it sink and land a half mile away, atop the building where he had found her. In the moonlight he marked the direction of the place, its distance. Then he was descending stairs, innumerable stairs. He could not hope to reach it in time to save Naomi. But—his eyes grew stony—he could avenge her.

Afterwards that nightmare journey through the murdered city was a detailless blur to Allan. He clambered over heaped rubble, forced himself through windrows of piled bones that crumbled to dust at his

touch. Vines, and whipping creepers of triumphant vegetation everywhere halted him; he tore them away with bleeding hands and stumbled on. He fell, and scrambled up again, and plodded on the interminable path till he had reached his goal.

Here, at last, some modicum of reason penetrated into the numbed blankness of his brain. The dark arch of the entrance-way was somehow familiar. Still legible under the verdigris of the bronze plate on the lintel he read, "Transportation Substation—District L2ZX." Now he understood why he had not seen the black flier till it had leaped in pursuit: how it was that Naomi's captors had so quickly found another 'copter. A broad well penetrated the center of this building—its opening must be covered by the luxuriant vines so that he had not noted it—and dropped down to the midsection that was a hangar for local and private planes. His own little Zenith had been stored here on occasion. There must be other helicopters there, and a stock of fuel. A dim plan began to form at the back of his head.

But first he must find where they were, and what had happened to Naomi.

Allan removed his sandals, and began the endless climb. He made no sound on the steps, cushioned as they were with mold, but at each landing he paused for a moment, listening. The cold fire that burned

within him left no room for fatigue, for pain.

A murmuring, then a laugh, cut through the deathlike stillness. Allan was nearly to the top. Down the corridor into which he crept, snakelike on his belly, red light flickered from an open door.

Dane moved soundlessly to that door, and, lying flat, pushed his head slowly past the sash till he could see within. By the light of a fire that danced in the center of the unburnable mallite floor, its illumination half revealing their sodden, brutish faces, he saw an unspeakably strange group. A scene from out of the dawn of history it was, the haunch-squatted circle, their yellow skins and black glistening in the crimson, shifting glow. He recognized the giant Negro, Ra-Jamba, his head bound with a rag, and Jung Sin. There were five others clustered about those two, and a third, a skew-eyed Oriental, intent on some game they were playing with little sticks that passed from hand to hand.

Before each of the players there was a little pile of fish bones, black with much handling. The Negro's pile, and that of Jung Sin, were about equal, but there were only two or three in front of the third player. And just as Allan caught sight of them, the sticks clicked, and a shrill objurgation burst from that third as the last of his markers were raked in by Jung Sin's taloned hand. The circle hunched closer,

there was a ribald, taunting laugh from Ra-Jamba and Jung Sin glanced over his shoulder into a shadowed corner.

"Have patience, my lotus flower," he purred. "Only one is left. Soon the goddess of fortune and love will clear him from my path. By the nine-headed Dragon, I have never seen a game of Li-Fan last so long. But it draws to an end. Then we shall have our joy together, you and I."

In that instant the fire flared. Allan saw an open window in the background, and beneath it a slim white form lying, bound and helpless. Fierce joy leaped in him, and fiercer hate, Naomi was as yet untouched, the game was being played for her as stake. He had come in time to save her!

But how? There were eight of the Easterners in the room. He had his ray-gun, and might cow them with it and free the girl. But as soon as he had gotten her out of the room, they would surge out after the whites. He could fight for a while, but the end was inevitable. And even if by some miracle he and Naomi escaped, they would be tracked to Sugar Loaf.

The sticks were clicking in a continuous rattle as the final bout of the game waxed fast and furious. And as fast and furious was the whirl

of Allan's thoughts. He strove to remember the layout of this building. The helicopter hangar was next above this level. Outside the windows of this floor a narrow ledge ran. The nebulous scheme that had entered his dazed brain as he read the bronze plate below took clearer form, shaped itself to meet this new need.

Allan crept away to safe distance, leaped to his feet and flitted upward. He was in the empty, echoing space of the hangar level. The fuel tanks bulged huge in the dimness. Here were reels of the feed hose he needed—flexible metal that had withstood the years; here a faucet nozzle, and a long coil of fine wire. Haste driving him, he made the connections. Then he was descending again, dragging behind him a long black snake of hose whose other end was clamped to a vat of oxygen impregnated gasoline.

The rustle of the hose along the hall floor was muffled by the greasy slime. Dane got the nozzle to just outside the door of the room where Naomi lay captive. The rattle of the playing sticks still continued. Jung Sin's voice sounded, in a language that Allan did not understand. But there was no mistaking the triumphant note in the silky, jeering tones. The yellow man was winning, and winning fast.

Dane twisted one end of the wire around the faucet handle. Then he was unwinding the coil as he tried the door of the chamber next to

the one where the fire burned, found it open, darted across the room and softly raised the sash. The sill here, like the one beneath which Naomi lay, was a bare two feet above the ground.

He was out on the ledge, sliding along it toward the fire-reddened oblong five feet away. He crammed his body close against the wall, kept his eyes away from the unfenced edge of that eighteen-inch shelf. Beyond, an abyss waited, twelve thousand feet of nothingness down which a single misstep, an instant's vertigo, would send him hurtling. Suddenly the rattle of sticks stopped, and he heard the black's long howl of disappointed rage. The game was over!

Allan reached the window, glimpsed a leering semicircle of animal faces, saw Jung Sin coming toward him. Then he had swung in.

"Back, Jung Sin! Back!" Allan was straddled over Naomi's form, the ray-gun thrust out before his tense threat, his face livid, his eyes blazing. "Get back, or I ray you!"

Consternation, awe, flashed into the brutal faces of the Easterners. Jung Sin reeled back, his saffron hands rising. Allan's weapon swept slowly along the line of staring men. "If one of you moves I flash."

He bent to the girl, keeping his eyes on the Easterners, and his

weapon steady. He had hung the wire coil over his shoulder, leaving his left hand free to fumble for and untie the cords around Naomi's wrists. He got them loose.

"Can you get your feet free, Naomi?"

"Yes, I can manage it." Her voice was steady, but there was a great thankfulness vibrant in it.

"Then do it and get out on the ledge. Quick." He straightened, and the blaze of his eyes held the yellow men, and the black, motionless.

Naomi, at the window behind him, gasped. "I know it looks tough," he encouraged her, "but you can make it. Don't look down. Go to the left. And keep clear of that wire."

"I'm all right, Allan. But you—"

"Never mind about me. Go ahead."

Jung Sin jerked forward, driven by the madness that twisted his face into gargoyle hideousness. But Allan's ray-gun stabbed at him, and he halted.

"I'm out, Allan."

Dane's foot felt back of him for the sill, found it. He lifted, facing his enemies inexorably, caught the lintel with his left hand, and was crouching outside. A sidewise flick of his eyes showed Naomi just reaching the other window.

He pulled at the wire till it was gently taut. A moment's compunction rose in him at what he was about to do. Then the black roll of the Easterners' crimes rushed into his mind. Naomi's safety, his own, and that of the little colony that had endured so much to preserve humanity, cried out for their extinction. Allan jerked the metal thread, and the faucet nozzle in the corridor opened.

A black stream gushed forward, reached the fire, and the room was a roaring furnace. Allan saw the forms of his enemies silhouetted against the blaze for a fleeting instant, then they were flaming statues. One only, Jung Sin, nearer than the rest, leaped for the window and escaped the first gush of flame. Allan pressed the trigger of his ray-gun. But no blue flash answered that pressure. The weapon's charge had leaked out, was gone!

Allan tore himself loose from yellow hands that clutched at him, his fist crashed into Jung Sin's fear twisted visage, and the crazed Oriental fell back into the roaring blaze.

But Allan himself was thrust backward by that blow, was swaying on the very edge of the chasm. His hand went out for a saving hold on the window sash; flame licked at it. He was toppling, against the strain of his body muscles to resist the inevitable fall, and death reached up from depths for him. Then an arm was around him, was drawing him back to life. Naomi had darted back, defying the terror of that height, the surge of heat. She had reached him just in time—a split-second later and his weight would have been too much for her puny strength. But in this instant, the merest touch was enough to save him. They crept along the ledge and climbed wearily in.

There was another plane in the hangar, and presently Allan had it rising through the well into clean, free air. He turned to the girl in the seat beside him and pointed at the scene they were leaving.

"Look," he said.

The city was in darkness beneath them, save for the one staring rectangle that marked a pyre. But dawn shimmered opalescent in the east.

A soft white hand crept into Allan's. There was a long moment of silence. Then Allan said, softly: "A new day, and a new world for their children."

A sleepy, tired voice sighed: "For their children and ours, Allan."

155 The Passing of Ku Sui by Desmond Winter Hall

A screaming streak in the night—a cloud of billowing steam—and the climax of Hawk Carse's spectacular "Affair of the Brains" is over.

Aproximate word count: 32,700

Bigotry:

Warnings:

- - -

The career of Hawk Carse, taken broadly, divides itself into three main phases, and it is with the Ku Sui adventures of the second phase that we have been concerned in this intimate narrative. John Sewell, the historian, baldly condenses those adventures of a century ago together, but on research and closer scrutiny they take on an individuality and significance deserving of separate treatment, and this they have been given here. For fictionized presentation, we have spaced the adventures into four connected episodes, four acts of a vibrant drama which ranged clear from Saturn to Earth, the core of which was the feud between Captain Carse and the power-lusting Eurasian scientist, Dr. Ku Sui—that feud the reverberations of whose

terrible settling still echo over the solar system—and in this last act of the drama, set out below, we come to its spectacular climax.

The words of John Sewell's epic history sit lightly on paper; easy words for Sewell, once the collection of data was over, to write; not very significant words for the uninitiated and casual reader who does not see the irresistible forces beneath them. But consider the full meaning of these words, and glance for a moment at the two figures conjured up by them. We see Hawk Carse, a man slender in build, but with gray eyes and lithe, strong-fingered hands and cold, intent face that give the clue to the steel of him; we see Dr. Ku Sui, tall, suave, unhurried, formed as though by a master sculptor, in whose rare green eyes slumbered the soul of a tiger, notwithstanding the courtesy and the grace that masked always his most infamous moves. These two we see looming through and dwarfing Sewell's words as they face each other, for they were probably the most bitter, and certainly the most spectacular, foe-men of that raw period before the patrol ships swept up from the home of man to lay Earth's laws through space.

Carse and Ku Sui, adventurer and scientist, each with his own distinctive strength and his own unyielding character—those two were star-crossed, fated to be foes, and whenever they met there was blood, and never was quarter asked nor quarter expected. How could

it have been otherwise? Ku Sui controlled the isuan drug trade, and Carse was against it, as he was against everything underhanded and unclean; Ku Sui had tricked and, by a single deed, driven Carse's loved comrade, Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow, from his honored position on Earth, and Carse was sworn to bring Ku Sui to Earth to clear the old scientist's name. Either of these alone was enough to seal the feud, but there was more. Carse was sworn to release from their bondage of life-in-death Ku Sui's most prized possession, his storehouse of wisdom—the brains of five great Earth scientists, kept alive though their bodies were dead.

These, then, were the forces glossed over so lightly by John Sewell's words. These the forces that clashed in the episode set out below: that clashed, then drew apart, and knew not one another for years....

It will be recalled that, in the second of these four episodes, "The Affair of the Brains,"[1] Hawk Carse, Eliot Leithgow, and the Negro Friday broke free from Dr. Ku's secret lair, his outwardly invisible asteroid, and in doing so thought they had destroyed the Eurasian and all his works, including the infamous machine of coordinated brains. In the third episode, "The Bluff of the Hawk,"[2] it will be remembered that the companions came in Dr. Ku's self-propulsive space-suits to Satellite III of Jupiter; and that there Carse learned that in reality the Eurasian and the brains had survived, and that Dr. Ku

might very possibly soon be in possession of a direct clue to Leithgow's hidden laboratory on Satellite III. We saw Carse take the lone course, as he always preferred, sending Leithgow and Friday to his friend Ban Wilson's ranch while he went to erase the clue. And we saw him achieve his end at the fort-ranch of Lar Tantril, strong henchman of Ku Sui, and, in brilliant Carse fashion, turn the tables and escape from the trap that had seemingly snared him, and proceed towards where, fourteen miles away, Leithgow and the Negro were waiting for him.

[1] See the March, 1932, issue of Astounding Stories.

[2] See the May, 1932, issue of Astounding Stories.

His three friends were waiting very uneasily that day. Eleven hours had passed since Leithgow and Friday had parted from the Hawk, and they had heard nothing from him. They knew he was going into high peril: Leithgow had in vain tried to dissuade him; and so it was with growing fear that they watched the hours pass by.

With Ban Wilson, they sat near dawn in the comfortable living room of the ranch's central building. Although largely rested from the ordeal of the journey to Satellite III, the huge Negro was fidgety, and even Leithgow, more controlled, showed the strain by continually

raising his thin white fingers to his lined face and stroking it. Wilson's men were on watch outside in the graying darkness, but often Friday supplemented them, going to the door, staring down to the beach of the bordering lake, staring up to the skies, staring at the black and murmurous flanks of the jungle—staring, scowling and returning to sit and look gloomily at the floor.

Ban Wilson was the most active physically. He was a miniature dynamo of a man, throbbing with a restless, inexhaustible tide of energy. Short and wiry, he stared truculently at the universe through wonderfully clear blue eyes, surrounded by a bumper crop of freckles and topped by a mat of bristly red hair. His short stub nose had prodded into countless hostile places where it most emphatically was not wanted. It would be hardly necessary to old acquaintances of his to say that he was now speaking.

"No, sir! I say the Hawk's safe and kicking! Can't kill him! By my grandmother's false teeth, I swear I'd follow him to hell, knowin' I'd come out alive and leavin' the devil yowlin' behind with his tail tied into pretzels! He said he would meet you here? Well, then, he will."

Friday looked up mournfully.

"Yes, suh, Cap'n Ban; but Cap'n Carse was going into a pow'ful lot

of trouble. An' he was worn an' tired, an' he only had a space-suit an' a raygun, an' you know he wouldn't stop for anything till he'd done what he set out to. I kind of feel ... I dunno ... I dunno...."

"By Betelguese!" swore Ban Wilson, "if he doesn't come soon I'll take that damned Porno apart till I find him!"

Eliot Leithgow gave up the late radio newscast from Earth he had been pretending to read. A brief silence fell, and through it the old scientist seemed to feel something, seemed to expect something. And he was not mistaken.

"Who's there?"

It was a cry from one of the watchers outside. Friday leaped out of his uneasy seat and was through the door even before Ban, who followed with Leithgow. They heard the Negro roar from ahead:

"Cap'n Carse! Cap'n Carse! Sure enough, it's Cap'n Carse!"—and they saw his great form go bounding down to the gray-lit beach of the lake, to a slight, weary figure that came stumbling along it.

Hawk Carse had come as he said he would, but he was a sore figure of a man. Though he was not in it now, for days he had worn the

harsh, grating metal and fabric of a space-suit, and its marks were left on him. Even from a distance the others could see that his once-neat blue trousers and soft flannel shirt were torn through in many places, revealing ugly purplish bruises; on his haggard face was a nap of flaxen beard, and in his blood-shot gray eyes utter exhaustion, both mental and physical. The Hawk had been acting at high tension for days past, and now the reaction was exacting its inevitable toll.

He came stumbling heavily along the beach, his feet dragging through its coarse sand, and it seemed as if he would drop any moment. With a slight smile he greeted Friday, then Eliot Leithgow and Wilson, all running down.

"Hello, Eclipse," he murmured, "and Eliot—and Ban—"

There he wavered and half fell against the Negro's body. Friday wished to carry him, but he would have none of it: by himself he walked up to the ranch-house, where he slumped into a chair while Ban Wilson went shouting into the galley for a mug of hot alkite.

After draining it, Carse revived slightly. Again aware of the three men grouped around him, and recognizing their eagerness for his news, he forced himself to speech.

"Sleepy—must sleep. But—yes—some things I'll tell you." In quick, staccato sentences, his tired eyelids shut half the time, he sketched his adventure at Lar Tantril's ranch, explaining how, even though captured, he had destroyed the figures, telling of the location of Leithgow's laboratory; and a slight smile appeared on his lips as he told of the ruse by which he had escaped. "Got away. Told them the lake-front was very dangerous to them. Made them let me show them. I walked out—dozens of them round me, guns on me—walked out till I went under water. Could do it in the suit. I walked under water half a mile or so, then came up and cached the suit. I guess they're still watching! Easy!"

He chuckled, and then, after a short pause, went on:

"But here's what's important—Ku Sui is alive. Yes, I know it. He has an assignation with Tantril at Tantril's ranch. In five days. And the coordinated brains I promised to destroy—they still exist. So, Eliot, these are orders: prepare plans for infra-red and ultra-violet devices—they ought to do it—so we can see Dr. Ku's invisible asteroid when it comes. Friday, you go down and get my space-suit: it's cached ten miles down the beach, beneath a big watrari tree. And then—" His head slumped over; he appeared to have abruptly fallen to sleep.

"Yes, Carse? What is your plan?" Eliot Leithgow asked softly. But the Hawk was only making a great last effort to gather the threads of his idea.

"Yes," he responded, "the plan. Ban stations a man to keep watch on Tantril's ranch, while we go back to your laboratory, Eliot, where you'll make the devices and repair the gravity-plates of my suit. Then, four nights from now, if the watcher's seen no one arrive, Ban, Friday and I return and lie in ambush round Tantril's ranch. Awaiting Dr. Ku. When he comes, he'll surely leave his asteroid somewhere near. And while he's at Tantril's, we capture the asteroid—and my promise to the coordinated brains will be kept.

"Then—but that's enough for now; I am so tired. Ban, will you please—some food—"

Wilson, who had been listening eagerly and, at the end, grinning in prospect of action with the Hawk, darted off like a spark. A few minutes later, after his third mouthful of food, Carse murmured:

"We'll use your ship to go to Eliot's lab in, Ban, but I think you'll—have to—carry me—aboard. So sleepy. Wake me when we get to—lab."

On this last word his sleep-denied body had its way, and at once he was deep in the dreamless slumber of exhaustion.

While he slept, the others rapidly carried out his orders. Within two hours Friday, in the ranch's air-car, had retrieved the cached suit. Ban Wilson had manned and made ready his personal space-ship for the trip to the laboratory, and Eliot Leithgow had jotted down a few preliminary plans for the infra-red and ultra-violet instruments which Carse would need in order to see the invisible asteroid of Dr. Ku Sui.

CHAPTER II

Three Figures in the Dawn

The fourth night after the Hawk had met his friends at Ban Wilson's was sunless and Jupiter-less, nor was there the slightest breath of wind; and in the humid, dank jungle surrounding on three sides the isuan ranch of the Venusian Lar Tantril the sounds of night-prowling animals burst full and loud, making an almost continuous babel of varied and savage noise.

In the midst of this dark inferno, Tantril's ranch was an island of stillness. Within the high guarding fence, the long low buildings lay quiet and were [illegible] brushed periodically by the light from the

watch-beacon high overhead as it swept its shaft over the jungle smother and then around over the black glassy surface of the Great Briney Lake, bordering the ranch enclosure on the fourth side. And, vigilantly, the eyes of three Venusian guards followed the ray.

They stood on the three lookout towers which reared at equal intervals up above the circumference of the ranch; and though the buildings below seemed deserted, in reality wide-awake men were stationed at posts within them, waiting for the clang of the alarm which the pressing of a button in any one of the lookout towers would effect. Lar Tantril's ranch was not asleep. It was as alert and wary as the beasts tracking through the jungle outside its fence, and all its defensive and offensive weapons were at the ready.

No one within the ranch knew it, but within two hundred yards lay the foe Lar Tantril and his men feared most.

Regularly around the watch-beacon swept, slicing the blackness with an oval white finger, the farthest edge of which reached a hundred and fifty yards. Over the "western" lake—and its inky ripples sparkled somehow ominously. Over the jungle's confusion—and trees, great bushes, spiky vines and creeper-growths leaped into momentary visibility, and then were again swallowed up in the tide of night. Here a cutlas-beaked bird, spotlighted for an instant, froze

into surprised immobility with the pasty, bloated worm it had seized twisting and dangling from its mouth, to flap squawking away as the ray glided on: there the coils of a seekan, in ambush on a tree limb, glittered crimson for the sudden moment of illumination; or a nameless huge-eyed pantherlike creature was glimpsed as it clawed at a nest of unfledged haris, while the frantic, screaming mother beat at it with wings and claws....

But all this was usual and unalarming, merely the ordinary routine of the jungle at night. Could the beacon have reached out another fifty yards, the guards on their towers would have seen that which was not usual—and would have summoned every weapon of the ranch beneath.

Or could the guards have heard, besides the cries and crashings and yowls of the jungle folk, the man-made sounds which sped silently back and forth across the ranch within their tight and secret radio beams—then, too, the alarm would have clanged.

Had the beacon suddenly stretched its path outward another fifty yards, it would have fallen upon a massive, leafy watrari tree, taller than most: and the guards, looking close, might have caught in one notch of the tree's many limbs a glint of metal: might have seen, had the light held on that glint, a bloated monster of metal and fabric

braced there, hiding behind a screen of leaves.

This giant, not native to the jungle, was posted due "north" from the ranch. Another waited to the "south," in a similarly large tree; and another to the "east."

Hawk Carse and his friends were abroad again and waiting to strike.

Ban Wilson, hot, itching and uncomfortable inside the heavy space-suit that he wore, and supremely aware of his consequent awkwardness, watched the ranch's beacon sweeping past him thirty or more yards away, and again sought relief from the tedium in conversation.

"Jupiter should be rising soon, Carse. It's the darkest hour—seems to me he'll come now if he comes at all. What do you think?"

He was the one posted in a watrari tree "south" of Tantril's ranch. Flung on the tight beam of his helmet-radio, which had been tuned and adjusted by Eliot Leithgow so as to reach only two other radios, the words rang simultaneously in the receivers of Friday, who was "east" of the ranch, and Carse, who was "north."

The Hawk responded curtly:

"I don't know when he'll come; I suspect not before full morning."

Ban Wilson grunted at receipt of this discouraging opinion, and then once more, as he had been doing regularly all through the night, raised to his eyes the instrument that hung by a cord from the neckpiece of the suit. Through it he scanned slowly and methodically the portion of black heaven that had been assigned to him. The instrument would have resembled a bulky pair of electro-binoculars with its twin tubes and eyepieces, had not there been, underneath the tubes, a small, compact box which by Leithgow-magic revealed the world through infra-red light by one tube, and ultra-violet the other.

"Nothing!" Ban muttered to himself, lowering the device. "And damn Ku Sui for makin' these space-suits so infernally uncomfortable! Might as well have made 'em space-ships, while he was at it!... Say, Carse," he began again aloud into his microphone, "maybe Dr. Ku's come already. I know my men said no one had arrived at the ranch in a suit like these we've got on—but, hell, if his whole asteroid's invisible, why couldn't he make his space-suit invisible, too?"

"I don't think he's done that. Otherwise he would have—" The adventurer's level tone raised incisively. "Now, both of you, still!

Conceal yourselves with great care—Jupiter's rising!"

The "western" horizon, a moment before indistinguishable, was now faintly flushed, a flush which deepened quickly into glowing, riotous crimson, causing long streamers to shoot out over the surface of the Great Briney, tingling it, sparkling it. The light reached the jungle: and when the first faint reflected rays filtered down through the matted gloom of tree and vine and bush the creatures that had tracked for prey all night looked to their lairs: and gradually, the tenor of the jungle noises waned off into a few last screams and muttered growls, and then died altogether into the heavy, brooding hush that comes always with dawn over the jungles of Satellite III.

Jupiter thrust his flaming arch upwards over the horizon, and climbed with his whole vast blood-blotched bulk into a sky turned suddenly blue. Lake and jungle shimmered under the rapidly dissipating night vapors. The ranch-beacon paled into unimportance. Day had come.

And now the three bloated figures of metal and fabric that were men crouched closely back beneath the leaves of the trees that concealed them, and waited tensely, not daring at first to move for fear of discovery. Each one could see, through the intervening growth, the watch-towers of the ranch; but Friday, from his post in the tree to the

"east," could see the area best, and it was Friday to whom Carse's next words were addressed.

"Eclipse?" his terse voice asked. "Do the guards in the towers seem to notice anything?"

The big Negro strained cautiously for a better view.

"No, suh, Cap'n Carse. Sure they can't see us at all. Just pacin' round on their towers, kind of fidgety."

"Anyone else in sight?"

"No, suh.... Oh, now there's somethin'. Two of the guards are looking below, cupping their ears. Someone down there must be tellin' them somethin'. Now they're lookin' up to the sky—the northern sky. Yes, suh! All three of 'em! They're expectin' someone, sure enough!"

"Good. He must be coming. Use your glasses."

Then in all three trees the instruments that Eliot Leithgow had shaped were raised, and the whole sweep of horizon and the glowing, clear blue dome of sky subjected to minute inspection through their detecting infra-red and ultra-violet. Ban Wilson, perhaps, stared most eagerly, for he had never seen Ku Sui's asteroid,

and despite himself still only half-believed that twenty craggy, twisted miles of rock could be swung as its master willed in space, and brought down bodily to Satellite III.

But he saw nothing in the sky; nothing looming gigantically over any part of the horizon; and he reported disgustedly:

"Nothing doing anywhere. Carse."

"Don't see nothing either, suh," the Negro's deep voice added. And both of them heard the Hawk murmur:

"Nor do I. But he must be—Ah! There! Careful! They're coming!"

"Where? Where is it?" yapped Ban excitedly, jerking the instrument to his eyes again.

"Speak low. Not the asteroid. Three men."

For a tense minute there was silence between them, until, in a low, crisp voice, the Hawk added:

"Three men in space-suits like ours, coming from the "north" straight for Tantril's. Ban, you may not be able to see them till they get to the ranch, so you keep hunting for the asteroid with your glasses. Friday,

you see them?"

"Yes, suh! Three! One ahead of the others!"

"Keep your eyes tight on them. No talking now from either of you unless it's important."

The steely voice snapped off. And carefully, in his tree, Hawk Carse brushed aside a fringe of leaves and concentrated on the three figures the dawn had brought.

Hard and sharp they glittered in the flood of ruddy light from Jupiter, great grotesque figures of metal and bulging fabric, with shining quarzite face-plates and the abnormally large helmets and boot-pieces which identified them as being of the enemy. At a level fifty feet above the jungle's crown they came in fast, horizontal transit, and there was much of beauty in the picture that they made—sparkling shapes flying without sound or movement of limb against the blue sky, over the heaped colors of the jungle below. One flew slightly in the lead, and he, the watching Hawk felt positive, was Ku Sui, and the other two his servants—probably men whose brains had been violated, dehumanized—mere machines in human form.

Straight in the three figures flew, without hesitation or swerving,

closer and closer to the watching man in the tree. The Hawk's lips compressed as his old enemy neared, and into his watching gray eyes came the deadly cold emotionless look that was known and feared throughout space, wherever outlaws walked or flew. Ku Sui—so close! There, in that even-gliding figure, was the author of the infamy done to Leithgow, of the crime to the brains that lived though their bodies were dead; of the organized isuan trade. Go for him now? The thought flashed temptingly through Carse's head, but he saw sense at once. Far too dangerous, with the powerful, watching ranch so close. He could not jeopardize the success of his promise to the brains.

And so Dr. Ku Sui passed, while two pairs of eyes from two leafy trees watched closely every instant of his passing, and one man's hand dropped unconsciously to the butt of a raygun.

Quickly, the Eurasian and his servitors were gone, their straight, steady flight obscured by the trees around Tantril's ranch, below which they slanted.

Dr. Ku Sui had arrived at his assignation. But where was the asteroid?

Through his instrument, Carse sought horizon and heaven for the

massive body, but in vain. He spoke into his helmet-radio's mike.

"Ban?"

"Yes, Carse?"

"See the asteroid anywhere?"

"Nowhere, by Betelgeuse! I've looked till my eyes—"

The Hawk cut him short. "All right. Stand by. Friday?"

"Yes, suh?"

"Can you see anything special?"

"No, suh—only that the three platform guards keep lookin' down towards the center of the ranch."

"Good. That means Ku Sui's being received," said Carse; and then he considered swiftly for a minute. Decided, he continued:

"Ban and Friday, you both wait where you are, keeping a steady lookout. None of us can see the asteroid, but it must be somewhere comparatively near, for Dr. Ku has no reason to bother with a long

journey in a space-suit. I think the asteroid's close down, hidden by that distant ridge in the direction from which they came. I'm going to find it. When I do, I'll tell you where to come meet me. Inform me at once if Ku Sui leaves or if anything unusual happens. Understood?"

The assenting voices rang back to him simultaneously.

"Right!" he said; and slowly his great bulging figure lifted.

Cautiously, the adventurer made through the watrari tree to the side facing away from the ranch. There, poising for a second, he manipulated the lateral direction-rod on the suit's chest, and, still very slowly, floated free from the shrouding leaves. Then, mindful of the lookouts on the towers behind, he employed the tactics he had used before, and kept constantly below the uneven crown of the jungle, gliding at an easy rate through the leafy lanes created by the banked tree-tops.

In that fashion, in the upthrust arms of the jungle, twisting, turning, sometimes doubling, but following always a path the objective of which was straight ahead, Hawk Carse soared soundlessly for miles. He maneuvered his way with practised ease, and his speed increased as the need for hiding his flight decreased.

He was familiar with the landmarks of the region, and it was towards the most pronounced of them that he flew. Soon it was looming far above him: a long, high ridge, rearing more than three miles above the level of the Great Briney, and crowded with trees even taller and sturdier than those of the lower jungle plains. Beyond it was the most likely spot....

The Hawk paused at the base of the ridge. There had been no warning from Ban or Friday, but, to make sure, he established radio connection.

"Friday?" he asked into the microphone. "Any activity on the ranch? Any sign they're aware of our presence?"

Clear and deep from miles behind, the Negro's voice answered:

"No, suh. Dead still. I guess they're inside the buildings—except the guards, and they're taking things easy. Where are you, suh?"

"About ten miles from you, 'north' and a little 'east,' at the foot of the ridge. I think I'll know something soon now. Stand by."

Then Carse moved forward again, slowly winding up between the trees to the summit of the ridge.

At the top he stopped. His eyes took in a long, wide valley, of which the ridge where he hung was the southernmost barrier. He knew at once something was wrong. Through his opened face-plate he was aware of a breathless hush that hovered over the valley, a hush which embraced its fifty miles or more of jungle length, a hush which was rendered actually visible in several places by the unmoving, limp-hanging leaves of the trees. Below, in the valley, all the myriad life of the jungle seemed to have frozen, and only occasionally was the pause of life and sound disturbed by the faint, muffled cry of a bird.

What had wrought the hush? Nothing showed to the naked eye.

From the summit of the ridge, Hawk Carse lifted Leithgow's glasses to his eyes. And the valley was suddenly changed, and the hush explained. The miracle lay before him.

CHAPTER III

The Raid

A dim, shimmering outline through the infra-red, the valley lay revealed as a great natural cradle for a mammoth body of rock which had been swung down from the deeps of space to the surface of Satellite III.

Titanic, breath-taking in its majesty of sheer bulk, the asteroid of Dr. Ku Sui was made visible.

It hung suspended, low over the tree-tops of the valley, and it filled the valley with rock and towered above it. This was the asteroid, exploded into a separate entity by the cataclysm that gave birth to the planets, which Dr. Ku Sui had wrenched from the asteroidal belt between Mars and Jupiter and built into a world of his own, swinging it through space as he willed, and cloaking it with invisibility to baffle those who marveled at how he came and went, unseen, on his various errands. This was the mighty rock fortress in which lay the key-stone of his mounting power. This his lonely, unsuspected home, come for a while to rest....

Hawk Carse scanned it closely.

It lay roughly head-on to him, its nearest massive, craggy end lying some three miles from where he hung. On that end lived the life of the asteroid, and were located all Ku Sui's works. On a space planed flat in the rock, rested the dome, like an inverted quarter-mile-wide bowl of glittering glasslike substance, laced inside with spidery supporting struts—the half bubble from inside which men guided the mass. Therein an artificial atmosphere was maintained, even as on any space-ship, and there lay the group of buildings, chief of which

was the precious laboratory in which were the coordinated brains to whom the Hawk had made his promise.

Carse lowered the glasses, and again the Jupiter-light poured normally around him, the valley hushed and seemingly empty once more. He put through his call to Friday and Ban, giving them simple directions how to find him. And twenty-five minutes after that, he saw, looking back down the ridge, their two giant metallic figures come twisting and turning in noiseless flight through the top lanes of the jungle below, and they were together.

It was seldom that Friday would intrude his thoughts when with his master and his master's friends, so when he arrived he merely surveyed the asteroid through his glasses and was silent. But Ban Wilson, after a long, comprehensive stare, during which one could almost feel the amazement leaping through him, sputtered:

"By jumping Jupiter, Carse—I never would've believed it! That Ku Sui's sure a genius! To have that whole asteroid there, man, and to take it with him wherever he wants to go! Look at it! Fifteen, twenty miles long, it must be! And that dome—"

"Yes," said the Hawk shortly, "but easy on that now. We've work to do, and it's got to be done quickly. Now listen:

"There are two main port-locks in the dome for space-ships, and the starboard one has a smaller man-size lock beside it. We're going to the smaller one. There'll no doubt be a guard on watch at it, so to him we're Ku Sui and the two men who accompanied him. We'll have to chance recognition; but at least there's no difference in the suits we're wearing, and we'll clasp our glasses on all the way to the lock, for surely Dr. Ku has to use some similar device. Keep your faces averted as much as you can though, when near, and your rayguns in your belts. If there's to be gunplay, leave the first shot to me. You'll both follow me just as those two followed Dr. Ku."

Ban Wilson asked: "Will you go down into the valley between the trees, then up the face of the rock? The guard wouldn't see us until we were right at the lock."

"No, he wouldn't: but he'd wonder why Ku Sui was being so cautious. We'll go straight across, in full view. We'll get in easily, or —well, that depends. Ready?"

They fastened the glasses over their eyes, keeping the helmet face-plates partly open. The rayguns they eased in their belt holsters, and slid back the hinged palms of their mittens, to give exit if need be to their gun-hands. They were ready.

Switching on the helmet gravity-plates to swift repulsion, the three soared out of the trees, soared up on a straight, inclined line for the dome on the asteroid, a steady, rapid climb that soon raised them one mile, a second and a third, where they leveled off and sped straight ahead. Now they could look right into the dome.

Rapidly the port-lock that was their objective grew in size. Behind it were the buildings: the large, four-winged central structure and the supplementary workshops and hangars, coolie-quarters and outhouses, all dim and shimmering through the infra-red—the mysterious, lonely citadel of Dr. Ku Sui. There it all was, inside the dome, with the rest of the asteroid looming massive behind.

A quarter-mile away, and swiftly half that, and half again the three grouped figures arrowed ahead without hesitation. And the Hawk said curtly:

"I see no men—do either of you? It looks deserted."

"There!" cried Ban, after a second. "There! Beside the port-lock. Just now!"

Beside the smaller port-lock's inner door a figure had appeared, clad in the neat yellow smock of a servitor of Ku Sui. It was a smooth,

impassive Oriental face that turned to stare out at the approaching men; and even Ban knew that this sentinel stationed at the lock was one of the coolies whose brains Dr. Ku had altered, turning him into a mechanicalized man who obeyed no orders but his. He watched closely the three who swept on towards him, his hand at a raygun in his belt. The same questions were in the minds of all three of the raiders. Would he recognize something as being different, or suspicious? Would he summon others of his kind from the small guard-box he had come out of?

But the coolie evinced no alarm. It would have been difficult for anyone to have discerned distinguishing features inside the cumbersome helmets, behind the instruments clamped to the faces of the men who wore the suits. He called no others, but merely watched.

Soon the opaque metal plates of the small lock's outer door had neared to within a few feet of Hawk Carse, and he stopped short, Ban and Friday following suit. They hovered there outside the door, gently swaying like flies against the great gleaming sweep of the dome, the craggy rock face dropping sickeningly down for miles beneath them. And, like flies, they were powerless to open the door to gain entrance. Only the coolie inside could do that; and he, through the dome to one side, was peering at them.

Apparently he was satisfied with his scrutiny. After a moment, bolts shifted and the door stirred and swung out, revealing the all-metal atmosphere chamber and the inner door at the far side. Immediately Carse floated into the chamber, and the two others pressed in behind. They saw the outer door swing shut, and heard its locks thud over.

They were sealed from sight inside the port-lock's atmosphere chamber.

"Looks to me," whispered Ban Wilson, "like a very sweet trap. If that fellow inside wants to—"

The Hawk's cool voice cut him off.

"We can take off the glasses now," he said casually. "Keep alert."

And for a full minute they waited.

At length a circle of light showed around the rim of the inner door, and it grew quickly into the full flood of Jupiter-light as the door opened.

Carse floated through, no longer attempting to avert his face.

The coolie, standing just outside the chamber, saw the adventurer's

features and remembered—and drew the raygun in his belt.

Carse did not shoot. He never killed unless he could not avoid it; this was as much a part of his creed as his remorseless leveling of a blood-debt. He struck with the suit. Under a quick turn of the control, the great heavy bulk of fabric-joined metal lunged forward. The move was quick, but not quite quick enough, for just before the coolie was bowled headlong to the ground, he got out a high-pitched warning yell; and then, as he lay sprawled out, apparently unconscious, a thin hot orange streak sizzled by Hawk Carse's helmet from the left.

This time Carse shot. His gun leaped from belt to hand, and had twice spoken from the hip before one could quite grasp what had happened. Seemingly without bothering to take aim, his deadly left hand had stricken into lifeless heaps two coolies who had come running and shooting from the nearby guard-box.

As Carse stood looking down at their bodies he was startled by another sizzling spit. He wheeled to see Friday holding the raygun that had spoken.

The Negro said apologetically:

"Sorry, suh—I had to. The other coolie, the one you knocked down, came to and was aimin' at you. Guess they're all three dead now, sure enough."

His master nodded, and said in a low, thoughtful voice: "In spite of what some men have said, I never like to kill; but for these robots, more machines than men, with nothing human to live for, it's release rather than death.

"Well," he began again, more briskly, "we're inside, and whoever else is here apparently doesn't know it yet. I expected more of a commotion. I wonder how many coolies Ku Sui had, altogether? Fourteen or fifteen were killed when we broke through the dome, before, and now these three. There surely can't be many left. Of course, there are the four white men, his surgical assistants."

Ban Wilson spoke after what was for him a long silence. He had watched the Hawk's gunplay with an awe-stricken face; its speed never failed to amaze him. He observed:

"These buildings certainly look lifeless. Well, what now, Carse?"

"A search." He planned it out in his head, then gave quick orders. "Ban," he directed, "you go through all the out-buildings, your gun

ready. The five main ones are a workshop, a power-house, storehouse, a ship hangar and a barracks for coolies. Whoever you find, take prisoner. Keep in touch with me by radio."

"Friday," he continued, "I'm leaving you here. First get these bodies in that guard-house they came out of. Then keep sharp watch. I don't think Ku Sui will return within fifteen minutes, but we must take no chance. At the first sign of him, warn me."

"Yes, suh. But what are you goin' to do?"

"Take over the central building," said the Hawk. "And then, when the whole place has been reconnoitered, fulfil my promise to the brains."

"And what about Ku Sui?"

"Later," he said. "It should not be hard to take him prisoner.... Now, enough!"

The three parted.

CHAPTER IV

The Voice of the Brains

The central structure of the group of buildings was shaped like a great plus-mark, each of its four wings of identical square construction, with long smooth metal sides and top, and with a door at the end giving entrance to a corridor that ran straight through to the chief central laboratory of Dr. Ku Sui.

Carse skimmed swiftly, two feet off the glittering metallic soil, towards the end of the nearest wing, where he gently landed. He tried the door giving entrance. It was open. He cautiously floated through into complete darkness.

The Hawk was prepared for that. He drew a hand-flash from the belt of his suit, and, standing motionless, his raygun ready in his left hand, he probed the darkness with a long white beam. Spaced evenly along the sides of the corridor were many identical doors, and at the end a larger, heavier door which gave entrance to the central laboratory. He found no life or anything that moved at all, so, methodically, he set about inspecting the side rooms.

The doors were all unlocked, and he moved down the line without alarm, like a mechanical giant preceded by a sweeping, nervous flow of light. Such he might from the outside have appeared to be, but the man within himself was more like a cat scenting for danger, all muscles and senses delicately tuned to alertness. Door by door, a

cautious and thorough inspection; but he found nothing of danger. All the rooms of that wing were used merely for stores and equipment, and they were quite silent and deserted. When he came at last to its end, Carse knew that the wing was safe.

He paused a minute before the laboratory door. He had expected to find it locked, and that he would have to seek other means of entrance; but it was not. By pushing softly against it, it easily gave inward on silent well-oiled hinges. He entered.

Carse found himself in a place of memories, and they were sharp and painful in his brain as he stood there. Here so much had happened: here death, and even more than death, had been, and was, so near!

The high-walled circular room was dimly lit by daylight tubes from above. The damage he, Carse, had wrought when besieged in it, a week before, had all been repaired. The place was deserted—it seemed even desolate—but in Carse's moment of memory it was peopled. There had been the tall, graceful shape in black silk; there the operating table and the frail old man bound on it; there the four other men, white men and gowned in the smocks of surgeons, but whose faces were lifeless and expressionless. Dr. Ku Sui and his four assistant surgeons and his intended victim, Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow....

They were all gone from the room now, but there was in it one thing of life that had been there before. It lay behind the inlaid screen which, standing on roller-legs, lay along the wall at one place. The Hawk did not look behind the screen. He could see under it, to know that no one lurked there. He knew what it was meant to conceal. There his promise lay.

But his promise could not be fulfilled immediately. There were four wings to the building, four doors leading into the laboratory, and he had inspected but one.

An open door to his right revealed a corridor similar to the one he had reconnoitered. He repeated down it his methodical search and found no one. Then he returned to the laboratory.

Surely there were men somewhere! Surely someone was behind one of the two closed doors remaining! Gun and flashlight still at the ready, Carse listened a moment at the nearest one.

Silence. He grasped the knob, turned it and quickly threw the door open. A rapid glance revealed no one. Wary and alert, he passed through, and discovered that in this wing were the personal living quarters of Dr. Ku Sui.

The quarters were divided into five rooms: living room, bedroom, library, dining room and kitchen, and the huge metal figure passed through all five, the cold gray eyes taking in every detail of the comfortable but not luxurious furnishings. There was a great interest to him, but it would have to wait.

He reentered the laboratory and went to the remaining door. Bending his head he again listened. A sound—a faint whisper? He fancied he heard something.

Ready for whatever it was, Carse pulled the door wide. And before him he saw the control room of the asteroid, and the men for whom he had been hunting.

They were white men. Carse recognized them immediately as the four assistants of Dr. Ku Sui. Once, they had been eminent on Earth, respected doctors of medicine and brain surgery, leaders in their profession: now they were like the mechanicalized coolies. For their brains, too, the Eurasian had altered, divested of all humanity and individuality, so as to utilize unhampered their skill with medicine and scalpel.

They were clad in soft yellow robes and seated at ease at one end of a room crowded with a bewildering profusion of gauges, machines,

instruments, screens, wheels, levers, and other nameless controlling devices. They did not show surprise at the huge clumsy figure that stood suddenly before them, a raygun in one hand. Like the coolies, their clean-cut features did not change under emotion. All they did was rise silently, as one, gazing at the adventurer out of blank eyes, saying nothing, and making no other move.

Carse tried simple measures in dealing with them. His voice gentle yet firm, he said:

"You must not try to obstruct me. You have seen me before under unfortunate conditions, yet I want you to know that I am really your friend. I mean you no harm; but you must realize that I have a gun, and believe that I will not hesitate to use it if you resist me. So please do not. I only want you to come with me. Will you?"

They were simple words, and what he asked was simple, but would the meaning reach these violated brains? Or would there instead be the desperate reaction of the coolies, who had tried to kill him? Carse waited with genuine anxiety. It would be hard to shoot them, and he knew he could not shoot to kill.

A moment of indecision—and then with relief he saw all four, with apparent willingness, move forward towards him. He directed them

through the laboratory and, without sign of resistance, herded them down the corridor he had first searched to the outside.

The light of Jupiter, flooding undiminished through the dome, dazzled him at first. When he could see clearly, he distinguished the great form that was Friday standing motionless by the small port-lock, and, an equal distance away, moving around one of the out-buildings, another similar figure. He spoke by radio.

"Find any, Ban?"

Cheerful words came humming back.

"Only one coolie, Carse. Had no trouble after I disarmed him. He's now locked inside a room in this building. Safe place for prisoners."

"Good," said Carse. "You can see I've got four men—white men. I believe they're unarmed and quite harmless, but I want you to take them, search them and put them away in that room too."

"Coming!"

The distant form rose lightly, skimmed low over the open area between, and grew into the grinning, freckle-faced Ban Wilson. He bounced down awkwardly, almost losing his balance, then surveyed,

wonderingly, the four assistants of Ku Sui.

"By Betelgeuse!" he muttered, "—like robots! Horrible!"

"Yes," said the Hawk shortly. "You had no trouble, eh?"

Ban grinned again. "Nothing to mention. This has been soft, hasn't it?"

"Don't be too optimistic, Ban. All right—when you've put these men in the room, please relieve Friday. Send him to me in the laboratory —he knows where it is—and stand watch yourself. If Ku Sui appears—"

"I'll let you know on the instant!"

Hawk Carse nodded and turned back into the corridor from which he had just come. Now he would fulfil his promise. With no possibility of a surprise attack from anyone within the dome, and Ban Wilson posted against the return of Ku Sui, he could attend unhampered to the vow which had brought him there.

He returned to the central laboratory. Quickly be rolled back the high screen lying across one part of the curved wall and stood looking at what was behind it. The monstrousness of that dead-and-alive

mechanism overwhelmed his thoughts again.

Before him stood a case, transparent, hard and crystal-like, as long as a man's body and half as deep, standing level on short metal legs. What it contained was the most jealously guarded, the most precious of all Dr. Ku Sui's works, the very consummation of his mighty genius, his treasure-house of wisdom as profound as man then could know. And more: it held the consummation of all that was so coldly unhuman in the Eurasian. For there, in that case, he had bound to his will the brains of five of Earth's greatest scientists, and kept them alive, with their whole matured store of knowledge subservient to his need, although their bodies were long since dead and decayed.

For some time the adventurer stood lost in a mood of thoughts and emotions rare to him—until he was startled back into reality by a heavy, clumping noise coming down the corridor through which he had entered. His gun-hand flickered to readiness, but it was only Friday, coming as he had been ordered. Carse greeted the Negro with a nod, and said briefly:

"There's a panel in this room—over there somewhere—you remember—the place through which Ku Sui escaped when we were here before. It's an unknown quantity, so I want you to stand watch by it. Open your face-plate wide, and warn me at the slightest sound

or sight of possible danger."

The Negro nodded and moved as silently as was possible in his space-suit to obey. And Carse turned again to the thing to which he had made a promise.

The icy-glittering case was full of a colorless liquid in which were grouped at the bottom, several delicate, colored instruments, all interconnected by a maze of countless spidery silver wires. Sheathes of other wires ran up from the lower devices to the case's main content—five grayish, convoluted mounds that lay in shallow pans—five brutally naked things that were the brains of scientists once honored and eminent on Earth.

Their bodies has long since been cast aside as useless to the ends of Ku Sui, but the priceless brains had been condemned to live on in an unlit, unseeing deathless existence: machines serving the man who had trapped them into life in death. Alive—and with stray memories, which Ku Sui could not banish entirely, of Earth, of love, of the work and the respect that had once been theirs. Alive—with an unnatural and horrible life, without sensation, without hope. Alive—and made to aid with their knowledge the man who had brought them into slavery unspeakable....

Hawk Carse's eyes were frigid gray mists in a graven, expressionless face as he turned to the left of the case and pulled over one of the well-remembered knife switches. A low hum came; a ghost of rosy color diffused through the liquid in the case. The color grew until the whole was glowing jewel-like in the dim-lit laboratory, and the narrow tubes leading into the undersides of the brains were plainly visible. Something within the tubes pulsed at the rate of heart-beats. The stuff of life.

When the color ceased to increase, Carse pulled the second switch, and moved close to the grille inset in a small panel above the case.

Slowly, gently he said into the grille:

"Master Scientist Cram, Professors Estapp and Geinst, Doctors Swanson and Norman—I wish to talk to you. I am Captain Carse, friend of Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow. Some days ago you aided us in our escape from here, and in return I made you a promise. Do you remember?"

There was a pause, a silence so tense it was painful. And then functioned the miracle of Ku Sui's devising. There came from the grille a thin, metallic voice from the living dead.

"I remember you, Captain Carse, and your promise."

A voice from living brain cells, through inorganic lungs and throat and tongue! A voice from five brains, speaking, for some obscure reason which even Ku Sui could not explain, in the first person, and setting to mechanical words the living, pulsing thoughts that sped back and forth inside the case and were coordinated into unity by the master brain, which had once been in the body of Master Scientist Cram. A voice out of nothingness; a voice from what seemed so clearly to be the dead. To Hawk Carse, man of action, it was unearthly; it was a miracle the fact of which he could not question, but which he could not hope to understand. And well might it have been unearthly to anyone. Even to-day.

Still thrilling to the wonder of it, he went on:

"I have returned here to the asteroid with friends. Primarily I came to keep my promise to you, but I intend to do more. Dr. Ku Sui is not here now, and will not be for at least fifteen minutes; but when he does return, I am going to capture him. I am going to take him alive."

He was silent for a moment.

"Perhaps you do not know," he continued levelly, "but the people of Earth hold Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow responsible for your disappearance. He is therefore a fugitive, and there is a price on his head. It is my purpose to restore Eliot Leithgow to his old place by returning Dr. Ku to Earth to answer for the crimes he has effected on you.

"I am now ready to fulfil my promise to you. I expect no interruption this time. I regret exceedingly my inability to destroy you when I was here before, but I simply could not in the little time I had. I still do not know how best to go about it. Perhaps you will tell me. I will wait...."

An afterthought came to him. He added into the grille:

"There is no hurry. Your extraordinary position—your thoughts—I understand...."

Then there was a long silence. For once the Hawk was not impatient; in fact there was in him the feeling that the pause was only decent and fitting. For before him were the brains of five great scientists, who as captive remnants of men had asked him to end their cold and lonely bondage. Limbless, his was to be the hand of their self-immolation. The present silent, slow-passing minutes were to be

their last of consciousness....

And then at last spoke the voice:

"Captain Carse, I do not wish you to destroy me. I wish you to give me new life. I wish you to transplant me within the bodies of five living men."

The words, so unexpected, took Hawk Carse by perhaps the greatest surprise he had ever known. For a time he was completely astounded; he could hardly credit his ears. It required a full minute for him to summon even the most halting reply.

"But—but could that be done?" He strove to collect himself, to consider logically this course that he had never dreamed would be requested. "Who could do it? I know of no man."

"Dr. Ku Sui could transplant me."

"Ku Sui? He could, but he wouldn't. He would destroy you, rather."

Almost immediately the artificial voice responded:

"You have said, Captain Carse, that you will soon have Ku Sui captive. Will you not attempt to force him to do as I desire?"

Carse considered the suggestion, but it did not seem remotely possible. Ku Sui could not be prevented from having endless opportunities for destroying the brains while enjoying the manual freedom necessary to perform the operations of re-embodying them.

"I do not see how," he began—and then he cut off his words abruptly.

Something had come into his mind, a memory of something Eliot Leithgow had told him once, long before. Slowly the details came back in full, and at their remembrance his right hand rose to the odd bangs of flaxen hair concealing his forehead and began to smooth them, and a ghost of a smile appeared on his thin lips.

"Perhaps," he murmured. "I think ... perhaps...."

He said decisively into the grille:

"Yes! I think it's quite possible that I can force Ku Sui to transplant you into living bodies! I think—I think—I cannot be sure—that it can be done. At least I will make a very good attempt."

The toneless, mechanical voice uttered:

"Captain Carse, you bring me hope. My thoughts are many, and they

are grateful."

But the Hawk had made a promise, and had to be formally freed of the duty it entailed.

"You release me, then," he asked, "from my original promise to destroy you?"

"I release you, Captain Carse. And again I thank you."

The adventurer returned the switches motivating the case, and the faint smile returned to his lips at the thought that had come to him.

But the smile vanished suddenly at the quick, excited words that came crackling into his helmet receiver.

"Carse? Carse? Do you hear me?"

He threw over his microphone control.

"Yes, Ban? What is it?"

"Come as fast as you can. Just caught sight of three distant figures flying straight towards here. It's Ku Sui, returning!"

CHAPTER V

"My Congratulations, Captain Carse!"

A few minutes later the trap was in readiness.

It had been swiftly planned and executed, and it promised well. Both the inner and outer doors of the smaller port-lock lay ajar. Hawk Carse was gone from view. The only figure visible there was that which lay sprawled face-downward on the ground close to the inner door of the port-lock.

The figure seemed to have been stricken down in sudden death. It was clad in the trim yellow smock of a coolie of Ku Sui. It was limp, its arms and legs spreadeagled, and it lay there as mute evidence that the dome of the asteroid had been attacked.

To one entering from outside, the figure was that of a dead coolie. The coolie that had worn those clothes was dead; his clothes now covered the wiry length of freckle-faced Ban Wilson.

Ban played the game well. His face lay in the ground, pointed away from the lock, so he could not see what was going to happen behind him: but before the Hawk had directed him to take off his suit and

don the yellow smock, he had glimpsed, rising swiftly over the southernmost barrier of hills that edged the valley, three black dots coming fast toward the asteroid in straight, disciplined flight, and he knew that the leader of the three was Dr. Ku Sui.

As he lay limp on the ground, playing his important part as the decoy of the trap, he knew that his life depended on the action and the skill and the timing of Hawk Carse. But he did not worry about that. He had implicit faith in the Hawk, and trusted his life to his judgment without a tremor.

Still, it was hard for Ban to throttle down his excessively nervous nature and maintain the dead man pose for the long silent minutes that crawled by before there came any sound from behind. The Jupiter-light, flooding down on him from the glittering blue sky above, was hot and growing hotter, and of course he began to itch. Had he had the freedom of his limbs, he would not have itched, he knew; it happened only when he had to keep absolutely still; he cursed the phenomenon to himself. Minute after minute, and no sound to tell him what was happening behind, or how close the three approaching figures had come, or whether Carse was at all visible or not—and the mounting, maddening itch right in the middle of his back!

At last Ban's mental cursings stopped. His straining ears had caught a sound.

It was quickly repeated, and again and again—the heavy, grating noise of metal on metal. The boots of space-suits on the metal floor of the port-lock. They had arrived!

Ku Sui would be there, close behind him; probably gazing at his outflung figure; probably puzzled, and suspicious, and quickly looking around for the enemies that had apparently killed one of his coolies. With a raygun in hand—and guns in the hands of the two others with him—glancing warily around over the guard-chamber close to the port-lock, and the main buildings beyond, and the whole area inside the dome, and seeing no one.

And then—approaching!

Ban could tell it by the silence, then the harsh crunch of the great boots against the powdered, metallic upper crust of ground. But he lay without an eyelash's flickering, a dead coolie, limp, crumpled. He heard the crunch of boots come right up to him and then pause; and the feeling that came to his stomach told him unmistakably that a man was looking down on him....

Now—while Ku Sui's attention was on him—now was the time! Now! Otherwise the Eurasian would turn him over and see that he was white!

It seemed to Ban centuries later that he heard the welcome voice of the Hawk bark out:

"You are covered, Dr. Ku! And your men. I advise you not to move. Tell your men to drop their guns—sh!"

The sound of the voice from the guard-chamber was replaced by two spits of a raygun. Unable to restrain himself, Ban rolled over and looked up.

He saw, first, the figure of the Hawk. Carse had stepped out from where he had been concealed, in the guard-chamber, and was holding the gun that had just spoken. Standing upright, close to the inner door of the port-lock, were two suit-clad coolies. Ban saw that they had turned to fire at Carse, and that now they were dead. Dead on their feet in the stiff, heavy stuff of their suits.

Dr. Ku Sui was standing motionless above him, and through the open face-plate of the Eurasian's helmet Ban could see him gazing at Hawk Carse with a strange, faint smile on his beautifully chiselled,

ascetic face.

The Hawk came towards them, the raygun steady on his old foe; but while he was still yards away, and before he could do anything to prevent it, the Eurasian spoke a few unintelligible words into the microphone of his helmet-radio. Carse continued forward and stopped when a few feet away. Dr. Ku bowed as well as he could in his stiff suit and said courteously, in English:

"So I am trapped. My congratulations, Captain Carse! It was very neatly done."

The two puffed-out, metal-gleaming figures faced each other for a moment without speaking. And in the silence, Ban Wilson, watchful, with a raygun he had drawn from his belt, fancied he could feel the long, bitter, bloody feud between the two, adventurer and scientist, there met again....

Carse spoke first, his voice steel-cold.

"You take it lightly, Dr. Ku. Do not rely too much on those words you spoke in Chinese. I could not understand them—but such things as I do not know about your asteroid I have already guarded against; and I think we can forestall whatever you have set in action.... You

will please take off your space-suit."

"Willingly, my friend!"

"Watch close, Ban," said the Hawk.

Dr. Ku Sui unbuckled the heavy clasps of his suit, unscrewed the cumbersome helmet, and in a moment stepped free. At the suit slid to the ground, there stood revealed his tall, slim-waisted form, clad in the customary silk. He wore a high-collared green silk blouse, tailored to the lines of his body, full trousers of the same material, and pointed red slippers and red sash, which set the green off tastefully. A lithe, silky figure; and above the silk the high forehead, the saffron, delicately carved face, the fine black hair. Half-veiled by their long lashes, his exotic eyes rested like a cat's on his old enemy.

The Hawk moved close to him, and swiftly patted one hand over his body. From inside one of the blouse's sleeves he drew a pencil-thin blade of steel from its hidden sheath. He found no other weapon. Stepping back, he quickly divested himself of his suit also.

"And now, Captain?" the Eurasian murmured softly.

"Now, Dr. Ku," answered Carse, once again a slender, wiry figure in

soft blue shirt and blue denim trousers, "we are going to have a little talk. In your living room, I think.

"Ban," he continued. "I don't believe there's anyone else who can even see the asteroid, but we have to be careful. Will you stay on guard here by the port-lock? Good. Close its doors, and yell or come to me if anything should occur."

He turned to the waiting Eurasian again.

"You may go first, Dr. Ku. Into the laboratory, and then to the living room of your quarters."

They found Friday on guard where he had been stationed in the laboratory. The big Negro, on recognizing the Eurasian, grinned from ear to ear and gave him what he considered a witty greeting.

"Well, well!" he said with gusto, "—come right in. Dr. Ku Sui! Make yourself at home, suh! Sure glad to have you come visitin' us!" He laughed gleefully.

But his words were wasted on Dr. Ku. His eyes at once fastened on the case of coordinated brains, standing at one side. Carse noticed this.

"No. Dr. Ku," he said. "I have not touched the brains. Not yet. But that's what we're going to talk about." He motioned to one of the four doors connecting the central laboratory with the building's wings. "Into your living room please, and be seated there. And no sudden moves, of course: I have a certain skill with a raygun. Friday, keep doubly alert now. Better take off your suit. I will call for you in a few minutes."

Ku Sui walked on silent feet into the first division of his personal quarters, the softly-lit living room. A lush velvet carpet made the floor soft; ancient Chinese tapestries hid the pastelled metal of the walls; books were everywhere. It was a quiet and restful room, with no visible reminder of the asteroid and its controlling mechanics.

Dr. Ku sank into a deep armchair, linked his fingers before him and looked up inquiringly.

"We were going to talk about the brains?" he asked.

Carse had closed the door behind him, and now remained standing. He met the masked green eyes squarely.

"Yes." He was silent for a little, then, quietly and coldly he went to the point.

"You'll be interested to hear that I have talked with the brains and been relieved of my premise to destroy them. They requested something else. Now I have committed myself to attempt their restoration into living bodies."

"So?" murmured the Eurasian. "So. Yes, Captain, that is very interesting."

"Very." The Hawk spoke without trace of emotion. "And some courtroom on Earth will find more than interesting the testimony of your re-embodied brains."

Dr. Ku Sui smiled in answer. "Oh, no doubt. But, my friend—this transplantation—you accept its possibility so casually! Won't it prove rather difficult for you, who have never even pretended to be a scientist?"

"Not difficult. Impossible."

"And Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow—I have unbounded respect for his genius, but brain surgery is a specialty and I really think that this task would be outside even his capabilities. I am sure he himself would admit it."

"You are right, Dr. Ku: he has admitted it. We both realize there is only one person in the universe who could achieve it—you. So you will have to perform the operations."

"Well!" said Dr. Ku Sui. The smooth, fine skin of his brow wrinkled slightly as he gazed up at the intent man facing him. "Is this just stupidity on your part, Captain? Or do you attempt a joke at which in courtesy I should smile?"

The Hawk answered levelly: "I was never farther from joking in my life."

With a delicate shrug of his silken shoulders, Ku Sui averted his eyes. As if bored, he glanced around the room. Slowly he unclasped his hands.

"I am a very fast shot, Dr. Ku," whispered Carse. "You must not make a single move without my permission."

At that the Eurasian laughed aloud, a liquid laugh that showed his even teeth between the finely cut lips.

"But I am so completely in your power, Captain Carse!" He held on to the last syllable, a low, sustained hiss—and then he snapped it off.

"S-s-stah!" His mood had changed: the smile vanished from a face suddenly thin and cruel; the green eyes unmasked, to show in their depths the tiger.

"What insane talk! You say such things to me! Don't you know that to coordinate those brains I worked for years with a devotion, a concentration, a genius you can never hope even to comprehend? Don't you realize they're the most precious possession of the greatest surgeon and the greatest mind in the universe? Don't you understand that I've fashioned a miracle? Realize these things, then, and marvel at yourself—you who, with your gun and your egotism, think you can make me undo their wonderful coordination!"

The tiger returned behind the veil, its power and fury again leashed, and Dr. Ku Sui relaxed his green eyes once more masked and enigmatic. Hawk Carse asked simply:

"Could you transplant the brains?"

"You insist on continuing this farce?" murmured the Eurasian. "I would not be rude, but really you try my patience!"

"Could you transplant the brains?"

Dr. Ku Sui looked at the colorless face with its eyes of ice. With a trace of irritation, he said:

"Of course! What I have once transplanted, I can transplant again. But I will not do it—and my will no one, and no force, can alter. Perhaps it is clear now? In no way can you touch my will. I am sorry that I so grossly insulted you, Carse, for there are certain things about you that in a small way I respect. But here you are helpless."

"Not entirely," said the Hawk.

Ku Sui leaned forward a trifle. In that moment, perhaps, he first felt real concern, for Carse's quiet voice was so confident, so assured. He attempted to sound him out.

"A gun?" he asked. "Torture? Threats? These against my will? Absurd! Consider, my friend—even if I seemed to consent to the operations, could I not easily destroy the brains while ostensibly working on them?"

"Of course," said Carse, with a faint smile. "And threats and torture would be absurd. Against your will, Dr. Ku, a more powerful weapon will have to be used."

The Eurasian's eyes were brilliant with intuition.

"Ah—I see," he murmured. "Eliot Leithgow!"

"Yes, Dr. Ku!"

The two gazed at each other, Carse still with the faint smile, the other with the face of a statue. Presently the adventurer went on:

"Unfortunately for you, Eliot Leithgow can provide a method of compulsion neither you nor any other man could ever resist. Not guns, torture, threats—no. A subtler weapon, worthy of your fine will."

As he spoke, Carse saw the Eurasian's green eyes narrow, and in the pause that followed he knew that the swift, trained mind behind those eyes was working. What would it evolve? What move? And those Chinese words, uttered out by the port-lock—what would they result in, and when? Dr. Ku Sui was concerned now, the Hawk knew, seriously concerned, and inevitably, would take serious steps. What was growing in his resourceful brain? He would have to ward off any trouble when it came, for he could not know now. He said curtly:

"But enough of that. Now, I have a trifling favor to ask of you—something concerning the laboratory. Will you please return to it."

A strange light glimmered for an instant in Dr. Ku Sui's eyes—a mocking of the slender man before him. Only for an instant; then it was gone. Gracefully he raised his tall figure.

"The laboratory? Of course, my friend. And as for the favor—almost anything."

CHAPTER VI

The Deadline

Friday greeted them with another wide grin, and would again have bludgeoned the Eurasian with his wit had not the Hawk motioned him to silence. Looking at Dr. Ku, he said:

"I have Friday posted here because of the secret panel somewhere in this wall. You escaped through it before—do you remember?"

"Of course I remember. And if I'd had merely a fraction of your luck then, my present situation would be quite different."

"Perhaps," said the Hawk. "This panel is now the unknown quantity

so far as I'm concerned, and I don't like unknown quantities; so I am asking you to show me where it is and how it works. That's my favor. Of course you can refuse to reveal it, but that will not delay me very long. The method of compulsion I mentioned...."

Dr. Ku-Sui appeared to reflect a moment, but his decision was not tardy in coming. He smiled.

"You terrify me, Captain, with your ominous hints about compulsion. I suppose I'd better be reasonable and show it to you. Really, though, your concern over the panel is rather wasted, inasmuch as it conceals nothing more than a small escape passage leading out of this building. Nothing important at all."

But his words, Carse somehow felt, were a screen; something else lay beneath them. He watched the tall figure with its always present odor of tsin-tsin blossoms move forward in a few indecisive steps, then back again, considering. The smile and the easy words were a camouflage, surely—but for what?

"Nothing important at all." Dr. Ku Sui repeated pleasantly. "Come. I will show you. Friday—if I may so address you—over on that switchboard you will find a small lever-control. It is the one with a Chinese character above it. Will you be so kind as to throw it?"

The Negro glanced inquiringly at his master. Grimly Carse nodded.

An enigmatic light glimmered in the Eurasian's green eyes as they watched the Negro go to the switchboard and put thumb and forefinger on the control.

"Only a small escape passage," he said deprecatingly as the Hawk crouched, gun ready, his eyes on the suspected place in the wall.

Friday threw the switch.

Immediately there sounded a short, sharp explosion. And acrid smoke billowed out from under the case of coordinated brains!

Carse sprang to Ku Sui, gripped one arm and cried harshly:

"What have you done?"

"Not I, Captain—your obedient servant, the Black. Please, your fingers—" He removed them from his arm; and then, smiling, he said:

"I am afraid that all your assurance, your threats, are now but so much wasted breath."

"You mean—?"

"Surely, Captain," said Ku Sui, "you must have known I would provide for such an emergency, as this. I chose not to risk your darkly-hinted method of compulsion, and so had Friday remove the need for it. The Chinese character above the switch stands for 'Death.'"

Frigidly the Hawk asked: "You've destroyed the brains?"

"I have destroyed the brains." The Eurasian's voice was deep with a strange, unusual tone. "No matter: it was time. I am far, far ahead of that work, great though it was; it has destroyed itself with its inherent, irremediable fault. Yes, far ahead. Next time...." He appeared to lapse into profound and melancholy reflections; seemed to forget entirely the two men by him.

But the Hawk acted.

"We'll see," he said curtly. "Friday, watch the Doctor closely; this trick may be only the first." An intent, grim figure, he strode to the case of coordinated brains, pulled over the first of its two controlling switches, and stood silent while slowly the pulsings of light grew through the inner liquid and very slowly irradiated the five gray,

naked mounds that were human brains. The light came to full, and Carse threw over the second switch. He said into the grille:

"I am Captain Carse. I wish to know if you are aware of what has just happened. Do you hear me, and did you feel anything a minute ago?"

Silence. Friday, close to the Eurasian and watchful, hung breathless, hoping that words might come from the grille in answer. But the silken figure he watched was there only in body; Dr. Ku's mind was in a far space of his own.

Cold, unhuman words spoke out.

"Yes, Captain Carse, I hear you. I felt the vibrations of the explosion that occurred a minute ago."

"Hah!" grunted Friday, immediately relieved. "All bluff, suh! No damage to 'em at all!"

Carse asked quickly into the grille:

"You felt the explosion, but do you know what it meant?—what it did?"

Again a pause; and again the toneless voice:

"A vital part of the machinery through which I live his been destroyed. I have left only some three hours of life."

The Hawk returned to Ku Sui. "Is that true?" he snapped.

"Yes, Captain." The words made a whisper, gentle and melancholy, coming from afar. A man was turning back from the scanning of the long years of one phase of his life. "Three hours is all that is left to them.... But there was a fault inherent in such coordinated brains; it is just as well that they are going.... Ah, Carse. I am so far ahead of you ... but I tell you it is a painful thing to destroy so wonderful a work of my hands...."

Silence filled the laboratory. It was broken by the awful voice of the living dead.

"I release you from your second promise, Captain Carse. No doubt what happened was beyond your control.... I will soon be dead. Although there is still nourishment in my liquid, I grow weaker already. I am dying...."

Harshly, the Hawk asked a final question into the grille:

"Within what time will you retain the vitality necessary to undergo the initial steps of the transplanting operations? Do you know?"

Dr. Ku raised his head at this, though he seemed only mildly interested in what the reply would be.

"I think for two of the remaining three hours."

"All right!" said Hawk Carse decisively. He threw off the case's switches. "Dr. Ku," he said, "you've only succeeded in accelerating things. Now for speed! Friday, we're taking this asteroid to Eliot Leithgow's laboratory. Go see that the port-lock doors are closed tight, then you and Wilson hurry back here! Fast! Run!"

CHAPTER VII

To the Laboratory

When the Negro returned, panting, with Ban Wilson, it was to discover Carse in the control room of the asteroid. He was studying the multifarious devices and instruments: and they, seeing his face so set in concentration, did not disturb him, but went over to where Dr. Ku Sui sat in a chair, and posted themselves behind it.

The apparatus in the control room resembled that of any modern

space-ship of its time, except that there were extra pieces of unguessed function. Directly in front of Carse was the directional space-stick above its complicated mechanism: above his eyes was the wide six-part visi-screen, which in space would record the whole "sphere" of the heavens: while to his right was the chief control board, a smooth black surface studded with squads of vari-colored buttons and lights, These were the essentials, familiar to any ship navigator; but they were here awesome, for they controlled not the one or two hundred feet of an ordinary craft, but twenty miles of this space-ship of rock.

"Yes ... yes...." Carse murmured presently out of his study, then turned and for the first time appeared to notice Friday and Ban. He gave orders.

"Eclipse, you see the radio over there? Get Master Leithgow on it for me—protected beam. Ban, you bind Dr. Ku Sui in that chair, please."

Wilson was surprised.

"Bind him? Isn't he going to run this thing?"

"No."

"You're going to, Carse?"

"Yes. I don't quite trust Dr. Ku. The asteroid's controlled on the same principles as a space-ship: I'll manage. Please hurry, Ban."

"Cap'n., suh! Already got the Master Scientist!" called Friday from the radio panel. The Hawk strode swiftly to it and clamped the individual receivers over his ears.

"M. S.?" he asked into the microphone. "You're there?"

"Yes. Carse? What's happened?"

"All's well, but I'm in a tremendous hurry: I've only got time, now, to tell you we're on the asteroid with Dr. Ku prisoner, and that I'm undertaking to transplant the coordinated brains into living human bodies.... What? Yes transplant them! Please, M. S.—not now: questions later. I'm calling primarily to learn whether you have any V-27 on hand?"

Eliot Leithgow, in his distant laboratory, paused before replying. When his voice sounded in the receivers again, it was excited.

"I think I see, Carse! Good! Yes, I have a little—"

"We'll need a lot," the Hawk cut in tersely. "Will you instruct your assistants to begin preparing as much as they can in the next hour? Yes. And your laboratory—clear it for the operations, and improvise five operating tables. Powerful lights, too, M. S. Yes—yes—right—all accessories. Have someone stand by your radio; I'll radio further details while we're on our way."

"Right, Carse. All understood."

The Hawk remembered something else. "Oh, yes, Eliot—is everything safe in your vicinity?"

"There's a small band of isuanacs foraging around somewhere in the neighborhood, but otherwise nothing. They're harmless—"

"But possibly observant," finished Carse. "All right—I'll clear them away before descending to the lab. Until later, Eliot."

Carse switched off the microphone and turned to catch Friday's shocked expression. Carse looked inquiringly at his dark satellite.

"What's wrong?"

"Lordy, suh," the Negro whispered, "Dr. Ku could hear all you said! He'll know where Master Leithgow's laboratory is!"

The Hawk smiled briefly. "No matter, Eclipse. I'm quite sure the information will avail him nothing. For this ride to the laboratory will be his last ride but one." He turned. "We're starting at once. Ban, you've bound him well?"

"If he can get out of those knots," grinned Wilson, "I'll kiss him on the mouth!"

The Eurasian's nostrils distended. "Then," he said. "I most certainly will not try. But Captain Carse, may I have a cigarro before we start on this journey?"

Carse had gone over so the space-stick and his eyes were on the visi-screen, but he now turned them to his old foe for a moment. "Not just now, Dr. Ku," he said levelly. "For it might be that all but two puffs of it would be wasted. Yes—later—if we survive these next few minutes."

The remark did nothing to ease the tension of their leaving. Ban Wilson could not restrain a question.

"Carse, are you going to risk atmospheric friction all the way to the laboratory?"

"No. Haven't time for that. Up and down—up into space, then down to the lab—high acceleration and deceleration."

He grasped the space-stick, then in neutral, holding the asteroid motionless in the valley. He glanced at the visi-screen again, checked over the main controls and tightened his hand on the stick.

"Ready everyone," he said, and gently moved the stick up and forward.

There was, to the men in the control room, little consciousness of power unleashed: only the visi-screen and the bank of positional instruments told what had happened with that first, delicate movement of the space-stick. It was an experiment, a feeler. The indicators of the positionals quivered a little and altered, and in the visi-screen the hills of the valley, that a moment before had been quite close and large, had diminished to purple-green mounds below.

Then the accelerating sensations began. Carse had the "feel" of the asteroidal ship and his controlling hand grew bolder. The steady pressure on the space-stick increased, it went up farther and farther, and the whole mighty mass of the asteroid streaked out at a tangent through the atmosphere of Satellite III toward the gulf beyond.

With dangerous acceleration the gigantic body rose, and from outside there grew a moaning which was quickly a shrieking—a terrible, maddened sound as of a Titan dying in agony—the sound of the cloven atmosphere. Twenty miles of rock were hurled out by the firm hand on the space-stick, and that hand only increased its driving pressure when the screaming of the air died away in the depthless silence of outer space.

In one special visi-screen lay mirrored the craggy back-stretch of the asteroid, half of it clear-cut and hard in Jupiter's flood of light, the other half lost in the encompassing blackness of space. Over this shadowed portion a faint, unearthly glow clung close, the result of the terrific friction of the ascent. In miniature, in the regular screens, was Satellite III, but a distorted miniature, for its half-face appeared concave in shape, and dusted with the haze of its atmosphere.

The Hawk was visibly relieved. He turned to the silent Ku Sui.

"I must congratulate you, Dr. Ku," he said, "on the operation of the asteroid. It's as smooth as any ship. And now, your cigarro. Ban, have you one?"

Wilson produced a small metal case from which he extracted one of the long black cylinders.

"You will have to put it in my lips, please," murmured Dr. Ku. "Thank you. And a light? Again thanks. Ah...." He drew in the smoke, exhaled a fine stream of it from his delicately carved nostrils. "Good." Then he looked up pleasantly at the Hawk.

"And my congratulations to you, Captain. Not only on your expert maneuvering of my asteroid, but on everything: your resourcefulness, your decision, your caution. I have long admired these qualities in you, and the events of to-day, though for me perhaps unfortunate, increase my admiration. My own weak resistance, my attempt to frustrate your plans in connection with the brains—how miserable in comparison! It would seem, Captain, that you cannot fail, and that you will indeed succeed in giving the brains new life, so swiftly do you move. Yes, my congratulations!"

He drew at the cigarro, and the smoke wreathed gently around his ascetic saffron face. A faint, queer glint was visible under the long lashes that half-veiled his eyes as he continued:

"But I have a question, Captain. A mere nothing, but still—"

"Yes, Dr. Ku?"

"The living bodies into which you propose to transplant the brains—

where are they?"

Hawk Carse's face was stern and his voice frigid as he answered:

"Fortunately, those bodies are right here on the asteroid."

"Here on the asteroid, Captain? I don't understand. What bodies are here?"

"The bodies of your four white assistants, whom I have safely confined, and one of your robot-coolies, also confined. I did not intend to use these five, but, because you put a premium on time by your attempted destruction of the brains, it cannot be helped."

Dr. Ku Sui's impassive demeanor did not change. He did not seem in the least surprised. He puffed quietly at the cigarro and nodded.

"Of course, of course. You have five bodies right here on the asteroid. Yes."

"At least," continued Carse levelly, "I do not regret having to use the bodies of your men. They are no longer human: they are not men: they are in effect but machines of your making, Dr. Ku."

"Quite. Quite."

"I suppose you find it an unpleasant thought, to have to be the means of re-making them into whole, normal human beings?"

"On the contrary," breathed the Eurasian, "you inspire a very pleasant thought in my brain, Captain Carse—though I must confess it is not exactly the thought you mention." A smile, veiled by the smoke of the cigarro, appeared on his lips.

The Hawk looked at him closely: the words had a hidden meaning, and it was clear he was not intended to miss the implied threat. But what was Ku Sui's thought? Back in his mind an anxiety grew, indefinite, vague and devilish.

And that vague anxiety was still with him when, fifty-seven minutes later, the asteroid returned from its inverted U-flight, slowed in its hurtling drop from space and hovered directly over the secret, hidden laboratory of Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow.

CHAPTER VIII

White's Brain—Yellow's Head

To Friday it was a bad mistake to reveal the location of the laboratory to Dr. Ku Sui. From him above all men had that location

up to now been kept. Just a few days before, Hawk Carse had risked his life to preserve the secret. And yet now, deliberately, he was showing it to the Eurasian!

Nervously, Friday watched him, and he saw that his eyes were alive with interest as they scanned the visi-screen. It was too much for the Negro.

"Captain Carse," he whispered, coming close to the adventurer, "look, suh—he's seein' it all! Shouldn't I blindfold him?"

Carse shook his head, but turned to Dr. Ku, where he sat bound in the chair scrutinizing the visi-screen.

"Yes, Doctor," he said, "there it is—what you have searched for so long—the refuge and the laboratory of Eliot Leithgow."

"There, Captain?" murmured the Eurasian. "I see nothing!"

And true, the visi-screen showed nothing but a hill, a lake, a swamp, and the distant, surrounding jungle.

That spot on Satellite III had been most carefully chosen by the Master Scientist and Carse as best suiting their needs. It lay at least a thousand miles—a thousand miles of ugly, primeval jungle—from

the nearest unfriendly isuan ranch, and was diametrically opposite Port o' Porno. Thus it allowed Leithgow and Carse to come and go with but faint chance of being observed, and the steady watch kept through the laboratory's telescopic instruments lessened even that. And even if their movements to and from the laboratory had been observed, a spy could have discovered little, so ingeniously was the camouflage contrived to use to best advantage the natural features of the landscape.

At this spot on Satellite III there was a small lake, long rather than wide. At its shallow end, the lake lost itself in marshy, thick-grown swamps; at its deep end it washed against the slopes of a low, rounded hill. Topping the hill was a rude ranch-house, which to the casual eye would appear the unimportant habitation of some poor jungle-squatter, with beds of various vegetables and fruits growing around it, and guarded against the jungle's animals by what looked like a makeshift fence. The ground inside the fence had been cleared save for a few thick, dead stumps of oxi trees, gnarled and weather-beaten, which made the whole outlay look crude and desolate.

So desolate, so poor, so humble, as not to deserve a second glance from the lowest of scavenger or pirate ships. So misleading!

Carse had brought the invisible asteroid to a halt perhaps a half mile

above the hill. The minutes were slipping by, bringing the two-hour deadline ever closer, but he did not skimp his customary caution on approaching the laboratory. From the control room, he swept the electelscope over the surrounding terrain, and soon sighted the band of isuanacs Eliot Leithgow had mentioned.

Through the 'scope's magnifying mirrors they seemed but yards away, though they were wandering knee-deep in the marshes at the far end of the lake. All their repulsive details stood out clearly.

More beasts than men, were such isuanacs (pronounced ee-swan-acs), so called from the drug that had betrayed them step by step to a pit in which there was no intelligence, no light, no hope—nothing but their mind-shattering craving. In many and unpredictable ways did the drug ravish their bodies. They were outcasts from the port of outcasts, driven out of Porno into the wilderness, where they tracked out their miry ways searching ever for the isuan weed until some animal ended their enslavement, or the drug itself finally killed them in convulsions. They were the legion of the damned.

This band of half a dozen was typical, grubbing through the slime of the swamp, snarling at each other, now and again fighting over a leaf, then squatting down in the mud where they were, to chew on it, their torture of mind and body momentarily forgotten. Rags, mud-

caked and foul, partly covered their emaciated bodies: their hair was matted, their eyes blood-shot....

Carse noted their position and looked up at Friday.

"Get the Master Scientist for me, please," he requested. The radio connection took only seconds: and then he said into the microphone:

"Eliot? We're directly above you, as you probably have seen. All well?"

"Yes, Carse. The laboratory's in readiness. But those isuanacs—they're still outside."

"I've seen them, and I'm going to drive them away. Then I'll be down to you. Have the upper entrance ready."

The Hawk turned back to the controls. Taking the space-stick out of neutral, he moved it very slightly down and to one side. Ban and Friday, not understanding his intention, watched the visi-screen.

The whole mass of rock that was the asteroid changed position at a gentle speed. The band of isuanacs came nearer and nearer, and then were to the right. Completely oblivious of the great bulk hovering above them, they continued their grubbing through the swamp; and

then the asteroid was over the jungle beyond them, and lowering its craggy under-side.

The under-side brushed the crown of the jungle. The trees bent, crackled and broke, as if swept by a vicious but silent hurricane. Only a moment of contact; but in that moment a square mile of interwoven trees and vines was swept low—and to the isuanacs the effect, as was intended, was terrifying.

They stared at the phenomenon. There had been no sound, no whip of wind, nothing—yet all those trees had bent and crashed splintering to the ground. Their slavering lips open, the isuan weed forgotten, they stared: and then howling and shrieking they broke and went splashing off panic-stricken through the marsh.

In five minutes the band had disappeared into the jungle in the opposite direction and the district was cleared; and by that time Hawk Carse was again in his space-suit, out of the control room and busy at the mechanism of one of the great ship-sized port-locks in the dome, having left behind him both Ban and Friday to guard Dr. Ku.

He mastered the controls of the port-lock quickly, and swung inner and outer doors open. He glided through, and then, a giant, clumsy

figure, poised far out in the air, a soft breeze washing his face as he gazed down at the hill five miles below, judging his descent. As he did not use the infra-red instrument hanging from his neck, the asteroid might not have been there at all.

A moment or so later, after a straight, swift drop, Carse landed on the hill, close to a particular, gnarled oxi-tree stump. The nearby ranch-house looked deserted, the whole place seemed desolate. The Hawk waddled over to the stump, pressed a crooked little twig sticking out from it, and a section of the seeming-bark slid down, revealing the hollow, metal-sided interior of a cleverly camouflaged shaft.

There were rungs inside, but Carse could not use them. He squeezed himself in, closed the entrance panel, and, carefully manipulating his gravity controls, floated down. A descent of twenty-five feet, and he was on the floor of a short, level corridor with gray walls and ceiling.

Carse clumped along to the door at the other end of the corridor, opened it, and stepped into the hidden underground laboratory of Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow, which, with its storerooms, living quarters and space-ship hangar, had been built into the hollowed-out hill.

Welcome back, Carse!"

"Hello, Eliot," the Hawk nodded, rapidly divesting himself of the suit but retaining his infra-red device. "You've lost no time, I see."

The elderly scientist, his frail form clad in a buff-colored smock, turned and surveyed the laboratory. In the center of the square room five improvised operating tables were drawn up, each one flooded individually with, light from focused flood-tubes above in the white ceiling. Flanking them were tables for instruments and sterilizers, and, more prominent, two small sleek cylindrical drums, from one of which sprouted a tube ending in a breathing-cone.

"The best I could do on such short notice," Leithgow commented.

"Where are your assistants?"

"At work on the V-27. All I had on hand is in those cylinders."

"Much?"

"Enough for twelve hours for one man, but the process of its manufacture is accelerating; fortunately I had plenty of ingredients. Of course I've divined your intention, Carse. Ku Sui to perform the operations under the V-27. And it's possible, possible! It's

stupendous—and possible!"

"Yes," said the Hawk, "but more later. I'm going up now to get Dr. Ku. I'll use the air-car. It's ready?"

"Yes." Leithgow answered. "But, Carse—one question I must ask—"

The Hawk, already halfway to the door in the opposite wall of the laboratory, paused and looked back inquiringly.

"What bodies are to be used?"

"The only ones available, Eliot," the adventurer replied, "since Ku Sui, in his attempt to destroy the brains, left us only two hours—now one hour—to complete the first steps of the transfer. They'll be those four white assistants of his—those men, you remember, whose intellects he's dehumanized—"

"Yes, yes?" Leithgow pressed him eagerly. "And the fifth?"

"A robot coolie."

"Good God!"

"I know, Eliot! It won't be pleasant for one of those brains to find

itself in a yellow body. But it's that or nothing."

The scientist nodded slowly, his first expression of shock leaving his old face to sadness: "But, a coolie. A coolie...."

"Come, Eliot, we need speed! Speed! We've but an hour, remember, to complete the first steps! I'll have Ku Sui and the five men down immediately."

The Hawk opened the door and strode down the long corridor beyond. His footsteps were swiftly gone: and then the sound of another door opening and closing. In the laboratory there was a murmur from the old man.

"A coolie! A scientist's brain in that ugly yellow head! When consciousness returns, what a cruel shock!"

CHAPTER IX

Four Bodies

Hawk Carse had gone into Leithgow's ship hangar.

It was a vast place, occupying most of the hollowed-out space of the hill. Seventy feet high and more than two hundred feet long, it was,

and, like the rest of the rooms, metal-walled and sound-proofed. Eliot Leithgow's own personal space-ship, the Sandra, rested there on its mooring cradle, and by its side was the laboratory's air-car, an identical shape in miniature, designed for atmospheric transit.

The adventurer, a silent, swift figure, went straight to the air-car and climbed into its control seat. He tested the controls, found them responsive, then pressed a button set apart from the others: and the huge port-lock door set in the farther wall of the hangar slid smoothly open, revealing a metal chamber similar to that of the ship port-lock on Ku Sui's asteroid. But whereas the chamber of the asteroid's port-lock was for vacuum-atmosphere, this was for water-atmosphere.

The clamps of the mooring cradle were released, and the air-car moved gently into the lock chamber. The door swung shut behind. On the pressing of another button there sounded a gurgling and splashing of water, and quickly the chamber was filled. The air-car was now a submarine. All these operations were effected by radio control from within it.

When the water filled the inside of the chamber, the second door opened automatically, and the car started forward through a long steel-lined, water-filled tube. It continued on even keel until Carse,

watching through the bow window, saw a red light flash in the ceiling of the tube: and then he tilted the car and rose.

A second later, the shiny, water-dripping shape of the car broke through the surface of the lake that edged on the hill, and forsook the water for the air.

To an outside observer, the appearance of the air-car and its subsequent movements would have been incomprehensible. There lay the hill, desolate, barren, apparently lifeless: and there, washing against its slopes, the lake; nothing more. Then suddenly a curve of gleaming steel thrust up through the muddy water, rose swiftly almost straight into the cloudless blue of the sky, and as suddenly disappeared, and remained gone from sight, as if the ether had opened and swallowed it.

Using his infra-red device, Carse brought the car in neatly through the ship-size port-lock of the dome, and sped it across to the central building, to land lightly beside one of the wings. Debarking, he ran down the wing's passage and in a few seconds was back in the asteroid's control room.

Friday was sitting in a chair close by the bound Eurasian; Ban Wilson, more restless, was pacing up and down. The Hawk nodded

in response to their looks of welcome and issued curt orders.

"All ready. Ban, the air-car's just outside; go over and get those four men and the coolie and put them in it. Have your raygun ready, but don't use it if humanly possible. We're going down to the laboratory. I want speed. Please hurry."

"Right Carse!"

"Friday," the Hawk continued, "help me untie Dr. Ku."

They stooped to the chair and the impassive, silken figure sitting in it, and in a moment the bonds were ripped off; all save those on the wrists. Stretching himself, the Eurasian asked:

"You are taking the brains down now, Captain Carse?"

"No—just you, your assistants and that one coolie, this trip. Master Leithgow and I wish to have a talk with you."

"I am always agreeable, my friend."

"Yes," said the Hawk, "you'll be surprisingly agreeable. And truthful and helpful, too. Now—outside, please, and do not attempt to delay me in any way. I am in a great hurry, and consequently will not be

patient at any tricks." He turned to the Negro. "Friday. I'm leaving you here on guard. Stay alert, gun handy, and keep in radio contact. I'll be back soon."

"Yes, suh!"

Walking behind his captive, the Hawk left, passing down the wing to the air-car outside. There, Ban Wilson was waiting with the four white assistants of Dr. Ku and the one robot-coolie, all unarmed, stolid, emotionless. Carse placed them all in the rear seats of the car's compartment, Ban facing them with drawn raygun. Then with a hum from its generators the car raised, wheeled, slid forward, until through the large port-lock, and swooped down to the lake.

Dr. Ku Sui watched everything with an interest he did not attempt to disguise. There was being revealed to him the secret entrance to Eliot Leithgow's laboratory, and long had he sought for that laboratory, long pondered on its probable location. No doubt, at various times, pissing over, he had seen the barren hill and its flanking lake, but had never given them a second glance. Yet here, right in the lake, was the doorway to Leithgow's refuge!

The air-car lowered like a humming bird to the lake's surface, paused and dipped under. The light left the sealed ports and entrance

hatchway, and the water pressed around, dark and muddy. Down the car sunk, apparently without direction, its course very slow, until ahead, out of the blackness, a spot of red winked.

At once the air-car made towards it and slid into the tube leading through the hill. Quickly it was in the chamber of the lock, the outer door closed automatically behind, the water was drained out, and then the inner door opened and the car, dripping, emerged into the brilliantly-lit hangar and went to rest in its mooring cradle beside Leithgow's space-ship.

A minute later its passengers were in the laboratory of the Master Scientist.

Dr. Ku Sui took in the arrangements made in the laboratory with a swift glance, and then his eyes went to a door that opened in the opposite wall and to the slight, smock-garbed figure that came through it. He smiled.

"Ah, Master Leithgow! A return visit, you see. At Captain Carse's invitation. It is very interesting to me, this home of yours: so cleverly concealed!"

Leithgow vouchsafed his archenemy no more than a look, but turned

to the Hawk.

"You are ready, Carse?"

"Some preliminaries first, Eliot. These men, the four whites and the yellow, must be put in some place of safety. You can take care of them, Ban. One of the storerooms; lock them in. You remember your way? Then, better take off your suit."

Ban nodded, and led the five robot humans out. Leithgow, Hawk Carse and Ku Sui were left alone in the laboratory, and for a minute there was silence.

How much had passed between these three! How many plots, and counter-plots: how much blood: how many lives affected! The feud of Hawk Carse and Dr. Ku Sui—and Eliot Leithgow, who was the chief cause of it—here again had come to a head. Here again were all the varied forces of brains and guile, science and skill, marshaled in the great, vital game on whose outcome depended the restoration of Eliot Leithgow and the lives of the coordinated brains and, indeed, though more distantly, the fate of all the tribes of men on all the planets. For if Ku Sui won free he would go on irresistibly, and his goal was the domination of the solar system....

Three men, alone in a room—and the course of the creature Man being affected by their every move. Large words: but the histories of the period bear them out. Though, doubtless, Ku Sui alone knew how great were the stakes as they stood there in the laboratory.

Hawk Carse was uneasy. The odds seemed all on his side—yet there was Ku Sui's strange, almost imperceptible smile, his mysterious words up on the asteroid, his smooth, unruffled assurance! What did these things mean? He intended now to find out. He said, tersely:

"Eliot. I have informed Dr. Ku that he is to be the means of the transplantation of the coordinated brains to living human bodies, since he is the only person capable of performing the operations. He does not believe that we can force him to do our will, yet all the same he is taking no chances: he started the death of the brains. We shall have to work very fast—all right. But Dr. Ku has other cards to play against us, and I don't know what they are. You and I must find out now."

"I somehow feel that you mistrust me," interposed the Eurasian with mock sadness. "Ah, if you could only read my mind.... Or can you? Is that what you are coming to?"

The Hawk glanced at Leithgow; and Leithgow nodded, and placed a

metal chair close to one of the cylindrical drums—the one fitted with a tube and breathing cone.

"Will you sit there. Dr. Ku?" Carse asked.

The green eyes scanned the drum.

"A gas, Master Leithgow?"

"That is all. Not harmful, not painful."

"I see. I see...." the Eurasian murmured. And suddenly, he smiled at the two men facing him, and said pleasantly to Carse:

"Things repeat! Not long ago I asked you to sit in a chair and submit to a treatment of mine, and you did as I asked. After so gallant a precedent, how could I refuse? All right. Now, Master Leithgow, your gas!"

With gentle fingers Eliot Leithgow fitted the cone on the Eurasian's face and fastened it there. The fingers and thumb of one hand he kept on Dr. Ku's pulse; with the other he pulled over slowly a control set in the side of the drum. A ticking and slight hissing became audible, and two indicators on the drum quivered and crept downward.

A minute of this—the ticking and soft hissing, the indicator's slow fall, the silk-clad figure in the chair, watched closely by Carse on one side and Eliot Leithgow on the other—and a change was apparent. A ripple flowed over the Eurasian's silken garments; the body appeared to loosen up, to become free of all muscular and mental tension. The gas hissed on.

"The first step," murmured Leithgow abstractedly, out of his concentration on dials and patient. "The muscles—notice—relaxed. The will—the ego—the nexi of emotions and volitions which oppose external direction—all being worked upon, submerged, neutralized—but not his knowledge, not his skill. No—all that he will retain! You'll notice nothing more until you see his eyes. A few minutes. What says the red hand? Thirteen. At nineteen it should be completed."

Carse watched intently. It was wonderful to know that when the correct amount of this substance, which he knew only as V-27, had been administered, and Ku Sui awoke, there would be no enmity in him, no opposition to their demands, no fencing with wits; that this same Ku Sui, his great mentality unimpaired, would be subservient and entirely dependable.

"Seventeen," murmured the old scientist. "Eighteen ... now!" With a

flick of his fingers he shut off the stream of V-27 and gently unloosened the cone from Dr. Ku's face.

The ascetic features were in repose, the eyelids closed, their long black lashes lying against the delicate saffron of the skin. Dr. Ku Sui seemed resting in dreamless, unclouded sleep. But for only a moment. Soon the eyelids quivered and slowly opened—and a great change was immediately visible in the man's green eyes.

Many observers have recorded that under the veiled, enigmatic eyes of Dr. Ku Sui there lurked a sultry glimmer of fire; or perhaps it was that the observers who met these eyes always imagined the fire, being conscious of the devil and the tiger in the man. But Carse and Leithgow now saw that all that was gone.

No mask lay over the green eyes now, no spark of fire glinted deep in them. They were clear and serene; they hid nothing; almost they were the eyes of a fresh, innocent child. Dr. Ku Sui, he of a hundred schemes, a score of plots, he of the magnificent capacity and untiring brain bearing ever toward his goal of lordship of the solar system—it was as if he had slipped into a magic pool whose waters had washed him clean and given him innocence and eyes of peace....

The Eurasian breathed deeply, then smiled at the two men standing

by him.

"Now," whispered Eliot Leithgow. "Ask him anything. He will answer truthfully."

The Hawk lost no time. He asked:

"Dr. Ku, you will perform the brain transplantations for us?"

"Yes, my friend."

The man's tone was different. Gone was the suaveness, the customary polite mockery; it was frank, open, genuinely pleasant.

"Is it true, Dr. Ku, that your coordinated brains will die, if left in their case?"

"Yes, they will die if left there."

"Within what time, to save them, must the operations to transplant them into human bodies be started?"

"Within twenty-five, perhaps thirty, minutes at the most."

"Can all five brains be given the initial steps for transplantation into

the heads of your four white assistants and the coolie prisoner within one hour—the remaining half of the two hours the brains said they would retain the necessary vitality?"

Dr. Ku smiled at him. There was no malice in the thunderbolt that he unleashed then. He simply told what he knew to be the truth.

"By fast work they could be, and so saved, although the subsequent operations will take weeks. But the brains cannot be transplanted into the heads of my four white assistants."

"What?" Both the Hawk and Leithgow cried the word out together. "They cannot?"

Dr. Ku looked at them as though astonished.

"Why, no, my friends! I wish I were able to, but I cannot perform the operations by myself, unaided. That would be impossible, absurd.... You seem startled. Surely you must have known that those assistants would be vital to the work! I have taught them, you see; trained them; they were specialists in brain surgery to begin with, and I do not believe there are any others this side of Mars who could take their place in operations of this type. Without them, I could never transplant the brains."

This, then, had been the trick up his sleeve! This was why, in the control room of the asteroid, he had shown relief when the Hawk told him what bodies were to be used for the transplantation! For he had known that, whatever Eliot Leithgow's method of forcing him to perform the operations might be, and no matter how efficacious, the coordinated brains simply could not be put in the heads of his four assistants—because the assistants were themselves needed for the operations!

"Then—it's hopeless!" said the Master Scientist bitterly. "All this for nothing! You might find other bodies in Port o' Porno, Carse—condemned men, criminals—but Porno's an hour away, two hours' round trip, and in thirty minutes the brains will be too weak to save...."

"I am sorry," Ku Sui continued. "I should have told you before, perhaps. If there were any way out I knew of, I would tell you but there does not seem to be...."

"Yes," broke in Hawk Carse suddenly. His left hand had been pulling at his bangs of flaxen hair; his brain had been working very fast. He added coldly:

"Yes, there is a way."

Leithgow and Ku Sui looked at him inquiringly.

"We need four bodies," he went on. "We have one—the coolie; he is not needed to assist in the operations. Four bodies—and here, ready, in twenty-five minutes. Not the bodies of normal men, of those with life ahead of them. No. That would be murder. Four bodies of condemned men—men with no hope left, nothing left to live for. I can get them!"

He brushed aside Ku Sui's and Leithgow's questions. He was all steel now, frigid, intent, hard. "Ban!" he called. "Ban Wilson!"

"Yes, Carse?" Ban had been waiting outside the laboratory.

"Put on your propulsive space-suit. Hurry. Then here."

"Right!"

Carse ran over to where he had left his suit and rapidly got inside. As he did so, he said:

"Eliot, there's fast work to be done while I'm gone with Ban. You must take your assistants and Dr. Ku up to the asteroid in the air-car and transfer down here all the equipment Dr. Ku says he'll need. Be extremely careful with the case of coordinated brains. If you

possibly can, have everything in readiness by the time Ban and I return with the four bodies."

Ban Wilson, in his suit, entered the laboratory. The Hawk gestured him to the door which led to the tree-shaft to the surface.

"But, Carse, what bodies? Where can you get four more living human bodies?" Leithgow cried.

"No time, now, Eliot!" the Hawk rapped out, turning at the door. "Just do as I say—and hurry! I'll get them!"

And he was gone.

CHAPTER X

The Promise Fulfilled

Although puzzled by the Hawk's promise, Leithgow could only put his trust in it and go ahead with the preparations as he had been directed. He took two of his three laboratory assistants off their hurried manufacture of quantities of the V-27, and with Ku Sui went out into the air-car. Passing by way of tube and lake and air, they were quickly inside the dome on the asteroid, and then into Ku Sui's laboratory, where Friday waited on guard.

Completely docile and friendly, the Eurasian indicated the various instruments and devices he would need for the operations, and these were transported quickly. Then came the case of coordinated brains. Dr. Ku detached in connections with expert fingers, and all but Leithgow took a corner and carried it with infinite care to the air-car outside.

"Do I stay here, suh?" Friday asked the Master Scientist in a whisper. Though informed of the change in Dr. Ku effected by the V-27, he was still very suspicious of him. "Seems to me he's a bit too meek and mild, suh. I think I ought to go down and watch him."

Eliot Leithgow did not quite know what answer to give. The Eurasian forced the decision.

"I will need," he observed, in his new, frank voice, "all the assistance you can possibly give me. I am faced by a tremendous task, and the use of every man will be necessary. I would suggest, Master Leithgow that the Negro be brought down."

And so Friday came and the asteroid was left unguarded. A mistake, this turned out to be, but under the circumstances Eliot Leithgow could hardly be blamed for it. There was so much on their minds, so much work of vital importance, so desperate a need for speed, that

quite naturally other considerations were subordinated. The asteroid, to the naked eye, was invisible; it could attract no attention; its occupants had all been disposed of. Certainly it seemed safe enough to leave it unguarded for a while.

However, Eliot Leithgow took one precaution. Down in his own laboratory again, in the midst of the work of transferring Dr. Ku's operating equipment from the air-car, he called aside one of his assistants and instructed him to go and survey the asteroid through the infra-red device every ten minutes: and with this order the old scientist dismissed the matter from his mind, and turned all his energies to preparing the laboratory for the operations.

Under Ku Sui's directions his cases of equipment were brought in and arrayed, and the various drills and delicate saws, and such other instruments as worked by electricity, were connected. Everything was sterilized. Rapidly the plain, square room assumed the appearance of an operating arena, the five tables in the center, spotlessly white and clean under the direct beams of the tubes hanging from the ceiling, at the head of every table a stand on which were containers of antiseptics, bottles of etheloid, a breathing cone, rolls of gauze and other materials, and along the edge of the stand identical, complete sets of fine instruments.

The case of coordinated brains was brought into the laboratory last. The inner liquid was now dark and apparently lifeless; to the casual eye, it would not have seemed possible that the five grayish mounds immersed in the liquid held life. And, indeed, Leithgow looked at them doubtfully.

"Are you sure they're still alive? Do you think there's still time?" he asked Dr. Ku.

The Eurasian picked up a long, slender, tubelike instrument with a dial topping it. Then, going to the brain-case, he touched a cleverly concealed catch and a square pane set in the top of the case swung back. He dipped the instrument he held into the liquid, and for a moment stood silent, watching the dial. Then he took it out, re-closed the pane and turned to Leithgow.

"A test," he explained. "The indicator, interpreted means we have about forty-eight minutes in which to complete the first phase of the transplantation of the brains into human heads. It might be done if we start in eight minutes. But the human heads—?" He paused.

"Eight minutes!" said Leithgow worriedly. "Eight minutes for Carse to come! He promised the bodies, but ... well, we can only go ahead with the preparations and trust to him. Is everything ready?"

"All but my assistants. I had better see them now."

The Master Scientist issued an order to one of his men, and presently the four white assistants of Dr. Ku were led into the laboratory. For these men, no V-27 was needed; their brains were utterly subservient to Dr. Ku Sui, and his orders they would obey unquestioningly, no matter what the work. There was no danger from them.

They stood motionless, their eyes fastened on their master, as he spoke to them.

"Brain operations," he said. "These"—he indicated the case—"are to be transplanted again into human heads. You have done work similar to it before; you know the routine. But now it must be quick. Synchronize your speed with mine; I will be working very rapidly, and it is vital that you be in harmony with me every instant. When the bodies come, you will prepare the heads: and then you will attend me through every step. You understand." He turned to the old scientist. "Operating gowns, gloves, masks, Master Leithgow?"

"I have your own. Over there. Your black costume is among them."

But Leithgow's answer was abstracted. Four minutes for Carse to come! Or else, everything lost! He busied himself helping the four

surgeons and two of his own assistants into the white, sterilized gowns, and the masks that left only the eyes free and the skin-tight rubber gloves, but his mind was not with his actions. The old man looked very frail now; his age showed in the deep lines now eminent on his face. Three minutes—swiftly two....

"At least," observed Ku Sui, "we have one body ... the coolie. I had better start immediately on him."

"Bring him out," Leithgow instructed one of his men. "One brain will be saved. But—there! Thank God! Hear that? Coming down the passage? It's Carse, returning!"

It was Carse. He and Ban Wilson, coming down the passage from the top of the tree-shaft. Everyone in the laboratory could hear plainly the heavy, sliding tread of the great space-boots. Eliot Leithgow was first to the door. He opened it, peered through eagerly and called:

"Carse? You've got them?"

"Yes, Eliot. Here—we need help."

The Hawk's voice sounded weary. Friday and the scientist ran down

the passageway until they reached the adventurer. In the faint light, they saw he was carrying a limp body. He laid it carefully down on the floor.

"Ban's coming down with another," he said, "and there are two more above. Go up and get them, Friday."

The Negro started to obey. But Eliot Leithgow did not move, did not utter a sound. He stood staring at the body Carse had laid down. The parchmentlike skin of his face seemed to whiten; that was all; but he winced and slowly brushed his eyes with his hands when, in a moment, Ban Wilson floated down the shaft and, approached with a second unconscious body.

At last Leithgow whispered:

"They're all—like that, Carse?"

"Yes," answered the emotionless voice. "There were two others, but we let them go. They were worse." The gray eyes looked steadily at Eliot Leithgow. "I know," the Hawk said. "It's horrible—but it can't be helped. It was these or nothing. There was no choice."

Hawk Carse had fulfilled his promise. He had brought back four

isuanacs.

CHAPTER XI

Ordeal

Five bodies lay on the operating tables in Eliot Leithgow's laboratory. The air, hushed and heavy, was pervaded by the various odors of antiseptics and etheloid. The breathing cones had been applied to each of the bodies, and they were now locked fast in controlled unconsciousness.

On the first table lay the body of the robot-coolie, a man of medium size, sturdy, well-muscled, with the smooth round yellow face and stub nose of his kind. His short-cropped, bristly black hair had been shaved off; the head was now bald. That head was destined to hold the mighty brain of Master Scientist Raymond Cram.

On the second table lay a twisted, distorted thing, an apelike body with which fate had played grotesque pranks. It was hairy, of middle height, and its dark skin all over was wizened and coarse, almost like the bark of a tree. The legs were short and bowed, the hands stubby claws; the face, puckered even in unconsciousness, was that of a gargoyle in pain. The long matted hair had been shaved away; the

large pate washed with antiseptics. Soon, were the operation successful, that head would hold the brain of Professor Edgar Estapp, world-famous chemist and bio-chemist.

On the third table lay a shape skeletonlike in appearance, so emaciated was it, so closely did the bones press into the dry, fever-yellowed skin. Of one leg, only the stump was left; this creature had been forced to hop or crawl his way through the isuan swamps. The head, too, was no more than a skull, with great sunken dark-rimmed eyes, discolored fangs and loose, leathery lips. There had been no hair on this death's head; it had long been bald, and now, washed, clean for the first time in months or even years, it was to hold the brain of Dr. Ralph Swanson, Earth's one-time leader in the science of psychology.

On the fourth table lay a giant's body—but a hollow giant, a giant made thin and pitiful by the ravages of his destroyer, isuan. A roistering, free-booting space-ship sailor, this man may once have been, but, from the drug, the mighty arms had been twisted and shrivelled, the strong legs wasted away. One ear had been torn from the skull in an old brawl, and what was left was naked and ugly to the eye. Behind that bitter, drug-coarsened face would be the new home of the brain of Sir Charles Esme Norman, wizard of mathematics and once a polished, charming Englishman.

On the fifth table lay a dwarf. Its ridiculous body was not over four and a half feet long, though the head was larger than that of a normal man. In the old dark ages on Earth this body would have served for the jester of a lord, the comic butt of a king; in more recent times as the prize of a circus side-show. The huge, weighty head with its ugly brooding mask of a face, the child's body below—this was for the brain of Professor Erich Geinst, the solitary German who had stood preeminent on Earth in astronomy.

These creatures were the result of Hawk Carse's desperate search. They had composed, with one other, the band of isuanacs that had been rooting in the swamp at the end of the lake when the asteroid had first arrived. The Hawk had remembered them, and had quickly seen that they were the only answer to the problem. And so, with Ban Wilson, he had gone out for them, his mind steeled to the ghastly thought of the great scientists' brains in such bodies. In space-suits they had swept down on them. There had been no time for considerate measures: the four isuanacs had been abruptly knocked out by the impact of the great suits swooping against them, and carried back to the laboratory.

Eliot Leithgow had been shocked at the idea of a scientist's brain in the head of the robot-coolie; how much greater, then, was his horror when confronted by the need of using these appalling remnants of

men! But he could not protest. What else was there? Ku Sui, under the V-27, had spoken the truth: the operations would be impossible without the aid of his four assistants. The brains even now were dying. The choice was: bodies of isuanacs or death for the brains. The scientist and the adventurer had chosen.

Circumstances had required their use. Ku Sui's attempt to kill the brains, thus inflicting a time limit: the presence of the band of isuanacs near the laboratory; each circumstance with a long train of other, minor ones behind it. Chance or Fate—whatever it is—whether predetermined or accidental—men must wonder at its working, and know awe from its patterns and results. Seldom, certainly, was there a pattern more strange than this now being worked out in the laboratory of Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow.

The bodies lay there, washed, shaved and swathed in customary loose operating garments: globules of etheloid dropped steadily down into the breathing cones, of hunchback, living skeleton, twisted giant, dwarf and robot-coolie. One by one the isuanacs dropped with the falling of the etheloid into unconsciousness—and that was their farewell to the brains, each one debauched either by isuan-drug or skill of genius, that they had known.

And movement began in the laboratory. White-clothed figures,

masked and capped, used gleaming instruments in their gloved hands; and all the figures were mute—mute from their great concentration on the delicate work in progress—or mute from horror that would not die....

So began the ordeal.

Of its details, Hawk Carse knew little. They were not of his world. Only for the first half-hour could he follow intelligently what was being done. He too had put on a white robe, as had Ban Wilson and Friday; and he stood at one side of the room, a silent, intently watching figure, with the two other men of action, Ban and the Negro, while the rest moved in a kind of rhythm. The center-piece was the black-garbed Ku Sui, moving from this table to that, slim gloved hands flying, pausing, flying again, steadying, concentrating on a detail, once more sweeping forward. No more than single words came from him; he and his assistants worked almost as a whole, in perfect sympathy and coordination, and a constant stream of instruments flowed to him and then away, their task done.

The first table, and then to the second, with one white figure staying behind at the first, finishing off details of the work, left by the master. The third table; the fourth; the fifth; and then back to the first, while two white figures detached themselves from the main

group and went to the nearby case of coordinated brains. An object held in a specially formed type of pan was lifted out and carried to the first table; and Carse sensed a crisis in the attitudes of the working men. This, he knew, was the first great, step. A brain was being re-born. The fingers of men, and one man in particular, were fashioning a miracle.

How could he hope to understand? He could only hang on the movements of that group of figures, and feel relief as he saw them settle into smoothness again. Evidently the first crisis was past. A few minutes more were spent at the first table; then once more Dr. Ku Sui went to the second, and another object was carried from the coldly gleaming case.

And in a long, deep pan standing on short legs beside the case, something gray and shapeless and warm was placed.

The first phase came to an end when there were five similar things in the open pan, and nothing, except the liquid and a multitude of spidery, disconnected wires, in the case that but shortly before had harbored the brains of five scientists....

A pause. Relaxation. Tests. The black-clad figure spoke to one in yellow in a tone of pleased relief.

"Successful so far, Master Leithgow! We may congratulate ourselves on the consummation of the first step. It has been done, I believe, well within the time limit."

"Yes, Dr. Ku; yes. And now—how long will be needed to finish?"

"That is up to you. Normally, I would require a month. In that time all could be done safely, with small chance—"

"Too long!" said Leithgow.

Carse intervened:

"Why too long, Eliot?"

The old scientist went over close to him, and, in a lowered voice, explained:

"Ku Sui would develop immunity to the V-27 in a month. Two weeks of it would give him part immunity. Even ten days might. He has to be re-gassed four times a day."

"But, letting him come out of it every night and resting normally?" the Hawk objected.

"I have allowed for that. The gas would still be in his system. No—nine or ten days is the limit." He raised his voice again to reach the Eurasian. "Can you complete the work within nine days, Dr. Ku?"

Ku Sui considered it. At last he said:

"That is a lot to ask, Master Leithgow. But—it might be possible. However, it would mean prodigies of sustained, concentrated labor; work and skill never-ceasing. We'll have to work in shifts, naturally."

So it was arranged. All the assistants, both Ku Sui's and Leithgow's, were portioned off into shifts of four hours' sleep and eight hours' work: Carse, Ban Wilson and Friday, too, for now every one of them was needed.

Nine days for the work of a month—and work as delicate and vital as could possibly be! Small wonder that in the minds of all of them, the Hawk and the old scientist, and Ban and the Negro, that period, when remembered later, seemed no more than a confused, unreal, hazy dream; rather, a nightmare connected imperishably with the odors of an operating room, antiseptics, etheloid, and the glint of small, sharp instruments.

It was a titanic task, an ordeal that stretched to the limit the powers

of the men working in that confined space. Normal life for them ceased; the operating room became a new universe. Swiftly they lost consciousness of time, even with the routine of the changing shifts and the food which was brought in at regular hours. Antiseptics, etheloid, the never-ceasing flow of the instruments, the five bodies lying still and deathlike on the tables, the hard white glare of the light beating down on them—all this and nothing more—all sealed away underground from the life of the forgotten world above. On and on and on....

It is impossible even to conjecture how the mind of Ku Sui saw the colossal work that he was doing to aid his most bitter enemies. Even when he was normal there are only moments when, through some recorded speech or action of his, we can peer past the man's personality into his brain; how great a sealed mystery must his thoughts remain to us when held in that abnormal state by Eliot Leithgow's V-27! Envision it: this arch-foe of Hawk Carse and Leithgow helping their designs, lending all his intellect, his great skill, to their purposes, aiding them in everything! Certainly, afterwards, the memory of what he had been forced to do must have occasioned Dr. Ku many bitter moments. Regularly, every four waking hours, he was led to the metal chair and gassed afresh with the V-27; and his expression remained pleasant; his eyes were always friendly. But the artificial state in which he was kept showed

soon on his face. It lost its clearness and became a jaundiced yellow in color: and also it grew peaked and drawn.

But the other faces around him were peaked and drawn, too. The terrific strain told in definite terms on all, no matter what stimulants they took to keep going. Many a man would have been driven to insanity by their sustained, terrible concentration, and the knowledge that five lives hung on every action, however minute....

On and on and on, science made into a marathon. Four hours of exhausted, deathlike sleep; eight hours more of the smells, and the glaring light, and the moving instruments. Days of this, sealing the brains permanently into their new homes, into their hideous new bodies....

But finally came the climax, and the last exhausted spurt of work. For the concluding twelve hours there was no sleep or rest for anyone; and at the end a breathless, haggard tension held them as Dr. Ku Sui, a shell of his former self, reviewed the results of the nine days' ordeal. His verdict was:

"Four have come through, I think, safe. The fifth—I do not know. His body was near death when he was brought here. He may live or die; it is impossible to tell now. But it is finished."

Then the men slept. Some slipped to the floor and slept where they were. In nine days, the work of a month had been done, and a miracle wrought. The brains had been born again.

CHAPTER XII

Flight

It was to Hawk Carse that the news of imminent danger came first.

He had staggered from the laboratory into a sleeping room and, clad as he was, fallen over into a berth. He would have wakened in a few hours, such was his custom of years to four-hour watches on ships, but he was permitted less than an hour of sleep. A hand pulled at him; a voice kept calling his name. Awareness returned to him slowly as his brain roused from the coma of sleep.

"Captain Carse! Captain Carse! Wake up, sir!"

It was one of Leithgow's assistants, a man named Thorpe. His tone was excited and his manner distraught.

"Yes?" the Hawk muttered thickly. "What is it?"

"It's the asteroid, sir! I was instructed to watch it at intervals, but I—

I guess I fell asleep, and just now—"

Carse sat up. "Yes? What?"

"—when I looked, through the glasses—it was gone!"

"Gone? You're sure? Let me see."

Swiftly, Thorpe at his heels, Carse strode out from the room to a cubby just off the laboratory, the watch-post, where observational electelscopes and visi-screens provided a panorama of the surrounding territory.

He gazed through the electelscope, which had been equipped with an infra-red device and trained on the asteroid, and saw that now, where the massive body of rock had been poised, there was nothing. Only the brilliant light of mid-afternoon, the cloudless sky. Carse swept the glass around. The search was fruitless. The heavens were bare. The asteroid had gone.

In half a minute Carse had reasoned out the disappearance, saw the consequences and made the inevitable decision. Gone was the torpor of sleep, the weariness of the laboratory; this was a crisis, and this was his work. During the operations, he had been able merely to

obey orders and do manual work. Now he assumed command.

"Your lapse has imperilled us all," he said curtly to Thorpe. "From now on we're in great danger. Stay here and keep on watch, and sound the alarm immediately if the asteroid reappears."

"Yes, sir. I—I'm sorry—"

The adventurer cut him off with a frigid nod and ran on silent, rapid feet to the laboratory, where both Ban Wilson and Friday lay fast asleep. Roughly Carse shook them into consciousness. Trained to shipboard routine and the sudden emergencies of space, they needed but little time to return to full wakefulness. In staccato sentences the new situation was outlined to them.

"The asteroid's gone. That means danger to everything here. We will have to evacuate. Ban, wake all the men, including Ku Sui and his assistants, then come to me for further orders. Friday, see that Leithgow's ship is ready for instant departure. Quick!"

Alarmed, but without questions, the two parted on their separate errands. Carse went to the room where Eliot Leithgow lay asleep.

The pallor and weariness of the old scientist's face were emphasized

by the alarming news his friend brought him, but he took it with spirit, and his voice was level and controlled as he asked:

"What does it mean, Carse? What must we do?"

"Leave, Eliot, and at once. We have no choice. Our danger while here is immense. The asteroid, in the hands of enemies, could crush us like a fly, simply by coming down on the top of the hill."

"But who could have taken it? There was no one on it, was there?"

The Hawk said wryly: "I thought not, but well, you remember the secret panel in Dr. Ku's laboratory?"

"Through, which he escaped before? Yes."

"I suspected that he might have someone hidden behind it, and I intended to question him when he was under the V-27, but in the terrific rush of things it slipped my mind. Sheer carelessness, Eliot; I'm very sorry. I should have known, for when we captured Ku Sui he spoke some words in Chinese through his helmet-radio. Now I can see that they must have gone to some man of his hidden there; and that man, obeying instructions, simply lay low, heard all that passed in Dr. Ku's laboratory, and then, at a suitable opportunity,

took the asteroid away in search of allies. He knows his master is a prisoner here and unquestionably he will be back to release him. We must be out of here and far away by the time he arrives."

"Yes," Leithgow nodded slowly. "As you say, there is no choice."

"But your work here is finished, Eliot," Carse went on. "If only we can get to Earth safely, with Ku Sui and the brains in their new bodies, we will have achieved everything we wanted to achieve. We have proof of the crime done you, and we have Ku Sui, too. Your position will be restored and the blame put where it belongs. But we must leave for Earth at once! God knows how near the asteroid is, or who's on it."

"All right, Carse." The scientist got up. "What are your instructions?"

Ban Wilson appeared in the door, reporting that all the men had been accounted for and awakened. Carse started the wheels moving.

"Everything of value here must be transported aboard the ship. Eliot, you know better than I what to take, so you'll assume charge of the loading. Ban, you and all the men save two of Eliot's assistants will help. I'll need them to move the bodies. Send them to me in the

laboratory. But first, be sure Ku Sui and his four men are safely confined. All right; let's go."

Within half an hour the general evacuation was finished and the ship loaded.

The Sandra, Leithgow's ship, bearing his daughter's name, was a sturdy vessel designed more for comfort and utility than speed, and so her appointments, including offensive and defensive weapons, though modern were limited. Her commodious cargo-holds were easily capable of accommodating all of the Master Scientist's laboratory instruments and devices, the volumes of his extensive library, his great mass of personal papers and more intimate effects; all the more important stores of the place, too, and its furnishings. The laboratory and its surrounding rooms were pretty well stripped.

The largest of the Sandra's cabins was transformed under the direction of Leithgow into a hospital bay, and the five cots bearing the prostrate, unconscious bodies of the patients put there. Though hastily improvised, this hospital was complete, as fully equipped and nearly as efficient as if it were on Earth and not in the belly of a space-ship. The chances of the patients for complete recovery were not diminished in any way by the sudden necessity for flight.

In a second, much smaller cabin, Dr. Ku Sui was confined by himself. Its walls, of course, were of metal, and there was no possible means of exit from it save by the door, which bore double locks. The Eurasian, silent and drugged and stupid, immediately stretched his tall form out on the single berth and in seconds was again sound asleep. A third cabin was made over to his four assistants.

With everything completed, the underground refuge bare of articles of value and the Sandra stored and made ready for the long trip, the inner door of the exit tube swung open, and the ship slid slowly out of her cradle and into the water chamber for the last time. Her flight to Earth had begun.

Eliot Leithgow stood near the Hawk in the control cabin, and his old face was made sad by many memories. For years, this place that he was now leaving had been his only home, his one sure haven. How carefully, long ago, had he and Carse planned it and built it! How many times had they met there, often when danger was close and enemies near, and cemented still more firmly the bonds between them! To Leithgow, the hill symbolized safety and friendship and his beloved work. Dangerous, weary years, those he had spent in the hill, but priceless nevertheless, warmed as they were by his achievements and the friendship of Hawk Carse.

Now he was leaving it and going back to Earth. The outlaw years, it seemed, were ended: Ku Sui was a prisoner, and the proof of his great crime, which had been laid to Leithgow, was aboard. Earth—green Earth! Separate, distinct, peerless in the universe; home of men, of his kind! He had loved and worked and known honor and respect on Earth; it held the grave of his wife, and the fresh, warm young love of his wife reincarnate, his daughter Sandra. He was at last going home to Earth from his exile on this desolate, raw frontier post.

There was a choking in Eliot Leithgow's throat at leaving the hill, and he turned away, afraid at that moment of being observed by the steel-gray eyes of his friend, Hawk Carse....

The Sandra swam up through the lake's muddy tide and launched herself, dripping, into the warm air of afternoon. Her generators hummed with life given them by the firm hand at the controls, and swiftly she arrowed forth into the blue. With a few words as to the visual course, Carse handed the space-stick over to Friday, and devoted himself to the matter of the watches.

Satellite III dropped swiftly to concavity, as the Sandra was expertly jockeyed through the rare outer layer of the stratosphere, became a true globe again. The Negro reported:

"Through the atmosphere, suh. Orders?"

"Full acceleration. Continue visually for the present. I'll work out the true course in a few minutes."

"Yes, suh!"

The hum of the generators deepened. In a matter of ten minutes, shipboard routine was arranged, Carse, Friday and Ban splitting the watches. The Hawk, as was his custom, took the first. Friday was relieved of the space-stick and immediately went back for sleep, as did Wilson. Eliot Leithgow did not retire right away, however.

He watched Carse snap on the automatic control and go to an electelscope which had been equipped with an infra-red device. He directed it rearward on Satellite III, back along the course the Sandra had described, and peered through its eyepiece for several minutes. Then he turned to the old scientist.

"Nothing," he said. "No sign of the asteroid as yet. We'll have to keep careful watch. The visi-screen's useless against the invisibility of the asteroid; and the high magnification of this scope, with its resulting small field of view, will require us continually and methodically to search through a wide circle behind, in the attempt

to pick up the asteroid, should it appear. A tedious job, with chances of sighting it about even.... At any rate, we'll have some sort of a head-start," he finished.

This was the opportunity Leithgow had waited for; he wanted a few frank words with his friend.

"Carse," he said slowly, "I wonder just where that man concealed behind the secret panel would take the asteroid?"

"I've thought about that too," replied the Hawk. "We may be sure that he went for allies: Dr. Ku has several on Satellite III. Of them all, I think he would go for Lar Tantril."

"Tantril?"

"Yes, I think so. Lar Tantril, the Venusian. A fellow of much self-confidence and one of Ku Sui's chief agents, and who at present"—he smiled faintly—"nurses a special bitterness against me. I told you how I tricked him on his ranch. He'd be very eager to pursue us in the asteroid simply for the opportunity of repaying me for that trick." The adventurer's left hand rose to the bangs of flaxen hair combing down over his forehead, and he murmured, musingly: "I rather hope it is Lar Tantril...."

"You hope so?" Leithgow repeated, surprised. "When he hates you so? And would be on the lookout for tricks? Why?"

"I would guess, Eliot, that Lar Tantril is not notable for intellect. Blustering, domineering—pretty much of a braggart, you know. Certainly he is not a model of caution; and he is not acquainted with Dr. Ku's asteroid, for he did not even know it existed. He will be able to run it, of course, with the advice of this hidden man, but surely he will not have the perception to discern the weakness in it. Yes, I hope it is he."

Leithgow went on to the main thing on his mind.

"I'm a little unsettled, Carse," he admitted. "I've been imagining this as the end of my outlaw years, and the beginning of my re-establishment on Earth. But this ship is slow, and I see now that if the asteroid does pursue us and capture us.... What do you really think of our chances?"

The Hawk pursed his lips slightly, and for a little while he looked away and did not answer. When his voice came, it was tinged with bitterness.

"Eliot," he said, "I've been trying to find an excuse for my lapse. But

there is none. It was the blunder of a novice, my not remembering to question Ku Sui about that secret panel. That was the cardinal point, yet it slipped my mind, in my preoccupation with the emergencies connected with the restoration of the brains.

"Our chances are only fair, Eliot; I'm telling you frankly how it appears to me. I believe we'll be pursued, and if we are the odds are greatly against us. The asteroid's far more powerful than we. And Jupiter only knows what new offensive resources Ku Sui may have given it: I had no time to study the several strange mechanisms I saw in its control room. Then, no nearby patrol ship would help us if we were attacked, for to them our enemy would be invisible, and they'd think us crazy."

He paused. But seeing the somber expression on the other's face, he smiled and cuffed him on the back.

"But maybe we won't even be pursued, Eliot! Maybe we'll be too far ahead for them to catch us! No doubt I've made it look too serious, so cheer up! We're alive, we've got everything we wanted, and we're hitting at full speed for Earth! And you know the luck of that space-adventurer they call the Hawk!"

Leithgow smiled gently in answer, then left the cabin for the sleep he

needed so badly. Hawk Carse was left alone on watch in the fleeing Sandra.

A lonely, intent figure, he stood over the chart-table, working out their best course to Earth. Presently, however, he went back to the infra-red electelscope and swept it over the leagues behind. Carse could not detect any sign of the asteroid, but he remained for a little while at the eyepiece, staring at Satellite III. There it lay, a diminishing globe, three-quarters of it gleaming in the light flung by Jupiter. Dark patches mottled it: they would be the jungles. And there was the scintillant sheet that was the Great Briney Lake, with Port o' Porno nearby. On the other side of the little world, now, lay the hill containing Leithgow's laboratory. All going ... going ... falling swiftly behind. Satellite III, scene of so many clashes, plots and counter-plots, where so many times he and Eliot Leithgow had fought off the reaching hand of Ku Sui—soon it would be a million miles away. What adventures would he have before he saw it again?...

A little sound came from the Hawk, a half-sigh. Abruptly he called one of the men on his watch and stationed him at the 'scope, and then he returned to the chart-table and the work of calculating their course to Earth.

CHAPTER XIII

In Earth's Shadow

Hour after hour and day after day, for a week the Sandra tracked on through the boundless leagues, the waxing sunlight beating steadily on her starboard bow and her silent gravity-plates and singing generators bringing Earth ever nearer. Friday, who possessed an extensive knowledge of all the practical sciences, did extra service in the role of cook, and his regularly served meals disguised the undifferentiated hours of space into Earth-mornings, noons and nights. Watch in and watch out, and nothing to disturb the even routine.

As for the ever-feared pursuit, there was no sign of it. Systematically and carefully the men stationed at the electelscope turned it through the region behind, but never did their watching eyes discern the bulk of the asteroid. Its disappearance, and the kindred mystery of who had been on it, remained unsolved.

Therefore peace came to Eliot Leithgow's face, and the tiredness left his eyes. The long, hunted years were beginning to be washed from him, and daily, to Carse, he appeared younger. Often in the control cabin or over a meal he talked of what lay ahead, and the happiness

Earth held waiting for him. There was his daughter, Sandra, whom he had seen last as a girl of fourteen, and even then interested in his work. She would be matured now, and she would perhaps be eager to help him in the work he intended to resume. There was so much of it! Discoveries, theories, evolved during his fugitive years—now he could complete them and give them to his old circles of brother scientists. All this was in his conversations; but secret and unworded in his thoughts were anticipations of the old dear beauty of Earth, that beauty for which his ageing heart had pined so long....

And Earth was drawing nearer.

Another week passed.

Twice a day the door of Dr. Ku Sui's cabin was unlocked and he was brought out under guard for several turns through the ship. Though for safety's sake they continued to dose him with the V-27, it was apparent that the gas had less and less effect on him. Four, then eight, then twelve times a day they re-gassed him—as often as they dared, considering its ultimate destructive mental effect—but more and more of the frankness and serenity foreign to his green eyes melted away. Gradually the normal veil came to hide their depths and make them enigmatic; and sometimes there was again on his face the hint of something strong and tigerish and cruel lying

waiting. They no longer trusted him to attend to the five patients. He spoke seldom. A tall, reserved figure in black silk, attended either by Ban Wilson or Friday, he strolled through the ship for fifteen minutes and was returned to his lonely cabin. Of all the marks his experience must have left upon him, the only one apparent was his silence.

It was on the seventeenth day that he forsook that silence and directly accosted Carse. He had a request. The saffron face impassive, the long lashes lying low over the eyes, he said softly:

"I wonder, Captain Carse, if I might be permitted a glimpse of the subjects of my transplantation?"

Leithgow and Wilson were at the time with Carse in the control cabin, and they regarded their friend intently, curious as to what the reply would be. They saw his steel-gray eyes meet Dr. Ku's gaze squarely; and the two men looked at each other: Hawk Carse, complete victor at last, and Ku Sui, the vanquished.

The adventurer answered:

"Your request is only natural, Dr. Ku. Certainly you may see them, and perhaps offer an opinion on their progress, which has so far been

in the hands of your assistants. But I shall have to accompany you."

"You are kind."

"Take the controls, Ban," Carse directed, and together they left the cabin.

There was no visible change in the five bodies. They lay stretched out in cots, sheets drawn up to their necks, and it seemed almost as if they were quietly slumbering and would presently wake up; though in reality consciousness would not return to the fine brains in their hideous, distorted bodies for many weeks, and then only if the healing processes were successful. Bandages swathed the heads, leaving eyes and nostrils alone visible. An assistant of Leithgow's, at present on watch there, moved occasionally with instrument in hand to time the fevered pulses.

"I must ask you to stand back here, Dr. Ku," said the Hawk, indicating a spot some five feet from the nearest cot. His left arm hung easily by his side, the hand resting by the butt of his holstered raygun; and the position was not accidental.

Ku Sui nodded and doubtless noted the gun, but his eyes were on the bodies. He stood regarding his own handiwork in silence, his face

inscrutable, and Carse did not disturb him. At last, in a low tone he asked the assistant:

"The food injections take successfully?"

The man nodded.

"I remember," the beautifully modulated voice went on. "I was not sure of one subject. Swanson's brain, was it not? Is his condition any better?"

"We are not sure."

"Ah, yes ... yes...." He appeared to muse, and no one disturbed him in the minutes of silence that followed. Finally he looked away and said:

"It was a great feat. Thank you, Captain Carse. I am pleased by this glimpse of the miracle my hands were made to perform. I am ready to return."

But at the door of his cabin he paused, and his eyes rested again on the cold, firm face close to him. He said:

"I suppose, Captain Carse, you intend to bring me before Earth's

World Court of Justice?"

"Yes. Along with our living proof of your abduction of the five scientists."

The Eurasian smiled. "I see. And since there is no questioning that proof, it would appear that Earthlings will soon levy punishment on Dr. Ku Sui.... So.... You know, Captain Carse, I find your caution a great handicap. You keep gassing me; I am locked in; and since I have observed no excitement aboard the ship, apparently there are no friends anywhere near me. You have stripped me of everything." His eyes lowered for a moment. "Everything save this ring."

On the forefinger of his right hand, set simply in a platinum band, was a large dark stone.

"A black opal," said Dr. Ku. "I have worn it for years and I prize it highly. Perhaps at the last I will give it to you as a memento of these past years, Captain Carse." And he went into the cabin, where they gassed him again.

The third week passed.

Crossing the orbit of Mars, now approximately in opposition to

Jupiter, the Sandra streaked on into the last leg of her long voyage. The sun was a vast, flame-belching disk on her starboard side, and ahead lay Earth, growing each hour. Cheerfulness pervaded the ship, nerves were relaxing, faces lightening. Carse could not remember when Eliot Leithgow had worn a smile so constantly. It was only natural, for to the old scientist and his personal assistants Earth was home, the fulfillment of every desire, the reality and symbol of normal life and love of man.

But to Hawk Carse the Green Planet was not home. He was the adventurer, and wanderer, the seeker of new places with the alluring lustre of peril. Earth was to him little more than a port of call, and it brought him sadness to see how eagerly Leithgow stared at her growing face. Their parting was not far away now.

The Sandra logged off the miles. Then came the day when only ten thousand were left, and, soon after, five thousand. Deceleration had long since been begun. Slightly but unvaryingly the ship's momentum slackened until she arrived at the two thousand mile mark, where the great curving stretch of the planet filled her bow windows, and the well-remembered continents and seas stood out as clearly as on a tilted classroom globe.

Carse leaned musing in a corner of the control cabin, oblivious to the

well-meaning but toneless voice with which Ban Wilson, at the electelscope was butchering a song. A gentle tap on the shoulder summoned him out of his study.

He turned and saw that Leithgow had come to him. Carse smiled at the old scientist, and said:

"Well, Eliot, we'll be in soon now. Apparently we've made it safely, and there's nothing to stand between you and the day you've waited for so long."

Yes. But Carse—what of you? How long will you stay? I only wish I could persuade you—"

"To retire, Eliot? Settle down? Become a humdrum landlocked Earthling?" He chuckled, and shook his head. "No, no, old friend. Oh, I'll stay on Earth for a few weeks; I suppose I'll have to, to testify before the World Court of Justice when it takes up your case; but after that's settled, I'll be going back. You know me, Eliot: I'll never change. There are a number of things I must attend to at once. My ship, the Star Devil, is still on Iapetus, remember; I must find her and get her tuned up again. She's the fastest craft in space, bar none. Then I must make the round of my ranches and see that things are running smoothly. I've a lot of work on the Iapetus ranch,

particularly. Then, there's that Pool of Radium—not that I need the wealth, if it really exists; but the job has killed so many who have sought for it that I'd like to take a crack at it myself. Oh, plenty to do!"

Leithgow looked at him, and there was all affection in his eyes, and friendship as close as it can be between men.

"No, Carse," said Leithgow softly. "I suppose Earth will never get her gravity on you for keeps. But I hope you will come down occasionally to see me, and perhaps once a year, say, spend a month with Sandra and me in our—"

"Carse!"

Ban shouted the name out. His face, turned from the electelscope, was alive with excitement.

"Here! Look!"

"What is it?"

"The asteroid! It's close!"

In two strides Carse was at the eyepiece of the infra-red glass

attached to the instrument. One look through it served to verify Ban's report. The asteroid of Dr. Ku Sui had at last appeared.

It was not more than fifty miles from the Sandra, a craggy fragment of rock, peanut-shaped, and tipped by its gleaming dome. Its speed seemed the same as theirs, but its course was different; and to Carse, that fact immediately explained its sudden appearance. He turned from the eyepiece with a face grown hard and cold.

"Well, it's happened," he said. "Instead of a stern chase, which would give us some chance of spotting them, they at once got off to the side and have all this time been flanking us. Now they're cutting in, straight behind, no doubt ready for business. All right. Ban, sound the alarm."

Like a gladiator about to step sword in hand into the arena, the Sandra, though a ship never designed for space duels, girded her loins and made herself ready for what at its best could only be an unequal struggle. She was outclassed in weapons, weight and speed —in all save pilots. She had Hawk Carse at her helm.

The harsh alarm bell at once rang through the ship, an emergency call to stations. Carse, at the controls, rapped out another order.

"Defensive web on, Ban, and build up power for the ray batteries."

As the echoes of the bell died, a piercing whine grew amidships, and shreds of blue light swiftly scattered by the Sandra's ports. They were quickly gone, but they left behind an almost invisible envelope of blue which enwrapped the ship completely. The defensive web against attacking rays was on.

Friday tumbled into the control cabin, and on his heels two of Leithgow's assistants, the third being on duty with the patients. Carse briefly explained what had happened. "Friday," he ordered, "you take the stern ray batteries. Ban—"

But Ban Wilson had returned to the electelscope, and it had given him more news. Interrupting, he cried out:

"They must be attacking! A light just flashed in the dome!"

With his words they all saw the light. The visi-screen, though it did not reveal the asteroid, showed the first weapon with which it struck —a lustrous ray of purple which in a blink had leaped out to the Sandra and enfolded her. A shower of sparks crackled out from the ship's defensive web, but the purple ray continued.

"I don't know that ray, Eliot." Carse said. "What's on our speed indicator?"

The scientist's gasp was plainly audible as he read the dial. "Why, it—it's dropping! Much faster than our deceleration accounts for! That ray—why, it must have magnetic properties! Carse, the asteroid's stopping us!"

CHAPTER XIV

The Hawk Strikes

No surprise showed on the Hawk's face, though the others were visibly shaken. He, at the helm, merely nodded and continued with further orders.

"Williams," he said to one of Leithgow's assistants, "get Thorpe and go and dose Ku Sui with V-27. Give him plenty. Then both of you station yourselves, ray guns in hand, outside his cabin. We'll take no chances with him, gassed or not. Friday, open our radio receiver to the general band. Just the receiver, not the mike.... Our speed, Eliot?"

"Down to seven hundred, and falling steadily."

Carse went to the electelscope, after giving the controls over to Ban.

Squarely behind the Sandra, and within twenty-five miles, the peanut-shaped body had come. It was an ominous and silent approach. The Sandra remained pinned by the purple ray for minutes while the Hawk studied her aggressor. As he watched the asteroid, the others watched him; Ban Wilson fidgety, Friday clenching and unclenching his big hands. Eliot Leithgow with whitened face and shoulders that seemed to have bowed a little.

The forward speed of the Sandra decreased to four hundred miles an hour, and still the Hawk studied the massive body behind....

A sputter sounded in the radio receiver. Carse turned away from the electelscope and listened to the heavy Venusian voice that was suddenly speaking to him from it.

"Carse, I've got you! You've seen our ray, of course, but have you looked at your speed-indicator? You're caught—and this time you're going to stay caught. You cannot possibly resist the magnetic ray I have on you, and in a few minutes you will be drawn right into me. I advise you to surrender peacefully. No tricks—though there's no trick that could do you any good! Nothing! I have you this time!"

A frosty smile tightened the Hawk's lips.

"I was right, Eliot," he murmured. "The man behind the panel took the asteroid to Lar Tantril. He is our opponent."

Those were his words, but he did nothing. He seemed content to stand with cold, intent face looking back through the infra-red electelscope. The Sandra's speed sank to three hundred, two hundred and soon a hundred, and the asteroid, which was of course also decelerating, crept up remorselessly. Ban Wilson had every confidence in the Hawk, but finally the inaction grew too much for him to bear.

"Jumping Jupiter, Carse!" he sputtered. "—aren't you going to do anything? Use our rays! Try maneuvering to the side! Damn it, we're just letting them take us!"

The adventurer might not have heard, for all the sign he gave. The Earth-clock on the wall ticked on; seconds built minutes, and the minutes passed. The asteroid was only ten miles astern.

"Eliot," said Carse quietly, "get me one of your infra-red glasses."

He took over the controls again. Carefully he varied the forward repulsion and sent current to the side gravity-plates, and slowly the Sandra answered by rotating, longitudinally, reversing her position.

Still maintaining a slight and dwindling speed toward Earth, her bow swung from that planet's eye-filling panorama and came to face, instead, the invisible asteroid. When turned completely around, the men in her control cabin looked through the bow windows right into the brilliant cone of the purple ray.

Lar Tantril's voice again boomed from the broadcasting shell, and this time it was harsh with anger.

"Try no tricks, Carse! I see what you intend. You plan to suddenly answer my ray, instead of continuing to resist it, and so drive right past me and escape. But I warn you I have terrific power, and if you move towards me of your own volition, I can burn you to a cinder in three seconds, and I'll do it. You can't escape! If I have to destroy Ku Sui, all right—but I'll get you!"

The Hawk strapped over his eyes the infra-red glasses Leithgow now gave him.

Reversing the Sandra's ends had neither increased nor decreased the rate at which the asteroid's purple stream was bringing her closer. Obviously the magnetic stream was being varied. The space-ship's forward momentum merely continued to drop normally until the moment came when she had no Earthward velocity at all; and then

more quickly she moved toward the restraining asteroid.

With his infra-red glasses, through the bow windows, Carse could now see the massive body in full detail. There was the dome, a huge, gleaming cup of transparent stuff now showing wisps of blue, from the defensive web around it; and inside were the several buildings, and minute black dots which were the figures of men. There was a great number of them. The largest group was clustered inside one of the large ship-size port-locks in the dome. The lock's outer door was open, and it was from there that the purple ray seemed to originate. Obviously the intention of the enemy was to draw the Sandra right in. Five miles now separated asteroid and ship.

Again the Venusian chief spoke.

"I warn you once more, Sparrow Hawk, try no tricks. You can see the men I have here, but you can't see my ray projectors. They're hidden, but they're centered on you, every one, and my hand's at the control that fires them. They have terrific power, Carse. Better not attempt anything!"

The Hawk switched on the extension microphone at his side. He said levelly into it:

"Lar Tantril, I'll make a bargain with you: a favor for a favor."

"What?" shot from the loudspeaker.

"I will agree to surrender peaceably when you've drawn my ship inside if, for your part, you promise to free Eliot Leithgow, who is aboard with me, and the five patients on whom Ku Sui operated. If you don't grant me that, I will oppose you to the last pull of my finger on trigger."

"But, Carse—" the Master Scientist began, horrified: but his expression of amazement faded when the slender man at the radio turned his head and half-closed one eye in a wink.

"You will agree to that—and no tricks?" Tantril's voice repeated.

"I will agree to it. And as for tricks, what could I possibly try? Your rays could burn through the maximum power of my web in three seconds, as you say: I know it as well as you. I only wish there was a chance to get out of your range in time."

"All right!" the Venusian replied decisively. "I agree. I'll release Leithgow and the five patients. Keep away from the controls and I'll draw you in."

Carse switched off the microphone.

"A hell of a lot Tantril's word is worth!" muttered Ban Wilson. Once more, surprisingly, the Hawk winked. Friday was grinning now. For once in his life he had guessed his master's strategy before the others.

A mile and a half to the front lay the dome-end of the asteroid. Perhaps nine hundred miles to the rear lay the tremendous mottled curve of Earth with her dangerous upper layers of the stratosphere all too close. In the very face of Earth, all three on a line, the ship lay linked by a stream of purple to the great rough-hewn, errant asteroid. Half the bulk of all three lay sharply outlined against the black of space by the intense yellow light of the flaming distant sun.

The asteroid neared to a mile, then a half-mile. Hawk Carse said curtly:

"Ban, when I give the word, put all the power we've got into our defensive web. Load the generators; overload them; tax them to the limit. That web must be as tough as possible for five seconds."

"Got you, Carse."

"You've—a trick?" ventured Leithgow timidly.

"I think I have, Eliot. Lar Tantril might have caught on when I turned the ship, but unfortunately for him his brain is incapable of proceeding past a certain point.... All right, Ban."

"Feel it!"

In answer to Ban's hands, the deck of the control cabin was literally vibrating under the mounting speed of the generators in the power-room. The generators could not stand that terrific overload long: they would burn out. But Carse needed only a few seconds of it.

The asteroid was a quarter of a mile away, seen through the infra-red. The dome loomed large.

"All right!" whispered Hawk Carse. "Hold on!"

With the words he unleashed the Sandra's full acceleration.

It was a risk and a big one, but the Hawk had it calculated to a fraction of a second, and so, without hesitation, he took the chance. A little less than four seconds to reach his objective, he reckoned; a little more than one second for Tantril to release the asteroid's disintegrating rays as he had threatened; therefore about two and a

half seconds for the Sandra to be exposed to those rays. The chance that her defensive web could resist them for that long would decide it.

From almost a standing start, the Sandra swept ahead, generators humming, her web a blue mist around her, acceleration at the full. Straight down through the heart of the narrowing purple ray she sped, a hurtling metallic projectile, hundreds of tons in mass, her stub bow levelled dead at the dome.

After a second the asteroid bared its fangs.

A cone of brilliant orange flamed and washed around the Sandra's bow, and a storm of soundless sparks engulfed her. She was caught in a maw of fire, and held there for the remaining terrific seconds of her wild forward dash. But the seconds passed; the hands of Hawk Carse were delicate on her controls; and the Sandra, curving slightly upward, struck, crashed, wrenched terribly in every joint; and then the jolt and the protesting wrench and the spluttering sparks were gone from her, and there was around her only the deep silence of lifeless space.

At three hundred miles an hour the Sandra had nicked the upper plates of the dome and streaked on, unharmed!

It was not necessary now to use infra-red glasses to see the asteroid. It was there in the visi-screen for naked eyes, but for seconds not one of the men in the ship's control-cabin thought to look. The awful acceleration and shock had dazed them. They had not known what was coming, except Friday and the Hawk, and only the latter was able to retain reasonable alertness. He, almost immediately after the impact, cut down the load on the generators, and brought the Sandra out of her mad drive forward, rotating the ship until she was facing back towards the asteroid. Then all of them looked through the bow windows, and what they saw told the story in an instant.

"It's visible! See—the invisibility's gone!" cried Friday.

A score of miles away the body lay, fully revealed, its starboard half gleaming hard and sharp in the sunlight. Cautiously the Sandra drew closer. Carse gave the controls to Ban and examined it carefully through the electelscope, after removing the infra-red attachment.

He saw that the keel of the Sandra had torn a great, mangled rent in the dome and through this the air had rushed out. Space had taken possession. The disintegrating rays which had been burning at the Sandra had been snapped off with the sheathing of invisibility; in that one wild second of impact, all the asteroid's functioning mechanism had been destroyed. Lar Tantril had not thought quite far

enough: he had not sealed the buildings air-tight against a possible crashing of the dome, and for that reason alone he and his men had gone down in full defeat under the drive of the Hawk.

Shreds of flotsam drifting and turning in space around the dome now became visible—bits of wreckage hurled out from the tear, and also a number of white, bloated things which once had been the bodies of men. The outrushing tide of air had taken them along, and now they drifted, shapeless, all of a kind, in the lifelessness of space.

"Merciful heaven!" whispered Eliot Leithgow, staring at the desolation. "Gone! Just snuffed out!"

The Hawk took over again and brought and held the Sandra in a position a quarter of a mile above the now rapidly falling asteroid.

"They're all dead, I'm sure," he said in a voice hard and emotionless as his graven face. "They must be, for the asteroid is now visible, and that means that the doors of the power building were open. Inside and out, all there is dead, machinery and men.... Still, it had to be done. It was they or we. A variation of the trick we used to escape from the dome before, Eliot; and Tantril of course didn't expect it and protect himself as Ku Sui did that other time. It's all done now—yes, its gravity-plates too, for see, it's turning."

"And fast!" murmured Friday.

The body was rotating around its longer axis at about twice the speed of an Earth-watch's second hand. Now the dome was sliding under, out of their sight, the craggy rock belly coming up to take its place. Nine hundred miles away was Earth—rather, less than that, for the body was now free to accept the tremendous gravity pull of the planet so near. Soon it would plunge to destruction there....

A thought came to Carse, and he said:

"Perhaps Ku Sui would like to see what has become—"

On the last word he stopped and whirled around. His eyes were suddenly intense and his face startled.

"I heard a hiss!" said Friday.

"You too? Then it was a port-lock!" Carse turned to the visi-screen. "Look there!" he cried.

In the screen Earth made a titanic background against which, a falling, dwindling figure in a clear-cut in the sunlight, gleamed space-suit. Down it went, rapidly, even as they stared, until it hung just off the also-falling asteroid. It was obviously preparing to enter

the dome.

"Take the helm, Ban, and watch him!" Carse ordered harshly, and ran aft from the control cabin.

Leithgow and Friday, following at once, found him inside the open door of Dr. Ku Sui's cabin, examining two figures stretched limp at his feet. The men were Thorpe and Williams, who had been set to gas and guard the Eurasian. Carse said:

"Both dead. Poison. Look at Thorpe's wrist."

On the right wrist of the dead man was a line of red, a scratch, and swollen, discolored flesh was ugly around it. One cheek of Williams bore a similar patch. Both had been armed with rayguns, but now they were gone. Half to himself, the Hawk murmured:

"Yes, poison. It might have been in the ring. Everyone else was in the control cabin. The men entered the door, Ku Sui was waiting—quick death.... Well, I'm going after him."

Not understanding, still horrified by the contorted face of the man on the deck, the other two gazed at the adventurer.

"But, Carse!" Leithgow broke out. "How can you? How can you

possibly—"

"He's gone back to the dome," the Hawk cut in frostily. "He can't make it to Earth as he is now, for we'd see him and easily be able to pick him up. No; he's got some reason for returning, to the dome. Something important. He thinks he's escaped.... He's mistaken."

A shudder passed over Friday, for Hawk Carse's eyes had fallen on him, and they were deadly.

"Let me by, Eliot," the man whispered. "This time he goes or I go, but by the gods of space it'll be one of us!"

CHAPTER XV

There Is a Meteor

His face set and cold, Carse ran to the stores cabin, just as the Eurasian must have hurried there a few minutes before. He took one of Dr. Ku's self-propulsive space-suits down from the rack and slipped into it, sticking a raygun in the belt. Still not speaking, he glided to the rear port-lock, Leithgow and Friday running alongside and attempting to dissuade him from the dangerous pursuit. Their words were wasted. Carse gave them only a faint smile and a few

directions.

"Keep the ship as close as you can without danger. No, Eclipse; I'm going by myself; there's no need to risk two. If I don't come out, you've everything needed to prove your case. Eliot—the re-embodied brains, Ku Sui's four white assistants—"

"I tell you you're going to your death! You'll be caught inside! Earth's attracting the asteroid now, and in a few minutes it will be plunging through the atmosphere with terrific speed! The friction will make it a meteor, and you'll burn. Carse! You'll die in flames! You haven't but a few minutes to do the whole thing!"

"Have to risk that, Eliot." He swung open the inner door of the lock and stepped into the chamber. "Remember, keep as close to the asteroid as possible, and a steady watch for Ku Sui and me." He looked levelly at them, white man and black, for a moment, then turned his face away. "That's all. Good-by," he said.

The door swung shut in their faces with a hiss of compressed air.

The Hawk closed the face-plate of his helmet and rapidly spun over the controls. Another hiss, and the outer door moved wide. He stepped with force into space.

The panorama below him was breath-taking: Earth seemed almost to hit him in the face. He had not realized it was so close. The sheer, mighty stretch of the globe filled his eyes, and for seconds he could not focus on anything else, so overwhelming to his vision was the colossal map. It reached away to left and right, before and behind, and he was so near that it seemed almost flat, a sun-gleaming plain on which stood out in sharp outline the continent of Europe, the Atlantic Ocean and, bordering it, the edge of North America.

To his left was the flaming orb of the sun; and directly underfoot, rotating against the vast background of the North Atlantic, he now saw the asteroid, glinting metallically along its craggy length as it swung over. Carse centered every bit of power he had on it, and at maximum acceleration began to overhaul his objective.

The asteroid was plunging free to Earth, and the rate of its uncontrolled plunge was second by second mounting tremendously; but Carse's power-fall quickly enabled him to overtake it. As the dome swooped up in front of him, and the sunlight washed briefly over its desolate buildings, he looked hard for a shape moving amongst them, without success. Doubtless the Eurasian was well inside by now.

The job of getting into the dome was a hazardous one. About every

thirty seconds the asteroid described a complete rotation, making the rim turn at a speed of half a mile a second, and that made the task of entering extremely dangerous to a man whose only protection was the metal and fabric of a space-suit. Misjudgment would either rip the suit or dash him to instant death. He had to slip cleanly down through the jagged tear in the dome, planning his swoop accurately to the fraction of a second.

Never cooler, the Hawk made it. Building a parallel speed equal to that of the rotating dome, he followed it over in a dizzy whirl; and as the rent came below he shot curving down and in with sufficient precision, and at once swiftly adjusted his gravity to offset the asteroid's great centrifugal force.

For alternating fifteen-second periods the sunlight filled the dome and its buildings; and on the tail of the first of these, even as the sable tide swept all vision from him, the Hawk arrived at the door of one wing of the central building. He had not seen Ku Sui, and he had no time for exploration, but he did have a hunch as to where the Eurasian had gone, and he followed that hunch. A silent, giant-gray thing in the black silence of the corridor, grim, intent and seeming irresistible, he swept along it; and every second he knew that a raygun might spit from where it had been waiting in ambush to puncture his suit and kill him. For whether or not Ku Sui was aware

that he was being tracked by his old, bitter foe, Carse did not know.

The asteroid plunged down faster and faster. Earth's atmosphere, with all its perils of friction, coming ever closer, and the great bosom of the planet lying waiting to receive and bury the rock hurtling towards it. Throughout most of the leagues of space that asteroid had tracked on its master's diverse errands, and in many distant places the trails of Hawk Carse and Ku Sui had crossed and left blood and crossed again; and now those three—asteroid, Eurasian and the Hawk—were drawn once more together for the spectacular and epic climax, now only minutes away. No power in the universe was to stop the plunge of the asteroid; it remained to be seen how one or both of the two living humans on it could get out in time....

But of all this, nothing was in Hawk Carse's mind except the beating, driving realization that few minutes were left in which to play out the last scene. With reckless haste he sped to where his hunch led him, the secret panel in Dr. Ku's laboratory. As he reached it, faint sunlight came filtering in from somewhere and he saw that the panel was open.

He looked within and dimly saw a ladder reaching down into black depths. Without hesitation he thrust through the opening and dropped into the blackness. He dared not lose a second.

He hit bottom with a thud, changed his glove controls and reached out in the darkness. He felt that he was in one end of a passageway. As rapidly as he could, his arms stretched wide, all his nerves and muscles and senses alert, he pressed along it.

Continually he was thrown into the rough wall at his right by the centrifugal force of the asteroid. How far did the passageway extend? Was Ku Sui at the end of it? It occurred to the Hawk that the asteroid was a developing shooting star, eating up the few hundred miles of life that remained, streaking down into the atmosphere, where waited quick friction and incandescence—and he down in the heart of it, blind, without clue to what lay in front of him, ignorant of everything, and with only minutes in which to achieve his end. There'd be no heat-warning through his insulated suit. Even now, perhaps, there was no time to get out; already the deadline might have been crossed; he could not know. He went on....

How far? A hundred yards; two hundred? Easily that, he thought, and still no variation in the blackness around him! The passageway seemed straight, so he might now be past the rim of the dome above.

Then, for just a second, he saw a faint wisp of light ahead!

Automatically Carse's raygun came up, but in the time that simple

motion took the light was gone and the blackness was as deep and lifeless as before. But he was coming to something. He went on, perhaps a little faster, hot to discover the last emergency resource of Dr. Ku. He took no pains to avoid making noise, for he knew Ku Sui could not hear him through the airless space between.

After another hundred yards or so the light from ahead winked again. It was stronger. Only a second of it, but he now suspected that it came at regular intervals. It was a machine, perhaps, working under the hands of the Eurasian. On—on! With the seconds fleeting by, building to the small total which would bring friction to the asteroid, and incandescence, and scalding death for him within it!

Again, suddenly, the mysterious light. It left instantly as usual, but not before it revealed, well ahead, the end of the passage. Quickly he traversed the remaining distance and felt around with his hands. He found what he half expected. There was an opening, a doorway, to his right. The room beyond surely held the final secret of the asteroid. And if Dr. Ku Sui were anywhere, he was in there.

Carse restrained an impulse to rush in, deciding to wait for the recurring light. Everything in him told him that this was the climax, that through the door to his right lay the object of his chase; and in spite of his consciousness of the plunging asteroid, and the up-

leaping skin of Earth's atmosphere, now so close, he stood full in the doorway, gun ready, waiting. Seconds were precious, but this was the part of common sense. He needed the light to show him what perils he must face; he could not go into that chamber ignorant of the situation there.

For what seemed ages the fantastic figure stood there. The great rock turning over and over, with awful speed dropping down. Earth nearing, death ever closer—and he standing in silence and darkness, waiting to finish the feud! He might never escape; he knew that; it might already be too late to try; but the core of the man, his grim and steely will, would not let him think of retreating towards safety until he had faced Dr. Ku Sui and decided the account between them forever.

The wall of darkness melted. A ghostly light filtered through. He stared, and in its brief maximum saw before him a high, bare rectangular room, hewn out of the rock—and at its far side a man in a space-suit. Ku Sui, brought to bay!

But Carse, for one of the few times in his life, doubted his eyes. What trick were they playing him? For it was not a real, sharp figure that he saw; it was an indefinite one, shimmering and elusive, like a mirage. A prank of the strange light, perhaps. But Ku Sui

nevertheless! Ku Sui trapped!

The Hawk leaped forward with outstretched arms to seize and hold the Eurasian's motionless figure. As he moved, the second of ghostly light dissolved away, and in the blackness his eager reaching arms closed on—nothing!

Surely Ku Sui had been there! Surely he had not just imagined he saw him!

Baffled and coldly raging, the Hawk whirled and groped frantically. The centrifugal force caught him off balance and hurled him into a wall, but dizzy he continued his desperate search, sweeping his arms all around him, over walls and floor and, rising, the ceiling. The tumbling asteroid banged him unmercifully into the six sides of the room, but even as he was flung he reached and felt in every direction—felt without result.

In some incredible way, Ku Sui had eluded him. The second the light failed, he must have slipped by and escaped down the passageway behind. The Hawk could hardly understand how it might have been achieved, but there was no other explanation. So, with lips firm set in his cold, grim face, he felt to the doorway, ready to track back through the long, unlit passage. He might still overhaul and capture

the other. If there was still time....

But was there?

The passing seconds had not been idle. Inexorably they had brought him to Earth's atmosphere. He stared around the room in sheer horror.

For its blackness was relieved by the faintest of glows. It was not that of the recurring light; it came from the whole rock ceiling above. Carse was overwhelmed by the realization that within numbered seconds the surface of the asteroid would reach incandescence.

Thoughts raced like lightning through his head. He could not get free through the corridor and dome behind: that would take at least three minutes, and not a quarter of a minute was left. Ku Sui too, if he were in the corridor trying to reach the dome, was trapped and finished. A meteor flaming to Earth would be their common grave!

A searing, hideous death! Trapped within fiery walls of melting rock!

At that moment the regularly re-recurring flash of light came, and

under pressure of his great need the phenomenon meshed with understanding in Carse's mind. That light was sunlight! It come at definite intervals as the dome side of the asteroid rotated to face the sun.

And that light could reach the room only by way of some channel in the ceiling!

In the waxing glow of the rock above him, Carse swiftly found the channel—a vertical bore several feet wide, in one corner of the ceiling. Its rock sides glowed redly, and at their end was a round black patch that caused his heart to leap with hope. Outer space!—and a short, straight escape to it! In a flash he saw how Ku Sui perhaps had eluded him.

The Eurasian's prepared emergency exit would also be his!

He lost not a fraction of a second. Turning his glove controls to maximum acceleration, he rose with a rush into the bore. Despite his good aim the asteroid's centrifugal force threw him heavily into one red-hot side. His heart went cold; would the fabric of the suit burn through? No time for such worries—must make the frigid air outside—fast—fast—never mind bumps—quick out—and must stay conscious—must stay conscious to exert repulsion against Earth!

Like a projectile Hawk Carse shot out of that tunnel of hell at a tangent to the asteroid and in a direction away from Earth, and in an instant the doomed body was far below him, and streaking faster and ever faster to the annihilation now so near.

He fought to come out of his dizziness. Shaking his head, he glanced back for sight of a minute, suit-clad figure. Had Ku Sui preceded him through the emergency exit, his shape should be visible somewhere, etched by the sunlight.

There was no sign of him.

Carse's eyes dropped to the asteroid. He saw it already miles below, a breath-taking celestial object, a second sun, brilliant and increasingly brilliant as it diminished over the watery plain waiting to receive it. His mind saw the Eurasian, caught in the long corridor to the dome, already dead on this last flight of his extraordinary vehicle of space....

The end came at once. The sun was quickly a great, brilliant shooting star, then a blinding smaller one: then its straight mad flight through the heavens was over, and it was received in the waters of the Atlantic Ocean and buried deep.

A cataclysmic burial. A titanic meteor, an incandescent, screaming streak in the night—a cloud of billowing steam—a wall of water rearing back from the strange grave of the asteroid, so far come from its accustomed orbit around Mars.... The thought came to Carse that Dr. Ku Sui had died as he lived, spectacularly, with a brilliance and a tidal wave and an earthquake to disturb the lives of men....

And a sadness fell over the heart of the Hawk....

He roused from it in a moment. He felt heat! In the rush of events he had not before noticed that his space-suit had started to burn from the friction of his own passage through the atmosphere. Fortunately, it was already cooling off.

For in spite of his own leaving speed and the added centrifugal velocity the asteroid had given him, he had hurtled down after the doomed rock; and only then was his building repulsion neutralizing Earth's gravity and his initial Earthward velocity. He had slowed down just in time to keep his space suit intact.

He came to rest, in relation to the Earth, and hovered there. Again he scrutinized the black untenanted wastes of space above. Far out, approaching as rapidly as it dared, was the Sandra.

He wanted to be sure, so he cut in his mike and asked Leithgow if they had, through their electelscope, seen, Ku Sui leave the asteroid.

The anxious scientist told him they had not.

With a slight sigh Hawk Carse snapped off his contact and waited till the sharp, growing spot that was the Sandra should come dropping down to pick him up, and his friends learn from his own lips the story of the passing of Ku Sui.…